modernism’s narrative, privileging functionalism and structure as the highest values of architecture. She masterfully demonstrates the enmeshed themes and intersecting threads in their texts, aggregating a diversity of objects from armor to altars, tattoos to teapots, column capitals to chairs, and typewriters to trunks. These objects and the texts that deployed them in their formulations about style were both product and productive of Sachkultur, the culture of objects. A term that emerged in the nineteenth century within the context of European industrialization and the concomitant emergence of a consuming bourgeoisie, Sachkultur characterized objects less by their luxury status and more by their scale and mobility. Thus, in an effort to outline a theory of style, a dialectic was conceived insofar as objects were placed in relation to architecture, tethered by a concept of the body that could both hold an object and occupy a room. This focus on the body was not solely textual, as cultural critics in fin de siècle Vienna regularly commented on the abundance of corporeal ornament in public space featured on new architecture.1 Perhaps the relationship of these objects of everyday life to the body is the strongest theme to emerge from Payne’s impressively synthetic and well-illustrated study, which combines close readings and broad knowledge in aesthetics, philosophy, art history, and architectural theory.

The book’s six chapters are organized chronologically, from Gottfried Semper to Le Corbusier. The first, “Semper’s Heritage,” is devoted to an analysis of the former’s writings on ornament. Beginning at London’s 1851 Great Exposition, Payne focuses on the sheer quantity and diversity of industrial objects displayed in Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace, which compelled Semper to question the role of consumer products in society and that of the decorative arts in fine arts. In studying high and low culture, the architect posited a methodology for understanding style based on ornament and its development centered on process and material, through which he linked anthropology and ethnology to art history. He redefined form as dynamically tied to function, the value and meaning of which were dependent on matter and manipulation. This formulation, as Payne describes, eventually led him to tie both the functional and symbolic origins of architecture to Bekleidung (or dressing) instead of structure and support.

The second chapter, “The Ubiquity of Objects,” contextualizes Semper’s ideas within a broader cultural turn toward the house as the site for art historical study and economic intervention. The explosion of publications after 1851 dedicated to the makers and consumers of decorative arts attested to a shared judgment that culture had devolved into too many excessively ornamented and cheaply made products. Industry provided access to a wealth of goods but also to poor taste. Art historians and curators responded by leading cultural reform efforts centered on the domestic environment of these goods. Objects, textiles, clothing, ornament, and domestic architecture were elevated as important subjects of study in the discipline of art history, which synthesized methods and perspectives from anthropology and archaeology. Accordingly, recent discoveries in the ancient world had brought to light a host of new objects, prompting attempts to understand ancient civilizations through not only architectural monuments but also artifacts of everyday life.

These findings pressured art and architectural historians to develop a broader concept of style, placing at the center objects that had previously been at the disciplinary margins. In the next two chapters, “Art Historians, Objects, and
Empathy” and “The Architect’s World between Culture and Style,” Payne juxtaposes the arguments of Wolfflin, Riegl, Schmarsow, and Warburg to demonstrate their shared attention to the small scale, Kleinarcbitektur, as a categorical site of inquiry. From Semper’s theory of Formgefühl (feeling for form) to Riegl’s concept of Kunstwollen (will of art), Payne’s nuanced analysis culminates with Warburg, highlighting his epistemological claims about the body and its physical contact with the object. Regarding architectural discourse, Payne focuses on Ernst Kapp’s formulation of the Organprojektion (organ projection), which proposed that human-made objects were extensions of the body, while other theorists related the specific functions of the body to architectural design. Although these architects and architectural historians emphasized its physical qualities over its putative mental ones, the body remained at the center of their theories.

In the fifth chapter, “The Fork in the Road: Muthesius and Loos,” Payne recovers a counterdiscourse contemporaneous to the art nouveau that pivoted on the decorative arts. Comparing Peter Behrens’s house with Victor Horta’s, the former is conceived as a collection of well-curated objects. The mobility and autonomy of the objects and inhabitants are emphasized and imagined in distinction to the static quality of Horta’s G simt kunstwerk, which exemplified a linear continuity from object to architecture, from teacup to armchair to house. The idea of Sachkultur was not to design a singular total work of art but to create an assemblage that defined modern culture through mass production. Accordingly, Muthesius coined the term Typisierung, first proposed by Schmarsow, whereby “serial repetition is raised to the level of art” (213). Loos pushed the idea further and negated the particularities of objects altogether, locating their modernity in their capacity to blend into their surroundings. Loos’s valuation of an object’s invisibility—its ability to blend into the background of everyday life—was, however, tied to an emergent design aesthetic based not on methods of production but on a recognizable “modern” appearance. At this point in Payne’s narrative, the ornament becomes a detached object and then invisible in its mass reproducibility.

The final chapter, “The Aftermath: Bauhaus Endgame and Le Corbusier’s Poetics of Portability,” highlights the activities and the curriculum of the Bauhaus founded on the older model of the Kunstgewerbeschule. The contradiction of this lineage was that the Bauhaus program did not emerge from the ground up, “organically,” but was designed from the top down; Walter Gropius’s objective to train designers “to build a society of consumers in step with modernity” (231) assumed that institutions were the vehicles of cultural transformation. Le Corbusier might be an unexpected concluding figure in a book devoted to German discourse, but Payne makes the case for Le Corbusier as both a reader of German art history and its disseminator to French audiences. Focusing on his 1925 Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau and subsequent publications, she returns to the spatial context of the Fernand Léger painting featured in her introduction, Le Balustré. Le Corbusier’s exhibition room was shaped around a painting, his design conceived as the context for an object. At the chapter’s end, the reader finds an architectural ornament objectified through art.

In conclusion, Payne writes that the object acted as a mediator of architecture, that it ultimately became essential in and through modern industry and mass production. The object was afforded this mediating power “once the past could be aroused by the unmediated perception of objects’ and gained an ‘experimental reality’ through them, that is, as history moved from metonymy to synecdoche” (111). Provocatively posed, her assertion is that the object’s mediating function for modern architecture was enabled by the denial of that same function to the past. If this was the “stylistic” role of the object for modernism, Payne’s critical project is to recover that history.

Her genealogical study attests to renewed disciplinary interest in objects (for art history) and in ornamentation (for architectural history), and this book is precisely situated between the two, showing how the disciplines’ major theorists and historians integrated methods and theories from anthropology, archaeology, ethnography, and museum studies. Contemporary architecture is at a moment when ornament is being revisited, and several new books on the subject posit the question of subjectivity and agency, with its language of the skin, its surface, and its limits. Payne’s critical contribution is to argue for the historical continuities that constitute the practice of architecture through the material object of text.

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Notes

Joanne Vajda
Paris Ville Lumière: Une transformation urbaine et sociale, 1855–1937
Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015, 422 pp., 133 b/w illus. €40 (cloth), ISBN 9782343056633

Behind an imprecise title and lackluster cover lies a book that lovers of the French capital will enjoy. Joanne Vajda discusses the urban and social transformation of the City of Light that was mediated by high-class tourism in the period 1855–1937. We learn how the members of the “traveling elite” helped transform the neighborhoods they patronized, originally near the Grands Boulevards, then moving westward, always on the Right Bank; the scholastic Latin Quarter and artistic Montparnasse are not featured, and Montmartre makes only a cameo appearance. The beginning and end dates in the book’s title relate to the first and last international expositions Paris hosted, and the bulk of the research concerns the Second Empire and the Belle Époque.

In this study, which originated in her doctoral research at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Vajda taps into a multitude of print and archival sources, taking the painstaking path necessary to comprehend the sociocultural, financial, and environmental dynamic between, on one hand, Paris’s business and high-end districts as well as residential beaux quartiers and, on the other, the rich men and women attracted to the city from all over the world. Her sources include