The decorative arts hold a special place in the study of visual culture because they expand considerably our understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, history, technology, and economics.

The Snite Museum’s collection of decorative arts is small but choice, with prime examples of major movements and styles that offer insights into human ingenuity and creativity.
METAL

Metals can be either precious, such as gold or silver, or non-precious, such as copper, iron, lead, or tin. They can be more or less “pure” or alloys in which various metals are combined, such as brass or alpaca silver (copper, zinc, nickel and sometimes iron), to achieve desired characteristics, such as malleability, hardness, or color (fig. 1).

The earliest metal pieces date to about 2500 BCE and were formed by artisans hammering a block or ingot of metal into a sheet and then bending or manipulating that sheet into a shape. Josef Hoffmann’s double-handled brass chalice on display here (fig. 2) is a modern example of this ancient technique. By employing this primitive practice, Hoffmann, one of the founders of the Wiener Werkstätte [Vienna Workshops] in 1903, hearkened back to a mythical golden age uncorrupted by the social ills attributed to industrialization in the early twentieth century.

An alternative to hammering is casting in which molten metal is poured into a mold. Decorative elements can be added to the metal forms by several means. Repoussé literally means “to push back” and refers to hammering from the back to create a design on the surface (fig. 3). Chasing is the opposite of repousse; the design is sunken into the surface from the front with the use of hammers and punches (fig. 4). Incising is used to make linear patterns and decorative motifs on the surface of the metal (figs. 1 & 4).
CERAMICS

In the West, ceramics—clay formed into shapes and fired in a kiln—first appeared about 24,000 years ago. It is unclear how those small figurines of humans and animals found in what is now the Czech Republic were used. It wasn’t until about 9000 BCE that ceramic was used to make vessels for storing grain, water, oil, or wine first by coiling ropes of clay into shape and later with the use of a potter’s wheel.

Ceramics can be divided into three main categories depending on the composition of the clay and the temperature of the kiln during firing. Earthenware is fired at low temperatures so that it remains porous and opaque. Stoneware is made with gray-colored clay that is more dense than earthenware, and it is fired at higher temperatures which changes the color during firing. The clay used for porcelain has a high degree of kaolin, a fine white silicate material, and it is fired at temperatures between 2,200 and 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit. The result is a strong, white, vitrified, translucent surface. Depending on the temperature at firing, porcelain is described as either soft-paste (lower temperature, fig. 5) or hard-paste (higher temperature, fig. 6).

Various techniques for decorating the surface of ceramics developed over the centuries. The earliest examples involve the use of slips—liquid mixtures of potash, iron clay, and vinegar or water—that were painted onto the surface and then fired using a three-stage process. The technique originated in Greece with black-figure vase painting around 700 BCE and evolved into red-figure vase painting around 530 BCE (fig. 7). In black-figure pottery, the motifs were painted onto the clay with a slip. Some details, like muscles and hair, were then scratched into the slip to reveal the clay body beneath. After firing, additional details could be painted on with red or white paint. In red-figure pottery, the slip was applied to what would become the background and the figures remained the color of the clay. Details were painted on with a brush rather than incised with a needle creating a more naturalistic effect. Pâte-sur-pâte (literally, paste-on-paste) is another technique employing slips. Here the designer builds up a design in relief using slips before it is fired and glazed (fig. 8).
Tin-glazed earthenware is glazed with tin oxide making it white and shiny. Additional colors are painted on with other metal oxides, such as cobalt, copper, or iron oxides. In Italy, this technique is called majolica; in France, it is faience; in the Netherlands, Delftware. The tureen on view here (fig. 8) was produced by the Marseilles Manufactory, renowned for its production of tin-glazed earthenware. Claude Perrin (1696–1748) founded the factory in 1740. After his death in 1748, his widow Pierrette Caudelot (1709–1794) directed the business. Under her management, the firm achieved great success with its bright colors and varied depictions of nature. Especially notable are the realistically rendered roses, peonies, tulips, and leaves scattered over the surface of this tureen.

Earthenware or porcelain that has been fired but not glazed maintains a white, matte surface and is called biscuit (fig. 9). In the 1700s it was favored for its resemblance to marble and was sometimes used to make copies of marble busts in a smaller scale for a popular market.

**NATURAL MATERIALS**

From the most ancient time, people used ivory, bone, horn, wood, shell, coral, or stone to fashion objects used in rituals, in daily life, and as decorations. They developed special tools to hew and carve them. Craftsmen sometimes used the patterns or grains inherent in these materials to enhance the design. Surfaces can be polished, stained, or painted. Sometimes they developed a rich patina from being handled. Details can be incised with chisels or punches (fig. 11) or drilled.

Vessels, such as the cup on display (fig. 12), were hollowed out by grinding them with other more coarse stones or files.
Glass may have been manufactured as early as 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Syria was a center of glass production in the ancient world, and it was there that the blowpipe was invented in the 1st century BCE (fig. 13). Prior to that, small glass vessels and jewelry were made by carving the form from a solid block or using a mud core that was dipped into molten glass until the walls had reached the desired thickness. With the invention of the blowpipe, however, glass could be fashioned into larger vessels and it could be made more quickly, easily, and economically. It could also be blown directly into a metal or wooden mold that had a design carved into it, resulting in elaborate decorations.

At its most basic, glass is made from melted silica (sand). Because silica must be heated to an extremely high temperature before it will melt (3,600 degrees Fahrenheit), sodium carbonate (soda ash) is added to it to decrease the melting point (2,192 degrees Fahrenheit). Lime, magnesium oxide, and aluminum oxide are added to make the glass less water soluble and to provide it with more chemical structure.

Color in glass can be achieved by adding various minerals to the compound. Cobalt, for example, will produce a blue glass; sulfur with carbon and iron salts produce an amber glass. The surface of glass can be painted as well (fig. 14). Chemical treatments to the glass fuse the color to its structure, rather than sitting on its surface, and create a rich, iridescent effect. On view in the adjacent gallery are examples of Tiffany’s favrile process patented in 1894. Using chloride sprays, Frederick Carder working for Steuben Glass Works developed a similar finish, called aurene, in 1904 (fig. 15).

Historically, glass vessels were functional: vases; containers; dishes; teapots, cups and saucers, etc. They were relatively small, intimate things made for a tactile experience. American artist Dale Chihuly produced glass objects on such a large and elaborate scale that they became sculptures in their own right (fig. 16). In some of his most ambitious projects, installations of colored glass in different shapes and sizes created fantastical environments—gardens, bridges over expressways, expansive rooms—that visitors experienced by walking through them. With his glass creations, Chihuly erased the line between craft and fine art.

**FIGURE 13.**
Vase, 3rd century CE, Syrian, glass, 9.5 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Goodman, 1964.004.016

**FIGURE 14.** (above left)
Vase, ca. 1915–20, Glasfachschule Haida & Johann Oertel & Co. (Haida, Czech Republic), clear and frosted glass, cased with gold-amber glass and hand-painted floral motifs in blue, black, and green enamels, 8.56 x 2.93 inches. Acquired with funds provided by the William L. and Erma M. Travis Endowment for the Decorative Arts and Mr. Joseph Skelton ’71, 2001.027

**FIGURE 15.** (above right)
Calla Lily Vase, 1904–33, Steuben Factory (Corning, New York), glass with aurene surface, 11.88 x 7 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Beckman, 1982.080.005

**FIGURE 16.**
Persian Set, 1988, Dale Chihuly (American, b. 1941) blown glass, 10 x 8.5 x 15 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William C. Ballard Jr., 1995.058.a-d
PART II: Revolutions in Taste and Style: 300 Years of Decorative Arts
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CERAMICS: ART FOR THE COURTS

GERMANY/AUSTRIA

Earthenware had long been produced in Europe, but porcelain from Asia became one of the most highly coveted imports in the eighteenth century. Aristocrats valued it for its hard white surface, brilliant enamel colors, and fine details. Regarded as “white gold” and occasionally exchanged as diplomatic gifts between heads of state, it was collected and displayed in elaborate galleries, rooms, or entire buildings constructed especially for the purpose as a demonstration of good taste and wealth.

Credit for developing the recipe for hard-paste porcelain in the manner of the Chinese (the Chinese weren’t about to share it with Europeans) goes to Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and Johann Friedrich Böttger working for King Augustus II. The king set up a manufactory in Meissen, just outside of Dresden, in 1710, which became the envy of European courts. Some decorative motifs were western, such as the character Columbine from the Commedia dell’Arte, but designers also borrowed eastern subjects like the fantastical dragons on the Boar’s Head Tureen on display. Claude Innocentius du Paquier founded the second European manufactory of hard-paste porcelain in Vienna in 1719, “recruiting” decorators, designers, and kiln operators from his German competitor. One of his contributions to porcelain decoration was schwarzlot, a design executed exclusively in black paint (fig. 1).

GREAT BRITAIN

The Chelsea Manufactory was the first soft-paste porcelain maker in Britain, founded between 1743 and 1745, and it imitated the wares coming out of Meissen and Sèvres. Although not especially inventive in terms of its forms, the Chelsea Manufactory distinguished itself with its stunning painted scenes, much in evidence in the perfume bottle and the covered soup bowls, which depict twelve different scenes on the plates, bowls, and lids (fig. 2).

The Bow Manufactory operated between 1744 and 1776 and was well known for its soft-paste porcelain figurines although it produced many other types of tableware, too. Thomas Frye, an Irish artist who helped establish the business, left his mark on the field by adding fired bones to his soft-paste porcelain formula.
FRANCE

The best-known producer of porcelain in eighteenth-century France was located at Sèvres, near the palace of Versailles. Having been founded in 1740 at Vincennes, a royal hunting village just east of Paris, the operations were moved in 1756 to be closer to the French court, its primary customer base. The objective of the original enterprise was to produce high-quality porcelain using raw materials exclusively found in France so as to avoid the expense of having to import these luxury goods from Saxony, where the Meissen Manufactory was located. Because of budget issues at court, the French porcelain industry was born out of economic necessity and national pride.

The Mennecy Porcelain Manufactory was established by François Barbin (1691–1765) first on the grounds of the Duke of Villeroy’s château and then moved in 1750 to the nearby town of Mennecy about twenty miles southeast of Paris. Barbin had been producing both faience and porcelain in the faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris before then but was sued by the Vincennes Porcelain Manufactory for infringement of their monopoly in 1748. To avoid prosecution, Barbin moved the manufactory out of the city and under the protection of the Duke of Villeroy. After Barbin’s death in 1765, the lease for the manufactory was purchased by partners at the Sceaux Manufactory and moved to Bourg-la-Reine, a suburb of Paris about 5.7 miles from the city center.

The colliding wave form invented by Jean-Claude Duplessis (1699–1774) for the Vincennes factory came to epitomize the rococo style. It found its way into the Mennecy repertoire (fig. 3). Similar wave-like motifs and color palettes decorate the soup tureen from Sceaux, which was characteristic of the Louis XV style.

The highest reward for a person’s toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it.
– John Ruskin

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: TOWARD A “NEW ART” FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

Industrialization, enlightenment ideals, and widespread political revolutions sporadically erupting across Europe (see the nineteenth century gallery on the second level) fostered nascent democracies and gradually increased standards of living for broader segments of society. Designers responded to an expanding market for domestic wares. They sought to remedy social ills through art often by invoking what they regarded to be “simpler” times. Augustus Pugin, the designer of the plate and spoon on display here, promoted the Gothic Revival style with its flat, bright colors and space-filling patterns in the belief that medieval Christian society was more humanitarian than the modern world he witnessed around him.

In the 1880s, this nostalgia for medieval communal workshop culture morphed into the Arts & Crafts movement in Britain, seen here in the pilgrim flasks produced by the Della Robbia Manufactory (fig. 4), as an effort to combat the effects of alienated labor.

Adherents to the movement believed that an object’s form should dictate its ornament. Here, the creeping vines with heart-shaped foliage and the scrolling handles emphasize the swelling form of the vessel. Variations in the pattern and coloring of the Snite Museum’s vases attest to their unique handwork. The costs of production, however, proved too high to be a commercial success. The Della Robbia factory closed after only twelve years in business. British designer Christopher Dresser took the opposite view, using new technologies like electroplating, distilling forms to their geometric essence, and rejecting extraneous ornamentation to achieve a bold new style.
Art Nouveau (new art) grew out of the Arts & Crafts movement. The term first appeared in 1884 in the magazine *Arte Moderne* published in Belgium. Proponents of the style, called *Jugendstil* in Germany and Austria, rejected classical western models and academic principles and turned instead to nature and the arts of Japan for inspiration. Japanese shapes made their way into works, such as the planter on view here with its flared legs and archaic drip glaze that decorates the body of the ceramic insert. Motifs drawn from the natural world dominate: spiraling tendrils, ivy, flowers, broad, heart-shaped foliage, and insects of every shape and kind decorate bowls, tureens, and vases (fig. 5). The motifs became ever more abstracted resulting in Henry van de Velde’s whiplash design or Maurice Dufrène’s covered sugar bowl and creamer.

In the United States, Louis Sullivan, his protégé Frank Lloyd Wright, and Louis Comfort Tiffany expanded on Art Nouveau and the Arts & Crafts movement. Although Sullivan is credited with introducing the idea that “form follows function” in 1896, he never intended it to suggest that modern design should be devoid of ornamentation. His baluster designed for the Schlesinger and Mayer Department Store in Chicago (now Carson, Pirie, Scott) is replete with acanthus leaves, thistles, and stylized flowers. The silver bowl by the Unger Bros. of Newark, NJ, sports a repoussé band of nymphs emerging from water lilies, each one slightly different from the next. Frank Lloyd Wright’s cabinet window from the K. C. DeRhodes House on West Washington Street in South Bend is a good example of his Prairie School style, a type of geometric Art Nouveau.

In Austria, the “new art” emerged in the Secessionist movement, which is defined less by an identifiable style than it is by its proponents’ anti-academic attitude toward art making. Their motto was “To every age its art. To every art its freedom.” Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich were two of the founding members of the group in 1897. The elaborate foliate motifs common in Art Nouveau and Jugendstil gradually evolved into simple, abstract geometric forms. The British designer Léon Victor Solon, who emigrated to the United States in 1909, is best known for his ceramic ware that had more in common with the Secessionist artists than with his native arts and crafts tradition.

What all of these turn-of-the-century movements had in common was a desire to spread better living through beautiful design to more people and an outright rejection of traditional academic rules that dictated how to achieve that goal. New materials, new technologies, and new methods required new models and new forms.
TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODERN DESIGN

In the early decades of the twentieth century, some designers abandoned the flowing, organic lines and shapes of Art Nouveau and Jugendstil and turned toward strict geometry (fig. 6). These artists, including Josef Hoffmann and Otto Prutscher, joined together to form the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops). They embraced industrial materials and processes, such as electroplating.

After World War I in France, Art Deco emerged as an effort to rebuild the French economy based in part on the export of luxury goods and to re-establish the country as a global leader in art and design. The style got its name from the international decorative arts exhibition held in Paris in 1925 and is characterized by its sleek geometry, stylized forms, bright colors, and expensive materials, such as the silver and burled walnut of Marcel Wolfers’ chalice (fig. 7).

Examples of the Walter Gropius’s innovative and influential Bauhaus, a school that rejected academic principles and blended design, art, and architecture in the years following World War I, are on view in the Walter Beardsley Gallery on the second level.

FURTHER READING