
Morris Dickstein

THE ARTIST AND THE CITIZEN

Meyer Schapiro's Values

With the death of Meyer Schapiro in 1996, the art world lost a legendary figure while the rest of us, including the *Dissent* community, were deprived of a valued colleague, teacher, and model. Schapiro's life and work touched several different worlds. As a charismatic teacher whose passion and erudition were astonishing, he trained generations of art historians and opened the eyes of others—students, artists, intellectuals—to the visual field around them. He was a pioneer in the study of both Romanesque art, the subject of his 1929 Columbia dissertation, and impressionist painting, to which he devoted some of his most trenchant lectures and essays. Unlike most historical scholars, he was keenly involved with contemporary art as a mentor to young painters. An independent Marxist in the 1930s, he brilliantly explored the social history of art but also, in his writing for *Art Front* and other left journals, threw himself into the political struggles of the period, supporting the formation of the Dewey commission that investigated Moscow's charges against Trotsky.

His circle of friendship was immense. In the quarrelsome world of the New York Intellectuals, he was universally admired as "our genius." He had a close-up view of the shadowy world of Whittaker Chambers, his friend and Columbia contemporary, whom he later helped wean away from underground work for the Communist Party. A later friend was the equally Dostoyevskyan figure of poet Delmore Schwartz, whose inexorable descent into paranoia cut him off from nearly everyone else he knew. Equably steady and sane, Schapiro was drawn to people whose temperament was far

more apocalyptic than his own.

For students at Columbia, the New School, and the New York Studio School, Schapiro was simply a great talker, a dazzling polymath, a high-wire performer who elevated classroom lectures and even ordinary conversation into an art form. Like Isaiah Berlin at Oxford, he seemed to have done very little writing, certainly no books, nothing except the out-of-the-way article in the remote *Festschrift* or scholarly journal. All this changed in 1977 when George Braziller began publishing a four-volume selection of Schapiro's papers, which showed the larger world how much he had been writing all along and how little his work had dated. (Ironically, an equally momentous selection of Berlin's essays, also in four volumes, began appearing a year later.)

Neither Berlin nor Schapiro had ever been obscure; both had been renowned as lecturers and revered by their peers, and Berlin, in an unusual feat, had negotiated the slippery rungs of the British establishment without downplaying his Jewishness. Both were cosmopolitan figures who emerged from the ferment of the secularized Jewish intelligentsia between the wars, Berlin in his passage from Eastern Europe to depression-era Oxford, Schapiro within the Europe-oriented world of the New York Intellectuals. Grounded in philosophy, Berlin brought a literary verve and empathy to the history of ideas, focusing on the conflict between totalistic systems like Marxism, nationalism, or romanticism and the more skeptical traditions of liberalism. Schapiro developed an equally subtle dialectic between the seemingly closed world of medieval art, with its traditional

religious iconography, and the more anarchic universe of modern art, marked by more individualized forms of self-expression.

As writers they take little for granted, constructing a subject from the ground up and bringing to it a level of reflection and scrutiny that seems permanently fresh. Very different minds, they resembled each other in bringing a rich sense of history to bear on contemporary issues, a practice that goes to the heart of what intellectuals do. One British reviewer of Berlin's most recent collection, *The Sense of Reality*, wrote of "his campaign to relate the great ideas of history to the way we live now" and his view of philosophy "not only as an intellectual discipline but also as an adventure profoundly integrated with the shaping of human affairs." Berlin's limpid accounts of the writers like de Maistre, Hamann, Vico, Marx, and the Russian social thinkers of the nineteenth century, like Schapiro's acute exploration of Romanesque sculptors and impressionist painters, are alive with the fundamental concerns of the moment. Their work traverses the whole arc of how modern culture has made us who we are.

If Berlin, like Raymond Aron in France, tried to turn intellectuals from overarching systems like Marxism toward pluralism, Schapiro, more like the theorists of the Frankfurt school, synthesized an iconoclastic Marxism with a modernist conception of the artist. In Schapiro's version, the artist embodied qualities like autonomy, spontaneity, sensuousness, and emotional generosity that were socially endangered under modern conditions. Thus the artist became the paradigm of an ideal of human freedom first theorized by the Enlightenment, then embraced but too often betrayed by Marxists and radical reformers of every stripe. These were also values cherished by John Dewey, Schapiro's senior colleague at Columbia, in both his social thought and educational philosophy. Schapiro, from a cosmopolitan Jewish starting point but by a much-different route, thus arrived at the same intensely committed liberalism as Berlin's.

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The first thing we notice in a Schapiro essay is the mixture of vast erudition and extraordinary simplicity of style. Where most theorists use specialized language as a matter of professional pride (or deformation), as if to distinguish their ideas from common-sense rambling, Schapiro's more direct approach, founded on lecturing and conversation, aims to democratize learning and make it more accessible. This plain style, as it moves inexorably from point to point, can strike a kind of terror in the reader. Schapiro habitually compresses into a perfectly lucid paragraph what other writers would develop over the course of a book—as when, in a brief essay on Diderot's art criticism, he summarizes the transition from rococo to classicism in 18th-century art. Among his papers on mod-

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He is arresting through his images—more rich in suggestive content than has been supposed—and also through his uninterpreted strokes which make us see that there can be qualities of greatness in little touches of paint. . . . Out of these emerges a moving semblance of a familiar natural world with a deepened harmony that invites meditation.

Writing in 1959, when abstract expressionism still commanded the New York scene and a formalist approach dominated the criticism of modern art, Schapiro typically moves through form toward the human configuration it expresses. The formal innovations of modern art—and the elusive content of some earlier art—had encouraged advanced critics to see all art in formal terms. Schapiro, on the contrary, anticipates virtually every strategy—the social, the psychoanalytic, the semiotic—that would take later critics beyond formalism. On Cézanne he looks forward to a time when “the personal content of this classic art” would “become as evident as the aesthetic result.”

Schapiro was able to make good on this promise a decade later in a famous piece, “The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life” (1968). In the earlier essay he had complained that “the lives of Gauguin and Van Gogh have blinded the public to what is noble and complete in Cézanne's less sensational, though anguished, career. . . . His art has a unique quality of ripeness and continuous growth. . . . He admitted to the canvas a great span of perception and mood, greater than that of his Impressionist friends.” Schapiro's portrait of Cézanne as an artist who combines nobility and anguish, tentativeness and completeness, hints at the personal content of his own work. Compared to his contemporaries, with their more dramatic lives and spectacularly expressive canvases, Cézanne was like the tortoise to

the hare. Schapiro, so bountiful in conversation, so reluctant to publish, clearly identified as much with Cézanne's reticence as with his steady growth and ultimate ripeness.

On one level, “The Apples of Cézanne” is Schapiro's bravura turn in the iconological mode of emigré art historians like Erwin Panofsky. It reads like a detective story, an intellectual adventure full of mystery and surprise. As Panofsky, deftly mobilizing a ingenious array of evidence, had unpacked the death-motif buried in the phrase *Et in Arcadia Ego*, Schapiro probes every valence of Cézanne's apples, from their formal properties, their domestic scale, and their sensual fullness to their resemblance to his own bald head, which he underlined in one striking sketch. Modernist critics had seen the apples as little more than a pretext, a “simplified motif” (in Lionello Venturi's words) that “gave the painter an opportunity for concentrating on problems of form.” Schapiro instead concentrates on the apples, using them to construct both the nature of still-life and the elusive inner life of the painter.

In reading the accounts of Cézanne by friends, I cannot help thinking that in his preference for the still-life of apples—firm, compact, centered organic objects of a commonplace yet subtle beauty, set on a plain table with the unsmoothed cloth ridged and hollowed like a mountain—there is an acknowledged kinship between the painter and his objects, an avowal of a gifted withdrawn man who is more at home with the peasants and landscape of his province than with its upper class and their sapless culture.

Here Schapiro himself does what he attributes to Cézanne, moving from attentive observation to meditation. With the providential word “sapless,” his residual radicalism, his imaginative empathy, and his sensuous feeling for the object come together. For all his scholarship, Schapiro's work is lit up by flashes of insight that take your breath away. His criticism is at once empirical and speculative, boldly imagined yet carefully qualified. Like many postwar intellectuals, he shifted his ground from the social to the psychoanalytic, but without really leaving his Marxism behind.

Schapiro's essay portrays Cézanne as a painter constrained and anxious in his feelings

about women, thwarted in his early efforts to paint nudes and tackle ambitious subjects, unable to match the rich sensory appeal of admired artists like Delacroix and Courbet—but finally an artist who fulfills himself by finding a limited scale, a muted technique, and a confined but endlessly varied subject that obliquely displays his full humanity. Cézanne triumphs by finding his way around the emotional blocks that hold him back, as Schapiro triumphs by revealing the tension and conflict behind Cézanne's apparently serene art.

Schapiro set the stage for this study of Cézanne with an earlier essay on the anxiety and blockage he found in Van Gogh's "Crows over the Wheat Field," painted only a few days before the artist killed himself. As he did with Cézanne, Schapiro excels at portraying an artist under emotional pressure yet somehow finding, for the moment at least, a profound aesthetic and personal solution. Schapiro shows how Van Gogh's painting, with its ominous images and foreshortened perspective, resonates with his emotional crisis, which it still manages to objectify, enabling it to resonate for the viewer as well. Like Lionel Trilling in his essay on "Art and Neurosis," Schapiro insists on the artist's "intense effort to control, to organize," to take firm hold of reality as he feels it slipping away from him. What others see as stylized or distorted in Van Gogh, Schapiro treats as witness to his "personal realism":

The strong dark lines that he draws around trees, houses, and faces, establish their existence and peculiarity with a conviction unknown to previous art. Struggling against the perspective that diminishes an individual object before his eyes, he renders it larger than life. The loading of the pigment is in part a reflex of this attitude, a frantic effort to preserve in the image of things their tangible matter and to create something equally solid and concrete on the canvas.

Schapiro's feeling for the painting as physical object, intensified no doubt by his response to Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists, is as crucial as his sensitivity to the painter's accentuated realism and internal crisis. In another essay he describes how the im-

pressionist painters' effort to render "the shapeless, diffused, unlocalized components of the landscape due to light and atmosphere" gave at the same time "a new tangibility and independence to the crust of pigment." The modernism that turned Clement Greenberg into a formalist made Schapiro a kind of realist, someone who sees paintings as experiences, expressive of the need and desire to take possession of the sensible world. This experiential approach also enables him to demonstrate "the humanity of abstract painting." For Schapiro, no successful representation is merely imitative and photographic, just as no pattern of abstraction is actually free of human content.

Schapiro belonged to no definable school of art criticism, had no methodology that could be passed on to students and epigones. His approach demands only a more alert seeing, enlightened by an exhaustive knowledge of the history of ideas, the history of visual representation, the lives of the artists, and the whole social matrix of art, including parallels with the other arts. A tall order, not easily filled without a lifetime of learning and an acute visual sensibility. Schapiro's nuanced approach, always infused with a sense of the present, explains the stark contrast between his work on medieval and on modern art. Writing about "the aesthetic attitude of Romanesque art," he becomes something of a formalist, seeing it less through its overt religious content than as an art "imbued with the values of spontaneity, individual fantasy, delight in color and movement, and the expression of feeling that anticipate modern art." In short, Schapiro looks at impressionist and abstract art in traditional terms as a way of rendering the world, a vessel of feelings and experiences, while finding in religious art some of the formal and creative independence intrinsic to modernism.

Schapiro's theoretical account of this tricky dance between form and content comes in an essay called "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content" (1966), which should be widely read by critics in every field. It appears not in the much-discussed *Modern Art* volume of 1978, but in a more recent collection, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (1994). If the modern volume is an as-

semblage of art-historical classics, the theory volume includes many pieces whose impact has yet to be assimilated. The 1966 essay reads like a skeptical postmodern manifesto that undercuts all those terms of artistic unity so dear to formalist aesthetics, whether Kantian, Hegelian, or New Critical. The relation between form and content, he shows, is as malleable and inconsistent as the patterns within any complex work. Qualities like unity, perfection, or coherence that we love to apply to works of art are based only on the selection of features we perceive at the moment. They belong as much to the interpretive process as to the aesthetic object.

As Dr. Johnson said about Shakespeare (and Poe argued about any long poem), the more ambitious the work, the more likely it is to contain ruptures and inconsistencies. "Perfection, completeness, strict consistency are more likely in small works than large. The greatest artists—Homer, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Tolstoy—present us with works that are full of problematic features," says Schapiro. "We cannot hold in view more than a few parts or aspects, and we are directed by a past experience, an expectation and a habit of seeing, which is highly selective." In other words, we bring our partialities and preconceptions, our habitual ways of seeing, to every act of critical observation. This is what makes new interpretations possible: they are based on "significant features overlooked by previous observers" and "an appeal to the freshly seen structure and qualities of the work."

With his customary balance and subtlety, Schapiro stops well short of a pervasive postmodern skepticism. The changing structures and qualities really do represent partial features of the work, not simply projections of the mind of the beholder. There *are* truths about art that can be established by the work of different scholars in a "collective criticism extending over generations." Always alert to contradictions, Schapiro saw scholarship as experimental and cumulative but also corrective. He showed how Freud misread da Vinci, how Heidegger mistook Van Gogh, each of them deflected by his own method and argument. When Heidegger saw in Van Gogh's shoes a sturdy pair of peasant shoes, he found what he needed to find. Schapiro respected the intellectual ambition that

drove them to misappropriate art, but he also had a Deweyan skepticism about the quest for certainty, a post-Marxist's suspicion of the true believer. He shows how the work of interpretation, with its strong impulse toward unity, can only be provisional. It rests on an ideal of perception that is almost mystical, "a feeling for the pervasiveness of a single spiritual note or of an absolute consistency in diverse things," he says. "I do not believe that this attitude, with its sincere conviction of value, is favorable to the fullest experience of a work of art." Schapiro, I think, puts his finger on the theological grounding of German aesthetics, as postmodernists recoil from other totalizing narratives. He sees formalism as a secular mysticism that obscures the work of art by idealizing it.

Schapiro concludes his essay with a kind of credo that offers a modest and provisional pragmatism in place of the spiritual satisfactions of formalist art history. Like Isaiah Berlin's politics, Schapiro's aesthetics are tentative, collaborative, and skeptical rather than absolute:

Critical seeing, aware of the incompleteness of perception, is explorative and dwells on details as well as on the large aspects that we call the whole. It takes into account others' seeing; it is a collective and cooperative seeing and welcomes comparison of different perceptions and judgments. It also knows moments of sudden revelation and intense experience of unity and completeness which are shared in others' scrutiny.

To me this sounds like the liberal outlook of John Stuart Mill, as expounded later by Berlin in *Four Concepts of Liberty*, but also like the experimental model of another of Mill's disciples, John Dewey. In old age Dewey consulted with Schapiro as he was completing his own treatise on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), a title that could be applied to Schapiro's criticism. But unlike the pragmatists, Schapiro could not quite relinquish the moments of ecstasy and revelation he associated with the other kind of critical writing. Even his skepticism is highly qualified.

A more oblique statement of Schapiro's own position can be surmised later in the theory volume when he follows his brief but incandescent essay on Diderot with a piece on the celebrated

connoisseur Bernard Berenson. The latter article, which first appeared in *Encounter*, is surprising, since Schapiro rarely attacks anyone; Michael Kimmelman in his *New York Times* review described it as "unusually testy." In fact it is an anti-self-portrait, for Berenson, another immigrant Jewish boy from Lithuania, represents everything Schapiro had tried not to be. He had turned his back on his Jewish origins, failed to develop after his early books on Renaissance painting, and spent his life accumulating money and living well as an adviser to the rich. He had no sympathy to spare for the poor and the unwashed, disliked democracy, and, worse still, detested everything about modern art. "Its great liberty of spirit probably disturbed him," writes Schapiro. "He failed to see the seriousness of its leading masters and their finesse."

For Schapiro, Berenson represents the dead end of the aesthetic movement, the pursuit of beauty "separated from the ethical, the civic, and the religious and lifted above these as a self-sufficient private goal." But he senses an inner contradiction in Berenson's career, for what redeems him in Schapiro's eye is the labor and exacting discipline that went into his connoisseurship: "Without this core of work his personal culture would have been vapid and precious. Rather, he made of the knowledge of art, both historical and aesthetic, the object of an exacting effort with a public result." As a poor immigrant, he had to make his own way. Berenson's success was founded on commerce, on the marketplace, not simply on a quivering aesthetic receptivity. "Business, a distasteful, indelicate subject, was the concealed plumbing of his House of Life." Thanks to both his scholarly and practical bent, which the aesthete in him was loath to acknowledge, "his sensibility became the instrument of a profession."

Not long afterward, almost as a foil to his portrait of Berenson, Schapiro wrote a sketch of Diderot that has strong elements of a self-portrait. Where Berenson is saved only by his scholarship and professional discipline, Diderot is admired as a passionate and gifted conversationalist, too restless and responsive to develop his ideas in any systematic form, living at a time when both art and society were going through a tremendous transformation. Diderot embodied

the freedom of spirit that was becoming the central value of his own age. A key theme in Schapiro's work, as represented in Diderot, is the parallel between the creative freedom of the artist and the social freedom of the individual, both of them emerging just as the power of church and aristocracy gave way to the new "public sphere" of the Enlightenment.

Unlike Berenson, "Diderot is so intensely concerned with artists not simply because he loves their paintings and sculptures. The artist is for him an example par excellence of the free man. . . . What Diderot says about the artist's freedom can be applied to the freedom of the citizen, which is a condition of the latter's dignity. In his warmth and spontaneity the artist is a model of the natural, productive, self-fulfilling man." Schapiro's idealized image of the artist as the autonomous individual, which influences his view even of medieval art, is exactly the point where his modernism and Marxism intersect.

As far back as his Marxist phase in 1937, when other left critics were attacking modern art for its bourgeois self-indulgence, Schapiro had maintained that impressionism, by turning nature into "a private, unformalized field for sensitive vision, shifting with the spectator, made painting an ideal domain of freedom." The very subjects of impressionist paintings, he suggested, the innumerable boating parties, picnics on the grass, and Sundays in the park, became the artists' way of using the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie for subversive ends, of emphasizing the principle of pleasure over restraint and responsibility. This argument about the utopian rather than regressive character of modern art would later be pursued more systematically by Frankfurt school writers like Adorno and Marcuse.

Though his interests turned in many directions, Schapiro at heart was a great expositor of modernism, perhaps the greatest we have had. In his mature work he substituted the modernist idea of constant upheaval and transformation for the Marxist faith in revolution, but many of the social values of Marxism remained with him, though they are hard to reconstruct from the

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volumes of his selected papers, which exclude his political writings. His remarkable essay on the 1913 Armory Show is virtually an inner history of modern art, which also explains sympathetically why the resistance to it was so strong. He showed how modernism had dethroned the hierarchy of subject-matter and moral uplift in art while renewing its social idealism, its ambition to change the world. From the viewpoint of modernism, he said, the artist was not only revolutionary, constantly remaking the whole idea of art, but ethical, because of the integrity of his individual vision.

Though he questioned everything else, Schapiro never questioned the modernist narrative of liberation, for he contributed so much to shaping and expounding it. He hardly touches the darker side of modernism, with its links to fascism and other forms of irrationalism, but his

work on individual painters remains exhilarating. Schapiro identified so strongly with modern art because, unlike the social revolution in which he had invested his early hopes, it was still happening all around him. But he understood modern art in his own terms, which were personal yet also social. He saw even its neoprimitivism as a form of social criticism and individual expression. His essays on abstract art profoundly illuminate the human core of visual experiments that can seem private, perverse, arbitrary, or alien. He notes that the modernity embraced by the early avant-garde has grown problematic, and he occasionally reminds us of how much was lost in the turn away from figurative representation, but he also opens our eyes to the spiritual adventure of modern art, the depth of feeling, the unexpected beauty, and the personal power of what remains. □

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He is arresting through his images—more rich in suggestive content than has been supposed—and also through his uninterpreted strokes which make us see that there can be qualities of greatness in little touches of paint. . . . Out of these emerges a moving semblance of a familiar natural world with a deepened harmony that invites meditation.

Writing in 1959, when abstract expressionism still commanded the New York scene and a formalist approach dominated the criticism of modern art, Schapiro typically moves through form toward the human configuration it expresses. The formal innovations of modern art—and the elusive content of some earlier art—had encouraged advanced critics to see all art in formal terms. Schapiro, on the contrary, anticipates virtually every strategy—the social, the psychoanalytic, the semiotic—that would take later critics beyond formalism. On Cézanne he looks forward to a time when "the personal content of this classic art" would "become as evident as the aesthetic result."

Schapiro was able to make good on this promise a decade later in a famous piece, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life" (1968). In the earlier essay he had complained that "the lives of Gauguin and Van Gogh have blinded the public to what is noble and complete in Cézanne's less sensational, though anguished, career. . . . His art has a unique quality of ripeness and continuous growth. . . . He admitted to the canvas a great span of perception and mood, greater than that of his Impressionist friends." Schapiro's portrait of Cézanne as an artist who combines nobility and anguish, tentativeness and completeness, hints at the personal content of his own work. Compared to his contemporaries, with their more dramatic lives and spectacularly expressive canvases, Cézanne was like the tortoise to the hare. Schapiro, so bountiful in conversation, so reluctant to publish, clearly identified as much with Cézanne's reticence as with his steady growth and ultimate ripeness.

On one level, "The Apples of Cézanne" is Schapiro's bravura turn in the iconological mode of emigre art historians like Erwin Panofsky. It reads like a detective story, an intellectual

adventure full of mystery and surprise. As Panofsky, deftly mobilizing a ingenious array of evidence, had unpacked the death-motif buried in the phrase *Et in Arcadia Ego*, Schapiro probes every valence of Cezanne's apples, from their formal properties, their domestic scale, and their sensual fullness to their resemblance to his own bald head, which he underlined in one striking sketch. Modernist critics had seen the apples as little more than a pretext, a "simplified motif" (in Lionello Venturi's words) that "gave the painter an opportunity for concentrating on problems of form." Schapiro instead concentrates on the apples, using them to construct both the nature of still-life and the elusive inner life of the painter.

In reading the accounts of Cezanne by friends, I cannot help thinking that in his preference for the still-life of apples—firm, compact, centered organic objects of a commonplace yet subtle beauty, set on a plain table with the unsmoothed cloth ridged and hollowed like a mountain—there is an acknowledged kinship between the painter and his objects, an avowal of a gifted withdrawn man who is more at home with the peasants and landscape of his province than with its upper class and their sapless culture.

Here Schapiro himself does the he attributes to Cezanne, moving from attentive observation to meditation. With the providential word "sapless," his residual radicalism, his imaginative empathy, and his sensuous feeling for the object come together. For all his scholarship, Schapiro's work is lit up by flashes of insight that take your breath away. His criticism is at once empirical and speculative, boldly imagined yet carefully qualified. Like many postwar intellectuals, he shifted his ground from the social to the psychoanalytic, but without really leaving his Marxism behind.

Schapiro's essay portrays Cezanne as a painter constrained and anxious in his feelings about women, thwarted in his early efforts to paint nudes and tackle ambitious subjects, unable to match the rich sensory appeal of admired artists like Delacroix and Courbet—but finally an artist who fulfills himself by finding a limited scale, a muted technique, and a confined but endlessly varied subject that obliquely displays his full humanity. Cézanne triumphs by finding his way around the emotional blocks that hold him back, as Schapiro triumphs by revealing the tension and conflict behind Cézanne's apparently serene art.

Schapiro set the stage for this study of Cézanne with an earlier essay on the anxiety and blockage he found in Van Gogh's "Crows over the Wheat Field," painted only a few days before the artist killed himself. As he did with Cézanne, Schapiro excels at portraying an artist under emotional pressure yet somehow finding, for the moment at least, a profound aesthetic and personal solution. Schapiro shows how Van Gogh's painting, with its ominous images and foreshortened perspective, resonates with his emotional crisis, which it still manages to objectify, enabling it to resonate for the viewer as well. Like Lionel Trilling in his essay on "Art and Neurosis," Schapiro insists on the artist's "intense effort to control, to organize," to take firm hold of tude of reality as he feels it slipping away from him. What others see as stylized or distorted in Van Gogh, Schapiro treats as witness to his "personal realism":

The strong dark lines that he draws around trees, houses, and faces, establish their existence and peculiarity with a conviction unknown to previous art. Struggling against the perspective that diminishes an individual object before his eyes, he renders it larger than life. The loading of the pigment is in part a reflex of this attitude, a frantic effort to

preserve in the image of things their tangible matter and to create something equally solid and concrete on the canvas.

Schapiro's feeling for the painting as physical object, intensified no doubt by his response to Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists, is as crucial as his sensitivity to the painter's accentuated realism and internal crisis. In another essay he describes how the impressionist painters' effort to render "the shapeless, diffused, unlocalized components of the landscape due to light and atmosphere" gave at the same time "a new tangibility and independence to the crust of pigment." The modernism that turned Clement Greenberg into a formalist made Schapiro a kind of realist, someone who sees paintings as experiences, expressive of the need and desire to take possession of the sensible world. This experimental approach also enables him to demonstrate "the humanity of abstract painting." For Schapiro, no successful representation is merely imitative and photographic, just as no pattern of abstraction is actually free of human content.

Schapiro belonged to no definable school of art criticism, had no methodology that could be passed on to students and epigones. His approach demands only a more alert seeing, enlightened by an exhaustive knowledge of the history of ideas, the history of visual representation, the lives of the artists, and the whole social matrix of art, including parallels with the other arts. A tall order, not easily filled without a lifetime of learning and an acute visual sensibility. Schapiro's nuanced approach, always infused with a sense of the present, explains the stark contrast between his work on medieval and on modern art. Writing about "the aesthetic attitude of Romanesque art," he becomes something of a formalist, seeing it less through its overt religious content than as an art "imbued with the values of spontaneity, individual fantasy, delight in color and movement, and the expression of feeling that anticipate modern art." In short, Schapiro looks at impressionist and abstract art in traditional terms as a way of rendering the world, a vessel of feelings and experiences, while finding in religious art some of the formal and creative independence intrinsic to modernism.

Schapiro's theoretical account of this tricky dance between form and content comes in an essay called "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content" (1966), which should be widely read by critics in every field. It appears not in the much-discussed *Modern Art* volume of 1978, but in a more recent collection, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (1994). If the modern volume is an assemblage of art-historical classics, the theory volume includes many pieces whose impact has yet to be assimilated. The 1966 essay reads like a skeptical postmodern manifesto that undercuts all those terms of artistic unity so dear to formalist aesthetics, whether Kantian, Hegelian, or New Critical. The relation between form and content, he shows, is as malleable and inconsistent as the patterns within any complex work. Qualities like unity, perfection, or coherence that we love to apply to works of art are based only on the selection of features we perceive at the moment. They belong as much to the interpretive process as to the aesthetic object.

As Dr. Johnson said about Shakespeare (and Poe argued about any long poem), the more ambitious the work, the more likely it is to contain ruptures and inconsistencies. "Perfection, completeness, strict consistency are more likely in small works than large. The greatest artists-Homer, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Tolstoy-present us with works that are full

of problematic features," says Schapiro. "We cannot hold in view more than a few parts or aspects, and we are directed by a past experience, an expectation and a habit of seeing, which is highly selective." In other words, we bring our partialities and preconceptions, our habitual ways of seeing and welcomes comparison, to every act of critical observation. This is what makes new interpretations possible: they are based on "significant features overlooked by previous observers" and "an appeal to the freshly seen structure and qualities of the work."

With his customary balance and subtlety, Schapiro stops well short of a pervasive postmodern skepticism. The changing structures and qualities really do represent partial features of the work, not simply projections of the mind of the beholder. There *are* truths about art that can be established by the work of different scholars in a "collective criticism extending over generations." Always alert to contradictions, Schapiro saw scholarship as experimental and cumulative but also corrective. He showed how Freud misread da Vinci, how Heidegger mistook Van Gogh, each of them deflected by his own method and argument. When Heidegger saw in Van Gogh's shoes a sturdy pair of peasant shoes, he found what he needed to find. Schapiro respected the intellectual ambition that drove them to misappropriate art, but he also had a Deweyan skepticism about the quest for certainty, a post-Marxist's suspicion of the true believer. He shows how the work of interpretation, with its strong impulse toward unity, can only be provisional. It rests on an ideal of perception that is almost mystical, "a feeling for the pervasiveness of a single spiritual note or of an absolute consistency in diverse things," he says. "I do not believe that this attitude, with its sincere conviction of value, is favorable to the fullest experience of a work of art." Schapiro, I think, puts his finger on the theological grounding of German aesthetics, as postmodernists recoil from other totalizing narratives. He sees formalism as a secular mysticism that obscures the work of art by idealizing it.

Schapiro concludes his essay with a kind of credo that offers a modest and provisional pragmatism in place of the spiritual satisfactions of formalist art history. Like Isaiah Berlin's politics, Schapiro's aesthetics are tentative, collaborative and skeptical rather than absolute:

Critical seeing, aware of the incompleteness of perception, is explorative and dwells on details as well as on the large aspects that we call the whole. It takes into account others' seeing; it is collective and cooperative seeing and welcomes comparison of different perceptions and judgements. It also knows moments of sudden revelation and intense experience of unity and completeness which are shared in others' scrutiny.

To me this sounds like the liberal outlook of John Stuart Mill, as expounded later by Berlin in *Four Concepts of Liberty*, but also like the experimental model of another of Mill's disciples, John Dewey. In old age Dewey consulted with Schapiro as he was completing his own treatise on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), a title that could be applied to Schapiro's criticism. But unlike the pragmatists, Schapiro could not quite relinquish the moments of ecstasy and revelation he associated with the other kind of critical writing. Even his skepticism is highly qualified.

A more oblique statement of Schapiro's own position can be surmised later in the theory volume when he follows his brief but incandescent essay on Diderot with a piece on the celebrated connoisseur Bernard Berenson. The latter article, which first appeared in *Encounter*, is surprising, since Schapiro rarely attacks anyone; Michael Kimmelman in his *New York Times*

review described it as "unusually testy." In fact it is an anti-self-portrait, for Berenson, another immigrant Jewish boy from Lithuania, represents everything Schapiro had tried not to be. He had turned his back on his Jewish origins, failed to develop after his early books on Renaissance painting, and spent his life accumulating money and living well as an adviser to the rich. He had no sympathy to spare for the poor and the unwashed, disliked democracy, and, worse still, detested everything about modern art. "Its great liberty of spirit probably disturbed him," writes Schapiro. "He failed to see the seriousness of its leading masters and their finesse."

For Schapiro, Berenson represents the dead end of the aesthetic movement, the pursuit of beauty "separated from the ethical, the civic, and the religious and lifted above these as a self-sufficient private goal." But he senses an inner contradiction in Berenson's career, for what redeems him in Schapiro's eye is the labor and exacting discipline that went into his connoisseurship: "Without this core of work his personal culture would have been vapid and precious. Rather, he made of the knowledge of art, both historical and aesthetic, the object of an exacting effort with a public result." As a poor immigrant, he had to make his own way. Berenson's success was founded on commerce, on the marketplace, not simply on a quivering aesthetic receptivity. "Business, a distasteful, indelicate subject, was the concealed plumbing of his House of Life." Thanks to both his scholarly and practical bent, which the aesthete in him was loath to acknowledge, "his sensibility became the instrument of a profession."

Not long afterward, almost as a foil to his portrait of Berenson, Schapiro wrote a sketch of Diderot that has strong elements of a self-portrait. Where Berenson is saved only by his scholarship and professional discipline, Diderot is admired as a passionate and gifted conversationalist, too restless and responsive to develop his ideas in any systematic form, living at a time when both art and society were going through a tremendous transformation. Diderot embodied the freedom of spirit that was becoming the central value of his own age. A key theme in Schapiro's work, as represented in Diderot, is the parallel between the creative freedom of the artist and the social freedom of the individual, both of them emerging just as the power of church and aristocracy gave way to the new "public sphere" of the Enlightenment.

Unlike Berenson, "Diderot is so intensely concerned with artists not simply because he loves their paintings and sculptures. The artist is for him an example par excellence of the free man.... What Diderot says about the artist's freedom can be applied to the freedom of the citizen, which is a condition of the latter's dignity. In his warmth and spontaneity the artist is a model of the natural, productive, self-fulfilling man." Schapiro's idealized image of the artist as the autonomous individual, which influences his view even of medieval art, is exactly the point where modernism and Marxism intersect.

As far back as his Marxist phase in 1937, when other left critics were attacking modern art for its bourgeois self-indulgence, Schapiro had maintained that impressionism, by turning nature into "a private, unformalized field for sensitive vision, shifting with the spectator, made painting an ideal domain of freedom." The very subjects of impressionist paintings, picnics on the grass, and Sundays in the park, became the artists' way of using the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie for subversive ends, of emphasizing the principle of pleasure over restraint and responsibility. This argument about the utopian rather than regressive character of modern art would later be pursued more systematically by Frankfurt school writers like Adorno and Marcuse.

Though his interests turned in many directions, Schapiro at heart was a great expositor

of modernism, perhaps the greatest we have had. In his mature work he substituted the modernist idea of constant upheaval and transformation for the Marxist faith in revolution, but many of the social values of Marxism remained with him, though they are hard to reconstruct from the volumes of his selected papers, which exclude his political writings. His remarkable essay on the 1913 Armory Show is virtually an inner history of modern art, which also explains sympathetically why the resistance to it was so strong. He showed how modernism had dethroned the hierarchy of subject matter and moral uplift in art while renewing its social idealism, its ambition to change the world. From the viewpoint of modernism, he said, the artist was not only revolutionary, constantly remaking the whole idea of art, but ethical, because of the integrity of his individual vision.

Though he questioned everything else, Schapiro never questioned the modernist narrative of liberation, for he contributed so to shaping and expounding it. He hardly touches the darker side of modernism, with its links to fascism and other forms of irrationalism, but his work on individual painters remains exhilarating. Schapiro identified so strongly with modern art because, unlike the social revolution in which he had invested his early hopes, it was still happening all around him. But he understood modern art in his own terms, which were personal yet also social. He saw even its neoprimitivism as a form of social criticism and individual expression. His essays on abstract art profoundly illuminate the human core of visual experiments that can seem private, perverse, arbitrary, or alien. He notes that the modernity embraced by the early avant-garde has grown problematic, and he occasionally reminds us of how much was lost in the turn away from figurative representation, but he also opens our eyes to the spiritual adventure of modern art, the depth of feeling, the unexpected beauty, and the personal power of what remains.

Morris Dickstein

“The Artist and the Citizen, the Values of Meyer Schapiro”

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