

Marsden Hartley in Berlin 1913-1915

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FOR MARSDEN HARTLEY in 1913, Berlin was "without question the finest modern city in Europe."¹ When he first arrived in January, the city was already beginning its gala celebration of "a Hohenzollern year." The year 1913 was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the throne. It also marked the centenary of the Battle of Leipzig, where Prussia, Russia, and Austria decisively defeated Napoleon's army. The Prussians were extremely proud of their army and the military staged massive parades along the broad expanses of the Unter den Linden in honor of the Kaiser's Jubilee.

Hartley's absorption with Berlin figures in all of the paintings that he produced there during the period from 1913 to 1915. Many of his pictures reflect his passionate interest in the German military with its handsome officers and its colorful pageantry. Others demonstrate his fascination with the modernity of Berlin —with its electricity and its Zeppelins, as well as his own yearning for acceptance from Europe's cultural vanguard and for recognition as an expatriate American artist working in the "modern tendency." With that ambition in mind Hartley also explored abstract imagery influenced by American Indian art which he saw on display in the ethnographic collections of Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde.²

In choosing Berlin over Munich as the place to live in Germany, Hartley asserted his independence from his new friends, the Russian expatriate Wassily Kandinsky and his German colleague Franz Marc.³ Although he admired *Der Blaue Reiter*, the almanac they had edited with its combination of modern, non-Western, and folk art illustrations, Hartley preferred to live amid the urban excitement of Berlin, claiming "I like the color of Berlin — It has movement and energy and leans always a little over the edge of the future instead of leaning so heavily in the past as other nations & places must. It is

essentially the center of modern life in Europe."⁴

Hartley delighted in the Prussian military displays and he adored the sight of the tall Prussian officers arrogantly strutting down Berlin's streets. "I have always loved these public spectacles — The military life adds so much in the way of a sense of perpetual gaiety here in Berlin. It gives the stranger like myself the feeling that some great festival is being celebrated always."⁵

Hartley particularly enjoyed the city's nightlife which he contrasted to Paris during his brief return to the French capital before he settled in Berlin later that spring: "I suppose I have never been so bored in my life as here in Paris in the evening — the cafes are so dull & most of them so filthy and after the cleanliness of Berlin — nothing is possible in Paris."⁶ Hartley explained his enthusiasm for the Prussian capital to his dealer Alfred Stieglitz who had himself lived in Berlin in the 1880s when he took up the pursuit of photography: "I found so much in Berlin that was agreeable: the fine climate — the good food — the clean conditions & the wondrous love of stillness — there is probably no city which has done more to suppress ugliness than Berlin."⁷

Part of the "ugliness" suppressed in Berlin was intolerance to homosexuality. Instead, there was a relative openness that must have appealed to Hartley who was himself homosexual. Homosexuals were known to be in the Kaiser's entourage and, by 1914, there were about forty homosexual bars and, according to police estimates, nearly two thousand male prostitutes.⁸ Sexual freedom in early twentieth-century Germany extended beyond homosexuals to a general rebellion against middle class values.

In fact, it was Hartley's affection for two German men that first inspired him to visit Berlin. During the summer of 1912, not long after his arrival in Europe, he wrote to Stieglitz from Paris, expressing his enthusiasm for these young Berliners and his desire to visit their home: "I am hoping that I can go to Berlin to see the galleries in the early spring for since I have the friendship of these fine German boys — the sculptor [Arnold Rönnebeck] and the handsome officer [his cousin, Karl Von Freyburg], they are anxious to have me go there, and the sculptor goes back for two months service then. I could have such a grand time with these fellows."⁹ Hartley was then thirty-five

years old; Rönnebeck was twenty-seven and Von Freyburg was twenty-two.

Hartley's enthusiastic response to the German pre-war pageantry is expressed in paintings such as *Warriors*, *Portrait of Berlin*, *Painting No. 48*, and *Military*, all of 1913, and *Berlin Ante-War* of 1914. The helmeted equestrian figure in a circle in the lower right of *Portrait of Berlin* surely represents a Prussian officer, perhaps Lieutenant Karl von Freyburg whom Hartley so admired. Pre-war military pageantry and Christian and Oriental mysticism, all of which fascinated Hartley at this time, are reflected in images of equestrian soldiers, a Buddha, a cross, and triangles containing the mystic number eight.¹⁰ Similar equestrian soldiers appear in surviving photographs of the period, complete with their distinctive high helmets and triangular banners. The soldiers recur in *Warriors* where two eight-pointed stars figure prominently in medallions at the base of the composition. Hartley told Stieglitz that he saw these stars "everywhere in Berlin... all the kings wore it over their heart - - the soldier on the forehead..."¹¹

What Hartley referred to as a "mystical presentation of the number 8," which he said he saw all over Berlin, is even more prominently featured in *Painting No. 48*.¹² The presence of a cross again links Hartley's picture to his interest in the Christian mystics such as Jacob Boehme, whose *The Super-sensual Life or the Life Which is Above Sense Being Two Dialogues Between a Scholar or Disciple and his Master* remained in Hartley's library to the end of his life.¹³ Significantly, Hartley featured the figure "8" within a large mandorla, the almond shape that often symbolizes the perpetual sacrifice that regenerates creative force, in part through life and death. The number eight also refers directly to regeneration because it was on the eighth day after the entry of Christ into Jerusalem that the resurrection took place. For Hartley, the city of Berlin offered a psychological and aesthetic regeneration in its freer atmosphere and lively cultural avant-garde.

The city that so struck Hartley also impressed others. With a population of over two million, Berlin had nearly tripled in size since the middle of the nineteenth century. The fast-developing Prussian capital, which supported important new electrical and chemical industries in an expansionist economy,

pulsated with the energy of modernity. The culture of Berlin took on an international flavor where, for example, one could see the latest Scandinavian plays, Russian dancers, and French and Russian paintings. Years later, Hartley recalled "hearing the best music, and...seeing all the novelties of these new ideas of the theatre..."¹⁴

Stieglitz wrote to Hartley encouraging him to make the most of his "German connections" and reminiscing about the nine years he had spent as a student in the Prussian capital: "I liked the order, the cleanliness, and the whole atmosphere of go-aheadness; and that was all nothing more than a preparation of what Germany was to reap after the year '90 when I left."¹⁵ He also recalled twenty-five years earlier, "when the Emperor Frederick came to Berlin but to die, and the day when the present Emperor took charge of affairs. I sat on a balcony of Cafe Bauer and saw him ride down the Linden at the head of his troop. It was an impressive sight." Stieglitz, having shared Hartley's enthusiasm for both Berlin and German military display, was the expatriate painter's ideal audience.

While admiring Berlin's material splendors, Hartley cultivated spiritual visions. His continuing enthusiasm for mystical texts helped to formulate his philosophical outlook and, as noted above, he made explicit references to such ideas in some of his paintings. Gail Scott has demonstrated that Hartley's 1913 painting *Raptus* refers to a passage in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* where James recounts the state of *raptus* or *ravishment* experienced by Christian mystics such as Saint Theresa and Saint John of the Cross.¹⁶ For James, neither verbal description nor graphic imagery could communicate this state of ecstasy or raptus which he believed extended beyond intellect.¹⁷

Yet for Hartley, who told Stieglitz in late May 1913 that his paintings reflected his "visionary point of view" and that "they have to do with religious attitudes,"¹⁸ the magical emanation of electric light could serve as a visual metaphor for spiritual entrancement. Thus, Hartley, who would certainly have known of interest in electric light on the part of the Delaunays and perhaps among the Italian Futurists as well, seems to have adapted one of the many images that Peter Behrens placed on posters and promotional literature for the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-

Gesellschaft (AEG) in pre-war Berlin. The central form in *Raptus*, with its diagonal lines converging in the center of a circle, specifically recalls Behrens' cover design for the 1911 AEG brochure of the Berlin company.¹⁹ Hartley's interest in modern German technology is also evident in his 1914 painting, *The Aero*, discussed below.

In September 1913, Hartley was able to exhibit five of his paintings in the First German Autumn Salon (*Erster deutscher Herbstsalon*) held at Herwath Walden's gallery Der Sturm. Hartley was proud to be in this international avant-garde exhibition along with artists such as Kandinsky, Marc, and others from The Blue Rider Group (*Der Blaue Reiter*). Only three other Americans were included: Albert Bloch whose work had been included in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, Lyonel Feininger who had lived in Germany for many years, and Patrick Henry Bruce who lived in Paris where he was a close friend of the Delaunays who were both included.

Hartley was of the opinion that the Delaunays were given too much space in the exhibition. He pronounced the display of Robert's paintings "a pleasant thing to look at" but concluded that Sonia's decorative works came "to little as to real expression," he noted that the simultaneous dress that Sonia wore at the exhibition banquet was "Amusing but not outside of the most ultracircles of Paris where aesthetics run mad."²⁰ Hartley, who was counting on Marc and Kandinsky to help him "make connections" to show and sell his work,²¹ may have been jealous of the Delaunays' status.

When Hartley's fortunes did not immediately prosper in Germany, he was forced to return to New York in November 1913 in order to raise money to continue to live in Berlin. Stieglitz gave him his third one-man exhibition at 291 in January 1914. In his catalogue statement, Hartley declared: "A PICTURE IS BUT A GIVEN SPACE WHERE THINGS OF MOMENT WHICH HAPPEN TO THE PAINTER OCCUR." He went on to proclaim: "THE IDEA OF MODERNITY IS BUT A NEW ATTACHMENT TO THINGS UNIVERSAL — A FRESH RELATIONSHIP TO THE COURSES OF THE SUN AND TO THE LIVING SWING OF THE EARTH..."²² After brief visits to London and Paris, Hartley was able to return to Berlin at the end of April 1914.

Back in Berlin, Hartley painted *Berlin Series No. 2*, reflect-

ing the influence of Marc in the compact crouching white horse. He knew Marc's *White Bull* especially well for it was reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*. Earlier Hartley had explained to Stieglitz that he found Marc to be "extremely psychic in his rendering of the soul life of animals."²³ But Hartley did not paint works in the shadow of Marc for long. Rather he sought his own identity in more personal subject matter.

Around this time, Hartley began his "Amerika" series, utilizing motifs of American Indians. He reported to Stieglitz that he had nearly finished four paintings on the theme when the war began in August 1914.²⁴ Hartley's image of the Indian was as "the peaceable and unobtrusive citizen" and as exemplary of the nobility of mankind. In his frustration over the war, Hartley told Stieglitz that he wished he were an Indian and that he longed to emulate them by painting his face with their symbols and going west, facing the sun forever.²⁵ The same colorful bold forms and painted frames occur in other works of 1914 such as *Paris Days...Pre War* or *Painting Number Three*. The former work, obviously titled after the fact, probably reflects Hartley's visit to the French capital on his way back to Berlin. While in Paris, he saw the Salon des Indépendants where he admired Robert Delaunay's *Homage to Blériot*, an abstract tribute to the pioneering French aviator.²⁶ Hartley was well aware that Kandinsky and Marc held Delaunay in high esteem and had included his pictures in their almanac to which he himself hoped to contribute.²⁷ The colorful disks in Delaunay's paintings surely reverberate in the bright polychromed circles that appear in Hartley's 1914 canvases.

The Aero, a canvas of 1914, also has connections to Delaunay, who depicted airplanes and dirigibles at least as early as 1909.²⁸ In late May 1913, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz that he had a canvas called "Extase d'aéroplane" that was his "notion of the possible ecstasy or soul state of an aeroplane."²⁹ He described this picture to Stieglitz as "of necessity symmetrical in design because the objects themselves are such..."³⁰ This symmetry is not evident in *Aero* of 1914, which has been associated with Hartley's 1913 description. In *Aero*, his earlier conception has been replaced by a strange floating red form with flame-like appendages set against a ground composed of various military insignia and banners. Although the red form

might seem to refer to an airplane, it more likely represents the "lighter than air" school of flying — the dirigible or Zeppelin.

When Germany's newest dirigible, the L2, crashed in a burst of flame in October 1913, killing all but one of its twenty-eight passengers, the Kaiser himself drew a sketch to commemorate the tragic loss. His commemorative picture, which featured a naval airship lighthouse on a rocky coast and a shining cross in the sky, included a figure of Germania holding the imperial shield and Christ with his crown of thorns.³¹ The floating or flying red shape in Hartley's picture is accompanied by a red cross on the lower right.

The Kaiser's reference to a naval airship lighthouse in his sketch may explain the appearance of the motif of a lighthouse in a little-known Hartley painting of April 1915 identified as *Leuchtturm*. Otherwise, the image of a lighthouse has few associations with Berlin which is not on the sea coast. This painting appears to be closely related to the "Amerika" pictures with their Indian themes. For example, the stick-like motif in the center of the mandorla shape suggests maize in the art of the Hopi. Hartley used the same motif superimposed on a mandorla within the teepee of his canvas *Indian Fantasy* of 1914.

Despite the inauspicious conditions of the war, Hartley wanted to remain in Berlin. With that goal in mind, in late October, he wrote to Mabel Dodge to collect the balance of the purchase price of a picture that she had purchased from Stieglitz. Hartley insisted that he was "stuck" in Berlin: "I cannot leave here because I am all tied down and there is no reason for me to..."³² He rhapsodized about "how nice the Germans are....Here in Berlin one simply knows there is a war & that is all — The people are calm & thoughtful and as always wonderfully undemonstrative — they know the secret of keeping one's head — and while it would seem like stolidity to some — it is actually a fine faculty for keeping cool."³³ Still, Hartley had no use for the war itself, which he called "the shame of all civilization" and he feared for the lives of his German friends who were soldiers.³⁴

On October 7, 1914, Hartley's friend von Freyburg, after being awarded an Iron Cross, was killed in action near Amiens, France. Von Freyburg's cousin, Rönnebeck, was wounded and hospitalized. Hartley was devastated by the death of his

beloved friend. He wrote to Stieglitz of his anguish at the loss of "that altogether necessary fellow" who was "much loved by everyone."³⁵ His mourning prompted a series of abstract paintings about the late German officer. In Hartley's *Portrait* (1914), *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914), and other paintings in this series, elements of von Freyburg's uniform become abstract elements in the composition. His hat, his Iron Cross, his epaulettes, and even his initials, KvF, are visible in various combinations.

The meaning of Hartley's 1915 painting, *Himmel*, is less obvious. Its title, which means "heaven" in German, is written boldly across a plaque containing two eight-pointed stars on the upper left of the picture. On a second plaque, located at the bottom of the composition is the word "Hölle," written upside down. Hölle means hell in German, so just as heaven faces up, hell faces down. Next to the bottom plaque is a rectangle with an equestrian sculpture depicted between two eight-pointed stars. This figure may be meant to recall the giant nineteenth-century monument to Frederick the Great by Daniel Christian Rauch, which is prominently displayed on the Unter den Linden near the Staatsbibliothek, the city's main library. Perhaps Hartley was thinking of von Freyburg, his deceased friend, who, unlike the Prussian leader, would merit no public memorial sculpture. Grief-stricken, Hartley created his own private memorial in this and other paintings.

During the war, indeed after the death of von Freyburg, Hartley continued to paint his "Amerika" pictures. One such painting, known today as *Schiff* in German because of the canoe which is central to the composition, was finished in April 1915.³⁶ The canoe is surely based on the Chippewa models Hartley saw in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. The cut-out wings across the top of the composition, however, recall the Prussian eagle as depicted in German folk art at the time Hartley was in Berlin.³⁷ The eagle was the symbol of Prussia, the emblem of the Hohenzollerns who became the Kaisers.³⁸ Indeed, the folk motifs were adaptations of the *Kaiserstandarte*, the official sign of the emperor.

Furthermore, the plant forms at the bottom of *Schiff* are reminiscent of the flowers and plants that frequently decorate hand-painted German folk furniture. Hartley's interest in such

folk motifs is consistent with his admiration for Bavarian *Hinterglasmalerei*, the folk paintings applied to the back of glass that he collected under the influence of Kandinsky and the circle of *Der Blaue Reiter*.³⁹ Indeed, Hartley's painted frames, such as that on *Schiff*, probably echo those that Kandinsky made for his own glass paintings.

In October 1915, Hartley's show of more than forty paintings and several drawings opened at the Berlin branch of the Graphic-Verlag of Munich. In September, a show of forty-five of his early drawings had opened at the Schames Galerie in Frankfurt. *The New York Times* reported his Berlin show in an article captioned: "Artist Astounds Germans."⁴⁰ Hartley, in his catalogue statement, proclaimed that his untitled paintings were "characterizations of the Moment, everyday pictures, of every day, every hour." He insisted: "I am free from all conventional aesthetics, and leave every artist his..." He considered himself "visionary." Despite his bravado, Hartley did not find the financial support he was seeking.

In December 1915, when he could no longer sustain himself in Berlin, Hartley sailed for New York. Although he was soon to deny his Berlin pictures represented any more than those forms "which I have observed casually from day to day," the paintings that he made there are filled with personal associations and meaning. Yet anti-German feelings in 1916 New York, when Hartley first showed many of these works at 291, caused him to claim "There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them..."⁴¹

Today we know differently. Hartley's Berlin pictures hold our attention not only with their bold colors and forms, but also with their rich associations. If we cannot read all of his subtle layers of meaning, at least we now have clues to help untangle them. His innovative paintings of 1913-1915 chronicle a particular time and place with a power and poignancy unsurpassed by others in the first American Avant-garde.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of February 1913, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter indicated as Yale).
- 2 For a more comprehensive discussion of this aspect of Hartley's work, see Gail Levin, "American Art," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, edited by William Rubin, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), pp. 452-469.
- 3 For the influence of Kandinsky on Hartley, see Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley, Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter," *Arts Magazine*, 52, pp. 156-160.
- 4 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of late May 1913, Yale.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Hartley to Stieglitz, letter of February 1913.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), p.83.
- 9 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of July 30, 1912, Yale.
- 10 See Gail Levin, "Hidden Symbolism in Marsden Hartley's Military Pictures," *Arts Magazine*, 54, October 1979, pp. 154-158 and Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley and Mysticism," *Arts Magazine*, November 1985, 60, pp. 16-21.
- 11 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of August 1913, Yale.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 This volume which Hartley inscribed is now in the Bates College Library, Lewiston, Maine.
- 14 Marsden Hartley, "Somehow a Past," unpublished autobiographical memoir, Yale.
- 15 Alfred Stieglitz to Marsden Hartley, letter of June 16, 1913, Yale. The following two quotations are also from this letter.
- 16 Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1988), p. 39.
- 17 William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan Collier Books, 1961,) pp.319-25.
- 18 Hartley to Stieglitz, letter of late May 1913.
- 19 For this suggestion, I wish to thank Steven Zucker, a member of a seminar on Marsden Hartley that I taught at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. See Tillman Buddenseig and Henning Rogge, *Peter Behrens und die AEG 1907-1914* (Bonn: Mann Verlag, 1980, plate G46).
- 20 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letters of September 22 and 28, 1913, Yale.
- 21 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of June 1913, Yale.
- 22 An Exhibition of Paintings by Marsden Hartley of Berlin and New York, The Photo-Seession, 291 Fifth Avenue, January 12-February 5, 1914. Hartley's entire statement was printed in uppercase letters.
- 23 Hartley to Stieglitz, letter of February 1913, Yale.
- 24 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of November 3, 1914.
- 25 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of November 12, 1914, Yale.
- 26 Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter received May 14, 1914, Yale. For additional discussion of Delaunay's influence on Hartley, see Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley and the European Avant-garde," *Arts Magazine*, 54, September 1979, pp. 158-163 and Gail Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).
- 27 Subsequent issues of *Der Blaue Reiter* were originally intended but were never realized.
- 28 See Sherry A. Buckenrough, *Robert Delaunay: The Discovery of Simultaneity* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 36.
- 29 Hartley to Stieglitz, letter of late May 1913.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 See Virginia Cowles, *1913 An End and A Beginning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968,) p. 82.
- 32 Marsden Hartley to Mabel Dodge, letter of October 1914, Yale.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Hartley to Stieglitz, letter of November 12, 1914, Yale.
- 36 *Schiff and Leuchtturm*, were acquired by the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle from the estate of Dr. Hans-Hasso von Veltheim, a wealthy German baron who owned antiquities galleries in Berlin and Munich. Veltheim, who was twenty-nine when Hartley painted these two canvases, was also homosexual. He surrounded himself at his home, Schloss Ostrau near Halle, Germany, with a circle of poets and painters. Among the other painters he collected were Erich Hackel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, two founders of *Die Brücke*. Veltheim, who was acquainted with Rudolph Steiner, traveled widely in Asia, including China and India. Thus Hartley had much in common with this patron, including homosexuality and interest in Eastern mysticism.
- 37 See the eagle wings on a "Schliessvogel" of circa 1900 in Erika Just, *Museum für Volkskunst Dresden* (Dresden: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, 1984,) pl. 66, Inventory no. A324.
- 38 John Mander, *Berlin: The Eagle and the Bear* (London: Barrie and Rockliffe, 1959), p. 3.
- 39 See Levin, "Marsden Hartley and the European Avant-garde," p. 161.
- 40 "American Artist Astounds Germans, *New York Times*, December 19, 1915, p. 4, (article dated November 5, 1915).
- 41 Marsden Hartley, Artist's Statement in exhibition catalogue, reprinted in *Camera Work*, no. 48, October 1916, p.12.