

# Aping Architecture

Anna Miles

In this paper I am interested in addressing the presence of architecture on printed furnishing textiles. It seems to me that the textile which includes architectural details becomes a kind of *tabula rasa* or scene for the playing out of anxieties about the relation between architecture and ornament.

There seem to be two distinct ways in which architecture may be incorporated into the design of printed textiles (*fig 1*). Firstly, architecture may be displayed as a motif within a larger pattern, in this case architecture becomes a decorative device. Applied to a one dimensional printed surface architecture is reduced to an ornamental facade. The facade attempted seems invariably to be an exterior rather than interior one. While some frisson is produced in importing the exterior of the building to the interior, this does not generally connote a very earth shattering experience. In the other case when architecture is introduced to the textile surface, a quite different scenario occurs. Think of trellis patterned material for instance, where architecture is not reconstituted as ornament so much as the ornamental textile imitates architecture. This type of textile explores the illusionistic potential of the decorated surface and often disrupts the coherence of the architectural interior it is situated in. Fornasetti's work is a superb example of just this kind of interruption. (See his *Venetian Venetian blind* (*fig 2*)). It is worth noting however that Fornasetti rarely produced his designs as textiles. He was more inclined to transfer his architectural patterns to the surfaces of furniture in the manner of eighteenth century *intarsia*. It is Fornasetti's son Barnaba who has subsequently adapted his father's work for furnishing textile purposes.

When architecture is present in textile designs, ideas of incorporation and reconstitution are never far away. My first example is a wonderful design by English Arts and Crafts architect C. F. A. Voysey: *The House That Jack Built* (*fig 3*). Here Voysey has managed to incorporate one of his own houses into his version of the well known nursery rhyme. It is not *The House That Jack Built* so much as 'The House That Charles Built.' This is the only Voysey design I know that includes architecture. The one time

architecture appears on a Voysey textile it is designed for the nursery. Certainly Voysey is interpreting a nursery rhyme and where else in the house would it better belong? This practical solution does little though to dispel the sense that when architecture becomes ornament in a Voysey textile it is destined for the nursery. Architecture as ornament is located in the context of Voysey's textile designs as something infantile. Interestingly Stuart Durant has written of Voysey's houses;

*Occasionally, Voysey's work has a quality which prompts us to think of the work of some of the well-known children's illustrators of the 1880s, 1890s such as Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway and Beatrix Potter. Any comparison between Voysey's work and that of once-fashionable illustrators might be thought to be an unflattering one but there is in his work a certain artificiality – an indefinable quaintness.*<sup>3</sup>

As an architect, Voysey was extremely anxious to restrain the ornamental possibilities of his interiors. Despite his enormous contribution to the history of decorative textiles, a contribution that is often described as more significant than that of his architecture, Voysey desired to eliminate these from his houses. This decorative disavowal manifests itself very clearly in his writing on architecture: "We cannot be too simple ... we are too apt to furnish our rooms as if we regarded our wallpapers, furniture and fabrics as far more attractive than our friends."<sup>4</sup>

It is an attitude that is re-encountered in critical writing on Voysey, which in general attempts to expel his decorative work from any consideration of his architecture. Duncan Simpson's 1978 *C. F. A. Voysey: an architect of individuality* apologetically excuses this absence on the basis of the "wide and understandable gulf between Voysey's work in two and three dimensions," adding, "it is symptomatic that he never upholstered a furniture design with one of his own or anyone else's, patterned fabrics."<sup>5</sup> Stuart Durant author of the recent and significant volume *Ornament* does much the same, managing to excise Voysey's decorative work from his *C. F. A. Voysey* for the Architectural Monograph Series.<sup>6</sup>

While anxieties about the incorporation of ornament mark writing on Voysey's architecture, it seems to me that they are registered most graphically on the surface of his textiles. When chosen imagery is reconstituted in the form of a decorative pattern there are two major operations at work, scale and repetition. In *The House That Jack Built* the most alarming of these is unquestionably scale. 'The House That Charles Built' is rendered miniature, its form will almost slip within the body of the rat. Transposed to fabric, the narrative of the nursery rhyme is transformed by a series of clashing and fantastic proportions. The scale of *The House That Jack Built* pattern is quite incoherent. Central to this drama is the encounter between the remarkably inflated rat and the diminutive house. While a rat swallowing a house can hardly be described as cannibalism, the implied narrative conveys the idea of a similarly inappropriate appetite. Architecture is positioned in this textile world as under threat of immanent mastication. It seems to me that the narrative of *The House That Jack Built* has been displaced here by another narrative, the twists and turns of which are not unfamiliar.

The process of establishing an ordered identity in opposition to a repressed and rejected other onto which all potentially disruptive psycho-sexual impulses are projected, is a story that has been analysed in a number of discourses, in particular those of colonisation and misogyny. In establishing the origin of architecture, it is distinctions between ornament and structure that are repeatedly traversed. What interests me most in terms of this paper though is the priority which these stories accord to the textile.<sup>7</sup> It is little wonder to find architecture in question when it is represented on the textile field. In the sense that the rat appears capable of eating the house in *The House That Jack Built*, the nursery rhyme appears to be interrupted by a greedy allegory about the kind of gross appetites that are repeatedly projected onto ornament. The sneer "it looks like a wedding cake"<sup>8</sup> is a monotonously applied figure of ornamental excess. It may seem strangely awkward, given that more than a little of the wedding cake's ornamental charm is supplied by the creamy corrugations of structural columns. The fact of these columns is not one I easily forget having been brought up on a story of my father breaking a tooth on one of them at a wedding. The moral of this was impressive, being on one hand that any decoration of food should be edible and on the other that it was my father's greed for icing rather than fruit cake that led him astray; still both of these amount to much the same thing, that ornament, and in particular an appetite for it, can be dangerous.

The power of the rats' symbolism in *The House That Jack Built* is perhaps most succinctly demonstrated by their eradication (fig 4). When Morton Sundour produced the printed fabric in 1929 the rats were left out of the pattern. Their absence is not one that is easily disguised. *The House That Jack Built* is an accumulative narrative, a nursery rhyme that is formed by the piling on characteristic of ornamental excess and the processes of incorporation and digestion. The absence of the rats in the Morton Sundour print leaves a gaping hole in the narrative. The rats among other things ensured narrative continuity; "this is the dog that worried the cat that chased the rat that ate the malt that lay in *The House That Jack Built*."<sup>9</sup> The narrative of the fabric now contains an incoherent leap from cat to malt, which is not present in Voysey's original design. Perhaps the rats' absence serves as a curiously economical sign for the process of digestion that I suspect was not far from Voysey's mind when designing furnishing textiles. This speculation is supported by another accumulative narrative that Voysey has charmingly introduced to the world of textiles, his *Let Us Prey* design which is based on the food chain (fig 5).

English textile designers Timney Fowler are well known for their transference of architectural imagery to the textile surface. Many of their designs explore the possibilities of reconstituting architecture as ornament. Neoclassical columns have been transformed into monumental stripes that suggest a cloned and domesticated variation on Brancusi's Endless column. These designs depend on repetition to construct an infinite illusionistic architecture. It is not repetition but scale though that seems to create textiles which narrate the relation between architecture and ornament most pronouncedly.

The operation of scale dominates Timney Fowler's 1980s design *Baroque Baboon* (fig 6). It is not simply scale that connects *Baroque Baboon* and *The House That Jack Built*, but more precisely the way in which scale contradictions are located in the relation of architecture and animals. The baboons slung over the curves of the architectural arches initiate disturbing perspective anomalies and an uneasy marriage of architecture and nature that is reminiscent of King Kong. Like Kong and Voysey's rats, the proportion of these baboons leaves the architecture looking shrunken and vulnerable. While the yawning arches imply an orality that I interpreted in *The House That Jack Built*, I think it is an accumulative narrative quite other than digestion that *Baroque Baboon* invokes. Positioned near a fragment of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the

Garden of Eden, I don't think it is difficult to read in the baboons an articulation of the narrative of evolution.

Like narratives of incorporation, that of evolution has a significant currency in the stories of architecture. The baboon is positioned well down the evolutionary chain from *homo erectus*, and in architectural terms the baboon's lowly position might be construed as being not just nearer to the point of origin, but nearer to ornament than *homo erectus*. It is a positional inferiority Loos makes explicit in "Ornament and Crime" when he links ornament to immaturity, degeneracy, immorality and barbarism, and writes: "I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use."<sup>10</sup> Loos' location of ornament aligns it with the colonised who Cairns and Richards contend are "constrained to assert a dignified self-identity in opposition to a discourse which defines them as variously, barbarian, pagan, ape, female; but always subordinate and inferior."<sup>11</sup>

*Baroque Baboon* identifies the baboon with a particular architectural moment at the same time that the architectural moment is associated with an early phase of evolution. There being no easy way to assemble a Baroque baboon and the baboonish Baroque in the descending hierarchy evolution depends on, suggests that what is at stake here is not an issue of proportionate scale so much as the clash of two unrelated scales. We may well ask as Foucault does in relation to Borges' *Chinese Encyclopedia*: "On what 'table,' according to what grid of identities, similitudes, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things?"<sup>12</sup> Foucault writes of the *Chinese Encyclopedia*; "What transgresses all possible thought is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of these categories to all the others."<sup>13</sup> *Baroque Baboon* implies a similar series. The alliterative title holds the glimmer of an alphabetical narrative of architectural moments crossed with anthropoids, a possible evolution that stretches from Baroque Baboon to Modern Man.

The double sense of scale which is at work in *Baroque Baboon* is also found in Timney Fowler's *Architectural Details and Animals* (fig 7). Of the three textiles I have looked at, it is *Architectural Details and Animals* that displays the most radical cropping and collage. The shifts in scale and levels of representation in fact align it precisely with the 'table' Foucault talks about. *Architectural Details and Animals* alludes very directly to the history of ornamental discourse.

While Voysey's houses are compared to nineteenth century children's book illustrations (fig 8), this Timney Fowler textile compares to the nineteenth century encyclopedias of ornament<sup>14</sup> which so effectively narrate a European fascination with ornament and other forms of alterity.

The way animals have shadowed the imagining of architecture on textiles in my examples finds a new form in *Architectural Details and Animals* (fig 6), which includes an architectural representation of the bestial, the grotesque, alongside its animal images. Another way this design departs from the two earlier examples is in the way it locates aberrations of scale. In this case the architecture is so fragmentary that its relation with the animals offers little clue to the proportional changes that have taken place. It is the inclusion of *homo erectus* in the form of disembodied classical profiles that provides the most effective reference to scale. Unlike the grotesques, these particular images of decapitation are not a familiar feature of the plates of Encyclopedias of Ornament (fig 9). Their presence alongside the beautiful bodily markings of the zebra makes them hard to disassociate from the first illustrated example in Owen Jones' 1856 *Grammar of Ornament* (fig 10), an example invariably featured when these encyclopedias are mentioned. As Gombrich writes,

*The very first example must have come as a shock to any Victorian reader. It shows a tattooed head from New Zealand in the Museum in Chester*<sup>15</sup> (fig 11).

While Timney Fowler's predilection for Neoclassical architectural imagery might be seen to preclude their work engaging with the "variously barbarian, pagan, ape, [and] female"<sup>16</sup> figures that haunt ornament, I think this is not the case. The transference of architecture to the textile inevitably brings these to the surface. In their encyclopedic setting, the decapitated heads of *Architectural Details and Animals* (fig 7) cannot avoid a reference to Owen Jones' pivotal example of the barbarity of ornamental excellence<sup>17</sup> (fig 12).

All this leads me to think that, despite my own predilection, it is not ornament alone, but the negotiation of ornament and architecture that is ultimately compelling. The point is well illustrated by the textiles I have looked at, for their charm is narrative, and that is located in the elaborate dialogue between ornament and architecture that they reproduce.

## NOTES

- 1 Patrick Mauries, *Fornasetti; Designer of Dreams* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).
- 2 Joanna Symonds, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects: C. F. A. Voysey* (London: D. C. Heath, 1976), fig. 98.
- 3 Stuart Durant, *C. F. A. Voysey* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), p. 7.
- 4 Voysey quoted in Duncan Simpson, *C. F. A. Voysey: An Architect of Individuality* (London: Lund Humphries, 1979), p. 120.
- 5 Simpson, *C. F. A. Voysey* p. 4.
- 6 Durant, *C. F. A. Voysey*.
- 7 In particular I am thinking of Semper's "The Textile Art," *The Four Elements of Architecture* trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 8 "The sneer 'it looks like a wedding-cake' is not on record in early civilizations. For why should not the wedding-cake celebrate the great occasion with all the frills and artifice of which the confectioner is capable?" E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of the Decorative Arts* (London: Phaidon, 1984), p. 17.
- 9 "Although The House That Jack Built first appeared in print in 1755, the rhyme is probably very old. James O. Halliwell thought that the reference to 'the priest all shaven and shorn' attested to its antiquity. There are similar rhymes in many European languages, and some scholars think that the rhyme stems from a Hebrew chant first printed in 1590." William S. Baring-Gould and Ceil Baring-Gould, *The Annotated Mother Goose* (New York: Bramhall House, 1962), p. 43.
- 10 Adolf Loos quoted, *C. F. A. Voysey* p. 194.
- 11 David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 8.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 15.
- 13 Foucault, *The Order of Things* p. 16.
- 14 For a useful bibliography of these see Stuart Durant's *Ornament, from the Industrial Revolution to Today* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1986).
- 15 Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* p. 51.
- 16 Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland* p. 8.
- 17 "Female Head from New Zealand, in the Museum, Chester," Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1910), p. 14.