

Riegl, Alois. Problem of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament. Trans. Evelyn Kain.

Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1992.

Alois Riegl argues in his book *Problem of Style*, translated by Evelyn Kain that design patterns, including the Assyrian Guilloche, Ancient Egyptian spiral and zigzag, borders, and the heraldic style; and specifically the vegetal motif, were passed down through history in an identifiable succession and clear evolutionary pattern that relied heavily on preceding cultures and artisans. The author dedicates the majority of the book to the vegetal motif, which includes the Ancient Egyptian lotus, the Phoenician palmette and Mesopotamian sacred tree motif, as well as the tendrils as continuous and intermittent, and eventually as fillers of open space. The book covers 3,000 years of ornament motifs and “epoch-making” achievements. Riegl starts with the exploration of where ornamental design originated as far back as the caves of Dordogne, and exploring possible artist’s inspiration, giving academic reflection to the idea that motifs were influenced by the patterns of weaving and wickerwork. From the beginning the author shows evidence that disputes the autochthonous ornamentation argument. He described this as art equaling technique and by the end of the book convincingly demonstrated changes and iteration of original designs that evolved from previous cultures and not indigenous plants or nature. The author notes that the Ancient Egyptians clearly copied the lotus plant, but immediately created a symbolic image, never intending a realistic interpretation, while the Phoenicians who created imitations of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian art for trade, recreated the ornaments but purely for commercial intent as decorations. During this period, the Phoenicians recreated previously representational ornaments and used these images simply as decorative ornamentation.

Riegl’s book is dense, compact with details and comprehensive, compelling arguments illustrating the lineage of ornamentation and the history of design. The author did a nice job of presenting counter points and citing past research that supported or argued his point; while never leaving any rhetorical loose ends. He admitted his limitations in specific arguments and meticulously argued the areas of his specialty. After reading *Problem of Style*, I have a clear picture of the evolution of ornamentation and less inclined to follow my intuition that some decorations were random and purely an artist’s imaginative creation. It forces me to analyze my own work and realize how constrained and limited I am by my culture, society and historical influences. This is sobering as an artist.