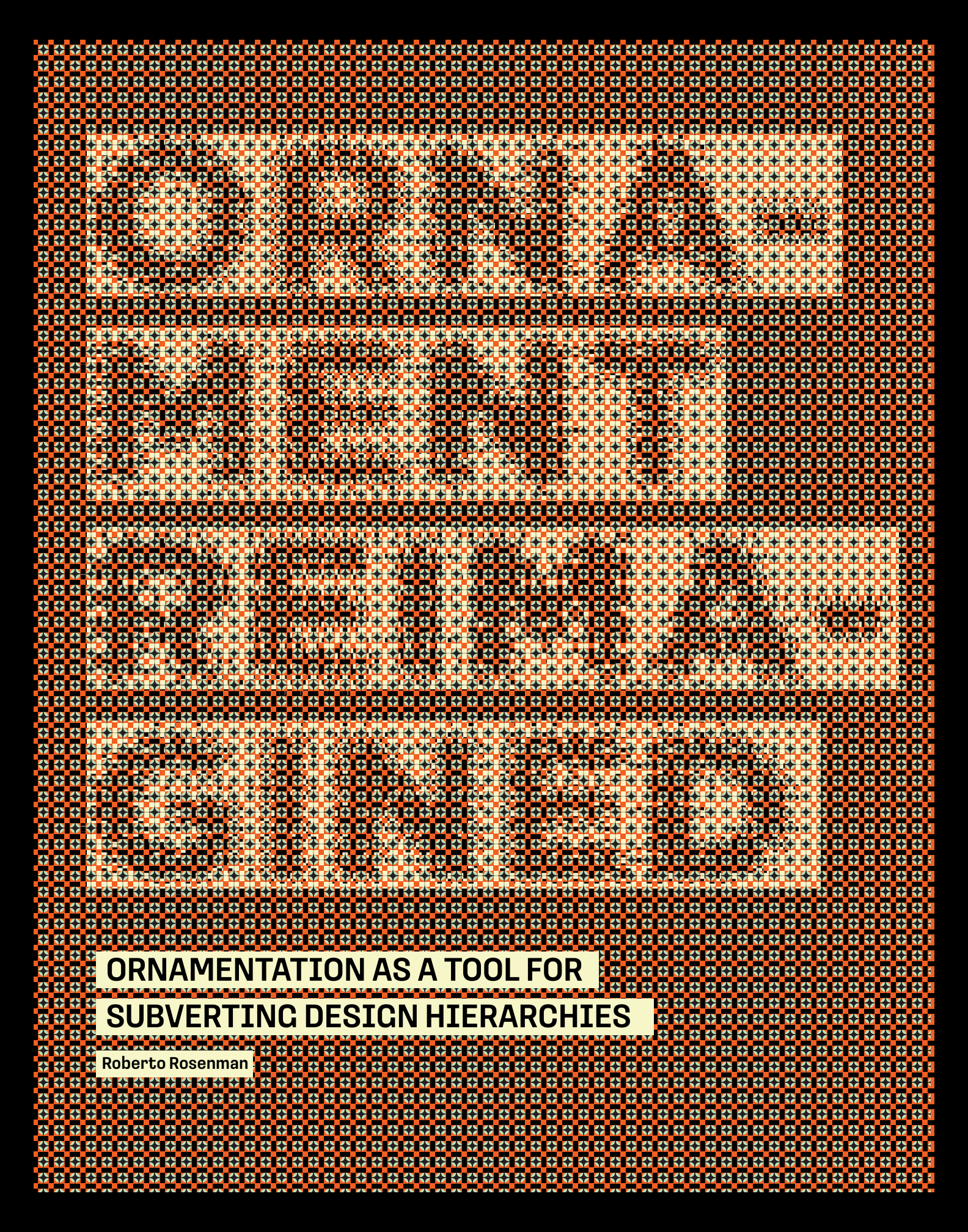
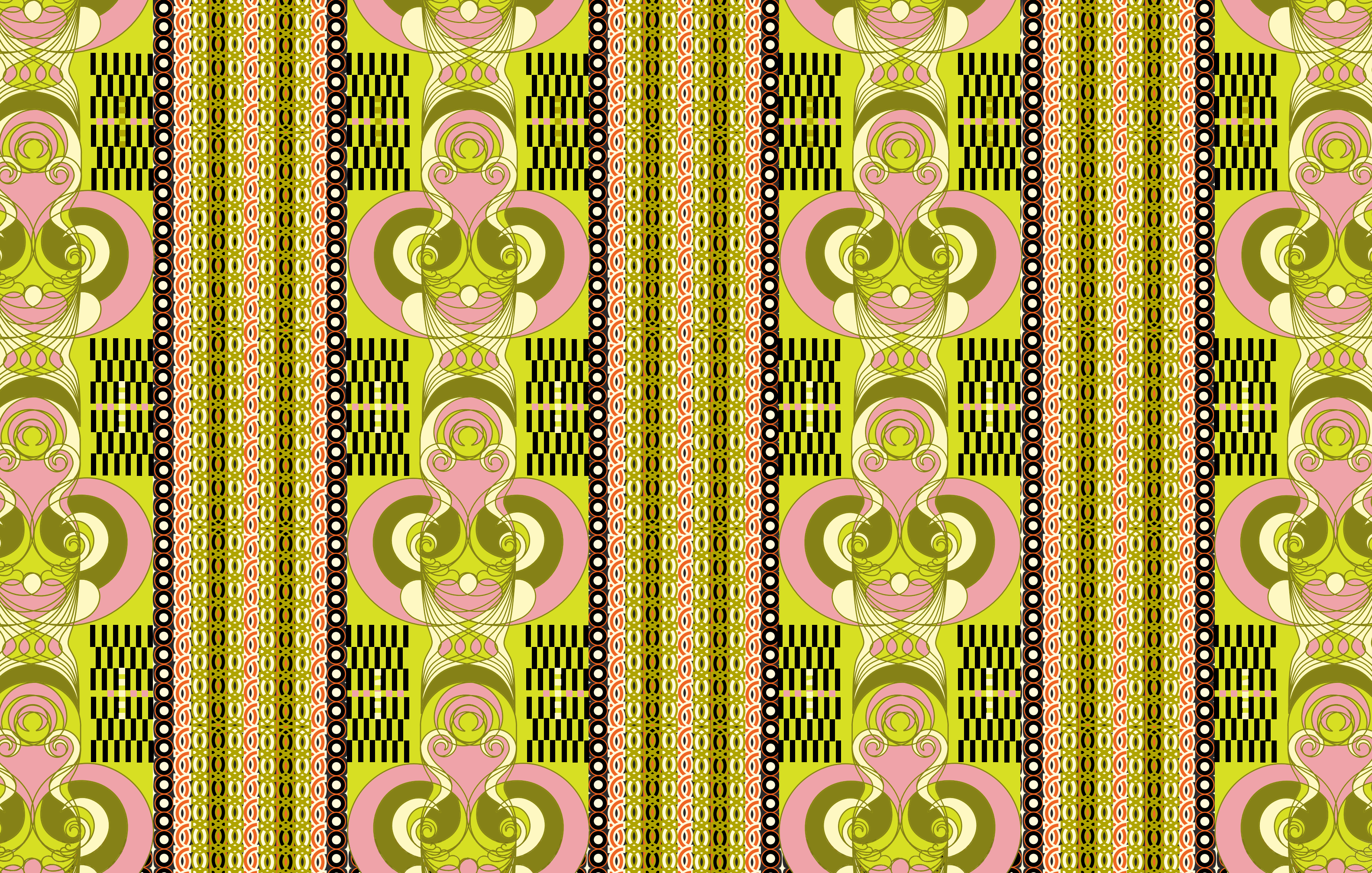




# ORNAMENTATION AS A TOOL FOR SUBVERTING DESIGN HIERARCHIES

Roberto Rosenman









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DEDICATED TO KOLOMAN MOSER  
(1868–1918)

*“Ornament is dangerous precisely because it dazzles us  
and tempts the mind to submit without proper reflection.”*

-Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001)

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# INTRODUCTION

## God is in the Details

**ACROSS THE BOSPHORUS**, in a quiet Istanbul neighbourhood, stands Chora Church (1316–21). This domed limestone Byzantine chapel pales in stature against the Hagia Sophia or Blue Mosque; even more so when compared with the stone forests of Chartres and Cologne. Yet, the richness of its interior decoration mesmerizes the viewer and sets it apart from the others. Every surface is adorned with mosaics and shimmering gilding, directing the viewer’s gaze upward toward the central dome. Where the mosaics and gilding recede, elaborate book-matched marble panels spread out in every direction, as if the walls were draped with woven fabric.

Book-matched marble was not a Byzantine invention and likely originated from splitting planks in carpentry. Thin slabs of marble were cut and mirrored together, creating a continuous rhythm and flow of the veining. Byzantine artisans selected marbles with complex veining, aligning them with such precision that the seams were almost undetectable. What compelled these early Christians to embellish every surface with elaborate symmetry? Were these patterns intended to reflect divine perfection? Or could their rhythmic, flowing forms suggest a more ambivalent impulse—a Dionysian undercurrent, as articulated by Nietzsche, where rhythm becomes an expression of the irrational and the sensual excesses of experience? (Indeed, one might also recall that ‘the devil is in the details’). In this context, Chora’s ornament takes a significant role in the viewers’ experience, appealing to subconscious and primordial instincts in the manner of an early Rorschach test. The surface of Chora does not merely decorate; it invites contemplation and a confrontation with both the sacred and the ambiguous.

Six centuries later, a new temple was erected. This time, its disciples were not Christian monks, but members of the Bauhaus. Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe’s *Barcelona Pavilion* (1929) for the International Exposition in Spain exemplified the principles of the Bauhaus movement, whose members sought to eliminate ornament from architecture and design. This purge was partly a symbolic gesture—a dismantling of class structures in order to liberate workers from the burden of producing intricate, labor-intensive embellishments historically reserved for the elite. The gilded cupolas were replaced with flat roofs, and the Jugendstil (Germany’s version of Art Nouveau) wallpapers with austere, whitewashed walls. This new temple signalled a reform of living: it featured stark white walls, steel columns, and behold, book-matched marble! While the Bauhaus might have rallied against ornament, in practice, they re-invented it, echoing the approach of ornament’s fiercest critic, Adolf Loos. Historian Finbarr Barry Flood writes,



01  
Bookmatched  
Marble in  
the Chora  
Church.

“He (Loos) gave the 20th Century a style of ornament without recognizable patterns or motifs, a style that it could pretend was not ornament at all.”<sup>1</sup> In their pursuit of functionalism, the Bauhaus merely replaced the decorative borders and swashes with rules and rectangles. What compels us to decorate ourselves and our surroundings? From Byzantium to the Bauhaus, ornament endures, reinvented as an expression of materials and production processes, not merely as embellishment but as a reminder of the infallible link between humans and culture.

To attempt to define ornament is to encounter a contradiction at every turn, but historian David Brett has given us a suitable description, stating, “I shall treat decoration and ornament as a family of practices devoted mainly to visual pleasure; and treat this pleasure as a family of values, which includes social recognition, perceptual satisfaction, psychological reward and erotic delight (amongst others, all overlapping one another).”<sup>2</sup> To this definition, I would add that ornament can also fulfill a social function by serving as a marker of cultural identity and giving voice to sensibilities that have been marginalized throughout history. As history has demonstrated, the impulse to decorate seems to be a human activity concerned with making sense of our world and our position in it. Just as Brett points out that there is not a society that does not “decorate, embellish or make patterns”<sup>3</sup>, there is not a people who have gone naked, not out of modesty but out of desire to affirm their identity.

It is no coincidence that a renewed interest in ornament emerged alongside the introduction of the Macintosh computer and the rise of digital publishing in the early 1980s, as these technological developments fundamentally reshaped the possibilities of graphic design. While advances in digital technologies, such as vector-based software and computer processing, have expanded the formal possibilities available to designers, they have also introduced new anxieties around creative autonomy in the face of increasing automation. This crisis is not new. Just as Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts designers a century earlier had responded to the Industrial Revolution through ornament creation, today’s designers are again turning to ornament as a way of subverting the increasing automation of human processes driven by artificial intelligence.

This thesis investigates the role of contemporary ornament in challenging traditional modes of production and design, drawing upon historical precedents from the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts period as models for re-engaging ornament in the context of an increasingly automated world. Through an exploration of pattern design, ornamental typography, and handcrafted ornament, I examine how ornament challenges notions of utility by blurring the boundaries between function and decoration while simultaneously fostering new cultural meanings and contexts. Through an analysis of contemporary ornamental work and the author’s experimental practices, this thesis argues that ornament functions as both a critical and symbolic tool—one that expresses the complexities of pluralistic societies, asserts artistic autonomy, and reflects the relationship between designers, technology, and culture.



02  
Chora Church,  
Exterior  
rear view,  
Istanbul.



03  
Barcelona  
Pavillion  
Interior.

1 James Trilling, “Modernism and the Rejection of Ornament: The Revolution That Never Happened,” *Common Knowledge* 3 (1994): 8

2 Brett, David. *Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure & Ideology in the Visual Arts*. (Cambridge, UK ; Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

3 Ibid., 4.



# THE PURGE

## A Troubled Past



04  
Owen Jones,  
*The Grammar of Ornament*, Plate XLIII.



05  
Alois Riegl  
c. 1890

DISCUSSIONS SURROUNDING the role and function of ornamentation culminated during the 19th century. In 1856, English designer and theorist Owen Jones (1809–1874) published his *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which provided illustrated plates showing examples of flat ornamental patterns from around the world. Concerned that industrial production was leading to an aesthetic degradation of ornament, Jones called for reforms in both the teaching and production of ornament by documenting various cultural examples previously unknown in Victorian-era Britain. At the forefront of these debates was Alois Riegl (1858–1905), whose monumental work *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer geschichte der ornamentik* (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament, 1893) traced the development of ornamental motifs within various cultures and sought to show how ornament developed independently of an object’s form and structure. Riegl dismissed the theories of architect Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), who made a distinction between Kernform, the tectonic structure of the building, and the Kunstform, an object’s outer shape and appearance, all the while elevating architecture as the highest art form.

In contrast, Riegl argued for ornament’s existence as an autonomous entity that developed independently throughout history and was not bound to any external considerations. Ornament, he wrote, follows “the same continuous, coherent development that prevails in the art of all periods, as in the historical relationship between antique mythological imagery and Christian iconographic types.”<sup>1</sup> Riegl’s objective was to elevate ornament to the same status as figuration by disengaging it from its materialistic associations. In challenging the hierarchical structures prevalent in the art academies of the 19th century, he suggested that abstract ornament and the applied arts were equal in value to fine arts and painting and therefore, should be considered worthy of serious scholarship.

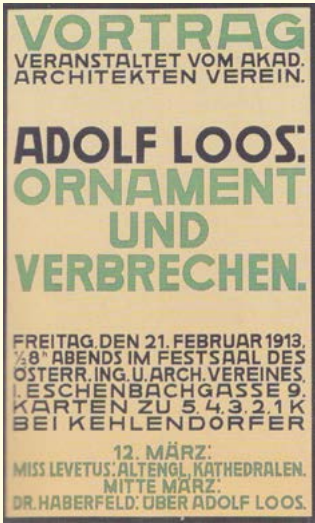
Riegl formulated the concept of Kunstwollen to disengage ornament from naturalistic and materialist associations. Often translated as ‘artistic volition’ or the ‘will to art’, Kunstwollen represents for Reigl the ‘spirit’ of the artist’s will, driven by psychological rather than materialist forces. The term was intentionally nebulous, but it was precisely its broad inclusiveness which allowed it to bridge aesthetic, cultural, and structural characteristics of an object, regardless of its status as high or low art.<sup>2</sup> For Riegl, ornament embodied the truest essence of Kunstwollen, capturing the artist’s effort to transcend purely technical constraints such as material, structure, and technique. As Jas Elsner writes, it reflects the “struggle between the artist and limitations imposed on him in the materials he works with and his own



06  
Henry Van de Velde.  
Thus Spoke Zarathustra



07  
Alfred Roller, *Ver Sacrum* calendar page, August, 1903. Collection of Letterform Archive.



08  
Adolf Loos,  
*Ornament and Crime*, 1908.

technical capabilities.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, ornament functioned as a metaphor for artistic freedom and autonomy.

As Riegl was writing *Stilfragen*, the early foundations of the Jugendstil movement were beginning to take shape, gradually evolving into a fully realized ornamental idiom that used abstraction as a reaction to historicism. The Vienna Secession, an artist group that seceded from the conservative Künstlerhaus (Vienna’s main exhibition academy), drew on many of Riegl’s theories, introducing ornament into painting and elevating graphic design as an artistic discipline. Their journal *Ver Sacrum* epitomized the Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk—a total work of art, fulfilling Riegl’s aim to elevate ornament to the status of the fine arts. The Secession Museum exhibited graphic posters and applied arts alongside paintings and sculpture, effectively challenging the established hierarchy of the arts and positioning the building as a de facto temple of modernism.

Originally an enthusiastic supporter of the Vienna Secession, architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) became its most vocal critic, rallying against their use of ornament and the Jugendstil style. In his 1908 essay *Ornament and Crime*, he argued for the eradication of ornament in objects of utility, believing that ornament concealed their true nature. Unlike Riegl, he made a clear distinction between the fine arts and ornament, believing that the latter was associated with untamed primordial impulses and a symptom of a primitive society. Loos extended this further by suggesting that ornament was not only linked to primitivism but also criminality—a claim he justified by highlighting the prevalence of tattoos among the indigenous of Papua New Guinea and criminals within Austria’s prison system. To understand Loos’ polemic against ornament, one must consider the context of rapid modernization in *fin de siècle* Vienna. A huge influx of migration to the urban centre saw Vienna’s population grow from 431,000 in 1850 to over 2 million by 1910. The race to build modern infrastructure led to an explosion of industry and manufacturing in construction, public transportation, and household goods.<sup>4</sup> In this climate, Loos considered ornament not as a device to improve people’s lives, but rather as an obstacle to a productive society. By eliminating ornament, society could save on time, money, labour, and materials, and more importantly, establish a system of standardization.

The popularity of ornament in the Jugendstil period might well have been its dying groans. Modernism responded to the rise of industrial production by effectively outlawing ornament from all areas of life. In his later years, Loos saw himself as a sort of prophet, convinced that he had ‘saved’ Austrian Society from the Jugendstil movement, writing in 1930, “I have emerged victorious from my thirty-year struggle. I have freed mankind from the superfluous ornament.”<sup>5</sup>

The Bauhaus shared Loos’ belief that ornamentation was incompatible with mass production and signified wasted labour and resources. At the same time, they tied it to class, believing that by freeing society from ornament, they could effectively free the craftsman from the mundane and time-consuming work of creating ornament. Ornament was viewed as an indulgence

3 Jas’ Elsner, “From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: Some Reflections on Riegl’s Concept of Kunstwollen.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2006) : 750. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/508091>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2025.  
4 Peter Payer, “The Age of Noise: Early Reactions in Vienna, 1870–1914,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 ( July 2007): 775  
5 Loos, Adolf, and Adolf Opel. *Trotzdem*, 1900-1930. (Wien: G. Prachner, 1982), 51.





09  
Le Corbusier,  
*Ronchamp  
Chapel*, 1955.



10  
Robert  
Venturi,  
*Vanna Venturi  
House*,  
Philadelphia  
1961–1964.

for the upper classes, with the towers and gilded cupolas symbolizing the crowns of monarchs.<sup>6</sup>

Their strategy was two-fold: first, by eliminating ornament and advocating for simplification and standardization, they could create a utopian future where class structures were no longer represented by stylistic tastes. The strategy was partly a symbolic gesture, as in the Bauhaus’ proposition to use a single case in their typographic posters. The second strategy was to promote the machine as the salvation of workers from the drudgery of handicraft. Yet, while industrial production was meant to free the craftsman from the mundane work of handicraft, there was the inconvenient reality that factory work was just as gruelling and mind-numbing. To resolve this contradiction, modernist discourse reframed mechanization not as a source of alienation, but as an aspirational goal.<sup>7</sup> By romanticizing the machine and the mechanization of everyday life, the drudgery of factory life was brought into the domestic sphere, effectively blurring the boundaries between leisure and work. The architect Le Corbusier claimed, the house “is a machine for living”, and modernist homes eerily resembled factories, with walls white-washed white and railings made of industrial piping.

In 1928, Loos was convicted of pedophilia and indecent acts against underage models who posed for him in his apartment—an irony made sharper by his moral posturing. Ultimately, it was Loos who was the criminal and degenerate, not the so-called “primitive” New Guinian tribes he denigrated in his essay. This incident might well have foreshadowed Modernism’s hypocrisy towards ornament. In their desire to shed ornament, the Bauhaus simply replaced Jugendstil swirls with a new type of ornament: that of black and red rules and bars. Traces of the ornamental appear in the work of the modernists, from Le Corbusier’s concrete formwork to Mies van der Rohe’s use of marble (though they would have never called it ornament). Ironically, as Loos was incapable of recognizing his criminality, Le Corbusier seemed unaware that in his desire to purge style for the sake of function, he had inadvertently created a new style, “the style of no style”.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, ornament experienced a resurgence driven by advances in desktop publishing, which streamlined the processes of reproduction and pattern creation. The possibility of easily creating complex tessellations through the use of algorithms and fractal generation software further closed the gap between labour and time, which according to John Ruskin (1819–1900), the central figure of the Arts and Crafts movement, was the defining marker of the value of an object. Ironically, the very machine that had once dehumanized the craftsman during the Arts and Crafts period eventually became the catalyst for reclaiming their autonomy by dismantling the assembly-line structure of ornament production and granting designers full creative control from start to finish. The computer had become, according to designer Denise Gonzales Crisp, a new craft tool which had the potential to empower the designer. She writes, “It is time to move the computer past the ‘machine age’, derail the persistent perception that it should only reproduce forms languages invented for another techno-logic.”<sup>9</sup>

6 James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere : The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape*. (New York ; Simon & Schuster, 1994), 71.  
7 Ibid., 71.  
8 Ibid., 73.  
9 Denise Gonzales Crisp, “Toward a Definition of the DecoRational (in real time)” (Self-published pamphlet, 2002), 98.



11  
*The Big Duck*, Flanders, New York.  
1931



12  
Jeffery Keedy,  
*Rick Poynor: Typographica*,  
2002.



13  
Jeffery Keedy, *Slanted  
Magazine* #35

Postmodernism as a philosophical movement further invigorated the interest in ornament by embracing nostalgia, Pop art, and vernacular forms. Most importantly, it relied on a skepticism toward modernism’s sweeping grand narratives by giving voice to marginalized groups that had been ignored in the design canon. Or so it claimed.

Architects Robert Venturi (1925–2018) and Denise Scott Brown (b. 1931) joined the rallying cry in denouncing the modernist fixation on minimalism and functionalism, cynically parodying Mies van der Rohe’s slogan of ‘less is more’ with ‘less is bore’. Inspired by the commercial vernacular architecture and signage of Las Vegas, Venturi and Brown sought to elevate ornament as a symbolic language to break the modernist obsession with rationality and transparency—the belief that architecture became more sincere when a building’s function was fully realized.

According to Venturi, in their attempt to banish ornament, modernists had simply created ‘architectural ducks’ (in honour of a duck-shaped drive-in in Flanders, New York, which sold ducks, dairy, and eggs) where whole buildings were turned into ornament themselves through a symbolic representation of their function. Yet while this critical rethinking of ornament might have offered the potential to re-awaken a Rieglian concept of ornament as the essence of Kunstwollen, Postmodernism ultimately reduced ornament to a tool of irony, stripping it of deeper meaning or substance. Referencing antique Renaissance and Baroque classicism, the swash returned as a dominant motif as ornament was revived primarily in the service of pastiche and parody. In an attempt to disengage itself from modernist values, Postmodernism simply continued the modernist tradition of using ornament as a tool for parody and ridicule. It is striking how much Jan Tschichold’s (1902–1974) instructions for using ornamental type reflect Venturi’s approach to ornament as ironic inflection. Outlining his decree on using the decorative typefaces of the Jugendstil era, Tschichold writes, “These old typefaces, can however, from time to time find a new use in modern typography, for fun, for example, to make typographical parody of the good old days.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the revival of ornament in graphic design was more restrained than in architecture, its function as an iconographic device referencing historical styles was clearly evident in the work of designers such as Jeffery Keedy (b. 1957) and Rick Poynor (b. 1957), whose use of ornament and decorative type evoked a past era far removed from the marginalized sensibilities postmodernism professed to excavate. Historian Linda Hutcheon points out, “Such a paradoxical model of postmodernism is consistent with the very name of the label, for *postmodernism* signals its contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that both historically preceded it and literally made it possible.”<sup>11</sup> Given postmodern ornaments’ dependence on inherited symbols, it is therefore no surprise that the movement proved short-lived, and ornament remains in as much a state of crisis as it did under modernism. The crisis is a pressing one, for designers must develop new frameworks through which ornament can meaningfully engage with personal and cultural histories.

10 Jan Tschichold, Richard Hendel, Robin Kinross, and Ruari McLean. *The New Typography*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 73.  
11 Linda Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (1986): 179–207, 180.





# Horror Vacui

ALTHOUGH PATTERN AND ORNAMENT are often used interchangeably today, it is important to examine the historical distinction between the two. Writing amid the renewed interest in ornament during the 1970s, philosopher Hans Heinz Holz (1927–2011) emphasized the traditionally subordinate status of pattern in relation to ornament within the aesthetic hierarchy, stating; “An ornament always has an element of deliberate stylization that elevates a pattern to an independent art form, whereas a pattern remains a form that serves the object.”<sup>1</sup> While decoration might have sat uneasily with the modernists, geometric patterns nonetheless aligned with their interest in systems: tiling, grids, and modular units as purely structural units.<sup>2</sup> According to Holz, a pattern was traditionally viewed as a structural organizing element that was free of symbolic meaning, whereas ornament could carry cultural and symbolic meaning. Echoing Riegl, Holz acknowledged that ornament was first derived from pattern-making. He argued that if ornament is to be regarded as a serious aesthetic and cultural form, then pattern can no longer be relegated to a subordinate or decorative subcategory. As the mother of ornament, pattern must also be recognized as an autonomous mode of expression, capable of conveying symbolic and cultural significance in its own right.

A discussion of pattern must first begin with its absence, or in graphic design terms, negative space. Also referred to as white space, this design principle was embraced by the New Typography of the 1930s and advocated by Jan Tschichold in *Die Neue Typographie* (1928), where it was promoted alongside asymmetry as a hallmark of modernist clarity. Although often associated with European modernism, notions of negative space are found much earlier in many cultures across various disciplines. In Japanese aesthetics, for instance, the concept of *Ma* refers to the interval or pause between elements, which forms the foundation of garden design. Yet, while the Japanese found a way to reconcile their notion of *Ma* with ornament and pattern design, 20th-century modernism’s prioritizing of negative space as a design device relied on the expulsion of ornament and pattern from the design sphere. For the Bauhaus and Tschichold, this iconoclastic purge was as much about rejecting the symmetry and centering inherent in Renaissance classicism as it was about rethinking ornament. The geometric abstraction central to Islamic design, for

1 Hans Heinz Holz, “Die Repristination des Ornaments,” (The representation of the ornament) in: *VomKunstwerkzur Ware*. (Neuwied and Berlin, 1972), 159–160.  
2 Despite the Bauhaus’ agenda to rid its program of decoration and acknowledge the functional element of pattern, patterned wallpaper designs, under the workshop of artist and colour designer Hinnerk Scheper, became the most successful mass-produced item produced by the school.

example, inherently relied on symmetry. According to Robin Kinross, “The idea is associated especially with twentieth-century modernism, which rejected the principle of centring (associated with the old classical order, and unresponsive to particular meanings—apart from the one big meaning of classical formality) in favour of asymmetrical configuration (denoting informality and able to articulate meanings within a whole).”<sup>3</sup> Despite non-European examples of negative space, early modernist designers looked to the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich, which represented not only a new aesthetic but also served as a deliberate rejection of Gottfried Semper’s formalism.

Yet Modernism’s concern with negative space was not purely an aesthetic reform, but one loaded with cultural implications. The Latin expression *horror vacui*, meaning a fear of emptiness, became not only associated with the excessive ornamentation of the Victorian age but with non-European art and design aesthetics, in particular Islamic art. While the Greeks struggled with the notion of infinity, Islamic culture embraced and elevated it as a profound aesthetic and metaphysical ideal. These opposing views of *horror vacui* can be traced to the use of canvas painting supports in the late Renaissance, which allowed artists to produce large-scale works which would previously have been impossible with wooden supports that were prone to cracking and warping. European art emphasized the picture frame not merely as a physical tool to hold the canvas, but as a division between form and the negative space outside the picture frame. In contrast, Islamic art, which often employed fresco techniques, was not constrained by the physical limits of a frame. As a result, ornamentation could extend infinitely, reinforcing a visual continuity that reflected broader metaphysical and symbolic principles.

The interdependence of asymmetry and negative space was favoured by Tschichold, who believed that the white background played an active role, while simultaneously rejecting the concept of background as ‘important’. Because symmetry tends to establish fixed boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, Tschichold saw asymmetry as a means of challenging these conventions. In typographic design, this translated to a dynamic relationship between margin and text that paralleled the spatial interplay of frame and image in art. He writes, “(The New Typography) uses the effectiveness of the former ‘background’ quite deliberately and considers the black and white spaces on the paper as formal elements just as the ones of black type.”<sup>4</sup>

Cultural attitudes toward *horror vacui* and ornamental patterning have also been shaped by differing religious doctrines within Christianity and Islam. While religious European paintings depicting Christ flourished in Europe, Islam’s decree against depicting the Prophet Muhammad led to the development of non-figurative artistic forms. Architectural landmarks such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Alhambra in Granada exemplify this approach, with their surfaces adorned in highly intricate, all-encompassing ornamentation that reflects a metaphysical engagement with the divine through abstraction. This spatial rhythm



14  
Iznik tiles in  
the Blue Mosque,  
Istanbul.



15  
*Book of  
Kells*, Folio  
34r, Chi Rho  
Monogram.  
9th Century.

3 Will Hill, Space as Language : *The Properties of Typographic Space*. First edition. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 107.  
4 Jan Tschichold, Richard Hendel, Robin Kinross, and Ruari McLean. *The New Typography*. Reprint 2020. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 72.



and symmetry is *horror vacui* at an extreme; intended to remind the viewer about the infallible and infinite nature of God’s power. By revealing merely a finite fragment of a design that theoretically extends endlessly through tessellations, such ornamentation reminds the viewer of both the boundless power of God and the limits of human existence. As Professor Massimo Carboni argues, the relationship between ornament, nature, and the divine forms the conceptual basis for the repetition found in both Islamic and early Christian ornament. This repetition is intended to elicit metaphysical contemplation, suggesting that spiritual enlightenment is attainable through an engagement with ornament. Writing on the *Book of Kells*, Carboni states, “It is as if this ordered, coldly splendid chaos were an attempt to demonstrate infinity within the borders of the page. Once again, ornament implies transcendence, spirituality, the eternal.”<sup>5</sup> While the Greeks might have feared emptiness, they recognized its inherent link to nature. Aristotle, who wrote ‘Nature abhors a Vacuum’, saw a complete surrendering of space to form as equivalent to the ideological struggle between Dionysus and Apollo. In other words, the absence of space became associated with the garden, where the primordial and irrational forces took hold. As art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) writes, “Ornament is dangerous precisely because it dazzles us and tempts the mind to submit without proper reflection.”<sup>6</sup>

The notion of *horror vacui* has been ascribed not only to theoretical value but also to an economic one. Loos’ central criticism of ornament was its incompatibility with the machine age and mass production. If a society were to become efficient, he argued, it must free itself from ornament, which represents a waste of resources and human labour. Loos’ idea represents an early association of space with value perception whereby, as space is increased, so too does an object’s perceived value. While ornament was historically associated with the wealthy class, capital, and labour expense, its shift from being a symbol of wealth to the working class was perhaps one of Modernism’s most striking reversals. In the essay *On White Space: When Less Is More*, Keith Robertson examines the value of white space in graphic design by ascribing it both a theoretical and economic value. Appropriately written just after the stock market crash of October 13, 1989, and the subsequent recession which followed in the early 1990s, Robertson’s essay brings the relationship between designer and the market into question. For him, white space is no longer merely a compositional device, but rather synonymous with questions of class, consumption, and waste. While the minimalist movement used white space as an aesthetic device to achieve clarity, it took a significant role in corporate advertising, where it was used to convey value, trustworthiness, elegance, and authenticity.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Robertson argues that it is impossible to ignore the economic associations of white space, which is often used to celebrate the object and its market qualities. He writes, “Since an aesthetic is an expression of value, then white space



16  
Value Perception implies that a crowded store-front is associated with poorly made products.



17  
Motu facial tattoos, ca. 1915.

is used to ascribe value to a product. Inversely, to overburden a design with clutter is to diminish the value”.<sup>8</sup> By asserting that white space represents elegance and refinement, then, inversely, ornament must be representative of primitiveness and the working class.

It is useful to bring in Loos again, who claimed the tattoos on the bodies of Papuan tribes were equivalent to the early scribbles of a child. The evolution of culture, he proclaimed, “marches with the elimination of ornament from objects of everyday use.”<sup>9</sup> Loos’ writings provide little doubt about his real gripe with ornamentation. By framing his argument for the elimination of ornament within an economic framework, he conveniently obscures his racially charged cultural superiority within the multicultural fabric of *fin de siècle* Austria. His rhetoric echoes the anti-Semitic undercurrents of his time, especially within the context of the Vienna Secession, which was significantly subsidized by Jewish patrons and came to represent the decay of Viennese society and culture.<sup>10</sup> For Loos, Modernism is not simply an endorsement of mechanization and industrialization; rather, it is predicated on the purging of society of foreign craftspeople. The cultural implications of white space, particularly within the context of modernist aesthetics, become instantly apparent for it suggests that cultures that value ornament exist in a state of primitiveness, and as an extension, that the litany of European colonial horrors might be excused for bringing economic prosperity and cultural refinement through the imposition of modernist design principles. In this context, the modernist ethos ‘less is more’ can be viewed as a patronizing injunction to ‘clean your room.’

*Horror vacui* represents not only a break with the cultural privileging of European modernism but, as author Umberto Eco (1932–2016) argues, a crisis of identity. In *Travels in Hyperreality*, Eco analyzes the phenomenon of excess in American regional museums and theme parks as a symptom of this crisis. He describes these environments as “moments in hyperreality,” where the overabundance of visual elements, signs, and details blur the line between illusion and reality, to create “a situation of ‘fullness’, of Horror Vacui.”<sup>11</sup> For Eco, this sense of fullness—manifested in the excess, imitation, and theatricality—reflects a post-war American impulse to construct a distinct cultural history and narrative. The simulated worlds represented by Hearst Castle and Disneyworld represent a state of hyperreality where *horror vacui* converges with simulation and artifice. He writes, “The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of the antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn’t suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by horror vacui, that is here achieved. The insane abundance makes the place unlivable just as it is hard to eat those dishes that many classy American restaurants, all darkness and wood paneling, dotted with soft red lights and invaded by non-stop music, offer the



18  
The sitting room in the Doge’s Suite at Hearst Castle, California.

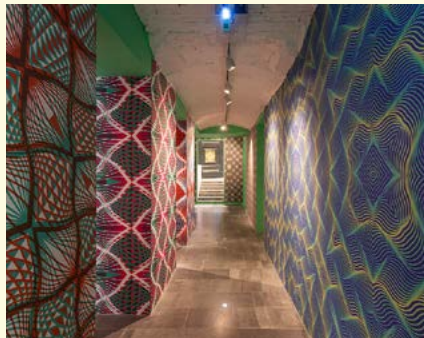
5 Massimo Carboni, “Infinite Ornament”, *Artforum* 30 (September (1991), 108  
6 E. H. (Ernst Hans) Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 17.  
7 John & Olsen Pracejus, Thomas G. & O’Guinn. “How Nothing Became Something: White Space, Rhetoric, History, and Meaning”. *Journal of Consumer Research*, no 33. (2006): 84.

8 Keith Robertson, “When Less is More.” *Emigre* 26: All Fired Up, 1993, 27.  
9 Adolf Loos, and Joseph Masheck. *Ornament and Crime : Thoughts on Design and Materials*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2019), 80.  
10 Claude Cernuschi, “Adolf Loos, Alois Riegl, and the Debate on Ornament in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna”, in *Cosmophilia* (McMullen Museum, Boston College, 2020), 49.  
11 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality : Essays*. (1st Harvest/HBJ ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 8.





19  
Massimo Vignelli and  
the Unimark team in  
labcoats, Milan 1970s.



20  
Hansje Van Halem,  
*In patterns*, 2017, at  
the Allard Pierson  
Museum in Holland.

customer as evidence of his own situation of “affluence”.<sup>12</sup> According to Eco, it is through the overburdening of space, meticulously filled with ornament and pattern, that a sense of meaning and wholeness is achieved.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Eco’s book of essays appeared in 1973, just one year after Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, when a renewed emphasis on complex ornament and patterning was spurred on through postmodernism’s skepticism towards the figure of the designer as a rational problem-solver, exemplified almost theatrically by Massimo Vignelli and his colleagues donning white lab coats. In 2017, graphic designer Hansje Van Halem’s (b. 1977) exhibit *In Patterns* at the Allard Pierson Museum was presented alongside the museum’s exhibition *Modernism in Print*. In a pointed response to the clarity and restraint of the adjacent modernist display, Van Halem enveloped the gallery space with a dizzying collection of her patterns. Her work, emblematic of *horror vacui*, stands in stark contrast to the clarity and restraint of the adjacent modernist display. The spaces are unsettling in their overabundance—and that perhaps is the point being made: like Hearst Castle, Van Halem’s space is ‘unlivable’ in its visual excess. In contrast to the restraint of the *Modernism in Print* exhibit, her patterned rooms confront the uncertainty and complexity of a postmodern world by filling hyperreal spaces with signs and symbols. If modernism favoured white space as a marker of clarity, objectivity, and economic prosperity, then to overload a space with ornament and pattern is to confront the complexity, subjectivity, and economic disparity in society.

Again, we can turn to historian Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), who argues that the opposing forces of ornament as both a symbol of the infinite (Horror Vacui) and emptiness (Amor Infinite), fulfill a fundamental human impulse to impose order upon the world. This desire for symbolic meaning, Gombrich argues, results in a “crisis of interpretation”, expressed through an innate compulsion to fill empty spaces. He writes:

“The urge which drives the decorator to go on filling any resultant void is generally described as horror vacui, which is supposedly characteristic of many non-classical styles. Maybe the term amor infiniti, the love of the infinite, would be a more fitting description. The most humble task of design, decorating a Christmas tree or arranging pictures on a wall. Distributing our elements, we step back to see where a ‘break’ demands to be filled. Another candle on the tree, another picture on the wall, will restore the repose. True, if we then go on enriching a particular area we create gaps elsewhere which have to be seen to in their turn...Once we are caught in break spotting, it is hard not to go on ‘framing, filling and linking’”<sup>13</sup>

To reduce Van Halem’s patterned rooms merely to expressions of beauty, as designer Stefan Sagmeister did in a similar installation in the *Sagmeister and Walsh: Beauty* exhibit, would be to overlook the deeper aesthetic and cultural significance of pattern. Van Halem’s installation calls for a re-evaluation of pattern, urging us to recognize its importance beyond functional design and to consider its sustained or renewed symbolic meaning.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>13</sup> E. H. (Ernst Hans) Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 125.

“Since an aesthetic is an expression of value, then white space is used to ascribe value to a product. Inversely, to over burden a design with clutter is to diminish the value.”

—Keith Robertson

‘On White Space:  
When Less is More’  
Emigre #26



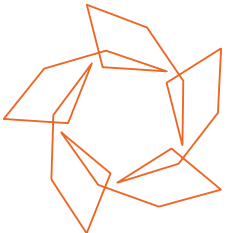
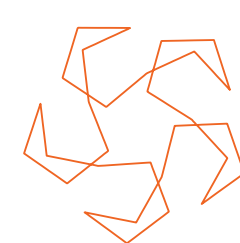
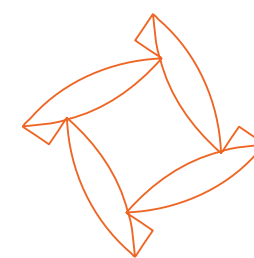
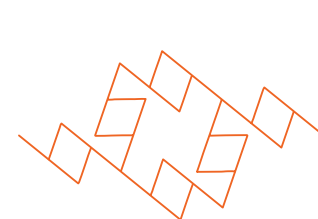
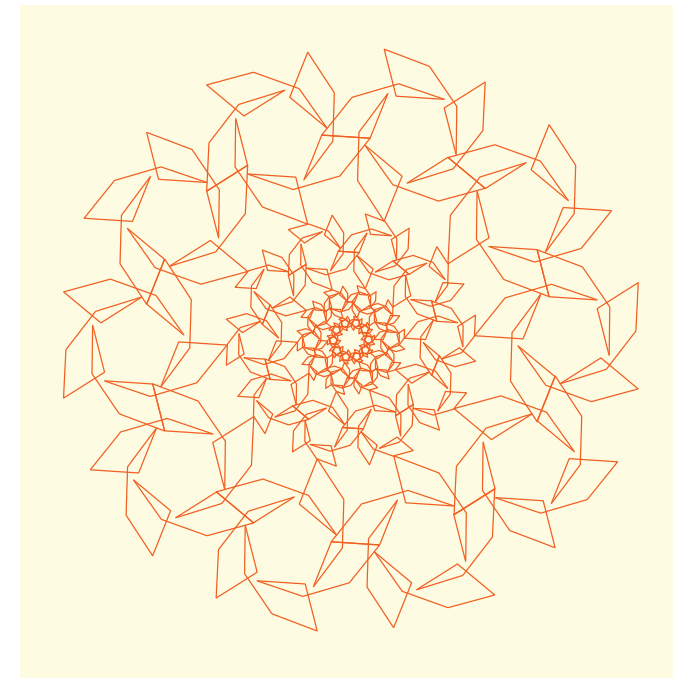
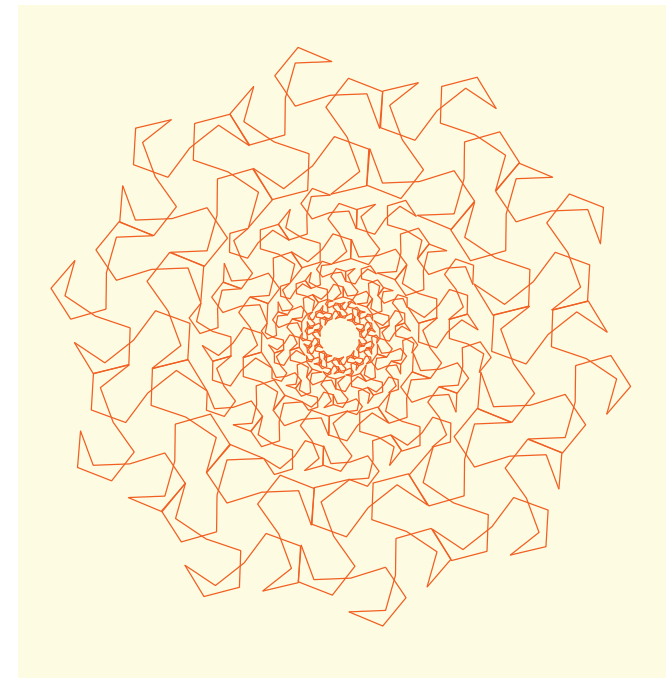
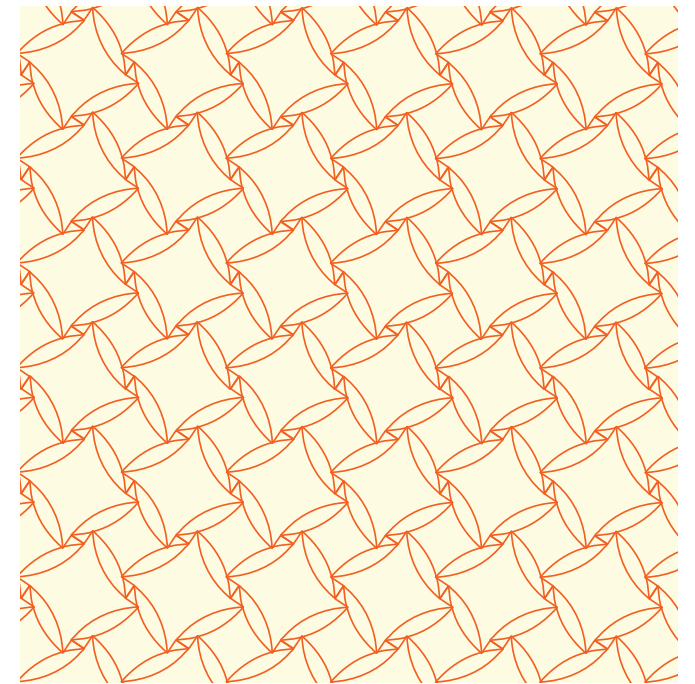
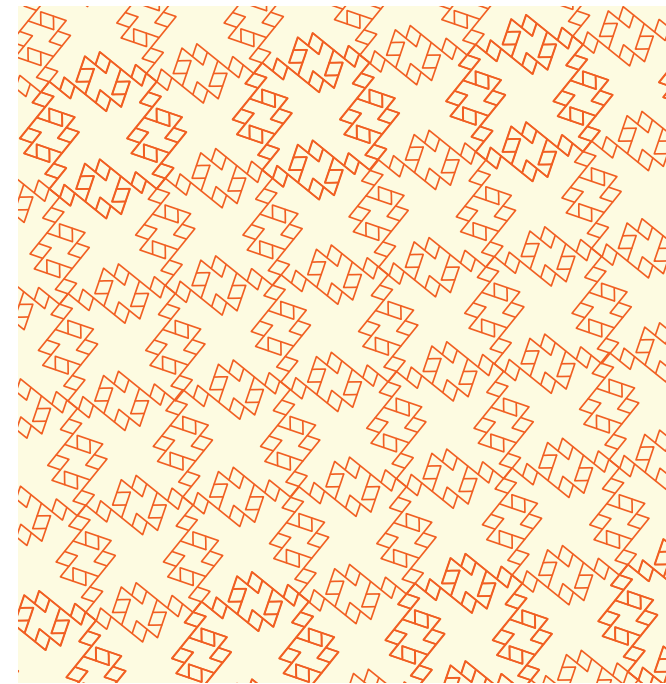
# Experiments in Pattern making

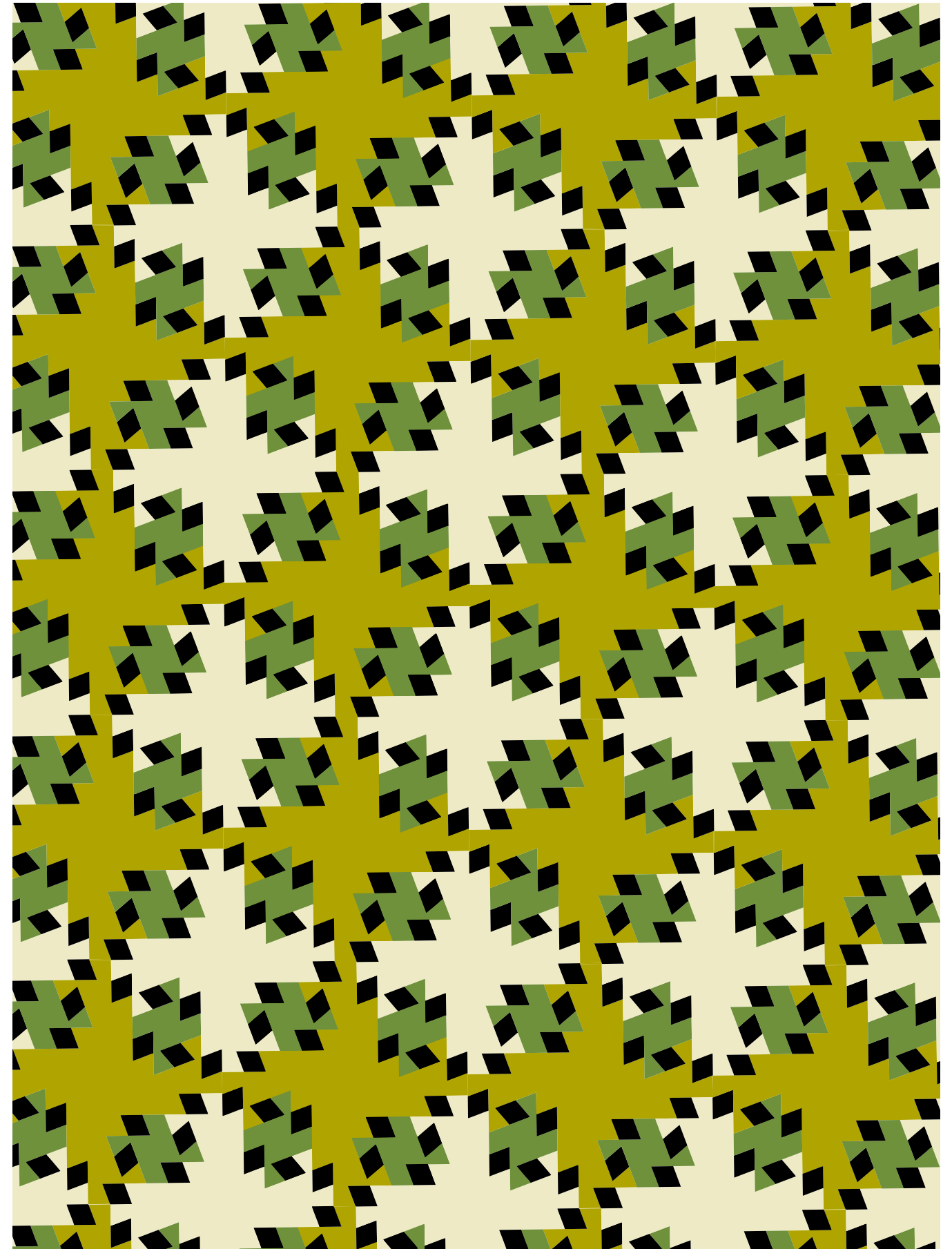
Utilizing fractal generation software Fraksl and Nico's Fraktal Machine, I began with base motif fractals (Plate 1). By manipulating parameters—including the base form, number of segments, mirroring, depth, angle, skew, and number of arms—complex patterns and tessellations were produced. Plates 2 and 3 illustrate patterns generated through these algorithms, later refined and colored using vector-based software.

The concept of 'Truchet tiles' originates from Sébastien Truchet's 1704 treatise *Mémoire sur les Combinaisons*, in which he explored the variations possible with square tiles divided diagonally. These tiles, when arranged such that their edges align, produce endlessly repeating patterns regardless of orientation. Christopher Carlson's development of multi-scale Truchet tiles extends this concept by incorporating tiles of varying sizes, scaled by powers of two, enabling intricate fractal compositions. Plates 4 and 5 demonstrate Truchet tile configurations using a set of seven geometric shapes assembled and arranged within vector design software. These configurations were subsequently imported into the software MirrorLab for further fractal-based transformations (Plate 6).

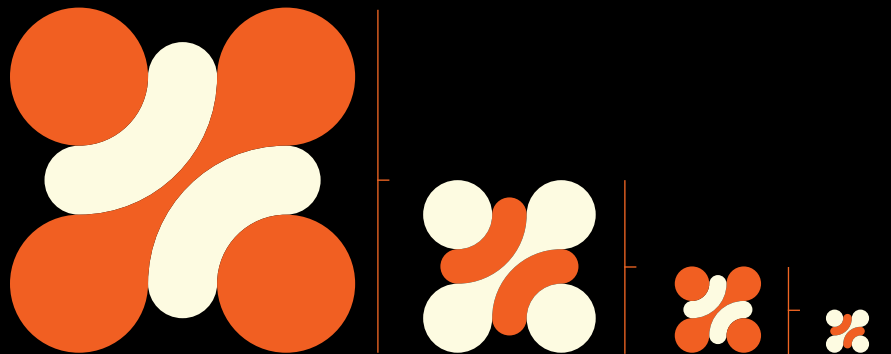
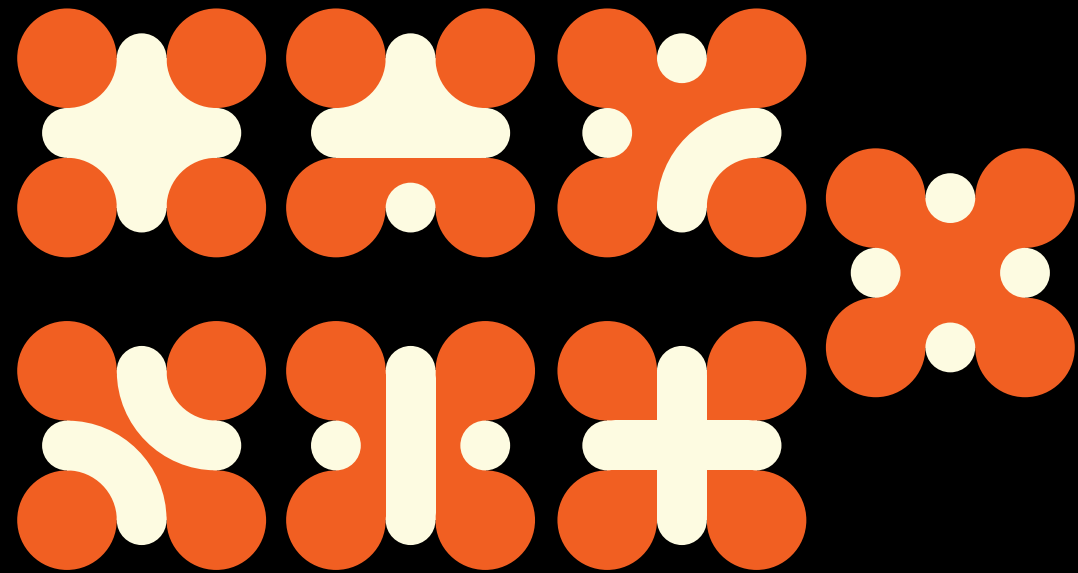
Additional explorations in MirrorLab involved other fractal forms, such as the fractal tree (Plate 7) and the Koch snowflake (Plate 8). Using Adobe Illustrator, I created geometric tessellations based on the hexagon (Plates 9–10), which then evolved into more organic, seamless patterns (Plates 11–14).

Plates 15–18 engage with the principle of horror vacui as a counterpoint to the minimalist tendencies of modernist design. While grounded in a rational grid structure and systematic approach, these experiments do not wholly reject modernist principles; instead, they aim to blur the boundaries between ornamentation and function.

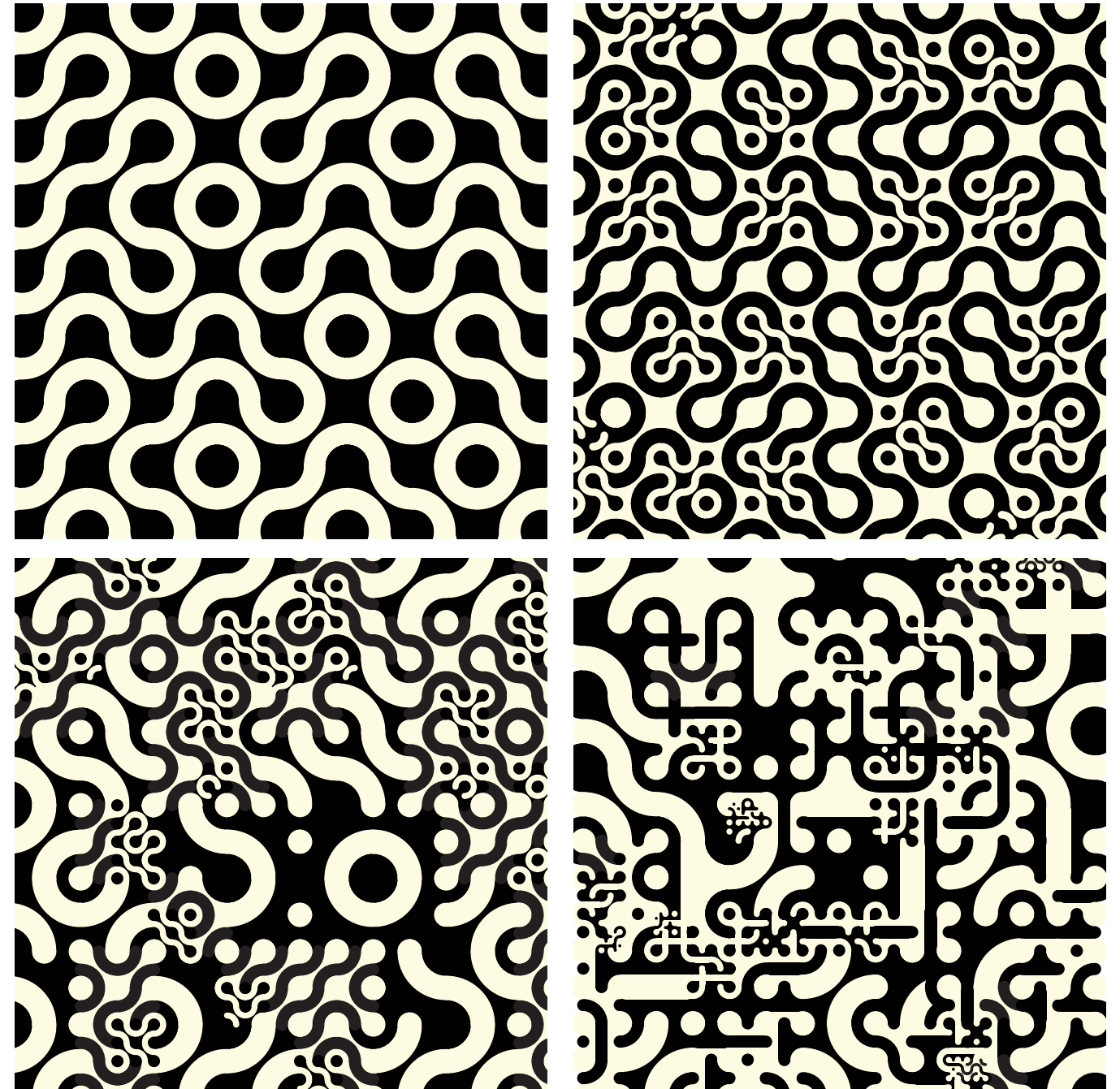




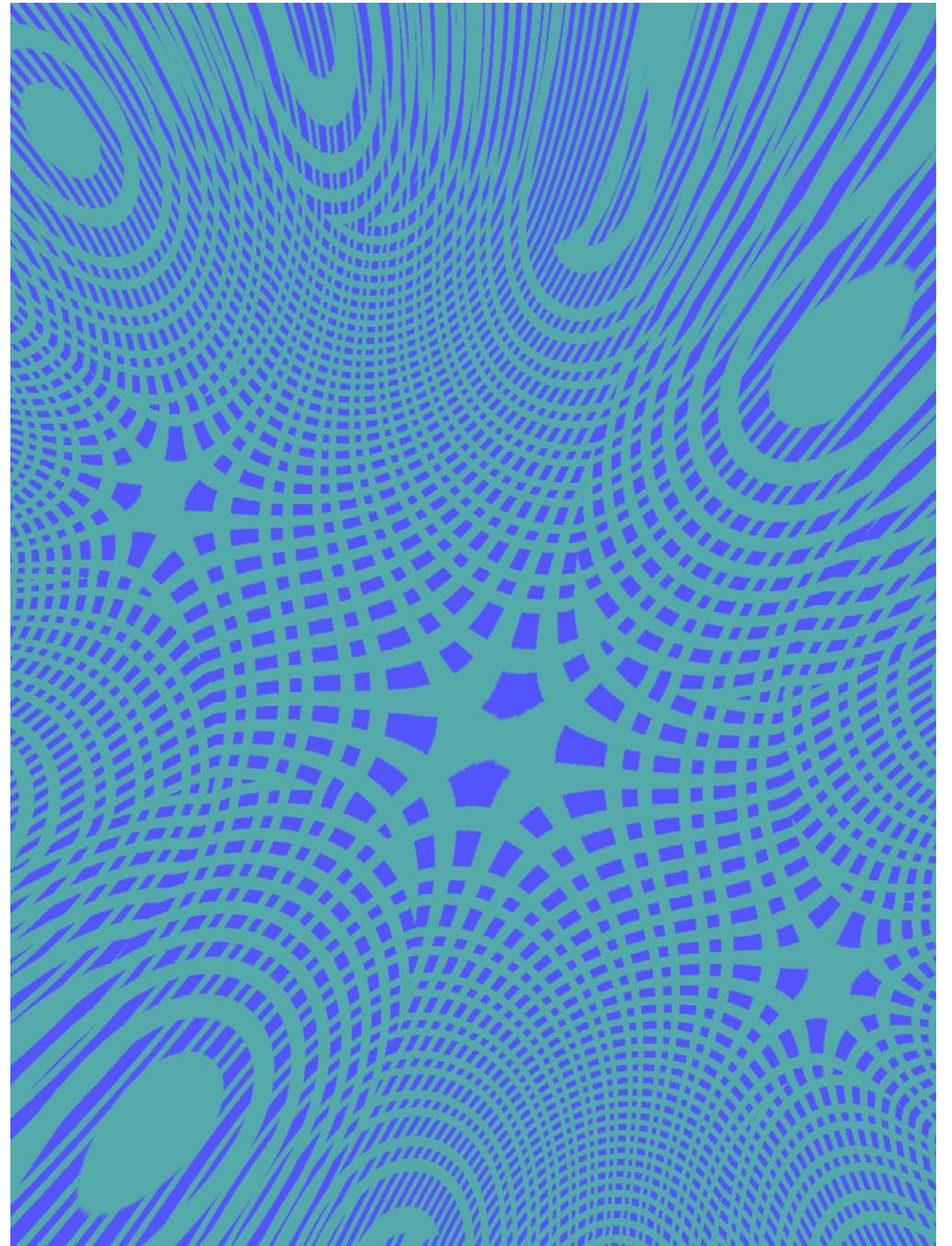
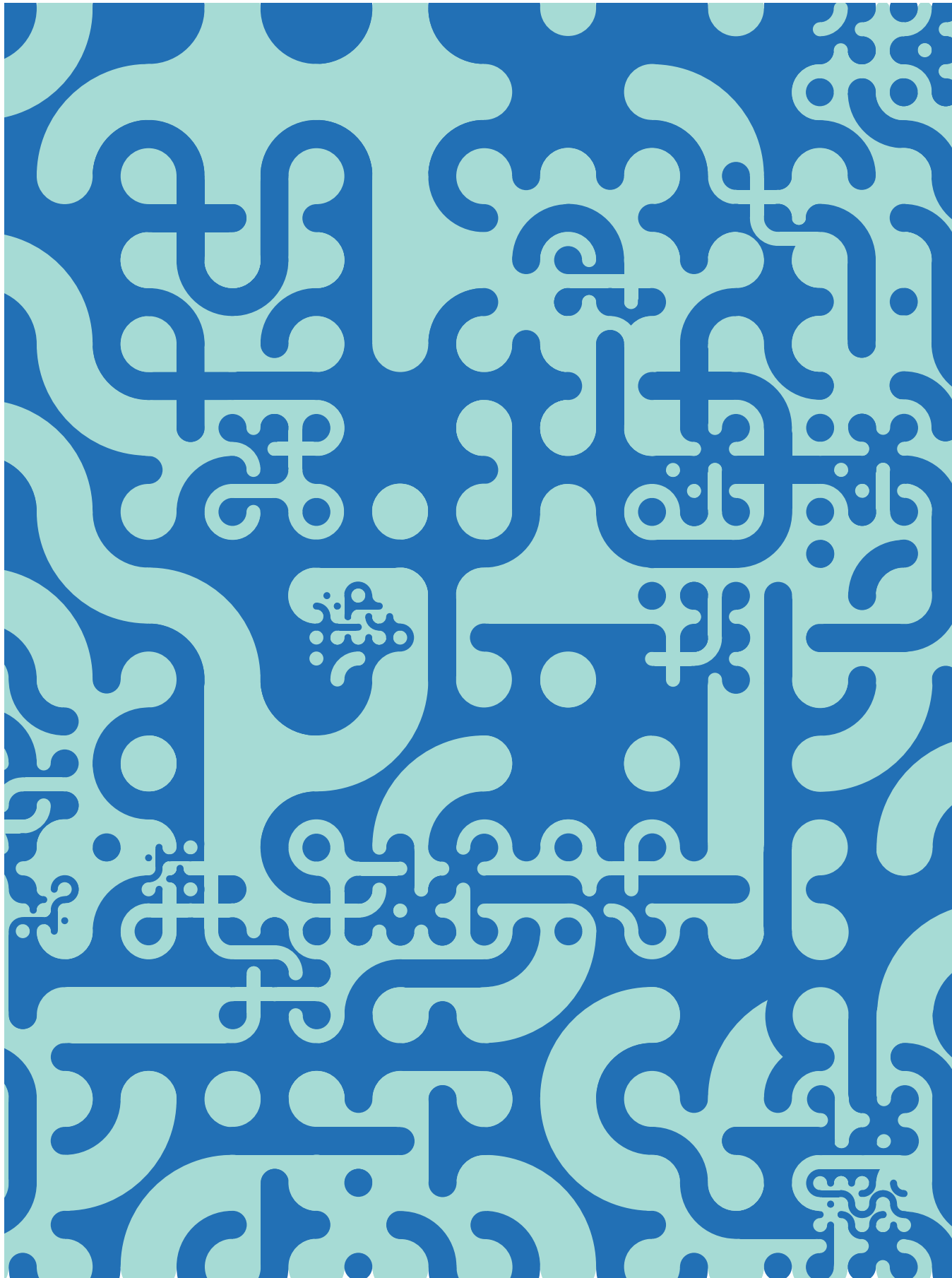




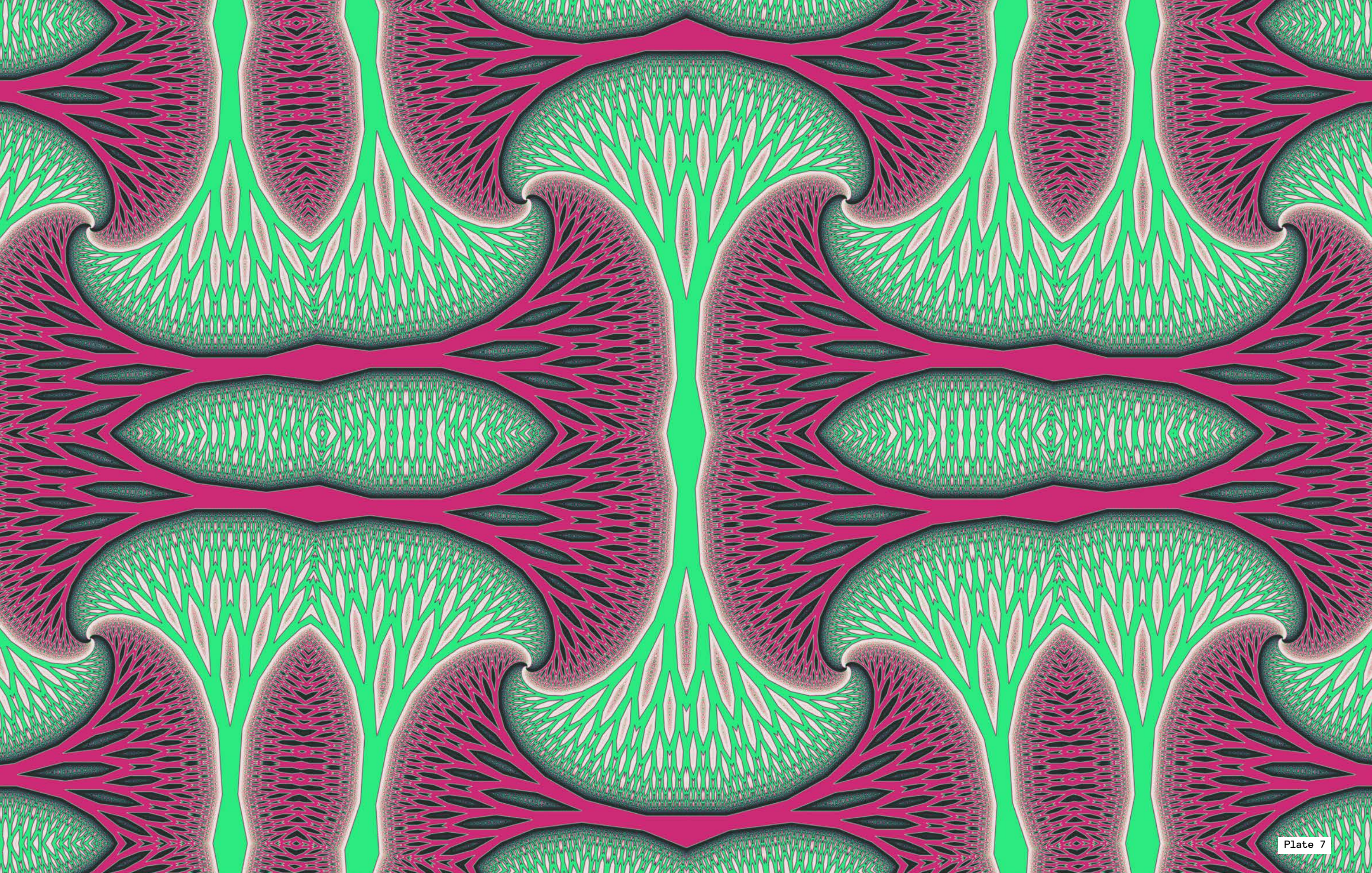
Scaleable  
Truchet  
tiling







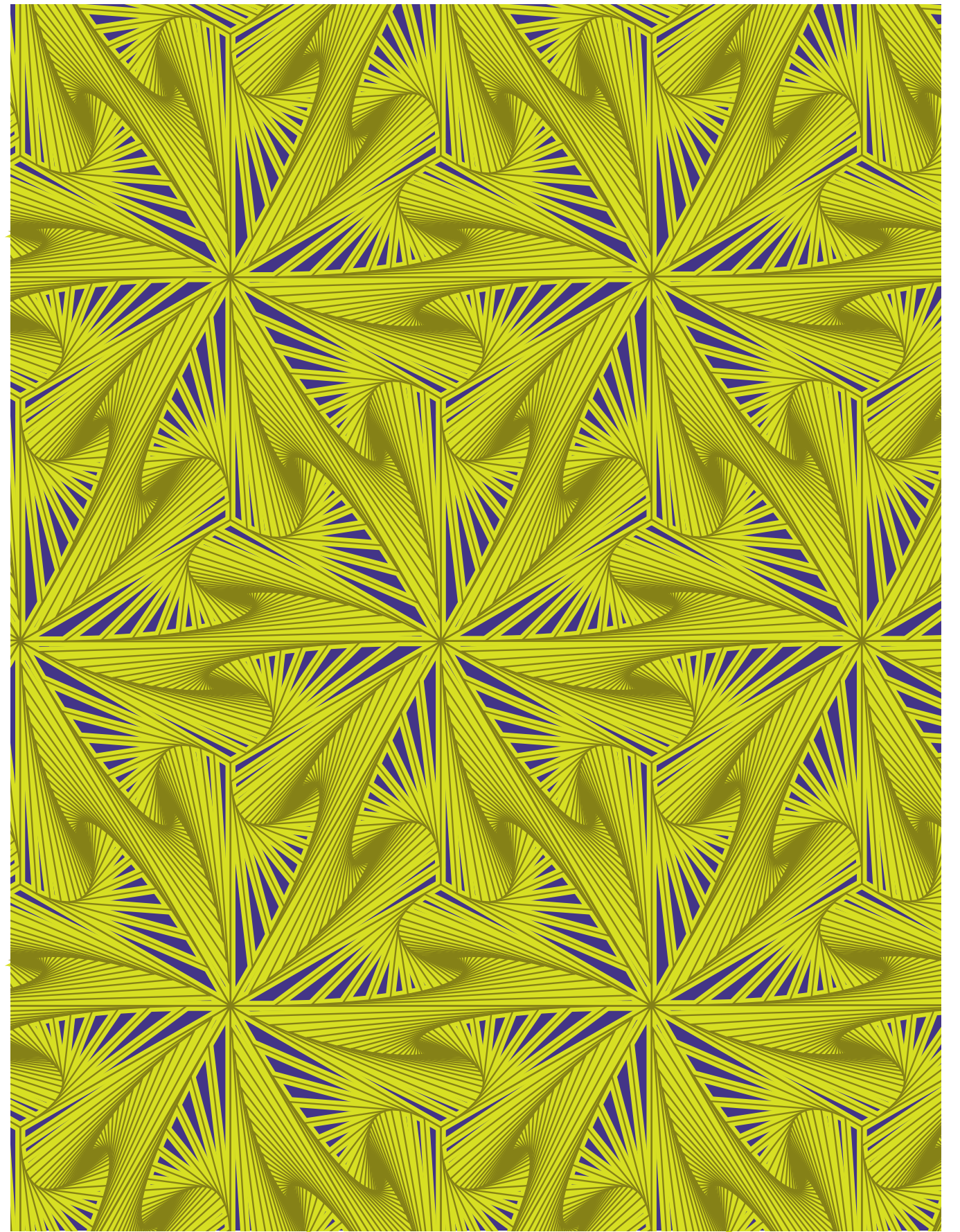
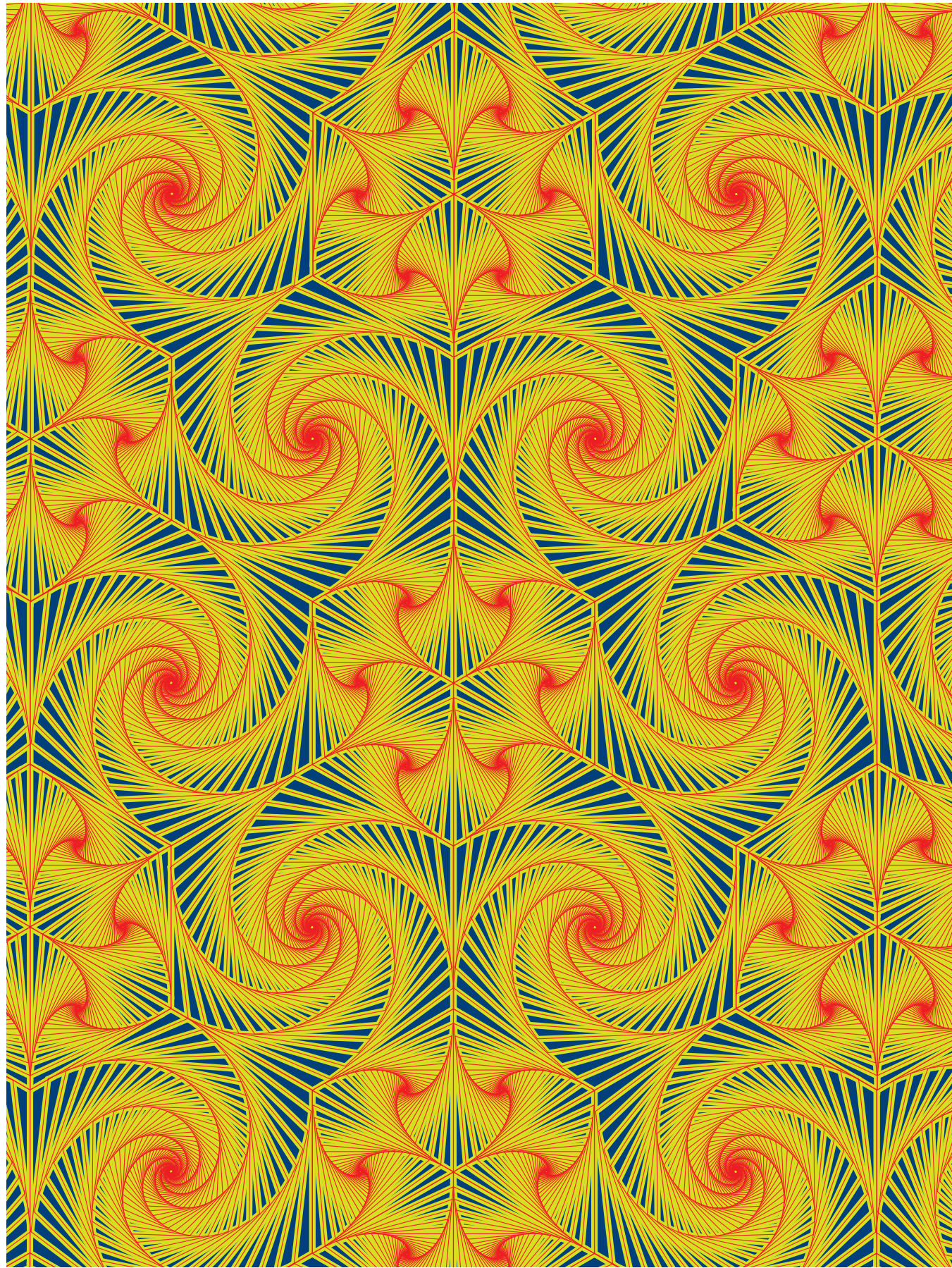




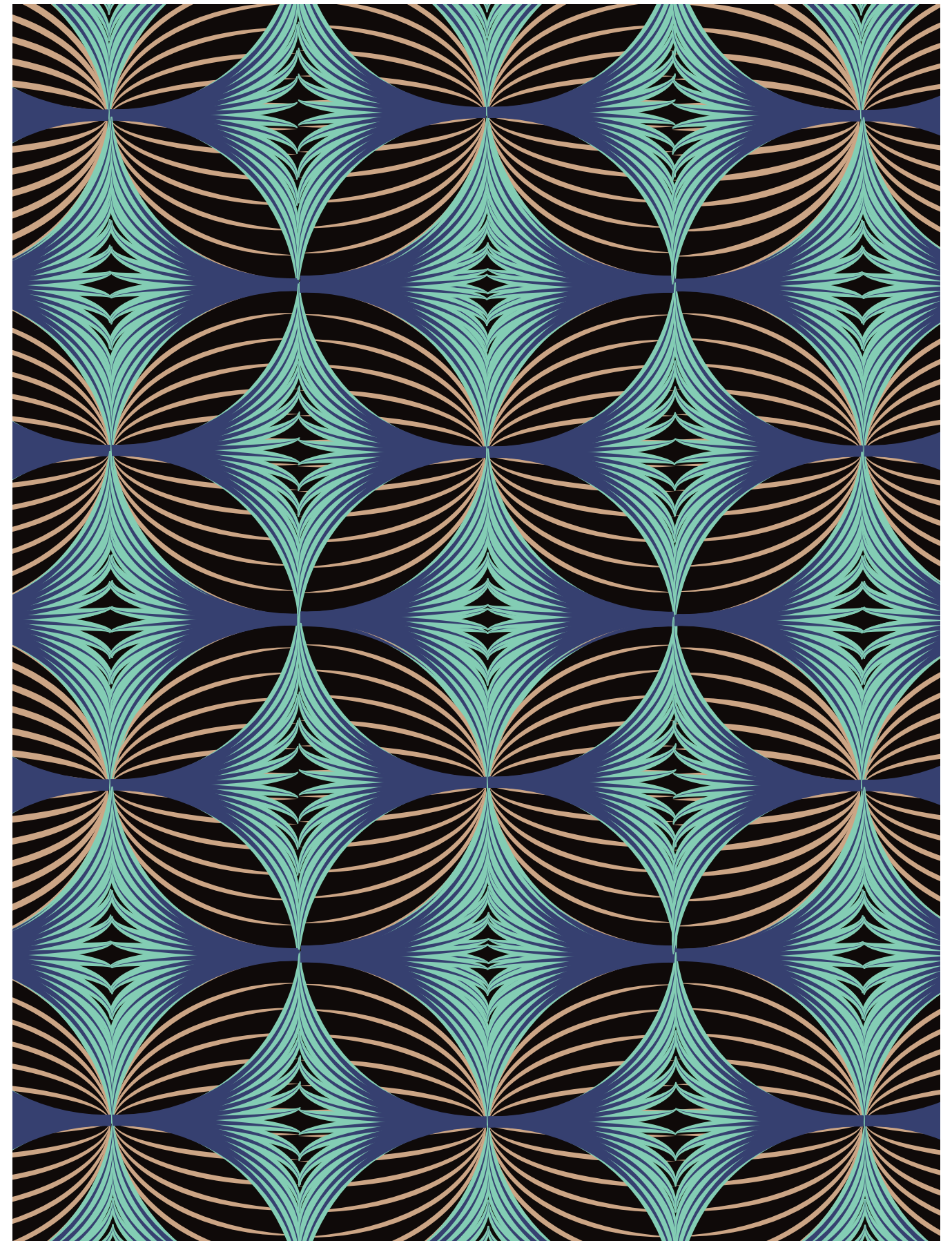
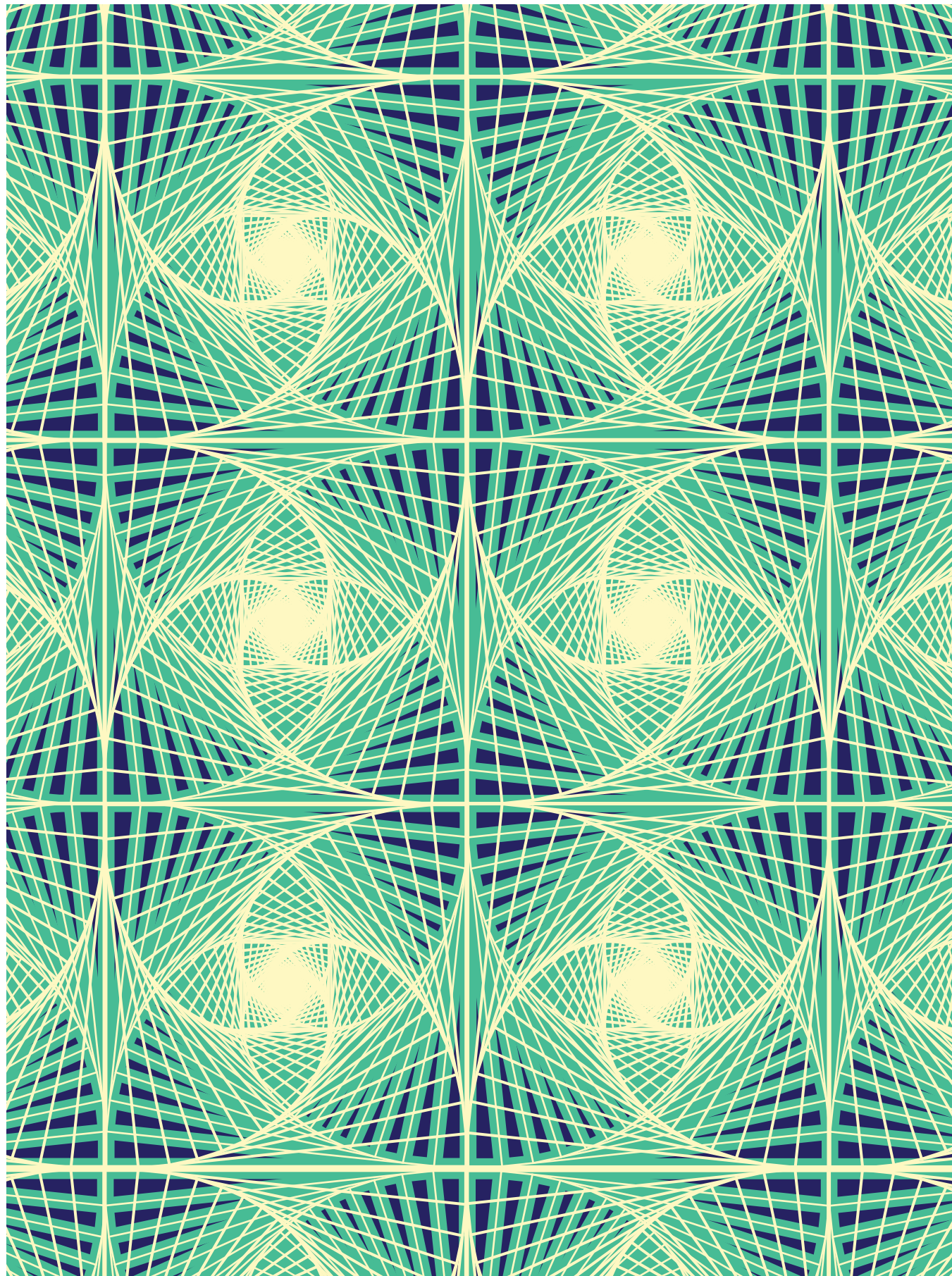




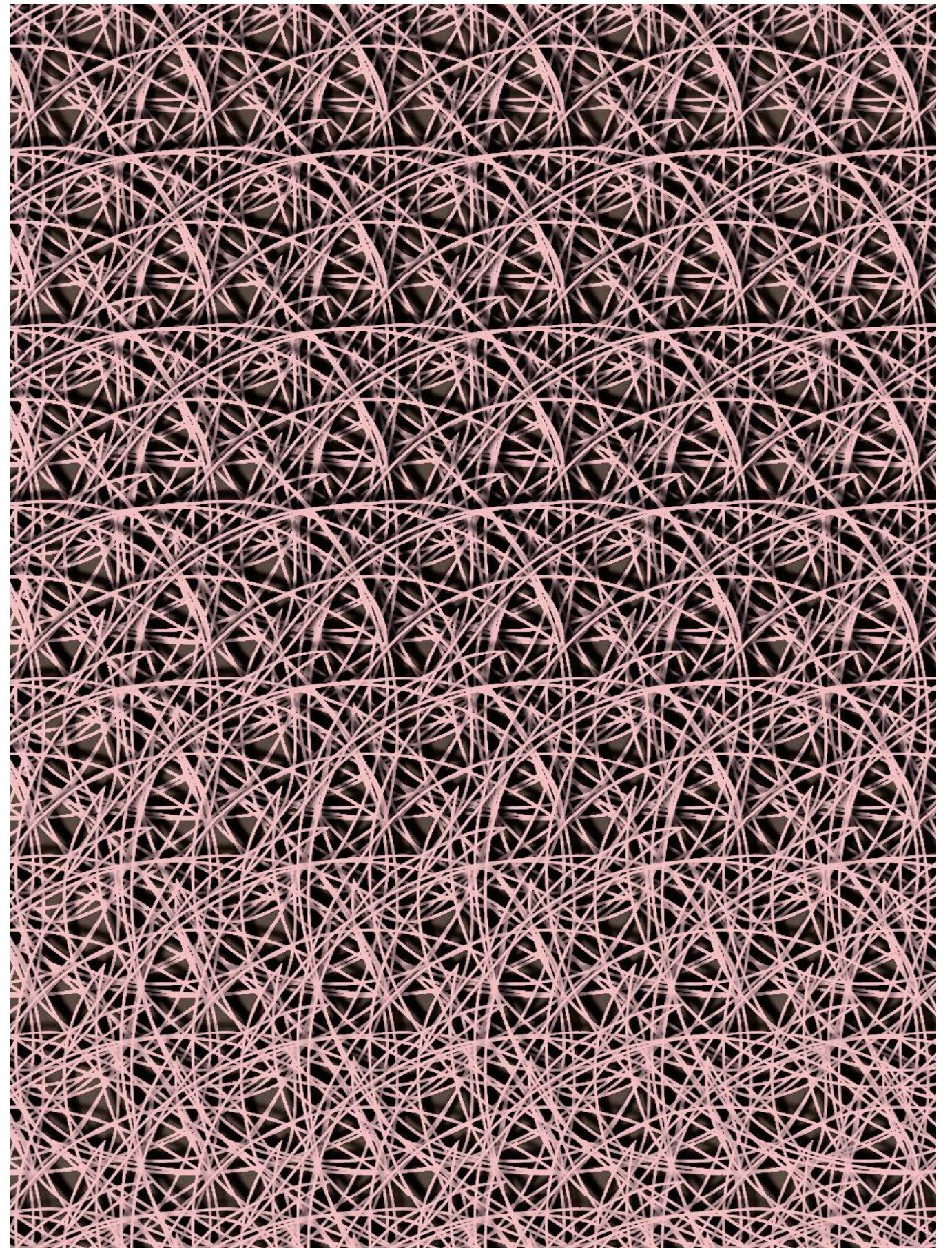


















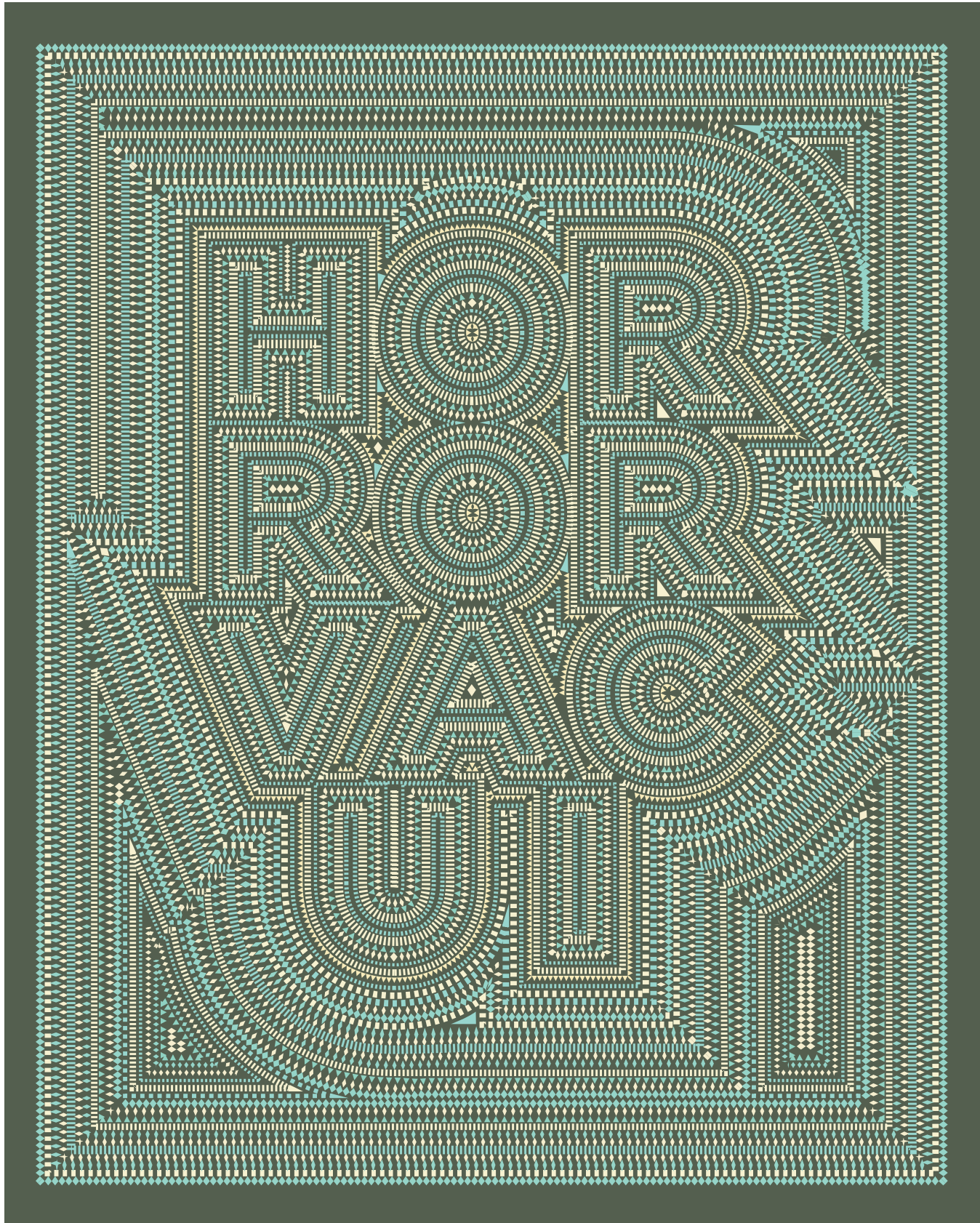


Plate 17

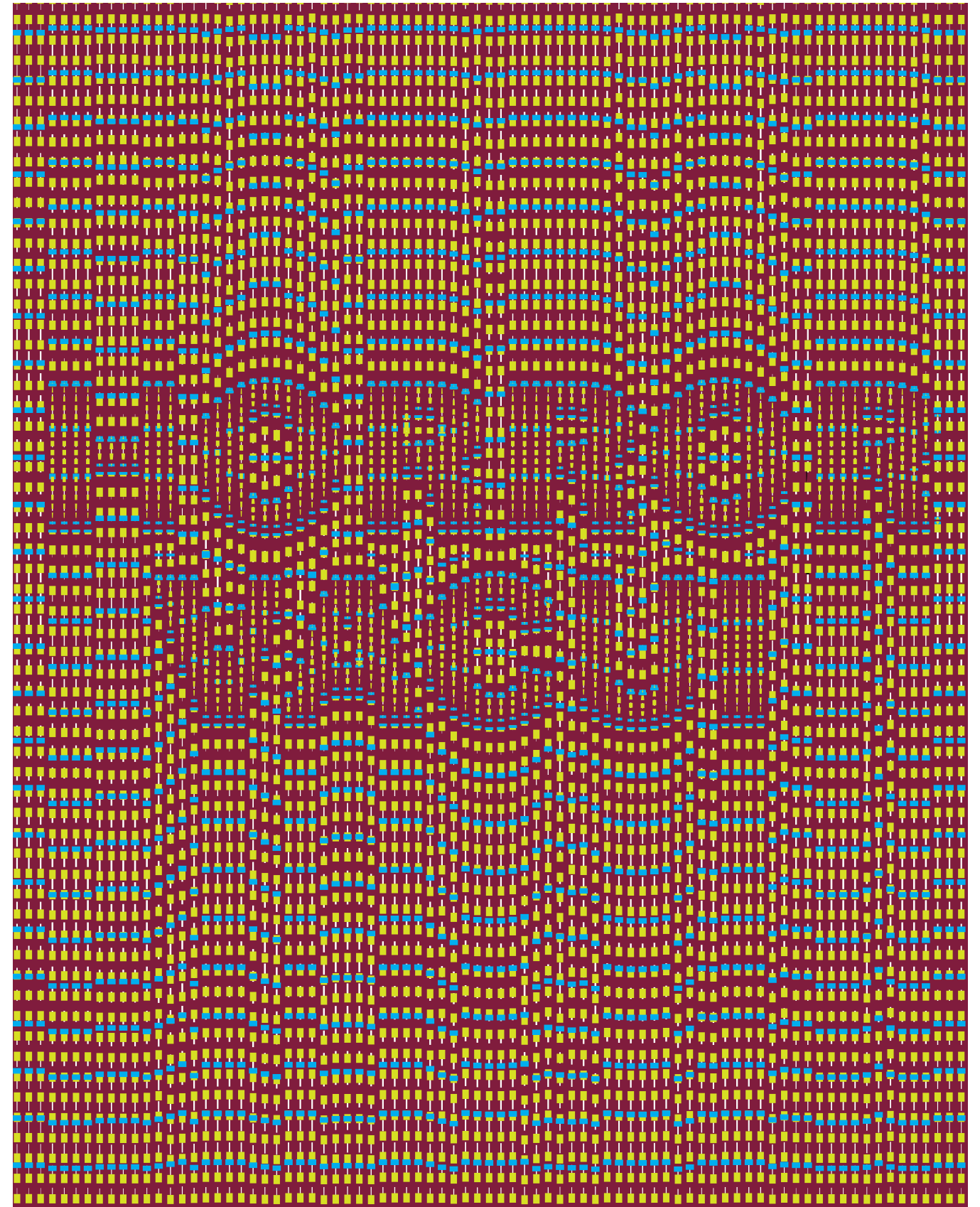


Plate 18





**nature  
abhors a  
vacuum**



# LETTERING

## Ornament is the Message



21  
Slevogt,  
Alfred Roller,  
1897.

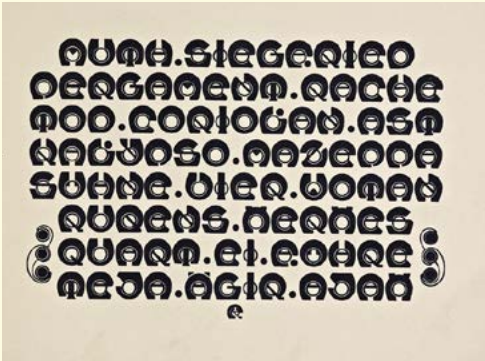


22  
Rudolf  
Larisch,  
1889.

IN HIS TREATISE *Ornamental Type* (*Über Leserlichkeit von Ornamentalen Schriften*) 1904, Austrian typographer Rudolf Larisch (1856–1934) recounts the effects of a revolutionary graphic poster by designer Alfred Roller (1864–1935) placed on a notice board on a Vienna Street. The poster for an exhibition by German Impressionist painter Max Slevogt featured an ornamental typeface of the name ‘Slevogt’, with the S drawn downward, its spine straightened vertically to align with the letter L that followed. The head of a recently slain Medusa lies at the bottom left of the picture frame, the tangle of her hair echoing the expressive curves of Roller’s letterforms. According to Larisch, thousands of amazed spectators stood in front of the notice board, in awe and bewilderment as they attempted to decipher the letters of the unfamiliar name. Roller’s expressively drawn S was, according to Larisch, “enough to frighten everything and shut it down in confusion.”<sup>1</sup>

This experience had a profound effect on Larisch, who used it to support his theories on readability and decorative type, which formed his pedagogy on lettering at the Künstgewerbeschule (School of Art and Design) in Vienna. The poster had, according to Larisch, put into question established notions of legibility and demonstrated how decorative and so-called ‘illegible’ letterforms could be used as a potent form of communication. In a series of home experiments with his son, Larisch had noticed the young boy’s ease at deciphering ornamental letter forms, which had stumped adult readers. He attributed this ability to the young boy’s untainted exposure to conventional letter forms and limited reading skills. In a further experiment, Larisch showed two words written in decorative typefaces to a group of subjects predominantly in their early 20s, who had chosen the profession of a visual artist. Again, Larisch noticed a unique ability for them to decipher the words faster than older readers who had chosen non-artistic professions. Both these experiments demonstrated that legibility was not based on form, but rather on one’s familiarity with letterforms. For children who had not yet become accustomed to stringing letters together to spell out words, more attention was given to the construction of individual letterforms, while artists who had developed

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Larisch, *Über Leserlichkeit von Ornamentalen Schriften*, Translated by Roberto Rosenman. (Vienna Schroll, 1904), 20.



23  
Type sample by Karladalb  
Fischl as published  
in Larisch's *Beispiele  
künstlerischer Schrift*,  
5 Folgen.



24  
Alfred Roller, Cover  
for *Deutsche Kunst und  
Dekoration*, 1902.

an aptitude for laboured patience through their craft were more adept at adapting to the new forms. It showed, writes Larisch, “How wrong it is to describe certain writings as legible or illegible without taking into account the great variety of talents or dispositions of the readers.”<sup>2</sup> Larisch used the results of both these experiments to draw parallels between changes in reading patterns and changes in modern society. Drastic shifts from a craft-based model to industrialization and mass production had created a faster pace of life, leading to a dependence on communication and speed. “Everywhere just the platitude: What is the point of writing if it cannot be read straight away!”, Larisch declares as the prevailing attitude of his age.

These experiments would go on to form his lifelong preoccupation with ornamental lettering and communication. If ‘communication’ meant engaging the viewer, then ‘illegible’ ornamental lettering, he argued, could be harnessed in a way to occupy the reader’s attention by defying the trend of simplification and speed. Not only did ornamental lettering represent for Larisch a defiance of standardization brought on by the economic demands of mass production, but more so, a belief that continued exposure to standardized typefaces would begin to erode one’s creative capabilities. Larisch asks, “But what if an artist has no intention of appearing ‘brutally legible’ in certain uses of artwork, if he even wishes that the writing would not be read immediately, would not reveal everything straight away, would not immediately release it to the viewer, but on the contrary force him to unravel, occupy him, captivate him?...What happens when the artist CONSCIOUSLY emphasizes the ornamental idea at the expense of the purposeful idea in such a way that the writing can be guessed at rather than read from the ornament, or if it even corresponds to his intentions that the dawning of this idea with should keep up with the comprehension of the ARTISTIC LANGUAGE OF THE WORK, i.e. MAY only become clearer after immersing oneself in the entire artistic performance for a longer period of time?”<sup>3</sup>

Jan Tschichold likely had Larisch in mind when he rallied against the ornamental type of the Jugendstil period in *Die Neue Typographie*, even singling Larisch’s student Carl Otto Czeschka (1878–1960) as a representative of this misguided group of artists. In opposition to Larisch, Tschichold argued that form should not be considered independently from technology and function, and criticized Jugendstil artists for considering form outside the realm of mass production. “They placed too great an emphasis on form as a concept in its own right”, Tschichold writes of Larisch’s students, “and failed to recognize its dependence on the factors which really control design, such as demand, purpose, raw materials, and manufacturing methods.”<sup>4</sup> Tschichold’s critique aligns closely with Adolf Loos’ condemnation of ornament as incompatible with the functional and economic imperatives of modern industrial society—defined by efficiency, speed, and standardization. Functional typography, Tschichold argues, simply could not have been a concern of Larisch’s readers, who had “plenty of time to read line by line in a leisurely manner”.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

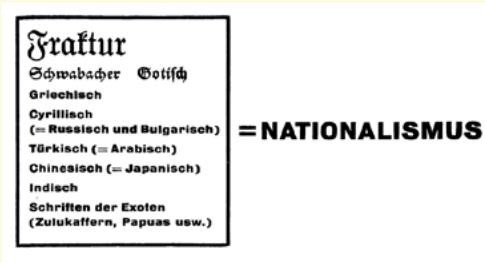
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Tschichold, Richard Hendel, Robin Kinross, and Ruari McLean. *The New Typography*. Reprint 2020. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 52.





25  
Max Bill, *Tanzstudio Wulff*.  
*Relâche*, *Parade*, *Ariadne*,  
1931.



26  
Jan Tschichold,  
*Fraktur=Nationalismus*  
diagram, From *The New*  
*Typography*, 1928.

For Tschichold, the essence of the New Typography movement was ‘clarity’, a trait he decided was best epitomized by sans-serif lowercase forms (ideally in Futura). The geometric sans serif was the best suited to form a standardized one-type system that would reflect the standardiza- tion of housing proposed by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. “It is obvious that functional design means the abolition of the “ornamentation that has reigned for centuries”<sup>5</sup>, Tschichold writes, believing that a one-type system would not only increase legibility but also be of great advantage to the economy by saving time and resources idled away in the creation of new typefaces. While the validity of Larisch’s small experiments on legibility might be questioned, Tschichold provides no empirical evidence to support his theory that sans-serif geometric typefaces are more legible than others. His admonishment of ornamental letterforms seems to be grounded more in philosophy than the science he reveres; rooted in the belief that if the progress of modern society depended on an economy of time and resources, then surely lopping off unnecessary serifs and swashes would achieve the same results in reading.

Tschichold is also never quite able to clearly define the characteristics of ‘clarity’, though he seems to use them synonymously with a need for ‘purity’ and ‘simplicity’ in design as a means of advancing society. Like Loos, he accuses those who show a reluctance to use ‘pure design’, from the New Guinea tribes to Slovak peasants, as a “giving in to a primitive instinct to decorate”.<sup>6</sup> The idea of a ‘pure’ mode of representation became a common trope of modernist art practices spurred on by a perceived threat to a European identity. The painter Jean Metzinger, for example, lays out the criteria for achieving a ‘purity’ of art in his 1910 *Notes on Painting*, stating; “Rejecting every ornamental, anecdotal or symbolic intention, he achieves a painterly purity, hitherto unknown”. <sup>7</sup> Thus, like Loos, the rejection of ornament for Tschichold is not only a way to achieve economic prosperity but as a way to liberate society from the ‘contamination’ of culture.

Postmodernism and Jugendstil seem like unlikely allies; however, it was in the early 1990s that designers began to critically re-examine estab- lished notions of legibility and formal clarity, prompting a renewed inter- est in the expressive possibilities of ornamental type. Echoing Larisch’s skepticism that legibility depends entirely on form, type designer Gerard Unger (1942–2018) declares at the onset of his essay *Legible* (1992) that, “suddenly legibility is under siege.”<sup>8</sup> Unger cites the dubious data on legi- bility, often derived from flawed experiments. Like Larsich, he suggests that legibility is not an inherent quality of type but rather one shaped by familiarity and repeated exposure. He observes that the demand for new typefaces arises partly from the diminishing impact of older ones as they become too familiar, losing their effectiveness. Thus, for Unger and Larisch, legibility is not inherent in form, but rather a dynamic process achieved through repeated use. He says, “In that respect, nothing has changed. The recent pronouncements about legibility are still primarily

based upon emotion and are prompted by the need for change.”<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, Unger appears to advocate for a type which responds to the age. Quoting designer Jeffery Keedy, Unger states that, “Too many people strive to omit ambiguity (which is exactly what good, legible typography aims at).”<sup>10</sup> Like Keedy, Unger believes that the sense of ambiguity inherent in postwar society, and brought to a climax in the post- modern period, precisely requires typefaces that emphasize this belief. Echoing Larisch, Unger questions the modernist notion of invisible typog- raphy, or rather typography which does not draw attention to its form, best encapsulated by Beatrice Ward (1900–1969) in her essay *The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should be Invisible* (1932). Unger exposes the inherent contradiction in this ideal: while modernist typography aspires to technical clarity and objectivity, it is nonetheless shaped by the emotional, intui- tive, and experiential decisions of the designer. He asserts that “Invisible typography does not exist” as the type designer’s personality inevitably surfaces through subtle formal decisions and stylistic inflections, all of which are informed by the cultural context of their time.

For Unger and Larisch, reading is a process more dependent on emotion and intuition, rather than form alone. While writing nearly seven- ty-five years apart, both seem to respond to a pressing loss of artistic autonomy marked by increasing automation and a growing scarcity of free time. Larisch and Unger’s perspective feels more relevant than ever in our current era, where increased automation through artificial intelligence is leading to an ‘invisibility’ of the designer. As rapid information processing becomes the norm, there is renewed value in ornamental typography that challenges the speed and efficiency prioritized by digital systems, whereby ornament is not merely a distraction but a deliberate act of resistance against passive consumption.

5 Jan Tschichold, Richard Hendel, Robin Kinross, and Ruari McLean. *The New Typography*. Reprint 2020. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 69.  
6 Ibid., 69.  
7 Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word : Experimental Typography and Modern Art*, 1909-1923. Paperback ed., (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 86.  
8 Gerard Unger, “Legibile?” Published in *Émigré* no.23: 1992.

9 Gerard Unger, “Legibile?” Published in *Émigré* no.23: 1992.  
10 Ibid.



“It is obvious that functional design means the abolition of the ornamentation that has reigned for centuries. The use of ornament, in whatever style or quality, comes from an attitude of childish naivety. It shows a reluctance to use ‘pure design,’ a giving-in to a primitive instinct to decorate — which reveals, in the last resort, a fear of pure appearance.”

—Jan Tschichold

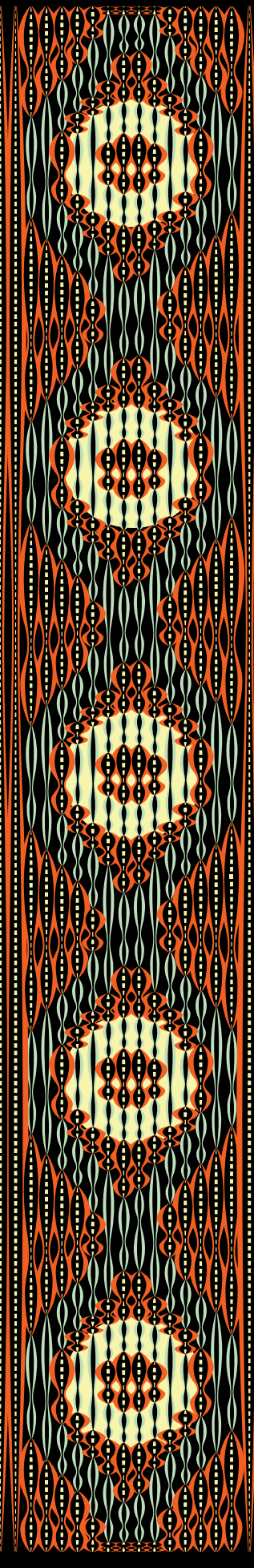
‘The New Typography’, 1928.

“But what if an artist has no intention of appearing “brutally legible” in certain uses of artwork, if he even wishes that the writing would not be read immediately, would not reveal everything straight away, would not immediately release it to the viewer, but on the contrary force him to unravel, occupy him, captivate him?”

—Rudolf Larisch

‘Über Leserlichkeit von Ornamentalen Schriften’, 1904.





## Experiments in Ornamental Lettering

Ornamental typography has traditionally been associated with beauty and surface aesthetics, often positioned in opposition to the perceived neutrality and functional clarity of sans-serif typefaces. Jan Tschichold critiqued such ornamental forms on the grounds that letterforms which hinder rapid reading fail as effective tools of communication, particularly in a modern context shaped by the demands of mass production, speed, and clarity. In contrast, Rudolf von Larisch proposed that ornamental type could serve a communicative function precisely through its ambiguity. By slowing the reading process and encouraging interpretive engagement, ornament itself becomes the message.

Plates 19–20 explore isolated decorative letterforms that challenge conventional notions of legibility when removed from word structures. As these forms reappear in subsequent compositions, they begin to gain recognizability through repetition, reflecting both Larisch and Gerard Unger’s assertion that legibility is not an intrinsic property of form but a learned and contextual process. Plates 21–29 examine the convergence of typography and ornament, deliberately blurring the boundaries between letterform and pattern. These works compel the viewer to decipher text rather than read it passively, with readability shifting according to viewing distance and shaped by the interaction of color, texture, and material. In an age increasingly defined by automation and speed, these experiments demonstrate how slowness and ambiguity can serve as vital components of visual expression.

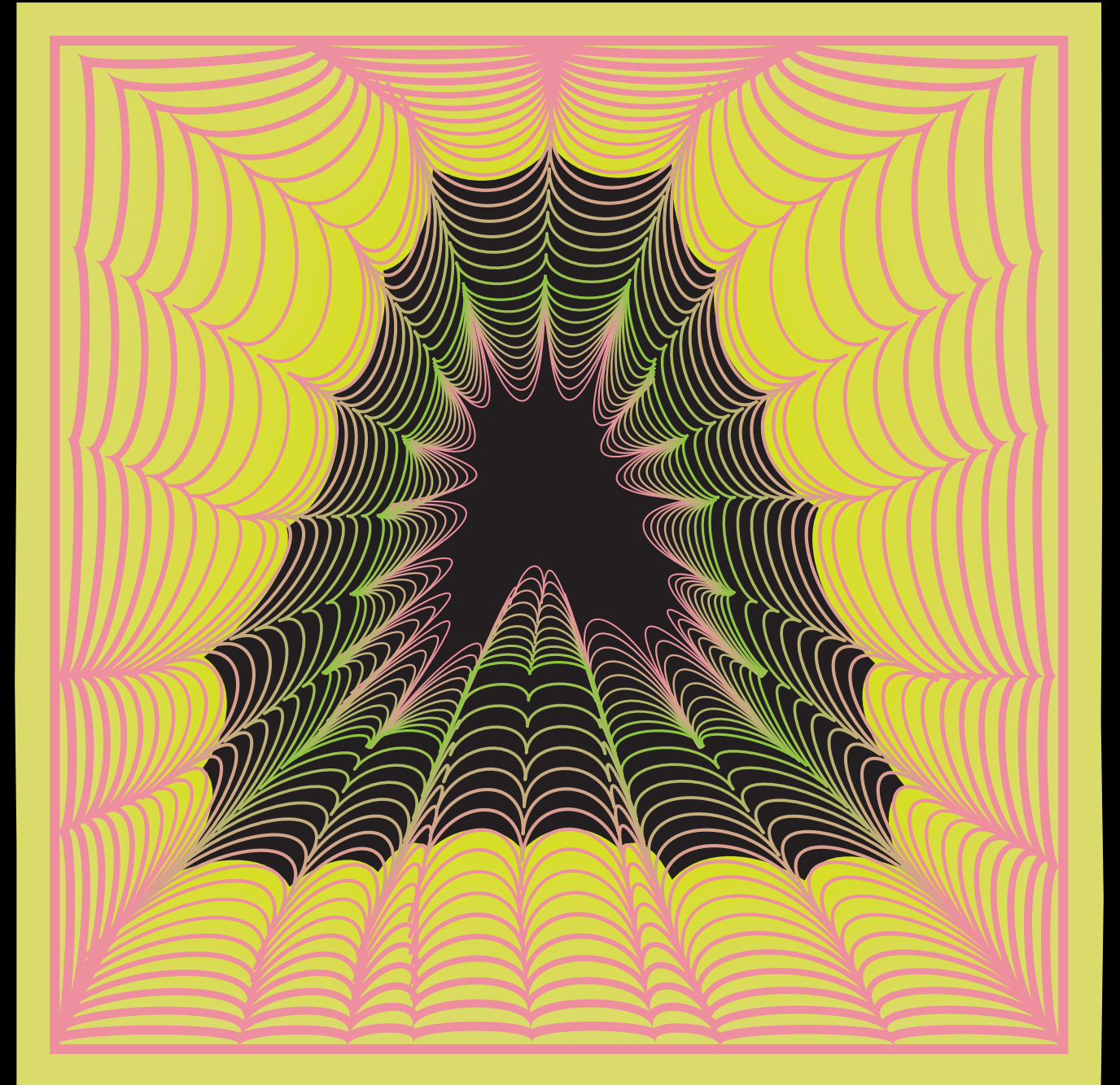
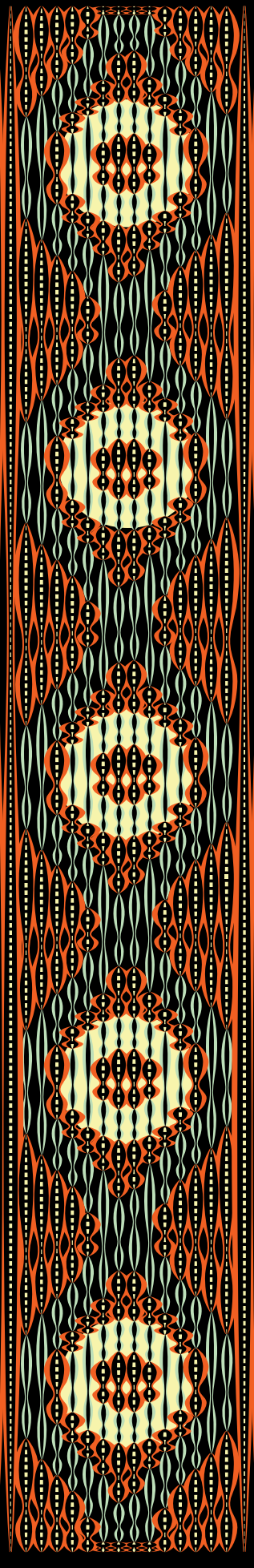


Plate 19



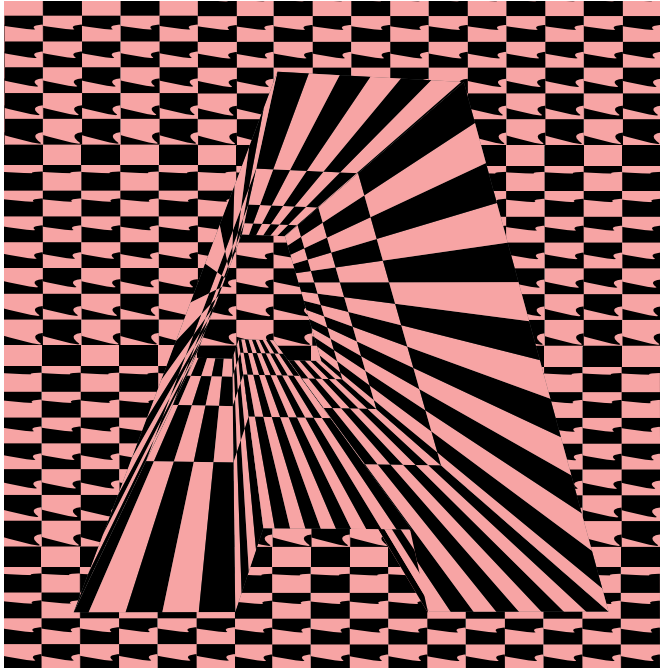
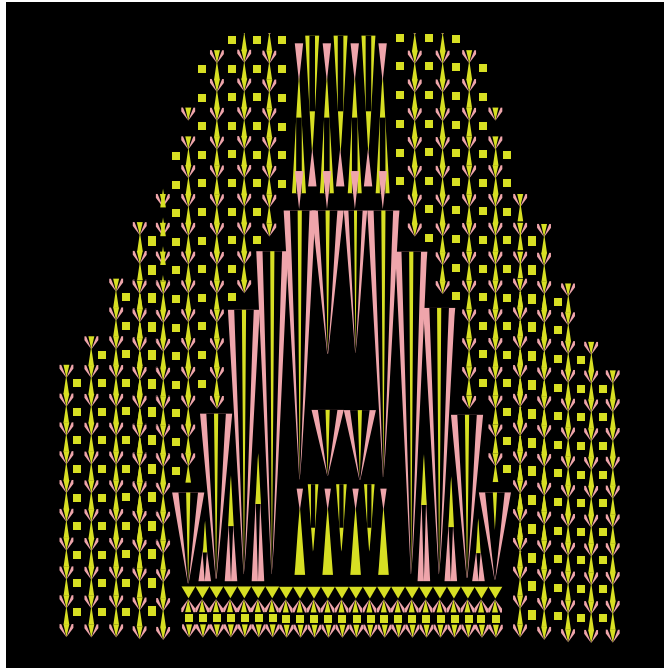
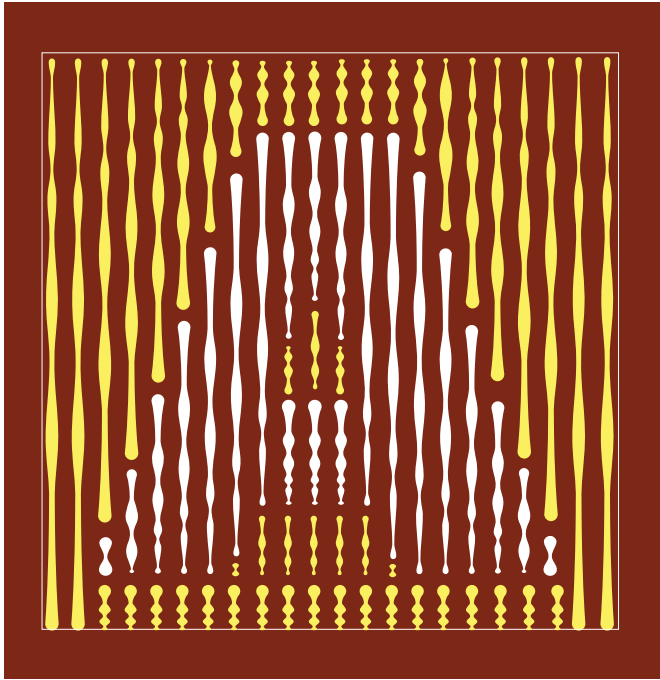
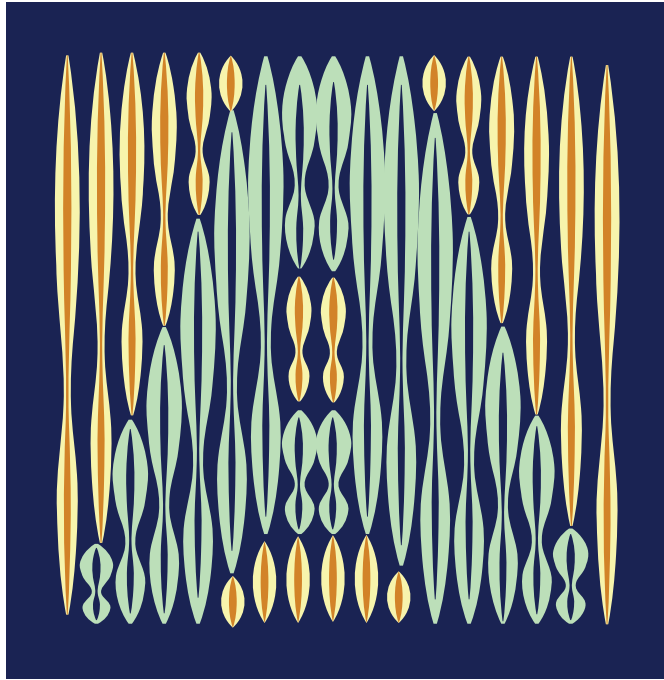
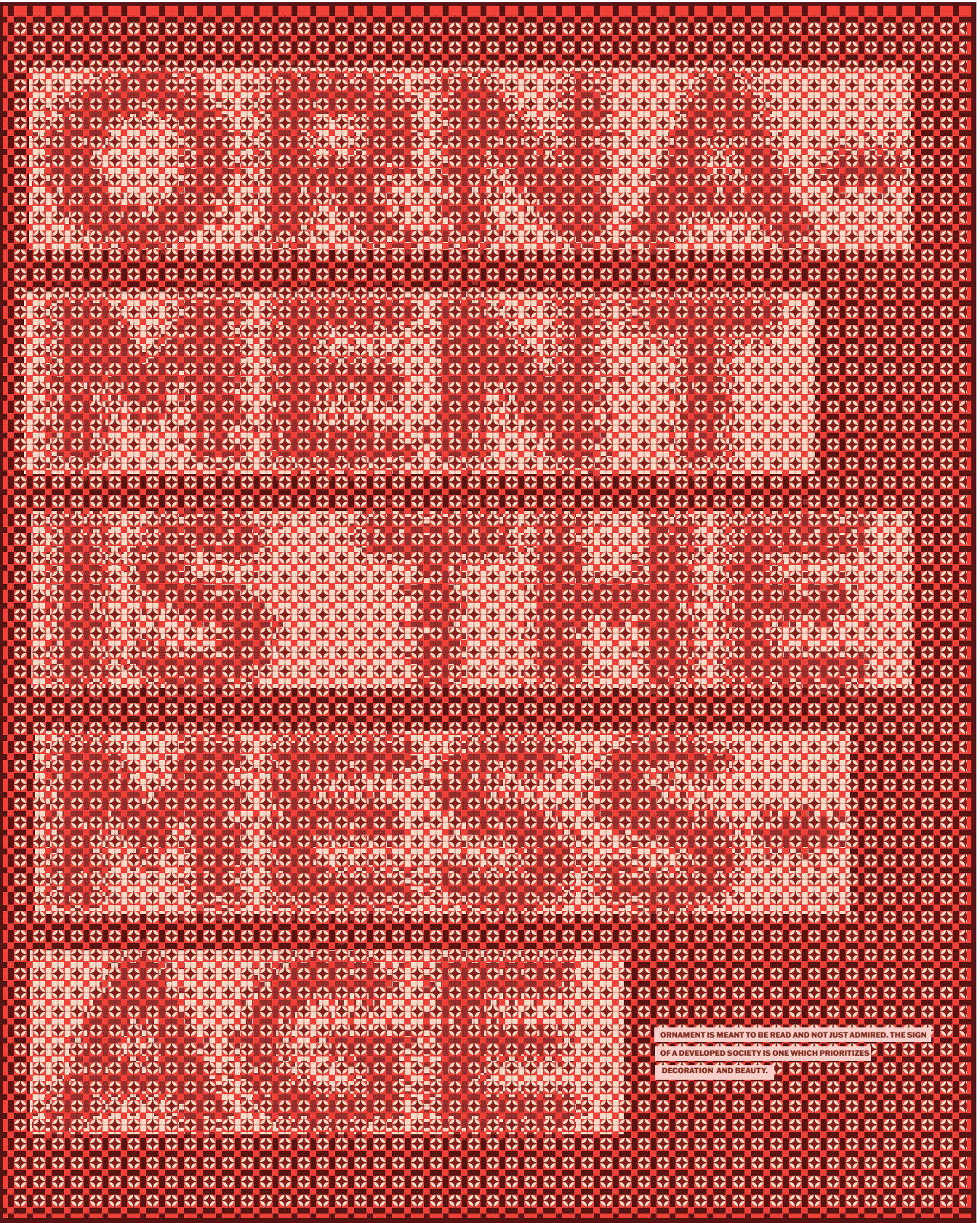


Plate 20



ORNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE READ AND NOT JUST ADMIRER. THE SIGN  
OF A DEVELOPED SOCIETY IS ONE WHICH PRIORITIZES  
DECORATION AND BEAUTY.

Plate 21





Plate 22

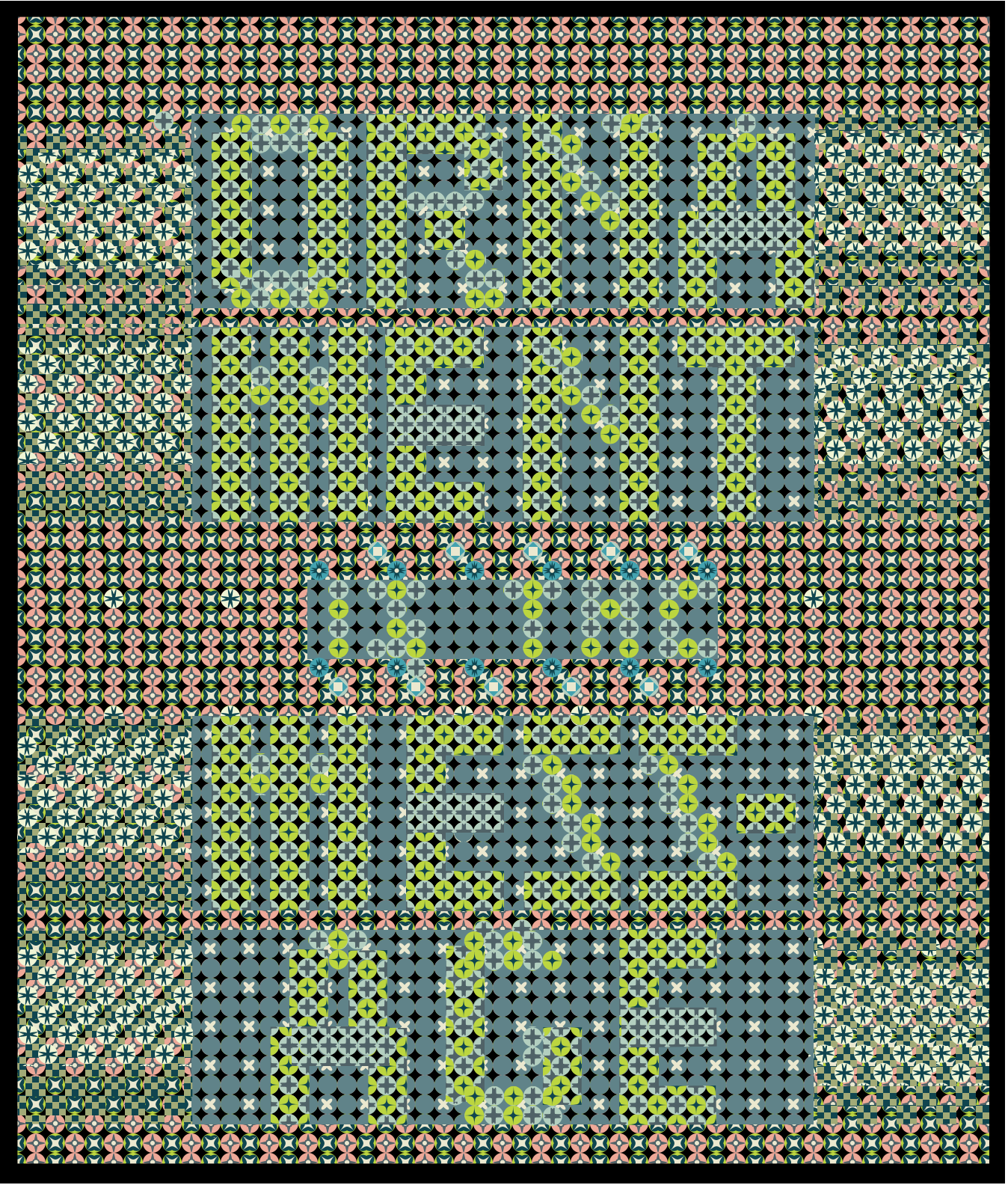
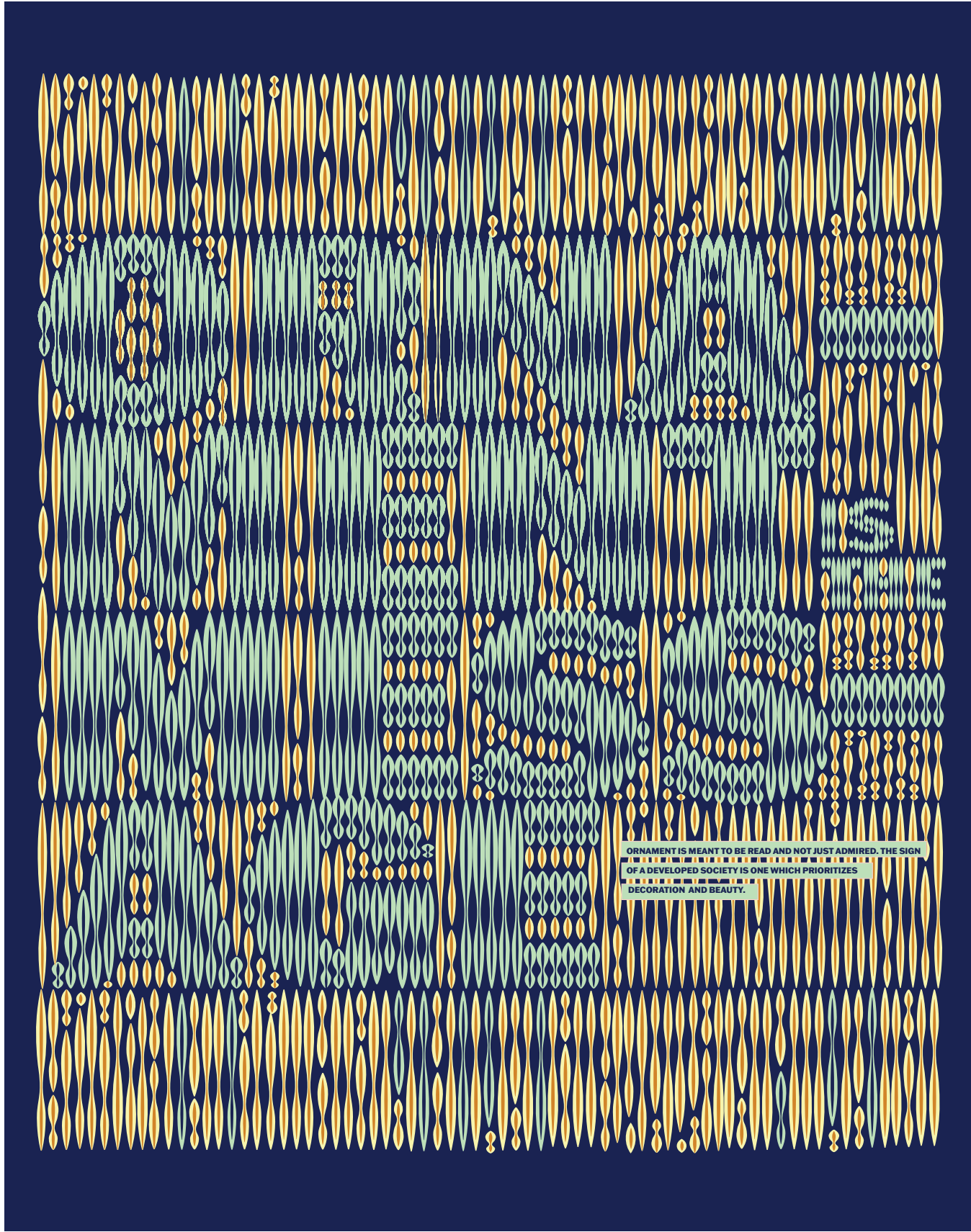


Plate 23





ORNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE READ AND NOT JUST ADMIRER. THE SIGN  
OF A DEVELOPED SOCIETY IS ONE WHICH PRIORITIZES  
DECORATION AND BEAUTY.

Plate 24



ORNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE READ AND NOT JUST ADMIRER.  
THE SIGN OF A DEVELOPED SOCIETY IS ONE WHICH PRIORITIZES  
DECORATION AND BEAUTY.

Plate 25



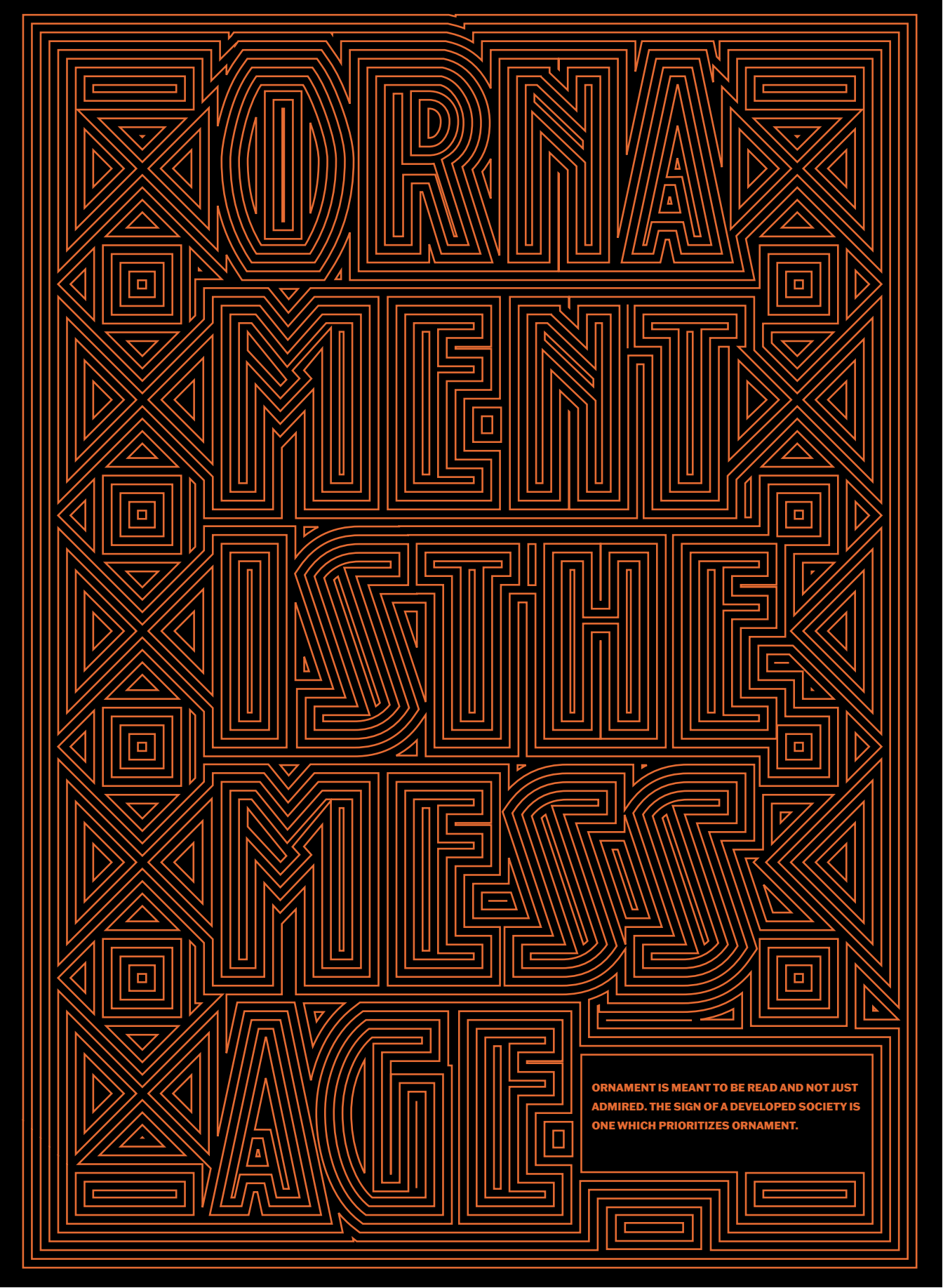


ORNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE READ AND NOT JUST ADMIRERD.

THE SIGN OF A DEVELOPED SOCIETY IS ONE WHICH PRIORITIZES

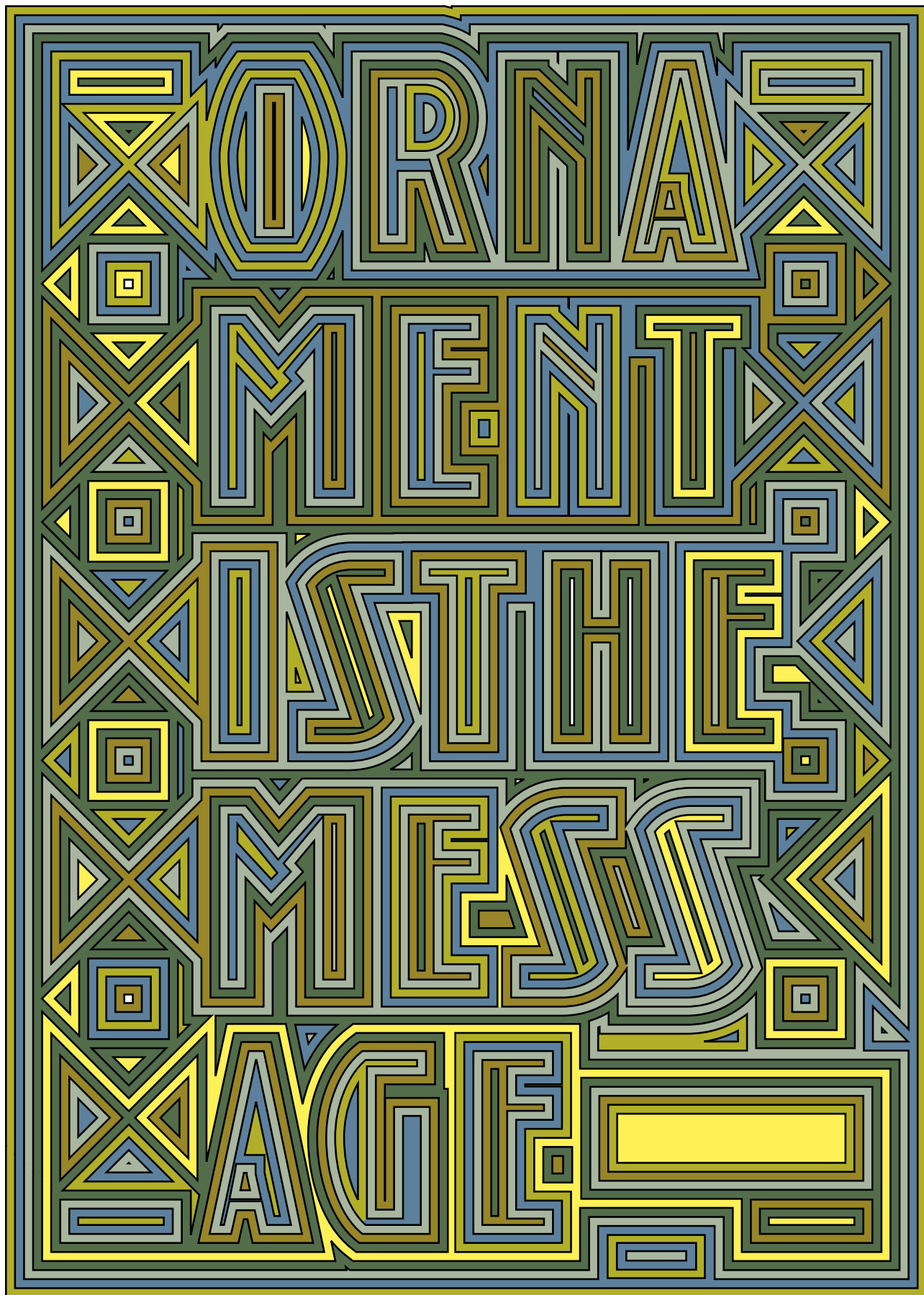
DECORATION AND BEAUTY.

Plate 26



ORNAMENT IS MEANT TO BE READ AND NOT JUST  
ADMIRERD. THE SIGN OF A DEVELOPED SOCIETY IS  
ONE WHICH PRIORITIZES ORNAMENT.







# THE TRACE

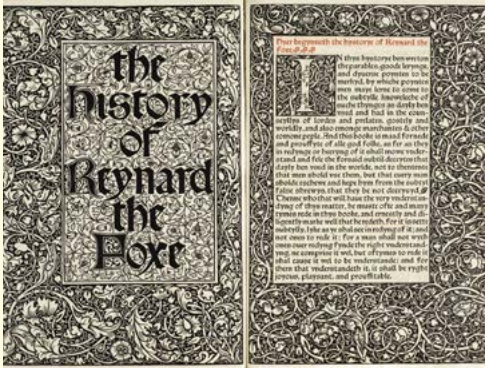
## A Return to Handcrafted Ornament

ALTHOUGH MASS PRODUCTION and mechanization in the late 19th century contributed to the demise of ornament, these same technological developments have more recently led to a renewed interest in ornament among contemporary graphic designers. For John Ruskin, ornament was not merely an aesthetic concern but a vehicle for social reform—an antidote to the alienation and dehumanization of the factory worker brought on by industrial labour.

In *The Nature of the Gothic* (1853), Ruskin highlights the example of the factory worker who is alienated from the fruits of their labour by being tasked with only producing a point of a pin, while simultaneously being deprived of the communal structure characteristic of pre-industrial craftsmanship. While Ruskin argued that mechanization introduced a separation between the worker and the product through a division of labour, he identified the real crisis of industrialization as the division of labourers themselves—a crisis he believed led to a diminishing of human creativity and capacities.<sup>1</sup> The result was not only a degradation of the ornament’s quality, but the craftsman’s dehumanization by stripping him of what Ruskin referred to as the ‘trace of the hand’.

This ‘trace,’ according to Ruskin, represented the imperfections and irregularities associated with handicraft. Ornament that revealed the deliberations and hesitations of the maker imparted it with value by invoking the craftsman’s labour. At the same time, the trace represented a subjective dimension whereby the artist revealed themselves through their craft by imbuing matter with the human spirit. Ruskin writes,

“Hand-work might always be known from machine-work...it will be plainly seen that some places have been delighted in more than others—that there has been a pause, and a care about them; and then there will come careless bits, and fast bits; and here the chisel will have struck hard, and there lightly, and anon timidly; and if the man’s mind as well as his heart went with his work, all this will be in the right places, and each part will set off the other; and the effect of the whole, as compared with the same design cut by a machine or a lifeless hand, will be like that of poetry well read and deeply felt to that of the same verses jangled by rote.”<sup>2</sup>



26  
Kelmscott Press. *The History of Reynard the Foxe*, by William Caxton, Printed by William Morris, 1892.



27  
Christoper Dresser, *The Art of Decorative Design*, plate 18, (1862).



28  
Trowel marks visible on the columns of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation, Marseille (1945).

Ultimately, the failure of Ruskin’s Arts and Crafts revolution lay in its inability to reconcile handcrafted ornament with the economic realities of production. Intended to be a social reform movement, it proved unsustainable in practice, as it remained dependent on the very mechanization it sought to reject. More significantly, the movement suffered from the same limitations that hindered its counterpart Art Nouveau style, in that its products were prohibitively expensive and thus accessible only to a wealthy clientele. William Morris’ Kelmscott books, for example, which sought to replicate the process of 15th-century Guttenberg printing, remained very expensive to produce and ultimately accessible to only a few wealthy patrons in Morris’ inner circle.<sup>3</sup> Herein lies a central paradox of the Arts and Crafts movement: it reacted against income inequality associated with industrial capitalism, yet the majority of its crafts became financially unattainable to the working class it sought to empower.

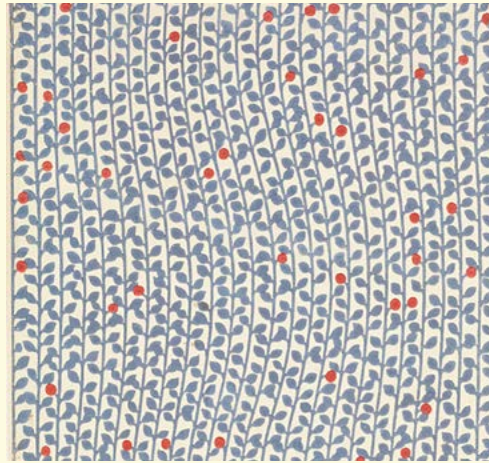
Despite Modernism’s goal to eliminate ornament and with it, the trace of the craftsman, the trace of the hand remained a defiant reminder of the machine’s impersonal nature. The architect Le Corbusier, who celebrated the mechanization of life and envisioned architecture as a “machine for living,” paradoxically embraced the tactile irregularities of manual construction by exposing the hand trowel marks left by workers in the concrete formwork of the *Unité d’Habitation in Marseille* (1952). Notably, these marks appeared on the columns—a symbolic gesture given that this structural element was historically associated with the highest levels of ornamental detail.

The adoption of natural plant forms as the source of inspiration for artists of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau period represented a further rejection of the precision and symmetry associated with the machine. Plants, characterized by their continuous growth and movement, possessed an inherent asymmetry that challenged the mechanical ideals of uniformity and perfection. This focus on organic growth emerged alongside developments of photography and microscopy, which enabled designers to consider nature not only through its externally visible idealized regularity but also through its internal, irregular structural properties. This irregularity of form thus became the template for handcrafted ornament, which bore the irregular marks of the maker. Nonetheless, we encounter a contradiction in the use of floral ornament by Arts and Crafts designers like William Morris, who represent nature as idealized, static, and ultimately symmetrical within their patterns. This tendency reflects a broader influence of mid-nineteenth-century design reformers such as Owen Jones and his student Christopher Dresser (1834–1904), who advocated for ornament grounded in geometric construction. Dresser went to great lengths to establish a new visual vocabulary for ornament, reportedly deriving certain motifs by observing the swirling eddies formed by a teaspoon resting in a cup of tea—an act of close observation which he transformed into abstraction. For Dresser, the shift from pictorial to abstract ornament was essential. He argued that “decoration must embody the mind of its producer”<sup>4</sup>, while asserting that the imagination

<sup>1</sup> J. Dakota Brown, *Typography, Automation, and the Division of Labor: A Brief History*, (Other Form Books, 2019) 2.  
<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, *On the Nature of Gothic Architecture : And Herein of the True Functions of the Workman in Art*. (London: Smith, Elder, 1854), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Kinross, *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*. 2nd ed. (London: Hyphen Press, 2010), 45.  
<sup>4</sup> Michael Whiteway, *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser’s Design Revolution*. Edited by Michael Whiteway, (Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2004), 58.





29  
Richard Riemerschmid,  
*Blätter und Beeren*,  
*Blau und Rot auf Weiß*,  
1900–1910.



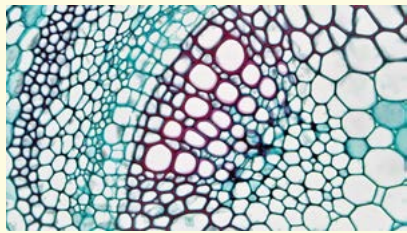
30  
Si Scott,  
*Letter ‘V’*, 2009 from  
the Type Tart Card  
project.

of the ornamental designer concerned with abstraction was of greater value than the pictorial artist who merely copied nature. Jones forbade the use of flowers and other natural objects as ornamental icons unless they were idealized, free of defects, anomalies, and irregularity. Thus, Dresser, despite his formal training as a botanist, ignores the irregularities and asymmetry of the natural world, producing designs in which organic forms are rendered through strict symmetry and stylization.

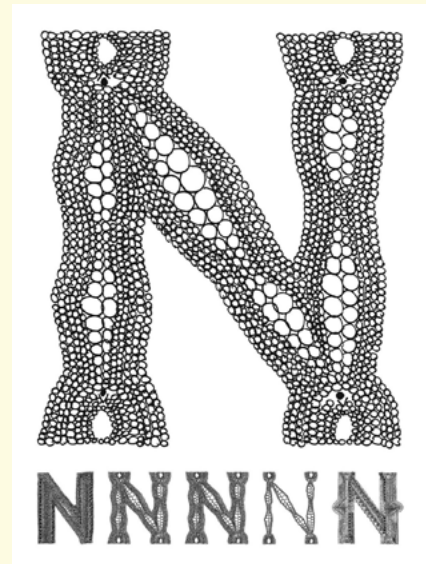
However, not all designers of the Art Nouveau period adhered to this idealization. For some, the irregular nature of ornament became a model for pattern-making, which responded to the repetitive uniformity of industrial ornament. German designer Richard Riemerschmid (1868–1957) created patterns that balanced the structural logic of repetition while simultaneously showing the anomalies reflective of organic growth. At first glance, the rhythmic pattern of his wallpaper design, *Leaves and Berries*, suggests a regularity placed along a grid. Yet, on closer inspection, one begins to see the uniqueness in the individual forms, which differ in the shape and placement of the leaves. In contrast to Owen’s and Dresser’s symmetrical construction of nature, Riemerschmid’s patterns seek to capture the anomalies and imperfections inherent in life as a principle of design. Historian Freyja Hartzell writes, “Riemerschmid enacted the dependence of asymmetry on symmetry—the permission that rationalism gives to irrationality. His patterns require structure if only for the purpose of wriggling free of it—to prove their living thingliness”<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Riemerschmid, ornament is no longer at the service of copying natural forms (kunstform), but about a recognition of the structural qualities (kernform) of nature. His work marks a move to follow nature not by imitating its outward appearance, but by its inherent laws of growth in the design process.

The advent of computers as a design tool amplified the symmetrical precision of form associated with ornament. Computer algorithms, fractal generation, and vector software simplified the process of replication, further eliminating the irregularities once linked to the hand-crafted ‘trace’. Yet, much like the Arts and Crafts movement, contemporary graphic designers have come to embrace the imperfections of ornamental handcraft as markers of authenticity and value. Designer and illustrator Si Scott (b. 1977) combines hand-drawn typography and imagery to produce highly detailed ornamental works in which letterforms dissolve into sinuous forms reminiscent of paper marbling. Scott does not use any preparatory pencil drawing, which he believes makes the final result ‘too forced’. Instead, he works directly in ink, partly improvising the forms as he develops the drawing. At first glance, his finished works may appear as if they were produced with the precision of vector software, yet on closer inspection, one begins to see the irregularities in his line work. These deviations serve as a testament to the ‘trace’ of the maker, and the value of the work becomes intrinsically tied to the labour behind its creation.

Similarly, designer Hansje Van Halem oscillates between digital and hand-drawn ornamental work, creating work which “explores the tension between a systematic approach, legibility, and irregularity.”<sup>6</sup> In her project



31  
Cross section of a  
Younger Trifolium stem  
(Clover) magnified at  
400x.



32  
Hansje Van Halem,  
*Doily Type*, 2024.



33  
Leopoldine  
Kolbe, *Basket  
of Flowers*,  
Postcard  
#32 for  
the Wiener  
Werkstätte,  
1907.

*Doily Type* (2024), Van Halem hand-drew ornamental letters inspired by traditional doily patterns. Like Riemerschmid’s patterns, her letters initially appear to conform to a symmetrical structural pattern. However, upon closer inspection, subtle deviations emerge with no circular motif being precisely replicated. To underscore this irregularity, she created multiple versions of each letter, ensuring that no two were identical within the same design. Van Halem has expressed that her work is driven less by a desire to decorate and more by an interest in methodology. Thus, we can view her hand-drawn ornamental-type experiments as a reflection on the tension between nature and machine, or between irregularity and symmetry. In addition to her study of lace-making, Van Halem cites the influence of her mother, a seamstress who used knitting machines, as crucial in helping her understand the intricate relationship between lines and their rhythmic patterns. Coincidentally, *Doily Type* was described by one reviewer as “equal parts Fabergé egg and magnified cell bacteria”; a telling analogy given that it was the microscope that first revealed complex and unique anomalies of cell forms behind seemingly regularizing structures of flower petals or leaf patterns. Like Riemerschmid, Van Halem’s hand-drawn work implores us to engage with ornament on a deeper level beyond mere decoration, but rather as an expression of nature’s dynamic structure as a model for artistic forms.

Just as Loos equated the tattoos of so-called “primitive” peoples with criminality, modernism stigmatized ornament by associating it with the ‘lower’ arts or decorative arts. This devaluation led to a marginalization of ornamental practices historically linked to the domestic and feminine sphere, such as floral painting, embroidery, weaving, decorative stencilling, and porcelain decoration. Design historian Cheryl Buckley argues that this hierarchical distinction between ‘high’ art (fine art and industrial design) and ‘low’ art (craft) has effectively erased women’s contributions from the design canon. As Buckley writes: “To exclude craft from design history is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed. For many women, craft modes of production were the only means of production available because they had access neither to the factories of the new industrial system nor to the training offered by the new design schools. Indeed, craft allowed women an opportunity to express their creative and artistic skills outside of the male-dominated design profession.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet women’s exclusion from the high arts ultimately helped elevate ornament and the utilitarian object, such as the doily, as one worthy of design by bringing traditionally feminine craft practices into the public and commercial realms of design. As one such case study, we can look at the contributions of female artists associated with the Austrian workshop Wiener Werkstätte (1903–1932). The idea of leading Vienna Secessionist designers Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffmann, the workshop served as a commercial offshoot of the Vienna Secession, aimed to integrate modernist design into all aspects of daily life. Despite education reforms that allowed Austrian women to study at art academies, women were nonetheless excluded from anatomical studies and architectural drawing, and were geared instead to more ‘feminine’ areas of craft such as floral

<sup>5</sup> Freyja Thorbjørn Hartzell, *Richard Riemerschmid’s Extraordinary Living Things* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2022), 285.

<sup>6</sup> Hansje Van Halem, (2025, March) About <https://www.hansje.net/ABOUT>

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Buckley. “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design”, *Design Issues* 3, no. 2 (1986): 7, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511480>. p. 7 (Last accessed December 4, 2024)

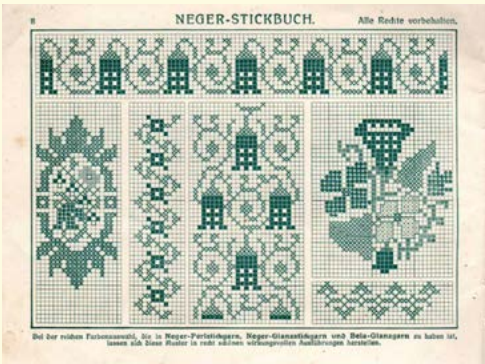




34  
Mariane Bantjes,  
*Obsessive Behaviour*.



35  
Susan Kare,  
Icons for  
Apple, 1982.



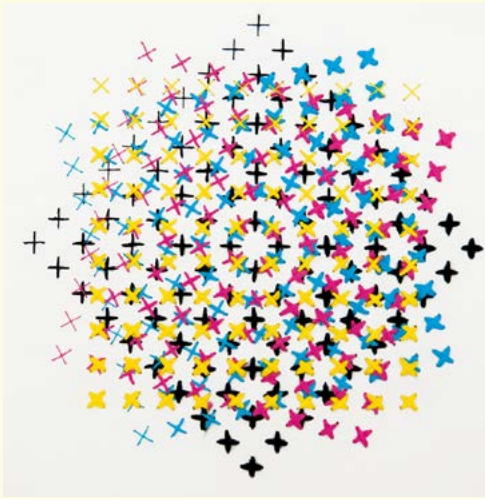
36  
Natalie Eger, Page from  
*Neger-Stickbuch Nr. 8.*,  
(Embroidery Book) 1900.

painting, decorative painting, embroidery, weaving and porcelain.<sup>8</sup> Within these so-called ‘minor’ decorative arts (postcard production, fashion, and embroidery), female graduates were able to find employment, inherently helping to shape the design aesthetics of utilitarian objects. Until the company’s closure in 1932, the Wiener Werkstätte employed roughly 180 women within the areas of fabric design, fashion, home accessories, toys, and postcards. Just over 300 of its 900 postcards were designed by female artists between 1908 and 1920, thereby becoming one of the first media which saw women’s traditional ornamental practices (such as stencilling and collage) applied to modes of mass production.<sup>9</sup>

Van Halem’s appropriation of the doily as an ornamental motif is both a nod to the marginalization of women’s handcraft in the design canon, while simultaneously reclaiming women’s crafts from the anonymity of mass production. Similarly, designer Mariane Bantjes’ intricate lace drawing *Obsessive Behaviour* brings to the forefront traditional ‘lower’ female handcrafts, drawing attention not only to their visual complexity but also to the intensive labour associated with them. Historically practiced in communal settings among women, these forms of handcrafted ornament become expressions of social connection and shared authorship, in opposition to the impersonal nature of mass production. In this context, hand-drawn ornament becomes a symbol of resistance, reclaiming the artistic autonomy and authorship of female designers who were excluded under Modernism.

While modernism’s emphasis on automation effectively sidelined women’s craft contributions to the history of ornament, the advent of the digital revolution played a key role in its resurrection. The release of the Apple Macintosh in 1984 and the development of early ‘bitmap’ fonts and graphics, which used a matrix of pixels that turned on and off according to programming instructions, sparked a renewed interest in the traditionally female craft practice of cross-stitching, which uses x-shaped stitches on a raster-style matrix. Susan Kare (b. 1954), the pioneering designer tasked with creating the early bitmap font and icons for the Macintosh computer in 1984, credits her knowledge of needlepoint, knitting patterns, and mosaic—craft traditions passed on to her by her mother—as sharing the same grid-based structure that helped her simplify designs to their essentials. Similarly, designer Zuzana Licko (b. 1961), whose 1985 font *Lo-Res* was designed on a bitmap grid, recognized how the cross-stitch could be seen as an early precursor of the pixel and drew from Slovak folk embroidery traditions as a model for early bitmap fonts. In a clever reversal, the bitmap revolution signalled an excavation of traditional women’s craft, and ironically, a move away from duplication since bitmap fonts were unscalable and therefore had to be redesigned at different sizes.

The computer as a modern craft tool, illustrates how contemporary designers are merging digital and analogue forms of ornamentation by blending handcraft with programming. New trends such as type knitting, which combines the precision of digital fonts and knitting, explore this kinship, highlighting the similarities between pixel and cross-stitch, while celebrating the ‘trace’ of the hand. Designer and author Rudiger Schlomer



37  
Evelin Kasikov,  
*CMYK Embroidered  
Piece*, 2007.

(b. 1978) examines how models of automation and subsequently digitization have been influenced by earlier analogue techniques, highlighting how the holes on punch cards on early mechanical looms served as an analogue equivalent to bytes, and in turn, became an early version of digital coding. He writes, “It’s no coincidence that knitting patterns look rather mechanical, like pixel diagrams. A knitting pattern is a universal visual code that lends form to the variable of knit and purl stitches. The symbols of this cryptography can be universally decoded no matter what language you speak.”<sup>10</sup>

Graphic designer Evelin Kasikov further explores this relationship through her technique of CMYK embroidery—a hand-stitched process that aims to replicate traditional offset printing using cyan, magenta, yellow, and black thread. The process culminated in a project called *XXXX Swatchbook* which, resembling a Pantone colour book, compiled 400 swatches of colour hand embroidered using cross-stitching.

Handcrafted ornament has traditionally been an anonymous art form. In considering ornament’s folk art origins and its status as a ‘minor art’, professor Massimo Carboni shows its unique position as an art form without an author or ‘aura’. This ‘fatherless’ art which evokes neither a narrative or an author, exists outside the traditional sense of human history and time as it “purposes no mythology of the author, or more generally of the subject....Ornament is art without the artist, art without aura. It tells nothing but itself.... Ornament appeals to the preconscious layers of identity that control the dynamic, generative mobility of the hand, the pulsating and kinetic rhythm of the gesture. Ornament is a seed without a father.”<sup>11</sup>

In stigmatizing ornament and emphasizing form and function, modernism became iconoclastic, erasing the identity of marginalized groups, often those of women, while privileging European cultural production. Jan Tschichold emphasized the need for objectivity in design in order to draw attention to an object’s form and function. For Tschichold, the presence of an author in a work was a distraction, which went against the very nature of design as a set of unified system. “The value of an object”, he writes, “is not measured by its origins, but by its approach to perfection of form, the highest and purest design. The creator disappears completely behind his work....Just as every human being is part of a greater whole, and is conscious of his connection with it, so his work should also be an expression of his general feelings of wholeness.”<sup>12</sup> One can’t help noticing the totalitarian undertones here; Tschichold’s vision of a design factory with anonymous creators working diligently in formation like a regiment of soldiers. We need only return to Ruskin’s damning condemnation of the alienation of factory pin workers to see the extent of this vision. In this bleak world of anonymous automation, handcrafted ornament re-emerges as a subversive force—the rogue soldier who defects from their unit. Just as the trace of the hand defies the symmetry of that industrial order, the attribution of ornamental work acknowledges the diverse identities which have been marginalized in the design canon.

<sup>10</sup> Rudiger Schlomer, *Typographic Knitting: From Pixel to Pattern* (United States, Princeton Architectural Press, 2019), 6.  
<sup>11</sup> Massimo Carboni, “Infinite Ornament”, *Artforum* 30 (September (1991), 106–107.  
<sup>12</sup> Jan Tschichold, Richard Hendel, Robin Kinross, and Ruari McLean. *The New Typography*. Reprint 2020. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 12.



With the emergence of artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, and 3D printing, there are growing concerns among designers that we are now in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and facing the same technological shifts and potential job losses that befell artists of the Arts and Crafts era. While John Ruskin is remembered for his critique of industrial technology, his objections were less about machinery and more concerned with its ethical, aesthetic, and social consequences. Ruskin did not categorically reject mechanization; rather, he imagined a future in which machines could coexist with human craft, enhancing life by preserving the dignity of the workers.

Today, designers find themselves at a similar crossroads. While some are embracing new technologies, others are echoing the concerns of Romantic thinkers by sounding the alarm on how these technologies may revive exploitative labour practices and erode human creativity. In confronting this crisis, we may take a cue from Ruskin himself, who encouraged his workers to take drawing classes, “not to make a carpenter an artist, but to (make) him happier as a carpenter.”<sup>13</sup> Ruskin’s drawing classes were not about replacing mechanization, but rather intended to help his workers create a sense of community, improve moral character, and, most importantly, exercise freedom of thought and imagination. Ruskin’s statement reminds us that technology, including artificial intelligence, may not necessarily replace human creativity, but can be harnessed as a tool to enhance human artistic work.

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<sup>13</sup> John Ruskin, et al. *The Works of John Ruskin*. [Library ed.], (G. Allen, 1903), II:56.

“Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness . . . shame upon shame . . . But out comes the whole majesty of him also.”

—John Ruskin

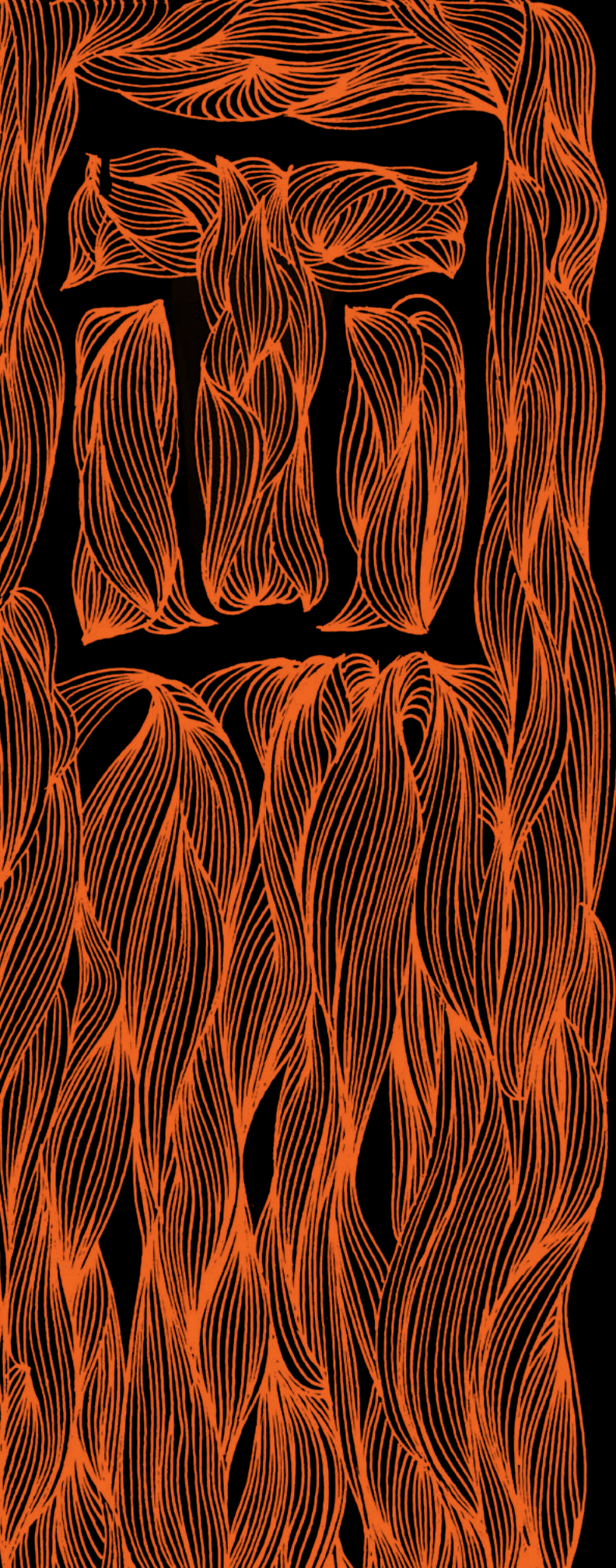
From ‘Characteristics of Gothic Architecture’  
in *Selections of the Works of John Ruskin*.

“No machine yet contrived or hereafter contrivable, will ever equal the machinery of the human fingers.”

—John Ruskin

From the lecture ‘The Unity of Art’  
Manchester, March 14, 1859.





## Experiments in Handcrafted Ornament

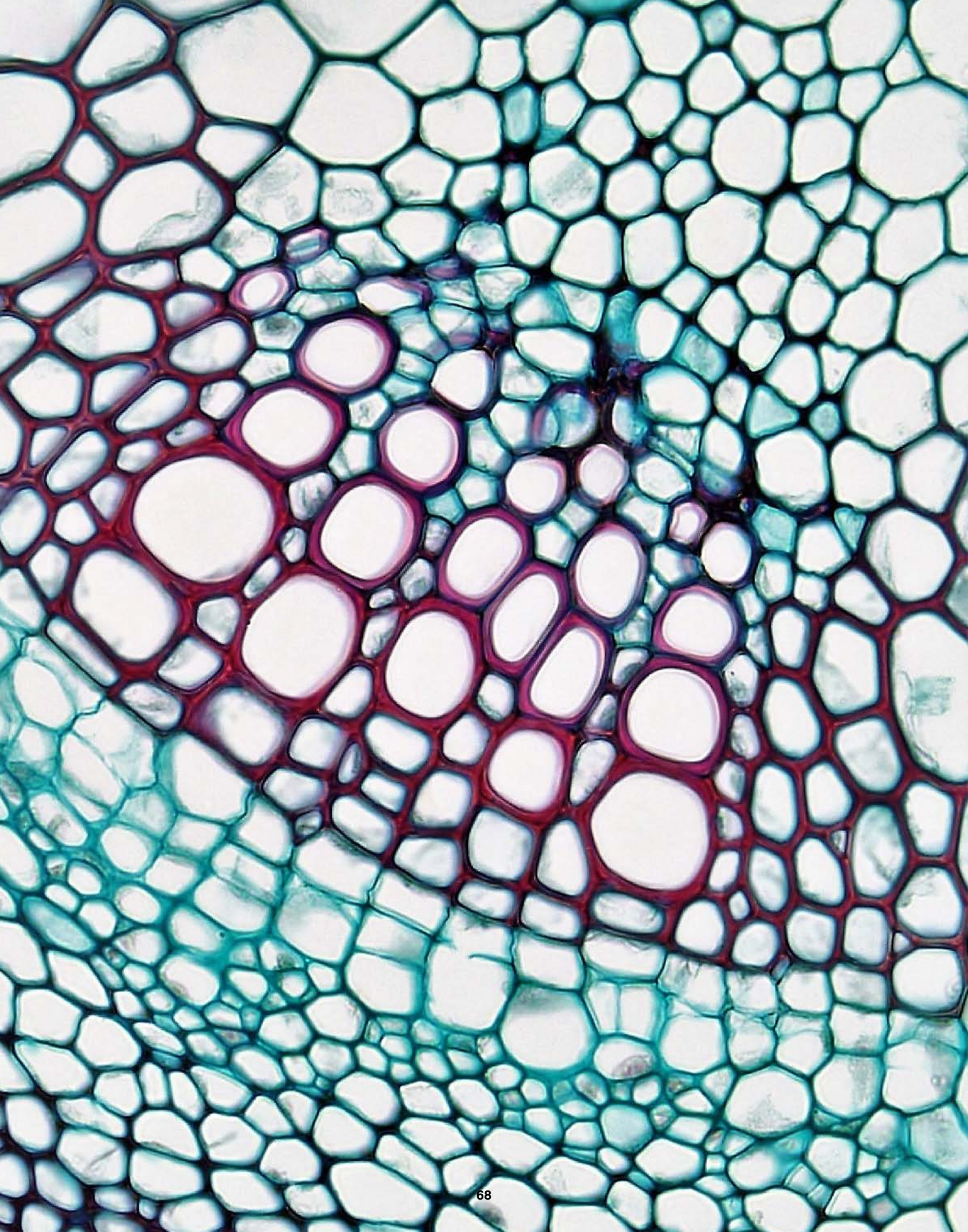
The following plates highlight the inherent imperfections and irregularities of handcrafted work. Initially produced using pen and ink on paper and subsequently digitally colored in Photoshop, these pieces are deliberately designed to highlight the imperfect, idiosyncratic quality of hand-drawn line work. This visible 'trace of the hand' foregrounds the presence of human labor, introducing a subjective and tactile dimension that stands in opposition to the uniformity and precision associated with mechanical reproduction. (Plate 30)

Plate 31 draws on the cellular structure of clover observed under 400x magnification as a model for contemporary ornamentation. The resulting pattern emphasizes asymmetry and organic complexity, departing from the rigid formalism of Neo-Gothic decorative vocabularies. Advances in imaging technologies have expanded the visual field for ornamental inspiration, enabling designers to engage with the intricate, irregular geometries found in the natural world at a microscopic scale.



TRUE ORNAMENT POSSESSES A SINGULARITY LINKED TO THE  
DELIBERATIONS AND HESITATIONS OF THE MIND AND HAND  
WORKING TOGETHER. IT IS NOT SERVILE IMITATION BUT  
RE-CREATION OF LIFE. -ANTOINE PICON







# CONCLUSION

AT THE ONSET OF THIS THESIS, I argued that ornament in graphic design remains in a state of crisis, a condition initiated with modernism’s repression of ornament, which continues to shape design discourse and practice today. The postmodern project to resurrect ornament in the spirit of pluralism ultimately fell short under the weight of its own contradictions. While postmodernism claimed to free ornament from the tyranny of modernism, it simultaneously failed to confront new cultural sensibilities surrounding appropriation. Rather than embracing ornamental forms that might have challenged the Eurocentric canon and amplified marginalized voices, postmodern graphic design often reverted to the use of Neo-Baroque and Neo-Gothic ornamental forms of pre-modernism. In doing so, it paradoxically reproduced the very sense of cultural detachment that modernism had enforced—alienating designers from lived experiences and cultural contexts of historically marginalized communities. Thus, rather than serving as a meaningful metaphor or tool for cultural expression, postmodern ornament reinforced the modernist view of ornament as superfluous decoration, which persists in contemporary practice.

As I showed, certain figures associated with the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau period sought to develop a new ornamental language—one grounded not in literal representation, as seen in Neo-Gothic motifs, but in abstraction. These designers often drew from scientific discoveries and the natural world revealed by the microscope, believing that a symbiotic relationship between the arts and sciences could elevate ornament beyond its strictly formalist qualities. At the same time, many of these designers looked beyond European traditions, drawing inspiration from non-representational sources in Japanese, Islamic, and Indian visual cultures. This cross-cultural exchange came to embody the richly inventive languages of ornament that emerged at the *fin de siècle*.

Today, many contemporary graphic designers remain entrenched in neo-Gothic ornamental vocabularies, relying heavily on decorative lettering adorned with excessive swashes and flourishes. However, designers like Hansje Van Halem and Marian Bantjes are actively working to develop new ornamental motifs that engage with global and non-European sources of visual culture, while combining the rationalism of modernist design (through the use of grids and duplication) with the organic nature of organic sources and handcrafted ornament.

How might we then envision a contemporary ornamental language that reflects the complexity and plurality of contemporary society? One essential step is to create opportunities for cultural exchange that expose design students to non-European visual traditions. This kind of cultural exchange is essential if designers are to move beyond a Eurocentric framework and develop new approaches that may elevate ornamentation beyond merely an aesthetic framework to become a form of cultural storytelling and epistemological exchange.

Unfortunately, this kind of pedagogical engagement is largely absent from most contemporary design curricula. Designer and educator Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall offers a compelling model in her book *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Handbook*. She recounts her collaboration with Dr. Norm Sheehan (Wiradjuri), in which they developed a foundational design studio course at Swinburne University of Technology:

“In 2010, Dr. Norm Sheehan (Wiradjuri), an associate professor at Swinburne University of Technology, and I laid out the structure of the Fundamental Design Studio course’s first module: 2D Design and Indigenous Ways of Knowing. The double-weighted course module would be organized around the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principles of Respect, Know, Care, and Share, which Dr. Sheehan contributed to the dialogue. It would focus as much on oral storytelling as on visual sketching and drawing, with video oral presentations weighted equally in the assessments. Any student whose outcome mimicked Aboriginal dot paintings would get a failing grade for cultural misappropriation. Indigenous ways of knowing would be put into dialogue with Bauhaus principles of design.”<sup>1</sup>

Tunstall proposes a design approach that moves beyond aesthetics to engage with oral cultural knowledge through storytelling. However, it also raises a challenging paradox: while aiming to protect cultural authenticity, her restrictions on cross-cultural visual expression risk reinforcing a modernist framework that considers ornamental creation valid only within the boundaries of a designer’s cultural heritage. This view inadvertently limits ornament’s potential as a shared, evolving, and inherently humanistic practice, while perpetuating the rigid categorization of aesthetic traditions propagated by modernism.

Ornament in graphic design holds the capacity to communicate complex, multi-layered meanings that extend beyond a decorative function. As both a symbolic and critical tool, it enables designers to reassert artistic autonomy and generate new cultural meanings. As Tunstall proposes, this approach need not stand in opposition to modes of rationalist design principles. However, for this to happen, we must foster environments in which designers can approach ornament as a shared humanistic practice that encourages respectful cultural exchange. Only then, can ornament be reimagined as a vehicle for new forms of storytelling and creative expression.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Tunstall, *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook*. (The MIT Press, 2023), 54.



# Image Sources

fig. 1 Chora Church, book-matched marble panels. Photo by R. Rosenman, 2013. Print.

fig. 2 Chora Church Constantinople 2007 panorama, Photo by Gryffindor, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Accessed 20 05 2025 [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/Chora\\_Church\\_Constantinople\\_2007\\_panorama\\_002.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/Chora_Church_Constantinople_2007_panorama_002.jpg) Web.

fig 3 Barcelona Pavillion Interior. Miis Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona. Accessed 20 05 2025 <https://miesbcn.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/06A5132-cort.jpg> Web.

fig. 4 Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, Day & Son, Ltd., London, 1856. Plate XLIII. Print.

fig 5 Alois Riegl, 1890. Authour Unknown. licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 Accessed 20 05 2025 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alois\\_Riegl.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alois_Riegl.jpg) Web.

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