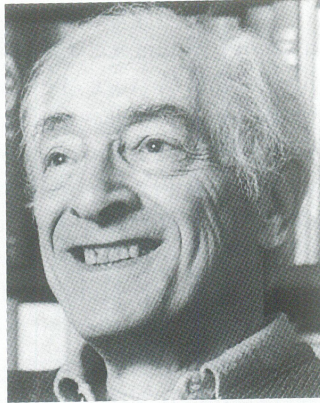


**Meyer Schapiro,
1905–1996**



Early in March of this year Meyer Schapiro, aged over 91, died in New York City. Because of the intrinsic complexity of his life work it is difficult to outline his portrait in a few paragraphs. “An archetypal Jewish immigrant,” as he has been called, he was so many-sided that no definite contour will fit him. Even if we concentrate only on his intellectual achievement, we are embarrassed by the variety of aspects to be considered. Meyer Schapiro was a man of contrasts. While he did not form a “school” in the usual sense of this term, his influence was wide and often profound. While he was not typical of any of the established and well-known trends in art history, he represented an important, perhaps a crucial, stage in the history of our discipline.

The intrinsic contrasts in Meyer Schapiro’s intellectual personality are clearly reflected in his scholarly work. While he was interested in all forms and periods of art, he was mainly concerned with medieval art, on the one hand, and with the art of our own age, on the other. His first important historical studies, published in the 1930s and 1940s, were devoted mainly to Romanesque sculpture. In the same years, however, he also published revolutionary essays on the art of his time and even of his city, mainly on abstract art.

In both fields he broke new ground in the form that remained his throughout his work. What he added to our knowledge and understanding of these seemingly so different arts was not so much new information (he did not discover any new objects), as a new way of understanding what was seemingly already known. Today not many students are aware of the fact that in the earlier parts of our century, Romanesque sculpture (in spite of Vöge’s analyses and Kingsley-Porter’s great collection of images) was considered mainly as an important testimony to the past rather than as an art in its own right. At best, it was considered as a stepping

stone to Gothic art, a medieval style that by then was already acknowledged as having a value and an aesthetic character of its own. Schapiro showed the intrinsic artistic character of Romanesque sculpture, and thus helped make it a type of medieval art. Of his path-breaking study “From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos,” John Plummer said that Schapiro studied a series of Romanesque sculptures as works of art rather than as documents of the past.

In the same years he also studied the art of his own day and the world as art. It was a time, we should remember, when what was called “abstract art” was largely rejected as non-art. In the works of Jackson Pollock and de Kooning he detected energies searching for a proper expression and appropriation of the world in which we live. The speakers of the modern art movement at the time used mainly ideological arguments in defense of abstract art. In an early study of abstract art (1937), that marked a turning point in the discussion of modern art, Schapiro based the discussion on new assumptions. It took the form of an argument with the great museum man, Alfred Barr, for whom Schapiro had a very high regard. Barr had just published his book *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), in which he suggested that abstract art derived mainly from formal, aesthetic motives. It was against this doctrine that Schapiro stressed the impact of factors beyond the domain of the aesthetic.

It is of interest that the periods and art worlds with which Meyer Schapiro concerned himself were in themselves paradigms of great tension. He had a particular ability to find and reveal the tensions – social, psychological, religious – that shaped the language of forms and the individual works of art that he loved to study. Thus, to mention just one example, the profound social and religious tensions and violent clashes between the church and heretical sects in southern France and Spain during the twelfth century are considered as possibly explaining “the themes of impulsive and overwhelming physical force” in the images of beasts so common in Romanesque art, and of the chiliastic postures, the twisted bodies and crossed legs of the figures of saints in the roughly contemporary sculpture in Silos and Souillac.

Schapiro evokes not only great historical conflicts, but also psychological tensions to explain forms and themes, also in the work of an individual artist. Another example, by now well known to students of art, is his interpretation of Cézanne’s depictions of apples as “a

displacement or substitution” of the artist’s suppressed erotic drives, and of the unresolved conflicts in his personality and life. This view is a starting point for Schapiro to search for the meaning of still-life in general, and in Cézanne’s work in particular. Both interpretations, that of violent motifs in Romanesque art and that of Cézanne’s apples and other still-lives, have been questioned and debated. The discussions of Schapiro’s interpretations constitute an interesting and enriching contribution to the methodology of art historical research. We do not have to go into these debates and consider the arguments brought forward in them, to see that tension and inner conflict play an important part in the subject matter of Meyer Schapiro’s scholarly work. It has been noted that periods in which the ideal of harmony plays a pivotal role, such as the Renaissance, were not central to his research. A major Renaissance study by Schapiro, his by now classic discussion of Freud’s view of Leonardo, also deals with a suppressed psychological conflict of Leonardo, and the impact of this conflict on the great master’s work.

Schapiro’s attraction to this kind of subject was not a matter of chance. In seeing the conflict that underlies a style or a work of art, we also perceive their amplitude, the multi-layered structure, and the richness of what they say. It is typical of Meyer Schapiro’s thought that he never considered art – whether the art of a period, of an individual, or even a single object – as pertaining to one domain only. It was always the interaction of different fields and levels that fascinated him. Schapiro’s legendary mastery of scholarly detail, his unusual recall of materials in various disciplines only helped him to stress the one idea that mattered to him most – that no aspect of art, of belief, or of language can be considered in isolation. It has been said of some of the great scholars and artists of the Renaissance that they were “decompartmentalizers,” breaking down the barriers between disciplines. In our age, Meyer Schapiro was a rare and outstanding decompartmentalizer. He has made a substantial and lasting contribution to the profound study of art.

Moshe Barasch