

SundayStyles

Section 9

Style Directive for 2000: Make It Extravagant



Postmasters

By ELIZABETH HAYT

PAPER magazine, the guide to downtown fashion and night life, has always been a reliable index of what's next. So when the magazine gave a book party to toast "Abfab to Zen: Paper's Guide to Pop Culture" not long ago, it was notable that the editors chose not a grungy club on Rivington Street but the newly renovated Russian Tea Room. Guests mingled in the eye-befuddling interior, decorated with mirrors, mosaics, a 15-foot revolving see-through bear filled with live fish and a gold tree laden with Fabergé-inspired eggs. "It was a bar mitzvah in Las Vegas," said Kim Hastreiter, a co-editor of Paper, who is planning an article for the March issue on the new vulgarity.

Once again, Ms. Hastreiter has her finger on the pulse. At the pivot point of the new century, ornamentation and frippery are the style du jour. The creators of visual culture are like party planners tossing confetti: fashion designers have been dousing dresses in Swarovski crystals, artists have been coating canvases in technicolor and glitter and architects have ushered in the new age with buildings that seem to shimmy and swagger, inside as well as out.

"It's a cultural expression of Dow Jones fever," said Sally Singer, fashion news director of Vogue. "It's about the money."

Some see in the turn toward decorative styles a reaction to cold, technological computer culture; others see an upbeat response to the longest period of peace and prosperity the West has known in 100 years. There is a parallel, often noted, to the last turn of the century, in particular the Gilded Age and the fin de siècle style of Vienna. At that time, an obsession with patterned facades, coupled with overblown materialism, manifested both a desire for sensual pleasure and spiritual distress or anxiety in the face of a new age.

"A lot of the preoccupation with ornament and splash today reminds me of the Victorians, because of the common fondness for excess, the grand gesture and ostentation," said Luc Sante, a writer who has been studying the ties between today's architecture and the Victorian period. "Like them, we're having such a grand tormented or imperial time. I have a feeling that a lot of today's apparent confidence in the economy, the unbridled enthusiasm, is actually people shaking in their boots. When the bottom falls out, it will do that in a really big way. All of the extravagance right now is an outward manifestation of denial."

Robert Storr, a senior curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, said that for 20 years contemporary art has been tending toward the baroque. He referred to Jorge Luis Borges's definition of baroque as a stylistic endgame, when

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ABOVE Art without the sensory deprivation: "Romantic Landscape," by L. C. Armstrong.

Debs & Company/
P.P.O.W.

ABOVE The gallery mood brightens: "All Systems Go: Mission Anemone No. 2," by Thomas Woodruff.

RIGHT Fashion throws off its cloak of darkness: sparkles from Dolce & Gabbana.



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art recognizes its near exhaustion. It caricatures its situation, flaunting and squandering its resources.

"That is what may be happening now," Mr. Storr said. "It's all gangbusters. Spend it while you got it, and spend it with style. The bills aren't paid. The credit cards are maxed, but you look great."

If the mid-90's saw the reign of sober, minimalist uniforms on fashion runways, now anything dark, monochromatic and tailored looks like a throwback. For spring 2000, the cry for oomph is crescendoing. Louis Vuitton is gleaming with gold, paillettes are the new techno fabric at Prada, and Dolce & Gabbana offers bejeweled micro-miniskirts. Stores will soon be swamped with exotic skins like python and ostrich.

Fashion insiders agree that decorative looks are a reaction to the "Gattaca aesthetic," as Hamish Bowles, Vogue's European editor at large, called it, referring to both the 1997 movie about the 21st century and the futuristic, sports-inspired clothes popularized by Miuccia Prada and Helmut Lang.

Toward the end of the 90's, people got bored with spare chic, and fashion now has to do with an ironic take on overt luxury and decoration and color," Mr. Bowles said, citing Alexander McQueen as an example.

The success of the Fendi Baguette bag, which was introduced in fall 1997 and helped set off the current craze for accessories, is a case in point. Although the bags come in 100 varieties in fabrics like cashmere and embroidered satin, each one is handmade. Once a style sells out, it is not repeated. Prices range from \$450 to \$6,000. Some Baguettes have a six-month waiting list, and the hottest one for fall was a tapestry design, at \$2,350.

Even understated designers like Jil Sander and Giorgio Armani are enthralled with prints these days. It

hardly seems coincidental that in the fall, the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology mounted a retrospective of Bob Mackie, the titan of over-the-top.

Some equate today's decorative styles with a newfound confidence in being female. Valerie Steele, the museum's chief curator, said women no longer feel the need to wear power suits to be taken seriously, and men have accepted the fact that the opposite sex can wear flowers and lace and still wield authority.

But others are not so sanguine. No less an observer than Silvia Venturini, the designer of the Baguette bag, described the yen for striking accessories in talismanic terms. The craze is "an attempt to ward off an unavoidable late-millennium anxiety," she said.

Just as minimalist fashion is out

**A new age dawns
radiantly. (Or is that just
the sequins glowing?)**

today, in furniture and interior design, cold, sleek surfaces are démodé. Sensual, colorful forms that incorporate the human touch, as well as luxurious materials, are in. "We're back to charm, character and comfort — the three C's," said Marian McEvoy, editor in chief of Elle Decor. "We all were in an aesthetic prison. Now, pleasure is a good thing. It means more color. If you like oranges, go for it. Plush, indulgent, sensual materials are going on."

As Murray Moss, the owner of the Moss design store in SoHo, put it: "Materials today appear more luxurious, reflective, strong, shiny, handmade. We're now out of an idea that modern is minimal. We want objects that speak to us. That means they look almost more baroque."

He cited the example of Gaetano

Pesce, a designer who emerged in the 60's and has experienced a resurgence. Moss carries a collection of his furniture and objects made of resin, which is poured into molds, each piece individual in its color scheme. Mr. Pesce also incorporates accidents and irregularities into the designs. "It is a humanization of the industrial process as opposed to 1930's assembly-line production," Mr. Moss said.

Like fashion and design, contemporary art has taken a turn toward the visually opulent. Matthew Barney, a multimedia artist whose operatic films are ravishing to behold, has emerged as the art star of the moment. Chris Ofili, whose festive canvases are festooned with glitter, sequins and, yes, elephant dung (he is the main catalyst of the controversy over the "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art), won the Turner Prize in 1998.

Fred Tomaselli, who has been making richly colored canvases with arrangements of prescription pills, plants and insects beneath layers of glossy resin since 1989, recently emerged from years of critical neglect. In July his work was featured on the cover of Art in America. "I was considered some kind of crackpot" at first, Mr. Tomaselli said, adding: "Serious art was supposed to look tough and be hard to like and understand. The zeitgeist has changed. There are a lot of artists who seem to be embracing pattern, decoration and intense color. Everything from Claritin ads to Nest magazine has a trippy, psychedelic quality."

In the early 90's, a concern for the politics of identity gave rise to a movement of angry, painful and cynical art. And long before that, since the heyday of austere modern art, the pursuit of the beautiful was maligned as superficial.

But in reaction, Dave Hickey, a cultural critic and professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, published a series of influential essays on beauty, beginning in 1991. He argued that beauty is the agent of visual pleasure, and that pleasure ought to be as important in art as any deeper meaning. And the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, in an exhibition titled "Regarding Beauty," is re-examining modern art from the perspective, once taboo, of visual pleasure. Even the American Craft Museum, recognizing that beading is hot, has mounted "Beadz!" with new work by contemporary artists. Liza Lou, an artist who painstakingly builds dazzling installations of domestic scenes out of millions of glass beads — a life-size kitchen, a suburban backyard — said the company in Prague that makes her beads is reporting a shortage because demand is so strong.

Arthur Danto, a critic who wrote an essay for the "Regarding Beauty" show at the Hirshhorn, said the art world's interest in beauty was not merely a reflection of economic prosperity, which seems to be driving fashion now. He called it primarily a reaction to the politicized art of the early 90's, in particular the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

Visiting a gallery once felt like an

experience in sensory deprivation, but in the past month a walk through Chelsea — vibrant with lush, colorful, glistening art — was like a stroll through Arcadia. There were L. C. Armstrong's paintings of lilies and bird of paradise at Postmasters gallery, Richmond Burton's abstract pattern paintings in metallic colors at Cheim Reid, and Thomas Woodruff's Victorian-style tableau paintings at Debs & Company and, in SoHo, at P.P.O.W.

Kirk Varnedoe, the chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, said he was stunned to see work at the latest Venice Biennale without social politics or sexual angst. "Irony has been such an important part of art in the 20th century," he said. "It's been the armor. A lot of work that is done now is more playful and fun."

Count Mr. Varnedoe among those who find the new decorativeness a sign of uncomplicated optimism. A decade ago, he noted, the cold war ended, bringing an end to potent international conflicts, and there has been a lack of social unrest. Rapid technological change has created a feeling of volatility that, he said, has made people feel opportunistic rather than anxious. Even a fashion photographer like David LaChapelle, who had his first show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in June and is known for outrageous, shrilly colored images that hover between the glamorous, the morbid and the deviant, said: "Sincerity is really cool. Irony is just overdone now. I don't feel jaded or mean about things."

His very espousal of sincerity, however, seems to come with a wink and a nod. Many people would find in Mr. LaChapelle's surreal work — its saturated colors, its cartoonishly pumped-up men and women — an ironic pose. A central question about all decorative chic is whether any artist, after decades of "less is more" modernism, can really embrace ornamentation for its own sake, without striking a pose. Is the love of froufrou ever completely on the level, or is it the latest hip recycling of a retro style?

Consider the fashion designers Josh Patner and Bryan Bradley, who scored a success in 1999 with their label Tuleh, a collection of frilly cocktail dresses and sable stoles inspired by a fictional muse — a glamor puss who stepped from a 1950's fantasy of New Orleans. The contemporary appetite for romantic, luxurious clothing, Mr. Patner said, is "a manifestation of exhilaration at the end of the century."

"The most exciting thing to do," Mr. Bradley added, "is wave goodbye to the 20th century with sable-trimmed, fringed gloves."

Which, if it isn't an ironic pose, comes awfully close.

Shifts in fashion and art occur relatively quickly. Architecture, which is meant to withstand the test of time, changes more slowly. Yet it, too, is experiencing a flamboyant moment. The Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain, by Frank Gehry, which opened in 1997 and is often cited as the most important building of the late 20th century, feels and

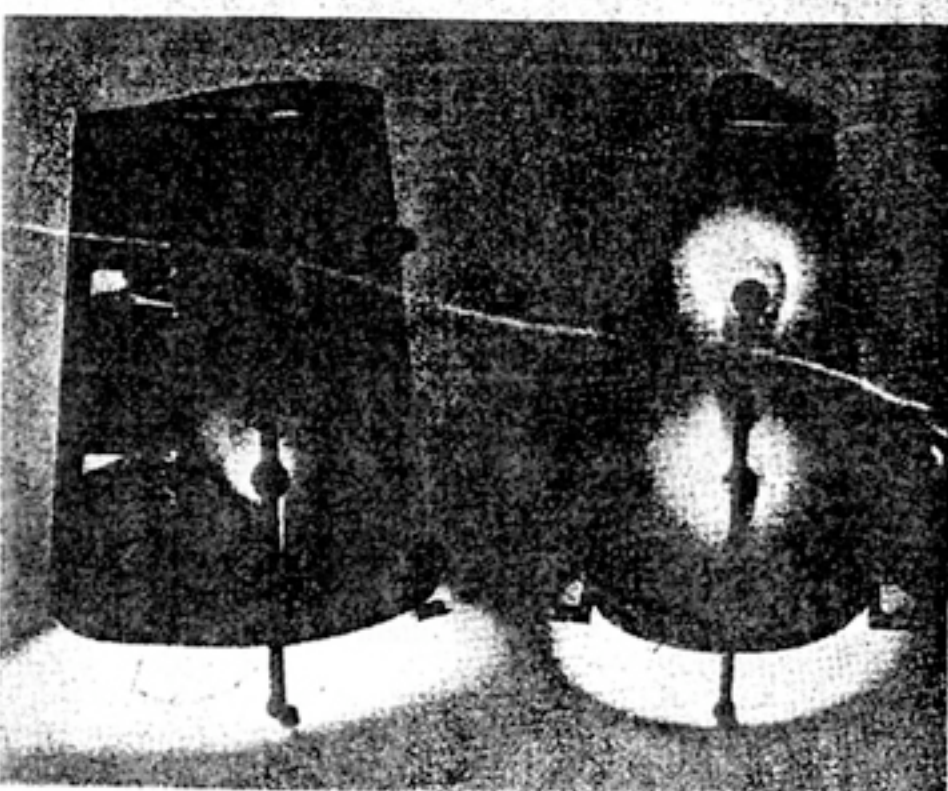


Exotic fabrics and sparkling uniforms are no longer rare

**It's the end of the
century. But which
century is it?**

looks like the architectural equivalent of a sequin dress. The tita surface shimmers in the light forms and spaces of the building appear to heave, cleave and appear to distill them with ratication. You solve the practical but don't take the juice out you're doing it."

One direction in architecture Mr. Gehry's work is said to inspire an exuberant, adventuresome Martin Filler, the architecture for The New Republic, points that the recent economic boom created more options for architecture, and since Bilbao, at least daring building projects have approved. One is an extension Victoria and Albert Museum, i



Resin, resin burning bright: poured objects by Gaetano Pesce, who emerged in the 60's and is now having a resurgence.