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*LES IMAGES ET LES FORMES. FRANÇOISE HENRY (1902-1982),
LES HÉRITAGES D'UNE ŒUVRE PIONNIÈRE*

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HENRI FOCILLON

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Henri Focillon

Kathleen James-Chakraborty

I would like to begin with a personal aside. Until I moved to Dublin in 2007 to become Professor of Art History at University College Dublin, I did not know about Francoise Henry. Henri Focillon, who encouraged Henry to undertake a study of Irish Celtic sculpture for her dissertation, was another matter entirely, however. The very first books on architectural history that I ever read were his volumes on Romanesque and Gothic architecture, which I devoured as a teenager.¹ My father had studied at Yale when Focillon taught there. When I followed in his footsteps, one of my favourite teachers was Focillon's student Walter Cahn, from whom I took a module on the Gothic Cathedral, writing a B+ essay on the cathedral of Laon. In addition to reading Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* as a student, I also lapped up the work of another Focillon student and Yale faculty member, *The Shape of Time*, which was very much written by George Kubler as a conversation with *The Life of Forms*.² Thus, my original training as an art historian, like those of generations of Henry's students at University College Dublin, was in part in a French tradition, rather than the German one that dominated most instruction in the subject in the English-speaking world in the second half of the twentieth century. This is undoubtedly one of the many reasons I have always felt so much at home in Dublin.

When I entered graduate school in the mid 1980s, the discovery of 'theory' was all the rage. That was more than thirty years ago, and this wave has long since crested, but one of the reasons that I was at the time able to view it with what I think in retrospect was a healthy scepticism was that I had always assumed that art history had a theoretical underpinning. And certainly, this conviction came as much from my early reading of Focillon and Kubler as from an awareness of the work of the most important German architectural theorist with whom some of my own teachers had studied, the equally formidable Erwin Panofsky.³ On a final personal note, I should add that when I returned to Yale as a guest professor, I found a revival of interest in Focillon, now for the path he created back to formalism.⁴

1 Henri Focillon, *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages*, New York, Phaidon, 1963, the translation into English of *Art d'Occident, le Moyen Âge roman et gothique*, Paris, A. Colin, 1938.

2 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, transl. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler, New Haven, Yale University Press, « Yale historical publications », 1942; reprint New York, Wittenborn, 1948, published in French as *La Vie des Formes* [1934], Paris, Félix Alcan, 1939. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962.

3 Charles Minott at the University of Pennsylvania and Judith Colton at Yale University had both studied with him, Minott at Princeton and Colton at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

4 Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen in the School of Architecture and Nicola Suthor in the Department of the History of Art were particularly enthusiastic about him.

Henri Focillon

So who was Henri Focillon? One hardly needs to introduce him to a French audience, but a few biographical details might not be entirely out of place even here before I proceed to his scholarly approach and the impact it had, not just upon Henry, but among English-speaking art historians and their readers more generally.⁵ Focillon was born in 1881 in Dijon; his father was an artist and art critic (Henry came from a very similar background; it is entirely possible that Focillon's father Victor-Louis Focillon and her maternal great-grandfather Charles Clément knew one another).⁶ Focillon grew up aware of post-Impressionist painting and sculpture, and interested in subjects as far afield from it as Buddhist art and Japanese prints.⁷ In 1924, however, in a dramatic shift of gears, he succeeded Émile Mâle, with whom Henry also studied, as the professor of medieval archaeology at the Sorbonne. For the rest of his life, he would be primarily known as a medievalist, and it was in this area, as well as that of theory, that he made his principal contribution. In 1933 he began to teach occasionally at Yale, always lecturing, I might add, in French. The outbreak of World War II saw him stranded in New Haven, where he died in 1943 without ever having returned to his beloved France. In addition to Henry and Cahn, Focillon's most notable disciples and students, not always the same thing of course, included the medievalists Jean Bony, André Chastel, Louis Grodecki, Sumner Crosby, and Robert Branner, as well as Kubler, whose subject was Iberian and Pre-Columbian art and architecture, and the late James Ackerman, best known for his monographs on Michelangelo and Palladio.⁸

Focillon was above all a formalist. In this he was unusual for a French art historian of his generation, having been strongly influenced by the work of the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. Wölfflin famously contrasted the principles that he believed shaped the art of the Renaissance and that of the Baroque.⁹ Focillon made clear that, following in a tradition first established in the eighteenth century by Winckelmann, he believed that such shifts could be attributed to the evolution of forms across time.¹⁰ These excerpts from the final paragraph of the introduction to his two-volume magnum opus *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages*, the one that I read while still in secondary school, make that approach clear:

Thus the human mind, the variable speed of time, the fixed data of place, the inconstant data of influence, all work together with the innate evolutionary factors of the styles, defining, amplifying, accelerating and coloring them...The great Gothic art of the twelfth century usually continued to utilize the programme and some of the details of Romanesque, but elaborated a tribuneless church-type, which, in conjunction with the systematic use of the flying-buttress, became the classical formula of the first half of the thirteenth century. The century of the cathedrals proceeded to raise its immense systems of stone, propounded and deduced with strict logic, each one a new and masterly statement

- 5 Lee Sorensen, « Focillon, Henri », *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/focillonh>, consulted 26 October 2021. See also *Henri Focillon*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, « Cahiers pour un temps », 1986; and Christian Briend et Alice Thomine (dir.), *La Vie des formes : Henri Focillon et les arts*, exh. cat., Lyon, musée des Beaux-Arts, 22 janvier-26 avril 2004, Ghent, Snoeck, 2004.
- 6 Lee Sorensen, « Henry, Françoise », *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/henryf>, consulted 26 October 2021. For her grandfather Clément see Taylor Leigh Robinson and Emily Crockett, « Clément, Charles », *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/clementc>, consulted 26 October 2021. See also Hilary Richardson, « Françoise Henry », *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <https://www.dib.ie/index.php/biography/henry-francoise-a3940>, consulted 26 October 2021.
- 7 Henri Focillon, *Hokousai*, Paris, Alcan, « Art et esthétique », 1914, and Henri Focillon, *L'Art bouddhique*, Paris, Henri Laurens, « Art et religion. Études critiques d'esthétique religieuse », 1921.
- 8 James Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, London, A. Zwemmer, 1961; *Palladio*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966; and *Palladio's Villas*, Locust Valley, J. J. Augustin/Institute of Fine Arts, 1967.
- 9 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Munich, Bruckmann, 1915.
- 10 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*, ed. David Carter, Rochester, Camden House, 2013.

of the same idea, and all peopled with a world of images as inexhaustibly various as Creation itself. The second half of this period and the following century, refined, elegantly but sometimes dryly, on these perfected solutions which had left no scope for fresh invention; meantime, form in sculpture and painting kept step with architectural evolution, and even the style of life itself lost in nobility what it gained in intimacy and charm.¹¹

This passage demonstrates the degree to which Focillon saw art moving through a period of experimentation towards a canonical moment, in this case the Gothic of the first half of the thirteenth century, and then, not exactly crashing, but nonetheless being subject to a subtle decline, a certain lack of imagination. The photograph on the book cover of the edition I think I read is of the mid-thirteenth-century Rayonnant transept of the Abbey Church of St. Denis, and thus at the very beginning of what he saw as that decline. This is a formulation that Winckelmann had applied to classicism, but which Focillon developed with unparalleled nuance in relation to the art of the Middle Ages. The passage also demonstrates the agency Focillon attributed to both form and time. Nowhere here do we hear of a stone cutter, a master mason, a merchant or a bishop, the men we know to have crafted, paid for, and organised the construction of the building. Engineering, too, appears but only as a means to an aesthetic end. Nor was archival research central to this approach; instead, the buildings and the sculptures that ornamented them were his principal sources, although, of course, he excelled at distinguishing medieval work from later additions and renovations.

Even when he was engaged in an effort to establish abstract principles, Focillon's arguments remained anchored in particular works of art. Take, for instance, the passage in *The Life of Forms in Art* about the richly illuminated page with which St. Mark's Gospel opens in the *Book of Kells*. Here the influence undoubtedly flowed from student to teacher, although without Focillon's enthusiasm, it is unlikely that Henry would have pursued the study of early medieval Irish Art. Focillon places the Irish illuminated page in the context of Eastern Christian and Islamic art:

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 that genius for analysis so typical of Islam [,] the construction and isolation of completely stylised patterns. In Ireland, the interlace appears as a transitory, but endlessly renewed mediation on a chaotic universe that deep within itself clasps and conceals the debris or the seeds of humankind. 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.¹²

Again, it is the interlace that has agency rather than the artist, much less his patron. But note the range of references.

Today those engaged in writing a global art history like to believe we are pioneers. For Focillon, such wide-ranging references came easily, however; the same volume displays, as well, his familiarity with East Asian art and its very different conventions. He published a book on the Japanese printmaker Hokusai in 1914, which was reissued (not for the first time) a century later.¹³ This global perspective would be true of very few of the next generation of medievalists. I am reminded of a Dublin exception, the late Hilary Richardson, whom I was privileged to know and who often spoke to me of how much she had learned from studying with Henry, whom she continued

11 Henri Focillon, *The Art of the West*, op. cit., v. I, *Romanesque art*, p. 10-11.

12 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, op. cit., p. 4-5.

13 Henri Focillon, *Hokusai : Le fou génial du Japon moderne*, Paris, Magellan et Cie, 2014.

to revere.¹⁴ Like Focillon, she, too, was intrigued by the early medieval art of Armenia and Georgia and its possible relation to that of Western Europe and, unusually for an Irish scholar at the time, travelled to that region when it was still part of the Soviet Union.

Francoise Henry

In her volumes on Irish art, Henry paid much more attention to historical background and to the processes of cultural exchange than her teacher typically did (note that in the passage I just cited, he described formal overlaps without proposing actual routes of transmission).¹⁵ Echoes of Focillon can nonetheless be detected in the way in which she viewed style as an evolutionary process, even as she also acknowledges the importance of the individual, although still anonymous, artist. Take for instance, this description of eight-century Irish metalwork:

The knowledge of English and possibly Continental metalwork is so evident in Irish jewellery that it becomes clear that these objects are only a few survivals of much more numerous importations and direct imitations. It is, however, essential to mark firmly, from the start, the true character of these connections. There is obvious imitation, but never a copy. We are faced with constant adaptations, where different techniques are used to give a similar effect and a few motifs are chosen carefully and completely incorporated into the current of the Irish repertory. The Irish artist is never overwhelmed by what confronts him. He assimilates what he borrows and submits it to the inner rhythm of his ornament. He is indefinitely superior to the Saxon artist in craftsmanship and less easily satisfied with his achievements. He seldom limits his efforts to producing the same effects by the same means. To him, each object represents a new adventure and ever-renewed experiments.¹⁶

The Life of Forms in Art

The first and third texts from which I have quoted are embedded in histories of the art of particular times and places. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, however, few scholars paid more attention to what they believed to be the abstract processes through which forms evolved than did Focillon and Kubler, the first in *The Life of Forms in Art* and the second in *The Shape of Time*. For both men, this evolution, although it could be in part the product of the imported influences that affected the design of the metalwork surveyed by Henry, was primarily a matter of formal processes that operated relatively autonomously from issues of use or cross-cultural exchange, although Focillon certainly privileged technological change as a contributing factor to the emergence of French Gothic. For instance, he credited the Abbot Suger with having a major role in the design of the choir and ambulatory of St. Denis outside of Paris, but he did not investigate the philosophical dimension of this story in anywhere near the detail, that the German scholar Otto von Simson subsequently did in his classic book *The Gothic Cathedral*, written while he was on the faculty of the University of Chicago (Simson, by the way, also grew up surrounded by French Impressionism).¹⁷

One of the most notable aspects of *The Life of Forms in Art* is the attention that Focillon pays to the baroque. Until Wölfflin, this had often been viewed as a debased style in comparison with the heights of sixteenth-century Renaissance art in particular. In his work on Gothic architecture, Focillon

14 Hilary Richardson and John Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, Dublin, Mercier Press, 1990.

15 Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.)*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1965; *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions (800-1020 A.D.)*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1967; and *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period (1020-1170 A.D.)*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1970. See also *L'Art irlandais*, La Pierre-qui-Vire, Zodiaque, 1963-1964, 3 vols.

16 Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.)*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

17 Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1956. For Simson see « Simson, Otto von », *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/simsono>, consulted 26 October 2021.

makes clear his preference for the 'classic' moment of Chartres and for that matter Bourges, Amiens, and Reims, over that of the French gothic churches of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁸ He was, however, a great admirer of the actual baroque, and particularly of Rembrandt's paintings and prints. The baroque, which he describes with characteristic vigour in the following passage owes, it should be noted, almost nothing to the art of the seventeenth-century France, which typically retained a stronger relationship to a classicism based on logic and rules. It was thus, for a French scholar writing at a time when these classical precedents were being revived, a particularly unnationalistic approach to the subject, even as he concludes with his characteristic reservations about what is obviously the late Gothic. These are written with an awareness of semiotic theory that, once again, belies the idea that art historians were unselfconscious about theory before the arrival of the new art history in the final decades of the last century:

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 a 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 as wholly deliberate content, and form is tortured to fit a 'meaning.'¹⁹

It is not just late Gothic ornament that Focillon envisions as being in motion. Here he might once again be writing about the *Book of Kells*:

In the Celtic gospels, the ornament, which is constantly overlaying itself and melting into itself, even though it is fixed fast within compartments of letters and panels, appears to be shifting among different planes at different speeds.²⁰

George Kubler

But ultimately it was Focillon's investigation of time in the penultimate chapter of in *The Life of Forms in Art* that would prove most influential, especially upon Kubler. Born thirty years after Focillon, Kubler was thus also junior to Henry.²¹ He wrote first his MA and then his doctorate at Yale under Focillon's supervision and taught there for the rest of his long and distinguished career. In his doctorate he focused on colonial churches in New Mexico, a topic that introduced him to anthropological perspectives, but which also demonstrated Focillon's own great confidence, as this would not have been a field he himself would have known well. Kubler also translated *La Vie des Formes* into English. *The Life of Forms in Art* appeared in 1942, shortly before its author's death.

18 Compare the language in Focillon, *The Art of the West*, *op. cit.*, v. II, *Gothic art*, p. 33-67 with that in p. 137-157. While the first describes the « classic », the second is titled « The Spirit of Fantasy: Gothic Baroque ».

19 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

21 « Kubler, George », *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/kubler/> consulted 26 October 2021.

Twenty years later Kubler published *The Shape of Time*.²² Unusually for the period, it was not only a theoretical investigation but one that proved useful to many of the most significant American artists of the day, including the minimalist sculptors Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson.²³

Here I want to focus on the aspects of the text, however, that might interest us in relation to both Focillon and Henry. The two disciples had very different areas of expertise, but not surprisingly, their approaches nonetheless overlapped. Quite notably, both worked very closely with archaeologists, something that distinguished them from the teacher who had had such a great influence upon them and who remained quite resolutely an art historian. Although Kubler's expertise in Latin America encompassed the post-Conquest period for which he had written sources, he, like Henry, was very much at home teasing out a sequence of objects in a situation in which the archival record was limited and almost never included the names of the people who had actually fabricated the art that so fascinated them.²⁴ Accustomed to working with far less textual material than even Henry, Kubler was equally skilled at teasing out sequences of objects through a careful study of their forms and reconstruction of the techniques used in their making. In his short, but extremely thoughtful book, he attempted to identify the conditions in which rapid change (he preferred the word inventiveness to our buzzwords 'innovation' and 'paradigm shift') occurred. Slightly provincial urban societies, including court cultures, were, he posited, to be preferred, although he granted a nod in the direction of itinerant artists, a group that included both medieval monks of the kind so crucial to the stories Henry told, as well as his own contemporaries, such as Walter Gropius.²⁵

An equally important overlap between the work of the two was their relative lack of interest in iconography. Henry was careful to identify the subjects of the art she studied, when it was representational enough for this to be done, but she very seldom interrogated them for larger lessons about, for instance, the theology of the period, much less a detailed analysis of court display. Instead, she carefully reconstructed a chronology of formal shifts, small and large, in the appearance of specific classes of objects.²⁶ Kubler was quite clear about the gap between his project and Panofsky's.²⁷ He worked in many cases on material whose iconography remained, in the absence of a text like the Bible, with whose stories Henry was as familiar as were the medieval monks who commissioned so much of the art she studied, relatively obscure to him.

Kubler, much more than Henry, focused on outstanding works of art, dismissing much of the rest as replicas. And he preferred 'early solutions,' as he termed them, to their successors, praising the first as 'technically simply, energetically inexpensive, expressively clear' as opposed to 'costly, difficult, intricate, recondite, and animated.'²⁸ Here he differed from Focillon, who not only celebrated the baroque but appreciated the vigour of the mid-twelfth century church of Notre-Dame du mont Cornadore in St. Nectaire, begun at the same time as Abbot Suger's ambulatory and choir at St. Denis, even though it remains determinedly Romanesque in style, without any significant stylistic advances upon predecessors like the much grander St. Foy in Conques.²⁹

22 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, op. cit.

23 Pamela M. Lee, « "Ultramoderne": Or, How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art », *Grey Room*, 2, 2001, p. 46-77; for Smithson, see Robert Linsley, « Minimalism and the City: Robert Smithson as a Social Critic », *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 41, 2002, p. 38-55.

24 For instance, George Kubler, *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1948.

25 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, op. cit., p. 113.

26 Within each of the three volumes of Henry, *Irish Art*, she organized material by medium.

27 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, op. cit., p. 3-4.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

29 Henri Focillon, *The Art of the West*, vol. I, p. 125.

Again, it is Focillon who appears prescient here at a time when precisely the least classic works of art are receiving renewed attention due to what they can tell us about cross-cultural contact and expressions of complex identity.³⁰ For this twenty-first century art historian, whose own life embodies these issues, which are also the focus of much of my scholarship, returning to the works of Focillon, Kubler, and Henry, three seminal figures in the field, illuminates the links between my beginnings as an intellectual and my present situation. Most of all, however, it has reminded me of what an inclusive and dynamic discipline I am a part, one in which the most esteemed academics of the 1920s encouraged talented and enterprising young women as well as men and set the high standards that enabled them to excel, thus creating space for successors like myself and my colleagues in Dublin.

30 Zoltean Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.