



ORTEGA y GASSET
Gazette

JANUARY 2014

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The ORTEGA y GASSET **Gazette** is a digital publication, produced monthly by artists, writers and thinkers associated with O y G Projects. This month's contributing artists illuminate pages from Adolph Loos's essay, *Ornament and Crime*. They are Sheilah Wilson, Karla Wozniak, Lauren F. Adams, Jessica Langely, Clare Britt, Joshua Bienko, Jose Joaquin Figueroa, Carrie Hott, Susanne Slavick, Christine Wong Yap, and David Mabb.
Compiled by Joshua Bienko

ORTEGA y GASSET PROJECTS was launched in May 2013 as a gallery and curated project space in the Bushwick/Ridgewood neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens. Formed by artists living in California, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York, O y G operates as a cross-country collective and an incubator for dialog and artistic exchange.

O y G is:
LAUREN ADAMS, Baltimore, MD
JOSHUA BIENKO, Knoxville, TN
CLARE BRITT, Chicago, IL
CARRIE, HOTT, San Francisco, CA
JESSICA LANGLEY, Pittsburgh, PA
LEEZA MEK SIN, Brooklyn, NY
SHEILAH WILSON, Granville, OH
KARLA WOZNIAK, Knoxville, TN

DECEMBER 2013

adolf LOOS

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ESSAYS

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL MITCHELL

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Riverside,
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ESSAYS

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29. Ornament and Crime (1929)

In the womb the human embryo goes through all phases of development the animal kingdom has passed through. And when a human being is born, his sense impressions are like a new-born dog's. In childhood he goes through all changes corresponding to the stages in the development of humanity. At two he sees with the eyes of a Papuan, at four with those of a Germanic tribesman, at six with those of a modern bourgeois. At eight he becomes a painter. At ten he becomes a scientist. The violet, the color discovered by the eighteenth century; before the violet was blue and the purple snail was red. Even today physicists can point to colors in the solar spectrum which have been given a name, but which it will be left to future generations to discern.

A child is amoral. A Papuan too, for us. The Papuan slaughters his enemies and devours them. He is not a criminal. But if a modern person slaughters someone and devours him, he is a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan covers his skin with tattoos, his boat, his oars, in short everything he can lay his hands on. He is not a criminal. But if a modern person does the same, he is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty percent of the inmates have tattoos. People with tattoos not in prison are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats.

The urge to decorate one's face and anything else within reach is the origin of the fine arts. It is the childish babble of painting. But all art is erotic.

A person of our times who gives way to the urge to daub the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate. What is normal in the Papuan or the child is a sign of degeneracy in the modern man. I made the following discovery which I had not made before: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use.* I thought by doing so I would bring joy to the world: it has not thanked me for it. People were sad and downcast. What depressed them was the realization we could no longer create new ornament. What? We alone, the people of the nineteenth century, were not capable of doing something every negro tribesman could do, something every age and nation before us had done!?

The objects mankind created in earlier millennia without ornament have been casually tossed aside and allowed to go to wrack and ruin. We do not possess a single workbench from the Carolingian period, but any piece of trash having even the slightest decoration was collected, cleaned up, and put in an ostentatious palace built specially to house it. And we made our way sadly around the showcases, ashamed of our impotence. Every epoch had its own style, and ours alone should be denied one!? By style people meant ornamentation. But I said, "Do not weep. Do you not see the greatness of our age resides in our very inability to create new ornament? We have gone beyond ornament, we have achieved plain, undecorated simplicity. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the cities will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital. Then fulfillment will be ours."

But there were hobgoblins who refused to accept it. They wanted mankind to continue to strain under the yoke of ornament. Mankind had reached the point where ornament was no longer a source of pleasure, where a tattooed face, instead of increasing people's aesthetic pleasure as it does for the Papuans, diminished pleasure. People had reached the point where they liked a plain cigarette case, while they would not buy a decorated one, even if the price was the same. They were happy with their clothes, and glad they did not have to go around dressed like fairground monkeys in red velvet trousers with gold braid. And I said, "See, the room where Goethe died is more splendid than all your renaissance pomp, and a plain piece of furniture is more beautiful than your museum pieces with all their inlay work and carving. Goethe's language is more beautiful than all the flowery language of the Nuremberg pastoral poets."

That displeased the hobgoblins, and the state, whose task it is to obstruct the people's cultural progress, decided to promote the development and revival of ornamentation. Woe to the state whose revolutions are made by its civil servants! Soon in the Vienna Museum of Applied Art there was a sideboard called "The Miracu-





lous Draught of Fishes," soon there were cupboards with names like "The Bewitched Princess," referring to the decoration with which these unfortunate pieces were covered. The Austrian state takes its task so seriously it ensures the ancient footcloth does not disappear entirely from within the bounds of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. It forces every cultured twenty-year-old man to spend three years marching in footcloths instead of in knitted hosiery. After all, every state works on the assumption that a primitive population is easier to govern than a cultured one.

The epidemic of ornament enjoys state recognition and state subsidy, then. For my part, however, I see that as a retrograde step. I do not accept the objection that ornament is a source of increased pleasure in life for cultured people, the objection expressed in the exclamation, "But if the ornament is beautiful!" For me, and with me for all people of culture, ornament is not a source of increased pleasure in life. When I want to eat a piece of gingerbread, I choose a piece that is plain, not a piece shaped like a heart, or a baby, or a cavalryman, covered over and over with decoration. A fifteenth-century man would not have understood me, but all modern people will. The supporters of ornament think my hunger for simplicity is some kind of mortification of the flesh. No, my dear Professor of Applied Arts, I am not mortifying the flesh at all. I find the gingerbread tastes better like that.

It is easy to reconcile ourselves to the great damage and depredations the revival of ornament had done to our aesthetic development, since no one and nothing, not even the power of the state, can hold up the evolution of mankind. It can only be slowed down. We can afford to wait. But in economic respects it is a crime, in that it leads to the waste of human labor, money, and materials. That is damage time cannot repair.

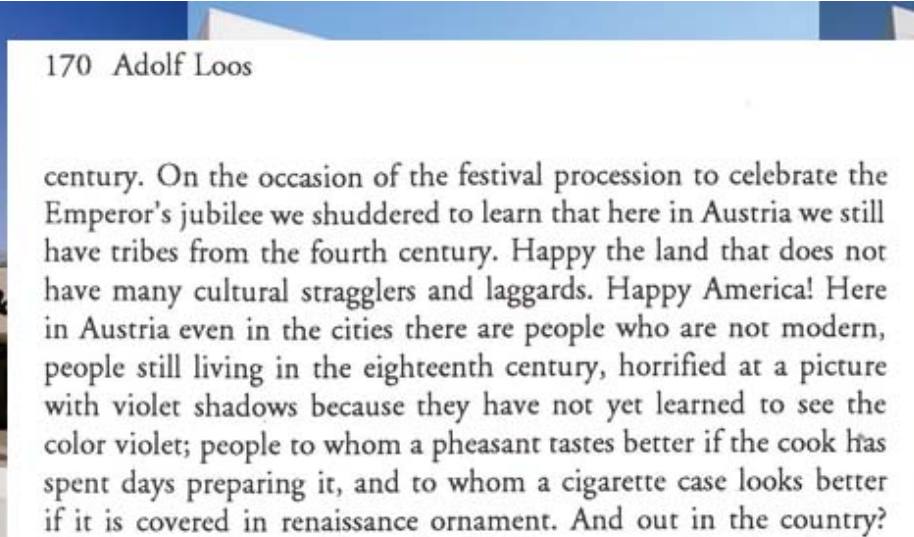
The speed of cultural development is hampered by the stragglers. I am living, say, in 1912, my neighbor around 1900, and that man over there in 1880. It is a misfortune for a state if the culture of its inhabitants stretches over too great a time span. The peasant who farms in the shadow of the Großglockner lives in the twelfth



century. On the occasion of the festival procession to celebrate the Emperor's jubilee we shuddered to learn that here in Austria we still have tribes from the fourth century. Happy the land that does not have many cultural stragglers and laggards. Happy America! Here in Austria even in the cities there are people who are not modern, people still living in the eighteenth century, horrified at a picture with violet shadows because they have not yet learned to see the color violet; people to whom a pheasant tastes better if the cook has spent days preparing it, and to whom a cigarette case looks better if it is covered in renaissance ornament. And out in the country? Clothes and household goods all belong to earlier times. The peasant is not a Christian, he is still a heathen.

These people who lag behind are slowing down the cultural development of the nations and of humanity. As far as the economic aspect is concerned, if you have two people living next door to each other who have the same needs, the same aspirations, and the same income, but who belong to different cultural epochs, you will find the man of the twentieth century getting richer and richer, and the man of the eighteenth century poorer and poorer. I am assuming, of course, that in both cases their lifestyles reflect their attitudes. The man of the twentieth century needs much less capital to supply his needs, and can therefore make savings. The vegetables he likes are simply cooked in water and served with a knob of butter. They taste good to the other only if there are nuts and honey mixed in, and a cook has spent hours over them. Decorated plates cost more, while twentieth-century man likes his food on white crockery alone. The one saves money while the other throws it away. And it is the same with whole nations. Woe betide the people that lag behind in their cultural development. The English are getting richer, and we poorer. . . .

The harm done by ornament to the ranks of the producers is even greater. Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our culture, but a symptom of backwardness or degeneracy, the craftsman producing the ornament is not fairly rewarded for his labor. The conditions among wood carvers and turners, the

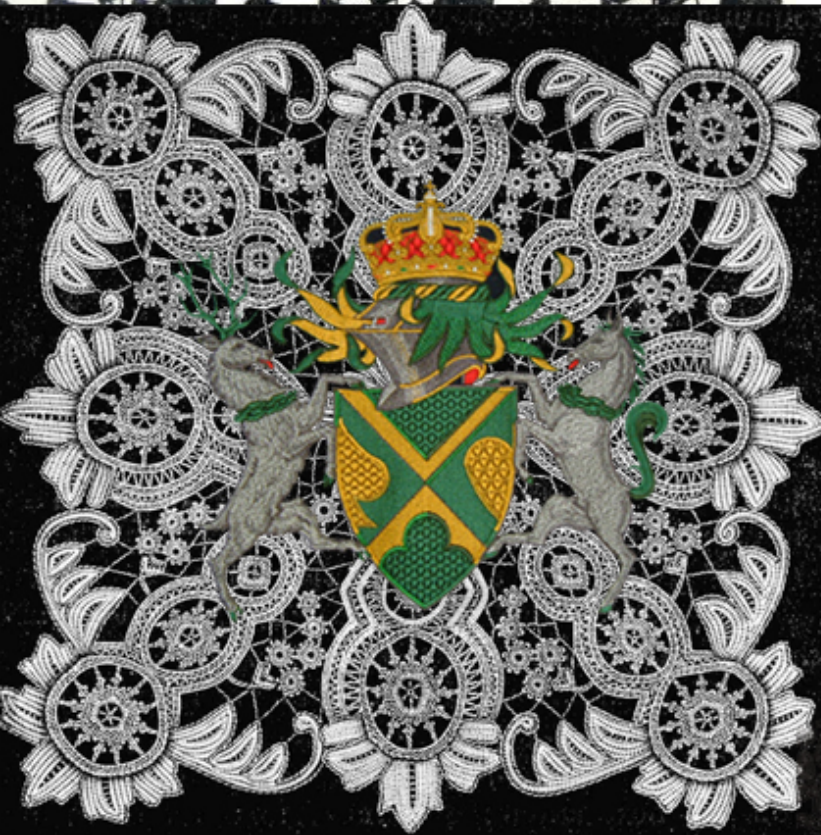




criminally low rates paid to embroiderers and lace makers are well-known. An ornamental craftsman has to work for twenty hours to reach the pay a modern worker earns in eight. In general, decoration makes objects more expensive, but despite that it does happen that a decorated object, with materials costing the same and demonstrably taking three times as long to produce, is put on sale at half the price of a plain object. The result of omitting decoration is a reduction in working hours and an increase in wages. A Chinese wood carver works for sixteen hours, an American laborer for eight. If I pay as much for a plain box as for one with ornamentation, the difference in labor time belongs to the worker. And if there were no ornaments at all—a state that will perhaps come about after thousands of years—we would need to work for only four hours instead of eight, since at the moment half of our labor is accounted for by ornamentation.

Ornament means wasted labor and therefore wasted health. That was always the case. Today, however, it also means wasted material, and both mean wasted capital.

As there is no longer any organic connection between ornament and our culture, ornament is no longer an expression of our culture. The ornament being created now bears no relationship to us, nor to any human being, or to the system governing the world today. It has no potential for development. Where is Otto Eckmann's ornamentation now, or that of van der Velde. In the past the artist was a healthy, vigorous figure, always at the head of humanity. The modern ornamental artist, however, lags behind or is a pathological case. After three years even he himself disowns his own products. Cultured people find them intolerable straight away, others become aware of it only after a number of years. Where are Otto Eckmann's works today? Where will Olbrich's be in ten years' time. Modern ornament has no parents and no offspring, no past and no future. Uncultivated people, for whom the greatness of our age is a closed book, greet it rapturously and then disown it after a short time.



[Hook]

Ellen Degeneres (swag!)

Ellen Degeneres (wool!)

[Verse 1]

I feel like Ellen

Right hand Ellen

Big blank rang

But I feel like Usher Raymond

Put me on the couches

Interview my girlfriend

Swag, swag, swag, swag

Brang-dang-dang your girlfriend

Girlfriend look like Ellen

Chain like Degeneres

"Damn Lil B, you done came up!

Now you touring heavy and your s

Damn BasedGod, you doing ever

And I still swag harder

Iced-out ring real big like a charger

Yeah, he tight, but I'm swagging harder

See me on the Internet, 10 million Youtube

950 MySpace, 10 million MySpace

Young BasedGod met a girl off of MySpace

Now I'm on TV like Ellen Degeneres

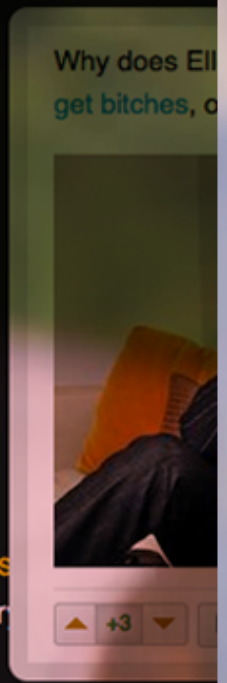
"30 thousand for his show: oh he's so generous!"

[Hook]

[Verse 2]

See me on set at 10 o'clock

Practicing my lines, swag to the tenth



Humanity as a whole is healthy, only a few are sick. But these few tyrannize the worker, who is so healthy he is incapable of inventing ornaments. They compel him to execute the ornaments they have invented, in a wide variety of different materials.

The changing fashion in ornament results in a premature devaluation of the product of the worker's labor; his time and the materials used are wasted capital. I have formulated the following principle: *The form of an object should last, that is, we should find it tolerable as long as the object itself lasts.* I will explain: A suit will change its style more often than a valuable fur. A woman's ball outfit, intended for one night alone, will change its style more quickly than a desk. Woe betide us, however, if we have to change a desk as often as a ball outfit because we can no longer stand the old style. Then we will have wasted the money we paid for the desk.

BRANG

Ornamental artists and craftsmen are well aware of this, and in Austria they try to show this deficiency in a positive light. They say, "A consumer who has furnishings he cannot stand after ten years, and thus is forced to refurnish his apartment every ten years, is better than one who buys something only when the old one becomes worn out with use. Industry needs that! The refineries in fashion provide employment for millions."

DANG

This seems to be the secret of the Austrian economy. When a fire breaks out, how often does one hear someone say, "Thank God! Now there is work for people again." Just set a house on fire, set the Empire on fire, and everyone will be rolling in money! Just keep on making furniture we chop up for firewood after three years, and we have to melt down after four, because even at that time they will not fetch a tenth of the cost of labor and materials. The rich will get richer and richer!

Not only the consumer bears the loss, it is above all the worker. Nowadays, putting decoration on objects which, thanks to progress, no longer need to be decorated, means a waste of labor and an abuse of material. If all objects would last as long in aesthetic terms as they last physically, the consumer would be able

en wear the fancy suits and "swag" (strut) her stuff? To of course..



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DANG DANG DANG

Lil B that he cannot directly, as he's do
This song cements community (with w sense of kinship)

Follow Rap

19 SCHOLARS ANNO

Maboo 272,2

Literate 5.7



for them, has would allow the worker to earn more
design's stronger lines, and an object that would I find
Mussolini's idea of what it is worth, but I am quite happy

I was
mann's interior
Apollo
factory shop is

is bearable only when they are steadily in a work +
different from what it is only worth when
being a success of their study, the stamp on the
the same way as a few days to much up and out

The ideal I preach is the aristocrat. What I mean by that is the

best material with the greatest care, and have taken up many man-
hours of work, do they become truly unaesthetic. I find it easier

different for individuals and people who have not yet a total dis-

The ideal I preach is the aristocrat. What I mean by that is the
small, the weak of humanity, who yet has a profound under-

standing of the problems and aspirations of those at the bottom. One who well understands the way the African works patterns into the cloth according to a certain rhythm, so the design appears only when the fabric is taken off the loom; likewise the Persian weaving his rug, the Slovak peasant woman making her lace, the old woman making marvelous needlework from silk and glass beads. The aristocrat lets them carry on in their own accustomed way. He knows the time they spend on their work is sacred to them. A revolutionary would go and tell them it was all pointless, just as he would drag an old woman away from the wayside shrine, saying there is no God. But the atheist among the aristocrats still raises his hat when he passes a church.

My shoes are covered with decoration formed by sawtooth patterns and holes. Work done by the shoemaker, work he has not been paid for. Imagine I go to the shoemaker and say, "You charge forty crowns for a pair of shoes. I will pay you forty eight." It will raise the man to such a transport of delight, he will thank me for my thorough workmanship and the material used, making them of a quality that will far outweigh my extra payment. He is happy, and happiness is a rare commodity in his house. He has found someone who understands him, who respects his work, and does not doubt his honesty. He can already see the finished shoes in his mind's eye. He knows where the best leather is to be found at the moment, he knows which of his workers he will entrust with the task, and the shoes will have all the sawtooth patterns and holes an elegant pair of shoes can take. And then I say, "But there is one condition. The shoes must be completely plain." I will drag him down from the heights of bliss to the depths of hell. He will have less work, and I have taken away all his pleasure in it.

The idea I preach is the reverse of it. I can accept decoration on my own person if it brings pleasure to my fellow man. It brings pleasure to me, too. I can accept the African's ornament, the Persian's, the Slovak peasant woman's, my shoemaker's, for it provides the high point of their existence, which they have no other means of achieving. We have the art that has superseded ornament.

After all the toil and tribulations of the day, we can go to hear Beethoven or *Tristan*. My shoemaker cannot. I must not take his religion away from him, for I have nothing to put in its place. But anyone who goes to the *Ninth* and then sits down to design a wallpaper pattern is either a fraud or a degenerate.

The disappearance of ornament has brought about an undreamed-of blossoming in the other arts. Beethoven's symphonies would never have been written by a man who had to dress in silk, velvet, and lace. Those who go around in velvet jackets today are not artists, but clowns or house painters. We have become more refined, more subtle. When men followed the herd they had to differentiate themselves through color, modern man uses his dress as a disguise. His sense of his own individuality is so immensely strong it can no longer be expressed in dress. Lack of ornamentation is a sign of intellectual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier or foreign cultures as he likes and as he sees fit. He concentrates his own inventive power on other things.

Afterword

This article by the Viennese architect, written in 1908, at which time it was the cause of riots among applied artists in Munich, but received with rapturous applause when delivered as a lecture in Berlin, has never before been published in German. The title, "Ornament and Crime," is a catchword for many, known even to people who never knew where it came from. The article has appeared in the languages of all advanced nations, even in Japanese and Hebrew. The only one missing was German. We are grateful it has been made available to us so we can publish it on the occasion of the Frankfurt meeting of the International Association for New Building. It demonstrates to us today that, at the time when *art nouveau* was flourishing, Adolf Loos was perhaps the only person who was clear about what is *modern*. Just as the houses Adolf Loos built twenty years ago, and which at that time aroused



ADOLF



LOOS

Unknown User says:

"I love Adolf Loos even though to him I am criminal"

Posted over 4 years ago

a storm of indignation, are now accepted as expressions of pure functional form.⁴

Notes

1. "This essay was written in 1908. We dedicate it to the Second International Congress for New Building, meeting today in Frankfurt." Footnote in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.
2. See note, p. 38.
3. The gallery of the Association of Viennese Artists.
4. The Afterword appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.





ORTEGA y GASSET PROJECTS

7-17 Troutman #327, Ridgewood, New York. www.oygprojects.com



ACTUALIZE

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