

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Gunter Irmscher, *Kleine Kunstgeschichte des Europäischen Ornaments der Frühen Neuzeit, 1400-1900*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 126, 1984, pp.700 [Trapp no.1984K.1]

Kleine Kunstgeschichte des Europäischen Ornaments der Frühen Neuzeit, 1400-1900. By Gunter Irmscher. 327 pp. + 208 b. & w. ill. + 111 b. & w. figs. in text. (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1984), DM. 117. ISBN 3-534-08819-0.

This concise history of European Ornament (1400-1900) is presented in a handy volume with c. 300 closely packed pages of text, 208 halftone plates, 111 text illustrations and 15 pages of bibliographies. It offers a useful survey of the development of the principal categories and motifs starting from 'tectonic' ornaments, such as the classical orders and their related decorative forms, and treating in turn such features as volutes, cartouches, strapwork, the auricular style, the grotesque, (with its subclasses including the rocaille) and foreign motifs (very selectively). While most of the later sections, dealing with specific types, resemble extended dictionary entries with useful references to dated examples, (especially of prints), the earlier pages devoted to the repertory of classical ornament labour under certain difficulties, acknowledged but not wholly solved by the author. The first of these is inherent in the subject: the history of ornament in the west is remarkably continuous, and hence any sharp division between mediaeval and modern traditions will be artificial. Thus the author wishes to exclude Dürer from his survey because of his frequent adherence to gothic forms. The move reveals the second difficulty –ornament is a playful genre and it has proved hard to force these exuberant inventions into the strait-jackets of pre-established categories. Admittedly a chronological treatment of motifs demands their isolation and definition, but this need not exclude a certain penumbra of vagueness.

The author's ambitions, however, are more philosophical. He belongs to a school of thought which attaches an overriding importance to definitions. His book opens with a section on the 'scientific concept of ornament', which happens to show up the problematic nature of this approach. We read that 'objects can be regarded as ornamental (*ornamental*), if their primary function within a larger context is to be characterised as decorative (*schmückend*). In that case possible narrative functions of such objects are merely secondary.' But if, one suspects, the two words to which I have added the German terms are more or less synonymous, the definition turns out to come perilously close to a tautology. The same cannot be said of his second point that 'ornamental motifs exist exclusively in the two dimensional plane', but this clearly conflicts with usage. The type of quandary into which the author is led by his rigid approach is well illustrated by the questions he poses on p. 21: 'Can, or may, a symbol be described as an ornament?' He thinks it can, when the symbol is used in multiple forms, but what about isolated motifs? 'At that point the discussion might easily turn on the alternative between symbolic ornament and ornamental symbol', an alternative the author describes as *durchaus nicht sophistisch* (by no means an exercise in sophistry). One wonders whether our many contemporaries who wear a cross, a heart or a zodiacal sign on their necklace would agree, but then English usage has long categorised such motifs as 'ornaments', where German speaks of *Schmuck*. Maybe the author attaches such importance to this question because he is inclined to accept Cumont's interpretation of much ancient funerary art as symbolic, regardless of the tenuous evidence on which it still rests. He is on firmer ground when he stresses the relevance to decoration of the rhetorical theory of decorum, but even here the decorative urge can often be observed to defy the system.

The author's bias for a well defined terminology also manifests itself in his tendency to describe ornamental compositions in lengthy paragraphs which would probably defeat anglo-saxon readers

and even tax the patience of native German readers. To be sure, these descriptions testify to the close attention the author has paid to every feature of, say, the wall-tombs of the quattrocento and will thus enhance the reader's awareness of all constituent elements, but they cumulatively conflict with the main purpose of a handbook to be consulted rather than read.

Given the exclusively historical orientation of the book it is somewhat puzzling to find the author commending, in the first paragraph of his Introduction, a purely systematic exercise by J.-C. Gardin, *Code pour l'analyse des ornements* [1978], which seems to him to foreshadow a 'paradigm change' as defined by Thomas Kuhn. Those who turn to this cyclostyled pamphlet will find, however, that all Gardin claims for his tentative proposal to computerise elementary forms is that 'it will help archaeologists to assess the nature and extent of the difficulties that will have to be overcome before we can have a computer language even for geometric shapes.' Nor is it correct to say that the proposed method is the first of its kind. In his book on *Nuba Personal Art*, London [1972] James C. Faris has analysed Nuba body paintings, trying to specify the principles of the visual grammar in algorithmic form. In any case the systematic analysis of patterns (as distinct from historical motifs) goes back at least to the permutation methods of Dominique Douat [1704] and has been furthered by eminent scientists such as Ostwald and Speiser. No title of this rich tradition, which I have attempted to survey in *The Sense of Order* is listed in Irmischer's bibliography (which is arranged within the section in no discoverable order). Nor is it the only part of the book which could do with a careful revision for the next edition. The assertion on p. 150 that the Laocoön had been seen in the *Domus Aurea* in 1488 has long been found to be due to a confusion.

Much as there is to be learned from this 'little art history' those in search of a handy survey may still prefer the attractive book by Peter Meyer, *Das Ornament in der Kunstgeschichte*, Zurich [1944].