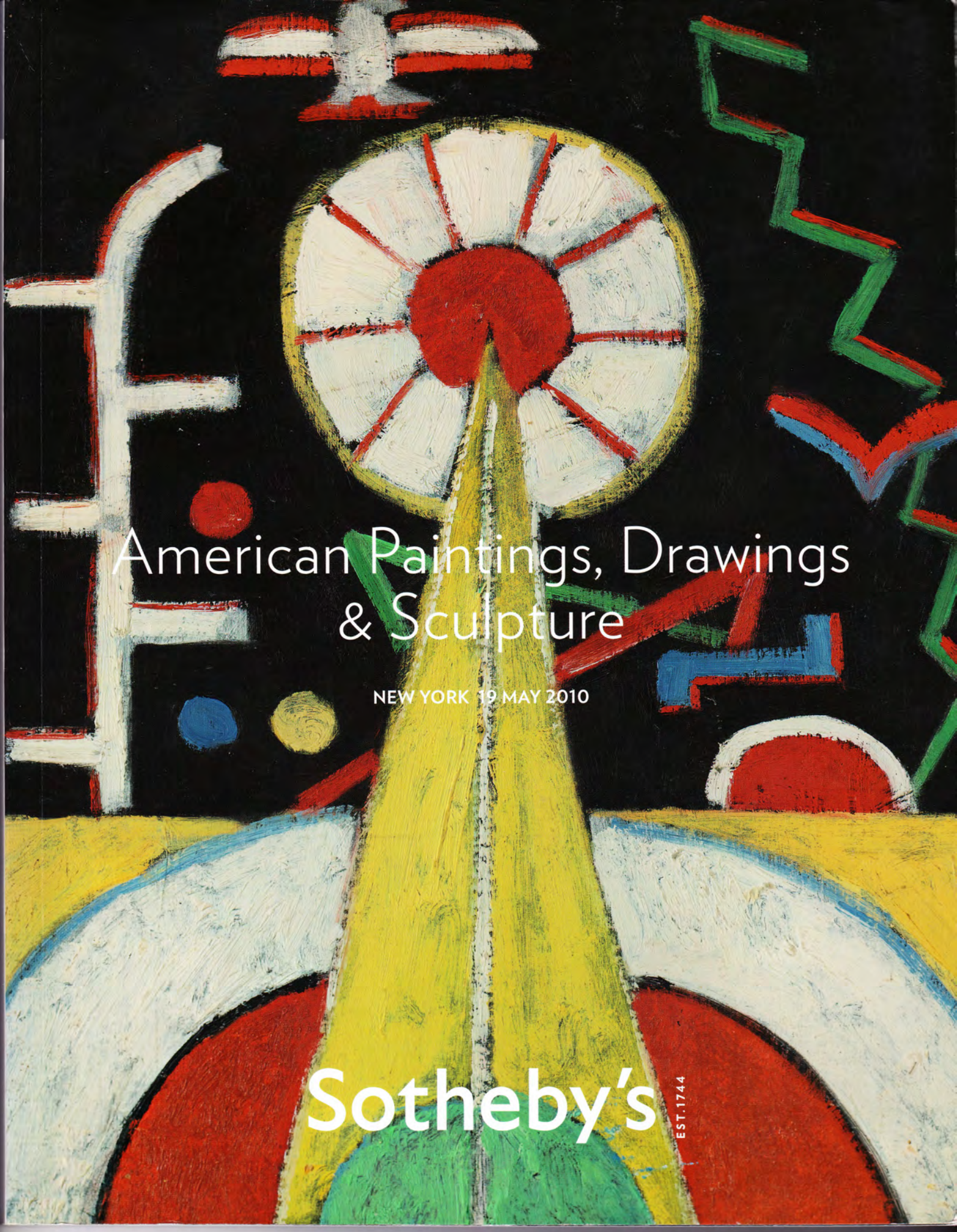

American Paintings, Drawings & Sculpture

NEW YORK 19 MAY 2010

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9

Marsden Hartley

1877 - 1943

BERLIN SERIES, NO. 1

oil on canvasboard
18 by 15 in.
(45.7 by 38.1 cm)

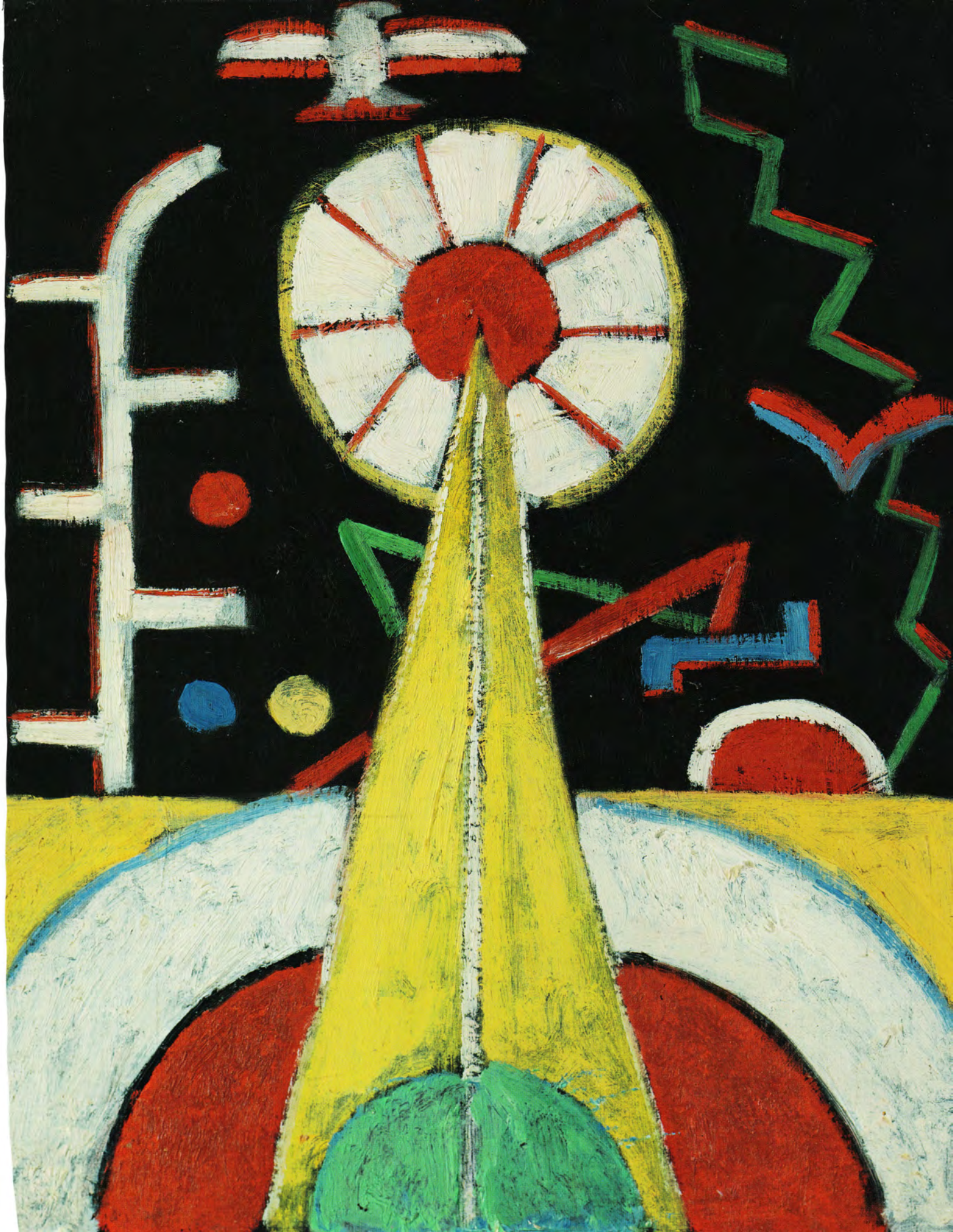
Painted *circa* 1913.

PROVENANCE
Alfred Stieglitz, New York
Georgia O'Keeffe, Abiquiu, New Mexico
Private Collection, New Mexico
Graham Gallery, New York
Acquired by the present owner from the above, 1993

EXHIBITED
Albuquerque, New Mexico, University of New Mexico, University Art Museum (on extended loan)

LITERATURE
Douglas George, "Three Way Stations in the Career of Marsden Hartley: Berlin, Ogunquit, Aix-en-Provence," *University of New Mexico Museum of Art Bulletin*, no. 8 (1974): 18-20, illustrated

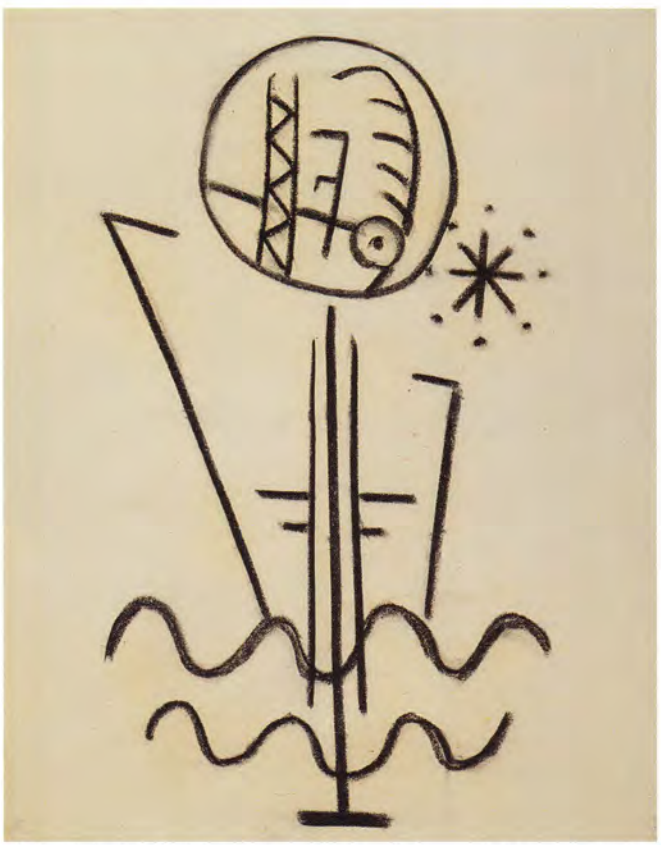
$1,500,000-2,500,000



We are grateful to Gail R. Scott for preparing the following essay. Scott, a leading Hartley scholar, is author of the monograph *Marsden Hartley* (New York, Abbeville Press, 1988) and editor of collections of his poetry and essays on art.

Berlin Series, No. 1 is one of the earliest works in the seminal group of paintings from 1913 and 1914 that Marsden Hartley called his *Amerika* series (adopting the German spelling for America but referring specifically to Native American art). Abroad for the first time and immersed in the powerful and fertile crosscurrents of European modernism, Hartley was seeking to establish himself as an American artist with his own distinct artistic vision and thus drew inspiration for the *Amerika* paintings from collections of North American Indian artifacts in both Paris (the Trocadéro) and Berlin (Museum für Völkerkunde).

Despite extensive scholarship on the *Amerika* series, there is yet no comprehensive study that incorporates the entire opus. Most of the art historical literature focuses on relatively familiar, large-scale canvases (at least 30 x 40 inches but also larger) executed in 1913 and 1914.[1]



Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Symbols #6*, 1914-1915, charcoal on off-white paper laid down, 25 by 19 inches, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, (67.2)

Because Hartley was also inspired by the military pomp of pre-war Berlin, some of the *Amerika* paintings, such as *Painting No. 4 (Black Horse)* (1914-15, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection), combine Indian imagery with emblematic military insignia and motifs—banners, numbers, the Iron Cross, helmets, and officers on horseback. Counting these crossover works, sometimes also referred to as pre-war pageants, there are about fourteen *Amerika* paintings. Four of these, which Hartley apparently finished just before war was declared in August 1914, form the iconic core of the *Amerika* series: *Indian Composition* (Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York); *American Indian Symbols* (Amon Carter Museum of Art, Fort Worth); *Indian Fantasy* (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, illustrated); and *Painting No. 50* (Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, Chicago). Against all the rest of Hartley's Berlin pictures, these four most commonly discussed and reproduced paintings are distinct stylistically. They are rigidly symmetrical in composition and comprised of densely packed, rhythmically repeated patterns and shapes. Also, they are painted in a hard-edged, linear manner—very different from the loose, soft-edged style that characterizes *Berlin Series No.* 1 and most of the pre-war pageant works, such as *Painting No. 2*, 1914 (Boston Museum of Fine Art, Gift of William H. Lane Foundation, illustrated), as well as the German Officer series.

Less well known and rarely mentioned are four smaller canvases (18 x 15 inches) that have common elements (besides size) that distinguish them from the rest of the *Amerika* series: *Berlin Series No. 1*; *Berlin Series No. 2* (Private Collection, New York, illustrated); *An Abstract Arrangement of American Indian Symbols* (Yale Collection of Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven); and *Pyramid and Cross* (Private Collection). Significant, and deserving of deeper study is the fact that these smaller works are probably Hartley's earliest Berlin paintings, and—somewhat surprisingly—among his most abstract renditions of the Native American theme.

When Hartley landed in Paris in May 1912, he encountered a ubiquitous, ardent fascination with all things primitive among the European avant-garde (including folk art traditions and the art of children). Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky and his wife, Gabrielle Munter, Auguste Macke, Franz Marc, George Grosz, and a host of other artists studied the museum collections and built personal collections of art and artifacts from Oceania, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. They wrote about the primitive; visited the grand scale world expositions; and saw the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley that featured both artifact displays and native people in replicated settings. The esthetic of the primitive lent itself to the ethos of rebellion, begun in the late 19th century, against the forms and traditions of academic art quickly and took hold among the early modernists to such an extent that it became one of the defining factors shaping 20th century art.[2]

While Hartley found himself surrounded by this *zeitgeist* of the primitive in Paris, London, Munich, and Berlin, his exposure to it actually pre-dates this first trip to Europe. Among the circle of artists who exhibited and gathered around Alfred Stieglitz and his Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (291), Max Weber was one of the first to espouse the importance of Native art as a wellspring for a new American art. Having been exposed to non-Western art through Arthur Wesley Dow, one of his teachers at the Pratt Institute in New York,[3] Weber spent hours studying the displays of ethnographic art and artifacts at New York's American Museum of Natural History. He was also one of the first artists in the Stieglitz circle to spend time in Europe (1905-1908) where he continued his museum studies of Native art at the Trocadéro and saw the groundbreaking work of Picasso, Braque, and Matisse that derived from their own collections and exposure to primitive art. Returning to New York, Weber began to incorporate the new esthetic into his own painting, sculpture, and poetry and to write about it in *Camera Work*, the publication arm of Stieglitz's gallery.[4] Hartley, who had joined the Stieglitz circle in 1909, was certainly familiar with Weber's art and writings, witnessed other 291 exhibitions of the Paris pioneers, and participated in the lively discussions that characterized the Stieglitz gatherings.

Among the first paintings executed by Hartley in the months after his arrival in Paris are two—*Still Life No. 1* (1912, Columbus Museum of Art) and *Indian Pottery, (Jar and Idol)* (1912, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art)—both of which depict Native American artifacts among the still life objects: in one, a pitcher and in the other an Ancoma pot (both of which are classic examples of Pueblo pottery), as well as a carved figure similar to those of the Kwakiutl tribe in the Pacific Northwest.[5]

Simultaneously, Hartley discovered the work of Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc through their radical publication, the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. In it, Marc and Kandinsky identified the moment as "the epoch of great spirituality," which demanded a renewal in art that would not be simply formal (based on empirical knowledge) but instead derived from "mystical inner construction." The art of primitive peoples, children, and folk traditions, described and illustrated in the *Almanac*, exemplified the purifying influence that would bring about this "rebirth of thinking" in the new epoch.[6]

The idealism and rhapsodic message of the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* resonated deeply with Hartley. His own mystical leanings date back to his formative years, when he avidly read Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays and the poetry of Walt Whitman, and are abundantly evident in his early Maine landscapes (shown at 291 in 1909 and 1910). From Paris, Hartley sent a copy of the *Almanac* to Stieglitz and reported its effect on him esthetically: "I am taking a very sudden turn in a big direction owing to a recent visit to the Trocadéro. One can no longer remain the same in the presence of these mighty children who get so close to the universal idea

Mardsen Hartley, *Berlin Series No. 2*, 1914, oil on composition board, 18 by 15 inches, Private Collection

in their mud-baking. The results in me are proving themselves and I am showing a strength unknown in past efforts. . . . They must be revolts of the soul itself if they are to mean anything other than intellectual imitation."[7]

In Paris, Hartley was drawn to the crowd of Germans who frequented the Restaurant Thomas—in particular the sculptor Arnold Rönnebeck and his cousin, Karl von Freyburg, who, after his death on the battlefield early in World War I, became the subject of Hartley's elegiac German Officer series. Accepting Rönnebeck's invitation to stay with him and his family in Berlin in early January 1913, Hartley immediately fell in love with Germany—so much so that by the end of the visit he had determined to move there for the duration of his time in Europe. During his three-week visit, he (along with Rönnebeck who translated) went to Munich where he met with Kandinsky, Munter, and Marc and made important gallery contacts. In Berlin they visited the Museum für Völkerkunde where, at that time, some 30,000 items of ethnographic art were housed. The fact that visiting this museum was a priority for Hartley during this brief trip suggests that Native arts were of primary interest to him. In fact, it's possible that the charcoal drawing (one of

three known works of a similar nature), *Berlin Symbols No. 6* (1914-15, Corcoran Gallery Museum of Art, Washington DC, illustrated) is a study of Native imagery from artifacts he saw at the Museum für Völkerkunde. Motifs in the drawings, such as the eight-pointed star, circles, stick-like shapes, zig-zags, and other linear patterns—resemble those in *Berlin Series No. 1*.

It took Hartley several months to make arrangements and actually relocate from Paris to Berlin. By June 1913 he had finally found living quarters but was distressed by his financial situation since the cost of moving had drained his meager resources. He was eager to embark on some large, 30 x 40 inch canvases and begged Stieglitz to add $30 or $40 to his modest monthly stipend so that he could buy an easel, canvas and paint. By October, with still no word nor money from Stieglitz, Hartley lamented that he had "not a sou" and couldn't even "afford a tube of paint."[8]

Thwarted in his efforts to execute the large paintings he had in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Hartley had to make do with materials on hand. We know, for instance, from stamps on the verso of both *Berlin Series No. 1* and the Yale picture, that these canvas-covered composition boards were purchased from an art supplier in Paris, meaning that Hartley brought them along when he moved and thus had them on hand. And surely, though he could not purchase enough tubes for large canvases, he had also brought some paints. These circumstances, in addition to common stylistic features, suggest that Hartley began work on these 18 x 15" paintings sometime during the summer of 1913 and that they are thus his first Berlin pictures.

Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 2*, 1914-15, oil on canvas, 39½ by 32 inches, Gift of the William H. Lane Foundation (Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

In all four of these small canvasboard paintings, Hartley arranges the forms against a broad field of black in a manner that anticipates the military and German Officer series done in the following months. The four major paintings in the *Amerika* series mentioned earlier also employ a black ground, but there is less of it because the forms and patterns dominate. In *Berlin Series No. 1*, the vibrant whites and primary colors stand out vividly against the black field. The contrast accentuates the dynamic composition, which, though flat and frontal, is nevertheless lively and suggestive of movement through the angular thrusts of the zig-zag motifs and central yellow triangle. Edges are important here; fine lines or bands of contrasting color define or outline some of the abstract shapes. The composition is grounded in the lower third of the canvas where the green, red, and white semi-circles arch upward and against which the tall and narrow yellow triangle juts into the upper region, surrounded at its peak by the enclosed eight-pointed ring.

Of the forms depicted in *Berlin Series No. 1*, the most representational is the red and white eagle at the top, though it is only crudely suggestive and far less literal than the Native motifs in most of the other *Amerika* paintings with their canoes, teepees, Native chiefs, and feathered headdresses. In *Berlin Series No.* 1 he transforms the most basic circular and linear Indian motifs into what he described as "an abstract arrangement of American Indian symbols . . . pictorial arrangements of things seen and felt."[9]

For Hartley indigenous art was the real thing. "These people," he told Stieglitz, "had no mean ambition. They created out of spiritual necessity."[10] Convinced that his own work sprang from similar inner sources, he declared in the foreword that accompanied the exhibition of his Berlin paintings at 291 in 1914 that these works were not intellectual and "not to be expounded." This statement, written in the style of emphatic intensity that would characterize the extensive, lifetime body of Hartley's prose essays, captures the spirit and essence of his Berlin moment. In effect, it amounts to his own manifesto of modernism. He saw his paintings as personal "discovery . . . sensations and emotions drawn out of great and simple things." The pictures were "created out of the spirit substance in all things. . . . The idea of modernity is but a new attachment to things universal. . . . a new fire of affection for the living essence present everywhere."[11]

Berlin Series No. 1 encapsulates Hartley's intent as expressed in these words. It is a newly revealed gem in the larger body of *Amerika* paintings—a small, abstract masterpiece among the groundbreaking Berlin paintings that heralded Hartley's entrance onto the international stage of modernism.

Marsden Hartley, *Indian Composition*, 1914, oil on canvas, 47¾ by 47¾ inches, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, Gift of Paul Rosenfeld, 1950.1.15

Footnotes:

1. For iconographic and stylistic analysis of the *Amerika* paintings and Hartley in Germany, see Gail Levin's articles: "Marsden Hartley's 'Amerika': Between Native American and German Folk Art," *American Art Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 120-125; "American Art" in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, pp. 453-469; Patricia McDonnell, "Indian Fantasy: Marsden Hartley's Myth of Amerika in Expressionist Berlin," *North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin* 16 (1993): 50-64; and Wanda Corn, "Marsden Hartley's Native Amerika" in *Marsden Hartley* [exhibition catalogue], ed. Elizabeth Kornhauser. New Haven CT Yale University Press for the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2002, pp. 69-85.

2. Important among the numerous studies of primitivism and modern art is William Rubin, ed. in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*.

3. Dow was one of the first American artists and teachers to incorporate non-western art into his curriculum and to espouse the value of Native and archaic art forms for the artists working in new directions in modernity. Through his famous teaching guide, *Composition* (1899; revised edition 1912) and his course in "Art Appreciation and Art History" at Columbia University, Dow wrote that students could find their way back to the foundations of art—the "primitive springs of thought, impulse and action that exist in every human being, and so put ourselves *en rapport* with the primitive state of mind and the primitive view of things. "Quoted in W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism*. Austin, TX: University of Texans Press, 1995, 42.

4. Max Weber, "Chinese Dolls and Modern Colorists," *Camera Work*, 31 (July 1910): 51" discusses color in modern art and the art of Native Americans.

5. Identified by Levin in "American Art," p. 457 and note 23, p. 469.

6. *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, first published 1912. New documentary edition edited with introduction by Klaus Lankheit. New York: Viking Press, 1974.

7. Letter to Alfred Stieglitz, n.d. [September 1912] from Paris, Yale Collection of American Literature, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, published in *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Marsden Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz 1912-1915*, ed. James Timothy Voorhies. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002, pp. 30-31.

8. Letters to Stieglitz from Berlin, June and October 1913, *My Dear Stieglitz*, pp. 82-83 and 111 respectively.

9. Cited in Elizabeth McCausland Papers (Archives of American Art online Series 6, Hartley catalogue raisonné, box 14, folder 3, frame 14) transcript of a letter from Hartley to Caryl Harris, March 26, 1930 in response to Mr. Harris's inquiry about the painting he owned—the companion piece to *Berlin Series No. 1* discussed in this essay and now at Yale and now titled *An Abstract Arrangement of American Indian Symbols*.

10. Letter to Stieglitz, October 9, 1912 from Paris in *My Dear Stieglitz*, p.34.

11. Foreword to his 1914 exhibition at 291 in Marsden Hartley, published in *Camera Work* (no. 45, dated January 1914, published June 1915): 16-18; reprinted in *On Art*, edited by Gail R. Scott. New York: Horizon Press, 1982, pp. 62-63.