



THE SHAPE OF TIME

REMARKS ON THE HISTORY OF THINGS

GEORGE KUBLER



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Preamble

SYMBOL, FORM, AND DURATION

Cassirer's partial definition of art as symbolic language has dominated art studies in our century. A new history of culture anchored upon the work of art as a symbolic expression thus came into being. By these means art has been made to connect with the rest of history.

But the price has been high, for while studies of meaning received all our attention, another definition of art, as a system of formal relations, thereby suffered neglect. This other definition matters more than meaning. In the same sense speech matters more than writing, because speech precedes writing, and because writing is but a special case of speech.

The other definition of art as form remains unfashionable, although every thinking person will accept it as a truism that no meaning can be conveyed without form. Every meaning requires a support, or a vehicle, or a holder. These are the bearers of meaning, and without them no meaning would cross from me to you, or from you to me, or indeed from any part of nature to any other part.

The forms of communication are easily separable from any meaningful transmission. In linguistics the forms are speech sounds (phonemes) and grammatical units (morphemes). In music they are notes and intervals; in architecture and sculpture they are solids and voids; in painting they are tones and areas.

The structural forms can be sensed independently of meaning. We know from linguistics in particular that the structural ele-

ments undergo more or less regular evolutions in time without relation to meaning, as when certain phonetic shifts in the history of cognate languages can be explained only by a hypothesis of regular change. Thus phoneme *a*, occurring in an early stage of a language, becomes phoneme *b* at a later stage, independently of meaning, and only under the rules governing the phonetic structure of the language. The regularity of these changes is such that the phonemic changes can even be used to measure durations between recorded but undated examples of speech.

Similar regularities probably govern the formal infrastructure of every art. Whenever symbolic clusters appear, however, we see interferences that may disrupt the regular evolution of the formal system. An interference from visual images is present in almost all art. Even architecture, which is commonly thought to lack figural intention, is guided from one utterance to the next by the images of the admired buildings of the past, both far and near in time.

The purpose of these pages is to draw attention to some of the morphological problems of duration in series and sequence. These problems arise independently of meaning and image. They are problems that have gone unworked for more than forty years, since the time when students turned away from "mere formalism" to the historical reconstruction of symbolic complexes.

The main framework of these ideas was set down at Gaylord Farm in Wallingford during November and December in 1959. I am grateful to my family and friends, and to the staff at Gaylord, and to my associates at Yale University, for their many thoughtful attentions to the demands of a restless patient. I wrote most of the text early in 1960 in Naples, and the finished manuscript was submitted to Yale University Press in November of that year. For their perceptive readings and valuable suggestions on its improvement I am indebted to my colleagues at Yale, Professors Charles Seymour, Jr., George H. Hamilton, Sumner McK. Crosby, G. E. Hutchinson, Margaret Collier, George Hersey,

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G. K.

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1. *The History of Things*

Let us suppose that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world. By this view the universe of man-made things simply coincides with the history of art. It then becomes an urgent requirement to devise better ways of considering everything men have made. This we may achieve sooner by proceeding from art rather than from use, for if we depart from use alone, all useless things are overlooked, but if we take the desirableness of things as our point of departure, then useful objects are properly seen as things we value more or less dearly.

In effect, the only tokens of history continually available to our senses are the desirable things made by men. Of course, to say that man-made things are desirable is redundant, because man's native inertia is overcome only by desire, and nothing gets made unless it is desirable.

Such things mark the passage of time with far greater accuracy than we know, and they fill time with shapes of a limited variety. Like crustaceans we depend for survival upon an outer skeleton, upon a shell of historic cities and houses filled with things belonging to definable portions of the past. Our ways of describing this visible past are still most awkward. The systematic study of things is less than five hundred years old, beginning with the description of works of art in the artists' biographies of the Italian Renaissance. The method was extended to the description of all kinds of things only after 1750. Today archaeology and ethnology treat of material culture in general. The history of art treats of the least useful and most expressive products of human