CHAPTER 11

The Grottesche Part 1. Fragment to Field

We touched on the grottesche as a mode of aggregating decorative fragments into structures which could display the artist’s mastery of design and imaginative invention.¹ The grottesche show the far-reaching transformation which had occurred in the conception and handling of ornament, with the exaltation of antiquity and the growth of ideas of artistic style, fed by a confluence of rhetorical and Aristotelian thought.² They exhibit a decorative style which spreads through painted façades, church and palace decoration, frames, furnishings, intermediary spaces and areas of ‘licence’ such as gardens.³ Such proliferation shows the flexibility of candelabra, peopled acanthus or arabesque ornament, which can be readily adapted to various shapes and registers; the grottesche also illustrate the kind of ornament which flourished under printing. With their lack of narrative, end or occasion, they can be used throughout a context, and so achieve a unifying decorative mode. In this ease of application lies a reason for their prolific success as the characteristic form of Renaissance ornament, and their centrality to later historicist readings of ornament as period style. This appears in their success in Neo-Renaissance style and nineteenth century


³ The use of black and white sgraffito grotesques on façades appears with Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini.
pattern books, where they appear as the distinctive style of Italian Renaissance ornament. The *grottesche* as universally applicable *all’antica* decorative style thus typified the nineteenth century understanding of the Renaissance as the beginning of historicist style. The result of such proliferation would ultimately be to strengthen the distinction between fine and “decorative” or “minor” arts, with the latter conceived globally as pleasurable décor.

The *grottesche* show the limitations in approaching ornament as a genealogy of motifs, rather than as the handling of relations. The flourishing of so-called grotesque decoration, from antiquity on, occurs in periods when scenographic design and the historicist revival of earlier art are dominant in decorative

---

4 See Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament*; nineteenth century revival of the *grottesche* exploits their flexibility in varied mediums, such as polychrome ceramics, decorative brickwork, stained glass and carved wood.

5 Cf. Ruskin’s oppositions between the “organic” nature of Gothic decoration versus the false, historic artifice of classicism.