The Primal Urge to Embellish

Collage by Joan Hall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ONE of the most basic human instincts is the need to decorate. Nothing is exempt — the body, the objects one uses, from intimate to monumental, and all personal and ceremonial space. It is an instinct that responds to the eye, for pure pleasure; to the rules of society, for signals of fitness and status, and to some deep inner urge that has been variously described as the horror of a vacuum and the need to put one's imprint on at least one small segment of the world.

Embellishment is an irresistible and consuming impulse, going back to the beginnings of human history. More than just a way of changing or improving a surface or a setting, it is meant to bring about artful and magical transformations that evoke surprise, delight, even awe. All early ornament was tied to the supernatural and sublime. The decorative cycle parallels civilization; there is a line that goes right through ancient cave paintings to contemporary graffiti, with the entire history of the decorative arts in between.

Probably the strongest motivating force is the simplest: the inability of almost everyone to ever leave well enough alone. The temptation to fill a blank space is common to all; a child will scribble on a wall, and the arbiter of taste and fashion will decree those decorative parameters that establish the charmed circle of social acceptability.

But one man's, or woman's, decoration can be another's atrocity, and no other art form can range from the elegant to the awful with such ease. Crimes of decoration — by the very surface or additive nature of pattern and ornament and their cumulative effect — are the easiest to commit.

Adolf Loos, one of the leaders of the modernist revolution, damned all decoration — a response understandable to any historian who has had to grapple with the excesses that spilled out of the 19th century and into the 20th. Loos is famous for equating ornament with crime. Only the unschooled and savage find ornament necessary, he declared, pointing out the taste of criminals for tattooing. This, he said, is conclusive evidence that ornament is to be associated with the debased and lawless elements of society.

Still, it takes a heroic resolve to dispense with the traditional synthesis of detail and delight. One is easily seduced by the superb library-gallery of Syon House in Middlesex, England, for example, where the brothers Adam stretched a neoclassical ceiling completely across the building and filled it with a pastel rainbow of Pompeian-inspired garlands, medallions, urns and arabesques.

The message fades in the shadowed salon of a Venetian palazzo, where the reflected water light of the green canal dances on heavy, ornate gilt and blends with the greens of painted furniture, faded velvets and frescoed ceilings filled with rosy putti. None of this is plain. And none of it has anything to do with savages or social misfits. Each example provides a superb decorative vocabulary that speaks the language of a particular taste and time.

There is no way to play down, or downgrade, the attractions of richness and the accouterments of style. The uses of enrichment go beyond surface decoration. The ornament on a Louis Sullivan building in Chicago defines the early art of the skyscraper by making the revolutionary structural frame visually clear while elevating it to something beyond engineering. Eighteenth-century painted rooms and

Continued on Page C6

Continued From Page C1

19th-century scenic wallpaper not only sent fashionable signals but also evoked the ambience of exotic beauties and far-off places.

Decoration definitely denies that less is more. It gilds the lily, out of choice. And while it may represent the distilled essence of the taste of the moment, in its change, say, from rococo to neoclassical, or from the Greek to Gothic Revival, it turns out to be far less transient than its ties with the world of fashion would indicate.

Surely no decorative style has been more enduring — or more adapted, bowdlerized and revived — than the Adam; the delicacy and refinement of its ornament, furniture and details have made it as suitable for small domestic interiors and contemporary uses as it was for the grand, palatial scale of the original Adam rooms.

If Adam has been the most copied style, then the rococo has been the most vulgarized. The 19th century's combination of mass production, new money, ambition and ostentation found the more elaborate styles most sympathetic; it did not matter if what was once artfully designed and elegantly handcarved was now reduced to banality and machine-stamped as long as there was plenty of it.

The 19th century also explored some fascinating decorative byways. It was the century that admired, and invented, the concepts of the "picturesque" and the "sublime." Those ideas were defined in terms of the distant and the exotic, in time and place. At Olana, the painter Frederick Church's home and studio on the Hudson, sublime views of the river were framed by picturesque architectural details, in a kind of Hispano-Moresque, or casbah-harem potpourri of arches and patterned brick and interiors thick with Orientalia.

Inevitably, the 20th century embarked on a kind of purification process. After one last serious fling with the whiplash curves of Art Nouveau, decoration was banished. It was a cold-turkey cure. But modernism did something more than deny the decorative past: it rediscovered the eloquence of space. Plain white walls and the simplest forms emphasized line and light, plane and void; the best interiors achieved a kind of minimal poetry.

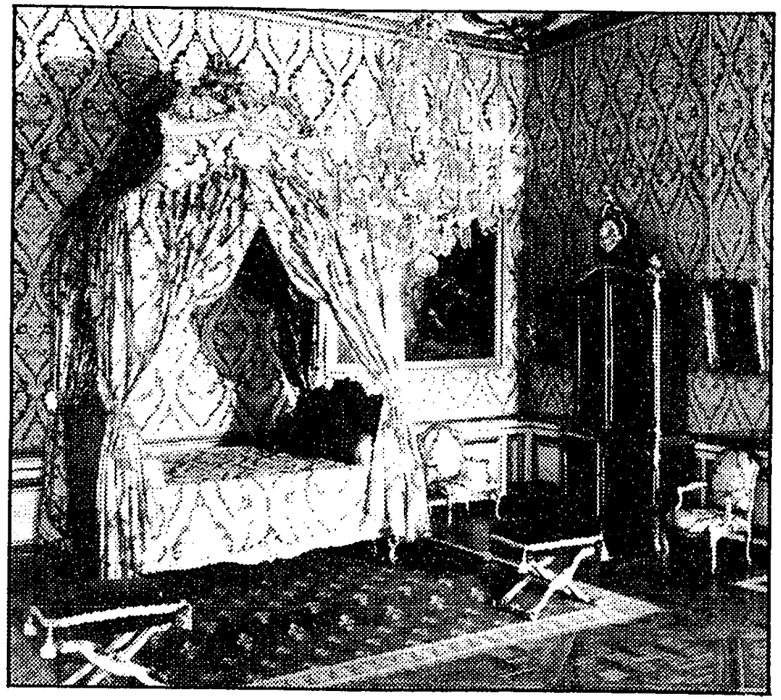
The urge to decorate, although fiercely disciplined, survived, however. If there was the modern, there was also the modernistic, and the two ran parallel in the 1920's and 30's. Modernistic, now called Deco, was lush rather than austere; it was the last of the decorative arts. But even among the most dedicated purists the need for enrichment came out in subtle and insidious ways. Sooner or later, a white wall had to have a painting or a piece of sculpture or, if all else failed, a tree. The suppressed desire for color and pattern remained expressed through the intrinsic ornament of visible structure. Mies van der Rohe announced that God was in the details.

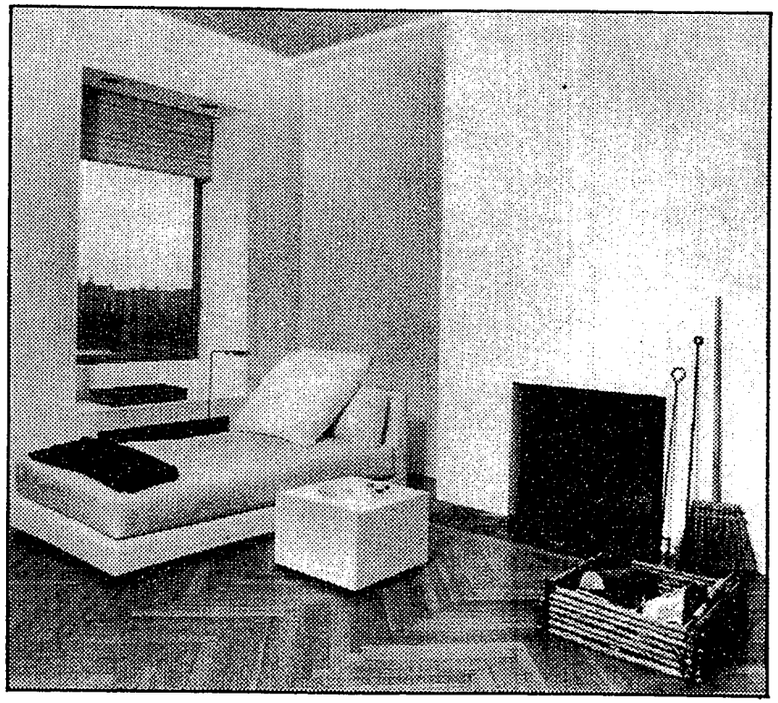
There was haute structural luxe with shining, chrome-sheathed joints and caps for concrete beams. Structure moved closer to sculpture.

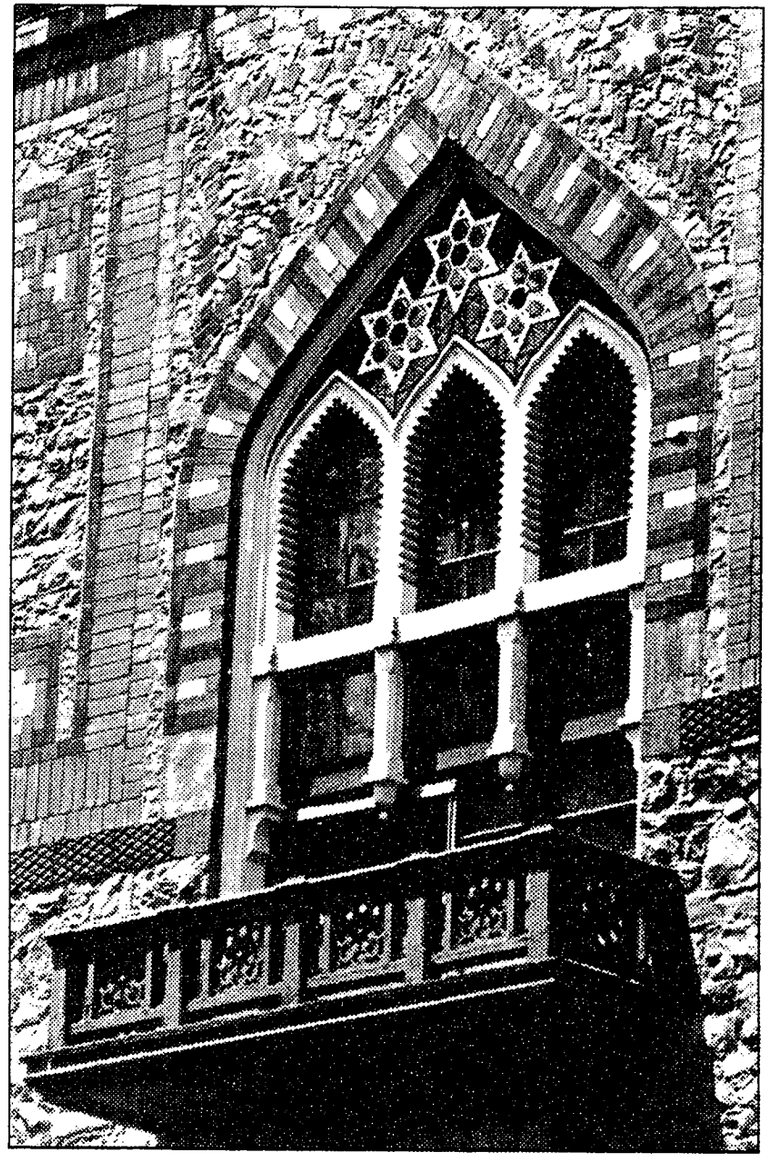
Decoration was like the thin man inside the fat man, struggling to get out. The clarity and courage of the early, earnest insistence on the primacy of form over surface was lost. Even the glass box borrowed the richly patterned variety of the rest of the world for its mirrored facades.

While it is fashionable today to say that decoration is back, the truth is that it never really went away. It has simply come out of the closet. Architects for whom Corinthian was a dirty word are now filling modest spaces with salvaged or mail-order classical columns. Parodies of Adam ceilings are coming from the offices of those who should know better. It is all a far cry from delight and caprice.

The art of decoration requires the most sophisticated and self-indulgent skills. Its aim has always been to sate the senses as gloriously as possible. That is why, when those effects become too predictable, popular or debased, decoration moves on to something else. And it always will, because ornament is not only a source of sensuous pleasure; it supplies a necessary kind of magic to people and places that lack it. More than just a dread of empty spaces has led to the urge to decorate; it is the fear of empty selves.







The New York Times, Charles Nesbit

Above: A "picturesque" window in patterned walls of Olana, 19th-century Hudson River home of the artist Frederick Church.

Top Left: The Dauphin's chamber at Versailles. The 18th-century decorations included damasks, carved furniture.

Left: A 1980 living room designed by Angelo Donghia. Furniture and walls are unadorned white, accessories are minimal.