



THE KINDS OF ART

Today we continue with the subject of art. And I hope we can deal with the problem of the different kinds of art.

You will recall that last week I proposed to you a generic, a most general meaning for the term “art,” that art referred to any human skill in the making or production of something. And in the light of that generic meaning of art as skill in making, it followed that art exists in the mind of the artist, in the person and in the habits of the artist, and is distinguished from the thing he produces, which we should not call art but the work of art.

Now, Lloyd, my impression from reading the questions we received this last week is that this generic meaning of art caused a general discomfort on the part of our viewers, a kind of very serious puzzlement because that generic conception of art requires us to see that every human being is an artist, that human life is almost impossible to live without the possession of the basic skills, which are art. In fact one would almost say that every act of work, every form of human work involves some skill which is art.

Now this doesn't disturb me because it reveals for me, at least, how broad and deep is the significance of art in human life. It is almost equivalent to saying that to be a human being is to be an artist or to be an artist is a human being. But I do see, I think, why

it disturbs a great many of our viewers. For example, Lloyd, we had a letter from Mrs. Mimi Bradford in which she said it had always been her impression that only those gifted with specific abilities to express themselves with the medium of art could be called artists. And this is in contradiction to what I said, but you are quite right, Mrs. Bradford, that only a few men are artists; but that opinion is based upon the conception of art as fine art. It is true that only a few men are fine artists and an even smaller number of those are really great fine artists.

Was it your impression, Lloyd, that from the letters you have received that the same thing happened? I mean, that people were disturbed by this generic meaning of art?

Lloyd Luckman: I have exactly the same impression. For example, a letter from C.B. Keiffer. "Well," he says, "it seems to me, Dr. Adler, that you are defining art in such a broad sense that it ceases to have any meaning as such." And he has here a very interesting suggestion. He says, "Wouldn't it clarify the subject if the word 'creative' were incorporated in the definition?"

Mortimer Adler: That same suggestion was made in a letter I have here from Mrs. Kathleen Edmonds. She asked, for example, whether every artist is creative or whether there are some arts which are not creative. And my immediate response both to Mr. Keiffer and to Mrs. Edmonds is that what you are both looking for is the distinction between the useful and the fine arts. And that is one of the points I hope we can get clear today.

Lloyd Luckman: Now there is a question here from Mr. Frank Delamater. He is from Modesto Junior College. And it seems, I think, to tend in this very same direction. He wonders, for instance, whether the artisan who was a skilled craftsman is an artist in the same sense as a painter or as a writer. And he suggests, then, that perhaps the essential difference between the craftsman and the artist lies in the significance of what each of them produces.

Mortimer Adler: My feeling, again, is that, Mr. Delamater, that you are looking for the distinction between the useful and the fine arts. Mr. Delamater, I gather, would like to use the word 'craftsman' for the useful artist and the word 'artist' for the fine artist.

Similarly, a letter from Mr. Jones in San Mateo asks whether the result of the sculptor's skill is art, whereas the result of a cabinetmaker's work is craftsmanship?

Now all these questions and many more like them, I think, indicate the work we have cut out for us today: the subdivisions of art into its various major types. And this isn't a verbal matter. For example, when we get the distinction between the sculptor and the carpenter or cabinetmaker clear, that distinction remains the same whether you call them both artists, and one a useful artist and the

other a fine artist, or whether you call the sculptor and artist and the cabinetmaker a craftsman; the distinction is exactly the same.

My only reason for still wishing to use the word “artist” for all of these kinds of skill and production, is that when you use the word “artist” in this generic sense to refer to both, it calls attention, and I think it should, to what is common in all these productive skills before we come to their differences and distinctions.

THE THREE COOPERATIVE ARTS

Now today, I would like to make three basic distinctions in the kinds of human art. And the first of these is the distinction between what I am going to call the cooperative arts and the simply productive arts. You asked me last week, Lloyd, how I could look upon the pilot or the physician as an artist when he didn’t produce anything. I mean, he didn’t produce a shoe the way the shoemaker did or a cake the way the cook did or a house the way the builder did; in what sense, then, if he doesn’t produce anything, is the pilot or the physician an artist?

Lloyd Luckman: That is just the point.

Mortimer Adler: Now, the answer to Mr. Luckman’s question of last week is in terms of our understanding of the difference between the cooperative arts and the simply productive arts. And this, I think, is the least familiar of the distinctions, though for many reasons I shall try to make plain to you, it is the most interesting.

Let me see if I can say it to you this way, there are only three arts, only three which are cooperative; all other arts are productive. The productive arts produce or make artificial things like shoes and houses and ships, but the cooperative arts simply help in the production by nature of natural effects or results.

The three cooperative arts are farming and healing and teaching. The farmer has as his end the growth of plants. The physician or healer has the health of a body, the human or animal body as his end. And the art of a teacher has as its end the knowledge and skill which can be acquired by man.

Shoes or houses or ships would not exist if human artists didn’t produce them. But you know as well as I do that the fruit and grain of the field would grow without human beings as farmers, that human bodies and animal bodies would gain health, maintain health, and regain health when they were ill without physicians, and that human beings can learn and acquire knowledge and skill without teachers. Unlike shoes and ships, which require the artist to produce the artificial product, what then is the character of these three great cooperative arts, the arts of the farmer, the physician, and the teacher? The characteristic of all three of them is that they help nature reach its own results.

Let me show you that a little more clearly. The farmer merely watches, observes what things in the natural process of growth produce good crops, sunshine and proper soil, irrigation, and then he helps nature produce those very factors in the growth of plants; unlike herbivorous animals which live off the grains and fruits of the fields and therefore have to take their chances with the way in which nature produces these things. The farmer makes the plants, the harvest, come at a time and with a frequency and regularity that suits human needs and fits human conveniences. Similarly, the human body has health and often regains health. And the physician, watching the body in the process of healing, helps it along. And the same thing is true of the teacher.

These arts, then, have as their characteristic the primacy of nature and the subordination of the human artist to the processes of nature, almost as if they watched how nature worked, imitated nature's working, and worked with nature.

And one other characteristic of these three arts which I think is quite remarkable. These are the only arts that work with living matter; all other arts, whether they be the art of the sculptor or the art of the painter or the art of the shoemaker or the art of the ship-builder, take dead matter and transform it. But these arts, these three cooperative arts, cooperate with living things, with living matter in their processes of change.

Lloyd Luckman: I don't want to keep on this point all the time, Dr. Adler, but last week, how about my pilot or my navigator? You were classifying him with the teacher and the physician. And here, now, it doesn't seem to me that he fits in with those definitions at all because he is working with dead matter.

Mortimer Adler: That's a very tough question. In fact, that question, Lloyd, has puzzled me for years. I searched through the great books on art where this wonderful distinction between the cooperative arts and the simply productive arts is made, and where they talk about the pilot, the navigator, to see if I could find out what they had to say about the pilot or the navigator and I could never find any discussion of it. And I think I've got an answer, which if it is true, I am very proud of having discovered or invented.

Lloyd Luckman: I'll be listening.

Mortimer Adler: What is a ship? A ship is a human invention for getting from one place to another. And whether it be a wind-powered or a steam-powered ship, it is planned, always planned by the inventor, the maker, to be operated by men. It involves human beings working with the sails or a motor to get the ship where it is going.

Let me take an example that is better. Some of you are not pilots, you haven't piloted vessels or piloted airplanes but almost

everyone in this audience, I think, has driven an automobile. And in driving an automobile you have a kind of secondary cooperative art. The automobile is not built to go by itself; it is built to be driven. And the human artist, the person who learns the skill of driving is cooperating with the machine for the end which the machine is built for, to get somewhere. And all the things, all the things the driver's manual tells you, are things that really instruct you in the art of cooperating, in the skill of cooperating with the machine as it is built. The extraordinary thing about man is that not only is he an artist that cooperates with nature, but he even builds machines which require other artists to cooperate with them.

Now I think that is a good solution to your problem.

Lloyd Luckman: I see your point.

Mortimer Adler: Well, think about it.

Lloyd Luckman: I will.

Mortimer Adler: I think that the more you think about it the more it will impress you. I have always thought it fascinating.

Lloyd Luckman: Okay.

Mortimer Adler: Let me see if I can come back now to one more series of brief points about these, I think, quite extraordinary cooperative arts.

THE COOPERATIVE ARTS HELP NATURE

In these cooperative arts nature is the primary artist and the artist is almost an auxiliary, almost as if you were to say, for example, that as the architect is the master craftsman and all the other artists work with him, so in the arts of medicine or teaching or farming, nature is the master craftsman and the artist works with nature. In addition to that—this insight, by the way, was gained very early in the history of medicine and in the history of education—Hippocrates, who was the father of medicine, laid it down as a basic rule, in his maxims and aphorisms, that the physician should let nature take its course and that the physician was to help nature take its course. And Socrates, who must have known this Hippocratic wisdom, defined himself as a teacher—the most magnificent thing in the whole list of education—functioning the way a midwife functions.

Notice the example of the physician. The teacher functions like a midwife. The mother gives birth to the child but the midwife assists in the birth, in the production. So the teacher doesn't give birth to knowledge; the student, the learner gives birth to knowledge and the teacher is strictly an auxiliary artist cooperating with the learning process in the learner and helps that process occur more frequently, more certainly, and perhaps a little less painfully.

There is a third conclusion from this comparison between the teacher and the physician as cooperative artists, one that has always fascinated me and bears on the whole of education. Hippocrates, thinking of the physician as cooperating with nature, pointed out that there are three things you can do in the therapeutic process in helping to cure sick people. His three things, the three techniques of medicine, he said, were controlling the regimen of the patient, his hours of rising and retiring, his diet, his work, his exercise, his climate. And this he regarded as the best form of therapy. And the reason why he regarded it as the best is because it was the most natural, the one that fitted best with nature's own course, the one that did not introduce anything foreign or violent in the process.

Then he said if controlling the regimen didn't work well, then you were permitted to use medication, introducing drugs. And the point there is that drugs are a foreign substance. Some might do some violence to nature, and so he recommended medication only when the control of the regimen didn't work.

And finally, in the last resort, if nothing else helped in emergency cases, he permitted surgery. But surgery, strictly, was the third of the three ways to be resorted to only in the emergency that the other two didn't work.

In teaching, if I may make the comparison, there are three ways of teaching that are like the controlling of regimen, medication, or giving drugs and surgery. Socrates' method of teaching, teaching by questioning, is the most natural process of helping the human mind learn. Lecturing, lecturing in a fashion which raises questions in the mind of the student, is next best, not as good as questioning; it is somewhat like medication, introducing a kind of foreign substance into the mind. But the worst form of teaching, which is like surgery, is telling the student what to put down in his notebook on your authority as a teacher, which is indoctrination, asking him to accept something as if it were a foreign substance incorporated in themselves. Just as surgery operates and takes something out, the teacher who indoctrinates operates and puts something in.

FINE ART IS USELESS

Now let me go to my second distinction, the distinction between the fine and useful arts. And, Lloyd, didn't we receive a question on this distinction?

Lloyd Luckman: Let me see. It's the one that we had from Mrs. Kincaid, I think, that you have in mind.

Mortimer Adler: That's right.

Lloyd Luckman: Her home is in Palo Alto, and she wants to know whether the difference between the art of the cobbler or cook

and that of Raphael or Michelangelo is one of kind or one of degree.

Mortimer Adler: Well, my answer, Mrs. Kincaid, is that that is a distinction in kind, not degree. Because if both the fine artist and the useful artist, the cobbler and Michelangelo, were doing the same thing, working for the same end and one did it better than the other, that would be a difference in degree. But in this case they are doing quite different things. One is producing a useful work and the other a work of fine art. And if we understand what this means, you will see that this is a distinction in kind.

Now let me see if I can explain this. In fact, this distinction between the useful and the fine arts is the most familiar and, I think, the easiest to understand. A work of useful art is a thing which serves an end, a means which function toward some ulterior end or purpose. And there is no difficulty in understanding that a shoe or a house or a desk is a work of useful art that helps us in some particular connection in our action or is practically useful.

Now does this mean, as you look at this as a distinction, useful art and fine art, that if the works of useful art are useful, serve as means, that the works of fine art are useless? The answer is in part yes. Oscar Wilde, in one of his witty epigrams, said, "All art is quite useless." And what he meant, of course, was not useful art but all fine art. The nonuseful arts are quite useless. Does this mean, if the works of fine art are quite useless, that they are of no value? Well, I'm sorry to say, Lloyd, that there are many people in America for whom the useless is the valueless. This country will place such a high value on utility that if you call something useless, it is like saying it is no good. But this, of course, is crazy, absolutely crazy.

In fact, the opposite is the case. Things which are not useful but enjoyable, good in their own right, things which we enjoy intrinsically, are much more valuable than the things which are merely useful as means to ends.

We'll see in our discussion of work and leisure that work or labor is useful and done for the sake of leisure which is intrinsically rewarding. In similar fashion, all the useful arts and their products are ordered to the fine arts which are the intrinsically enjoyable things.

Perhaps I can explain this by one more comment: Have you ever stopped to think about the meaning of the word *fine* in the phrase "fine art"? Did you suppose, for example, that it meant "excellent," that the work was an excellent work? Did you suppose it meant it was very good? Did you suppose it meant, for example, that it was for a refined audience or was a very refined, and elegant, or precious work? Not at all. That word *fine* has exactly the same meaning of the same root as the word *final*. It means "end."

The arts we call “fine arts” in English are called in French *beaux-arts*, or in German, *schönen Künste*, the “beautiful arts.” And the reason why *fine* has the same meaning as *beautiful* is that a thing of beauty is something which is enjoyed in itself, not used, not consumed, not referred to something else, but taken as itself, beheld, enjoyed, looked at. So that the meaning of the word *fine* as it occurs in the phrase “fine arts” means these things produced are good in their own right just to be enjoyed, ends in themselves, as it were.

Though this distinction is clear, no one should understand it too sharply. Because there are two qualifications we have to introduce. In the first place, we must consider the fact that the intention of the person who receives the work of art may control what he does with it. For example, let’s consider a lovely Chippendale highboy. This was intended by its maker as a useful thing, a chest of drawers to put clothes in. But it could become a museum piece, looked upon with admiration, and beheld with satisfaction just in looking at it. It was a useful work—I mean it was intended as a useful work, though it can be received by someone as a work of fine art.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY ASPECTS OF WORKS OF ART

Similarly, I’m sure that there are many people who hang paintings on the wall just to cover spots or tears in the wallpaper. And I’m sure there are people who use a Brahms lullaby to put the baby to sleep. That is one qualification. The other qualification on the distinction is this, particularly with regard to the fine and useful arts. Almost every work has two aspects, a primary and secondary aspect. And it may be useful in its primary aspect and fine in its secondary aspect or the reverse.

For example, consider kitchen stoves. In the old days when I was a boy, a six-burner gas stove was one of the ugliest things in the world to look at because at that time the manufacturer of the kitchen stove had no interest in design; it was a perfectly useful thing. But now, kitchen stoves and iceboxes, all things of that kind which are still just as useful, in fact perhaps even more useful, are designed not only to be functional but also to be pleasant to the eye. They have an aspect of fine art, nice to behold even when you aren’t using them.

And the reverse—well, I can give you one other illustration. Think of architecture for a moment. The great traditional art of architecture is at once a useful and a fine art because the building that is being made is made as a domicile or an office or some kind, but also is meant to be looked at in a way that pleases the eye. So

today you see in architecture and houses the combination of the useful and the fine.

The reverse is also true. Works of fine art, poems, pieces of music, and paintings, sometimes have, in addition to being beautiful, being pleasant to behold, and causing delight, are instructive. They give both delight and instruction. And as instructive, as causing men to learn something from them, they have a kind of intellectual utility. Nevertheless, they are primarily fine works. And how do you know this? You know it because if, for example, Lloyd, a piece of writing merely instructed you, as a guidebook does, you wouldn't call it a poem. You would call it a poem if in addition to its instructing you and giving you something to learn, it also delighted you as a thing of beauty. This same thing is true of architecture. If a building were merely beautiful and you couldn't live in it in any way, you wouldn't call it a house because architecture is primarily a useful art and only secondarily is it a thing of beauty. So poetry is primarily a fine art, producing things of beauty and only secondarily useful. And this indicates the combination of the two senses: one primary and one secondary.

LIBERAL AND SERVILE ARTS

Now, if a work that looked like a work of fine art were merely instructive, we wouldn't call it fine art at all, Lloyd; we would call it liberal. We would call it a work of liberal art.


Lloyd Luckman: Well, now that you use this phrase "liberal art," it reminds me of this question, I think we received one here from Mother Anne at the Ursuline College. Yes, here it is. That is in Santa Rosa. And she said, "What is the meaning of the word 'arts' in the phrase 'liberal arts', as for example in 'liberal arts course' or 'liberal arts college'." And this is her question.

Mortimer Adler: Well, I can certainly see why Mother Anne is puzzled by the phrase "liberal arts." Because most of the things, Mother Anne, that are taught today in liberal arts courses and liberal arts colleges have little or nothing to do with the liberal arts. In fact, many of them, being entirely vocational schools, have to do with the useful arts and not with the liberal arts at all.

But to answer Mother Anne's question, Lloyd, I would have to go to my third distinction between the free and the servile arts. That, by the way, is the most difficult distinction to make. It is a distinction which I think I shall only be able to start today. I don't think there is time to finish it. If I don't finish it, you remind me and I'll pick it up next time as we start off to talk about these matters further. But just let me suggest it to you today and then go on next time.

The ancients made a distinction according to whether the artist

had to work in matter, actually get his hands dirty, get involved in touching physical things and changing them, or whether the artist could produce his- result simply in the soul of persons or in their minds. By this distinction—and the reason why they called the arts, which had to work in matter, servile arts is because for them in the ancient world only slaves worked and the free man didn't get his hands dirty. Hence they regarded the art of shoemaking or the art of building and even the art of sculpture or the art of painting as servile arts. And they regarded music as a free art. And they regarded poetry as a free art. But to explain the sense in which music and poetry are free I will have to come back to next time.

What I would like to do now is to summarize quickly what we have done today and close. We have understood today the distinction between the cooperative arts and the simply productive arts, the useful and the fine arts. And next time I would like to discuss the fine arts in detail, along with the liberal arts which we haven't fully discussed today. 

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