

Marsden Hartley
American, 1877 - 1943

Berlin Abstraction

1914/1915

oil on canvas

overall: 80.8 × 64.8 cm (31 13/16 × 25 1/2 in.)

framed: 101 × 85.1 × 5.7 cm (39 3/4 × 33 1/2 × 2 1/4 in.)

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund) 2014.79.21

ENTRY

Berlin Abstraction numbers among the most innovative works in Marsden Hartley's oeuvre, and indeed in that of any artist in the first wave of the American avant-garde. [1] The canvas is one of a dozen deeply symbolic and personal paintings Hartley produced between November 1914 and the fall of 1915, during his second stay in Berlin. The name by which the group is best known today, the German Officer portraits, derives from the most discussed aspect of its content: the World War I soldiers to whom the paintings pay tribute, especially the artist's cherished friend Lieutenant Karl von Freyburg. Although their primary significance is elegiac, the War Motifs, as Hartley called them, are as rich with layers of meaning as they are vibrant and complex in appearance. [2]

Born in Lewiston, Maine, to working-class English immigrant parents, Hartley received some artistic training in Cleveland in the 1890s after his family relocated there. When he moved to New York in 1899, he studied at William Merritt Chase's School of Art and the National Academy of Design. This restlessness was to characterize Hartley's later life as well as his art: he traveled frequently in Europe, North America, and Mexico, painting landscapes, still lifes, and abstractions in many different styles. The location closest to his heart, however, was Berlin—he called it “without question the finest modern city in Europe.” [3] His first two excursions there were financed by the photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946), who promoted Hartley's work in a one-man exhibition at his gallery 291 in 1909 and in a pioneering group show there the following year, *Younger American Painters*. [4]

In April 1914, reunited in Berlin with Freyburg and his cousin, the sculptor Arnold Rönnebeck, both of whom he had met during his first European trip in 1912¹⁹¹³, Hartley resumed his enthusiastic embrace of the “movement and energy” of the fast-growing modern metropolis [5]—the brilliantly colored military uniforms, lively parades, and other pageantry of the imperial capital—and the city’s LGBTQ subculture, which was closely intertwined with the German military at that time. [6] Simultaneously, his friendship with Freyburg intensified, and the two likely became lovers. [7] In the fall of 1914, however, Hartley’s exuberance was dashed by a series of tragedies: he learned that his father had died in August, the same month as the outbreak of World War I; on October 7 Freyburg was killed in battle on the western front; and soon thereafter Rönnebeck was seriously wounded and hospitalized. These events, above all Freyburg’s death, led to Hartley’s creation of the War Motifs. After a month of intense grieving, Hartley began the series to memorialize his friend and the many other war dead and to express his abhorrence of the war in general. [8]

As one Hartley scholar has written, despite this primary meaning, the artist’s War Motifs are multivalent and represent a major synthesis of modernism’s pictorial vocabulary. They contain heavily coded expressions of Hartley’s life in Berlin’s vibrant LGBTQ culture, the role of the German military in that culture, and an outpouring of the artist’s thoughts about war. [9] Like the brightly colored, effusive Berlin canvases that predated Hartley’s emotional downturn, *Berlin Abstraction* and other War Motif paintings were strongly influenced by the modernism to which he had been exposed on his first European trip. The juxtaposition of flat, geometric, black-outlined shapes continues the artist’s espousal of synthetic cubism—he was the first American artist to fully adopt the style—which he saw when he met Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973) at Gertrude and Leo Stein’s famous salon in Paris in 1912. His loosely brushed, bright palette recalls the bold German expressionist work by Der Blaue Reiter members Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866 - 1944) and Franz Marc (German, 1880 - 1916) with whom he became friendly in Berlin in 1913. The two not only strongly influenced his style but also led him to embrace the spiritual aspects of art.

Berlin Abstraction incorporates general allusions to German military pageantry found in the other War Motif paintings: the sleeve cuffs and epaulets of uniforms; a helmet cockade denoted by two concentric circles; and the blue-and-white, diamond-patterned Bavarian flag. Other symbols refer specifically to Freyburg: the red number four signifies the Fourth Regiment of the Kaiser’s guards, in which he

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

fought, and the red-and-white checkerboard pattern recalls his love of chess. The central black cross on a white background circumscribed by a red and a white circle is likely an abstraction of the Iron Cross medal for bravery bestowed posthumously on Freyburg. The calligraphic red letter *E* refers to Elisabeth, queen of Greece, the patroness of Rönnebeck's regiment. [10]

The content and style of the War Motifs evolved from symbol-laden and hieratically, even anthropomorphically, composed paintings that refer specifically to Freyburg early in the series to increasingly patterned canvases that more generally evoke the vivid designs of German military uniforms. [11] *Portrait of a German Officer* [fig. 1], acknowledged to be the first painting in the sequence, incorporates explicit references to Freyburg—his initials (K.v.F.), his age when he died (24), and his regiment number (4)—into a composition of interlocking elements evocative of a human torso against a black background. In contrast, *Berlin Abstraction* is one of the three latest, most abstract paintings in the series. Along with *Painting Number 5* [fig. 2] and *Military* [fig. 3], it achieves a total absence of illusionistic space and a near erasure of recognizable subject matter, its more loosely arranged pictorial elements extending to the edge of the canvas and incorporating fewer symbols referring specifically to Freyburg. [12]

In the spring of 1916, 40 of the Berlin paintings, including the War Motifs series, were exhibited at Stieglitz's 291 gallery. *Berlin Abstraction* was likely included. [13] Although some critics wrote favorably about the Berlin paintings' formal qualities, others criticized them for their perceived pro-German messages. In 1916 Hartley issued a statement claiming that the group had no hidden meaning. He described their forms as "those which I have observed casually from day to day" and having "no symbolism whatsoever." [14] It was only after his death that the more private nature of these paintings was revealed.

Sarah Cash

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

Berlin Abstraction

© National Gallery of Art, Washington



fig. 1 Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949



fig. 2 Marsden Hartley, *Painting Number 5*, 1914–1915, oil on linen, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of an Anonymous Donor 58.65

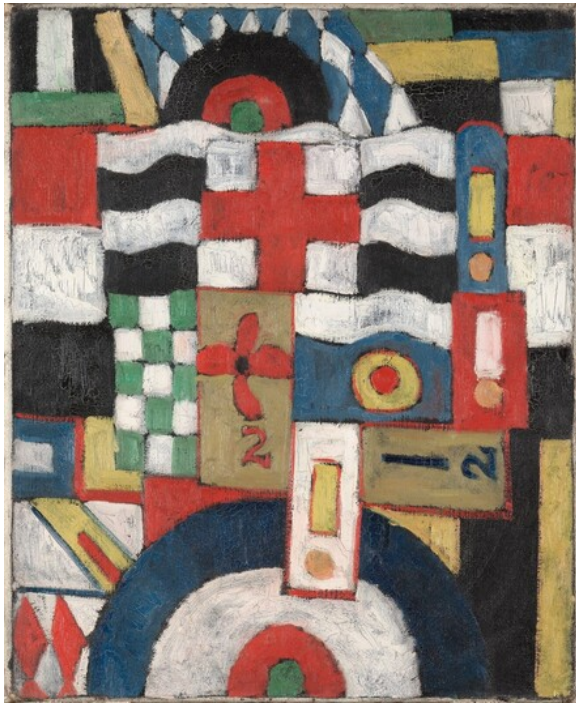


fig. 3 Marsden Hartley, *Military*, 1914–1915, oil on canvas,
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Professor Nelson
Goodman. © The Cleveland Museum of Art

NOTES

- [1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).
- [2] “I am working out some war motifs which people praise highly,” Hartley wrote to Alfred Stieglitz, Nov. 3, 1914, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, quoted in Patricia McDonnell, “‘Portrait of Berlin’: Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernism in Expressionist Berlin,” in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 53. McDonnell has written extensively on the multivalence of the War Motifs; in addition to the foregoing essay, see also her “Changes of Heart: Marsden Hartley’s Ideas and Art,” in *Marsden Hartley: American Modern; Selections from the Lone and Hudson Walker Collection*, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, ed. Patricia McDonnell (Minneapolis, 2006). Barbara

Haskell's *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980) is a pioneering study of these works.

- [3] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, Feb. 1913, Yale Collection of American Literature, quoted in Patricia McDonnell, "'Portrait of Berlin': Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernism in Expressionist Berlin," in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 39.
- [4] Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, "Marsden Hartley: 'Gaunt Eagle from the Hills of Maine,'" in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 16.
- [5] Hartley to Stieglitz, May 1913, Yale Collection of American Literature, quoted in Patricia McDonnell, "Changes of Heart: Marsden Hartley's Ideas and Art," in *Marsden Hartley: American Modern; Selections from the Lone and Hudson Walker Collection, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (Minneapolis, 2006), 14.
- [6] Patricia McDonnell, "'Portrait of Berlin': Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernism in Expressionist Berlin," in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 53.
- [7] Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980), 43, discusses at length (and for the first time) Hartley's homosexuality, his lifelong obsession with masculine beauty, and his love for Freyburg, which, she notes, may or may not have been consummated. She extensively cites letters and writings by Hartley and Freyburg and discusses what they reveal of the pair's relationship.
- [8] Patricia McDonnell, "'Portrait of Berlin': Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernism in Expressionist Berlin," in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 43; see also n. 113, which quotes Hartley's letter to Stieglitz of Oct. 23, 1914, Yale Collection of American Literature, in which Hartley writes of "sit[ting] alone much the spectator of the great tragedy of the heart & soul of mankind—I cannot set up and work."
- [9] Patricia McDonnell, "Changes of Heart: Marsden Hartley's Ideas and Art," in *Marsden Hartley: American Modern; Selections from the Lone and Hudson Walker Collection, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (Minneapolis, 2006), 15.
- [10] Many of the symbols that appear in *Berlin Abstraction* are referenced in a key to *Portrait of a German Officer* (fig. 1). See Dieter Scholz, ed., *Marsden Hartley: The German Paintings 1913–1915* (Berlin and New York, 2014), 138, 139.
- [11] See Gail Levin, "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures," *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 2 (Oct. 1979): 158; Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980), 45; and Patricia McDonnell, "'Portrait of Berlin': Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernism in Expressionist Berlin," in *Marsden Hartley*,

ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 54.

- [12] Two other War Motif paintings in this more abstract vein are *Painting Number 46* (1914–1915, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY) and *The Iron Cross* (1914–1915, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis), reproduced in Gail Levin, “Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley’s Military Pictures,” *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 2 (Oct. 1979): 157. Unlike the three works mentioned in the main text, however, these two retain some of the black background from earlier paintings in the series.
- [13] Records of this exhibition’s content are not extant, but this is a strong possibility. I am grateful to Charles Brock, associate curator, American and British paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, for discussing this with me.
- [14] Marsden Hartley, “Foreword,” *Camera Work* 48 (Oct. 1916): 12, quoted in Patricia McDonnell, “Changes of Heart: Marsden Hartley’s Ideas and Art,” in *Marsden Hartley: American Modern; Selections from the Lone and Hudson Walker Collection, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (Minneapolis, 2006), 15.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, medium-weight, pre-primed canvas and is unlined. [1] On the reverse of the fabric, “27/15370” and “2171” (crossed out) are written in black crayon, probably not by the artist. The stretcher, a replacement, is a five-member, keyable model. The priming is a thin, smooth, ivory colored layer. The opaque paint was freely applied with some brushmarking and low to medium impasto. Most of the colors were mixed with varying amounts of white paint (except for the black and possibly red). The artist apparently did not use any glazes to modify his colors. Hartley began the painting by laying in a relatively smooth layer of black paint that mostly covered the light-colored ground. The composition of red, yellow, green, white, blue, and black shapes was painted on top of the already dry black layer. Most of the paint was applied thickly, with ridges, daubs, and prominent brushstrokes, but in some passages the paint was more thinly applied and was rubbed and intentionally abraded. The black underlayer plays an important role in the design, as it remains visible through the thin paint and was left exposed around the edges of many of the brightly colored shapes. The painting is in excellent condition with only some fine cracking in the thickest white passages and a little abrasion around the edges. At an unknown time it was coated with a heavy layer of discolored varnish that was not appropriate to the painting; this

varnish was removed in 2015. To preserve the subtle discrepancies in gloss that had been part of Hartley's original execution, the painting was left unvarnished. [2]

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The ground was probably commercially applied, evidenced by its extension over the tacking margins, and dry at the time of original stretching.
- [2] Gay Myers prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is available in NGA conservation files.
-

PROVENANCE

Probably collection of the artist [1877-1943], Maine;[1] probably Alfred Stieglitz [1864-1946], New York.[2] Paul L. Rosenfeld [1890-1946], New York;[3] bequest 1946 to Arthur Schwab and Edna Bryner Schwab [1886-1967], New York;[4] consigned 1946 to (Downtown Gallery, New York);[5] consigned to (sale, Kende Galleries at Gimbel Brothers, New York, 17-18 January 1947, 1st day, no. 65); purchased January 1947 by Ione [1915-1987] and Hudson [1907-1976] Walker, Minneapolis;[6] (Babcock Galleries, New York), February 1966;[7] purchased 30 January 1967 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] There is no will on file for the artist. There are, however, documents in the Hancock County Probate Court, Ellsworth, Maine, related to Hartley's estate that list paintings in his collection; copies in NGA curatorial files. The list titled "Schedule of Personal Estate...Goods & Chattels" includes one painting (item no. 138) that could be *Berlin Abstraction*: "Painting #8," 25 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.

[2] Card files of Michael St. Clair, owner of Babcock Galleries from 1959 to 1989; see e-mail correspondence, 11 January 2007, Lisa Koonce, Babcock Galleries, to Emily Shapiro, assistant curator of American art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, in NGA curatorial files.

[3] Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington: reel D269, frames 551-555; reel D274, frame 68; copies in NGA curatorial files.

[4] Paul Rosenfeld will, dated 22 October 1937, proved 7 August 1946, Surrogate's Court, County of New York; copy in NGA curatorial files.

[5] Records of the Downtown Gallery, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington: Series I: Correspondence; letter of 13 November 1946, Edith G. Halpert, president, The Downtown Gallery, to Miss Edna Bryner and Mr. Arthur Schwab; reel 5498, frames 965 and 968; copy in NGA curatorial files.

[6] Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington: reel D269, frames 551-555; reel D274, frame 68; copies in NGA curatorial files.

[7] E-mail correspondence of 10 January 2007, Lisa Konce, Babcock Galleries, to Emily Shapiro, assistant curator of American art, Corcoran Gallery of Art; in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1915 Probably Haas-Heye Galerie of the Münchener Graphik Verlag, Berlin, October 1915.

1916 Probably Paintings by Marsden Hartley, Photo-Secession Galleries, New York, 4 April - 22 May 1916, unnumbered catalogue.

1950 Loan to display with permanent collection, University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1950s-1965.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

1960 Marsden Hartley, McNay Art Institute, San Antonio; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Amerika Haus, Berlin; Stadtische Galerie München in Verbindung mit dem Amerika Haus, Munich; Kunstmuseum der Stadt Amerika Düsseldorf in Verbindung mit dem Amerikanischen Generalkonsulat, Dusseldorf; American Embassy, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; City Art Museum, Saint Louis; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1 December 1960 - 31 January 1962, no. 16.

1980 Marsden Hartley, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago, 5 March - 3 August 1980, no. 107.

2004 *Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 November 2004 - 7 August 2005, unpublished checklist.

2005 *Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no. 72.

2008 *The American Evolution: A History through Art*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1 March - 27 July 2008, unpublished checklist.

2009 *American Paintings from the Collection*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2012 *Inventing Abstraction*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 23 December 2012 - 15 April 2013, no. 153.

2013 *American Journeys: Visions of Place*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist (removed early from this exhibition for loan to the 2014 exhibition in Berlin and Los Angeles).

2014 *Marsden Hartley: The German Paintings*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2014, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1947 "1st Editions to Go on Sale Tomorrow." *New York Times* (12 January 1947): 63.
- 1952 McCausland, Elizabeth. *Marsden Hartley*. Minneapolis, 1952: 26, 66.
- 1967 Harithas, James. "Marsden Hartley's German Period Abstractions." *The*

oe NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

- Corcoran Gallery of Art Bulletin* 16, no. 3 (November 1967): 22, repro., 24.
- 1967 Hudson, Andrew. "Around the Galleries." *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (26 March 1967): H:7.
- 1967 Hudson, Andrew. "Viewpoint on Art: Capital's Museums Grow in Prestige." *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (28 May 1967): K:7, repro.
- 1968 Corcoran Gallery of Art. "The Annual Report of the One Hundred and Ninth Year." *The Corcoran Gallery of Art Bulletin* 16, no. 4 (June 1968): cover, 4, 26, repro.
- 1973 Phillips, Dorothy W. *A Catalogue of the Collection of American Paintings in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Vol. 2: Painters born from 1850 to 1910*. Washington, 1973: 98, repro., 99.
- 1979 Levin, Gail. "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures." *Arts Magazine* 54 (October 1979): 157, fig. 13, 158.
- 1984 Corcoran Gallery of Art. *American Painting: The Corcoran Gallery of Art*. Washington, 1984: 34, repro., 35.
- 1988 Scott, Gail R. *Marsden Hartley*. New York, 1988: 53, 55, pl. 39.
- 1995 McDonnell, Patricia. *Dictated by Life: Marsden Hartley's German Paintings and Robert Indiana's Hartley Elegies*. Exh. cat. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1995: 31, 52, repro.
- 2000 Cash, Sarah, with Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 161, 172, repro.
- 2002 Heartney, Eleanor, ed. *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. London, 2002: 18 (detail), 19, 38-39, repro.
- 2006 "Celebrating American Genius [exh. review]." *New York Sun* (6 July 2006): 1, repro, 16.
- 2006 Patterson, Tom. "Just Visiting: Major American Works from the Corcoran Gallery are Ending the Year at Charlotte's Mint Museum [exh. review]." *Winston-Salem Journal* (3 December 2006): F:9
- 2006 Shinn, Susan. "Viewing Masters: 'Encountering American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art' Opens at the Mint [exh. review]." *Salisbury Post* (12 October 2006): D:7.
- 2007 Bennett, Lennie. "The Coming of Age of American Art [exh. review]." *St. Petersburg Times* (18 February 2007): 9L, repro.
- 2011 Cash, Sarah. "Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Abstraction*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 210-211, 278-279, repro.
- 2014 Scholz, Dieter, ed. *Marsden Hartley: The German Paintings 1913-1915*. Exh. cat. Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Berlin, Los Angeles, and New York, 2014: 90 repro., 204.
- 2014 "The Corcoran Gallery of Art - A New Beginning." *American Art Review* 16, no. 2 (March-April 2014): 139, repro.

To cite: Sarah Cash, “Marsden Hartley/*Berlin Abstraction*/1914/1915,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/166451> (accessed May 21, 2024).