Chapter Three

The Decorative Esthetics: Abstraction and Ornament

Abstraction is at the very core of the concept of decoration and all decoration is inherently abstract. In fact it could be argued convincingly that abstraction in the visual arts begins with the concept of decoration and this beginning goes all the way to the very first objects made by humans. If graphic representations are also found since the cave paintings of the Neolithic and also in the fired clay votive figures (usually female idols with exaggerated fertility aspects of the early Bronze Age), abstraction also goes as far back in time and manifests itself primarily on functional and votive objects. Among these are ceramic objects, mostly pots and vessels that have come down to us, due to the permanent nature of the ceramic material, so resistant to the ravages of time.

The History of Art wants us to believe, in one of its most enduring myths, that abstraction begins in the early 20th Century in the paintings of Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky in Europe or, simultaneously in the watercolor drawings of John Marin in America. Neither is true. In fact, even within "visual arts" this history is not quite accurate since abstract art, in the form of non-objective drawings, were first exhibited in London in 1864 by Giorgiana Houghton and her "spirit drawings". The fact that these were done by a woman artist while in a spiritualist trance, probably precludes them as well, as pioneer works of abstract art. This "tabula rasa" of the genealogy of abstraction is the result of ideological purposes and the hierarchical structure of the art history. Of course,

non-objective drawings, ink on paper, also have a long, ancient history in oriental art, notably in Zen painting from Japan. Here again, their non-Western origin generally prevents their inclusion within the canon of art history. Unless of course by "art" we mean flat, square things, made by white males, that go on the wall; then, maybe, abstraction in art, i.e. image making, begins with Malevich, Kandinsky and Marin, at that specific time. What we really have here is yet another example of an appropriation of precedence by art history. Since the concept of pictorial abstraction has been part of the formal vocabulary of ceramics for millennia, by ignoring the concept of abstraction in other forms of human expression and experience, namely in functional objects and decorative arts (closely related intrinsically), art history establishes a fallacy and in the process does not only a great disservice to important productions of human creativity but, worst, to the field of art history itself, since this negation or dismissal of abstraction in visual and material culture prior to the beginning of the 20th Century makes it impossible to really understand, explain, evaluate and appreciate the contribution and development of abstraction in the visual arts in the last one hundred years as well. As an example, in the 1950's, a prominent "abstract" painter predicted that we would have a period where abstraction in art would predominate for one thousand years. By art, as is so often the case of course, he meant images, paintings, etc. Not only was this important artist proven wrong almost instantly and definitively within less than fifty years of his prediction (there is not much "abstract" art, in the stylistic sense, being produced anymore, although like all things stylistic, it is enjoying another revival right now), but what is essential to remember is the complete fallacy of the statement, since there had already been a period of abstraction reaching back into the past for at least 30,000 years, and that will hopefully reach into the future for much more than a thousand years! Yet, this investigation of abstraction as a concept was not taking place within image making primarily, but within other cultural practices (object making), which were deemed, and still often are, irrelevant or even worst, impossible to consider as valid within art, and are relegated to the domain of anthropology and archeology, instead, where they are much less troublesome. Even within Modernism itself, in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, abstraction really begins within craft practices and decorative arts, what would become known eventually as "Design", and these early Modernist examples of abstraction are all geometric in nature. Check out the work of British designer Christopher Dresser in the 1880's or in Austria, the ground-braking designs of Michael Powolny, for example, both great examples of minimalism, decades before its manifestation in sculpture in the 1960's.

If abstraction as style, abstraction in its visual and formal aspects has been embraced by art institutions (and most abstract art is stylistic in nature and predicated on a personal, expressive, idiosyncratic and recognizable approach to form), in practice and in theory, abstraction as a concept hasn't been fully understood yet. To do so would require a complete reexamination of the contribution to art history of certain practices (largely craft practices, where abstraction has existed since the beginning of culture) and this would mean the destruction of the present power structures of hierarchies of materials, of art forms, created by current art history and still operating in art institutions.

The main problem is the result of an association within decorative arts between abstraction and decoration. Within craft practices, abstraction, as patterns and motifs added to form, is closely related to decoration, if not totally relegated to it. Of course, within Modernism in visual arts and most notably painting, decoration is the ultimate interdiction. When the Austrian architect Aldolf Loos writes "Ornament and Crime" in 1908, he specifically targets decoration as irrelevant and unessential within Modernism. Ornament, according to Loos, is a superfluous appendage, unfitting to the Modern Age. Within the reductive logic of Modernism and Abstraction in Art, at the beginning of the 20th Century, we see the progressive removal of ornament from functional objects. By 1925 and Art Deco, geometric abstraction reigns supreme in all forms of design and it could be successfully argued, that geometric abstraction in art and in decorative arts is nothing but a stylistic revival of historical precedents going back to the origins of mark-making and object making by humans. What differs is that the work now has a slickness and perfection given by mechanical processes, not quite generally available before when things were hand made. The irony of this is that we have also seen Abstract Art quickly reduced to decoration and product merchandising, something evident in all the posters, postcards, greeting cards and calendars available in Museum shops worldwide.

The resistance of institutions toward objects and specifically decorative objects, and toward decoration as a valid concept, is a resistance to abstraction as a concept as well.

What is Abstraction?

Figurative representation, as we will see in the "Narrative Esthetics" later, imply a system of familiar and recognizable signs directly referencing nature, that is basically

shared and can be read with reasonable consensus by anyone within a culture and even beyond.

Abstraction, on the other hand, is much more ambiguous or, should I say, is ambiguous in a very different way. Figurative representation implies “mimesis” in the imitation of external appearances coming from nature, while abstraction comes from pure form and is not referential or imitative. In that sense, abstraction is more intellectual, cerebral and conceptual. Yet, in our hyper mediated and representational visual environment (very few, if any, of the images we encounter on a daily basis are abstract), we tend to forget that the most basic artistic drive has nothing to do with the representation of nature, but is instead based on abstraction, an abstraction usually geometric in nature. Ornamentation and decoration are the forms this type of abstraction usually takes. Thus, ornamentation is an independent formal category, one that implies strict order, symmetry and repeated patterns. Whether we use the term ornamentation or decoration, the first term being somewhat more positive in art historical discourse, both imply abstraction.

An ornament is an adornment, a decoration with no specific meaning. It is there to animate, accentuate and modify, superficially, the form, whether it is a building or a vase. But if meaning is implied, if the ornament is meant to refer to something, then it becomes a sign, that is to say a single element, and when used in combination with other signs, will signify and convey meaning (rain, for example, as diagonal lines on a pot). If the sign operates independently, it becomes a symbol, which is an abstract figure with meaning, different from other signs and symbols. When used in narratives, symbols are allegories, and together they are methods of conveying meaning. The dialectic and dynamism between ornament, sign and symbol are at the core of the operative power of the decorative esthetics and of all forms of abstraction.

This can also be expressed in another way with three other definitions, where the iconic is a singular element, which represents a group or a category (for example, pottery forms as anthropomorphic representations), the indexical is a sign representing itself (a bowl, for example) and the symbolic is another type of sign, a kind of code, which represents something else (for example the color black representing night, or absence, or death).

It is the art historian Herbert Read who wrote that pottery, and music, are the most abstract of all the arts. This was a rare moment of lucidity and perceptiveness by an art historian, and a courageous, daring and true statement to make. Pots and objects are inherently abstract (conceptually). They can only represent themselves, even if metaphorically they are often substitutes for the human form and physically they often act as extensions of the human body. At the same time, a vessel, such as a teapot, is not an abstraction (formally); it is representational. A teapot is only a teapot because it looks like a teapot; all teapots represent "teapot" as a type of vessel, as a prototype (the first of a kind) or even a stereotype (one of many, all identical). Objects are inherently conceptual; they are the materialization of an idea, even if that idea, that concept, is more often than not function and/or decoration. Containers and objects are the ultimate form of abstraction and their genesis is also profoundly conceptual. In order to make a container or any other object, a rigorous mental and intellectual process must take place, preceding the material, physical process of making itself, or at least simultaneous with it. Containers and objects are conceptually abstract since they do not represent anything (except themselves). They are what I have come to call a "homotopia", a space representing itself.

Yet, these notions of abstraction and conceptualization have been appropriated and absorbed by visual art practices, theory and criticism, and they are generally perceived to be largely unique to visual arts and to language. Object makers need to re-appropriate their historical ownership of these terms. Since obfuscation and appropriation of precedence have been trademarks of art history, I do not foresee redress in the near future. If we were to acknowledge the seminal and important contributions objects have made, through decoration (ornamentation), abstraction and conceptualization to the history of art, the whole structure of art history would have to be rethought and the whole of art history would have to be re-written, from scratch. The history of art we now have is basically, fundamentally useless, except as a subjective accumulation of highly selected "facts".

Decoration itself has a rather negative image in the art world. 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, like images, specifically, can. There is an aspect of truth to this and decoration or the decorative is often nothing more than a pleasant, meaningless organization of forms, shapes, patterns and colors, and this seems to be true especially today, unfortunately. Yet, to reduce all decoration to that limited role is not only

doing it great injustice and disservice, it is also missing out on its great potential for meaning through symbolism and metaphor, and for actually engaging the mind, beyond the narrative, fictional nature of images, through pure abstraction, when art distances itself from external reality to focus on the internal reality of art itself and its experience. Decoration and the decorative as concepts have such a bad reputation within both art making and art history that it is often debated whether abstract painting itself is not anything more than mere decoration, intrinsically, and cannot have the potency and efficiency of representational art. This may be actually true of much abstract painting engaging exclusively with issues of style, yet it remains that abstraction, wherever it finds itself, is intrinsic to human expression and should be embraced and understood for all the potential it contains. In 1917, poet and art critic Hugo Ball asked the question: "Abstract Art? Will it produce more than a revival of ornament?" The question is still valid today.

Recently I found myself in a family restaurant in a small rural town and all around me were local farmers with their family enjoying a Sunday dinner. On the wall were framed reproductions of paintings by Kandinski (one of the "father" of abstraction), which no one was looking at or even noticing. When these images were painted in the 20's, 30's and 40's, they would have been deeply insulting and revolting, absolutely ugly and offensive, to the present company, who would not only have noticed them but be deeply shocked by them as well; they were now nonetheless enjoying their meal in total indifference to the artworks surrounding them. What had once been avant-garde, confrontational, even offensive art had now become invisible, mere decoration in a country restaurant. This will eventually repeat itself with other phenomena as well, now shocking, tomorrow irrelevant.

Ceramics and Decoration:

Decoration in ceramics is a vast subject of inquiry. It is connected to representation when it refers to the natural world, and to abstraction when it refers to signs and symbols, usually connected to an imaginary or spiritual world.

Decoration on early ceramic objects and pots may actually have had a direct connection with human bodies and skin ornamentation. Decoration on pots, since the earliest Neolithic idols and Bronze Age vessels, often reads as ornament, as jewelry applied to the anthropomorphic parts of vessels, the neck and shoulder for example. Ceramic jewelry, like any jewelry is a form of ornamentation, of decoration, for bodies. We

know from found archeological evidence and from anthropological studies that humans have been adorning their bodies with jewelry and more significantly here with tattoos, scarifications and other bodily mark-making for a long time. Decoration on early pots and figures, usually consisting of various combination of dots, lines, spirals and circles organized as geometric patterns, often of great beauty and complexity, may have referenced these skin ornaments on human bodies. We also know that abstract motifs and patterns on pots historically held great symbolism and that the meaning and power of these symbols could be understood by the communities making and using these objects. Nothing was arbitrary or superfluous. This symbolism of abstraction is connected alternatively to sexuality and reproduction, to gender or social roles and positions, to mythologies and religion, and to rituals around birth, growth, death and rebirth and the cyclical rhythm of nature (rain, snow, thunder, etc.) and the rotation of the seasons, as well as geographical references (mountain, cloud, river, tree, etc.) and animals, including humans. In Oriental art, this symbolism can be of great variety and complexity and thousands of forms, shapes, icons and colors are used to signify a vast repertoire of symbols. This intricate language of references, at time obscure, is rather complex and its study demands a dedication I do not personally have. What is important to remember is that any abstract pattern or form or even any use of color was never merely decorative and used only for optical effect and seductive interest, but was always meaningful as a symbol that carried a specific reading, related to the function and intended use of the object itself. Today, images and other marks on objects are unfortunately too often merely “decorative” and the decoration has retained none or little of the symbolic power of historical signs (often abstract) on objects, which connected humans among themselves and with the larger natural world surrounding them and the imaginative world of myths, spirits and religion. Our present obsession with personality and individuality is also evident in our relation to decoration. Historical pots remain anonymous and are never merely decorated, especially those of pre-historical, “primitive” cultures. Their designs always convey symbolic meaning, even if that interpretation must remain for us, by necessity, speculative. This symbolism is very complex yet tends toward universality. It is never purely stylistic and optical, like most contemporary work made today, where personal, individual expression more often than not, unfortunately, produces weak and disconnected work.

All old pots are good. It is impossible to find a bad one. They were made anonymously, in symbiosis with the culture that produced them. Most pots made today,

and most of their decoration, are much weaker since with have lost that connection with the culture we now live in, in order instead to focus on individual expression. Our pots may actually be very beautiful or often very well made, and they usually are, yet they are still bad, or not as good as they could be or even need to be, since they remain in the end meaningless, except as commodity in the exchange of (cheap) gifts. Nonetheless, like all other ceramic objects previously made, they will outlive us and remain as emblems of our schizophrenic culture. This is why it is so important to analyze and absorb the lessons of historical objects. In their forms (function) and in their surface (decoration) they embody a lack of authorship, which also happens to be a characteristic aspect of abstract ornament. Ornament is expressed in art based on a reductive concept. It speaks of an interest in repressing artistic personality, which corresponds to the lack of authorship in ornament. Like so many other aspects of ceramics history, ornament is fundamentally universal instead of personal. It speaks of humanity instead of individuals and this is where its great power lies.

At best, decoration on objects today only plays an iconic role as referent to other signs, for history and for culture, for example. As well, signs on contemporary objects are too often simple optical devices for seduction in order to foster consumerism. This is true for industrial design products as it is for unique, hand made objects, with few exceptions. The decorative now denotes the superficial, the unessential; yet, the surface itself of historical objects, as we have seen, is not just decorative at the conceptual and perceptual levels, but constitutes a system of signs where everything is on the contrary essential, relevant and meaningful when the surface with its ornamentation played a powerful symbolic role (Jean Baudrillard). That surface was never merely decorative. Objects made today need to return to the stage where any marking is essentially symbolic and not only ornamental, void of meaning, beyond visual and optical excitation. Signs (decoration) on the surface of objects must be there essentially to inform us about the nature of the object (it's ontology), how it is perceived and experienced (it's phenomenology) and how we come to understand it (it's epistemology). Any other sign on an object is unnecessary. Modernism and modern design have largely resolved this problem of decoration and ornamentation by altogether dispensing with them. I predict that this situation will very soon change and due to the expanding role and use of computer technologies in both the design, fabrication and marketing of things, the potential for extremely complex and excessive ornamentation will grow and we will soon see the creation of individualized, and customized to each consumer, idiosyncratic and varied decorations on all the industrially

fabricated things in our daily lives. One can already see the effect of this potential in advertisement on city buses. This might create a visual revolution the like of which we haven't seen since the reductive, minimalist, "negative" esthetics of Modernism.

A technical aside:

Decoration in ceramics, except when it is within the clay form or surface alone, is usually defined in relation to a glaze. It can be painted under the glaze, on the glaze or within the glaze itself or over the glaze. Each type of decoration has a logical name and is referred to as under-glaze, in-glaze, on-glaze or over-glaze decoration.

Under-glaze decoration is done in or over the clay surface of the object, which is then covered with a glaze, usually clear but if colored, then transparent or translucent in order to reveal the decoration underneath. The glaze protects the decoration and usually enhances the colors by "wetting" them. That is to say that these same colors left bare, uncovered and unglazed would be much more dull, matt and less vibrant.

In-glaze decoration is more rare and unusual. It happens when the decoration itself is imbedded within the glaze thickness, usually through the use of multiple glazes, applied simultaneously, side by side, or in layers. We have seen examples of that process in the Flux Esthetics.

On-glaze decoration implies an image, representational or abstract, painted or applied over an unfired glazed surface, which will fuse the diverse processes and materials in the heat of the kiln. Maiolica is a great example, and it will be prominently featured in the next chapter on "The Narrative Esthetics". In-glaze decoration embeds the image within the glaze and both become one. It is mostly used for painterly effects and descriptive figuration, as it permits the creation of very complex, elaborate "painterly" surfaces.

Over-glaze decoration is applied over an already glazed, fired and vitrified surface. The colors, called ceramic enamels, are basically ground glass, and are usually mixed with oil (acrylic medium is now also used) then applied to the smooth, hard and shiny surface of the fired glaze, to be subsequently fired again at a much lower temperature than the original glaze to which they will adhere in this "third" firing. Most ceramic objects are fired twice; the first firing is called a "bisque" and it solidifies the clay body, making it stronger,

easier to handle but also porous so that it will then readily absorb the liquid glaze when it is applied. Once glazed, the object is fired a second time, to melt the glaze and fuse it to the clay form. Over-glaze decoration, applied over the fired glaze, requires a third firing. It tends to "sit" on top of the glaze, and feels separate from the form and the surface it covers, as another surface. Since it is fired at a rather low temperature, it abrades and scratches more easily and tends to be reserved for non-functional objects simply meant to be admired.

These distinctions between these types of ceramic decorations (under-glaze, in-glaze, on-glaze and over-glaze) can be complexified further, which often causes more confusion and misappropriation of techniques, even by experts assigning nomenclature to objects. For example, blue and white under-glaze decoration from China became in-glaze decoration when it made its way to Italian maiolica and in Dutch or English "Delft" wares and it then became over-glaze decoration when transferred into decal wares in the work of Paul Scott, for example, and other contemporaries using the historical referent as a sign, while adapting the technique to their specific needs. The use of printed decals also operates such a reversal when an original, unique pattern becomes multiplied, endlessly.

Four Types of Decoration: the "Geometric", the "Arabesque", the "Floral" and the "Blue and White".

The Geometric:

The earliest and longest, continuous decorative tradition is without doubt geometric abstraction. The "Geometric" is at the origin of all ornamentation through repetition and symmetry. In fact, any decorative schema can be reduced to three main aspects, the dot, the straight line and the curved line. The basic language of decoration can be written fully with just such a limited vocabulary of forms and they are at the very root of geometric abstraction. They are also purely conceptual since they do not exist in nature in their purest state (you can find a dot on things in nature but not an independent dot and straight lines are very rare, confined basically to the structure of certain crystals). Their use usually, but not always, leads to patterning, that is, the repeated organization, following mathematical principles, of a basic motif. Abstract ornamentation is much older than the figurative, mimetic imitation of nature. Geometric decoration and patterning can be found all over the world, in all ceramic traditions, through all times, and it is still an

efficient and frequently used method of surfacing in ceramics. Its endless potential for new combinations makes it inexhaustible, and it will probably continue to play a significant role in ceramics decoration for a long time. It remains important to keep in mind and to repeat again that this type of abstract, non-representational decoration is at its best when it retains a highly symbolic nature. This symbolism is also very often universal, with similar shapes and patterns having basically a similar if not identical meaning no matter where and when they were produced. This again speaks of the universality and timelessness of ceramics as an art form. Often, historians make connections between cultures by presenting as evidence the recurrence of identical motifs on pots and other objects. In most cases, these connections are spurious and hide an agenda that is often disturbing as well. Humans are all the same everywhere, fundamentally, and when confronted with an identical problem, tend to come up with similar solutions. This is true as well at the level of form, where similar if not identical pottery forms are found everywhere pots are made and this is also true at the level of surface decoration.

The absolute masters of geometric abstraction and patterning in historical ceramics are the pre-Columbian cultures of the southwest USA, notably the Anazazi and Mimbres cultures and their descendants to this day, the Pueblo peoples. No other cultures have achieved more diverse, complex, sophisticated and intricate use of geometric patterning, at times combined with abstracted, highly stylized animal and human forms. This is achieved with the exclusive used of black paint on a lighter, whitish ground and the dynamism of contrast they create is sufficient for maximum results. Sometimes, black on red with the addition of white is also found, depending on locally available materials. In fact, I would argue that the Anazazi and Mimbres (and now Pueblo) cultures offer the best example of graphic design to be found anywhere at any time (the Islamic world is a strong contender too here), and certainly on pots and pottery forms, especially on deep, half-spherical bowls and on “olla” jars where the overall effect is achieved on either a deep concave surface or as an all around pattern on the convex, bulbous and characteristic shape of the olla, specifically designed to carry precious water while preventing spilling as it is balanced on one’s head. This energized dynamism operating between the seemingly flat, bi-dimensional surface and the concave or convex three-dimensional form is a specific characteristic of the ceramic esthetics and it finds its best and most potent manifestation in complex, contrasted geometric patterning on simple, basic shapes. This

dynamic visual relationship, this specific form of “pictorial space” found in ceramics, will be analyzed further with narrative surfaces in “The Narrative Esthetics” chapter, as well.

Another significant and exceptional example of geometric abstraction in ceramics can be found in the Islamic world, all over its historical sphere of influence from Indonesia all the way west to Morocco and southern Spain. This preeminence and importance of geometric abstraction is due in part to the interdiction found in the Koran for representation and the predilection of Arabic cultures for intricate, complex geometry due to their advanced knowledge of mathematics. Islamic cultures explored the esthetics potential of symmetry more deeply, with more complexity than any other. Due to this veto on representation of living things, which is often transgressed in amazing ways, notably with floral motifs, their art was driven in a very different direction to that found in the Christian cultures of Europe. In architecture, elaborate tiling and tessellations are used to cover space as fully as possible, hardly leaving anything empty or uncovered (an esthetic effect called “horror vacuii”, the fear of emptiness). Many of their great buildings are almost overwhelming in their exploration of symmetry and periodicity. These periodic covering of large surfaces are composed with complex, interwoven patterns that repeat themselves with geometric predictability. A long-standing mathematical challenge has been to discover whether it is possible to tile a never-ending plane with a systematic tiling pattern that is NOT periodically repeating. In the 1960’s, British mathematician Roger Penrose decreased the number to two tiles, in four different shapes, making “kites” and “darts”, and also with two slightly different lozenges, whose angles are calibrated so that they fit together to create an infinite number of different tiling patterns within the plane. Recent discoveries have brought forth that in Uzbekistan, in 15th Century Islamic architecture, “girish” patterns were made with a complex aperiodicity inscribed into larger tiles that underlay the design. This underlying design remains invisible yet is conceptually essential to the overall, visible design. A scroll at Topkapi palace in Istambul depicts how to inscribe larger pieces with a sub-pattern necessary for large scale non-periodic tiling, used as a design guide and tracer for architects. A 15th Century mathematical genius got there five centuries before recent discoveries in geometry and mathematics, aided by computers. The best applications and manifestations of this discovery are found in ceramic mosaic and tile panels all over the Islamic world.

The more sublime uses of tiling, mosaic and the most intricate examples of geometric decoration are found on the interior and exterior of mosques everywhere (see

"Shelter" chapter), yet the most complex, dynamic, inventive and mind-bogglingly intricate patterns are found in the "zelij" mosaic of Morocco, in public and private buildings. These patterns are also found painted, but to a lesser degree, on pots and other vessels forms. Zelij mosaic deserves a special mention. Usually, when ceramic mosaics are made, each tile is individually shaped and glazed. The problem with this method is that the glaze will be a bit thicker all around the edges, since fluid mechanics will make the glaze slightly thicker there, as can be observed with water on a plane surface. When the mosaic is assembled, these differences in glaze thickness will reflect light in such a way that the pattern will then be less sharp and clear and the overall surface will appear mottled instead of smooth and flat. This smoothness and flatness is important in order to make the complexity of the geometric pattern the main visual feature of the ensemble. Zelij mosaic are made from large glazed tiles that are then laboriously cut and shaped, after firing, with chisels and hammers. This is a highly skilled and difficult process but each element of the mosaic design is then assured to have a very sharp, defined edge, with the overall color of the glaze having the same thickness allover the surface. These bits of chiseled tesserae will then be positioned closely, side by side and upside down, and organized following an incredibly intricate pattern. The whole panel is then covered with a binding material, usually plaster. When this has set, the panel is reversed and finally mounted, right side up on the wall to be covered. The final effect hardly shows any space between each individually colored element and the overall surface appears regular, smooth and flat, with no distracting reflections that would conflict with the intricacy of the geometric pattern.

The geometric in decoration is a vast field of inquiry and it takes many other forms. I nonetheless need to single out here the rather common use of binary striping on pots, when bands of alternating black and white, or other contrasting colors are organized in horizontal stripes (much rarely vertical or diagonal, since it is mush easier to apply horizontal banding on a circular form rotating on the wheel, than to add vertical or diagonal lines on a similar form). This creates an optical dynamism that animates the surface of the vessel to activate the form and connects the finished object to the transformative process of making. It is as if the object was still in movement, as if it had retained some of the rotation and spinning that took place as it was formed and as it was decorated. Numerous examples could be cited from time immemorial, all over the world, notably from Crete. I will single out here the exemplary vessels of Roseline Delisle and the terra-sigillata pots of Greg Payce.

The Arabesque:

The arabesque is based on a transformation of the organic palmette, a fan like vegetal motif often found on Greek pots. Like the palmette, the arabesque is organic in origin and is composed of an organization of curves and curving lines, often changing direction, unexpectedly, with the potential to endlessly divide, endlessly repeat. In geometric decoration, the "figure" predominates over the "ground" or the two are in a position of equilibrium, at least in the best examples. In the arabesque, the figure/ground relationship is reversed, the arabesque making visible the space between things. Its organization of dynamically sweeping elements animates the ground and reveals the energy between the ground, the negative space, and the figure. This dynamic oscillation between figure and surface, this alternation between pattern and ground is at the origin of all ornamentation.

The absolute masters of the curved line, the essential characteristic of the arabesque, in all of its possibilities, are again the Islamic cultures. The calligraphy observed in the writing of the Arabic language already provides the best example of a curvilinear graphic sensibility to be found anywhere. Koranic script has two main forms, the "kufic" which is rectilinear and geometric in form and is often used for that reason in brick architecture, and another cursive calligraphic form, very sensuous, fluid and curvilinear, based on the principles of the arabesque. In Islamic architecture, quite often, Koranic quotes are located in spaces that are not readily, if at all, accessible to the viewer. To write something or decorate something that cannot be read or seen, except by God, is an act of defiance toward reality and of reverence toward the spiritual. (see also "Text" chapter) If the Arabic potters learned a thing or two from their Chinese counterparts, through the commercial exchange of the Silk Road, it is nonetheless during the Ottoman period in Turkey that the best examples of the use of the arabesque can be found, more specifically in the ceramics produced at Iznik for the sultan's court and the coverings on the major mosques in Istambul. The arabesque is an abstracted form of organic, floral patterning. Its basic principles consist of a curved line that divides in two, then again and again, repeatedly. The arabesque never ends or begins, it endlessly unfolds and bifurcates, and as a structuring principle, it has universal validity, and it is found everywhere. It is actually a form of simplified fractal-like design and one of its most beautiful uses is in the paisley shawls, woven in wool in Kashmir, in northern India. The

symbolism of the arabesque represents the universal dynamism of growth in nature and the power of creation through regeneration. The arabesque makes visible the form of the cosmos (galaxies are generated as arabesques), and to infinity through repetition. It expresses all universal relationships as they relate to the principles of order and disorder and to natural law. In Islam, ornament is an expression of the divine omnipotence, and the arabesque is an organic design representing flowers as abstracted gardens, with echoes of paradise. In the Orient, it represents constant change and movement, the fact that nothing is static in nature, or what Physics calls entropy in the second law of thermodynamics.

In Europe, the arabesque finds its ultimate expression in the Rococo scrolls of 18th Century decorative arts (see the figurine in "The Figure…" chapter), so influential, to this day, remnants of which can even be found in the streamlined, aerodynamic designs of industrial Modernism. The arabesque is the last true ornament in the history of ornamentation. The "rocaille" curves and scrolls of the Rococo actually constitute the last true ornament in the history of decorative arts, in the sense that it is different from anything that preceded it and nothing new in the language of ornament has been discovered since. Art Nouveau, for example is but an extension of the principles of the arabesque, in a more naturalistic and descriptive vein. Since the 18th Century, we have simply composed with a decorative vocabulary that has been passed down to us and that we may have modified, yet without adding anything substantially new. The next thing would be to come up with a new form of ornament, one that has not been conceptualized before. Maybe new technologies will make that possible. The challenge has been set…

The Floral:

If the arabesque is floral in inspiration, its basic structure and virtual quality, while wildly organic, remains fundamentally abstract. A more representational approach to floral design is also frequently, very frequently in fact, found in ceramics. Despite their descriptive believability, at times to the point of "trompe- l'oeil" illusion (see "The Simulation Esthetics" chapter), flowers in ceramics are not representation per se, since they do not imply a clear narrative. Instead, like geometric abstraction, their role is usually if not always symbolic and this symbolism can be quite complex. Most of that symbolism

of flowers can be quite familiar and despite the fact that it changes somewhat from culture to culture, it retains a lot of universality and can be interpreted with relative ease.

Floral decoration in ceramics, usually painted on the surface, are found everywhere, all over the world, a fact that comes as no surprise. Flowers can also be realistically modeled at times, especially in European Rococo porcelain and all its numerous derivatives all the way to today. Great examples of this can be found at Meissen in Germany, at Bow in England, at Capodimonte in Italy, then Spain, and today in the incredibly realistic flower sculptures of Boehm in the USA (see "The Simulation Esthetics" chapter). Not to forget their efficient use in Jeff Koons's "Michael Jackson and Bubbles", whose base is covered with gilded porcelain roses, one of the few elements of this sculpture to retain a ceramic quality (the rest of it is actually painted and covered with a clear resin, a fact that is never mentioned anywhere on museum labels or in the extensive literature on this artwork). Jeff Koons's masterpiece was fabricated, in an edition of three, to the specification of the artist at Capodimonte in Naples in the 1990's (see "The Figure and the Figurine" chapter).

The earliest examples of floral decoration on ceramics can be found in Mesopotamia, in the Babylonian glazed brick walls, adorned with rows of white and yellow daisy like flowers and in Egypt as well, as we would expect. Yet one of the most interesting early example is found in the pre-Columbian vessels of the Chavin culture of Peru (900 BCE). It is in the Chavin culture that we also find the earliest appearance of the distinctive "stir-up" vessel shape, which will play such a continuous and important role in funerary and ritual Peruvian pottery, all the way to today. The stir-up vessel is a specifically ceramic pottery from, in itself a very rare thing, and is not found in any other material or anywhere else than in the pre-Columbian cultures of Peru. Variations are found in all of these nonetheless diverse cultures, over a two thousand year period. This peculiar shape is still puzzling to us today, and no plausible explanation has ever been brought forward as to its use or function. Chavin ceramics is also distinctive by its burnished black color surface and its minimalist, modern looking forms that are never painted. Their design instead is carved or modeled in the clay, within the form. Some of these carvings are depicting very interesting flower patterns, bold, reductive four petals blooms with a circular centre, very similar, identical really to those seen in 1960's pop art designs. In fact such a stylized, minimalist approach to floral decoration will only reappear later in 17th Century Japan, in the work of Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743) and the Rinpa

school of decorative arts and then again in 1960's Pop design, art and fashion. Decorative arts flourished and developed rather independently in Japan, when the country closed its ports at the end of the 16th Century, due to the unwanted influence of meddlesome European missionaries. Until 1854, when the American Commodore Perry got others to reopen, only the port of Nagazaki was accessible to foreigners and then only to Dutch vessels. During this long period of isolation, Japan developed an extremely refined, sophisticated and specific decorative esthetics and floral patterning is at the core of this burst of creativity. The ceramics of Nonomura Ninsei (1648-1690, and the first Japanese potter to sign his work) are a great example of this explosion of a specific approach to decoration in Japanese art. His pictorial vessels with floral, all around depictions are particularly impressive.

An analysis of all the possible and different uses of floral decoration in ceramics would require an extensive study, one I hope someone will enterprise someday. To single out a few possibilities, one of the most interesting conceit in the use of flowers and other plant forms in ceramics happens, most often in Rococo ceramics, when multiple, contradictory yet consecutive decorative schemes are mixed together, say a realistic bouquet framed by a garland of abstracted blooms, with modeled, dimensional blossoms elsewhere on the body of the vessel. This mixing of stylistically different and potentially confusing forms disorients our perception, by combining a representational perspective image with a stylized one and another even more realistic modeled flower form. This presents us with three diverse yet similar floral schemes altogether in continuity thematically and in separation, stylistically and conceptually. This use of formal and perceptual disorientation is specific to ceramics and is not fond to that degree anywhere else in the visual art, until the recent experiments with collage within Modernism and the stylistic confusion and appropriations of post-Modernism. Another similar disorientation of the senses happens when multiple different decorative schemes are used on the same object, say a heraldic or symbolic icon in the middle of a plate, framed by a decorative, ornamental border itself surrounded by a representational, narrative, perspective image. Italian maiolica of the Renaissance made great use of this multiplicity of techniques and of this mega-visual approach, yet it can be found in Oriental examples as well, specifically on objects made for exports to the European market. In Europe, a great example of this kind of formal mixing can be found in the famous Swann service (see Food chapter) made at Meissen, in Germany, which combines a coat of arms in polychrome enamels over a water

landscape with swimming swans in low relief carved on a ground representing a large marine shell form making the white porcelain dish itself.

The most extreme examples of the use of flowers in ceramics remains the “thousand flowers” decoration in “famille rose” overglaze enamels made for export in China during the Qing dynasty (late 18th and 19th Centuries). “Famille Rose” decoration is part of a group of decorative styles developed in China, during the reign of emperor Kang-xi (1654-1722), following the introduction by French Jesuit missionaries of European enamel colors. These recently developed European enamel colors used colloidal gold and arsenic as a whitening agent and their discovery comes out of experiments made at Meissen in Germany, at the beginning of the 18th Century, at the court of Frederick the Great, in an attempt to discover the secret of transmuting lead into gold. These pointless and fruitless experiments in alchemy led nonetheless to the discovery of true, hard paste, high fired porcelain in Europe (see “on clay” addendum) and the development of a wide range of new enamel colors based on gold, which could be added to the existing palette of enamel colors used since the Middle Ages on glass and enameled metal wares. All these over-glaze enamel colors provided a full color spectrum and could be fired on the new (to the Europeans), white porcelain body to achieve a richness and pictorial complexity, similar to oil painting eventually (see ‘The Simulation Esthetics” chapter), not found previously on ceramics. In fact these new enamel colors on porcelain provided the most vivid and intense chromatic experience one could have at the time and surpassed only with the discovery of chemical dyes used in textiles and printing in the 19th Century. When the Jesuits brought these new enamel colors to China (along with blown glass technology and other European technical developments like plaster molds), they were instantly adopted and to this day they are called by the Chinese: “foreign colors”. The Chinese potters had been using color enamels on stoneware since the Song dynasty but their palette of colors was limited to the lead based colors available for glazes since the Tangs (brown, yellow, green and rarely blue), now supplemented as well with a rather dull iron red. These colors were used on porcelain during the Ming dynasty in a very effective combination with underglaze blue, the color that is the most defining of the Chinese ceramics esthetics. These lead-based enamels are translucent and somewhat runny so their use is limited to accents to define simple shapes. On the other hand, the new “foreign colors” enamels are very stable when applied and when fired, and since the colors are made with ground glass that has already been fired (the technical term is “fritted”), they look almost identical when applied as they will appear after firing, which provides great control and predictability for

the painter. These enamels are made opaque with arsenic and when they are mixed with oil they can be easily painted on ceramic surfaces, where they provide a full spectrum permitting complex painterly images to be fired on ceramics, as well as incredibly intricate decorative effects. These opaque colors could also be easily intermixed to create gradations of tone and shade, and could be used like oil paints to create highly representational, realistic images, something that was not possible before. Depending on the main color used by the Chinese potter in the decoration, the various decorative surfaces of these over-glaze enamels are named famille rose, famille jaune, famille verte and famille noire, each distinctive not only visually but also in the range and type of patterns used in each "famille" group. "Famille Jaune" and "Famille Noire" wares usually refer to the use of this color in the all over monochrome background of scenes, a very spectacular use of color, rather unusual since it is unrealistic yet highly effective as a decorative effect. The "famille verte" enamels actually use green only as an accent and for that reason it is the least obvious of the four to define and recognize. Green as a color for executing designs is not very common in ceramics. Contrary to blue, which is widely used, or even red or black, less usual but more common, especially together, green seems not to possess the necessary independent substantiality (Rawson). The color green in ceramics is usually transparent and this reduces its efficiency, since it lacks the depth, consistency and materiality to sustain a design by itself. The color is also highly fusible and tends to bleed, run and appear fuzzy, all of which prevents it from being used to define or delineate designs. The color most often used in ceramics remains blue, which is easily and readily obtained, remains very predictable and provides great control and consistency. "Famille noire" wares are very theatrical and spectacular, and their allover black ground is usually overlaid with the transparent green enamel, which helps in reviving and enhancing the vibrancy of the black ground, which would be a bit too flat, with a shallower depth otherwise. If green as a color is rarely used, except as an allover color (celadon, for example) or in a descriptive role (for leaves and foliage, usually), it can nonetheless be used very effectively by combining the two effects, all over and description, on molded botanic surfaces in dishes and plates where their after-image will enhances the redness of a polished wood table top on which they are placed. These kinds of botanical dishes were very popular in England, for that very reason, in the late 18th and 19th Century and they are still being made today. This notion of after-image needs to be explained here. When the eye looks at a color for a certain amount of time, a retinal imprinting happens and when we move our eyes slightly to look away at a white surface, a fuzzy after-image of the observed pattern, in a complementary color will seem to appear, floating on the light

ground. If one looks at red, for example, the after-image will be green, and vice-versa. With blue and white, this phenomenon is particularly effectively produced, and when we look at the blue image and then look at the white ground, an after-image in orange will tint the white to a warmer tone. This will greatly change the dynamic of the visual experience and the overall effect of the blue and white pattern. According to Philip Rawson, whom I am paraphrasing here, it is virtually certain that this effect was considered by Chinese potters and that they accordingly adjusted and deliberately calculated the color quality of their white ground so as to either cancel or assert the complementary after-image of their blue. Depending on the color(s) used in the composition, the white porcelain would be made cooler or warmer, in order to balance the after-image with the composition and energize the image. This was also considered with their polychromatic, over-glaze enamel designs. Again this after-image effect is rather specific to ceramics esthetics and to oriental porcelain specifically, where it can be used and controlled very effectively. It is very noticeable on Kakiemon porcelain from Japan, where the whiteness of the porcelain ground, quite expansive and considered very carefully within the overall composition, very effectively operates an after-image with the red enamel color, supplemented with yellow and green, of the characteristic Kakiemon palette.

The “famille rose” enamels are by far the more popular and widely used. The “thousand flowers” pattern presents us with an all-over surface of realistic flowers covering the whole vessel completely. It is one of the most extreme and iconic surfaces found in floral design and in enamels on porcelain and its excessiveness has been tremendously influential in decorative arts. It represents a tour-de-force technically, stylistically and esthetically, bordering at times on bad taste, and could only have been devised and realized by the Chinese mind.

Blue and White:

Without a doubt the greatest contribution ceramics has made to visual culture is blue and white decoration. It is the most important and influential ceramic decoration and

its impact can be felt widely, in textile patterns and designs, in printed wallpapers, and in dinnerware patterns as well, all the way to today.

Blue is far and away the commonest and, incidentally, the oldest, non-clay color in the history of ceramics. Blue as a color is very reassuring and it is psychologically calming in human experience, since it creates a natural and inevitable association with water as well as the open sky. The use of cobalt, the mineral providing the color blue in ceramics, originates first in Mesopotamia and Egypt as we would expect and then finds wide use in the Islamic world, where blue represents paradise, while green represents the prophet Mohamed himself, and green itself is used as a substitute for the prophet, since his image, his representation was forbidden by the Koran. Cobalt blue pigment was then exported from the Middle East to China through the commercial exchanges of the Silk Road. It is for a long time a very rare, expensive material in Chinese ceramics and it is thus very rarely used, and where it is only very occasionally found, on Tang ceramics at first. It finds its use more commonly in blue and white porcelain first during the Yuan dynasty when the Mongols are actually the masters of most of the Orient, from Persia in the Middle East all the way to the China Sea in the Far East. This vast Mongol empire facilitates not only commercial exchange but, most importantly, technical and artistic exchange. Thus, the cobalt blue pigment can finally be exported in sufficient quantities to the Imperial potteries of Jingdezhen, where it finds a ready use in under-glaze painting on the recently refined, pure, white porcelain clay body, reserved for the needs of the imperial court in Beijing. The Yuan cobalt blue is of dark color, even turning black depending on concentration, and it is called by the Chinese Mahomedan blue, since the cobalt ore was imported from Islamic areas, coming all the way from the far western parts of the Mongol domain. Some of the patterns used by the Chinese potters were actually Islamic as well in origins, and after spending some time in China where they were transformed and adapted to the local sensibility, many of these patterns returned to Persia and Turkey where they were then influential in the current wave of ceramic decoration. Iznik ceramics, which is white earthenware emulating Chinese porcelain but rarely imitating it, often makes use of these oriental patterns that may have been Islamic in origin, actually. The Arabic and Turkish potters were not aware that they were somewhat copying not only Chinese patterns but indirectly the altered designs of their own ancestors from centuries past. During the Ming dynasty, contemporary with the Renaissance in Europe and the beginning of the Ottoman empire in the Middle East, a Chinese source of cobalt mineral is finally found and the distinctive Chinese blue, with a warm, purplish tone and a finer, more

consistent color value than the Yuan blue, is developed and applied to wares that constitute the supreme achievement of blue and white under-glaze painting and decoration on porcelain. These blue and white porcelains produced in vast quantities will be traded and exported to Turkey then to Europe where they will have a tremendous impact, not only on the development of new Islamic (Iznik wares from Turkey) and in European ceramics traditions (early experiments in Venice and Florence in "Medici porcelain" which is not actually porcelain at all but a translucent "fritted" white earthenware, then finally in Meissen in Germany, where true, hard paste porcelain is first discovered in Europe, in 1710), but in all the decorative arts, notably in the mania for "chinoiserie" decoration in furniture, textile and interior design in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

If blue and white decoration is the most commonly found in ceramics, white on blue is much more rare. There are limited uses found in a few examples of Italian maiolica, usually combined with areas painted in the usual palette. In these examples, the white glaze is applied in intricate, very fine patterns over a glaze that has been colored light blue. The effect is very refined, lace-like almost, yet rarely used and never by itself, as an overall decoration on an object. White on blue is also found, more commonly this time, in the unglazed Blue Jasper wares made by Wedgwood in the late 18th Century (and to this day), where ornaments and figures sprigged in white porcelain are positioned over a blue ground. Cheaper imitations abound as well, often is a strange interpretation where the ware is glazed, trapping the sprigs under a thickish substance that is almost unpleasant. The white on blue effect in ceramics is usually quite subtle if unusual, a bit unsettling even, at times, thus, its efficiency. It is also a form of reversal of the very common and familiar blue on white. It has never really taken hold, interestingly enough and its potential rewards are still largely to be explored.

The example of the "willow pattern":

One of the main pictorial conceit of the Chinese blue and white esthetics consist of an idealized landscape with figures. This formalized image was to have a tremendous impact in the development of subject matter in all the decorative arts and specifically on ceramic vessels and figurines. The figurine in ceramics is a Rococo invention and it comes directly from chinoiserie decorations, themselves coming from Chinese porcelain designs, where idealized landscapes, with or without figures, can be found as a painted motif. It

eventually finds its way in the familiar pattern found in “toile de Jouy” in France, and in rather tasteless wallpaper patterns all the way to today. Toile de Jouy depicts a pastoral scene of shepherds and shepherdesses, inspired by the bucolic scenes of oriental porcelain, transported to an ideal, utopian, European context. The scene is organized within a rocaille frame and is repeated as a pattern all over the printed fabric or wallpaper. The color combinations vary from blue and white, to brown, red, green, even black on white. The action within the image, the scene within each frame changes within the repeated pattern of the framing device. If this was an abstract pattern, then the repetition could be continuous but within a narrative subject, repetition becomes senseless. Repetition can only happen at a farther distance (two identical scenes cannot be side by side) in order for memory (visual and literal) to forget the previous experience of a similar image. This is also done with descriptive, realistic scene on pottery forms, for the same reasons. This ideal, innocent, bucolic landscape of Chinese porcelain serves as a model for the creation of the most widely used pattern in ceramic tableware, to this day, the “willow pattern” designed by Thomas Minton in England in 1780. The willow pattern is printed from an etched copper plate into paper and then transferred to the ceramic object, which is then glazed and fired to bring out the blue color. This transfer printed decoration is an under-glaze technique, and for that reason it has remained very popular due to ease, speed and cheapness of production and to the resilience of the pattern to wear, since it is covered by the protective layer of the clear glaze. It is the earliest use of printmaking and of a true industrial process of image making in ceramics. The “willow pattern” represents a formalized set up of a pagoda under a willow tree, with an arched bridge over a brook or a lake, with two birds facing each other as they fly in the sky. These birds are meant to represent two fateful lovers, killed in a fire set by a disapproving father. None of this passionate melodrama is actually depicted in the pattern itself, which is meant nonetheless to convey the feeling of impossible yet eternal love. Since it is so widely used all over the world and still popular and in production, it has been used by many contemporary ceramics artists as a stereotypical iconic ceramic surface, efficient as a symbol for ceramics itself as well as for its potential for metaphorical associations with history and utopian, ideal times. Numerous contemporary artists, in ceramics and elsewhere are now using the pattern in such a fashion. IT is quite remarkably popular right now. The “willow pattern” like all blue and white patterns is reassuring, calming, familiar and innocent. Contemporary artists tend to use it in rather confrontational, often political works in order to create an opposition between form and content. These kinds of

oppositions and contradictions are often found in contemporary ceramics and the use of the blue and white willow pattern is very efficient example of this practice.

A bit more historical context: Blue and white decoration on porcelain of the Wan-Li type (1573-1619) first appears in Holland in the 17th Century, where it is imitated on the white earthenware pots from Delft and its derivatives in England, then all over the world. The same phenomenon will be repeated a bit later through Meissen imitations in Germany of the Chinese Kang-Xi and Japanese Imari enamel decorations, which will both greatly influence European ceramics and other decorative arts as well. The Japanese Imari color palette is also very distinctive and if it is relatively easy to recognize, it is also difficult to assign effectively, since it has been so widely copied everywhere and is still popular now. Imari wares are painted in under-glaze blue, which is then painted after firing with over-glaze red enamels, and then exuberantly finished with gold luster decoration. The use of gold, the intricacy of the patterns, the laborious process as well as the multiple firings necessary to achieve the impressive results, all converge to make Imari ware very expensive and luxurious. The combination of the deep blue, the bright red and the flashy gold proves irresistible and that decorative scheme is one of the most popular in ceramics history.

The example of the after-image in blue and white porcelain provides the opportunity for this kind of subtle, informed use of the perceptual mechanisms of visual experience, as they affect the esthetic experience. This needs to be understood and absorbed by the contemporary potter, if the superb examples of Chinese blue and white under-glaze porcelain painting are to be not only imitated slavishly but their achievement met if not even surpassed, eventually. Another aspect of blue and white that could be of interest to the student or the maker of such decorative wares now is that the color blue in chromatic image making can actually replace black where it then becomes, to cite Rawson again, “active shadow” and “positive darkness”. Rawson is very eloquent about the use of various colors in ceramics and I would refer the interested reader to his very perceptive and informed comments on the subject. Suffice to reaffirm that distinctive polychromy is probably one of the pre-eminent formal characteristic of ceramics and the aspect where it situates itself with the most independence from other art forms, including sculpture.

Contemporary examples:

The accepted discourse concerning ceramic objects often mentions the symbiotic relationship between form and surface. Actually, it could be stated that the surface is actually more important than the form itself, in its potential to carry symbolic meaning more readily. If forms in ceramics are more generic and less specific, the surfaces can be highly diverse and offer much more potential for variety. And after all, it remains obvious that images (surfaces) are always more powerful than objects (form).

Leopold L. Foulem's ceramics work has as a subject the very specificity of ceramics, and not just

formally through specific contexts and functions, but more importantly, conceptually. In the ceramic works of Leopold L. Foulem, whose ideas and theories I am using here, the binary proposition form/surface is rendered more complex in the formula form/surface/surface. In his exceptional, seminal and highly original if puzzling work, the association is not only between the tension form/surface where the form itself determines the surface. On the contrary, often in his case, it could be said that it is the surface that creates the form, in another formal and conceptual reversal, as if the object had no "form", no perceptual thickness and the interior pressure extended all the way to the exterior skin; as if the clay had dematerialized and all that remained were the two surfaces, the surface of the ground and the surface of the figure, suspended in the air without any real support. The fact that the expected openings on top of vessels are here closed and sealed, making the volume appear as a mass, only reinforces this impression. The form is not as much a shell anymore as a bloated balloon, with no real physicality. It has become pure representation, with the excessive, exaggerated "foot" at the base, often covered in gold, serving as a frame to reaffirm the nature of the object as image, as abstracted representation of a thing, and not a thing in itself. This complex analysis of the two surfaces implies a surface as physical presence and pictorial field (the ground color) and another surface as a non-representational formal component, as abstract concept (the decorative pattern). This form/surface/surface is emblematic of Foulem's work and it represents a totally new field of inquiry for ceramics. It explores the notion of spatial aporia, that is to say the inherent irreconcilability between the spatial and the planar in

art. The container and all pottery forms, can be perceived as a deliberate space which is at once spatial and planar, altogether three-dimensional form and two-dimensional surface. Within this system, the ornamental motif is not just an observation of nature but operates instead and grows out of its own internal logic, in this contradictory dialectic between form and surface. Ceramics, and particularly in its intimate and specific connection to decoration, is the ideal arena for such investigations to be developed further. Foulem's work and theories examine the intrinsic plurality of functions surface has in ceramics, where we can find alternatively: surface as process, when the traces of making informs the surface; surface as covering, when another surface alters the original surface; surface as structure when the surface reaffirms the structural nature of the form; surface as narrative, when it carries representations; and surface as signifier, when its abstract nature as an independent image, as a sign, is the most evident. Here again, it can be noted that pictorial abstraction in surface designs has been part of the vocabulary of ceramics for millennia. If the surface in ceramics is therefore essentially a shell, the outer perimeter defining the volume of a pottery form, it is nonetheless very complex in its language and in its various manifestations. For example, we could say that the interior surface of a bowl is the exterior aspect of its interior. This may seem like a futile semantic game, but is it but one example of what can be implied when we use the term surface to designate an aspect of a pottery form. The form/surface/surface theorem as defined in Foulem's works and writings is of that nature as well. Most glazes on decorated vessels create a surface as surface; one of the layers (the clay surface) establishes the real nature of the thing itself, and the second layer (the glaze surface) establishes the superficial (used here as a descriptive term) appearance. The reason to affix a third surface in the equation is to stress the singularity of ceramics as an art form, since a third surface, a decoration over the glaze is also often present. The necessary difference within the context of ceramics, and not found to that degree elsewhere, is that surface as surface as surface is about the representation of a stylistically recognizable surface proper to ceramic as a specific and autonomous genre, in art. More surfaces can even be added, not only physically to objects, but conceptually as well. Each of these will also operate, visually, esthetically and conceptually independently from the preceding or succeeding surface. In conventional painting, the canvas, the support for the paint is not a surface per se, it remains more structural and physical than conceptual. In ceramics, all surface aspects need to be properly considered, nothing is merely structural. In ceramics, the support, the primary surface offered by the clay form is independent conceptually and it operates according to its own logic and necessities. It has an independent role and meaning from

the other surface itself, and all the other surfaces, as well. Another example of such surface complexity, at the perceptual and conceptual levels, is found in the seminal work of Ron Nagle, which also explores effectively the role of frames and framing in ceramic surfaces and on ceramic forms, as we will see in the next chapter.

I have mentioned earlier, within the geometric decoration, how black and white stripes can be effectively used to create an optical dynamism of opposites, in order to reconnect the static object with its rotating genesis, which energizes the form. In the work of Roseline Delisle, this is used to great effect. In her work, beyond the obvious banding, "fins" are also used as pointed, decorative elements encircling the piece, like rings preventing it from bursting at the seams. They serve to contain the interior pressure retained by the form as it was expanded on the potter's wheel. The painted stripes play a similar role, containing the implied pressure, that tautness of the precise, perfect, mechanical forms, blown, expanded, dilated from the inside, like a balloon. The decoration is similar to the concentric circles and the banding of Cretan and Greek pots as well as the banding found in the work of Greg Payce, for another exemplary model among many. The perfection of the banding and stripes is partly an illusion caused by the optical play of dark and light and the kinetic jump of the eye over the surface. The stripes, in their variety and slight differences, make the eye move over the piece. This adds to the impression of movement and contradicts the apparent stillness of the piece. This tension of the horizontal band with the vertical shape is the main energy animating the work.

Swiss ceramic artist Philippe Barde intelligently decomposed and deconstructed a standard blue and white pattern while in residency in Jingdezhen, China, in 2000. This work was subsequently shown in the exhibition "Retour de Chine". In one work, consisting of six porcelain rice bowls, he deconstructs a Ming blue and white pattern, by changing to a new bowl each time a new person intervenes in the process. If we actually consider the whole process of making such a bowl, he is off by quite a few persons. When French Jesuit Father d'Entrecolles first went to Jingdezhen in the 18th Century and reported in an influential series of letters on the manufacture of porcelain in China, he counted 72 different processes, thus 72 different hands necessary to make a porcelain piece from start to finish. In Philippe Barde's work, the full pattern can only be reconstructed if we recombine mentally the fragments of images found on the first five bowls to then look at the completed result on the sixth bowl. In this work, Barde decomposes a benign pattern over the six bowls, showing the intervention of each worker. His problem and questioning

had to do with a rapport to perfection; the big question of the opposition between symmetry and asymmetry, the Ming potter having perfection as a goal, thus perfection as a mean as well. This opposition between symmetry and asymmetry is also found in the dichotomy between classicism and modernism. Barde was curious to see if the equilibrium of the pattern, the balance of the drawing, would be maintained despite its deconstruction and incompleteness on each object. Of course, the Chinese painters succeeded nonetheless in maintaining that order and each bowl remains a masterpiece of balance, despite the fact that the remaining decoration is missing. This is due to the fact that in Chinese ceramics, the pictorial space (as we will see in the next chapter, "The Narrative Esthetics"), the white, empty ground is not void and irrelevant but always considered fully as part of the image and integral to it. This is even true when the image is willfully incomplete and decomposed as is the case with Barde's intellectual, conceptual and perceptual problem. He also repeated the same exercise with a five color, polychrome enamels image of a dragon, to similar effect, analyzing by deconstruction, the mentioned relation of the image to the white ground in Chinese art.

At the recent Olympic games in Beijing, blue and white porcelain medallions could be purchased as souvenir and their publicity stated that they were conceived to "express China and impress the world". When Chinese artists make use of blue and white porcelain decoration, they mean to refer to Chinese culture, which is exemplified by blue and white porcelain. But when artists from other parts of the world do the same, their use of blue and white is meant to represent ceramics itself, as an art form. Since blue and white porcelain not only represents Chinese culture but more importantly here, it also represents ceramics in all its distinctiveness.

Surface decoration in ceramics, either geometric abstraction or organic arabesque, whether floral or representational, polychrome or blue and white remains one of the intrinsic aspects of ceramics as a distinctive art form with its own specific esthetics, where the surface is independent, conceptually from the form itself. This dynamism form/surface is energized by the inherent opposition between a three-dimensional form and a two-dimensional surface. This is particularly evident in the extraordinary, complex and varied solutions found in ceramics within the decorative esthetics and in its influence on all the other decorative arts as well as visual arts. The contribution ceramics as made to culture through decoration is seminal, tremendously important and, hopefully, continuing.