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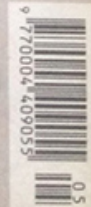
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**KARA
WALKER**
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72-PAGE
GALLERY GUIDE

BIG DRAWINGS GO BIG-TIME
ART GANGS OF LONDON: PULLOUT MAP SPECIAL
CARLO MOLLINO: SECRET POLAROIDS
MARTIN PARR AT THE SAATCHI GALLERY

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'The superfluous, a very necessary thing.' VOLTAIRE

Utopia & Interiors by Carlo Mollino, architect

with annotations by Becky Beasley, artist

During my time spent working on the body of work which became a series of connected exhibitions, I came across Carlo Mollino's essay 'Utopia e Ambientazione', published in two parts in consecutive issues of *Domus* in 1949. In the same way that his very beautifully produced book *Message from the Darkroom* (1949) functions as a history of photography (the first in Italy), 'Utopia e Ambientazione' is a little history of the interior and social life. Both are, however, cut through sharply with Mollino's own idiosyncratic meditations on the subject. I discovered that 'Utopia e Ambientazione' had not previously been translated, and so we are presenting the essay in English for the first time. My instincts from the start were that, rather than placing 'Utopia e Ambientazione' in another architecture magazine, an art context in the contemporary moment would be more in keeping with Mollino's attitude. Initially I had proposed retaining the original layouts, but we soon decided it would be more appropriate to update them. In the spirit of friendship and conversation, I have written seven short, dense, personal responses. Like Maurice Blanchot, I have found in Mollino someone who was truly open and ahead of his time, someone strange and kind, and for the future. I hope this translation is right on time. *Becky Beasley*

Every act reveals its author. Every work is made in the image and likeness of those who fashion it, be they human or animal. In the beginning, as animals developed habits, nests, lairs and shells, so people developed ceremonies, laws, houses, clothes, weapons and a whole host of devices for communicating, building and transporting: *extensions of themselves* that allowed people to live and assert themselves, and to take delight in so doing (1). These creations became extensions of taste, a *taste* that was none other than an individual or collective reaction to the conditions of life, like the different marks registered by lead and chalk when they are dropped to the ground, each of which nevertheless expresses the primordial condition of gravity. Persistent constants or variables in internal or external conditions, in the broadest sense, create sets of particular qualities, preferences and sensibilities that are constantly changing, and this is the evolution of *taste*. Like all definitions, that of *taste* has indistinct boundaries in which the characterisation of a being becomes confused with a way of being or wanting to be, with questions of how to act, think and desire.

The aim of my remarks here is to characterise the way a particular taste in interior architecture – namely the extension of selves into environments, furnishings included – and the society of a given time, with its conditions of grandeur, misfortunes, miseries and ambitions, reflect and affect one other, without any attempt at aesthetic criticism. Like all schematic ventures, mine suffers from arbitrary judgements, subjective mutilations and generalisations. However, my precision is like that of the asymptote, approximating towards infinity, to the point where every story falls silent, futile, because it now concurs with reality itself.

The chief of the Ifugao tribe in the Philippines, unlike his people, lives and sleeps raised above the ground in a special, separate hut. His status is also signalled in front of this distinguished dwelling by a sort of chaise longue, this too raised above the ground and intended for 'dual' use, guests being afforded the same honour as the chief, namely to be raised off the ground and lie with him on this simultaneously functional (for him) and decorative form.

The 'family arms', or rather the effects of their use – a number of skulls (2) – are lined up, perhaps in chronological order, on the door of the chief's dwelling. The 'armorial device' of this ever-expanding crest nearly always conveys the same message: 'Woe betide anyone who touches me'. In this case, the *self-assertion* comes via immediate and persuasive symbolism – without recourse to excuses, euphemisms or references to higher powers such as God, Honour, the Emperor or any of those other common forms of complicity or fraudulent representation.

Altogether different is the organisation of status that we see expressed in the interiors of that most famous of Western civilisations. In the open hierarchy of the rooms in the houses of Ancient Rome, the decoration is based on order, clarity and perpendicularity conveyed with far from subtle shades: this is a 'formal' interior. From the atrium, the 'clients' (footmen, mediators, accomplices and petitioners) and all those moving in the 'patron's' world are psychologically put in their place by the spatial and decorative rigour of the setting. This classical approach continues to be used by today's tycoons and their virtually identical 'clients', although today's architectural forms are vastly inferior. Even the privacy of the cubicles and triclinium (3) ooze status and power, conveyed by the assertiveness of the decor; nature is admitted but not allowed to run wild. These interiors are not for dreaming, and are no place for empty introspection. Action is their essence and purpose. Orgies might take place in these rooms, but they would be vigorous ones.

When, at a certain point, Rome's philosophers become irritating and 'anguished', this practical and decisive society will even ban them, conducting a precautionary mass expulsion. The constitutional expansion of what would become a leviathan sense of a right to conquest, and the

ensuing killings, become legitimated by a shrewd device that gives the conquered the illusion of being part of the same social order as the winners: almost as though the army were operating within a colossal charity institution governed by the admirable architecture that was 'Roman law', a hypertrophic organisation that would eventually become impossible to steer, marking the beginning of the end. A quite analogous phenomenon, albeit for different reasons, will prompt a crisis in the nineteenth century: a crisis that also emerges from inventions, discoveries, progress and all the rest.

It should be noted that a diplomatic recourse to the classical principles of Roman architecture is common whenever it becomes necessary to demonstrate or impose a principle of authority or order that must not be questioned. Simply consider the architecture of banks, ministries and government buildings in general, from the atria to the salons and even the desk legs, in both democratic and totalitarian regimes, not least the Soviet Union. Of this last, in the face



Mollino begins with habits, nests, lairs and shells. In literature, for me it began with Kafka's 'The Burrow'. These are the feral architectures of sanctuary and anxiety, deeply interior, wildly exterior, leading almost directly to the limits of the image, if one so wishes. For Gaston Bachelard too, writing his *Poetics of Space* ten years after Mollino, in 1958, 'The concept that corresponds to the shell is so clear, so hard, and so unsure that a poet, unable simply to draw it and, reduced rather to speaking of it, is at first at a loss for images.' In his *Message from the Darkroom*, Mollino locates the origins of the history of photography in an actual nutshell.

of the impossibility of documenting the desks of the Soviet Union, I will limit myself to recalling the stateliness of current directives aimed at turning every government building into a Colosseum, and again the candid zeal of making them a prime, and counterproductive, object of propaganda. The structure and civilisation of Roman houses, submerged by the chaos of the Barbarian invasions, will remain forever destroyed. A less perfect, but still functional order, organised very differently, will develop gradually in the late seventeenth century, although only coming to fruition in the bourgeois apartment of modern times.

For now, in 800 AD, however, the fair Isolde ('her sweetness reaches, through the eyes, the heart'), her husband King Mark, her lover Tristan – with whom she shared a love

that transcended the laws of Man – ministers, courtiers, servants and jesters all slumber beneath the ceiling of a common 'hall', with known and predictable consequences. Even the royal palace is a permanent, fortified 'campsite', albeit an opulent one. In the hall described in the Merovingian and Carolingian texts, all life takes place with everyone under each other's feet and surrounded by hides, hanging fabrics, chests, weapons and beds. Nevertheless, the pecking order at the table is never threatened.

The serenity of an exclusively material universe, expressed in the *complete space* of classical taste, would be fervently but humbly surpassed by the Gothic style, seen in the mystical desire of the Gothic cathedral for infinity. With the material world – and consequently that of the senses – mortified, homes become but a temporary occurrence in earthly passage. The layout becomes empirical, irregular and fragmentary, delightfully resolved with a minute and ornate practicality (4). The furnishings are incidental, standard, portable possessions that are functional thanks to the servants who are live accessories, 'property masters' and 'bearers' – squires, cupbearers, boot-fasteners, lightbearers, wise men and troubadours who act as travelling libraries.

The 'chest' (coffers, safes) is the prize item among these makeshift furnishings. The bed is a straw mattress laid on chests which, over the centuries, evolve into a 'platform'; this is still a barbarian bed, in that it conserves the sense of sleeping on your possessions or tucking everything, except for your sword, away under you. Fabrics are randomly draped over chairs and just as temporarily hung in folds along stone walls, flapping in the draughts, to serve as partitions and even, as a development, wrapped around the bed like a camp tent, symbolising and fulfilling the need to, at last, be secluded within a perimeter of newfound modesty and intimacy that is very different from that of the 'proprietary' Greek gynaeceum, the women's quarters.

In the eleventh century we see the invention of love: Gothic women are given angel wings and armour. When appearing naked, in wall-painted allegories, they are portrayed as strange, pale creatures, violated by the light, seeming demurely embarrassed despite wishing to appear relaxed. While once again attempting to avoid aesthetic judgement, the comparison that immediately springs to mind is with the comprehensive idealisation of Greek sculpture, born out of visual, rather than merely tactile or imaginative, familiarity.

In contrast, on the same latitude, yet opposed in almost every way, another civilisation presents itself through the singular expression of its houses. In Japan, houses are the image of a less dynamic society than that of Rome, equally immune to worries about the hereafter and to the misfortunes caused by the race to rule and expand. This condition endured until that perhaps unfortunate day in 1854 when the doors

that Japan had closed to the Jesuits and the rest of the West in 1624 were reopened.

From the entrance to the Japanese house (5), a clear rhythm of light partitions heralds the magical possibilities of retreat, designed as perfectly as an egg, in which all material circumstances had disappeared, or rather been transfigured into grace; no slamming doors or unsynchronised routines and no speed save for that of their fabled dragons. These spaces, modulated by the 'standard' mats, seem suspended in space and free from the constraints of gravity; even the decorative unity seems to exclude a hierarchy between high and low. After leaving their shoes at the door, the Japanese (the cleanest people on earth) enter an interior where feet become as respectable as hands; the animalistic and the spiritual are reflected in the sacred proportions of a basic geometric harmony, steadfast yet always mobile.

This house is a box of tricks, a maze of mutable rooms and furnishings. A lightweight setting in which mobile and sliding frames transform the interiors, dividing them to create rooms and lobbies to suit different seasons, moods and ceremonies or daily household 'occurrences'. Every domestic task is a ceremony and an event; the pictures on the walls, the



As a primary support within still life, the shelf became a special vehicle for thinking beyond the object. The narrow shelf, for example, which supports only objects which may be held in the hand, like books or bananas, and then, narrower still and hinged at the joints, limp and empty, its dimensions based on those of my aging father's arm span – colloquially known as measuring one's own grave. A pair of wide oak Shelves for My Parents 2011. In my little history, there are these bodies we hold in the hand: a rabbit, lemons, peonies, the reflecting surfaces of metalware and glassware, asparagus and carrots whose tips pierce the front plane of the image and vision. These things move tidally in me, from the freshness of the cadaver or a meal to the coldness of the corpse and the threshold of a silent morgue: 'Absent from Cotan's work is any conception of nourishment as involving the conviviality of the meal – the sharing of hospitality present in the antique "xenia". The unvarying stage of his paintings is never the kitchen but always the "cantarero", a cooling-space where for preservation the foods are often hung on strings (piled together, or in contact with a surface, they would decay more quickly)' (Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 1990).

furnishings and the types of flowers also changed, with the decor constantly and quietly evolving as if in a fairytale. When a piece of furniture becomes unwelcome, it simply disappears into the wall. Having attained the celebrated 'harmony with nature', and at peace with his neighbours and with himself, the Japanese man works and provides without material or mystical anxieties.

The beauty of this house, born out of an idyllic encounter between freedom and inner restraint – the secret to Japanese society – has captivated and beguiled Westerners in search of a model of hedonistic escape from their everyday hell. As we shall see, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the Japanese house would be more or less openly dreamed of, not only by Wright, with his 'organic architecture', but by a whole host of architects. I must, however, add a few considerations that may destroy the illusion of a perfect world and a potential model for anxious Westerners.

The interiors described, the norm for a certain class, date from 1550 to 1600 when impeccable domestic organisation governed the magical and extremely isolated island of these enigmatic and docile class leaders. Blissful and linear in its simplicity, this refined house is the dwelling of a 'Japanese man', a feudal lord, a *daimio* or the emperor and his courtiers. The common people live like the frogs in rice paddies, or rather they 'exist' (and are obliterated) as and when it is decided by the dominant class, who have control over their life and death, force them to wear a 'civilian uniform' and work 11 hours every day.

An ethereal and dreamy class of lotus-eaters, who disdain ambition and conquest, produces its mirror-image in a house for demigods, the natural poetry of almond and other trees in blossom, prodigious paintings seemingly made of thin air and graceful poems the length of a satisfied and peaceful sigh. The joy and security of this class are assured by the creation of the geisha, a living doll educated or rather manufactured for the purpose, and the samurai, literally selected over generations, fed a special diet and then trained, who knows how, into blind obedience and an easy death, a huge watchdog as well armed and fortified as a lobster.

In the West, a house from almost the same period presents interiors that are vastly different, but just as magical (6). Carpaccio's *Dream of St Ursula* (1495) portrays a space divided serenely, in which the hours – and time itself – appear to have vanished. Carpaccio gives this room a dreamy,

suspended interior that is common to his work: an aura already predisposed by a lifestyle free from serious problems and anxieties. Venice is at this time a peaceful Northern Italian city; not even the Church can disturb its tranquillity, and the evil Inquisition is skilfully avoided. St Ursula

dreams in surroundings that are a subtle mix of Gothic style and the sweet elegance of Florence at the happy instant of a civilisation within which even saints and Madonnas are fables in the colours of everyday life.

When a society, pushed by the biological imperative of self-preservation, transforms itself, using its own means and fortunes, from a climate of poverty and fear into a leisure

society, a new conception of the world simultaneously emerges. I assume that each and every one of us has, at least once in our lives, experienced a similar phenomenon. We observe it in the (ambivalent) cause-and-effect components of the Renaissance. The agony of sin and divine retribution 'subsides', the principle of authority (*ipse dixit*) lapses and Man begins to feel that he is his own maker, responsible for his personal fortune and status, and as such he shows himself to the world by asserting his personality, prestige and love of glory. Instead of transcending into the infinity of divine mystery, humans and their world reemerge within the *limits* of a new order of finite measure, of autonomy and *human grandeur*. Still alive beneath the ashes, and now in tune with current tastes, the fabulous 'models' of the buried grandeur of Greece and Rome are uncovered by Humanism; and, of course, the *modern utopia* (Thomas More) starts to blossom.

The emphasis falls on impeccable and canonised form; the house becomes a *palace* and, although it has no dome, basically resembles a house of God. The interior space, no longer subordinated to an afterlife, becomes a continuation of the exterior; architecture steps inside the house to represent order and create a total, finished *beauty*. The furniture, in turn, becomes rooted in a spatial composition with its surroundings, becoming an architecture within architecture, where the frescoed vaults are pagan heavens descending into the house, and the walls, 'ordered' by moulding and plaster strips, lend themselves to the portrayal of pagan myths in which no one believes, and that are simply a pretext for beauty and metaphors to celebrate the status of the master of the house.

It is at this moment that the padded chair is born. Along with the salon, the bedroom becomes the fulcrum of an apartment that, although sumptuous, is – in the strictest sense of the word – nonexistent because it comprises a string of places of 'representation', staircase included. The 'apartment' is really only the bed that, with its hangings, columns and canopies, becomes a throne during the day, from which it is customary to receive guests and visitors, reclining and more decorated than dressed.

Meanwhile, in the North, Martin Luther is preparing the Reformation, the pomp of Rome having become far removed from the evangelical ideal. Looking at a space that could have been his room – actually that of his friend and fellow Reformation activist Dürer (7) – we are struck by a growing sense that these spaces engage their agenda. These rooms symbolise scruple and fervour for life in the knotty wood, unflinching conviction: inhabitants here could dig in their heels and might even decide to burn a bull of excommunication. The sharp edges would dig into one's sides, and the chair backs are rigid. There may well be pillows, but



Punctuating politics with furniture and objects in his unique way, Mollino writes, in 1949, of the 'impossibility of documenting the desks of the Soviet Union'. The Classical structures which were reactivated so explicitly in the twentieth century, at work in 'the atria to the salons and even the desk legs', and to be found 'in both democratic and totalitarian regimes' – like the history of the Helvetica typeface – find their origins in the 'architecture that was 'Roman law', a hypertrophic organisation that would eventually become impossible to steer, marking the beginning of the end'. Coinciding with modernity's own hypertrophic process, and his own crisis concerning originality and the superficialities of publishers in the age of mass reproduction and photography, Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (1853) offers a deflationary mode in which windows which looked onto blank walls, office desks containing only ginger-nut crumbs and slices of lemon, and a high green folding screen become structures of resistance to power and authority. (Kafka is the source of 'the minor', but I'm sure I once read that he had been reading Robert Walser, too.) Bartleby himself hinged somewhere between architectural fitting, object and image. The green is the hope that is also the space of Blanchot's *Communism*. As an interior becomes image, Bartleby activates Melville's formula: I would prefer not to. A flattening occurs, the rotund CEO punctured like a balloon.

without a doubt I can guarantee that they are padded with corn leaves. A guest with only the slightest sense for satisfaction and softness would surely deem this 'study' uncomfortable indeed.

I could use scandalously obvious (even to me) and base psychological models to justify a continuity in the evolution of taste from the concinnity of fifteenth-century design to the poised magnificence of the High Renaissance and on to the dynamic and delirious Baroque pomp before it eventually shatters in the playful affectation of Rococo, the Arcadian reaction and the cold, frosty Neoclassical style. The Faustian adventure of the West, one of settlement and universal dominion over the earth via the use of sense and intellect, evolves with the Baroque age to become theatrical drama; an age restless for a paradise – perhaps lost – and thirsty for the infinite.

The classical and static serenity of the straight line and circle comes to be replaced by the dynamic of the broken line, the oval and the hyperbola. Significantly, the hyperbola, the geometric diagram used to depict a line leaping towards the infinity of the asymptote, is aligned with the rhetorical term 'hyperbole', which describes the baroque style.

The house is the palace and scene for that spectacle which sees humans broken free from dogma and canon, a deceptive setting of unexpected perspectives and the pictorial exaltation of matter and space. It should be noted that artifice

is employed for the expressive ends of a culture that still believes in itself, which believes that it owns the world, rather than one that seeks to create a scenic escape from a world it doesn't own.

Serious and haughty in its relational conventions with the outside world, the Baroque facade contrasts with the magnificent spectacle that greets those admitted into its interior. This is a contrast born of the encounter with the minor nobility, who were at home there. From a monumental staircase that melted away in an ascending perspective, the *arcade* is born. The dimensions of these interiors transcend human scale and are better suited to men three metres tall. Every extension, garment and furnishing here is a prestigious celebration of the greatness of their owner; together with high heels for men, improbable wigs and walking sticks and ornate



William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a novella written in the vernacular speech of the South during the Depression, completed in six weeks while working night shifts at a power station, as a carpentry manual for the construction of objects made out of wood and night: '4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. 5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways. 6. Except. 7. A body is not square like a crosstie. 8. Animal magnetism. 9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.'

rods taller than their owners, we now also witness the birth of the *armchair*. The bed becomes secluded in an *alcove*, a room within a room, and the four-poster bed now starts to hover above plumes, spiral columns and caryatids. The furniture becomes more precious but also more specialised in *filig* (chests, drawers); this was the prelude to the era of bureaucracy, of 'many papers' and of the modern communication epidemic. The *cabinet*, the forerunner of the desk with drawers and front compartments, is the craze of the times and, adorned with valuable materials, is considered a 'precious' object in itself. Upon his death, the schemer and

meddler Cardinal Mazarin will have the bad taste to leave *seventeen* of these to his heirs (as well as 125 million in gold). The cabinet, sometimes tiny and extremely ornate, is also the most loved, precious and expressive plaything of the Rococo period. This is the taste of a society, a nobility, even, that has turned merely obsequious and is, by this time, living in an aquarium of exquisite objects from which the rest of humanity is viewed simply as a world of beings whose fate is to be regretted but who could hardly, because of *their very nature*, be considered human. The immediate parallel that springs to mind is that equally refined class of the Japanese civilisation on which I dwelled at length previously.

Even Voltaire views this fauna from the unruffled stance of the naturalist: 'It seems essential to me that there should be some ignorant beggars.' The home becomes a suspended, gilded and padded limbo, multiplied and dissolved by mirrors and flourishes on high. The grace and affectation of minute objects, minuets, harpsichords, chinoiserie, 'trinkets', whim, intrigues and sceptical and elegant complications fill *Il Giorno* [*The Day*, a reference to Giuseppe Parini's satirical poem about a day in the life of a young aristocrat] of a class with no political ideals or civic duties. Delirious metaphorical representation is replaced with conversation, and the perspectives afforded by gigantic salons are replaced by an apartment divided into *sitting rooms*, *boudoirs* and alcoves that were 'chests' removed from the *dressing room*. Conservatories, orangeries and lemonaries – nature tamed and domesticated – become settings for parties and pleasures.

The whole interior is nothing more than a 'fixed' piece of furniture, with the furnishings incorporated, emanating from the walls. The real furniture becomes minute once again and tends to be scattered: everyday objects and caskets, albeit extremely precious ones.

We can say that today's furniture range is complete by the eighteenth century, and in addition to the cabinet and a variety of *writing desks*, we see the light-hearted introduction of *bergères*, *duchesse chairs*, *commodes*, *bureaux*, the *loveseat* – two attached and facing armchairs, a gallant variation on the *chaise longue* – and, at last, the famous *canapé sofa*. Fortunately and obviously, the radio cabinet is still missing and, I like to think, in tribute to good taste amid such frivolity – so was the drinks cabinet or, worse still, the 'minibar'.

The adventure of these self-sufficient beings in the natural world, bolstered only by their intelligence, continues. The universe expands, and science and scientific method (Galileo) open up fantastical prospects that are rational and seem deceptively achievable. The grandeur of nature discovered by science and reason will later be the reason behind that desire for infinity, panic and naturalism (Rousseau) that in the end will resolve itself in the spirit of Romanticism. And it is with this evident contradiction that Enlightened rationalism and Romantic irrationalism, first in succession

and then contemporaneously, will form as a dyad the most disturbing discord of our times. This particular aspect is revealed by tastes in the home: the dualism of reality and dream, the desire for *escape* and the consequent scenery.

The Neoclassical will be the optimistic beginning of this. From the age of the Enlightenment and the encyclopaedia, we have our first example of style with an overtly cultural focus, basically the prelude to romantic eclecticism; and the Neoclassical style is indeed essentially romantic, as is always the case in the presence of the prefix 'neo'. It was an impressive and *almost* instantaneous crystallisation of the taste, and hence the culture, of the Enlightenment. I say 'almost' because the elegant play of eighteenth-century sentimentality and the faunted Neoclassical composure were separated by a period of pause and compromise, that of Louis XVI, the equivalent of that cautious and pasteurised aristocratic Enlightenment (Fénelon's ideal of the 'enlightened prince'), and the relative simulacra of reform, which, as we know, nearly always produces an opposite result; in that case, his own decapitation.

The desire for a *definitive* revision of humanity's position in the world, scientific and *enlightened* by rationality, and the rejection of any dialectic not based on *fact*, creates the illusion that people can order everything because they know everything, forming the way for the *Petit Larousse*.

Linnaeus classifies insects, Winckelmann creates archaeology and Paestum, Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1763) are discovered. Thanks to Lessing, the beauty of Greece and Rome are seen to, *once and for all*, dictate the 'eternal laws' of art: again here we have the illusion of having measured and rationally catalogued 'absolute beauty'. Among 'consoles', 'tribunes' and 'Phrygian' caps the ideal model is ready for a new order and morality; a culture that is always right on schedule. The Committee for Public Safety discusses whether clothing is to be Greek or Roman and appoints David to create the figurines for the new democratic Olympus. For the first time in history, a style is *rationality* developed and put into circulation for the benefit of a triumphant class, the Third Estate.

The bourgeoisie, now aware of the rights they have attained, will also develop a style of its own in the home and will embark on a performance destined to last, in various scenarios and dramas, through the centuries, to the present day and beyond. The people follow fashion: 'Not one fashionable coquette, not one young dressmaker who does not on Sundays attire herself in Athenian dress... to show herself in antique style or at least resemble Venus Callipyge.' (Mercier). And the neoclassical will be, precisely, a '*décor*' which will have an immediate effect on fashion and furnishings. More royal than the king, this style will enter homes with a hieratic step, bringing in marblelike clarity, measuring and framing geometric spaces, and with a reserve as false as it is



Early 2010. Norma Mangione arranged for me to spend some days at Casa Molino. That first morning, Fulvio and Napoleone Ferrari welcomed me warmly and told me that they would be going out on business that morning and that I would be left alone. They would return at lunchtime and we would go out and eat together and I could ask them any questions I had. They left and I was amazed to be so quickly in their trust, suddenly and delightfully free in a way that one can only be when alone. I went and sat on the toilet in the bathroom Molino had designed for women. At lunchtime the Ferraris returned as promised and we went out nearby to eat. I was not allowed to pay. I was their guest. On a return visit a year later, I noticed a design for a pair of swing doors in the blueprints. I did not recognise them and, having developed a weak spot for hinges, asked Napoleone where the doors were located in the apartment. He told me that they were intended for the corridor, but that in the end Molino did not make them. He made a folding door instead. Looking at the position of the folding door, I realised that the swing doors would have conflicted with another door set into the corridor wall leading to the dining room. The folding doors solved the problem.

pungent, distributing palms, palmettes, antefixes, rose windows, winged victories, crowns and caryatides.

Sleigh beds, *cheval glasses*, the *récamier* sofa, three-legged tables, swinging mirrors, console tables and mausoleumlike clocks are partially responsible for that gloomy vein in which the usual textbooks have dispensed with Neoclassicism, using the familiar clichés: an absence of élan, a muted coldness, lack of originality and so on. Decorative and linear but closed in form, the Neoclassical interior does not expand the space between light and shadow but rather flatly expands the plane itself; it might even be said to create a theatrical set, a designed rather than pictorial space; and to what effect?

A new clandestine vitality is, however, throbbing beneath the mask of Hellenic severity. The funeral and the risqué are mixed at the point of encounter between a scene of impassive bourgeois reserve and the legacy of an extremely refined era: here we have an austerity based on coquetry. A rash step taken by a '*Merveilleuse*' reveals that her simple 'dress attached by a belt at the height of her bust' (André Blum) features a split up to her garter. The disguised functionalism of Neoclassical furniture is also significant: the imperturbable dignity of art objects, temples and colonnades conceals secrets and surprises. The temple walls break down, the columns rotate and the palmettes and metallic friezes spring open to reveal unexpected comfort. At the time of the Empire, the ideals of Greece and Rome are ready and well tested; an

enthusiastic 'order', Neoclassical becomes the *Imperial style*, the national or rather European style, endorsing the adventure and triumph of the '*Grand Parvenu*' with fresh splendour. Under the romantic hypnosis of a leader dying of a cancer, who keeps a copy of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* on his night table, a new class *performs theatrically*. To illustrate this I will end this first section by pointing to examples of two paintings of famous beauties – *Paolina Borghese* by Canova and *Juliette Récamier* by David – who can be seen to be 'in performance' in their respective reclining, or rather 'posing' exquisitely, on a sofa. And with this, so closing the heroic era of the bourgeoisie – if you will forgive that contradiction in terms.

2

With Louis Philippe, the 'bourgeois monarch', seated in his eponymous armchair, the golden age of trade and industry begins. From the Age of Enlightenment we ascend to the nineteenth century – that of 'great inventions and discoveries', of 'Progress', of great accomplishments and ensuing disasters of today. Its style is (and remains) one that seems to offend only the minorities. *Romantic, eclectic, historicist and cultural* are the words used to express the new subtleties of a chaos that has no precedents.

Just as Neoclassicism is the style of the Enlightenment, so this eclectic style coincides with the rise of liberalism, and this is said without wishing to offend a rightwing political doctrine that I respect, in its historical function and concreteness, as I do all the others, including those of the left and centre.

This is the age of 'magnificent and progressive destinies', of the myth of technical infallibility, of organisation, of the machine and the subsequent presumed identification of progress with wellbeing and civilisation. The possibilities for feeling and imagination are boundless; dissatisfaction is born from automatic and semifree wellbeing, the 'palpitations of infinity' which have no determined direction. This is a consequence of that decrepit, yet always *new* truth: that the reality is always more disappointing than the dream, even when the dream has come true; ways to *escape* from the present remain the dominant motif in taste today: life conceived as a *becoming*, not as a *being*. So this is a time typified by hedonistic and almost idyllic escape: an escape from ourselves, a forgetting of ourselves in an exaltation of primitive impulses, an existence forever focused on the present moment.

The boundless tastes of this inexhaustible society, today a cinematic cliché, are now well-known clichés, which, by the *fin de siècle*, will reach a zenith of the most optimistic chaos: trains that travel whatever and wherever, cosmopolitanism, ruinous women and *femmes fatales*, green eyes, Slavic charm, a treasure trove of all the pleasures imaginable; the allure of Byzantine, Turkish and Japanese culture, perfumes, incense, drapes, damask, silk, 'soft lace', the thrill of gambling,

illustrious ruins and all else besides.

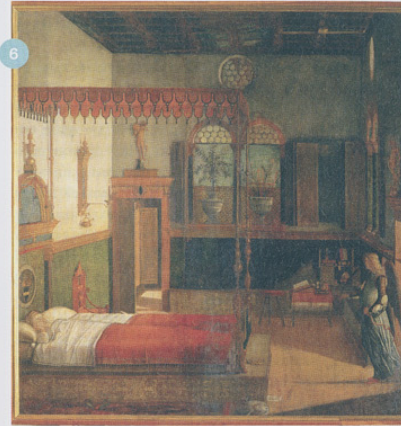
This play of tastes is reflected in the home in the equally legendary and suffocating fashion for bric-a-brac, formed from a need to embrace the entire cosmos of beauty, for the delight of an easy life, *the life of a society that takes everything from everywhere*. Taste starts flying in all directions, like the needle of a compass going 'crazy' when close to a pole that, in this case, would never be reached. All styles are evoked and collected, from the Turkish salon to the Gothic bedroom, from exotic weaponry to tapestries, ecclesiastic stoles and sacred vestments, from seashells to 'pieces' from Japan, Capodimonte or Sévres. People shuffle carefully around these homes, past miniature versions of famous bronzes, oriental rugs, suits of armour, ancient debris. And finally, for the first time in the history of furnishings, we see *nature indoors* in the form not only of flowers but an abundance of evergreen plants that are actually turning grey from dust.

The machine, exalted as the wonder of progress, but not yet anchored in expressive function in external and internal architecture; devices are awkwardly disguised with the forms and decorations of the premechanical era, from the chandelier with screw-in bulbs in the shape of candle flames to the coffeemaker with Rococo curves.

In conformist England of all places, William Morris's application of the arts to furnishings sows a seed that evolves, in the space of a few decades, into a revolution on the Continent. England has always produced these black sheep. Morris, when he becomes engaged to be married in 1859, rebels against the thought that the charming creature of his dreams will have to accept, like him, to live amidst the horror of the furniture that was then in fashion, or the sort that is machine-manufactured and with which the market is flooded. He blames the barbarity of the machine and, returning to the sincerity of the medieval artisan (see Ruskin), begins to build furniture the way he wants it, with his own hands. With his pure and revolutionary ideas, he goes on a crusade: a reaction to industrial-mechanical production and to period 'styles' (read: 'classical'), a return to craftsmanship and the imitation of natural forms (read: Gothic style + Morris + the Orient + nature). His is an adventurous style expressing, with fresh and genuine coherence, the inner reality of a liberated world that was joyfully discovering nature every day. We are now at the prelude to art nouveau. The fact that this world is yet to be constructed and is thus a utopian dream expressed in furniture is another matter. For Morris, art was the means by which humans expressed the joys of their work, and it must be 'made by the people for the people... a joy to both the maker and the user'. The company Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, which is to be the beginning of realising this vision, is however, aside from the quality of its products, a failure in every sense. Its handmade 'pieces' are hugely expensive: anyone who appreciates and buys them is necessarily part of a rich and sophisticated élite. This is a dramatic and cruel case; the age of the machine, as we know, has no reverse gear. Morris is the first and most noble example of the utopia that can be

seen in today's architect: dreaming on paper of an ideal and non-existent world, while at the same time working as *best he can*.

Morris's analysis is prophetic and pours salt on the great wound that was being created even while progress was being embraced with widespread euphoria. This wound will become a highly relevant 'leitmotif' of our own times, the



Weekday midday matinees became my favourite time to go to the cinema, and always alone. As a way of dropping out for a while, the effect upon leaving the movie hall remains with one until dusk. The day disappears as one enters or, ideally, descends, as one does at the Renoir in the Brunswick Centre at Russell Square in London. Weekday midday movies at the Renoir in the late 1990s, deeply depressed, but relatively undisturbed by the handful of OAPs also in the cinema, the then-desolate, prerenovation Brunswick Centre arcade, under which the cinema is located, mirrored my mood. The movie killed time productively. Afterwards, the streets became energised by *matinee fever*, the simple fact of the day upon exiting. Browsing in the nearby SKOOB and Judd Books, those wondrous rooms and corridors made of used and remaindered books, like Benjamin built by unpacking his library, into which I could disappear, somehow allayed my desire to return immediately to my room, to sleep, the depression always drawing me towards the horizontal, to sleep, night. The Brunswick, now renovated, teems with life. I'm glad. I had my time in that place when it was still strange, time hanging there like a dustbowl in the desert, a dead elephant in the centre of the city. In the early 2000s Waitrose paid for the paint job. The Brunswick was never intended to have a grey concrete finish, so the decades-long delayed paint job is right in the end. SKOOB has been relocated to the exterior back of the centre, in a large basement space, the entrance of which is located directly next to Waitrose. It too is now underground. One descends. In the light of all this, now free from the depression, weekday midday matinees remain my favourite time to go to the movies alone.

depersonalisation of the individual wrought by technical and mechanist specialisation. The current conditions of manual and intellectual work and production abstract humans from their *natural reality*. The individual becomes a headless part of a large organism: a specialised, blind termite. We can work up from the 'specialised' engineers and 'intellectuals', bureaucrats, typists, labourers and industrialists, to the scientists and politicians, and discover in all of them the smallest common denominator of the crisis of *dehumanisation*,

of an impotent confusion between *ability, shrewdness and intelligence*. In short: a crisis of civilisation.

From this angle, we will find that any great industrialist, financier or the like who finds his back against the wall will generally reveal a spiritual, and therefore cultural level which is the same, if not lower, than that of the ordinary worker (it's nothing to do with the degree of specialised learning). This is no paradox: for if forced to declare straightforwardly in the name of what faith and morals he is acting, he will have to admit that he is driven by a cancer – an inflated ideal of purely biological and physiological excitement. The exceptions, which include Bata and, in Italy, Olivetti, simply prove the melancholy rule.

In such a climate, we cannot, of course, hope that '*one style*' in the home, however worthy of the name, might become '*the style of the era*', and even less so as a result of press crusades and lectures on 'taste'. Morris was seeking the great lost secret, that of a life lived day by day, a current idea, in which one's joyful and pondered activities are at one with the world's development. However, the Arts and Crafts movement founded by Morris lives on only ten years after his death. England, remaining conformist and conservative even in the home, will continue along the flat path of eclecticism.

The renewed interest and awareness of a new dignity in the decorative and applied arts, which is still 'elite', emigrates to and spreads throughout Europe, however; and amid a tangle of threads and reciprocal influences that historians of modern architecture regularly get bogged down in, the art nouveau style will emerge. A ricochet of now illustrious exhibitions and magazines showcase the birth of twirling vines, subtle repetitions of languid stems emerging from geometrical clusters of flowers, chairs, tables and *armoires* modulated in choice vegetable curves and corolla-shaped projecting curved-glass roofs resting on metallic vine-leaf corbels, a fluid outpouring of wavy ramifications. An asymmetrical Gothic style enters the home, and all known vegetation is vaguely architectural sculptural forms.

Two factors – one 28,000 km away and the other 3,500 years old – impacted on Morris's romantic Gothic influence, his stylised naturalism based on linear decoration, gelling in an ephemeral style destined to die a shameful death in less than 20 years. It was a 'new' style that would create a playground for an easy life, with no emergencies or commitments, and which would only be sick in its petty hedonism. Japan, closed since 1624 to all foreign relations, reopens its ports to the West in 1854 and conducts its first trading abroad: marking the beginning of Japan's rediscovery by the West.

Furthermore, *a fact that is regularly forgotten*, the birth of art nouveau coincided with and almost immediately followed the discovery of the *Cretan-Mycenaean* civilisation. This culture was, again, in step with the taste of the age. This was a revelation of an extremely elegant society, radiating with joy and harmony with nature, free from all metaphysical concerns: 'On the island of Crete, the tormented race of Man dreamt what was perhaps its finest dream' (Romagnoli).

The spirits of art nouveau could not have wished for more fitting models than Japan and Crete. The famous Miss Cranston's Tea Rooms and the Glasgow School of Art library



In a lecture at the University of Warwick, Georges Perec said that *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965) was written to fill the blank space created by the juxtaposition of four works important to him: Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), Nizan's *La Conspiration* (1938) and Antelme's account of life in the concentration camps, *L'Espèce Humaine* (1947). The epigraph to Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's novel *Correction* (1975) reads: 'A body needs at least three points of support, not in a straight line, to fix its position.'

by Mackintosh, and Horta's staircase certainly didn't just arrive in a spontaneous flash of inspiration. Certain Cretan vases, as well as certain Japanese ornaments, chiselled and cut stones placed in the finest art nouveau surroundings would certainly be mistaken for belonging to the same era and would only be distinguished by a specialised eye. Even the fashion of the time, the taste of poster designers and certain paintings unmistakably betray these origins. The sensitive form and nervous but 'measured' elegance of Vienna, in particular, drew on these models to pursue the path towards the *Secession*: a bridge to 'modern' architecture.

Although art nouveau places itself among the great catalogue of eclectic styles and lives alongside them (it may be dead today, but there are concrete signs of a partial revival and rehabilitation), it does have a 'historical' merit that is good to remember from time to time. *It was the first taste movement that totally liberated space, surfaces and decor from the age-old canons of the classical framework*, which is no mean feat. To find a similar nonchalance, not only in the decor but also in the planning of the house, it is necessary to look to Japan, Crete and Mycenae.

If the English are the masters of liberty in terms of compromise and empiricism, the Germans, by contrast, are fanatics of *objectivity* and require the presence of a guiding idea even in the intimate refuge of the home. Germans are not initiators or pioneers but realisers, with consequences that are familiar to all and, when the Germans master a schema, they will not let it go, taking it to absurd extremes and disaster by means of ruthless organisation.

Germany will seize on Ruskin and Morris's call to return to a new honesty and daily proximity between art and life and the rejection of imitation and art for a minority, *objectively* developing and organising them. The *Deutscher Werkbund* (1907) was its most daunting organisation. It is also in the German nature to come together (and become dogmatised) not for some vague form of pleasure but to plunge headfirst into a well-defined task – acclimatising the hummingbird, classifying the tiles and organising the architecture of the home – it was rightly the machine, at one with the taste for this, which was *the means and end* of this achievement: the machine that was mortally despised by Ruskin and Morris. It seems a cruel irony that those machines would one day be masters of the new home.

It is furniture and furnishings, namely where the programme of taste and that of industry could most easily and immediately be brought together, that gives rise to the isms of modern architecture: Functionalism, Rationalism, Constructivism and, of course, New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). The path from here to Gropius's Bauhaus was straightforward.

Alongside the growing taste of the machine in and for itself, there is a parallel in the wilful and manifest mechanicity of its production, the smug *immediacy* of its functional and plastic vision of the tool, the everyday object, furniture. Thus the functionality of the interior and the furnishings becomes aesthetically expressive. Hence, the firm *rejection* of any applied decoration that was detached *from the pure nature* of the object and from its manufacturing technique, hence the taste for the honesty of solid geometry and for simple, clear-cut surfaces. Even in *examples* of today's architecture, you can always distinguish the components of the aforementioned idiom of contemporary taste: classical and romantic, which is the same as saying sculptural and functional.

As for the customary question asked at this point, namely whether the technical factor and the 'new materials' generated the new architectural forms or whether they sprang forth spontaneously from a pure act of free will, I believe the only possible response is the equally silly question of the chicken and the egg. There have even been those who, with the same mentality and lit up by 'pure visibility', have seen Impressionism as the originator of modern architecture (and perhaps, they would like, of the bicycle, too).

Like art nouveau, the 'modern' style also ranked itself in the great catalogue of contemporary eclecticism. Rather than taking its place, it remained involved and absorbed in it, again still an 'elite' style. Anyone perusing an interior design magazine worthy of the name may consider this claim exaggerated, but to be convinced, they need only browse through generic luxury magazines from anywhere in the world. The more homes throughout the Western world they peer curiously into, the more they will be convinced – from Swedish or Lombard bourgeois homes to the North American businessman's house or that of the ageing celebrity, photographed in 'her interior' in London or Paris for the purposes of the society pages of *Vogue* or the like (8). Also significant as expressions of a 'universal' taste are the *always eclectic* interiors of the films made by all the civilised world and imposed by a commercial need for *accuracy* that is above suspicion and for the *ideal* expression of a society's international taste.



This is a new phenomenon in the history of taste. Another phenomenon is equally unique – a *style*, a controversial movement seemingly convinced and legitimised in all its theoretical premises, has never fought in vain for 50 years to become the style of the age. The *concrete and irrefutable* aesthetic results are a tiny percentage, lost in the chaos and accepted by a minority of those who are sensitive and cultured. I am not stating a retraction of 'modern architecture' but making some observations on things ranging from the 'artistic glass' chandelier that gives me light to the legs of the chair I happen to be sitting on. In order to witness some genuine albeit not exceptional architecture, you must *go and see it*, it is a curiosity. When people say 'modern', they currently and erroneously mean a *cipher*, placed in a row with the other no-

less-horrid remakes 'in a style you never tire of': from the botched attempts at 'modernised Chippendale' to the *late Baroque* offered by the *majority of luxury* interior firms *the world over*. The current idea of 'modern' ranges from the fashion for coloured herbarium plants or antique prints on bell-shaped lampshades to the reproductions of old sailing ships which, like the old framed bird prints, no one will ever look at again, not even the person who 'lovingly' chose and unfortunately bought them. The singed or sandblasted 'country-style' rooms and those featuring 'cretonne' fabric that are so 'well suited' to adolescents and divide the space at little expense are the height of current bourgeois audacity. To find an acceptable mass-production result, we must look back to the unshakeable exceptions of Thonet and, in Italy, the straw-bottomed chairs of Chiavari or those found in provincial churches.

These are, however, exceptions that do not bear up against the consistent taste level of *current* production, prior to Louis Philippe, and from there we can easily go back to the furnishings of Ramses and beyond. Even without disturbing Ramses's sarcophagus, we can obtain proof by roaming around the old crocks of any modest antique dealer's, stripped of all hypersensitive snobbery and without expecting to stumble on a piece from the dynasties of Boule, Piffetti, Cressent or Meissonnier: *here, it is the ugly that is the exception*. For counterproof we could then visit a well-known firm of 'antique and modern' interiors to see what they have to offer that is 'posh'.

Even if Morris's utopia was to come true and an authentic artisanal production laboured for the beauty and decor of *everyone's* home, we would still be faced with depressing results. Unlike those of the past, be they Japanese lacquerers or woodcarvers from the days of Louis XVI, today's artisans no longer ride the wave that brings contemporary, *unitary* and therefore *naturally* accepted taste. The artisan, in his hierarchy, formed part of a *true* society, *whatever* that was. Today, he has no world to naturally and unconsciously interpret; now, he searches and *imitates*, if he can, what his client, who has no taste and no sense of a true society, asks him to. In turn, industrialists are not so foolish as to turn a profit-making machine into an institute of aesthetic propaganda. *As I have said, 50 years was not enough for this propaganda to work*. It is with the analysis of this historical paradox in relation to furnishing that I wish to conclude this essay.

The statement of fact regarding a *crisis* in today's society, and the relative diagnoses concerning 'Western decadence' and the like, are a cliché: the idea a nonfiction story that has replaced 'fictionalised life' and the 'saga'. Promised lands (nineteenth century) that are constantly found arid and dry despite a highly refined industrial and mercantile activism, *an uncontrollable technical and scientific progress out of kilter with that of civilisation*, the death of ideals and of unreplaced faiths, the code of silence and passive and *clandestine* amorality are all pieces in a configuration that is

still blurred but that ends with the image of a society which *denies its own present* and seeks *escape* in the most contradictory forms, as already mentioned, towards a *state* which is not its own: a state that is often deceptively and knowingly involved in constructing scenarios and which declares nothing but its own nonexistence. The veneration of *actors*, namely those who are able to recreate the much-pursued *type*, originated with François-Joseph Talma (1790) and with the advent of the Third Estate. This support continues arrestingly with the celebrity conduct of the cinema actor. All are symbols of escapism.

Apart from a *satisfaction with a (perhaps gratuitous) personal preeminence* and apart from biological refinement, *today's society no longer knows what it wants*. It does not really even need a home save for vanity and show; the ideal of the home now equates to the hotel. A fiancé worried about the costs of a new home received his fiancée's reply: 'It's quite simple: a room to sleep in, a bathroom and a car to go off in.'

The artist, a man of his times, can do no more than limit himself to expressing a *subjective world* that is hard to convey. Extreme subjectivity, the cause of noncommunication between the audience and the artist, is also a new phenomenon in history. Every artist emigrates towards unknown shores, individual and detached from a world that has been disowned. The passage here to utopia is but a short step.

We should now state frankly that, even in their highest and most successful present manifestations, the figurative arts are only *truly* interesting to a tiny group of respectable experts, joined by the usual fanatics and snobs. The fact is that the majority, whether the respectable and educated, technicians or the man in the street, serenely and not without reason could not care less about the modern figurative arts, even when they do not find them boring. This is not the place to discuss whether or not this is, as with other arts (tragedy, for instance), a natural death. The fact is, in the practical application of this art, *particularly implicit in architecture*, inevitably fails in the face of the task of designing houses for a society that does not exist, and fails again even when the aesthetic result is perfectly achieved.

This practical failure is clearly revealed inside the home, in the furnishings, where there is a multifaceted and immediate contrast between the world of its designer and that of the inhabitant. In the absence of a common ideal interior landscape to interpret within the intelligible scope of an equally common taste, the architect has created an interior for a hyperuranium world that matches his dream and is organised in his likeness: *a world that does not exist and that cannot exist except in the realm of utopia*. This everyday illusion may indeed have been constructed with real elements that ought to have made it perfect, but in this particular case it died before it was born.

Flawless industrial and mechanical technique makes it possible to take houses to the extremes of purity and refinement for transhumanised beings, pure spirits intent on the serene and daily enjoyment of untouchable spatial and chromatic relationships.

These worlds are quintessentially balanced in Euclidean and Platonic terms, worlds in which you are not allowed to have toothache, debts, family troubles, mishaps or abysmal delays. In these interiors, which *will go down in history as works of art as truly as the most famous ones of all ages*, chance cannot happen. The collision with everyday life would be a constant catastrophe, because a newspaper on the floor, a laid table or a forgotten pair of slippers would all result in a series of collapses.

It is, I believe, far from easy to read a book in these astral surroundings; an armchair shifted just a few degrees from its intended place would bring an intolerable dissonance to such golden-section tension. Admiration is followed by a sense of the unliveable. You would leave it as if emerging from a painting to go and see a Western or a Veronica Lake movie. The entrancingly serene Japanese homes described previously, only *real* to their wise inhabitants and in the dreams of Western architects, appear similar to and as uninhabitable as the high architecture of this Western world.

After these 'golden knots' (up until 1930) 'modern architecture' developed in fairly impeccable but always astral spheres: dynamic form and constructivism, psychological functionalism, romantic calls for a 'return to nature'; a return to original positions as abstract formal exercises. We even see a form of manifest self-negation in the shape of exasperated mechanisms (see existentialism). I repeat, these are programmatic and astral spheres, of critical and argumentative interest only to the usual tiny 'elite'; and they only slightly influence the *architecture that is actually built* throughout the world.

Equally optimistic and utopian is that ever-returning commitment to the idea of the modern interior based on pure functionality, still deluded in its love of predictable sizes and layouts with compulsory directions based on those patterns of a life that are as perfect as they are unknowable, and that could be mistaken for those of a torpedo-boat gun turret. Patterns that inevitably fail all objectives when faced with the countless exceptions that are the norm. The concept could even be extended from the interior layout of the home to the observation of the failure of classical urban planning in general, planned in all its most flexible developments on paper and then in chronic agony from the day of its construction.

Finally, another aspect of utopia is the familiar intellectualistic rejection of *decoration proper*. Without wishing to embark on a disquisition on its essence and the relative demonstration that it is irreplaceable, I shall merely point out the obstinacy with which it comes back in through the window in interiors by great architects, who could not be suspected of any reactionary weakness. By yielding to the surrealist subconscious, albeit a shortlived label, it demonstrated its legitimacy in current taste as in that of every age. Voltaire's paradox is truer than ever: *'Le superflu, chose très nécessaire'* ('The superfluous, a very necessary thing').

It is customary when discussing decoration to conveniently forget or avoid wondering how the embarrassing

problem of its nature was resolved throughout the millennia, from the engraving on a reindeer bone to the Greek 'frieze' and the design on 'high fashion' fabric, and despite all programmatic desires for its *functionalisation* or reduction to the *measured harmony* of purely formal and chromatic compositional elements. It is this *decoration, a pointless gesture*, in the strictest sense of the word, that is one of the most consummate signs of humanity's progressive distancing from animals, which is like saying his *civilisation*. We are miles away from good old Loos's controversial 'Ornament and Crime' (1908).

There is no need to call Freud to the table to find that the origins of decoration begin in *playful* activity - the sublimated liberation of a vitality or instinct that has been 'repressed' by the pressure brought on us by - and this is more pertinent than ever - political legislation that acts on the biological in everyday life. Thus, we could speak again of *rational* disappointment in light of the vitalistic return of *organic* architecture.

This schematic report on the history of the links between furnishings and society certainly should not end with lectures and proposals. Dear architects, we shall continue with the utopia, the only way we have at present to exist as such. The only conclusion we can hope for is to form part of a *genuine* society and that this society, in turn, is not so barbaric that they will have no need for equally authentic houses. ♣

This text has been translated from the Italian by Barbara Fisher, in cooperation with Casa Mollino, Turin. Originally published in Domus 237 & 238, May & June 1949, pp 14-25 (spreads pictured right).

Carlo Mollino was an influential Italian architect and designer who lived from 1905 to 1973. Significant projects by Mollino include the Società Ippica Torinese (1936-9), the Camera di Commercio (completed in 1972) and the rebuilding of the Teatro Regio (1967-73), all in Turin.

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