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# The Drawing Underlying the Text? On Meyer Schapiro's "Words and Images"

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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## REFERENCES

Schapiro, Meyer. *Les Mots et les images : sémiotique du langage visuel*, Paris : Macula, 2000, (La Littérature artistique)

- 1 The French publication of Meyer Schapiro's essay *Les Mots et les images* opens with the reproduction of a *Selfportrait of the Author* produced in 1923 —a magnificent drawing of a face whose wide open eyes stare out at us. Schapiro, who was an accomplished draughtsman, was, as we know, a friend of many artists: Héliou, Motherwell, De Kooning, Rothko. He was also teacher to Ad Reinhardt, Judd, Segal, and others. This certainly has a knock-on effect for his work as an art historian, and for the way he broached problems as remote in time as Souillac's sculptures, Silos' Romanesque art and "aesthetic attitudes in Romanesque art" (1947). Even as Schapiro levelled harsh criticisms at Jurgis Baltrušaitis, in 1932, on account of his abstract visions of Romanesque ornamentation, over-defined by the Parisian Cubist aesthetic of the day, it is not too hard today to make out in his descriptions of the 1940s a thoroughly New York culture, informed by Rothko's lesson on colour and Pollock's psychological attitudes<sup>1</sup>. But behind what these famous writings owe to Marxism and its critical commitment, we should perhaps take a look at Schapiro's sensibility for drawing, which comes through as a complex third factor in a line of thinking that pays close heed to the processes of duplication and splitting, and the interweave of words and the pictorial. We are not simply thinking here of the sketches made by Schapiro in 1938 of Horkheimer and Marcuse, listening to Hitler speaking on the radio, nor even of the apocalyptic "Romanesque" caricature of this latter, but first and

foremost of the noteworthy annotated drawings of 1930-31 of the capitals in the cloisters at Moissac<sup>2</sup>. "Preliminary drawings", we might almost call them, but for a text, as it so happens. We should possibly even talk in terms of a sort of "drawing underlying" the text, once we consider Schapiro's writing and arguing style, which forces the description to remain close to the image and its shapes. What subject, henceforth, other than the problem of the pictorial transformations of one and the same text over time, indirectly involves (but in the keenest of ways) the issue of the description of art works, by making it possible to get as close as possible to what binds and separates pictorial language and textual language? While the iconological approach, as defined and practised by Panofsky, looks for the text and textual arrangements behind the image—to the point, at times, of implicitly postulating a hidden meaning and an operation aimed at deciphering the meaning in the image—the way Schapiro proceeds is quite different. Starting out from explicit texts, he strives, by way of a sequence of examples, to describe and analyze processes of drift and shift, difference, necessary interpretation, reversions to other texts and other images. The tight discussion about face and profile as symbolic forms, likened by Schapiro to the grammatical forms of the second and third person, is one of the highlights of the text. It suggests to what degree art symbols, unlike language, remain particularly autonomous, independent of traditional, conventional systems, which makes it difficult to construct a complete and systematic artistic code<sup>3</sup>. The analysis, as Hubert Damish rightly notes in his preface, does not culminate in any overall analytical plan, or in any explicit method. On the other hand, it invites the reader to tread the theoretical paths it opens up<sup>4</sup>, as much because of the ambiguous nature of the acts in question as for the way they are qualified by Schapiro. "Reading of the text by the artist", when this latter shatters the literal meaning of a piece of writing by transposing it: instatement of a "pictorial text" or "speculative enhancement of history", once an artist—like the famous Souillac sculptor—adds meaning, over and above what the transposition produces *per se*. When signification is involved, Schapiro questions the realization, in other words the passage of the text towards the image; and when realization is involved, Schapiro acknowledges the reading and thinking of the artist (all apparently acts subject to the sole order of the textual world).

- 2 This French publication also includes another essay, "*L'Écrit dans l'image*" (1976), where the issue is the many different functions of the representation of what is written in mediaeval and modern art alike, from Goya to Joseph Kosuth—from the open book appearing in a picture to the thought bubble, and from the signature to the coded message. Just before a brief observation about the obliteration of the image in favour of the written form which seems to invade the space, in Conceptual Art, Schapiro winds up his essay with a description of Marc Chagall's *Red Jew* (1914). In the background, the painter has here incorporated a group of words, the names of painters he venerates, transcribed in different alphabets: "Giotto", "Brueghel the peasant", "Rembrandt", "Cézanne", "Courbet", "Fouquet"... This, among a host of other examples, is just one of the problems put forward today for discussion, since Schapiro has brought it to the fore, but without trying (as in many other instances) to further analyze it. By this gesture, Chagall probably refers to the sacredness of the word in the Middle Ages, but possibly also to a very precise praxis in art history—that of the artist's name inscribed by hand on one of his works by another artist (as, to give an example keenly analyzed by Panofsky, Dürer did, recognizing on a drawing the "hand" of his master Schongauer, and inscribing the latter's name). A practice of inscription which thus forms the double of art, which

Schapiro had better than anyone: revealing the circulation of meaning between words and images, without forgetting that the hand of a clearly defined person has been laid upon a parchment, a sheet of paper, a picture...

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Werckmeister, O.K. "Romanesque Art, by Meyer Schapiro", *The Art Quarterly*, vol. 2, n° 2, 1979, pp. 210-218; Craven, D. *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique. Dissent during the McCarthy Period*, Cambridge : CUP, 1999. More broadly we should mention the tributes paid and reflections devoted to Schapiro in the following magazines : *Oxford Art Journal*, 17 :1, 1994 ; *Social Research*, vol. 45, n° 1, 1978 ; *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55 :1, 1997, pp. 1-18
2. Hofmann, W. "Laudatio auf Meyer Schapiro zur Verleihung des Aby M. Warburg Preises 1984", *Idea IV*, 1985, pp. 209-221 ; J. Thompson, S. Raines. "A Vermont Visit with Meyer Schapiro (August 1991)", *Oxford Art Journal*, 17 :1, 1994, pp. 2-12
3. Cf. Zerner, H. "Meyer Schapiro, maître ès Art", *Ecrire l'histoire de l'art. Figures d'une discipline*, Paris : Gallimard, 1997, pp. 88-99
4. . We should mention here, in particular, the famous reading of another Schapiro text by Jacques Derrida, in *La Vérité en peinture*, Paris : Flammarion, 1978, p. 291 ff.