The Inevitable Ornament: Decoration According to Droog Design



by Gabriele Quarta

At the 1998 edition of the Salone del Mobile, an exhibition with an emblematic title opened: *The Inevitable Ornament*, featuring works by the Dutch collective Droog Design, making its sixth appearance at the Milanese event. The group, founded in 1993 by art historian and critic Renny Ramakers and designer and professor Gijs Bakker, has consistently involved and continues to involve, in its creative and entrepreneurial strategies, leading figures in contemporary design such as Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongerius, Tejo Remy, Richard Hutten, Ed Annink, Jurgen Bey, and Joris Laarman. Its work has been labeled with terms such as minimalist, ecological, and poverist design. Even the expression “conceptual design” -however appropriate and fitting it may be in describing the group’s working philosophy – implicitly suggests, in the common understanding, a rejection of, or at least a distancing from, the seemingly frivolous and superficial subject of decoration. But it was precisely at that edition of the Milan exhibition that Droog decided to openly address the issue with a statement as strong as it was unexpected: “Take away the ornament and you remove the essence of the design” [1].

What does “decoration” mean to a group of designers who rose to fame thanks to objects such as chests of drawers made by stacking secondhand drawers and armchairs composed of piled-up rags? To provide a comprehensive and, hopefully, convincing answer, we must take a step back and try to understand the context in which the collective emerged and established itself. The decade preceding the founding of Droog was a period of profound cultural and

stylistic transformation. Throughout the 1980s, Postmodernism, now fully mature, rejected the dogmas associated with 20th-century design. Principles that could be summed up in slogans such as “less is more” and “form follows function” – which had been fundamental just a few years earlier – were quickly set aside. Object design reclaimed a wide range of figurative, visual, and user-oriented elements. There was a renewed focus on the virtues of ornamentation, which – once considered a “crime” according to Loos’s precepts – brought back into vogue as an “anthropologically justified necessity” [2].



Gijs Bakker, Accent Teapot, 1997, porcelain, manufactured by Rosenthal (www.droog.com).

But this reversal of codes, bringing with it an excess of meanings, ultimately creates the opposite problem: the loss of what Ghislaine Kieft defines as “eloquence” – that is, the ability of objects to provide “powerful, meaningful, concise images; metaphors that can convince us and that transcend mere irony” [3].

In other words, the overabundance of the ornamental element strips the decoration of its meaning.It is against this backdrop that Droog Design was founded, proposing a third way between the opposing schools of thought represented by Functionalism and Postmodernism: hence the formula, coined by

Renny Ramakers, “Less+More”, which advocates a design approach based on the subtraction of material and, at the same time, the addition of thought. The idea of ornament is central to the group’s approach. They engage with it not by developing variations and stylistic repertoires drawn from the history of decoration, but by directing their perspective outward, toward both the creator and the viewer. This is where the true stylistic signature and the genuinely innovative impact of Droog’s collective work lie. The group’s entire body of work is based on the desire to prompt the viewer to ask questions about everyday reality – sometimes even to express dissent – and, in any case, to make an idea tangible, without having to compromise on quality. For Droog’s designers, decoration is not embellishment or an exercise in style, but rather, to borrow the words of Gijs Bakker, “the packaging for the idea”[4].



Gijs Bakker, Maria Coffee Pot, 1997, porcelain, manufactured by Rosenthal (www.droog.com).

We will explore how this design philosophy can be expressed through ornamentation by analyzing a few significant case studies drawn from Droog’s decades-long body of work. In 1996, a collaboration began between the Dutch collective and the historic German porcelain manufacturer Rosenthal. The

challenge Droog took on was to apply its own idea of conceptual design to the development of one of the most traditional and ancient materials on the market.

Among the first contributions are those by Gijs Bakker, who is reinterpreting two historic Rosenthal designs: *Accent teapot* and *Maria Coffee Pot*. Bakker takes the concept of decoration in its traditional sense and reinvents it through the use of new technologies, demonstrating how even the most conventional materials can be reimagined, refined, and enhanced through experimental manufacturing techniques. Both objects feature interwoven ceramic fibers that, fused with enamel on the smooth surface, serve as an ornamental detail. *Accent* is further distinguished by the fusion point of the handle, which is dramatically left exposed.

Another very interesting contribution comes from Dick Van Hoff, with his *Extrusion Plates*. In this case, the decoration is left to chance: the result is a series of plates that are unique in appearance, as they are the product of a mixture of color and clay that emerges randomly from the extrusion machine, making the ornamentation of the pieces a direct result of the production process. The decoration is nothing more than “an incidental and unavoidable side effect of the conceptual design process” [5].

There is also no shortage of ornamental elements expressed through irony, another of the group’s core design principles. Marcel Wanders, the most irreverent designer in the entire group, has chosen this approach with *Eggshell*, a piece of furniture created using condoms stuffed with hard-boiled eggs, which serve as molds for producing a vase with a spherical and irregular shape.



Marcel Wanders, Eggshell Vase, 1997, porcelain, manufactured by Rosenthal (www.droog.com).

The Droog-Rosenthal collaboration takes the form of a series of projects featuring conceptually inspired design – which, on paper, might seem unlikely to embrace decorative elements – yet effectively and innovatively integrates them through a series of high-tech experiences. A fundamental yet difficult-to-apply legacy in the history of design is reimagined in an explicitly communicative key. The desire to incorporate ideas and meanings does not translate into cold perfectionism but, rather, into the need to embrace imperfection, understood as a variable dependent on technical innovation and high-tech tools, which are normally aimed at pursuing either abstract formal perfection or enhancing functional aspects.

If we turn our attention to other famous examples of Droog's work, we realize that the theme of decoration comes to the fore even in products that start from a counterintuitive premise: decorating objects by forgoing any added ornamentation. The objects we are about to discuss, in fact, are all characterized by what might be called "structural honesty". Their distinctive feature lies in emphasizing the functional and structural elements that are usually hidden when one thinks of a design object.

A prime example of this is Tejo Remy's *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* chest of drawers, a true icon of Droog's production as well as of late 20th-century design. It is a piece of furniture created by stacking secondhand drawers, held together by a strap. And it is precisely this strap that is the fundamental element: it is crucial for keeping the individual components together, but – defying common sense, which would suggest concealing it – the designer decides to highlight it as much as possible. Remy does not refine it or make it more aesthetically pleasing, but keeps it conspicuously visible, assigning it a dominant role. In *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, it is therefore the structural element that serves as decoration. Add to that the fact that each piece, being made from reclaimed materials, is unique, as is often the case with Droog products. Add to this the fact that each piece, being made from reclaimed materials, is unique, as is often the case with Droog's products, and as has been the case in the world of design ever since Alessandro Mendini's *Proust Armchair* (1978).



Tejo Remy, You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory Chest Of Drawers, 1991, manufactured by Droog, Atlanta, High Museum of Art (www.high.org).

A similar concept lies at the heart of Peter van der Jagt’s *Bottoms Up Doorbell*. It is an apartment doorbell consisting of two upside-down crystal glasses, in which the technical mechanism needed to produce the ringing sound is left fully exposed. At the heart of the project is the idea of revealing how the object works, giving it maximum visibility to the user while also alluding to the common practice at the dinner table of clinking glasses and tableware. Once brought to the forefront, the basic mechanism transforms from a utilitarian component into an aesthetic and ornamental feature of the

doorbell as a whole. This insight has precedents (such as the designs of the Castiglioni brothers), but Droog takes it to its logical extreme.

The two objects designed by Remy and van der Jagt strictly adhere to the principle of self-referentiality – a distinctive feature of Dutch design, based on revealing the manufacturing and production process through the formal elements of an object – as defined during a conference held a few years ago, aiming to take stock of the relationship between design, science, and technology in the contemporary landscape [6].



Peter van der Jagt, Bottoms Up Doorbell, 2007, manufactured by Droog (www.droog.com).

Droog’s reinterpretation of design parameters involves shifting the focus on ornamentation from the formal and stylistic aspects inherited from tradition to the conceptual and operational aspects characteristic of a specific realm of contemporary artistic sensibility. This has allowed the group’s members to remain faithful to their design principles while simultaneously achieving good results in multiple directions, even those that appear to be antithetical to one another: from the high-tech experiments in Gijs Bakker’s collaboration with Rosenthal to decoration as a random process, as seen in the work of Dick Van Hoff; from the irony and humor of Marcel Wanders to the structural honesty of the ready-mades by Tejo Remy and Peter van der Jagt.

A particular strength of Droog’s approach lies in the awareness that objects are not neutral: they possess a “skin” that, whether we like it or not, always communicates something. It is by paying attention to this “skin” that it becomes possible to shape an idea, express a point of view, and share a message, without losing control over what we are doing. The formula *Less+More* is, to all intents and purposes, an operational methodology. Thanks to it, the group’s members strive to transcend the dichotomy between essentialist rigor, which prioritizes usability and functionality, and the overabundance of forms, colors, and patterns for their own sake. In doing so, they restore to ornament the dignity and conceptual value that functionalist minimalism programmatically denied, and that postmodernist redundancy had threatened to compromise.

[1] R. Ramakers, *Less + More. Droog Design in context*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2002, p. 173.

[2] D. Dardi, V. Pasca, *Design History Handbook*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2019, p. 220.

[3] G. Kieft, *Modernism and Post-modernism*, in P. Van Kester, G. Kieft (eds.), *Memphis*, catalogo della mostra, Dienst Beeldende Kunst / Het Kruithuis, 's-Hertogenbosch 1984, p. 26.

[4] G. Bakker, R. Ramakers (eds.), *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 1998, p. 89.

[5] L. Schouwenberg, *Hella Jongerius*, Phaidon, London 2003, p. 74.

[6] J. Ozorio de Almeida Meroz, *Autarchy: The Making of Dutch Design in Practice*, in C. Coletta, S. Colombo, P. Magaudda, A. Mattozzi, L.L. Parolin, L.Rampino (eds.), *A Matter Of Design. Making Society Through Science And Technology: Proceedings of the 5th STS Italia Conference*, STS Italia Publishing, Milano 2014, pp. 901-919.

Homepage: Hella Jongerius, PS Jonsberg Vases, Stoneware, earthenware, porcelain, glaze and various decorations, manufactured by IKEA, 2005 (photo credits Gerrit Schreurs).
Below: Dick Van Hoff, Extrusion plates, 1997, porcelain (prototype), manufactured by Rosenthal (www.droog.com).

