


Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation

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Donna M. Cassidy *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation* Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004. 416 pp.; 17 color ill.; 150 b/w ill. Cloth \$39.95 (1584654465)

Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) remains one of the most fascinating figures in the history of early twentieth-century American art, in no small part due to his extraordinary ability to act at once as a consolidator of boundaries and a boundary-crosser. In his best-known paintings, Hartley presented compelling images of American modernist, regionalist, and nationalist identity, iconic representations that seem to operate within the familiar parameters of place and character, just as they venture creatively beyond them. During the mid-nineteen-thirties, for example, Hartley developed a highly innovative compositional strategy in which he presented regional subjects so familiar that they were virtually interchangeable with the visual culture of the tourist industry associated with his native state of Maine. In these strikingly original paintings, Hartley placed ubiquitously popular--even archetypal--scenes of lighthouses, seascapes, and marine creatures within a central plane of brilliant color, which he then surrounded with dark, incidental items such as cut logs, twisted ropes, buoys, and driftwood. These tangential framing elements served at once to locate the luminous center of the scene securely within a homespun, coastal, or wooded context, just as these adjacent elements dramatically isolated the pictorial focal point, encasing its distinctive glow while setting it apart in all its vivid radiance.

In various ways, this aesthetic strategy can be seen as a metaphor for the portrait of Hartley himself that emerges in Donna Cassidy's important new book, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation*. This study represents a decade-and-a-half of the author's meticulous research, as she carefully reconstructs the social and cultural bases underpinning the representational strategies that Hartley adopted as he purposefully crafted his own artistic identity during the later phase of his career, circa 1934-43. Prominently identifying himself as the "painter from Maine," the artist situated both his own public persona and the overall character of his work within the context of his local, regional, and national surroundings. In so doing, he placed himself firmly within the socially integrated structures of North Atlantic life in order to set himself apart as one of his region's brightest cultural luminaries.

As this example suggests, Cassidy's text is itself an impressively multi-layered, composite work that is a product not only of modernist art history but of rigorous cross-disciplinary inquiry in American Studies and New England Studies. At the outset, it becomes clear that two internally opposing constructs inform the nature of the text's scholarly exposition and its corresponding interpretive investments. The first issue concerns the scope of the book and its range of subject matter. By focusing primarily on the final decade of the artist's career, Cassidy goes narrow--artistically and chronologically, in her treatment of Hartley's oeuvre--in order to go broad, socially, culturally, and historically. In turn, this approach relates directly to the ambivalent construction of modernism that Cassidy identifies in Hartley's later artistic practice. She posits a dialogical tension between modernism and regionalism, casting the latter term as a collective form of anti-modernist nostalgia and as a type of later-modernist artistic production, one that was adopted not only by Hartley himself but by such prominent contemporaries as Charles Sheeler, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe. Cassidy thus seeks to reposition Hartley beyond the dominant art-historical discourses that are informed either by formalist aesthetics or prevalent conceptions of modernist individualism, thereby placing the artist within an informed social history that spans the multiple national cultures Hartley himself engaged during the thirties and early forties, including those of the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Germany. As Cassidy observes, Hartley's

... complicated late career was not only a long-awaited homecoming, the culmination of a lifelong search for home, but Hartley's response to cultural change. Returning to Maine [in 1937], he contributed to the central discourses of the period--regionalism, historical reconstruction and mythmaking, primitivizing the folk, masculinizing the gay man, creating a new race. The Maine paintings show Hartley not as the mythic modern artist but as a painter engaged in his culture with multiple, sometimes conflicting values. These works show a Hartley beyond the usual construct of modernism. (13)

The book is divided into three primary sections, followed by a supplementary selection of seven essays by Hartley on a range of New England subjects. The essays, which date from 1931 to 1938, include four previously unpublished pieces in the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The inclusion of these primary documents helps to balance the text rhetorically by presenting Hartley as a cultural critic as well as the subject of art criticism and historical inquiry.

In the first part of the book, Cassidy situates Hartley's paintings in relation to the marketing strategies associated with the popular culture of the tourist industry, ranging from Yankee magazine (which was launched in 1935), to early L. L. Bean mail-order catalogs, to the vacation literature produced by the

Maine Development Commission. As Cassidy astutely observes, this powerful visual cultural currency provided Hartley with a means of claiming "aesthetic ownership of very salable Maine places" (80), just as it allowed him to produce a commercially successful and critically acclaimed body of images.

In the second section, Cassidy examines Hartley's purposeful refashioning of American history to construct a "usable past," to paraphrase the author and literary critic Van Wyck Brooks. The appropriation of salient national cultural symbols enabled Hartley to solidify his American identity in the wake of his previous, extensive international travels and periodic bouts of expatriation. Through the expressive vehicles of autobiography, the heroic iconography of Abraham Lincoln, and the collection of New England antiques and historical artifacts, Hartley engaged in a potent form of cultural mythologizing, a practice that was broadly appealing during the hardships of the Depression era and the uncertainties preceding the Second World War.

In the final chapters of the book, Cassidy situates Hartley's figural works in relation to the typologies of primitivism, the working-class male body, and North Atlantic folk culture. While the initial portions of the study focus primarily on American materials, the concluding chapters are informed by in-depth, cross-cultural comparisons, as Cassidy extensively reconstructs contemporary artistic practices and social developments in Germany, where Hartley spent extended periods of time prior to his permanent relocation to Maine. However, here one wishes that the discussions of primitivism as a nostalgic, anti-modernist (modernist) construction were linked in a more sustained fashion to the ambivalent conception of modernism that Cassidy identifies as underpinning Hartley's "New England variety" of regionalism, as discussed in the first section of the text.

The key issues in play are especially interesting. Throughout both Hartley's private correspondence and his published art, literary, and cultural criticism, the artist continually presents himself as being at once sympathetically connected to, yet distinctively set apart from, the people and locales he inhabits. As Cassidy aptly notes, this multiple sense of self-positioning, expressed through Hartley's ambivalent dynamic of identification with and separation from his surroundings, contributed directly to the strength and complexity of his artworks. Not surprisingly, these issues become particularly charged in Hartley's exaggerated representations of working-class masculinity. As Cassidy demonstrates, the muscular physiques of hunters, trappers, woodsmen, fishermen, boxers, and bathers provided Hartley with a means to express his own homoerotic desires, just as these figures could simultaneously signify classical ideals of athleticism, health, and vital national masculinity. Especially intriguing are Hartley's composite ethnic formulations of Yankee typologies, which equated notions of spirituality, sexuality, and race with the alluring promise of social regeneration. Ultimately, the conclusion Cassidy reaches is as important as it is surprising and seemingly contradictory. With considerable thoroughness and

expertise, she demonstrates that "a commitment to conservative politics did not preclude an artist's involvement with modernism, and a commitment to modernist aesthetics did not preclude artists like Hartley from producing work shaped by reactionary social, political, or racial values" (286).

This book represents the product of the sustained thought and probing inquiry Cassidy has devoted to these fascinating and complicated subjects, as she investigates the place of the local within the various, sometimes conflicting, ideologies that informed conceptions of American identity during the nineteen-thirties and early forties. Cassidy has produced an archivally solid and conceptually powerful account of Hartley that suggestively extends the familiar parameters of the artistic monograph, just as she critically repositions Hartley's paintings, writings, and rhetoric within an expanded--and evermore complex--field of social inquiry.

Credit: Marcia Brennan

AuthorAffiliation

Marcia Brennan, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, Rice University, mbrennan@rice.edu