



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

RALSTON CRAWFORD (1906–1978)

Fishing Boats #3

Oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in.

Signed (at lower left): RALSTON CRAWFORD

Painted in 1955

RECORDED: William Agee, *Ralston Crawford* (New York: Twelve Trees Press, 1983), p. 15, pl. 43
illus. in color n.p.

EX COLL.: the artist, until 1978; to his estate; to private collection, 1988

In 1942, Ralston Crawford, thirty-six years old, entered the U.S. Army. After basic training at Fort Meade, Virginia, Crawford went to Washington, D.C. to head the Visual Presentation Unit of the Weather Division of the Army Air Force, where he produced images that translated weather charts into easily readable graphics for troops in the field. Toward the end of the war Master Sergeant Crawford visited regional installations in India, Burma, and China. Crawford was discharged in 1945 and struggled to resume his career after a three-year hiatus. In 1946, *Fortune Magazine* sent him to Bikini

Atoll in the Marshall Islands to witness an atomic bomb test. (The most comprehensive account of Crawford's career remains, Barbara Haskell, *Ralston Crawford*, exhib. cat. [Whitney Museum of Art, New York, 1985] and is the source for this essay, unless otherwise indicated.) While Crawford's post-war art reflected his wartime experience, as importantly, it represented a continuation of tendencies that had already begun in the 1930s, the period when Crawford had enjoyed his greatest success as a second-generation Precisionist. *Fishing Boats #3* is an iconic statement of Crawford's mature style, one of a mid-1950s series of abstract compositions inspired by the nautical gear scattered on the decks of small fishing boats and on the wharves where they docked.

Ralston Crawford was born into a family of Great Lakes ship captains. Sailing with his father, his childhood was saturated with the powerful industrial images of the Great Lakes' cargo trade—grain elevators, shipyards, railroads, and drydocks seen against vast expanses of water. After graduating from high school in Buffalo, Crawford went to New York City where he signed up to crew on United Fruit cargo ships serving Central America. Deciding to cultivate his strongest talent, Crawford worked his way West through the Panama Canal to Los Angeles, enrolling at the recently founded (1918) Otis Art Institute. His experience at Otis (combined with a side job working for the Walt Disney Studio) convinced him to acquire a proper art education. Accordingly, in 1927, Crawford returned East to study at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. His principal teacher there, Hugh Breckenridge, was a Paris-trained artist who had taught at PAFA since 1894. Among the largely conservative faculty, Breckenridge enjoyed a reputation for being most open to modernism. Crawford remained in the Quaker City for three-and-a-half years, supplementing the Academy curriculum with regular attendance at lectures at the Barnes Foundation in nearby Merion. By the time he left Philadelphia for New York City in 1930, he had been profoundly influenced by the rich exposure to modern art that was available

through Breckenridge, through the lectures and the collection of Dr. Alfred Barnes, and through his free access to the private Philadelphia collections of Earl Horter, Samuel and Vera Horter, and Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Speiser. Crawford was generous and honest in his appraisal of the effects of influences on his own evolving aesthetic development. In a May 1966 lecture on the occasion of the Student Awards Dinner at the University of Illinois, he noted

I had my masters and I wasn't afraid to look up to them. I haven't seen the statement in 35 years but I think I remember the gist of it. "Don't worry about your originality, if you haven't got it, there's not much you can do to get it; if you've got it, there's not much you can do to lose it." Robert Henri said something like that (as quoted in William C. Agee, *Ralston Crawford* [1983], facing p. 2).

Crawford's acknowledged masters included Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse, Braque, Picasso, and Gris. That Crawford recalled a Henri maxim is another piece of telling evidence of the powerful and enduring influence of the Philadelphia connection. Robert Henri, an earlier Pennsylvania Academy alumnus, was the founder of the so-called Ashcan School of art, and the charismatic inspiration for a circle of Philadelphia artists including John Sloan, George Luks, and Stuart Davis, son of Philadelphia newspaper editor, Edward Davis.

In the 1930s Crawford made his name as a precisionist artist, a generation younger than his American compatriots, Charles Sheeler (1883–1965) and Charles Demuth (1883–1935). The style, born in the United States in the aftermath of World War I, derived from strands of European modernism including cubism and futurism. The American adaptation of these impulses celebrated homegrown vernacular and industrial architecture, seen in sharp focus and clearly defined blocks of color. This was congenial to young Crawford who naturally translated his youthful experience into an artistic language that explored beauty in the simple geometries of mechanical and architectural configurations. By the 1930s,

Precisionism was already a period style. While Crawford was a fellow traveler, at the same time, he worked toward an increasingly abstracted language of sharply delineated shapes and colors based on the components of objects he had seen and experienced, leavened by his favorable exposure to the work of Purists and Surrealists that he absorbed traveling in Europe in 1932–33. Crawford began to exhibit in the early 1930s. He had his first solo exhibition in Baltimore in 1934. The pictures that attracted the most favorable critical notice were precisionist in style. A closer look, however, at Crawford's work of his "Precisionist period" reveals a parallel presence of significant "abstract" images (see, for example, *Composition [Bar]* of 1935 [Haskell, pl. 12 illus. in color] and even a di Chiricoesque influence as in *Columns with Pool* of 1936 [Haskell, pl. 9 illus. in color]). This is to say that even at his most precisionist. Crawford's work confounded easy characterization, which was exactly as he wished it. He was a young artist, absorbing a variety of influences as he worked toward his own personal voice.

In 1938, as had Sheeler and Morton Schamberg (1881–1918) before him, Crawford took up photography, a medium that froze observations in time and emphasized form and light intensity in its reduction of the world into shades on a black-and-white spectrum. In the mid 1940s, in the aftermath of yet a second World War, Crawford increasingly employed the techniques of sharp focus and strong blocks of color, to deconstruct and reassemble the shapes of his former landscapes into compositions where he explored interactions, sometimes rhythmic, sometimes contrapuntal, playing off each other. Like his friend, Stuart Davis, Crawford practiced an abstraction that was firmly rooted in reality. He derived his shapes from shards of perceptions, jumbled in time and space, but always the result of visual and emotional stimuli. In 1978, he approvingly quoted the influential modern art critic and curator, James Johnson Sweeney, saying "nothing begets nothing" (as cited in Haskell, comment on *Kewalo Closeup*, 1947–48, pl. 31 illus. in color). In 1946, Crawford described his "goal in painting" as

“selection, elimination, simplification and distortion for the purpose of conveying emotional and intellectual reactions to the thing seen” (as quoted in Haskell, p. 56). The gulf between Crawford’s meticulously controlled images and the work of the abstract expressionists is not just a matter of style but goes to Crawford’s view of the significance of art in society. Crawford deeply believed that art, in Haskell’s words, in order to be “fundamentally ethical,” had “to serve as a model for a rational and ordered society. For him, art’s ethical significance was directly proportional to its elimination of chaos and sentimental caprice” (p. 66). That was directly contradictory to the reigning American style of the post-War era, abstract expressionism.

In fact, in the post-war period, Crawford went his own way—too abstract to satisfy the taste for realism or even super realism, but far removed from the expressionist mainstream. While Crawford’s art production did not let up, he supported himself largely through a series of teaching appointments, lecture tours, and visiting instructorships—in Hawaii, Brooklyn, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Baton Rouge, Boulder, Ann Arbor, Lexington, Kentucky, Los Angeles, Lincoln, Nebraska, and Champaign, Illinois. From 1952 through 1957 he was on the faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York, and from 1960 to 1962, he taught at Hofstra College on Long Island.

Crawford traveled tirelessly, always camera in hand, expanding his oeuvre to include lithography, etching, and film. His camera served both as sketchpad, and as the medium for yet another art form, photography. His works on paper found a readier market than oil paintings. Nevertheless, Crawford continued a full exhibition schedule, often exhibiting in the locations where he taught, as well as in major venues and New York commercial galleries. A gloss of the “Chronology” in William Agee’s book (pp. 161–64) reveals a frenetic travel schedule, with a list of global international destinations from

northmost Europe to North Africa, and from Asia and the Pacific Islands to the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State. Crawford's love of islands took him to the Orkneys and Shetlands the Outer and New Hebrides, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific islands of Tahiti and Bali. Arguably, though, his greatest love was for the river port of New Orleans, and for its native art form, jazz. Crawford took over 10,000 photographs of the city and its people. (A selection of these are held at the Hogan Jazz Archive, Ralston Crawford Collection of Jazz Photography, at Tulane University.)

Crawford's oeuvre of the post war period, across all his media, is characterized by works executed in thematic series often over extended periods of time, identified by their series title and a number. It is no accident that Crawford's mental habit of understanding the visual world as a sequence of variations on themes has a direct parallel in the aural art of music. He shared his love of jazz with his friend, Stuart Davis, and with Piet Mondrian. Among Crawford's oil on canvas series are *Minnesota Boxcars*, *New Orleans*, *Lobster Pots*, *Third Avenue Elevated*, *Torn Signs*, *Nassau*, *First Avenue*, *Port Clyde* [Maine], *Giles* [France], as well as the present *Fishing Boats*. Their titles reflect the artist's wide-ranging interests and favorite places.

Ralston Crawford died in Houston, Texas in 1978. According to his wishes, after a traditional brass band funeral parade (he specified the bands and the musicians), he was laid to rest in a crypt in a mausoleum building in St. Louis Cemetery No. 3, in New Orleans, with his chosen epitaph carved in stone, "Didn't He Ramble."