If we would have new knowledge, we must get a whole world of new questions.
SUSANNE K. LANGER
[1895-1985]

“Art is the objectification of feeling and the subjectification of nature”

Susanne K. Langer was an American philosopher, writer, and educator who wrote extensively on linguistic analysis and aesthetics and was well known for her theories on the influences of art on the mind. She was one of the first women in American history to achieve an academic career in philosophy and the first woman to be popularly and professionally recognized as an American philosopher.

Born Susanne Knauth, she was raised on Manhattan’s West Side where her first language was German (which was strictly spoken in her household) and her German accent remained with her to the very end. She was early exposed to creativity and art, being taught to play both the cello and the piano, Langer continued to play the cello for the rest of her life.

Her early education included attendance at Veltin School for Girls, a private school as well as being tutored from home. In 1916, Langer enrolled at Radcliffe College where she had the good fortune to study with Alfred North Whitehead, earning her bachelor's degree in 1920. After graduate study at Harvard University and the University of Vienna, she received her master's diploma from Harvard in 1924 and her doctorate in 1926.

In September of 1921, she married William Leonard Langer, a fellow student at Harvard, and in that same year they took their studies to Vienna, Austria. They had two sons and moved back to Cambridge MA, before divorcing in 1942.

Langer was a tutor in philosophy at Radcliffe from 1927 to 1942. She lectured in philosophy for one year at the University of Delaware and then for five years at Columbia University (1945-1950). From 1954 to 1962 she taught at Connecticut College. She also taught philosophy at the University of Michigan, New York University, Northwestern University, Ohio University, Smith College, Vassar College, the University of Washington and Wellesley College.

In the course of her long career, Langer published many philosophical articles, edited a collection entitled Reflections on Art (1961) and in 1946 she published a translation, Language and Myth, of Ernst Cassirer’s Sprache und Mythos which had been published in German twenty-one years earlier. In addition to all that, she published ten books of her own original thought:

The Cruise of the Little Dipper, and Other Fairy Tales (1924)
The Practice of Philosophy (1930, foreword by Alfred North Whitehead)
An Introduction to Symbolic Logic (1937)
Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (1942)
Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (1953)
Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures (1957)
Philosophical Sketches (1962)

Significant articles by Susanne K. Langer include:

“A Logical Study of Verbs,” Journal of Philosophy, 24 (1927): 120–129,
“On Cassirer’s Theory of Language and Myth,” in The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, Volume 6 (1949), pp. 381–400

An excellent biography and philosophical overview can be found at huthsteiner.org/Knauth/Susanne.Knath.Langer_Bio_DLB.pdf.
1923  
Susanne K. Langer’s First Book – Fairy Tales for Her Children

The Cruise of the Little Dipper and Other Fairy Tales (Illustrated by Helen Sewell). Norcross, New York, [1923]. 1 leaf with a color plate illustration on the verso + TP + half title + 5-[176]. Square Octavo. First Edition. $ 275

With Helen Sewell’s red line illustrations throughout and five color plate illustrations (frontispiece and following pp. 64, 102, 112, & 144). Lovely printed front and back endpapers with illustrations of five major characters from the book.

Langer’s first published book was not a work of philosophy at all, but rather a collection of five original fairy tales.

According to Langer’s Preface in the 1963 re-issue of this book (New York Graphics Society, Greenwich, CT), she and the illustrator Helen Sewell had played together as children and were always fond of making up stories. Her relationship with the illustrator was life-long and she dedicated her sixth book, Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures to “My Lifelong Socratic Teacher / in the Arts / Helen Sewell,” That book was published in 1957, the same year as Sewell’s death.

NOTE: This was Helen Sewell’s first book but she went on to a long and distinguished career as a children’s book illustrator – including doing the original illustrations for the Little House on the Prairie series from 1932 to 1943.

Another likely reason for Langer’s interests in fairy tales at this point in her life is that her first son, Leonard, was born on August 30, 1922 – a year before the book was published – and her second son, Bertrand, on May 6, 1925. Fairy tales were likely much on her mind during that time.

The Cruise of the Little Dipper and Other Fairy Tales presents five different stories:

1. “The Cruise of the "Little Dipper" in which a boy is magically shrunk and sails in the toy boat he has built to find his missing sailor father
2. “The Wonderful Tale of Niu” about a girl who, with the help of a spider and a snail, temporarily becomes Empress-Consort of China
3. “Peter Dwarf” in which a boy is raised by dwarves and his magically transformed cat
4. “The Crystal Bowl” about a prince who rescues his love from a magician
5. “The Merciless Tsar” in which a haughty king learns to mend his ways and regain his kingdom

The stories are beautifully written (readers may particularly enjoy the gentle humor of “The Wonderful Tale of Niu”) and the illustrations are lovely.

While a children's book might seem completely tangential to Langer's later philosophical interests, myth would play an important role in her system of philosophy, so perhaps this book shows her coming to grips with those ideas that fascinated her at this early stage of her career. [NOTE: Langer was greatly influenced by Ernst Cassirer and, in 1946, Harper & Brothers published her translation of his 1925 work Sprach und Mythos under the title Language and Myth.]

Original publisher’s blue cloth with gilt lettering on the front board and the spine. The gilt lettering on the spine is about 30% worn off. Just the faintest bit of wear to the top and bottom of the spine and the boards showing a minimum of wear. With the bookplate of Elizabeth Leonori Rohland to the inside front cover. A tight, clean and altogether lovely copy of this scarce children’s book by a woman who went on to become one of America’s most outstanding philosophers.
At Radcliffe, Langer had studied with Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote a generously laudatory Prefatory Note for this, her first book on philosophy.

This book contains an admirable short exposition of the aims, methods, and actual achievements of philosophy. Each chapter takes the form of a discussion of some question which must – or, at least, should – be in the mind of any student entering upon a course of philosophical reasoning. Some of the conclusions may be controversial, but the book is admirably clear, and those who disagree can form an exact estimate of the reasons for their dissent. Thus the book serves the purpose of a philosophical introduction and of an exercise in philosophical thought. I have read the book with great interest.

The book is organized into three sections.

The first, “Method and Madness,” presents her understanding and exposition of the philosophical project and how it differs from science. Philosophy, she says, is the pursuit of meanings – in every sense of the word – always seeking the fullness of its implications and their logical connections. Science, on the other hand, is concerned with the connection of facts.

The second section, “Meaning,” delves more deeply into this thesis with examples and quotes from Whitehead, Cassirer and Wittgenstein and touches on the workings of symbolic logic.

Having presented her thesis and explicated it with modern examples, the third section, “The Progress of Ideas,” examines some of the basic concepts of the philosophical project, tracing the ways in which past philosophers have dealt with them and the changes in our understanding of those basic concepts as the history of ideas has progressed.

The Practice of Philosophy was written as a textbook for students in philosophy. As such, this work – and her next book which was also conceived as a textbook – have been characterized as “detours in Langer's path toward original thought” (Named article, encyclopedia.com).

But what is presented here is a clear exposition of the foundation of the path that this interesting thinker would take once she did fully launch herself off into a thoroughly original direction.
First UK Edition of Her “Introduction to Symbolic Logic”


$ 250

The UK and US editions were issued simultaneously from British printed sheets. No priority has been established.

In the mid-1930s, Susanne Langer was one of the founders, along with the philosophers C. I. Lewis, Alonzo Church, W. V. Quine, and other pioneers in the development of formal logic in the United States, of the Association for Symbolic Logic. She served as a consulting editor for the association’s Journal of Symbolic Logic from its first issue in 1936 until the end of 1939, contributing regular reviews of the German, French, and Italian literature in the field.

Langer is best known for her contributions to the philosophy of culture, and in particular to the philosophy of art, so readers are often puzzled by her early preoccupation with symbolic logic and her frequent use of logical concepts in her theory of artistic meaning. However, Langer’s conception of logic was the wide one she inherited from the logician, Henry M. Sheffer, and then modified in the light of her concern with the epistemological significance of the arts. In her view logic is not just limited to the principles of inference but also includes a study of the structures, forms, or patterns exhibited by objects, events, and processes of all kinds. The articulation of logical patterns in this wider sense can be applied in any medium that can be manipulated to exhibit complex combinations of distinguishable elements – including the tonal materials found in a musical composition or the pigments used in a painting as well as the words or mathematical symbols in a piece of discursive reasoning.

Like her first book, An Introduction to Symbolic Logic was written as a primer for philosophy students. It was not just one of the best of the early texts in this field, it continued to be required reading in colleges courses for years to come and – as a testament to its importance and longevity – was reissued in a third edition in 1953.

The book is still in print today and the current Amazon listing amply attests to the works ongoing appeal:

This is probably the clearest book ever written on symbolic logic for the philosopher, the general scientist, and the layman. For years it has received the appreciation of those who have been rebuffed by other introductory works because of insufficient mathematical training. No special knowledge of mathematics is required here; even if you have forgotten most of your high school algebra, you can learn to use mathematical logic by following the directions in this book.

Now revised and corrected, the book allows you to start with the simplest symbols and conventions and end up with a remarkable grasp of the Boole-Schroeder and Russell-Whitehead systems. It covers the study of forms, essentials of logical structure, generalization, classes, and the principal relations among them, universe of classes, the deductive system of classes, the algebra of logic, abstraction and interpretation, calculus of propositions, the assumptions of Whitehead and Russell's Principia Mathematica, and logistics. Appendices cover symbolic logic and the logic of the syllogism, the construction and use of truth-tables, and proofs of two theorems.

In original publisher’s dustjacket with a few dings and spots, but overall remarkably well preserved. Inexplicably, the light blue ink printing of the final part of the books title (Symbolic Logic) and the publisher’s name was not done for this particular jacket. Otherwise a bright, clean, tight and beautiful copy of this important work by Langer.
First US Edition of Langer’s “Introduction to Symbolic Logic”


As noted above, this book was issued simultaneously in the UK and the US – both having been printed from British sheets. No priority has been established.

This is the US version which uniformly appeared without the four pages of George Allen & Urwin ads that are found in all the UK issues of this book.

Without the publisher’s original dust jacket but in original blue cloth with gilt lettering to the front board and to the lightly sunned spine. There are three former owner’s inscriptions in the book: one on the inside of the front cover (Edward Fletcher), another to the top right corner of the front free endpaper (William Trennell / 29 Otis St. / Watertown, Mass.) and the last one running tightly up the gutter of the title page (Harvard Coop, Sept. 29, 1938, $4.50). Otherwise the book is tight, clean and bright. A nice copy.
Langer was one of the most widely read philosophers of the 20th century and this book actually made publishing history. It was one of the first books written for a major academic press to be picked up by a mass-market publisher; Penguin Books released a thirty-five-cent paperback edition in 1948. By 1951, it had sold more than 110,000 copies, and by the mid-1980s sales had reached almost 450,000. The book was translated into eleven languages and used as a text for courses in a wide variety of academic disciplines. In 1971 Harvard University Press brought out its own paperback edition of the third edition, which was still in print. Total sales for Philosophy in a New Key, in all of its editions, have now exceeded 570,000 copies.

Significantly, the work is dedicated to “ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD / my great Teacher and Friend.”

Langer was not just an amazingly original thinker, she was also an excellent and witty writer. The title of this, her most popular book, plays off her love of music while emphasizing the fact that her radical new approach to philosophy is one that is inclusive of several previously neglected non-language-specific areas of human experience.

The “new key” in Philosophy is not one which I have struck. Other people have struck it, quite clearly and repeatedly. This book purports merely to demonstrate the unrecognized fact that it is a new key, and to show how the main themes of our thought tend to be transposed into it. As every shift of tonality gives a new sense to previous passages, so the reorientation of philosophy which is taking place in our age bestows new aspects on the ideas and arguments of the past. Our thinking stems from the past, but does not continue it in the ways that were foreseen. Its cleavages cut across the old lines, and suddenly bring out new motifs that were not felt to be implicit in the premises of the schools at all; for it changes the questions of philosophy. (Preface)

Her book “changes the questions of philosophy” by challenging two basic assumptions held by philosophers.

These two basic assumptions, go hand in hand: (1) that language is the only means of articulating thought, and (2) that everything which is not speakable thought is feeling…

I believe that in this physical, space-time world of our experience there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression. But they are not necessarily blind, inconceivable, mystical affairs; they are simply matters which require to be conceived through some symbolic schema.

In short, Langer denied the rational/nonrational dichotomy that is usually ascribed to intellectual versus creative discourses. It is unfortunate that the wide recognition this book received for its new approach to aesthetics overshadowed the work’s innovative articulation of a radical new empiricism, one that was open to the complexities of actual experiences in creativity and invention.
Early in her career, Langer was much influenced by Ernst Cassirer, believing, as he did, that symbolism should be the central concern of philosophy because it underlies all human knowing and understanding.

As she had stated so clearly in *Philosophy in a New Key*, “It is a peculiar fact that every major advance in thinking, every epoch-making new insight, springs from a new type of symbolic transformation.”

Along with Cassirer, Langer argued that man is essentially a symbol-using animal. Symbolic thought is deeply rooted in our human nature – it is the keynote to questions of life and consciousness, and to all humanistic problems. In her own work, Langer lucidly distinguished between the open "presentational" symbols of art and "discursive" symbols of language, which cannot reflect directly the subjective aspect of experience. Langer's view of language was, in fact, not far from Ludwig Wittgenstein's logical theory developed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), but when Wittgenstein stopped on the threshold of the unsayable, Langer argued that "music articulates forms which language cannot set forth" – in short, music says what cannot be said.

In her *Preface* to this translation – Langer’s attempt to bring Cassirer’s thought to a wider audience – she notes that Cassirer’s basic insight was that “language, man’s prime instrument of reason, reflects his mythmaking tendency more than his rationalizing tendency. Language, the symbolization of thought, exhibits two entirely different modes of thought. Yet in both modes the mind is powerful and creative. It expresses itself in different forms, one of which is discursive logic, the other creative imagination” – and it is this fundamental insight of Cassirer’s which resonated so strongly with Langer and informed so much of her original work.

Further emphasizing the central importance of this symbolization of thought in Cassirer’s philosophy, she writes in this *Preface* that “Human intelligence begins with conception, the prime mental activity; the process of conception always culminates in symbolic expression. A conception is fixed and held only when it has been embodied in a symbol. So the study of symbolic forms offers a key to the forms of human conception. The genesis of symbolic forms – verbal, religious, artistic, mathematical, or whatever modes of expression there be – is the odyssey of the mind.”

“…Such a view changes our whole picture of human mentality. The following pages give the reader the high lights of significant facts which suggested, supported, and finally clinched the theory. I offer the translation of this little study (with some slight modifications and abridgments made by the author shortly before his death) both as a statement of a new philosophical insight and as a revelation of the philosopher’s work: his material, his technique, and the solution of the problem by a final flash of interpretive genius.”
A festschrift in honor of Henry Sheffer, one of the most important influences in Susanne K. Langer’s intellectual life:

At Radcliffe… [she] came under the influence of the Harvard logician Henry M. Sheffer, who introduced her to the rapidly developing field of formal logic. Sheffer had inherited from his teacher, the American philosopher Josiah Royce, an expansive vision of logic as the science of order or of forms in general, which Royce had pursued as an alternative to the more restricted view held by many of his contemporaries… Sheffer does not appear to have shared his teacher’s metaphysical interests, but he found in Royce’s logical investigations the means to pursue a study of relations, systems, and principles of order that went far beyond the confines of traditional logic. In Sheffer’s hands symbolic logic became a general theory of structure, form, or pattern; Whitehead later called this approach one of the great advances in modern logic. In an unpublished manuscript in Harvard’s Houghton Library, “Henry Sheffer’s Legacy to His Students,” Langer recalls that she was inspired by the power of Sheffer’s logical imagination “to see logic as a field for invention, and to learn that in this traditionally stiff and scholastic pursuit” there was “as much scope for originality as in metaphysics.” Under Sheffer’s tutelage she acquired confidence in her power to deal with difficult intellectual problems: “I remember the growing sense of mental power that came with following his expositions, expecting to understand, even before the end of a discourse, a whole intricate conceptual structure with the same clarity as its simplest initial statements.” [her] abilities were evident to Sheffer, who wrote in a letter of recommendation on her graduation that she had “a firmer grasp of philosophy problems than many a Harvard Ph.D.”

The book opens with a Foreword by Supreme Court Justice, Felix Frankfurter quoting a longish memorandum written by Whitehead in praise of Sheffer to which Frankfurter then adds his own salutary comments.

The contents comprise twenty essays including notable ones by Langer (Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art) and also by Charles Hartshorne (Strict and Genetic Identity: An Illustration of Relations of Logic to Metaphysics). Alonso Church’s contribution (A Formulation of the Logic of Sense and Denotation) is significant in its description of a hierarchy of the senses, a needed element for the completion of Frege’s schema. And W. V. Quine’s The Ordered Pair in Number Theory is a paper which does not appear in his Selected Logic Papers (or elsewhere for that matter) because it is really a paper on number theory.

In a well-preserved, unclipped publisher’s original dust jacket with sunning to the spine. The blue pebbled cloth binding and the gilt lettering on a black field to the spine have been perfectly preserved by the dust jacket. The interior is clean, tight and bright. A gorgeous copy of this book.
Langer wrote Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art during her years at Columbia University and with the support of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and it was with this book that she achieved widespread recognition in the field of aesthetics.

The book is a sequel to Philosophy in a New Key where her theories of symbolism had been applied primarily to music, but the book wasn’t just a simple restatement of New Key; it was the presentation of the beginnings of her more mature philosophy and more expansive explanation of her radical new reconfiguration and expansion of empiricism.

In this work, we see her expand her subject matter and offers nothing less than a systematic, comprehensive, philosophical theory of art which she applies in turn to painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music, the dance, drama and film – focusing on each specific art in turn – drawing distinctions between the ways in which each symbolically shapes the basic materials of feeling. In doing so, each art form is seen as focusing on a different aspect of human experience: music being concerned with time, art and sculpture with space, and dance with what Langer called virtual power.

Philosophically speaking, Langer postulated such concepts as “created” and “virtual” space through these discussions of painting, the dance, and film. She also reflected on the concept of time in her considerations of a “virtual memory” and a “virtual present.”

This idea of “virtual” is a central term in the aesthetics of Suzanne Langer. She held that artists create a virtual world, whether the art be music, dance, architecture, film, painting or sculpture. Although she rejected the imitation theory of art, she did believe that art creates a kind of “illusion,” i.e. an illusion of another world with its own space. Every work of art involved (1) abstraction from actuality, whereby becoming mere semblance, a created realm of illusion, (2) plasticity (the capacity of being manipulated in the interests of expression), and (3) expressiveness whereby the symbol became transparent. Thus the former concentrated focus on the meaning of art works was replaced by a discussion of their import or significance. Intuition became the link between the qualities of the art work that constituted it as a symbol and the import that the work held for the observer. It is through this intuition that we perceive the ‘felt life’ of the artist’s expression.
Dedicated to Langer’s lifelong friend, Helen Sewell (the illustrator of Langer’s first book, The Cruise of the Little Dipper) and with a dust jacket that was designed by Sewell.

Here she refines the common notion that a work of art expresses the feelings of the artist, arguing that the artist expresses “not his own actual feeling, but what he knows about human feeling.” She added (as quoted in the New York Times) that “once he is in possession of a rich symbolism, that knowledge may actually exceed his entire personal experience.”

Although delivered to different audiences – dancers, music students, college students and learned societies – each with their own special interests, “yet the lectures when put together prove to have a common theme, dictated by those central concepts that direct every special inquiry. Art has many problems, and every problem has many facets. But the basic issues – what is created, what is expressed, what is experienced – underlie them all, and all special solutions are developments of the crucial answers. The single lecturers, therefore, may seem to be on many single subjects, but they are really somewhat arbitrary small spotlights turned on the same great topic, the nature of Art.” (from the author’s Preface)

The ten lectures offered are:
- The Dynamic Image: Some Philosophical Reflections on Dance
- Expressiveness
- Creation
- Living Form
- Artistic Perception and “Natural Light”
- Deceptive Analogies: Special and Real Relationships Among the Arts
- Imitation and Transformation in the Arts
- Principles of Art and Creative Devices
- The Art Symbol and the Symbol in Art
- Poetic Creation

There is also an 18-page Appendix reprinting “Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art.”

Langer notes that what is most compelling about works of art is often described, by critics and artists alike, with metaphors drawn from the realm of life and feeling. “Every artist,” she observes, “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.’” Similarly, in a musical composition “melodies move and harmonies grow and rhythms prevail, with the logic of an organic living structure.” In music one hears, with apparent immediacy, “a flow of life, feeling, and emotion in audible passage.” The virtual image created by the arrangement of tonal materials in music is a powerful illusion of movement that seems in some way to be charged with life and feeling.

In Langer’s theory a work of art formulates an idea of feeling, which Langer defines quite broadly as “inner life,” “subjective reality,” or “consciousness.” “Feeling” for Langer is thus a generic term for conscious experiences, or what William James in The Principles of Psychology (1890) called “mental states at large, irrespective of their kind.”

Original publisher’s textured blue cloth with bright gilt lettering to the spine. The original publisher’s dust jacket it lightly chipped along the top edge and much less so on the bottom of the spine. With very light, occasional pencil underlinings and sidebars. Overall, a bright, tight and relatively clean copy of this fascinating work by Langer.
Her Carefully Chosen “Source Book” for Contemporary Thought on Art


$200

This collection of twenty-six essays covering music, art, dance, poetry, film and architecture, focused on two main issues: expressiveness and semblance. Langer’s list of contributors included artists and ‘lay aestheticians’ as well as professional philosophers.

As she says in her opening to the Introduction:

The purpose of this book is to bring together some of the many significant essays on art that have appeared within the last five or six decades, in widely scattered publications, and make them available to readers of English, especially readers who have no great library at their disposal. This is not an anthology intended to give students a survey of trends and schools in aesthetics; it does not offer representative statements of current views. It is a source book to serve independent study on the part of scholars and fairly advanced students in philosophy of art, and those excellent teachers of the arts -- of painting and sculpture, music, dance, literature, or whatever else -- who do their own thinking about basic principles.

In fact, the selections here were driven very much by their agreement, support and expansion of Langer’s own aesthetic theories. As she further notes:

Yet of course there is a fundamental agreement between these authors and me, or I would have no reason to judge their work as generally sound and important. They are, in fact, all people from whom I have drawn some of my own philosophical ideas. They all either expound or tacitly assume two basic concepts: the concept of expressiveness, as I treat it in Feeling and Form; and the concept of “semblance” (S‘chiller’s “Schein”), which defines the work of art as a wholly created appearance, the Art Symbol. Their explicit acceptance of these basic concepts, and especially their constant use of them in handling problems of artistic meaning, structure, aesthetic versus nonaesthetic values, distance, talent, technique, and many other subjects, seem to me the surest corroboration of the philosophy of art I have tried to build on these same foundational ideas. (Introduction, pp. xi-xii).

The essays covering such disparate topics are united by the fact that they uniformly deal with the nature of art, the relationship of art to life in general and to the process of artistic creation.

Original publisher’s unclipped dust jacket which is lightly worn with a few closed tears. A label has been artfully removed from the bottom of the spine. Original textured grey cloth with embossed silver decorations on the front cover and silver lettering on the spine. With a small two-line red ink stamp (Galen Eugene Sargent / Collection) to the insider front cover and to the inside of the rear cover. This is a truly scarce book in first edition, first printing (this is only the second copy we have ever seen and the first in original dust jacket). Despite the minor faults mentioned, an excellent copy of this book.
Philosophical Sketches is one of Langer’s most important book because it signals the final stage of her most mature thought – which was published in the three-volume Mind series in 1967, 1972 and 1982 respectively. Here she offers preliminary indications of the main conclusions and pivotal concepts of that great trilogy which was still to come.

In general, Philosophical Sketches argues that the “inward life” of human beings “is something language as such – as discursive symptomism – cannot render.” What defies verbal expression, however, “may nevertheless be known – objectively set forth, publicly known” by means of other symbolic materials.

Langer then defines works of art as “forms expressive of human feeling” and defines form to include “a permanent form like a building or a vase or a picture, or a transient, dynamic form like a melody or a dance, or even a form given to imagination, like the passage of purely imaginary, apparent events that constitutes a literary work.”

But most important, by the time she wrote the introductory essay to Philosophical Sketches, the overall plan of Mind and her reasons for undertaking the project had fallen into place.

Consciousness, or subjectivity, she argues in that essay, is the proper subject matter of psychology. The difficulties of dealing with mental phenomena, however, had forced psychology to divert its attention to other things, such as overt behavior or the activity of the brain and nervous system, which were thought to be more amenable to scientific investigation.

Although “the most pressing need of our day,” she writes, is “to bring mental phenomena into the compass of natural fact,” psychology has been unable to deal conceptually with its own essential subject matter.

This, she says, require a “philosophy of mind” and these “philosophical sketches” are Langer’s attempt to provide the necessary philosophical underpinning for such a comprehensive, systematic philosophical understanding of mind.

Original publisher’s unclipped dust jacket with light chipping to the top and the bottom of the spine which is lightly sunned. Fine publisher’s two-color cloth binding with the author’s name in black on the spine and the title in gilt on a red field. A pretty copy of this important work by Langer.

First Editions of Her Tripartite Magnum Opus

“Our basic philosophical concepts are inadequate to the problems of life and mind in nature”


$450

The last years of Susanne K. Langer’s life – stopping only when she was nearly completely blind – were devoted to the completion of this massive study of the human mind – her final and most mature attempt to incorporate human feelings into a grand scheme of human thought. One of the outstanding intellectual challenges of the late twentieth century, in Langer’s view, is the construction of “a conceptual framework for the empirical study of the mind” that will be grounded in the biological sciences. Given the right working concepts, she believes, the study of mind should lead “down into biological structure and process… and upwards into the purely human sphere known as ‘culture.’” Driven by this imperative, her study of mind ranges across many academic disciplines in a manner that was new to the discipline of philosophy – attempting to deal with “actual living form as biologist find it… and the actual phenomena of feeling.”

How is it, she wonders, that mind functions so uniquely in humans and, in particular, how is it that an artist projects the idea of feeling by means of art?

This led Langer backwards into the history of evolution and to the construction of a biological theory of feeling, explaining “feeling” as an inherently biological concept that can be connected to evolutionary genetics. To do so, she used a broadly cross-disciplinary, garnering data from biology, the social sciences, and art as well as from philosophy. In a feature article about Langer in the New York Times Book Review (May 26, 1968), James Lord praised her broader conceptual purposes in Mind: “To challenge the existing boundaries of scientific thought! Not by chance, not by the single intuitive tour de force that is occasionally the happy experience of the laboratory scientist, but by the deliberate and rigorous exercise of intellect.”

Langer goes to great depths, connecting the early evolution of man to the ways in which we perceive the mind today. She explains how early organisms were refined through natural selection, shaping certain behaviors and functions in order for them to survive. She describes the body's organs as all operating and co-operating within a specific rhythm, and these rhythms are what are necessary to keep the organism alive. This development, she explains, was the beginning of the framework for the Central Nervous System, which she believed to be the heart of cognitive interactions among humans.

This comprehensive study of evolution is a composite of the living world's dynamic and heterogeneous processes. Langer perceived a continuity among species. Much of the argument of Mind is that “feeling,” and even the completions of “repertoires” of acts, was characteristic even of the origins of life. However, she did not regard the continuations of feeling across the span of evolution to consist of obedience to any a priori natural laws. She argued, for example, that animals do not have society or politics; there is no territory, competition, leadership, or goal such as survival except in humans. For the human, symbol making is a transformation of much of the instinctual in animals. This she called “the great shift” which she described it in great detail in the second volume of her trilogy.

Regarding the critical emergence of language, she argued that the human brain is the condensation of many physiological ways of patterning in evolution. For the early humans, language was the phenomenal assemblage of these complex patternings; the physiology of hand, posture, and central nervous system being the contingent material condition that enabled symbol-making to begin in a conscious, enduring way. Once this process was actualized, she speculated, humanity and culture appeared, fully realized, with great speed.

In the philosophical debate on the question of freedom versus determinism, Langer’s thought served the “interest” of ontological freedom. In Mind, she poignantly refuted two prominent theories about the nature of the mind, both of which are highly deterministic. The first of these is geneticism. Langer did not believe that evolution is reducible to material units, i.e. first causes in
a mechanistic sequence of natural selection. She argued that evolution has been, rather, the process of organisms’ making new and unforeseeable responses to one another and to such nonliving events as the elements, seasons, and habitat. The second theory she refuted was cognitivism, the doctrine that consciousness is a projected rationalism, simulable in a totalized way. “Instead of trying to understand the mind as software for the brain,” said Melvin Woody in a commentary on her thought at the time of her death, “she conceives of mental life as rooted in sentience, in the feelings that enable the simplest of organisms to adapt to its environment. Then she traces how the evolution of higher forms of life yields expanded awareness of the surrounding world.”

All three volumes are in the original publisher’s dust jackets which have the occasional worn spot or small closed tear. The first volume is not price clipped while volumes two and three are clipped. Volumes two and three with the bookplate of Howard and Margaret Thrig to the inside front covers. The matching publisher’s binding of textured blue cloth with gilt lettering on the front covers and the spine are uniformly fine. The interiors of each are clean, bright and tight. Overall, a remarkably well-preserved set of this monumental work by one of the most important women philosophers of the twentieth century.
Music is 'significant form,' and its significance is that of a symbol, a highly articulated, sensuous object, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import.

Susanne K. Langer