
The title of On the Animation of the Inorganic is derived from Wilhelm Worringer’s dissertation Abstraction and Empathy (1907), which describes how our psychological makeup applies meaning and life to inanimate forms. Author Spyros Papapetros takes this theory a few steps further by applying the concept to twentieth-century modernist theory in art and architecture. Using only a vague structure of a chronological approach, the author pulls in peripheral and abstracted elements of art and art history.

At first, the themes and topics appear unrelated, but the author brings the topics together stating "the ‘animation of the inorganic’ is an exclusively abstract concept that implicitly migrates from one area to another” (p. xii). The six chapters exist separately but link together as a whole, easily referencing one another. They do not create a narrative but rather, as the author describes, a "chronological collage" of objects and ideas connected by animation. Papapetros elegantly brings to our attention the threads linking these subjects.

The text is divided into two parts: “Animated History” and “Inorganic Culture.” The first half orients us in art history concepts developing at the turn-of-the-century Germany. While referencing the works of several art historians of the time, including Worringer, Alois Riegl, and Émile Durkheim, among others, the text draws heavily from the work of art historian Aby Warburg, who brought iconography into the twentieth century. The section is further divided into three parts on accessories, snakes, and crystals. Each is a separate thematic study describing how each element influences our perception of movement.

The second half discusses how the three themes listed above are later applied to art and architecture in the mid-twentieth century. This section focuses primarily on Léger’s Nudes in the Forest (1910-11), the films of Friedrich Murnau, notably Nosferatu (1922), and perspectives on the transformation of Daphne, a theme found throughout the book and intrinsic to the subject matter.

A library with a focus on design theory would benefit by adding this to their collection. The book contains clearly reproduced black-and-white illustrations throughout with descriptive captions, and the plates are found at the end, before the notes section. However, it does not include an index to the illustrations. This does not subtract from the content, but it would be a useful guide for the art history scholar. The notes are thorough, providing an excellent source for further reading on the topics explored by the author. The index is detailed as well, in subject matter and relevant personalities in design philosophy.

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