Art for the philistine

(Continued from page 4) asked of me, he refuses to do the same on their behalf! Says he, "Sculpture, and indeed painting and music as well, are not susceptible to verbal translations — attemps invariable result in the purblindness of prose." (Too true, Mr. Shladover! That's why so little of what now passes for art criticism is actually that. The great bulk of it is imaginative literature in which an art work will be assigned sundry attributes drawn from the writer's fertile brain. Or it is straightforward description of the journalistic brain. Or it is an attempt to describe the visual arts in terms of the verbal arts.) It seems reasonable to expect that Mr. Shladover would extend the difficulties and disadvantages of rendering into language one's partiality for art works to naysaying as well. But, lo, what is this! Once again I am indicted for revealing a lack of "understanding [for the language of Henry Moore and] Louise Nevelson" that puts me "in no position to contend that their works are wort- less, meaningless" (a contention, incidentally, that I never made). Our modernist never displaying any knowledge of that language himself, he says he also has no position to judge Moore and Nevelson either. His assertion to the contrary notwithstanding, Mr. Shladover once again forces me to assert that if he is to understand an art work to have the same opinion of it as he has from his letters it seems that the way in which one comes to understand the Moore-Nevelson languages is by looking at RF or TH at great length. More than once I have imprisoned for having looked at those items for an insufficient amount of time in a narrow frame of mind. How on earth our modernist knows how long and in what disposition I looked at RF and TH I cannot say. If mine were the same opinions as his, chances are he would now be claiming that I have looked at them long enough. His attitude reminds me of the academic phenomenon that a friend of mine calls the Infinite Tolerance syndrome. Let the college professor find out that his students don't like an art work he approves of, and he will get down on his knees and plead for patience, tolerance, an open mind, etc. (As though a contrary opinion of necessity results from an absence of those virtues.) But let him suspect that the same people like certain modern works (e.g., Wyeth, Parrish, The Beatles, science fiction) that he does not care for, then it's a case of the hell-with-them. Stay away from them. They're harmful. Bad taste.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me say that there is a little to be said for tolerance. Complex musical compositions like Tristan, Elektra, Le Sacre and Beethoven's late quartets, as Mr. Shladover correctly points out, are complex musical works. RF and TH, on the other hand, are simple art works in what is by its very nature a simple art form compared to music and literature. In general, the visual arts, except for film, are relatively simple media. One can spend months laboring over Tristan, Ulysses, War and Peace, The Waste Land, Beethoven's late quartets. A piece of sculpture, on the other hand, can be summarized by the eye in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. The fact that a sculptured work can be summarized quickly accounts for the inferior popularity of that art form compared to music, literature and film. (The arts achieve definition by virtue of extension into space do not command and hold most people's attention as well as those that achieve definition through extension into time.) It also explains why few people, including sculpture fans, ever stand before a statue for more than a minute or two at a time despite the familiar observation two hundred years ago, "If a person wants that he is moved. I cannot tell him that he is moved."