



Hartley, Marsden (1877-1943)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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A central figure in the evolution of modern American art, Marsden Hartley was also among a handful of gay and lesbian artists who came to define the delicate balance between the poetic and the erotic in the early days of the American avant-garde.

He was born Edmund Hartley in Lewiston, Maine in 1877. His mother died when he was only eight years old, an event that may have haunted him his entire life. Certainly, death was to be the occasion of many of his most memorable paintings.

In 1889, four years after the death of his mother, Hartley's father married Martha Marsden, whose maiden name the painter was to adopt as his first name in 1906. From 1898 to 1904, Hartley studied at the Cleveland School of Art, the New York School of Art, and the National Academy of Design.

In 1909, Hartley landed his first major exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's highly respected New York gallery, gallery 291, followed by a second exhibition in 1912. In that same year, like many artists of his generation, he made a pilgrimage to Paris, where he met the well-known art collectors Leo and Gertrude Stein.

In 1913, Hartley visited Berlin and Munich, where he met artists Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. While in Germany, he was drawn to the extravagant military parades he saw there and began a series of abstract paintings, the first of which were exhibited in the 1913 Armory show in New York.

Even after the outbreak of World War I in August of 1914, Hartley continued to live in Germany and only after the death of his close friend, a young German soldier named Karl von Freyburg, did he return to the United States.

Hartley's famous *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914) includes abstracted versions of von Freyburg's initials and his own. The painting, in which military regalia is arranged to suggest a body, is both a memorial to Hartley's friend and an expression of forbidden desire. Jonathan Weinberg provides a detailed analysis of the painting and what he sees as the overt homosexual content of the entire war motif series.

Not surprisingly, Hartley's paintings of the German military machine were not well received in New York. The artist's fascination with military themes continues to be a topic of debate, as is the nature of his relationship with von Freyburg.

By 1919, Hartley had discontinued not only the war motif series but also his use of abstraction as well. In the years to follow he would do many still lifes, landscapes, and figure studies, but it was not until the late 1930s that he returned to the masculine subject, although in 1933 he painted another memorial work, *Eight Bells Folly*, dedicated to his friend Hart Crane, the gay poet who committed suicide at sea.



Marsden Hartley (top, in 1939) painted *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914, above) as a memorial to a friend and an expression of forbidden passion. Photographic portrait of Marsden Hartley by Carl van Vechten, June 7, 1939. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction of *Portrait of a German Officer* courtesy of Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

Moving first to Nova Scotia, and then back to Maine in 1935, Hartley renewed his earlier fascination with individual subjectivity, exploring American transcendentalism and Jamesian radical empiricism through the everyday scenes of a fishing village. The works from this period employ a crude realism closer to American Regionalism than to modernist abstraction.

In this style, Hartley created one of his strongest images in *Adelard the Drowned, Master of the "Phantom"* (1938-1939). Based on the death of his close friend Alty Mason, the painting is a touching portrait. Seated with hands crossed, Mason's open shirt and rugged form are softened by a single white flower placed at his temple.

Another portrait in the same series is *Christ Held by Half-Naked Men* (1940-41), an all-male *pietà* in which Mason is presented both as a Christ-figure and an object of desire.

Hartley's exact relationship to Mason and to other subjects of his paintings is open to speculation, but in her 1997 catalogue essay, "Changes of Heart: Marsden Hartley's Ideas and Art," Patricia McDonnell writes on the difficulties of being a gay artist in an era when public admission was taboo and costly.

Bibliography

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