Charles Sheeler: paintings, drawings, photographs
With an introduction by William Carlos Williams

Author
Sheeler, Charles, 1883-1965

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Charles Sheeler. Photograph by Edward Steichen
CHARLES SHEELEER

paintings
drawings
photographs

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART • NEW YORK • 1939
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INTRODUCTION

Here for the first time, I think, the paintings of Charles Sheeler have been assembled for a complete retrospective view giving him and others an opportunity to witness them as a whole. This is an important moment for contemporary painting. Apart from the enjoyment received, it provides a means for the study and evaluation of the work in all its phases as well as a cross-check on painting generally today.

The catalogue details elsewhere a chronological list of the exhibits. No comment on the individual pieces will be made nor does it seem appropriate to more than mention the biography so ably covered in previous publications. All that is intended is a bird's eye view of the exhibit and a quick pencil sketch of some of its features and implications—as they appeal to one who is not a painter, a bad thing perhaps, writers incline to be gassy.

I think Sheeler is particularly valuable because of the bewildering directness of his vision, without blur, through the fantastic overlay with which our lives so vastly are concerned, "the real," as we say, contrasted with the artist's "fabrications."

This is the traditional thin soup and cold room of the artist, to inhabit some chance "reality" whose every dish and spoon he knows as he knows the language that was taught him as a child. Meanwhile, a citizen of the arts, he must keep his eye without fault upon those things he values, to which officials constantly refuse to give the proper names.

The difficulty is to know the valuable from the impost and to paint that only. The rest of us live in confusion between these things, isolated from each other by the effects of it, a primitive and complex world without air-conditioning. It is the measurable disproportion between what a man sees and knows that gives the artist his opportunity. He is the watcher and surveyor of that world where the past is always occurring
contemporaneously and the present always dead needing a miracle of resuscitation to revive it.

More and more alone as time goes on, shut off from each other in spite of facile means of communication we shrink within ourselves the more the more the others strike against our privacy. We cannot be forced to love and talk, the gangsters are right—I should say they are the mirrors. Nor can it be told by looking into a man's face what he is thinking or in what hovel-sized confinement he exists. But the monasteries of our thoughts have walls like any others for paintings to carry us beyond them to reality. Lucky the man who can dispel them with a Sheeler.

And let it be strictly noted, the arresting thing is that this world of the artist is not of gauze but steel and plaster. It is the same men meet and talk and go to war in. Pictures are made with paint and a brush on canvas.

Any picture worth hanging, is of this world—under our noses often—which amazes us, into which we can walk upon real grass. It's no "fabrication," we realize that at once, but what we have always sought against that shrunken pulp (from which everyone is running faster nowadays than ever) called, monstrously, "the real."

Charles Sheeler gives us such a world, of elements we can believe in, things for our associations long familiar or which we have always thought familiar.

Driving down for illumination into the local, Sheeler has had his Welsh blood to set him on. There is a Sheelerville, Pa., up in the old mining district. The Shakers express the same feeling in maple, pine and birch, pieces which Sheeler out of admiration for what they could do with those materials keeps about him.

But the world is always seeking meanings! breaking down everything to its "component parts," not always without loss. The arts have not escaped this tendency, nor did Sheeler whose early work leaned toward
abstraction, in the drawing and composition, the familiar ironing out of planes. Something of it still lingers in his color.

Later Sheeler turned, where his growth was to lie, to a subtler particularization, the abstract if you will but left by the artist integral with its native detail.

The tree grows and makes leaves which fall and lie in the swamp-water. The ages change, as the imagination changes, and of the resultant coal we draw off an electric fluid. But for the artist, for Sheeler as an artist, it is in the shape of the thing that the essence lies.

To be an artist, as to be a good artisan, a man must know his materials. But in addition he must possess that really glandular perception of their uniqueness which realizes in them an end in itself, each piece irreplaceable by a substitute, not to be broken down to other meaning. Not to pull out, transsubstantiate, boil, unglue, hammer, melt, digest and psychoanalyse, not even to distil but to see and keep what the understanding touches intact—as grapes are round and come in bunches.

To discover and separate these things from the amorphous, the conglomerate normality with which they are surrounded and of which before the act of “creation” each is a part, calls for an eye to draw out that detail which is in itself the thing, to clinch our insight, that is, our understanding, of it.

It is this eye for the thing that most distinguishes Charles Sheeler—and along with it to know that every hair on every body, now or then, in its minute distinctiveness is the same hair, on every body anywhere, at any time, changed as it may be to feather, quill or scale.

The local is the universal. It was a banana to Cézanne.

Look! that's where painting begins. A bird, up above, flying, may be the essence of it—but a dead canary, with glazed eye, has no less an eye for that, well seen becomes sight and song itself. It is in things that for the artist the power lies, not beyond them. Only where the eye hits does sight occur. Take a cross-eyed child at birth. For him to see at all
one of the eyes must go blind, he cannot focus it. But let him look past the
object to "abstraction" long enough and soon the other eye will follow.

The exhibits date back approximately a quarter of a century but
their quality is singularly uniform, lucid and geometric from the first. It
was an early perception of general changes taking place, a passage
over from heated surfaces and vaguely differentiated detail to the cool
and thorough organizations today about us, familiar in industry, which
Sheeler has come more and more to celebrate.

Sheeler had especially not to be afraid to use the photographic camera
in making up a picture. It could perform a function unduplicatable by
other means. Sheeler took it that by its powers his subject should be in-
tensified, carved out, illuminated—for anyone (I don't know that he
said this to himself) whose eyes might be blurred by the general fog
that he might, if he cared to, see again.

It is ourselves we seek to see upon the canvas, as no one ever saw us,
before we lost our courage and our love. So that to a Chinaman Sheeler
at his best should be a heartfelt recognition, as Sheeler, looking at some
ancient Chinese painted screen, would hope fervently to see himself
again. A picture at its best is pure exchange, men flow in and out of it,
it doesn't matter how. I think Sheeler at his best is that, a way of painting
powerfully articulate. But after all, so is all good painting.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
A BRIEF NOTE ON THE EXHIBITION

Perhaps the greatest value of art teaching is that the pupil may later have something to unlearn. The distance I traversed along the road from art school days to the present has been greater than the length of that sentence may imply.

From the casual portrayal of the momentary appearance of nature learned in art school, to the concept of a picture as having an underlying architectural structure to support the elements in nature which comprise the picture, was a long journey with many stop-overs along the way.

The pictures included in this retrospective show have their beginning in a period when a consciousness of structure and design as essential considerations was first becoming evident in my work. While the use of natural forms has for the most part been prevalent in my painting, a brief excursion into abstraction was made. These abstract studies were invariably derived directly from forms seen in nature, Flower Forms and Lhasa being offered in evidence. The duration of this period was determined by the growing belief that pictures realistically conceived might have an underlying abstract structure. This belief has continued with me as a working principle until the present time.

My theories about the technique of painting have changed in direct relation to my changed concept of the structure of a picture. In the days of the art school the degree of success in the employment of the slashing brushstroke was thought to be evidence of the success of the picture. Today it seems to me desirable to remove the method of painting as far as possible from being an obstacle in the way of consideration of the content of the picture.

The painting Upper Deck of 1929 marks the dividing line between my previous work and that which has followed in regard to my ap-
proach to a picture, which continues to prevail. Starting with Upper Deck I have sought to have a complete conception of the picture established in my mind, much as the architect completes his plans before the work of bringing the house into existence begins. It may be seen that Upper Deck differs much in its execution from Spring Interior, the canvas which immediately preceded it. In Spring Interior the planning proceeded as the picture developed: the structure of the picture is much more loosely woven. With the change of approach came a further development of the desire to remove the method of painting as such from being a hindrance in seeing.

My interest in photography, paralleling that in painting, has been based on admiration for its possibility of accounting for the visual world with an exactitude not equaled by any other medium. The difference in the manner of arrival at their destination—the painting being the result of a composite image and the photograph being the result of a single image—prevents these media from being competitive.

CHARLES SHEELER
Photograph by Sheeler of his house at Ridgefield, showing several examples of Shaker furniture.
CHRONOLOGY

1883  Born in Philadelphia, July 16, of American parents of Irish and Welsh descent.

1900–1903  Studied applied design at the School of Industrial Art, Philadelphia.

1903–1906  Studied under William M. Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

1904  Trip to London and Holland with Chase and members of his class.

1905  Trip to Spain with Chase's class.

1909  Trip to Italy, Paris and London.


1912  Took up photography as a means of livelihood.

1913  Exhibited six paintings in the Armory Show, New York.


1918  One-man exhibition of photographs at the Modern (De Zayas) Gallery, New York.

1918  Series of photographs of African Negro masks.

1919  Moved from Philadelphia to New York.

1920  Collaborated with Paul Strand on the motion picture Mannahatta.

1920  One-man exhibition of paintings and photographs, De Zayas Gallery, New York.

1922  One-man exhibition, Daniel Gallery, New York.
1924 One-man exhibition, Whitney Studio, New York.
1926 One-man exhibition of photographs, Art Center, New York.
1927 Series of photographs of the Ford Plant, River Rouge.
1929 Exhibited photographs at International Film and Photo Exhibition, Stuttgart.
1929 Trip to Europe. Series of photographs of Chartres Cathedral.
1931 One-man exhibition, Downtown Gallery, New York.
1935 Two-man exhibition with Charles Burchfield, Society of Arts and Crafts, Detroit.
1927–1939 Has lived in South Salem, New York, and in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


For color reproductions, see catalog numbers 10, 21, 31, 38, 43, 55.

All the publications listed may be consulted in the Library of the Museum of Modern Art.
46 Barn Abstraction. 1918. Black conté crayon and tempera, 19½ x 24½ inches.
9 Flower Forms. 1919. Oil on canvas, 24 x 19 inches.
Church Street "El." 1922. Oil on canvas, 15½ x 18½ inches.
50 Pertaining to Yachts and Yachting. 1922. Color crayon, 19 x 24 inches.
65 Still Life with White Teapot. 1924. Black conté crayon and tempera, 31 x 21 inches.
71 Torso. 1924. Pencil, 4½ x 6 inches.
15 Staircase, Doylestown. 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.
20 Upper Deck. 1929. Oil on canvas, 29 x 21 3/4 inches.
Classic Landscape. 1931. Oil on canvas, 25 x 32\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches.
88 The Open Door. 1932. Black conté crayon, 18 3/8 x 14 1/4 inches.
24 View of New York. 1931. Oil on canvas, 47\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 36\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches.
85 Tulips. 1931. Black conté crayon, 26 x 19 inches.
93 Of Domestic Utility. 1933. Black conté crayon, 22 x 16 inches.
River Rouge Plant. 1932. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches.
37 City Interior. 1936. Oil on gesso panel, 22 x 27 inches.
105 Barn Reds. 1938. Tempera, 10 x 13 inches.
39 Kitchen, Williamsburg. 1937. Oil on gesso panel, 10 x 14 inches.
42 Still Life. 1938. Oil on canvas, 8 x 9 inches.
43 Silo. 1938. Oil on canvas, 20 x 19 inches.
102 Rocks at Steichen's. 1937. Black conte crayon, 10¼ x 8⅜ inches.
Bucks County Barn. Photograph, 1915.
149 Chartres Cathedral. Photograph, 1929.
William Carlos Williams, Photograph, 1938.
177 Generator. Photograph, 1939.
The Ford Plant. Photograph, 1927.
184, 185 Teaspoon and salt and pepper shakers designed by Sheeler.

187, 188 Textiles designed by Sheeler.
LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Arensberg, Hollywood
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Baum, Washington
Mrs. Rita Benson, New York
Holger Cahill, New York
The Downtown Gallery, New York
Mrs. Juliana Force, New York
Edsel B. Ford, Dearborn
Harold Goldsmith, New York
Morton Goldsmith, Scarsdale, New York
Philip L. Goodwin, New York
Earle Grant, New York
Mrs. Edith G. Halpert, New York
Earl Horter, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell Iselin, New York
Mrs. C. H. Jordan, Wakefield, Rhode Island
Matthew Josephson, Gaylordsville, Connecticut
Samuel M. Kootz, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Kyle, Radburn, New Jersey
Thomas N. Metcalf, Boston
Mrs. Paul Moore, Convent, New Jersey
Charles Perkins, Wakefield, Rhode Island
Mrs. Frances M. Pollak, New York
Miss Helen Resor, New York
Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., New York
Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York
Miss Constance Rourke, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Mrs. Charles H. Russell, Jr., New York
Harry Scherman, New York
John S. Schulte, New York
Charles Sheeler, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Mr. and Mrs. John S. Sheppard, New York
Edward Steichen, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Robert K. Straus, New York
G. D. Thompson, Pittsburgh
William Carlos Williams, Rutherford, New Jersey
Philip Wittenberg, New York

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
William Hayes Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
The Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco
Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts
Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

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Cornelius J. Sullivan.
CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION

OIL PAINTINGS

1. Plums on a Plate. About 1910. Oil on wood, 10 x 14 inches. Lent by the artist.
4. Still Life, Spanish Shawl. 1912. Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 inches. Lent by the artist.
6. White Tulips. 1913. Oil on wood, 14 x 10 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Kyle, Radburn, New Jersey.
7. Landscape. 1915. Oil on wood, 10 x 14 inches. Lent by the artist.
8. Lhasa. 1916. Oil on canvas, 25½ x 31¾ inches. Lent by the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, the Ferdinand Howald Collection.
12. Pertaining to Yachts and Yachting. 1922. Oil on canvas, 19½ x 23¾ inches. Lent anonymously.
14. Vermont Landscape. 1924. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Lent by Charles Perkins, Wakefield, Rhode Island.

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<td>Oil on canvas</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Classic Landscape.</td>
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**OIL PAINTINGS**

33 Ephrata. 1934. Tempera on gesso panel, 4 x 5 inches. Lent by Mrs. Edith G. Halpert, New York.

34 Ephrata. 1934. Oil on gesso panel, 19½ x 23½ inches. Lent by the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, James Philip Gray Collection.


*37 City Interior. 1936. Oil on gesso panel, 22 x 27 inches. Lent by the Worcester Art Museum.

38 Clapboards. 1937. Oil on canvas, 19 x 21 inches. Lent by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.


*39 Kitchen, Williamsburg. 1937. Oil on gesso panel, 10 x 14 inches. Lent anonymously.

40 Farm Buildings. 1938. Oil on gesso panel, 4 x 6 inches. Lent by Harry Scherman, New York.

41 The Upstairs. 1938. Oil on canvas, 20 x 13 inches. Lent by the Cincinnati Art Museum.


Reproduced in color, 10 x 9⅝ inches, Fortune, Apr. 1939, v. XIX, no. 4, cover.

44 The Yankee Clipper. 1939. Oil on canvas, 24 x 28 inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York, courtesy Fortune.

One of a series of seven paintings of contemporary industrial subjects by Charles Sheeler commissioned by the magazine Fortune. To be published as a color portfolio by Fortune in February 1940.

**WATERCOLORS AND DRAWINGS**

45 Barn Abstraction. 1917. Black conté crayon, 14¼ x 19½ inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Arensberg, Hollywood.

*46 Barn Abstraction. 1918. Black conté crayon and tempera, 19½ x 24½ inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Arensberg, Hollywood.

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48 New York. 1920. Pencil, 19\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 13 inches. Lent by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection.

49 Still Life. 1921. Pencil, 13 x 15\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ferdinand Howald Collection.


51 Leaves, Flowers and Glass. 1922. Color crayon, 19\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 15\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.

52 Tulips and Etruscan Vase. 1922. Pencil, 21 x 15\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. The Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

53 Still Life. 1922. Tempera and black conté crayon, 20 x 16 inches. Lent by William Carlos Williams, Rutherford, New Jersey.


55 Bucks County Barn. 1923. Color reproduction. (Original: tempera and color crayon, 19\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 26 inches. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.) Reproduced in color, 18\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 25 inches, American Art Portfolios, series 1, New York, Raymond & Raymond, 1936, pl. 10. Since the original drawing was not available the color reproduction is exhibited.

56 Dahlias and White Pitcher. 1923. Tempera, 26 x 19\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ferdinand Howald Collection.

57 Still Life with Peaches. 1923. Color crayon, 15\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 11\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ferdinand Howald Collection.

58 Self Portrait. 1923. Black conté crayon, 19\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 25\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. The Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

59 Gloxinia. 1923. Pastel, 23\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 19\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by Mrs. Juliana Force, New York.

60 Geraniums, Pots, Spaces. 1923. Color crayon, 23\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 18\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by the Art Institute of Chicago, Olivia Shafer Swan Memorial Collection.


62 Stairway to Studio. 1924. Black conté crayon and tempera, 25\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 19\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by Earl Horter, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania.

63 Portrait. 1924. Red and black conté crayon, 19 x 25 inches. Lent by the artist.

64 Still Life. 1924. Color crayon, 8\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 11\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell Iselin, New York.
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*65 Still Life with White Teapot. 1924. Black conté crayon and tempera, 31 x 21 inches. Lent by the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ferdinand Howald Collection.

66 Timothy. 1924. Color crayon, 32 x 21 inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.

67 Amaryllis. 1924. Color crayon, 217/8 x 27 inches. Lent by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

68 Pears on Pink Plate. 1924. Color crayon, 27 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Baum, Washington.

69 Nude. 1924. Lithographic crayon, 4 1/2 x 6 inches. Lent by Mrs. Rita Benson, New York.

70 Nude. 1924. Red crayon on black paper, 6 x 6 1/2 inches. Lent by Mrs. Rita Benson, New York.

*71 Torso. 1924. Pencil, 4 5/8 x 6 inches. Lent by the Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection.


73 Bucks County Barn. 1926. Watercolor, 6 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches. Lent by Earle Grant, New York.


75 Landscape. 1927. Watercolor, 5 x 8 inches. Lent anonymously, courtesy the Detroit Institute of Arts.


77 Industrial Plant. 1928. Watercolor, 8 x 11 inches. Lent by G. D. Thompson, Pittsburgh.


80 Chartres. 1930. Black conté crayon, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.

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82 Ballet Mécanique. 1931. Black conté crayon, 10 x 10½ inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell Iselin, New York.

83 Portrait. 1931. Black conté crayon, 10 x 8 inches. Lent by the artist.


*85 Tulips. 1931. Black conté crayon, 26 x 19 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John S. Sheppard, New York.


87 Home, Sweet Home. 1931. Black conté crayon and watercolor, 11½ x 9½ inches. Lent by Holger Cahill, New York.


89 Shaker Laundry. 1932. Watercolor, 5 x 7½ inches. Lent by the artist.


94 Connecticut Barn and Landscape. 1934. Watercolor, 4 x 5 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell Iselin, New York.


99 Totems in Steel. 1935. Tempera, 3¾ x 5 inches. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell Iselin, New York.
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101 Williamsburg Kitchen. 1936. Black conté crayon, 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 9\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by Mrs. Edith G. Halpert, New York.

*102 Rocks at Steichen’s. 1937. Black conté crayon, 10\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 8\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.


104 The Upstairs. 1938. Tempera, 9\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 6\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by Miss Constance Rourke, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

*105 Barn Reds. 1938. Tempera, 10 x 13 inches. Lent by the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection.

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107 Roses. About 1925. 14 x 10\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.

108 Delmonico’s. 1926. 9\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 6\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Lent by the Downtown Gallery, New York.

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Five thousand five hundred copies of this catalog have been printed for the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art at The Spiral Press, New York. Of the edition, four thousand copies have been reserved for members of the Museum.