

Arts & Letters

IMPRESSIONISM: *Reflections and Perceptions.*

By Meyer Schapiro. George Braziller.
359 pp. \$50

As a professor of art history at Columbia University for many years, the inimitable Meyer Schapiro dominated the field with an approach that was at once erudite and personal. A mythic talker, Schapiro was famous for his brilliant lectures, his performance art with slides. When he died in 1996, he was in the midst of reworking a series of his lectures on Impressionism for publication. Now, thanks to the efforts of his widow and his editor, the manuscript has become a handsome hardcover book with 100 color plates.

Schapiro explains that the term *Impressionist* originated with Claude Monet's *Impression, Soleil Levant* (1872). In titling the painting, Schapiro observes, "Monet was saying that the picture was not just an image of the



Haystack at Sunset (1891) by Claude Monet

dawn" but "an effect of the scene on the eye," a perception "with its own validity." The word *impression* alluded to "the reality of the unclear and atmospheric in nature." Having seen the painting, art critic and playwright Louis Leroy began describing the style as Impressionist.

Though Schapiro recognizes "great differences" among the individual painters—he compares Paul Cézanne to a dramatist and Monet to a lyric poet—he has no qualms about treating Impressionists as a group. "All of them were devoted to an ideal of modernity . . . in opposition to the then-current official taste for history, myth and imagined worlds." All had, like the nondoctrinaire Marxist Schapiro himself, "radical aims." The author gives Monet, "the clearest and

most far-reaching in accomplishing certain broadly shared goals," a chapter to himself. Other painters come up for discussion as the historian zooms in from a high interdisciplinary altitude, tracing the influences of nature, the city, the railroad. Schapiro goes on to show how the Impressionist cast of mind extended beyond the visual arts to literature (the prose of Henry James), photography, science, and history. A polymath and, like the British historian Paul Johnson, very much a connector of dots, Schapiro comfortably moves from realm to realm, epoch to epoch, macro to micro.

For the author, context—the historical, philosophical, and political realities within which people struggle to define their lives and ideas—is everything. Art, in his view, is much more than the dry confines of the finished canvas. Where the late critic Clement Greenberg sees formalism and a precursor to Cubism in the work of Cézanne, for example, Schapiro sees deeply repressed sexuality, an all-too-human art.

The author was fond of quoting the 18th-century poet Edward Young, who observed that we are born originals and die copies. Meyer Schapiro, who began life as just another Jewish immigrant off the boat from Eastern Europe, did the reverse.

—A. J. Hewat

THE BIRTH OF BEBOP: *A Social and Musical History.*

By Scott DeVeaux. Univ. of California Press. 572 pp. \$45.

When did jazz become *modern jazz*? "Such a question," writes DeVeaux, a professor of music at the University of Virginia, "is typically parried with mystification—'If you've got to ask, you'll never know.'" Fortunately, there is very little mystification in this thoughtful and meticulous study of a pivotal period in American culture: the early 1940s, when a coterie of dance band musicians created the demanding style of modern jazz known as bebop.

DeVeaux scrutinizes the two "master narratives" that are commonly used to explain the origin of bebop. The first is the "evolutionary approach," preferred by critics and musicologists. It acknowledges the disruptive originality of such figures as Charlie Parker,