

TRANSLATED TEXT

*Folk Art: Artistic and  
Scientific Works from  
the First Congress on  
Folk Arts, Prague, 1928*

Henri Focillon, Professor at the Sorbonne

Introduction by Christopher Wood  
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## Introduction

The first international scholarly congress on the topic of *art populaire*, or folk art, took place in Prague in October 1928, under the aegis of the League of Nations. The two volumes of conference proceedings, published in 1931, comprise eleven general essays on the origins and definitions of folk art; a series of brief reports on the study and collection of the *arts populaires* in twenty-four nations, mostly but not all European; several dozen more detailed articles on the various techniques: architecture, wood carving, metalwork and jewelry, ceramics, textiles, dance, theater, and music (including an essay by Béla Bartók); and abundant illustrations. Among the authors of the reports were directors and conservators of regional, ethnographic, and so-called open-air museums as well as university instructors. The following text is a translation of Henri Focillon's introduction to that publication.<sup>1</sup>

Focillon (1881–1943) was, from 1913 to 1924, director of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and, from 1924, as the successor to Émile Mâle, professor of art history at the Sorbonne. Focillon was active in the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI), an agency of the League of Nations whose first chair was Henri Bergson and which numbered among its members Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and Paul Valéry. Focillon, often in league with Valéry, would play a leading role in the IICI's programs throughout the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

Before the Prague conference, Focillon had no record of publications in the field of *art populaire*. Mainly he had written on the graphic arts and modern French painting. Nevertheless Focillon was entrusted with the keynote lecture. He had an intuition about folk art and, for those museum conservators who might be tempted to enlist their collections in the promotion of nostalgia or nationalism, a message: namely, that the traditional rural crafts of Europe, which in some remote corners had survived industrialization, spoke a common formal language that precedes all distinctions, all contents. "Spirals, roses, chevrons, stars, wreaths, and knot work," in Focillon's words, "constitute a universe where man's thought injects the meaning of his choosing" (XIII/ 00). Folk art, he said, opens a window onto a primordial creativity rooted in fantasy: "A hidden instinct allows the marvel of a beautiful dream to inhabit the poorest material. . . . within the tightest extended thread, the strictest human definition, whimsy, reverie, love, and gift remain in play" (XV–XVI/ 00). The proper frame of reference for folk art can therefore never be "national and ethnic," for these latter categories are "unstable as well as mobile, because the notion of race is confused and often artificial, because a people is a complex entity, be it ancient



Henri Focillon, Image courtesy of Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Public Domain.

or recent, stabilized within a language and a civilization” (XI/00). Folk art, its roots lodged in the deepest, universally shared layers of human nature, numbered instead among those “connections that unite national forms of action” (X/00). This was the very program of the League of Nations, which placed great hopes in the capacity of culture to disarm divisive nationalisms.

Focillon wished to pull the study of folk art out of the orbit of the ethnographic museums, whose perspectives were often parochial and identitarian, not to mention reductively materialist, and instead toward what he saw as the universalism and idealism of the academic discipline of art history. He brought to the conference in Prague the same liberal optimism and moral seriousness he brought to his teaching duties in the United States, where, over the last decade of his life, at New York University but mainly at Yale University, he taught as a visiting professor. At Yale Focillon succeeded in introducing the formal study of art history to the university’s general curriculum.<sup>3</sup> His voice resonated in New Haven for decades. In 1948, Focillon’s eminent pupil George Kubler translated into English his teacher’s poetic meditation on the essential freedom and irreducibility of art, *Vie des formes* (1934). Almost three decades later, the furniture historian Robert F. Trent, who had been a Fellow at the Yale University Art Gallery in the mid-1970s, published a translation of Focillon’s introduction to the Prague conference as a supplement to his own book on early American chairs, *Hearts and Crowns: Folk Chairs of the Connecticut Coast, 1720–1840*. With this new translation by Samuel Luterbacher, we reopen the dossier of the Prague Congress of 1928.

Focillon and the League of Nations were well aware that the collecting and study of folk art since the eighteenth century had very often reinforced regional, national, and ethnic particularisms as well as myths of the “genius of races,” including the liberatory myths of oppressed minorities, myths nourished by suspicion and hostility toward cities, mechanization, and internationalism. “The principle of nationalities,” Focillon warned, “tended to accentuate differences, leading each political group to glorify its own ancient heritage of traditions as an exclusive asset, like some original value” (VII/00). Admittedly, the contributions to the Prague proceedings are mostly workmanlike in tone and ideologically innocuous. But with little prompting, the promoters of folk art and culture, especially in Germany, were apt to strike nationalistic notes. Nowhere was folklore studies better established than in Germany. In 1965, reflecting on the history of his discipline—*Volkskunde*, a calque from the English “folklore”—the folklorist Hermann Bausinger wrote that “already on the basis of its name *Volkskunde* seemed predestined to verify and disseminate National Socialist ideas.”

The Nazification of *Volkskunde* after 1933 did not impose alien ideas but rather brought out themes already latent in the discipline.<sup>4</sup> One senses the Germans' lack of enthusiasm for the League's program already in the 1931 publication, where the German contribution to the section reporting on the various national folk art traditions amounted to only a single page. And, sure enough, Germany, which had been invited to join the League of Nations only in 1926, withdrew in 1933. Six years later, the League, with its fond dreams of peaceful cooperation among nations, effectively expired.

Since World War II, at least in Europe, a cloud has hung over the topic of folk art. Folk art is marginalized within the academic study of art history. Exactly what Focillon feared has come to pass: the study of folk art is left mostly in the hands of local and regional scholars and collectors, at least in Europe; and museological solutions remain sources of misunderstanding.

Just as the League of Nations and its irenic spirit was reborn after World War II in the United Nations, so too the IICI was reborn as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Yet the case Focillon made for folk art qua art as the basis for a renewed concept of a common humanity has never been reopened. Have his propositions been refuted?

In the opening paragraphs of his text, Focillon recounts in compressed form the story of the discovery of folk art in the Romantic era, a project that he likens to the uncovering of "hidden treasures," the revelation of a "strange, obscure, and disdained world," which the narrow rationalism of the *ancien régime* had overlooked. A formless but "active and primordial element," the "people" had produced poetry and art, "an order of authentic powers that shapes humanity's essential traits." In the nineteenth century, scholars faced with the "forest of folklore" began to sketch out a "vast system of comparisons and associations, which—under the variety of races and environments—tend to show kind of common ground, a universal sensibility and wisdom" (VII/00).

Focillon's phrases resonate with those of Walter Benjamin in his essay of 1927 on the mid-nineteenth-century Swiss writer Gottfried Keller: "His work is the breakwater from which the tide of bourgeois ideas once more retreats, revealing the treasures of its own and every past, before gathering up and unleashing the idealistic floodwaters that will devastate Europe."<sup>5</sup> Benjamin credits Keller with sheltering within his fictions certain irreducible forms of provincial and rural life otherwise concealed by "bourgeois idealism," by which he means the

religion of art, sentimentalism, and spurious, hollow utopianisms. Benjamin valued Keller for the unromantic materialism that rendered his portrayals of vanishing ways of life at once heartfelt and skeptical, and all the more intense and touching.

To bring out this guileless, unpretentious aesthetic, Focillon believed, the study of folk art must be disengaged not only from the ethnographic museum but also from the already well-developed academic discipline of folklore, as represented, for example, by Arnold van Gennep, who was among the authorities involved in the planning of the Prague conference, or by Pierre Saintyves. Van Gennep and Saintyves were scholars of legends and fables, customs and superstitions, calendars and rituals, “rites of passage,” archaisms, and survivals. They more or less ignored the products of folk art unless they happened to be chaperoned by symbolically laden behaviors or performances.<sup>6</sup>

In the next section of his argument, Focillon discusses the mind-liberating effect of Europeans’ encounters with unfamiliar forms of art beyond Europe, in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries, acknowledging that such encounters were an aspect of the colonial enterprises of the “white race.” The new art, escapist and rejuvenating, taking as its examples “primitive art forms,” was the site of a struggle between “the principles of Mediterranean humanism, weakened from the battles of modern painting, and the passionate anxiety aroused by contact with other forms of humanity and their more distant secrets” (VIII/00). Folk art, for Focillon and for many of the conferees, was a form of primitive art, a trace of this “other humanity,” embedded in Europe itself.<sup>7</sup> This was the blunder that marred the Congress of 1928: the attempt to compare the arts and crafts of rural Europe to the “primitive” arts of those peoples “with whom we have entered into relations through exploration and colonization,”<sup>8</sup> for example in the Belgian Congo, New Caledonia, the Dutch West Indies, Ecuador, Egypt, Canada, and the United States (where the topic was Native American art, not American folk art!). (The reports on all but the North American material were unsurprisingly written by Europeans.) Equally half-baked and poorly supported—and equally half-hearted—were the frequent comparisons of folk art to prehistoric art and the art of children, as if all forms of art that flourish outside official or court contexts, in any time or place, or beyond the reach of rule-governed, academic art instruction were alike.<sup>9</sup>

But in practice the main focus of the Congress was the modes of household decoration characterized by colors and patterns, which flourished in rural

Europe between about 1750 and 1850. After 1850, threatened by industrialization, folk art was produced with increasing degrees of self-awareness, as a deliberate rebuke of the machinic approach and with the awareness that handmade products are not only well out of step, stylistically, with the main currents of modern art but also that those products were ever more likely to end in a collection, private or public, than put into daily use.

Like Alois Riegl already in 1894, Focillon saw no profit in extending the ambition, cultivated by the Arts and Crafts movement and by the Fauves and Expressionists, of regenerating modern art through the assimilation of folk and craft forms. In his pamphlet *Volkskunst, Hausfleiss, und Hausindustrie*, Riegl punctured the lingering Romantic fantasy of a renewal of modern arts and crafts based on rural folk art. Folk art as a living art was exhausted and could now only ever be the object of historical study.<sup>10</sup> Riegl and Focillon both understood that the nationalist “care” for folk art, cultivated in modern times, was just another aspect of that hypocritical idealism invoked by Benjamin, which, in seeking to redeem and sublimate the crass materialism that shapes bourgeois existence, sometimes submerges the irreducible “treasures” of folk culture but sometimes also seeks to honor them as tokens of a more genuine, more realistic, but no-longer-possible materialism, which—free of the idealist neurosis—does not contest mortality.

Focillon also marks out his own distance from the aesthetic ideology of his day, avant-gardism: “Our goal is to show series and not discontinuities” (X/00). Here he plants the seed that will grow into the little masterpiece of his American disciple Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962), a still widely read meditation on the plural time frames of art production. As if detecting a pause in the late 1920s in the momentum of avant-gardism or seeing in the anarchy promoted by Surrealism a symptom of exhaustion,<sup>11</sup> Focillon adopts a defiant tone against that “almost Hericlitean hostility to any idea of continuity” characteristic of evolutionary or progressive thought, as noted by Benedict Anderson.<sup>12</sup> But Focillon’s argument is not simply that folk art is a hardy survivor; rather he seeks to locate it on another stratum of history altogether, as witness to a different sense of time, less urgent and fitful, less obsessed with novelty: “A slowed down, even immobile, temporality opposes this accelerated time where the past is contemporary with the present, and the idea of a future escapes understanding. One can do plenty in these wide expanses of time, this vast daily monotony, but nothing ever happens” (XII/00).

Focillon's hypothesis has two implications. First, the essential structure of world art—the stratification of time, the “double humanity” (XII/00)—is revealed *only* by the formal approach. “Technical analysis, formal analysis, and the comparative method”: this is the way of art history (X/00). The “proper object” of an art history of folk art is “the study of forms.” This is what Focillon means when he calls for the disengagement of the study of folk art from the “neighboring disciplines” of ethnography, linguistics, sociology, and human paleontology (XI/00).

One might have wished that Focillon, here or elsewhere, had shown his readers exactly how to look at a work of folk art. But his point comes across. Forms have a life of their own. By treating folk art as art, in the formulation of Annamaria Ducci, he was removing folk art “from the domain of nature in order to give [it] back to that of culture, understood as an open and dynamic system of relations.”<sup>13</sup> The life of forms is a third time frame, involving neither the rural, immobile time nor the paroxysmal, accelerated time of civilization. None of this was lost either on Kubler or Trent, who saw that Focillon's axiom that “forms have a vocation,” derived from Riegl, could serve as the basis for a rigorous analysis of the formal systems governing the plain-spoken chairs of colonial Connecticut, thereby liberating the objects from condescending and invidious comparisons with the luxury furniture produced in those years in London.<sup>14</sup>

The second implication of Focillon's hypothesis is that formalism refutes any nationalist, ethnicist, or racialist approach to folk culture. This is the core of Focillon's essay and the belief of the League of Nations. “The art of the people,” wrote Focillon, “is not necessarily the art of *peoples*” (XV/00). All folk art belongs to everyone and so cannot be recruited to the myths of the nations. Kubler, too, decades later, would use form as a way of overcoming the cultural politics of race and ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> Folklore—what the people *know*—is actually mostly wrong, a web of superstitions and delusions. Folk *art*, by contrast, is beyond truth and falsehood. It has no stable relation with content. The secrets of folk art invoked by Focillon must remain secrets.

Paradoxically, with his rather loose and inconsistent uses of the word “race,” Focillon the anti-nationalist exposed himself to later critique. About the folk art of Romania, he waxed sentimental, all too charmed by the handicrafts of “a beautiful peasant race.”<sup>16</sup> As World War II unfolded, and Focillon felt compelled to speak out in writings and lectures on behalf of the civilization threatened by Hitler's Germany, he formulated ever more patriotic and, finally, embarrassing



defenses of the genius of the French “race.”<sup>17</sup> Éric Michaud has pointed out the inconsistencies in Focillon’s uses of the word “race.”<sup>18</sup> In more than one context, he discredited the concept of race and then immediately employed it himself. An example is his debate, published in 1935 by the IICI, with the Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski about the cultural identity of the “Germans” and “nordic genius.” Focillon rejected Strzygowski’s Aryanist fantasies but then countered with his own dubious notions of the “Celtic” genius.<sup>19</sup> Let us say that Focillon had a “stratified” mind.<sup>20</sup> Opposition to the nationalist and ethnicist ideologies infecting folklore, folk art studies, and museology was, after all, the very essence of Focillon’s Prague address. He saw that the cultivation of “a political philosophy based on the idea of race” (IX/00) had been a major factor in the establishment of ethnographic museums. He saw that the supposed ultimate object of the study of folklore and folk art, “the people,” was an unstable object. At risk of disappearing, he wrote, were the “languages and civilizations [that] enrich themselves through exterior influences . . . History is composed more of communications than conservations” (XI/00)—a clear shot across the bow of the assembled directors of the ethnographic museums.

Focillon’s credentials as a socialist and a liberal, his good will and his social conscience, cannot be questioned.<sup>21</sup> And yet—missing from his presentation of folk art was any consideration of social class, which, after all, determined the whole configuration of “the people” as non-elites. At one point, Focillon lists class alongside race, nation, and time period as forces less “powerful” than “man’s condition”—his “immediate forms of life, the contexts of creation and action as they are defined by human geography” (XI/00). Focillon did not consider the tensions between the people and the elites to be an aspect of the content of folk art.<sup>22</sup> The same could be said about his youthful enthusiasm for the vitality and sincerity of vernacular spectacle—vaudeville, the circus, operetta, cinema. Focillon was quite far from grasping the idea of the culture of “the people” as *counterculture*, as a site of resistance, an idea that would emerge in the 1960s, ignited in part by the great book of Mikhail Bakhtin on Rabelais, written only a decade or so after the Prague conference but published in Russian and not until the 1960s in translation. Some of the scholars associated with this last happy moment of folklore studies, rebaptized in Europe as the study of “popular culture,” are still active: Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Burke. Popular culture was once defined by the Frankfurt School theorist Leo Lowenthal as “the counterconcept to art.”<sup>23</sup> The formulation is striking because it is similar to Focillon’s, but with the values reversed. Focillon sought to redefine folk art *as* art and so position it against folklore as conceived by the ethnographers (that is, as something like “popular culture”). For Focillon, folklore and folk customs, a thicket of beliefs and practices created by fears, desires, and confused memories, were less

likely than folk art to bind the nations back together. For Lowenthal, by contrast, the concept of popular culture, insofar as its basic content was the struggle against elites, offered the best hope of forging new transnational solidarities. For the Marxist critical theorist, “art” was a bourgeois fiction that served only to mask the real rifts in our societies.

This was not Focillon’s position. He seemed to hold out hope that rural forms of life, once transfigured as folk art, might serve as a “commons” embedded within modernity, a place where all might meet. A similar idea was articulated by Benjamin in a short essay on folk art written in 1929 but never published in his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Here Benjamin developed theses adumbrated in the essay on Gottfried Keller published two years earlier. Folk art, he wrote in this typically dense, gnomic text, “draws the human being into itself.” One wears folk art like a mask: behind it, we look outwards onto our former selves and experience a distant recognition, a *déjà vu*. Folk art allows us to “stand apart from moments and situations that have been lived through unconsciously but that are here finally reintegrated.” Folk art emerges out of elemental existential orientations. This is why Benjamin spoke in the essay on Keller of the hidden treasures not just of the past of nineteenth-century Europeans but of *every* past. Folk art activates sensations of well-being, shelter, immunity. Its beauty is a primitive wish fulfillment. Unexpectedly, Benjamin said that *kitsch* affords us the very same vantage point upon ourselves that folk art does. Kitsch is sentimental, ingratiating, and inauthentic art, a quaint and consoling art that appeals to the unsophisticated. In his text of 1929, Benjamin chose to disregard the threat or affront posed by kitsch to the purist ideology of modernism. Instead, alert to the mysterious involvements with shared, even presocial existence offered by some forms of art, Benjamin wrote that kitsch and folk art alike “allow us to see outward from within things.” He described folk art and kitsch as “a single great movement that passes certain themes from hand to hand, like batons, behind the back of what is known as great art.”<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin’s text of 1929 forces us to ask whether a certain alienation from avant-garde art, even a secret vulnerability to kitsch, may not have animated Focillon’s romance with folk art. Focillon himself would not have put it this way. His intentions were modern. He risked everything in apologizing for folk art, an art form that already in his own lifetime had become, for art history, an impossible object. But Benjamin also reminds us not to judge Focillon too quickly.

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## Notes

- 1 *Art Populaire: Travaux artistiques et scientifiques du 1er Congrès International des Arts Populaires, Prague, 1928*, 2 vols. (Paris: Duchartre, 1931), 1:VII–XVI.
- 2 Annamaria Ducci, “Henri Focillon, l’arte popolare e le scienze sociali,” *Annali di critica d’arte* 2 (2006): 341–77; Annamaria Ducci, “Europe and the Artistic Patrimony of the Interwar Period: The International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations,” in *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea*, ed. Mark Hewitson and Matthew D’Auria (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 227–42; Annamaria Ducci, “Le musée d’art populaire contre le folklore: L’Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle à l’époque du Congrès de Prague,” *Revue germanique internationale* 21 (2015): 133–48. Daniel H. A. Maksimiuk, “L’engagement politique au sein de l’Institut de coopération intellectuelle,” in *La vie des formes: Henri Focillon et les arts* (Ghent: Snoeck; Lyon: Musée des beaux-arts de Lyon; Paris: Institut national d’histoire de l’art, 2004), pp. 283–91 (drawing on archival material); Bjarne Rogan, “Folk Art and Politics in Inter-War Europe: An Early Debate on Applied Ethnology,” *Folk Life* 45 (2006): 7–23; Bjarne Rogan, “Popular Culture and International Cooperation in the 1930s: CIAP and the League of Nations,” in *Networking the International System: Global Histories of International Organizations*, ed. Madeleine Herren (Cham: Springer, 2014), 175–85; Molly Nesbit, *The Pragmatism in the History of Art* (Pittsburgh: Periscope, 2013), 56–57.
- 3 Nesbit, *Pragmatism*, 55–66.
- 4 Hermann Bausinger, “Volksideologie und Volksforschung,” in *Deutsches Geistesleben und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Andreas Flitner (Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1965), 125–43, here 140 and 128.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 2.1:286; translated as *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.1:53.
- 6 See, for example, Van Gennep’s remarks on folk art in chapter ten of his *Le folklore* (Paris: Stock, 1924): he dismisses rural costumes and jewelry as unaesthetic and rural furniture as poor and belated imitations of urban furniture; he approves only of simple, pragmatic artifacts, such as wooden chests, chimney tiles, toys, commercial signs, and some religious imagery.
- 7 Focillon said that insofar as folk art is guided by a need for order, regular and symmetrical figures, and a harmonic sense of color without models in nature, it “seems to continue the stylistics of Neolithic art” (XIII/00).
- 8 G.-H. Luquet, “Essai de définition de l’art populaire,” in *Art Populaire*, 1:7.
- 9 Focillon, too, asserted that the Prague Congress had revealed the affinity of folk art with prehistoric art (XV/00).
- 10 Alois Riegl, *Volkskunst, Hausfleiss, und Hausindustrie* (Berlin, 1894), esp. 54–82.
- 11 Willibald Sauerländer, “L’art des sculpteurs romans et le retour à l’ordre,” in *La vie des formes*, 147–53.
- 12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983, rev. ed. 1991), 11.
- 13 Ducci, “Europe and the Artistic Patrimony,” 234. Theodossios Issaias, PhD candidate in the School of Architecture at Yale University, kindly shared with me the text of his oral presentation on Focillon and the 1928 conference, in which he maps out the politics of the event and defends Focillon’s attempt to “resignify” folk art.
- 14 Robert F. Trent, *Hearts and Crowns: Folk Chairs of the Connecticut Coast, 1720–1840* (New Haven: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977), 11.
- 15 Barbara E. Mundy, introduction to “Dialogues: Kubler’s ‘On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-

Columbian Art' Reconsidered," *Latin America and Latinx Visual Culture* 2, no. 4 (2020): 58: "By setting the trajectory of forms themselves as [his schema's] organizing principle . . . [and] by accepting into its embrace any formal sequence of objects, [Kubler's art history] set itself free from Eurocentrism."

**16** Henri Focillon, "L'art populaire et les musées: Échanges et comparaison," *Mouseion* 2, no. 6 (December 1928): 206–7: Folk art "traduit une poésie particulière, le génie des races et leurs inflexions préférées." See also Focillon's foreword to G. Oprescu, *Peasant Art in Rumania* (Bucharest: Rumanian Academy, 1937), IX–XII, and Ioana Vlasiu, "L'expérience roumaine," in *La vie des formes*, 231–41.

**17** See the quotes collected in Pierre Wat, *Henri Focillon* (Paris: Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2007), 32, 58, and Ducci, "Europe and the Artistic Patrimony," 231–33.

**18** Éric Michaud, *Les invasions barbares: Une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 138–41, 187–88; translated as *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2019), 116–19, 163–66.

**19** Correspondence of Henri Focillon and Josef Strzygowski, in *Civilisations: Orient-Occident; Génie du Nord-Latinité; Lettres d'Henri Focillon, Gilbert Murray, Josef Strzygowski, et Rabindranath Tagore* (Paris, 1935), 131ff.

**20** Walter Cahn decided in the end that Focillon's heart was in the right place: "L'art français et l'art allemand dans la pensée de Focillon," in *Relire Focillon: Cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 27 novembre au 18 décembre 1995 sous la direction de Matthias Waschek* (Paris: Musée du Louvre et École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1998), 35–39.

**21** See the revealing article about Focillon's teaching and his journalistic writings in his twenties, in the first decade of the century: Pascale Cugy and François-René Martin, "'Populovitch n'est pas si bête qu'il est mal vêtu': Henri Focillon, le vaudeville, les prolétaires et l'art social," in *L'art social en France: de la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, ed. Neil McWilliam, Catherine Méneux, and Julie Ramos (Paris: INHA; Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 357–71.

**22** On the left-wing traditions of interest in artisanal and folk cultures in France, see Ducci, "Le musée d'art populaire," 134–35, and Frédéric Maguey, "Pierre-Louis Duchartre et l'imagerie: La construction d'un discours sur l'image," in *Du folklore à l'ethnologie*, ed. Jacqueline Christophe et al. (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2009), 263–73.

**23** Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 4. An earlier version of Lowenthal's first chapter was published in 1950.

**24** Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:185–87; Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings and Brigid Doherty (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 254–56.

**25** Benjamin's position on kitsch is complex; see Winfried Menninghaus, "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste,'" in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 39–57. Menninghaus argues that Benjamin imagined a counterpolitics drawing on our "most primordial . . . affects, fears, and images of yearning" as well as the dream energies of everyday life and banal objects (55).

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## *Folk Art: Artistic and Scientific Works from the First Congress on Folk Arts, Prague, 1928*

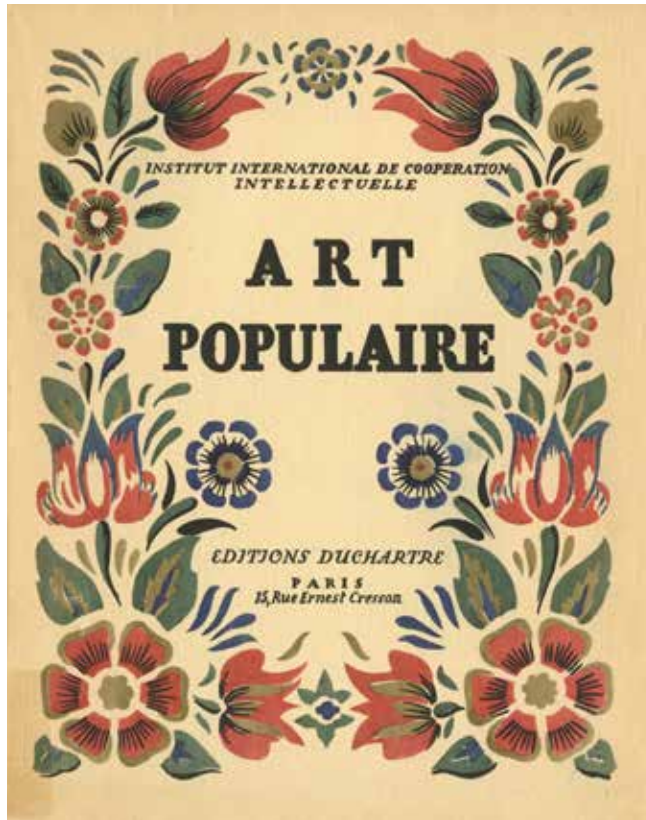
## **Introduction**

**Henri Focillon, professor at the Sorbonne, government delegate at the Prague Congress**

For a long time, the vast domain of the folk arts remained unknown to historians, intellectuals, and people of taste.<sup>1</sup> One could say that until the end of the Classical Age (the seventeenth century), it belonged to the category of hidden treasures—like the arts of the medieval era and those of the Orient. Even though these latter fields impinged on European consciousness over long periods, leaving a lasting mark, the simplifying power of rationalism and its narrow definition of man prevented any methodical inquiry into such a strange, obscure, and disdained world. But then, the great maritime voyages undertaken during the eighteenth century expanded our knowledge of primitive forms of activity, social organizations, and morality. These insights generated more reflection among philosophers concerning man in the state of nature, rather than awakening a greater interest in positive observations among scholars and artists.

It is the nineteenth century that discovered the folk arts. The Romantic movement played a large part in this because it assigned an important role to the notion of “the people,” as opposed to the elites, as an active and primordial element within historical forces. One knows the place the Romantics reserved for the people in the life of languages—even in the very genesis of language. Among all the revivals undertaken by the Romantics, the genre of “popular” epics is one of the most characteristic, considered to be the natural extension of a race’s instinct and genius.<sup>2</sup> The people, their poetry, and their folk arts, as formulated within the Romantic philosophy of history, constitute the order of authentic powers that shape the essential traits of humanity. For the first time, the full amplitude of this forest of folklore was revealed in all its shimmering diversity, and one can begin to map out the vast system of comparisons and associations, which— under the variety of races and environments—tend to show a kind of common ground, a universal sensibility and wisdom.

But at the same time, by a contradiction more apparent than profound, the principle of nationalities has tended to accentuate differences, leading each political group to glorify its own ancient heritage of traditions as an exclusive asset, like some original value. In the struggles to liberate oppressed minorities, the folk arts held a value equivalent to a language: one recognized blood brothers not only in their demeanor, nuances, or inflections but in the songs and ornamentation of their lives. These obscure masterpieces—a carpet, a piece of pottery, a dance step—became the symbols and bearers of a fraternal force; they signified the union of hearts. Long



Caption TK

condemned to servitude and oblivion, they were suddenly swept into the foreground. Exoticism, the love for the long-lost trinket, and this passion for the object, which is a trait of the nineteenth century, led the refined cultures to enrich themselves from such things, in the vein of so many other stimulating discoveries revealing the complexity of the world.

Folk arts acquired a particular significance within the later forms of Romanticism. When John Ruskin came to formulate his antimechanization stance and the lengthy

praise of handicraft in his work that, even today, preserves a touching poetic virtue by returning to natural models and matters, encouraging a renewal of ancient techniques, he came to agree not only with the archaic nostalgia of his time, not only with a form of age-old naturalism, but also with the very conceptions ignored in preceding eras that had revived a mode of reverie and action. He combined this with a social protest explained by the development of mid-nineteenth-century English industrialization. For the same reason and many others, his thoughts later reverberated throughout the rest of Europe. For a long time, however, before the history of folk arts was established as a science, this particular Ruskinian tone informed its study. Without a doubt, fifty years ago a similar sentiment inspired some Western artists. Tired of the false and flimsy refinement and confused eclecticism of the cultivated classes, they strove to establish a new style: synthetic and decorative in character, taking its examples from more primitive art forms.

This attempt at escape and renewal takes on a singular grandeur, even a dramatic meaning, when one sees the struggles between the principles of Mediterranean humanism, weakened from the battles of modern painting, and the passionate anxiety aroused by contact with other forms of humanity and their more distant secrets. When Paul Gauguin draws inspiration from the Calvaries of Brittany and later exiles himself to discover a more noble sadness in Polynesia, he follows the same path, obeying a logical development. One could say that he pushed Romantic Pre-Raphaelitism to its final conclusion. Around the same time, it was from popular sources that a renaissance in the decorative arts drew its strength. In addition, a passion for the “decorative,” even in its more subtle and rare forms, reawakened the outlook of ancient Man, substituting a singular interest in beings or objects with combinations and rhythms initiated by the mind. Finally, sociological research on primitive societies, results acquired by great explorations, and colonial expansion by the white race has reshaped the definition of man, and of the art of humans. This has provoked a movement that is much greater in scale than the former vague exoticism. We will study this decisive moment in Western history later, although some of its traits are now within our historical consciousness.

The peoples of Russia, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe pursued their investigations into their own roots and the treasures of their peasant cultures. At times by way of research motivated by taste alone, at other times through the frame of a political philosophy based on the idea of race, the rustic arts came

back into light, museums were founded, and attempts were made to preserve the products of disappearing techniques and even to endow them with an artificial vitality. Fine and skilled image makers elaborated a composite style in which the contributions of varied cultures were brought together through diverse historical fates. Music demanded deeper accentuations of folk themes and a beauty of color that the masters no longer believed they could harness themselves. Thanks to the work of capable administrators, the heterogeneous character of certain political communities, like the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, fostered the establishment of art and ethnographic museums, which—even within their unifying setting—respected such diverse elements of this mosaic with ingenious fidelity. Meanwhile, in countries more formally melded and subject to the upper hand of a centralized culture, those same institutions remained, for a long time, mediocre and of little significance. Since then, however, folk art museums, regional museums—like in France, for instance—took on a completely different tonality.

The Great War and its consequences have increased the value of the folk arts as historical testimony in certain regions of Europe. Extending Romanticism's poetic and political trajectory, the folk arts became publicly institutionalized. They provide the bases for independent cultures (or those conceived as such), representing not only the legacy of the past but the permanence of a sacred activity. The museum is not the inevitable destination of the folk arts. Its tastes and processes are propagated through elementary-school education, which draws its strength from deep regions of national sentiment. One seeks its traces in the history of ancient religious and dynastic arts. One proposes them as models to metropolitan artists. Finally, the peripheral and agitated form of knowledge that we call fashion takes hold of it. In nations where the peasant element dominates and charmingly preserves ancient skills, some high spirits judge it possible to fight for some advantage against banal and interchangeable mass production by calling on indigenous procedures and labor and, thus, by associating it with the nation's active life to save its most precious heritage.

The League of Nations thought that a methodical study of the folk arts could promote an interesting exchange of views on the connections that unite national forms of action. It approved the project of the International Congress of Folk Art that was proposed by the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, following the initiative of the subcommittee of the Arts and Letters. One will find the proceedings of the Congress's conference, held in Prague in 1928, in the present volume, which was the first attempt to address these questions





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systematically. Its main aim was to provoke comparisons and establish the outlines of a kind of ideal chart in which classification by nationality would not prevent us from seeing forcibly the links that unite so many forms of folk art, diversely nuanced but not unfamiliar to one another.

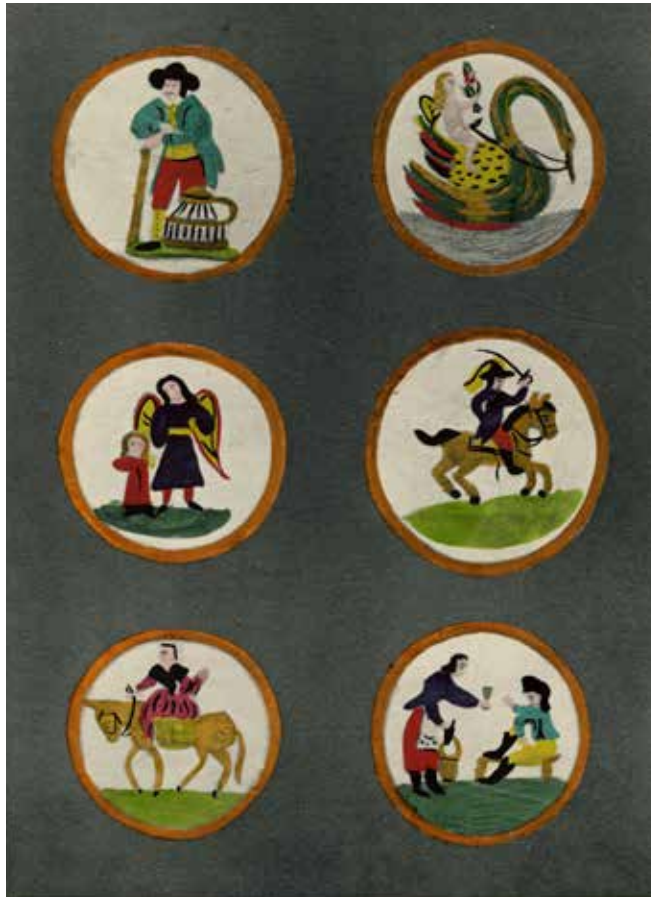
The need to compare is the basis of all observational science and perhaps of all scientific disciplines. One knows how the comparative methodology has developed over two generations; it is no longer a marginal technique but almost an art of the mind. To define is not to separate; even when isolating a phenomenon or a fact, we need to confront it. We only create specificities by making connections. Our goal is to show series and not discontinuities. Everywhere we find ourselves at crossroads, wherever routes of exchange meet. This is obvious in the field of archeology. Admittedly, we need an archeology “of location”: one that scrupulously studies a precise object and proceeds monographically. We also require a comparative archeology that establishes relationships and lineages and, beyond that, influences, affinities, and identities. In this way, the study of monuments offers some opportunity to found this science of man that matters so much to us. The same goes for art history itself. It stands between two polar opposites: either everything is devoted to the individual, to the particular and the spontaneous, following the arc of creative imagination and free play; otherwise it conforms to the Hegelianism of Taine, ascribing everything to race, milieu, and the moment, presenting the work of art not as the vague dream of a God but as the product of a great number of factors.<sup>3</sup> Technical analysis, formal analysis, and the comparative method lead us to consider forms as living beings and milieus as malleable frameworks, modified by nomadic geniuses, novel inventors, or sedentary spirits that live outside of time. Ultimately, they invite us to consider spiritual families that chronology and geography allow us to situate but not to qualify.

Is this the case in the study of the folk arts? Do these issues appear in similar ways? This kind of research has still not clearly been detached from neighboring disciplines. It borders not only on archeology and art history but also on ethnography, folklore science, linguistics, sociology, and human paleontology. Its proper aim is the study of forms; plastic, graphic, musical, dramatic, choreographic, and ceremonial, as well as the study of the techniques emerging from within their popular milieus. The whole question is to clarify the value of the term “folk art”; our chances of success hinge upon setting limits within which this activity must be undertaken. Any investigation of cultural movements must define not only its objectives but also its very frameworks. Those that take place here are manifold and overlay one another. National and ethnic frameworks do not coincide, nor would they, because they are unstable as well as mobile, because the notion of race is confused and often artificial, because a people is a complex entity, be it ancient or recent, stabilized within a language and a civilization. However, these very languages and civilizations enrich themselves through exterior influences at pain of death. History is composed more of communications than conservations. Conservative forces, with their sheer regulatory procedures, can only be provisional guarantors of stability.

Social frameworks hold more of an objective value, as long as we extract them from a determined period, because such frameworks are not immutable. Social classes go up and down, or, rather, there is an osmosis from one to the other. The study of cultures reveals porous zones at the boundaries of classes, a kind of periphery where elements tend to amalgamate and engender a series of hybrids or even a common ground. As for chronological frameworks, they would certainly be useful, if it were not for facts and objects that are almost impossible to date and that manifest (as I will show) within an irregular timeline.

The immediate forms of life, the contexts of creation and action as they are defined by human geography, seem to offer more resources. Man's condition is perhaps a more powerful force than his race, his nation, his class, or his time. It presses immediately upon him: by his type of work, his tools, his habitat, his environmental resources, the beasts that act as his companions, and, finally, even his food. Pastoral and agricultural life, urban and peasant life, the life of the plowman and that of the sailor, that of the islander and that of the continental dweller, these are not interchangeable and remain far from being impermeable: one sees again that exchanges come into play here, but the construction of each life remains strong and constant. It may be what maintains itself the most solidly through time.

Yet what we are seeking is not classification for a museum or an encyclopedia. If we want to obtain the truth— that is, to accurately qualify phenomena that sparks our interest, we must defy theoretical and preventative structures. We have to constantly keep in mind all of the forms, all of the frameworks, offered by the logic of the moral sciences without restricting ourselves to one or another. As observation enriches our documentary baggage and the materials of such research expands, we can better conceive of folk art's remarkable diversity. At the same time, it seems possible to perceive it not as a series of secondary movements and derivations of high art but as an order with its own laws, like a human language that is not "noble" and originates in other regions of life. The truth is, one might be tempted to think here and there, I would say, not of two levels or branches of humanity but of two faces of man. Without a doubt, one will fall into error if one takes this notion to the extreme. It is not historically accurate because there were periods and contexts in which the two arts were conflated: where folk art faithfully transmitted "high art" in the most common materials and by the most expeditious techniques. But, if I may be permitted, as a working hypothesis, to maintain for a few moments this notion of a double humanity, we will immediately see that it can be justified by fundamental differences in the conception of time, of space, and of action.



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First, as far as time is concerned, let us recognize that its perceived wavelength is not the same everywhere. The West and urban centers all possess an accelerated notion of time that is extremely mobile and capable of both artificial backtracking (archaism) and of anticipation. The many everyday drudgeries fragment time into various short and full periods that press upon each other

and set the frantic and halting pace of life's ordinary actions. It imposes upon all an impatience to surpass temporal boundaries and incessantly renew matters of existence. Thus, the notion of the modern is born in art, determined by an acute need for synchronicity and by the fear of being outmoded. It is for the same reason that art is the domain of inventors and that we can view (rightly or wrongly) each significant work as a discovery, an innovation, in other words, as a renewal. The spirit of novelty depends on short temporal wavelengths. However, a slowed down, even immobile, temporality opposes this accelerated time where the past is contemporary with the present, and the idea of a future escapes understanding. One can do plenty in these wide expanses of time, this vast daily monotony, but nothing ever happens. Actions may pile up without ever giving rise to an event. Cultures of slowed time are naturally characterized by survivals, patois, beliefs, customs, folklore, and folk arts. Invention, in the fullest sense of the term, is banished from that temporality. Such cultures are unaware of the particular type of humanity known as the great artist, and even though they create charming and beautiful works by way of endless variation, the *idea* of art is foreign to them.

The same contrast is manifest in the conception of space and of form. True space, three-dimensional space, true form, meaning a being or an object's authentic external appearance, is the result of discoveries and lengthy prepared investigations in modern art. We have proof of this in the history of perspective as it was formulated by Renaissance masters: before becoming the perspective of verisimilitude, the fiction of space, represented or simulated in all its parts, it was initially purely hierarchical or ornamental. When it comes to the authentic representation of the human form, we know—thanks to the successive investigations of the Greek canons of proportion—what kind of subtle modulations it received. Notions of aesthetic imitation or realism tend to stabilize, to harden, and to represent as passive all sorts of very particular approaches that are, themselves, inventions. However, an indeterminate space exists, one where combinations of spiritual and conceptual forms link up with each other. This space belongs to children and primitives but also to folk artists. These makers conceive their art before seeing it. Rationality and a powerful instinct for order dominates their representation of imagery. From this originates the love for regular and symmetrical figures, as well as a harmonious sense of color, whose principles and models are not found in nature: spirals, roses, chevrons, stars, wreaths, and knot work all constitute a universe where man's thought injects the meaning of his choosing, all forms serving as the storehouse of a great number of suggested images. In this way, folk art seems to continue the stylistics of Neolithic art. But, more than a direct affiliation or heritage transmitted from generation to generation, can we not see within this identity the continuity of the same intellectual structure? In any case, prehistoric humanity would have left us a double tradition

(rather than a singular one): on the one hand, we have the Age of the Reindeer of Paleolithic art, where visualization of the form preceded the conception of images, and on the other hand, Neolithic art conceived of the image first. The secular experiences of great inventors and observers belongs to the former group, while decorative permanence and the order of symmetries can be ascribed to the latter.

The dual conception of time and space also corresponds to a dual aspect of action and creation. Sometimes creative action alone can satisfy and even serve as a game on its own terms, while at other times, creative action is tied to the requirements of social life, subject to natural forces and the change of seasons. At times, art is a luxury that engenders this astonishing notion of *the art object*, thus implying that non-art objects exist and are eternally condemned to indifference and ugliness. At other times, art is life's regular and necessary ornament. Here we see techniques change and becoming perpetually enriched; there, they preserve the most remote era's materials, techniques, tools, and handiwork. We could even shine a light on differences among cooperative groups and fabrication processes. But it is important to note the profound gap between a disinterested, superior, and free art, created for the pleasure of little useless universes, and, on the other hand, an art linked to function, to the object, to the commodities of existence; an art that serves like moral law, like a religious technique.

We are no longer considering two races, two groups of people, or two periods in history but, rather, two attitudes of the human spirit, two outlines of civilization. These are not eternally separate from one another. We move from one to the other, either abruptly or by slow infiltration. When barbarians invaded the West, they brought with them a huge and repetitive repertoire of linear combinations, bestiaries from the steppes subject to ornamental patterns, decorative grammars related to hunters, carpenters, basket makers, leather curriers, and goldsmiths. Upon a sedentary and urban civilization knowledgeable in stonemasonry, they overlaid a nomadic and rustic culture that improvised its own habitat. The primacy of ornament erased that of architecture. Therefore, the history of art during the high Middle Ages consisted entirely of successive attempts to balance and assimilate the remnants of Mediterranean forms, the feeble leftovers of the great antique tradition, and, on the other hand, contributions from nomadic art, from folk art. Sometimes this relationship slowly established itself the other way around. We moved gradually from a cultivated art to a folk art or, at least, to popular renditions of cultivated art. We therefore find in the Calvaries of Brittany not a direct and fierce expression of the Celtic spirit but a vast conservatory of obsolete forms in the middle of the seventeenth century. Even after that, the

Calvaries continued perpetuating late medieval and Renaissance themes, types, and styles. Often propagated by waves of refinement, style leaves its mark in a more modest décor: for example, the Sassanian griffon of Russian embroideries, the baroque themes found in some Scandinavian or Czechoslovakian textiles, or the “classical” scrollwork of Saxon potteries in Transylvania. We would find more abundant and characteristic evidence of this tendency in the history of popular imagery in Italy. The line of demarcation between bastardized or feeble forms of high art and the instinctive forms of folk art remains difficult to determine. This category of relations, resulting in what one might call a rejuvenation or a degeneration (depending on one’s taste), makes up a formidable intermediary zone. But it would be a grave error to view folk art as uniquely composed of these residual elements. That represents only one avenue of exchange. Similarly, but in the opposite direction, the bastardized forms stand as borrowings made by skillful artists or masters of treasured rustic and distant arts. I only recall them in order to cite another aspect of such associations that tend to unite and merge two such apparently different forms of human ingenuity.

Therefore, the idea can gradually be established that such kindred relations, such differences, exchanges, and irreducibilities, singularly surpass the limitations of theoretical frameworks—or rather, cancel them out completely. Earlier I tried to seek their principles within the structuring of the intellect. Does the identity of the tools, closer to ourselves and within easier reach, not explain a great deal? The Prague Congress, which has illuminated the close relationship between the study of prehistoric and folk art, has also revealed graphic analogies explainable only by analogous procedures: for example, the drops of color and ink left at the brush’s tip using a system of thick and thin lines can be found in certain Savoyard interiors but also far from their area of development. It is therefore true that the art of the people is not necessarily the art of *peoples*. By this I mean that it is not chiefly a national expression because the identity of materials and techniques will correspond to at least one kinship in labor and forms, because in villages we sometimes find the diminished, simplified, and durable traces of more general artistic movements. Finally, because the folk arts maintain traditions as old as man himself, they escape our political geography.

But these remarks are not conclusions. Art, whatever it may be, is not entirely defined by a certain notion of time, space, or action. The tangible quality is inherent within the diversity of skills, hands, eyes, and voices. It is the product of heavy and light hands. Some eyes prefer to see rare, severe, and delicate notes, while others see sumptuous brilliance. Not all voices are equally warm, just, and

pure. A hidden instinct allows the marvel of a beautiful dream to inhabit the poorest material. The indolent potter of a Carpathian hamlet is, at once, a bird charmer and an accomplished gardener of painted flowers. Within the tightest extended thread, the strictest human definition, whimsy, reverie, love, and the gift remain in play. Here lies the principle of this magic we call talent and that which none of our efforts can reduce to formulas. This is the privilege of certain individuals but also of certain groups. Folk art is not the domain of serial production; what we enjoy is its diversity, its freshness, fighting against the idea of monotonous conservatism lurking within us. In the repertory of inherited forms, taste discerns and combines while fantasy circulates freely. From canton to canton, skills and preferences change as if the clans of yesterday remembered their distinctive signs and conventions. If the genius of folk art is not determined by nationality, national tonality is not a fiction. It is a precious variety to be noted and preserved among exchanges, influences, and accords—so surprising in other respects. But to accomplish this securely, one must proceed by way of comparison and speculate upon vast ensembles.

This was accomplished at the Prague Congress, truly an event free of doctrines and excessive theorizing but, rather, demonstrating faith in the natural development of our work. To our surprise, examples projected on the screen led us to spontaneous comparisons. Such rich experiences, so new and yet already so conclusive, compel us to borrow a current expression that encapsulates an essential problem of our time: to combine within our research the horizontal with the vertical. What I mean is, we must not be satisfied with the monographs of a region but focus our investigations in the study of a theme, a form, or a technique, and we must extend it broadly over a certain number of contexts. This attitude does not just offer a purely philosophical advantage; it leads us to very remarkable factual consequences: first, even in strongly conservative and traditionalist circles, like peasant groups or “schools” (here I deliberately apply one of the most unsuitable expressions), gifted talent can be felt, and quality intervenes. It is just that identities and resemblances, when they are not attached to well-determined historical trajectories, influences, or exchanges, correspond to profound affinities between races, either concerning a very ancient community or revealing a general and natural aptitude of man. Thus, we are led to move from the provincial to the universal level.

#### Notes

- 1 Focillon's term *art populaire* typically appears as “folk art” in English translations. The French



notion of *art populaire* or *culture populaire* differs from the English “popular art” or “popular culture.” Defined in opposition to industrialized “mass” cultural production, it carries stronger associations with tradition and social class; thus, it shares more affinity with the English “folk.” It is important to note, however, that the Congress’s organizing committee chose the term *art populaire* to define their object of study while explicitly avoiding other words, including “ethnology,” “ethnography,” or “folklore.” They not only felt that these words were limited in scope but that they carried a political charge, emphasizing differences that could exacerbate contested territorial claims among different participating communities. They omitted these terms lest they hinder the strengthening of ties. See Bjarne Rogan, “Folk Art and Politics in Inter-War Europe: An Early Debate on Applied Ethnology,” *Folk Life* 45 (2007): 9.

2 Focillon often uses the term “people” and “race” interchangeably. This topic had already been the subject of debate in the Institut International de Cooperation Intellectuelle (IICI). In their view, the term “race” should not be deployed for explicitly discriminatory purposes, but racial difference could be seen as an objective cultural qualifier. Racial categories had been proposed initially to structure the Congress’s sections. See A. Ducci, “Le musée d’art populaire contre le folklore,” *Revue Germanique Internationale* 21 (2015): 138 and note 28.

3 Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) was a French historian who developed theories of naturalism and historical determinism under the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). The expression “race-milieu-moment,” denoting the three factors that determine historical events, draws directly from Taine’s writings, notably his texts on the philosophy of art. See Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophie de l’art* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1865).