



Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise

Museum of Modern Art, Ludwig
Foundation (MUMOK), Vienna
23rd February–8th September

by DAVID ANFAM

Most histories of post-war art overlook the Pattern and Decoration movement,¹ usually abbreviated to 'P&D', which was championed by the flamboyant New York gallerist Holly Solomon in the 1970s. MUMOK's current survey makes an excellent and timely case for P&D's rehabilitation. The impressive selection of works, all lent by the museum's benefactors, the prolific collectors Peter and Irene Ludwig, fills two large gallery levels. Within the dour, minimalist museum designed by Ortner & Ortner, it makes a spectacular display of colour, countless configurations and excess. Such a juxtaposition is apt since Minimalism – understood as a specific American phenomenon from the 1960s onwards – bears upon P&D's rationale, as does the Viennese setting of the current show. In 1908 the Austrian architect Adolf Loos published his polemic *Ornament and Crime*; over a century later, the ghosts of this perennial chromophobia and

preference for purity still linger. The show's subtitle and its seventy-three artworks cock a clever snook at this aesthetic puritanism. In such a scheme, Loos's eschatological warning becomes the teleological 'promise' of a brighter, less proscriptive future. More, so to speak, should be more.

No single style distinguished P&D. Rather, pluralism and unpredictability reigned.² On one hand, the viewer encounters small, almost twee pieces such as Valerie Jaudon's pastels, with their delicate arcing tracery, and Brad Davis's perky little dogs. On the other hand, Joyce Kozloff's wallpapers and tiles cover big vertical and horizontal expanses, emulating architectural surfaces (pp.102–03). The show's shrewd design echoes this quality with freestanding enclosures punctured by Islamic-type window openings (Fig.29). Indeed, allusions to Islam recur throughout P&D. The catalogue reprints three key historic texts – respectively by the critic Amy Goldin, Jaudon and Kozloff and the curator Harald Szeemann.³ In the first, Goldin associates pattern with Islamic artisans whose intentional 'mistakes' signified a religious renunciation of perfection, believed to belong 'only to God' (p.42). Indeed, Ned Smyth's *Philadelphia*

colonnade (1979; pp.142–43) drew upon Egyptian architecture (its palm trees and crispness share an aesthetic with David Hockney's Los Angeles work), while in 1974 Robert Kushner went to Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. Viewed from a contemporary geopolitical standpoint and given the Jewish ethnicity of several P&D members, their outlooks appear laudably open-minded. Yet not everyone then or soon thereafter was in favour.

Foremost among the naysayers was Hal Foster. In a 1982 article titled 'The problem of pluralism' Foster took a Greenbergian slant, criticising 1970s art as 'promiscuous'. This censorious response strikes at the heart of P&D's aims. It was inclusive, impure, subversive and counter-cultural. In this sense, its short-lived sensibility – the movement per se lasted only a decade (1975–85) although a majority of its members are still active – represented a riposte to Minimalist orthodoxy. Despite Clement Greenberg's quirky aversion to Minimalism, paradoxically some of his views overlapped with its tenets. This reciprocity included a penchant for formal rigour, reductiveness, planarity, machismo and more. As the P&D exponent Kim MacConnel recalled in 1997: 'To me, carrying a message or content

28. *Geometry in flowers*, by Miriam Schapiro. 1978. Acrylic on canvas, textile applications, collage, 180.4 by 364.3 cm. (Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst Aachen; exh. MUMOK, Vienna).

through a decorative vehicle was absolutely antithetical to the notion of Minimalism [. . .] I was using a decorative vehicle while trying to carry content through the imagery – which I view as being non-decorative. And therein lies the irony' (p.17). Irony had no place in the high modernist temple.

Greenberg began his critical campaign as early as 1939, when he argued for a lofty separation between the notions of avant-garde and kitsch: 'folk art is not Athene, and it's Athene whom we want'.⁴ Some thirty years later P&D countered the critic by incorporating references not just to folk art, but also Indian miniatures, early Christian icons, diverse textiles, floral designs, Art Deco and much else both 'high' and 'low'. Thus these artists undercut Modernism's plainsong, as it were, with a dodecaphony of expressive voices. In a sense P&D resembled the freewheeling, flower-power spirit of the sixties redivivus, launched anew into the conflicted seventies.

To order it opposed unruliness; to the spartan grid it added capricious flourishes; the stern industrial ethos underlying Minimalism, Earthworks and the like segued to artisanal traits or appropriation (tiles, weaving, neo-Chinoiserie); Kozloff and Miriam Schapiro countered machismo with a commitment to feminism; and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt helped pioneer gay rights. Artificiality, glittering and brash, answered such mantras as 'truth to materials' and flatness.

Susan Sontag's disquisition on 'Camp' (1964) is pertinent: 'Indeed, the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'.⁵ Nothing better describes Kushner's gaudy, drag queen-like *Rivals* (1978; p.111), nor Robert Zakanitch's monumental pale pink field of rose blossoms, *Tea party* (1979; pp.150–51). Replacing the promised relaxation of Matisse's metaphoric armchair, this postmodern fantasia mixes memory (the floral

fabrics familiar from Zakanitch's grandparents' New Jersey home) with some strange new mythology, perhaps akin to Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888; private collection). Elsewhere, Schapiro transforms Frank Stella's Protractor series into a shimmering, gauzy fan (pp.136–37; Fig.28). An especially fascinating discovery are the intricate fields by the relatively little-known Frank Faulkner (Fig.30). Seemingly woven, cartographic and rendered in subtle browns with an aged aura, these images defy categorisation (and also evince an uncanny resemblance to certain compositions by Ellen Gallagher). Throughout, MUMOK's display emphasises the sheer richness of P&D's *esprit de corps*, an imaginative and material generosity that starts to make Minimalism's bricks-and-steel slabs feel a bit sterile.

With a comparable scope, the catalogue is set to be a standard text on the subject. Holger Otten traces

29. Installation view of *Pattern and Decoration* at MUMOK, Vienna, 23rd February–8th September 2019, showing *An Interior Decorated*, by Joyce Kozloff.



Exhibitions

30. *Atlantis II*, by Frank Faulkner. Acrylic on canvas, 182.5 by 183.5 cm. (Austrian Ludwig Foundation; exh. MUMOK, Vienna).

Matisse's ideological fortunes in the United States with exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) scrutiny; five of the artists in the show offer valuable reminiscences in reply to a questionnaire; among the historic texts is Jaudon and Kozloff's revelatory 'Art hysterical notions of progress and culture' (1977–78), which art historians could do well to revisit. If the book has a fault, it is a hesitancy to further contextualise its theme by discussing other Post-Minimalists of otherwise disparate makeup, such as Lynda Benglis, Larry Poons and Charles Simonds, who have continued to create remarkable, innovative work into the present. Crucially, the entire project offers a timely reminder of a much larger issue. Namely, how pattern and decoration – far from being superficial, pejorative or frivolous – have deep, often strange and always abiding existential roots.⁶

After Modernism's lingering demise, P&D's creative bag of tricks remains more topical than ever, a veritable magic carpet flying into the present.

1 A notable exception is D. Wheeler: *Art Since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present*, New York 1991.

2 For the various sources of the P&D movement, its development and early reception, see J. Sorkin: 'Patterns and pictures: strategies of appropriation, 1975–85', *Burlington Contemporary* 1 (2019), doi.org/10.31452/bcj1.patterns.sorkin.

3 Catalogue: *Pattern and Decoration*. Edited by Manuela Ammer and Esther Boehle. 176 pp. incl. 105 col. + b. & w. ills. (Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst Aachen, Aachen, and Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, with Walther König, Cologne, 2019), £29. ISBN 978-3-902947-59-8.

4 C. Greenberg: *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, Chicago 1986, p.19.

5 S. Sontag: *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York 1982, p.105.

6 At opposite ends of the interpretive spectrum relating to decoration and pattern, see, for example, G. Hersey: *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*, Cambridge MA 1988; and E. Gombrich: *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, London 1984.

Cut and Paste: 400 Years of Collage

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern Two), Edinburgh
29th June–27th October

by SUSANNAH THOMPSON

Eileen Agar, whose Surrealist work *The lotus eater* (1939; cat. no.101) is displayed alongside over 180 other collages as part of this exhibition, described the medium as 'a form of inspired correction, a displacement of the banal by the fertile imagination of chance or coincidence.'¹ While Agar's definition seems apt for the majority of works included in this expansive show, the resounding success of the exhibition – the first ever historical survey of the form – lies in its refusal to impose strict conditions on what does or does not constitute collage.² Works are included that both enhance and complicate the viewer's understanding of the history of the form, too often regarded as beginning with Picasso's *Still life with chair caning* (1912; Musée Picasso, Paris). Numerous examples here contradict such established lineages, including a poignant memento to the Tay Bridge Disaster of 1879 (no.36), for which the anonymous artist used paper tickets from passengers alongside photographs of the driver, fireman and two guards, all of whom lost their lives in the disaster. A moving reminder of lives lost, the work also adds a fascinating footnote to long-held art-historical assertions that a 1919–20 collage by Kurt Schwitters was the first collage to have incorporated travel tickets as a material. Elsewhere, *New Zealand ferns* (1895; no.35), one of twenty-eight pages of a *hortus siccus* by the Northumberland-born emigré Mary Frances Hindmarsh, is pioneering in its use of material: long before Juan Gris's mirror in *The washstand* (1912; private collection), Hindmarsh used a mirror to represent water in a landscape composed of fern fronds.

As an illuminating catalogue essay by Freya Gowrley notes, examples of collage that predate Picasso and Braque are often 'dismissed as faintly related curios of a resolutely un-modern age', thus reinforcing 'entrenched hierarchies within art history: differences between "high" and "low" art forms; divisions

