

## LIVING FORM

ONE of the most widely used metaphors in the literature of art is the metaphor of the living creature applied to the artistic product. Every artist finds "life," "vitality," or "livingness" in a good work of art. He refers to the "spirit" of a picture, not meaning the spirit in which it was painted, but its own quality; and his first task is to "animate" his canvas. An unsuccessful work is "dead." Even a fairly good one may have "dead spots." What do people mean when they speak as though a picture or a building or a sonata were a living and breathing creature?

Another metaphor of the studio, borrowed from the biological realm, is the familiar statement that every art work must be organic. Most artists will not even agree with a literal-minded critic that this is a metaphor. "Organic" simply and directly refers, in their vocabulary, to something characteristic of good pictures and statues, poems and plays, ballets and buildings and pieces of music. It does not refer to biological functions like digestion and circulation. But—breathing? Heartbeat?

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Well, maybe. Mobility? Yes, perhaps. Feeling? Oh yes, certainly.

For a work to "contain feeling," as that phrase is commonly used, is precisely to be alive, to have artistic vitality, to exhibit "living form." We discussed yesterday why a form that expresses feeling appears not merely to connote it, as a meaning, but to contain it, as a quality. Since, however, we know that for a work to contain feeling is really to be an expressive form which articulates feeling, we may well ask, at this point, why such articulation requires a symbol having the appearance of vital organization and autonomous life; and furthermore, how this appearance is achieved. For, certainly, works of art are not really organisms with biological functions. Pictures do not really pulse and breathe; sonatas do not eat and sleep and repair themselves like living creatures, nor do novels perpetuate their kind when they are left unread in a library. Yet the metaphors of "life" and "organic form" in art are so strong that I have known a serious, reflective artist to be actually shocked at such philistine statements as I have just made, calling those terms metaphors.

Let us consider, first, what feeling and emotion have to do with organic life; secondly, what are the characteristics of actual organisms; thirdly, what are the most general features of artistic creation by virtue of which the semblance of life is produced, and finally, how this semblance empowers the artist to imagine and articulate so much of human mentality, emotion, and individual experience as men of genius do in fact put before us.

Sentience—the most elementary sort of consciousness