

ADOLF LOOS, "ORNAMENT AND CRIME" (1908)

SOURCE: YEHUDA SAFRAN AND WINFRED WANG, EDS. *THE ARCHITECTURE OF ADOLF LOOS* (LONDON: ARTS COUNCIL, 1985).

The child is amoral. To us the Papuan is also amoral. The Papuan slaughters his enemies and devours them. He is no criminal. If, however, the modern man slaughters and devours somebody, he is a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his oar, in short, everything that is within his reach. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons where eighty percent of the inmates bear tattoos. Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder.

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The man of our time who daubs the walls with symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or a degenerate. . . . One can measure the culture of a country by the degree to which its lavatory walls are daubed. With children it is a natural phenomenon: their first artistic expressions to scrawl symbols on the walls. But what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneration in the modern man. I have made the following observation and have announced it to the world: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use. . . .*

Every period had its style; why was it that our period was the only one to be denied a style? By 'style' was meant ornament. I said, "weep not. Behold! What makes our period so important is that it is incapable of producing new ornament, we have struggled through to a state without ornament. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits. . . . Soon, city streets will glow like white walls!"

But there are hobgoblins who will not allow it to happen. Humanity is still to groan under the slavery of ornament . . .

The rate of cultural development is held back by those that cannot cope with the present. I live in the year 1908, but my neighbor lives approximately in the year 1900, and one over there lives in the year 1880. It is a misfortune for any government, if the culture of its people is dominated by the past. . . . Happy is the country which does not have such backward-looking inhabitants. Happy is America! . . .

Those who measure everything by the past impede the cultural development of nations and of humanity itself. Ornament is not merely produced by criminals, it commits a crime itself by damaging national economy and therefore its cultural development. . . .

In a highly productive nation ornament is no longer a natural product of its culture, and therefore represents backwardness or even a degenerative tendency. As a result, those who produce ornament are no longer given their due reward. We are aware of the conditions that exist in the wood carving and turning trades, the very low wages which are paid to the embroiderers and lace makers. The producer of ornament must work for twenty hours to obtain the same income of a modern laborer who works for eight hours. As a rule, ornament increases the price of the object. . . . The lack of ornament results in reduced working hours and an increased wage. The Chinese carver works sixteen hours. The American laborer works eight hours. . . . If there existed no ornament at all, a condition which might arise in millennia, man would only need to work four instead of eight hours, as the time spent on ornament represents half of today's working day.

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As ornament is no longer organically related to our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture. The ornament that is produced today bears no relation to us, or to any other human or the world at large. It has no potential for development. . . . The artist always stood at the centre of humanity, full of power and health. The modern producer of ornament is, however, left behind or a pathological phenomenon. He disowns his own products after only three years. Cultivated people find them instantaneously intolerable, others become conscious of their intolerability after many years. Where are Otto Eckmann's products today? Where will

Olbrich's work be, ten years from now? Modern ornament has no parents and no offspring, it has no past and no future. \*

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The absence of ornament has raised the other arts to unknown heights. Beethoven's symphonies would never have been written by a man who walks around in silk, velvet and lace. The person who runs around in a velvet suit is no artist but a buffoon or merely a decorator. We have become more refined, more subtle. Primitive men had to differentiate themselves by various colors, modern man needs his clothes as a mask. His individuality is so strong that it can no longer be expressed in terms of items of clothing. The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power. Modern man uses the ornament of past and foreign cultures at his discretion. His own inventions are concentrated on other things.

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\* Both Otto Eckmann (1865-1902, German painter and graphic artist who promoted the *Jugendstil* movement) and Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957, Belgian painter, designer and architect who was influential in Belgian Art Nouveau and in similar Arts and Crafts-inspired movements in Germany) were leading designers during the flowering of Art Nouveau; Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867-1908, architect who practiced mostly in Vienna) was part of the *Sezession* and architect of the eponymous gallery.