



Abundance, 1939-40. Oil on canvas. 40 1/8 x 30".
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire

MARSDEN HARTLEY VISIONARY OF MAINE

An exhibition of paintings, drawings and poems sponsored by the University of Maine at Presque Isle and supported by a grant from the Maine Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Reflex

The macabre simplicity of the white church
across the road in which never a prayer is
formed nor antiphon sung,
seagulls and starlings perching on the roof-tree
in hastily devised rows, the tall and the short of
it in modified black and white,
swallows with sunflush on their hearts swooping
up and down the temporal pattern, like drunken
punctuation—
July's sentence stiffly spoken against August's
too decisive recitation,
with its wands of fire-weed if the clarion
call has come too soon,
are months at times in a hurry to get it
over with too—we have known them too
who have dreamed too drunkenly.
O whip of any little wind,
drive toward our bleak simplicities the
tender thoughts we beckon to us
that we may unarm them with unfaltering love.

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MARSDEN HARTLEY (1877–1943) reveals much of his own biography in his poetry. In “Lewiston is a Pleasant Place” he tells us

I admire my native city because
it is part of a secret sacred rite
of love of place

and goes on to describe the pastures, woods and streams, the mills, factories and canals on the edge of the Androscoggin that shaped his childhood environment. And further in the same poem,

My childhood which was hard, it is always
hard to be alone at the wrong time,
brought seizures of intensity to the years

hinting at the difficult time he had after his mother's death, when he was only eight. In “Family Album in Red Plush” he depicts his parents, both their foibles and their virtues:

My father was a dreamer—dreamed everything but
the right
thing, leaving it to my mother to put his dream in
order. . .

My father belonged to the street-cleaning squad to
the
Royal House of Heaven,

and kept his brooms and brushes clean, polished
highly his
name plate on them;
he did not sing hymns around the house but he
acted them,
“my soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit—”
and my mother scrubbed many a sacred corridor in
the Holy
House of the mind. They were excessively human—
they
had an almost unnatural sense of bounden duty.

After his mother's death Hartley lived with an older sister in Auburn. He left school at the age of 15 to work in a shoe factory, but the next year moved to Cleveland to join his father, who had remarried. There, while working in a marble quarry, he began to take art lessons, a course of action which gradually evolved into a painting career, and brought him in 1899 to New York City for further study. For the next twelve years he would winter in New York—immersed in the exciting world of art and literature—and summer in the isolated hills of Maine, usually around Center Lovell, painting such scenes as *Kezar Lake, Sundown* (1910). Such would be the pattern of a lifetime, serving the different needs of his psychological make-up. In the opening lines of “World-Passport Visa” he relates

Daily Library Visitor

I seem to hear winches and peaveys
and capstans as he walks,
the great rumblings of a quiet man put
to good use.
He sits him down, reads nothing in particular
but looks like a monument of fine conduct
as he does it.
His field has been plowed—he knows this
better than anyone else how many rocks he
took out of it
and how many worms came up for the robins,
he has seen clouds of frozen breath rise
from oxen nostrils
and heard often the click of iron shoe
against broken rifts of granite,
and perhaps the impertinent laughter
of herring gulls above his blueberry fields—
the laughter is not respectable which steals—
once it was anchor chains probably, then it
was plows,
now it is just fixing things up around the
house,
now it is the quiet look of a mystic in love
with a simple theme,
for the beautiful mask is utterly unruffled,
and the huge hands seem to say, “we have earned
a little respite now, and can afford to hold
a book.”

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Casual Frontier

When the sea swell takes me in
at the scattering
its saltness over my dishevelled,
shaking
bone,
and the sharpest wave tries to drown out
the last all but lost note in my throat
that is that was, for being silenced now
and compatibly still like stone,
therefore beyond brute shout—
the wind protesting impecunious will
and cannot shoulder
or heart make bolder
to bear the power of the word one
instant longer—
that word shall make itself free
of profligate mystery
and help me somehow to outcry
thanks for this immitigable parity;
my choked whisper shall have empirically then
been made clarion—
flag flung up to stave
nonsense of the grave,
or—dual faced oblivion.

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I was born on the island of New England.
Had I not escaped to the continent,
Joined the elephants and tigers and acrobats of New
York City,
Which is the greatest circus arena of the world,
I would be chopping twisted trees
to clear a space for calm, persistent contemplation.

Throughout his life Hartley craved, alternately, “a space
for calm, persistent contemplation” and the “circus
arena” of New York and other art capitals of the world.

His *wanderlust* was unusually long for artists of that
period. From 1912 to 1935 (with intermittent stays in
New York and numerous visits to Maine and New En-
gland) it took him to Paris, Germany, Mexico, southern
France, New Mexico, Italy, and the Bavarian Alps. Dur-
ing this time he had established a reputation as one of the
leading painters in the circle surrounding the famed pho-
tographer and champion of avant garde American art,
Alfred Stieglitz. Along with Georgia O’Keeffe, John
Marin, Charles Demuth and others, Hartley had annual
or bi-annual exhibitions at Stieglitz’s galleries, though
there were relatively few sales of his paintings. Somehow
he scraped out a meager living, depending on the gener-
osity of friends and a few patrons. Like his heroes Albert
Pinkham Ryder and Francis Thompson, Hartley seemed
until his last years to live at the brink of poverty.

From an early age he had written poetry, and, after his
first trip abroad in 1912, began also to document his reac-
tions to modern art by writing essays. Publication of his
poetry and essays came easily at first. By 1922 he had one
book of essays and one of poems in print, along with
numerous individual pieces appearing in the leading liter-
ary magazines and such major weeklies as *The Dial* and
The Nation.

These were years of the development and evolution of
his painting. Exposure to the art of such European mod-
ern masters as Picasso, Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse
had enormous impact on his own work. But despite these
strong influences there remained in him a strain of
Yankee integrity which demanded that the truly original
artist is one who must hew out his own path. Gradually,
beginning in 1930, he came to the realization that this
must be done on native turf. This yearning for home, the
desire to return, Hartley expressed in many poems from
the 1930s, including “Return of the Native” and an
unpublished poem called “Recognition of Region” where
he confesses,

All round the iron road of everywhere
I overwisely wandered
I thought it would
to show me whole of paradise
until I thought twice—



Maine Coast at Vinalhaven, c. 1938. Oil on academy board. 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick

but good enough for me I learned
the place so early spurned.
How could it else but home be
that took so long to see.

What was it that drew him back? In his youth he had spurned Maine because it was associated with childhood memories overshadowed by tragedy and hardship. A series of dark and threatening landscapes from these early years (such as *Deserted*, 1912) evoke the mood of loneliness which not only expresses his own feelings of being a deserted child, but also suggests the decline of the once prosperous New England farms. And the poems from these same years depict the "cobwebs and ratholes" decaying the social fabric of his native state. One especially harsh poem called "Spinsters" (1918) begins,

October in New England:
They are the gargoyles supporting old buttresses,
These virgins that roam wistfully among the
ruins, . . .

Deserted farms are they, with the good grain gone,
The flax spun.

But as these more bitter memories faded with the years, there remained what he calls in an untitled poem from the late 1930s, "the miracle of place." With an ironic twist he, the poet, states

We can take the poets with a grain of salt
nothing is as different as the poets
make it,
nothing as regionally impeccable as
the poets make it—
and yet—
the something they could not say
despite their glibly flowing words
falls and furls from the firs and
the hemlocks, the spruces and the
granite declivities. . .
and there—the residue of meanings—
crystals dug from the dark of the
earth
substances revealed,
and there—the miracle of
place.

The miracle of place is what is left when even the poets can say no more; it "falls and furls from the firs and / the hemlocks, the spruces and the / granite declivities." As painter and poet, Hartley's experience had taught him that it is not enough to be a "regionally impeccable" artist depicting the trees and rocks and sea—the local scene of Maine, or anywhere else. The artist must strive to capture that unnameable quality of a place, its "residue of meanings."



Mt. Katahdin, 1941. Oil on masonite. 22 x 28".
Mrs. Suzanne Schrag, New York

That striving to reveal the miracle of place is the vision that underlies Hartley's late paintings and poems of Maine. The paintings are not breezy, picturesque renditions of popular land- and seascape vistas around the state. They dig deeper, to the core of that human spirit that settled Maine and endured for centuries its harsh climate and terrain. In another unpublished poem he states it eloquently this way:

There are no rocks and trees that take
the place of people
the people that are rich and round and large
strong with a nation's agitation
deep with a lovingness profound—

Such are the people of his paintings, drawings, and poems: fishermen, their wives and daughters, lumbermen, and farmers. Hartley once described the game warden, Caleb Scribner, who escorted him to Mt. Katahdin in 1939 so that he could paint it; Caleb Scribner, he wrote, "had Ktaadn in his flesh and bone." These were the people whose lives attested to the same ruggedness that characterized their natural environment. Rocks and trees—and especially the sea—become metaphors for the human qualities of courage, endurance, and strength, as in these lines from "Recognition of Region,"

My mother has a handsome face
all veined with granite, strength and grace.

The rocks that the speaker of the poem sits on become his "mother" welcoming him home.

Many of these poems and paintings are elegiac in mood, hymns which lament the fate of fishermen drowned at sea, sea birds lost in coastal storms, old age, or the inevitable transition from the glorious short summer to autumn. "Casual Frontier," "Fisherman's Last Supper," "Daily Library Visitor," "Reflex," and "This Portrait of a Sea Dove, Dead" mourn the passage of mortal existence. But underlying the tone of sadness are strains of courage, dignity and grace, as in the latter poem where the Sea Dove tells his brood

to be brave,
have grace
to face
the loneliness of their days.

Similarity of subject matter and theme in individual poems and paintings occurs frequently in Hartley's later years. "This Portrait of a Sea Dove, Dead" and several other poems relate to a series of still lifes of dead birds. "Fisherman's Last Supper" relates to a group of portraits of fishermen and their families, of which the untitled drawing from the Bates College Collection (catalogue no. 25) is one. The poem "Three Friends" relates to a painting of the same title and to the preparatory drawing shown



Courage, Power, Pity, c. 1941. Pen and black ink on white paper. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection, Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston

here entitled "Courage, Power, Pity." And there are many landscape sites (like islands in Penobscot Bay) which must have inspired both poems and pictures. However, the paintings should not be regarded as merely illustrated versions of the poems. According to one of his publishers, Hartley did not want to illustrate his books with his paintings (though this was done in the posthumous volume, *Selected Poems*). Such thematic coincidence may have derived from the artist's experience at a given moment or location, but the pictorial and poetic expressions are separate and unique evocations of particular scenes and events. One may amplify the other, but they can also be experienced independently. And in some instances he apparently found a subject suited to one medium and not another, as with Mt. Katahdin which appears only in paintings and drawings.

On the one hand Hartley wanted desperately to be known as *the painter of Maine*, and took steps in the years after 1936 to establish that reputation. His two volumes of poetry published during this time—*Androscoggin* (1940) and *Sea Burial* (1941)—contain mostly poems about Maine, and both were issued by Maine publisher Leon Tebbetts. Yet in both words and pictures what Hartley accomplished with such vigor was to go beyond the parochialism of a particular locale or a merely subjective impression of a place. Perhaps because of his lifelong refusal to remain in any locality for more

than a few months, place was, for him, not geographically fixed, but a state of consciousness. His works are indeed "crystals dug from the dark of the / earth." In them he penetrates beneath the surface appearance of landscape, or objects, or people to the core of some living truth. Place becomes in Hartley's art a vehicle by which the artist moves out from his own creative center to discern and communicate the universal meanings in man and his environment.

Gail R. Scott
Project Director

Checklist of Exhibition

PAINTINGS

1. *Kezar Lake, Sundown*, 1910
Oil on wood panel
5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
2. *Desertion*, 1912
Oil on wood panel
14 x 22"
Sanford Schwartz, New York
3. *Lobster Pots and Buoys*, 1936
Oil on academy board
10 x 24"
Museum of Art of Ogunquit
4. *Rope and Wishbone*, 1936
Oil on academy board
24 x 28"
Pierce Gallery, Bangor
5. *Granite by the Sea*, 1937
Oil on composition board
20 x 28"
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
6. *Maine Coast at Vinalhaven*, c. 1938
Oil on academy board
28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick
7. **Intellectual Niece*, 1938
Oil on academy board
22 x 12"
Chris Huntington Collection, courtesy of the Portland Museum of Art
8. **Islands, Penobscot Bay*, 1939
Oil on academy board
10 x 14"
Chris Huntington Collection, courtesy of the Portland Museum of Art
9. *Mt. Katahdin, Winter*, 1939-40
Oil on academy board
22 x 28"
Museum of Art of Ogunquit
10. *Abundance*, 1939-40
Oil on canvas
40 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30"
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire
11. *Mt. Katahdin*, 1941
Oil on masonite
22 x 28"
Mrs. Suzanne Schrag, New York
12. *Breaking Wave*, 1942
Oil on board
8 x 10"
Sanford Schwartz, New York
13. *Storm Down Pine Point Way, Old Orchard Beach, Maine*, c. 1941-43
Oil on masonite
22 x 28"
Babcock Galleries, New York
14. *Mt. Katahdin*, 1940
Crayon on paper
22 x 28"
University of Maine at Orono Art Collection
15. *Untitled (Forested Cove)*, c. 1934-36
Pen and black ink on paper
6 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
16. *Untitled (Lone Fisherman Seated on Barrel)*, c. 1938-39
Pen and black ink on paper
7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5"
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
17. *Untitled (Two Male Figures at Old Orchard Beach)*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
4 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
18. *Wrestler*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
4 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
19. *Untitled (Six Lobstermen and Lobster Traps)*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
8 x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
20. *Untitled (Five Lobstermen and Christ Figure—Pieta Concept)*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
10 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8"
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
21. *Untitled (Three Fishermen with Fish and Lobster)*, 1940
Pencil on paper
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
22. *Untitled (Rock Coast, Sea and Sail)*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
8 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
23. *Untitled (Rock Coast)*, c. 1940
Pencil on paper
5 x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
24. *Courage, Power, Pity*, c. 1941
Pen and black ink on white paper
10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston
25. *Untitled (Fisherman's Family)*, c. 1943
Pencil on paper
10 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8"
Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Lewiston

*At Presque Isle, Payson Gallery, and Treat Gallery only.

Acknowledgements

THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE at Presque Isle is honored to present to the people of Maine this exhibition of paintings, drawings, and poems by one of the state's eminent native sons, Marsden Hartley. This project, which includes the exhibition, poetry readings, gallery talks and panel discussions at five locations, has been funded by a generous grant from the Maine Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Gail R. Scott
Project Director

Schedule

University of Maine Library
181 Maine Street
Presque Isle, Maine
September 19 - October 21, 1982

Joan Whitney Payson Gallery
Westbrook College
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, Maine
October 31 - December 2, 1982

Treat Gallery
Bates College
Lewiston, Maine
December 16 - February 17, 1983

Brick Store Museum
Maine Street
Kennebunk, Maine
February 27 - March 30, 1983

Colby College Museum of Art
Waterville, Maine
April 10 - May 15, 1983