

In 1953, the Swiss architect, sculptor and graphic designer Max Bill was invited as a guest speaker at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado (USA). “We came to aspen and are meeting there, all of us interested in design [...] people may never agree with our creations. Maybe people do need decoration and ugly things,” he explains to his audience. For him, the need for decoration is incomprehensible and a concept that stands in binary opposition to modernity. Incompatible with his idea of design.

At the end of his speech, Max Bill came to the following conclusion: “Typography and decoration - is nonsense.” This dissociation from the decorative is more than an aesthetic program and it is no coincidence that it was formulated so dismissively at a time when the newly created profession of the designer had to establish itself with all its might as socially relevant and among the artists, the creative intellectuals. Decoration embodied in arts and crafts means unacademic – decoration embodied in femininity means worthless.

This perpetuates gender constructions to this day. For me as a young female designer in 2024, it was a conscious act to overcome my inner discomfort and break through this attribution set over 100 years ago with the beginning of modernism. With the Liga Typeface, I have developed a set of ornaments that can be used to embellish – decoration for graphic compositions and typography.

In the middle of the 20th century, when Max Bill gave this lecture, decoration was established as the antagonist of modernism. Decoration stood for the superfluous, the superficial, the irrelevant: “something extra”, “not primarily useful”. Distance from the arts and crafts with their “feminine” connotations of ornamentation was key to positioning design as serious and socially relevant - design is “useful”.

40 years before Bill's speech, Adolf Loos revealed to the world that the ornament was a crime against art and cultural evolution. In “Ornament und Verbrechen” (1908), modernism is founded on the principle of overcoming ornament. This deconstructs the concept of the decorative arts and legitimizes a specific hierarchy between “high” and applied (“low”) art. „High” art elevated as the ideal to be achieved, replacing ornament. With the figure of the (male) artist and genius, which has been at the forefront of art history since the 19th century, it simultaneously becomes an ideal that, marked with “masculine” attributes, is positioned out of reach for women. From the very beginning of modernism, they were thus actively excluded.

With the consequence that the decorative arts, precisely because of their devaluation, represented the only access for women to a professional occupation within the field of design. Therefore this gender-specific attribution could be historically cemented. With the Bauhaus, Gropius established an institution that was intended to reflect the progressive ideas of modernism. But the clear division “[...] between the beautiful and the strong sex” and the introduction of the women's class - exclusively for textile design - makes the predominant hierarchy unmistakable.

The reality for women artists at this time shows that the rejection of the decorative stands for more than the rejection of an ornamental aesthetic. The connotation with female stereotypes is undeniable. Female artists and designers had to distance themselves very explicitly from this if they wanted to be taken even remotely seriously: “I don’t want to even use this word because I don’t want it to be used in any interview of mine, connected with my work. To me that word, or the way I use it or feel about it, is the only art sin.” said the artist Eva Hesse in an interview with Artforum in 1970.

The construction of the allegedly “universal” design of the modernity proves to be an extremely effective method of exercising patriarchal-colonial dominance. Ascribing decoration as a “sin” and ornamentation as a “crime” is a way of excluding non-patriarchal perspectives. This inheritance of modernity must be identified and made visible.

This is the foundation for breaking down the deep-seated gender stereotypes in design. Or, in the words of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, the first female director of the Department of Graphic Design at the Yale School of Art: “Until social and economic inequalities are changed, I am going to call good design feminist design.”