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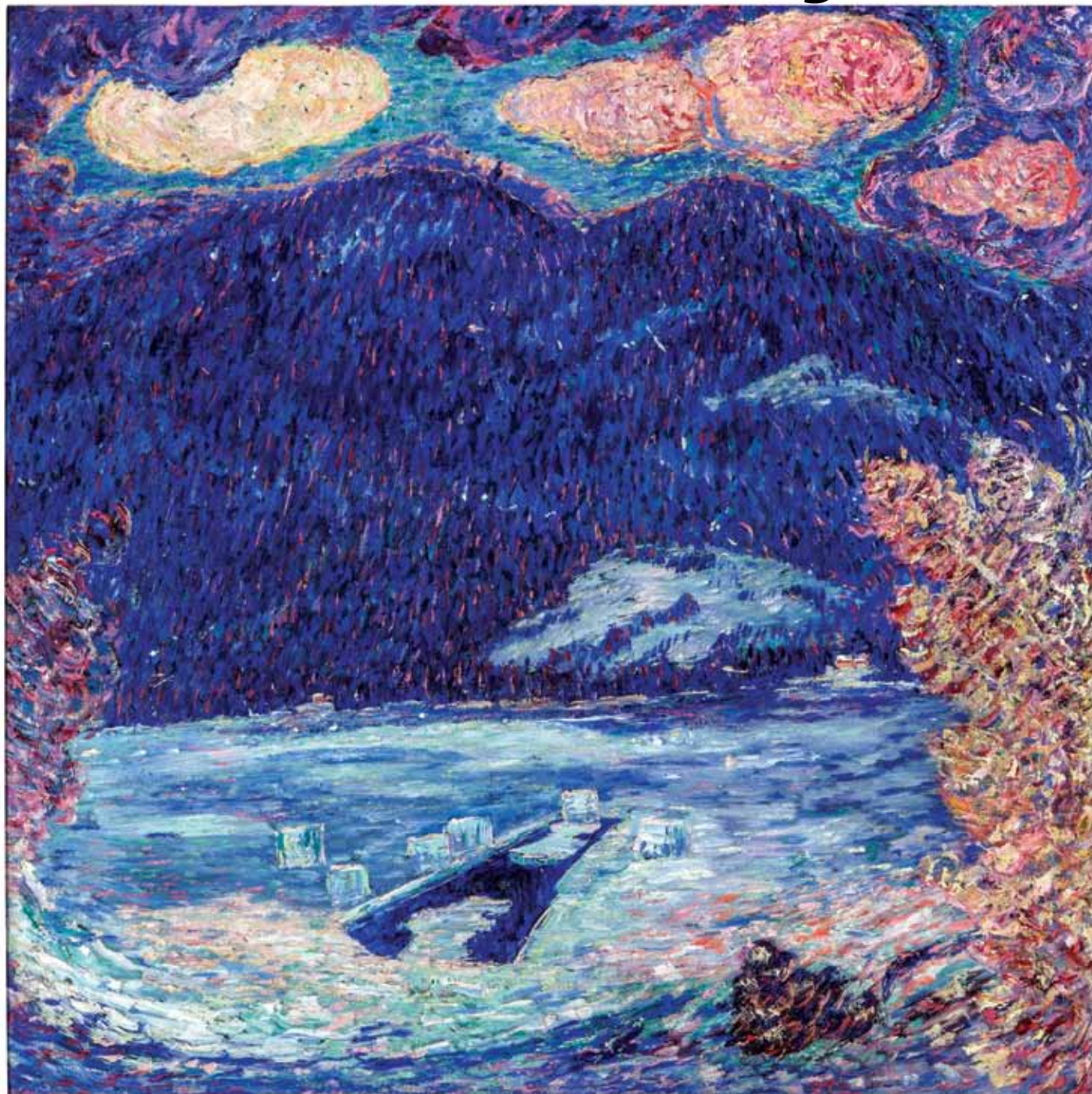
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The Body Invisible: A Portrait of Marsden Hartley



Examining the modernist master from unseen angles. **BY DANIEL KANY**

MARSDEN HARTLEY (1877-1943) is seen by many as America's greatest artist to have participated in the awakening dawn of modernist painting. Hartley had solo exhibitions at

Alfred Steiglitz's pioneering New York gallery and was introduced by Steiglitz to Gertrude Stein's circle in Paris, including Picasso and the others who have headlined art history. Hartley was featured in the all-im-

portant 1913 Armory Show that introduced fully-blossomed modernism to America. Not only did he participate in the modernist circle of Paris, in Berlin he became a friend and colleague of the Russians Franz Marc

LEGENDS

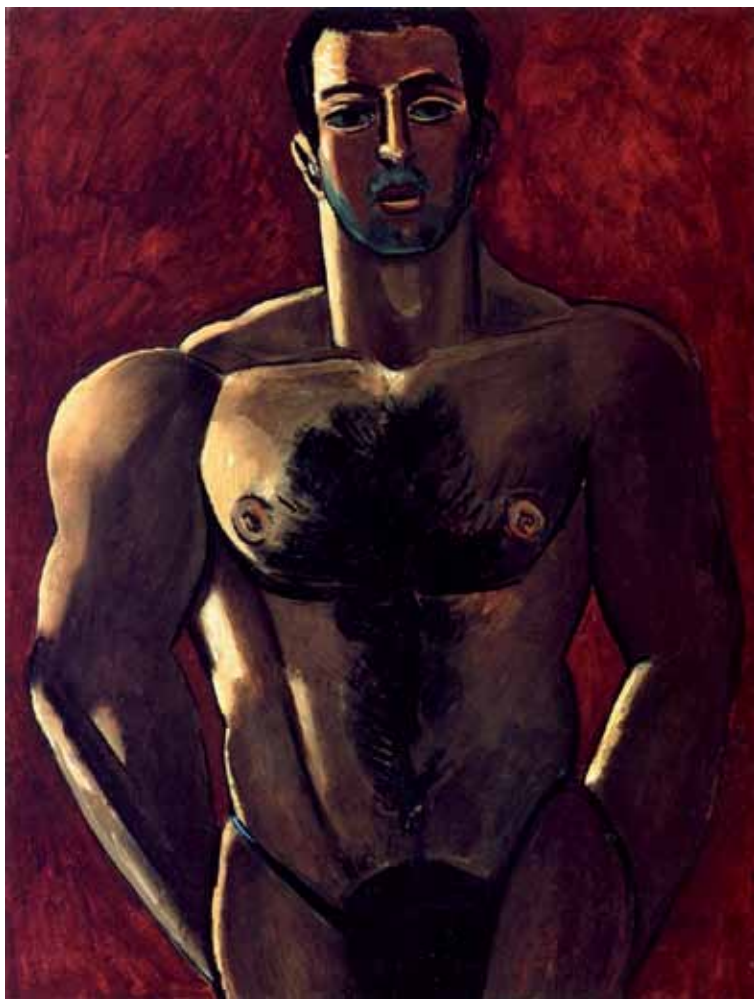


and Wassily Kandinsky, the great painterly spiritualist and pioneer of abstraction.

More famously, during his time in Berlin, Hartley met Prussian lieutenant Karl von Freyburg, who became the love of his life. Von Freyburg was the cousin of Hartley's friend Arnold Ronnebeck, and he was the subject of Hartley's best-known paintings—the *Portrait of a German Officer* series—after von Freyburg was killed in battle in October 1914. These paintings feature bold and bright presentations not of the man but his regalia—his associated symbols and markers of military pageantry.

EARLY YEARS

Born in Lewiston as Edmund Hartley (he later took his mother's maiden name, Marsden), the painter had a tough and lonely life as a young man in Maine. The youngest of nine children to immigrant parents, his mother died when he was eight years old.



One Portrait of One Woman (pictured left), 1916, oil on composition board, 30" x 25", University of Minneapolis

This is a 1916 symbolic portrait of Gertrude Stein, the American expat whose salons at 27 rue de Fleurus were the intellectual soul of the Parisian modernist art scene frequented by the likes of Picasso and Matisse. Hartley was the first American painter Stein encouraged, and she featured a word portrait of Hartley in her play *IIIIIIIIII*. Hartley's placement of "Moi"—me, or I—is witty: It can be seen as a label of Stein-I—or as Hartley's marker at the table across from his supporter. This playful and witty deployment of a vast range of symbols and their possibilities reveals Hartley's sophisticated understanding of late (Synthetic) cubism.

The Ice Hole (pictured opening page), 1908, oil on canvas, 34" x 34", New Orleans Museum of Art.

In 1908, Hartley lived at an old farm near Lovell, Maine, where he painted series of the mountains and winter landscapes including *The Ice Hole*. It is a transformational image: Men had mined the lake for ice and so created a hole in the frozen landscape for fishing. The negative form of the cut-ice shape is the keystone to Hartley's fascinated meditation on the literal and metaphorical opening of the hole between human culture and the hidden mysteries of nature's landscape.



At age 14, he was left behind for a year to work in a factory when his family moved to Ohio. But Hartley persevered. He enrolled at the Cleveland School of Art. And at 22, he moved to New York to study under William Merritt Chase. There, he attended the New York School of Art and then the National Academy of Design.

From 1912 to 1916, Hartley lived and worked in Europe, returning because of WWI. He went back to Europe from 1921 to 1930. In 1937, after time spent working in New York, New Mexico, California, and Canada, Hartley came home to become, as he proclaimed, “the painter of Maine.” He painted mostly around Lovell, Corea, and Ellsworth, where he died in 1943.

A particularly vivid chapter of Hartley’s life was the time he spent in Nova Scotia in 1935 and 1936 living with the Masons, a fishing family of East Point Island. Hartley, an able poet and writer, penned *Cleophas* and *His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy*, a story based the Masons. But it is the paintings from and about this period that have become ever more poignant and piercing.



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LEGENDS



Marsden Hartley on the beach in Cannes, 1925.
Gelatin silver print, photographer unknown.

SEEN AND UNSEEN

There is no question Hartley's homosexuality played a role in his art. The extent to which it was closeted, coded, or crucial, however, is less clear. For example, it is easy to project erotic content in Hartley's depictions of the boxer—the *Acadian Light Heavy*—who modeled for classes he taught in Bangor. But we need to consider these as depictions associated with a figurative art class, and, more importantly, within the context of Hartley's notion of beauty. Just because he depicted the Mason boys as beautiful doesn't mean Hartley, who was in his late 50s when he knew them, was creating homoerotic depictions of them. Two of the Mason family's boys and their cousin, in fact, drowned, an event that reopened the deep wounds in Hartley's soul. Not only had he lost the love of his life, but his friend Hart Crane had committed suicide in 1932 by jumping off a ship after he had sustained a horrific beating apparently because of unwelcome advances towards one of the ship's crew.

Eight Bells Folly: Memorial to Hart Crane (top left, previous page) depicts a sailing ship with "33" on the sails (a reference to Hart's age when he died) and several references to "eight bells," which stands for noon, the hour Crane committed suicide. There is also a large shark in the foreground, an apparent painting reference to John Singleton Copley's early 1778 masterpiece *Watson and the Shark* with its notion of terror and the specter of violence moving towards a vulnerable young man. What is missing from the sym-

DETAIL FROM: PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, MARSDEN HARTLEY, CANNES, (1925), GELATIN SILVER PRINT, 3.5" X 5 9/16", NORMA BERGER ESTATE, BATES COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

bol-laden image is a depiction of Crane. In fact, this is a theme with Hartley. Despite the beautiful corporeal presence of the boxer and the Canadian fishermen, Hartley's most important "portraits" of his gay colleagues depict them indirectly: Hartley's seminal *Portrait of a German Officer* (pictured previous page) paintings follow a cubist path of semiotic symbolism to refer to his lover, and his portrait 1916 of Gertrude Stein, *One Portrait One Woman*, recently on view at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art's *This is a Portrait if I Say So* exhibition, similarly renders its subject poetically through symbols rather than depicted resemblance: It's a portrait, but there is no picture of a person.

In other words, Hartley's portrait of homosexuality appears as the body invisible: a coded identity, or, rather, identity as code. Moreover, it is this insight about painting that made Hartley the greatest interpreter of Picasso's and Braque's late cubism, possibly the first person to fully grasp the implications of synthetic cubism. With his *German Officer* paintings, we can say Hartley paved the way for Magritte's iconic 1948 *The Treachery of Images* in which a depiction of a pipe reads "This is not a pipe." Of course it's not a pipe, we now see: It is a depiction of a pipe. It is a picture, not the thing itself—and pictures are simply sets of codes.

MAKING OF A MASTER

Was Hartley's inverted body ("invert" was a term of the time for homosexual) the body invisible? Instead of the stoic heroic, Hartley showed us the beauty of the young men sacrificed to work and war—recognizing beauty as the necessary backdrop for tragedy. Hartley had admonished Crane for his dangerously unguarded cruising of the streets of New York. Straight hipsters now sometimes brag of their prowess with "gaydar" (that ability to "tell") while missing the point that remaining sufficiently coded and camouflaged was, at times, an issue of life and death. This insight may have been why Hartley was able to fully understand the deepest implications of cubism based on the idea that painterly language is a set of legible codes. In other words, Hartley's need for the body invisible may have set "the painter of Maine" precisely on the path to becoming America's greatest modernist painter. ■

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