Painted Skies and Unicorns

Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols. NELSON GOODMAN. Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1968. xiv + 278 pp., illus. $8.

A reader attracted to this book by its title must come to terms with the fact that much of it is not about art. There are many references to painting, music, or literature, and the author's inquiries remind one often of weighty issues of art; but these issues appear only as reflections on the wall of the dark cave. Goodman is interested in what he calls symbols, that is, man-made objects such as "letters, words, texts, pictures, diagrams, models, and more," which can serve to represent other objects. In search of "nonverbal symbol systems" he came across the arts. The result looks somewhat as though a chemist used Rubens paintings and Picasso lithographs as material for a treatise on the difference between canvas and paper.

An example? Goodman is concerned with denotation, which raises the vital problem of what art is about. But the discussion ends before it starts when we are told that "Pickwick" or "unicorn" denotes nothing. A theory limited to the representation of material objects excludes art totally; for art never denotes material things, although it employs them at times. A picture of the unicorn denotes a mental image giving sensory shape, for example, to ideas of purity, chastity, and the soothing influence of love upon violence. What the unicorn in the tapestry refers to is no less existent than Bernini's horse of Louis XIV, which is not an accredited historical mammal either but an image of boldness, strength, and elegance. Furthermore, not only the works of artists and writers represent figments of the mind. The contraptions of cardboard and metal built in the Cavendish Laboratory in 1953 did not denote molecules but an imaginary helical model of forces and relations, which in turn, to be sure, referred to material specimens of DNA. A philosophical theory on the workings of the mind should admit the existence of the mind's products.

A book on art need not be artistic, but it must perform the miracle of catching the albatross while keeping it flying. Goodman gives a detailed analysis of notation, by which he means a strictly unequivocal relation between a system of labels and what is represented by it. Each kind of item is referred to by only one kind of label, and each kind of label refers to only one kind of item. In music, a tone of a certain pitch and duration is linked with a particular note on the staff in this manner. Notation, which requires that its characters as well as the denoted items meet certain conditions of disjointness and unambiguousness, is not only a most reliable system of representation; it also produces a neat arrangement of distinct and defined shapes, pleasing to a logician's eye. This neatness entices Goodman to assert that a work of music is its score, just as he believes that a work of literature is its text. The playing of a sonata, we are told, qualifies as a performance of the work when it reproduces all the notes of the score correctly. "Since complete compliance with the score is the only requirement for a genuine instance of a work, the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not." The author realizes that a musician will bristle at such a view, but apparently this does not matter. The musician must be overruled because any less mechanical criterion "gets us quickly into trouble." Once mistakes, that is, deviations from the score, are admitted, we can no longer tell the difference between Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and "Three Blind Mice."

This procedure raises a serious problem of scientific method. The notes of the score, far from being the work of music, do not even cover its essentials. Goodman believes that if someone played, let us say, the funeral march of the *Eroica* at the speed of a polka, he would not violate the identity of the work because Beethoven's tempo indication, *Adagio assai,* is deplorably vague, nonnotational, and therefore not a part of the work. Now every work of art shares with every phenomenon of nature the property of being unreducible to a set of measurements. Musical notation, applicable to certain kinds of music but not to others, is a makeshift device for somehow preserving transcribable aspects of the work that was in the mind of the composer when he committed it to writing. Its identity is adumbrated by an infinity of readings and performances, and the criteria of authenticity are essentially qualitative. In natural science, phenomena vary as to how much counting and measuring they admit. One can do better with an x-ray of a crystal than with that of a human chest. A scientist resigns himself to his data, but to identify them with the phenomenon itself would be his undoing. It would bar him from the sources of evidence. If, in a Platonic dream, a chemist treated the formula for air as *the* air and the various concoctions we breathe as mere impure compliances, he would be rightly accused of taking the score for the music.

Goodman states that he is not concerned with the esthetic aspects of art; but a theorist cannot with impunity insist on his right to deal with irrelevancies rather than the heart of the matter. Consider his suggestion that a work of literature cannot be forged because the work is its text, and the correctness of the words can be checked by any schoolboy; whereas the shapes and colors of a painting are harder to identify. The question raised by a forgery is not always whether or not an object is its own known self, as in the case of a phony dollar bill, but, more interestingly, whether it may be attributed to a particular source of origin. How do the properties of artifacts conform to those of the minds that designed them or are purported to have done so? When in 1821 a publisher in Paris retranslated Goethe's German version of *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot into French and sold it as Diderot's dialogue, of which the original manuscript had been lost temporarily, he committed a forgery; and when James Macpherson published in 1761 his own writings as those of the legendary third-century poet Ossian, he too forged. However, fakes are nothing but annoying curiosities unless treated as experiments on problems such as: What properties constitute the character or style of an artist's work? What does the character of a particular work, genuine or not, do to our view of the character of a man's *oeuvre* as a whole or of the style of its period?—problems highlighted by the painter Max Liebermann's dictum: "The function of the art historians is to pronounce our weaker works unauthentic."

What is the nature of representation? "Effective representation and description require invention. They are creative." They are an "elusive conceit," a subtle translation, not mechanical imitation. Quite so, but how is this process defined? We are told that art uses exemplification, in that it possesses samples of what it represents. Applied literally, these concepts turn out to be misleading. The prototype of the operation

is the tailor's swatch. Just as the cloth presents itself through the sample, so a painting by Josef Albers is said to exemplify the shapes and colors it possesses. This, however, is true only if the painting is used as a display for a paint manufacturer; just as a dance can be used to exemplify rhythms. As works of art, pictures or dances fulfill no such function. The artist is no more in the business of exhibiting swatches of nature than the scientist is. The sky of a painted landscape is, in the language of art, not a sample of sky-blue or any other blue. It represents within the medium of painting and in accordance with a color scheme determined by the artist's style an equivalent of what the sky's color stands for in the artist's view of nature. Nothing so complicated goes on in the tailor's shop.

But wait! Goodman makes it quite clear that art employs no ordinary exemplification. It possesses what it represents only metaphorically. A "sad" piece of music is not really sad; the sadness is only a figure of speech. This is a linguistic trap, still standard equipment in many philosophy departments. If, however, one looks at facts rather than words, one finds that certain dynamic properties are shared by colors, shapes, movements, and by states of the mind, and that they are often named after the latter because that is where they are talked about in daily practice. Freed of their names, they turn out to be entirely unmetaphorical properties of sensory percepts. And the "sad" quality of a melody or color scheme of a painting no more exemplifies what it represents than do its carriers, the pitches, rhythms, and hues. It does represent its subject by structural "resemblance"—a concept that can be called "naive" only if it is defined as literal imitation. But the so-called copy theory of human knowledge should be allowed by now to rest in peace.

To assert that "any picture can represent any object" is correct but unproductive. What the artist and the scientist need to know is what makes a representation appropriate, that is, under what conditions a sphere is better suited than a pyramid to depict the moon. Appropriateness, far from being an arbitrary habit or convention, is strictly controlled by the properties of the phenomenon to be described as well as by the purposes of the image and the cognitive level and outlook of its users. These determinants can be analyzed.

Anybody in sympathy with Goodman's endeavor to brush aside artificial distinctions between art and science will be pleased to find him impatient with certain theories of esthetics that draw the line between knowing and feeling, the cognitive and the emotive. Art strives for pleasure no more and no less than does science, and the so-called emotions are explored and described by both. Goodman sees the true difference in certain formal characteristics of the "symbols" employed. But this approach is not likely to succeed. Works of art, I said earlier, do not "exemplify." They are statements, not objects. Just as science does, art denotes what it represents by constructs of the mind that reflect selected features of perceived reality by structural resemblance. One can agree that esthetic products are "densely ordered," that is, consist of patterns whose dimensions allow infinite gradation—especially if one denies that scores are music and texts are literature. But this trait distinguishes art only from experimental, modern science, not from nonesthetic pursuits of knowledge more in general. To find the answer, it will be necessary, as usual, to go beyond formalities.

Perhaps one could begin by suggesting that science employs and consumes sensory data in order to arrive at the principles governing the operations of physical and mental forces. In art, the sensory data themselves are the ultimate statement because what we are made to see and hear lets us experience the play of forces that govern our existence.

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Anthropology: The Working Out of an Idea

Race, Culture, and Evolution. Essays in the History of Anthropology. GEORGE W. STOCKING, JR. Free Press, New York; Collier-Macmillan, London, 1968. xx + 380 pp. $10.

This book consists of a collection of essays (seven are republished but expanded journal articles, three are sections of Stocking's doctoral dissertation, and one is original to this book) dealing with some of the major ideas in anthropology from approximately 1800 to 1930. The first essay and the introductions to each of the following essays deal with historical method. Two things tie the book together. One is the direct or indirect concern with Franz Boas in every essay. The other is Stocking's explicit concern with historiography, which provides continuity to the arguments developed throughout the book. The book is thus both a historical work and a treatise on the writing of intellectual history. Taken together the essays chart the abandonment of a belief in the existence of causal relationships between race and culture. Stocking presents the ideas of men who, via a theory of "evolution," thought there were such connections. Then, mainly by following the intellectual development of Boas, Stocking shows how a fundamental separation of the two concepts occurred.

It is Stocking's argument that the savage was still noble for 18th-century anthropologists and that race was not considered an explanation for cultural differences until the 19th century. Polygenesis provided the reason for the temporal coexistence of societies at different stages of cultural complexity. Each society was in effect frozen at a place on the chain from savagery to Western European civilization, organically incapable of reaching the next link. Evolution, rather than representing a process, was but a configuration used to order societies, each locked at some fixed distance from the bottom of the hierarchy. The modern theory of culture could not come from such a context, and Stocking argues that to identify Tylor as the originator of the present-day concept is erroneous. Nor can Tylor be considered a cultural Darwinist simply because he believed culture to exist at all "levels"—most crude in savagery, most evolved in civilization. Tylor not only applied a static, pre-Darwinian classification to societies, but he also, according to Stocking, was more concerned with cultural survivals than with cultural adaptations. After a review of the Victorian social evolutionists, Stocking concentrates on the American anthropological intellectual environment around the turn of the century. Here too, "the linkage of the polygenist hierarchy of races and the cultural hierarchy of the 18th Century was yet to be broken."

The essays up to this point have de-