

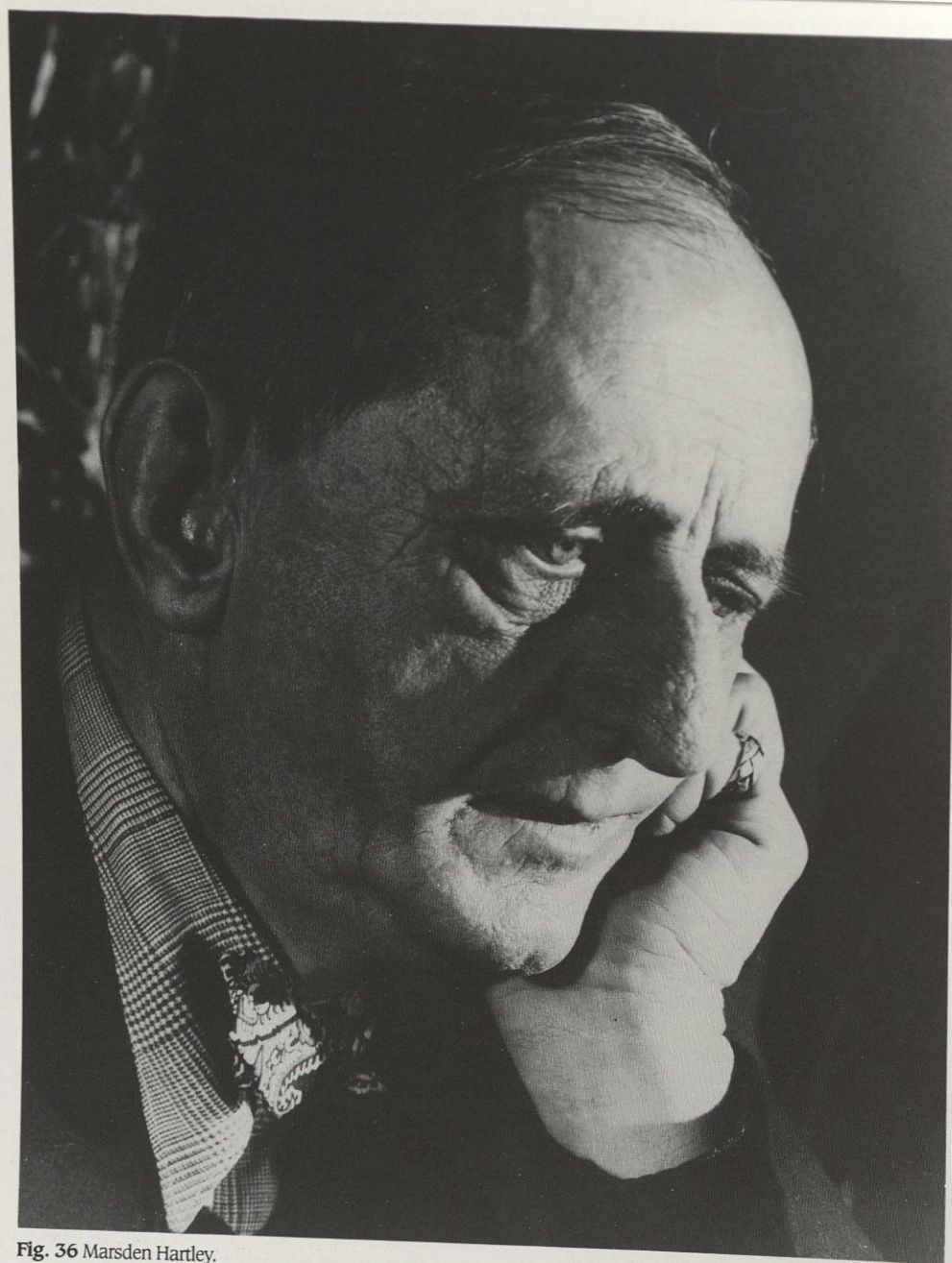


Fig. 36 Marsden Hartley.
Archives of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.

Theory and Practice

Hartley, Bluemner, and the Expressionist Landscape

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Critic Willard Huntington Wright introduced the 1916 Forum Exhibition as "an unusual opportunity for coming into touch with the most important modern American painters . . . [whose works] have been chosen because each represents a definite attainment in the new field of aesthetic endeavor."¹ Although subject and technique did vary among the seventeen select exhibitors, co-organizer Alfred Stieglitz found their art linked by a profound, underlying motive: "To bring about a closer Life between Expression and Individual."² Most of the painters' own "explanatory notes" published in the catalogue affirmed Stieglitz's assessment, particularly those by Marsden Hartley and Oscar Bluemner, both landscapists with strong theoretical interests. Hartley wrote:

Personal quality, separate, related to nothing so much as to itself, is something coming to us with real freshness, not traversing a variety of fashionable formulas, but relying only upon itself. The artist adds something minor or major more by understanding his own medium to expression, than by his understanding of the medium or methods of those utterly divergent from him . . .

I am wondering why the autographic is so negligible, why the individual has ceased to register himself . . . I wonder if the individual psychology of El Greco, Giotto and the bushmen had nothing to do with their idea of life, of nature, of that which is essential—whether the struggle in El Greco and Cézanne, for example, had not more to do in creating their peculiar individual aesthetic than any ideas they may have had as to the pictorial problem. It is this specialized personal signature which certainly attracts us to a picture—the autographic aspect or the dictographic . . . Who will not, or cannot, find that quality in those extraordinary and unexcelled watercolors of

Cézanne, will find nothing whatsoever anywhere. There is not a trace anywhere in them of struggle to problem: they are expression itself. He has expressed, as he himself has said, what was his one ambition—that which exists between him and his subject. Every painter must traverse for himself that distance from Paris to Aix or from Venice to Toledo . . . Every expressor relates solely to himself—that is the concern of the individualist.³

Bluemner too championed *personal* expression, but coupled with modes of thought shaped by national and historical experience:

The painter today as formerly . . . aims at a liberation of feelings. Only the ideas of the present age create emotions wanting liberation through expression in form and beauty that are different from those of the past . . . because man's intellect progresses, widens, deepens. Hence the arts also become more manifold and freer, less bound by traditional . . . points of view.

Why then should American painting be limited by either old canons or any single new "ism"? We have a climate and a mind of our own—greater intellectual freedom demands . . . a corresponding freer use of line, form, tone and color. The only law a picture must conform to is that which it carries within itself . . . just as true art springs from within, while that which is caused from without is imitation.

The intensity and purity of . . . modern painting is greater than it was in by-gone art, so that we have even come to speak of abstract painting. Whatever inner impulse we address towards nature is abstract. Thus a landscape, as a motive for expression, undergoes a free transformation from objective reality to a subjective realization of personal vision.⁴

Such positions—emphatically subjective, progressive, and shaped by significant prior contact with the European avant-garde⁵—grew dubious as World

War I eroded faith in modernist institutions and ideals. Soon after the Forum Exhibition, which featured examples of Hartley's semiabstract Berlin "portraits" and Bluemner's early prismatic landscapes, both artists left New York. Hartley began a five-year odyssey that took him through Massachusetts, Bermuda, Maine, New Mexico, and California. His physical meanderings during this period were matched by abrupt fluctuations in style that included Synthetic Cubist still lifes, folk-inspired paintings on glass, and relatively realistic landscapes in pastel. At one point, he confessed to friend Carl Sprinchorn: "I weary of emotional excitement in art."⁶ Likewise, Bluemner also quit New York in 1916 for a sequence of small-town New Jersey residences that changed constantly over the next decade. Reluctant at first to start any new paintings, he turned instead to sketching out-of-doors daily, and to revising most of his previous work because "there is *too much* effect and too much idea and feeling in each picture."⁷

During the 1920s, Hartley and Bluemner revamped their artistic credos along increasingly divergent lines. The same decade that prompted their colleague Paul Strand to foresee "God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost,"⁸ also saw greater objectivity enter into Hartley's thinking. His brief affiliation with New York Dada, through Katherine Dreier's Société Anonyme, led him to argue that "the artist has made a kind of subtle crime of his habitual expression, his emotional monotonies . . . life and art are one and the same thing . . . it is

never a question of whether it shall or must be set down on paper or canvas, or given any greater degree of expression than we give a morning walk."⁹ In his "Dissertation on Modern Painting" (1921), Hartley further qualified his earlier autography: "Art is not a mystery . . . [but] is one with the laws of nature and science. Art is the exact personal appreciation of a thing seen, heard, or felt in terms of itself." Though still maintaining the painter's right "to reform his own sensations and ideas . . . [because] to illustrate externals means nothing," he added that "the thing must be brought clearly to the surface . . . without cast or shade of the application of extraneous ideas." He now deemed art an "intellectual" rather than an "emotional issue," and like Strand, concluded in Precisionist-related terms: "We have a timely appreciation for the mechanistic . . . we care for the perfect line and mass, the unornamented plasticity of workable objects, such as the dynamo and the steam drill, as well as the cool and satisfying distinction which electricity contains."¹⁰

Despite these sentiments, no dynamos or steam drills appeared in Hartley's paintings; moreover, in July 1921, he again fled bustling New York for war-ravaged Europe, where he would remain through most of the rest of the decade and focus initially on sensuously executed still life subjects. His first landscapes, a series of New Mexico "recollections" painted in Berlin in 1923 (fig. 95, cat. 57), also belied standards set forth in his "Dissertation"—a



Fig. 37 Oscar Bluemner.
Archives of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.

discrepancy that echoed Hartley's larger, career-long struggle to reconcile emotional vision and physical realities. Symptomatic of the estrangement Hartley felt while in the Southwest, these broad but thinly painted "recollections" suggest a barren, restless state of mind.

Hartley's next major body of landscapes, produced after 1925 while living in southern France, more closely approximate the dispassionate intention prefigured in his writing. Those made near Vence (fig. 93, cat. 58) are solidly painted and possess stable, weighty qualities drawn directly from the terrain. Later landscapes from Aix-en-Provence, most notably his numerous views of Mont Sainte-Victoire, honor Cézanne,

a man who had evolved some of the clearest principles for himself, a new metaphysic—a new logic—a new, inviolable conviction, a new law for the artist with ambitions toward truth, a belief in real appearances, and a desire toward expression, without the HYPOCRISIES.¹¹

Hartley's renewed regard for Cézanne centered around the latter's apparent control and structured response to nature. In his own paintings, Hartley not only adopted Cézanne's ordered brush strokes, but stretched them into bars of discrete color so as to emphasize their architectonic function. In "Art—and the Personal Life" (1928), he ranked Cézanne first among "the great logicians of color" and publicly renounced "'expressionism', 'emotionalism', [and] 'personality'":

I do not admire the irrationality of the imaginative life. I have . . . made the intellectual grade. I have made the complete return to nature, and nature is . . . primarily an intellectual idea. I am satisfied that painting also

is like nature . . . 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.¹²

Like Hartley, Bluemner's rigorous self-evaluation following the Forum Exhibition recalled Cézanne, though hardly with the same result: "Cézanne's idea to let colors increase the effect of receding and advancing planes . . . is not a pictorial idea but sculptural. It is not true painting. Van Gogh in giving to a reddish face a blue background . . . is true, free supreme painting."¹³ Asked by dealer Stephan Bourgeois to amplify his views, Bluemner wrote:

Art is not an external thing and fixed, it is one of the elements of human life . . . only it is the last element to free itself. Art is man's divine instinct for creation . . . it corresponds to 'recreation'. Art lifts our innate sense of beauty to that final consciousness to which Life aspires. . . . Art is through Vision and Imagination, hence a work of Art is a modification or transfiguration of our ordinary sensuous experience; of the appearance of NATURE. Faithful representation is not Art.¹⁴

Bluemner's mystical subjectivism found theoretical reinforcement in sources as varied as Henri Bergson, Clive Bell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Claude Bragdon, Goethe, and ancient Chinese aesthetics, and led him to pare his estimate of "Painting [to] Line + Color . . . Flat, Simplification, Idea, Feeling."¹⁵ *Vermillion Houses, Sparkill* (fig. 42, cat. 5), a reworking of his 1915 *Illusion of a Prairie, New Jersey* (Regis Collection), substantiated that premise through an elemental contrast of soft/organic and hard/architectural shapes arrayed in the precious "Colors of Tang . . . lapis lazuli, malachite, agate [blue, green, red] . . .

much freer, simpler, purer than Nature's colors."¹⁶ During the mid-1920s, Bluemner concentrated on two major series of watercolors that continued to mirror his highly variable emotional and material circumstances: *The Poor Farm* (fig. 43, cat. 6), sold by Expressionist art dealer J.B. Neumann to critic Paul Rosenfeld, is deep-toned and rapturous; *Death* (fig. 44, cat. 7), painted after the loss of his wife Lina, assumes the brooding character of Hartley's New Mexico "recollections" and parallels Bluemner's own reading of Osvald Spengler's pessimistic *Decline of the West*; the later "Suns & Moons" (fig. 46, cat. 8), exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery and related in time to similar subjects by O'Keeffe, Marin, and Dove, complement his visionary claim that "ultimately, the painter feels the unknown Absolute."¹⁷

In both theory and practice, the greatest divide between Hartley and Bluemner developed in the late 1920s. From France, Hartley praised Cézanne in paint and print as the epitome of creative clear-sightedness. Bluemner, by then living in Massachusetts, turned his attention instead to a series of nocturnal fantasies in which complementary landscape elements—especially sinuous "female" greenery and radiant red "male" buildings—made formal Freudian "analogy" to drives competing deeply within the human subconscious. While at work on *Red Glare, American Night* (fig. 47, cat. 10), he likened art to "neuroses by which the psyche finds outlet" and reminded himself "to render a scene as if it were a person . . . since all such turns on ego, landscape painting is

semi self portraiture."¹⁸ In October 1929, Bluemner published a long essay, "What And When Is Painting? Today," in conjunction with an exhibition of his "inlandscapes" at the Whitney Studio Galleries. As if rebutting Hartley's objectivistic "Art—and the Personal Life" of a year earlier, he insisted that "nothing but emotional imagination produces real painting . . . What does not come from a painter's imagination does not go to the spectator's soul." He then posed a metaphor that made his ideas as vivid as his imagery:

Take a steel bar: it is hard, rigid, cold fact, Reality. If you heat it, it glows red, and now you can bend it and twist it any way. Let intense emotion fire your imagination, or memory of scenes . . . and the colors of things, or of night will glow with the hues of corresponding moods, the lines and shapes of things will sway and twist as if they were human. The space is set with actors . . . Now let colors as psychological plasma create their own forms (cells) instead of letting the stupid photographic forms of reality dictate . . . As a painter, say not: the tree is green . . . [but] say: green is like a tone in an octave or like a force. . . . Say: there is a feeling-world "red", and find out in life and nature what significances it takes on by way of . . . objective shapes. For I told you that painting is imaginative color, and that realities are communicative by-play.¹⁹

Financial and professional pressures brought Hartley back to the United States in 1930 just as economic and political crisis sparked a decade of intense cultural nationalism. His initial series of *Dogtown* subjects (fig. 97, cat. 60), billed in a 1932 exhibition at The Downtown Gallery as "Pictures of New England by a New Englander," suggests timely obedience to popular calls for Regionalist art.

However, the paintings themselves—all of which feature monumental, starkly composed rock formations—and Hartley's own descriptions of Dogtown downplay local detail in favor of a transcendental, mythopoeic response to this isolated moraine: "The place is forsaken and majestically lovely as if nature had at last found one spot where she can live for herself alone . . . No triviality enters [here] . . . it gives the feeling that an ancient race might turn up any moment and renew an ageless rite."²⁰ Even less immediate and tangible were the musical associations he drew from his unusual surroundings: "Beethoven (in Dogtown)/ Deep chested trills arise—/ from organ pipes of juniper/ Oboe's throat expands—mezzo cries/ of blueberry & sage and ferns prefer/ to die among the rocks, nobly perish/ mire of torrid green . . ."²¹ Such rekindled subjectivism, fully divulged by Hartley the following year in his supernatural, synthetically colored Mexican landscapes (fig. 98, cat. 61), was prescribed in an ardent letter to Carl Sprinchorn: "I am trying to return to the earlier conditions of my inner life, and take out of experience . . . that which has enriched it, and make something of it more than just intellectual diversion. . . . that is to be my mental and spiritual occupation from now on."²²

Bluemner's strong aversion to artistic "patrioteering" was expressed more openly in a commentary published by *The New York Times*:

This business of chewing the cud about what is . . . 100 percent home-brew painting is . . . the storm in a teapot. . . . Today, for quality, nationalism . . . means nothing; chemistry, astronomy, or engineering admits, nowhere, any national flavoring, nor do higher things like religion and philosophy. . . . Ideally, art, pure, is of a sphere of no country; . . . the future will not fail to stamp that of our own work as peculiarly American in which the living painter, here, has injected no conscious thought of his hailing from Hoboken or Kankakee . . . [but instead] every consideration of pure and modern . . . quality he may be capable of.²³

To underscore this position, Bluemner entered *Composition* (fig. 49, cat. 11)—*nonspecifically* titled, but identified in his diary as "Yards in Bloomfield, Lakes at Port Morris"—in the Whitney Museum's 1932 Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting. Conceived as an "orchestration" = color pattern . . . polarity & repetition . . . [of] red, green, blue, white and black,"²⁴ this painting recalls Hartley's musical impressions of Dogtown and parallels Bluemner's own ambitious, though unsuccessful, bid for a Guggenheim Fellowship:

I am now at work with new possibilities for landscape painting, partly by way of free and new construction, partly by that of the Chinese, as against the abject and artless Naturalism prevailing from about 1600 . . . and including most . . . modernistic, as well as, academic fashions. Early this year, I thought out and systematically tabulated a great number of . . . radical conceptions,—sketches and layouts—, going by imagination. From these I want to paint a series of unusual "color themes"—inlandscape form.²⁵

"Compositions For Color Themes," Bluemner's final solo exhibition, opened at Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, in January 1935. The thirty paintings, ranging from crystalline midday views in

his customary red-green-blue palette to pulsing nocturnes in rarer chords of yellow or violet and blue-black (fig. 48, cat. 12), followed Bluemner's dictum "to humanize a scene" as a "musical composition of theme, melody, and development . . . freer and more pliable than words . . . not bound by Naturalness but . . . infinitely variable to express every shade of sensation," because "as I look at a scene in my own way, so too a scene, endowed by me with mirrored soul . . . looks about itself and [back] at me."²⁶ The Harriman show brought a few needed sales, positive reviews, and a second venue at the Arts Club of Chicago, but Bluemner's last years were plagued by increasing ill health, poverty, and isolation. *Walls of New England* (fig. 50, cat. 13), a late work and among his boldest efforts to surmount "Naturalness," evolved as "a purely mathematical conception of free space . . . esthetic, emotional, the mind to supply the connection of such semi-abstract[ion] with reality"²⁷—a reality that had, in fact, grown as "sharp hard flat" for the artist as the elements within this painting.

The comparably severe character of Hartley's North Coast paintings after 1935 also denotes personal and physical hardship. *Rising Wave, Indian Point, Georgetown, Maine* (fig. 100, cat. 63) is as inflexibly frontal and densely structured as Bluemner's *Walls of New England*. The primary distinction arises in Hartley's lush impasto, which like the salt spray it depicts, cuts into the rocky shoreline forms and in so doing, signifies Hartley's mature effort to integrate his

deep feelings for the subject with the *subject itself*. In an unpublished essay on fellow artist Milton Avery, aptly entitled "On the Persistence of Imagination" (1938), Hartley recognized the same crucial tension:

There is such a thing as being theatric about an emotion or a thought, but . . . if these aspects are all that can be felt in the presence of nature . . . which functions with such perfection as to leave the puny human mind in the lurch, all that can be said is that if the artist is to be effective at all, he shall at least trust the appearances and the forces of nature as something to start with for his major emoting.²⁸

Ultimately, both Bluemner and Hartley honored the landscape in distinctively profound expressionist terms—terms that transcended their earlier and much narrower "personal vision." After 1933, Bluemner signed his paintings FLORIANUS, a Latin universalization of his own surname, and wrote: "Two activities, the abstract and the concrete, the lean and the fat, like ebb and tide, are the constant rhythm of all movement in all things."²⁹ Hartley, finding that "true emotion is experienced [only] after . . . preliminary emotionalism has been dissected and discarded," renounced "petty personalisms" to seek in his late work "the vital essence of all things."³⁰

*In memory of Floyd Lee Smith
(1922-1987)*

1. Willard Huntington Wright, "Foreword," in *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, exh. cat. (New York: Anderson Galleries, 1916), 41.
2. Alfred Stieglitz, "Foreword," *Forum Exhibition*, 35.
3. Marsden Hartley, *Forum Exhibition*, unpaginated.
4. Oscar Bluemner, *Forum Exhibition*, unpaginated.
5. Hartley's association with Der Blaue Reiter is well known. See Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley and the European Avant-Garde," *Arts Magazine* 54 (September 1979), 158-63. Bluemner's familiarity stemmed from his affiliation with Stieglitz's 291 gallery, and his 1912 tour of Europe, where he held his first exhibition at the pro-modernist Galerie Fritz Gurlitt (Berlin), reviewed the momentous Sonderbund Exhibition (Cologne) for *Kölnischer Tafelblatt*, and studied Roger Fry's second Post-Impressionist exhibition at Grafton Galleries (London). See author's "Oscar Bluemner: Life, Art, and Theory," (PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 1982), 93-124.
6. Marsden Hartley, letter to Carl Sprinchorn, Winter 1917, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
7. Painting Diary, 18 May 1916, Bluemner Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as BP/AAA).
8. Paul Strand, "Photography and the New God," *Broom*, 3 November 1922, 252.
9. Marsden Hartley, "The Importance of Being 'Dada,'" in *Adventures In The Arts* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921; facsimile reprint, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1972), 248, 253.
10. Marsden Hartley, "Dissertation on Modern Painting," *The Nation* 112 (February 1921), 235-36.
11. Marsden Hartley, "The MOUNTAIN and the RECONSTRUCTION," in *Paintings and Watercolors by Marsden Hartley*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago, 1928), unpaginated.
12. Marsden Hartley, "Art—and the Personal Life," *Creative Art* 2 (June 1928): reprinted in Gail R. Scott, *On Art by Marsden Hartley* (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), 70-73.
13. Painting Diary, 28 June 1917, BP/AAA.
14. Oscar Bluemner, "In Other Words," in *Exhibition of Modern Art Arranged by a Group of European and American Artists in New York*, exh. cat. (New York: Bourgeois Galleries, 1918), unpaginated.
15. Painting Diary, mid-1918, BP/AAA. For further discussion of these sources, see author's "Oscar Bluemner: Art, Life, and Theory," 248-74.
16. Ibid., 16 March 1922.
17. Ibid., 21 May 1927.
18. Ibid., August 1929.
19. Oscar Bluemner, "What And When Is Painting? Today" (South Braintree, Mass.: Privately Printed, 1929), 1-2, 7.
20. Marsden Hartley, *Somehow a Past*, unpublished autobiography, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, unpaginated.
21. Inscribed on verso of *Flaming Pool Dogtown* (1931, o/b), Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. For further discussion of the artist's musical references, see Gail R. Scott, "Marsden Hartley at Dogtown Common," *Arts Magazine* 54 (October 1979): 159-65.
22. Quoted in *Feininger/Hartley* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 63.
23. Oscar Bluemner, "What is American Art—A Reader's Forum of Opinion," *The New York Times*, 27 November 1932. Clipping File, BP/AAA.
24. Painting Diary, 6 March 1931, BP/AAA.
25. Oscar Bluemner, "Plans For Study" (Typescript), July 1932, BP/AAA.
26. Painting Diary, 11 August 1934, BP/AAA.
27. Ibid., September 1935.
28. Scott, *On Art by Marsden Hartley*, 206.
29. Oscar Bluemner, "The Abstract," *The Art Digest* 9 (15 March 1935), 9.
30. Scott, *On Art by Marsden Hartley*, 290-91. Scott dates this unpublished essay on "The Element of Absolutism in Leonardo's Drawings" after 1938.

Catalogue entries are grouped by artists, arranged alphabetically. Within each section, entries are listed chronologically. Those undated are listed last. Measurements are given in inches followed by the equivalent measurement in centimeters (in parentheses). In both cases, height precedes width.