

Art history and empiricism: a response to Ian Verstegen's review of *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates*¹

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Ian Verstegen's generous review of my book presents an opportunity to discuss a variety of important questions that are fundamental to the focus of this journal. Since many of these questions appropriately concern specialized points of scholarly interpretation, for the most part I am happy to leave my arguments and Verstegen's criticisms as principled differences of informed judgement. As readers of this journal know well, for instance, the most apposite terminology for understanding Schapiro's engagement with the New Vienna School or the efficacy of Schapiro's critique of Heidegger are historiographic topics in themselves that have generated extensive academic analysis and debate; a letter like this one is not the place to discuss such issues. At a more general level, however, Verstegen's review critiques what he correctly recognizes as an empiricist tendency that is fundamental to Schapiro's work and my interpretation of it: to resist the *full* implications of general theories for our understanding of the art-historical record. This tendency is also, and here I agree with Verstegen, 'very common among departments of English and Art History.' What makes Meyer Schapiro a remarkable—indeed, unusual—embodiment of this empiricist tendency is the extent to which he followed through on it. Not only did Schapiro engage with the most prominent general theories that were brought to bear on 20th century art historiography, but he did so in direct conversation or debate with many of the most famous architects of those theories. It wasn't just that Schapiro drew on Gestalt psychology in his work, in other words, but that he did so critically and in conversation with a figure like Max Wertheimer; it wasn't just that Schapiro was an early explorer of the implications of semiotics for art history, to choose but another example, but that he did so in personal dialogue with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson. My book argues that this disposition was fundamental to Schapiro's thought—an expression of his attenuated pragmatist commitments, often summarized as entailing maximally flexible habits of mind—and Verstegen is sympathetic. Such agreement, however, also leads Verstegen to ultimately regret the placing of Schapiro under a 'glaring theoretical light,' and to make a provocative suggestion in closing his review. What if we accepted Schapiro as an 'art historian', and turned away from theoretical matters to instead 'linger through the soft touch of one of his discussions of a medieval manuscript or painting by Van Gogh.'

To merely 'linger' over previous interpretations rather than dissecting and assessing value and validity is a difficult task for those engaged in art

¹ Ian Verstegen, 'America's greatest empiricist, review of *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates* by C. Oliver O'Donnell', *Journal of Art Historiography* 26 (June 2022).

historiography. While I would agree that our holistic 'experience' of any of Schapiro's interpretations is the ultimate basis of the interest that those interpretations generate, to rest content with such 'experience' as an unanalyzed whole risks an attitude that can be dilettantish, professionally protectionist, and even anti-intellectual. It seems to me that one of the great services that historiography performs within our discipline is to elucidate for the practitioners of that discipline their predecessor's intellectual commitments by clarifying those commitments in terms most understandable to those practitioners: that is, not in purely abstract philosophical terms of art historical ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics, but in individualizing and specifying terms, in short, in *intellectual-historical* terms.

Schapiro's empiricism and its lessons for the discipline are relevant here. His scholarly ambitions followed from art history being—much like history itself—by definition empirical; it is particularizing and individualizing, having the tendency to base its positive propositions on what is observable or confirmable, its negative propositions on what is refutable, its skeptical propositions on what is obscure. When these empirical habits become more theoretical, art historians can become more self-consciously entangled with the philosophical tradition of empiric-*ism*, meaning that they maintain the same empirical commitments but dialectically assess those commitments in relation to more general and universalizing claims. Our knowledge of art principally derives from sensory experience, the art historian perpetually claims, but a scholar endowed with sensation but devoid of reason or memory could admittedly have no knowledge of art, meaning that the 'general and essential tendencies of the human mind', to use Erwin Panofsky's famous formulation, inevitably have a bearing on art historiography. Such platitudinous observations, of course, about the interrelations of sensation, memory, and reason are but one of the many famous paradoxes of the empiricist tradition. I raise one of them here to highlight an important point not made in Verstegen's review: that empiricism not only entails the bread and butter of everyday art-historical practice—the study of primary source documents, the attribution of artworks based on soberly assessed evidence, for example—but also a confrontation with the theoretical dead ends and blind spots that those tendencies bring with them. By engaging with the major theoretical systems of his time, Meyer Schapiro showed himself to be the kind of art historian who was willing to confront those paradoxes, assessing the extent to which prominent general theories conflicted *and* harmonized with traditionally assembled art historical knowledge. Doing so allowed him to be theoretically aware without moving beyond art history.

But wither, Verstegen understandably asks, the fundamental consequences of art historical empiricism *tout court*? Is it really true that Schapiro's empiricism—and therefore the more common tendency among art historians towards particularism, specificity, and concrete documentation—'blocks', 'resists', and 'rejects' something called 'theory' at a fundamental level, as Verstegen abjures? Since prominent theoreticians from other disciplines—for instance the psychoanalytic ego psychologist David Rapaport and the philosopher Michael Kelly—subsequently agreed with Schapiro's criticisms of Freud and Heidegger

respectively, it seems that Schapiro's empiricist critiques of the grand theories of his day were hardly disabling of theoretical inquiry more generally.² On the contrary, Schapiro's criticisms have resonated with *other* philosophical commitments, *other* theories, theories which have still not been fully explored by art historians.

To say, therefore, that Schapiro was 'allergic to all abstraction' is a little too strong, both in its specificity as it pertains to Schapiro and in its generality as it relates to art historical empiricism. It is not a coincidence that two of Schapiro's closest philosophical interlocutors were Ernest Nagel and Otto Neurath, two distinguished and committed verificationists in the tradition of logical empiricism. Nor is it a coincidence that Schapiro himself agreed to write a monograph for the *Encyclopedia of the Unified Sciences* that would bring those commitments to bear on the study of visual art. That Schapiro failed in such an undertaking comes as no surprise; the failure of logical positivism as a movement, as George Reisch has shown, had as much to do with the fate of socialism during the Cold War as with the analytic dead ends of its various dogmas.³ But we should pause before inferring from that failure general consequences for art historical practice in the future. The past is an uncertain means for prediction and I would hope that we could all agree with Schapiro himself that the history of socialism in the 20th century does not demonstrate that socialism in the future—however we choose to define it—is an impossibility. Needless to say, therefore, I do not believe that we do a disservice to Schapiro by bringing him into dialogue with the major intellectuals of his time. Quite to the contrary, Schapiro's willingness to foster such debates—to say nothing of the scholarly restaging of them in an academic monograph like my own—helps us gain a better concrete understanding of the place of theory, socialist or otherwise, in our understanding of art's history.

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² David Rapaport to Meyer Schapiro, Series IV.2, Box 244, Folder 2, Meyer Schapiro Collection, Columbia University Libraries; Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*, Cambridge, 2003.

³ George Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science*, Cambridge, 2005.