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Review of *Meyer Schapiro Abroad: Letters To Lillian and Travel Notebooks*

Meyer Schapiro was one of the New York intellectuals radicalised by the Great Depression and associated with the anti-Stalinist left in the late 1930s.¹ Teaching art history for his entire academic career at Columbia University he was renowned for the lectures that he gave there and at the New School for Social Research. At both institutions they attracted a whole range of contemporary intellectuals and artists, including some who would make their names as leading Abstract Expressionist painters in the postwar period. Indeed, it was this interest in contemporary American art, and its antecedents in late 19th century French avant-garde painting, that would help secure his reputation as one of the 20th century's most eminent art historians. *Meyer Schapiro Abroad* represents a different aspect of his scholarship. It is a collection of letters to his future wife, Lillian Milgram, produced during the period of July 1926 to October 1927 whilst Schapiro was travelling through Europe and the Near East to research his doctoral thesis on the Romanesque sculpture at the abbey of Moissac in southwest France. These are supplemented by drawings taken from his notebooks. The thesis topic was suggested to Schapiro by his supervisor Ernest DeWald at Columbia who helped him get a two-year research grant from the Carnegie Corporation to fund a journey from France to Spain, Italy and Greece, and then onto Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, before venturing on his way back. For a first generation American immigrant born into a Jewish family in Lithuania such an award was clearly based upon academic merit, as anti-Semitism was still rife in the university system in the U.S.

Whilst Schapiro's lectures were famous for their brilliance and a necessary stop for any intellectual passing through New York, his publishing record is relatively small for a scholar of such immense reputation. The two monographs he published in his lifetime (on Cézanne and Van Gogh) were exemplary within their genre, but not necessarily works of original scholarship.² As such, his reputation rests primarily upon a series of essays and articles that he published from 1931 onwards, many of which were later collated into a number of anthologies beginning in 1977.³ In helping to assemble this work, especially after Schapiro died in 1996, his wife Lillian (1902-06) – who he married in 1928, the year after he returned from his travels – played a key roll, devoting herself to organising his notes and lectures after her retirement. It

was Lillian who brought the 1926-27 letters to the attention of her nephew, David Esterman, who had decided to publish his uncle's travel notebooks as the latest posthumous collection of his work and served as the editor of the volume under review. Convinced of the value of Schapiro's detailed drawings of Romanesque sculpture and architectural details, and of the notes that accompanied them, Esterman needed a way of ordering them as many had been ripped from the notebooks in which they had originally been bound. Lillian suggested that Schapiro's letters to her would provide an appropriate chronological framework and hence the form of the publication.

As Hubert Damisch acknowledges in an introductory essay, Schapiro's journey was analogous to the European Grand Tours that from the 16th through to the 19th century were almost *de rigueur* for wealthy young English aristocrats, even if Schapiro's class, and in particular his ethnicity – which forms a minor, if not recurrent, strand within the travel narrative – clearly set him apart from such a tradition (5). The letters themselves are mixed, containing a few interesting passages pertaining to the objects of his study, but the contents are mainly incidental, informing his future wife of his itinerary and the assorted cast of characters that he met along the way. As such, the letters read as little more than a discontinuous and anecdotal travel diary. What is missing – considering what we know of Schapiro's main preoccupations in his later career – is any sense of his keen interest in modern art. Whilst Schapiro claimed to have been actively seeking out the paintings of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso in the handful of galleries that showed them in New York in the early 1920s, he seemingly made no comparable effort to do the same during his long visits to Paris where he could have more readily found such works.⁴ Hence the productive relationship between contemporary art and that of the Middle Ages that proved to be so dynamic in his later work on Romanesque sculpture and manuscript illuminations is all but absent from the letters.⁵

Similarly with politics. Whilst Schapiro claimed to have joined the Young People's Socialist League in 1917, and had read Marx and Engels, and Trotsky at an early age, the letters are also largely apolitical.⁶ Indeed the soon-to-be renowned radical art historian reserved his political enthusiasm for leftist Zionism and communist kibbutzim in Palestine, and he seemed strangely muted on the subject of Italian

fascism in his letters from Rome (81 & 89). This has a parallel in his research in that whilst his field-studies allowed him to see that ‘Between 1100 & 1150 there was a great burst of originality and experimentation in architecture and the other arts, which, tho ultimately based on the preceding 400 years, achieved a disproportionate effect and determined the forms for several hundred years to follow’, Schapiro could not proffer any material explanation for these transformations (25). His analysis of Romanesque architecture and sculpture remained a largely formalist one, a point he acknowledged himself when he wrote to Lillian: ‘I am professionalised, dear, sweet Lillian: I am a monster of measurements, plans, transverse sections, squinches, arabesques & other orthostatic courses’ (97). Correspondingly, the dissertation that Schapiro wrote up on his return and completed in 1929 – the first two parts of it which were published in *The Art Bulletin* two years later – predominantly conform to the principles of a history of style.⁷

This close attention to form was a significant component of Schapiro’s two groundbreaking essays on Romanesque sculpture and manuscript illuminations of 1939: ‘The Sculptures of Souillac’ and ‘From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos’.⁸ In the interim period, however, Schapiro, like many American intellectuals, was radicalised by the effects of the Depression. Hence Schapiro turned to Marx once again, this time in a sustained attempt to pinpoint the broader historical, political, economic and social transformations that could account for the stylistic shifts that he encountered at the abbey church at Souillac in France and the Benedictine monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos in Spain. From this new vantage point the ‘discoordinate’ composition of the sculpture at Silos could be seen as the expression of class antagonisms between ecclesiastical and secular authority, between spiritual conformity and freedom; and the secular motifs in the art at Souillac were similarly understood as heralding an accommodation of religious art to lay preferences, on a historical trajectory of social progress leading away from the dogmatic affirmation of church authority in the latter part of the 12th century and beyond.⁹ Schapiro subsequently claimed that all this was apparent to him whilst he resided with the monks at Silos, and that there was therefore an unbroken continuity between his doctoral work and the essays of 1939.¹⁰ Yet the letters that he wrote to Lillian whilst there suggest nothing of this nuanced complexity, representing instead little more than paeans to the simplicity and piety of monastic life (113-115).

Acknowledging the relative lack of material that Schapiro published in his own lifetime, and the consequent ‘longing for a larger lasting record of that mind at work’, Esterman argues that the travel letters ‘arrive to fill that desire in the most fresh and unexpected way’ (vii). I disagree emphatically with this claim and instead point the reader to Schapiro’s prescient remark in the letters when he wrote: ‘I am overwhelmed by the libraries of the world which surely contain 10,000,000 monographs ... which no search for proposed truth or man’s happiness designed, but the professional practice of printing, broadcasting personal details’ (96). Despite these larger reservations the letters do perhaps help us to periodise the shifts in Schapiro’s early intellectual and political development more precisely, lending support to the view that his work on Romanesque art moved from a formalist position through to a more broadly socio-historical one, as a result of a return to Marx in the early 1930s. As such, they may help to resolve the competing claims made about these matters in more recent scholarship and for this, if nothing else, they have some art historical interest. That said, nevertheless, I do think that this book is perhaps one posthumous Schapiro publication too many as it adds little to the reputation of this extraordinary thinker who was so adept at making sense of artworks, both historical and contemporary, and who still provides a template for rigorous art historical research today.

¹ On the New York Intellectuals see Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

² Andrew Hemingway, ‘Meyer Schapiro: Marxism, Science and Art’, Andrew Hemingway (ed.), *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), p. 123. See Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne* (New York: Abrams, 1952) and Meyer Schapiro, *Van Gogh* (New York: Abrams, 1952).

³ Meyer Schapiro, *Selected Papers I: Romanesque Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), Meyer Schapiro, *Selected Papers II: Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, (New York: George Braziller, 1978), Meyer Schapiro, *Selected Papers III: Late Antique, Early Christian, and Medieval Art*, (New York: George Braziller, 1979), Meyer Schapiro, *Selected Papers IV: Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, (New York: George Braziller, 1994) and Meyer Schapiro, *Selected Papers V: Worldview in Painting: Art and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1999).

⁴ Helen Epstein, ‘Meyer Schapiro: A Passion to Know and to Make Known’, *Art News*, part 1, vol. 82, no. 2 (May 1983), p. 72.

⁵ On this productive relationship see Otto Karl Werkmeister, ‘Review of Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Art*’, *Art Quarterly*, 2 (1979), p. 213 and ‘Jugglers in a Monastery’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), pp. 60-64.

⁶ Epstein, *op.cit.*, 1983, p. 70 and Andrew Hemingway, ‘Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), p. 14.

⁷ Meyer Schapiro, ‘The Romanesque Sculptures of Moissac’, part 1:1, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 13, no. 3 (September 1931), pp. 248-351 and part 1:2, vol. 13, no. 4, (December 1931), pp. 464-531. For an interpretation of the work that stresses its inherent formalism see John Williams, ‘Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style’, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 85, no. 3 (September 2003), pp. 442-

468. Werkmeister also argues that this 'self-contained' text 'acquires a questionably autonomous logic'. Werkmeister, *op.cit.*, 1979, p. 212. Linda Seidel takes issue with Williams' interpretation although even she concedes that the 'debut work, which focused on the formulation of principles of sculptural analysis, followed in the pioneering tradition of classical archaeologists and philologists; the later papers were case studies that examined the expressive potential of formal analysis on the one hand, and explored the intimate relationship between sociopolitical events and stylistic change on the other'. Seidel (ed), 'Introduction', Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. xxi.

⁸ Meyer Schapiro, 'The Sculptures of Souillac', W.R.W. Koehler (ed.), *Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter, vol. 1* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939), pp. 359-387 and Meyer Schapiro, 'From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos', *The Art Bulletin*, 21 (1939), pp. 312-374.

⁹ Werkmeister, *op.cit.*, 1994, p. 61.

¹⁰ 'The conceptual framework for my 1939 Silos article was first used in my 1929 dissertation on Moissac. The third part of this dissertation which has never been published, uses a Marxist concept of history... In 1927 I was a guest of the monks at Santo Domingo de Silos. Much of my article was conceived then and it was written long before it was published in 1939'. Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram Schapiro, 'A Series of Interviews (15 July 1992 - 22 January 1995)', interview by David Craven, *Res* 31 (1997), p. 16. Schapiro had already seemed to contradict this in a letter to James T. Farrell dated 30 July 1942 when he explained that he was not much politically engaged in the 1920s and was one of those transformed by what he called 'the 1930-1933 discovery of Marxism'. There is little reason to see why Schapiro would have lied about this to a close friend and confidant at the time, in fact quite the opposite. See Hemingway, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 128. Werkmeister argues that Schapiro's socio-political interpretation of Romanesque art was filtered through a reading of Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Karl Marx*, an English translation of which was published by the New York Critics Group in 1938 and reproduced notes and excerpts from Marx's lost article 'On Religious Art' of 1842. Werkmeister, *op.cit.*, 1979, p. 214. David Craven refutes this on the basis of a telephone conversation with Schapiro in August 1992, during which he apparently reiterated: 'In fact, the article was largely written in the late 1920s (1928-29) and represents my position *from then until now*. Furthermore, I had not read Lifshitz's book at the time. Nor is it a book that I find of any real interest'. David Craven, 'Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the Emergence of Critical Theory', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), fn. 65, p. 53