



COSMOPHILIA

ISLAMIC ART FROM THE DAVID COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN

SHEILA S. BLAIR AND JONATHAN M. BLOOM

with essays by Kjeld von Folsach, Nancy Netzer and Claude Cernuschi

McMullen Museum of Art
Boston College

Distributed by the University of Chicago Press



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	5
Note to Readers	7
Ornament and Islamic Art SHEILA S. BLAIR AND JONATHAN M. BLOOM	9
The David Collection: the Museum's History, Character, and Various Reflections on the Reinstallation of the Islamic Collection KJELD VON FOLSACH	31
Insular and Islamic Cosmophilic Responses to the Classical Past NANCY NETZER	39
Adolf Loos, Alois Riegl, and the Debate on Ornament in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna CLAUDE CERNUSCHI	45
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION	
Figures	57
Writing	83
Geometry	107
Vegetation and the Arabesque	135
Hybrids	179
Glossary	205
Timeline	207
Bibliography	211
Appendix: Concordance of Catalogue and Accession Numbers	216



Adolf Loos, Alois Riegl, and the Debate on Ornament in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna¹

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In his controversial essay of 1908, "Ornament and Crime," the architect, cultural critic, and polemicist Adolf Loos proclaimed a culture's intellectual and moral development to be directly proportional to its rejection of decorative ornament. In our modern age, he wrote, "we have out-grown ornament, we have struggled through to a state without ornament. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of cities will glow like white walls!"² But the euphoric tone of this passage is deceptive. The modern city of "Ornament and Crime" bears little, if any, resemblance to the turn-of-the-century Vienna Loos made his home, a city slowly but gradually falling prey to the aesthetics of the Viennese Secession—Austria's own local version of Art Nouveau. Under the tutelage of Joseph Maria Olbrich, architect of the Secession's exhibition building, and Gustav Klimt, its intellectual and artistic leader, the Secession favored curvilinear forms, luxurious materials, decorative surfaces, and, of course, ornament. Loos's intent in writing "Ornament and Crime," then, was not to celebrate the implementation of a utopian ideal, but

to decry its perversion, not to rejoice in the taste of his contemporaries, but to vilify and impede their increasing infatuation with the decorative. To be sure, the Secession proved controversial at first; to Loos's increasing dismay, however, it soon gained public recognition and even state sponsorship. The streets did not "glow like white walls" in fin-de-siècle Vienna, and the austere yet brilliant city of "Ornament and Crime" was nothing more than a fictive ideal. More than anything, Loos wrote to vent his frustration; he may have called for the removal of ornament, but by his own admission: "there are hob goblins who will not allow it to happen. Humanity is still to groan under the slavery of ornament."³

The very virulence of Loos's rhetoric—his explicit association of ornament with criminality in particular—suggests that there is more at stake in his argument than the mere presence of surface decoration on architectural sites or objects of every day use. Ornamentation, after all, can be considered criminal only if one assumes, as did Loos, that artistic decisions are moral decisions. To make this case, the architect takes his readers

on a tortuous and complex route of arguments, directives, and value judgments. First, implicit in Loos's view that the evolution of culture is "synonymous with the removal of ornament,"⁴ is the very assumption that culture is evolving in an incremental, cumulative manner, and that modern culture, per force, embodies its most advanced incarnation. In our present contemporary intellectual climate, many would readily find this position objectionable; but from an already tenuous assumption, another soon follows: though reflecting the moral and aesthetic precepts of one's culture is inevitable, borrowing the precepts of an earlier, "less sophisticated" culture is tantamount, for Loos, to both aesthetic and moral regression. Papuans, he proclaims, are "amoral" because they devour their enemies. Being amoral does not necessarily make Papuans criminal, but if a modern man devours his enemies he is not only amoral, he is a criminal as well. Thus, *mutatis mutandis*, it follows that although a Papuan "tattoos his skin, his boat, his oar, in short, everything that is within his reach," he cannot be considered "criminal."⁵ But if a modern man

"tattoos himself," Loos asserts, he is "a criminal or a degenerate."⁶

Loos did not choose the word "degenerate" at random. According to Brigitte Hamann, it "was a fashionable term in fin-de-siècle Vienna...used in virtually all areas of life. It meant 'strayed from one's kind' or 'alienated from one's kind' and referred to behavior 'inimical to one's nature'."⁷ In other words, to follow the precepts of one's culture may be amoral (assuming, of course, those precepts are so labeled by Loos), but infinitely worse is to descend the evolutionary ladder, to regress to an earlier, less advanced (and presumably even less moral) state of civilization. For Loos, such a course of action is nothing short of criminal. No wonder, he continues, "there are prisons where eighty percent of the inmates bear tattoos. Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder."⁸ If Loos's polemic, full of sarcasm and irony as much as indignation, strikes a contemporary audience as somewhat perplexing, his intent is clear: to reform society by reforming art. Since ornament is a vestige of, and only appropriate to, an earlier, less "advanced" stage of civilization, then the Viennese Secession, by regressing to that stage, betrays both its responsibility to be modern, and the moral and intellectual level which is ostensibly its own. For Loos, the Secession threatened the moral fabric of culture the way a criminal threatens the ethical fabric of society.

If this point of view may seem somewhat unorthodox to us today, its effect on Loos's fel-

low Viennese was not altogether different. He may have decried the Secession's embrace of ornament, but the geometric severity of his own buildings (when he procured patrons interested enough for construction to proceed) was not enthusiastically received. Allegedly, the Emperor Franz Josef himself changed the very location of his Imperial living quarters in the *Hofburg* expressly to avoid seeing Loos's building on *Michaelerplatz* from his window, and, moreover, refused to leave the palace by any gate from which that same detested structure could be seen. The building was so controversial, in fact, that—even before its completion—a municipal order was drafted to suspend construction. The intensity of these scandals, however, should not, from the other side, hide the degree to which Loos was a child of his age. His views on architecture may have run afoul of Secessionist aesthetics, or even of contemporary Viennese taste in general, but underlying his association of ornament with crime was the Darwinian logic of late-nineteenth-century biological science: namely, the widely endorsed hypothesis that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. At the very outset of his essay, Loos writes: "In the womb the human embryo passes through all the development stages of the animal kingdom. At the moment of birth, human sensations are equal to those of a newborn dog. His childhood passes through all the transformations which correspond to the history of mankind. At the age of two, he sees like a Papuan, at four, like a Teuton, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire."⁹

The inclusion of such evolutionary rhetoric in an essay on aesthetics may seem logically, even

discursively misplaced. Yet against the assumption that the development of culture coincides with the elimination of ornament, Loos intimates that any recourse to ornament is tantamount to violating the biological order of nature, i.e., the very Darwinian evolutionary postulate upon which much of the Western late-nineteenth-century scientific and intellectual edifice rested. Loos thus cleverly sets up aesthetics, ethics, and biology in a triangular structure whose every part somehow interlocks with the other. His rhetorical move lies, not so much in attempting to validate his aesthetic judgments in a tangible or demonstrable way, but in putting *an ethical spin on the nature of these judgments*—judgments whose very legitimacy are made to revolve around the Darwinian pivot of evolutionary theory. In this way, ideological debates pretend to transcend their local, ideological character, and aesthetic choices are presented as unimpeachable by virtue of the very moral stances they uphold—stances, in turn, whose morality hinges on their reflecting and upholding the "natural order."¹⁰

Implicit in Loos's conflation of aesthetic regression and moral degeneracy, however, lies yet another argument: an epistemological one. This argument is not explicit in "Ornament and Crime," but it is clearly articulated in a host of previous essays where Loos construes decoration as a subset of deception. "Imitation," Loos regrets, "has dominated the entire building industry. Wall coverings are made out of paper, but this they may by no means show. They must retain the patterns of damask silk or Gobelin tapestries. Doors and windows are made out of softwood. But since hardwood is more expensive,

the softwood must be painted to look like it. Iron must be painted to look like bronze or copper.... It is characteristic of our Viennese situation that I who am against the violation of materials, who have combated imitation energetically, am dismissed as being a 'materialist.' Just look at the sophistry: these are the people who attribute such a value to materials that they have no fear of their becoming characterless and who freely resort to surrogates."¹¹ Since materials have their own intrinsic formal properties, violating these properties, in Loos's mind, is nothing short of forgery. Ethics and aesthetics are thus interchangeable because one's very choice and use of materials raises fundamental issues of truth versus falsehood, of the genuine versus the surrogate. Loos was so outraged over fin-de-siècle Viennese architecture that he even compared Vienna to the Ukrainian villages built by the Russian statesman Potemkin to impress Catherine the Great (the villages, though outwardly imposing, were actually made of nothing but canvas and pasteboard). "The Potemkin of which I wish to speak here," wrote Loos, "is none other than our dear Vienna herself [where]...in the interest of rentability, the landlord is forced to nail on [buildings] a particular kind of facade."¹² Loos thought he had seen through the deception, and chastised those deceitful enough to practice what he called a strategy of imitation by proclaiming: "The human soul is too lofty and sublime for you to be able to dupe it with your tactics and tricks."¹³ For Loos, then, aesthetics and ethics were subsets of epistemology, of a theory of truth whose ultimate purpose was "to distinguish real from counterfeit."¹⁴

As if collapsing the difference between ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology were not convoluted enough, Loos's critique of ornament also raised a number of disconcerting political issues. The same disturbing anti-feminist rhetoric often spouted during the fin-de-siècle, for example, sometimes emerges in some of his critical writings. And given his predilections for Darwinian theory, it is perhaps unsurprising that Loos voiced these prejudices in an unmistakably Darwinian tone—i.e., a tone marked by the biologist's proclivity to ascribe an inferior position to women in the evolutionary scale.¹⁵ The essay "Ladies' Fashion" is a case in point. "The clothing of woman," Loos writes, "is distinguished externally from that of the man by the preference for ornamental and colorful effects and by the long skirt that covers the legs completely. These two factors demonstrate to us that the woman has fallen behind sharply in her development in recent centuries. No period of culture has known as great difference as our own between the clothing of the free man and the free woman. In earlier eras, men also wore clothing that was colorful and richly adorned and whose hem reached to the floor.... The lower the culture, the more apparent the ornament. Ornament is something that must be overcome.... The march of civilization systematically liberates object after object from ornamentation."¹⁶ (Given Loos's antipathy towards the ornamentation of Klimt's work, he might have felt his own intuition confirmed when the acknowledged leader of the Secession was often photographed in his long painter's coat, or in garments that reached to the floor.)

But if Loos's aesthetics were somewhat idiosyncratic, his association of women with ornament, and ornament with moral degeneration, was not. His connection between femininity and decoration, in fact, stemmed from a widely disseminated stereotype that women were avaricious and lusted for gold. In the second half of the nineteenth century, women had acquired a significant reputation for being both exceedingly materialist and the willing accomplices of capitalist consumerism. According to Abba Goold Woolson, "The majority of women seem to consider themselves as sent into the world for the sole purpose of displaying dry goods; and it is only when acting the part of an animated milliner's block that they feel they are performing their appointed mission."¹⁷ In a more extreme manner—i.e., in a manner worthy of Loos—Tennie Claflin decried the "woman of fashion" as generating the contemporary taste for "vile bunches of hair, tortured into all conceivable, unnatural shapes, to transform the natural beauty of the head to a hideous, affected thing." "What right have you, Woman of Fashion," Claflin asks, "to thus consume wealth, while children on the next street are crying for bread? Your laces and diamonds, and other superfluous articles of ornamentation which you filch from the public welfare, seeking thereby to hide your deformities or to add to your attractions..."¹⁸ In *The Sexes Compared*, moreover, Eduard von Hartmann, deeply influenced by Darwin and Schopenhauer, also reinforced the view that women were both psychologically disturbed and hungry for material possessions. A woman, he writes, will succumb to "hysteria and melancholy, which

constantly threaten to develop into madness if her will is not satisfied, and her depression dissipated by diversions. The husband has to strain every nerve to obtain the money necessary to satisfy her desires."¹⁹ The obvious consequence of women's "irrational" quest for material possessions, Hartmann insisted, was moral degeneracy and economic waste. Loos's tactic of associating women with decoration, and of placing them on a lower evolutionary echelon, is entirely consistent with the opinions just cited. On this basis, one could make the case that Loos objected to the excessively decorative work of the Secession, not on exclusively aesthetic and epistemological grounds, but also because he construed its penchant for ornament as evoking the very effeminacy to which he and his culture were so opposed.

Looking at the political implication of Loos's critique of ornament from another side, it is no less significant to mention that the predilection for materialistic ostentation often attributed to women was also attributed to another marginalized group: Jews. Since both Jewish and women's emancipation were perceived as imminent threats to the established order, the same stereotypes used to denigrate women in fin-de-siècle culture were frequently applied to Jews; in fact, the characteristics expressed are so close as to be nearly interchangeable: physical frailty and deformity, intellectual backwardness and moral depravity, and, of course, avarice and passion for gold. The general consensus in Vienna 1900 that women were inferior, according to Hannah Decker, prompted "the insistent proclamation of anti-Semites that the proof of the Jews' deficiency

lay in their exhibition of traits commonly associated with women. Thus did antifeminism and anti-Semitism unite at the turn of the century."²⁰ Along similar lines, Otto Weininger (whose book of 1903, *Sex and Character*, was spreading around Europe like wildfire, and especially admired in Loos's intellectual circle) insisted that "Judaism is saturated with femininity, with precisely those qualities the essence of which I have shown to be in the strongest opposition to the male nature... the Jew is more saturated with femininity than the Aryan, to such an extent that the most manly Jew is more feminine than the least manly Aryan."²¹ The politician Georg von Schönerer, moreover, proclaimed that it is "unoccupied women who devote themselves to the idiocy of female suffrage, women who have failed in their calling as women or who have no wish to answer it—and Jewesses. They naturally get the support of all the old women of the male sex and of all 'feminists,' that is, those men who are no men."²² And in 1912, Ludwig Langemann, editor of a journal published by the German League Against Women's Emancipation, wrote that the modern feminist movement, like social democracy, is "an international, foreign body in our national life.... Both movements are, considering the great participation of the Jewish element, international in origin and fight, with equal fanaticism, against all fundamentals of the people's life."²³

Intriguingly, even if Loos's aesthetic critiques were not explicitly Judeophobic, his praise of functional simplicity at the expense of ornament parallels tendencies widely repeated in contemporary anti-Semitic rhetoric. In correspondence with the historian of literature Alois Brandl, for

example, the poet Adolf Pichler decried pieces by a Jewish composer in a manner highly reminiscent of Loos: "Technical virtuosity, obtrusive, everything just pasted on the surface, nothing coming from inside, nothing but Jewish merchandise. How different was the appeal of Palestrina's *missa brevis* on Sunday: everything simple."²⁴ Pichler's remarks also typify the way the culture of the time targeted Jewish *nouveaux riches* for ridicule. In his *Austro-Hungarian Life in Town and Country* of 1905, for example, Francis Palmer describes a certain Baroness whose husband is one of the "great powers upon the Stock Exchange," and whose "annual dressmaker's bill alone would equal the salary of a Cabinet Minister. Red-faced and rotund in form, her figure is a striking contrast to that of the typical Viennese women of the higher classes, and her loud, harsh voice, no less than the splendor of her attire, her carriage, and the livery of her servants, betrays her Semitic origin.... The two greatest forces in Viennese society have come into conflict; the Old-World traditional pride of race, and the modern ideal of the supreme power of gold."²⁵ Likewise, in *Vienna and the Viennese* of 1902, Maria Hornor Lansdale writes that "Those women, decked out like the show windows of a jeweler's shop...[who wear] ear-rings in the form of hoops, or little coffers or bells, are Jewesses, bankers' wives and millionaires..."²⁶ Jews themselves, such as Ludwig Oppenheimer, were forced to admit that their coreligionists "affronted" Gentiles by "the provocative manner in which they paraded their wealth."²⁷ Even Theodor Herzl lamented that: "Fops, up-starts, [and] bejewelled women used to be regarded as representative Jews."²⁸

Loos's condemnation of ornament, arguably, fits comfortably within this context. He also decried nouveaux riches and parvenus for their vulgar display of wealth: "The parvenu considers it disgraceful not to be able to adorn himself with diamonds, disgraceful not to be able to wear furs, disgraceful not to be able to live in a stone palace...those people whom he wants to deceive [however]...cannot be fooled."²⁹ When specifically targeting the *Wiener Werkstätte* and the Secession, Loos qualified ornament as criminal, not only because it ran afoul of his own modern aesthetic sensibilities, but also because of its generation of waste. By cloaking his arguments in economic garb, and, in the process, echoing his culture's nefarious propensity to associate Jews with materialism and profit-seeking, Loos felt justified in stressing that, by increasing the price of objects, ornament "is not only produced by criminals, it commits a crime itself by damaging [a society's] national economy and therefore its cultural development."³⁰ Since the monies squandered on excessive decoration played to dubious forces such as fashion and pretense, rather than satisfied genuine needs or practical functions, Loos argued that ornament corrupts a culture from within; it manipulates market forces by artificial means, and upsets the natural economic balance between supply and demand. "This," Loos continues, "appears to be the secret of the Austrian national economy."³¹

Given the above, it is not unreasonable to posit the argument that Loos's critique of Secessionist ornament was skewed by political motives. It was common knowledge in turn-of-the-century Vienna that the Secession was highly

subsidized by Jewish patrons.³² Karl Wittgenstein, for instance, the philosopher's father, provided the necessary funding for the completion of Joseph Maria Olbrich's Secession building; the *Wiener Werkstätte*, the Secession's sister organization, were lavishly financed, almost single-handedly, by Fritz Wärndorfer—even if to the dismay and alarm of his own family. Of the three critics most supportive of the Secession, two were Jewish (Berta Zuckermandl and Ludwig Hevesi), while Hermann Bahr, in spite of an early flirtation with anti-Semitism,³³ married a Jew and compiled 38 interviews in a book devoted to the implications and ramifications of anti-Semitism.³⁴ Many of the women who posed for Klimt's most famous portraits, Margarete Stonborough, Serena Lederer, Fredericke Maria Beer, Elisabeth Bachofen-Echt, and Adele Bloch-Bauer, were all of Jewish descent.³⁵ And when Klimt's proposed university paintings were causing scandal and controversy among the faculty, Klimt's opponents attempted to defame Klimt and his defender, the art historian Franz Wickhoff, by painting both men as the willing participants in a Jewish conspiracy—even though, as Carl Schorske has already noted, both were in fact Gentiles.³⁶ For his part, Loos declined to participate in Secessionist exhibitions until, in his own words, "the merchants will be chased from the Temple."³⁷ And in an essay on Jewish emancipation, he went so far as to say that, although he had nothing against Jews who held fast to their beliefs, those who patronized the Secession were another matter. "Jews who have long since given up the caftan," he writes, "are now happy to take it up again. Because these Secessionist apartment

furnishings are nothing but disguised caftans, no less than the names Gold and Silberstein, or Moritz and Siegfried."³⁸

Loos may not have been a fierce anti-Semite, at least not one who endorsed a racial definition of Jews (his two closest friends, the essayist Karl Kraus and the poet Peter Altenberg, as well as his second wife, Elsie Grünfeld-Altmann, were converted Jews). But this did not prevent his aesthetic diatribes from being inflected with political meanings. Those inflections may have been subtle, but an astute Viennese of the time would surely have detected them. Not long after its completion, for example, Loos's house of *Michaelerplatz* was referred to as "clean-shaven,"³⁹ a term that, according to Patrick Werkner, was not innocuous but referenced "the 'beardedness' of the Orthodox Jew." (The Jew, in other words, whose assimilation to modern culture, both symbolically and practically, was contingent on his shaving off his beard.) Werkner states, moreover, that Karl Kraus, who sought to eradicate ornament from language as fiercely as Loos did from architecture, specifically "mocked the Viennese Zionists who, like Theodor Herzl, defiantly grew beards to accentuate their Jewish solidarity." "The unornamented, 'unbearded' house," Werkner concludes, "thus could also be read as a [Loosian] statement against Jewish particularism."⁴⁰ Werkner's is a powerful point, which he reinforces by quoting the following passage by Kraus: "I am not taken in by the facade!... I can make tabula rasa. I sweep the street, I loosen the beards, *I shave the ornaments!* [*italics mine*]."⁴¹ When applied to the Loos house, then, the term "clean-shaven" was far from an innocent metaphor. Indeed, Edward

Timms states that, for Kraus, beards symbolized “what wigs were for the rebellious young men of the eighteenth century: an ostentatious attempt to disguise the inadequacies of the wearer.”⁴² The psychological motivation behind Kraus’s preoccupation with facial hair, he continues, “seems more likely to be ethnic rather than sexual. If shaving is an act of personal conviction, it is so because not shaving was also a matter of conviction, in the Orthodox Jewish tradition which Kraus repudiated. It was the anti-Semitic ambience of Austria-Hungary which gave beards their symbolic force.... He [Kraus] mocked the Zionists for the regressiveness of their ‘Assyrian’ beards and hair styles, as well as their ideas. Being clean-shaven was part of his attempt to divest himself of all traces of Jewish identity.”⁴³ That contemporary observers referred to Loos’s building on *Michaelerplatz* as “clean-shaven” suggests, especially in view of how loaded the term was in fin-de-siècle Viennese culture, that politically alert members of Loos’s audience may very well have detected a subliminal anti-Semitic connotation underlying its dearth of ornament.

If the argument of this essay is at all persuasive, however—i.e., that the deprecation of ornament could have conveyed specific gendered and ethnically charged meanings in fin-de-siècle Vienna—then its opposite should also be the case. In other words, if aesthetic debates had a decidedly political edge, then apologies *for* should be no less ideologically charged than attacks *on* decorative ornament. To make this point, we need to turn our attention to a thinker at the opposite end of the spectrum from Loos: the art historian, curator, and theorist Alois Riegl. Given

his curatorial experience in a museum devoted to decorative rather than fine arts, Riegl developed a great appreciation for the complexity of the decorative patterns and designs found on textiles and oriental rugs. In his seminal treatise *Stilfragen (Problems of Style)*, he traced the migrations of ornamental motifs in Ancient vases and architectural structures from culture to culture and from chronological period to chronological period. Intriguingly, his methodological tools were no different from those a mainstream art historian would have brought to bear on issues of stylistic influence in representational art; they were different only insofar as Riegl applied them to allegedly “lesser” idioms such as abstract patterning. On the basis of his extensive formal analyses, Riegl argued that ornament not only had a complex history, but that it also could be studied on the same footing and with the same techniques as figuration: ornament, he wrote, undergoes “the same continuous, coherent development that prevails in the art of all periods, as in the historical relationship between antique mythological imagery and Christian iconographic types.”⁴⁴

By studying ornament from a scholarly perspective, thereby raising it to the level of a legitimate, serious art form, Riegl also sought to counteract the materialistic theory of art espoused by Gottfried Semper and his followers, a theory that saw in materials and technique the primary impetus behind art and ornament. In counter-distinction, Riegl introduced the term *kunstwollen* (usually translated as “artistic intention” or “artistic volition”) to attribute artistic creativity to other (i.e., national or psychological) impulses. Unrestricted by practical utility or by

the physical limitations imposed by materials, these impulses, according to Riegl, could trigger the creation of either representational art or abstract ornament. What is especially noteworthy about Riegl’s text, however, is its refusal to praise figuration above abstraction, or to claim, as did Loos, that ornament was an anterior (and thus inferior) mode of representation. Instead, Riegl argued that three-dimensional sculpture could have emerged independently of, or even prior to, abstract patterning because artists could have been inspired to copy animals or human beings directly from nature. Since no models or prototypes existed for drawing, carving, or painting an animal on a flat surface, Riegl counted such a transposition as a “truly creative act.”⁴⁵ But whether abstraction and figuration evolved autonomously or sequentially, in the end, each, according to Riegl, stands on equal footing. Even abstract patterns found on Greek Geometric vases, he wrote, were created in accordance with “the highest laws of symmetry and rhythm.” Yet despite being “the most perfect of styles” from “the standpoint of regularity,” Riegl lamented that: “on our scale of values...it occupies the lowest rank.”⁴⁶

It was thus among Riegl’s self-appointed tasks to undermine the legitimacy of certain hierarchical distinctions. Why, he asked, should one mode be declared superior to another? In his view, all art vacillates between two poles: “at one end a decorative urge demanding a feast for the eyes and at the other a desire to give concrete expression to the most significant ideas and feelings of humanity.”⁴⁷ Even if decorative patterns are not directly copied from nature, and may have

no visible connection to human affairs, Riegl insisted that the same symmetry and rhythm evidenced in geometric shapes are “apparent in the natural forms of humans, animals, plants, and crystals...it does not require any particular insight to perceive how the basic shapes and configurations of plane geometry are latent in natural things.”⁴⁸ Since all art continually oscillates between the figural and the abstract, it is invalid to valorize one and impugn the other, or to describe any change between them in terms of an aesthetic “rise and fall.” After originating in abstraction, he continues, Ancient Greek art had been characterized by a “drive to depict the objective world and...to master human anatomy and give concrete form to the religious, ethical, and political concepts motivating Hellenic culture. By the last third of the fifth century, this process had reached a point that could hardly be surpassed. Then the delight in decoration once again stirred, pressing toward the other of the two poles between which all art fluctuates.”⁴⁹

Both styles are not just equal from a qualitative point of view, but they can even co-exist simultaneously. Since Greek art focused on the human figure, it should hardly be surprising, according to Riegl, if the human figure would also enter “the realm of decoration. It was the task of Hellenic artists to find an appropriate means of combining human figures and tendril ornament.”⁵⁰ What is most compelling about Riegl’s concept of the *kunstwollen*, then, is the broad inclusiveness of its scope, a scope that makes no qualitative distinction between art and ornament. Like his compatriot, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Riegl apparently rejected

the view that works of art have inherent, objective meanings, arguing, instead, that all meanings and values are predicated upon context. (In the *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, Wittgenstein made that most un-Loosian of statements: “One may say of certain objects that they have this or that purpose. The essential thing is that this is a *lamp*, that it serves to give light; —that it is an ornament to the room, fills an empty space, etc., is not essential. But there is not always a sharp distinction between the essential and inessential.”⁵¹) And unlike Loos, Riegl also rejected absolute distinctions between fine and applied art, declaring: “how senseless and unjustifiable it is from the scholarly point of view to make such a distinction.”⁵² Riegl, in addition, did not connect tattooing with criminal degeneracy, but with natural human impulses and inclinations. “The desire to adorn the body,” he wrote, “is far more elementary than the desire to cover it with woven garments, and that the decorative motifs that satisfy the simple desire for adornment, such as linear, geometric configurations, surely existed long before textiles were used for physical protection.”⁵³ For Riegl, then, “All of art history presents itself as a continuous struggle with material; it is not the tool—which is determined by the technique—but the artistically creative idea that strives to expand its creative realm and increase its formal potential.”⁵⁴

On his own account, Riegl was able to detect the cross-fertilization of ornamental motifs across different cultures and geographical locales precisely because his rejection of a progressive theory of aesthetics unburdened him from the biases commonly held against decorative

abstraction. If Loos saw the appropriation of ornament as regressive, especially if its origins were foreign, Riegl was especially sensitive to the nuances of cross-cultural interchange; in fact, he devoted the entire last section of *Stilfragen*, “The Arabesque,” to the relationship between Islamic and Western art. “I find it exasperating,” Riegl admitted, “and explicable only as one of the many unfortunate consequences of the materialist theory of art—that even highly experienced specialists still blithely dismiss any possibility of a relationship between the Oriental Arabesque and classical antiquity just as there can be no relation between fire and ice.”⁵⁵ Some decorative patterns characteristic of Islamic ornament, he continues, were “already latent in Greek art, waiting only to be sparked by the desire for greater abstraction” that would later promote them into “major formal element[s].”⁵⁶ Not only was it possible for cross-cultural interchange to have salutary results, but, for Riegl, social and religious motives (i.e., motives extraneous to the aesthetic) also had to factor into any persuasive explanation of stylistic change. Although he conceded how difficult it proved to identify the specific point at which ornament produced in regions from the Byzantine Empire annexed by Islam began to diverge from its Byzantine precedents—i.e., because art in both regions initially followed analogous lines of development irrespective of political boundaries—he nonetheless recognized that the drive towards ornament increased “in areas where figurative representation was deliberately inhibited, if not outrightly suppressed by religious statutes and where art, as a result, was essentially limited to satisfying the decorative urge and to ornament

alone."⁵⁷ In other words, Riegl detected hitherto overlooked formal connections among the art of two separate cultures; and, more importantly, by refusing to judge art according to fixed, pre-established criteria, he was able to ascribe any formal divergences to the function the art serves in the specific culture's socio-religious dynamic. In so doing, he unhinged art from any universal, trans-cultural, or absolutist set of values, recognizing, instead, that creativity is subject to conditions that can only qualify as time-bound and context-specific.

Of course, Riegl's position is not free of problems: his interpretations are neither devoid of errors,⁵⁸ nor of a proclivity (typical of his time) to praise Greek artistic achievements with special vigor. The concept of the *kunstwollen*, moreover, is so nebulous that even Riegl's followers strongly disagree as to its precise meaning.⁵⁹ Yet what distinguishes Riegl from Loos is his greater sensitivity to the wide diversity and plurality of human creativity. For the likes of Riegl and Wittgenstein, conceptualizing a persuasive theory of representation precluded ascribing truth to one kind of artistic style and falsehood to another. If only on this basis, Riegl and Loos's positions are intellectually incompatible. But the emergence of Riegl's ideas in Viennese fin-de-siècle culture—a culture where aesthetics and politics formed such a strong alliance—invites further speculation as to whether Riegl's aesthetic inclusiveness also had notable *political* implications; and, more to the point, whether these implications could have opposed the very sectarian antifeminism and anti-Semitism so virulently espoused in the Habsburg Empire. In other words: if the aesthetic

exclusiveness of Loos's critique of ornament reflected *political* exclusiveness, could the aesthetic *inclusiveness* of Riegl's apologia for ornament have reflected a desire for *political* inclusiveness?

To appreciate the specific ways in which Riegl's writings may have satisfied such an agenda, it is significant to mention Riegl's intellectual debt to his teacher Robert Zimmerman, a philosopher whose own formation was profoundly indebted to the worldview of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. Leibniz is an important thinker to introduce in this context because his philosophy offered a clear counter-example to the vitriolic and divisive character of Viennese politics. In his "Monadology," Leibniz saw the universe as a harmonious system comprised of interconnected parts—what he called monads. "All matter," he declared, "is connected.... Not only is every body affected by those which are in contact with it," he argued, "and responds in some way to whatever happens to them, but also by means of them the body responds to those bodies adjoining them, and in their intercommunication reaches to any distance whatsoever. Consequently every body responds to all that happens in the universe..."⁶⁰ All of these elements fit together in what Leibniz calls a "preestablished harmony between all substances, since they are all representations of one and the same universe."⁶¹ This harmony, moreover, functions like a perfect government under whose aegis no noble action goes "unrewarded and no evil action unpunished; everything must turn out for the well-being of the good."⁶² In the Habsburg Empire, Leibniz had exercised a powerful influence during the early nineteenth century, especially

among intellectuals and politicians eager to implement Enlightenment ideals of universal order and harmony. On a practical level, Leibniz's influence manifested itself above all in attempts to engender cooperation among the various nationalities and ethnic groups of the Empire—especially between Czechs and Germans—as well as to placate the very tensions that, with World War I, were to erupt with such destructive force. According to William Johnston, Robert Zimmerman, whose philosophical works count among the "last great treatises of the Leibnizian tradition...exerted his most lasting impact on [his pupil] the art historian Alois Riegl."⁶³

In view of the frequent interconnections between aesthetics and politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna, Riegl's reluctance to privilege representational art over ornament could be construed as an aesthetic parallel to, and philosophical extension of, Zimmerman's fidelity to a Leibnizian view of universal interdependence and harmony. Riegl's breaking down of the barrier between fine and applied art—a barrier Loos sought to maintain at all costs—could also be seen as a counter-pole to what Johnston has called the typically Austrian "delight in polar opposites."⁶⁴ In the philosophical arena, resistance to Leibniz came from Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, two philosophers whose influence on the artistic and political currents of the period gradually overtook and eclipsed that of Leibniz. Instead of harmony, Schopenhauer stressed self-preservation as the pervasive principle in the universe.⁶⁵ Instead of interconnection and symmetry, Schopenhauer saw the world as driven by strife and division. And if Leibniz exercised a powerful influence on

Zimmerman and Riegl, Schopenhauer exercised his most powerfully on Richard Wagner. Wagner, in turn, provided an inspirational force behind the very German nationalism (and, ironically enough, Herzlian Zionism) scissoring the aesthetic and political landscape of Vienna 1900.⁶⁶ Through the example of Wagner, the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche substituted the Leibnizian view of mutual interdependence and harmony with a neo-Romantic cult of genius, a cult to which many members of the Viennese avant-garde subscribed.⁶⁷ Connected with that cult was a divisive belief in the superiority of a certain kind of stoic European, who, following the ideas of the Greeks, practiced a life of self-denial unknown to other cultures. Unlike the Greek, Nietzsche writes, "The Roman of the Empire ceased to be Roman through the contemplation of the world that lay at his feet; he lost himself in the crowd of foreigners that streamed into Rome, and degenerated amid the cosmopolitan carnival of the arts, worships and moralities. It is the same with the modern man."⁶⁸

By the time he began articulating the key principles of his late philosophy, Nietzsche was arguing that the most powerful force behind existence—more powerful, even, than self-preservation—is the will to power. In the late nineteenth century, many politicians employed Nietzsche's subversion of Enlightenment ideals to attack the Liberal values that often accompanied them, emboldening those Viennese confident in the legitimacy of certain polar oppositions. Feminism and Jewish assimilation were often decried in the fin-de-siècle precisely because they blurred the distinction between

men and women, Christian and Jew, obfuscating what were considered clear and unbridgeable boundaries and questioning the social order that empowered one group as opposed to another. The cult of genius came at the issue from the other side. It encouraged the isolation of the gifted individual from society as prescribed by Nietzsche (a recurrent theme in both the literature of the time⁶⁹ and in the work of avant-garde painters such as Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, and Egon Schiele); but it also contributed to the blind adulation of strong political personalities (e.g., Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, and later Adolf Hitler). Like antifeminism and anti-Semitism, the cult of artistic or political genius managed to counteract the Leibnizian view of balance and consonance by exploiting rather than mitigating oppositions: oppositions between the self and society, the genius and the herd, one political party and another, one nation or race and another, and so on. Intriguingly, those demagogues who championed political or racial division often championed individualism—at least on a rhetorical level, and only insofar as it suited their purposes—which, given Nietzsche's opposition to both German nationalism and anti-Semitism, entailed a gross distortion of his ideas. Regardless, anti-Semitic writers such as Julius Langbehn were not above misusing Nietzsche and claiming individualism to be "the original motive force of all Germanness."⁷⁰ Riegl's closeness to Leibniz, of course, made him an altogether different animal. As Henri Zerner put it, he not only argued "for equal treatment for all historical periods," he also sought to "overthrow the supremacy of the individual creator as central to the significance of

the work [of art] in favor of a higher communal point of view."⁷¹

From this perspective, the debate surrounding ornament in fin-de-siècle Vienna transcended the realm of mere aesthetics; or, to put it another way, this debate reflected the intimacy of the connection between ethics and aesthetics, epistemology and politics. For Loos, the division between the structural and the ornamental betrayed a distinction between the real and the illusory, the genuine and the counterfeit. His entire worldview hinged on maintaining strict demarcations between one domain and another. Riegl saw things differently. Which does not mean, of course, that he was intellectually committed to breaking down all distinctions. Refusing to privilege representational over ornamental forms of art, or the fine over the applied arts did not prevent him from endorsing other forms of binary oppositions. Yet those oppositions (e.g., between the optic and the haptic) did not disparage one art form at the expense of another. To fall on Riegl's side of the debate, therefore, does not mean that all categories and distinctions should be banned. Certain oppositions are entirely benign, and without making oppositions of any kind, human thought and intellectual activity would most likely grind to a halt. But others, especially when manipulated by a clever rhetorician, and introduced in a particularly divisive cultural climate, can take on highly charged political ramifications—as did the oppositions this essay has touched upon (structure and ornament, function and decoration, truth and falsehood, male and female, Christian and Jew, German and non-German, Western and

non-Western). And, as has often been stressed in post-structuralist and deconstructionist thought, most binary oppositions are not only arbitrary and culturally constructed, but they invariably tend to valorize one of terms of the opposition above the other. This observation applies to the Viennese fin-de-siècle culture with a vengeance, a culture that not only often exacerbated the oppositions between political parties, aesthetic camps, ethnic groups, but one that also fought to prevent the contamination of one group by the other. The frequency with which terms such as "feminized" or "Judaicized" were used to describe the degeneration of art, language, politics, or the human body itself, bespeaks the extent to which many turn-of-the-century thinkers exploited ethnic slurs and sexist rhetoric to uphold clear and distinct boundaries between the ostensibly "positive" characteristics of a culture and their "negative" counterparts. These oppositions were in place to prevent the "desirable" elements from being polluted by the "undesirable," and to allow those using such dyadic rhetoric to believe that they, and not their rivals, represented the "desirable" pole of the opposition. Riegl's defense of ornament may not have brought those oppositions crumbling down, of course, but it could be construed as a step in the right direction.

I would like to express my gratitude to Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom for their kind invitation to contribute to this catalog, and to Nancy Netzer, Naomi Blumberg, and Susan Forster for their help and assistance. Finally, I dedicate this essay, in friendship, to David Castriota.

Endnotes

- 1 This essay has been adapted from parts of my book *Re/Casting Kokoschka: Ethics and Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Madison and Teaneck, 2002).
- 2 Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime." *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*. Arts Council of Great Britain (London, 1985) 100.
- 3 Loos, "Ornament and Crime," 100.
- 4 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 100.
- 5 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 100.
- 6 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 100.
- 7 Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship* (New York, 1999) 82.
- 8 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 100. It may be significant to mention that Loos's equation of ornament and crime may have been borrowed from the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso who argued that born criminals possessed both nervous systems and bodily frames that resembled those of savages. This also explained, in his view, their predilection for tattoos, a tendency to decorate the body that has "fallen into disuse among the higher classes and only exists among sailors, soldiers, peasants and workmen." Cesare Lombroso, Introduction, *Criminal Man According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso*, by Gina Lombroso Ferrero (New York, 1911) 46. See also, Allan Janik's essay "Weininger and the Science of Sex." *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*. Ed. Robert B. Pynsent (London, 1989) 29.

9 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 100. See also, Burkhardt Rukschcio and Roland Schachel, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk* (Salzburg and Vienna, 1982) 57, 59.

10 Loos's ideas may have appeared idiosyncratic to some, but the tone of his rhetoric relies on the popularity of the term "degenerate" in turn of the Century Viennese culture. As Brigitte Hamann writes in *Hitler's Vienna*, p. 82: "The frequent use [of the word degenerate] around 1900 suggests the popularity of the great doctrine of faith of that time, Darwin's theory of evolution. Following Charles Darwin, who died in 1882, degeneration means the abnormal devolution of plants and animals. For example, everything that contradicted Darwin's law of progress and the permanent evolution toward a better state also was 'degenerate.'"

Viennese modernism's turning toward the primitive was also termed 'degenerate' as well, looked upon as a regression that defied nature.... Modernism's appreciation of primitive art contradicted this alleged natural law, and was thus no longer viewed as progress or as an independent form of art, but as 'degeneration,' a fashionable aberration, a sign of decay..."

11 Loos, "Building Materials," *Neue Freie Presse*, August 28, 1898. *Spoken Into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900*. Ed. A. Rossi (Cambridge, MA, 1982) 64-65.

12 Loos, "Potemkin City," *Ver Sacrum*, July 1898. *Spoken Into the Void* 95, 96.

13 Loos, "The Principle of Cladding," *Neue Freie Presse*, September 4, 1898, *Spoken Into the Void* 69.

14 Loos, "The Principle of Cladding" 69.

15 Darwin, quoted in Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London, 1906) 71: "If two lists," Darwin wrote in the *Descent of Man*, 'were made of the most eminent men and women

in poetry, painting, sculpture, music...the two lists would not bear comparison."

16 Loos, "Ladies' Fashion," *Neue Freie Presse*, August 21, 1898. Adolf Loos: *Spoken Into the Void, Collected Essays 1897-1900*, 102. See also, J. Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna: Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism* (London and New York, 2000), and Hélène Furján, "Dressing Down: Adolf Loos and the Politics of Ornament," *The Journal of Architecture* 8 (Spring 2003): 115ff.

17 Abba Goold Woolson, *Woman in American Society* (Boston, 1873) 103.

18 T. C. [Tennessee] Claflin, *Constitutional Equality, A Right of Woman* (New York, 1871), quoted in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, 1986) 355.

19 Eduard von Hartmann, *The Sexes Compared; and Other Essays*, trans. A. Kenner (London, 1895) 42.

20 Hannah S. Decker, *Freud, Dora, and Vienna 1900* (New York, 1991) 40. See also, Hitler's Vienna 372ff. In *Modernity and Crises of Identity* (New York, 1993) 167, Jacques Le Rider also states: "from Schopenhauer to Baudelaire and Weininger, misogyny and antisemitism develop according to an analogous 'logic'."

21 *Sex and Character* 306.

22 Schönerer in the *Alldeutsches Tagblatt*, January 15, 1907, quoted in Peter G. J. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York, 1964) 222; see also, I. Belke's *Die sozialreformistischen Ideen von Josef Popper-Lynkeus 1838-1921* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1978) 239.

23 Ludwig Langemann, *Auf falschem Wege. Beiträge zur Kritik der radikalen Frauenbewegung* (Berlin: 1913) 13, 25, quoted in Pultzer 222.

24 Letter of Adolf Pichler to Alois Brandl, Letter 178, 10 April 1886, quoted in S. P. Scheichl, "The Contexts and Nuances of Anti-Jewish Language: Were all the 'Antisemites' Antisemites?" *Jews, Antisemitism and Culture in Vienna*. Eds. Ivar Oxaal, Michael Pollak, and Gerhardt Botz, (London, 1987) 101.

25 Francis Palmer, *Austro-Hungarian Life in Town and Country* (New York and London, 1905) 187-88.

26 M. Hornor Lansdale, *Vienna and the Viennese* (Philadelphia, 1902) 117.

27 [Oppenheimer, Ludwig John] *Austriaca: Betrachtungen und Streiflicher* (Leipzig, 1882) 193. Hugo Bettauer, in his satirical novel *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (New York, 1936) 12, describes a scenario where the chancellor of Austria proposes and then implements a law to expel all Jews from Austria. In his speech, he proclaims: "Who has piled billions upon billions since the ill-starred year 1914? The Jew! Who controls the tremendous circulation of our money, who sits at the director's desk in great banks, who is the head of practically all industries? The Jew? Who owns our theaters? The Jew! Who writes the plays that are produced? The Jew! Who rides about in automobiles, who revels in night resorts, who crowds the cafés and fashionable restaurants, who covers himself and his wife with pearls and precious stones? The Jew!"

28 Theodor Herzl, *Old-New Land*, quoted in Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Bloomington, 1993) 75.

29 Loos, "Building Materials," *Spoken into the Void* 64.

30 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 101.

31 Loos, "Ornament and Crime" 102.

32 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (Lincoln and London, 1964) 21-22.

33 See George E. Berkley, *Vienna and its Jews: the Tragedy of Success 1880s-1980s* (Lanham, Md, 1988) 73, and Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism*, 51.

34 See Bahr's *Der Antisemitismus: ein internationales Interview* (Berlin, 1894).

35 Stephen Beller, *Vienna and the Jews 1867-1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1989) 28.

36 Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1985) 239.

37 Loos, "Keramika" *Die Zukunft* 13 (1904), quoted in *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, 55.

38 Loos, "Die Emanzipation des Judentums," Undated Typescript, quoted in *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, 70.

39 Patrick Werkner, "The Child-Woman and Hysteria: Images of the Female Body in the Art of Schiele, In Viennese Modernism, and Today." *Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality, and Viennese Modernism*. Ed. Patrick Werkner (Palo Alto, 1994) 66.

40 Werkner, "The Child-Woman and Hysteria," n 18, 138. For another point of view, see also, Burkhardt Rukschcio and Roland Schachel, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, 295.

41 Werkner, "The Child-Woman and Hysteria," n 18, 138.

42 Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven, 1986) 132.

43 Timms, Karl Kraus: *Apocalyptic Satirist* 133-34.

44 Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain and annotated by David Castriota (Princeton, 1992) 8.

45 *Problems of Style* 14.

46 *Problems of Style* 16.

47 *Problems of Style* 82.

48 *Problems of Style* 15.

49 *Problems of Style* 215.

50 *Problems of Style* 210.

51 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1958) 30.

52 *Problems of Style* 31.

53 *Problems of Style* 5, 6.

54 *Problems of Style* 33.

55 *Problems of Style* 239.

56 *Problems of Style* 254.

57 *Problems of Style* 287.

58 See David Castriota's annotations in *Problems of Style* 307-96.

59 See Erwin Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981): 17-33; and Henri Zerner, "Al-

ois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism," *Daedalus* 105 (Winter 1976): 177-88.

60 Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, "The Monadology," *The Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz* (Garden City, New York, 1974) 465.

61 "The Monadology" 468.

62 "The Monadology" 470.

63 William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History 1848-1938* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, 1983) 288, 289.

64 Johnston, *The Austrian Mind* 1.

65 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols. (New York, 1966) 2: 184, 338; see also Johnston, *The Austrian Mind* 283ff.

66 Michael Pollak, *Vienne 1900: Une identité blessée* (Paris, 1984) 69-71.

67 See Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity* 26.

68 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York, 1957) 28-29.

69 See the chapter "Individualism, Solitude and Identity Crisis," in Le Rider's *Modernity and Crises of Identity* 30ff.

70 Quoted in *Modernity and Crises of Identity* 59.

71 Zerner, "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism" 179.