

The Mystery of Decoration

(By Robert Harbison. Published 1992 by Lincolnshire County Council for an exhibition at the Usher Gallery, Lincoln, 1992)

Bette Spektorov has produced a series of painting which take as their starting point works of decorative art, whose richness is met by the answering richness of her palette and imagination. So far there are two paintings taken from different parts of a Japanese robe which depicts a quasi-architectural entity bordered by pines, two taken from an Elizabethan coverlet with a wayward lattice of birds on branches, and two from an embroidered casket with little Royalist figures and big butterflies and snails.

The robe is transmuted most, until it becomes a rich blur on a clear linear framework flowery veils are hung. Most people wouldn't guess it was Japanese, whereas the casket paintings, in which the borrowed motif is enlarged many times and greatly emboldened, make exact reference to a period and a style. In between are many possibilities for filtering images from the past through the eye of the present.

The casket paintings stand out because they are done in acrylic, which makes for a somewhat flatter relation to the subject. It is like sewing together clearly delimited pieces in order to arrive at a kind of puzzle, complete but still strange in the semi-autonomy of the various slivers of colour. Decorative designs have stimulated the painter who produces something more than decoration.

Decoration is an idea that has been in bad odour for a long time. Adolf Loos, the sceptical dandy from Vienna, put the case very pungently in an essay called Ornament and Crime. He derived all decorative pattern from the savage tribesman tattooing himself and his belongings in a tasteless and never-ending exuberance. Modern tattoos and modern decoration appeared just about equally degenerate in Loos' perspective.

There is at least this truth in Loos' view: that much of the most interesting decoration is a kind of popular art transmitting misremembered or misunderstood borrowings from high cultural forms via pattern and embroidery, which serves some of the function in its rustic environment that paintings do in more sophisticated homes.

For me it is important to shift the emphasis from decoration to pattern, from the function or service provided to the subject itself, from the social to the quasi-mathematical or metaphysical. Decoration is trivialized by being seen first and foremost through its utility. Perhaps this only happens when patterns lose their force and their ability to command attention, becoming mildly pleasant background noise instead of a code which encapsulates ancient knowledge.

Some people, looking at Bette Spektorov's paintings, will be surprised to hear that decoration and pattern are issues impinging urgently on them. But certain of her pictures which look like landscapes or interiors turn out to have their starting point in textile designs.

Of course immediate sources don't always have the last word. It would be a thick perceiver whose thoughts about a Cezanne still-life never left the kitchen. The starting point may give scant clue to what the resulting painting is about, yet the present exhibition provokes all kinds of speculation about starting points.

It was an inspired idea to have this painter sift the Usher Gallery collections looking for objects which engaged her and might become points of departure for fresh paintings. All collections fall into disuse, however well or completely displayed. For various reasons

collections of so called decorative arts – that is to say, of objects which have some other reality or function besides being beautiful – fall more naturally into such disuse. The rescue, when it comes, from this attic-condition, is more exciting the longer the objects have lain unvalued. It requires a regenerating moment of perception, noticing or recognizing the forgotten life or energy in the piece, which may subsist in tension between the pattern and the device, and in the way one of them triumphs over the other.

A curator's way of resurrecting a rediscovered object is usually to clean it, light it and describe it, acts of perception which should not be undervalued. Bette Spektorov's way of resurrecting is to involve the old work in metamorphic process, disturbing its entombment and showing the thought it enshrines capable of further development. In part this is only a demonstration of how any live encounter with the past works: perception ingests the worn artefact, partially refashioning it in the process.

So these objects from the Usher Gallery have been firmly reintroduced into the history of human creativity after slumbering for however long. It is a nice demonstration of what the art of the present can do for that of the past. In the course of the exhibition the comparative materials – casket, coverlet, robe and priest's box – will be more intelligently scrutinized than they have been for a long time.

The project has made Bette Spektorov remember something half forgotten about her own sources. She says that when growing up she spent many hours in the V&A, London's great storehouse of domestic objects raised out of ordinary necessity into a transcendent darkness, where they often appear like hallucinations in dreams, their power all the greater because one isn't very sure where they came from, and in any case they have left it far behind.

Kandinsky retains a vivid memory of crowded rooms in Russian peasant dwellings which he says inspired his painting of 1909-14, though these works may show battles in snow or turreted cities surrounded by forests or other fairy tale subjects. I have always thought Kandinsky of that period very germane to Bette Spektorov's paintings, but never thought to connect them to the V&A or the richness of embroidered patterns.

Matisse believed that decoration was a spiritual function and was apparently happy to be credited with that and no more. But there is a crucial distinction. A painting can never be, or can only be after extreme and perverse self-limitation, decoration. It has inevitably an independence which puts it in an entirely different mental realm. It is less perfect and less pure than the pattern, and is sullied as well as enriched by the thinking which sets it apart. It always embodies a series of interpretive acts, which one cannot say of even the oddest pattern.

Thus it is not surprising that most of Bette Spektorov's paintings don't bear a simple resemblance to their sources in other art. One of the pleasures of the exhibition will be to gauge these different distances. Some paintings will seem to take their own principle of organization from the efforts of long dead seamstresses displayed adjacent. Sometimes the resemblance is hard to detect, sometimes it is obvious, but even in the nearest there are subtle reorganizations which among other things are a way of understanding the source.

There are examples in the history of art where the artist's identity is such a powerful filter that every subject passed through it comes out looking the same. Dufy and Lautrec are cases in point. In one respect it seems at first that Bette Spektorov may be one of them: in the way colour appears in her work. The faded old fabrics are subdued and indistinct, while the paintings based on them are a welter of saturated hues, like an Eastern reinterpretation of Western themes. Colour is a kind of universe of its own in

these painting. If I had to single out one thing as making them remarkable it would be this – that the normal barriers between us and strong colours are down and we are joyfully reunited with them. It is a paradise not exactly like anywhere you've been, which feels strongly like indoors not outdoors, a created or arranged comfort and ease. Not that they are not imbued with a kind of striving too. Less bourgeois works are hard to imagine: if they are finally about the sense of a spiritual home, it is earthly but not overstuffed, and warm in abundance but not comfy or particularly friendly.

In the painter's studio was a large pastel of a woman's head and shoulders. She wore what I interpreted as a Russian peasant head-dress and her face was hidden in her hands – histrionic lament, from a Diaghilev ballet perhaps. In fact it was an apparition of the Virgin near Grenoble in the 19th century. In Spektorov's mind this is one of a series of Apparitions of the Virgin, a set of visionary subjects spanning centuries and continents which she thinks of taking up, a wonderful prospect which I hope will come to pass. She is a visionary painter who paints apparitions seized in unlikely places, and finds religious significance in fabric designs. The unlikelihood of the Virgins would be different and the sense of the exotic, while the clear presence of powerful narrative would be new. It seems a set of subjects made for her.

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