

Art & Design

The plane truth

Pioneering precisionist Charles Sheeler found beauty in industrial America. By **Ruth Lopez**

The industrial skyline south of Chicago is beautiful. Not convinced? Perhaps the exhibition "Charles Sheeler: Across Media" at the Art Institute of Chicago could persuade you. Sheeler found his muse in the mills and factories of industrial America. He also found it in the barns of rural Pennsylvania. Considering the geometry of Sheeler's compositions, a line does indeed stretch between these seemingly disparate scenes.

Sheeler (1883–1965) came to be identified as a precisionist in his day, though in an interview in the late 1930s he also described himself as a realist. Be that as it may, labels have their function, and when it comes to Sheeler, we can expect precision with crisp compositions. When Sheeler was in art school, Cubism was flowering and like many painters of the day, he was influenced by Picasso and the European avant-garde. But Sheeler simplified his forms and developed his own style.

There have been several solid Sheeler shows in recent years, including one focusing on his photography. This exhibition, however, brings all his work together. For years, Sheeler supported himself as a commercial photographer, at a time when that medium was still fighting for its place as a legitimate art form. Sheeler was just as committed to creating fine-art images with his camera as he was with his paintbrush. And this exhibition makes it clear that the camera supported Sheeler's imagemaking more than just financially.

Sheeler's earliest photographs were taken in 1917 inside an old farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania. In those simple compositions, Sheeler considered an open door and the beams on the ceiling, creating a holy balance in that austere, rustic space. In a painting made 20 years later, *The Upstairs*, we see the very same space made vivid with touches of pigment. Sheeler often revisited his subjects, but his photographs were more than just documents for his ideas. As he started to experiment with photomontages, he also explored abstraction in his paintings, boiling

Classic Landscape, 1931.



down structures in his compositions to plain (or plane) shapes and forms.

Also shown here is the silent film "Manhatta," created with photographer Paul Strand in 1920, which celebrates the urban environment. The short work is recognized as a pioneering piece of experimental filmmaking for its considered framing (a nod to still photography), gliding camera moves and intertitles of a Walt Whitman

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poem. Unfortunately, it plays on a small screen and there are no benches inviting us to sit and ponder—a minor complaint with this otherwise excellent show. Nearby is a small tempera on paper of factory smokestacks based on a movie still; its title, *Totems in Steel*, reflects Sheeler's adoration of industry.

In his photographs of the city, Sheeler might've taken time to appreciate and incorporate smoke blowing over the rooftops into his compositions; it's safe to say he was in love with the energy of the city. But generally his was a pared down, unpeopled view, which emphasized architecture's geometry. He believed that "realistic" pictures could reveal an "underlying abstract structure." That's clear in his most famous

commission, documenting Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant outside of Detroit. He spent six weeks in 1927 figuring out how to capture the 1,100-acre site with his camera for a promotional campaign. In drawings made years later from those images, you can see a technical skill as potent as his vision. Years later, he would find inspiration in abandoned textile mills in New England and create a series of paintings and photographs as abstract layers of space.

Not surprisingly, Sheeler was drawn to Shaker craftsmanship and you can spot that simple furniture in some of his paintings. As it turns out, the year before he died, he sold 15 pieces from his collection to the then nascent Shaker historic site of Hancock Village in Massachusetts.

Rather than adhering to a strict chronology, the curators wisely put one of Sheeler's paintings from 1931 at the end of the exhibition. Titled *View of New York*, it depicts a black cloth covering camera equipment. At the time, Sheeler's dealer asked him to downplay his photography and focus on his paintings. The piece seems to thumb its nose at the suggestion: The camera couldn't be any more obvious without the cloth, and behind the still life a window opens to a cloudy yet blue sky—perhaps hinting that a bigger world exists outside of the confines of that room. In the end, whether Sheeler used a brush or camera, his exacting vision was purely his own.

"Charles Sheeler: Across Media" is at the Art Institute through January 7.