

**The Stories We Tell Ourselves**  
*Charles Sheeler and the myth making machine*



Charles Sheeler "American Landscape" 1930  
Oil on canvas 24 x 31 in. (61 x 78.8 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Context:**

In modern US history, we have been studying the heady times between World Wars I and II, a transformative era of great technological change and social ferment. We have looked closely at the Roaring Twenties, an decade when President Calvin Coolidge observed:

"The man who builds a factory builds a temple, that the man who works there worships there, and to each is due, not scorn and blame, but reverence and praise."

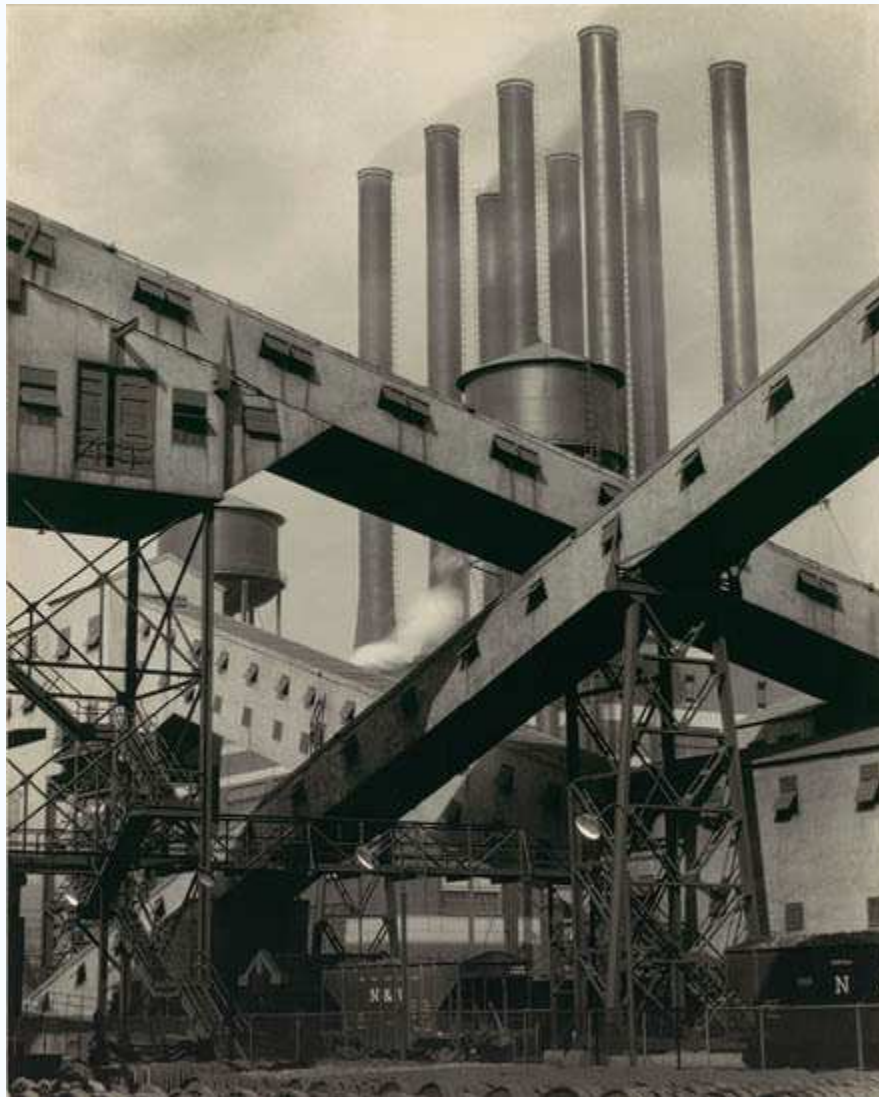
We are now transitioning to the Great Depression when boom followed bust. In the upcoming month students will be working on a multi-staged research project where they will take an in-depth look at how art shaped the national narrative during this pivotal period. To begin we will see how social history is revealed through the lens of painter/photographer Charles Sheeler, whose career spanned five tumultuous decades, yet whose personal aesthetic remained remarkably consistent.

Anticipatory set: Background reading for “American Landscape, 1930” Picturing America.

[http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource\\_Guide\\_Chapters/PictAmer\\_Resource\\_Book\\_Chapter\\_15A.pdf](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_15A.pdf)

The night before students were assigned this introductory essay on Charles Sheeler’s landmark painting the so that they will have a shared vocabulary to deconstruct the imagery in this **precisionist** painting.

In 1927 the Ayers Advertising Agency commissioned Sheeler to photograph the Ford Company’s River Rouge industrial complex in Michigan as part of the ad campaign launching the Model A. The artist spent six weeks documenting the manufacturing process. The first image to be published appeared in the February 1928 issue of Vanity Fair captioned “By Their Works Ye Shall Know Them.”



“Criss-Crossed Conveyors, Ford Plant” 1927,  
gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 7 3/8

Show additional Sheeler River Rouge prints:

<http://thehenryford.artehouse.com/perl/collection.pl?seeAllImages=1&productTypeID=1&collectionID=1419>

“American Landscape” evolved from this photography series. Show slides of “Classic Landscape” 1931 and “River Rouge” 1932 – all oil on canvas. Students discuss their inferences about the machine age, industrialization and urbanization based on the images in the painting. Explain Sheeler’s working process (uses photos to document before beginning canvas.)

**For homework**, students are asked to pick an artist associated with Precisionism and view their works in ArtStor or by searching museum sites, paying close attention to technique and theme. The list includes Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, Paul Strand, Edward Hopper, Georges Ault, Niles Spencer, Joseph Stella, Ralston Crawford, Georgia O’Keefe, Preston Dickinson, Morton Schamberg, Nile Spencer, Elsie Driggs, Francis Criss, Edmund Lewandowski, Stuart Davis, Virginia Berresford, Herman Trunk, John Storrs, Paul Strand, Edward Steiglitz. Each student is asked to choose a representative painting or photograph and then submit it to the class Moodle site with an annotation on how this piece is characteristic of the movement. They are also instructed to Note stylistic similarities to Sheeler.

## **Day 2 Further discussion of “American Landscape”**

How does his work fit in with contemporaries such as Joseph Stella and Charles Demuth? What are recurrent Precisionist themes? How does his vision reflect his times?

What techniques does Sheeler use to imbue technology with spirituality? How does he challenge our expectations of landscape painting?

The River Rouge series was designed to launch an advertising campaign for the Model A Ford. Yet neither the car nor the workers were pictured in Sheeler’s work. Why? What iconography was created instead (Fordism).

What does this image say about the relationship between man and machine? Is industrialism dehumanizing? empowering? Show “Suspended Power” 1939.

Is the title ironic or referential?

Sheeler has remarked “Photography is nature seen from the eyes outward, painting from the eyes inward.” How does Sheeler use photography and painting differently to express his themes? Are they both primary sources? Why?

What does the popularity of Charles Sheeler’s work reveal about the cult of the machine? Although he has been quoted as saying that machines are the “new religion,” he may be articulating cultural mythology rather than his own personal viewpoint. Sheeler was a professional photographer / artist commissioned to create specific themes (i.e. River Rouge series and Fortune’s “Power” series.). Show slides from Doylestown barn and Shaker series and show “The Artist Looks at Nature” 1943.

Detail Robert Hughes interpretation with Karen Lucic’s reappraisal to illustrate complexity of interpreting primary sources. Close examination of an artist’s aesthetic and iconography are required when we live in “interesting times.” Lucic questions whether Sheeler a high priest or heretic of the machine age, arguing that he is actually a critic rather than a champion of dehumanizing technocracy as Hughes claims.

### Day 3 Introduce Research Project Assignment:

**Part 1:** Students will pick a social history topic from 1920s and 1930s and show how the themes / cultural mythology were interpreted by contemporary artists or by the popular press. (This can include all media – film, drama, novels, poetry, etc.) Does this interpretation change over time? How does art contribute to the shaping of national identity and vice versa? Students will develop a class presentation summarizing an issue, event or movement and explain how it was interpreted by a particular artist or manifested in popular culture.

**Part 2:** Students will annotate a resource that they viewed especially useful for their social history project. They will submit their recommendation to the library reference blog as a shared resource.

#### Example:

The Heilbrunn Timeline of American History, presented by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>

Explore art through the centuries – traveling through time and place with this treasure trove referencing the Met's extensive collections. Can be accessed thematically, geographically and chronologically, or searched by individual artist and works of art. The timeline provides excellent context. The thematic essay on Charles Sheeler was exceptional. Has cross referenced links, image gallery and suggested readings. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd\\_shee.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd_shee.htm).

#### Sample subjects (by no means a complete or exclusive list):

Fordism      Taylorism      Industrialization      Assembly line      Mass production  
Urbanism  
Culture transformed by industrial engineering      Skyscrapers      Bridges  
Hydroelectric power (Boulder Dam, TVA)  
Mass communications – radio, film.  
The Machine Age  
Mass magazine culture (New Yorker, Fortune, Harpers, etc.)- print revolution.  
Muckraking journalism  
Transportation – how automobile revolutionized culture  
Mass market advertising  
Labor Movement      National Labor Relations Act 1935 (Wagner Act) 1941 Ford Strike  
Stock market crash      Dust bowl      Migrant workers      Hooverville  
Progressive movement  
Stieglitz vs. Steichen photography debate

#### A sampling of works

Huxley Brave New World or other dystopian novels

Steffens "The Shame of the Cities" 1904

Fitzgerald Great Gatsby

Sinclair The Jungle

FSA photographers - Lange, Evans, etc.

The Ashcan School

Poets such as T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane

Diego Rivera Detroit murals

Steinbeck The Grapes of Wrath

Lewis Dodsworth

Adams The Education of Henry Adams – “The Dynamo and the Virgin”

Dos Passos USA Trilogy

Welles “Citizen Kane”

Wallace Nutting

Lewis Hine photographs

Modernism Realism Cubism

Sturgis “Sullivan’s Travels”

Eugene O’Neill

**Students brainstorm secondary sources they can access to research these topics.**

American History (Facts on File)

Jstor and Academic Search Premier for peer reviewed journals.

Gale Reference Suite : American Decades Primary Sources series, Literature and Its Times series,

American History Through Literature series

ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Demonstrate resource selection for Sheeler analysis – primary sources (interviews, speeches, paintings, photographs), peer reviewed journal articles, art criticism, exhibitions, books, websites. See bibliography below.

**Sheeler resource sampling (this is a source list not a formal bibliography).**

“American Icon: Charles Sheeler.” Area of Design.

<http://www.areaofdesign.com/americanicons/sheeler.htm> Accessed. 4/1/10.

“American Landscape, 1930.” Picturing America.

[http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource\\_Guide\\_Chapters/PictAmer\\_Resource\\_Book\\_Chapter\\_15A.pdf](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_15A.pdf) Accessed 3/15/10.

Brock, C. (2006). Charles Sheeler: across media. University of California Press. (exhibition)

“Charles Sheeler.” The Heilbrunn Timeline of American History, presented by The Metropolitan Museum of Art [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd\\_shee.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd_shee.htm). Accessed 03/31/10

Friedman, M. (1960). The precisionist view in American art. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center.

Hughes, R. (1999). American visions: the epic history of art in America. New York: Knopf.

Lucic, K. (1993) Charles Sheeler and the cult of the machine. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Maroney, James. “Charles Sheeler Reveals the Machinery of His Soul,” *American Art*. Vol 13, No 2. Summer, 1999: pp. 27-57.

Murphy, D. Precisionism in America, 1915-1941 : reordering reality. (1994). New York: Abrams.

Murphy, J. "Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd\\_shee.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shee/hd_shee.htm) (November 2009)

Rawlinson, M. (2008) Charles Sheeler: modernism, precisionism and the borders of abstraction. New York: St. Martins Press. *Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*

Rourke, C. (1938). Charles Sheller: artist in the American tradition. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Sayre, H. "American Vernacular: Objectivism, Precisionism, and the Aesthetics of the Machine." Twentieth Century Literature: 35. Autumn 1989, pp 310-342.

Tonelli, E. "Precisionism and modern photography." Art Journal: 42. Winter, 1982. Pp. 341-345.

Tsujimoto, K. (1982). Images of America : precisionist painting and modern photography. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

#### **Related works:**

Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams

Coolidge, C "The Press Under a Free Government" a speech delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, D.C., January 17, 1925.

Marx, L. The Machine in the Garden