Meyer Schapiro

Born: September 23, 1904, Siauliai, Lithuania (born Meir Schapiro)
Died: March 3, 1996, New York, NY

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis
Meyer Schapiro was a critic, teacher, and art historian who spent most of his life in New York City after emigrating from Lithuania as a child. In the 1940s and '50s, Schapiro delivered many lectures that were attended regularly by many of the well-known modern artists of the time. Schapiro was a huge proponent of modern art, as well as a close friend and adviser to many artists, such as de Kooning and Motherwell, among others, who benefited from Schapiro's vast knowledge of art history and theories on aesthetics and perspective. More so than many of his critical contemporaries, Schapiro was a learned expert on matters of art history and theory, which made his opinions all the more valuable to the many artists he lectured to and socialized with.

Key Ideas / Information
Schapiro was, above all else, a teacher and an intellectual, who believed that all art must be appreciated within a specific context, and that any great art is linked to the social and economic conditions of its time.

Schapiro's ideas about art and culture were firmly rooted in the teachings and writings of Georg Hegel, the German philosopher, who believed that the spirit and significance of art is constantly being reinvented in different times and places.

When it came to modern art, Schapiro looked to ancient forms of art (Roman and Greek sculpture, religious art, different forms of folklore, etc.) as possible influences, refuting the perspective that they are merely historical documents.

In addition to modern and abstract art, Schapiro was also an accomplished scholar of Romanesque sculpture, but surprisingly, he did not consider this specialty to be separate from his love for modern art. When it came to discussions and studies on modernism, Schapiro made sure that ancient art history was an integral part of the lesson.

**DETAILED VIEW:**

**Childhood**
The descendent of Talmudic scholars, he was born Meir Schapiro in Lithuania to Nathan Menachem Schapiro and Fanny Adelman Schapiro. Nathan had abandoned the Orthodox Jewish
faith and was influenced by an Eastern European enlightenment movement that favored Western secular learning.

Nathan moved to New York City alone and worked as a Hebrew teacher at a Yeshiva in the Lower East Side. Once he had earned enough, Nathan sent for his family, who all emigrated in 1907.

**Early years**

While growing up in the predominately Jewish neighborhood of Brownsville in Brooklyn, Schapiro discovered at an early age that he lacked the natural gifts of an artist, but this shortcoming did little, if nothing, to deter his interest in the arts and their rich history. After attending public school in Brooklyn, Schapiro attended Columbia College to study mathematics, philosophy and art history, and graduated with distinction before his 20th birthday.

Although Schapiro was an artist himself, and painted and sketched frequently throughout his life, his real talents lied in history and education. In his earlier years, he studied under the painter John Sloan, but ultimately Schapiro did not make a living from his art work.

He wanted to pursue graduate studies at Princeton, but was refused admission - something he believed was due to his Jewish background. So he returned to Columbia to earn his doctorate in Art History. While writing his dissertation, he spent five years studying and researching abroad (mostly in France) and taking
in all the history and culture he possibly could of both ancient and modern European art; knowledge and experience that would soon prove beneficial to him and his many students-to-be upon returning to the U.S.

One invaluable skill he possessed was his knowledge of German philosophy and literature. Schapiro grew up in a primarily Yiddish-speaking household, thus he was able to teach himself German, and became very familiar with the teachings of Georg Hegel, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, among others.

In 1928, before completing his dissertation, he was made a lecturer in Art History at Columbia, and was appointed to Assistant Professor in 1936.

In the late 1930s, Schapiro helped organize a socialist dissident group called the American Artists' Congress, which counted as its members artists like Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb. The Congress was established as a place for artists to have a voice in the fight against global fascism. Schapiro later resigned from the Congress but remained a member of the newest organization the Congress helped spawn, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, formed in 1940 for the purposes of assisting artists in exhibiting their work.
Middle years

As a faculty member at Columbia, Schapiro began to gain wide acclaim for his progressive theories on art history, and in particular the cultural significance of modern abstract art, something that at the time remained on the fringes of what was popularly considered true art. Schapiro would soon help change all that. When the paintings of some of the European modernists - Braque, Picasso and Miró - arrived to New York City for an exhibition in the late 1930s, Schapiro worked hard to promote these works (still relatively unknown in the U.S.) by citing them as significant to the progression of art history, and offering his own theories on how these modern painters were influenced by artistic giants like van Gogh and Cézanne (two of his favorites). Schapiro lent some validity to the modern art movement, and the Abstract Expressionist movement that followed.

Schapiro had made his home in Greenwich Village, which during the '40s and '50s was a hotbed of intellectual and artistic activity. Schapiro was renowned and frequently sought out for his theoretical leanings towards Marxism and Socialism, and however controversial these theories were at the time, Schapiro
was known to be quite impartial and level-headed; he didn't argue for the sake of arguing.

Schapiro was on the acquisitions committee on the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and reportedly was instrumental in convincing the Museum to purchase Jackson Pollock's She-Wolf. Pollock was still relatively unknown at the time, a recluse living on Long Island, but Schapiro's intuition for great modern art seemed to be more attuned to the times than others.

From 1936 to 1952, Schapiro held one of the most influential roles in his life: a lecturing post at The New School for Social Research, in New York City. Many of his students, including the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, came to the New School specifically to learn from Schapiro and benefit from his vast understanding of art history. Many of the era's best artists were not themselves well versed in the history of their trade, so Schapiro proved to be a valuable asset and friend to many.

The one story for which Schapiro is probably best known is the time when he advised his friend Willem de Kooning not to abandon the painting Woman I. De Kooning had worked on it for 18 months, and Schapiro, ever the tempered and patient thinker, reassured him that it was a worthy endeavor and that he should complete the work. (Whether there is any truth to this story has been questioned over the years.)
In 1950, Schapiro and fellow critic Clement Greenberg were contacted by Samuel Kootz to help organize an exhibition at the Kootz Gallery, called "Talent 1950," which showcased the works of younger artists like Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline, Sue Mitchell, Esteban Vicente and Manny Farber. Many of these artists had attended lectures given by Schapiro at the New School and at the famed Artist's Club, which was a regular gathering place for artists and writers in Greenwich Village, much in the tradition of the Cedar Tavern.

In 1954, along with the literary and social critic Irving Howe and other New York intellectuals, Schapiro helped launch the magazine Dissent, a quarterly newsmagazine of politics and culture, which still exists today. The founding editors opposed Soviet totalitarianism and McCarthyism, and throughout the Cold War, they challenged the Marxist notion that culture in all its forms should be at the service of politics.

With the New York art scene, in all its post-WWII glory, now taking a strong liking to modern and abstract art, dozens of art galleries began popping up all over the city, and Schapiro was a regular attendee at many of them. By this time a seasoned educator and historian, Schapiro could have settled into his cushy professorship at Columbia and spent his later years basking in moderate celebrity, but he chose to remain active in the New York art world. In 1957, using much of the art on view in the galleries, he helped curate a show at the Jewish Museum.
called "Artists of the New York School: The Second Generation."

**Later years and death**

Schapiro was made a university professor at Columbia in 1967, and later a professor emeritus in 1973.

Throughout the '60s and '70s, Schapiro was called upon to deliver lectures and advanced courses on art at Harvard University, Oxford University and the College de France in Paris. In 1976 he was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He lived out his remaining days in his long-time home in Greenwich Village.

Although he did not teach very often in the late '70s, Schapiro did continue painting until at least 1979, and possibly beyond.

In 1987, Columbia University housed a very unusual exhibition, devoted to the art work of Professor Schapiro. The works spanned the time period from 1919 to 1979. This show successfully shed new light on a man whose talents and achievements were already far reaching in the modern art world, and the Columbia show proved he had even more to offer.
He died at the age of ninety-one, in the same Greenwich Village apartment he had lived in since the late 1930s.

**Legacy**

Meyer Schapiro was more than just a proponent of modern art; he was a historian and intellectual of the highest regard. He paid close attention to art movements that were popular in a given time, and believed that art and the society in which it exists must be considered in tandem. Any true appreciation of a work of art must be complemented by an understanding of why it is important to the time period in which it was made.

Although Schapiro encountered some of the most talented young art historians of his time during his tenure at Columbia University, his legacy as a PhD supervisor is surprisingly thin. However, he more than compensated for this in the lectures he delivered to a diverse public, from academic art historians to working artists.

As a friend to several abstract artists and as a member of MoMA's acquisitions committee, Schapiro was instrumental in championing the art of two of the era's most celebrated artists, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. It's worth asking today if either man would have been as famous if not for the advice and counsel of Meyer Schapiro.
THEORY:

Schapiro on Art History
As much as art history fascinated him, he was skeptical of historians and teachers in academia who had little to offer in the ways of real world experience. Schapiro's love for modern abstract art was informed by his love for much older forms of art (Romanesque sculpture, Renaissance, religious art, Impressionism, etc.), and he saw an undeniable connection between the ancient and the modern. In a 1973 speech, Schapiro said, "The study of art history presupposes that art is a universal and permanent feature of civilized life and that what we do to preserve it, and to discriminate the best of it, will contribute to future enjoyment as much as to our own".

According to Schapiro, art is informed by the society in which it is created. This idea was closely linked to the ideas of his philosophical and literary heroes, the German philosophers Georg Hegel and Karl Marx.

Many forms of art, wrote Marx, can only come about at an undeveloped stage of artistic development. In other words, in the history of art, great art is truly great because, when it arrives, we have no standard for judging it; nothing quite like it has come before, so we must judge it the only way we know how, by looking at the art within our own society.
So when the works of Braque, Picasso and Miró all arrived to New York in the late '30s, it was Schapiro who assisted the public in properly judging them, with the use of theory and history and, most important of all, a historical context. The public's understanding of Modern art was not ready and too underdeveloped to accept these artists as is, so it was Schapiro who helped ready them.

**Schapiro on Abstraction**

Schapiro once wrote that sculpture and painting were "the last hand-made personal objects" in a society dominated by the division of labor. This outlook is particularly relevant to abstract art, which communicates to the public more contradictions than solutions.

Schapiro viewed abstract art as a major leap forward in art, because while the world had been transformed by modernisation and industrialisation, it offered access to different realms, and its handmade products offered authentic means of expression. Abstract art, Schapiro believed, was a critical stage in history because it communicated to the viewer the achievements of the individual in an era when industry and mass communication was the accepted norm.
Schapiro on Dialectics
When it came to Abstract Expressionism, Schapiro promoted the idea of a dialectic in art, or in other words, the natural existence of opposing forces - a thesis and antithesis - which together form a synthesis. A dialectical approach to art is a concession that there are contradictions present, particularly in modern art, and it's these contradictions which must be embraced for their merits, not their shortcomings.

The specific dialectic Schapiro embraced was this: During the 1930s and '40s, when the civilized world was being torn apart by differing political and ideological factions (Fascism, Communism, Socialism, Democracy, Industrialization, and so forth), abstract art inspired intense emotion and spontaneity, and the greatness of the individual mind, all without communicating any political or ideological message. Schapiro firmly believed, like Hegel and Marx, that art and society were interconnected. However (and this is where Schapiro deviates from Marx), the two should and must remain mutually exclusive. Art, in many ways, reflects the society in which it's created, but it must
remain free of any social or political influence. This is a modern idea, and not one widely accepted at the time.

**Schapiro and *Kunstwollen***

Schapiro's writings and teachings were heavily influenced by a little-known German historian by the name of Alois Riegler, who introduced the idea of *Kunstwollen*, the definition of which has been debated for years, but has commonly been boiled down to the "will to art." In other words, any society's willingness to create art stems from its understanding of the world around it. The will to create art differs greatly from generation to generation, and from culture to culture, but the will itself always remains. When Schapiro viewed any art, whether modern or ancient, he yearned to observe it contextually, and through the lens of that time period's particular "will to art."

**Writing Style**

Schapiro provided beautiful and highly visual descriptions of specific works of art, something his more well-known contemporaries, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, did not do in their writing. Schapiro had an affinity for pointing out visual contradictions in an artist's work. Of Vincent van Gogh he wrote: "The duality of sky and earth remains-the first light, soft, rounded, filled with fantasy and suggestions of animal forms, the earth firmer, harder, more intense in colour, with stronger contrasts, of more distinct parts, perhaps masculine. Or one might interpret the duality as of the real and the vaguely desired and imagined."
Schapiro wrote about artists and their works in terms of symbolic meaning, and how such works existed in a historical context. Arguably, Schapiro's style of writing was intentionally designed to assist his readers in understanding a particular artistic style or form of expression.
**ARTISTIC INFLUENCES**

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**INFLUENCES ON CRITIC**

Meyer Schapiro

*Years Worked: 1928 – 1994*
Quotes
"Nature and abstract forms are both materials for art, and the choice of one or the other flows from historically changing interests."

"The movement of abstract art.. bears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture."

On Picasso: "There is no example in all history of another painter who has been able to create such a diversity of works and to give them the power of successful art."
ARTWORKS:

**Artist:** Paul Cézanne  
**Title:** Portrait of Chocquet  
**Year:** 1875  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Description:** In an excerpt from Schapiro's book on Paul Cézanne, he writes in reference to Cézanne's *Portrait of Chocquet*: "And as in [Cézanne's] landscapes, we follow the action of the brush everywhere, spirited and frank in creating a thick fleshy paste of pigment, rich in flicker, direction, and tone."

**Collection:** Lord Victor Rothschild collection, Cambridge, England

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**Artist:** Vincent Van Gogh  
**Title:** A Pair of Shoes  
**Year:** 1885  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Description:** There is an interesting story concerning Schapiro and this peculiar still-life by Vincent van Gogh. In a heated exchange with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, with whom Schapiro sharply disagreed on many topics concerning art, they discussed the origins of van Gogh's Shoes. While Heidegger believed that the boots once belonged to a peasant, thus, the portrait was meant to reflect the state of peasant life. Schapiro, on the other hand, saw something of the artist himself in this work, and argued that "the idea of the shoe as a symbol of [van Gogh's] life-long practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage." Schapiro was able to find deeper meaning, a reflection of the artist's life in the portrait. Furthermore, since van Gogh painted many still-lifes of shoes, it's still up for debate as to which portrait the two men were discussing.

**Collection:** Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

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**Artist:** Pablo Picasso  
**Title:** Evocation (The Burial of Casagemas)  
**Year:** 1901  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Description:** In his famous lecture, "The Unity of Picasso's Art," Schapiro wrote: "Picasso enters the scene of European painting with an astonishing diversity of practice." According to Schapiro, Picasso had no singular style, but a mastery of nearly every style. In Evocation (one of several paintings devoted to his recently deceased friend Carles Casagemas), the artist employs some elements of European religious art, and combines them with provocative imagery (nudes and prostitutes, for example). Schapiro pointed...
out that it contains a "unity" and "disunity" unfolding at once, and is symptomatic of the artist's work as a whole, "for one cannot help but notice also in Picasso's work that at the very same moment he is able to paint and to draw in several different styles, he is not bound to a particular way of working at a moment."

**Collection:** Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris

**Artist:** Jackson Pollock  
**Title:** She-Wolf  
**Year:** 1943  
**Materials:** Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas  
**Description:** Jackson Pollock's *She-Wolf* is an early work that pre-dates his use of dripped paint, and it won Schapiro's admiration while he sat on the acquisitions committee of MoMA in New York City. Despite much hesitation from other committee members, Schapiro, who was highly regarded for his knowledge and professional opinions, convinced the museum to purchase the piece.  
**Collection:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Artist:** Willem de Kooning  
**Title:** Woman I  
**Year:** 1950-52  
**Materials:** Oil on canvas  
**Description:** Schapiro can claim to have had a direct hand in the successful completion of this piece, since after working on *Woman I* for eighteen months, de Kooning was ready to abandon it altogether. It was only when Schapiro came to his studio and convinced him that it was worthwhile that he persisted and completed it. To this day, this painting is regarded as one of the most significant and controversial Abstract Expressionist paintings.  
**Collection:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York