

Trilling, James, from the epilogue of *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2003, pp. 228-231.

From the book's epilogue, a discussion of *Adam's Boat*

A quilt called *Adam's Boat* (plate 10), made in 1994-95 by the Canadian artist Barbara Todd, combines the new acceptance of ornament with the emotional range of classic modernism. It is a real quilt that one could use; the color blue is deeply restful, and the spiral ornament is hypnotic without being threatening. Todd's vision, however, is darker in every sense of the word. With the intrusion of the black, looming shape that she calls a boat, the quilt becomes a complex and disturbing meditation on the meaning of sleep. In the context, any large black shape would have nightmarish connotations: a cloud passing over one's dreams, the shadow that death casts over sleep. But Todd goes far beyond this simple contrast. The outline of the "boat" is copied from the coverlet depicted in a twelfth-century carving of the "Dream of the Three Wisemen" at Autun Cathedral. In other words, what seems most disturbing in the quilt is itself a quilt, a shelter for sleep. In St. Matthew's Gospel, the wise men's dream is a message from God, warning them not to report back to Herod that they have seen the infant Jesus. Since this is how Jesus was saved from Herod, who planned to kill him, the disturbing shape becomes an even more explicit token of protection. Its relevance is poignantly clear when we learn that Adam is the name of the artist's son, a small child when the quilt was made. We know from the title that the dark shape is a boat. The association of sleep and sailing invokes Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "My Bed is a Boat," in *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). The last stanza reads:

All night across the dark we steer;
But when the day returns at last,
Safe in my room, beside the pier,
I find my vessel fast.

Thanks to this connection, the "quilt within a quilt" is no longer just a shelter for the sleeper, but something more dynamic, a conveyance across the sea of sleep. By allusively layering the dark form of the boat with Stevenson's poem, and with biblical images of protection, the artist seems to be promising her child that if he can embrace the darkness and mystery of sleep, with all its intimations of mortality, he will be embarking on a momentous yet safe adventure.

This is a deeply personal message, but its significance is universal. Since Adam was also the first human, the boat and its symbolism are for all of us. *Adam's Boat* is neither more nor less than an image of the unknown, our fear of it, and the peace to be won by coming to terms with both. Whether we approach it in ignorance, or armed with the artist's verbal clues, the dark shape of the boat challenges and daunts us, covering the tranquil sea with a shadow too vast to ignore. It may be our only refuge from the unknown, but at the same time it *is* the unknown. To board the boat and set sail requires no small investment of courage, trust, or both.

In purely formal terms, *Adam's Boat* overturns the modernist hierarchy of art and craft. As a functional object that is also decorative, it is a work of craft. As an exploration of the human condition it is a work of art. As a work of nonfigural art, in which a highly personal iconography conveys a universal message, it is proudly modernist. Yet ornament and craft have the last word. Instead of stopping at the edge of the boat, the spirals continue without a break, asserting the claims of pattern and everything pattern connotes: pleasure, control, the intimacy of an object

of daily use, continuity with the past, the certainties of craft to balance the uncertainties of art.

No new ornamental forms are needed for this synthesis; no new structures or techniques for the ornament to relate to; only the will to revive what was long assumed to be defunct. After a century in which art and craft, ornament and modernism, subjectivity and convention were declared irreconcilable, can the restoration of ornament be such a simple matter? If what we mean by the restoration of ornament is an updated version of the time-honored, intuitive synthesis of fine and applied art (however we define these categories), the answer appears to be yes, on one all-important condition: the restoration cannot take place within the conceptual framework of modernism. Todd has stepped outside that framework. Her debt to modernism is great, and she acknowledges it with boldness and humility, but one crucial ingredient is missing: the aesthetic of process. Although the shape of the "boat" has the spontaneity of a Matisse cut-out, the balance between it and the regularity of the spiral ornament is anything but spontaneous. By *choosing* a modernist idiom for its role in her larger plan, Todd approaches modernism historical, as one stylistic mode among many. This daring venture into historical eclecticism defines her outlook as postmodern.

The resulting fusion of seemingly incompatible styles is graceful, personal, and controlled; respectful of both the recent and the distant past, eclectic without irony or greed. It is everything that postmodernist art could have been, and may yet become. If ornament is reborn in this spirit, it will matter very little which style or styles we adopt. The modernist interregnum will have achieved its true goal: an exit from the old locked room of the ornament question.