

The life of sculptor constantin brancusi

Life



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Our simplest words are often the deepest in meaning: birth, kiss, flight, dream. The sculptor Constantin Brancusi spent his life searching for forms as simple and pure as those words—forms that seem to have existed forever, outside of time. Born a peasant in a remote village in Romania, he spent most of his adult life in Paris, where he lived in a single small room adjoining a skylit studio. Upon his death in 1957, Brancusi willed the contents of his studio to the French government, which eventually re-created the studio itself in a museum (1. 1).

Near the center of the photograph are two versions of an idea Brancusi called Endless Column. Pulsing upward with great energy, the columns seem as though they could go on forever. Perhaps they do go on forever, and we can see only part of them. Directly in front of the white column, a sleek, horizontal marble form looking something like a slender submarine seems to hover over a disk-shaped base. Brancusi called it simply Fish. It does not depict any particular fish but, rather, shows us the idea of something that moves swiftly and freely through the water, the essence of a fish.

To the left of the dark column, arching up in front of a patch of wall painted red, is a version of one of Brancusi's most famous works, Bird in Space. Here again the artist portrays not a particular bird but, rather, the idea of flight, the feeling of soaring upward. Brancusi said that the work represents “ the soul liberated from matter. ” 1 A photograph by Brancusi shows another, more mysterious view of Bird in Space (1. 2). Light from a source we cannot see cuts across the work and falls in a sharp diamond shape on the wall behind.

The sculpture casts a shadow so strong it seems to have a dark twin. Before it lies a broken, discarded work. The photograph might make you think of the birth of a bird from its shell, or of a perfected work of art arising from numerous failed attempts, or indeed of a soul newly liberated from its material prison. Brancusi took many photographs of his work, and through them we can see how his sculptures lived in his imagination even after they were finished. He photographed them in varying conditions of light, in multiple locations and combinations, from close up and far away.

With each photograph they seem to reveal a different mood, the way people we know reveal different sides of themselves over time. Living with art, Brancusi's photographs show us, is making art live by letting it engage our attention, our imagination, our intelligence. Few of us, of course, can live with art the way Brancusi did. Yet we can choose to seek out encounters with art, to make it a matter for thought and enjoyment, and to let it live in our imagination. You probably live already with more art than you think you do.

Very likely the walls of your home are decorated with posters, photographs, or even paintings you chose because you find them beautiful or meaningful. Walking around your community you probably pass by buildings that were designed for visual appeal as well as to serve practical ends. If you ever pause for a moment just to look at one of them, to take pleasure, for example, in its silhouette against the sky, you have made the architect's work live for a moment by appreciating an effect that he or she prepared for you. We call such an experience an aesthetic experience.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the feelings aroused in us by sensory experiences—experiences we have through sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Aesthetics concerns itself with our responses to the natural world and to the world we make, especially the world of art. What art is, how and why it affects us—these are some of the issues that aesthetics addresses. This book hopes to deepen your pleasure in the aesthetic experience by broadening your understanding of one of the most basic and universal of human activities, making art.

Its subject is visual art, which is art that addresses the sense of sight, as opposed to music or poetry, which are arts that appeal to the ear. It focuses on the Western tradition, by which we mean art as it has been understood and practiced in Europe and in cultures with their roots in European thought, such as the United States. But it also reaches back to consider works created well before Western ideas about art were in place and across to other cultures that have very different traditions of art. THE IMPULSE FOR ART

No society that we know of, for as far back in human history as we have been able to penetrate, has lived without some form of art. The impulse to make and respond to art appears to be as deeply ingrained in us as the ability to learn language, part of what sets us apart as humans. Where does the urge to make art come from? What purposes does it serve? For answers, we might begin by looking at some of the oldest works yet discovered, images and artifacts dating from the Stone Ages, near the beginning of the human experience.

On the afternoon of December 18, 1994, two men and a woman, all experienced cave explorers, were climbing among the rocky cliffs in the Ardeche region of southeastern France. From a small cavity in the rock, they felt a draft of air, which they knew often signaled a large cavern within. After clearing away some rocks and debris, they were able to squeeze through a narrow channel into what appeared to be an enormous underground room, its floor littered with animal bones.

Pressing farther into the cave, the explorers played their lights on the walls and made an astonishing discovery: The walls were covered with drawings and paintings (1. 3)—more than three hundred images as they eventually found—depicting rhinoceroses, horses, bears, reindeer, lions, bison, mammoths, and others, as well as numerous outlines of human hands. It was evident that the paintings were extremely old and that the cave had remained untouched, unseen by humans, since prehistoric times.

The explorers agreed to name the site after the one in their number who had led them to it, Jean-Marie Chauvet, so it is called the Chauvet cave. What they did not realize until months later, after radiocarbon testing had accurately dated the paintings, was that they had just pushed back the history of art by several thousand years. The Chauvet images were made about 30, 000 B. C. E. and are the oldest paintings we know. The paintings date from a time known as the Upper Paleolithic Period, which simply means the latter part of the Old Stone Age. Archaeologists have formed some tentative conclusions about how the paintings were done.

Pigments of red and yellow ochre, a natural earth substance, along with black charcoal, could have been mixed with animal fat and painted onto the walls with a reed brush. In powdered form, the same materials probably were mouth-blown onto the surface through hollow reeds. Many of the images are engraved, or scratched, into the rock. More intriguing is the question of why the cave paintings were made, why their creators paid such meticulous attention to detail, why they did their work so far underground. The paintings clearly were not meant to embellish a dwelling space.

The cave artists must have lived—slept, cooked their meals, mated, and raised their children—much nearer to the mouths of these caves, close to daylight and fresh air. Until the Chauvet cave was discovered, many experts believed that ancient cave paintings were done for magical assistance in the hunt, to ensure success in bringing down game animals. But several of the animals depicted at Chauvet, including lions and rhinos and bears, were not in the customary diet of early peoples. Perhaps the artists wished to establish some kind of connection with these wild beasts, but we cannot know for sure.

Fascinating as these mysteries are, they pass over perhaps the most amazing thing of all, which is that there should be images in the first place. The ability to make images is uniquely human. We do it so naturally and so constantly that we take it for granted. We make them with our hands, and we make them with our minds. Lying out on the grass, for example, you may amuse yourself by finding images in the shifting clouds, now a lion, now an old woman. Are the images really there? We know that a cloud is just a

cloud, yet the image is certainly there, because we see it. Our experience of the images we make is the same.

We know that a drawing is just markings on a surface, a newspaper photograph merely dots, yet we recognize them as images that reflect our world, and we identify with them. The experience was the same for Paleolithic image-makers as it is for us. All images may not be art, but our ability to make them is one place where art begins. The contemporary British sculptor Anthony Caro has said that “ all art is basically Paleolithic or Neolithic: either the urge to smear soot and grease on cave walls or pile stone on stone. ”² By “ soot and grease” Caro means the cave paintings.

With “ the urge to pile stone on stone” he has in mind one of the most impressive and haunting works to survive from the Stone Ages, the structure in the south of England known as Stonehenge (1. 4). Today much ruined through time and vandalism, Stonehenge at its height consisted of several concentric circles of megaliths, very large stones, surrounded in turn by a circular ditch. It was built in several phases over many centuries, beginning around 3100 B. C. E. The tallest circle, visible in the photograph here, originally consisted of thirty gigantic upstones capped with a continuous ring of horizontal stones.

Weighing some 50 tons each, the stones were quarried many miles away, hauled to the site, and laboriously shaped by blows from stone hammers until they fit together. Many theories have been advanced about why Stonehenge was built and what purpose it served. Recent archaeological research has confirmed that the monument marks a graveyard, perhaps that

of a ruling dynasty. The cremated remains of up to 240 people appear to have been buried there over a period of some five hundred years, from the earliest development of the site until the time when the great stones were erected.

Other findings suggest that the monument did not stand alone but was part of a larger complex, perhaps a religious complex used for funerary rituals. What is certain is that Stonehenge held meaning for the Neolithic community that built it. For us, it stands as a compelling example of how old and how basic is our urge to create meaningful order and form, to structure our world so that it reflects our ideas. This is another place where art begins. In our society, we tend to think of art as something created by specialists, people we call artists, just as medicine is practiced by doctors and bridges are designed by engineers.

In other societies, virtually everyone contributes to art in some way. Yet no matter how a society organizes itself, it calls on its art-makers to fulfill similar roles. Stonehenge was erected in the Neolithic era, or New Stone Age. The Neolithic era is named for the new kinds of stone tools that were invented, but it also saw such important advances as the domestication of animals and crops and the development of the technology of pottery, as people discovered that fire could harden certain kinds of clay. With pottery, storage jars, foodbowls, and all sorts of other practical objects came into being.

Yet much of the world's oldest pottery seems to go far beyond purely practical needs (1. 5). This elegant stemmed cup was formed around 2000 B.

C. E. in what is now eastern China. Eggshell-thin and exceedingly fragile, it could not have held much of anything and would have tipped over easily. In other words, it isn't practical. Instead, great care and skill have gone into making it pleasing to the eye. Here is a third place we might turn to for the origins of art—the urge to explore the aesthetic possibilities of new technologies. What are the limits of clay, the early potters must have wondered.

What can be done with it? Scholars believe such vessels were created for ceremonial use. They were probably made in limited quantity for members of a social elite. To construct meaningful images and forms, to create order and structure, to explore aesthetic possibilities—these characteristics seem to be part of our nature as human beings. From them, art has grown, nurtured by each culture in its own way. WHAT DO ARTISTS DO? First, artists create places for some human purpose. Stonehenge, for example, was probably created as a place where a community could gather for rituals.

Closer to our own time, Maya Lin created the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a place for contemplation and remembrance (1. 6). One of our most painful national memories, the Vietnam War saw thousands of young men and women lose their lives in a distant conflict that was increasingly questioned and protested at home. By the war's end, the nation was so bitterly divided that returning veterans received virtually no recognition for their services. In this atmosphere of continuing controversy, Lin's task was to create a memorial that honored the human sacrifice of the war while neither glorifying nor condemning the war itself.

At the heart of the memorial is a long, tapering, V-shaped wall of black granite, inscribed with the names of the missing, the captured, and the dead—some 58, 000 names in all. Set into the earth exposed by slicing a great wedge from a gently sloping hill, it suggests perhaps a modern entrance to an ancient burial mound, though in fact there is no entrance. Instead, the highly polished surface acts as a mirror, reflecting the surrounding trees, the nearby Washington Monument, and the visitors themselves as they pass by.

Entering along a walkway from either end, visitors are barely aware at first of the low wall at their feet. The monument begins just as the war itself did, almost unnoticed, a few support troops sent to a small and distant country, a few deaths in the nightly news. As visitors continue their descent along the downward-sloping path, the wall grows taller and taller until it towers overhead, names upon names upon names. Often, people reach out to touch the letters, and as they do, they touch their own reflections reaching back. At the walkway's lowest point, with the wall at its highest, a corner is turned.

The path begins to climb upward, and the wall begins to fall away. Drawn by a view of either the Washington Monument (as in the photograph here) or the Lincoln Memorial (along the other axis), visitors leave the war behind. In a quiet, unobtrusive way, the place that Maya Lin created encourages a kind of ritual, a journey downward into a valley of death, then upward toward hope, healing, and reconciliation. Like Stonehenge, it has served to bring a community together. A second task artists perform is to create extraordinary versions of ordinary objects.

Just as the Neolithic vessel we looked at earlier is more than an ordinary drinking cup, so the textile here is more than an ordinary garment (1. 7). Woven in West Africa by artists of the Asante people, it is a spectacular example of a type of textile known as kente. Kente is woven in hundreds of patterns, each with its own name, history, and symbolism. Traditionally, a newly invented pattern was shown first to the king, who had the right to claim it for his own exclusive use. Like the Neolithic vessel, royal kente was reserved for ceremonial occasions.

Rich, costly, and elaborate, the cloth distinguished its wearer as special as well, an extraordinary version of an ordinary human being. A third important task for artists has been to record and commemorate. Artists create images that help us remember the present after it slips into the past, that keep us in mind of our history, and that will speak of our times to the future. Illustrated here is a painting by a 17th-century artist named Manohar, one of several painters employed in the royal workshops of the emperor Jahangir, a ruler of the Mughal dynasty in India (1. 8).

At the center of the painting we see Jahangir himself, seated beneath a sumptuous canopy. His son Khusrau, dressed in a yellow robe, offers him the precious gift of a golden cup. The painting commemorates a moment of reconciliation between father and son, who had had a violent falling out. The moment did not last, however. Khusrau would soon stage an armed rebellion that cost him the throne. Although the intricate details of Mughal history may be lost on us today, this enchanting painting gives us a vivid glimpse into their vanished world as they wanted it to be remembered. A fourth task for artists is to give tangible form to the unknown.

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They portray what cannot be seen with the eyes or events that can only be imagined. An anonymous Indian sculptor of the 10th century gave tangible form to the Hindu god Shiva in his guise as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance (1. 9). Encircled by flames, his long hair flying outward, Shiva dances the destruction and rebirth of the world, the end of one cycle of time and the beginning of another. The figure's four arms communicate the complexity of this cosmic moment. In one hand, Shiva holds the small drum whose beat summons up creation; in another hand, he holds the flame of destruction.

A third hand points at his raised foot, beneath which worshipers may seek refuge, while a fourth hand is raised with its palm toward the viewer, a gesture that means “fear not.” A fifth function artists perform is to give tangible form to feelings and ideas. The statue of Shiva we just looked at, for example, gives tangible form to ideas about the cyclical nature of time that are part of the religious culture of Hinduism. In *The Starry Night* (1. 10), Vincent van Gogh labored to express his personal feelings as he stood on the outskirts of a small village in France and looked up at the night sky.

Van Gogh had become intrigued by the belief that people journeyed to a star after their death, and that there they continued their lives. “Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen,” he wrote in a letter, “we take death to reach a star.”⁴ Seen through the prism of that idea, the night landscape inspired in him a vision of great intensity. Surrounded by halos of radiating light, the stars have an exaggerated, urgent presence, as though each one were a brilliant sun. A great wave or whirlpool rolls across the sky—a cloud, perhaps, or some kind of cosmic energy.

The landscape, too, seems to roll on in waves like an ocean. A tree in the foreground writhes upward toward the stars as though answering their call. In the distance, a church spire points upward as well. Everything is in turbulent motion. Nature seems alive, communicating in its own language while the village sleeps. Finally, artists refresh our vision and help us see the world in new ways. Habit dulls our senses. What we see every day we no longer marvel at, because it has become familiar. Through art we can see the world through someone else's eyes and recover the intensity of looking for the first time.

Ernst Haas' photograph *Peeling Paint on Iron Bench, Kyoto, 1981* (1. 11) singles out a small detail of an ordinary day and asks us to notice how rich it is if we really take the time to look. Rain has made the colors shine with fresh intensity, brilliant red against deep black, and the star-shaped leaves could almost be made of gold. After seeing through Haas' eyes, we may find ourselves—if only for a few hours—more attentive to the world around us, which is stranger, more mysterious, more various, and more beautiful than we usually realize. CREATING AND CREATIVITY

Out walking on a rainy day in Kyoto, Ernst Haas could have noticed the park bench, smiled with pleasure, and continued on his way. Standing in a field over a century ago, Van Gogh could have had his vision of the night sky, then returned to his lodgings—and we would never have known about it. We all experience the moments of insight that put us where art begins. For most of us, such moments are an end in themselves. For artists, they are a beginning, a kind of raw material that sets a creative process in motion.

Creativity is a word that comes up often when talking about art, but what is creativity exactly? Are we born with it?

Can it be learned? Can it be lost? Are artists more creative than other people? If so, how did they get that way? Many writers and educators have tried to analyze creativity and determine what makes a person creative. 6 Although the exact nature of creativity remains elusive, there is general agreement that creative people tend to possess certain traits, including:

- Sensitivity —heightened awareness of what one sees, hears, and touches, as well as responsiveness to other people and their feelings.
- Flexibility —an ability to adapt to new situations and to see their possibilities; willingness to find innovative relationships.
- Originality —uncommon responses to situations and to solving problems.
- Playfulness —a sense of humor and an ability to experiment freely.
- Productivity —the ability to generate ideas easily and frequently, and to follow through on those ideas.
- Fluency —a readiness to allow the free flow of ideas.
- Analytical skill —a talent for exploring problems, taking them apart, and finding out how things work.
- Organizational skill —ability to put things back together in a coherent order.

We might bear that list in mind as we look at Tim Hawkinson's *Emoter* (1992).

Like many of Hawkinson's works, *Emoter* looks like a do-it-yourself science project that has gotten a little out of hand. The stepladder on the floor houses a black-and-white television monitor tuned to a local broadcast station. Rows of light sensors attached to the monitor's screen react to changes in the moving image, sending signals through a tangle of cords, cables, and wires up to a large photograph of the artist's face. The

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components of the face—eyes, nostrils, eyebrows, and mouth—move continuously in response to the signals they receive, generating expressions that are as extravagant as a mime's.

Certainly, sensitivity made Hawkinson a keen observer of faces, and originality suggested to him that such unlikely material as laboratory experiments monitoring brain waves, or antiquated scientific theories linking specific facial expressions to specific emotions, could inspire a work of art. Playfulness, flexibility, fluency, and productivity set him to exploring ways in which his project could be given form, while analytical and organizational skills allowed him to carry it to completion. The profession of artist is not the only one that requires creativity.

Scientists, mathematicians, teachers, business executives, doctors, librarians, computer programmers—people in every line of work, if they are any good, look for ways to be creative. Artists occupy a special place in that they have devoted their lives to opening the channels of visual creativity. Can a person become more creative? Almost certainly, if one allows oneself to be. Being creative means learning to trust one's own interests, experiences, and references, and to use them to enhance life and work. Above all, it means discarding rigid notions of what has been or should be in favor of what could be.

Creativity develops when the eyes and the mind are wide open, and it is as important to looking at art as it is to making it. We close this chapter by exploring what looking creatively might involve. **LOOKING AND RESPONDING** Science tells us that seeing is a mode of perception, which is the recognition

and interpretation of sensory data—in other words, how information comes into our eyes (ears, nose, taste buds, fingertips) and what we make of it. In visual perception, our eyes take in information in the form of light patterns; the brain processes these patterns to give them meaning. The role of the eyes in vision is purely mechanical.

Barring some physical disorder, it functions the same way for everyone. The mind's role in making sense of the information, however, is highly subjective and belongs to the realm of psychology. Simply put, given the same situation, we do not all notice the same things, nor do we interpret what we see in the same way. One reason for differences in perception is the immense amount of detail available for our attention at any given moment. To navigate efficiently through daily life, we practice what is called selective perception, focusing on the visual information we need for the task at hand and relegating everything else to the background.

But other factors are in play as well. Our mood influences what we notice and how we interpret it, as does the whole of our prior experience—the culture we grew up in, relationships we have had, places we have seen, knowledge we have accumulated. The subjective nature of perception explains why a work of art may mean different things to different people and how it is that we may return to a favorite work again and again, noticing new aspects of it each time. It explains why the more we know, the richer each new encounter with art will be, for we will have more experience to bring to it.

It explains why we should make every effort to experience as much art in person as possible, for physical dimensions also influence perception. The works reproduced in this book are miniaturized. Many other details escape reproduction as well. Above all, the nature of perception suggests that the most important key to looking at art is to become aware of the process of looking itself—to notice details and visual relationships, to explore the associations and feelings they inspire, to search for knowledge we can bring to bear, and to try to put what we see into words.

A quick glance at Juan de Valdes Leal's *Vanitas* (1. 13) reveals a careless jumble of objects with a cherub looking over them. In the background, a man looks out at us from the shadows. But what are the objects? And what are the cherub and the man doing? Only if we begin to ask and answer such questions does the message of the painting emerge. In the foreground to the left is a timepiece. Next to it are three flowers, each one marking a stage in the brief life of a flower across time: budding, then blossoming, then dying as its petals fall away. Then come dice and playing cards, suggesting games of chance.

Further on, a cascade of medals, money, and jewelry leads up to an elaborate crown, suggesting honors, wealth, and power. At the center, books and scientific instruments evoke knowledge. Finally, back where we began, a skull crowned with a laurel wreath lies on its side. Laurel traditionally crowns those who have become famous through their achievements, especially artistic achievements. Over this display the cherub blows a bubble, as though making a comment on the riches before him. A bubble's existence is

even shorter than a flower's—a few seconds of iridescent beauty, and then nothing.

Behind the books, a crystal globe resembles a bubble as well, encouraging us to see a connection. When we meet the man's gaze, we notice that he has drawn back a heavy curtain with one hand and is pointing at a painting he has thus revealed with the other. “ Look at this,” he all but speaks. The painting depicts the Last Judgment. In Christian belief, the Last Judgment is the moment when Christ will appear again. He will judge both the living and the dead, accepting some into Paradise and condemning others to Hell. The universe will end, and with it time itself.

We might paraphrase the basic message of the painting something like this:

“ Life is fleeting, and everything that we prize and strive for during it is ultimately meaningless. Neither wealth nor beauty nor good fortune nor power nor knowledge nor fame will save us when we stand before God at the end of the world. ” Without taking the time to perceive and reflect on the many details of the image, we would miss its message completely. Vanitas is Latin for “ vanity. ” It alludes to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, a meditation on the fleeting nature of earthly life and happiness in which we read that in the end, “ all is vanity. The title wasn't invented or bestowed by the artist, however. Rather, it is a generic name for a subject that was popular during his lifetime. Numerous vanitas paintings have come down to us from the 17th century, and together they show the many ways that artists treated its themes. Closer to our own time, the painter Audrey Flack became fascinated by the vanitas tradition, and she created a series of her own, including Wheel of Fortune (Vanitas) (1. 14). Knowing something of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-sculptor-constantin-brancusi/>

tradition Flack is building on, we can more easily appreciate her updated interpretation.

As ever, a skull puts us in mind of death. An hourglass, a calendar page, and a guttering candle speak of time and its passing. The necklace, mirrors, powder puff, and lipstick are contemporary symbols of personal vanity, while a die and a tarot card evoke the roles of chance and fate in our lives. As in the painting by Valdes, a visual echo encourages us to think about a connection, in this case between the framed oval photograph of a young woman and the framed oval reflection of the skull just below. Flack may be painting with one eye on the past, but the other is firmly on our society as we are now.

For example, she includes modern inventions such as a photograph and a lipstick tube, and she shuns symbols that no longer speak to us directly such as laurels and a crown. The specifically Christian context is gone as well, resulting in a more general message that applies to us all, regardless of faith: Time passes quickly, beauty fades, chance plays a bigger role in our lives than we like to think, death awaits. Despite their differences, both Flack and Valdes provide us with many clues to direct our thoughts. They depict objects that have common associations and then trust us to add up the evidence.

At first glance, a contemporary work such as Jim Hodges' *Every Touch* seems very different (1. 15). *Every Touch* is made of artificial silk flowers, taken apart petal by petal. The petals were ironed flat, intermingled, then stitched together to form a large curtain or veil. Yet although *Every Touch* may not

direct our thoughts as firmly as the other works, we approach it in the same way. We look, and we try to become aware of our looking. We ask questions and explore associations. We bring our experience and knowledge to bear. We interrogate our feelings. We might think of spring.

We might be put in mind of other art, such as the flowered backgrounds of medieval tapestries (see 15. 24) or the role of flowers in the vanitas tradition. We might think about flowers and the occasions on which we offer them. We might think about the flowers we know from poetry, where they are often linked to beauty and youth, for all three fade quickly. We might think about petals, which fall from dying flowers. We might think about veils and when we wear them, such as at weddings and funerals. We might notice how delicately the work is stitched together and how fragile it seems.

We might think about looking not only at it but also through it, and about how a curtain separates one realm from another. The man in Valdes' painting, for example, draws back a curtain to reveal the future. Every Touch is not as easily put into words as the vanitas paintings, but it can inspire thoughts about many of the same ideas: seasons that come and go, how beauty and sadness are intertwined, the ceremonies that mark life's passing, the idea of one realm opening onto another, the fragility of things. In the end, what we see in Every Touch depends on what we bring to it, and if we approach the task sincerely, there are no wrong answers.

Every Touch will never mean for any of us exactly what it means for Hodges, nor should it. An artist's work grows from a lifetime of experiences, thoughts, and emotions; no one else can duplicate them exactly. Works of art hold

many meanings. The greatest of them seem to speak anew to each generation and to each attentive observer. The most important thing is that some works of art come to mean something for you, that your own experiences, thoughts, and emotions find a place in them, for then you will have made them live.