

Architecture and the Arts

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Architecture has been in dialogue with the other arts throughout history. What is often referred to as ornament or decoration are those aspects of a building that are separate from, or applied to, its structural surfaces. These supplemental elements—paintings, sculptures, and mosaics on walls; inventive uses of glass, both transparent and colored; elaboration on (or of) structural components themselves; and imaginative approaches to exterior cladding—have appeared across the globe and served many functions across time. These non-structural embellishments have acted as political propaganda, as conduits of moral or religious meaning, as functional additions, and as “art for art’s sake,” in the modern sense of that phrase.

The quantity, quality, and complexity of ornament on a given structure can provide important clues about the social values of a place and time. An analysis of architectural decoration can also clarify a society’s most cherished architectural principles. In fact, it is often difficult, not to mention arbitrary, to praise the structural act of building apart from its artistic elements. In some contexts, such as the architecture of early Islam, function and decoration are not considered distinct, but rather as inextricable bearers of architectural meaning; at the Qasr Mshatta in Jordan (Figure 7.1-8), the carved stonework frieze, with its cavorting griffins, peacocks, and lions, announces the palace’s role as a secular space (only the qibla wall lacks these figures).



Figure 7.1-8

In others, ornament is considered auxiliary to the technical creation of a building. In 19th-century Britain, for example, ornament itself was believed to have aesthetic and moral content of its own that was separable from the constructional aspects of architecture. One of the main proponents of the Gothic Revival, Augustus Welby

Northmore Pugin, claimed that it was attitudes towards ornament that distinguished medieval life from its degraded industrial counterpart. Pugin argued that the creation of ornament was itself a religious, redemptive act of piety. Like his contemporary John Ruskin, Pugin believed that the Middle Ages were a time of harmonious union between art, craft, and everyday life—a conviction that is reflected in the Houses of Parliament (Figure 15.2-3), which he designed together with Charles Barry. Barry was largely responsible for the structure's horizontal and rather neoclassical massing, while Pugin devoted himself to its decoration. Therefore, the details of the building are entirely Gothic, with lancet windows, carved stone sculptures, and towering spires.



Figure 15.2-3

Though most buildings feature decoration of some sort, the amount and elaborateness of architectural ornament is generally proportional to the wealth of its patrons—and an abundance of lavish ornament is in itself often a declaration of state power. By the sixth century BCE, for example, the Achaemenid Empire under King Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE) reached its apex, covering an extensive territory from the Indus Valley to the Ionian coast of Turkey. To demonstrate the expansion of the empire, Darius established a new ceremonial capital at Persepolis, selecting a site near Cyrus the Great's capital of Pasargadae that backed up to steep cliffs (Figure 4.1-9).



Figure 4.1-9

Like many Persian cities, Persepolis sat on a vast platform that contained complex drainage systems and was enclosed by mud brick fortifications. The scale and engineering of Persepolis (meaning simply “the city of the Persians” in Greek) is impressive, and works in concert with a technically sophisticated program of ornament to demonstrate what it meant to be a citizen of the empire. The bifurcated stair (Figure 4.1-10) that provided the single point of ingress to the platform, a masterpiece of processional architecture, is flanked by intricate stone carvings.



Figure 4.1-10

The low-relief sculptures depict delegates from each territory of the empire arriving to bring gifts to the emperor during the annual festival of Nawruz, with characteristically regional garb, weaponry, and hairstyles. As these dignitaries ascended the platform, they would have seen their own comportment both dictated by and mirrored in the sculpture around them. In life, as in the ornament at Persepolis, territories conquered by the Achaemenids voluntarily participated in the pageantry of veneration surrounding the emperor, showing the relatively peaceful process of absorption that was the empire's strategy.

As well as conveying monumental displays of power, ornament has also been used to articulate the content of everyday life and reflect it back to elite viewers, like the landowners and merchants of the Roman Empire. Roman houses in the capital city were usually decoratively restrained in accordance with the ideal of moderation (Vitruvius himself had established the connection between decorum and décor, or purpose and appropriate adornment). However, homes in the country or the colonies were often highly ornamented with familiar narrative scenes rendered in fresco, ivory inlay, or mosaic, demonstrating the importance of the *domus* to quotidian life throughout the empire. In Pompeii, the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE preserved much architectural ornament that would have otherwise been lost to time. The wall paintings and mosaics adorning the walls of Pompeii's houses reveal how its citizens thought about both architecture and daily life. Pompeian wall paintings are examples of "true fresco," or *fresco buono*, in which paint is applied to the wall while the plaster is still wet. Thus, the architectural ornament here is simultaneously "applied" and part of the wall itself. At the Domus Vettii (Figure 5.1-19), the paintings in the peristyle surrounding the court depict scenes from nature, mirroring the landscape in the garden itself. In the so-called Ixion Room, the narrative scenes are set in illusionistic architectural spaces that serve to push the wall surfaces visually back in space, a characteristic of many of the wall paintings in Pompeii. In addition to wall paintings, houses in Pompeii contain an extraordinary range of scenes rendered in mosaic, from portraits of the homeowners to mythological scenes to historical vignettes. Some mosaics represent scenes of the family's business. In others, domestic animals are affectionately rendered; in the House of Orpheus, a guard dog with a red collar and leash bounds towards the space of the viewer, the horizontal composition of the mosaic lending depth to the flat, ungraded tones of the tesserae, and in the House of the Faun, a tabby cat subdues a dismayed-looking bird with its paw. The mosaics display a range of technical skill, from basic to sophisticated. One remarkable floor mosaic shows an aquatic scene in which an octopus struggles with a lobster while various colorful fish teem in the water around them. The careful calibration of color in the tesserae gives the scene a remarkable dimensionality. In fact, both mosaics and wall paintings have a particularly spatial function within the *domus*. Not only do these decorations add narrative, but the illusionistic architectonic space of the paintings and the glittering, reflective surface of the mosaics also add a virtual depth to the walls on which they appear. This enrichment of the space of the house is characteristic of the empire's emphasis on everyday life. Even more modest homes display an attention to the quotidian; at the multi-dwelling insula in Ostia, for example, the pattern of the exposed brick lends an attractive and dignified variety to the façade.



Figure 5.1-19

Due to their fragility, wall paintings and mosaics are usually employed on the interior of buildings. Exterior cladding, on the other hand, can serve multiple purposes, at once decorative and functional. In Portugal, the glazed ceramic tiles known as azulejos—provide both decorative energy and protection from the elements to wall surfaces. The form arrived on the Iberian Peninsula in the thirteenth century as a material and linguistic translation of the Moorish *al zellige*, which in Arabic refers to a smooth, polished stone. In fact, the origin point of the idea was in Roman mosaics, which, in addition to Pompeii, appeared throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Rather than undertaking the labor-intensive process of making tesserae, however, craftsmen were able to produce azulejos in large amounts by making glazed terracotta tiles and then cutting them into smaller fragments. Though azulejos have been used in a number of regions, under the Portuguese Empire they developed a particularly Portuguese meaning and were used, much like Roman bricks, as bearers of imperial identity. As the favored decorative material of King Manuel I, under whose rule Lisbon had grown to be the largest city on the Iberian Peninsula, architectural tilework proliferated throughout the city and its surroundings. Among other sites, the king commissioned a vast program of azulejo installation in the interiors and courtyards of the royal palace at Sintra. Demonstrating the vibrant trading culture of Portugal, they combine Chinese, Dutch, and Arabic ceramic techniques, and depict a variety of figural scenes and geometric motifs. Because azulejos

could be decorated in a number of ways, they often covered surfaces that had previously been the domain of other arts, thus effectively functioning as tapestries, frescos, and carved reliefs. After the earthquake of 1755 devastated the city of Lisbon, azulejos offered a quick and easy way to establish a vernacular architecture that was at once regional and modern. During the era of urban rebuilding known as the Pombaline period, azulejos were able to be mass-produced using industrial methods, and were therefore an affordable means of decoration to the rising middle class. This combination of vibrancy and practicality means that ceramic tilework has remained a popular means of decoration in Iberia. More recent variants on the idea include the stations of the Lisbon metro, Antoni Gaudi's Parc Guell in Barcelona, and Rem Koolhaas of OMA's Casa de Música in Porto.



Porto, Portugal. San Ildefonso, azulejos tiles as cladding

Despite the widespread belief that modernist architects sought to purify architecture from the scourge of applied decoration, this was largely a rhetorical position meant to cure the excesses of historicism. To be sure, many architects heralded Adolf Loos's 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime," in which the Viennese architect and theorist argued that the mark of a civilized society was its abstention from applied ornament. But

this argument was polemical; in fact, modern architecture is shot through with inventive interactions with the arts, both new and old. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright pioneered a new decorative synthesis in his prairie houses, one that fused influences from the Arts and Crafts movement, Japanese architecture, and even medieval stained glass. True to his Arts and Crafts roots, what Wright sought was a “true” use of materials and an “honest” expression of structure. In the Frederick C. Robie House, built for a wealthy bicycle manufacturer and his family, the long, low-rise Roman brick is framed by smooth bands of concrete. Under the broad eaves, rows of leaded art-glass windows depict abstracted prairie motifs. Here, ornament—not only in the form of the stained glass, but also in the horizontal urns and planters and the bronze wall sconces—serves to unify the house with its prairie setting and to blur the boundaries between interior and exterior. In the Susan Lawrence Dana House, Wright confronted a different kind of client: a politically progressive, independently wealthy young widow with an interest in the arts who hired Wright to remodel her existing Victorian mansion. Ultimately, Wright’s work amounted to an almost total rebuilding of the structure as a sort of home-cum-gallery to showcase the collection of art that Dana amassed on her travels. The home is replete with custom-commissioned murals, statuary, and art glass, and Wright even designed special easels on which Dana could display her collection of Japanese prints. Though Wright spoke of his desire to “eliminate the decorator,” it is plain that his actual goal was not the eradication of architectural ornament. Instead, Wright sought the artistic enrichment of architecture itself, which he saw as the master art. Modern architecture, in fact, is full of such complex syntheses with the arts, in which structure, surface, and space themselves become sites of artistic enhancement. This tendency continues in contemporary architecture, in which decoratively arranged solar glass, elaborate steel lattices, and LED screens add flourish to a variety of building types.

For Further Reading

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