

A Footnote on the Salad Dressing

by Colin Cabot

The decorative scheme of the theatre is conceived as a whimsical tribute to the orderly achievements of the ancient Greek architects, Ictinus and Callicrates, the stability and poise of the Renaissance master of scale and proportion, Palladio, and the exuberant delight in curvaceous extravagance of the baroque masters Bernini and Boromini.

The Ceiling is painted in the style of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770), who is recognized as the master of refined, baroque illusionistic ceiling decoration. His ceilings "do not reveal avalanches of figures propelled by dramatic bursts of light, like those of Roman ceilings, but blue sky and sunlit clouds, and an occasional winged creature soaring in this limitless expanse. Only along the edges are there solid clusters of figures." (Janson, History of Art, third edition 1986)

The Putti flying around the ceiling (also called cupids or amoretti if they happen to be carrying bows and arrows) are doing their traditional artistic job: providing balance in the composition by taking up space where needed to help focus the viewer's eye on the more important images in the painting, and helping to set the scene. In our painting the putti are childish stagehands of a sort -- not meant by any means to imply that all stage hands are infantile -- a way to give credit in a diminutive way to some of the people who had a hand in developing the decorative scheme. The putti's hairlines and styles of eyeglasses are the key to identifying these pint-sized manipulators of the ceiling composition.

David Birn, the designer of the decorative scheme, is trying, to unfold an architectural plan which he has had some difficulty in deciphering. Chas Rader-Shieber, the Skylight's Artistic Director, is clutching two roses and an arrow which he has borrowed from Erato's box facade to use in one of his operas.

Colin Cabot, Co-Chair of the building campaign and project supervisor, is anxiously stretching a tape measure to see whether or not the chandelier is the same size as the one he paid for. David Zinn, David Birn's associate and the artist who drew the sketch for the ceiling, has given himself the place of most visibility: he is closest to the audience and floats below the balustrade which rings the ceiling. He, holds a collection of paint brushes along with one of Cupid's' arrows in his left hand and is recognizable by the tattoo on his right shoulder. Dick Wright, the project manager, is clutching his pencil as the cost of the project sends him somersaulting into the stratosphere. Paul Horpedahl, the Skylight's Production Manager, realizing that Melpomene has stolen one of the proscenium box curtains to cover her shame, has retrieved one of its gold tassels and is returning it to its rightful place. Tom Acker, the Skylight's Technical Director, is waving his crescent wrench exultantly in the air upon learning that the ceiling figures have assumed a life of their own and need no further help from the technical crew.

The figures around the ceiling are leaning over a Balustrade that Palladio could have designed but is actually a copy of the one that circles the terrace on the ground floor of Milwaukee's University Club, lending tone to the proceedings. The Cornice immediately beneath the ceiling is taken from Tiepolo's ceiling fresco for the Kaisersaal in the Episcopal Palace at Wurzburg (1751). Interestingly, the same ornament adorns the light lock in the Schlossgarten Rokoko-Theater at Schwetzingen (1752). (Mozart performed at Schwetzingen when he was 14 years old.)

The garlands of oakleaves that outlines the edges of the Pendentive Arches and Groin Vaults that connect the ceiling to the columns of the proscenium boxes are a traditional symbol of honor. The scenic artists who spent days painting them above their heads call them, without the slightest affection, "asparagus with ribbons." It is interesting to note that the pendentive arches, like the inside of an orange peel, curve in three dimensions at the same time. Nothing else in the entire building is this complicated, and a good thing too. The painters were able to paint everything else on canvas on the floor and have it applied like wallpaper to a primed surface. There was very little ecstasy resulting from the agony of prolonged painting directly overhead. on the pendentives, although we accord them great honor for depicting a traditional symbol of honor in so difficult a manner.

The Third Ring has an upper cornice made up of Acanthus leaves and darts in an ovolo molding, and dentils in an arrangement with the unlikely name of Lesbian cymation. In simple English, this means that the top of the ring bulges out and curves in both vertically and horizontally at the same time. Acanthus is a plant with thick, fleshy, scalloped leaves that has been used to decorate buildings since the Egyptians built the pyramids. The consequence of all this activity is that it looks distinctly "old-fashioned." We found that "old-fashioned" turns out to be much more pleasing to the eye than anything anybody was able to invent for the express purpose of decorating the theatre.

Incidentally, a lot of time and effort was put into developing ornaments that might have interesting content and be appropriate for our purposes; but funky ornaments simply don't look right. The eye is used to and consequently pleased by the classic shapes because the viewer recognizes their place in the canon of semeiotics even if he or she doesn't know what they stand for. They simply work the best.

In the middle band of the third ring there are scallop shells flanked by fishes. Scallop shells traditionally represent travel and sex -- remember Botticelli's famous painting of Venus on the half shell -- or a pilgrimage to rebirth, not an inappropriate goal for anybody attending a live performance in a theatre.

Fishes are symbolic of the waters of life where anything can happen. Two fishes together are temporal and spiritual power. Taken together the scallop shells and fishes invite audience members to shed their inhibitions, immerse themselves in the flow of the performance, and come to the theatre on Friday nights.

Between the marine life sheaves of barley can be discerned sprouting from linked Cs (originally intended to flank a lighting fixture that didn't work.) Traditionally grain symbolizes potentiality. The presence of this symbol in the theatre recognizes the possibility that the theatre can change people's lives.

(The real reason the grain ended up as part of the decorative scheme is that Colin Cabot would like the staff at the bar to keep a supply of Scotch whiskey on hand at all times. And the real reason for scallop shell and fish grouping is that the Cabot family crest is a scallop shell over a shield which shows three fishes swimming upwards. The Cabots originally were fisher-folk on the Isle of Jersey and have never been able to shake the urge to return to the primordial ooze.)

The bottom band of the third ring consists of a garland of laurel leaves bound with ribbons, often used to give rhythm and vitality to a Toros, or convex, molding at the base of a column. Laurel traditionally symbolizes triumph, which is appropriate considering the allegory for the decorative scheme is called The Triumph of Art.

The Second Ring is capped by a blue velvet railing which invites the audience to lean out over the edge of the facade, breaking through the implied cylinder defined by the three balcony facades which holds up the ceiling. In many opera houses officious ushers sternly admonish patrons to refrain from perching their purses or even their programs on the velvet railings lest they inadvertently tumble onto the groundlings below. Time and insurance rates will tell what happens in our new theatre. Immediately below the railing is an ovolo, or quarter-round molding decorated with a pattern based on alternate eggs and arrow-heads. This most basic of ornaments is found around the walls and columns inside the boxes as well as on the facades.

As long as we're talking about the boxes, you show know that the Columns are vaguely Doric and that the marble they are made of cannot be found in any quarry in the world, it is entirely the figment of the scenic artists' minds. Notice also that the box facades become more dimensional as you get closer to the stage.

The center band of the second ring is divided into nine panels, one for each of the nine muses. The shape of the attribute panels has no significance in and of itself, but merely separates them from the oval keystone brackets engarlanded with laurel which are vaguely reminiscent of the round ornaments which decorate the outside of the theatre above the windows of the salon. These ornaments, known either as "ear-rings" or "knockers" depending on the company, being addressed, were in turn inspired by an ornament in an eighteenth century opera house in Triene, Italy that was itself an abstraction of a swag or festoon holder (in plain English: a curtain tie-back.)

Not only are the contents of the attribute panels anachronistic, but the way in which they are designed is too. The banners which name the disciplines of the Muses, like the ones that bear the names of the Muses themselves on the ceiling, are more nineteenth century Romantic than baroque -- although it must be noted that the 'Pre-Raphaelites who made such banners commonplace a hundred years ago had resurrected them from their emulation of medieval art.

Similarly the keystone scrolls at the top of the brackets around the light fixtures are purely Renaissance shields and would not have been used by any forward looking decorative artist.

The light fixtures themselves are a real hodge-podge of references; the leaves are a modern version of the Acanthus plant and are attached to Georgian balls that would have looked appropriate in your grandmother's dining-room had they been made of shiny brass.

The bottom band of the second ring is a traditional enrichment of a torus, or half-round, molding and features a flame and ribbon motif in the same family as the oak and laurel motifs of the other levels. ,

The Third Ring begins like the one above it with a velvet rail cushioned on a bed of eggs and darts. Notice, though, that the keystones in the brackets around the light fixture are flanked not by Renaissance scroll work but rather by flower pots out of which grow traditional floral curlicues. On close examination the vegetation can be identified as a particularly rare variety of Succulent

Hummel Hybrid in honor of Clair Richardson who used to grow these plants in the greenhouses atop the old Skylight Theatre on Jefferson Street. The plants don't grow together, however, and are kept apart by an abstraction of a clothespin, purloined from the costume shop in an effort to keep the vegetable world from taking over.

The bottom band of the first ring is a floral rosette embedded in a bead, a not-so-traditional enrichment of a torus molding, but one which reflects Clair Richardson's not-so-traditional spirit'.

The Proscenium Arch is surrounded by a compendium of the ornament taken from the three rings: bands of egg and dart, laurel garlands, and rosettes in beads. In this way all the elements of the house are reintroduced and reinforced at the place which is most important for the viewer, the frame of the action on stage.

The grand drape features a gold fringe painted across the bottom of a plain blue curtain. Above the arch, however, a riot of reference asserts itself as a sort of crown for the proceedings. Immediately over the opening is a perfectly symmetrical neoclassical valance, complete with gold tassels equally spaced and carefully sewn jabots and pleats. But this level is overwhelmed by another level of curtain in the form of a vast, baroque asymmetrical swag that has apparently been hastily yanked out of the way but still shows part of its silk moire lining. Sometimes, when you come to the theatre you may see the hard edge of the top of the proscenium opening. At other times the curtains may cover it, softening the line of the opening. The entire valance assembly is rigged on a winch that can raise or lower the curtain so that the designer of a show can change the look of the proscenium depending on the demands of the show.

The Colors used in the theatre would never have been chosen before the invention of electric light. The important thing is that the room should disappear when the lights go out. This meant that gilt and cream colors which had worked so beautifully in candle light had to be minimized. But it was equally important that the patrons be able to read their programs and feel that the room was inviting before the show began. So warm, wood colors built up from a base of yellow ochre was chosen to compliment the blue of the curtains, seats and walls. The choice of blue was a felicitous occurrence. The Tiel Theatre in Prague (where Mozart conducted the premiere of Don Giovanni) is blue. Blue is very much a color of the eighteenth century. And Milwaukee didn't have until now a theatre that wasn't red or creamy white.

All of the painted ornament is representational; it is supposed to give the illusion of dimension. The technical term for it is Trompe l'Oeil, French for "fool the eye". If it is successful it gives pleasure to the viewer twice. First it is seen as what it purports to represent: beautiful classical three dimensional plaster molding, or wrought iron, or carving. Second, once the viewer understands that it isn't real, it gives pleasure in the form of an appreciation of the cleverness and expertise with which it is executed. Once the trick is perceived, the beauty of the ornament and the craft of the trick can be shared by the viewer as a conceit not unrelated to one of the essential ingredients for success in communicating in the theatre: the willing suspension of disbelief. If you squint as the house lights are dimming you can transport yourself to another time and place, eighteenth century Europe during the age of the enlightenment, in preparation for the rise of the curtain.

Excerpts from Classical Ornament

by Henry Hope Reed, President of Classical America

John Barrington Bayley, in his book, *Letarouilly on Renaissance Rome*, explains that there is a hierarchy in classical decoration...

At the lowest level ornament, or decoration, begins with abstract profiles, the fillet, the bead, the ovolo, the scotia and others so familiar. To grasp what they are [is] best seen in a combined form, the baluster... a Renaissance invention, by the way.

Next...come the profiles enriched with egg-and-dart, the lead-and-dart, the bead-and-reel, pearls, the Vitruvian scroll.

Flora stands at the third level. Anthemion, bayleaf, swags of fruit or flowers, and the rosette. Above all there is the Acanthus, that blessed link with the Mediterranean. So abundant is Acanthus in the classical panorama that [it can be called] the morphological symbol of Western art, the equivalent of the chrysanthemum in Japanese art.

Less abundant, but no less an object of affection are animal forms...fourth on the list...Think of the dolphin, so closely associated with the ancient world, perfect ornament for any city which has risen on the sea.

Yet another category is that of man-made objects...Spears, halberd and even swords can be found on city fences. For interiors a favorite is a cluster of musical instruments.

At the top of the hierarchy is the human form. In no other artistic tradition does the human body have quite the place of honor that it does in Western art...

Of all human forms the most Western...must be the baby. No other artistic tradition offers so many examples of it.

One good reason for turning to the past was that the models were only to be found in art. Pierce Rice, in his discussion of the cherub, observes that the infants "resemble only to a degree actual infants. In particular the baby in art is a flying baby...The depiction of the winged infant required creative rather than transcriptive abilities...The model is in art itself, and the conditions dictated epitomize the essential nature of pictorial invention.