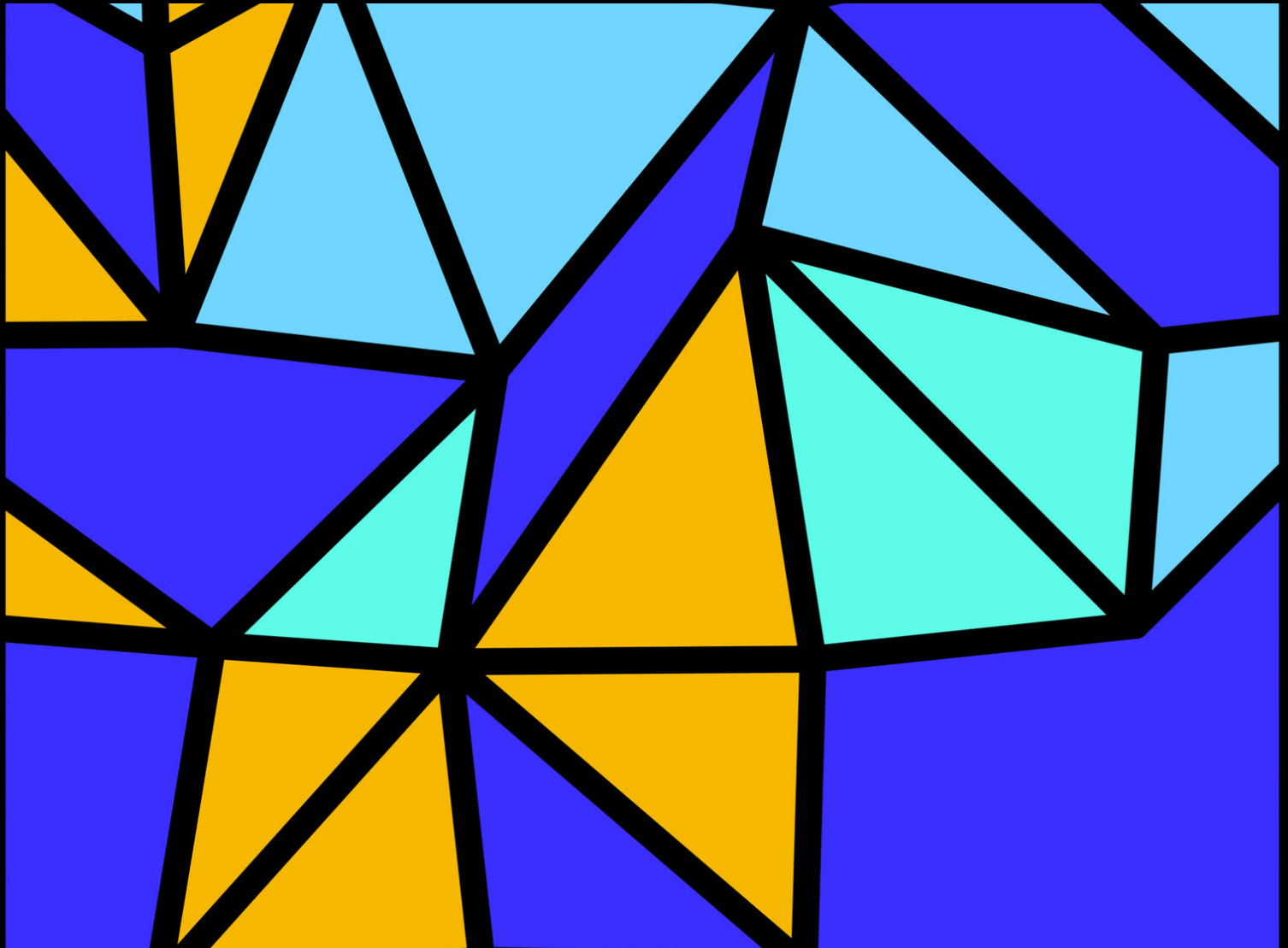




THE REAL DECEPTION

DECORATION IS NOT AVANT-GARDE

The greatest illusion in art discourse

TOBIAS POST

Artista · Arte luminosa digitale · Pittura · Progetti curatoriali

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Aggiornato 11 settembre 2026

The concept of decoration is among the most self-evident concepts in art. Precisely for that reason it is among the least precise. Hardly any word is used more often to classify works, to devalue them or to exclude them from the actual discourse of art. Anyone who calls a work decorative believes they know what they are talking about. In fact, they usually describe their own perception more than the work.

The concept rests on a premise that is rarely stated. It presupposes that there could be designs whose artistic positing is so slight or so insignificant that they could be reduced to mere decoration. It is precisely this premise, however, that does not withstand theoretical scrutiny.

There is no design without positing.

Every form posits relations. Every colour posits differences. Every composition posits orders. Every choice of material posits properties. Even repeating an already familiar form is a new positing, because it places this form anew in a different context. The decision not to change anything also remains a positing. The notion of non-positing is therefore a logical contradiction.

With that, the concept of decoration also loses its theoretical foundation.

Decoration does not denote a category of design of its own. As an independent category, it does not exist.

THE REAL DECEPTION

If every design is necessarily a positing, another question inevitably arises. Why does some of it nevertheless strike us as decorative? The answer does not lie in the work. It lies in the history of our perception.

Every new positing first changes the way we see the world. It interrupts habits, creates irritation and opens up a new order of perception. That is exactly what is usually called the avant-garde.

But no positing stays new.

With every further act of perception, a process of cultural appropriation begins. The new order is understood, taught, copied, reproduced and finally taken for granted. It migrates from the studio into museums, art history, architecture,

design, advertising and everyday culture. An individual insight becomes collective knowledge.

The work does not change in the process. The culture changes. For that very reason the positing does not disappear. It merely disappears from consciousness.

The greatest success of an artistic positing lies in no longer being recognised as an artistic positing at some point.

It is precisely at this point that the illusion of decoration arises.

WHY DECORATION IS NOT AVANT-GARDE

The traditional opposition of avant-garde and decoration rests on a category error. It treats the two concepts as opposites. In fact, they describe two different historical states of the same cultural development.

Avant-garde denotes the moment when a new positing meets a culture that does not yet know this order. Decoration denotes the moment when the same culture has fully internalised this order.

It is not the work that has become decorative. The perception has become familiar.

The sentence "That is just decoration" therefore does not describe an objective state of a work. It describes the loss of awareness of its original positing.

Anyone who uses decoration as a judgement of quality confuses the degree of cultural familiarity with the rank of a positing.

Decoration is not a property of art.

It is a property of its cultural appropriation.

THE NECESSARY STORAGE FORM OF INNOVATION

It is precisely at this point that decoration acquires its real significance. It is not the opposite pole of art. It is its necessary storage form.

No cultural innovation could have a lasting effect if it did not pass into the shared perceptual knowledge of a society. Every new positing would have to be rediscovered again and again. Art history would be impossible. Cultural learning would be impossible. Every generation would have to develop its visual language entirely anew.

That is exactly what does not happen. A culture preserves innovation precisely by making it self-evident. What originally arose as an artistic insight becomes the shared language of a society. Perspective, proportion, typography, colour orders, architectural principles or visual languages at some point no longer appear as inventions. They appear as natural components of reality.

At some point a culture no longer recognises its most successful positings as positings. It recognises them as reality. Therein lies their greatest effect. Decoration is therefore not a failed avant-garde.

It is the culturally most successful form of a positing.

IMITATION IS CULTURAL LEARNING

For the same reason, the charge of imitation is also theoretically inadequate.

No generation begins its perception from zero. Every generation first has to take over the positings that earlier generations brought forth. Only by appropriating them does the possibility of later going beyond them open up at all.

Imitation is therefore not the opposite of creativity.

It is its precondition.

What often appears as mere repetition fulfils a fundamental epistemological function. It turns individual innovations into collective knowledge and makes them the common property of a culture.

Precisely what is hastily dismissed as decoration often forms the ground on which the next avant-garde can arise in the first place.

Without culturally appropriated positings there would be no new avant-garde. Every avant-garde stands on the positings of its predecessors that have become decorative.

THE TEMPORALITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

From this perspective, the notion of a timeless avant-garde also loses its plausibility. Avant-garde is not a property of a work. It is a temporal state within the history of its perception.

A positing is avant-garde as long as it exceeds the perceptual horizon of its present. With its cultural appropriation it loses this historical status. Not because

the work has become weaker, but because the culture has changed through the work.

Every successful avant-garde therefore works towards its own dissolution. The more successful it is, the more self-evident it becomes. The more self-evident it becomes, the less it is recognised as avant-garde. Its very greatest success makes it invisible.

NO LACK OF ART

The concept of decoration does not describe a lack of art. It describes the forgetting of its origin.

The history of art is not the history of an opposition between avant-garde and decoration. It is the history of positings. New positings arise. They change perception. They are culturally appropriated. They become part of shared knowledge. And from this shared knowledge, new positings arise in turn.

Decoration is therefore neither an inferior form of art nor its opposite pole. It is the historical state of a positing after it has fully entered cultural memory.

The real illusion does not consist in seeing decoration. The real illusion consists in believing that decoration is a category of art of its own.

It is not.

Decoration is not a category of art of its own. It is the name for the moment in which a culture has forgotten the origin of its own visual language.

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Immagini: © 2026 Tobias Post

Saggio · Aggiornato 11 settembre 2026

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