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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
Department of Art History and Archaeology

**Charles Sheeler's "Practical Manifestations":  
Painting and Design in the 1930s**

by  
Jennifer Christine Padgett

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts

May 2012  
Saint Louis, Missouri

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2012

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## INTRODUCTION

For a short period during the 1930s, the American artist Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) designed a number of domestic goods, including textiles, glassware, and tableware. In his autobiographical writings, he claimed that the venture was a means for the artist to insert himself into the “active life of the times,” designing objects that would have use in the everyday activities of others.<sup>1</sup> If we interrogate how Sheeler formulated the integration of art into life in this project and his broader production, however, we discover the problematic nature of these intentions. His idea for design was oriented toward the consumption of goods, removed from the material realities of the objects’ manufacture and human labor involved in the process, and he disregarded the political and economic forces at work in the “active life” he imagined. Although his foray into design was brief, it exemplified many of the themes that complicate Sheeler’s work for us, presenting in particular challenges to his idea of how the artist connected to society through his practice. His work in design has been largely neglected in the literature on the artist, as most art historians and scholars have devoted greater attention to the painting and photography that constitute the main body of his work. Nonetheless, we can use it as an avenue into the most complicated issues of his artistic practice.

In this thesis, I will examine Sheeler’s designs for domestic goods and work in painting, drawing, and photography to analyze how he formulated a greater integration of art into life, focused on the experience of material objects. I argue that he professed an interest in how forms were experienced in a wider community and how artistic expression entered into this object-world, yet in his concentration on material things he

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938), 132.

willfully turned away from questioning the larger social, economic, and political structures within which those forms were developed. In a period characterized by artists' involvements in social life, whether through New Deal projects like the Federal Art Project program, ties to leftist political movements, or a dedication to cultural democracy, the possibilities for meaningful social engagement highlight the limited nature of Sheeler's claim for a greater connection between the artist and his time.<sup>2</sup> In the discussion that follows, I consider Sheeler's interest in the everyday but pose a critique of his project based on how it elided the contemporary realities of labor, manufacture, and consumption.

The display of Sheeler's work in the exhibition *Practical Manifestations in American Art* in 1934 exemplified his interest in connecting the arts with the everyday. Organized by Edith Halpert at her Downtown Gallery – which represented Sheeler beginning in 1931 – the exhibition presented nine artists' work in both fine and “practical” arts, including decorative arts, textile design, objects for domestic use, and advertisements. Featuring a selection of Sheeler's designs for home goods and textiles (see Figs. 1 and 2 for examples) along with his painting *Americana* (1931, Fig. 3), the display promoted his efforts as evidence of the artist's interest in extending beyond the limits of easel painting, into the everyday life of a broader public.

Unfortunately, very little information exists regarding *Practical Manifestations*, and while the exhibition text notes that the objects would be available for purchase

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<sup>2</sup> Sheeler's writings and statements on the integration of life and art were rather opaque. He continually asserted that the artist is connected to his own time, but did not elaborate on how this was defined. Statements such as “...art can only carry conviction and the accompanying interest, when it bears a direct relation to the age and the stratum of mentality of which it is an expression” (Charles Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, circa 1840s-1966, bulk 1923-1965. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, NSH-1, 107) are of little use in determining his position, and suggest his general evasiveness in regard to contemporary issues.

through the gallery, there is no available documentation to describe how many items were produced and sold. The listings for the items Sheeler designed are footnoted with a note of thanks to “S. M. Kootz Assoc. (industrial designers),” and three of the objects are presented “courtesy Revere Copper and Brass, Inc. Rome, New York.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, while the exhibition served to illustrate Sheeler’s work in design as a tangible project, his activity extended beyond it in a number of ways. A number of Sheeler’s design drawings, currently located in the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, indicate that he worked on several other projects for Kootz, as the design firm’s name is featured on the drafting sheets for objects such as a flower pot (Fig. 4) and a wood rack.<sup>4</sup> In an interview much later Kootz indicated that his collaboration with Sheeler predated the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition and was independent of any intervention from Halpert, but the exact arrangements of Sheeler’s work with Kootz remains unknown.<sup>5</sup> His textiles may have been distributed widely, as the *Practical Manifestations* text noted that some of the fabric available was offered for purchase at Marshall Field & Co.<sup>6</sup> Ten of his fabric designs were featured in his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, illustrating they once had a more notable place in his larger body of work, even though his time spent in design was short.

These collected details do not offer a readily comprehensible picture of Sheeler’s ambitions in design or the extent of his work in this field. His writings about the foray

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<sup>3</sup> *Practical Manifestations in American Art*, Downtown Gallery records, 1824-1974, bulk 1926-1969. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 105.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA.

<sup>5</sup> Diance Tepfer, *Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery: Downtown, 1926-1940: a Study in American Art Patronage* (Thesis (Ph. D.)--University of Michigan, 1989), 103.

<sup>6</sup> “Drapery Fabrics, Courtesy Marshall Field & Co., Chicago and New York,” *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.

provide some additional context, as he described the “brief excursion, during about two years” in which he pursued industrial design: “Believing that the term artist should have a wider application than referring to occupation in the Fine Arts, I sought a working knowledge of designing in several fields. The adventure comprised the drawing of designs applicable to textiles, glass, china, silver and designs by photography for textile printing.”<sup>7</sup> This “adventure” involved working with the firms or manufacturers mentioned above, including Kootz, Revere, and others.<sup>8</sup> This variety of collaboration points to the exploratory quality of his efforts, pursuing a mix of potential venues for design that could have real application in daily use. His exploration into design could also reflect his motivation to create new financial opportunities, seeking a broader market and new outlets during a period in which the demand for oil paintings was significantly reduced. Yet it remains unclear how widely the goods of Sheeler’s design were distributed or how they were priced. Despite his claims for extending to a wider audience, Sheeler designed objects that appear to be precious pieces, such as the silver spoon (Fig. 2) or his tumbler for the art glass Steuben Company—certainly an expensive item, though the design appears remarkably simple and unassuming (Fig. 5).

Despite the fact that these goods may have been beyond the means of a large portion of the American public, in the accompanying text for *Practical Manifestations* Halpert asserted that artists were “finding new channels for their talents,” responding to the interests and needs of contemporary life.<sup>9</sup> This echoed Sheeler’s concern about expanding the place of the artist in society, and along with the potential financial return,

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<sup>7</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Teaspoon is marked B. Altman & Co.; some textiles are tagged A. Kimball Co., Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA.

<sup>9</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.



these dual motivations offer insight into the conditions and themes that affected Sheeler's foray into the design of functional objects.

Halpert's conception of the arts linked to broader intellectual and cultural developments of the 1930s, such as those promoted by New Deal administrator Holger Cahill. An associate of Halpert who had financial stakes in her American Folk Art Gallery, Cahill championed a greater integration of the arts into American life as a means to develop a "free and enriching communion" among the people.<sup>10</sup> As the director of the Federal Art Project within the Works Progress Administration of President Roosevelt's New Deal, he challenged the traditional elitism of the arts and promoted "Art for the Millions."<sup>11</sup> His views characterized the larger effort during the period to shape a "cultural democracy," one that involved the participation of all American citizens, a fitting match to the political democracy of the nation.<sup>12</sup> Cahill argued that to develop a cultural democracy the arts must gain a wider social impact, with an increased accessibility to the American public.<sup>13</sup> He believed that in the 1930s this was possible, through the help of "the United States Government—our greatest art patron," claiming

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<sup>10</sup> Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 139.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive anthology, see Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> There were a variety of opinions on how this cultural democracy could be achieved. As an example, New Deal artist Chet la More argued for the unionization of artists: "The Artists' Unions have given the artists of America a new perspective for growth through which they will be able, in collaboration with all other American citizens, to build an art in our country predicated upon our historical ideas of democracy." "The Artists' Union of America," in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O'Connor, 238. For a thorough discussion of cultural democracy, see Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *The Journal of American History* 62, 2 (Sep., 1975), 316-339.

<sup>13</sup> Mathews, "Arts and the People," 322.

that “we now have a sweeping renaissance of democratic interest in American art which runs through every level of economic society, from the richest to the poorest.”<sup>14</sup>

Cahill’s views coincided with a redefinition of “culture” that occurred in intellectual, anthropological, and artistic circles during the period. Culture was no longer, as the nineteenth-century Victorian critic Matthew Arnold had proclaimed, “properly described... as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection,” but instead it gained a broader and more inclusive interpretation.<sup>15</sup> In the emerging model, culture could be understood as a pattern encompassing the general activity and beliefs of a given population, not simply the “perfection” at the highest level of intellectual or artistic accomplishment.<sup>16</sup> Cahill argued this reimagining of culture allowed for a destabilization of hierarchies and permitted a more democratic vision, in which the participation of a greater number of Americans would have significance. In the new cultural formation, the fine arts were no longer accepted as the definitive character of the age or the pinnacle of a society’s output, and other expressions were more actively

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<sup>14</sup> Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O’Connor, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1869), 8. For a critical discussion of how culture was formulated during the decade, see Warren Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” in *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 150-183. The ideological formation of culture by artists, writers, and critics in the 1930s connected to a larger historical reformulation of culture taking place in American anthropology. John S. Gilkeson associated the development with the instrumental work of Franz Boas, a German émigré who “reoriented American anthropology around a broad, pluralistic, relativistic, and holistic conception of culture.” Gilkeson, *Anthropologists and the Rediscovery of America, 1886-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>16</sup> The book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) by Ruth Benedict, a student of Boas, was widely read during the decade. It popularized cultural relativism and the notion of culture as an internally coherent integration of a particular society’s system of beliefs, ideas, habits, etc.

recognized and appreciated as constitutive of culture—one more relevant to the ordinary lives of the people.<sup>17</sup>

Cahill attributed the source for his ideas to the philosophies of John Dewey (1859-1952). He was a dedicated follower of the philosopher's work and argued it provided an intellectual framework directly relevant to the lives of American people, as it “emphasized the importance and pervasiveness of the aesthetic experience, the place of the arts as part of the significant life of an organized community, and the necessary unity of the arts with the activities, the objects, and the scenes of everyday life.”<sup>18</sup> This framework underlies the project that Halpert pursued in *Practical Manifestations*, though whether it fulfilled these ideas is a matter of question as the work was still framed in the context of a high-end gallery setting.

The ideas of John Dewey frequently emerged in period discussions of culture and the integration of art into life. He advocated a union of aesthetic experience with ordinary experience through incorporating the arts into the everyday, and challenged the compartmentalization of modern life in which the arts were relegated to the “the beauty parlor of civilization,” seen as only the purview of the wealthy and elite in society.<sup>19</sup> In his major text on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), he argued that the challenge for modern individuals was “that of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living,” which required a reintegration of the arts in ordinary life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In a similar but ideologically distinct program, intellectuals, artists, writers, and workers of the “cultural front” attempted to shape social consciousness through the use of mass culture. On their “laboring” of American culture, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 34.

<sup>19</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Penguin, 2005), 357.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

His hope for a wider participation in the arts linked to his optimism for a more democratic model of society, one in which individuals formed a community with others that allowed each person to live a fulfilled life.<sup>21</sup> Dewey's idea of democracy extended beyond a political democracy of participating voters, as it related to the welfare of all members of a community and the ability of each person to self-realize his or her highest potential. He viewed human community as a "social organism," in which the relationships between individuals were dynamic and interdependent.

Dewey's philosophy is linked to Sheeler through the intermediary figure of the poet William Carlos Williams. Williams and Sheeler were close friends and shared a lengthy correspondence about artistic ideas, during which the poet expressed ideas that he had gathered from Dewey's writings. Williams especially admired Dewey's essay "Americanism and Localism" and the notion that "the locality is the only universal."<sup>22</sup> The abstract nature of the terms involved – local and universal – allowed for a broad degree of interpretation, however, and Williams's formulation of the idea was not necessarily an objective transmission of Dewey's original concept. Williams adopted this phrase as a rallying cry in his work, prefacing his epic poem *Paterson* with the claim that "the local is the only universal, upon that all art builds."<sup>23</sup> He applied the idea directly to Sheeler's work in his introduction to a catalogue of the artist's work accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective exhibition in 1939. The quality that Williams

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<sup>21</sup> "We cannot think of ourselves save as to some extent *social* beings," he observed. "Hence we cannot separate the idea of ourselves and our own good from our idea of others and of their good." John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899 – 1924: Ethics, 1908* (Carbondale: Southern Ill. Univ. Press, 1983), 268, quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 158.

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, "Americanism and Localism," *Dial* 68 (June 1920): 687.

<sup>23</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), iii.

identified as local in Sheeler's work was the artist's direct contact with his environment and a deep knowledge of his subject matter through experience, whether it be an industrial landscape or a still life.

The key to Dewey's theories that both enriches and complicates our understanding of Sheeler's artistic practice is his notion of experience. Dewey believed that experience was a psycho-physical process of the interaction between self and environment in which both are changed, and that this process was the basis of a community defined by individuals interacting with each other. The habits, beliefs, and knowledge of an individual were in dynamic interaction with the surrounding environment, both natural and man-made, through experience. For Dewey, the aesthetic experience was not defined by the art object, but instead as an active process that engaged the viewer's intellectual and imaginative capacities. The "expressive object" was built up through the artist's immediate experience of the world, which he then transformed through the past experiences he had internalized to effect in the viewer a similar response.<sup>24</sup> We can read this idea to an extent in Sheeler's paintings, as he built up the image through direct observation and interaction with his subject, such as the living room of his South Salem home pictured in *Americana*. He described the act of painting and image-making as a cumulative process, in which the painter's vision is conditioned by what he has previously seen. The resulting image is not a naturalistic representation of what he observed, but instead it is a reformulation of the scene that develops from the artist's contact with the world, meant to create a mutual experience for the viewer perceiving the work.

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<sup>24</sup> "The real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies." Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 67.

When considered in relation to the complex model that Dewey proposed, which permeated much of American thought during the 1930s, Sheeler's notion of experience is considerably limited. Sheeler focused on the visual experience of material and surface qualities, and did not open to a broader investigation of how that experience connected to social, economic, and political conditions. By contrast, Dewey argued that experience – the interaction of the individual with his or her environment – was shaped by historically developed constructs. He argued that the fine arts were separate from everyday life and that aesthetic experience was divided from ordinary experience because of the excesses of a social and economic system that produced a more compartmentalized society. In *Art as Experience*, he promoted a radical reformulation of how the means of production were organized in the capitalist model, arguing that the public needed to have a greater involvement in the management of their own labor and the products they created. The vision of a fully realized democratic society was linked directly to this: "What does democracy mean," he posited, "save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and aims of his own work; and that, upon the whole, through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by a few, no matter how wise or of how good the intent [of] that few?"<sup>25</sup> In this democracy, the individual would be connected to the products of his labor and have a more organic relationship to the world around him – shaped by his decisions – therefore having a more meaningful and fulfilling experience of modern life.

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<sup>25</sup> John Dewey, "Democracy in Education," 232-233, quoted in Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 107.

The *Power* series that Sheeler completed on commission for *Fortune* magazine demonstrates the limitations of his notion of experience. Published in the December 1940 issue, the series included large color reproductions of six paintings Sheeler had completed on the theme of “power” in American production, from the preindustrial waterwheel in *Primitive Power* (1939) to the newly constructed Boulder Dam in *Conversation – Sky and Earth* (1940, Fig. 6). The series was financially attractive, as Sheeler both received funds from *Fortune* for the publication of the images and sold the actual paintings through the Downtown Gallery. Notably, one of the paintings was purchased by the company whose “power” was on display: the S. Morgan Smith Company, a maker of hydroelectric turbines, purchased *Suspended Power* (1939, Fig. 7) in 1944.<sup>26</sup> The painting depicts the assembly of one of the company’s turbines during the construction of the Guntersville Dam in Alabama, a project by the Tennessee Valley Authority. The appeal of his images to industry leaders is part of the reason some art historians have called Sheeler “the true artist of corporate capitalism,” and this relationship between his work and corporate interests raises important questions about the limits of his social engagement, warranting a more critical analysis of his position.<sup>27</sup>

The *Power* series connected to Sheeler’s idea of the artist’s role in the active life of the times, taking contemporary subjects and presenting them in a mass media publication. The activity of traveling to various sites such as Boulder Dam in Nevada or a steam power plant of the Brooklyn Edison Company, selecting his subject, and encountering it in a specific place and time constituted the experience from which he

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<sup>26</sup> Lillian Natalie Dochterman, *The Stylistic Development of the Work of Charles Sheeler* (Thesis (Ph. D.)--State University of Iowa, 1963), 374.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Baigell, “American Art and National Identity: The 1920s,” *Arts Magazine* 61, (February 1987): 51.

could develop his painting. Through experience, he focused on the aesthetic form of the machine and represented the structures of industrial power as—in the words of the *Fortune* writer who provided commentary—“exquisite manifestations of human reason” harnessing “the limitless power of nature.”<sup>28</sup> By picturing a congruity between the traditional form of the waterwheel and the Boulder Dam, a marvel of technological engineering completed in 1936, Sheeler presented a developmental continuity in human progress that elided issues of agency or struggle in technological advancement.<sup>29</sup> His interpretation of the theme of power excludes any indication of the political or corporate power at work, which Dewey would likely argue must be considered because these are intrinsically connected to the forms produced. The celebratory images of industrial progress gloss over the debates about labor rights, the fight for better working conditions, or the everyday experience of those physically affected by the material conditions of energy manufacture, instead presenting seductive surfaces and design.

By highlighting a contemporary subject but eliminating evidence of the surrounding debates, Sheeler presented a narrow version of experience. His professed goal to connect to his own time was limited by his focus on aesthetic form and his inattention to the different kinds of experience possible. Experience during the 1930s was a widely contested subject, as other artists and writers challenged the narrowness of the traditional fine art establishment and the perspectives it encompassed. Joseph Freeman, a writer and editor of *The New Masses*, argued that experience was not a neutral and

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<sup>28</sup> “Power: A Portfolio by Charles Sheeler,” *Fortune*, December 1940, 72.

<sup>29</sup> The construction of Boulder Dam was marked by considerable labor disputes, along with the deaths of over one hundred workers during the project. See Michael A. Hiltzik, *Colossus: Hoover Dam and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Free Press, 2010), in particular the chapter “The Wobblies’ Last Stand,” 217-250.



uniform activity, but that “the social class to which the poet is attached conditions the nature and flavor of his experience.”<sup>30</sup> He urged the artist to recognize the mediated quality of experience and develop a greater social and political consciousness, subsequently joining the proletariat in the active class struggle of the time. In his account, the ruling classes professed the existence of a direct, unfiltered experience, and that in doing so, “What they are really saying is that only *their* experience is experience. They are ignorant of or hate proletarian experience; hence for them it is not experience at all and not a fit subject for art.”<sup>31</sup> Freeman argued that proletarian experience, which included consciousness of the reality of modern labor and the exploitation created by the prevailing systems of social and political organization, was not only a “fit” subject for art, but also one that was most meaningful and relevant to the masses.

The political engagement of many artists during the 1930s connected to the desire for art to relate to the social conditions of contemporary life.<sup>32</sup> They joined a variety of organizations to promote leftist interests, such as the John Reed Club, which claimed to “[recognize] that the interests of all artistic, intellectual, and cultural workers are in harmony with those of the working class.”<sup>33</sup> Some artists, such as Philip Evergood and Ben Shahn, explored pro-labor themes through social realism, but the visual language of the left was not limited to a single aesthetic and allowed a wide range of expression. In addition to painting, photography, lithographs, film and other art media, artists also

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<sup>30</sup> John Freeman, “Introduction,” in *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology* ed. Granville Hicks, et. al. (New York: International, 1935), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Freeman, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the political engagement of artists, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

<sup>33</sup> Application form sent to Philip Evergood from the John Reed Club, Philip Evergood Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 1.

entered the social and political debates of the period through publications such as *The New Masses*, a journal with contributors ranging from William Gropper to Louis Lozowick, who served on its editorial board.

Sheeler, by contrast, may have been uninterested in proletarian experience because of his own comfortable position, as even during the worst of the Depression he seems to have been buffered from its effects. The beginning of the decade was actually a fortunate period in his career, since when he joined the Downtown Gallery in 1931 he was able to focus on painting and move away from the commercial photography he had previously undertaken. In 1932 he moved to a more comfortable and spacious home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which might be unremarkable under different circumstances, but during a period of rampant unemployment and bread lines it indicated he was far removed from the experience of the wider public. Instead of interpreting his work as separate from the economic turmoil of the period, however, we should evaluate the significance of this disengagement in our account of his images and objects. When we consider his fabric designs were being produced at the very same time of the 1934 textile labor union strike in which workers demanded more humane working conditions, the divide between Sheeler's activity and the concerns of workers and labor becomes more pronounced.

Though he claimed his work was situated outside of political concerns, his images actively participated in the visual exchange of the times and may have glorified the corporate interests of those who supported him. A writer from the communist-affiliated newspaper *Daily Worker* noted in a review of Sheeler's work:

Sheeler approaches the industrial landscape... with the same sort of piety Fra Angelico used toward angels. His architecture remains pure and

uncontaminated without any traces of humans or human activities, an industrialist's heaven where factories work themselves. In revealing the beauty of factory architecture, Sheeler has become the Raphael of the Fords. Who is it that will be the Giotto of the U.A.W.?<sup>34</sup>

Though Sheeler may not have deliberately intended this effect (and, as we shall see, this reading does not take into account the deep ambivalence present in his images), his focus on aesthetic form and design of the canvas as guiding principles was visually complicit with the goals and aspirations of the corporate magnates who offered him commissions and purchased his oil paintings. For this reason, we should be more critical of the kind of experience Sheeler represented and how he acted as a historical agent during this period. Further, as Meyer Schapiro argued before the First American Artists' Congress in 1936, art was not a neutral, formal pursuit because every artist linked to his or her own time and developed from a specific set of historical and cultural factors.<sup>35</sup> While Sheeler appreciated this to some degree, in particular in his admiration of Shaker goods as the result of a communal society, he did not offer a critical approach to the implications of this idea in his own production, which may heighten the potential for his works to be interpreted as emblems of capitalist interests.

Given the range of responses from artists in the 1930s, Sheeler's own interpretation of the artist's role in society and the integration of art into life appears limited by comparison. The following chapters will explore this issue, both recognizing Sheeler's interest in the everyday through material things and evaluating his disregard for issues such as the conditions of industrial manufacture. Chapter one addresses Sheeler's

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Corwin, *New York Daily Worker*, February 4, 1949, 12, quoted in Martin Friedman, "The Art of Charles Sheeler: Americana in a Vacuum," in *Charles Sheeler* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1968), 57.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "The Social Bases of Abstract Art," (1936) reprinted in *Social Realism: Art As a Weapon*, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Ungar, 1973), 119.

notion of the everyday through the “usable past” and the lived aesthetic that he promoted through his interest in handcrafted material from traditional American production. By filling his home with Shaker furniture, American craft objects, rag rugs and similar domestic goods, Sheeler established a connection between past traditions and present practice in the domestic realm. The use of functional objects that incorporated the usable past into everyday activity could suggest a historical continuity through material goods, aligning Sheeler’s contemporary design project with craft traditions, yet we should question this notion based on the changing social structures in which the modern goods were produced and the disparate processes of manufacture. He employed a variety of modern processes and materials in his designs, such as Bakelite, machined aluminum, and chromium, but suppressed the difference in kind between the production of these goods by human-operated machines versus the handcrafted objects of the past.

The emphasis on utility and the creation of objects to suit a specific purpose were also important strains in Sheeler’s interest in the everyday. Sheeler imagined the artist could infuse the aesthetic into everyday experience by designing objects that would be both functional and well designed. In chapter one this idea is introduced in terms of his willingness to use machine production for this end, seeing it as part of the integration with the processes of modern life, but in chapter two I argue that we should more critically examine the issues of machine manufacture and the social atomization caused by the separation of production and consumption. The desire to connect art and ordinary experience through consumer goods was troubled by the inequality of modern factory labor systems in the social environment. Dewey claimed that the social compartmentalization resulting from the excesses of industrially organized wealth and

control were responsible for the separation between art and life.<sup>36</sup> In considering the negative effects of industrialized labor in the social environment, this reading critiques Sheeler's approach to designing objects as a means of connecting with others and developing a more organic relationship between the arts and life, even as he proposed to engage the "active life of the times" through material goods.

Sheeler's integration of art into everyday experience is complicated further in chapter three, which explores his painting *Americana* and its complex representational strategies. By choosing ostensibly familiar subject matter then making willful distortions of perspective and spatial relations, Sheeler created an image that first appears comforting and familiar yet becomes unreal and unnerving through sustained examination. The painting connects to Sheeler's insistence on deep knowledge of the subject matter resulting in an accumulative vision in painting, a theme shared in Dewey's notion of how artistic expression is built up through both connection to the immediate environment and the integration of the viewer's past experience, which shapes them as they act within the world. This interaction gives depth to the image of the everyday, revealing the exchange between self and the world as mediated through craft objects of the past. The conspicuous display of craft objects, however, suggests that the domestic space presented is not linked to the everyday experience of a wide audience, but instead is characterized by the privilege of owning valuable, collectible furniture and would have appealed to others with the financial means to acquire such pieces.

In his landmark text *Art as Experience*, Dewey promoted the pragmatist notion that the arts should pervade all of life, participating in the activity of a society he

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<sup>36</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 335-337.

imagined as a social organism. He argued that the arts should not be relegated to a separate sphere but instead should be integrated fully into social and political life.<sup>37</sup> Sheeler's design of practical goods embodied a desire to extend the arts into the everyday lives of others, but his disregard for social and political issues signaled a significant impasse in his work. In the following discussion, I will analyze the complexity of Sheeler's artistic practice in relation to the intellectual, social, and industrial developments that constituted his everyday environment, which his work both engages and – more tellingly – does not fully acknowledge. By offering a critique of his work through Dewey's philosophy, I argue that Sheeler's desire for the integration of art into life was limited by his focus on aesthetic form and material qualities, without recognizing how these were shaped and produced in a complex and contested environment.

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<sup>37</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 357.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ***Practical Manifestations and the Usable Past***

The exhibition *Practical Manifestations in American Art* opened at the Downtown Gallery in December 1934. In the exhibit, artists including Charles Sheeler, Stuart Davis, Stefan Hirsch, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Ben Shahn, and William Zorach displayed paintings and drawings alongside “practical” objects of their own design, which took a variety of forms. Davis designed textiles with abstract prints (Figs. 8 and 9) that harmonized with his painting *House and Street* (Fig. 10); Shahn displayed book-jackets and poster designs in addition to a gouache drawing and sketches for murals.<sup>1</sup> Sheeler’s display was exceptional among the nine artists featured, as it demonstrated a greater engagement with the idea of the “practical” in utilitarian forms and a more diverse selection of objects. Instead of only one or two items of design, Sheeler included eight: a glass tumbler, silver spoon, drapery fabrics, linens, knitted wool fabrics, metal coffee service, salt and pepper shakers, and combination ash tray and cigarette container [see Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 12, and 13 for examples].

Sheeler’s engagement with design linked to his interest in the forms of traditional handcraft objects, the focus of the one painting he included in the exhibition: *Americana* (Fig. 3). One of several interior scenes that Sheeler painted, it highlights the subject matter of American handcraft in an innovative and complex visual language.<sup>2</sup> A long Shaker table flanked with benches stretches vertically across the canvas, dotted with a Shaker box, a shallow dish, and a backgammon board with a game in progress. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Figs. 8 and 9 are representative examples of Davis’s textile design; the specific patterns included in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition were not identified.

<sup>2</sup> In chapter three I will analyze the radical language of the painting more closely and explore in further detail the significance of the objects depicted.

head of the table, nearest to the viewer, a ladder-back chair is squeezed into the frame, nearly cropped out of the scene yet still identifiable. The floor of the room is covered with both hooked and rag rugs, each with a distinct pattern, creating a visual commotion that enlivens the presumably quiet and undisturbed scene. The setting is the living room of Sheeler's home in South Salem, New York, which he filled with simple handcrafted American objects that he greatly admired and took pleasure in depicting. He had begun collecting this material, including Shaker furniture and domestic wares, in the mid-1910s, at the very moment in which a renewed interest in past forms was emerging among modern American artists, writers, collectors, museum curators, and critics.<sup>3</sup>

Looking back to the forms of traditional craft in America for inspiration was precisely what the supporters of the notion of the "usable past" encouraged. The proponents of the idea, including Van Wyck Brooks and Constance Rourke, declared that a national cultural tradition could be discovered, or invented, to suit the needs of modern artists and foster a distinct American tradition. Sheeler was indeed seen as the evidence that this model could be successful, and was supported in particular by Rourke because of her reading of this quality in his work. In scholarship on Sheeler this idea has been largely affirmed, and in recent years art historians have written extensively on Sheeler's

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<sup>3</sup> For a broad overview of folk art collecting practices, see Elizabeth Stillinger, "From Attics, Sheds, and Secondhand Shops: Collecting Folk Art in America, 1880-1940," in *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*, ed. Virginia Tuttle Clayton, exh. cat. (Washington [D.C.]: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 45-60; Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archeology: Collecting Folk Art in America, 1876-1976* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Beatrix T. Rumford, "Uncommon Art of the Common People: A Review of Trends in the Collecting and Exhibiting of American Folk Art," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, ed. Ian M.G. and Scott T. Swank, (New York: Published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del. by Norton, 1980), 13-33.



interest in the past.<sup>4</sup> The connection between the objects that Sheeler collected and included in *Americana* and the domestic goods in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition, however, has still been read as a simple correspondence, presuming a simple parallel between objects such as the textiles Sheeler designed and the geometrically patterned rugs in *Americana*.<sup>5</sup> Yet the relationship between past and present in Sheeler's work is perpetually complicated, and a closer examination of the idea of the "usable past" in relation to his work reveals the problematic nature of his approach to the idea. In using traditional craft objects in his home, depicting them in his paintings, and then associating them with the items that he designed, Sheeler collapsed the distance between past and present and avoided questioning the differences in production and consumption of goods in their respective contexts. He viewed the past as a model for how others could connect through material goods and tried to emulate this in his own design project, but did not show concern for the realities of industrial manufacture or the significance of his works being presented in a gallery context, defined by its dissociation from the everyday.

This chapter will place Sheeler's work and the exhibition into the larger intellectual and cultural context of the period between the wars, specifically focusing on the idea of the usable past as a means of orienting cultural production. I will structure this discussion around four main figures: Van Wyck Brooks, who originally conceived the notion of the usable past; Constance Rourke, who saw the past as a resource for

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<sup>4</sup> See Wanda M. Corn, "Home, Sweet Home," in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition*, exh. cat. (Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum, 1997). For a specific study of Sheeler's interest in Shaker craft, see Faith and Edward D. Andrews, "Sheeler and the Shakers," *Art in America* 1 (1965): 590-95.

<sup>5</sup> Corn, *Great American Thing*, 332; Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1987), 63; and Brock, *Across Media*, 16.

discovering indigenous, vernacular forms, or *Urformen*; Holger Cahill, who integrated folk art and American craft into the larger narrative of American art history; and Edith Halpert, who loosely viewed folk artists as “ancestors” of the artists she represented but maintained that contemporary artists should create based on their varied reactions to the surrounding environment, as she believed folk artists had done during their time. In many ways Sheeler epitomized the model of the usable past during this period, as Rourke claimed, yet his particular approach to the past and his emphasis on present experience and the material world suggest that he was most interested in aesthetic form. Sheeler worked from the discourse of the usable past to elide the disjuncture of modern life and generate a sense of continuity between past and present—a historical continuum—through the presence and use of material goods.

### **The Usable Past Between the Wars**

The perception that America was culturally deficient in comparison to the rich traditions of Europe constituted a major problem for many American artists, writers, and intellectuals during the early twentieth century. Some believed that America needed a more fully developed cultural past toward which they could look back, that the lack of one was too great and that society would remain unfulfilled without the resource of a greater national tradition. Notably, the increased desire for a more solid foundation came during a period of unprecedented technological, scientific, social, and political change and, during the interwar period especially, many turned to the idea of the “usable past” to negotiate these effects. The usable past allowed individuals to construct their own version of a national past or rediscover vernacular traditions that had been previously overlooked, recognizing history as a subjective and adaptable entity.

In 1918, the cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks offered a workable notion to satisfy the desire for a truly American tradition. His essay “On Creating a Usable Past” and the eponymous idea of the “usable past” became shorthand for a generation of major American artists and intellectuals wishing to mitigate the perceived deficiency of the young country. While Brooks declared that “we have no cumulative culture” to his fellow Americans, he suggested the solution was in realizing that “the spiritual past has no objective reality; it yields only what we are able to look for in it.”<sup>6</sup> By suggesting that our relationship to the past is subjective as opposed to objective, Brooks opened up new possibilities for a country that struggled with its relative paucity of cultural achievement when compared to Europe. This view of history transformed the present into an active agent, able to create a version of the past that could aid in the realization of its own goals and produce a tradition where one was lacking. “Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can,” Brooks implored his audience, “The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choices.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, interaction with the past was seen as a productive force for future ideas and developments. Brooks encouraged a move away from singling out “masterpieces” of culture and instead aimed to develop a more encompassing appreciation of past arts. One of the important elements of this paradigm was its essentially democratic approach to artistic tradition, linking political and cultural aims.<sup>8</sup> Brooks, along with his fellow intellectuals Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, and Randolph Bourne, believed (or at least

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<sup>6</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* (April 11, 1918): 337-338.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks, “Usable Past,” 339.

<sup>8</sup> Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank & Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 3.

hoped) in the ideal of democratic culture as a communitarian entity that involved the self-realization of the individual through participatory interaction in society. To achieve this, individuals needed to have access to the arts and the ability to participate through personal interaction and imagination in culture, enjoying an exchange with others and the world around them that would lead to a more fully realized self.

While Brooks and others may not have fully credited John Dewey for these ideas, this model of culture clearly was indebted to Dewey's version of pragmatism. Dewey shared Brooks's belief in an essentially democratic vision of the arts, and in his philosophy he emphasized the connections between individuals, such as those made possible through aesthetic experience, as the constitutive fabric of society and the means for each individual to lead a more fully realized life. He lamented that too often "art is remitted to a separate realm," and claimed that if it were more closely tied with everyday experience of the ordinary man or woman, the individual and the community would be more fulfilled.<sup>9</sup> The two differed in their attitudes toward how the arts could shape society, however: Dewey advocated the notion of society as a "social organism" which was created through a mode of interdependent experience (including aesthetic experience) among individuals, while Brooks placed a greater emphasis on how society could root itself in a version of history, and the need for shared traditions and values derived (or invented) from the American past.<sup>10</sup> Dewey believed that the interactions of individuals within their specific time and place were the basis for shaping a sense of community and fulfilling the promise of democratic society; for Brooks, the unifying

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<sup>9</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy," in *Pragmatism: a Reader*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage, 1997), 184.

power of the usable past appealed more strongly to his vision of American democratic progress.<sup>11</sup>

While Brooks was a literary critic, the ideas that he originated were eagerly adopted by others excited by its potential for the reinvigoration of American culture. In the visual arts during the 1930s, more than a decade after Brooks published his essay, the concept became a driving force for proponents of modern art in the country. During this period, many critics encouraged this development through a look back to the folk arts of the past, seeking generative forms in the “primitive” handcraft traditions of American art. This move countered the idea that America did not have a visual tradition of its own, as many had contended. It was intended to dispel a certain anxiety regarding the overreliance of the arts on European tradition, including the concern that American artists were merely producing derivative work. In 1924 the journalist and critic Paul Rosenfeld complained, “We have been sponging on Europe for direction instead of developing our own.”<sup>12</sup> This was a major issue for those who represented or supported contemporary American artists, as they wanted to present these artists as distinctive voices and not merely reformulations of European predecessors.

The problem of American art was not only seen as a problem of artistic inspiration, however, but as a deficiency in the general appreciation of American culture. John Cotton Dana believed that it was essential to support American artists in order to foster a greater cultural and social climate for the country, aspiring to an American cultural renaissance that would rival the Italian Renaissance around 1500. In his 1914 text

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<sup>11</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 350.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (1924; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 281.

*American Art: How It Can Be Made to Flourish*, Dana argued that the lack of patronage for American artists had stunted the growth of culture, and that the country needed to turn from European influence and support its own tradition. He claimed, “We buy our objects of art from other countries; we educate our artists in other countries; we borrow designs for decorating almost everything we make, or we import foreign-made designers; and for an art journal we steal a corner of one published in England...”<sup>13</sup> Throughout his argument, he criticized the wealthy who purchased art only as an ostentatious display of status, and insisted that patronage of the arts must progress. “Here our artists and artisans are continuously ignored,” he lamented, “Their products are not needed as prizes in the race for distinction in curio-acquisition; genius, talent and patiently acquired skill are not called forth, and America has neither artists nor artisans and – there is very little American art!”<sup>14</sup> This rhetoric pointed out the importance of the “American” quality of the arts and the anxiety regarding its dearth that preceded the logic of the usable past. Even Dana, who did not typically partake in a “cultural boosterism” fueled by nationalistic fervor, wished for a more lively and original production of art in the country.<sup>15</sup> He took a radical view toward the appreciation of American art, claiming that the study of it should move beyond its “oil painting fetish,” as he termed it, to encompass a broader interest in the designs of useful objects of everyday life.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the model that he promoted for viewing and appreciating art was realized to a small degree in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition twenty years after his short piece was published.

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<sup>13</sup> John Cotton Dana. *American Art, How It Can Be Made to Flourish* (1914; repr., Woodstock, Vt: The Elm Tree Press, 1929), 6

<sup>14</sup> Dana, *American Art*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> For more on cultural boosterism, see Corn, *Great American Thing*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Dana, *American Art*, 18.

Dana's concept of what exactly characterized "American" art remains unarticulated in this work, leaving us to question what he imagined would emerge in an American renaissance. For some, its distinctive quality could be found in a reading of the origins of form. Rourke in particular believed that there were forms inherent to the American tradition, even though it may have "many ancestries."<sup>17</sup> She recognized the diverse streams of artistic production in the American past, but held to the idea that underlying this diversity there was a formal quality that characterized these works as American. America's "*Urformen*—forms which for us are source-forms,"<sup>18</sup> in Rourke's estimation, were characterized by a sense of necessity, simplicity, purpose, and unity, as exemplified by the vernacular architecture of Bucks County's barns. These structures "expressed native taste uncorrupted by the *luxe* that quickly invaded architecture on the large scale."<sup>19</sup> She believed that these forms were rooted in a rich (identifiably democratic) cultural heritage and subsequently should be manifested in the work of modern artists, emphasizing continuity instead of the disruptive potential of modernization. Rourke's deep belief in an "Americanness" that was distinctively modern yet grew out of American history was verified, or so she contended, in the life and work of Sheeler. Rourke championed his work and in 1938 published a biography of the artist accordingly titled *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* in 1938, in which she claimed that in his paintings and drawings of Bucks County's barns he had successfully captured the *Urformen* she advocated. She described these as "forms that were basic in American experience," arguing that a kind of natural, essential form arises from

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<sup>17</sup> Constance Rourke, "What Is American Design?" (1936) in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O'Connor, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 70.

somewhere within the depths of American culture.<sup>20</sup> This concept of form stems from the philosophies of German idealism that developed in American intellectual circles during the interwar period, stimulated by German-speaking philosophers and art historians emigrating from Europe.<sup>21</sup> The idealist philosophies of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) were absorbed into a variety of intellectual contexts, and his aesthetic theory permeated much of the discussion surrounding the search for national identity in indigenous forms, even if it is not mentioned explicitly.<sup>22</sup> Rourke's construction of *Urformen* conjured the Hegelian notion of a unifying principle in the cultural forms that arise in a given environment, whether defined by nation, race, or religion. By doing so, however, this concept circumvented the issues of agency and historical process in how forms are developed and perpetuated, allowing for the illusion of a continuity over time and within the values of a given community. In Hegel's aesthetic philosophy, forms continue in cycles of advance and decline toward a particular end, which adds a sense of teleological development not present in Rourke's writing. She grounded cultural forms in the vernacular design that she considered as perpetually enduring, present and available to be discovered and adopted from the work of earlier American craftspeople.

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<sup>20</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Individuals from this group include Oskar Hagen (1888-1957) and Wolfgang Born (1893-1949), both students of the German traditions of art historical study. The methodology of art history incorporating Hegelian ideas was largely established and shaped in Europe during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century by Alois Riegl (1858-1905), Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), Max Dvorák (1874-1921), and Paul Frankl (1889-1963). See Jochen Wierich, "Mutual Seduction: German Art History and American Art," in *Internationalizing the History of American Art*, ed. Barbara S. Groseclose and Jochen Wierich (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 41-60.

<sup>22</sup> Hegelianism and Neo-Hegelianism were formative in Dewey's early career, although he eventually weaned himself from these philosophies in his search for a more grounded philosophy (incorporating functional psychology) that eschewed idealist metaphysics and the Hegelian notions of the Absolute. See Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 62-65.



The distaste for what Rourke termed “luxé” reflected the paradigm of the usable past and its move away from what was seen as the art of elites. Instead of trying to find great “masterworks” in American history, individuals including Rourke and Holger Cahill, art curator and National Director of the Federal Art Project during the Great Depression, declared that the wealth of the nation’s cultural history could be seen in the work of untrained craftspeople. This assertion linked art with the populist spirit at its height during the 1930s, and Cahill furthered this approach through an exhibition titled *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*, held in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>23</sup> In the exhibition, folk art was presented as a true American tradition, rooted in the values and production of the “common man.”

This framing of material grouped broadly (and problematically) under the term “folk art” marks a distinct difference from previous approaches. In early American material culture, objects were valued for their associative potential and the connection to significant events or individuals.<sup>24</sup> In the late nineteenth century, objects such as domestic goods, tools, and decorative arts were valued as ethnological or antiquarian material, used to understand the culture during a specific period or recreate the historical setting. The attitudes of Rourke and Cahill, by contrast, approached folk art from aesthetic and art historical perspectives. Rourke emphasized the formal qualities of the individual works, and Cahill worked to establish folk art as a prominent category in a broader art historical context. In exhibitions he staged at the Newark Museum, *American Primitives: An Exhibit of the Paintings of Nineteenth-century Folk Artists* in 1930 and *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsmen* in 1931, Cahill

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Tuttle Clayton, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” in *Drawing on America's Past*, ed. Clayton, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Stillinger, “From Attics, Sheds, and Secondhand Shops,” 46.

presented folk art as an important part of the larger history of American art.<sup>25</sup> He argued for the significance of the works based on their artistic merit and advanced folk art as a precedent for modern art.<sup>26</sup> The formal qualities of abstraction and eschewal of unnecessary decoration in much of the traditional American craft were interpreted as forerunners to the visual strategies of modern art, shifting the focus of the modernist narrative away from European influences toward native inspiration.<sup>27</sup>

The desire to record and proliferate images of America's visual past, thus making it more "usable" for present and future artists, was exemplified by the Index of American Design, a project begun in 1935 and wrapped up in 1942. Administered by the Federal Art Project under the Works Progress Administration, the program was an ambitious attempt to document a massive array of objects from America's handcraft tradition, including items such as "weather vanes, quilts, toys, tavern signs, figureheads, stoneware, and many other types of artifact made by America's ancestral 'common man.'"<sup>28</sup> The project, which ultimately produced over 18,000 renderings, depicted folk, popular, and decorative art objects in meticulously rendered watercolor images, many of which are intensely life-like. One of the main objectives of the Index was to provide work for unemployed commercial and graphic artists, and over the length of the project over one thousand artists across the country had contributed detailed drawings to the Index. Cahill,

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<sup>25</sup> Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 56.

<sup>26</sup> This attitude was similar to the earlier development of primitivism in European arts, in which artists drew from the formal language of African or "native" arts. See Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 20. For more on the relationship between "primitive" arts and modernism, see Richard John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> For a primary account, see Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: its Place in American Tradition," *Parnassus* 4 (March 1932): 1-4; two useful histories include the chapter "Folk Art and Modern Art" in Stillinger, *A Kind of Archeology*, 145-254, and *Drawing on America's Past*, ed. Clayton.

<sup>28</sup> Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 4.

as director of the Federal Art Project, headed the program and enlisted the help of Rourke as an editorial consultant for a portion of its duration. Under their guidance, the Index was not an antiquarian project but instead a mission founded on the belief that craft traditions of the past could inspire living artists and designers to create more beautiful and useful objects, which would in turn benefit the country and its citizens. As Virginia Tuttle Clayton described, Cahill pioneered the project with an “egalitarian vision of well-designed, mass-produced, utilitarian goods that would serve as modern art for the lives and homes of all people—‘from the shaping of a teacup to the building of a city.’”<sup>29</sup> He believed that the Index was a flexible archive from which designers could draw inspiration for their own work and that the images of traditional craft could provide a basis for improved goods in industrial design. In his optimism for the project, however, he did not explain exactly how this would occur, whether through the adoption of the handcraft aesthetic, being generally impressed by the wealth of America’s creative potential shown in the multitude of past objects, or some other means. The drawings were never published as originally intended due to the premature end of the program and budgetary issues; thus they never achieved the level of distribution or subsequent effect that Cahill desired. However, they were widely exhibited and seen by huge numbers of visitors in museums, department stores, libraries, banks, hotels and book shops across the country, in both major cities and smaller urban centers.<sup>30</sup>

Rourke viewed the project as a way to disseminate the idea of the nation’s “distinctive character.”<sup>31</sup> Producing the images and spreading them to the public was a

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<sup>29</sup> Clayton, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 27.

<sup>30</sup> Clayton, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 18.

<sup>31</sup> Rourke, “What is American Design?,” 165.

means to acquaint the people with what she viewed as their own national history. The Index was organized into divisions by state, with 34 states participating, yet as a collective whole it was meant to communicate the idea of a shared past.<sup>32</sup> The nationalism at stake exhibited both local diversity and national unity, as representations of objects from a wide geographic range were taken out of their context and combined into a larger set of references. At their most optimistic, leaders of the project believed the accumulated body of folk art in the Index could express national identity, with each region making distinct contributions and interconnecting with others, though how this would come about was never fully articulated. The formulation of this concept seems to elide the issues of how culture is constructed and perpetuated by human agency, as Cahill claimed, “The Index is a record of objects which reveal a native and spontaneous culture.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of a culture that is both native—apparently innate to a particular people or place—and spontaneous—appearing without a sense of historical development—is a deliberate construction that simplifies the past and avoids the complex issues of cultural formation. It seems to derive from Hegelian ideals, with the production of a pattern of unified culture developing from the collective spirit, subsequently manifested in material forms. While in contemporary scholarship we are highly critical of this position and the idea of a collective national spirit with essential attributes, in the foundation of the Index there was very little critical self-reflection about the intellectual and ideological basis of its establishment. This quality was typical of many other New Deal programs that strove to establish an “American cultural nationalism,” based on a

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<sup>32</sup> Because the project was designed to assist unemployed commercial artists, states without a considerable number of such individuals were not involved.

<sup>33</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 42.

sense of unity and collective identity through regional and ethnic diversity.<sup>34</sup> Although it allowed for diversity, unlike the government art programs of fascist regimes, the idealized image of a collective unity through regional difference meant that objects were removed from their specific histories and contexts, in service of a larger national picture.

Rourke actually arranged to have Sheeler's remarkable collection of Shaker furniture included in the Index of American Design, thus reinforcing the importance of his collection and the place it could have in the larger picture of American artistic tradition. The objects depicted in the Index were located through a variety of channels, and one of the most prominent sources for objects from New York and the New England area was Edith Halpert's collection and exhibitions at the American Folk Art Gallery. Halpert founded the gallery in 1931 with Cahill as an associate, and through the exhibition and promotion of folk objects she helped shape an audience and market for the anonymous works of handcraft tradition. The most important patron she fostered was Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who actively collected folk art with Halpert's guidance and later founded a museum for folk art in Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>35</sup>

Halpert, like Rourke, believed in elevating the status of folk art and fashioning it into a usable past. She drew a direct connection between folk art and modern American artists, including those represented in her Downtown Gallery, exhibiting works of traditional American folk art as *Ancestors of American Art* in 1931, 1933, and 1938.<sup>36</sup> These exhibitions, held at the Downtown Gallery instead of the American Folk Art Gallery, positioned the artists of the folk tradition as "ancestors" to the contemporary

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<sup>34</sup> Erika Doss, "American Folk Art's 'Distinctive Character': The Index of American Design and New Deal Notions of Cultural Nationalism," in *Drawing on America's Past*, ed. Clayton, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery*, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 23.

artists whose works were usually shown in the gallery. The idea of ancestry and lineage leading from the past to the present helped to promote the “Americanness” of her artists, though this was a tenuous claim on her part, as she did not establish a solid ideological basis for such a connection.

Halpert and Rourke differed slightly in their opinions regarding the concept of the usable past, and more broadly in their concepts of what made art “American.” This difference emerged particularly in Halpert’s writing about her Downtown Gallery artists, as shown in the text from the *Practical Manifestations* brochure. In her statement about the artists’ work, Halpert explained, “The very nature of the artist rebels against standardization. His conception, his expression, the message he wishes to convey, must be personal. Each artist in the same environment selects what impresses him most and must—when necessary—make an adjustment suitable to his own nature. And our national art must therefore have a varied pattern.”<sup>37</sup> She characterized the American quality in their work as both a result of the environment and the singular experience that generated varied responses for each person. This loosely defined pluralism allowed Halpert to promote each of her artists as a representative of American art, despite their stylistic differences and ethnic heritage. This tactic was warranted by her commercial aims, as she sought to market such diverse works as William Zorach’s figural sculpture *Spirit of the Dance* (Fig. 14) and Stuart Davis’s *House and Street* (Fig. 10) in the same exhibition, yet why she chose to pursue the rhetoric of “our national art” seems puzzling. As she recognized, the artists were not united by similar stylistic visual languages – Kuniyoshi’s work drew from folk art forms in representing the human figure; Davis

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<sup>37</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.

worked within the language of abstraction; Stefan Hirsch and Sheeler developed within a Precisionist mode – and they all chose subject matter that responded to entirely different sources in American society (or beyond, as Zorach’s *Spirit of the Dance* references allegorical subject matter). Further, the artists in the exhibition came from a diverse range of geographic and ethnic backgrounds, which may complicate the idea of how national art is bounded or identified – though perhaps allowing for a more inclusive reading of American art that is not determined by stereotypes of nationality.<sup>38</sup> Halpert’s approach differed from Rourke’s belief in a “distinctive character,” as she did not insist on the presence of *Urformen*, but believed that the artist’s individual response to the environment could contribute to a national art. The overall logic of her position remained unclear, however, as she still maintained that the work of these artists constituted an “‘American’ record” when considered as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

Given Halpert’s interest in past art and its connection to modern artists, it may seem surprising that she made no allusion to traditional craft in the *Practical Manifestations* text. The properties of function and design integral to much of the craft tradition are perhaps an obvious connection to the exhibition, yet Halpert chose to omit any comparison to this past. Instead, she claimed that artists were finding “new channels for their talents” and that “Art is now becoming a living factor in the home.”<sup>40</sup> She framed the exhibition as completely oriented in the present, emphasizing how keenly artists were reacting to their present environment and the contemporary situation of the

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<sup>38</sup> Ben Shahn, Ernest Fiene, and William Zorach were immigrants to America, Stefan Hirsch was born to American parents but lived most of his early life in Europe, Yasuo Kuniyoshi emigrated from Japan, and Sheeler was born in Pennsylvania and lived in the United States all his life.

<sup>39</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.

<sup>40</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.

Depression. Her consideration of the artists' reactions and the importance of experience, though stated in a generalized fashion, ties in closely with the issues in Sheeler's work that are at the center of this study. He encouraged the idea that art was a living factor in the home and arranged his own domestic spaces with a keen eye for the aesthetics of design, but his idea of present experience tied to objects of the past suggested a complicated relationship to history through material objects.

### **Sheeler and the Usable Past**

Sheeler's interest in folk art and simple, utilitarian objects from traditional American production developed within this larger intellectual context of the usable past. His perspective on the relationship between the past and present fit into the historical discourse shaped by the figures discussed above, yet he adapted this idea through his artistic practice in unique ways.

Sheeler had a deep interest in and affection for handcrafted objects and vernacular forms. He collected Shaker furniture, which, as mentioned above, was illustrated in the Index of American Design project.<sup>41</sup> He outfitted his homes in South Salem, New York, and Ridgefield, Connecticut, with these pieces, and subsequently depicted these interiors in paintings such as *Americana*, *Home, Sweet Home* (Fig. 15), and *American Interior* (Fig. 16). He was similarly fascinated by the vernacular architecture of Bucks County barns, returning to the subject repeatedly throughout his career in paintings and drawings (Fig. 17).

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<sup>41</sup> Most of the Shaker pieces he owned are now in the collection of Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Charles Brock, *Charles Sheeler: Across Media*, exh. cat. (National Gallery of Art, Washington. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 16.



Early in his career, he combined his interest in the past with everyday life when he rented an eighteenth-century farmhouse in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, with his close friend and fellow artist Morton Livingston Schamberg. The structure, originally built by Jonathan Worthington in 1768, functioned as an escape from the city for the two artists, and became significant subject matter for Sheeler's work for years after his time spent there.<sup>42</sup> The simple architectural forms of the home fueled his creation of drawings, paintings, and photographs. He whitewashed portions of the interior to emphasize the simplicity of the space and its construction, and employed careful cropping and strong lighting effects to create striking images representing it.<sup>43</sup> His images explore the dark nooks of the home, the windows, and the stairwells – the last of these were especially intriguing to him, compelling because they signified functional, complex and aesthetically interesting construction (Fig. 18). The works that he created depicting these interior elements exemplify how he transformed visual experience and contact with well-designed forms into compelling images, which both depict the craftsmanship of the source material and demonstrate his own craft-like skill in the design of the picture plane.

Sheeler rented the house through Henry Chapman Mercer, a local collector and antiquarian who worked to preserve the historical structures of Bucks County. Mercer shared with Sheeler a strong interest in the past, but their attitudes toward it diverged considerably. While Sheeler was interested in the formal clarity of past objects and their continued use, Mercer's interest was based in archaeology and ethnological practice. Trained as an archaeologist, he wanted to preserve and present the past as an object of

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<sup>42</sup> See Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown*, for a comprehensive account of his time in Doylestown and artworks related to this experience.

<sup>43</sup> Lucic, *Doylestown*, 19.

study for his fellow Americans, seeking to create a window into history through the objects of preindustrial society. To achieve these efforts he amassed an enormous collection of preindustrial objects, particularly tools, and in 1916 built a museum in Bucks County to house it. The contrast between the interior of the home that Sheeler inhabited and the displays arranged by Mercer within his museum vividly picture the difference between their visions of the past. Mercer categorized the objects in the museum largely according to their original purpose, creating cluttered arrangements of tools and materials that surrounded the visitor and produced a visual overstimulation. The formal quality of each object was not intrinsically significant, but gained meaning when placed in the context of preindustrial culture and life through the accumulation of objects. Sheeler, by contrast, valued the formal qualities of the material he depicted and was attracted to the geometries and simple forms it embodied. But his interest was not merely formalist: he was interested in using objects and structures from the past as functional material, not historicizing them but bringing them into everyday experience. He did not view the home as a museum of sorts, or a window onto the past, but instead as an active element within his lived experience. While Mercer believed that objects could convey the meanings of past times by themselves, Sheeler based his idea of objects on his close interaction with them. Mercer saw artifacts as signifiers of earlier times, and that through observing them we could better appreciate past American culture. Sheeler had a strong interest in history and in particular what he saw as the greater communal spirit within groups in the past, but he did not want to observe history from an objective distance.

It was this affection for and the formal affinity with handcraft and Shaker furniture in Sheeler's work that was praised as evidence of the usable past by Rourke and

others. Sheeler viewed these objects as congruent with the forms he wanted to depict in his work, through their shared formal simplification, use of firm lines defining the edges of objects, and sense of material solidity. His style expresses his interest in folk art and the handcraft, but in a complex way that integrates a variety of other sources. The hard-edged “Precisionist” style that is associated with his work borrows from Cubism and the language of abstraction developed in Europe and the United States, illustrating his connection to both native and international developments. He greatly admired the work of Paul Cézanne and employed the complex spatial play of the French artist’s work as inspiration for his own images. For the radical composition of *Americana*, Sheeler might have drawn from paintings such as Cézanne’s *Still Life with Plaster Cast* (1894, Fig. 19), which features a sharply tilted ground plane and conflicting systems of perspective. He looked to a variety of sources showing little concern for issues of nationalism in the development of visual language, and extended his interest to international movements including Dada and magic realism in works such as *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 20) and *The Artist Looks at Nature* (1943, Fig. 21). Although Rourke claimed that he had found the *Urformen* of American culture in Bucks County barns, Sheeler seemed uninterested in the notion of a nation-based aesthetic in his own painting and drawing.

In his writings and statements, Sheeler rarely commented on the issue of national identity, which is somewhat surprising for an individual who was held up as the model “artist in the American tradition.” His approach to collecting and appreciating objects further suggests a more pluralistic approach to culture than some major proponents of the usable past maintained. In addition to the Shaker furniture he collected, he owned a sculpture by Constantin Brancusi, which he treasured dearly, and Rourke described that

he “had had not only [a] small Cézanne for a time but Walter Arensberg had also lent him one of Rousseau’s great tropical pictures.”<sup>44</sup> He also possessed an Etruscan black glaze pitcher, which he depicted in a number of works including *Tulips and Etruscan Vase* (1922) and *Interior* (1940, Fig. 22). In other works, we see his interest in contemporary international design: the emotive conté crayon drawing *Portrait (Katharine)* (Fig. 23) depicts his wife seated in a Marcel Breuer “Wassily” chair, the iconic tubular steel armchair from the Bauhaus designer. Another landmark work of European design appears in *View of New York* (Fig. 24), which features a prototype of the “Safari” chair by Danish designer Kaare Klint, “one of the most advanced furniture designs of its day... a classic of the modern style.”<sup>45</sup> This range of objects exhibits both his catholic interest in well-designed objects and his rather privileged ability to purchase expensive goods, from both past and present origins.

Art historians including Wanda Corn have identified the importance of the usable past as a framework for the painting and objects Sheeler included in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition.<sup>46</sup> The interior in *Americana* imagines the quiet domesticity of earlier times through the staging of lovingly crafted objects, using the past as inspiration in both subject matter and formal qualities. The geometric patterns of the rugs and defined edges of the furniture are amassed and arranged into a calculated composition, fitted together like the woodwork of a skilled craftsman. The impact of simple handcraft forms is also seen in the domestic objects that Sheeler designed, especially in his textiles (Figs. 1, 11, 13). It would appear Sheeler was following the aims of the Index of

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<sup>44</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 99.

<sup>45</sup> Carol Troyen, “The Open Window and the Empty Chair: Charles Sheeler’s ‘View of New York,’” *American Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1986): 28.

<sup>46</sup> Corn, *Great American Thing*, 332, 336.

American Design in borrowing from traditional patterns, yet his work predated this project, which indicates how his practice anticipated its gaze toward the past.

Yet the designed objects and their manufacture demonstrate how Sheeler's work complicates the notion of the usable past in significant ways. One of the major issues in his oeuvre is how his extensive engagement with American handcraft of the past is paired with a serious interest in modern industry and machine production. The objects themselves participate in this tension: while Sheeler looked to the formal inspiration of the past, he only designed the objects, intending them for machine production. While in this case the production was on a rather small scale and could not be considered mass production of a considerable dimension, there was still a separation between Sheeler's design and the machine work and human labor that created the objects, unlike in handcraft production. Some of the objects were produced in small quantities and sold through the Downtown Gallery, but a number of determining factors prevented any wider production or distribution. Sheeler's attitude toward this limitation, as he expressed in his autobiographical writings, is tinged with regret that the project did not expand. He explained, "An artist should be able to turn his hand to other materials. Perhaps it's because we so seldom do this that the artist feels, as a good many people have said, out of the picture today."<sup>47</sup> In Sheeler's mind, the creation of practical objects for a broader audience was a way for the artist to remain relevant and participate in "the active life of our time"—though, as we will see, the potential ideological complications of this project may have actually discouraged the artist from pursuing it further.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 132.

This desire to produce machine-crafted yet artist-designed goods seems to conflict notions of the artist's handcraft and the value found in preindustrial processes. Yet this reveals Sheeler's interest in reaching out in the hopes of communing with a larger audience, with the aim of connecting shared experience. Cahill and Dana shared this perspective and did not think mass production was antithetical to the logic of the usable past. They both advocated designing machine-produced wares that would improve the lives of users, democratizing good form and making it available to a wider public.<sup>49</sup> As mentioned, Cahill was optimistic about the possibility of bringing modern art into the everyday lives and homes of the public through utilitarian, mass-produced goods, and he viewed the machine as a way to achieve this end.<sup>50</sup>

Mass production through machines opened new possibilities that actually allowed a return to the past, reconciling the desire for well-designed goods, which were perceived to be characteristic of everyday life in early American culture, with modern developments. Movements that suggested only a return to craft production, as in William Morris's Arts and Crafts philosophy, lacked considerable presence by the 1930s because of the near impossibility of creating handcrafted works at a reasonable price for the broader public. In Sheeler's work, we see an attempted model of how the usable past could be integrated with mechanical processes into modern society. Sheeler saw the industrial as inherently linked to modern life, and that to deny it—either as subject matter or as a means to creating objects—was to limit the interaction of the artist with society.

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<sup>49</sup> Carol Duncan, *A Matter of Class: John Cotton Dana, Progressive Reform, and the Newark Museum* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope Pub, 2009), 151, 157.

<sup>50</sup> Clayton, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 27.

When he compared the modern condition to a previous age, specifically the Gothic era that had produced the stunning Chartres Cathedral he admired, he proclaimed

Every age manifests itself by some external evidence. In a period such as ours when only a comparatively few individuals seem given to religion, some form other than the Gothic cathedral must be found. Industry concerns the greatest numbers—it may be true, as has been said, that our factories are our substitute for religious expression.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the artist could use the industrial subject in his work as a form of expression to reach “the greatest numbers.” Industry had not become a new *kind* of religion for the modern age, but had taken the place of religion as an institution relevant to the everyday lives and experiences of people. Despite this assertion, the centrality of industry in modern life is largely excluded from Sheeler’s images of domestic spaces. Except for the gas furnace heater in *Home, Sweet Home* (Fig. 15) and the electric lamps in *Cactus* (Fig. 25), modernity and its material evidence is consistently left out of the images that focus on handcrafted goods, including *Americana*. His images of industry seem to occupy a separate realm, although he used a shared style of clean lines and inventive compositional techniques for the treatment of both subjects. The fragmentation of subject matter in his own creative output perhaps mirrors the fragmentation he perceived in modern life, in which a variety of spaces and environments could be experienced in isolation from each other, and his aesthetic approach signals his adaptability to the varying conditions of modern experience. Though his visual language acts as a bridge between the two, making them seem more congruous, he pictured industry and craft in totally different spheres without considering how they might interact. The domestic spaces he created through the careful staging of objects close out the outside world, and though his factory landscapes

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 130.

seem to highlight the importance of industry in modern life, he downplayed the problems associated with industrial development by depicting it as its own space, not showing its products or how they enter into the experience of the everyday.

Sheeler's attitude toward industry differed from the outlook of Brooks and several other cultural critics during the period, such as Randolph Bourne and Waldo Frank, who saw the industrial model as deleterious to society and desired a move away from it.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps Sheeler was doubtful about the ability to completely break up current institutions, but he recognized both benefits and drawbacks resulting from the progress of the machine and industry.<sup>53</sup> Some of his works, such as the *Power* series, appear completely celebratory of modernization and the ability of humankind to harness nature for its own purposes. He did separate the industrial from the domestic in his imagery, indicating an unease about modernization permeating every element of life, but he turned to mass production in his own designs for home goods, adopting its processes when it suited his need to produce goods for sale.

Rourke asserted that "[Sheeler] has never been anything of an antiquarian," instead finding value in objects of the past "for the pleasure they could give and because they were useful," not necessarily because of their age.<sup>54</sup> He looked to the past forms for their utility and simplicity, and sought to use similar forms to connect with the modern world, placing the artist at the center of activity and making his work relevant to others. In uncritically using industrial processes to do so, however, he ignored the issues of modern labor involved in the creation of machine goods. For Sheeler the past and present

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<sup>52</sup> Blake, *Beloved Community*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 14-15.

<sup>54</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 99.



were bound together through the experience of physical objects in use, which fabricated a sense of historical continuity that obscured the changes in production and consumption of objects that accompanied the advancements of modernity. The usable past—here in usable domestic goods—could create a sense of reassurance about the stability of everyday life despite increasingly rapid change in other areas of society, such as the industrial landscape that Sheeler explored in other works.

This view precludes a serious consideration of the social and political forces shaping the forms of everyday life, which Dewey argued were fundamental to a full appreciation of the aesthetic since it connected to collective experience and beliefs. Sheeler recognized that the objects of traditional craft and Shaker goods appealed to him partly because of the context in which they were produced, in the service of the “communal life,” and even claimed “I don’t like these things because they are old but in spite of it. I’d like them better if they were made yesterday because then they would afford proof that the same kind of creative power is continuing.”<sup>55</sup> In some ways, his foray in design was an attempt to achieve this, but he focused largely on aesthetic form isolated from social and cultural context. Despite his appreciation of the organization of material goods in past communities, it does not seem that he considered how his own project was complicit with social atomization of modern life effected through the separation of production and consumption, with human labor of manufacture made invisible, the worker separated from the design and products of his creation, and the commercial value of luxury goods for sale in a gallery replacing a communal model. Given his indifference toward these factors, the affinity between the goods depicted in

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 136.

*Americana* and the modern designs that Sheeler produced was problematic, as the idea of a historical continuum in the production of everyday goods circumvented a real evaluation of the system of contemporary production and consumption within which he worked.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Practical Manifestations and the Significance of Utility*

One of the elements of the “usable past” that spoke most directly to Sheeler’s interests was its nostalgia for the human connection and more communal society that past times purportedly offered.<sup>1</sup> In his appreciation for the era of handmade goods and craftsmen integrated in society, Sheeler expressed a fondness for a greater union of the artist with society, through creating goods that would connect more directly to everyday life.<sup>2</sup> The utility and function of the objects exhibited in *Practical Manifestations* demonstrate his desire for the artist to relate directly to society. In this chapter I will examine more closely the issue of creating objects for specific domestic use, and argue that Sheeler’s venture into industrial design developed in part from his desire to connect more closely with the life of his own time and to insert the aesthetic into the everyday, a critical element of pragmatist philosophy. His relative lack of success in fulfilling this goal and limited engagement with it suggest that he found a more conducive outlet for these ideas in his painting, the subject of the next chapter. To some degree, fine art allowed him to formulate a more individualized response to material goods and everyday experience, circumventing the complications of labor and machine production, and the processes of design and manufacture in actual objects. As discussed in the previous chapter, he elided these issues during his short foray into design, claiming that the artist could connect to others in his time through material goods. The following discussion will evaluate this notion further and suggest that we can uncover deep contradictions in his

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter one; Sheeler’s discussion of Chartres and Shaker communities in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 129-136.

<sup>2</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 131-132.

desire to use industry as a means of connection, though he may not have acknowledged this himself.

Previous scholarship has often addressed Sheeler's appreciation for the past and its objects of utility as a means of achieving formal beauty. Sheeler certainly admired this element in art and architecture of the past and present, advocating an aesthetic of simplified forms that served a functional purpose. In his own writing he described the appeal of Shaker architecture and craft as forms derived with practicality in mind, claiming the Shakers

gave us abundant evidence of their profound understanding of utilitarian designing in their architecture and crafts. It was well understood, and convincingly demonstrated by them, in house or table, that rightness of proportions, due regard for efficiency in the use to which it was applied and the carrying out of the plan by means of skilled craftsmanship and careful consideration of the material use, made embellishment superfluous.<sup>3</sup>

The utilitarian quality of their design meant that ornament was not required, and moreover, that ornament or embellishment would be "superfluous." The critique of ornament was a rallying cry among many artists and critics, and the judgments of unnecessary embellishment often linked it with a transgression of moral as well as aesthetic values.<sup>4</sup> The elements that Sheeler appreciated in Shaker work were themselves coded in terms with inherent value judgments, such as "honesty" and "sincerity." Sheeler

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<sup>3</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 115-116.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Lloyd Wright "The Art and Craft of the Machine," (1901) in Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Adolf Loos and Adolf Opel, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, Calif: Ariadne Press, 1998).

saw the Shaker production as tied to the group's religious beliefs, in which "beauty as something aside from utility was not desired."<sup>5</sup>

In his work in industrial design, Sheeler had the opportunity to materially implement his belief in the close association between function and aesthetic value. He described his activity as "an interesting experience, especially in the designing of objects of utility, in trying to arrive at beauty through a successful realization of the highest efficiency of the object in its use."<sup>6</sup> His small teaspoon exhibits this efficiency and restraint in ornament and decoration, with a simple rectilinear handle extending from the ovoid bowl of the utensil (Fig. 2). Nothing extraneous seems to detract from the utility of the spoon, and the proportions between the geometric shapes are balanced and elegant. In the photograph by Sheeler, the design of the spoon is highlighted in a carefully composed arrangement with a set of his salt and pepper shakers, which also display an austere simplicity in their forms. The use of light, with carefully balanced areas of shadow creating volume, combines with a sense of stillness to give the image and its objects an almost monumental quality. In the gelatin silver print the cylindrical body of the pepper shaker calls to mind the geometry of a silo, giving it a sense of volumetric solidity and utilitarian purpose. Even the markings to distinguish the two shakers – "S" and "P" – are tied to the use of the objects; instead of superficially imprinting the initials onto the containers, Sheeler transformed the forms of the letters into the pinholes that dispense their contents. By turning a potentially decorative embellishment into an element integral to the function of the object, Sheeler created a resulting form that is both inventive and utilitarian.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 117.

<sup>6</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 114.

Yet Sheeler did not account for the changing means of production or the drastic difference in the social framework in which his useful goods were created. While he praised the Shakers for creating objects through skilled craftsmanship for use in their own community, his work followed a model in which he designed goods but did not physically craft them, and then offered them to an upscale market through the gallery. The focus on formal qualities and stylistic similarity with objects of the past sidestepped the issues of machine production and the atomization of society, in which the acts of production and consumption were increasingly separated by the systems of corporate organization. Dewey saw this as indicative of the problems of modern life, which was increasingly compartmentalized. He claimed “the conditions that create the gulf which exists generally between producer and consumer in modern society operate to create a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience,” which was deleterious to the individual and to the community.<sup>7</sup> The separation of production and consumption also allowed for the reification of industrial forms, in which the process of human agency was made invisible and the object itself gained a sense of autonomy.

Sheeler performed this separation in his own work, as the processes of modern industrial production are depicted without a connection to their product or the integral role of human labor. His images of the Ford Motor Company River Rouge Plant evidence his narrowed attention to the formalized qualities of utility, as he explained of his six-week visit in 1927: “There I was to find forms which looked right because they had been designed with their eventual utility in view and in the successful fulfillment of their

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<sup>7</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 8.

purpose it was inevitable that beauty should be attained.”<sup>8</sup> In his photographs, he created an accumulated vision of the factory through the strategy of serial photography, focusing on elements of the industrial machinery that were graphically striking to establish an overall image. *Criss-Crossed Conveyors, River Rouge Plant* (Fig. 26) demonstrates this approach, as Sheeler depicted the entirely utilitarian coke conveyors as strong graphic elements, forming an X pattern across the frame of vision. The dark shadows of the conveyors flatten the image, lessening the sense of spatial recession of the large forms. The steel supports, elevated stairways, and powerhouse stacks in the distance contribute to the patterned quality of the image, as the repeated forms add a graphic rhythm and complexity to the scene. Through careful framing and focus, Sheeler combined the existing utilitarian material into an image that presents an architectonic beauty, the various forms in layered planes of vision, intersecting and knit together in a mechanistic basket weave. His continuing appreciation of industrial forms is evident in his later paintings and drawings, as he would return to depict the beauty that he perceived there in subsequent works, such as *American Landscape* (1930), *Classic Landscape* (1931), and *River Rouge Plant* (1932).

While the images that he created are striking, Sheeler’s emphasis on machine forms resulted in an active reading-out of the human activity at the Rouge Plant. He depicted a surprising number of human figures or portions of figures in his photographic series – over sixty – but they are made small and incidental to such a degree that most scholars have overlooked them altogether.<sup>9</sup> The minimization of the worker in the factory

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<sup>8</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Corwin, *Selling "America": Precisionism and the Rhetoric of Industry, 1916-1939*. (Thesis (Ph.D. in History of Art)--University of California, Berkeley, Spring 2001), 24. In this dissertation,

setting mirrors the desire of corporate management for labor that would be undistruptive, and the images illustrate Sheeler's passive complicity with this aim. His complacency toward the significance of machine production and the labor involved in the production of his domestic objects likewise continued this omission.

While these examples, in conjunction with his statements, illustrate that Sheeler appreciated a functionalist aesthetic while downplaying issues of labor, this is only one element in understanding the complexity of his interest in the material goods in everyday life. By looking at his writings, paintings, and foray into design, I argue that social function and shared interaction with forms were major elements in his love of utility, despite his blindness toward labor. In many ways, his ideas of connection and communion through form link to a pragmatist desire to create aesthetic experience not in a vacuum, but as an individual working, living, and interacting with objects within a larger community.

The issue of utility and usefulness is explicit in the title of the exhibition *Practical Manifestations*. As a framing device it proposed that the works seen in the 1934 exhibition were materializations of the creative energy of the artists, directed toward a particular use or function. By showing the "practical" objects in conjunction with painting, Halpert (as organizer of the material) suggested that the talent of artists was versatile and could be relevant to everyday life. "Art is now becoming a living factor in the home," she explained, through the efforts of the artist imparting his taste to objects of use.<sup>10</sup> Sheeler's photograph *Edith Halpert Wearing a Dress of Fabric Designed by*

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Corwin provides a compelling account of how these figures have been read, noting that workers appear in twenty out of the thirty-three photographs that comprise the Rouge series.

<sup>10</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.



*Sheeler* (Fig. 27), illustrates art as a “living factor” in practice, as Halpert is shown walking the galleries, poised between two of his paintings and outfitted in a dress fabricated from a textile of his design. By presenting fine art and textile art in a photograph, Sheeler synthesized three strains of his artistic output and demonstrated the artist’s versatility. Depicting the actual fabric, a wool knit with a Shaker-inspired pattern utilized in a garment, in the same image as the paintings *View of New York* (1931) and *Classic Landscape* (1931) seems to elevate his work in design while demonstrating its use. The composition and focus of the photograph itself suggest the quality of the everyday: unlike Sheeler’s characteristic photographic style, using strong lighting, a dynamic balance of light and dark shapes, and dramatic cropping, this photograph has the more casual feel of a snapshot, an image captured in the flux of everyday life. The photograph functions as a portrait of Halpert, but additionally presents a portrait of art in everyday life and, relevant to my argument, an image of utilitarian design in a practical application. Without venturing too far into biographical matters, we can speculate that the photograph carried special meaning for Sheeler in both professional and personal registers. The painting *View of New York* (fig. 24), cropped at the left edge, can be interpreted as commemorating a turning point in Sheeler’s career, as he moved from commercial photography to dedicate himself more fully to oil painting under Halpert’s representation at the Downtown Gallery.<sup>11</sup> Sheeler was also dearly attached to Halpert, and while a romantic relationship between them never actualized, their personal correspondence reveals Sheeler’s heartfelt professions of affection.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Sheeler’s

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<sup>11</sup> Troyen, “The Open Window and the Empty Chair,” 28.

<sup>12</sup> In one particularly ardent note Sheeler declared, “you are the center of my life.” Sheeler to Edith Gregor Halpert, January 22, 1935, quoted in Tepfer, *Edith Gregor Halpert*, 102.

drawing *Katharine* (Fig. 23), the photograph of Halpert presents a subject of deep significance to Sheeler in conjunction with a specific object of design, in this case his own. He did not include the objects only because they were useful, but because they appealed to his interest in how individuals connect through material forms.

Other objects in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition were useful goods as well, mostly intended for a domestic setting. The tumbler, silver spoon, and salt and pepper shakers (Figs. 2, 5, 28) would have had a place at the table; the coffee service would have been suitable for the intimate conversations of after-dinner socializing (Fig. 29); the ash tray and cigarette container were appropriate for quotidian habit and ritual.<sup>13</sup> Together, one can imagine them knit into the activity of the daily life of their user—not showy objects but instead pieces that seem suited for the comfort and familiarity of a home such as Sheeler’s residence in South Salem (Fig. 30).

### ***Arts, Industry, and Everyday Use During the 1930s***

The design projects that Sheeler participated in were only a small part of a larger development during the period, in which collaborations between artist and manufacturer offered new possibilities for both parties involved.<sup>14</sup> Other artists, in addition to those represented by Halpert in the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition, worked in design with varying degrees of intensity: Georgia O’Keeffe, like Sheeler, designed glass work for Steuben; Isamu Noguchi created several designs for table and floor lamps, among other

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<sup>13</sup> Kristina Wilson. *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Yale University Art Gallery, 2004), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Sheeler’s commission for the Ford Motor Company, shooting photographs at the River Rouge Plant for use in advertising and internal publications, is an example of how the artist could play a part in creating the image of a company.

things; Alexander Calder designed jewelry, textiles and wallpapers.<sup>15</sup> Halpert described developments such as those of her artists as beneficial interactions in which the artists had made adjustments in their practice and found “new channels for their talents,” an especially pressing task when the sales of work by contemporary American artists flagged during the Depression.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether Sheeler’s work in applied arts resulted in significant income for him, but the work of other artists in the exhibition indicates that their “practical manifestations” were sources of additional funds in a tight economic environment, which should be considered in tandem with the idealistic view about the artist’s connection to society. Yasuo Kuniyoshi produced an advertisement for the North German Lloyd shipping company, Ben Shahn illustrated a book-jacket for “The Official Mixers Manual,” a book on cocktails – work that served commercial ends but may have been less than thrilling ventures for the artists. Projects in decorative goods for the home, including carved panels and cabinets created by artists such as Robert Laurent and William Zorach, likewise offered the opportunity to gain additional income, as the artists could seek a larger potential market by working in a wider range of goods. Sheeler’s attitude toward commercial work is open to question: in some cases his commissioned work clearly spurred his interest, as is the case of the River Rouge images that inspired later paintings, while other projects were less fulfilling, such as the advertising photography for Condé Nast.<sup>17</sup> His statements regarding these maintain an

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<sup>15</sup> For more on artists working in design, see J. Stewart Johnson, *American Modern, 1925-1940: Design for a New Age* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2000), and Martin P. Eidelberg, Paul Johnson, and Kate Carmel, *Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was: Selections from the Liliane and David M. Stewart Collection* (Montreal: Musée des arts décoratifs de Montréal, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> *Practical Manifestations*, Downtown Gallery records, AAA.

<sup>17</sup> See Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, 74, for more on his distaste for this work.

utterly practical approach to work done out of financial necessity, without any engagement of the ideological issues involved in creating work to serve corporate ends.

During the 1930s the desire to promote more liberal cooperation between art and industry was shared by many different factions, including artists and the manufacturers of consumer goods. This period hearkened the rise of industrial design as a profession, at the very same moment Sheeler was trying his hand at projects for Kootz and others.<sup>18</sup> In this time of experimentation, the work of professional designers – generally artists previously working in the areas of stage design, fashion illustration and commercial arts – had a major impact on the consumption of goods and the material quality of everyday life. Many of these artists expressed an optimistic desire to collaborate with industry to bring well-designed products to the public, echoing some of Sheeler’s sentiments, and worked to achieve this through mass-produced goods that reflected the “spirit” of the machine age. Manufacturers and businesses showed interest in how the application of a modern aesthetic to consumer products could stimulate desire for goods and increase sales, a response to the sluggish rate of Depression-era spending.<sup>19</sup>

The promotion of beautifully designed objects in the commercial realm was assisted by a comparable endeavor on the part of museums, galleries, art foundations, and other cultural institutions, who proposed the exhibition of good design could serve as a means of improving the lives of American citizens.<sup>20</sup> The Newark Museum, under the leadership of John Cotton Dana, presented objects of everyday use, installing displays as

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<sup>18</sup> For a thorough account of this rise, see Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Trask, *Things American: Art Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

banal as a room full of bathtubs, to educate the public in tasteful design.<sup>21</sup> At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Robert M. de Forest had encouraged progressive reforms in the museum's display of decorative arts during the decades prior, claiming that better aesthetic models for the public were key to creating improved citizenship and that the museum could be democratized through the display of everyday objects.<sup>22</sup> De Forest asserted that the museum institution should be integrated into the larger movement of Progressive Era social reform, exhibiting and promoting improvements in design that would lead to better homes, better cities, and a better society. This project had an economic dimension as well, as he believed the production of superior goods would appeal to American consumers, bolstering the market and elevating the nation's production on the international stage. De Forest believed that collaborations with commercial institutions could be effective in achieving a larger viewership and generating interest in design, and acted as a consultant for Macy's *Art-in-Trade Exposition* in 1927. The exhibition presented a visually stimulating arrangement of objects, many of which employed a machine aesthetic, representing the convergence of fine art, modern style, and consumer marketing in domestic goods during the period. Also at the Metropolitan Museum, beginning in 1918, Richard F. Bach championed the display of modern design and sought to increase the appreciation of the everyday object, to such an extent that he told his audience, "In time you will come to realize that there is just as much art in your rug or your doorknob as in any oil painting in the Met."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 20; Duncan, *A Matter of Class*, 90-91, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 2, 11,

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Murdock Pemberton, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker*, 14 May 1927.

Bach's insistence on locating fine art on the same level with the design of practical objects such as doorknobs and rugs, used in the home and built into the fabric of everyday experience, suggested a functionalist appreciation of forms. His examples correspond with objects that interested Sheeler: while living at the Worthington house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, the artist noted in a letter to Henry Chapman Mercer that ironwork details such as the escutcheon-lift latch were "the chief reason for my enthusiasm for the little house."<sup>24</sup> His fascination with rugs is prominently featured in *Americana*, as four distinct patterned rugs constitute major elements of the composition. His paintings *Interior* (Fig. 31), *American Interior* (Fig. 16), and *Home Sweet Home* (Fig. 15) also use rugs to add visual complexity and a profusion of geometric lines and patterns to an interior scene. He used and appreciated them in his home as functional objects, and integrated them into his paintings as dynamic elements of the design. That the objects Sheeler was attracted to were from the past traditions of American craft may seem to distinguish his interests from Bach and others, but the fact that he was also designing modern objects that appealed to the aesthetics of both past and present illustrated his complex working between these two strains.

Modern design experienced a boom in America during this time, a development that would appear unexpected because of the realities of the Great Depression and the decreased spending on consumer goods. Its meteoric rise is even more surprising given the state of America's modern design scene in 1925, when the nation did not participate in the landmark *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris. Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, had decided the nation did not have

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<sup>24</sup> From Sheeler to Mercer, 26 March 1924, Bucks County Historical Society. Quoted in Lucic, *Doylestown*, 38.

significant contributions to make and declined the opportunity to exhibit, instead sending a “delegation of designers, educators, and critics to study the exposition.”<sup>25</sup> Thanks to the circulated reports of the delegation, “a broad segment of the American public soon learned about the movement” in modern design overseas, subsequently sparking public interest.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, the advancement of design was caused in part by the impulse to generate consumers’ desire – not only for what they needed, but also to replace the things they owned with what was considered “in style.” But modern design also had proponents who advocated design as a response to the troubled times of the Depression, offering a sense of comfort or security, a means of navigating the current situation through forms that spoke to the “spirit of the age.” Through enhancing the home and the individual experience in the domestic space, modern design aimed to create a better life for its user/consumer. In this way, consumption of material goods acted as a maneuver of reassurance during a time in which the fabric of social and economic stability was profoundly shaken.

Beyond the specific trauma of the Depression, the embrace of modern design also signaled a reversal of the narrative of decline associated with industrialization, which had been established by American cultural critics of the nineteenth century. Instead of viewing advances in machine production with anxiety, designers focused on the potential of the emerging consumer market to affect the lives of everyday Americans for the positive. Industrial designer Russel Wright held these beliefs and encapsulated his perspective on the aims of modern design and its relationship to modern life in this passage, published in 1934:

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 5.

[Modern design] is a design solution to living, a solution that is absolutely necessary if you are going to live gracefully, comfortably, and naturally in the world at the time at which you happen to be born into it. Thus if our homes are planned for modern comfort by means of modern materials, it is possible to achieve a new kind of beauty—not the pictorial beauty of the past, but the honest practical beauty of the present, which is the only true refuge in these harsh and strident times.<sup>27</sup>

Not only did modern design respond to what Wright recognized as the difficult reality of the contemporary situation, but he insisted that it also offered a better and more fulfilling life. This claim was highly optimistic and should be read as the idealistic expression of Wright's highest aims for design, not necessarily evidence of the historical reality of the designer's accomplishments. In his idealized vision, Wright proposed that there was a new aesthetic to be found, an "honest practical beauty of the present," and that in capturing this in his work the designer could improve the lived experience of others. The statement sounds strikingly close to what Sheeler advocated in his work, in particular staying connected to one's own time and presenting objects with an aesthetic coded as honest and practical.

The promotion of consumption as a means of connecting with others, as an activity separate from production, marked a major shift from previous forms of handcraft and the collective structures associated with it. This had both economic and social implications that Sheeler did not acknowledge, and even as he presented objects for sale in a gallery setting he did not analyze how these were different in kind from the goods of the past that he admired, especially the Shaker works that were tied to a communal production and used within a community. For both Sheeler and Wright, the turn to

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<sup>27</sup> Russel Wright, "Modern Design," *AH* 11 (January 1934): 60-61.



consumption was congruous with commercial aims, regardless of whether they acknowledged this fact in the promotion of their work.

Besides a common sense of purpose in modern design, Wright and Sheeler shared aesthetic similarity in their manufactured objects. A pair of salt and pepper shakers (ca. 1933) by Wright is perfectly compatible with the duo of Sheeler's design, both seen in a contemporary photograph of objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and they date to nearly the same year (Fig. 32 – design by Sheeler in bottom right, Wright in bottom left). The nearly perfect cubes of Wright's design share the squared geometric quality of the forms that Sheeler created, but they employ even rows of holes on their top faces instead of "S" and "P." In the same photograph from the Met collection, curved shakers by architect William Lescaze are shown utilizing the punched-hole initials in the design for dispensing their contents. The aesthetic harmony between the three sets illustrates that Sheeler's work connected to larger developments taking place in the design at the time, embracing the style of the machine age. Capturing the spirit of the current time through form – the goal professed by both Sheeler and Wright – did not mean Sheeler refuted the traditional aesthetic he appreciated; instead he viewed the two as compatible through the shared qualities of simplicity and directness of materials. The aesthetic continuity that Sheeler established between handcraft goods and machine-made objects collapsed the historical distance between them, eliding the issues of changing production as mentioned above.

The rapid development of modern design and the optimistic hope for everyday goods that would transform the lives of their users relate to the complex attitudes toward the machine age and technological progress. The advancements in technology and

increased mechanization of modern life posed a threat to the vitality of the individual, yet machines could also assist human labor by freeing people from the more taxing aspects of handcraft production, and through mass-produced objects the artist could distribute designs to a wider audience. Machine production conversely constrained and liberated the individual. Sheeler reflected on the tenuous relationship that he sustained with the machine age, explaining, “I find myself unable to believe in Progress – Change, yes. Greater refinements in the methods of destroying life are the antithesis of Progress.”<sup>28</sup> By disparaging the aspects of progress that were deleterious to life, Sheeler claimed a critical stance toward technological advance in itself. In his statement he challenged the notion that all development can be understood as progress, suggesting that the potential to enrich life should be the marker in evaluating what constitutes progress. This attitude reveals his pragmatist leanings, as he chose to judge the value of technology or change based on its resulting effect on the self. He did not recognize, however, the contradictory nature of his own project, in which the high-end goods he designed were produced for a limited market, with the workers and production totally outside of his consideration. Enriching life through what might be regarded as conspicuous consumption is squarely opposed to the ideals Dewey professed, in which the worker could be connected to the products of his own creation and enjoy a greater communal interaction through those goods. Dewey asserted that an “industrial democracy” was possible and that mechanical progress could be beneficial—but only if used to advance a more egalitarian form of society.

Their perspectives differ further in considering the human agency and formation of technological progress. Sheeler recognized the negative and positive potential in the

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA.

machine age, but did not address the problems of social and economic organization behind this. For Dewey, the compartmentalization of modern life was caused by the disparity in these organizations, which ultimately diminished the quality of lived experience in one's environment. He faulted the excesses of capitalism for the problem at hand, claiming "Oligarchical control from the outside of the processes and the products of work is the chief force in preventing the worker from having that intimate interest in what he does and makes that is an essential prerequisite of esthetic satisfaction."<sup>29</sup> His answer to this situation was unusually radical for the philosopher: "The labor and employment problem of which we are so acutely aware cannot be solved by mere changes in wage, hours of work and sanitary conditions. No permanent solution is possible save in a radical social alteration, which effects the degree and kind of participation the worker has in the production and social disposition of the wares he produces."<sup>30</sup> With such a social revolution, the worker would be more connected to the objects of his production, restoring a more organic relationship with the world of material things and other individuals.

Although Sheeler did not approach this level of critical engagement, in his paintings and drawings we can read a certain ambivalence toward industrial advancement and the effects of the machine age.<sup>31</sup> The images present machines as intimidating entities, a source of both exhilaration and terror. In *American Landscape* (Fig. 33), the human element is reduced to an inconsequential figure running along the rail tracks, pictured in the gap between two strings of railway cars. The figure can almost function as

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<sup>29</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 357.

<sup>30</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 357.

<sup>31</sup> Lucic, *Cult of the Machine*, 15.

a surrogate for the modern individual and the artist himself, who reflected on his own potential insignificance in the face of a changing cultural and artistic reality.

But how do Sheeler's objects of design enter into his ambivalent relationship toward mechanical advancements? Because we have no details on the actual manufacture of the pieces, answering the question requires some speculation. It seems that the objects would have been machine produced in small quantities, but whether Sheeler saw this as significant remains unclear. One issue in particular is the separation between the artist and the actual object in the process of design in which he participated. Sheeler would have drafted plans for the manufacture of objects and then worked through the industrial designer, S. M. Kootz for example, to have the piece fabricated. In contrast, to create objects such as paintings or the handcraft Sheeler admired, an artist or craftsman would be continually involved with the shaping of the work, with no separation between the experience of creating and its eventual form. Dewey identified the process of the artist continually reacting to the material and determining new forms as an integral part of the creative activity of art-making, but Sheeler worked according to a different model in his process of design. For Dewey, the acts of doing – creating the work of art – and undergoing – perceiving the resulting object – should be concurrent processes, because “What is done and what is undergone are... reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to this, the act of design requires a separation of the two processes. Sheeler may not have perceived this as a major problem if he was more interested in the viewer/user's eventual interaction with the forms, thus having a slightly different approach to how experience should shape the work. In the following

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<sup>32</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 52.

chapter Sheeler's difference from Dewey's paradigm of experience will be addressed further because it is characteristic of his painting technique as well.

While Sheeler's viewpoint on the complexities of machine-produced goods in the home remained obscure, many proponents of modern design believed that these objects could enhance the lives of Americans and lead to a greater democratic society, regardless of (and, in fact, thanks to) their origins in machine or mass production. The enthusiasm for a greater connection between the public and the aesthetic was a vital component in the culture of the 1930s, stretching far beyond design. Holger Cahill called for a shift away from venerating the rare masterpieces of traditional fine art and a turn toward a more democratic standard, similar to what Bach had professed. He argued that reforms in education, based on the philosophy of Dewey, should emphasize "the importance and pervasiveness of the aesthetic experience, the place of the arts as part of the significant life of an organized community, and the necessary unity of the arts with the activities, the objects, and the scenes of everyday life."<sup>33</sup> In this formulation, the public would become active participants in viewing and experiencing art, which would lead to a greater involvement in what Dewey had originally described as the "free and enriching communion" possible in a truly democratic society.<sup>34</sup> The arts could become more integrated into the everyday through both a democratization of the experience of viewing painting and sculpture, and through the greater availability of well-designed goods for domestic use. Whether Sheeler achieved either of these is questionable, as the paintings and high-end goods that he created were still within the commercially distinct context of the gallery that separated them from a more democratic mode of consumption.

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<sup>33</sup> Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," in *Art for the Millions*, ed. O'Connor, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Cahill, "American Resources," 35.

The language of “community,” “unity,” and “communion” in Cahill’s writing indicates his aspiration for connection through aesthetic experience, one of the principles of the pragmatist philosophy in Dewey’s *Art as Experience*. Dewey argued that aesthetic experience was not contained in an isolated exchange between the artist and viewer, but that “In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.”<sup>35</sup> Art had a shaping role in communal life, as the object was not only a creation of human action but also had direct agency in the experience of future viewers. If the work expressed the artist’s experience in a way that generated a mutual response in the viewer, the shared interactions between them could create a sense of unity and fulfillment. Cahill viewed the recent developments in education and the arts program under the FAP as reactions against the “discrete, gritty, broken experience of our industrial age,” which could institute a more democratic and united culture while forging a connection between the artist and society.<sup>36</sup> His concerns paralleled Sheeler’s complaints about the loss of spirituality and the isolation felt by the artist, left “out of the picture today.”<sup>37</sup> Cahill had fully absorbed the philosophy proposed by Dewey, and believed that the interaction with the environment and the arts could be the “best means for entering sympathetically into the deepest life experience of other peoples.”<sup>38</sup> He identified multiple ways to achieve this end: besides education, he mentioned the Federal Art Project and its murals, the Index of American Design, and the Community Art Center programs as means to reach the American public. The mural

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<sup>35</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 37.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 39.

offered “the odyssey of the American artist in our time,” a means of mythmaking; the Index illustrated a “continuity of aesthetic experience” through America’s history that was congruent with democratic ideals; the Community Art Centers provided a resource for citizens to learn through doing, an elemental tenet of pragmatism.<sup>39</sup>

Sheeler’s strategy differed in significant ways from the governmental programs Cahill championed, even though they shared some aspirations. Cahill believed that these programs could eventually provide a complete expression of the nation’s character, “those qualitative unities which make the pattern of American culture.”<sup>40</sup> Sheeler never made such ambitious claims for his own work, instead focusing on the more personal element of the experience of everyday life. Sheeler claimed “Every age manifests itself by some external evidence,” and that the artist could use that external evidence to create a work that communicated directly with others during his time, but stopped short of connecting the artist’s work to an expression of national concerns.<sup>41</sup> His relationship to national expression was, if anything, somewhat indirect: from William Carlos Williams he had absorbed Dewey’s idea that “the locality is the only universal,” which may, in Sheeler’s interpretation, circumvent the national as a dominant conceptual frame.<sup>42</sup> His works were rooted more in the experience and sense of a real physical place, such as his extensive engagement with the Doylestown house, the rural barns of Pennsylvania, or the River Rouge Plant. He tended to choose subjects that were thoroughly part of his

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<sup>39</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 42, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Cahill, “American Resources,” 44.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 130.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, “Americanism and Localism,” 687. For more on the “local” as “universal,” and the connection between Sheeler, Williams, and Dewey, see Heather L. Stark, *Nine Paintings by Charles Sheeler: A Study in the Literary and Aesthetic Influences Upon Sheeler's Expression of the Local*. Thesis (Ph. D.)--Ohio University, 2006.

individual experience, hoping that through these he could reach a greater public. But it remains unclear whether he thought that these, taken cumulatively, could amount to an expression of the nation. His statements indicated an evasion of this subject: “The question of an American tradition in painting could worry me quite a bit if I would let it,” he maintained. As a modernist artist in America, he recognized a diverse range of sources for his own work and continued, “Obviously we are a composite of many influences, but the same thing is true even of French art. Consider our friend Picasso from across the Spanish border. We seem to derive from many sources. I suppose some variation from these sources makes something which is our own, but just how to define this!”<sup>43</sup> This assertion contains two important propositions: first, that artistic expression is the result of an indeterminate process not fixed to national or cultural boundaries, as even in Europe it developed as a composite. Second, Sheeler conceded there may be “something which is our own” but faltered in defining or setting parameters for this, ending with the exclamatory “how to define this!” Ultimately he was not interested in tracing through to the specific origins for each aspect of his work, but sought to synthesize the multitude of sources – both local and international – through direct contact with materials and forms. The workings of this process in his painting will be analyzed in depth in the following chapter.

Our understanding of his relation to a distinct national character has been shaped largely by secondary literature: Wanda Corn’s account in *The Great American Thing* in particular proclaims that he sought a truly American quality in his art and had a formative role in the discourse on the nation’s tradition in the arts. This reading was instituted

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 182.



during Sheeler's lifetime by Constance Rourke, who declared him the archetypal "Artist in the American Tradition," affirming for him a key position in the construction of a national culture, as the previous chapter explained.<sup>44</sup> When we consider more carefully Sheeler's statements, however, we see that his relationship to national expression was much more uncertain. His artistic orientation fits more closely with what Halpert described in the *Practical Manifestations* text as the individual artist's response to the world around him, which is uniquely personal.

For Sheeler, the work in design was a means to participate in "the active life of our time."<sup>45</sup> He pursued this aim throughout his career, as he collaborated with various industries and worked in the realm of commercial advertising.<sup>46</sup> He published images in *Fortune* magazine, illustrated a Christmas card for Hallmark, and was even featured on the NBC hour-long telecast "Art In Our Time."<sup>47</sup> In light of this, his special identification of industrial design as a way into the "active life" might demonstrate his profound interest in the physical quality of everyday experience, the object-world that fascinated him in his own works of fine art. For him, participating in the active life meant an intervention into the physical world of materials and objects. In some ways, however, his desire to be involved in the variety of forms he pursued meant that he was not critical about the way that the arts could be deployed in the service of a capitalist consumer society, a deployment that sometimes operated in a manner deleterious to the forms of community that he idealized.

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<sup>44</sup> Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Brock, *Across Media*, 173.

Despite Sheeler's efforts, his projects in industrial design never reached a level of production or distribution significant enough to truly enact his desire to insert his work in everyday life. The objects that he produced remained outside the grasp of the majority of American consumers, elite objects despite their seemingly humble design. The products displayed in the Downtown Gallery likely would have been purchased only by those who were already part of the market for works of fine art from the gallery. Because we have no pricing information for *Practical Manifestations* this is a difficult point to prove, yet the gallery setting itself indicates a separate realm from everyday mass consumption and a more limited audience for the wares.

The elite character of this consumption points to a tension in Sheeler's excursion into the everyday. Though he looked back to Shaker cultural production and admired the communal and collaborative element of their activity, his work in design remained isolated from a larger public. This may have been the result of not being able to work with larger manufacturers or design firms due to their lack of interest, but this remains unclear. In his writing, his explanation for the untimely end of his experimentation in design pointed toward a lack of demand: "Since its application is the primary motive for designing and a sufficient market was not available, the excursion came to an end."<sup>48</sup> Yet others during the period, including modern designers such as Russel Wright, Raymond Loewy, and Walter Dorwin Teague were able to develop and popularize their work for large market even during the middle of the Depression.

I argue that the excursion came to an end because he was more drawn to painting and other media as a means to work through his ideas about connecting to others through

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<sup>48</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 104.

forms. He could have pursued design further if he had desired, but instead chose to continue working in painting, along with drawing and photography. Through painting, he was able to explore elements of aesthetic experience that were more significant to him than the notions of practicality and usefulness that his experimentation during the 1930s. Notably, however, the individual nature of the act of painting may have offered a less problematic venue in some aspects than the realm of design as discussed above. Sheeler chose not to acknowledge many of the issues involved in industrial design, but a lengthier engagement on a larger scale may have forced him to do so. His work in painting continued to relate to many of the issues of modern industry, but in a more complex and indirect manner. The next chapter will explore how painting provided a realm for navigating the individual's relationship to a dynamic environment through the representation of things, linking Sheeler to the fundamentals of pragmatist philosophy through his friendship with William Carlos Williams and the notion "the local is the only universal."

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Sheeler's Painting and Dewey's Pragmatist Philosophy*

Sheeler explored his attitudes toward experience and the individual's interaction with the material world through his paintings, turning an intent eye upon the objects that surrounded him and representing them in ways that challenge perception. In this chapter, I look more closely at his paintings and argue that in them we can read both connections and differences with Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. The points of convergence illuminate how Sheeler's understanding of the aesthetic correlated with a pragmatist perspective, and the points of departure indicate how he overlooked some of the subjects that concerned Dewey most, namely the importance of the aesthetic in creating a sense of community that could challenge the reifying forces of modern capitalist society. By navigating Sheeler's work through the idea of experience and the ways in which his practice coincides and differs from the aims of pragmatism, we can track how he both engaged with and glossed over the most pressing issues of the 1930s.

In the *Practical Manifestations* exhibition, the painting *Americana* joined Sheeler's objects of design in representing the output of the artist. The representation of the material world in the painting and the three-dimensional fabrication of the domestic wares may initially seem to form a seamless relationship, as the handcraft aesthetic of the Shaker furniture in the painting and the simple forms of the salt and pepper shakers or wooden rack by Sheeler harmonize easily together. However, if we delve more deeply into the painting we realize a complicated relationship with the material world is on display. Sheeler's depiction of forms may have a photographic quality, but his complex

distortion of photographic models departs from a literal representation of the world and reveals the importance of the individual's accumulative experience.

The connection of Sheeler's work with the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey is indirect, as there is no evidence that Sheeler read Dewey's writings, but it can be traced in two ways. More importantly, for the purposes of this study the connection I draw between them does not insist on Sheeler's knowledge of pragmatism, but instead concerns how Sheeler's work can be read in light of pragmatist concerns. The two strands that I find useful are, first, how Dewey's ideas are related to Sheeler through the intermediary figure of the poet William Carlos Williams, and second, how Sheeler's statements and paintings operate within the terms of pragmatist experience.

Williams Carlos Williams was attracted to the philosophies of Dewey, in particular his essay "Americanism and Localism," and transmitted some of the philosopher's guiding principles to Sheeler through their lengthy and involved correspondence.<sup>1</sup> After meeting in 1919, Williams claimed that in Sheeler he found a fellow soul who "looked at things directly, truly. It was a bond. We both had become aware of a fresh currency in expression, and as we talked we found that we both meant to lead a life which meant direct association and communication with immediate things."<sup>2</sup> Through this intellectual engagement, Sheeler was exposed to the ideas that Williams had absorbed from pragmatism, and this may have shaped a shift in his painting, in particular toward a focus on the "local" and the importance of direct experience or "contact."<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of the relationship between Williams and Sheeler, including the transmission of Dewey's ideas, see Stark, *Nine Paintings*.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 49-50.

ongoing artistic dialogue between them represents a tangible connection between Sheeler and Dewey, but a highly mediated one.<sup>4</sup> The transmission of ideas was indirect, from Dewey to Williams, then Williams to Sheeler, and was further complicated by the way each individual may have had different understandings of the contested terms involved.

One of the central concepts that Williams developed from Dewey's work was the idea that "the local is the only universal, upon that all art builds."<sup>5</sup> This statement promotes the importance of the local as source material for artistic practice – looking toward the world surrounding the artist as a starting point for expression. In a general sense, expressing the local involved a direct engagement with the immediate environment, searching within it for an underlying quality of something universal, but this oversimplifies the various ways in which the "local" and "universal" can be interpreted. In his own work, Williams dedicated himself to this principle and sought to capture the local in his poetry, such as in the modernist epic *Paterson*. The expression of the local in the poem stems from the observation of place using concrete language, as the poet strives "To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general, rolling / up the sum..." in the quest for "beauty."<sup>6</sup> The accumulation of language in poetry, expanding in form as necessary, differs from the bounded space of the canvas, but Williams imagined a

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<sup>3</sup> Williams was so drawn to the term he started a journal titled *Contact*, whose first issue restated his belief in the importance of "essential contact with the local conditions which confront us." *Contact*, December 1920.

<sup>4</sup> Stark's evaluation of the relationship is overly deterministic, as she claims, "It was during the period from 1923 to 1929 that Williams apparently relayed to Sheeler in full his program for the creation of a local aesthetic," which seems to assume that Williams had a definitive "program" to communicate and that it transparently communicated Dewey's formulation of the local. *Nine Paintings*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey, "Americanism and Localism," 687-88.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, 11.

similar potential for local expression in painting and interpreted Sheeler's work in these terms.

Williams offered commentary on Sheeler's work in two publications, first in 1939 in a catalogue introduction for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition of the artist, then in 1954 in the magazine *Art in America*. In the 1939 introduction, he proclaimed that Sheeler "sees the universal in our midst... To cipher his widest reaches of understanding he has used characters of intensely local bearing. And the wider his understanding, the more intense have become his perceptions of the local."<sup>7</sup> Williams emphasized the importance of the eye and senses in experiencing the world of "things" around us, along with the connection of the artist to this material realm, as "It is in things that for the artist the power lies, not beyond them."<sup>8</sup> He reiterated Dewey's declaration that "The local is the universal," and proclaimed the artist's ability to bring this forward in his work. Sheeler developed the concept of the local in his own work, both through working practice and subject matter, by keenly observing the world around him.

Local and regional concerns gained heightened political and social significance during the 1930s, and entered into the contested debates about the formation of culture and its role in society. In response to the pressures of the Depression and sense of alienation from mass production and consumer culture, a growing desire to articulate a national culture rooted in the local developed among artists, who interpreted the presence of regional diversity as evidence of the nation's democratic character and an alternative to the pervasive homogeneity of mass media. Regionalist painters Thomas Hart Benton,

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<sup>7</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Charles Sheeler," in *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*, ed. by Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978), 142.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, "Charles Sheeler," 143.

Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry believed – like Sheeler – that art should be grounded in the experience of place, but were more interested in the role of myth and history in the construction of a collective identity. In this formulation, the artist both reflected and shaped the public's account of history and the shared beliefs of a community, making culture an active agent in identity formation. Wood's painting *Parson Weems' Fable* (1939, Fig. 34) presents a mythic tale of George Washington from American history, using strategies that call attention to how history is mediated by representation: as the figure of Parson Weems pulls back the curtain, we realize the constructed nature of the narrative being revealed. Wood replaced the head of the young George Washington with a portrayal of the mature president taken from the portraiture of Gilbert Stuart, a humorous commentary on the operations of the historical imagination and the role that images play within its development.

In contrast, Sheeler avoided the narratives of myth and history, focusing on the local as a function of the sensorial experience of a given place or objects. Williams and Sheeler both turned to the idea of the local as intimately connected to personal experience, developed through an individual's interaction with the surrounding environment. Williams declared that through his poetry, "I will express my emotions in the appearances: surfaces, sounds, smells, touch of the place in which I happen to be," manifesting the local through a connection to the senses.<sup>9</sup> He eschewed literary movements such as Symbolism and championed "no ideas but in things," believing that

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<sup>9</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Vortex* (1915) reprinted in Dijkstra, *Recognizable Image*, 42.



the real world of objects should be directly expressed through unornamented language in poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Sheeler likewise focused on the perception of the environment as a source of expression, generally becoming familiar with his subject matter through direct experience over a lengthy period of time before beginning work. He described that, beginning with the work *Upper Deck* (Fig. 35) in 1929, “it became my custom to build up gradually a mental image of the picture before the actual work of putting it down began.”<sup>11</sup> *Upper Deck* was the first painting in which Sheeler fully executed his characteristic style, a departure from the looser compositions and more painterly works he had completed earlier in his career, such as *Spring Interior* (Fig. 36). The painting resulted from his experience on the steamship the S.S. *Majestic* and he used a photograph taken onboard as the basis for the work, combining his direct contact with the subject with the visual information the photograph provided. Art historians have claimed that this work marked a shift toward using photographic sources in a way that did not alter them, which is a misleading notion in the discussion of his work.<sup>12</sup> He altered the photograph (Fig. 37) in a number of ways, removing the detailed rivets and seams covering many of the surfaces, things that are clearly visible in the photograph. This streamlining emphasizes the seamless and austerity of the solid shapes that dominate the composition, and eliminates the evidence of their assemblage and the human labor involved in constructing them.

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase appeared first in the poem “A Sort of Song” and is repeated again multiple times in *Paterson*.

<sup>11</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Norman Keyes claimed that with this work “for the first time he did nothing to disguise or alter his photographic source,” in *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs*, exh. cat. (A New York Graphic Society Book. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 39.

Another obvious difference between the painting and the photograph is the use of color. Sheeler used a limited palette in the painting, yet achieved a striking effect through the careful handling of bright white, lilac-tinged grays, and cream hues. The subtle modulations of tone create an alluring surface with an insistent smoothness, not allowing for a wide disparity of texture. The color scheme remains consistent across the entire surface of the canvas, as the sky matches the main hues of the ship's architecture, punctuated only by the two black forms of the funnel openings. The use of color signals a mediation between the artist's experience of the scene and his use of a photographic source: its complex oscillation between warmth in the beige hues and cool bleached white does not derive from the photograph, but the visual continuity in hues between the sky and machine forms recall the limited range of hue in a black and white photograph.

Sheeler also departed from the photograph noticeably in his representation of the clouds, replacing the wispy cirrus clouds with a more amorphous and blended combination of forms. The handling of organic forms presented difficulty in many of his other works and his representation of these passages generally involved a looser treatment in comparison to the detail of a photograph. Commentary on Sheeler's painting rarely notes the contrast between organic forms and the strict geometry of machines, even though it appears to be a continuing fascination for Sheeler throughout his work, including in scenes when he could have easily excluded organic material to allow for a more "photographic" result.

The willingness to read the painting as an unaltered version of the photograph indicates the ability of the artist to subvert expectations and the elusive nature of his images. The transformation from photograph into painting was a highly mediated process

with the specific qualities and processes of each medium an intrinsic challenge, yet Sheeler's handling could convince the viewer to overlook this by exploiting his or her acceptance of painting's ability to reproduce a photograph. Sheeler's paintings are often accepted as photographic, yet this identification is complicated upon closer examination, as will be discussed further in the chapter. The important point in the issue of experience here is that Sheeler did not take photographs then merely translate them into painted versions, but instead relied upon experience of the environment in conjunction with photographic models – which he appreciated for their usefulness in capturing “information” – in his process. Building an image in his mind before he began and using photography allowed him to compose an image in which every element fit together, in a structure more akin to a puzzle than to architectural construction. The forms of *Upper Deck* are fitted together in a tightly controlled balance, recalling the quality of either a woven tapestry or a finely tooled machine. Sheeler preferred not to underpaint and in *Upper Deck* the thinness of the paint application indicates that he did not rework areas significantly, thus requiring a deliberate plan and execution before beginning the work. According to his statements, Sheeler believed that the experience of the object in reality was key preparation for his method, having close contact in advance to create an almost architectural plan for the canvas.

The experience of the local consisted of more than momentary sensorial experience, such as that which characterized the working practices of American Impressionists of the previous decade. In 1939, Sheeler looked back to his training under William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts with a critical eye, arguing that the method of painting Chase instituted failed to achieve what he desired in

painting. The fleeting or temporary sensation lacked “a primary consideration of design, that would be outside of time, place or momentary conditions” that Sheeler most wanted, thus he stated his “interest in representing the casual appearances of nature ceased” shortly after he finished at the academy.<sup>13</sup> The quick working method that focused on “brilliance” and immediate impressions contrasted with the deliberate and carefully organized approach that Sheeler developed in creating his architectonic images. He likened his own process to the work of a craftsman as well as an architect, as “The way in which a building or a table is planned and put together is as interesting to me, and as applicable to my work, as the way in which a painting is realized. For I would arrive at the picture, which I hope ultimately to paint, through a conception of form architectural in its structure, whether flowers or buildings are the theme, set forth with the utmost clarity by means of craftsmanship so adequate as to be unobtrusive.”<sup>14</sup> To craft a structured image, Sheeler argued that it was necessary to combine the direct connection to the material world through the senses with previous experience, synthesizing the present with the past to create a more complex portrayal of the interaction with the external world. This interaction then extended to the viewer, as he explained that the picture allowed the artist to convey an image of nature that would invoke a mutual response from the viewer, resulting in a shared experience.<sup>15</sup> While this illustrates how Sheeler connected to a basic element of pragmatist philosophy, his version of experience did not go beyond the direct contact with forms to incorporate how this interaction is

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<sup>13</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 122.

<sup>15</sup> “A picture is a vehicle for conveying to the observer, the visual image evoked by nature within its creator, with the intent of an approximation of mutuality of response.” Charles Sheeler papers, AAA, 105.

intrinsically connected to the larger social environment in which the artist and viewer are situated.

Sheeler's description of his method fits closely with what Dewey argued was necessary in the creation of the aesthetic. For the artist, the interaction of individual with environment over a given period resulted in locating "Something seen which keeps recurring in one's memory, with insistence increasingly vivid, and with attributes added which had escaped observation on first acquaintance."<sup>16</sup> Sheeler continued, "In the course of time the accumulation takes on a personal identity and the picture attains a mental existence complete within the limits of one's potentiality."<sup>17</sup> The aesthetic develops through direct visual experience with the subject matter, gaining completeness through an interaction with the self, a notion that conforms to Dewey's philosophy of the experiencing subject, though again Sheeler narrowed his focus tightly on the individual instead of integrating this into a more communal model. Dewey claimed that "The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience," in particular in the creation of aesthetic objects.<sup>18</sup> Sheeler also expressed a Deweyan notion of the process of painting in creating a composite image: "This has to do with the mechanics of painting. Because of the length of time the eye of the artist is looking, while its recording is taking place, it is inevitable that it shall be seeing not one, but a succession of images, with the resulting evidence in the course of progression toward the completed work. This likewise has to do with esthetics."<sup>19</sup> While

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<sup>16</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 106.

<sup>18</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 74.

this description of the painting process seems oddly incongruous with the method Sheeler employed, using an almost architectural method of planning with predetermined forms, it closely mirrors the action of creation that Dewey communicated. In *Art as Experience* he narrated the encounter in the following passage:

As we manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear. The hand moves with etching needle or with brush. The eye attends and reports the consequence of what is done. Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative and not a matter of caprice nor yet of routine. In an emphatic artistic-esthetic experience, the relation is so close that it controls simultaneously both the doing and the perception.<sup>20</sup>

The doubling of the response to stimuli – touching and feeling, looking and seeing – suggests a process of experience that involves two dimensions, which for Dewey meant the immediate sensorial perception combined with the individual's past experience, their internalized knowledge of the world. Dewey's enthusiasm for this dynamic practice is linked to the belief that the viewer also perceives the work of art in an active way, connecting them through shared engagement – an element that Sheeler does not touch upon in his own writing on the matter.

For Dewey, the connection between the artist and the viewer through material forms acted against the process of reification, making the material world a space of active exchange shaped by the agency of individuals within their environment. It seems that Sheeler's painting could achieve this, which complicates the reading of his paintings as images that reinforce the process of reification by separating production and consumption. In *Interior* (Fig. 22), we can see how Sheeler depicted a space transformed by his perception of it, with strong shadows appearing as material as the table or the wall

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<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 51.

in the background. By converting the visual experience of light and dark into the same representational terms as physical objects in the scene, Sheeler draws attention to the act of viewing and how the self interacts with the environment. Strange alterations such as the irrationally shortened table leg and the confusion of spatial depth created by the column on the left make the viewer conscious of the artist's distortion, as he engaged with the scene but altered it in a dynamic process.

The capacity of painting to allow for an accumulation of experience marked, for Sheeler, a major distinction from the medium of photography. He referenced the difference between them in his discussion of portraiture by the old masters, and claimed he "had never seen in any painting the fleeting glimpses into a person's character that I have seen depicted in some photographs, nor have I seen in any photograph the full rounded summation of the character of an individual that a Rembrandt or Greco portrays."<sup>21</sup> This comparison of the respective possibilities of each medium points toward his appreciation of both, and reinforces the notion that through painting the artist infuses the image with a deeper understanding of the individual sitter, a summation accumulated over time. This summation in painting can be carried out only through an experience of sustained contact with the local, which for Sheeler could imply a human sitter or a scene of industrial architecture, achieved through long exposure to the subject.

By aligning the local so closely with the individual's experience, Sheeler and Williams both framed their work in a way that evaded the larger political implications within the meaning of the local. The scholar Bram Dijkstra criticized Williams on his stance toward the social and political situation in the 1930s, noting his conservative

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<sup>21</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 95.

predisposition regarding issues of politics and art. Dijkstra argued that for Williams, “As an intuitive expression of aesthetic and structural excellence, art was a record of the artist’s insight into realities which were beyond the realm of politics.”<sup>22</sup> The notion that the artist’s vision allowed him access to a special, rarified field beyond the machinations of the contemporary political situation relieved him from the possibility that the perceptions of the artist are formed by external conditions. In removing the artist from the political or social realities, this position obscures the importance of the linkage between art and politics.<sup>23</sup> This distancing is ironic for Williams, who identified sensorial “contact” with the world as the main goal of the artist, yet excluded from his conceptualization other types of contact in the environment as major factors in shaping the artist. By emphasizing the ability of the artist to access and express the “universal,” or a “truth” outside of socially constructed forms, Williams tried to remove the artist from the complications of modern social life and failed to critically examine the conditions of the artist’s production. His claim that the artist should focus intently on the material world surrounding him – only “things” – disregarded the need for historical consciousness in evaluating the forces shaping that surface reality. Dijkstra rightly criticized this move, explaining, “Ideological manipulation has structured our perceptions long before we come into any intellectual consciousness. Therefore any belief in the inherent purity of our visual perception itself is an ideologically determined delusion.”<sup>24</sup>

The same critique of “delusion” can be leveled at Sheeler, who often framed his images

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<sup>22</sup> Dijkstra, “Introduction,” in *Recognizable Image*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Though, at the same time, Williams may have been asserting the individualism of the artist and autonomy of art to wrest it from the logic of corporate capitalism. See John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Dijkstra, “Introduction,” 18.



in purely formal terms. He professed an apolitical position in his life and work, lacking any hint toward the left-wing leaning involvement that can be read in the paintings of fellow artists working within the Precisionist mode such as Louis Lozowick, and in choosing to do so ignored the power of external constructs in shaping individual perception.<sup>25</sup>

The ambivalence or disregard for social and economic critique in Sheeler's work marks a distinct contrast from the pragmatist ideals that Dewey professed. Dewey centered his idea of the aesthetic on the principle that the interaction between the individual and the environment or work of art was intrinsically connected to the society in which he lived. "The material of esthetic experience in being human—human in connection with the nature of which it is a part—is social," he wrote: "Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization."<sup>26</sup> For Dewey, the aesthetic was linked to historical consciousness and played an active role in shaping the development of a given society, a position that involved greater responsibility than Sheeler or Williams would likely affirm. Dewey argued that the context of culture was a realm that allowed for the productive discussion of morality and human interaction, and that the moral dimension of life was tied to art.<sup>27</sup> The aesthetic life was not only about creating appealing objects that reflected the artist's perception for others to experience – as Sheeler did with his paintings and objects of

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the leftist politics of other Precisionists, see Andrew Hemingway, *Mysticism of Money: Precisionist Painting and Machine Age America* (forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 339.

<sup>27</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 358.

industrial design – but about producing a more equal and balanced social structure in which a greater public could partake in a fuller experience of all elements of life.

In his focus on the individual, Sheeler accorded a special role in society for the artist, as one who could perceive reality more keenly and present truth to the viewer—a rather un-Deweyan notion. His formulation of the artist paralleled that of Williams, and in doing so he may be culpable in also eliding the political implications of the artist's work. Williams avoided assigning definite social responsibility to the artist, and instead evaded the political by claiming that the “true” artist had a prophetic role in society, whose insight could pierce into the essence of things. This turn to individualism placed importance in the artist's vision and ability to express freely, but in doing so, as discussed above, avoided the pertinent social issues and complications of the period. Identifying this strategy in Sheeler's work is a necessary starting point in untangling his evasions of the political framework in which he worked, and following this it is necessary to describe why this elision is especially troubling. Even though he depicted images of industry with at least a slight ambivalence toward the increasing mechanization of modern life, the works that he created could easily serve to justify and reify the forces of capitalist production when employed by those with a vested interest to do so.

The focus on individual experience is revealed in Sheeler's work not only through the repetition of subjects with which the artist had close contact, but also through other images that indicate the position of the individual. The enigmatic painting *The Artist Looks at Nature* (1943, Fig. 21) can be read in terms of Sheeler's portrayal of the artist as individual, separate from the world around him, isolated in both physical and mental realms. Poised in the lower right corner of the painting, the figure of the artist sits at an

easel drawing an interior scene, not the absurd landscape before him. The figure is based on a photograph Sheeler created in 1931 or 1932, *Self-Portrait at Easel* (Fig. 38) depicting the artist working at an easel in a studio setting. The photographic self-portrait presents Sheeler at work on *Interior with Stove* (1932, Fig. 39), a conté crayon drawing that was based on a photograph he created in 1917 while at Doylestown (Fig. 40). Karen Lucic claimed that the painting is “a work that dramatically sums up Sheeler’s reflections on art-making in the machine age,” picturing the complexities of Sheeler’s work as an artist and ultimately communicating “a painful but profoundly human sense of isolation.”<sup>28</sup>

This reading of the individual, however, is complicated by the utterly strange quality of the painting and the potential humorousness of the figure’s departure from his ostensible subject matter referenced in the title. The use of spatial disjunction and assimilation of such various visual sources as the Boulder Dam – linked to the high walls in the landscape – and the barns of rural Pennsylvania – echoed in the forms in the distant left background of the scene – confuse our attempts to read the image as a straightforward representation of an isolated artist. The title of the work is clearly ironic, as it claims the artist “looks” at nature yet the viewer sees that he depicts a scene from a separate place and time, and the illogical humor in the work could constitute a form of critique. The painting illustrates Sheeler working in the mode of “magic realism,” using imagination and realism to create a scene with ambiguous meaning and confound the viewer’s attempts towards interpretation. The ability to read the image as both a reaffirmation of the isolated individualism of the artist and as an ironic subversion of this

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<sup>28</sup> Lucic, *Doylestown*, 98; and Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, 137.

notion indicates the unresolved tension present in his work. The limited extent of his commentary on theory or philosophy undergirding his practice contributes to a fluidity of meaning in his paintings, therefore leaving us uncertain as to whether *The Artist Looks at Nature* can be critiqued as an interpretation of the individual completely autonomous from others and his environment (the opposite of pragmatist ideas), or understood as ironic commentary on the role of the artist. The work hinges on ambiguity and the confusing combination of portrait and landscape, the artist in nature and the artist in his studio, and fantasy and realism. It bears strong similarity to other works of magic realism created during the period, such as O. Louis Guglielmi's 1942 work *The River* (Fig. 41), in its depiction of an unsettling space and its evasion of an intelligible meaning. *The River* is peopled by multiple figures, in contrast to Sheeler's work, yet it transmits the same sense of vacancy and psychological isolation. To further complicate the reading of these images, painted during World War II, the avoidance of fixed meaning and the turn to personal imagery and individual autonomy can also be connected to an anxiety about the power of images to shape collective experience as demonstrated by fascist regimes. Ambiguity could have distinct political implications, but it seems unlikely that this was Sheeler's primary concern given his general disregard for political issues.

### ***Illogical Images of the "Everyday"***

The ambiguity of Sheeler's work continually resists a definitive interpretation and contributes to the difficulty in analyzing his relationship to the local, and to modern life and industrialized production. The complexity of his practice stems from his choice of subject matter and willingness to engage diverse projects, in addition to the perplexing

nature of his images in their representational strategies. His images are riddled with disjunctions, confusions of space and form, and illogicalities that often go unnoticed. In this section, I will examine these underlying disruptions and analyze how they concern Sheeler's relationship with the material world and the complicated nature of the process of viewing. We can go beyond the notion of formalistic play in examining the strangeness of these works, questioning how the instability of vision links to larger social issues. Even if Sheeler himself often did not substantiate a critical role towards experience and the surrounding world, in his images we can discern the contingency of vision at work and the need for a more engaged kind of looking than is regularly granted to them.

In *Americana*, Sheeler represented a domestic scene of the living room within his home in South Salem, New York. He had moved to the residence approximately 40 miles from New York City in 1926, bringing with him the Shaker furniture and objects of American craft that he had been collecting since the mid-1910s. He placed these in his home with a keen eye for compositional arrangements, and photographs of the living room (Figs. 30 and 42) taken from varying angles give us an idea of how the space was organized. The photographs also prompt us to recognize the distortions in form and perspective that create an illogical sense of space in the painting, as we can compare the profile view of the table in one photograph (Fig. 42) to the aerial perspective of the same piece of furniture in *Americana*. The table stretches across almost the entire canvas, leaning away from the viewer at a forty-five degree angle. The extreme tilt of the table pushes its surface toward the viewer, flattening space and hovering like a slightly distorted rectangle on the two-dimensional plane. The position of the viewer looking at

the table would be so elevated as to be nearly impossible in Sheeler's low-ceilinged room, and the indeterminate location of the viewer's position adds a sense of discomfort to the eerily vacant scene. Although it first appears to be an inviting, welcoming setting which offers an escape from the harsh realities of modern urban life, its emptiness and distortions of space create a scene that is strange and unreal.

The feeling of discomfort unfolds as you continue to view the work, growing increasingly aware of the sensation of looking down and the vertiginous quality this evokes. The tilted ground plane and table account for four-fifths of the entire composition, with the edge between the floor and the wall marking off the top fifth of the canvas. The top edge of the canvas meets the edge of a window ledge, cutting the window out of the scene and in effect sealing off the room from the outside world as a claustrophobic space. The wall is depicted perpendicular to the viewer's line of sight, almost as if appearing on the same plane as the table and floor—thus forcing together two conflicting systems of perspective. The semi-circular form of the tilt-top table is presented as if positioned directly in front of a standing viewer, again in contrast to what we could expect from a logical use of perspective in the scene. Other objects contribute to the disjunction of elements seen from impossible angles: the rug on the lower right area of the canvas does not show realistic recession, but is composed of strips of color gradually shortened toward the top. If isolated from the larger scene, it appears as a purely patterned trapezoid. The other rugs in the frame similarly read as flat patterned shapes, increasing the two-dimensionality of the image. All the elements seem to fit together on the surface of the canvas much like the shapes in a geometrically patterned rug join together, but using this strategy for the creation of a three-dimensional space

complicates this process. *Americana* differs from the language of Cubism in the seamlessness of its elements joining together, not breaking into fragmented or separated parts, but instead initially convincing the viewer of its illusion. Like other works by the artist, the canvas has a sense of photographic clarity – especially when viewed from a distance – that becomes convoluted upon closer attention to its illogical elements.

The detail of the folded paper resting on the edge of the table references the tradition of illusionism in the *trompe l'oeil* works of earlier American artists such as William Harnett or John F. Peto. In these paintings, folded papers, envelopes with raised corners, torn newspapers and other objects are rendered with such verisimilitude that they appear physically present, almost lifting off the surface of the canvas, ostensibly fooling the viewer in a manner befitting of the ancient Parrhasius. In *The Artist's Letter Rack* (1879, Fig. 43), Harnett employed the conceit of flat wooden boards with letters and other paper materials pinned or pasted to its surface to create a convincing scene. The reading of the painting hinges on a complex play between surface and depth: the generally two-dimensional subject matter becomes even flatter when rendered in oil paint applied meticulously to the surface of the canvas, without perceptible build up of the medium; conversely, the image reads as more three-dimensional through the use of shadow and foreshortening, creating the sense of animated objects with a tactile appeal.

The paper in *Americana* recalls this dynamic, yet Sheeler subverts the notion of *trompe l'oeil* by not using vivid illusionism to make the viewer question whether the piece of paper is real or painted. The paper itself does not have a sense of texture and is not rendered in a particularly detailed style, and indeed none of the individual elements of the painting appear convincingly “real” when focused on in isolation. Instead Sheeler

employs a photographic quality that convinces the viewer of the plausibility of the scene when viewed as a whole, which unravels upon close examination of the parts as one picks apart the illogical nature of the representation. This process highlights the instability of vision and how the viewer's inclination to accept the image as a literal representation of space can override the reading of detail. Though Sheeler may not have critically examined the implications of the process of viewing, the images themselves point toward the degree to which vision can be conditioned and not trusted as an objective tool with which we experience the world. Social, political, and cultural values could factor into the way that we consume images: in *Americana*, the idea that photographic qualities lead to a truer representation of the scene is premised on the view that photographs are unmediated sources of visual information, a construction worthy of interrogation. Additionally, notions about the meaning of handcraft from the American past can elicit in the viewer a sentimental response, even though the scene is vertiginous, disorienting and claustrophobic.

The ability of the painter to create these distortions and convey a distinct visual experience to the viewer reasserts the autonomy of the artist. In divorcing himself from a direct representation of nature, as the figure in *The Artist Looks at Nature* pictures literally, Sheeler suggested the independence of the artist, whose work was not determined by natural or external conditions. By presenting his experience of the outside world in a way that both relates to the everyday and introduces elements of the unreal, Sheeler refused the notion that painting should replicate observed reality. Through this subversion, Sheeler's painting takes on a personal quality, but not following the idea of nature seen through personality or temperament. Instead, his alterations link to what



Dewey considered necessary for the aesthetic object to fully express the artist's engagement with the subject: artistic expression "is the extraction of what the subject matter has to say in particular to the painter in his integrated experience," which includes both the relation to the immediate environment and the accumulation of his interactions with the world, integrated into the self.<sup>29</sup> The manner in which the self is developed is interdependent, reacting to others, thus the expression is connected to a larger community even while allowing for the artist's individual autonomy in constructing the image. In Sheeler's work the interaction with others is mediated through the objects that he depicts, though his incorporation of these seems to relate more to aesthetic form in itself than to a kind of communal interdependence.

Thus far, the reading of *Americana* offered is that it takes the everyday and makes it into something strange, something that causes the viewer to question the process of viewing and experience. Yet, we should ask, whose "everyday" is this? We too easily take for granted that it depicts a domestic setting and normalize it as an image of quotidian subject matter, which is certainly far from reality. The living room here is a refined space, characterized by Sheeler's taste for works of American craft and Shaker furniture that were not inexpensive during the time. Despite their humble origins, objects such as these were increasingly valued goods in the twentieth century, and while not as elite as colonial furniture, for example, they were firmly situated within the realm of consumption of those more affluent.<sup>30</sup> Sheeler was well aware of the considerable price

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<sup>29</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> For example, in the 1937 sale of the Shaker collection of Juliana Force – "one of the first important recorded sales relating to Shaker furniture" – Abby Aldrich Rockefeller purchased many of the finest pieces. Stephen Bove and Peter Richmond, *Selling Shaker: The Commodification of Shaker Design in the Twentieth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 33.

of these goods, and when he reached a point of financial hardship at one point considered selling his Shaker table – and his Constantin Brancusi sculpture – for needed funds.<sup>31</sup> He did not want to part with either object, but the fact that he turned to these as potential sources of income indicates that he recognized the market for the Shaker table was just as viable as that of the Brancusi. The American vernacular of the past had found appreciation from many individuals within the elite circle of the gallery crowd, which we should also consider when analyzing Sheeler's paintings of domestic scenes. The image of *Americana* would have connected more directly with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who had developed an avid taste for American craft through Halpert's nurturing via the American Folk Art Gallery, in both its subject matter and exhibition setting, than with any collectivized public during the period. This distinction indicates again Sheeler's relative lack of concern with seriously pursuing democratic or socially motivated aims in his practice.

The strangeness of subject matter and the tension in “everyday” objects can be detected in Sheeler's images of industry as well. Though he claimed that “our factories are our substitute for religious expression,” in the same way that Chartres Cathedral connected to the “mass consciousness” of its time, his depictions of industry did not draw upon material that would have been previously familiar to the public or part of their lived experience.<sup>32</sup> If Sheeler had wanted to locate an imagery that was more democratic, connected to what he envisioned as mass consciousness, he might have turned toward the goods that people actually used, depicting the Ford vehicle instead of the Ford plant in his paintings. He photographed both as part of his commercial or commissioned work, but

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<sup>31</sup> Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery*, 186.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 130.

selected the images of factory scenes instead of the manufactured product as material for his subsequent reworking in paintings and drawings. He may have wanted to avoid the overtly commercial element of depicting consumer goods, and in his focus on the plant he attempted to reveal the processes behind the creation of goods in the consumer economy. He neglected, however, the real conflict in industry and the dangers of capitalist structures in removing the machine and product from human agency, because he erased the labor of the worker as a driving force in the manufacturing process.

In his body of work as a whole, there is a persistent disjunction between process and product. The paintings and photographs of River Rouge present an image of industry with no product, and the images of handcraft goods present objects with no reference to the process of their creation. In *Classic Landscape*, Sheeler adopted an unconventional approach to machine age imagery, and depicted the Rouge as a landscape, filled with the raw natural materials needed to create the automobiles on the assembly line. Henry Ford controlled every element in the manufacturing process, beginning with the access to materials such as coke and iron ore used in the making of iron, which could then be used to manufacture steel. By beginning with raw elements as part of the production, Sheeler created a narrative of industry that matched the scope of Ford's program, drawing the viewer's attention to one of the realities of industrial organization. Despite this, the images of industrial landscapes and machine forms mask the larger reality by naturalizing the setting and erasing the human agency involved in their establishment. Although the agency of the artist is at work in creating a narrative of machine production, it is unclear whether the image communicates the constructedness of its own narrative – as Wood's *Parson Weems' Fable* signals us to the construction of myth – in a critical manner.

### ***What is Wrong with this Picture?***

In 1941, Sheeler's dealer Edith Halpert organized the exhibition *What is Wrong with this Picture?* at her Downtown Gallery. The deliberately provocative title posed its question to the seven paintings on display, each of which had been painted between 1931 and 1936, exhibited and reproduced in catalogues or magazines on numerous occasions, yet remained unsold.<sup>33</sup> Halpert seemed to interrogate the gallery-going audience, asking why no one wanted to purchase the works, and even went so far as to hand out "questionnaires to gallery visitors, soliciting their critiques and [subsequently] offering responses, many of them negative, to the local art press."<sup>34</sup> One newspaper commented: "Until May 30, visitors to the gallery are invited to turn critics and on blanks provided help explain why the oils are black sheep."<sup>35</sup> Halpert's tactics to generate interest and discussion surrounding the works reflected her own brazenness as a promoter, as well as the desire to continually stimulate the market for the American artists she represented. Included among the seven works exhibited, *Americana* had a lengthy history: since Sheeler had finished the painting in 1931, it had been exhibited twenty-five times, including in *Practical Manifestations*, and reproduced in sources including magazines and exhibition catalogues at least ten times. In response to the questionnaire proffered

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<sup>33</sup> *What is Wrong with this Picture?* exhibition text. Downtown Gallery records, AAA (reel 5598, frame 808). In addition to *Americana*, the paintings included were *South of Scranton* (1931) by Peter Blume, *The Pony Cart* (1936) by Bernard Karfiol, *Girl Thinking* (1935) by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *The Chef* (1934) by Julian Levi, *Tiger, Tiger* (1933) by Katherine Schmidt, and *Across the Tracks* (1934) by Niles Spencer.

<sup>34</sup> Pollock, *Girl with the Gallery*, 230.

<sup>35</sup> "Show of Seven Worst Sellers Invites Criticism by Public," *Dayton, Ohio News Week*, May 26, 1941. Downtown Gallery records, AAA (reel 5598, frame 822).

during *What is Wrong with this Picture?*, visitors responded that the work was “too abstract” and “too photographic.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite the critical commentary offered from the public, the press surrounding the exhibition generally praised the paintings as examples of the artists’ finest work, likely fulfilling Halpert’s hopes for publicity. Underlying the exhibition and the accompanying commentary, however, lingers a strange tone of anxiety about usefulness and employment. By May of 1941 the nation was slowly recovering from the effects of the Depression, but its presence in the mindset of American citizens remained in full effect. The rhetoric surrounding the sale of the paintings, which Peyton Boswell described as “seven homeless canvases” in *Art Digest*, suggested latent fears about the loss of work and financial devastation endured by the public in the previous decade. A writer for the *New York World Telegram* declared that in his depiction of “the familiar arrangement of table and hooked rugs shown on occasion in some of our best museums” in *Americana*, Sheeler “really did a job.”<sup>37</sup> The praise for Sheeler’s efforts may be a colloquial turn of phrase, but choosing to portray the painting in terms of a “job” carried deeper resonance immediately following a period in which a quarter of Americans were without jobs. This statement hints at the conflicting reality of the everyday that both connected the painter’s efforts to the lives of his fellow citizens, asserting the place of culture in society, and separated him from those around him through the elevated nature of his consumption and production.

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<sup>36</sup> “Show of Seven Worst Sellers Invites Criticism by Public,” *Dayton, Ohio News Week*, May 26, 1941. Downtown Gallery records, AAA (reel 5598, frame 822).

<sup>37</sup> “Guessing at the Downtown,” *New York World Telegram*, Saturday, May 10, 1941. Downtown Gallery records, AAA (reel 5598, frame 821).

In some respects, Sheeler as a painter was like other American laborers in taking various jobs. In 1935, Halpert goaded him to accept and appreciate the commission from Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to make images at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, which apparently did not generate great enthusiasm on his part. “After being so depressed for financial reasons and being on the verge of taking any old job,” she recounted in a letter, “this very interesting (at least I think so) commission was offered to you by a person whom you admire and in whose collection you like to be represented.”<sup>38</sup> The underlying financial pressure to make money and to gratify a patron of his work acted as motivators, and he set to work at Williamsburg creating a large series of photographs and the painting *Kitchen, Williamsburg, 1937* (Fig. 44). A profile of Sheeler in *Life* magazine in 1938 affirmed that the painter “works all day every day,” and, in his own words, was simply “like any day laborer.”<sup>39</sup> While Sheeler did complete an impressive amount of work and at times experienced financial difficulty, this characterization masks the real nature of day labor during the 1930s and the turbulent conflicts between labor and management, such as violence at the Rouge against unemployed workers during the Ford Hunger March of 1932, and against union organizers in 1937.

Sheeler’s work was also separated from the realities of industrial labor because he created objects of fine art beyond the financial reach of most Americans. A *New York World Telegram* review of *What is Wrong with this Picture?* hinted at the issues of economics at the end of the column, asking: “Is price, perhaps, a factor in their inability to find purchasers? Could be. After all, Blume’s good, but \$4500 is an awful lot of

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Halpert to Sheeler, Downtown Gallery records, AAA November 13, 1935 (reel 5493, frame 560).

<sup>39</sup> “Sheeler Finds Beauty in the Commonplace: Classic Form and Function Interest This Artist Most,” *Life*, August 8, 1938, 42.

money for a picture by a living, producing young American. Nor is the \$1800 asked for Kuniyoshi or Karfiol small change.”<sup>40</sup> *Americana* fell in between the range mentioned, offered for a respectable \$2500.<sup>41</sup> This price was not exorbitant and was much less than paintings by European old masters, but as the review noted, it was not “small change” and would have been affordable only to those of considerable means.

Dewey’s formulation of the aesthetic advocated a move toward a more democratic form of culture, one that could reach the public and play a vital role in shaping social interaction. For Sheeler, the artist worked within society but did not exhibit a high degree of agency in changing the situation of his present age. Even in one of the moments when Sheeler recognized the larger social web of relationships, he strangely converted the dynamic into technological terms. “No one can hope to achieve a detached identity,” he recognized, yet followed this by saying, “We are as the parts of electrical equipment designed to carry the current on.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast to Dewey’s organic notion of culture, Sheeler envisioned a mechanically deterministic model, with predetermined structures in which we all exist but cannot necessarily transform.

This seems in turn to contradict the ability of the artist to willfully transform the world, as he did in paintings including *Americana*. Sheeler broke away from any framework of visual representation that insisted on seeing the world logically, and substituted for it an image that challenges the viewer and subverts any expectations of realism. This reasserts the autonomy of the artist as well as unsettles the idea that painting

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<sup>40</sup> “Guessing at the Downtown,” *New York World Telegram*, Saturday, May 10, 1941. Downtown Gallery records, AAA (reel 5598, frame 821).

<sup>41</sup> It would eventually be sold to Edith Lowenthal and her husband, Milton, in 1946 for \$1800. Pollock *Girl with the Gallery*, 417.

<sup>42</sup> Sheeler, autobiographical notes, Charles Sheeler Papers, AAA, 109.

should depict the everyday in a transparent manner, instead drawing the viewer into a complex play between recognizing objects of the real world and realizing the artifice of the painted surface. By subtly diverging from the forms and perspective of ordinary experience, Sheeler's image draws attention to the agency of the painter and the painting itself as the central point of aesthetic experience, connecting artist and viewer. This aligns with Dewey's idea of a triadic relationship in art: "There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to. The external object, the product of art, is the connecting link between artist and audience."<sup>43</sup> This relationship is complicated, ultimately, as it is organically connected to the larger community, set within a social framework in which the artist and viewer both take part.

As a final note, although Dewey's pragmatist philosophy advocated a society more deeply connected through experience and an expressive life through culture, many critical interpretations of his work argued that his ideas relied too heavily on romantic notions of how social change could be established. He resisted Marxist notions of change through class struggle and proletarian revolution, retaining an optimistic belief about the potentials of democratic reform without addressing exactly how it would challenge the entrenched political and economic forces dividing society. Despite this, the comparison with Sheeler is valuable because of it reveals the problematic issues in Sheeler's work, especially at the points in which their terms overlap and vary. The ideas of experience, the everyday, and the relationship between the artist and his culture were highly contested issues, to which Sheeler's ambiguous images respond – without offering any sense of resolution.

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<sup>43</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 111.



## CONCLUSION

The quotation of Sheeler in *Life* magazine – “he works all day every day—‘like any day laborer,’ he says,” might be a slight remark, included in the article to humanize the artist for the reading audience, but I argue it calls attention to the divide between Sheeler and the realities of others’ experience in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

The quip about his feigned association with the laboring class rings hollow when we consider the realities of Sheeler’s position and work. The activity of painting may have been strenuous – especially in the exacting and demanding manner in which Sheeler worked – but it hardly qualified him to lay claim to a kinship with day laborers. In the issue of *Life* magazine just a few pages before the profile on the artist, an article reporting a workers’ strike presents a jarring contrast to the painter’s self-identification. “TROOPS CLOSE IOWA’S MAYTAG PLANT” the headline reports, “BITTER WAGE DISPUTE TURNS A TRANQUIL IOWA TOWN INTO A MILITARY ENCAMPMENT.”<sup>2</sup> The story recounts the 1938 strike at the Maytag Company plant in Newton, Iowa, in which union workers went on strike after Maytag proposed a 10% wage cut, even after a year of considerable profit for the company. The dispute between the laborers, who argued on the basis of human rights to maintain a fair salary, and the corporate power of Maytag, which had tried to establish a sort of “benevolent autocracy” in the industrialized town it created, is only one example of the tumultuous history of labor during the period. The image of a National Guardsman bearing a bayonet-fitted rifle reveals the implicit potential for violence and with it the life or death stakes of the tense conflict (Fig. 45).

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<sup>1</sup> “Sheeler Finds Beauty in the Commonplace,” *Life*, 42.

<sup>2</sup> “TROOPS CLOSE IOWA’S MAYTAG PLANT” *Life*, August 8, 1938, 11, 14.

The proximity of this account to the profile of Sheeler in the popular magazine may be incidental, but the contrast between them emphasizes the issues that he excluded from his work. He did not live a life of wealth or extravagance, but in comparison to many Americans he enjoyed a rather comfortable existence, distanced from the anxiety of union strikes or dangerous, monotonous labor. He lived in a home filled with exhibition-quality furniture, including highly collectible Shaker pieces and fashionable contemporary European designs. He had his choice of commissions and enjoyed a level of comfort and security that average laborers surely did not.

During the period, many artists engaged in the issues of labor and politics at an unprecedented level, seeking an actual unity with other workers, but Sheeler refrained from such engagement and worked in a realm defined by the wealthy patrons he attracted and the industrial capitalists who offered him commissions.<sup>3</sup> His position is notable in particular because the means for a greater association with the working class were readily available during the decade, whether through participation in organizations or publications, and the active involvement of other artists in these outlets accentuates Sheeler's withdrawal.

His work was not hermetic, as he was interested in a social dimension of art in exploring modern subjects, but he framed these subjects within terms that allowed him to be selective about his interaction with the troublesome issues of present. His selective framing is most evident in the striking images that depict the spaces of industrial labor in the 1930s while excluding any discernable political or social comment. Perhaps the

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<sup>3</sup> The growth and evolution of the Artists' Union – which at times participated in sit-down strikes – is a vivid example of the greater identification of the artist with the worker. See O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*, 28.

enduring appeal of his paintings results from this intentional elision. They allow us to read our own feelings and beliefs into the works: we can interpret his images of alienated industrial landscapes as metaphors for the perceived loss of human significance as suggested by Karen Lucic, thus signaling Sheeler's insight into the losses incurred in industrialization, or we can read them as the art historian Sharon Corwin proposed, as images that perform the active reading-out of human labor that industrial capitalists desired, undercutting the place of the worker in the visual discourse at the time.<sup>4</sup>

While Sheeler's images make it nearly impossible to pin down his relationship to industry, as they inherently resist interpretation, his work in design offers a revealing avenue into his practice. In the character and execution of the project itself, we can determine Sheeler's disregard for the problems posed by machine production and his acceptance of the available means to create goods for a high-end market. Whether we view this as an indictment of Sheeler depends on our own perspective on the social or critical function of art. If we do not require a critical response to the problems and challenges of contemporary life from the artist, it would be inappropriate to judge Sheeler harshly for the way he formulated his artistic practice. We can, however, keep in mind the diverse range of experiences present in the 1930s and Sheeler's position as an agent within his larger social context, figuring his mediation into our study of the artist. The visual seduction of his images, such as those in the *Power* series, veils the disruptive, gritty and contested nature of the interactions between individuals and their environment, and recognizing this dynamic can lead to more complex and textured accounts of his work. In separating production and consumption, home and industry, he obscured the

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<sup>4</sup> Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, 114; Corwin, *Selling "America,"* 24.

relationships that shaped that modern life and instead concentrated on aesthetic form. His images do perform a compartmentalization of modern life, one that contrasts with Dewey's hope for a more integrated and fulfilling social environment.

The reading of Sheeler's work I offer does not merely restate the claim that Sheeler was "the true artist of corporate capitalism" because he invented an iconography suitable for the needs of industrialists such as Ford.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Sheeler presents a challenge to us in thinking about how art is integrated into life, and about the complexities of how the artist responded or did not respond to the social, cultural, and economic complications in the world surrounding him.

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<sup>5</sup> Baigell, "American Art and National Identity," 51.

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## IMAGES



Figure 1. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Textile Sample*, c. 1933-36, knitted wool.



Figure 2. Charles Sheeler, *Untitled* (Silver teaspoon, silver salt and pepper shakers designed by Charles Sheeler, 1934-36), ca. 1939, gelatin silver print.



Figure 3. Charles Sheeler, *Americana*, 1931, oil on canvas.



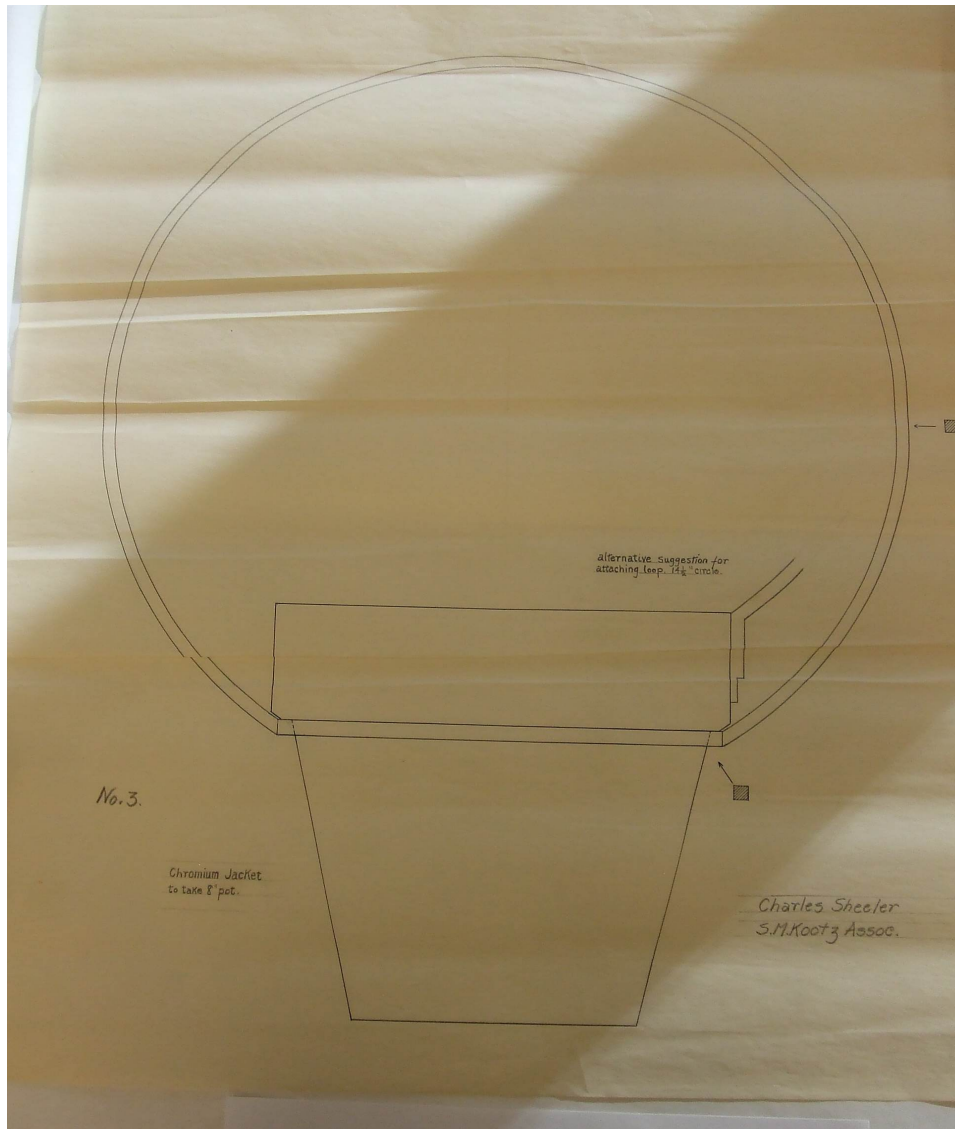


Figure 4. Charles Sheeler, *Design for Plant Pot*, c. 1933-36.

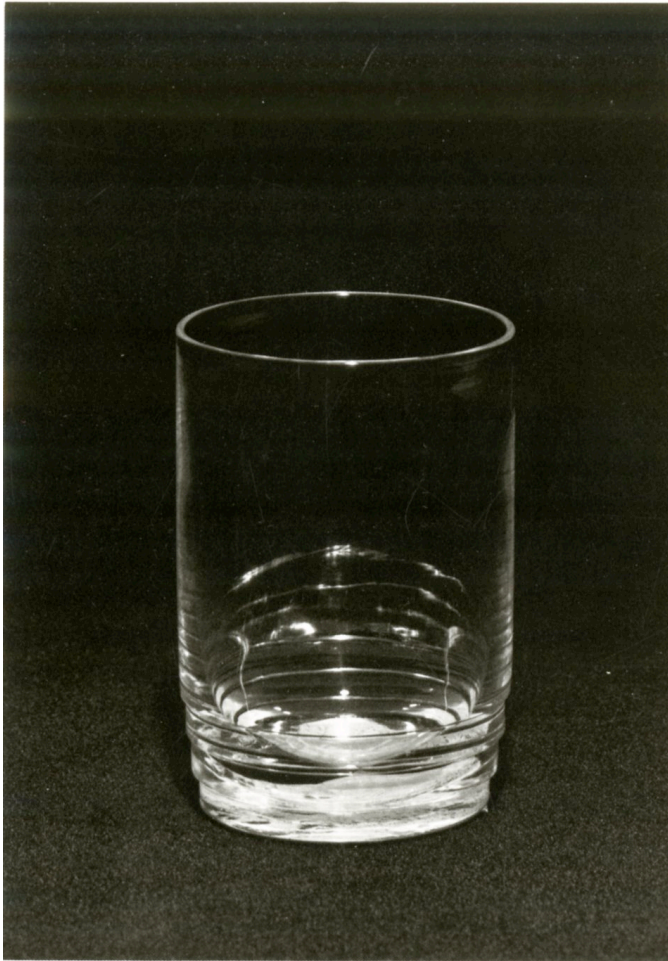


Figure 5. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Tumbler*, manufactured by Steuben Company, c. 1933, colorless glass.



Figure 6. Charles Sheeler, *Conversation – Sky and Earth*, 1940, oil on canvas.



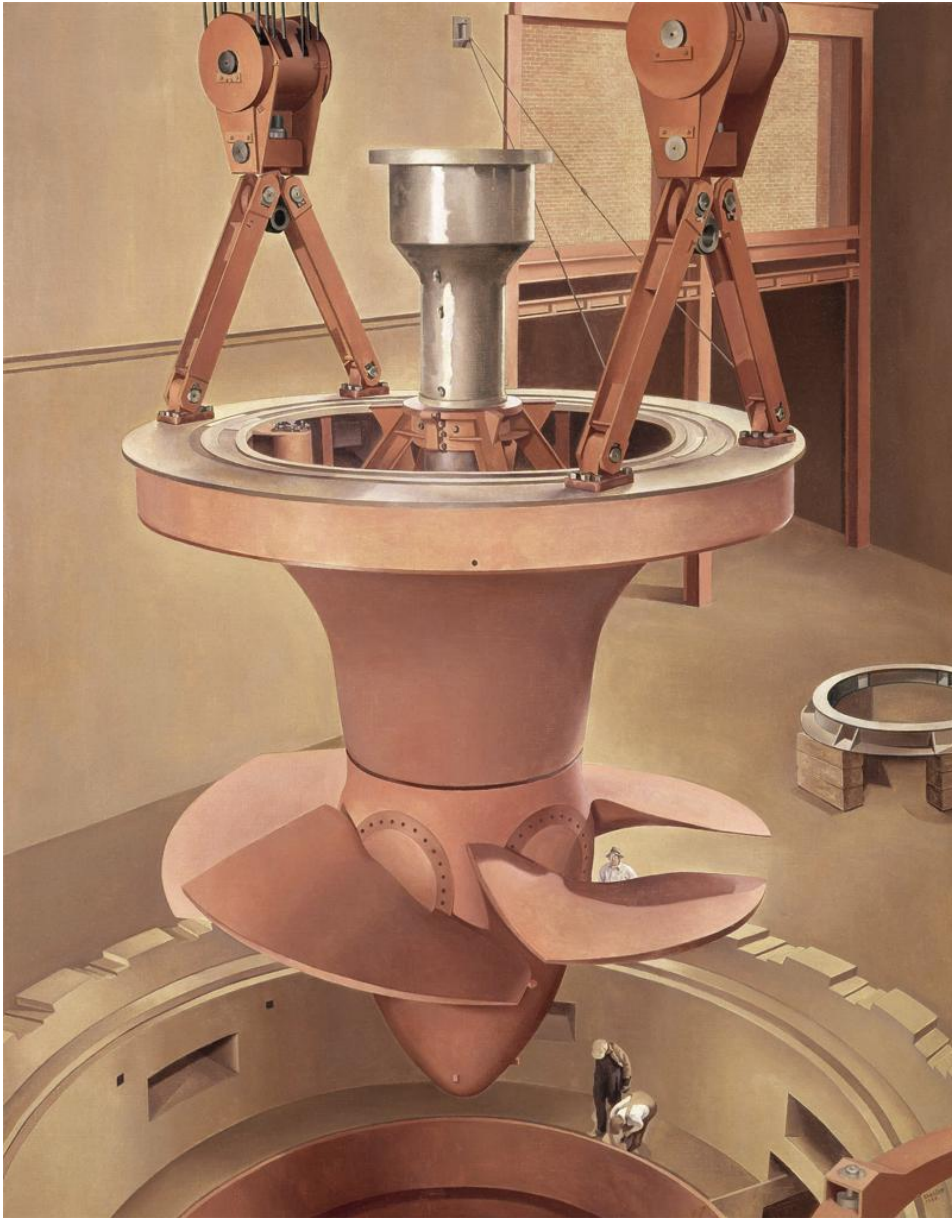


Figure 7. Charles Sheeler, *Suspended Power*, 1939, oil on canvas.

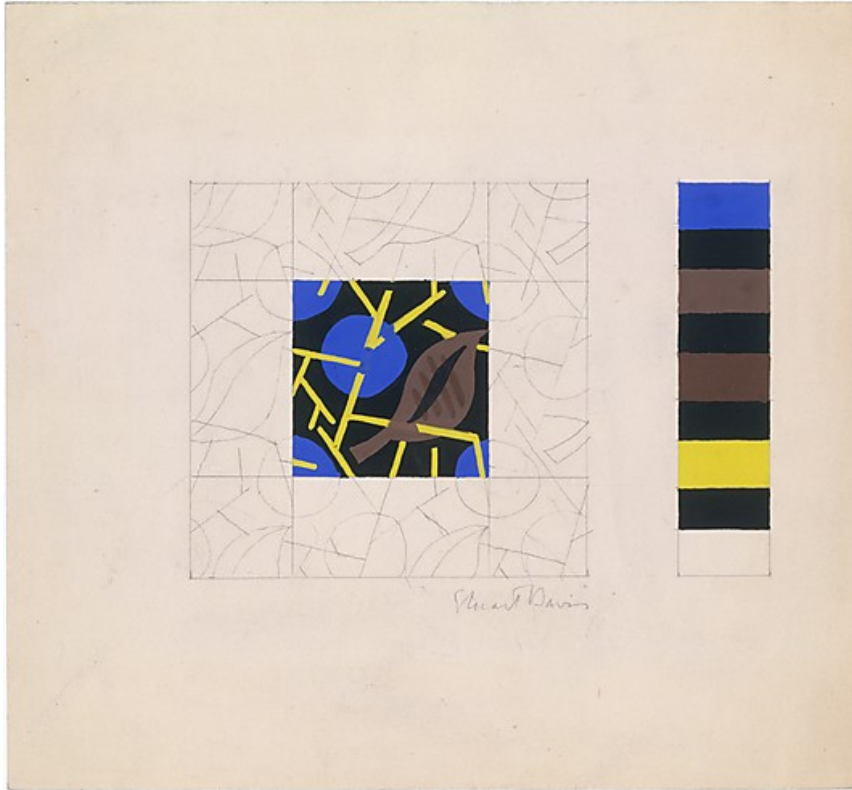


Figure 8. Stuart Davis, *Fabric Design, leaf, branch, and circle motif*, ca. 1934, gouache over graphite.



Figure 9. Stuart Davis, *Fabric Design, nautical motif with compass, anchor, seagull, and helm*, ca. 1934, gouache over graphite.



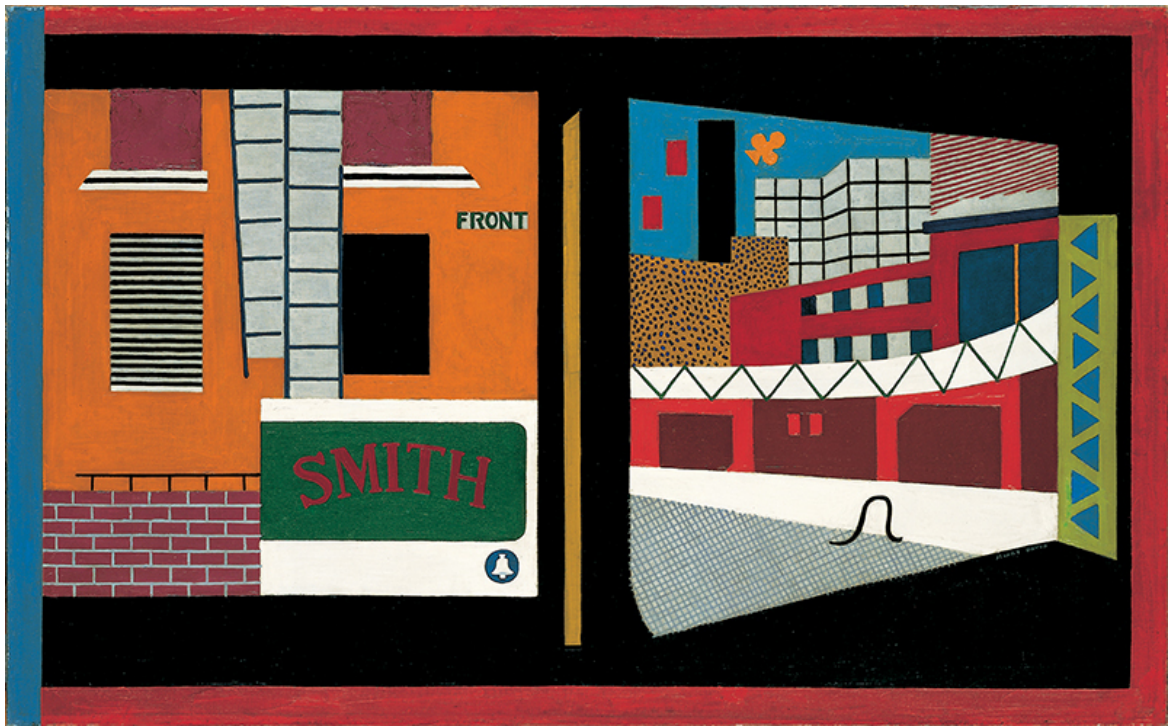


Figure 10. Stuart Davis, *House and Street*, 1931, oil on canvas.



Figure 11. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Textile Sample*, c. 1933-36, knitted wool.



Figure 12. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Textile Sample*, c. 1933-36, printed linen.



Figure 13. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Textile Sample*, c. 1933-36, knitted wool.



Figure 14. William Zorach, Spirit of the Dance, 1932, bronze.





Figure 15. Charles Sheeler, *Home, Sweet Home*, 1931, oil on canvas.



Figure 16. Charles Sheeler, *American Interior*, 1934, oil on canvas.





Figure 17. Charles Sheeler, *Bucks County Barn*, 1940, oil on canvas.



Figure 18. Charles Sheeler, *Staircase, Doylestown*, 1925, oil on canvas.

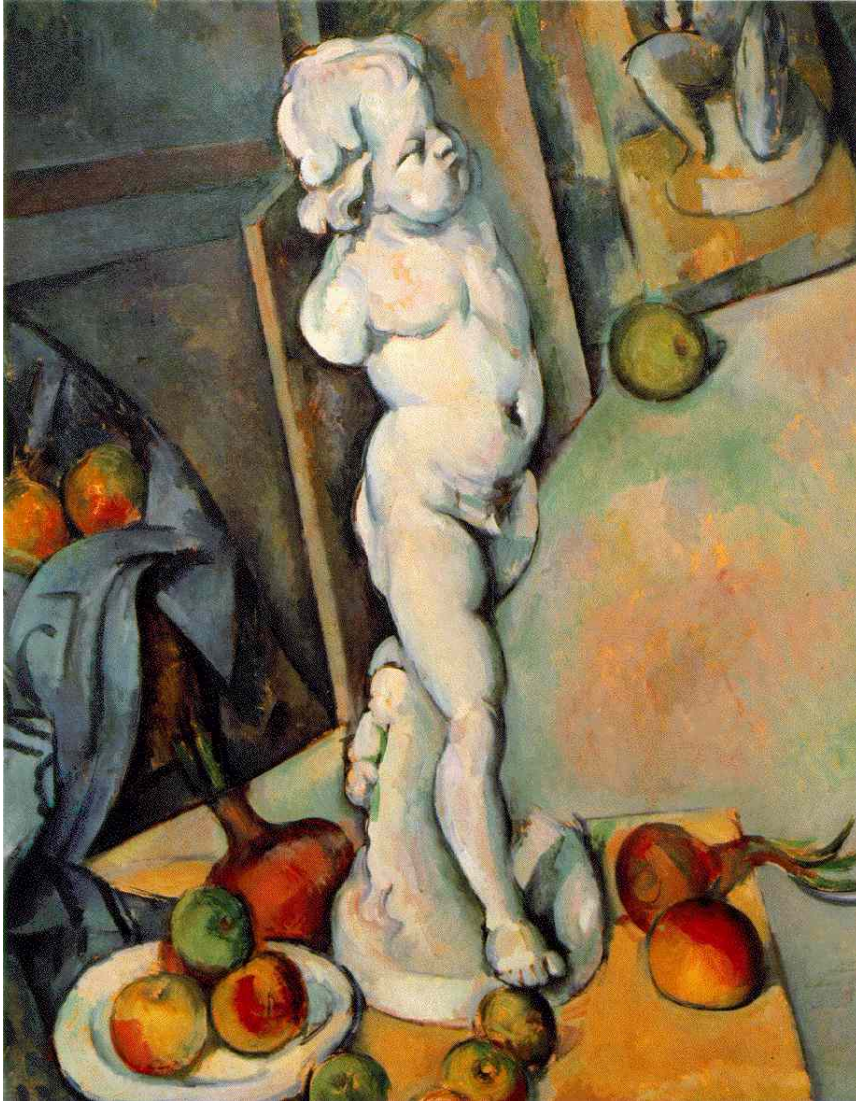


Figure 19. Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Plaster Cast*, 1894, oil on canvas.



Figure 20. Charles Sheeler, *Self-Portrait*, 1923, conté crayon, gouache, and pencil on paper.





Figure 21. Charles Sheeler, *The Artist Looks at Nature*, 1943, oil on canvas.



Figure 22. Charles Sheeler, *Interior*, 1940, tempera over graphite on gessoed composition board.





Figure 23. Charles Sheeler, *Portrait (Katharine)*, 1932, conté crayon.





Figure 24. Charles Sheeler, *View of New York*, 1931, oil on canvas.



Figure 25. Charles Sheeler, *Cactus*, 1931, oil on canvas.

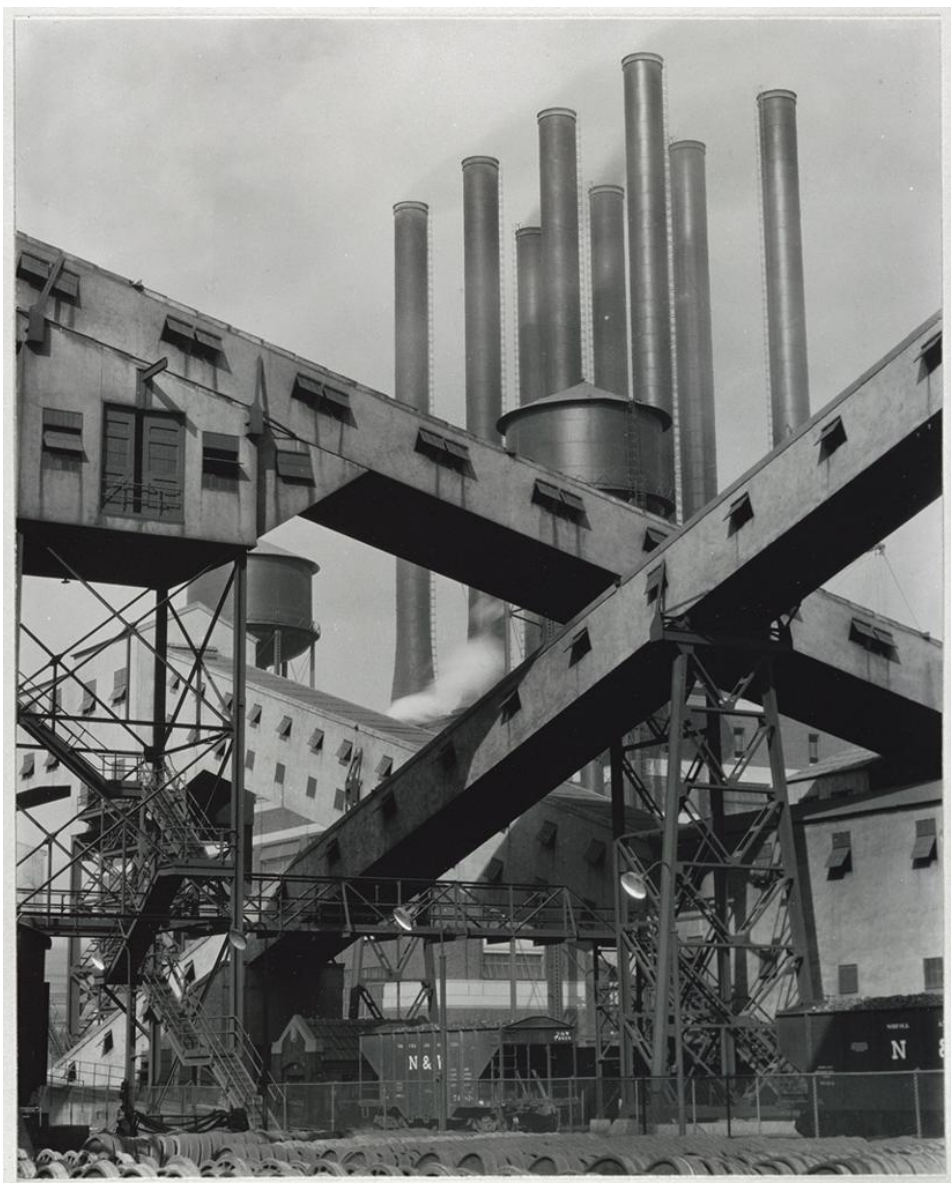


Figure 26. Charles Sheeler, *Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, 1927, gelatin silver print.





Figure 27. Charles Sheeler, *Edith Halpert Wearing a Dress of Fabric Designed by Sheeler*, 1935, gelatin silver print.

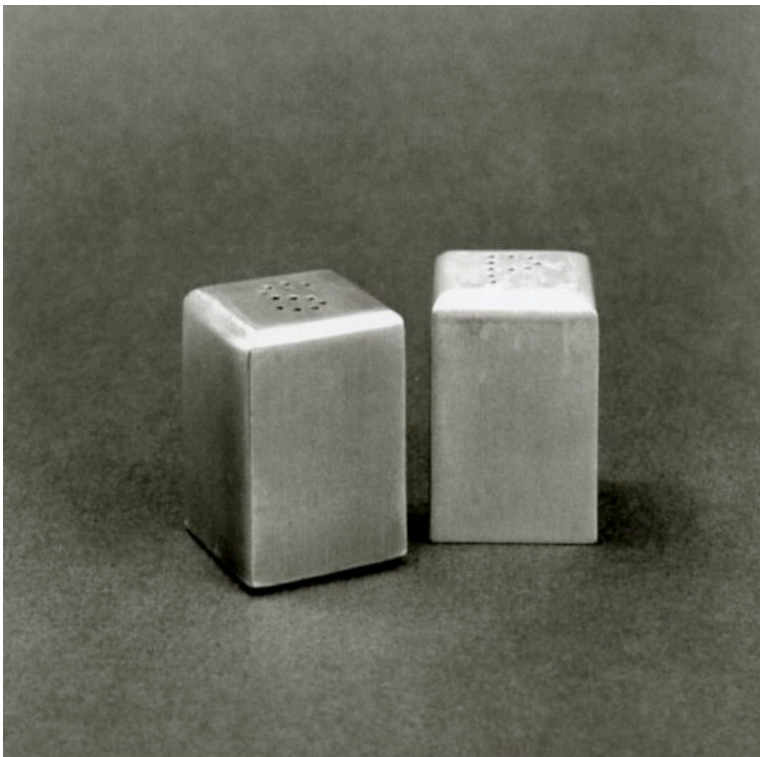


Figure 28. Designed by Charles Sheeler, *Salt and Pepper Shakers*, 1934-36, aluminum.

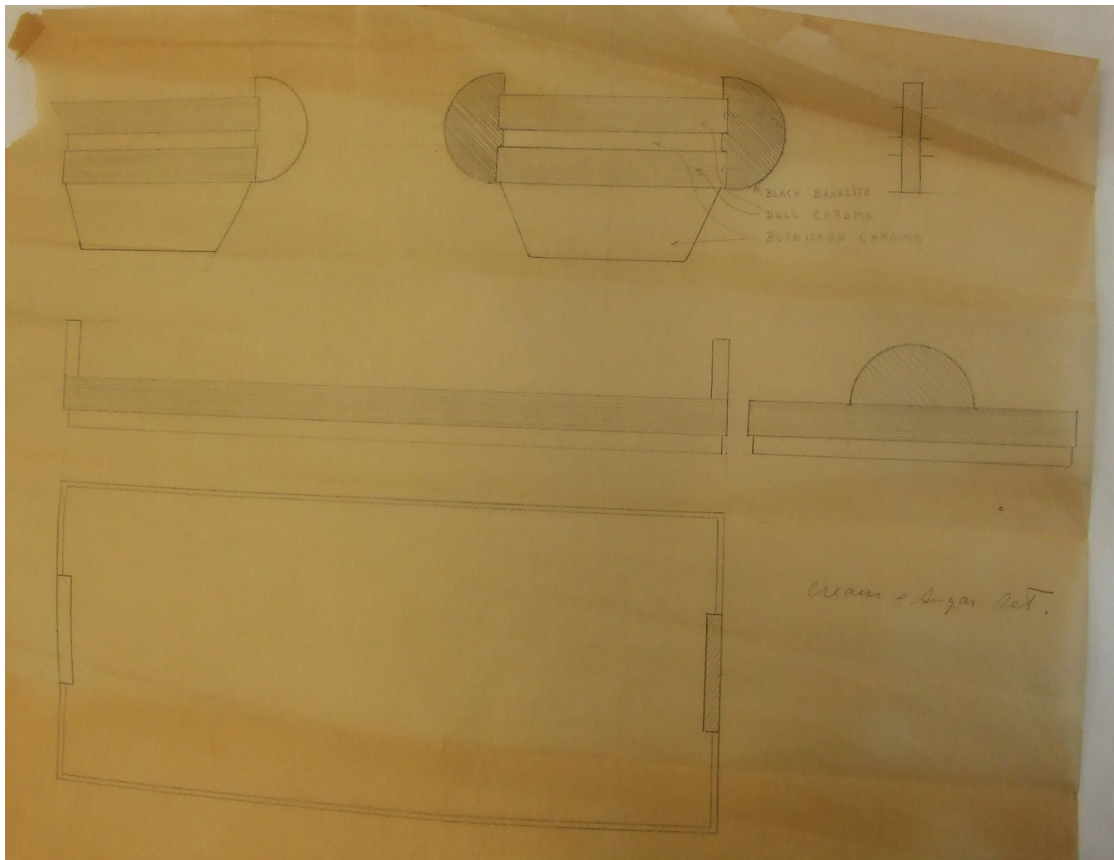


Figure 29. Charles Sheeler, Designs for Cream and Sugar Set, c. 1933-36.





Figure 30. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room with Easel*, 1929, gelatin silver print.



Figure 31. Charles Sheeler, *Interior*, 1926, oil on canvas.



Figure 32. Salt and Pepper Shakers from the Metropolitan Museum of Art Collections. Clockwise from top: William Lescaze, ca. 1935, metal and plastic; Charles Sheeler, 1935, aluminum; Russel Wright, ca. 1933, silver.





Figure 33. Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas.



Figure 34. Grant Wood, *Parson Weems' Fable*, 1939, oil on canvas.

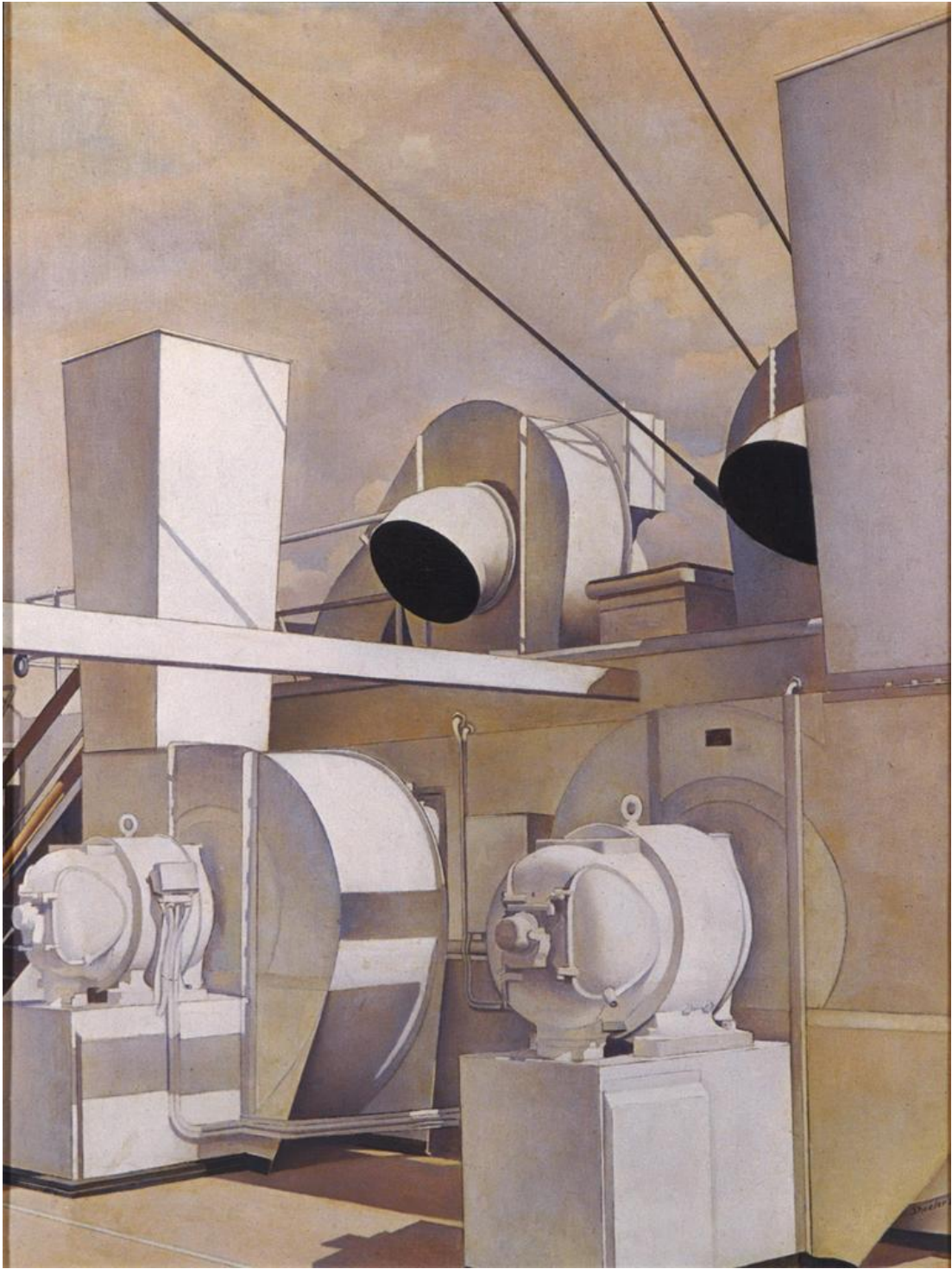


Figure 35. Charles Sheeler, *Upper Deck*, 1929, oil on canvas.





Figure 36. Charles Sheeler, *Spring Interior*, 1927, oil on canvas.

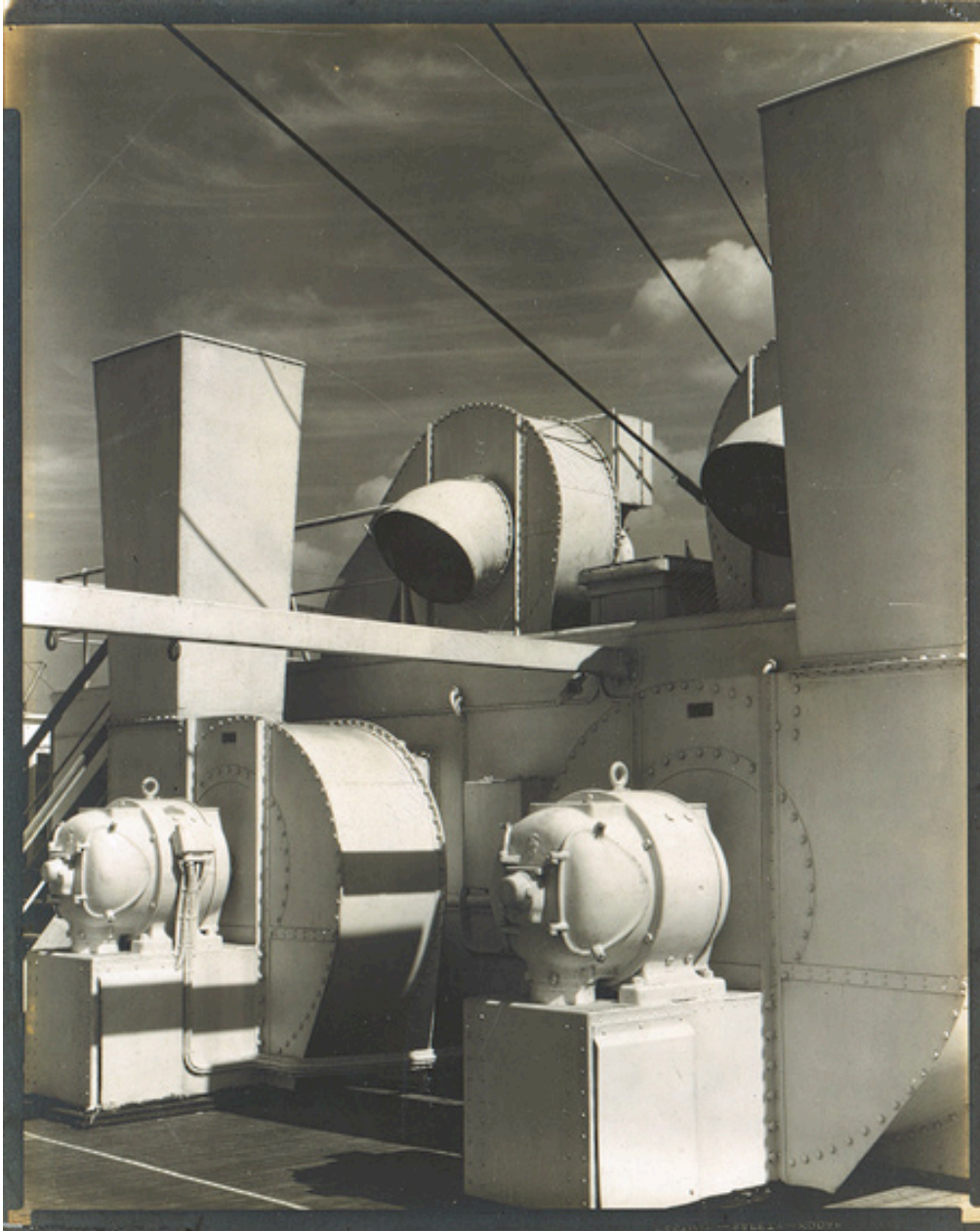


Figure 37. Charles Sheeler, *Upper Deck*, ca. 1928, gelatin silver print.



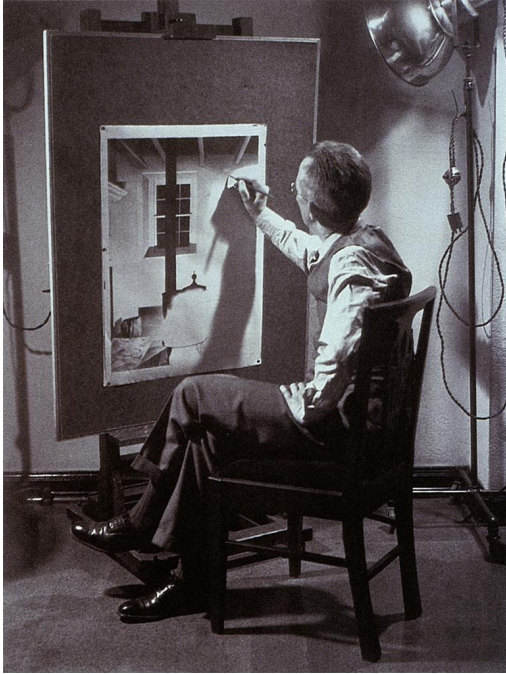


Figure 38. Charles Sheeler, *Self-Portrait at Easel*, 1931/32, gelatin silver print.



Figure 39. Charles Sheeler, *Interior with Stove*, 1932, Conté crayon on wove paper.



Figure 40. *Doylestown House—The Stove*, 1917, gelatin silver print.



Figure 41. O. Louis Guglielmi, *The River*, 1942, oil on canvas.



Figure 42. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room*, 1929, gelatin silver print.



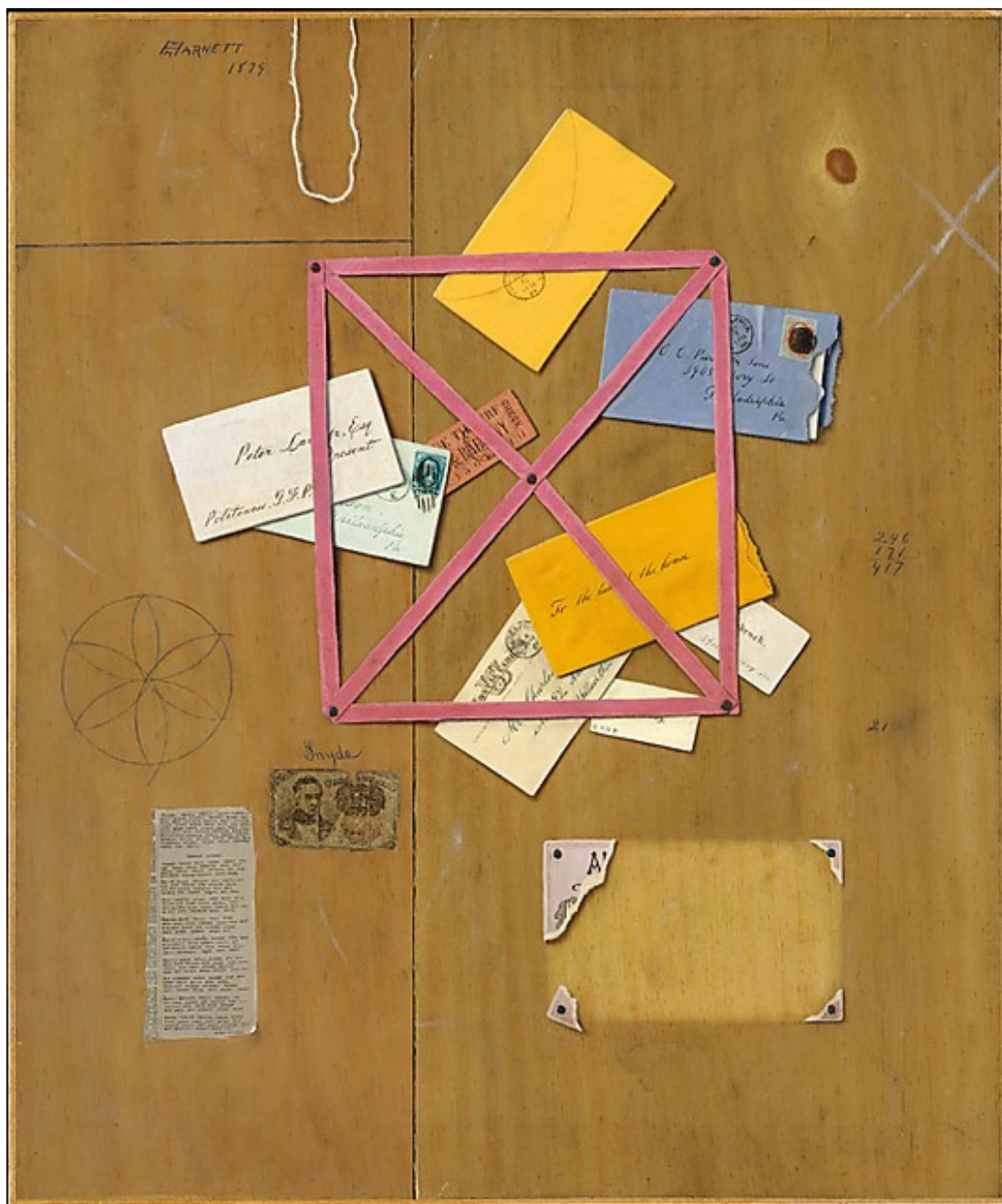


Figure 43. William Harnett, *The Artist's Letter Rack*, 1879, oil on canvas.





Figure 44. Charles Sheeler, *Kitchen, Williamsburg*, 1937, 1937, oil on canvas.



Figure 45. "National Guardsmen, On Order From The Governor," *Life Magazine*, August 8, 1939.