

Visual beauty, crafted by hand, pleases more than just the eye; it goes to the heart of all that is cultured and stands as a rebuke to the uncouth.



This truth was grasped from the earliest times: Witness the polychrome motifs of the ancient Egyptians, done against a backdrop of sand and stone. Or consider the frets and patterns of the Greeks, Byzantine filigree, even the Celtic drakslingers, or dragons, coiled so elaborately on runic stones.

These wonders of embellishment -- and others from India, China and the European Renaissance -- have been reproduced in "The World of Ornament," a magnificent encyclopedia of adornment as practiced by painters, illustrators, weavers, potters, jewelers and embroiderers through the ages.

The book is itself a complete reprint of two 19th-century French tomes, Auguste Racinet's "L'Ornement Polychrome" and M. Dupont-Auberville's "L'Ornement des tissus." This compendium of decorative styles -- complete with 320 plates -- represents a bounteous à la carte menu for any modern decorator or designer.

The pleasure is here provided not merely by the illustrations -- each of which is sumptuous enough to make a reader purr -- but also by the accompanying text.

In his note on a Persian design, M. Racinet wrote: "These margin decorations are from a superb manuscript edition of the poems of Saadi, calligraphed at Shiraz by Schams, and painted by Mir-Amad in 1609....It was from [Saadi] that La Fontaine borrowed the fable 'The Grasshopper and the Ant,' although in Saadi's original the grasshopper was a nightingale." This is quite beautifully pedantic -- an ornament, no less, of words.