

The Henri Focillon (1881-1943) Centenary Commemoration at Yale University

Walter Cahn

Yale University

The conversation, whose transcription follows below, took place on April 14, 1981, in Room 268 of Street Hall at Yale University, under the sponsorship of the Department of the History of Art. The announced title was “Focillon as a Medievalist,” and the event was designed to mark the centenary of the birth of Henri Focillon, who had taught at Yale as a visiting professor on a regular basis from 1933 until his death in New Haven in 1943. In organizing this commemoration, we took advantage of the fact that the speakers, all of them distinguished students of Focillon, had been brought together for the symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition on The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger (1122-1151) organized at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and held a few days earlier. Our speakers were Sumner McKnight Crosby (1909-1982), Yale University; Jean Bony (1908-1995), University of California at Berkeley; Louis Grodecki (1910-1982), Université de Paris-Sorbonne; and Philippe Verdier (1912-1993), Université de Montréal.

The discussion was recorded on tape, but the transcription presented some difficulties. Professor Crosby’s speech, somewhat slurred as a result of a stroke, could not always easily be made out. A few sentences were lost at the beginning, and during the brief interval when the tape had to be turned over. As all the participants spoke extemporaneously, and in the case of Grodecki, somewhat à bâtons rompus, as the expression goes, repetition, lack of clarity, or ungrammatical formulations, to be expected in these circumstances, made the task more difficult, and in spite of considerable effort, a few words remained unintelligible or could not be construed with certainty. These are indicated by elisions placed within brackets or by question marks. Great thanks are due to Professor Elizabeth Sears and to Kate Brion

of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor for having taken on this arduous and rather unrewarding task. Mme Catherine Grodecki made helpful corrections and suggestions for improvement of the French text, which are gratefully acknowledged

It seemed desirable to retain the informal character of the speakers' remarks, and I have therefore tried to resist the temptation to produce a smoothly sanitized text, intervening only when the intended meaning was likely to be obscure to the reader.

Walter Cahn

[...] It is, I believe, a fact that although Focillon wrote on a great variety of topics--Piranesi, Hokusai, Raphael, Rembrandt, 19th century painting, and graphic art in particular, from which he drew much inspiration, among other subjects – it does seem that his mark on the field of scholarship and taste has above all been made in the area of medieval art. Now it is possible that some of our distinguished panelists may object to this observation or want qualify it in one way or another, but justification for it can be found both in terms of the number of students that he has inspired who have gone into the medieval field, but especially in view of the extraordinary resonance which his ideas have had on the study and teaching of this subject in this country and in Europe.

Some of these ideas are now in such common use that we scarcely credit them to Focillon. I mention, for example, that it is now customary to begin any course on Romanesque art in France in the year 1000 or in the XIth century, and this seems to us both normal and reasonable, but it overlooks the fact that before Focillon's writings and before those of his rough contemporary Marc Bloch, which one would suppose he knew, the developments of the eleventh century, the century of *grandes expériences*, as he called it, were generally ignored or at best slighted. One tended to begin with Cluny, Toulouse and

Moissac, and saw the eleventh century as dark and uncreative. The significance of this period, having entered into the fabric of discourse, is no longer questioned, though not always understood or recognized. Thus, a recent study on Romanesque sculpture, which includes as a part of its title “The Revival of Monumental Sculpture in the Eleventh Century” has paradoxically been advertised as a “refutation of Focillon.”¹ For or against, the master remains unavoidable, or as the French might say “incontournable.”

Of course, the importance of Focillon’s thought is not restricted to the study of medieval art. He made it the principal focus of his interests only in 1925, when already in his mid-forties, he succeeded to the post of Emile Mâle at the University of Paris, and even then, he continued to lecture and publish on other topics, including the elaboration of his theoretical treatise *Vie des formes*. It will suffice to mention here the impact of his teaching on the work in different fields as such figures as James Ackerman, André Chastel, Charles Sterling, Philippe Verdier, and of course, Yale’s own George Kubler, who turned to the study of ancient American art with Focillon’s encouragement after exposure to the lectures on medieval art of Focillon and Marcel Aubert at this university in the early 1930’s.

I should say only one further brief word. I will not introduce our speakers: they don’t need any introduction from me. I’d like to thank them for coming. They did so partly courtesy of the very fine symposium that was just held in New York concerning Abbot Suger and we persuaded them to make a détour to the provinces and visit us in New Haven. I especially want to thank M. Bony, the translator of one of Focillon’s very fine works, and M. Grodecki, who has come from Paris and who is here with us today. For the sake of the record, I should explain that while Focillon’s work on medieval art is very broad and there are many titles, we are concerned, I believe, mainly with four or five items, which just for the clarity of the discussion I might mention. *L’art des sculpteurs romans*, which appeared in

1931; the long and important chapter in the book which he wrote in collaboration with Henri Pirenne and Gustave Cohen that is found in *La civilisation occidentale au moyen âge du XI^e milieu du XV^e siècle* of 1934. It constitutes the basis of *Art d'Occident* of 1938, which Professor Bony translated and edited, appearing in 1963 in English with the title *The Art of the West* and the only one of the books here mentioned of which there is an English version; and finally, the collection of articles called *Moyen âge: Survivances et réveils*, published by Brentano's in New York in 1943, and again in Montreal in 1945. I need a footnote here, which is that I got all these facts from Professor Grodecki's fine *Bibliographie Henri Focillon*, which was published by the Yale University Press in 1963. Well, without further ado I'd like to ask Sumner Crosby to begin the discussion and introduce the speakers.

Sumner Crosby

I've been asked to take this place simply because I'm essentially the youngest of our panel [Laughter] My own acquaintance with Henri Focillon began when the great *patron* arrived on these shores in 1933. Grod began working with him in Paris in '28, and Jean Bony followed a year later. I suppose one of the difficulties we have in trying to speak of Focillon—at least my trouble-- is that the experience is simply indescribable. The presence that manifested itself in whatever engaged his interest can hardly be put in terms of a few words, even extremely well chosen ones. But our subject today really should not be mere reminiscence, but rather a focus on Focillon as a medievalist, which I think should be much more interesting to all of you here. First, I will ask Jean Bony to speak, and then Louis Grodecki, and then possibly other Focilloniens present here, who might want to comment contribute additional observations.

Let me ask Jean if he won't begin.

Jean Bony

I had thought of talking about the experience we had of Focillon, and each of us had a different experience. Each of us inevitably had a different experience of Focillon, at least at the start, because we came from different backgrounds, formation, and with different expectations. I know that I'd been looking at buildings from the age of twelve, and I had read quite a lot about architecture, but I was terribly tired with the Lefèvre-Pontalis kind of approach.² And it was really wonderful to find a man who talked about what really matters in architecture, about that grand intellectual ordering and the ways in which it was achieved. A man who talked about the choir of Saint-Denis, for instance, saying that what you had before was an art of masons, but that suddenly you found an elegance all of rigor and of intellectual solutions. I remember also at the end of a talk by a student on a great cathedral, I think it was Soissons, Focillon saying: You mustn't look only at moldings and profiles. *Il ne faut pas voir l'architecture en botaniste du caillou, c'est de la pensée pure qui travaille sur des formes régulières dans l'espace.* Pure thought working on regular shapes in space. Or, a man who could add also: I would like to teach you brutality. You must express your ideas with a fierce energy, *avec une énergie farouche.* Well, I suppose we have sometimes done that. So it was wonderful, and it was fun, because Focillon was a liberator. His approach never ceased to open new ways of understanding architecture. *Vie des formes (The Life of Forms in Art)* is a summary which has often been misread. Some people have stiffened it into formulas, and after that, they've created the word "formalism" to get rid of it. But Focillon more incisively and with greater subtlety defined architecture as an interpretation of space, of gravity, of light, of matter, and his analysis of space [...] in terms of plan and volumes and surfaces and the inside and the outside of space. And the rules of conduct he gave us, that in the study of a building, you should follow the sequence: plan (function and geometry),

structure, masses (that is, space and volume), then visual effects.

Well, all these systems of reminders, which we will find so brilliantly expressed in the little summary that is *Vie des formes*, these systems of reminders meant that he was providing you with new grids to be applied to the material under study, new grids of questioning. And it was an invitation for you to invent in turn some more new grids, some more new ways of asking questions and of formulating the problems. It was always perfectly clear that the aim to be achieved was nothing more or less than a more complete decoding of the architectural evidence and of all it contains or reflects. And his questioning was constantly renewed and widened. Now there's been a lot of talk in the past fifteen years about codes and decoding and deciphering. But that was already fifty years ago the basis of Focillon's method and the basis of his constant methodological reflection.

He had also, of course, his own grids to apply to the structure of historical time, the concepts of rule and play, and the activities of the mind, etc. It was fun but it was also a lot of hard work, and I remember two of the most frequent reminders of Focillon when you were working with him on architecture. One was the essential importance of the technical aspects of construction and of all the structural problems. His first question to me had been, have you read your Viollet-le-Duc? Have you read the article "Construction."³ And I had not. But I said that I had read Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture* and that I loved it.⁴ Focillon's reply was that if I loved Choisy, I was saved, but I must now read the article "Construction." It may not all be true, he said, but it will force you to face the problems of construction. And as you know, it was some five years later, Viollet-le-Duc was violently attacked by Pol Abraham, and Focillon joined actively in the debate that followed with, in particular, a long article in the periodical *Recherche*.⁵ And we had talked about these matters at length or written letters back and forth on this question, trying to see beyond Pol

Abraham because his views were terribly short-sighted. Of course all this seems rather distant now, and perhaps over simple. The debate was perhaps too much centered on the rib as such, and not enough on the cohesion of the vault cells, on their tension, on what has been called sometimes the “shell effect.” And we didn’t have then a Jacques Heyman⁶ or a Robert Mark⁷ to help us with these issues. No computers, no epoxy models to freeze the stresses. But I am sure Focillon would have been the first to press the engineers of Gothic structure with new questions and new points of view on these questions..

The second of the reminders, I heard many times, was that of maximum scholarly rigor. You must be as good, I mean, or better than the Chartistes. He wanted you to exhaust the sources, to find, if possible, new documents, or at least check the interpretation that had been given of what was already known. But he kept asking you whether you had turned to certain archival series for possible new light, for instance, anything in the volumes of the *Monasticon Gallicanum*, at the department of manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale, and what about these articles by Depoin⁸ and he refers somewhere to the papers of the Président Levrier,⁹ who was writing in the 1780s, you know, all sorts of things like that. What is clear is that he was constantly warning you against what would be *une pure vue de l’esprit*. Although his *vues de l’esprit* were wonderful, they [had to be] supported by evidence. The danger was what would be a mere figment of your intellect. You had to have done the counterchecking and the verification of facts through the methods of scholarship.

And this applied naturally to the analysis of buildings more than to anything else. At what end did the construction start, the oldest base profile, the different series of capitals, the capital part, the seams in the masonry, the signs of alterations, of restoration. He kept questioning you all the time on these matters, and the changes introduced by different campaigns and the alterations in the vocabulary of forms or in the character of architecture.

He had to be satisfied that you could not go farther, and this is a point which, I think, has to be stressed because some people have sometimes given a second- or third-hand impression of Focillon which is much looser than that. Pinpointing the chronology was for him essential. You have to be better at it than the Chartistes because you ask questions which matter more and which go deeper than the questions they ask. And this was the major point at stake. A difference of a few years in the dating could be critical. No one perceived this more sharply than Focillon and has expressed more intensely, the importance of the moment, the moment as a unique situation which could never be repeated, which might explain, if you understood it properly, why things took at that given moment a certain turn, the richness of the moment poised between several pasts and several potential futures.

Well, I was mentioning among his grids of questioning those he applied to historical time. These also have a very modern ring. They are partly printed in the introduction of his *L'an mil*, his *The Year 1000*. You remember it is an analysis of the layers of time, the stratification into layers animated by different speeds or different wave-lengths, and his demand for a stratigraphic analysis of each moment of history. Isn't that the first version, and often better than those which have followed, of that richly layered view of culture which is now so widely recommended by the social historians of art? He was, like Lucien Febvre, whom he knew well, a protagonist of *l'histoire problème*, as Duby, for instance, has defined it for Lucien Febvre.¹⁰ And his concept of "event," the event which cannot be eliminated from history in the name of structures. The event as a structural phenomenon, precisely, definable within the structure of time. He saw in the event a sort of general model, a contact suddenly established between actualities moving at different speeds, in different layers of time, but united in this simultaneousness of the moment. Now such models of thinking still have all their power and their validity, and I think all we can do is try

to continue experimenting with such restructuring of our own thinking and try to keep some of that same balance he could keep between intellectual rigor and intellectual imaginativeness, if we can. And I would suggest that this is probably the best homage we can pay to Focillon a hundred years after his birth.

Louis Grodecki

May I speak in French, please?

Comme il est étrange que la vision d'un homme peut différer d'un à l'autre de ses condisciples. Comment l'expérience que nous avons eu du maître, peut influencer différemment notre propre jugement de celui-ci. En écoutant, en vous écoutant, en t'écoutant, j'ai rêvé à ce thème des improvisations de Focillon au moment des travaux pratiques. Et où toutes les questions d'architecture se défilaient devant nous—sous fonds de questions, justement—mais où les problèmes de structure, bien sûr, capable de recherche, se confondaient avec toute sorte de choses. C'était à la fois un structuraliste, si l'on veut, et en même temps un imaginaire, il pensait forme, c'était un formaliste en même temps. Meyer Schapiro, par exemple, ou Worobiov¹¹ à Vienne, le lui reprochaient, mais il l'a reconnu lui-même: « Oui, je suis formaliste, je considère, en effet que toute forme de l'œuvre d'art condense et accumule tous les caractères de sa création: structure, espace, imagination, sensibilité, et c'est la forme, par la forme seule, que nous l'appréhendons ». Et c'est un peu comme ça que j'ai appris de Focillon à juger l'architecture. Je vais donner la parole à quelqu'un d'autre sur cette question.

Sumner Crosby

C'est plutôt, Grod...

Louis Grodecki

Pas besoin de répondre.

Jean Bony

I think Sumner and I have had a different experience from yours for a very simple reason.

You were not working on the topic of architecture, and therefore Focillon was not warning you against the same dangers as he was warning us. So inevitably we had quite a different experience. That's what I meant when I said that we had inevitably a different experience. I was working on Mantes and you were working on Saint-Denis... And you are still... And I may still be working on Mantes for that matter. I wouldn't mind turning back to Mantes one of these days and to the problems of Parisian art around Mantes and after Mantes and when Paris bypassed High Gothic and all that. I mean there is still a lot to be done in that field. No, nobody has worked on it. There has been one article by Branner in '62 on making a sort of jump to the Rayonnant but these [problems] are almost essential for the post-Notre-Dame, post-Mantes, and between Mantes and Amiens, if you like, sort of, development of Parisian art.¹²

Okay. So we have a different view. And of course, I was enthused not by the necessity of having to go to the papers of Président Levrier or of checking all these things. No, of course, it was Focillon's view of space as being conditioned by structure, and as conditioning structure, as forcing structure to solve new problems because a certain concept of space had been generated and that it was pushing forward in certain directions. Of course. And also the contrast between the treatment of light in a mural architecture like Mantes and an architecture of diaphany (*diaphanie*)¹³ like Laon or like Noyon, etc. So I'm not trying to reduce what everybody knows and considers to be essential to Focillon, which for me is essential also, our overall view of architecture, and the sense he gave you of stepping into a world, which was there complete and organized by the mind on these many

levels of structuring, of designing, of that geometry, of that three-dimensional geometry, of these volumes, of this space created with its perspective, its effects of light, and after that, the modeling of every form, and the modeling of the surfaces, or the destruction of surfaces, or the creation of the surfaces in that different way. All that giving you finally a sort of cosmic feeling of the creation of a complete world, which is material.

Louis Grodecki

Matérialité avant tout.

Jean Bony

Materiality before everything. And that is...

Louis Grodecki

Une intention d'art qui n'est pas réalisée dans une matière n'existe pas.

Jean Bony

No, it doesn't

Louis Grodecki.

C'est une des choses que Focillon nous a tous appris, et sa vue de l'architecture est parfaitement cohérente avec ce concept. Tout est matière d'abord. L'œuvre se conçoit de la matière, et de l'esprit, de la matière d'abord, mais tout aboutit en une forme. Et la signification essentielle d'un œuvre d'art est sa signification formelle, et non pas spirituelle, non pas philosophique, non pas idéale.

Louis Grodecki

En Salle Turgot [Sorbonne], mardi soir, Focillon faisait un cours [sur le] gothique. On parlait de Reims, toujours là. Et le dimanche suivant, j'ai pris le train pour Reims, et je suis devenu médiéviste [Laughter] C'est comme ça [que] les choses arrivent.

Quand Focillon est arrivé en 1924 à Paris, pour remplacer Emile Mâle qui était parti pour Rome, il a dit à tous ses élèves—je n'en étais pas encore—qu'il n'était pas médiéviste du tout, qu'il ne savait pas grande chose du moyen âge, et que son seul mérite était d'avoir habité pendant longtemps auprès des grandes cathédrales. En effet, il enseigna à Chartres, il enseigna à Bourges, au lycée, et il s'intéressait beaucoup, bien sûr, à ces œuvres extraordinaires qui le fascinaient, mais qu'il n'étudiait pas. Et, en 1924, quand il dit, je ne connais rien encore au moyen âge, il a quand même immédiatement suscité autour de lui, tellement son magnétisme personnel était fort, un groupe d'étudiants, certains déjà formés, formés ailleurs. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, le premier, d'entre eux, qui avait déjà étudié en Allemagne; Françoise Henry, qui a ensuite fait sa carrière en Irlande; Tibor [Grosz] Követz,¹⁴ toute une série d'étudiants, qui se sont groupés immédiatement autour de lui, pour l'aider [...], pour travailler avec lui sur le moyen âge. Et ils ont raconté, soit dans les *Mélanges Focillon*,¹⁵ ou bien après la guerre, que cette manière de procéder, par contact avec ses étudiants, et quelques fois voyageant avec eux sur les lieux, en Bourgogne, sur la Loire, en Provence... était une sorte de [...] collectif, immédiatement créé en 1924. Et un des sujets privilégiés, alors, de la recherche de Focillon était l'art roman, l'architecture romane, la sculpture romane. Et très vite dans ce domaine, Focillon a donné les premiers résultats. Ce fonds d'articles, deux articles—un qui était très célèbre à l'époque, très novateur, « Apôtres et jongleurs »,¹⁶ paru en '29, puis un deuxième, « Emplacement et fonction de l'architecture romane », paru aussi en '29¹⁷—ont ouvert la voie à une nouvelle conception des problèmes de la sculpture romane. Ces deux essais ont été suivis en '29 par une publication collective des travaux du groupe d'histoire de l'art de Focillon. Il y avait de tout, toute une série d'études romanes.¹⁸

Et puis, en '31, commençait à paraître les ouvrages, *L'art des sculpteurs romans*, qui était le

résultat de toutes ces années d'initiation au moyen âge, en même temps que paraissait dans la même année *La Stylistique ornementale* et puis d'autres travaux, de toute une série d'élèves qu'il a lancés dans la direction de la sculpture romane, Françoise Henry sur la sculpture irlandaise, [George] Gaillard, Ahmed Fikry sur l'art roman au Puy... Et donc le premier groupe, si on peut dire, des études romanes, qui a élaboré ce qu'on peut appeler, non pas une doctrine de Focillon, mais l'approche de l'œuvre d'art de Focillon dans ce domaine. Qu'est-ce que c'est, en fait ? Ces deux livres, comme je vous ai dit, ont été attaqués vivement, mais de façon solide par la critique, par Meyer Schapiro, américain, que vous connaissez tous, et par un esthéticien autrichien, fidèle à l'école Viennoise de Dvořák, qui s'appelle Worobiov,¹⁹ [...] très important, qui ont pris pour cible le formalisme de Focillon, son ahistoricisme. Là, encore, vous voyez que nous ne sommes pas tous tout à fait d'accord. Focillon voulait toujours que toute œuvre soit datée, elle n'existe pas si elle n'est pas placée sur une certaine [...], à un certain moment, à un certain lieu—elle nous échappe, alors donc, il faut la situer (?).

Mais ce n'est pas—comme, dans l'École Viennoise, par exemple—le but de la recherche d'établir les chronologies, d'établir les filiations, d'établir les ambiances, par lesquelles l'œuvre d'art est créé. Ce n'est pas ça le but de la recherche. La recherche, c'est d'étudier d'abord l'œuvre elle-même, en elle-même, dans ses formes, dans ses structures, dans sa technique, dans son matériau... Et c'est ça la grande leçon de *L'art des sculpteurs romans*. Focillon y dresse—une véritable définition, nouvelle, non historique, [...] de la sculpture romane en tant que [...] c'est l'expérience formelle, en tant que définition dans l'architecture par son emplacement, par sa fonction, de sa définition par le cadre—soit le cadre réel dans lequel il se place, soit ce cadre presque idéal qui est sa possession d'un, sa prise de possession de l'espace—sa matière et sa technique... sa structure,

c'est-à-dire la distribution des parties essentielles et la place de toutes les parties secondaires par rapport aux parties principales—et finalement, la composition, les motifs, l'iconographie, tout ça, ça vient plus tard, ce n'est pas ça qui est l'essentiel de la sculpture. Alors, bien sûr, cette recherche, à laquelle correspondaient beaucoup de tendances de ses élèves, a étonné et offensé même, un très grand nombre d'historiens de l'art français, et d'archéologues français. Et Focillon, jusqu'à--on peut dire, jusqu'à sa mort--était en lutte, en butte avec les spécialistes tels que Paul Deschamps, Jean Hubert, qui ne comprenaient rien à cette méthode, cette approche de l'œuvre d'art, pour lesquels l'essentiel était de se servir de l'œuvre d'art, surtout du moyen âge, en tant que document de l'histoire, en tant que document qui explique l'histoire, qui s'explique par l'histoire, selon la méthode chartiste et par conséquent ils ne comprenaient rien à cette esthétique, comme on disait, de Focillon, qui plaçait les problèmes formels au premier plan de la recherche.

En même temps, paraissait un livre complémentaire de celui de Focillon, de Jurgis Baltrušaitis, qui en fait, comme *L'art des sculpteurs romans*, élaboré un peu en même temps, en contact permanent, c'était *La stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane*, où Baltrušaitis dans une thèse aussi très originale, mais peut-être, issu, un peu, des méthodes de Riegl, voyait dans tout le développement des compositions romanes et des motifs romans, une évolution à partir d'un schéma ornemental pur, végétal. Là encore, l'histoire importait peu, la place de ces monuments importait peu: l'essentiel était de déterminer des catégories, d'établir des formes. Et c'était cela, au fond, la première influence de Focillon, la toute première, celle qu'il a exercé [sur] un premier groupe d'élèves, qui d'ailleurs, bien sûr, une fois la thèse passée, ont quittés la Sorbonne et l'enseignement, les uns partis en Egypte, les autres en Irlande, un troisième à Kaunas (Lituanie), d'autres enfin, abandonnant la recherche romane. D'autres sujets de thèse sont sortis de cet enseignement:

René Crozet, Georges Gaillard, sur la sculpture espagnole, et catalane...

L'efficacité, au fond, de cet enseignement de Focillon sur l'art roman pendant les premières années de son séjour à Paris a été énorme, inattendue, et l'a étonnée lui-même. Il m'a dit, à un moment donné, deux ou trois ans plus tard, « Je ne m'attendais absolument pas à cela, absolument pas. Je ne croyais pas que l'art roman puisse intéresser à tel point les historiens de l'art, non pas les archéologues, mais les historiens de l'art ». Puis Focillon, après '31, continuait à diriger des thèses sur ces sujets, mais s'est éloigné des préoccupations de Mâle très vite, préparant son grand livre sur l'art d'Occident, l'évolution artistique depuis le XI^{ème} jusqu'au milieu du XV^{ème} siècle, et faisant des cours, et quels cours admirables, un [...] prodigieux sur Giotto, sur Piero della Francesca, sur le vitrail médiéval, sur Fouquet, sur la peinture flamande au XV^{ème} siècle, et tout ceci, bien sur, en préparant en même temps, et en publiant toute une série d'articles sur l'art moderne, en faisant toutes sortes d'incursions dans le domaine international de la Société des Nations, une activité prodigieuse dont on à peine la possibilité d'imaginer la cohérence.²⁰

En 1933—oui, je fais un peu l'historique de ce qui s'est passé—Focillon est revenu alors, en fondant un nouveau groupe, un deuxième groupe focillonien d'études sur la sculpture romane. Parce qu'en effet, même s'il n'était pas historique, son premier livre *Art des [sculpteurs] romans* a eu une portée historique. Focillon a mis en valeur la sculpture du XI^{ème} siècle, contrairement à toute la doctrine de [Robert de] Lasteyrie, de Marcel Aubert, de Paul Deschamps, d'Arthur Kingsley Porter, de tous. L'architecture romane pour Focillon ne commençait pas vers 1100 avec Saint-Sernin de Toulouse ou avec Cluny, controverse inépuisable, mais qu'elle commençait en vérité autour l'an mil, ou avant l'an mil, et les expériences du XI^{ème} siècle étaient d'autant plus intéressantes qu'elles montraient presque comme, *in vitro*, toute la création de la sculpture, toutes les raisons de tel ou tel échec. Le

XIème siècle est rempli par des renaissances qui n'aboutissent pas, par des tentatives de formation qui ratent, et c'est pour ça que ce siècle discontinu, sans évolution, pour tout dire, a été mal compris jusque là, parce qu'il ne pouvait pas être abordé au point de vue de l'histoire.

Il nous a réuni en '33, un groupe peut-être d'une dizaine, j'en étais, Philippe Verdier en était, Geneviève Micheli en était, toute une série d'étudiants de 23 ans, 25 ans. Il nous a lancé sur les routes à travers la France et l'Europe, pour photographier les monuments, pour recueillir des fiches, pour ramasser des documents d'archives, oui, bien sûr, et pour documenter la sculpture du XIème siècle, tout ce qui pouvait être du XIème siècle. Et nous avons déjà obtenu des résultats, en '38, notamment. Focillon, dans une conférence illustre— parce qu'elle a fait un scandale terrible à Paris—a exposé les récentes recherches sur la sculpture du XIème siècle en France, qui a paru dans un *Bulletin Monumental* en '38.²¹ C'était une conférence à la Société française d'archéologie, et il s'est fait siffler, après cette conférence, par tous les tenants de l'ancienne conception de l'histoire de l'architecture, de l'art roman. Et je me souviens comment, après la conférence, nous sommes allés chez Balzar dans un restaurant Parisien non loin de la Sorbonne,²² pour boire de la bière et oublier les archéologues, comme il disait [Laughter]

En juin '39, nous avons eu au Collège de France, avec Focillon, une dernière réunion avant les vacances, où on a dressé le programme de travail pour l'année, pour la seconde partie de '39, pour '40 et pour '41. L'ouvrage sur le XIème siècle était tout à fait prêt en '41. Et puis, la guerre, le départ de Focillon, sa mort. Le groupe s'est dispersé, bien sûr, par la guerre, par les suites de sa mort. Certains étaient prisonniers, les gens ont dû s'enfuir. Et c'est ça peut-être qui est, à mon avis, le plus miraculeux dans l'influence que Focillon a exercé. C'est que, deux mois après sa mort, lorsqu'on l'a appris à Paris en '43,

un nouveau groupe s'est formé, autour de Baltrušaitis, dans son appartement, à la Villa Virginie, au sud de Paris... Et tous les mercredis un certain nombre de fidèles venaient, malgré les alertes, les bombardements, pour reprendre le travail de l'architecture romane, de la sculpture romane, tous les problèmes que Focillon avait laissés un peu en suspens en partant.²³ Et, bientôt, quand la guerre était finie, nous avons, d'abord le plus officieusement et clandestinement, repris le travail de la sculpture du XI^{ème} siècle, et aussi de la publication de *L'an mil*, ouvrage que Focillon avait commencé pendant la guerre et qu'il a continué un peu ici aux Etats-Unis, et qui restait inachevé—ce n'était qu'une introduction.

Et alors, bien sûr, nous avons essayé à ce moment là de nous rapprocher le plus possible de toutes les méthodes que Focillon avait préconisées, et de tout ce qu'il nous avait dit de la valeur formelle de l'œuvre d'art, et de l'architecture aussi, et tout ce qu'il a voulu aussi... donner comme lien avec l'architecture, avec le moment, avec les lieux, tout ce paysage, qui au début ne le préoccupait pas, mais qui à la fin de sa vie, le préoccupait beaucoup plus. Il est devenu beaucoup plus historien qu'il ne l'était au début. Et ce groupe a travaillé, a donné des résultats, puis des articles importants, qui ont été publiés par ce groupe dans l'année '43, les Focilloniens de '43. *L'an mil* a été publié,²⁴ et même quelques ouvrages étaient en préparation, qui devaient être publiés [?], en pensant toujours que nous sommes restés le plus près de la pensée de Focillon, mais en combinant toutes les choses qu'il nous a enseignées, et tout ce que, peut-être, il aurait enseigné s'il avait vécu. Jean dit, par exemple, que la préoccupation archéologique et historique montait dans l'œuvre de Focillon, et par conséquent qu'il fallait bien que nous y allions aussi. On voit bien aussi que les tendances iconographiques que Focillon, au début, a un peu négligées, apparaissaient de plus en plus dans son œuvre, dans sa pensée, et il a fallu là aussi corriger un peu les orientations marquantes dans ce groupe

Le groupe de '43 se dispersait, parce qu'il manquait là un conducteur, un maître d'œuvre qui aurait été Focillon. Des articles ont été publiés ; mais c'était un peu mort, un peu disparu, et appartenait au passé, que les méthodes nouvelles allaient remplacer [...]. Et voilà où les choses étaient arrivées à nouveau en 1969, c'est-à-dire 30 ans, 40 ans après les débuts de la recherche focillonienne sur l'art roman. A ce moment un groupe s'est formé, qui existe encore maintenant, en France, qui travaille en contact avec certains savants étrangers, comme Georges Zarnecki, par exemple. Et puis, il y avait auparavant un espagnol, [Francisco García] Romo. Actuellement il existe plusieurs études, travaux, préparés, ou publiés déjà, et qui sont sortis de l'esprit focillonien, avec toutes ses adjonctions, comme nous avons vu déjà naître après la guerre. Il y a une étude sur la Normandie qui est parue déjà, très importante, de [Maylis] Baylé, qui est une jeune femme. Une autre est préparée, sous presse presque, sur la Loire, qui est un des centres de notre préoccupation du XI^{ème} siècle. Une troisième est une thèse sur l'art du Sud-ouest, pendant le XI^{ème} siècle. Je n'examine, je n'énumère pas tout qui existe, non. Mais tout un groupe s'est reformé, qui tout le temps, sans arrêt, se réfère à certains des principes de Focillon. Je crois donc que si nous parlons de Focillon, nous n'avons pas affaire à une façon de voir sclérosée, à quelqu'un qui inventait un système d'art roman, une doctrine. Il n'y a pas de doctrine, il n'y a pas de système. Focillon s'en est défendu, [mais] il y a des observations stylistiques, une méthode d'approche, qui est toujours valable, qui est toujours viable. On doit la compléter avec d'autres approches, que Focillon peut-être, dans sa brutalité, dans un sens, dans son invention première, n'a pas envisagés. Nous devons le [reconnaître] (?). Je crois donc que c'est peut-être là la véritable [...] de Focillon, une sorte de force vitale d'enthousiasme qui est toujours renouvelée par [delà] tous les morts, toutes les insuffisances des vivants, il reste comme une sorte d'exemple et comme une sorte de force

vive Voila ce que j'avais à dire.

Sumner Crosby

It is clearly difficult, if it isn't impossible, to try to comment on what Grod has been saying of his own experiences. As I said at the beginning: Focillon is by and large indeed impossible to describe or explain in any simple terms. But Jean used several times the word Chartiste. Unfortunately that's where I began. When I first went to Paris to study I was at the Ecole des Chartes and indeed the difference was enormous. In fact one was astounded that the same city could contain two totally different concepts, and they were almost in terms of space, side by side. The Chartistes with their specific, or attention to nothing but specifics, or their attempt to read the unreadable scripts of early medieval manuscripts, became an end-all which seemed to have to no particular aim in terms of a larger meaning. And that was what, for me, Focillon was always in search of. The ultimate meaning, though not a universal meaning, meaning in its own context. And perhaps where he misjudged his guidance at times is when he launched me on the study of a building, a given site, which was unapproachable, indefinable on its own terms, and whose problems could not be satisfactorily solved. Jean, what do you think? You have worked with... George [Kubler] works with the large movements, Jean has worked with specific buildings as well as with large urban movements. His recent work on the English Decorated style is a marvelous synthesis of the development of this art. What are your thoughts on this?

Jean Bony

There's a lot to be said, of course. Professor Grodecki has had a completely different experience, that's what I said when he was talking. Grodecki has been involved in a group. I have never been involved in a group. I have always been a free lance, *franc-tireur*, or

something like that. And that's different, that's a different situation. I was doing my *agrégation*, you were doing exclusively *l'histoire de l'art*. It was a completely different orientation of activity as students. So of course it was quite different and so you were involved in a group which had intense vitality and in which I didn't take part because I was too busy doing something else at the same moment. And Focillon treated me probably differently because he knew I was a historian by training. I was not part of the group which was working on Romanesque sculpture. I was part of something different. But it was represented by his American students, by you [Crosby], by Charles Seymour, and also at the present time, by the monograph in the Focillon spirit is exemplified by Charles Seymour's *Notre-Dame de Noyon*, and that was a sort of guide, I mean, for me.

You talked about your students who have started again working on Romanesque sculpture from '69, of course, and you've been lucky enough to be able to start again Focillon's work in his own chair. That was wonderful, and we are all enormously grateful to you for that. I was a missionary in foreign lands. And I've also created a third generation, second or third generation of Focillon students. So you see Focillon is everywhere, all over the place, and all my students also claim to be Focillon students, and they are interested not in what I force them to do also, or that nasty work *à la manière des Chartistes*, which Focillon wanted me to do too, when I was working on my buildings. But of course beyond that what is really the reward is the entrance into that kingdom of heaven, the world of forms, of why, say, the form of art [is] simply formal, the form being, as you say, the contact between the matter and what is not material. It is form which creates. Okay. So, you see that there is a lot to be said about the multiplicity of the aspects and of the inheritance. I think we had in some ways a similar experience and some ways dissimilar again.

Sumner Crosby

You were moving out as a carrier of the gospel. We were the heathens who got it. He came here.

Jean Bony

...not from a disciple.

Sumner Crosby

Well, without trying to go into that, which I don't think is really very necessary. I am wondering whether Philippe Verdier wouldn't like to say something. He is sitting in the middle of the audience, and if he would like to come up, we'd be delighted to have him.

Philippe Verdier

Yes please.

[Be warned] that I shall utter a few dirty words which will be in French...

I became a Focillonien by a sort of accident, the most happy accident of my life. When there were riots in Paris, in February 1934, a sculptor from Reims, a friend of Henri Focillon since the First World War, took me--it was a Monday evening at 5:00 o'clock--to a lecture by Focillon, the first time I heard him, when I even did not know his name.²⁵ I heard him lecture on stained glass, and it was like St. Paul falling from his horse on the road to Damascus. I was converted forever. And then (that is also a little bit both for you, Grod, and for Jean Bony), the following day there was an ordinary course on Rayonnant architecture and I heard Focillon speak of architecture and then I was even more amazed. Because Focillon was essentially a poet, and it is easy to inject poetry in, I mention [...], but maybe it is a little bit difficult when it comes to architecture. And the magic of the poetical approach to architecture was one of the great secrets of Henri Focillon.

Between us there was quickly established a sort of freemasonry of *normaliens*. I was

treated immediately as a friend. And I shall remember always what Focillon told me. He took me in his office and told me exactly this: “Mon cher ami, ces messieurs de la Sorbonne s’imaginent que je suis ici pour faire de l’histoire. Je suis ici pour faire de la poésie. Mais si je le disais, ils me foutraient dehors à coup de pied au cul.” That was, that was Focillon’s usual witty way of speaking.

The great chance for me, and it appeared an extraordinary political (?) chance, was that I knew Henri Focillon when I was fresh from the hand of the philosopher Alain.²⁶ I knew Focillon in my first year at the École normale supérieure, and I had the great chance also to be a student of Alain in his last year of teaching philosophy. And I think Alain and Focillon’s teaching had much in common. Maybe the first was that their way of treating paradox, paradox as a way of reaching truth. Focillon was a master at this sort of way Alain was deeply a follower of Kant, and Alain injected in me the belief that there is absolutely no real path of thought in a man’s mind if you don’t stick to the material world. And it was very important Kant’s philosophy, and it was very important with Alain. You do not think out of the world. You don’t sit (?) against the world. You have to be living in the material world in order to establish a system of thought which has value and which can finally lead to the truth.

¹The reference is to M.F. Hearn’s Romanesque Sculpture. The Revival of Monumental Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, Ithaca, 1981, which had just then appeared.

²Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis (1862-1923). Author of a thesis on L’architecture religieuse dans l’ancien diocèse de Soissons au XIe et au XIIe siècle (1885) and numerous other studies on medieval architecture in France. Professeur-suppléant in medieval archeology at the École des

Chartes (1894), then Professor (1911). President of the Société française d'archéologie (1911) and the Société nationale des antiquaires de France (1916).

³E. Viollet-le-Duc, Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle, Paris, 1854-1868, IV, 1-279

⁴A. Choisy, Histoire de l'architecture, Paris, 1889 (repr. 1929), 2 vols.

⁵H. Focillon, "Le problème de l'ogive," Recherche, I, 1939, 5-28, earlier published in Office des Instituts d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art. Bulletin périodique, 3, 1935, 43-53.

⁶Jacques Heyman, Professor of Engineering at the University of Cambridge and head of the Department (1983-1992). In the bibliography of his masterly French Gothic Architecture of the 12th and 13th Centuries, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1983, 559, Bony cites three studies by him: "The Stone Skeleton," International Journal of Solids and Structures, II, 1966, 249-280; "Beauvais Cathedral," Transactions of the Newcomen Society, XL, 1967-68, 15-32; and "On the Rubber Vaults of the Middle Ages and Other Matters," Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 6th Ser., LXXI, 1968, 177-188.

⁷Robert Mark, Professor of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Princeton University. Bony, French Gothic Architecture, 563, cites his articles "Gothic Cathedrals and Structural Rationalism," Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, 2nd Ser., XXXIII, 1971, 607-624; "The Structural Analysis of Gothic Cathedrals. A Comparison of Chartres and Bourges," Scientific American, LXVI, 1978, 543-550 ; (with R.A. Prentke), "Model Analysis of Gothic Structure," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XXIX, 1968, 44-48; and (with R.S. Jonash, "Wind-Loading on Gothic Structure," Idem, XXIX, 1978, 222-230.

⁸Louis-Joseph Depoin (1855-1924). Historian and author of several works on aspects of medieval history, notably concerning his native city of Pontoise. See on him the entry of S.J. Delmont in Dictionnaire de biographie française, Paris, X, 1965, col. 1102.

⁹Antoine-Joseph Levrier (1746-1823). Lawyer and legal historian. He was Juge-Président of the civil tribunal of Amiens in 1791, and President of the Royal Court until 1816. See on him Biographie ancienne et moderne. Supplément, LXXI, Paris, 1842- 464-465. I have not been able to discover if and where Focillon mentions him in print.

¹⁰George Duby and Guy Lardreau, Dialogues, Paris, 1980, 56-57, where Duby remarks that "Febvre and [Marc] Bloch ont renoué en soutenant l'histoire des civilisations et des structures contre l'histoire événementielle. Mais ils ont renoué bien davantage en luttant pour l'histoire problème." For the concept, see G. Massicotte, L'histoire problème. La méthode de Lucien Febvre (Coll. Méthodes des sciences humaines, 4), St.-Hyacinthe (Quebec) and Paris, 1981.

¹¹Nikolaj Worobiow (1903-1954), author of Die Fensterrahmen Dominikus Zimmermann. Versuch einer genetischen Ableitung (Diss. Munich), 1934; M.K. Curlionis, der litauische Maler und Musiker (1938) and other works on Lithuanian art and culture. He reviewed Focillon's Vie des formes in Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtliche Literatur, IV, 1935, 40-65.

¹²R. Branner, "Paris and the Origins of Rayonnant Architecture Down to 1240," Art Bulletin, XLIV, 1962, 39-51.

¹³Bony refers to *diaphanie* in his French Gothic Architecture [as in n. 6], 145, 352, and 497, n. 23, where the concept is attributed to Hans Jantzen.

¹⁴Claire Tissot, in her Archives Henri Focillon (1881-1943). Annexes à l'inventaire, Paris, 2000, 22, lists a study by Követz (or Köves) entitled La formation de l'ancien art chrétien, Paris, 1927. A letter by him to Focillon dated August 30, 1925 concerns his health and the excursion of Focillon's group to Burgundy (Tissot, Archives Henri Focillon (1881-1943), Paris, 1998, 142, No. 263. He was again in epistolary contact with Focillon in 1941 (Idem, 183, No. 110).

¹⁵Mélanges Henri Focillon (Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 86th Year, 6th Ser., XXVI, July-December 1944 [1947]).

¹⁶H. Focillon, "Apôtres et jongleurs (Études de mouvement)," Revue de l'art ancien et moderne, LV, 1929, 13-28. On this essay, the author's first foray into Romanesque art, see W. Cahn, "Focillon's jongleur," Art History, XVIII, 1995, 345-362.

¹⁷Idem, "L'emplacement de la sculpture romane," Cahiers de Belgique, II, 1929, 261-271.

¹⁸Allusion, according to Catherine Grodecki, to the collection Études d'art et d'archéologie sous la direction d'Henri Focillon, published by Ernest Leroux, in which have appeared J. Baltrušaitis, Études sur l'art médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie (1929); Ladislav Gál, L'architecture religieuse en Hongrie du XI au XIIIe siècles (1929); F. Henry, La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne (1933), 2 vols., among other titles

¹⁹See above, note 11.

²⁰On Focillon's activity in the Institut international de Coopération intellectuelle of the League of Nations, see the items listed in the Bibliographie Henri Focillon, 27, No. 36; 28, Nos. 37a, b, and c, and 120-121, Nos. 358-362.

²¹H. Focillon, "Recherches récentes sur la sculpture romane en France au XIIe siècle," Bulletin monumental, XCVII, 1938, 49-72. Note 1 indicates that this article was based on a lecture given on December 16, 1937, to the Société française d'archéologie, and lists the members of the author's research group, students at the Institut d'art et d'archéologie, as Mlles [Aenne] Liebreich, [Geneviève] Micheli, Kann, Nicaud, [Suzanne] Brodtbeck, and MM. Grodecki, Verdier, and Jean Prinnet.

²²The Brasserie Balzar, located at 49, rue des Écoles, in the Vth Arrondissement, now a somewhat more upscale place than it probably was in the Thirties. See the amusing account of recent efforts by patrons to prevent the place from losing its character as a result of being acquired by a chain, the Flo Group, in Adam Gopnik, Paris and the Moon, New York, 2000, 228ff. and 271-295.

²³The Villa Virginie, the site of the apartment of Hélène and Jurgis Baltrušaitis, is located in the XIVth Arrondissement, near the Porte d'Orléans. Michel Laclotte, in his memoir Histoire des musées. Souvenirs d'un conservateur, Paris, 2003, 23, writes that "Dans l'immédiat après guerre [Baltrušaitis] avait coutume de réunir des amis chaque mercredi chez lui, villa Virginie, grace à sa femme Hélène... la belle-fille de Focillon et son élève, avec qui je me suis lié ensuite d'une grande amitié... Je suis moi-même arrivé plus tard dans ce groupe. On allait chez Baltru, m'a t-on dit, pour prendre un verre, discuter d'histoire de l'art, écouter un exposé." Julia Child, who made herself in these years an expert on French cooking, also sometimes attended with her husband:

see her posthumously-published (in collaboration with A. Prud'homme) My Life in France, New York, 2006, 37, 38, and 123-124.

²⁴H. Focillon, L'an mil (Collection Henri Focillon), Paris, 1952.

²⁵Verdier gives a somewhat more detailed account of this circumstance in the article "Henri Focillon enseignant," which he contributed to the anthology Henri Focillon (Cahiers pour un temps) Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1986, 235-236, where Focillon's friend is identified as Auguste Coutin. Focillon wrote an introduction to the wartime exhibition La cathédrale de Reims. Exposition d'études exécutées à l'école d'art médiéval sous la direction d'Auguste Coutin, sculpteur de Reims, Lyon, 1915 (Bibliographie Henri Focillon, 44-45, No. 76)

²⁶Alain (pseudonym of Emile-Auguste Chartier), 1868-1951. Philosopher and influential teacher at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris from 1909 until his retirement in 1933 (L. Dubief, in Dictionnaire de biographie française, VIII, 1959, 670-671). For his views on Kant, see G. Pascal, "Le Kantisme d'Alain," in R. Bourgne, ed., Alain, lecteur des philosophes de Platon à Marx, Paris, 1978, 95-108.