8. Decorative Art as Social Art:
Temple, House, Factory

Paris—London—Berlin, 1893

His work is a vast temple with profound secrets that no one will ever explore without respect or difficulty. Grace and beauty are merely its external decorations; the flame of spirit burns within the depth of its sanctuary. Examine the monument as a whole with the desire to penetrate its meaning; it appears to be a homage to creation and truth; the joy of living and loving has inspired it. It is the expressive manifestation of a sensibility and intelligence directed towards nature's spectacle and passing time. If the ingenuity of the artist and the dreamer are tenderly displayed here, everyone can discover elements of a regenerated aesthetic and the system of a philosophical doctrine within it. The creation bears the date of an era and the mark of a country; it partakes in modern anxiety and curiosity.

This is how a Parisian lecturer spoke in 1910, commenting on the work of an artist.\(^1\) This celebration of the work as a temple surely belongs to the style of the period. In the 1890s, Mallarmé explained the 'crisis of verse' through the 'rending of the veil in the temple' and dreamt of 'services' celebrating the new splendour, the ordinary magnificence of human artifice, bound to follow the 'shadow of long ago' cast by Catholicism. Ten years later, Isadora Duncan and her family attempted in vain to restore an ancient temple on mount Kopanos in front of Athens. In the 1910s, men of the theatre like

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Adolphe Appia wanted to transform the theatre into a cathedral of the future; later, others followed Rudolf Laban to Monte Verità to found a monastic community of a new kind, devoted to the marriage of nature and art alone; others still became involved with the concrete construction of temples raised for the new religions of humanity, like Rudolf Steiner’s Goetheanum. There is thus nothing very astonishing about the recurrence of the temple metaphor in the ornate prose of a speaker who was essentially repeating a talk delivered twenty years earlier, in the context of the Universal Exposition in 1889.

But three elements make this banality more singular. Firstly, the ‘monument’ evoked in this text is not the work of an architect or a sculptor, nor of a poet or a novelist. The temple builder thus saluted was an ‘artisan of earth, glass and wood’, a master of the so-called ‘decorative arts’, Émile Gallé, whose works were essentially furniture pieces and vases. Secondly, it was in front of ‘comrades’ that the speaker uttered this praise for an artist whose productions we associate more readily with the privileged décor of rich art-lovers. The speaker, Roger Marx, was an art critic more familiar in Edmond de Goncourt’s ‘attic’ than in workmen’s circles. But here he was addressing an audience of workers that the association Art et Science convened on Sunday to complete their education.

And his lecture glorifying the Lorraine industrialist followed two talks devoted to the apostles of the Arts and Crafts movement and the socialist future, William Morris and Walter Crane. Finally, the text was published in 1913 in a volume titled *L’Art social* (‘Social Art’). The other models of social art that came with it were Lalique jewellery, the art of a dancer, Loie Fuller, and a poster designer, Jules Chéret, associated with the splendours and frivolities of the music-hall. And finally, an ‘example of patronage’, represented by the sumptuous decoration of a villa on the shores of Lake Geneva by Auguste Bracquemond and Alexandre Charpentier. None of this seems to suit the idea of the temple or the affirmation of a ‘regenerated aesthetic’, any more than it does ‘social art’.

Yet none of these formulas occurs by chance. None of them can be attributed to the excessive rhetoric of a man of letters nourished on Mallarmean reveries and the artistic language of the Goncourts.

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2 Ibid., p. 112.


of flowers, insects and landscapes whose shapes these stones stylize. What glimmers on the bust of the high-society lady is thus this impersonal, egalitarian life, and not the mark of her class. The value of her jewellery is no longer given by the size or the quality of the diamond, but by the singular manifestation of great anonymous life composed by the artisan’s thoughts and hands. Thus the latter can also mix his jewellery with ‘poor pebbles collected during a walk and mixed with the gravel from his garden’. The elegant woman’s ornaments display the equality of the arts and their materials. The only distinction of her ornaments is in the artistic genius that composed it. But the genius of Lalique or Gallé is itself nothing but the manifestation of an extreme sensitivity to the spectacle of nature, the inflorescence of plants, the shapes of insects, or the harmonies of landscapes according to the seasons and the hours. It is nothing but the singular expression of impersonal life. It is this life of the whole, this life of all, that the artist illuminates on the trinkets of elegant women, and that the speaker wants the workers listening to him to feel, in order to awaken their desire to be men ‘for whom the visible world exists’.

Life – such is the god who comes to inhabit the deserted temple once again and command the revival of art. This ‘aesthetic’ revival seems to reverse the conception of art born from the contemplation of the mutilated Belvedere Hercules or the Juno of the Villa Ludovisi. Winckelmann and Schiller admired the undulations of the body without a head or limbs, or the goddess’s gaze without a will, as the expression of a free people. But this expression had entirely gone into the stone; this fullness of life was manifested as the suspension of life, the indifferent movement of waves, the perpetually balanced attraction and withdrawal of aesthetic free play before free appearance. A hasty posterity accused these lovers of free appearances of having invented the fatal cult of a new Greece, the totalitarian passion of art turned into a form of collective life. But the statue without limbs was also a statue without a temple, displaced into museums where the only temples to be found were in the fluted columns from porticos. The reality of the romantic passion for stone was the desertion of this stone: temples abandoned to vegetation and looters, statues turned into museum pieces.

5 Marx, L’Art social, p. 181.
6 Ibid., p. 150.

And figures of a new aesthetic of indifference rose from this desertion. It was expressed in the admiration of the philosopher, Hegel, for the little gods of the street, bearing witness to an excellence of painting indifferent to its subject and to its exhibition space; but also in the project of the novelist Flaubert during the period when he was writing Madame Bovary: to write the book without a subject, the ‘book about nothing’, the inverse equivalent of now impossible Greek art, which was the expression of a people and a land. The ‘poor pebbles’ that Lalique placed on the busts of elegant women, and that Roger Marx included in his idea of ‘social art’, take on meaning in relation to the rags and grapes of the carefree young beggars, as they do towards the blades of grass and eddies of dust in Emma Bovary’s grey life and Flaubert’s indifferent sentences. But to understand this relation, one must recall the revolution, somewhat forgotten today, brought about by a book that was published between the Lectures on Aesthetics, in the 1830s, and Madame Bovary in 1856. This revolution occurred in 1851, the year when the first edition appeared of The Stones of Venice by Ruskin. The second volume summarizes the gist of the book in a chapter, ‘The Nature of Gothic’, destined to become not only a reference text for the conception of decorative art, but also the bible for a new idea of art.

It is worth reconsidering the stakes of the notion of the gothic that Ruskin developed. All too often it is merely reduced to a naïve nostalgia for the work of artisans from long ago, masters of their craft, inspired by faith and protected by their guilds. It has been reduced to the desperate will to reject the world of machines and restore a dream-like Middle Ages. At the same time the contributions of the Arts and Crafts movement, which it inspired, were summed up as imitations of haute époque furniture, images of knights and noble dames with diaphanous complexions, wallpaper with stylized foliage inspired by mille fleurs tapestries, and calligraphy aping medieval manuscripts. By doing so, this movement’s influence on nineteenth-century socialist militants, and twentieth-century architects, decorators and designers obsessed with functional modernity, was rendered incomprehensible. One failed to recognize its effect on the idea of art, and the relation between art and society, well beyond the milieu of decorative art. The concept of the gothic, as Ruskin formulated it, is much more than the expression of nostalgia for the lost paradise of popular faith and art. It marks both the
fulfilment and the reversal of the dream of an art of the people that was nourished by the contemplation of Greek statues. To understand this, it is necessary to recall Hegel's argument. The temple and the statue, he showed, are art for us because they were something other than art for those who made them, the expression of the life of their people – a life idealized in the geometric proportion of the temple colonnades, in the perfection of idle life, the indifferent forehead and the empty gaze of their gods. Hegel set this link between a people's freedom, the geometric perfection of volume and the indifferent majesty of form against the excessive volume and the illegibility of the forms of symbolic art, found in pyramids and hieroglyphs. He also contrasted it with the tension of edifices raised to the sky and the multiplicity of figures, belonging to 'romantic' art – that is to say, medieval and Christian art – in which religious interiority experienced the impossibility of finding its full expression in the materiality of stone. The age of Schiller and Hegel had conflated Greek perfection with the freedom of a people that did not recognize the separations and the servitude of the division of labour. The symbolic art that had come before it was the art of an enslaved people. Romantic art, which followed, was the age of the withdrawal of freedom into the interiority of souls, within a world of servitude and corporative divisions. 

Ruskin came to brutally overthrow this schema. For him, the formal perfection of straight lines, precisely calculated volume, and the symmetrical proportions of the Greek temple in no way expresses the freedom of a people. On the contrary, such perfect execution signals the subordination of the builders' hands to the thought of an architect whose blueprint is precise and complete enough in itself for its realization to be entrusted to servile labour, which neither adds to nor subtracts anything from the master's drawing. Geometric perfection expresses the rigor of the division of labour; it signals that the work comes from the thought of a man who has nothing more to express through the activity of his hands, and is executed by men who do not have the right to put any of their own thought or their lives into their work; nothing more than their skilled hands following instructions. This division between the work of the artist and the artisan was institutionalized, in mores and minds, through the distinction between the fine arts and the applied arts. It is expressed in the cult of pure art whose idol is the 'portable' work of art; easel painting made to be enjoyed in salons and museums. The only true art, on the contrary, is supposedly applied art, which applies both to the construction and the decoration of buildings, art that serves life, serves to shelter and express it.

To shelter and express: the conjunction of these two functions is essential because it allows one to reject the simplistic opposition between the useful object and the object of disinterested contemplation. The received opposition between the useful and the beautiful undoes the unity of art and establishes the division of labour and the hierarchy of lives. For Ruskin there is basically only one art: architecture, which builds housing for men, people and gods. But architecture is not simply 'functional' art, the art of 'adherent' beauty to which Kant opposed 'free' beauty. Or, in other words, free beauty does not belong to the separate work, designated as such, and defined by the perfection of form alone. Moreover, Kant's own examples of 'free beauty' were not paintings hanging on the wall or statues in the garden, but the decorative wallpaper that transfers the free allure of birds or foliage onto the walls of homes. Ruskin does not linger over Kant, but he is determined to displace the relation between different ends that is at the centre of the definition of art. He contrasts the formal 'perfection' of art that signifies its servitude in the name of so-called autonomy with its submission to a double law: adaptation to a functional end and the free expression of the imagination. These two laws only seem opposed to one another. For life is subject to both the law of necessity and the law of free expression, to the expansion of the self that takes it beyond immediate satisfaction. Man needs the place where he lives after the workday to offer him not only shelter but also the feeling of life in action, joyous in itself. He thus needs rooms devoted to living together to be decorated with ornaments. On the other hand, he does not need the window of the store where he shops to imitate a Greek temple or be decorated with medieval calligraphy. He does not need the workshop where he earns a living to be designed by a decorator. But he does require the work he does there to allow him to express his own life. There is a true life, which winds through the constraints at the very heart of the useful, grows through them, and leaves behind the fruit of this growth. There is also a false life that uses the appearance of art to hide its subjection to necessity: Corinthian columns used as bait for commercial trickery, fake marble stuck on to hide
machine work, fake flying buttresses that support nothing but make it impossible to notice the very balance of weight and volume, and so forth. Fake art hides the reality of work. And it is forced to hide it because this work is not the manifestation of life, but the servile work of a machine or of human hands subject to the thought of a foreign mind.

Thus the same confusion between true and false life produces the ‘pure’ art one admires in museums and the ‘applied’ art used to decorate stores. It places its point of honour in the admiration for the regular forms of the Greek temple and the taste of professors of aesthetics for genre scenes, like the vicious little vagrants Murillo picked up in the street. He not only shows us their rags, but also the disgraceful grin of the boy eating melon, and the sole of the dirty foot of the one eating grapes, deliberately turned towards us in the foreground. By attacking Murillo’s little beggars, Ruskin may not have been interested in starting a polemic with Hegel. Yet his charge marks his distance from the way the latter transferred the virtues of antique marble and Greek freedom to genre paintings. And it is not out of a taste for digression either that this bravura passage on the ‘roguey’ of the ragged and vicious vagrants is included in a chapter on the nature of the gothic. The long classification of genres of painting it is inscribed in is also not a digression. Ruskin differentiates between three ranks of artists: the formalist champions of drawing, the ‘sensualist’ lovers of facts, and the ‘naturalists’ who reconcile the two. Thus, on the one hand, the lovers of lifeless perfection, inspired by the servile regularity of the Greek temple; on the other, the adorers of life without harmony, found in the bourgeois home and the poor street, the world of shops and factories. The ‘Olympic’ serenity of the little beggars is of the same order as the neo-Greek arrangement of shop-fronts. Ruskin contrasts both Greek perfection and the trash of the bourgeois world, the work of the slave obeying the architect and the artist’s gaze on the picturesque riffraff of the street with this ‘naturalism’, this assimilation of art with the expression of a magnified life for which gothic art provides the model.

‘Naturalism’—that is to say, the translation of emotions felt before forms of nature, forms that every British subject knows, after Burke, are never straight—comes in third rank, after the love of change, in Ruskin’s articulation of the characteristics of Gothic art. First, and most important, is its ‘savagery’ or its ‘crudeness’. The term is ironically taken from the classical judgment condemning the barbaric art of dark times. But this is done in order to reverse the conception of art and the very opposition between the civilized and the savage. Surely gothic art is an essentially imperfect art: made of rarely symmetrical parts, often added during construction without taking the initial plan into account, adorned with a multitude of little naive or grotesque figures, executed by artisans of unequal talent but all equally keen to leave their mark, like the sculptor of the tiny figure lost in the interstice above the Portal des Libraires at Rouen cathedral. This imperfection can be described in classic terms as a conflict of the faculties: the hand fails to execute thought adequately, while thought hastens to act, rushing the work of the hand. For Hegel this inadequacy characterized symbolic art, which is incapable of imposing the forms of the idea on matter because it is incapable of clarifying this idea itself. But Ruskin reverses this argument: symbolic art is human art par excellence, the art of an anxious creature, impatient to realize his thought even if it means anticipating his capacity for action; the art of an imperfect being, thus constantly in progress, always capable of renouncing initial plans to better respond to the difficulties of the enterprise and to adapt to the function of the building. Above all, it is the art of free men, capable of feeling joy in crafting ornaments according to their own idea, bound to be lost among the abundance of figures.

The praise for the impish little figure on the Rouen portal is part of a tradition of thinking that was already a century old: one that conflates the potential of art with the anonymous expression of collective life. It is in the name of this idea that the eighteenth century stripped Homer of his royalty by transforming the Iliad and the Odyssey into fragments of a vast and anonymous poem of the people. Hegel objected that the very dignity of a poem of the people demanded that it possess its own voice, the voice of a singular subject. He thus restored the poems to Homer. Ruskin rejected

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the dilemma entirely. An artist cannot sum up the poem of the people. It is the work of many artists, all singular. It matters little whether we know the name of all those who sculpted the countless sacred or profane figures that adorn the great stone poems of Gothic cathedrals. But it does matter for us to notice these figures as the work of artist- artisans, participating individually in the collective work by inscribing their own mark on this multiple poem. The sculptor of little gothic figures provided a new solution to the problematic status of art since the age of revolutions, of the museum and aesthetics conflated the greatness of antique art with the expressive character of a people, even as it liberated works from their subjection to the expression of social powers: How can an art free to do what it wants regain the power of embodiment of an art expressing the life of a community? How can one intentionally create something equal to an unintentional work of the past? The model of the ‘gothic’ artist responds to the problem posed by Hegel or Flaubert: while subordinating himself to the collective work, to the function of the building and the constraints of the material, he expresses his own will, and his singular manner within this framework. Ornamental work is the exemplary response to this double demand. And the ‘naturalism’ of the ornament illustrates this: the man who ‘governs’ (‘man as governing’), the man who freely creates forms, shows himself to be equal to the man who gathers (‘man as gathering’), the man who creates forms based on his emotional response to natural appearances.

The Ruskinian concept of the gothic is thus far more than another stone added to the romantic nostalgia for the faith of medieval artisans. It is not simply the concept of a form of historically situated art. It proposes an idea of art equally capable of inspiring the art workers of a secular republic and the rational engineers of modern life. Decorative art is not a utilitarian art whose external finality could be opposed to the autonomous work of art. Nor is it an art meant for consumption by the leisure class. It is art that obeys its concept, by responding to a vital double function: habitation and expression. One can thus establish a strict equivalence between two propositions: all true art is decorative, since it is meant to be integrated into a building. But also, all true art is symbolic, since the buildings it works with are not only destined to provide individual shelter or be the seat of collective functions. They are destined to be inhabited by individuals, communities and their divinities, whether old or new. Thus, they must express modes of social existence, of individual and collective health. But such expression always exceeds function. It does not have its own form or its own perfection.

The modern destiny of decorative arts is always played out over the question of the expressive supplement. One readily describes the movement that stretches from Arts and Crafts and Art Deco to Bauhaus and Esprit Nouveau as the abandonment of ornamental sinuosity in favour of the pure line matching the function of objects and the rationality of the habitat. But this opposition is far too simple. Behind the battle between the future and the past, the industrial machine and the artisanal tool, rational straightforwardness and the ornamental curve, there lies a far more complex play between function and expression. Ruskinian gothic is a social paradigm of art, not the nostalgia of an historic style. The admirers of the machine agree with the defenders of artisanship in thinking that true art is so-called ‘applied’ or ‘decorative’ art – art that adapts to life and expresses it. The entire question is to know which life one must adapt to and which life one must express. The transformations of the concept of decorative art depend on the way in which the joint or disjointed relation between these two lives is interpreted. Defining the tasks and the forms of the decorative arts amounts to defining the style of life that gives art its principle. Everyone agrees: a style is the expression of the life of a people in a time. Everything depends on the way in which the articulation of this double relation is understood.

This is the perspective in which Roger Marx’s florid prose takes on meaning. Consider the sentences describing the vegetal effervescence of the furniture for which Gallé provided a décor and fitting names, both to their function and their manifestation of shared life, like the dining table dubbed Les Herbes potagères (‘Garden Herbs’) decorated with the ‘exquisite Parmentière flower, globular inflorescences of the onion, spruced garlic stalks, lambrequins of kale, and the seeds of umbelliferous plants’, or the décors of the ‘small poems’, comprised by Lalique’s bottles, grinders, lorgnettes, cases or reading lights: ‘... a flock of swallows takes flight from the bottom of the gorse bush bent by a gust of wind ...; swans silently crack the frozen

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9 Marx, L’Art social, p. 137.
enamel of the wave; bats cut across a diamond studded sky; through
a hedge of tapered pines, the surface of the swamp sparkles and glit-
ters; a swarm of bees keenly seeks its pasture.10 Surely these pieces
of furniture, chests and bottles only decorate high society salons and
boudoirs, and the style of the speaker that describes them is bor-
rowed from the ‘aesthete’ descriptions of the Goncourt brothers. But
these little poems by botanists or landscapers, evoking the flower-
ing of vegetables or familiar birds, are themselves in harmony with
another literature, constituted by the readers, and the object lessons
provided in republican primary school, taking care to associate the
learning of signs closely with the evocation of animals and plants
that make up the everyday background of rustic life. They integrate
the furniture and the bibelots of rich art lovers with the global vision
of an educational republic. The latter, moreover, does not draw its
education exclusively from images of country life. The everyday life
of cities also has its colourful flourishing. Hence, Roger Marx asso-
ciated Chéret, who designed posters for the streets of Paris, with
luxury decorators. His ‘open air museum’, free for all, responds to the
pastoral of glasswork, furniture, pottery and jewellery made by Gallé
and Lalique. In his drawings of tumbling creatures, as in the vegetal
effervescence of their furniture and their bibelots, or in the flying
fabric in Loïe Fuller’s dance, the ‘serpentine line’ becomes far more
than a style imported from England; it becomes the expression of
this ‘unanimous’ life that must found a new education of the mind
and the senses. The equality recognized between artists and artisans
is the means of a new art, which borrows the means of educating the
men of the Republic from the great democracy of natural forms. It
is no accident that Gallé himself referred to the emblematic female
figure of the sower – painted by Millet, featured on Larousse dic-
tionaries, or on the coins and stamps of the Republic – likening his
own work to that of the sower, whose scattered seeds contribute to
the elaboration of the ‘decorative style of an era’.11 This decorative
style belongs to a republic whose elite sustains the elements of their
refinement through the same ‘unanimous life’ taught in the aca-
demically rigorous object lessons and primary school readers, and
reflected in the apparent frivolity of colourful street posters.

This new educational art therefore has its privileged place not

10 Ibid., p. 183.
11 Émile Gallé, quoted in Marx, L’Art social, p. 127.

in art exhibitions, no matter how applied, but in the Universal
Expositions of Industry. Contrary to the Ruskinian prejudice
against machine civilization, the new champions of decorative art
sought to reconcile art and industry in one and the same energy,
which could serve the needs of life and its freedom of expression.
It was thus entirely natural that the theatre built for Loïe Fuller,
whose architecture followed the movement of dance, was juxta-
posed in the 1900 Exposition to machine galleries or exhibitions
of new furniture. Loïe Fuller’s serpentine dance emblemized the
harmony between the dream flowers drawn by moving veils and the
new power of electricity. It was the emblem of art itself intimately
entangled with unanimous life, manifestations of which ‘proved to
hold interest for aesthetics, sociology and political economy at the
same time’.12 Regenerated aesthetics affirms itself as the formative
potential of a new society. The educational vocation attributed to the
elite meets the worker’s ideal of a society of free producers, in which
art directly works towards the construction of a common manual
and mental culture. The ‘social’ art conceptualized by Roger Marx
has two essential sources: it lays claim to Léon de Laborde, the com-
missioner of industrial Expositions during the Second Empire, who
asked the state to shape the taste of the people by infusing useful
objects with the principles of great art, but also to Proudhon, the
socialist theorist urging artists to turn towards the splendid future
of 36,000 communal homes, schools, workshops, factories, plants
and gymnasiaum, and 40,000 libraries, observatories, museums,
auditoriums, and belvederes to be built, not to mention the trans-
formation of France into a vast garden.13

The ideal of decorative art can thus reject the Ruskinian prohibi-
tion of machines and distinguished materials when they come to
serve the Ruskinian conception of an art controlled by the union
between utility and expressivity. Roger Marx pushed this concep-
tion to its extreme by intensifying the creative character of decorative
artists: they become artists par excellence because they owe nothing
to the genre they practise and everything to their own invention.

12 Marx, L’Art social, p. 51.
13 Léon de Laborde, Quelques idées sur la direction des arts et le maintien
du goût public (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1856), p. 26; Pierre-Joseph
Proudhon, Du principe de l’art et de sa destination sociale (Paris: Garnier
Any piece of furniture or salon ornament thus becomes a poem, and the equality of all the arts risks being translated into the overwrought quality of every useful object. Later generations did not fail to count this overwrought aspect as kitsch, contrasting it to the beauty of functional lines. Yet the author of the report on the 1900 Exposition, although a convert to the cause of the decorative arts, was already protesting in the name of art and utility against the 'unhealthy intoxication' that had invaded industries: 'As a result of insisting that all arts were equal, it seemed that there was not one brave worker left whose work aimed to satisfy the basic needs of existence, who did not believe himself to be a sacred artist. There was no longer great art or minor art. This much was clear! This final Bastille had been overthrown.' According to the reporter, this was the source of all sorts of extravagance: the gigantic animated flora, 'the entanglement of overexcited tapeworms and tumultuous noodles, macaronic tentacles', figures of dishevelled women swaying on the beaks or handles of vases and pitchers,

so that the honest container, so convenient before being elevated to the dignity of the art object, could now no longer pour or be grasped by hand ... If one decided to make a chair, the unfortunate person who decided to sit down on this bizarre, mean and savage-looking furniture was sure to catch his clothes on some spiky point, to tie his feet in the bars shaped like wrought-iron volutes ... And all this full of pretension about usefulness while the imagination could hardly conceive of anything more inconvenient.  

The reporter only forgets that this 'inconvenience' has another side: the living room crowded with these indiscreet poems finds itself bound to the exhibition of the unanimous life of nature, shared with the residents of the countryside. And the original artist, above all when like Gallé he is a captain of industry, becomes an educator of the community. The intensified expressivity of ornamental décor is a way of ushering the gothic paradigm into the universe of business, the machine and the modern city, in the new world of distinguished salons and popular streets animated by window displays and posters.

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This programme was ostensibly dismissed when the protagonists of German 'artist colonies' rejected their youthful love for swaying lines and the decorative and symbolic exuberance of Jugendstil. And it was the entire artistic ideal of Ruskin and William Morris that seemed to be symbolically rejected when one of their leaders, Peter Behrens, became the 'artistic adviser' of the German electric company, AEG, and undertook not only the design of its lamps and kettles, its logo and its catalogues, but also agreed to build the monumental steel-and-glass structure of the new factory producing its turbines. The inauguration of the Berlin Turbinenhalle in autumn 1909 seemed to mark the conversion of neo-Greek or neo-gothic dreamers to functional industrial architecture. And these were the terms in which the constructivist age praised it as the first great achievement of modern architecture. Yet contemporaries did not hesitate to recognize it as 'Ruskin's words come true'.  

In this great hall without partitions or corners, where well-lined working spaces evoked 'the trees in an avenue', they saw the exemplary realization of 'joy at work' promoted by the author of The Stones of Venice. More fundamentally, the model factory designed by Behrens expresses a Ruskinian idea of an essential link between three things: a society, a way of working, and a function of art. Like Roger Marx, Peter Behrens and his friends of the Werkbund used Ruskin against Ruskin. But they did so in the opposite way: Roger Marx united art and industry by exalting the individuality of the artist-artisan. If they shared the idea that art expresses and organizes the life of a people, they did so in order to refute the privilege of artistic individuality. And if they rehabilitated the Ruskinian principle of 'sincerity', and especially faithfulness to material, they did so in order to reject the swaying and swirling of the organic line by celebrating the beauty of functional lines and the honesty of the machine. Some have argued that they referred to Ruskin merely to mask the absorption of expression into function. But this misunderstands


how, for them, function has two parts: an artist’s construction of a functional factory is also the affirmation of a programme to unite art and life. The best symptom of this was Behrens and his supporters’ indecision concerning the function of the four corner pillars in cement, whose horizontal blocks clashed with the vertical structure of the Turbinenhalle, and the polygonal pediment adorned with the alveoli of the AEG logo alone. They loudly declared that these cement pillars respected the Russian precept of sincerity, by making it clear that they were not support structures. But the ‘artistic’ treatment of useful material and the shape of the pediment, which seemed a compromise between the Greek triangle and the gothic arc, blurred the distinction between the useful and the decorative, the functional and the symbolic. This was not a remainder of the Jugendstil idea among the new followers of functionalism. Functional construction is not merely construction adapted to utilitarian ends, but also the artistic affirmation of a society in which these ends are themselves subordinate to an ideal of social harmony.

Indeed, the ‘functionalism’ of the Werkbund artists and their Bauhaus heirs cannot be reduced to the point of view of a rational engineer, opposed to the individualist vision of the artist. It is primarily an idea about art and its social function. The goal is not to adapt buildings to their use or to tailor products to their consumers. Rather, it is a reform in the very structure linking modes of production and modes of consumption, similar to the one found in Ruskin or Roger Marx. This reform counts as art, since the latter is not merely the production of works through a defined technique. It is the power of ordering forms of individual life and those in which the community expresses itself as such within the same spiritual unity. An ethical function of art is being affirmed here in the strictest sense: its mission is to produce objects best suited to practical needs, but also ones that are most likely to place the symbols of a common way of inhabiting a world within each home, thus educating individuals in common culture. This common culture is based on style. Style is not the manner that signals art or the artist. It is not the artificial form of individualization that fashion offers to those who want to affirm their singularity, or that of their class. Behrens had already insisted on this forcefully during a period when he was not building factories but designing a theatre symbolizing the culture of a people and a time:

The style of a time does not mean particular forms in one or another art; every form is only one of many symbols of inner life, every art only a part of style. Style, however, is the symbol of feeling in common, of the whole conception of the life of a time in its totality, and it only shows itself in the totality formed by all the arts.¹⁷

Here again, the artist’s business is shared in common with the architect and the engineer, but also the sociologist, as he was understood at the time: a committed observer who analyzes individualized forms of life produced by new economic structures and collective forms of life to be promoted in order to harmonize forms of individuality with the demands of the community. Furthermore, artists, sociologists and captains of industry came together in the pages of Dekorative Kunst, where the most eminent German sociologist, Georg Simmel, elevated the question of ornamental stylization to one of style expressing collective life:

Where only one style is conceivable, every individual expression grows organically from it; it has no need to search first for its roots; the general and the particular go together without conflict in a work ... Finally, style is the aesthetic attempt to solve the great problem of life: how an individual work or behavior, which is closed, a whole, can simultaneously belong to something higher, a unifying encompassing context.¹⁸

This liberation of the individual will leaves its mark on works and objects produced by the decorative arts, and they transmit it to spectators or consumers.

The fact that style also appeals to the spectator at levels beyond the purely individual, to the broad emotional categories subject to the general laws of life, is the source of the calming effect, the feeling of security and serenity with which the strictly stylized object provides us. From the stimulation points of individuality to which the work

of art so often appeals, life rises with respect to the stylized object into more pacified levels, where one no longer feels alone. There — or so at least these unconscious events can be interpreted — the supra-individual law of the objective structure before us finds its counterpart in the feeling that we too are reacting with the supra-individual part of ourselves, which is subject to universal laws. Thus we are saved from absolute responsibility towards ourselves, from balancing on the narrowness of mere individuality.19

The style expressing the unity of a people is thus at the greatest distance from the ‘manner’ of artisans contributing their handiwork or their individual idea to the collective project. First, it implies the renunciation of the individual will. And the design of stylized objects must make this disindividualization enter everyone’s consciousness through the habits of everyday life. The proper form of useful stylized objects no longer synthesizes the organic forms of nature, as it does in Ruskin. It is the ‘abstract’ line through which the will of art is imposed on nature, the ‘gothic’ line theorized in the same period by an art historian, Worringer, as a response to the anxiety of living. On the clock Behrens designed for AEG, there was only some discreet moulding on the side and a tiny volute at the base softening the rigor of straight lines. When it came to stylizing the life of the greatest number through these purified lines, the adequate form of such aesthetic education was the serial production of objects manufactured for the masses. Industrial ‘functionality’ thus articulates the ‘aesthetic’ principle of an art of pure lines with the economic principle of the mass production of useful objects. But it articulates it in the name of an ethical function of art. The most eloquent advocate of types within the Werkbund, Hermann Muthesius, clarified the re-educative function of the serial production of normalized objects:

Applied art now faces a daunting educative task … It is becoming something more than applied art: it is becoming a means of cultural education. Applied art now has the goal of reeducating all classes of present-day society in the virtues of sound workmanship, truthfulness, and bourgeois simplicity. If it succeeds, it will profoundly alter our culture, and the consequences will be far-reaching. Not only will it transform the rooms and buildings in which people live: it will directly influence the character of a generation.20

The very virtues of industrial standardization affirmed the unity between function and expression once again. But the problem, solved in sociological terms, allowed the tension to persist on the artist’s side. And the Werkbund finally exploded when Henry Van de Velde and his friends set the unalienable rights of artistic individuality against the standardized types Muthesius prescribed. Yet if the claim to artistic sovereignty was opposed to the affirmation of the virtue of standardized types, it was still on the basis of the same fundamental idea: the vocation of art to develop forms that educate a society. The theorist of the house as ‘machine for living’, Le Corbusier, who went on a pilgrimage to the Turbinenhalle, as others had gone to Bayreuth twenty years earlier, would not stop repeating this in issues of L’Esprit nouveau after the First World War: architecture is more than construction, it is the ‘masterful, correct, and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light’.21 Only this ‘more’ must not appear as such. The same science of lines and volumes responds to the ‘typical need’ (‘besoin-type’) and gives rise to a ‘typical emotion’ (‘l’émotion-type’), the happy gaze of feeling a thought expressed in the prisms created by light.22 The precise satisfaction of the needs of modern life is also an education for the eye in the harmony of forms, thus an education of minds for a harmonious society, a society ‘redeemed’ from individualism, purified of the dross it leaves on the surfaces of buildings and objects, which these sickly surfaces transmit to men whose everyday backdrop they constitute. The functional surface also splits in two. On the one hand, its pure functionality already expresses an inner necessity, a form of spirituality. This concept of ‘inner necessity’ or this ‘spirituality’ — later championed by Kandinsky and considered the privilege of pure and autonomous art by countless critics — was first put to work by the


22 Ibid. pp. 165, 84.
'applied' artists, artists who sought to educate society through the form of buildings and useful objects.

Thus, on the one hand, pure adaptation to function bears the expression of a reformed life within itself. But, on the other hand, this reform of sensibility must signal itself. Hence the straight lines curve at the corners of the sidewall of the Turbinenhalle, and contradict their verticality with horizontal stripes copied from the facades of Florentine palaces. This is also the reason the ridgeline fluctuates between a straight line and a curve: hesitation between a Greek temple and a Gothic arch, but also a Wincklemannian fusion of contours. The same play is repeated on the pediment in the simple hexagon where the three letters AEG, designed by Peter Behrens, are spread in the middle of six compartments, just like the inscription TURBINEN FABRIK that appears below it. The turbine factory, well designed to accomplish its function, is also a temple of work. In its own way it fulfills the religious function that Behrens first expected from a theatre-temple, where the stage and the hall communicated in unseparated space, to celebrate the new 'festivals of life and art'. And the logo itself, despite the attempts at typographic simplifications led by Behrens, did not meet a pure objective of legibility. Its six alveoli are not only there to separate the three letters of the logo distinctly. They recall the forms of certain Roman jewels studied by Alois Riegl in Spätromische Kunstindustrie ('Late Roman Art Industry'), but also the facets of a diamond. More precisely, they recall the diamond, the symbol of the new life of new souls, celebrated by Georg Fuchs's poem Das Zeichen ('The Sign') and solemnly exhibited, like the Grail in Parsifal, during the 1901 opening ceremony organized by Peter Behrens for the artist Colony in Darmstadt. This relation between the mystical diamond of an educating art and the workman's labour is expressed in striking shorthand in a musical drama whose text was published in 1911: Schönberg's Die Glückliche Hand ('The Lucky Hand'). In the third scene, a man – a poet educator – shows workers bound to their task in a cave recalling Mime's forge, how to proceed to make a culture out of work: 'it can be done more simply', he tells them, by transforming a block of gold into an ornament through a single hammer blow. Here the simplification of forms and procedures that we normally associate with the reign of machines is, on the contrary, associated with art, alone capable of spiritualizing industrial work and common life. The work of the musician who would be considered the champion of the modernist revolution only makes sense if we draw it closer to the evolution stretching from 'festivals of art' to the construction of model factories. It reminds us that it is in the theorization of 'applied' arts that one must seek the genesis of formulae that would be used to emblematize the autonomy of art.  

23 It is understandable that this work caught the attention of Adorno, who wrote a long and suggestive commentary about it. But, by finally reducing the gesture of the hero to a defence of 'the magic of the old mode of production' (Philosophy of New Music, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006], p. 40) Adorno fails to recognize the paradoxical genealogy leading from Ruskin to the Werkbund and Bauhaus, and simultaneously the role of debates concerning applied arts in the construction of the categories of artistic modernism.