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

Marsden Hartley
American, 1877 - 1943

Maine Woods

1908

oil on canvas
overall: 74.9 x 74.9 cm (29 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.)
framed: 82.5 x 82.5 x 5.3 cm (32 1/2 x 32 1/2 x 2 1/16 in.)
Inscription: top center reverse: Marsden / Hartley
Gift of Bernard Brookman 1991.71.1

ENTRY

During the autumn of 1906, Marsden Hartley began to abandon impressionism and paint in a more expressive neo-impressionist style. The catalyst for this change in technique was his introduction to the work of the little-known Italian divisionist artist Giovanni Segantini, whose paintings were featured in the January 1903 issue of the German magazine *Jugend*. The most notable characteristic of Segantini's alpine landscapes is his use of the "stitch" brushstroke, by which he built up an image out of short, interlocking lines of pure color. Hartley adapted this technique for his Maine mountain scenes, and by 1907 it had become the dominant feature of his work.[1]

On the recommendation of his friend, the Portland publisher Thomas Bird Mosher, Hartley obtained a job for the summer of 1907 at Green Acre, a retreat in Eliot, Maine. Founded by transcendentalist Sarah J. Farmer and named by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, Green Acre was a utopian community where progressive intellectuals discussed Eastern religions, theosophy, the arts, science, and philosophy. In Eliot that August, the young Hartley had his first solo exhibition at the home of Sara Chapman Thorp, a prominent supporter of Green Acre and

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widow of the famous Norwegian violinist Ole Bull.

After spending the winter of 1907 to 1908 in Boston, Hartley sought to brighten his palette, probably in response to encountering the work of Maurice Prendergast, an artist who would exert a significant influence on Hartley's emerging style and whose own style drew upon the postimpressionism of Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, and Paul Signac.[2] Hartley also sold a painting to a prominent local collector of French impressionist art, Desmond Fitzgerald, who encouraged him to return to Maine and paint. Buoyed by Fitzgerald's financial support, Hartley went to Maine in the fall of 1908 and settled on a farm in Stoneham Valley near North Lovell, where he remained until March 1909. Working at a feverish pace in isolation and enduring the severe winter conditions, he produced his first mature, neo-impressionist works, including *Maine Woods*. The majority of Hartley's paintings from this period are expressionist mountain landscapes with two-dimensional forms and high horizon lines. The earliest examples are brilliantly colored autumn scenes, such as *Carnival of Autumn* [fig. 1], but as winter progressed his palette darkened, as seen, for example, in *The Ice Hole* [fig. 2]. Jeanne Hokin has noted that, "although limned from his immediate experience in the untamed Maine woods, these paintings offer visual testimony to Hartley's mystical and spiritual intensity. Rendered in heavy impasto—at times almost a quarter of an inch thick—and stitches like heavy embroidery with elongated flecks of vibrant color, these works engender in the viewer a distinctly physical sensation."[3]

Maine Woods differs from the majority of Hartley's Stoneham Valley oils because it represents a dense forest interior that emphasizes the verticality of the white birch trees pressed up against the picture plane. A snow-covered mountain is barely distinguishable at the upper right. Hartley applied the pigment thickly and spontaneously, giving the painting a highly expressive character. It is very similar to the much smaller but more animated *Landscape No. 16* [fig. 3], the reverse of which is inscribed with a poem by the artist that begins: "October Lies—Dying / The dead dance frantically!"—a fitting allusion to the end of autumn and the coming of winter depicted in *Maine Woods* as well.[4]

The Maine landscapes that Hartley executed in North Lovell proved critical to his career. In the spring of 1909 he showed them to Maurice and Charles Prendergast in Boston, and they were sufficiently taken with them to write him letters of introduction to influential New York painters Robert Henri and William Glackens, both founders of the Ashcan school. Glackens arranged for the young artist to have a modest exhibition of the Maine views in his Washington Square studio.

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Arthur B. Davies (American, 1862 - 1928) became a strong early supporter of Hartley, but Everett Shinn (American, 1873 - 1953) and John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951) were not impressed, the latter commenting that they were “a little too much for me.”[5] In April 1909, Hartley’s friend, the poet Shaemas O’Sheel, introduced him to the photographer and avant-garde art impresario Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946), owner of the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession located at 291 Fifth Avenue, known familiarly as just “291.” Stieglitz felt an immediate affinity for Hartley and offered him a solo exhibition at 291 of 33 Maine landscapes (15 of them from a series titled Songs of Autumn) that opened on May 8, 1909, and that very likely included *Maine Woods*. Esteemed critic Sadakichi Hartmann, in his review of the event in Stieglitz’s journal *Camera Work*, described them as “examples of an extreme and up-to-date impressionism” that represent “winter scenes agitated by snow and wind, ‘proud music of the storm’; wood interiors, strange entanglements of tree-trunks; and mountain slopes covered with autumn woods with some island-dotted river winding along their base.” Noting the presence of the "Segantini stitch," Hartmann opined that as long as Hartley applied “his colors in a temperamental, self-taught manner, he is above the approach of imitation. I for my part believe that he has invented his method for himself, up there in Maine amidst the scenery of his fancy, and that only gradually he has learnt to reproduce nature in her most intense and luminous coloring.”[6]

Other critics were not as generous. One commented that “of all the dreary fads we have been called upon to look over this season . . . this is the most dispiriting and sorrowful. And it is genuinely regretted that the little galleries of the Secession should be given over to this sort of foolishness. . . . Mr. Hartley about tries one’s patience to the limit.” This writer was also dismissive of Hartley’s technique: “Putting the color on with a trowel to the thickness of half an inch or more, placing pure pigments side by side, serving himself bountifully of blues and reds, he obtains finally a result suggestive of a rug with all the charm of design left out.”[7] The show was a financial failure.

By 1909 the difficult, complex pattern of Hartley’s career had been largely established. Always a modernist outsider, Hartley would continually struggle to achieve critical acceptance and a modicum of economic stability in the midst of a peripatetic creative existence driven by restless experimentation and constant reinvention. Shortly before his death, Hartley’s peregrinations seemed to come full circle when, once more in desperate financial straits, he returned to his home state and, in a last bid to create a more sustainable, commercially viable persona,

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declared himself the “painter of Maine.” As he had done since his youth, Hartley, forever searching for answers, again turned to the mountain landscape for solace and enlightenment in a final series of paintings devoted to *Mount Katahdin, Maine*.

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Marsden Hartley, *Carnival of Autumn*, 1908, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Hayden Collection–Charles Henry Hayden Fund. © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

fig. 2 Marsden Hartley, *The Ice Hole*, 1908, oil on canvas, The New Orleans Museum of Art, Museum Purchase through the Ella West Freeman Foundation Matching Fund 73.2

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fig. 3 Marsden Hartley, *Landscape No. 16*, 1908, oil on canvas, private collection. Image courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery

NOTES

[1] See Hartley's 1932 essay "On the Subject of the Mountain: Letter to Messieurs Segantini and Hodler," reprinted in Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles and Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 136.

[2] For Prendergast's influence on Hartley, see Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles and Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 16. Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980), 14–15, has suggested that Hartley was also influenced by the German neo-impressionist Richard Pietzsch, whose work had been discussed in a 1906 issue of *Jugend*.

[3] Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles and Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 18.

[4] Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1988), 18. A partial transcription of

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the poem is in Elizabeth McCausland, *Marsden Hartley* (Minneapolis, MN, 1952), 14.

[5] Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene: From the Diaries, Notes, and Correspondence, 1906–1913* (New York, 1965), 303.

[6] Sadakichi Hartmann, "Unphotographic Paint: The Texture of Impressionism," *Camera Work* 28 (October 1909): 20.

[7] *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, May 14, 1909.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave, cotton fabric that has been lined to heavy-weight linen using a wax/resin adhesive and stretched onto a five-member expansion bolt stretcher that is not original. All four tacking margins remain intact, although the corner folds have been removed. Although the painting is lined, the artist's signature is clearly visible on the reverse along the upper edge. A continuous layer of off-white priming coats the canvas and extends to the cut edges of the fabric.[1] The design layers are the result of direct applications of relatively pure colors worked wet into wet over this ground. The oil-like paint varies from low to moderately high impasto; the texture of the canvas remains visible in many areas. A fairly stiff, paste-like appearance characterizes the surface quality of the paint film. The painting is in excellent condition with only a few tiny, inpainted losses along the bottom edge. An inappropriately glossy varnish and a good deal of wax/resin stuck in the interstices of the canvas were removed in a 1993 treatment. The painting was left unvarnished after this treatment.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than applied by the artist.

PROVENANCE

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Purchased c. 1912/1914 by Harrie T. Lindeberg [1879-1959] for Herman S. Brookman [1891-1973], New York, and Portland, Oregon;[1] by inheritance to his son, Bernard Brookman [1912-2001], Watsonville, California; gift 1991 to NGA.

[1] Herman Brookman was a New York City architect who worked as a draftsman and designer for Harrie T. Lindeberg from 1909 until 1923, when he moved to Portland, Oregon, to start his own firm. One day, Lindeberg took Brookman to lunch and then to an exhibition of Hartley's work, where he offered to buy his employee any painting in the gallery. Brookman chose *Maine Woods*, and it remained in his family until 1991. The date of the purchase is unknown; Bernard Brookman suggested it might have occurred in 1920, when his father temporarily left Lindeberg's employ to study in Europe, while Philip Brookman, Bernard's son, suggested it was around 1912/1914. Herman Brookman specialized in residential architecture and designed the M. Lloyd Frank estate, now Lewis and Clark College, as well as the Temple Beth Israel and the Memorial Temple House in the Portland area. The provenance has been reconstructed through letters from Bernard Brookman, 2 February 1990, and his son Philip Brookman, 28 September 1989, both to NGA curator Nan Rosenthal, in NGA curatorial files. See also https://digital.lib.washington.edu/architect/architects/2221/.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1909 Probably Exhibition of Paintings in Oil by Mr. Marsden Hartley, of Maine, 291 Gallery, New York, 1909, probably one of the Songs of Autumn.

1974 Loan to display with permanent collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1974-before 1989.

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