

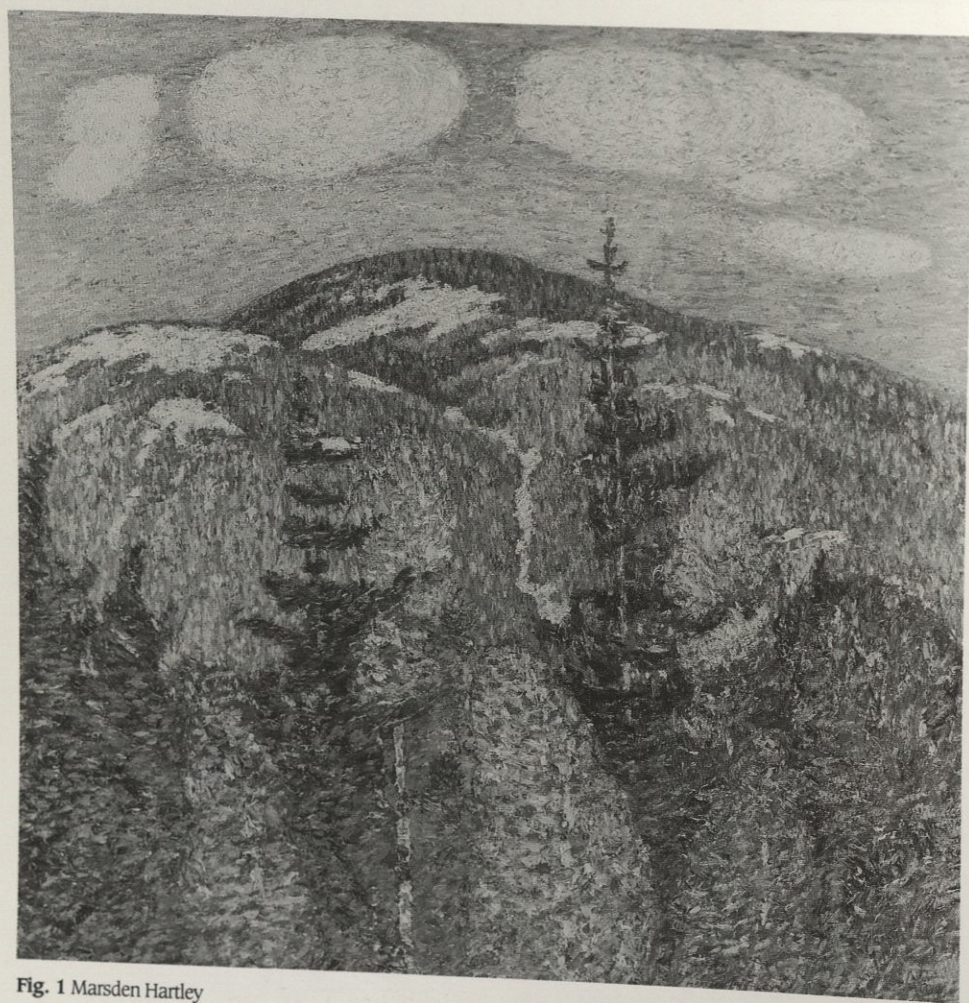


Fig. 1 Marsden Hartley
The Mountains, 1909
 Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 1/4"
 (76.2 x 76.5 cm)
 Collection of the Columbus
 Museum of Art, Ohio; gift of
 Ferdinand Howald

Transcendental Realism in the Stieglitz Circle

The Expressionist Landscapes of Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley,
 John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe
 Barbara Haskell

The grandeur of the American landscape has always been a fertile subject for American artists. Early nineteenth-century Americans identified nature with God's immanence; through nature the universal spirit spoke to man and provided spiritual and moral instruction. America's abundance of virgin wilderness gave the nation the status of a chosen land and encouraged its identification with nature. Though the twentieth century saw confidence in the indissoluble union of God, nature, and America shatter, the mystery of nature and the religious and moral overtones which adhered to it remained.¹ Nature continued to function as a metaphor for personal freedom and individual fulfillment. In the twentieth century, nature as subject attracted American artists who prized introspective individualism and spiritual intensity. Indeed, nature seemed singularly capable of providing the solitude and introspection conducive to spirituality. For artists such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, it offered a sympathetic vehicle for the expression of emotional states rather than the simple detailing of external reality.

The impulse for an emotional, intuitive connection with the landscape temperamentally linked these American artists with the European Expressionists, who were likewise formulating an aesthetic based on emotional expression. To an extent, the desire to express the inner experience of reality rather than to reproduce the external world guided all modernist formulations. Nevertheless, the French modernists were primarily concerned with formal issues: Fauvism

emphasized the analysis of color, Cubism the abstract structure which lay behind surface appearances. It therefore fell to the Expressionists to adapt modernist discoveries to the expression of feeling and emotion and to the representation of mood.

Of the two modes of German Expressionism—the Blaue Reiter and the Brücke—the Blaue Reiter's mixture of romanticism and mysticism found greatest favor among American artists. The explosive pathos and distorted forms with which the Brücke painters depicted figurative subjects had little impact. On the other hand, the view held by members of the Blaue Reiter—in particular, Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky—that nature and man were part of the same whole, accorded with the heritage of American Transcendentalism. Vestiges of this heritage had continued into the twentieth century; reason was still suspect, and intuition favored over intellectualism. The Blaue Reiter's emphasis on intuition as a means of penetrating beneath external appearances and the group's decision to turn attention away from the representation of things to the "inner mystical structure of the world" found a receptive audience in America.²

The exaltation of intuition was particularly strong among the artists and intellectuals associated with Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, 291, and his magazine, *Camera Work*. Widely heralded among this group was the French philosopher Henri Bergson's proposal that intuition could potentially transcend the

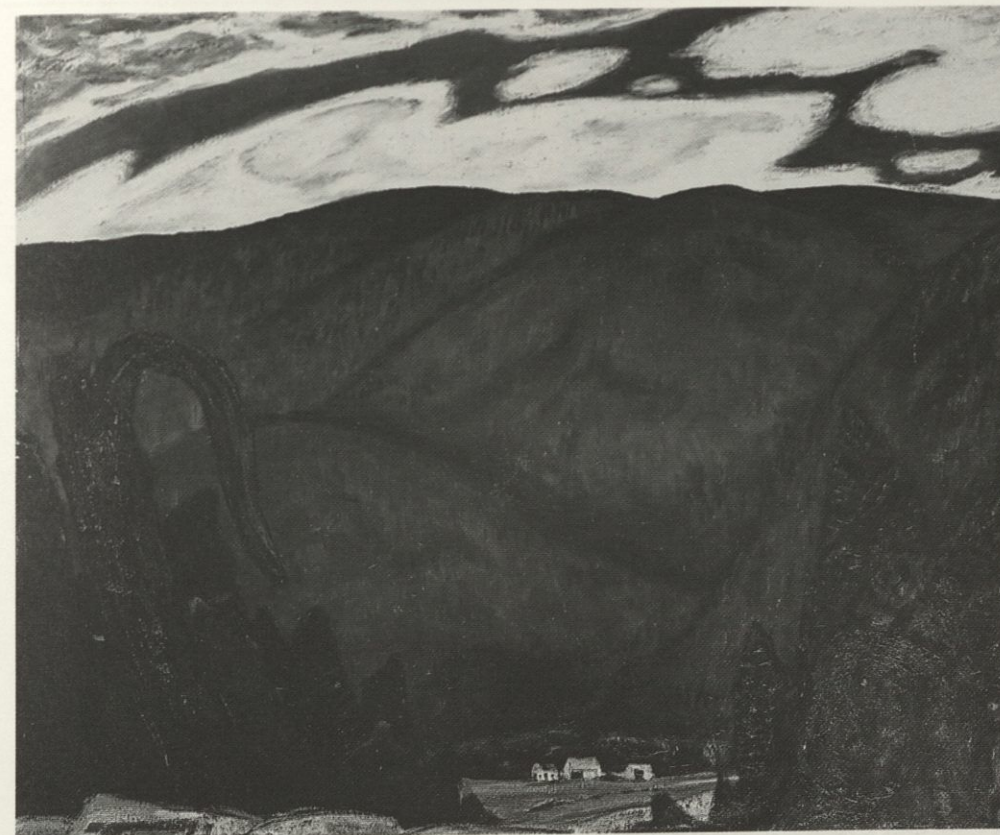
facts of outward appearance and directly perceive an object's inner nature. His writings were regularly featured in *Camera Work* along with those of the Belgian writer Maeterlinck, whose use of pre-language sounds Kandinsky cited as a literary equivalent of his own efforts in painting. The magazine also carried articles by Marius De Zayas and Benjamin De Casseres attacking reason, as well as discussions by Charles Caffin and Sadakichi Hartmann that paralleled those of Kandinsky on the reciprocal relationship between painting and music. The first non-photographic artist Stieglitz exhibited (in 1907), Pamela Colman Smith, created poetic-mystical paintings based on musical principles. The artists whom Stieglitz most consistently championed and exhibited—Dove, Hartley, O'Keeffe, and Marin—all placed greater value on personal expression than on solving formal problems. The essentially spiritual approach to landscape which resounded in their work paralleled the mystical orientation of the European Expressionists.

Ironically, Expressionism was far less well known in America than was Cubism. American artists traveling abroad in the first decades of the century flocked to Paris; few ventured into Germany or Austria. This Parisian bias colored the reports of European art developments that flowed home. Even Stieglitz contributed to this French orientation: of the foreign artists he exhibited at 291 only one, Gino Severini, did not live in France. Since Severini's Futurist style was related to Cubism, it corroborated the American equation of modern art with Cubism. So

too did the Armory Show, which limited its German Expressionist representation to two canvases: one by Kandinsky, the other by Kirchner. For Americans with modernist aspirations, practicing a variant of Cubism became almost requisite. The Cubist hegemony was reinforced by the arrival in this country of artists such as Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp who were fleeing the war in Europe. With America's entry into the war and the ensuing hostility to all things German, the final death knell was delivered to any potential widespread receptivity to German art in America. Yet the aesthetic theories of Kandinsky were nonetheless known and admired in Stieglitz's circle. *Camera Work* had published excerpts of Kandinsky's book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in 1912 and *Der Blaue Reiter*, edited by Kandinsky and Marc, had made it to America by 1912. The enthusiasm for the arts of primitive people and children expressed in this latter publication probably stimulated the children's art exhibitions that Stieglitz mounted at 291 in 1912 and 1914. Although Kandinsky's work was not known in depth, Stieglitz's purchase of the Russian-born artist's entry to the Armory Show had insured that at least one example was available to the American vanguard after 1913.

Marsden Hartley was the only artist in the Stieglitz circle who had had direct contact with the Blaue Reiter painters in Germany. Hartley's earliest aesthetic attitudes had been informed by the Transcendentalist writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's endorsement of inspiration over reason and his

Fig. 2 Marsden Hartley
Dark Mountain, 1909
Oil on composition board,
19¼ x 23¼" (49 x 59.1 cm)
Courtesy of The Art Institute of
Chicago; The Alfred Stieglitz
Collection



conviction that nature embodied a divine spirit underlay Hartley's earliest mature works. The agitated brush strokes and swirling forms in these 1908-1909 Maine landscapes place them within the Expressionist tradition of van Gogh (fig. 1). So too does their content, which Hartley described as based on ecstatic visions of heaven.³ Hartley's next paintings, executed in 1909, were a series of brooding, dark landscapes (fig. 2) influenced by the expressive realism of the American romantic Albert Pinkham Ryder.

With this background, Hartley went to Paris in the spring of 1912 and encountered the ideas of Kandinsky. Kandinsky's approach encouraged Hartley to abandon the formalist exercises that

had engaged his attention between 1910 and 1912 and to return to the mystical-spiritual track of his earlier series. Although the results—Hartley's Cosmic Cubist paintings of 1912-1913 (fig. 3)—drew on the inspiration of Kandinsky, his assertion that his mysticism was singularly American and represented a return to his earlier expressive nature was not inaccurate.⁴ His outlook apparently accorded so much with that of the Blaue Reiter artists that Marc, solely on the basis of Hartley's letters, invited the American painter to exhibit with the group in the first Herbstsalon in Berlin in 1913.⁵ The following year Hartley's



Fig. 3 Marsden Hartley
Abstraction with Flowers, 1913
Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 32"
(99.7 x 81.3 cm)
Collection of the University Art
Museum, University of Min-
nesota; bequest of Hudson
Walker from the Lone and Hudson
Walker Collection

the sensuous physicality of his painting style still reflected his wish to have "the whole body, the whole flesh, in painting."⁶ Increasingly, he harnessed this weighty, sensuous expressionism to the description of nature's mythical and primordial forces. By the time he returned to his birthplace, Maine, in 1937, he had successfully evolved a mode of landscape painting which was at once heroic and personal (fig. 100, cat. 63). He had shifted his point of departure from the self-conscious spirituality of the Blaue Reiter to the archaic expressionism of Emil Nolde and Max Beckmann. In arriving at a means of directly pictorializing his emotional response to nature, he extended the tradition of imaginative realism, epitomized by Ryder and Winslow Homer, with which he had begun his career.

In contrast to Hartley, John Marin was essentially a romantic impressionist whose aesthetic development occurred outside the context of European Expressionism. He had lived abroad between 1905 and 1911, but did not truly begin his engagement with modernist theories and styles until after he had returned to America and begun to see exhibitions of European painters at 291. Out of his understanding of the work of Cézanne and Picasso, Marin evolved an explosive style that captured the convulsive vitality of the skyscraper environment of Lower Manhattan. His stenographic, atmospheric watercolors documented the countervailing forces which he felt objects exerted on one another. Compositionally, they drew on the same influences that had informed Hartley's

affinity for German culture, unusual for an American artist, encouraged his move to Berlin. The series of German Officer paintings which emerged from his experiences there transform states of feeling and emotion into explosive visual statements. These works allied themselves with those of the Blaue Reiter artists through color and paint handling, but they were far more structured and taut than their German counterparts.

Hartley's connection to the European Expressionist community was shattered after his return to the United States in 1915. Isolated in an environment in which his expressionist work received only lukewarm reception, he began seeking a more objective presentation of subject matter. Over the next two decades he experimented with a variety of subjects and styles, with varying degrees of success. Yet, despite his purported "weariness" with personal expression,

Cosmic Cubism: the color effects of Fauvism, the structure of Analytic Cubism, and the transparency and sparseness of Cézanne's late watercolors. Yet, while Marin's buoyant evocations of New York were full of spontaneous excitement, they contained none of the spiritual-mystical symbolism of Hartley's endeavors. Instead, Marin's depictions of New York remained impressionistic. They express a world of movement and flux, but they eschew the emotional and spiritual content associated with Expressionism.

If Marin's watercolors of the rugged contours of the Maine landscape and sea initially suggested physical rather than emotional sensations, Marin's response to elemental nature was nonetheless authentic. "Seems to me," he once said, "that the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Seas, Mountain, Plain—and those things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be a part of these in sympathy."⁷ Marin sought to condense his sensations of specific subjects into universals. He desired not to paint "a sea" but "The Sea," a goal he reinforced with the words he included in his titles—"pertaining to" and "related to."

By 1920, Marin's decisive pictorializations had begun to assume greater weight and solidity. With the introduction of oil in 1925, he conjoined the spontaneity of his previous work with tactile paint surfaces. His efforts to "give paint a chance to show itself entirely as paint" eloquently exploited the expressive potential of the medium.⁸

Marin's agitated brush strokes and his aim of "representing paint first of all, and not the motif primarily" anticipated the Abstract Expressionists, who likewise used fluid paint handling to convey inner states of emotion.⁹

In contrast to Hartley's heavily worked surfaces or Marin's agitated brush strokes, Arthur Dove's more lyrical approach to landscape mirrored his spontaneous, pantheistic empathy with nature. Speaking of Dove's oneness with nature, O'Keeffe remarked: "Dove is the only American painter who is of the earth. . . . No, Marin is not of the earth. He walks over the earth, but Dove is of it."¹⁰ This perception of Dove's empathy with nature was echoed by a friend's description of sailing with Dove: "For with Dove, people came into more connection with the reality of the water beneath and of the wind around and of the little rowboat in the midst of it. Not through anything he said, simply through his presence."¹¹ Dove's exaltation of the spiritual in nature paralleled the philosophy of the Blaue Reiter artists. His belief that everything in the world was a living vital presence with "as much right to any spiritual royalty as any intellectual" was particularly close to the vitalist pantheism of Franz Marc.¹² Nevertheless, the affinities between Dove and the Blaue Reiter Expressionists were more a matter of shared sensibility than of influence. Dove had made the requisite trip to Europe in 1908, and would have seen Kandinsky's entry to the 1908 Salon d'Automne in which both artists participated. However, since Dove left

Europe in the spring of 1909, he would not have seen any of Kandinsky's abstract paintings until 1913. Nor would Dove have come upon the theories of either Kandinsky or Marc, for he returned to America a year before Kandinsky wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and two years before he and Marc began preparing *Der Blaue Reiter*. Dove's 1910 abstract nature studies, which suggest Kandinsky by virtue of their non-objectivity, seem to have emerged independently, since Kandinsky's abstract style was not seen in America until its Armory Show debut in 1913.

Dove's view of nature as a living, breathing organism drew sustenance from the philosophy of Bergson that was propagated in Stieglitz's circle. Indeed, Dove's works from the teens (fig. 4)

probably owed something to Bergson's belief that objects were not isolated entities but were part of a continuum of movement, whose rhythms mingled with those of other objects. Dove's commitment to finding pictorial equivalents for these invisible forces came closer than any other American artist to paralleling the philosophies of the Blaue Reiter. So too did his desire to penetrate to a subject's essence and depict its inner spirit—its "condition of light" as he called it. Dove's distinction between feeling the spirit of a thing and simply "feeling a certain way about something" echoed Marc's desire to "paint as the forest and horse feel themselves—not as they appear to us."¹³

During the 1920s and 1930s, Dove used an imagery of circles which expand

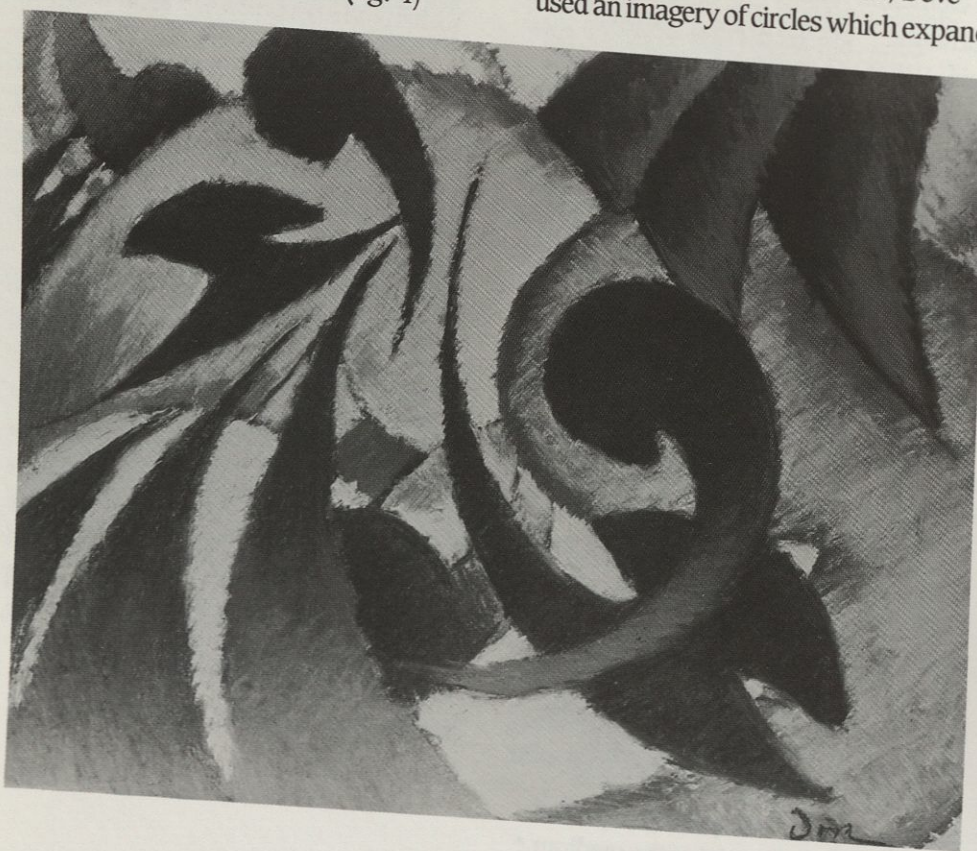
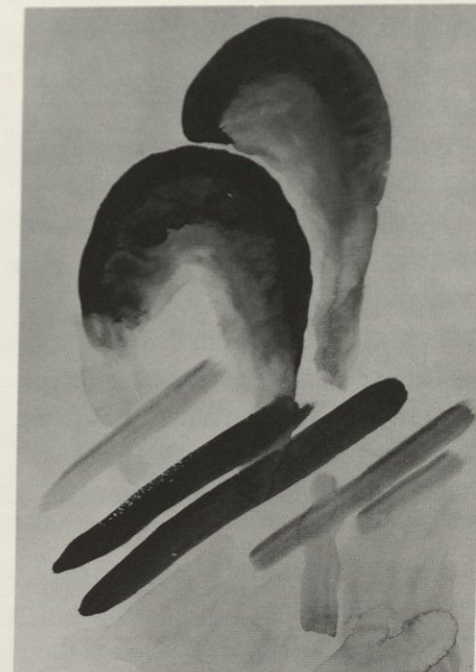


Fig. 4 Arthur Dove
Nature Symbolized, No. 2, 1914
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago

Fig. 5 Georgia O'Keeffe
Blue No. III, 1916
Watercolor, 15 1/16 x 11"
(40.5 x 27.9 cm)
Collections of The Brooklyn Museum

from a central core in concentric bands of modulated color to invest nature with a pulsating energy and a sense of unity and harmony. By 1938 he had begun to replace his organic vocabulary and active brush strokes with flatter, more abstract shapes and evenly applied color (fig. 85, cat. 48). These paintings retain Dove's personal connection with nature while moving toward an abstract, contemplative expressionism from which the momentary and temporal have been banished.

Within the Stieglitz circle, Dove felt the greatest personal and stylistic affinity for Georgia O'Keeffe. Both artists were linked to the Blaue Reiter by virtue of the pantheistic, transcendental life with which they imbued nature. Yet O'Keeffe's attempts to create symbolic equivalents for inner emotional states developed with little exposure to Blaue Reiter theories. She had studied in New York in 1914-1915, during which time she frequented Stieglitz's gallery and listened to him expostulate on art. When she assumed a teaching position at Columbia, South Carolina in the fall of 1915, she had already purchased a copy of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and was subscribing to *Camera Work*.¹⁴ Although O'Keeffe had probably spoken to Stieglitz only rarely and still addressed him formally in correspondence, she confided to her friend Anita Pollitzer that he was the one individual whose opinion about her work she would value. When she began her abstract charcoal drawings in the fall of 1915, it was no doubt that Stieglitz's interpretations—of Kandinsky and others—guided her efforts. Her adoption



of his views may have been reinforced during her three-month visit to New York in the spring of 1916. The watercolors which she began after that visit went far beyond what had been done previously by American artists in attaining "a feeling like wonderful music"¹⁵ (fig. 5). Relying almost exclusively on a vocabulary of abstract organic forms, these watercolors rhapsodically celebrate the vital, generative forces of nature and give pictorial form to what O'Keeffe described as "the intangible thing in myself."¹⁶

In O'Keeffe's subsequent work, executed primarily in oil, she replaced the expansive forms of her watercolors with tighter, more focused compositions. Enlarged, isolated images of flowers and real objects became the vehicles for her lyric vision. After 1929, when she began

summering in New Mexico, her work became increasingly majestic. Out of the limitless boundaries and visual serenity of the New Mexican landscape, and from the Spanish-American crosses, sun-bleached skulls, and pelvic bones that she observed there, she developed a powerful, iconic imagery. In this work, O'Keeffe broke with the ecstatic expressionism of her early career. She no longer sought equivalents in nature for private emotions, but instead looked for the universal and timeless experiences in landscape.

The aesthetic radicalism which the artists of the Stieglitz group developed in the 1910s had been stimulated by the theories and art of Blaue Reiter painters. By the 1920s a mood of restraint had replaced the revolutionary fervor of the teens; realism supplanted abstraction as the dominant mode. Yet this retreat from abstraction did not signal an end to the melding of art and spirituality which the Blaue Reiter artists had expressed. With a commitment to an authentic, personal expression fully internalized, American artists reflectively turned to their native landscape, stressing their personal connection to a subject that had sustained earlier generations of American artists.

1. See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
2. Franz Marc, quoted in Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1965), 126.
3. Marsden Hartley, letter to Seuman O'Sheel, 19 October 1908, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. (Hereafter cited as Yale.) Copy at Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
4. Marsden Hartley, letter to Alfred Stieglitz, February 1913, Yale.
5. Marsden Hartley, *Somehow a Past*, Yale.
6. Marsden Hartley, "Pictures," in *Marsden Hartley/Stuart Davis*, exh. cat. (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Modern Art Society, 1941), 6.
7. Quoted in *John Marin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 20.
8. Quoted in Sam Hunter, *American Art of the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), 106.
9. Ibid.
10. Herbert J. Seligmann, *Alfred Stieglitz Talking: Notes on Some of His Conversations, 1925-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
11. Charles Brooks, *Sensory Awareness: The Rediscovery of Experience* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974).
12. Quoted in Barbara Haskell, *Arthur Dove*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1974), 118.
13. Statement by Dove in *The Intimate Gallery*, exh. cat., 1929; quoted in Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1957), 202.
14. Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Anita Pollitzer, September 1905 and 6 October 1915; copy of letters in O'Keeffe Archives, Whitney Museum of American Art.
15. Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Anita Pollitzer, undated, O'Keeffe Archives, Whitney Museum of American Art.
16. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), unpaginated.