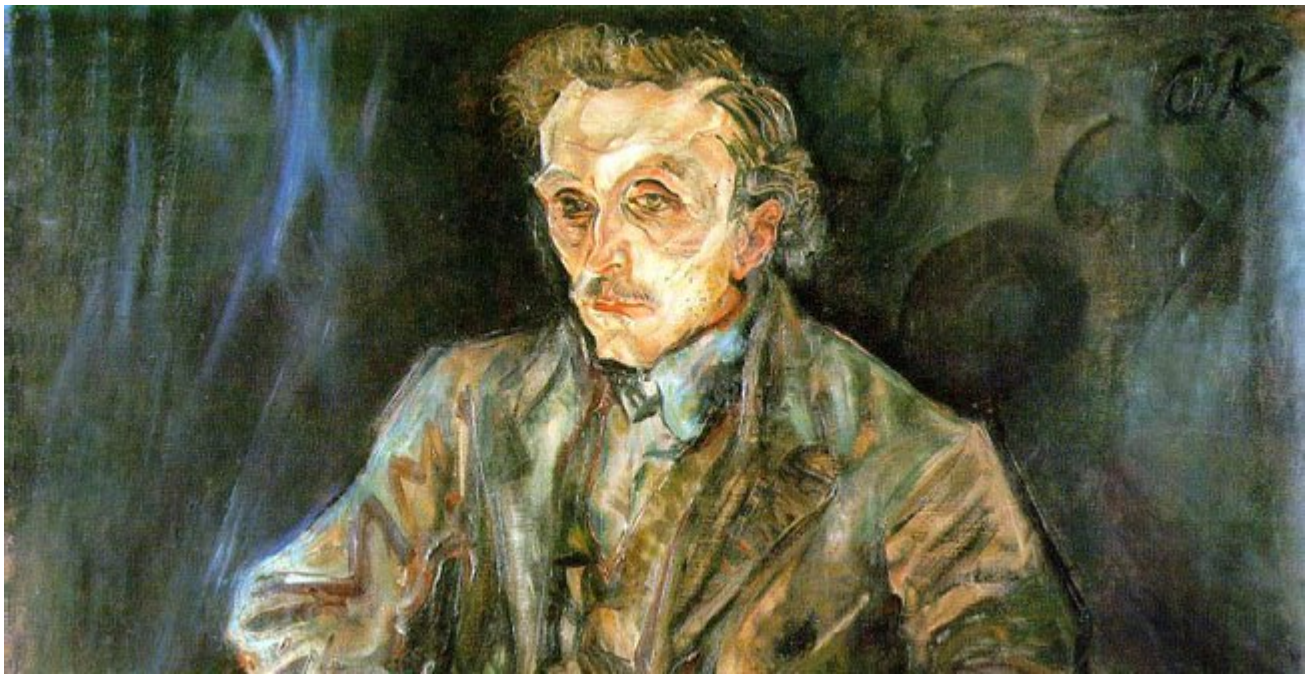
Ornament and Crime



by Adolf Loos

We are publishing here the most famous theoretical work by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933). It is the essay Ornament and Crime *(*Ornament und Verbrechen*), which was presented as a lecture in Vienna and other European cities beginning in 1909, and first published in Paris, in French, in June 1913. For the printed version: A. Loos,* Ornament and Crime. Selected Essays*, translated by Michael Mitchell, with an introduction by Adolf Opel, Ariadne Press, Riverside, California 1998, pp. 167-176. But why revisit a text so well-known and so easily accessible, one of the most influential theoretical writings of twentieth-century artistic culture? Precisely because* Ornament and Crime *is a text that is more famous than it is read. Many know it as a manifesto of twentieth-century architecture and design. But very few would be able to go beyond its title to explain its contents. Just as we have inherited it, the reading-non-reading of* Ornament and Crime *lies at the root of many prejudices that weigh on the culture of decoration. More than a century after its publication, Loos's essay deserves a lucid, non-condescending reexamination—and, above all, one that is mindful of the time that has passed. The images accompanying the text are the result of an editorial choice.*

The human embryo goes through all the phases of animal life while still inside the womb. When man is born, his instincts are those of a newborn dog. His childhood runs through all the changes corresponding to the history of mankind. At the age of two he looks like a Papuan, at four like one of an

ancient Germanic tribe, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire. When he is eight years old, he becomes conscious of violet, the colour discovered by the eighteenth century, for until then violets were blue and purple-fish were red. The physicist today points out colours in the spectrum of the sun that have already been named, but whose comprehension has been reserved for future generations.

The child is amoral. So is the Papuan, to us. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is no criminal but if a modern man kills someone and eats him, he is a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his rudder, his oars; in short, everything he can get his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the prisoners are tattooed. Tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder.

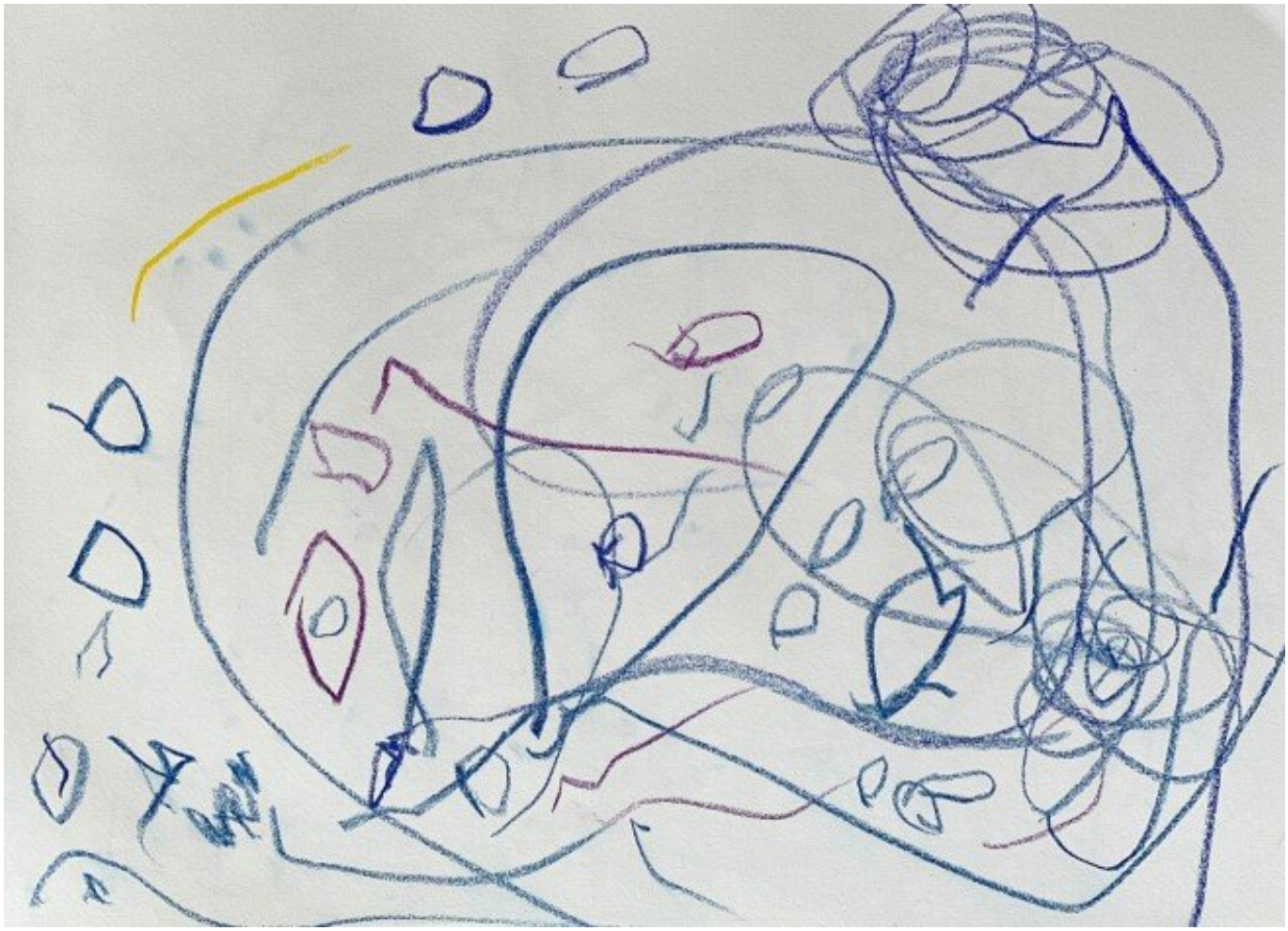
Indigenous police force photographed in 1899 in Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen (Madang), Papua New Guinea, during the German colonial occupation (photo credits Frankfurt Universität Koloniales Bildarchiv).

The urge to decorate one’s face and everything in reach is the origin of the graphic arts. It is the babbling of painting. All art is erotic.

The first ornament invented, the cross, was of erotic origin. The first work of art, the first artistic act, which the first artist scrawled on the wall

to give his exuberance vent. A horizontal line: the woman. A vertical line: the man penetrating her. The man who created this felt the same creative urge as Beethoven, he was in the same state of exultation in which Beethoven created the *Ninth Simphony*.

But the man of our own times who covers the walls with erotic images from an inner compulsion is a criminal or a degenerate. Of course, this urge affects people with such symptoms of degeneracy most strongly in the lavatory. It is possible to estimate a country's culture by the amount of scrawling on lavatory walls. In children this is a natural phenomenon: their first artistic expression is scribbling erotic symbols on walls. But what is natural for, a Papuan and a child, is degenerate for modern man. I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: *cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use.* I thought I was giving the world a new source of pleasure with this; it did not thank me for it. People were sad and despondent. What oppressed them was the realization that no new ornament could be created. What every Negro can do, what all nations and ages have been able to do, why should that be denied to us, men of the nineteenth century? What humanity had achieved in earlier millennia without decoration has been carelessly tossed aside and consigned to destruction. We no longer possess carpenters' benches from the Carolingian period, but any trash that exhibited the merest trace of decoration was collected and cleaned up, and splendid palaces built to house it. People walked sadly around the showcases, ashamed of their own impotence. Shall every age have a style of its own and our age alone be denied one? By style they meant decoration. But I said: Don't weep! Don't you see that the greatness of our age lies in its inability to produce a new form of decoration? We have conquered ornament, we have won through to lack of ornamentation. Look, the time is nigh, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the town will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the holy city, the metropolis of heaven. Then we shall have fulfillment.



A scribble drawn by a child of about two and a half years old.

But there are some pessimists who will not permit this. Humanity must be kept down in the slavery of decoration. People progressed far enough for ornament to give them pleasure no longer, indeed so far that a tattooed face no longer heightened their aesthetic sensibility, as it did with the Papuans, but diminished it. They were sophisticated enough to feel pleasure at the sight of a smooth cigarette case while they passed over a decorated one, even at the same price. They were happy with their clothes and glad that they did not have to walk about in red velvet pants with gold' braid like monkeys at a fair. And I said: look, Goethe's death chamber is more magnificent than all the Renaissance grandeur and a smooth piece of furniture more beautiful than all the inlaid and carved museum pieces. Goethe's language is finer than all the florid similes of the Pegnitz Shepherds.

The pessimist heard this with displeasure and the State, whose task it is to retard the cultural progress of the people, took up the fight for the development and revival of ornament. Woe to the State whose revolutions are made by Privy Councillors! A sideboard was soon on show in the Vienna Museum of Arts and Crafts called *The Rich Haul of Fish*, soon there were cupboards called *The Enchanted Princess* or something similar, relating to the ornament

that covered these unfortunate pieces. The Austrian government takes its task so seriously that it makes sure that puttees do not disappear from the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It forces every civilized twenty-year-old man to wear puttees instead of knitted hose for three years. For every government still labours under the supposition that a nation on a low standard is easier to govern.

All right, then, the plague of ornament is recognized by the State and subsidized by State finds. But I look on this as retrogression. I do not allow the objection that ornament heightens a cultivated man's joy in life; I do not allow the objection: "But what if the ornament is beautiful…!" As far as I am concerned, and this goes for all cultivated people, ornament does not give zest to life. If I want to eat some gingerbread, I choose a piece that is quite plain, and not in the shape of a heart or a baby or a horseman, and gilded all over. The man from the fifteenth century will not understand me. But all modem people will. The advocate of ornament believes that my urge for simplicity is equivalent to a mortification of the flesh. No, my dear art school professor, I'm not mortifying myself. I prefer it that way. The spectacular menus of past centuries, which all include decorations to make peacocks, pheasants and lobsters appear even tastier, produce the opposite effect on me. I walk though a culinary display with revulsion at the thought that I am supposed to eat these stuffed animal corpses. I eat roast beef.

The room where Goethe died in 1832 in Weimar, in a photo by Kurt Hielscher, 1925 (www.periodpaper.com).

The immense damage and devastation wrought on aesthetic development by the revival of decoration could easily be overcome, for no one, not even governments, can arrest the evolution of mankind. It can only be retarded. We can wait. But it is a crime against the national economy that human labour, money and material should thereby be ruined. This kind of damage cannot be put right by time.

The tempo of cultural progress suffers through stragglers. I may be living in 1908, yet my neighbour still lives in 1900 and that one over there in 1880. It is a misfortune for a country if the cultural development of its people is spread over such a long period. The peasant from Kals lives in the twelfth century. And in the jubilee procession there were contingents from national groups which would have been thought backward even in the period of the migrations of the tribes. Happy the country that has no such stragglers and marauders! Happy America! In our country there are old-fashioned people even in the cities, stragglers from the eighteenth century, who are shocked by a picture with violet shadows because they can't yet see violet. They prefer

the pheasant on which the chef has had to work for days, and cigarette cases with Renaissance decoration please them better than smooth ones. And how is it in the country? Clothes and furniture belong entirely to earlier centuries. The farmer is not a Christian, he is still a heathen.

Stragglers slow down the cultural progress of nations and humanity; for ornament is not only produced by criminals; it itself commits a crime, by damaging men's health, the national economy and cultural development. where two people live side by side with the same needs, the same demands on life and the same income, and yet belong to different cultures, the following process may be observed from the economic point of view: the man from the twentieth century becomes ever richer, the one from the eighteenth ever poorer. I am supposing that each lives according to his inclinations. The twentieth century man can pay for his needs with much less capital and can therefore save. The vegetables he likes are simply boiled in water and then served with a little melted butter. The other man doesn't enjoy them until honey and nuts have been added and someone has been busy cooking them for hours. Decorated plates are very dear, while the plain white china that the modem man likes is cheap. One man accumulates savings, the other one debts. So it is with whole nations. Woe to the country that lags behind in cultural development! The English become richer and we poorer…

Mountain guides from Kals am Glossglockner in an anonymous photo, 1869 (www.bergfuehrer-kals.at).

Even greater is the damage ornament inflicts on the workers. As ornament is no longer a natural product of our civilization, it accordingly represents backwardness or degeneration, and the labour of the man who makes it is not adequately remunerated.

Conditions in the woodcarving and turning trades, the criminally low prices paid to embroiderers and lacemakers, are well known. The producers of ornament must work twenty hours to earn the wages a modern worker gets in eight. Decoration adds to the price of an object as a rule, and yet it can happen that a decorated object, with the same outlay in materials and demonstrably three times as much work, is offered for sale at half the price of a plain object. The lack of ornament means shorter working hours and consequently higher wages. Chinese carvers work sixteen hours, American workers eight. If I pay as much for a smooth box as for a decorated one, the difference in labour time belongs to the worker. And if there were no ornament at all – a circumstance that will perhaps come true in a few millennia – a man would have to work only four hours instead of eight, for half the work done at present is still for ornamentation.

Ornament is wasted labour and hence wasted health. That’s how it has always been. Today, however, it is also wasted material, and both together add up to wasted capital.

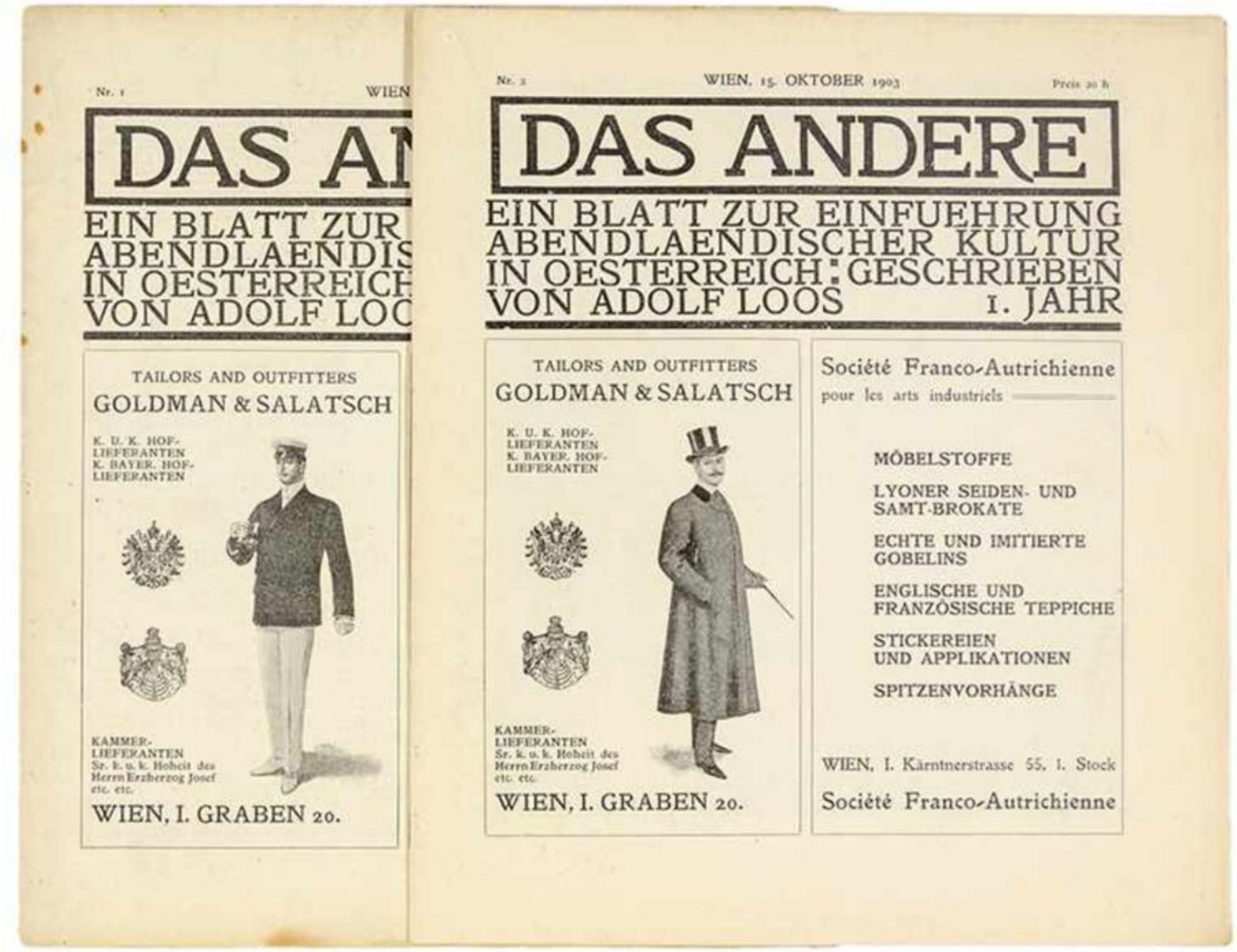
As ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer an expression of our culture. Ornament as created today has no connection with us, has no human connections at all, no connection with the world as it is constituted. It cannot be developed. What has happened to the decorations of Otto Eckmann and those of Van de Velde? The artist always used to stand at the forefront of humanity, full of health and vigour. But the modem ornamentalist is a straggler, or a pathological case. He rejects even his own products within three years. To cultivated people they are unbearable immediately, others are aware of their unbearableness only after some years. Where are the works of Otto Eckmann today? Where will Olbrich’s work be in ten years’ time? Modern ornament has no forbears and no descendants, no past and no future. It is joyfully welcomed by uncultivated people, to whom the true greatness of our time is a closed book, and after a short period is rejected.

Map of the Austrian Empire showing (in red) the locations of the main lace-making schools in operation around 1910.

Mankind today is healthier than ever, only a few people are sick. But these few tyrannize over the worker who is so healthy that he cannot invent ornament. They force him to make the ornaments they have invented in the greatest variety of materials.

Changes in decoration account for the quick devaluation of the product of labour. The worker’s time and the material used are capital items that are being wasted. I have coined an aphorism: the form of an object should last (i.e., should be bearable) as long as the object lasts physically. I shall try to clarify this: A suit will change in fashion more often than a valuable fur. *A* ball gown for a lady, only meant for one night, will change its form more speedily than a desk But woe to the desk that has to be changed as quickly as a ball gown because its shape has become unbearable, for than the money spent on the desk will have been wasted.

This is well-known to the ornamentalists, and Austrian ornamentalists try to make the most of it. They say: “A consumer who has his furniture for ten years and then can’t stand it anymore and has to re-furnish from scratch every ten years, is more popular with us than someone who only buys an item when the old one is worn out. Industry thrives on this. Millions are employed due to rapid changes”. This seems to be the secret of the Austrian national economy; how often when a fire breaks out one hears the words: “Thank God, now there will be something for people to do again”. I know a good remedy: burn down a town, burn down the country and everything will be swimming in wealth and well-being. Make furniture that you can use as firewood after three years and metal fittings that must be melted down after four years because even in the auction room you can’t realize a tenth of the outlay in work and materials, and we shall become richer and richer.



The covers of the two issues of "The Other. A Journal for the Introduction of Western Culture in Austria," edited by Loos in Vienna in 1903.

The loss does not hit only the consumer, it hits the manufacturer above all. Today, ornament on items that need no ornament means wasted labour and spoilt materials. If all objects were aesthetically enduring for as long as they lasted physically, the consumer could afford to pay a price that would enable the worker to earn more money and work shorter hours. I don't mind spending four times as much for an article which I am certain I can make use of and use up completely as I would for one inferior in shape and material. I don't mind spending forty kronen for my boots although I could get boots for ten kronen in another shop. But in trades suffering under the tyranny of the ornamentalists, good or bad workmanship does not count. The work suffers because nobody wants to pay its true value.

And that is a good thing, because these decorated objects are only bearable in the cheapest form. I can get over a fire's havoc more easily if I hear that only worthless rubbish has been destroyed. I can enjoy the tripe in the Künstlerhaus because I know that it has been put up in a few days and will be torn down in a day. But throwing gold coins around instead of pebbles,

lighting cigarettes with a banknote and pulverizing a pearl and than drinking it is unaesthetic.

The most unaesthetic decorated objects are those made of the best materials with the greatest care, those that have demanded hours of work. I cannot deny having asked for high quality work above all-but not this kind.

Modern men who revere ornament as a sign of the artistic expression of earlier generations, will immediately recognize the painfully laboured and sickly ornament of today. No-one can create ornament now who lives on our level of culture.

It is different for people and nations who have not yet attained this level.

Scherrebek Weaving School, designed by Otto Eckmann, Fairy Tale, 1899, tapestry, Flensburg, Museumberg (Anagoria/Wikimedia).

I am preaching to the aristocrats; I mean, to the people in the forefront of humanity who still fully appreciate the needs and strivings of those beneath: them. They understand the native weaving ornaments into textiles to a certain rhythm, which can be seen only when torn apart, the Persian knotting his carpet, the Slovak peasant woman embroidering her lace, the old lady crocheting wonderful objects in beads and silk. The aristocrat lets them be,

for he knows they work in moments of revelation. The revolutionary would go there and say “This is all nonsense”. Just as he would pull the old woman away from the roadside shrine with the words: “There is no God”. But among the aristocrats the atheist raises his hat on passing a church.

My shoes are covered over and over with decoration, the kind made up of pinking and perforations. Work done by the shoemaker but not paid for. I go to the shoemaker and say: “You want thirty kronen for a pair of shoes. I’ll pay you forty”. In this way I have raised the man to a level of happiness which he will repay me for by work and material of a quality absolutely out of proportion to the extra cost. He is happy. Good fortune rarely comes his way. Here is a man who understands him and appreciates his work and does not doubt his honesty. In his imagination he can already see the finished shoes before him. He knows where the best leather is to be had at present, he knows which of his workers he can entrust the shoes to. And the shoes will boast perforations and scallops, as many as can possibly be fitted on an elegant shoe. And then I add: “but there’s one condition. The shoe must be quite plain”. With that I’ve toppled him from the heights of contentment into Tartarus. He has less work, but I have robbed him of all his pleasure.

I am preaching to the aristocrats. I tolerate ornaments on my own body if they afford my fellow-men pleasure. Then they are a pleasure to me, too. I put up with the ornaments of the natives, the Persians, the Slovak peasant woman and my shoemaker’s ornaments, for these workers have no other means of reaching the heights of their existence. We have art, which has replaced ornament. We go to Beethoven or *Tristan* after the cares of the day. My shoemaker can’t. I must not take away his joy as I have nothing to replace it with. But whoever goes to the *Ninth Symphony* and than sits down to design a wallpaper pattern is either a rogue or a degenerate.

Lack of ornament has pushed the other arts to unimagined heights. Beethoven’s symphonies would never have been written by a man who was obliged to go about in silk, velvet and lace. Those who run around in velvet nowadays are not artists but buffoons or house painters. We have become more refined, more subtle. The herd must distinguish themselves by the use of various colors, modern man uses his clothes like a mask. His individuality is so strong that he does not need to express it any longer by his clothing. Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier and foreign cultures as he thinks fit. He concentrates his own powers of invention on other things.

Homepage: Oskar Kokoschka, Portrait of Adolf Loos (detail), 1909, oil on canvas, 74 x 91 cm, Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace.
Below: Promotional poster announcing the lecture given by Adolf Loos on

February 21, 1913, in Vienna.

VORTRAG

VERANSTALTET VOM AKAD. ARCHITEKTEN VEREIN.

ADOLF LOOS:
ORNAMENT UND VERBRECHEN.

FREITAG, DEN 21. FEBRUAR 1913, ½8h ABENDS IM FESTSAAL DES ÖSTERR. ING. U. ARCH. VEREINES, I. ESCHENBACHGASSE 9. KARTEN ZU 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 K BEI KEHLENDORFER

12. MÄRZ:
MISS LEVETUS: ALTENGL. KATHEDRALEN.
MITTE MÄRZ:
DR. HABERFELD: ÜBER ADOLF LOOS.

DRUCK A. BERGER WIEN VIII/2