Second Nature

Imagine these bizarre garlands detached from the wall they are decorating and laid out on a table like a real object. It would send a shiver up one’s spine.
—Paul Souffrin, L’Imagination de l’artiste (1901)

The 19th-century eye abhorred abstractions. The most taciturn of figures—a simple line—could bring to mind a legion of objects and resemblances. “Form is always the form of something,” the philosopher Victor Cousin was known to repeat. For the aesthetician Paul Souffrin, even an object as imposable as a cushion had an “expressive attitude, a physiognomy.” He believed that ornamentalists could capitalize on the mind’s propensity to animate objects, transforming, for example, the leg of a table into the claw of a predator. But he cautioned his readers: accidental patterns in wood or marble can easily transform into hallucinatory nightmares, unwittingly giving life to “a profusion of deformed and frightening monsters.”

Fear played a critical part in conceptions of ornament in the 19th century. In aesthetic circles, fear of ornament was matched only by the fear of lack of ornament—by what art historian Alois Riegl termed a “horror vacui.” By most accounts of the time, ornament first emerged as a response to a primitive terror of nature. It was a recoiling from the external world, a way to bring order to the disorderly chaos. Primitive man was seen to be possessed by an ornamental impulse that compelled him to adorn every available surface, from his own skin to objects of daily use. But the theories who established these original narratives were no doubt writing history in their favor: no moment in time produced as much ornament as the 19th century. Architecture, the non-mimetic art form par excellence, was overwhelmed by visibly figurative forms: bushy shoots, corpulent flowers, and coiled fronds. The “parasitic vegetation,” as Souffrin termed it, took root most inevitably in the dimly lit interiors of the bourgeois home, where the plush velvety of furniture and wall coverings were made to contrast with the alienating surfaces of the modern metropolis.

But if these interior decor had emerged to provide refuge from the street, they soon were seen as equally menacing. An important faction of designers perceived ornament as a special locus of violent disclosure, a conduit for a wholly new and potentially disruptive kind of metaphor. Ornament was a second nature, one that captured and framed the animate forces more potently than the living world itself. Ornamentalists quickly recognized that once mobilized, these forces inevitably took on demonic grimmery; they looked fearsome, unsettling, and they stared back. This is especially true when given three-dimensional form. The veiled coil of an unrolling leaf could be carved to appear so real it seemed wet to the touch. And so too the tongue, as Salvador Dalí implied in his 1953 essay “The Terrifying and Edible Beauty of Fine-Scale Architecture.” “Eat me,” Dalí captioned a photograph of one of Hector Guimard’s columns in the Paris Metro. Ornamental flesh was as delectable as it was repulsive.

Ralph Gchoe

Haverford Design Magazine

No. 42 / Run for Cover!