

The New York Times

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2007
ART IN REVIEW

E5

A Cosmopolitan Cubist With a Wandering Eye

By ROBERTA SMITH

Charles G. Shaw (1892-1974) belongs to a generation of abstract painters who remain for the most part stubbornly lost. Active in the interwar period, they organized themselves into the American Abstract Artists when abstraction was viewed as un-American and then were largely swept aside by Abstract Expressionism.

Yet Shaw's art has hardly been hidden. The exhibition of his paintings from the 1930s and '40s at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery through Saturday is the 38th in New York since 1934, when he made his debut at the Valentine Gallery. (The roster includes nine shows at the Washburn Gallery between 1975 and 1997.) Some of Shaw's obscurity can be explained by a tendency to portray him as an overlooked Modernist, which he was, rather than as a peripatetic, multitasking insider-outsider who pledged allegiance to Modernism but also played the field, which he also was.

A native New Yorker and Yale graduate whose sizable inheritance had a Woolworth lineage, Shaw was rich but rarely idle. According to the Rosenfeld catalog, he spent the Roaring Twenties as a writer about town. His output included a novel ("Heart in a Hurricane"), a fleeting Broadway play and a book of profiles of people he mostly knew (F. Scott Fitzgerald, Anita Loos, Sinclair Lewis and his college classmate and friend Cole Porter). He also contributed society columns to magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Smart Set* and *Vanity Fair*.

These activities are reflected in a second Shaw show that runs through Feb. 7 at the Archives of American Art. Included are sketches and photographs and copies of his books, as well as a flattering note from Fitzgerald about "Heart in a Hurricane" and notification of his acceptance into the Racquet and Tennis Club (entrance fee: \$200).

Shaw started studying painting at the Art Students League in 1926. Over the course of three trips to



Charles Shaw (1892-1974), *Polygon "No. 34"*, 1937, painted wood relief with artist frame, 22 1/4 x 28 1/4 x 1 3/4 inches, signed.

Europe in the early 1930s he evolved into a confident maker of small, stylish, expertly composed abstractions. Their slightly jaunty lightness can suggest magazine cartoons or theater props. Some of the earliest are rather brittle Cubist caricatures — Max Beerbohm meets Picasso.

Like his writing, Shaw's paintings paddle serenely through various painting genres, among them, Synthetic Cubism, Surrealism-tinged biomorphic abstraction and a more straight-edged, planar variety related to De Stijl and Precisionism. His colors feel filled in and fresco thin; their shapes often seem to hang like starched laundry from drawn lines that stretch edge to edge.

Despite his numerous debts, Shaw managed to make some styles his own, and never more than when his work became cautiously physical. In "Polygon No. 34," a painted wood relief from around 1937, he starts out in the vicinity of Jean Arp, another friend, but his fluttery white shapes overseen by a sunlike red disc form a distinctly American landscape.

At the same time he expanded one of his Precisionist geometries outward to the edges of a stepped panel, making one of the earliest shaped abstract paintings in this country, although it also resembles a Siense altarpiece.

By then Shaw was close to the modern art collector A. E. Gallatin, the critic and artist George L. K. Morris and the artist Suzy Frelinghuysen. Like him they were affluent painters and founding members of the American Abstract Artists; together they were often called — and not always benignly — the Park Avenue Cubists.

Shaw's paintings have an interesting foil in the juicier, more cosmopolitan abstractions of Frederick Kann (1884-1965), the subject of a rare show at Meredith Ward Fine Art (through Saturday). A Czech-born American and early American Abstract Artists member who lived and worked in New York; Paris; Kansas City, Mo.; and Los Angeles, Kann often combined straight-edge and biomorphic forms into starlike clusters that tower like colossi over low horizons and immense cloud-strewn skies. Quite a different sensibility.

In the 1940s Shaw began making collages and assemblage boxes using tarot cards, dice and other materials. He also wrote poetry and children's books, one of which, "It Looked Like Spilt Milk" (1947), is still in print. In the 1950s and '60s his abstract paintings became larger, in step with the times, and he exhibited regularly at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery. But his eye always wandered, as the Archives of American Art show reminds us with a photograph of Manhattan that served as a model for one of Shaw's best-known works: a painting of a giant pack of Wrigley's Spearmint gum floating before a semiabstract skyline.

The scene resembles Man Ray's big red lips but suggests a disembodied billboard, not a sexy dream image. It presages Pop Art as much as Shaw's shaped painting, made at the same time, presages 1960s abstraction. He may have been too busy to notice.

"Charles G. Shaw" continues through Saturday at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan; (212) 247-0082; www.michaelrosenfeldart.com. "Manhattan Modern: The Life and Work of Charles Green Shaw" runs through Feb. 7 at the Archives of American Art, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, at 51st Street, (212) 399-5015; www.aaa.si.edu/exhibits.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/arts/design/20shaw.html>



Charles G. Shaw, c.1945

Courtesy of the Charles Green Shaw papers, 1874-1979;
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC