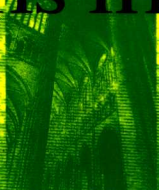


The Life of Forms in Art

Henri Focillon



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ZONE BOOKS · NEW YORK

1989

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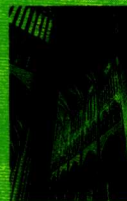
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Henri Focillon (1881-1943) taught at the Collège de France and at Yale University. His books include *Art of the West: Romanesque and Gothic* (2 vols.), *The Year 1000*, *L'art des sculpteurs romans*, and *Piero della Francesca*.



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Pollaiuolo: Apollo and Daphne

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Translators' Foreword

The *Vie des formes* was originally published in Paris in 1934. Since then there has been another French edition, and translations into Czech and Danish, although the latter exists only in manuscript. The present text is the first to appear in English.

When work upon it was begun, its distinguished author granted to the translators an entirely free hand. Their text is, as a result of this generous action, somewhat longer than is that of the original, since a great many words and passages have been liberally extended. No translation is – or at least should be – strictly literal. This is peculiarly the case as regards a book whose argument is as penetrating and as revolutionary as is that of the *Vie des formes*. Every effort has therefore been made to keep the text as explicit as possible, without at the same time transgressing the field that belongs rightfully to the critic or the interpreter.

But the experience of working on the text has been made doubly advantageous and doubly valuable to the translators by the experience of working with the author. M. Focillon's patience, his criticisms and elucidations, loom very large upon the horizon of their endeavors. It could be said with little exaggeration that he not only wrote the book, but is rather more than half responsible for its English dress. To Mme. Focillon, too, the trans-

lators owe a heavy debt of gratitude. Her wonderfully idiomatic knowledge of English has stood more than one thorny passage of the French in good stead. Not one of the following pages is without its mark of her suggestion or elucidation.

An evasion of responsibility may seem, here, to be implied, but it is not intended. The *Vie des formes* is, be it frankly said, by no means an easy book to read, nor was it an easy one to translate. For the inadequacies of style, the shortening of certain phrases and the amplifying of others, the still-remaining deposits of gallicisms – in short, for whatever is unsatisfactory, the translators are in every instance to blame.

Special thanks are due to S.L. Faison, Jr. who translated "In Praise of Hands." Mr. Emerson Tuttle and Mr. Robert Bates have made many pertinent suggestions and have given cheerful and attentive assistance in the unraveling of difficult passages. Mr. George Hamilton's criticism of the manuscript as a whole was so percipient that, of the scores of recommendations he made, all but two or three were immediately adopted.

CHARLES BEECHER HOGAN
GEORGE KUBLER

Introduction

by Jean Molino

En el central reposo se cierne el movimiento.

– Miguel Hernández

The Life of Forms in Art is an unusual book, and one that initially might seem to hold little interest for the contemporary reader. Well written, perhaps even too well written – since this is not seen as a gauge of scientific rigor – the book uses a somewhat supple rhetoric to reflect on problems of art and art history. It contains few or no concepts, no specific theory, no simple analytical model comparable to Panofsky's iconologic program, no experimental or philosophical aesthetic. And yet, *The Life of Forms in Art* is one of that small number of books in which a lifetime's experience is collected and in which we find in condensed form a great specialist's global vision of his field of study.

Great historians are rarely theoreticians: their sense of the complexity of things means that they feel at ease only with specific problems, particular areas of inquiry. Focillon is one of those thinkers who are too attached to matter to isolate its abstract forms, to formulate a diagram, a generic model that could then simply be applied to all possible cases. Focillon has no explicit theory of art or art history to offer us, because he feels that no theory, no model has universal value. Does this mean that he has no analytical tools, no principles to guide him in his research? Certainly not, but his principles and tools are adaptable and com-

plex, and can always be modified on contact with the object of analysis. It is precisely this quality that gives *The Life of Forms in Art* its value, this book in which Focillon went as far as he could, as far as he wanted to, in the direction of abstraction and of theory. But flexible and open models are no less useful and illuminating than the rigorous and too simple models produced by a Formalist age. This is especially true when the flexibility is in the service of a central hypothesis that animates the entire work: form is alive.

We must be careful not to interpret the title and this central thesis erroneously: what is important here is not the biological metaphor according to which forms constitute living organisms whose evolutionary laws would then be the same as those of animals. I see no trace of organicism in Focillon's thought, which does not make form a living organism so much as life itself a form; this is the meaning of Balzac's pronouncement that is quoted at the beginning of the book: "Everything is form, and life itself is form." Why then speak of the life of forms? The title, as Focillon points out, echoes that of Darmsteter's famous work, *The Life of Words*, and I will come back to the parallelism thus proposed between language and plastic forms. But the point, for Focillon, is not merely to situate himself in the context of historicism according to which, at the end of the nineteenth century, historical linguistics, literary history and art history all came together. It is true that he is above all a historian, and faithful to the historical method that reigns in all disciplines. It is here, however, that the choice of title is significant, since it refers not to the history of forms, but to their life. Focillon remains removed from formalisms like the iconologies of the Warburg School, and it is doubtless because of his distance from such movements that he is now beyond them and still has much to tell us. And what he says is that form is inseparable from movement: forms are alive

in that they are never immobile. Recent orientations in the analysis of artistic works have tended to privilege figures and significations. Focillon reminds us that figure and significations are caught in a perpetual movement:

Plastic forms offer peculiarities that are no less remarkable. . . . Such forms constitute an order of existence and . . . this order has the motion and the breath of life. Plastic forms are subjected to the principle of metamorphoses, by which they are perpetually renewed. . . .

Life and metamorphosis do not merely have a historical dimension; they characterize forms in all circumstances, and the immediately perceived form takes on movement, is already movement:

For form is surrounded by a certain aura: although it is our most strict definition of space, it also suggests to us the existence of other forms. It prolongs and diffuses itself throughout our dreams and fancies: we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm – a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.

How could our era, which is that of dynamic art, of art as event, not be in agreement with Focillon in his recognition, at the heart of form, of movement?

Form constitutes a specific domain. It “sets up within history an immutable order,” an autonomous reality that presents itself as a “fourth realm” added to the three realms of the physical world.

Borrowing Popper's formulation, one could say that forms belong to "World 3," the world of human knowledge that includes the objective content of thought set down and inscribed in objects and material traces, writing, buildings, paintings and sculptures. But we should probably not be too hasty in placing all human productions in which thought is incarnated under a single heading; let us first of all deal with artistic forms in terms of their singularity, before mixing them together or putting them with other types of human expression.

It cannot be denied that there is a whole world of artistic forms. Certainly, the relativisms and sociologisms currently in fashion have always sought to contest the existence of a world of artistic forms. Art, it is endlessly repeated, is not a pure and atemporal essence, and an autonomous world of art only gradually became separated from the other spheres of social life; Egyptian art is not art, any more than is Roman sculpture; these are religious objects and realities, for which form is hardly more than embroidery, an ornament added to function, almost as an afterthought. It is only to us, twentieth-century aesthetes, that an Aurignacian sculpture has come to represent Venus; for prehistoric people it was only an image of fertility that doubtless had its place in rites and myths of a religious order. These received ideas I have just mentioned are quite simply false: artistic and aesthetic categories are not a recent invention, they correspond to a basic anthropological given: there is no human group without some form of artistic expression. This does not mean that art is separate, but that artistic judgment can be associated with other modes of perception and of judgment, and association means neither confusion nor identification. Steven Feld's admirable work, *Sound and Sentiment*, shows that the Kaluli of New Guinea are capable, in a religious ceremony, of making specifically aesthetic judgments about the songs they hear: religious fervor does not preclude artis-