

The hidden horizontal : cornices in art and architecture - selections from the exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich

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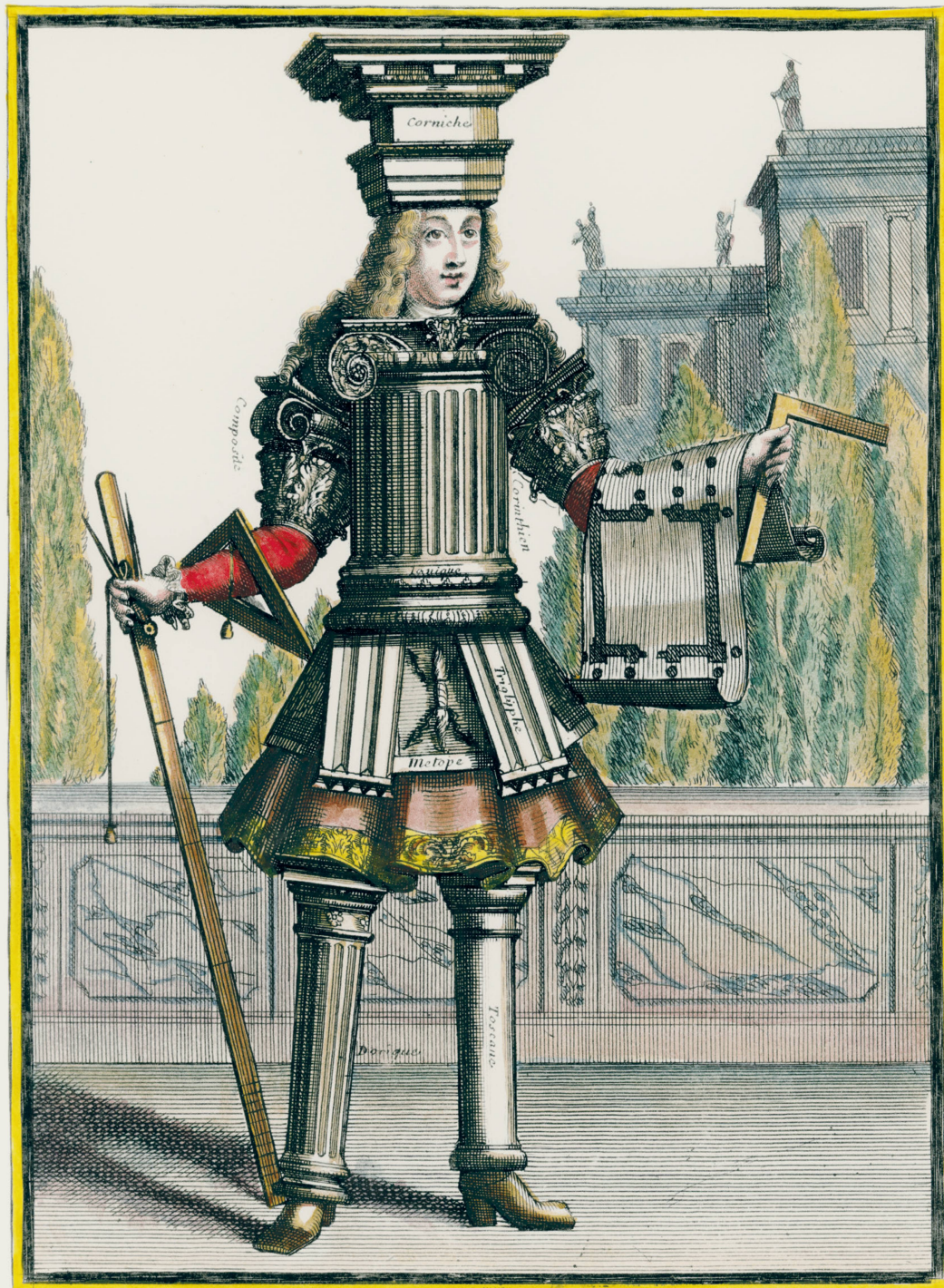
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**The Hidden Horizontal:
Cornices in Art and Architecture – Selections from the
Exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich
Erik Wegerhoff**



Nicolas de Larmessin,
Costumes grotesques,
seventeenth century,
engraving. Bibliothèque
nationale de France
(Gallica)

This seventeenth-century French architect has dressed perfectly for a Versailles cocktail party: legs in columns, a skirt of triglyphs, his torso a column shaft, and his hat a cornice—an entire glossary of tectonics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the costume looks as if it would be hard to move in. The title *Habit d'Architecte* puns "habit," the garb of the profession, against the habit of designing in a classical language in which every capital is crowned by a cornice.

Habit d'Architecte

N. de Larmessin juven. et Sculp.

Se vend a Paris Chez N. de Larmessin Rue S. Jacques, devant la Rue du Plâtre a la Cour d'Or. avec Privil. du Roy. 1685

Unknown artist, cabinet,
ca. 1650–1675, walnut
wood, canton of Zurich.
Landesmuseum Zürich,
inventory number
LM-5584

This seventeenth-century cabinet, today at home in the Landesmuseum Zürich, assembles as many cornices as possible into a small piece of furniture. It not only resembles a building with socle, piano nobile, and a double attica, but it is also a beautiful example of the cornice emancipating itself from its origin in the entablature. The protruding profiles echo the elaborate frames accentuating its doors. The cornices are all that remains of a classical order here, all pilasters and architraves stripped.



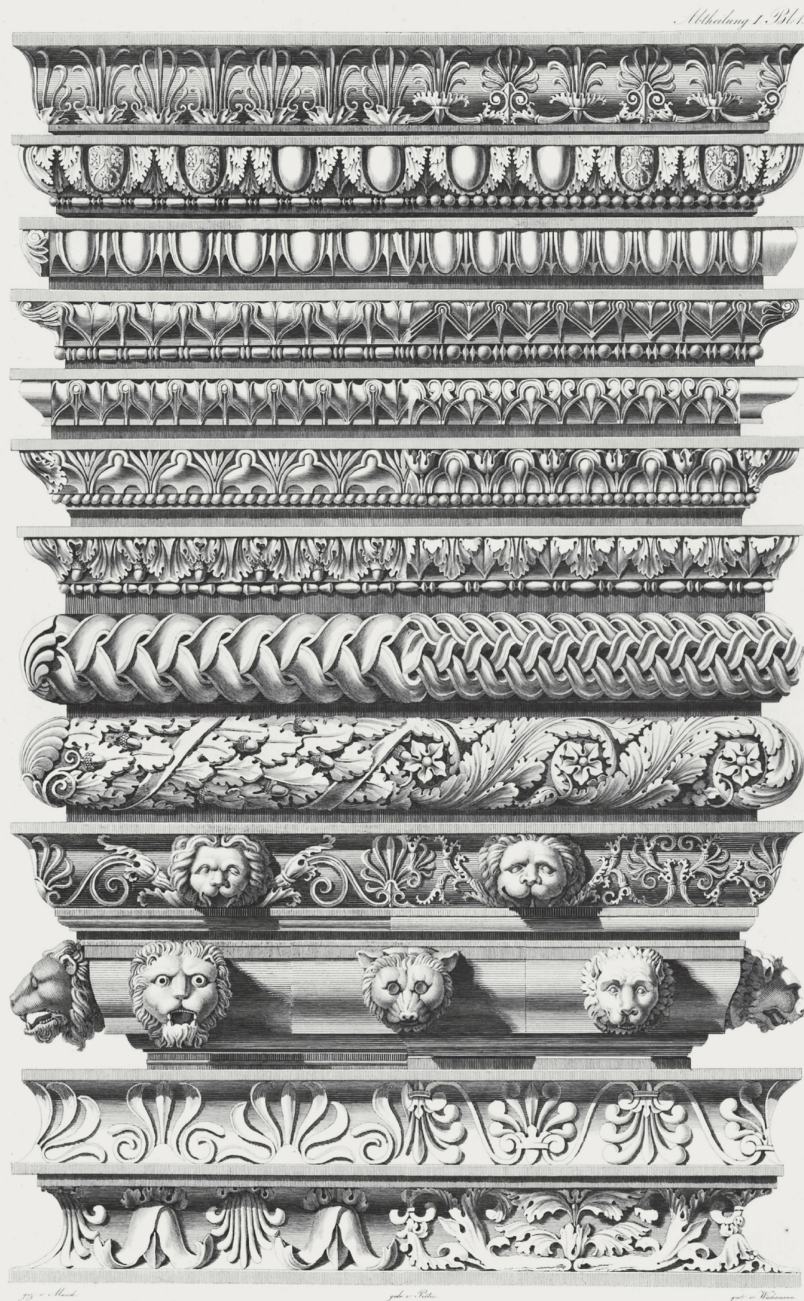


Henri Labrouste, drawing of a detail of the tomb of Cecilia Metella, 1826, pencil and gray wash. Courtesy of Niall Hobhouse and Drawing Matter

Henri Labrouste's magnificent drawing of the bucranium frieze of the tomb of Cecilia Metella on the Via Appia outside the Roman city walls is proof of the young architect's great talent as a draftsman. The ancient ornament appears almost sculpted in pencil and displays the architect's great handling of shading. Labrouste's strict depiction of a detail, and especially the confrontation between the upper and lower halves of the drawing, invite a reading of the architect at the brink of abstraction. While everything depicted is classical Roman ornament, the highly detailed figurative elements of the lower part find a startling response in the straight gray lines above that seem to anticipate modernist reductions.

Model cornices
featured in *Vorbilder
für Fabrikanten und
Handwerker* (Berlin:
Königl. Technische
Deputation für
Gewerbe, 1821–1837)

Intended to guide the
tastes of craftspeople
who in the 1800s
became increasingly
responsible for artistic
production, the *Vor-
bilder für Fabrikanten
und Handwerker*
(Models for manufac-
turers and craftspeople)
chiefly featured classical
models. Industrialization
made the cornice a
product of the machine,
its forms severed from
cultural meaning, but
this series is also proof
that the industrialization
of art created a fresh
grasp of antiquity.
This new serialization
revealed ancient
serialization. In some
regards the cornice was
a linear product not so
far from the production
line, and egg-and-dart
were already a serial
business in antiquity.



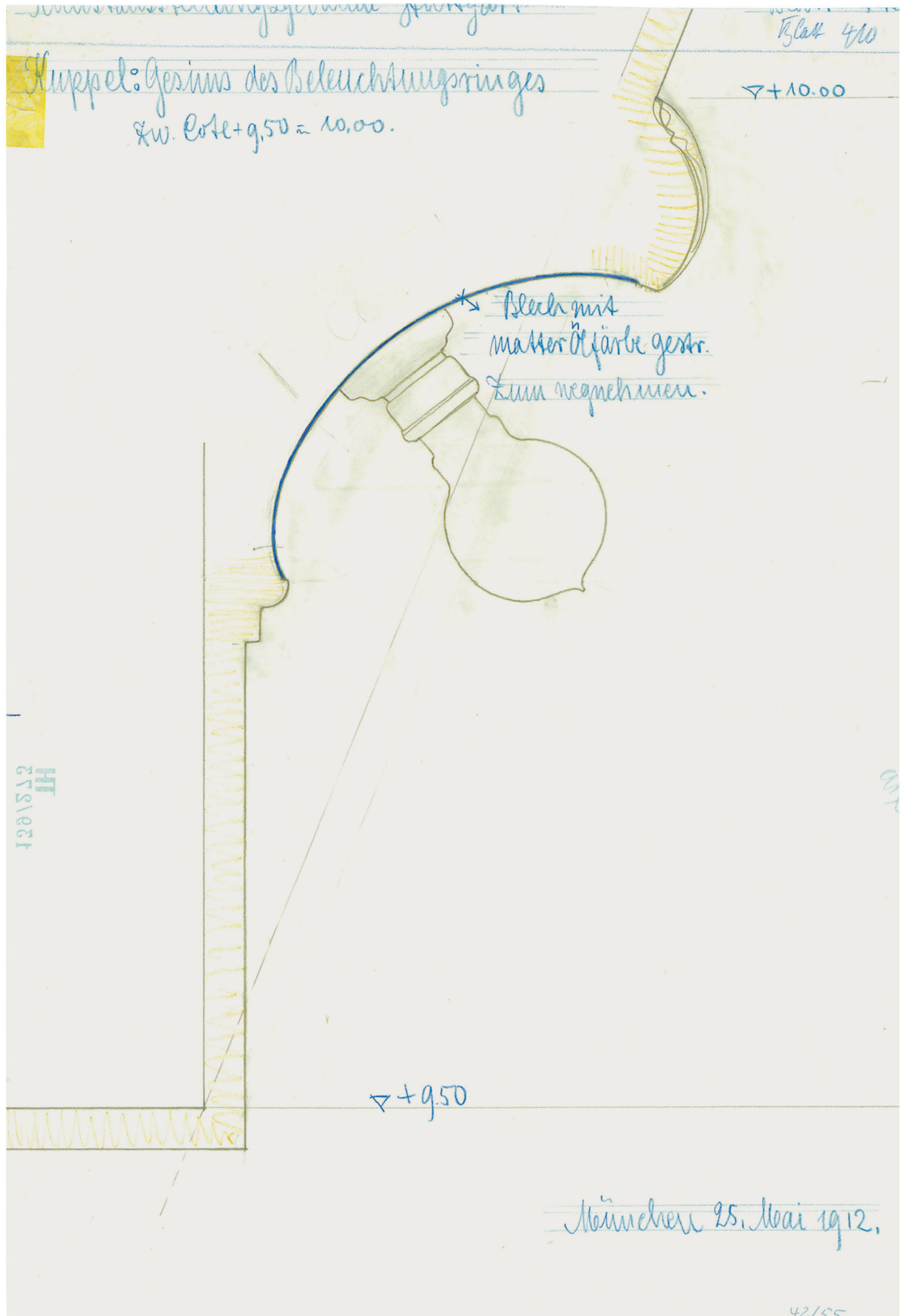


Herzog & de Meuron,
Ricola Storage Building,
Laufen, Switzerland,
1986–1987

The warehouse for the Swiss sweets manufacturer Ricola has become a classic of the early work of Herzog & de Meuron. The calculated elegance of the play of lines is also a play on the cornice. The facade is nothing but cornices—stacked on top of each other as if to insist on the legitimacy of a building element outlawed by many modern architects and reintroduced much more crudely by Herzog & de Meuron's postmodern contemporaries. The top, where the horizontal layers find relief in a series of verticals, also pays homage to the cornice, its series of battens clearly echoing a classical *Kranzgesims*.

Theodor Fischer,
Drawing for a Cornice,
Kunstaussstellungs-
gebäude Stuttgart,
1912, colored pencil.
Architekturmuseum
TU München

Arguably, lines of light and shade make up architecture's prime material, and not just in the eyes of Le Corbusier. The complex profile extruded to form a cornice produces nothing other than a series of shadow gaps. Theodor Fischer's cornice from the early 1900s is proof of the longevity of the cornice and the ease with which it glided into the age of modern technology. It also prominently features a light bulb exactly where a predecessor would have produced a line of shade. Fischer's design is thus a beautiful example of how twentieth-century architecture set out to upend every established convention of architecture while remaining within the tradition that it was attempting to revolutionize.





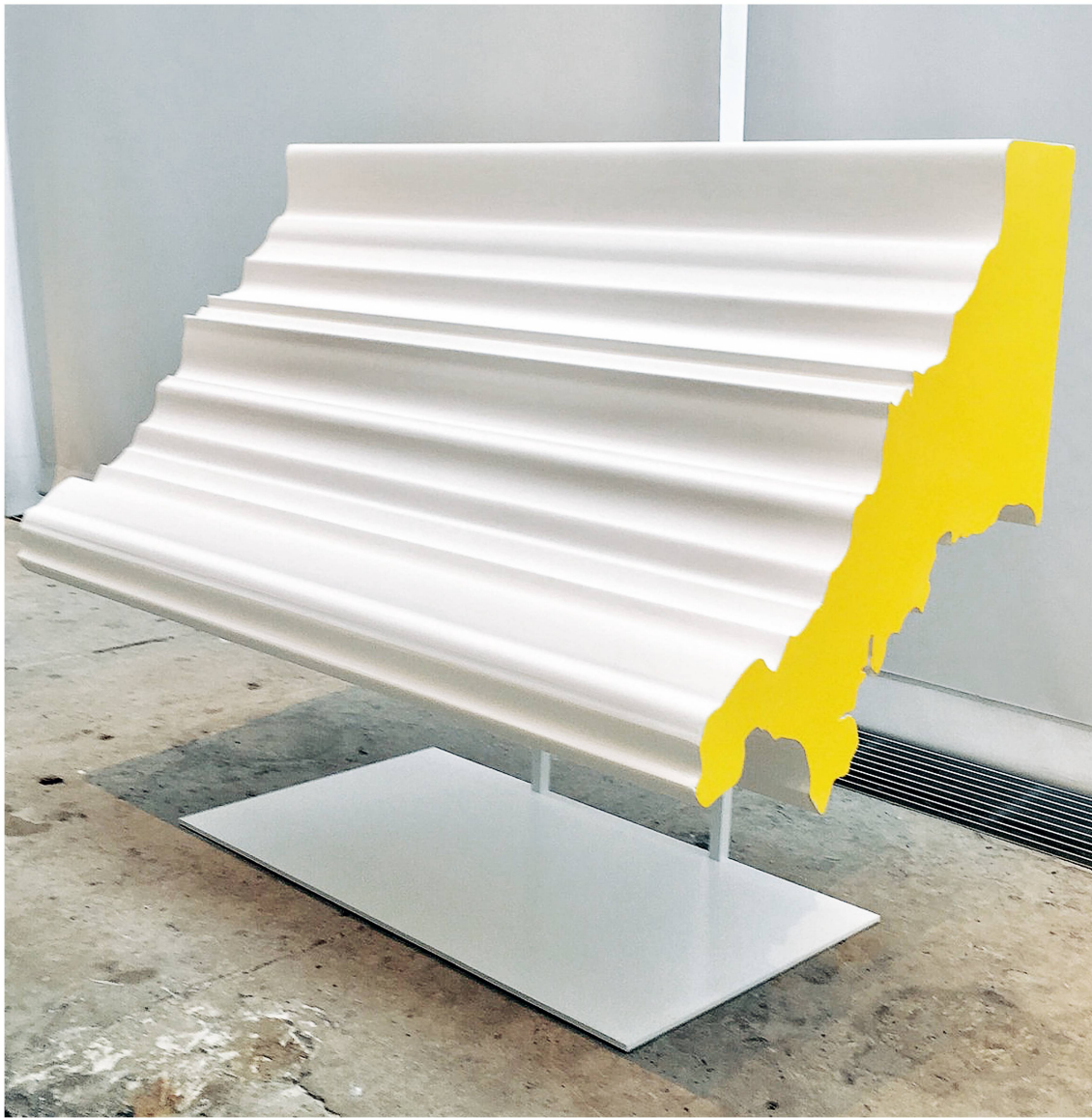
Erich Mendelsohn, Mossehaus, 1921–1923, Berlin. Photograph from Erich Mendelsohn, *Das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1930), 83

If anyone knew how to accelerate the classical cornice, it was Erich Mendelsohn. Berlin's busiest modern architect specialized in curved corners, which he interpreted both as an echo of, and architectural sovereignty over, urban traffic. The long horizontals are the movement of "dashing cars" (*sausende Autos*) turned into building material. At the top of Mendelsohn's redesign of the headquarters for the Mosse publishing company, the cornices take on the form of rally stripes. That these are made from terra-cotta makes clear that Mendelsohn had not lost his faith in architecture's authority, a faith he then underlines with the proudly protruding socle cornice that functions as a canopy above the entrance.

Row of columns, from Christian Ludwig Stieglitz, *Plans et dessins tirés de la belle architecture* (London: A. Dulau & P. F. Fauche, 1801)

Christian Ludwig Stieglitz's plate, one of the first illustrations in his *Plans et dessins tirés de la belle architecture* (1801; originally published as *Zeichnungen aus der schönen Baukunst*, Leipzig, 1800), draws from a long tradition in architectural publishing. A depiction of the orders was a feature of nearly every illustrated book on architecture from Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola (1562) onward. Here, however, the five orders are displayed as if they had once formed one colonnade, perfectly preserved except for the entablature, which has fallen into picturesque fragments in the foreground. Close inspection of these reveal that the row of columns could never have formed the implied entity, as one piece does not link to the other. The two diminutive figures shown drawing at the lower left may be as puzzled by this incongruous cornice as they are by the pedagogical inscriptions at the base of the columns.





Charles Holland,
Cornwall Cornice, 2016,
sculpture
Source: courtesy
of Charles Holland
Architects

The British architect Charles Holland's cornice pays homage to all those produced by Inigo Jones, Colen Campbell, and other British Vitruvians. Yet its inspiration was neither antiquity nor Andrea Palladio but rather the coastline of Cornwall. Holland's neo-postmodern piece thus both refers to and satirizes classical architecture.