

A painting of a forest scene at sunset. The sky is a vibrant mix of orange, yellow, and blue. Large trees with dense foliage frame the scene. In the foreground, three deer are visible: one with large antlers stands prominently, while two smaller deer are nearby. The overall atmosphere is serene and naturalistic.

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Marsden Hartley

1877 - 1943

NEW MEXICO RECOLLECTION NO. 8

oil on canvas
22 by 41 ½ in.
(55.8 by 105.4 cm)

Painted in 1923.

PROVENANCE

Estate of the artist
Babcock Galleries, New York, 1958
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, 1983 (acquired
from the above)
Acquired by the present owners from above, 1984

EXHIBITED

New York, Babcock Galleries, *Marsden Hartley 1877-1943: Paintings
from 1910 to 1942 and a Bavarian Sketchbook of Silverpoint Drawings*,
1933, March 1980, no. 5, p. 9, illustrated p. 11
New York, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, *Marsden Hartley: Paintings and
Drawings*, March-April 1985, no. 8, illustrated in color
Roslyn, New York, Nassau County Museum of Art, *American
Vanguards*, January-April 1986, no. 53
New York, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, *Marsden Hartley*, January-
February 1988, no. 10, illustrated in color
Roslyn, New York, Nassau County Museum of Art, *Landscape of
America, The Hudson River School to Abstract Expressionism*,
November 1991-February 1992, no. 57
New York, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, *A Gallery's Perspective:
Modernist Painting and Sculpture in America: The Past 25 Years at
Salander-O'Reilly*, November-December 1999, no. 24, illustrated
in color

LITERATURE

Elizabeth McCausland, Archive of American Art online catalogue
raisonné files, box 14, folder 29, file 36-38

\$800,000-1,200,000

We are grateful to Gail R. Scott for preparing the following essay. Ms. Scott, a leading Hartley scholar, is the author of the monograph *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1998) and the editor of collections of his poetry and essays on art.

In March 1923, Marsden Hartley wrote from Berlin to his dealer, Alfred Stieglitz, to report that he was postponing his departure to Italy because he was just getting into some "exceptional painting" and was pleased with its "plastic simplicity."¹ In subsequent letters that spring and summer Hartley variously described this new work as "New Mexican landscape recollections" and "New Mexican & Texas landscape inventions," adding that he ventured onto these landscapes because "I have done about all I could of objects." So began a rush of landscape paintings that have since become known collectively as the New Mexico Recollection series and which, in five short months, resulted in about twenty large and small canvases, including *New Mexico Recollection No. 8*.²

Hartley had arrived in Berlin one-and-a-half years earlier, in November 1921, after four months in Paris and flush with the proceeds of the New York auction of his unsold paintings that had netted him \$4,900 dollars and the freedom to live, travel, and work in Europe. For over a year he had, indeed, focused exclusively on "objects": still life paintings and a series of thirteen lithographs of fruits, vegetables, and flowers in vases, compotes, and baskets. The new work, he explained to Stieglitz, was "for restoration's sake after over a year of abstracting still life" and "bridges the way to landscape again" in order to ready him for his next project: the "real work outside," first in Italy and then the south of France where he intended to investigate in Cézanne territory in Aix-en-Provence.

continued



Including a brief trip to California, Hartley had lived and worked in the West from summer 1918 to November 1919. All told, the work executed from memory *after* he left New Mexico amounts to around thirty-five paintings, the first of which were done in New York (1919-1920) and the majority, including *New Mexico Recollection No. 8*, in Berlin in 1923, followed by a few more in Paris in 1924—a span of over five years from the original experience. Stylistically and emotively the New Mexico Recollections from Berlin, including No. 8, are in sharp contrast to the work Hartley did while actually in the Southwest where his focus was naturalistic renderings in pastel of specific landscape sites (mountains, arroyos, and desert vistas around Taos and Santa Fe). In executing these pastels Hartley devoted fastidious attention to details of light, color, and land contours observed in the scene before him. They depict what we expect the desert to appear as: sunlit and sand-colored with high-keyed color accents. We could *walk into* these hills and valleys.

Not so with the Recollections. They are landscapes of the mind rather than of place, as can be readily observed in the mood, color, and execution of *New Mexico Recollection No. 8*. The scene, rendered with intense physicality, is foreboding. In the immediate foreground strange forms of desert vegetation, bent over and bulbous, lean symmetrically outward as if repelled by some mysterious force at the center. Only a narrow pathway at center allows visual access deeper to the picture space. Long oval cloud formations (echoing in form the vegetation below), hang low and heavy over the mountains. Slashing brushstrokes across the dark sky denote the distant rain. The painting evokes troubling thoughts rather than a reality of place.

Heightening the portentous mood in No. 8 is the chromatic effect of a dark palette reduced nearly to monochrome, with subdued shades of grey, brown, green and pinkish red. In comparable paintings from the New Mexico Recollection series, one overall hue dominates, such as the pervading green of *Green Leaves and Rocks* (Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey), which also closely resembles No. 8 in composition. In other examples, such as *Landscape, New Mexico*, (Axa Financial, Inc. Collection), the dominant tonality is a dark but subdued red.

As a body of work, Hartley's New Mexico Recollections are significant on many levels. After years of being, to some degree, marginalized or unexamined, the series has more recently sparked intriguing analysis and interpretation. Much of this discussion centers on the view of these paintings as complex, multilayered manifestations of the darker side of post-World War I states of mind in America, Europe, and in Hartley's own anguished experience and his position as an American modernist. Heather Hole, for instance explores at length the notion of the Recollections as "landscapes of self, body, and nation."³ While Hole's study of the Recollections adds depth to our understanding of Hartley's New Mexico experience and its aftermath, another aspect of



Marsden Hartley, *Green Leaves and Rocks*, 1923, [alternate title *New Mexico Recollection*], Montclair Art Museum, Gift of Ruth and Richard Newman (1982.43)

the story needs to be told: an examination of Hartley's concept and practice of *landscape as recollection* throughout his career.

As with many landscapists, Hartley's paintings in and of nature began with *in situ* drawings and sketches, followed later by paintings executed in oil indoors. Often the span of time from outdoor sketches (or simply contemplation of the scene) to a final painting was a matter of hours, days, or even several months during which he worked simultaneously on a number of canvases. With his Mt. Katahdin series (1939-1942), for instance, paintings continued to emerge for years after the original, brief (three week), on-site experience. In the process of time and distance, his Mt. Katahdin paintings took on a life of their own, less representations of a particular scene than pure painting and the expression of a mystical sense of the scene.

Such was the case in Berlin when Hartley's need to push on to a new creative experience called up to visual consciousness the New Mexico landscape experience from four years before. It "is astonishing," he told Stieglitz, "how states of being revive themselves upon request," even more vivid to him in Berlin, he added, than in New York. And there is no intended irony in his claim to Stieglitz that these landscapes were preparation for "the real work outside" when, in fact, he was doing them in the urban setting of Berlin, indoors. Rather, as landscape "inventions" they were pure products of memory and imagination, signifying a desire to move on from the confines of still life objects. For Hartley, the inward experience of the New Mexico landscape was no less real than the original, outward experience had been.

The Recollections series continued at a feverish pace during the spring of 1923. In May he apologized to Stieglitz for not writing, explaining that the painting must go on "at the expense of all else" and reporting that the New Mexico and Texas "inventions" lay all over the floor of his apartment-studio. He was amused that he was able to see that distant geography from his perch in Berlin—"especially the Texas aspect," which he recalled from the train ride from El Paso to Los Angeles, the side trip to the West Coast he had taken during his time in the Southwest. In fact, the long horizontal format of *New*

Mexico Recollection No. 8 and *Green Leaves and Rocks* suggest the viewpoint from a moving train.

The New Mexico Recollections both recall and anticipate other points in Hartley's career when his encounters with nature plunged abruptly and dramatically into unearthly, abstracted landscape renderings, full of dark mystery and stemming from and speaking more to the imagination than observed reality. These are periods when landscape as invention took over entirely. The earliest such works are the so-called Dark Mountain or Deserted Farm canvases (*Dark Mountain No. 1* and *No. 2*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection) done in 1909 and 1910 just after first seeing the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder. Later, in the 1930s came a series of paintings of Dogtown Common, a strange, forbidding, stretch of landscape on a glacial moraine near Gloucester, Massachusetts. *The Embittered Afternoon of November, Dogtown, 1931* (Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota), for instance, resembles in many respects the type of landscape of the imagination evident in the Deserted Farm and *New Mexico Recollection No. 8*. The three series share many characteristics: dead trees and twisted, broken shrubs evoke an eerie, distinctly unnatural scene; the viewer's visual path into the space of these pictures is blocked by either rocks or vegetation or both; a dark, largely monochromatic or limited palette pervades; the brushwork is energetic and intensely physical, emphasizing sweeping, directional lines (as in the rainstorm on the right of *No. 8* and *Green Leaves*); the facture matches the mood and emotional tenor.



Marsden Hartley, *The Embittered Afternoon of November, Dogtown, 1931*.
© Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Deserted Farm, Dogtown, and New Mexico Recollection series each coincided with significant career or psychological transition points in Hartley's career. In fact the 1909 Deserted Farm paintings were prominent in his thought as he painted the Recollections in Berlin in 1923. Having just received from Stieglitz some photographs of his early paintings, Hartley was struck by the "pioneering & stone blasting" quality of them, realizing "how much I was those deserted farms myself and I didn't like it that my inhabitants had gone off and left me to rattle in the wind as I was then." The Deserted Farm paintings were pivotal in Hartley's self-ejection from his native Maine

out into a next phase of exploration in a wider world. Likewise, Dogtown was for him a landscape where the turmoil surrounding all manner of internal struggles and doubts about identity and his future played itself out at this druidic, wild plot of ground on the shores of Cape Ann.

Because a similar moody turbulence suffuses the New Mexico Recollection series, viewers and commentators like Hole most commonly interpret them as a manifestation of the *strum und drang* of Hartley's emotional life and circumstances: his ambivalence about his own place in the art world of Europe vs. America; the strain of his relationship with his dealer, Stieglitz; doubts about his career; and fears about health and finances. On the other hand, rather than being peculiar to Berlin in 1923, such extreme psychic and physical conditions were a norm for Hartley, whose entire life seemed fraught with similar mental and spiritual wrestlings. Considered another way, the Recollections, like the earlier Deserted Farms and the later Dogtown paintings can actually be seen as a pathway leading out of the morass of the moment—out of the proverbial "dark night of the soul" common to the Christian mystics Hartley loved. For St. John of the Cross with whom Hartley was familiar, the dark night of the soul signified the passage from doubt and spiritual crisis to renewal and oneness. For Hartley, the journey—the path to renewal—was the act of painting itself. The expressive intensity inherent in the Recollections propelled him forward into the next great adventure.

No matter that he was not outdoors or doing landscape from nature. It was immersion in the process itself, the veritable outpouring of twenty canvases in a few months' time that got him excited about painting again. The physicality and plasticity of execution evident in *New Mexico Recollection No. 8* and readily apparent in the entire series was, Hartley exclaimed, "just good old fashioned honest painting as Renoir cared – as Cézanne – Courbet cared – just the idea for its own sake." He hungered, he told Stieglitz, to be like them, "all artist & nothing else . . . just pure sensibility & nothing else. . . . I've decided that there is nothing in the wide world but a picture & a way to paint one."

¹ Letter from Hartley to Stieglitz, March 1923, Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, MSS 85. All quotes by Hartley in this essay are from six letters to Stieglitz in the Yale archive: undated [March]; March [1]; April 28; May 23; and July 17

² It should be noted that although the title for the series derives from Hartley's description of the works in these letters to Stieglitz, the artist did not affix this designation to the series and probably left most of the paintings in the series, including *New Mexico Recollection No. 8*, untitled and unnumbered. See Elizabeth McCausland's Marsden Hartley catalogue raisonné files (on line at the Archives of American Art, specifically for No. 8, box 14, folder 29, frames 36-38), where the entry (and photograph) of this painting is listed at top in typescript as "No Title #24", then later crossed out and replaced in handwriting with "New Mexico Recollections". The date, 1922-23, the "-23" was later crossed out leaving only "1922". The present titles and numerical sequence (including the No. 8 for this work), were apparently applied by individuals working on the Hartley estate inventory in the mid- to late-1940s. McCausland's entry also specifies that the painting is on a Berlin stretcher.

³ Heather Hole, *Marsden Hartley and the West: The Search for an American Modernism*, New Haven and London, 2007, especially chapter four, pp. 95-131. The threads of Hartley's emotional life and personal circumstances are the main premise of Hole's assessment of the New Mexico Recollection series.