

Interfaces of art: Meyer Schapiro, Fernand Léger, and the role of the art historian in anachronistic artistic influence

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The humanities [...] are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away, but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead.¹

Art historians have proposed a number of theories on why 'the contemporary' holds an increasingly large foothold in the discipline.² However, the focus of this debate on today's scholarship glosses over the role that art historians have long played as a medium between art of the past and contemporary art. In the 1930s Meyer Schapiro introduced a number of modernist painters to medieval art objects, which both created and affirmed a relationship between the 'abstracted' figuration of the early medieval period and modernist abstraction.³ Among the objects presented was the Morgan Beatus, an illustrated tenth century *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Beatus of Liébana held by the Morgan Library and Museum (M.644) in New York City.⁴ As a trained artist himself, Schapiro was sensitive to modern art and maintained friendships with many practicing artists. He was therefore in a position to introduce Fernand Léger, Roberto Matta, André Masson, Jean Lurçat, Diego Rivera and other painters to both the Morgan Beatus and another thirteenth-century Beatus Apocalypse manuscript held in the Morgan collection (New York, Morgan, MS M.429). Schapiro noted that Léger was perhaps the most powerfully impacted by his interaction with these Apocalypse manuscripts.⁵

¹ Erwin Panofsky, 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', in *The Meaning of the Humanities: Five Essays*, ed. Theodore Meyer Greene, Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1969, 116.

² Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*, 2019; Hal Foster, ed., 'Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'', *October* 130, 2009, 3–124; Terry Smith, 'The State of Art History: Contemporary Art', *The Art Bulletin* 92:4, December 2010, 366–83; Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009; Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

³ C. Oliver O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern American Mind*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019, 1–2.

⁴ Although the story was undoubtedly floating around the artworld since the time Schapiro showed these artists the Morgan Beatus, Schapiro himself explicitly confirmed these meetings, pointing to the influence on Léger in particular, in a letter quoted in Joyce D. Rosa, 'The Beatus Manuscripts: Aesthetic Characteristics of Selected Illuminations from the Thompsonian, Saint-Sever, and Gerona Manuscripts and Their Influence on Picasso and Leger', Ph.D., New York, New York University, 1975.

⁵ Rosa, 'The Beatus Manuscripts', 289.

This story has been frequently mentioned in passing but has never been incorporated meaningfully into an analysis of either the Beatus manuscript or Léger's work. It is worthy of further investigation, however, as it speaks to how art historians negotiate their contemporary moment. The dominant thread of art historical scholarship in the early twentieth century, based on theories of stylistic development and artistic self-referentiality, excluded interactions such as this one. In this article, I contend that, although they are no longer dominant in the field, these historical methods and theories of art history have produced assumptions that continue to underpin scholarship in the discipline, which overestimate the distance of art historians from art-making and underestimate their influential role in art practice. In order to meaningfully incorporate a story such as this into art history, we need to rethink the supposed objectivity of art historical research in how we conceptualize provenance, taxonomy, and the afterlives of artworks.

As told through the lens of Schapiro, Léger, and the Morgan Beatus, the first section of this text addresses provenance, which is limited to ownership rather than influence and ends once an object reaches a museum collection. The second concerns taxonomy or the relationships between artworks in time. Traditionally, artworks were arranged in 'families', genealogies, or evolutionary trees of interrelated works. However, this implies that they 'evolve' over time and have a direct linear relationship to one another. Following from this discussion of biological metaphors in art historical taxonomy, the next section of this article addresses theory around whether artworks are 'alive or 'dead', whether we account for the power and relevance of artworks long after they were created. The final two sections, which discuss the chosen example in greater depth, concern the nature of anachronistic influence. While comparing the formal qualities of Léger's work with the Beatus manuscript is a relatively straightforward exercise, exploring the reverse direction of influence is more complicated. In this case, issues of authorship/authenticity as well as modern readings of medium-specificity come into play.

Provenance

The story of Léger and the Beatus manuscript seems to have been propagated by Meyer Schapiro himself, appearing in print in an article he wrote on the Gerona Apocalypse (Museo de la Catedral, MS. 10) in 1963, and it has been repeated in scholarship with some regularity since the 1970s.⁶ For most medieval scholars, this story seems to merely be a curiosity or a shorthand way to point to the historiography of their research area. I would argue, however, that this is more than a fun anecdote. Art objects have the potential, via art historical mediation, to influence other works and communicate some element of form or content to a subsequent generation, even if there is a considerable gap in time. The web of

⁶ Meyer Schapiro, 'The Beatus Apocalypse of Gerona', *Art News* 61, January 1963, 50.; Notable repetitions, among many more, occur in Rosa, 'The Beatus Manuscripts', 289; John Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus: A Corpus of the Illustrations of the Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 5 vols., London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1994-2003, 2:169; Elizabeth S. Bolman, 'De Coloribus: The Meanings of Color in Beatus Manuscripts', *Gesta* 38:1, January 1999, 22.

relationships between artworks expands outward, not linearly. No art object can be divorced from its original context, nor should it be, but its continued presence in the world complicates and alters its meaning in time.

Collecting information on the artwork's provenance, which typically lists where the work has travelled and who has owned it since it was created, is still common practice for the art historians who work in institutional or commercial settings. Rarely does provenance account for influence, however. As digital culture and networks make clear, influence does not flow in direct lines or family trees, nor does it relate merely to ownership. The issue has become more pressing as digital images are notoriously hard to retain control of or ownership of due to the ease and speed of their reproducibility. Provenance can be seen, in some ways, as the biography or the afterlife of an artwork. However, once an artwork reaches a museum collection, the biography of the work does not end.

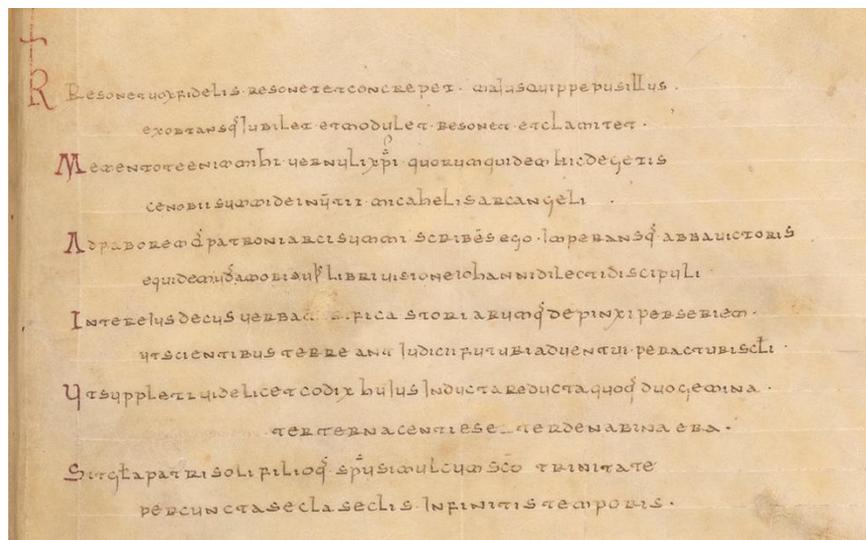


Figure 1: Signature: Maius, Fol. 293r in Beatus of Liébana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (MS M.644), ca. 945. New York: Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

Looking at the example of the provenance and curatorial notes for the Morgan Beatus manuscript, we find that it was illustrated circa 940-945 CE, a date revised by John Williams from an earlier assignment of 922 or 926 CE. As such it is thought to be the most complete early Beatus Apocalypse manuscript extant.⁷ It is in remarkably good condition—its vibrant colors still pop off the pages—which suggests that it was not heavily used or exposed to the elements over the course of its existence. Despite its colorful vibrancy, it does not contain any gold and silver, and the pigments lay over a wax base.⁸ The dimensions of the manuscript are 387 x 285mm—a large book—and it contains three hundred folios, with sixty-two full-page miniatures and forty-eight smaller miniatures. It is a paradigmatic example of Mozarabic illustration among Christians living under Islamic rule in the Iberian

⁷ Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, 2:22.

⁸ Morgan Library and Museum, 'Curatorial Description of MS M.644', accessed November 9, 2014, <http://corsair.morganlibrary.org/msdescr/BBM0644.htm>.

Peninsula. Maius, whose name appears prominently in an acrostic on the final folio of the manuscript [fig.1], is credited with creating it, most likely in the scriptorium in Tábara in the north of Spain for the monastery at San Miguel de Escalada.⁹ I will return to the significance of this authorial statement further on in the text.

After the mid-tenth century, the next recorded movement of the manuscript is in 1567 where it appears to have been in the possession of Archbishop of Valencia on the other side of Spain, who bequeathed it to the Order of Santiago of Uclés, not far from Madrid. The manuscript narrowly escaped assimilation into the Madrid archives when it was sold between the dissolution of the order in 1837 and the relocation of their manuscripts to Madrid in 1872. It then entered the open market in exchange for a silver watch and changed hands a few times before ending up in the collection of British newspaperman Henry Yates Thompson. J.P. Morgan, Jr. purchased it for the Morgan collection in 1919, six years after his father's death and five years before he would make the collection public.¹⁰ The book was rebound at least five times, including once when it was purchased by Morgan and most recently in 1992.¹¹

This is typically where the story of provenance ends: with the manuscript safely folded into its current collection. From here, however, we can gather further episodes in the continued history of the manuscript from other sources. Meyer Schapiro, who enrolled in Columbia University when he was sixteen, was still a student when J.P. Morgan, Jr. announced in February 1924 that he would open up the Morgan library to the public, particularly researchers and scholars.¹² At the end of March 1924, a selection of Morgan manuscripts were put on display at the New York Public Library.¹³ Schapiro set off on a research trip through Europe and the Middle East from July 1926 through October 1927 during which he deepened his knowledge of Romanesque and Mozarabic art and met with a leading scholar on Spanish art, Manuel Gómez-Moreno.¹⁴ Upon Schapiro's return to New York, he was in a position to impart his knowledge of early medieval Spanish art to a receptive community of modern painters and had access to the works in Morgan's collection. In traditional accounts of provenance, the museum is usually the final resting place of the art object. However, an expanded notion of provenance would chart not only the object itself but the ideas contained and transmuted subsequently.

⁹ Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, 2:21; Morgan Library and Museum, 'Curatorial Description of MS M.644.'

¹⁰ Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, 2:29.

¹¹ Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, 2:31.

¹² 'The Morgan Library for the Public', *The New York Times*, 17 February 1924.

It should be noted that a response published a few weeks later by Henry Alfred Todd of Columbia University pointed out the fact that Morgan's library had long been accessible to interested scholars. See: Henry Alfred Todd, 'Morgan Library in Use', *The New York Times*, 2 March 1924.

Meyer Schapiro's precociousness during his university days was reported in 'Meyer Schapiro', *Columbia Daily Spectator* CIV:65, 10 February 1960, 2.

¹³ 'Morgan Manuscripts on Exhibition', *The New York Times*, 31 March 1924.

¹⁴ Meyer Schapiro and Daniel Esterman, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad: Letters to Lillian and Travel Notebooks*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009, 101-15.

Family resemblances

Historically, academic writing on medieval manuscripts has focused on families or groups of iconographically similar works, meticulously tracing genealogies and lineages. The Beatus manuscripts are no exception and have been taxonomically ordered since the nineteenth century, most recently and completely by art historian John Williams.¹⁵ Williams has exhaustively researched these manuscripts, and much of his research is compiled in a comprehensive five-volume catalogue on the illustrated Beatus.¹⁶ One can hardly imagine, however, that a revised version of these volumes would include images of Léger's work from the 1940s. As much as this sort of taxonomy favors stylistic analysis above other factors, it also draws lines around contextual relationships.

Even as it seems remote that Léger's work would be included in taxonomies of the Beatus group, there are many formal and stylistic similarities to be found in Léger's paintings of *Divers* and *Acrobats* (*Les Plongeurs* and *Les Acrobates*).¹⁷ For example, *The Divers* (1941-2) [fig.2] in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art is a paradigmatic example of Léger's work during this period. This rather large painting (228.6 x 172.8 cm) shows a jumble of human body parts collected together in a mass, almost as if seen from above, and placed on vibrant blocks of color. There is no obvious directionality or orientation for the work, as all the elements are

¹⁵ Important early work in categorizing, dating, and tracing stylistic and iconographic connections between manuscripts were conducted in the following publications: Léopold Delisle, 'Les manuscrits de l'Apocalypse de Beatus conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale et dans le cabinet de M. Didot', in *Mélanges de paléographie et de bibliographie*, Paris: Champion, 1880, 117-48; Wilhelm Neuss, *Die Apokalypse Des Hl. Johannes in Der Altspanischen Und Altchristlichen Bibel-Illustration. Das Problem Der Beatushandschriften. Nebst Einem Tafelbande, Etc.*, Münster, 1931; Peter K. Klein, *Der Ältere Beatus-Kodex Vitr. 14-1 Der Bibliotheca Nacionalzu Madrid: Studien Zur Beatus-Ill. U.d. Span. Buchmalerei D. 10. Jh*, Studien Zur Kunstgeschichte, Bd. 8, Hildesheim; New York: Olms, 1976; Peter K. Klein, *Beatus a Liébana, In Apocalypsin commentarius Manchester, the John Rylands University Library, Latin MS 8*, Munich: H. Lengenfelder, 1990. For dating and categorization of the text, see Henry A. Sanders, ed., *Beati in Apocalypsin libri duodecim*, Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1930.

¹⁶ John Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*. See also John Williams and Barbara A Shailor, *A Spanish Apocalypse: The Morgan Beatus Manuscript*, New York: George Braziller, Pierpont Morgan Library, 1991; John Williams, 'Purpose and Imagery in the Apocalypse Commentary of Beatus of Liébana', in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992, 217-33; John Williams, 'Isidore, Orosius and the Beatus Map', *Imago Mundi* 49, January 1997, 7-32; John Williams, 'Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style', *The Art Bulletin* 85:3, September 2003, 442-68.

¹⁷ Simon Willmoth suggests that Léger may have seen images of other Beatus manuscripts published in the French art press, given his association with Christian Zervos and his documented interest in medieval art. This possible exposure to the Beatus type is purely speculative, but we know that Léger did see the Morgan M.644 in person with Meyer Schapiro when he was in New York City in 1935. It is possible that M.644 was the only manuscript he saw in person rather than in reproduction. Simon Willmoth, 'Léger in America', in *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, ed. Nicholas Serota and Ina Conzen, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987, 49-50.

arranged in a symmetrical manner. The illustrations in the Beatus manuscript are similarly placed on stripes or registers of color. Additionally, it makes ample use of symmetrical compositions, notably on fol. 222v depicting Heavenly Jerusalem [fig.3] and the Adoration of the Lamb on fol. 87r. The mass of jumbled bodies found in Léger's paintings bear a resemblance to the corpses in hell found on fol.220r [fig.4] and the tumbling grasping bodies in the Witnesses Ascension on fol. 154v [fig.5]. Apart from *The Divers* series, a case for an iconographic comparison between Léger's *La Grande Julie* (1945) and the *Woman Clothed in the Sun* from fol.152v has also been suggested, though the relationship is perhaps a bit more tenuous than that of the *Divers*.¹⁸ What are we to do with stylistic relationships such as these, if not incorporate them into taxonomies? Perhaps such comparisons are doomed to anecdote because their contextual disconnect cannot be rectified by the existing methods of art historical research.

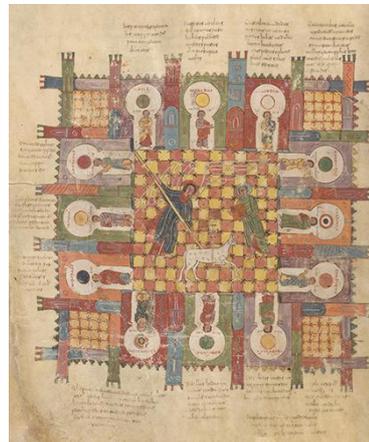
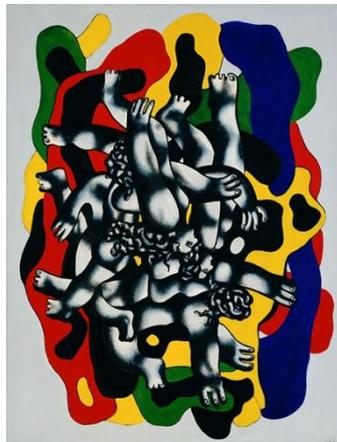


Figure 2: Fernand Léger, *Les Plongeurs* (*The Divers*), 1941-42. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 172.8 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art. Photo: © 2022, The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

Figure 3: Apocalypse: New Jerusalem measured, Fol. 222v in Beatus of Liébana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (MS M.644), ca. 945. New York: Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

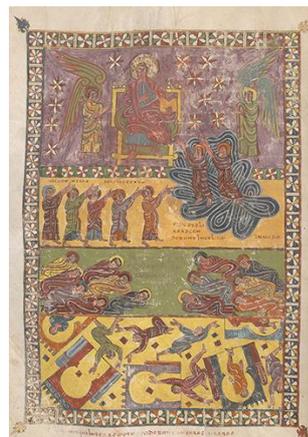
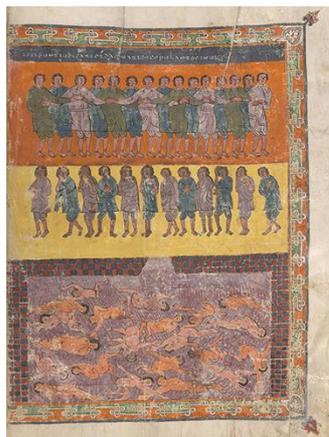


Figure 4: Last Resurrection and Judgment, Fol. 220r in Beatus of Liébana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (MS M.644), ca. 945. New York: Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

Figure 5: Apocalypse: Witnesses, Ascension, Fol. 154v in Beatus of Liébana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (MS M.644), ca. 945. New York: Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

¹⁸ Rosa, 'The Beatus Manuscripts', 290-303.

The standard methodology traditionally employed in grouping and cataloguing medieval manuscripts and, in particular, Apocalypse manuscripts is a combination of the general and specific. The existing manuscripts are arranged, as noted, as a kind of biological lineage, an evolutionary line of descendants connected typologically, often with accompanying diagrams. Each manuscript is also examined in its particularity with the goal of pinpointing how it relates to the others and where it falls in the lineage. The model or archetypal manuscript, or what George Kubler later called a 'prime object', indicates a starting point or rupture in the chain. Unlike the taxonomists of art history who came before him, Kubler rejected the genealogical model of art history while retaining the notion of an origin point for groupings of objects.¹⁹

In *The Shape of Time*, Kubler argues that the biological metaphor in art lineage is misguided, stating:

The biological model is not the most appropriate one for a history of things... we are dealing in art with the transmission of some kind of energy; with impulses, generating centers, and relay points; with increments and losses in transit; with resistances and transformers in the circuit. In short, the language of electrodynamics might have suited us better than the language of botany; and Michael Faraday might have been a better mentor than Linneaus for the study of material culture.²⁰

Applying Kubler's model to the work of Léger, one could say that it seems to draw a charge from the Morgan Beatus and the artist's encounters with it. His work is not a direct or complete copy of its 'genetic materials' but, instead, is party to a transferal of energy or residual electricity.

Kubler's theory of form was a continuation of the critiques of a generation of art historians who came before him. Despite his rejection of 'evolution' as a model, Kubler was more than content to use other metaphors from the natural sciences, as evidenced in the quote above. He was certainly not the first or the last art historian to try to explain form as a natural process. Kubler's conception of formal influence and the changes it undergoes in time is indebted to the theoretical work of his doctoral advisor, Henri Focillon. Meyer Schapiro, a younger contemporary of Focillon, was also active in rethinking existing taxonomies and notions of style in art history.

This is unsurprising given the shared interest between Schapiro and Focillon in eleventh and twelfth-century Romanesque art in the 1930s.²¹ Schapiro and Focillon both considered Romanesque art and architecture worthy of appreciation in its own right rather than as a mere stepping-stone to the more superior Gothic period that followed, but they clashed on methodological issues.²² This change in disciplinary attitude toward the Romanesque period required the art historians who

¹⁹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 35–48.

²⁰ Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 9.

²¹ Walter B. Cahn, 'Schapiro and Focillon', *Gesta* 41:2, 2002, 129–136.

²² Cahn, 'Schapiro and Focillon', 129.

studied it to conceive new methods and frameworks that dispensed with the evolutionary model of art history, which placed the Romanesque below its more highly evolved successors.

In different ways, Schapiro and Focillon began to rethink art historical theory on form. Although neither scholar approved of the evolutionary models of art history propagated by their forebearers in the discipline, their different approaches to solving the methodological problems they faced created tension between the them, as evidenced by their brief personal correspondence.²³ Whereas Schapiro did not see formalism and contextual analysis of the social conditions surrounding the work as 'incompatible methods,' Focillon very strongly asserts in *The Life of Forms in Art* that a 'work of art rises proudly above any interpretation we may see fit to give it' and that it is 'not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself.'²⁴

Artistic form, in Focillon's conception, exists in a milieu apart that must not be thought of as caused by or created primarily in relation to the external world around it. He writes, '...sometimes form, although it has become entirely void of meaning, will not only survive long after the death of its content, but will even unexpectedly and richly renew itself.'²⁵ Indeed, Focillon saw early critical theory perspectives like Schapiro's as a cause-and-effect formula that cheapens the power of form. His point, that when form is divorced from a specific content it has the power to live on, could well be applied to the example of the Beatus and Léger. The formal correspondence of the works is only possible given Léger's disregard for the particular social and political context of the manuscript. After all, he could hardly have been interested in recreating ninth-century devotional practices.

Kubler's work on formal changes over time is thus foregrounded by broader debates in the 1950s over the question of 'style' in art history.²⁶ Schapiro was also key player in these debates.²⁷ Noting the cultural biases which had prejudiced western commentators against non-western art on the basis of abstraction, Schapiro writes, 'The analysis and characterization of the styles of primitive and early historical cultures have been strongly influenced by the standards of recent Western art.'²⁸ It was only through western art's own adoption of abstraction in modern art that it became apparent to art historians that the work of people outside of Europe could be seen as valuable and worthy in its own right, not merely a display of 'primitiveness.' Although it took some time for the discipline to welcome a broader range of visual and material artefacts into the fold, the changes in attitude were undoubtedly influenced by modern art practices in the west and artists' fetishization of non-western art in the modern period.

²³ Cahn, 'Schapiro and Focillon', 131.

²⁴ Cahn, 'Schapiro and Focillon', 131; Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler, New York: Zone Books, 1989, 32-33.

²⁵ Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 38.

²⁶ James S. Ackerman, 'On Rereading "Style"', *Social Research* 45:1, Spring 1978, 153.

²⁷ Meyer Schapiro, 'Style', in *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, ed. A.L. Kroeber, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 287-311.

²⁸ Schapiro, 'Style', 291.

Schapiro also critiques the completionist attitude in art historical studies of style up to that point, noting that, '...the single name given to the style of a period rarely corresponds to a clear and universally accepted characterization of a type.'²⁹ In so doing, he begins to take the first steps towards dismantling the universalist doctrines that governed the discipline. In addition to this, Schapiro acknowledges that, if a term like style were to persist, it does not belong to a delimited and continuous time period but rather can echo in different historical periods: 'The group style, like a language, often contains elements that belong to different historical strata.'³⁰ Schapiro thus sets the stage for contemporary art historical discourse, though it certainly took the discipline some time to catch up.

These debates over which metaphor should govern the taxonomy of art are typically built on the assumption of successive or continuous unidirectional influence. This erases the role of the art historian in reanimating art historical objects. Even if the governing classifications of traditional art history have weakened in popularity or relevance over the past century, the assumptions they are built on remain. One of these assumptions is the invisibility or objectivity of the art historian in processes of influence. While art history may now contain multiple flows and threads that represent the stories beyond the traditional western artistic canon, each individual path still seemingly flows with singularity in one direction, independent of the art historian's hand. Instead of thinking of history in terms of flow, it may be more useful to think of it in terms of multidirectional networks, taken as a whole, which provide multiple pathways rather than a series of one-way streets between art objects. Most of all, no ordering or accounting of art should forget the influence of the one who creates the schema: the art historian.

Alive or dead

Artists and art historians have long debated just how 'alive' artworks are, particularly those already consigned to art history and the museum. In 1909 F.T. Marinetti penned the Futurist Manifesto and published it in newspapers across Italy as well as on the front page of *Le Figaro* in France in 1909. He wrote:

Museums, graveyards! ... They're the same thing, really, because of their grim profusion of corpses that no one remembers. [...] Admiring an old painting is just like pouring our purest feelings into a funerary urn, instead of projecting them far and wide, in violent outbursts of creation and of action.³¹

It is not only the first so-called artist's manifesto but also an infamous diatribe against the value of museums—or, indeed, the study of art history. He asks, 'Why should we want to poison ourselves? Why should we want to rot?'³²

²⁹ Schapiro, 'Style', 288.

³⁰ Schapiro, 'Style', 294.

³¹ F.T. Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism (1909)', in *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, ed. Alex Danchev, London: Penguin, 2011, 6.

³² Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism (1909)', 6.

The idealized figures and themes of Greek and Roman art and architecture, which dominated European academies for centuries, kept Italian artists confined to their past and the ruins of that past that surrounded them. The Futurists operated under the shadow of, among others, Giorgio Vasari, who wrote about the lives of artists in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy and is often considered the first art historian. His work solidified the place of Cinquecento artists like Michelangelo and Raphael at the pinnacle of western artistic production for centuries to come. An artist himself, Vasari wrote about his contemporaries in heroic terms. His *Lives* were either stories about artists he knew or rumors and anecdotes he had heard about others he did not, and he did not concern himself much with research or getting the facts right.

Nevertheless, Vasari's shadow looms large over the development of the discipline of art history. This modern discipline, at its start in the nineteenth century, continued to prize Italian Renaissance art as the pinnacle of artistic production. While early art historians were concerned with cataloguing this peak and understanding the shape of artistic development before and after it, contemporary artists of their time were beginning to rebel against the classical models that had ruled European art since the sixteenth century. According to Christopher Wood, the modern period is the moment 'when artists will take control again of art history.'³³ If modernism saw artists wresting back control of the narrative from the historians, Futurism was modern artists' attempt at a full *coup d'état*. Their manifesto declares that historians and their dusty old museums are no longer needed at all. The Futurists' *tabula rasa* approach aimed to erase the intellectual heritage of the past, including the influence of the artistic and literary movements that came before it.

By labelling the artworks in museums 'corpses', the Futurist Manifesto implies that the art of the past cannot grow or change, circulate, or meaningfully influence. The communicative potential of artworks remains intact through continual interpretation and translation. They provide an interface between the past and the present but also perhaps something more than a mere glimpse into the past. For Wood, the art historian is a kind of spiritual medium who communes with the dead object and transforms it into a living work of art through interpretation. He writes, 'I will tell you, however, that the art historian is the one who makes you see the carved relief again as a work of art.'³⁴ Once translated, according to Wood, the artwork can take over the business of communicating its aesthetic to the viewer itself. Key to this experience, according to Wood, is desire. He writes, '...art registers an adjustment of living consciousness to dead things.'³⁵ By this definition, art has a mystical quality that cannot be encapsulated by factual information surrounding its creation or creator.

Following Wood's line of thinking, it seems that in order for the artwork to live again, a priest is required, someone who can perform a ritual of resurrection. As a case in point, Meyer Schapiro was often described in terms more befitting a priest

³³ Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, 265.

³⁴ Wood, *A History of Art History*, 2.

³⁵ Wood, *A History of Art History*, 5.

or a cult leader than an art historian. As one attendee to his lectures described it, 'His knowledge was so impressive as to appear occult.'³⁶ Attending one of Schapiro's lectures is thus compared to attending a church service, where the priest reveals and decodes the hidden meanings of ancient objects for the present day.

Preposterous history

In most contemporary art historical scholarship, the meaning assigned to an artwork is closely related to the moment and situation in which it was created. Whether this specific meaning is part of a formalist history of stylistic development or tied to the social and cultural milieu of the object, traditionally-defined artistic meaning cannot possibly change once the artist completes the work and puts it into the world. However, what constitutes meaning in art has shifted considerably among art historians over the past few decades. Western art history scholarship is full of subjectivity, biases, and blind spots. Purely objective or empirical modes of art historical scholarship have, through successive disciplinary critiques, been exposed as fallacies.

Mieke Bal proposes a model of history that she calls 'preposterous history,' arguing that not only does older artwork inform art in the present—basic linear history—but that the existence of newer artwork changes the older in turn. She writes:

Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking. It specifies what and how our gaze sees. Hence, the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead.³⁷

Of course, there are many facts around a work of art that are fixed in time and change little over the years. The basic information around medium, physical appearance, and creator are rarely revised, let alone totally 'obliterated', once documentation to confirm them has been secured. This is the empirical side of art historical research, its basic metadata, but it is not what has come to constitute meaning for art historians today.

Bal's idea that an artwork can retrospectively change makes sense if we look at just how radically the definition of artistic meaning has shifted over the past decades. Artworks have historically been defined by their iconography, what they represent, or their materials/medium. Painting in general (and oil painting in particular) still enjoy near synonymy with art. However, if we look at artworks as vehicles of communication—conveyors of meaning, layered with the cultural baggage of sometimes centuries of existence in the world—it follows that a work of art could change over time and be fundamentally altered by the work that comes in its wake, even if it remains more or less the same physically or materially.

³⁶ O'Donnell, *Meyer Schapiro's Critical Debates*, 4.

³⁷ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001, 1.

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison propose a model of the history of science that is similar to the one that Bal proposes in art history. They write:

You can play an eighteenth-century clavichord at any time after the instrument's revival around 1900—but you cannot hear it after two intervening centuries of the pianoforte in the way it was heard in 1700. Sequence weaves history into the warp and woof of the present: not just as past process reaching its present state of rest—how things came to be as they are—but also as the source of tensions that keep the present in motion.³⁸

It is so with art as well. Looking at a historical work of art today—viewing it, using it as an example, discussing it, experiencing it—is an ongoing process. Art historical scholarship balances between the past and the present, mediated via the work of art.

As James Elkins writes, 'Good scholarship suppresses the more egregious anachronisms, but it can never erase them entirely.'³⁹ It would be impossible and, even, undesirable to try to write art history from any point of view other than an anachronic (i.e., contemporary) one. Revisiting different artists and time periods in art history is more than just correcting the facts around artworks. These facts are the basic metadata of the work, but there is also more to the data and interpretation that surrounds an artwork than this. Subsequent history can have an irreversible effect on how we 'read' a work of art and changing perspectives provide new layers of meaning.

After a period of approximately two hundred years, new styles, series, and ways of representing the Book of Revelation, along with other commentaries and exegeses, took prominence over the Beatus group of manuscripts.⁴⁰ The Léger anecdote, however, reminds us that the object has a life in the world after its point of creation that deserves further attention. Even more than that, however, it reminds us that art historians are not passive or objective observers of art objects.

Despite the formal similarities between Léger's work and the Beatus manuscript, I would not, in fact, lobby for its inclusion in Williams's catalogue of Beatus manuscripts nor would I argue it should be read as a continuation of medieval visual culture. While acknowledging the layers of use, interpretation, and influence piled on an art object after its creation, we still need to be careful in how we read the present into the past. Schapiro shared this view, as evidenced by his comments to Focillon in a letter dated May 9, 1936:

I have cited you in my lectures as the only French teacher of medieval art who was applying to the past the insights gained through the modern aesthetic experience... But I believe that unless the peculiar assumptions

³⁸ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, 19.

³⁹ James Elkins, *Stories of Art*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 34.

⁴⁰ The Beatus typology did not entirely disappear from use after this period. It should be noted that manuscripts placed in other taxonomies, such as the Trinity Apocalypse (Cambridge, Ms. R.16.2), a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman Apocalypse, retained some iconographic elements from the Beatus Apocalypse, such as the scene of Heavenly Jerusalem on fol. 25v.

underlying modern formalism are laid bare, its application to past art will involve serious distortions, even in formal analysis.⁴¹

In other words, Schapiro approaches the topic of confluence between medieval and modern art with interest but not without reservations.

A raft of more recent publications, including Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel's *Anachronistic Renaissance*, Nagel's *Medieval Modern*, and Amy Knight Powell's *Depositions*, have attempted to read pre-modern art in the context of postmodern theory and postmodern art in the context of pre-modern practice, often exercising little caution in the enterprise.⁴² While the comparisons in these texts are provocative, the reading of the Morgan Beatus and its interaction with Léger that I am proposing here is not designed to unite the disparate time periods in which they were produced. Nor am I attempting to read these works formally, through a pseudomorphic lens. Instead, I aim to address a very specific historical moment where Léger and the Morgan Beatus directly interacted with one another. While the manuscript remains firmly in the context of its creation, it also continues to exist as part of the modern period. The same work is both medieval and modern in turn, not only in its persistence through time but, crucially, in how it is read, its use, and its importance in the historical moment in question and within that particular context. Léger's work becomes a little bit medieval while the Beatus acquires a new gloss of modern theory, but that does not mean Léger's work or the manuscript lose their historical specificity.

Schapiro's art historical methodology has been tied to the emergence of critical theory in his application of Marxist dialectical materialism.⁴³ His leftist political affiliation and anti-fascist stance emerged through his attempt to unravel how other scholars had injected modern prejudices, such as assumptions based on racial psychological character, into their categorization of art historical objects. Of course, Schapiro's readings also contain his own particularly modern political perspective.⁴⁴ However, Schapiro began to acknowledge the various subjectivities at play in art history at this early moment, unlike many of his contemporaries.

Copy / original

In the 1930s many artists and intellectuals, including Schapiro and Léger, were concerned with the proliferation of mass media they observed in popular culture. Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,' speaks powerfully on the theoretical issues surrounding mass

⁴¹ Qtd. Cahn, 'Schapiro and Focillon', 131.

⁴² Alexander. Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, 2010; Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012; Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum*, New York: Zone Books, 2012.

⁴³ David Craven, 'Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the Emergence of Critical Theory', *Oxford Art Journal* 17:1, 1994, 42.

⁴⁴ Cynthia L. Persinger, 'The Politics of Style: Meyer Schapiro and the Crisis of Meaning in Art History', Ph.D., Pennsylvania, University of Pittsburgh, 2007, 91–100.

media reproductive technologies at the time.⁴⁵ Schapiro, in fact, was one of the last people to try to convince Benjamin to leave Europe before the Nazi invasion of France in 1939.⁴⁶ The work of Benjamin's fellow Frankfurt School theorists, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on what they called 'the culture industry' further contextualizes the importance of these questions in the 1930s and into the 1940s.⁴⁷ The Morgan Beatus, therefore, enters into two concurrent debates at the time: the debate around reproduction and authenticity and the status of the material object in art.

Attendant to its focus on family lineage, the literature surrounding medieval manuscripts is often fixated on the isolation of a model. A useful example of this fixation can be found in scholarship on the Anglo-Norman Apocalypse manuscripts that were produced in England in the thirteenth century. For many years, scholars debated whether the Morgan Apocalypse (New York, Morgan, MS. M.524), or some other extant manuscript, was the archetypal model of the series, as if all copies of this type were extant and one of them *had* to be the 'original.'⁴⁸ It was only later that scholars began to question the primacy of the Morgan Apocalypse and surmise that perhaps there was a lost archetypal model that served as the starting point of the series.

By the fifteenth century, in Burgundy, Apocalypse manuscripts such as the Apocalypse of Margaret of York (New York, Morgan, MS. M.484) and the Apocalypse of Charles the Bold (New York, Morgan, MS. M.68) copied no model but were left up to the personalized inclinations of bookmaker and patron. This shift in practice and sudden interest in uniqueness or originality occurred around the same time as the invention of the printing press and the development of block book or xylographic printing methods.⁴⁹ While copies and copied motifs occur for the next few centuries (notably in the recycling and repetition of elements or figures in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings), the emphasis from the sixteenth century onward is mostly on uniqueness or originality of a singular work, despite liberal

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Its Technological Reproducibility, And Other Writings On Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, 19–55.

⁴⁶ Thomas E Crow, *The Intelligence of Art*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 7.

⁴⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, London: Routledge, 1993, 31–41.

⁴⁸ The debate on this manuscript between scholars George Henderson and Roger Freyhan can be found in George Henderson, 'Part II: The English Apocalypse: I', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30, January 1967, 131; R. Freyhan, 'Joachism and the English Apocalypse', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 18:3/4, July 1955, 211. Barbara Nolan provides proof that the M.524 contains copying errors and therefore cannot be an archetypal model, see Barbara Nolan, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 69, note 69.

⁴⁹ Amanda Wasielewski, 'Books Were Opened: The Apocalypse of Margaret of York (Ms. M.484) and Spiritual Empowerment of the Laity in the Fifteenth Century', *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 5:4, January 2016, 76–110.

stylistic and iconographic borrowings.⁵⁰ One could argue that not until techniques of appropriation and repetition were taken up in the twentieth century, did the mystique and aura of the 'original' dissolve again. This shift in practice in the twentieth century effectively bookended a long period of experimentation with the singular and unique artwork that began in the fifteenth century with the printing press and ushered in a long era of mass-media.

Michael Camille, writing on the relationship between Schapiro's scholarly output and New York School modernism, frames his own art historical methodology in terms of material culture studies and the renewed focus on the object in the 1990s. He opines that:

...the Beatus Apocalypse in the Morgan Library has nothing in common with the works of individual genius displayed in the Museum of Modern Art, but is more akin to the flesh of hoardings and the funnies in the newspapers sold in the streets outside.⁵¹

It is true that the Morgan Beatus, used and viewed as intended in the tenth century, has very little in common with the artworks in the Museum of Modern Art. In the present day and in its current state, however, it *does* appear to now have quite a lot in common with those artworks in MoMA. Both the Morgan M.644 and Léger's *The Divers* in MoMA have met a similar fate: preservation in perpetuity in a New York institutional setting. Both these works are treated and handled today in not dissimilar ways. The modern period transformed what we know or can say about what the Morgan Beatus is and what it does. Interactions between this book and Schapiro, Léger and others during the early twentieth century isolated the book from any tenth century utility into the realm of auratic art and individual genius.

Camille argues that medieval art is part of a network 'which totally transcends the individual either as maker or viewer.'⁵² Scholarship on the Morgan Beatus has always revolved, in some way, around its individual maker due to the presence of his signature in an acrostic on fol. 293r [fig.1]. The emphasis on Maius is, on one hand, indicative of the pride, authorship, individual perspective, and invention that is so highly valued in the modern period, but it also reflects the rarity of this type of signature or any signature at all in manuscript production of the

⁵⁰ Examples of recycled imagery in seventeenth century Dutch painting are too numerous to mention in full, but the practice was particularly prevalent in genre painting, such as those by Gerrit ter Borch and Pieter de Hooch, and still life painting, such as those by Melchior d'Hondecoeter. See Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Wayne E. Franits, Pieter de Hooch, and J. Paul Getty Museum., *Pieter de Hooch: A Woman Preparing Bread and Butter for a Boy*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006, 9. Eric Jan Sluijter, 'On Brabant Rubbish, Economic Competition, Artistic Rivalry, and the Growth of the Market for Paintings in the First Decades of the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1:2, December 2009; Marringje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Bird Painter*, Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2008.

⁵¹ Michael Camille, 'How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art': Medieval, Modern and Postmodern in Meyer Schapiro', *Oxford Art Journal* 17:1, January 1994, 73.

⁵² Camille, 'How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art', 72.

medieval period. Due to the rarity of authorial markings in manuscript work and the fact that manuscripts were often collaborative efforts, art historians have been understandably excited to see Maius's prominent statement at the end of the Morgan Beatus.

The status of the M.644 as 'original' is not only due to its age and relative completeness but also to the prominent place of the authorial statement. Authorship signifies intent and uniqueness. Not until a signed urinal was introduced to the jury of a New York art exhibition in 1917 (with the pseudonym R. Mutt), did any artist so clearly separate the authorial gesture from its role as an indication of originality. The author's signature usually points to an object imbued with personal artistic invention. Duchamp, of course, subsequently produced a number of reproductions and proxies for the lost original. In doing so, he posed the question of what happens when you layer authorial intent upon the unoriginal. What happens when you sign a copy?

The modernist implication, prior to Duchamp, was that this would be a rather meaningless act. It is notable that Schapiro, in his analysis of medieval artwork, places a great amount of value on individual artistic freedom and by implication authorship.⁵³ As modernist logic would have it, there would be no point in assigning authorship to something unless there had been some significant change or individualistic contribution to its production, unless it was one of Kubler's prime objects or signified some great leap forward. In fact, John Williams implies just such a rationale for Maius's signature: Maius had altered the cycle to such a degree that he felt compelled to claim credit for his invention.⁵⁴

It is evident that modernist interest in pre-modern art was inflected by the question of authorship and artistic intention. Léger wrote, in 1931, on the mosaic murals of the Hagia Sofia:

Everything that preceded the Italian Renaissance is infinitely interesting to us modern artists because of its nearness to our conception of an art form which invents, and not merely copies. The Italian Renaissance substituted for the artistic creation of the great epochs the simple imitation of reality.⁵⁵

Léger's statements on the Hagia Sofia murals invert the conventional wisdom of the time regarding the inventiveness and originality of pre-modern art. According to Léger, the artwork produced following the Italian Renaissance was the *unoriginal* or the copy due to its strict adherence to naturalism.

The collection of extant Beatus manuscripts are, without a doubt, a series of handmade copies produced over the course of two centuries, and their deviations from one another form the basis for complex taxonomies devised by art historians over the years. The aim of the iconography is not, however, to reproduce the natural world as seen through a singular perspective, as artists had been doing since the Renaissance. Looking at the Morgan Beatus as an object in its entirety, we can see

⁵³ Williams, 'Meyer Schapiro in Silos', 339; Camille, 'How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art', 66.

⁵⁴ Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus*, 1994, 1:77.

⁵⁵ Fernand Léger, 'Byzantine Mosaics and Modern Art', *Magazine of Art*, April 1944, 144.

that it is just one amongst a large number of similar hand-copied books created around a nearly identical program, but each individual illustration in the book does not reproduce the material world in optical precision. This distinction between a copy of nature and a copy of symbolic iconography is the crux of this modernist meditation into the nature of reproduction and originality.

Medium specificity

In addition to modern commentators reading authenticity into the Beatus manuscript by virtue of its specific authorship, they also comment on its purity with regard to medium. By referencing the concept of medium in relation to medieval works, they superimpose a decidedly modern issue on premodern artifacts. In the aforementioned essay by Léger, for example, he comments that the flatness of the figures in the Hagia Sofia mural is truer to its architectural medium, writing, '...instead of destroying the wall, they respect it.'⁵⁶ Both the murals of Hagia Sofia and the Morgan Beatus can be seen, from a modernist point of view, to be working within the confines of their flattened medium: the pages of a book or the wall of a building.⁵⁷ The flatness of the figures here is seen to be *true*, but it is not true to the natural world but rather the support structure (the materiality of the medium) upon which it is painted.

The figural style of the Morgan Beatus was not, of course, chosen with some modernist notion of truth to materials, but Léger nevertheless reads it within this modernist framework. Elizabeth S. Bolman argues that the use of color in this manuscript functioned as a type of mnemonic device to aid in memorizing the text.⁵⁸ I would not want to speculate on the exact reason for the flatness of the figuration in the Morgan Beatus, but, given the symbolic and mnemonic functions of the iconography, a naturalist depiction would have severely limited the communicative abilities of this manuscript. The tension that remains, then, for the Morgan Beatus during its afterlife in the modern era, is the ideological difference between a copy of nature as perceived by the eye and a copy of a figural typology, developed over a length of time within a culture and intimately integrated into social life.

In his essay, 'The Human Body Considered as an Object,' from 1945, Léger states, '... to the mind of the modern artist, a cloud, a machine, a tree are elements as interesting as people or faces. So new pictures, important compositions will be made from an entirely different visual angle.'⁵⁹ In addition to the flatness of the figures, one of the first things the modern viewer might notice in the Morgan Beatus is the flatness of the picture plane. The visual angle presented in its pages differs substantially from a single point (i.e. single viewer, individualistic) perspective. The Morgan Beatus would have most likely have been oriented horizontally when it was viewed, so the horizontal plane creates a field upon which figures crawl and scramble.

⁵⁶ Léger, 'Byzantine Mosaics and Modern Art', 144.

⁵⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'Post Painterly Abstraction', *Art International* 8:5-6, 1964, 63.

⁵⁸ See Bolman, 'De Coloribus.'

⁵⁹ Fernand Léger, 'The Human Body Considered as an Object', in *Functions of Painting*, New York: Viking Press, 1973, 133.

Léger was not at all circumspect in proclaiming that the flatness of both figure and medium in pre-modern artwork mirrored the modernist conception of artistic invention. For modernist artists like Léger, looking for a way out of linear perspective, the Morgan Beatus seemed to present a new visual angle. Léger's *Divers* and *Acrobats* of the 1940s, as noted, drew inspiration from many of the formal qualities of the Morgan Beatus. The difference in Léger's work is that is always shown on a wall, vertically aligned. While the downward viewpoint makes particular sense in a book that lies flat as its viewed, Léger's work pictured on the wall also, in its own way, disorients a sense of Euclidean space and a particular individualistic point of view.

It can be assumed, given the schematic nature of the Apocalypse illustrations in the Morgan Beatus, that they are not based on a paradigm of natural vision. The narrative of the Apocalypse is not vision-centric, but rather map-like, serving as a means by which to decode and understand the text. Léger's stylistic borrowings from the Morgan Beatus divorce the iconographic and visual techniques from the text, indicating a key break between the medieval period and modern artists' interest in this manuscript. For the medieval reader, text was paramount. As noted, Bolman argues that the formulas for arranging the different blocks of color in the manuscript were a type of mnemonic device and served as a key to memorizing the text.⁶⁰

Beatus of Liébana, and those who followed him, felt that the Book of Revelation was the most important book of the Bible, the key to understanding all the other texts.⁶¹ So it was of the utmost importance to know the Apocalypse inside and out. The illustrations are aids that guide the acquisition of the knowledge encoded in the text. The Apocalypse has, throughout its existence, been used as a key to knowledge, the source from which believers decode the meaning of their age. Many of the existing manuscripts from the Mozarabic period in Spain, such as missals and antiphonaries, are associated with collective oral/aural worship practices. During this period, clergy actively promoted liturgical practice that prominently featured music and hymns.⁶² It is, therefore, possible that the Morgan Beatus could have been used as part of collective worship practice, which may at least partly explain the use of symmetrical or mirrored figures in the illustrations. Given these contextual clues, the schematic illustrations of the Morgan Beatus can be interpreted as a source of collective knowledge and site of immersive action.

Léger, like many other artists in the 1930s, was drawn to murals and large-scale paintings. He saw this format as a way to emphasize the power of humanity in collective action and a means by which art could be created for all classes of people.⁶³ Two murals, both of which happen to be placed in wealthy patrons' homes rather than among the 'people', nevertheless demonstrate the model of viewership for mural works of this era as enveloping or immersive sites: a mural created for

⁶⁰ See Bolman, 'De Coloribus.'

⁶¹ Bolman, 'De Coloribus', 25.

⁶² Ruth E. Messenger, 'Mozarabic Hymns in Relation to Contemporary Culture in Spain', *Traditio* 4, January 1946, 163.

⁶³ Willmoth, 'Léger in America', 50. See also Fernand Léger, 'Art and the People', in *Functions of Painting*, New York: Viking Press, 1973, 141–48.

Wallace K. Harrison's home (1943) and one in Nelson A. Rockefeller's New York apartment (1938).⁶⁴ A similar immersive quality can also be found in the illustrations of the Morgan Beatus and their schematic use of the horizontal space of the page. Although Léger's work is oriented vertically, we cannot characterize its subject matter, in critic Leo Steinberg's terms, as 'nature' over 'culture'.⁶⁵ Nor can we view it as any model of vision that would imply a window-like portal to naturalism. It fits more readily into Steinberg's conception of the horizontal picture plane, a workspace or site of activity rather than an individual, distanced perspective. The Morgan Beatus is also, in essence, a horizontal picture plane, upon which its narrative objects are spread. In this way, each work can be read in any order, so to speak, without compromising its historical specificity or integrity.

Conclusion

Mutual exchange between the academic discipline of art history and the contemporary art world is common practice. Art historians regularly write about the work of contemporary artists in academic journals and act as art critics and theorists in the non-academic art press. They also help curate contemporary art exhibitions, guest lecture at art schools, attend art fairs, and advise commercial galleries. While the self-reflexivity of art history as a discipline is evident in the copious literature devoted to historiographic concerns, the influence of art historians in the direction contemporary art takes is often treated as background information, such as in the case of Schapiro/Léger. There are notable exceptions to this, such as Clement Greenberg's influence on the painters of his time. Barring such authoritarian influence, however, one might be forgiven for assuming art historians have remained isolated from the business of art-making. Indeed, the ideal of the objective, distant observer is still upheld in the humanities, despite late twentieth-century critiques of scientific epistemologies.⁶⁶

While a certain amount of distance in the writing of art history may be desirable, the pretense of objectivity or lack of influence in the direction of contemporary art practice is just as impossible as it ever was. Christopher Wood argues in his book *The History of Art History* that the discipline lost its bearings once artists turned away from formal experiments. Rachel Wetzler summarizes his argument, writing, 'Modernism opened a door that can't be shut; now art is doomed to a permanent present.'⁶⁷ Despite what dire prognoses art historians may make, however, the present only appears permanent by virtue the near-constant mediation and remediation of artworks and artefacts. These works continue to 'live' as works of the present, as contemporary art or visual culture, because they are continually renewed. The past has never been contained safely in the past as long as its objects

⁶⁴ Given Léger's leftist theories around murals, it is ironic that the two under discussion in this essay were commissions for the private homes of wealthy individuals.

⁶⁵ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 61–98.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Andrew Ross, ed., 'Science Wars Special Issue', *Social Text* 46/47, Spring/Summer 1996.

⁶⁷ Rachel Wetzler, 'Lives of the Art Historians', *Art in America*, January 2020, 28–30.

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continue to speak to the living. Meyer Schapiro acted as a medium between a reading of the Morgan Beatus in a modern context and Léger's work in a medieval one. Art historians are more than distant observers of historical artworks; they are interfaces, raising the dead again and again.

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