

75 Years Ago: Marsden Hartley in Provincetown

by Tony Vevers

ing a Mandarin whose enigmatic profile faces that of Hartley.

Throughout his life, Hartley seemed to have enjoyed having his picture taken. In many of them he poses for the camera, his large, curiously pale eyes with their dark pupils staring out of deep hollows over his aquiline beak of a nose. So much a wanderer, perhaps Hartley felt his presence in strange places substantiated by a photographic image.

After a major show of his work in Berlin in 1915, Hartley came back to the United States to what he later characterized as “the Great Provincetown Summer.” Provincetown was described at the time in a *Boston Globe* article as the “Biggest Art Colony in the World” (August 27, 1916). This was largely due to the war; many artists who, like Hartley, had had to leave Europe, and

foreground stand six masqueraders and there is Hartley, to the left of a pair of penguins. He is again dressed in exotic garb, “the East Indian” costume for which he won a prize as “Most Artistic,” as an article in the *Provincetown Advocate* (August 24, 1916) tells us. This costume is not as extravagant as the Paris version (which, one suspects, may have been rented) but he has stained his face and hands as he had done before. His stance, too, is like that of the Quatres Arts Ball photo, right arm akimbo, right leg forward. He stares out, his eyes catching the flash of the camera’s exposure. His is easily the most compelling figure in the crowded room—the Ball was a sold-out success, according to the *Advocate*.

Hartley’s sense of self and his innate dandyism come across in these photographs as they do in so many others. When one



“Provincetown is full. Provincetown is intoxicated, full of people, intoxicated with pleasure.”

Provincetown Advocate, August 24, 1916

In Paris, on the first of June, 1912, Marsden Hartley was photographed in the exotic Arabian garb he had worn to the Quatres Arts Ball the night before. The notation over his signature gives the time: 7 a.m. He was 35 years old, on his first visit to Europe. His costume is resplendent with jewels and embroidery—even his turban—and he wears beads and bangles around his neck and on his arms (to the end of his life he loved and collected beautiful objects). He poses like a silent movie sheikh with a proud and confident air of mastery—all the more striking since he had arrived only three weeks earlier. Behind him is an oriental hanging show-

of course many who would have gone, all found a viable substitute in Provincetown. In addition there was an influx of writers, notably Eugene O’Neill, Max Eastman, and John Reed who invited Hartley for the summer.

During his stay in Provincetown, Hartley produced a series of paintings which are unique in his oeuvre. Seemingly based on nature and on things observed—the sails and hulls of boats and the cool tones of sea and sky—these works present a sharp contrast to the intensity and color of his “War Motif” paintings of the year before.

The major social event of that summer was the costume ball sponsored by the Provincetown Art Association. A sepia-toned print in the archives of the Art Association shows the celebrants in the Town Hall, where the dance was held (the Art Association was not to have its own building until 1921). In the

thinks of the often wretched circumstances of his life: constantly in need of money, driven to a nomadic existence, and without the recognition that he felt he deserved (on many occasions he contemplated suicide), one can only be glad for these recorded moments when Marsden Hartley appeared as a prince, an exotic and noble being, who would indeed, as he sometimes proclaimed, live forever in the history of American art. ■

I am indebted to Barbara Haskell’s *Marsden Hartley*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, with New York University Press, New York and London, 1980, a most knowledgeable and thoughtful account of Hartley’s life and work.

— Tony Vevers

Left: photo courtesy of the Provincetown Art Association & Museum; right: Marsden Hartley in Florence, from a postcard in the possession of the author.

Reflections on Painting in Marsden Hartley's Poem "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place"

In the summer of 1937, the painter Marsden Hartley, who was also a poet and an essayist absorbed with Emerson and Whitman as well as the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart, returned to paint in Maine, where he was born 60 years earlier. He had six more years to live. There, moving about and working in different locales, gathering memories of his childhood, he found the self he composed in a poem, "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," which appeared three years before he died in a collection called *Androscoggin*, named after the river that flows through the town. The poem is full of revelations about his paintings.

In "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," Hartley announces that he is returning "to instances that are the basic images/ of my life as it now is." The dreams of his youth in Lewiston, nurtured by nature in the vicinity of David's Mountain, a hill that rises above Bates College, were interrupted by economic necessity. In 1892, at the age of 15, he was forced to abandon school and work in a shoe factory in nearby Auburn. Only in 1896, after rejoining his family in Cleveland, Ohio, and working in a marble quarry, did Hartley begin to study art with a local painter. Subsequently, scholarships to art schools in Cleveland and New York brightened his future, and by the age of 30 he began to exhibit his work. He never forgot the pain of his youth, redeemed



Eight Bells Folly: Memorial to Hart Crane
University of Minnesota Art Museum

Marsden Hartley, 1993
Gift of Ione and Hudson Walker

B Y G A I L L E V I N

for John B. Van Sickle, *Horatiano Amico*

only by adult life:

*On the breast of David's Mountain
many an adolescent dream was slain,
later to be snatched from an early death
when manhood gave them back their breath
again.*

Mountains were one of Hartley's basic images. Whether these images were the mountains of New Mexico or the Bavarian Alps, the rock formations of Dogtown in Gloucester, Massachusetts, or the coves and islands off the coast of Maine, each place is particular and recognizable in his paintings. He depended on place for inspiration, which is one reason he felt the need for lifelong travel in search of subjects. He opens his poem about Lewiston by announcing his devotion to place:

*I admire my native city
because
it is part of the secret sacred
rite
of love of place.
My childhood which was
hard, it is always
hard to be alone at the
wrong time . . .*

The central drama of Hartley's childhood must have been the death of his mother, which occurred when he was only eight. Death was to become a major theme in his paintings. Indeed, those persons he loved were most powerfully celebrated in paint only after they were lost through death, such as the handsome young soldier

Karl Von Freyburg, whom Hartley memorialized in his 1914 "Portrait of a German Officer," or Hart Crane, whose portrait, "Eight Bells Folly," was painted a year after Crane's death in 1932, or Alty Mason, the young Nova Scotia fisherman whose portraits were painted in the late '30s after he was lost at sea. In "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," Hartley speaks of death with pointed force as "drama number one," although he displaces the death of his mother with the earlier death of a white kitten, which he calls the "image of all that was to come after."

However diminutive to the adult, this death, to a child, looms large, much as a remembered pasture in Lewiston "which for/ us children was the Asia and Africa of/ our first impressions." Hartley relates his boyhood imagination and awed sense of scale to the exoticism

of non-Western cultures, which he investigated in the Trocadero Museum in Paris, the Museum for Volkerkunde in Berlin, or in other collections of the art of Asia and Africa. Early on he acquired some curios such as a much-loved Siamese Buddha—"this silver laid in wax," he told his niece years later in 1924, with the "most heavenly smile." These much-loved treasures appear in paintings such as "Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)" of 1912-13 or in his abstractions inspired by African textiles of the early 1920s.

Throughout his life Hartley undertook arduous hikes to commune with nature and to paint his impressions. In "Lewiston" he recalls the central role that nature played in his adult life: "and myself walking with my father along the/ edges of a cool clear stream, gathering water cresses,/ trilliums, dogtooth violets." He wanted to erase any distance which separated him from nature and what nature revealed. When he was happily painting in the Bavarian Alps in 1933 he wrote to his friend Adelaide Kuntz exclaiming: "I am seeing nature all over again—and what I am doing here now is the work of the rest of my life."

In "Lewiston" Hartley recalls the log drives of the lumber industry and the jackstraw patterns of the logs created in the flowing river. The tall trees that figure in his early Maine paintings recur later, and lumbering itself seems the theme of other late works such as "West, Brookville, Maine" or "Log Jam, Penobscot Bay." In the poem, Hartley observes that the



Labrador Ducks
Private Collection

Marsden Hartley, 1936
Courtesy Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown

cut wood suffers a kind of death, too, as it undergoes transformation into paper or synthetic stockings:

*I myself having seen the moment when wood
becomes syrup,
then silk.*

In the poem he also recalls attending church services with "Miss Jane at the organ, pumped by a boy at the/back, out of sight." Watching over him while he sang magnificats and epiphanies was the Ascension of Christ "in not too good stained glass," a phrase that anticipates his powerful late work with its unorthodox Christian imagery, "Christ Held by Half-Naked Men" from 1940-41 and "Prayer on Park Avenue" from 1942.

The Maine folk described in the poem, Dr. Gasselton, spitting tobacco juice, and Skinny Jinny, terrifying the children who believe she carries a butcher's knife under her black shawl, may be the verbal equivalents of folk

characters in paintings such as "Canuck Yankee Lumberjack at Old Orchard Beach, Maine" from 1940-41 or "Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy" from 1940. Like the Canadians who settled in Lewiston, bringing new fervors, new charms, new vivacities, these ethnic stereotypes contribute to a "richer sense of plain living."

Hartley's poem is a kind of *ars poetica* about his own practice as a poet and as a painter. His language, like Horace's *Satires*, has an in-

formal, conversational immediacy, with dramatized anecdotes and occasional editorial irony. A long passage praises a Lewiston poet, Wallace Gould, whose work Hartley promoted to William Carlos Williams and Harriet Monroe, among other poets and editors. Some of his own aims and values may be revealed by the terms of his praise for Gould as a poet of "Greek outline, Horatian/ simplicity, with pagan notions of the/ livingness of the moment." ■

Gail Levin, Professor of Art History at Baruch College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, is working on a catalogue raisonne of Marsden Hartley.