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Against primitivism

Meyer Schapiro's early writings on African and Romanesque art

RISHAM MAJEED

When the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz was newly arrived in New York from Europe during World War II, he spent an evening in Dr. Schapiro's company. The talk turned to the great collections of tribal art in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and in particular to a piece that he had especially admired. To help Lipchitz recall it, Dr. Schapiro took a sheet of paper and drew, from memory and to scale, not only the piece in question but every other piece that had been in the case with it some years before. He did not see this as anything out of the ordinary.¹

To most art historians, Meyer Schapiro (1904–96) is best known for his work on modern and contemporary art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For medievalists, Schapiro is equally renowned for his penetrating formal and historical analysis of Romanesque sculpture, the subject of his 1929 doctoral dissertation, the first in the history of art submitted to Columbia University, where he taught until the late 1970s. But before he was celebrated as the charismatic polymath professor, he was engaged in disciplines and pursuits at the edges of the nascent field of art history. He also attended art school and was an accomplished draftsman, as evident in the travel notebooks he filled during his study trip to Europe and the Near East in the years 1926–27.

When he enrolled at Columbia University at the age of sixteen, there were few classes that engaged what would become his primary fields of study (medieval and modern art), so he also enrolled in anthropology courses with Franz Boas. Given that much of the “primitive” art that avant-garde artists were engaged with at this time fell under the purview of anthropology, it makes sense that Schapiro was drawn to Boas's classes. At the same

time, private collectors such as John Pierpont Morgan and Isabella Stewart Gardner had started collecting medieval objects—painting, manuscripts, metalwork, and architectural fragments—which were also then considered “primitive.” Furthermore, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, pre-Renaissance painting was frequently categorized as “primitive,” connoting both its anteriority and supposed stylistic naivete.²

Schapiro's training in the tools of art making not only gave him an alternate perspective on the “primitive” arts; it informed the itinerary of his study trip and stayed with him throughout his career. His interest in the stylization and abstraction of art from earlier periods and places beyond Europe honed his particular approach to formalism, because these arts so clearly invented their respective visual universes. The fraught political climate of the 1920s and 1930s necessarily inflected his thought, and his abiding dedication to social issues of his time heightened his sensitivity to commensurate power dynamics in the past.

When Schapiro began researching his doctoral dissertation on the Romanesque abbey of St. Pierre in Moissac in the 1920s, medieval art was primarily understood as belonging to an era in which all forms of visual production were conceived for a numinous purpose; functionality and ritual eclipsed style and form.³ In these very years, the same was true for African art, which was then the purview of ethnographic museums and perceived to be tied to mysticism, totemism, and fetishism. In the early twentieth century, both medieval and African societies were assumed to be subjugated to religion rather than rational, scientific, or secular concerns, and it was, in part, this reliance on religion that made them “primitive.” Before Schapiro, the

My initial interest in Schapiro's letters and travel journals was stimulated by David Rosand at Columbia University. However, this essay grew directly out of a later presentation I gave in Robert Harrist's seminar on Schapiro's archive in 2015. I am grateful for the incisive comments of Stephen Murray, Keith Moxey, and Linda Seidel, who critically engaged with earlier versions of this article.

1. J. Russell, “Meyer Schapiro, 91, Is Dead; His Work Wove Art and Life,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1996.

2. On this point see A. Hayum, “The 1902 Exhibition, *Les Primitifs flamands*: Scholarly Fallout and Art Historical Reflections,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 1–20.

3. See esp. H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994), along with the critique in R. Betancourt, “Medieval Art after Duchamp: Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence* at 25,” *Gesta* 55 (2016): 5–17.

only formal considerations of medieval and African art came through stylistic appropriations by avant-garde artists, most notably Picasso and his circle.⁴ Schapiro's dissertation and subsequent publications of the 1930s and 1940s refuted these views and credited medieval artists with radical and intentional formal innovations. An artist himself, Schapiro became the artist's historian.

During Schapiro's formative years in the 1910s and 1920s, there was no existing literature that rigorously engaged with Romanesque sculpture in terms of its formal character. Romanesque was deemed a crude predecessor to the more naturalistic expression found in later Gothic art around the Île-de-France. The most serious scholarship was iconographic, concerned with textual origins, or archaeological, attentive predominantly to problems of chronology. Stylistic distinctions were discussed as regional characteristics; inquiry into form had not occurred at all. Moreover, the primary material was not readily available to American scholars, and many monuments now considered canonical had yet to be photographed in detail.⁵

4. There is a vast literature on modernist primitivism, which is not directly pertinent to the study at hand. The argument presented here is based on Schapiro's earliest writings, which predate the debates engendered by the publication of Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1938) and the controversial exhibition "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by William Rubin at the Museum of Modern Art (September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985). Nevertheless it is important to note that even as late as 1937, when Picasso recounted to André Malraux his first interaction with African art thirty years earlier at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, he repeated anachronistic notions of fetishism: "The Negroes' sculptures were intercessors, I've known the French word ever since. Against everything; against unknown, threatening spirits. I kept looking at the fetishes. . . . But all the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits, to become independent" (J. Flam, ed., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* [Berkeley, CA, 2003], 33). For a recent reassessment of the MoMA exhibition and its ensuing critique see J. Hay, "Primitivism Reconsidered (Part 1): A Question of Attitude," *Res* 67/68 (2016–17): 61–77, and "Primitivism Reconsidered (Part 2): Picasso and the Krumen," *Res* 69/70 (2018): 227–50.

5. In this early period, Schapiro relied on the image archive built by Harvard professor Arthur Kingsley Porter, author of *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* (Boston, 1923). Schapiro developed a close relationship with Porter and often wrote to him with requests for photographs of medieval sculpture, as noted in Linda Seidel's introduction to Schapiro's Norton Lectures: M. Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Chicago, 2006), xvi–xvii. More recent scholarship has drawn attention to the paucity of available images before World War II. See especially M. H. Caviness, "Seeking Modernity through the Romanesque: G. G. King and E. H. Lowber behind a Camera in Spain c. 1910–25," *Journal of*

Given this intellectual landscape, a scholar aiming to understand Romanesque style on its own terms, not as a forerunner or successor, did not have a methodological model at hand.⁶ But this did not deter Schapiro, who had a long-standing engagement with underappreciated artistic styles (e.g., Assyrian and archaic Greek), the contemporary avant-garde, and the non-Western styles that had so great an impact on the modernist artists whom he admired.

Schapiro had studied art as a teenager and would go on to develop close relationships with many contemporary artists.⁷ Schapiro thereby gained a sensitivity that led him to consider formal challenges that artists faced in the past. Like the most progressive artists of the time, Schapiro was also fascinated early on by African art. These experiences converged during his research trip to Europe in 1926–27. The recently published letters that Schapiro wrote during his journey to his future wife, Lillian, provide insight into the early development of his theories of medieval art.⁸ These letters function as an uninhibited yet scholarly diary in which he wove his thoughts into a narrative at the end of long days of looking and reading.

In his notebooks and letters we see that Schapiro approached the marginal time periods and places that Romanesque and African art represented through the eyes of the sculptor, rather than those of the theologian

Art Historiography 11 (2014): 1–30; and J. T. Marquardt, *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951–2001* (University Park, PA, 2015). For a more complete historiography of Romanesque sculpture, see J. Nayrolles, *L'invention de l'art roman à l'époque moderne (XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)* (Rennes, 2005); and R. A. Maxwell, "Modern Origins of Romanesque Sculpture," in *A Companion to Medieval Art*, ed. C. Rudolph (London, 2006), 334–56.

6. Decades after it was first published in the *Art Bulletin*, when Schapiro republished the Moissac article, he amended the first sentence to reinforce the fact that his analysis was formal: "The study here undertaken is of the style of the sculptures of the cloister, the portal, and the porch of Moissac" (Meyer Schapiro, "The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac I," in idem., *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* [New York, 1977], 131).

7. As a scholar he was beloved by contemporary artists from Jacques Lipchitz, who attended his classes at the New School, to Robert Motherwell, who enrolled at Columbia to study with him. On this point see D. Craven, "Aesthetics as Ethics in the Writings of Robert Motherwell and Meyer Schapiro," *Archives of American Art Journal* 36 (1996): 25–32. In his obituary for Schapiro, David Rosand emphasized Schapiro's deep sympathy for artists by quoting from the latter's lectures on abstract art: "The humanity of art lies in the artist and not simply in what he represents" ("Meyer Schapiro [1904–1996]," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 [1996]: 547). See also W. Sauerländer, "The Artist Historian," *New York Review of Books*, June 28, 2007.

8. D. Esterman, ed., *Meyer Schapiro Abroad: Letters to Lillian and Travel Notebooks* (Los Angeles, 2009).

or ethnographer. Studio training propelled Schapiro to craft an alternate language for discussing these works, through which they could be evaluated in terms of their aesthetic qualities. His protean specializations as an artist, a critic of contemporary art, and a historian of Romanesque art always informed each other. Furthermore, as an eastern European of Jewish ancestry, he was highly critical of the colonial politics that enabled modernist primitivism from the start. Unlike other critics of the time, he made a wide-ranging and systematic case for “primitive” arts to be understood through the exigencies of their original users and makers rather than as handmaidens of modernist artists.

The works of African art that were amassed at the height of the colonial period were not accompanied by contextual or historical information because they were collected as little more than curiosities or trophies. Western artists and critics taught themselves how to understand African art stylistically and had started to develop a critical formal language for it by the 1920s.⁹ The present study will show how non-Western art, particularly African art, with which Schapiro was well acquainted, furnished an original way to engage with Romanesque art.

Schapiro and African art

Schapiro’s own sculptures, which are now in private collections, were carved in wood and stone during the 1920s and 1930s; these three-dimensional experiments further reinforce his interest in African and other non-Western arts.¹⁰ While his activity as an art student and

his early attraction to the art of his time are well known, his simultaneous fascination with African art from a very early age has not yet received critical attention. His personal archive, and particularly his early letters and travel journals, reveals that African art was a touchstone and a point of comparison for Schapiro as he confronted medieval objects. These materials likewise reveal the importance of African art for his early scholarship.

When Schapiro enrolled at Columbia in 1922, medieval art was hardly available in public collections. The Metropolitan Museum of Art had devoted a portion of its decorative arts wing to late medieval statuary in 1910. As for large-scale sculpture, George Grey Barnard, an American sculptor turned dealer, had amassed a sizable collection of French Romanesque architectural sculpture, which he had slyly shipped over before French patrimony laws were enacted in 1913. Unable to find a collector to purchase these fragments, taken from the abbeys of St-Michel-de-Cuxa and St-Guilhem-le-Désert, among others, he opened his own museum in upper Manhattan, which displayed fragments of Romanesque and later medieval sculpture in an atmosphere approximating the ambiance of medieval architecture (fig. 1). Barnard’s museum was a sensation when it opened, and Schapiro took advantage of the opportunity to see actual medieval sculpture and architecture in the years before his trip abroad: he makes explicit reference to Barnard’s museum during his travels when he visits the ruins of the monastic complex of St. Michel-de-Cuxa near the town of Prades in France.¹¹ The Cloisters became the medieval arm of the Metropolitan Museum of Art after John D. Rockefeller Jr. provided funds for its acquisition in 1925; it reopened to the public in 1938.

Reproductions of now canonical monuments, such as the abbey of Moissac, the subject of Schapiro’s dissertation, were scarce until Arthur Kingsley Porter’s *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* was published in 1923: two of the three volumes are devoted exclusively to images.¹² Thus during the late 1910s and

9. Early sources that approached African art in terms of aesthetics and that Schapiro would have had access to include C. Einstein, *Negerplastik* (Leipzig, 1915); G. Apollinaire and P. Guillaume, *Sculpture Nègres* (Paris, 1917); R. Fry, *Vision and Design* (London, 1920); C. Bell, “Negro Sculpture,” *Arts & Decoration* 13 (1920), reprinted in *Since Cézanne* (London, 1922), 113–21; S. Culin, *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (Brooklyn, 1923); A. C. Barnes, *The Art in Painting* (New York, 1925); and P. Guillaume and T. Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (New York, 1926).

10. A stone carving made by Schapiro from 1929 makes use of the natural curvature of the material as it is transformed into the contours of a nose and brow, which is a recognized hallmark of sculpture by Modigliani and Brancusi but derived from African carving circulating in those years. Features are fragmented and reduced to salient geometries with minimal projection from the facial plane. A smaller carving in wood made during the 1930s shows a more direct engagement with African sculpture. Deliberately carved as a fragment of three-quarters of a face and laid on its side, the head may be referencing the distinctive tapered eyes and nose of Benin bronzes, widely known by the 1930s. See *Meyer Schapiro: His Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture*, ed. L. M. Schapiro and D. Esterman (New

York, 2000), 77 (“Head,” 1925), 112 (“Head,” 1929), and 151 (“Head,” 1930s).

11. Writing from Barcelona on July 20, 1927, Schapiro recalls, “On July 14, I walked to Cuxa from Prades, & to Codalet, to see the fragments of the old monastery left by George Grey Barnard—On the hot holiday, peasants were still at work in the fields” (Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 94).

12. Porter’s introduction gives us penetrating insight into the ideological tenor of scholarship at the time, as he begins with the following assessment: “National vanity found the liveliest satisfaction in depreciating the monuments on the Spanish side of the frontier, and



Figure 1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, photographed in 1926. Capitals from the cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa (ca. 1130) appear in the foreground. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, New York.

early 1920s, African art was more widely available than medieval art in New York.¹³ Artists such as Marius

in praising those on the French side. Interest in this sport appears to have blinded all eyes to the still obvious truth, that the art of the two sides of the frontier is precisely the same" (A. K. Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* [Boston, 1923], 1:1).

13. In his review of the museum, Lewis Mumford remarked, "Maybe this is an experimental model to help us face more cheerfully the Dark Ages" (*Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford's Writings on New York*, ed. R. Wojtowicz [New York, 1998], 216). Mumford's wry commentary reveals the persistent view of the Middle Ages as barbarous and crude. Schapiro mentions the cloister of St-Guilhem in a review of crusader art published in 1930: "a pilaster from St.-Guilhem-le-Désert in the Barnard Cloisters in New York is decorated with acanthus scrolls very similar to the Palestinian specimens" (review of Camille Enlart, *Les Monuments des Croisés dans le Royaume de*

de Zayas and Max Weber facilitated the import of African art from Europe in these years, which prompted Alfred Stieglitz to remark, "De Zayas brought with him some things he had collected abroad. . . . How old these things are no one knows, but they are very very remarkable." His admiration prompted him to mount the path-breaking exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" at his gallery, 291, in 1914. As the photographer points out in the

Jerusalem: Architecture Religieuse et Civile, *Art Bulletin* 12 [1930]: 302). For a complete history of the Cloisters, see T. B. Husband, "Creating the Cloisters," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 70, no. 4 (2013): 4–48.

catalogue, this exhibition represented “the first time in the history of exhibitions that Negro statuary will be shown from the point of view of art.”¹⁴ Stieglitz’s photographs of this installation disseminated the ideas of the exhibition to a wider audience through their publication in the influential magazine *Camera Work*. Many of the exhibited works were sold to collectors, such as the prominent lawyer John Quinn, whom Schapiro credits as a pivotal figure because he had “persuaded the government to remove the import duty on foreign works of contemporary art.”¹⁵ The photographs of Quinn’s collection taken by the American artist Charles Sheeler show an array of styles of African art available in the northeast before 1920; subsequently a sophisticated market emerged for African art in the United States.¹⁶

In 1923, the Brooklyn Museum held the first museum (as opposed to private gallery) exhibition to present African art as *art* rather than ethnographic specimens, although the exhibition was nevertheless under the purview of the institution’s Department of Ethnology. *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* was curated by the ethnographer Stewart Culin, who had purchased objects primarily in Belgium and from the dealer Paul Guillaume in Paris during a short stay in Europe between 1921 and 1922 (fig. 2).¹⁷ The

14. Alfred Stieglitz as quoted by Helen M. Shannon, “African Art, 1914: The Root of Modern Art,” in *Modern Art in America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*, ed. Sarah Greenough (Washington, DC, 2000), 170.

15. M. Schapiro, “The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show” (1952), in idem., *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York, 1977), 138. Note that Quinn supported artists, including Jacob Epstein, who would go on to form an exceptional collection of Fang sculpture; see A. LaGamma, ed., *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary* (New York, 2007), 196–98.

16. On early collections of African art in America, see Y. Biro, “Exhibition Preview: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde,” *African Arts* 46, no. 2 (2013): 88–97; and M. Murphy, *De l’imaginaire au musée: Les arts d’Afrique à Paris et à New York (1931–2006)* (Dijon, 2009). See also Y. Biro, “Avant Charles Ratton: Commerce et diffusion des arts africains des années 1900 aux années 1920,” in *Charles Ratton: L’invention des arts “primitifs,”* ed. M. Murphy and P. Dagen (Paris, 2013), 42–57.

17. In the catalogue Culin wrote, “The entire collection, whatever may have been its original uses, is shown under the classification of art; as representing a creative impulse, and not for the purpose of illustrating the customs of African peoples. As art it may be considered as inspired by fresh and direct observation of nature. It is this which gives it much of its peculiar interest and value and it is this which may explain the influence Negro art is having upon our own art as intimated in the work of many recent painters and sculptors” (*Primitive Negro Art*, 1).



Figure 2. A painted Yoruba (Nigeria) wooden figure and a Kongo (Democratic Republic of the Congo) stone sculpture that served as a grave marker, as exhibited in the 1923 exhibition *Primitive Negro Art*. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of the Arts of Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas. *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (April 11–May 20, 1923). Installation view: Historic title “Fetish images. (wood, Lagos, Nigeria, unnumbered; stone, Bakongo, 22.1203).” Photo: Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

availability of objects for sale in European capitals was contingent on French and Belgian colonies. For this reason, the majority of the objects shown in 1923 were from regions controlled by Belgium or France. Despite its geographic and cultural limitations, however, the exhibition displayed a range of sculptural styles, from highly polished and naturalistic stone carving to tersely stylized treatments of the body. It was widely reviewed and had a significant cultural impact,

particularly on fashion, as evident in the press clippings from journals of the time.¹⁸

Schapiro was a frequent visitor to the Brooklyn Museum and would have seen the exhibition, noting perhaps the possibility for the simultaneous production of entirely different styles within a self-defined ethnic group or particular region. The Brooklyn Museum was a foundational institution for Schapiro and remained important to him throughout his career, as evinced by the fact that his brother endowed galleries there in his memory.¹⁹

Writing to Dr. Albert C. Barnes during his collecting “expedition,” Culin lamented, “Here I spent a week at the Museum of the Congo, reviewing their collections with the conclusion that they have failed to grasp the artistic significance of their material, and that they have relatively few things of the artistic value of the objects you bought from Guillaume. At the same time they have a magnificent collection of the sculptured images which I brought with me to show you.”²⁰ In 1924, shortly after the Brooklyn show closed, the more eccentric collection of Barnes—which exhibited medieval, African, and modern art together—was established in Merion, a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia, but it was not open to the public without express permission from Barnes.²¹ During Barnes’s lifetime, Schapiro was only once granted access to the collection. This occurred while he was a student, in the mid-1920s, as he recalled in a later request to the foundation.²²

When Schapiro visited the foundation, the African art that Barnes had acquired from Paul Guillaume was displayed alongside small-scale medieval sculpture

and modern painting (fig. 3).²³ Guillaume and Barnes believed African art to be centuries older than it actually was, and their publications attributed it to a span of decades that mostly covered the medieval period. The dates assigned to Barnes’s objects in the table of illustrations to *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926), a catalogue of the collection by Guillaume and Thomas Munro, span the time period associated with Romanesque and earlier medieval art (the eighth to thirteenth centuries). Guided by Guillaume and suspicious of Culin, Barnes declined the Brooklyn Museum’s loan request for their exhibition *Primitive Negro Art*, citing the supposed age and fragility of his sculptures.²⁴

Although Schapiro admired Barnes’s collection, he was not sympathetic to Barnes’s interpretive schemata. On August 4, 1927, he wrote to Lillian, “I poo-poo the analytical method afterward—tho it is a great satisfaction to follow complex rhythmical coordinations—& I think Miss Mullen an officious fool to recommend that in the approach to works of art, random & ‘aimless’ movements be diminished by ‘education’ & only the ‘essentials[.]’ attended to, as a result of the Barnes & John Dewey analytical focus.”²⁵ Schapiro was developing an approach to style that considered context and form to be inextricable, unlike Barnes, who advocated for a purely formal system divorced from sociocultural context. Barnes’s hostility to academic and critical writing is manifest in an exchange with Schapiro in the

18. On the reception of this exhibition, see W. C. Siegmann, “A Collection Grows in Brooklyn,” in *African Art: A Century at the Brooklyn Museum*, ed. W. C. Siegmann (New York, 2009), 11–28.

19. The dedication to the Morris A. and Meyer Schapiro Wing at the Brooklyn Museum states: “Endowed through the generosity of Morris A. Schapiro, pioneer financier of American banking, this wing is dedicated to him and his brother Meyer Schapiro, eminent art historian and mentor to generations of scholars and artists.”

20. Stewart Culin to Albert Barnes, October 3, 1922, Barnes Foundation Archive AR.ABC.1922.34.

21. For an overview of Barnes’s African art collection, see C. Clarke, “Albert Barnes, the Barnes Foundation, and African Art,” in *African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of L’Art nègre and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. C. Clarke (New York, 2015), 21–72.

22. “I am publishing a book on Seurat and wish to study those pictures which I have not seen since my visit to the Foundation as a student many years ago” (Meyer Schapiro to the Barnes Foundation, April 15, 1958, MS #1121, box 113, folder 8, series II, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).

23. On September 12, 1922, Barnes wrote to Guillaume: “My negro sculpture is a constant joy and my pictures look all the better for having the carvings for company” (Barnes Foundation Archive AR.ABC.1922.70). On October 6, 1922, Barnes wrote to Culin of his African art collection: “My pieces are a delight which increases daily and they go most beautifully with my paintings” (Barnes Foundation Archive AR.ABC.1922.33).

24. On February 2, 1923, Barnes wrote to Culin: “I just returned from Paris and Guillaume advises extreme care of them in their present conditions. . . . My pieces are all very old, have never been kept in the steam-heated atmosphere we find necessary here and have consequently suffered from these combined causes” (Barnes Foundation Archive AR.ABC.1923.46).

25. Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 107. “Miss Mullen” was a docent at the Barnes Foundation at the time. Barnes was a staunch advocate of the art theories of philosopher John Dewey, collected and published as *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934). Later in life, Schapiro stated that the publication “is marked by a tendency to treat humanity and art as extensions of nature, as products of nature, without dealing with how humanity reshapes and remakes nature, hence also itself. This lack of emphasis on mediating nature, on humanity using craft and art to redefine itself, is a problem of the book” (M. Schapiro, L. M. Schapiro, and D. Craven, “A Series of Interviews [July 15, 1992–January 22, 1995],” *Res* 31 [1997]: 159).



Figure 3. The Barnes Foundation. Ensemble view, Gallery 22, south wall, Merion, 2006. African art is in the vitrine while Modernist paintings are hung on the walls along with medieval carvings. Photo © 2019 The Barnes Foundation. Color version available as an online enhancement.

early 1930s. The two had a long and contentious correspondence. In one of the more creatively offensive rejection letters, Peter Kelly of the Barnes Foundation wrote, in a letter to Schapiro dated April 14, 1934, "I read your letter of April 12th to Dr. Barnes, and he said: 'Tell little Jack Horner that his use of the names of two universities as proof of his capacity is in reality merely additional evidence of the educational bankruptcy prevalent in existing institutions. His confusion of values arises from not knowing that identifying with symbols of worth is the outstanding symptoms [*sic*] of that social-disorder-breeding neurosis most common in Jews. Our gallery has no gimlet to penetrate that crust, so we shall continue to reserve admission to hopefuls.'"²⁶ Such unabashed anti-Semitism was common at the time, and Schapiro's ethnic identity positioned him as an outsider; it's possible his own alterity made him particularly responsive to art that was considered marginal and

primitive.²⁷ Certainly the first collectors of African art were Jewish, and the scholarly embrace of African art in spite of racial biases may have served as a retort to the systemic anti-Semitism they faced regularly.²⁸

Having familiarized himself with these collections of African art and having taken Franz Boas's anthropology courses at Columbia, Schapiro was conversant with African and other non-Western art before he departed for Europe. While his primary purpose was to study medieval art, Schapiro's scholarly preparation at Columbia and in New York collections ensured that while abroad he would engage with a wide array of

27. As Hubert Damisch noted in his introduction to Schapiro's travel notebooks: "In his case, then, the possibility of making such a trip . . . was due solely to his own merits: a point not to be taken for granted in this period, when anti-Semitism, more or less openly avowed, was still pervasive in American higher education" ("These Are All about Me," in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 5).

28. Mason Klein makes a similar point regarding Helena Rubinstein's motivation to collect African art in *Helena Rubinstein: Beauty Is Power* (New York, 2014).

26. Barnes Foundation Archive AR.ABC.1934.473.

material culture, including the important museums of the Trocadéro palace in Paris, which was built for the World's Fair of 1878 and destroyed to make room for the Palais de Chaillot for the World's Fair of 1937.

The Musée de Sculpture Comparée and the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro had been founded together for the 1878 World's Fair as twin institutions presenting artifacts from distant time periods (including the Middle Ages) and remote regions (most prominently Africa and Oceania; see figs. 4–5). In Paris, Schapiro spent much of his time working in the library of the Musée de Sculpture Comparée, which housed plaster casts of primarily French Romanesque, Egyptian, and Archaic Greek sculpture. His letters make it clear that he also devoted a significant portion of his limited time in Paris at the ethnographic museum across the foyer (fig. 4). Schapiro's familiarity with the collections of the Musée d'Ethnographie (renamed the Musée de l'Homme in 1937) was deep-seated and became a prominent point in his obituary in the *New York Times*.²⁹

Throughout his travels, Schapiro had been collecting ethnographic bulletins in bookshops even before he arrived in Paris.³⁰ Once settled in, he wrote to Lillian of the museums of the Trocadéro: "in the same building are casts of most of the important carvings from the earliest times & a large museum of Ethnology."³¹ Writing from Paris, he did not dwell on the ethnological collection, but while traveling, he made frequent comparative reference to African art when analyzing Romanesque carvings in the provinces. Furthermore, his notebooks are filled with drawings from ethnological collections in regional museums that he visited en route to medieval sites.³²

Arriving in Toulouse, Schapiro likened a reliquary bust to the shifting geometries of African sculpture, revealing his appreciation of the multiple viewpoints and scales that are simultaneously deployed in African and medieval art (fig. 5): "What a grand buste reliquaire for a bone; he is perfection in every detail, not a line or plane wrong—supreme homeliness of face neck and shoulders with such beautiful result—like African wood

carving—try him upside down from close by and away for detail—such surface should be touched as well as seen—there are nice asymmetries of modeling as well as line; & the profile is as subtly round and angular."³³

Schapiro's analysis corroborates the scope of his engagement with African art before he left for Europe, to the extent that it functioned as a benchmark for him. He was clearly acquainted with Kota reliquary guardian figures from Gabon, which he would have seen at the Barnes Foundation and subsequently in Paris. Medieval reliquary busts and Kota guardian figures are made with the same technique: in each case, a carved wooden core is clad with an elaborate repoussé exterior. At the pilgrimage church and abbey of St. Foi at Conques, Schapiro again linked Romanesque and African carving (fig. 6): "this sculpture which has everything any tradition has had; there are heads of classic smoothness and regularity, archaic draperies, details of African abstraction and the most barbaric folk fancies in the Hell Torment; and with it all an architectural composition of as complicated groups as are found in the Renaissance."³⁴ Here Schapiro appears to be laying the groundwork for a method that celebrated the coeval existence of different styles in a single monument, which he would fully flesh out in his discussion of the cloister capitals of Moissac and later at the abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos; however, as we have seen, he had already encountered this phenomenon at the Brooklyn Museum with regard to distinct styles from the same region and time period.

Romanesque in Gotham

Schapiro returned to New York in 1927. As a Jewish émigré, and as a politically engaged American scholar, he was not invested in the territorial claims of European nationalism, which led scholars of particular countries to argue for the originality or priority of their medieval art.³⁵ This physical and intellectual distance enabled him to pursue the idea of Romanesque as "primitive," as a resistive style that was inventive, autonomous, and

29. See the epigraph at the beginning of this essay.

30. "Imagine, dear, I picked up Boas' *Handbook of American Indian Languages* in Nantes for less than 15 cents! and a whole series of *Bulletins of the Bureau of Ethnology*" (Meyer Schapiro to Lillian Milgram, July 27, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 25).

31. Meyer Schapiro to Lillian Milgram, August 28, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 31.

32. See, e.g., Schapiro's sketches of Gallo-Roman utilitarian objects at the Musée Anne de Beaujeu in Moulins, France, made on September 15, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 137.

33. Postcard from Meyer Schapiro to Lillian Milgram, October 15, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 43.

34. Meyer Schapiro to Lillian Milgram, September 26, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 40.

35. In her introduction to Schapiro's Norton Lectures, which he delivered in 1967, Linda Seidel notes, "Porter and Schapiro, foreigners with less at stake, were staunch critics of European claims concerning the chronology of medieval art, challenging what often seemed to them to be proprietary commentary on local carvings" (Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture*, xiii).

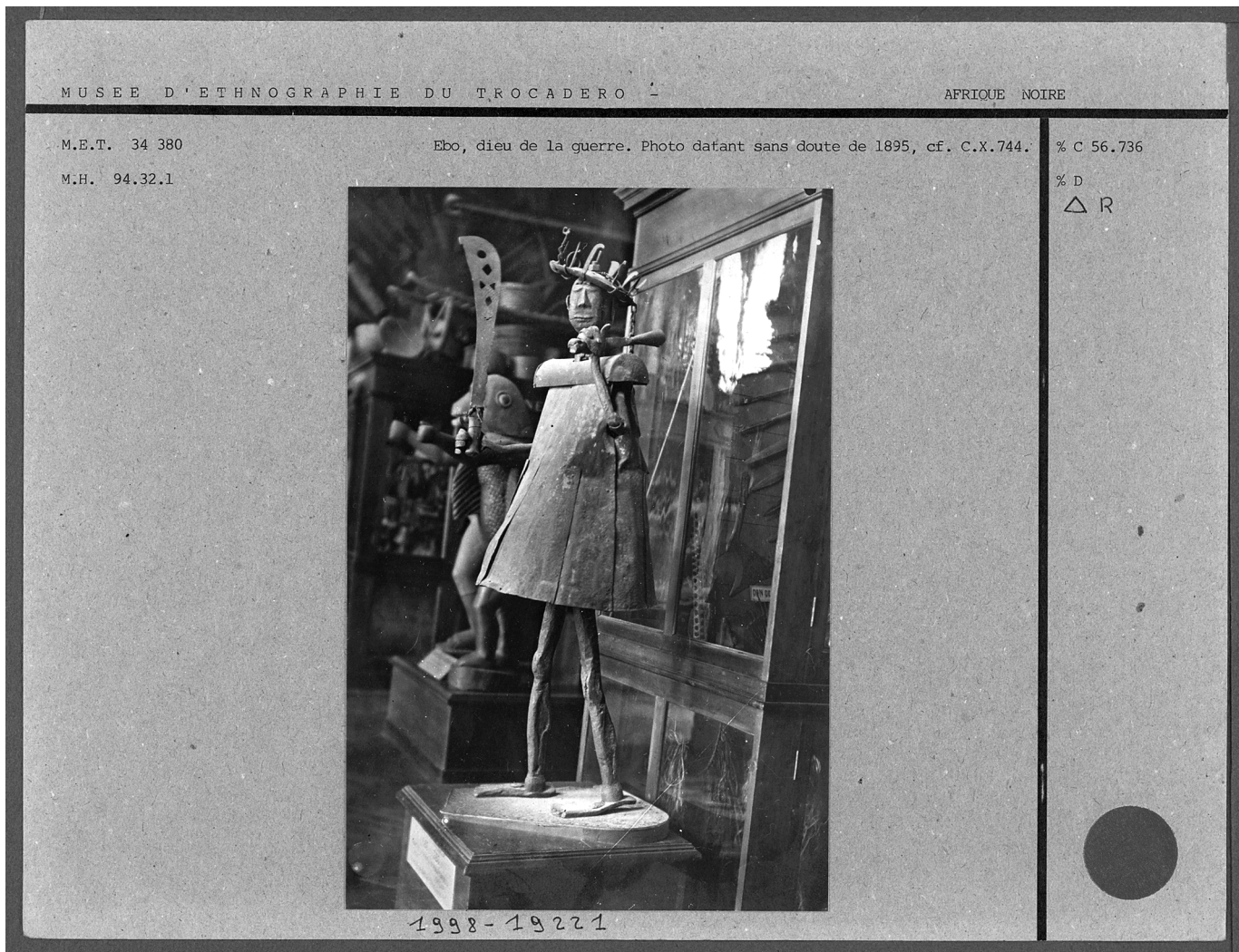


Figure 4. Akati Eklékendo, *Gou, God of War and Iron*, before 1858 (Fon, Republic of Bénin). Photographed in 1895 at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris. Now in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac (inv. 71.1894.32.1), installed at the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, Paris. Photo: © Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ Art Resource, New York. Color version available as an online enhancement.

socially engaged. Schapiro critically embraced the term “primitive” in a complex and positive fashion in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent publications on the sculptures of the abbey of Moissac.

For the first half of the twentieth century the terms “primitive” and “archaic” were used interchangeably to describe most premodern art that did not originate in classical Greece or Renaissance Europe. The arts of archaic Greece, Egypt, Romanesque Europe, Africa, and Oceania were frequently compared. Archaic Greek art, characterized by the planar hieratic stylization of freestanding kouroi, was perceived to have de-animated

the body. One of the first aesthetic appraisals of the preclassical period was Emanuel Löwy's *Die Naturwiedergabe in der älteren griechischen Kunst* (1900), which became influential in the first third of the twentieth century. Löwy was the first to liken the stylized preclassical or “primitive” carvings to the art of children who proceed from a composite “memory picture”: “As the result of the visual impressions which we have received from numerous examples of the same object, there remains fixed in our minds a memory-picture, which is no other than the Platonic Idea of the object, namely, a typical picture, clear of everything individual



Figure 5. Postcard of a thirteenth-century reliquary bust. Gold repoussé over a wooden core, jewels, rock crystal. Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse. Postcard in the public domain. Color version available as an online enhancement.

or accidental.”³⁶ Löwy theorizes that in recollection, our minds summarize details into streamlined signifiers of form, which accounts for the succinct stylization of the body in archaic art.

The analogy to the art of children became a readily perceivable way to understand African art, in which commentators observed the same strategies of representation. Of course this equivalence had overtly pejorative associations, since it amounted to seeing African artists as living fossils of mankind’s childhood. In one of the earliest aesthetic considerations of African art, “The Art of the Bushmen” (1910), the influential art critic Roger Fry related African art to children’s drawings:

36. E. Löwy, *The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art*, trans. J. Fothergill (London, 1907), 10.

In a child’s drawing we find a number of forms which have scarcely any reference to actual appearances, but which directly symbolise the most significant concepts of the thing represented. . . . The child does, of course, know that the figure thus drawn is not like a man, but it is a kind of hieroglyphic script for a man, and satisfies his desire for expression. Precisely the same phenomenon occurs in primitive art; the symbols for concepts gradually take on more and more of the likeness to appearances, but the mode of approach remains even in comparatively advanced periods the same. The artist does not seek to transfer a visual sensation to paper, but to express a mental image which is coloured by his conceptual habits.³⁷

Fry was not unique in making this association; in the same years, Camille Enlart, curator of the Musée de Sculpture Comparée, had likened Romanesque sculpture to the art made by children: “practically never does it imitate nature, faithfully or directly; the artists of those days were like children who prefer to copy drawings, rather than draw from the objects themselves.”³⁸

Fry goes on to connect African art to archaic Greek art, citing Löwy.³⁹ The characteristics of “primitive” art transcend both temporality and geography, transforming the term into an ontological category. “Primitive” art then originates in a simultaneously universal and individual memory that telescopes visual characteristics across space and time. Preclassical Greece, Romanesque France, and the “primordial” state of contemporary Africa coalesce in the perennial present that is embodied in the art of children.

A decade later, Fry went on to extol African sculpture, albeit somewhat grudgingly, by arguing that it surpasses all “primitive” Western art: “I have to admit that some of these things are great sculpture—greater, I think, than anything we produced even in the Middle Ages. . . . They have indeed complete plastic freedom; that is to say, these African artists really conceive form in three dimensions. Now this is rare in sculpture. All archaic European sculpture—Greek and Romanesque,

37. R. Fry, “The Art of the Bushmen” (1910), in Flam, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 41.

38. Camille Enlart (1911), quoted in Harry Bober’s introduction to Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), xix. Schapiro also noted that he found Enlart’s theories to be of a different age, and somewhat archaic: “But I have three volumes of Enlart’s *Manuel*, which tho very dull in style, and tastelessly compiled, deriving its form from similar works of the last century, & written mechanically, like an inventory, is however, so rich in facts, & details of every sort” (Meyer Schapiro [writing from Paris] to Lillian Milgram, August 26, 1926, in Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad*, 30).

39. Fry, “Art of the Bushmen,” 41.

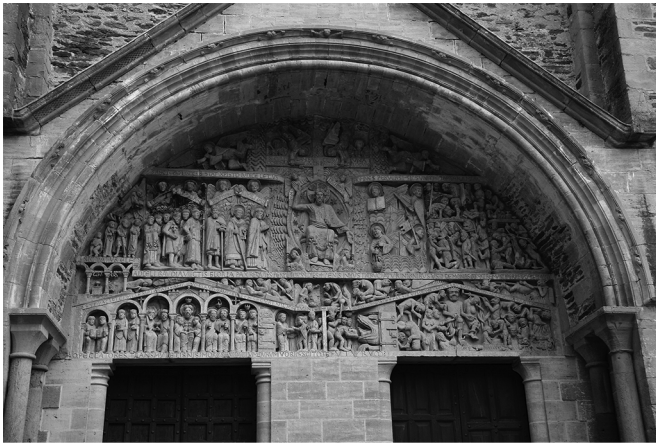


Figure 6. Last Judgment tympanum at Ste-Foy de Conques (with detail of angel and demon), early twelfth century. Limestone and pigment. Photo: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

for instance—approaches plasticity from the point of view of bas-reliefs.”⁴⁰ Fry perceptively recognizes the distinctive desire of African artists to engage mass on equal footing with void in three dimensions whereas “archaic” Western sculpture clings to a planar background, revealing its origins in a two-dimensional pictorial conception of figure-ground relations. Nevertheless, his comparison aligns African art with archaic Greek and Romanesque sculpture, a conceptual trio that Schapiro would deploy in his dissertation.

Schapiro also repositioned the term “archaic” as a formal strategy; his repudiation of previous scholarship in the introduction to his dissertation fashioned an aesthetic of archaism. This was the first sustained consideration of Romanesque formal innovation as an interdependent element in the communication of content. Schapiro references Löwy’s notion of the “memory picture” to explain what he argues is the “hieroglyphic”⁴¹ character of the cloister carvings:

I am employing the term “archaic,” not simply with the literal sense of ancient, primitive, or historically initial or antecedent, but as a designation of a formal character in

early arts, which has been well described by Emanuel Löwy. In his study of early Greek art he observed a generalized rendering of distinct parts, the parallelism of relief planes, the subordination of modeling to descriptive contours, and other traits which he found also in primitive styles, and explained as characteristics of memory imagery. Although the psychological explanation is not satisfactory and the definition of the features overlooks their positive aesthetic qualities, the description is valuable for the interpretation of mediaeval as well as classic art.⁴²

Schapiro elucidates the adjustable nature of the term “primitive,” which at once connotes antecedence and prevalence and is used to diminish as well as elevate. He defines it as a mode that precedes a more developed style but is also originary and innovative because it is the first of its kind: the beginning of a style. Schapiro expands Löwy’s concept of the memory image, arguing that if Romanesque sculptors repeat earlier motifs, it is a deliberate strategy: representation, image-making, refers more often to other representations than the natural world.⁴³ Age and anteriority are also sources of authority

40. R. Fry, “Negro Sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club” (1920), in Flam, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 145–46.

41. Schapiro is reappropriating the same terms that were used to dismiss Romanesque art in the nineteenth century. Viollet-le-Duc also used the term “hieroglyphic,” but he associated it with sterility and lack of innovation. Schapiro’s employment of the same term emerges from his sensitivity to semiotics, the rigorous study of the structure of language. It is clear that Schapiro appreciated the tenuous, fragile, and arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified even in his earliest work, and he would continue to explore it throughout his career; see especially the posthumous collection *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language* (New York, 1996).

42. Schapiro, “Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac I,” 133. See also L. Seidel, “‘Shalom Yehudin!’ Meyer Schapiro’s Early Years in Art History,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 559–94. Seidel argues that Schapiro “snatched Romanesque from the marginalization to which it was being unwittingly relegated by its scholarly spokesmen through a combination of narrow-mindedness and intellectual naïveté” (561).

43. Schapiro continues: “The archaic characters may be purely conventional formulas (repeating a traditional archaic style), without an immediate origin in the peculiarities of memory or a conceptual reconstruction of a visual whole. In a similar way, they may be aesthetically or morally valued aspects of an early style, consciously imitated by a later artist. In such archaistic works the retrospective character is betrayed by the unconscious and inconsistent participation

that can be transmitted to new images through selective quotation, as Schapiro contends: “Archaic characters are not historical in a chronological sense, except where there is an unilinear development toward more natural forms. The archaic work is conditioned not only by the process of reconstructing part by part the whole of a natural object in imagination, but also by a preexisting artistic representation of it, with fixed characters that are more or less archaic and by the *expressive effects* required of the specific profane or religious content.”⁴⁴

Schapiro credited modern artists with the perspicacious ability to appreciate Romanesque sculpture, since their vision had been liberated from the stupor of academic pictorial conventions.⁴⁵ In a 1967 lecture, Schapiro related an edifying anecdote: “one should remember too that the impressionists admired Romanesque works and that Renoir told his son that Cézanne was the greatest French artist since the Romanesque sculptors. He adored these works at Vézelay, and in Burgundy, where he lived on a village

of the later (often impressionistic) style within the simpler forms. We must observe also the frequent recurrence, not *survival*, of archaism whenever the untrained or culturally provincial reproduce nature or complex arts or fashion their own symbols” (“Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac I,” 133). Schapiro references Löwy’s memory image again in his 1953 essay “Style,” expanding on the Moissac piece to argue for the archaic or “primitive” principles as a stylistic type, a choice rather than a stage in cyclical development: “Limited by an evolutionary view and a naturalistic value norm, Löwy ignored the perfection and expressiveness of archaic works” (“Style,” in M. Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* [New York, 1994], 77).

44. Schapiro, “Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac I,” 133–34 (my emphasis).

45. On this point it is crucial to distinguish Schapiro’s formalism, based in the dialectical tradition of Alois Riegl and the Frankfurt School, from the kind of anachronistic formalism employed by Henri Focillon and his pupil Jurgis Baltrušaitis. The latter published a formal consideration of Romanesque sculpture in the same year as Schapiro’s article on Moissac, and Schapiro was quick to distance his work from that of Baltrušaitis in a review published in 1932. Schapiro argued that the schemata of the “law of the frame” that Baltrušaitis appropriated from his teacher and imposed on sculptural programs underestimates the Romanesque’s formal innovation as it divorces form from content. In so doing Baltrušaitis’s approach drains meaning from iconography: “To make Romanesque a modern art, or an art in modern terms, he has reduced content to a passive role, and has identified form with geometrical schematisms and with architecture—an abstract art” (Meyer Schapiro, “On Geometrical Schematism in Romanesque Art,” in *idem*, *Romanesque Art*, 283). See also W. Cahn, “Schapiro and Focillon,” *Gesta* 41 (2002): 129–36; and L. Seidel, “Formalism,” in Rudolph, *Companion to Medieval Art*, 106–27. It is also important to note that Schapiro only published the first half of his dissertation on Moissac, which was chiefly concerned with developing a formal language for the cloister capitals; the unpublished second part of the dissertation is dedicated to the historical context of the abbey.

farm belonging to the parents of his wife.”⁴⁶ Schapiro reminds his audience that at the turn of the century modern artists were among the first to value the expressive, non-naturalistic representations found initially in Romanesque and subsequently in non-Western art. Even Picasso looked to Romanesque sculpture before he turned to African art, a point that has been eclipsed by the somewhat overblown primal moment of “primitivism” when the artist discovered African art at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in 1907, as canonized by William Rubin’s 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, “*Primitivism*” in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.⁴⁷

Letters in Schapiro’s archive indicate that he was in correspondence with Robert Goldwater, the future director of the Museum of Primitive Art, from 1934 onward, while the latter was working on his dissertation on modernist primitivism. Their sympathetic ideas can be seen in Goldwater’s pioneering study *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938), in which he revealed how modernist artists appropriated not only the forms of “primitive” arts but also the label “primitive” itself as “a term of praise.”⁴⁸ Goldwater demonstrated the degree to which the artists sought to maintain the tropes of “primitive” art

46. Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture*, 35.

47. Rubin’s exhibition was intensely controversial and provoked a variety of trenchant criticism regarding its treatment of “tribal” objects. In the 2017 exhibition *Picasso Primitif*, the Musée du Quai Branly updated MoMA’s narrative by including a key example of Romanesque sculpture, the Madonna of Gósol, which Picasso had studied in Barcelona in 1906 before he visited the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in the summer of 1907. In his catalogue, Rubin noted that Picasso had stumbled into the ethnographic museum accidentally. His initial visit to the Trocadéro had been to study the casts of medieval sculpture at the Musée de Sculpture Comparée: “Picasso had gone that day to look at the plaster casts of Romanesque sculpture in the Musée de Sculpture Comparée, which occupied one wing of the Palais du Trocadéro. He had been there before, and the fact that he was drawn back to an art considered ‘primitive’ in those years is probably symptomatic—another case of Picasso’s famous ‘prescience,’ here exercised in regard to the kinds of solutions his instinct told him were needed to resolve his dissatisfaction with the *Demoiselles*. He had, however, never before visited the Musée d’Ethnographie, which occupied the other wing of the Trocadéro, and as he described it, his entering that wing was virtually serendipitous. In retrospect, however, it seems a logical continuation of the search that had taken him to the Musée de Sculpture Comparée” (W. Rubin, “Picasso,” in “*Primitivism*” in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. W. Rubin [New York, 1984], 1:254). Rubin states that in his conversations with Picasso, the artist recounted the same details he had given to André Malraux in 1937, which he published in *La tête d’obsidienne* (Paris, 1974), 17–19. See also J. J. Sweeney, “Picasso and Iberian Sculpture,” *Art Bulletin* 23 (1941): 191–98.

48. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 273.

as aspirational attributes for their own art making through their accounts of their critical encounters with these works. Goldwater's familiarity with Schapiro's work on Romanesque sculpture is made clear in a much later publication in which he argues that the nascent field of African art history should look to Romanesque art since it too was not considered in terms of its aesthetics:

The parallel is especially striking if one examines the historiography of medieval art . . . the Middle Ages offer a propitious comparison for the treatment of primitive art on several counts: medieval, and especially Romanesque and pre-Romanesque art is a comparatively recent field of investigation; the overwhelming preponderance of the art was "functionally determined," being either religious or ceremonial in use and intention; and most of the representational works of art, whether painting or sculpture, like most works of primitive art, offer varying degrees of non-naturalistic stylization which by our own traditional standards are at the very least more "expressive" or "imaginative" than "beautiful." Here, as in the primitive arts, it was the apparently purely technical causes of an evolving or declining naturalism that were first investigated, largely in the narrow terms of the development or loss of skills alone, with the assumption (stated or assumed) that where skills were adequate naturalism would ensue, since it was the normal artistic goal.⁴⁹

Goldwater has received much of the credit for these parallels because Schapiro's remarks were unpublished; in light of Schapiro's letters, it becomes clear that he played a formative role in the development of these ideas in advance of Goldwater's 1938 publication.

Mature writings: "Aesthetic Attitude" and "Style"

In his reappropriation of the term "primitive," Schapiro was building up to the arguments presented in his essay "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art," published in 1947. The primary aim of this article was to retrieve this art from charges of anonymity, lack of intentionality, and suppressed individuality in a society perceived to be regulated through fear and superstition.⁵⁰ Schapiro began by refuting the premise

that the relationship between the work of art and society had been radically altered, even rejected, in the modern period. He also dismisses the notion that art had ever been alienated from the social concerns of its users and makers, citing a variety of medieval literary sources to make this point. The similarity between modern and Romanesque art, for Schapiro, lies in the collective misunderstanding of both because they are approached through negative definitions, which mistakenly conflate moral judgment of social and religious systems with aesthetic intention.⁵¹ Not coincidentally, these were the same misguided critiques that were typically applied to the more familiarly "primitive" arts of Africa.

In his 1953 essay "Style," the private and passing observations that we find in the letters he wrote during his travels as a student are developed more completely. Schapiro argues that the deployment of competing, even antithetical styles in a single composition—a common tendency of "primitive" art—does not constitute an inferior expression of style in general. Schapiro cites as examples the medieval manuscripts and sculptural programs that mingle animated naturalism in the margins with static, hieratic forms in the center, as well as certain African sculptures: "There are styles in which large parts of a work are conceived and executed differently, without destroying the harmony of the whole. In African sculpture an exceedingly naturalistic,

Festschrift. Coomaraswamy (with whom Schapiro maintained a correspondence from 1932 to 1946), a scholar of mixed Indian and German heritage, was a pioneer in introducing Western audiences to the aesthetic qualities of Indian art, which he did through comparisons with European medieval art. He argued that because medieval Europe and India (still atemporal) were both "traditional" societies in which the production of art was an integral part of devotion or daily life, the aesthetics of these arts were determined by convention and religious didactics, filtered through the unquestioning piety of anonymous craftsmen: "the purpose of the imager was neither self expression nor the realisation of beauty. He did not choose his own problems, but like the Gothic sculptor obeyed a hieratic Canon . . . not [a] . . . philosopher or aesthete, but . . . a pious artisan" (quoted in P. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* [Chicago, 1992], 279).

51. "Lacking sympathy for modern art, these critics can hardly be expected to serve as guides to its qualities and aims. One could easily show that contemporary art, though unreligious—and precisely because unreligious—is bound up with modern experiences and ideals no less actively than the old art with the life of its time. This does not mean that if you admire modern works, you must also accept modern social institutions as good—much of the best art of our day is, on the contrary, strongly critical of contemporary life; in the same way, admiration of mediaeval art does not require that we accept feudalism as an ideal human order or the legends and dogmas represented in the church sculptures as true beliefs" (M. Schapiro, "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art [1947]," in *idem.*, *Romanesque Art*, 1).

49. R. Goldwater, "Art History and Anthropology: Some Comparisons of Methodology" (1973), as republished in the expanded edition of *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 304–5.

50. On the interdependence of modern and Romanesque art in Schapiro's work, see M. Camille, "'How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art': Medieval, Modern and Postmodern in Meyer Schapiro," *Oxford Art Journal* 17 (1994): 65–75. Schapiro's paper, among the first considerations of the self-generated aesthetics of Romanesque sculptors, was published in Ananda Coomaraswamy's

smoothly carved head rises from a rough, almost shapeless body. A normative aesthetic might regard this as imperfect work, but it would be hard to justify this view.⁵² Schapiro could be referring to Fang reliquary guardians from Gabon, which were among the earliest African objects to enter the collections of museums and dealers; if so, he does not seem to be aware that the “rough, almost shapeless body” of such sculptures was submerged in a box that contained relics and would not have been visible in their original context. One of the best known of these guardian heads, which rises from a roughly hewn base, was in the collection of the dealer Joseph Brummer, whom Schapiro knew very well, and published in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* in 1915 (fig. 7).⁵³ In this essay, which was published in an issue of *Anthropology Today* edited by Alfred L. Kroeber,⁵⁴ Schapiro presents many of the arguments that had been used to diminish non-Western “primitive” arts, in turn rejecting their premise by giving a counterexample in Western art from nearly every period and place.

As much as this article is a thorough analysis of the historical theories of style and their development from Winckelmann to Boas, it is at the same time a highly charged and politically engaged critique that confers creative expression to all cultures from every period and place. Schapiro’s remark that “art is now one of the strongest evidences of the basic unity of mankind” sounds almost like a reconciliatory statement after the horrors of World War II.⁵⁵ Indeed, written at the beginning of the period of decolonization, “Style” can be understood as a sustained dismantling of nineteenth-century cyclical biological models, physiognomy, and

racial theories, which, when Schapiro was writing, had been implemented to calamitous ends in Germany less than a decade prior.⁵⁶

The conflation of ethics and aesthetics, and the belief that the beautiful is necessarily also the good, buttressed the racially inflected theories used to assess the style of different periods. Schapiro systematically dismantled the premise of this symbiosis, arguing that what is “beautiful” is contingent on the moment of the art’s production as well as its immediate consumption. In other words, the historically “beautiful” is determined through a consensus between the maker, or the artist, and the user, or the audience—not by the standards of later periods. “Style” is a forceful argument for historical contingency, proposing an inclusive approach to the art of all people and periods, while at the same time eschewing the notion of a universal aesthetic standard.

“Style” is the “protagonist,” to borrow James Ackerman’s characterization,⁵⁷ against the absent antagonist: Hegel. Schapiro does not once mention him by name, yet the entire study concerns itself with unsettling the authority of a unified *Geist*, an invisible yet inviolable force that for Hegel and his followers culminated in the transcendental ideal of their own time. For many writers following Hegel, time and style had a purpose that was projected into a distant future. In “Style,” Schapiro prevents the future from infringing on the historical moment of creative conception and its subsequent expression. Schapiro shows that it is through these preconceived notions of what comes *after* that the meaning of the moment becomes obscured. A few years after writing “Style,” he summed up those arguments pithily for *ARTnews*: “The work of art is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming.”⁵⁸

The politics of style

Schapiro’s art historical analysis was conditioned by his own experience as an artist and his lifelong involvement with the avant-garde in New York. By the

52. Schapiro, “Style,” 61.

53. Later in life, Schapiro described Brummer as “a remarkable man, who had a gruff manner but was very gentle, a very human person” (J. Thompson and S. Raines, “A Vermont Visit with Meyer Schapiro [August 1991],” *Oxford Art Journal* 17 [1994]: 4). Brummer handled objects from all time periods, but he had an exceptional collection of African and medieval art, with which Schapiro was familiar. The scholar had consulted for Brummer at times and had asked the dealer to donate his consultation fees to student scholarships in art history at Columbia University.

54. Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas, was an important voice in American anthropology who continued his teacher’s quest to discard the theories of racial inequality that were deployed to explain differences in material culture around the world. The broad global references Schapiro employs in “Style” were likely informed by a series of six exhibitions devoted to non-Western art organized by Alfred Barr and James Johnson Sweeney at the Museum of Modern Art, including the influential *African Negro Art* (1935). Schapiro maintained correspondence with Sweeney between 1935 and 1968, and with Barr between 1943 and 1982.

55. Schapiro, “Style,” 58.

56. During World War II, Schapiro had also become friendly with European émigrés, including Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose ideas on anthropology and aesthetics informed Schapiro’s “Style.” Thomas Crow argues for similarities in method between Schapiro and Lévi-Strauss in his chapter titled “A Forest of Symbols in Wartime New York,” in *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 25–50.

57. See J. S. Ackerman, “On Rereading ‘Style,’” *Social Research* 45 (1978): 160.

58. M. Schapiro, “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” *ARTnews* (Summer 1957).



Figure 7. Reliquary guardian, Fang (Gabon), before 1914. Wood and metal. Now in the collection of the Fondation Dapper (inv. 2664), Paris. Photo: Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (Leipzig, 1915), 16–17.

time he published his articles on Romanesque art during the 1930s, his use of the term “primitive” could be understood as an ideological claim, one that aligned it with the most transgressive modes at the forefront of avant-garde art.⁵⁹ Schapiro explicitly divulged the interdependence of colonialism and collecting “primitive” art in the 1930s: “If colonial imperialism made these primitive objects physically accessible, they could have little aesthetic interest until the new formal conceptions arose. . . . By a remarkable process the arts

of subjugated backward peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those who renounced it.”⁶⁰ Recognizing that it was the political dimension that enabled access to these objects was an important admission during a period when French ethnologists, supported by the colonial state, all but avoided the moral implications of collecting “primitive” art.

During these same years, the Trocadéro museums that Schapiro had spent so much time in as a student assumed a self-conscious agenda of reorganization and expansion under their ambitious directors, Paul Deschamps at the Musée de Sculpture Comparée and Paul Rivet at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro

59. Mâle’s publication on the twelfth century, *L’art religieux du XIIe siècle en France: Étude sur les origines de l’iconographie du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1922), was the most comprehensive and serious consideration of Romanesque sculpture, but he nevertheless privileged Gothic art as the truly national, mature style. He was not alone in this assessment, which was in fact a general consensus in the late nineteenth century: Auguste Rodin declared in 1914 that “Le Gothique, c’est l’histoire de la France, c’est l’arbre de toutes nos généalogies,” and “La Cathédrale est la synthèse du pays. Je le répète: roches, forêts, jardins, soleil du Nord, tout cela est en raccourci dans ce corps gigantesque, toute notre France est dans nos Cathédrales, comme toute la Grèce est en raccourci dans le Parthénon” (*Les cathédrales de France* [Paris, 1921], 78, 12.)

60. M. Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art” (1937), in idem., *Modern Art* (New York, 1979), 200–201. One year later, Robert Goldwater published *Primitivism in Modern Art*, in which he also outlined the colonial context of collecting African and Oceanic art. See especially the chapter titled “The Accessibility of the Material,” in *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 3–14. Note that Schapiro’s use of the pejorative term “backward” is likely appropriated ironically from the racial biases of the time.

(1928–37). The ethnographic museum received thousands of objects through collecting expeditions led by Marcel Griaule during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission (1931–33) and the Paulme-Lifszyc Mission (1935–36). These expeditions brought back some of the most renowned objects of African art to the Trocadéro, including now canonical Dogon pieces, which can be seen today at the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre and at the Musée du Quai Branly.

At the same time, Deschamps added key models and casts to the Musée de Sculpture Comparée, including a maquette of the crusader castle Crac des Chevaliers in Syria, based on military surveillance photographs taken by the French army in the 1930s, at the director's request (the Musée de Sculpture Comparée was renamed the Musée des Monuments Français when the Trocadéro palace was destroyed to make room for the Palais de Chaillot for the World's Fair of 1937). Through the enlargement and reinstallation of the collection, Deschamps presented twelfth-century Frankish crusaders as the predecessors to twentieth-century French colonizers.⁶¹ This argument is exemplified by the World War I memorial just outside the restored western façade of the twelfth-century abbey of Vézelay, erected in the 1920s (fig. 8). Immediately above the monument's inscription dedicated "to the brave men who died for France" is a pair of profiles carved in shallow relief: a World War I soldier with a helmet and rifle is superimposed on a crusader in chain mail, his silhouette framed by a sword. The medieval past is telescoped into the present, and France's contemporary military activities are represented as a continuation of Bernard

61. In a document written in 1939 to outline the mission of the Musée des Monuments Français, Paul Deschamps justified the removal of the casts of all foreign sculpture that had been displayed alongside the Romanesque ones at the Musée de Sculpture Comparée, with the exception of those that Crusaders had built, in a proto-colonial vein, in the Holy Land: "Mentionnons en terminant, que l'ancien musée de sculpture comparée contenait d'importantes œuvres étrangères, tandis que le Musée des Monuments français se limite aux œuvres qu'implique son titre même; mais, on a eu la bonne idée de présenter quelques témoins de l'expansion de l'art français en exposant notamment des maquettes de monuments considérables construits par des Français au Moyen Age en Syrie; en Palestine et dans l'île de Chypre. C'est ainsi que nous apparaissent le Crac des Chevaliers et le Château de Saône, forteresses élevées par les Croisés pour défendre contre les Musulmans le territoire héroïquement conquis" ("Le Musée des Monuments Français," September 10, 1939, 3). This document was sent to the members of the French Foreign Ministry and is now preserved in the archives of the MMF at the Palais de Chaillot. In the same document Deschamps refers to the cathedral of Reims as being "martyred" (*martyrisée*) during World War I through intensive German shelling; the memory of previous destruction was highly politicized and continuously invoked in Deschamps's museum.

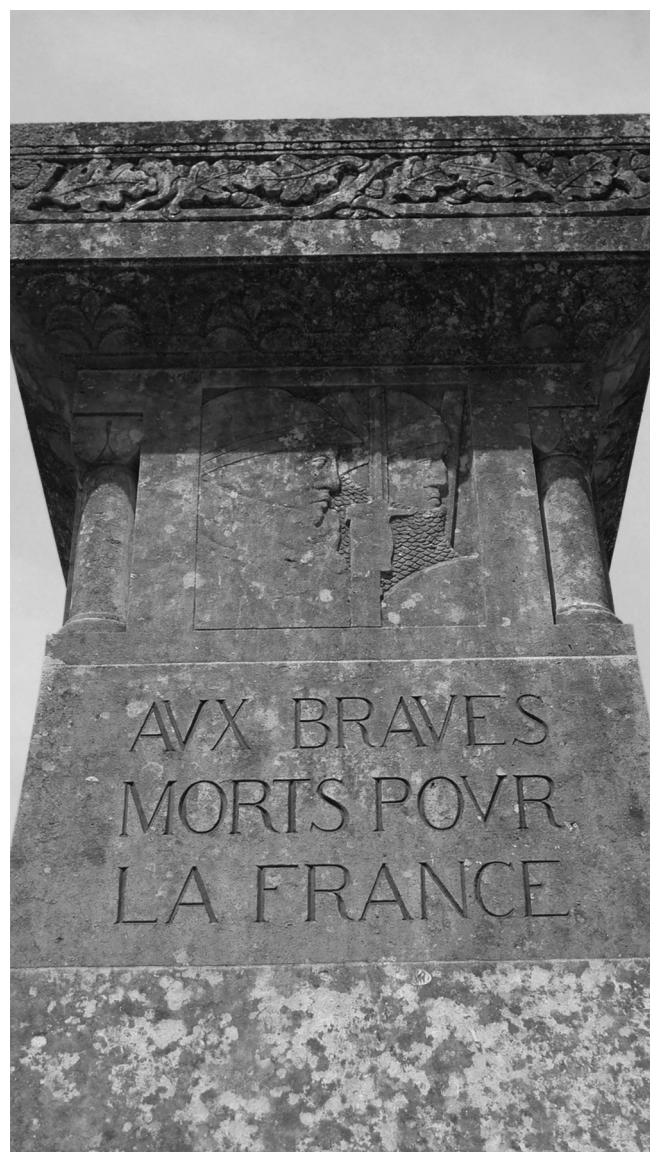


Figure 8. World War I memorial outside the church of Ste-Marie-Madeleine de Vézelay. Photo: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

of Clairvaux's preaching of the Second Crusade on this spot in 1147. Indeed, when Deschamps reopened the doors of the newly renamed Musée des Monuments Français, he explicitly cited Vézelay as a source of national pride, "pour ressentir une impression d'orgueil, une émotion reconfortante, en présence de tant de trésors consacrés au pays de France."⁶²

Schapiro was alert to the political implications of the ongoing reception of Romanesque and "primitive" art

62. "Le Musée des Monuments Français," 1.

and foregrounded these ideological claims as an integral part of their interpretation. It was, of course, easier for an American intellectual to remark on these paradoxes precisely because the United States was removed from France's political discourses and interests. Yet, at the same time, excising medieval and African art from the national and colonial agendas of European nations was essential in reevaluating them according to their own standards of production.

Previous scholarship has made much of how Schapiro's Marxian analyses overwhelmingly shaped the ideas presented in his publications of the 1930s, to the point of making these works anachronistic in their argumentation.⁶³ The principal example of this method is "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos" (1939), where Schapiro correlates the intentionality of an alteration in style at the abbey to a parallel change in the socioeconomic circumstances of the town. What has been muted is how Schapiro's shift in attention from the doctrinal aspects of the iconography at Silos to the secular subjects that occupy the margins of the manuscripts and relief panels was a way of asserting the individual and independent personality of the artist: "In representing the musicians—jongleurs who improvise a sensual music, in contrast to the set liturgical music of the church—the sculptor expresses also the self-consciousness of an independent artistic virtuosity."⁶⁴ He continues to valorize the medieval carvers and painters by comparing them to contemporary artists, an audacious assertion for a time period when these artists were thought of as anonymous artisans working under the oppressive tutelage of clerics and theologians: "[The sculptor] inserts in a context controlled by the church and committed to religious meanings figures of lay artists, free, uninstitutionalized entertainers whose performance is valued directly for its sensuous and artisan qualities; just as in modern art, which is wholly secular, painters so often represent figures from the studio or from an analogous world of entertainment—acrobats, musicians, and harlequins—consciously or unconsciously affirming their own autonomy as performers and their conception of art as a spectacle for the senses."⁶⁵ It is clear from this passage that

the motivations of the present inflected Schapiro's investigations of the past. However, instead of projecting the constricted biases of twentieth-century religious nationalism, like Mâle, Schapiro's thinking in/of the present allowed him to locate creativity in the individual, and establish the "primitive" as an artistic expression that could rival, and even surpass, the art of any place and time.

The research presented here reveals the singularity of Schapiro's work when compared with that of his contemporaries, from his very earliest engagements with art history in American collections, and later in the field. Though he did not publish works specifically dedicated to African art, it evidently shaped both his formalism, as well as his philosophy of art history more generally. His landmark article "Style," which I understand to be the most comprehensive and fleshed-out example of Schapiro's method, substantiates a complex sense of temporality that does not participate in ideas of progress as the engine of change. Indeed, it is the narrativization of time as history that results in the establishment of exclusionary hierarchies, which diminish our ability to interact with the object, and its past, in the present.

63. See, e.g., O. K. Werckmeister, "Jugglers in a Monastery," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 60–64; J. Williams, "Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style," *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 442–68.

64. M. Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque at Silos," in *idem., Romanesque Art*, 46. Originally published in *Art Bulletin* 21 (1939): 312–74.

65. Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque at Silos," 46.