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CREATIVE ART

The palette knife

FROM A PARISIAN PICTURE DEALER

WE LIVE today under the constellation of painting. Painting is everywhere. It furnishes the subject matter of every other conversation. It invades every one of our homes. Painters are the heroes of the hour. The average citizen, who until recently took no interest in any kind of painting except the gingerbread of the Hotel de Ville or the fabrications of Bouguereau's successors, now finds his attention turning, like a compass needle, toward modern art, dubbed revolutionary, pure, or independent. What are the reasons for his infatuation? It is a new vice or the birth of a new ideal? Or is it another of the illusions which underlie so much of the spiritual life of our time?

The aesthetic geniuses of the 19th Century, to be sure, underwent the martyrdom of being misunderstood, indeed, encountered open hostility and tardy recognition. In consequence an atmosphere of mystery grew up about them. Their work, recognized at the outset by a handful of the initiated, has given birth to a voluminous literature on the subject. In consequence the value of these modern masters, once recognized, like the sudden discovery of a diamond mine, has aroused an almost universal passion which amounts to universal cupidity. Speculation has set in, frenzied speculation, which has succeeded in confusing the intrinsic quality of a picture with its market price. Nowadays the acquisition of a picture brings with it not only aesthetic enjoyment, but the kind of expectation attendant on the purchase of securities at the Bourse. In various auction sales during the last 25 years, collectors who had the right flair saw the prices they had originally paid for their paintings increased a hundred, even five hundred fold. This fascinating fact has bred a mob of new collectors, until today speculation in pictures has reached such a point that almost every collector is a picture dealer. With the exception of a few museums or a few European collectors and certain American nabobs, no one buys at present except to re-sell.

Let me recall, in support of these rather lugubrious assertions, the exhibition organized by Bernheim Jeune a few years ago under the title *We propose* which aroused considerable discussion, less because of the painters shown than because of the preface of the catalogue. There Felix Feneton dangled before the eyes of collectors the ultimate rise in value to be expected of the pictures shown, appraised in toto at 100,000 francs. Which means that there is no longer any use in disguising the fact that painters today are condemned to the business of creating securities, instead of painting for the pleasure of their contemporaries.

Indeed, how can a mere mortal, without intuitive taste and expert knowledge, orientate himself if he attempts to speculate in paintings? Who can guide him? The art critics?

Of what use can critics today be in clarifying a phase of human activity as chaotic as modern painting? Is there any one else to rely upon except picture dealers, whether professional or

amateur, who discover paintings of value, buy them in at the bottom of the market, and then push them, as brokers' pools do securities, to higher and higher price levels?

But even this stock market has its oracles. One of the most respected is the Viennese, Alphonse Kann. He is accepted both as a connoisseur and an authority by every dealer of the *Rue de la Boétie* and the *Faubourg St. Honoré*. Until recently, one could see in his mansion on the *Avenue du Bois* the same Cezannes, Renoirs and Van Goghs which, a short time before adorned the shop windows of his gallery or would adorn them again. And when the paintings of the *douanier* Rousseau, Matisse, Picasso, de Segonzac reached a certain price level, it always turned out that he had bought them before the rise. When he grows tired of certain painters, he finds successors for them, not always their equals. There is another oracle: The American collector Barnes, financially disinterested, who was fired by an ambition to endow his native city, Philadelphia, with a novel museum, the Barnes Foundation. Having accumulated dozens of Daumiers, Manets, Cezannes and Renoirs, he is now devoting his attention to the younger generation. And there he imposes his dictatorial taste on all the merchants of modern painting and all the snobs in the universe. In a volume filled with his lucubrations on art, he discovers and proclaims Sontine, a minor Russian-Jewish painter. Sontine is not without talent—a very minor talent in any case. But the dithyrambics of Barnes are enough to send every gullible person in Paris and the entire world scurrying after his pictures. What collector these days has not his little Sontine?

If the vogue of "independent" art has put the official pot boilers of the Salon hopelessly into the background, the notion that we have gained much by the change will presently be dissipated. Just as there are at the Salons time-servers condemned to paint year in and year out the same casseroles and musketeers, so there are among the independents *routiniers* who repeat, endlessly, the same Rubenesque nudes, mythological or religious scenes, or manufacture landscapes and still-lifes, less stupid, more modern, but so uniformly without any freshness that they are no better than the rancid rubbish of the more official expositions.

Criticism of art is perhaps nothing more than a microbe which for a century has been gnawing the vitals of both art and artists. In contrast the present passion for painting as we see it today is a new phenomenon. One might say that the collecting passion of picture buyers, infatuated with certain kinds of work, has defined the taste of an epoch. Being inclined to accept the economic interpretation of history, I am inclined to see in this orgy of painting not primarily a spiritual need but a purely economic symptom typical of the period of insecurity in which we find ourselves,—a symptom of nothing less than inflation. This phenomenon, world wide, frays the nerves of our contemporaries, disturbs their minds, and excites them to hysterical states which assume the proportions of a large-scale neurosis. Contemporary painting corresponds, as no other could, to this particular kind of mentality. And the growing number of painters seems to satisfy an insatiable appetite for pictures.

This intensive traffic in pictures requires production on a gigantic scale. French painters, obviously, are not enough to cope with it. We have to rely on foreign labor. It must be admitted that the business of painting doesn't inevitably enrich everyone. But Paris, as a result of the painters who congregate there from the far corners of the earth, has become the real seat of the League of Nations. Painting has become the language which unites people of every language and every color. Thus one can see on the terrace of the *Rotonde* or the *Café du Dome* all the expressionists (one might say Express-Zion-

ists) of Witelsk and Smolensk, all the banana eaters of Valparaiso and Costa Rica,—Indians, Esquimaux, constructivists from Leningrad, neo-romantics from Belakistan, neo-classicists from Algeria and Mesopotamia. And this same Society of Nations supplies picture dealers with their most enthusiastic customers.

Painting today is a religion which satisfies not only the mystic aspirations of its devotees, but endows its adherents as well with luxuriant profits. Its prophets are everywhere, in every quarter, in every street, if not in every house in Paris. The banker, the music teacher, the retired police commissionaire, the actor, the minor poet of the newest group, each and every one practises the cult of St. Brocante. Their sanctuaries are to be found at every cross-roads; shop windows of dealers in modern painting arise at every step, even to the proprietors of cabby's restaurants and junk-shops, in the *Place d'Italie* or the *Butte de Chaumont*, and they are often shrewder judges than the professional art critics or the painters themselves, who are very rarely fair to their contemporaries.

One day Derain and Segonzac, on a café terrace agreed, "We don't know what the great pictures of tomorrow are. . . . There is no doubt that we pass them by today without even noticing them." Is there any difference, after all, between that opinion and the casual remark of a junk dealer at the *Place d'Italie*, speaking of his collection of 2,000 canvases, "I have 2,000 of them in my cellar; there's plenty of garbage in that pile. But there are a few that will make up for the whole lot, and I'll be on velvet, just like the crowd today who own the Derains, Segonzacs, Utrillos, Matisses and Picassos." For these names are as familiar as "Suez", "Royal Dutch" or "Rio".

How can anyone presume to judge a picture that has reached a certain market level? Its power of suggestion grows as its price advances. Artists themselves bow before a *confrère* when dealers, either amateur or professional, fight for everything he produces. It takes a great artist like Derain to be severely critical of his own work. I saw him stop recently, in the *Rue de la Boétie*, before a shop window that contained two of his rag-tag studio sketches, and remark, disgustedly, "How I should like to buy back that rubbish." The fact is that Derain, now at the height of his vogue, is forced to stand by and see his worst pictures traded in along with his best, his unfinished work as well as really completed pictures.

Permit me to repeat a colloquy I had with Picasso recently—an extraordinary being, who, like another Cagliostro, has for the last twenty years intrigued the entire world with the mystery of his methods. This field marshall of contemporary painting, as he likes to imagine himself to be, both in his own eyes and those of his admirers, stopped me one day in the *Rue de la Boétie* to ask, "And how goes modern art?" I put the same question to him. Barely concealing his depressed mood, he commenced to attack all his contemporaries who had attained commercial success. "Look what painting has come to! Look at Bracque: cheap decoration. That will die out like *Art Nouveau*, or like the style based on Liberty silks that annoyed us so a few years before the war in the shop windows of the *Avenue de l'Opera*.

"But your cubist pictures are not painting. They are compositions meant to be carried out in precious lacquers, or in tapestry like Bracque's. Bracque has ignored the logical limits of the easel picture. But he is a perfect tapestry designer, who could, as director of a factory, renovate a craft in crying need of being revived."

We continued to stroll past art dealers' shop windows. I pointed out a fine still-life of Courbet. "There you are," cried Picasso, "the work of every painter who was a revolutionist in his day, remains beautiful." But, an instant later, in front of a Renoir, contemptuously, "Bah—

flowers are more beautiful in nature." "And those Cezannes. Cezanne has already become another Haupignies." Further on two Utrillos elicited only "They're rather nice." As for Modigliani, two of his canvases, quite fine in quality, provoked him to: "I had a canvas of his once. I painted over it. I've never done that to any other painter. I've always despised his pictures." Opposite a Bernard, "How meager." Matisse alone found favor. "At any rate, he has talent. Compared to him, the others amount to nothing." As we separated, Picasso made a final confession. "You know I haven't done a stroke of work for the last few months. I've had a bellyful of painting for dealers, auction sales and snobs. I've a few pictures left; they're enough to live on. I don't need an auto, or a chateau or a town house like most of our great modern painters today. Work? For whom? Where are the collectors of yesterday? What happens to pictures these days? Work in order to manufacture so much merchandise? I assure you it disgusts me." And Picasso left me for lunch.

Both Picasso and Bracque created a type of art unrelated to the domain of true painting. Life, being a teacher far more ingenious than aestheticians and doctrinaires, Cubism ended logically enough, with a school of interior decoration where it will continue to be used, rationally. When I made this remark one day to Picasso, he replied with his usual condescension, "When Michaelangelo realized his gigantic conceptions, he wasn't concerned with the Renaissance cupboards that could be derived from them."

But the recent Exposition of Decorative Art proved, in indubitable fashion, the logical application to industrial art of so-called abstract form, products of the cubists' intellectualism. Never has the fact been more clearly demonstrated, that these art formulas belong exclusively to architects and decorators. A style has been built up which is bit by bit growing more popular, until even dressmakers decorate gowns with cubistic concepts. The cubists invited nothing less in demanding a non-imitative plastic art. They have merely demonstrated, as I have pointed out on several occasions, that the essential characteristics of their styles are borrowed from architecture and the applied arts, and have nothing in common with painting, which can have an autonomous and less parasitic life.

In point of fact, the artistic life of the society which we are evolving is fairly badly organized. The anarchy of capitalism and the disorganization of contemporary society are reflected in the arts as everywhere else.

The arts and crafts are not meant to function on so unsound a basis. Any number of painters who struggle today with the difficulties of their profession, would have found in a happier epoch a more appropriate use for their talents. When I look at the paintings of our contemporary innovators, I cannot avoid regretting that this kind of inventiveness, which in its deliberate richness eclipses the work of men who are essentially painters, cannot be utilized for tapestries and fabrics, in a word, for an interior decoration that could breathe warmth, intimacy and elegance, and continue the tradition of the great styles. The old tapestry designers and cabinet makers, whose abstract conceptions were controlled by an architectural sense, were not isolated as are our philosophers of the paint brush. The logical goals of their metaphysical doctrines are such stores as the *Galleries Lafayette* and the *Bon Marché*, where their ideas could be successfully commercialized and could rejuvenate deadly stereotypes. The present confusion of *genres* would disappear, and the number of painters be reduced to the essential few whose vocation it is to objectify nature. And arbitrary codification of form would disappear as well.

Adolph Basler

EDITORIAL NOTES

AMERICAN opinion about modern painting is, like women's wear, still very largely styled in Paris. And even when we recut it to fit our measure, it is made as a rule from imported cloth. For this reason I have translated for this month's *Palette Knife* excerpts from a pamphlet published two years ago entitled *Painting ... The New Religion*, as a corrective to the usual legends of the world of modern art in Paris. It was written by Mr. Adolphe Basler, formerly an art critic and more recently a picture dealer. Although I have only been able to reproduce a fraction of his comments, the article, I think, does justice to the trend of his ideas. I have suppressed his more vitriolic comments upon Dr. Barnes and others. On the whole, it gives a picture of the Parisian art world which may be seen through the bias of one very pronounced personality, but which at least is a distinct reaction to the picture one usually gets at second hand.

I am happy to announce that in October—or shortly thereafter—both Mr. Walter Lippmann and Mr. Lewis Mumford will contribute to the *Palette Knife*. Mr. Mumford will be an occasional contributor to the paper as well. In the August issue, Mr. Kenneth MacGowan will review the scenic art of the year. Mr. Motherwell, in *Before and After* will comment upon the designs of Mr. Joseph Sinel for such utilitarian objects as acousticons and sandbags. *L. S.*



MARSDEN HARTLEY
Photograph by
ALFRED STIEGLITZ

MARSDEN HARTLEY *was born in Lewiston, Maine in 1878, of English parents. He attended the Grammar School until 15. His first job was as an office boy in Cleveland, Ohio. His interest in art, augmented by weekly lessons from John Semon, cost him his job but won him a scholarship in the Cleveland School of Arts. He also had lessons from Cullen Yates and Miss Nina Waldeck, who, he feels, were the vital influence. At 21 he came to New York and studied in the Chase School under F. Luis Mora, Frank Vincent Dumont and Chase. The following year, at the National Academy of Design, under Ward, Dillman and J. Scott Hartley. He then left New York to live in Maine where he painted until 1912, during which time all his subjects were taken from Stoneham Valley between North Bridgeton and Center Lovell. In 1909, he had his first exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's pioneer gallery "291"; this first showing brought forth a storm of abuse and vilification. Second exhibition in 1911 at "291". In 1912, with the help of "291" and Aruthur B. Davies, first trip to Paris 1913, he returned to America and lived in Bermuda, New York and Provincetown. He showed his work at "291" and in 1914 returned to Europe, painting in Paris, Munich and Berlin. Exhibited in Munich with* Der Blaue Reiter *a group consisting of Kandinsky, Marc and Paul Klee. One man show at the Max Liebermann Gallery. Returned to the United States in 1916. Several exhibitions at the Daniel Gallery. 1918, went to the Southwest where he painted for two years. In 1921, through the aid of Mitchell Kennerly and Alfred Stieglitz, organized an auction of his paintings which enabled him to return to Europe. Painted in the south of France above Nice 1926, and 1927 Aix-en-Province, the natal town of Cezanne, in sight of Mount Sainte Victoire where he plans to continue his work. An exhibition of his paintings, silver points and drawings is scheduled for the autumn at Stieglitz's gallery. Hartley has published two books,* Adventures in the Arts (*Liveright*) *and* Twenty-five Poems (*Paris: Three Mountains Press*).

MONT STE. VICTOIRE AIX-EN-PROVINCE

Oil Painting by MARSDEN HARTLEY *1927*

Reproduced through the Courtesy of Alfred Stieglitz



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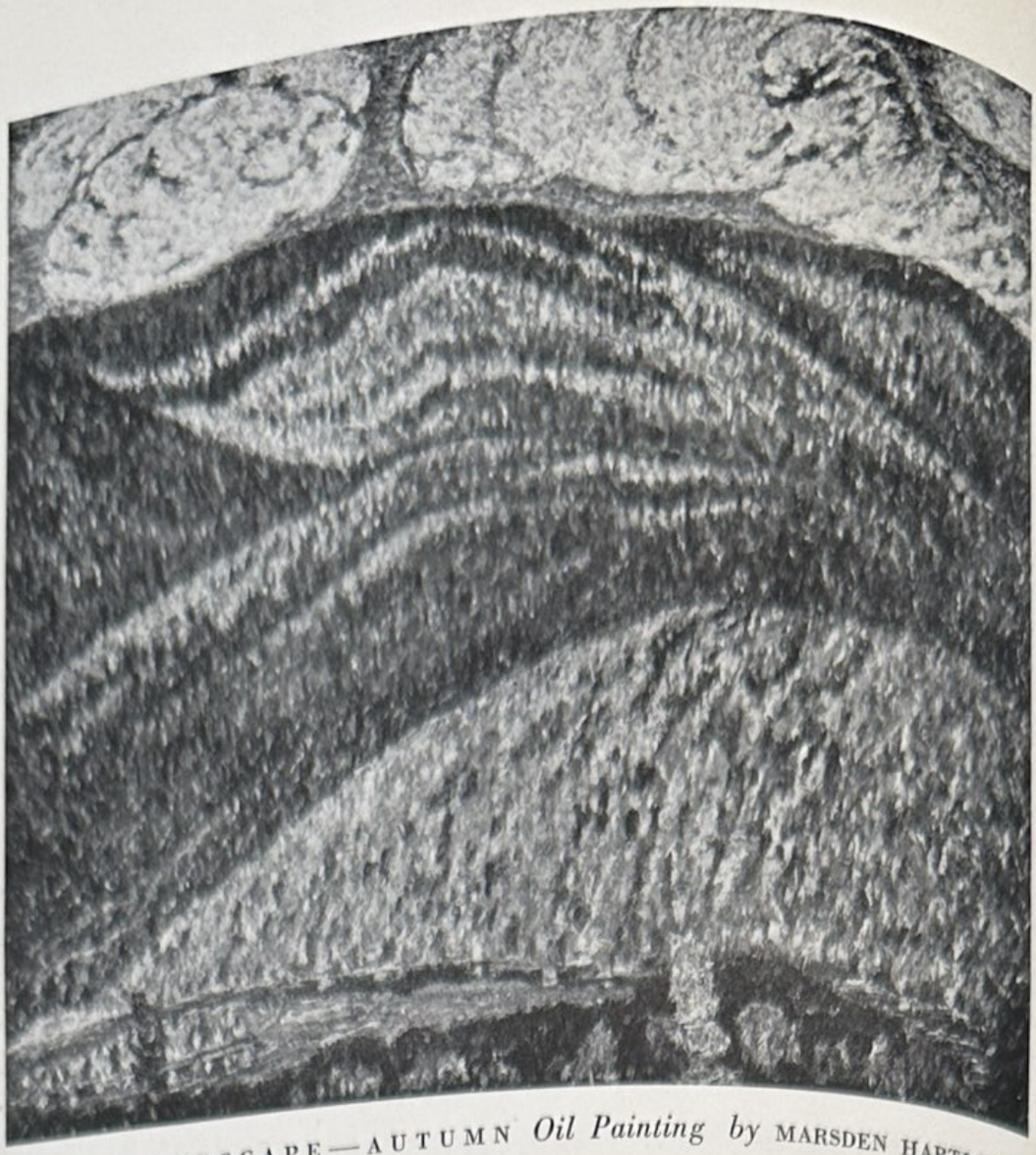
ART—AND THE PERSONAL LIFE *by Marsden Hartley*

As soon as a real artist finds out what art is, the more is he likely to feel the need of keeping silent about it, and about himself in connection with it. There is almost, these days, a kind of *petit scandale* in the thought of allying oneself with anything of a professional nature. And it is at this point that I shrink a little from asserting myself with regard to professional aspects of art. And here the quality of confession must break through. I have joined, once and for all, the ranks of the intellectual experimentalists. I can hardly bear the sound of the words "expressionism", "emotionalism", "personality", and such, because they imply the wish to express personal life, and I prefer to have no personal life. Personal art is for me a matter of spiritual indelicacy. Persons of refined feeling should keep themselves out of their painting, and this means, of course, that the accusation made in the form of a querulous statement to me recently "that you are a perfectionist", is in the main true.

I am interested then only in the problem of painting, of how to make a better painting according to certain laws that are inherent in the making of a good picture — and not at all in private extraversions or introversions of specific individuals. That is for me the inherent error in a work of art. I learned this bit of wisdom from a principle of William Blake's which I discovered early and followed far too assiduously the first half of my aesthetic life, and from which I have happily released myself— and this axiom was: "Put off intellect and put on imagination; the imagination is the man". From this doctrinal assertion evolved the theoretical axiom that you don't see a thing until you look away from it—which was an excellent truism as long as the principles of the imaginative life were believed in and followed. I no longer believe in the imagination. I rose one certain day — and the whole thing had become changed. I had changed old clothes for new ones, and I couldn't bear the sight of the old garments. And when a painting is evolved from imaginative principles I am strongly inclined to turn away because I have greater faith that intellectual clarity is better and more entertaining than imaginative wisdom or emotional richness. I believe in the theoretical aspects of painting because I believe it produces better painting, and I think I can say I have been a fair exponent of the imaginative idea.

I have come to the conclusion that it is better to have two colors in right relation to each other than to have a vast confusion of emotional exuberance in the guise of ecstatic fullness or poetical revelation—both of which qualities have, generally speaking, long since become second rate experience. I had rather be intellectually right than emotionally exuberant, and I could say this of any other aspect of my personal experience.

I have lived the life of the imagination, but at too great an expense. I do not admire the irrationality of the imaginative life. I have, if I may say so, made the intellectual grade. I have made the complete return to nature, and nature is as we all know, primarily an intellectual idea. I am satisfied that painting also is like nature, an intellectual idea, and that the laws of nature as presented to the mind through the eye—and the eye is the painter's first and last vehicle—are the means of transport to the real mode of thought: the only legitimate source of aesthetic experience for the intelligent painter.

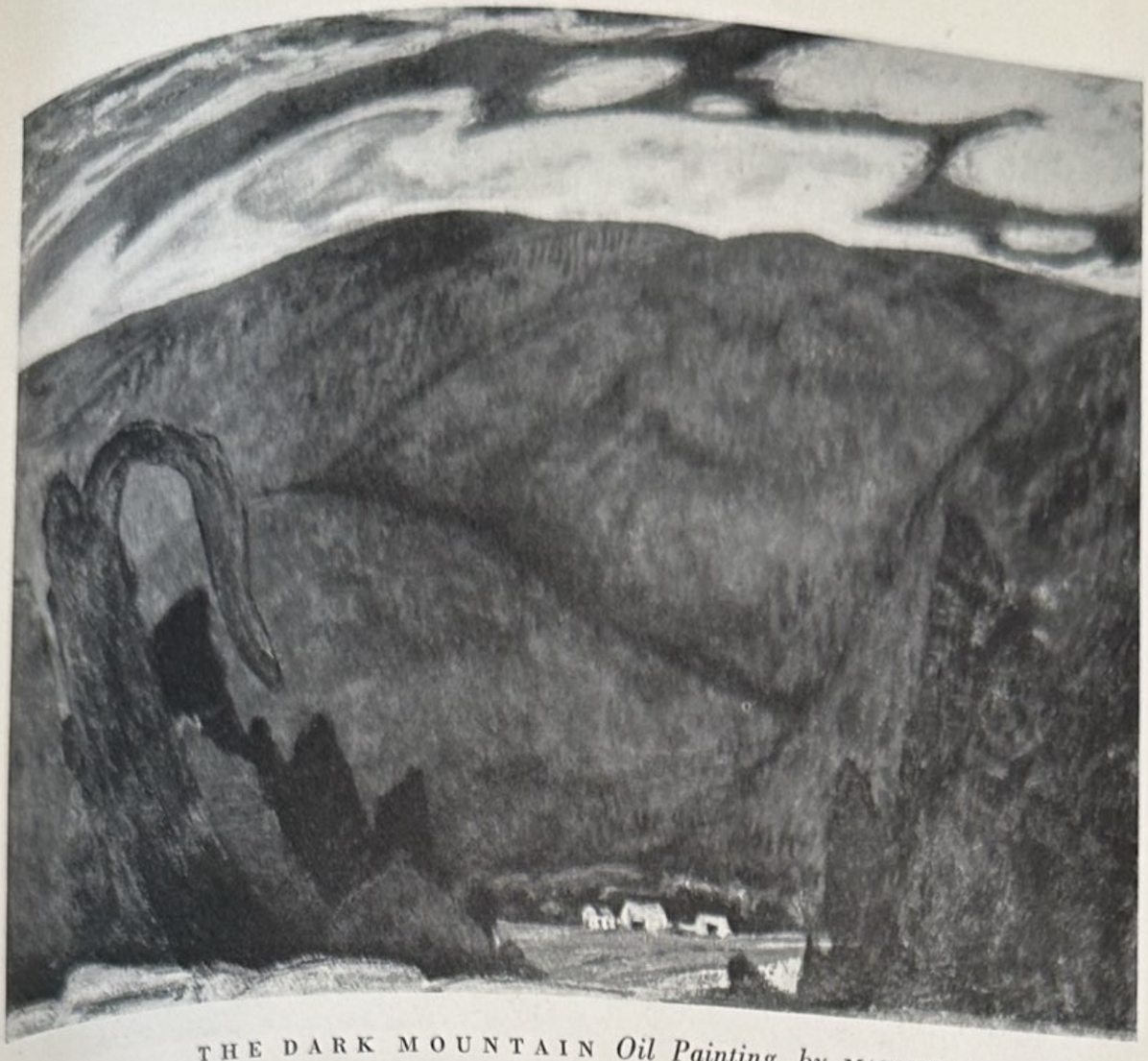


MAINE LANDSCAPE—AUTUMN *Oil Painting by* MARSDEN HARTLEY *1907*
From the Collection of Alfred Stieglitz

All the isms from impressionism down to the present moment have had their inestimable value and have clarified the mind and the scene of all superfluous emotionalism; and the eye that turns toward nature today receives far finer and more significant reactions than previously when romanticism and the imaginative or poetic principles were the means and ways of expression.

I am not at all sure that the time isn't entirely out of joint for the so-called art of painting, and I am certain that very few persons, comparatively speaking, have achieved the real experience of the eye either as spectator or performer. Modern art must of necessity remain in the state of experimental research if it is to have any significance at all. Painters must paint for their own edification and pleasure, and what they have to say, not what they are impelled to feel, is what will interest those who are interested in them. The thought of the time is the emotion of the time.

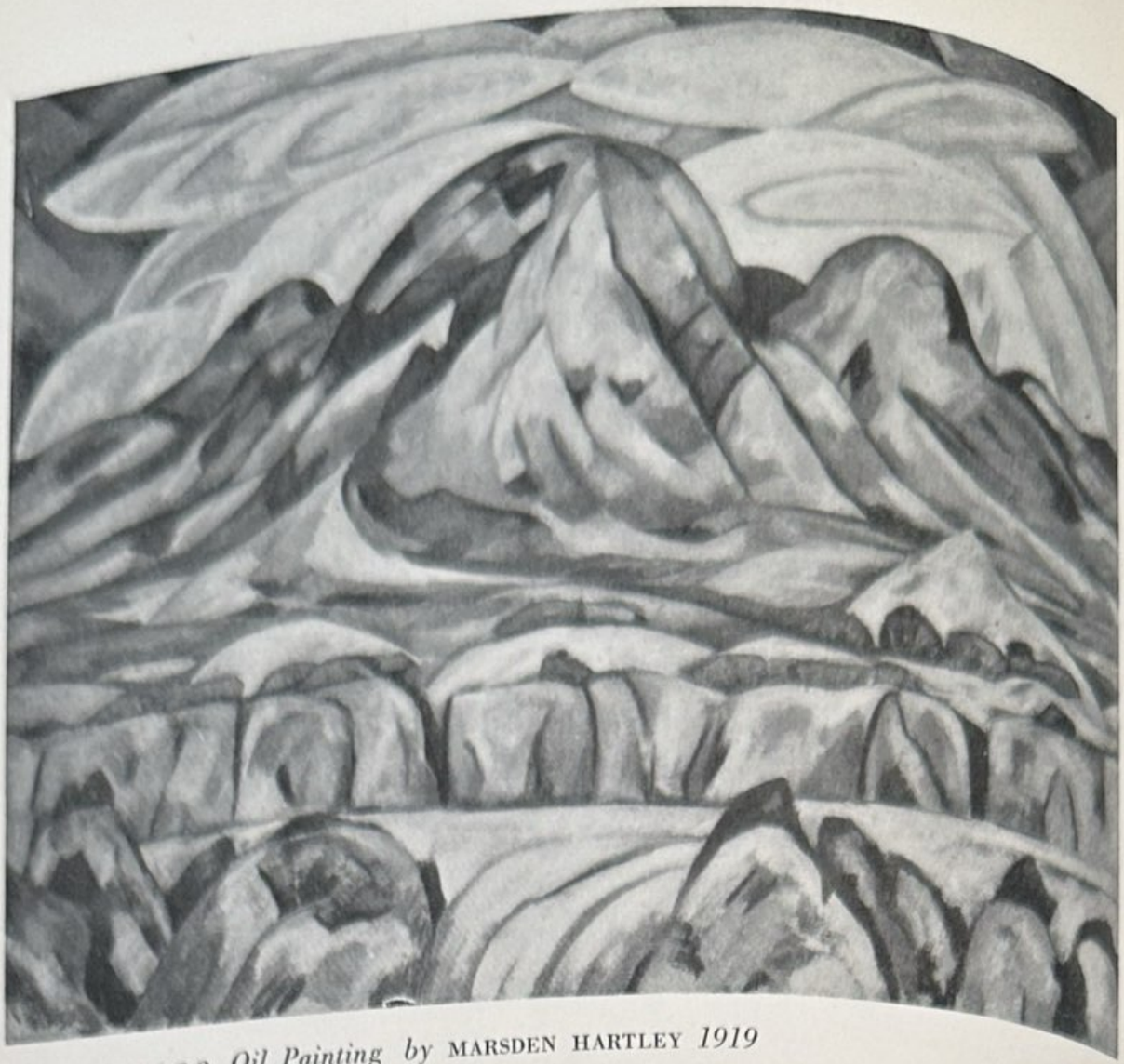
I personally am indebted to Segantini the impressionist, not Segantini the symbolist, for what I have learned in times past of the mountain and a given way to express it—just as it was Ryder who accentuated my already tormented imagination. Cubism taught me much and the principle of Pissarro, furthered by Seurat, taught me more. These with Cezanne are the great logicians of color. No one will ever paint like Cezanne, for example,—because no one will ever have his peculiar visual gifts; or to put it less dogmatically, will any one ever appear



THE DARK MOUNTAIN *Oil Painting* by MARSDEN HARTLEY *1909*
From the Collection of Alfred Stieglitz

again with so peculiar and almost unbelievable a faculty for dividing color sensations and making logical realizations of them? Has any one ever placed his color more reasonably with more of a sense of time and measure than he? I think not, and he furnishes for the enthusiast of today new reasons for research into the realm of color for itself.

It is not the idiosyncrasy of an artist that creates the working formula, it is the rational reasoning in him that furnishes the material to build on. Red, for example, is a color that almost any ordinary eye is familiar with—but in general when an ordinary painter sees it he sees it as isolated experience—with the result that his presentation of red lives its life alone, where it is placed, because it has not been modified to the tones around it — and modification is as good a name as any for the true art of painting color as we think of it today. Even Cezanne was not always sure of pure red, and there are two pictures of his I think of, where something could have been done to put the single hue in its place —the art for which he was otherwise so gifted. Real color is in a condition of neglect at the present time because monochrome has been the fashion for the last fifteen or twenty years—even the superb colorist Matisse was for a time affected by it. Cubism is largely responsible for this because it is primarily derived from sculptural concepts and found little need for color in itself. When a group feeling is revived once again, such as held sway among the impressionists, color will come into its logical own. And

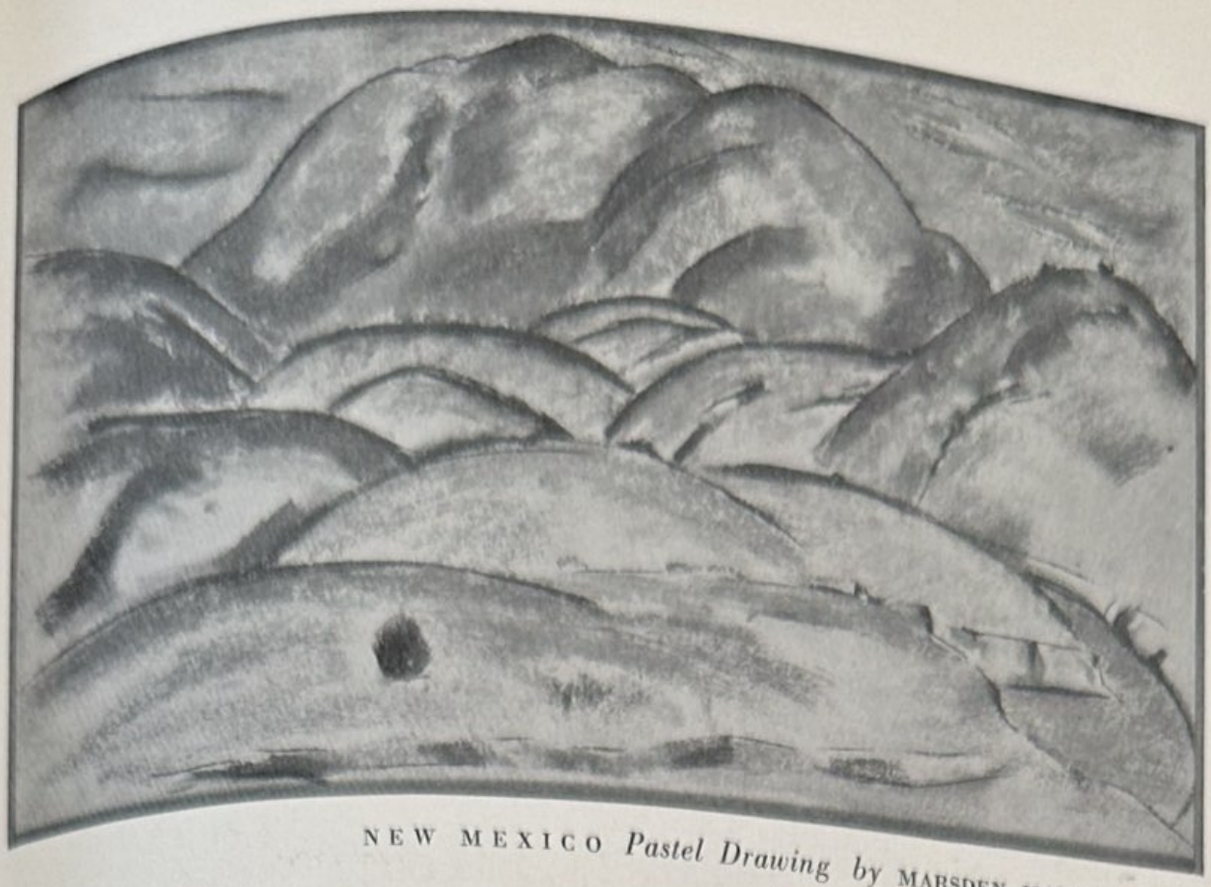


NEW MEXICO *Oil Painting by* MARSDEN HARTLEY *1919*
Courtesy of Alfred Stieglitz

it is timely enough to see that for purposes of outdoor painting, impressionism is in need of revival.

Yet I cannot but return to the previous theme which represents my conversion from emotional to intellectual notions; and my feeling is: of what use is a painting which does not realize its aesthetical problem? Underlying all sensible works of art, there must be somewhere in evidence the particular problem understood. It was so with those artists of the great past who had the intellectual knowledge of structure upon which to place their emotions. It is this structural beauty that makes the old painting valuable. And so it becomes to me—a problem. I would rather be sure that I had placed two colors in true relationship to each other than to have exposed a wealth of emotionalism gone wrong in the name of richness of personal expression. For this reason I believe that it is more significant to keep one's painting in a condition of severe experimentalism than to become a quick success by means of cheap repetition.

The real artists have always been interested in this problem, and you feel it strongly in the work of Da Vinci, Piero Della Francesca, Courbet, Pisarro, Seurat and Cezanne. Art is not a matter of slavery to the emotions—or even a matter of slavery to nature—or to the aesthetic principles. It is a tempered and happy union of them all.



NEW MEXICO *Pastel Drawing* by MARSDEN HARTLEY *1919*
From the Collection of Paul Rosenfeld

MARSDEN HARTLEY—PAINTER OF MOUNTAINS *by Mme. M. Debrol*

(Translated from the French by Arnold Ronnebeck)

THIS TITLE is very daring to give, and very heavy to wear. Up to the present time, only one has really deserved it: Segantini—but he was rather a lover than a believer. He took the mountain for a symbol, he exalted it, he immaterialized it. Marsden Hartley considers it as a reality; he does not transpose it, he reproduces it. He knows that it is made of stone, of earth, that it has a form, that it is neither a cloud nor an appearance. If he sometimes hardens the far distant summits, if he defines them almost too much, it is to preserve their character of solidity, and not of vaporous illusion conventionally adopted by so many impressionist decorators. Here, however, Marsden Hartley's realism ends,—at his scrupulous sense of construction, of volume, at his respect for organized mass underneath the garment of color. With him, this very exactitude is devoid of all naturalism, since realism can be spiritual.

The spiritual, in spite of everything, is always born of a material impression, almost physical, lifted up to the highest power, freed of all sensual element. How many artists know how to accomplish this transmutation in themselves? Marsden Hartley possesses this magic faculty. His works may seem removed, almost arrogant, a little inaccessible to the ordinary public. They are rare with the marvelous rarity of silence, of solitude, of austere sufferings, of watchings in the night, with the rarity of the air above the summits. They are not cold, but their warmth is not of the surface. It lies in depth and in density. The strongest colors are not of the exterior; they come, it seems, from behind the canvas, from an internal flame which multiplies their intensity without borrowing anything from ephemeral reflections, from surface illuminations. The still-lifes, as the landscapes, have an extraordinary richness of tonality in colors that never clash, that do not play around, that are concentrated like those of churches, of deep pools, of the mysterious glow of precipices, of hoarded treasures.



PEARS *Oil Painting by* MARSDEN HARTLEY *1916*
From the Collection of Mrs. Florence Cane

Marsden Hartley has the religion of life. To him painting is not a profession, or a diversion; it is a cult. He communicates this piety which is a little mystic but infinitely moved by things themselves. He acknowledges a soul behind them. To him an apple, a flower, a vase, are not a fruit, a plant, an object, they are synthetic, existent things, a form of forms, an expression of vegetation, an aesthetic thought. He preserves for them a personality, and yet for Marsden Hartley, they are not separate individuals; they are a part of the great world aspect. They take part in life, in the great all. They are a particle of it, an atom. I do not say an incomplete or broken fragment, but a cell.

Likewise in his mountains, Mr. Hartley sees more than the mass, the outline in the sky, the fusion of granite and of the earth. His mountain is not the emblematic and biblical mountain of a Sinai, surrounded with thunder and lightning — nor either the fantastic cardboard mountain of the would-be interpreters of summits. No, it is the mountain with its own name, a beautiful name that sounds clear and very French—Sainte Victoire, the mountain that is part of the universe, that stands sentinel for millenniums and for millenniums to come, the mountain that has its profile, that receives the light, but receives it like a benediction, and gives it back transformed and pacified to the valley where human beings move.

That is what Marsden Hartley has been the first to show, and to give us—an exact portrait grown into a vision, of that formidable thing, so touching, immovable, tender, intangible, colossal, living—the mountain.