Architectural ornament ‘at home’ in Abbeville

Whether you call it millwork, gingerbread, fretwork or applique, it is still architectural ornament. Many late 19th and turn-of-the-century Abbeville homes are adorned with intricate and interesting patterns of applied decoration. The concept of applied decoration goes as far back as the Greco-Roman period. The triumphal arch of Home is a good example; the Colosseum is another. Through the ages architects used massive shapes to unify a building visually by organizing it into a series of units. This organization of a building’s visual effect was achieved for centuries by imitation of the great style of pilasters (decorative columns), domes, or wall-surface designs.

In the 19th century, the use of applied ornament changed and a different use of decoration on a smaller scale became characteristic. In part it was a natural outgrowth of the increasingly lavish decoration of the late Baroque and Rococo architecture of the 18th century. With the development of machinery, such as multiple lathes and jigs, builders were able to give their structures an illusion of elegance. To domestic architecture of the Victorian Period (1837-1900) this meant porch brackets and corbets, rails and balusters. Some popular types were scroll bracket with or without frame, ball and doweled, fan bracket, and moldings applied, such as curia. Applique is applied to flat surfaces to create a molded, carved, or textured effect.

Around the turn-of-the-century enthusiastic carpenters left to their own devices created some structures decorated almost totally in and out with “gingerbread.” This style is called Carpenter’s Gothic. The first 20th century ornamentation was a reproduction of the details in medieval cathedrals and chateaus. It was based on texture and pattern with interspersed bands and patches of ornament, applied with organization, in series.

After World War I, in the 1920’s, this type of architectural ornamentation lost favor and the International Style dominated design in building through the 1930’s. The concrete and glass barrenness resulted in a reaction in the 1940’s to return to more visually interesting materials and patterns. This trend continued into the 60’s and 70’s and added natural settings as the proper basis of architectural ornament.

Contemporary couples building a home occasionally choose to reproduce this ornate style. Their builders sometimes are able to find skilled carpenters who care to take the time to hand cut or use mechanical means to reproduce old millwork patterns. There are some local woodworks who provide these materials and also a few mail order companies who manufacture several designs and will ship to you after a catalog selection.

In the meantime the well-preserved Victorian architecture of Abbeville is ours to admire and enjoy.

Intricate patterns embellish eave moldings

Star-flower carved bracket, pillars

Scroll bracket arrangement pleasing

Scallop ceiling

Note fish-scale siding on eave