Introduction: Definitions and Qualifications

The essay begins with a few modest definitions and qualifications. First of all, Schapiro’s analysis is limited to “modern art”. By “modern” he means that which is particular and unique to the time and place—western society, postwar, late ’50s. “Modern art” is work by 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

These are as much logical, social, and cultural distinctions as they are chronological. Schapiro is a social historian who believes that human experience is shaped by the political, economic, and social conditions of life. What we do, think, and make—individually and collectively—must be understood in relation to these forces. So when he talks about “modern life” and “the present time”, he’ll pay close attention to the complex factors that both distinguish this period from, and relate it to, other historical moments.

Having offered a provisional definition of “modern art”, he then provides a justification for limiting his discussion, for the most part, to one medium—painting. Modern painting, Schapiro claims, shares many of the characteristics of modern literature, architecture, poetry, and music—a highly personal quality and freer sense of boundaries and formal limitations, in contrast with pre-modern art. But painting has a special status in that it contains possibilities not found to the same degree in other arts and mediums.

In the past, it was taken for granted that the role of painting was primarily to represent or depict various aspects of the objective world. This assumption that painting was a representational medium was called into question and abandoned by many artists in the first half of the 20th century.

The Emergence of New Criteria and Proliferation of Styles

This radical rethinking of the essential conventions of painting produced a change in criteria and standards comparable to paradigm shifts in natural science. Schapiro is thinking here of the change in fundamental assumptions or axioms that gave rise to non-Euclidian geometries in the 19th century, and from the mechanism of Newton to the relativity theory of Einstein in the early 20th century, both of which completely revolutionized the way we think about the natural world (“nature”) and our place within it.

Schapiro acknowledges that the change in the foundation of modern painting triggered a proliferation of styles, which may appear symptomatic of social chaos. But this conclusion, he claims, is not warranted. To see why we need a larger historical perspective. 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. Schapiro argues that an analogous shift took place in the 20th century—a re-emphasis on the positive and much-needed social and political values of freedom, creativity, and self-reliance.

Thus, according to Schapiro, the move away from representation toward abstraction and the "self-sufficiency of forms and colors" in painting, gave rise to the most inventive and forward-looking work throughout the 1940s and ’50s. It also challenged established understandings of art and its expressive potential.

¹ All quotes are from Meyer Schapiro, “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art”, Art News (Summer 1957), emphases added.
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.

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 unity and coherence, 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....

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.

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.

The Value of Avant-Garde Art

Having forged these new criteria, what needs and interests does avant-garde painting address? Here Schapiro appeals to the value of

1. reclaiming the individual "handmade" quality of painting against the homogenization one finds in mass-produced objects, and
2. 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”.
In this way, Schapiro appeals to a populist value in avant-garde art. It reaches "out into common life", he claims, and belongs to everyone.  

[At this point, Schapiro goes into an extended 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. He also makes reference to change, association, and the unconscious. I won’t try to summarize or reproduce this section. It’s a brilliant, detailed, and insightful examination of the general features of abstract expressionist paintings. While he does not refer to particular artists or works, it’s likely that he has Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in mind, among others. This section is worth close reading and reflection.]

Schapiro goes on to argue that avant-garde art is important in being radically distinct from mass media since its emphasis is not on communicating pre-packaged and easily accessible messages, but rather on engaging the inquisitive viewer through expressive form and contemplation.

[W]hat 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. And in many works where natural forms are still preserved, the objects and the mode of representation resist an easy decipherment and the effects of these works are unpredictable.

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.

Here Schapiro’s argument implies that avant-garde art demands an 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.

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. This is

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.

This suggests a problem: Doesn’t embracing spontaneity and freedom and rejecting communication as an ideal or goal diminish the role and expressive potential of the individual? In other words, does modern art exclude important aspects of life by focusing so narrowly on personal, expressive forms?

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2 Note that this is a utopian moment in Schapiro's essay, but one that reaches for an ideal and counteracts what often offends so many as blatant elitism in Clement Greenberg’s writings. Greenberg, in that sense, is not at all utopian, and often seems to assume an unbridgeable gap between those fortunate enough to have been educated in art and those whose circumstances in life make it impossible. So it appears their assumptions may diverge somewhat on the issue of art reaching out to everyone.
Here 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.

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.

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.

Timothy Quigley, 5 Feb 10