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Selective Visions: The Art of Ralston Crawford

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Selective Visions
The Art of Ralston Crawford

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From the collections of Neelon, John, and Robert Crawford
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., NYC
Acknowledgements

The senior Art-Historical Methods seminar is unique among undergraduate programs in art history in that it offers students the opportunity to become curators for a semester wherein they select, research, write a catalogue for, and organize a public exhibition in The Trout Gallery. In the short three and one-half months of the semester, this process always seems a more than difficult challenge. Not unexpectedly, however, the students rose to the occasion and devoted a tremendous amount of energy, time, and enthusiasm not only to the course material for the seminar, but also to researching and writing the entries for this catalogue. The thematic approach, installation design, and idea for organizing the catalogue are the result of their initiative and creativity and they should be proud of the quality of the process and final product. Their sustained industry and good humor throughout the semester has made the seminar a pleasure to teach, and I would like to extend my congratulations to them on a job well done.

This year’s seminar topic and exhibition are unprecedented in the history of the Art-Historical Methods seminar in that the works for the exhibition have not been drawn from the permanent collection of The Trout Gallery, but rather have been graciously loaned by the prestigious Hirsch & Adler Galleries in New York City. Thanks to the generosity, interest, and hard work of Eric W. Baumgartner, an alumnus of Dickinson with a major in Fine Arts (class of ’79), who is now Director of American Art at Hirsch & Adler, we are privileged to have nineteen paintings of the distinguished American artist, Ralston Crawford, as the subject of this year’s seminar and exhibition. These paintings are from the collections of Neelon, John, and Robert Crawford, and thus we extend our appreciation to them, and our sincere and heartfelt gratitude to Eric and his staff at Hirsch & Adler. The opportunity for current Dickinson students to study and work with paintings by an artist of Crawford’s stature has been an invaluable and rewarding experience.

Many colleagues at Dickinson contributed their time and expertise to the seminar and exhibition. Without their help and interest, the quality of the seminar and the exhibition itself would not have been possible. The students and I especially thank Prof. Peter Lukehart, Director of The Trout Gallery and Associate Professor of Art History, for his enthusiastic support of the seminar and exhibition despite many other professional commitments. My personal thanks to Peter for helping with the preliminary selection of paintings along with Eric at Hirsch & Adler this past summer, and for sharing the responsibility of transporting them to The Trout Gallery.

The students were aided in their research by our Fine Arts library liaison, Kirk Moll, whose expertise, course web-page design, and enthusiasm provided a source of support and comfort throughout the semester. Similarly, our appreciation goes to Duwayne Franklin, Gallery Registrar and Preparator, who made the paintings available for study by the seminar as a whole and on an individual basis for each student when needed. We are also indebted to Duwayne for his advice and supervision of the installation process, which forms an important part of the students’ experience in the seminar, and to his staff for ably assisting in the process. We also thank Wendy Pires for making the exhibition accessible to a wider audience through the Gallery’s Outreach Program.

In the design and publication of the catalogue, the seminar met twice with Kim Nichols and Dottie Reed, co-directors of the Publications Office. The result of their practical guidance, creative suggestions, and visual conceptualization is the present catalogue. We are similarly grateful to Pierce Bounds for his always professional and quickly-delivered photographs of the works in the exhibition without which this catalogue would have no reproductions.

Without the organization, knowledge, and clear thinking of Fine Arts Department Secretary/Gallery Administrative Assistant Stephanie Reisser, neither the final editing of the catalogue, invitations, opening reception, and all issues related to the exhibition would happen.

Finally, the publication of this catalogue was made possible by the generosity of The Ruth Trout Endowment. Ruth’s unflagging commitment to the educational role of the visual arts through The Trout Gallery is one of the most unique and exciting aspects of the liberal arts experience at Dickinson. We thank her for her continued interest, support, and participation.

Melinda Schlitt, Associate Professor, Art History

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RALSTON CRAWFORD (1906-1978) occupies a unique and fascinating place in American twentieth-century art. As a painter, printmaker, and photographer his art has been identified with “Precisionism,” “Modernism,” “New Realism,” and “Abstractionism,” but with none of these stylistic categories exclusively. While critics and historians have generally agreed, however, that Crawford’s images of the American industrial landscape made during the 1930’s rank among the best examples of “Precisionism,” in which the works of his contemporaries, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, Stuart Davis, Niles Spencer, and Georgia O’Keeffe figure prominently, critics and historians also concur that Crawford’s work after 1939, and especially after World War II, represents his most original and effective expression of an aesthetic vision and pictorial language. Despite this retrospective critical consensus, Crawford’s work after 1939 was not immediately “popular” with the critics and art-buying public, and it has ironically been less recognized and appreciated historically than the work made prior to that period. He belongs to the same generation as the Abstract Expressionists, yet never received the notoriety of the artists who represented that style, even though it can be argued that much of his work is as imaginative, innovative, and conceptually sophisticated. This condition owes far more to the vicissitudes of fortune and the art market than to the quality and effect of Crawford’s art. The substance of Crawford’s contribution and achievement is considerable, and his work has been increasingly readdressed and re-evaluated in recent years to a degree never recognized during Crawford’s lifetime.

The nineteen paintings in this exhibition span virtually the entirety of Crawford’s career, from the early 1930’s through 1975. In making the preliminary selection of works from which the student curators would eventually make a final selection for the exhibition, Peter Lukehart II, together with Eric Baumgartner of Hirschi & Adler Galleries, endeavored to include as broad and representative a range of subjects within Crawford’s art as was possible: still lifes, landscapes, seascapes, industry, war, and geometric abstraction inform the thematic variety of the exhibition, and therefore the thematic variety of the curators’ essays.

Crawford grounded his art and the inspiration for his art in direct experience of the visible world and his life within that world. Subject matter was therefore always central to his art, but was never privileged at the expense of a larger and more synthetic artistic goal, even if that goal was not immediately evident in the work. Of the many statements Crawford made about his art, the following two underscore the shifting but dependent relationship between subject and painting in Crawford’s art:

The times I have started without a direct physical reference point are very few. And it doesn’t matter to me if the source is clear to the person looking at the picture, if there is some kind of residue, a fertilizing residue, of this initial experience. If it hasn’t got that, it’s sterile, at least in my opinion.

I don’t feel obligated to reveal the forms. They may be totally absent to the viewer of the work, or even to myself, but what is there, however abstract, grows out of something I have seen. I make pictures.

From his early studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts with Hugh Breckenridge from 1927 to 1930 and at the Barnes Foundation during those same years, to his travels around the world throughout his life, Crawford readily acknowledged the artists who inspired him and from whom he continued to learn valuable lessons throughout his career; Cézanne and Matisse were paramount in this regard, although Renoir and Seurat, Picasso and Braque, Rembrandt, and especially Goya were also painters he carefully studied and admired greatly—the impact of his engagement with these artists, among others, is everywhere evident in Crawford’s own unique vision and style. Consistent with his artistic goals and the visible evidence of his images, Crawford always admitted feeling a closer affinity to the artists who represented European Modernism than to those who were more distinctly “American,” and he was proud of the artistic patrimony he had selected: “...Reference to influences is made without regret or apology. I consider indebtedness to other artists highly desirable.” This affinity found its expression in a structured emotionalism in Crawford’s work, always bound to the elements of color, form, and space, but never lapping into the trivial or redundant.

The student curators, in searching for a theme that would inform their research and analysis and unify the paintings in the exhibition, tackled the ever-present issue of “Precisionism” in Crawford’s work as well as the much broader and more problematic question of what is “American” about American twentieth-century art. While the question of an “American” style is obviously central to any discussion of twentieth-century painting, the students prudently elected to address this issue in the specific and circumscribed contexts of their essays rather than foreground it as the foundation of the exhibition. In reading scholarly and critical studies about this issue as well as the statements of twentieth-century artists, the students quickly realized the quandary of ambiguity that would soon engulf them. They especially appreciated the remarks of Crawford himself on this issue, and those of Jackson Pollock:
While I was born in Canada, I have lived most of my life in this country. So in a general way I am an American—British flavour. But I have never been concerned in any way with putting an American or un-American stamp on my work...5

The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd...An American is an American and his painting would naturally be qualified by that fact, whether he wills it or not. But the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country.6

Similarly, while “Precisionism” is directly relevant to Crawford’s art of the 1930’s and the way in which he has been represented in critical and historical discourse, the seminar decided that beginning with Precisionism as a thematic foundation for addressing Crawford’s work from the 1930’s through the 1970’s would limit and foreclose the possibility of finding a common thread with which to unite the nineteen paintings in the exhibition. After studying, discussing, and thinking about Ralston Crawford’s art and the nineteen paintings in the exhibition, the students discovered that what was consistently present in all of Crawford’s work, for which the nineteen paintings could serve as a microcosm, was the issue of painting itself; that is, the act of painting and the visual language of a painting or, more precisely, the relationship between what a painter does and what a painting is. The formal and critical tension between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, between the material and illusion of painting (an issue central to twentieth-century art and indeed, the western tradition), became the theme for the students’ research and organization of the exhibition.

In their essays, the student curators look closely at the visual language of Crawford’s paintings within the context of his life and career in an effort to address how they “work.” What emerges is the recognition of a vibrant, sometimes understated, sometimes animated tension between forms, color, and space that is often completed or left unresolved by both artist and viewer. What the student curators also discovered during the course of the seminar, is that the subtlety and sophistication of Crawford’s pictorial language and artistic invention resist any easy insertion into a familiar, stylistic “ism.” Ironically, this same subtlety and originality that distinguishes Crawford from many of his contemporaries, has also contributed to his being somewhat marginalized by those critics and historians who are often willingly straight-jacketed by stylistic categories.

Even a casual familiarity with Crawford’s art and life reveals his committed pursuit of a visual “truth.” His art is marked by an originality that is uncommon and a visual language that is accessible without being ordinary. Crawford constantly challenges a viewer’s perceptual mettle in front of one of his pictures, but there is a guaranteed satisfaction for any observer willing to engage in a dialogue—one learns something new in the process of seeing his work.

Paintings are impermanent and incomplete—in time, all will decay and disappear. But as Crawford’s paintings demonstrate and as artists for centuries have known, the idea, of which the individual works are fragmentary mirrors, will survive the destruction of its various reflections.8 Selective Visions: The Art of Ralston Crawford is a recognition of the significance and integrity of the artistic idea and a tribute to the success of its visual realization.

Melinda Schlitt


5. Ibid.


7. On Precisionism, see Precisionism in America 1915-1941; Rereading Reality, ed., Gail Stavitsky (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The Montclair Art Museum, 1996). Precisionism was coined in 1927-29 by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and other critics in order to characterize certain stylistic and thematic similarities among several artists who never actually formed a declared group or school. In her essay in the volume cited above, Gail Stavitsky has remarked that “by establishing links between America’s past and present, the Precisionists affirmed the country’s pervasive quest for national identity. Not only were they among the first to adapt their selectively realist styles to the precise geometry of the burgeoning machine age, but they also spearheaded the revival of interest in America’s fine art, folk art, and applied art traditions.” (p.8).

And further, “The essence of the Precisionist aesthetic was an objective synthesis of abstraction and realism, manifested by hard-edged, static, smoothly brushed, simplified forms rendered in unmodulated colors. This solver, matter-of-fact mode of perception, nurtured by mechanization and vernacular design, was regarded as distinctively American.” (p.39)

8. I have adapted this analogy from C. Dempsey, Aesthetic Continuity and the Beginnings of Baroque Style (Glückstadt: J.J. Augustin, 1977), 72-74.
Because of uncertainties in the exhibition and publication history of some works in the exhibition, exhibition and publication histories are listed for only those works for which we had secure and complete information.
Still Life: Fruit on Table, 1931

Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
Unsigned
Collection of Neelon Crawford, Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Still Life: Fruit on Table is an example of Ralston Crawford’s attempt to reconcile the problem of three-dimensional objects and a two-dimensional surface. The brightly-painted fruit is precariously placed on the cloth so that it looks as though it will roll off the table at any moment. The radiant yellow and green fruit capture the viewer’s attention because the remainder of the painting is gold, white and brown. The yellow fruit is highlighted with white, while the green fruit is highlighted with the same tone of green as the other fruit. This emphasizes the fruit as the central focus, rather than the table or cloth. The lumpy white cloth hangs off the edges of the table, and it seems unimaginable that the fruit will stay so perfectly placed on the haphazardly arranged cloth. Through careful modeling and shadows, however, Crawford creates depth and three-dimensionality. His goal is not necessarily to create realistic-looking fruit, but rather to create a spatial tension where the fruit almost appears to slip off the table.

Paul Cézanne was a great model to Crawford and “stood as a mountain in Ralston Crawford’s young life,” as Barbara Haskell has observed. In 1906, Theodore Duret commented that Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) painted pictures that “offered a range of color of very great intensity.” Cézanne’s arrangement of colors, shapes, and lines created intense images that Crawford admired and emulated. While studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Barnes Foundation, Crawford was exposed to Cézanne’s work and attempted to imitate Cézanne’s forms and colors in his own still lifes. The painted fruit in Crawford’s Still Life: Fruit on Table stands out against the light-colored cloth with its bright greens and yellows. The colors of the cloth, table and background wall are all similar in tone and blend together in a way that highlights Crawford’s modeled fruit as the focus of the painting. However, the fruit is not the focus of this painting. The fruit may be what the viewer sees first because it is in the center, but the focus of this painting is the dynamic tension of recognizable images. Crawford uses the fruit simply to highlight the slippage of spatial planes.

Crawford’s Still Life: Fruit on Table is strikingly similar to Cézanne’s arrangement of fruit in his Still Life with Apples (1895–1900). While Cézanne’s color scheme in this work is livelier and more varied, Crawford certainly could have seen this painting. Cézanne’s fruit is laid out on a white cloth and rests in the indentations made by the sharp angles of the folded cloth just as Crawford’s fruit does. The cloth hangs off the table edge and entices the viewer to explore what is on the table. The table top tilts downward slightly and a plate in the left corner is angled up oddly, which creates a sense of tension in the painting.

Charles Sheeler was a contemporary of Crawford’s and was known primarily as a “Precisionist.” Early in his career, however, Sheeler was also attracted to the art of Cézanne, and this is apparent when viewing Sheeler’s Plums on a Plate (1910). The simple color palette is composed of bright purples, yellows, and greens. The fruit is modeled with shadows and highlights of opposite colors and alludes to a three-dimensional form through Sheeler’s use of thick paint. Sheeler studied with Crawford at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under Hugh Breckenridge, so their models and ideas were similar in their early years. Breckenridge’s “modernist” ideas influenced these artists and pointed them toward working with simple shapes and solid masses. In reference to Cézanne’s Still Life with Apples, Sheeler said: “That picture was painted by one of the Angels. Incredible.” The basic color scheme of Plums on a Plate was borrowed from Cézanne and, as in Crawford’s Still Life: Fruit on Table, the surface tilts forward and the fruit is in danger of spilling out of the picture. In both Crawford’s and Sheeler’s paintings, the fruit clings fiercely to its surface in order to resist the tension of the sliding spatial plane.

Crawford was not concerned with producing the decorative. Instead, he believed that “color should function as a building block of form.” He did not use color to attract his viewer, but rather to help the viewer understand the form and function of his painting. He wanted the viewer to understand that the subject of the painting is not the fruit, but the implication of movement in his illusion of space. The color highlights the act of painting. Color has a specific purpose, and that purpose is to demonstrate spatial tension.

Melanie Baird

Fruit and Pitcher on a Brown Three-Legged Table, 1932

Oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches
Unsigned
Collection of Neelon Crawford, Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Fruit and Pitcher on a Brown Three-Legged Table is similar to Still Life: Fruit on Table and is unlike Bookcase with Sculpture, because it represents an interior. There is no implication of an outside world. The painting is an attempt to address the issue of three-dimensionality using the simple idea of a table in a domestic space. It is obvious that the fruit, pitcher, and table are not the focus of the work: the focus is the act of painting. Crawford commented that, “my pictures mean exactly what they say, and what they say is said in colors and shapes.” Therefore, the carefully selected vibrant yellow of the fruit and dark brown of the table have significance. The bright yellow piece of fruit balanced on the table serves to attract the viewer's attention and entices the viewer to examine the rest of the painting. Once the viewer looks at the table, it is clear that the dark brown of the table stands in sharp contrast to the white cabinet behind it. These color choices serve to highlight the middle ground and the background respectively. The foreground holds only a fraction of a rug, but is important in order to differentiate the spatial depth between the placement of objects.

Although Crawford’s depiction of a table is not perfectly precise, that is not his goal. He attempts to create different spatial planes and convince his viewer that he has represented the illusion of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional canvas. The table looks a bit unstable (it could use another leg for balance) and the table top should, structurally, be angled up a little more. However, Crawford’s goal is to create a slippage between spatial planes and show different planes in juxtaposition to each other rather than to depict realistic objects.

In a statement from thirty years later in 1967, Crawford remarked that he had “little interest, really none in making the kind of picture [he knew] how to make. In such a procedure there is for me no enlightenment.” So, although his painting may not seem “correct” or “realistic” to some viewers, that is not the point. To Crawford, the creation of Fruit and Pitcher on a Brown Three-Legged Table revolves around a learning experience and his progression as an artist. It is “finished” in terms of the artist’s objective of painting a picture that successfully presents the spatial relationship between objects and space.

When asked in 1977 what differences were apparent in the art world during the 1930’s and the 1970’s, Crawford replied that, “In those days it was hard to find a painter who never let a painting leave his studio if he knew how to make it any better. It didn’t matter who wanted to buy one next week, if it wasn’t ready, it wasn’t ready.” Crawford took the time to make sure his painting met his goals and was successful. We can assume that he was here pleased with the contrast between the dark brown table and the white cabinets, and the opposing roundness of the table and pitcher to the straight lines of the tiles and walls.

Charles Sheeler had painted Interior (1926) which is strikingly similar to Fruit and Pitcher on a Brown Three-Legged Table. Sheeler’s work features a table top angled upwards in the center of the work, which creates a slight awkwardness. The image is filled with furniture, from a bed in the left-hand corner with a brightly-colored, plaid bedspread, to a rug filled with geometric shapes. There is a small table in the center of the image and a larger table that looms in the background. The furniture looks “off-kilter” and appears as if it is about to slide out of the frame. The geometric shapes of the rug, tables, and bed create a “patchwork of interlocking squares.” The bright colors of Sheeler’s image encourage the viewer to sort out the shapes. In this sense, the viewer is drawn to the white pitcher and the fruit on the table because those are the only objects that are not rectangular. Therefore, they stand out and serve to highlight the angle of the table. Both Crawford and Sheeler create a strange distortion of space that adds to the effect of slippage in their works.

Melanie Baird

Ralston Crawford's *Bookcase with Sculpture* is a painting composed of various styles seen in other works by Crawford. The modeled bust on the bookcase stands in sharp contrast to the geometric shapes in the rest of the painting. The bookcase and bust are modeled with light and dark shadows to highlight their details, but the modeling does not seem to correspond with the precise features of the world outside. In Barbara Gallati's review of Crawford's 1983 exhibit at the Robert Miller Gallery, she commented that his work before 1944 possessed a "pristine clarity."* Bookcase with Sculpture embodies this idea: the sharp, straight lines of the window and bookcase are highlighted by the contrasting colors of the light blue sky and the darker blue wall, as is the dark blue wall against the white bookcase. This painting diverges from *Still Life: Fruit on Table* (1931) and *Fruit and Pitcher on a Brown Three-Legged Table* (1932) in that it includes a view to the outside, industrial world. Also, the large scale of this work is unique among Crawford's still lifes. The other still lifes were only painted two to three years earlier, yet they stand in opposition to Crawford's newest style.

This is a seemingly simple composition, consisting of a bookcase and a window. The central focus of the painting is a small green book which seems out of place in the rest of the composition because of the industrial emphasis, but on closer inspection, the book serves a significant purpose. It draws the viewer's attention to the center of the work with its oblique angle to the bookcase, its vibrant green color, and its rectangular shape that mimics the shape of the bookcase and the window. The majority of the imagery is precise and geometric, except for the book and the bust. The delicate features and subtle shadows of the bust do not correspond with the geometric clarity of the rest of the painting. Both of these objects seem as though they belong in an earlier still life by Crawford. The paint is built up on the canvas, which may indicate that Crawford spent a lot of time modeling the bust in order to make it look "correct." While the remainder of the painting is composed of straight lines and angles, the bust is round, modeled, and carefully represented.

Although the bookcase may seem like an odd addition to the room, it too serves an important purpose. Without the bookcase, there would be no indication of depth. The window would blend into the wall and it would be hard to decipher the difference between the interior and exterior. With the addition of the bookcase, there is a suggestion of different spatial planes. The bookcase partially blocks the view to the exterior and allows the viewer to understand the implied spatial separation. Without the bookcase, the window would blend into the wall and look like an illusionistic, depicted painting instead of a vista.

The subject of this work is certainly not the bookcase and bust, but the attempt to address three-dimensionality. The similar tones in the color of the bust blend into the sky and the building, but at the same time, the detailed representation of the bust creates depth. As Virginia Tillyard has remarked, Crawford uses color "entirely consciously for its various properties, those of dynamism through contrast, and of recession and depth through overlapping tones of the same color." The contrasting tones of the wall and bookcase create depth with their opposing colors, while the similar tones of the bookcase and bust blend together to advance into the foreground of the painting.

Stephen Eisenman commented that in the 1930's, Crawford "adopted large formats and crisp tonal contrasts...which documents a fascination with modern engineering, surface textures, and human physiognomy."* Bookcase with Sculpture is an example of Crawford's incorporation of the industrial world as well as the human figure into a still life. This work is atypical for his earlier still lifes in its inclusion of a window overlooking a vibrant orange building and dark smokestacks. The book and bookcase highlight the interior and convince the viewer that the image is an interior, but the viewer is also persuaded to look past the bookcase into the outside world. *Bookcase with Sculpture* draws attention to itself not only through the sharp lines and vivid color, but also its large scale, which commands attention.

Melanie Baird

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Bucks County Houses, 1931

Oil on canvas, 26 x 20 inches
Unsigned
Collection of Neelon Crawford, Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Bucks County House, which is one of Ralston Crawford's earliest works, displays geometric architectural forms, mottled paint (which is the application of a mixture of colors), and deceptive use of three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. This work is related to the principles Crawford learned at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. His appropriation of these techniques was inspired by studying with Hugh Breckenridge at the Pennsylvania Academy. As a student, Crawford focused his concern on the use of color and paint, with a wide range of mottled colors and heavy, thick paint. Although he was no longer studying in the Academy by 1931, his work still reflected the technique he learned there. In addition, the conflict between three- and two-dimensional space demonstrates another idea he worked with during his study in Pennsylvania. This time, it was through the Barnes Foundation that Crawford was exposed to Cubist painters, such as Braque and Picasso.

In Bucks County House, Crawford creates a subtle tension by purposefully manipulating perspective and space. The creation of three-dimensional space isn't consistent; the subject is contained almost completely in the foreground without any background beyond the flat sky while another hill in the distance limits the perception of depth. The porch doesn't make sense as a three-dimensional representation, since the slope of its roof is only partially seen when it should logically continue along the rest of the house. There is a tension between the forms in the painting that is attributable to the proximity of the three-dimensional and two-dimensional. The flatness of the peak of the roof and its line on the house in the foreground contrasts with the obvious three-dimensional representation of the chimney.

The handling of color in this work, along with the representation of spatial relationships, is indicative of Ralston Crawford's connection with the Pennsylvania School and the Barnes Foundation. These two institutions presented Crawford with the opportunity to view the work of Paul Cézanne who had left a great impression on Crawford through his representation of color and space. The Barnes collection, although not well-received by critics when first opened, represented an excellent collection of European painters. When one is confronted with images such as Farm of Jas de Bouffan, Gardanne (1885–1886) by Cézanne, the connection between Crawford and Cézanne is clear because of their shared ideals about the representation of space, and specifically, architectural forms in space.

Crawford erects his buildings along the same lines as Cézanne, including the use of geometric rectangles to build a three-dimensional form in space, although the land around the buildings seems visually softened by comparison. The mixture of softer, natural settings and the more substantial form of the buildings is then united through the use of color. The mix of tonal values that Crawford used can also be seen in Cézanne's work. The paint in Bucks County Houses is heavily worked up and mottled. This is easily seen in the house in the foreground and also in the thickly built-up mixture of tones Crawford utilized to paint one side of the house, and in the fact that these tones vary. Even the sky receives this work up of paint, although it only has one tonal value.

Although the impressions of Cubist paintings such as George Braque's Houses at L'Estaque (1908) on Crawford are regarded as self-evident in many of his works, this conclusion seems less obvious for Bucks County Houses. When confronted with Cubist landscapes, it is the way in which Crawford builds the painting around the buildings that reveals the relationship. The structure in the foreground is created around an interlocking effect between forms. The building in the back appears to be connected to the main building as the front porch is attached to it while occupying its own rectangular space. There are also the cement blocks of varying geometric shapes interwoven in front of the house. This seems like a very simplified derivative of the same design Braque used in a work such as the Houses at L'Estaque, where each part of the house leads into another and is woven around the trees. The relation of this painting to Crawford's years of study at the Pennsylvania Academy and connection with the Barnes Foundation is seen through the borrowing of concepts from the works which those institutions made available to him. Crawford's studies of Cubist design and of Cézanne are filtered and reconfigured to create the vision that is uniquely his.

Sarah Spanburgh

Tracks, New Hope, Pennsylvania, c.1930's

Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches
Signed (at lower right): Crawford
Collection of Neelon Crawford, Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

In Tracks, New Hope, Pennsylvania, Crawford demonstrates his relationship with the Precisionists while he retains the problem of three-dimensional and two-dimensional space. Barbara Haskell points out that [works] from 1934 and 1935 verify Crawford's concern for the solidification of forms into planes and cylinders... They also reveal his penchant for sober monochromes and his technique of modulating brushy, closely valued hues within individual color areas so that each appeared distinct. 1

The date given for this work is the 1930's, but when we consider Haskell's quote stating that Crawford is "solidifying" form but still painting with a "brushy" technique, Tracks appears to have been created during a narrower period in the middle of the decade. Nonetheless, while color and form converge into a clear definition of space that hints at the clarity and "cleanliness" of painting that leads the Precisionists to be called, "Immaculates," this work cannot be considered an "authentic" Precisionist work.

In Tracks, Crawford works the paint in a built-up manner, but the use of color to create space is also consistent. The two rectangular buildings in the middle demonstrate this effect. While the flat side of each building is not a solid color and is built up, the front sides parallel to the tracks are more mottled, but are uniformely dark. On the other hand, the flat sides are light, less worked up, and clearly show the three-dimensional qualities of the roof's overhang on those sides with a distinct but subtle shadow. The shadow reinforces the perception of the buildings in space, heightening the three-dimensional space of the central structures. Crawford also uses the contrast between dark and light in the same manner in order to give three dimensions to the two bins adjacent to the second building. Each side of each bin, which is located parallel to the corresponding side of the building, reflects the same dark or light tone. This is the solidifying effect that Haskell speaks of that can be seen to place Tracks with the Precisionists, but when compared with works such as Charles Sheeler's Bucks County Barn (1923), the lack of polish in Crawford's work is visible. Sheeler's painting of a series of barns is crisp, clean, and almost photographic in the sharp use of color as opposed to the mottled tonal mix employed by Crawford.

The intrusion of two-dimensional space is also present in Tracks. In the flat, depthless background and the cut-off building on the left, which are painted without a third dimension, Crawford utilizes imperfect perspective to increase this juxtaposition of spatial differences. The vehicle with the pole—or the cart—in front of the buildings does not fit in with the rest of the structures when the painting is viewed straight on. Ideally, the viewer would be able to see into the cart because one is looking down into the scene, however, this is not possible. The lack of uniform spatial representation deviates from the "immaculate" representation characteristic of Precisionist work.

In Tracks, New Hope, Pennsylvania Crawford has sharpened his elements, making the contrast between three- and two-dimensional space sharp and clear. His use of flat color and radically simplified forms in the mid-thirties, and reference to the industrial subject, are the key elements that mark his placement in Precisionism. 2 However, Crawford does not sharpen this image enough that it can be classified as a pure Precisionist work. The color is still mottled, the tension between two- and three-dimensional space is at work and, because of these reasons, the painting should not be confined within the stylistic category of Precisionism.

Sarah Spanburgh

Marine at Sanford, 1938

Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
Unsigned
Published: Ralston Crawford’s America, exh. checklist (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 1996).
Collection of Neelon Crawford, Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Marine at Sanford was painted in 1938 and has all the indications of being a Precisionist work. However, Crawford’s preoccupation with space progresses away from the ideals that a Precisionist work is said to represent. According to Jerome Tarshis, a fundamental principle in the Precisionist movement is the removal of any evidence of human activity from a painting, such as the human figure, and the apparent absence of any visible technique used by the painter. The way that Crawford applies the paint in Marine at Sanford and the manipulation of two- and three-dimensionality have brought him away from the representation of pure, Precisionist ideals.

The inconsistency between two- and three-dimensional space distances this work from Precisionism. A three-dimensional building is situated on a pier that is only two-dimensional. It is obvious that the building is behind the railing, but there is nothing on which the building seems to rest. In addition, the pier is set next to the distant land, and the two-dimensional pier is flattened further. With more depth in the background than exists in many of his other paintings, Crawford breaks a realistic space by the intrusion of the pier and building into the landscape. It is this inconsistency itself that draws this work away from the Precisionist style because it lacks a solid grounding in space. The quality of the building is light when it is placed floating above the water, whereas the Precisionist style tends to reflect the strength and solidity of industry.

The representation of the sea is a particular part of Marine at Sanford in which Crawford’s painterly style contrasts with the “smoothness” associated with other Precisionist painters for the evidence of the painter, and of painting, is visible. In Marine at Sanford, nature is not the main focal point of the painting, but it is also not dominated by man-made forms and includes evidence of a natural, human presence. These characteristics demonstrate Crawford’s divergence from the “pristine” images that often define Precisionist America. In any Precisionist painting, be it a Charles Demuth like Masts, Chimneys and Ventilators (1919), or American Landscape (1930) by Charles Sheeler, nature is superimposed by industry and painted without the heavy brushwork that reveals the artist. Yet, the representation of the water and land in this manner in Marine at Sanford creates three-dimensional space which is an intricate part of Crawford’s contrast between two- and three-dimensional space.

However, Crawford further develops the interaction of color and shape which adds to the clarity of the work and emphasizes its Precisionist qualities. Here, the function of the color, tone, and space have a close relationship to one another, and the color of the structure is aligned with its shape. Most notably, on the building and inside each outlined shape, tonal differences appear. The front of the building is lighter in tone than the side, but each element of the front is consistent in its tone. The same is true for the side, the roof, its edge, and the wall in that each has a different tonal value. The shadow develops this relationship between color and shape because it takes on a solid and defined form, and is represented in a different tonal value. The shadow that demonstrates the roof’s overhang and creates the illusion of three-dimensional space is becoming a two-dimensional shape of its own. Although he is flattening out his three-dimensional structures, the increased unity in tone makes the building appear to be solid. This uniformity in tone also adds to the sharpness of the image, with the elimination of mottled color on the building.

Marine at Sanford demonstrates Crawford’s growing tendency to treat different parts of an architectural structure as a single plane of color. This effect condenses the structures and creates a sharp image. The clarity that Crawford exhibits in this work may place him within the Precisionist style, but again, the notions of Precisionism appear too limited to contain Crawford’s vision. His brushstrokes and the built-up mottled colors are central to the issues Crawford is dealing with—those of contrasting two- and three-dimensional space—but the warmth of human touch these qualities generate are an antithesis to the Precisionist ideal.

Sarah Spanburgh

In 1931, Ralston Crawford moved from Pennsylvania to New York. Crawford had only begun his painting career five years prior, and his early work shows his great admiration for the French painter, Paul Cézanne, who was a source of inspiration for the young Crawford. Regarding Cézanne’s early work, Crawford wrote, “...Cézanne deeply affected my entire attitude toward painting. I speak of the early influences because the early ones really count.” Crawford loved Cézanne’s use of impressionist-like color and imitated the way Cézanne reduced his architectural forms to planes and volumes. To Crawford, this style achieved the unity and harmony that he sought in his own work. In Barbara Haskell’s 1985 monograph on Ralston Crawford, she discusses the artist’s interest in Cézanne and addresses Crawford’s approach to the three-dimensional and two-dimensional problem. Haskell writes, “In his own early work, he emulated Cézanne’s compressed space and his reconciliation of three-dimensional form with the two-dimensional space of the picture plane.”

Not only did Crawford study Cézanne, but he also studied images of the sea. Because his father was a seaman, Crawford developed an appreciation for and fascination with ships and dockside settings from the very beginning of his career. Therefore, the sea became an important and recurring theme for Crawford. As Crawford himself stated, he never painted anything he did not see with his own eyes, and in 1932, he traveled to Massachusetts and spent the summer in Nantucket painting a series of wharf scenes.

In *Nantucket Wharf, No. 1*, three white tugboats are depicted resting peacefully against a dockside-setting of red and orange houses against a cloudless blue sky. This painting is a good example of Crawford’s earlier work encompassing both his fondness for Cézanne and the sea. The plain houses in the background clearly give reference to Cézanne’s architectonic structure of linking shapes together. One of Cézanne’s works that shows this effect is *Gardanne and the Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (1885–1886). In this painting, Cézanne creates an architectural and geometric solidity in a picturesque landscape with houses. This quality is achieved by linking several spatial planes into one. Crawford too, clusters his houses together in *Nantucket Wharf, No. 1*. All of the buildings seem to be touching one another, not leaving much space in between them, and thus creating a tension between the forms and their space. Here, Crawford imitates Cézanne’s traditional modeling techniques and his rendering of individual formal elements as solid, three-dimensional entities. As there is reference to Cézanne, so too is there reference to Crawford’s cherished teacher and mentor at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Hugh Breckenridge. The influence of Breckenridge can be seen in Crawford’s use of extremely “mottled” paint. As is evident in this particular work, Crawford’s brushstrokes are visible, and the canvas is built up with many paint layers. Here, there is a rather thick application of paint compared to his later works, such as *New Orleans, No. 8* (1957) or *Hoover Dam* (1975).

Placed in a compressed space, the recognizable images of the houses and boats rendered in *Nantucket Wharf, No. 1* evoke a sense of tranquility and calmness for the viewer. The boats float quietly on the water, only slightly agitated with noticeable ripples that are emphasized by the artist’s brushstrokes. The houses are geometric in form and shape with hardly any detailing, except for a few square windows and rectangular doors. The tugboats in the foreground, however, are highly modeled in comparison to the houses. Crawford notices and paints details on the boats, for example, their small windows, shadows, and reflections. He executes his tugboats in a three-dimensional manner, while the rest of the canvas is treated and presented more two-dimensionally. Executed in a very “painterly style,” *Nantucket Wharf, No. 1* hints at the planar, abstract, and more geometric style of Crawford’s future work.

Daniela M. D’Amato

The same summer that Ralston Crawford completed Nantucket Wharf, No. 1 (1932), he produced another painting similar in both title, color, composition, and subject matter. Possibly dissatisfied with the first rendering or possibly just experimenting, Crawford painted Nantucket Wharf. Although nearly double in size, it is virtually identical to Nantucket Wharf, No. 1 in subject matter, but with notable and important differences. The main difference is in the reduction of details in the later painting. In Nantucket Wharf, Crawford has eliminated the little windows on his tugboats, a ladder, and has cropped a door and window on the background houses. The only details that have been added are two neatly-painted telephone poles. This work is even more simplified than the first, and one must note that Crawford's lines are much cleaner and precise when compared to those in his previous painting. The paint has also been applied more thinly and the brushstrokes are not as evident. As a result, Crawford gives the objects a greater degree of flatness and accentuates their geometric form. It seems as though Crawford is attempting to move away from Cézanne's technical style, but his presence is still there in Crawford's treatment of the background and foreground as one.

As in the earlier Nantucket Wharf, No. 1, color plays an important role. Crawford paints his houses in warm brick reds, oranges, and browns. The use of these colors places a strong emphasis on the houses and makes it difficult for the viewer not to pay immediate attention to them. Crawford has still kept his sky a pale, light blue and his water, a deep black blue. The use of these specific colors successfully harmonizes and unifies the work for his viewer.

Nantucket Wharf is also a recognizable dockside scene in a naturalistically-depicted compressed space. As seen in Nantucket Wharf, No. 1, Crawford again makes use of the representation of the two- and three-dimensional plane. Geometric elements are obviously present, and Crawford treats his canvas more two-dimensionally here, although there is still the presence of three-dimensional space. The strong geometric shapes of the houses are solidly constructed and clearly dominate the painting. Well-grounded in space, the houses stand firm and have been reduced to simple cubes. In her book on Crawford, Barbara Haskell comments that "in his series of Nantucket Wharf paintings, his propensity for architectural forms began to assert itself even more forcefully. He retained three-dimensional space while simultaneously blocking infinite spatial recession with a curtain of architectural motifs in the background." The viewer's observation of space does not go beyond the wall of houses, which in turn creates spatial compression, although Crawford does suggest that space is present between the wooden fence and in between the houses themselves. He achieves this effect by placing a row of shrubs, rendered more realistically and not as flat-looking as the rest of the forms, behind the wooden fence. Crawford also creates another illusion of space by positioning a smaller house in between the two houses on the left. The only additional objects, in comparison to Nantucket Wharf, No. 1, are two telephone poles placed behind the houses which help to emphasize space in between them as well. All these factors have a visual and compositional effect and serve to break up space for the observer. Rather than attempting to portray three-dimensional forms on a two-dimensional canvas, Crawford appears to be more concerned with the surface plane itself. With this painting, it seems as though Crawford is starting to solidify his forms into flat planes of color. This is something that concerns and occupies Crawford throughout his career. He once said, "My pictures are exactly what they say, and what they say is said in colors and shapes."
Crawford was always known for doing a lot of traveling which in turn inspired his paintings, prints, and photographs. In the winter of 1938, we know that Crawford was one of five artists invited to spend time at the Research Institute Studio in Maitland, Florida. Before that, he spent some time in New Orleans. It was in New Orleans that Crawford was once again inspired by the sea and its imagery, which was always a “great source of visual delight” for him.1

Completed in 1938, Ship’s Bow is a large painting of the front part of a docked ship and is a simplified, yet clearly recognizable image.2 It has few details, and projects that simplified quality as can be seen in other Crawford paintings, such as Marine with Island (1934). At the same time, however, one cannot but notice that some of the surfaces are highly modeled while others are not. It is in this contrast that Crawford once again plays upon and juxtaposes the two-dimensional and three-dimensional relationship of space and form. For example, this juxtaposition can be seen with the dock tie in the bottom left hand corner, which is highly studied. On the other hand, the buildings in the background and certain parts of the ship are flat shapes of line and color, denying any three-dimensionality. As noted in the “Nantucket Wharf” series, Crawford makes use of geometric shapes and forms. However, he always seems to retain representational elements, conveying a strong element of mood—often of haunting nostalgia, as he keeps his images recognizable for the viewer.3 Brushstrokes are visible throughout this work, which is unusual for a Crawford painting from the late 1930’s, and the colors are primarily muted greens, tans, browns, black, and white.

In Ship’s Bow, the viewer is looking up from a wide angle at the front part of a ship. This angle, along with recessional perspective that Crawford added, creates spatial tension and draws the viewer into the painting. Concerning his work of the 1930’s, Haskell writes that Crawford “…instead began to treat compositional areas as discrete planar entities. In several of these landscapes, Crawford also introduced the sharply receding perspective that would reappear in his mature work.”4 It is this perspective, evident in Ship’s Bow, that creates depth and three-dimensional space for the observer.

In 1938, Crawford also started to experiment with a new medium: photography. Ship’s Bow may possibly be based on a photo. In his photography, Crawford preferred industrial subjects, although his photographs did not fully exploit the potential for bold abstraction which he was at that time investigating in his painting.5 Crawford was still exploring the use of photography in his own work and had not yet mastered the geometric images abstracted from reality in his picture-taking. Another dock painting that is similar to Ship’s Bow is Public Grain Elevator in New Orleans (1938), which also has an accompanying photograph by Crawford. Approached in the same manner, Crawford focuses on representing his material, three-dimensional forms in a highly simplified two-dimensional way, manipulating both form and space. Another later work entitled At the Dock, No. 2 (1941-1942), also represents the same subject matter, but is introduced here in a much more abstract and linear manner.

Ship’s Bow is another work in which Crawford was experimenting and investigating as he gradually created a more abstract style which would be seen in his work to come following the years during and after World War II.

Daniela M. D’Amato

5. Haskell 1985, 45.
Air War, 1944

Oil on canvas, 16 x 22 inches
Signed (at lower left); CRAWFORD
Collection of Robert Crawford, Williamston, Michigan
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Though Ralston Crawford may be best remembered for his “Precisionist” years, his paintings done as a result of his experience in World War II reveal, as Richard Freeman has remarked, “a fundamental growth in expressive power [and] a sharpened critical faculty.” Crawford first enlisted in the Army Engineers' Corps and remained in basic training at Fort Meade, Maryland for six months. It was there that Crawford developed his awareness of destruction and, as Haskell has remarked, “his dream of individual freedom through industrialization and collective action was shattered.”

In the summer of 1942 at the age of 36, Crawford accepted a position as Chief of the Visual Presentation unit of the Weather Division at the Army Air Force Headquarters in Washington, D.C., aware of the possible detrimental effect on his career. Through the use of symbols, Crawford was responsible for inventing pictures to go along with the explanations of the climatologists. The public focussed a great deal of attention on Crawford as he was the only artist who had any involvement with the Army. His involvement in the war and emotional attachment to events surrounding it, led to paintings such as Air War. Based on the plane wreckages Crawford observed while on assignment in D.C., works such as Air War and Bomber were strikingly different from his past efforts.

In 1944, Crawford was commissioned by the magazine, Fortune, to cover “Operation Crossroads,” a series of atomic bomb explosions intended to test nuclear war capability. “Operation Crossroads” was conducted on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall islands. Crawford's paintings based on “Operation Crossroads” (the visual representation of his experiences), were not received without criticism. Those who valued purely representational images, objected to the fact that the only artist engaged to document the tests was an “abstract” painter. Indeed, many expected to see something that referred directly to the bomb's spray. In defense of his images of battles and instruments of war, Crawford often said that he painted what he felt, not what he saw. His paintings were a “comment on the negative and the positive expressions of contemporary society, with an emphasis on the negative.” As Crawford said, the blasts “combined destruction in terms of the ultimate energy source of the universe itself, and the chartable consequences if man should lose the battle of good and evil.”

In Air War, we see first and foremost red, yellow, and inky-blue planes of color contrasted with sharp, disjointed, jagged lines of brown and black. The lower section of the painting suggests a gray mass which at once incorporates a powerful image referring to shards of glass, and represents a fractured landscape marked with bomb craters. This impressive image is interrupted by the presence of a dial or aircraft instrument, bearing the only reference to recognizable reality. The stopped dial that no longer measures anything can be seen as a reference to man's mortality. One is reminded of Salvador Dalí's famous clocks in which we are faced with the reality that it is the clock which governs our life and ultimately marks our death. The fact that the instrument points to the number forty-seven may, perhaps, be an autobiographical reference to the time period of the explosion. One can argue, as James Farrell has noted, that this painting is one of the first instances of the “atomic sublime in which the color, shape, dynamism, and destructiveness of atomic explosions combined to reproduce aesthetic response.”

What is so effective about this painting is the relationship between color and form. The tonal vibrancy of the red and yellow causes them to jump out into the foreground while the presence of the dark blue has a receding effect. At the same time, the fractured lines depict movement and break the space and effect of color. Crawford's experimentation with two- and three-dimensional space can be best understood if one imagines the painting without the fractured lines. Without the juxtaposition of color versus line, the painting would read as a much flatter space. Crawford is clearly playing with illusion. The viewer reads the colors as bright and therefore they seem to jump forward. At the same time, however, his use of line flattens the composition and causes the colors to recede into the background. The terrain-like shape, rising up out of the ground and the painting, thereby furthers the relation between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional world. In reference to his paintings of the atomic blast, Crawford himself stated: “Destruction is one of the dominant characteristics of our time. These pictures constitute a comment on destruction... They refer in paint symbols to the blinding light of the blast, to its color, and mostly to its devastating character as I saw it in bikini lagoon.” We could apply Crawford’s words here to Air War; his black shapes with jagged contours suggest a reference to scraps of metal or even abstracted forms representing bodies. In this work, Crawford has succeeded in communicating the devastation of instruments of war.

Claire Jacomme
5. Cited in Farrell 1987, 64.
Aircraft Wing
suggested that Crawford's process involves a reduction of reproduction of nature in his paintings. Robert Mahoney
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"Starting out with a specific subject Crawford clarifies and rearranges the basic forms and patterns of the scene, using interplay of line and geometrically disciplined shapes of bright, flat color." Crawford works intensely with composition, involving much more than a simple reproduction of nature in his paintings. Robert Mahoney suggested that Crawford's process involves a reduction of depth of field, a simplification of detail, and a sharpening of all shades of color." These statements hold equally true for Aircraft Wing in which the intense blue jumps out at the

How Crawford moves from his paintings of the 1930's representing gray-black steel structures and ships, to those like Aircraft Wing is a question sure to puzzle many viewers. Unlike Air War, in which he focussed some of his visual concerns ever since his involvement in the war in terms of distortion and abstraction, Aircraft Wing marks the beginning of a career geared towards the painting of more open, simple images. Aircraft Wing probably derives its subject from the flight that Crawford took across the Pacific to the testing site in order to complete the project for Fortune magazine. Crawford was selected by Fortune to create pictures of the two bomb drops known as "Operation Crossroads, Test Able and Test Baker." These tests were very much public events as thousands of military experts, scientists, and observers attended. Representatives for news and radio agencies were also sent to cover the blast. It is interesting to note that out of 124 international and national press representatives who witnessed the test, Crawford was the only artist.

The effectiveness of this painting is clearly a result of its simple and stunning, yet playful composition. A portion of an aircraft wing sits slightly off center amidst a gray mass, juxtaposed against the overwhelming permeation of a cerulean sky. It may be argued that it looks as though Crawford has taken a photo and simply transposed the image. However, as Robert Mahoney remarked, "careful inspection shows subtle changes from one image to another which whisper the secrets of modernist abstraction." Thematic and stylistically Crawford's work resembles the art of Stuart Davis and others from the New York School, but his work followed a different course and thus it is difficult to group Crawford within any "ism."

Crawford does not simply take images out of reality and reproduce them on a surface. Judith Kaye Reed commented: "Starting out with a specific subject Crawford clarifies and rearranges the basic forms and patterns of the scene, using interplay of line and geometrically disciplined shapes of bright, flat color." Crawford works intensely with composition, involving much more than a simple reproduction of nature in his paintings. Robert Mahoney suggested that Crawford's process involves a reduction of depth of field, a simplification of detail, and a sharpening of all shades of color. These statements hold equally true for Aircraft Wing in which the intense blue jumps out at the

Claire Jacomme

**Untitled (Aircraft Plant), 1945**

Gouache on paper, 10 x 14 inches
Signed (at lower center): R.C.


Collection of Nelson Crawford. Baltimore, Maryland
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

In contrast to the frenzied composition of *Air War*, the viewer can appreciate a serene calmness in *Aircraft Plant*. This work is the result of a commission he received from the Miller Lighting Company in Buffalo to execute a painting of their new lighting system which had been installed at the Curtiss-Wright aircraft plant in Buffalo. *Aircraft Plant* may be successful as a painting simply for the serenity that it imparts to the viewer. However, one may be surprised and disconcerted to find that this painting was based on "the type of factory that delivered machines of unspeakable destruction," as William Agee remarked. We see here the beginnings of the abstraction and simplification of forms that dominated Crawford's work over the next thirty years. In *Aircraft Plant*, he uses an abstraction of form and a simplification of detail and colors that offer no reference to the visible world, yet he manages to retain figurative elements. That is to say, he uses recognizable imagery in unexpected ways through abstracting the forms and not relying on strict representation. His work continues to move away from a literal transcription. Crawford does not lend everything all at once to his viewer; rather, the viewer must react with the work and take what he or she will from what Crawford hints at. As Agee remarked: "Even at its most abstract, his art never was based on pure invention, but rather could be traced to specific scenes or sites. For Crawford, abstraction was a process of selection and distillation from the known, visible world."3

In terms of color, the mint green, brown, soft blue, and turquoise invoke the Abstract Expressionism of the 1950's. Ford notes that Crawford's colors "have an infectious gaiety" and remarks that his composition "is good, in the sense that the eye is cunningly directed, has no difficulty in finding the place where the gaze should alight."4 This observation is applicable to *Aircraft Plant* in which there is movement from one vertical to the next horizontal axis and back and forth. Crawford achieves a fluidity in his composition which results in an altogether successful picture. James Johnson Sweeney used the term, "visual understatement," to describe Crawford's work. Crawford often leaves his color and line understated. As Sweeney remarked: "Each of these minor understatements is related to other understatements throughout the canvas: an avoidance of compositional crowding that balances on the verge of emptiness—an emphasis on perspective lines that never bores a hole into the picture's surface and flat areas of color that lie parallel to the face of the canvas..."5 What is also effective is Crawford's utter simplification of form into areas and planes of color with minimal detail. Robert Mahoney remarked: "Instead of trying to freeze the real in perfect abstraction, [Crawford] turn[s] away from the source, and want[s] to get back to 'painting,' and so inject[s] color, pattern and painterly care between factory and easel."6

Crawford works in the two-dimensional world and his forms and choice of color echo this 'flatness.' The lights, for example, become simply white bars while the turbine is reduced to a cone shape instead of showing reference to its volume and mass. The colors in the foreground with their strict uniformity appear to be flat. Similarly, Crawford employs nothing but cool colors that tend to recede into space. The only hint of the three-dimensional world is suggested with the lighting fixture represented by white lines which seem to either recede into space or act as a means of enhancing the composition. For Crawford, perspective is a means to manipulate space, not necessarily to represent it. These same broad, thick, white lines are repeated throughout the painting. A black-and-white image of this painting shows how little variance Crawford achieves in tone. A possible explanation for this effect is his principle that "the transition of color within an area is less important than the relationship of that area to another."7 Color is an independent expressive force for Crawford; his subtle differences in meaning lie in his relationship between form and tone. What he lacks in tonal variance in *Aircraft Plant*, Crawford makes up for in the relationship of one form to another. The cylindrical shapes juxtaposed against the horizontal and vertical movement of color make for a picture that is altogether inventive in its manipulation of space.

Claire Jacomme

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Lifeboat Davit, 1940

Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 inches
Signed (at lower left): Crawford
Collection of Robert Crawford, Williamson, Michigan
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

Although often regarded as a “Precisionist” for his geometric renderings of the American landscape, Crawford, by the late 1930’s, began to turn his subject matter towards the industry of the sea—the industrial objects that are used in marine life. It is by this time that Crawford began a clear introspection of space, light, and form in his paintings. Crawford flattens the forms and subjects in his paintings and investigates relationships between color and space as a whole, rather than developing them individually. It is clear that Crawford chose his colors, as monochromatic as the works may have been, in accordance with their function within the painting instead of relying strictly on the natural perception of colors. This is quite an aberration from the landscapes of the 1930’s. Early works such as Bucks County Houses (1931) or Nantucket Wharf (1932), show Crawford developing the tactics of a representational painter. These works exhibit a rather “classical” approach towards representation—the blue sky, green trees, and a use of perspective to show space and depth. In Lifeboat Davit, Crawford begins using color as a device for showing spatial depth as he explores the possibilities of combining both the natural representation of color and the “abstract” qualities of the two-dimensional.

This change can be attributed to Crawford’s extensive knowledge and use of the photographic medium. Crawford’s Precisionist contemporaries like Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth had been exploring the artistic possibilities of photography since 1910. Sheeler’s approach towards photography is especially evident in Crawford’s photography. Early images of factories in stark contrasts of black and white and the constant presence of a “sfumato” reflect Crawford’s images of anchors, sails, shipyards, and marine tools from the 1940’s and 1950’s. Comparing Crawford’s photography with his painting, John Heilpern writes, “They share the same ‘quiet, reticent, lyric ease,’ a similar abstraction, and identical themes in terms of America’s industrial icons—water tanks, factories, bridges, ships, and steel mills, the silhouettes and shapes of modern America.” However, his development in subject and content, both in terms of painting and photography, shows Crawford using these objects as studies for the properties of the art form and the analytic, “painterly” approach that accompanies it. His photographs, especially, do not reveal an intimate connection between the artist and the content of the resulting images. \(^3\)

Lifeboat Davit from 1940 shows Crawford obeying the “precisionist rule” of tight line and solid forms, but also exhibits Crawford’s newfound interest in space and the rendering of the three-dimensional on the two-dimensional canvas. The davit is almost cartoon-like in its nearly monochromatic palette and its sharp contrasts between light and dark. Crawford’s photographs of the 1930’s and the 1940’s also possess sharp tonal contrasts and an attention to industrial objects. Eisenman comments that by “the late 1930’s, Crawford had adopted large formats and crisp tonal contrasts...which document a fascination with modern engineering, surface textures, and human physiognomy.” \(^5\)

The solid, vertical structure in the center of the painting is given dimensions, strength, and a definitive light source. Crawford denies the surrounding objects of any three-dimensionality, and relies strictly on their composition and value to exhibit and enhance the spatial qualities of the painting. The rather ambiguous rectangular form protruding from the center is the only area on the canvas where Crawford attempts to model his subject, resulting in an inconsistent and confusing spatial effect. The central structure relies on drawing for its form while the rectangular object relies on shading and color values to determine its existence. Perhaps Crawford is critiquing the effects of photography’s realism and painting’s “human touch.” The two, cool blues are used more as devices for pushing the objects to the front of the canvas, for they merely hint at the presence of water and sky.

The painting becomes a geometric study in form and space—using the subject merely as a visual means for representation. As a result, Crawford’s rendering of these marine-related subjects is done so with the entire picture in mind and with the notion that “recognizable things appear in his pictures only under good-natured threat of expulsion.” \(^4\)

Adam Granofsky

As Ralston Crawford moved into the latter part of the 1940's and into the 1950's, he began balancing representation and abstraction on the same canvas. And although Crawford insisted that everything he painted was something he had seen, his subjects were often only identifiable by the subsequent title given to the work. In *Sails, No. 2* from 1955, Crawford further explores the properties of form and space as he began doing in the early 1940's. Only 9 1/2 by 13 3/4 inches, *Sails, No. 2* is only recognizable by the title. In fact, on the back of the canvas, Crawford labeled the stretcher bar "top," so one would know the correct position of the work.

The painting is a study of contradicting planes and lines which are defined only by a small change in tonal value, but also allude to realistic space and shapes. The title, "sails," is the only hint Crawford gives the viewer and by doing so, changes the viewer's response to the painting. Crawford limits himself once again to a rather monochromatic palette with the exception of his use of different tones of blue which contribute spatial depth to the painting. Richard Diebenkorn, an abstract, Modernist painter working in California during the 1950's, remarked of the color blue, "I was always fighting the landscape feeling. For years I didn't have the color blue on my palette because it reminded me too much of the spatial qualities in conventional landscape." What is evident in *Sails, No. 2* is Crawford's investigation of the line between representational landscape and pure abstraction.

Crawford is constantly pushing the canvas forward and then back again while a uniform line (or sail) flows equally over the receding plane. *Sails, No. 2* demonstrates Crawford playing with the notion of the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional. Perhaps the painting only works with the title—that is, if we are not told that we are looking at sails, the subtle changes in space and depth may not seem as effective. Rather, we associate "sails" with an object and thus expect to see a uniform plane upon which the sails exist. It is in this sense, that is, in the viewer's response to the content of the painting, that Crawford is able to capture both the representational and the abstract at the same moment. In 1946, Donald Bear remarked that Crawford "bridges that seemingly impossible distance between the pictorialist and the non-objective or abstract artist." Crawford, especially by the mid-1950's, is concerned with this gap between an abstract painting and the subject matter which is rendered representational by the title and the associations of the viewer.

Much like *Lobster Pots* from 1958, Crawford can be seen utilizing his photography within the resolved image of *Sails, No. 2*. Crawford took many photos over the course of his life which allude to the image in *Sails, No. 2*. Both *Untitled (Fishing Nets on Wall, Croix de Vie)* (1974) and *Untitled (Fishing Boats, Corpus Christi, Texas)* from around 1945 exhibit Crawford's interest in the composition and planar relationships of hanging fishing nets or sails, not only ten years prior to his completion of *Sails, No. 2*, but twenty years after as well. Crawford admitted that his photography played a large part in the conception of his paintings.

Crawford's use of the color blue in *Sails, No. 2* works as a further investigation of depicting three-dimensional space on the flat canvas. As the tones of the blue change, so do the receding qualities of the painting. As a result, space is not only created and distinguished by form and line, but by color as well. As Crawford's work evolves over the next twenty years, it is evident that he is becoming a great deal more comfortable with color and its ability to dictate the presence of space. In later works, such as *Hoover Dam* (1975) and *St. Gilles, No. 3* (1963), Crawford begins to use color in accordance with his other investigations of space, light, and form. The combination and juxtaposition of vibrant, saturated colors pull and push at the canvas and create spatial depth and the prospect of three-dimensionality. *Sails, No. 2* could be regarded as one of Crawford's earliest attempts at establishing spatial depth through the use of color, rather than through line or composition.

Adam Granofsky

In 1958, the same year that Ralston Crawford painted *Lobster Pots*, the artist remarked that the analytic properties of a painting and the process behind it were very important to him.\(^1\) By this time, with Modernism losing steam, Crawford had been exploring the boundaries between representational painting and abstract painting for almost two decades. *Lobster Pots* is a pinnacle achievement for Crawford, and the thin line that lies between “classic” representational painting and abstraction is exemplified in this work. Although Crawford had been working in collaboration with his photographs for some time, *Lobster Pots* is a resolution of past studies. It is a resolution of everything that Crawford had been exploring for nearly twenty years—space, light, form, and the visual distinction between representing two and three dimensions on the canvas. *Lobster Pots* still relies on a rather limited palette of yellow, deep alizarin, and grays, but Crawford’s mastery of light and space result in form, light, and shape that are more convincing than anything in the past. Nancy Grimes writes about *Lobster Pots* that, “Crawford compresses a tangle of sunlit wooden cages and a bit of fishing net into an ambiguous configuration of light and dark shapes that hovers elegantly between representation and abstraction.”\(^2\)

Although Crawford is still relying on a three-color palette for *Lobster Pots*, he renders an ambiguous existence of both the three-dimensionality of the pots and the two-dimensionality of painting as a medium.

The important issue in *Lobster Pots*, as well as the goal of the history of “Modernist” painting, is the rendering of a three-dimensional subject on the flat, two-dimensional surface. The bright value contrasts squeeze the foreground of the painting to the front, and although the values of the colors remain constant, the horizontal bars create a space in the middle ground that pushes the pots to the background. Through the center, the dark values of the ground create an even more believable space towards the back of the work. However, Crawford isn’t too concerned with leaving the spatial qualities of the painting without ambiguity. On the right side of the canvas, Crawford pulls the lobster pot in the back into the foreground by extending the line off the bottom of the canvas. Crawford adds three vertical marks to accentuate the foregrounding of the subject. Crawford also exhibits this effect in *Sails*, No.6 (1956), with his use of yellow stripes on the black background to create inconsistent planar relationships. As a result of this tactic, the composition in *Lobster Pots* is torn between the realistic possibilities of natural space, and the “artistic license,” if you will, of the Modernist painter. Nancy Grimes comments further: “Here, as elsewhere, Crawford wrestles with the chaotic flux of perception, pinning form and space, still squirming to the ground.”\(^3\) I believe that this is Crawford’s closest achievement within the high ideals of Modernism of the 1940’s and 1950’s. *Lobster Pots* does not simply imply the difference between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, but it relies on both properties. It is not simply a “representational” or “abstract” painting, it is a critique of form and space and light and the properties of “realistic” versus “painted” space.

*Lobster Pots* is not only a clear and descriptive definition of Crawford’s evolution as a painter, but it highlights Crawford’s continued interest in photography. Crawford did not merely use the photographic medium as a guideline for his painting, but he treated the two forums independently from one another. John Heilpern comments that, “[Crawford] often returned to photograph a subject long after he had painted it...sometimes over and over throughout his life, as if obsessed by the possibilities of reality and image.”\(^4\) Having painted *Lobster Pots* in 1958, Crawford returned four years later in 1962 to photograph the pots. *Untitled (Lobster Pots, Croix de Vie)* (1962), could stand as a photographic study of *Lobster Pots* if it had not been taken four years later. Heilpern adds, “But whether or not a Crawford photograph became a painting or was linked to a painting, that photograph exists in its own right.”\(^5\) Crawford also painted the “St. Gilles” series of paintings in 1962 which adopts the image of the lobster pots, yet shows Crawford experimenting with different colors and spatial qualities. It is evident that Crawford was concerned not with the resulting image as much as he was the properties of both the painting and the painted subject.

Adam Granofsky

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Havana Harbor, No.3, 1948

Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches.
Signed, dated, and inscribed (at lower left): Ralston Crawford © 1948
Collection of John Crawford, Brooklyn, New York
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

According to Crawford, "I arrived at my own form, on the basis of a long and patient search... One arrives at [style], or he doesn't. It is a matter of his clarity of conviction... I am unconcerned with painting pictures that are recognizably mine... my search has a specific direction and my paintings indicate that direction." Ralston Crawford dealt with the issues of space in his works through the manipulation of color, form, and perspective. In the late 1940's and early 1950's Crawford addressed this problem by placing emphasis on form creating space rather than color creating space.

Close examination of Havana Harbor, No.3 from 1948 reveals Crawford's use of dull colors primarily as a means to represent the "subject" of the sea. By denying intense colors, he causes the viewer to focus on the manipulation of space within the image. Barbara Haskell summarizes Crawford's works of the 1940's and 1950's as a "dynamic contradictory spatial network by having shapes advance and recede simultaneously." During this period, Crawford is just beginning to pull away from his images of war and destruction that resulted from his experiences in World War II and the bombing of Bikini Atoll. In 1947, just one year before he painted Havana Harbor, No.3, Crawford stated, "I look to the left and to the right, ahead and behind. Then I paint from memory and from the thoughts about things I have remembered. In these recollections the last instant and many years ago are important. Perhaps it would be a difficult synthesis, but a picture referring to Pennsylvania with further reference to Nanakuli, seems possible to me." He based his art on a delicate process of selection and the recombining of visual elements as well as personal experiences, producing an "emotional" composition that is exhibited in Havana Harbor, No.3.

Crawford's return to a more open, relatively simple type of painting composed of fewer shapes began in the late 1940's. In Havana Harbor, No.3, Crawford uses black lines and positions shapes at specific angles to create a three-dimensional perspective. He contradicts this space by adding a brownish, trapezoidal shape in the lower right-hand corner of the painting at an angle oblique to the rest of the composition. This shape flattens the space that the large gray shape and the black lines create. The forms, especially the white boat-shape in the center of the work, are pushed to the foreground, thus reducing the space to two-dimensions. Crawford begins to create three-dimensional perspective within the work, but then he denies the

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New Orleans, No.8 (1957) is one painting within a series of thirteen works that Crawford completed during the 1950’s. He was very interested in photography during this period of his career and has been described as carrying a camera wherever he went. Crawford felt that photography freed the painter and did not “narrow the artist's vision but broadened it.” Often times, Crawford would return to the same subject repetitively after he had photographed or painted it, searching for a different aspect of the subject with each visit. One of his favorite sites in New Orleans, where he embraced his obsession with photography, was the St. Louis Cemetery. His attraction to the cemeteries in New Orleans has been attributed to the recurring theme of destruction, decay, and death that is such in his earlier representations of World War II and the bombing at Bikini Atoll. Regardless of his past experiences, he loved this specific cemetery so much so that when he died in 1978, he was buried there with a full New Orleans brass band.

Crawford discussed painting from his photographs by stating, “my photography follows my painting in a great measure... [my photographs] are sometimes used in relation to my drawings and color studies as sources of specific information concerning the movement of light patterns in relation to the possible effect on picture structure.” A comparison between his photographs of the St. Louis gravesite to his paintings of the same site reveals many interesting problems that he addressed throughout his lifetime. All of Ralston Crawford's photographs and paintings were based in reality and observation, but the form that he produced was created by subtraction and abstraction. He discovered the “image potential of shadows” and began to render them equal to solid objects. The treatment of shadows as three-dimensional objects contributes to his manipulation of space in New Orleans, No.8.

One of Crawford's stylistic contemporaries, Charles Sheeler, also exploited the form-making capabilities of shadows in his works, and stated that “light is the great designer.” The solid geometric shapes that are almost unrecognizable as specific objects create a flat two-dimensional space for the viewer. The space in New Orleans, No.8 is compressed into spatial planes and then organized into patterns; for example, the triangles in the lower left of the composition. Crawford adds stripes around the top and down the center of the composition bringing the objects into the foreground and, more importantly, providing a contrast against the white shape to the right of the stripes that is carefully positioned so that it provides enough of a three-dimensional effect within the work to contradict the two-dimensional space already established.

The manipulation of space in New Orleans, No.8 is also addressed through Crawford’s use of color, “less as a descriptive tool and more as a means of establishing space.”

The hard, black, striped lines repeated throughout the composition contrast with the bright white of the vertical line located in the right of the composition. Crawford emphasizes this line because it is presented at an angle that adds a three-dimensional effect to the work. He also places a black vessel shape almost behind the white line, attempting to show layering. He purposely utilizes the intensity of the black and white colors to emphasize the objects that contradict the two-dimensionality of the painting. Crawford manipulates color and form to create a disagreement between the two- and three-dimensionality of the composition.

Sara Adams

"Crawford's work is so definite in pattern and so concise in form that many of its characteristics are reasonably well translated in half-tone plates."1 This statement by the critic, Ernest Watson, precisely describes The Sails, No. 6 from 1956. Ralston Crawford repeats the triangular shape of a sail across the surface of the painting. This repetition of angular and oblique shapes creates a pattern that moves rhythmically across the canvas, denying a movement into space.2 The patterns emerge from the compression of space into planes. Crawford layers the triangular shapes creating a series of planes within the composition creating a three-dimensional effect. He then denies this three-dimensionality by adding the yellow horizontal stripes in the right section of the painting. Included in this section of the work is a brown line that diagonally cuts through the stripes, pushing the triangular shapes against the surface of the painting. The painting is divided into two different dimensions, with the two-dimensionality of the stripes juxtaposing the three-dimensional overlapping of the triangular sails, thus creating a contradictory space within the composition.

Crawford stated that, "I am very much interested in a kind of pictorial counterpoint—the juxtaposing of one melody or theme in relation to another, or to several. It is out of this argument or contrast that I believe interest is created in pictorial structure. This must be part of the total plan—I am uninterested in producing the decorative."3 During the mid-1950's, a relatively simple type of composition consisting of fewer shapes dominated Crawford's paintings.4 He was beginning to evolve from his destructive images of World War II and the bombing of Bikini Atoll into a simpler representation of subject and form. Also, during this time, Crawford was becoming interested in photography and its power to "magnify and clarify other observations"5 of a single subject. The photographic presence in The Sails, No. 6 is evident in the cropping of the sails in addition to the movement of the sail pattern across the canvas. As Crawford stated, "[my photographs] are sometimes used in relation to my drawings and color studies as sources of specific information concerning the movement of light patterns in relation to the possible effect on picture structure."6

Photography had a large impact on Crawford's style in the 1950's, especially in creating a contradictory picture plane. Crawford's different use of photography in his painting is evident in the comparison of New Orleans, No. 8 (1957) and The Sails, No. 6 (1956). Both works were completed within a year of each other, yet they address the issue of dimensionality and space with slightly different approaches. Crawford's experimentation with the influences of photography is obvious in The Sails, No. 6 through the repetition and overlapping of planes. While the same issues are addressed in New Orleans, No. 8, Crawford incorporates the photographic elements into the composition by placing less emphasis on specific stylistic values and focusing more on creating a successful image that embodies both a two-dimensional and three-dimensional quality.

Color also contributes to the two-dimensional and three-dimensional problem that Crawford addresses in The Sails, No. 6. While the colors are diluted, the wide tonal range emphasizes the different planes within the work, thus creating a three-dimensional illusion. In many of his works from the 1950's, Crawford used color solely for the representation of subjects, but in The Sails, No. 6, he used it to emphasize the different planes of the triangular shapes. The yellow stripes against the black background provide a distraction from the layering in the opposite half of the composition, and the soft brown diagonal line draws the viewer back to the three-dimensional side of the painting. One critic summarizes Crawford's work of the 1950's as a "dramatic evolution of interest from pictorial depth to preoccupation with pattern which is primarily, if not wholly, two-dimensional."7 Crawford is here experimenting with the combination of photography and painting, and thus creates a spatial contradiction in many of his works of the 1950's.

Sara Adams

**Hoover Dam, 1975**

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches
Signed and dated (with initials, at lower left): RC 75
Collection of Robert Crawford, Williamston, Michigan
Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, NYC

The title of this painting, *Hoover Dam*, alerts the viewer that it is a depiction of an industrial subject. It is composed of abstracted forms and shapes that do not necessarily look like a dam, but the title provides the necessary explanation of context. Nancy Grimes comments that Ralston Crawford’s “faith in the contrivances of industry and art supported a measured, robust vision of man and the world that remains refreshingly, if naively, optimistic.” In this sense, it seems apparent that Crawford supports the idea of industry and the advantages of structures like the Hoover Dam in order to better humanity as a whole.

The artist presents vivid colors, jagged lines, large rectangular images, and allows the viewer to interpret and decipher these shapes and colors in order to piece together a picture of a turbine. The jagged white lines seem to interrupt the flow of the composition by cutting into the shapes atop the rectangular images. It seems like the variety of shapes are almost placed randomly in order to come together as the image of the turbine and Dam. Crawford uses the American industrial landscape as a starting point for his explorations of dynamic relationships among forms and colors, and *Hoover Dam* is one of many images of this industrial landscape painted by Crawford.

*Hoover Dam* invokes several re-occurring subjects in Crawford’s art. As a hydroelectric power plant, it is an image of industrialization and has an immediate association with water. However, the association is made through the title as opposed to any representation of water. This is an image of the insides, where the turbines create electricity and it is transferred along powerlines and through transformers. It is surprising that for a fairly famous landmark, Crawford does not concentrate on the external features of the dam, but rather its internal workings. Although the *Hoover Dam* represents Crawford’s visual distillation and abstraction, the lines and forms recall familiar electricity-producing elements, such as converters, towers, and power lines. With *Hoover Dam*, Crawford draws out the industrial aspect of a well-known site through the internal organs of the power plant from which its purpose and design emerge.

Though one may automatically think of the *Hoover Dam* as water pouring through an immense structure, Crawford furthers the knowledge of this landmark by revealing its internal structure.

*Hoover Dam* is represented as extremely abstract imagery. Although quite different in form and approach from his earlier work, Crawford returns to the industrial imagery he had often depicted throughout his career. Crawford represented *Hoover Dam* by using sharp lines, geometric shapes, and patterns everywhere on the canvas. Shadows and planes have been reduced to clean, flat shapes of solid color. Three-dimensionality, for the most part, has been denied here. Crawford shows his viewer that there is volume to the cylinder-shaped object, partly cropped, placed on the right side of the painting. But at the same time, the flat colors render it as two-dimensional in form. This is also apparent with the large, dark, and angled shape located at the bottom of the canvas. It appears to recede in space, possibly presenting the viewer with depth and three-dimensional space and form. Rather than rendering *Hoover Dam* in a completely three-dimensional way, Crawford chooses to have color and two-dimensional space dominate his painting, thus challenging the viewer, but also creating a successful and appealing image.

In all of his pictures, Ralston Crawford addresses the form-making capabilities of color and shadow. As Crawford once stated, his pictures involved a “particular kind of solitude related to color and movement [in which he found his] deepest and most meaningful early experiences in relation to painting . . . There was the color, and the intensely human character of many of the situations . . .” This statement is applicable to *Hoover Dam* in which Crawford melds a variety of colors together. One way that Crawford simplifies his images is through color. He often eliminated details contributing to the recognizability of a given subject and used shadows as separate abstract entities. In *Hoover Dam*, Crawford works with the juxtaposition of a variety of colors. Crawford once explained that what interested him was the relationship of one form or tone to another. The left portion of the picture, which appears to protrude from the surface, is constructed of simple, neutral colors—various shades of gray mixed with black and white. Crawford effectively used color to form the structural bases of his imagery.

The lower section of the painting (which appears to be the ground) is a brick red that picks up the yellow ochre of the geometric shape above. Juxtaposed against this red ground is a dark blue shadow of the reflected industrial image. Throughout the picture, Crawford used a repetition of colors to achieve fluidity in his composition. He exploited the same cool tone throughout *Hoover Dam* so that even the grays pick up a slightly blue sheen.

Crawford maneuvered space in his paintings throughout his career. *Hoover Dam* represents the manipulation of space through a combination of two- and three-dimensional objects on the same picture plane. Crawford established a receding three-dimensional plane with the red, angled shape at the bottom of the painting. He contradicted this
perspective by placing two-dimensional shapes, like the rectangular object in the middle of the canvas, on the three-dimensional red plane causing the “flat” objects to be pushed into the foreground. The repetitive pattern of shapes throughout the painting also contributes to a two-dimensional effect that opposes a traditional three-dimensional perspective. Crawford placed horizontal lines and obtuse angles throughout the painting, denying the three-dimensional space that is established by the shapes and lines positioned at specific angles. The manipulated space in *Hoover Dam* exemplifies Crawford’s ability to balance two- and three-dimensional objects while creating an illusion of depth that is combined with flat two-dimensional objects. Unlike many of Crawford’s earlier paintings, the space in *Hoover Dam*, completed three years before his death in 1978, is almost plausible. The viewer is optically challenged by the accessibility of the space in the painting. The spatial harmony that Crawford creates is the product of a career focussed on the issue of space and perspective. As Crawford stated earlier, “I did see an awful lot of space before me and it fascinated me.”

Crawford’s use of the photographic medium played an intricate part in the construction of his paintings. His proclivity for deep, stark contrasts of black and white in his photographs became evident as his colors and tonal range became much more ambitious in many of the paintings completed within the last twenty-five years of his life. Crawford’s early “Precisionist” counterparts, Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth, incorporated photography into their paintings as well—focussing primarily on the geometric forms of cities, industrial objects, and the urban landscape. The Precisionists “reflected a common interest in a more precise and simplified art whose primary interest was machine-age America.” *Hoover Dam* characterizes Crawford’s evolution as not only a painter, but also in that it exhibits a strict attention to the problems addressed in his photography. Crawford uses deep, tonal contrasts of colors to push and pull at the spatial depth within the painting. Bordering between flatness and three-dimensionality, *Hoover Dam* fulfills Precisionist ideals of urban architecture and simplified, geometric forms.

Sara Adams, Daniela D’Amato, Melanie Baird, Adam Granofsky, Claire Jacomme, Sarah Spanburgh
