



Josef Hoffmann, an Art Nouveau interior, 1899: "The individuality of the owner expressed in every ornament . . . this is what it means to go about life living with one's own corpse" (Adolf Loos).

Adolf Loos and I – he literally and I linguistically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room [*Spielraum*]. The others, the positive ones [i.e., those who fail to make this distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.<sup>3</sup>

## Descriptive

**Image Title:** *Art Nouveau Interior by Josef Hoffmann* (1899)

**Quote Attribution:** Adolf Loos, referenced by Hal Foster in the text

**Date:** 1899 for Hoffmann's design, early 20th century for Loos's commentary

**Author:** Hal Foster, summarizing and interpreting Loos's ideas on design and culture

**Historical/Cultural Context:** Art Nouveau movement and modernist criticism in late 19th and early 20th century Europe. Loos was reacting against the ornamental excesses of Art Nouveau, advocating instead for functional, minimalist design

**Medium:** Architectural and interior design (Hoffmann's work) referenced in a written, critical essay by Foster

**Genre:** Cultural criticism, modernist design commentary.

**Length:** Approx. 109 words, page 16

## Interpretive

### Themes:

- **Ornament vs. Function:** Loos's disdain for excessive ornamentation, seen as unnecessary and regressive, contrasting with his emphasis on pure functionality
- **Cultural Critique:** The passage critiques cultural misinterpretations or distortions that blur distinctions, which Loos felt was essential to maintaining cultural integrity and purpose

**Symbolism:** *Urn and Chamber Pot*, Loos uses these objects symbolically to highlight the absurdity of conflating aesthetic objects (urns) with functional ones (chamber pots). This distinction underpins his argument for clarity and intentionality in design

**Tone:** Satirical and critical; Loos's tone, mirrored by Foster, mocks those who overemphasize ornamentation to the point of absurdity

**Purpose:** Foster's purpose in including this passage is to underscore Loos's modernist critique of decorative excess, illustrating the point with Hoffmann's lavish designs as an example of Art Nouveau's aesthetic maximalism

**Social Commentary:** By citing Loos's metaphor, Foster critiques the cultural confusion over form and function in design, reflecting broader concerns with consumerism and design's role in expressing personal or societal values.

### Interpretive Commentary/Annotations:

- "*The individuality of the owner expressed in every ornament... living with one's own corpse*": This phrase implies that Art Nouveau design focus on self-expression through ornamentation ultimately stifles authenticity, as it transforms living spaces into mausoleums of decorative excess.
- *Urn vs. Chamber Pot*: The analogy highlights the need for a clear distinction between functional and decorative objects, advocating for design with purpose and cultural "running-room" (or *Spielraum*).

## Descriptive

Design and Crime 17

Here “those who use the urn as a chamber pot” are Art Nouveau designers who want to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot). Those who do the reverse are functionalist modernists who want to elevate the utilitarian object into art. (A few years later Marcel Duchamp would trump both sides with his dysfunctional urinal, *Fountain*, presented as art, but that’s another story.) For Kraus the two mistakes are symmetrical – both confuse use-value and art-value – and both are perverse inasmuch as both risk a regressive indistinction of things: they fail to see that objective limits are necessary for “the running-room” that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture. This is why Loos opposes not only the total design of Art Nouveau but also its wanton subjectivism (“individuality expressed in every nail”). Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural “essence” of art, or an absolute “autonomy” of culture; the stake is one of “distinctions” and “running-room,” of proposed differences and provisional spaces.

\*

This old debate takes on a new resonance today, when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes – seems to be regarded as so much *design*. After the heyday of the Art Nouveau designer, one hero of modernism was the artist-as-engineer or the author-as-producer, but this figure was toppled in turn with the industrial order that supported it, and in our consumerist world the designer again rules. Yet this new designer is very different from the old: the Art Nouveau designer resisted the effects of industry, even as he also sought, in the words of Walter Benjamin, “to win back [its] forms” – modern concrete, cast iron, and the like – for

## Interpretive

### Themes:

- **Art vs. Utility:** The debate between creating art from functional items and infusing utility with artistic qualities, each side blurring boundaries to the detriment of clarity in design’s purpose
- **Distinction vs. Indistinction:** Loos’s and Kraus’s focus on preserving clear distinctions between art and functional objects, which they see as essential for a dynamic, “liberal” culture
- **Critique of Consumer Culture:** Foster extends Loos’s and Kraus’s criticisms to contemporary consumerism, where design has come to dominate every aspect of life, commodifying everything

### Symbolism:

- **Urn vs. Chamber Pot:** Represents the confusion between functional objects and art objects, with each misinterpretation leading to a “perverse” blending of value and use
- **Duchamp’s *Fountain*:** A symbolic middle-ground that critiques both views by presenting a functional object (the urinal) as a dysfunctional art object, challenging both value and use-value distinctions

**Tone:** Analytical and critical, with a historical perspective; skeptical of both the romanticism of Art Nouveau and the asceticism of modernism

**Purpose:** To illustrate how debates over utility and art have evolved, and to critique the current consumer-driven design culture that commodifies all aspects of life

### Social Commentary:

- **Consumerism and Total Design:** Foster critiques contemporary consumerism for blending art, design, and utility into a single commercial aesthetic that erases meaningful distinctions
- **Erosion of Distinctions:** Highlights the problem of merging aesthetics and utility into “total design,” where everything from architecture to jeans is consumed as “design” with little regard for cultural or functional boundaries

### Interpretive Commentary/Annotations

- “Individuality expressed in every nail”: Loos’s critique of Art Nouveau’s personalization in design, where excessive decoration detracts from the clarity of function and form
- “Distinctions” and “Running-Room”: The need for cultural boundaries that allow for creativity within defined parameters, which Foster views as essential for sustaining a productive cultural dialogue
- “Conflation of aesthetic and utilitarian”: In modern consumerism, the erasure of boundaries between art, utility, and commerce leads to a reduction of everything to mere “design,” which risks commodifying cultural values

**Title:** *Design and Crime*

### Key Figures:

- **Adolf Loos:** An influential modernist architect who criticized Art Nouveau’s decorative excess
- **Karl Kraus:** Cited as a cultural critic who condemned the confusion between art and function
- **Marcel Duchamp:** Mentioned briefly for his work *Fountain*, which subverted the conventional boundaries between art and utility
- **Walter Benjamin:** Referenced for his views on Art Deco’s response to industrial materials

**Date of Reference Events:** Early 20th century (Art Nouveau, rise of modernism); late 20th to early 21st century (contemporary consumerism)

**Cultural Context:** Art Nouveau and Art Deco as design responses to industrialization; modernist reaction to ornamental design, and contemporary consumerist society

**Genre:** Art and cultural criticism

**Medium:** Printed text within a critical essay

**Length:** Approx. 270 words, page 17