

**"Ballardvale," a
1946 oil painting
by Charles Sheeler,
is part of the
permanent collection
at the Addison
Gallery of American
Art in Andover.**

Addison Gallery image





Tim Jean photo

Gordon Wilkins, curator of American art at the Addison Gallery, talks about the painting "Ballardvale," currently on display as part of the exhibit "Finding American Form: 20th-Century Selections from the Permanent Collection."

DRAWN TO BALLARDVALE

Andover had a lasting effect on Charles Sheeler,
Addison Gallery's first artist-in-residence

The Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy owns works by many of the country's greatest artists, from Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer to Georgia O'Keeffe and Jackson Pollock.

Locals may be pleased to learn that a painting depicting a scene in Andover is included among them.

"Ballardvale" was painted by Charles Sheeler in 1946 and is rarely absent from the walls of the museum.

"It's one of our frequent flyers, or greatest hits," says Gordon Wilkins, the Robert M. Walker curator of American art

at the Addison, which has a collection of more than 25,000 works.

The painting features a cluster of mill buildings with a square smokestack rising from their midst and reaching out of the painting's frame.

The structures are rendered in solid sections of brick red, along with dark green shadow, that emphasize their geometry.

Two-dimensional forms of light green and light and dark blue suggest the sky and environment but also belong to a

By WILL BROADDUS

Finding 'Ballardvale'

Charles Sheeler's 1946 painting "Ballardvale" is currently featured in the exhibit "Finding American Form: 20th-Century Selections from the Permanent Collection."

On display through July 31 in Gallery 209, the show "explores the spirit of formal experimentation and range of artistic styles that characterized the 20th century."

The Addison Gallery of Art is located at Phillips Academy, 3 Chapel Ave., Andover. It is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sundays. Admission is free.

For more information, call 978-749-4015 or visit addison.andover.edu.

scheme of abstraction in the work.

"He's relishing the geometric elements and distilling them into this very triumphant, uplifting, exultant composition," Wilkins says.

The history of this work's creation is almost as interesting as the painting itself, and even marks a unique development in the art world.

That's because Sheeler painted "Ballardvale" as the result of an invitation from Bartlett Hayes, who taught art at Phillips and was assistant curator at the Addison from 1933 to 1940, before he was appointed director in 1940.

Hayes and Sheeler had met early in the '40s when both were serving on the jury of a painting competition at the Art Institute of Chicago, Wilkins says.

Starting a tradition

When Hayes had the idea to bring an artist to the Addison for a six-week residency — a concept that was "more or less invented by Bartlett Hayes," Wilkins says — he thought Sheeler was the perfect choice.

"There really wasn't anything quite like it, and he had this idea because he thought that it would make sense, since artists are producing works on spec without a specific buyer in mind — that it would be a novel idea to support an artist, guarantee an acquisition, and bring something into the collection that had a really concrete connection to this museum and this place," Wilkins says.

Sheeler, who was born in Philadelphia in 1883, had already enjoyed "a very long, fruitful career, but he had stagnated a bit" by the time he visited Andover, Wilkins says.



Addison Gallery photos

"Ballardvale Mill, Vertical," top, and "Ballardvale Mill Buildings, Distant View With Reflections," above, are 1946 gelatin silver prints by Charles Sheeler. The 8-by-10 photos were gifted to the Addison Gallery of American Art by Sandra B. Lane in honor of Jock Reynolds.

Sheeler was best known as a painter by that time, although he had also worked with photography throughout his career.

“He was a pioneer in melding the two, and utilizing one not just to inform the other, but there is this kind of mutual inflection where his photographs are influenced by the way he thinks about his painting, and his paintings are influenced by the way he thinks about photographs,” Wilkins says.

One of Sheeler’s first jobs was taking photographs of buildings in Pennsylvania for architects, which led to his fascination with forms of vernacular architecture.

These became focal points of his art and drew him to Ballardvale, where mill buildings had stood idle for years.

Sheeler described these structures in a later interview as “carcasses” and the area around them as “pretty gruesome,” but he found new life for them in his painting.

“In this painting, he has presented them in a much finer form than they were at the time, they were quite decrepit,” Wilkins says.

During his residency, Sheeler and his wife, Musya, stayed at the Andover Inn, where they were allowed to bring their dachshund, Ebony.

Sheeler’s participation in the residency began a tradition at the Addison that is still going strong. There are differences today, in that artists now are expected to interact in some way with students but are otherwise free to focus on their work, while Sheeler had zero demands on his time.

Sheeler spent his six weeks walking around campus and driving around Andover taking lots of photographs, Wilkins says. But the painting “Ballardvale” was created later at his home in New York.

“He returned there with all of these photographs and worked on a number of compositions,” Wilkins says.

Lasting impression

Along with the painting that was added to the Addison’s collection in 1947, Sheeler continued to create work that was inspired by Ballardvale for years after his visit.

These included a painting called “The Mill – Ballardvale,” which now belongs to the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine, and a watercolor at the Addison called “Ballardvale Revisited,” where “he gets even more abstract,” Wilkins says.

“Then there’s a work called ‘New England Irrelevancies,’ which we have



Charles Sheeler took a more abstract view of the Andover mills in “Ballardvale Revisited,” an opaque watercolor created in 1949 and purchased by the Addison Gallery.

a study for,” Wilkins says. “The finished work is at the MFA in Boston, where he’s kind of superimposing Ballardvale mills and melding them with Manchester, New Hampshire, mills and commenting on the beautiful decay of these mill towns.”

The Addison brought all of Sheeler’s Ballardvale-inspired work together for an exhibit in 1996, which was held on the occasion of the gallery’s 65th anniversary.

Along with 14 works from the Lane Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, there were also pieces from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio; and the Worcester Art Museum.

While Sheeler’s work tended to feature elements of abstraction, it was also rooted in local traditions, such as Shaker architecture, that he wanted to celebrate, especially in the years following World War I.

“Artists, as well as politicians, started to deliberately turn their back on foreign

influence and look more at the past to try to build what in the field is talked about as a usable past, so people were starting to look at folk art,” Wilkins says.

Along with representing the mature work of a masterful artist, “Ballardvale” testifies to the vision of Hayes, who helped build the Addison into a premier collection of American art.

“Hayes was responsible for a lot of these firsts that we are really proud of,” Wilkins says. “He was the first person to give a retrospective exhibition to an abstract expressionist artist, which was Hans Hoffman. We were the first to publish an abstract expressionist text. We were the first to show Andy Warhol.”

But “Ballardvale” also bears witness to the value of the town as a source of inspiration, and Wilkins thinks it is the best work that Sheeler devoted to the subject.

“This is the most triumphant of the group, and it has this spirit,” Wilkins says. ▲