

## Special Issue "[When Art History Meets Design History](#)"

### Introduction\*

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- [1] In this special issue you will find discussion of several episodes in the relationship between the fine and the decorative arts, ranging from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century. As readers will discover, despite this broad chronological sweep there is much in common among our authors' findings. Above all, and perhaps contrary to readers' expectations, each essay contests the notion that fine and decorative were truly opposed in their period. This was our intention from the beginning; the origins of the present volume were in a one-day symposium convened at The Courtauld Institute of Art in October 2011, entitled "[At Cross Purposes? When Art History Meets Design History](#)", organised by The Courtauld Institute of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art. Together with my co-convenor Anne Puetz, The Courtauld Institute of Art, we sought to establish the many continuities between the two fields. For example, we read that in the sixteenth century, the concept of *disegno* (meaning "design", but also "drawing", and more generally, the ability to create pleasing forms) was a shared criterion across many disciplines, from architecture and painting to pottery and metalwork. In Georgian Britain, we have a continuity of a different (and unacknowledged) kind; sculptors presented themselves as individual creative geniuses when in fact they were more like the managers of artisanal factories, whose primary skills lay in self-promotion and what we would today call outsourcing. Later still, inverting the standard set of priorities, in the Arts and Crafts Movement we find William Morris admiring the "intellectual" qualities of a carpet, which he saw as superior to any painting.
- [2] The desire to blur boundaries and contest hierarchies is, of course, an equally strong instinct today. I have felt it myself. When I was trained at Yale University as recently as the 1990s, the art history department still had a slide library. Among its serried ranks of oak-and-brass cabinets, mostly devoted to geographical areas (France, Germany, Africa, East Asia), was a section that was labelled "Minor Arts". The little pull-out drawers contained images of furniture, ceramics, textiles, and the like, further subdivided by place and period. It was the same range of material you would find in the decorative arts collection of a big American museum. At the time, I saw those cabinets as a challenge. My own interests were in the history and theory of craft, a concept that I saw (rather like *disegno*) as a common concern shared by creative practitioners of all kinds. The stark separation by category that was institutionalized in Yale's slide library, and indeed its undergraduate curriculum, was for me something to overcome.

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- [3] I imagine that few students have that motivation nowadays. The slide library is long gone in any case, and while the curriculum is more or less intact, for the current generation I expect that challenging the divide between fine and decorative seems like pushing at an open door. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the door in question is down a forgotten hallway. The very terms "fine" and "decorative" have a musty, remote air about them. This is even truer for makers than it is for scholars. While art schools sometimes struggle to achieve interdisciplinarity on a practical level, given the difficulty of making bench space and equipment available on a completely flexible basis, it is hard to find a ceramic department these days that does not consider itself to be involved in design, craft and sculpture. Similarly, ceramics and other previously "minor" media have seen a recent surge of interest on the part of fine arts institutions.<sup>1</sup>
- [4] All of this raises the question: why devote this special issue to the "cross purposes" that have existed between fine arts and their decorative counterpart? Can we not just presume that creative practice, past and present, is a fluid matter, and call it a day? The answer is twofold. First of all, there are still many citadels of scholarship (the Courtauld and the Victoria and Albert Museum are arguably two of them, though they look at the question from opposite ends) which have yet to achieve full evenhandedness in the treatment of artefacts. Chairs and paintings are still valued very differently, though there is an increasingly wide awareness that this is due to institutional, rather than intellectual, factors. There is another issue to confront, as well; not all types of "interdisciplinarity" are alike. The commonalities within these pages are real, but so too are the substantive differences. It is not enough to say that attempts to create and maintain distinctions have lost their force; or indeed, that they have always been only partially effective. One must understand how different forms of hierarchy have been erected, and how different types of interaction, hybridization, and mobility have developed in response.
- [5] In this respect, the present volume serves to usefully condition our own, often self-congratulatory, claims about contemporary interdisciplinarity. It is easy to assert egalitarianism among various artistic media; much more difficult to achieve equal access, due recognition, and adequate support within the creative industries or the academic sector. In this respect, the early twenty-first century is not so much a long-awaited departure from the "bad old days" of rigid classification, but rather another chapter in the ongoing, tumultuous history of valuation in the arts. From this perspective, it is salutary to encounter, at the beginning of this special issue, Marta Ajmar's essay on the Italian Renaissance, a context in which artists of all kinds were certainly not shy in proclaiming their own virtues. Ajmar explodes easy assumptions about this period as the origin of the dichotomy between fine and decorative. The broad applicability of *Disegno* is here related

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include exhibitions held on ceramics in a fine art context, notably *Makers and Modelers* at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 2007; and *Dirt on Delight: Impulses that Form Clay* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, 2009.

to another concept, that of "trans-materiality", the passage of form from one substance to another via human agency. This notion resonates strongly with present-day ideas about innovation – in which the digital, rather than *disegno*, is understood to be the common ground.

[6] Ajmar also usefully reminds us that, to the extent that Renaissance thinkers did construct a tiered system within the arts (with the triumvirate of architecture, painting and sculpture at the apex), this was not an easy process. Medieval thought had presumed equality across various trades, and the reinstatement of the classical hierarchy on this point was difficult to apply in practice. Hence the comically byzantine system of classification constructed by Benedetto Varchi, whose self-confessedly fruitless attempt to subdivide the arts is an intriguing pendant to Giorgio Vasari's much better-known linear hagiography.

[7] Draftsmanship was a *passepartout* in the Renaissance, a technique that served as a connective tissue between artists and artificers of all kinds. This remained true until the nineteenth century, and so it is no surprise that drawing is a key leitmotif in the work of three of our other authors. Deanna Petherbridge, Katie Scott and my co-editor Anne Puetz all invest the term "working drawing" with its full range of potential meaning. In these papers, we see various ways in which the preparatory sketch or pattern was a site in which questions of authorship were put to the test – in particular, the question of whether a drawing was deemed to be "enliven'd" (to use an eighteenth-century term of praise) by the artist's spirit, or *gusto*. This emphasis on extemporaneous, imaginative artistry as the basis of reputation was, again, a common ground between figural painters like William Hogarth and ornamental designers like Matthias Lock or John Linnell. Petherbridge concludes her essay with the perceptive remark that drawing can be pressed into a position or set role within classificatory system, like Varchi's, but this will always be an awkward fit because of the "elasticity, transparency and polymorphous capabilities" of the medium.

[8] Those familiar with twentieth-century design theory may feel a shock of recognition when encountering Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, which resembles certain modernist texts in setting out objective principles for design in a prescriptive tone. There is an historiographical arc to be drawn between the two points, passing through the writings of mid-nineteenth-century design reformists; we might even wish to push ahead further, into the 1960s and the writings of a figure like David Pye, who shared both Hogarth's pragmatism and his delight in "variety". But our temptation to make such linear, cross-historical associations – which might in turn serve as an armature on which to hang a set of distinctions and connections between fine and decorative art – must be tempered by the specificity of any given artist or object.

- [9] This is an insight that Katie Scott imports from Bruno Latour's work, in which the practicalities of paperwork are shown to be as influential as the theory of "scientific method". As she reminds us, drawing too is a kind of paperwork, and in its objecthood a sketch can be seen as a "quasi-agent" which works tactically to move through a system of production and patronage. Her discussion of the draftsman Pineau includes a Hitchcockian turn which I will not give away here; suffice to say that his bravura drawings were even more rhetorical than one might first guess. In this discussion of rococo technique, one feels the force of "craft" in an older sense of the term, the power to trick or beguile. In French, the term *ingénieux* has a similar connotation, and Scott persuasively shows that even the settled order of the *ancien regime* was rife with mutability, thanks to the "manifold artifices" of the decorative artist.
- [10] Over the course of the nineteenth century, design drawings arguably lost this inventive role, and instead became pressed into the more straightforward service of managing and limiting artisanal agency. As Celina Fox has recently demonstrated in her broad-ranging survey *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment*, the figures of the architect, the engineer, and eventually the industrial designer utilized an increasingly precise and "scientific" set of drafting techniques to exert control over the workers who realized their ideas.<sup>2</sup> Matthew Craske's essay on the backstage operations of British sculpture in the eighteenth century is read profitably against that story. In this context, drawing did not serve a powerful role. There was at the time a broad consensus that, put bluntly, "two dimensional design had no true place within the workshop." Without the intermediary of drawing as an effective way to assert authorship, the means by which one sculptor directed another's work was more a political and financial matter. Predictably, this led to a world rife with gossip and dispute. Underneath the squabbling and backbiting, though, is a serious point – also explored by scholars such as Malcolm Baker and Thomas Macsotay – that sculpture, a paradigmatic "fine art" category, was actually carried out through subdivided labour in what were in essence small factories.<sup>3</sup> Anyone familiar with contemporary art will recognize this system, because it closely resembles the way that sculpture is made now – by means of outsourcing structures, in which specialist fabricators provide a ready repository of skills to "imaginative" but practically incompetent artists. If anything, the art world today is even less explicit about the means by which ambitious sculptural projects are realized than the academicians of the eighteenth century.
- [11] One of the valuable insights of Anne Puetz's essay on Lock and his contemporaries is that as producers and mediators, they were also consumers. Artisans and artists aspired to

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<sup>2</sup> Celina Fox, *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment*, London 2010. See also my own discussion of this in *The Invention of Craft*, London 2013, chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture*, Los Angeles 2000; Tomas Macsotay, "The Tortoise and the Hare: Extempore Performance and Sculptural Practice in Eighteenth-Century France," in: *Journal of Modern Craft* 3/3 (Nov. 2010), 293-308.

"culture, taste and style" just as much as their prospective clients. This is very much the perspective from which our last author, Caroline Arscott, addresses the much-studied career of William Morris. Pye would later have harsh words for Arts and Crafts idealism, with its blithe disregard for efficiency and other workshop realities. Yet on the importance of "variety" as a vital marker of human agency, he was absolutely at one with Morris's worldview. One of the undercurrents running through this volume is the distinction between that degree of nuanced difference, which happens whether the craftsman wants it to or not, and the more self-conscious expressive quotient normally associated with fine art. In the case of Morris's love affair with historic carpets, we see a man who refused to make any distinction along these lines. For him, the prime consideration in the appreciation of any art form was human affect. Rather like later craft pundits such as the Japanese *mingei* theorist Soetsu Yanagi, self-conscious sophistication was irrelevant to that aesthetic quality and might even inhibit it.

- [12] Arscott also includes a speculation that might, at first, seem curious: that an "M" monogram in one of Morris's own carpets might be taken as a cipher for the handmade knot. This may strike the reader initially as overly ambitious interpretation; if so, then that reader is among those who still presume that the sort of deep, metaphorical reading of art to which historians have learned to submit paintings has no place in the discussion of decorative art. The knot does extensive duty as a master metaphor for Morris, according to Arscott: as a connection between present and past; as a figure of the common cause between workers; as a physical juncture between flatness and depth (*pace* Clement Greenberg, a dynamic just as interesting with respect to textiles as to paintings, if not more so).
- [13] This literal and figurative multidimensionality is not unprecedented in analysis of decorative art, of course. There is a rich precedent – too rich to fully recount here – of scholars who have explored readings of decorative art that stray far afield from the narrowly connoisseurial. This is not the place for a complete historiographical review, but it is worth invoking here the names of some of the scholars who have mapped and expanded the territory. If we restrict ourselves to works on the early modern period in Europe and America, which is in fact only a tiny minority of the field as a whole, we might think of figures who have explored the metaphorical content of decorative art (Jules Prown, Ethan Lasser); its political overtones (Leona Auslander, Mimi Hellman); the social history of its production (Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Carolyn Sargentson, Rob Hunter, David Jaffee); the lifecycle of objects through the stages of consumption and use (John Styles, Victoria Kelley, Ken Ames); the intertwining of craft with science and technology (Pamela Smith, Alexander Marr, Sven Dupré); the importance of artefactual evidence in gender history (Amanda Vickery, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich); and the role played by decorative objects within global commercial trade (the subject of a dedicated research cluster at the

University of Warwick, which includes Maxine Berg, Rebecca Earle, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello). Increasingly, scholars are consciously applying the insights of these scholars to other parts of the world, notably within Asian contexts (Craig Clunas, Christine Guth, and Amin Jaffer). The list could go on: the study of decorative art is a large and complex field, with highly-developed intellectual traditions. Studies in decorative art display fundamental commitment to the cross-disciplinary. On the basis of the 'social turn' in art history that originated in the writings of figures like Linda Nochlin and T. J. Clark, art historical methodologies have flowered. The ecumenical, miscellaneous and de-centered structure of decorative art studies offers challenging paradigms and important resources for the ongoing evolution of art history.

- [14] It is salutary in this connection to note that there is not even consensus on the usage of the term 'decorative art' among the leading institutions that study it. In Britain, scholars seldom use the term 'decorative art' at all, perhaps because it smacks to them of the auction house rather than the archive. Instead they usually opt for 'design history.' This is the chosen nomenclature of the V&A's postgraduate course run in collaboration with the Royal College of Art, which is the leading programme internationally in the subject area, as well as other academic departments (at Kingston and Brighton, for example), and the national organization devoted to the field, the Design History Society. This terminology has also been adopted by schools and organizations in the continent, such as the German *Gesellschaft für Designgeschichte*, founded in 2008 – the use of the English term, instead of the German term *Gestaltung*, reflects a consciousness of the British field's influence. American institutions, by contrast, sometimes speak of themselves as studying decorative art – here I am thinking of the programmes at Yale, Winterthur and the Bard Graduate Center – but their faculty are more likely to describe themselves as studying 'material culture,' a phrase that originated in vernacular architecture and archaeology but has become widely popular internationally among historians of all stripes (including in Britain), who are presumably attracted to its comprehensiveness. If you define your research interests as the intersection of the material and the cultural, not much is left out.
- [15] From the perspective of art history, the people across numerous institutions and academic departments who are studying historical artefacts – whatever they choose to call them – may seem downright promiscuous in their use of terminology and methodology. But as so often in the twenty-first century, an *ad hoc*, anything-goes attitude may prove to be more compelling than rigorous focus. At its best, the study of objects can indeed blend all the themes I mentioned above: the empirical insights of social history and consumption studies, the explorations of *mentalité* found in anthropology, the technical knowledge associated with the history of science, the suggestive insights of cultural theory, and more. Unexpectedly, the study of musty old

'decorative art' has become so capacious and attractive that it could, in time, come to swallow up the more established discipline of art history. In my view, that would be no bad thing. It would finally give us a scholarly field in which all artefacts, regardless of their historical prioritization, can be treated equally. Given that there are today only a handful of design history and material culture departments, and thousands devoted to art history, this may seem a distant and even fantastical prospect. But as the contents of this special issue make clear, many equally drastic shifts in attitude toward the fine and decorative have happened in the past. What will be made of this invidious distinction in the future is up to us.

**Contributions to this Special Issue:**

0084 [Marta Ajmar, Mechanical Disegno](#)

0085 [Deanna Petherbridge, Graphic Intersections: Erga, Parerga and Pro-Erga](#)

0086 [Katie Scott, Persuasion: Nicolas Pineau's Designs on the Social](#)

0087 [Matthew Craske, Model Making and Anti-Competitive Practices in the Late Eighteenth-Century London Sculpture Trade](#)

0088 [Anne Puetz, Drawing from Fancy: The Intersection of Art and Design in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London](#)

0089 [Caroline Arscott, Morris Carpets](#)

[<top>](#)