



Ornamentation

Striking decorative designs, gleaned from
antiquarian jewelry, textiles, ceramics
and manuscripts, fuel the senses

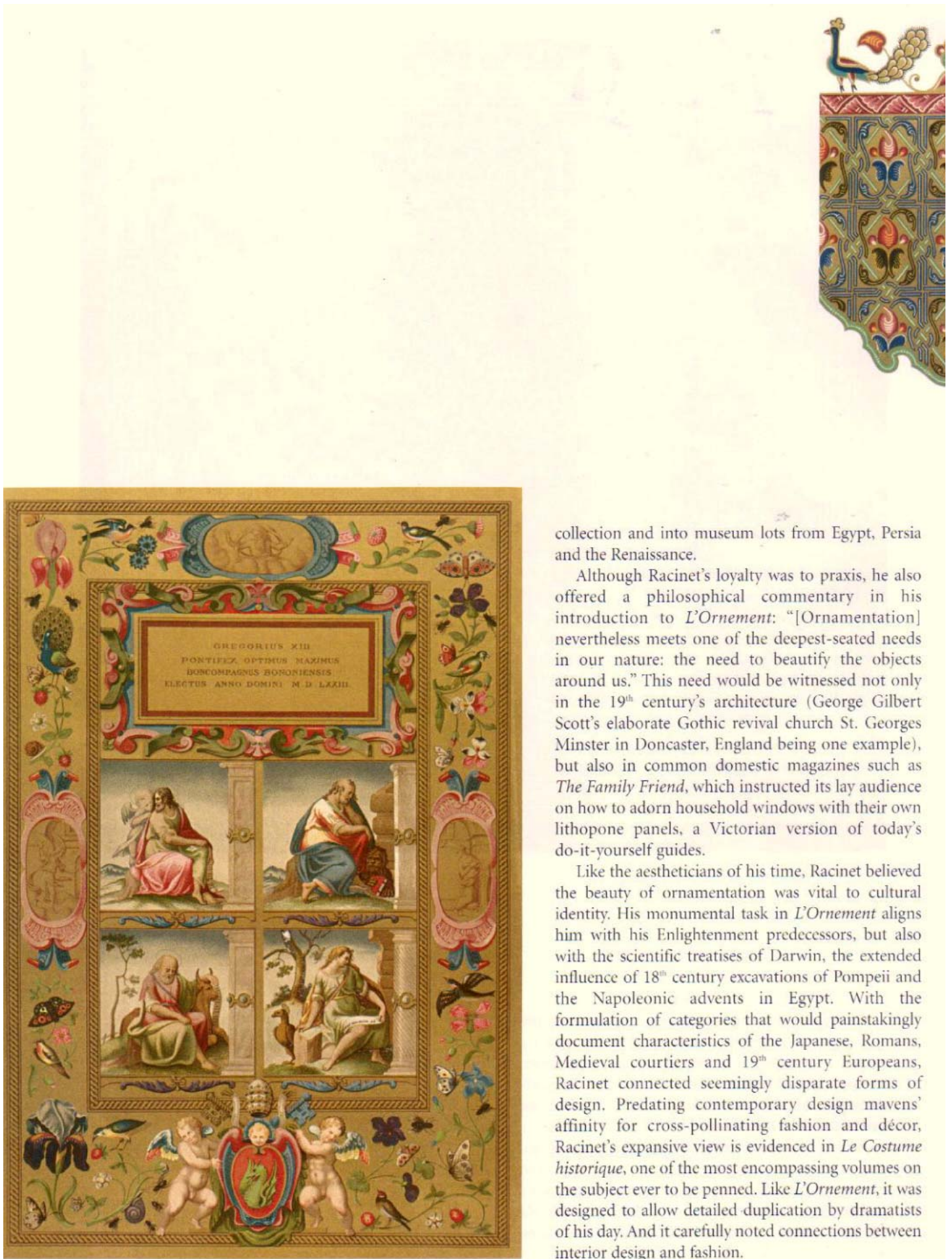
Whether adorning themselves like characters from *The Mikado* or peering through opera glasses to admire the costumes in Meyerbeer's flamboyant *L'Africaine*, 19th century Europeans aimed for cosmopolitan cache. David Batterham's *The World of Ornament* captures this period of cultural flux with its dizzying array of brilliantly colored patterns that encompass a wide range of aesthetics hailing from ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, as well as the Middle East and Europe. His encyclopedic volume, a compilation of more than 2,000 reproduced designs from French illustrator Auguste Racinet's *L'Ornement polychrome* (1869/1885) and collector M. Dupont-Auberville's *L'Ornement des tissus* (1877), demonstrates how art, nationalism and industry gave birth to the modern multicultural European ethos.



“The Victorians have been called the first post-moderns, insofar as they used eclecticism to break the mould of the hierarchies of style, and that’s just what contemporary architecture and design are doing now,” explains 19th century decorative arts authority Charlotte Gere. The age of industrialization and commercialization moved at lightning pace, allowing for mass production and a more democratic, accessible design approach. And London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 catapulted manufactured creations onto the world stage for the first time, prompting the attention of the likes of Racinet. However, the modern process did have its fare share of casualties, including craftsmen and artisans. “The 19th century was suffering from the ill effects of the industrial revolution, not only socially but artistically. Overly decorated mass produced objects flooded markets,” says Barbara Perry, curator of decorative arts at the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina. Nevertheless, Racinet considered polychromatic ornamentation vastly important because, according to him, it was “the natural link between industry and art.”

With a goal to create an aesthetic catalog that stimulates the imagination and creative self-expression, his vibrant plates ran the gamut from ceilings of a Theban necropolis to Henry II’s bed and illuminated biblical manuscripts. Perhaps it was Racinet’s tenacity that inspired M. Dupont-Auberville’s *L’Ornement des tissus*, a similar volume containing over 100 color plates. A wealthy, reputable collector of *objets d’art*, Dupont-Auberville boasted a textile collection that earned accolades at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1880. With a fondness for Chinese textiles, paintings and drawings, his extensive research led him beyond the bounds of his own





collection and into museum lots from Egypt, Persia and the Renaissance.

Although Raciné's loyalty was to praxis, he also offered a philosophical commentary in his introduction to *L'Ornement*: "[Ornamentation] nevertheless meets one of the deepest-seated needs in our nature: the need to beautify the objects around us." This need would be witnessed not only in the 19th century's architecture (George Gilbert Scott's elaborate Gothic revival church St. Georges Minster in Doncaster, England being one example), but also in common domestic magazines such as *The Family Friend*, which instructed its lay audience on how to adorn household windows with their own lithopone panels, a Victorian version of today's do-it-yourself guides.

Like the aestheticians of his time, Raciné believed the beauty of ornamentation was vital to cultural identity. His monumental task in *L'Ornement* aligns him with his Enlightenment predecessors, but also with the scientific treatises of Darwin, the extended influence of 18th century excavations of Pompeii and the Napoleonic advents in Egypt. With the formulation of categories that would painstakingly document characteristics of the Japanese, Romans, Medieval courtiers and 19th century Europeans, Raciné connected seemingly disparate forms of design. Predating contemporary design mavens' affinity for cross-pollinating fashion and décor, Raciné's expansive view is evidenced in *Le Costume historique*, one of the most encompassing volumes on the subject ever to be penned. Like *L'Ornement*, it was designed to allow detailed duplication by dramatists of his day. And it carefully noted connections between interior design and fashion.



Images courtesy Taschen

From the admirer of elaborately patterned couture to the designer inspired by the Victorian desire for a fantastic voyage, the breadth of audience that is drawn to (and draws from) the legacy of Racinet, Dupont-Auberville and their contemporaries can scarcely be overestimated. *The World of Ornament* provides a reverently assembled reintroduction to this influential design period, an age poised uniquely and irretrievably at the crossroads of ancient aesthetics and modern industry ■ Joanne Molina ~ *The World of Ornament*, David Batterham, 528 pages, \$200/hardcover, Taschen

