FROM SPLENDOR TO SIMPLICITY: EXPLAINING THE AESTHETIC VARIATION OF THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT, 1875–1914

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OVERVIEW

• Research question: What explains the diversity of artistic styles across the Arts & Crafts movement?
• Introduction to the Arts & Crafts movement
• Review of existing sociological models of aesthetics
• Comparative analysis of Arts & Crafts styles and ideologies
• Conclusions and implications of the research
THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT

- 1875—1914

- Began in England, spread to U.S., Western Europe, and as far Russia, Australia, and Japan

- Advocated both social and aesthetic reform

- Founders were critical of industrial capitalism and sought to resurrect the Medieval era and its Gothic styles

- But in the U.S., Frank Lloyd Wright declared “The machine is my God.”
Sociological Studies of Cultural Form

- Rooted in the work of Simmel (1916), Sorokin (1937-41), and Hauser (1974)
- Developed by Bergesen (1996, 2006) and Cerulo (1995), based on Bernstein (1964)

![Regional Strength → Syntactic Code → Artistic Style](image)

- Main finding: Stronger societies produce simple cultural forms and weaker societies, complex forms
MEASURING ORGANIC VERSUS GEOMETRIC STYLE

- Degree of Symmetry
  Asymmetric versus Symmetric
- Degree of Multiplicity
  Unity versus Multiplicity
- Degree of Linearity
  Serpentine versus Linear
- Degree of Simplicity
  Ornate versus Simple

Deg Geo = 0.94

Deg Geo = 0.0
Testing Bergesen & Cerullo

- Catalog of 2004 LACMA exhibition, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World*
  - UK, US, Germany, Scandinavia, Austria, and Hungary
  - Objects=192, Artists=97
- Catalog of 2005 V&A exhibition, *International Arts & Crafts*
  - UK, US, and Austria
  - Objects=160, Artists=98
### Regional Style by Regional Strength

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak Regions</th>
<th>Strong Regions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geometric Style</td>
<td>Organic Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>U.K. Hungary Scandanavia</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>LACMA</th>
<th>V&amp;A</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>0.29 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.03)</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
<td>0.31 (0.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scan</td>
<td>0.34 (0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0.60 (0.07)</td>
<td>0.57 (0.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>0.56 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.54 (0.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>0.58 (0.05)</td>
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➢ Bergesen/Cerulo model fails to explain Austria
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
<th>Unity</th>
<th>Style</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Backward-looking Regions</strong></td>
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<td>U.K.</td>
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- Regions that valued labor and regionalism produced organic work. Regions that valued democratic design and unifying the arts produced geometric work.
THE VALUE OF LABOR

- Of primary concern in England, where Morris, Ashbee, and others eschewed industrial fabrication and cultivated nostalgia for the past, expressed politically as socialism.

- Of secondary concern in the United States and Germany, but see Stickley's "The Craftsman," Roycroft, and Byrdcliffe
REGIONALISM AND THE VERNACULAR

- Only principle emphasized in all regions: design should reflect the landscape; use local materials
- Most important in Scandinavia and Hungary, where it was interpreted as romantic nationalism
DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE ARTS

- Of primary concern in U.S. and Germany; mechanization is valued for its cost savings
- In England, subordinated to (expensive) hand work
- Dismissed in Vienna
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Democratization of the Arts

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UNITY OF THE ARTS

• “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”

• In UK and US, the goal was to bring beauty to everyday goods

• In Austria, the goal was to raise the status of applied and decorative arts to that of fine art
  • Vienna Secession (Vienna, 1897) and Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna, 1903)
    – “To the Age its Art, To the Art its Freedom”
    – Emphasis on the Gesamtkunstwerk
    – “Our aim is to create an island of tranquility in our own country, which, amid the joyful hum of arts and crafts, would be welcome to anyone who professes faith in Ruskin and Morris.”
AUSTRIA: CHASING THE GEOMETRIC

KOLOMAN MOSER
AUSTRIA: CHASING THE GEOMETRIC

JOSEF HOFFMANN
AUSTRIA: CHASING THE GEOMETRIC

Josef Hoffmann: Purnersdorf Sanatorium (Vienna 1904-05)
**Conclusion: The Use of Ideology in Unsettled Periods**

- The period of the Arts & Crafts was a period of political and economic turmoil.

  **Consequences:**

- Nostalgia in England, expressed as socialism
- Backward-looking romantic nationalism in Hungary and Scandinavia
- Forward-looking capitalist ideology in United States and Germany
- Forward-looking status competition in Austria
Implications of the Research

• Methodological
  Sociological study of artistic style is possible. Key is to identify a basis for
  commensuration that allows comparison among different types of
  objects.

• Substantive
  Arts & Crafts aesthetics and ideologies varied according to a region's
  position in the world-system. Organic styles arose in regions that looked
  to the past. Geometric styles arose in regions that looked to the future.

• Theoretical
  Bergesen/Cerulo model of culture needs to be reconsidered. Must
  examine how a region's political-economic situation affects its cultural
  situation.

  • Bergesen/Cerulo model:
    Regional strength —→ Syntactic Codes —→ Artistic Style

  • Rubinson model:
    Regional strength —→ Ideology —→ Horizon —→ Artistic Style
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Analysis of aesthetic and ideological diversity within the American Arts & Crafts movement; also, role of middle class

• Locating the Viennese Arts & Crafts movement within the fin de siècle cultural revival

• Analysis of the Arts & Crafts revival (1988—present)