
The subject undertaken by Clare Guest in this large, elegant study is at the heart of the gulf between the sensibility of the modern age and the civilisation that preceded it. The paradox of ornament is in its definition as embellishment added to a basic essence, but added as the means of expressing the fullness of being of that essence. Contributed by the artist’s hand, arriving as the necessary complement and distinguishing feature that makes individuality, ornament cannot be separated from that which it adorns. In Cicero’s discussion of rhetorical ornament in *Orator* it illuminates meaning — and the connection between ornament and illumination is fruitfully explored in several passages in this book — and yet it can also be seen as separable and categorizable in an inventory of ‘precious’ assets. Ornament has political, philosophical and cosmic as well as technical dimensions; so much was evident to the poets and artists of the Renaissance, and if we discount ornament in our approach to their work we flatten the experience they offer.

Some examples which occur to me from English literature exemplify the relevance of these considerations well beyond the Italian and art-historical context. Guest emphasises the links between ornament and theatre with examples from Hellenistic reliefs to sixteenth-century palaces, sharing a preoccupation with how ornament is perceived. On stage, Lear cannot be fully King Lear without the attendance of his hundred knights, becoming instead ‘Lear’s shadow’, as the Fool informs him, and then mere unaccommodated man. When Regan suggests that he does not need even one follower, he points to how the splendour of her dress transcends its basic function:
Allow not Nature, more then Nature needs:
Mans life is cheape as Beastes. Thou art a Lady;
If onely to go warme were gorgeous,
Why Nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st,
Which scarcely keepes thee warme ...

Ornament completes and proclaims humanity, whether in clothing, architecture or speech. Spenser’s Amoret, tortured by a cruel Cupid in a triumphal masque, is depicted as unjustly deprived of adornment, while she enacts a central ornament of rhetoric, a metaphor — in fact one of the most common and durable metaphors of romantic love, the heart pierced by an arrow:

Her brest all naked, as net iuory,
Without adorne of gold or siluer bright,
Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify,
Of her dew honour was despoyled quight ...
    her trembling hart
Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,
Quite through transfixed with a deadly dart,
And in her bloud yet steeming fresh embayd ...

The gruesomely literal contemplation of the metaphor in its physical dimension is introduced by a striking comment on ornament as essential to 'due honour': it is not her lack of clothing but the lack of adornment that makes her nakedness a degradation defining her as victim. Ornament is equipment, *ornatus*, whether consisting of military armour or a fragile necklace. It glitters, its effulgence can convince, overpower as well as delight. It populates, as when in Genesis the world already created in its elemental form is filled with the variety of species which make it alive and beautiful. At another Spenserian moment, the climactic vision in Canto x of Book VI, when Calidore on Mount Acidale sees ‘an hundred naked maidens lilly white/ All raunged in a ring and
dancing in delight’ the circle is compared to ‘a ring most richly well
enchaced’ but also to the constellation Corona Borealis. An ornament of
dress reflects a cosmic circle, the dance, the full number and the eternal
form announcing completeness and harmony.
The rejection of adornment by some early poets (which sometimes
misleads students into assuming a proto-modern impatience with its
seemingly superfluous loading of texts) can still associate it with a
natural tendency, and frame the refusal of metaphor in metaphorical
terms; George Herbert confesses that ‘My thoughts began to burnish,
sprout and swell/ Curling with metaphors a plain intention’. One of the
prime examples of ornament in this book is the motif of the acanthus,
whose leaves curl and sprout on Corinthian columns and William Morris
wallpaper, and which form decorative scrolls in the margins of medieval
manuscripts, where they house angels, prophets, coats of arms and
symbolic birds.

This substantial, deeply learned study of approaches to ornament
in the Italian Renaissance provides compelling instances of the centrality
of the subject in theory as well as practice, surveying elements of the
culture from rhetoric to garden design, discovering continuities of debate
between discussions of practical skills, disciplines vital to humanism,
such as philology and archaeology, and the perennially revisited
questions first raised by ancient philosophers. If the ultimate focus is on
Renaissance Italy, this is reached via a discussion of a two-thousand-
year dialogue on how we may — how we still may — discover meaning in
the world and in the works we make. It goes adventuring from Socrates
to Pirro Ligorio (the antiquarian and architect of the Villa d’Este at Tivoli,
and of much else) and beyond, exploring a world saturated and splendid
with meaning, where ornament enables action — a world that as we read
we have not entirely lost.
Starting from a divergence in antiquity between platonic and sophistic approaches to rhetorical ornament, and tracing them through later centuries, our attention is directed to the importance of ornate, varied and often luminous surfaces. The Sophists’ emphasis is on fantasy and the art of conjuring up lively, thus moving, imagery; with them, cosmos becomes in our sense cosmetic, through the deployment of rhetorical devices to ‘enhance the surface’ of speech. Plato’s critique of the Sophists associates these effects with scenography and optical illusion. Guest suggests that the Sophists’ difference from the Platonic tradition, from the Platonists’ emphasis on universal Forms, knowable by humans or at least worthy objects of their quest, underlies much of the later development of thinking about ornament, leading to an emphasis on ornate surfaces; this is a theme that would repay further exploration, and whose implications may need to be sorted out in more detail for the majority of readers, who know about the Sophists’ rhetorical enterprises mainly from their hostile critics.

The argument moves via the ancient notion of decorum, the variety of treatment proper to themes and person, to the decorative deployment of visual motifs. The writing is admirably clear, the argument sinuous and entertaining (also sometimes demanding to follow, as we are told everything once). The author’s depth of scholarship and fertility of allusion are those of her subjects, so that it is natural to refer to Petrarch’s lyrical landscapes in comments on Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The visual and natural metaphors find us constantly evaluating the sister arts in terms of each other, since writers on the arts of speech so often discuss verbal argument in terms of the visual. Not only the flowers and twisting vines of the rhetorical garden, the vistas of the actual garden, but the attitudes and motion of the human body connect rhetoric with the visible: she draws together the anatomical flexing of a human figure in graceful motion with the obliquity of
metaphor, showing the progressions from Quintilian’s praise of the torsion of the Discobolos to Botticelli’s graceful, slightly turning figures, to Castiglione’s analysis of grazia in the ideal courtier.

Guest’s book, as it examines the links between different arts and approaches, thus extends our sense of subjects one might think exhausted, such as the Renaissance view of the body. We know that its height of artistic achievement coincides with advances in anatomy, and she shows how, when Vesalius’s skeleton is portrayed among fragments of ancient stone, the antiquarianism and the broken columns are also related to one kind of ornament, as emblems of mortality. The human body that enchants the age is penetrated and distorted, science triumphs, but there are many kinds of science involved. Light is cast on the aesthetics of light in Arabic and medieval optics, and the abundant connections discovered between areas we no longer consider as related, such as theories of genre and beliefs about astrological influences, are both surprising and convincing, like the erudition and industry that have unearthed them.

The fragment and the emblem become more important as the argument proceeds. Cicero describes sophistic rhetoric as ornate, poetic, descriptive and epideictic, i.e. suitable for praise. Renaissance patrons soaked up praise and are complimented in multiple ways including the use of their heraldic badges, emblems and personal imprese as ornaments in decorative schemes. Their devices share these spaces with fragments and trophies from antiquity. The later part of the book is increasingly concerned with the tendency of marginal zones, whether in book frontispieces, picture frames, or the interstices of whole façades or interiors, to effervesce with bizarre and fascinating complexities. Guest possesses the most basic talent needed in scholarship, the ability to see what is in plain sight, especially those elements we tend to see but to look past: frames, patterned spaces surrounding perspectival scenes,
classical or heraldic motifs we skip under the impression they amount to no more than visual cliché, antiquarian revivals.

One revival which has received recent attention is the triumph, a custom which originally seemed to celebrate and affirm order but did so by displaying chaos and ruin in processions of prisoners and exotic trophies snatched from their original contexts, the most celebrated being the seven-branched candlestick from the Temple in Jerusalem visible on Trajan’s column. Triumph appropriates the riches of the defeated, and of the past, it consigns to the past. Its exhibition of riches and luxury is also a transformation, as in Mantegna’s St Sebastian in Vienna. A Christian martyr, almost nude and elegantly writhing, is bound to a ruined classical column; on his right are some fragments of ancient carved stone, a decaying stone wall, while under his elbow is the painter’s signature in Greek. Triumph salutes the progressions and destructions of history, frequently, in later centuries, the takeover of the pagan past by Christianity. Thus columns lifted from temples adorn churches, the ancient bronze horses looted from Constantinople gaze on the Piazza S. Marco, and in the author’s own photograph the bronze door of a temple from Cydnus, decorated with twining vegetation motifs, remains in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul since AD 838.

The triumphal arch is a doorway, appearing sometimes as background (as in Botticelli’s Calumny of Apelles where it displays panels of literary conceits) sometimes also a frame controlling a perspective, a surround loaded with ornament. So it is no surprise that the argument moves finally to a lengthy discussion of the Renaissance grotesque, in which antique fragments, emblems and chimeras are grouped to frame painted scenes and celebrate patrons. These dense zones of ornamentation articulate and differentiate representations which flaunt spatial depth, they keep the viewer aware of shifting perspectives and alternative modes of conveying meaning. The nightmare quality of some
of these masks and mermaids, their deliberate offence against known physical laws (fat cupids sitting on vine tendrils, fabulous birds) contrasts with the realistic physicality of painting which can appear increasingly illusionistic (apparently three-dimensional figures sometimes protruding outside their frames). Guest calls attention to their debt to Renaissance views of the psychology of perception, how we see gothic forms in the smoke, how reflection works on shapes, how the crack in the teacup opens a lane to the land of the dead...

This excellent book so finely explores its subject that one would not quarrel with the price except to regret that it must inevitably curtail the readership. Especially since it is a book to return to: one is grateful for the indexes of names, places and subjects which will guide consultation and re-reading. And the illustrations are so apt and so beautiful, and bring together so many of the theoretical and physical elements, that they form a harmonious accompaniment that is also a constant source of astonishment. The most splendid example is ‘Elena Rapita da Paris’ by Maso Finiguerra, from ‘The Florentine Picture Chronicle’ of 1470–75, where Paris and Helen appear as a rather staid couple, she turning away from us to display the embroidered hem of her skirt and her elaborate headdress; he gazing in profile under a terrific hat, a phoenix on its brim; his jacket, boot and the arm she leans on all edged with ornamental trimming. The pair stand in a round tempietto, its base, pillars and frieze overloaded with decorative detail. Most noticeably with a gang of putti in the frieze, struggling to manage a hefty anaconda of a laurel wreath which bends and sags in spite of them. Their efforts add up to a circular dance, the top level of the tempietto abutting on the heavens like Spenser’s Mount Acidale. This deliberately excessive proliferation at margins, and its neat containment in the little circular building, perhaps tell us as much as all the helpful commentators of why
ornament contributes so much to the delightful variousness of Renaissance art.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin  
School of English (Emeritus)  
Trinity College Dublin  
enchllnn@tcd.ie