Charles R. Sheeler, Jr.

Charles R. Sheeler, Jr. (1883–1965), a pioneer of American modernism, was one of the most important American artists and photographers of the 20th century. Influenced by Cubism and European Modernism, he demonstrated versatility in both photography and painting, two arts that he believed were complementary and equal. Employing a style called Precisionism that combined abstraction with high realism, he chose the American built landscape as his main subject, seeking “to reduce natural forms to the borderline of abstraction, retaining only those forms which [he] believed to be indispensable to the design of the picture.” Showing little concern for social commentary, Sheeler focused his art almost exclusively on architectural and industrial forms. His images of industrial power, such as the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge Plant in Detroit (1927), have become iconic in America, and his work is regarded as a paean to industry and American progress.

Born in Philadelphia, Sheeler had decided to become an artist by the time he finished high school. He studied at the School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts) and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. After a trip to Italy and Paris in 1908–1909, where he first encountered Cubism and modern art, he realized that he needed to unlearn what he had been taught and develop his own vision.

Beginning in 1912 Sheeler taught himself photography as a means to make a living while he tried to establish himself as an artist. His early work involved taking pictures for Philadelphia architects. As a freelance photographer, Sheeler came to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and

This photograph by Charles Sheeler (ca. 1915) shows the original location (1913–16) of the Egyptian Sphinx in the Museum’s Upper Courtyard (now the Warden Garden), as well as the construction (in the background) of the White Pavilion of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. UPM Image 173861.
Anthropology to capture the beauty and architectural grandeur of the building and its collections. In 1913 he photographed a special exhibition of Graeco-Roman artifacts, as well as a number of Chinese vases and African artifacts. In 1915 he made a series of images of the recently completed Harrison Rotunda, which clearly show his interest in dramatic architectural spaces, and from a 1918 letter to John Quinn—the well-known New York art patron and collector—we learn that Sheeler “selected and arranged a special exhibition of Negro Art at the University Museum.”

He eventually moved to New York City in 1919, where he befriended artists, dealers, and collectors, including Marius De Zayas, a Mexican artist-turned-dealer, who exhibited Sheeler’s work and employed him in his gallery. Through Sheeler’s New York connections, the Museum was able to purchase such antiquities as a faience plaque of the Egyptian god Bes and an Aztec sculpted head, and Sheeler himself donated several pieces from the Philippines and the Congo to the Museum. The correspondence detailing these transactions, as well as a large series of Sheeler’s photographs, is now housed in the Museum Archives—the record of an early but exciting facet of the personal vision of a great American artist.

**For Further Reading**


**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Yaëlle Biro of Université Paris Sorbonne, for drawing my attention to the correspondence between Sheeler and Quinn. The letter mentioned above dates to February 22, 1918, and can be found in the John Quinn Archives, NYPL, Microfilm Reel 2 (ZL-355), Dealers Correspondence folder 6-7, Modern Gallery (de Zayas) 1917–1924.

Charles Sheeler (1915) photographed the opening exhibition in Harrison Hall, complete with Oriental porcelains (in European vitrines), European tapestries, and Oriental rugs. UPM Image 173852.