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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARTIFACT

YI-FU TUAN

AN artifact, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a thing made by art, and the word art connotes skill. An object made with skill, that is, through knowledge and practice could be a poem, an ax, or a house. In 1834, Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the term in the following sentence: "A lump of sugar or lead lies among other artefacts on the shelf of a collector."¹ An early usage then is to restrict the meaning of the term to something that a collector might keep in a gallery or a museum. That thing could not be as large as a house, nor could it be a poem unless it takes material form, engraved on a clay tablet or at least in print. A modern dictionary of anthropology defines an artifact as "an object of any type made by human hands. Tools, weapons, and sculptured and engraved objects are representative artifacts."² This definition seems to exclude deliberately mental objects such as legends and myths and to include only objects that are made by human hands, that can survive the erosion of time, and that can be accommodated in a museum. Although the narrow, and now generally accepted, definition serves a useful purpose in technical literature, much of the significance of the artifact would be lost unless we retain also its broad sense as a humanly constructed object, material or mental.

What is the significance of the artifact? This question needs to be placed in the context of the larger question of significance and value in human lives. What is it in life that we value? We may, of course, start with life itself—the simple yet profound pleasures of the body undergoing the rhythms of desire and fulfillment, tension and ease. We have all known the immense satisfaction of consuming a good meal, of letting the cool water assuage our thirst, and of easing weary limbs between the sheets of a comfortable bed. And then there are the modest pleasures of habitude: the daily round, the efficient performance of routine tasks, the unforced exchange of pleasantries among familiar faces in a familiar landscape. Such experiences, however, leave no trace on the world. Each moment is wiped out by the next: once thirst is appeased, it disappears beyond recall, and the succession of customary gestures is almost equally elusive to memory.

REIFYING EXPERIENCE

It is an essential characteristic of being human that we feel the urge to reify experience, to give those fleeting moments of pleasure and pain a narrative outline or visual shape. At the simplest level, we tell stories to each other about what we have done in the course of an ordinary day. Customary behavior gains

¹ The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (edited by H. N. Coleridge; London: W. Pickering, 1838), Vol. 3, p. 347, as quoted in Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), Vol. 1, p. 473.

² Charles Winick, Dictionary of Anthropology (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1966), p. 44.

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significance as it is captured and recreated in a story. We need friends and listeners for this purpose; we need spectators for our little acts of self-dramatization, and the word dramatization reminds us that gestures as well as speech are necessary to recreate experience. Experience as it occurs has immediacy, but no permanence; its value is ephemeral. Recalled and reconstituted experience lacks immediacy, but it does have a certain durability in personal consciousness and in the minds of persons who listen and look; this experience has meaning by virtue of being reflected on, of being consciously held, and of having a public—or a potentially public—existence.

People do not and cannot simply live, savor, or endure each moment as it passes. We are impelled to make sense of our experience beyond the sort of practical calculations necessary to survival. One of the simplest human groups known to ethnography is the Tasaday of Mindanao in the Philippines. Even hunting is not among their practical skills. Primarily gatherers and scavengers the Tasaday live in a tropical forest almost without the support of artifacts. They have few legends, and their ceremonial life is also restricted. Can a people be closer to the state of nature, more accepting of what is, and further from the need to create and reify experience? Yet the Tasaday, being human, do not and cannot let the flow of daily events pass. Nothing unusual need happen in the day; still the Tasaday feel the urge to tell each other what has transpired. Incidents, trivial perhaps in themselves, are dramatized and told in songs. The Tasaday love to sing.³

In a well-known book, "The Human Condition," Hannah Arendt explored the meaning of labor, work, and action in classical antiquity as well as in modern times. Labor is defined as activity geared to the sustenance of the body and to other necessities of life. Labor does not terminate in a product. Activities such as house cleaning and cooking are repetitious. Whatever is made is quickly undone or consumed. Laboring always moves in the same cycle and resembles processes observable in nature. Impatience with everything that leaves no mark, no great object worthy of remembrance, was the original source of the ancient Greek contempt for labor. Work, by contrast, ends in things that outlast the short periodicities of nature. Artifacts are thrust into the world. They have the power to stabilize life. Transient feelings and thoughts gain permanence and objectivity in things—in the jugs and chairs that endure. Nevertheless, objects produced for ordinary use have limited value. Not made to defy time, their durability is modest. More importantly, as common objects in daily service they quickly become invisible. Instead of standing above the round processes of life, they are soon absorbed by them. We no more notice the things that we habitually use than we do our own hands and feet when they are functioning.

An artwork is a special type of artifact that by virtue of its successful embodiment of complex emotions of great importance resists absorption into the daily activities of the utilitarian world. This type of artifact has high visibility and permanence in people's awareness and enables mortals to savor immortality. A city may be a monumental work of art, and that is one reason for its

³ Carol H. Molony and Dad Tuan, *Further Studies on the Tasaday Language: Texts and Vocabulary*, in *Further Studies on the Tasaday*, *Panamint Foundation Research Series No. 2* (edited by D. E. Yen and John Nance; Makati, Rizal, Philippines, 1976), p. 27.

prestige. A city also provides a public setting for action, which Arendt characterizes as "activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things." The private realm of the household recognizes necessity and caters to life. By contrast, the public realm of the city symbolizes freedom and caters to the virtues of courage and excellence. By allowing free men to speak and act together, the city provides occasions for them to win "immortal fame."⁴

ARTIFACTS VERSUS MERE LIFE

The Tasaday sing. They are not content merely to live. As we examine different peoples, past and present, we may find that with all of them there is at least a hint of that Greek contempt for mere life—for survival as such, for the routines that do not touch the emotions and leave no imprint on either memory or the world. In the West, writers have expressed forcefully their extreme impatience with the essential but tiresome business of living. Proust wrote, "The artist who renounces an hour of work for an hour of talk with a friend knows that he sacrifices reality for something that does not exist." And Balzac, after a perfunctory inquiry about the health of some relative, said irritably to Jules Sandeau, "Now, let's get back to reality—who shall marry Eugénie Grandet?"⁵ Direct experiences seem less real than reconstituted ones. Artifacts can appear to have greater substance and personality than do live human beings. F. L. Lucas, the Cambridge classical scholar, wryly observed: "Those [dons] who sit decade after decade at college high-tables, while generations [of students] grow up and pass away around them, may come to feel that the college portraits of statesmen and ecclesiastics which watch them immutably from the walls, are more real, though only paint-and-canvas, than the fleeting pageant of flesh-and-blood that rises up and vanishes again under the gaze of those impassive, changeless eyes."⁶

Because an artwork has the power to embody and to manifest significant human experience, we are able to value the work even more than we do ourselves or other people. When the Romans were about to raze Carthage at the end of the Third Punic War, a leading citizen pleaded with the conquerors to spare the city, its temples, shrines, and forum. If the Romans must have vengeance, let it fall on the people rather than on an innocent city.⁷ We can respond to this sentiment and yet feel disturbed when the fate of others, rather than of ourselves, is in question. Consider Botho Strauss's reflections on the sinking of a great liner. The ship with its lights ablaze against the darkness of water and sky effectively symbolizes a world or a civilization. Watching it sink into the primordial ocean may give rise to a "universal sensation of disappearance," for nothing else vanishes so completely. Strauss wrote, "I was twelve years old when I saw the 'Andrea Dorea' go under on TV. It is hardly possible,

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959). Definition of action is on p. 9.

⁵ Quotations of Proust and Balzac are from F. L. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, and Pirandello* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 367 and 411.

⁶ Lucas, footnote 5 above, p. 411.

⁷ Appian's *Roman History*, Book 8, 12:84 (translated by Horace White; London: Heinemann, 1912), Vol. 1, p. 545.

as one watches such a thing happening, to think as one should of the human lives lost. Almost all one's regret is for the burning, sinking, the proud ship."⁸

The problem with nature, which includes the human body and raw experience, is that it lacks satisfying order or shape. People worldwide have tried to improve on nature. They may begin by decorating their own bodies, imparting to them some of the clarity and shapeliness of an artifact. We reveal our unadorned selves only to an intimate few. It is as artifacts that we encounter and feel at ease with each other in the public realm. We see a need to transform the body both when it is alive and when it is dead. Death signalizes disarray and disintegration, and our almost instinctive urge is to overcome it through art. André Maurois observed:

A man dies suddenly at home. He is on the floor when he fell, his limbs are limp and in disarray, his mouth is twisted, his lips are bloodied. The family is in tears. What have human societies invented to relieve such painful tensions? They lay the dead man on his bed; they fold his hands upon his breast. What is the meaning of all this if not that they are already carving a sculpture, the recumbent figure for the tomb, and changing the deceased into a work of art?⁹

ORDER AND CONTROL

Nature outside an individual's body is a wilderness that must be transformed and given the sort of order that satisfies material and spiritual needs. Thus we have created fields, villages, and cities that temper the flux of nature as well as the instability of human moods and actions. By dressing our body we limit the range of what we may be or do, but at the same time, as a result of such concentration, we can be what we want to be and do what we want to do more effectively. Likewise with our houses, streets, and buildings: the constraints that they put on us focus our energies and intentions; the clear images that the structures present to us sharpen our sense of self. However, we feel the need to order not only external nature but also our own body, experience, and other human beings whom we may consider unkempt, potentially disruptive and violent. The instability of mood and passion that we vaguely recognize and repress in ourselves we may see—sometimes grotesquely exaggerated—in others. Other people must be controlled as wild nature must be controlled. Architectural means are employed, and in a large city we can expect to find containers for the unassimilated and the unruly—ghettos, workhouses, prisons, and asylums.

The architecture of control, however, is far more subtle than its most obvious example—a barefaced prison. An artifact designed for control is not necessarily something crude and ugly. Beauty, after all, includes the idea of order, and order implies constraint. The broad thoroughfares of Paris are splendid monumental artifacts. Yet at least one reason for their creation by Baron Haussmann under Napoleon III's direction was to minimize the risks of rebellion and fighting of the kind that occurred in 1848.¹⁰ In New York it would seem

⁸ Botho Strauss, *Devotion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 88.

⁹ André Maurois, *Illusions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 76.

¹⁰ David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 35–37.

that Robert Moses, master builder of the city from the 1920s to the 1970s, deliberately used artifacts to promote social ends that he considered desirable. Motorists might have noted that many of the bridges spanning the parkways on Long Island are extraordinarily low, with little more than nine feet of clearance at the curb. Were they made low to produce an elegant aesthetic effect? That factor might have been a consideration, but another was the master builder's wish that the parkways be enjoyed by affluent automobile-owning whites, while poor people and blacks who patronized the twelve-foot tall buses of public transit were excluded.¹¹

A striking example of the mixed purposes of design is the traditional Chinese city. A monument of rectangular shape, oriented to the cardinal points and possessing a grid pattern of streets and avenues, this type of city is cosmic order imposed on the irregular, natural features of the earth. It symbolizes a rational way of life separate from the instinctive life and unruly manners of the barbarians. Its walls keep out the barbarians. On the other hand, that cosmic pattern of nested walls—each gate guarded by a gatekeeper—is also an effective device for internal surveillance. The geometric city is built against the threat of chaos from without and from within, against unpredictable nature and people.¹²

WORDS AND GESTURES

Experience is fleeting, elusive, and chaotic. We use words, gestures, and artifacts to give it a semblance of duration and coherence. Experience is captured in a thing; an inner sense of harmony might appear as a thing in a world of tangible things. But a thing is seldom able to speak unambiguously for itself. Its significance relies at least in part on the support of words and gestures. Thus, after putting the final polish on a jar that we have made and feel proud of, we call on persons present to admire it and place it almost reverently on the mantelpiece. An object commands attention by virtue of its own outstanding quality and by virtue of a prominent location among other artifacts. Nonetheless, the visibility tends to diminish in the course of time unless it is recreated periodically with verbal and gestural appreciation. Valued artifacts must be maintained by human discourse. That is one reason why friends and appreciative critics are important. Consider the following incident from Kenneth Grahame's animal story, "The Wind in the Willows."¹³ It illustrates beautifully how sympathetic speech and action can establish a home. Rat and Mole were friends. When the two of them found their way back to Mole's underground burrow, Mole felt shame because after a period of absence his home seemed such a poor and cold little place. Rat, kind beyond measure, set about to restore his friend's confidence. He was able to see all kinds of merit in the house that escaped his host's notice. "So compact! So well planned! Everything here and everything in its place!" Rat built a fire and got Mole to dust the furniture. Then they searched for food.

¹¹ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 951–953; and Langdon Winner, *Do Artifacts Have Politics?*, *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, pp. 123–124.

¹² Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 69.

¹³ Roger Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 187–188.

"No bread!" groaned the Mole dolorously; "no butter, no—"

"No *pâté de foie gras*, no champagne!" continued the Rat, grinning. "And that reminds me—what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute."

He made for the cellar door, and presently reappeared . . . with a bottle of beer in each paw and another under each arm. "Self-indulgent beggar you seem to be, Mole," he observed. "Deny yourself nothing. This is really the jolliest place I ever was in. Now, wherever did you pick up those prints? Make the place look so home-like, they do. No wonder you're so fond of it, Mole. Tell us all about it, and how you came to make it what it is."¹⁴

We are inclined to believe that artifacts carried greater symbolic import in the past than they do now. This may well be true. In the Middle Ages not only natural things such as tree, stone, and cloud were thought to possess life but also artifacts such as sword, ship, bell, and church. These human manufactures were given names and regarded as having the kind of power and personality associated with privileged people. The church building at Glastonbury was so mighty that, wrote William of Malmesbury, "if any person erected a building in its vicinity, which by its shade obstructed the light of the church, it forthwith became a ruin."¹⁵ In those times, certain types of artifacts did appear to glow with numinous presence, but such attention as they attracted depended to a large degree on speech—on the circulation of vivid tales concerning a particular object or place. A sword lost its magic and a house ceased to be haunted if people no longer talked about them. Words are necessary to sustain the potency of a visual symbol. This relationship was true of the past as it is of the present. Stephen Orgel, in his sketch of Renaissance theater, wrote: "Then as now, a symbol had meaning only after it was explained. Symbols function as summations and confirmations; they tell us only what we already know, and it is a mistake to assume that the Renaissance audience, unlike the modern one, knew without being told. Even emblems that seem perfectly obvious, or those that derive from standard handbooks of symbolic imagery, were relentlessly explicated."¹⁶

TIME AND MEMORY

We can order space by naming its features, by holding hands to form a ring and dance, and, of course, by transforming space into an artifact—a village or a city. We have to make sense of space and feel oriented in it to survive. What of time? Time, as experienced, is inextricably tied to location and space. We go to work in the field at sunrise and return home at sundown. We must catch the eight o'clock bus at the street corner. We are always somewhere at a particular time of the day or season of the year; neither location nor time is arbitrary. When we have ordered space we have also ordered time, and vice versa. However, the time thus punctuated and experienced is cyclical rather than linear: summer will return, and we can always step back into the place

¹⁴ Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1944), pp. 69–70.

¹⁵ Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 19.

¹⁶ Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p. 24; and Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 28.

that we have just left. In preliterate and traditional communities, people seldom travel far. The places visited are ones that people are reasonably certain that they can see again if they so desire. The same principle applies to the new acquaintances that they made in the neighboring villages; only death will remove these acquaintances forever as actual or potential experience. By comparison, people in modern society are mobile, and they may have friends living in distant places whom they rarely see and may never see again. Awareness of "never again" promotes a sense of linear and historical time—a past that slips away constantly and resists recapture. We are forced to accept the fact that experiences may not be repeatable and that we are unable to maintain time as we are able to maintain space. Paul Zweig articulated the malaise derived from this type of awareness:

It seems I can't go somewhere even for a few days without arranging it mentally into a home, and working out how to come back anytime I want. Part of my pleasure lies in the echo of returns I'm always constructing. I caught myself doing this once in the middle of the Sahara Desert, in a place I was not likely ever to see again, and I was dumbfounded. I realized that I had been acting all my life as if everything that happened to me was infinitely repeatable—and all because I couldn't bear having a past. The past diminished and scared me, because it was so much of being human that would never be possible again. I suppose that's why traveling to a new place, or even making a new friend, has always unsettled me. Here is something else to repeat, a new orbit to trace.¹⁷

Questions of identity—of "who am I?"—became pressing in Europe from the seventeenth century onward. Words such as self-love, self-confidence, self-command, self-esteem, self-knowledge, and self-pity, other words such as disposition, ego, conscience, and sentiment began to appear with their modern sense in English and French two or three hundred years ago.¹⁸ Painters (Rembrandt par excellence) painted portraits of themselves at different stages of life. People began to write autobiographies in addition to biographies and family histories. Some persons kept diaries and spiritual journals.¹⁹ There was an increased interest in childhood and in the child as a stage of growth with experiences that would affect his or her character later in life. Georges Poulet in his study of human time in literature observed that "the great discovery of the eighteenth century is the phenomenon of memory." By exploring retained impressions, a genuinely new sense of self emerges. "To exist . . . is to be one's present, and also to be one's past and one's recollections."²⁰ But what do we find when we rummage the storehouse of memory for scenes of the past? The effort can be frustrating. To Simone de Beauvoir

The past is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me, a country in which I can stroll wherever I please, and which will gradually show me all its secret hills and dales. As I was moving forward, so it was crumbling. Most of the wreckage that can still be seen is colourless, distorted, frozen: its meaning es-

¹⁷ Paul Zweig, Paris and Brighton Beach, *The American Scholar*, Autumn, 1978, pp. 501–502.

¹⁸ John Lukacs, The Bourgeois Interior, *The American Scholar*, Autumn, 1970, p. 623.

¹⁹ Paul Delaney, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 8–13.

²⁰ Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 23–24.

capacities. Here and there, I see occasional pieces whose melancholy beauty enchants me. They do not suffice to populate this emptiness that Chateaubriand calls "the desert of the past."²¹

Diaries retain a measure of the past in the present. First as a physical object we can see that the binding is fragile and that the pages are yellow with age. Then there is the testimony of penmanship—the way that it has changed over the years. Most important of all, obviously, are the feelings, moods, and incidents as they are captured in the entries. But how etiolated they now seem. The keeping of a diary may indeed reassure an individual that he has lived. On the other hand, the skeletal notes and the blank pages are reminders of how little of time can be salvaged by such a literary device. On April 7, 1824, Eugène Delacroix, after reading through what he had written earlier in his diary, added the following comments:

I feel that I still retain control of the days about which I have made entries, even when they are past. But as for the days which are not mentioned in the diary, it is as if they had never existed. What dark abyss has swallowed them up? Are these flimsy pages the only token I have of my past existence? And so my mind and the life history of my soul are to be destroyed because I am not willing to commit to paper that part of them which might thereby be preserved.²²

An album of photographs now does what the diary used to do for people of a more literate age. As with entries in a diary, photographs provide a few landmarks, not a whole landscape to stroll through. Each picture is an isolated flare surrounded by darkness. Here is a colored snapshot of the living room with seated figures, but how the dining room, for example, looked and what transpired in it are beyond recall. Again, between one picture and another—between one scene of the beach and another of a Christmas party—memory is blank. Diaries and photographs in the family album are intended as records. We take them out periodically for the express purpose of savoring the past. However, most artifacts with which we are reared are not intended as aids to memory. If the artifacts are a part of our daily setting, occasionally glanced at, they will seem to belong to our present rather than to our past. Such is how we feel about a painting that we bought twenty years ago and that is still hanging on the wall; such is how we see our old school as we pass it. Allow a period of time to lapse, that is, remove ourselves from a familiar object for a number of years, and at the next encounter with that object it will have the power to recreate in us, briefly, vivid sensations of an earlier self. The world of this earlier self cannot be consciously recalled. When we try to remember what we garner is a dry catalogue of people, events, and places, so impersonal as to belong seemingly to the biography of a stranger. On the other hand, if we open a long-shut drawer and find in it rubber bands and yellowed calling cards, that chance encounter can release a flood of lost impressions. Experience of this sort is even more likely to occur when a total environment—a place that we have lived in and known well—is revisited. An American poet was overcome by the onrush of memories when he returned to Paris after an absence

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), p. 365.

²² Quoted in A. L. Vischer, *On Growing Old* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 88.

of eleven years. Layers of his past came smashing together like "a car flattened by a gigantic press in a wrecking yard." He reminisced:

What a digging place the past was! From it I had gotten more lives than I know what to do with. Swimming from one to another, I had become a stack-together sort of person: voice from here, walk from there, angers from somewhere else; and the smaller ghosts too, every moment of my hands and mouth. . . . All of it—all of me—had come floating from somewhere in this ocean place of past living, made of everything I had loved without knowing it and, having loved, had forgotten.²³

We *can* go home again, provided it has not been altered beyond recognition during our absence. A home revisited will possess an enchantment, an ability to engage our emotions, that was absent when we lived there. But we cannot return the second time and expect to be flooded by the same rush of feelings. In second and subsequent visits we may be able to respond powerfully to our home, but usually at the level of conscious appreciation; we shall be making deliberate attempts to regain a sense of the past with the help of artifacts and things. Without these material aids, an imaginative empathy for the continuity and the depth of time, for the full flavor of a past, is most difficult to achieve even when written documents remain. Hence our sadness when artifacts of the past are destroyed, or when none are made that can last and a whole period of our personal and collective life will vanish without a trace.

When we are aware of historical time, we are distressed by the temporal gaps in the landscape—by the blank pages of our diary. Vladimir Nabokov remarked of Cambridge, England, that the town, although it lacked broad spatial perspectives, offered deep temporal vistas with its cluttered buildings of different ages.²⁴ Many old cities do not have such vistas. The traditional Chinese capital, for example, was built to reflect an ageless cosmic order, and, like all ideal settlements, it denied the passage of time. The Chinese landscape, lacking in monuments that clearly reflect the different periods of its past, seems timeless rather than historical. Egypt provides a striking contrast. Its landscape is historical. But to European eyes there are conspicuous gaps in the record. An Englishman made the following comment:

Not the least curious thing about a country with so much "past", is that the stranger finds no historical continuity. Upon the black alluvial soil stand pharaonic[sic] temples and concrete apartment houses, and nothing links them. Hypostyle halls and medieval mosques are well enough to visit and admire, but they don't connect up with the way one thinks. What is missed and missing is the middle distance: where there should be an eighteenth century, there is the Turkish hiatus. Saladin is juxtaposed to cinemas, and To-day, having no ancestry, is ridiculously isolated and uncertain of itself. For the average cultured European with his seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from which his taste may wander but to which it inevitably returns, a recent historical continuity is the very ground he stands on. . . . The innocent exile coming to the "cradle of civilization" is taken aback.²⁵

²³ Zweig, footnote 17 above, p. 511.

²⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 269.

²⁵ Robin Fedden, *Personal Landscape* (London: Editions Poetry Limited, 1945), pp. 9-10.

THOUGHT AND ARTIFACT

Artifacts are not normally objects of thought. As specialized tools artifacts extend our sense of competence in the world; we do not think about them as long as they continue to function. As multipurpose dwellings they stabilize experience, support our sense of a perdurable self, and confirm our belief in a comprehensible universe. The house in many societies is a microcosm that encapsulates with clear and graspable detail what the larger world is like and how we should behave in that world. The house imparts lessons implicitly, without demands on conscious thought. Artifacts do not normally raise puzzling questions. Why should they? After all, they are the products of human minds and skills. Yet in our modern age the artifacts that surround us intrude increasingly on our consciousness and force us to cogitate even when we would prefer to sink back in easeful acceptance.

Artifacts stir our minds for various reasons. One is the scale and the complexity of the manufactured world since the appearance of large cities. Artifacts and systems of artifacts defy comprehension. No one knows in detail how the transportation system of a metropolis works; no one—no single organization—has created the entire net. The human-made object no longer stands for clarity, for something that we can understand intuitively and spontaneously. A city that undergoes rapid change no longer provides a secure anchor for the perturbations of personal and social life. Our mind cannot rest in a manufactured world that has no overall plan, but rather must grapple with that world, must try to resolve its perplexing amorphousness at the level of intellectual comprehension while knowing that the task is unrealizable.

Not only large and complex manufactures goad us to agitated thought. Small and simple ones may do so. Consider the subtle differences in our response to a wooden chair and an aluminum chair, or to a china cup and a plastic cup. Things made of natural substance appear restful. We see the wood of the chair and the clay in the cup, and there our thoughts stop. Wood and clay symbolize the calm of immemorial nature, while aluminum and plastic remind us constantly of the busyness of the human mind. Although we may not know the technical and economic history of aluminum and plastic, we are aware that it exists, and this awareness of human striving acts as a stimulant or irritant so that we are unable to feel completely at ease.

Finally consciousness can be a source of delight. We take pleasure in the fact that the artifacts around us stimulate thought. This intellectual use and appreciation of artifacts, uniquely developed among the educated members of Western society, is a consequence of the awareness of historical time. At first, interest in the relics of the past was not purely for what they could tell of that lost world. We know, for example, that Renaissance antiquaries dug into the past for self-serving rather than impersonal and scholarly ends: they were motivated by a desire to find respectable antecedents for their own institutions and to weave a narrative line (often fictitious) from Biblical and classical antiquity to their own time that would lend it prestige. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, however, more and more antiquaries were inspired by the burgeoning scientific ideal of that age to study artifacts disinterestedly for

the evidence that they give of vanished cultures.²⁶ The past was perceived to have its own value and hence worth reclaiming with all the ingenuity at the scholar-scientist's command.

Today we retain these mixed motivations. On the one hand, our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess. On the other hand, we are also what we think, and the artifactitious world presents itself to us as an object of appreciation and of thought. In a similar fashion, we turn ambivalently toward the past. We value genealogical trees, grandfather clocks, and cluttered ware of a local museum because they suggest that our identity, far from being a transient and elusive thing, is fixed in extensive time and space. On the other hand, we are able to approach the past from an intellectual standpoint. Recognizing that the past is slipping to oblivion, we wish to rescue what we can. In the process we not only reclaim the people and the culture of an earlier time but also enlarge and enrich our general conception of the world—and thereby, inevitably, though perhaps unintentionally, a sense of ourselves.

²⁶ Stuart Figgott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp. 6 and 16.