

American Landscape, 1930

The only trace of humanity in Charles Sheeler's austere *American Landscape* is a tiny figure scurrying across the railroad tracks. With one arm outstretched, he appears frozen in action, as if in a snapshot, precisely halfway between two uncoupled freight cars. The calculated placement of this anonymous person suggests that he was included in the composition only to lend scale to the enormous factories, which dwarf even the train and displace every other living thing. Sheeler coined the term "Precisionism" to describe this emotionally detached approach to the modern world. Influenced by the mechanisms of modern technology, Precisionist art employs sharply defined, largely geometric forms, and often gauges the landscape's transformation in the wake of industrial progress.

American Landscape toys with our expectations. In a painting of that title, we hope to find a peaceful view of mountains and trees, or perhaps cottages and crops, in the manner of Thomas Cole or Albert Bierstadt (see 5-A and 8-A). Instead, Sheeler gives us factories, silos, and smokestacks. The work expresses the artist's view that the forces of human culture, propelled by industrialism, have overtaken the forces of nature that once laid claim to American landscape painting. Here, all that's left of the natural world is the sky, and not even that escapes the effects of mass production: the smoke rising from a smokestack blends into the clouds, making them just another by-product of industry. Like many traditional American landscapes, this one is organized around a body of water. Yet here, the water is contained in a canal, an artificial channel that controls its flow.



15-A Charles Sheeler (1883–1965), *American Landscape*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 24 x 31 in. (61 x 78.8 cm.). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (166.1934). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, New York.

Sheeler earned his living as a professional photographer. In 1927, he spent six weeks taking pictures of the Ford Motor Company's enormous auto plant west of Detroit. The company commissioned the project as a testament to Ford's preeminence: the plant at River Rouge was a marvel of mechanical efficiency—with miles of canals, conveyor belts, and railroad tracks connecting steel mills, blast furnaces, glass plants, and the famed assembly line. Henry Ford himself had invented the term "mass production" to describe his innovation of making workers on a movable production line part of the machinery. If the belt-driven process dehumanized workers, it helped to democratize capitalism by making manufactured goods affordable to a wider public. "There is but one rule for the industrialist," Ford declared, "and that is: Make the highest quality goods possible at the lowest cost possible." To twenty-first century viewers, *American Landscape* may appear as an indictment of the machine age, but to Sheeler's contemporaries, it would have stood for the triumph of American ingenuity.

Sheeler derived *American Landscape* from the background of one of his River Rouge photographs. To achieve the impersonal effect of the mechanical image, he eliminated every sign of brushwork and any other indication that the painting had been conceived by a distinct artistic personality and made by hand. In this way, Sheeler downplays his own presence, as if he were just as anonymous as the faceless figure stranded on the train tracks. After his time at River Rouge, Sheeler observed that factories had become a "substitute for religious expression." The stillness and silence of the scene impart an air of reverence traditionally associated with a place of worship—or, in American painting, some awe-inspiring view of nature. But nature as a divine presence is absent; it is industry, with its cold and indifferent factories, that prevails.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at all the details in this painting.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Have students locate the tiny figure.

He is on the railroad tracks.

Where is the ladder?

It is located in the right corner.

Where are the silos?

They are on the left.

E | M | S

How does Sheeler indicate distance in this painting?

The parallel horizontal lines are converging, coming closer together, to the left of the painting. Objects overlap and distant structures are smaller, with fewer details.

E | M | S

What lines look as if they were drawn with a ruler?

The lines on the edge of the canal, the train and tracks, and the buildings look as if they were composed with a straight edge.

Much of this painting is geometric. What parts are not?

The water and the reflections in the water, the sky and smoke, and the pile of ore are irregular in shape.

E | M | S

Ask students how large the buildings seem in comparison with the man. *They are huge.*

This plant mass-produced automobiles. Raw materials and ores were transformed into cars. Long conveyor belts moved materials within the factory. What structures in this view possibly house conveyor belts?

The long, thin white structure in front of the silos and other large buildings are possible sheds.

What does this painting say about the scale of American industry in 1930?

Sheeler was impressed with the massive scale of American industry and this plant.

INTERPRET M | S

Have students visualize how industrial progress changed this view of the American landscape. Encourage them to imagine how this scene looked before the canal, railroad, and factories were built.

The river might have curved and been lined with trees and plants. Smoke would not fill the sky.

Ask students if they think this painting seems more positive or negative regarding industrial development. How might an average American in 1930 answer this question? How did factories like this affect the lives of American consumers?

Factories like this employed many people and the mass-produced goods they made were affordable to middle-class Americans.

Early twentieth-century Americans were proud of their country's industrial development and appreciated the rise in their standard of living made possible by mass production. Today, Americans are more sensitive to the effects of industrial development on the environment.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: industrialism; progressive movement; the Great Depression

Historical Figures: Samuel Gompers

Civics: substantive due process

Geography: growth of cities

Economics: labor unions; industrial expansion; transportation innovations

Science: machinery

Literary Connections and Primary Documents

The Jungle, Upton Sinclair (secondary); "Chicago," Carl Sandburg (secondary)

Arts: photography; Modernism; Precisionism; compare with Cézanne; contrast with Cole