

Ambivalence, Irony, and Americana

Charles Sheeler's "American Interiors"

Kristina Wilson

This article examines the canvases and photographs made by Charles Sheeler between 1926 and 1939 of his own collection of Shaker furniture, hooked rugs, and nineteenth-century ceramics. It argues that the paintings possess modernist self-consciousness, ambivalence, and irony toward their historical subject matter and that they critique the contemporary collecting fad for all things Americana. The article sets Sheeler's paintings in the context of the Metropolitan Museum's American Wing and the writings of Holger Cahill and Edward and Faith Andrews and argues that an ambivalent, ironical attitude pervaded much of the early scholarship on these artifacts.

THROUGHOUT THE 1920s and 1930s, Charles Sheeler participated in the popular trend of collecting American material artifacts by photographing and painting his personal collection of Shaker furniture, hooked rugs, and nineteenth-century ceramics. While some of his images are essentially still-life studies of assorted objects, a series of four paintings, probably inspired by a group of photographs, captures his collection as he arranged it and lived with it in his own home: *Interior* (1926), *Americana* (1931), *Home, Sweet Home* (1931), and *American Interior* (1934; see below). Although Sheeler moved from South Salem, New York, to Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 1932, all four of these paintings are based on the interiors of his South Salem residence. The series, sometimes referred to as the "American Interiors," is well known to historians of American art.¹ The paintings are

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¹ These paintings merit discussion as a group not only because they depict the same place, but also because they focus on antique furnishings to the exclusion of architecture; they are best classified in the genre of domestic interior. In her catalog of Sheeler's paintings, Carol Troyen suggested that *Newhaven* (1932, private collection), *Spring Interior* (1927, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and

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more than an expression of Sheeler's love for these objects—although they are certainly that. They are a profound meditation on the culture of collecting Americana and of buying reproduction American antiques that had arisen over the previous few decades. Sheeler's paintings interrogate, with modernist self-consciousness, ambivalence, and irony, the cultural phenomenon that elevated humble artifacts made in an earlier century to cherished possessions and canonical masterpieces of the present day. They celebrate and at the same time question whether the American past is substantial enough to serve as a foundation for its commercially driven present.

In her 1938 biography of Charles Sheeler, Constance Rourke quoted the artist discussing his interest in nineteenth-century American artifacts. "I don't like these things because they are old but in spite of it," he said somewhat cryptically. "I'd like them still better if they were made yesterday because then they would afford proof that the same kind of creative power is continuing."² Critics have

Gladioli (1927, private collection) be considered part of the group of paintings of interiors; another possible candidate is *Interior* (1940, National Gallery of Art). *Newhaven* is, in my opinion, an explicitly different project: it depicts the interior of the Ridgefield house and interrogates historic architecture as much as, or more than, antique furnishings. *Spring Interior*, *Gladioli*, and the 1940 *Interior* are better understood as still lifes, rather than domestic interiors, because they focus on single arrangements of objects and plant life on a table top. Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 112.

² Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 136.

long celebrated Sheeler's ability to extract his subjects from the context of time and to present them as transcendent truths, and this statement would appear to support that: after all, he claims that what interests him is how well the objects work, in whatever time period.³ Yet the heart of this passage is the irreducible identity of these artifacts as "old": they are from a time when things were better than they are *now*. Despite his laconic reserve, Sheeler's words reveal a deep-seated ambivalence: he admits that he cherishes these old objects and, simultaneously, claims he would discard them for new ones—but only if the new had the same "creative power" as the old. The statement has a curious, insistent circularity, where the reader continually arrives back at "these old things," even as Sheeler attempts to pull the narrative into the present day. If Sheeler's statement can be read as an index to his thoughts on the American artifactual past, it is representative not in its surface content—which professes to celebrate the past in the present—but rather in its convoluted logic and ambivalence, where the past always threatens to overshadow the present.

Various scholars have argued, quite compellingly, that Sheeler's American Interiors embrace vernacular objects from the American past in an effort to build a modernist idiom unique to the United States. The American Interiors have been placed in the context of a broader intellectual movement in the interwar decades that aimed to establish a genealogy of American artistic and literary sources, or to find, in the famous words of Van Wyck Brooks, a "usable past."⁴ Sheeler shared his interest in the American artifactual past—in particular Shaker objects and nineteenth-century folk art—with many compatriots in the interwar art world, including fellow artists Elie Nadelman and Henry

Schnakenberg, collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg, historian Henry Chapman Mercer, curators Holger Cahill and Juliana Force, the critic (and Sheeler's biographer) Rourke, and his influential dealer, Edith Halpert. These intellectuals' interest in objects from the American past must be seen, in turn, as part of a broader public fascination with the nation's material history, as evidenced by the popularity of "colonial revival" as a decorating style in the 1920s and 1930s and the founding of public collections such as the American Wing, with its parade of fully furnished period rooms, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924.⁵ While the colonial revival focused on higher-style objects than the Shaker and folk objects of Sheeler's circle, all of these collecting practices contained contradictory impulses that, on the one hand, celebrated the American past as a model for the present and, on the other, reworked history to better fit present concerns.⁶

Although the American Interiors series is clearly a part of this interwar culture of collecting, consuming, and displaying American artifacts, these paintings should not be seen as simple, unapologetic celebrations of the American past. Rather, they are complex expressions of the commercialized society that exhumed such objects. Carol Troyen observed that the Interiors, with their dramatic cropping, vertiginous sight lines, and collage-like arrangement of forms, were "disquieting" depictions of "unwelcoming spaces." She too argued that the paintings were more than mere celebrations, and that they seemed to have an "ironic undertone": "It is hard to say whether Sheeler was speaking only personally or for his whole generation in intimating a kind of hollowness in the embracing of America's past."⁷ In the pages that follow, this

³ Both Michael Kammen and Wanda Corn interpret this statement as a preference for form over any specific time period, but both also mention (without discussing it further) the possibility that conflicting sentiments might be found in Sheeler's words. See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 328; Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 314.

⁴ The two significant pieces of scholarship about the American Interiors emphasize Sheeler's positive celebration of the past: Corn, *Great American Thing*, chap. 6; Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1987). Karen Lucic has explored many facets of Sheeler's revival interests, especially his Doylestown work, and has examined the ambivalence and complexity in his attitude toward the past. See "Charles Sheeler and Henry Ford: A Craft Heritage for the Museum Age," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 65 (1989): 37–47; and *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition* (Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum, 1997).

⁵ For a good study of political undertones of the colonial revival as manifested in the American Wing, see Wendy Kaplan, "R. T. H. Halsey: An Ideology of Collecting American Decorative Arts," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 43–53.

⁶ For a variety of views on the complex phenomenon known as the colonial revival, see, among others, Richard Guy Wilson, Shaun Eyring, and Kenny Marotta, eds., *Re-creating the American Past: Essays on the Colonial Revival* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Thomas Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Wadsworth Athenaeum of Art, 2003); Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Abigail Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Revival Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 335–64.

⁷ Carol Troyen, "'From the Eyes Inward': Paintings and Drawings by Charles Sheeler," in Troyen and Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler*, 24–25. Karen Lucic also suggests that Sheeler's attitude toward history in these canvases is complex and perhaps contradictory in "Charles Sheeler: American Interiors," *Arts Magazine* 61 (May 1987): 44.

essay will refine and expand Troyen's tantalizing observation. Through a deep visual analysis of the paintings, it will argue that Sheeler's Interiors are laced with ambivalence and that the anxious atmosphere pervading them is only relieved by clever passages of visual punning and irony. In addition, an examination of Sheeler's intellectual and aesthetic milieu will suggest that his peers were not immune to bouts of ambivalence about the objects they uncovered, nor were they so straitlaced that they did not occasionally find humor in their project: in his paintings, Sheeler *was* speaking for a whole generation. When Sheeler depicted his cherished possessions in a state of perpetual fragmentation, pushed to and beyond the edges of the canvas, he questioned their solidity and strength as a potential foundation for an "American school" of art; and when he depicted a skeletal ladder-back chair standing next to a streamlined furnace, he skewered the nostalgic image of the healthy family gathered around the hearth. Indeed, Sheeler's Interiors can be read as period rooms like the ones so popular in museums, albeit of an ironic variety: they celebrate historical artifacts even as they remind viewers that such objects are mere lifestyle products catering to a contemporary fad for all things American.

The American Interiors

Several pieces in Sheeler's collection appear in more than one canvas of the American Interiors series (figs. 1–4). A carved slat-back chair with turned front legs figures prominently in *American Interior* and edges into the lower left corner of *Americana*. The broad, rectangular plane of a large, refectory-style table can be seen in all four canvases (although details such as the trestle base in *Interior* and the delicate strip of end wood in *American Interior* make one wonder if it is the same table in each). The floor in each painting is covered by at least one colorfully striped rag rug.

The four paintings share not only objects, but also compositional strategies. In each, Sheeler uses the formal language of cubism to create a room where space is confusingly flattened and objects exist in a state of perpetual fragmentation. Each painting is organized like a pinwheel, with objects propelled out from an illusionistically deep center and pushed toward both the picture plane and the edges of the canvas. The last of the group, *American Interior*, best exemplifies the pinwheel composition: at the true center of the painting (the canvas is almost a perfect square) there is no object, but rather

only a shadow cast over a hooked rug; from this void at the center, objects spiral out as if driven by a centripetal force. One looks from the slat-back chair cut off by the canvas edge to the table in the upper right, whose corner seems to puncture the picture plane; from there, along the canvas's top edge, the lower portion of a storage cupboard lies flat, fully abstract against the canvas surface; and finally the checkered bedspread hovers at an illusionistic distance along the canvas's left edge. Each of these objects is on the verge of being pushed out of the viewer's limited range of vision; only when one alights on the table in the lower left, itself confusingly close to the picture plane, does one's eye begin to travel back into the heart of the canvas. Finally, the rag rug along the lower edge of the canvas falls out beneath one's feet as Sheeler distorts perspective to vertiginous effect.

The three earlier canvases in the group have elements of this pinwheel. In the earliest, *Interior*, the dramatically attenuated legs of the side table in the foreground extend beyond the edge of the canvas; the refectory table, which pushes the checkered bed out of the picture in the upper left, is itself falling out of the right side of the canvas. In *Americana*, both the slat-back chair and settee barely fit into the picture at either end of the great fulcrum of the refectory table. *Home, Sweet Home* contains the single piece of furniture rendered whole in the entire series—the ladder-back chair—but it too seems propelled out of the picture as its shadow falls across the floor to the stairs and off the left edge of the canvas. The chair itself leaves little room for the furnace and the refectory table, which stand at the periphery of sight. Finally, these first three canvases share with *American Interior* its vertigo-inducing drop along the bottom edge and its cubist compression of space. In none of these paintings does the viewer find a floor to stand on. Indeed, Sheeler's painterly attention to every surface—be it complex modulations of beige to brown to green on floors and table tops, the carefully painted fluid lines of the rug patterns, or the countless strands of rush on the chair seats—has the effect, like the feathery brushwork of Picasso or Braque's analytic cubism, of pushing every part of the painting to the picture plane. In none of these paintings does one find much space to stand at all: chair seats, table tops, floorboards, and flamboyantly patterned rugs are choreographed in such tight arrangements that the intrusion of a human being threatens to send the pinwheel spinning out of control.

The mostly cheery palette of the American Interiors canvases would seem to contradict the anxiety



Fig. 1. Charles Sheeler, *Interior*, 1926. Oil on canvas; H. 33", W. 22". (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney; photo, Geoffrey Clements.)



Fig. 2. Charles Sheeler, *Americana*, 1931. Oil on canvas; H. 48", W. 36". (Edith and Milton Lowenthal Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, bequest of Edith Abrahamson Lowenthal, 1991; photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.)

bred by their tightly wound compositions. In each painting there are passages where vibrant reds, greens, and blues collide in animated energy. Yet in each painting there is also a counterpoint to this riot of color: the broad expanses of wood floorboards and wooden tabletops, rendered with gentle

tonal gradations of brown, beige, blue, and green. These passages are by no means inactive, for they are carefully painted with deep, if subtle, color complexity. In fact, if these canvases can be read as a fugue-like arrangement of textile and bare wood, the wood is occasionally the stronger voice. *Americana*



Fig. 3. Charles Sheeler, *Home, Sweet Home*, 1931. Oil on canvas; H. 36", W. 29". (Detroit Institute of Arts, gift of Robert H. Tannahill; photo, Bridgeman Art Library.)

is pervaded by brown-orange-ish light, as if the tabletop cast a reflective glow over the entire scene. In *American Interior*, the air has a pinkish tint that seems to emanate from the cupboard, side table, and floorboards.

These canvases have been described as photographic from their first public display: responding to *Home, Sweet Home* and *Americana* in their 1931 debut, a critic noted, "Mr. Sheeler has brought to his canvases the photographer's eye for light and for

masses, together with an extraordinarily sensitive photographic conception of line and shadow." Sheeler made a series of photographs of his South Salem home (1929), which were apparently never intended to be publicly exhibited (figs. 5–8).⁸ The

⁸ H. V. D., "Art: Charles Sheeler's Exhibition," *New York Times*, November 19, 1931, reel NSH-1, frame 309, Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC (hereafter CSP-AAA). For the status of the interior photographs, I am indebted to conversations with Carol Troyen and Troyen, "From the Eyes Inward," 24.



Fig. 4. Charles Sheeler, *American Interior*, 1934. Oil on canvas; H. 32½", W. 30". (Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Mrs. Paul Moore.)

known, extant photographs were taken before the three later paintings were created, and thus might have served as inspiration (for example, fig. 5 is clearly the template for fig. 4). They help to explain certain aspects of the paintings: figure 5 makes legible the *New Yorker* magazines in the upper left corner of figure 4, and the angle of the camera explains the flattening of space along the painting's lower edge. The photographs are notable for their carefully constructed quality. Rather than capturing his home casually, with belongings depicted in their everyday use, these photographs depict an assortment of objects arranged in very particular ways. In figure 6, the Windsor chair has been pulled away from the end of the table and turned, as if

Sheeler were searching for a pattern of oval shapes among tabletops and chair seats, or perhaps a pattern of verticals among the chair spindles and table legs. In figure 7, the chairs and bed frame hint at a larger grid of horizontals (slats) and verticals (spindles) that recedes from the foreground to far distance; and in figure 8, Sheeler has found a surprising resonance between his painting *Upper Deck* (1929) and the rectilinear cupboard holding a variety of bulbous glass forms. In each photograph, Sheeler seems to be exploring the potential of distorted space and the geometries that are revealed when familiar objects are fragmented or viewed from unusual angles. Although his famous distinction was that "photography is nature seen from the eyes



Fig. 5. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room*, 1929. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 7¼", W. 9⅝". (© Lane Collection; photo, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

outward, painting from the eyes inward," in these photographs it is evident that the artist was attempting to shape his outer world to match an inner vision.⁹ In the photographs, however, the clutter of objects ultimately looks agreeably busy and even cozy; the abstract patterns never overwhelm the scene, and instead the eye lingers over the endless numbers of varied objects. In the paintings, in contrast, Sheeler has transformed the clutter into overcrowded, tense arrangements, where the pieces seem to struggle to stay in the picture. If, in the photographs, Sheeler was intrigued by the confusion of three-dimensional objects flattened against the plane of his camera's viewfinder, then in the paintings he explored the ramifications of that confusion. The American Interiors paintings are much more than transcriptions of these photographs, but the photographs seem to have pointed the way to-

⁹ Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 119.

ward the more radical, cubist-like compressions of space and fragmentation of objects in the paintings.

A critical discourse linking Sheeler's art with a newly discovered (or newly appreciated) American aesthetic tradition can be traced as early as 1923, in an essay by critic Forbes Watson in *The Arts*. Watson knew Sheeler through the Whitney Studio Club, where director Juliana Force organized special exhibitions, group shows, and studio classes for young artists in New York City. In his essay on Sheeler, Watson put forth several interpretations of the artist's oeuvre that would be echoed by other critics in succeeding years and generations. His central argument, clearly inspired by Sheeler's drawings of Bucks County barns (one of which was illustrated in the article), was that the artist's sensibility could be linked to an American aesthetic tradition of structural efficiency, clarity, and a lack of ostentation (fig. 9). Using terms such as "strength," "taste," and "refinement," he then begged readers to "let



Fig. 6. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room, with Easel*, 1929. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ "", W. 9 $\frac{5}{8}$ ". (© Lane Collection; photo, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

me ... refer once more to early American furniture because, in its best examples, we find a pure abstract of taste and because early American furniture is one of Charles Sheeler's admirations, and an artist's admirations are as good a key to his outlook as anything except his own work. Moreover, in the clean-cut fineness, the cool austerity, the complete distrust of superfluities which we find in some pieces of early American furniture, I seem to see the American root of Sheeler's art."¹⁰

In 1931, when Edith Halpert staged Sheeler's first one-person show at the Downtown Gallery, she too linked Sheeler to this idea of an American aesthetic tradition: "Mr. Sheeler's paintings and drawings show a distinct connection with the work

of the Colonial and early American painters, and the Folk Artists of the early 19th century."¹¹ In this show, which included only six oil paintings, Sheeler displayed his two newest additions to the Interiors group: *Americana* and *Home, Sweet Home*, the latter of which was reproduced on the cover of the exhibition brochure. By the time Rourke argued in her 1938 biography that Sheeler had "discovered forms that were basic in American creative experience, *Urformen*—forms which for us are source forms," she was building on a well-established critical scaffold.¹²

Ambivalence

Despite its numerous proponents, the critical discourse linking Sheeler to a tradition of unadorned

¹⁰ Forbes Watson, "Charles Sheeler," *The Arts* 3 (May 1923): 337, 338. Watson and Force were also lovers during the 1920s. Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* (New York: Athenaeum, 1990), 164, 185–87.

¹¹ Halpert, quoted in Corn, *Great American Thing*, 324.

¹² Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 69.



Fig. 7. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Interior*, 1929. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 7 $\frac{5}{16}$ " W. 9 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". (© Lane Collection; photo, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

American furniture and early folk-like painting did not entirely define the terms by which he was understood in the interwar decades. In the early 1930s, when Sheeler effectively relaunched his career as a painter with the solo exhibit at the Downtown Gallery, *Home, Sweet Home* and *Americana* were shown in a variety of venues.¹³ The diversity of critical responses to the paintings in these years should encourage a reconsideration of the centrality of this celebratory ideology in his work. Indeed, most reviews were surprisingly reticent about his alleged nationalist artistic heritage. The *New York Times* review of the Downtown Gallery exhibition was typical in referring to the “old rugs and furniture” and “old

table” in *Home, Sweet Home* and *Americana*: the adjective described the objects in a generic way, but did little to tie Sheeler to a particular historical tradition. William McCormick in the *New York American* described the chair in *Home, Sweet Home* with greater specificity, calling it “an early American rush-bottomed chair,” but neither his nor any other exhibition review dwelled on aesthetic affinities between Sheeler and the content of his interiors.¹⁴

¹³ For the importance of the 1931 Downtown Gallery show in Sheeler’s career, see Carol Troyen, “Photography, Painting, and Charles Sheeler’s *View of New York*,” *Art Bulletin* 86 (December 2004): 731–49.

¹⁴ H. V. D., “Art: Charles Sheeler’s Exhibition”; W. B. McCormick, “Machine Age Debunked,” *New York American*, November 26, 1931, reel NSH-1, frame 432, CSP-AAA. In the fall of 1932 and in the summer of 1934, *Americana* was included in group shows and was singled out by critics. In neither case, however, was the painting discussed as an emblem of the American past. E. C. Sherburne noted the “machine age patternings of the floor coverings,” in “A New American Biennial,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 26, 1932, 8; and Edward Alden Jewell called the painting “cleverly patterned” in “New Exhibit Opens at Grand Central,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1934, 19.



Fig. 8. Charles Sheeler, *South Salem, Living Room*, 1929. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ " , W. 9 $\frac{7}{16}$ ". (© Lane Collection; photo, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

Instead, critics were tellingly divided about Sheeler's treatment of the objects in his paintings—what William Carlos Williams later called Sheeler's "eye for the thing."¹⁵ Some critics felt that his minutely observed interiors indicated a love for the subject, while others argued that his portrayals verged on the clinical. The *Art News* praised *Americana* as "another triumph of Mr. Sheeler's slow but sustained investigations," an approach that imparted a "super-sensuous quality" and "special vitality and charm," while McCormick described the paintings as possessing "the most affectionate precision."¹⁶ However, the critic for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Eleanor Jewett, writing about *Home, Sweet Home* in a group exhibit in January 1932, argued

¹⁵ William Carlos Williams, "Introduction," in *Charles Sheeler* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 8.

¹⁶ "Charles Sheeler," *Art News* 30, November 21, 1931, 8; McCormick, "Machine Age."

the opposite: "It is objective painting, austere, impersonal. The drawing is perfect; the coloring pure, clear and cold, although repeatedly very lovely. One gets from these pictures something of the feel of a near approach to the person of a terrifying surgeon, immaculate in white, with instruments of glittering edge in hands eager to probe."¹⁷ Through Jewett's metaphors, Sheeler's tightly calibrated composition and all-but-invisible brushwork were signs not of lovingly attentive observation, but rather of clinical obsession veering on the violent.

Competing interpretations of sensuousness and clinical sterility indicate divided opinions among critics, but, more importantly, they point to a central ambivalence in the American Interiors canvases. If ambivalence is the state of possessing "simultaneous and contradictory attitudes and feelings toward an

¹⁷ Eleanor Jewett, "Modern Paintings Shown at Arts Club," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 24, 1932, D6.

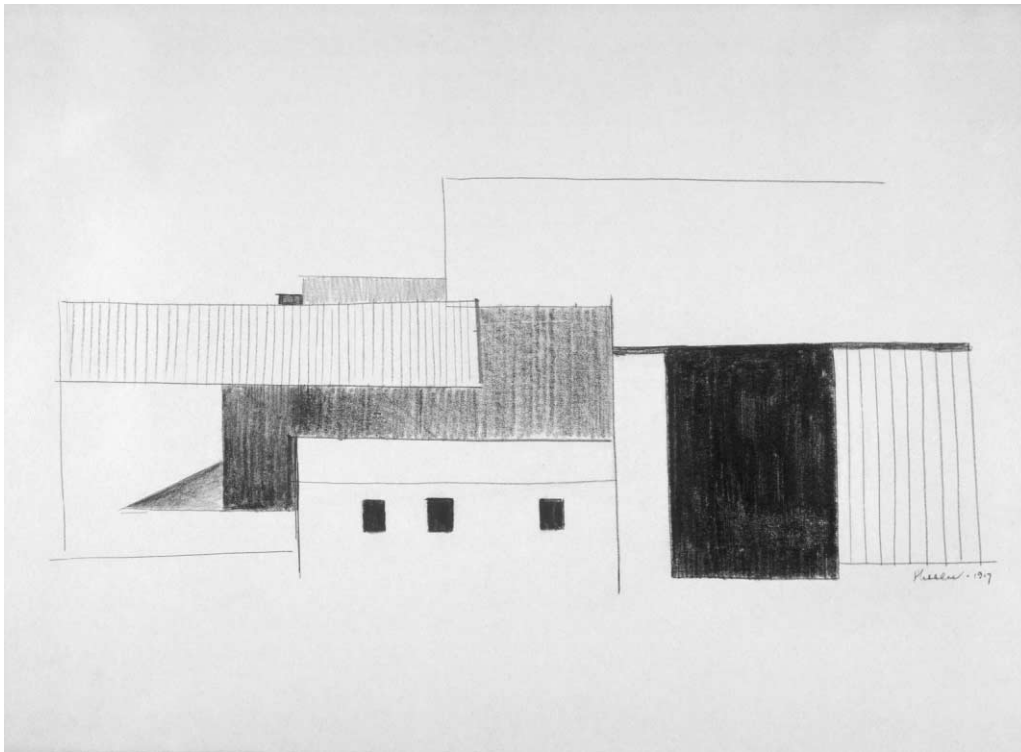


Fig. 9. Charles Sheeler, "Barn Abstraction," 1917. Fabricated black chalk on off-white wove paper; H. 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", W. 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". (Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950, Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

object," then in each of the four paintings, Sheeler expresses ambivalence by simultaneously constructing and deconstructing his historical objects.¹⁸ He offers up carefully—even tenderly—rendered objects, only to fracture them and cause viewers to question what they are seeing. Objects literally fall apart in these canvases as they pass through Sheeler's cubist lens. The massive trestle table in *Interior* loses a foot as it passes behind the side table, and the side table itself, with its spidery legs, threatens to topple over. In *Americana*, the table top crowds out everything in the room, but it is curiously disembodied: it hovers in the air with no legs visible, and the carved slat-back chair obtrudes on its rectangular perfection in the lower left. The ladder-back chair in *Home, Sweet Home*, perhaps anxiously awaiting dissection at the hands of Jewett's "terrifying surgeon," begins to come undone—its left arm is, upon closer examination, lengthened and attenuated almost to the point of breaking, and its woven seat falls slightly out of perspective—and its shadow strains to escape the surgeon's approach by reaching toward the staircase. The chair in *American Interior* experiences what the previous one feared: it is pulled awk-

wardly off the top of the canvas, its top slat wrenched out of alignment.

Sheeler's ambivalence is evident at the level of painterly application as well, where painstaking brushwork yields surprising passages of abstraction, as if the artist had looked so intently that he realized he could not truly see the object. The viewer of these canvases has the recurring sensation of simultaneously perceiving minutely rendered detail and witnessing its complete dissolution. The pewter plate in *Interior* has a gleaming reflective surface that dissolves into a wash of gray. The oval box on the table in *Americana* seems to be Shaker, but without the telltale swallowtail tabs one cannot be sure; and in fact the brown brushwork is so abstract that one is not even confident the box is made of wood. In the rag rugs in *Home, Sweet Home*, the slightly irregular path traced by the brush is evident for each single stripe of color, and the rug thus loses its woven structure and its integrity as an object. Finally, the floral-rimmed plate in *American Interior* is in a perpetual state of just-coming-into-focus; its design is rendered with loose touches of the tip of the brush that refuse, ultimately, to cohere in a tight, illusionistic representation. Sheeler's paintings embody that kind of deep absorption that constantly

¹⁸ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.

veers into utter distraction, that kind of deep absorption that ultimately dismantles absorption. His ambivalence about what he is able to see induces similar ambivalence in the viewer: the longer one stares at the canvases, the more things fall apart.

In Sheeler's paintings, a visual and cognitive aporia occurs: the more we (and he) try to grasp the identity of the objects in the paintings, the more they resist definition. As he simultaneously delineates and dissolves his subjects, he seems to be tracing a deeply ambivalent philosophical path in which he both cherishes and destroys them, both claims to know them and insists that objective comprehension is impossible. Indeed, in pointing to the limitations of illusionism, he reveals his own deeper engagement with the theoretical foundations of cubism, which proposed that a "fuller comprehension" of the world cannot be made through "the more or less verisimilar optic image which describes the object from a single viewpoint."¹⁹ Instead, cubism's radical proposition was that objects might be best understood as existing in space and through time, from multiple perspectives and across anecdotal change—an understanding that cannot, ultimately, be condensed to a single, illusionistic image. Sheeler's use of cubism in these canvases—flattening the spaces, fragmenting and dissolving the objects—is thus not merely a language of form, but a language through which to question the known world. After seeing cubist painting in the Armory Show in 1913, Sheeler described his own explorations in abstraction along these same lines: "The identification of familiar objects comprising a picture is too often mistaken for an appreciation of the work itself and a welcome opportunity for a cessation of investigation. For this reason it was the intention of the abstractionists to divorce the object from the dictionary and disintegrate its identity."²⁰ Although he had clearly returned to a level of figurative representation in the *American Interiors*, Sheeler preserved an irreducible level of abstraction and thus pointed to the difficulty of objectively perceiving and knowing these objects. Through his application of paint to these canvases, Sheeler questions how clearly such objects can be seen and, more fundamentally, how thoroughly they can be known. And, as these objects physically fall apart, he asks how much metaphorical

weight can be put on them. Perhaps the cornerstones of an American artistic foundation are not so readily grasped, and America, like American material things, is not so easily understood.

Parallel instances of definition and disintegration—of ambivalent embrace and dismissal—occur in some of the key texts on folk art and furniture published in the 1920s and 1930s. These texts were written by curators, collectors, and critics who shared with Sheeler an interest in early American vernacular artifacts, and who, together with Sheeler, constituted an active intellectual community where the meaning of such objects was debated. The difficulty that these authors had in defining a folk tradition, and the critical judgments they offered on the quality of this art, demonstrate a pervasive ambivalence: they all agreed this material was important, but as their focus tightened and their examination of the material deepened, they grew progressively more uncertain as to its level of importance.

Curator Holger Cahill wrote numerous articles and essays in which he introduced American folk art to a general public. Cahill worked with Edith Halpert to establish folk art as significant (and collectible) American art; in addition to the pioneering exhibitions that he organized at the Newark Museum in 1930 and 1931, he staged the high-profile 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900*.²¹ In his essay for the *American Folk Art* catalog, Cahill used his preferred technique for defining folk art: he compared it negatively against other art forms. This strategy in itself reveals certain ambivalences. Cahill wanted his readers to see the art, but his inability to positively describe it suggested, however subconsciously, that perhaps it was not worth seeing. Repeated negative definitions throughout the essay bred confusion and unease for the reader, and ultimately the text conveyed a hesitancy about the core identity—and thus value—of folk art. Cahill began by contrasting folk art with "professional" art. "The work of these men is folk art because it is the expression of the common

¹⁹ Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, from *The Rise of Cubism* (1915), excerpted in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 206, 207.

²⁰ Reel Nsh-1, frame 75, CSP-AAA.

²¹ The exhibition consisted almost entirely of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's collection, although this was unstated in the catalog and the press. Rockefeller had purchased a significant portion of her collection through Edith Halpert with Cahill's advice; Rockefeller was also an important patron of Sheeler at this time. The catalog for the exhibition is: Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932). For an assessment of Cahill's training and its ambivalent influence on his approach to folk art, see John Michael Vlach, "Holger Cahill as Folklorist," *Journal of American Folklore* 98, no. 388 (April–June 1985): 148–62.

people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment. It is not the expression of professional artists made for a small cultured class, and it has little to do with the fashionable art of its period.” If the distinction between “professional” and “folk” was (for the moment) clear, Cahill’s next distinction, between “folk” and “craft,” was less so. He wrote, “It [folk art] does not come out of an academic tradition passed on by school, but out of a craft tradition plus the personal quality of the rare craftsman who is an artist. . . . It does not include the work of the craftsmen who made American silver, glass, or furniture, except when their work carried over into the fine arts.”²² Folk art was thus a product of the craft community, but was more art than craft; it was not so much art, however, as to be “professional art.” It occupied a profoundly liminal space: neither professional art nor craft yet constituted by both, relying on the skills of the latter and the forms and standards of the former. As he tried to forge a concrete definition, the object of his inquiry became ever more elusive. The reader, in turn, was left with a growing uncertainty about which activities (and products) could be considered folk art.

Although the elusive materiality of Sheeler’s painted objects was a conscious effect, Cahill’s rhetorical struggles to define folk art were perhaps less intentional. The curator did, however, display self-conscious ambivalence about the qualitative value of folk art. He offered a blunt assessment of folk portraiture, observing that “the painters’ method of working and their limited training made for a certain monotony, and for a tendency to use formulae in the painting of stock figures.”²³ He then concluded his essay with a fundamentally cautious statement about the value of folk art, insisting that “any judgment upon American folk art at this time can represent little more than a personal opinion.” “Folk art cannot be valued as highly as the work of our greatest painters and sculptors,” he reminded his readers, “but it is certainly entitled to a place in the history of American art. When compared with the work of our secondary masters it holds its own quite well.”²⁴ Cahill was not alone in issuing half-apologetic, half-defensive analyses of the quality of folk art; a reluctant and often skeptical tone pervaded several early discussions of this category of art. Homer Eaton Keyes, founder of *Antiques*, offered a typical assessment of nineteenth-century

folk art in an early article, admitting that such works had formal deficiencies but insisting nonetheless on a cautious appreciation: “The discerning eye will recognize in many [paintings]—despite curious inadequacies of draftsmanship, and, at times, an almost perverse distortion of bodily proportions—the evidence of artistic sensibility, and—within limits—of considerable technical precision.”²⁵ Edward Alden Jewell, reviewing one of Cahill’s Newark Museum shows in 1931, was more reticent about the artistic value of the objects on display, preferring instead to assert their historic significance: “Not every primitive weathervane and parlor gimcrack is to be accepted as a transcendent work of art. There are naively beautiful, even upon occasion subtly beautiful, examples among the objects now being brought to light. But it would seem that the supreme virtue of all this folk art is its significance as background, solidifying and enriching a nation’s fund of tradition.”²⁶ In pronouncements such as these, critics were posing questions that resonate with the deconstructing, dissolving objects in Sheeler’s paintings. All seem to agree that vernacular art has value, but they equivocate on what kind. As they ponder—abstract aesthetic sensibility? historical significance? something else?—the very terms by which the art shall be known hang in the balance. And as the definition of folk art comes in and out of focus, its durability as a national aesthetic cornerstone is interrogated.²⁷

A final example of the curious ambivalence that permeated the Americana discourse can be found in the publications of Edward and Faith Andrews, the famous early collectors of Shaker furniture. They published their first article on Shaker furniture in *Antiques* in 1928 and their foundational book, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect*, in 1937. A notable feature of their early writings was their tendency to present

²⁵ Homer Eaton Keyes, “Some American Primitives,” *Antiques* 12 (August 1927): 120.

²⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “Contemporary and ‘Folk,’” *New York Times*, October 25, 1931, X12. In her perceptive study of Constance Rourke, Joan Shelley Rubin also notes passages in her writings that indicate “doubts” or “ambivalence” about the value of American folk literature: Joan Shelley Rubin, “A Convergence of Vision: Constance Rourke, Charles Sheeler, and American Art,” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (June 1990): 202, 212.

²⁷ A recent study of the Index of American Design emphasizes the place of folk art collecting in that project. The authors discuss at least two competing ways that folk art was valued—esthetically and ethnographically—which underscores the complex intellectual climate traced here. See Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, and Erika Doss, *Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art and University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²² Cahill, *American Folk Art*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

Shaker furniture in terms that resonated with contemporary definitions of modernist design. In their 1928 article, they argued that the communal furniture-making process "helped to standardize the original type-forms" of Shaker objects; their choice of words cast Shaker production as a proto-assembly-line model of efficiency, and Shaker pieces themselves as paragons of "type-form" functionalism. They also described the Shaker design process as one that adhered to the modernist decree to abolish ornament: "In discarding all unnecessary embellishment and artifice, they reduced these earlier designs [eighteenth-century models] to their essentials of form and proportion, and, in so doing, achieved distinctly beautiful results."²⁸ Their decision to frame Shaker furniture as protomodernist had two undoubtedly intended effects: it made the objects seem familiar, and it justified their plainness. Yet the modernist frame also points to a deeper ambivalence, since it insists on the presentness of the objects even as they are being resurrected as emblems of the past. They made Shaker furniture knowable as modern objects, but ultimately unknowable as historical artifacts.

A more extreme form of present-day vision displacing knowledge of the past occurred in the 1937 *Shaker Furniture*, which was illustrated by the photographer William F. Winter. Winter's photographs of Shaker interiors appeared to be documentary studies of rooms furnished as they were used: in fig. 10, for example, he captured a dormitory room with a single bed, clothing rack, and stray hanger, and through the doorway, a communal washstand and mirror. However, as the Andrewses explained, the photographs were, in fact, entirely staged, and consisted largely of their own collection, arranged in a few rooms at the communities in Mount Lebanon, New York, and Hancock, Massachusetts. They admitted that they adhered to "formalities of arrangement" and that "the placement of objects followed the ordinary rules of pictorial technique." They also hypothesized about the "somewhat stark, austere effect which the early interiors must have presented," and assured their readers that the anti-septic light and rigid lines of the photographs did not constitute "historic incorrectness." Ultimately, they stated, "every effort was made to evoke the spirit

²⁸ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, "Craftsmanship of an American Religious Sect," *Antiques* 14 (August 1928): 134, 135. For critical assessments of the Andrewses' role in popularizing Shaker furniture, see John T. Kirk, *The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 239–40; Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 38–81.

of the original scene, as we imagined it to be."²⁹ Although one might examine these images for information about the Shaker past, they were purely modern constructs. No amount of in-depth looking would reveal historical truth—it would only lead the viewer back to history as the Andrewses imagined it.

Winter's dormitory photograph merits further interpretation. Although it depicts a room and a hallway beyond, the even play of light against the uniform white walls and dark woodwork creates an optical illusion: the viewer momentarily loses her sense of depth, and the doorway seems to be a large mirror or picture frame, holding its image within the plane of the wall just as the row of storage pegs adhere to the wall. As one experiences this spatial confusion, the dormitory room momentarily becomes a hermetically sealed space. There is no exit, only the constant reflection into the room. Indeed, even after the viewer has resolved the pictorial space, the mirror hanging in the hallway, reflecting the threshold of the room, reenacts the sense of an enclosed space that reflects only upon itself. If this photograph is a metaphor for knowledge about Shaker furniture, it proposes that one might never know this subject at all. Never able to cross the threshold of the room and travel down the hall to examine the rest of the dorm, one may be forever trapped, staring at a space and a story of one's own construction.

Although the Andrewses expressed their "indebtedness" to Winter's photographic aesthetic, the historical evidence suggests that the authors, in fact, influenced Winter's images.³⁰ Winter had been photographing Shaker communities in Hancock and Mount Lebanon since the early 1920s. His photographs prior to his collaboration with the Andrewses portray irregularities of life, and have softer lines, warmer blacks and grays, and an intense if quiet emotionality (fig. 11). The Andrewses' modernist aesthetic sensibility undoubtedly contributed to the more rigorous austerity of his images for *Shaker Furniture*, but another possible source was Sheeler's own photographs of Mount Lebanon Shaker Village, taken circa 1934, and possibly his American Interiors canvases or photographs (fig. 12). The Andrewses had met Juliana Force, Sheeler's early supporter and fellow collector of

²⁹ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (1937; reprint, New York: Dover, 1964), 65.

³⁰ Ibid. On the place of Winter's photographs in the Andrewses' scholarship, see Stephen Bove and Peter Richmond, *Selling Shaker: The Commodification of Shaker Design in the Twentieth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 1.



Fig. 10. William F. Winter, *Room with Bed and Towel Rack*, ca. 1936. (Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection, Winterthur Library.)

Shaker objects, in 1932, and through her it is likely they learned of Sheeler's art.³¹ Winter's dormitory image specifically shares the doorframe device with Sheeler's own photograph in figure 7, and in general Winter's later photographs share with the *American Interiors* a tendency toward claustrophobia. In Sheeler's canvases, not only do the architectural spaces slide out from under the viewer's feet, but the objects crowd her out of the space and there are no doors or windows through which to escape; even the staircase in *Home, Sweet Home* is flattened as it approaches the top of the canvas, losing the necessary structural integrity to carry someone out of

the room. In these jewel-like spaces, the artifacts make no room for a human user, and Sheeler seems to be questioning how well these antiques can engage with the needs of contemporary society. That Winter's photographs for *Shaker Furniture* deploy some of the same formal strategies as Sheeler's paintings—and seem to express some of the same philosophical ambivalence about the substance of an American artistic tradition—should not be taken as a sign of specific influence. Rather, it is evidence of the deep-rooted ambivalence that permeated the discourse of discovering America's aesthetic heritage.

³¹ For Winter's work before *Shaker Furniture*, see Kirk, *Shaker World*, 240–42; David A. Schorsch, *The Photographs of William F. Winter, Jr., 1899–1939* (New York: David A. Schorsch, 1989), pl. 3–25. Berman notes that Force provided the Andrewses "with the services of a photographer" after their meeting in 1932. It is possible that this photographer was Winter, since the Andrewses knew Winter by 1932, and Winter took photographs of the interior of the new Whitney Museum ca. 1933. Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 317; Schorsch, *Winter*, pl. 78–82.

Irony

In the 1931–32 season, as critics reflected on Sheeler's new group of paintings, several commented on the humor that they found. McCormick of the *New York American* said that the chair in *Home, Sweet Home* was



Fig. 11. William F. Winter, *Cobbler's Shop Interior, Mt. Lebanon, New York*, ca. 1923–30. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 10¾", W. 13½". (David A. Schorsch and Eileen M. Smiles, Woodbury, CT.)

"amusingly combined with domestic architecture and modern rugs." In his assessment, Sheeler's art made ironic commentary on a range of popular fads, from nostalgic views of the American past in *Home, Sweet Home* and *Americana* to the new craze for tanning (occasionally under artificial lights) in *Cactus*: "These last three pictures are indicative of his sense of humor, for he calls the chair subject 'Home, Sweet Home'; the game's table 'Americana,' and his cactus appears to be enjoying a sunbath judging by the electric light on its standard which the light bath craze has developed. Mr. Sheeler wins my enduring gratitude, since he always strips art of its artiness" (fig. 13).³²

³² McCormick, "Machine Age Debunked." The fad for sunbathing in the 1920s and early 1930s can be traced in newspaper and magazine advertisements for bathing suits. The *New York Times* noted in 1927 that the "latest fad of fashionable" British society was to host a tea party in which guests "are shown into a room lighted by sun-ray lamps. Low divans and cushions enable them to lie full

Henry McBride tossed a bit of his own sardonic wit into his review of Sheeler's Downtown Gallery show. Like McCormick, he saw *Cactus* as a reference to sunbathing: "The cactus is taking a hygienic bath in some kind of electric rays." He framed his discussion of the two Interiors paintings as exercises in clever visual puns, in which antique rugs and the distinctly modern shadows cast by hard electric lights rhyme with the patterns of cubist compositions. Conflating *Americana* and *Home, Sweet Home*, he wrote: "Still another picture is called 'Americana' and shows how a cute Yankee painter can get away with cubism in a country that says cubism is against the law. Old-fashioned hooked rugs are on the floor in the picture he has painted and they have the kind of patterns you see in early cubist pictures,

length while enjoying the beneficial rays from the lamps as they drink tea, gossip, or listen to the radio." "Sun-Lamp Parties London Fad; Guests Wear Bathing Suits," *New York Times*, March 6, 1927, 2.



Fig. 12. Charles Sheeler, *Doors to Meeting Hall, Mt. Lebanon Shaker Village*, ca. 1934. Photograph, gelatin silver print; H. 6 $\frac{7}{16}$ " , W. 8 $\frac{9}{16}$ ". (© Lane Collection; photo, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

accentuated by the lights and shadows that filter through a ladder-backed chair that stands against the light."³³ Chicago's critic Jewett, assessing Sheeler's work in another column from January 1932, proposed that amidst the coolness, austerity, and perhaps violence of his canvases, viewers would "find humor."³⁴

Where might the humor in these complicated paintings lie? While they may not be explicitly funny, they are laced with an ironic tone that often serves to critique the status of the objects depicted. It is this irony that critics seem to have interpreted as dry wit (Sheeler himself was described in Rourke's biography as possessing a "dry" sense of humor).³⁵

³³ Henry McBride, "Far-Reaching Effect: Paintings by Charles Sheeler," *New York Sun*, November 21, 1931, sporting section p. 12, Reel NSH-1, frame 432, CSP-AAA.

³⁴ Eleanor Jewett, "New Mexico and France Aid at Art Show," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 20, 1932, 15.

³⁵ Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 37.

There are two lenses through which Sheeler's use of irony can be interpreted. The first is the tradition of satire, often self-deprecating and subtle, described by Rourke in *American Humor* (1931). In her analysis, this distinctly American form of humor arose in early nineteenth-century traveling theatrical performances and eventually informed the voices of such literary figures as Mark Twain and even Henry James. It included an eye for "low-keyed satire," "understatement," "irony," and "faint masquerade."³⁶ Twain himself may have provided the best description of this dry, satirical tradition when he wrote: "The [American] humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything

³⁶ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931; reprint, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 25. Rubin also connects Sheeler's paintings to Rourke's study of humor, although she focuses on the question of myth-making in humor and its role in Sheeler's paintings. Rubin, "Convergence of Vision," 209.



Fig. 13. Charles Sheeler, *Cactus*, 1931. Oil on canvas; H. 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ "", W. 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". (Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950, Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

funny about it."³⁷ The second reference for irony in Sheeler's works is the absurdist wit of Dada. Sheeler spent his early years in New York City as part of the rambunctious crowd at Walter and Louise Arensberg's apartment, where Marcel Duchamp was the central figure. Although Sheeler never adopted the radical Dadaist gestures of the French artist, he evidently appreciated Duchamp's work. In 1924, he staged an exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club that featured five Duchamp canvases; in 1938, Sheeler described Duchamp's ready-mades in his biography: "a tin cup, a can-opener, an egg-beater, a strainer, arranging these in irrelevant combinations to which he gave strange titles. His humor never took the form of jokes but twists of expression."³⁸

³⁷ Mark Twain, "How to Tell a Story [1895]," in *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays, 1891–1910*, vol. 2, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York: Library of America, 1992), 201.

³⁸ Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 48. On Sheeler's Duchamp show, see Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 202.

Dadaist humor had an anarchic agenda, interrogating the politeness of bourgeois society and inverting it into bawdy chaos. William Carlos Williams further explained the appeal of this circle of artists: "There was a lot of humor in French painting, and a kind of loose carelessness. Morals were down and so were a lot of other things. For which everybody was very happy, relieved."³⁹

If irony is the use of a form to express the opposite of what it usually means, often to humorous effect, then irony can be found throughout the *American Interiors*, inflected with both a Twain-like dry satire and an absurdist Dada wit. Sheeler's irony takes shots at multiple targets: it laughs at the objects, at antiquarian collectors who romanticize and idealize the past, and at this collector himself, who is not always immune to covetous or sentimental imaginings. In the earliest painting, *Interior*, the attenuation of the side table's legs can be seen as an ironic distortion of an essential Shaker trait. Shaker objects were usually praised for their lightness, but in Sheeler's painting, the slenderly proportioned legs are overly extended.⁴⁰ As if caught in a fun-house mirror, where the proper world is distorted into Dadaist absurdity, the table's legs appear to be elastic, stretched thin beyond reason. Sheeler ironizes the supposed gracefulness of such objects and also, by creating a table that cannot stay upright on its four thin legs, satirizes their cherished functionality. Moreover, its alternate title, *Interior, South Salem*, introduces autobiography and low-keyed self-deprecation to the work: I too, Sheeler seems to say, make an extreme fetish of the Shaker economy of form.⁴¹

In *Home, Sweet Home*, the ladder-back chair sits next to a modern furnace rather than an open hearth. The replacement of the fire by the furnace is a classic Dada gesture—substituting the mechanical for the organic—which thumbs its nose simultaneously at an antiquarian's nostalgia for the premodern world and a modernist's obsession with the mechanical present. The title of the painting itself is an example of a Dada-like "twist of expression." "Home, Sweet Home" is taken, as Wanda Corn documented, from the title of the sentimental, nineteenth-century folk song that celebrates the sanctuary of a pastoral "thatched cottage" home: "To thee, I'll return, overburdened with care / The heart's dearest solace will smile on me there."

³⁹ Quoted in Rourke, *Charles Sheeler*, 49.

⁴⁰ For the lightness of Shaker objects, see Walter A. Dyer, "The Furniture of the Shakers," *House Beautiful* 65 (May 1929): 672.

⁴¹ For the painting's alternate title, see Troyen and Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler*, 110.

Sheeler's home is hardly pastoral, with its gleaming modern furnace; and if the hearth traditionally symbolizes "the heart's dearest solace," here the solace has turned, ironically, cool and metallic. In this home, warmth does not come from layers of emotional and physical connection, but rather is efficiently manufactured. The chair, moreover, seems ambivalent about the modern home to which it has "returned": one foot is placed on the furnace's foundation almost as if by accident, while its shadow leans away.⁴²

In *Americana*, Sheeler's ironic eye informs the large refectory table (referred to by McCormick as a "game's table"), which hovers above the floor. Such a table would have been used to gather a large group together for communal dining. In Sheeler's room, however, the table takes on an exaggerated, even grandiose sense of its own importance. It looms far too large in the space, and instead of drawing people to it, seems to crowd everything else out. The random objects on the table are isolated from one another, as if the surface was simply too vast to allow for social interaction. In its vain attempt to facilitate human community, Sheeler's table subtly satirizes the romantic imagination that would place merry diners hip-to-hip on the benches and at either end. Instead, all one sees is a disjointed collection of inanimate artifacts, or "Americana" as in the painting's title. The term "Americana" referred, in 1931, to both historical American artifacts and to the popular fad for all things supposedly historic and American.⁴³ Sheeler's title thus proposes a kind of double entendre. It describes the historical character of the objects in the painting, but it also points to the sheer materiality of the objects on view—a cacophony of collector's goods jammed together within the confines of the canvas.

Irony—in the form of satire and Dadaist absurdity—appeared in the contemporaneous literature on folk art as well, where it often was used to express doubt about the value of the artifacts. According to Corn, Dadaist wit coursed through the 1924 folk art show staged at the Whitney Studio Club, organized by Henry Schnakenberg. At this early date, many artists who collected folk art

enjoyed it partly for its subversiveness: much like Duchamp's ready-mades, they considered folk art's uncommonly rough forms to be a challenge to the politeness of good taste embodied in high-style antiquarian collections like that of the Metropolitan's American Wing, under construction that very year.⁴⁴ Indeed, the formal awkwardness of some folk art pieces made them unintentionally funny to modern eyes. The *New York Times* noted that "there is much, of course, that is funny" in the Whitney show, singling out "'Solomon's Wise Decree' with the baby being held upside down by one leg."⁴⁵ Yet several reviewers suspected that the entire show was staged as a joke on the audience, and responded with mild scolding. One warned the "younger painters" of the Studio Club not to be too enamored of "a joke in paint": "to be perpetually joking is to kill all the fun; we must be serious if only to be relieved of the necessity of laughing."⁴⁶

A year later, a critic in *International Studio* published a reproduction of a folk painting, which he titled *Dover Baby*, and proposed that his working date of "possibly seventeenth century" could be corroborated by a scholar who could date the style of the bottle held by the baby (fig. 14).⁴⁷ The following month, his colleague wrote this tongue-in-cheek response to the vexing question of dating: "I was seized by the antiquarian urge. And, allowing for the isometric drawing of the bottle in the portrait, the duplicate was found. Not, as one might suppose, in a museum or collector's case, but in that of a druggist on Sixth Avenue. Moreover, the bottle contained a mixture guaranteed to promote the growth of hair. I looked again at the portrait, noted the astonishing hirsute accomplishments of the child. Here, I said, is a great discovery—the first Early American advertisement."⁴⁸ In his satire of the scholarly connoisseur, he managed to poke fun at both the collector and the collected object without cracking a smile.

⁴⁴ Corn, *Great American Thing*, 322, 326. For more on the relationship between Duchamp and folk art collecting, see Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 202.

⁴⁵ "Art Exhibitions of the Week," *New York Times*, February 17, 1924, sect. 10, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Virgil Barker, "Notes on the Exhibitions," *The Arts* 5 (March 1924): 161. The *New York Times* similarly lectured the Studio group by celebrating "the type of humor that prevailed well into the nineteenth century ... [which] was bold and brave. Not a trace of innuendo, and that is the unfortunate taint in much of the modernist art that has plenty of wit but less than enough good taste." "The World of Art," *New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 1924, 12.

⁴⁷ Guy Eglington, "Art and Other Things," *International Studio* 80 (February 1925): 417.

⁴⁸ Deogh Fulton, "Cabbages and Kings," *International Studio* 80 (March 1925): 489.

⁴² Corn also discusses the possibility of irony in Sheeler's title: "As a title it both mocked the Victorian sentimentality of the original song and indulged a little in it." Corn, *Great American Thing*, 295, 313.

⁴³ A typical instance of the latter use of the term can be seen in an art review, where Edward Alden Jewell commented that N. C. Wyeth's canvas *In a Dream I Met General Washington* was "an addition, it should probably be esteemed, to the ever-increasing fund of Americana." Jewell, "Corcoran Art Show at Capital Opens," *New York Times*, December 4, 1932, 33.



Fig. 14. *Unidentified Baby*, possibly Dover, NJ, probably ca. 1840. Oil on canvas; H. 26", W. 21". (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA.)

Even the self-consciously serious photographs by Winter for *Shaker Furniture* occasionally have a hint of irony. In another plate from the book (assembled in the same space as fig. 10), Winter and the Andrewses arranged eight examples of Shaker chairs to either side of a doorway (fig. 15). The chairs face each other, leaning slightly back and occasionally to the side as anthropomorphized substitutes for the people who might sit in them. Rather than a meeting of elders, Winter has stumbled upon a meeting of chairs. He not only satirizes the revered elders, however. As the chairs confer, one is forced to consider whether their status as collector's objects—as pure material value—is what gives them this human identity. By using irony to reveal the seduction and allure of the marketplace, Winter speaks truth to power and edges toward Dadaist subversion.

Americana

There is one painting in the American Interiors group that does not lend itself to humorous reflection: the 1934 *American Interior*. This canvas was

painted the year after Sheeler's wife, Katherine, died, and it depicts the home in South Salem, New York, that they had left in 1932. The painting is frequently understood as a personal statement of mourning: it refers back to the home where he and Katherine lived happily and healthily; the woman painted on the plate, trapped under glass, could represent her as a frozen memory; and the center of the canvas is a shadowy void.⁴⁹ Although the painting engages in an act of chronological subterfuge—it depicts a house in which the painter no longer resides—it is very deeply rooted in the specifics of the painter's biography. Sheeler adds another element of the contemporary world in the form of *New Yorker* magazines stacked at the end of the bed in the painting's upper left corner. Without the knowledge of the painter's life, this detail alone suffices to place the scene in the cultural moment of the United States in the 1920s or 1930s.

In his 1923 article on Sheeler, Forbes Watson proposed that as an artist, Sheeler was uninterested in conveying temporal specificity: "the temporary aspect of the barn does not interest him in the least—how it looks in the morning mist or the noonday sun, or under any other transitory effects of light."⁵⁰ Sheeler's allegiance to the "essential" as opposed to the "accidental" became a common theme in critical accounts of his work in the ensuing decades.⁵¹ Timelessness may not, however, be an entirely appropriate framework for interpreting the American Interiors canvases. Just as Sheeler's comment about antique objects, which opened this essay, indicated a preoccupation with the past as a precise entity, so too each of these four canvases includes elements from the interwar years, elements that mark the scenes as temporally specific. The furnace in *Home, Sweet Home* is the most obvious: its streamlined form was a clear reference to "the sort so often admired, according to the advertisements, by immaculate ladies and gentlemen in evening clothes."⁵² Sheeler's decision to compose the canvas with a flight of stairs in the corner recalls a common visual trope in furnace advertising and seems intended to confuse: is this a basement or a living room (fig. 16)? In *Americana*, the backgammon board is an emblem of the game's raging popularity

⁴⁹ I would like to acknowledge Robin Jaffee Frank, who suggested to me the symbolic interpretation of the woman on the ceramic plate. See also Troyen and Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler*, 154.

⁵⁰ Watson, "Charles Sheeler," 341.

⁵¹ Parker, "The Classical Vision of Charles Sheeler," 68.

⁵² Ernest Brace, "Charles Sheeler," *Creative Art* 11 (October 1932): 104. Troyen notes at least one description of *Home, Sweet Home* as a basement room. Troyen and Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler*, 136.



Fig. 15. William F. Winter, *Room with Eight Chairs*, ca. 1936. (Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection, Winterthur Library.)

in late-1920s society; and Ernest Brace, writing in 1932, noted that the painting combined “in one composition the eighteenth and twentieth centuries ... an early American blanket ... hooked rugs ... [and] a piece of very up-to-date linoleum.”⁵³ The earliest canvas in the series, *Interior*, has no obvious reference to the present day of the 1920s. Yet its agitated, visible brushwork, so different from the other canvases, can be interpreted as a signifier of the irreducible moment of its creation. From an

⁵³ Brace, “Sheeler,” 104. Brace’s “up-to-date linoleum” may have been in reference to the geometric pattern in the painting’s upper left; however, the photograph in figure 6 reveals that the item is a rug, not linoleum. Backgammon’s popularity in the late 1920s and early 1930s was aptly described by Clare Boothe Luce in *Vanity Fair’s Backgammon to Win* (1930; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster in association with Condé Nast, 1974), in which she explained that new strategies for gambling had “lifted Backgammon from the dry plains of strategy and science to the adventurous and romantic heights of an exciting gambling game, a game which is peculiarly suited to the modern scene and temperament” (n.p.).

iconographic perspective, the broad hooked rug in the lower portion of the canvas can be understood not merely as an antique product, but more specifically as a collectible item that reached the height of its popularity in the 1920s. Advertisements abounded for hooked rugs offered by dealers, auction houses, and retail establishments during this decade, and historian Russell Lynes noted that “in the twenties ... there was a boom in hand-hooked rugs, and you could buy them at New England filling stations when you paused for gas.”⁵⁴

The dual identity of the hooked rug—as historical artifact and contemporary collectible—actually applies to all of the objects in Sheeler’s paintings, and raises a fundamental question about their content. These paintings are less about American

⁵⁴ Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1954), 238–39.



Fig. 16. George Shepherd, "Here Is a great Fireman," 1930. From *House Beautiful* 68 (September 1930): 277. (Iron Fireman.)

objects and their history than they are about the culture of twentieth-century Americana collecting. They provide no historical context in which to learn about the pieces' origins; rather, their only context is other collectible goods. As rooms filled with historical artifacts that are also desirable commodities, Sheeler's canvases beg comparison with the museum installation technique made popular by the Metropolitan's American Wing, the period room.

As a cultural phenomenon, the American Wing rooms were significant in part for the historical lessons they imparted; as one official at the Metropolitan noted, period rooms gave the public a sense of daily life in the historical past and thus "presented the arts humanly."⁵⁵ But perhaps more importantly,

⁵⁵ Henry W. Kent, "The American Wing in Its Relation to the History of Museum Development," *An American Wing for the*



Fig. 17. Parlor, Powel House, Philadelphia, 1765–66, remodeled 1769–71; view as installed October 1924. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918; photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY.)

period rooms provided a veneer of respectability to the fad for all things colonial. After the American Wing opened, it was quickly hailed by commercial outfits as a reputable model for consumers in terms of both the objects shown and the values embodied therein; the museum's own publicity images, showing models "living" in the rooms, encouraged such readings (fig. 17). The Erskine-Danforth Corporation explained, in an advertisement in *House Beautiful* from March 1925, that its line of colonial revival furniture could be readily understood in relation to the "three great periods of American design," as represented in "the new American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum." The company explained that its products were "so direct and genuine that they bring

the truth of traditions ... to all homes where good taste, quaint interest, and comfortable dignity are valued" (fig. 18). *Ladies' Home Journal* reported to its readers in May 1925 that "it is not merely material for club papers that [the housewife] finds in the American Wing, but something more vital—a practical inspiration toward the furnishing of her own home."⁵⁶

If Sheeler's Interiors are related to period rooms, it is not because of their historical subject; indeed, they have no history. Instead, they may relate to period rooms because they, like the American Wing, could serve as models for a particular kind of lifestyle. Indeed, Sheeler's decision to include a photograph of his Ridgefield, Connecticut, home as a

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 17, pt. 2 (November 1922): 14.

⁵⁶ Ethel Davis Seal, "The American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Ladies' Home Journal* 42 (May 1925): 20.

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DANERSK FURNITURE as related to the three great periods of American design

R. H. T. Halsey, in his introduction to the handbook describing the new American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum, gives the clearest summary of the history of the utilitarian arts of the American Colonies and the Early Republic that has yet been presented. He divides it into three periods:

First Period: 1630 to 1725
 Second Period: 1725 to 1790
 Third Period: 1790 to 1825

In making Danersk Furniture in our New England factories we have specialized for the last ten years in furniture of the First and Third Periods. In the Second Period we have done little or nothing because of its extreme elaboration and Rococo influence of ornamentation which, if well done, is the most expensive and formal ever devised.

We have turned rather to the friendly forms of the First Period: tavern tables of oak, maple and pine; quaint cupboards; dignified walnut highboys; comfortable Queen Anne chairs and dining groups developed from the choicest examples of this era.

From the Third Period we have selected those delightful forms of 18th Century design, with their classic refinement of detail comprised by the American adaptations of Heppelwhite and Chippendale chairs; Pembroke tables by Duncan Phyfe and Sheraton; dining room, bedroom, and luxurious upholstered pieces for the living room.

These things need no special setting and are so direct and genuine that they bring the truth of traditions and hidden values of construction to all homes where good taste, quaint interest, and comfortable dignity are valued.

Our Chicago and New York salesrooms are the only places where Danersk Furniture can be seen. Your own dealer or decorator is familiar with our productions—all good decorators are. They will welcome your personal investigation of our furniture, and it is most important that you should see this furniture before purchasing for your home, if you value correct traditions in design.

DANBURY CUPBOARD OF WHITE WALNUT, FINISHED IN MELLOW AMBER TONES.



DUNCAN PHYFE LIBRARY OR BREAKFAST ROOM TABLE OF CUBAN MAHOGANY.



AMERICAN MAPLE CHAIR OF CHIPPENDALE INFLUENCE AND BUTTERFLY TABLE.



A GRACEFUL LAMP TABLE OF WALNUT WITH TRUMPET TURNINGS.



ERSKINE-DANFORTH CORPORATION, 383 Madison Avenue, New York City

Chicago Salesrooms
315 Michigan Avenue, North

Opposite the Ritz-Carlton Hotel
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL
Factories in New England

Distributor for Southern California
2869 West 7th Street, Los Angeles

Fig. 18. "Danersk Furniture as related to the three great periods of American design," 1925. From *House Beautiful* 57 (March 1925): 265.

frontispiece to his 1939 retrospective at MoMA indicates his own participation in the rhetoric of period rooms as designs for living: the photograph is positioned in the catalog not as a work of art but as a doc-

umentation of the artist's life, accompanied by the caption, "Photograph by Sheeler of his house at Ridgefield, showing several examples of Shaker furniture" (fig. 19). Placed on the page facing the



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

Fig. 19. Charles Sheeler, *Interior, Ridgefield* ["Photograph by Sheeler of his house at Ridgefield, showing several examples of Shaker furniture"], 1939. From *Charles Sheeler* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 12. (photo © Museum of Modern Art/ licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY.)

artist's chronology, it is parallel to the frontispiece for the entire catalog, which is a portrait of Sheeler by Edward Steichen; the interior is thus parallel to the man, and the room becomes a stand-in for the life of the artist. What kind of living might Sheeler's rooms represent? His paintings (and photographs)

depict rooms that are much more crowded, and considerably less formal, than those in the American Wing. Perhaps they convey an idea of community, of relaxed, casual living, embodied in the form of the always-present refectory table, the daybeds, and the prominent chairs. In Sheeler's own account,



Fig. 20. Cover, *House and Garden*, 1941, showing Sheeler's *American Interior*. From *House and Garden* 83 (February 1941). (Charles Sheeler/*House & Garden Magazine*, 1941 © Condé Nast Publications.)

the formal simplicity of Shaker objects and buildings fostered an openness and sense of exhilarating freedom: "No embellishment meets the eye, beauty of line and proportion through excellence of craftsmanship make its absence in no way an omission. The sense of light and spaciousness received upon

entering the auditorium [the Meetinghouse at Mount Lebanon] is indicative of the similar spiritual qualities of the Shakers. Instinctively one takes a deep inhalation, to capacity, as in the midst of some similarly moving and exalted association with nature. There were no dark corners in their lives

and their religion thrived on light rather than the envelopment of a dark mystery.”⁵⁷ In much the same way that his vernacular pieces challenged the high styles of the Metropolitan’s “three great periods,” Sheeler’s “period rooms” might be a decidedly spiritual, and perhaps bohemian, challenge to the pretentious “good taste” and “dignity” of living in the American Wing.

But Sheeler’s interiors have no people in them, demonstrating how they might be used—they lack human context as well as historical context. Far from providing open space for deep breathing, they seem to have no room for people with their flattened spaces and lack of doors. In contrast, even in the American Wing, visitors could walk into the rooms as far as the stanchions would allow.⁵⁸ In *Americana*, the casual detritus of human habitation on the tabletop—the backgammon game arrested, a note hanging off the edge of the table—is a hint that people may have been there recently, but for an unknown reason had to flee quickly. If these paintings engage a society’s penchant for fantasy interiors and model lifestyles, they do so only with deep ambivalence. The American Interiors satirize the public’s interest in prescriptive furnishing by depicting spaces that have social scripts ready to follow, but then ultimately providing no easy way to follow them. As they inject irony into the objects of collecting, so too these paintings ironize the display of those collections.

Finally, by inserting markers of the twentieth century in the latter three canvases, Sheeler could be satirizing the uniformity of each American Wing

⁵⁷ Reel N-Sh1, frame 119, CSP-AAA.

⁵⁸ Seal even reported that some women visiting the American Wing were known to “surreptitiously measure a table with a length of string,” indicating that the public could get fairly close to the objects on view. Seal, “The American Wing,” 20.

period room, which was furnished with objects from a strictly defined historical moment and apparently hermetically sealed against the pollutants of the modern era. Sheeler’s rooms, too, of course, seem to be hermetically sealed—but not against the twentieth century, rather against human inhabitants. It is revealing that when *American Interior* was reproduced as the cover of *House and Garden* in 1941, the image was compromised in only one way: the *New Yorkers* in the upper left were hidden by an inserted block of text advertising the “Double Number” (fig. 20). This bit of editing removed the reminder that the past is merely a modern-day fiction, and, it would seem, profoundly changed the work. Sheeler’s canvas was no longer an awkward, self-critical meditation on the appeal of American antiques; it served, instead, as fantasy lifestyle guide for “American Trends in Decoration.”

Sheeler’s American Interiors ultimately express the difficulty of constructing a “usable past.” In their absorbing, attentive rendering of furniture, ceramics, and rugs, these paintings celebrate a vernacular canon; and as they deconstruct and dissolve those very objects, they also voice a hesitation about the cultural substance of such artifacts. The playful distortions satirize the collector’s fetish and, in their ironical wit, assert Sheeler’s self-conscious difference from the antiquarians who put together collections such as the American Wing. Finally, as they stage a collection of antiques interspersed with modern elements in spaces that cannot be inhabited, these canvases play with the conventions of the museum period room. In dissecting both the American past and the prejudices of contemporary consumer culture, these canvases remind their viewers that a usable past is a product of the present and that it is, perhaps more importantly, a product to be consumed by the present.

AUTHOR QUERIES

- Q1 Au: Per WP style, the beginning letter of a quotation may be made either cap or lowercase to fit the context of the sentence. That is, you can lowercase it even if it was cap in the original.
- Q2 Au: The Chicago Manual of Style recommends rewriting to avoid awkward plurals like “Andrewses.” I’ve substituted “they” in some instances (not all), and I think it’s still clear who you’re talking about.