“The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art”

Meyer Schapiro

Summary of the Argument
Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996)

"Art has its own conditions which distinguish it from other activities. It operates with its own special materials and according to general psychological laws."

Schapiro lived in Greenwich Village with his wife, Dr. Lillian Milgrim, and lectured at The New School from 1936-1952.
In this essay, Schapiro makes use of
• formal visual analysis,
• social history,
• psychology, and
• natural science
to show how abstract painting and sculpture
• embodies,
• focuses, and
• intensifies
key aspects of human experience and, in so doing, expresses our fundamental values and ideals.
Social History of Art

As a social historian, Schapiro believes that human experience is shaped by the

- political,
- economic, and
- social conditions of life.

It follows that we must understand whatever human beings do, think, and make — individually and collectively — in relation to these forces.

When Schapiro talks about “modern life” and “the present time”, he pays close attention to the complex factors that both distinguish this period from, and relate it to, other historical moments.
Definitions and Justifications
Definitions

“Modern” is not just a **chronological** category — for Schapiro it marks

• **logical,**
• **social,** and
• **cultural** distinctions.

He defines “**modern painting and sculpture**” as

the work of artists who take seriously the challenge of **new possibilities** and wish to introduce into their work **perceptions, ideas** and **experiences** which have come about only within our time. [1]
Justification

With this provisional definition of “modern art”, Schapiro limits his discussion to one medium — painting.

Is this an arbitrary decision? What justifies it?

According to Schapiro, modern painting shares many of the characteristics of modern literature, architecture, poetry, and music.

But painting has a special status in that it contains possibilities not found to the same degree in other arts and mediums.

Having said that, how does he convince the reader it’s true?
“It is obvious that each art has possibilities given in its own medium which are not found in other arts, at least not in the same degree. Of course, we do not know how far-reaching these possibilities are; the limits of an art cannot be set in advance. Only in the course of work and especially in the work of venturesome personalities do we discover the range of an art, and even then in a very incomplete way.” [Schapiro, 1]
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

In the pre-modern era, it was taken for granted that the role of painting was primarily to represent or depict various aspects of the objective world.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

This understanding of painting as a **representational** medium was called into question and **abandoned** by many artists in the first half of the 20th century.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

This radical shift in the understanding of painting produced a change in criteria and standards comparable to revolutionary shifts taking place in natural science...

...from the mechanistic model of Newton in the 17th century, to the relativity theory of Einstein in the early 20th century, both of which completely revolutionized the way we think about the natural world and our place within it.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

The parallel shift in the foundation of modern painting triggered a proliferation of styles, which many claim was a symptom of social chaos.

But this conclusion is not warranted, according to Schapiro. To see why, we need a larger historical perspective.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

For example, in 19th century France, artists such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Courbet adopted new and challenging artistic styles shaped not by chaos and lack of direction, but rather by re-fashioned ideals of order, liberty, and truth.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque and Slave*, 1839

Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*, 1849
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

Schapiro argues that an analogous shift took place in the 20th century — a re-emphasis on the value of freedom, creativity, and self-reliance.

Paul Klee, Abstract Trio, 1923

Pablo Picasso, Night Fishing at Antibes, 1939
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

Modern artists moved away from representation toward abstraction and the "self-sufficiency of forms and colors" in painting.

This gave rise to the inventive and forward-looking work of Abstract Expressionist painters in the 1940s and '50s.

It also challenged conventional views of art’s expressive potential.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

Schapiro points out that analogous forms of abstraction were occurring simultaneously in other arts, including poetry.

Example: Kurt Schwitter’s *Ursonate*.

"The Sonata consists of four movements, of an overture and a finale, and seventhly, of a cadenza in the fourth movement. The first movement is a rondo with four main themes, designated as such in the text of the Sonata. You yourself will certainly feel the rhythm, slack or strong, high or low, taut or loose. To explain in detail the variations and compositions of the themes would be tiresome in the end and detrimental to the pleasure of reading and listening, and after all I'm not a professor." [Kurt Schwitters]
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

Here’s an excerpt from the “Introduction” of Schwitter’s Ursonate, performed by the artist.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

And here’s a recent virtuoso performance by Jaap Blonk.
Emergence of New Criteria

“**Abstraction** implies...a **criticism** of the accepted contents of the preceding representations as **ideal values** or life interests. This does not mean that painters, in giving up landscape, no longer enjoy nature; but they do not believe, as did the poets, the philosophers and painters of the nineteenth century, that nature can serve as a **model of harmony** for man, nor do they feel that the experience of nature’s moods is an exalting value on which to found an adequate philosophy of life. New problems, situations and experiences of greater import have emerged: the challenge of **social conflict** and **development** [Marx and the critique of capitalism], the exploration of the **self**, the discovery of its **hidden motivations and processes** [Freud and the unconscious], the advance of human creativeness in **science** and **technology** [Darwin, Einstein, etc.]

“All these factors should be taken into account in judging the significance of the change in painting and sculpture. It was not a simple studio experiment or an intellectual play with ideas and with paint; it was related to a broader and deeper reaction to basic elements of **common experience** and the **concept of humanity**, as it developed under new conditions.” [Schapiro, 4]
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

As abstraction and expression trumped representation in the practice of modern artists, new criteria and expectations emerged.

The two fundamental requirements for the modern painting were that every individual work have both unity and expressive form.

The artist came to believe that what was essential in art...were two universal requirements: that every work of art has an individual order or coherence, a quality of unity and necessity in its structure regardless of the kind of forms used; and, second, that the forms and colors chosen have a decided expressive physiognomy, that they speak to us as a feeling-charged whole, through the intrinsic power of colors and lines, rather than through the imaging of facial expressions, gestures and bodily movements.... [Schapiro, 2]
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

This shift in criteria opened up a wide range of artistic experience and made it possible to appreciate both pre-modern and non-western art in new ways.
Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

The change in art dethroned not only representation as a necessary requirement but also a particular standard of decorum or restraint in expression which had excluded certain domains and intensities of feeling. The notion of the humanity of art was immensely widened. Many kinds of drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture, formerly ignored or judged inartistic, were seen as existing on the same plane of human creativeness and expression as “civilized” Western art. That would not have happened, I believe, without the revolution in modern painting.

The idea of art was shifted, therefore, from the aspect of imagery to its expressive, constructive, inventive aspect. That does not mean, as some suppose, that the old art was inferior or incomplete, that it had been constrained by the requirements of representation, but rather that a new liberty had been introduced which had, as one of its consequences, a greater range in the appreciation and experience of forms. [Schapiro, 3]
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

Given these new criteria, what needs and interests does avant-garde painting address?

Here Schapiro appeals to the value of

- reclaiming the individual "handmade" quality of painting against the homogenization one finds in mass-produced objects, and
- experiencing the “spontaneity and intense feeling” in modern art as an antidote to the numbing effects of modern work that flows not from one's intrinsic interests and desires, but is imposed by the needs and interests of others — what Marx refers to as “alienated labor”.

Surprisingly perhaps, Schapiro is appealing to a populist role for avant-garde art. That’s because it reaches "out into common life", he claims, and in doing so, is accessible to everyone. [8]
At this point, Schapiro goes into a general formal analysis and argument for the non-technological, personal, human qualities of abstract painting based on the move away from external, objective representation to internal, subjective sensations and states.

While he does not refer to particular artists or works, but clearly has abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in mind.

This section is worth careful re-reading and reflection.
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

Schapiro goes on to argue that avant-garde art is also important in being radically *distinct* from *mass media*.

The modern artist’s emphasis is not on *communicating* pre-packaged and easily accessible *messages*, but rather on engaging the inquisitive viewer through *expressive form* and *contemplation*.

Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, 1957
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

What makes painting and sculpture so interesting in our times is their high degree of non-communication. You cannot extract a message from painting by ordinary means; the usual rules of communication do not hold here, there is no clear code or fixed vocabulary, no certainty of effect in a given time of transmission or exposure. Painting, by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented....

The artist does not wish to create a work in which he transmits an already prepared and complete message to a relatively indifferent and impersonal receiver. The painter aims rather at such a quality of the whole that, unless you achieve the proper set of mind and feeling towards it, you will not experience anything of it at all. [Schapiro, 9]
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

Notice that Schapiro’s argument implies that avant-garde art demands an active, informed, and educated audience.

Only a mind opened to the qualities of things, with a habit of discrimination, sensitized by experience and responsive to new forms and ideas, will be prepared for the enjoyment of this art. [Schapiro, 9]

In fact, he goes so far as to say that communication with the viewer, in the experience of avant-garde painting, is replaced by “communion and contemplation”, analogous to the “sincere and humble submission to a spiritual object” of the religious life;

an experience which is not given automatically, but requires preparation and purity of spirit. It is primarily in modern painting and sculpture that such contemplativeness and communion with the work of another human being, the sensing of another’s perfected feeling and imagination, becomes possible. [Schapiro, 9]
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

This suggests a problem:

Does modern art diminish communication — a crucial aspect of human life — by placing such a high value on subjective, expressive form?
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

In defense of abstract art, Schapiro offers an argument from specialization.

Modern painting, he claims, has its own tasks based on its inherent possibilities as a medium. Accepting those limitations and working responsibly and creatively within them is the job of the artist.
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

Whether a culture succeeds in expressing in artistic form its ideas and outlook and experiences is to be determined by examining not simply the subject-matter of one art, like painting, but the totality of its arts, and including the forms as well as the themes.

Within that totality today painting has its special tasks and possibilities discovered by the artists in the course of their work. In general, painting tends to reinforce those critical attitudes which are well represented in our literature: the constant searching of the individual, his motives and feelings, the currents of social life, the gap between actuality and ideals....

By maintaining his loyalty to the value of art — to responsible creative work, the search for perfection, the sensitiveness to quality — the artist is one of the most moral and idealistic of beings, although his influence on practical affairs may seem very small.

Painting by its impressive example of inner freedom and inventiveness and by its fidelity to artistic goals, which include the mastery of the formless and accidental, helps to maintain the critical spirit and the ideals of creativeness, sincerity and self-reliance, which are indispensable to the life of our culture.

[Schapiro, 11]
The Value of Avant-Garde Painting

In the end, according to Schapiro, avant-garde art refines and reinforces values that are crucial for living a creative and satisfying life.

And the artist is the ethical agent responsible for producing art which has this liberating potential.

Hans Hofmann, Radiance, 1956