



# ART REVIEW: Intensely American Exhibition by Precision

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by Charles A. Riley II

“Painter, sharpen your diamond!”

That was the command of Max Jacob in 1924 addressing his avant-garde colleagues in Paris at the height of the Jazz Age. What would drive Le Corbusier, Picasso, Leger and their American proteges into Apollonian mode when the rest of the world was living it up with such Dionysians as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Josephine Baker and Nancy Cunard?

The “call to order” in art, music, literature and dance rose after the massive chaos of war and the shock of Cubism, perceived to be destruction on canvas. Many of the masterpieces of the period were Purist statements coated in white Ripolin (Corbusier’s Villa Stein), neo-classical portraits and still lifes by [Picasso](#) that adopted the constructed stage idiom he used for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and Stravinsky and Balanchine’s “Apollo.”

Among the most attentive responses to Purism were the lucky Americans in Paris at the time and those at home who, reading their magazines, saw the potential of a painting style that fitted their urban and even rural landscapes.

That is my own Francophile prelude to “Adapting Precisionism: 1925 - 1946” at D. Wigmore Fine Art in New York through July 31, 2015. This intensely American exhibition generously offers a whole semester’s education in the trajectory of the Precisionists, from their inception in the mid-1920s to tacking in the face of such “headwinds” as Surrealism, American Scene and Social Realism.

Curator Deedee Wigmore, who brilliantly used the term “headwinds,” traces the precursors back to American Synchronists Stanton MacDonald-Wright and Morgan Russell in 1913-1917 as well as the Photo-Secession (1905-1917), from which compositions based on architecture were derived. The architectural angle is insightful, as Morton Schamberg and Miklos Suba, both strongly represented in the show (Suba’s muscular Industrial Scene has the bold graphic punch expected in a Precisionist show), were trained architects. Charles Sheeler, Louis Lozowick and Niles Spencer are identified with architecture as well.



“Industrial Scene” by Miklos Suba, 1930. Oil on canvasboard, 20 x 16 inches.

One of the most arresting works in the show is the almost Rockwell-esque (and I mean that kindly) overhead point of view on a drafting table in Henry Billings's *Take the Point*: its clean straight edge and arc are a boon to Pythagoreans. Right by it on a wall that skews toward the hard-edged and almost abstract side of the movement is *White Boat*, a moody Corbusian shipyard with crisply married contours in a cool palette, also by Billings. The artist, who died in Sag Harbor in 1985, also painted the ladies room mural still at Radio City Music Hall (not that I would know from firsthand experience).



"Take the Point" by Henry Billings, 1935. Tempera on panel, 15 x 18 1/2 inches.

The row of the gallery that begins with Billings culminates in two remarkably light yet monumental cityscapes by Charles Green Shaw—on close examination the black outlines of the buildings stutter across the nubby ridges of the canvas so delicately that there is a rhythmic play of white and black. Shaw, by the way, was first Museum of Modern Art Director Alfred Barr's trusted go-to connoisseur in Paris, a board member who was dispatched to acquire some of MoMA's finest treasures in the permanent collection.



"Shape Shadows" by Charles Green Shaw, 1934. Oil on artist board, 30 x 21 3/4 inches.

An even more intimate sense of the hand that is required for Precisionism, along with the guiding tools in the Billings work, is offered by the pastel on heavy paper of grain elevators in Nebraska by Preston Dickinson, which reads like a watercolor from a distance and is a deft historical reminder of the architectural link between these massive rural structures and our own city skylines.

The other side of the gallery loosens up a bit, following the Art Students League prodigies upstate to Woodstock where they started not just a painting but a crafts colony. Local color by George Ault and Ernest Fiene convey an undeniable charm, although I found Martin Lewis's almost Munch-like *Dawn* to be more compelling in part because he left Sandy Point, Connecticut, at that hour to commute to the city each day and the golden light in the window conveys domestic warmth perfectly.



“Barn at Woodstock” by George Ault, 1940. Watercolor on paper, 11 3/4 x 14 3/4 inches.

Something about accessible lighthouse pictures must appeal to presidents, because Georgina Klitgaard’s Point Judith, RI was correct enough to make her Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s favorite painter.

For both color and texture, as well as spatial complexity and the challenge of technical ideas, nothing in the show beats a brilliant painting by Irene Rice Pereira, Mill Town. With its red and gold tones like the glowing coals of dying fire, its vigorous black orthogonals—a kind of cross hatching delved by the tip at the wrong end of the brush—and thick passages of divided greens and pinks (the central panel) the work looks ahead to the virtuoso [Larry Poons](#). I have to admit that I shamelessly stole this insight from Emily Lenz, the gallery director, who has the privilege of sitting right in front of it all day long.



“Mill Town” by Irene Rice Pereira, 1940. Oil on canvas, 12 1/2 x 18 inches.

A few steps and miles away stylistically is another Pereira, Windows, that flattens and re-assembles in a Klee-like way the fenestration of Mill Town, based incidentally on the silk mills of Paterson, New Jersey, their silhouettes and the flowing canal at their feet. Paging Dr. William Carlos Williams, the Homer of Paterson, who similarly heard the poetry in the falling waters of an industrial locale and captured it in his epic poem Paterson, parts of which were first published in 1946, just six years after Pereira painted her wonderful work.

That mechanical and industrial theme is present several times in the show: the boats of Konrad Cramer and Ernest Fiene, their smokestacks predictably puffing; an anecdotal moment at a Kansas gas station from the cross-country road trip of Henry Dix nonchalantly posing by his Ford; and a sociologically, historically and regionally interesting scene from the integrated (black and white crewmen) Grumman plant in Bethpage by Daniel Celentano.



“Fueling Up, Grumman Aircraft Plant,” Bethpage, Long Island by Daniel Celentano, 1942. Watercolor on paper, 18 1/2 x 23 3/4 inches.

A little of this goes a long way in my book but [Hopper](#) fans (and all roads lead to the Whitney this spring) will enjoy the anticipatory frisson of recognition from Dale Nichols's *When the Grass Grows Green*. With its planes of stark white and black against an almost Japanese ombre of blue for the sky, the lush green grass promises a bountiful harvest that will be heading toward the city on the appealing red freight train that just pulled up.

Because my kid sister lives in a house (with the best feng shui in New England) in a famous Paul Sample landscape painted on a hill overlooking Beaver Meadow Road outside Norwich, Vermont, I smiled to see his placid Vermont Farm from the same locale, a pastoral interlude from the factory tour.



“Vermont Farm” by Paul Sample, 1937. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

What could have been a bore (row on row of lifeless smokestacks) became instead a terrific show. Gallery president and doyenne Deedee Wigmore's careful, clear two-pager is a model of the gallery essay at its best, laying out the historical and stylistic criteria for the curatorial choices while eschewing the kind of self-serving and dubious claims to the epochal significance of every work in the show that mar the catalogues of the auction houses, where everything's a “masterpiece.”

Wigmore, in the role of enthusiastic but firmly focused teacher, points out in the essay that these works are not just tightly painted but, and I love this detail, thoughtfully “edited,” like the show itself.

She writes, “Rather than organize our exhibition on a specific set of artists, the paintings were selected because they exhibited the following characteristics of Precisionism: carefully edited, hard-edged architectural elements within static, balanced, and smoothly painted compositions of interlocking designs. In a selection of paintings with an architectural focus, we aim to show that these Precisionist characteristics used by artists of the 1930s-1940s were modified only slightly by new narratives contributed by national and international social events.”

Precisely.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “ADAPTING PRECISIONISM: 1925-1946” remains on view through July 31, 2015 at D. Wigmore Fine Art, 730 Fifth Avenue, Suite 602, New York, NY 10019. [www.dwigmore.com](http://www.dwigmore.com).

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