

## ИЗОБРАЗИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИСКУССТВО

UDC 7.01+7.04

### Studies of Ornament: Main Trends and Prospects\*

*I. V. Palaguta*

St. Petersburg Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design,  
13, Solyanoy per., St. Petersburg, 191028, Russian Federation

**For citation:** Palaguta, Iliа. “Studies of Ornament: Main Trends and Prospects”. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Arts* 10, no. 4 (2020): 571–585. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu15.2020.403>

The analysis of the ornament is the key issue in the studies of the applied decorative art. Nevertheless, the principal points pertaining to the nature of ornament, its expressivity, semantics, compositional principles and cultural value, have only been covered intermittently. This is primarily due to the disengagement of the various academic fields involved in the studies of ornament: art history, cultural anthropology, ethnography, archeology, etc. It seems important to synthesize the methods and approaches as well as set up the basis for developing the general principles for the studies of ornament, that would take into account all its various aspects. The definition of ornament through its decorative function does not encompass its essential features: rhythm, meter, and symmetry. Ornament can be considered as a strategy of visualizing rhythm and can be regarded as a specific art form. Apart from the formal trend, based on systematization of ornaments, the approaches to ornament as the basis of ethnocultural reconstructions play a prominent part. Studies concerning the semantics of ornament offer a whole range of opinions, but the widespread notion that ornament is a set of signs and symbols calls for a critical reappraisal. At the same time, ornament plays an important part in the process of intercultural and intracultural communications on the level of signal and index, being a special kind of “art-rhythm”. The interdisciplinary approach opens a much broader range of ideas concerning the options for studying ornaments and offers solutions for subsequent research. One of the most promising possibilities is the comprehensive and cross-cultural analysis of ornament as the element of a communication system, based on the search for the links between the development of the ornamental traditions and styles as well as the developments in the other spheres of human culture.

*Keywords:* ornament, theory of ornament, history of ornament, definition of ornament, ornament in archeology, ornament in ethnography, symmetry in ornament.

---

\* The research was supported by RFBR, Project no. 19-112-50079.

© Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, 2020

Ornament as a theme seems to be amply represented in scholarly writing: apart from art history, it is considered in ethnographic, archeological, and related humanitarian studies. The principles of ornamental patterning are researched in mathematics. Furthermore, ornamental décor is a “live” object in artistic practices and art criticism. There are, however, major discrepancies both in the definitions of ornament, related definitions, and assessments of its cultural and artistic value.

The problem in question is not limited to the diversity of approaches; it stems from the isolation of trends and research schools. On the one hand, it has to do with the deepening specialization within the fields of certain humanitarian studies and natural sciences. Thus, when the issues related to “figurative activity” are considered, the term “ornamental image” [1] springs up in certain archeological papers, that has neither equivalents in art history nor any relationship to “artistic image”. Yet the methods of ornament symmetry analysis widely practiced in archeological and ethnographic research have not yet been incorporated into traditional art history.

On the other hand, because of the language and cultural barriers, the studies of ornament have often evolved in isolation. For instance, despite a range of productive ideas, Russian scholarship had certain limitations in considering the issues pertaining to ornament<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, taking into account the recent growth in involvement with ornament, as reflected in numerous publications, there is a need to synthesize the approaches to the studies of ornament developed in various academic fields, establish the common definitions and their understanding, and lay the grounds for its subsequent productive exploration as a cultural and artistic phenomenon. The first step involves an overview of the existing approaches to the studies of ornament, which is main focus of this article. Because of the article’s limited volume, the summary cannot by definition be exhaustive, and will only touch upon the main problems of ornament studies.

As the issue is addressed, it is necessary to primarily define the two interrelated aspects of the studies on ornament: practical and theoretical. The practical one pertains to the use of ornament in architectural and artistic practices, as well as to its role in the process of artistic training. To a large extent, the practical aspect defines the paths of its analysis and the topicality of studies.

As far as theory is concerned, it seems important to answer the questions: what is ornament? Which place does it hold amid the various art forms? What is the role played by ornament in the emergence and evolvement of art styles? Where does it belong in culture? To resolve these issues, we need to encourage an interdisciplinary approach to ornament and synthesize the knowledge from various fields of scholarship.

## **Ornament: From Practice to Theory**

Technically, the process of construing ornaments is closely connected with the standardization of operations in the process of the advancement in artisanship, beginning with the use of certain quantitative proportions of elements and motifs up to the introduction of the geometrical marking of the ornamental field and of templates and stencils for standard ornamental patterns. Thus, special chapters of the Mediaeval Arabic treatises on geometry are dedicated to the structuring of the Girih patterns [3]. In addition, the

---

<sup>1</sup> As far as the recent monographs are concerned, we can only mention an abortive attempt of “theorization”, where “hermeneutics of ornament” turned into an eclectic collage of quotes [2].

introduction of a systematic and informed approach to the ornamental legacy of various cultures and styles is closely connected with the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of mass production. Illustrated reference books and encyclopedias of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were, in essence, the artists' manuals that featured ornaments of different styles, from the prehistoric cultures to "neostyles," went through numerous editions and are reprinted even today [4–6]. They provided the groundwork for the emergence of the ornament theory in European scholarship [7].

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only the ornaments from the "big" styles, but also the achievements of folk art become pertinent. To a large extent, this interest is stipulated by the phenomenon of the "invention of traditions," i. e. the introduction of new values and behavioral norms in the process of the rise of the modern nations [8]. Thus, the practices of collecting and systematizing the samples of folk ornaments by Russian aficionados of antiques, as well as ethnographers, should be considered in the context of the rise of the Russian imperial mentality: the artefacts, i.e. the "preserved," "authentic," and "typical" "relics of the national Russian arts" [9], laid the groundwork for the emergence of the "Russian Style" in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [10].

The studies of the variety of forms and styles of ornament play an important part in the contemporary artistic training, "promoting the skills of designing the composition of a work of art and understanding harmony as an esthetic category of plastic arts" [11, p. 103]. Numerous modern manuals on ornament serve the purpose [12; 13]<sup>2</sup>; overall, they are structurally similar to the albums and manuals of the 1800s.

An important landmark in the attitude to décor was its renouncement in the Functionalist design and architecture, as declared in the essay "Ornament and Crime" (1913) by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) [16]. Even though, *de facto* it is just the renouncement of applique that was typical for Eclectic and Art Nouveau architecture: it was replaced by the rhythmical patterning of the architectural passes that had, in essence, an ornamental character. In the 1920–30s, debates on décor in the Soviet Union were held in this vein [17]. In the subsequent history of Russian architecture and design, one more debate followed — "Should We Keep the Ornament?". This debate raged in the pages of the "*Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo SSSR*" ("*Decorative Arts of the USSR*") magazine in 1964, in the aftermath of the post-Stalin-period campaign against "excesses in architecture". In the course of the discussion, the "constructive" quality of ornament was underscored, as well as its role in "revealing the rhythmical pattern of an object" [I–IV].

The comeback of ornament in modern Western architecture began with the "Post-modernist Heraldry," while the extensive use of ornamental décor became commonplace in projects of the recent decades [18; 19]. Ornament is now used to "reconfigure the medium" to produce a "compound of percepts and affects", and to achieve the appropriate emotional state [20]. The prospects of ornament in architectural décor and design are further improved by the programs of automated design and production. According to Antoine Picon, today's global culture has eliminated the symbolic meaning of ornament that formally marked the social significance of an object and the status of its owners. "When the budget allows for it, an architect will use the same type of texturing and patterning for social housing as for a museum" [21, p. 142]<sup>3</sup>. Postulating the fading of traditional ornament

<sup>2</sup> Despite the titles of some of them [14; 15], they have nothing to do with the theory of ornament.

<sup>3</sup> It is open to debate: Functionalism, with its rejection of redundant décor, is fairly concurrent with the period of reduced income inequality in the leading countries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the growing

and décor, the author suggests that contemporary ornament makes it possible to create “multiple mediations that relate individuals to the world and seem almost literally to distribute their identities along various canals” [21, p. 136–7]. Thus, the growing significance and widespread practical use of ornament (not only in architecture, but also in a multiple aspects of design), inevitably entails its conceptualization as one of the key aspects of art and culture as a whole.

## The Problem of Defining Ornament, and Its Essential Properties

The “from art practice to art history” movement has been reflected in numerous recent works that analyze the functioning of ornament over the last two centuries [23–26]. Theories of ornament, initiated by disputes on artistic taste, emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as two approaches to its studies.

On the one hand, Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), while considering ornament in his *Praktische Ästhetik*, pointed out its “technical nature,” its pertinence to the structuring of the object, as well as the formation of décor through the reproduction of lost structural details or texture of items made from other substances [27]. Semper’s views regarding the development of material culture had a major impact on design practices [28].

On the other hand, Aloise Riegl (1858–1905) focused on the psychology of perception of art forms, ascribing the stylistic changes of ornament to the evolution from the tangible, haptic (tactile and flatbed) to optical (spatial) perception, conditioned by the metaphysical “Art will” (*Kunstwollen*), immanent to art [29].

In the 1970s, Ernst Gombrich turned to the psychology of perception of ornament (via Gestalt psychology) and artistic vision of decorative art. In *The Sense of Order* he outlines the principle set of the means of artistic expressivity that play the key role in the perception of ornaments, whiling also tracing the social conditioning of the development of decorative styles and pointing out a specific relationship between ornament and music [30].

In both cases, the problem of defining ornament remains topical. In the encyclopedias of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in continuation of the tradition that dates back to the Renaissance period, ornament is tantamount to décor [31, p. 915]. A similar definition of ornament through its function, as “the elaboration of functionally complete objects for the sake of visual pleasure” is to be found in many recent works [32, p. 6]. It doesn’t trace the borderline between image and ornament: any piece of applied art, including a “single image,” can be regarded as “ornament” [32, p. 54 et al.].

The identity of the terms stem from the partial overlap of the meanings of the two Latin words, *ornamentum* and *decorum*. The first one, though, is derived from *ordo* — line, order, row. Hence the verbs *ordino* — to align, put in order, and *orno, ornare* — to provide, equip, arrange, decorate, thus *ornatus* — equipment, horse tack, adornment. The term *decorum* is derived from *deceo* — to be or look appropriate, fitting. The difference in meaning has repeatedly been mentioned by scholars [33, p. 98–101; 34, p. 3–4; 21, p. 37–8], which did not, unfortunately, help to clarify the terminology.

In Russian historiography, the emphasis on the basic properties of ornament as “the art of rhythm” — rhythm, meter (as a rhythmic template) and symmetry, emerged back in

---

economic and social inequality in today’s world [22] correlates with the major comeback of décor in architecture.

the 1930s [35, p. 3–6; 36]. This was mentioned in the course of the abovementioned dispute on ornament in the 1960s [I–IV]. The definition of ornament as “a pattern comprised of elements set in a rhythmical order,” i.e. as a rhythmically structured *décor*, is to be found in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia [37; see also: 38].

The question of terminology cannot be disengaged from the problem of segregating ornament as a separate type of art either through its functional definition and subjugation to the decorated object [39, p. 90] or through its essential specifics: rhythmical arrangement of the art form (that gives it the wholeness) or particular means of expressivity, the viewer’s “presumption” that is focused on the emotional perception, rather than the image [40]. The latter, essence-based definition of ornament, as well as its treatment as a separate type of art, i.e. as an approach to ornament as a manner of visualization and graphical expression of rhythm, seems more convincing [41]. Rhythmic structure is essential for both the “non-representational” and “representational” (arabesque, grotesque) forms of ornament. Because of the fairly narrow scope of meanings, the term “pattern,” used in the English language for defining geometric ornament that consists of same-type elements, seems a rather inadequate alternative to the more meaningful term “ornament”.

The departure from the definition of ornament through its “adorning” function and the specification of the term seems imminent because the studies of ornament have transcended the boundaries of issues pertaining to its usage and art practices, as well as the boundaries of art history. Studies have expanded into various fields of ethnography, archeology, psychology, as well as, through the studies of rhythm and symmetry, into crystallography, bionics, and mathematics. Thus, the disengagement of the two terms, *ornament* and *décor*, seems essential for broadening the framework of the related studies.

## Trends of Ornament Studies: Formal and Technological

The Russian archeologist and Oriental scholar Pavel Kozhin (1934–2016) outlines five principal trends in the studies of ornament: formal, technological, ethno-cultural, semantic, and art history [42]. We might also suggest the “culturological” one<sup>4</sup>, but it calls for additional discussion. All the trends are closely interrelated, being the various levels of studies.

According to Kozhin, the formal trend of ornament studies implies the classification of the forms of its elements and motifs, their mutual arrangements (symmetry), and principles of composition. The technological aspect implies the analysis of the properties of the ornamental field, the approaches to construing and marking the ornamental composition, its division, rhythm, metrics, as well as the techniques of executing ornament in various media [42, p. 133–4].

These trends have flourished in the studies of archeological data, where the identification and seriation of various types of ornament offer solutions to the problems pertaining to emergence, evolution and correlation of archeological cultures, and subsequently for

---

<sup>4</sup> This trend is mentioned in a sidenote to the abovementioned article [42], in the author’s copy of the volume: “culturological, i.e. studies of ornamentation within the context of the totality of conditions defined by the human environment and the degree of its deliberate and non-deliberate exploitation, for culture is not just a set of skills and the abilities to put them into practice, it’s a form of adapting to natural and social structures”. An e-copy of this page is available at <https://ifes-ras.academia.edu/KozhinPavelM> [V].

ethno-cultural reconstructions. Formal and technological analysis is also the groundwork for the subsequent studies of ornament in art history.

The studies of symmetry in ornamental compositions played an important part in the development of formal analysis. Anne Shepard's work, detailing her studies of the ceramics of Pueblo Indians from the South-West of the USA, was fundamental [43]. On the one hand, the studies are based on ethnographic studies: Franz Boas was the first to pinpoint the differences in the symmetry of ornaments [44]. On the other hand, as early as the 1930–40s, symmetry as a theme was prominently featured in crystallography, with its mathematical models being designed and projected on ornaments in art [45; 46]. This perspective was further developed in the American archeology and cultural anthropology [47], even though scholars from other countries also took the principles of symmetry into account in their research [48].

The first drawback of many works on the classification of ornaments is the insufficiently elaborate breakdown into elements, motifs, and compositions; more often than not, a single impress of the instrument, rather than the figure as a whole, is taken for a unit; the authors seem to concentrate on elements, rather than analyze the compositional pattern, etc. The second issue is the mix-up of categories and levels of analysis, with no clear-cut definition of the difference between ornament and décor with both being defined just as “a system of signs featured on an object” [49].

The technologies of ornaments are immediately connected with the technologies of producing the ornamented objects, where ornaments are created both on a two-dimensional surface and as a three-dimensional modeling. Semper's approach to ornament as the outcome of artificial construction of the objects of material culture is based on the premise that “all the changes that occur in artifacts, their formal and functional properties, are fully dependent on the human creative intents and on the techniques used in the process of organized professional activity” [50, p. 13–4]. Semper's ideas were used as the groundwork for defining the samples of “technical ornament”, i. e. the reproduction and creative reworking in ornament of surface textures and ornaments of artifacts made from other substances or the refashioning as décor of the structural elements that have lost their function. This line of studies gained prominence at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been pursued in certain ethnographic and archeological works until nowadays [51–53]. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars pinpointed yet another basic property of ornament, its reversibility, meaning that both the composition *per se* and the semantically equivalent areas of its background can be perceived as ornamental figures [42, p. 136; 54].

In analyzing ornamental structuring, it is also essential to see the difference between the formal (morphological) properties and technology: symmetrical structuring in ornaments can be achieved both by the sequential positioning of elements and motifs as well as by fragmentation of the plane — de-symmetrization [46; 55]. That is why the analysis of composition calls for the sequential reconstruction of applying the ornament and for identifying the principles of its marking [56]. These issues are still mostly limited to archeological and ethnographic studies even though the questions regarding the rhythm and symmetry of ornamental structuring can also be set pertaining to the ornament of historical styles, e. g. Baroque [57].

## Ornament in Ethno-Cultural Studies

The ethno-cultural approach to the research of ornament emerged within the framework of archeology and ethnography where the special properties of forms and ornament structuring are studied as an ethno-defining cultural indicator that is instrumental for reconstructing ethnogenesis, delineating cultural traditions and identifying their interrelations.

As far as the Soviet historiography is concerned, *Ornament of the Peoples of Siberia as a Historical Source* (1963) by Sergey Ivanov is a prominent landmark, with almost all the Russian works on the subject referencing it. Ivanov's goal was to outline the "ornamental types" and "ornamental assemblages" as linked to the particular ethnic communities, as well as to trace their evolution against the background of the historical data on the ethnogenesis of the peoples of Siberia [48, p. 41–2, 474–9]. It is noteworthy that Ivanov (a) highlighted the difference between ornament and image (i.e. rhythmically organized ornament and décor) and (b) spoke with reservation about the feasibility of direct statements regarding the semantics of ornament, since its elements and motifs are highly variable in their meaning [48, p. 5–8].

It is not necessary to provide here a detailed outline of works on the ethnographic ornaments of the peoples of Russia and the former USSR: they present and systemize an impressive volume of data as featured in fabrics and felt, embroidery and applique, ceramics, wood, bone, and metal. The possibilities here are by no means exhausted. As a rule, these studies are based on the analysis of the elements and motifs of ornament with the researchers tending to neglect the structuring of the ornamental field, the principles of construing of ornament, the properties of rhythmic and metric proportions of figures, and the types of the breakup of compositions and their orientation. These are the properties that are "closely related to certain ethno-psychological determinants" [42, p. 133], while the studies thereof offer a deeper insight into the factors that determine the idiosyncrasies of ethnic art and culture as well as the ways of their evolution [58].

In archeology, ornament is the basis both for developing the chronological timeframe for the sites of a specific archeological culture (based on construing the typological charts of an ornament) and for revealing the relative timeframe of cultures and establishing their interrelations. Thus, in Eurasia during the Neolithic and Bronze Age several large areas with similar traditions of ceramics ornamentation can be defined, with local traditions typical for specific archeological cultures outlined in each [59]. The linkage between ornamental traditions and specific ethnic groups is confirmed by the ethno-archeological data [60]. Moreover, ornament often serves as the "marker" of social groups as well as the ethnic ones.

The difference between archeological and ethnographic ornaments is determined by the specifics of the sources. Archeology deals with the "dead" cultures, and its artifacts are devoid of any comments by producers or viewers. Even though ethnography deals with living representatives of the studied community, with their comments being available, the relevant possibilities are also quite limited: ornament, as a part of the artisanship of traditional societies, in most cases, came into the domain of academic studies at the point when the societies had already experienced certain transformations through contact with industrial civilizations, with artisanship turning into "folk art" geared at the tourist market [e. g.: 61].

Most of the studies in art history focus on how ornament, as one of the principal components of an artistic style, reflects the specific features of various art schools, ethnic, and cultural traditions. Thus, the similarities in construing architectural ornament are instrumental in identifying the connections between Mediaeval Rus and Central Europe [62]. The principles of ornament analysis are roughly the same, yet the research possibilities widen considerably as we get closer to modern days when various written sources can be used for interpreting ornament, such as contemporary testimonies and assessments, artists' practical tips, etc.

What seems crucial is the development of common approaches, which would eliminate the tensions that emerged in the studies of "Western" Art where the traditions of analyzing ornament go back to Vitruvius and the interpretation of his legacy in the Renaissance period, and of "non-Western" Art. Here the ornament is perceived differently, e. g. in the Islamic tradition, where ornament in architecture and applied art is closely linked with calligraphy and being a metaphorical reflection of a worldview [63]. Over the last decade, scholars were focusing on the intercultural ties reflected in ornament, simultaneously with the abovementioned rise of practical interest in ornament in the architectural and designer community. This is reflected in a number of fundamental collective monographs and symposiums on the history of ornament that strive to account for it both in European and "non-European" cultures [64–66].

### **Semantics of Ornament: Speculations and Feasible Prospects**

The semantics of ornament is studied through "establishing correlations between abstract geometric forms of ornamentation and realistic images of objects," while the development of this trend was "determined by separate ethnographic observations that pointed at a certain meaningfulness of all the works of decorative applied art of preliterate societies" [42, p. 134].

Extensive empirical ethnographic data outline the elaborate terminology that most societies use for designating both the elements and motifs of ornaments, and the composition as a whole. Despite the pronouncements that "folk ornament is a fairly stable element of art that has been preserved for centuries and even millennia" [48, p. 23], there are numerous cases that show that "one and the same pattern would often go under different names, while one and the same name would often be applied to different patterns" [48, p. 27–9]. Forms of ornament can evolve either from the naturalistic to abstract ones, or vice versa [44, p. 122–4, 142–3]. Thus, the meaning of ornament tends to vary and it is impossible to establish it for abstract geometrical figures in the absence of the producer's comments. The respective interpretations in numerous works on the "meanings" of ornaments and their "symbolism" are mostly based on subjective associations that contemporary viewers might experience. That is why the attempts to establish the similarity of meaning of ornamental motifs as symbols common for various cultures, if based on formal properties [e. g.: 67; 68], seem fairly ungrounded.

The idea that ornament is a set of symbols, a "proto-writing" of sorts, is even more open to debate. Even today, the ceramics ornament is often defined as a "system of symbols" mapped on its surface [69, p. 97]. This leads to persistent attempts of "decoding" the ornaments as "texts", a "pictographic system" that features a set of ideogram elements. This approach does not seem to agree with the rhythmic nature of ornament and its above-



mentioned instability and fluidity of names for its motifs, as traced by the ethnographers. Apparently, the meaning of ornament is reduced to a signal or index, rather than an iconic symbol or a set of symbols. That leads to its perception *in toto* as an index (with variable “spelling”) that points to the place held by the artifact in the system of culture, its belonging to a certain group of items that mark a certain ethnic or social group etc. [42, p. 134–5; 70, p. 71–2, 75–6]. Ornament is used in the basic processes of recognition, identification, and categorization, and is perceived holistically through its rhythm and symmetrical structure [71; 72].

This approach is also confirmed by the studies of ornaments of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, where, apparently, each element is loaded with symbolic meaning. Yet the abstract ornaments of the Early Christian churches look more like an artistic metaphor, striving to “visualize an extraordinary or extraterrestrial reality” [73, p. 86–7]. Along the same lines, the semantics of the “carpet pages” of the English-Irish Gospels of the early Medieval times seems to boil down to achieving an emotional visual effect: “to be bewildered, or awed, or fascinated, or overwhelmed by the carpet pages is fundamentally to apprehend their content; to see them is to understand them” [74, p. 23].

### Art History Trend: Expanding the Agenda

According to Kozhin, the art history approach “implies the analysis of the esthetic effect of the ornament on the spectator <...> the rhythms, artistry used in rendition of ornament, the degree of the artist’s creative involvement, his individual, synthesizing or uncouth and routine approach to his craft, i.e. of those issues that allow to trace the emergence of the social basis of art, to evaluate the extent of its spiritual and creative maturity in the various periods of the past” [42, p. 135]. Over the last decades, however, art history seems to have broadened its research horizons considerably. Several perspectives have emerged in the studying of ornament as an artistic and cultural phenomenon.

The first issue is the approach to the problem from the perspective of the psychology of art, with the groundbreaking work being the abovementioned *The Sense of Order* by Ernst Gombrich, which, primarily, considers the visual effects pertaining to ornament and actualized in the process of interaction between the creator and the viewer [30]. In ornament the sense of spatial order and wholeness, which human perception and mentality always strive for, plays the key role. The diversity of its forms is conditioned by the cultural context that defines the range of expressive means actualized within the framework of a certain culture. Another landmark in the ornament studies from the art history perspective is the work by Oleg Grabar, who transcends the limits of the European data and considers ornaments as “intermediaries, agents that are not logically necessary to the perception of a visual message but without which the process of understanding would be more difficult” [63, p. 230].

The second issue is that the agenda of the art history studies in the recent decades has largely been determined by the scholars indulging in anthropological theories, where “broad-based cultural revalorization of the minute and marginal as well as the sociopolitical, semiotic, aesthetic, and phenomenological dimensions of ornament nevertheless created a fertile soil for its positive reassessment” [64, p. 2]. Its prominent features are the emergence of the approach to art as a communication technology [75], as well as the construing of the “anthropology” of art as an intermediary in human relations [76].

Currently, scholars believe that addressing the anthropology of art caused a “global turn,’ leading to transversal and cross-cultural analysis”; in Western art scholarship it took place at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when

ornament has been finally perceived as a complex phenomenon, situated at the crossroads of practice and theory, understanding of which cannot be limited to the single aesthetic or stylistic sphere. On the contrary, its study must involve a transdisciplinary approach, taking into account, for instance, its anthropological, economic or social dimensions. Only then may ornament become a powerful key in the narrative of a broader cultural history [77].

This mergence calls for establishment of unified approaches to the studies of ornamental art in both anthropological scholarship and classical art history.

### **Ornament in Cultural Studies, or Cultural Studies of Ornament: Certain Prospects**

The fact that ornamental studies have transcended the boundaries of traditional art scholarship is predetermined by the basic properties of ornament: the rhythmical structuring of its elements, their metrics and symmetry, that are also the basis for construing any artificial structure. Hence the holistic nature of the ornamental style that permeates all the cultural spheres. This has been noted for the Ancient Greek geometric style that corresponds to the lines of a phalanx and the rhythmical pattern of hexameter in poetry, for the decoration of Mediaeval manuscripts that corresponds to the metaphor of “word weaving”, for Skaldic poetry and the styles of early Mediaeval Scandinavian jewelry, etc. [41, p. 49–50]. Rhythm provides a link between physiology of labor and music as well as poetry [78]. Rhythm is the construing form of a work of literature, the rhythm of speech being coordinated with the rhythmic pattern of breathing; it also plays an important role in memorizing the text [79].

Rhythm is also an instrument of sound arrangement in music<sup>5</sup>. Thus, as suggested by the anthropologist Yakov Roginskiy, ornament, the same as music (and dance for that matter) can be attributed to a special “trend” in art — “art-rhythm” [80, p. 25; see also: 30, p. 285 et al.]. The analysis of these interrelations puts ornament into the broad temporal and spatial context of the culture of human communities.

Another aspect of ornament in architecture is that it is not limited to the decoration of individual buildings, for rhythmic compositions can be construed through the planning of cities and settlements<sup>6</sup>. Rhythmic structuring, corresponding to the structuring of a social group, can be traced back to the archaic societies where the planning of a settlement was not simply determined by functionality. Planning was based on a certain concept that was linked with the social structure and thus emerged as a rhythmic pattern [the survey: 81].

In the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer, a German sociologist and art critic, introduced the term “*Ornament der Masse*” to describe the process of an individual’s involvement in the mass culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the self tends to dissolve in the artificial arrange-

---

<sup>5</sup> In music, the term *ornament* is routinely used to describe the ways to embellish a melody (theme) with additional tones, i. e. the definition involves the principle of a function, and thus corresponds to the term *décor* in applied arts and architecture.

<sup>6</sup> The idea was suggested by a renowned art historian and philosopher Tatiana Shekhter (1946–2010) in a private conversation with the author.

ment of human bodies — the elements that can be used for chartering any figure. It is visually represented in the measured patterns of ceremonial military formations and mass stadium performances [82; 83].

Furthermore, to a certain extent, symmetry and rhythm can be traced in the structuring of all human communities. As shown by Dorothy K. Washburn, who analyzed the ornamentation of ceramics of Pueblo Indians in the South-West of the USA, “symmetries that structure the social institutions of a culture are mirrored in the symmetries that structure the artistic output of that same culture” [84, p. 127; see also: 85].

Thus, cultural and social dimensions of ornament seem to acquire a number of additional hues and can be revealed on the level of nonverbal communications via particular ways of construing the ornamental rhythms. These “transversal” and “cross-cultural” lines of ties, based on the search for correspondences and correlations between the evolution of ornamental traditions and styles and the evolution of other fields of human culture, can be traced within the framework of interdisciplinary studies with ornament providing a wide scope for these studies.

## Conclusions

It seems obvious that ornament cannot be reduced to the simple formula “ornament = décor” because of the diversity of dimensions that can be applied to ornament as a phenomenon. As we assess the outlined perspectives for the studies of ornament, we see that they reflect various levels of its studies, from systematizing the data to establishing its role in the system of culture.

Formal and technological analyses are essential for establishing the evolutionary trends and transformations of motifs and compositions, techniques of transferring ornament and other technologies, and rules of scaling the patterns. These are followed by the problem of interpreting ornament which cannot be resolved through presenting ornament as a set of symbols that need to be decoded. The dialectics of meanings reflected in the ornamental creativity exceeds by far the simple meanings of its elements and motifs: ornament emerges as one of the principal elements of cultural identity, with its main principles in the process of the engagement between artist and viewer being “pleasure, social distinctions and knowledge” [21, p. 50–5].

The topicality of this aspect of ornament calls for its careful consideration, both in the curriculum of modern education of artists and art scholars, where theory of ornament should be covered, and in addressing the issues pertaining to the preservation of cultural heritage, which is very acute, for instance, in St. Petersburg with its abundant architectural legacy of “applied décor” period of Eclectics and Art Nouveau.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Gülru Necipoğlu, Aline Paine, Cecily Pollard, Maria Silina for their help in data research, to Dorothy K. Washburn for her cooperation, and to my colleagues, Tatiana Gorbunova, Alexandr Karpov, Natalya Mutya, Nadezhda Tochilova, Ekaterina Stalinskaya, Anna Bespyatykh and others for their interest in my work and insightful comments. I am ever grateful to my Teacher Pavel Kozhin (1934–2016). Thanks to Alexandra Glebovskaia for help in translation.

## References

1. Tsetlin, Iurii. "Object Figurative Activity of Early Man: Nature and Matter". *Rossiiskaia arkheologiia*, no. 2 (2004): 87–94. (In Russian)
2. Ivanov, Nikolai. *Ornament: Hermeneutics and Glossary*. Moscow: Eterna Publ., 2018. (In Russian)
3. Bulatov, Mitkhat. *Geometric Harmonization in the Architecture of Central Asia in the 9<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> Centuries: (Historical and Theoretical Research)*. Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1978. (In Russian)
4. Jones, Owen. *The Grammar of Ornament*. London: Day and Son, 1856.
5. Racinet, Albert. *L'Ornement polychrome: 100 planches en couleurs or et argent contenant environ 2000 motifs de tous les styles art ancien et asiatique, Moyen Âge, Renaissance, XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. 2 vols. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1869–1873.
6. Speltz, Alexander. *The Styles of Ornament*. New York: Dover, 1959.
7. Braga, Ariane Varela. *Une théorie universelle au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. La Grammar of Ornament d'Owen Jones*. Roma: Campisano, 2017.
8. Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
9. Stasoff, Wladimir. *L'Ornement National Russe*. Saint-Petersbourg: Édition de la Société d'encouragement des artistes, 1872, Livr. 1 : Broderies, Tissus, Dentelles. (In Russian, in French)
10. Mut'ia, Natal'ia. "The Search for a National Style in Russian Painting of the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Historiographic and Methodological Aspects". In *Istoriia iskusstva v Rossii — XX vek: intentsii, konteksty, shkoly. XXVIII-e Alpatovskie chteniia: materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii (7–8 dekabria 2017)*, ed. by Elena Romanova, 98–104. Moscow: Reklamno-poligraficheskaia studiiia R. PR. studio Publ., 2018. (In Russian)
11. Veksler, Anna. "Ornament in Art Education: Historical Background and Pedagogical Potential". *Pedagogical Journal* 8, iss. 6A (2018): 95–104. (In Russian)
12. Fokina, Lidiia. *Ornament: A Study Guide*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Rostov-na-Donu: Feniks Publ., 2000. (In Russian)
13. Butkevich, Liubov'. *Ornament History: A Study Guide*. Moscow: Vlado Publ., 2004. (In Russian)
14. Stepanova, Anna. *Ornament Theory: A Study Guide*. Rostov-na-Donu: Feniks Publ., 2011. (Vysshee obrazovanie). (In Russian)
15. Beschastnov, Nikolai. *The Artistic Language of Ornament: A Study Guide*. Moscow: Vlado Publ., 2010. (Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo). (In Russian)
16. Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime". In *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750–1940*, ed. by Isabelle Frank, transl. by David Britt, 288–94. London; New Haven, CT: Bard Center; Yale University Press, 2000.
17. Silina, Mariia. "Discussions About Ornament in Soviet Architecture of the 1920s — 1930s". In *Khan-Magomedovskie chteniia*, ed. and comp. by I. Bondarenko, 207–18. St. Petersburg: Kolo Publ., 2017, iss. 2. (In Russian)
18. Levit, Robert. "Contemporary 'Ornament'. The Return of the Symbolic Repressed". *Harvard Design Magazine* 28 (2008): 70–85.
19. Balik, Deniz, and Allmer Açalaya. "A Critical Review of Ornament in Contemporary Architectural Theory and Practice". *A|Z ITU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 13, no. 1 (2016): 157–69.
20. Moussavi, Farshid, and Michael Kubo, eds. *The Function of Ornament*. Barcelona: Actar, 2006.
21. Picon, Antoine. *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*. New York: Wiley, 2013.
22. Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Transl. by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
23. Frank, Isabelle, ed. *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750–1940*. Transl. by David Britt. London; New Haven, CT: Bard Center; Yale University Press, 2000.
24. Payne, Alina. *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.
25. Braga, Ariane Varela, ed. *Ornamento, tra arte e design. Interpretazioni, percorsi e mutazioni nell'Ottocento: Atti della giornata di studi internazionale del 23 Aprile 2009 all'Istituto Svizzero di Roma*. Basel: Schwabe, 2013.
26. Vandi, Loretta, ed. *Ornament and European Modernism: From Art Practice to Art History*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
27. Semper, Gottfried. *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik: ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*. 2 Bd. Frankfurt am Main; München: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft; Bruckmann, 1860–1863.

28. Payne, Alina. "The Agency of Objects: From Semper to the Bauhaus and Beyond". In *Dust & Data. Traces of the Bauhaus across 100 years*, ed. by Ines Weizman, 24–41. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019.
29. Riegl, Alois. *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*. Berlin: George Siemens, 1893.
30. Gombrich, Ernst. *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.
31. Walker, Ralph Thomas. "Ornament. Architecture". In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. by Walter Yust, vol. 16: 915–6. 14<sup>th</sup> ed. London: The Encyclopædia Britannica Company, Ltd.; New York: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1946.
32. Trilling, James. *The Language of Ornament*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001.
33. Summers, David. *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London; New York: Phaidon, 2003.
34. Brett, David. *Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure & Ideology in the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
35. Filippov, Aleksei. *Construction of the Ornament with a Large Number of Options*. Moscow, Izdatel'stvo Vsesoiuznoi akademii arkhitektury Publ., 1937. (In Russian)
36. Shubnikov, Aleksei. *Symmetry: The Laws of Symmetry and Their Application in Science, Technology and Applied Arts*. Moscow; Leningrad: Izd-vo AN SSSR Publ., 1940. (In Russian)
37. Nedoshivin, German. "Ornament". In *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, ed. by Aleksandr Prokhorov, vol. 18: 524–25. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia Publ., 1974. (In Russian)
38. Beresneva, Veronika, and Isaak Iaglom. "Symmetry and the Art of Ornament". In *Ritm, prostranstvo i vremia v literature i iskusstve*, ed. by Boris Egorov, 274–89. Leningrad: Nauka Publ., 1974. (In Russian)
39. Kagan, Moisei. *Applied Art. Some Questions of Theory*. Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR Publ., 1961. (In Russian)
40. Gerchuk, Iurii. *What is an Ornament. The Structure and Meaning of the Ornamental Image*. Moscow: RIP-kholding Publ., 2013. (In Russian)
41. Palaguta, Iliia. "Ornament as a Special Kind of Art". *Khudozhestvennaia kul'tura*, no. 1/32 (2020): 45–64. (In Russian)
42. Kozhin, Pavel. "The Role of Ornamentation of Ceramics and Bronze Items of Northern China in the Neolithic and Bronze Age for the Study of Ethnogenesis". In *Etnicheskaia istoriia narodov Vostochnoi i Iugo-Vostochnoi Azii v drevnosti i srednie veka*, ed. by Mikhail Kriukov, Mikhail Sofronov and Nikolai Cheboksarov, 131–61. Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1981. (In Russian)
43. Shepard, Anne. "The Symmetry of Abstract Design with Special Reference to Ceramic Decoration". In *Contributions to American Anthropology and History* 9, no. 44–47 (1948): 211–93. (Carnegie Institution of Washington).
44. Boas, Franz. *Primitive Art*. New York: Dover Publications, 1955.
45. Shubnikov, Alexey, and Vladimir Koptsik. *Symmetry in Science and Art*. New York: Plenum, 1974.
46. Jablan, Slavik Vlado. *Symmetry, Ornament and Modularity*. River Edge, NJ: World Scientific, 2002. (Knots and Everything, bk 30).
47. Washburn, Dorothy K., and Donald W. Crowe, eds. *Symmetries of Culture: Theory and Practice of Plane Pattern Analysis*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.
48. Ivanov, Sergei. *Ornament of the Peoples of Siberia as a Historical Source (Based on Materials from the 19<sup>th</sup> — Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*. Peoples of the North and the Far East. Moscow; Leningrad: AN SSSR Publ., 1963. (Trudy Instituta etnografii imeni N. N. Miklukho-Maklaia. Novaia seriia, vol. 81). (In Russian)
49. Kokorina, Iuliia, and Iuliia Likhter. *Morphology of Décor*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2010. Reprint. Moscow: Librokom Publ., 2019. (In Russian)
50. Kozhin, Pavel. *China and Central Asia Before the Era of Genghis Khan: Problems of Paleocultural Studies*. Moscow: Forum Publ., 2011. (In Russian)
51. Welfish, Gene. *The Origins of Art*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953.
52. Kozhin, Pavel. "Origin and Development of Ceramic Production and Painted Pottery Ornamentation". In *Trudy Margianskoi arkhelogicheskoi ekspeditsii*, ed. by V. Sarianidi, 112–26. Moscow: Staryi sad Publ., 2014, vol. 5: Issledovaniia Gonur Depe v 2011–2013 gg. (In Russian)
53. Palaguta, Iliia. "'Technical Decoration' of the Tripolye Ceramics". *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 37, no. 2 (2009): 85–91.
54. Palaguta, Iliia. "A Phenomenon of Reversibility and the Basic Trends of the Development of Ornament Composition of the Tripolye-Cucuteni Pottery". In *Tverskoi arkhelogicheskii sbornik*, ed. by Igor

- Chernykh, 411–8. Tver': Triada Publ., 2009, iss. 7: Materialy 9-go — 11-go zasedanii nauchno-metodicheskogo seminar "Tverskaia zemlia i sopredel'nye territorii v drevnosti". (In Russian)
55. Greenberg, Laura. "Art as a Structural System: A Study of Hopi Pottery Designs". *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communications* 2, no. 1 (1975): 33–50.
  56. Palaguta, Iliia. "Ornaments of Tripolye-Cucuteni Ceramics: Some Observations on the Composition and the Sequence of its Performing". *Camera Praehistorica*, no. 1 (2020): 76–92. (In Russian)
  57. Leonhard, Karin. "Über Links und Rechts und Symmetrie im Barock". In *Topologie. Zur Raumbeschreibung in den Kultur- und Medienwissenschaften*, Hrsg. Stephan Günzel, 135–51. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007.
  58. Washburn, Dorothy K., and Donald W. Crowe, eds. *Symmetry Comes of Age: The Role of Pattern in Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004.
  59. Kozhin, Pavel. "About Ancient Ornamental Systems of Eurasia". In *Etnoznakovyye funktsii kul'tury*, ed. by Iulian Bromlei, Al'bert Baiburin and Ian Chesnov, 129–51. Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1991. (In Russian)
  60. Hodder, Ian. *Symbols in Action. Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
  61. Bunzel, Ruth L. *The Pueblo Potter: A Study of Creative Imagination in Primitive Art*. New York: Dover, 1972.
  62. Tochilova, Nadezhda, and Anna Slapinina. "From Wawel Hill to Volkhov River Bank: To the Question of the Presumptive Influence of the Pre-Romanesque Polish Architecture to the Decoration of So-Called 'Columns of Oak Sophia' From Novgorod". *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* 23 (2018): 405–25.
  63. Grabar, Oleg. *The Mediation of Ornament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
  64. Necipoğlu, Gülru, and Alina Payne, eds. *Histories of Ornament. From Global to Local*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
  65. Dekoninck, Ralph, Caroline Heering, et Michel Lefftz, éd. *Questions d'ornement. XV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.
  66. Mendonça, Isabel, Maria Coutinho, and Silvia Ferreira, eds. *The Art of Ornament: Meanings, Archetypes, Forms and Uses. 23–25 November, 2017. Book of Abstracts*. Lisbon: Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2017.
  67. Schuster, Carl, and Edmund Carpenter. *Patterns That Connect. Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.
  68. Golan, Ariel. *Myth and Symbol: Symbolism in Prehistoric Religions*. Jerusalem: Schoen Books, 1991.
  69. Volkova, Elena. "Relative Stability of Ornamental Pottery Traditions (Based on Bronze Age Materials)". *Kratkie soobshcheniia Instituta arkheologii*, no. 251 (2018): 96–110. (In Russian)
  70. Palaguta, Iliia. "Prehistoric Ornamentation: Possible Directions in Research and Aspects for Interpretation as Suggested by Analysis of Tripolye-Cucuteni Pottery". *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* 68 (2016): 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.23858/SA68.2016.004>.
  71. Washburn, Dorothy K. "Perceptual Anthropology: The Cultural Salience of Symmetry". *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 3 (1999): 547–62. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1999.101.3.547>.
  72. Washburn, Dorothy K., ed. *Embedded Symmetries: Natural and Cultural*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. (Amerind Foundation New World Studies Series, bk 6).
  73. Kiilerich, Bente. "Abstraction in Late Antique Art". In *Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art. New Perspectives on Abstraction and Symbolism in Late-Roman and Early-Byzantine Visual Culture (c. 300–600)*, ed. by Anna Cecilia Olovsson, 77–94. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110546842-005>.
  74. Tilghman, Benjamin. "Pattern, Process, and the Creation of Meaning in the Lindisfarne Gospels". *West* 86<sup>th</sup> 24, no. 1 (2017): 3–28.
  75. Rubin, Arnold. *Art as Technology. The Arts of Africa, Oceania, Native America, and Southern California*. Ed. by Zena Pearlstone. Beverly Hills, CA: Hillcrest Press, 1989.
  76. Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
  77. Braga, Ariane Varela. "[Review of:] Ornament and European Modernism. From Art Practice to Art History, by Loretta Vandi (ed.), New York and London: Routledge, 2018". *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 20 (2019): 1–11.
  78. Bücher, Karl. *Arbeit und Rhythmus*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1899.
  79. Gumovskaia, Galina. *Harmonious Organization of a Work of Art*. Moscow: MPGU Publ., 2015. (In Russian)
  80. Roginskii, Iakov. *On the Origins of Art*. Moscow: MGU Publ., 1982. (In Russian)

81. Jarzombek, Mark. *Architecture of First Societies: A Global Perspective*. New York: Wiley, 2013.
82. Kracauer, Siegfried. *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963.
83. Bobrinskaia, Ekaterina. *The Soul of the Crowd: Art and Social Mythology*. Moscow: Kuchkovo pole Publ., 2018. (In Russian)
84. Washburn, Dorothy K. "Cognitive Archaeology: A Symmetry / Symmetry-Breaking Model for the Analysis of Societies". *Time and Mind* 11, no. 2 (2018): 121–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1751696X.2018.1468673>.
85. Washburn, Dorothy K., Donald W. Crowe, and Richard V.N. Ahlstrom. "A Symmetry Analysis of Design Structure: 1,000 Years of Continuity and Change in Puebloan Ceramic Design". In *American Antiquity* 75, no. 4 (2010): 743–72. <https://doi.org/10.7183/0002-7316.75.4.743>.

## Sources

- I. "Should We Keep the Ornament?" *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 4 (1964): 32–6. (In Russian)
- II. "Should We Keep the Ornament?" *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 5 (1964): 11–5. (In Russian)
- III. "Should We Keep the Ornament?" *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 6 (1964): 21–5. (In Russian)
- IV. "Should We Keep the Ornament?" *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 7 (1964): 35–9. (In Russian)
- V. "Kozhin Pavel M." *Academia*. Accessed December 04, 2019. <https://ifes-ras.academia.edu/KozhinPavelM>.

Received: April 17, 2020

Accepted: August 27, 2020

### Author's information:

*Iliia V. Palaguta* — Dr. Habil., Associate Professor; [ipalaguta@yandex.ru](mailto:ipalaguta@yandex.ru)

**Для цитирования:** Palaguta, Iliia. "Studies of Ornament: Main Trends and Prospects". *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Искусствоведение* 10, no. 4 (2020): 571–585. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu15.2020.403>