Arts & Humanities

Making Art History at Columbia

Meyer Schapiro and Rudolf Wittkower

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Art history came relatively late to Columbia, long after it had been established as an academic field at other major universities and colleges in America. Shortly after his appointment as President of the University in 1902, Nicholas Murray Butler submitted to the Trustees a “Report on the Organization of Instruction in the Fine Arts,” in which he deplored that “at present Columbia University makes no pretense of representing the art element in life and in civilization. References to it are cursory and inadequate, and this extremely important and significant branch of culture is, to all intents and purposes, unrecognized by us.”

It was only in 1921 that art history became part of the liberal arts curriculum of Columbia College, thanks to a bequest of $100,000 from the estate of the art collector Hugo Reisinger ’11HON for the establishment of a professorship in fine arts. Appointed the first assistant professor of fine arts was one Butler Murray Jr. (the intriguing similarity of his name to that of Columbia’s President and its possible role in his appointment have remained a matter of speculation). Dominating serious scholarship in the field at Columbia, however, was William Bell Dinsmoor ’29HON, known for his pioneering work on ancient Greek architecture. A professor in the School of Architecture and head of the Avery Architectural Library, the greatest collection of its kind in this country, Dinsmoor designed a program in archaeology that drew upon the faculties of the departments of Greek and Latin, Semitic languages, and Chinese and Japanese, as well as the recently established Department of Fine Arts (renamed Art History and Archaeology in 1960).

Although a strong bias toward classical art and archaeology continued to mark the curriculum, the program in art history expanded with new faculty appointments, at

Barnard as well as Columbia. Medieval art was taught by Ernest DeWald—who was to leave for Princeton after a few years—and by Charles Rufus Morey of Princeton, who crossed the Hudson to offer courses on Morningside Heights. Instruction in Asian art was given by a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, thus initiating a pattern of adjunct appointments by which Columbia took advantage of the resources of museums in New York. Marion Lawrence, a specialist in Early Christian art, was appointed to the Barnard faculty in 1929 and served as chair for many decades. The 1930s saw the arrival of a number of distinguished scholars whose careers were to add new distinction to its programs in art history: Millard Meiss ’75HON, whose work transformed the understanding of early Renaissance painting; Margarete Bieber ’54HON, an authority on Greek and Roman sculpture; and, at Barnard, Julius S. Held ’77HON, who was to become the leading interpreter of Rubens and Rembrandt.

Redefining a Discipline: Meyer Schapiro (1904-96)

rom the very beginning of its official establishment, one name defined the special character of art history at Columbia: Meyer Schapiro ’24CC ’35GSAS ’75HON. An undergraduate in Columbia College when the department was created, he received the first PhD in the field awarded by Columbia, became a member of the faculty in 1928, and remained at Columbia beyond his retirement in 1973 as University Professor Emeritus. Schapiro came to personify art history at Columbia and to stand for a particularly American approach to the study of art, one founded on a deep intellectual engagement with its European elders but particularly shaped by an equally profound response to developments in modern art.

Born in Lithuania in 1904, Schapiro came to America with his family when he was three; he grew up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, attended Boys High School, and in 1920, at the age of 16, entered Columbia College. His course of studies included Latin, modern languages, ancient and modern literature, anthropology, philosophy, mathematics, and art history, demonstrating an intellectual range that was to inform and characterize his work throughout his career. As much as he appreciatively recalled “a largely friendly faculty with some inspiring teachers,” the talented youth from Brooklyn especially “enjoyed the great libraries in which I loved to browse, the opportunities of learning in new fields,” as well as “the companionship of congenial, like-minded students with strong intellectual and artistic interests and readiness for conversation, whether serious or playful.” As an

undergraduate he continued to draw and paint, at the National Academy of Design. At Columbia he discovered the new literature of modernism as he confirmed his commitment to the visual modernism of Matisse and Picasso—and perhaps especially Cézanne, who was to be the subject of one of his first and most influential books (*Paul Cézanne*, Abrams, 1952). Schapiro obviously stood out as a remarkable student.

In the *Menorah Journal* of 1927, in an essay bearing the now embarrassing (but telling) title of "Jewish Students I Have Known," Mark Van Doren ’21GSAS ’60HON, then a young member of the faculty, recalled Schapiro, who in the alphabetic anonymity of the reminiscence is referred to as "student C": "C's face is as clear in my eye now as if he were not, as he is, four thousand miles east of New York, clambering up no doubt to some rose window in a French or English cathedral that he may quench his thirst for details in thirteenth-century design." "C's face was passionate," the description continues, ". . . it was positively beautiful. C glowed —in his thick curly black hair, in his eager white cheeks, and in his darkly rolling eyes. He too knew everything, but what he knew best was the history of art. I never saw any of his own paintings, but I have sat hypnotized while he roamed my office and poured into my ears a bibliography of, say, Byzantine sculpture. I recall a very clear exposition he gave one day of certain modern theories concerning the spread of early cultures through the migration of symbols; he described the symbols, and he made as if to tell me all the places on Earth where they might still be seen. That I could not stay to hear was not because I was unwilling; I had another appointment—to which he conducted me, still talking. I heard now and then that his instructors often resented his knowledge, which they felt was intruded without cause during class discussions. I am sure, however, that this was the best of causes—a passion to know and make known. The passion of a pitcher to spill its contents, the passion of a river to flow and, if the sun shines, to sparkle."

Schapiro graduated from the College in 1924 and continued his graduate studies at Columbia—having been rejected by Princeton. His classes with Franz Boas and John Dewey ’29HON, he confessed, meant more to him than any in art history, a discipline that lacked the intellectual rigor and challenge he found in other areas of study. His dissertation, "The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac," was defended in 1929, and parts of it were published in two issues of The *Art Bulletin* in 1931. Such publication, however, was evidently not considered sufficient to meet the formal requirements for the degree: "printing and deposit with the Librarian of the

University of seventy-five copies.” In 1935 Dinsmoor interceded, and Schapiro was finally awarded his PhD—a situation that has confused a generation of younger scholars currently writing their own dissertations on Meyer Schapiro.

On a Carnegie Corporation fellowship, Schapiro traveled widely in Europe and the Near East in 1926 and 1927. Voraciously taking in a vast range of art while doing research for his thesis, he was preparing the foundations for the larger vision of his subsequent work. He was also leaving behind a trail of legendary anecdotes that continued to be recounted long after by those who met the brilliant young graduate student. At Villa I Tatti outside Florence, he visited the redoubtable Bernard Berenson, who recorded the occasion with undisguised sarcasm: “Yesterday a very handsome youth named M. Schapiro sent up his card on which was written Columbia University. . . . It turned out he had been sent by Creswell [the Islamicist K.A.C. Creswell] whom he had seen in Cairo and Riefstahl [Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl, also an Islamicist] whom he had seen in Constantinople. He is acquainted with the entire personnel of the arts and the entire literature: he has worked years and years on Coptic art and as many again on the local school of Azerbaijan; decades he has spent in Spain and Southern France, and as for the remotest corners of Byzantine and Cappadocian art, he has explored, delved, and assimilated it all. I put him to the test by showing him my jade libation cup and my little bronze candlestick, and he praised them and discoursed about them as sweetly as Solomon did about the hyssop in the wall.” Whatever his appreciation of the young Schapiro’s learning and eloquence, the grand connoisseur—and fellow Lithuanian Jew (by then twice converted)—was obviously less sympathetic to such passion than was Van Doren.

The source of another, more legendary recollection of the young scholar is the Abbey of Silos in northern Spain, whose art, in both sculpture and manuscript painting, was the subject of one of Schapiro’s most ambitious and provocative studies, “From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos” (1939). The French art critic Jean Leymarie, a friend of Schapiro, tells of visiting the monastery in the years following World War II and hearing an elder monk recall the impression made by the traveling Jewish student: “His face was so radiant and he explained the meaning of the sculpture in the cloister with such eloquence that we thought we had some idea of what our Lord must have been like.”

Upon his return to New York and appointment to the faculty, Schapiro added significant new dimensions to the program at Columbia and opened new perspectives on the field at large. With his critical commitment to modern art,

Schapiro effectively redefined the responsibilities and ambitions of the discipline. In the winter session of 1934–35, for example, he was offering both a course on “manuscript painting, drawing, ornament, and calligraphy from late antiquity to the thirteenth century in Europe and the Near East” and a seminar in contemporary art, the syllabus of which was organized around the following topics: “(a) functionalist and post-functionalist architecture, (b) the content of modern painting, (c) painting and cinema, (d) sociology of modern art, (e) contemporary philosophy of art in relation to contemporary art.” Early in his career he also developed the course that was to become the intellectual core of the graduate program in art history at Columbia, “Introduction to the Literature, Theories, and Methods of Art History.”

On the undergraduate level, Schapiro brought the study of art history into the Core Curriculum of the College, before the creation of Art Humanities, through his contribution to the revised, seventh edition of *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West* (1928), a chapter, “Art in the Contemporary World.” In it he adumbrated the complex vision of modernism that he would further refine in the course of the next decade—especially in critical response to the formalist values of the recently established Museum of Modern Art. His was a vision that recognized the dialectic tension between the assertion of artistic freedom and the constraints of social and economic life. Schapiro’s liberal Marxism combined with his own artistic instincts to yield a particularly profound awareness of that tension and its creative potential. He knew that “individuality is a social fact.” Nonetheless, “Art has its own conditions which distinguish it from other activities,” as he declared to a professional audience at the First American Artists’ Congress in 1936. “It operates with its own special materials and according to general psychological laws.”

The larger aim of Schapiro’s project might be termed the reclamation of the artist, whether medieval or modern, in and from history. From the beginning, his method involved effectively reconstructing the creative process, through close and sympathetic stylistic description. From the expressive qualities of the work of art, discovered in accordance with those “general psychological laws,” there emerged a persona of its creator. Behind the style, Schapiro sought and found the artist. In the marginal figures of jongleurs at Silos, he saw affirmation of “the self-consciousness of an independent artistic virtuosity,” and he delighted in discovering and sharing the inventive fantasy of Hiberno-Saxon monks of the seventh and eighth centuries. He rescued this art from its neglect in an art historiography founded on traditional Western aesthetic values, based ultimately upon some sense of “classical” (i.e.,

Greco-Roman) norm.

It seems perfectly logical that Schapiro's focus should have been on those periods in the history of art when the basic elements of picture-making were subjected to the most fundamental pressures and reevaluation: In Hiberno-Saxon and Romanesque painting, as in Impressionism and Cubism, the picture plane itself is viewed as a dynamic field of conflicting energies and ambiguous relationships, the resolution of which resides in the very act of painting—and in the act of interpretation. As an artist himself, Schapiro was sensitive to the marks on the surface—the "special materials" of art—to the qualities of their making and of their expression, their "physiognomic" character, as he phrased it. Eventually, he formulated essential aspects of this analytical experience in a now-classic essay, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs" (1969), whose rather intimidating title only hints at its fundamental presentation of a pictorial semiotics.

As Schapiro demonstrated consistently by example, especially in lecturing, where his own enthusiastic engagement was so much in evidence, the best criticism reenacts creation. Those who attended his public lectures on Picasso in 1980 will recall the ebullient choreography of his re-creation of that painter's *Three Dancers*. Through his imaginative projections, his students were led into the scriptorium, the workshop, and the studio; they learned about artistic creation through his reenactment.

It was that special sympathy with the creative act that made him particularly welcome in the artists' world. Throughout his career, Schapiro moved between the Columbia campus on Morningside Heights and his home in Greenwich Village, between the University and the City at large. The shuttling was cultural as well as geographic. No academic or critic was more respected by the artists themselves—I recall Barnett Newman and Saul Steinberg, among others, as faithful auditors in Schapiro's class on abstract art in the early 1960s. Part of the Schapiro legend involved his privileged position among them—guiding the young Robert Motherwell, who had come to Columbia to study with him; persuading Willem de Kooning that his canvas *Woman I* was indeed finished; inspiring a younger generation of artists like Alan Kaprow and Sol LeWitt. Through Schapiro, students in art history at Columbia felt they gained some special access to the creative world of the studio. It seems only fitting that the endowed professorship established to honor Meyer Schapiro should have been funded primarily through the sale of an album of prints contributed by twelve contemporary artists, among them Jasper Johns, Roy

Lichtenstein, and Robert Motherwell.

In concluding a retrospective account of the history of art at Columbia, Julius Held offered “a salute to one who not only brought honor to art history at Columbia, but has been an inspiration to all people who study and love art: Meyer Schapiro.” Indeed, no name was more intimately and significantly connected with the development of the discipline of art history at Columbia or has had a greater impact on the field in this country, an impact that reached well beyond the halls of the academy to shape the critical response to art in the broadest sense.

Building a Department: Rudolf Wittkower (1901-71)

During the two decades of William Bell Dinsmoor’s leadership (1934–54), the department expanded its programs in several ways. For the Core Curriculum it developed “Masterpieces of Fine Arts,” the course that has come to be known as “Art Humanities.” It expanded the range of its curriculum to include courses in African and Oceanic art; inspired by Franz Boas in the Department of Anthropology, this pioneering effort to include so-called primitive art was led by Paul Wingert ’29CC ’47GSAS. And yet the department was hardly collegial, and upon Dinsmoor’s retirement, internal tensions frustrated the effort to select a successor. The University administration stepped in, appointing an outsider, Albert Hofstadter ’35GSAS from philosophy, as acting chairman. During his term (1955–57), Hofstadter oversaw further significant additions to the faculty, most notably Otto Brendel, who brought new critical perspectives to the study of classical art. Hofstadter’s most significant achievement, however, was the appointment of a new chairman from abroad. In 1957, Rudolf Wittkower ’70HON assumed that position, and the department embarked on a period of growth that was to lead it to its current preeminence in the field.

Wittkower came to Columbia from London, where he had been Durning Lawrence Professor at University College, having left Hitler’s Germany for England in 1933. Born in Berlin in 1901, Wittkower had studied first at the University of Munich and then at the University of Berlin, where he received his PhD in 1923. For the following decade he served as research fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, and it was there that the major concerns of his own research took shape, above all, the art of Michelangelo and that of Gianlorenzo Bernini, the giant of Baroque art and

architecture—and the artist with whom Wittkower was to become most closely identified. In 1931 he coauthored the two-volume corpus of Bernini drawings, pioneering in a field that had been neglected by contemporary art history, or, worse, rejected as unworthy of serious study. (He recalled that Bernard Beren-son, on being shown photographs of drawings by Bernini, confessed to feeling physically ill.)

In England, Wittkower turned his attention to the more theoretical aspects of Renaissance architecture. His research culminated with the publication in 1949 of his most broadly influential book, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. Wittkower set out to dispel the Ruskinian notion that this art, inspired by the classical forms of pagan antiquity, was essentially profane and unfit for a truly Christian culture. Denying that Renaissance architects were indulging in mere formalism, he insisted on the symbolical values of this art and demonstrated the meaning of its forms. The section on the principles of Palladio's architecture opened entirely new prospects on the understanding of harmonic proportion in architecture. Wittkower explored the significance of musical theory for architecture, the ways in which a building could deliberately declare its consonance with the larger Pythagorean order of the universe. Not only did his studies restore the fullest cultural resonance to the architecture of the Renaissance, but they proved an inspiration to a generation of architects in the twentieth century. The triumphal monument of Wittkower's work on Baroque art was his contribution to the Pelican History of Art series, the volume *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750* (1958). In this magisterial and beautifully written study, Wittkower organized for the first time an incredible range of art-historical material—painting, sculpture, and architecture. Shaping his complex subject with critical intelligence and methodological awareness, he effectively returned the Italian Baroque to the history of art.

When Wittkower left London for Morningside Heights in 1956, he had already experienced the American university scene, having taught as a visiting professor at Columbia the previous year and at Harvard in the summers of 1954 and 1955. Howard Hibbard, who was eventually to join him at Columbia, was a graduate student in those seminars, and, in the obituary notice in *The Burlington Magazine* of 1972, he recalled that experience: "I shall never forget my first impression of that awesome figure, who immediately proved to be so gentle, so generous, and so kind. . . . [His students] were profoundly and permanently influenced by the seriousness, range, and enthusiasm of his scholarship. But it must be said that Wittkower too was impressed by his new students—perhaps our combination of enthusiastic naïveté

and admiration was a novelty.”

Wittkower recognized the potential of this American enthusiasm. His new appointment offered the kind of major challenge that inspired his best talents; he saw the opportunity to build. He had warned the dean of the Graduate Faculties at Columbia that his appointment would cost the University dearly; during his tenure the department’s annual budget reportedly rose from $50,000 to more than $600,000. The faculty already boasted a number of major scholars—most notably Otto Brendel, Julius Held, and, above all, Meyer Schapiro—but Wittkower expanded its range, inviting Edith Porada to develop the program in ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology, and bringing in a younger generation of outstanding scholars—including Robert Branner in medieval architecture, Howard Hibbard in Baroque art and architecture, and Theodore Reff in modern art. At Wittkower’s retirement in 1969 the programs of the department encompassed the world—from Europe and the Americas to Africa and Asia, from the ancient Near East to the contemporary scene in New York.

In addition to new appointments, Wittkower invited a series of distinguished visitors to enrich the offerings, and he created seminars in cooperation with museum curators and collectors to assure that Columbia students had the opportunity to study works of art firsthand. There was no aspect of the study of art that did not find its place within the generous curricular arena envisioned by Wittkower. Beyond the curriculum, he created an Advisory Council, a group of friends from the New York art world dedicated to supporting the goals and programs of the department. Typically, that support came from projects that involved students and contributed to their education: a series of loan exhibitions prepared in graduate seminars, the catalogues written by students. The aim was to raise funds for scholarships to enable students to travel. Wittkower wanted his students to know their art *in situ*.

Colleagues and students remember Wittkower as a genial and generous giant. He encouraged the intellectually ambitious student to test new fields and try new methods; he was prepared to offer the less secure student ideas and topics that he knew would yield genuinely interesting and even important results. Any measure of his contribution to art history must inevitably take into account the scholarship that he fostered, that is, the achievements of his students and his younger colleagues. His effect was at once inspiring and catalytic.

Wittkower’s rare wisdom was never more apparent than in the spring of 1968, when the campus was in turmoil. Several prominent members of the faculty, distinguished

scholars who remembered the university violence of their own earlier careers in Germany, could view Columbia's student rebellion only with dismay as a repetition of that past. Although he had shared their pilgrimage, Wittkower maintained a clearer and more objective vision and remained calm. He thus offered an important ethical example, as well as very definite political acumen. Marshaling peers like Otto Brendel and Meyer Schapiro, he managed to turn a time of crisis into a shared moment of self-reflection. The events of 1968 only confirmed Wittkower's benevolence as a leader. By bringing conflicting generations together, he enabled his department, which only 14 years earlier had been severely splintered, to remain not just intact, but truly collegial.

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