

The Life of Forms in Art

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The World of Forms

Whenever we attempt to interpret a work of art, we are at once confronted with problems that are as perplexing as they are contradictory. A work of art is an attempt to express something that is unique, it is an affirmation of something that is whole, complete, absolute. But it is likewise an integral part of a system of highly complex relationships. A work of art results from an altogether independent activity; it is the translation of a free and exalted dream. But flowing together within it the energies of many civilizations may be plainly discerned. And a work of art is (to hold for the moment to an obvious contradiction) both matter and mind, both form and content.

Again, the critic will define a work of art by following the needs of his own individual nature and the particular objectives of his research. But the creator of a work of art regards his work — whenever he takes the time to do so — from a standpoint very different from that taken by the critic, and should he chance to use the same language in speaking of it, he does so in quite another sense. And the lover of a work of art — that is, the man of true sensitivity and wisdom — loves it for itself alone, wholeheartedly. In his unshakable belief that he may seize hold of it and possess its very essence, he weaves about it the mesh of his

inmost dreams. A work of art is immersed in the whirlpool of time; and it belongs to eternity. A work of art is specific, local, individual; and it is our brightest token of universality. A work of art rises proudly above any interpretation we may see fit to give it; and, although it serves to illustrate history, man and the world itself, it goes further than this: it creates man, creates the world and sets up within history an immutable order.

From the above it is easy to see how luxuriant is the wilderness of criticism that may spring up beside a work of art: flowers of interpretation that do not adorn, but completely conceal. And yet one of the very essentials of its character is the welcome it holds out to all possible interpretations, which may be – who can tell? – already commingled within it. Here, in any event, is one obvious aspect of the immortality of a work of art; here, if the expression may be allowed, is the eternity of its present, the proof of its human abundance and of its inexhaustible interest. And yet, we must not forget that the more a work of art is used for any specific purpose, the more is it despoiled of its ancient dignity, and the more is its privilege of working miracles revoked. How best can we define something that lies so far beyond the reach of time and yet is subjected to time? Is this prodigy merely a simple phenomenon of cultural activity in a chapter of general history? Or is it something added to our universe – an entirely new universe, with its own laws, materials and development, with its own physics, chemistry and biology, with its own engendering of a separate humanity? To find the answers to these questions, to pursue, in other words, the study of a work of art, we must, for the time being, isolate it. Then and only then would we have the opportunity of learning to see it. For art is made primarily for sight. Space is its realm – not the space of everyday life involving, say, a soldier or a tourist – but space treated by a technique that may be defined as matter and as movement. A work of art is

the measure of space. It is form, and as form it must first make itself known to us.

In one of his political tracts, Balzac has affirmed that "everything is form, and life itself is form." Not only may every activity be comprehended and defined to the extent that it assumes form and inscribes its graph in space and time, but life itself, furthermore, is essentially a creator of forms. Life is form, and form is the modality of life. The relationships that bind forms together in nature cannot be pure chance, and what we call "natural life" is in effect a relationship between forms, so inexorable that without it this natural life could not exist. So it is with art as well. The formal relationships within a work of art and among different works of art constitute an order for, and a metaphor of, the entire universe.

In considering form as the graph of an activity, however, we are exposed to two dangers. The first is that of stripping it bare, of reducing it to a mere contour or diagram. We must instead envisage form in all its fullness and in all its many phases; form, that is, as a construction of space and matter; whether it be manifested by the equilibrium of its masses, by variations from light to dark, by tone, by stroke, by spotting; whether it be architectural, sculptural, painted or engraved. The second danger is that of separating the graph from the activity and of considering the latter by itself alone. Although an earthquake exists independently of the seismograph, and barometric variations exist without any relation to the indicating needle, a work of art exists only insofar as it is form. In other words, a work of art is not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself. It does not design art; it creates it. Art is made up, not of the artist's intentions, but of works of art. The most voluminous collection of commentaries and memoirs, written by artists whose understanding of the problems of form is fully equaled by their understanding of words,

not contour of space + matter, but its construction.

not isolating form from the act of making

not a trace of art/making, but art.

could never replace the meanest work of art. In order to exist at all, a work of art must be tangible. It must renounce thought, must become dimensional, must both measure and qualify space. It is in this very turning outward that its inmost principle resides. It lies under our eyes and under our hands as a kind of extrusion upon a world that has nothing whatsoever in common with it save the pretext of the image in the so-called "arts" of imitation.

Nature as well as life creates forms. So beautifully does she impress shape and symmetry upon the very elements of which she herself is made and upon the forces with which she animates them that men have been pleased to regard her from time to time as the work of some God-artist, some unknown and guileful Hermes, the inventor and contriver. Form inhabits the shortest wavelengths, no less than those of the lowest frequency. Organic life designs spirals, orbs, meanders and stars, and if I wish to study this life, I must have recourse to form and to number. But the instant these shapes invade the space and the materials specific to art, they acquire an entirely new value and give rise to entirely new systems.

Now, that these new values and new systems should retain their alien quality is a fact to which we submit with a very poor grace. We are always tempted to read into form a meaning other than its own, to confuse the notion of form with that of image and sign. But whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only itself. And whenever a sign acquires any prominent formal value, the latter has so powerful a reaction on the value of the sign as such that it is either drained of meaning or is turned from its regular course and directed toward a totally new life. 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. Perhaps in this way may best be explained all the decorative variations that have been given to the letters of the alphabet, and more specifically, the real meaning of calligraphy in the arts of the Far East. A sign is, in other words, treated according to certain rules: it is brushed with light or heavy strokes, with rapidity or deliberation, with embellishments or abbreviations. Each one of these treatments constitutes a different manner. Such a sign cannot, then, help but welcome a symbolism that not only fixes itself to the semantic value, but has as well the faculty of fixing itself so fast that it becomes in turn an entirely fresh semantic value. Another example – and one that is nearer home – of the interplay of these exchanges and stratifications of form is the decorative treatment of the Arabic alphabet (Figure 1) and the use made of Kufi characters by the Christian art of the Occident.

Can form, then, be nothing more than a void? Is it only a cipher wandering through space, forever in pursuit of a number that forever flees from it? By no means. Form has a meaning – but it is a meaning entirely its own, a personal and specific value that must not be confused with the attributes we impose on it. Form has a significance, and form is open to interpretation. An architectural mass, a relationship of tones, a painter's touch, an engraved line exist and possess value primarily in and of themselves. Their physiognomic quality may closely resemble that of nature, but it must not be confused with nature. Any likening of form to sign is a tacit admission of the conventional distinction between form and subject matter – a distinction that may become misleading if we forget that the fundamental content of form is a formal content. Form is never the catch-as-catch-can garment of subject matter. No, it is the various interpretations of subject mat-

(mimesis?)

ter that are so unstable and insecure. As old meanings are broken down and obliterated, new meanings attach themselves to form. The great network of ornament in which the successive divinities and heroes of Mesopotamia are caught fast changes its name without ever changing its shape. The very moment form appears, moreover, it can be construed in many different ways. Even in the most highly organic periods, when art, as Émile Mâle has pointed out, faithfully obeys strict and rigorous rules – such as those laid down by mathematics, music or symbolism – it may well be questioned whether the theologian who dictates the program, the artist who executes it and the devotee who subscribes to its lessons all understand and interpret form in quite the same way. For in the life of the mind, there is a region in which forms that are defined with the utmost exactitude nevertheless speak to us in very different languages. I may take as an example the Sibyl of Auxerre. There, deep within the shadows of time and of the church, it stands before us, in matter-of-fact materials around which many beautiful and gratuitous dreams have been woven. What in our day Maurice Barrès saw in these materials the artist himself saw centuries ago. But how marked the difference between the creation of the interpreter and that of the workman and, again, between that of the priest who first conceived the design and that of the other dreamers of a later day, who, as generation succeeded generation, have been mindful of the suggestions called forth by form.

Iconography may be understood in several different ways. It is either the variation of forms on the same meaning, or the variation of meanings on the same form. Either method sheds an equal light on the respective independence of these two terms. Sometimes form might be said to exert a magnetic attraction on a great variety of meanings, or rather, it might be compared to a kind of mold, into which are successively cast different materi-

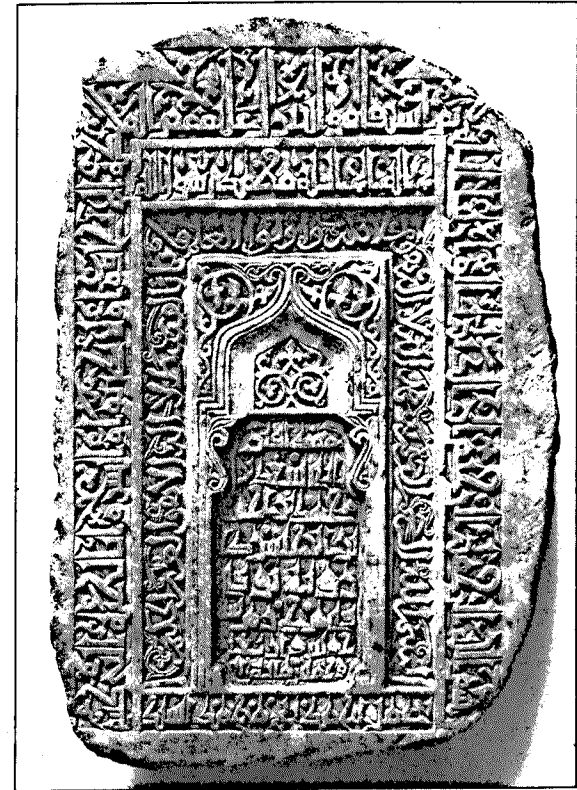


Figure 1. Tombstone of Abu Sa'd, son of Muhammad.

als that, yielding to the contours that then press upon them, acquire a wholly unexpected significance. Sometimes, again, the insistent fixity of one meaning will take complete possession of formal experiments that it did not necessarily provoke. And sometimes form, although it has become entirely void of meaning, will not only survive long after the death of its content, but will even unexpectedly and richly renew itself. By copying the coils of snakes, sympathetic magic invented the interlace. The medical origin of this sign cannot be doubted: a trace of it persists among the symbolic attributes of Aesculapius. But the sign itself becomes form and, in the world of forms, it gives rise to a whole series of shapes that subsequently bear no relation whatsoever to their origin. The interlace, for instance, lends itself to innumerable variations in the decoration of the architectural monuments of certain East Christian sects: it may weave various shapes into single indissoluble ornaments; it may submit to syntheses that artfully conceal the relationship of their component parts; or it may evoke from that genius for analysis so typical of Islam the construction and isolation of completely stylized patterns. In Ireland the interlace appears as a transitory, but endlessly renewed meditation on a chaotic universe that deep within itself clasps and conceals the debris or the seeds of humankind (Figure 2). The interlace twines round and round the old iconography, and devours it. It creates a picture of the world that has nothing in common with the world, and an art of thinking that has nothing in common with thought.

Thus, even in limiting ourselves to the consideration of a perfectly simple linear scheme, some idea of the immense activity of forms is at once made clear to us. Forms tend to manifest themselves with extraordinary vigor. This may, for example, be observed as regards language, where the verbal sign can become the mold for many different interpretations and, having attained

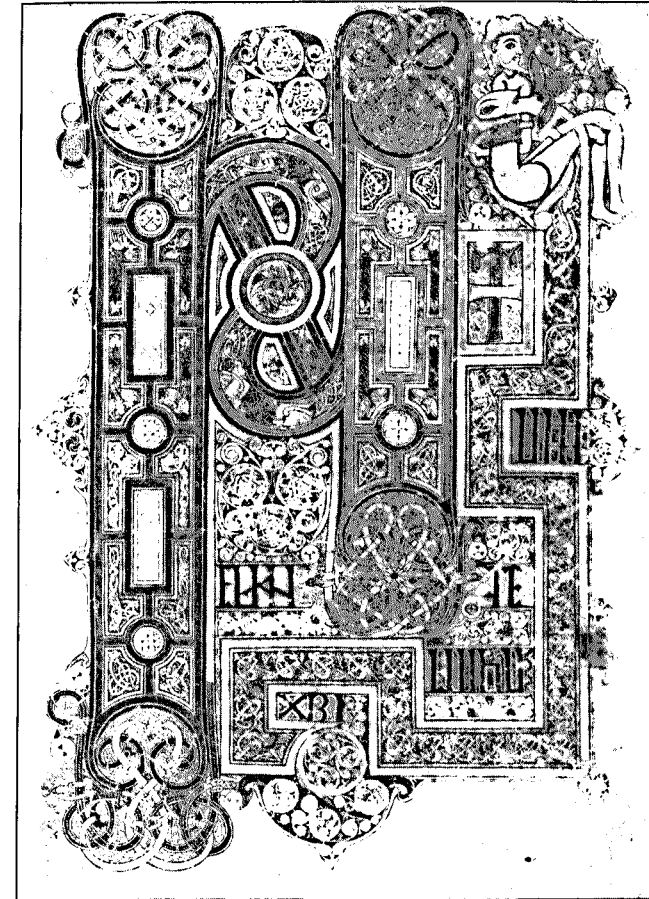


Figure 2. The Book of Kells, *The Beginning of St. Mark's Gospel*.

form, experience many remarkable adventures. I am not, in writing these lines, unmindful of the perfectly legitimate criticism raised by Michel Bréal against the theory formulated by Arsène Darmsteter in his *Life of Words*. The verbal sign, endowed as it is with both real and metaphorical independence, lavishly expresses certain aspects of the life of the mind, of the passive and active aptitudes of the human spirit. It exhibits a wonderful ingenuity in the various processes of the distortion and the ultimate extinction of words. But to say that it wastes away, that it proliferates and that it creates monstrosities is equally true. A wholly unforeseen event may provoke these processes; a shock the force of which is both extrinsic and superior to the factors of history may touch off and activate even more singular processes of destruction, deviation and invention. In passing from these complex depths of the life of language to the lofty regions where language acquires aesthetic value, we can see again the verification of the principle formulated above — a principle whose effects we shall often note during the course of this study, namely: the sign bears general significance, but having attained form, it strives to bear its own individual significance; it creates its own new meaning; it seeks its own new content, and then endows that content with fresh associations by the dislocation of familiar verbal molds. The struggle between the two extremes of the purist ideal and the deliberate manufacture of inexact and inadequate language is a notable episode in the development of this principle. The struggle between purism and verbal "impropriety" may be interpreted in two ways: either as the effort toward the greatest possible semantic energy, or as the twofold manifestation of a hidden travail from which spring forms that are untouched and uninfluenced by any of the fickle changes of meaning.

Again, plastic forms offer peculiarities that are no less remarkable. It is my conviction that we are entirely justified in our

assumption that such forms constitute an order of existence and that 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, as well as to the principle of styles, by which their relationship is, although by no means with any regularity of recurrence, first tested, then made fast and finally disrupted.

Whether constructed of masonry, carved in marble, cast in bronze, fixed beneath varnish, engraved on copper or on wood, a work of art is motionless only in appearance. It seems to be set fast — arrested, as are the moments of time gone by. But in reality it is born of change, and it leads on to other changes. (Within the same shape there are often many such changes, as in the preliminary sketches of painters who, seeking the accuracy or the exact beauty of a movement, will superimpose the drawing of several arms on the same shoulder. Rembrandt's sketches swarm across Rembrandt's paintings. The rough draft always gives vitality to the masterpiece.) A score of experiments, be they recent or forthcoming, are invariably interwoven behind the well-defined evidence of the image. This mobility of form, however, this ability to engender so great a diversity of shapes, is even more remarkable when examined in the light of certain narrower limits. The most rigorous rules, apparently intended to impoverish and to standardize formal material, are precisely those which, with an almost fantastic wealth of variations and of metamorphoses, best illuminate its superb vitality. What could be more removed from life, from its ease and its flexibility, than the geometric combinations of Islamic ornament? These combinations are produced by mathematical reasoning. They are based on cold calculation; they are reducible to patterns of the utmost aridity. But deep within them, a sort of fever seems to goad on and to multiply the shapes; some mysterious genius of complication interlocks,

enfolds, disorganizes and reorganizes the entire labyrinth. Their very immobility sparkles with metamorphoses. Whether they be read as voids or as solids, as vertical axes or as diagonals, each one of them both withholds the secret and exposes the reality of an immense number of possibilities. An analogous phenomenon occurs in Romanesque sculpture. Here, abstract form is both stem and support for a strange, chimerical image of animal and human life; here, monsters that are shackled permanently to an architectural and ornamental definition are yet endlessly reborn in so many different ways that their captivity mocks both us and itself (Figure 3). Form becomes a *rinceau*, a double-headed eagle, a mermaid, a duel of warriors. It duplicates, coils back on and devours its own shape. Without once trespassing its limits or falsifying its principles, this protéan monster rouses up and unrolls its demented existence — an existence that is merely the turmoil and the undulation of a single, simple form.

The objection will perhaps be raised that no matter how much abstract form and fantastic form are restrained by fundamental necessities and, as it were, imprisoned within them, they are at least free as regards the models of nature. It might also be maintained that a work of art which respects the models of nature does not need to obey the formal principles I have just described. This is by no means the case, since the models of nature may themselves be regarded as the stem and support of metamorphoses. The body of man and the body of woman can remain virtually constant, but the ciphers capable of being written with the bodies of men and women are inexhaustibly various, and this variety works on, activates and inspires all works of art, from the most elaborate to the most serenely simple. We do not, it is true, turn for examples of this to those pages of the *Mangwa* which Hokusai covered with his sketches of acrobats, but rather to the compositions of Raphael. When Daphne, in the fable, is transformed



Figure 3. Capital from Abbey of St. Michael and St. Germain, Cuxa.

into a laurel, she must pass from one realm into another. A more subtle and no less extraordinary metamorphosis also involving the body of a beautiful young woman, is that which leads us from the *Orléans Madonna* to the *Madonna della Sedia*, which, with its even, pure volute, resembles nothing so much as some exquisite sea-shell. It is, however, in those compositions by Raphael that are laden with whole garlands of human bodies (Figure 4) that we can best comprehend the genius for harmonic variations that combines over and over again those shapes wherein the life of forms has absolutely no aim other than itself and its own renewal. The mathematicians in the *School of Athens*, the soldiers in the *Massacre of the Innocents*, the fishermen in the *Miracle of the Fishes*, Imperia seated at the feet of Apollo or kneeling before Christ — all these are the successive interlaces of a formal thought composed of and supported by the human body, and by means of which are contrived symmetries, contrappostos and alternating rhythms. Here, the metamorphosis of shapes does not alter the factors of life, but it does compose a new life — one that is no less complex than that of the monsters of Asiatic mythology or of Romanesque sculpture. But whereas these latter are fettered hand and foot by abstract armatures and by monotonous calculations, the ornament of human form remains identical and intact in its harmony and draws ceaseless new compulsions from that very harmony. Form may, it is true, become formula and canon; in other words, it may be abruptly frozen into a normative type. But form is primarily a mobile life in a changing world. Its metamorphoses endlessly begin anew, and it is by the principle of *style* that they are above all coordinated and stabilized.

This term has two very different, indeed two opposite meanings. Style is an absolute. A style is a variable. The word "style" in its generic sense indicates a special and superior quality in a work of art: the quality, the peculiarly eternal value; that allows it to



Figure 4. Raphael: Detail from School of Athens.

style

escape the bondage of time. Conceived as an absolute, style is not only a model, but also something whose validity is changeless. It is like a great summit that, rising between two slopes, sharply defines the expanse of skyline. In utilizing style as an absolute, we give expression to a very fundamental need: that of beholding ourselves in our widest possible intelligibility, in our most stable, our most universal aspect, beyond the fluctuations of history, beyond local and specific limitations. A style, on the other hand, is a development, a coherent grouping of forms united by a reciprocal fitness, whose essential harmony is nevertheless in many ways testing itself, building itself and annihilating itself. Pauses, tensions, relaxations occur in the best defined of styles. This fact was established long ago by the study of the monuments of architecture. The founders of medieval archaeology in France, especially Arcisse de Caumont, taught us that Gothic art, for example, could not be regarded merely as a heterogeneous collection of monuments. By means of a strict analysis of forms, it was defined as a style, that is, as a closely related sequence and succession. A comparable analysis shows that all the arts may be comprehended by this same token of a style – even to the very life of mankind, insofar as its individual life and its historical life are both forms.

What, then, constitutes a style? First, its formal elements, which have a certain index value and which make up its repertory, its vocabulary and, occasionally, the very instrument with which it wields its power; second, although less obviously, its system of relationships, its syntax. The affirmation of a style is found in its measures. In such wise did the Greeks understand a style when they defined it by the relative proportions of its parts. Rather than the mere substitution of volutes for a molding on the capital, it is a measure that distinguishes the Ionic from the Doric order, and it is clear that the column of the temple of Nemea is an aberration, since it has Ionic measures, although its elements

are Doric. The history of the Doric order, that is, its stylistic development, consists solely of variation on and studies of measure. But there are other arts whose component elements also possess a truly fundamental value. One of these is Gothic art. It might well be said that the rib vault (Figure 5) contains Gothic art in its entirety, composes it and controls the derivation of all its parts, although we should not forget that in certain monuments the rib vault does appear without engendering a style, that is, a series of planned harmonies. The earliest Lombard rib vaults, for example, had no issue in Italy. The style of the rib vault developed in other countries, and in other countries its possibilities grew and became coherent.

This activity on the part of a style in the process of self-definition, that is, defining itself and then escaping from its own definition, is generally known as an "evolution," this term being here understood in its broadest and most general sense. Biological science checked and modulated the concept of evolution with painstaking care; archaeology, on the other hand, took it simply as a convenient frame, a method of classification. I have elsewhere pointed out the dangers of "evolution": its deceptive orderliness, its single-minded directness, its use, in those problematic cases in which there is discord between the future and the past, of the expedient of "transitions," its inability to make room for the revolutionary energy of inventors. Any interpretation of the movements of styles must take into account two essential facts. First, several styles may exist simultaneously within neighboring districts and even within the same district; second, styles develop differently in accordance with whatever technical domain they may occupy. With these reservations established, the life of a style may be considered either as a dialectic or as an experimental process.

Nothing is more tempting – and in certain cases nothing is better warranted – than to show how forms comply with an inter-

nal, organizing logic. In the same way that sand spread out on the diaphragm of a violin would fall into different symmetrical figures in response to the strokes of a bow, so does a secret principle, stronger and more rigorous than any possible creative conceit, summon together forms that multiply by mitosis, by change of key or by affinity. This is certainly the case in the mysterious domain of ornament, as well as in any art that borrows and subjects the pattern of the image to ornament. For, the essence of ornament is that it may be reduced to the purest forms of comprehensibility and that geometrical reasoning is infallibly applicable to the analysis of the relationship between its parts. This was the method pursued by Jurgis Baltrusaitis in his brilliant studies of the dialectic of ornament in Romanesque sculpture. In studies of this sort, it is by no means improper to equate style and stylistic analysis, in the sense of "reconstructing" a logical process that already exists, with a force and power more than adequately evident, within the styles themselves. It is of course understood that the character of this process varies in quality and uniformity according to time and place. But it is still perfectly true that an ornamental style takes shape and exists as such only by virtue of the development of an internal logic, of a dialectic worth nothing except in relation to itself. Variations in ornament are not occasioned by the incrustation of alien elements or by a merely accidental choice, but by the play of hidden rules. This dialectic both accepts and demands new contributions, according to its own needs. Whatever has been contributed has already been demanded. The dialectic may, indeed, invent such contributions. A doctrine that still colors many of our studies in the history of art, that is, the doctrine that "influences", may be interpreted in one heterogeneous mass and considered as resulting from impact and conflict, must therefore be qualified and tempered.

This interpretation of the life of styles is one that is admira-

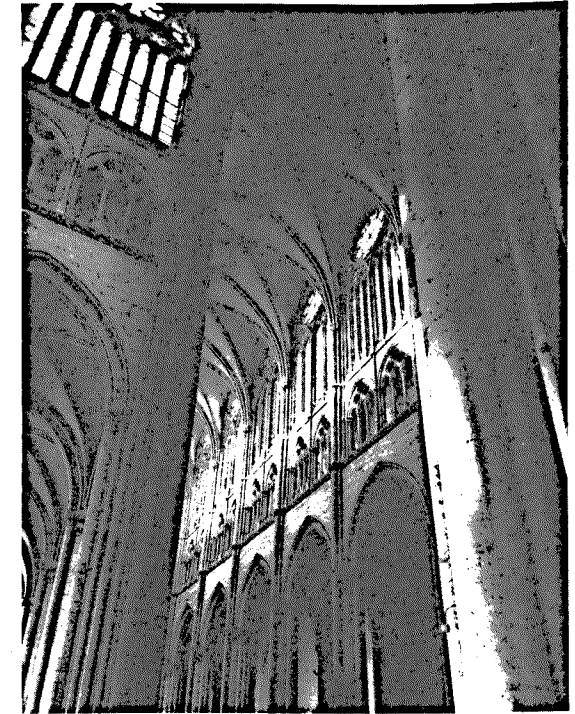


Figure 5. Gothic Rib-Vault, Amiens.

bly adapted to the subject of ornamental art. But is it adequate in all other cases? To architecture, and especially to Gothic architecture (when considered as the development of a theorem), it has been applied in speculations that were both absolute and, as regards ordinary historical activity, practical. Indeed, it is nowhere possible to behold more clearly than in Gothic architecture how, from a given form, there are derived to the very last detail the happy issues that affect the structure, the organization of masses, the relation of voids to solids, the treatment of light and even the decoration itself. No graph, apparent or real, could be more plainly indicated. It would be a mistake, however, not to recognize in this graph the action of an experiment at each of its crucial points. By experiment I mean an investigation that is supported by prior knowledge, based on a hypothesis, conducted with intelligent reason and carried out in the realm of technique. In this sense it may well be said that Gothic architecture is guesswork and reasoning, empirical research and inner logic all at once. The proof of its experimental character is the fact that, in spite of the rigorousness of its methods, some of its experiments remained almost wholly without results; in other words, much was wasted and much was barren. How little do we know of the innumerable mistakes that lurk in the shadow of success! Examples of such mistakes could perhaps be discovered in the history of the flying buttress, which was originally a concealed wall, with a cut-out passage, and later became an arch, awaiting its transformation into a rigid prop. Furthermore, the notion of logic in architecture is applicable to several different functions, which sometimes coincide and sometimes do not. The logic of the eye, with its need for balance and symmetry, is not necessarily in agreement with the logic of structure, which in turn is not the logic of pure intellect. The divergence of these three kinds of logic is remarkable in certain states of the life of styles, among others in flamboyant

art. But it is, nevertheless, admissible to suppose that the experiments of Gothic art, bound powerfully one to the other, and in their royal progress discarding all solutions that were either hazardous or unpromising, constitute by their very sequence and concatenation a kind of logic – an irresistible logic that eventually expresses itself in stone with a classic decisiveness.

If we turn from ornament and architecture to the other arts, and especially to painting, we see that the life of forms is manifested in these arts by a larger number of experiments, and that it is subjected to more frequent and more unexpected variations. For the measures are here more delicate and sensitive, and the material itself invites a degree of research and experiment that must be constantly proportionate to its manageability. Further, the notion of style – a notion that is equally applicable to everything, including the art of living – is qualified by materials and techniques: it does not behave uniformly or synchronously in all realms. Then, too, each historical style exists under the aegis of one technique that overrides other techniques and that gives to the style its tonality. This principle, which may be called the law of technical primacy, was formulated by Louis Bréhier with respect to those barbarian arts that were dominated by ornamental abstraction rather than by anthropomorphic design and by architecture. But, on the other hand, it is architecture that receives the tonic of the Romanesque and the Gothic styles. And we know how painting, at the end of the Middle Ages, tends to encroach on, to redirect and finally to triumph over all the other arts. And yet, within one given style that is homogeneous and faithful to its technical primacy, the various arts live and move with perfect freedom. Each subordinate art seeks to come into agreement with the dominant art. This it attains through experiments, not the least interesting examples of which are the adaptation of the human form to ornamental designs or the variations in monumen-

tal painting due to the influence of stained glass windows. The reason for this is that each one of the arts is attempting to live for itself and to liberate itself, until the day comes when it may take its own turn as the dominant art.

Although the uses to which this law of technical primacy may be put are virtually inexhaustible, it is, perhaps, but one aspect of a more general law. Each style passes through several ages and several phases of being. This does not mean that the ages of style and the ages of mankind are the same thing. The life of forms is not the result of chance. Nor is it a great cyclorama neatly fitted into the theater of history and called into being by historical necessities. No. Forms obey their own rules — rules that are inherent in the forms themselves, or better, in the regions of the mind where they are located and centered — and there is no reason why we should not undertake an investigation of how these great ensembles, united by close reasoning and by coherent experiment, behave throughout the phases that we call their life. The successive states through which they pass are more or less lengthy, more or less intense, according to the style itself: the experimental age, the classic age, the age of refinement, the baroque age. These distinctions are perhaps not wholly new, but it must be borne in mind that — as Waldemar Déonna has pointed out in a penetrating analysis of certain epochs in the history of art — these ages or states present the same formal characteristics at every epoch and in every environment. This is so unmistakably the case that we need not be surprised in noting close similarities between Greek archaism and Gothic archaism, between Greek art of the fifth century B.C. and the sculptures of the first half of the thirteenth century A.D., between the flamboyant, or baroque state of Gothic, and eighteenth-century rococo art. The history of forms cannot be indicated by a single ascending line. One style comes to an end; another comes to life. It is only natural that

mankind should reevaluate these styles over and over again, and it is in the application to this task that I apprehend the constancy and the identity of the human spirit.

The experimental state is the one in which style is seeking to define itself. This is generally called archaism, in either the pejorative or the laudatory sense, according to whether we see in it a crude inarticulateness or an auspicious promise, dependent, obviously, on the historical moment that we ourselves occupy. If we follow the history of Romanesque sculpture during the eleventh century, we become aware of the apparently unsystematic and “crude” experiments whereby form seeks not only to exploit ornamental variations, but also to incorporate man himself into them, thus adapting him to certain architectural functions, even though in the eleventh century man, as man, had not yet become an object of study, and far less a universal measure. The plastic treatment of the human body was still concerned with the integrity of the masses and their density as blocks or as walls. The modeling, a mere gentle undulation, did not penetrate below the surface; the thin, shallow folds possessed no more than a calligraphic value. And such is the course followed by every archaism. Greek art begins with that same massive unity, that same plentitude and density. It dreams of monsters that it has not yet turned into men; it is indifferent to the musical quality of those human proportions whose various canons dominate its classic age; it seeks for variations only in a tectonic order that is conceived primarily in terms of bulk. In Romanesque archaism, as in Greek, experimentation proceeds with disconcerting speed. The sixth century B.C., like the eleventh A.D., suffices for the elaboration of a style; the first half of the fifth B.C. and the first third of the twelfth A.D. witness its flowerings. Gothic archaism is perhaps even more rapid. It multiplies structural experiments, creates types that would normally be considered as stopping points and continues

to renew them until, with Chartres, its future has been, as it were, ordained. The sculpture of the same period presents a remarkable example of the constancy of these laws: it has no meaning if it be regarded as the ultimate expression of Romanesque art or as the "transition" from Romanesque to Gothic. For an art of movement, this sculpture substitutes an art of frontality and immobility; for a grandiose arrangement of the tympani, the reiteration of the Christ enthroned within the tetramorph. Its manner of imitating Languedocian types shows it as retrograding from these latter, older models; it has entirely forgotten the rules of style that implement the Romanesque classicism, and whenever it seems to draw inspiration from that source, it does so by contradiction: form and iconography no longer agree. This sculpture of the second half of the twelfth century, contemporary with Romanesque baroque, undertakes its experiments in another direction, and for other ends. It is starting afresh.

It would be idle to attempt to enrich the long series of definitions that have been given for classicism. Simply by regarding it as a state, or as a moment, I have already qualified it. But it is never beside the point to remember that classicism consists of the greatest propriety of the parts one to the other. It is stability, security, following on experimental unrest. It confers, so to speak, a solidity on the unstable aspects of experimentation (because of which it is also, in a way, a renunciation). Thus it is that the endless life of styles coincides with style as a universal value, that is, as an order whose value never ceases, and which, far beyond the graph of time, establishes what I have called the expanse of skyline. But classicism is not the result of a conformist attitude. On the contrary, it has been created out of one final, ultimate experiment, the audacity and vitality of which it has never lost. How good it would be could we rejuvenate this venerable word — a word that has today lost all meaning through so much careless

and indeed illegitimate usage! Classicism: a brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms; not a slow and monotonous application of "rules," but a pure, quick delight, like the *ἀκμῆ* of the Greeks, so delicate that the pointer of the scale scarcely trembles. I look at this scale not to see whether the pointer will presently dip down again, or even come to a moment of absolute rest. I look at it instead to see, within the miracle of that hesitant immobility, the slight, inappreciable tremor that indicates life. It is for this reason that the classic state differs radically from the academic state, which is merely a lifeless reflection, a kind of inert image. It is for this reason that the analogies or identities occasionally revealed by the various types of classicism in the treatment of forms are not necessarily the result of an influence or imitation. The wonderful statues of the Visitation, full, calm, monumental, on the north portal of Chartres, are much more "classic" than the figures at Rheims whose draperies suggest a direct imitation of Roman models. Classicism is by no means the unique privilege of ancient art, which itself passed through different states and ceased being classic art when it became baroque art. If the sculptors of the first half of the thirteenth century had constantly drawn inspiration from that so-called Roman classicism of which France retained so many traces, they would have ceased being classic. A remarkable proof may be seen in a monument that deserves a careful analysis: the Belle Croix of Sens (Figure 6). The Virgin, as she stands beside her crucified son in all her simplicity and in all the absorption and chastity of her grief, still bears the traits of that first experimental age of the Gothic genius that recalls the dawn of the fifth century B.C. But the figure of Saint John on the other side of the cross is, in the treatment of the draperies, plainly an imitation of some mediocre Gallo-Roman full-round work, and particularly in the lower part of the body it is entirely out of key with the purity of

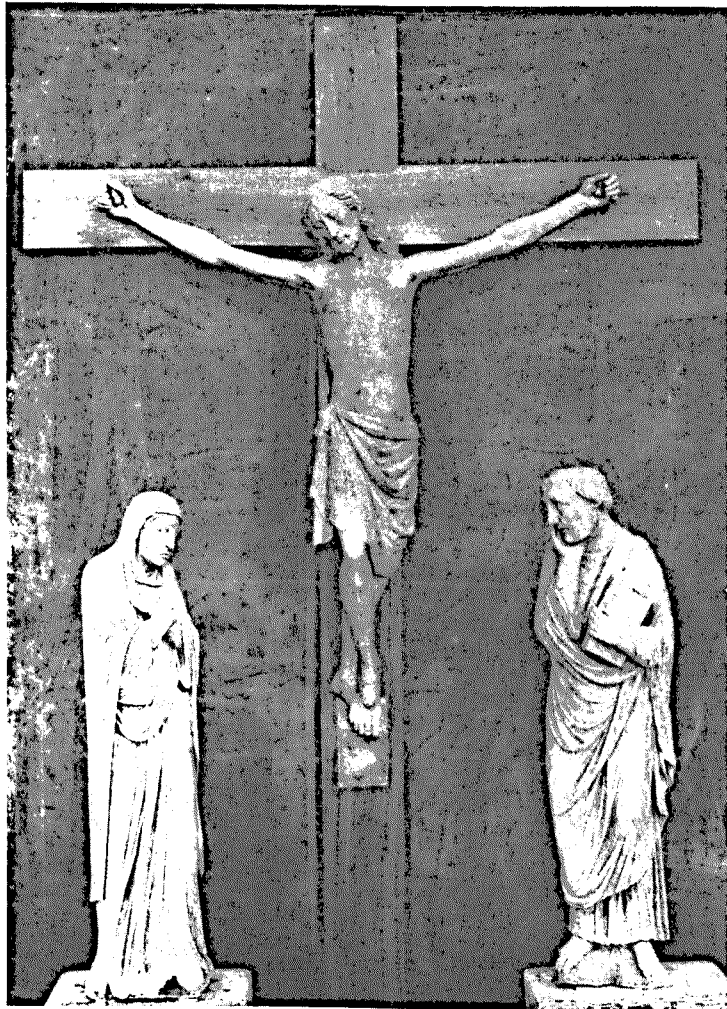


Figure 6. La Belle Croix, Sens.

the group as a whole. The classic state of a style is not attained from without. The dogma of slavish imitation of the ancients can serve the objectives of any romanticism.

This is not the place to show how forms pass from the classic state to those experiments in refinement that, as regards architecture at least, enhance the elegance of structural solutions to what may seem a very bold paradox, and that reach that state of dry purity and of calculated interdependence of the parts so singularly well-expressed in the style known as *art rayonnant*. Nor to show how, in the meanwhile, the image of man discards little by little its monumental character, loses contact with architecture and becomes elongated and enriched with new axial torsions and with more subtle modeling. The poetry of bare flesh as an artistic subject induces every sculptor to become, after a fashion, a painter, and arouses in him a taste for the warmth of reality. Flesh becomes flesh; it loses the quality, the look of stone. Ephemism in the representation of man is not the sign of the youth of an art; it is, on the contrary, perhaps the first gracious annunciation of decline. The svelte, alert figures of the Resurrection on the main portal of Rampillon (Figure 7), the statue of Adam from St. Denis (despite its restorations) and certain fragments from Notre Dame — all these shed over French art at the end of the thirteenth century and during the entire fourteenth century a truly Praxitelean light. Such comparisons are no longer, we feel, merely matters of taste on our part; they seem to be justified by an inner life that is incessantly active, incessantly effective in various periods and environments of human civilization. It might be perhaps permissible to explain in this way, and not simply by means of analogies of process, the characteristics held in common by quite different things. One might cite, for instance, the figures of women that were painted on the sides of Attic funerary lekythoi in the fourth century B.C., and those whose sen-

sitive, flexible likenesses the Japanese masters designed with their little brushes for the wood engravers at the end of the eighteenth century.

The baroque state likewise reveals identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time. Baroque was not reserved exclusively for the Europe of the last three centuries any more than classicism was the unique privilege of Mediterranean culture. In the life of forms, baroque is indeed but a moment, but it is certainly the freest and the most emancipated one. Baroque forms have either abandoned or denatured that principle of intimate propriety, an essential aspect of which is a careful respect for the limits of the frame, especially in architecture. They live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own; they proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities. This mastery of space is pure delight to them. They are obsessed with the object of representation; they are urged toward it by a kind of maniacal "similism." But the experiments into which they are swept by some hidden force constantly overshoot the mark. These traits are remarkable, nay, strikingly noticeable, in baroque ornamental art. Never has abstract form a more obvious — although not necessarily a more powerful — mimic value. And the confusion between form and sign never becomes more complete. Form no longer signifies itself alone; it signifies as well a wholly deliberate content, and form is tortured to fit a "meaning." It is here that the primacy of painting may be seen coming into play, or, better, it is here that all the arts pool their various resources, cross the frontiers that separate them and freely borrow visual effects one from the other. At the same time, by a curious inversion that is governed by a nostalgia arising from the very forms themselves, an interest in the past is

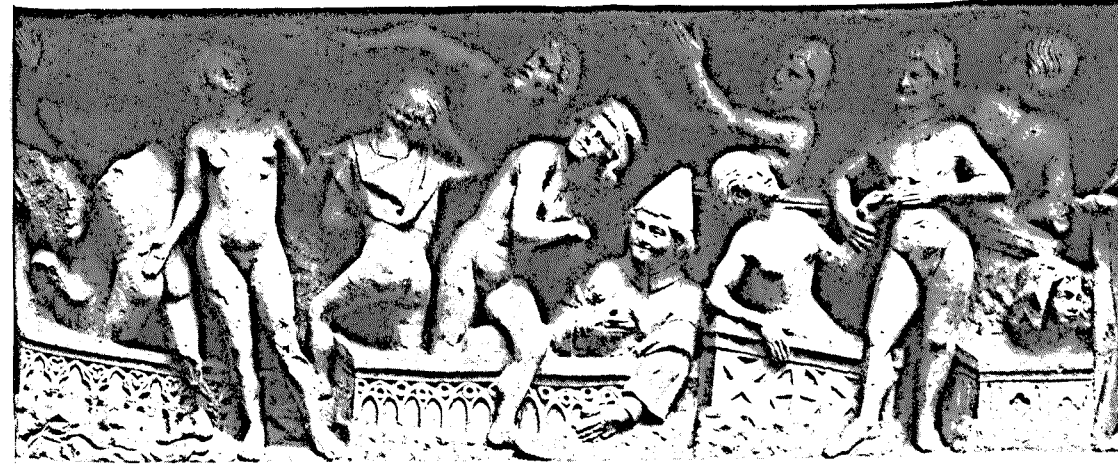


Figure 7. Detail of the Resurrection from the Main Portal at Rampillon.

awakened, and baroque art seeks models and examples and confirmations from the most remote regions of antiquity. But what baroque wants from history is the past life of baroque itself. Exactly as Euripides and Seneca, and not Aeschylus, inspired the seventeenth-century French dramatists, so did the baroque of nineteenth-century romanticism particularly admire in medieval art the flamboyant style: that baroque form of Gothic. I do not mean that there are exact parallels between baroque art and romanticism at every point, and if in France these two "states" of form appear separate and distinct, it is not simply because one followed the other, but because a historical phenomenon of rupture — a brief and violent interval of artificial classicism — divided them. French painters had to cross what I may call the gulf of David's art before they could rejoin the art of Titian, Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Rubens and later, under the Second Empire, of the great eighteenth-century masters.

We must never think of forms, in their different states, as simply suspended in some remote, abstract zone, above the earth and above man. They mingle with life, whence they come; they translate into space certain movements of the mind. But a definite style is not merely a state in the life of forms, nor is it that life itself: it is a homogeneous, coherent, formal environment, in the midst of which man acts and breathes. It is, too, an environment that may move from place to place *en bloc*. We find Gothic art imported in such wise into northern Spain, into England, into Germany, where it lived on with varying degrees of energy and with a rhythm sufficiently rapid to permit an occasional incorporation of older forms that, although they had become localized, were never vitally essential to the environment. Occasionally, again, this rhythm may precipitate movements sooner than might be expected. Whether stable or nomadic, all formal environments give birth to their own various types of social structure: styles of

life, vocabularies, states of awareness. Expressed in a more general way, the life of forms gives definition to what may be termed "psychological landscapes," without which the essential genius of the environments would be opaque and elusive for all those who share in them. Greece, for instance, exists as a geographical basis for certain ideas about man, but the landscape of Doric art, or rather, Doric art as a landscape, created a Greece without which the real Greece is merely a great, luminous desert. Again, the landscape of Gothic art, or rather, Gothic art as a landscape, created a France and a French humanity that no one could foresee: outlines of the horizon, silhouettes of cities — a poetry, in short, that arose from Gothic art, and not from geology or from Capetian institutions. But is not the essential attribute of any environment that of producing its own myths, of shaping the past according to its own needs? Formal environment creates historical myths that are fashioned not only by the state of existing knowledge and by existing spiritual needs, but also by the exigencies of form. Take, for example, the long succession of fables that, appearing, disappearing and reappearing, have come down to us from the remotest Mediterranean antiquity. According to whether these fables are embodied in Romanesque art or Gothic art, in humanist art or baroque art, in David's art or romantic art, they change shape, they fit themselves to different frames and different curves, and, in the minds of those who witness metamorphoses such as these, they evoke wholly different, if not indeed wholly opposite, images. These fables occur in the life of forms, not as an irreducible factor nor as a foreign body, but as a true substance, plastic and docile.

It may seem that I have laid down a far too unwieldy determinism in underlining with such insistence the various principles that rule the life of forms and that so react upon nature, man and history as to constitute an entire universe and humanity. It may

subject matter
is material

seem that I am anxious to isolate works of art from human life, and condemn them to a blind automatism and to an exactly predictable sequence. This is by no means so. The state of a style or, if one prefers, a state in the life of forms, is simultaneously the guarantor and the promoter of *diversity*. Man's spirit is truly free in the impregnability of a high intellectual self-expression. The power of formal order alone authorizes the ease and spontaneity of creation. A large number of experiments and variations is likely to occur whenever the artist's expression is at all confined, whereas unlimited freedom inevitably leads to imitation. In case these principles should be disputed, two observations may be made that will shed light on the qualities of activity and of apparent uniqueness that coexist within the closely knit phenomena of forms.

First, forms are not their own pattern, their own mere naked representation. Their life develops in a space that is not the abstract frame of geometry; under the tools and at the hands of men it assumes substance in a given material. It is there and not elsewhere that forms exist, that is, in a highly concrete, but highly diversified world. An identical form keeps its dimensions, but changes its quality according to the material, the tool and the hand. A text does not change because of the different papers on which it chances to be printed; the paper is but the support for the text. In a drawing, however, the paper is an element of life; it is the very heart of the design. A form without support is not form, and the support itself is form. It is essential, therefore, to bear in mind how immense is the variety of techniques in the genealogy of a work of art, and to show that the principle of all technique is not inertia, but activity.

And second, man himself, who is no less diversified, must be taken into consideration. The source of man's diversity does not lie in the accord or disaccord of race, environment or time, but

in quite another region of life, which seems to comprise affinities and accords far more subtle than those that preside over the general historical groupings of mankind. There exists a kind of spiritual ethnography that cuts across the best-defined "races." It is composed of families of the mind — families whose unity is effected by secret ties and who are faithfully in communication with one another, beyond all restrictions of time or place. Perhaps each style, each state of a style, even each technique seeks out by preference a certain state of man's nature, a certain spiritual family. In any case, it is the relationship between these three values that clarifies a work of art not only as something that is unique, but also as something that is a living word in a universal language.