

Following the River Bend: Exploring Decorative Meanders

by Mark Arnold

/mē'andər/

1. a decorative border constructed from a continuous line and shaped into a repeated motif
2. a Greek fret

Good design never dies, it just gets recycled. Every major period in the decorative arts since the early 18th century has been a reintroduction of themes and motifs found in the arts or architecture of earlier periods. Ironically, every reinterpretation of a style seems to lead us further from the original meaning of the style's decorative motifs, insofar as they are known or can be known. Typically, design elements having broad visual appeal warrant enough attention to be revisited. Consider the craze for all things Gothic during the mid-18th century and then again in the mid-19th century. The trefoils, quatrefoils, Gothic arches and cusps applied to early Georgian (Rococo or Chippendale) and later, to Gothic Revival furnishings were liberally borrowed from medieval architecture completed 500 years before the publication of Chippendale's *Director*. Another example of recycled elements is a group of decorative borders, collectively known as *meanders*, that are as prevalent in modern design as when they were painted on Greek vases nearly 3000 years ago (Fig. 1).

Meanders take their name from the Maeander River located in present-day Turkey and are evocative of the twists and turns of the river as it makes its way to the Aegean Sea. The ancient Greeks borrowed the name to describe any act of aimless wandering, although most rivers and streams likewise exhibit a history of sinuous bends known as oxbows which are caused by the gradual deposit of sediment as the flow of water slows along one bank. As a result, the waterway seems to double back on itself before continuing its downhill course (Fig. 2). This periodic reversal in direction, as well as the rhythmic regularity of its ebb and flow, characterize decorative meanders. Meanders belong to a group of ornamental forms known as *bands* whose functions are to frame other decorative elements and to unify the distinct parts of a composition.

Evolutis Vitruvius

While all meanders are classified as bands, the two most prevalent are commonly known by other names. The first of these is the Vitruvian scroll, or Vitruvian wave, named for the 1st-century BC Roman architect although he never mentions this scroll in his *Ten Books on Architecture*. The motif is also known as a 'running dog', and one source from the early 19th century refers to these specific scrolls as *veredaria*, or runners. Although most of these terms do not suggest a marine origin, it appears



Figure 1. Plate 10, from *A Collection of Vases, Altars, Paterae, Tripods, Candelabra Sarcophagi, &c. from Various Museums and Collections* (1814), by Henry Moses. This hydria vessel is decorated with several meander motifs including vertical Vitruvian scrolls and stopped Greek key.



Figure 2. A series of oxbows is a typical feature of most rivers like those of the Nowitna River in Alaska whose meandering path is shown here.