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

Marsden Hartley
American, 1877 - 1943

The Aero

c. 1914

oil on canvas
overall: 100.3 x 81.2 cm (39 1/2 x 31 15/16 in.)
framed: 106.7 x 87.7 cm (42 x 34 1/2 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1970.31.1

ENTRY

Marsden Hartley first visited Berlin for three weeks in January 1913, accompanied by German friends that he had met in Paris. He was enchanted by the city, which he considered “without question the finest modern city in Europe,”[1] and resolved to move there as soon as possible. The artist lived in Berlin from May 1913 to December 1915, a period interrupted only by a four-month trip to New York from November 1913 to March 1914 to raise money to support himself. Fascinated by German militaristic culture in pre–World War I Berlin, Hartley began to produce a series of paintings incorporating imagery he observed in the almost daily flow of military parades, replete with emblems, flags, and pageantry.

After returning to Berlin from his New York interlude, he embarked on the Amerika series, a set of four paintings that incorporate Native American imagery. With the outbreak of the war in August 1914, Hartley reverted to painting festive German military subjects. The tragic battlefield death of his close friend, the Prussian officer Lieutenant Karl von Freyburg, on October 7, 1914, inspired him to begin the famous 12-painting War Motif series. Many of these works, such as the well-known *Portrait of a German Officer* [fig. 1] and the Gallery’s *Berlin Abstraction*, allude to his fallen friend through a complex set of pictorial symbols. In general, the works Hartley produced during his two-and-a-half year stay in Berlin, particularly the War Motif series, are regarded as among the finest and most original of his career. Although they earned him a degree of critical acclaim in Germany, privations such as food shortages brought about by the war forced him to return to the United States in December 1915. When 40 of the German paintings were shown at Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 gallery in April 1916, Hartley and Stieglitz downplayed the works’ celebration of Germany’s wartime pageantry to avoid the ire of a largely anti-German American

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public.[2]

Hartley is thought to have completed *The Aero* in 1914, sometime after his return from New York and before Freyburg's death. He mentioned such a subject as early as May 1913 in a long letter to Stieglitz. In the letter, Hartley describes how the "military life adds so much in the way of a sense of perpetual gaiety here in Berlin. It gives the stranger like myself the feeling that some great festival is being celebrated always." He avows his intention "to establish myself in the ultra modern scheme here and this is all possible now with Kandinsky and Marc and their group." Later in the same letter Hartley notes that he had been told: "I succeed in bringing mysticism and art together for the first time in modern art—that each canvas is a picture for itself and there the ideas present themselves after. This is my desire—to make a decorative harmony of color & form using only such color and such form as seems fitting to the subject in hand." The artist then refers to a painting that may well have been *The Aero*: "I have one canvas 'Extase d'Aéroplane' if it must have a title—it is my notion of the possible ecstasy or soul state of an aéroplane if it could have one."[3]

Hartley was a keen follower of recent advances in aviation, mentioning zeppelins in three letters to Stieglitz. On a postcard of June 1913 he wrote how the "Hansa or the Victoria Luise Luftschiffs pass overhead so majestically and so close that you see people waving their handkerchiefs." On October 18, 1913, Hartley mentioned the explosion of a naval zeppelin the previous day that had killed 27 people in Johannisthal, 10 miles outside Berlin. A year later, in a letter of June 1914, he remarked that "the Luftschiff L.V. has just passed over us here as I write—a fascinating thing which transports one somehow every time one sees any of them."[4]

Interpreting each of the various motifs in this colorful abstract composition is difficult considering Hartley's avowed intention to create "a decorative harmony of color & form as seems fitting to the subject in hand." Moreover, in part because he was worried about the way the largely anti-German public would receive them, Hartley discouraged viewers from speculating about the meaning of his Berlin abstractions by claiming that "the forms are only those which I have observed casually from day to day. There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them; there was no slight intention of that anywhere."[5] It is impossible to determine whether Hartley intended *The Aero* to evoke either an airplane or a zeppelin, or simply embodied the two in a single image. Gail R. Scott has interpreted *The Aero* as an attempt to convey the "'soul state' of an airplane, symbolized by the red fireball of

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its engines and the aerial view of flags and banners signaling its flight."[6] Certainly the wavy motifs at the bottom center and left of the composition make one think of the artist's description of "people waving their handkerchiefs" as a zeppelin majestically flew by. The painting adeptly conveys a sense of the exhilaration and energy that Hartley felt as he watched a large and impressive airship sail overhead.

The Aero, like most of Hartley's Berlin paintings, reflects his close ties to the Der Blaue Reiter painters. These artists, Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866 - 1944), Franz Marc (German, 1880 - 1916), Gabriele Münter (German, 1877 - 1962), Alfred Kubin (Austrian, 1877 - 1959), Paul Klee (Swiss, 1879 - 1940), and August Macke (German, 1887 - 1914) among them, all privileged art's ability to convey inner subjective feelings over depicting a literal reality. Hartley was in frequent contact with Marc and Kandinsky, and had studied the latter's book *On the Spiritual in Art* as well as *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*. The group's interest in the expressive decorative patterning of Bavarian folk painting probably informed Hartley's painted frame in *The Aero*.[7]

Although Der Bleue Reiter provided Hartley with the philosophical and technical means to pursue his own aesthetic desires, his fascination with aviation found its closest parallel in the French cubist Robert Delaunay (French, 1885 - 1941). Hartley saw three of Delaunay's most famous paintings, which all feature airplanes, around the time he was either planning *The Aero* or working on it. He described the huge *L'Equipe Cardiff* [fig. 2] to Stieglitz after viewing it at Delaunay's studio in March 1913 (calling it a "a perfect confession of egomania"),[8] and saw it again later in the year at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon exhibition in Berlin, where it was accompanied by *Soleil, Tour, Aeroplane* [fig. 3]. En route back to Berlin in March 1914, he visited Paris and attended the Salon des Indépendants, where he admired Delaunay's *L'Hommage a Blériot* (Kunstmuseum, Basel), a tribute to the French aviator Louis Blériot, who had successfully flown across the English Channel in 1909.[9]

Gail Levin has speculated that *The Aero* was intended as an allusion to the German Imperial Navy Zeppelin L-2 that exploded during a test flight on October 17, 1913—an accident that Hartley specifically mentioned in a letter to Stieglitz.[10] A month earlier, another naval zeppelin, the L-1, had crashed into the North Sea 20 miles north of Helgoland Island. Both incidents were highly publicized setbacks to Germany's military aviation program. The most plausible interpretation of *The Aero* is Patricia McDonnell's suggestion that it alludes to one aspect of modern urban life in Berlin by offering "a contemplation of one of modernization's more amazing

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inventions."[11] This idea fits well with Hartley's fascination with the German military reflected in other works executed in 1914, such as *Berlin Ante-War* [fig. 4], *Forms Abstracted, Berlin* [fig. 5], and *Himmel* [fig. 6]. After Count Zeppelin successfully flew 240 miles in one of his airships the German public was swept by "Zeppelin fever." Kaiser Wilhelm II personally supported the idea of enhancing imperial Germany's military prowess with the creation of an aerial fleet comprising airships and airplanes. The German military increasingly took notice of Zeppelin's exploits and acquired airships. German writers such as Rudolph Martin had already advocated air superiority in popular novels such as *Berlin-Bagdad* (1907). In France, the novelist Emile Driant, influenced by Jules Verne, wrote popular and prophetic novels like *L'Aviateur du Pacifique* (1909) and *Au-dessus du continent noir* (1911) about the military deployment of airplanes.[12]

One of the best-known novels of this genre was *The War in the Air* (1908) by H. G. Wells, who conjured up alarming visions of German airships destroying the American fleet in the North Atlantic and laying waste to New York City. We know Hartley was familiar with the author because, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, he discussed recent events in a letter to Stieglitz, commenting that "even H. G. Wells is a fair prophetic authority."[13] The development of the airplane and especially the zeppelin played an increasingly prominent part in both Germany's military preparations and popular culture, and Hartley was an eyewitness to this progress in Berlin. Painted on the eve of World War I, the exhilarating, jubilant, and colorful *Aero* presents an optimistic interpretation of one of the greatest inventions of the modern era. Like a number of Hartley's other prewar Berlin paintings that extol German military prowess, there is no indication of the imminent death and destruction that the flying machine would rain down on the cities and battlefields of Europe during World War I.

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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 Robert Delaunay, *L'Equipe Cardiff*, 1912–1913, oil on canvas, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Image: Eric Emo / Parisienne de Photographie

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fig. 3 Robert Delaunay, *Soleil, tour, Aeroplane*, 1913, oil on canvas, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, A. Conger Goodyear Fund. Image: Albright-Knox Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY

fig. 4 Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Ante-War*, 1914, oil on canvas, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Gift of Ferdinand Howald

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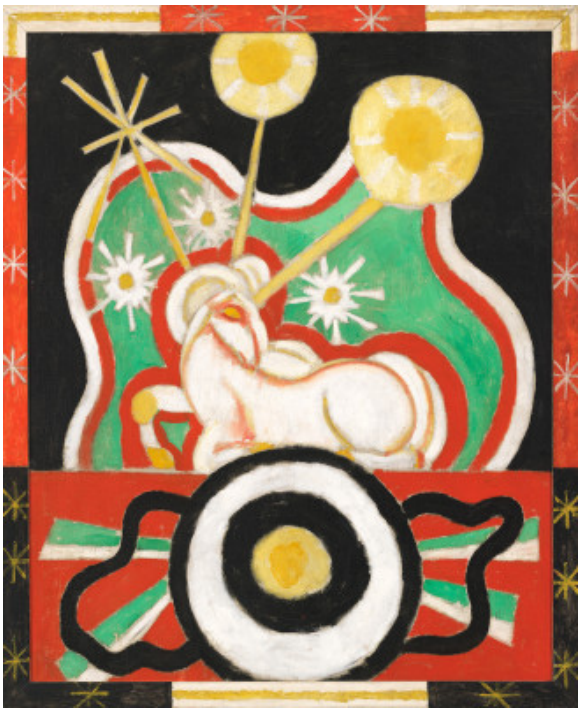

fig. 5 Marsden Hartley, *Forms Abstracted, Berlin*, 1913, oil on canvas with wood frame, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Hudson D. Walker and Exchange 52.37a–b

fig. 6 Marsden Hartley, *Himmel*, c. 1914–1915, oil on canvas, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Gift of the Friends of Art 56-118. Image: Jamison Miller

NOTES

[1] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, Feb. 1, 1913, quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 54.

[2] On the 1916 exhibition at 291, see Bruce Robertson, “Letters to the Dead,” in *Modern Art in America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*, ed. Sarah Greenough (Washington, DC, 2001), 228–241.

[3] All quotes in this paragraph come from Hartley to Stieglitz, week of May 18, 1913, quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 76–77.

[4] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, June 28, 1913, Oct. 18, 1913, and June 30, 1914,

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quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 87, 114, and 149. Both the LZ-11 Viktoria-Luise (named after Kaiser Wilhelm II's only daughter) and the LZ-13 Hansa were civilian passenger airships that flew for the Deutsche Luftschiffahrts-Aktiengesellschaft (DELAG), or German Airship Transportation Corporation Ltd., that was established in 1909 as an offshoot of the Zeppelin Company. Both were requisitioned by the military at the outbreak of World War I. The third zeppelin Hartley mentioned cannot be identified. Stephen Gregory, in an e-mail dated August 31, 2013, to Franklin Kelly at the National Gallery of Art, emphasized the October 1913 zeppelin disaster as the most likely source for the prominent red fireball in *The Aero*.

[5] The text is from the artist's statement in the catalog for the exhibition of 40 of Hartley's Berlin paintings (including *The Aero*) at Stieglitz's 291 gallery that was held from April 4 to May 22, 1916. The catalog was reprinted as "Hartley's Exhibition," *Camera Work* 48 (Oct. 1916): 12, and is quoted in Gail Levin, "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures," *Arts Magazine* 54 (Oct. 1979): 154. Of course it is now recognized that many of the War Motif series paintings do indeed contain symbols that allude to Freyburg.

[6] Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1988), 49.

[7] Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley's 'Amerika': Between Native American and German Folk Art," *American Art Review* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 122.

[8] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, March 13, 1913, quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 65.

[9] For a discussion of Hartley's relationships with Der Blaue Reiter artists and Delaunay, see Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley and the European Avant-Garde," *Arts* 54 (Sept., 1979), 158–163.

[10] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, Oct. 18, 1913, quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 114. Gail Levin, "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures," *Arts Magazine* 54 (Oct. 1979): 158.

[11] Patricia McDonnell, "'Portrait of Berlin': Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernity in Expressionist Berlin," in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 51.

[12] Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908–1918* (New Haven, CT, 1994), 44–45, 71–72.

[13] Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, Sept. 2, 1914, quoted in James Timothy Voorhees, ed., *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Mardsen Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 157.

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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain, coarse-weave, medium-weight fabric that has been lined with wax to a plain-weave, medium-weight, auxiliary fabric support. The painting has no ground, but the fabric has been primed with a moderately thick layer of light gray paint that forms the background of the design. The exposed areas of the background paint appear to have been mixed with white before drying, altering the initial priming color, which remains its original darker gray color beneath the design elements. The main elements of the composition are applied in fairly thick, heavily textured paint. Some areas, particularly the whites and light yellow, are characterized by lively brushwork and moderate impasto. A thin layer of charcoal or black paint may be observed scumbled at the edges of many design elements, indicating that the composition was drawn before the paint was applied. An artist-constructed frame consisting of a simple wooden liner painted with an extension of the composition is attached to the painting.

The initial examination report of 1987 indicates that the painting was in good condition with numerous small, filled, and retouched losses scattered throughout. However, in a conservation treatment of the painting in 2001 it was noted that many of the major design elements had been repainted by another hand long after the completion of the painting. During this 2001 treatment, the non-original overpaint was removed, revealing some abrasion that had occurred in a previous cleaning. Although the goal of the 2001 treatment was to return the painting to its original, unvarnished state, the retouching required to compensate for previous damage and some blanching that occurred as a result of the overpaint removal necessitated locally varnishing some areas with a nearly invisible synthetic varnish. The rest of the painting was left unvarnished.[1]

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Stephen Kornhauser and Ulrich Birkmaier, “Marsden Hartley’s Materials and Working Methods,” in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 270.

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PROVENANCE

The artist; (sale, Anderson Galleries, New York, 17 May 1921, probably no. 46, as *Pre-War Pageant*); Hamilton Easter Field [1873-1922], Brooklyn, and Ogunquit, Maine; by inheritance to Robert Laurent [1890-1970], Brooklyn and Ogunquit, Maine; his estate; purchased 15 October 1970 by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1916 [Marsden Hartley exhibition], 291 Gallery, New York, 1916.

1951 Marsden Hartley, John Herron Art Museum (now the Indianapolis Museum of Art), 1951, no. 1, as The Aero, Pre-War.

1965 The Collection of Robert and Mimi Laurent and the Field Foundation Collection, Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington; Colby College Art Museum, Waterville, Maine, 1965, no. 37.

1969 Marsden Hartley: A Retrospective Exhibition, Bernard Danenberg Galleries, Inc., New York, 1969, no. 6, repro.

1980 Marsden Hartley, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth; University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1980-1981, no. 22, pl. 80.

1995 Dictated by Life: Marsden Hartley's German Paintings and Robert Indiana's Hartley Elegies, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago; Art Museum at Florida International University, 1995, no. 2, repro. (shown only in Minneapolis).

1996 Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996, no. 57, repro.

2001 Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2001, no. 69, repro.

2003 Marsden Hartley: American Modernist, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 2003-2004, no. 15, repro.

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2014 Marsden Hartley: The German Paintings 1913-1915, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2014, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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1979 Levin, Gail. "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures." *Arts Magazine* 54 (October 1979): 158, fig. 8.

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 170, repro.

1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: 17, no. 57, color repro.

1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 215, color repro. 217.

1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 574, no. 879, color repro.

1988 Scott, Gail R. *Marsden Hartley*. New York, 1988: 46-49, pl. 34.

1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 174, no. 64, color repro.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 194, repro.

1997 Southgate, M. Therese. *The Art of JAMA: One Hundred Covers and Essays from The Journal of the American Medical Association*. St. Louis, 1997: 190-191, 215, color repro.

2000 Kirsh, Andrea, and Rustin S. Levenson. *Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies*. Materials and Meaning in the Fine Arts 1. New Haven, 2000: 250-251, color fig. 261.

2000 *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001: no. 69.

2002 Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin, et al. *Marsden Hartley*. Exh. cat. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; The Phillips Collection, Washington; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 2002-2003. New Haven and London, 2002. no. 15, repro.

2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 410-411, no. 343, color 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: 95 repro., 205.

2016 National Gallery of Art. *Highlights from the National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Washington, 2016: 278, repro.

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