CHAPTER 1

Introduction

WHEREVER we dig up the human past, wherever we run on men today, we find things men have made more fancy than use demands: tools, weapons, pots, clothes, jewelry, hairdos, skin decoration, mats, houses, furniture, dance masks, amulets, gravestones, effigies of totems and ancestors and deities. The range of decorated things is enormous, and few groups of men past and present do not show samples of a great part of it. I remember seeing an anthropologist's film of Australian primitives, a nomadic people who traveled in small family groups, their whole possessions a few carved pots, a few spears, and no clothes at all. At a season of the year the families gathered in some low mountains; the older men circled about the head man, perhaps the oldest, and from a hiding place among the rocks he took a piece of stone on which were carved two spirals. According to the anthropologist's explanatory voice, the old man told a long story of tribal history, using the spirals as tracks of tribal journey, pointing "here this happened, here our hero grandfather did this." Perhaps we can assume, then, that spoken stories are as basic as formed artifacts. And since all

people make organized noises of some kind, we can assume music likewise original.

Our own lives pass among made things. What we make we try to make pleasant, good, fine, "nice": our experiences differ, our ideas of the good differ, but the urge toward something more than use requires seems fundamental. We shall have, then, to define art first as the unnecessary addition of attractiveness.

Let us take here a bowl (Figure 1). It is an old bowl made toward 1500 A.D. in Arizona. It was made, we can assume, by a Pueblo Indian woman, for women were the pot-makers of Pueblo tribes. It was made to hold meal or grain. It was decorated. Why? Perhaps in this particular case because a decorated bowl could be traded for more

FIGURE 1. Jar from Homolovi, Arizona. Courtesy of the Chicago Natural History Museum. (Illustrated in Martin and Willis, *Anasazi Painted Pottery*, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 1940)

meat or grain or wool than an undecorated one, an economic reason, but this only throws the artistic reason onto the feeling of the "buyer" who was willing—why? —to give more for a decorated pot than an undecorated one. Perhaps, contrariwise, it was decorated only because the pot-maker wanted to decorate it: she was an "artist" for her own satisfaction: she was her own audience.

In the situation of this bowl, then, there are two primary factors, the bowl-maker and the bowl, and a third, not inescapable but at last the most important, those who looked at the bowl in the past and those who look now: artist, art, audience. The bowl came by the mind and hand of the Indian woman; it came, we shall say, out of her experience. What the artist does with the material of art is to give it shape. Shape is both for use—here to hold something and to stand on its bottom and to allow one to lift it—and for some satisfaction of eye and feeling. The bowl is given shape, and so the bowl is given decoration, not haphazard but organized and internally related. No piece of art, you will find, lacks organization of some sort and of some degree. However accidental some painters have tried to make their splashes and their lines, art is not accidental like "life." The mark of a piece of art seems to me to be its unnatural order.

Experience and order come to be two basic words for art. But an area cannot be defined by two lines, and the area of art needs a third word. This one can only come out of the way art is looked at. The bowl can be looked at as an article useful to hold things. It can also be looked at, by the same person and in the next second, as an article nice to look at. Here it has no use beyond its attraction. It is not a thing for something else but a thing for itself, in itself. It is, so seen—and this, it seems to me, is

the artistic way to see it—self-sufficient. It needs no other purpose than to be—and to be seen.

If the three words are put together, they make a definition: "art is the self-sufficient ordering of experience." The connotations of the definition will not be immediately plain, perhaps; there is more to say and some insecurity of argument in defense of these characteristics, for few definitions turn out to be absolute, not even in science. Let us, however, rest for the moment here with these three words.

Other men than the maker look at the bowl and say things about it. We can guess at a caveman saying, "I like that bison he painted." And we can then guess at a companion's query in any tone of voice you wish to give it, "You do? Why?" The first man expressed a taste; the second demanded defense of that taste. When the first man went on to say, "Because—" he had taken up criticism, a habit as old as art. And criticism is the subject of this book.

Criticism may seem subjective and niggling and parasitic, and perhaps we should give more honor to the artist than to the critic, for the art is what we enjoy at last. Yet the critic is necessary to the artist. It is out of criticism that the artist grows; it is out of criticism that the public who are not artists form taste, opinion, feelings not only about art but about their lives and attitudes toward action. The early and primitive critic was showing the artist how to be better at his trade; the late critic is creating —for himself, for those who listen to him, and even, indirectly, for those who do not listen to him—a philosophy of human existence. And we are all critics. The crowds pouring from the theaters, the new greater crowds at last turning off their television sets, all comment good or no good, like or not like. No matter how insecure their judg-

ments, they are acting as critics, as they do when they buy lamps or rugs or neckties or flowers for the garden.

The reason for discussing the nature and methods of criticism is in part the improvement of criticism and the improvement of art. "Improvement," I suspect, can only mean greater consistency, logic, being all of a piece. Criticism, however, does more than improve art, for one of the characteristics of the criticism we are inclined to call good is that it implies a thorough view of life as well as a peculiar sensitiveness to art. More thoughtful criticism will, we think, lead to more thoughtful views of action and more justified feelings about men, for what the critic is at bottom always discussing is the viability of art, what feelings it sanctions, what logic it shows, what relation these have to life at large. Many of us—from reading, from picture-gazing, from moviegoing, from staring at our houses and our furniture—test against our opinions the proposals of artists, what they present as good or bad or likely or unlikely. Our acceptances and rejections herein shape us quite as much as our physical, "actual," experiences in life. What we "like" is an expression of us, and by liking we alter or confirm what we were. Criticism, then, which puts thought upon taste, can hardly help enlarging our opinions and our attitudes and our feelings. It has taken me a great number of years to come to the expression of this faith in criticism, but now it seems to me just to phrase that faith, and this discussion will serve in part to show the reasons for it.

Men seem, then, to need art, however some of them scorn it, and they insist on talking about it. The different arts may not seem much alike, for nonverbal music is a long way from verbal story and the dance from the flower garden, yet in a very general way what they each evoke may bear some sort of likeness. And before we can take

up the discussion of criticism we must try to find what very general likenesses these are.

Criticism becomes, then, first of all the analysis of a piece of art to uncover its kind of experience and order and self-sufficiency, but it becomes after that some evaluation of these factors, how much, how satisfactory, how good. Underlying these judgments must be a series of criteria of what makes the good in art, and underlying these criteria will lie the philosophic criteria of what makes the good in life.

Such are the materials of this discussion, though it will take some time to get to the end of them. I propose, I think, no ultimate and absolute system, for various men have various views of the good and the proper and the effective and of the purposes of human life, and, as I shall attempt to show, criteria for art depend upon views of these purposes. There can be many sorts of critic; in the old phrase of the marketplace of ideas each one of us may listen, estimate, and come to his own conclusions. The kinds of ideas that must be examined, the necessity of looking at what logically follows what, the range of possible thoughts, so far as I can myself see that range—to look at these is the only proposal I should make. Hence the title of this discussion is "The Choices of Criticism."