



Brad Flowers / © Estate of Honoria Murphy Donnelly / Licensed by VAGA, New York

Gerald Murphy's "Watch" (1925) is described as a coded gay coming-out statement, which may not be evident to the viewer.

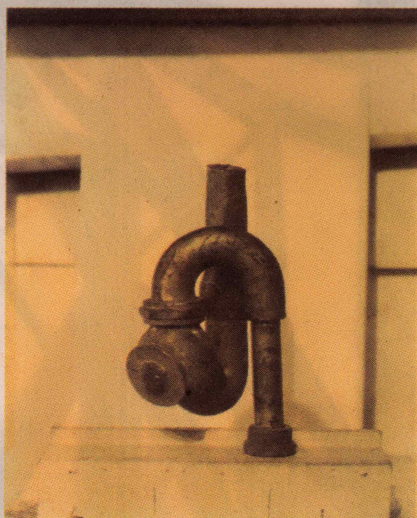
Moving parts on view

'Cult of the Machine' exhibition examines an American fascination

By Charles Desmarais

In Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, artists began to seek out visual metaphors for the modern. New industrial forms — think machines and skyscrapers — and technological processes like the assembly line, photography and film provided rich mines of fresh imagery.

In America, sophisticated artists were inspired by the European model. They looked for ideas, among many sources, to the Cubist paintings of Picasso, Braque and Léger; the Constructivist photographs of Alexander Rodchenko and László Moholy-Nagy; the embrace of simple forms and mass



Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Morton Livingston Schamberg's photo of "God," by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Schamberg (1917).

"Cult of the Machine: Precisionism and American Art": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, March 24-Aug. 12. \$13-\$28. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

production by the Bauhaus.

To judge from the evidence of a new exhibition at the de Young Museum, however, American artists generally took a more descriptive, less critical approach to what they saw as modern. Visually and conceptually, the Europeans dismantled the machine. The Americans worshiped it.

"Cult of the Machine: Precisionism and American Art" opens Sat-

Machine continues on E2

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The American love of the machine

Machine from page E1

urday, March 24, and will be on view through Aug. 12. It is a large show, the first major de Young effort to be led by associate curator of American art Emma Acker, who came up through the ranks at the museum. With a concise topic and a checklist of 127 paintings, photographs, films and decorative art objects, it suffers a bit from bloat — there may be 15 more pictures of machine parts and architecture seen at skewed angles than you will have the patience to consider carefully.

Yet there is no denying the visceral thrill many of these works still provide, in their surprising selections and suppressions of detail, their energetic linear convergences, their confounding geometries. And seeing these works, many of which will be unfamiliar to West Coast audiences, brought together is what adds up to the sense of a uniquely American approach to the topic.

That approach has been called Precisionism, which Acker defines as “paintings and works on paper produced ... predominantly between the First and Second world wars, whose

typically smoothly painted, highly structured, and geometric compositions reconciled realism with abstraction, and European art styles ... with American subjects.”

With 23 paintings and works on paper showing up at various inflection points throughout the exhibition — not to mention a co-produced film projected on a large screen in the middle of your path through the show — Charles Sheeler is the de facto central figure. An artist devoted to a bone-dry, reverential commemoration of the clarity and simplicity of industrial forms that bordered on the ascetic, he is a fitting choice. His 1939 close-up of a locomotive engine, “Rolling Power,” painted on assignment for the business magazine Fortune, is a crystalline object of veneration that quietly commands a gallery filled with more colorful pictures competing for attention.

Not all of Sheeler’s works are so slavish in

their description. His “Golden Gate” (1955), one of the latest works in the show but an obvious inclusion in a museum less than 5 miles from the bridge, is so abstracted, so exalted, that its subject is barely recognizable at first glance. More telling, though, is a couple of pictures, a photograph and a painting, both titled “Upper Deck” and made around 1929.

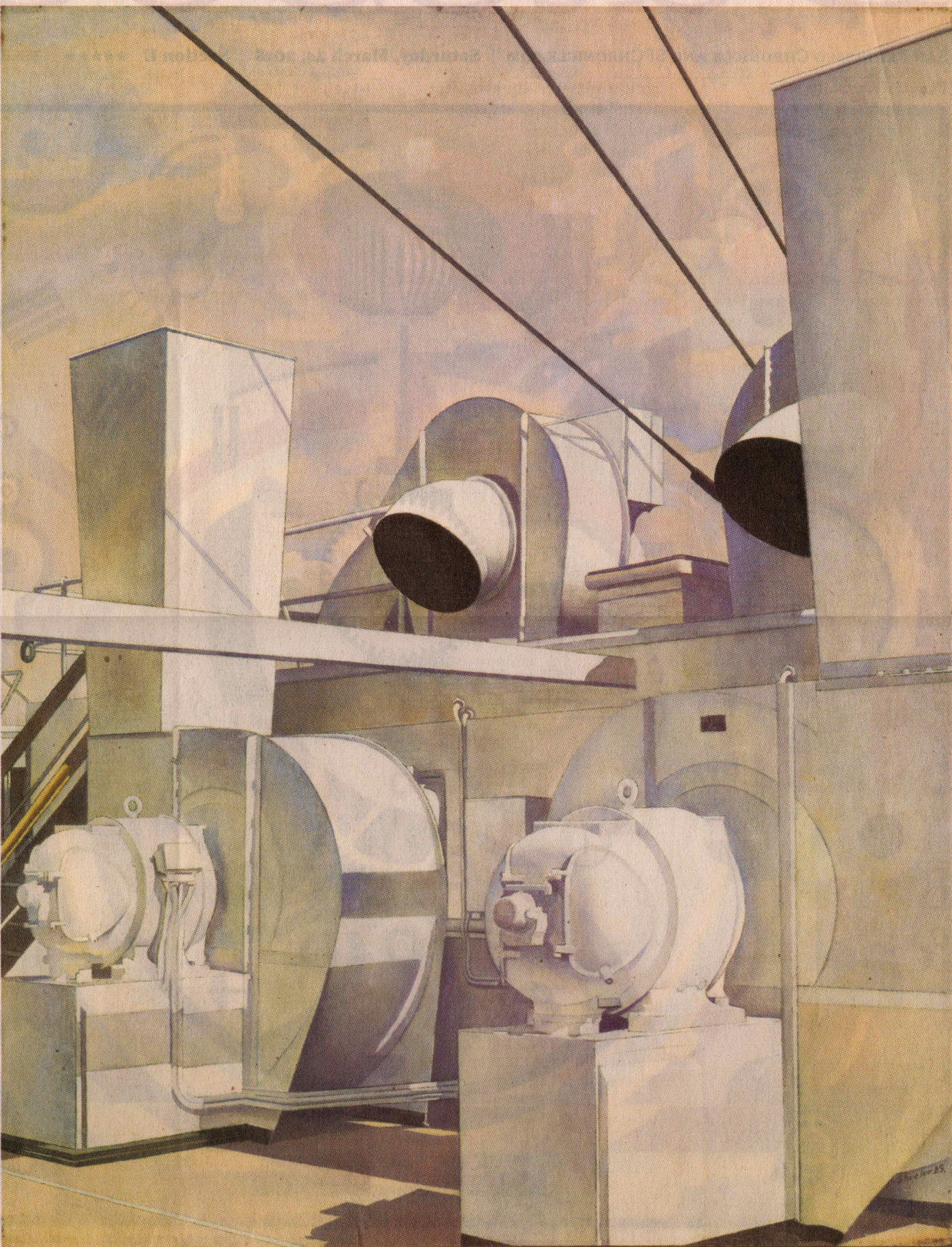
You would say they are identical, with every outline in the photo just so on canvas, every nuance of shadow transferred faithfully. Yet they are clearly different. It is more than just a 782 percent expansion in scale that distinguishes them. Tiny details — a row of rivets, a bit of sloppy weather coating — are smoothed over, perfecting what almost seemed flawless. Additions of faint color and tonal shifts — some subtle (clarity in the shadows), others extreme (a dark-gray deck in the black-and-white photograph rendered as tan in the painting) — give the painting a heavenly glow.

That is the point of view behind many of the works in the exhibition. For every Charles Demuth “Incense of a New Church” (1921), which depicts ringlets of smog rising up through an industrial landscape dominated by smokestacks, there are 10 images of gleaming oil tanks and colorful juxtapositions of derrick and bridge elements. A wall label goes to some effort to convince us that Gerald Murphy’s “Watch” of 1925 is a coded gay coming-out statement, but it still looks like a decorative mural after all.

Art Deco objects from furniture to cocktail shakers, redolent of speed and mechanical efficiency, celebrate the modern with an optimism that seems divorced entirely from the economic realities of the 1930s, when they were all the rage.

There are great pictures, like Joseph Stella’s “Bridge” (1936) with its view of the Brooklyn Bridge as gateway to a celestial Manhattan, and stunning surprises, like the underappreciated, visually kinetic paintings of Elsie Driggs. Classics of American art by Georgia O’Keeffe,

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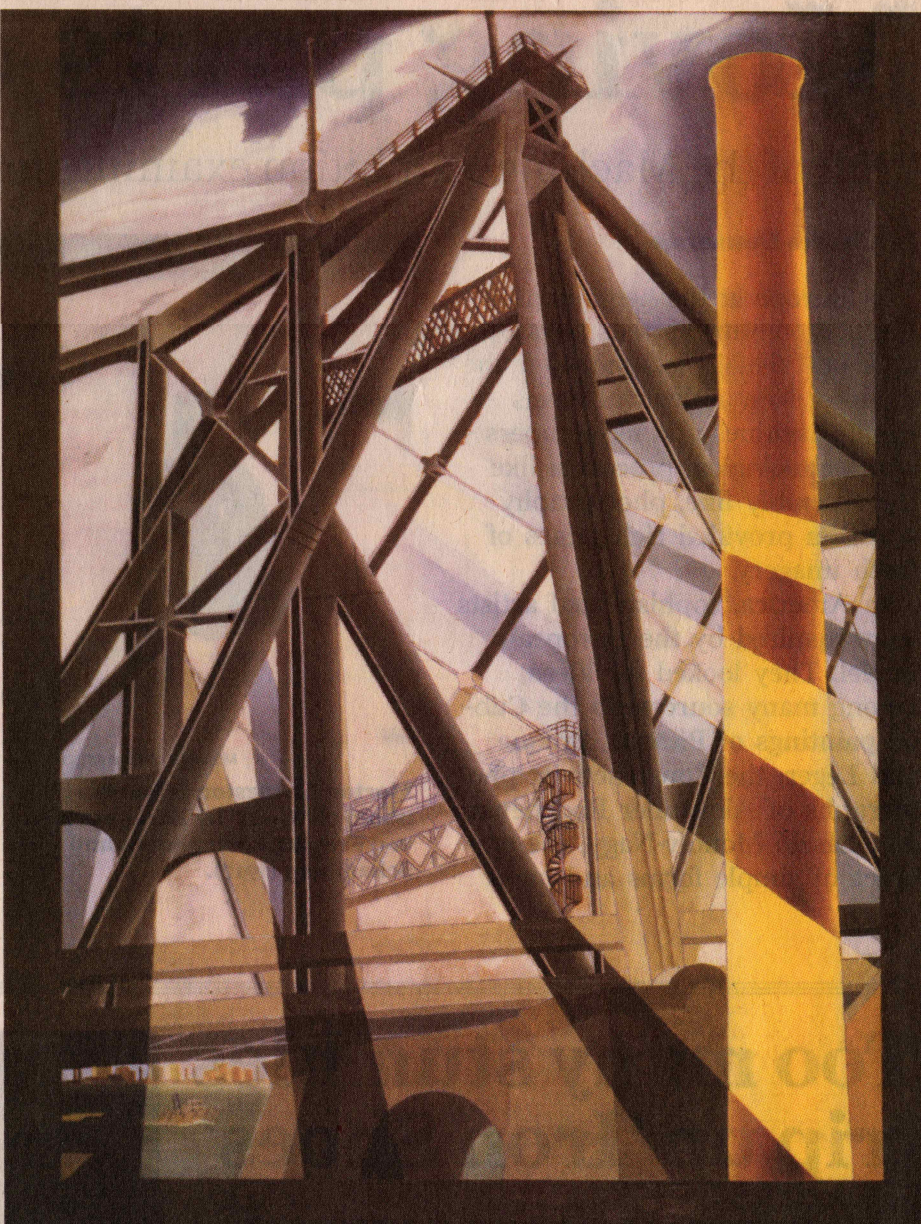
Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum

Above: Charles Sheeler, “Upper Deck” (1929). Right: Elsie Driggs, “Queensborough Bridge” (1927).

Paul Strand, designer Norman Bel Geddes and others make the show a must-see. For the most part, these and other works in the show accept as given the benefits of the new world they describe.

The exhibition opens with a mini-survey of the work of Morton Schamberg, a friend of Sheeler and a strong artistic influence, who died in 1918 at age 37. Schamberg, who made pictures like “Painting (formerly ‘Machine’)” (1916) that could be mistaken for some of the best works of the French Dadaist Francis Picabia, is the obvious link to Europe. A cynical sense of humor one never finds in Sheeler — or indeed, in virtually all the earnest, adulatory works that make up the bulk of the exhibition — comes through in the work of Schamberg.

Nowhere is that more evident than in “God,” a found sculpture Schamberg photographed in 1917 (the same year Marcel Duchamp showed a urinal as a sculpture titled “Fountain,” for those turning now to the Internet to check dates). “God” was a plumbing fixture before it was art, and it may or may not have been developed by Schamberg with the eccentric Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Whether he himself



Montclair (N.J.) Art Museum

anointed it art or merely pictured it as such, the attitude it conveys — mocking and at the same time expressive of genuine humility — could not be further from the mainstream of the American art that would follow his early experiments.

The final work in the exhibition is presented in a gallery all its own, flanked by projections of contrasting “word clouds” related to technology, generated from old

publications and current visitor responses. The painting is a fitting coda to an exhibition and an era that so loved the idea of an engineered world that would flourish, if not apart from nature, then in some happy new marriage.

Clarence Holbrook Carter’s “War Bride” (1940) depicts from behind a woman in wedding attire, standing before a vast, altar-like machine. From the red glow at the center

of the picture, we surmise that it is a furnace of some sort. We don’t know whether she is meant to be married within the protection of this cathedral of industry, warmed at its massive hearth, or is to be taken by the smelter itself as wife. Some 80 years later, we still await the answer.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

TAPAS	THATSTHAT
ADELE	WOREAWIRE
UNPIN	ELCAPITAN
TASTELESS	CUBS
OUT	CATT
PREPS	
NSC	ABS
ABOUT	
YECOW	STEAMBOAT
MALTA	OPT
ELCID	
MAINT	INFRA
ELCIDE	
STEAM	BOYS
PEA	
TIPSY	ABRA
PTA	
GINO	SPIELBERG
ALARM	BELL
OLLIE	
WENTROGUE	MILAN
PRESSPASS	EXALT

Sudoku Puzzle

9	7	2	6	1	5	3	4	8
6	4	8	2	3	7	9	5	1
1	5	3	9	4	8	7	6	2
4	8	1	7	5	2	6	9	3
7	6	5	3	8	9	1	2	4
2	3	9	4	6	1	8	7	5
3	9	4	8	2	6	5	1	7
5	2	6	1	7	3	4	8	9
8	1	7	5	9	4	2	3	6

New York Times Crossword

CISCO	ESURANCE	THERAM
USTEN	SHAWNEES	MADAME
BARES	QUERY	WASHINGTON
IDENT	EST	OSSEGO
CAIPE		
SOVIET	SPINE	EXT
GRAE		
TRENCH	QUOTE	LED
CAR		
SANG	UPTO	BABYQUAKES
ROLO	HOPES	SEA
MARACAIBO	LILLE	TAPIR
APATHY	ROHAN	ORG
ISE		
HERES	LODGING	AT
YOUQUID		
AMERS	ADAPT	CEST
LAVIE		
LYRES	ADEPT	CEST
LAVIE		
TAU	AYES	SIR
HISN		
QUICKBOXER	DUMA	TAPA
USS	SEN	PEACHYQUEEN
AHAS	RIFE	LOLL
EAMONN		
BEINE	OUTT	AEN
LAO		
ORDER	THE	QUART
WINNY		
GISELE	ONE	UNDER
APACE		
SNORED	NOSE	CONE
SANER		

Challenger

3	3	1	1	8
5	1	1	1	8
2	2	2	2	8
1	2	3	2	8
11	8	7	6	8

Chess

1. Bxf7ch! Rxf7
2. Qh8ch!
Kxh8 3. Nxf7ch
(regaining the queen)
[Anand-Leko '09]