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THE
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MAY
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For my dear niece Norma
from her uncle Marsden Hartley

B A T E S

THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE

On the Cover: The artist Marsden Hartley gave this photograph to his niece, Norma Berger, for Christmas in 1908. It is among the College's Hartley memorabilia.

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Metamorphosis of Idea: Marsden Hartley's Drawings

BY GAIL R. SCOTT

The process by which an artist moves from an initial encounter with a stretch of landscape (or a still-life arrangement or a human model) as recorded in a preliminary drawing, to the final work of art, is a fertile and fascinating area of exploration. Often that transition involves a mysterious process of transformation whereby a creative idea comes suddenly to life with perhaps just a few crucial alterations. This process of evolution from one stage to another is unique to each artist, and understanding it is like having a key to unlock the aesthetic treasure hidden in his work.

In the case of Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Bates College is fortunate to possess one of the largest storehouses of this key element—a collection of ninety-nine drawings and sketches dating from Hartley's first trip to Europe in 1913 to the end of his life in 1943. The collection is particularly valuable because of the relative rarity of such preliminary works by Hartley. Despite the fact that he is acclaimed mainly as a landscape artist, he was not a prodigious draftsman, nor did he habitually sketch scenery for the pure enjoyment of it as do many landscapists. What then is the role of the sketch or drawing in Hartley's oeuvre? What function do they play in the evolution of a creative idea? The Bates drawings in the Treat Gallery provide a number of possible answers.

The collection, as catalogued by William J. Mitchell in 1970, comprises a number of sketchbooks and individual drawings of specific landscape sites, figure studies, and still-life motifs from different periods of his career. Prominent among these are the 1927 studies after Cézanne done at Aix-en-Provence in which Hartley attempted a rigorous examination of Cézanne's landscape technique. There are also studies of mountains: Mt. Katahdin and the Bavarian Alps; a series of studies of fishermen with a pietà theme and a large group of pencil sketches of male

figures on the beach. Out of each of these thematic groups, there is usually one drawing which corresponds closely with a finished painting, and it is that correspondence on which we will focus, for it will give us a fuller understanding of this sometimes enigmatic artist and his mode of operation.

Typically, Hartley's first encounter with a landscape location would involve a lengthy period of contemplation. It would take weeks, or maybe months for him to get *into* a place mentally before he would lift a finger to sketch the scene. While at one particular location, he wrote to a friend that he would "go along, empty handed & sit [and] look at it and register it"—no canvas, no paint, brushes, or even pencil and sketch pad. And during the three summers that he lived in Corea, Maine, Hartley would frequently request local artist Chenoweth Hall to drive him over to Schoodic Point in her car. There, she recalls, he would sit silently for a long time, simply looking at the majestic granite rocks and crashing waves. She never saw him sketch the scene, never even saw a pencil in his hand on those occasions. But the Bates collection testifies to the fact that at some point his inner meditation of a site gave way to active engagement in the form of quickly executed, spontaneous renderings or carefully controlled studies of the given location. As we shall see, however, that period of contemplation was always intrinsic to his method.

In the fall of 1933 Hartley went to the Bavarian Alps in Germany with the explicit purpose of returning to one of his favorite themes, the mountain. His letters from Germany relate how he would walk around these Alpine peaks for miles in order to get the right perspective—somewhere between a bird's eye view of the *mass* of mountain and an intimate profile of its precise identity. He wanted to avoid an awesome or overwhelming viewpoint, and to capture a likeness, as it were, of the

mountain's unique characteristics. To achieve this he made a number of meticulous drawings of specific Alpine vistas. *Alspitz* (fig. 1) is one of several such drawings in the memorial collection and is of special significance because it corresponds to a painting (now in the Santa Barbara Museum) entitled *Alspitz-Mittenwald Road* (1934, fig. 2). The drawing is dated "Oct. 28 '33" and, moreover, is signed and titled—a rare occurrence in Hartley's work, especially with drawings. It records with great accuracy a vista from the mountain road out across a wide range of peaks. When he did this drawing, it was obviously with the clear intention of turning it into a painting.

When winter set in and he could no longer walk the mountain trails, Hartley painted in his rented room in the little town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, from the studies he had done in September and October. In comparing *Alspitz-Mittenwald Road* with the preparatory drawing, we see that the transition process was mainly one of simplification. The drawing gives a wealth of detail: foreground forest, intermediate peaks, deep shadow rendered in the usual hatched pen stroke. In the painting, Hartley has transformed the essentially linear pattern of peaks and trees into a study of contrasting, broadly spaced, black and white masses. It is almost as if we move from drawing to sculpture, rather than from drawing to painting.

Of course, most paintings do have a greater sense of volumetric mass than works in the linear medium of pen or pencil. But with Hartley the reason lies deeper than a difference in medium: the purpose of the drawing was to record the particulars of the mountain's identity. The painting retains that identity, but the purpose has been enlarged and clarified in order to convey a more universal meaning of the mountain image—its iconic power and grandeur. During these months in the Alps he had been reading the Neopla-

FIG. 1
Alspitz. Oct. 28, 1933. Pen and sepia
ink on beige paper. 6-7/8 x 9-5/8 in.
Treat Gallery, Bates College, Marsden
Hartley Memorial Collection.



FIG. 2
Alspitz-Mittenwald Road. 1934. Oil on
paper board. 17-5/8 x 29-3/4 in. Santa
Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs.
Sterling Morton to the Preston Morton
Collection.



FIG. 3
Untitled. (Field with rock wall and fence). Undated. Pen and black ink on white paper. 6-7/8 x 9-7/8 in. Treat Gallery, Bates College, Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection.



FIG. 4
The Last Stone Walls, Dogtown. 1936-37. Oil on canvas. 17-1/2 x 23-1/2 in. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Walter Bareiss.



tonic philosopher Plotinus and works in Christian mysticism, and these had a clarifying effect on the paintings. Through his reading and his contemplation of the mountain, he realized (as he explained in letters) that he had achieved an unusual degree of peace, a kind of mystical state which he compared to an aphorism by the Belgian mystic Jan Van Ruysbroeck, "Perfect stillness, perfect fecundity." Indeed, the views of Alspitz are profoundly and majestically still. Furthermore, the works in the Alpine series from these months are prophetic of the "fecundity" which was to characterize the work of Hartley's last ten years. They are rich and somber and iconic, as if he had finally found, deep within him, his "voice," as it were, his own special vision.

He left Germany in February of 1934 and returned to New York where he spent the spring months employed by the Federal Government in one of its Depression era Public Art Works Projects. As his custom was, when summer came, he fled the city and went to a spot he had first visited in 1931: Dogtown Common, near Gloucester on Massachusetts' Cape Ann. It is a rugged, isolated stretch of land, strewn with giant glacial boulders, empty quarries, and scrub. He had originally chosen it, he declared, because none of the "art school sketch artists" would know what to do with such a place where nature remained untamed and desolate. There in 1934 he made a number of pen and ink sketches now in the memorial collection. Unlike the controlled and subdued drawings of the Bavarian Alps, these ink sketches were done with rapid pen strokes, as though in a frenzied attempt to record the scene lest it vanish before his eyes. One of these (fig. 3) is a scene of rocks, fence, and juniper trees. The painting which corresponds to this particular drawing, *The Last Stone Walls, Dogtown* (fig. 4) was not actually executed until 1936—two full years later and

hundreds of miles from Dogtown. Such practice was not uncommon for Hartley. A few quick drawings and a lot of meditative looking and thinking would work their magic in him, sometimes, as in this case, over a long period. Then, while he was living and working in a completely different context, the paintings would emerge from that mix of memory, drawings, and creative gestation.

When we compare *The Last Stone Walls, Dogtown* to its original drawing, we note immediately that the frenzy and haste of the sketch have mostly dissipated, but there remains a dynamic compositional balance between agitated motion and elemental, meditative calm. The straight white line of the horizontal road establishes the foreground area which is then echoed in the stretch of sky and dark boulders of the background. Sandwiched between this solid framework is a middle ground that recaptures the lively activity of the drawing. The horizontal planes of foreground and background are punctured by forceful vertical thrusts placed at rhythmical intervals across the picture plane in the form of fence posts and juniper trees. The broken boulders of the stone walls fairly dance along the vertical pockets of space. Their peculiar animated quality derives from the contrast of heavy black outlining around a brilliant white surface, occasionally accentuated further by a black center which stares out at us like the disconcerting eye of a cyclops. Traversing the whole scene is an additional disturbing note—the irregular, twisted line of wire fence whose loops repeat the rounded black outline of rocks.

The drawing and painting can be seen as an objective correlative of the opposing forces in Hartley's nature. The spontaneous freedom and frenzy of the drawing and the middle ground area of the painting suggest his constant desire to be at the busy, stimulating hub of the art world, whether it be New York,

Paris, or New Mexico. This agitated motion is tempered in the painting, restrained by the other side of his nature which sought the quiet contemplation in lonely regions of nature, and the discipline of solitary endeavor.

In 1936 there appeared rather suddenly in Hartley's painting a motif that was absent before: the human figure. A fair number of drawings and sketches of figures can be found. As noted in the Bates catalogue, sixty of the ninety-nine drawings are of people. But there was not a single painting until 1936. The emergence of the figure as a dominant theme coincides chronologically with the two summers he spent with the Francis Mason family in Nova Scotia. The Masons were fisherfolk whom Hartley grew to love as his own family for the simple verities of life they expressed, and their natural piety. Many of the sketches of fishermen and women in the Bates collection are from these months on the Nova Scotia islands. Tragically, the two sons of the family were drowned in a boating accident in September of 1936, and the loss was nearly unbearable to the family and Hartley.

The event, however, had an unexpected generative effect on his work, unleashing many paintings and poems which are, even today, not fully understood or discussed. A number of these late figure-paintings are overtly religious in subject matter: groups of five or nine or thirteen fishermen holding the dead body of Christ; or a female holding a dead youth's body; and the drawing entitled *Courage, Power, Pity* of the crucified Christ flanked by the clown and the prizefighter which evolved into the painting and related poem, both called *Three Friends*.

The most compelling of the figure paintings are the icon-like portraits of the Nova Scotia family members. In his prose-poem recounting the drowning incident, *Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy* (published in

FIG. 5
The Lost Felice. 1939. Oil on canvas.
40 x 30 in. Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William
Preston Harrison Collection.



facsimile in 1982 from a manuscript also in Bates's Hartley Memorial Collection), he gave French Canadian names to the family members, and the paintings use these same fictionalized names: Cleophas, the father; Marie-Ste. Esprit, the mother; Adelard and Etienne, the brothers; and Felice, the sister. Each is the subject of one of the so-called "archaic" portraits. The one of the sister, titled *The Lost Felice* (1939, fig. 5) is of special interest to us because it derives from an untitled and unassuming drawing in the Bates collection (fig. 6). The woman sits holding a bowl. Behind her on each side are her two brothers, dressed in their fishing gear—tall boots, rubber coats, and conical hats.

In the prose-poem Hartley described Felice as being powerful in physique with the muscular strength of a man by which to accomplish the hard tasks of her rough life. As the daughter who stayed at home (another sister had gone to the city to work) to help her aging parents, her "sense of duty is . . . like the shine on a sunlit fossil." "Out of the baking tins and shortening pails come solemn cakes and cookies, solemn because there is no love coming into her life. . . . She lays three raisins in the cookie centers with all but geometric precision as if the Lord had told her that precision is the most beautiful thing of all." The poem is a sensitive verbal transcription of the visual image. Each of the qualities that characterizes Felice's nature—powerful physique, geometric symmetry, and solemnity—emerges, first in the drawing on an intimate level, and then on a grand and imposing scale in the final painting.

The drawing, which was probably done before the accident, presents a simple portrait of the three grown children—a relatively straightforward composition with the three figures given equal emphasis, though their features are not individualized. The painting was not executed until three



FIG. 6
Untitled. (Two fishermen and woman).
Undated. Pen and black ink and pencil
on beige paper. 10-3/8 x 7-7/8 in. Treat
Gallery, Bates College, Marsden
Hartley Memorial Collection.

full years after the drowning episode, another example of delayed response to a subject. Hartley admitted needing time to distance himself from the actual events. When he eventually came to do Felice's portrait, the catalytic effect of the tragedy had done its work, transforming a simple portrait into an elegiac tribute. Symmetrical composition and heavy, solid forms prevail on both drawing and painting but are heightened in the latter by the now familiar process of simplification and light and dark contrasts. In the painting Felice has become monumentalized. She now dominates the triangle with her powerful, white-garbed frame which presses forward out of the shadowy gloom that engulfs her dead brothers. Her features, though only slightly more distinctive, resemble a tribal mask and convey a stylized, universal sadness. She is no doubt the support upon which her parents will lean in the wake of their loss. As her title suggests, Felice tells us that lost happiness breeds stoic strength and rock-like endurance. Significantly, the contents of her bowl are now identified: it contains a fish, and the two ghost images behind her hold fish offerings—the fruit of their livelihood and, possibly, symbols of their Christian lives and sacrifices.

Such thoroughgoing change from drawing to painting is not always the case in Hartley's work. Sometimes there is little significant difference, except for the changes in medium. But in the three examples we have explored, the change is so apparent as to give us pause. In each case, Hartley's creative idea, sketched out in the drawing, was radicalized by some specific event (the drowning episode in Nova Scotia) or thought process (his mystical experience in the Alps or the long period of creative gestation of Dogtown) which he underwent between the drawing and the painting. The drawings were for Hartley the germinating impulse which set that process in motion.

They were the skeleton—the essential framework—upon which the flesh and sinew of the creative idea were formed out of the trials and triumphs of his life experiences.

Gail R. Scott received her degrees in art history at Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley in 1965 and 1967. From 1967 to 1972 she was Assistant Curator of Modern Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In addition to publishing a number of articles on Marsden Hartley's painting, Ms. Scott received in 1977 a three-year research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to collect and edit Hartley's essays and poetry. On Art (published in 1982 by Horizon Press) was the first in an edition of three volumes of Hartley's writings. The second, My Life in the Arts, is scheduled for release later this year, and the third in the series will be a collection of Hartley's poetry.

Ms. Scott now lives in northern Maine where she teaches part time at the University of Maine at Presque Isle.