



THE FINE ARTS

Today we continue the discussion of art. And I hope we can concentrate on the fine arts. There are many interesting problems connected with the fine arts that I should like to discuss.

But first I would like to return to a point we did not complete last week. Last week I tried to present to you three basic distinctions in the arts and I only succeeded in dealing with two: first, the distinction between the cooperative arts and the simply productive arts, an art like farming on the one hand and like shoemaking on the other; and then the distinction between the useful and the fine arts, arts which produce things that serve a purpose or a function and the fine arts which produce things which are beautiful, whose aim is to delight the persons who behold them, to give pleasure in beholding.

Now there is a qualification on that distinction between the useful and the fine arts I want to remind you of as I go on. A useful work may delight as well as serve a purpose. For example, fine furniture may give delight to the eye and a building, a work of architecture, may be useful, but also delightful. On the other hand, a work of fine art such as a painting or a novel or a piece of music, in addition to being delightful, being a thing of beauty, may be useful as well.

But if something is merely instructive, useful in the sense of teaching, then it is not a work of fine art. For example, I think of Euclid's elements of geometry. To me, Euclid's elements of geometry is a thing a beauty. But it is not primarily so. It is primarily instructive and that is why I would call it liberal art, not fine art. This brought us to the third distinction we were concerned with last week between the liberal and other arts. Lloyd, do you recall the question I was answering when time ran out?

Lloyd Luckman: Very well, indeed. It was the question from Mother Anne of the Ursuline School in Santa Rosa I believe. And she was asking you in terms of the liberal arts, what was the meaning of the term "liberal arts" as we use it today in colleges, liberal arts colleges? And you pointed out that while we call these colleges liberal arts colleges, they are teaching useful arts more than liberal arts. And then you went on with the distinction between liberal arts and both—

Mortimer Adler: The distinction between the liberal arts and the servile arts. Let me make that distinction now, Lloyd.

Let me say first what the meaning of "servile" is. An art is servile if it makes something out of matter and the thing which is made exists in matter. It is called servile because in the ancient world where this name originated only slaves got their hands dirty and callused, only slaves worked in matter. Most useful works, most material products of art are in this sense servile; they are made in matter and they exist in matter.

The meaning of "liberal" on the other hand is free, free from having to deal with matter, made in the mind and existing in the mind. For example, a speech, a great speech, exists in the human mind. A mathematical demonstration is made in the human mind and therefore exists there. And that is why any such work, a speech or a mathematical demonstration, is called a work of free art, liberal art. And this is what gives the name, Lloyd, to our traditional seven liberal arts, of which I'm only going to name three: grammar, rhetoric, and logic. These arts make works in the human mind.

But these arts, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, are useful arts, not fine arts. They are liberal but useful arts as the art of teaching is. Hence we have the interesting question: What about the fine arts? Are the fine arts servile or are they free? Now, my answer to this question may seem shocking at first. The answer is, some of the fine arts are free and some of the fine arts are servile.

For example, literature and music are free arts. And the way we know that they are free is that all that is physical about them is the notation by which the art is conveyed from the mind of the artist to the mind of the audience. I am thinking of literature now and music, for example, without regard to the auxiliary arts of a per-

former, the stage actor necessary to produce a play or the orchestra necessary to play a piece of music. For example, if we consider a book of poetry. Its only physical existence is in words. But those words are merely there to convey the poem from the mind of the author to the mind of the reader of the poem. The poem doesn't exist there on the page. Or take a piece of music. The notations, the musical symbols in the score, are not the music and you don't even have to play the piece of music to "have" the piece of music, because the person who is competent in reading music can, by reading the notations, actually hear in the "mind's ear," have the physically unheard but imaginatively heard music that the composer intended. It is in this sense that arts like poetry and music are said to be free, because they are made in the mind and can exist in the mind.

But let's consider fine arts which are not free in this sense, for example, the arts of painting and sculpture. Consider reproductions of a famous statue. The original of the statue exists some-where in the world in one place only, in a museum. If this statue is to be seen by anybody who doesn't go to that museum, we must make actual models of it, reproductions of it. This reproduction of the statue is not like the notes on a page of musical score or like the words in a book. They have to convey the statue by actually physically reproducing it. That shows that the statue in a sense is a servile work; it has to be made in matter and exists in matter.

Let me just add by the way that Leonardo da Vinci, the great painter, was very sensitive to this distinction between the liberal and the servile arts. He regarded painting as more liberal than sculpture because the painter could be in a studio with a fine velvet jacket and his hands could be kept clean, whereas the sculptor was covered by the dust of chipping marble and his hands got dirty and callused. That is why Leonardo thought painting was a more liberal art than sculpture.

Let me take another art to illustrate the point. Let's take the ballet. Is the ballet free or servile? Well, it has changed. At one time the ballet necessarily was servile art because the ballet could only be produced on the stage by these actors using their own bodies to produce. But now in recent years the notations of choreography have been developed. And these notations enable the dance, the ballet, to exist on paper in symbols just as music exists on paper in symbols. So the person who could read the choreography could understand and can actually imaginatively reconstruct the dance without having to go to a theatre to see it.

Let me now summarize these categories. Literature, music, and choreography are free (or liberal) fine arts; painting, sculpture, and ballet are servile fine arts; grammar, rhetoric, and logic are free (or liberal) useful arts; finally, architecture, carpentry, and cosmetics

are servile useful arts. “Literature” includes all forms of fictional writing, imaginative literature and poetry. Architecture is the most liberal of the useful servile arts, but nevertheless the building has to exist in matter—it doesn’t exist in the architect’s plans.

Lloyd Luckman: In that summary I’m missing something that you were stressing very much last week and you haven’t mentioned today. Remember the cooperative arts are farming and medicine and teaching.

Mortimer Adler: Yes.

Lloyd Luckman: How do they fit in?

Mortimer Adler: Well, I should have mentioned them. The cooperative art of farming is a useful art and servile. Actually the farmer has to deal with the soil and the things of the soil. The cooperative art of teaching is like grammar, rhetoric, and logic, a liberal useful art. And medicine, partly dealing with the body and partly with the mind or soul, is partly free and partly servile.

Let me get back to the problem that bothers me. Because it may bother you, too. I can’t get over being bothered by the fact that you have a sense that all the fine arts should be free. But if literature, music and the choreography of the ballet are free fine arts, why aren’t all the others free? Now that is a hard question to answer.

In a sense perhaps they are free, even though they must exist in matter, as the statue exists in the stone or the painting exists on the canvas, perhaps in the deepest sense the fine arts do not exist except in the mind of the beholder. In this sense, then, they exist in the mind and are like free art.

THREE QUALITIES OF A WORK OF FINE ART

Let us now move on to three characteristics which are common to all the fine arts and distinguish them from useful art. In the first place, a work of fine art has individuality. In the second place, a work of fine art is original. In the third place, a work of fine art says something.

Now let me briefly explain each of these three points. A work of fine art, we say, has individuality. What does this mean? It’s a most astounding fact: every work of fine art has a proper name. It either has a title or an opus number or a number of production as in the case of a numbered print. Now we don’t name shoes, we don’t name desks, we don’t name fountain pens or clocks. Among the works of useful art, only extraordinary things like great trains or great ships are given proper names. Why is this so? When we give a proper name to something we are giving it personality as when we personify famous trains and ships. And every work of fine art which has a proper name, its own individual name, therefore is re-

garded by us as having more personality than any useful thing has.

Secondly, we say that every work of fine art is original. What do we mean by this? Well, in all these letters we have been receiving in the last few weeks, people have talked about the creative arts. "The useful arts aren't creative," they say. The meaning of that is that a work of fine art is creative in the sense of being original. It's not an exact duplication of anything else, not a reproduction. Here it is, this for the first time is this thing produced, you see. And somehow the combination of these two, the individuality and the originality of the work of fine art give it its unique character.

Now I come to the third characteristic, a work of fine art says something. What does that mean? What does it mean to say that a work of fine art says something? I will never forget in my youth when I heard musicians talking. I heard one musician saying to another about a piece of music, "Oh, I don't think that is very good. It says so little. It says so little." And I said to myself, "Well, what can that musician mean by saying that a piece of music says so little"? I didn't think it said anything at all. And then I realized as the more I thought about the arts, I realized that that was the deepest remark I had ever heard made about the fine arts. Every one of the fine arts is a kind of language, not like our verbal speech, the kind of speech I'm using now, but a language of its own, a language which says only certain things.

Now let's ask that question again: What is it that a work of fine art says? What is the meaning of its content? To answer that question I would say you have to think of each of the great fine arts: music, poetry, literature, painting and sculpture, in terms of the medium in which the work of art is produced, a language, a kind of speech utterly different from the ordinary speech of everyday discourse. Because it is a speech which says certain things and only certain things. If we look at the fine arts this way, we can reach a classification of the fine arts as so many different languages, each language in its own medium a special mode of communication or expression.

When we start to classify the fine arts, we make a distinction between fine arts which are in motion, which are in time, which take time for them to exist, and fine arts which are motionless.

In the fine arts which are in motion, let me take literature and music. The language of literature is not necessarily just words but it is what the words evoke, the images, the whole imagination, emotional and intellectual imagination that is evoked by the symbols of literature. The language of music is the language of tones and time, these are the elements out of which music is composed, tones and time, the elements of rhythm and temporal structured music. And the language of music is in terms of the grammar, if

you will, of these elements. And so (moving on to motionless fine arts) language of the plastic arts, arts like painting and sculpture, is a language in terms of physical forms, forms that have to be seen. Forms, visible shapes and colors and patterns; they have to be seen to express what the painter or sculptor is trying to say.

Now, that classification is only exemplary.

IS PHOTOGRAPHY A FINE ART?

Lloyd Luckman: If it is only exemplary, then I think I can bring in this question at this point because we have a very interesting letter here from a Mr. Peterson in Oakland, and he wants to know about photography. Is the photographer an artist? And I'd like to know, since you mentioned ballet a moment ago, along with Mr. Peterson's question, where would you put ballet? Photography and ballet.

Mortimer Adler: Well, I would say in the first place, that photography is a plastic art; its works exist in the visible forms that they contain. As for ballet, ballet looks like a plastic art, it contains a visible moving form, but looking a little deeper into the content of ballet, you see that ballet is an art in time and not a motionless art. It is in motion and therefore it has more affinity to music and poetry, to narration and drama, than it does to the simple motionless plastic form. As a matter of fact, the art of the motion picture, one of my favorite arts, the art of the cinema, is partly plastic in the fact that it uses a pictorial medium, in part but not entirely; nevertheless it is an art in motion, the main point of which is storytelling. The only plastic art in motion that I can think of that is truly a plastic art in motion that isn't like poetry or music is the new art of creating mobiles, actually moving visible forms, the movement of which is part of the art.

CAN DIFFERENT ART FORMS HAVE THE SAME CONTENT?

Now, let me get back to my main question, Lloyd, which is about the different fine arts as so many languages. And the question I want you all to think about as hard as you can, is this question: Do they all say the same thing? Can you translate what one art says into another art? Can you say, "Oh, this in music says what this says in painting, what this says in poetry"? Think of that question for a moment before you hear my answer. Is the meaning, the content—so I put it this way, is the artistic language of one art capable of translation into the artistic language of another, as French, for example, is translatable into English or French into German?

The answer would at first appear to be yes. Because the arts

have a certain kind of common content. They all refer to an objective world in which we live, which is common. They all somehow express common thoughts and feelings. So you would think the answer would be yes. Of course, you can translate, just as you can translate from French into German or German into English! But no. Deeply and more really the answer is no. And the reason why the answer is no is because in the fine arts the content can never be divorced from the form, the form given to it by the medium of communication which is the language of that fine art.

Let me say it another way. You get a sense of this when you recognize that to translate English prose into French prose is easy. But why do people say, "Well, French poetry, French verse can't be translated into English verse," because there in poetry, not prose, something about the actual language and the imagery that language is not translatable into another foreign language?

Now there is a deep mystery here. I think this is the deepest mystery about the fine arts, the fact that there is something common to all of them which we can never express in words, and we can never express what one art says in another art. There is a kind of ineffability about the arts which makes it impossible to translate from one to another. Yet for most people, and I'm going to use a hard word here, the popular and almost the vulgar approach to the fine arts is to transgress this mystery, to avoid this mystery, not to be sensitive to this mystery. Most people when they look at paintings and the plastic works, paintings and sculpture, do no more than read the story off it; *they say it in words*. And when they do this they are in a sense violating that mystery. And I think as a matter of fact, you can actually see this done.

Let me take an example here. Most people looking at a certain, very famous statue, would say, "Why, that's a boy taking a thorn out of the sole of his foot." And having said it in words that way, they might be satisfied that they had seen the statue, whereas in fact all they had done was take a story from it. Or to take another example. There's a painting by Caravaggio. Most people looking at would see only the story, the great Christian story of Christ being taken down from the cross. Or take another painting they would read that way, a painting by Fra Angelico called *The Entombment of Christ*. Reading the title and knowing the story, they would not see the picture. They would be satisfied merely with this literary equivalent, with saying in words what the picture seemed to say. It is precisely this vulgar approach to the fine arts, especially of the fine art of painting, translating it into literary terms, that the modernists revolt toward abstraction and surrealism in art was an answer to, a quarrel with, an attempt to overcome.

The titles of some modern paintings, such as Picasso's *The Three Musicians*, Dali's *A Chemist Lifting with Precaution the Cu-*

ticle of a Grand Piano, Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, or Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, these titles themselves express the artists' defiance. It is as if to say, "No, you are not looking at the picture. You are reading the title and trying to find in the picture what the title says. You can't do it," says the artist. On the other hand, one modern picture, by Kandinsky, has the title *Circles in Circles*, and this doesn't disturb anybody. Anyone looking at it would say, "Why, yes—circles in circles."

My point is that modern art, the modernist revolt, is an attempt to overcome the literary interpretation of the plastic arts and the same thing is true in modern music. But this modernist revolt calls our attention to what, to me, is the deepest issue about the fine arts: the problem of imitation and creation in the fine arts.

Lloyd Luckman: I stop you for a moment, Dr. Adler, because I have a question here about imitation. And this particular problem is whether or not you have imitation in good art or not. "I would appreciate some consideration," says this writer—

Mortimer Adler: Mr. Carvel:

Lloyd Luckman: Mr. Carvel, "of the question dealing with the imitative nature of art. I am wondering what role imitation plays in the creation of a work of art."


Mortimer Adler: Mr. Carvel, imitation and creation supplement each other. They belong together. As I see it, imitation in the work of fine art signifies that which the artist draws from the object, the world of nature, whereas creation in a work of fine art signifies that which the artist draws out of his own soul or mind. But these two things fuse. Because in drawing something from the objects of nature, the artist, if he is an artist, must transform it subjectively. And in drawing something out of his own soul or mind, the artist, if he is an artist, must objectify it, put it in the object which is the work of art produced.

Hence artistic imitation is not simply copying, reproducing a mere photographic image. Artistic imitation is creative imitation and artistic creation is also imitative creation. Artistic creation is not pure creation any more than imitation is mere copying. And the reason for this is that only God is a pure or absolute Creator. Man is derivatively a creator, an imitative creator.

That is why the human artist must borrow from nature. There is a magnificent remark by the great French painter, Delacroix, which is that nature is simply a dictionary. Think of that a moment. Nature, for the painter, is simply a dictionary. It is as if for a writer the words are there, but he must compose the poem from the words. So nature provides, in its visible forms and shapes and colors, something like the dictionary, the words of painting but the artist, taking those "words" if you will, an analog of words, the elements of this plastic speech of painting, composes the picture or

composes the statue.

Hence, Mr. Carvel, there is no *conflict*, I would say, between creation and imitation in the fine arts, for fine art is both creative and imitative. But there is a deep *tension* between creation and imitation that produces two opposed tendencies in the fine arts, the tendency toward *representation* on the one hand and the tendency toward *abstraction* on the other.

And this problem, Lloyd, I'd like to start off with next week when we have more time. I would like to begin next week with this deep and difficult problem of the opposed tendencies in the fine arts going toward abstraction on the one hand and representation on the other. And if I can finish that next week, I would also like to go on to the other problem of what is good and bad in the fine arts, both what is morally good and morally bad art and what is esthetically good and esthetically bad art. 

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We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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