Art within Ceramic Decoration

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Abstract. Decoration in early ceramic work stemmed from the abstraction of culturally significant symbols and motifs now serves as a record of cultural identity. Contemporarily, the role of decoration in our visual culture has been relegated; commonly artists view decoration not as an element of cultural significance but as a dispassionate method of image making. I will research the use of decoration in contemporary ceramics and in my studio work and what role decoration plays with regard to individual and cultural narrative by conducting a review of contemporary ceramic artists and examining their methods of making and use of decorative motifs in addition to utilizing a range of decorative elements within my own work and incorporating decorative motifs.

1. Introduction

My exploration in the making of ceramic objects has predominately been intrinsically directed towards the process and visual intrigue of surface design. Historically, surface adornments in functional and sculptural ceramic work range from being symbolic to purely ornamental in the lens of contemporary interpretation. The connotation of the word ‘decorative’ tends to limit any deeper perception of visual significance by being synonymous with the unnecessary and excess. The word is very commonly used to describe only objects and art of aesthetic value and does not impart the truly rich potential of decoration and its role in art and object history. My goal is to explore that potential in my own ceramic work and to investigate the translation of a decorative visual language through surface and form.

2. Exploration of Literature

“It is often perceived that decoration exists only to please the eye, to create optical interest, not to engage the mind or strike deep into the imagination…” [1]

What role should, or does, decoration play in contemporary ceramics? Decoration can be generally defined as the presence of elements that serve a primarily aesthetic purpose. The part that decoration plays in contemporary ceramics and contemporary art as a whole has never been exclusively definite. My own interpretations of what is and what can be decorative are limited to the extent of my perception of a visual library that I segment to focus my personal explorations. There are many different motifs within decoration, all of which carry their own cultural and symbolic language and varying levels of abstraction. In the words of contemporary ceramicist Paul Mathieu: “Abstraction is at the very core of the concept of decoration and all decoration is inherently abstract.” [2], and it is through that abstraction that information is conveyed – it is important to investigate how impactful this information is, and if this communication in relevant in the field today. In my studio research, I’ve investigated the occurrence of historical decorative motifs in contemporary ceramic work and applied these motifs to my own work in an effort to develop my own visual language. In addition, I’ve examined common decorative motifs in contemporary ceramic work.

Decorative motifs can be gleaned from abstraction of visual culture, language, fauna, etc, and serve as culturally identifiable and recognizable forms. Stylistically, motifs are transferred between cultures as technologies and goods are traded and shared. A prominent historical example would be the practice of Chinese Blue and White [Figure 1] in Iznik Ottoman pottery, with shards of Yuan and Ming dynasty Chinese ceramics found to be present at Iznik production sites (1480-90) [3][Figure 2]. Decorative motifs historically are appropriated, most likely due to evolving cultural designs, tastes and intrigue. Within contemporaneity, decorative patterning and practices almost universally have visual baggage, and in the decision-making process of any object-maker, individual design contexts need to be taken into account. Appropriation is a direct result of influence and is a crucial part in the development of individual stylistic motifs and narratives; is it inherent to visual perpetuation.
Contemporary ceramic artist Julia Galloway is particularly sensitive to the role of visual decorative history in her work. She utilizes blue-on-white patterning on her utilitarian forms as a visual binder to the historically familiar, while fulfilling one of her stated goals of completing “a need for beautiful domestic objects…” [4] [Figure 3] This focus she has placed in her work asks the question: what is the relationship between aesthetic beauty and contextual beauty, and does one supersede the other in cultural importance? “Decoration’s primary function is to add something to, so as to make more attractive; adorn; ornament, and this relates directly to taste.” [5] – and if this is so, the interpretation of decoration is primarily relative. This is an idea that reduces the cultural claim to decorative motifs, for if decoration is primarily relative it would reside in isolation and it would not transcend the rise and fall of societal dominance. Decoration at the core of its function and history is both transient and persistent, and acts as a visual barometer and record. This definition is evident in the work of Molly Hatch [Figure 4], whose decorative motifs can be linked to Chinese blue-on-white, Ottoman floral arabesque and European floral concurrently [6] among others – these motifs have been combined in such a way that they are not only relevant in contemporary visual culture, but that they also speak to the importance and impact that these motifs had in their respective societies. This malleability history, and the influence of historical and cultural significance, threatens be devalued by the modern connotation of decoration.

3. Studio Practice Contribution

Within my body of work, I have explored various methods of decoration as well as various visual motifs with the aim of exemplifying a historical influence while simultaneously seeking what is relevant. Throughout these physical and visual discussions I have frequently come question my individual claim to visual history – it seems that momentary influence does not bear the appropriate amount of significance to justify cultural appropriation. These feelings cause me to wish to further investigate the perpetuation of motifs and the artistic inceptions of new visual vernacular and how it relates to an artists' personal perception of culture identity and heritage. Individual appropriation and perception of decoration is key to a wider cultural and societal ownership of the decorative; it is through the personal efforts of those who value visuality, symbology and narrative that motifs are perpetuated on a grander scale. Whether or not the information that sustains over time is the most valuable cannot be readily determined or measured, but endurance does warrant consideration.

4. Conclusions

To solely perceive the contemporary cultural perception that decoration is an elemental function that serves to only please the eye undervalues the plethora of monumental visual conventions in art and art object history. In my own studio work I find that different methods of decoration imbue my work with historical contingency. It is a disservice to developed visual culture to relegate the role of decoration to the superficial and extraneous. To a point, it is hypocrisy to value any contemporary visual language while depreciating decorative language, as modern visual language was not miraculously incepted but rather strained from centuries of discernable elements. Perception is limited only to an individuals’ ability to perceive – thus the elevated role that decoration should play is dependant on the ability of any audience to perceive significance. The importance that ceramic artists are visually literate in decorative history cannot be understated. Decorative motifs contain dense information accumulated over years of visual evolution, but this value can be undermined almost instantaneously by occurrences of decorative motifs that do not themselves take responsibility for their substance.

[Fig. 1] Carswell, John. _Iznik Pottery_. Interlink Books, Chapter 2, p. 34. 2007
[Fig. 2] Carswell, John. _Iznik Pottery_. Interlink Books, Chapter 2, p. 34. 2007