

Decoration Beyond the Decorative

Svante Helmbaek Tirén
on the work of Benedetta Crippa

It would be an understatement to say that it is a confusing time for decoration. Since the dawn of time, the impulse to decorate our bodies, belongings and surroundings have been a fundamental outlet for how we engage with form and visuality to create pleasure, meaning and identity.

But since the introduction of modernist ideals, the very same force has also been labelled as something dangerous, irrational, “feminine” and superficial. And in fact, the intellectual separation and rejection of decoration is still strong in both artistic and architectural discourse, often in ways we might not be aware of. Even in the digital tsunami of the 21st century, the myth of “neutrality” in the undecorated surface or pure form is remarkably intact, despite decades of counter movements and critique. So what can we make of the decorative today?

Through *Works on Desire* we see a project where painting, drawing and research are performed in order to highlight the complexity and urgency of rethinking decoration as a category. Benedetta Crippa dives into new layers of the decorative explored in both theory, method and practise. The process includes thorough analyses of political and creative issues that are all part of coming to terms with how the very notion of “decorative” represents a hidden system of cultural hierarchies and narrow distribution of legitimacy.

Works on Desire reminds us that much of what we dismiss as “just decoration” is actually a lot more complicated and politically significant than we might expect. But at the same time, it is exactly in this tension that we can find keys to a new understanding of decoration while also identifying aesthetic power structures.

The drawings on display are not explicit or single-pointed statements to this discussion, however. Rather, they are openings to a more intuitive dialog with decoration beyond the decorative. A succession of portals, floral motifs, ornaments, body parts and patterns represents different languages or modes of expression that are given agency and content in their own right.

Bold shapes full of energy and confidence are there to catch attention, but also reflect a more spontaneous playfulness and careful contemplation. Ornament is intertwined with text, often obscuring or twisting the boundaries and narrative functions of each other. The work has a raw quality in its directness and eye catching desirability, but is far from limited to its immediate face value. Instead, it is a series of moments where the decorative ceases to be a monolithic category and rearranges itself in unexpected ways with the viewer.

In some respects the drawings could be seen as sketches or hints towards a new and much more diverse poetics of creativity, which was exactly what the decorative arts were allowed to have in a pre-modernist context. Before the 18th century invention of the autonomous “Fine arts”, ornament and decoration were important bearers of meaning, storytellers and manifestations of ideas. With their placement as secondary to fine arts, their decline in intellectual prestige commenced and culminated with brutal force in the modernism of the early 20th century, when indeed ornament became crime. Even though decoration as a practise never stopped, the intellectual appreciation of it was almost entirely abolished and has yet to recover from nearly a century of neglect.

But restoring decoration as a theoretic field is not enough. A truly changed dynamic of the decorative cannot be achieved until it is combined with practical and artistic interpretation as well. As Benedetta states in one of her sketches, it is a kind of beautiful labyrinth at the intersection of imagery and meaning, far from any rational control. It includes the critique of large parts of our modernist terminology and systems, and may often prove to be confusing and bewildering.

In Crippa's case, it is no longer a question of joyful kitsch versus restrained purism, or maximalism contrasted to minimalism. Instead, it is a freedom from these binary opponents altogether and a focus on developing a new sensitivity beyond polarizing structures and concepts. Here, we can reconnect with a fundamental appreciation and desire of form as meaning and perhaps discover an increased freedom in both the creation and perception of imagery.

It remains to be seen how and when these discussions will continue. Decoration is now increasingly debated in both art history, sociology, feminist theory and psychology and perhaps a more profound shift will eventually come. But through her work, Benedetta Crippa visualizes a problem that we cannot continue to neglect, and invites us to challenge: to face our desire, fear and need for decoration.

Svante Helmbaek Tirén is a curator and art historian based in Stockholm. His current projects include Ornament Matters, a cross-disciplinary platform on critical research about ornament and decoration. Benedetta Crippa is graphic designer and communication consultant based in Stockholm, MFA visual communication at Konstfack, where she graduated with World of Desire, an artist's book celebrating plurality and visual democracy. This text was written as a contribution to the exhibition Works on Desire by Benedetta Crippa in February 2017 at Konstfack.

www.benecrippa.com