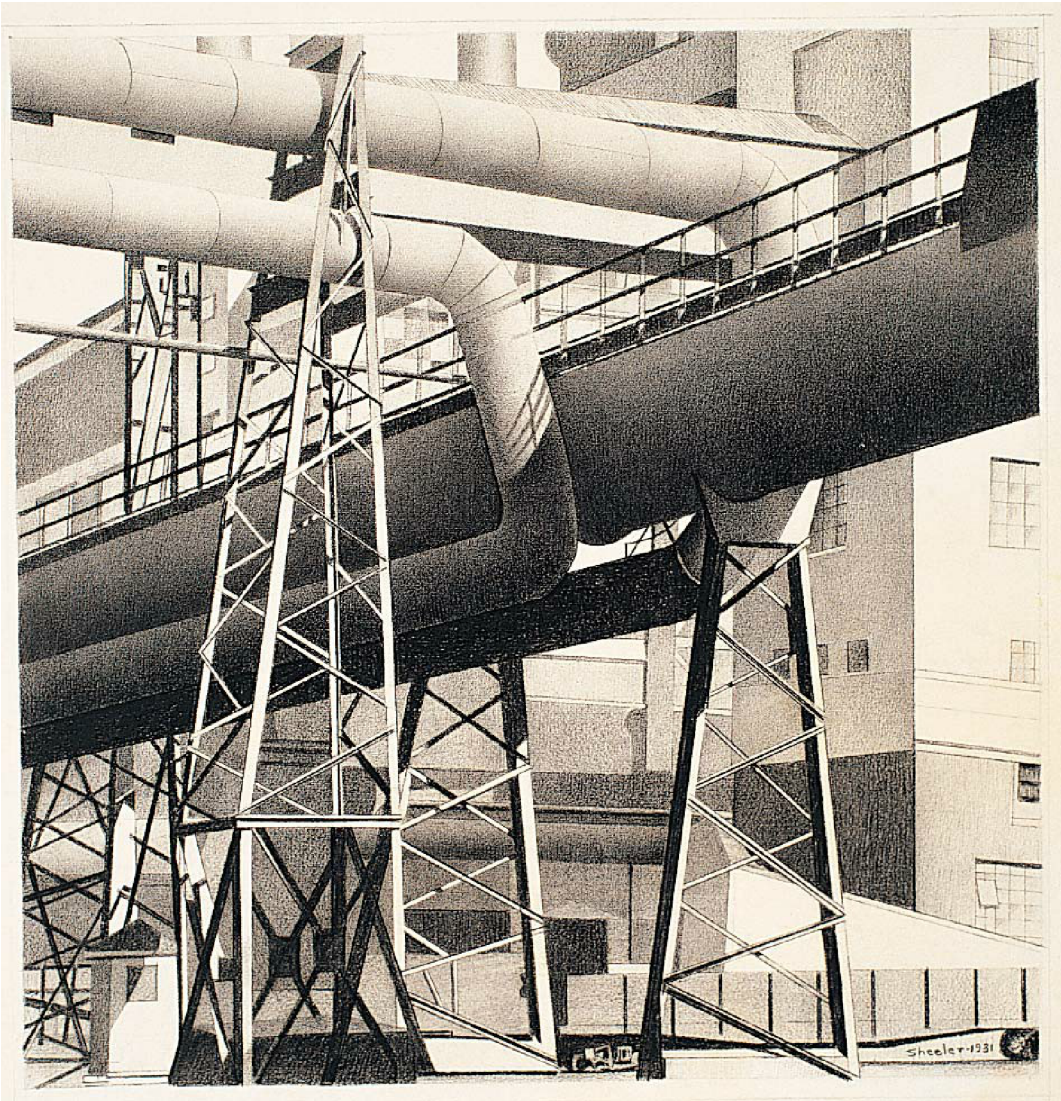
55: Charles Sheeler *Ballet Mechanique* (1931)

Karen Haas

In the fall of 1927, on the occasion of Ford's introduction of the new Model A automobile, Charles Sheeler was commissioned by the N. W. Ayer advertising firm to photograph the Ford Motor Company plant outside Detroit. During Sheeler's six-week stay at the River Rouge plant, popularly known as the Rouge, he wrote to his good friend Walter Arensberg: "[W]hat wouldn't I give for the pleasure of showing you through this unbelievable establishment. It defies description."[1] The largest such industrial complex in the world at the time, the Ford factory was a daunting subject, and its immense scale, deafening noise, and bustling activity were a challenge to an artist known for his carefully composed and painstakingly rendered works. As a result, Sheeler told Arensberg, he planned to focus his camera on "details of the plants and portraits of machinery" rather than try to capture an impression of the whole vast enterprise, in which every stage of automobile manufacturing was carried out, from the production of raw materials—steel, glass, and rubber—to the fabrication of actual car parts.[2] In the end, the more than thirty photographs that resulted from the commission became some of Sheeler's most critically acclaimed images and were widely reproduced in Ford Motor Company publications, as well as in art magazines in the United States and Europe.

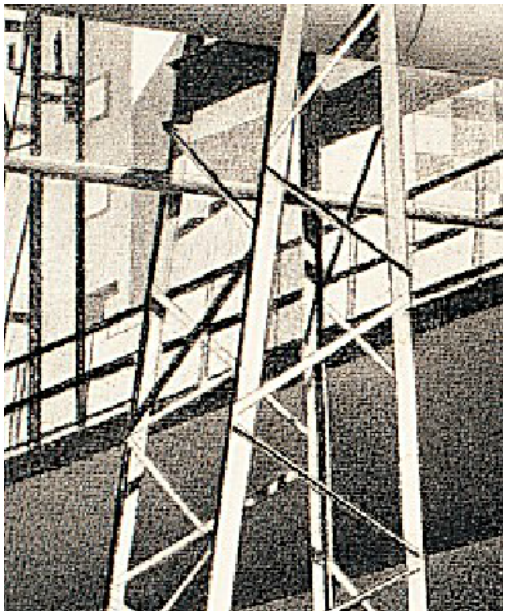
Ballet Mechanique is one of three conté crayon drawings Sheeler made in 1931 that were based on his photographs taken at the Ford plant four years earlier. In fact, two of the three Rouge drawings—*Ballet Mechanique*, with its unusual, almost square format, and the more standard vertical *Smokestacks* (William H. Lane Collection)—appear to share the same source in a now-lost photograph.[3] Both depict the network of ducts and pipes that connected the factory's massive blast furnaces and powerhouse, but *Ballet Mechanique*, which represents the lower part of the overall image, is the more striking and unconventional of the two. *Smokestacks* centers on the eight soaring stacks of Powerhouse No. 1 (which also appear in two other photographs in the series),[4] while the truncated view in *Ballet Mechanique* features the contrasting dark and light shapes of the large pipes and the maze of slender supports below. An unprepossessing subject with little sense of scale or context, *Ballet Mechanique* is a fascinating example of Sheeler's tendency to use the camera to tease the simple geometry and underlying structure out of what would have been a much larger and more complex view. Employing a technique that he had first experimented with more than a decade earlier (in a series of views of New York skyscrapers), Sheeler created increasingly abstract images by closely cropping his photographs under the enlarger and printing smaller and smaller parts of the negative.[5] Often these photographic details then became the basis of drawings like this one, with its emphasis on architectonic form and graphic composition rather than recognizable aspects of the factory, its famous assembly line, or its workers.

Never one to work *en plein air*, Sheeler's practice, at this stage in his career, was to use photographs as source material for nearly all of his paintings and drawings. The artist likened his working methods to that of a squirrel gathering nuts for the winter and described the often protracted process of "digesting" an unwieldy subject like the Rouge, by saying: "I was out there…on a mission of photography.…And when I got there, I took a chance on opening the other eye and so then I thought maybe some pictures could be pulled out."[6] "Opening the other eye" was Sheeler's way of explaining that he first approached his subjects through the monocular "eye" of the camera, with its built-in one-point perspective. Only having done that could he discover potential pictures that might be translated into other media, in some instances "pulled out" even several years later. Thus, the camera became an important intercessor for Sheeler, who always seemed most comfortable initially working out his compositions in black and white.


Sheeler-1931

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Charles Sheeler,
1883–1965
Totems in Steel, 1935
Gouache on paper,
3 11/16 x 5 1/8 in.
Gift of Peter Iselin and
his sister, Emilie Iselin Wiggin,
74.94

Conté crayon was a favorite medium for the artist beginning in 1929 and continuing well into the 1930s. With its velvety blacks and subtle gradations of tone, it was also the medium that most closely rivaled the graphic qualities of his photographs. Meticulously drawn using an extremely sharp crayon, pictures like *Ballet Mechanique* were created by projecting the photographic image onto a piece of paper using an opaque or overhead projector and then rendering the subject with nearly invisible, feathery strokes. The obvious connection between his photography and these works is significant, because Sheeler took up conté crayon at about the same moment that his dealer, Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery in Manhattan, began actively discouraging him from making and exhibiting photographs, which she felt took time and attention away from his paintings and drawings. Halpert later claimed that she simply did not want to have to reorient Sheeler's artistic career, but it is also true that drawings like these—in which the technique so beautifully complements the subject—were acceptable even to those who otherwise criticized the close relationship between photography and his work in other media.[7]



Charles Sheeler,
1883–1965
Ballet Mechanique (detail), 1931
Conté crayon on paper,
10 1/2 x 10 1/4 in.
Gift of Peter Iselin and
his sister, Emilie Iselin Wiggin,
74.96

Sheeler often gave his works musical titles and, in this case, the reference is not simply to the elegant, balletic forms of the large pipes and their delicate network of supports, but to George Antheil's "Ballet Mécanique," an avant-garde piece of music which had its highly publicized American debut in New York in 1927, the same year that Sheeler first visited the Rouge. Originally written in 1924, as the score for a modernist film of the same title by Fernand Léger and Man Ray, the two parts were never actually performed together during Sheeler's lifetime and the film itself was little known in the United States. Antheil's composition, which called for a percussion orchestra, synchronized player pianos, electric bells, sirens, and airplane propellers, was performed with much fanfare at Carnegie Hall in the spring of 1927, and seems the most likely inspiration for the title of the drawing. The painted backdrop for the production depicted a variety of machines and machine parts—from whistles to spark plugs, and riveters to excavators—in front of a panoramic image of futuristic skyscrapers, and some of the notices of the show in New York newspapers were accompanied by cartoons that set the musical program on an imaginary construction site complete with jackhammers, backhoes, and steam shovels.[8] Whether or not he attended the actual performance, Sheeler would certainly have been aware of Antheil, the young American expatriate who was the *succès de scandale* of Paris, and his

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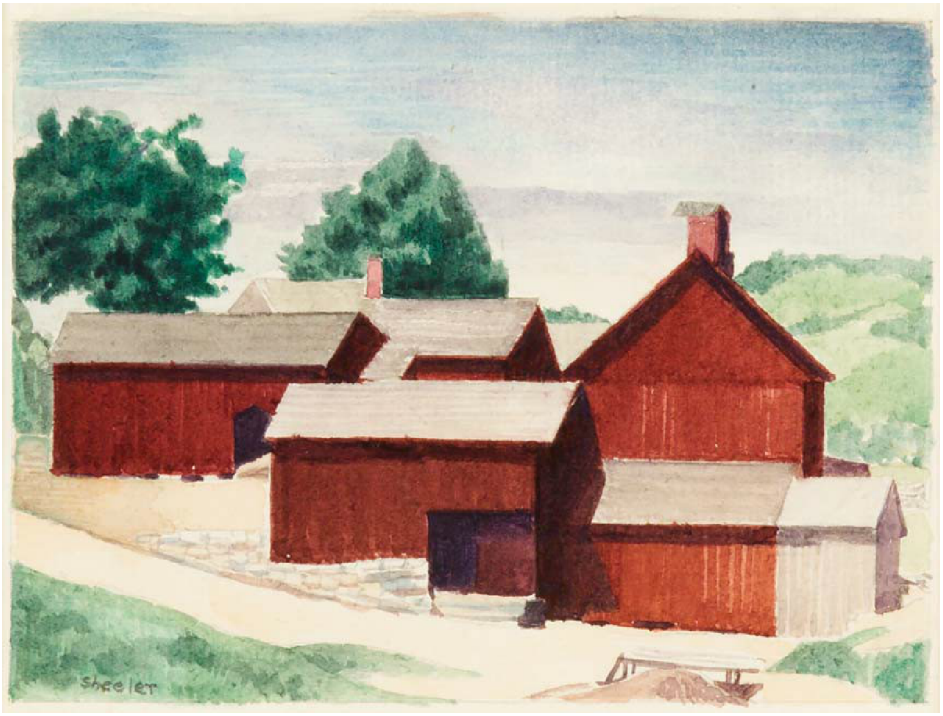
74.96



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Charles Sheeler,
1883–1965
Connecticut Barn and Landscape,
1934
Watercolor on paper,
6½ x 8¾ in.
Gift of Peter Iselin and
his sister, Emilie I. Wiggin, 74.93

infamous "Ballet Mécanique," which, Ezra Pound suggested in his review, allowed the audience to imagine "the possibility of organising the sounds of a factory."[9] Also, Antheil's contention in his program notes—that the aesthetic purity of his "Ballet" had more to do with the mechanical perfection of the automobile than any other art form—would surely have resonated with Sheeler who, that same year, described the subject of the Ford plant as "incomparably the most thrilling I have had to work with."[10]

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