



Marsden Hartley  
American, 1877 - 1943

## *Mount Katahdin, Maine*

1942

oil on hardboard

overall: 76 x 101.9 cm (29 15/16 x 40 1/8 in.)

framed: 101.6 x 127 x 5.7 cm (40 x 50 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: M.H. / 42

Gift of Mrs. Mellon Byers 1970.27.1

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### ENTRY

Marsden Hartley was fascinated by mountains throughout his career. His habit of painting a series of views of the same site, as he would with Mount Katahdin, was inspired by Paul Cézanne's famous paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire in Aix-en-Provence. After seeing a Cézanne exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris in 1926, Hartley had actually moved to Aix, where he lived from 1926 to 1928 and, following in Cézanne's footsteps, produced his own series. In a letter to a friend, Hartley referred to Mount Katahdin as a "magnificent savior" and commented: "I feel as if I shall be rivaling Hiroshige who published 80 views of Fujiyama," [1] a reference to the famous 19th-century Japanese artist whose colorful woodblock prints were important precedents for both Cézanne's and Hartley's mountain vistas.

By the late 1930s the aging Hartley had experienced a number of personal and professional reversals that prompted him to consider returning to his native state to reinvent himself as a Maine artist. After his German Alpine landscapes exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery An American Place in March 1936 elicited negative critical reviews, he wrote to a friend proposing "a 100% Yankee show next year." [2] Later

*Mount Katahdin, Maine*

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in 1936 he was devastated by the deaths at sea of three members of a fisherman's family with whom he had been living in Nova Scotia. After another exhibition at An American Place in April 1937 failed to produce sales or positive reviews, he broke with Stieglitz.

It is indicative of how fraught Hartley's relationship with Stieglitz had become that the catalog to his final exhibition at An American Place, while it did not include a single painting of Maine, was nevertheless accompanied by an essay titled "On the Subject of Nativeness—A Tribute to Maine," in which Hartley announced that the "quality of nativeness is coloured [*sic*] by heritage, birth, and environment, and it is therefore for this reason that I wish to declare myself the painter from Maine." [3] For many years Stieglitz had been directing Hartley, as he had Arthur Dove (American, 1880 - 1946), John Marin (American, 1870 - 1953), and Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887 - 1986), to forego European influences and instead to tie his artistic identity more directly to the distinctive qualities of the American landscape. Finally, in June 1937, plagued by financial problems and ill health, Hartley sought refuge in Georgetown, Maine. He wrote to a friend: "Maine is a strong silent country and so I being born there am able to express it in terms of itself with which I am familiar." [4]

After brief stays in Portland, Vinalhaven, and Brookville, Hartley settled in Bangor in September 1939, where he realized a long-standing objective to paint Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest mountain and the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Thanks largely to the efforts of the state's former governor Percival Baxter, the mountain and the land surrounding it had been designated a forest preserve called Baxter State Park during the early 1930s. The area's unspoiled, rugged beauty was heavily promoted as a tourist destination by state authorities, who noted that Native Americans had considered it a sacred site and that it had attracted such luminaries as Henry David Thoreau and Frederic Edwin Church. Donna M. Cassidy has convincingly demonstrated that Hartley was aware of the promotional literature concerning Mount Katahdin, and that his "journey to Katahdin, however brief, can be understood as part of his publicity campaign to promote himself as a Maine artist and market his Maine work." [5] In addition to the practical need to make marketable works, Hartley also responded to the regionalism that attracted so many American artists and intellectuals during the 1930s, and naturally turned to his native state for inspiration. [6]

In October 1939 Hartley made arrangements to have the district's fish and game warden, Caleb Warren Scribner, escort him to Mount Katahdin. After driving to the base of the mountain, Scribner led the 62-year-old artist on an arduous four-mile

trek to Cobb’s Camp, a family-managed hunters’ camp located on the shore of Lake Katahdin. During six of Hartley’s eight days there the weather conditions allowed him to work outdoors on oil sketches and drawings that he would use as source material for the series of paintings of the mountain that he produced over the next three years.

The experience had a transformative effect on Hartley. Shortly after returning to Bangor, he informed a friend that “I know I have seen God now. The occult connection that is established when one loves nature was complete—and so I felt transported to a visible fourth dimension—and since heaven is inviolably a state of mind I have been there these past ten days.” He felt “lifted out of a long siege of psychic languor and emotional lassitude,” [7] and was eager to begin painting the mountain. Using the Indian spelling for Katahdin (which Thoreau had also used), he informed another friend that “I have achieved the ‘sacred’ pilgrimage to Ktaadn. . . . I feel as if I had seen God for the first time—and find him so nonchalantly solemn.” [8] Hartley had also been impressed by his guide Caleb Scribner, and honored him in a 1941 poem, “The Pilgrimage, and the Game Warden.” [9]

From 1939 to 1942 Hartley produced at least 18 oil paintings of Katahdin from the same viewpoint and with nearly identical compositions. The work had a rejuvenating effect on him. By early February 1940, when he had completed six of the views, he informed a friend: “My work is getting stronger & stronger and more intense all the time which is most heartening at 63.” [10] Painted in 1942, the Gallery’s *Mount Katahdin, Maine* was one of Hartley’s last versions of the subject. He probably painted it shortly after formalizing arrangements for an exhibition at the gallery of his new dealer Paul Rosenberg in New York. Like the others in the series, for example *Mount Katahdin, Autumn No. 2* [fig. 1] and *Mount Katahdin* [fig. 2], the Gallery’s painting was not intended to be a literal view of the mountain, but rather an evocation of its grandeur that captures a seasonal mood. Hartley exercised artistic license by centering Baxter Peak, the mountain’s highest point, and bringing it closer to the foreground than it really appeared from his vantage point at Cobb’s Camp. [11] The reductive composition consists of four horizontal zones: the lake, the foliage, the mountain, and the sky. In her study of Hartley’s mountain paintings, Jeanne Hokin has noted that the artist used “a somewhat looser technique, softening his palette with rosy-violet hues that gradually darken above the vivid verdure of the autumn brush, culminating in the deep blue tones of the watery surface of the lake below. Here using large areas of primary colors, Hartley simplifies the format by condensing the cloud motif into three discrete

forms and positioning the truncated cone of the mountain lower and almost in the center of the composition.” [12]

One of the most popular and aesthetically satisfying paintings among Hartley’s views of the Maine landmark, *Mount Katahdin, Maine* raises the issue of how the series should be regarded within the context of his career. The conventional art historical view articulated by Barbara Haskell maintains that the work Hartley started producing in Berlin before World War I is “equal in achievement and sophistication to any work being done by the key figures of the European avant-garde.” After returning to the United States in 1915, Hartley spent the next two decades restlessly traveling in Europe and America and experimenting with various styles. In doing so, he set himself apart from the three core members of the Stieglitz group, Dove, Marin, and O’Keeffe, who “remained in America after their initial introduction to modernist theory, and drew on their intuitive responses to natural landscape forms to express a distinctly American vision.” It was only after Hartley returned to his native Maine, however, that he was able to create “a group of richly toned, expressive landscapes whose spiritual grandeur equals, if not surpasses, the intensity of his German military paintings.” [13] This interpretation accords with Stieglitz’s idea that artistic success arises from a special, spiritual affinity or connection to the land of one’s birth.

Recently Heather Hole has persuasively challenged this view: “If we accept that his relationship to Maine was not one of simple native connection, inherently different from any other attempt to paint a place, but was rather the end result of a life of philosophical wrangling and negotiation with landscape itself, an important trend becomes visible in his entire body of work.” For a visionary artist like Hartley, inner, boundless spiritual truths transcended physical realities. Having been born in Maine, Hartley never lost his spiritual connection to the state no matter where his travels took him. In that sense he had been and always would be “the painter from Maine.” Consequently the Katahdin series becomes “the culmination of a lifetime’s work, not simply a late return to authenticity after twenty-five years of misguided wandering and experimentation.” [14]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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### NOTES

- [1] Hartley to Adelaide Kuntz, Oct. 24, 1939, quoted in Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles & Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 111; the letter is in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.
- [2] Hartley to Adelaide Kuntz, possibly late May, 1936, quoted in Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles & Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 105, and also quoted in Townsend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Boston, 1992), 250, where he identifies it as dated April 28, 1936. The letter is in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.
- [3] The essay is reprinted in Gail R. Scott, ed., *On Art by Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1982), 115.
- [4] Hartley to Rogers Bordley, 1939, Archives of American Art; quoted in Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980), 111.
- [5] Donna M. Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation* (Lebanon, NH, 2005), 79.
- [6] See Donna M. Cassidy, “Localized Glory: Marsden Hartley as New England Regionalist,” in *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser (Hartford, CT, 2002), 175–192.
- [7] Hartley to Elizabeth Sparhawk Jones, Oct. 23, 1939, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Boston, 1992), 270; the letter is in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
- [8] Hartley to Adelaide Kuntz, Oct. 24, 1939, quoted in Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles & Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 111; the letter is in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.
- [9] Marsden Hartley, *The Collected Poems of Marsden Hartley, 1904–1943*, ed. Gail R. Scott (Santa Rosa, CA, 1987).
- [10] Marsden Hartley to Adelaide Kuntz, Feb. 2, 1940, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist* (Boston, 1992), 269.
- [11] Donna M. Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation* (Lebanon, NH, 2005), 78, has noted that photographs taken from this same viewpoint were used in contemporary tourist brochures and magazines.
- [12] Jeanne Hokin, *Pinnacles & Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley* (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 114.

[13] Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York, 1980), 9.

[14] Heather Hole, *Marsden Hartley and the West: The Search for an American Modernism* (Santa Fe, NM, 2007), 142.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on the smooth side of a 1/8-inch-thick, pressed, wood pulp board. There is no ground, but there appears to be a shellac size applied to the cardboard panel. [1] The paint is applied in thin, translucent glazes in the bottom layers, while broad, opaque masses painted wet into wet characterize the pictorial elements. The painting was probably executed with large brushes, as there are numerous two-inch brush hairs embedded in the surface. The palette is limited to only a few pigments. A thin layer of glossy, synthetic resin varnish coats the surface. [2]

The painting is in excellent condition. The support is structurally secure, displaying none of the flimsiness or decay often seen in wood pulp supports. The paint layer does not have any cracks or losses, with the exception of a little frame abrasion around the edges.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The bottom layer, which is thin enough to show wood pulp fibers through it, fluoresces a characteristic bright orange-red in ultraviolet light, suggesting the presence of a shellac sizing layer.

[2] The milky white fluorescence of the surface coating in ultraviolet light suggests that it is a synthetic resin.

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## PROVENANCE

The artist [1877-1943]; his estate; (Paul Rosenberg & Co., New York, as *Katahdin, Autumn Rain*); purchased 1951 by Hudson D. [1907-1976] and Ione [1915-1987] Walker, Forest Hills, New York, and Provincetown; gift May 1970 to the American Federation of Arts, New York; (Babcock Galleries, New York); purchased 3 December 1970 by NGA with funds given by Mrs. Constance Mellon Byers.

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1943 Marsden Hartley, Paul Rosenberg Gallery, New York, 1943, as Katahdin--Autumn Rain.

1944 Marsden Hartley, Paul Rosenberg Gallery, New York, 1944.

1948 Paintings by Marsden Hartley, Paul Rosenberg Gallery, New York, 1948, no. 16, as Mt. Katahdin--Autumn Rain.

1951 Loan to display with permanent collection, University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1951-1970 (during ownership by the Walkers, when not on loan to special exhibitions elsewhere).

1952 [Exhibition of paintings by Marsden Hartley and ceramics by Frances E. Upham], Tweed Gallery (now Tweed Museum of Art), University of Minnesota, Duluth, 1952, no catalogue.

1955 In Memoriam, American Federation of Arts travelling exhibition, 1955-1956.

1957 The Painter and the Mountain, University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln, 1957, unpublished checklist.

1959 Photography in the Fine Arts, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 1959, no catalogue.

1966 Late Works of Marsden Hartley, American Federation of Arts traveling exhibition, 9 venues, 1966-1967, no. 39.

1968 Marsden Hartley: Painter/Poet 1877-1943, University Galleries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles; Tucson Art Center; University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, 1968-1969, no. 49, 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, 1980-81, no. 99, repro.

1999 Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., 1999, no. 200, repro.

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

2001 *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2001, no. 157, 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. 93, repro.

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- 1952 McCausland, Elizabeth. *Marsden Hartley*. Minneapolis, 1952: 57 repro., 72.
- 1978 Olds, David William. "A Study of Marsden Hartley's Mt. Katahdin Series, 1939-1942." M.A. Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1978: 35, 46, 48-49, fig. 7.
- 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, 152, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 216, repro. 226.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 574, no. 880, color repro.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 174, repro.
- 1990 Paulson, Ronald. *Figure and Abstraction in Contemporary Painting*. New Brunswick and London, 1990: repro. 69.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 194, repro.
- 1992 Ludington, Townsend. *Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist*. 1st ed. Boston, 1992: repro.
- 1993 Hokin, Jeanne. *Pinnacles & Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley*. Albuquerque, 1993: cover, 114, color pl. 33.
- 1995 Robertson, Bruce. *Marsden Hartley*. New York, 1995: 123, color repro.
- 2000 *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001: no. 157.
- 2007 Hole, Heather. *Marsden Hartley and the West: The Search for an American Modernism*. Exh. cat. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe. New Haven and Santa Fe, 2007: 142, pl. 127.
- 2009 Stavitsky, Gail, and Katherine Rothkopf. *Cézanne and American Modernism*. Exh. cat. Montclair Art Museum; Baltimore Museum of Art; Phoenix Art Museum. Montclair and Baltimore, 2009: 216, fig. 1.



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