



The Life of Forms in Art

By Henri Focillon



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In this beautiful meditation on the history of art and the problem of style, Henri Focillon (1881-1943) describes how art forms change over time. Although he argues that the development of art is reducible to external political, social, or economic determinants, one of his great achievements was to lodge a concept of autonomous and organic artistic creation within the shifting domain of materials and techniques. Focillon emphasizes the universal presence of contradictory tendencies that give all styles manifold, stratified character. The Life of Forms remains one of the most brilliant and important applications of biological metaphors to the study of art. It has been superbly translated by Yale art historian George Kubler, whose book *The Shape of Time* was strongly influenced by Focillon.

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