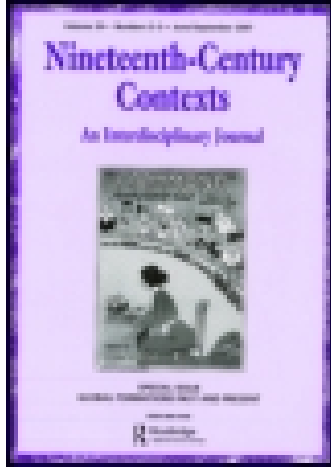


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Publisher: Routledge

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Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gncc20>

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Published online: 01 Jul 2008.

To cite this article: Mitchell Schwarzer (1994) Ethnologies of the primitive in Adolf Loos's writings on ornament, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 18:3, 225-247, DOI: [10.1080/08905499408583394](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905499408583394)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08905499408583394>

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ETHNOLOGIES OF THE PRIMITIVE IN ADOLF LOOS'S WRITINGS ON ORNAMENT

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Adolf Loos's theory of ornament is a manifesto of twentieth-century architectural modernism. A practicing architect in Vienna, Loos (1870–1931) was closely identified by later historians with modernism's struggle to purify architecture's ethical conduct and appearance through the elimination of decorative superfluities. Walter Curt Behrendt thus described Loos in 1937:

For purity's sake he resisted the ornament on a plate as he disapproved of the flour in the spinach served on this plate. . . . Ornament aroused all his passions, and to such an extent that he once flung from the table of his café in Vienna the sharply pointed remark: "Ornament is a crime," an aphorism which for a long time became the popular slogan of the movement. (96–97)

The sources for Loos's extreme stance on ornament, formulated during the last years of the nineteenth century, have been customarily seen as the radical re-evaluation of the arts, aesthetics, and epistemology in Vienna,¹ and the pragmatic building practices of England and the United States.² Although these interpretations have allowed historians to better grasp certain dimensions of Loos's theory, they do not fully engage his central concerns. For instance, Loos's personal contacts with Kraus, Schönberg, and Wittgenstein, cannot account for his specific reflections on the uselessness of ornament for buildings and practical arts objects. Nor can Loos's experiences in Anglophone countries fully explain the fervent ideological associations which he attached to the practice of ornamentation. Truly exceptional, and largely unexplored in either the English or German literature on Loos, are the ways in which he associated wasteful ornament with primitive culture.

Other architectural theorists, both in Loos's time and afterwards, condemned ornament as arbitrary, outdated, and irrelevant to utilitarian social concerns. Loos's greater contribution was his articulation of architectural modernism's evolutionary drive away from ornament. In vividly describing primitive society's exuberant practices of decorative embellishment, Loos found a flash-point for all that he felt was contrary to the progress of asceticism in the West.³ Painted and sculptural ornamentation atop buildings were decadent reminders to him that architecture had not fulfilled the modern commands of utility and economy. And, because Loos was un-

Nineteenth-Century Contexts, 1994

Vol 18, pp. 225–247

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Amsterdam B. V. Published under license by

Gordon and Breach Science Publishers SA

Printed in the United States of America

willing or incapable of identifying the rise of bourgeois society and its productive methods with the ornamental excesses he so detested, he attributed the problems of contemporary design to ornament's non-Western nature.⁴ His attack on ornamental historicism associated it with the seemingly most distant historical period in the steady march toward utilitarian Western architecture: the tattooing traditions of the South Sea Islands.

The decisive factor underlying Loos's critique of ornament and primitivism was his awareness of other nineteenth-century models of Western progress. Between the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* in 1859 and the end of the century, theories on the primitive origins of culture pervaded efforts to represent contemporary Western civilization. Loos accepted the idea, which had emerged in anthropological and ethnological texts, that all cultural practices—including architecture and the practical arts—could be understood only through an initial elaboration of their progress away from primitive rites, including ornamentation. Analogous to the work of anthropologists, Loos identified modern forms of architectural expression through their displacement of earlier primitive practices.

Loos's insight was that the widely held belief in the parallel evolution of ornament and civilization was untenable. Architectural theorists had long believed that function, structure, and ornament possess reciprocal origins and routes of historical development. It was Loos's aim to prove the sophistry of this argument. Reversing established arguments, Loos associated art and ornament with all that is backward and decadent in contemporary architecture. In this crucial respect, Loos's theory on ornament challenged Gottfried Semper, who believed that changes in artistic ornament occur in harmony with technical and constructive advances. In a series of writings between the 1830s and 1860s, the influential German architect and theorist had stated that changes in artistic ornament occur in complete unity and harmony with technical and constructive advances. For Semper, ornament made possible the artistic illumination of otherwise hidden functional, constructive, and material values in modern building. Thus Semper linked ornament to an ongoing integrative impulse within modern design, while Loos established an identity for modern architecture based on the opposition of modern practical utility to pre-modern symbolic effluence.

My principal question for this essay will be: how did Loos come to the position that ornament was an obsolete architectural system, indeed, an expression of earlier, more primitive evolutionary drives which had to be subdued to reach modern architecture? In beginning to answer this question, I will try to establish a relationship between nineteenth-century anthropology and ethnology and Loos's theory of progress, primitivism, and ornament. Before taking up this relationship, however, I must discuss two related issues. The first concerns the conceptualization of architectural ornament in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and its transformation in the hands of Semper. The second refers to the increasing sovereignty attributed to ornament within architectural discourse between the time of Semper and Loos. Loos's challenge to Semper did not occur in isolation. In the generation

between them, the validity of ornament was debated with reference to an assessment of its equation with materials, constructive technologies, and contemporary needs.

The Symbolic Impersonation of the Ordinary

The modern controversy on architectural ornament emerged during the eighteenth century. It is primarily related to two intellectual developments: 1) the attempt by French architectural theorists to cut through the physiognomy of classical architecture to derive first principles of design; and 2) the growth of philosophical aesthetics in Germany and its debasement of that strand of aesthetic experience considered to be the perception of dependent relations and functional considerations. In the first case, the growing authority accorded to scientific investigations during the eighteenth century catalyzed a series of attempts by architectural theorists to postulate laws on architecture parallel to those of science. Whereas architectural reason had been previously associated with the imitation of classical *taxis*, it now became associated with inductive and (more often) deductive scientific reason. No longer content with mythological associations of taste, or the rhetorical and allegorical messages of antiquity, architectural theorists began a search for first principles and mathematical purity (Rykwert 117). These axiomatic investigations were exemplified by Marc-Antoine Laugier's identification of formal architectural principles with the elementary forms of the primitive hut and Etienne Louis Boullée's conception of the rational perfection of regular geometric volumes. Responsible only to their own internal logic, such theories no longer admitted a privileged position for classical ornament on the basis of its traditional embodiment of beauty (Vidler 20).

The theory of architectural ornament was also powerfully influenced by the new science of aesthetics. As formulated by German philosophers after 1750, architectural beauty was re-apprehended from its static, mimetic associations with classical adornment into a dynamic set of predicates relating to the conceptual powers of the human mind. In a set of arguments explicitly ordered around the mind's internal workings, both architectural decoration and structure were explicated as sensual correlates of conceptual processes unrelated to external practical affairs. Cut off from its associations to function, construction, and historical culture, ornament was autonomized by Immanuel Kant as disinterested contemplation, a set of formal qualities to bring pleasure perceptually to the processes of the mind. Aesthetic judgment according to Kant means that "we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing either for myself or for any one else, but how we judge it by mere observation" (47). Considered in this manner—as an injunction against beauty derived from purposive form and raw material requirements—other aesthetic philosophers such as Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer blocked development of aesthetic categories out of an assessment of utilitarian conditions, and the consequent acceptance of a historically supplied system of ornamental forms.⁵ Architecture and the other dependent arts were understood as

deriving beauty mainly through their ornament, and not their structural innovations or functional dexterity.

It comes as no surprise that among theorists of architecture during the first half of the nineteenth century, conflictive impulses governed the correlation of ornament with architectural beauty. In response to aesthetic philosophy, the proclivity to stress the symbolic and imitative considerations of architecture became marked. At least rhetorically, ornament was accorded the prominence it had received during the Renaissance. Yet, in consequence of the French emphasis on reason in architecture, it was now also essential to prove that the ornamental embellishment of function and structure was a logical and consistent outgrowth from axiomatic principles. These ambiguities were taken up by one of the most famous architectural decorators of the nineteenth century, Eduard van der Nüll, partner with August Siccardsburg for the design of the Vienna Opera. In his essay "Remarks on the Artistic Relation of Ornament to Raw Form" (1845), van der Nüll interpreted decoration and ornament as a measure of progressive civilization and hence the goal of all educated artists.

Decoration for van der Nüll was not a luxury, but a necessity; it was synonymous with culture.⁶ Yet, van der Nüll did not believe that beauty arose from the forms of ornament themselves. Rather, the Viennese designer explained the aesthetic relations between construction and decoration, and proposed that a new style of decoration was needed to correspond with the rapidly advancing structural technologies of the age. Consistent with French rationalists like Jean Rondelet, van der Nüll's idea of architectural ornamentation mandated a logical organization of materials as well as a scientific knowledge of constructive technologies. He stood by the rationalist belief that the constructive scheme or predominant materials of a building should not be masked by decoration. Yet, while he realized that every building that is beautiful must also be constructively functional, he also accepted the philosophical dictum that functional objects are not themselves works of art. Most important for van der Nüll was the symbolic step from utility to art. It required the simplification and ennoblement of constructive relations in decorative forms, and the expression of purpose through the sense of beauty (van der Nüll 32).

Van der Nüll appreciated ornament as a supplement to construction, the essence of architecture's striving to emphasize the more elementary structural aspects of form. In the tectonic tradition of Karl Bötticher, he wrote that beauty derived from ornament should always follow organically, making the elementary aspects of building more sensual and understandable to the viewer: "Only the striving to artistically express closer relations to life can ennoble the form into an artwork. Especially for architecture this means the symbolization of static forces, the *Durchdringungspunkten* where points of balance are located" (31). As a matter of course, by focusing on the supplemental relationship of ornament to raw form, architectural theorists like van der Nüll were still faced with the differentiation of ornament from practical and technological development. Far from being the essence of architectural character, ornament became semi-autonomous from building. This assumption of autonomy

for ornament—the result of both the need for rational explanations of construction and technology and the philosophical distancing of aesthetic judgment from utilitarian concerns—had great consequences for the representation of ornament's historical and progressive relationship to the practical arts.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the increasing association of architecture with historical explanation linked the debate on ornament to the issue of progress. Unlike the ahistorical argument of van der Nüll, it was increasingly deemed important after 1850 to explain the contemporary presence of ornament in architecture through its related presence in the past, and its association with a chain of historical developments. This notion of history, which has been frequently described as universal history, promised to demonstrate, as Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote, that “every dead and living force acts in accordance with the laws, its nature, and everything that happens stands, according to space and time, in inseparable connection” (45–46). Spurred by this totalizing conception of human history, architectural theorists themselves began to justify a positive and progressive relationship between ornament and structure within the space of historical reality.

Gottfried Semper's theories on architecture and the applied arts forcefully demonstrate this urge to integrate the understanding of technology and art through a progressive historical continuum. Above all, Semper sought to demonstrate the unity of culture through the interconnectedness of the arts and technologies of making form. In an early article, “Preliminary Remarks on Polychrome Architecture & Sculpture in Antiquity” (1834), Semper portrayed the evolution of ornament with functional and structural aspects of design as a staged process (63–64). Ornament, we are told, evolves alongside other aspects of design and building, much as the symbolic and spiritual intentions of cultures themselves unfold in conjunction with material and technological advances. Ornament is not a supplement to progressive building activity. Rather, in conjunction with structure, it evolves into ever more complex forms.

Semper's subsequent theory of *Bekleidungswesen* (the clothing of building), articulated in *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* (1860), became a leading explanation for the origins and integrative development of ornament with progressive technologies (1: 217–37). Reversing conventional architectural wisdom, Semper depicted textiles, and not masonry, as the original forms of wall systems. Most importantly, the theory of the textile wall established a fundamental bond between ornament and structure. Unlike stone or brick walls, where ornament could be easily dismissed as additive, the actual technologies of assembling textile walls encouraged complex patterning and suggested a common origin of ornament and structure. Furthermore, since Semper advocated that material and spiritual advances in architecture were coincident, the integrated development of ornamental and structural systems as history progressed followed as a logical consequence. Architecture and all practical arts develop from a point at which the worlds of constructive and decorative forms are indivisible.

Semper's design historiography treated the evolution of ornamental forms from

the standpoint of universal reason. Denying (or decrying) the fragmentation of industrial society, he portrayed modern ornament as consistent with modern technology and congruous with a rational theory of design. This motivation to rationalize building and structure through an indivisible holistic mantle of decoration was most likely a response to both overtly materialist theories within architectural discourse (emphasizing structural rationalism to the detriment of ornament) and theories of philosophical aesthetics. Semper's bias against regarding ornament as an imitation of nature gave his theory validity in regard to the philosophical interdiction on architectural representation. Unlike Kant or Schopenhauer, Semper rejected the representation of ornament as aesthetic accretion or a supplemental representation of a nature superior to building. Thus it may be that partially in response to the philosophical idea of beauty in architecture as essentially decorated mass, Semper espoused an ornamental consciousness shaped by concerns which were later widely misunderstood as purely materialist: the binding, joining, and tying functions of enclosing spatial elements.

Preoccupied by the unity of spirit and matter, Semper regarded ornament alongside technology as integral to a true architectural consciousness. His theory provided a groundwork for explaining a valid rational and aesthetic role for ornament in subsequent German discourse during the latter third of the nineteenth century. Interestingly enough, as a result of Semper's vague articulation of the relationship of contemporary ornament to the enormous recent advances in iron construction, many of his followers were stimulated to better represent ornament as a valid symbolic system integrated with material culture. For instance, the German architect Constantin Lipsius's depiction of the entwined relationship between beauty and new constructive methods in architecture was indebted to the Semperian framework (*Gottfried Semper* 100). In an article entitled "On the Aesthetic Interpretation of Iron in Architecture" (1878), Lipsius raised the issue of advances of engineering science and its purposive reaching toward a naked, unembittered reality, and abandonment of ideal striving. Still, despite this admiration for pure engineering forms, Lipsius retained Semper's preoccupation with an architectural design process which integrated structure and decoration and refused the belief that forms derived from technological necessity alone could satisfy the psychological demands of modern humanity. Feeling a sense of duty to the notion of ideal truth in art and beauty which related to historical forms, Lipsius argued for a future architecture in which true beauty was created from the aesthetic embodiment of specifically modern building impulses ("Ueber die aesthetische Behandlung" 365).

A tendency of architectural theorists in the 1880s to pursue a heightened role for ornament, however, cast doubt on the consensus of architects to reconcile structure and ornament. For instance, in "On the Concept of Architecture" (1877), another follower of Semper, the architect Rudolf Redtenbacher professed that decoration should match the purpose of building, progressing in form to relate to changing functional demands on society and the individual (226). Of consequence for Loos, Redtenbacher also described ornament as integral to cultural development: "The

original representations of writing are closely related to the marking of the skin, of tattooing" (193).

Despite this rhetoric, Redtenbacher endowed ornament with certain autonomous poetic powers, and understood the spiritual content of a building as the determinate force for uniting its diverse aspects. For Redtenbacher, spiritual content "determines the entire artistic impression of the building, its environment, its elaborate or simple appearance, its solemn or festive character. It decides not only the mass of decoration, but also its quality, the specific choice of ornamental motifs" (229). Perhaps unsure of how to integrate ornament with recent technology, and seeking to bestow upon ornament's symbolic role a status equal to technological innovation, he accorded an absolute privilege to ornament's historic role in architecture, writing that decoration is as important to many as clothing or nourishment (227). Similarly, Ferdinand Ritter von Feldegg, the Viennese architect and editor of *Der Architekt*, characterized ornament as progressing organically from primitive human impulses into civilization. Feldegg was overtly concerned to dissipate competing theories on the objectivity of construction and function. During the 1880s, more and more proposals were set forth by architectural theorists encouraging the establishment of a realistic logic of architectural creation in conformity with scientific (and often Darwinian) principles.⁷ In opposition to these utilitarian arguments which threatened the organic development continuity between ornament and structure, Feldegg argued an overtly independent purpose for ornamentation:

The ornamentation of each human product indifferent to which purpose it serves is a natural need, based on original and natural impulses. We find finery on the primitive products of completely crude Naturvölker, yet, for whom the intention of decorating serves unmistakably the same purpose as the perfected works of a highly developed age. (1)

What was lost in Redtenbacher's and Feldeggs' texts was Semper's holistic belief in the interconnection between ornament and construction in historical progress. In their attempts to legitimize ornament against competing theories of structural rationalism, a strongly supplemental notion of ornament had emerged once more.

By 1891, the German architect H. Schatteburg, in "Ornament and Color," unveiled ornament's additive nature—the same notion that had been put forth several decades earlier by van der Nüll. To be sure, Schatteburg felt obliged to write of the instinctive and evolutionary aspects of ornament: "The inclination to ornament is instinctive to every people and increased with the advance of culture" (89). Yet, we are also told that ornament is vital for the elevating and enlivening of architecture. The significant facts relating to ornamental use in building design are described by Schatteburg as threefold: 1) it completed and animated empty, lifeless surfaces which lie between architectural members; 2) it combined different architectural parts into a whole; and 3) it clarified single architectural parts with regard to their symbolic activity (89). Foremost, this new conception of ornament destabilized architectural knowledge and epitomized the awareness that ornament had lost its rational connection to purposive building agents and become an irrational crown atop constructive form.

REGRESS AND ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENT

If Semper's association of ornament and building was undermined by an autonomizing discourse on architectural ornament, it was also compromised by the mass production of decorative features for urban buildings toward 1900. The sheer number and variety of historical ornament—including elements from all the so-called civilizations—were encouraged most by the appearance of ornamental pattern books after mid-century.⁸

Alongside others, Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1868) exercised seminal influence on design during this time. The illustrated drawings contained in this book constituted a set of models for architectural creation in school and the workplace. In an aesthetic sense, Jones seized upon the importance of illustrating the innumerable historical varieties of ornament in order to further modern creativity. Presaging the *Art Nouveau*, and departing from Semper, Jones abstracted ornament from its historical and cultural connections and placed it instead within a universal grammar of lines, color, and figuration. For Jones, all ornament had to be based on geometrical conceptions, a balance and contrast of straight, inclined, and curved lines, traced to a branch or root (6). This line of thought was influenced no doubt by John Ruskin's earlier reflections in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Here, Ruskin had observed the overriding importance to design of the qualities of line, plane, mass, shadow, and color. On the penultimate importance of ornament, Ruskin wrote, "[T]he young architect should be taught to think of imitative ornament as of the extreme grace in language; not to be regarded at first, not to be obtained at the cost of purpose, meaning, force, or consciousness, yet, indeed, a perfection—the least of all perfections, and yet the crowning one of all" (130). For both Jones and Ruskin, modern culture still possessed the ages-old instinctual urge to embellish practical objects artistically.

The celebration of the artistic drive and its historical flowering in ornamental schemes did not occur independent of productive forces. Contrary to the hopes of pattern book designers, the abstraction of historical ornament yielded great excesses and a dissolution of the so-called instinctual freedom associated with the symbolic act. On city streets, speculators poured out historicist facades, each architect seemingly trying to outstrip the other in originality of formal syntax and historical grammar. Unnerving the sense of propriety in Germanic architectural culture, the relentless exhibition of historical ornament compromised much of the artistic aura that ornament still retained in Semper's day (Otzen 160). Jones's philosophy of ornament, when translated into the commodity practices of the building industry, resulted in compositional and arbitrary decorative schemes antithetical to the demands for coherent cultural meanings by architectural theorists.

Describing these conditions of artistic fragmentation and boundless individualism in "Old Forms-New Style" (1889), the art historian Cornelius Gurlitt linked ornament to fashion and crass commercialism. Gurlitt declared that ornamental forms were being created not to express inner functions, crown structural joints, or accomplish external climactic needs, but merely—in the manner of Ruskin—to create artistically a play of light and shadows (346).

The corruption of ornament was also remarked on by the Bavarian architectural critic Richard Streiter in his essay "Contemporary Architectural Questions" (1897). The rapidity of historical change in the modern era, Streiter contended, was the culprit for the futility of the Semperian ideal of an architectural culture which rationally integrates functional changes in new structural and ornamental arrangements. Like Gurlitt, Streiter laid great blame for the eclectic and seemingly irresponsible nature of recent ornament on the incredibly fast pace of industry and product commodification (72). Streiter's prognosis implied that if ornament is to progress as the symbolic counterpart to material and technological advances, it must be afforded much more time to adapt to societal changes (65).

Even earlier, in "Middle Class Architecture" (1892), the Viennese architectural critic Karl Henrici defined the cleavage between the artistic and practical halves of the architectural mind. Henrici's judgments about the subordination of architecture to function remarkably prefigure Loos's reluctance to allow an intimacy between architecture and art. Henrici revealed that outside of graves and other monuments of ideal design, architecture should obey practical considerations:

Architecture, especially in its middle-class varieties, is and remains an art of service. It always serves some purpose which lies outside of itself. Its beauty can never be founded or conceived on the basis of independent principles, but must always refer to its ability to meet the demands of a need. (95)

Where Henrici acknowledged that architecture must only rarely stray from practical drama, Loos would later be more blunt. As Loos remarked, the design of houses has nothing to do with art. Sounding much like Henrici, Loos wrote much later—in the essay "Architecture" (1909)—that only grave memorials and monuments have anything to do with art. Objects which serve a purpose for living people are precluded from the realm of art. Architecture, above all, must accommodate itself to the cultural traditions that bind a people together. It must not disturb the peace (*Trotzdem* 102–103).

Adolf Loos's prohibition on ornament reflects the climate of intense indecision regarding ornament's artistic or artificial nature, its additive or integral relationship to utilitarian concerns.⁹ Unlike Semper and the bulk of nineteenth-century architectural theorists, Loos rejected the balance sought by architectural theorists since the Renaissance; rather, he described historical progress as constituted by the increasing remoteness of outdated material and spiritual practices such as ornament. In an early article, "The Principle of Cladding" (1898), Loos pointedly denied Semper's claim that the historical development of the arts was generated by an essential coincidence of structure and cladding, structure and ornament (*Ins Leere Gesprochen* 139–44). Quite specifically, Loos also repudiated the theorists of the Viennese *Moderne*—the architects Josef Hoffmann and Josef Olbrich—for whom the question for the role of art within architecture had become one of whether form follows the objective (or scientific) laws of nature or the subjective and personal dictates of an artist.¹⁰ With an interdisciplinary boldness recalling Semper, Loos's enunciation of these judgments through reference to primitive peoples effectively

joined the architectural debate on ornament to concurrent anthropological investigations on the aesthetic value of primitive art and ornament.

In the essay, "The Luxury Article" (1898), Loos embarked upon what he felt was a corrective account of ornament and social progress. By essentially reversing the progression of ornament's rise with civilization, Loos first described the fall of ornament as a basic thread within the evolution from savage to civilized man. Accordingly, in man's primitive state, symbolic displacements and the syntaxes of ornamental languages consume the essence of form:

The lower the cultural level of a people, the more extravagant it is with its ornament, its decoration. The Indian covers over and over again every object—each boat, each oar, each arrow—with his ornament and decoration. To see decoration as a sign of superiority means to stand at the level of the Indians. But we must overcome the Indian in us. . . . To seek beauty only in form and not in ornament is the goal toward which all humanity is striving. (*Ins Leere Gesprochen* 97)

Conversely, in modern societies, Loos argued for a purity of form, an austerity of architectural expression. He identified irreconcilable levels of individuality and collectivity, the separate languages of culture and civilization (Colomina 53).

Loos's concept of modern culture as the universal pursuit of the separate realms of art and craft both supports and contradicts the dominant strain of anthropological theories on ornament during the 1890s. On the one hand, Loos rejected the adage, supported by most anthropologists, that decoration is the proper enrichment of an object with forms which give the object a higher concept of beauty (Ward 19). On the other hand, he evidently subscribed to the widespread anthropological concept that mankind had evolved along a linear path from savagery to civilization. In the latter case, inspired by modern comparative philology's study of Sanskrit as the source of all European languages, anthropologists had earlier attempted to unify knowledge on culture and art through a connection between primitive and civilized peoples, and between the previously separate fields of ethnology and art history.¹¹ For instance, the Swedish anthropologist Hjalmar Stolpe's research on Pacific Island peoples in the 1880s was the first sustained effort to connect the cultural practices—encompassing religion, poetry, myth—of primitive peoples to their creation of ornament (24–28).¹² Whereas architects and art historians had previously sought the origins of contemporary architectural forms through non-empirical visions of European prehistory, anthropologists now depicted the history of the arts of design as a successive development from the cave period to modernity through the intermediary stage of primitivism. As a case in point, British anthropologist Henry Balfour argued that primitive culture presented clear evidence of retarded development since it remained practically the same through countless ages (15). Accordingly, primitive societies resembled the ancestors of modern European peoples, and, as such, allowed the demarcation of outmoded customs from vital cultural features within the latter. They became the crucial link between prehistory and the earliest historical recollections on the art of the Egyptians and Greeks.

Generally speaking, anthropological studies of ornament focused on primitive

societies exclusively, or their relation to European historical cultures such as antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Like Semper, they implied a valid connection to the contemporary arts, but considered its complexity too great a hinderance for explicit references. It is significant, therefore, that Loos recognized in the complexity of modern life a set of traits which may have caused him to deny the implicit tie anthropologists made between primitive and civilized ornament. Given his concern for economic utility, Loos was likely aware of the vast differences between the clan organization of primitive society and the capitalist economies of the modern state.¹³ His reversal of Semper's theory that architectural ornament was a continuous outgrowth of historical building processes may be looked at as his exploitation of a contradiction in the anthropological representation of the primitive: that discrepancy between history as an organic, evolutionary process and the portraits of the primitive as consigned to historically arrested states of development. In any case, stressing the divide between the suspension of savage life and the vitality of civilization rather than any unascertained affinities, Loos reversed anthropological notions of the temporal universality of ornament. The truth of societal progress, for Loos, specifies the increasing exclusion of ornament from architecture and the crafts. In a key passage in "Women's Fashions" (1902), Loos enacted the analogy of the primitive man or woman who ornaments him or herself and the criminal, contrasting how the progressive development of culture has gradually overcome those ornamental devices which find their origins in the primitive: "The papuan and the criminal ornament their skin. The indian covers his entire boat with ornament. But the bicycle and the steam machine are free of ornament. Advancing culture eliminates ornament" (*Ins Leere Gesprochen* 130).

It is no accident that Loos choose Papuans and tattooing as counterpoints to the moderns and ascetic behavior. Papuans, along with other Pacific Islanders and Amazonian Indians, were favorite primitive subjects for anthropologists. In his book, *Evolution in Art* (1895), the British anthropologist A.C. Haddon described Papuan tattooing rites (1-18, 43-45), and mentioned tattoos themselves as religious symbols which make for social purity, "clan badges of social significance with the object of preventing persons from falling into the sin of unwitting clan incest" (256). Obviously, this rationale for tattooing applied only to social circumstances specific to primitive society. It no longer had value in a civilized society devoid of clan groups. Ironically, Semper's earlier contention that the tattooing of the South Sea islanders related to the tools and monuments of the Assyrians, Egyptians, Etruscans, and early Greeks was now countered by the emerging social portrait of primitive society (*Über die formelle Gesetzmäßigkeit* 10). It is possible that, on the basis of his awareness of the anthropological correlation of tattooing to other social aspects of primitive culture, Loos gained confidence to reject Semper's seemingly spurious claim that the customs of skin-painting and tattooing had to relate to the polychrome architecture of antiquity and the artistic developments that logically follow from them.

In "Ornament and Crime" (1908), Loos made his most famous statements on the backwardness inherent in ornament. He repeated and expanded details of his

decade-long arguments against ornament in the applied arts and architecture. For instance, he argued that ornament was “damaging to the health of mankind in both their national capacities and cultural development” (*Trotzdem* 82). Ornament, a bygone remnant of primitive culture, had no place in modern society. We are reminded of the origins and exclusivity of ornament to primitive art: “The impulse to ornament one’s face and everything else within reach lies at the ultimate origins of fine art. It is the childish babble of painting” (*Trotzdem* 78). Repeating a favorite theme, Loos described human history as an evolutionary process, one whose progress is “equivalent with the distancing of ornament from objects of use” (*Trotzdem* 79). Since different codes of conduct govern the evolutionary stages of societies, modern people have a different outlook than their predecessors. What was once accepted in human history is often no longer correct in advanced stages of evolution. The Papuan can tattoo his skin while modern man cannot. Loos made it clear that a man of our time who ornaments himself or his dwelling is estranged from society. More forcefully, he wrote that “the man of our age, who from an inner impulse smears his walls with erotic symbols, is a criminal or a degenerate” (*Trotzdem* 79).

In Loos’s vision, the evolution of modern society entailed a progressive movement toward rational, utilitarian concerns. Ornamental symbolism was not only no longer appropriate in this new context, it was also bereft of meaning. Calling ornament indecipherable chatter, Loos was convinced that the contemporary rear-guard battle to reintroduce ornament to design was doomed to failure. The immense destruction wrought by aesthetic developments in the preceding decades through the revival of all manner of decoration could be easily overcome, wrote Loos, since no one may “interfere with the evolution of mankind” (*Trotzdem* 81). Furthermore, Loos did not hesitate to attribute the extraordinary greatness of contemporary society to an inability to produce a new form of ornamentation, writing such ringing manifestoes as “A lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength” (*Trotzdem* 88), and “[M]odern ornament has no forebears and offspring, no past and no future” (*Trotzdem* 84). The true future of design, for Loos, was to be the creation of unornamented coiffures, rooms, and cities. This scheme was based upon the aforementioned fact that human evolution leads to an increasing pleasure in smooth, unadorned objects. When the “slavery of ornament” is finally shaken off, uttered Loos, “the streets of the cities will shine with white walls” (*Trotzdem* 80).

Throughout “Ornament and Crime,” as in his other writings, the concept “civilized” was defined in opposition to that of the “primitive”: the savage ornaments, while civilized man does not. For Loos, the multitude of potential histories associated with ornament, the subjectivity which constituted art, violated the sense of progressive direction and singular purpose argued as the basis for modern architecture. Ornament and art, as such, threatened the reconciliation of architecture with utility, technology, and science—those elements Loos foremost identified with a progressive (albeit exclusionary) Western culture. By 1909, in “Architecture,” Loos restated his belief that the cultural progress of mankind, which included a gradual alteration of perception and economic organization, has led culture away from or-

nament. "[T]he path of culture is one away from ornament and toward *Ornamentlosigkeit!*" (*Trotzdem* 92).

PROGRESS FROM THE PRIMITIVE

Loos's attack against ornament—based on his capitalization on incongruities within anthropological theories—exploited the ambivalence felt toward ornament by architects of his time. It established, moreover, an alternative paradigm for correlating progress and ornament within modern architecture. Architecture was faced with two contrasting visions of ornament's place within theories of historical progress: on the one hand, Semper's acceptance of ornament's role within a theory of progress as increasing diversification; on the other, Loos's rejection of ornament and his belief that uniform progress leads to a unitary state of modern existence.

Midway through the nineteenth century, Semper's functional analysis of the "decorated object" reflected the apogee of efforts throughout European culture to justify the adhesion of contemporary social practices to the furthest recesses of history.¹⁴ Analogously, in his history of the development of the law, the influential historian Henry Maine characterized the most rudimentary historical conditions as the "germs out of which has assuredly been unfolded every form of moral restraint which controls our actions and shapes our conduct at the present moment" (115). Semper doubtless would have agreed with the evolutionary overtones of this statement. Nonetheless, Semper also regarded the evolution of forms from this rudimentary state quite differently than historians such as Maine, who had also asserted that "much of the old law which has descended to us was preserved merely because it was old" (117). To the contrary, for Semper, if ornament was absolutely true in its primitive origins, it must be so not only for the past, but also for every moment in the present and future. The fates of ornament and design were inextricably linked throughout historical progress.

This idea that ornament is absolute and progressive implied that over the course of history, ornament became increasingly complicated. Enmeshed in spiritual and material development, ornament evolved in conjunction with the specialization of a culture. Semper delineated Renaissance ornament as the most fitting language of forms for the simple reason that the development of numerous new building types between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries had endowed it with a fitting (and almost universal) elasticity in regard to function. Semper's theory of a universal and increasingly complex vocabulary of ornamental forms most closely approximates the arguments of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer.

In his essay, "Progress: Its Law and Cause" (1857), the British thinker defined progress as operating throughout culture, equally powerful in the realm of astronomy as in art. In brief, Spencer saw progress as movement from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, an ethical philosophy supporting the ideals of freedom and

individualism (Nisbet 229). Claiming that “every active force produces more than one change,” Spencer concluded that “every cause produces more than one effect” (37). In other words, change must lead to progressive differentiation and complexity. It is natural, therefore, that ornament would continue to differentiate its forms as functional (or other) changes occurred in design. This point was also shared by Owen Jones, who wrote:

From the universal testimony of travellers it would appear, that there is scarcely a people, in however early a stage of civilization, with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct. The desire is absent in none, and it grows and increases with all in the ratio of their progress in civilization. (13)

Spencer’s vision that progress occurs universally throughout human culture also accords well with Semper’s analysis of the emergence of art through its connection to materials and technology. Both theories share a belief in the basic validity of complex human actions and the lack of an ascetic code of conduct for world culture. What is also important is that Spencer did not specify a single, or linear direction for progress. For him (and perhaps also Semper) progress retained the metaphor of the branching tree, and a varied vision of the future.

This concept of the absolute presence, yet singular expression of ornament, could only coexist within notions of progress such as those of Spencer, in cases in which an unconscious and constant dynamism brought change to all matters in design. In the dissimilar theories of universal progress, predicated on separate rates of development, and the conditioning of progress itself upon social and individual initiative, ornament’s status to absolute truth, like all other traditional values, was suspended. It became accepted that human actions proceed differently. One need not therefore explain all aspects of the evolution of design as responding equally to progressive changes. If ornament’s historicity lacks absolute truth, its representation through historical progress must make evident either its presence or absence in different societies.

Without doubt, Loos assembled his vision of architectural culture through the synecdochic exclusion of ornament. Ornament came to represent the degeneracy and primitive fossilization of modern culture. In this important respect, Loos was caught up in a discourse concerning the coincident progress of civilization with the banishment of primitive values, which for him was depicted by the creation of a world free of tattooing and ornament, and characterized by a rational and simplified expression. In this sense, Loos may have been influenced by Darwin’s social theories. By the 1890s, Darwinism had become an enormously influential social philosophy in Central Europe. Popularized by Ernst Haeckel, Darwinism spoke to the importance of struggle and change in social life, justifying the competitive and hierarchical attributes of bourgeois civilization (Kelly 100–101). Most important to Loos’s affiliation with Darwin (and not Spencer) was the former’s claim that community selection (and not instinct) was at the core of the creation of a higher moral sense. Indeed, in staking out a theory of moral evolution in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin had described how the development of modern social mores was the result

of a competitive civilizing process, one in which visceral desires for immediate pleasure were continually sacrificed to the demands of community welfare and moral restraint (1: 163–66).

Darwin's vision of history as the progressive revelation of reason was foreshadowed much earlier by the French philosopher Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793–94). Condorcet rejected Rousseau's enshrinement of primitive nature, and argued for a society based upon science and rational thought. Believing that the perfectibility of man is an indefinite process, Condorcet envisioned progress as the step-by-step banishment of tyranny, superstition and barbarism—what amounted to the destruction of false prejudices. He stressed a single stream of progress and wrote, "We shall endeavor to prove that the rules of taste have the same universality, the same constancy as the other laws of the physical or moral universe" (253). In subsequent theories of social evolution, anthropologists repeatedly invoked Condorcet's notion of developmental stage theory and its attendant vision of a uniform ladder of progress. In the 1860s, this movement toward teleological realization was described by the German anthropologist J.J. Bachofen as passing through many levels, "each of which may be said to bear within it the preceding and the following stage" (98). For Bachofen, the particular passage led from matriarchy to patriarchy, and civilization's liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature (109). The repression of gender difference by Bachofen was accompanied by a more extensive set of anthropological descriptions of non-European cultures as the obverse (and negative) side of this progressive march to civilization. As we have discussed, hunter-gatherer societies became extant indexes of earlier stages of the development of mankind, the ambiguous evidence of the progressive evolution of mankind.¹⁵

Central to many anthropological texts was the belief, apparently shared by Loos, that progress was not inevitable, but rather brought about by the competitive abilities and will of individuals and societies. In his book, *An Anthropology of Primitive Peoples* (1859), the German anthropologist Theodor Waitz opposed Spencer's belief in the invisible hand of progress, and insisted instead that progress resulted from fortuitous evolution. For Waitz, progress was caused by specific social factors, greatly aided by the work of men of genius. In addition, a sharp Eurocentric bias characterized his text, and he wrote that "the development of civilization is, with some few unimportant exceptions, limited chiefly to the Caucasian race" (8). Nearly all texts of the period carried a similar bias against non-Western cultures. In describing the rudeness of early mankind in *Ancient Society* (1877), the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan characterized the gradual evolution of mental and moral powers through experience and protracted struggle on the path to civilization (11). Morgan went on to renounce the Rousseauian theory of moral degradation from the savage as no longer tenable, attributing it as a corollary of an outdated Mosaic cosmogony. Recognizing all stages of social evolution present in the contemporary world, Morgan related that society developed from savagery (Australians, Polynesians) to barbarism (American Indians), and finally culminated in civilization (Greece and Rome) (15).

John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Conditions of Man* (1870) and Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1874) are particularly relevant in regard to Loos's theory of progress. The British anthropologist Lubbock reiterated the growing anthropological theory that primitive societies illustrate passing customs, traits which no longer have a relation to present circumstances, but "which are rooted in our minds, as fossils are imbedded in the soil" (1). While not directly naming ornament in this regard, in his discussion of art and ornament Lubbock wrote that although many primitive peoples were not conscious of practicing art, they almost invariably were fond of ornament. "Savages are passionately fond of ornament. . . . As a general rule we may say that Southerners ornament themselves, Northerners their clothes. In fact all savage races who leave much of their skin uncovered, delight in painting themselves in the most brilliant colors they can obtain" (40). Lubbock went on to describe tattooing practices in great detail, commenting that the ornamentation of the skin is almost universal among the lower races of man.

Like Morgan and Lubbock, the American anthropologist Edward Tylor reiterated the general idea of the passage of human society from a state of savagery to civilization. He also mentioned Loos's favorite savages, the Papuans, as exemplars. Tylor's insight into the evolutionary process expanded upon Lubbock's contention that vestiges of primitive practices often survive into later stages of culture. Describing his theory of "survivals" in culture, Tylor wrote, "When a custom, an art, or an opinion is fairly started in the world, disturbing influences may long affect it so slightly that it may keep its course from generation to generation, as a stream once settled in its bed will flow on for ages" (70). In these survivals, which could easily describe Loos's view of ornament in architecture, original meanings die out, leaving an old practice increasingly estranged from society. "[M]eaningless customs must be survivals, [in] that they had a practical, or at least ceremonial, intention when and where they first arose, but are now fallen into absurdity from having been carried on into a new state of society, where their original sense has been discarded" (94). Tylor's "survivals," like Loos's "ornament," correspond to outdated superstitions outliving their cultural age. What was characteristic of an earlier era was not necessarily representative of modernity.

RESTRAINT AND EXCESS

During the second half of the nineteenth century, ornament's status in regard to modernity was discursively represented through its differential representation in schemes of historical progress. It should be clear that, unlike Semper, who at least implied heterogenous conditions for modernity, Loos's reading of modernity sought to establish homogeneity as the guiding principle of architecture. Echoing anthropologists who described a linear route of progress from primitivism, Loos equated architectural truth with the pursuit of improvement as measured against the complexities of modern day life. In discussing the Western pursuit of perfection in *Ancient Law* (1861), Henry Maine had described the danger of the primitive to modern society:

The rigidity of primitive law, arising chiefly from its early association and identification with religion, has chained down the mass of the human race to these views of life and conduct which they entertained at the time when their usages were first consolidated into systematic form. (74)

The notion of social betterment, which sharply differentiated the civilized from the primitive, was fundamentally based on a prohibition of those excesses associated with primitive culture: in the case of Maine, religion; for Loos, ornamentation.

Loos sought the abandonment of the culture of aesthetic centrality instituted during the early nineteenth century. In his view, art had taken on the incoherences of the world by becoming its central event. Progress toward true architectural modernism in the West could be accomplished only through the repression of art and its symbolic narratives. The negative values of ornament and primitivism lie at the heart of Loos's theory *contra* art.

The attack on ornament was aimed at the elimination of architectural excess as defined by both artistic decadence and economic waste. First, Loos contended that art, unlike productive and useful design, makes its way into the world independent of need. Anything but the center of cultural thought that Schelling had proposed, art is irresponsible. On the basis on this observation, Loos concluded that whereas architecture rationally serves the productive tasks of comfortable living, true art tears people from comfort (*Trotzdem* 101). Second, Loos aimed part of his assault on ornament at the damage that it causes to productive efficiency.¹⁶ Principally concerned that labor and materials are wasted on ornamentation, he contrasted inefficient conditions in factories producing ornamented goods with the fewer hours of labor characteristic of work places solely assembling unornamented goods. For Loos, the time it takes to ornament goods worsens working conditions and leads to the impoverishment of factory workers (*Trotzdem* 83). He concluded that the antidote to the decline of contemporary building and craft was a denial of unproductive expenditure.¹⁷

Overall, Loos blamed academic arts education and the rise of historical consciousness for the misplaced fetishism of ornament and the false romance of contemporary architecture with art. Historical education had installed a fraudulent liaison between modern building and the libertine imaginations of past cultures. Pattern books, architectural histories, and theoretical writings on art appealed to extinct habits, cultural mores, and artistic forms. They falsely aestheticized modern building and design, operating in reverse to the pragmatic laws of contemporary moral and economic culture. Banishing art and ornament implied mending the rupture with architectural progress engendered by the rise of historical scholarship. The inflammatory nature of Loos's prose, his shocking associations of ornament with primitivism and criminality, are all sustained by his belief in the need to extinguish utterly history's distortions. For the future, Loos nostalgically sought to revive a long-lost age devoid of all historicisms and relativisms: a re-connection with the sphere of architecture as myth that holds the possibility for a modern design language full with the rational power of clear, economic form-making. To repeat, acts of repression were fundamental to this forgetting of history. For Loos's idiosyncratic ideal of myth to re-emerge, the modern memory of antiquated ornamental practices would have to be cleansed.

In retrospect, the presence of historicist ornamentalism in the modern era was never erased by theories of utilitarian reason such as those of Loos. As the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes of historical consciousness, "In the beginning, the power of myth strikes consciousness with stupor and puts it 'outside of itself' (that is, it makes it conscious). In the end, this consciousness become consciousness of self and of the totality qua myth suspends itself on (or as) the consciousness of the mythic (or subjective) essence of the 'self' of all things" (55). Despite Loos's desire to rationalize architecture through the denial of artistic signification, other equally rational strategies (like the Austrian *Moderne* and German *Jugendstil*) bestowed credibility on ornament in Loos's own day. Even in the decades after 1920, architectural modernism never spoke a single anti-ornamental or anti-artistic language, as ongoing debate on the importance of artistic expression throughout the twentieth century points out. More recently, the rise of architectural post modernisms have contradicted any attempts to impose utilitarian norms and silence (ornamental) difference.

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate the relationship of Loos's theory of modern architecture to his belief that Western civilization was the culmination of progress from primitivism. Today, the identity of the modern West, as constituted by its rationalized ordering of all of human history and variety, is the dominant subject of interpretation in contemporary humanistic circles. Yet, merely denying exploitative cultural identities without examining their narrative underpinnings is insufficient. In this light, interpretations of projects such as Loos's, which attempt to abolish the similarities in built form between Western functional reason and pre-modern irrationality, are crucial guide-rails into the modern creations of West and Non-West.

NOTES

1. In his article on Loos, Rossi linked the ideas of Loos to those of his contemporaries in Vienna, Arnold Schönberg, Karl Kraus, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern. We are similarly told that Loos's distinction between the utilitarian and artistic emerged alongside Karl Kraus's exploration of the boundaries between literature and rhetoric, and set the stage for Ludwig Wittgenstein's analogous differentiation of logic from metaphysics. See Barnouw, Safran, and Colin St. John Wilson.
2. See especially Rukschcio and Schachel, Eaton, and Sekler.
3. On related attempts to impose Western values on non-Western societies through the elaboration of theories of the primitive, see Herbert (161–166).
4. In Loos's texts, as well as in writings by later architects and historians of architecture, the conceptualization of modern architecture was defined through its exclusion of so-called irrational activities like applied decoration. For example, in 1923, echoing other allegedly functional modernists, the architect and city planner Ludwig Hilbersheimer condemned the arts of the last decade as arbitrary and illusionary, and wrote, "[R]ational thought,

certainty of purpose, precision, and economy, until now qualities of the engineer, must become the basis of a comprehensive *Architektonik*" (134).

5. For a history of the philosophical approach to ornament during the nineteenth-century, see Kroll.
6. See Ottlinger (84).
7. See Hoffmann's theory of architectural realism (543), and Heuser's relating of architectural development to Darwinism (529–535).
8. The proliferation of ornamental pattern books during the nineteenth and early twentieth century no doubt was one of the causes of eclecticism. Among the more important books published toward the fin-de-siècle were Meyer's *Hand Book of Ornament*, and Speltz's *Styles of Ornament*.
9. For Loos, it arose as well from several critiques common to discourse on architecture in the 1880s and 1890s: consideration of how machine production of cheaply-made and imitative decoration debases historical associations and destroys the aesthetic aura of ornament in general; the improprieties inherent in the middle class attempt to represent their forms of living as like those of the nobility; the commodification of decorative schemes and ensuing lack of concern for use values; and finally, the conspicuous economic waste of materials and labor that go into ornamentation.
10. In a deeper sense, Loos's antagonists here were philosophers of psychological perception and artistic empathy, and those critics and artists who attempted to implement a theory of line as the language of ornament. On the promotion of a renaissance of ornament for the modern age, see Bahr (158), and van de Velde.
11. For a history of ethnological investigations on ornament, see Elisabeth Wilson (9–19).
12. See also Read.
13. In describing shared attitudes on primitive society, Kuper stresses that primitive institutions were presented as fossilized, representative of long-dead practices. Thus, despite the urge to establish connective links between them and modern civilization, the emergence of territorial states based on private property could be read as fundamentally different from the kinship relations determining primitive societies (6–7).
14. This process had reoccurred since the fall of Rome (and, one could argue, since the initial contacts of Romans with Greeks). What was constant up until and through the nineteenth century was the belief by theorists of architecture and the arts that the essence of Western design culture lay in an absolute coincidence of beauty and function, of ornament and structure.
15. On the history of anthropology and social evolution during the late nineteenth century, see Bowler (ff. 33), Leaf (106–139), Lowie (10–85), Malefijt (138–180), and Penniman (208–210).
16. As Müller stresses, what Loos criticized in the economic and social relations of his day was their particular backwardness, and unrealized power. His concept of the economical was saturated with thoughts of profitability (136).

17. Bataille characterized productive expenditure as that related solely to bare maintenance and unproductive expenditure—ornament, spectacles, cults, mourning, war, and perverse sexual activity—as those activities without an end in themselves (118).

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