

61: Marsden Hartley *Waterfall, Morse Pond* (ca. 1940)

Margaret MacDougall

Marsden Hartley's *Waterfall, Morse Pond*¹ demonstrates the synthesis of styles, spirituality, and personal expression that Hartley was able to achieve in his late painting. It is part of a body of work, painted by Hartley on his return to his native Maine in 1937, that celebrates the state's natural beauty, as well as its historical and cultural importance.

The painting was in the personal collection of Hudson D. Walker, Hartley's art dealer, promoter, and close friend, when Harris K. Prior, director of the Memorial Art Gallery, contacted Walker, searching for a "first rate example" of Hartley's work.² Walker, who had vigorously encouraged and promoted the artist, believed that the work Hartley did from 1935 until his death in 1943 was "monumental and American," and he was convinced that Hartley's return to his native Maine was pivotal in his ability to paint with emotion and "universal expression."³ Part of Hartley's genius was his ability to capture a natural setting, and to portray the spirit of the place by reinterpreting it, using the expressionist tools of a modernist.

Hartley painted the waterfall in the late autumn when rich, red colors contrast sharply with the black rocks and cascading water. The artist uses a close-up focus, and crops and eliminates much of the surrounding forest, resulting in an intimate portrait of the waterfall. He captures the reverent stillness and vital energy simultaneously by using strong, stable, geometric lines to outline the rocks and trees, in contrast to the turbulent water, which is formed by thick, white, curving brush strokes. It is a private scene of nature, located ostensibly far from civilization, but Hartley includes cut logs



Marsden Hartley,
1877–1943
Waterfall, Morse Pond, ca. 1940
Oil on board, 22 x 28 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
65.59

at the base of the waterfall, perhaps making reference to the use of this waterway as transportation to the saw mills of Maine's lumber industry. The small glimpse of blue sky gives perspective to the modernist, flat surface and, in contrast with the dark, earthy tones of the water and woods, hints at the artist's connection with the spiritual.⁴

Morse Pond is located deep in the Maine woods,⁵ accessible only by a four-wheel drive vehicle, and is part of a tributary to the Kennebec River, one of the largest rivers in Maine. The waterfall looks today much as it might have sixty-five years ago when Hartley visited it. It is a horizontal rather than vertical waterfall, with churning water spilling around several large, moss-covered boulders, which step down to the stream below. The woods frame the waterfall, and one tree still stands exactly in the middle of the background with blue sky visible behind it.

Hartley's method of painting his late landscapes was to visit a site, either on foot or by being driven (he did not operate a vehicle), and remain at the location for hours, even days, in order to absorb the total essence of the natural setting. He would then, at a later date, paint from memory, drawing on his own interpretation and personal, spiritual connection to the place.⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that he was entranced by the waterfall below Morse Pond. In a poem entitled "Water from the Rock," he describes his attraction and affinity for moving water:

*O—lead me there
To where the pure water gushes forth
From rock made bountiful
With faith.*

*...Cool be thy mercy's flow
river beneath the glowing rock
obstructing not the silver show.
I would not be slow
To sense wonder.⁷*

Hartley loved waterfalls and rushing streams, and would actually immerse himself in the stream under a waterfall and let the water pour over him, delighted by the "old baptism of nature and the hypnosis of water."⁸

Along with *Waterfall, Morse Pond*, Hartley painted other waterfalls, views of the coast, a series of Mt. Katahdin, and a number of remarkable character paintings of lumberjacks, fishermen, and lobstermen. While artists from Fitz Hugh Lane to Winslow Homer chiefly painted the coast of Maine, Hartley searched inland for remote locations that exhibited the beauty of the land but also acknowledged the hardworking natives and their culture. The painting of the waterfall below Morse Pond particularly fits in with a series that Hartley did in reference to the logging industry,⁹ celebrating Maine's natural resources, yet at the same time seeming to warn about exploitation.¹⁰ Lush forests, for instance, are contrasted in the same painting with chopped trees and barren stumps in *Wood Lot, Maine* (1938). Hartley titles one painting of logs which have washed down the Kennebec River, *Ghosts of the Forest, Georgetown* (1937–38).¹¹

Marsden Hartley was originally a Yankee from Lewiston, Maine, who spent much of his restless and peripatetic life outside of New England. When he was studying and painting in New York, he came to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz who, as a great promoter and supporter of young, avant-garde artists, exposed him to the modern art of Matisse and Cézanne. "He knew that I was a traveler," Hartley said, "and that my education lay out in the open free areas of the world—and that I must go wherever my education called for me to go."¹² In 1912, with the financial help of Stieglitz, Hartley went to Paris, met Gertrude Stein, and frequented her home at 27 rue de Fleurus, where he grew excited by modernist ideas and paintings. "They seemed to burn my head off," he remarked in his autobiography.¹³



Waterfall, Morse Pond,
November 4, 2002
Photograph by the author

Hartley returned to Maine in 1937 in response to a search for personal identity and connection, but he was also reacting to emerging nationalism in post-World War I American culture and art.¹⁴ The artists and writers in the Stieglitz group, who showed at the New York gallery An American Place, were determined to define and distinguish American culture from that of Western Europe.¹⁵ In order to appeal to the public, an artist's identity—associated with a particular location, such as Georgia O'Keeffe's with New Mexico—became an important ideological as well as economic goal. In New England there was a strong regionalist movement, much like that in the Midwest, exemplified in art by the seascapes of John Marin, lumberjacks of Waldo Pierce, and the stalwart granite sculptures of William Zorach and Robert Laurent.¹⁶ The expatriate Hartley began a strong bid to become a New England painter, and wrote an essay in which he proclaimed, "I wish to declare myself the painter from Maine."¹⁷ In his essay, Hartley distinguishes himself as a native "Maine-iac" in contrast to Winslow Homer, whom he greatly admired, but who had been "born in Boston,"¹⁸ and John Marin, who had recently been celebrated as a great American painter and a Maine painter after an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.¹⁹ Neither Marin nor Homer was a Maine native, and Hartley began a relentless campaign to claim his right to be "painter laureate" of the state. He wrote numerous letters to the state, to his friends, and to Hudson Walker outlining his intentions.

Yet for all his desire to be "the painter from Maine," a lifetime seeking the transcendent meaning of *place* meant that Hartley's strongest spiritual connection as an artist was to the American mystical painter, Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose *Moonlight Marine* he had seen in 1909. "All my essential Yankee qualities were brought forth out of this picture....It had in it the stupendous solemnity of a Blake mystical picture and it had a sense of realism besides that bore such a force of nature itself as to leave me breathless."²⁰ Hartley, who always derived inspiration from nature, labored to paint the mysticism he found in the work of Ryder, whose spirit is evident in the dark, thick textures of the waterfall at Morse Pond.

Waterfall, Morse Pond is relatively unknown, primarily because it remained in the private collection of Hudson Walker until 1965, but it was part of Hartley's bid to be known as Maine's premier painter. The intimate portrait of the waterfall, painted with the realism of a modernist, incorporates Hartley's spiritual connection to nature and his admiration for the hardworking Yankee character, and exemplifies the extraordinary work he did at the end of his life.

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