



# Across Media

**SURVEYING THE BOUNDARIES OF ART**

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**CHARLES SHEELER'S STANDING AS** an important figure in the history of American art is well established. Dubbed “the Raphael of the Fords” during his life and more recently “an iconographer for the religion of technology” or “the true artist of corporate capitalism,” and often perceived as having a “pietistic belief in America and...unqualified admiration for its technology,” he is perhaps best known for his iconic images of the Ford River Rouge factory.<sup>1</sup> In art-historical terms, Sheeler’s work is synonymous with precisionism, a crisp, clean, hard-edged style that reconciled cubist abstraction and the machine aesthetic of Marcel Duchamp with American subject matter and that found its first full expression in Sheeler’s c. 1917 Doylestown photographs. As the art historian Rick Stewart has asserted, precisionism, although associated with a host of artists during the 1920s and 1930s, such as Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Joseph Stella, and George Ault, and codified as a term in *American Landscape Painting* by Wolfgang Born in 1948, was essentially the invention of Sheeler and the poet William Carlos Williams, both of whom sought what Williams called “a direct contact” between reality and abstraction that would allow their art to attain “a separate existence.”<sup>2</sup> Beyond these standard associations with American industry and precisionism, Sheeler has been a subject of interest to writers for more than eighty years, resulting in a vast, unwieldy bibliography that bears further witness to the richness and complexity of his achievement. During that time an impressive array of prominent American art historians and critics have both praised and criticized the artist’s work and offered salient insights into Sheeler’s accomplishment.<sup>3</sup>

A central point of dispute among the diverse views and variety of approaches found throughout the literature is whether Sheeler’s art—characterized by a style that strives to erase any traces of the working process—is bereft of feeling or a more personal form of expression. The former view was often voiced during Sheeler’s lifetime and expressed most forcefully by the critic Emily Genauer in her review of Sheeler’s 1939 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: “Sheeler is not even austere. He’s just prophylactic, painting septic, bloodless pictures devoid of all signs of intensity, the explosiveness, the dreams, the passions, the fears and the aspirations of life and the living.”<sup>4</sup> Yet many commentators, including more recent writers, have presented evidence of personal, often enigmatic feelings and emotions underlying Sheeler’s work. They include Carol Troyen, who has convincingly argued that *View of New York* (cat. 1) can be read as a personal biographical statement, and Karen Lucic, who observed ambivalent feelings about industry in the River Rouge works and has offered complex psychological readings of

<sup>1</sup> Charles Corwin, *New York Daily Worker* (February 4, 1949); Michael Kimmelman, “An Iconographer for the Religion of Technology,” *The New York Times* (January 24, 1988); Matthew Baigell, “American Art and National Identity: The 1920s,” *Arts Magazine* 61 (February 1987): 51; Friedman 1975, 210.  
<sup>2</sup> Stewart 1983, 100–114. As is often the case with terms used to designate art-historical movements, the definition of precisionism remains imprecise. See also M. L. Friedman, *The Precisionist View in American Art* [exh. cat., Walker Art Center] (Minneapolis, Minn., 1960); Katherine Lochridge and Susan Fillin-Yeh, *The Precisionist Painters, 1916–1949* [exh. cat., Heckscher Museum] (Huntington, N.Y., 1978); and Karen Tsujimoto, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* [exh. cat., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] (Seattle, 1982).  
<sup>3</sup> These commentators range from Lloyd Goodrich, “New York Exhibitions—Sheeler and Lozowick,” *The Arts* 9 (February 1926): 102–103, to Corn 1999, 293–337.  
<sup>4</sup> Quoted in “Modern Museum Enshrines Charles Sheeler,” *Art Digest* 14, no. 2 (October 15, 1939): 6.



**1 View of New York**  
 1931, oil on canvas,  
 121.9 × 92.4 (48 × 36 3/8)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
 The Hayden Collection—  
 Charles Henry Hayden Fund



the Doylestown series.<sup>5</sup> Even a contemporary critic not entirely sympathetic to Sheeler, such as Hilton Kramer, while noting that “In Sheeler’s art, we are a long way from the traumas and anxieties of the modern spirit,” has acknowledged, “What seems at first so accessible and familiar in Sheeler’s art ends by looking more and more mysterious and haunted.”<sup>6</sup> Such views echo the rebuttal to the position of Genauer and others offered at the time by Williams: “Sheeler’s paintings are often spoken of as cold, but when a man is mastered, as he is, by an overwhelming reticence, his paintings are possessed by an emotional power hard to put your fingers on.”<sup>7</sup>

### Photography versus Painting

Criticism of Sheeler’s paintings as unfeeling was often leveled by those uncomfortable with the photographic qualities of his art. The camera was considered a machine incapable of expressing human emotions, which were more rightfully the province of traditional fine arts such as painting, sculpture, and drawing. Since photography and art could not be reconciled, many writers were simply flummoxed by an artist who worked simultaneously at such a high level in both media. More confusing still was the fact that Sheeler, having early on so clearly established the particular qualities of photography as a medium in his Doylestown series, often took photography as a starting point for his work as painter, filmmaker, and graphic artist. Already uncomfortable with the notion of photography as art, his critics could not fathom paintings adulterated by photography. According to Milton Brown, Sheeler had stood the recurrent question of whether photography was an art on its head: “The curious inversion of this question now presents itself in the guise of whether art is photography. . . . In the paintings of Sheeler it is no longer a question of any such principle as the relation of art to nature, but of the relation of art to the technique of the camera.”<sup>8</sup>

Unwilling to accept the new orientation of Sheeler’s art, his contemporary critics, rather than viewing his work in photography and painting as integrally connected, sometimes dismissed his accomplishments in both by observing, “as a painter he is a good photographer and vice versa.”<sup>9</sup> It was claimed that Sheeler “has fallen between two stools and allowed the single image point of view of the camera to replace to a large extent the composite image of the painter and to crowd out that emotional something which would have given his work so much greater validity.”<sup>10</sup> Another writer commented: “His technique is suitable neither to the illustratively photographic, which

requires to be more juicily and slickly set down, nor to the clearly abstract, which probably ought not to be painted at all, but done in micarta or linoleum.”<sup>11</sup> Sheeler’s paintings were often dismissed as merely “tinted photographs,” with the protest that if, “in the fullness of their particular statement, these photographs express more powerfully, and more profoundly what the artist wants to say, then why attempt to approximate such statement with brush or pencil.”<sup>12</sup>

During Sheeler’s lifetime his supporters went to great lengths to advocate the superiority of his paintings over his photographs, while more recently, as the status of photography has risen, the tendency has shifted, giving preference to his work as a photographer. Both approaches effectively sidestep broader issues raised by the relationships between a much wider range of media represented in his work. The former attitude was in large part the result of the dealer Edith Halpert’s efforts to recast Sheeler—who had made his reputation in New York as a photographer with the Doylestown photographs in 1917 and with his work for Condé Nast in the 1920s—as first and foremost a painter.<sup>13</sup> Halpert signed Sheeler to an exclusive contract in 1931, yet she never showed his photographs in the nine single-artist exhibitions she organized for him at her Downtown Gallery between 1931 and 1966, and she discouraged their exhibition elsewhere. Her views were shared by William Lane, who became Sheeler’s patron in the early 1950s and who, in addition to assembling the most prominent private collection of Sheeler’s paintings, also eventually acquired the artist’s photographic prints and negatives. The mutual concerns of Halpert and Lane are evident in a letter from Halpert to Sheeler’s widow, Musya, discussing arrangements for the major retrospective of Sheeler’s work organized by the National Collection of Fine Arts in 1968: “No doubt you have heard from Bill Lane, who spent quite a long time with me discussing the whole photograph business. We are both upset about the possibility of reorienting Charles’s reputation as a painter by focusing so much attention on the photographs, which relate so closely to the paintings which followed. It took me years and years to change the public attitude which was built up many years ago, indicating that he merely transferred one medium to another and I hate to see it revived.”<sup>14</sup>

Since Sheeler’s death, perhaps in reaction to the proscriptions of Halpert and Lane, many have expressed their preference for Sheeler, the photographer. Charles Millard opined, “His best photographs have an emotional conviction that one does not feel in even his best paintings.”<sup>15</sup> In his review of a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1969 Abraham

5 Troyen 1986, 24–41; Troyen 2004: 731–749; Lucic 1989b, 36–47; Lucic 1991; Lucic 1995, 227–255; Lucic 1997; also see Maroney 1999, 26–57.

6 Hilton Kramer, “Art: Survey of Sheeler,” *The New York Times* (October 11, 1968).

7 Williams 1954, 215.

8 Brown 1941, 46.

9 James Lane, “Of Sheeler’s Immaculatism: The Modern Museum’s One-Man Show,” *Art News* 38 (October 7, 1939): 10.

10 Howard Devree, “Exhibition Reviews,” *Magazine of Art* 32 (November 1939): 645.

11 Winslow Ames, “A Portrait of American Industry,” *Worcester Art Museum Annual* 2 (1936–1937): 97.

12 Edwin Alden Jewell, quoted in “Modern Museum Enshrines Charles Sheeler,” *Art Digest* 14, no. 2 (October 15, 1939): 6.

13 On the relationship between Sheeler and Halpert see Tepfer 1989, 94–105.

14 As quoted in Tepfer 1989, 100–101. Lillian Dochterman also took this approach in Dochterman 1963 and in *The Quest of Charles Sheeler: 83 Works Honoring His 80th Year* [exh. cat., University of Iowa] (Iowa City, 1963).

15 Millard 1967, n.p.

Davidson also wrote: “My purpose...is not to bury Sheeler’s painting, but to praise his photography...the scope of the photographs is greater.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, in response to the dual retrospectives of painting and photography held at the Museum Fine Arts, Boston, in 1988, Martin Hammer offered, “Sheeler was a natural and brilliant photographer, but he could be insensitive...to painting,” while William Agee wrote, “there is no escaping the decline of Sheeler’s painting after 1931, at precisely the moment his dealer, Edith Halpert, induced him to suppress his photography, thereby suppressing the largest and most authentic portion of his talent.”<sup>17</sup>

Any attempt to assess Halpert’s role must acknowledge that her decision to promote Sheeler as a painter was an eminently practical one that proved highly successful. Despite the prodigious efforts of Alfred Stieglitz and others, the status of painting in 1931 remained clearly higher than that of photography. De-emphasizing the role of photography in Sheeler’s work allowed Halpert to place his paintings in prestigious private and public collections, even in the difficult economic climate of the Depression. Halpert’s strong stance also provided a way for Sheeler to move beyond the intractable issue of whether photography was art, and to devise a more complex creative strategy. In fact, Sheeler’s partnership with Halpert ushered in one of the most productive periods of his career, allowing him in large measure to fulfill the promise of his early work. In the late 1920s commercial assignments with Condé Nast had not allowed him time to paint or to actively explore his interest in other media. Now, under Halpert’s guidance, he was able to create significant bodies of work in painting, Conté crayon, and tempera, including his famous series of paintings depicting American interiors and the River Rouge, which rivaled and complemented his earlier accomplishments in photography. In addition, Sheeler’s paintings and drawings so fully exploited their respective media that they could be exhibited successfully as self-contained, without recourse to their photographic sources. Moreover, Halpert’s moratorium on showing photographs at the Downtown Gallery by no means hindered Sheeler from continuing to use photography and to experiment with the medium as a crucial part of his working method. Nor did it preclude the exhibition of his photographs at other venues, such as the Museum of Modern Art, where they were a major component of the 1939 retrospective show. In a similar way, Lane’s decision to purchase and quarantine Sheeler’s photographic estate has ultimately served Sheeler well by preserving the full breadth of the artist’s accomplishment in the medium in one comprehensive collection, from which the ambitious photography retrospectives organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in

1987 and 2002 were drawn. In sum, the decisions of Sheeler’s most important dealer and patron exhibited prescient savvy and acumen.

But while the strategy of Halpert and Lane may have been eminently practical, it did not encourage a comprehensive understanding of Sheeler’s accomplishment across various media. Also, neither their efforts to downplay photography, nor the more inclusive approaches taken in Sheeler’s 1938 biography by Constance Rourke and the retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art succeeded in preventing the role of photography from dominating discussions of his work. This narrow focus must have been a source of continuing frustration for Sheeler, whose art consistently referenced not only photography but also a range of other disciplines, such as architecture, film, illustration, and industrial design. In exasperation he finally asked in 1950: “Do you realize that if all the discussions having to do with the question ‘Is photography Art,’ were laid end to end they would extend from here to nowhere?”<sup>18</sup>

Sheeler had tremendous respect and admiration for Halpert, and their relationship was much more complex than simply that of artist and dealer. Following the death of his first wife, Katharine, in June 1933, Sheeler became emotionally attached to Halpert, writing to her, “you are the center of my life.”<sup>19</sup> Their relationship had a creative, collaborative dimension, most evident in the superb photograph Sheeler took of Halpert (fig. 1) wearing a dress made out of a fabric Sheeler had designed, and standing in profile between *View of New York* (cat. 1) and *Classic Landscape* (cat. 27).<sup>20</sup> The presence of *View of New York* is significant because, as Troyen has shown, Sheeler’s 1931 decision to abandon his commercial photography practice and join forces with Halpert is memorialized in the painting: “It is a lament, in which the empty chair, the covered camera, and the switched-off lamp allude to Sheeler’s withdrawal from a nearly twenty-year career in photography... *View of New York* speaks of disconnection and possible loss in the face of uncertainty... Yet the pressures that brought him to this point also impelled him to find a new method, a new outlet for his creativity, and this, too, is reflected in the painting.”<sup>21</sup> This photograph of two paintings and a Sheeler textile design, by bringing together Sheeler’s artistry in three different media in one work, also speaks eloquently of an artistic enterprise larger and more expansive than that engendered just by the interplay of photography and painting. Moreover, it suggests how Halpert’s public promotion of Sheeler as a painter did not inhibit his artistic development but instead provided him the necessary rationale and financial means to pursue a broader agenda.

<sup>18</sup> Paper read at a symposium on photography at the Museum of Modern Art, October 20, 1950. Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSH-1, frame 5, and reel NSH-2, frame 6.

<sup>19</sup> Sheeler to Edith Gregor Halpert, January 22 [1935], quoted in Tepfer 1989, 102. In a letter to Ralph Edwards, August 27, 1953, suggesting Halpert as an appropriate person to feature on his popular television show, “This Is Your Life,” Sheeler wrote, “Edith Halpert has done more for American Art and Artists than any other individual.” Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 346.

<sup>20</sup> Other examples of this creative side of the relationship include another striking Sheeler photograph, c. 1936, of Halpert seated before a Shaker table in his Ridgefield, Connecticut, home (fig. 13, page 174), as well as a film, c. 1951–1952 (see figs. 22–24, page 178), of Sheeler at his home in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, on which Sheeler and Halpert may have collaborated. Both are in the Downtown Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Tepfer 1989, 103, dates the photograph to January 1935, when Sheeler and Halpert attended the opening of a two-person show with Charles Burchfield at the Society of Arts and Crafts. She notes that Halpert’s dress features a fabric Sheeler had exhibited in *Practical Manifestations in Art*, a show at Halpert’s Downtown Gallery in December 1934.

<sup>21</sup> Troyen 2004, 731, 746.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham A. Davidson, “Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Photographs at the Whitney,” *Arts Magazine* 43 (March 1969): 39–40.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Hammer, “Exhibition Reviews—New York, Whitney Museum, Charles Sheeler,” *Burlington Magazine* 130 (February 1988): 164; William C. Agee, “‘Helga’ and Other Problems,” *New Criterion* 6 (April 1988): 48. More recently Roberta Smith has commented that “Sheeler’s most profound and personal response to European modernism was made with a camera.” Roberta Smith, “Only Through a Lens Did a Master Emerge,” *The New York Times* (June 6, 2003).



**FIG. 1** Charles Sheeler, *Edith Halpert Wearing a Dress of Fabric Designed by Sheeler*, 1935, gelatin silver print, Downtown Gallery Papers, 1938–1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

### Applied Art, Fine Art, and Photography

Mature works such as the Halpert portrait, with its layering and juxtaposition of media, as well as its complex structuring of time and space and merging of life into art, exemplify Sheeler's extraordinarily rigorous, varied, and long apprenticeship. He was trained in industrial drawing, decorative painting, and applied art at the School of Industrial Art in Philadelphia. This was followed by years under the tutelage of William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Sheeler learned an impressionistic, painterly style, and then finally by a period during which he embraced European modernism and taught himself photography. The first complete expression of his artistic vision was the extraordinary Doylestown series, created when Sheeler was in his early thirties. Moving successively from applied design to painting to photography, Sheeler fully absorbed the lessons of each discipline he encountered and forged his own singular approach in a methodical, well-informed reaction to each in turn.

Early on, in public school, Sheeler had learned to draw geometric solids and to copy architectural ornament. At the School of Industrial Art he was introduced "to the various orders of ornament, Greek, Egyptian, Romanesque and others, and the application of them as designs for carpets, wall-papers and other two-dimensional surfaces."<sup>22</sup> The school's philosophy, based on the teaching of John Ruskin, focused on applying the standards and skills of traditional craftsmanship and the integrity of workmanship exemplified by medieval guilds to modern industrial design and practice. Aligned with the arts and crafts movement in America, the school did not recognize traditional distinctions between the fine and applied arts and encouraged students to appreciate the qualities of everyday craft objects, many of which were accessible to them at the nearby Pennsylvania Museum.

Sheeler next studied still-life and figure painting with William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He later recalled: "It was a principle of Chase's that the student should complete the study at one sitting rather than lose the original spontaneity by repeatedly painting on it. In drawing from life he insisted upon a set-up of the figure for proportions and action, by lines denoting just these things—rather than getting lost in a labyrinth by trying to copy outlines of forms. It was a good principle to follow at that stage, training the eye in judgment."<sup>23</sup> During the next two summers Sheeler and other members of the class traveled to England, Holland, and Spain, where Chase introduced them to the work of the old masters, such as Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn, El Greco, Francisco de Goya, and Diego

<sup>22</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSh-1, frame 31. Commencement brochures and official circulars for the School of Industrial Art of the Pennsylvania Museum indicate that Sheeler was enrolled for the twenty-fourth season in 1900–1901 and for the twenty-fifth season in 1901–1902. He received certificates in Industrial Drawing and in Applied Art and Decorative Painting.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSh-1, frame 37–38. The enrollment records for Sheeler in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Archives are incomplete but indicate that he attended Still Life Painting in 1905–1906, Head Class in 1905–1906, and Day Life Drawing in 1903–1904, 1904–1905, and 1905–1906.



Velázquez: “The long quivering brush-stroke was what we were after. Nature was a peg on which to hang the garment of manual dexterity.... The mechanics of painting was what mattered—brilliance, fluency. But how exciting this all was!... We went home at concert pitch, determined to outdo Hals.... I do not recall that this was ever accomplished.”<sup>24</sup>

After leaving the Academy, Sheeler began “to bail out what I had been taught.”<sup>25</sup> Traveling to Naples, Rome, Venice, Milan, and Florence with the artist Morton Schamberg in 1908, he encountered the great Italian traditions of painting: “Seeing the works of the great Italian masters gave us our first clue to design in its larger sense. It was apparent in the works of Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and others, that forms must be placed with consideration for their relation to those adjacent in the matter of their bulk, color or direction of movement, if the picture as a conception was to achieve an architectural like structure.”<sup>26</sup> Sheeler and Schamberg moved on to Paris, where they first saw the work of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and visited the collection of Michael Stein: “They were very strange pictures which no amount of description, of which I had considerable in advance, could prepare me for the shock of coming upon them for the first time.... An indelible line had been drawn between the past and the future and we were pointed in a new direction with an entirely new concept of a picture.”<sup>27</sup>

Following their return from Paris, Sheeler and Schamberg shared a studio in Philadelphia. They also arranged to rent a Quaker fieldstone house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, with the assistance of Henry Mercer, a local archaeologist and potter, and a leading figure in the American arts and crafts movement. Around this time both artists turned to photography as a way to support their experiments in modern painting, with Sheeler specializing in work for architects and Schamberg specializing in portraiture. Taking frequent trips to New York, Sheeler began photographing works of art for various galleries and dealers, including Marius de Zayas’ Modern Gallery. Arthur B. Davies invited him to show his paintings in the 1913 Armory Show, and Alfred Stieglitz in the 1916 Forum exhibition. Sheeler also formed important relationships with Walter Arensberg and members of the Arensbergs’ circle. He was especially intrigued by Marcel Duchamp and participated in the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition, where Duchamp, under the pseudonym R. Mutt, entered his iconoclastic readymade, a urinal he titled *Fountain*. Sheeler’s contacts with Stieglitz and de Zayas encouraged him to pursue photography as an art form in its own right. In March 1917 he was included in a group exhibition at the Modern Gallery with Schamberg and Paul Strand, and



**FIG. 2** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, 1871, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

<sup>24</sup> Rourke 1938, 18–22.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSH-1, frame 56.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 736–737.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 738, 739.

in December he had a solo show there that featured his Doylestown photographs. These works helped establish his reputation in New York, where he moved in 1919, in the wake of Schamberg's death the previous year.

During these early years Sheeler was clearly intent on carving out an independent artistic identity for himself. While he absorbed many of these various lessons, Sheeler ultimately rejected the models for a career offered him by the School of Industrial Art and by Chase. He praised and drew inspiration from American folk and craft traditions throughout his life, yet he always distanced himself from what he saw as the "antiquarian" attitudes of the proponents of such traditions, for example Mercer. Although Sheeler aligned with Stieglitz in the late 1910s, they later fell out. (In the 1920s he would join Edward Steichen at Condé Nast, only to abandon commercial photography in the early 1930s.) Despite his profound admiration for Duchamp's activities in New York, Sheeler's art was never iconoclastic or as highly conceptual, but rather ultimately connected to concrete things. Possessing the ability to synthesize, he delighted in layering and juxtaposing opposing views. At almost every turn in Sheeler's early evolution as an artist he demonstrated an ability to absorb artistic influences as well as counter them with new, often starkly contradictory experiences and ideas. Relating to but distinguishing himself from the many influences he encountered, Sheeler's approach to developing his personal idiom—by employing a strategy akin to musical counterpoint—culminated in an ambitious and complex artistic language characterized by sharp tonal and conceptual contrasts such as figure/ground, dark/light, object/void, inside/outside, personal/impersonal, and realism/abstraction, and animated by a rich interplay of media.

#### Art about Art: Whistler and Sheeler

In Sheeler's unpublished autobiography, which served as a basis for Constance Rourke's 1938 biography, he criticized many of his most prominent predecessors in American art. Regarding Winslow Homer he commented: "objects seen in space...are presented as bas-reliefs....It is the realism of the stage drop."<sup>28</sup> For Sheeler, Albert Pinkham Ryder "had no sense of the painter's materials."<sup>29</sup> Thomas Eakins, so much like Sheeler in his preference for rigorous painting methods based on preparatory drawings and photographs, was disparaged for his "preference for the homely scene" and "clinical" approach.<sup>30</sup> Spared from this litany of criticism and conspicuous by his absence is an artist whose *Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (fig. 2), with

<sup>28</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 794. Also quoted in Rourke 1938, 184.

<sup>29</sup> Rourke 1938, 186.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 797. Also quoted in Rourke 1938, 184–185.

**FIG. 3** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Harris Whittemore Collection



**FIG. 4** Charles Sheeler, *Side of White Barn, Bucks County*, negative 1915, gelatin silver print, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

its rectilinear forms, figure in profile, and the layering and juxtaposition of materials and media, clearly informs Sheeler's portrait of Edith Halpert: James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

The content of Whistler's and Sheeler's art and the structure of their careers are strikingly similar. Both were first and foremost masters of tonal control who, in their early endeavors—Whistler with his *White Girl* (fig. 3) and Sheeler with his *Side of White Barn* (fig. 4)—created seminal works that assayed the technical problem posed by white-on-white subjects. Crucial to both artists' oeuvres are images devoted to the literal depiction of their personal collections of decorative objects—Whistler's paintings of his Japanese screens and woodcut books, and his Chinese blue-and-white porcelain (fig. 5), and Sheeler's interiors featuring his Shaker furniture (fig. 6)—collections whose aesthetic qualities had previously been largely overlooked but which Whistler and Sheeler had assiduously promoted. Both Whistler's and Sheeler's industrial scenes distance themselves from the harsh circumstances of their subject matter by omitting the human figure (compare fig. 7 and cat. 27). Both artists first made their reputations in media other than painting—etching for Whistler and photography for Sheeler. Their status as painters relies in both instances on a comparatively small core of midcareer works. Universally acclaimed, these achieve a classical stasis of form—Whistler's great trilogy of portraits of his mother, Thomas Carlyle, and Cicely Alexander; and Sheeler's River Rouge paintings. Finally, in the late stages of their careers, both artists—Whistler with his late evanescent symbolist portraits and Sheeler with his montage paintings of overlapping forms—pushed their work in new directions. The carefully ordered arrangements of their signature works gave way to compositions that explored more elusive, less stable notions of time and space.

Whistler and Sheeler also espoused similar artistic beliefs and principles. Neither gave preference to painting within his oeuvre, contending that neither medium nor scale could dictate the significance of a work of art. Both saw nature as a source for and subservient to art and sought to balance realism with abstraction in their work. Whistler lectured famously, "Nature contains the elements...but the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful," and Sheeler wrote, "All nature has an underlying abstract structure and it is within the province of the artist to search for it and to select and rearrange the forms for the enhancement of his design."<sup>31</sup> While Whistler believed the artist was set apart from ordinary humanity, Sheeler "preferred to think of the artist as representative of the normal...rather than to stress his apartness."<sup>32</sup> While



**FIG. 5** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Lady of the Lang Leizen*, 1864, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection



**FIG. 6** Charles Sheeler, *American Interior*, 1934, oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Paul Moore



**FIG. 7** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, c. 1871–1872, oil on panel, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Nigel Thorp, *Selected Letters and Writings 1849–1903 of James McNeill Whistler* (Manchester, England, 1994), 84; paper read at a symposium on photography at the Museum of Modern Art, October 20, 1950. Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSH-1, frame 8, and reel NSH-2, frame 9.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 788.



Whistler chastised the general public for mistaking utility for beauty, Sheeler promoted the connection between function and beauty. Yet both shared the view that the ultimate aim of art was indeed the beautiful. Sheeler, echoing Whistler's remark that "the story of the beautiful is already complete—hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon," writes: "I am interested in intrinsic qualities in art not related to transitory things. I don't believe I could ever indulge in social comment. I could be disturbed by it. But it is so transitory. I think of art as being fundamentally on a different plane. I maintain an idea of Venus as a symbol of beauty unsupported by social considerations. A foot of Venus is just as much of our time as it was of its time."<sup>33</sup>

Like Whistler, who created many exquisite interiors, Sheeler transformed the interiors of his houses in Doylestown, Ridgefield, and Irvington-on-Hudson (fig. 8) into aesthetic realms featuring Shaker furniture and early American textiles and rugs—objects he depicted in his art, and many of which eventually entered museums.<sup>34</sup> One critic observed astutely that for "Charles Sheeler... life in America is just one museum piece after another.... Sheeler's art is thus a study in isolates."<sup>35</sup> The sense of the world as a museum—understood as a timeless realm where objects are displayed out of context, primarily for their aesthetic qualities and the pleasure of looking—pervades the timeless, eternal spaces Sheeler created in his photographs, paintings, and drawings. "Suspending forms in space without an environment," Sheeler depicted "the absolute beauty we are accustomed to associate with objects... in a vacuum."<sup>36</sup> While he found inspiration in American cultural forms, his art was intended to function independently from any historical context. He declared, for instance, "I don't like these things because they are old but in spite of it. I'd like them still better if they were made yesterday..." and "To revere the past for its antiquity alone, rather than for its intrinsic merit, is as futile as to revere yesterday for no better reason than that it preceded to-day."<sup>37</sup>

Recognizing Whistler as a source and model illuminates a crucial characteristic of Sheeler's efforts: almost invariably, his art is self-consciously about art or, as Whistler stated, an art "selfishly occupied with her own perfection only—having no desire to teach—seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions, and in all times."<sup>38</sup> This principle is at play in Sheeler's photographs of African, Greek, and Egyptian art, and in his photographs of Chartres; as well as in the photographs, drawings, and paintings of the eighteenth-century Quaker fieldstone house in Doylestown, of nineteenth-century New England mills, New York skyscrapers, and the River Rouge factory. All are examples of an art that seeks and finds art as its subject. This self-referential approach



**FIG. 8** Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room, with Easel*, 1929, gelatin silver print, The Lane Collection

<sup>33</sup> Thorp 1994, 95; Wight 1954b, 199.

<sup>34</sup> Many pieces are now in the Hancock Shaker Village, Inc., in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Also see fig. 27, page 181.

<sup>35</sup> Jerome Klein, "Modern Museum Shows Sheeler's Pure Americana," 1939, as found in Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel NSh-1, frame 333.

<sup>36</sup> Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 750; vacuum, quoted in Craven 1923, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Rourke 1938, 133–136; *A New Realism: Crawford, Demuth, Sheeler, Spencer* [exh. cat., Cincinnati Art Museum] (Cincinnati, 1941), 9, and Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 1811, frame 874.

<sup>38</sup> Thorp 1994, 80.

is even more evident when Sheeler makes his own works his subject, as in the Halpert portrait, and perhaps most strikingly in images such as *The Artist Looks at Nature*—a Sheeler painting of a Sheeler drawing based on a Sheeler photograph (cat. 34). The layering of references to a variety of media explicit in these particular examples is implicit in much of the rest of his work, such as the Conté crayon drawings of Doylestown and River Rouge (cats. 32, 23–25), which, while fully independent expressions of their particular medium, also inevitably evoke their photographic sources.

If Whistler's career was defined by his complex relationships with various national cultures in America, France, and England, Sheeler's was distinguished primarily by his mastery of a wide range of artistic languages. Fluent in the techniques of commercial art, the fine arts, photography, and film, he was able to navigate what Michele Bogart has recently termed "the borders of art" with great agility and skill.<sup>39</sup> These borders constantly shifted during Sheeler's career, as the status of not only photography, but also of illustration, industrial design, and other disciplines rose and fell. Indeed, the parameters of art and the identity of the modern artist were in continual flux in America and Europe as various movements and schools—arts and crafts, Dada, purism, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, constructivism—sought new ways to redefine them. Sheeler participated in this dialogue by creating works such as the River Rouge factory images—works not easily classified because they functioned well in many different artistic and commercial contexts. With his extraordinary ability to synthesize and balance references to a variety of media and techniques, he crafted richly layered, compelling, and eloquent commentaries on contemporary artistic practices and identities. In surveying the boundaries of various artistic disciplines, Sheeler's ultimate aim was to transcend them. Seeking knowledge of American subjects and the various traditional and modern practices used to both make and depict them, he hoped to create works that would achieve a "separate existence" in the timeless, boundless realm of art.<sup>40</sup>

The abstract sense of time and space at which Sheeler arrived through his mastery of various media imbued his work with spiritual connotations while expressing the dilemmas of modernity. In his statement for the 1916 Forum exhibition catalogue he wrote that "the business of the artist" was "to communicate his sensations of some particular manifestation of cosmic order," and that the "highest phase of spiritual life has always in one form or another implied a consciousness of, and, in its greatest moments, a contact with, what we feel to be the profound scheme, system or order underlying the universe; call it harmonics rhythm, law, fact, God, or what you will."<sup>41</sup> In turn, the

empty spaces and the historical void that characterize his art also reflect the dislocations and alienation of modern life. By reiterating American places and objects successively in photographs, drawings, and paintings, Sheeler attenuated the connections of his art with actual locales and objects. His work, as Lucic first noted, confirms the observations made by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility": "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. . . . the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity."<sup>42</sup> Critics such as Kramer might speak of Sheeler's "vision of innocence," but the poet Williams was always acutely aware of the more profound dimensions of his friend's engagement with the modern experience: "Charles Sheeler has lived in a mechanical age. . . [with] a realization on the part of the artist, of man's pitiful weakness and at the same time his fate in the world. These themes are for the major artist. These are the themes which under the cover of his art Sheeler has celebrated."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> In Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938 (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 104. On Benjamin and Sheeler see Lucic 1991, 135–136.  
<sup>43</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Art: Survey of Sheeler," *The New York Times* (October 11, 1968); Williams 1954, 215.

<sup>39</sup> Michele H. Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Concerning his relationship to American cultural traditions, Sheeler wrote, "The question of an American tradition in painting could worry me quite a bit if I would let it. Obviously we are a composite of many influences, but the same thing is true to an extent 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!" Rourke 1938, 182.

<sup>41</sup> *The Forum Exhibition*, 1916, n.p.