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## Review

*From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* by Alina Payne

Olaf Recktenwald

### Abstract

A review of Alina Payne's *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*, published in 2012 by Yale University Press.

### About the Author

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## Review

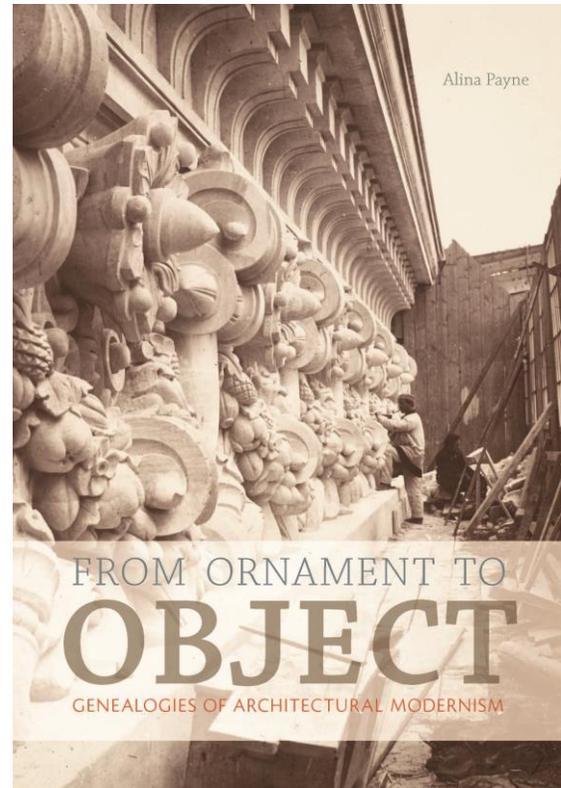
# From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism

Olaf Recktenwald

Sandwiched between the “battle cry”<sup>1</sup> of Adolf Loos’ essay “Ornament and Crime” and questions of equipment in Le Corbusier’s *Le Modulor*,<sup>2</sup> author Alina Payne’s account of the circumstances surrounding the rejection of ornament in the modernist era provides a new approach to the topic by suggesting that everyday objects have continued the elucidation of architecture for which ornament had once provided. The reflection upon and about architecture did not disappear with the advent of modernism, for Payne, but rather was transferred to the objects associated with that architectural world. Attached ornaments gradually transformed themselves into detached objects in a progression here studied from Gottfried Semper to modernist times.

Although bracketed between two twentieth-century writings, the book remains a decidedly nineteenth-century exploration. Semper stands at the foreground of this layout, where his interest in understanding objects through the realm of aesthetics receives much attention. Her concern lies in Semper’s connection between the materials of daily objects and those of architectural ornament, a relation that allows for the transference of an architectural theory to an object theory. The aftermath and response to Semper’s views are analyzed in turn as both a beginning and an end. While she views his work *Der Stil* as having reconstructed much of a traditional understanding of the architectural treatise, she also views his writing, which drew from varied disciplines, as being absorbed and replaced by the specialized literature of the end of his century.

Following the outcome of this fragmentation of discourse, she turns to art historians indebted to Semper’s writings and to his desire for a method that could form the base of a doctrine of style and of a mechanism for invention. The foremost contribution of those historians, for Payne, remains the attention given to the smaller elements related to architecture, be they *Kleinarchitektur*, ornaments, parts of ornaments, details, clothes, or art objects. How and in what format this theory became known to architects forms the author’s subsequent inquiry. While classrooms and public lecture halls figure prominently, other formats of dissemination such as the professional press, with its journals, reviews, and essays are also considered. The central conversation among the art historians discussed at this point



<sup>1</sup> Alina Payne, *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Payne, *From Ornament...*, 267.

remains that of style. Payne here views this topic positively as an important link in how those historians were to reach out to architects.

The reception of this evolving theory among canonical twentieth-century architects occupies the final chapters of her study. Hermann Muthesius and Adolf Loos are contrasted and yet ultimately reunited in their dual insistence upon objects of daily use as vehicles of change. Examples of Le Corbusier's oeuvre sum up her argument, where she stresses how object and architecture become one in his work. While at the outset readers might preconceive a deep divide between nineteenth-century ornament theory and that of modernism, Payne squarely emphasizes the continuities. Her prime contribution rests on arguing for this persistence.

Overall, though, several questions remain for this reviewer. In chapter three, the author speaks about the attention given to the concept of "detail" at the turn of the twentieth century. This would appear to be a notion of some importance in linking any shifting conception of ornament with modernist times. Payne notes how interest in detail partook of the new "clue" mentality and, broader yet, of nineteenth century *Sachkultur*. Moving from archaeology, anthropology, psychology, and philology to art history and then indirectly to architecture, the scrutinizing of the detail was born of a "methodological turn."<sup>3</sup> This turn was the result, for the author, of a blending, tilling, or exchanging of cultural definitions among disciplines and of the tools used to perceive those meanings. The ensuing instrumentality of the detail is remarked upon: "Once the detail became the critical working instrument for an academic discipline it moved into the foreground of consciousness for any number of issues and generated a whole new angle from which to evaluate and chart development, change, and innovation."<sup>4</sup> Overall this concept could have received more than a partial paragraph's worth of discussion. What relation exists between the discarding of embedded ornament and this novel interest in the detail? Is one a surrogate in the absence of the other?

In her previous essay "Reclining Bodies: Figural Ornament in Renaissance Architecture," Payne remarked how in Leon Battista Alberti's era, the isolation of ornament as a self-sufficient entity became more pronounced in the wake of greater scholarship on and translations of Vitruvius.<sup>5</sup> How does this notion of a growing categorical independence relate to the author's current thesis, given that the objects she refers to here are in general physically detached from the architecture? Should one speak of a progressive self-sufficiency of ornament? In *De architectura*, Vitruvius could be seen to be setting the stage for an understanding of ornament as its own architectural category.<sup>6</sup> In Book IV, Chapter II, he accounts for the orders by describing their origins and prescribing their proper use. *Ornamentum* comes to be understood as a likeness where, for example, triglyphs stand for beam ends and dentils for rafter ends. For Alberti, who relied on Cicero's work as did Vitruvius, a greater sense of ornament's detachment from the built order arises. One could continue this story of independence. If the physical separation of the modern object-as-ornament is noteworthy, this story might have enhanced the argument.

The sense of the complex Latin words *ornare* / *ornamentum* / *ornatus* varied greatly in antiquity. As Brian Vickers has rightly pointed out, the word *ornatus* is inevitably translated

<sup>3</sup> Payne, *From Ornament...*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> Payne, *From Ornament...*, 113-114.

<sup>5</sup> Alina Payne, "Reclining Bodies: Figural Ornament in Renaissance Architecture," in *Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, ed. Michael Cole (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), chap. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. and ed. Frank Granger (London: W. Heinemann, 1931), vol. 1.

into English as “ornament.”<sup>7</sup> Along with that modern word come the unfortunate connotations of something attached, embellished, or even meaningless, which latter term the Oxford English Dictionary once used to define rococo ornament. These connotations, I would add, have been handed down to us from a largely nineteenth-century understanding of the term. *Ornamentum*, as Walter Ong has discovered, retained strong military metaphors in antiquity and signified “equipment or accoutrements.”<sup>8</sup> Yet one must not discount the fact that a sense of detachment did already exist in these terms in classical times. *Orna-* words could already have a slight nonessential character to them. What could be clarified further in this contemporary text is in what sense of the word *ornament* the author sees the modern object.

If “objects are architecture’s rhetorical devices, just as ornament once was”<sup>9</sup> (20), in what manner was the rhetorical capacity of prior ornament to aptly and emotionally engage an audience resuscitated through everyday objects? This very weighty statement in the introduction of the book demands attention. Ornament, acknowledging its origins in speech, once served the appropriateness of the oration. It was a virtue the expression of which could not be fully grasped. Ornament-as-speech did not present an autonomous whole which was neatly crafted and self-referential. Instead, that ornament demanded that we engage with that which it presented rather than with itself. However, the emotional link between ornament and participant gets weakened when we turn to objects of daily use. Everyday objects are both physically detached and independent of setting. As one moves a teacup from one house to another, it would seem a tall order for the object to produce a sympathetic reaction between the new beholder and the previous dwelling.

The author does note how the modern object, unlike architectural ornament, is potentially mobile. Yet as one moves an object from one setting to another this act would appear to change the rhetorical qualities of that object. A chair, moved from one sitting room to another, would surely tell a different story based upon its new surroundings. The displaced object could not serve the “fitting togetherness” (*aptum*) of the speech, as *ornatus* once did. Aristotle suggests in *Rhetoric* that not only does the audience have emotions, but that the speaker also emotes. The orator calls upon the apt level of emotion so as to be in harmony with the subject-matter. Similarly in ornamentation, a grave topic would require a serious level of embellishment whereas a simple topic should be treated parsimoniously. Vitruvius would have concurred. Ornamentation, for the Roman author, was a respect for convention or principles – a fitting, suited, or appropriate form of respect. A building dedicated to the moon received her light aptly. A building honoring Mars acknowledged his vigor through its lack of embellishments. Facing the Heavens, Venus, or Bacchus, a temple acknowledged the particulars of the conversation it would engage in and could be said to welcome its guest through its ornamental manners. How the appropriateness of emotion and respect is handled by the daily object is a topic that warrants discussion. Ultimately, the mobility of common objects undermines their ability to speak in the same manner as ornament once did.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 314.

<sup>8</sup> Walter J Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 277.

<sup>9</sup> Payne, *From Ornament...*, 20.



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