



ArtSeen

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Marsden Hartley's Maine

by Noah Dillon

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Is Marsden Hartley's pre-war America great? Though seemingly full of promise and productivity, in civic and art historical terms, the scenes and scapes within his paintings also constitute a world that repressed sexual desire, celebrated extractive industries, and segregated race, class, gender even more harshly than today. His Maine is a Rorschach test in which we can find conflicting strands of ideals and inspirations, and the world as it painfully and beautifully is.

The current survey, *Marsden Hartley's Maine* at the Met Breuer, likely wasn't curated with the outcome of the recent presidential election in mind, but one can't help considering it in those terms. Focusing on works rooted in the state where he was born and died—Maine—the ideas and histories of Regionalism and historical memory aroused by these ninety paintings and drawings now take a different cast than they might have just six months ago.

A video projection covering an entire large wall greets visitors as they enter, showing big mesmerizing waves crashing—presumably against Maine's rocky coast—overlaid with the exhibition's title. (This is echoed later on in a series of paintings from the late 1930s and early 1940s.) It's a pleasurable, if oddly anachronistic way to start the show, which jumps immediately backwards to works over a century old, starting in 1907.

Here, Hartley feels expansive. His earliest drawings appear predictive of Futurism, with locals at work formed by twisting ropes and whirlwinds of graphite lines, such as in *Woodcutter* (1908)—Mainers sawing logs, crocheting, chopping wood. The paintings, landscapes inheriting post-Impressionist daubing, are dense. Many have an unusual, squarish format, and unlike, say, Paul Cézanne or Georges Seurat, whose depth of field can stretch far into the distance, Hartley's most exciting early pictures of the countryside are close-in and claustrophobically flattened; you can see inklings of Jackson Pollock in paintings like *Maine Woods* (1908), the roots of America's first artistic identity.



Marsden Hartley, *Canuck Yankee Lumberjack at Old Orchard Beach, Maine, 1940 – 41*. Oil on Masonite-type hardboard. 40 1/8 × 30 inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute.

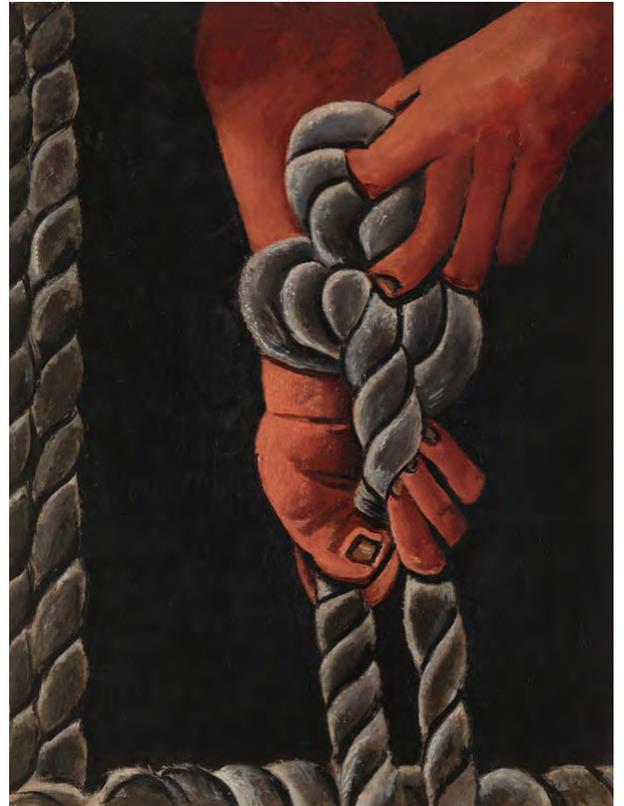
Interspersed throughout the galleries, with typically one or two per room, are works by other artists from the museum's collection, including woodblock prints by Hokusai, a lithograph by Cézanne, paintings by Winslow Homer and Albert Pinkham Ryder, antique American folk artworks, and photographic portraits of Hartley by his friend Edward Steichen. In those pictures, he looks distant, sad, loving, and sweet. Having them is sweet. This vision of rural America feels very sweet.

In places, the inclusion of others' artworks swamp Hartley's own. A selection of his "Dark Landscapes", made in 1909 – 10 and later expanded in 1924, which appear unresolved, is accompanied by a small and damaged painting by Ryder, which completely devours the room and its attentions. Likewise, a seascape by Homer, a couple rooms over, serves as a great formal reverberation of Hartley's heavy waves, but risks upstaging him, too.

The hanging of this show, excepting the opening video, is much more conservative and protective than the Breuer's first two exhibitions since opening, fitting the space handsomely—tidy and chronological. Skipping much between 1912 – 30, when Hartley spent a lot of time living and working in Europe, one room displays later scenes and portraits, pictures of people at the beach, particularly young men, such as *Flaming American (Swim Champ)* (1939 – 40) and *Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy* (1940). The hyper-masculine depictions, unlike the paintings of churches, woods, and seascapes, look less like Tom's of Maine and more like Tom of Finland. And here people work. Maine's traditional economic centers—fishing, logging, trapping, shipbuilding—are visible throughout the show, though dwindling from focus in the state itself, which is perhaps now better associated with L.L. Bean (championed by Trump), paper pulping, opioids, and potato farming.

The last gallery captures views of Mt. Katahdin, in central Maine. It is the northern head of the Appalachian Trail—one of the American park system's crown jewels, spanning fourteen states, all the way to Georgia. It was developed as part of the New Deal, a national and regional effort that has been steadily undermined, piece by piece, for decades by politicians such as the Bushes—who keep a family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine—and the state's current governor, Paul LePage, who's called himself "Donald Trump before Donald Trump became popular." Painted over and again by Hartley between 1939 and his death in 1943, Maine's highest point is given the same reverence here as Mt. Fuji (by Hokusai and Hiroshige) and described as Hartley's Mont Sainte-Victoire. (A colorful 1927 rendition of that famous alpine peak by Hartley is included, too, as a copy of Cézanne or an homage, or as a means of inhabiting his hero's shoes.)

What is Hartley's focus on place for us, today? Rural America has expressed revulsion over the past year—not claiming an identity rooted in Maine or Kansas or Idaho so much as the rural working-class forgotten—against wealthier urbanites, in regions as geographically and culturally diverse as San Francisco, Houston, Miami, and New York. How did we get from Hartley to here? And is his nostalgia palliative? One thing heard over and over during the election was that those from red counties felt



Marsden Hartley, *Knotting Rope*, 1939 – 40. Oil on board. 28 × 22 inches. Private collection, New York.

unheard and unrecognized. Perhaps one of the most important things that can be taken from Hartley now is an interest and attempt to see one's countrymen, who they are, as they are, where they are.

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by Bradley Rubenstein

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