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Hybrid Forms: Architectural Ornament and Intercultural Dialogues

Editorial

Ariane Varela Braga

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Editorial

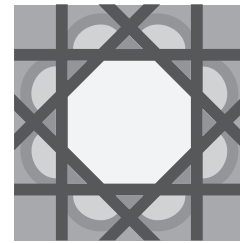
Ariane Varela Braga
University of Zurich

The days when ornament was the object of disdain and disinterest seem far away now. In the last thirty years, studies and publications on the subject have multiplied. Ornament has returned to the focus of attention of architects, artists and philosophers, as well as art and architectural historians. Perceived as a complex phenomenon, where formal and symbolic questions intersect with anthropological, economic and social issues, recent studies have placed ornament at the heart of a broader and more complex cultural history.¹

Devoted to the theme of architectural ornament and intercultural dialogue, the third issue of the peer-reviewed academic publication *bfo-Journal* invited papers to address the question of hybridisation from a broad historical and geographical perspective.

The concept of hybridity is historically rooted in biology and botany: the hybrid (*hibrida*) defines the offspring of two animals or plants of different species or varieties. In the nineteenth century, the term was first applied to linguistics and soon after integrated into racial theories of the time. Like ornament, whose interpretation has ranged from the reflection of cosmic order (*kosmos*) to a merely superficial decoration (*ornatus*), the perception of the hybrid has oscillated between the neutral values of its scientific metaphor to racial connotations associated with *métissage* and cross-fertilization.² Inextricably linked to the idea of purity, hybridity has been used to refer to situations where racial boundaries cross, thereby often embracing negative overtones. More recently, however, the re-appropriation of hybridity in social and cultural theories,³ which took place in the framework of the challenges caused by an increased globalisation, has brought new and more positive perceptions of the term and transformed it into a prerequisite of potential cultural innovations and creativity. Inasmuch as hybridity can be seen as a site of disintegration, it is also the stage where constructions of identity take place in a constant negotiation between divergent forces.

In today's Visual culture numerous examples of a positive reception of the ornamental and hybridity can be found that demonstrate how much both have become central topics of our present times. What stands centre stage for many media and communication professionals today are the manifold potentials of the hybrid, especially in scientific and technological areas. Slogans such as 'we choose hybrid'⁴ invite the public and its



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¹ To mention only a few: Michael Snodin, Maurice Howard, *Ornament. A Social History Since 1450*, (New Haven and London, 1996); Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Massimo Carboni, *L'ornamentale tra arte e decorazione* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2000); James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001); Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Philosophie de l'ornement. D'Orient en Occident* (Paris: Galilée, 2008); Alina Payne, *From Ornament to Object. Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012); Ralph Dekoninck et al. (eds.), *Questions d'ornements. XVe-XVIIIe s.*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Ariane Varela Braga (ed.), *Ornament, between Art and Design: Interpretations, Paths and Mutations in the Nineteenth Century, proceedings of the international study day of April 23, 2009, Istituto Svizzero di Roma* (Basel: Schwabe, 2013); Sabine Frommel and Eckhart Leuschner (eds.), *Architektur und Ornament-graphik der Frühen Neuzeit: Migrationsprozesse in Europa* (Rome: Campisano, 2014); Alina Payne and Gülrü Necipoğlu, *Histories of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

² On the elasticity of the term see: Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) or *A Case of Cultural Hybridity: the European Renaissance* (Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2012).

³ Hybridity is referred to a lot in post-colonial studies, see for instance Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). For an overview of the use of the term, see also Nicolas Balutet, "Du postmodernisme au post-humanisme: présent et futur du concept d'hybridité", *Babel*, 33 (2016), pp. 19-47 <<http://babel.revues.org/4391> ; DOI : 10.4000/babel.4391>.



Fig. 1
Tordesillas, Real Convent of Santa Clara, vestibule, detail of stucco decoration (1354-1361) © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Thomas Scheidt, Christian Stein

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consumers to embrace the idea of hybridity as something modern, ecological and somehow revolutionary. From cars to watches, from food to fashion, hybridity in the early twenty first century evokes the idea of flexibility, adaptability, innovation, fusion and creativity.

Welcomed as a new paradigm to bring new life to the discourse of art history,⁵ hybridity and ornament seem an ideal match. As current studies across the globe demonstrate, the concept of hybridity suggests a complete revision of art historical canons and opens a gateway to new and challenging fields of investigation. This has been clearly brought forth in a recent international conference in Lisbon on ‘The Art of Ornament: Meanings, Archetypes, Forms and Uses’.⁶ Many papers testified to the challenges and problems related to the interpretations and classifications of ornament in a global dimension, and underscored how much the understanding of ornaments and their categorisations are always unstable and dynamic.

In contrast to these developments, nineteenth-century narratives of art history, dominated by the need to categorize and divide art into schools, periods and styles, tended to avoid the hybrid or to exclude it as a potentially disruptive element difficult to fit into an ideally constructed discourse often permeated by nationalist interests. For instance, the inclusion of Assyrian art in museums after its rediscovery by Paul-Émile Botta

⁴ See for instance the official discourse related to Toyota Hybrid Cars and its brand: <<https://www.toyota.co.uk/hybrid/index.json>>.

⁵ See Nicolas Reveryon’s contribution in this issue.

⁶ The conference was an initiative of a group of researchers from the Universidade NOVA de Lisboa and was held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, from 23-25 November 2017 (<<https://ornament2017.weebly.com>>).

(1802–1870) and Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894) in the early 1840s, is a good example of the challenging reception of an art that was perceived as an in-between Ancient Egyptian and Greek art, as has been well demonstrated by Frederick Bohrer.⁷

The narrative of the nineteenth-century also affected the historic perception of ornament. Since the beginning of the century, an increased number of styles were gradually being included in ornamental patterns books that reflected the fashion for historicism and stylistic diversity. Volumes such as Charles Clerget's *Encyclopédie universelle d'ornements* (ca. 1840), Henry Shaw's *Encyclopedia of Ornament* (1842) or Joseph Cundall's *Examples of Ornament* (1855) all attest to an increasing global interest of the time in the production of ornament. These publications also demonstrate the importance of contemporary historiographical discourses, which were not only shaped through handbooks on the arts, but also were staged in museums and exhibition halls.

When in his seminal *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) architect Owen Jones (1809-1874) tried to present ornament as part of a global and unified expression, classified by cultures and styles, his judgement on hybridity was harsh. When speaking about the 'Turkish ornament', he defined it as an 'inferior,' 'unimaginative' and 'mixed style,' since 'on the same building, side by side with ornaments derived from Arabian and Persian floral ornaments, we find debased Roman and Renaissance details.'⁸ Jones's attack on hybridity was part of an overall combat against

that unfortunate tendency of our time to be content with copying, whilst the fashion lasts, the forms peculiar to any bygone age, without attempting to ascertain, generally completely ignoring, the peculiar circumstances which rendered an ornament beautiful, because it was appropriate, and which, as expressive of other wants when thus transplanted, as entirely fails.⁹

In the age of imperialism, aesthetic judgements were never that far from racial or colonial considerations. For Jones, the 'Turkish ornament' was perceived as something unsettling and destructive, due to its openness to other cultural influences in general, and its contemporary appropriation of European architecture and fashion in particular. It echoed Jones's own anxieties and reservations regarding a general aesthetical crisis of Western decorative arts and architecture.

On the other hand, the term Mudejar – to which the cover image of this issue refers – was for the first time theorised in 1859 by Spanish historian and archaeologist José Amador de los Rios (1816-1878), who already understood it as a product of cultural hybridity. As it was perceived as a positive example of cultural and artistic expression (fig. 1), this intrinsic hybridity also embodied the aspirations of contemporary discourses on Spanish nationalism. Even so, Mudejar struggled to find its way into art history as an acknowledged proper style.¹⁰ It was only recently that it

⁷ Frederick Bohrer, "Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France", *Art Bulletin*, 80 (1998), pp. 336-356.

⁸ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament, illustrated by examples from various styles of ornament* (London: Day & Son, 1856), pp. 61-63. Also see : Ariane Varela Braga, *Une théorie universelle au milieu du XIXe siècle. La Grammar of Ornament d'Owen Jones* (Rome: Campisano, 2017).

⁹ Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (see note 8), p. 1.

¹⁰ On Mudejar ornament see: Maria Judith Feliciano, "The invention of mudejar art and the visceral aesthetic paradox: notes on the reception of Iberian ornament in New Spain", in Payne and Necipoğlu, *Histories of Ornament* (see note 1), pp. 70-93.

became the focus of attention in a wave of global art history with a strong interest in contact zones.¹¹

The present issue of the *bfo-Journal* addresses the potentials of hybridity as a new paradigm for the renovation of art historical studies in a global perspective. As a privileged vehicle for artistic and cultural experimentations located on the tension-laden nexus between local and external traditions, the ornament absorbs and transforms distinct artistic languages. It can be considered a generator of processes of exchange, dialogue and acculturation. Its aesthetical, material and technical versatility and adaptability places it at the heart of present-day transnational and transcultural studies.

The three scholarly articles featured in this issue examine the question of cultural and artistic hybridity in relation to architectural ornament from very different perspectives and periods. Nicolas Reveyron's essay on twelve-century religious architecture in the region of Lyon, France, analyses the fertile dialogue and complexity in this intersection of French, Bourguignon and Germanic models. Discussing the particular case of the Iberian Peninsula, Caroline Helmenstein analyses Gothic-Mudejar architecture and the lavishly carved wooden cornices widespread in the northeast of Spain in the sixteenth century. On the other hand, the last essay brings us to the present day. In an interview with artist Jim Cogswell, Claire Zimmerman unveils the many discourses employed in the de- and reconstruction of Western narratives in his approach combining analogue and digital techniques.

Inasmuch as these essays confirm the multiple readings related to the idea of ornament and hybridity to this very day, they also point out to the significance of hybridity for art history.

¹¹ See Gülrü Necipoğlu, "Architectural dialogues across the eastern Mediterranean monumental domed sanctuaries in the Ottoman Empire and Renaissance Italy", in Alina Payne (ed.), *Renaissance and Baroque architecture* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 594-623, or Avinoam Shalem, "Dangerous claims: on the 'othering' of Islamic art history and how it operated within Global art history", *Kritische Berichte*, 40 (2012), pp. 69-86. The Mudejar phenomenon is also at the heart of the SNSF project "Mudejarismo and Moorish Revival in Europe" based at the University of Zurich and directed by Francine Giese (www.transculturalstudies.ch).