PROBLEMS OF STYLE

ALOIS RIEGL

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PROBLEMS OF STYLE

FOUNDATIONS FOR A HISTORY OF ORNAMENT

Translated by
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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Chichester, West Sussex

The preparation of this volume was made possible in part by
a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities,
an independent federal agency.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Riegl, Alois, 1858–1905
[Stilfragen. English]
Problems of style : foundations for a history of
ornament / by Alois Riegl ; translated by Evelyn Kain ;
annotations and introduction by David Castriota ;
and preface by Henri Zerner.
p. cm.
Translation of : Stilfragen.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8071-1706-4
1. Decoration and ornament—History. I. Castriota, David,
1950–. II. Title.
NK1175.R513 1993 91-22797
745.4'4—dc20

This book has been composed in Adobe Caledonia

Princeton University Press books are printed on
acid-free paper, and meet the guidelines for permanence
and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines
for Book Longevity of the Council on
Library Resources

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Princeton Legacy Library edition 2018
Paperback ISBN: 978-0-691-65516-1
Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-691-65658-8

DEDICATED TO

Christine Ivusic

AND

Otto Pächt

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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I would like to give a brief account of the genesis of this annotated English version of Riegl's *Stilfragen*, say a few words about the characteristics of the original German text, offer some thoughts on the translating process, and then make my acknowledgments.

It was Tom Kaufmann who, in the early 1980s, first gave me the idea to do an English translation of Riegl's *Stilfragen*. Tom felt that it was time to make Riegl's ideas more available to English-speaking scholars and that, as an American who had studied art history at the University of Vienna and accumulated some translating experience, I was the one to do it. It seemed a daunting task at best. However, at Tom's urging and with the encouragement of Otto Pächt, one of whose lifelong wishes had been to see greater appreciation of his predecessor's contribution, I met with Christine Ivusic, who gave enthusiastic support to the project. It was clear from the start that *Stilfragen*'s introduction to the English-speaking world required a respectable critical apparatus, to which purpose Henri Zerner and David Castriota agreed to contribute their expertise. The project received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and work began in 1985. Neither Otto Pächt nor Christine Ivusic lived to see the completion of the undertaking that they helped call into life; therefore, the present volume is dedicated to their memory.

Riegl's German syntax is like the Arabesques that the author so exhaustively describes in *Stilfragen*: in both instances, the first impression is of bewildering complexity, so that one initially despairs of ever deciphering the basic pattern. However, just as Riegl was able to break down, through painstaking observation, the perplexing effect of Islamic decoration into its simple, constituent parts, so Riegl's prose reveals its clear, underlying structure to anyone patient enough to subject it to analysis. There are no instances of what I refer to in general as the "translator's nightmare," namely places where the thinking of the author was obviously ambiguous and unresolved in his or her own mind to begin with, and therefore impossible to translate. On the contrary, Riegl was always quite certain about what he wanted to say, though he expressed his ideas in a style that represents a challenge to the contemporary reader.

Riegl meant *Stilfragen* to be read closely, at a pace essentially slower than what one is used to today. He expected the reader to sit back and share his delight in observing minute detail and unraveling its dazzling

complexity. One enters, so to speak, on a kind of fantastic journey through the very bloodstream of ornamental existence. Reading *Stilfragen* is, therefore, a myopic experience, and as a whole, this inspired study of humble decoration is a testament to the belief in the profundity of small things, a textual equivalent to such images as Dürer's "Great Piece of Turf."

The translator, as I see it, is always in an inherently awkward and decidedly unenviable position: ill-cast to play the role of the author in the production of a work that can never do more than masquerade as the original, one is always acutely aware of one's personal shortcomings and of the serious obstacles involved that are far greater than the obvious linguistic kind. Is it even possible, one asks oneself in this particular case, to make a piece of scholarship that was written for a public dressed in starched collars or corsets, seated comfortably in overstuffed armchairs, understandable to a readership one hundred years later, which is more likely to be wearing sweatshirts and sneakers while working out on an exercise bicycle? And yet, the overriding desire to understand and to communicate that understanding to others manages to keep one from despair during such an undertaking and finally to win out in the end. *Problems of Style* was written in this spirit of communication. Neither a literal nor a literary translation, it makes no effort to recreate the flavor of the original Viennese Academese (for that fascinating aspect, the reader is referred to the original text). The present volume is an attempt to make Riegl's ideas accessible to a contemporary English-reading public, and if it is at all successful, there should be times when readers of *Problems of Style* can forget that they are reading *Stilfragen* in translation.

Finally, I would like to thank the people who gave support and encouragement to my work on this project. They include Tom Lyman, Gerhard Schmidt and Margaret Olin; Ted Jones, Louise Schang, Jeffrey and Sarah Quilter, plus Doug Northrop along with many other colleagues at Ripon College; and, of course, Gene, Jascha, and Nico, who helped me every step of the way.

PREFACE

How many of our graduate students, indeed how many of us who teach them, can read German with sufficient ease to appreciate the full significance of Riegl's *Stilfragen*, to grasp the relation between the large sweeping historical design, the detailed analyses or scholarly discussions, and the theoretical theses? As for myself, I found it most rewarding to read Evelyn Kain's excellent translation. It has the flow of idiomatic English, and this is essential to render Riegl's work. The rhythm of his prose is often that of the spoken word and in fact we know that by the time he taught at the university his publications were directly related to his lectures.

Something also that the translation will, I hope, convey is the passion invested in Riegl's enterprise. We are made to feel that the issues he discussed mattered vitally to him; it was the very nature of art and its relation to human life that were at stake, art as an absolute necessity. This is the fundamental significance of formalism at its inception, not that art is divorced from life but, on the contrary, that it is a human urge so fundamental that it does not depend on anything else.

Stilfragen occupies a key position in the development of Riegl's work and thought. Up to then, he had published a whole cycle of specialized contributions to the study of the decorative arts, especially textiles. This was the outcome of his activity as curator of textiles at the Museum of Art and Industry in Vienna, an institution modeled on London's South Kensington Museum (now called the Victoria and Albert Museum). Institutionally as well as intellectually his work went hand in hand with the arts and crafts movement, which was particularly brilliant in Vienna. At the museum, Riegl's most sustained task was to catalogue oriental rugs, and this gave him the occasion to develop exceptional skills for the description and analysis of the intricate patterns. This rigorous discipline in the discussion of ornamental motifs is the backbone of *Stilfragen*.

In 1889, Riegl, who was thirty-one years old, submitted a successful application to enter a university career. In 1890 and 1891 he lectured on the history of ornament, and *Stilfragen* was the first work to result from this new activity. Riegl's increased intellectual ambition takes shape here in the form of a bold historical thesis: he claimed that there had been an uninterrupted continuity in the history of ornament from the ancient kingdom of Egypt until the Islamic world (and consequently until the present).

More specifically, Riegl saw this continuity embodied in the permanence of a few fundamental motifs that undergo drastic changes in their superficial appearance. This appearance can vary from the most abstract formulation to the most naturalistic embodiments, yet the basic scheme of the palmette, the rosette, the wavy line or tendril, or the zigzag can be recognized under these sundry disguises.

Stilfragen is a polemical work. Its principal target is the thesis defended by the followers of Gottfried Semper, who derived the forms of ornament from the techniques of production and the nature of the materials, especially in weaving crafts. On the other hand, Riegl also opposed a mimetic interpretation according to which vegetal ornament would occur as a spontaneous imitation or transcription of natural forms, with stylization as a secondary phenomenon. Although this is a less sustained theme in the book than the attack on the "materialist" theory, it was of great importance to Riegl, who persued it with increased vigor in later years. What these two antithetical claims have in common, making them equally pernicious in Riegl's eye, is that both tear the production of ornamental art away from its history, an independent history of its own.

Riegl, then, envisages the history of ornament as the endless, tireless, compulsive reiteration of a very few fundamental motifs. Only in a long, long, while, due to the intervention of a different human group, does a new motif appear, like the tendril: that is, the basic motif of a wavy line introduced by Myceanean culture and added to the heritage of Egypt and the ancient Near East. In Riegl's mind this unbroken historical continuity of an underlying core of fundamental motifs was the guarantee of the independence of the artistic urge, of the irreducibility and freedom of art.

Stilfragen is Riegl's most formalistic statement: the combination of unbroken historical continuity and endless inventiveness in the constant restatement of the same few motifs implies an art completely independent from exterior conditions and other human endeavors. In this work, Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* (which can be rendered variously as "artistic intention," "intentionality," "will," or whatever) was just taking shape—and the term makes only a timid appearance in the book. Later this concept was to assume a most prominent role and embody the worldview of a period. But when he wrote *Stilfragen*, Riegl was above all anxious to demonstrate the autonomy and freedom of an aesthetic urge in man.

Riegl's theoretical thinking had not by any means reached maturity. He still thought of an urge to form in terms of beauty, and his attitude remained normative. He seems still to have felt that Greek art was a sort of ultimate attainment. By the time he wrote *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie*

he had gone beyond this aestheticizing formulation, expression had assumed a greater role, and he was increasingly concerned with an understanding of the relation between the coherence of a culture and the autonomy of the visual domain. He would consider "beauty" as the special contribution of Greece, but as only one particular option within a larger, more expressionist view of artistic possibilities. He came to distrust any notion of decline or decadence, to consider evaluation as strictly a relative activity; as expression took on a more prominent position, the expressive aim systematically justified the formal means. Or conversely, the formal means were to be understood strictly in relation to their inherent expressive motivations and not judged according to preestablished formal standards.

These theoretical issues became all-engrossing for Riegl as the years went by, and he was increasingly concerned with the finality of art as it expresses itself at a given time (*Spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, 1901), or in a given genre (*Holländische Gruppenporträt*, 1902).

In *Stilfragen*, however, Riegl was still principally concerned with establishing the continuity of a historical narrative. Consequently, the methods of philology or historical criticism in the positivist tradition were directly operative. It is therefore particularly interesting to see how well the work has withstood the test of time.

Thanks to David Castriota we are now able to do so. For this new edition, he has assumed the formidable undertaking of testing the book against a hundred years of scholarship. Many details have to be corrected, of course, and some of the ideas are untenable, like Riegl's presentation of Egyptian ornament as an absolute beginning. But all in all, Riegl's basic narrative holds good, and many of his hypotheses and intuitions have been confirmed by later research and archeological finds. Quite extraordinarily, the book has not been replaced or superseded as an exposition of the history of ornamental art in antiquity and the medieval period—no small tribute to a scholarly book on the eve of its first centennial.

Henri Zerner

ANNOTATOR'S INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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When, in the period before 1893, Alois Riegl undertook the much needed task of laying the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding or history of ancient and medieval ornament in western Asia and the Mediterranean, the circumstances could hardly have been less favorable for such an enormous and ambitious endeavor. Historians of art had already come to recognize the importance of applied decoration or ornament as a major form of artistic expression in all media, both great and small, among the peoples of antiquity and the periods that followed. This awareness was due largely to the vast array of new material collected by early archaeologists, antiquarians, and ethnographers in the course the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the study of the preclassical cultures of Greece, Egypt, and the Near East was in its infancy. The recent and important discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and on the Greek mainland had opened the door to the study of Aegean Bronze Age cultures, but the Minoan civilization of Crete, which had played such a decisive role in this process, still awaited the excavations and researches of Sir Arthur Evans. Pioneers like Henry Layard or Flandin and Coste had also excited the nascent archaeological community with the finds and illustrations that they brought back from their expeditions into Mesopotamia and Iran. Yet the major sites or capitals of the ancient Near East, like Assur, Babylon, and Ur in Mesopotamia, Ugarit in Syria, and Susa or Persepolis in Iran, remained largely unknown until the monumental campaigns of the German, French, British, and American archaeologists at the turn of the century and the decades that followed.

Ancient Egyptian culture was a good deal more accessible, owing to the scale and preservation of the monuments in the Nile Valley, to the widespread use of stone in such works, and also to the abundant and informative decoration of the monuments with hieroglyphic texts, which were deciphered relatively soon after the European penetration into Egypt. But even here one must conceive of an Egyptian archaeology that still knew little or nothing of many important sites and artifacts, like those from the tomb of Tutankamun or Amarna, for example, which have contributed so much to our understanding of Egyptian art, religion, and society. Even the more well-established field of classical archaeology was relatively undeveloped at this time; major monuments like the Altar of Zeus

at Pergamon or the Ara Pacis Augustae in Rome were still poorly known, only partially excavated, and not yet properly published.

If one considers the sheer wealth of art historical or archaeological material that has accumulated since Riegl's death in 1905, in comparison to the rather limited corpus of artifacts and monuments that was available to him for study, it is not surprising that *Stilfragen* has for many scholars become a kind of period piece. It appears as an interesting document of its time from a historiographical point of view, but a work whose observations, content, and conclusions are assumed to be hopelessly skewed and distorted by the limited data sample upon which they were based, and therefore no longer of any immediate, practical value. Yet such a view of *Stilfragen* is as simplistic and erroneous as it is insensitive. As the eminent art historian and critic Meyer Schapiro once pointed out to me, the validity and value of a study does not depend entirely upon an exhaustive survey of the data. One may contribute a great deal by studying a smaller, well-chosen body of material, so long as the objects are representative of their class or type and provided that the mode of analysis applied to them is careful, penetrating, and methodologically sound.

There is no denying the constraints or lacunae that inevitably marred Riegl's study of ancient and early medieval ornament, but it would be naive and ungenerous for anyone today to disregard the positive contributions of *Stilfragen*, which far outweigh its deficiencies. Nor can one ignore the considerable debt that subsequent scholarship in the field of ancient, late antique, and Islamic decorative arts owes to this fundamental and seminal work. For the art historian or archaeologist who becomes concerned with the analysis of ornamental design as a historical phenomenon, Riegl's early study remains a valuable introduction or point of departure.

When Riegl originally conceived this project, however, he was already sensitive to the paucity of accessible material and the problems that this posed, yet even so he did not see this as the primary obstacle to the kind of approach that he advocated constantly in his work. For Riegl, the whole notion of historical continuity was the real issue at stake in a study that purported to trace the outlines of the evolution of the decorative arts from ancient Egypt to Islamic times as a single, unified, or interrelated phenomenon. By the late nineteenth century, the study of ornament had come to be dominated in European circles by certain positivist notions, especially the materialist theory of art, which ascribed the formal properties of ornamental style and composition overwhemingly to the dictates of raw material and technique. In the case of stylized representations of plants or animals, one could substitute the natural model or analog for the

material and technique as a governing principle, but the result was the same. Formal or stylistic analogies in geometric and stylized vegetal and animal ornament appeared simply as the passive result of common technologies and mimetic skills; they were thereby rendered meaningless in historical terms, incapable of being understood as vestiges or evidence of artistic transmission or diffusion.

Riegl stubbornly resisted and challenged such notions against enormous and entrenched opposition. Instead he viewed the production of art as a creative, intellectual achievement. Artistic forms, especially to the extent that they departed from those of nature, were the material expression of ideas that originated actively in the creative human mind rather than as passive responses to some technological expedient or natural prototype. Artistic design could undoubtedly yield to the differing possibilities and requirements of medium and technique, but Riegl always adhered to the principle of creative autonomy and choice as fundamental to the artistic process. In such an outlook, artistic forms were highly distinctive products whose recurrence could and should be explained in terms of human interaction. Distinctive artistic concepts were not only ideas but traditions, that were transmitted from one generation to the next and from one culture to another. In the hands of a creative artist, traditional forms could also be mutated to produce innovations as they were handed down or diffused transculturally. In the spirit of Darwin, Riegl sought to trace, map, and classify this evolutionary process and the phenomenal range of forms or styles that it could engender.

The methodological or ideological polarity between Riegl and his opponents helps us to understand why at times he tended to overstate his case, perhaps as a deliberate rhetorical or polemic technique, although this led him to some conclusions that must now be modified. For the critical reader, there is also ample room for disagreement with *Stilfragen* on the basis of the historical or factual gaps in the data. The art of Syria and the Levant, and the Aegean as well, all played a more vital role in the international current of decorative arts across the eastern Mediterranean in the later second millennium B.C. than Riegl could possibly have anticipated or surmised from what was known in the 1890s. Egypt was highly receptive to artistic motifs and themes from these regions, just as the Levant served as a major conduit or intermediary for Egyptian forms and design principles that eventually became basic in the Mesopotamian decorative arts of the early first millennium B.C.

Riegl's Egyptocentric bias in the early development corresponds to his Hellenocentric tendencies in assessing the ornament of later periods. The

various tendril patterns that he considered to be the peculiar contribution of the "Greek spirit" now appear as inventions of Minoan or Cretan and Syrian artists, although such patterns did ultimately attain their classic form and maximum currency in Greek art. In more general methodological terms, one may fault Riegl for his excessive formalism, his desire to attribute so much of ornamental pattern or design to artistic imagination, even where the evidence of natural analogs or technical considerations does speak against this. At times his emphasis upon causality in the gradual process of artistic change and transformation smacks uncomfortably of historicism or historical determinism. Riegl's frequent assertions regarding the unparalleled aesthetic achievement of the Greeks, as opposed to those of earlier cultures, are no less a product of his time as were his assumptions about the "purely decorative" function of ornament, or his notion of *Kunstwollen*, a pervasive spirit or impulse motivating and shaping the art of certain ethnic groups or periods. Nowadays, one is prone to be a good deal more circumspect in attempting to understand or explain the root causes of major stylistic trends and developments.

Yet on balance, the general historical construct and conclusions of *Stilfragen* have stood the test of time and subsequent study remarkably well. Today Egyptian decorative art still appears as the first successful effort to establish a systematic and consistent approach to floral or vegetal ornament, an approach that was enormously influential in the decoration that subsequently became current in the ancient Near East and the Aegean in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Today there is no doubt that the radical changes in the Greek ornament of post-Geometric times resulted from the assimilation of motifs and design principles from the Near East and Egypt, which the Greeks gradually modified in the course of time to produce something essentially new. Nor do scholars nowadays have any difficulty in understanding the further development of ornament in Classical and Hellenistic Greek, Roman, and late antique art as a series of progressive transformations reaching back unbroken to the Archaic phase. Among Islamicists as well, there are few who would dispute the notion or indeed the fact that Arabesque and geometric ornament in the medieval Near East was an extension of motifs, design principles, and tendencies inherited from the Hellenistic, Roman, and late antique art in the same regions.

Riegl never intended *Stilfragen* to be a definitive history of ornament as a whole, or even of any of the various individual developments that he treated. It was, as his subtitle made clear, a foundation upon which subsequent scholarship could build. And this is what it soon became. Within

two decades Ernst Herzfeld applied Riegl's mode of analysis and terminology in the publication of the rich architectural decorations of the Abbasid palace at Samarra, opening up a whole new phase in the study of early Islamic ornament. Riegl's work also provided the point of departure for the only other extended study of the Arabesque by the Egyptian scholar Shafi'i, just as it paved the way for the comprehensive treatment of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern ornament in Helene Kantor's doctoral dissertation (University of Chicago), which has unfortunately remained unpublished since 1945. In the domain of classical and European archaeology, *Stilfragen* spawned a long list of more specific studies, above all the influential work of Paul Jacobsthal in Greek ornament and his investigations of the Greek impact upon the decorative arts of the Celts in Iron Age Europe. Via Jacobsthal, Riegl's legacy continues in the ongoing scholarship on La Tène Celtic art by British and Continental archaeologists. Even classical archaeologists who have approached Riegl more critically, like Imma Kleemann, have nevertheless done so in the mode of discourse, analysis, and terminology initially established in *Stilfragen*.

From this perspective, the present volume has a number of objectives. Most immediately, it is intended to increase the awareness or appreciation of Riegl's contribution to the study of ornament and to make this contribution more accessible to those less able or inclined to tangle with the difficulties of *fin de siècle* Viennese German. But it is intended in more practical as well as historiographic terms. There is still no available comprehensive survey of ancient or early medieval ornament in any language that treats the major phases or the larger developments. *Stilfragen* remains the only solid and detailed introduction to the classification, analysis, and terminology basic to the study of stylized vegetal ornament in the Near East and the West during these periods. For this reason alone it is still a valuable piece of scholarship whose benefits and lessons can now become available to a wider audience of scholars and students.

To maximize such positive value, this English translation of *Stilfragen* is equipped with extensive scholarly apparatus or annotations; these are keyed to the text by letters rather than numbers, to avoid confusion with Riegl's footnotes. They refer the reader to the relevant scholarship on a given point or subject that has accumulated since Riegl's time, as well as to new additions to the corpus of artifacts or monuments that may test, dispute, or corroborate Riegl's findings. Often these annotations are somewhat discursive so as to provide a more substantive and critical indication of how the bibliography bears upon the discussion of *Stilfragen*, and how Riegl's arguments apply to new material. As a result, the text is

no longer outdated, and the reader has the option of pursuing an issue on the basis of more recent work and new data.

To some extent, the annotations and other additions are editorial. They alert the reader to newer, more accessible publications of material that Riegl cited as additional comparanda in his footnotes. The footnotes too have been reorganized or expanded according to more modern conventions and standards. The once familiar abbreviations of 1893 may often be obscure or confusing to today's reader; these have now been cited fully. The many abbreviated references that once encumbered the body of the text itself have also been expanded and moved down into supplemental footnotes. Simple factual errors in date, medium, or provenance, etc., within the footnotes or the text itself have also been emended, but all such changes have been indicated through the use of brackets or discussion in the annotations. The list of illustrations has been expanded to include full citations of the sources, both as a convenience to the reader and to compensate for those instances where Reigl neglected to indicate such sources in his footnotes. Thus the present volume is not only a new translation but a new edition, whose additional material will hopefully render it useful even to those readers who are fluent in the language of the original text.

There has been a similar attempt to improve the illustrations as well. The halftone illustrations of the original edition were inferior copies made from earlier publications. Those halftones which reproduced actual photographs of the objects have sometimes been replaced by new black-and-white prints. However, all illustrations consisting of artistic renderings of the objects have been retained. These include the halftones that reproduce ink or watercolor versions, as well as the various line drawings that comprise the majority of the illustrations in *Stilfragen*. In order to maximize their graphic quality, these have been rephotographed directly from the original sources used by Riegl. Many of Riegl's illustrations were excerpted from more extensive renderings of patterns or objects, although the radical and adroit cropping of the images in the original edition of *Stilfragen* often tends to obscure this fact. Consequently, the illustrations of the present edition have been cropped somewhat less severely so as to provide an indication of context.

It is certainly true that nineteenth-century renderings of this kind introduce in varying degree qualities and inaccuracies that are alien to the original works of art. Yet one should never lose sight of the extent to which such artistic renderings shaped the conception or impression of ancient ornament shared by Riegl and his contempories. These were the illus-

trations that Riegl had before him as he developed his arguments; therefore they constitute an inextricable component of his text, and as such they remain essentially beyond any notion of improvement or emendation. Nor is it justified to dismiss the archaeological value of such drawings and watercolors too lightly; often enough they provide an invaluable record of the design and detail of works that have unfortunately deteriorated or disappeared since the time of their discovery.

The technical vocabulary or terminology of this edition is the result of careful consideration and collaboration between the translator and the annotator. Wherever possible, it follows the English adaptation of Riegl's terms established by Jacobsthal in *Early Celtic Art* and current among the British scholars influenced by Jacobsthal. Nevertheless, Jacobsthal's discussion of Greek and Near Eastern ornament here was limited, emphasizing only those forms and issues that were relevant to his primary subject, Celtic art. In many instances it has been necessary to start fresh and to settle upon terms that approximate the sense of Riegl's German, while also avoiding the excessively lengthy and descriptive or cumbersome quality of some of his vocabulary. To make the sense and usage of the English terminology as clear and precise as possible, the annotator has also contributed a glossary, which defines the terms and provides some indication of their application, while also referring to relevant text and illustrations. The original German terms have been included in each entry of the glossary (unless phonetically equivalent to the English).

From all of this it should be clear that the present volume is no longer the text of 1893. It is first of all a translation of that text and reflects everything that is inherent to the process of translation. Through the addition of annotations, it now becomes a dialogue between Riegl and the scholarship that has followed. This scholarship, like the discovery of new artifacts and monuments, invites or demands a new reading of Riegl in the light of new contexts, perspectives, and potentialities that have arisen since the 1890s and that will no doubt continue to arise. As such, the text is now a *Stilfragen* for the 1990s and beyond, through which new generations of scholars may contemplate the challenges and intricacies of ornamental design that so preoccupied the artistic imagination in the past.

As a text, *Stilfragen* may also have achieved a new currency or relevance owing to the concerns peculiar to our own time, a period when practitioners and theoreticians of postmodern architecture and interior design have come to look anew at the role of ornament and the burden of tradition in the creative process that shapes the built environment. Ours is also a period in which historians, critics, and epistemologists have come

to question the basic assumptions behind the whole notion of historical or cultural continuity and evolution. In place of continuity, relation, and order, it has now become preferable to seek discontinuity, difference, and fragmentation. *Stilfragen* remains very much a focus or target for such a reevaluation, and it is an enticing prospect to speculate upon what sort of rereading this new perspective may engender.

Continuity is ultimately a polar conception; it can only be gauged against the process of change with which it perpetually coexists or interacts. If the corpus of artifacts treated in this volume does indeed constitute the links in a chain connecting the decorative arts of antiquity with those of relatively recent times, as Riegl argued so passionately, then one need only compare examples from various intervals of the chain to see the volatile and dynamic process of transformation that constantly attended such continuity, and to appreciate how effectively Riegl's analysis brought this protean dimension of artistic production into focus. *Stilfragen* bears eloquent witness to the cultural and creative forces that engender disruption and innovation even as they stimulate the borrowing and preservation of existing artistic concepts and norms. As the end of another century approaches amidst new intellectual anxieties and polemics, historians of art would do well to reexamine and debate the implications of the long and complex artistic process that Riegl's study sought to disclose.

I WOULD like to express my deep gratitude to all those whose help and skill contributed so substantially to the production of annotations in this volume. First of all, I want to thank my research assistant, Heather Hornbuckle, for the time and care that she put into running down all potentially relevant bibliographic references. Her diligence and thoroughness were instrumental in making the annotations as complete and up-to-date as possible. I also want to thank the team of librarians here at Duke University whose expertise and professionalism also facilitated access to the wide range of material that the project required. On the reference staff these included Ken Berger, Ilene Nelson, Joe Rees, and Johannah Sherrer. Among the librarians of the Interlibrary Loan Office at Duke, I especially want to thank Rebecca Gomez, Jade Kelly, Linda Purnell, and Clifford Sanderson. I know that the masses of material that they acquired for me must at times have pressed their resources to the limit, and I appreciate not only their abilities, but their forbearance as well. I am extremely grateful to Henri Zerner for his wisdom and support in overseeing the entire project, and to the translator, Evelyn Kain, for her care, patience, and flexibility. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Powers, Fine Arts

Editor at Princeton University Press. Although she came to the project when it was well underway, she has been enormously helpful all through the final stages. This undertaking has ultimately been the result of teamwork. Without the participation of everyone involved, it would never have been possible.

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PROBLEMS OF STYLE

INTRODUCTION

The subtitle of this book announces its theme: "Foundations for a History of Ornament." How many of you are now shrugging your shoulders in disbelief merely in response to the title? What, you ask, does ornament also have a history? Even in an era such as ours, marked by a passion for historical research, this question still awaits a positive, unqualified answer. Nor is this purely the reaction of radicals who consider all decoration original and the direct result of the specific material and purpose involved. Alongside these radical extremists, there are also those of a more moderate bent, who would accord to the decorative arts some degree of historical development from teacher to pupil, from generation to generation, and from culture to culture, at least insofar as they have to do with so-called high art, devoted to the representation of man, his achievements, and struggles.

Certainly, from the very inception of art historical research, there have always been some scholars in the field who also conceived of pure decoration in terms of a progressive development, i.e., according to the principles of historical methodology. But these were, of course, mainly learned academicians who adapted the rigorous training in philology and history acquired at gymnasia and universities to the study of ornamental phenomena as well. However, the drastic impact of this more extremist position upon the general attitude toward the decorative arts is revealed by the way in which historical methodology has been applied to the study of ornament up to now. For example, scholars have been extremely reticent to propose any sort of historical interrelationships, and even then, only in the case of limited time periods and closely neighboring regions. Their courage seems to fail them completely the moment an ornament ceases to have any direct relationship with objective realities—to organic, living creatures or to works fashioned by the human hand. As soon as they deal with the so-called Geometric Style, which is characterized by the mathematical expression of symmetry and rhythm in abstract lines, all consideration of artistic, mimetic impulses or of variation in the creative abilities of various cultures immediately ceases. The degree to which the terrorism of extremists has successfully intimidated even the "historians" involved in the study of ornament emerges clearly in the haste of scholars to assure us that they would never be so foolish and naive as to believe, for example, that one culture could have ever copied a "simple" meander band from

another, or by their repeated apologies whenever they do venture to assert even a loose connection between, shall we say, the stylized two-dimensional vegetal motifs current in two geographic areas.

What led to this situation, which has had such a decisive and, in many respects, paralyzing effect upon all art historical research in the last twenty-five years? The blame can be placed squarely on the materialist interpretation of the origin of art that developed in the 1860s, and which succeeded in winning over, virtually overnight, everyone concerned with art, including artists, art lovers, and scholars. The theory of the technical, materialist origin of the earliest ornaments and art forms is usually attributed to Gottfried Semper. This association is, however, no more justified than the one made between contemporary Darwinism and Darwin. I find the analogy between Darwinism and artistic materialism especially appropriate, since there is unquestionably a close and causal relationship between the two: the materialist interpretation of the origin of art is nothing other than Darwinism imposed upon an intellectual discipline. However, one must distinguish just as much and just as sharply between Semper and his followers as between Darwin and his adherents. Whereas Semper did suggest that material and technique play a role in the genesis of art forms, the Semperians jumped to the conclusion that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and techniques. "Technique" quickly emerged as a popular buzzword; in common usage, it soon became interchangeable with "art" itself and eventually began to replace it. Only the naive talked about "art"; experts spoke in terms of "technique."

It may seem paradoxical that so many practicing artists also joined the extreme faction of art materialism. They were, of course, not acting in the spirit of Gottfried Semper, who would never have agreed to exchanging free and creative artistic impulse [*Kunstwollen*] for an essentially mechanical and materialist drive to imitate. Nevertheless, their misinterpretation was taken to reflect the genuine thinking of the great artist and scholar. Furthermore, the natural authority that practicing artists exert in matters of technique resulted in an environment where scholars, archaeologists, and art historians swallowed their pride and beat a hasty retreat whenever the question of technique arose. For they—mere scholars that they were—could have little or no competence in this regard. Only recently have scholars become bolder. The word "technique" proved to be extremely flexible: first came the discovery that most ornamental motifs could be (and had actually been) rendered in a variety of techniques; then came the pleasant realization that techniques were an excellent source of controversy. In time, archaeological publications, as well as journals de-

voted to arts and crafts, joined in the wild chase for techniques, a pastime that will probably continue until all the technical possibilities for each and every humble motif have been exhausted, only to return—one may be sure—precisely to the point where it all began.

In the midst of such a spirited intellectual atmosphere, this book ventures to come forward with foundations for a history of ornament. The wisdom of beginning with foundations that pretend to be nothing more than that is obvious. In a situation where not only the field of action is hotly contested at every step along the way but even the groundwork itself is constantly in dispute, our first concern is to secure a few positions, a connected series of strongholds from which a comprehensive, systematic, and complete offensive can later be launched. The nature of the situation militates further that "negative arguments" take up a far greater portion of this book than is customary in a positive, pragmatic description of history. Here our most immediate and urgent objective is to address the most fundamental and harmful of the misconceptions and preconceptions that still hinder research today. This is another reason why, for the present, the concepts of this study are presented in the form of "foundations."

Having said this, I still feel compelled to justify the existence of this book. However, anything one might say in this regard will sound unconvincing as long as the technical-materialist theory of the origin of the earliest primeval art forms and ornamental motifs remains unchallenged, even though it has failed to define the precise moment when the spontaneous generation of art ends, and the historical development effected by laws of transmission and acquisition begins. The first chapter, therefore, is devoted to challenging the validity of the technical-materialist theory of the origin of art. As its title indicates, it deals with the nature and origin of the Geometric Style. Here, I hope to demonstrate that not only is there no cogent reason for assuming a priori that the oldest geometric decorations were executed in any particular technique, least of all weaving, but that the earliest, genuinely historical artistic monuments we possess in fact contradict this assumption. Similar conclusions will also emerge from deliberations of a more general nature. It will become evident, namely, that the human desire to adorn the body is far more elementary than the desire to cover it with woven garments, and that the decorative motifs that satisfy the simple desire for adornment, such as linear, geometric configurations, surely existed long before textiles were used for physical protection. As a result, this eliminates one principle that has ruled the entire field of art theory for the past quarter century: the absolute equation of textile patterns with surface decoration or ornament. The

moment it becomes untenable to assume that the earliest surface decoration first appeared in textile material and technique, then the two can no longer be considered identical. Surface decoration becomes the larger unit within which woven ornament is but a subset, equivalent to any other category of surface decoration.

In general then, one of the main objectives of this book is to reduce the importance of textile decoration to the level it deserves. At the same time, I must admit that this medium has been the point of departure for all the research that I have gathered from eight years of service in the textile collection of the k. k. Österreichisches Museum für art und Industrie [Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst]. At the risk of ridiculous sentimentality, I cannot help feeling some regret at robbing textile art of its nimbus, in view of the personal relationship which I acquired with textiles in the course of curating the museum's collection for so many years.

Once the momentous proposition about the original identity of surface decoration and textile ornament had become accepted, there were almost no limits placed on its application. Beginning with rectilinear geometric shapes, it quickly expanded to include artistic representations of even the most complex natural forms, namely, human beings and animals. For example, the origin of motifs consisting of two figures symmetrically arranged to either side of a central axis was attributed to tapestry weaving. The Heraldic Style, as this type of decorative arrangement has come to be known, is so common that it warrants its own separate discussion. In the second chapter, therefore, I explain why there is neither proof nor even a possibility that heraldic motifs resulted from tapestry weaving, since the advanced technical knowledge necessary to produce such complicated forms simply did not exist during the period when the earliest heraldic motifs originated. And, at any rate, we shall see that there are other, albeit less tangibly materialist explanations for the Heraldic Style.

As a result, the basic tone of the two first chapters is somewhat negative, even though I have made every effort to replace the things that were discredited with something new and positive. In the case of the Geometric Style, it is especially necessary to dispel once and for all the misconceptions surrounding its purely technical, material origin and the allegedly ahistorical nature of its development. Yet one fact enormously complicates any historical approach to the Geometric Style: whereas organic nature and the handicrafts inspired by it allow the artist manifold alternatives, the mathematical laws of symmetry and rhythm that govern the simple motifs of the Geometric Style are more or less the same the

world over. Spontaneous generation of the same geometric decorative motifs in different parts of the world is, therefore, not out of the question; but even so, one can take specific historical factors into account with complete objectivity. Certainly, some cultures were always leading the way for others, just as more talented individuals have always distinguished themselves from their peers. And surely it was just as true in the remote past as it is today that the vast majority of people find it easier to imitate than to invent.

Once plants are used as decorative motifs, the study of ornament finds itself on more solid ground. There are infinitely more species of plants that can be used as the basis for patterns than there are abstract, symmetrical shapes, limited as these are to the triangle, the rectangle, the rhombus, and only a few others. This is the point where classical archaeology begins to take an interest in vegetal ornament; in particular, the connection between Greek plant motifs and their ancient Near Eastern prototypes, which mark the beginning of art history proper, has already provided the subject of intense study and extensive debate. Nevertheless, German archaeology has not yet attempted a systematic description of the history of the vegetal ornament that was so crucial to antique art from ancient Egyptian to Roman times; this is a consequence of the enormous resistance to making "mere ornament" the basic theme of a more ambitious historical study. However, an American, has recently taken the step that German-trained scholars timidly avoided. W. G. Goodyear, in his book, *The Grammar of the Lotus*, was the first to argue that all antique vegetal ornament, and a good deal more, was a continuation of ancient Egyptian lotus ornament. The driving force behind the ubiquitous diffusion of this ornament was, in his opinion, the sun cult. This American scholar is apparently no more concerned with the technical-materialist theory of the origin of art than he is with Europe's crumbling castles and basalt deposits—unless I am mistaken, Gottfried Semper's name is not mentioned once in the entire book.

Strictly speaking, Goodyear's main thesis is not completely new; what is indisputably unique, however, is his radical determination to accord his ideas a universal significance, as well as the motivation that he cites for the entire development.

As far as the latter is concerned, however, the idea that the sun cult had such an overwhelming influence on decoration is surely erroneous. It is not even certain whether sun-cult symbolism played such a preponderant role in ancient Egyptian ornament, much less outside of Egypt, where there is absolutely no proof and, moreover, no likelihood that it did. Sym-

bolism was unquestionably one of the factors that contributed to the gradual creation of a wealth of traditional ornament. However, by proclaiming symbolism the sole and decisive factor, Goodyear makes the same mistake as the materialists who single out technique in this way. Moreover, both interpretations share an obvious desire to avoid at all costs the purely psychological, artistic motivation behind decoration. In cases where the artist is obviously responding to an immanent, artistic, creative drive, Goodyear sees symbolism at work, just as the artistic-materialists in the same instance utilize technique as their incidential, lifeless objective.

Moreover, Goodyear places almost no limitations on the influence that the lotus motif exerted as a model for all sorts of ancient ornament, including even the prehistoric zigzag, and this amounts to the same kind of overstatement indulged in by artistic-materialists and Darwinists. As a result, Goodyear often makes historical connections that a more dispassionate observer would flatly reject. Since he seizes only upon those things which serve his purpose, he has become willfully blind to finer distinctions. Therefore, it is not surprising that he overlooked, among other things, the genuinely Greek core of Mycenaean ornament, thereby missing what may well have been the most important point of the entire development of classical ornament.

As many a scholar before him, Goodyear clearly recognized the vital importance of vegetal decoration in ancient ornament, not only for its own sake but also for the proper assessment and appreciation of ancient ornament within the overall history of the decorative arts. My lectures on the history of ornament, delivered during the winter term of 1890–91 at the University of Vienna, gave special emphasis to the development of the vegetal ornament that began in the earliest period of antiquity. A part of the content of these lectures appears in the third chapter along with a few minor additions; it consists mainly of responses to Goodyear's work, which had since appeared. I would agree with him that the Greeks borrowed motifs extensively from the ancient Near East; moreover, the way that they infused such forms with formal beauty has long been acknowledged as a Greek accomplishment. However, Goodyear, along with other scholars interested in determining the essentially Western elements and impulses in early Greek art, ignored the Greeks' most characteristic, autonomous, and influential invention, namely the tendril. One seeks in vain for dynamic, rhythmic vegetal tendrils among the various ancient Near Eastern styles, though they already appear fully developed in Mycenaean art on what would later become Greek soil. While Greek blossom motifs have a Near Eastern origin, the lovely undulating lines connecting

them are specifically Greek. From this point on, the development of the tendril is a major aspect of the subsequent history of ornament. The tendril begins as an undulating band emitting spirals within a narrow border; by the late Hellenistic period, it has turned into an elaborately branching, leafy vine capable of spreading out over large areas. In this form it continues in Roman art and beyond to the Middle Ages, in the West as well as in the East, in Islamic no less than in Renaissance art. The curling foliage of the Little Masters of the sixteenth century is as much a direct descendant of antique classical tendril ornament as late Gothic crocket-work. By tracing vegetal decoration throughout the centuries from its first appearance up to the present day, it becomes evident that ornament experiences the same continuous, coherent development that prevails in the art of all periods, as in the historical relationship between antique mythological imagery and Christian iconographic types. But this is too vast a theme to take up in depth within the framework of this book. Therefore, I will concentrate solely on describing in detail the development of tendril ornament from its origins down through the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Chapter 3, because it deals with a topic of such obvious importance, represents a truly significant "foundation" for the history of ornament.

It is very easy to trace the historical development of traditional stylized vegetal motifs. The same is not true, however, the moment that man attempts to produce ornament related to the natural appearance of an actual vegetal prototype. For example, the projection of the palmette found in Egypt and Greece cannot have been invented independently in both places, since the motif bears no resemblance to the actual plant. One can only conclude, therefore, that it originated in one place and was subsequently transmitted to the other. It is quite another matter, however, in the case of two ornamental works of differing origin that depict a rose, for instance, as it appears in nature; since the natural appearance of the rose is generally the same even in the most diverse countries, it is conceivable that similar depictions could arise independently. It becomes readily apparent from the study of vegetal ornament as a whole, however, that realistic renderings of flowers for decorative purposes, as is nowadays the vogue, is a recent phenomenon. The naive approach to art characteristic of earlier cultures insisted adamantly on symmetry, even in the case of reproductions of nature. Representations of humans and animals soon departed from symmetry by way of the Heraldic Style and other similar arrangements. Yet plants—subordinate and seemingly lifeless as they are—remained symmetrical and stylized throughout the centuries even in

the most sophisticated styles, particularly as long as they functioned as pure decoration and had no representational value. The transition from ancient stylization to modern realism, of course, did not come about in a day. Naturalism, the tendency to make ornamental forms resemble actual plants seen in perspective, crops up repeatedly in the history of vegetal ornament. Indeed, there was even a period in antiquity when naturalism was quite advanced; however, it represents only a brief interlude in the otherwise constant use of traditional, stylized forms. Generally speaking, the naturalistic vegetal motifs of antiquity and of almost the entire medieval period were never copied directly from nature.

The acanthus motif provides us with the best, and probably most crucial, insight into how naturalized vegetal motifs were understood and executed in antiquity. Nevertheless, Vitruvius's story that decorative acanthus motifs were originally based directly upon the actual plant is still accepted without question today. No one seems disturbed by the improbable suggestion that a common ordinary weed could suddenly and miraculously be transformed into an artistic motif. Seen within the context of the history of ornament as a whole, the situation is unprecedented, without parallel, and downright absurd. Furthermore, it is the earliest acanthus motifs that least resemble the actual plant. Only in the course of time did the stylized motifs begin to acquire the characteristics of the acanthus plant itself; obviously, no one referred to them as acanthus motifs until much later in their development, when they actually began to resemble the plant. Chapter 3 will prove that the earliest acanthus ornaments are nothing more than palmettes that were either executed in sculpture or else conceived sculpturally. As a result, the acanthus motif, by far the most important vegetal ornament of all time, makes its debut in art history not as a *deus ex machina* but with a role that is fully integrated into the coherent course of development of antique ornament.

From the time it first fell under the influence of the more refined culture and art of Greece, the Orient resisted the naturalizing tendencies of Western art epitomized in the development of acanthus motifs and the like. Nevertheless, it fully accepted Hellenistic forms; surely no one doubts this anymore except those stubbornly committed to upholding a cherished theory. That there should be any question at all today in this regard, in view of the convincing evidence offered by the monuments themselves, is due primarily to the deeply-rooted antihistorical attitudes in evaluating decorative forms. In actual fact, however, the stylized blossom forms of Late Hellenistic and Alexandrian art occur frequently on Oriental works from the Roman Imperial period side by side with the

naturalistic forms of the Roman West. Byzantine decoration is in part directly related to the Hellenistic forms that were clearly still in use in Greece and Asia Minor even during the Roman Empire. The same is true of Islamic art, though less obviously, since there were so many intervening stages.

A strong Byzantine element has long been recognized as a factor in the origin of Islamic ornament, in fact, even more so in the 1840s and 50s than today, a circumstance once again attributable to the ill-advised technical-materialist theory that doggedly insists upon the spontaneous, autochthonous origin of the art of different cultures. In contrast, the Arabesque remains uncontested as a special creation of the Orient, and particularly of the Arabs. And yet the history of antique ornament demonstrates clearly that the tendrils basic to Arabesque decoration were unknown in the ancient Near East and therefore could only have been adopted from the Hellenistic West. In addition, a closer look at the dense entanglements of Arabesque decoration discloses a number of more conspicuous motifs whose volute-shaped calyces and leaf-fans clearly betray their connection to ancient palmette ornament. What does appear as an entirely new feature of the Arabesque, and completely unattested in the decorative approach to plants in classical antiquity, however, is the peculiar placement of Islamic blossoms. These occur not only at the ends of tendrils, as they are in nature and in Western decoration in general, but they often appear integrated within the tendril. This arrangement suppresses the character of the blossom and obscures the concept of the tendril as a stem, so much that it is sometimes difficult to recognize the Arabesque as a form of vegetal tendril ornament at all.

However, even these fundamental and characteristic idiosyncracies of the Arabesque, in which the antinaturalistic and abstract quality of all early Islamic art emerges so perfectly, have their antecedents in ancient tendril ornament, as the conclusion of the third and the fourth chapters will demonstrate. Here I am able to address a number of additional issues that could not be accommodated in my *Altorientalische Teppiche*, mostly because of the limitations on space. I am happy for the opportunity to expand upon the subject since I realize that many are still unconvinced that antique art was also the evident point of departure for the early medieval art of the Near East. This shows how profoundly modern thinking has been biased by the ahistorical attitude that maintains that art must have originated here and there spontaneously and autochthonously, yet even so the Occident must be a passive recipient, with the Orient always on the giving end. The Orient, of course, represents a land of fable and enchant-