

Phone

Interview w/ John Crawford - son of Ralston Crawford
December 20, 1988. ≈ 1 PM.

101 KALOS (for Allen)
notes - photocopied
from his notebook

Discussed possibility of tracking down a bill of sale for Boat and Grain Elevators, No. 2. He said it would be extremely difficult, but will try to find anything that has to do with sale of the painting to Duncan Phillips in 1943. Also said that he will search for a possible "No. 1" to the "No. 2," which we have.

ATTITUDES

Period before war was "positive, man seemed to control nature and this attitude affected almost any artist." World War II changed that. Ralston went to Cologne right after the war ended and he did landscape images in lithograph. Crawford did "have more confidence in industry before the war."

CONTENT/
STYLE

Interestingly enough, a fact that would add some weight to the notion that Crawford was veering away from precisionism before the war was that he was already photographing "form signs," a subject he would paint when his art became much less representative of visible reality (after the war). Also, Crawford's art was "more simplified and distilled [before the war]" than the art of Charles Sheeler. The fact that Sheeler used photography "in a different way" from Ralston Crawford might have ~~and~~ had something to do with this. "Sheeler would trace over a photograph, reverse it," and generally be much more complex in his transition from photography to painting. Crawford was not as concerned, it seems, with detail as Sheeler was.

over →

Interview w/ John Crawford, cont.

12/20

inspiring sources

} after he was.

"Images from after he was were as closely related to things seen as ever before. What he sees [is] on a formal level, light and shade... if he saw a cylinder [for instance] with light on one side, he might paint a white stripe and a black stripe... he was never abstract on one level [only]...."

COMPARISON w/ SHEELER

There is already some mention of photographic differences in terms of studies for paintings. Both artists drew from similar sources - cubism, Cézanne, the Pennsylvania landscape, etc. But, Sheeler "kept on going [with the Precisionist style] after he was." Also, as mentioned earlier, Crawford simplified his subjects more.

Inspiration

He mentioned his father's often used motto, an analogy to shipping with respect to his art, "emotion is the propeller, but without the rudder, the intellect as rudder, there would be nothing but chaos."

Studio of N.Y.C.
Feb. 14, 1973
New York City, New York

- 55 -

1973
CRAWFORD
INTERVIEW
NOTES

① pop, op - no effect on my studio in any way
quotes Louis Armstrong - "stay in one city to stay sharp"
"you can play, but not stay in provinces"

② last twenty years - "discovery of abstract art" ~~seems~~
it in recent times. abstract art - a fact
in the 1920s and earlier than that. For young
people, for them, it's brand ~~you~~ new. That's how
it should be.

③ Otis Art Institute. "appallingly bad ~~state~~ taste, I had
when I first attended." "Arctipenko" - "one of the
first modern artists I had contact with."

④ loved teaching. would like to do some more in a
limited sense. calls US education, higher education
an "appalling commercial enterprise." VAPID

⑤ Work by nature? "yes, I do work directly from
nature". Sometimes, I would spend four
years unconsciously absorbing what I saw,
and then I'd paint - "Spain scenes."

* a direct, external stimulus.

⑥ "I'm a highly disciplined person. I recognize, almost as
a matter of nature, the effect of a particular experience
on me."

1
Facts, cont.

taskell
- Crawford was no doubt a dedicated artist. He left Breckenridge because of his color, and went to New York on his own at the height of the Depression

Dedication

- Multiple paint layers gradually disappeared. , p. 18
- Influenced by Cézanne. Add to it, an interest in surrealism.

Early influences

" One need only compare a 1931 painting, Untitled of Barns - pigments are built up. Grass and foliage looks thick and details are not excluded. There is a flatness. By 1935, Crawford's Barn, Exton, Pa. is more immaculate. The surface is ambiguous and the barn is similar in style to _____, Develop.

~~train elevators~~

" Buffalo Grain Elevators (1937). There is a three dimensionality. The elevators are monumental, but they appear round, wires and a crane are nearby, and so are surrounding buildings. In 1938, Crawford's Coal Elevators represent further simplification. By 1942, Crawford's art was "imbued... with a more planar, abstract structure, although he retained distinct, if summary, figurative elements. Further, the color became far less naturalistic..." Develop.

taskell, p50-51
Nevertheless, Crawford's expansive, simplified forms were more than a formalist's interpretation of the architectonic shapes of industry. For him, industrial structures were the American counterpart to Europe's Gothic cathedrals. They were "symbols of the emancipation of the times. They represented the liberation of the world from poverty."

more on optimism

Interesting Points

Agee > - Crawford started painting, as an illustrator - p. 5

at the age of fifteen or sixteen.

- By the age of fourteen - he had travelled all the Great Lakes with his father - also worked as an able bodied seaman. Close connection with the sea permeated his work. @

Early
Dev.

- Otis Art, Disney; but it was at the Barnes Foundation where Crawford received his first extensive exposure to modern art. p. 6

- 1930 and 1932, New York.

- Nevertheless, the sea yielded a "great source of visual delight."

- In 1934, Crawford did his first paintings in which his characteristic sharp-edged, planar style emerged.

Precisionism had begun as early as 1916-1917.

- In 1939, Crawford secured the maximum "visual impact." A painting is not "something to be read." He insisted that his work was "charged with emotion," and was "never concerned with a pictorial logic to the exclusion of feeling." (p. 7). However, his Boat and Train Elevators, No. 2 seems to be much more concerned over a pictorial logic than does his

- As Haskell wrote, Crawford's artistic development in the Precisionist style, pursued a path that was independent of the earlier Precisionists. (?) yes - p. 51!

- Barnes Foundation, Dr. Barnes → collection of over 700 Post-Impressionist works, the largest and most comprehensive in the country. p. 15.

early development

Crawford on sea.

Haskell >

Differences w/ Precisionists

Haskell > "He was not of their generation. Indeed, by the late 1930s, it [Precisionism] had become a historical movement. (p. 51).

One could easily question Barbara Haskell's assertion that the majority of Precisionists saw the American landscape merely "as a vehicle for uniting recognizable subject matter with the abstract forms and flattened space of Cubism,"⁴ that, "for them, the social ramifications of technological innovations were less interesting than technology's clear lines, angular shapes, and smooth surfaces.

an analogous comparison could be drawn between a 1938 painting showing a ship at the dock, a 1941-1942 at the dock, and the Boiler Synthesis (1942).

Haskell → p. 56

The success of Overseas Highway publicly cemented "his identification with the Precisionist style which had launched his career." As Haskell wrote, Crawford "began to move beyond that style" In fact, Crawford himself Haskell quotes the artist's new goal as in art as the "selection, elimination, simplification, and distortion for the purpose of conveying emotional and intellectual reactions to the thing seen." This seems different from Charles Sheeler and his more Precisionist attitude to painting, art, "A painting is a thing seen. It is not something to be read..."

arguable.
his purpose
is to
paint
pictures.
some
exceptions

p. 52

Richard Hall
NY Times

Crawford always painted from nature. He may have distorted, simplified, or flattened his images, but they were always derived from something Crawford had seen. In a 1973 interview, Crawford said, "yes, I do work directly from nature, [but] sometimes, I would spend ~~for~~ four years or so unconsciously absorbing what I saw, and then I'd paint."

also interview w/ Edm.

p. 55 notes

As Age has written, for Crawford, abstraction was "a process of selection and distillation from the known and visible world."

p. 8, Age

difference -> precisionists

Crawford took photography as a kind of "nourishment" and "visual stimulation" which continually allowed him to explore and discover the most powerful and emotive possibilities of any given site - more of a psychological, moody character than most precisionists.

p. 9 1941-1942

Age sites 1941-1942 as a crucial period transitional period in which Crawford became "less interested in literal transcription and turned to a more abstract mode of painting in order to depict the many juxtapositions of experience that shaped his perception of modern life." Indeed, color becomes less naturalistic and begins "to assume a non-associative character in its nascent stage of becoming an independent force," expressive force.

H.H. Arnason ->

cln style, a "classicist," -> "from the beginning, his interests centered on the classical problems of space organization - relations between the picture plane and the illusion of the third dimension - rather than any form of narrative or literary-expressionist subject."

p. 6

Weldon Spilley!

Arnason concurs that, after 1940, "the sense of the painting as an autonomous object increased."

II Crawford

- known for his "precisionist" style
- perhaps, as Haskell has written...
- but, he was a dedicated artist who was not really a precisionist in the end.*

- In fact, his mature style began in 1944 and lasted until his death in 1978.

* although he retained elements of precisionism - a predilection for a sharp, linear style and a homage to utilitarian objects of the urban age.

- However, Crawford was not like "nearly all the Precisionist painters [excluding] to wit who refused to let outside events permeate the idealized world of their art."

As Richard Freeman wrote in 1941, "whatever painting Crawford does during or after his military career will undoubtedly be vastly different." By that year, however, Crawford's art was already changing - William Agee wrote that it was "on the verge of moving into the realm of Synthetic Cubist abstraction..."

Indeed, the March 2 - April 28 Whitney Museum catalogue text deemed the Precisionist movement as ending w/ WWII. Crawford's is, in many ways, the most "advanced" form of precisionism.

Because → his movement to abstraction, and what Donald Bear called, Crawford's awareness "of the underlying human imagination that motivated... the earlier paintings of de Chirico."

Diff.
w/
precisionists

Martin
Bridman

act Marches
on

Agee, p. 9

Jubovskiy

Bear

Seal

w/ respect to materialism : "I should like to point out that in my approach... there has been no tolerance of any rationalistic approach... these pictures are are physical symbols of particular perceptive processes."

Thomas
AlbrightArt News
1973

Nonetheless, art writers are not accurate when they refer to Ralston Crawford as "a hard-core" Precisionist, who was able to straddle the "line between realism and abstraction." This Crawford most certainly did in Boat and Brain Elevators, No. 2, but after 1944, his painting was much more abstract than it was "real." yes.

Excellent

Romantic
vs.Classical
vs.

Surreal.

It is a style surely open to analysis. Its ambiguity invites speculation that often contradicts is contradictory among art historians. Hilton Kramer calls it "a romantic" art that turns "hard material facts into digestible transcendental doctrine." Writing in 1961. ~~Thomas~~ More than twenty five years later, Bonnie Zarret Strick of Art News called Crawford a "reticent Romantic." ~~Other~~ other art historians like H.H. Arnason have noted that Crawford's interests "centered on the classical problems of space organization..." Indeed, in the catalogue for *

Midden doof/lone
catalogue.

There is a subtle "romance" to his pictures. As Russell Tynes wrote in 1977, in Crawford's paintings, "there is power without arrogance, delicacy without mincing, intensity without bravado..." John Crawford, Ralston's son explained his father's emotional that his father was "a very emotional man." At, in his art, ruddes, etc...

*The Lines of Power Exhibit, Maroney refers to the art of Precisionism as "classical." → p. 2.

master
footnote
for
optimism

In a review for Times of Power, John Russell of the New York Times wrote, "what nature had left crooked could be made straight; there was no limit to our potential for growth; technology had everything tried. The hydroelectric dam, the steel mill, the blast furnace, and the grain elevator were emblems of society a society that had forgotten the word 'failure.'"

tie-in
to P. 3
exceptions

But Crawford was affected by events, unlike Sheeler, in the New York Times, 1946 - he was quoted, "It is futile to look for illustrative value in each detailed area. My purpose is to have been to convey ideas and feelings in a formal sequence and not reproduce nature."

This is a far cry from 12 years before, when Crawford wrote, "I have spent much time drawing when it was impossible to paint (grass one day, snow the next, etc.)"

~~In any case, perhaps Maroney says it best,~~

Maroney noted that "the presence of a wispy white cloud in Overseas Highway dissipates just enough the severity of powerful lines which recede and converge into an undefined distance. In Boat and Grain Elevators, No. 2 the monumental elevators almost eerily overwhelm the boat in the distance. The water is an unnatural mustard brown color, and there is not a single cloud in the ~~gray~~ empty all too empty sky.

Good
analysis
of
painting

When Boat And Grain Elevators, No. 2, travelled to the "Lines of Power show," in 1977, Maroney was prompted to say about it, "Crawford does not stress the littleness of man and the enormity of his machines. There is an emptiness - but always there is life... It is the sight of Crawford's art which has caused me to be increasingly preoccupied w/ the sense of images drawn from recollections and not just with the shapes of power emerging out of lines."

Lines
of
Power

Conclusion
"Perhaps
he said
it
best"

1978
Bulletin.

In terms of attitude, Crawford himself said, "We thought the solutions were around the corner. Optimism, for some of us, was the note." ~~to~~
Talking about his art before 1944, Crawford said λ

"I've never had any inclination to reduce painting to a series of repeated angles or curves. In relation to my work, I'm not congenial to the term 'geometric.'"

Boat And Grain Elevators was painted just before Crawford's art changed somewhat drastically. "My own life changed violently with the war, a period starting for me in June, 1942 when I joined the Army... Prior to the war, I had had the rather simple minded attitude that most young painters shared then...."