

CHARLES
SHEELER

FASHION, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND SCULPTURAL FORM

EDITED BY KIRSTEN M. JENSEN

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JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM
Doylestown, Pennsylvania

Distributed by the University of Pennsylvania Press

THIS BOOK ACCOMPANIES THE EXHIBITION
CHARLES SHEELER: FASHION, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND SCULPTURAL FORM
AT THE JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM MARCH 18–JULY 9, 2017

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Doylestown, PA 18901
www.michenerartmuseum.org

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Distributed by
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia, PA 19104-4112

A Cataloging-in-Publication record is available from the Library of Congress.

Book design by Judith Stagnitto Abbate / Abbate Design

Printed in Italy.

ISBN 978-1-5128-2148-2

SPONSORS

Major support for *Charles Sheeler: Fashion, Photography, and Sculptural Form* has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, with additional support from The Coby Foundation, Ltd. and the Bucks County Foundation.

In-kind support is generously provided by Condé Nast Editions.

page iv: Anne Pennington, 1926
page v: Frances Williams, 1928
page vi: Frances Hope, 1927
page x: Mrs. James Hazen Ripley (formerly Marguerite Doubleday), 1926
pages xvii–xx: Georges Carpentier, 1926
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VANITY FAIR'S INDEPENDENCE DAY PAGEANT

Kristina Wilson

V*anity Fair's* July 1926 issue was a multimedia affair. Historians, novelists, and satirists used the printed word to weigh in on the state of the country on its sesquicentennial birthday; cartoonists provided humorous interpretations of life in the eighteenth century and the twentieth; and Charles Sheeler presented five elaborately staged photographs of theater stars dressed as historical personages from Revolutionary-era history. The photographs, interspersed among the written and graphic pieces, were presented as "*Vanity Fair's* Independence Day Pageant," suggesting that the reader-viewer consider each tableau as a contestant in a pageant—or perhaps more appropriately, given the Fourth of July holiday, a float in a parade. The tradition of Fourth of July parades was, in fact, playfully mocked in an article by humorist Corey Ford, and it provides a vivid context in which to imagine Sheeler's historical reenactors: "Behind the band comes a huge float called 'Post-War Conditions in the Linoleum Business,' followed by another float representing 'The Sister Spirits of Osmosis and Capillary Attraction.' . . . Next come four thousand men marching for the Post Office and Civil Service Department, three thousand more for the Marshall Stillman movement, and also the Camp Fire Girls of America, the Department of Street Cleaning . . . and a long file of men who take two hours to pass a given point, but who have unfortunately forgotten to bring along a banner."¹ This satirical account gives us a few clues as we approach Sheeler's photographs: the painted landscapes, props, and period-room settings become the stages of parade floats from which celebrities graciously wave to the crowd even as they offer a knowing wink—as if to confess they too know this 150th birthday is merely an occasion to sell something.

Sheeler's Independence Day Pageant photographs have not been examined in the scholarly literature on the artist. Although they are a series commissioned by a Condé Nast publication, they should be understood not as fashion photographs, nor even as celebrity portraits. Rather, they are a playful commentary on the place of American history in the popular imagination of the early twentieth century. In their thematic focus, they are closely related to the series of paintings by Sheeler known as the American Interiors, in which he depicted historical American furniture arrayed in a domestic interior. The earliest canvas in the series, known as *Interior* (Fig. 3.1),

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ABOVE

3.1 *Interior*, 1926, Oil and fabricated chalk on linen, 33 1/8 × 22 1/8 in. (84.1 × 56.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.344. Digital Image ©Whitney Museum, New York.

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3.2 *American Interior*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 32 1/2 × 30 in. (84.5 × 76.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Paul Moore. 1947.424.

was painted in 1926, around the time Sheeler was also making the sesquicentennial photographs for *Vanity Fair*, while the latest canvas in the series, *American Interior*, dates to 1934 (Fig. 3.2). Several scholars, including Carol Troyen and myself, have previously argued that Sheeler's *American Interiors* are laced with a wry, understated sense of humor.² The discovery of the *Vanity Fair* Independence Day Pageant photographs allows us to deepen our understanding of the humor in the paintings. The photographs feature 1920s theater stars in campy performances of historical figures, implying that our veneration of the nation's founding history may be no deeper than our facile celebrity worship. The paintings depict nineteenth-century furniture, then the focus of an increasingly competitive collecting culture, from the artist's own collection, arranged in his home.³ These overly crowded compositions suggest sardonic self-reflection on Sheeler's part: he may have been dramatizing his own wish to feature as many coveted objects from his collection as possible in a single canvas. Like the photographs, the paintings speak to the ease with which twentieth-century viewers conflated their desire for the trendy, present-day collectible with the veneration of an object that embodies American history.



Interior and *American Interior* demonstrate the crowded, almost claustrophobic compositional strategies that Sheeler used throughout the series. In both, the furniture is presented in a state of perplexing fragmentation: the tables, beds, and chair are repeatedly cropped at the edges of the canvas or are positioned so that they confusingly overlap each other. It is almost as if the furniture pieces are vying against one another for a prime spot, overly eager celebrities trying to squeeze into the limited space of a reporter's photographic frame. In *Interior*, the focal point of the composition is a Shaker side table holding an arrangement of apples and a pitcher. The Shaker table seems under threat, however, by the large trestle table that looms immediately above it, with the cupboard and bed lurking in the upper-left corner of the canvas and the geometric rug beneath it, which falls out of perspective in a vertiginous slant along the bottom edge. The slender legs of Shaker furniture were a celebrated feature among scholars of the day, but in this canvas Sheeler has made them ridiculously long: the still life composition teeters on the table's spider-thin legs, three of which extend beyond the canvas, perhaps in search of level ground. The distorted legs could be kin to a Paul Bunyan-style folkloric tradition of humorous

exaggeration: Sheeler seems to dare us to believe how thin and delicate *his* Shaker table's legs are. In *American Interior*, objects—a bed, tables, a bench—again push in from the edges of the canvas to surround a carved, slat-back chair. The top slat of the chair has been torn out of alignment, as if subjected to a violent, pulling force, perhaps an over-eager collector grabbing the chair beyond the top edge of the composition. The shadow of the chair falls backward onto the bed and imbues the object with a vaguely anthropomorphic quality: it seems to be crawling toward the bed as if to recover from the force of the disfiguring, acquisitive assault from above. These two paintings, and the others in the American Interiors series, indicate that Sheeler was both an avid collector of American antiques and someone who could poke fun at the fetishized objects of "Americana." The *Vanity Fair* photographs, taken as part

of the sesquicentennial celebration for Condé Nast, provide a crucial early example of Sheeler's experimentation with this sardonic tone, simultaneously celebrating American history and acknowledging the self-interest of its current appeal.

Sheeler's five photographs for the Independence Day pageant are best understood from within the context of *Vanity Fair* as a publication. In the 1920s, *Vanity Fair* offered celebrity news, consumer trends, and gossip. Many of its articles featured an arch sense of humor: a reader might imagine these hard-boiled journalists gathered around a table for Prohibition-era drinking, sparring with one another in a competition of wry understatement as they mercilessly debunked the pieties and conventional wisdoms of everyday life. Sherwood Anderson alluded to this institutional tone in an essay he wrote as the introductory editorial for the sesquicentennial issue. His central thesis was indisputably sincere—he proclaimed the arrival of an authentic American creative voice, not dependent on European models—but he was also aware that his seriousness was out of place in the magazine. "I'm talking in the dark now, being pretty heavy and serious," he ruefully remarked after two pages. "You would never guess I was in *Vanity Fair*. Excuse me, please."⁴ Readers could find plentiful examples of this raised-eyebrow sarcasm elsewhere in the July 1926



issue. Robert Benchley described Paul Revere's famous ride from the perspective of a salesman who, oblivious to the simmering revolution (his communications to the home office repeatedly note, "Things are pretty quiet here in Boston"), relentlessly pursues Revere in order to sell him engraving acid.⁵ A brilliant cartoon by A. H. Fish depicted George III, surrounded by courtiers, learning of the outbreak of war, the ladies' wigs creating a mesmerizing field of abstract patterns (Fig. 3.3). The accompanying text explained, "This, as far as we know, is the first authentic print showing one of the most tense moments in English history, when the news of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was rudely broken to George III, of whom the historian Greene says, 'He had the smallest brain in captivity.'"⁶

The gleeful skewering of historical figures throughout the sesquicentennial issue was tempered, however, by the intermittent expression of reverence about the significance of the 150-year anniversary. For example, the historian Walter Prichard Eaton captured an awkward balance between sarcasm and sincerity in his article about life

in the colonies: “In the New England end of the Colonies,” he explained, “they were already lankier than their British cousins, talked through their noses, couldn’t spell, and combined a shrewd sense of humour with considerable serious-mindedness.”⁷ Another cartoon feature, comparing the first Continental Congress with the current U.S. Congress, expressed veiled pride in the historical ancestors. In describing the Continental Congress, the editorial text noted, “This was no senatorial junket. These gentlemen had no railroad passes—nor railroads. They travelled by coach and bought their own oats. They rendered no vouchers for hotel bills, taxi fares or theatre tickets.” On the opposing page, depicting a current congressional session, the editor wrote, “Where now are the courtesy and dignity of Colonial times? Gone, all gone.”⁸

It is this tone of arch humor—which only partially conceals a sense of pride in the myths that circulate through the history of the American Revolution—that permeates Sheeler’s Independence Day Pageant. The five photographs in the series convey a profoundly ambivalent tone. In them, Sheeler persistently mixed satire and veneration, celebrating historical personages even as he poked fun at the seriousness with which we behold these figures who are, in the end, only human. He also conflated past stature and present status, crossing admiration for historical heroes with present-day celebrity worship. Finally, his photographs were laced with an insistent commercialism, in keeping with their place in a glossy magazine. The photographs sell celebrity, entertainment, and fashionable colonial revival accessories. They suggest that in the end, Americans can only know the past through the lenses of their present-day preoccupations. The past, in 1926, was not a foreign country to discover but rather merely another neighborhood to colonize with contemporary attitudes.

Historical Flapper

The first parade float in Sheeler’s Independence Day Pageant was the portrait of Broadway actress Lenore Ulric dressed as First Lady Dolley Madison. In the original photograph, Ulric’s frilly white dress spills beyond the lower edge of the frame; as she leans slightly to her left, her figure forms a regal triangle that is provocatively off-center (Fig. 3.4). She stands before a patently artificial backdrop, an impressionistic landscape with trees over her left shoulder and a distant hillside beyond her right. In its published form, the photograph was cropped in an oval frame and the negative was reversed; its expressive effect is tellingly different (Fig. 3.5). The background has been almost entirely eliminated, and what remains appears to be an abstract pattern of vertical lines. These are a subtle echo of the vertical compositional structures that Sheeler employed in many of his photographs for Condé Nast: in images such as a portrait of Lynn Fontanne from April 1926 (see Plate IV), a portrait of Ulric from August 1926 (see Plate V), or a fashion photograph of Marilyn Miller from December 1926 (Fig. 3.6), he emphasized the modernist, minimalist vertical contours of the flapper figure, with her broad shoulders, flattened bust, and narrow skirts.⁹ If, upon publication, the Dolley Madison image acquired a vaguely modernist backdrop, the figure of Madison-Ulric herself became emphatically nonmodernist. When cropped in the oval frame, Ulric’s slightly off-center pose and hoop skirt became curvaceously baroque. Her tilted head, bent arm, flared fan, twisted torso, and layers of lace on her



dress created a composition of continuous curves. Against the tomboyish contours of the flapper, Ulric's Madison embodied an almost excessive degree of femininity. The signifying power of the cascading curls, lace, ribbons, and flowers was brought into focus by a slight, flirtatious curve near the center of the image: the cleavage of her breast pressed against the bodice of her dress.

If Ulric's body represented the femininity that had been evacuated from the flapper's uniform, the decision to give her the character of Dolley Madison was slightly more complex. Madison was interpreted by some in the 1920s as a historical figure who foreshadowed the social liberation of contemporary women. An article from the Associated Press wire service in 1926 described the wife of the fourth president as a member of the "flapper class" and quoted a public lecture on her character: "She was frivolous, used rouge, dipped snuff and played cards for high stakes."¹⁰ Ulric's flirtatious engagement with the camera, her heavy eye makeup, and the prominent beauty mark on her cheekbone suggest that she is "performing" the flapper interpretation of Madison: the historical figure is no remote paragon of demure femininity but rather justifies the social behavior of the modern flapper. Indeed, the blatant artifice of her wig—which sits awkwardly low on her forehead—and the incongruity of her modern makeup against the historical costume suggest that we are not meant to read this as an image of Madison at all. This is a modern actress projecting a modern persona while almost laughing at the historical dress she has been asked to wear. Veneration for the past is eclipsed by modern celebrity worship, and we find ourselves gazing at an image that is more about the present-day world of 1926 than it is about the generation of the founding fathers.

In the context of 1926, Ulric's photograph suggests an additional set of symbolic codes that may be less obvious to twenty-first-century viewers. Her white dress, white fan, platinum blonde wig, and pale skin repeatedly point to an idea of racial whiteness. White historical figures dominated histories of colonial life and the American Revolution in the 1920s (and continue to do so to this day), but Lenore Ulric's whiteness was particularly charged when this photograph was published. During the spring and summer of 1926, she played the title role in *Lulu Belle*, a large-scale musical production at the Belasco Theatre. As the character Lulu, Ulric performed in blackface among a cast that was largely African American.¹¹ In Sheeler's August 1926 *Vanity Fair* photograph of Ulric, she dressed in the character's costume, but her exposed skin is clearly white. The *Lulu Belle* and Dolley Madison photographs are stylistic opposites in many ways: modernist verticality opposes a composition of curves; a sleek, form-fitting dress opposes layers of ruffles; a brunette bob opposes blonde ringlets; a haughty, downward gaze opposes a flirtatious sideways glance. The sole point of continuity is her whiteness. When seen as pendants, these photographs assert Ulric's racial identity for the largely white readership of *Vanity Fair*.

Shared Parody and Props

The most regal entrants in the Independence Day Pageant were Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, photographed by Sheeler as George and Martha Washington (Fig. 3.7). In 1926, Lunt and Fontanne were already well-known actors and a celebrity

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3.4 Lenore Ulric, 1926.

3.5 Lenore Ulric, portrait as published in *Vanity Fair*, August 1926.

3.6 Marilyn Miller, 1926.



couple; Sheeler would photograph them again, Lunt's arms around Fontanne, their faces cheek to cheek, in 1928 (Fig. 3.8). The Washington portrait stands out among the others in the Independence Day Pageant for its excessively staid air. Lunt stands behind Fontanne, who is seated at a three-quarter angle in a chair. Behind them is draped a large swag of fabric, and at the photograph's left edge is a gilt-and-marble pier table with a pair of books placed casually on it. The swag of fabric references a theater curtain, but it more readily evokes the conventional backdrop of countless eighteenth-century portraits. Indeed, the entire photograph is clearly staged in homage to the genre of portraiture as practiced by such American artists as Gilbert Stuart and John Singleton Copley. Fontanne reclines in her chair in a pose similar to Copley's *Mrs. Isaac Smith* (Fig. 3.9), but her face is turned from viewers to reveal an impassive profile. Lunt's face has been subjected to an early mode of photographic editing (Fig. 3.10), and the round line of his chin and restrained set of his lips have been adjusted so that he looks uncannily like Gilbert Stuart's famous Athenaeum portrait of Washington.¹² Interestingly, a 1795 portrait of Washington by Stuart was reproduced as the frontispiece for the *Vanity Fair* issue.¹³ The accompanying editorial commentary lauded this "realistic portrait . . . painted from life" and cast aspersions on the "idealized" Athenaeum portrait: "It is this over-sweet, over-mellow portrait which most of us think of as Washington."¹⁴ Lunt's "over-sweet" face and the extreme formality of the photograph trace an uncertain boundary line between historical ven-



eration and historical parody: these dynamic, living celebrities have been embalmed in an eighteenth-century portrait. Ultimately, Sheeler's photograph begs a comparison of the actors' celebrity status with that of the original First Couple: Lunt and Fontanne are presented as the First Couple of New York's theater world. As in the Ulric-Madison portrait, this portrait encourages the viewer to conflate the past and the present: the status of the couple in the present is justified by their likeness with the historical First Couple; viewers are invited to feel as though they understand the historical past because they know who the contemporary actors are.

Sheeler's portrait of Lunt and Fontanne was not the only appearance of the historical First Couple in the sesquicentennial issue. Margaret Case Morgan contributed a work of fiction in radio-play form in which a contemporary couple argues about the husband's drinking, the wife's choice of friends, and her profligate spending; among her newest purchases is a "marvelous, scientific" radio that can channel conversations from hundreds of years ago.¹⁵ She manages to tune in a conversation between George and Martha Washington: the contemporary couple hold their breath, lean in to listen, and hear the Washingtons bickering about his drinking, her choice of friends, and her profligate spending. The play was illustrated with a photograph of a period room from the recently opened, highly lauded American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 3.11). Rather than simply documenting the historical room, however, the photograph featured a female model wearing a dress styled from

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3.7 Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, as George and Martha Washington as published in the *Vanity Fair* sesquicentennial issue, 1926.

3.8 Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, 1928.

ABOVE

3.9 John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Isaac Smith*, 1769. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896, L.H.D. 1938. 1941.74.

3.10 Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, as George and Martha Washington, original photograph with editing marks, 1926.



the eighteenth century, seated at the tea table preparing to pour tea. The conflation of present and past—historical architecture refitted to a modern museum, historical furniture being used by a contemporary person dressed in a historical outfit—was further compounded by the caption that accompanied the photograph: “Martha Washington, Waiting Patiently: Mrs. Washington, expecting the approach of her lord and master. This picture was made in the actual room where Washington danced with Benjamin Franklin’s daughter. The room is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”¹⁶ In the Metropolitan Museum photograph, the radio play, and the Sheeler photograph, George and Martha Washington are presented as characters so familiar to Americans that we can almost touch them: they occupy rooms we can walk into, have conversations we can identify with, and are as beloved as our favorite star-crossed couple.¹⁷

Sheeler used the backdrop of the Lunt and Fontanne photograph for another image in the Independence Day Pageant: the actress Madge Kennedy as Mary Lindley Murray (Fig. 3.12). The large swag of fabric and the gilt-and-marble pier table are reversed from the Lunt and Fontanne photograph, perhaps to accommodate the magazine layout.¹⁸ In the Kennedy portrait, we see less of the curtain, which cuts across the upper-left corner, and more of the pier table in the lower right. She is wearing an elaborate period dress made from a stiff, shiny fabric that shimmers under the studio lights. Kennedy leans forward over the pier table, her head turned over her right shoulder as if to face something unwelcome. The architecture of her dress and the angle of her pose create a diagonal compositional line from the lower left of the photograph to its upper right, and this line parallels the swag of the theatrical curtain in the upper-left corner. Moreover, the crisp folds of her overdress create a dramatic pattern of deep shadows and bright highlights that echoes the drapery backdrop. She and the drapery are thus tied together visually and perhaps conceptually: the dramatic swag of the drapery symbolizes the artifice of portraiture and of the theater, and the photograph asks us whether the lens of artifice is the proper way to approach her figure as well.

Madge Kennedy was, like the other actors in the Independence Day Pageant, an actual actress in New York. Known in particular for her success in comedic roles, she could be seen on the stage in New York during the summer of 1926 performing in *Love-in-a-Mist* and also in New York movie theaters, starring in a Hollywood comedy called *Oh Baby*.¹⁹ Her presentation in the sesquicentennial issue stands out among the five photographs for its blatant, almost parodic theatricality. Rather than posing as if she is sitting for a formal portrait, she seems to be arrested midscene in a historical reenactment; her glaring eyes and pursed lips indicate a tense confrontation with a figure just beyond the photographic frame. Kennedy’s portrait is also distinctive among the five works in the series because its subject is less familiar to twenty-first-century viewers. Whereas the other pageant characters had the status of folk hero, Kennedy’s Mary Lindley Murray is more obscure. The photograph’s caption explains her significance succinctly, if not entirely accurately: “The New York Hostess of 1776 Who Detained the British While Washington Fled to Safety.”²⁰ Murray’s story may have been familiar to readers of *Vanity Fair* in July 1926 because it was the subject of a Rodgers and Hart musical, *Dearest Enemy*, that played in New York in the fall of 1925.²¹ Again, the photograph manages to thoroughly tangle the

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3.11 Parlor from the Powel House with model, Philadelphia, 1765–66; remodeled 1769–71. View as installed, October 1924. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.87.1-4). ©Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

3.12 Madge Kennedy as Mary Lindley Murray, 1926.

threads of past and present: the historical figure is known primarily because of the contemporary musical written about her. Indeed, given this theater-world context, the balance of past and present in the Kennedy photograph is more heavily tilted to the present than any other image in the pageant. Viewers may well have read the portrait as Madge Kennedy, a contemporary star, giving audiences an overly dramatic interpretation of a current theatrical role.

Folk Heroines

Sheeler photographed the actress Alice Brady as Molly Pitcher for another image in the Independence Day Pageant, creating a portrait that thematized the artifice of history in a surprisingly blunt way (Fig. 3.13). Brady stands before a painted backdrop of a cartoonish tree. The backdrop, however, seems turned on its side, the broad tree trunk forming a large horizontal band across the field of the photograph and its thin branches creating a series of vertical lines. The horizontality of the tree trunk is mirrored by the barrel of a cannon, just barely contained within the photograph's foreground. Between the cannon and painted backdrop stands Brady, who creates a pronounced vertical form. She wears a partially laced dark vest over a modest white blouse and a long striped skirt; not only do the vertical stripes of her skirt emphasize her height (and perhaps foreshadow the stars and stripes), but the modest curves and flounces of her costume turn her body into a streamlined, vertical form that is similar to the contours Sheeler repeatedly used in his modernist fashion photographs. She holds a long iron rod that extends beyond the top and bottom frames of the photograph—presumably the ramming tool used to compact the cannon's gunpowder before firing and then sponge the barrel after firing—that further dramatizes her verticality between the two horizontal forms. Brady's hair is short and tousled. Its messiness symbolizes the historical action attributed to Molly Pitcher on the battlefield of the Revolutionary War, but it is ultimately a dramatically cropped flapper bob; her hair, not hidden beneath a wig as in almost every other pageant photograph, has the effect of pulling her figure out of its historical milieu and reminding viewers of the actress's twentieth-century identity.

Molly Pitcher, unlike the other characters in the Independence Day Pageant, was not a specific historical individual but rather a composite figure based on legendary accounts of several women who fought in battles during the Revolutionary War. "Molly Pitcher" was variously interpreted as any woman who brought water to soldiers as they battled on the field, or as a woman who acted as part of an artillery team, perhaps sponging the cannon barrel after firing.²² The moniker Molly Pitcher does not appear in histories of the Revolutionary War until the nineteenth century, and the myth may have been solidified during the Victorian period in part through two Currier and Ives prints titled "The Heroine of Monmouth." These popular lithographs depicted a woman in the frantic energy of battle thrusting a ramming pole into a cannon; in one, from the series "The Women of '76," the intersection between Molly Pitcher's upright figure and the horizontal cannon presents compositional challenges similar to those Sheeler confronted (Fig. 3.14).²³ Tellingly, the caption that accompanied Sheeler's photograph in *Vanity Fair* borrows its title and its content from the captions that accompanied the Currier and Ives prints: "The Heroine of

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3.13 Alice Brady as Molly Pitcher, 1926.

3.14 *The Women of '76: The Heroine of Monmouth* ("Molly Pitcher"). Published by Currier & Ives [between 1856 and 1907], lithograph, hand-colored. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-USZC2-3186.



Monmouth, Who Took Her Husband's Place When He Fell in Battle."²⁴ The photograph is perhaps a twentieth-century modernist take on a Victorian image of a mythical historical figure. Indeed, the cannon in the foreground of the photograph points to the layers of artifice that undergird this image. Sheeler positioned the cannon across Brady's figure, evidently struggling to contain its considerable form within the frame of his camera. The rounded back end of the cannon is cut off at the right edge, and its firing end in the lower-left corner falls slightly out of focus, a consequence of the shallow depth of field typically used in a studio portrait. As the cannon slips out of focus, it disrupts the fictional space of the modern fashion photograph. Its physicality is too massive for the flat, cool angles of Sheeler's composition, and we are reminded that it is simply a prop for an admittedly curious celebrity portrait.

Ina Claire, another comedic actress, was the subject of Sheeler's fifth photograph in the Independence Day Parade (see Plate III). She posed as Betsy Ross, wearing a demure floral dress and a platinum blonde wig with ringlets suspiciously similar to those that adorned Ulric. Ross, a historical individual and a folk heroine, merges the mythical stature of Molly Pitcher and the biographic specificity of the other pageant figures into a single character. The Claire portrait was staged at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency; she sits on a Windsor chair before a large fireplace in a wood-paneled room; to her right is a side table with flowers arranged in a silver tankard; an American flag spills off of her lap, creating a contrapuntal graphic design against the geometric pattern of the rag rug on the floor. Claire's portrait, with its fully realized architectural setting, creates the strongest fictional *mise-en-scène* of the five photographs in the series; it recalls the photograph of the model seated in the Metropolitan Museum's period room. Among the five photographs, the Claire photograph has the least conflation between past and present, tilting strongly toward the past: Claire's identity as a modern actress is recognized, but her modest makeup, placid facial expression, and period setting emphasize the historical reenactment over the modern reenactor.

The Claire photograph is significant in Sheeler's oeuvre because it foreshadows many compositional motifs that he would use in the coming years in the American Interiors canvases. The floral arrangement at the left edge of the photograph, a sprawling combination of twigs with flowering buds and flowers positioned on a round side table, is similar to a 1927 canvas, *Spring Interior*, which depicts an array of forsythia branches in a glass jar on a round side table (Fig. 3.15). The rag rug looks like the floor coverings that appear in several of the American Interiors paintings, including *Home Sweet Home* and *Americana* (Figs. 3.16 and 3.17). Even the way the American flag spills off of the lower edge of the photograph, pushing the composition toward a vertiginous flattening of space, echoes the way Sheeler used dramatically patterned, antique rugs to collapse space in many of his American Interiors compositions. Indeed, the American flag in the Claire portrait and the cannon in the Brady portrait both function to challenge the illusion of depicted space and the flatness of the picture plane, and in these passages we can see Sheeler bringing his knowledge of cubist painting into photography. The American Interior series would become one of Sheeler's most sophisticated explorations of cubism, as he continually fragmented his objects of Americana in order to point to the instability of domestic space, the flatness of the canvas, and the superficial understanding of the historical

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3.15 *Spring Interior*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 1/8 in. (76.2 × 63.82 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of the William H. Lane Foundation. 1990.441. Photograph ©Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

3.16 *Home Sweet Home*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 36 × 29 in. (91.4 × 73.7 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Robert H. Tannahill/Bridgeman Images.

3.17 *Americana*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 48 × 36 in. (121.9 × 91.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edith and Milton Lowenthal Collection. Bequest of Edith Abrahamson Lowenthal, 1991. (1992.24.8). Image copyright ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.





3.18 Printed linen textile sample with green colorways, ca. 1933–1934, 8.27 × 8.27 in. (21 × 21 cm). Charles Sheeler papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

3.19 Knitted wool textile sample with green, blue, and cream diagonal pattern, ca. 1933–1934, 15.75 × 14.57 in. (40 × 37 cm). Charles Sheeler papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

3.20 Printed linen textile sample with blue, peach, and cream colorways, ca. 1933–1934, 6.29 × 7.87 in. (16 × 20 cm). Charles Sheeler papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



past that drove the fad for American antiques. The Claire and Brady photographs call attention to the conventions of pictorial illusion that govern photography through their modest disruptions of space and, in so doing, call attention to the shallowness of contemporary knowledge of the historical past and to the artifice of celebrity culture. Neither of these photographs possesses the parodic edge that circulates through the Ulric, Lunt and Fontanne, and Kennedy portraits. Yet Sheeler manages to introduce a skeptical undercurrent to the historical veneration in these portraits nonetheless, through his subtle manipulation of accessories and space.

Conclusion

The Claire portrait shares many themes with the rest of the Independence Day Pageant photographs as well as the American Interiors paintings: in it, we can trace conflicting attitudes of veneration and skepticism about historical greatness as well as the conflation of past hero worship with present-day celebrity worship. This photograph also foregrounds another theme that courses just below the surface of every work in the Independence Day Pageant: commercialism. Staged in an advertising agency, the photograph showcases a variety of objects that lend historical credence to the scene but that also might be desirable to *Vanity Fair's* consumers. Claire could be sitting on an antique Windsor chair, perhaps purchased from B. Altman in its “Salon of Antique Furniture,” as advertised on page seven in the July 1926 issue; their furniture, they claimed, was “fashioned in the workshops of master makers and used by our forefathers.”²⁵ Similarly, the tankard holding flowers on the left of the photograph might be an antique, or it could have been a reproduction made by Rogers, Lunt, and Bowlen Silversmiths, who advertised their “Early American Style” silver on page ten as superlative copies of historical models: “The finish of every piece would cause even Paul Revere—himself a famous silversmith—to be generous in his praise.”²⁶ Finally, the hooked rug on the floor beneath Claire was an example of a popular collectible, as Russell Lynes later noted: “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.”²⁷ Indeed, the rug is not merely an item that could be purchased

by a 1920s consumer, but its abstract pattern was also clearly the inspiration for some of Sheeler's own experiments in making art for broad consumption: the graphic design bears notable resemblance to several of his fabric patterns from the mid-1930s (Figs. 3.18–3.20).²⁸

The commercialism of the colonial revival interior-decorating trend is overt in Sheeler's photograph of Claire as Betsy Ross. Yet the objects are not the only means by which this photograph, or the rest of the Independence Day Pageant, engages with commercialism. Each photograph is predicated on the tension between the known faces of theatrical celebrities and their layers of costuming and set design. As the photographs embrace the famous, they foreground the essentially commercial nature of modern stardom: celebrities are, in essence, commodified human beings, selling themselves and the entertainment products in which they appear. Through Sheeler's deft manipulation of the camera, these celebrities ultimately sell their own star status; they sell both a veneration of the historical past and a satirical eye roll, and they sell a magazine—*Vanity Fair*.

NOTES

- 1 Corey Ford, "The Day We Celebrate; And How: Some National Pastimes and Diversions for Glorifying the Glorious Fourth," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 58.
- 2 See "Ambivalence, Irony, and Americana: Sheeler's American Interiors," *Winterthur Portfolio* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2011), 249–76; and Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirshler, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 112. Other scholars have emphasized Sheeler's paintings as positive celebrations of the American past: see Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chap. 6; and Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1987). Karen Lucic has explored many facets of Sheeler's revival interests, especially his Doylestown work: see Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition* (Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum, 1997).
- 3 For a variety of views on the complex phenomenon—part historical research, part collecting mania—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: Yale University Press/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); and Abigail Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Revival Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 335–64.
- 4 Sherwood Anderson, "Hello, Big Boy: An Inquiry into America's Progress During One Hundred and Fifty Years," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 42.
- 5 Robert C. Benchley, "Paul Revere's Ride: How a Modest Go-Getter Did His Bit for the Juno Acid Bath Corporation," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 54.
- 6 "Breaking the News to George III," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 49.
- 7 Walter Prichard Eaton, "Our Colonial Ancestors: Life in America When Antiques Were New and Our Passions Tempered," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 43.
- 8 "A Governmental Contrast: The Continental Congress and The Hon. Senate of Today," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 52–53.

- 9 See Chapter 2 in this volume for further discussion of Sheeler's compositional techniques in his Condé Nast photographs.
- 10 "Puts Dolly Madison in Flapper Class," *New York Times*, January 28, 1926, 9.
- 11 Ulric was featured in the photography section of the *New York Times* in March 1926, where her skin tone has clearly been darkened; the image was accompanied by a caption: "A Lady of Color: Lenore Ulric." *New York Times*, March 7, 1926, RP6. An article that month also described Ulric's preparation for each performance: "There were a dozen jars of make-up on the dressing table and Miss Ulric seemed to have a use for every one. . . . Another contained a kind of dark grease-paint, which she used on her face, neck and arms." Charles MacArthur, "In Which the Playwright Interviews His Star," *New York Times*, March 28, 1928, X1.
- 12 This portrait, known colloquially as the "Athenaeum" portrait (1796), is now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acc. no. 1980.1.
- 13 This portrait is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 07.160.
- 14 "The Early Stuart Portrait of Washington," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 40.
- 15 Margaret Case Morgan, "Loud Speaker: Voices from a Forgotten Century Enliven, Momentarily, a Summer Home," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 68, 108.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 68. The anecdote about Washington dancing at the Powel House in Philadelphia (although perhaps not in this exact room) was published in the guidebook to the American Wing, where several period rooms were linked to specific moments in Washington's biography. R. T. H. Halsey and Charles O. Cornelius, *A Handbook of the American Wing*, 4th ed. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1928), 188. 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.
- 17 Washington appeared several other times in the July 1926 issue. For example, in a photographic essay on the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, a bedroom was highlighted: "George Washington is authentically reputed to have slept in this room, with its pleasing woodwork and great hearth." "The Wayside Inn, Sudbury," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 60. In addition, an advertisement for an antiques dealer in London boasted, "Washington Manor House, Sulgrave, Eng., Home of George Washington's Ancestors restored by us in 1920." Advertisement for Gill & Reigate, Ltd., *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 116.
- 18 Kennedy appeared on an even-numbered page (left side), so the curtain frames her on the left and she faces the opposite page; Lunt and Fontanne, in contrast, appeared on an odd-numbered page (right side), and thus the curtain frames them on the right and Fontanne looks to the page opposite her.
- 19 "Madge Kennedy, Starring in Love-in-a-Mist," *New York Times*, May 30, 1926, RP7; Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *New York Times*, August 11, 1926, 25.
- 20 "Madge Kennedy, as Mary Lindley Murray," *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 62; for a summary account of the events in which Murray distracted the British troops through her hospitality, see David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 216.
- 21 "The Play: Redcoats and Patriots," *New York Times*, September 19, 1925, 9.
- 22 As numerous scholars have argued, there are several historical figures who fit this description. In the battle at Monmouth, Mary Hays McCauley fought alongside her husband; a monument designating her as Molly Pitcher is in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Margaret Corbin fought in the battle at Fort Washington in Manhattan after her husband was killed in action. See Linda Grant De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 126–31; and Emily J. Teipe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?" *Prologue Magazine (National Archives)* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1999), <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html> (accessed March 31, 2016).

- 23 De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies*, 127. For a history of Currier and Ives, see Bryan F. LeBeau, *Currier and Ives: America Imagined* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).
- 24 A print of Molly Pitcher, copyright 1876, has the following title: “The Heroine of Monmouth: Molly Pitcher, The wife of a Gunner in the American Army, who when her husband was killed, took his place at the gun, and served throughout the battle (June 28th, 1778).” Another print depicting Molly Pitcher, dated between 1856 and 1907, is titled, “The Women of ’76: ‘Molly Pitcher,’ The Heroine of Monmouth. Her husband falls . . . she sheds no ill timed tear / But firm resolved . . . she fills his fatal post / The foe press on . . . she checks their mad career / Who can avenge like her a husband’s ghost?” Both prints are at the Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006691580/> and <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002698846/> (accessed March 31, 2016).
- 25 Advertisement for B. Altman and Company, *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 7.
- 26 Advertisement for Rogers, Lunt, and Bowlen Silversmiths, *Vanity Fair* 26, no. 5 (July 1926), 10–11.
- 27 Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1954), 238–39.
- 28 Fillin-Yeh discussed Sheeler’s fabric designs in the context of his collection of Americana in *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors*, 53–59.