

# The Rejection of Ornamental Design in Modernism

What is Ornament?

(or·na·ment)

- An accessory, article, or detail used to beautify the appearance of something to which it is added or of which it is a part: architectural ornaments.

## Introduction

Simply put an Ornament (in the terms used within this essay) is a decorative piece of work or art, which has extra design to embellish the beauty of its form.

Within this essay I shall be exploring the rejection of ornament within the modernist world, using Alfred Loos “Ornament and crime” and the impact of the foundation known as Bauhaus, (a German school of crafts and fine arts 1919- 1933) to get a greater impact of why this rejection came about and its reasons, I shall be exploring the culture known as Art Nouveau (1890-1905)

To get a brief background history/timeline of the progression of design from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> I’ll be starting to examine Art Nouveau.

Art Nouveau (French for “new style”) also known as Jugendstil (German for “youth style”) an International style that captured a moment at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a very ornamental design using curvilinear lines and floral patterns, a total contrast against the modernist design values. It was this movement that spurred Alfred Loos into creating his Essay “Ornament and Crime” talking about how negative an effect ornament has on design,

stating; *that ornamentation can have the effect of causing objects to go out of style and thus become obsolete.* (Alfred Loos, 1908) Even at the heights of Nouveau, Loos still challenged the most common style movement and fought to sway people to realise that Nouveau only hindered the aspects of design and functionality and would not pass the test of time.

Alfred Loos himself was a forefather of the movement “modernism” by voicing out his concerns of the current artistic movements he helped rush in a new thought of change regarding design.

Art Nouveau was a very popular style between (1890-1905) having a short longevity, due mainly to the rise of the modernist ideals, in this newer vision of the future of design, mathematics, science, form & function were key components to its uniqueness and popularity, being a complete contrast to the earlier Art Nouveau it brought a new age to design, using primary colours straight lines and simplistic features, modernism captured a lot of its history due to industrialisation, mass production catered better for straight lines for simplistic design stripping back all feature to give pure form and function, industry used these factors to keep production costs down, therefore in itself creating a new way for architecture and design to bring us a new movement.

Bauhaus was an institution that is now revered as a pinnacle innovator of modernism, opening its doors in 1919 until 1933 when closed down by the Nazi regime, it managed to spearhead the modernism movement, through its arts and craft design, Bauhaus was also famous for removing the class divide between crafters and artists which always caused

tension and problems in the past, a new wave of mutual respect between all designers brought in a new era of shared design.

With Bauhaus inspiring the new wave of modernism Ornamentation had died a very quick death, the designers of Bauhaus all had a simple vision; to create simple designs and artefacts/buildings that would stand the test of time, designs that now, looking back from the year 2008, still fit into a modern design that looks like it has just been designed.

Bauhaus's main goal was architecture, they saw that as the pinnacle of all design, I feel that they were different from Alfred Loos, still striving to help change and improve design in their own ways and bring about Modernism. Unlike Loos the team at Bauhaus wasn't so publicly adverse about the negative affects of Ornamentation, they simply knew the style they wanted to craft and aimed to bring that to the public.

Now I'm going to discuss why the Modernistic movement rejected ornamentation completely, as earlier stated, Alfred Loos was a forefather of the public belief that ornamentation only served to halt progress within design, things may have started towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it wasn't until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Art Nouveau and Art Deco had been and gone. As with all cultures, design is fundamentally born, and then dies, cultures are always seeking out the new and the unknown, after time a typical type of design will become common and new designers/philosopher's will start to call for a change for new ideas and start creating something of their own, sometimes to become popular/famous, sometimes out of love for their beliefs, but in the end, we, cultures, will

always seek to better ourselves, to take what we know, understand it, mess with it and then create something new and bold.

At the peak of Art Nouveau, peoples houses were crammed to the brim of clutter and ornaments, rooms were starting to become congested and lost a lot of form and function, I believe this, and societies embracing attitude to change, was another major factor why ornamentation was easily rejected, with the start of modernism houses started to become living spaces, with room to use its function, and have a theme running through.

Ornamentation had been prominent for centuries and a really iconic design that spanned the ages, going back to Alfred Loos again I can see his point of view clearly, when you have designed something, why then put additional design on, that only personalises the item? Design in its purest form is functional and only requires simplistic form to carry on that purpose, but additionally retain a sense of feature that will draw the eye and remain personal, but personal to the majority.

A great understanding of today's modernism, is in the selling of homes, now homes are as personal as you can get to the owner, as they move in they quickly implement their own tastes and designs into their house, only to undo all this when its time to sell up, we, (the public) are told time and time again that to sell a house easily, we have to help the viewer see a blank canvas, that way they can see their own design and vision in the room, as they

enter a room a “blank canvas” is easily described as using neutral tones of colour, using very straight clean lines and simplistic form and function (again going back to the ideas of industrialisation giving birth to our current modernistic ideals) stripping everything back to this state is a very modern way of design, some would argue a post-modern era, but I believe that post-modern is all about bringing some life back into modernism. At a point within Modernism these themes seemed to disappear as people changed for really sterile and minimalist looks. (fen shui)

This essay is looking into the rejection of ornamentation within modernism, which is apparent more and more as the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, design goes through cycles, just like fashion, we are subjected to a certain type of design for so long we have to seek a change, sometimes we will take a current design and build upon it furthering its overall appeal, this is seen more within our current era of post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century after having a cut back and simplistic design movement for so long, consumers are crying for more detailed design, wallpapers with ornamentation on are appearing in spates in retail shops and magazines, so we can see how design is subjected to the consumer and also that of constant change which borrows so much from its predecessors.

## Conclusion

Ornamentation was always going to be rejected in time, as with all styles, culture becomes jaded with them over time, they yearn for something new, something bold, sometimes even when it takes from its predecessors to create something better yet similar.

Alfred Loos and Bauhaus were huge players in the rejection of ornamental design, both in different ways, but both were achieving the same goal. Loos had to be aggressive as he brought his fight in the middle of Art Nouveau's popular heights and is now seen as a forefather and revered for his vision in the progress of design. Bauhaus didn't have Art Nouveau to fight against but capitalised when art deco (which preceded Art Nouveau) also faded away.

When I look at the current trends in our culture, 2008, I see a new trend still complying with the modernistic ideals but recently a slight invasion of ornamentation creeping back into design, my beliefs for this is that society has grown tired of the simplistic and sometimes boring design of modernism and are searching for new life within design, which only serves to show how, as a culture, we will always go back on ourselves and use what was popular or hasn't been utilised for a while in the past. Sometimes world wide events will shape our styles and designs, take the surge of excavation in north Egypt in the mid 1920's which started the Art Deco era or the moon landing in 1966's space race and the futuristic design in furniture and new technologies.

## References

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(Hardcover)

**Web Design Degree**

**Student Number: WRI06102817**

**Semester 2**

**Contextual Practice - INT1047**

**The Rejection of Ornament Design in Modernism**

**1<sup>st</sup> Submission**

**Handed In: 16/4/2008**