

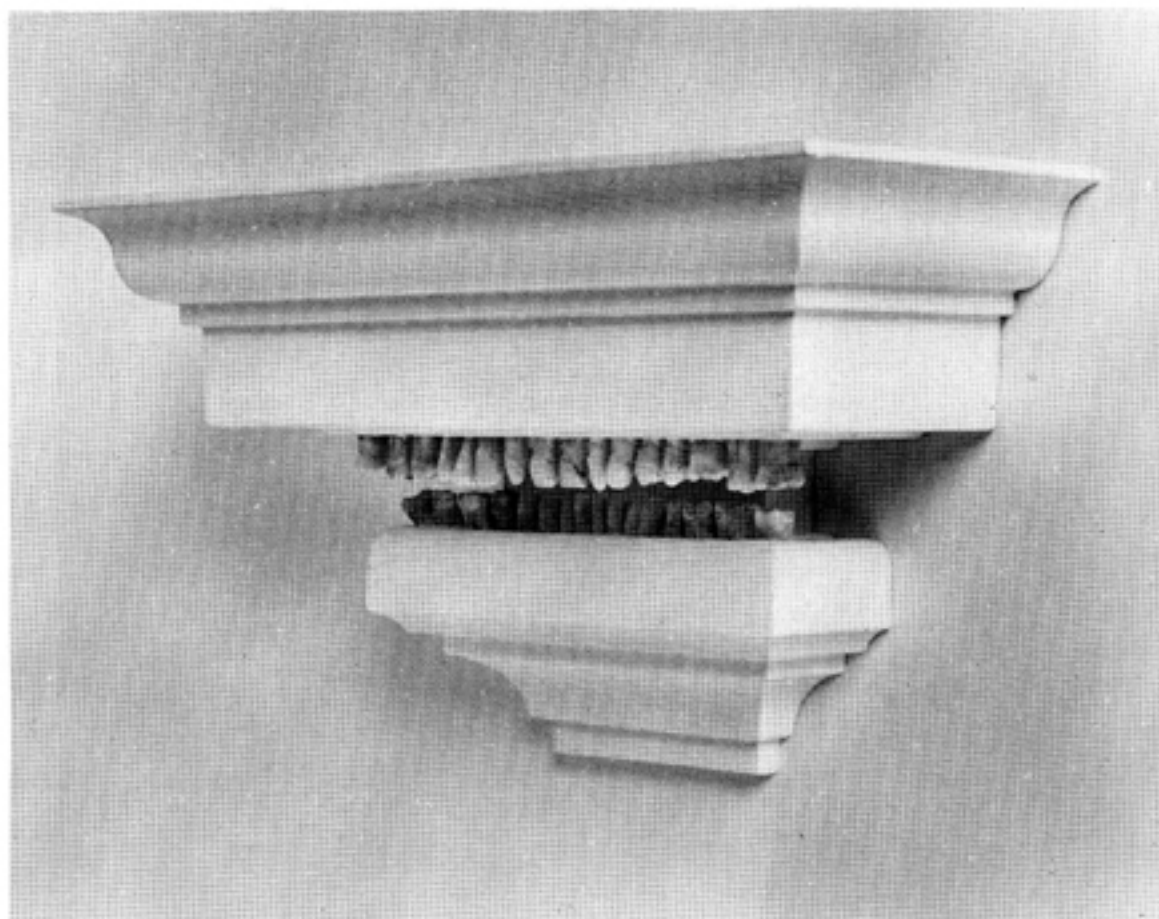
Art in America

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Spring Hurlbut at the Municipal Art Society

In her exhibition "Sacrificial Ornament," this Toronto-based artist reflects upon the ritualistic beginnings of the ornament used in classical architecture. Spurred by recent speculation that many motifs in Greek architecture are derived from human and animal body parts central to pagan sacrificial rites, Hurlbut sculpts, in plaster, architectural elements—friezes, entablatures, capitals—in which eggs, bones and teeth reclaim their original place.

In *Quail Ovo and Dart Entablature* (1989), she exchanges the rounded elements of the traditional egg-and-dart scheme with mottled quail eggs. *Ovo and Claw Entablature* (1990) uses turkey eggs and replaces the darts with cast chicken feet. *Dentil Entablature* (1989) replaces the regular, boxy dentil pattern with a long row of irregular cow teeth. And in *Triglyph Frieze* (1991), Hurlbut inserts a polymer cast of a human femur within each triglyph of a Doric frieze. All of these pieces are full-sized and expertly crafted, and Hurlbut has mounted them on the wall well above eye level, so that their identity as architectural ornament is never in doubt. Most of the works are also very chaste coloristically, with the white plaster armatures holding the usually off-white "ritual" elements.



Spring Hurlbut: *The Sacred Dentils*, 1990, plaster, teeth; at the Municipal Art Society. Photo Tony Maggs.

The simple act of replacing a familiar geometric motif with a natural object proves jarring and forces the viewer to look anew at ornament previously taken for granted. Hurlbut succeeds in removing classical architecture from a purely esthetic realm and exposing some of its other, more troubling aspects. One unsettling issue that she raises, for instance, is that of the public sacrifice of animals. Today animal slaughter is considered repulsive and even immoral, but in the not too distant past such bloodletting was an essential part of religious rites. Hurlbut hints at an even darker pagan ritual. By using casts of human femurs as triglyphs or by replacing Ionic volutes with long braids of hair on a bloodred capital in *Sacrificium* (1991), she raises the specter of human sacrifice, one of the most taboo aspects of our past.

The importance of exploring the origins of classical architecture in this way should not be underestimated. By refocusing attention on the ancient ceremonial symbolism that underlies classical ornament, and by allowing us to sense how those religious meanings were incorporated into architecture, Hurlbut enriches our understanding of a cornerstone of Western culture.

—Joseph Ruzicka