The Concept of Metamorphosis in André Malraux's Comparative Studies of Art

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The paper examines how globalization, cross-cultural interactions, and media technologies have reshaped the study and perception of art, focusing on two key thinkers: André Malraux and Jurgis Baltrušaitis. Malraux, known for his concept of the Imaginary Museum, argued that artworks undergo metamorphoses over time and across cultures. He believed that art should be understood not through fixed meanings, but through its evolving dialogue with different historical and cultural contexts. Baltrušaitis explored anomalies, cultural crossovers, the persistence and awakenings of artistic forms. His work brought attention to non-Western and marginalized art traditions through comparative and historical research. Both thinkers emphasized timelessness, anachronism, and the comparative evolution of art. While Malraux developed the psychology of art, Baltrušaitis provided empirical analysis that transcends cultural boundaries. Malraux's ideas are relevant in a digital world of constant image reproduction and cultural hybridization. His idea of a "museum without walls" remains influential in contemporary museology and media. Baltrušaitis's works contribute to an understanding of European artistic identity within a global framework. Ultimately, Malraux's theory of metamorphosis challenges traditional aesthetics and affirms a humanist, existentialist vision of art that evolves with time, context, and the viewer's gaze.

Keywords: André Malraux, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, metamorphosis, anachronism, imaginary museum, reproduction, timelessness

Introduction: Searching for a Comparison between Malraux and Baltrušaitis

Since the mid-20th century, the process of globalization and the interactions between Western and non-Western civilizations and cultures have deeply transformed national societies and traditional cultures. The world of non-Western artefacts, sacred and religious objects, and various aesthetic creative forms – newly accessible to art historians – has encouraged new ways of understanding and approaches to research. At the same time, the rapid development of new media technologies of reproduction is changing the way art is disseminated and perceived.

At that time, two significant figures emerged in the French field of art history

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and criticism: André Malraux (1901–1976) and Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1903–1988). Their comparative art studies made a substantial contribution to understanding the significance of non-European civilizations, as well as the intercivilizational and intercultural migration of art styles and forms.

Malraux, a French intellectual, novelist, art theorist, and philosopher, developed an original approach to art objects and their transformation over time in the concept of the "imaginary museum" or "museum without walls." He described the transformation of sacred or religious objects into works of art as the "metamorphosis of gods"[1] or "voices of silence."[2] Malraux's comparative psychology of art and his concept of the museum without walls had a considerable impact on the humanities and the history of civilizational ideas in the 20th century. Questions about the transformation or metamorphosis of artefacts via photographic reproductions and museums continue to provoke thought, especially in the context of today's digital and AI-driven era.

Baltrušaitis, a Lithuanian art historian and researcher of medieval art, wrote most of his works in France and in French. His primary research interests included Western medieval culture and art, seeking links with the artistic traditions of other civilizations, and addressing the problem of European cultural identity in a broader civilizational context. Baltrušaitis was intrigued by the strangest and most unusual historical metamorphoses of art forms and structures, by anachronisms, and by the long-term survival of artistic forms through time – what he referred to as "awakenings and miracles." His explorations took him across the vast territories of Europe and Asia.

Malraux's and Baltrušaitis's investigations of non-traditional and non-classical art objects and phenomena – artefacts and religious objects that had previously remained on the margins of art history – have transformed the conceptual approach to Western civilization and its interactions with non-Western civilizations and cultures. Their explorations of the temporal and immanent existence of artistic styles and forms – metamorphoses, anachronisms, *la longue durée*, and timelessness – are part of the French tradition in art history, which is more "archaeological" in nature than the German tradition.

Baltrušaitis is known as an art historian, whereas Malraux never considered himself one – he referred to his work as a psychology or theory of art. As Derek Allan notes, misunderstandings of Malraux's writings on art have two principal causes: "first, there has been a widespread tendency to read Malraux quickly and superficially – an approach almost guaranteed to fail because his thinking is highly original and often quite challenging; and second, many critics have attempted to interpret his works through the lens of traditional aesthetics, apparently not realizing that Malraux presents us with a radically new way of thinking about art."[3]

1 André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957 (*The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, transl. by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Double Day Company, 1960).

2 André Malraux, *Les Voix du Silence*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951 (*The Voices of Silence*, transl. by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Double Day Company, 1953).

3 Derek Allan, *André Malraux and Art. An Intellectual Revolution*. New York: Peter Lang, 2021, p. 2.

This is where Malraux's fundamental misunderstanding of the imaginary museum originates. As a result, his works are often criticized for their fluidity, ambiguity, and disregard for historical context. Although the nature of his art theory required frequent references to art history, he was not – nor did he ever intend to be – an art historian. Malraux proposed a global vision of artistic creation, deeply rooted in personal experience and shaped by an overwhelming, and at times vertiginous, body of knowledge. His thinking was structured by two powerful concepts: the imaginary museum and the idea of metamorphosis. "It is no more a history of art," writes Malraux, "than The Human Condition is a report on China." He does not teach us about art; instead, he makes us love it and invites us to experience it through time. In his imaginary museum, artworks – transformed through metamorphosis – escape their original historical context, become present, and exert their full emotional and aesthetic power upon us. So, the aim of this paper is to reveal Malraux's concept of metamorphosis within the theory of the imaginary museum. This study also seeks to demonstrate Malraux's role as an art theorist and Baltrušaitis's as an art historian, highlighting the closeness of their approaches to art; however, it will not present a comparative analysis of their art investigations.

It should be noted that Baltrušaitis's books have been translated into many languages, including English, Japanese, Italian, and others. His works became bestsellers and were frequently quoted or used in other ways – sometimes even "without attributing authorship" – yet they did not receive proper scholarly attention for a long time.[4]

Malraux's name became well-known in the field of philosophy and art theory in English-speaking countries during the 1960s and 1970s, following the publication of English translations of two of his major works: *Les Voix du silence* (*The Voices of Silence*, trans. 1953) and *La Métamorphose des dieux* (*The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, trans. 1957). Malraux's books were also translated into German, Japanese, and Russian. His theory of art attracted the attention of Maurice Blanchot and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the 1950s, and later – that of André Chastel,[5] François de Saint-Cheron,[6] and Jean-François Lyotard.[7] Derek Allan analyzed Malraux's philosophical theory of art in many of his books, including *Art and the Human Adventure: André Malraux's Theory of Art* (2009), *Art and Time* (2013), *André Malraux and Art: An Intellectual Revolution* (2021). Walter Grasskamp explored the idea of the art album as an imaginary museum in *The Book on the Floor: André Malraux and the Imaginary Museum* (2016). Georges Didi-Huberman organized a cycle of conferences at the Louvre Museum titled *L'Album de l'art à l'époque du "Musée imaginaire"*

4 Jean-François Chevrier, *Portrait de Jurgis Baltrušaitis & Art sumérien, art roman* par Jurgis Baltrušaitis. Paris: Flammarion, 1992, p. 272; Odeta Žukauskienė. *Meno formų metamorfozės: komparatyvistinė Focillono ir Baltrušaičio menotyra*. Vilnius: KFMI, 2006, p. 288.

5 André Chastel, "André Malraux: La Métamorphose des dieux (Le Surnaturel, L'Irréel, L'Intemporel)," *Critique*, Vol. 43, No. 47, mars 1987, pp. 185–202.

6 François de Saint-Cheron, *L'Esthétique de Malraux*. Paris, SEDES, 1996.

7 **Jean-François** Lyotard, *Signé Malraux. Biographie*. Paris: Grasset, 1996.

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(2013), where he discussed the criteria by which Malraux associated artworks from different cultures in his "Imaginary Museum" – a timely question in an era when museums are increasingly juxtaposing Western works with so-called "primitive" or contemporary art alongside ancient works. Thus, the polysemous metaphor of the *musée imaginaire* – "the imaginary museum" or "the museum without walls" – remains a key concept in contemporary museological, artistic, and media discourse. It reflects the current condition of the digital world: the persistent, countless reproduction, dissemination, and dematerialization of art.

Baltrušaitis and Malraux belong to the French tradition of the humanities and social sciences, which focuses on comparative cultural studies – on "archaeological" art theory and history, and on the immanent life of art forms: their transformations, survivals, and awakenings. They continue Henri Focillon's idea that great artistic achievements, stylistic features, and masterpieces continue to live on even after their eras have ended, exerting a lasting influence on the development of art. The question of timelessness and anachronism became the central object of both Baltrušaitis's and Malraux's research, forming a core part of their methodological approach.

Baltrušaitis and Malraux engaged in a comparative theory and history of art, focusing on metamorphoses, immanent transformations, and mutations of art forms – particularly on timelessness and anachronism in art and its history. When we look at a work of art, we encounter a particular time – we immerse ourselves in it – but what time? Time in art is not homogeneous. Works contain chronological deviations; they are not visual chronicles. Rejecting the notion of formal continuity, Malraux and Baltrušaitis rethought the relationship between artworks and time.

Malraux and Baltrušaitis: Intellectual Biographies

The following section provides a closer examination of Malraux's and Baltrušaitis's lives and intellectual biographies (fig. 1). They were contemporaries who entered the French intellectual and cultural field from different places and along distinct paths. Malraux was born on November 3, 1901, in Paris. In 1915, he entered Turgot College. The vibrant cultural life of Paris profoundly shaped his personality and stimulated his intellectual growth. Deeply immersed in French literature, Malraux enrolled at the Condorcet Secondary School in 1918 but left before completing his baccalaureate. He attended archaeology and art history courses at the Guimet Museum and the Louvre School. Preparing for his missions in the East, he also studied Sanskrit and Chinese at the National Institute of Living Oriental Languages. His literary career began in the 1920s and 1930s, with works such as *La Tentation de l'Occident* (1926), *Les Conquérants* (1928), and *La Voie Royale* (1930). His most acclaimed novel, *La Condition humaine* (1933), depicting the Chinese Revolution, was awarded the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1933.

Malraux's concepts of the "museum without walls" and the "metamorphosis of the gods" emerged from his archaeological and art-collecting expeditions, during which he encountered religious artworks *in situ*.

Between 1920 and 1922, he and his wife Clara travelled across Europe – visiting Austria, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Germany, and Sicily, and exploring both Western historical and modern art movements. In December 1923, Malraux, Clara, and their companion Louis Chevasson travelled to Cambodia on an official mission to French Indochina, commissioned by the Ministry of Overseas Affairs. There, Malraux and Chevasson were discovered along the colony's Royal Way, transporting several tons of bas-reliefs taken from the lost temple of Banteay Srei. This episode would later be fictionalized in his novel *The Royal Way*. Malraux was detained and tried. After his release, he relocated to Saigon, where between 1924 and 1926 he ran two anti-colonial newspapers. It was in Saigon that he wrote his first novel *The Temptation of the West*. In it, he lamented the spiritual void dominating Europe and began formulating the existentialist vision that would later define his work and reputation. The novel posits the East not as a model to emulate, but as a necessary "Other" – a mirror through which the West might examine and confront itself. By 1931, Malraux had travelled extensively throughout Asia, visiting countries such as India, China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan (Baku), Burma, Iran, Iraq, Hong Kong, Japan, Persia, Lebanon, Syria, Singapore, and Turkey (Constantinople) during his art-collecting expeditions.

Baltrušaitis was born on May 7, 1903, in Moscow. His father was a prominent Lithuanian Symbolist poet. The Baltrušaitises' family environment reflected that of the broader Russian intellectual elite at the time. Their household was visited by many renowned Russian poets, writers, artists, and theater figures, such as Konstantin Balmont, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Valery Bryusov, Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely, Maxim Gorky, Igor Severyanin, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Alexander Scriabin. The young Baltrušaitis received his early education at home under the guidance of Boris Pasternak, who had just returned from the University of Marburg.

After receiving an excellent early education, Baltrušaitis arrived in Paris in 1923 and began studying art history at the Sorbonne under the guidance of Henri Focillon. His first academic publications appeared in the 1920s. In 1931, he obtained his doctorate from the Sorbonne and served as a cultural assistant at the Lithuanian legation in Paris. During the 1930s, Baltrušaitis published his early books on medieval Romanesque art, including *Études sur l'art médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie* (1929), *Art sumérien, art roman* (1934), and *Le Problème de l'Ogive et l'Arménie* (1936).

In contrast to Malraux, Baltrušaitis undertook fewer archaeological expeditions abroad. He travelled extensively throughout France, visiting numerous medieval art sites. Yet his pursuit of the origins of Romanesque and Gothic art led him further afield – to Armenia and Georgia in 1927, and later to Germany, Italy, and Spain. In 1933, Jurgis and Hélène Baltrušaitis travelled via Istanbul to Iraq and Persia, where the art historian sought connections between Middle Eastern and Western medieval art forms.

It is difficult to determine how Malraux's unconventional, non-academic

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ILIUSTRUOTAS TAUTINĖS MINTIES LIETUVIŲ LAIKRAŠTIS

Lietuvos Pasiuntinybės Paryžiuje patarėjas prof. J. Baltrušaitis su žmona (dešinėje) viename pobūvyje kalbasi su Prancūzijos ministeriu kultūriniams reikalams André Malraux.

Vasario 16 proga priėmimas Lietuvos konsulate New Yorke

kevičienė ir dr. M. Žukauskienė.

Ponios Bulvičienės pastangomis buvo meniškai paruoštas lietuviškų valgių stalas.

Fig. 1. Jurgis Baltrušaitis and Hélène Baltrušaitis conversing with André Malraux. Photograph from *Dirva*, Detroit, 29 March 1968, No. 37, p. 5.

education influenced his way of thinking. Perhaps it enabled him to transcend established classical categories of art history – to go beyond disciplinary boundaries, historical periods, and traditional classifications of artworks and movements – and to envision his own imaginary museum without walls. However, there is no doubt that his direct visual and archaeological encounters with non-Western civilizations and cultures *in situ* played a significant role in shaping this imaginary museum.

In the 1940s, Malraux published his first studies on art under the title *Le Musée Imaginaire* (*The Museum Without Walls*, 1947). From the outset, Malraux envisioned art books that would juxtapose works from cultures across the globe, not only Europe, but also Africa, South and East Asia, and the Americas. A comparison of the diverse

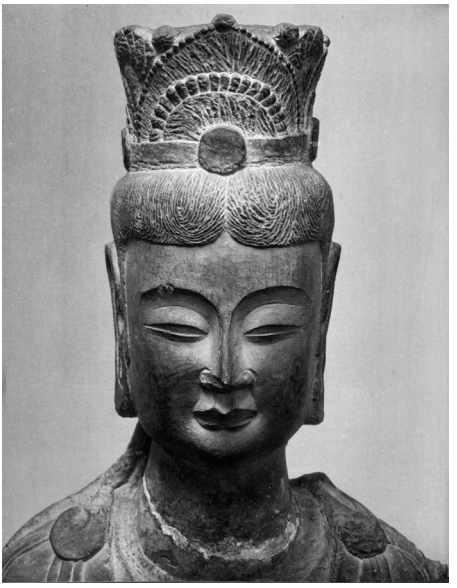

Fig. 2. Seated bodhisattva. Eastern Wei dynasty (386–534), c. A. D. 530, China. Carved limestone, 196.5 × 90 × 46 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

artistic forms he had encountered during his travels, which are typically segregated by the physical and conceptual walls of traditional museums, was essential to him. Marlaux believed that art books offered the most effective way to realize this comparative vision. His reflections on art appeared across several editions and stages. His initial ideas, including the concept of the *musée imaginaire*, were first articulated in a trilogy titled *La Psychologie de l'art* (1947–1949). This trilogy consists of three major essays: *Le Musée imaginaire* (*The Museum Without Walls*, 1947), *La Création artistique* (*The Artistic Creation*, 1948), and *La Monnaie de l'absolu* (*The Twilight of the Absolute,* 1949). In 1951, this trilogy was revised and republished under the new title *Les Voix du silence* by Gallimard. In the 1970s, Malraux returned to these ideas and expanded them into the three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*: *Le Surnaturel* (1977, originally published as *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 1957), *L'Irréel* (1974), and *L'Intemporel* (1976) exploring the transformation of art and its perception across different cultures and eras (fig. 1, 2).

Therefore, archaeological field research and expeditions spanning various European and Asian countries were an important component of both Malraux's and Baltrušaitis' art historical inquiries. Their comparative approaches were shaped not only by exposure to artworks from non-European civilizations and cultures but also by another significant methodological influence – French formalism. This method, which emphasized the intrinsic development of art forms, was developed by Henri Focillon in his seminal work *La Vie des formes* (1934). It can be said that Focillon's approach – replacing historical determinism with an art history marked by fractures and contradictions – was a crucial starting point for both Baltrušaitis and Malraux in their theoretical reflections on the metamorphosis of forms.

Baltrušaitis continued the theme of metamorphosis in several of his key works from the 1950s, in *Le Moyen Âge fantastique: antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique* (1955), and later in *Aberrations: quatre essais sur la légende des formes* (1957). For Malraux, metamorphosis is not only a theme but a governing principle – it "is the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics."[8] While the worlds

8 André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel, Œuvres complètes5, Écrits sur l'art II*. Paris:Gallimard, 2004, p. 971. The quote is translated by the author.

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created by art are unified, they are never fixed, never final. Art has its own specific, temporal nature, its own form of existence in time, and this is one of its essential features. It is through metamorphosis that the imaginary museum comes into being: a transformation not only of artworks, but of our gaze itself. As Allan notes, "no longer understood as impervious to change, as required by the traditional notion of timelessness, art, this argument holds, lives and endures in the world of change, and does so through metamorphosis."[9]

In addition to what has already been mentioned regarding the life trajectories of Baltrušaitis and Malraux, it is important to highlight their involvement in cultural politics. Speaking of the Baltrušaitis family, both father and son played active roles in Lithuanian foreign affairs. The senior Baltrušaitis served as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1939. The son, art historian Jurgis Baltrušaitis, worked as a cultural advisor (*attaché culturel*) at the Lithuanian embassy in Paris from 1931 to 1939. In 1934, he was asked to curate the Lithuanian section of a Baltic folk art exhibition in the summer of 1935 in Paris. After World War II and the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Baltrušaitis represented Lithuania in various international organizations, including the Assembly of Captive Nations in Europe and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. From 1951 to 1954, he held the position of Lithuanian consul in France and continued to act as a temporary diplomatic representative of Lithuania until his death in 1988. Since 1944, he participated in numerous international meetings and movements, becoming Vice Chairman of the Lithuanian Committee for the European Movement in 1950, and Secretary General of the Lithuanian European Movement in 1960. Thanks to his efforts and contacts, in 1965 the French government approved the issuance of identification cards for Baltic émigrés, recognizing their Lithuanian nationality.

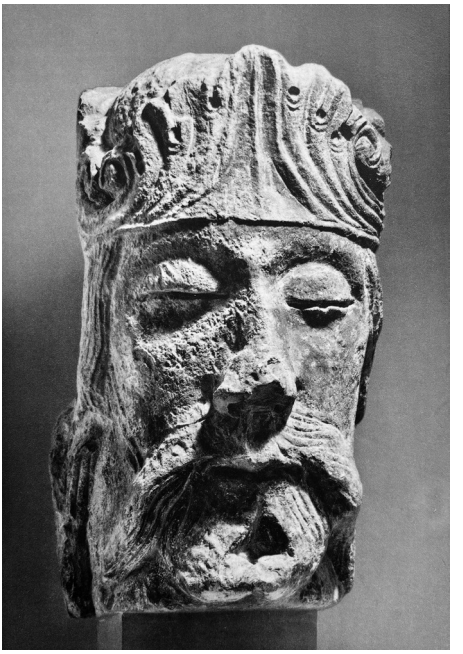

Fig. 3. Head of a King. 12th century, Beauvais, France. Carved limestone, 410 × 220 cm. MUDO – Musée de l'Oise, Beauvais. André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, pp. 211–213. These two images (fig. 2 and fig. 3) are presented as a double-page spread.

Malraux was politically active from the 1920s, when he started to edit the journal *L'Indochine*, later continued as *L'Indochine enchaînée* (*Indochina in Chains*, 1925–1926) as a means of criticizing the

9 Derek Allan, *Art and Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, p. 62.

corrupt colonial regime. In 1959, Malraux became the first Minister of Culture in France under President Charles de Gaulle. Malraux authored the decree of the newly founded ministry in July 24, 1959 (Decree No. 59-889), outlining its mission: "to make the great works of humanity, and first and foremost those of France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French citizens; to ensure the widest possible audience for our cultural heritage; and to foster the creation of works of art and thought that enrich it."[10] This decree laid the foundation for future cultural policies regarding heritage protection, contemporary artistic work, dissemination and education, decentralization of administration, and the regulation of cultural industries. Malraux's cultural policy was firmly grounded in the idea of a museum without walls and cultural democratization.

Malraux's Theory of Art

Malraux's theory of art emerged from his profound exposure to non-Western cultural, artistic, and visual experiences. His theoretical principles of the Imaginary Museum and the metamorphosis of art began to unfold as early as the 1920s, through both Malraux's novels and art criticism. The comparative perspective became a foundational principle of Malraux's approach to art. His first published piece of art criticism, written in 1922, was dedicated to an exhibition by the Greek painter Demetrios Galanis, a close friend of Picasso who exhibited alongside other Cubist artists. In that piece, Malraux emphasized the comparative approach as a central tenet of art studies:

> We can only feel through comparison… Whoever has read Andromaque or Phèdre will better grasp what constitutes the French genius by reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than by studying the rest of Racine. The Greek genius will be better understood through the juxtaposition of a Greek statue and an Egyptian or Asian statue than through knowledge of a hundred Greek statues.[11]

Although Malraux embarked on an analysis of art, he never intended to be an art historian. His writings on the psychology of art reveal a unique literary style that includes few direct references to earlier art historians. Malraux's theory of art is a complex, multi-layered structure, woven from the ideas of numerous thinkers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Allan has emphasized, Malraux did not simply borrow or interpret others' ideas; he was a gifted writer and an original thinker."[12] Among French influences were Élie Faure's vision of art history as the history of civilizations, Henri Focillon's notion of style and art forms as living entities, Marcel Mauss's ethnological theories, and Paul Valéry's reflections on the mortality of civilizations. At the same time, Malraux

10 Ministère d'état des affaires culturelles, Décret no. 59-889 du 24 juillet 1959, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 1959 Juillet 26, p. 5.

11 André Malraux, *Peinture de Galanis. Préface au catalogue de l'exposition Galanis*. Paris, Galerie de Licorne. Argenteuil: Couloma, 1922. Text reprinted in André Malraux, *Œuvres complètes IV. Écrits sur l'art I*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004, p. 1170.

12 Derek Allan, *André Malraux and Art. An Intellectual Revolution*. New York: Peter Lang, 2021, p. 190.

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engaged deeply with German intellectual traditions – *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Kunstwissenschaft* – supported in part by his wife Clara, translator of German philosophical works into French. He was also influenced by German cultural pessimism and Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West," Friedrich Nietzsche's vision of "the death of God" and the tension between Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism, Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will to life, Walter Benjamin's reflections on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Wilhelm Worringer's culturally neutral "psychology of style," and the ethnological investigations of Leo Frobenius and Carl Einstein into African art and culture.

At first glance, Malraux's work appears closely aligned with Élie Faure's[13] art history. Indeed, it is often claimed that he merely elaborated and popularized Faure's ideas. However, while both shared a comparative approach that saw art as inseparable from civilizational history – and explored the fundamental characteristics of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, African, American, and Western art – Malraux's ideas stand apart. Faure's five-volume History of Art was one of the earliest attempts at a universal history of art, tracing a continuum from prehistoric cave paintings to the modern era. Rather than analyzing styles in isolation, Faure sought to extract their essential characteristics and identify two or three fundamental human attitudes that recur across time and space. His ambition was to dissolve the boundaries between centuries and cultures, revealing both their differences and their shared humanity. This poetic vision reached its peak in the final volume of *L'Histoire de l'art – L'Esprit des Formes* (1927), which juxtaposed artworks from diverse civilizations to uncover unexpected spiritual resonances and awakenings. He compared French sculpture with Greek sculpture, African wood carvings with classical marble works, revealing a deep sense of universality. Faure wrote that art of every age and culture is penetrated by "intuitive, intimate, ever-living, and ever-present notion of time [...] An African wood carving and a Greek marble are not as far apart as we think. In fact, the affirmation of this solidarity is not the fruit of mystical intuition – it is real. It is one of the driving forces of universal history, perhaps the densest and most flexible of all."[14]

Faure's conception of art as a language of forms is particularly significant. The ability to speak and understand this language depends not only on the individual artist, or on time and place, but equally on the perceiver. This idea became important in Malraux's metamorphosis of the gaze: "Art is a sign, without doubt – a way of speaking. A language. A language that differs from another, analogous language depending on the human who speaks it, on the place, on the time in which he speaks it – and, let us be very careful, on the human who hears it."[15]

13 Faure was trained as a surgeon and spent his early years as a medical doctor. Simultaneously, he worked as an art critic and self-taught historian of French and Italian art; Faure delivered a series of lectures later compiled into five volumes of *Histoire de l'art* (first edition published in 1909–1914).

14 Élie Faure, *Histoire de l'art: L'esprit des formes*. Paris: G. Crès & Cie, 1927, p. III–IV.

15 *Ibid*.

Another art historian whose work inspired Malraux was Henri Focillon, whose scholarly influence was also felt through his students, both directly and indirectly. In his studies of Buddhist art,[16] Focillon applied a formalist approach by raising the following questions: "What they [forms] do, how they behave, where they come from, through what stages of development they pass and, finally, what turmoil or activity they undergo before taking shape."[17] Focillon's unique work *La Vie des Formes* (*The Life of Forms in Art*, 1934, translated to English in 1948) emphasized the immanent logic of the transformation of art forms and the role of the accidental in disrupting historical continuity – "history is not unilinear; it is not pure sequence."[18] The concept of metamorphosis is principal in this work; the same concept later became central in Malraux's psychology of art. Focillon writes:

> within this great imaginary world of forms, stand on the one hand the artist and on the other hand form itself. Even as the artist fulfills his function of geometrician and mechanic, of physicist and chemist, of psychologist and historian, so does form, guided by the play and interplay of metamorphoses, go forever forward, by its own necessity, toward its own liberty.[19]

Metamorphosis is the constant law of transmutation in artistic creation, and "art begins with transmutation and continues with metamorphosis. It is not man's language for communicating with God; it is the perpetual renewal of Creation. Art is the invention of materials as well as the invention of forms. It develops its own physical laws and its own mineralogy."[20] Malraux absorbed and reconfigured these ideas through the lens of his own psychology of art. His idea of artistic metamorphosis and the timelessness of art, expressed through the metaphor of the "voices of silence," resonates with Carl Einstein's research on African sculpture. Malraux collaborated with Einstein, who in 1931 wrote the introduction to the catalogue *L'art des nomades d'Asie centrale*, where he conveyed a poetic notion about the voices from the past:

> This folk art is full of forgotten symbols. The signs and customs of ancient conquerors, scattered by the wind, are often preserved without being understood. The memory of long-defeated peoples has left fragile marks. Old, dead forms endure; forgotten or buried beliefs resume their voice. These pieces still bear witness to the ancient belief in demons – the Bon-Po – which was later overlaid by Buddhism. Yet, the emblems of Buddhist vision recede into older layers of demonic belief.[21]

This poetic notion of the voices of silence was further elaborated by Malraux. For him, art connects people, cultures, and civilizations, liberating them from the constraints of linear history and human time.

16 Henri Focillon, *L'Art bouddhique*. Paris: Henri Laurens, 1921, p. 336.

17 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*. New York: Zone books, 1992, p. 118.

18 *Ibid*., p. 140.

19 *Ibid*., p. 156.

20 *Ibid*., p. 169.

21 Carl Einstein, *L'art des nomades d'Asie centrale*, transl. by Isabelle Kalinowski, *Gradhiva*, 2011, 2 (14), pp. 230–233.

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Although art is timeless, it is also mortal, as is every civilization. Each culture must reinterpret and reawaken works of art. In his later philosophical and psychological works, Malraux argued that a work of art is not merely an object – it is a confrontation with time. Its resurrection requires human engagement, because "cultural objects are a continuity of resurrections."[22]

The Imaginary Museum: Photography, Reproduction, and the Transformation of Art

The idea of reproduction plays a crucial part in Malraux's theory of art. From the second half of the nineteenth century, art-collecting expeditions aimed to introduce the art and architecture of the most remote regions. These expeditions systematically employed modern recording techniques. "The age of mechanical reproduction had begun, under colonial rule that encouraged territorial expansion abroad and enforced scientific rigor at home."[23] Malraux's theory of art was deeply influenced by reproduction through (audio)visual media technologies such as photography, cinema, and television.

From the beginning, cinema functioned not only as a tool for reproduction but also as a medium for constructing art history and theory. Malraux's focus on photographic reproduction and the imaginary museum had many predecessors. These include Faure's art books, Walter Benjamin's reflections on the reproducibility of artworks, and Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. Malraux worked extensively with reproductions. However, he was unaware of Warburg's *Bilderatlas*, despite the parallels it shares with his own idea of the imaginary museum. In cinematic terms, it became possible to construct images in sequence and bring together works of art in meaningful constellations.

Malraux begins *The Imaginary Museum* with reflections on the role of museums and reproductions – photographs, prints, or copies – in shaping our knowledge of art. According to him, photography, which began humbly as a means of making acknowledged masterpieces accessible to those who could not afford engravings, initially seemed destined merely to perpetuate established values. However, the technical conditions of reproduction gradually began to affect the selection of works. "Photographic reproduction suggests and then imposes a new hierarchy of artworks."[24] Photography and reproduction transform artworks and our understanding of them.

Unlike Benjamin, who pessimistically argued that reproduction diminishes a work's aura, Malraux emphasized that reproduction alters the material characteristics – such as color, texture, dimensions, relative proportions, or volume – and the identity of works. Sculptures, stained glass works, tapestries, or miniatures may "seem like members of the same family," yet, as

22 André Malraux, *Le Miroir des Limbes, La Pléade: 1. Antimémoires*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 278.

23 Roberto Ohrt, Axel Heil, "The Mnemosyne and its Afterlife," in Aby Warburg: *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. The Original*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (dir.). Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2000, p. 11.

24 André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, transl. by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Double Day Company, 1953, p. 18.

Malraux notes, "their common style is by so much the gainer."[25] The isolation of an art object on the pages of a book results in a physical metamorphosis, sometimes revealing previously unnoticed beauty.

One could even argue that the Imaginary Museum, or the Museum without Walls, is constructed through photography and cinema – through the lens of the camera or edited as a movie using juxtapositions of objects from different periods and places. A survey published in *Le Film* in 1920 had already recognized this: close-ups, slow motion, accelerated montage, and the juxtaposition of different images were among the technical developments that significantly altered how both the world and the arts were perceived. In his article *Le cinématographe et les arts* (1934), Focillon also expressed a profound aesthetic response to the enlarged images, the uncanny projection of shadows, and the capacity of light to transform space into an entirely novel medium.[26]

As Thierry Dufrêne rightly observed, Malraux and Faure "were struck by the heuristic power of the film image."[27] In his last book *L'Intemporel* (1976, the third volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*), Malraux developed the idea of "the museum of the audio-visual," which went far beyond the earlier notion of the "museum of the cinematograph."[28] Malraux predicted that "all the capital images of humanity will be available for each person at the touch of a button." He envisioned the Imaginary Museum of television as one especially suited to sculpture, because "the screen is always kind to sculpture,"[29] to unsorted arts of other cultures. Indeed, the audiovisual realm succeeded the Imaginary Museum because, whereas "the art book can bring into dialogue only pairs of images," film and video sequences are well suited to non-framed arts: "The true Imaginary Museum of sculpture – temples, cathedrals, Asian caves – and of architecture has become the domain of television, which can transmit the interior essence of monuments, whereas photography can only suggest it."[30]

In what ways does cinema both complement and potentially transcend the age of the museum? Malraux's response to Benjamin's pessimism is instructive: "the place expressed by the audio-visual leaves us in as much perplexity as its time [...] it is not the museum ... it is not the small screen that the image constantly seems to be escaping from." For Malraux, "the basalt head of Nefertiti belongs simultaneously to the Egyptian 14th century BC, to our own time, and to the artificial temporality of film – the time of the Audio-visual Museum."[31]

While Benjamin lamented that, through reproduction, "the cathedral is dislodged from its original site to take up residence in the apartment of an art lover," Malraux

25 *Ibid*., p. 21.

26 Henri Focillon, "Le cinématographe et les arts," in *Relire Focillon*, M. Waschek (ed.). Paris: ensb-a, 1988, p. 129–135. This text was prepared for l'Office des instituts d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art and published in *Bulletin périodique* No. 1, July 1934.

27 Thierry Dufrêne, "Art History in the Cinema Age," *Diogenes,* No. 58(3), 2011, p. 102. doi:10.1177/0392192112460813

28 *Ibid*., p. 102.

29 André Malraux, *L'Intemporel*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p. 357.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid*., p. 381–400.

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responded almost verbatim: "the Audio-visual Museum does not elect its domicile in the apartment of the viewer."[32] On the contrary, it reveals the connection between the sacred statue and the crypt, between the Parthenon's façade and the sky and the Panathenaea, between the equestrian statue and its square, between the giant Christ of Sicilian mosaics and the cathedral – and more profoundly, the inherent relation of all sacred art to the sanctuary.

Art and the Principle of Metamorphosis

In Malraux's view, the art museum represents the context in which works of art come to life:

> The art museum, by its very nature, facilitates this: it places a variety of works in close proximity and, in so doing, fosters a process of dialogue and metamorphosis through which the meanings of each work are most powerfully revealed, accentuating both the newly discovered common language of art and the specific features of the autonomous world that each work embodies.[33]

Malraux refers to the art museum as "a confrontation of metamorphoses."[34] For Malraux, metamorphosis "is a law governing the life of every work of art," because a work of art lives on, continually speaks anew, and enters into dialogue with us. He writes:

> We have learned that, if death cannot still the voice of genius, the reason is that genius triumphs over the death not by reiterating its original language, but by constraining us to listen to a language constantly modified, sometimes forgotten – as it were an echo answering each passing century with its own voice – and what the masterpiece keeps us is not a monologue, however authoritative, but a *dialogue* indefeasible by Time.[35]

The Museum Without Walls is a world in which images speak both a shared and distinct language. In this world, metamorphosis replaces, simultaneously, the realms of the sacred, of faith, and of both the real and the unreal. As Malraux writes: "If we replace faith with love of art, it matters little whether a cathedral chapel is faithfully reconstructed, stone by stone, in a museum – for we have already begun by transforming our cathedrals into museums. Metamorphosis is no accident but a law of being for every work of art."[36] In this sense, metamorphosis constitutes the very life of the artwork.

According to Malraux, there are several levels of metamorphosis. The fundamental metamorphosis, which marks the birth of our modern art world, is embodied in the concept of the Imaginary Museum,[37] where artworks, once removed from their original contexts, undergo metamorphoses in meaning and significance. The continual recontextualization and reinterpretation of art across time and cultures determine the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of artistic expression. Before that, the world of arti-

32 *Ibid*., p. 387.

33 Derek Allan, *André Malraux and* Art, p. 127.

34 *Ibid*., p. 127–128.

35 André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls. Voices of Silence*. Frogmore: Paladin, 1974, p. 68–69.

36 André Malraux, *Twilight of the Absolute (Psychology of Art, Volume III)*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1950, p. 20.

37 André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des Dieux. L'Intemporel*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p. 241–242.

facts underwent minor metamorphoses, driven by numerous discoveries (including Chinese, Buddhist, and Sumerian art). With each discovery, the Imaginary Museum is redefined, and its internal constellations are shifting accordingly. Malraux also emphasized the metamorphosis of the gaze – subtle shifts in the gaze that change how we see and interpret art. As Malraux noted, "our admiration is also foreign to the sentiments of its author, his own view [...] our pilot gaze is itself a product of metamorphosis"[38]; it reshapes our relationship with art.

Conclusions

At the heart of Malraux's theory is metamorphosis, which has certain connections with the works of Baltrušaitis, the idea that artworks abandon their original context and begin new lives in the realm of imaginative perception. According to Malraux, each culture perceives and assimilates the art of another culture through its own interpretive lens – a process he defines as metamorphosis. The work of art lives its autonomous life, liberated from historical context and linear permanence. This metamorphosis constitutes the core of Malraux's humanist metaphysics of art.

The notion of the imaginary museum serves as a model for the modern conception of art and space, wherein a religious object or work of art is detached from its original function and sociohistorical context. This concept can be interpreted in two interconnected ways. First, the imaginary museum represents a non-material phenomenon grounded in human memory, imagination, and consciousness – a "collection" shaped by individual experience and knowledge of art. Second, it functions as a medium or container of cultural memory: a virtual or material archive (such as an art book or digital platform) that objectifies and reproduces artworks.

The polysemic metaphor of the "museum without walls" has become a foundational concept in contemporary museological, artistic, and media discourse. It also reflects the conditions of the digital era, characterized by the continuous reproduction, dissemination, and dematerialization of art.

38 *Ibid*., p. 245.

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