Zeitschrift: gta papers Herausgeber: gta Verlag Band: 6 (2021)

Artikel: The hidden horizontal: cornices in art and architecture - selections from

the exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich

Autor: Wegerhoff, Erik

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007007

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 17.11.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

The Hidden Horizontal: Cornices in Art and Architecture — Selections from the Exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich Erik Wegerhoff



Se vend a Paris Chez N. de l'Armessin Rie S. Taques, devant la Riic du Plaire ala Conpe l'or duce Privil du Roy. 1605

Nicolas de Larmessin, Costumes grotesques, seventeenth century, engraving. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Gallica)

This seventeenth-century French architect has dressed perfectly for a Versailles cocktail party: legs in columns, a skirt of triglyphs, his torso a column shaft, and his hat a cornice—an entire glossary of tectonics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the costume looks as if it would be hard to move in. The title Habit d'Architecte puns "habit," the garb of the profession, against the habit of designing in a classical language in which every capital is crowned by a cornice.

Unknown artist, cabinet, ca. 1650—1675, walnut wood, canton of Zurich. Landesmuseum Zürich, inventory number LM-5584

This seventeenth-century cabinet, today at home in the Landesmuseum Zürich, assembles as many cornices as possible into a small piece of furniture. It not only resembles a building with socle, piano nobile, and a double attica, but it is also a beautiful example of the cornice emancipating itself from its origin in the entablature. The protruding profiles echo the elaborate frames accentuating its doors. The cornices are all that remains of a classical order here, all pilasters and architraves stripped.



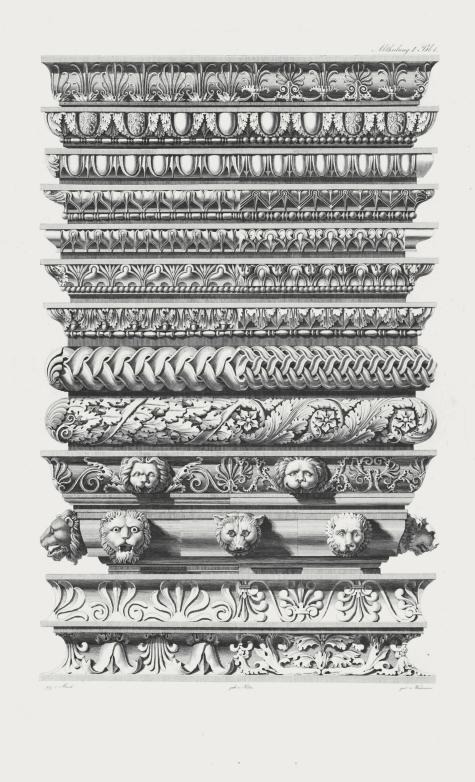


Henri Labrouste, drawing of a detail of the tomb of Cecilia Metella, 1826, pencil and gray wash. Courtesy of Niall Hobhouse and Drawing Matter

Henri Labrouste's magnificent drawing of the bucranium frieze of the tomb of Cecilia Metella on the Via Appia outside the Roman city walls is proof of the young architect's great talent as a draftsman. The ancient ornament appears almost sculpted in pencil and displays the architect's great handling of shad-ing. Labrouste's strict depiction of a detail, and especially the and especially the confrontation between the upper and lower halves of the drawing, invite a reading of the architect at the brink of abstraction. While everything depicted is classical Roman ornament, the highly detailed figurative elements of the lower part find a startling response in the straight gray lines above that seem to anticipate modernist reductions.

Model cornices featured in Vorbilder für Fabrikanten und Handwerker (Berlin: Königl. Technische Deputation für Gewerbe, 1821–1837)

Intended to guide the tastes of craftspeople who in the 1800s became increasingly responsible for artistic production, the Vorbilder für Fabrikanten und Handwerker (Models for manufacturers and craftspeople) chiefly featured classical models. Industrialization made the cornice a product of the machine, its forms severed from cultural meaning, but this series is also proof that the industrialization of art created a fresh grasp of antiquity. This new serialization revealed ancient serialization. In some regards the cornice was a linear product not so far from the production line, and egg-and-dart were already a serial business in antiquity.



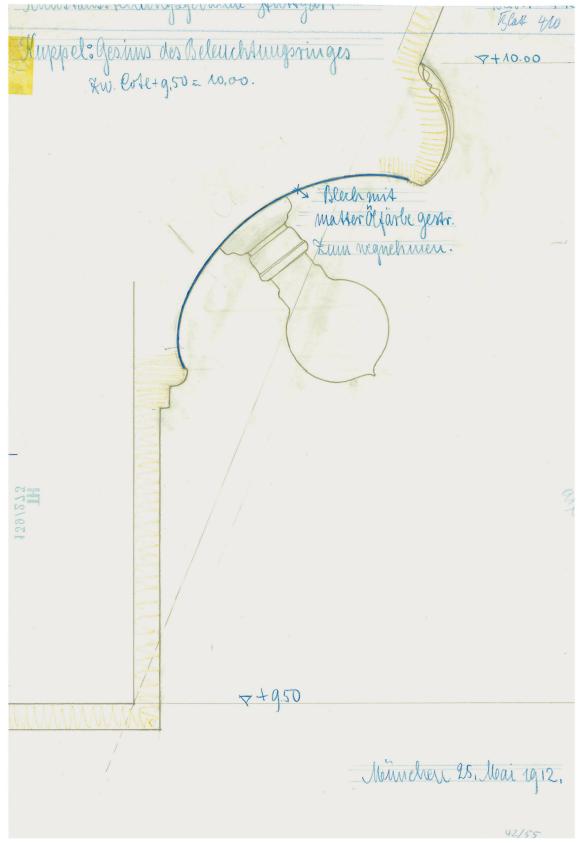


Herzog & de Meuron, Ricola Storage Building, Laufen, Switzerland, 1986—1987

The warehouse for the Swiss sweets manufacturer Ricola has become a classic of the early work of Herzog & de Meuron. The calculated elegance of the play of lines is also a play on the cornice. The facade is nothing but cornices - stacked on top of each other as if to insist on the as it to insist on the legitimacy of a building element outlawed by many modern architects and reintroduced much more crudely by Herzog & de Meuron's postmodern contemporaries. The top, where the horizontal layers find relief in a series of verticals, also pays homage to the cornice, its series of battens clearly echoing a classical *Kranzgesims*.

Theodor Fischer, Drawing for a Cornice, Kunstausstellungsgebäude Stuttgart, 1912, colored pencil. Architekturmuseum TU München

Arguably, lines of light and shade make up architecture's prime material, and not just in the eyes of Le Corbusier. The complex profile extruded to form a cornice produces nothing other than a series of shadow gaps. Theodor Fischer's cornice from the early 1900s is proof of the longevity of the cornice and the ease with which it glided into the age of modern technology. It also prominently features a light bulb exactly where a predecessor would have produced a line of shade. Fischer's design is thus a beautiful example of how twentieth-century architecture set out to upend every established convention of architecture while remaining within the tradition that it was attempting to revolutionize.



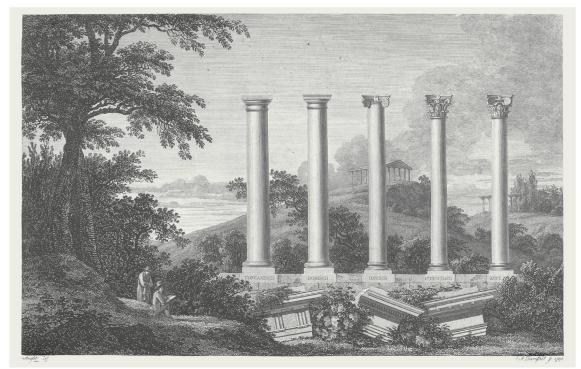


Erich Mendelsohn, Mossehaus, 1921—1923, Berlin. Photograph from Erich Mendelsohn, Das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1930), 83

If anyone knew how to accelerate the classical cornice, it was Erich Mendelsohn. Berlin's busiest modern architect specialized in curved corners, which he interpreted both as he interpreted both as an echo of, and archi-tectural sovereignty over, urban traffic. The long horizontals are the movement of "dashing cars" (sausende Autos) turned into building material. At the top of material. At the top of Mendelsohn's redesign of the headquarters for the Mosse publishing company, the cornices take on the form of rally stripes. That these are made from terra-cotta makes clear that Mendelsohn had not lost his faith in architecture's authority, a faith he then underlines with the proudly protruding socle cornice that functions as a canopy above the entrance.

Row of columns, from Christian Ludwig Stieglitz, Plans et dessins tirés de la belle architecture (London: A. Dulau & P. F. Fauche, 1801)

Christian Ludwig
Stieglitz's plate, one
of the first illustrations
in his Plans et dessins
tirés de la belle
architecture (1801;
originally published
as Zeichnungen aus
der schönen Baukunst,
Leipzig, 1800), draws
from a long tradition in
architectural publishing.
A depiction of the
orders was a feature of
nearly every illustrated
book on architecture
from Giacomo Barozzi
da Vignola (1562)
onward. Here, however,
the five orders are
displayed as if they
had once formed one
colonnade, perfectly
preserved except
for the entablature,
which has fallen into
picturesque fragments
in the foreground.
Close inspection of
these reveal that the
row of columns could
never have formed
the implied entity, as
one piece does not
link to the other. The
two diminutive figures
shown drawing at the
lower left may be as
puzzled by this incongruous cornice as they
are by the pedagogical
inscriptions at the base
of the columns.





Charles Holland, Cornwall Cornice, 2016, sculpture Source: courtesy of Charles Holland Architects

The British architect Charles Holland's cornice pays homage to all those produced by Inigo Jones, Colen Campbell, and other British Vitruviuses. Yet its inspiration was neither antiquity nor Andrea Palladio but rather the coastline of Cornwall. Holland's neo-postmodern piece thus both refers to and satirizes classical architecture.