ORNAMENT – OVERLOOKED AND REVISITED



I have just received a copy of Diana Newall and Christina Unwin’s marvelous book *The Chronology of Pattern* [Link] – just published in the UK by Bloomsbury/A & C Black.



We still radically separate ornament from style and meaning, treating it as superfluous and superficial, yet it is the primary experience we have of much of our artifactual world – surface treatment.

After the likes of Owen Jones (*Grammar of Ornament* –[Link]), there are few works like Gombrich's *Sense of Order* [Link] that take pattern seriously and liberate it from the fine art :: decorative craft distinction. (Though I also constantly return to Alois Riegl, Henri Focillon and George Kubler.)

The topic fascinated me in my own study of ancient Corinthian ceramics (at the beginnings of the Mediterranean city state), where I refused the distinction and dealt with surface treatment, including both figurative painting as well as geometric and floral pattern, in a contextual study of *design* [Link]. My broad point now is that ornament/pattern is precisely the worked ground against which subject matter is set, even to the point where ground is more significant and

eclipses apparent subject matter (this a variation on my obsession with signal-noise relationships in the history of design).



But how can so much be encompassed in a single synoptic view? Diana and Christina offer a bold thematics, set in a timeline, from antiquity to modernity. Their wonderful topics include: flamboyant gothic, glowing grotesques, the dramatic and the divine, floral perfection, compositions of refinement, patterns of richness, bold colors and abstracts, tartan grids, all accompanied by acute commentary and

contextual reference.

This is a reminder of just how much analytic attention we still need to apply to the world of design and making, and how hampered we are by the narrowness of art and design history, even when they mobilize the likes of semiotics (as Tilley and I attempted as part of our contribution to the emerging field of material culture studies in the 80s [Link]).

