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Art

A gush of affection for a giant of art history

Friends and protégés of Meyer Schapiro, one of the most important scholars of modern art, show how to join together without conforming.

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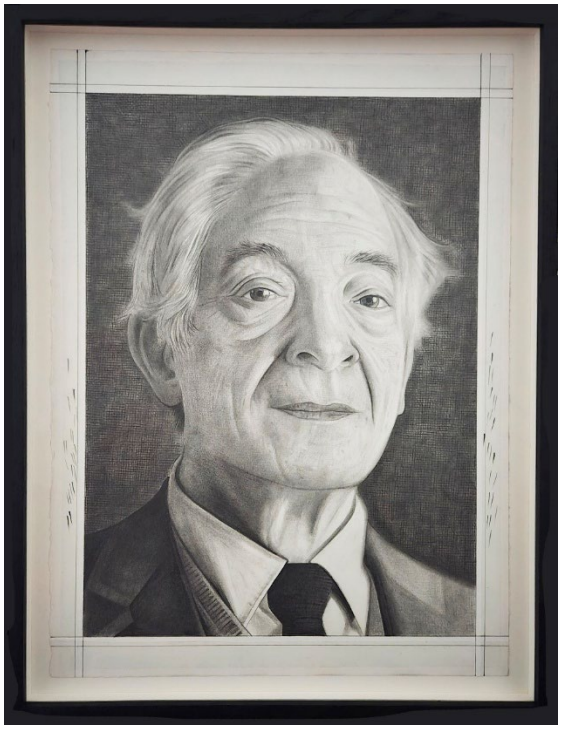


Phong H. Bui, “Portrait of Meyer Schapiro, from a photograph by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders” (2025). (Phong H. Bui)

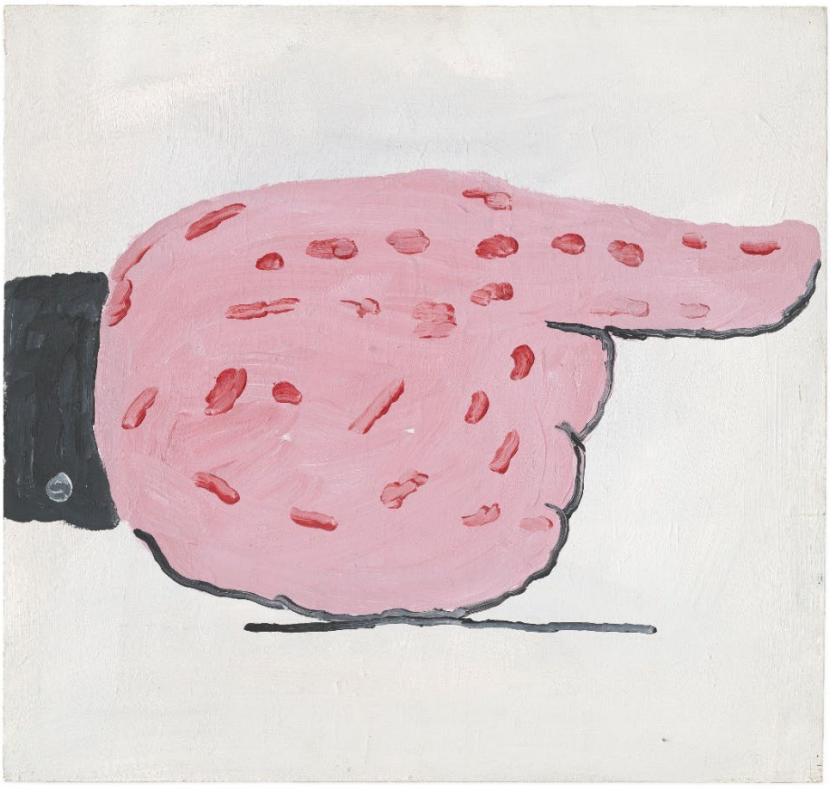
Review by Sebastian Smee

BRATTLEBORO, Vermont — Possibly apocryphal but undoubtedly significant is the story of the college instructor at Columbia University who had the misfortune to have in his class some of the most brilliant minds of the century, among them Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun and Meyer Schapiro.

Schapiro, so the story goes, was a particular thorn in the instructor's side. "Time after time," according to a 1960 story in the Columbia Spectator, "utilizing his deadly logical precision, perception and dialectical facility, this student completely obliterated his 'mentor's' position. ... Finally, after a particularly trying intellectual assault, the teacher reached the limits of endurance, collapsed in tears at his desk unable to go on."

It's no longer fashionable — and probably for good reason — to use terms such as "intellectual assault," "obliterate" and "deadly logical precision" in the context of academic inquiry — and perhaps that's the point of the anecdote's punch line, which is that the result of this student-instructor contretemps became known to Schapiro's contemporaries as a "Schapirric victory."

But it's nice to be reminded that some people are just very clever. Occasionally, moreover, they recover from this handicap and go on to transform not only the field they enter but also the lives of those around them.



"Untitled (Finger)," by Philip Guston (1968). (Mark Mann/Private collection)

Schapiro, a great art historian whose influence on his artist peers is the subject of a wonderful exhibition-as-homage at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center in Vermont, was one of these people.

A brilliant lecturer, fond of unscripted asides and audience interaction, Schapiro taught at Columbia University and lived in the same West Village apartment from 1933 until his death in 1996. He and his wife, Lillian, explains Danny Lichtenfeld, the director of the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, "summered in southern Vermont over six decades, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of our region and the world beyond."

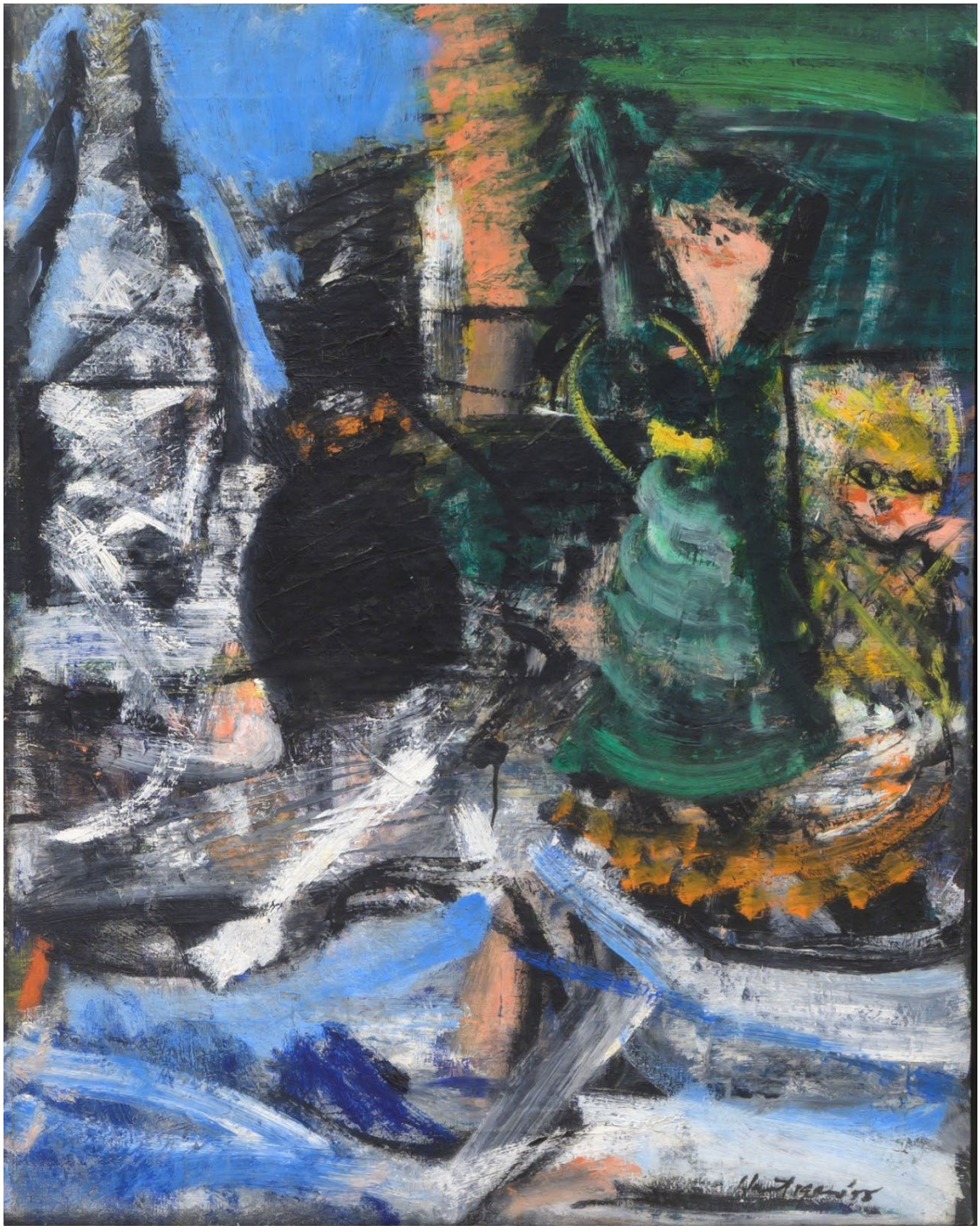
In the United States, Schapiro was one of the most important figures in the evolution of art history as an academic field. He combined close formal analyses of artworks with an understanding of how style related to social conditions, the art and literature of the past, individual biography, and mental forces both conscious and unconscious. In other words, he introduced a lot of complexity, and his insights were accordingly deep.

Phong H. Bui with Meyer and Lillian Schapiro, circa 1994. (Eyal Danieli)

"Singing in Unison, Part 13: Homage to Meyer Schapiro," as the Brattleboro show is titled, presents work by the many artists whom he taught and befriended and influenced. It's light on explanatory wall texts, so audiences come away with little insight into the specific connections between Schapiro and individual artists. Rather the emphasis, as per the title, is on community.

It’s an unusually personal exhibition. Its curator, Phong H. Bui, is the indefatigable co-founder and artistic director of the Brooklyn Rail, as well as an artist and independent curator. He was a close friend of Schapiro and Lillian.

Bui has chosen to set aside Schapiro’s intellectual achievements and instead celebrate his art and the impact he had on many of America’s finest postwar artists, among them Philip Guston, Forrest Bess, Robert De Niro Sr. (yes, the actor’s father), Janice Biala, Larry Rivers, Bob Thompson and Grace Hartigan.

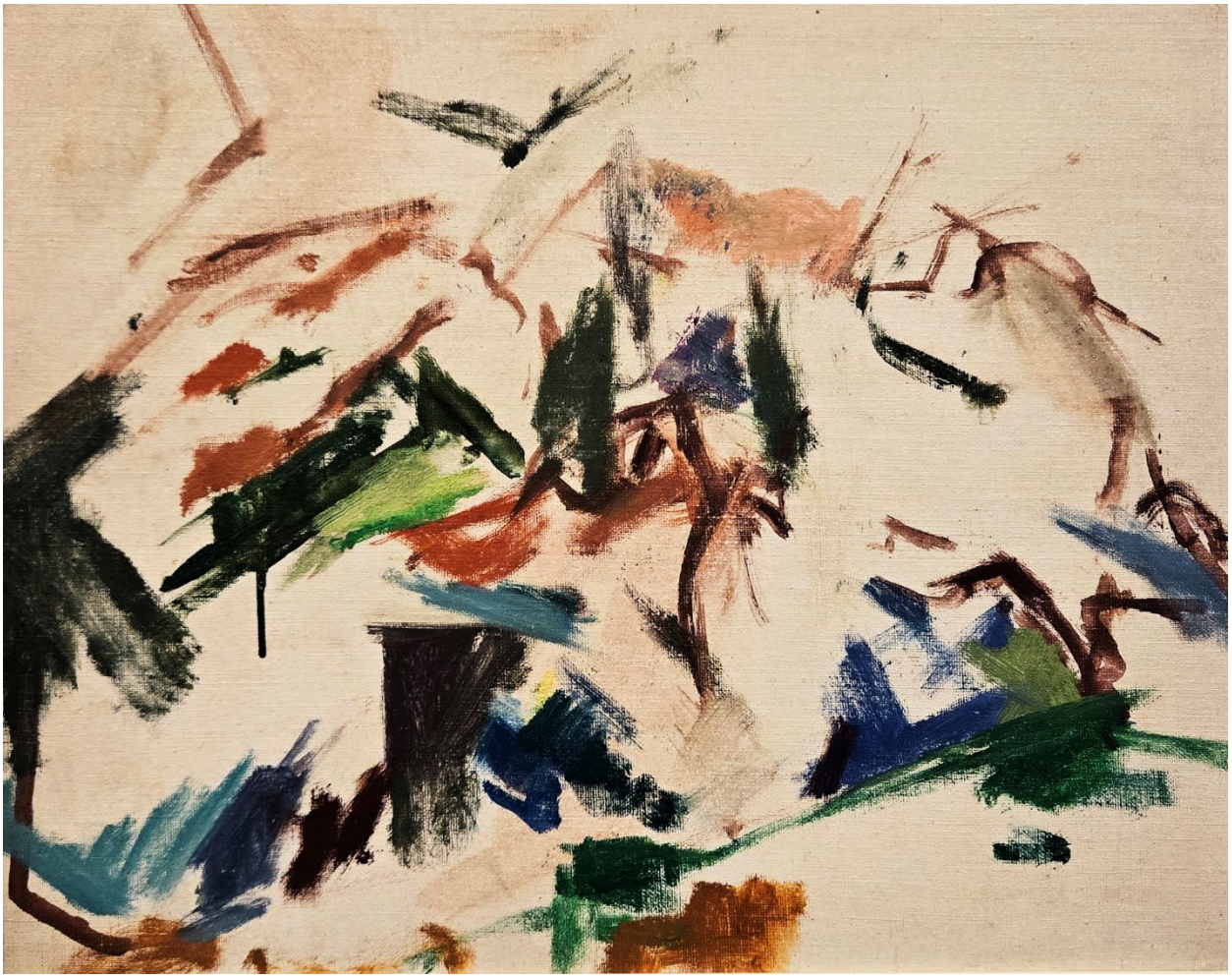


Grace Hartigan, “Still Life With Dolls” (1955). (Collection of Steve and Beverly Newborn)

The slightly scattergun Brattleboro presentation models a way of being that is less concerned with winning arguments or "obliterating" opponents than finding common cause and connecting with others. Amiably, agreeably, but with scattered dollops of mischief, the show presents an example (as Bui puts it) of how to "be part of the dialogue of American life while remaining at odds with conformity."

Which feels timely because that's the challenge, isn't it? To be at odds with conformity — to escape (in the spirit of Augie March, that great fictional creation of Saul Bellow, another of Schapiro's friends and a fellow long-term resident of southern Vermont) other people's *schemes*, their attempts to recruit us — and yet at the same time to connect, to serve and to love.

Something like that has been the tension, the agon, at the heart of the American story all along. So it's of more than passing interest that a show about the influence of Schapiro — a Lithuanian Jew who came to America as a young boy — was put together by Bui, a refugee from Vietnam who also came to America as a boy, and that the deepest concerns of both men are art and community.



Mercedes Matter, "Untitled (Maine Landscape)" (circa 1957). (Berry Campbell, New York.)

Bui met the Schapiros in 1986, telling one interviewer that he soon became their “adopted Jewish grandson.” He had seen Schapiro lecture at the New York Studio School (founded by Mercedes Matter in 1964) and was asked to go to his house to fetch a painting. When Bui told Schapiro where he came from in Vietnam — the coastal city Hue — he was stunned to hear Schapiro tell him the history of Hue.

Bui visited every Wednesday. He and Schapiro would walk together around a few blocks, discussing Schapiro’s friendships with the likes of Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, Elizabeth Hardwick and Irving Howe, and then dine with Lillian. Schapiro would recommend books, which Bui would make sure to read ahead of their next meeting.

Bui had a chance to follow Schapiro into academia, but he accepted a grant to go to Italy instead. There he mixed with artists, among them Al Held and Cy Twombly, and soon realized (as he informed Schapiro by telephone from Europe and in a separate letter) that he wanted to be an artist, not a scholar.

“I knew that Meyer had encouraged many of his students who he knew were not going to be great scholars to make art instead,” he explained. “The list is long.” (This show is in part an attempt to reconstitute the list with pictorial evidence.)

Mark Rothko, “Untitled (William and Rose Sachar)” (1936-1937). (Private collection)

According to Bui, Schapiro made art both for pleasure and "to inform his writing." It's not clear from the show just how his art informed his art history writing, but it's intriguing to see some of Schapiro's small, idiosyncratic assemblages, paintings and works on paper arrayed on a wall.

Schapiro's ancestors were Talmudic scholars. His father immigrated to America in 1906 and taught Hebrew at the Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva on the Lower East Side and the following year sent for his family.

At university, Schapiro wrote a dissertation about how the 12th-century cloister at a monastery in southwestern France, far from being rigid and doctrinal, was an expression of "spontaneity, fantasy, individuality and delight."

Those characteristics, of course, are also associated with 20th-century art, so it made sense that Schapiro complemented his expertise in Romanesque architectural sculpture by transforming himself into one of the most important scholars of modern art. Writing brilliantly on such figures as Picasso and Arshile Gorky as well as the nature of abstract art, he was able to thread together a painting by Cézanne with Virgil, Propertius, Émile Zola and Sigmund Freud.

At Columbia, Schapiro was politically active, a vocal and principled opponent both of fascism and Soviet aggression. He taught and befriended not only artists but also future critics and art historians, including Hilton Kramer, David Rosand, William Rubin and Barbara Rose.

When he turned 70, in 1974, a dozen leading artists, among them Jasper Johns, Saul Steinberg and Andy Warhol, created prints, each in an edition of 100, which they exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and sold to raise money to endow the Meyer Schapiro professorship of art history and archaeology at Columbia.

This Brattleboro show, which includes Bui's brilliant pencil portrait of Schapiro, based on a photograph by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, is like a postscript to that 1974 effort: a tribute, a salute, a gush of gratitude and affection.

Singing in Unison, Part 13: Homage to Meyer Schapiro *Through Feb. 15 at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center.*

By Sebastian Smee

Sebastian Smee is a Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic at The Washington Post and the author of "Paris in Ruins: Love, War and the Birth of Impressionism." He has worked at the Boston Globe, and in London and Sydney for the Daily Telegraph (U.K.), the Guardian, the Spectator, and the Sydney Morning Herald. @SebastianSmee