

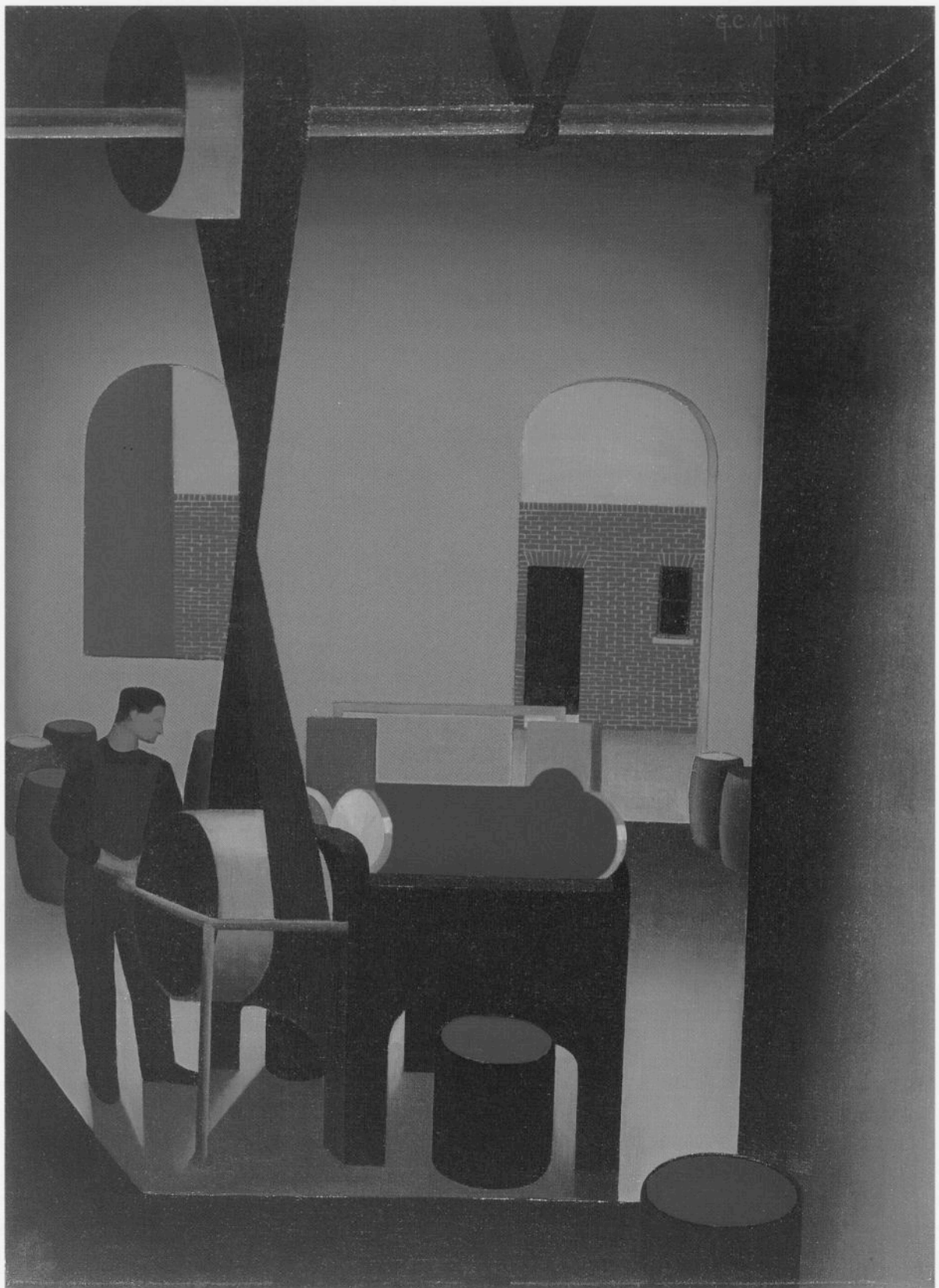
AESTHETICIZATION AND ALIENATION

In a 1917 issue of *Soil*, a short-lived avant-garde magazine published in New York, the editor Robert Coady exhorted American artists to find their subjects in what he saw as the unique urban and industrial landscape of modern America. "Our art is, as yet, outside of our art world," he stated. "It is in the spirit of the Panama Canal . . . the skyscraper, the bridges and Docks . . . the Electric Signs, the factories and Mills—this is American Art. It is not an illustration to a theory, it is an expression of life—a complex life—American life."¹ Painters responded to the counsel of Coady and other like-minded critics and intellectuals, and by the early 1920s a new artistic idiom had emerged, today known as Precisionism. The Precisionist artists—whose name is derived from the word "precise," used by critics in the 1920s to characterize the painting style—most often rendered American skyscrapers, bridges, and industrial subjects in a linear, crisp, and abstracting style.² Among the earliest and most promising practitioners of this modernist style was George Ault, whose 1923 painting *The Mill Room* both typifies the precisionist style and conveys complexities of the machine age often elided by other Precisionist painters.

George Copeland Ault (1891–1948) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, where he grew up in a prosperous but conservative family.³ His introduction to art came from his father, Charles Henry Ault, an amateur painter, an acquaintance of William Merritt Chase, and an active supporter of the arts who served as president of the Western Art Union and was a founder of the Saint Louis Museum and School of Fine Arts. The family moved to London in 1899, when the senior Ault was appointed European representative to his cousin's ink manufacturing firm. Once in London, George Ault's artistic talents were encouraged; he was enrolled in

University College School, the Slade School of Fine Arts, and St. John's Wood Art School, where, in 1908, he first publicly exhibited his work. Three years later the family returned to the United States, at which time his father opened the Jaenecke-Ault Printing Ink Company in Hillside, New Jersey, a suburb of New York. George, now in his twenties, worked for a time in the plant but devoted himself to painting, executing rural landscapes in the conservative impressionist style he had learned in London—paintings he later disparagingly called "the 'winter brook and birch tree' subjects of the National Academicians."⁴

About 1920 Ault's painting style changed. He turned his attention to urban subjects, which he increasingly rendered in a flat, planar style. In 1922 he moved to New York City and soon established his reputation as one of the nation's leading painters. By the late 1920s his work was being exhibited at such progressive galleries as the Downtown Gallery, run by Edith Halpert. Halpert's stable of artists included Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Charles Demuth, and Stuart Davis. In a review of a 1928 exhibit of Ault's work, one critic praised his modernist abstractions, saying, "The artist, like many of our young modernists, has had a decided flair for the abstract, building up his design in somber tones with architectural precision of structure."⁵ A second critic singled out Ault as one of the period's most important painters: "Ault may be called one of the true American artists. . . . The American school of painting which is now in a fertile period of development . . . has in this artist a strong and important contributor, with an individual approach and a very personal sense of the relation of form and color."⁶ Unfortunately, Ault's success did not last. Toward the end of the decade, he had become reclusive and prone



79. George C. Ault (1891–1948), *The Mill Room*, 1923
Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (54.2 × 40 cm)
Gift of Max Rosenberg to the California
Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1931.26

to excessive drinking. The death of his father from cancer in 1929, the stock market crash, and the suicide deaths of his two brothers further undermined his mental stability, and he alienated his art dealers, artist friends, and wife. During the 1930s he continued to paint, but his unsound personality isolated him from the mainstream art world. In an unsuccessful effort to improve his mental health, in 1937 he moved to Woodstock, New York, where he lived until 1948, the year he committed suicide.

The Mill Room (1923) depicts an industrial interior painted in Ault's mature, precisionist style. Framed by shadowy darkness, a solitary worker monitors a mill, its red cylindrical rollers turned by a belt stretching down from a driveshaft along the ceiling. In the foreground, two red-topped cylinders lead our eye from the lower right corner of the painting to the red roller of the mill. In the background, multicolor barrels rest against the walls, while beyond the arched doorway and window we glimpse the rest of the manufacturing plant.

The title of the work and the subject depicted suggest Ault based this painting on observations he made of his family's ink manufacturing business, which may have used similar mills, known as roll mills, to process ink for use in printing presses.⁷ Although the scene is based on reality, Ault has simplified and abstracted the worker, the machinery, and the architecture, rendering each with a minimum of detail and modeling and a consistent, flat application of paint. As a result, the scene appears composed of a series of interlocking geometric shapes and evinces a fixed stillness and a silence that are characteristics of precisionist painting.

Ault and the other Precisionist painters generally did not incorporate figures in their paintings, and the laborer here creates an unexpected tension. By rendering the industrial machinery and architecture as a composition of crisply painted geometric shapes, Ault aestheticizes and glorifies modern manufacturing. The real heroes of the machine age, as represented by Ault and his fellow Precisionists, are the mills, power plants, factories, and skyscrapers, which almost appear to have manufactured themselves. The solitary figure in this painting, whose body has been reduced to a black silhouette and whose face is devoid of an individualized physiognomy, reminds us of the very human cost of

industrialization, namely, the worker's alienation. As Karl Marx stated, "Alienation manifests itself not only in the result, but in the *act of production*, in the *producing activity* itself."⁸

Although Ault's *The Mill Room* does not represent an assembly line, the worker's contribution to the manufacturing process consists solely of observing and monitoring the "work" the mill does—work that, a century earlier, would have been done by the labor of men. This figure's abstracted body and features reduce him to a generic unit, one that can be replaced with a similar unit should the need arise, just as worn-out rollers on the mill can be taken out and replaced with new ones. Furthermore, the belt's figure eight, Möbius-strip form is suggestive of infinity and, by extension, the monotony of industrial labor. Thus, even as the painting celebrates the machine age, it also reminds us of the potential human cost of modernization and industrialization, in which the worker controls neither the mode of production nor the product of his labor.

This rare inclusion of a human figure in a precisionist painting renders its content potentially critical. Yet, the ambivalent relationship between modern manufacturing and individual labor expressed in *The Mill Room* may reflect the artist's personal relationship to the subject of the painting. The industrial space depicted in this painting was, it is thought, based on Ault's observations of the workers, machinery, and architecture of the Jaenecke-Ault Printing Ink Company, the business run by his father.⁹ The profits of this business had enabled Ault to become a successful painter. Indeed, he had been able to move to New York in 1922 with the help of a small stipend from his father.¹⁰ Yet, his father disapproved of the modernist style in which his son painted. As Ault's second wife later recalled, "Because George wouldn't paint the way his father wanted him to, the father gave him little to live on. . . . George suffered terribly."¹¹ The subject of *The Mill Room* may thus be seen as representing an industrial space that was, for all intents and purposes, an extension of the artist's father, to whom he was indebted for his artistic education and financial support. But the style in which *The Mill Room* is painted had alienated George from his father. Thus, the son's ambivalent relationship with his father may in some ways parallel the worker's alienation on the shop floor. [KM]

79. GEORGE C. AULT, *The Mill Room*

1. Robert Coady, *Soil* 1, no. 2 (January 1917): 55, quoted in Barbara Zabel, "The Machine as Metaphor, Model, and Microcosm: Technology and American Art, 1915–1930," *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 4 (December 1982): 103. For an analysis of artists, critics, and intellectuals who in the second decade of the twentieth century called for American artists to represent the urban and the industrial, see Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 43–90. A well-illustrated survey of the machine aesthetic in art and design during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s is Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian, *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941* (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1986).
2. Neither artists nor critics used the words *Precisionism* or *precisionist* in the 1920s to describe the paintings of Ault and his peers. For a history of these terms, see Gail Stavitsky, "Reordering Reality: Precisionist Directions in American Art, 1915–1941," in *Precisionism in America, 1915–1941: Reordering Reality* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 1994), 30–34. Surveys of Precisionist artists include *ibid.*; and Karen Tsujimoto, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1982).
3. The following biography of Ault is based on Susan Lubowsky, *George Ault* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1988), 7–45; and Jennifer Saville, "George C. Ault," in Marc Simpson, Sally Mills, and Saville, *The American Canvas: Paintings from the Collection of The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1989), 220.
4. Louise Ault, "Louise Ault Writings," 1, George Ault Papers, AAA/SI, quoted in Lubowsky, *Ault*, 8.
5. Unidentified source, review of exhibition at Downtown Gallery in 1928, Downtown Gallery Papers, AAA/SI, microfilm reel ND 1, frame 18, typescript copy in the George Ault artist file, AAD/DEY/FAMSF.
6. *Brooklyn Eagle*, 25 November 1928, from Downtown Gallery Papers, AAA/SI, microfilm reel ND 1, frame 22, typescript copy in the George Ault artist file, AAD/DEY/FAMSF.
7. Saville, "Ault," 220. For a brief discussion of the milling process in the manufacture of printing ink, see *Printing Ink Manual* (Cambridge, U.K.: W. Heffer and Sons, 1961), 601–605.
8. Karl Marx, "Alienated Labour," in *The Portable Karl Marx*, trans. and ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York, 1983), 136, quoted in Sharon Corwin, "Picturing Efficiency: Precisionism, Scientific Management, and the Effacement of Labor," *Representations* 84 (2004): 146, emphasis in original. My analysis of the representation of labor in Ault's painting is indebted to Corwin's insightful essay.
9. Saville, "Ault," 220.
10. Lubowsky, *Ault*, 11.
11. Louise Ault, "Writings," 17, quoted in *ibid.*, 14–15.

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