

DIRTY PRETTY THINGS

According to received wisdom the decorative arts are inferior to the fine arts, partly because they're useful as well as attractive. What nonsense, says **Nick Foulkes**

There is a fair amount of snobbery about the decorative arts, as opposed to fine art. I know it makes me sound like I don't know much about art (although I know what I like), but why shouldn't art be decorative? I am well aware that it has a duty to raise questions, provoke us into viewing the human condition anew and all that, but I also like it to look nice on the wall, or, if it is a piece of sculpture, on the table.

Lorenzo Mongiardino, one of the favourite decorators of the jet set, believed that the concepts of art and decoration only parted company halfway through the 19th century. 'Painting became independent, created without reference to architecture or decoration,' he wrote. 'Paintings of this era disturb each other and refuse to be incorporated into a whole. When an important collection brings together paintings that range from Van Gogh to Gauguin, to Cézanne, to Renoir, they must be isolated from each other, or grouped by artist, distancing one painter from another.'

I must admit this is not a dilemma that afflicts me, but I have no doubt that other *Spear's* readers are constantly agonising over whether to hang the Gauguin next to the Cézanne. Moreover, since Mongiardino wrote those words, art has become if anything more jarring still. Can you really plonk a Koons next to a Cézanne and still have any sort of interior design scheme? Or are you perforce resigned to your home becoming an empty gallery space, a sort of White Cube or Haunch of Venison lookalike, in which you just happen to live?

The thing about fine art is it doesn't do anything (except perhaps commu-

nicate your net worth to other rich people), whereas the decorative arts are not just pretty but also useful. And yet decorative art always comes off second best when compared to 'fine' art.

But why should, say, a necklace by Van Cleef & Arpels, cunningly wrought and cleverly conceived — as well as gorgeous to look at — be inferior to a piece of conceptual art?

If this rhetorical question is answered by saying that the necklace is a piece of commercial merchandise whereas the art is... well... art, then I would counter that commoditisation of art, the justifiable care with which artists protect the value of their works and the status conferring qualities that Contemporary art possesses, make art just as much a piece of commercial merchandise as any necklace. It pleases me that the product of human creativity, whether a painting or a diamond bracelet, can command high prices.

Unsurprisingly, one of my favourite museums is the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, which under the enlightened guidance of Hélène David-Weill has recently held an exhibition of Van Cleef & Arpels jewellery. It is a serious show that treats some remarkable items with an almost forensic academic rigour, and the visitor is invited to set the pieces in the context of the age in which they were made.

Works of decorative art needs to be appreciated as products of, and mirrors for, a defined societal era. Compare, for instance, Picasso's *Guernica* and the 'Liberation' jewellery of Van Cleef & Arpels. Am I alone in detecting a parallel between Picasso's stipulation that *Guernica* be returned to Spain only

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after democracy was restored and the Van Cleef brooch depicting a bird in a golden cage, the door of which is open, signifying the end of the Nazi occupation in Paris?

Apply there are others who agree that the decorative arts are worthy of rehabilitation. Guillermo Solana, artistic director of Madrid's Thyssen Museum, has opened a fabulous show dedicated to the highly decorative art of Cartier. The collection is a fabulously curated archive of some of the most beautiful things made by the hand of man (and I find more meaning in a Cartier cigarette case than I do in the entire oeuvre of Mr Koons).

Of course, the thousand-plus pieces of the Cartier Collection comprise far more than cigarette cases. There are tiaras enough for a dozen state openings of parliament; clocks of almost baroque imagination; vanity cases so gorgeous that I am seriously thinking of taking up the wearing of cosmetics; weapons, such as Jean Cocteau's academician's sword, so splendid it would be an honour to be run through by them; and then the stuff that defies categorisation, like a scale model of the lunar landing module of 1969 in eighteen-carat gold.

In fact, I only have two cavils. The first is that the exhibition does not include every item in the Cartier Collection, although it is a valiant attempt to do justice to the fecund output. The second is with the catalogue: the print is too pale for my failing eyes to read it easily. However, this could justify the use of the tiger lorgnette that Cartier made for the Duchess of Windsor in 1954... *f*

