



# CHARLES SHEELER

## MODERNIST AT THE MET

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In 1942 the Metropolitan Museum of Art made the unorthodox decision to take on Charles Sheeler as the museum's "Consultant in Photography" — a position specifically created with the artist in mind, and one that has remained unoccupied since Sheeler's departure in 1945.<sup>1</sup> Sheeler eagerly described his new job as "ambassador at large with a camera," in a letter to Edward Weston, and largely avoided the traditional duties of a staff photographer.<sup>2</sup> The artist was allowed to freely photograph masterpieces from the Met's extensive collection as he saw fit, experimenting with the use of light and shadow, avant garde cropping techniques, and color film. Approximately 130 of Sheeler's photographs were published in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, *Annual Report*, and collection catalogues between 1942-1946.<sup>3</sup> Others were reproduced as postcards, lantern slides, and large-scale reproductions for sale in the Museum's gift shop.<sup>4</sup>

Although Sheeler made several fine art prints from his Met negatives, the patina of the "popular" or "commercial" has long separated this body of work from the artist's larger oeuvre, an added layer of irony considering the canonical nature of the very objects these images depict. Sheeler conceived each art object he photographed as an isolated element within a larger pictorial arrangement, supplemented by deliberately composed shadows, highlights, and backdrops. Upon closer examination this work presents a thoughtful meditation on the plasticity of the Met's collection when rendered through a well-trained photographic lens. This paper seeks to situate Sheeler's methodology within the broader tradition of American readymades, in addition to illuminating one of the Met's more surprising experiments in Modernism.

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<sup>1</sup> While some sources have previously named Sheeler's title as "Senior Research Fellow in Photography," Sheeler is referred to on the masthead of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* as "Consultant in Photography." *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 73 (1942): xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Norman Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston: Little Brown, 1987): 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Besler, *Charles Sheeler: Photographer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1982): 4.

Sheeler had already established himself as one of America's foremost painters and photographers well before 1942, making his late-career tenure at the Met all the more unusual. In fact, several of his works were previously accessioned by the Museum before the time of his hiring.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the timing of Sheeler's employment was atypical in itself; the United States had formally entered World War II just seven months prior. In this short interval the Museum had already taken several extraordinary steps to ensure the safety of its collection, including the installation air raid sirens, a 4 PM curfew in accordance with city wide dim-outs implemented to disguising the recognizable skyline from German bombers, and the shipment of nearly eighteen thousands works of art to a safehouse outside Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> It has been suggested that dealer Edith Halpert played a role in Sheeler's hiring, convincing director Francis Henry Taylor to take on the photographer due to the declining sale of art during the war. Sheeler was formally assigned to the Museum's publication department sometime around July 15, 1942, where he worked full-time for the remainder of the war, commuting every day to Manhattan from his home upstate in Irvington-on-Hudson.<sup>7</sup> The photographer was paid the salary of an associate curator, plus an additional \$10 for every photograph published by the Museum.<sup>8</sup>

Although impacted by the war, the Met remained an active and lively place. Under the stewardship of Francis Henry Taylor, the Museum implemented several initiatives aimed at increasing popular engagement, particularly among working class New Yorkers, writing of his desire to "make this Museum a living civic center for everyone in the city, not only for a group

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<sup>5</sup> see 33.43.259; 33.43.260; 33.43.261; 33.43.287; 33.43.343; 41.178.1.

<sup>6</sup> See "ART BLACKOUT," *Binghamton Press*, January 2, 1942, 8 and "Metropolitan's Ready if Raiders Come," *Boston Globe*, January 3, 1942, page 14.

<sup>7</sup> Besler, *Charles Sheeler*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Stebbins, Jr. and Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 46.

of those with leisure or with special education.”<sup>9</sup> The Director was also keen on finding new ways to bring art outside the walls of the Museum, notably through the distribution of photomechanical reproductions of fine art. For example, in October 1942 the Museum sent high-quality reproductions of objects in the collection to the offices of various high-powered labor unions for display. The News guild received copies of Goya’s “Disasters of War” series, while the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union exhibited a selection of Käthe Kollwitz prints.<sup>10</sup> The Museum also entered a cooperative agreement with the MTA system to sell color reproductions “of paintings adequate in size and at prices within the range of even the most modest purse” in subway stations across the five boroughs.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, throughout the 1940s Taylor allowed fashion brands to photograph models at the Museum for the purpose of advertising, an initiative which included one of Richard Avedon’s earliest ads (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup>

Sheeler’s assignment to the publications department, and in particular the *Bulletin*, appears to have fit into this broader institutional agenda to engage the public through photography and print media. Around the time of Sheeler’s onboarding, the *Bulletin* went through a major transformation in order to accommodate a more general readership, reverting to Volume 1, Issue 1 in the summer of 1942. In his introduction to the new volume, vice director Horace H.F. Jayne acknowledged that while the old *Bulletin* was a “model for a score of similar museum periodicals” in its “dignity, grace, and fundamental typographic excellence...the passage of time, however, and the ingenuity of photographers and engravers and printers produced new

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Helen B. Cole, "Art goes to the Unions with Love from the Metropolitan," *Daily Worker*, October 24, 1942, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Henry Taylor, Horace H. F. Jayne, and Laurence S. Harrison, "Review of the Year: 1942" *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 74 (1943): 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Avedon most likely shot this image between 1944-45, however the advertisement was not published until the fall of 1946. Information courtesy the Richard Avedon Foundation. "Advertisement for Bonwit Teller," *Vogue*, October 1, 1946, 145.

methods of presentation which it would be folly for an art museum to ignore in any studied effort to offer its printed material in as engaging a manner as possible. To continue to be cabined [sic] by a format established over a generation ago, would be to confess to timidity or to an unreasoning archaeological perversity.”<sup>13</sup>

Sheeler made his debut in the subsequent issue published in October 1942, further solidifying the *Bulletin*'s commitment to its own modernization. On the cover a tightly cropped detail of Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Lute* is reproduced in color (Figure 2). The compact nature of the photographer's composition was most likely implemented out of necessity, as the technology of color film was still relatively crude in the early 1940s. In focusing on a relatively small area of the painting, Sheeler was able to better preserve the tonal range without distracting from the overall quality of Vermeer's original work. And yet, Sheeler's cropping is clearly not indiscriminate, as is the case in previous covers of the *Bulletin* that feature details. For example, in the January 1942 issue, *The Birth of Cupid* by the Master of Flora is trimmed squarely around the center of the image so that the line of Venus's extended leg is awkwardly truncated (Figure 3).

In a statement printed on the inside cover of the issue Sheeler outlines the formal logic of his reproduction, drawing an implicit parallel between Vermeer's detailed work and his own practice as a photographer for the Met:

“The miracle resulting from the envelopment of forms by light was of lasting interest to Vermeer, and he found ample opportunities close at hand, in his own unpretentious home and in his neighbors', of observing this miracle. His pictures, which it is our privilege to enjoy need no assistance in telling us of his penetrating observations and of his capacity for making those observations visible to us. In making the detail from Vermeer's *Lady with a Lute* [now titled *Young Woman with a Lute*], which appears on the cover of this issue, as with details from other paintings to appear on successive issues, it has been our

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<sup>13</sup> Horace H. F. Jayne, "Forward," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* New Series, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer, 1942): 4.

intention to create a fresh approach to these pictures in their entirety by presenting them in their parts.”<sup>14</sup>

The photographer’s cropping clearly “makes visible” the modular geometry present in Vermeer’s interior scene, which is comparable to that depicted by Sheeler’s fellow Precisionists. The ornate map that hangs in the background, for example, is distilled down to three rectangles circumscribed by thick black borders, Mondrian-like in its structural simplicity. Abstracted too is the black, rectangular neck of the woman’s lute. The shadow cast by the curtain, absent from Sheeler’s frame, is reduced to a hazy field of black and brown when separated from its original source.

In his own painting practice, Sheeler sought to “reduce natural forms to the borderline of abstraction, retaining only those forms which I believed to be indispensable to the design of the picture.”<sup>15</sup> While it’s not hard to see how this ethos may have informed his approach to photographing Vermeer’s masterpiece, I hesitate to connect Sheeler’s work for the Met with his career as a painter, as others have done before. Weston J. Naef, curator of the Department of Prints and Photographs, suggested retrospectively in 1982 that, “The Museum decided to employ Sheeler from the very liberal perception that all photography involves interpretation and that the person best qualified to be given this responsibility was one who was not only a photographer, but also a painter.”<sup>16</sup> In emphasizing Sheeler’s status as a painter, Naef inadvertently obscures the artist’s long standing practice as a photographer of fine art, which is of the utmost relevance to his later work at the Met.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Sheeler, “Notes,” *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* New Series, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1942): 3.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Alex Pezzati, “Charles R. Sheeler, JR.: A Famous Artist Photographs the Museum,” *Expeditions Magazine*, Volume 50, Issue 1 (2008): 6.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Besler, *Charles Sheeler*, 1.

As a young man Sheeler taught himself photography as a means of supporting himself, working for a variety of architectural firms in the Philadelphia area.<sup>17</sup> Through these connections, Sheeler began freelancing for the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where he worked between 1913-1919. His assignments for the Penn Museum were varied, and included documenting special exhibitions, producing promotional material for the newly accession Penn Sphinx, and creating a series of images of the recently completed Harrison Rotunda (Figure 4). Sheeler was evidently confident enough in this body to work to send several images taken for the Museum of Chinese and Roman sculptures to Alfred Stieglitz in 1914, marking the beginning of a long dialog between the two artists on the topic of photographing fine art.<sup>18</sup> Sheeler was a great admirer of Stieglitz's work and even tore out a gravure from the August 1921 issue of *Camera Works* by Stieglitz of Picasso's *Head of Woman* to mount on his studio wall, where it reportedly hung for many years (Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> In Stieglitz's photograph, the sculpture is positioned within a nondescript black space, illuminated to convey every curve and crevice of its undulating surface. The picture suggests the ways in which light can transform the two-dimension into something that projects the appearance of sculptural volumes, providing an important model for Sheeler.

It's of note to mention that Sheeler's role at the Penn Museum was not limited to photography. In a 1918 letter to John Quinn (the collector and patron) Sheeler wrote that he "selected and arranged a special exhibition of Negro Art at the University Museum."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Oral history interview with Charles Sheeler, 1959 June 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>18</sup> See Sheeler to Stieglitz May 25, 1915, Stieglitz Archive. As cited by Stebbins, Jr. and Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Letter is dated February 22, 1918, and can be found in the John Quinn Archives, NYPL, Microfilm Reel 2 (ZL-355), Dealers Correspondence folder 6-7, Modern Gallery (de Zayas) 1917-1924. As cited by Pezzati, "Charles R. Sheeler, JR.," 7.

Additionally, Sheeler helped coordinate the purchase of several Egyptian and Mexican antiquities from New York dealer Marius de Zayas, a prominent dealer of Modern and Non-Western art.<sup>21</sup> Beginning In 1916, Sheeler worked on-and-off as a staff photographer for de Zayas's Modern Gallery, documenting works in de Zayas' holdings for archival, promotional, and artistic purposes. During this time, he photographed a wide range of objects, from French Gothic statues to Chinese jade and Native American hide paintings.<sup>22</sup>

This interest in Non-Western or "primitive" art was typical of Sheeler's artistic circle and was a point of bonding with fellow Philadelphia artist Morton Schamberg. Schamberg himself had a small collection of figurines from the Philippines, Indonesia, Easter Island, and the Congo, documented by Sheeler in 1917 in front of what is certainly one of Schamberg's own lost works. (Figure 6).<sup>23</sup> After Schamberg's premature death in 1918 from the Spanish Influenza, Sheeler donated the collection to the Penn Museum.<sup>24</sup> Sheeler's relationship with Schamberg and the figurines, however, appears to be more than sentimental, and provides an interesting view into the development of his practice as a photographer of fine art. Two of Sheeler's main aesthetic devices — the use of dramatic lighting and carefully orchestrated backdrops— appear to be informed by Schamberg's earlier explorations. Before his death, Schamberg created an incredibly evocative photograph of one of his statuettes, now in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Figure 7). The object is dramatically isolated against a white background, casting a long, almost spectral-like shadow. It is unclear if the photograph was taken from above or straight on, further confusing our sense of space. Through the artful manipulation of light, the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 7.

<sup>22</sup> Stebbins, Jr. and Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Attribution made in "Untitled [Filipino, Easter Island, Indonesian, and Congolese sculptures in front of an unidentified painting by Morton Schamberg(?)]," Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/321081>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



figure's eyes are rendered as deep, shadowy pockets, giving the work a sense of animation or awareness absent in more traditional photographs of the statue.

Schamberg's photograph shares a remarkable affinity with Sheeler's 1918 portfolio of African wooden sculptures from de Zayas' collection (Figure 8). In the introduction to the portfolio de Zayas writes "Sheeler has used the light to project the Negro vision. He photographs Negro sculpture in its plurality of form and effect."<sup>25</sup> While de Zayas' language might be antiquated in its overt exoticism, it effectively conveys one of Sheeler's main photographic strategies, the use of light and shadow as a means of activating the inanimate subject. Notably, the sculptures are not shot against a seamless background. Rather, Sheeler chooses to use the boundaries of the white paper and table on which the object sits to suggest something more informal or spontaneous. The visible borders also function as a framing device, enclosing the sculpture in a grid-like structure.

This too appears to be borrowed from Schamberg's photographic lexicon and is notably present in the artist's best-known work, a collaborative assemblage with Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven titled *God* (Figure 9). Freytag-Loringhoven was most likely responsible for creating the sculpture, while Schamberg made two equally famous photographs of the object, both signed and dated 1917.<sup>26</sup> In the first image *God* is placed in front of what appears to be a white piece of cardstock or perhaps a painted plywood board, which serves as a neutral space in which to photograph the object against. Yet, the utility of this backdrop is ultimately negated by Schamberg's expanded framing, which reveals a wider view of his studio and tacitly acknowledges the very construction of the image. In a second photograph, *God* is placed in front

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Sheeler and Marius de Zayas, "African Negro Sculpture," (New York: Modern Gallery, 1918): 1.

<sup>26</sup> This attribution, now commonly accepted, was made by Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada 1915-23* (New York: Abrams, 1994).

of one of Schamberg's machine paintings, as if to situate the work in some sort of artistic context (Figure 10). The sculpture's attribution has long been debated, in large part due to the ways in which Schamberg carefully orchestrated the photographs — and hence our perception — of the object to reinforce his authorship.

Stieglitz, of course, utilized similar strategies in his iconic image of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, first published in the May 1917 issue of *The Blind Man* (Figure 11). William Camfield has argued that Stieglitz's photograph was integral in disseminating Duchamp's work to a wider audience, and has critically shaped retrospective reading of the object, particularly in regard to the work's oft-cited connection with representations of the Madonna or Buddha. Camfield suggests that Stieglitz solidified the work's quasi-religious persona through exacting methods of composition and lighting, "Place[ing] *Fountain* exactly at our eye level, bringing it close, magnifying its presence, rotating it slightly on axis to set up just a touch of tension, and lighting it from above so that it is dramatically isolated against its setting yet also softly veiled, moody and mysterious."<sup>27</sup> These associations were further reinforced by the textual elements of article, which refer to the piece as "The Buddha of the Bathroom." The sculpture was later lost or destroyed, in many ways turning Stieglitz's image, and the photographer's distinct viewpoint, into a stand-in for Duchamp's original object.

This tangent is all to say that Sheeler's practice as a photographer of fine art emerged from an artistic scene that was deeply concerned with the transformative powers of photography, particularly as it relates to publicity and the consumption of art outside the gallery space.

Although Sheeler's tenure at the Met came much later, his photographs of the collection can be seen as a continuation of the "readymade" tradition in the photography of art objects. This

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<sup>27</sup> William Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Aesthetic Object, Icon, or Anti-Art?" in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Boston: MIT Press, 1992): 153.

conjecture is evident not only in Sheeler's use of particular photographic devices established in the 1910s and 20s, but in the all-too-obvious fact that these photographs appropriate existing visual material in the service of new, independent works of art. However, while Schamberg and Stieglitz's photographs implicitly criticize the institutional authority of museums and galleries, Sheeler adapts their approach to reinforce the position of the Met as one of the foremost repositories of art. In doing so the artist gently nudges the Museum towards something more modern, in keeping with the institutional agenda regarding reproductions and the popular dissemination of art during the War.

While Sheeler's images for the Met feature many of the same techniques, his photographs of the collection show much more restraint and intentionality, perhaps a result of the working conditions at the Met. The fact that Sheeler worked a regular, full-time schedule at the Museum allowed him to spend an unprecedented amount of time with the collection, which he appears to have had *carte blanche* access to with the support of a variety of curators. Nora Scott of the Egyptian department recalled that Sheeler moved very slowly, "like molasses in winter," studying each object at length and setting up precise lighting before embarking on the photograph.<sup>28</sup> He frequently produced multiple images, sometimes in both color and black and white film, as in his two details of Joos van Cleve's *Annunciation* (Figure 12). Sheeler even insisted on developing his own negatives in the Met's darkroom, and several colleagues reported of his earnest concern over print quality and reproduction.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Quotation comes from Wendy Besler, "Sheeler at the Metropolitan," (unpublished manuscript, 1980), a dissertation that is supposedly the most thorough source on Sheeler's work for the Met, but I could not find access to at this time. Stebbins Jr., and Keyes Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Also, from Besler, "Sheeler at the Metropolitan," as cited in Stebbins Jr., and Keyes Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 47.

Sheeler's maturity is particularly evident in his use of lighting. In some instances, such as in one photograph of a Flemish polychrome sculpture, Sheeler uses light to draw attention to details that would otherwise go unnoticed (Figure 13). A sharp diagonal shadow runs directly through the figure's raised right hand, working to highlight the delicate molding of her fingers. In other photographs, Sheeler uses light in an additive or symbolic manner. For example, in his photograph of the *Buddha Vairocana*, Sheeler angles the light to produce a shadow reminiscent of a mandorla around the sculpture (Figure 14). Perhaps an accidental reference, the image shares intriguing compositional similarities with Stieglitz's *Fountain*; Sheeler's Buddha is positioned at a nearly identical angle as the urinal and is photographed under equally moody lighting as a means of expressing the figure's religiosity.

One of Sheeler's most successful images is a photograph of the *Statuette of the lady Tiye*, a superlative work of Egyptian art dating from the 14th century BCE (Figure 15). Sheeler shoots the object in semi-profile, obscuring the figure's left arm, positioning the light source to the right of the frame. In doing so, Sheeler creates a shadow that gives the suggestion of the missing arm, rather than showing it in full. This type of framing defies traditional modes of photographing sculpture within an institutional context. Heinrich Wölfflin, the 19th century formalist, theorized that sculpture should only be photographed from the angle at which is normally viewed in the museum setting. He wrote in 1896 that "one destroys [the sculpture's] effectiveness when one takes away its main silhouette; without batting an eye, present-day people allow their uncultivated eyes to put up with the most disagreeable overlaps and lack of clarity."<sup>30</sup> Of course, clarity was not necessarily the artist's goal. Instead, Sheeler appears to be in pursuit of something more graphic and suggestive. The image was used for the cover of an otherwise traditional guide

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<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin "How One Should Photograph Sculpture," trans. Geraldine A. Johnson, *Art History*, volume 36, issue 1 (February 2013): 53.

to the Museum's collection of Egyptian statuettes, representing a remarkable departure from convention.<sup>31</sup>

Sheeler's real innovation at the Met, however, is the detail shot. From what evidence survives, it does not seem like Sheeler made any details of art objects in the early part of his career, and that this development is distinct to his practice at the Met. As previously discussed, Sheeler began making details of paintings for the *Bulletin* as early as 1942. It appears that the Museum explicitly encouraged Sheeler to make close-ups with the intention of reprinting the covers to "fulfill the popular demand" for smaller reproductions.<sup>32</sup> In 1943 alone, the Museum sold over 50,000 color offprints of Sheeler's *Bulletin* covers in both the museum gift shop and newsstands set up in subway stations.<sup>33</sup> Sheeler continued creating detail images throughout his time at the Met, culminating in 1945 with the publication of a photobook featuring tightly cropped images of the Met's reliefs from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II.<sup>34</sup>

Sheeler had actually begun photographing the reliefs, which were at the time displayed prominently in the Great Hall, soon after his arrival in 1942. At Sheeler's instance, this project evolved into a lavishly illustrated photobook titled *The Great King... King of Assyria*, believed to be one of the first books published by the Museum with an expressly general audience in mind.<sup>35</sup> The photographer was reportedly closely involved with the book's production, from contributing to its thematic inception to assisting with layout design.<sup>36</sup> Unlike other contemporaneous guides to the collection, *The Great King* has relatively little textual elements and is primarily composed

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<sup>31</sup> Nora E. Scott and Charles Sheeler, *Egyptian Statuettes*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1946).

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, Jayne, and Harrison, "Review of the Year," 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Sheeler, *The Great King... King of Assyria: Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1946)

<sup>35</sup> Besler, *Charles Sheeler*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Stebbins Jr., and Keyes Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 47.

of close-up images, set against a stark, black background (Figure 16). The panels were a particularly appropriate subject for Sheeler's close examination as they are made of "Mosul marble," a type of gypsum stone celebrated in the ancient world for its relative softness, which allowed for highly detailed mark-making.<sup>37</sup> Each of Sheeler's details typically consists of a small rectangular section of the panel that displays variation in line, texture, and relief height (Figure 17). The cropping often renders the subject matter of the panel illegible, reducing the content of the relief to its basic formal elements. The book was well received and was named as one of the Fifty Books of the Year by The American Institute of Graphic Arts.<sup>38</sup> Sheeler also produced several fine art prints from his *Great King* negatives, some of which were accessioned into the collection at the time of their creation (see 43.83.3-5).

Sheeler was in the process of embarking on another photo book on Cloisters, the Met's Medieval branch in Fort Tryon Park, when he was terminated for budgetary reasons on July 15, 1945.<sup>39</sup> The photographer allegedly wanted to negotiate with the Museum to extend his residency, but both his wife and gallerist urged him to return to painting. In his resignation letter, Sheeler expressed regret that the Museum didn't have the chance to "publish more fine editions making use of my photographs."<sup>40</sup> The Museum retained ownership of the entirety of Sheeler's negatives produced during his employment. This body of work largely receded from memory into the Met's vast archives until the late 1960s.

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<sup>37</sup>, Michael Seymour, "Nimrud," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000): [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nimr\\_1/hd\\_nimr\\_1.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nimr_1/hd_nimr_1.htm).

<sup>38</sup> Francis Henry Taylor, Horace H. F. Jayne, and Laurence S. Harrison "Review of the Year: 1946," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* New Series, Vol. 6, No. 1, page 26.

<sup>39</sup> Stebbins Jr., and Keyes Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Sheeler to Mr. Laurence Harrison, first published in Besler "Sheeler at the Metropolitan," cited in Stebbins Jr., and Keyes Jr., *Charles Sheeler*, 47.

A good portion of Sheeler's prints remained in the museum's archives until 1969, when they were officially accessioned into the collection as art objects. Several exhibition-quality prints found their way to the private market, including a substantial collection belonging to David H. McAlpin, which was eventually donated to the Princeton Museum of Art in 1971. In the early 1980s the Museum formally catalogued Sheeler's negatives under the direction of curatorial researcher Wendy Besler, who wrote her dissertation on the photographer's work for the Museum. In efforts to publicize this previously forgotten body of work, the Met hired Alan B. Newman to create a limited-edition portfolio printed from Sheeler's original negatives.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these earlier efforts, very little has been written about Sheeler's work for the Met in contemporary art historical literature. Sheeler's contribution to the Met is unparalleled in the institution's storied history and is deserving of further evaluation. If the Museum were to consider digitizing Sheeler's negatives, research on this subject would advance substantially. Although a product of the Modern condition, Sheeler's Met photographs aptly demonstrate persistence of art as a malleable, yet enduring aspect of our culture.

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<sup>41</sup> See Besler, *Charles Sheeler*.

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# CHARLES SHEELER

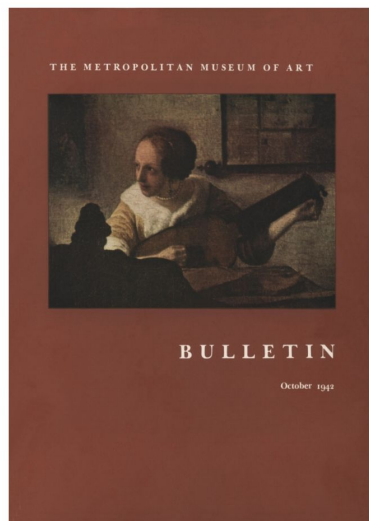
## MODERNIST AT THE MET

By Rose Bishop

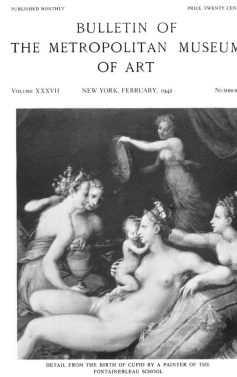
- **Figure 1:** Advertisement for Bonwit Teller, shot at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Richard Avedon, c.1944-1945.



- **Figure 2:** Cover of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, featuring photograph of Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Lute* (c.1662-63) by Charles Sheeler, October 1942.



- **Figure 3:** Cover of the *Bulletin*, by unknown photographer, February 1942. Featuring *The Birth of Cupid* by Master of Flora. (c. 1550-1590)



- **Figure 4:** Postcard of the "Penn Sphinx," by Charles Sheeler, c. 1916.



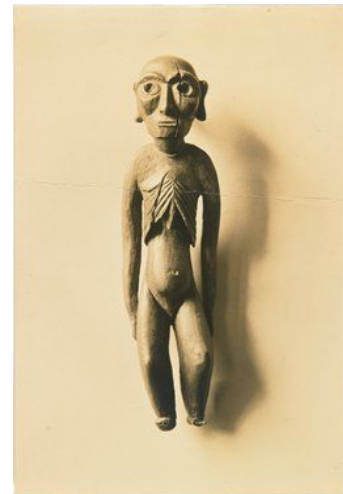
- **Figure 5:** *Head of a Woman* by Pablo Picasso, by Alfred Stieglitz. Published in August 1921 issue of *Camera Works*.



- **Figure 6:** Photograph of Oceanic figurines in front of painting by Morton Schamberg, taken by Charles Sheeler, c. 1917.



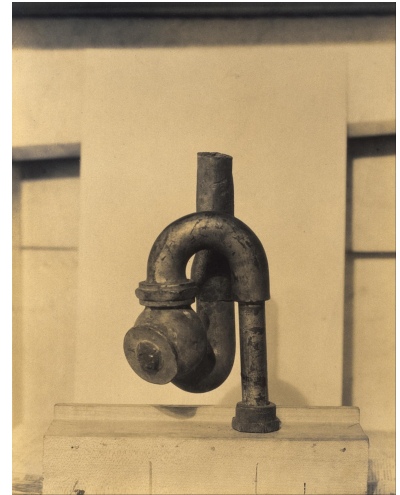
- **Figure 7:** *African Wood Carving*, by Morton Schamberg, c. 1900-1918. Minneapolis Institute of Art.



- **Figure 8:** Selection from *African Negro Wooden Sculptures*, by Charles Sheeler, 1918. Published by Marius de Zayas.



- **Figure 9:** Photograph of *God*, taken by Morton Schamberg, c.1917



- **Figure 10:** Photograph of *God*, taken by Morton Schamberg, c.1917



- **Figure 11:** Spread from *The Blind Man*, featuring photograph of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* by Alfred Stieglitz, May 1917

Photograph by H. Mutt

THE RIGHT BY THE INDEPENDENTS

## THE BLIND MAN

### The Richard Mutt Case

*They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.*

*What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain?—*

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

**"Buddha of the Bathroom"**

I suppose monkeys hated to lose their tail. Necessary, useful and an ornament, monkey imagination could not stretch to a tailless existence (and frankly, do you see the biological beauty of our loss of them?), yet now that we use it to sit we get on pretty well without them. But evolution is not pleasing to the monkey race; there is a death in every change and we monkeys do not love death as we should. We are like those philosophers whom Dante placed in his Inferno with their heads out the wrong way on their shoulders. We walk forward looking backward, each with more of his professors' personality than his own. Our eyes are not ours.

The ideas that our ancestors have joined together let us man put himself? In *La Dissolution des Idées*, Remy de Gourmont, quietly analyses, shows how sacred is the marriage of ideas. At least one charac-

ing thing about our human institutions is that although a man marry, he can never be safe a husband. Besides being a money-making device and the one man that one woman can sleep with in legal purity without sin he may even be as well some other woman's very personification of her abstract idea. She, white to his employees he is nothing but their "Boss," to his children only their "Father," and to himself, certainly something more complex.

But with objects and ideas it is different. Recently we have had a chance to observe their metaphysical monogamy.

When the ladies of *The Society of Independent Artists* finally resolved to remove the bit of sculpture called the *Fountain* sent in by Richard Mutt, because the object was irrevocably associated in their staid minds with a certain natural function of a mediocre sort. Yet to any "innocent" eye

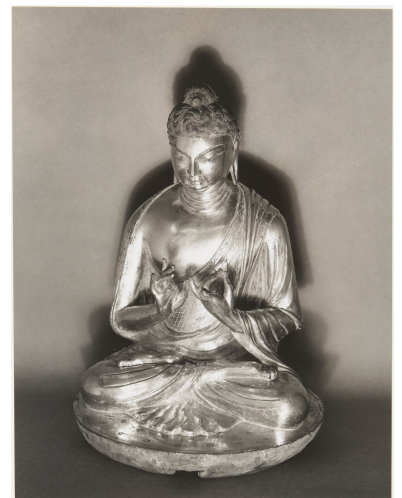
- **Figure 12:** Details of Joos van Cleve's *Annunciation* (c.1525), by Charles Sheeler, c. fall 1942



- **Figure 13:** Photograph of *Holy Woman* (c.1480) by Charles Sheeler, c. 1943-45



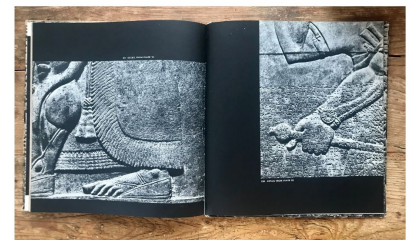
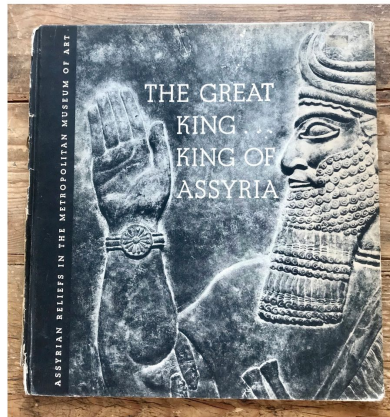
- **Figure 14:** Photo of Buddha Vairocana (early 8th century), by Charles Sheeler, c. 1943-45



- **Figure 15:** Details of Joos van Cleve's Annunciation (c.1525), by Charles Sheeler, c. fall 1942



- **Figure 16:** *The Great King..King of Assyria*, with photographs by Charles Sheeler, 1946.



- **Figure 17:** Detail of Relief Panel (ca. 883–859), by Charles Sheeler, c.1943-45

