

Documents

A critique: Pevsner on modernity (1938)

MEYER SCHAPIRO

translated by David Craven

This book (*Pioneers of the Modern Movement*) is a careful, concise, and well-documented overview of the history of modern architecture and the industrial arts, up to the First World War. Pevsner traces the movement, which had its beginning with and was advanced by William Morris and his followers, who sought to reestablish the artisanal skills and aesthetics quality that had been lost during the decline of the Victorian Period. The movement included the following: an aesthetic opposition to the machine; the change of taste in the 1890s of the last century, from Pevsner's viewpoint, as much in architecture as in painting; the emergence of Art Nouveau; the extraordinary absorption of art into technology during the nineteenth century; the new *Grundbegriffe* (basic principles) of an art that applied new materials and was governed by the ideals of technology; and finally the confluence of three major sources—Morris, Art Nouveau, and the Industrial Arts—into a modern post-First World War style. While extremely sensible in his assessment of specific achievements, Pevsner is nonetheless contradictory and unclear in his general historical characterization and in

his theoretical pronouncements. On the one hand, he to a certain extent explains the decline of art in the mid-Victorian Period by means of the devastating consequences of industrialism, yet, on the other hand, when he attributes art's revitalization in the nineteenth century to one of these developments, he does so by means of a reactive climate of spiritual opinion. This leads him as a result to group together otherwise basically different artists like Cézanne, Van Gogh, Munch, Rousseau, Vallotton, and Seurat, as if they were all pursuing a common goal. The authenticity of their form, their intellectual integrity, their spiritual feelings, their abstractedness, and their intensity were supposed to have displaced the superficial sensuality and hedonism of Impressionism (Renoir!), which in turn supposedly reflected Victorian materialism. Similarly, Pevsner explains the movements of Symbolism and Art Nouveau of the same epoch in the nineteenth century, at one point, as coming from the dried-up sources of Realism and Impressionism and, at another point, as emanating from the ever strongly emergent projection of cheerfulness that brought fresh air and sunshine into the

David Craven would like to thank the late Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram for reading over the translation in the spring of 1993, discussing it with him, and suggesting some minor revisions in keeping with the original intent of Schapiro's essay.

This is the first appearance in English of a review essay by Meyer Schapiro that was originally published in German in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7, no. 1/2 (1938):291–293. The *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* was the official publication from 1932–1941 of the Institute of Social Research (better known as the “Frankfurt School”). The Institute has been associated with the University of Frankfurt since 1923, except when it was affiliated with Columbia University from 1934–1944. Among the most notable essays to appear in this journal were those by Max Horkheimer (vol. 6, no. 2 [1937]) and by Herbert Marcuse (vol. 6, no. 3 [1937]), in which the term “critical theory” was coined and the theoretical concerns of the Frankfurt School were identified.

Among other journal articles that have since become well known are Walter Benjamin's essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (vol. 5, no. 1 [1936]), Leo Lowenthal's critique of the novels of Knut Hamsen (vol. 6, no. 2 [1937]), T. W. Adorno's discussion of Thorstein Veblen's concept of art (vol. 9, no. 3

[1941]), and Friedrich Pollock's essay on state capitalism (vol. 9, no. 2 [1941]). Furthermore, over a third of each issue was taken up by a book review section that featured such critiques as those of Karl Korsch on Lenin and Sorel (1932, 1933), Georg Lukács on the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* (1933), Ernst Bloch on John Dewey (1935, 1936), Henri Lefebvre on Paul Nizan (1937), Meyer Schapiro on Pevsner (1938), and Paul Mattick on New Deal Programs (1938).

In one of the best summaries to date of this journal's role, Jürgen Habermas has said of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* that, “It was the organizational core and the intellectual center of . . . a small group of scholars, who in the cramped space of emigration banded around the journal's standard.” Furthermore, Habermas noted that “if ever there were a single datable and localizable Frankfurt School it was in New York, between 1933–1941.” (See Jürgen Habermas, “The Inimitable *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*,” *Telos* 45 [1980]:219–221.) Significantly, Meyer Schapiro executed a set of six portrait sketches in 1938 of various members of the Frankfurt School. Among those who can be identified are Max Horkheimer (editor of the *Zeitschrift*), Leo Lowenthal (reviews editor), Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, and Erich Fromm.

stuffy Victorian world. But these movements are also still ultimately characterized by an "enervating atmosphere," a "muggy dream."

Van der Velde, a founder of the *Neuen Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), in Pevsner's account, appears than as an unhealthy aesthete, indifferent to unbearable disorder and to dirty conditions. Although Pevsner recognizes the tendency of William Morris's art to entail a medievalizing Romanticism, he neglects this reactionary side, as he did with Art Nouveau and symbolism, and he describes Morris's work instead as merely progressive because it provided a basis for the art of the twentieth century. Pevsner is forced to concede the substitution of Art Nouveau for Impressionism as involving a thoroughgoing transformation of the artistic impulse. Nonetheless, operating as he does with an erroneous construction that around 1890 there began an entirely new world (or a new *Geist*), he speaks emphatically of an irreconcilable opposition between the two styles. Since Pevsner does not distinguish between different phases and tendencies within Impressionism, he does not see the moment or aspect of continuity between it and the art that followed—Monet's Giverny Garden and decorative paintings, for example, have a very strong connection with Art Nouveau. The relationship between the formal and the technical aspects of architecture remains unsound within this argument, so that one begins to have the impression, on the one hand, that the form is the mere goal-directed solution of a technical problem and, on the other hand, that the form is the product of fantasy or the expression of a moralizing outlook.

The weak point in Pevsner's method, despite his scholarly care, can be located in his train of thought about the psychology of certain national folk characters and the nature of the present. No sooner has he used these ideas than he has a pronounced historical change to explain concerning the so-called *Volkseele* (national soul of a people); after 1900 the *Volkseele* of the English was transformed, bringing into being new forms, since the new forms were *necessarily* democratic and that would have been "to go against the core of the English character." Pevsner is, however, repeatedly contradictory in the characterizing of a people's folk character: in one passage, he gives the impression that the effusive, unbridled, energetic ornamentation of the architect August Endell embodies the "eternal unity of German art," yet, in another place, the same is true of the unornamented, stringent form of Gropius, whose

"uncompromising directness" represents the German national character.

This same tendency, to displace the analysis of an historical situation through a general psychological category, surfaces in the frequent references to the *Zeitgeist* and to the "essence" of the century as such. He advances from the representation of our time as a "practical" and "collective" century—somehow, the ordering structure of architecture reflects the *Geist* of rational planning in society—and forgets thereby the social conflicts and class divisions, all of which are subsumed under the collectively based sense of practicality. It is also entirely in the sense of an uncritical concept of mainstream society, with his erroneous judgment of society as "collective," that Pevsner rejects the subjectivity and individualism of the last three hundred years and sees in them instead the increasing acceptance of an idealistic and mystical outlook, to the development of which modern art is said to contribute. Cubism, though, is evaluated as the impersonal, decorative by-product of this collective architecture. "The artist," writes Pevsner, "who is a representative of our century must be detached, since he is entering a century quite cool with steel and glass, of which the precision allows less room for subjective expression than any epoch of the past."