Topics in Modern and Contemporary Art History: Criminal Minds? Art, Craft, and Design

CALENDAR DESCRIPTION:
An examination of one aspect of modern and/or contemporary art history. Possible areas of investigation include the study of an issue important to the art of the modern and/or contemporary period, as well as the study of the methods and historiographic positionings of art historians working today.

PREREQUISITE:
Second-year standing or permission of the Department.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
In his provocative lecture “Ornament and Crime,” architect Adolf Loos declared that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects” (1909), thus calling for an intensification of the rift between the fine and the decorative arts, the artist and the craftsperson, which had been growing since the Renaissance. While this “hierarchy of the arts” became entrenched in art historical scholarship, in practice, many artists of the modern and contemporary periods were exploring the interplay between art and craft. This course examines the makers and movements that have challenged this art/craft divide in order to question the validity of such hierarchies and whether they are helpful or a hinderance in the study of art. Individual case studies will include the Gesamtkunstwerk and the Vienna Secession, the fashion design of Surrealist Elsa Schiaparelli, the celebration of the quilts of Gee’s Bend as abstract works of art, and the use of “African” wax fabric in the installation art of Yinka Shonibare, MBE. We will also consider a series of primary texts, as well as the role of art institutions, gender, and race in this debate.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:
A detailed list of readings and requirements will be available during the first class. Attendance is mandatory. Evaluation will consist of short written assignments, a mid-term test and a final exam.