

Art Review

Charles Sheeler, Romantic Pragmatist, at the National Gallery

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WASHINGTON — In light of how large and dominant American art became after World War II, it is always a bit surprising to think about how small and provincial the American art world was before the war. The most interesting and ambitious American artists — Edward Hopper, Charles Demuth and Stuart Davis, for example — struggled to bridge the yawning chasm between European Modernism and homespun regionalism. Charles Sheeler was another of those interesting prewar American Modernists, and he is now the subject of a small but suggestive exhibition at the National Gallery of Art here.

"Charles Sheeler: Across Media," organized by the museum's assistant curator of American and British paintings, Charles Brock, is narrowly designed to highlight Mr. Sheeler's versatility. With just 50 works, it does not try to survey his career or sample his greatest hits. Nor does it focus on Precisionism, the sharp-edged representational style most closely identified with him. It highlights, rather, four phases from his career in which photography, painting and drawing enjoyed particularly intimate and fertile relations.

For many viewers, the show's most surprising work will be the 10-minute silent film "Manhatta," which Mr. Sheeler made with the photographer Paul Strand in 1920. Shown in the gallery on a wide television screen, "Manhatta" is a grainy, scratchy, black-and-white ode to the architecture and industry of New York City. (It was also seen in 2003 at the Met in an exhibition devoted to Mr. Sheeler's photographs.)

Views from high buildings and across waters plied by tugboats and freighters are interspersed with lines of text from poems by Walt Whitman that extol the spiritual energies of New York. Mr. Sheeler, whose sensibility was far less effusive than Whitman's, objected to those textual insertions, which were probably imposed by the Rialto Theater in New York, where the film was first publicly shown in 1921. But however coolly expressed, Mr. Sheeler's tribute to the city's awesome energy was certainly in the spirit of Whitman. Accompanying the film are a drawing and a painting derived from one of its frames, depicting a building under construction with steel beams and tall cranes heroically silhouetted against the sky.

Also from Mr. Sheeler's early years are examples from a celebrated 1917 series of photographs that he shot inside an old house in Doylestown, Pa., that he rented in the teens and 20's. Formally exacting pictures of a backlit wood stove in an empty white room, and of a rustic wooden door open to reveal a narrow flight of stairs, make it clear that Mr. Sheeler considered himself as much a photographer as a painter when he was starting out. So does the 1927 series of photographs made on assignment for the Ford Company, documenting a huge new car-making factory in River Rouge, Mich.

But Mr. Sheeler's handmade versions of images from both series also prove that there was something he could achieve in painting and drawing that he could not in photography. These works enlarge and subtly flatten and simplify the photographic images, enhancing their

abstract qualities but also making them more luminous, mysterious and even visionary.

The last part of the exhibition presents paintings, drawings and small studies that are based on double- and triple-exposed photographs of old mills in New England, all from the 1940's and 50's. Mr. Sheeler produced the photographs in the darkroom by layering two or three negatives sandwiched together. Printed without much fuss, these photographs served mainly as studies for his drawings and paintings that elegantly blend Cubist fragmentation, Surrealistic montage and American Scene painting.

What emerges from all this is something more than the image of a technically inventive and versatile artist. Mr. Sheeler was a cool pragmatist, but he was also deeply romantic. Throughout his career he tried to match form and technique with subject matter, and he realized his love for the aesthetic and functional economy of American industry in works made with no-nonsense spareness. Yet his paintings are not without feeling, contrary to the criticism in his day that found him cold. His works often exude melancholic, nostalgic moods. Some could be cousins of Hopper's lonesome paintings.

What, if any, personal sources fed those feelings is hard to say; Mr. Sheeler doesn't tip his hand. One of his most famous pictures, included in the exhibition, is the black-and-white drawing of a telephone on a windowsill with Mr. Sheeler himself reflected from the neck down in the dark window pane: it's a picture of a lonely guy waiting for someone to call, a man too reticent to reach out.

Biographical speculations aside, what is remarkable about Mr. Sheeler's art is that images representing the epitome of American vitality should turn out so mournful and even, in some cases, funereal. See, for example, "Classic Landscape" (1931), a depiction of gravel piles, railroad tracks and severely geometric industrial buildings under a leaden sky, based on one of the River Rouge photographs. Mr. Sheeler was looking for beauty, but what he found was a De Chirico-like spiritual desolation. It is as if he is saying that beneath the frantic busyness of American capitalism there is a terrible grief over the loss of a more humane way of life.

In the two decades after Mr. Sheeler made his abandoned mill paintings, the United States enjoyed the greatest economic boom in history, Abstract Expressionism triumphed, and the art of Mr. Sheeler went into long-term partial eclipse. Now, almost 60 years later, after the triumph of Pop Art, the rise of photography and the decline of an unquestioning faith in America, domestically and globally, he looks like a prophet.

Think of the paintings of Los Angeles industrial buildings by Ed Ruscha, which represented the United States in last summer's Venice Biennial and were seen more recently at the Whitney Museum. Made with cool wit and mechanical precision, yet exuding feelings of abandonment and sadness, they could be postmodernist homages to Mr. Sheeler's elegiac Modernism.