As feminists and artists exploring the decorative in our own paintings, we were curious about the pejorative use of the word “decorative” in the contemporary art world. In rereading the basic texts of Modern Art, we came to realize that the prejudice against the decorative has a long history and is based on hierarchies: fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men’s art above women’s art. By focusing on these hierarchies we discovered a disturbing belief system based on the moral superiority of the art of Western civilization.

We decided to write a piece about how language has been used to communicate this moral superiority. Certain words have been handed down unexamined from one generation to the next. We needed to take these words away from the art context to examine and decode them. They have colored our own history, our art training. We have had to rethink the underlying assumptions of our education.

Within the discipline of art history, the following words are continuously used to characterize what has been called “high art”: man, mankind, the individual man, individuality, humans, humanity, the human figure, humanism, civilization, culture, the Greeks, the Romans, the English, Christianity, spirituality, transcendence, religion, nature, true form, science, logic, purity, evolution, revolution, progress, truth, freedom, creativity, action, war, virility, violence, brutality, dynamism, power and greatness.

In the same texts other words are used repeatedly in connection with so-called “low art”: Africans, Orientals, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, chaos, anarchy, impotence, exotica, eroticism, artifice, tattoos, cosmetics, ornament, decoration, carpets, weaving, patterns, domesticity, wallpaper, fabrics and furniture.

All of these words appear in the quotations found throughout this piece. The quotations are from the writings and statements of artists, art critics and art historians. We do not pretend to neutrality and do not supply the historical context for the quotations. These can be found in the existing histories of Modern Art. Our analysis is based on a personal, contemporary perspective.

WAR AND VIRILITY

Manifestoes of Modern Art often exhort artists to make violent, brutal work, and it is no accident that men such as Hirsch, Rivera, and Picasso like to think of their art as a metaphorical weapon. One of the longstanding targets of this weapon has been the decorative. The scorn for decoration epitomizes the machismo expressed by Le Corbusier, Gabol Pevsner and Marinetti/Sant’Elia. Their belligerence may take the form of an appeal to the machine aesthetic: the machine is idolized as a tool and symbol of progress, and technological progress is equated with reductivist, streamlined art. The instinct to purify exalts an order which is never described and condemns a chaos which is never explained.

Joseph Hirsh, from “Common Cause,” D.W. Larkin, 1949: “The great artist has wielded his art as a magnificent weapon truly mightier than the sword...”

Diego Rivera, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” 1932: “I want to use my art as a weapon.”

Pablo Picasso, “Statement about the Artist as a Political Being,” 1945: “No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

Le Corbusier, “Guiding Principles of Town Planning,” 1925:

“Decorative art is dead... An immense, devastating brutal evolution has burned the bridges that link us with the past.”

Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, “Basic Principles of Constructivism,” 1920: “We reject the decorative line. We demand of every line in the work of art that it shall serve solely to define the inner directions of force of the body to be portrayed.”

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Antonio Sant’Elia, “Futurist Architecture,” 1914: “The decorative must be abolished!... Let us throw away monuments, sidewalks, arcades, steps; let us sink
squares into the ground, raise the level of the city.”

El Lissitsky, “Ideological superstructure,” 1929:
“Destruction of the traditional. . . . War has been declared on the aesthetic of chaos. An order that has entered fully into consciousness is called for.”

“Manifesto of the Futurist Painters,” 1910:
“The dead shall be buried in the earth’s deepest bowels! The threshold of the future will be free of mummies! Make room for youth, for violence, for daring!”

Amédée Ozenfant, Foundations of Modern Art, 1931:
“Decoration can be revolting, but a naked body moves us by the harmony of its form.”

Willem de Kooning, “What Abstract Art Means to Me,” 1951:
“One of the most striking of abstract art’s appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare.”

PURITY IN ART AS A HOLY CAUSE

Purity can also be sanctified as an aesthetic principle. Modern artists and their espousers sometimes sound like the new crusaders, declaring eternal or religious values. A favorite theme is that of cleansing art. The ecclesiastical metaphor of transcendence through purification (baptism) is used to uphold the “Greek” tradition (as in the van de Velde quotation) or the “Christian” tradition (as in the Loos quotation). Cleansing and purification are sometimes paired with an exalted view of the artist as a god, as in Apollinaire’s desire to “deify personality.”

Henry van de Velde, “Programme,” 1903:
“As soon as the work of cleansing and sweeping out has been finished, as soon as the true form of things comes to light again, then strive with all the patience, all the spirit and the logic of the Greeks for the perfection of this form.”

Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 1908:
“We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls, like Zion, the holy city, the capital of heaven. Then fulfilment will be come.”

Guillaume Apollinaire, The Cubist Painters, 1913:
“To insist on purity is to baptize instinct, to humanize art, and to deify personality.”

THE SUPERIORITY OF WESTERN ART

Throughout the literature of Western art there are racist assumptions that devalue the arts of other cultures. The ancient Greeks are upheld as the model, an Aryan ideal of order. Art in the Greco-Roman tradition is believed to represent superior values. Malraux uses the word “barbarian” and Fry the word “savages” to describe art and artists outside our tradition. The non-Western ideals of pleasure, meditation and loss of self are clearly not understood by the exponents of ego assertion, transcendence and dynamism.

David Hume, “Of National Characters” (on Africans), 1748:
“There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.”

Roger Fry, “The Art of the Bushmen,” 1910:
“... it is to be noted that all the peoples whose drawing shows this peculiar power of visualization (sensual not conceptual) belong to what we call the lowest of savages, they are certainly the least civilizable, and the South African Bushmen are regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes.”

André Malraux, The Voices of Silence, 1953:
“Now a barbarian art can keep alive only in the environment of the barbarism it expresses...”
“... the Byzantine style, as the West saw it, was not the expression of a supreme value but merely a form of decoration.”

Roger Fry, “The Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art,” 1910:
“It cannot be denied that in course of time it [Islamic art] pandered to the besetting sin of the oriental craftsman, his intolerable patience and thoughtless industry.”

Gustave von Grunebaum, Medieval Islam, 1945:
“Islam can hardly be called creative in the sense that the Greeks were creative in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. or the Western world since the Renaissance, but its flavor is unmistakable...”
FEAR OF RACIAL CONTAMINATION, IMPOTENCE AND DECADENCE

Racism is the other side of the coin of Exotica. Often underlying a fascination with the Orient, Indians, Africans and primitives is an urgent unspoken fear of infiltration, decadence and domination by the ‘mongrels’ gathering impatiently at the gates of civilization. Ornamental objects from other cultures which appeared in Europe in the nineteenth century were clearly superior to Western machine-made products. How could the West maintain its notion of racial supremacy in the face of these objects? Loos’s answer: by declaring that ornament itself was savage. Artists and aesthetes who would succumb to decorative impulses were considered impotent and/or decadent.

RACISM AND SEXISM

Racist and sexist attitudes characterize the same mentality. They sometimes appear in the same passage and are unconsciously paired, as when Read equates tattoos and cosmetics. The tattoo refers to strange, threatening customs of far-off places and mysterious people. Cosmetics, a form of self-ornamentation, is equated with self-objectification and inferiority (Schapiro). Racism and sexism ward off the potential power and vitality of the “other.” Whereas nudity earlier alluded to woman as the object of male desire, here Malevich associates the nude female with savagery.
ments. But counterfeit art, like a prostitute, must always be decked out.”

HIERARCHY OF HIGH-LOW ART

Since the art experts consider the “high arts” of Western men superior to all other forms of art, those arts done by non-Western people, low-class people and women are categorized as “minor arts,” “primitive arts,” “low arts,” etc. A newer more subtle way for artists to elevate themselves to an elite position is to identify their work with “pure science,” “pure mathematics,” linguistics and philosophy. The myth that high art is for a select few perpetuates the hierarchy in the arts, and among people as well.

Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 1939:
“It will be objected that such art for the masses as folk art was developed under rudimentary conditions of production—and that a good deal of folk art is on a high level. Yes, it is—but folk art is not Athenian, and it’s Athenian whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehen-

H. W. Janson, History of Art, 1962:
“... for the applied arts are more deeply enmeshed in our everyday lives and thus cater to a far wider public than do painting and sculpture, their purpose, as the name suggests, is to beautify the useful, an important and honorable one, no doubt, but of a lesser order than art pure and simple.”

Amédée Ozenfant, Foundations of Modern Art, 1931:
“If we go on allowing the minor arts to think themselves the equal of Great Art, we shall soon be in a small number of all sorts of domestic furni-

THAT OLD CHESTNUT, “HUMANISM”

Humanism was once a radical doctrine opposing the authority of the church, but in our secular society it has come to defend the traditional idea of “man-kind” and status quo attitudes. The “human values” such authorities demand of art depend on the use of particular subject matter or particular ideas of “human” expression. Without humanist content, ornament, pattern and ritual or decorative elaborations of production are condemned as inhuman, alien and empty. “The limits of the decorative,” says Malraux, “can be precisely defined only in an age of humanistic art.” We could rather say that the generalities of “humanist” sentiment characterize only a small part of world art, most of which is non-Western and decorative. But why should anyone prefer the false divisions of these writers, based on ethnic stereotypes, to a historical awareness of the interdependence of all “human” cultures?

Camille Maupain, “La Réforme de l’art décoratif en France” (on the Impressionists), 1896:
“Decorative art has as its aesthetic and for its effect not to make one think of man, but of an order of things arranged by him: it is a de-

Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, 1954:
“Paintings or sculpture are self-con-

Hilton Kramer, “The Splendors and Chill of Islamic Art,” 1975:
“... for those of us who seek in art something besides a bath of pleasur-

imprint of his private drama on every man’s face, that prevented Western art from becoming like Byzantine mosaics always transcendent, or like Buddhist sculpture obsessed with unity.”

“How could an Egyptian, an Assyrian or a Buddhist have shown his god nailed to a cross, without reining his style?”

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DECORATION AND DOMESTICITY

The antithesis of the violence and destruction idolized by Modern Art is the visual enhancement of the domestic environment. (Ifhumanism is equated with dynamism, the decorative is seen to be synonymous with the static). One method “modernism” has used to discredit its opponents has been to associate their work with carpets and wallpaper. Lacking engagement with “human form” or the “real world,” the work of art must be stigmatized as decorative (Sedlmayr and Barnes/de Mazia). So decorative art is a code term signifying failed humanism. Artists such as Gleizes and Kandinsky, anxious to escape the tag of the decorative, connect their work to older, humanist aspirations.

“Aldous Huxley on Pollock’s Cathedral, 1947:
“It seems like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall.”

Wyndham Lewis, “Picasso” (on Minotauromachy), 1940: “... this confused, feeble, profusely decorated, romantic carpet.”

The Times of London critic on Whistler, 1978: “... that these pictures only come one step nearer to fine art than a delicately tinted wallpaper.”

Hans Sedlmayr, Art in Crisis: The Lost Center, 1948: “With Matisse, the human form was to have no more significance than a pattern on a wallpaper...”

Dr. Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia, The Art of Cézanne, 1939: “Pattern, in Cézanne an instrument strictly subordinated to the expression of values inherent in the real world, becomes in cubism the entire aesthetic content, and this degradation of form leaves cubistic painting with no claim to any status higher than decoration.”

Albert Gleizes, “Opinion” (on Cubism), 1913: “There is a certain imitative coefficient by which we may verify the legitimacy of our discoveries, avoid reducing the picture merely to the ornamental value of an abacus or an Oriental carpet, and obtain an infinite variety which would otherwise be impossible.”

Wassily Kandinsky, Über das Geistige in der Kunst, 1912: “If we begin at once to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to combinations of pure color and independent form, we shall produce works which are mere geometric decoration, resembling something like a necktie or a carpet.”

W.

AUTOCRACY

Certain modern artists express the desire for unlimited personal power. The aesthetics of “modernism”—its egomania, violence, purity-fixation and denial of all other routes to the truth—is highly authoritarian. The reductivist ideology suggests an inevitable, evolutionary survival of the aesthetic fittest. Reinhardt declares throughout his writings that all the world’s art must culminate in his “pure” paintings. Ozennfant equates purism with a “superaesthetic.” Mendelsohn believes the advocates of the new art have a “right to exercise control.”

Ad Reinhardt, “There is Just One Painting,” 1966: “There is just one art history, one art evolution, one art progress. There is just one aesthetics, just one art idea, one art meaning, just one principle, one force. There is just one truth in art, one form, one change, one secrecy.”

Amédée Ozennfant, Foundations of Modern Art, 1981: “Purism is not an aesthetic, but a sort of super-aesthetic in the same way that the League of Nations is a superstate.”

Erich Mendelsohn, “The Problem of a New Architecture,” 1919: “The simultaneous process of revolutionary political decisions and radical changes in human relationships in economy and science and religion and art give belief in the new form, an a priori right to exercise control, and provide a justifiable basis for a rebirth amidst the misery produced by world-historical disaster.”

Adolf Hitler, speech inaugurating the “Great Exhibition of German Art,” 1937: “I have come to the final inalterable decision to clean house, just as I have done in the domain of political confusion...”

“National-Socialist Germany, however, wants again a ‘German Art,’ and this art shall and will be of eternal value, as are all truly creative values of a people...”

NO DEED IN FASHION FOR SHAM
NOR FOR FAME E’ER MAN MADE
SHEATH THE NAKED WHITE
BLADE
MY ACT AS BECOMETH A MAN
MY ACT
ACTS THAT BECOMETH THE MAN”

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To Amy Goldin whose ideas and encouragement made this piece possible.

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