

ORNAMENT

The question of whether ornamentation is allowable in principle is one that hardly anyone poses seriously nowadays. Even the later writings of that passionate critic of ornamentation, Adolf Loos, leave out the radical renunciation of ornamentation in objects of practical utility, which he argued in his legendary publication *Ornament and Crime* (1908). One generation before Loos, Gottfried Semper, whose body of work gave rise to today's MAK, declared that the artistic endeavors of human beings began with braiding and weaving, whereby a surface ornament comes into being by performing the technical aspects of the activity.

In the early years of its founding, the MAK, formerly the Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, set an all-encompassing goal for its collections: to document ornamentation in its historical and its contemporary development, and to present it as an exemplary model to artists and craftsmen. Over time, these parts of the collection were relegated to a different role, with the concept of “ornamentation” continuing to serve as the unifying element.

150 years after the founding of the MAK and after numerous exhibitions, the MAK DESIGN LAB has mounted a review of the diversity and complexity of the ornament with a focus on contemporary times. This is not about reaching agreement on definitions—as one would have to do in an open society—but rather much more about describing a state of being, a bringing to conscious awareness the role that ornamentation plays in our lives.

Thus, the interest in “rhythmic” composition—and progressing beyond it—takes shape in numerous media, whether in products for daily use or in autonomous works of art. The proximity of the ornament to topics ranging from symbols to abstraction makes it an ideal mediator between formal aesthetic design and everyday life.

Inside the MAK DESIGN LAB the thematic area *Ornament* is structured in a modular fashion, i.e., topics may be swapped or expanded. Ornaments made of natural materials such as stone or wood, which have fascinated people for hundreds of years in the design of façades and interiors, as well as in the treasures found in chambers of art and wonders, mark the beginning of the presentation in playful reference to Adolf Loos and his Vienna architecture.

As ornamental wrappings, book spines play a significant role in living and work spaces. They impart information about our educational level and our interests; their colorful designs help us in locating books and conjure irregular patterns onto (book-lined) walls.

At the Paris World Fair in 1867 the MAK acquired a rosette from Sultan Lajin's minbar at the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo; the minbar dates back to 1296. At present this important wood intarsia from the time of the Mamluk sultanate is scattered across various museums; the rosette in the MAK Collection gave rise to the idea of taking a closer look at the topic of ornamentation in the Islamic world. The proscription against images—whether verbalized or not—led to a symbolism in ornamentation that is understood worldwide. In recent times in particular, these types of surface ornamentation and their often intricate construction have fascinated Western artists. For this reason, contemporary artworks are rotated so as to be in juxtaposition with the rosette from the minbar. Two artists were courted for the opening: Adriana Czernin, who perceives ornaments as metaphors for personal entanglements, and Jörg Ahrnt, a wanderer between Europe and Iran, who contributed an installation consisting of Central Asian ceramic shards dating from the 8th to the 17th centuries from the MAK Collection.

How much the topic of ornamentation influences our daily lives will be illustrated in several chapters, for example by juxtaposing Persian and Turkish floor tiles with head scarves worn by young women today. These are not only a way of expressing religious affiliation, but more and more are becoming a key fashion accessory, an attention-getting head decoration. Body decoration, too, which often literally gets under the skin, is experiencing a renaissance, with 30–40% of the population sporting piercings or tattoos in addition to traditional jewelry.

In closing, a question about the functionality of ornaments will be pursued: why are water bottles decorated with waves whereas drinking glasses feature knobs or diamond-cut patterns? And what will the soccer ball used in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil look like?

After the opening is before the opening—the exhibition will be modified over time, with the ideas and suggestion of visitors taken into account; for in the future, ornamentation will be defined much more by consumer demands than by spectators.

—Johannes Wieninger
Curator, MAK Asia Collection