

HIDDEN SYMBOLISM IN MARSDEN HARTLEY'S MILITARY PICTURES

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Purposefully cryptic regarding the interpretation of his military pictures of 1913-14, Marsden Hartley vested in them a profound testament. Thus, in the matrix of abstraction lies an impassioned talisman of the Prussian officer Karl von Freyburg.



Fig. 1.
Marsden
Hartley,
Portrait of a
German
Officer,
1914. Oil on
canvas,
68 1/4 x
41-3/8".
Metropo-
litan
Museum of
Art, Alfred
Stieglitz
Collection,
1949.



Fig. 2. Marsden Hartley, Berlin Abstraction (Portrait of a German Officer), 1914. Oil on canvas, 47 x 39 1/4". Collection Barney A. Ebsworth, St. Louis.

Despite the signs of impending disaster, Marsden Hartley chose to remain in Germany after the declaration of war in August 1914.¹ He had lived in Berlin since May 1913, except for an absence of four months, from November 1913 through March 1914, when he returned to New York in order to raise the money necessary to support his life abroad. His two closest friends, Arnold Rönnebeck and Karl von Freyburg, were Prussian officers. Rönnebeck was wounded during the winter of 1914-15, but his cousin Von Freyburg was killed in action in France on October 7, 1914.² At this time, Hartley stopped working on his "Amerika" or Indian theme paintings and began a series of emblematic military pictures, some of which are a direct tribute to his dead friend.

When Hartley finally had to return to New York in December 1915, his paintings from the previous two years in Germany were delayed in transit due to the war. Forty oil paintings from this period were eventually exhibited at "291" from April 4 to May 22, 1916. In Hartley's own statement about this "Germanic group" of pictures, he claimed:

The forms are only those which I have observed casually from day to day. There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them; there is no slight intention of that anywhere. Things under observation, just pictures of any day, any hour. I have expressed only what I have seen. They are merely consultations of the eye. . . my notion of the purely pictorial.³

In his review of this exhibition for the *New York Sun*, art critic Henry McBride wrote:

Fig. 5. Gabriele Münter, Still Life with St. George, 1911. Oil on cardboard, 20 x 26 3/4". Stadtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus.



These works are all terribly modern, of course, else they would not be shown at the Photo-Secession. There are triangles which can be readily accepted as soldier's tents, and there are rhythmic repetitions of horses and constant suggestions of uniforms of dragoons, banners, swords and all the pomp and circumstance of war. So much even a Philadelphian could make out. But as to the exact episode or emotion that the artist portrays there will be less certainty, although Mr. Hartley says he has expressed only what he saw during his travels in Germany.⁴

As McBride expressed his doubts that there was "no hidden symbolism" in Hartley's Germanic paintings, another critic, Charles Caffin, writing in the *New York American*, also questioned Hartley's statement:

He tells us that he has expressed only what he has seen, 'things under observation.' This is no doubt true of many of these paintings; but there are others, such as the two which record, respectively, his sensation on hearing of the death of a friend's horse and on reading a friend's description of a dream. The motive of these is scarcely what has been seen, unless it be in the mind's eye.⁵



Fig. 4. Marsden Hartley, Portrait of Berlin, 1913. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 39 3/8". Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Gift of Mabel Dodge Luhan.



Fig. 3. Marsden Hartley, Portrait Arrangement No. 2, 1912-13. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 31 3/4". Courtesy Weyhe Gallery.

Caffin also wrote in his review that in spite of the recognizable details in Hartley's paintings, "the whole has the intangibility of abstract expression."⁶

Hartley's close friend Arnold Rönnebeck, writing to the art collector Duncan Phillips after Hartley's death, indicates that there is good reason not to accept Hartley's claim of "no hidden symbolism whatsoever." Referring to Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* (Fig. 1), Rönnebeck, a sculptor who later became director of the Denver Art Museum, wrote that he had seen Hartley at work on this painting in the winter of 1914-15 in his studio in Berlin; he explained:

There is a very personal and emotional connection between this picture and myself, because I am partly symbolized in it. I am one half of the Prussian officer. The other half is a cousin of mine. . . Rather dominating is the Iron Cross. My cousin was killed in action in France on the 24th of October, 1914. (24). He was an active officer in the 4th regiment of the Kaiser's guards (center) 4 on blue ground (of shoulder straps). He received the Iron Cross a day before his death. Next to the 4 is an E and I am certain that it is in red on yellow ground which stands for Queen Elisa-



Fig. 6. St. Luke, 1800. Bavarian glass painting, 12 1/4 x 8". Reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*.

beth of Greece or the patroness of the third regiment of the grand-grenadiers in which I then served. The E appears again in the lower middle right on my "full-dress epaulettes" and the long tassels next to 24 represent the heavy silver-wire tassels I wore as an aide-de-camp in the guards. In the lower left corner we distinguish the initials K. V. F. My cousin's name was Karl Von Freyburg. The triangle symbolized the friendship and the understanding between 3 men: Hartley, Karl V. Freyburg and myself. During the winter of 1914/15 I was hospitalized, wounded and battered, in Berlin, but the Iron Cross had already been awarded to me. Hartley admired its beautiful shape, designed by the great German architect Schinckel in 1813 and asked me to leave it on his palette-table as something of a silent friend who had left us. . . . Karl loved to play chess which explains the black and white squares. . . .⁷

Rönnebeck's convincing interpretation suggests that Hartley intentionally wished to dispel any notion of what his German paintings were about. This was probably due to Hartley's realization of the anti-German feeling in New York at the time, and to his desire to achieve some financial success and security through the sale of his works. Unfortunately, his exhibition coincided with the height of agitation against German-Americans. Motivated by nationalistic anxiety, even Teddy Roosevelt was promoting "America for Americans" and anti-German sentiment was rampant.



Fig. 8.
Marsden
Hartley, *The
Aero*, 1914.
Oil on
canvas, 42 x
34 1/2".
National
Gallery of
Art,
Washing-
ton, D.C.,
Andrew W.
Mellon
Fund, 1970.



Fig. 9. Marsden Hartley, *Warriors*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 47 1/2".
Collection Max Zurier, Palm Springs, California.

Fig. 7. Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 48*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 47-3/16 x 47-1/8". Brooklyn Museum, Dicks Ramsay Fund.



Rönnebeck's interpretation was essentially accurate except that the number 24 stands for Karl von Freyburg's age at his death on October 7, 1914.⁸ Hartley had written to Stieglitz to express his personal agony at the loss of this close friend, and this is clearly the "hidden symbolism" of his visually powerful emblematic painting. Hartley's lack of candor about his work and the inspiration motivating him in this instance is in keeping with his denials of various influences on his work. Like so many artists, he often wanted to preserve a sense of mystery about the subjects and the sources of his work.

In one of his first German officer paintings, *Berlin Abstraction* of 1914 (Fig. 2), the combination of abstract shapes, bright colors, and numbers also symbolizes the death of Hartley's friend Karl von Freyburg. The Iron Cross, given for distinguished service in war, is again prominent, as are the forms of a setting sun at the bottom, an officer's dress helmet in the center, with epaulettes off to either side. Each of the epaulettes and the hat contain the number 8, which Hartley may have chosen to use here because he felt that its mystical significance would be appropriate to commemorate the death of his friend. The number 24, which is also predominant here, again represents the age at which Karl von Freyburg was killed in action. The setting sun



Fig. 10.
Marsden
Hartley,
Military,
1913. Oil on
canvas,
39 1/4 x
39 1/4".
Wadsworth
Atheneum,
Ella Gallup
Sumner and
Mary Catlin
Sumner
Collection.

Fig. 11. Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Anter-War*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 41 3/4 x 34 1/2". Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.



against a red "sky" at the bottom of this painting must also refer to this soldier's sudden death, for red symbolizes martyrdom, and the phenomenon of the sudden disappearance of the setting sun below the horizon is related in mythology to the sudden death of heroes such as Samson, Hercules, and Siegfried. Another "sun," red and not setting, containing the number 9, is located at the top of this painting in a yellow circle superimposed on a larger white triangle framed in blue which Kandinsky, whose writings Hartley had admired, had referred to as "the typical heavenly color."⁹ The bright colors in this canvas still relate to his series of American Indian themes, which he interrupted to memorialize his friend. His sense of mourning perhaps prompted his eventual adaptation of a black ground.

Hartley had been enchanted by Rönnebeck and Von Freyburg from his first meeting with them in Paris during the summer of 1912, not long after he had arrived there the previous spring. On July 30, 1912, he wrote to Stieglitz expressing his enthusiasm not only for his two friends, but for the romantic vision of Berlin which they represented:

I am hoping strongly that I can go to Berlin to see the galleries in the early spring for since I have made the friendship of these fine German boys—the sculptor and the handsome officer, 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 there with these fellows.¹⁰

On August 12, 1912, Hartley also wrote to his friend, the artist Rockwell Kent, of this attraction:

Paris is a delight really, even though as I say, one can be insufferably bored here as anywhere else if it is one's nature to feel that way.... Personally, while I do not altogether dislike the French, I turn to the Germans with more alacrity for they are more sturdy like ourselves though one makes allowance too for differences as they must likewise make them for us. I have been fortunate in knowing several excellent Germans here and I am more than ever attracted to Germany and hope to go there while I am over and yet I wander....¹¹

Hartley first visited Germany in the company of Rönnebeck during three weeks in January 1913. He stressed in a lengthy letter to Kent in March 1913 that he would take his place among the Germans because "they too are mystical whereas the French are merely intellectual."¹² After only a brief visit, he adored Berlin "where life is a lovely thing in itself, where mankind is healthy and has more of a soul than I could ever discover in France in a lifetime." He described the Germans as "a wholesome and really warm people... the handsomest specimens you ever saw" and Berlin as "ultra-modern" with "a unique sense of order and cleanliness" where "health and order and gaiety prevails." He felt the French to be "utterly feminine in its essence while Germany is essentially masculine with a

masculine ruggedness and vitality," and explained:

Of course the military system is accountable for many things—and to some this military element is objectionable—but it stimulates my child's love for the public spectacle—and such wonderful specimens of health these men are—thousands all so blonde and radiant.

Both Stieglitz and Kent shared Hartley's admiration for Germany, also preferring it to France. In a letter to Kent dated September 14, 1914, Stieglitz lamented the growing anti-German feelings in America; indicating his own pro-German feelings, he stated that although less "polished" than the French, the German people stood at "the head of civilization."¹³

Hartley had written to Stieglitz from Berlin on September 28, 1913: "The German is most essentially a symbolist and there is every evidence that mysticism has had its home here. . . . I am mystic too but what I want to express is not national but universal. . . ."¹⁴ He had been interested in mysticism long before he arrived in Paris in April 1912, but it was in Europe that he found reinforcement of his ideas in the writings of Meister Eckhardt, Jacob Boehme, William James, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Richard Maurice Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*.¹⁵ In his copy of Boehme's *The Supersensual Life*, inscribed "Marsden Hartley, Paris 1912," for example, the Disciple asks the Master:

How shall I arrive at this Heavenly Understanding. . . at this pure and naked knowledge which is abstracted from the senses. . . . For, alas, I am touched every Moment by the Things which are about me; and overcome by the

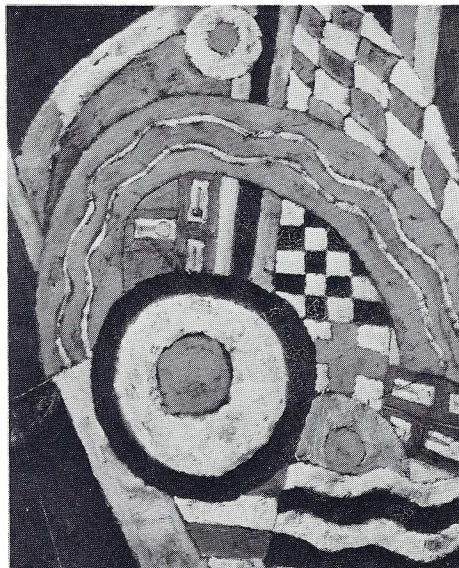


Fig. 12. Marsden Hartley, *Painting Number 46*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 39 x 31 1/4". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Philip Kirwen Fund.

Fig. 13. Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Abstraction*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 32 x 26". Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

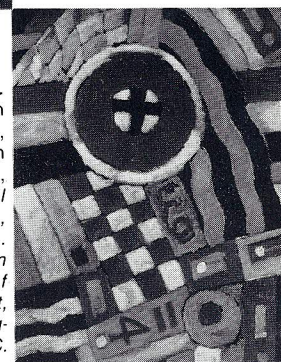


Fig. 14. Marsden Hartley, *The Iron Cross*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 46 3/4 x 46 3/4". Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis.

Clouds and Fumes which rise up out of the Earth.¹⁶ Perhaps Hartley was attempting to express such mystical visions of Heaven in works like *Portrait Arrangement No. 2* of 1912-13 (Fig. 3).

It is possible that the equestrian figure in *Portrait Arrangement No. 2* already represented a Prussian officer, perhaps even a specific portrait of Lieutenant von Freyburg, Hartley's handsome friend: When this equestrian figure in a circle next appears on the lower right of *Portrait of Berlin* of 1913 (Fig. 4), the rider is clearly a Prussian officer. The painting's subject is pre-war military pageantry combined with Christian and Oriental mysticism, all of which fascinated Hartley at this time. He juxtaposed the Oriental seated figure in meditation found in an earlier work of 1912-13, *Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)*, with two triangles containing the number 8, a large "mystical" triangle enclosing the center of the composition, various circles, and numerous representations of equestrian Prussian soldiers. The soldier represented in a circular medallion is like St. George in Gabriele Münter's *Still Life* (Fig. 5) reproduced in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* which Hartley bought in Paris in 1912. He and the horse seem to float on clouds not unlike the depiction of St. Luke (Fig. 6) and his symbol, the ox, in a Bavarian glass painting in *Der Blaue Reiter*.

As in *Painting No. 48*, another work of 1913 (Fig. 7), Hartley included a cross linking his theme to Christian mysticism. One of the triangles containing a figure 8 is also enclosed by an eight-pointed star. Hartley's emphasis on the number 8 exemplified his fascination with numbers as both visual and symbolic elements. In August 1913, he wrote to Stieglitz of his expression of "spiritual enthusiasm" in a large painting containing a "mystical presentation of the number 8," which he claimed he saw everywhere in Berlin.¹⁷ He was probably referring to *Painting No. 48*. The figure 8 is contained within a large mandorla, a shape that often symbolizes the perpetual sacrifice that regenerates creative force, in part through life and death. The number 8 also refers directly to regeneration because it was on the eighth day after the entry of Christ into Jerusalem that the resurrection took place. He was perhaps initially expressing the psychological and aesthetic regeneration that he had himself found in Germany.

Hartley had clearly attached symbolic significance to numbers for some time. Before he left Paris for Germany in April 1913, Hartley frequented the residence of Gertrude Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus, occasionally being honored with an invitation for dinner. Writing to accept such an invitation in late 1912 or early 1913, Hartley had compared her home to Stieglitz's beloved gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue:

I have somewhat the same feeling toward the number 27 that I have toward the number 291—They both have a magic of their own—291 is in every way an oasis in a great place—and once one gets in there—into this room the size of a kitchenette—one gets in touch with currents that give one a great deal—And so with 27 I like what I get there—I feel as if I were really in somewhere—whereas most places one goes one remains forever at the gate—and one wonders why one goes—whereas when the electrician flashes up the number 27 I know it is where I like to go. . . .¹⁸

From Berlin in June 1913 Hartley wrote to Miss Stein that he liked Germany, but missed certain features of Paris: "I do miss 27—I shall sometime paint why I miss 27—It is a place of living issues and the dead ones that come there don't effect it any. It is the living that live there who make it live."¹⁹

Portrait of Berlin is one of several paintings Hartley completed before the war which delight in the spectacles he had witnessed in Berlin, such as the massive military parade in mid-June 1913 on the occasion of the Kaiser's Jubilee, the 25th anniversary of the Kaiser's accession to the throne. He adored Berlin in 1913 with its constant pageantry, martial music, waving banners, and processions. The Kaiser's Jubilee itself was celebrated for two days, transforming the city with decorations, music, and visions of glory.

In *The Aero* of 1914 (Fig. 8), Hartley may have been referring to another war-related disaster, the tragic crash of the Zeppelin L 2 in October 1913 which took the lives of all but one of the twenty-eight passengers who included many eminent scientists. The idea

of linking the cross (in the lower right corner and around the frame) with an image representing the ill-fated naval airship probably came to Hartley from the much publicized commemorative sketch produced by the Kaiser himself. His Majesty had depicted "a naval airship light house on a rocky coast and a shining cross in the sky."²⁰

Hartley's response to the German prewar pageantry is evident in *Warriors* (Fig. 9) and *Military* (Fig. 10) of 1913 and *Berlin Ante-War* of 1914 (Fig. 11). In *Military*, also known as *Brass Band* or *Pre-War Pageant*, he once again dealt with the idea of music expressed through color and form. The sound of the brass military band is evoked and the blue circle at the bottom represents the form of one of the horns. Again, although less prominent, the mystical 8 appears, this time within a rectangle.

In *Berlin Ante-War*, he depicted a Prussian officer in white dress uniform on a blue horse floating on clouds amidst yellow crosses on blue medallions. Behind the officer is a large circle or halo containing a cross and a kneeling white horse with a "mystical" number 8 emblazoned on its hindquarters. Below, much like a predella on an altarpiece, are four tiny scenes placed around a larger, more abstract rectangle containing a cross. Hartley, who was familiar with the votive paintings in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, produced his own tribute to the Prussian officer he worshipped.

Following Von Freyburg's death, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz of his anguish at the loss of "that altogether necessary fellow" who was "much loved by everyone."²¹ Gradually he was able to channel his grief into painting symbolic portraits of his late friend. Eventually the explicit symbolism of *Portrait of a German Officer* gave way to purely abstract canvases (Figs. 12, 13, and 14), still containing some of the emblems, numbers, letters, and shapes which originated in his tribute pictures. The resulting paintings are bold, lively abstract painting in the Synthetic Cubist tradition.²² Emphasizing patterns of primary colors juxtaposed with black and white, Hartley created his most innovative works which today stand out among the strongest abstract paintings of the first American Avant-garde.

1. This article is adapted from the author's doctoral dissertation. See Sandra Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde, 1912-1950," Rutgers University, 1976. For related issues in Hartley's work, see Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley, Kandinsky, and Der Blaue Reiter," *Arts Magazine*, 52, November 1977, pp. 156-60, and Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley and the European Avant-garde," *Arts Magazine*, September 1979.

2. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of October 23, 1914. The Alfred Stieglitz Archives, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; hereafter as (Yale).

3. Marsden Hartley, Artist's Statement in exhibition catalogue, reprinted in "Hartley's Exhibition," *Camera Work*, no. 48, October 1916, p. 12.

4. Henry McBride, review in *New York Sun*, reprinted in *Camera Work*, no. 48, October 1916, p. 58.

5. Charles Caffin, review in *New York American*, reprinted in *Camera Work*, no. 48, October 1916, p. 59.

6. *Ibid.* This precedes the later origin of the term "Abstract Expressionism" by Alfred Barr in 1929 by thirteen years. Barr used this term to distinguish between Kandinsky's improvisations and some of the more representational Expressionist works by the Brücke artists. The term did not come into its current use until the 1950s after Robert Coates, art critic of the *New Yorker* magazine, applied it in 1946 to artists of the "New York School" like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

7. Arnold Rönnebeck to Duncan Phillips, letter dated after 1943 (Yale).

8. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of October 29, 1914 (Yale).

9. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, George Wittenborn, Inc., New York, p. 58.

10. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of July 30, 1912 (Yale).

11. Quoted in Garnett McCoy, "The Rockwell Kent Papers," *Archives of American Art Journal* 12, January 1972, p. 5.

12. Marsden Hartley to Rockwell Kent, undated letter of March 1913, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution. The following quotes unless otherwise identified are also from this letter.

13. Alfred Stieglitz to Rockwell Kent, letter of September 14, 1914, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution.

14. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of September 28, 1913 (Yale).

15. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, undated letter of early February 1912 (Yale).

16. Quoted from p. 13 of Hartley's inscribed copy of Jacob Boehme, *The Super-sensual Life or the Life Which Is Above Sense Being Two Dialogues Between a Scholar or Disciple and His Master* (London: H. R. Allenson, Ltd.) which is in the Bates College Library, Lewiston, Maine.

17. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of August 1913 (Yale).

18. Quoted in Donald Gallup, "The Weaving of a Pattern: Marsden Hartley and Gertrude Stein," *Magazine of Art*, November 1948, p. 257.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

20. Virginia Cowles, 1913: *An End and A Beginning* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 82.

21. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, letter of November 12, 1914 (Yale).

22. Most of these canvases will be exhibited together for the first time in many years in the Marsden Hartley retrospective opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on March 4, 1980.