Publication of a long secreted cache of eighty-year-old letters, written to a fiancée and tied together with pink ribbon, would seem to provide an unlikely prelude to a groundbreaking book on the intellectual development of one of the twentieth-century’s seminal thinkers and most wide-ranging scholars of art. These missives, begun in the summer of 1926 when Meyer Schapiro was not yet 22 years of age and composed while traveling during the course of a fellowship year abroad, sporadically address routine personal matters (such as concern for family members), details of diet and dress, missed trains, reunions with old acquaintances as well as poignant encounters with distant relatives and erotic longing for a loved one; more frequently and substantively, the letters recount, with dazzling attention to subtleties and arcane minutiae, places visited, books read, and conversations held with scholars, curators, and archivists. In them, Schapiro expresses doubts about the significance of the study of art as well as criticism of approaches to it. All of this comes as the graduate student moves from the coast of France to the Middle East and back in search of the ancient and medieval art he had come to study first hand, “by touching, seeing & moving about objects.” (p. 50) The letters functioned as a diary of his journey in a world still in turmoil in the aftermath of World War One, to which it was difficult for their recipient to respond other than by preserving them as a chronicle of a career under construction in a discipline that was then in the earliest stages of its development.

In later years, Lillian Milgram Schapiro, the recipient of the letters, would serve informally as her husband’s amanuensis, ultimately setting aside her own career as a pediatrician to assist him in his. In particular, she oversaw the publication of the volumes of papers that occurred in rapid succession from the late 1970s on. She continued her work after Schapiro’s death in 1996, urging me, in the years before her own passing, to see to the publication of the lectures Schapiro had given nearly thirty years earlier as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University. She emphasized, on numerous occasions, that the subject of those talks—architectural sculpture in France and Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries—was as close to her heart as it had always been to his. Her comments, moreover, suggested that she felt his work on Romanesque art played an underappreciated role in evaluations of his scholarly career, one that publication of the Norton Lectures would, she was confident, rectify. In retrospect, I wonder if it wasn’t the memory of the letters that Daniel Esterman would uncover in boxes in Schapiro’s study and tirelessly transcribe, in which the young student fervently shared with his beloved details of his initial encounters with his other burgeoning passion, that stirred and sealed her own fondness for the subject of her husband’s earliest writings to her. These letters were kept apart from the vast files of correspondence that Lillian helped Schapiro maintain throughout his life.

Schapiro wrote more than sixty letters to Lillian, an average of one a week, although occasionally with gaps of nearly a month. Frequently a single one chronicles events that transpired over the course of several days and was evidently created in stages, whenever and wherever Schapiro found time, usually late at night. As a whole, the letters constitute a complete series, one that is self-consciously framed. They begin with a carefully crafted account of the voyage over that reads like the opening of an early eighteenth-century account of the Grand Tour, such as Lady Montagu’s, with its description of inclement weather and shipboard activity. We learn that while on board, Schapiro studied a Spanish grammar, spoke French and German with an “elderly Catholic Swiss” passenger (p. 20), and read novels by Mann and Barrès in their original languages. In addition, he consumed a volume of letters by the courtesan Ninon de l’Enclos that he appreciated for both its ideas and style; one wonders if he was contemplating his own imminently epistles while practicing French. His last letter to Lillian closes with a glance at the Mont-Saint-Michel seen by starlight the previous night, when all that could be made out was not its sacred imagery, but “finely serried lines & masses—another architecture. . . . the building’s true destiny (p. 122).” The letter, written from Cahors on the 22 September 1927 is dated on its last line October 8, exactly fifteen months after the one bearing the dateline

*Cunard R.M.S. Andania, 8 July 1926,* with which the series and the book begins.
The letters provide incontrovertible evidence of Schapiro’s remarkable sensitivity to his physical and political surroundings; his insatiable intellectual curiosity; facility with language and sense of humor; his capacity for friendship and developing life-long commitment to the notion of art’s interrelatedness with life. At the same time, they offer unprecedented insight into what constituted the study of medieval art in France and Spain in the 1920s before Emile Mâle had become a household name.

As Hubert Damisch writes in his introductory essay, the letters also inform us about the “becoming of a subject,” (p. 6) but they are not the only evidence in the book of Schapiro’s personal and professional coming of age. Facsimiles of eighty pages of drawings that Esterman painstakingly and judiciously culled from countless loose-leaf sheets and numerous bound notebooks kept by Schapiro throughout his travels provide equally remarkable insights into his way of thinking about visual form. In these quick but deliberate renderings, the former art student analyzed postures and gestures, *rinceaux* and rib vaulting, epigraphy and architectural profiles while annotating his drawings with questions that came to mind as his hand explored what his eyes took in. Together with the letters, they form an exceptional ensemble of words and images, one that the Getty Research Institute has published with scrupulous care. The volume constitutes the debut work of a seminal figure in Anglo-American art history and should be mined for what it displays of Schapiro’s open-minded attitude towards art and his efforts to arrive at a systematic way of looking at it, all of which was clearly already in formation as he began this trip abroad.

Immediately after disembarking in Cherbourg, Schapiro filled a sheet with thumbnail sketches of architectural details and elevations in the Eglise Catholique de Ste Trinité, Place Napoleon (Plate No. 1, p. 125). The name “Ste Trinité” was subsequently added, once in pencil and once in ink, probably when Schapiro had the opportunity to verify its dedication. The lacuna suggests the alacrity with which Schapiro plunged into his viewing exercises, even before he could confirm the precise name of the church he was studying. This contrasts with the selective overview of activities and precise descriptions of places with which he filled his letters. The drawings are accompanied by commentary, usually staccato phrases that restate as well as expand upon what he has sketched, and to which are sometimes added renderings of isolated elements as though to secure a point in a terse description; in one instance, on the first plate, he writes “cylindrical piers decorated with zigzags & scrolls between” followed by some linear squiggles that convey the energy of the design. The whole resembles the sort of notes a diligent (and talented) student might once have taken in art history class to prod memory of buildings and sculptures in the decades before slides and images became readily available for study on line.

On subsequent sheets, images take precedence over words. In Nantes, a week later, Schapiro produces a bold drawing of the three-figured decoration on an engaged capital in the choir of the cathedral, rendering it in frieze-like formation as though it were the imprint of a cylinder seal on which a central standing figure tames two primordial beasts (Plate No. 2, p. 126). Vertical lines cut through the winged lateral forms in order to identify the location of the angles of the capital, while smaller sketches below offer views from the front, side, and top as guides to the three-dimensional positioning of the carved elements. Here Schapiro limits his comments to particularly unusual aspects of the sculpture, such as the fact that the bearded human figure has two sets of eyes, noting the location—“1 set on cheeks”—and remarking that, in contrast to the other figures, the “left monsters hair is knobbed.” In his third letter to Lillian, written from Nantes, he refers to beautiful carvings from the destroyed Romanesque cathedral that he has seen in an old château on the grounds of the local museum, “which reveal details, monsters and folk motifs from Scandinavian mythology,” a reference very likely to the capital he has separately sketched (p. 22).

He goes on in this letter to describe at length collections in the Musée Dobrée, including ancient artifacts as well as “a whole room devoted to the comparison of prehistoric forms with modern primitives,” marveling that “The Museum is arranged like a book . . . and is more readable than any manual.” After five days, he still finds new things and tells Lillian that he will “surely return to it in the late autumn,” not realizing how many museums of this sort he would encounter in his travels (ibid.). Later in the trip, after he has compiled hundreds of pages of notes, he remarks that it is hard to remember all that he did when looking over his papers at the end of the day.