

Decorum. An Ancient Idea for Everyday Aesthetics?

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Everyday Aesthetics was born in the 21st Century as a sub-discipline of Anglo-American Aesthetics and it has spread in the international debate. However, the contribute of historical perspective has not properly explored yet. Is it possible to trace the history of everyday aesthetics before the official birth of this discipline? I will try and give an affirmative answer by focusing on an exemplary category: that of the *decorum*. Using the history of ideas, I will analyse the Greek concept of *prepon* and the similar Latin concepts of *decorum* which express the idea of ‘convenience’ or ‘fitness to purpose’ in the ethical and rhetorical sphere. Later I will analyse the evolution of the concept of *decorum* in the theory of Ancient and Renaissance architecture (Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti). My goal is to demonstrate that in Ancient and Renaissance culture *decorum* is a category that refers to the objects and practices of everyday life but also a principle that regulates appropriate behaviour in the sphere of good manners. Consequently, given its pervasiveness in the different areas of everyday life, the concept of *decorum* can be a paradigmatic example to trace the history of everyday aesthetics. | Keywords: *Decorum*, *Everyday Aesthetics*, *Prepon*, *Good Manners*, *History of Ideas*

1. Introduction

Originated at the start of the new Millennium as a sub-discipline of Anglo-American aesthetics focusing on art, Everyday Aesthetics has distinguished itself for its shift towards practices and objects of everyday life. Several fields and varied aesthetic categories have been included in its inquiries, nevertheless one line of investigation has received little attention until now, that is to say, the historical realm. This essay aims to go back to the early origins of Western culture in the attempt to trace the steps of the history of everyday aesthetics before its official birth. To this aim I will rely on the methodology of the history of ideas in the footsteps of the Polish philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1980). His method turns out to be particularly fitting for my inquiry seeing as Tatarkiewicz developed the history of aesthetics including all ideas affecting aesthetic issues, even when presented under different names, and belonging to other disciplines not only philosophical.

Tatarkiewicz's historiographical approach allows us to find a way out of the traditional impasse inherited from the early historians of aesthetics, Robert Zimmerman (1858) and Benedetto Croce (1902). They firmly held onto a general framework excluding all contributions not produced by philosophers, and inevitably got bogged down while attempting to legitimize a history of aesthetics also predating the eighteenth-century foundation of the discipline. By separating the history of words from that of concepts, Tatarkiewicz claimed that aesthetic thinking began in Europe more than two-thousand years before a name was found for it and an autonomous field of research was established.

Considering that everyday practices and objects had rarely attracted philosophical interest before, usually being seen as too trivial, this method, that targets on implicit aesthetics, proves to be suitable above all for everyday aesthetics. The reason for this is that it aims at including a variety of concepts touching upon the field of aesthetics by relying not only on philosophical texts but also on artistic and literary contributions, technical textbooks and private documents.

Needless to say, a full outline of the history of everyday aesthetics is an ambitious goal far beyond the limits of this essay. I will therefore limit myself by outlining the origins of one single aesthetic idea, that of *decorum*. This notion has an exemplary value, inasmuch as it cuts across several cultural realms. While changing its names in the course of different periods, it preserves a consistent meaning: 'aptness', 'convenience', 'fitness to purpose'.

Tatarkiewicz includes this notion among the varieties of beauty and focuses on its terminological transformations:

From ancient times regarded as a variety of beauty has been aptness, specifically the aptness of things to the task the things were meant to fulfil, to the purpose that they served. The Greeks called this quality *πρέπον*; the Romans translated the expression as *decorum*. [...] Later, in Latin, the name *aptum* was used more frequently, but in the Renaissance *decorum* returned. Frenchmen of the 'Great [17th] Century' most often called this property *bienséance*, Poles of the age spoke of *przystojność*. Today one speaks rather of suitability, appropriateness, purposefulness and functionalism as a quality of certain arts and the cause of the pleasure that we find in them. The terminology has varied, but the concept itself has persisted." (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 159)

Among the above listed terminological variations, *decorum* is in my opinion the most interesting, inasmuch as it qualifies as a norm regulating the beauty of both behaviour and architecture, two realms in which the Italian language still uses the same Latin-derived word *decoro*.

The notion of *decorum* was first conceptualized by Cicero as a norm of rhetoric and as a principle of everyday life (*Orat.* 21, 70): "In an oration, as in life, nothing is harder than to determine what is appropriate. The Greeks call it *πρέπον*; let us call it *decorum* or 'propriety'" Cicero, 1952, p. 357).

Starting from Cicero's early definition and in reference to the history of ideas, I will first explore the Greek notion of *πρέπον* from which the Latin concept stems; then I will focus on *decorum* as conveying the idea of 'convenience' and

‘fitness to purpose’ in the rhetorical and ethical sphere. Finally, I will analyse the evolution of *decorum* in the Ancient and Renaissance architectural theory (Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti) and in the field of good manners.

My goal is to demonstrate that *decorum* – and its analogous terms – is a category that not only refers to the objects and practices of everyday life but is also a principle that regulates appropriate behaviour. Consequently, given its pervasiveness in the different areas of everyday life, the concept of *decorum* can be a paradigmatic example to trace the history of everyday aesthetical ideas.

2. The concept of *πρέπον* in Greek culture

As emphasised by Pohlenz (1933, p. 53), the substantivized adjective *to prepon* has many meanings. In archaic Greek it designates a shining quality, a conspicuousness which, like the virtues of Homeric heroes, stands out before the eyes of the beholders (Homer, *Iliad*, XII, 104). However, the timelessness of the myth fades away when the term *to prepon* is coupled with the noun *kairos*, ‘occasion’. The temporal determination provides a new meaning to *to prepon* and connects it to what Mario Perniola defines as ‘actual beauty’, that is to say, a type of beauty waiving off its absolute and universal value to adapt to given circumstances (Perniola, 1982, p. 45).

The connection between ‘convenience’ (*prepon*) and ‘occasion’ (*kairos*) is abundantly documented in Greek literature and it is particularly powerful in technical writings about medicine, politics and rhetoric. This bond describes words and actions being effective, since they are placed in a given space-time configuration (i.e. the decisive place, the crucial moment) and therefore they are well adapted to the situation (Trédé, 1992).

In the field of rhetoric, the link between *prepon* and *kairos* was first established by Gorgias and then reinforced by Isocrates, according to whom discourses cannot be beautiful if they are not attuned to the circumstances and befitting the topic (*Soph.* 13). Furthermore, Isocrates was the first to confer an educational and political value to the notion of *prepon* connecting it to the issue of *paideia*, that is to say, the education of youth in relation to which the rhetor is the life mentor.

In the realm of philosophy, Socrates plays a key role in the understanding of the idea of *prepon*. Since he left no autographic writings, his legacy can be evinced from the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, which often feature Socrates in the main role.

In the Platonic dialogue, *Hippias Major* (289d-290e), talking about utensils, Socrates claims that not all materials are well adapted to all shapes, but only to those for which they are ‘appropriate’. For stirring a bean soup, a fig wooden spoon is more appropriate than a golden one because “it makes the soup smell better, and at the same time, [...] it won’t break our pot, spill out the soup, put out the fire, and make us do without a truly noble meal, when we were going to have a banquet” (Plato, 1982, p. 13).

However, while Plato’s Socrates is mainly concerned with metaphysical

questions and the quest for beauty in itself (i.e. the idea of beauty), Xenophon's Socrates launches the notion of functional beauty. This latter, which is to be found again in the Latin concept of *aptus* (appropriateness to purpose), will survive through Medieval theoretical contributions – as testified by Augustine's surviving treatise, *De pulchro et apto* (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 160) – until modern functionalism many centuries later.

Socrates's key role in the elaboration of an aesthetic category pertaining to everyday life is made clear by his many references to domestic environments and objects of daily use. In a passage from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (III, 8, 4), Socrates claims that a golden shield, although beautiful to look at, is not suited to a battle since gold is too fragile to guarantee safety. The careful choice of materials then translates into care for the people who are going to use them and for their needs. This is clearly stated in a later section of the *Memorabilia* (III, 10, 9-13). Talking to the armorer Pistias, who is bragging about his breastplates and how they are well-made because they are well-proportioned, Socrates claims that an armour should not be perfectly well-proportioned, but in relation to the wearer. As a matter of fact, unfitting armours, as they hang from one's shoulders or burden some other part of the body, are oppressing and difficult to wear, while those which are fitting should look like "an accessory rather than an encumbrance" (Xenophon, 1979, pp. 237-239).

Furthermore, the notion of convenience is abundantly discussed by Aristotle in his contributions both to rhetoric and to philosophy. He defines convenience as the right correspondence between the language and the character of the rhetor (*Reth.* III, 7, 1408 a-b) and in the *Poetics* (13, 1454a) he emphasises how each character is supposed to use words and perform actions that are consistent with their character. This line of thought has then been further developed in Theophrastus' *Characters*.

Finally, among the most important Greek theoretical contributions on the notion of *prepon*, one should mention Panetius, a member of the middle Stoa. While breaking with the early Stoa and its idea of the wise life as isolated from the world, Panetius addresses all people, who while dealing with everyday affairs have to make choices and perform actions. According to Panetius, people should use their abilities and gifts to the benefit of society by following the *prepon* which guides everybody to do the right thing at the right time (Cicu, 2000, pp. 136-137).

3. Cicero and *decorum*

The close correspondence between the Greek word *prepon* and the Latin *decorum* is clearly stated by Cicero in the texts *Orator* (21,70) and *De Officiis* (I, 93). Although the two expressions are similar, the notion of *decorum* undergoes some evolution in meaning in the transition between the text on rhetoric written in 46 BC to the one on ethics written two years later.

It would actually be wrong to believe that the notion of *decorum* as presented in the *Orator* is simply a tool of rhetoric. This latter is not only an operational field connected to politics, but also one in which *decorum* is presented as

a guiding principle, whose validity extends beyond the rhetoric to the arts and life in general (Guérin, 2009, p. 125). Nevertheless, an even stronger connection between ethics and aesthetics can be found in the *De Officiis*, inasmuch as *decorum* is introduced as the fourth part of the *honestum* dealing with the appropriateness of discourses and daily actions performed within one's community.

In the rhetorical field, *decorum* is a virtue of style, harmoniously regulating the relations between speaker, message, audience, and register of communication (*Orat.* 21, 71). Latin rhetoric distinguishes three styles, *genus tenue* or plain, *genus medium* and *genus grande* or grand. *Decorum* should see that each genre is matched with the appropriate arguments, styles and audiences.

Despite appearing at first as a normative principle with codified rules, *decorum* is introduced by Cicero when dealing with the difficulties connected to understanding what is appropriate both in discourses and in life in general (*Orat.* 21, 70: “*ut [...] in vita sic in oratione nihil est difficilius quam quid deceat videre*”; “In an oration, as in life, nothing is harder than to determine what is appropriate” Cicero, 1952, p. 357).

It should be added that, in the realm of ethics, grasping the appropriateness of words and actions with respect to circumstances is the result not of rational intelligence but of a form of sensibility which is able to perceive nuances, atmospheres and moods. Jumping ahead to a notion engendered within the *milieu* of Romanticism, one might say, with André Demouliéz (1976, p. 286), that convenience belongs to the realm of taste, provided it is not taste itself. This remark is confirmed by Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 11, 1, 91); while connecting *decorum* to measure and temperance, he states that convenient behaviour cannot be guided by pre-established rules but only by sensitivity. We might refer to it as a certain taste, as suggested by Quintilian's analogy with food, where, rules are of little value. Inspired by the philosopher Panetius, in *De officiis* Cicero emphasises the bond between *decorum* and moral integrity, which is applied to interpersonal relations within the community, in the following terms:

We have next to discuss the one remaining division of moral rectitude. That is the one in which we find considerateness and self-control, which give, as it were, a sort of polish to life; it embraces also temperance, complete subjection of all the passions, and moderation in all things. Under this head is further included what, in Latin, may be called *decorum* (propriety); for in Greek it is called *πρέπον*. Such is its essential nature, that it is inseparable from moral goodness; for what is proper is morally right, and what is morally right is proper. The nature of the difference between morality and propriety can be more easily felt than expressed. (Cicero, *De off.*, I, 27, 93; 1928, pp. 95-97)

Self-control, temperance and moderation make up the essence of *decorum* and provide aesthetic value to everyday life (*quidam ornatus vitae*, ‘a sort of polish to life’), making one's manners gentle and one's behaviour refined, while respecting not only those who belong to the high society but to all citizen.

As it was in Greek culture, also in Latin culture *decorum* is a form of beauty.

This is confirmed by Cicero's analogy between the harmony of the body and the appropriateness of one's conduct. However, whereas physical beauty is visible to the eye, *decorum* is a 'relational' aesthetic category. In other words, it is a behavioural beauty which shines through words and daily actions and sparks approval in the community.

For, as physical beauty with harmonious symmetry of the limbs engages the attention and delights the eye, for the very reason that all the parts combine in harmony and grace, so this propriety, which shines out in our conduct, engages the approbation of our fellow-men by the order, consistency, and self-control it imposes upon every word and deed. We should, therefore, in our dealings with people show what I may almost call reverence toward all men – not only toward the men who are the best, but toward others as well. [...] It is the function of justice not to do wrong to one's fellow-men; of considerateness, not to wound their feelings; and in this the essence of propriety is best seen. (Cicero, *De off.*, I, 28, 98-99; 1928, pp. 101-103)

This form of beauty that glows in a correct behaviour is the distinctive feature of the *vir bonus* (honest man), whose ideal portrait is painted by Cicero in *De officiis*. This would be someone who is active in public and political life, and who spends their free time (*otium*) engaging in the arts and philosophical studies. By nurturing a sense for aesthetics and abiding to the principles of honesty and convenience, this person achieves elegance in their being and acting.

As he outlines this ethical and aesthetic model of the ideal person, Cicero includes in *De officiis* (I, 126-134) some sort of 'manual of good manners', suggesting hygiene and behavioural norms inspired by the right measure and avoiding all excess. He recommends bodily hygiene without affectation but also without negligence; a way of walking neither too fast, nor too slowly; a clear and fluent way of conversing, which avoids excluding others from the conversation or falling into tittle-tattle (Cicu, 2000, pp. 150-154).

As a result, Cicero's ideal person, in close resemblance to Roman models such as Scipio Aemilianus, is well-read, balanced, never out of place or out of measure, with a strong sense of attachment to their homeland and community.

As Guérin (2009, p. 126) points out "the *decorum* described in Cicero's *De officiis* is [...] a principle of coherence between the ethical agent and his actions, a means to reach a state of general appropriateness, the rational *convenientia* by the virtue of which one can make the choices and accomplish the actions which correspond to his own nature". As a result, Cicero applies to his *vir bonus* model the same criterion of convenience, based on which the poets choose only those words and actions that are befitting of a character – according to the previously mentioned Aristotelian principle consolidated by Theophrastus.

Along the same line one can place Quintilian's contribution on the topic of convenience in the XI book of his treatise, *Institutio oratoria*. According to Quintilian as well, *decorum* is a norm regulating the choice of content, the distribution of words, the style and even the performance of the rhetor.

However, as it shares its lexical root with the impersonal verb *decet* (it is convenient, it is befitting), *decorum* qualifies also as a moral principle, guiding choices and behaviours even to the detriment of personal interest. Quintilian mentions the example of Socrates, who refrained from simple personal defence in court, which would have saved him from being sentenced to death, since it was contrary to his moral values. Hence, the rhetor has to refrain from persuasion if this latter clashes against a higher value (*Inst. Or.* 11, 1, 11). As a result, also for Quintilian, *decorum* is a rhetorical norm regulating the rhetorical performance as much a moral principle, guiding one's lifestyle and the consistency of thinking and acting. Indeed, in the footsteps of Cicero (*De or.* 3, 212), he claims that the main virtue of the orator is *prudentia* (practical sagacity). This is a moral virtue that can be acquired with experience and its effects derive from the ability to grasp what is appropriate in each occasion.

In this regard, Latin culture establishes *decorum* as an ethical and aesthetic category which describes the ideal of an honest person (Cicero) and of a rhetor engaged in the rightful and appropriate administration of public affairs (Quintilian) for the good of the community.

4. The Architectural Theory: Vitruvius and Leon Battista Alberti

The migration of the notion of *decorum* into the area of art – already inaugurated by the numerous architectural metaphors employed by Cicero (*De or.* III, 152 and *Or.* 50.) – was further legitimized by Vitruvius, who imported into architecture many terms and concepts from rhetoric. According to Vitruvius, architects have to design a building taking into account beauty (*venustas*), utility (*usus*) and appropriateness (*decor*) (*De arch.* VI, 10). In *De architectura* (IV, I, 7-8) *decor* is the principle that connects the use of the various orders of architecture to the character of the divinity to whom a temple is dedicated: the Doric style, simple and sober, is appropriate to gods who manifest strength and military valor; the Ionian style is appropriate to female deities; the Corinthian style with its delicate ornaments and floral motifs to the youngest and most graceful gods.

Whereas Vitruvius is mainly receptive to the normative aspect of the principle of convenience, Leon Battista Alberti also picks up on its moral value. In line with Cicero's and Quintilian's teachings, he claims that a good architect must be able to evaluate 'what is fitting' to each building since each of them has its own specific 'character' (Alberti 1988, IX, 10, p. 315: "The greatest glory in the art of building is to have a good sense of what is appropriate"). Paradigmatic remarks are then provided concerning the differences between the palace of a prince and the fortress of a tyrant:

A royal palace should be sited in the city center, should be of easy access, and should be gracefully decorated, elegant, and refined, rather than ostentatious. But that of a tyrant, being a fortress rather than a house, should be positioned where it is neither inside nor outside the city. Further, whereas a royal dwelling might be sited next to a showground, a temple, or the houses of noblemen, that of a tyrant should be set well back on all sides from any buildings. In either case an appropriate and useful guideline, which will lend the building

dignity, will be to construct it in such a way that, if a royal palace, it should not be so large that it is impossible to throw out any troublemaker, or, if a fortress, not so constricted that it resembles a prison more than the apartment of a fine prince.” (Alberti 1988, V, 3, pp. 121-122, *emphasis mine*)

Decorum is therefore connected to the idea of *dignitas* (dignity)¹, which conveys the ethical and aesthetic distinctive features of individuals with respect to their character and social status. While developing this line in book VIII of his treatise on architecture, Alberti claims that *decorum* establishes the amount and type of ornaments for different buildings taking into account hosted functions and the social prestige of their inhabitants.² Alberti then outlines an ascending scale of aesthetic values from private dwellings to public and religious buildings. These latter are said to require greater decorative richness as no house can be more beautiful than the house of God. As a result, the ornament is no longer just an additional and decorative element, and is perfectly integrated to the structure, characterizing each building according to the principle of *decorum*, understood as both an ethical and aesthetic measure.

Besides the *decorum* of the rhetorical tradition, Alberti also retrieves – although just in a quick implicit remark – the Socratic notion of *prepon* as functional beauty. Socrates’ criticism of the golden shield, which despite being aesthetically pleasing is of little use in battle, seems to find an echo in Alberti’s words, as they criticize the “doors like those about which we read in historians and poets, so heavily weighed down with gold, ivory, and reliefs that they could be opened only by a team of men, and would give off a terrifying creak” (Alberti 1988, VII, 12, p. 226). On the contrary, those less elaborate and light, “that are easy to open and close”, should be appreciated more because they are more functional.

The idea of beauty as aptness or fitness to purpose, already launched by the Socratic *prepon*, is reborn along the centuries under many other names. As emphasised by Tatarkiewicz:

During the Enlightenment, the concept of beauty became still more strongly bound up with the concept of aptness; in that period, aptness had advocates especially among the philosophers, essayists and aestheticians of Britain: no longer now in the sense of social aptness, but once again in the sense of utility, as formerly in Greece. David Hume wrote (*Treatise*, 1739, vol. II) that the beauty of many human works derives from their utility and fitness for the purpose which they serve. Likewise Adam Smith (*Of the Beauty which the Appearance of Utility Bestows upon all Productions of Art*, 1759, part IV, chap. I): The effectiveness of any system or machine in producing the purpose for which they were designed, lends beauty to the entire object. And in the same vein, Archibald Alison (*Essays on the Nature and Principles of*

¹ The connection between the concept of ‘dignity’ (*dignitas*) and that of ‘convenience’ (*decor / decorum*) is found in the treatise *De pictura* II, 38, (Alberti 1980, p. 67: “Dignity must be observed in everything. It would not be suitable to dress Venus or Minerva in a servant’s hood nor to dress Mars or Jupiter in female clothes” (my transl.).

² Alberti (1988 VIII, 3, p. 250) claims: “In these matters I do feel, however, that even when the dignity of the individual is considered, a sense of measure must be maintained, and that even kings may be criticized for overexpenditure.”

Taste, 1790) said that there is no shape that does not become beautiful when it is perfectly suited to its purpose. For these writers the field of beauty continued to be split: some objects possess their own beauty, others acquire it thanks to their utility. (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 161)

While the Socratic *prepon* will launch a line of thinking on architecture and objects of use which will reach modern functionalism, the ethical and aesthetic notion of *decorum* will sustain the debate on good manners and what is befitting of those who wish to be part of ‘high society’.

5. The Good Manners

The ethical notion of dignity (in Italian *decoro*) recurs in a lot of books on good manners. Already in *The Book of the Courtier* written by Baldassare Castiglione in 1528, one reads that the perfect courtier must display courtesy and most of all ‘discretion’ – that is to say, the ability to act appropriately according to the circumstances (Castiglione 1901, par. 7-8, pp. 82-83).

The Courtier enjoyed great literary success in sixteenth-century Europe, and it would be misleading to take it as just a handbook of good manners, like those popping up in the following centuries starting with Giovanni Della Casa’s *Galateo*. Already bucking the trend of his time and the decline of court values, Castiglione aims to outline the ideal figure of the courtier, who is able to bestow beauty on everyday life through an elegant and graceful behaviour. The distinctive *sprezzatura* which shapes all of the courtier’s behaviours is a refined art which avoids all artificiality. Virtue is indeed achieved, according to Castiglione, when that affectation is kept at bay, that is to say, when each activity is distinctively natural, simple and modest. However, Castiglione’s ideal courtier belongs to the already faded Renaissance world. In the sixteenth century, the courts of the great Italian lords resemble more a theatre stage, where a role needs to be played, that is to say, one’s behaviour needs to be adapted to what ensures the prince’s or leader’s benevolence; as a result, courtesy turns into sterile formalism and etiquette.

The several treatises on good manners of the following centuries bear testimony to the need to establish a code of norms defining the behaviour of high society. Social aesthetics is hence developed on the basis of a shared ceremonial, which is often more a matter of appearance than a real expression of virtue.

As Tatarkiewicz points out, over time the notion of aptness appears under other names, particularly in seventeenth-century French classicist theory: ‘convenience’, ‘justesse’, and especially ‘bienséance’.⁵

The change was not only one of terminology. A fairly significant shift in thinking had taken place: the concern now was less with qualities of things fitting them to their use, and more with qualities of a man fitting him for his social station: a man is pleasing when his appearance and behaviour match his estate and dignity. (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 161)

⁵ As Tatarkiewicz (1980, p. 161) points out: “According to Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française (1787 edition), ‘bienséance’ signifie ‘convenance de ce qui se dit, de ce qui se fait par rapport à l’âge, au sexe, au temps, au lieu etc.’”

The issue of behavioural appropriateness finds ample development in French and English debates in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, leading to the origins of the person 'of good taste', a refined, elegant person, who is tactful and able to select appropriate words and perform appropriate actions in each moment of everyday life.

6. *Decorum* as a Category for Everyday Aesthetics

This short historiographical journey has shown that the notion of convenience has crossed several cultural fields (philosophy, rhetoric, art, good manners) and has received many names (*prepon*, *decorum*, *decor*, *biénseance*). What remains to be investigated is whether this notion can be rightfully credited with exemplary value with regard to everyday aesthetics.

Although Cicero presents *prepon/decorum* as operating within every aspect of life, the propounders of Everyday Aesthetics do not seem to be familiar with the Greek-Latin notion, despite often speaking of fitness for purpose and convenience in relation to circumstances.

Within the Anglo-American contemporary debate, only Glenn Parson and Allen Carlson (2008, pp. 2-4) directly refer to the Socratic *prepon* in order to provide their theory of functional beauty with a historical foundation. However, their inquiry focuses on the question of whether beauty results from 'being fit' or 'looking fit' for function. They thus forget that, according to the rhetorical theory of *prepon/decorum*, there is no dyscrasia between the two options. Both Aristotle and Cicero (*De or.* III, 45, 179) conceive the perfection of the discourse on the model of the human body, that is beautiful because each organ fits its specific function. Following the rhetorical tradition, the architect Leon Battista Alberti compares buildings to living organisms ("a building is very like an animal"; Alberti 1988, IX, 5, p. 301), and on this ground points to the unity of 'being' fitting to purpose and 'looking' fitting to purpose:

Take the case of a horse: they realized that where the shape of each member looked suitable for a particular use, so the whole animal itself would work well in that use. Thus, they found that grace of form could never be separated or divorced from suitability for use. (Alberti 1988, VI, 3, p. 158)

Without mentioning rhetoric but staying in the same line, Jane Forsey (2013, p. 238) connects the idea of function with those of 'character' and 'active use' that are reminiscent of the Aristotelian ideas of 'character' and 'enérghēia'⁴: "The functional beauty [...] marks out its everyday character, which can be experienced only through active use as demanding singular and specific attention".

Closer to Everyday Aesthetics, the contributions of Japanese-American scholar Yuriko Saito and Finnish philosopher Ossi Naukkarinen deserve particular attention here.

In her famous book *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007, p. 7), focusing on "the care and

⁴ According to Aristotle, (*Met.* IX, 6, 1048b e) the act (*enérghēia*) is the existence itself of the object.

respect for the materials, users, and dwellers”, Saito echoes, unawarely, the notion of appropriateness or adaptedness to purpose already developed in the classical era through the Greek word *prepon* and the Latin *decorum*.

Furthermore, while repeatedly mentioning Archibald Alison, Saito mainly references his association theory and the emotions evoked by natural environments. She therefore does not seem to grasp the sense of Alison’s contribution to the development of an idea of beauty as aptness or fitness to purpose.⁵ As already discussed elsewhere (Di Stefano 2020), Alison retrieves, without particular theoretical rigor, the topos of the expressive qualities of architectural orders⁶, which is first to be found in Vitruvius’s *De architectura*, but then focuses in particular on everyday objects. Concerning furniture, machines and tools, he claims, “nor is there any form which does not become beautiful, where it is found to be perfectly adapted to its end.” (Alison 1821, p. 281)

Although Saito (2017, p. 125) discusses the issue of the appropriateness of clothing to different circumstances and cultures, she fails to acknowledge that Alison had already developed a wide investigation on this topic. According to the Scottish philosopher, no garment is beautiful in absolute terms: the colours of clothes should fit the situation and the person wearing them (Alison 1821, pp. 176-178). Bright colours suit young people, sober ones the elderly, and the colours of a prince’s garments are different from those of a farmer: “the dresses in every particular performance had some relation to the character of that performance, and to the emotion it is destined to excite in our mind.” (Alison, 1821, p. 247)

Alison’s remarks influenced the American cultural debate of the late nineteenth century and had an impact on the theoreticians of modern functionalism. One can indeed hear the echo of Alison’s words in American sculptor Horatio Greenough, one of the greatest propounders of American functionalism (Ringe, 1960, pp. 314-321), as he says that: “The most beautiful chairs invite you by a promise of ease.” (Greenough, 1947, p. 122) According to Greenough, beauty is the ‘promise of function’ and it expresses a proportion in relation to action and character.⁷ Alison also influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, who established an insoluble connection between beauty and convenience.⁸ Along the line traced by Greenough and Emerson, also Louis H. Sullivan developed contributions which have earned him the title of father of modern functionalism (Di Stefano 2012).

Over the centuries the category of *decorum* has undergone several

⁵ See Tatarkiewicz (1980), pp. 159-161, in particular on Alison, p. 161.

⁶ Alison (1821, p. 256) claims: “The Tuscan is distinguished by its severity; the Doric by its simplicity; the Ionic by its elegance; the Corinthian and Composite by their lightness and gaiety. To these characters, their several ornaments are suited with consummate taste.”

⁷ Greenough (1947, p. 71) points out: “I define Beauty as the promise of Function; Action as the presence of Function; Character as the record of Function [...] but so long as there is yet a promise of function there is beauty, proportioned to its relation with action or with character.”

⁸ See Hopkins (1951, pp. 78-80).

transformations in relation to its different philosophical backgrounds. In Saito's contributions, for instance, the care for the materials, the users, and the inhabitants is enriched with perceptual and sensorial nuances previously unheard of, especially in the aesthetic debate predating the eighteenth century. As a result, Saito's concept of convenience acquires connotations which are closer to sensibility than to normativity. The importance given to sensibility is clearly expressed when Saito attempts to reconcile aesthetic and functional criteria in the design of objects and buildings, by emphasizing the need to take into account the physical and psychological effects that objects and environments will produce in their users: "a design process also engages the moral capacity of care and respect for other people", overall people with special needs, for instance, children, elderly people, patients, people with disabilities and refugees (Saito 2017, p. 227).

Along the same line Saito polemicizes against the narcissistic and self-referential trends in contemporary architecture, which make it arrogant if not alienating, and hopes instead for "an architecture of courtesy and attention." (Saito 2007, p. 221)

Connecting the field of architecture and good manners, Saito is unconsciously in line with Tristan Edward's teaching (Edward 1944), who wrote a book titled *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture*, thus reconciling the two evolutionary lines of *decorum*: the architectural theory and the behavioural precepts. According to the Welsh architectural critic and town planner, there are selfish and presumptuous buildings, like skyscrapers, or even rude buildings. To contrast these, he suggested polite and sociable buildings.

As we have seen, courtesy would in origin stand for the respect of given rules of conduct and the being endowed with certain virtues (kindness, generosity) which used to be a prerequisite for the members of the court. In a leap from the Renaissance to the present time, within the line of the notion of appropriateness and convenience applied to everyday behaviour, the remarks on tact presented by another supporter of Everyday Aesthetics, the Finnish scholar Ossi Naukkarinen, find an appropriate collocation. He claims that tact is to be understood as a behavioural mode which is appropriate to given circumstances and respectful of others (Naukkarinen 2014). To behave tactfully is really important in all those sectors where a given behavioural etiquette is in place (e.g. at work; in politics; in social relations).

In the globalized and multiethnic world of today, it is easy to crash against customs stemming from different cultural values and behavioural norms. In this context, to use tact means to follow a form of sensibility related to the situation, selecting actions based on circumstances.

7. Conclusion

Following Władysław Tatarkiewicz's example and traced path, I tried to show that, since Antiquity and through the Renaissance, *decorum* has been a category encompassing both objects and practices of everyday life as well as the principle that regulated appropriate behaviour.

Although it might at first seem a normative principle, since Antiquity *decorum* has had an ancipital meaning: it has both a normative aspect and an aspect connected to natural instinct. The former appears to be prominent in rhetoric and architecture, where the fitting ornaments for each discourse (rhetorical figures) and for each building are established. The notion of aptness regulates also the design of objects and affects also the realm of behaviour, whenever strict rules of conduct need to be followed (e.g. etiquette, diplomacy). However, rules do not always provide the fitting solution in relation to changing circumstances, and a natural instinct need to take over. In the realm of social relations, this kind of sensibility is called tact.

By means of this short historical journey, I have tried to demonstrate to what extent the concept of *decorum* has pervaded all spheres of everyday life and to what extent it not only belongs to the categories of everyday aesthetics, but it also allows us to trace the history of Everyday Aesthetics before its official birth.

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