

August Sarnitz

# ADOLF LOOS

1870 - 1933

Architect, Cultural Critic, Dandy

**TASCHEN**

HONG KONG KÖLN LONDON LOS ANGELES MADRID PARIS TOKYO

# "The Poor Little Rich Man"

"Neues Wiener Tagblatt", 26th April 1900

I want to tell you about a poor rich man. He had money and possessions, a faithful wife to kiss away the cares of his daily business, and a gaggle of children to make even the poorest of his workers envious. Everything he laid his hands on thrived, and for this he was loved by his friends. But today, everything is very, very different; and this is how it came about.

One day this man talked to himself: "You have money and possessions, a faithful wife, a gaggle of children to make even the poorest of your workers envious, but are you really happy? You see there are people who have none of the things you are envied for. But their worries are utterly wiped away by a great magician; Art! But what is art to you? You don't even know the name of a single artist. Every snob could drop his business card at the door, and your servant would throw it open for him. Nevertheless, you have not once really received art! I know for sure it won't come. But now I will call on it. It shall be received in my home like a Queen who has come to reside with me."

He was a powerful man, and he carried through with great energy whatever he took on. It was his accustomed way of doing business. And so yet on the same day he went to a renowned interior architect and said: "Bring me art, art under my own roof! Money doesn't matter!"

The architect needn't be told twice. He went to the man's house and immediately threw out all of his furniture. Then he let floorers, lackers, painters, masons, tressilbuilders, carpenters, installers, potters, wallpaper-hangers, and sculpters move in.

You have never seen the likes of the art that was captured and well cared for inside of the four corners of that rich man's home.

The rich man was overjoyed. Overjoyed he went through the new rooms. Art everywhere he looked. Art in everything and anything. When he turned a door handle he grabbed hold of art, when he sank into a chair he sank into art, when he burried his tired bones under the pillows he burrowed into art, his feet sank in art when he walked across the carpet. He indulged himself with outrageous fervour in art. Since his plates were artistically decorated, he cut his boeuf à l'oignon with still more energy.

People praised, and were envious of him. The Art periodicals glorified his name as one of the foremost patrons of the arts. His rooms were used as public examples, studied, described, explained.

But they were worth it. Every room was a complete individual symphony of colour. Walls, furniture, and fabrics were all composed sophisticatedly into perfect harmony which each other. Each appliance had its proper place, and was connected to the others in the most wonderful combinations.

The architect had forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Everything from the ashtray and flatware to the candle extinguisher had been combined and matched. It wasn't a common architectural art. In every ornament, in every

form, in every nail was the individuality of the owner to be found. (A psychological work of such complication that it would be clear to anyone.)

The architect modestly refused all honours. He only said: "These rooms are not from me. Over there in the corner stands a statue from Charpentier. Just like anyone else would earn my disgust, if he claimed a room as his design, as soon as he uses one of my door handles, as little as I can claim these rooms as my design." It was nobly, and consequently said. Many carpenters who perhaps used a wallpaper from Walter Crane and nevertheless would want to credit the furniture in the room to themselves because they had created and completed it they were ashamed to the depths of their black souls as they learned about these words.

After flying off at a tangent let us now return to our rich man. I have already told you how overjoyed he was. From now on, he devoted a great deal of his time to studying his dwelling. For everything had to be learned; he saw this soon enough. There was much to be noted. Each appliance had its own definite place. The architect had done his best for him. He had thought of everything in advance. There was a definite place for even the very smallest case, made just especially for it.

The domicile was comfortable, but it was hard mental work. In the first weeks the architect guarded the daily life, so that no mistake could creep in. The rich man put tremendous effort into it. But it still happened, that when he laid down a book without thinking that he shoved it into the pigeonhole for the newspaper. Or he knocked the ashes from his cigar into the groove made for the candleholder. You picked something up and the endless guessing and searching for the right place to return it to began, and sometimes the architect had to look at the blueprints to rediscover the correct place for a box of matches.

Where applied art experiences such a victory, the correlating music can't lag behind. That idea kept the rich man very busy. He made a recommendation to the tramway company to replace the senselessly ringing bells on the trams with the characteristic motif of Parsifal bells. He didn't find any concession there, obviously they weren't ready for such a modern concept. Therefore he was allowed at his own cost, to change the cobblestone in front of his house, so that the carts rolled by in the rhythm of the Radetzky March. Even the electrical bells in his house got new Wagner and Beethoven motifs, and all the competent art critics were full of praise for the man who had opened up the new area of "art as a basic commodity."

One can imagine that all of these improvements would make the man happier.

We can't hide the fact however, that he tried to be home as little as possible. Now and then one needs a break from so much art. Could you live

in an art gallery? Or sitting in "Tristan and Isolt" for months at a time? See! Who could blame him for collecting strength in restaurants, cafés, and from friends and acquaintances to face his own home. He had expected something different. But art requires sacrifice. He sacrificed a lot. It brought tears to his eyes. He thought of all the old things that he held so dear, and that he missed. The big armchair! Everyday his father had taken his afternoon nap in it. The old clock, and the old paintings! Art requires it! Don't cave in!

One time it came to pass that he celebrated his birthday, and his wife and children gave him many gifts. He was very pleased with all his birthday presents, and they brought him much happiness and joy. Soon afterwards the architect returned because of his right to check on the placement of objects, and to answer complicated questions. He entered the room. The prosperous man who had many concerns on his mind came to greet him warmly.

The architect didn't recognize the happiness of the prosperous man, but he had discovered something else, and the colour had run out of his cheeks. "Why would you be wearing those slippers?" He blurted out.

The master of the house looked at his embroidered shoes, and sighed in relief. The shoes were made from the original design of the architect himself. This time he felt guiltless. He answered thoughtfully.

"But Mr Architect! Have you forgotten? You designed these slippers yourself!"

"Certainly!" The architect thundered. "But for the bedroom! With these impossible pieces of colour you are destroying the entire atmosphere. Don't you even realize it?"

The prosperous man took the slippers off immediately, and was pleased as punch that the architect didn't find his socks offensive. They went into the bedroom, where the rich man was allowed to put his shoes back on.

"Yesterday", he timidly began "I celebrated my birthday, and my family gave me tons of gifts. I sent for you so that you could give us advice as to where we should put up all of the things I was given."

The architect's face became visibly longer. Then he let loose:

"How dare you presume to receive presents? Didn't I draw everything up for you? Haven't I taken care of everything? You need nothing more. You are complete!" "But" the rich man replied "I should be allowed to buy things."

"No, you are not allowed, never ever! That's just what I was missing, things, that have not been drawn by me. Haven't I done enough, that I put the Charpentier here for you? The statue that steals all the fame out of my work! No, you are not allowed to buy anything else!"

"But what about when my grandchild brings me something from kindergarten as a gift?"

"You are not allowed to take it!"

The prosperous man was decimated, but he still had not lost. An idea! Yes! An idea!

"And when I want to go to Secession to buy a painting?" He asked triumphantly.

"Then try to hang it somewhere. Don't you see that there isn't any room for anything else? For every painting I have hung here there is a frame on the wall. You can not move anything. Try and fit in a new painting!"

Thereupon a transformation took place within the rich man. The happy man felt suddenly deeply, deeply unhappy, and he saw his future life. No one would be allowed to grant him joy.

He had to pass by the shopping stores of the city, perfect, and complete. Nothing would be created for him ever again, none of his loved ones would be allowed to give him a painting. For him there could be no more painters, no artists, no craftsmen again. He was shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires. He felt: Now is the time to learn to walk about with one's own corpse. Indeed! He is finished! He is complete!

Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture

# Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture

Translated by Michael Bullock

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## 1908 Adolf Loos: Ornament and crime

Adolf Loos (b. 1870 in Brno, d. 1933 in Vienna) brought back with him to Vienna from his three-year stay in the United States (1893–6) a remark of Louis Sullivan's: 'It could only benefit us if for a time we were to abandon ornament and concentrate entirely on the erection of buildings that were finely shaped and charming in their sobriety'.

From this Loos developed his radical aesthetic purism, which made him a zealous foe of Art Nouveau and the German Werkbund: 'The German Werkbund has set out to discover the style of our age. This is unnecessary labour. We already have the style of our age.'

The human embryo in the womb passes through all the evolutionary stages of the animal kingdom. When man is born, his sensory impressions are like those of a newborn puppy. His childhood takes him through all the metamorphoses of human history. At 2 he sees with the eyes of a Papuan, at 4 with those of an ancient Teuton, at 6 with those of Socrates, at 8 with those of Voltaire. When he is 8 he becomes aware of violet, the colour discovered by the eighteenth century, because before that the violet was blue and the purple-snail red. The physicist points today to colours in the solar spectrum which already have a name but the knowledge of which is reserved for the men of the future.

The child is amoral. To our eyes, the Papuan is too. The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. He is not a criminal. But when modern man kills someone and eats him he is either a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddles, in short everything he can lay hands on. He is not a criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the inmates show tattoos. The tattooed who are not in prison are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies at liberty, it means he has died a few years before committing a murder.

The urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the start of plastic art. It is the baby talk of painting. All art is erotic.

The first ornament that was born, the cross, was erotic in origin. The first work of art, the first artistic act which the first artist, in order to rid himself of his surplus energy, smeared on the wall. A horizontal dash: the prone woman. A vertical dash: the man penetrating her. The man who created it felt the same urge as Beethoven, he was in the same heaven in which Beethoven created the *Ninth Symphony*.

But the man of our day who, in response to an inner urge, smears the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate. It goes without saying that this impulse most frequently assails people with such symptoms of degeneracy in the lavatory. A country's culture can be assessed by the extent to which its lavatory walls are smeared. In the child this is a natural phenomenon: his

first artistic expression is to scribble erotic symbols on the walls. But what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneracy in the modern adult. I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.* I believed that with this discovery I was bringing joy to the world; it has not thanked me. People were sad and hung their heads. What depressed them was the realization that they could produce no new ornaments. Are we alone, the people of the nineteenth century, supposed to be unable to do what any Negro, all the races and periods before us have been able to do? What mankind created without ornament in earlier millenia was thrown away without a thought and abandoned to destruction. We possess no joiner's benches from the Carolingian era, but every trifle that displays the least ornament has been collected and cleaned and palatial buildings have been erected to house it. Then people walked sadly about between the glass cases and felt ashamed of their impotence. Every age had its style, is our age alone to be refused a style? By style, people meant ornament. Then I said: Weep not! See, therein lies the greatness of our age, that it is incapable of producing a new ornament. We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the holy city, the capital of heaven. Then fulfilment will be come.

There were black albs, clerical gentlemen, who wouldn't put up with that. Mankind was to go on panting in slavery to ornament. Men had gone far enough for ornament no longer to arouse feelings of pleasure in them, far enough for a tattooed face not to heighten the aesthetic effect, as among the Papuans, but to reduce it. Far enough to take pleasure in a plain cigarette case, whereas an ornamented one, even at the same price, was not bought. They were happy in their clothes and glad they didn't have to go around in red velvet hose with gold braid like fairground monkeys. And I said: See, Goethe's death-chamber is finer than all Renaissance splendour and a plain piece of furniture more beautiful than any inlaid and carved museum pieces. Goethe's language is finer than all the ornaments of Pegnitz's shepherds.

The black albs heard this with displeasure, and the state, whose task it is to halt the cultural development of the peoples, made the question of the development and revival of ornament its own. Woe to the state whose revolutions are in the care of the *Hofrats!* Very soon we saw in the Wiener Kunstgewerbemuseum [Vienna Museum of Applied Art] a sideboard known as 'the rich haul of fish', soon there were cupboards bearing the name 'the enchanted princess' or something similar referring to the ornament with which this unfortunate piece of furniture was covered. The Austrian state took its task so seriously that it is making sure the foot-rags used on the frontiers of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy do not disappear. It is forcing every cultivated man of 20 for three years to wear foot-rags instead of manufactured footwear. After all, every state starts from the premise that a people on a lower footing is easier to rule.

Very well, the ornament disease is recognized by the state and subsidized

with state funds. But I see in this a retrograde step. I don't accept the objection that ornament heightens a cultivated person's joy in life, don't accept the objection contained in the words: 'But if the ornament is beautiful!' Ornament does not heighten my joy in life or the joy in life of any cultivated person. If I want to eat a piece of gingerbread I choose one that is quite smooth and not a piece representing a heart or a baby or a rider, which is covered all over with ornaments. The man of the fifteenth century won't understand me. But all modern people will. The advocate of ornament believes that my urge for simplicity is in the nature of a mortification. No, respected professor at the school of applied art, I am not mortifying myself! The show dishes of past centuries, which display all kinds of ornaments to make the peacocks, pheasants and lobsters look more tasty, have exactly the opposite effect on me. I am horrified when I go through a cookery exhibition and think that I am meant to eat these stuffed carcasses. I eat roast beef.

The enormous damage and devastation caused in aesthetic development by the revival of ornament would be easily made light of, for no one, not even the power of the state, can halt mankind's evolution. It can only be delayed. We can wait. But it is a crime against the national economy that it should result in a waste of human labour, money, and material. Time cannot make good this damage.

The speed of cultural evolution is reduced by the stragglers. I perhaps am living in 1908, but my neighbour is living in 1900 and the man across the way in 1880. It is unfortunate for a state when the culture of its inhabitants is spread over such a great period of time. The peasants of Kals are living in the twelfth century. And there were peoples taking part in the Jubilee parade [of the Emperor Franz Joseph] who would have been considered backward even during the migration of the nations. Happy the land that has no such stragglers and marauders. Happy America!

Among ourselves there are unmodern people even in the cities, stragglers from the eighteenth century, who are horrified by a picture with purple shadows because they cannot yet see purple. The pheasant on which the chef has been working all day long tastes better to them and they prefer the cigarette case with Renaissance ornaments to the smooth one. And what is it like in the country? Clothes and household furniture all belong to past centuries. The peasant isn't a Christian, he is still a pagan.

The stragglers slow down the cultural evolution of the nations and of mankind; not only is ornament produced by criminals but also a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget and hence on cultural evolution. If two people live side by side with the same needs, the same demands on life and the same income but belonging to different cultures, economically speaking the following process can be observed: the twentieth-century man will get richer and richer, the eighteenth-century man poorer and poorer. I am assuming that both live according to their inclinations. The twentieth-century man can satisfy his needs with a far lower capital outlay and hence can save money. The vegetable he enjoys is simply boiled in water and has a little butter put on it. The other man likes it equally well only when honey and nuts have been

added to it and someone has spent hours cooking it. Ornamented plates are very expensive, whereas the white crockery from which the modern man likes to eat is cheap. The one accumulates savings, the other debts. It is the same with whole nations. Woe when a people remains behind in cultural evolution! The British are growing wealthier and we poorer . . .

Even greater is the damage done by ornament to the nation that produces it. Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our culture, so that it is a phenomenon either of backwardness or degeneration, the work of the ornamentor is no longer adequately remunerated.

The relationship between the earnings of a woodcarver and a turner, the criminally low wages paid to the embroideress and the lacemaker are well known. The ornamentor has to work twenty hours to achieve the income earned by a modern worker in eight. Ornament generally increases the cost of an article; nevertheless it happens that an ornamented object whose raw material cost the same and which demonstrably took three times as long to make is offered at half the price of a smooth object. Omission of ornament results in a reduction in the manufacturing time and an increase in wages. The Chinese carver works for sixteen hours, the American worker for eight. If I pay as much for a smooth cigarette case as for an ornamented one, the difference in the working time belongs to the worker. And if there were no ornament at all – a situation that may perhaps come about in some thousands of years – man would only have to work four hours instead of eight, because half of the work done today is devoted to ornament. Ornament is wasted labour power and hence wasted health. It has always been so.

Since ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture. The ornament that is manufactured today has no connexion with us, has absolutely no human connexions, no connexion with the world order. It is not capable of developing. What happened to Otto Eckmann's ornament, or van de Velde's? The artist has always stood at the forefront of mankind full of vigour and health. But the modern ornamentalist is a straggler or a pathological phenomenon. He himself will repudiate his own products three years later. To cultivated people they are immediately intolerable; others become aware of their intolerable character only years later. Where are Otto Eckmann's works today? Modern ornament has no parents and no progeny, no past and no future. By uncultivated people, to whom the grandeur of our age is a book with seven seals, it is greeted joyfully and shortly afterwards repudiated.

Mankind is healthier than ever; only a few people are sick. But these few tyrannize over the worker who is so healthy that he cannot invent ornament. They force him to execute in the most varied materials the ornaments which they have invented.

Changes of ornament lead to a premature devaluation of the labour product. The worker's time and the material employed are capital goods that are wasted. I have stated the proposition: the form of an object lasts, that is to say remains tolerable, as long as the object lasts physically. I will try to explain this. A suit will change its form more often than a valuable fur. A lady's ball

gown, intended for only one night, will change its form more quickly than a desk. But woe if a desk has to be changed as quickly as a ball gown because the old form has become intolerable; in that case the money spent on the desk will have been lost.

This is well known to the ornamentalist, and Austrian ornamentalists are trying to make the best of this shortcoming. They say: 'We prefer a consumer who has a set of furniture that becomes intolerable to him after ten years, and who is consequently forced to refurnish every ten years, to one who only buys an object when the old one is worn out. Industry demands this. Millions are employed as a result of the quick change.'

This seems to be the secret of the Austrian national economy. How often do we hear someone say when there is a fire: 'Thank God, now there will be work for people to do again.' In that case I know a splendid solution. Set fire to a town, set fire to the empire, and everyone will be swimming in money and prosperity. Manufacture furniture which after three years can be used for firewood, metal fittings that have to be melted down after four years because even at an auction sale it is impossible to get a tenth of the original value of the material and labour, and we shall grow wealthier and wealthier.

The loss does not hit only the consumer; above all it hits the producer. Today ornament on things that have evolved away from the need to be ornamented represents wasted labour and ruined material. If all objects would last aesthetically as long as they do physically, the consumer could pay a price for them that would enable the worker to earn more money and work shorter hours. For an object I am sure I can use to its full extent I willingly pay four times as much as for one that is inferior in form or material. I happily pay forty kronen for my boots, although in a different shop I could get boots for ten kronen. But in those trades that groan under the tyranny of the ornamentalist no distinction is made between good and bad workmanship. The work suffers because no one is willing to pay its true value.

And this is a good thing, because these ornamented objects are tolerable only when they are of the most miserable quality. I get over a fire much more easily when I hear that only worthless trash has been burned. I can be pleased about the trash in the Künstlerhaus because I know that it will be manufactured in a few days and taken to pieces in one. But throwing gold coins instead of stones, lighting a cigarette with a banknote, pulverizing and drinking a pearl create an unaesthetic effect.

Ornamented things first create a truly unaesthetic effect when they have been executed in the best material and with the greatest care and have taken long hours of labour. I cannot exonerate myself from having initially demanded quality work, but naturally not for that kind of thing.

The modern man who holds ornament sacred as a sign of the artistic superabundance of past ages will immediately recognize the tortured, strained, and morbid quality of modern ornaments. No ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level.

It is different with the individuals and peoples who have not yet reached this level.

I am preaching to the aristocrat, I mean the person who stands at the pinnacle of mankind and yet has the deepest understanding for the distress and want of those below. He well understands the Kaffir who weaves ornaments into his fabric according to a particular rhythm that only comes into view when it is unravelled, the Persian who weaves his carpet, the Slovak peasant woman who embroiders her lace, the old lady who crochets wonderful things with glass beads and silk. The aristocrat lets them be; he knows that the hours in which they work are their holy hours. The revolutionary would go to them and say: 'It's all nonsense.' Just as he would pull down the little old woman from the wayside crucifix and tell her: 'There is no God.' The atheist among the aristocrats, on the other hand, raises his hat when he passes a church.

My shoes are covered all over with ornaments consisting of scallops and holes. Work done by the shoemaker for which he was never paid. I go to the shoemaker and say: 'You ask thirty kronen for a pair of shoes. I will pay you forty kronen.' I have thereby raised this man to heights of bliss for which he will thank me by work and material infinitely better than would be called for by the additional price. He is happy. Happiness rarely enters his house. Here is a man who understands him, who values his work and does not doubt his honesty. He already sees the finished shoes in his mind's eye. He knows where the best leather is to be found at the present time; he knows which craftsman he will entrust the shoes to; and the shoes will be so covered in scallops and holes as only an elegant shoe can be. And then I say to him: 'But there's one condition. The shoes must be completely smooth.' With this I have cast him down from the heights of bliss to the pit of despondency. He has less work, but I have taken away all his joy.

I am preaching to the aristocrat. I tolerate ornaments on my own body, when they constitute the joy of my fellow men. Then they are my joy too. I can tolerate the ornaments of the Kaffir, the Persian, the Slovak peasant woman, my shoemaker's ornaments, for they all have no other way of attaining the high points of their existence. We have art, which has taken the place of ornament. After the toils and troubles of the day we go to Beethoven or to Tristan. This my shoemaker cannot do. I mustn't deprive him of his joy, since I have nothing else to put in its place. But anyone who goes to the *Ninth Symphony* and then sits down and designs a wallpaper pattern is either a confidence trickster or a degenerate. Absence of ornament has brought the other arts to unsuspected heights. Beethoven's symphonies would never have been written by a man who had to walk about in silk, satin, and lace. Anyone who goes around in a velvet coat today is not an artist but a buffoon or a house painter. We have grown finer, more subtle. The nomadic herdsmen had to distinguish themselves by various colours; modern man uses his clothes as a mask. So immensely strong is his individuality that it can no longer be expressed in articles of clothing. Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier or alien cultures as he sees fit. He concentrates his own inventiveness on other things.