

## Art 5a

University of California at  
Los Angeles Extension Course



Descriptive Notes by Mary Holmes

## **Bibliographical Note**

Art 5a was a credit course in art appreciation offered through University Extension at the University of California at Los Angeles in the mid-1950s. The instructor of the course and the author of these descriptive notes was Mary Holmes (1910–2002), later Professor of Art at the University of California at Santa Cruz. More information about her is available at [www.maryholmesbook.com](http://www.maryholmesbook.com).

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In the early 1970s the author gave permission to former students to reproduce the booklet in any number and to distribute it free of charge. This online version has been very slightly emended to correct misprints.

## Introduction:

### First Week

The word Art today sets up peculiar reactions in most people who are not professionally involved with it. One of those reactions is to get away fast. Another is to fold the hands, assume an appropriately solemn expression and wait for directions. Art, with a capital A, along with all the other areas of human experience, has fallen into the hands of experts. Most people are willing to leave it there. Some, for reasons not always commendable, feel obliged to know something and turn to an authority to find out. We have been taught to distrust ourselves. How many people, 200 years ago, would have bought a book as soon as they got a baby (or, more importantly, before?) and started to read up on how to have a baby, how to feed it, how to rear it? And how many people would have reached for a book or an expert as soon as they were faced by an object of art? None! Books on the *Sane Sex Life* or *What Should I Listen To in Music?* would never have been published in 25c editions then, and not because there weren't any.

Yet all the paintings and sculpture and architecture that are called "art" grew out of vital human experience and need. They were made by people who could not have been so deeply different from ourselves. These things have been preserved for us by generations of men whose emotion they stirred, whose delight they were. Can they be alien to us?

We have all been seriously wounded by the idea of specialization. We are afraid to think or feel or act without authority. Take a test and let the authority decide whether you are in love. Take a test and let the authority decide whether you should have green draperies in the living room. Don't dare decide it yourself. The fact that our authorities never agree only adds to our fears, instead of dissipating them.

The point of this course is to give art back to you, not to give you a new authority that you can turn to, but to make you realize that the only meaningful judgments in art are yours to make—if you will make them. And, if you will make them, the richest experiences of all the human beings who have ever lived will be yours to explore and make your own.

### Second Week

Man is the consumer and creator of art. This distinguishes him completely and absolutely from the animals. No animals care for art (preserve it, create it, need it), but all men do. The earliest record of man is the record of his art. (Cave paintings). The instant man as an individual begins to become that individual, with a degree of consciousness

(about 2 years old), he becomes an artist, and this propensity increases for the rest of his life. In old age, his whole life takes on an aspect of art and he may judge it and usually does as meaningful, fine, barren, exciting, etc.

Our own period is art saturated. Nothing is more absurd than the statement "I know nothing about art." We all know something about it. We are addicted to it so deeply that we cannot live comfortably (perhaps not at all?) without constant support from some form of art. We must hear the radio. We must see the newspaper. We must read the comic page before the editorial or instead of it. We are steeped in but never satiated by the endless pictures representing abstractions of life, provided for us by magazines, newspapers, television, radio, phonographs. Everything conspires to flood us with expressions of art.

We are surrounded, armored, accompanied, by the product of the imagination of man.

Since this is true, why should anyone take such a course as art appreciation or give one? One of the reasons is snobbery. It is a touching indication of man's feeling of inadequacy that he will go to any lengths to be able to look down on someone. He will impose on himself disciplines whose severity would appall the world in order to be fatter or thinner or brighter or richer or stronger or in some way superior to someone else. It is a valuable vice and has probably brought about as much improvement of the human condition as charity has.

Art is a very susceptible instrument for snobbery, in part because it can be expensive. Its long association with the aristocracy helps, too. Also, it is supposed to provide a "higher pleasure" and most people dislike admitting they have a need for nothing but lower pleasures. (Yet the comics, too, must give higher pleasure, if lower pleasures are only for animals. No animals read comic books.)

Snobbery isn't the only reason people want to know about the fine arts, even though they have the greatest sufficiency of the popular arts. It is because most of the popular arts are unsatisfactory. They don't perform their function well enough. People fed by popular arts only are like laboratory animals given all they want to eat but only of food with no nourishment in it. Their emotional lives are thin and they are constantly hungry. Exhausted by sensationalism and the specious coin of false situations and two dimensional stereotypes, the majority of popular arts seem to spread a feast that turns out to be papier-mâché. We are bored by an imperishable hero and a fate that twists everything no matter how threatening into harmlessness. Grief and horror that forever dissolve into sweetness and light seem like a cheat. Girls that are always beautiful and always marry rich young men begin to pall on the most gullible after a while. The very prolixity of our popular arts makes their unvarying patterns more deadening. The new hunger for fine painting, for music, for ideas, that is reflected in the sale of 25-50-cent books is probably due to the superabundance of shallow popular arts. After a day or a year with cowboys and private-eyes, mechanically prompt murders and equally mechanical laughter, the question arises, is there something else? The answer is, yes.

# The Nature of Art is Paradoxical:

## Third Week

This makes art difficult to talk about. Language resents paradoxes. It is an abuse of language to say "This is and is not butter." "Is it or isn't it?" we say. Yet life itself and religion, as well as art, present us with paradox after paradox. "He who loses his life shall find it," "The greatest tragedy provides the greatest pleasure," are only two of an almost infinite number of possible instances.

The basic paradox of art is that it should be like life and yet unlike life. It should be real but yet unreal. Everyone asks this of all the arts, the most untrained person and the most highly trained alike. It is their point of agreement, though they may differ in everything else. If it were completely real it would *be* life. If it were completely unreal it would bore us by its triviality.

That it should be lifelike or "real" seems obvious. It is not only that for centuries people have described art as a mirror held up to nature; it is through the quality of seriousness with which all people take the arts that their relation to reality shows clearly. Art is not irresponsible play. Its roots are deep in life. It makes us angry if we suspect that the thing is a hoax. Naturally art doesn't need to be solemn—comedies, caricatures, satires disprove that—but it must have the requisite seriousness of truth, even beneath the most playful and outrageous ornament.

Yet, equally, everyone recognizes that art is an escape from life. Not only in what is called "escape literature" or music for daydreaming or "pretty" pictures, but also in Dostoyevsky and Bach and Rembrandt do we escape the limitations and confusions and flatness of life to a more richly endowed world.

We all need escape. The word "need" is not imperious enough to describe this necessity. We "need" clothes but we can go without them or in rags. We "need" food but we can diet or even starve ourselves to death. But escape we will, in dreams, in art, in gossip, in lies, in alcohol, in some way from the exigencies of life.

Yet equally we need involvement in life. We need a sense of reality. If the external world fails to give it to us, we will create a structure of paranoia to give meaning and density, "toughness," "reality" to our own private world. The miracle of art is that it provides at once escape and realization.

## How to Look at a Picture:

### Fourth Week

It sounds easy. The trouble is that it is too easy. A picture can be taken in at a glance, so most people glance at it and go on. Their chief concern is whether they can recognize in it something they have seen before. Or whether its subject matter is familiar, or “pleasing.”

Part of the difficulty is that people looking at pictures are usually uncomfortable. Their feet hurt, or they are in a doctor’s office wondering what’s wrong with them. Or they are in a strange house in a tight girdle. If you go to a concert or a play you are in a comfortable seat and darkened room. You can forget yourself. If you read a book you can smoke or lie down, relax completely.

Most important of all, you expect to give these arts a certain amount of time. You know that you will not enjoy a symphony or a popular song if you invest just two seconds in listening to it. You will get very little from a book if you read one page. To enjoy anything you must lose yourself and find yourself in it, and that takes time. It also takes certain minimal conditions of comfort.

If possible you should be alone. Or with someone you are not afraid of. A dog, maybe, preferably small. You should be in a sound proof room so you can say “Oh” or “Ugh” or “Whee” or whatever occurs to you. You should have your shoes off. You should be absolutely certain that no one need ever know what your experience of this painting was. If you want to tell someone about it later that’s another thing. You probably will, if it means a great deal to you. But your first experience should be just between you and the picture.

How much time should you give it? That depends in part on you and in part on the picture. A picture that is worth looking at at all is worth five minutes of your time. Some may take as long as it takes to read *War and Peace*. Only don’t try to use all that time at once, any more than you’d try to read the Bible at one sitting. A good picture can be returned to time and again throughout your life and be at once new and familiar, challenging and quieting. At first you cannot expect to be able to look very long even at the best pictures. It takes practice: practice in losing yourself; practice in finding your feeling clarified. You have to get over the bad habits most of us have formed of glancing and recognizing and dismissing.

We have much to learn from the Orient about how to look at pictures. Our western system is to hang as many pictures as we have on as much wall space as we have until the paper is faded everywhere but under the pictures, and then we can’t move them. The pictures have faded, too, from our consciousness and enjoyment but they “fill the space.”

In the Chinese tradition pictures are stored until needed and put away again after they

are used. We do the same thing with music and would be quite shocked if we discovered one of our friends had four record players playing all at once even if each were playing a Beethoven symphony. Of course, a work of visual art doesn't demand quite such exclusive attention because of our physical makeup. We can shut our eyes or look in another direction but we can't shut our ears. Yet we should try to bring about conditions for looking at pictures that fulfill some of the requirements we know are necessary for the enjoyment of the other arts:

- (1) Time
- (2) Comfort
- (3) Loss and discovery of self.

## **Empathy:**

### **Fifth Week**

What do people say who have deeply enjoyed something, a book or a movie or music or for that matter, a football game? "I was carried away by it." "I was lost to the world." "It's out of this world." "I forgot myself." "The time flew." "We played a great game." All of these expressions describe what must happen for us to enjoy anything. We must lose ourselves in the thing we enjoy, and become a part of it.

Because people have recognized this, they have made up a word to describe it so it could be talked about more exactly. That word is *empathy*. It is a translation of the German word *Einfuehlung* that was first used by Theo. Lipps, a German critic. The word means literally "feeling into." But it means more than that, too, or we could use "feeling into" instead. It has a meaning of entering, living in, and knowing completely, through identification with the thing empathized. It is "feeling the way it feels to feel that way," and from this fusion of the self with the object comes a kind of knowledge, greater, we believe, than any external description could give. It is "the intuition of meaning in forms."

Even without knowing the word, you have been empathizing all your lives, some of you more successfully than others. We all empathize to an extent with the people around us. We have all learned to tread softly when The Boss is frowning; we "feel" (know, experience, recognize) his anger. But a few people will be able to empathize so subtly that they will know whether the frown is concentration, anger, irritating boredom, an attempt to feel important, or a slight headache that will disappear with the administration of coffee. "Good" secretaries and "good" wives and "good" salesmen are expert empathizers.

It is important to distinguish between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy means *feeling*



*with.* We may feel sorry for, or sympathize with someone who has forgotten his lines in a play; or we may feel sweat burst in our own palms and our throats dry up and know the desperate agony from inside the person. Obviously empathizing is not necessarily a happy or pleasurable condition. But it compensates for the acute suffering it may bring us with the satisfaction of knowledge, richness of experience, and escape from ourselves.

## **Psychic Distance:**

### **Sixth Week**

Empathy is our immediate, spontaneous kinesthetic response to forms and gestures in life and in art. But the empathic act does not describe the totality of our experience with a work of art. To complete that experience we need the opposite of empathy, which is called *distance* (or psychic distance, or esthetic distance). This sounds paradoxical? It is. Psychic distance is the attitude of recognizing that this, whatever it may be, a picture or a play or a piece of music, is not life and is not to be acted on as if it were life. It is remote or distant from the demands of life. Through this distancing our experience of the object becomes terminal or for itself alone. Questions like “What is it?” or “What is it for?” indicate absence of psychic distance. They throw the object back into the “real” world.

All of the arts set up conditions of distance to make it easy for the appreciator to gain psychic distance. In those arts where confusion with life (failure to recognize the separateness from life) is easy, the physical conditions of distance are strong. A contemporary play, for instance, could easily be confused with life. It has living people, often in a convincing environment, acting and talking about things we know. Distance has to be great enough to keep us from joining in on their conversation. This is achieved physically by separating the audience from the players, putting us in our place. The bright stage, the darkened auditorium, the curtain, the fact that we have come to this theater, have paid money, have been shown to a seat and are expected to stay in it, are all devices of establishing distance or remoteness from life. Even with such strong aids, children and naïve people “break the distance” to scream warnings to the heroine that the doctor is really the murderer.

Sculpture, which could also easily be confused with life, has almost always relied on distortion of scale or material or placement to create distance. Imagine how differently you would feel about a marble nude on a pedestal and one on a sofa! Have you said “Excuse me” to a department store dummy (plaster one)? Lack of distancing made you feel like a fool.

Architecture, tied as it is to usage, makes distancing difficult for some people. That’s why so many of our cities are eye-sores. Yet we can become conscious of a building as an object



to look at, not just live or work in, and when we do we demand style. Some arts, such as music and painting, have an inherent distance so great that it is astounding that we can empathize at all. Yet music “carries us away” very easily (it seems to be the only art animals respond to at all), some would say ideally.

Psychic distance is that attitude which makes it possible for us to appreciate, to enjoy something for itself not for what it can do. It is achieved in the arts by more or less clear devices. It can be achieved in life by a mental set of disassociation and its achievement turns life into art. This is perilous not alone because it endangers practical action but because it induces a feeling of profound unreality and separateness that vitiates personality. In its extreme it may produce sainthood, but it is more apt to produce coldness. Empathy, practiced extremely, destroys the boundaries of the self and is equally valuable to saints and destructive to personality. The “right” balance between the two [empathy and psychic distance] is itself an artistic achievement.

## **Art Is Concerned with the Life of Feeling:**

### **Seventh Week**

This concern is perhaps the reason for our insatiable hunger for art. In so far as we feel, we live. Feeling is the most precious possession of man. By the richness and strength of our feelings we can live happy and meaningful lives in poverty or illness, or any other adversity. If our feeling life is thin and abortive, we can find no meaning or satisfaction in anything. If it becomes completely barren we sink into apathy or suicide.

The feeling life is not the same as the emotions, though it contains the emotions in a dense ambivalence. It is not sensation, though, again, it contains sensations. Meaning and value, things of the intellect are inherent in it and sustain and vivify all it contains.

To write about it or speak about it is difficult, even impossible, because the natural and inevitable means of communicating about the life of feeling is through a work of art. Words fail, unless they are poetry. The life of feeling is to be experienced, not described.

For most of us, life situations do not give sufficient exercises for feeling. In many ways feelings impede or corrode the practical world. Our feelings of exhilaration and terror, pity and delight, as a house burns down would prevent us from putting out the fire. We would experience the beauty of the flames against the night and the exciting sound of the crackling fire and falling timbers and the horror and awe of destruction and a thousand other things. A complex of emotions and meanings would expand time and hold us motionless.

Yet the need to exercise the life of feeling is an absolute necessity to man, as great as the need for food, or bodily exercise. Even if we never took any “exercise” at all we would consider it a refined and unbearable torture to be so bound and constrained that all bodily movement would be impossible. The feelings also demand their freedom. Though dreams provide us some relief, art supremely satisfies this part of our nature.

In art we can experience, feel, undergo to capacity. *We can do this without the consequences that life demands.* The house burns and the timbers fall on the just and on the unjust, and we feel it (in a great work of art) as keenly as, or more keenly than, we would if we were there. And yet nothing has happened that is measurable.

To say there are no consequences must be modified. There are no immediate practical consequences. But art exercises the feeling life and thereby trains it.

This is the great power of art and also its danger. People will have it, will not live without it and will be affected by it. If the only art they experience is false or shallow or cruel, their feeling lives will be limited to those same qualities. Exactly as our thinking is formed and clarified (and limited) by words, so our feelings are formed and clarified by works of art.

This doesn't mean that we should never read trash or listen to sentimental music or stare at Petty girls. Sentimentality and pseudo-eroticism are a part of life and that may be the best way to experience them. The danger lies in the exclusive diet.

## **Components of Visual Art—Art's Building Material:**

### **Eighth Week**

The axiom of art is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Because of this any analysis of works of art can be misleading.

Simply to say, “this house is built of wood,” gives you no way of telling whether or not you would like to live in it. Even if you are given the specifications for the amount, size and shape of the pieces of wood used you still could not know. It isn't until you grasp the relationships in which those pieces of wood occur that you begin to know whether it even is a house. Yet you may like wood just for itself and use exposed beams and paneled walls to satisfy that pleasure. The building materials of all works of art can be understood in this way. We may enjoy them for themselves alone, but they always exist in a relationship. Hold constantly in mind that a work of art is a totality.

If you do that it may profit you to examine the simple materials out of which the complexities of the visual arts are built. All of these materials have their intrinsic value for us, as ends in themselves, as a line may delight us by its vitality, its delicacy or its sinuousness. In addition, they *do* something as a line, by demarcation, may create spaces, volumes and movements. Beyond that they function in relation to each other and to the piece of sculpture, picture or building they create.

Among the most important of these materials is Line. Lines scarcely exist in the world but we easily accept the convention that they exist and can speak of the lines of a building or a car without difficulty and read lines in a drawing as though things were bounded by them. *Light and Dark* is the second important component, though since line itself exists because of light and dark (as the lines that compose the letters of this page are visible because they are dark against light) these two may be thought of as one. *Volume and Space* are other fundamental building materials. They may be achieved by line and light and dark or by systems of perspective (linear, aerial, overlapping planes) and have as the other, their own intrinsic appeal. *Color* is of fundamental importance in painting, exercising its own effects and working in the establishment of space relationships and in description of objects. In previous periods color had an equal importance for sculpture and architecture. Greek classical temples and sculptures were painted, as well as medieval cathedrals. Present day sculpture and architecture are attempting to return to the use of color but it is not yet general. *Texture* is the last important component. It may be associated with the medium used in the work of art as oil paint, bronze, clay, etc., or it may be an illusion of roughness and smoothness, softness and hardness.

It is rare for any one of these to appear alone. Yet they may be enjoyed alone, and these separate enjoyments enrich the entire work.

## **Components of Art II:**

### **Ninth Week**

It is easy to argue about the selection of line, light and dark, volume and space, color and texture as fundamental materials of the visual arts. For you they may fuse and divide in another way. It is even easier to argue about the principles of organization of these materials in what is called design, or composition, or plastic orchestration of a work of art. In fact it's almost impossible not to argue about them. Even if one agrees on the words used, their application may be the cause of bloody battles. Part of this violence is due to the fact that we live in a changing period. To establish principles for anything is difficult if not impossible. The trans-valuation of values makes some people resent the very idea of principles. The blind worship of the free and experimental even in the form of selfish

irresponsibility affects art as it affects the lives of juvenile delinquents. In addition, our immense knowledge and our perfect familiarity with works of art distant in time and space make the uncovering of principles behind extreme diversity bewildering.

Part of the quarrel is due to the fact that art has been disassociated from use to become a commodity of indeterminate usefulness. The sobering effects of purpose are gone, and without purpose principles dissipate. (Very much the same thing has happened in the realm of personality.) The definition of principles is an effort to establish value. If, for instance, art or life exist only for purposes of self-expression, that becomes the principle as well as the purpose. If for psychotherapy, again the principle is implied in the purpose. If for pleasure, pleasure.

If on the other hand its purpose is seen as providing insight and wisdom, clarification and intensification of all human meanings, the principles are more complex. It must be like life in order to clarify life, unlike it because life does not clarify itself. Nor does life give intensification or insight or interpretation. The principles or devices art uses must be at once a part of life and not a part of life

One such principle, and perhaps the most stable one, is *Rhythm*. Rhythm pervades all living things. The cessation of our familiar rhythms of breathing and heart-beat, peristalsis, means death. We are deeply subject to the rhythm of day and night, the seasons of the year, the rhythm of birth, growth, death and decay, the tempo of exhilaration and despair, crescendo and diminuendo. It is perfectly possible to say that life is rhythm.

It is equally possible to say that art is rhythm. In all the arts, rhythm is clarified and intensified beyond the rhythms of life; by contraction of time and space, by exaggeration, by duplication, by omission, by many other means. *Repetition* is one of the commonest means and *Balance* is another. Because of them we can speak of the rhythm of a painting or a piece of sculpture as easily as we experience it in the dance or in music. The rhythms we live, by themselves, live more explicitly in a work of art. We can see and know with satisfying precision what before was dispersed and half realized, though of vital importance. Rhythm establishes deep correspondences between ourselves and the work of art. We “lose ourselves” in its rhythms and yet because of them come to know more fully the rhythms of our own lives.

Hierarchy of emphasis establishes another correspondence between life and art, ourselves and the work. It is a prime means of interpreting or understanding. When we pay absolutely equal attention to everything (this is, of course, an impossibility) we know nothing, experience nothing, and can do nothing. Action as well as interpretation depends on relative dominance—one thing being more important than another. In art our attention is called to one thing not so much at the expense of others but in order for the others to be seen, too, in their turn. Relationship is established and value given by means of hierarchy of emphasis. In life the hierarchy may be confused and blurred, but it is there. In art it is clear enough for the work to be fraught with meanings

“Clear enough”—this is the crux of the problem. No one can tell you how clear is clear

enough. For some people only the strongest rhythms are perceptible, only the sharpest emphasis gives order. For others subtle and complex relations of emphasis and rhythm alone are satisfying. This is in part a personality difference, in part a matter of training in perception.

## Components of Art III:

### Tenth Week

Uncovering principles of rhythm and relative dominance cannot get at the ultimate nature of a work of art, the why and how of its existence. These principles and all other principles are not laws but insights: insights into the concordance of life and art, ourselves and the work. As insights they cannot be rules of behavior that will map out exact courses of action for the artist or the appreciator of art. They are at best admonitions and suggestions, half oracular, because they require intuitive understanding.

Such a principle is the common one that a work of art, or any satisfactory experience, must have *variety within unity*. Human nature is such that even the adult attention span is short. We need change. Without it, we rapidly reach boredom or imperviousness. The threat of monotony continually assails us. Yet too great a change is confusing. We cannot take it in. It is chaos and baffles and repels us as effectively as the absence of change stifles. A work of art must have sufficient variety to challenge interest and sufficient unity to provide coherence. There must be a theme and a variation on a theme. This does not tell us much, but it tells us all it can. Our individual tolerances of monotony and chaos differ. For some people only the slightest change is tolerable, for some unity is discernible in what, for others, would be chaotic variation. Again, both inherent individual differences and training affect our capacity to determine what "sufficient" variety within "sufficient" unity may mean.

*Economy of means* is another principle that may give insight. It is analogous to the law of parsimony in science whereby scientists agree to accept the simplest explanation of phenomena rather than the most complex if both explain equally well. Misuses of the law of parsimony have undoubtedly hampered scientific understanding and misuses of the principle of economy in art have produced some grave misconceptions. One of the first of these is identification of economy with simplification instead of with simplicity. Simplification is a relatively easy, even mechanical act. It is based on omissions. You can simplify your life by having your telephone and electricity disconnected, refusing invitations and dropping all of your friends. Never read, never think, eat just enough to live and act as little as possible. The complications of life will disappear. But you will not be a simple person; just simple-minded. Simplicity is not achieved by omission but by integration. It is the uncomplicated organization of complexity. Its achievement is of such

great difficulty that it occurs in art nearly as rarely as it occurs in life and, as in life, is identified with the greatest artists' late maturity.

Economy also has an implication of technical fluency. If you know how to do something, anything, from paint a picture to bake a cake or drive a tennis ball, you are apt to do it with less excess motion and complication than would be required by the unskilled. We admire this economy of skill wherever it occurs. In a way it must be respected. We know that it takes time to achieve, that its presence indicates a portion of human life invested in that achievement, and this commands our attention. If the skill is very great and, therefore, the time dedicated to achieving it very great, yet the purpose to which the skill is put is a lowly one, contempt may displace our respect. Why write eight pages of the Congressional Record on the head of a pin, particularly with an axe? Why paint a landscape in oils that can scarcely be distinguished from a Kodachrome?

## **Selection; Tradition:**

### **Eleventh Week**

From the confusion of sensations and events, ideas and attitudes that are possible for us at any time, all of us constantly select those we wish to recognize. Most of this selection is toward practical ends. We must get dinner in order to eat even though we'd rather go swimming. We watch the road for signs and changes of direction in order to drive a car. The most beautiful tree may be flowering not far from the highway, but we should not select it for our attention or we may have more flowers than we want.

The artist selects from the same confusion of possible events, ideas, sensations and attitudes but his selection is not for immediately practical ends. It may be for relatively lowly purposes of startling or surprising the beholder. It may be to work magic. It may be to sell something. It may be for what is called beauty. No matter what means he uses, it is most aptly designed to give insight into the confusion. He draws your attention to this or that to reveal its endowment of meaning, to separate and thereby clarify this event or sensation from all the others. He omits, as all of us omit in our lives, some things in order to make others clearer.

These omissions or selections (two sides of a coin) are usually determined for the artist, as for all of us, first of all by the tradition in which he lives. The tradition may be and frequently is so exacting that the selections made by the artist himself may be very slight. This does not mean that the work of art is inferior. Some of the greatest works of art have



been created under a strict and demanding tradition that allowed the individual artist no room for deviations at all.

Tradition very often permits only certain subject matter. We are all accustomed to landscape paintings. In fact it seems to most people at the present time a natural, even an inevitable subject. Yet for one thousand years in Europe no landscapes were painted (between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance). At this same time, in China, tradition put landscape painting uppermost. Greece, on the other hand, apparently never had any tradition of landscape in its period of greatest artistic achievement.

Not only subject matter but the materials used are frequently determined by a tradition. The most obvious illustration of this is the development of painting in ink on silk in China as opposed to painting in oil on canvas in the Western world. The artist sees in the medium of his tradition, and the appreciator recognizes pictures according to that medium. This traditional determination of what a picture will be *made of* is so strong that a change of its physical nature indicates a dissatisfaction with the whole tradition associated with the old materials. In Western tradition, the shift from tempera painting to oil painting occurred when the entire Medieval world, and tempera painting along with it, were found wanting. From that time until the Nineteenth Century painting in oil seemed the only "real painting" possible.

The 20th century is experiencing again the revulsion that demands search for a new tradition. What a picture is to be *made of*, as well as what it should be, agitates the artists, and their answers very often are disappointing. Part of this disappointment is the traditional expectation on the part of the beholder: a painting is a rectangular canvas on which oil-based pigments portray the visible world. The 20th century artist may say no to every part of that definition.

## **Selection in Art:**

### **Twelfth Week**

Tradition usually selects from the chaos of the *possible* those ideas, forms and materials that it considers *suitable* for a work of art. But any tradition may break down or be destroyed. In the Western world, it is characteristic for it to be short lived. From the time of Greece to the present world, five hundred years or even a shorter time may be the life span of a tradition. The Orient has held to traditions over a longer period. Egypt maintained a tradition almost unbroken for approximately two thousand years, and it is possible that traditions in primitive art were even more enduring. But all of them die to make way for others. They may die a violent death as the result of conquest, with its intrusion of a



different tradition (primitive sculpture today), or they may die of internal changes in value that find the old tradition limiting or inadequate. They may be suddenly outmoded by the powerful imagination of a single person (extremely rare occurrence).

Our own century has seen the death of a tradition and the bewilderment and anguish that that involves. But, perhaps more bewildering, we have been exposed to the greatest variety of alternate traditions, all given equal value, that any generation ever faced. The world has shrunk not only in space, so that we may move, in knowledge if not in fact, from Paris to the South Seas in a few minutes, but also in time. We can turn back the ages and know what a man had for dinner in Mesopotamia in the year 2000 B.C. or stir up the camp fire and see the magical amulets of the hunters living in 25,000 B.C. We can be almost as familiar with their traditions of art as we are with our own. Every tradition that ever determined a work of art can be minutely known to us. Thus, as our accumulated data on the physical world is staggering to us, so this same vast familiarity with traditions is, to a certain extent, paralyzing to the artist. Nothing is new under the sun. The artist has at his disposal not one tradition to screen the chaos of life, but a hundred. To create a new one in such profusion is unimaginable. Art has lost its shock value for the artist.

It has not for most other people. The specialized knowledge of art that makes this familiarity with all traditions possible is not a part of their world. The tradition of the 19th Century art in Europe and America seems to them the proper tradition. In fact, they don't think of it as a tradition of art, but as Art. The use of the tradition of Medieval, archaic, primitive, oriental, Egyptian or any other art can still surprise and usually anger by its failure to conform to expectations. This feeling of surprise and anger is commonly turned against the artist, who is then described as a charlatan or blunderer. It is as though a Frenchman were accused of lying or having speech defects because he called a cat "un chat."

A tradition is analogous to a language. Working outside a tradition is as difficult as speaking outside a language. It is also about as profitable. But languages change and incorporate new words for genuinely new conditions and new materials. What did nylon mean twenty years ago? The "language" of the tradition of architecture, confronted by new materials, steel and poured concrete, expanded. The conditions of modern life, whether one thinks of life in urban office buildings or in suburban houses, forced an alteration in architectural tradition—new words, and newer and newer words until very few of the old words are left to us and most of them are mispronounced.

Architecture being public and useful is easier to accept than poetry or painting. In fact, architecture usually doesn't get built at all unless it is accepted by a large number of people with a lot of money. Changes in its traditions seem less whimsical (sometimes less whimsical than they are) because some of their reasons for change are apparent.

The question of use also affects changes in painting and sculpture. As handmaidens of religion they followed the requirements of the religion they served, changing with its changes. As they are used to decorate or to tell amusing or morally persuasive stories or to describe objects, they met these needs. Though appreciation of works of art must divorce

them from their use, still use functions in complete appreciation. People know this and rarely hang in their living rooms pictures whose ability to sell refrigerators can't be denied. The very art editor who bought the refrigerator picture will not hang it in his house. Part of people's perplexity about art arises from questions of use.

## **Uses of Art:**

### **Thirteenth Week**

Is it to decorate? Then it should be pleasing, but not too pleasing. Decoration should be a little boring so it can be inconspicuous.

Is it to describe? What's the matter with your camera?

Is it for specific therapy? Then don't hang it up. Medicine belongs in medicine cabinets, clearly labeled.

Is it to express the artist's emotions? Just how interested are you in his emotions? Most people's emotions are not very fascinating, except to themselves.

The idea of art as primarily self-expression is degrading to art. We have little respect for the person who is so exclusively concerned with his own emotions that he can make a profession out of displaying them. The most we can allot to him is the sneaking admiration we all have for the renegade. The life of the hobo and the bandit and the bohemian artist might seem enviable from time to time when routine and responsibility become oppressive, but we cannot take too seriously an adult who lives for self-indulgence. The fact that many people think of the artist as existing only to express himself has lowered him in society to the status of a child, and his work to a plaything.

Art is not primarily self-expression though it always expresses the artist. It bears the stamp of his personality as inevitably as your signature on a check is an expression of yourself, though that is not why you signed your name. Checks and works of art may be forged but rarely perfectly. Even signatures that look alike to the casual eye reveal their differences under expert examination. We cannot do anything, even forge checks, without expressing ourselves.

Nor is art primarily decorative or descriptive though it may be both. To say that it must be a decoration or description is not so much to limit art as to limit yourself. Art cannot be restricted to either of these aspects of itself; its history is too long and various to permit such a simplification. Against the abundant contradiction of the past this reduction of art becomes absurd. If you insist that it be decorative and nothing else, or descriptive and

nothing else, you exclude yourself from the greatest masterpieces of the human spirit. They continue to exist, silently refuting you, but you exist without them.

To think of art as therapy is an equivalent reduction. It may have value for the physician in diagnosis, it may externalize pathological problems, but even among seriously disturbed patients in institutions, therapy is not the motivating force for the creating of a work of art. It can be a by-product. Whether there is any specific therapeutic value in the visual arts for the beholder is more dubious. (The use of the mandala as an aid to concentration in Tantric ritual might be an instance, though scarcely a definitive one.) The only way to limit art to its therapeutic function is to extend the meaning of therapy to include all that promotes richness in experience. All that gives fullness to life. But this perhaps expands the meaning until you are no longer saying art is therapy, but therapy is art, or even, art is art.

The uses of art are multiple and perhaps finally elusive. Any given work is capable of many uses, simultaneous or in sequence, uses we can identify and uses for which we have no name. We may say with Edman<sup>1</sup> that art functions to clarify, intensify and interpret experience. How it does this, through decoration, through expression, through therapy or through a combination of them, we may never be able to pin down. That it does it, makes all the difference in the world.

1. Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), p. 12. The reference is to the 1936 edition.

## **Art and Reality:**

### **Fourteenth Week**

Art has always been expensive in terms of actual money, time and energy. Yet society has always spent lavishly of all three for the creation of works of art. The craftsman faces a long and expensive period of apprenticeship. The individual work may take hours or even years of time and exhaust the strength of many people. Artists themselves are notoriously capable of a dedication to art that can make them unmindful of health, social pleasures, ordinary comforts, even life itself. One does not need to turn to Michelangelo, crippled by work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, for proof. People everywhere, today and yesterday, have made such sacrifices of all that it seems rational to desire in order to make works of art.

If it were the artist alone who felt keenly the priceless value of art, we could explain his actions in terms of self-expression or need for glory or even insanity. But it isn't; works of art have been prizes of conquest, at times protected by societies at war, at times destroyed to inflict the ultimate defeat. They have been, and still are, purchased at great price.

All of these actions testify to the value of art and make absurd any description of it as a personal luxury or amusing play. It seems and has seemed *real*; involved with the deepest needs and understandings, conveying knowledge of inestimable importance that cannot be spoken but must be communicated. It creates and perpetuates the image of reality, transcending words but rooted in conviction and shared belief.

The confusion of art today, a confusion that makes a Picasso valued equally (but not by the same people) with a Norman Rockwell, is an inevitable result of the unsettled conflict of beliefs in the midst of which we live—because we believe differently, we visualize differently. Until we reach larger areas of agreement, we must expect radical diversity in art to continue.

Art is not innocently content to beguile us with pleasant sensations of color and grace. If we condemn it to such triviality we prostitute it. It will deal, as it has always dealt, with ultimate things, the nature of man and God, the meaning of life and death, the mystery of time and space.

On none of these things can we, as inhabitants of the 20th century world, agree. What is man? An animal, a machine, the image of God? We speak of the mechanism of the heart or the mechanics of learning as if we knew him to be an involved and complicated machine. Are we like machines made up of replaceable parts? Our "banks" of blood and eyes might lead us to think so. What will we be if finally all our parts are replaceable? Are we animals drooling, with Pavlov's dogs, at the sound of bells? Are we the image of God?

What do you believe to be true? What do your neighbors believe? On what authority? The artist faces these questions with you and on his answers his work will depend.

We believe in whatever has the power to deal life and death. At present science and technology seem to have that power and we turn to them for any interpretation of human experience, from the most trivial to the most profound. We are no more (and no less) alarmed at their incoherence and inconsistency than the savage is at the failure of his medicine man. *Credo quia absurdum*. We believe in germs we have never seen and electrons no one has ever seen, the proof of whose existence we could not begin to follow, but we believe because their actions are fatal. Lives are saved in sterile hospitals and cities are destroyed by splitting atoms. The invisible is ascendant in power. All our fears and hopes center on forces we cannot understand and are helpless to influence.

No one should expect the artist to concern himself with the visible and substantial world when we are told that it is an illusion, and the only reality is Energy.  $E = mc^2$  and the atomic bomb makes a mushroom cloud. Energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light. We can neither understand it nor visualize it, but as long as this seems true, the artist will

work toward its image, no matter how unimaginable. To achieve it he may have to discard almost all that we associate with the old forms of painting and sculpture as quantum physics discards the old concept of materialism, causality, and determination. But achieve it he will, and in achieving stabilize and interpret the new knowledge in a new image.

## ***De Gustibus:***

### **Fifteenth Week**

Of all the areas of human vanity, taste is the most sensitive. Though we all take refuge in the truism that there is no arguing in matters of taste, we are outraged if someone says our taste in clothes or furniture or cars is bad. If there were really no argument about it we would be indifferent. But to disparage, even to question our taste is to offer a deep personal insult, much greater than an insult to our intelligence or the virtue of our children. To be told that we are not very bright or that our children are neighborhood menaces may make us angry, but to be told our taste is bad is unforgivable. The limitations of our children and our brainpower can be blamed on the in-laws or the workings of God, but our taste seems to be our own making, even when it isn't.

The aim of most courses in art appreciation is to change taste, or more properly to exchange your taste for the taste of the person teaching the course. This has some value. Much of our taste is given (or taken) because of an authority, and usually, by adopting it, we gradually make it our own. Yet today, our technological civilization gives us such an array of possible choices, the chants of taste-mongers are so conflicting, that even discovering an authority to follow requires the exercise of taste. Shall it be *House and Garden* or *Arts and Architecture* that determines our house? Shall it be the Association of American Artists or the Museum of Modern Art that provides us with paintings?

Yet no matter what authority is chosen, some aspects of taste are so deeply rooted in personality that efforts to alter them can only succeed at the expense of the personality itself. In broadest terms a taste for delicacy, smoothness, intricacy, the flowered and the elaborate, can never be changed to a taste for hardness, severity, the bold and clear. Nor should it be. The one is not superior to the other, only different in kind. Training of taste should not mean deep alteration but increased capacity to distinguish excellence of a given kind. The question is not whether flowered dimity is better than burlap but whether this chintz is better than that and for what. The most highly trained taste can distinguish the better chintz even though it prefers burlap and can't even hear the word chintz without a shiver. When that level is reached, the level of discriminating approbation rather than simple liking, the whole realm of enjoyment of the exercise of taste is opened.

That realm is exhilarating. Taste is an affirmation of ourselves, as everyone who has ever gone window shopping knows. Our taste in clothes and furniture and automobiles is confident enough to make judging the things on display in stores endlessly exciting. For people whose taste in art has reached that level of confidence a trip to a museum is as much fun as walking down 5th Avenue at Christmas.

## BEAUTY

“ . . . if a person says to me that the bloom of color or form or any such thing is a source of beauty I leave all that, which is only confusing to me, and simply and singly, and perhaps foolishly, hold and am assured in my own mind that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of beauty in whatever way or manner obtained; for as to the manner I am uncertain, but I stoutly contend that by beauty all beautiful things become beautiful” —Plato, *Phaedo* (100d), tr. Jowett.

Beauty eludes definition as subtly today as in Plato’s time. It does no good to say it is in the mind of the beholder. Why is it in his mind? The abuses of the word, the hopelessness of righting those abuses, has made the word unfashionable, but the longing for it, defined or undefined, is still with us, wrapped in its association with truth and goodness, themselves unfashionable words.

Art has seldom made beauty its prime intention (thought beauty and truth and goodness too, may be what quicken the greatest works of art). We know the popular arts would never exist if beauty were their greatest requirement. No one ever read *Little Orphan Annie* because they found her blank stare beautiful, or *Dick Tracy* because he was a handsome man, or even because their stories were “beautiful.” It is for the quality of life intensified and made meaningful (no matter how falsely) that people turn to art. This, not beauty, is its justification.

Beauty is a hoped-for Grace that illumines good works. Without it the work may be bare, but to strive for it is disastrous to the worker and the work.

## Required Reading:

*The Meaning of Art*, Herbert Read (Faber Modern Classics, 2017). The reference is to a Pittman edition now unavailable.

## Suggested Reading—Suggested Buying:

*The Story of Art*, E.H. Gombrich (Phaidon, 1995). The reference is to an earlier edition.

*Philosophy in a New Key*, Suzanna K. Langer (Harvard Univ. Press, 1996). The reference is to the 1956 Mentor edition.

*Arts and the Man*, Irwin Edman (W.W. Norton, 1960). The reference is to the 1936 Mentor edition.

*Civilization: An Essay*, Clive Bell (Pelican, 1947).

*The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, Lincoln Barnett (Dover, 2005). The reference is to the 1952 Mentor edition.

*An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, Frieda Fordham (Pelican, 1953) (read particularly p. 39–42).

*The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Renel Denney (Doubleday Anchor, 1953). Later editions, including abridged editions, are available.