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MODERNISM MEETS THE FARM:
PRECISIONIST PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE, 1915-1940

by

R. Sarah Richardson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

2005

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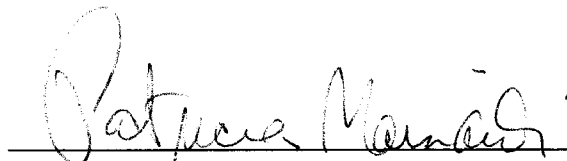
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Executive Officer

Professor Kevin Murphy

Professor Katherine Manthorne

Dr. Virginia Mecklenburg

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

MODERNISM MEETS THE FARM:
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Adviser: Professor Sally Webster

In the period between the two world wars, the everyday elements and artifacts of American life were rediscovered and celebrated for their utilitarian qualities. The group of modernist artists identified as Precisionists—in particular Charles Sheeler and Georgia O'Keeffe—contributed to this widespread cultural reevaluation through their images of rural vernacular architecture.

The term “Precisionist” refers to artists who worked in a similar hard-edged style; critics identified objectivity, simplification, and architectonic structure in this art and used the term “precision” as a common denominator. Precisionist artists were never an official group or school. They did, however, exhibit with many of the same dealers, including Alfred Stieglitz, Charles Daniel, and Edith Halpert. Intriguingly, these artists, who were not formally aligned, all gravitated toward modernist treatment of the same types of buildings, including barns and historic homes.

While O'Keeffe and Sheeler are the focus of this study, others artists are also included: George Ault, Peter Blume, Ralston Crawford, Stefan Hirsch, Edmund Lewandowski, Niles Spencer, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston. The first chapter identifies the buildings that the artists drew, painted, and photographed and describes the agricultural needs the buildings themselves served. The second chapter considers these images in the context of European and American modernism, as well as how the mythology of the American land as a site of renewal and redemption was part of modernist thought. The third and fourth chapters discuss the era's fascination with American history, especially its quotidian elements, including folk art and historic buildings, on both national and local levels. These trends provided the context in which O'Keeffe and Sheeler worked. Chapter Five looks at work by other artists who also considered agricultural themes in the period, including the Regionalists, Edward Hopper, and Walker Evans.

The examination of the past through a modern lens is at the heart of this project. The ways that O'Keeffe, Sheeler, and the other Precisionist artists portrayed historic buildings as icons for the modern age reveals many of the complexities of the interwar period.

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Introduction

“I’ll never forget the barns that I saw in the moonlight. Talk about the Sphinx & pyramids—there was that barn—nothing could be grander.”¹ When, in 1923, Alfred Stieglitz recalled this night on his family’s property in Lake George, New York, he equated the barn with the monuments of antiquity. This connection represents more than poetic hyperbole. Stieglitz worked and wrote in an environment in which the everyday elements and artifacts of American life—including nineteenth-century barns, such as the ones on the Stieglitz farm—were being reevaluated and celebrated for their utilitarian qualities and functional beauty.

The group of artists identified as Precisionists contributed to this widespread cultural reevaluation in important ways. Two artists considering these ideas were Charles Sheeler and Georgia O’Keeffe. Sheeler participated through his paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs of rural houses and historic barns. He created at least 75, most these from 1915 through 1925, and again through the 1930s and periodically until the late 1950s, when ill health left him unable to work. Sheeler’s work is central to this study, both because of the sheer number of vernacular architecture images, as well as the varied treatment—exteriors and interiors of barns and houses are all part of his

¹ Alfred Stieglitz to Sherwood Anderson, 28 November 1923, Alfred Stieglitz Archives, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (hereafter Alfred Stieglitz Archives).

oeuvre. O'Keeffe painted 24 images of historic barns and other agricultural buildings from the early 1920s until about 1934. As barns are a major—and virtually unstudied—aspect of this prominent artist's work from this period, and because contemporary photographs of her subjects also exist, her work is a second focus of this project. Both artists worked within the movement of Precisionism, which was most prevalent for two decades, 1920–1940.

Through an examination of Precisionist rural vernacular images, particularly those of O'Keeffe and Sheeler, and the wider context in which they were made, this dissertation considers how and why one group of avant-garde artists explored and represented the past.

The 1920s and 1930s in the United States saw a dramatic rise in interest in early American painting, architecture, and craft items—a concern reflected in private and museum collecting and in the establishment of regional historical societies. This interest in Americana took two forms. First, the plain contours and simple materials of these objects signified modernity to the artistic avant-garde; these shapes seemed to anticipate the aesthetics of contemporary design. At the same time, the enormous popular nostalgia for Americana rested on the objects' associations with the nation's cultural heritage and their connections to a pre-modern, presumably simpler, era. I consider the intersection between these approaches to the American past as expressed in Precisionist art and explore the ideas the Precisionist artists communicated through their images of historic structures.

One particularly intriguing aspect of this project is the fact that the subject matter in these works does not change substantially during the course of more than two decades. That is, while America after the Treaty of Versailles was far different from the America recovering from the Depression, Precisionist art remained essentially stylistically the same. That this interest in the subject endured as long as it did speaks to the compelling nature of rural and historic buildings for these artists.

I relate the Precisionist images of vernacular architecture to contemporaneous ideas about historic preservation, American folk art, and American art historiography as expressed in art criticism, literature, and popular culture. While the Precisionist images of vernacular architecture may strip the buildings of their specific historical associations, they also depict those buildings in terms of broader cultural attitudes toward the past. This apparent paradox reflects divergent cultural attitudes toward America's past. Indeed, Precisionist artists and others in the modernist milieu found the national past a valuable resource for exploring a modern national culture.

These artists were not, of course, alone in their attraction to the subject matter. Other artists of the era were also drawn to rural buildings. Notably, the Regionalist artists—particularly Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood—as well as Edward Hopper and Walker Evans, also made these subjects important parts of their careers. Their approaches to the

subject, however, differed substantially from that of the Precisionist artists; these distinctions will be discussed in greater length later.

This interest of modernists in the past was expressed in numerous ways. For instance, in the journal that he edited, *The Soil*, art dealer Robert Coady integrated old and new in a broad vision of what modern American art could be. The issues that he edited contained a remarkably wide selection of photographs, drawings, essays, and literary excerpts. Indeed, the wide-ranging contents of the first issue, published in December 1916, included a selection from the Book of Job, an article on Renoir by Ambrose Vollard, a serialized dime novel, a photograph of an archaic Greek kore figure, an article by Charlie Chaplin on humor, an anthropological study of indigenous Mexicans, and photographs of steam hammers and railroad engines. In his review of the first issue, art critic Henry McBride lauded Coady's efforts: "Mr. Coady holds, like Walt Whitman, that American art should be all embracing."²

An important element of this study is an awareness of the unique place that the vernacular architecture images hold in the oeuvres of Sheeler and O'Keeffe. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, both artists created enough images of the subjects that rural vernacular architecture themes constitute a substantial element of their work; they were important for O'Keeffe during the 1920s and 1930s, and for Sheeler throughout his career. It was also a major subject within the Precisionists' collective

² Henry McBride, "*The Soil*, a Magazine of American Art," *The Sun*, 17 December 1916, sec. 5, p. 12, quoted in Zilczer, 35.

oeuvre. While their style is most often associated with sleek images of cities and modern industry, I submit that the Precisionists' modernist exploration of rural vernacular buildings is at the heart of their contribution to the larger artistic project of reimagining and recreating American national identity.

Precisionism's history

In the interest of clarity, the following are a few notes on terminology used in this dissertation: Throughout my text, I use the terms "avant-garde" and "modernist" interchangeably, to refer to the early-twentieth-century artists who were committed to finding new means of expression, consciously distinct from the art academies and official teachings and styles they found retardataire or lacking contemporary significance. In the same vein, I use the words "America" and "American" to refer to the United States, not North America or the Americas.³

As Precisionism is the stylistic context within which these artists work, a discussion of the style's parameters and background is warranted.

"Precisionism" is a problematic term. Applied after the fact to work sharing stylistic qualities, the term developed gradually from critics' and scholars' descriptions of the trend toward similar subjects and styles. For this reason, "Precisionist" serves as a useful label for this general trend, rather than as a

³ Wanda Corn explains these distinctions lucidly in her introduction to *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), xvii.

description of a discrete movement. Because the artists described as Precisionists never established a formal group or school, Precisionism can be a difficult style to identify.⁴ The identification of Precisionist artists is complicated by the flexibility of the term and by the fact that many artists worked in a hard-edged style.

The term "Precisionist" was probably first used in the manner it is used today by Alfred H. Barr in the late 1920s, when he described "certain important tendencies" in contemporary painting, citing the work of Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth.⁵ The words "precise" and "precision," however, had been used to describe the style from the time of one of the first public exhibitions of work that I define as Precisionist. This exhibition was the February 1917 show of Sheeler's work at New York's Montross Gallery; the unidentified reviewer in the *New York Times* remarked upon the "clear precision" of Sheeler's "definite little drawings."⁶ Barr and other critics used the word to denote stylistic and thematic consistencies among some modern

⁴ Gail Stavitsky provides a thorough overview of the origins and meanings of the term "Precisionist" in "Reordering Reality: Precisionist Directions in American Art, 1915–1941," in *Precisionism in America 1915–1941: Reordering Reality*, Gail Stavitsky et al. (Montclair: Montclair Art Museum, 1994), 12–39. Some of the artists now called Precisionists did not even know each other. Elsie Driggs, for instance, claimed to have met Niles Spencer only in 1927, years after they had both shown at Charles Daniel's gallery.

⁵ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Tendencies in Modern Painting" (summary of lecture), *The Bowdoin Orient*, 11 May 1927, 3–4. Quoted in Stavitsky, 21–22.

⁶ "Art at Home and Abroad," *New York Times*, 18 February 1917, magazine section, 14.

American artists. Most art critics, such as Forbes Watson, Thomas Craven, Robert Allerton Parker, Henry McBride, and Helen Appleton Read, identified objectivity, simplification, and architectonic structure in this art and used the term "precision" as the common denominator.⁷ Other terms that were frequently used to describe this art included "immaculate," "ascetic," and in one case, the "be hard" school.⁸ Of these terms, "immaculate" was probably invoked most often. In fact, the first important survey of Precisionism, held at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1960, had as its original working title "The Immaculates." In a letter to Sheeler, curator Martin Friedman acknowledged the complicated parameters of the style:

I realize that the term 'Immaculates' is an arbitrary one, and that it by no means defines the diverse philosophies and styles which it purportedly includes. Still, it does partially serve to distinguish what, by now especially, emerges as one of the significant American tendencies of the century.⁹

⁷ Forbes Watson, "American Note in Demuth's Art," *The World*, 2 December 1923, 8; Thomas Craven, "Charles Sheeler," *Shadowland* 8 (March 1923), 71; Robert Allerton Parker, "The Classical Vision of Charles Sheeler," *International Studio* 84 (May 1926), 72; Helen Appleton Read, "New York as Art," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 May 1932, E6. The sources are identified in Stavitsky, 17-19.

⁸ Henry McBride used the phrase "be hard" in "Salons of America Now Include Art Specimens of Entire World," *New York Herald*, 27 May 1923, 7.

⁹ Martin Friedman to Charles Sheeler, 12 March 1959, Charles Sheeler Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and New York City (hereafter Charles Sheeler Papers).

Most scholars, however, now agree that the Precisionists were united in their associations with Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's Studio Club in the 1920s, the Daniel Gallery in the 1920s (until it closed in 1932), and Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery from 1926 to 1940. In addition, several of the artists either exhibited or were otherwise associated with Alfred Stieglitz's circle. Some artists who are dubbed Precisionists, such as Sheeler, worked in a Precisionist manner for most of their careers. Others, such as Peter Blume, best known for his surrealist-inspired paintings, and Elsie Driggs, who worked in a Precisionist manner for only a few years, created relatively little Precisionist work. In fact, the artists did not necessarily associate themselves with a particular school, even though critics identified them as a stylistic group. Reflecting on her career in 1962, O'Keeffe objected to the label: "I'm not a joiner and I'm not a precisionist or anything else."¹⁰ Sheeler also rejected the word: "It just happened that a group of painters of their own volition and their isolated position just began to paint in a more exacting way [Precisionism] didn't mean anything as a term."¹¹ In this way, Precisionism is similar to the development and use of the term "Luminism," employed to describe a broader tendency rather than a distinct group. It remains an intriguing fact, however, that these numerous artists who were not formally

¹⁰ Interview with Georgia O'Keeffe in Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 202.

¹¹ Martin Friedman interview with Charles Sheeler, 18 June 1959, Charles Sheeler Papers.

aligned all gravitated toward a modernist treatment of the same types of buildings.

My definition of Precisionism derives in large part from Gail Stavitsky's essay, "Precisionism in America 1915–1941: Reordering Reality," from the catalogue accompanying the Montclair Art Museum's 1994 exhibition of the same name. For the purposes of my study, I consider O'Keeffe and Sheeler Precisionist artists, as well as those who shared a hard-edged style, somewhat related to Cubism and often depicting common subject matter. These subjects included architectonic aspects of the urban scene, such as skyscrapers, cityscapes, and factories, as well as the focus of my study, rural vernacular architecture. My study is also bounded by the world wars; I discuss only the period from the late 1910s until about 1940 and the artists who worked within these dates. Furthermore, most of the artists in my study worked in the Northeast and had professional, and often personal, connections with each other. These connections frequently grew out of mutual ties with the dealers listed above.

In the Walker Art Center's show, eighteen artists were identified as Precisionists. Karen Tsujimoto expanded the roster of Precisionist artists in the catalogue accompanying the 1982 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography*, to

include several West Coast photographers, including Brett Weston and Imogen Cunningham.¹² Stavitsky narrowed the list in her 1994 study.

Precisionist work was created in many two-dimensional media: painting, prints and drawings, and photography. Most of the artists considered Precisionists worked in more than one medium; most famously, Sheeler was fluent in both painting and photography. Of course, different media reveal different aspects of the subjects depicted—a photographed barn will look different from the same barn rendered in oil on canvas. Still, the depictions of these vernacular buildings in different media bear more similarities than differences. The clean lines, simplified contours, and emphasis on abstracted geometry are common to all of the work in oil, prints, drawings, and photographs.

The rural vernacular buildings in this study include the following: barns; other farm structures, such as chicken coops and silos; rural or small-town churches; and rural or small-town houses. Of the houses, many of the images depict interiors. I have included those that reveal significant architectural information, such as Sheeler's Doylestown house series, or those

¹² Martin L. Friedman, *The Precisionist View in American Art* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1960) and Karen Tsujimoto, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1982). Individual studies of artists, such as Theodore Stebbins' *The Photography of Charles Sheeler: American Modernist* (Boston, Bulfinch Press and The Museum of Fine Arts, 2002) and Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirschler, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1987), consider the rural vernacular architecture works as part of the artists' oeuvres but do not discuss them extensively within the context of Precisionism.

that include objects—such as folk art—relevant to the themes of old and new, craft and modernism, which are considered in my study. As a result, I consider some works that are more still life than strictly architectural; Niles Spencer's *The Green Table* (figure 1, 1930, Whitney Museum of American Art) is one such example.

In addition to the work of Sheeler and O'Keeffe, which is discussed at length, I explore the work of other artists who are generally considered precisionists: George Ault, Peter Blume, Ralston Crawford, Stefan Hirsch, Edmund Lewandowski, Niles Spencer, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston. As the oeuvres of Preston Dickinson, Elsie Driggs, and Louis Lozowick include few, if any, barn images, I will not discuss those artists. A comprehensive study of all of the artists whose work is considered Precisionist—there are fifteen or more, depending on one's definition—would be beyond the scope of a doctoral dissertation.

Furthermore, I have not tried to identify systematically all of the depictions of vernacular buildings by all of the Precisionist artists; creating such a catalogue would be a dissertation in itself. Instead, I discuss different artists' work as the images relate to broader themes in my study. Again, the exceptions are O'Keeffe and Sheeler. I have closely examined their oeuvres and identified as many relevant artworks as possible.

Some Precisionist artists painted images of nineteenth-century industrial buildings. Sheeler, for instance, depicted the old mills in New

England towns, such as *Ballardvale* (figure 2, 1946, Addison Gallery of American Art). I have omitted these works for two reasons. First, many of these images are dated after 1940, the end of my study. More importantly, they differ thematically from the other images. Such large-scale factories represent the mass labor of the industrial revolution. While they are of similar vintages as the old barns and other buildings, they do not represent the small-scale, hand-hewn, local labor symbolized by the buildings in this study.

Another omission is Charles Demuth's series of images of houses created in Bermuda in February and March of 1917. Although the modest structures are rendered in a Precisionist style consistent with the artworks in this study, these works depict buildings of an English colony, buildings whose histories and associations differ significantly from examples of vernacular architecture in the American Northeast.¹³

¹³ Future study may examine more closely the Bermuda cottages that Demuth portrayed. The oeuvres of most of the Precisionist artists are relatively neglected. Ralston Crawford, for instance, has not enjoyed a serious retrospective since the 1985 Whitney Museum survey. His work, representing several styles in a variety of media, would be well served by closer examination. Similarly, while George Ault's painting career was surveyed in a recent gallery exhibition (Zabriskie Galleries, New York, mounted *George Ault*, from March 9–April 24, 2004), a focused study of his architectural paintings in and around Woodstock would be of great interest. There exists a paucity of recent scholarship on Driggs, Blume, Hirsch, and Lewandowski, and further research on these artists' careers would benefit the field.

Literature

Only in the last twenty years has scholarship considered the rural vernacular imagery present in Precisionism in depth; these studies are mostly monographic. Sheeler's work is overwhelmingly the subject of choice.¹⁴ Susan Fillin-Yeh's 1987 Yale University Art Gallery exhibition and its catalogue, *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors*, is a very important study devoted to the folk art and vernacular design in the artist's work.¹⁵ Karen Lucic's 1989 dissertation, "The Present and the Past in the Work of Charles Sheeler," is an invaluable study of Sheeler's depictions of the Doylestown house and his Bucks County barn imagery. The work in her dissertation was expanded in the catalogue accompanying the 1997 exhibition, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition*, held at the Allentown Art Museum.¹⁶ This emphasis on Sheeler is not coincidental; there exists far more scholarship on his work overall than that on most of the other Precisionist artists, such as Ault and Spencer.

¹⁴ An early study devoted exclusively to Sheeler's rural vernacular architecture images is Karen [Lucic] Davies, "Charles Sheeler in Doylestown and the Image of Rural Architecture," *Arts Magazine* 59 (March 1985): 135–39.

¹⁵ Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1987).

¹⁶ Karen Lucic, "The Present and the Past in the Work of Charles Sheeler" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1989); Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition* (Allentown, Penn.: Allentown Art Museum, 1997).

The exception, of course, is O’Keeffe, on whose art and life an enormous amount has been written. In the great number of studies of O’Keeffe’s art, however, images of rural vernacular architecture are not examined as a group. This may be due to the fact that the majority of the artist’s work involved other themes—most famously her flowers, still lifes, and landscapes. In addition, the details of her life have proven very compelling for scholars and biographers, as discussed at length in Chapter Two. The 1995 Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalogue *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George* offers information about barns at the Stieglitz family compound that were painted by O’Keeffe and photographed by Stieglitz.¹⁷

Although the great majority of Precisionist artists created studies of barns and other rural structures—Ralston Crawford, for instance, created at least seventeen oils, drawings, and gouaches of barns—the works have not been considered as a group to date. An important reference source for the literature on Precisionism is the wealth of references compiled in *Ten Precisionist Artists: Annotated Bibliographies*, published in 1992.¹⁸ Much of the early literature on Precisionism, beginning with contemporary reviews and expanding in the 1940s, stresses the mechanical and industrial subject matter of the style. Furthermore, literature into the 1970s emphasizes the definition

¹⁷ John Szarkowski, *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995).

¹⁸ R. Scott Harnsberger, ed., *Ten Precisionist Artists: Annotated Bibliographies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992).

of the style and the identification of Precisionist artists. Milton Brown's article, "Cubist-Realism: An American Style," which was written before the start of the second world war and published in the 1943/1945 issue of *Marsyas*, studied the style as a whole,¹⁹ as did the other articles and studies published in the following decades. While these examinations of the trend, including the exhibition catalogues mentioned earlier, do address the rural architecture imagery, the subject is usually presented as secondary to the factory pictures. Industry is given pride of place.

More recent work on Precisionism includes the dissertation by Sharon Corwin, "Selling 'America': Precisionism and the Rhetoric of Industry, 1916–1939."²⁰ Corwin's study focuses on Precisionism and labor and includes a chapter on rural vernacular images and the concept of the pastoral that is particularly relevant to this project. Also important is a chapter on Sheeler in Wanda Corn's *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity 1915–1935*, which discusses the artist's interiors in relation to many of the ideas about modernist uses of history in this period.

Methodology

I have combined close reading of the Precisionist images with study of the larger cultural context in which they were made. Models for this type of

¹⁹ Milton Brown, "Cubist-Realism," *Marsyas* (1943/45), 157–158.

²⁰ Sharon Lynn Corwin, "Selling 'America': Precisionism and the Rhetoric of Industry, 1916–1939" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001).

approach include Wanda Corn's *The Great American Thing* and Susan Fillin-Yeh's *Charles Sheeler: American Interiors*. Both provide strong arguments for considering a modern artist's relationship to early Americana. Earlier sources, such as issues of the journal *The Soil*, published in 1916 and 1917, are used for their historical value. As much of this project explores the cultural context of the interwar period, contemporary texts are used as primary sources. These include literature and criticism, including William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*, Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming-of-Age*, and Constance Rourke's *The Roots of American Culture*.²¹

As the approach of this dissertation is a synthesis of cultural trends and ideas—rather than an unearthing of undocumented material—much of my research was drawn from published sources. The vast resources of the New York Public Library and the libraries of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art provided the majority of the contemporaneous printed literature used in this project, from nineteenth-century agricultural manuals to Lake George tourist guides to exhibition press announcements. A good deal of the primary source information on Precisionist artists is in the collection of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, which is the repository for important material,

²¹ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1925); Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915; New York: B. W. Huebsh, 1924); Constance Rourke, *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays*, ed. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942).

including papers on Sheeler, O'Keeffe, Spencer, and Ault. The Archives also hold materials from several relevant organizations, such as exhibition records from the Downtown Gallery and the Montross Gallery.

For information on Sheeler and Doylestown, I consulted the Bucks County Historical Society Library, which holds extensive information on the Doylestown antiquarian/collector Henry Chapman Mercer and related information on Sheeler. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University is the repository for the Alfred Stieglitz archive. Travel in the places where these artists worked (Bucks County, Pennsylvania; the Hudson River Valley; parts of Connecticut; and southern Wisconsin) allowed me to see the types of buildings the artists depicted.

Organization

The first chapter, "Precisionist Vernacular Architecture: Depiction, Omission, and Meaning," identifies the buildings that the artists drew, painted, and photographed and describes the artists' different methods of rendering them. Some artworks are very representational, while others abstract the buildings until they are nearly unrecognizable. The emphasis of this section is iconographic; I examine what elements of the rural world the artists chose to depict and what they omitted. The designs of the buildings in the Precisionist artworks reflect regional variations and local agricultural needs. This chapter also considers agricultural practices and the buildings

needed to support them, focusing on the following regions: southeastern Pennsylvania (particularly Bucks County); Lake George, New York; southern Wisconsin; the Hudson River Valley; and Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula. Finally, I discuss how the choice of these buildings, which are uniformly old, reveals the Precisionist interest in participating in one of the broader cultural projects that took place in the United States in the interwar period—the exploration of regional and folk history.

The second chapter, titled "Modernism and the Barn," looks at Precisionism and at the rural vernacular architecture images in the context of modernism in Europe and in the United States. The abstracted style of the works in this study closely relates to several contemporaneous movements, including Cubism, Surrealism, Purism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the principles of the Bauhaus. This chapter also discusses modernists' fascination with the "other," that is, work made by distant cultures, past eras, and even women (I discuss how O'Keeffe's work was marginalized in this category of "other"). Finally, this chapter considers how the mythology and notion of the American land as a site of renewal and redemption is part of modernist thought, both at home and abroad. Thus, the Precisionist images in rural settings participate in broader themes of the avant-garde.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the United States saw a widespread and powerful increase of interest in the nation's past. Chapter Three, "Precisionism and Creation of a Usable American Past," discusses the era's

fascination with American history, especially its quotidian elements. One major manifestation of this trend, of particular relevance to this study, is the increased interest of more and more Americans, including the artistic avant-garde, in collecting folk art in the period; its appeal lay in the identification of folk art both as a fine art native to this country and as an ancestor to modern art. For instance, art dealer Edith Halpert, in 1931, opened her American Folk Art Gallery adjacent to the Downtown Gallery, her space for modern art. Major institutions of fine art, including the Museum of Modern Art, also began exhibiting folk art during this period. Related to this interest was a fascination with historic buildings. Four case studies related to Precisionist artists—Colonial Williamsburg, Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, Shaker communities, and Pennsylvania’s Ephrata Cloister—illustrate how the historic preservation of workaday structures became increasingly common in the interwar period. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how American artists looked to other cultures to legitimize their own contemporary art.

Chapter Four, “History on a Local Scale,” takes this broad view of American history and narrows it to a discussion of local identity. Almost without exception, Precisionist artists depicted historic buildings near their homes. While their choice of local vernacular architectural subjects seems logical, other factors were involved in the artists’ decisions. I submit that choices of subject and locale were not made solely on the basis of proximity of

the buildings. This dissertation proposes that the artists' interest in the old structures inhabiting their immediate environments was a response to increased awareness of and interest in local and regional histories and traditions. The Precisionist rural vernacular architecture images are studied here in the context of local and regional culture. The buildings that appear in these artworks reflect the agricultural histories of the regions where they were created. This chapter considers changes in the key areas where O'Keeffe worked—Lake George, New York; southern Wisconsin; and Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula—and in eastern Pennsylvania, which Sheeler and Crawford used as a base for much of their art. Works by other Precisionist artists featuring buildings with particularly identifiable regional connections are also studied. In this chapter, the art is located in the context of literature, music, dance, and other art forms that documented and celebrated local customs and life.

Chapter Five, "Small Towns, Agriculture, and the Lure of Nostalgia," looks at work by artists who were not Precisionists but who also considered agricultural themes in the interwar period. Regionalists and artists working for the federal art projects of the 1930s regularly chose similar subjects of barns and rural buildings. Edward Hopper and Walker Evans also chose such subject matter; their work is compared with that of the Precisionists. This chapter addresses the apparent dichotomy of the Precisionist choice of urban/industrial subjects and rural vernacular themes. While the subjects represent extreme opposites of old and new, the two do share thematic

similarities, including an emphasis on functionality and labor. These images uniting the antiquated and the modern are considered through a model of the pastoral, of a bucolic, distant, anti-urban space. Finally, I explore the role of nostalgia in these images.

The examination of the past through a modern lens is at the heart of this project. The ways that O'Keeffe and Sheeler, and the other Precisionist artists chose to portray historic buildings as icons for the modern age—and the contradiction of at once isolating them and working within a rich historical context that celebrated the old—reveals many of the complexities of the interwar period.

Chapter One: Precisionist Vernacular Architecture: Depiction, Omission, and Meaning

This chapter begins by identifying the rural houses and related buildings in Precisionist art. The second part of the chapter discusses the agricultural history associated with these rural vernacular images. The story of changes in farming provides context for the Precisionist images of barns, which portray buildings designed for older methods of cultivation. The last part of the chapter describes these agricultural buildings—their style, age, and function. The Precisionists' choice of such structures as their subjects and the ways they present these buildings shed light on their role in a larger cultural project—engagement with American folk history.

In stylistic terms, the barns and houses are treated much like other Precisionist subjects. The paintings and drawings of rural vernacular architecture are clearly defined, reduced to basic geometric shapes, and smoothly brushed. The simplification of forms, often to the point of abstraction, draws attention to the geometry and planes of the buildings. Sheeler, O'Keeffe, and other Precisionist artists customarily flattened the volumes of the buildings or emphasized the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Even in photographs—which presumably render the world more veristically than paintings or drawings—traditional one-point perspective is subverted by devices such as cropping, framing, and using

unexpected points of view. Sheeler's *Side of a White Barn* (figure 3, 1915, Lane Collection) is a particularly austere example. In this photograph, one wall of the structure fills the entire picture plane. With the exception of a fragment of a fence and a chicken in the foreground, no clues indicate where the barn is—no outbuildings, tools, or farmer are visible. Instead, Sheeler reduces the barn to its formal qualities of flat planes and basic textures.

Before introducing the buildings in the vernacular architecture images, a few points are worth elucidating. First, the terminology for barns and other farm buildings varies a great deal, even when considering the same type of structure. For instance, the Pennsylvania bank barn is often referred to by other names: Sweitzer or Swiss barn, Pennsylvania Dutch barn, basement barn, Mennonite, forebay, hex barn.¹ Despite numerous scholarly attempts to classify barns, their identification is an inexact science. Perhaps to a greater degree than other kinds of buildings, barn buildings do not remain unchanged; their functions change with the needs of the farm. Over time, through renovations, additions, and other structural changes, roofs, doors, windows, and other identifying features modify the building's original design. For instance, a small barn originally intended for holding hay, a few cows, and a few horses might be expanded with the addition of a larger gambrel roof (which could hold more hay) and an el-shaped addition to

¹ Joseph William Glass, "The Pennsylvania Culture Region: A Geographical Interpretation of Barns and Farmhouses" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1971), 45.

house a larger dairy herd. Main doors that originally opened out on hinges—one indication of a building's age—could have been modernized with a track allowing the doors to slide open and closed.² Such layers of renovation, reuse, and change within a single building make precise dating and classification difficult. Furthermore, the historical record offers scant documentation for barns—one barn scholar observed that these utilitarian structures may never have had extensive formal plans.³ Thus, studies of barn architecture are the work of educated guesses, not an exact science. The same is true for houses, yet houses, more elaborate and reflective of the status of their owners, are more likely to have surviving plans. Still, additions, repairs, and other alterations often disguise the original size and details of the building.

Houses

In this section, I will discuss houses depicted in the work of Sheeler, O'Keeffe, Ault, and Demuth. Fewer images of small-town or rural houses appear in these works than do images of barns. In most cases, the buildings' interiors, rather than their exteriors, are portrayed.

² After about 1850, doors operating on tracks began replacing those that opened by swinging out on hinges. The hinged door type was dangerous in windy weather, when the door was difficult to hold open or could slam shut. Thomas Durant Visser, *Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997), 33–37.

³ Glass, 97–98.

Sheeler probably created the greatest number of such works; houses, both exteriors and interiors, appear in more than 30 of his paintings, prints, and photographs. He depicted vernacular buildings in most of the rural places where he lived as an adult: the house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania; and his later homes in South Salem, New York; Irvington-on-Hudson, New York; and Ridgefield, Connecticut.

The most famous of his houses, arguably, is the house he rented in Doylestown, of which a series of 16 images exists.⁴ Dating from 1768, the Worthington house was constructed of fieldstone, with one room on the first floor and two on the second.⁵ Sheeler found the house in about 1910 and shared it with Morton Livingston Schamberg as a retreat from New York City until Schamberg died from influenza in 1918. Sheeler continued to rent the house until 1926. As has been documented extensively by Karen Lucic and Theodore Stebbins, Sheeler photographed the main room downstairs and created images of the upstairs space as well. Dramatic artificial lighting highlights the severe, plain contours of the rooms and the geometric flatness of the door and window openings. It is interesting to note that Sheeler used the Doylestown house as a weekend and summer retreat and maintained urban residences in Philadelphia and in New York City during the same

⁴ The dating of these photographs and the number of prints made from the negatives are discussed in Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), 8–9.

period. There exists, however, little visual record—photographic or otherwise—of his city homes.

Sheeler's images of his later homes in Connecticut and New York also depict interiors, with greater emphasis on details. In *American Interior* (figure 4, 1934, Yale University Art Gallery), a view of his South Salem, New York, living room, the distorted perspective of the table shares the vertiginous geometry of the Doylestown stairwell. Here, however, Sheeler offers closer examination of elements such as the rug patterns, the designs on the plates, and the shape of the slat-backed chair. The building itself is less the focus of the work than the objects inside.

Sheeler's houses, however, reflected the same simplicity he sought in his artistic practice. The house he occupied in Ridgefield, Connecticut, was much newer than the Worthington house. Built in 1929, the house was a stucco cottage with modern amenities. But Carol Troyen and Erica Hirschler have argued for the house's affinity with older architecture, noting that the building:

...was deliberately simple, even rustic, in its materials, and incorporated elements from the past. The huge rough-hewn beams surrounding the door of the living room were salvaged from an earlier structure, possibly the school that was razed to build this house. The living room mantelpiece was constructed from parts of an old

⁵ The house's plan and history are extensively described in Lucic (1997). See in particular, 16–17.

stone 'boat' (a toboggan-like cart designed to carry huge stones).⁶

Indeed, in the painting *Newhaven* from 1932 (figure 5, Lane Collection), Sheeler depicts the old-fashioned qualities of the front hall of his house and the stairway to the second floor. The painting emphasizes the enormous beams, the stones composing the back of the fireplace, and the rustic-looking tiles of the floor.

Sheeler's next home, in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, was actually a nineteenth-century structure; one source described the stone cottage as dating from 1866.⁷ This house, where the artist settled in 1942, was called "Bird's Nest."

As with his other paintings and photographs of homes, Sheeler's images of Shaker buildings are usually interiors. These works, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, also constitute an important part of his oeuvre. Although he had been collecting Shaker objects for several years, he probably did not visit Shaker settlements until about 1930. From 1932 to 1956, Sheeler created more than a dozen images of buildings—painted and photographed—in the communities at Hancock Shaker Village, Massachusetts, and Mt. Lebanon Shaker Village in New Hampshire. The paintings and photographs emphasize the geometry of flat planes and

⁶ Troyen and Hirshler, 138.

vertiginous angles. The photographs depict the design elements that made the Shakers famous; their inclusion was perhaps inevitable, given the Shakers' attention to overall design. In *Doors to Meeting Hall, Mt. Lebanon Shaker Village* (figure 6, circa 1934, Lane Collection), the celebrated pegs used to hold household items from bonnets to chairs run along the walls in parallel bands. The stripes appear both in the hallway in the foreground of the photograph and along the walls into the meetinghouse room beyond.

Ault also portrayed his old house in Woodstock, New York. While this house was simple by necessity rather than choice—Ault was impoverished for most of his adult life—his paintings emphasize the simple lines of the structure. In *Studio Interior* (figure 7, 1938, Smithsonian American Art Museum), the simple stairwell and the old-fashioned stove dominate the interior. Ault also includes the details of the interior siding and the boards of the ceiling. The rented building was extremely basic; it had no electricity or plumbing. In his painting, Ault presents an orderly and tidy space, one that is cleanly austere.

O'Keeffe painted the Victorian-style farmhouse on the Stieglitz compound at Lake George. It, too, is a nineteenth-century building. As with her barn images, the lines of the Lake George house are extremely simplified and stripped of detail. In *Farmhouse Window and Door* (figure 8, 1929, The

⁷ Materials relating to the "Art in Your Life" television program, dated 1951, describe the house as eighty-five years old. Charles Sheeler Papers.

Museum of Modern Art), for example, O’Keeffe includes details such as the siding in the ornate scroll of the lintel, but she simplifies the scrolled contours and omits the stepped quality of the lintel that is visible in Stieglitz photographs, such as *House and Grape Leaves* (figure 9, 1934, Art Institute of Chicago). As striking as the painting is, more telling is the fact that only one image of the Stieglitz farmhouse exists. In light of the number of photographs Stieglitz took during the same years, as well as O’Keeffe’s numerous images of the property’s barns, this isolated example suggests O’Keeffe’s relative disinterest in the Victorian building—or perhaps her feelings for the Stieglitz family.⁸

Most of Demuth’s rural vernacular architecture images depict exteriors of buildings in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he spent summers in 1915 and 1916. In watercolor, oil, and tempera, his works offer a broader view of his chosen places; he often focuses on rows of rooftops dotted by chimneys, with a taller church steeple or industrial building punctuating the composition. Although Lancaster was not a small town, Demuth, whose diabetes required him to live at home under his mother’s care, often felt confined in the city. In letters to his friends

⁸ O’Keeffe’s lack of interest in the farmhouse as a subject may also have been a response to the busy family life, which centered around the building. Sue Davidson Lowe reports that O’Keeffe relished the long walks that separated the barns from the farmhouse. Sue Davidson Lowe, *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), 234.

in New York, he referred to his hometown as “the province.”⁹ As Demuth’s paintings incorporate glimpses of many buildings, rather than a single structure, they do not have the same stolid monumentality of, for instance, Ault’s barns or O’Keeffe’s farm buildings. Demuth’s buildings are difficult to identify, as only small pieces of the structures are visible. Many of the paintings depict aspects of the center of the city, near the family’s home. Lancaster’s downtown had a particularly rich early American history: It was the nation’s capitol for one day in 1777; its City Hall dated from 1795; and it was the largest inland city of the thirteen colonies.¹⁰ The buildings Demuth painted, close to the city center and near the Demuth family’s eighteenth-century house, are probably nineteenth-century, and many are probably houses. Certainly, for Demuth they would have stood in sharp contrast to the New York City skyscrapers he would have seen during his many visits to the city.

Farming developments

Barns are the most commonly depicted of the Precisionist rural vernacular architecture subjects, and the ways these artists approached them is significant. As is usually the case with creative endeavors, the ways these

⁹ Demuth used the phrase often; Betsy Fahlman traces examples in *Pennsylvania Modern: Charles Demuth of Lancaster* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1983), 13, 24 n. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

artists portrayed their subjects were different from how the subjects actually appeared. The details of their environments that the Precisionists chose to omit or depict hold the key to their larger cultural enterprise. For this reason, the story of agricultural changes in this period is critical to understanding how these artists approached their subjects. The artists' omissions and inclusions suggest their ideas about their subjects and establish the artists' role in the broader cultural program of reevaluating the national agrarian past.

In the mid-nineteenth century, agriculture in the United States was shifting from primarily subsistence farming to a more market-driven system. Developments in transportation, such as steamboats, canals (particularly the Erie Canal), and improvements in railroads—notably the development of refrigerated cars, general improvements to infrastructure, and subsidies that allowed railroads to operate below cost—allowed farm goods to reach cities from much greater distances. These improvements increased the profitability of farms further from the large markets of the East Coast. Accordingly, smaller farms on higher-priced land east of the Appalachian Mountains grew less profitable, both because they could not produce enough to offset land prices, and because much of the soil may have become less fertile through

overuse.¹¹ By the end of the century, farms in the Northeast were significantly less valuable than larger enterprises in the West.

Farms in the West produced staples such as grain and cattle more cheaply than those in the East. Thus, in the decades following the Civil War, farming activity in Northeastern states declined overall. From 1880 to 1900, for instance, Vermont lost half its farms. A third of its population left for farms in the West or for jobs in towns and cities.¹² Farm population leveled off and stayed fairly constant—with a spike during the Great Depression—from 1910 to about 1935. As a result of this decreased cultivation, much farmland reverted to woods.¹³ In some cases, abandoned farms were sold or rented as summer homes and rural getaways; the resort area of Lake George, where the Stieglitz farm property lay, was well suited to such reuse. Additionally, some farmers, particularly those in accessible and scenic locales, rented space to visitors. Tourism, discussed further in Chapter Four, provided stable income in many rural areas.¹⁴

¹¹ Russell argues that soil fertility did not change substantially between the earliest agricultural settlement and the early twentieth century. Howard S. Russell, *A Long, Deep, Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1982), 324–325.

¹² *Ibid.*, 256–257.

¹³ Russell argues that much of New England's cultivated land, particularly on poor, rocky soil, was ill suited to farming in the first place.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 278–279.

Perhaps due to the smaller size of their land holdings, Northeastern farmers continued to cultivate a variety of foods, while the larger farms in the West specialized in producing and selling large volumes of a single crop or animal product.¹⁵ In the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many Northeastern farmers responded to cheap staples imported from the West by shifting production to perishables for the large Eastern cities. Fresh produce was marketed to the large population centers, and specialized buildings were built to accommodate this new focus of production. But according to economist Clarence Danhof, full conversion to specialized commercial ventures could only occur in farms located very close to urban centers or to transit. Other farms in the Northeast retained a large degree of subsistence agricultural practice. Most farmers had relatively few acres on which they cultivated many crops.¹⁶ Barns and other structures on these small farms were most likely built to meet the subsistence needs of their owners, who sold their extra goods in local communities.

As most of the Precisionist artists lived and worked in the Northeast, the majority of the barns in their work are typical of the region. Perhaps the most common type of identifiable barn depicted in Precisionist images—

¹⁵ Clarence H. Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820–1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 11, 108–109, 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 145–147.

particularly in Sheeler's work—is the Pennsylvania bank barn.¹⁷ Of German origin and developed in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this barn was designed to house animals and store large volumes of crops. Bank barns grew in popularity in the Northeast, particularly in eastern Pennsylvania, around the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁸

The lower floor, which is often partially excavated into a natural or man-made slope, is primarily used for housing cows and horses. The earth insulates the floor, providing warmth in winter and cooler temperatures in summer; the lower floor also usually opens to the south to take advantage of the sun. The lower story and sometimes part of the upper floor is made of stone or concrete, although very early bank barns were entirely of wood.¹⁹ The larger upper part of the barn was used as a hay mow. Farmers used the existing slope or built an earth ramp to drive hay onto this upper floor. A distinctive characteristic of this type of barn is the cantilevered forebay extending from the hay mow over the barnyard below. This forebay provides

¹⁷ I have chosen to use the terms “bank barn” and “Pennsylvania bank barn” because they are most commonly used in literature in general and particularly in the writing on Sheeler. Furthermore, the terms describe the buildings’ design and general regional spread.

¹⁸ Visser, 42.

¹⁹ Allen G. Noble, *Wood, Brick, and Stone: The North American Settlement Landscape* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 25.

protection for livestock in bad weather, and chutes cut into its floor allow feed and hay to be dropped directly to livestock below.²⁰

Case studies

In this section, I will discuss depictions of barns and farm buildings by Sheeler and O'Keeffe, and in less detail those by Crawford and Ault. Charles Sheeler's connection with barns is the most thoroughly documented of the Precisionist artists'. He completed more than 80 images of barns and farm buildings in most two-dimensional media, including oil, tempera, conté crayon, photography, prints, and drawings.²¹ As he lived in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New York, the farm scenes depicted are from those areas. Most identifiable are Pennsylvania bank barns, clearly rendered with their distinctive forebays. His photograph *Bucks County Barn (with Wall)* (figure 10, circa 1916–1917, Lane Collection), for instance, shows the rear of a bank barn. The forebay, parallel to the picture plane, extends over the recessed part of the barn, where doors leading to the interior are visible. The barnyard is surrounded by a stone wall. And in a later painting, *Barn Abstraction* (figure 11, 1946, Arthur E. Imperatore collection), Sheeler indicates the distinctive forebay by highlighting the broad shape in red; the purples and grays in the space below suggest the shadow that the forebay would create. A less

²⁰ Ibid, 26–27.

²¹ Lucic (1997), 113.

abstracted oil of the same building from 1940 (figure 12, *Bucks County Barn*, Terra Foundation for American Art) reinforces this identification.

Ralston Crawford began painting barns in the early 1930s and executed a series of more than fifteen paintings and drawings on the theme in 1935–1937.²² In the 1930s and 1940s, he also photographed barns. Crawford's barn images range from less representational, such as *White Washed Barn* (figure 13, 1937, location unknown), to very descriptive, such as *Indian Run Farm, Exton* from 1936 (figure 14, location unknown). Most are set in eastern Pennsylvania,²³ all appear to be bank barns. Most include the forebay extending over the space below, such as *White Washed Barn*, in which the horizontal structure parallel with the fence appears to be supported by timbers over a dark space. This probably represents the rear of the building, the bay extending over space for livestock; the placement of the fence reinforces the identity of the space within as a barnyard. An alternative reading of the image identifies the wedge shape at left as the gable end of a bank barn, the "profile" of which is the bay extending over the barnyard. Indeed, in collapsing and distorting the three dimensions, Crawford suggests both possibilities.

²² William Agee, *Ralston Crawford* (New York: Twelve Trees Press, 1983), 7, 14.

²³ I have found a reference to only one barn image by Crawford that seems to be from a different area. One work included in an exhibition at Middendorf/Lane Galleries (Washington, D.C.) is identified on the checklist as *Barn, Delaware*. Checklist from Crawford artist file, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.

Georgia O'Keeffe's rural vernacular images also portray places the artist knew well. Her work depicts some areas outside the Northeast; O'Keeffe's vernacular architecture images are located in southern Wisconsin (particularly Dane County); Canada's Gaspé Peninsula; areas around Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico; and Lake George, New York. She painted most of her barn images in the 1920s and 1930s.

The nineteenth-century structures in the Lake George paintings are tall and fairly narrow. Although the buildings appear to be quite massive in the paintings—they fill the picture plane to the edges—the locations of the windows that O'Keeffe included and comparison with photographs of the same structures by Stieglitz indicate that they were probably three stories or less. Stieglitz's photographs, such as *Barn & Snow* (figure 15, 1923, National Gallery of Art), offer valuable information about the buildings. First, the large barn appears to have clapboard siding, which was the most popular siding for New England barns from about 1860 through the 1930s.²⁴ A smaller farm building, apparently connected to one of the larger structures, seems to have a kind of novelty siding, an inexpensive method of planing tongue-and-groove boards to look like clapboards. According to Thomas Visser, such siding was popular from the 1920s, particularly for small farm buildings. The sliding doors on the gable end of the structure were attached to a track, a common design after the mid-1800s. In sum, the barn appears to be a

²⁴ Visser, 33–35.

standard late-nineteenth-century type evolved from early New England settlers' adaptations of English barn design.²⁵

The larger buildings had only two stories and a shallow loft for hay storage. By 1920s standards, these were relatively small farm buildings. Architectural history of barn design and details about the Stieglitz family's ownership of the property indicate that these barns probably dated from the second half of the 1800s. The memoirs of Stieglitz's niece, Sue Davidson Lowe, describe the 1920s renovation of old barns on the property.²⁶ Architectural evidence supports this claim. For instance, the fieldstone foundation of the larger barn visible in O'Keeffe's *Barn with Snow* (figure 16, 1934, San Diego Museum of Art), which is probably the same building in Stieglitz's photograph *Barnside* (figure 17, 1923, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), is one indication that the building may date from the late nineteenth century, when such foundations were common; by the early twentieth century, poured concrete had come into more general use.²⁷

One farm building appearing in O'Keeffe's work was the small, plain structure on the Lake George property that she used as a studio. The shanty had particular importance for O'Keeffe. According to her biographers, Stieglitz family and friends overran the Lake George farmhouse during the

²⁵ Ibid, 5–6.

²⁶ Lowe, 234–235.

²⁷ Visser, 44.

summer. The activity and noise made both privacy and painting difficult.

Artist Meridel Rubenstein observed that O’Keeffe’s energies were often directed toward household duties rather than to her painting:

She would come [to Lake George] in the spring and stay on in the fall, and that’s why in the summer she could never get anything done. . . . she and Becky Strand cooked and cleaned for everybody, not just the relatives, but all Stieglitz’s friends. . . . she was the wife, and she was expected to do all this. And she never even questioned it. . . . she just did it.²⁸

Located in a meadow about a five-minute walk from the farmhouse, the shanty was distant enough from the house to provide relative peace. The original purpose of the building remains unclear. O’Keeffe recalled it was built for dances: “It was a one-room building put up years before by young people who worked in the area and wanted a place to dance. It hadn’t been danced in for years and I wanted a place to work away from the house so we fixed up the Shanty.”²⁹ The building’s small size, however—it was 18 by 24 feet—suggests it may have been used for more conventional farm storage purposes. In 1945, Stieglitz’s niece, Georgia Englehard, described the building as a “cottage.”³⁰ Whatever its original function, it is clear that by the

²⁸ Meridel Rubenstein, interview by Laurie Lisle, circa 1977, Laurie Lisle research materials on O’Keeffe, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ Georgia O’Keeffe, *Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), n.p.

³⁰ Georgia Englehard, “Alfred Stieglitz: Master Photographer,” *American Photography* 39 (April 1945): 9.

time Stieglitz and O’Keeffe were summering regularly at the property, the shanty was essentially a ruin, used for storage. The couple did not have enough money to renovate the building, but when Stieglitz’s niece and her husband, Elizabeth and Donald Davidson, arrived in August 1920, they were pressed into service. Margaret Naumberg, Waldo Frank’s wife, also lent assistance during the couple’s visit. Stieglitz described the renovation in letters to Arthur Dove and Paul Rosenfeld:

The shingles of the roof were torn down—they were rotten—& in their stead was placed tar paper. You should have seen Georgia astraddle the rooftop working with a vengeance. She certainly enjoys hammering and plastering, etc., etc. . . . And my niece and I were laying the floor—& oiling the old rafters—& Mrs. Waldo Frank, emptying the shanty which had been filled with old shingles from the old Farmhouse.—The women worked as few men worked.³¹

Within a few days, with virtually no outlay—doors and hinges salvaged from—or in old barns, old windows fished out of old woodpiles etc. etc., Georgia had her dream in concrete form—.³²

While both Stieglitz and O’Keeffe may have briefly shared the shanty—Stieglitz once referred to the building as “our own shanty”³³—it

³¹ Alfred Stieglitz to Arthur Dove, 28 August 1920, Alfred Stieglitz Archives. Quoted in Ann Lee Morgan, ed., *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 70.

³² Stieglitz to Paul Rosenfeld, 28 August 1920, Alfred Stieglitz Archives.

³³ Stieglitz to Dove, 28 August 1920, Alfred Stieglitz Archives.

appears to have been primarily O’Keeffe’s space from the beginning and was probably exclusively hers by the time the farm’s potting shed was renovated for Stieglitz’s use as a darkroom in 1922. By all accounts, she seems to have considered the building a refuge and a place to be creative:

I often walked through the pasture to the back road and as I walked down past the beautiful juniper bushes the Shanty looked very shabby. It had never been painted and the outside boards were scorched by the sun. The clean, clear colors were in my head, but one day as I looked at the brown burned wood of the Shanty I thought, ‘I can paint one of those dismal-colored paintings like the men. I think just for fun I will try—all low-toned and dreary with the tree beside the door.’³⁴

This painting became the Phillips Collection’s *My Shanty* (figure 18, 1922). Stieglitz’s photographs of O’Keeffe and the Davidsons working on the building show a weathered, splintered structure. At about the time of the building’s renovation and later, in the early 1930s, Stieglitz photographed O’Keeffe in the window of the building and also standing at the door. From these images, we see a fence extending from the left side of the door to outside the picture plane (figure 19, *Door to Shanty, Lake George, 1934/1937*, National Gallery of Art). While the photographs symbolically associated O’Keeffe with the structure, they also revealed the building’s age and shabby condition—which are elided by O’Keeffe’s painterly, smooth contours.

³⁴ Georgia O’Keeffe (1976), n.p.

O’Keeffe traveled to Quebec’s rural Gaspé Peninsula in 1932, where she chose to depict the area’s rustic barns rather than its Victorian houses. As with most of her other barn images, these generally omit specific contextual clues such as topography, trees, crops, or human figures. Instead, the series emphasizes the low, long shapes of the Canadian structures. The artist’s focus, as in *White Barn, Red Doors* (figure 20, 1932, private collection), is on the volumes. O’Keeffe renders the buildings as substantial and almost monumental, and she flattens and simplifies the planes of the white buildings. The development of the Gaspé region and O’Keeffe’s choices are discussed further in Chapter Four.

George Ault’s images of barns also reflect the rural area he knew well. Ault moved permanently to a small house outside Woodstock, New York, in 1937. He painted a series of five known views of a local farm, Russell’s Corners, four of which are night scenes. He also depicted what is probably a Dutch barn in *January Full Moon* (figure 21, 1941, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art). An uncommon type usually built from about the mid-1600s until the 1870s, Dutch barns are characterized by a very steep roof—which can be twice the height of the buildings’ side walls—and long rafters. They are concentrated in the Hudson River Valley, with some examples in southern New Jersey. The plans of Dutch barns are often roughly square, creating a large space for threshing. Ault identified this barn near his Woodstock home

as belonging to a farmer known as “Old Rick.”³⁵ The emphasis on the dramatically steep pitch of the roof in *January Full Moon* is the focus of what Susan Lubowsky describes as a “spectral” and “moody” composition.³⁶ The roof, however, also identifies the structure as of a particularly unusual type.

Edmund Lewandowski, a generation younger than most of his Precisionist colleagues, is somewhat lesser known than the other artists in this study. He is included here because he maintained a Precisionist style during his long career and painted barns throughout his decades of activity. Furthermore, his work appears amid important studies of Precisionism, including the Montclair exhibition. In many of his images, he used more detail than other Precisionists, an approach that often makes his barns easy to identify. Although he painted Amish farms during a visit to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1982, the majority of his barns are those he saw in the Midwest.³⁷ In the early 1940s, he created a series of paintings he called “Farmscapes of the Midwest.”³⁸ His gouache *Farm Buildings* (figure 22, 1940, location unknown) focuses on some of the more modern inventions of the

³⁵ Henry Adams, “George Ault, *January Full Moon*,” *American Art Review* 5 (Summer 1992): 154.

³⁶ Susan T. Lubowsky, *George Ault* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1988), 35.

³⁷ *Edmund Lewandowski: Fifty Years of Painting* (New York: Allison Galleries, 1990), n.p.

³⁸ *Ibid*, n.p.

farm; silos are the dominant structures, blocking the other buildings, and a modern pipe stands in the right foreground.

In some later paintings, Lewandowski depicted very large barns. The buildings in *White Barn-Wisconsin* (figure 23, 1960, location unknown) and *Amish Farmscape, No. 2* (figure 24, 1982, location unknown), identifiable by their long shapes and multiple windows, are probably dairy barns. The gambrel roof in the Wisconsin picture reflects that area's agricultural history. Developed in the Midwest, the gambrel roof style creates greater volume in the building; these barns could, thus, hold the feed necessary to support a herd through long winters. The dormer windows that allowed light and air to enter the space are also a common feature of this type of structure.³⁹ In states further west, agricultural practice required large farms—accompanied by large buildings—earlier, generally in the nineteenth century. Indeed, gambrel roofs were a regular feature in the Midwest by 1900.⁴⁰ And while gambrel roofs did spread to the Northeast at the turn of the century,⁴¹ they remained more identified with Midwestern design. As these Lewandowski paintings were created well after the period of the focus of my study, these

³⁹ Ingolf Vogeler, "Dairying and Dairy Barns in the Northern Midwest," in *Barns of the Midwest*, ed. Allen G. Noble and Hubert G. H. Wilhelm (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), 105.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 105. Gambrel roofs did spread to the Northeast, but never became a regular feature in the eastern Pennsylvania area of the traditional Pennsylvania bank barn. Glass, 111.

⁴¹ Visser, 82–83.

images of barns do not entirely fit the definition of Precisionism; I include them because the function of these structures is very recognizable and because Lewandowski's early work was created in the Precisionist milieu. He maintained the style—and depicted unpeopled architectural subjects—for much of his career.

In general, Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture feature the exteriors of barns and other agricultural buildings; there exist very few images of the interiors of farm buildings. In contrast, there are many more depictions of the interiors of houses than there are of house exteriors. This fact has two potential causes: The artists usually depicted barns located on other people's property—as with Ault's portrayal of Old Rick's buildings—and may not have had access to the interiors. Furthermore, most of the Precisionist artists did not actually work on farms; they simply did not spend substantial amounts of time in agricultural buildings. The notable exception is O'Keeffe, who spent her earliest years on a family farm in Wisconsin. After the O'Keeffes left Wisconsin, they moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, where, according to O'Keeffe's sister, the family's house was connected to a farm.⁴² O'Keeffe was also an active part of the Stieglitz family compound at Lake

⁴² Catherine Klenert, interview by Laurie Lisle, audio cassette, 11 September 1977, Laurie Lisle research material on O'Keeffe, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. Klenert does not specify whether the farm was worked by the family or even whether the land was cultivated at all.

George, but that farm was largely out of use, and the family's cultivation of the land was minimal.

In contrast to barn exteriors, the interiors of barn buildings provide a wealth of information about the structures' methods of construction. The style of framing used by the builders, the types of nails employed, the evidence of new structural additions, and the arrangement of interior space for different kinds of animals and grain storage all reveal information about the histories of the buildings. In the great majority of Precisionist images, such interiors are not included. Instead, identification of buildings rests largely on the examination of the building exteriors.

In the Precisionists' exterior views of barns, one can usually identify only the most general characteristics of the structures: the degree of the roof's grade, the relative width and height of the buildings, the location of the main door on the long side or the gable side. But determining more specific information about the buildings' functions, design, and age becomes quite difficult for several reasons.

First, Precisionist artists often abstracted and simplified their subject matter. O'Keeffe's smooth surfaces, for instance, make it impossible to determine whether a barn's siding lies vertically or horizontally—one clue to a building's provenance. In omitting details of window and door designs, or omitting these elements entirely, the artists erased information about the buildings' ages and locations. Often, an artist depicts just one part of a

building, whether a single wall or one side of a complex of farm buildings. This selective point of view, combined with the Precisionist interest in flattening space, can effectively telescope a complex, functional building or group of buildings into an abstracted arrangement of planes and volumes.

Furthermore, the paintings and drawings of barns and houses are highly simplified, with details such as shingles, siding, and even windows omitted. In the majority of examples, only the barn or barns are shown; the farmhouse, silos, and most smaller outbuildings, such as chicken coops and sheds, are left out of the images. The artists occasionally included fences, railings, and walls in their images. The larger environment of the farm—including trees, fields, and pastures—is usually not represented. More often, the barns are isolated, separate from their physical context.

The majority of Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture eliminate the context of landscape. In most instances, the structures fill the greater part of the picture plane. In some works, particularly photographs, the building composes the entire image, as in Strand's *Porch Railings, Twin Lakes, Connecticut* (figure 25, 1916, Thomas Walther collection). Generally, little or no pasture, sky, grass, hill, road, trees, or bushes appear in the images. Instead, the buildings are isolated either on a plain or indistinct background, such as O'Keeffe's *White Barn* of 1932 (figure 26, Mrs. Paul Mellon collection), in which the building stretches along the entire lower register of the horizontal painting. The building's context consists of two

horizontal bands of color. A flat green ground with pale spots before the barn doors suggesting worn areas in the grass is the only indication of the earth. Above, the sky is a simple blue expanse, without clouds. By the same token, Sheeler's Doylestown house photographs reveal no information about what lies outside the building. Shot at night, the photographs show only black voids beyond the window panes. The physical contexts of the buildings are generally secondary to the structures themselves. Some exceptions exist. Strand's photographs of the Gaspé Peninsula, for example, take a wider view and incorporate the shore, sea, and landscape. Demuth's Lancaster images often include several buildings in their deep, nearly topographical perspectives.

As is true with most Precisionist work depicting other subjects, almost no human or animal life appears in these images of rural vernacular architecture.⁴³ The few painted exceptions include two by Peter Blume, which include *Home for Christmas* (figure 27, circa 1926, Columbus Museum of Art), which features a highly simplified horse and its rider, a woman in jodhpurs, standing before the buildings of a small town. Aside from these examples, however, when animals appear in the Precisionist works, it is usually in photographs, where the artist has somewhat less control of the elements in

⁴³ Lucic observes, however, that modernist artists rarely included the human figure in their work in this period; the omission may speak more to the artists' engagement with the avant-garde than to a broader meaning. See Karen Lucic, "On the Threshold: Charles Sheeler's Early Photographs," *Prospects* 20 (1995): 227–255.

the image, rather than paintings or drawings. In Sheeler's photograph *Side of a White Barn*, for example, the chickens visible at the bottom of the image are at odds with the severe formalism of the massive plane of the barn. Karen Lucic has suggested that the chickens are a reminder—perhaps one not welcomed by Sheeler—of the life supported by the structure.⁴⁴ But Sheeler appears to have liked the effect enough to retain the accidental chickens in his oil versions. His photograph *Bucks County Barn* (figure 28, circa 1916–1917, Lane Collection), includes nearly a dozen chickens in the foreground. A 1932 oil after the same subject (described later) retains the animals. Another photographic example, Weston's photograph, *Cow, Tree, Barn* (figure 29, circa 1933) features a cow in the foreground.

Even fewer people appear in these works. Blume's *Home for Christmas*, noted above, is a rare example. A few photographs by Stieglitz at Lake George, such as *Jerome Mellquist and Paul Rosenfeld, Lake George* (figure 30, 1932, National Gallery of Art), show figures in front of buildings. These, however, are more character studies or portraits than depictions of architecture. And Ault's *Walking by the Shed on a Winter Day* (figure 31, 1943, location unknown) shows a lone figure dwarfed by building, tree, and sky; the painting evokes a mood rather than describes a person. Indeed, the figure is anonymous and nearly faceless, while the shed, with the tree growing through it, is given more identifiable characteristics. For all practical

⁴⁴ Lucic (1997), 59.

horizontal bands of color. A flat green ground with pale spots before the barn doors suggesting worn areas in the grass is the only indication of the earth. Above, the sky is a simple blue expanse, without clouds. By the same token, Sheeler's Doylestown house photographs reveal no information about what lies outside the building. Shot at night, the photographs show only black voids beyond the window panes. The physical contexts of the buildings are generally secondary to the structures themselves. Some exceptions exist. Strand's photographs of the Gaspé Peninsula, for example, take a wider view and incorporate the shore, sea, and landscape. Demuth's Lancaster images often include several buildings in their deep, nearly topographical perspectives.

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1950s and an oil from 1932.⁴⁵ Although they were widespread on the East Coast by the 1920s, silos had only been a regular feature of the landscape for thirty years.⁴⁶ The Precisionists may have omitted silos because silos were a relatively new invention and did not represent the nineteenth-century farm. One image with a silo is O’Keeffe’s *Red Barn* of 1928 (figure 34, private collection), set in Wisconsin. Its location is important; silos developed to provide food storage during long winters for dairy cattle in the Midwest before they were adopted by farmers in the East. Thus, the silo in O’Keeffe’s painting may, in fact, be an older one than if she had seen it in the Northeast. Wisconsin-based Lewandowski also includes silos in his images. While many of the paintings are dated later than 1940, when silos were more in common use in the Northeast, the silo in *Red Barn* of 1935 (figure 35, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery) may also be an older structure than Northeastern silos.

Other, more obvious examples of modern technology are also omitted from most farm scenes. Automobiles and tractors appear rarely, if ever. In the few instances when farm equipment appears with the barns and outbuildings, the equipment is simple or old-fashioned. Hirsch’s *Farmyard and Moon* (figure 36, 1933, The Phillips Collection) not only depicts carriages

⁴⁵ Sheeler’s works from the 1950s that include silos are *Family Group* (1950, private collection), *Composition Around Yellow* (1958, location unknown), *On a Connecticut Theme* (1958, private collection), and *Red Against White* (1957, location unknown). The oil painting, *Bucks County Barn*, is discussed in Chapter Five.

⁴⁶ Noble, 69.

but also includes a well. The Precisionist artists generally did not depict the newer equipment that was introduced into agricultural practice by the early twentieth century. These developments included automated hay-making and milking equipment. Technological improvements in dairy production included the introduction of the centrifugal cream separator, which allowed farmers to sell cream to butter manufacturers, and centrifugal cream testers, which measured the butterfat content of milk and cream.⁴⁷ Other technological developments included tractors with gas rather than steam engines, which were developed by 1909.⁴⁸ Almost no tractors at all appear in the Precisionist images. This omission may reflect the greater use of new machinery on western farms than in the northeastern areas most Precisionists depicted. Still, O’Keeffe’s Wisconsin farm paintings include no tractors, and the nearly absolute lack of such elements in any of the artists’ work suggest a conscious decision on their part to omit them.

Even electricity is downplayed in these images; only Ault’s paintings of the Russell’s Corners farm feature electric lights prominently. One painting, *White Washed Barn*, by Ralston Crawford incorporates the sweep of wires connecting to the side of a barn as a compositional element. O’Keeffe’s paintings of the Lake George buildings do not include the electric wires that connected the old greenhouse to the farmhouse. In Stieglitz’s *First Snow and*

⁴⁷ Willard Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 90.

the Little House (figure 37, 1923, National Gallery of Art), the power lines clearly connect over the door, but O’Keeffe’s *Little House* (figure 38, 1921/1922, private collection), which represents the same façade, omits them. There exists the possibility that the little house was not yet electrified when O’Keeffe painted the building in 1921 or 1922. Two later paintings of the structure incorporate the power lines that are visible in Stieglitz’s photographs. These paintings are *Flagpole* (figure 39, 1925, Georgia O’Keeffe Museum) and *Spring* (figure 40, 1923/1924, private collection).

Admittedly, electricity was not ubiquitous on rural East Coast farms—only 11 percent of farms had electricity in 1935—yet the Precisionist choice to leave it out when it did exist suggests a consciousness of the modern development.⁴⁹

The two Precisionist works that combine pastoral imagery with electricity, Lozowick’s *Sentinel* and *Sentinel #2* (figures 41 and 42, locations unknown), both lithographs, do so very uneasily.⁵⁰ In *Sentinel*, an electrical pylon on a hill dominates the composition; the house below, located slightly in the background, appears tucked against the hill, minute in comparison. Similarly, in *Sentinel #2*, the tower stands in the foreground and a relatively tiny farm lies behind it. Both of these images suggest an uncomfortable

⁴⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 227.

⁵⁰ Sharon Corwin identified these unusual works in her dissertation, 237.

relationship between the emblems of the rural world and the overpowering electrical equipment. In the most upbeat interpretation, the focus on the electrical tower suggests that new technologies can support the old and the rural, as suggested by the title. The disproportionate sizes of the towers, their relative dominance in the compositions, and the dark clouds in *Sentinel* anxiously describe the meeting of the technological and the rural. In these compositions, the electrical system appears to overwhelm the farm and the house.

Although the barns in the Precisionist images are generally not small—the hay mows are two stories or more—they are not big enough to be used in large commercial farms. Not only were the farms depicted by Precisionist artists probably unprofitable, the barns themselves were becoming obsolete. Some technological innovations in the late nineteenth century, such as automatic hay baling, made the bank barns' enormous hay lofts less useful. This type of barn fell into disuse because of these changes in agriculture and also as a result of urban expansion into farmland.

As illustrated by the artists' intentional inclusions and omissions, the agriculture depicted in the Precisionist barn images is of a kind practiced a century earlier. At the time these images were created, the barns they featured were disappearing from the landscape.⁵¹ This fact begs the question why these avowed modernists, practicing among the most progressive circles

⁵¹ [Lucic] Davies, 135–39.

of their time, chose such old-fashioned, often decrepit, subjects for their work.

Further implications of modernism's intersections with the historic and nearly obsolete are explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Modernism and the Barn

Stylistically and thematically, Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture had a great deal in common with broader currents of European and American modernism. But, on its face, the choice of historic buildings as the subject for a modernist aesthetic exercise is paradoxical. In this chapter, I trace this apparent contradiction to explore how nineteenth-century barns, churches, and houses serve a modernist agenda in several ways. In the context of European modernism, these buildings' designs are understood as both anticipating twentieth-century architecture and symbolizing the industrial and technological progress associated with the United States. These examples of rural vernacular architecture are not polar opposites of skyscrapers and factories, the other predominant subjects of the Precisionists, but represent a different, related image of America.

At the same time, the old-fashioned buildings were understood in the context of another important element of modernism, so-called primitivism. This chapter considers the early-twentieth-century fascination with the "other"—exotic cultures, distant periods in time, and, as seen in a discussion of criticism of Georgia O'Keeffe's work, women.

Finally, the American soil itself comes to represent a kind of modernism—a site of promise, renewal, and, ultimately, redemption. In

these ways, the rural vernacular architecture images are very much part of—indeed, integral to—the larger story of modernism.

The modernist aesthetic that forms the context of Precisionism is defined by formal elements and by the style's temporal location in the history of art. I define modernism as the aesthetics of the early twentieth century. Geographically, the term includes Europe and North America. The artistic movements involved are numerous, from Fauvism and Cubism to abstraction and Surrealism.

Of course, the many, often disparate, movements and trends that appeared during these several decades and on two continents had widely varying stylistic elements. But in a broad sense, most of them share the following formal qualities: a denial of traditional Renaissance illusionism in favor of flat or distorted space, a general distortion of form—broken down, caricatured, or abstracted entirely—and a use of uncommon, unusual, or non-naturalistic color. Also common to early twentieth-century modernism is unexpected subject matter, or a lack of any narrative subject, as well as an awareness of and a drawing from popular and commercial visual culture.

These modernist experiments resulted in redefinitions of the modern world, both real and imagined. The artists used their new stylistic tools to explore the world around them in both positive and negative terms. The responses to modern life were, of course, as varied as the artists themselves: Matisse's *Joy of Life* (*Bonheur de vivre; Joie de vivre*, 1905–1906, Barnes

Foundation) suggested leisurely utopia; Braque's and Picasso's Cubist collages considered public café life and the studio; George Grosz's post-World War I caricatures implicated corrupt authorities in social ills; Piet Mondrian explored abstraction through austere grids; the American Abstract Artists group searched for universal experiences in colors and volumes; Le Corbusier's urban plans proposed cities of high-rises; John Marin kinetically interpreted the Woolworth Building; and Salvador Dali explored his own memories in fantastic dreamscapes.

The avant-garde in the United States was distinguished from its European kin by several tendencies. As Wanda Corn has described, many of the "machine age modernists" of the early twentieth century sought to define Americanness by first rejecting the older associations of America with nature. Instead, they concentrated on using abstracted formal elements to portray the machine age of America. Doing so often meant incorporating imagery associated with the technological and commercial identity of early-twentieth-century America, such as billboards, fast cars, skyscrapers, the iconography of speed, and streamlining.¹ In this way, American artists could adopt the formal language of European modernism—which at this point was becoming international—while simultaneously claiming the machinist associations with the United States as their unique heritage.

¹ Corn, xv.

Modernist circles in America

As with any art historical trend, the modernist movement in which the Precisionists worked did not have discrete boundaries. The American avant-garde of the interwar period had several focal points. If it had a center, however, then it was arguably the circle around Alfred Stieglitz, his publications *Camera Work* and *291*, and the art galleries he ran during the period. The gallery *291* existed from 1905 to 1917, the Intimate Gallery operated from 1925 to 1929, and An American Place was open from 1929 to 1946. Stieglitz was both a key importer of progressive European art and a tireless promoter of American modern artists. While at *291*, Stieglitz showed European avant-garde art and American art; the Intimate Gallery and An American Place exhibited only American art. Many of the Precisionists—notably, Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, and Paul Strand—had personal relationships with Stieglitz, and other Precisionist artists without direct connections to Stieglitz were certainly aware of his work and his modernist agenda.

Also critical to the history of avant-garde art in America were the collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg, who amassed a collection of progressive art from both Europe and the United States. Walter Arensberg’s involvement with the art world extended beyond collecting; he was a director of the Society of Independent Artists, backed the Modern Gallery (which had begun as part of *291* and was run by Marius de Zayas from 1915 to 1918),

composed Dada poems, and financially supported three Dada magazines: *The Blind Man*, *Rongwrong*, and *New York Dada*.² The Arensbergs' collection included avant-garde art from Europe and America—notably, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art)—as well as non-Western pieces, including African sculpture. Their interests also extended to Americana. Among other early American pieces, they owned a stretcher-base table, a New England desk-on-frame, and a slat-back chair. Sheeler eventually acquired the chair from them; it appears in his painting *Geranium* (figure 43, circa 1926, Whitney Museum of American Art).³ The Arensbergs' New York apartment, in which they displayed their collection, served as an informal international salon from about 1914 until they moved to California in 1921. The group around the Arensbergs, composed of people involved with the visual arts, literature, and criticism, socialized and shared ideas. Of the Precisionist artists, Schamberg, Sheeler, and Demuth attended the most regularly. Sheeler's connection with the Arensbergs was particularly strong; from 1917 to 1921, he regularly joined the group around the couple. The Arensbergs also hired Sheeler to photograph the interior of their apartment and its contents. The existing photographs, such as *Living Room of the New York Apartment of Louise and Walter Arensberg*

² *The Blind Man* ran for two issues in 1917, *Rongwrong* had one issue in 1917, and *New York Dada* also was published just once, in 1921. See Abraham A. Davidson, *Early American Modernist Painting, 1910–1935* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 82.

³ Fillin-Yeh, 13.

(figure 44, circa 1918, Whitney Museum of American Art), serve as a partial document of the couple's extensive collection.

In addition to the Arensbergs and Stieglitz, other collectors transmitted European avant-garde ideals to Americans. Charles Daniel, for instance, exhibited contemporary European art, as did Carroll Gallery, J. B. Neumann's New Art Circle, Marius de Zayas, Bourgeois Gallery, Anderson Galleries, and Montross Gallery. Other key players in the early modernist circles in the United States included collector John Quinn and writer and collector Katherine Dreier.

Through these avenues and through their travel abroad, artists working in a Precisionist manner knew of European currents. Their work—including the images of rural architecture—incorporated many of the important characteristics, both stylistic and thematic, of the European avant-garde. Stylistically, Precisionist depictions of rural vernacular architecture clearly relate to international modernism. The images of barns and other rural buildings incorporate elements of Cubism, Surrealism, Purism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the principles of the Bauhaus.⁴ These European trends and their relationships with Precisionist artists and their work are discussed in the forthcoming pages.

⁴ Romy Golan has argued that while Precisionists working in the United States absorbed elements of the European avant-garde movements, European artists were much less influenced by trends in Precisionism in the United States. Romy Golan, "Américanisme/Amerikanismus: The Adventures of a European Myth," in Stavitsky et al., 60–67.

The single most important European modernist influence on Precisionism was Cubism. Instead of conveying the illusion of depth on the picture plane, Cubism sought to emphasize the canvas's two-dimensional flatness by fragmenting objects in space and overlapping planes. The Precisionist artists experimented with techniques such as multiple perspectives in the same space, faceting subject matter, and generally emphasizing the flatness of the space. Crawford's *White Barn* (figure 45, 1936, Albright-Knox Art Gallery), for instance, depicts a landscape that possesses a degree of three-dimensionality, as indicated by the road that extends from the foreground to the right background. The main part of the barn, however, is presented as one long plane. Most of the structure is portrayed as a single, flat, undifferentiated mass. While the building's extension on the right contains a degree of illusionary recession into space, overall, Crawford chooses to subvert conventional techniques of perspective in favor of planar experimentation.

Such Cubist-inspired techniques are most visible in the work of Sheeler, Demuth, Crawford, and Preston Dickinson. Contemporary American critics remarked upon the similarities between the Americans' work and European art. The unidentified reviewer (probably Henry McBride) of Sheeler's 1917 solo exhibition of Doylestown house interiors at the Modern Gallery remarked:

This gallery has just opened to the public an exhibition of photographs of Charles Sheeler, in which the camera has registered certain effects and qualities hitherto seen only in the works of Pablo Picasso's ablest followers. . . . [Sheeler] clearly vindicates [Picasso] to the extent that an unprejudiced, open minded individual, inexperienced with Cubism and seeing it for the first time in these photographs—if such an individual be imaginable—would exclaim, 'Why, if that be Cubism, Cubism is not so bad after all!'

For one thing, there is never a doubt in the mind of the beholder as to the subject. The title is not necessary for one to understand instantly that it is a stairway, or a door, or a window, and this is not always the case in regard to the paintings of Picasso.⁵

Interestingly, the reviewer attributes some of Sheeler's success to the fact that his subjects are recognizable; the implication is that a degree of representation in a Cubist-inspired artwork renders the otherwise extreme pictorial distortions more palatable. In general, Precisionist images of any subject matter retain enough fidelity to the actual object to remain recognizable. And with few exceptions, such as work by members of the American Abstract Artists group, American avant-garde art of this period did not develop into an entirely "pure" abstraction; usually some representational quality remained.⁶

⁵ "New Light on Cubism," *New York Sun*, 10 December 1917, 7.

⁶ Many American artists chose to pursue representational art because it had a stronger commercial market than abstraction. The political implications of this trend are discussed in Celeste Connor, *Democratic Visions: Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle, 1924–1934* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 83.

Direct influence of Dada on American Precisionism is less strong. Much of the influence came through Duchamp, whose glorification of everyday objects—such as his infamous *Bicycle Wheel* mounted on a kitchen stool (original 1913; 1951 version The Museum of Modern Art)—had echoes in the Precisionists' depiction of functional, ordinary buildings. Of the Precisionist artists, Demuth was the most interested in Duchamp's brand of artistic wordplay. Fragments of words, often on partially visible billboards and signs, appear regularly in the American artist's paintings, such as *Welcome to Our City* (figure 46, 1921, private collection), in which, as Jonathan Weinberg has observed, cropped letters read counterclockwise form the word "shit."⁷ Demuth used witty titles for his paintings. For instance, he titled his 1921 painting of an adjacent water tower and smokestack in his hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after the medieval French lovers, *Aucassin and Nicolette* (figure 47, Columbus Museum of Art). The joke, of course, is that the lovers in Demuth's painting are inanimate tools of industrial progress—a comment on both the heartlessness of industry and on the notion that industry is America's passionate heritage.

Like Duchamp, Francis Picabia served as an important transmitter of Dada ideas to the American avant-garde. His contact with Precisionism was through the Arensbergs and Stieglitz. Picabia contributed to the Armory

⁷ Jonathan Weinberg, "Demuth and Difference," *Art in America* 76 (April 1988): 192.

show in 1913. He both exhibited at Stieglitz's 291 gallery and helped publish *291*, the periodical. Picabia also showed his work with the Modern Gallery in 1916 and in other major New York galleries of the period; his frequent trips between Paris and New York made him an important conduit of modernist ideas between Europe and the United States. Picabia's characteristic imagery was mechanical and absurdist, celebrating gadgets, such as spark plugs, while also criticizing them—his mechanical contraptions are often both anthropomorphized and sexualized, functioning as neither human nor machine. Picabia's embrace of American technology may have been as important as his art itself. As early as 1913, he declared: "New York is the cubist, the futurist city."⁸ His emphasis on the machine from the 1910s until about 1924 both paralleled and predicted Precisionist explorations of mechanized efficiency. Although Schamberg, who died in 1918, a casualty of the influenza epidemic, did not live long enough to develop his style along with the other Precisionists, his work was closely related to Picabia's. Both artists explored carefully rendered machinist imagery.⁹

Although the Surrealist movement was based in Paris and officially announced in 1924, American artists active in the avant-garde—including

⁸ Francis Picabia, "A Post-Cubist's Impression of New York," *New York Tribune*, 9 March 1913, sec. 2, p. 1.

⁹ While most sources have claimed that Picabia's mechanical subjects came first, William Agee has argued that Schamberg's treatment of the theme predated Picabia's. William Agee, "Morton Livingston Schamberg: Notes on the Sources of the Machine Images," in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *New York Dada* (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1986), 72–73.

Precisionists—may have known of it in the 1920s; numerous periodicals, books, and exhibitions appeared in Europe and some information would inevitably have traveled to the United States. But Surrealism officially arrived when the Wadsworth Athenaeum held the first Surrealist group show in 1931–32; the exhibition later traveled to New York City’s Julian Levy Gallery. In the years that followed, Surrealist artists, including Joan Miró, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dali, exhibited in New York galleries. And in 1936, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a survey titled “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism.”

Man Ray also provided a direct connection with Surrealism for Americans. A photograph by Stieglitz, *Dorothy True* (figure 48, 1919, National Gallery of Art), featured an accidental double exposure: The subject’s face is superimposed on her leg. Due to the contrast of light and dark, the woman’s face is only visible on the dark part of the stockinged leg, an effect that crops her face to a sliver of eye, nose, and mouth. When the photograph was reproduced in the periodical *New York Dada*, Man Ray added the short caption, “Watch Your Step!,” to the image.¹⁰

The impact of Surrealism is particularly evident in the work of Ault, Blume, and Hirsch. Although they worked in a Precisionist vein, these artists

¹⁰ Sarah Greenough, “Alfred Stieglitz, Facilitator, Financier, and Father, Presents Seven Americans,” in Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2000), 298.

show in 1913. He both exhibited at Stieglitz's 291 gallery and helped publish *291*, the periodical. Picabia also showed his work with the Modern Gallery in 1916 and in other major New York galleries of the period; his frequent trips between Paris and New York made him an important conduit of modernist ideas between Europe and the United States. Picabia's characteristic imagery was mechanical and absurdist, celebrating gadgets, such as spark plugs, while also criticizing them—his mechanical contraptions are often both anthropomorphized and sexualized, functioning as neither human nor machine. Picabia's embrace of American technology may have been as important as his art itself. As early as 1913, he declared: "New York is the cubist, the futurist city."⁸ His emphasis on the machine from the 1910s until about 1924 both paralleled and predicted Precisionist explorations of mechanized efficiency. Although Schamberg, who died in 1918, a casualty of the influenza epidemic, did not live long enough to develop his style along with the other Precisionists, his work was closely related to Picabia's. Both artists explored carefully rendered machinist imagery.⁹

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desire for rationality and stability after the devastation of Europe. The two movements were part of a wider trend toward neoclassicism in the late 1910s and 1920s, which took place both abroad and at home. Dealer Charles Daniel, for one, recognized the similarities in their styles; he called the Precisionists “New Classicists.”

In France, the principles of the “call to order” were advocated by artists Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (later, Le Corbusier) under the name Purism. Their manifesto, entitled *Après le cubisme*, was published in 1918 and denounced the current state of Cubism as overly ornate and decorative. Purist art depicts objects as simple volumes, free from ornament and with an almost mechanical smoothness and efficiency.

The German equivalent was *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity), a term coined in the 1920s to describe not an organized group but a style of contemporary art grounded in reality. The artists identified as such included Otto Dix, George Grosz, Christian Schad, and Max Beckmann. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists used a controlled manner of painting their spare, representational images. Unlike Precisionism, however, *Neue Sachlichkeit* included many examples of images of the human figure and often emphasized satirical social comment. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists were known in the United States; J. B. Neumann’s New Art Circle exhibited Beckmann’s work in 1926, the same year Charles Sheeler had an exhibition at the gallery, and Beckmann had several exhibits in New York in the 1930s.

Grosz left Germany permanently in 1933 and settled in New York, where his exhibitions included a 1935 show at An American Place. The Neue Sachlichkeit emphases on clarity, order, and “sanitized space,” clearly relate to Precisionist efforts.¹² According to one biographer, Stefan Hirsch was an enthusiast of the work of Otto Dix.¹³

In 1929, the major international “Film und Foto” photography exhibition opened in Stuttgart. It included work by artists associated with Stieglitz: Edward Weston (who organized the American portion of the show and contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue) and Charles Sheeler, whose *Side of a White Barn* (figure 3) was included. Also in the exhibition was work by other members of the international photographic avant-garde, including Neue Sachlichkeit artist Albert Renger-Patzsch. Sheeler’s trip around Germany after the exhibition would have exposed him to other progressive tendencies in art. Still, as Sheeler’s hard-edged style was well developed by the late 1920s, the Neue Sachlichkeit aesthetic may have been more important in reinforcing Sheeler’s existing stylistic interests than in shaping them.

Precisionism is clearly related to trends in European industry and design of the late 1910s and 1920s; the Bauhaus aesthetic is the most apparent common link. Officially named Das Staatliche Bauhaus, the German art and

¹² Romy Golan in Stavitsky et al., 60.

¹³ Richard Rubinfeld, “Stefan Hirsch: Pioneer Precisionist,” *Arts Magazine* 54 (November 1979): 97.

design school created an overall aesthetic intended to integrate craft and design during its operation from 1919 to 1933. Although in its early years the school emphasized craft with spiritual overtones, after curriculum and leadership changes in 1923—as well as a move from the city of Weimar to Dessau—the Bauhaus program became increasingly focused on training students for industry. From the 1920s, the school became the center for new ideas in architecture, particularly the International Style. While the degree of influence of Bauhaus design on mass culture is open to question—few of the products designed by the school were ever manufactured—it is clear that the school integrated and furthered numerous contemporary ideas about modern art and design.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that the Bauhaus's origins were closely linked with craft traditions and a goal of recreating connections between mechanical production and the arts. Walter Gropius, the school's founder and, until 1928, its director, cited as his main influences John Ruskin and William Morris; the name of the Bauhaus itself was borrowed from terminology of medieval artists' guilds. Furthermore, Lyonel Feininger's woodcut—itsself an antiquated medium—of a Gothic cathedral illustrated the cover of the school's founding manifesto of 1919. Their attempt to employ old-fashioned

¹⁴ John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 103. Also see Rose-Carol Washton Long, "The Weimar Bauhaus: Introduction," in Long, ed., *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), 245–46.

aesthetics in a modern idiom parallels the Precisionist project of depicting historic buildings.

Bauhaus ideas came to the United States through several venues. Louis Lozowick, who moved from the United States to Berlin in 1922, had contact with the progressive art movements in Europe, including the Bauhaus. Gail Stavitsky has observed that Lozowick, who exhibited regularly in New York venues, including the New Art Circle, “may have served Sheeler and others as a key source of information.”¹⁵ A decade later, former Bauhaus instructor Laszlo Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus design school in Chicago. That Bauhaus design and Precisionism shared common stylistic traits may more accurately reflect international aesthetic trends than one-to-one relationships between their proponents.

Walter Gropius explained the institution’s vision for architecture, which also applied to design: “We want to create a clear, organic architecture, whose inner logic will be radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying façades and trickeries; we wanted architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast motor cars, and architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in relation of its form.”¹⁶ It is the Bauhaus’s stress on functionalism that most closely aligns it with Precisionist art. That is,

¹⁵ Stavitsky et al., 19.

¹⁶ Walter Gropius quoted in H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York, Prentice-Hall, 1977), 259.

Bauhaus designers and architects strove to reduce the elements in their projects in order to create a strictly economic design, reduced to its most essential function. The term “functionalism” is applied to architecture in which the form of the building derives from the function it is intended to fulfill. While the idea that modern architecture is inherently more functional than that of other periods is open to question, a functionalist interpretation can be applied to vernacular architecture; the design of vernacular buildings generally leaves little room for ornament, and the buildings are often created to meet a specific need.

In this regard, the Precisionist choice of barns as subject matter can be seen as consistent with broader trends in modernist art. In their representation, the buildings are pared down, reduced to their essentials, and usually portrayed with an emphasis on the flatness of the picture surface. As symbols, they perfectly illustrate the tension between the past and present explored in early twentieth century art, as discussed later in this chapter and in following chapters. Because the Precisionists represented American buildings in a simplified, abstracted style, the buildings were instantly identifiable as modern and progressive.

Skyscrapers and America

Upon first inspection, skyscrapers and factories, the archetypes of American progress and the most identifiable subject matter of the Precisionist

artists, appear to be the exact opposite of the barns and other modest buildings. But these emphatically twentieth-century structures actually share a great deal with the older buildings. Like the barns and other buildings, skyscrapers and factories were also examples of homegrown, particularly American symbols. After World War I, the United States represented the modern machine age; skyscrapers, Henry Ford, and the Taylorization of industrial production identified the country as the harbinger of a new industrial world.

The United States was home to—and strongly identified with—the first skyscrapers. The United States also developed the earliest examples of streamlined, efficient industry. As Sharon Corwin has observed, by the 1920s, systems of mass production, and in particular the assembly line developed by Henry Ford, became equated with the United States. In Russian, “Fordize” translated to “Americanize.”¹⁷ Other technological innovations were identified with the United States; American plumbing was particularly advanced compared with European standards. Morton Schamberg even titled his photograph of plumbing pipes *God* (figure 50, circa 1916, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Furthermore, Duchamp’s famous urinal-turned-high-art, *Fountain* (1917, original lost), invites many complex interpretations. Central to the artwork’s meaning is the fact that the French

¹⁷ Gerald Silk, “The Automobile in Art,” in *Automobile and Culture* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 100. See also Corwin, 149–159.

citizen selected an American fixture—a particularly elegantly designed, efficient, and clean-lined one—for his work. Defending *Fountain* and criticizing the lack of high culture of the younger country, Duchamp (or a collaborator) announced that “The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.”¹⁸

Le Corbusier appealed to European architects to observe American buildings for ideas to invigorate their own work: “We have American grain elevators and factories, the magnificent first fruits of the New Age. *The American Engineer overwhelms our expiring architecture with their [sic] calculations.*”¹⁹ In these ways America was identified with progress of a particularly streamlined, practical variety.

Because the rural vernacular buildings in the Precisionist images have clean lines, smooth edges, and little ornament, their essential design is not unlike that of the modern factories and skyscrapers. Neither Sheeler’s Pennsylvania barns nor the River Rouge plant had unnecessary elements, extraneous to the functions performed within; there are no ornate moldings,

¹⁸ The passage is from the unsigned editorial, “The Richard Mutt Case,” *Blind Man* 2 (May 1917), 5. William Camfield argues that the piece expresses Duchamp’s sentiments of the period, though the article may have been written in collaboration with Louise Norton or Beatrice Wood. Norton may also have been the sole author. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp, Fountain* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1986), 37.

¹⁹ Le Corbusier, “Trois rappels à MM. les architects,” *L’Esprit nouveau*, no. 1 [Oct. 1920], 95, translated in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Americans in Paris (1921–1931): Man Ray, Gerald Murphy, Stuart Davis, Alexander Calder* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996), 194 n. 55.

no grand pilasters. Both types of buildings have very specific purposes, and their designs reflect those purposes.

In the first issue of his magazine *The Soil*, published in 1916, Robert Coady included an article entitled "American Art." Really a list, the article named people, ideas, places, and things that represented the best examples of the nation. Not surprisingly, the long list included examples of American machinery: ". . .the Tug Boat and the Steam-shovel. . . the Motor Boat and the Automobile." Coady also included, in the same breath, "the Sky-scraper and Colonial Architecture."²⁰ In these ways, modern efficiency had its corollary with the old-fashioned.

This simultaneous appreciation for modern industry and the aesthetics of old-fashioned efficiency was one example of a series of binary divisions within modernism. These seemingly opposite poles operating at the same time have been acknowledged by numerous scholars, including Wanda Corn.²¹ If the modern era was usually equated with the urban and the industrial, the past was associated with the rural. The modern age was also identified with mechanized tools of industry and mass production, and its converse was individual craftsmanship and hand labor.

The idea—really a myth—of "unspoiled" nature held an important place in American modernist visions. Yet in the twentieth century, the notion

²⁰ R[obert] J. Coady, "American Art," *The Soil* 1, no. 1 (December 1916): 3.

²¹ Corn, XV-XVII.

of an uncorrupted natural world was imaginary. The American West was opened by railroads and, increasingly, by automobiles, and major cities sprang up from the Mississippi to the Pacific. Europe, of course, had no physical equivalent to the vast spaces of the United States. As the nation's pristine open spaces receded into history, the idea of the "West" maintained a strong hold on the public imagination.

The mythology of the land fed the modernist interest in America. Nature stood for the antithesis of modern urban life. In this way, it also represented an antidote to it—a pure, restful, Edenic refuge. At the same time, however, the untamed wilderness was somewhat frightening and uncivilized. Or, to a lesser degree, it was retardataire and backward. While later chapters will consider the rural myth in greater depth, my argument here is that during this period the archetypal imagery of the urban and industrial bumped up against the old-fashioned and the natural images of America. In this way, the Precisionist interest in both the new buildings and the historic corresponded closely with the interests of their European counterparts.

In European art, this debate was well illustrated during France's 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, where modern artists' murals combined images of factory smokestacks with rural workers, glorifying both. The fair, held in Paris, was based on the theme of modern progress and designed to boost national confidence hurt by the

depressed economy. It was organized in the usual World's Fair manner, with pavilions representing different nations, a section devoted to different regions of France, and a variety of buildings devoted to the arts, sciences, and social programs. Fernand Léger and avant-garde designer Charlotte Périand collaborated on the mural of the exterior of the Centre Rural. The mural, which incorporated painting and photo collage, combined elements of rural identity and technological progress. The Eiffel Tower—which here resembles an electrical pylon—and a modern jazz saxophonist appear next to women in traditional Breton costumes and a fisherman with a dog. As Romy Golan has argued, the imagery reflected the Popular Front government's agrarian agenda.²²

While the 1937 fair also included a portion of buildings and exhibits devoted to the French colonies, the official display of the "colonial" had been institutionalized at the national level six years earlier. The enormous 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris celebrated the colonies by reconstructing African and Southeast Asian dwellings and importing "natives" and palm and date trees. The fair was a popular success. Golan has described it as "an idyllic dream of escape from domestic gloom," observing that "the exposition offered scores of images of an Edenic Golden

²² Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 120–121.

Age.”²³ Displays from the French African colonies had appeared as early as 1900 at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Indeed, among the avant-garde in general, the interest in the antimodern extended beyond the past and the rural to include, according to art historian Daniel Robbins, an “imagined community” of outsiders, “children, the mentally ill, and the human subconscious.”²⁴ It also encompassed non-Western art, which symbolized both the rural and the past. Art made by peoples in Africa, pre-Columbian Central and South America, and Oceania, and by Native Americans, was routinely grouped together under the single, simplistic heading of “primitive.” Both the physical distance from the West and the relatively lesser degree of industrialization of such cultures lent their art associations shared with other non-modern imagery.

As E. H. Gombrich has argued, the taste for so-called primitive art has existed in all of the arts, in different periods. In the twentieth century, primitivism took the form of favoring formal values over ornament and decoration—consistent with the other stylistic characteristics of modernism.

²³ Golan, 115.

²⁴ Daniel Robbins, “Folk Sculpture without Folk,” in *Folk Sculpture USA*, ed. Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Museum, 1976), 12.

This trend involved a general rejection of acquired skills in favor of more pure expression; a “cult of subjectivity” became the goal of the avant-garde.²⁵

Thus, art coming from outside mainstream modern Western culture (which avant-garde artists considered decadent and “over-bred”) was perceived as a purer form of expression. Robbins explains this appeal: “The sentiment, growing throughout the twenties, that the naïve, the peasant, the savage, unspoiled by the corrupting factors of modern civilization—especially factory standardization and depersonalization—naturally produced work of innate value.”²⁶ In addition to makers of tribal art, Western artists outside the mainstream—children, the mentally ill, folk artists from outside the conventional academies, and, to a certain extent, women—fit these requirements for cultural unsophistication, and thus, were considered to be more emotionally legitimate creators. Art historian Wilhelm Worringer wrote in 1911 that

...the subliminal urgency we feel today is finally not only a reaction against Impressionism, but also against the whole previous development in which we have been involved since the European Renaissance. . . . We want art to affect us again, to affect us more powerfully than does that higher, cultivated illusionism that has been the destiny of our art since the Renaissance.²⁷

²⁵ E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 215.

²⁶ Daniel Robbins in Hemphill, 11.

²⁷ Wilhelm Worringer, “Entwicklungsgeschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst,” *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den “Protest deutscher Künstler”* (Munich: R.

Painter Oskar Schlemmer, a faculty member at the Bauhaus, also specified this point of view in a manifesto published in 1923, arguing that the school echoed contemporary art in a general “flaming protest against materialism and the mechanization of art and life.” He went on to describe the “primitive” sources used: “Breaking the limitations of classical aesthetics reinforced boundlessness of feeling, and the art of the Negro, peasants, children, and the insane. The origin of artistic creation was as much sought after as its limits were courageously extended. . . .”²⁸

In the United States, such primitive art was available through many sources. Robert Coady, publisher of *The Soil*, also worked as an art dealer in New York. At the Washington Square Gallery, which he co-founded in 1914, he regularly placed African art with ancient and contemporary pieces.²⁹ For the most part, the United States did not have the vast, far-flung colonies that Europe held in Africa, Asia, and Oceania; the nation’s best equivalents of “outsider” culture available for modernist interpretation were American folk

Piper & Co. Verlag, 1911), 92-99; reprinted in *Der Sturm* 2 (August 1911): 597-598. Quoted in Long, ed., 11.

²⁸ Oskar Schlemmer, manifesto from the publicity pamphlet for the first Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar, 1923. English translation from Hans M. Winkler, *The Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 65-66.

²⁹ Judith Zilczer in Kuenzli, 31-43. Zilczer indicates that Coady made a regular practice of juxtaposing artwork from widely different eras and places. In 1916, he moved the gallery from its Washington Square location to Fifth Avenue, where it was called the Coady Gallery.

culture and Native American art. For the Precisionists, American folk art, discussed at greater length in the next chapter, was an important source.

O’Keeffe, criticism, primitivism

Historian Nancy Leys Stepan has traced how, from the Enlightenment on, race and gender differences became increasingly explored in the West. Into the late nineteenth century, scientific studies of human anatomy explained how non-Caucasian races and women of all ethnic backgrounds were less developed than men. “Women and lower races were called innately impulsive, emotional, imitative rather than original, and incapable of the abstract reasoning found in men.”³⁰

Indeed, into the period of Precisionism, women were included in the category of “other,” outside the mainstream, and considered less developed, not fully as culturally and intellectually sophisticated as men. Georgia O’Keeffe, Elsie Driggs, and, to a lesser extent, photographer Margaret Bourke-White, are the only women whose work is regularly considered Precisionist in the scholarship today.³¹ The body of 1920s and 1930s criticism of O’Keeffe’s work that exists today serves as a useful example of how the

³⁰ Nancy Leys Stepan, “The Role of Analogy in Science,” in *Feminism in Science*, eds. Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen E. Longino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122.

³¹ With the exception of Sharon Corwin’s and Karen Tsujimoto’s work, most studies of Precisionism do not include Bourke-White as part of the movement.

complex interpretations of modernists of the era considered her work as akin to primitivism.

Critics' responses to O'Keeffe's barn images from the early 1920s into the 1930s—at Lake George, Wisconsin, and the Gaspé peninsula—were generally very positive. In 1933, critic Edwina Spencer identified “four distinguished designs of barns” at an exhibition of O'Keeffe's at An American Place, singling out a Gaspé barn as “particularly handsome.”³² In another review four years earlier, the barns—probably at Lake George, since the exhibition predated O'Keeffe's trip to the Gaspé—were described as “thrilling.”³³ Reviewing an exhibition for the *New York Sun*, Henry McBride noted the “exquisite precision,” of the Gaspé pictures and went on to write that the barn paintings “are very elegant. . . The little one in the corner gallery has all the force of a statement of a Picasso.”³⁴

While the reviews of these barn paintings were enthusiastic, O'Keeffe's gender was usually an important topic in the criticism. To a certain degree, this emphasis makes sense; her success as a woman working in a field dominated by men was remarkable. It bears repeating that she had her first

³² Edwina Spencer, “Around the Galleries,” *Creative Art* 12 (April 1933): 315–316.

³³ Murdock Pemberton, “Mostly American,” *Creative Art* 4 (March 1929): 1.

³⁴ Henry McBride, “Georgia O'Keeffe's Exhibition: Star of An American Place Shines in Undiminished Luster,” *New York Sun*, 14 January 1933, 10.

solo exhibition, at Stieglitz's highly prominent 291 gallery in 1917, before women gained the right to vote.

In addition to her professional accomplishments and her romantic relationship with Stieglitz, O'Keeffe's choice of seemingly suggestive subject matter—particularly her gynecologically interpreted biomorphic abstractions and oversized flowers—contributed to her status as an art world curiosity. As has been discussed at length by other scholars, O'Keeffe was seen as a woman first, artist second.³⁵ Her story—uncorrupted innocent from the heartland is nurtured by Stieglitz and later married to him—served as the foreground of contemporary literature. To a large extent, these details of her life still dominate the literature today.

Such interpretations often began with Stieglitz himself, who called O'Keeffe "The Great Child pouring out. . . her Woman self . . . purely—truly—unspoiled."³⁶ A year later he wrote, "The Woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second."³⁷ A 1926 reviewer described O'Keeffe as "Delicate, sensitive,

³⁵ The biographical—and often highly speculative—criticism on O'Keeffe is outlined in Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78 (January 1990): 114–24, 177, 179, and in Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 29–103.

³⁶ Stieglitz to O'Keeffe, 31 March 1918, quoted in Anita Pollitzer, *A Woman on Paper: Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 159.

³⁷ Stieglitz to Stanton Macdonald Wright, 1919, quoted in Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Aperture, 1960), 120–122.

exquisitely beautiful, with the candor of a child in her unafraid eyes."³⁸ Such descriptions of the artist as childlike or immature—even despite her supposedly sexually explicit imagery—exist throughout the literature.

Linked with this idea of O'Keeffe as a child is the notion of her as an unsophisticated naïf who is uncorrupted by the larger world. In 1924, writer Paul Rosenfeld, who was friendly with O'Keeffe and Stieglitz and visited them at Lake George, commented on O'Keeffe's supposedly unsophisticated background. He argued that her ideas "come out of general American life; not out of analyses of Cézanne and Picasso. They come out of the necessity of one who shows no traces of intellectualization and has a mind born of profoundest feeling."³⁹ And critic Louis Kalonyme, another Lake George visitor, noted that "no woman painter ever has made so innocent an approach in painting as she does," and called O'Keeffe "innocent. . . of all aesthetic categories of masculine approach in painting."⁴⁰

That O'Keeffe's approach to painting was anything but innocent was beside the point. Critics overlooked the years of formal training she had at institutions including the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art

³⁸ Blanche Matthias, "Georgia O'Keeffe and the Intimate Gallery: Stieglitz Showing Seven Americans," *Chicago Evening Post Magazine of the Art World*, 2 March 1926, 14.

³⁹ Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), 204–205.

⁴⁰ Louis Kalonyme, "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Woman in Painting," *Creative Art* 2 (January 1928), 35.

Students' League, and Columbia University's Teachers College. Instead, they often insisted that her art came from a kind of unstudied, pure instinct. It is interesting to note, however, that O'Keeffe's training included acknowledgment of art from primitive cultures. Her instructor at Teachers College, Arthur Wesley Dow, published an article titled "Designs from Primitive American Motifs" in 1915, the same year that O'Keeffe studied at the school. In the article, Dow discussed Native American weaving and "Yucatán hieroglyphs," among other sources, as valuable references for art students.⁴¹ Ironically, then, O'Keeffe had formal exposure to the very sort of "primitivism" her critics attributed to her.

The idea of O'Keeffe as unsophisticated was reinforced by the fact that she eschewed the rite of passage for many artists and did not travel to Europe to study. Instead, O'Keeffe first went to Europe much later, in 1953. Critics picked up on this fact, as well as on the artist's background. That she came not only from the Midwest, but from a Wisconsin farm, added to her supposed innocence. Many critics commented that these agrarian roots, as well as her multiethnic background—she was of Irish and Hungarian descent—gave the artist a particular claim to an American heritage. One

⁴¹ Arthur Wesley Dow, "Designs from Primitive American Motifs," *Teachers College Record* 16 (1915): 29–34. Laurie Lisle research material on O'Keeffe, Archives of American Art. For more on Dow and the "pure design" movement, see Marie Ann Frank, "The Theory of Pure Design and American Architectural Education in the Early Twentieth Century," (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1996).

publication called O'Keeffe the "only artist in America today who is so strictly American in her painting that no trace of European influence can be found."⁴² And Paul Rosenfeld described O'Keeffe's work as stemming from the spirit of the "Amerinds," and from "the plains and the cornlands and the general conditions of life in the new continent."⁴³

One review even described O'Keeffe as an iconic American building type:

Georgia O'Keeffe is as authentically American as the Little Red Schoolhouse. She belongs to that category of cherishable Americana because she has kept to a fixed course, hewn sharply to the line, done what she had to do without fuss or compromise, and produced a unique pictorial record of a woman's outlook on life. Instead of splitting rails or driving a covered wagon, she has painted pictures; but none the less she is a pioneer woman. She has . . . emerged as simple, as ruggedly individual and spontaneously alive as the day she first left home to study art.⁴⁴

For this critic, the appeal of O'Keeffe's national identity is so strong that he has turned her into a romanticized rugged settler of the wild frontier.

This explicit identification of O'Keeffe with Americanness became developed into a more literal connection between the artist and the American

⁴² "Georgia O'Keeffe," article dated after 1945, otherwise unidentified clipping, O'Keeffe artist file, microform 013, New York Public Library.

⁴³ Rosenfeld, 205.

⁴⁴ Ralph Flint, "Lily Lady Goes West," *Town and Country* 98 (January 1943): 65.

land itself. Paul Strand wrote in 1924 that O'Keeffe's work "springs from roots. . . deeply embedded in American soil."⁴⁵ In 1927, Waldo Frank compared O'Keeffe to a peasant. In his view, the fact that such an artist could come from America, particularly from the Midwest, the center of America, says something not only about the artist herself but also about the nation as a whole. In discussing O'Keeffe, Frank noted that although "America is supposed to be the land of sophisticated cities, of industrialized, mechanical civilization," it produced an artist whose work exhibits a "native sense of life, which we associate with the beginnings of culture, with the peasant, with peasant art. . . . Perhaps America is not what we supposed; perhaps America is a young world, a world with much of the peasant in it after all."⁴⁶ O'Keeffe, then, represents American culture and also serves as a catalyst by which others define it.

One statement by Stieglitz directly equates femininity with the barn structure. Describing his own photographs in a letter to writer Howard Seligmann in 1926, Stieglitz observed that "Perhaps that dark entrance (the barn door) that seems to you mysterious is the womb, the place whence we came and where we desire when we are tired and unhappy to return, the womb of our mother, where we are quiet, and without responsibility and

⁴⁵ Paul Strand, "Georgia O'Keeffe," *Playboy: A Portfolio of Art and Satire* 9 (July 1924), 20.

⁴⁶ Waldo Frank, "Art of the Month," *McCall's Magazine* (September 1927), 80.

protected. That is what men desire, and thinking and feeling and working in my own way I have discovered this for myself."⁴⁷

Sarah Whitaker Peters argues that O'Keeffe herself considered the barn a metaphor for the womb. Peters notes that after 1918—after O'Keeffe moved to New York City and became involved with Stieglitz and the ideas circulating in his group—the artist moved away from abstracted “uterine” images. Instead, she moved toward more object-based images. These also suggested shelter, but were manifested in tangible things: trees, barns, fruit, flowers.⁴⁸ There exists, however, no direct evidence that O'Keeffe considered this work as containing specifically bodily images; the artist was famously tightlipped about her own interpretations of her work. Had she considered the subject imbued with uterine significance, she certainly would not have acknowledged so publicly. Still, that the famously voluble Stieglitz articulated a symbolic connection between barns and the womb indicates that O'Keeffe may well have encountered the idea.

In Stieglitz's comments, we find again a connection between the barn structure and the idea of the simpler, uncomplicated existence, where one could be “without responsibility and protected.” These impulses fit with the same ideas of naïveté assigned to work of O'Keeffe. And by extension, these

⁴⁷ Stieglitz to Howard Seligmann, 26 February 1926, quoted in Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O'Keeffe: The Early Years* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 359 n. 19.

⁴⁸ Peters, 134–135.

impulses are closely related to the appeal of folk art and so-called primitive art. For instance, language used by de Zayas to describe African sculpture sounds remarkably like the criticism of O’Keeffe. He described the work as “devoid of the faculties of observation and analysis, [the art is] the expression of the emotion of a savage race.”⁴⁹ The “savage race” de Zayas describes could just as easily refer to women.

Although she did not publicly mention any uterine connections to her paintings of barns, O’Keeffe did acknowledge one personal reason for the importance of barn imagery: “The barn is a very healthy part of me—There should be more of it—It is something that I know too—it is my childhood—I seem to be one of the few people I know of to have no complaints against my first twelve years.”⁵⁰ For O’Keeffe, barns represented a happy earlier period in her own life.

O’Keeffe’s gender also prompted critics to link her with the American soil. Wrote artist Oscar Bleumner, “We behold O’Keeffe’s work flowering forth like a manifestation of that feminine causative principle, a painter’s

⁴⁹ Marius de Zayas, *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: 291 Gallery, 1914). It is unclear whether the essay was actually published. Reprinted in Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 70–72.

⁵⁰ O’Keeffe to Mitchell Kennerly, 20 January 1929, quoted in Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe, Art and Letters* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 187.

vision: new, fascinating, virgin America."⁵¹ This treatment of O'Keeffe continued a long history of investing the earth with feminine qualities.

Women and nature

Philosopher Genevieve Lloyd has traced associations between women and nature as early as Plato. She argues that Western culture has consistently associated men with rational thought and women with nature and "unknown forces."⁵² And in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that "woman is more closely related to Nature than man and in all her essentials she remains ever herself. Culture is with her always something external, a something which does not touch the kernel that is essentially faithful to Nature."⁵³

Among modern artists, too, nature was associated with the female, the opposite of the mechanical (male) world. Fernand Léger wrote to French art dealer Léonce Rosenberg in 1922, "The contemporary environment is clearly dominated by the manufactured and the mechanical object; this is slowly

⁵¹ Oscar Bluemner, "A Painter's Comment," in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings* (New York: The Intimate Gallery, 1926), n.p.

⁵² Genevieve Lloyd, "Reason, Science and the Domination of Matter," in Keller and Longino, 42.

⁵³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 97.

subjugating the breasts and curve of woman, . . . the soft landscape—
inspiration of painters since art began.”⁵⁴

A symbolic connection between women and the earth was not a new concept. Studies of relationships among the American landscape, history, art, and identity by scholars including Barbara Novak and Angela Miller have provided a strong foundation. In later chapters of this dissertation, I consider the continued fascination with American physical space as reflected in broader questions of identity.

With its booming cities and technological advances, America in the early twentieth century was not “primitive” in the sense of industrial development. Still, the culture of the United States remained (and remains today) vastly “younger” than its European kin. Symbolically, the earth—particularly the expanses of wilderness and the West—distinguished America from Europe. Physically and psychically remote from “culture,” the untamed wilderness was decidedly anti-bourgeois. In this way, the vast, sparsely populated expanse offered a sort of psychological freedom. Katherine Manthorne has described this phenomenon as “geographical myth,”⁵⁵ when fact and fiction combine and the land is seen as Eden, a paradise on earth

⁵⁴ Fernand Léger, *Bulletin l'effort moderne*, no. 4 (February 1924), quoted in Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avant Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 244.

⁵⁵ Katherine Emma Manthorne, *Tropical Renaissance: North American Artists Exploring Latin America, 1839–1879* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 10–14.

where one can begin anew, free from original sin. The apparent lack of stratification of wealth and class and the supposed lawlessness of frontier towns was an attractive antidote for Europeans—and urban Americans—who chafed at the strictures of a more conventional society.

That the West of North America was also home to Native Americans further enhanced its identification with modern primitivism. Developments in tourism, photography, and anthropology brought American Indians and their cultures to Europe.⁵⁶ From the 1880s, Buffalo Bill Cody and others took Wild West shows to Europe. The “casts” were Indians and white Americans, supposedly from the Great Plains. These shows, a medley of rodeo, historical pageant, and displays of animals and people toured the continent and were particularly well received in Germany.⁵⁷ With the growing interest in “primitive” art of the early twentieth century, European museums of folk art added Native American work to their collections of indigenous art from around the world. In these ways, the myth of wild America was strong in this period.

Because the American landscape was the purest example of “unspoiled” wilderness in the Western—developed—world, it was mined

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Cromley, “Masculine/Indian,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 31 (winter 1996): 266.

⁵⁷ Peter Bolz, “Life Among the ‘Hunkpapas’: A Case Study in German Indian Lore,” in *Indians and Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*, ed. Christian Feest (Aachen: Edition Heroldot, Roder-Verlag, 1987), 480–481.

for modernist purposes, as were non-Western cultures. These uses of the American wilderness and its trappings by avant-garde artists are discussed further in the next chapter. Associated with the idea of the unspoiled earth is the notion that one can be redeemed through it, that it offers an antidote to the struggles of modern life. This association makes the American landscape modern.

The Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture reflect this broader cultural interpretation of the American soil and the nation's pastoral history as modern. The abstracted buildings simultaneously refer to the agrarian past and predict the aesthetics of the urban industrial future. Such mining of the old and old-fashioned for contemporary use is a hallmark of modernism; thus, the Precisionist images in this study played a complex role in American modern art.

Chapter Three: Precisionism and Creation of a Usable American Past

In the 1920s and 1930s, Americans examined and defined their collective past. In particular, this period was distinguished by increased awareness of the nation's agrarian origins, rather than by an emphasis on history that valorized heroic figures. This awareness took several forms, including interest in folk art and preservation of buildings with historical significance. Appreciation of folk history grew from broader ideas about America and its land and from a national interest in privileging the commonplace and the utilitarian elements of history. National ideals were identified with thrift, industry, efficiency, and connectedness to the earth; wastefulness and opulence were discouraged. These trends provide the context within which O'Keeffe, Sheeler, and the other Precisionist artists worked.

This chapter will first offer a brief review of political and social developments that reflect the insular mood in the interwar period. This will be followed by a discussion of the increasing interest in American folk art and craft as legitimate art forms and, in particular, Sheeler's connections to folk art. His involvement with these ideas began particularly early in this modernist milieu and remained meaningful throughout the period of this study. I will also describe the national impulse toward the preservation of American historic buildings and sites, considering four case studies: Colonial Williamsburg, Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, Shaker communities, and the Ephrata Cloister of Pennsylvania. I will then briefly look at how Americans

of the period sought artistic precedents in other cultures to define and legitimize contemporary American art. The chapter will describe how these trends demonstrate an identification of America with its land, establishing the soil itself as integral to the national artistic identity of the interwar period.

Interwar politics

The numerous political and social developments during and after the First World War offer insight into the artworks in the study. As many scholars have observed, the interwar period in the United States was defined by general entrenchment, a national turning inward. This section will outline political, economic, and social indicators of interest in establishing forms of national unity, emphasizing those changes outside a purely cultural realm.

One telling measure of a general cultural shift toward national unity was support for legislation that sharply limited immigration to the United States. A 1921 law, introduced by Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont, imposed strict numerical limits on immigration from Europe. The law limited immigration from Europe to three percent of the number of foreign-born people of each nationality already present in the United States according to the figures reported in the census of 1910. Immigration from Asia was already largely prohibited, while immigrant labor from Canada and Latin America was essentially unrestricted. The Dillingham bill, which was renewed twice through 1924, ensured that new immigration would not reach

the heights of numbers of immigrants entering the country before the war. The act that followed, passed in 1924, limited immigration numbers further.¹ Indeed, immigration dropped sharply, from a high of almost nine million in the decade 1901–1910, to slightly more than four million in the 1920s. The numbers plunged even more dramatically in the next decade, with fewer than 600,000 arrivals from 1931–1940.²

Accompanying these immigration restrictions were other legal and social examples of entrenchment. For instance, in California, a law forbade the Japanese ownership of land. In the 1920s, many states barred aliens from holding licenses to practice architecture, engineering, and medicine, and from executing wills, among other professional activities.³ And the early- and mid-1920s saw a revival of the Ku Klux Klan, resurrected from its nineteenth-century incarnation after the Civil War. Nativist sentiments also resulted in the red scare, the anti-Communist hysteria, which particularly targeted new immigrants.

These changes illustrate broader isolationist trends. The League of Nations, the international cooperative organization established as part of the

¹ Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 143-145.

² *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2003), 11.

³ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1978), 265, 301.

Treaty of Versailles, enjoyed public support immediately after the end of the war. By the end of 1920, however, the League lacked the support of any national magazine and more than 90 percent of daily newspapers.⁴ The sentiments behind these numbers are crystallized in one very public statement from the year. At the Republican National Convention, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge declared: "we must be now and forever for Americanism and Nationalism, and against Internationalism."⁵

In addition to these changes, government agencies began working on a broader, national scale. Examples included the cooperation of federal and state governments to construct highways, and the growth of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which steadily gained increased responsibilities and powers in the years following the war.⁶ Even time became the subject of regulation in this period; in March 1918, standard time, divided into a series of time zones, was established by law, thus making communication easier (railroads in the United States and Canada had used standard time since the 1880s).⁷

⁴ Ibid., 270. See also, Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945).

⁵ Republican National Committee, *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Seventeenth Republican National Convention* (New York: Tenny Press, 1920), 32.

⁶ For example, see Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 18-24.

⁷ U.S. Naval Observatory: http://aa.usno.navy.mil/faq/docs/us_tzones.html. Accessed August 3, 2004.

In these ways, in the years following the First World War and into the 1920s, by its broadest measures, America grew more insular and became managed internally by increasingly expansive systems. These isolationist and organizational trends were the backdrop for O’Keeffe’s and Sheeler’s art from this period.

Folk art

The period of most Precisionist art activity—roughly 1915 until the Second World War—coincided with a dramatic rise in interest in American folk art and craft objects. During this same period, American folk art came to be appreciated by a wide general public as well as by art dealers, museum professionals, and artists themselves. The relationship between Precisionism and folk art is not one of explicit links. That is, Precisionist images do not often mimic folk art styles, and folk art as a subject appears only occasionally. The connection between Precisionist and folk art is instead one of affinities. Modernist artists, including Precisionists, looked to folk art—as well as to art of “primitive” non-Western cultures—for a common, related foundation. In this section, I will explore how American folk art came to prominence in the galleries, museums, and private collections of the Northeast, and how this rediscovery relates to the Precisionist images of vernacular architecture.

In his thorough analysis of the term “folk art,” art historian David Park Curry has noted that there exists no single “folk” culture in the pluralistic

United States. Furthermore, the notion of what distinguishes art from strictly utilitarian objects varies widely with the audience.⁸ In the art historical literature from the 1920s to the present, the phrase “folk art” has incorporated all varieties of artistic production of the last three centuries—shop signs, paintings, ship’s figureheads, weathervanes. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will use the definition of folk art used by avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century. The general approach is typified by Holger Cahill’s essay accompanying the Museum of Modern Art 1932 exhibition, “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750–1900.” Cahill described folk art as:

The expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment It does not come out of an academic tradition passed on by schools, but out of craft tradition plus the personal quality of the rare craftsman who is an artist.⁹

The objects collected as folk art by Precisionist artists, as well as those displayed in fine art museums and sold by art dealers during this period, will define the parameters of the category. I will consider American folk art as, generally, objects made for practical purposes before the twentieth century.

⁸ David Park Curry, “Rose-Colored Glasses: Looking for ‘Good Design’ in American Folk Art,” in *An American Sampler: Folk Art from the Shelburne Museum* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 25–26.

⁹ Holger Cahill, “American Folk Art,” In *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 6.

The aesthetic characteristics of this art usually include simple contours, bold colors, and flattened shapes.

Precisionist artists knew folk art through a variety of sources. Folk art gained increasing acceptance in the world of fine art as galleries and museums began exhibiting and collecting it. At the same time, many artists themselves were accumulating folk art objects. The appeal of folk art in the interwar era is linked to several related developments. One is the broader cultural interest in recovering and restoring American history. Just as important as such wider cultural trends are those more specifically related to visual arts; European and American modernists also saw in folk art some of the visual themes that they were exploring. The stylistic elements favored by modernists—simplification of forms, strong outlines, bold colors—were present in much of the American folk art they championed.¹⁰ As I will discuss in greater detail, for these reasons and others, artists and critics in the United States looked to art of the past to help define and justify developments in contemporary art.

Dealer Edith Gregor Halpert was a key figure linking folk art with modernism, including Precisionism. Halpert had practiced art; she studied at the National Academy of Design and at the Art Students League in the 1910s. She gave up her formal art training when she married artist Samuel Halpert in 1918, but remained very involved with the visual arts. The couple were

¹⁰ Curry, 25.

well connected to the contemporary art world; among their friends were artists Max Weber, Man Ray, William and Marguerite Zorach, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Thomas Hart Benton, teacher and writer Hamilton Easter Field, and *New York Sun* critic Henry McBride.¹¹ Later, Halpert established her Downtown Gallery dedicated to the exhibition of modern art. She showed the work of many of the most prominent modernists active in the United States, including many of the Precisionists, notably Georgia O'Keeffe and Charles Sheeler.

Her professional interest in folk art may have come about through these connections to the contemporary art world and, in particular, her acquaintance with Hamilton Easter Field. Editor, collector, and promoter of modern art, Field founded the art colony in Ogunquit, Maine, which attracted many members of the American avant-garde. Halpert bought her first examples of folk art during the summers of 1926 and 1927, which she and Samuel Halpert spent as part of the Ogunquit colony. In his lessons in Ogunquit, Field incorporated his collection of early American portraiture, folk art, and decorative arts as teaching tools.¹² He also exhibited folk art in the buildings of the art school and in the studios—fishing shacks—at the

¹¹ Diane Tepfer, "Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery Downtown: 1926–1940; A Study in American Art Patronage," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1989), 24.

¹² Doreen Bolger, "Hamilton Easter Field and His Contribution to American Modernism," *American Art Journal* 20 (1988): 93–94.

Ogunquit colony.¹³ His own collection of folk art was considerable. An article in the journal he edited and founded, *The Arts*, described the “early American hooked rugs” he collected, noting that they “deserve the same attention as Egyptian or Coptic textiles . . . they are closer to us and express the taste of our immediate ancestors.”¹⁴ Furthermore, artist Robert Laurent, Field’s protégé, collected nineteenth-century looking glasses; Marsden Hartley later reported that they had been more important to his experiments in abstraction than his better-known exposure to the *hinterglasbilder* (folk art painting on glass) during the time he lived in Germany.¹⁵ Holger Cahill later noted that the artists who summered in Ogunquit “got the folk art fever,” and William Zorach reported that all of the artists “were picking up early American furniture and antiques. Not only were they more beautiful than the regular manufactured products but they were much cheaper.” Zorach claimed that it was Halpert’s exposure to Americana in Ogunquit that

¹³ Dona Brown and Stephen Nissenbaum, “Changing New England: 1865–1945,” in William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein, eds. *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 6.

¹⁴ [Hamilton Easter Field], “American Hooked Rugs,” *The Arts* 1 (May 1921), 31.

¹⁵ Remarks made by Robert Laurent to Thomas N. Armstrong III, 20 August 1968, cited in Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with New York University Press, 1980), 57. See also Sarah L. Giffen and Kevin D. Murphy, eds., *‘A Noble and Dignified Stream’: The Piscataqua Region in the Colonial Revival, 1860-1930* (York, Maine: Old York Historical Society, 1992), 138.

prompted her to pursue the commercial dealing of folk art: "Edith got the idea of picking up antiques and opening a little shop in New York."¹⁶

The "little shop" became the room she named the American Folk Art Gallery and opened on the second floor of her Downtown Gallery in October 1931.¹⁷ In this space, which did not hold regular exhibitions but was open by appointment, she exhibited paintings, weathervanes, toys, and other objects that were not necessarily old but had in common simple forms and bold colors.¹⁸ Halpert's December 1931 exhibition in the American Folk Art Gallery, titled "American Ancestors," (the first of several exhibitions using the phrase) had broad criteria for folk art. Halpert's definition of "American ancestors" was "little known or anonymous" American artists of the nineteenth century, a designation that included the unnamed creators of the weathervanes and other folk art objects, but also Edward Hicks and Raphaelle Peale.¹⁹

The exhibition attracted numerous modern artists, including several whose work Halpert represented. Sheeler, Spencer, Stuart Davis, the Zorachs, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Max Weber all attended. Critical

¹⁶ Holger Cahill to Edgar P. Richardson, 30 June 1954, reprinted in *Archives of American Art Journal* 24 (1984): 22; William Zorach, *Art Is My Life* (Cleveland: World Books, 1967), 88.

¹⁷ Tepfer, chapter 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

reception of the exhibition was positive; Edward Alden Jewell, writing for the *New York Times*, not only praised the exhibition for presenting an important part of American art history but also exhorted his readers to support further such explorations into the artistic history of this country.²⁰ The critic for the *New York Sun* noted:

In all the extraordinary emancipation of the present era...ancestors still persist. In fact, they seem more necessary than ever they were. So, doubtless, our younger painters are quite right in thus hitching on to history. Conscious that they have a definite background they may [make] more confident gestures.²¹

As the American Folk Art Gallery's exhibitions were directly upstairs from the Downtown Gallery's selections of contemporary art, a visitor to the two galleries would be likely to compare the works in the two spaces to each other. "American Ancestors" followed Charles Sheeler's first solo exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, which ran from November 18 through December 5, 1931. And in November 1938, a Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition ran at the same time as "American Ancestors: Masterpieces in American Folk Art, 1720–1860."²²

²⁰ Edward Alden Jewell, "In the Realm of Art: 'Ancestors' and Other Matters," *New York Times*, 30 December 1931, sec. 8, 10. "American Ancestors" ran at the American Folk Art Gallery from December 9 through December 31.

²¹ Quoted in "New York Criticism," *Art Digest*, 1 January 1932, 18.

²² Finding Aid to Downtown Gallery records, Archives of American Art. "American Ancestors: Masterpieces in American Folk Art, 1720–1860" ran from November 1–12, 1938; the O'Keeffe exhibition opened on November 2.

The relationship between the American folk art tradition and contemporary art was noted by artists. Fernand Léger reportedly remarked at a preview of the “American Ancestors” exhibition that Edward Hicks’ *The Peaceable Kingdom* (circa 1833) was “the greatest painting [Léger] saw in America.”²³ Evidence indicates that this connection was quite calculated on Halpert’s part. In a draft of the press release for “American Ancestors,” Halpert made this comparison explicit:

The collections of the American Folk Art Gallery show very definitely the relation of American folk painting to modern painting This relationship between what is most characteristically American in the art of this country in the last two centuries, with what is being done by contemporary American artists, demonstrates a continuity in the American Art tradition . . . It is this relationship and continuity which is being stressed by the American Folk Art Gallery, and by the Downtown Gallery which is sponsoring the new enterprise.²⁴

After her first “American Ancestors” exhibition, Halpert expanded her professional interest in folk art beyond her gallery. She sent shows of folk art elsewhere, including to the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts in February 1932, where Henry Ford bought several items for the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. Halpert also lent significant numbers of works to exhibitions of folk art at the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo and the Detroit

²³ “New York Criticism,” 18.

²⁴ Edith Halpert, press release dated September 1931 and marked “draft” in Downtown Gallery papers, Archives of American Art.

Institute of Arts in 1932 and 1935, respectively.²⁵ In addition to these shows, Halpert disseminated folk art through direct sales to prominent collectors and institutions, including Electra Havemeyer Webb, Ima Hogg, Detroit Institute of Art supporter Robert Tanahill, Duncan Phillips, Henry Francis du Pont, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, and Kansas City's Nelson Gallery.²⁶

According to Halpert biographer Diane Tepfer, the dealer amassed and sold American folk art not only for its aesthetic value, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to advance the sales of her modern art holdings. That is, the folk art activity was a way to provide a historic and cultural foundation to living American artists; Halpert felt that exhibiting folk art in proximity to contemporary art would bolster sales of the latter. Furthermore, folk art was also a way to diversify her holdings. Halpert made this strategy clear in an essay from 1949: “We [art dealers] humbly take in washing—some of us French art, some advertising commissions, some folk art—moneymakers to pay the overhead for the living American artist.”²⁷ There also exists the possibility that selling folk art adjacent to her avant-garde

²⁵ Tepfer, 179.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁷ Edith G. Halpert, “The Function of the Dealer,” *College Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (autumn 1949), 55. The early dealers of American folk art included, in addition to Halpert, Isabel Carleton Wilde, Valentine Dudensing, Harry Shaw Newman, and Harry Stone. For further discussion of early dealers, see Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776–1876* (New York: Viking Press, in cooperation with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974).

inventory was a way for Halpert to argue for American modernism's roots in the United States rather than (or in addition to) in European art. Halpert was savvy in business; she could not have been unaware of the general cultural leaning toward isolationism.

Halpert also served as an advisor to collectors of folk art. With Holger Cahill and others, she traveled through parts of the eastern United States, buying a variety of folk paintings and other artifacts. The best of these were included in the 1930 and 1931 exhibitions at the Newark Museum, where Cahill worked as a publicist, and in the 1932 exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art, where Cahill served as acting director.²⁸

Another figure important to the acceptance of folk art as a fine art was Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, wife of oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr. By early 1928, Halpert was serving as Abby Rockefeller's art advisor. Rockefeller had been collecting contemporary American art, and Halpert convinced her to include American folk art in her collection. Rockefeller's first purchase of Americana was in October 1929, within two years of Halpert's first acquisitions. Rockefeller's collection grew quickly and extensively under Halpert's guidance; most of the nearly 200 works in the Museum of Modern Art's 1932 exhibition, "American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900," were lent anonymously by Rockefeller. The Rockefeller family's interest in American folk art expanded beyond Mrs. Rockefeller's

²⁸ Tepfer, 48.

collecting. During the same period as his wife's acquisitions, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was involved with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, discussed later in this chapter. Much of Mrs. Rockefeller's collection went to the project.

Although undertaken on a particularly large scale, Mrs. Rockefeller's collecting activities were not unique; many others added American folk art to their personal holdings. In the 1920s, Electra Havemeyer Webb began her collection of folk art, granting particular attention to weathervanes, figureheads, quilts, and paintings, some of which she acquired through Edith Halpert. Webb eventually gave her art to the Shelburne Museum, the institution she founded with her husband, J. Watson Webb. Henry F. du Pont was inspired by Mrs. Webb's collecting activities and began his own acquisition of folk art, which along with his collection of American decorative arts constituted the holdings of the Winterthur Museum.

From 1923 through 1928, sculptor Elie Nadelman and his wife spent more than \$500,000 on their collection of American folk art. In 1926, the Nadelmans finished building a museum, the Museum of Folk and Peasant Arts, on their property in Riverdale, New York. Although the Nadelmans collected folk art from around the world, their art included examples of

American paintings and sculpture, as well as furniture, utensils, ceramics, toys, quilts, and other objects.²⁹

Many of these private holdings made their way into publicly accessible collections. A particularly prominent case of private holdings becoming available to a public audience was that of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's collection. Juliana Force advised Whitney on her purchases of contemporary American art and ran the Whitney Studio Club, a space in Manhattan with two small galleries and a membership of about three hundred modern artists. Many of these artists had their own collections of folk artifacts, and Force herself had an extensive collection of early American objects. According to Avis Berman, Force's nostalgia for her early childhood in Bucks County prompted her collection of Pennsylvanian furniture and handicrafts.³⁰ Her involvement with modern art circles probably encouraged this interest, and her association with critic Forbes Watson may have propelled it further.

Force pursued her interest in folk art in the exhibitions held under her direction. In 1924, artist Henry Schnakenberg organized for the Whitney Studio Club an exhibition of examples of "Early American Art" borrowed from the collections of some of the club's modern artist members. The exhibition included forty-five works: portraits by untrained artists, a pitcher

²⁹ "Folk Art Collecting in America," essay draft, Downtown Gallery papers. Fiscal constraints forced the Nadelmans to sell the museum and their folk art collection in the mid-1930s.

³⁰ Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 147.

and sugar bowl, a brass bootjack, and a ship's figurehead. Lenders to the exhibition included several artists, among them Sheeler, Alexander Brook, Peggy Bacon, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi.³¹ In 1935, the Whitney Museum of American Art (the Whitney Studio Club had dissolved in 1929) hosted the first exhibition of Shaker art.

The first scholarly writing on American folk art preceded these exhibitions by a few years; the magazines *Art in America* and *Antiques*, among others, dedicated space to the subject from the early 1920s on. The first books devoted to the subject appeared later, beginning with Clara Endicott Sears's 1941 *Some American Primitives*.³²

Most of the artists who worked in a Precisionist manner lived in New York or were involved in the city's art circles. Because of their involvement in this milieu, they would have come in contact with these exhibitions and collections. There also exists direct evidence of their knowledge of folk art. Sheeler was closely connected with the Whitney Studio Club; he showed his work there, served as one of its exhibition managers, and worked as a photographer for the gallery. One of his projects was the photography of the folk art works reproduced in the pamphlet that accompanied the 1924 "Exhibition of Early American Art."³³ Sheeler's biographer, Constance

³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

³² Clara Endicott Sears, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

³³ Troyen and Hirshler, 12–13.

Rourke, wrote extensively on popular culture in America, including a book on folk art, *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays*.³⁴

Charles Sheeler's commitment to folk art is well documented, both in his artistic output and by the details of his biography. Ample evidence of this interest is demonstrated in the paintings, drawings, and photographs that the artist created of his living spaces. In the oil *American Interior* (figure 4), for instance, the room in the artist's South Salem, New York, house contains two Shaker tables, a round Shaker box, rag rugs, and an English side chair.³⁵

Between 1926 and 1934, Sheeler produced seven paintings of his homes in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and South Salem, New York, and after 1929 created at least seven photographs of the houses' interiors.³⁶ These views of his rooms, usually unpopulated, reflect his fascination with furniture and domestic objects; the items in his spare rooms are almost obsessively detailed. On the long table that appears in *American Interior*, for instance, the tiny joint that connects the edging strip of wood to the wider boards of the tabletop is clearly delineated. *Interior* (figure 51, 1926, Whitney Museum of American Art), the first of this series depicting his homes, shows the early nineteenth-century bed that appears in other works, as well as the bottom of a cupboard

³⁴ Rourke (1942).

³⁵ These pieces of furniture and other objects owned by Sheeler are identified and discussed in Fillin-Yeh (1987).

³⁶ Troyen and Hirschler, 23.

and rugs that are familiar in Sheeler's art.³⁷ The dining table, identified as Shaker, and the little stand with its attenuated shape do not appear in other works. While his interiors and still lifes depict a variety of objects, including Pennsylvania pottery and an ancient Etruscan pitcher, his collection of Shaker artifacts—tables, cupboards, benches—dominate these images.³⁸

Sheeler probably knew the work of Edward Hicks, the nineteenth-century painter, through Henry Mercer. Hicks, a native of Bucks County who worked as a sign painter and artist of religious subjects, painted Pennsylvania farm structures in a flat, frontal, nonacademic manner that bears strong similarities to Sheeler's barn images. Hicks's 1848 painting, *The Cornell Farm* (figure 52, National Gallery of Art), for instance, depicts all the sides of the farm buildings, with limited perspective. In a similar manner, Sheeler's *Bucks County Barn* (figure 53, Mr. & Mrs. Bernard Schwartz collection) of 1918 flattens the volumes, so there exists little traditional perspective. Although

³⁷ Troyen and Hirschler, 110.

³⁸ A pottery mug, identified by Fillin-Yeh as Pennsylvanian, appears in *American Interior* (1934, Yale University Art Gallery) and in a photograph of Sheeler's Ridgefield home (circa 1939) that was the frontispiece for the catalogue accompanying his 1939 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Sheeler depicted his Etruscan oinochoe-type pitcher (circa 600 B.C.) in 1922's *Still Life* (titled *Suspended Forms* in a Forbes Watson review of 1922) and in the 1929 photograph, *South Salem Interior*. Sheeler extended this interest in household objects to create industrial design objects, including salt and pepper shakers, flatware, and textiles, all with a simplified aesthetic, in the mid-1930s. Some of these objects are illustrated in Fillin-Yeh; textile samples and salt and pepper shakers are among the objects in the Charles Sheeler Papers.

the two artists worked in vastly different contexts, Sheeler created simplified barn images that resemble Hicks's buildings, where all facets of the structure tend to be made visible.³⁹

Indeed, Sheeler's barn images resemble those by folk artists other than Hicks. In the work of Wisconsin-based Paul Seifert, who was active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, the depictions of barns are simplified and frontal. His *Residence of Lemuel Cooper* from 1879 (figure 54, Howard and Jean Lipman collection) carefully depicts a bank barn with an earthen ramp leading up to the structure's threshing floor.⁴⁰

Paul Strand also depicted artifacts of early rural New England life, in addition to creating the images of rural barns described in Chapter One.⁴¹ The publication *Time in New England* was a combination photo essay and literary collection for which Strand provided photographs that were placed with literary excerpts edited by Nancy Newhall. The photographs and texts documented the area's colonial and nineteenth-century history. In addition to churches, barns, and historic industrial buildings, Strand included several photographs of folk objects. In *Side Porch, Vermont* (figure 55, 1946), for

³⁹ Lucic (1997), 66–67.

⁴⁰ Three decades later, Seifert painted *Farmscape with Ford* (circa 1915, Samuel L. Meulendyke collection), a startling juxtaposition of old style and new technology. Thomas Armstrong, III brought Seifert's work to my attention.

⁴¹ John Rohrbach, "Time in New England: Creating a Usable Past," in *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, ed. Maren Stange (New York: Aperture, 1990), 161–162.

instance, half of the vertically bisected composition is a recession through an open door into the rooms of the building, while the other half of the photograph depicts a flat, whitewashed wall along which several household objects are arranged. While these objects are undoubtedly utilitarian, their straightforward placement against the pale wall emphasizes their simple contours. Their arrangement reads like a display of art in a gallery. In *Time in New England*, Strand also depicted objects such as a more ornate chair inside an elegant house (*Open Door*, 1946), a carved eagle (*Eagle*, 1946), and ships' figureheads.

Rebecca Salsbury Strand, Paul Strand's wife, painted on glass—a New England folk art form available in antiques shops. She mounted the paintings in Mexican tin frames, thus combining folk art traditions from the United States and Mexico.⁴² More famously, Hartley had created his *hinterglasbilder* in a similar spirit several years earlier; his, of course, referred to German folk art tradition as well as to American folk art.⁴³

George Ault also had an affinity for utilitarian objects. While his possession of simple and old-fashioned objects certainly reflected the poverty he endured through much of his adult life, evidence suggests that, at least to some degree, the artist was interested in the aesthetic attributes of such items. Ault's widow, Louise Ault, recalled among their few possessions an "early

⁴² *Paul Strand: Sixty Years of Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1976), 154.

⁴³ Bruce Weber, *The Heart of the Matter: The Still Lives of Marsden Hartley* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, 2003), 38–39; Haskell, 56–57.

American wooden clock,” and noted Ault’s admiration for the shape of a tin dipper.⁴⁴ Such simple objects appear in his still lifes, as in the jug and pitcher in *Mantelpiece Composition* (figure 56, 1929, Beck Collection).

Similarly, Niles Spencer incorporated very simple, even homely, objects in his paintings. His *Interior, Still Life* (figure 57, 1925, Curtis Galleries), for instance, includes an unadorned mirror and a plain pitcher on an unprepossessing flower-patterned tablecloth. A gravy boat with fluted lip and turned handle is the only “high style” element.

Ultimately, the importance of folk art to Precisionist artists lies in the more general appeal that folk art held for modernists rather than in explicitly direct relationships. Both the aesthetic qualities of the work and the idealized, romanticized way of life that the objects represented lent a historical legitimacy to modernist aesthetics. This appeal of folk art for American modern artists is closely related to the larger interest in so-called primitive art that arose in the early twentieth century. As described in Chapter Two, artists of the early twentieth century in Europe and the United States borrowed motifs and styles from non-Western cultures for their own work.⁴⁵ In the same vein, artists also drew from local heritage, as in the well-

⁴⁴ Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock: George Ault, the Independent Years* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1978), 6, 59.

⁴⁵ The benchmark study of non-Western art’s influence on modernism remains William Rubin, ed., *“Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984). See also Flam (2003).

known case of Pablo Picasso's interest in Iberian sculpture. Contemporary critics made the links among folk art, so-called primitive art, and modernism explicit: Edward Alden Jewell stated that "We can be very sure that these early Americans [represented in the 1931 "American Ancestors" exhibition] were genuinely primitive."⁴⁶ In 1932, Holger Cahill wrote of folk artists, "Their expression is primitive in the sense that it is the sincere, unaffected and childlike expression of men and women who had little training or book learning in art, and who did not even know that they were producing art."⁴⁷

As with American folk art, Precisionist artists used non-Western art as a direct source in only a very limited way, although they were certainly exposed to it in the artistic and intellectual climate in which they worked. Some examples of non-Western imagery, however, do exist. In 1918, Sheeler photographed twenty African sculptures owned by Marius de Zayas, and published a portfolio, *African Negro Sculpture*, in an edition of twenty-three.⁴⁸ But as these photographs were commissioned projects, they are probably best understood as evidence that Sheeler was well acquainted with African art rather than an indication that he actively sought it as a source for his own work. O'Keeffe also drew on non-Western art; her still life, *Mask with Golden*

⁴⁶ Jewell, "In the Realm of Art," sec. 8, 10.

⁴⁷ Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* 4 (March 1932): 2.

⁴⁸ Virginia-Lee Webb, "Art as Information: The African Portfolios of Charles Sheeler and Walker Evans," *African Arts* 24 (January 1991), 56–63, 103–104.

Apple, from 1923 (figure 58, private collection) incorporates an African mask lying on its side with fruit in front of it.

As discussed in Chapter Two, modernist artists looked to “primitive” art and cultures for sources. As part of this trend, artists in the United States examined their own history of artistic production. Because the work created by folk artists was considered symbolic of a simpler, less corrupt period, artists could understand it as a more honest and pure means of expression.⁴⁹ Contemporary critics of modern art recognized the value of folk art, often in language that seems patronizing today. Edward Alden Jewell referred to the objects in a Halpert Folk Art Gallery exhibition as better understood “as honest, often eloquent, documents of a native tradition, than as art.”⁵⁰ And in about 1935, the mission of the United States Section of the International Commission on Folk Arts, a project of the League of Nations, stated: “...throughout the civilized world it is now being recognized that in the folk arts lies the regenerative and stabilizing influence for contemporary life and art.”⁵¹

This interest in connecting with simplicity can be related to the historical practice of seeking a rural retreat. As noted by art historian

⁴⁹ Gail Levin, “American Art,” in Rubin, vol. 2, 468.

⁵⁰ Edward Alden Jewell, “The Week in New York: Recently Opened Shows,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1931, sec. 8, 10.

⁵¹ “A Folk Art Service for the United States,” brochure (United States Section International Commission on Folk Arts), circa 1935. Francis P. Garvan Papers, Archives of American Art. Catherine Whelan brought this source to my attention.

Woodard D. Openo, withdrawal from the city was part of standard professional practice for many artists from the 1800s into the twentieth century.⁵² In a sense, the move to rural areas is a kind of primitivising, an attempt to immerse oneself in a presumably less sophisticated culture—or at least to be removed from city life. In American art history, the notion of a rural retreat as a means to seek creative inspiration is easily traced to the Hudson River School artists' trips to the Catskills in the nineteenth century. The many later incarnations of this impulse to leave the urban world included the art colonies in bucolic settings at Ogunquit, as well as at Cos Cob and Old Lyme, Connecticut, and Taos, New Mexico.

Participating in the growing interest in American folk art was a way for Precisionist artists to find precedents and justification in American art history for their own modernist projects. American folk art served as a useful model because it was accessible, visually appealing, consistent with avant-garde movements in art, and most importantly, a particularly American mode of expression. They succeeded in finding a "usable past" in these objects. Folk art served a similar purpose for the Precisionists as vernacular architecture: It was a particularly American art that legitimized their modernist aesthetics. The search for American antecedents to modernism

⁵² Woodard D. Openo, "Artistic Circles and Summer Colonies," in Giffen and Murphy, 115.

helped deflect criticism that modernism was too closely linked with European art and, therefore, was suspect as unpatriotic.⁵³

As discussed in Chapter Two, however, the very premise of primitivism has its limits. The drawing from other cultures and other periods that modernist artists did was selective. That is, the artists chose only certain examples of the art from these cultures and, in so doing, removed the objects from their own contexts. Such selectivity and isolation bestow upon the Precisionists' historical subjects—be they barns or, in the few explicit instances here, folk art objects—a kind of purity from the inevitable complexities of the modern world. It expresses nostalgia both for what has been lost and for a world that never existed. As Karen Lucic has observed, this mining of the past for aesthetic models to justify contemporary art is fundamentally flawed. Artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not have predicted future artistic developments, and so such a “reverse lineage” is logically impossible.⁵⁴

This paradox applies to the Precisionists' images of vernacular architecture, as well as to the modernist project at large, and speaks to a desire to create a context for this art. Folk art—prevalent, novel, and specifically American—provided a legitimate historical framework. Such an interest in American history was shared by other artists in the interwar

⁵³ Connor, 83.

⁵⁴ Karen Lucic, “Charles Sheeler: American Interiors,” *Arts Magazine* 61 (May 1987): 47.

period, including Regionalists, but with very different results, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Historic preservation

The historic preservation movement in the 1920s and 1930s reflected many of the interests expressed in the Precisionist vernacular architecture images. Most studies of historic preservation argue that the trend began in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union purchased George Washington's estate in 1859 and opened the home to visitors. This first generation of preservationists "considered themselves to be in the business of creating and perpetuating shrines."⁵⁵ Preservation activities in the period following the Civil War emphasized the protection of the homes of great men—often people associated with the Revolution or other conflicts. The didactic aim of these projects was, in part, patriotic education; their founders held the belief that merely spending time at these historic sites would transform and strengthen the visitor's character.

The second generation of preservationists were antiquarians, often New Englanders interested in maintaining buildings of unusual character. The emphasis was on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as

⁵⁵ Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., "The Broadening View of the Historical Preservation Movement," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton, published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1978), 122.

Charles B. Hosmer has observed, the stress was on filial piety, or memorializing their ancestors' lives.⁵⁶ Key events of this period included the passing of a comprehensive Antiquities Act of 1906—the first major federal preservation legislation—which considered the preservation of prehistoric sites in the American West. Another important event was the establishment in 1910 of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities by William Sumner Appleton (the grandson of a pioneer textile manufacturer). The leaders of the preservation movement in this period were generally wealthy amateurs who believed that a broad public should have a greater appreciation of the early settlers of the United States, as well as an understanding of the contributions of colonial era patriots. As Kevin Murphy has argued, this emphasis on patriotic figures generally privileged the activities of heroic men and reinforced the importance of a few elite families.⁵⁷ The educational program also had a less salutary goal of training people without knowledge of American history—essentially, immigrants of different races and different cultures—in American tradition. In this way, teaching history through historic sites could help maintain social order.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁷ Kevin D. Murphy, "The Politics of Preservation: Historic House Museums in the Piscataqua Region," in Sarah L. Giffen and Kevin D. Murphy, eds., *'A Noble and Dignified Stream': The Piscataqua Region in the Colonial Revival, 1860–1930* (York, Maine: Old York Historical Society, 1992).

Historian Michael Kammen has outlined the development of regional historical societies, such as the Pennsylvania Historical Association's launching of a quarterly journal and adopting a constitution in 1933, and in 1936, a celebration of the 300th anniversary of the settlement of Long Island, and a 1923 marking of Deerfield, Massachusetts's, 250th year of settlement. Kammen quotes an Indiana man's 1928 statement that "interest in American history with special emphasis on local history is spreading."⁵⁸

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Wallace Nutting created a commercial empire of colonial iconography for a middle-class audience. He sold colored photographs, books, and reproduction colonial furniture. Nutting also owned five furnished historic house museums, which, as William Truettner and Thomas Andrew Denenberg have observed, were strategically located along a New England automobile route.⁵⁹ The colonial revival industry extended much further, too. For instance, Walter Von Nessen's Diplomat Coffee Service of 1935 (figure 59) combined modern streamlining with Revere-type design (and was created by a process used for

⁵⁸ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 375–376. Kammen also describes how many involved in preservation in the early twentieth century rejected the dominance that New England preservation and preservationists held in the rest of the country.

⁵⁹ William H. Truettner and Thomas Andrew Denenberg, "The Discreet Charm of the Colonial," in Truettner and Stein, 104–105.

industrial hardware). And into the 1930s, suburban home designs were regularly of a colonial style.⁶⁰

The period from about 1926 to 1940 brought a number of professionals in architecture, engineering, history, archaeology, and landscape architecture into the preservation movement. The Colonial Williamsburg restoration, for instance, was undertaken by architects. The era also saw the federal government becoming actively involved with preservation.⁶¹ The battlefield at Yorktown and the George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Virginia were taken over by the federal government in 1930. In 1935, the Historic Sites Act was passed, and a Branch of Historic Sites was added to the National Park Service.

The federal projects of the 1920s and 1930s emphasized the same interests that are reflected in Precisionist artists' images of historic buildings. In 1933, the Department of the Interior sponsored a Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), which continued until the Second World War. In the survey, groups of architects photographed and measured buildings across the United States; they usually chose places of historical importance that were in danger of destruction. The range of structures covered was enormously broad: from convents, to fences, to canal locks, to barns. The goal of the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁶¹ Hosmer, 124–125.

project was to record no less than “a complete picture of a culture of the time as reflected in the buildings of the period.”⁶²

Although the buildings in Sheeler's and O'Keeffe's paintings are among the types that the HABS project and others documented, the artworks do not demonstrate the preservationist impulse or ideals that contemporaneous projects engaged in. For instance, Sheeler's *Barn Abstraction* of 1917 (figure 60, Philadelphia Museum of Art) is rendered so abstractly that it is almost unidentifiable. Sheeler gives the viewer the horizontal siding of the barn walls and overlapping planes that suggest roofs and walls of the structure. And O'Keeffe's *White Canadian Barn No. 2* (figure 61, 1932, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) likewise betrays little information about its context. In these works, there exists no interest in the kind of documentation to provide facts that a cataloguer or educator might find useful; foundations, hinges, and other informational details are omitted. The blank façades tell viewers very little—and they certainly do not engage in any explicit rhetoric about national identity that was one part of the preservationist goal. So perhaps the artists were not especially interested in preservation per se but found the volumes and shapes of the historic buildings appealing.

⁶² National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, *Historic American Buildings Survey Bulletin*, 3 (December 20, 1933). Quoted in Carl Lounsbury, “Vernacular Construction in the Survey,” in *Historic America: Buildings, Structures, and Sites* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1983), 183.

Colonial Williamsburg

An important connection between the preservation movement and Precisionism was Sheeler's involvement with the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller learned of Sheeler's work through Edith Halpert. According to Sheeler, it was after Mrs. Rockefeller bought his *American Landscape* (later donated to the Museum of Modern Art) from Halpert that Rockefeller commissioned Sheeler to depict Williamsburg, which was being reconstructed thanks to the financial involvement of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.⁶³ Mrs. Rockefeller originally hired Sheeler to photograph buildings of the new project, but she eventually commissioned him to make two paintings of historic houses, the Governor's Palace and Bassett Hall. In addition, Sheeler also painted *Kitchen, Williamsburg* (figure 62, 1937, private collection), which Mrs. Rockefeller also acquired, a scene that depicts the interior of the outbuilding that lies a few yards west of the Governor's Palace. Sheeler first visited Colonial Williamsburg late in 1935; he returned in April 1936 and stayed for several months. He probably took some 40 photographs during this time at Williamsburg, and from these images, he created the paintings to complete the commission.⁶⁴ The photographic series included

⁶³ Charles Sheeler, interview by Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, 9 December 1958. Charles Sheeler Papers.

⁶⁴ Troyen and Hirschler, 28.

numerous images of the Governor's Palace, from several angles and distances, as well as photographs of Bassett Hall, and of many smaller houses and outbuildings. Among the most prominent of the outbuilding Sheeler depicted was the "Virginia kitchen," pictured in *Kitchen, Williamsburg*.

Sheeler's decision to paint the kitchen, with its pots and pans and other everyday, utilitarian tools on display adjacent to the hearth, poses questions about his interest in the project. That Sheeler chose this building, rather than one of the other reconstructions on the main part of the Williamsburg grounds, suggests that he was drawn to the authenticity of a "real" colonial building, in which ordinary life rather than tourist visits took place. The sole image of a grand building—the Governor's Palace, the focal point of the Williamsburg site—is arguably the weakest of the Williamsburg series (figure 63, *Governor's Palace, Williamsburg, 1936, Colonial Williamsburg*). Although depicted in the artist's characteristic simplified, flattened style, the painting lacks life or tension. Instead, Sheeler appears to have applied his "formula" in a rote manner.

Bassett Hall is several blocks removed from the center of the project and is further isolated by a deep lawn and a long driveway. The two-story frame house, not visible from the street, was built around the middle of the 1700s. The Rockefellers renovated the building—it had been damaged in a fire in 1930—and added a wing in the back to house modern amenities,

including bathrooms and kitchen, and servants' quarters.⁶⁵ These renovations were completed in 1936, the same year Sheeler worked in Williamsburg; his painting must have been completed shortly after the renovations, or even during them.

Bassett Hall (figure 64, 1936, Colonial Williamsburg) lacks the qualities of Sheeler's best works, but the play of shadow of the tree branches on the building surface and the more complex composition make the painting more compelling than that of the Governor's Palace. According to Troyen and Hirschler, Sheeler did not care for the paintings.⁶⁶ The relative weakness of *Governor's Palace, Williamsburg* and *Bassett Hall* lies in their contexts. Both paintings present broad views of the buildings, with most of the exteriors represented. In the image of the Governor's Palace, the artist included not only the building but also the edge of the neighboring structure, trees, the wall and ornamental gate, and the path, shrubs, and low fence in the foreground. All of these elements dilute the powerful lines and volumes that Sheeler might have found in the grand structure. In contrast, although *Kitchen, Williamsburg* is full of furniture and tools that identify the work that takes place there, the space and volumes of the room's structure remain apparent. Perhaps it is the wider context in these Williamsburg paintings that makes them less effective. Most of Sheeler's barn and house images, after all,

⁶⁵ Mary Miley Theobald, "'Our Little Colonial House,'" *Colonial Williamsburg* 24 (autumn 2002), 77–78.

⁶⁶ Troyen and Hirschler, 28.

do not incorporate this degree of contextual information. It may be their very isolation that makes the barns and houses powerful.

During his stay in Williamsburg, Sheeler sublet the small apartment where the curator of the buildings' interiors usually lived. The apartment was really a small house, attached to the east side of the Governor's Palace, with four identically sized rooms, two upstairs and two downstairs, with a stairwell and hall in the center.⁶⁷ Apparently, Sheeler liked the space—he described it as “a little gem. . . . I had a very pleasant environment, I think, in which to live for that time.”⁶⁸ In the same interview, Sheeler described how he expressed his appreciation for the building to Vernon Geddy, an aide to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: “I said, Gee, if there was another house like that in Williamsburg, I'd move down.” To Sheeler's surprise, his comment was taken seriously. Sheeler reported that on his last night at Williamsburg the president of the restoration, Kenneth Chorley, made him an offer: “How serious were you when you said that if there was a house in Williamsburg [,] like the one you were living in while you were here [,] that you would love to move to Williamsburg? Because if you really mean it we'll build you one just like it and rent it to you.’ Can you beat that?”⁶⁹ But Sheeler declined the offer.

⁶⁷ This building and its twin on the other side of the Governor's Palace are open to the public today; tours of the Governor's Palace begin in the first-floor rooms of the twin buildings.

⁶⁸ Charles Sheeler, interview by Cowdrey.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

“I liked it for the novelty, and I also revere what Williamsburg originally meant to this country. But I couldn’t stand the idea that in order to enjoy the Eighteenth Century, you had to be in Eighteenth Century costume. I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t go that far back.”⁷⁰

Sheeler had an ally in his antipathy toward the project in Lewis Mumford and his modernist ideals. Mumford, who called the project “quaintly unauthentic,” criticized Williamsburg this way:

This painstaking work of reconstruction, which has not merely re-created the old buildings but also put them under the custodianship of people dressed in the costume of the period, has all the merits of a great open air museum, except one: it leaves nothing to the imagination. As an educational instrument, it has many invaluable features; but perhaps its greatest lesson is finally this—the past cannot be re-presented in space, because one element is missing, time, which brings changes and transformations.⁷¹

Earlier, Georgia O’Keeffe also had depicted Williamsburg, but in a very different way. The O’Keeffe family moved from Wisconsin to Williamsburg in 1902. O’Keeffe, who stayed in Wisconsin to finish the school year, joined her family in June 1903. They lived on Scotland Street, only two blocks from the Governor’s Palace. In 1905 or 1906, O’Keeffe drew

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (New York: Boni and Liverwright, 1924; reprint, with annotations by the author, New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 9 (citation is from 1955 reprint annotation).

Williamsburg's Bruton Parish Church (a building that became central to the Colonial Williamsburg restoration project) in the representational style she employed in her youth (figure 65, Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation). While these drawings were executed long before O'Keeffe developed a style that could be called Precisionist, it is interesting that images of the eighteenth-century landmark building—rather than houses in the town—exist. This apparent choice indicates an interest in historical America, even if the subject was more ornate than the barns the artist would depict in the following decades. She left Williamsburg in 1907, to attend the Art Students League in New York. O'Keeffe was not in Williamsburg during the renovation of the colonial site, and she did not see it until 1938, when she received an honorary doctorate from the College of William and Mary.

Henry Ford's Greenfield Village

Another major preservation project opened to the public in 1933, almost six years after Sheeler first visited the River Rouge plant to work on the famous photographic commission of the factory complex. Henry Ford's Greenfield Village is a collection of historic buildings that Ford moved from their original sites to the Dearborn, Michigan, complex that surrounds Ford's birthplace. The diverse buildings included Orville and Wilbur Wright's bicycle shop; Thomas Edison's laboratory from Menlo Park, New Jersey; Noah Webster's birthplace; and an Illinois courthouse where Abraham

Lincoln practiced law. Greenfield Village also includes artifacts not associated with famous Americans: eighteenth-century houses, barns, a wagon shop, and a windmill, as well as tools and other artifacts.

As with the Williamsburg project, Greenfield Village was a reconstruction of historical sites, not the preservation of existing buildings. Unlike Williamsburg, however, the Greenfield Village project was undertaken only by Ford—without contributions from professional preservationists or historians. The objects and buildings were originally presented almost completely free of historical context. This disregard for a scholarly approach to the project reflected Ford's self-proclaimed disinterest in history: "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."⁷²

Henry Ford's amassing of American folk objects was in the same spirit as Henry Mercer's. In fact, Ford's collecting trips took him to Doylestown in the 1920s, before he created Greenfield Village. Ford's first trip was in 1922, when traveling with his son, Edsel, he visited Henry Mercer's museum. During their visit, the Fords stayed at Fountain House, an inn owned by antiques collector Francis C. Mireau, who had been encouraged by Henry

⁷² Ford quoted in Robert Lacey, *Ford: The Men and the Machine* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1986), 238. Ford later argued that he was not quoted accurately in the newspaper article that published this statement. He did maintain, however, that "bunk" was an apt description of history as it was conventionally presented. Lacey, 238–239.

Mercer to buy the inn and furnish it with antiques. The next year, Ford visited Doylestown again, apparently with the goal of hunting antiques. The local newspapers reported that Ford offered Mireau \$75,000 for his entire collection of antiquities and artifacts, both high style and vernacular. Evidence indicates that Ford was actively thinking of furnishing his own museum at this time:

‘This is the only museum I’ve ever been sufficiently interested in to visit,’ said Henry Ford, flivver king, Saturday, when he made his second visit to Mercer Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown. ‘Some day I expect to have a museum which will rival it.’⁷³

Despite Ford’s offer, Mireau did not sell his collection until five years later; although Henry Ford did not attend the sale, he may have purchased items in advance. Henry du Pont and Henry Mercer, however, bought many of the antiques from the auction.⁷⁴ Sheeler probably knew of Ford’s collecting activities in Doylestown, even though he did not work for Ford until the late 1920s. Ford’s visits to Doylestown in the early 1920s occurred during the same periods that the artist lived in the town. The connection between the

⁷³ “Ford Says the Mercer Museum is the Finest,” *Doylestown Daily News*, 10 September 1923, Henry Chapman Mercer Papers, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁴ Helen H. Gemmill, “The Great Fountain House Antiques Sale of 1928,” *Mercer Mosaic* 3 (November/December 1986), 145–160.

two through Henry Mercer, and the blaring headlines announcing Ford's visits, suggest that while Sheeler may never have met the industrialist during this period, he almost certainly knew that Ford was collecting Americana.

Shakers

In this period of interest in Americana, appreciation developed for the products of the Shaker religious sect. The Shakers' cloistered, celibate faith developed in the late 1700s under the leadership of Mother Ann Lee. Lee and her successors formed communal settlements in New York, New England, Ohio, Kentucky, Florida, and Georgia. The basic premise of the faith dictated that its members reach salvation through disciplined, codified work and prayer in communities of shared property and duties. The communities generally tried to attain self-sufficiency, though varying degrees of contact with the secular world were usually necessary to keep the communities functioning.

To accommodate the many hundreds of members in the community, the buildings in Shaker settlements—meetinghouses, large "dwelling houses," and various buildings for farming and agricultural industry—were generally larger than structures in the secular world. To this end, Shakers developed stylistic and structural innovations to meet their communal needs. For instance, roofs of large meetinghouses had to be self-supporting, without pillars or columns, in order to allow free movement during religious dancing.

In the often-crowded rooms of the community buildings, space was at a premium; the characteristic built-in drawers and cupboards offered storage without furniture, which in turn, permitted multiple uses of rooms. It appears that the Shakers themselves viewed their designs as utilitarian, rather than beautiful in their own right. A book from 1893 published by the Shaker Village of Canterbury, New Hampshire, describes at length the history, practices, and leadership of the Shakers. The author does not, however, write about the physical structures beyond relatively brief descriptions, noting that the community built more to accommodate its growing size. He does note that the buildings are “unsurpassed for comfort and durability” and provides a longer explanation of an innovative dairy barn heated by steam, where the cows produce large quantities of milk.⁷⁵ Architectural historian Julie Nicoletta has observed that Shaker buildings “had to be efficient [and] easy to maintain,” a dictum that could apply as aptly to a modern factory. Nicoletta continues to note that the Shaker designers gave “their buildings a sense of serenity and grace from knowing that what they created was as close to perfection as humanly possible.”⁷⁶

Sheeler’s extensive interest in Shaker design roughly coincided with the development of scholarly studies of the sect’s material production. By the

⁷⁵ Charles Edson Robinson, *The Shakers and Their Homes: A Concise History of the United Society of Believers Called Shakers* (1893; reprint, Canterbury, N.H.: Shaker Village, 1976), 57–58.

⁷⁶ Julie Nicoletta, *The Architecture of the Shakers* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1995), 10.

1930s, Sheeler's collection of Shaker objects was so highly regarded that it was inventoried by the Index of American Design. Part of the Works Progress Administration, this program provided work for commercial artists who created a pictorial history of industrial arts, including textiles, ceramics, glass, silver, furniture, and many other items created in America from the colonial era to the early nineteenth century. The government cataloguers came to Sheeler's home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 1936 to record the collection in watercolor, pen and ink, and gouache.⁷⁷ One work resulting from this project is *Table* by illustrator Alfred H. Smith (figure 66, National Gallery of Art). The watercolor depicts Sheeler's Shaker table that appears in several of his paintings and photographs of his house.

In the forefront of the studies were Edward and Faith Deming Andrews, a husband-and-wife team who studied and published on Shaker design. They first published articles on Shaker aesthetics in the magazine *Antiques* in 1928 and 1929, and organized several exhibitions based on their own collection, including "Shaker Handicrafts" of 1935 at the Whitney Museum. Their 1937 book *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* stresses the originality and unusual character of the group. Their thorough, thoughtful study still uses the somewhat pejorative language that identifies the Shakers as naïve; Shaker craftsmanship is the product of "an unspoiled culture, an 'unhelped people,' with a native instinct for good

⁷⁷ Fillin-Yeh (1987), 42.

workmanship, and a regard for form and design, which was given direction and meaning by certain moral-scientific-inspirational values of unusual import.⁷⁸

Edward Deming Andrews's essay that accompanied the 1935 exhibition at the Whitney Museum describes the utility of Shaker products:

True serviceability excluded the 'superfluous,' all elements unrelated to the essential function of the product, especially those of 'ostentation, parade or any vain show'. . . . the merits of the finished piece must depend on form alone, on rightness of proportion and linear composition.⁷⁹

In the late 1920s, Juliana Force furnished a large country house called Barley Sheaf Farm outside Doylestown with examples of Shaker furniture, including a bench and several chairs, and folk art, including naïve portraits and landscapes, and a "primitive-patterned" quilt.⁸⁰ In 1928, Force bought a house in South Salem, New York, near the homes of her friends the Sheelers and the collectors Alexander Brook and Peggy Bacon. She dubbed the house Shaker Hollow and moved her collection of Shaker furniture into it. Edward

⁷⁸ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 20.

⁷⁹ Edward Deming Andrews, "Introduction," in *Shaker Handicrafts* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935), 8.

⁸⁰ Berman, 146–147. The house and the barn adjacent to it still stand today; they are a bed-and-breakfast east of Doylestown.

and Faith Deming Andrews guided her in the acquisition of several more examples of Shaker furniture.⁸¹

The appeal of Shaker design for twentieth-century modernists was debated in the modernist circles. In 1935—after the Index of American Design catalogued Sheeler's collection—Edward Deming Andrews observed that the "geometric simplicity of Shaker cabinet work and its straightforward adaptation to everyday use suggest a kinship with modern furniture design: it has been termed, indeed, 'the first functional furniture in America.'"⁸²

The Shakers attracted many admirers in the twentieth century for more than their characteristic design. In the 1920s and 1930s, a time when many in the modernist milieu were interested in utopian communities (such as the Russian Constructivists in the early years of the Soviet Union), communism, and socialism, the Shaker emphasis on renunciation of private property and working toward a common good had resonance. Edward Deming Andrews noted that "the achievement of the individuals stood indeed, for that of the group, since [a Shaker's] work must always satisfy the communal conscience."⁸³ Furthermore, the group's emphasis on renouncing the trappings of conventional society was also a basic tenet of twentieth-century modernism.

⁸¹ Ibid., 147–148.

⁸² Andrews (1935), 8-9.

⁸³ Ibid., 7.

While no existing evidence suggests that Sheeler knew or had met the Andrewses directly, the couple met Force in October 1932, and they worked closely together on the Whitney show that opened three years later. The same month that Force met the Andrewses, she bought Sheeler's *River Rouge Plant*.⁸⁴ Through Force and through the Andrewses' extensive activities in his circles, Sheeler may well have known of their studies.

Ephrata Cloister

In addition to his interest in the Shakers, Sheeler had also explored the architecture of another, less well-known, American religious sect. In about 1917, Sheeler visited the Ephrata Cloister in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, sixty miles west of Philadelphia. The cloister was founded by Conrad Beissel, a German mystic who fled religious persecution and emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1720. After breaking from the Pennsylvania German religious communities, Beissel established the Ephrata group. With practices similar to those of the Shakers, the Ephrata community sought spiritual perfection through separation from the world and through expressions of self-denial, including celibacy and meager, mostly vegetarian diets. Their long hours of work included running a printing press, composing and performing music, operating a tannery and a sawmill, as well as conducting

⁸⁴ Berman, 147, 316–317.

the day-to-day operations of the community.⁸⁵ The main buildings at the Ephrata Cloister date from about 1740 and are constructed in a German style, with steeply pitched roofs, low lintels, and central hearths designed for maximum heat efficiency.

The celibate community of Ephrata was largely extinct by the early 1800s, and the site was adopted by the German Seventh-Day Baptist Church. While members of this church lived and worshipped at Ephrata until 1934, the site was in a state of disrepair when Sheeler visited it.⁸⁶ During Sheeler's visit, he photographed the main buildings of the Cloister: the Bakery, the Saron (the sisters' house, constructed 1743), and the Saal (the meetinghouse, constructed 1741). As Troyen and Hirschler have observed, Sheeler's 1934 painting *Ephrata*, after a 1917 photograph, *Ephrata Cloister from the Cemetery*, significantly crops the image but retains most of the original details (figure 67, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Mass.; figure 68, Lane Collection). Most strikingly, in his painting, Sheeler omitted the cemetery and its eighteenth-century headstones found in the foreground of the photograph.⁸⁷ Instead, he concentrated on the distinctive eighteenth-century buildings.

Constance Rourke observed that the Ephrata pictures are another example of

⁸⁵ William F. Stierer, Jr., "A New Look at the Ephrata Cloister," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 70, no. 2 (1966): 102–110.

⁸⁶ The Pennsylvania Historical Commission took over the site in 1941, restored it, and opened it to the public.

⁸⁷ Troyen and Hirschler, 152.

Sheeler's interest in early Pennsylvania architecture. His depictions of the Ephrata buildings "are as rigorously simple as the barns, they have the same air of quietude and permanence."⁸⁸

Indeed, some elements of the Ephrata buildings share commonalities with other subjects of Sheeler's work. In the Saron, for instance, the small windows are very deeply set into the walls and resemble the windows in Sheeler's Doylestown house. The Saron also houses a stairwell from a first-floor kitchen to an upper level. Standing in the stairwell and looking up at the bottom of the risers above has a disorienting, vertiginous effect, almost identical to that Sheeler explored in his stairwell images from the Doylestown house.

Sheeler was not the only modernist who found the Ephrata community intriguing. Architect Eleanor Raymond included Ephrata in her important 1931 study of rural buildings, *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania*. In the forward to her publication, Raymond acknowledges the utility of the rural vernacular architecture in her study:

. . . to perceive how sincerely these houses and farm buildings manifest their function, how perfectly they are adapted to site and how simply they are expressed in the best materials at hand is only to recall that these qualities

⁸⁸ Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 165. Two versions of the painting exist. The larger oil is in the collection of the Springfield, Massachusetts, Museum of Fine Arts. The second is a smaller version, probably a study, in tempera; its location is unknown.

are the identical ones exemplified by all the great architectural movements of the past.⁸⁹

Her study, composed of an extensive series of photographs of a variety of types of rural buildings, includes twenty plates of exterior and interior views of the buildings at Ephrata. They document buildings in disrepair, with missing shingles, plaster patched over the wood siding, and stones missing from hearths. When Sheeler saw the buildings, fourteen years before the book's publication, the site may have been as shabby as it appears in Raymond's publication. His photograph of cloister buildings from the cemetery, however, shows buildings that appear to be in better condition than those in Raymond's photographs. But in any case, his characteristically smooth-edged, simplified painting omitted signs of age.

Raymond's book also includes numerous images of Pennsylvania barns, many of which display the characteristic elements of the bank barns that Sheeler also found compelling. Raymond described the buildings in terms similar to Sheeler's:

An unstudied directness in fitting form to function, which seems to have been guided by an instinctive appreciation of proportion, and by skill in the use of materials have then resulted in the excellent design shown in these buildings . . . the necessity for a barn extensive enough to hold the crops and live stock of a

⁸⁹ Eleanor Raymond, *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania* (New York: William Helburn, 1931; reprint, Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1973), n.p.

large, fertile, expertly cultivated farm and to provide the threshing floor for the grain.⁹⁰

Like many of her modernist counterparts, Raymond idealizes the simplicity of the buildings she studies, and by extension, their “unstudied” creators, who had the skill to design structures that efficiently fit their farming needs.

Architecture studies

Raymond was not unique in her investigation of rural vernacular structures. For instance, early studies were undertaken by Aymar Embury, a practicing architect. Embury published photographs of Pennsylvania farmhouses and early churches in *Architectural Record* in 1911 and 1912. He noted the appeal of Pennsylvania bank barns, citing “their excellent adaptation to the needs of the farmer.”⁹¹ But studies of rural vernacular buildings in this period did not always originate from an interest in architectural history per se. Instead, architecture was often part of the larger projects undertaken by those working in other disciplines, including preservationists, historians, and folklorists.

Among the preservationists was the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities; its journal, *Old-Time New England*, began

⁹⁰ Ibid., n.p.

⁹¹ Aymar Embury, “Pennsylvania Farmhouses: Examples of Rural Dwellings of 100 Years Ago,” *Architectural Record*, 30 (November 1911): 485. See also Aymar Embury, “Early American Churches,” *Architectural Record* 30 (December 1911): 584-596.

publication in 1910. In addition to reporting on historic buildings and including plans and photographs of barns, the wide range of topics included the designs of seventeenth-century headstones and the construction of straw bonnets.⁹²

A historical point of view that considered architecture was taken by Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, whose 1938 publication *The Founding of American Civilization* discusses the designs of Pennsylvania barns and houses in the context of their relationships to European traditions. A number of studies of colonial architecture were published in this period, including Fiske Kimball's *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic*, which mentions the Ephrata cloister. Most of these studies, however, such as John F. Kelly's *The Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* and Samuel Chamberlain's numerous publications on Northeastern architecture, do not make significant mention of non-high-style buildings.

Providing a useful gloss on the state of study of vernacular architecture is a bibliography, *Writings on Early American Architecture*, published by Ohio State University in 1943.⁹³ It lists all sources up to the date of publication (the index itself was compiled beginning in the early 1930s). The authors quantify the literature, noting a steady growth in the publication

⁹² See, for instance, Mrs. George L. Underwood, "The Derby-Osborne Farm, Peabody, with its McIntyre Summer House and Barn," *Old-time New England*, 16, 2 (October 1925), 54-64.

⁹³ Frank J. Roos, Jr., ed., *Writings on Early American Architecture* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1943).

of related titles from 1900 to 1940; peaks occurred in 1924–1927 and 1938–1939 (the latter due to a flurry of publication about the Colonial Williamsburg restoration). The book's very existence, of course, indicates the development of the subject as an avenue for academic inquiry.

Precisionists and Puritans

Although the avant-garde Stieglitz circle supposedly eschewed the repressive shackles of Puritanism, the work of Sheeler has been identified with the reticence of the Puritans. In his extensive 1923 review of Sheeler's work, Forbes Watson compared the artist's work to the ideals of the early settlers of the United States, noting the "clear-cut fineness, the cool austerity, the complete distrust of superfluities" of the paintings.⁹⁴ And in their study of 1987, Carol Troyen and Erica Hirschler link Sheeler with the colonial values of austerity and honesty and with a longer history of American approaches to the arts:

Beneath the modernity of Sheeler's still lifes and city views is a puritanical strain, evident in the very way he applies his paint. . . . Sheeler's humble subjects, the modest scale of his pictures, and even their unadorned frames deflect the associations with luxury and privilege that had troubled commentators on the fine arts since the founding of the republic.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Forbes Watson, "Charles Sheeler," *The Arts* 3 (May 1923), 138.

⁹⁵ Troyen and Hirschler, 15.

In these ways, the critics locate a historical, specifically American, precedent for Sheeler's work.

Lewis Mumford also considered the impact of Puritans on contemporary aesthetics. He observed that the Puritans rejected all ornament, even if the ornament was useful. Puritans "did not see that ornament itself may be functional, too, when it expresses some positive gesture of the spirit."⁹⁶ Furthermore, the text of Nancy Newhall's and Paul Strand's 1940 project, *Time in New England*, begins with a 1630 speech by John Winthrop, a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Puritan colony, which is followed by a Strand photograph of the stark Maine coastline. The excerpt calls Winthrop's fellow colonizers to hard work: "We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of others' necessities. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, as members of the same body."⁹⁷ As art historian John Rohrbach has observed, beginning the study of New England with this quote suggests that the values of colonial New England—thrift, honesty, industriousness—define American attributes at large.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Mumford, 9.

⁹⁷ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," quoted in *Time in New England*, photographs by Paul Strand, text selected and edited by Nancy Newhall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950; reprint, New York: Aperture, 1980), 19.

⁹⁸ John Rohrbach, in Stange, 167.

The American soil

These different manifestations of love for country—interest in folk art, appreciation of Shakers, renovation of Williamsburg—are inevitably bound with love for the land, for the country's soil. Karal Ann Marling describes this impulse as "topophilia," a sense of connection with the physical environment, which is, arguably, particularly strong in the United States, where the national ethos is intricately connected with the land. As Marling describes, the "rough-and-tumble democracy of the frontier and the experience of westering shaped the democratic institutions of the nation."⁹⁹ Indeed, the very history of the country has deep rural and agricultural roots. To Thomas Jefferson, farmers embodied the best of the civilization. He wrote that "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people . . . whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."¹⁰⁰ And an agricultural writer in 1841 equated the United States with ancient civilization through agriculture. He wrote that "the farmer is the most noble and independent man in society . . . he has ever been honored and respected from the days of Cincinnatus, the Roman

⁹⁹ Karal Ann Marling, "Heartland Dreaming: Utopias, Distopias and the Wonderful Kingdom of Oz," in *Illusions of Eden: Visions of the American Heartland*, ed. Robert Stearns (Minneapolis: Arts Midwest, 2000), 58–60.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: H. W. Derby, 1861, as part of Volume VIII of *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), 157 (query 19).

farmer."¹⁰¹ So in this sense, the definition of America as land and its cultivation is intricately linked with national pride and its extension, patriotism.

Paul Strand's film *Native Land* used highly evocative imagery of the land to inspire public support for labor. The film's narrative progresses from rural scenes to industrial imagery, a technique that contrasts the poor conditions of industrial workers' with the more bucolic traditional rural America. Although the 1942 film was created after the height of Precisionist work, it underlines the Precisionist concern with the visual contrast of old-fashioned versus modern (though, unlike the film, Precisionist work was without an explicit political agenda). John Rohrbach has argued that *Native Land* is essentially patriotic; the close-ups of rocks, woods, and churches represent the nation's democratic heritage, worth preserving.¹⁰² *Native Land* was produced under the auspices of Frontier Films, a cooperative that Strand helped found and run, which operated from 1937 to 1943. The other films Strand was involved with, including *Heart of Spain* (1937), often had pro-agriculture, pro-labor messages. In his films, Strand explored the idea that the American land was key to the nation's identity.

Between the world wars, Americans in modernist circles became increasingly interested in the folk history of the nation. Such a valorization of

¹⁰¹ Uncited quotation in John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 31.

¹⁰² Rohrbach, in Stange, 163.

the “Common Man” served to redefine the nation as a whole. The Precisionist artists, actively engaged in and aware of the pursuit of high art’s humble origins, translated this cultural trend into visual appreciation—in the form of their images of vernacular architecture and folk art objects. The next chapter will consider these ideas through a much narrower lens, examining the ways Precisionist artists focused on very specifically local history and identity.

Chapter Four: History on a Local Scale

Historian Warren Susman has identified the most culturally important aspect of the interwar period as the growing awareness of the notion of American culture. In this period, he argues, there was an “overwhelming effort to document in as many media as possible the patterns of American life; the goal of this exploration was no less than to define Americans’ shared culture as meaningful.”¹ The resulting flood of information and analysis amounted to a “crusade” by the 1930s.

Contemporary developments in the arts, including dance, music, and literature, reflected this interest in the character of specific places. As Thomas Craven exhorted his readers in 1932, “the only outlet, the sole means of escape for the American painter lies in the discovery of the local essence, after which we hope for a viable national school.”² In this context, Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture exemplify a larger cultural concern with Americanness on a small scale. This chapter then discusses regional changes in the places where O’Keeffe, Sheeler, and other Precisionists worked and outlines the elements composing this cultural context. In their paintings, photographs, and prints, the Precisionists chose identifiably local subjects.

¹ Warren Susman, “The Thirties,” in *The Development of American Culture*, edited by Stanley Ratner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 189.

² Thomas Craven, “American Painters: The Snob Spirit,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 91 (February 1932): 83–84.

An important proponent of the value of local American identity was poet-physician William Carlos Williams, friend of Demuth, Sheeler, and O’Keeffe, and an associate of the Stieglitz circle. He advocated an American art strong in its own right, free from European standards. By his definition, a truly American art would be reached via an artist’s full understanding of the particular place where he or she lived. According to Dickran Tashjian, it was for this reason that William Carlos Williams settled in suburban Rutherford, New Jersey—where he could more easily make contact with a local environment that offered fewer distractions than the city.³ Indeed, *Contact* was the title of the journal he founded and edited from December 1920 until 1923. He explained the journal’s goals: “We, Contact, aim to emphasize the local phase of the game of writing. . . . We want to give all our energy to the setting up of new vigors of artistic perception, invention and expression in the United States.”⁴

As Tashjian has argued, Williams’s emphasis on direct observation demanded that “regional” perception be at the center of art and, at the same time, serve as symbol of collective experience.⁵ Since contact with the earth and with one’s community can be practiced by everyone, such a definition of regionalism is universal. His exhortation to work locally could apply to

³ Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920–1940* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), 20, 24.

⁴ William Carlos Williams, “Comment,” *Contact* 2 (January 1921): n.p.

⁵ Tashjian, 98.

anyone, anywhere: "take anything, the land at your feet and use it."⁶

Ultimately, the philosophical goal of the regionalism espoused by *Contact* served to set the American experience apart from Europe.

The complex relationship between American artists and European precedents and trends (the tension as described in Chapter Two) may be at the heart of Williams's proposal. Tashjian has described how Williams found it difficult to reconcile his identity as provincial in the presence of prestigious European artists. He explained this point in a passage from 1919: "Then for God's sake let us proclaim to ourselves that [poetry] isn't made out of the brains of Frenchmen, Englishmen, or dead Greeks. Poetry is fully at home in the woodsy brain of Wallace Gould [the Maine-based poet introduced to Williams by Marsden Hartley] as in another man's living in Teheran."⁷ Williams's stress on the American experience had a kinship with the Precisionist attention to the simplified shapes and forms of their own regional architecture.

The commitment to local identity that Williams advocated as early as 1919 was echoed on a much larger, officially-sanctioned scale in the Works Progress Administration, begun in 1935. One of the administration's programs was the Federal Writers Project (FWP), which gave jobs to more than 6,000 writers. These writers created more than a thousand publications

⁶ William Carlos Williams, "A Maker," *The Little Review* 6 (August 1919): 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37, 38.

considering local American topics, including state, city, and regional guides; historical records; ethnic studies, including *The Italians of New York* and *The Negro in Virginia*; and collections of folklore. Many of the oral histories and reminiscences that the writers recorded involved farmers. In these narratives, the writers' transcriptions of local dialect and slang both vividly capture the speakers' tone and also—to contemporary ears—romanticize the laborers' experiences.

In one oral history, dated 1939, the writer interviewed a farmer in Northfield, Massachusetts, whose family had worked the land since before the American Revolution. In the following passage, the author stressed the difficulty of agricultural work and included the subject's comment about the relative ease of his life in the 1930s compared with the "old days:"

Course in a way farmers are better off than city folks though it depends on what you mean by being well off. If you have to make money to be happy the farm is no place to live. Most people seem to think that they have to have money in order to buy something that they can get without any money on the farm. What I mean is, yer never hear of a farmer starving to death, or freezing either. He don't have to run around looking for a job nuther. 'Course, a farmer could freeze if he was such a dum [damn] fool that he wouldn't cut the wood on his own place. And I suppose he could starve if he didn't know enough to put in his crops. And he could come dum near croakin' if he didn't know enough to keep everlastingly at things. But, if a feller liken to work, and work for himself, he can p'rob'ly enjoy life more on a farm than he can anywhere else. 't ain't no place for a lazy man, though. Course in the old days a farm was a pretty tough place. It's a lot better now than it was as far

as amusement is concerned. What with the radio and the automobile the farm isn't half bad.⁸

The author's choice of this quote stresses the idea that farming is a difficult but noble pursuit. This farmer, unpolished but straightforward, stands for the profession at large and embodies the idealized view of working the land that dominated much of the early-twentieth-century vision of agricultural work.

Celebration of rural and small-town life was also an important subject of literature of the period. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, for instance, tells the story of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, a resolutely ordinary small town at the turn of the century. Although the play, which opened on Broadway in 1938, is set in a specific place and time, the narrative of life cycles, the minimal staging, and the continuous narration of the Stage Manager character were designed to remind audiences that the events taking place in Grover's Corners are universal.

Other prominent examples of literature with explicitly local themes include John Steinbeck's characterizations of denizens of Northern California, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, which were published in 1935 and 1945. And

⁸ Robert Wilder, "Connecticut Valley Yankee Farmer: M. T. Cragg - A son of generations of Connecticut Valley farmers," January 13, 1939, in "American life histories: manuscripts from the Federal writers project, 1936-1940," Library of Congress. memory.LOC.gov. Accessed April 21, 2004.

Oklahoma!, by Rodgers and Hammerstein, which was originally titled *Away We Go*, opened on Broadway in March of 1943, shortly after the end of the Precisionist period of this study.

Similar explorations were also taking place in dance. In May 1941, choreographer Sophie Maslow presented her vision of the American “folk” in her dance *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Maslow based her vision of migrant farmers on newspaper reports about the dust bowl and John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. The dance, which presented dancers in the guise of migrant workers, proposed that the destitute farmer represented the bedrock of American democracy.⁹

Aaron Copland, who had ties to the Stieglitz circle, created his best-known compositions during the same general period, from about 1938 to 1945. The Paris-trained composer gained his fame by creating music from distinctively American sources. He brought the myth of the American Wild West to high art ballet, completing *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo* in 1938 and 1942, respectively. *Billy the Kid* even includes a portion titled “Honky Tonk Interlude.” In 1939, Copland composed the score for the film adaptation of Steinbeck’s novella, *Of Mice and Men*, and the next year, he composed the score for *Our Town*. The title of *Fanfare for the Common Man*, commissioned by

⁹ Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 146. Joshua Perelman brought Maslow’s dance and this source to my attention.

the Cincinnati Symphony in 1943, exemplifies his role in this period of examination of the history of ordinary life in America.

Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning ballet commissioned in 1943 for Martha Graham's dance company, quite famously used the melody from the Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts." The ballet's narrative concerns a wedding in rural Pennsylvania. In her correspondence with Copland about the project, Martha Graham noted that the ballet's set should include "A Shaker rocking chair with a bone-like simplicity of line."¹⁰

Copland left his composition untitled until shortly before the ballet's premiere, when he took "Appalachian Spring" from Hart Crane's poem *The Bridge* (the passage actually refers to a water source rather than the season):

O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge;
Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends
And northward reaches in that violet wedge
Of Adirondacks!¹¹

In his introduction to the collected poems of Hart Crane, Waldo Frank described the poet as perpetuating a culture of agrarian America, a culture Frank described as originating in ancient Mediterranean civilizations and carried to America via the Puritans. Crane, he argued, embodied this culture

¹⁰ Martha Graham, script for "House of Victory," sent to Copland, 16 May 1943, Copland Collection, Library of Congress. Quoted in Gail Levin and Judith Tick, *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2000), 99.

¹¹ Hart Crane, "The Bridge," in *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Liveright, 1933), 20.

in the modern, industrialized world.¹² Frank emphasizes Crane's Americanness: "His parents . . . were of the Pioneer stock that trekked in covered wagons from New England to the Western Reserve." He also stresses Crane's wide reading in American sources, including Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Sherwood Anderson. Frank also notes that Crane had experienced manual labor in the Cleveland munitions plant: "He loved machines, the earth-tang of the workers."¹³

"Appalachian Spring" was not the first occasion Crane's and Copland's work intersected. In November 1924, Crane was invited to read his work at a reception hosted by Paul Rosenfeld; those present included, in addition to Copland (who performed his own composition), Stieglitz, O'Keeffe, and Strand.¹⁴ Crane had met Stieglitz by April 1923 at an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs at the Anderson Galleries. Crane was particularly drawn to a Lake George photograph by Stieglitz, *Gable and Apples* (figure 69, 1922, National Gallery of Art), depicting the family farmhouse.¹⁵

The notion of a regional and local identity as expressed through architecture was promoted and discussed at length by Lewis Mumford in

¹² Frank (1933), vii-ix.

¹³ Frank (1933), xi-xii.

¹⁴ Clive Fisher, *Hart Crane: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 239.

¹⁵ Hart Crane to Stieglitz, 4 July 1923, quoted in *O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane*, ed. Langdon Hammer and Brom Weber (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997), 156.

Sticks and Stones (1924). In the book, Mumford bemoans the lack of stylistic differences across geographical areas in the United States. The standardized materials, patterns, and plans that he saw as dominating American architecture resulted in the creation of monotonous spaces. In particular, Mumford takes aim at the use of past architectural models and tropes—of Greek and Renaissance styles, especially—for contemporary building types. When modern buildings are dressed in a retardataire style, “form and function are too far divorced . . . to permit the growth of an architecture which will proceed on all fours in houses and public buildings, and factories and barns; moreover, there are too many new structures in the modern world which the builders of Rome or the Renaissance have not even dimly anticipated.”¹⁶ Instead, Mumford argues that the daily needs of contemporary buildings call for different models. One such model, he argues, is “mechanical architecture.” The kinds of buildings represented by Sheeler and O’Keeffe could be aptly described as mechanical architecture. Mechanical architecture is effective for structures without stylistic precedents, including subways, modern schools, and—relevant to Precisionist subjects—factories and grain elevators. Mechanical architecture, he argues, is functional but not yet well developed—its proper application will take time.¹⁷ Mumford also decries the failure to use local materials, such as limestone and

¹⁶ Mumford, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

granite, in favor of the perceived grandeur of other building materials, such as imported marble. Appropriating materials and styles from distant places and eras and then using them in a modern context is an act of imperialism.

Mumford's argument quite cogently describes the philosophical underpinnings of the Precisionist vernacular architecture images. The rural buildings the artists chose are designed in keeping with their quotidian, practical uses. Mumford argues that these buildings, with new uses for a new era, should be architecturally distinct, free from the precedents of other times and places. In fact, the Precisionist artists almost never depicted courthouses with Greek temple fronts or banks styled after Renaissance palazzos. Demuth's work is the clearest exception. His views of downtown Lancaster buildings regularly incorporate older historical styles, such as the ionic columns visible in *After Sir Christopher Wren* (figure 70, 1920, The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

O'Keeffe had close connections to several places, documented in the architecture in her work. Chronologically, the first was the area around Lake George, New York. O'Keeffe first visited the Stieglitz family compound in the summer of 1918, shortly after she moved to New York City from Texas and began her romantic relationship with Stieglitz. O'Keeffe had been to the area at least once before; as the recipient of the Art Students League Still Life Scholarship she spent the summer of 1908 at the League's Outdoor School at Lake George. By the time O'Keeffe began summering with the Stieglitzes at

their farm a decade later, the area was already well established as a tourist destination. In the nineteenth century, the lake was accessible from New York City by steamboat up the Hudson River to Albany; trains and stagecoach would take visitors to Lake George via Saratoga Springs. In 1882, the trip was made much easier and faster by the extension of railroad lines that brought visitors all the way to the town of Lake George.¹⁸ Amenities for tourists developed very quickly. The Hudson Day Line, a steamship company, advertised daily trips from New York City north on the Hudson with connections to Lake George resorts.¹⁹ Grand hotels were built along the shores in the last decades of the nineteenth century, including the Fort William Henry Hotel and the Lake House. Indeed, as early as 1870, an almanac of northern New York counties declared that Caldwell “is the annual resort of great numbers of tourists and pleasure seekers.”²⁰

These visitors generally represented the upper echelons of society. Regular society reports appeared in the newspapers of other larger cities. In the first summer that O’Keeffe spent at the Stieglitz family compound, the

¹⁸ *Warren County: A History and Guide*, Writers’ Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of New York (Glens Falls, N.Y.: Warren County Board of Supervisors, 1942), 158; and William Howard Brown, ed., *History of Warren County, New York* (Board of Supervisors of Warren County, 1963), 211.

¹⁹ For instance, see advertisement, *New York Times*, 18 September 1918, 18. Caldwell was the first name for the town; it was officially renamed Lake George in 1962. *History of Warren County*, 35, 207.

²⁰ *The Farmers’ and County Merchants’ Almanac and Ready Reference Book* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen & Sons, 1870), 113.

New York Times reported how the summer residents of Lake George celebrated Independence Day.²¹ The *Washington Post* announced in October 1918 that members of one family “have returned from their summer home on Lake George, New York, where they have been since early spring.” And a few months earlier, a Miss Nanny Miner was “spending some time” at Lake George.²²

One guidebook emphasized the appeal of the town of Lake George:

It is a comely village awakened to the newer life of thrift and enterprise in place of the slumbrous past, with a growing civic pride and independence in its modern ways and belongings, yet delightful in its combination of the old and new and restful in its shaded streets and beautiful mountain setting.²³

In broad terms, this increase in tourism in the area replaced farming. In 1870, nearly twenty years before Edward Stieglitz bought his property, the census recorded for the first time a decline in the population of adjacent Saratoga County (home to popular tourist site Saratoga Springs). Despite a small spike in this number later in the century—as jobless town dwellers tried to support themselves on the land—the standard of living for farmers decreased by 1920.

²¹ “The Day at Lake George,” *New York Times*, 5 July 1918, 9.

²² “Society at Richmond,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 1918, E10.

²³ S. R. Stoddard, *Lake George and Lake Champlain* (Glens Falls, N.Y.: S. R. Stoddard, 1910), 31.

“By the turn of the twentieth century, agriculture was a declining industry in Saratoga County, both absolutely and relative to manufacturing.”²⁴

A 1942 guide to Warren County was compiled by employees of the Works Progress Administration’s Writers’ Program. The guide noted that some rural towns had lost more than half their populations, although there was a slight increase in rural residents from 1930 to 1935, which probably reflected the Depression, as some former city residents tried their hand at farming.²⁵ The guide describes the composition of the town of Bolton, near the Stieglitz property:

. . . most of its lakeshore not pre-empted by estates of the wealthy is occupied by hotels, summer camps, cabin colonies and state campsites. There is fertile farmland high up on the mountainsides and along the Schroon River but only a small part of it is worked. Most of Bolton’s 1,310 permanent inhabitants live along the shores of Lake George and nearly all of them depend on their livelihood upon attracting visitors they serve not only during the summer but increasingly at other seasons.²⁶

An offshoot of this kind of tourism was the reuse of farm buildings to house tourists. This trend was described in the personal account of writer Kate Sanborn, whose 1891 book *Adopting an Abandoned Farm* details her rental

²⁴ G. Terry Sharrer, “Farming in Saratoga County, 1860–1920,” *The Grist Mill* 14 (winter 1980), n.p.

²⁵ *Warren County: A History and Guide*, 107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

of a farmhouse in rural Massachusetts and her subsequent efforts to manage the land. Her book begins with a quote from Cicero: "I have now come to this farmer's life, with which I am exceedingly delighted, and which seems to me to belong especially to the life of a wise man."²⁷ This citation validates her project with the imprimatur of classical antiquity, while at the same time wryly commenting on her humorous misadventures, which are anything but wise.

She pokes fun at her foibles as a city transplant, ignorant of managing life in the country. One such account is a neighbor's response to Sanborn's problem of her recently purchased ducks producing no eggs for sale: "Dear Madam: the reason your ducks won't lay is because they're too old to live and the biggest part of 'em is drakes."²⁸ While most of the book is humorous, she does acknowledge the difficulty of farming life and attempts to dispel the stereotype of the agricultural laborer: "the phlegmatic, overworked, horny-handed tillers of the soil are no more alike than Fenimore Cooper's handsome, romantic, noble, and impressive red man of the forest and the actual Sioux or Apache, as regarded by the cowboy of the West." Sanborn continues, acknowledging the economic shift that made her rural tenancy possible: "it's all work, with no play and no proper pay, for Western

²⁷ Cicero is quoted in Kate Sanborn, *Adopting an Abandoned Farm* (New York: D. Appleton, 1891), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

competition now prevents all chance of decent profits.”²⁹ Sanborn’s book thus aptly summarizes the trend that brought the Stieglitzes—and O’Keeffe—to a formerly productive farm.

O’Keeffe’s other major barn series was also set in an area historically dominated by agriculture and increasingly turning to tourism for support—the Gaspé Peninsula. O’Keeffe traveled the Gaspé in 1932; her companion was Stieglitz’s niece, Georgia Englehard. Lisa Mintz Messinger has argued that O’Keeffe was inspired to travel there by the example of Paul Strand, who visited and photographed the area in the late 1920s.³⁰

Strand made two trips to the Gaspé Peninsula: in 1929 with his first wife, Rebecca Salsbury, and in 1936 on his honeymoon with his second wife, Virginia Stevens. He produced series of photographs from each visit, which Naomi Rosenblum argues “create a telling sense of place, physically and psychologically.”³¹ While the specifics of his itineraries are unclear, during his 1929 visit he traveled by car and probably stayed at inns and hotels in the more remote parts of the region, including the towns of Percé, Rivière au Reynard, and Trois Rivières.³² The titles of the photographs, such as *Percé Beach*, *Gaspé*, and *Gulf of the St. Lawrence, Gaspé*, identify locations in the less-

²⁹ Ibid., 109.

³⁰ Lisa Mintz Messinger, *Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 30.

³¹ Naomi Rosenblum, “Paul Strand: the early years, 1910–1932,” (Ph.D. diss., the City University of New York, 1978), 149.

³² Ibid., 158.

touristed northern and eastern sides of the peninsula. The buildings depicted are not exclusively barns; unlike O’Keeffe, Strand extended his subject matter to include most of the structures he was likely to find in the area: churches, houses, fishing shacks. And unlike O’Keeffe’s closely cropped barn paintings, many of his views depict much broader scenes. The barns that do appear in the photographs, however, are consistent with those that O’Keeffe painted. They are low, white horizontal structures, probably only a single story tall, with gently peaked roofs—which certainly held some hay, though perhaps less than the Lake George buildings would have. In *Fishing Village, Gulf of the St. Lawrence, Gaspé* (figure 71, 1929), for instance, the barns in the lower right foreground appear to be the same size or smaller than the dark house beyond them. Architecturally, they are severe, with few lean-tos or ells attached. The dark shingled roofs meet the pale horizontal siding of the rectangular buildings without embellishment.

The structures in Strand’s photographs appear somewhat more tidy and better kept than the Lake George barns in the Stieglitz photographs. There seem to be fewer broken windows and loose boards. In *White Shed* (figure 72, 1929), the buildings are neatly aligned with each other in a series of interlocking triangles and rectangles. Their siding is crisply paralleled, and the lines of the roofs are straight and unbowed. The only suggestion of wear is on the planks of the siding in the rectangular building just behind the white shed, where the wood appears somewhat more weathered. The diagonal line

of the fence in the foreground disrupts the rigid geometry of the buildings, but it, too, is in good shape; its suggestion of slight disorder is a compositional device that enlivens the arrangement of shapes, rather than a comment on any dilapidation in the scene. This depiction of buildings in good condition may suggest that the Canadian buildings were in more regular use than were the largely abandoned—at least for intensive farming—structures at Lake George. Consistent with the Precisionist project of depicting vernacular architecture—and with O’Keeffe’s and Stieglitz’s images at Lake George—is the lack of “modern” conveniences in Strand’s photographs. There are horses, one laboring, the other at pasture, but no autos or mechanized equipment.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Gaspé Peninsula became an increasingly popular tourist destination for both Canadians and United States citizens. Its development roughly paralleled that of the Lake George area, although it occurred a bit later; luxury travel featuring hunting and fishing became available in the late nineteenth century, and waves of tourism following the arrival of the railroad in 1902 and again in 1911 led to the development of elaborate resort hotels.³³ But the Gaspasian inhabitants greatly expanded amenities for tourists in the 1920s. New roads begun in the early 1920s replaced the existing thoroughfares, which were typically

³³ Mark Desjardins et al., *Histoire de la Gaspésie* (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1999), 537.

glorified trails, impassable during bad weather. In particular, the so-called Perron Boulevard, technically Highway Six, which opened in the fall of 1928, connected the circumference of the peninsula and made tourism significantly easier.³⁴ The creation of more inns, restaurants, and garages accompanied this trend; regular bus service connecting the area's main towns and more extensive postal service followed. At the same time, car ownership among Gaspasians increased greatly. In the town of Gaspé, at the easternmost tip of the peninsula, auto ownership increased 169 percent between 1926 and 1930.³⁵ In the second decade of the twentieth century, the Gaspé was more accessible to ordinary American visitors rather than strictly limited to the very wealthy who visited the region in the mid-nineteenth century. Accordingly, travel agencies offered trips, including summer cruises to the area.³⁶ These promotions often appeared alongside offers for trips up the Hudson River to Lake George.³⁷

A 1928 article in the *New York Times* described how travel in Canada was becoming easier, with the introduction of good roads and procedures

³⁴ *The Gaspé Peninsula: History, Legend, Resources, Attractions* (Quebec: Department of Highways and Mines [Provincial Tourist Bureau], 1930), 24.

³⁵ Desjardins et al., 521–522.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 536–537.

³⁷ For instance, travel advertisements in the *New York Times*, 20 July 1927, 47.

making the border crossing simpler for visitors from the United States.³⁸ A pair of 1929 articles in the *New York Times* described the pleasures of a driving tour of the Gaspé area. The author describes the growth of the region as a comfortable, if rustic, resort. Interestingly, in his articles, the author emphasizes the distinctive qualities of the Gaspé region: "It belongs to the Province of Quebec, but it is really. . . 'a province within the province.' It has a quality of its own, in scenery as well as in the character of its French and English settlements. Its people seem removed from the rest of Canada, as well as the rest of the world. They are Gaspasians and the peninsula is theirs."³⁹

Integral to the residents' peculiarity is their isolation, the author explains, giving the area a particular rustic, almost backward charm. He notes that many inhabitants do not speak English and instead "talk the French of their ancestors from Normandy and seem to be dwelling, in mind at least, in their original fatherland."⁴⁰ Wooden covered bridges—newly built—dot the landscape, in opposition to the growing use of metal and concrete spans in other areas, and "all the bicycles that went out of fashion

³⁸ James Montagues, "Canada Opened by Good Roads," *New York Times*, 24 June 1928, XX12.

³⁹ James O. Spearing, "At the Wheel: Around the Gaspé Peninsula," *New York Times*, 13 October 1929, XX16.

⁴⁰ James O. Spearing, "At the Wheel: Scenery and Spelling," *New York Times*, 27 October 1929, XX10.

twenty-five years ago seem to have been sent to Gaspé.”⁴¹ Spearing concludes that the old and new meet in the region; homemade ox-carts and “Gallic French” coexist with Victrolas and imported California oranges. The contradictions described here are the same ones considered by Precisionist artists in their modernist images of historic buildings. There exists in both a desire to preserve the elements that make a place unique.

In 1936, a Gaspsian woman, in describing the area, despaired that the more isolated north shore of the region might lose its character through modernization:

There time to a large degree has stood still and the old habits and customs of their ancestors of centuries ago have been maintained. How much longer will they prevail? It is not difficult to hazard a guess for, with roads opened up, motor cars, electricity, and the radio, the metamorphosis will soon be complete.⁴²

As late as 1949 an author called the region “as primitive as any twentieth-century community can be.”⁴³

Indeed, O’Keeffe seems to have appreciated the simplicity described in these accounts. She recalled in her 1976 semi-autobiographical publication that she and Englehard drove through Quebec to reach the area. “The

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Olive Willett Smith, *Gaspé: The Romantique* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1936), 17–18.

⁴³ Blodwen Davies, *Gaspé: Land of History and Romance* (New York: Greenberg, 1949), 36.

country became very interesting—farming land with well-to-do Victorian houses usually a miserable dingy color but with beautifully simple long, low barns painted white. The roofs of the barns were sometimes shingled but most of them had black tar paper that often reflected the blue of the sky. Sometimes the roofs were dark red.”⁴⁴ In an earlier interview, she noted that “The southern side of the St. Lawrence River was lined with hideous houses and beautiful barns. The barns looked old, as if they belonged to the land, while the houses looked like bad accidents.”⁴⁵ O’Keeffe apparently did not care for the “hideous” houses in the area for subject matter either; they do not appear among her surviving artworks. Few accounts describing O’Keeffe’s Canadian visit exist, but the description above indicates that the artist visited the more rugged, isolated northern side of the peninsula—the southern bank of the St. Lawrence—and that she avoided the peninsula’s gentler southern shore, which featured the grander resort hotels and closer connections to the “modern” world.

O’Keeffe seems to have appreciated the simplicity of the lives she saw in the region. Describing a home where she and Englehard stayed, O’Keeffe recalled that the “kitchen was the principal room of the house. On one side it had a fine stove with very fancy trimmings. On the other side was a long line of rocking chairs with a spittoon between each two. At one end—over a

⁴⁴ O’Keeffe (1976), n.p.

⁴⁵ O’Keeffe quoted in Kuh, 202.

cupboard—was a long high board for cutting bread.”⁴⁶ Her paintings from the region reflect this simplicity. Although O’Keeffe noticed the shingles and tar paper coverings of the barn roofs, she did not delineate these details in the paintings. Instead, the roofs and walls are smooth, almost unmodulated, planes of color.

Henry McBride admired the power of the structures, noting the “exquisite precision with which these barns are placed upon the canvas . . . the mechanics [of the painting process] have been so successfully concealed.”⁴⁷ Indeed, as Messinger has argued, they appear more austere, more spare, than the buildings at Lake George.⁴⁸ The Gaspé barn paintings, such as *White Barn* (figure 26), provide almost no clues to topographic context. With the exception of low trees in the background of a few paintings and worn patches of earth before some of the barn doors, no hills, trees, or roads are visible. And while doors and windows appear in the barns’ walls, almost all of them are solid squares of paint, without suggesting any depth to the space inside, or clues to the barns’ context. The smaller doors used by farmers and the small windows often located adjacent to them offer some detail; some windows have panes, and some of the doors have slats and/or triangular lintels. The big doors used for wagons or livestock are the most

⁴⁶ O’Keeffe (1976), n.p.

⁴⁷ McBride (1933), 10.

⁴⁸ Messinger, 94.

disconcertingly blank. Since they give no clues to the interior of the buildings, these blank entrances also deny information to the function of the buildings; there is little actual evidence of labor.

The two exceptions, *White Barn with Cart* (figure 73, 1932, private collection) and *Stables* (figure 74, 1932, Detroit Institute of Arts) incorporate a cart and a buggy or wagon, respectively. Both conveyances are visible through doors in the right side of the barn, and both are obscured by the door frames. A small hillock or bush also blocks the view of the cart in *White Barn with Cart*. That O'Keeffe chose old-fashioned vehicles may be significant. Cars did exist in Gaspé by 1932—O'Keeffe herself drove there in one—but they don't appear in the buildings. Consistent with other Precisionists' work, in these images of vernacular architecture, O'Keeffe focuses on the historic at the expense of the new.

The sharp contrast of the buildings' all-white walls against the bright blue sky emphasizes the stark, low, horizontal shapes of the structures. The horizontal canvases mimic the low, broad shapes of the buildings to the point that the structures fill almost the entire picture plane in every painting. Daniel Catton Rich wrote in his essay for the 1943 O'Keeffe exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago that the artist "found starkness and silence even in white Canadian barns where the utter reduction of the object to a few cleanly

cut but sensitized forms is as remarkable as the brilliantly controlled craftsmanship with which they are painted."⁴⁹

There may be a certain irony in the fact that the Precisionist artists worked in touristed areas. This choice reflects the areas' increased accessibility, but also the fact that the artists did not actually work the land. They were visitors, consciously choosing their rural subjects, but mostly (with the exception of O'Keeffe's connection to Wisconsin agriculture) not part of the areas' agricultural lives. They were part of the remaking of the farming landscape, one that turned the farm from the site of work to an artifact, to be documented and thus preserved. The artists were weaving simple agriculture and labor into the fabric of modern cultural identity.

Perhaps related to the increased travel to the Gaspé was the fact that unlike the rest of the Canadian provinces, Quebec never fully adopted the prohibition against alcohol. Canadian prohibition roughly paralleled that in the United States, from about 1917 into the 1920s. In early 1921, the Quebec government began selling alcohol—at very high prices—in state-sponsored stores. Thus, in the Gaspé, the legal opportunity existed for alcohol purchases that did not exist in the United States.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Daniel Catton Rich, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1943), 32.

⁵⁰ Robert A. Campbell, "'Profit Was Just a Circumstance': The evolution of Government Liquor Control in British Columbia, 1920–1988," in Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, ed., *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993), 173–174.

But the relative accessibility of alcohol alone certainly does not account for artists' interest in traveling as far as the remote Gaspé; after all, liquor could be found through many channels in the United States. The very remoteness of the peninsula may have been an important part of its appeal. Further away from the American urban centers, the Gaspé may have had more exotic associations. The area's isolation and the French language of its inhabitants may have underscored outsiders' perception of its difference. This casting of the area as exotic lends it the appeal of primitivism, to which many modernists were drawn. The Gaspé, particularly the northern shore that Strand and O'Keeffe visited, offered a rugged, isolated alternative to the urbanized milieu, discussed in Chapter Two, that many in the avant-garde rejected.

The third site where O'Keeffe painted multiple images of barns is southern Wisconsin. Here the agricultural story was very different. O'Keeffe worked in the areas around the town of Sun Prairie, where the O'Keeffe family had an approximately 600-acre farm until 1902, and where the artist's sister, Catherine Klenert, lived as an adult.⁵¹ When O'Keeffe traveled to the area, she did so as a family member, not as a tourist. Indeed, the area did not (and still does not) rely on the level of tourism that the Lake George and the Gaspé regions experienced.

⁵¹ Catherine Klenert, interviewed by Laurie Lisle, 11 September 1977, audio cassette, Laurie Lisle research materials on O'Keeffe, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Two barn paintings from Wisconsin exist; both were the result of the visit to see relatives that the artist made in the summer of 1928. The larger of the two, *Red Barn* (figure 34), features a broad red building rendered with more detail than most of O’Keeffe’s architectural works. She depicts the main part of the building from the gable side; the steep angle of the roof is emphasized by its placement against the sky. The lower level of the barn, composed of stones delineated by the artist, is partially excavated into the earth, as the grass slope in the foreground and the stone ramp to the second floor suggest. The el-shaped extension at the left side of the painting, with its door opened to the fenced-in barnyard and windows beyond, was almost certainly used for housing livestock, probably horses or cows. This barn is large, certainly bigger than those in the Gaspé and possibly larger than the Lake George structures. The building’s size, as well as the silo adjacent to it, identify the structure as a Midwestern barn. As discussed in Chapter One, barns in the Midwest were generally larger and more likely to be accompanied by silos in the nineteenth-century than their Northeastern counterparts.

The second identified barn image from Wisconsin, painted during the same summer, offers a dramatically cropped view of a similar building, perhaps the same one. In this painting, *Red Barn in Wheatfield* (figure 75, 1928, Georgia O’Keeffe Museum), O’Keeffe depicts only the very top of the building’s roof; the triangular gable is cut off by a gold swath of landscape in

the foreground. The effect is as if the barn is glimpsed from over a hill. The red of the building and its stark lines make it an imposing structure. This barn, however, may dominate its surroundings the least of any in O'Keeffe's oeuvre. The curve of wheat (an important part of local agricultural production), which renders most of the building invisible, shares equal billing with the architecture. Sarah Peters states that O'Keeffe painted another barn image, a 35-foot-long mural based on *Red Barn*. The location of this work, however, is unknown and there exists no further information.⁵²

Charles C. Eldredge has suggested that O'Keeffe had a "sentimental" interest in the barn motif, citing her recollections of life on her father's dairy farm. Elderfield notes that it "is significant that she returned to the subject at moments of personal distress," as when she returned to Wisconsin in 1928 and traveled to Canada in 1932.⁵³ In 1929, O'Keeffe herself noted that "the barn [in a 1928 painting] is a very healthy part of me . . . It is something that I know."⁵⁴ If Elderfield's suggestion is correct, then perhaps O'Keeffe's interest in things local, such as the shape of a particular barn or barn type, is linked to her notion of comfort or home.

Sheeler also had a deep connection to a particular building. In about 1910, Sheeler found the eighteenth-century farmhouse in Doylestown,

⁵² Peters, 359 n.22.

⁵³ Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Abrams, 1991), 56.

⁵⁴ O'Keeffe is quoted in Eldredge, 56.

Pennsylvania, that he and Morton Schamberg went on to use as a summer and weekend retreat for many years. The circumstances around the house's rental connected Sheeler with a remarkable example of both pursuing and valorizing local history. Through the rental of the Worthington house, Sheeler met archaeologist Henry Chapman Mercer, a wealthy native of Doylestown who collected pre-industrial tools and handicrafts of the region and promoted their preservation. Mercer gave his collection of more than 30,000 artifacts to the Bucks County Historical Society in 1916, and the collection was on display from that time.⁵⁵

An article from 1925 that Mercer saved among the clippings he collected articulated the educational purpose of his zeal for preservation:

The past is no longer a vague dream [,] it is seen to be full of men and women and children, simple souls who laid the heroic foundations of the America of today. . . . Example is better than precept and no teacher in Doylestown, or any other place, can drive in American history like those relics; there is a peculiar message in an object which is superior to a lesson in words, and this is the educational power of what is termed Americana.⁵⁶

Mercer also attempted to revive a mostly lost craft. Fascinated by the pottery making of the Pennsylvania Germans, Mercer designed a kiln in the late

⁵⁵ Lucic (1997), 17–18.

⁵⁶ Robert Coope, "The Historical Building," 4 March 1925. Otherwise unidentified article, "Museum Notes" book of clippings collected by Henry Chapman Mercer, Bucks County Historical Society Library, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

1890s to keep the art form alive; the early tiles he designed were based on Moravian designs (of the Pennsylvania German religious sect) and generalized Pennsylvania Dutch designs. Mercer's project, the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, still stands in Doylestown very near the Worthington house that Sheeler rented.

Sheeler would have known the tile works and Mercer's enormous home in the center of town from his many years there, but the artist chose other buildings as subjects. Beginning in about 1917, Sheeler created numerous paintings, drawings, and photographs of Bucks County barns, and he worked on the theme into the 1940s. Whether Sheeler's choice of subject matter is directly indebted to his friendship with Mercer is uncertain, but Mercer himself sketched barns in pencil and pastel.⁵⁷ Documentation does exist, however, of Sheeler's and Mercer's shared interest in preserving the Worthington house in as authentic a condition as possible.⁵⁸

As Karen Lucic has observed, correspondence between Sheeler and Mercer elucidates the young artist's devotion to authenticity. In 1924, Mercer wrote to Sheeler regarding the unusual latch on the front door of the house: "If you agreed I would have the latch copied exactly, put the original in the Museum and the copy on the door so that in case of latch thieves who might

⁵⁷ These drawings are among the Henry Chapman Mercer Papers, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The undated drawings are very detailed representations of the buildings.

⁵⁸ Lucic (1997), 18.

slip over there any night and help themselves as the craze for antiques increases, we would be protected." Sheeler declined: "the chief reason for my enthusiasm for the little house is that it remains so nearly intact, even to such details as the ironwork."⁵⁹ Such obsession with detail echoes Sheeler's discomfort with the re-creation of Colonial Williamsburg, as noted in Chapter Three. Sheeler's photograph *Buggy (Interior, Bucks County Barn)* (figure 76, circa 1916–1917, Lane Collection) demonstrates an interest in historic equipment. The silhouetted buggy reveals the wide wheels and a glimpse of its axles. In the left foreground, edges of other pieces of equipment are crisply defined.

This area of Pennsylvania was well known to artists other than Sheeler. Easily accessible from Philadelphia and New York City, Bucks County proved an appealing rural retreat, and the town of New Hope, on the Delaware River and a few miles from Doylestown, was a major art colony for the area and attracted a group of artists working in an Impressionist manner, which included Edwin Redfield and Daniel Garber. Somewhat removed from this center, Doylestown was an unusual choice for Sheeler and Schamberg.

⁵⁹ Henry Chapman Mercer to Charles Sheeler, 19 March 1924; Sheeler to Mercer, 26 March 1924, Bucks County Historical Society, quoted in Lucic (1997), 38. After Sheeler moved out of the house in 1926, the lock was removed and placed in the Bucks County Historical Society.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Hamilton Easter Field developed a summer school in Ogunquit, Maine. He built artists' studios in Ogunquit from parts of old barns, a choice that certainly reflected a degree of frugality. But this choice also suggests an interest in local tradition and hand-craftsmanship.⁶⁰ Artist Elsa Rogo, wife of Stefan Hirsch, recalled that while overseeing the building of the studios, Field "saw to it that [the studios] conformed with the fine simplicity of the fishermen's huts both in the lovely gray tone and good proportionings, for he revered the nobility and grandeur which he felt was innate in these Maine natives."⁶¹

Paul Strand's and Nancy Newhall's *Time in New England* project used texts written by authors from the area or based on regional themes, including a Massachusetts blacksmith's diary, an excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal, and Winslow Homer's letters from Maine. The focus of the book, clearly, was local. The virtues celebrated by these texts, and in Strand's photographs, included honesty, thrift, industry, and straightforward simplicity. Interestingly, the images accompanying the texts uniformly depict historic structures. The houses, barns, headstones, and natural elements (rock formations, enormous tree trunks) do not allude to the contemporary world. The implication, then, is that the best parts of the region, the attributes defining it, are located in its past.

⁶⁰ Bolger, 90.

⁶¹ Elsa Rogo, "Foreword," in *Hamilton Easter Field Foundation Collection of Painting and Sculpture, Sponsored by the College Art Association [1934–1935]*: n.p.

Strand first proposed that his New England portrait take a somewhat different form, and he applied for a Guggenheim Foundation grant to fund it.

His statement for the 1943 application explained his goals:

This might be described as a portrait of a particular American environment in terms of the character of the land itself, the people who live in it, the things which they have made and built. . . . I feel it is important that artists who are not being used in the war effort should continue to function by recording (in all mediums) the essential character of those American traditions we are trying to preserve.⁶²

Strand's proposal clearly appeals to wartime patriotism. Importantly, however, it also links the buildings in his photographs to the land of that specific area, indicating that the New England landscape is worth celebrating as a unique and valuable entity. Strand was also interested in closely documenting an even smaller area. According to John Rohrbach, Strand explored creating a photographic project documenting all of the people in a single village. This interest was prompted by his appreciation for *Spoon River Anthology*, Edgar Lee Masters's 1914–1916 poem, in which 244 residents of a Western Illinois town "speak" their epitaphs from the grave. Masters's work is far from a simplistic celebration of a bucolic small town; the characters

⁶² Paul Strand to Henry Allen Moe (Secretary General of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation), 15 October 1943, quoted in John Rohrbach, in Stange, 161.

from all walks of life—a judge, a prostitute, a librarian—show a complex, discordant view of American experience.

In the poem, a close, cropped view of a particular place stands for a larger whole. The same idea characterizes the relationships of Precisionist buildings to their locales; the shape of a single building suggests a broader context of local history and tradition. Finally, while the examples of rural vernacular architecture found in Precisionist images meet Mumford's call for purposeful design, they do not strictly adhere to his promotion of the idea of site-specificity. Mumford's enthusiasm for local materials and awareness of place is essential to most of his arguments; but the buildings in the Precisionist works dominate the scenes. In the majority of cases, a structure occupies most of the picture plane, often filling it to the edges. So while the buildings do reflect local traditions in their designs, they do not explicitly address or document those traditions. The barns and houses inhabit essentially undefined spaces, with little evidence of the physical or cultural landscapes. The only concrete indications of their local or regional environments are the shapes of the buildings themselves, which reveal the agricultural needs of the structures' creators. This prioritization of structure over the more minute details of local life is consistent with the Precisionist project in general; these artists did not make their careers from documenting the human condition or the nuances of daily living (unlike some of their peers, discussed in the next chapter). They tended to focus on the man-made

environment, rather than the people in it. Perhaps the Precisionist artists were uninterested in explicit depiction of the towns or farmscapes in which their vernacular architecture buildings stood. They may have found the shapes of the structures the most compelling feature and the markers of regional identity may have been secondary.

Chapter Five: Small Towns, Agriculture, and the Lure of Nostalgia

The impulse to turn to local traditions, experiences, and iconography for valuable sources and subject matter was not limited to Precisionist artists. Others in the visual arts responded to the appeals for defining local and national identity during the interwar period, particularly toward its end. Many of these artists responded to those calls by depicting small-town and rural America—and often, the buildings they found there.

This chapter explores how the Precisionist images of rural America differ from depictions of the same subjects by other artists. Study of the work of Regionalist artists, the Federal Art Projects of the New Deal, and the individual oeuvres of Edward Hopper and Walker Evans offers a different perspective on the Precisionists' own project. Furthermore, this chapter will consider the apparent dichotomy between the Precisionists' urban/industrial subject matter and their rural subject matter by investigating different approaches to the idea of the pastoral. Finally, I will consider the overarching idea of nostalgia—the human impulse to long for a past time or place—and its role in the artwork in this study.

In the 1930s, Regionalist artists came to prominence for their treatment of rural subjects. This group was identified in the now-famous *Time* magazine cover story of December 1934; Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart

Curry, and Grant Wood came to be identified as its main adherents.¹ In general, these artists were committed to employing their art to find renewal and validity in the American frontier, and particularly in American agricultural life.² In a 1934 lecture originally presented to the John Reed Club of New York City, Benton stated that “art... is a local phenomenon—to be a living factor it must meet and know directly the conditions of its locality—it must be the mirror held up to life—capable of being emotionally participated in by the locality. It is possible for an artist to be born in one place and take root in another—but that taking root is essential if his work is to function socially.”³ Grant Wood’s statement that “a true art expression must grow up from the soil itself,”⁴ also echoes the calls for local forms of art discussed in Chapter Four. In his important study of 1930s American Scene painting, Matthew Baigell argues that in the contemporaneous social sciences, Regionalism “did not imply a retreat into local archaeology, antiquarianism,

¹ “Art: U.S. Scene,” *Time* 24 (24 December 1934): 24–27.

² Sources on Regionalism include Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Praeger Publishers, 1974); James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³ Thomas Hart Benton, “Art and Nationalism,” *Modern Monthly* 8 (May 1934): 235–236.

⁴ Grant Wood is quoted in F[rederic] A[llen] Whiting, Jr., “Stone, Steel, and Fire: Stone City Comes to Life,” *American Magazine of Art* 25 (December 1932): 337.

or the maintenance of outmoded ways of living. In part, the movement was a rational approach to the utilization of resources across the nation, in part a reaction to the dehumanization and standardization of industrial and urban society."⁵

The ideals of Regionalist art sound strikingly like the broader cultural themes, discussed in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, that created the context for Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture. Clearly, however, the Regionalist work is quite different from that of the Precisionists. Regionalists generally chose a much wider view of their similar rural and agricultural subjects. In addition to depicting rural buildings, their work includes people, extensive backgrounds, and, simply, a broader context. These images generally suggest narratives, as in Curry's depiction of a religious rite in *Baptism in Kansas* (figure 77, 1928, Whitney Museum of American Art) and Joe Jones's depopulated, desiccated *American Farm* (figure 78, 1936, Whitney Museum of American Art).

However, a comparison of *Baptism in Kansas* with Sheeler's *Bucks County Barn* (figure 79, 1932, The Museum of Modern Art) reveals the differences between the Regionalists' and the modernists' approaches. While both depict farm buildings and equipment, the Curry painting is not about the structures per se. The buildings form the backdrop for the crowd attending the baptism. The steeper roof of Curry's barn and the water-

⁵ Baigell (1974), 43.

pumping windmill adjacent that lifts into the sky serve to mimic a church and steeple, an association underscored by the rays of light and religiously symbolic birds that emanate from the heavens at the same place. Whether this scene is read as a straightforward country anecdote or critique of rural religious practices, it certainly offers the viewer a narrative.⁶ In contrast, Sheeler's painting presents a barn from a similar angle, and also includes trees, equipment, and animals that provide a bit of context. But Sheeler does not offer us any people to create the story. Instead, the message offered, if any, is an appreciation of the building's volumes and planes, highlighted by the shadows of trees cast against their walls.

Some Regionalist images, however, do have a superficial resemblance to Precisionist images of rural life. Wood's lithograph, *In the Spring* (figure 80, 1939, Whitney Museum of American Art), for instance, presents a farmer standing with a shovel before orderly fields, a simplified barn, and a silo in the distance. There is no evidence of plows or other equipment in this scene, nor are there signs of the dust-bowl-making drought that in 1939 was a defining factor of agricultural life.⁷ But the rounded, well-tended fields, the livestock in the background at left, and, most importantly, the cleanly dressed farmer, with his hands on hips and a slight smile on his face, tell a different

⁶ For discussion of the painting's varied interpretations, see Dennis, 165–167.

⁷ Matthew Baigell, "The Vigor of Americanism," in Betsy Fahlman et al., *American Images: The SBC Collection of Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 30.

story. This image suggests the man's pride in successful cultivation of the land. It is this approach—one that conveys the artists' frank admiration and idealization of their subjects and ultimately communicates a message—that distinguishes Regionalist depictions of agricultural subjects from the Precisionist treatment of the themes.

Thomas Craven, Regionalism's most famous promoter, articulated the difference in a critique of Cubism:

Cubism erroneously presupposes that design is an end and not a means, and that all human attributes are irrelevant Cubism is the apotheosis of structure. It strips objects of all the features and characteristics with which the emotional life is inseparably connected, leaving only the denuded concepts of the physicist and mathematician. . . . [Cubists] have no experience that is worth communicating, or in plainer speech, nothing to say.⁸

Regionalists, he argued, have more to say. For instance, Benton's art reflects

The tumultuous forces of America, its manifold dissonances, and its social anarchy, [which] are perfectly expressed in the restless counterplay of his forms. The common criticism that his work is without poise or serenity is an unwitting affirmation of its truth, its connection with its time and place.⁹

⁸ Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), 499-500.

⁹ Thomas Craven, *Modern Art: the Men, the Movements, the Meaning*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1934; Garden City, New York: Halcyon House, 1950), 346.

Craven asserts that the engagement of contemporary life is the best way to create a truly American modern art; the United States borrows too much from “foreign sources,” a tendency that has stunted the growth of a native expression. Craven writes little about the Precisionist artists—he addresses only O’Keeffe’s flowers and leaves, and labels Sheeler’s art “alien in method and in point of view”—but he complements Stieglitz for bringing new art to the American public. Yet he found the effect of Stieglitz’s modernism on American artists “debilitating.”¹⁰ For Craven, the work of Precisionist artists was probably too close to European modernism, and certainly too far from portraying the disorder of everyday life, to meet with his approval. Craven’s distinctions thus serve to elucidate the differences between Precisionists and their realist contemporaries.

Interestingly, although Wood’s art differs from Sheeler’s in important ways, Wood demonstrated an attraction to local history that parallels Sheeler’s. In 1932, Wood designed a private house in Cedar Rapids and based his project on elements from and plans for mid-nineteenth-century Iowan buildings. After the completion of this house, he helped the owners fill it with local antiques. Many of these objects came from a local religious community in Amana, Iowa, which had a history of craftsmanship—a

¹⁰ Craven (1950), 315-316, 325.

description analogous to that of the Shakers.¹¹ In 1932 and 1933, Wood was involved in the founding and operation of a summer arts school and colony in the town of Stone City, Iowa, where students and teachers adapted a nineteenth-century building for their school.¹² In these activities, Wood quite clearly shared ideals with Sheeler, but his efforts took place nearly twenty years after Sheeler first began documenting the Worthington house and became involved with Doylestown's history. Wood's enthusiasm for things local, argues Wanda Corn, was a boosterism he felt compelled to follow in order to redeem the heartland—a way to mythologize Midwestern life and elevate it. In contrast, Sheeler appears to have been little interested in any myth of eastern Pennsylvania and, instead, more concerned with the materiality of the objects he depicted than with extensive explicit associations.

Other major examples of art strongly identified with agrarian subjects were the projects of the federal programs that were part of the New Deal. Like the programs that employed workers in many other professions during the Great Depression, these national projects were designed to keep visual artists employed. In keeping with the New Deal's goals of buoying public morale and keeping otherwise unoccupied people productive, many of the artworks created under the programs' auspices were explicitly intended to convey positive, admiring messages of ordinary people's work and daily

¹¹ Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Published for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts by Yale University Press, 1983), 37, 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39–40.

activities. As a result, everyday subjects and sights were commonly depicted. These subjects included scenes of life in cities, towns, and country.¹³

Particularly relevant to the themes of local identity that were of interest to O'Keeffe, Sheeler, and other Precisionist artists was the project organized by the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts to create murals for new post offices.¹⁴ Artists competed for mural commissions with subjects symbolizing the histories and activities of the local communities. Program administrator and painter Edward Bruce described the project's goal as "to develop local cultural interests throughout the country."¹⁵ Accordingly, the imagery in these post office murals varied widely, from the harvesting work in Charles W. Thwaite's *Threshing Barley* in Chilton, Wisconsin, to the crowded inhabitants of Kindred McLeary's *Lower East Side*, painted for the New York City Madison Square post office. While the exact subjects differed,

¹³ See, for instance, Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Records and Administration; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1969 and 1971); Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

¹⁴ The Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, later named the Section of Fine Arts and generally called "the Section," was among several federal agencies that coordinated art projects as part of the New Deal. The different programs are outlined in Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 6.

¹⁵ Edward Bruce is quoted in Park and Markowitz, 8.

the styles employed by the artists in the mural projects of the federal art programs were usually representational.¹⁶

Two Precisionist artists participated in this post office mural project. Niles Spencer created an unpopulated industrial panorama of railroad, factories, and barges for the Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, post office; and Edmund Lewandowski painted *Air Mail Service* for the building in Stoughton, Wisconsin. Both works have the hard edges and simplified forms of Precisionism but avoid extreme abstraction of their subjects. Louis Lozowick participated in a related project, the Treasury Relief Art Program, the Treasury Department's second project to employ artists. His two scenes of New York City were designed for the city's general post office.

In keeping with the regional and local nature of the projects, Section officials generally attempted to hire local artists. If an artist from a different part of the country received the commission, he or she was requested to visit the town or city for which the mural was intended and to consult with the postmaster and residents about appropriate subject matter.¹⁷ Because they were commissioned and their subject matter was intended to be guided by agency or local officials and citizens, and because they served a specific, explicit narrative purpose, these public projects were not entirely

¹⁶ An important exception was the design for the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, a modern twenty-building complex designed as workers' housing. The mural project included abstract work by Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron G. Browne, Balcomb Greene, and Stuart Davis.

¹⁷ Park and Markowitz, 10–14.

uninfluenced examples of modernist approaches to local identity. At the same time, however, their subjects do suggest the broader cultural context encouraging the exploration of local history, folklore, and everyday life.

Also related to the Precisionist rural vernacular images is the work of Edward Hopper, who famously portrayed city streets and isolated rural houses. Working in New York at the same time as the Precisionists, Hopper would have known their art through numerous routes. Hopper exhibited four etchings at the Downtown Gallery in December 1927, as part of the American Print Makers group¹⁸; in 1928, Juliana Force bought *Early Sunday Morning* for the Whitney Museum; and Forbes Watson wrote admiringly of the artist.

There are clear similarities between Hopper's work and the Precisionist project; his austere façades and buildings in empty landscapes are spare and precisely rendered. Furthermore, he omits figures in many of his works, concentrating instead on portraying buildings in space. But Hopper's work differs from the Precisionist architectural images in important ways. First, his style is more painterly and reveals his hand far more than the customarily smooth surfaces and clean edges that characterize the Precisionist work. A more important, albeit less quantifiable, distinction is the emotional tenor of the work. As Milton Brown observed in his early

¹⁸ Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 210.

survey of the era, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression*, “The America which Hopper paints is a bleak land. He finds no warmth in its streets, its houses, or its people, and the light with which he is so prodigal illuminates but never warms This is not a pretty side of American life.”¹⁹ Whether his scenes are inhabited by humans or not, there exists in most of them a psychological disquiet, an uneasy loneliness that the Precisionist artists do not explore.

Even when they are depopulated, Hopper’s scenes of buildings often indicate the human presence. In his iconic *Early Sunday Morning* (figure 81, 1930, Whitney Museum of American Art), for instance, the curtains in the windows are pulled closed to varying degrees, and although they are illegible, the signs painted on the windows at the street level clearly indicate that work is performed within. Furthermore, the long shadows of *Early Sunday Morning* and other works indicate the time of day, and his buildings set in landscapes usually include great swaths of hills and lawns. In this way, the artist tells the viewer that his scenes exist in a particular time and place, even if the exact locations are not made explicit.

Still, Hopper was leery of divulging too much information about the world depicted in his canvases. In an interview, he remarked on the title of *Early Sunday Morning*: “it wasn’t necessarily Sunday. That word was tacked on later by someone else.” He continued, “I don’t believe it’s important to

¹⁹ Brown (1955), 175.

know exactly" the specifics of a scene.²⁰ In fact, the composition originally had been titled *Seventh Avenue Shops*, an even more explicit (and ultimately rejected) title.²¹ Hopper noted about another work, "Any psychological idea will have to be supplied by the viewer."²²

Despite his protestations that his intentions were purely pictorial, Hopper's works suggest narratives; they give the viewer the sense that something has just happened or is about to happen. This distinguishes Hopper in a critical manner from the Precisionists, whose buildings appear more suspended in time.

Another American artist with thematic and stylistic ties with Precisionism was Walker Evans, whose cropped, flattened photographs reveal slices of ordinary American life. Images of buildings, such as *Westchester, New York, Farmhouse* (figure 82, 1931, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), are unsentimental, technically straightforward documents that resemble Precisionist photographers' work. Indeed, Evans and Sheeler were grouped together in at least one exhibition at Ayer Galleries (Ayer was the advertising firm that hired Sheeler for the River Rouge photograph commission) in Philadelphia in 1931. Evans also had a connection to Strand; both exhibited in a group show at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art

²⁰ Edward Hopper, quoted in Kuh, 134.

²¹ Gail Levin, *Hopper's Places* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 16.

²² Hopper, quoted in Kuh, 135.

in 1930.²³ But Evans may not have found Strand's architectural works important for his own development. Evans acknowledged Strand's work as influential but cited a figurative photograph as particularly significant. The photograph that Evans reported "excited me very much" was *Blind Woman* (1916), Strand's portrait of a New York City street beggar. Maria Morris Hambourg argues that Evans avoided mentioning the rest of Strand's oeuvre—including his images of architecture—in his later career, thus revealing his disapproval of it.²⁴ Hambourg notes that Evans's photographic process was different from that of Stieglitz and Strand, who labored with experimental techniques to create beautiful prints. Evans, on the other hand, chose to hide his skills in the darkroom in order to present a print that was as "straightforward, legible, and unremarkable as a ready-made print from the corner photo shop . . . he wanted the viewer to be directly confronted by the reality presented in the work and be unaware of the travail hidden within it."²⁵

Indeed, *Westchester, New York, Farmhouse* contains few of the modernist conventions of artifice. While the building is frontally located parallel to the

²³ Maria Morris Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," in *Walker Evans* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Princeton University Press, 2000), 18.

²⁴ Walker Evans is quoted in an interview with Paul Cummings, 13 October and 23 December 1971, 15. Archives of American Art and Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Hambourg, 22

²⁵ Hambourg, 25.

picture plane, like most of the Precisionists' buildings, it lies in the photograph's middle ground. The simple, unpretentious building is clearly modest, as are the Precisionist buildings. But what sets this rural vernacular image apart from the Precisionist project most clearly is the farmhouse's context. Evans offers a wealth of information about the building's surroundings, including a road, grass, and an old tree stump in the foreground. Most strikingly, he incorporates a truck, as well as a fence to the left of the structure, a stone wall on the hill behind, and numerous trees, many of which cast shadows on the house's walls. Also interesting are the curtains visible in every one of the building's windows. Like the curtains in Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, this element, combined with the truck prominently placed in front of the structure, hints at the human presence within this scene. No matter how spare the building or how stark the leafless trees appear, life takes place here. This fact may be the most important distinguishing characteristic of Evans's work compared with that of the Precisionists. Evans is generally concerned with exploring or documenting the human condition; even in his photographs without figures, people are present via the posters, signs, and automobiles that he includes.

Such narratives and anecdotes present in the work of Evans, Hopper, and the Regionalists and in the federal arts programs' efforts are conspicuously absent from the Precisionist images. What does it mean that explicit storytelling is excluded from this work? The result is that the

Precisionist images are more neutral in their message; they do not explicitly celebrate or critique the rural context. If they do celebrate anything, it is the structures themselves. The close attention paid to planes and lines suggests a deep appreciation of their formal qualities. Reviewer Dudley Poore observed this in a review of Sheeler's exhibition at the Neumann Print Rooms in 1925. He wrote of the paintings, which included barns among their many subjects, "in nearly all of them, the subject is more or less an excuse, the point of departure for a scheme of abstractions. His [Sheeler's] real subject is always spaces, volumes, forms . . . the forms, beautiful in themselves, are without associations, without literary content."²⁶ More recently, Matthew Baigell distinguished Precisionists from American Scene artists by noting that Precisionists were "fascinated with the forms of the environment rather than the environment itself."²⁷ But the subjects of the paintings must have held some importance in order for the same types of buildings to appear so consistently, both among members of the Precisionist group and within each artist's own oeuvre. The buildings must have had some inherent significance, some association for the artists, in order for them to depict the structures with such regularity. Their formal qualities alone do not explain the phenomenon.

The lure of the rural vernacular subjects may be explained, in part, through examination of the urban and industrial imagery by the same artists.

²⁶ Dudley Poore, "Current Exhibitions: Charles Sheeler," *The Arts* 7 (February 1925): 115.

²⁷ Baigell (1974), 16.

Precisionist images of factories and skyscrapers are the best known of their work; more examples of these subjects exist than do rural vernacular architecture images.

Precisionism could not have existed at all without the urban/industrial subject matter. Throughout the literature on Precisionism, discussion regularly returns to and focuses on the style's affinities with the mechanical: The machine and industry are invoked constantly. It becomes clear that Precisionism as a style was inseparable from its industrial subject matter. That is, the skyscrapers and factories are so intricately part of Precisionism that the style itself depends on the urban and industrial subjects. Most contemporary critics generally associated Precisionist paintings with industry and mechanization, even when the subjects were historic buildings. For instance, the title of a review of the Downtown Gallery exhibit that included the River Rouge scenes and *Americana* trumpeted "Landscapes and Still Life That Are Unquestionably of the Machine Age."²⁸

Probably because the subject matter of the city and industry are so closely linked with the idea of the machine, the use of the Precisionist style to depict factories and skyscrapers is less paradoxical than use of the style to depict rural architecture. That is, the urban and industrial buildings themselves are new designs, intended to be efficient and clean. The new buildings do not reveal age because they are not old; the buildings

²⁸ [Henry McBride], "Paintings by Charles Sheeler," *New York Sun*, 21 November, 1931, 12.

themselves have not suffered the ravages of time. Thus, the style amplifies the subject in a more obvious manner than it does in the rural vernacular architecture work. Elsie Driggs's *Queensborough Bridge* (figure 83, 1927, The Montclair Art Museum), for instance, sleekly depicts smokestacks before the bridge's monumental beams; Futurist-type ray lines emanate from the structure and bind the composition together. And although O'Keeffe created fewer images of the urban scene than did the other Precisionists, her skyscraper images are iconically Precisionist. The buildings, such as those in *City Night* (figure 84, 1926, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts), loom vertiginously, as smooth dark slabs. Critical studies, both contemporaneous to the work and into the present, routinely stress the urban and industrial subjects, relating the style to the nation's technological progress. In his study of early modernism, Abraham Davidson wrote that Precisionists focused "on what best typified [American] power and self-sufficiency: its industrialism."²⁹

The ideas of self-sufficiency and power do not apply solely to the American ideal, but also to the buildings themselves. Factories are emblematic of functionalism; every part of the building has a practical purpose. There are few ornamental elements, if any. These descriptions, of course, apply just as aptly to barns. This functionalism, shared by both factories and barns, was also characteristic of high-art design, as exemplified in the products of the Bauhaus discussed in Chapter Two. The efficiency

²⁹ Davidson, 184.

embodied in the barns and the factories was noted by contemporary critics as well as by the artists themselves. In a statement for a 1941 exhibition brochure, Sheeler explicitly linked his interest in farms and factories to the buildings' functional designs:

The attraction which our early farm-buildings, and later industrial plants, have had for me as subject matter for my pictures may be referred to as a basic principle of mine. Namely, forms related to each other. . . for their utility invariably have a resulting beauty. . . . Pre-Revolutionary barns of Pennsylvania, modern bridges, industrial buildings, grain-elevators, power-plants . . . among the many man-made forms designed for their utility. These forms in their use are as authentic evidence of the necessities of the people, at the given time...³⁰

Four decades later, a review of Edmund Lewandowski's 1983 exhibition at Sid Deutch Gallery described how the show, primarily composed of paintings of steel mills, ended with "paintings of an Amish farm . . . as if to prove that exactitude predated the Industrial Revolution."³¹ These twentieth-century concerns had their antecedents in much earlier advice to farmers. A mid-nineteenth-century agricultural guide stressed the same need for practicality in working buildings:

³⁰ Sheeler is quoted in *A New Realism* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Modern Art Society, 1941), 9.

³¹ *New York Times*, May 1983, otherwise unidentified clipping, Lewandowski artist file, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.

Farmers should be put on their guard against laying out extravagant sums for the sake of making their barns 'artistic' and elegant structures. They have, in general, but little capital; and they should be used for increasing the conveniences, and arrangements for the comfort of animals, rather than improving the mere outside appearance. We have contended that decorations are useless on the dwelling-house: they are utterly senseless on a barn.³²

In addition to their functional designs, factories and barns share another important characteristic: Both represent work, specifically blue-collar work. The artists did not paint banks or law offices, but sites where people work directly with their hands. In a sense, farm and factory work parallels artists' work; both manual workers and artists produce things by exerting their muscle power, and the Precisionists may have responded to this similarity. Factories and barns are inherently constructive buildings. Symbolically, they are not related to work or activities that destroy or that pull apart. Both types of buildings are involved with creating—whether corn or Fords. This emphasis on creation and, by extension, on progress speaks to the American identification with economic and social advancement and development. Indeed, industry typified American power in the years after the First World War; just as the idea of America's vast expanses of well-tended farmland spoke to the earlier associations that identified the nation with its land.

³² J. H. Hammond, *Farmer's and Mechanic's Practical Architect and Guide in Rural Economy* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1858), 129, quoted in Visser, 9.

Ultimately, however, farm and factory work are very different from each other, and both are different from art-making. Factory labor can be understood as regimented, unvaried, and part of a much larger commercial system. But the small farms depicted in the Precisionist images recall work based on growing cycles, literally tied to the earth and primarily involved with supporting the farmer and the immediate community. From this point of view, the fact that in their imagery Precisionists eschewed newer elements of agriculture in favor of older buildings and tools indicates a particularly conscious and broad division. That is, the artists chose to represent an emphatically small-scale, locally oriented agriculture system, rather than larger, newer farms that were also available as subject matter.

Farm buildings are inherently site-specific. A barn must meet the needs of local agriculture, whether that means grain storage, livestock housing, or dairying. In this way, as discussed in earlier chapters, the structure also reflects the area's history. A farmer's neighbors helped raise a barn, thus barns also suggest communal, social effort (an idea also particularly evident in Shaker buildings' design). Factories, on the other hand, do not share these associations; their owners did not (and do not) need to live near the buildings. Indeed, many factories could be, and still can be, located anywhere in the world.

Recent theoretical approaches offer models that help contextualize the rural vernacular images. First is the notion of agrarian space as a mediator

between city and wilderness. The second model is the pastoral, which offers an understanding of the creation of an idyllic past. The final theoretical approach is meditations on nostalgia; examining the functions of longing for the past creates a framework with which one can consider the Precisionists' modern views of historic buildings.

While the factories in Precisionist art are an absolute symbol of urbanization, the barns are a somehow softer, older American architectural symbol. As Lewis Mumford observed, when industrial cities became too dirty in the mid-nineteenth century, people looked to nature for escape. In civic parks, Mumford argued, people "re-created the traditions of civilization—of man naturalized, and therefore at home, of nature humanized and therefore enriched."³³ Although he was discussing parks, the idea of "nature humanized" also extended to formerly wild land used for agriculture. The view of humans in nature that was prevalent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not a strict dichotomy between civilization and wilderness. Instead, as Leo Marx describes in his book *The Machine in the Garden*, the human–nature relationship is more accurately described as comprising three parts. There existed the corrupted city and the frightening wilderness, and between them the countryside, the "middle landscape." The agricultural realm—or at least the popular notion of it, the myth—is tamed nature. Marx describes the pastoral ideal as "located in a

³³ Mumford, 41.

middle ground somewhere 'between,' yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature."³⁴ The Precisionist images of barns and other rural buildings fall into this category. Neither city nor wilderness, they represent instead the Edenic middle space in which humans (represented by the buildings made by them) exist in a balance with nature.

Sharon Corwin has studied the Precisionist agricultural images through a lens of the pastoral, the fictional, idealized, domesticated nature.³⁵ She argues that an approach that omits signs of industry and progress preserves an ideal of the untroubled agrarian past. The decontextualization of the farm buildings, without references to landscape or tools (either old or new), presents the subjects at a remove from any economic exchange. The viewer sees no evidence of work taking place; such isolation from everyday economic concerns underscores the buildings' existence in an untroubled, bucolic realm. Hilton Kramer addressed the same idea in his lengthy review of the 1960 Precisionist exhibition at the Walker Art Center: "the aim [of Precisionist artists] is always to turn the urban theme into something like a nineteenth-century pastoral, into something as innocent and aloof from human complexity as the natural wilderness before urban civilization made

³⁴ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 23.

³⁵ Corwin, 225–245.

its inroads."³⁶ Corwin concludes that this pastoralization of farm buildings ultimately obstructs any depiction of labor.³⁷

But, of course, suppressing signs of labor is a result of artistic license; the artists deliberately chose to omit these elements. And so, as with any creative endeavor, the subject portrayed is a fiction, filtered through the artists' own understanding. The choice of this particular fiction reveals how Precisionists attempted to understand the past.

The Precisionists' consistent treatment of agrarian, old-fashioned buildings warrants a discussion of nostalgia. Nostalgia was originally a medical diagnosis from the seventeenth century: Those who traveled too far from home supposedly risked death from melancholy.³⁸ The contemporary use of the word does not invoke such dire consequences. It is, as David Lowenthal has observed in his book *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, "memory with the pain removed."³⁹ As described by sociologist Stuart Tannock, the nostalgic model has three main stages.⁴⁰ First, there exists the idea of a

³⁶ Hilton Kramer, "The American Precisionists," *Arts* 35 (March 1961): 35.

³⁷ Corwin, 241.

³⁸ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 10. According to Lowenthal, the term nostalgia was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer: *nosos*= return to native land, and *algos*= grief.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia Critique," *Cultural Studies* 9 (1995): 453–464. Isabel Taube brought this article to my attention.

prelapsarian world; in this case, that realm is the unspoiled American wilderness. In the next stage of the model, this idealized, Edenic place is altered by a traumatic lapse or a cut—a separation from what existed before. The final part of the model is the present, a changed, postlapsarian world. As Precisionists worked, according to this model, in the postlapsarian present, the mostly nineteenth-century buildings represent the idealized past world, free from the difficulties of actual farming.

Tannock argues that nostalgia is prompted by a sense that the contemporary world is somehow lacking. For this reason, he defines nostalgia as a “search for continuity,”⁴¹ a response to a deficient or troubling present. In this process, “the nostalgic author will inevitably gloss over contradictory or negative components” that existed in the past.⁴² Following this model, Precisionists ignored negative elements in the agricultural history that they portrayed, such as signs of the dirt, labor, poverty, and uncertainties inherent in depending on the land for survival.

Tannock argues that people use nostalgia for the past as a way to find support for the present. But the strategy works only if the past is still accessible. That is, if the source of support (in this case, the Precisionist images of older small towns and farms) is far away or impossible to draw upon practically, it leaves the present “stranded.” Thus, nostalgia can

⁴¹ Ibid., 456.

⁴² Ibid., 455.

become a retreat rather than a tool. The Precisionist images function more as a source than as a retreat, for a single important reason. The subjects of their artworks were accessible; the barns were actual structures, the Worthington house actually served as a home. The past in these paintings and photographs was represented by structures of tangible wood and stone, however abstracted, simplified, or isolated they appeared in the artworks. In this way, the Precisionists successfully found the “usable past” that Van Wyck Brooks advocated.

But this modernist interest in the historic buildings was perhaps not employed solely for celebratory or useful purposes. By the 1930s, the cultural zeal for all things American was an established phenomenon, as described in Chapter Three. But in the early 1910s and 1920s, the Precisionists’ subject matter was less a part of the American norm. David Lowenthal observes that there is a paradox in venerating physically old objects—because old things are usually seen as ugly or repugnant.⁴³ The Precisionists’ choice of barns and other historic buildings in the early years of this study may have been part of the artists’ own iconoclasm, as part of the modernist project that rejected convention. After all, as Karen Lucic has observed, artists have the option of depicting older *venerated* buildings, such as the Thompson-Neely house, where George Washington strategized before crossing the Delaware River during the Revolutionary War. The house was near Doylestown, and Sheeler

⁴³ Lowenthal, 127–129.

had ample opportunity to portray it—but no record exists that he did.⁴⁴ In fact, he remarked in an interview, “I wouldn’t paint Washington’s Headquarters.”⁴⁵ Instead, he portrayed often dilapidated barns and the eighteenth-century Worthington house that had no esteemed connections to national history. But given the humble subjects of Regionalism by 1930, as well as the consciously quotidian topics of the Works Progress Administration artists, any strict dictum claiming the buildings as inappropriate subject matter for high art did not last.

The Precisionist architectural images were created in an environment that scrutinized the meaning of modern American existence. These artists’ treatment of archetypal American themes connects them with other artists who explored the same subjects. But their unadorned, isolated, and unpeopled style both separated their work from that of artists who depicted explicit social concerns and also allowed them to participate in broader, more theoretical questions of nostalgia and the pastoral. In this way, the Precisionist images of rural vernacular architecture have a particular and necessary role in this creative process of participating in and commenting on national identity, and on the linking of ideas of progress with awareness of the past.

⁴⁴ Lucic (1997), 13.

⁴⁵ Charles Sheeler quoted in Fredrick S. Wight, “Charles Sheeler,” in *Charles Sheeler: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Los Angeles: Art Galleries, University of California, 1954), 27.

Conclusion

The historic buildings depicted by Precisionists as modernist objects present the audience and the scholar with an apparent dilemma: How is one to understand these modern images of old-fashioned structures? The social and political contexts in which they were created, as outlined in Chapters Three and Four, offer some clues. Fascinated with their own history and culture, many Americans explored the past by collecting folk art, recording oral histories, or establishing historical societies. This exploration had its focus both on a national scale and on smaller, regional levels. Increased regional and local consciousness was reflected in a variety of cultural and social expressions; dance, music, and literature, among other activities, all celebrated local culture.

Such developments occurred in a political environment that encouraged nationalist introspection at the same time that the nation's rural farming spaces and traditions—which were particularly intricately tied to the identity of this country—appeared to be rapidly overtaken by cities and by industry.

All of the social and historical developments are manifestations of general ambivalence toward the modernism represented by assembly lines at the River Rouge plant and the skyscrapers of the tall metropolis. Contemporary critics recognized these tensions that the artists chose to

address. In his review of Sheeler's work in 1932, writer Ernest Brace invoked Henry Adams's essay, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," which considers the growing primacy of the machine and science at the expense of nature (or femininity). Adams is cautious and thoughtful in his essay, qualities that Brace finds in modern art and, particularly, in Sheeler's work:

Nowhere more clearly than in contemporary painting does one find illustrated Henry Adams's reluctant, nostalgic decision that the modern world must renounce the symbolism of the Virgin for that of the dynamo. However sound-proof and opaque his ivory tower may be, no modern painter can quite forget that he lives in a vastly different world from that of Rubens or Rembrandt, or even Renoir. He may choose, according to his temperament, to ignore the difference or else to build upon it, but whether he paints nudes or grain elevators, farmhouses or factories, flowers or telephones, he cannot escape a harrying awareness of the dilemma of Henry Adams.¹

Like the tenor of Adams's essay, Brace's tone is almost elegiac, sympathizing with the artist who must acknowledge the massive, fundamental changes to his culture. But despite these complicated historical contexts and the "dilemma" of the Virgin and the dynamo, Precisionist images do not directly express any political or social comment or opinion. Without a narrative, as described in Chapter Five's discussion of other artists' treatment of similar subjects, without human figures, and without detailed information about the building's contexts, the works do not offer an explicit message or messages.

¹ Ernest Brace, "Charles Sheeler," *Creative Art*, 11 (October 1932), 97.

Instead, they remain somewhat blank, even expressionless. Any stories they have, they are not sharing.

As described in a 1937 article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the buildings depicted in the “painstaking” Precisionist style seem well preserved; the author remarks that the careful treatment of details and surfaces in a Sheeler painting creates “a style which is most helpful for documentary recording.”² In this way, the very depiction of these buildings—which in the Precisionists’ time were often in various stages of ruin—is an act of preservation. Thus recorded, they cannot disappear entirely. But more than simply preserved, they are almost hermetically sealed. Painted and photographed with a minimum of context, nearly alone on the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, the barns stand outside time. The Precisionist manner of recording the buildings functions like a bell jar: It both protects the structures and creates a vacuum. In these airless images, the passage of time is rendered impossible—or at least invisible.

The artists considering similar subjects during the period—the Regionalists, Hopper, Evans—conveyed a range of attitudes and viewpoints toward their subjects. In general terms, these attitudes were optimistic in the earlier part of the period and more anxious in the 1930s. In contrast, over

² “Kitchen, Williamsburg: A Painting on Gesso by Charles Sheeler,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 December 1937, 11.

time the Precisionists projected the same basic attitude—somewhat dispassionate—during the years of the interwar period.

Where time is invisible, so are the normal functions of buildings. The Precisionist structures are almost entirely removed from the world of work.

As Brace wrote about the barns appearing in Sheeler's art:

Any of the New England farmers whose barns have been the subject of countless canvases would certainly be no less dumbfounded to find pictures of their property hanging in art museums than were those persons who were shocked to find in a picture gallery a portrait of a telephone. To the farmer, his barn connoted mortgages, manure piles and drudgery. . . . Perhaps Sheeler's training as a photographer, his gazing at objects upside down through ground glass, has purified his sense of form and design, has rid it of prejudices.³

Several decades later, Jane Holtz Kay observed in an article on O'Keeffe's *Lake George Barns* (figure 85, 1927, Walker Art Center): "farmers do not dote on barns, I'm sure; better to sketch a tree or stitch a quilt or paint a landscape than to trace the outlines of what must be to them plain places. There is no romance in such structures for those who work within . . . [in the O'Keeffe painting] there are none of the appurtenances that make a barn real, if scruffy."⁴ Indeed, these structures are mostly non-functioning; in large part, they are crystallized, pure form, of the type that Thomas Craven deplored.

³ Brace, 104.

⁴ Jane Holtz Kay, "The Mystery of the Simple," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 March 1976, 24.

Such clarity is expressed in the industrial pictures as well as the rural images. The relationship between the two, as explored in Chapter Five, has numerous implications. First, the building types are characterized by clean design, an aesthetic that was winning adherents during the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, in 1934 the Museum of Modern Art mounted the exhibition *Machine Art*, in which everyday household objects and tools were on display. The exhibition presented laboratory equipment, vacuum cleaners, and toasters, among many other items, as artwork. As museum director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., explained, elevating these objects to the status of high art was a deliberate strategy:

Today man is lost in the far more treacherous wilderness of industrial and commercial civilization. On every hand machines literally multiply our difficulties and point our doom. If . . . we are to “end the divorce” between our industry and our culture we must assimilate the machine aesthetically as well as economically. Not only must we bind Frankenstein—but we must make him beautiful.⁵

With this blurring of the divisions between industry and art, industry is rendered more easily accessible. A vacuum cleaner on a pedestal in an art gallery symbolically represents fine art in addition to the factory. Such connections have been explored further in the recent art historical past, as with the use of industrial materials in Minimalist art. Even more recently,

⁵ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., quoted in Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the 20th Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 189.

when the Dia Art Foundation opened its new museum space at a former Nabisco factory (which was built in 1929) in Beacon, New York, the *New York Times* remarked on the kinship between the building's historical and new uses. "The affinity of art and industry is taken to its logical conclusion," stated the editorial, "it's almost impossible not to feel the industrial urge behind the [art] works."⁶ Ultimately, these connections between industry and art spring from a shared recognition of the value of efficient design. This appreciation also binds the urban and industrial Precisionist imagery with the rural vernacular subjects. In Precisionism, both barns and factories represent work and labor, and the efficiency of such work.

This admiration for work done well was part of a broader undercurrent in American identity. One element of Puritanism, as Warren Susman has argued, is an emphasis "toward success in the material sense, a sign of salvation . . . stressing industry, thrift, achievement of wealth. Such an ethic, creating a vibrant modern capitalism, was the true safeguard of the whole economic and social order."⁷ That is, there existed (and perhaps still exists), a deeply ingrained valuing of the moral and social benefit of work. Work, productivity, and progress are the heart of early-twentieth-century views of the United States. With their efficient, utilitarian designs, the buildings in Precisionist images, both old and new, speak to this nationalist

⁶ "Art, Industry and Beacon," *New York Times*, 16 June 2003, A18.

⁷ Susman (1984), 42.

view of progress. Thus, despite the age and location of rural vernacular architecture, these structures are not necessarily anti-industrial. The buildings may be better understood as a complement to industry and urbanism. Together, the two create a more complete understanding of the uses of the past in a self-consciously modernizing world.

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