

# MARSDEN HARTLEY, KANDINSKY, AND DER BLAUE REITER

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During the years 1913-1914 that Marsden Hartley worked in the ambience of Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter, he produced his best abstract paintings.

In July of 1912, just three months after he had arrived in Paris for the first time, Marsden Hartley wrote to his friend and supporter Alfred Stieglitz that he had discovered a new direction in modern art, distinct from the work of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso whose art he had seen in New York.<sup>1</sup> Hartley referred to an article called "After Gauguin" by M. T. H. Sadler in John Duncan Fergusson's publication *Rhythm*. This article discussed Kandinsky as one of Gauguin's disciples, "a Polish artist," whom Sadler called a "neo-primitive" because of his technique "reminiscent of primitive and savage art."<sup>2</sup> Since Hartley's departure, however, Steiglitz had already discovered Kandinsky and published a translated passage from his treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in the July, 1912, issue of *Camera Work* which Hartley had not yet received in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

It was probably both the influence of this article in *Rhythm* and the sculptor Jacob Epstein, whom Hartley had just met in Paris, as well as the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*,<sup>4</sup> that prompted Hartley to visit the Trocadero Museum with its famous collection of African and other tribal art. Hartley's reaction to the primitive art he saw there was immediate, as he wrote to Steiglitz on October 9, 1912: "Yes we can find the real thing at Trocadero. These people had no mean ambition. They created out of spiritual necessity." Hartley's use of the phrase "spiritual necessity" reflects his growing interest in Kandinsky's treatise which he had purchased along with the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* at Clovis Sagot's art gallery. He sent a second copy of the almanac to Steiglitz and repeatedly stressed its importance.<sup>5</sup>

Hartley's initial interest in the almanac is apparent in some of the still lifes he painted in 1912 in which he depicted primitive art objects. His *Jar and Idol* (Fig. 1) suggests a comparison with Gabriele Münter's *Still Life of 1911* (Fig. 2), which was reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*. Like Münter, Hartley has arranged a random group of primitive art objects on a table top in a shallow space. The pottery images of birds in both paintings appear to be American Indian, a theme that would later be of great interest to Hartley.

Writing to Steiglitz of his latest work, in mid-November, 1912, Hartley explained that he had departed from still lifes "in favor of intuitive abstractions" and revealed:

My first impulses came from the new suggestion of Kandinsky's book the *Spiritual in Art*. Naturally I cannot tell what his theories are completely, but the mere title opened up the sensation for me, and from this I proceeded. In Kandinsky's own work, I do not find the same convincing beauty as his theories hold. He seems to be a fine theorist first and a good painter after.

Hartley expressed his desire to travel to Germany in order to "meet Kandinsky and size up the Blaue Reiter group and its activity there."

Hartley's first trip to Germany was brief, only about three weeks long from January 7th to the 28th, 1913. The highpoint of Hartley's travels was meeting Kandinsky in his Munich home. This took place on January 24th in the company of Hartley's friend, the German sculptor Arnold Rönnebeck, and Kandinsky's companion, the painter Gabriele Münter. Details of this meeting are recorded in a postcard and in an eighteen page letter that Hartley sent to Steiglitz in early February after

Fig. 1. Marsden Hartley, *Indian Pottery (Jar and Idol)*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4". Courtesy La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.

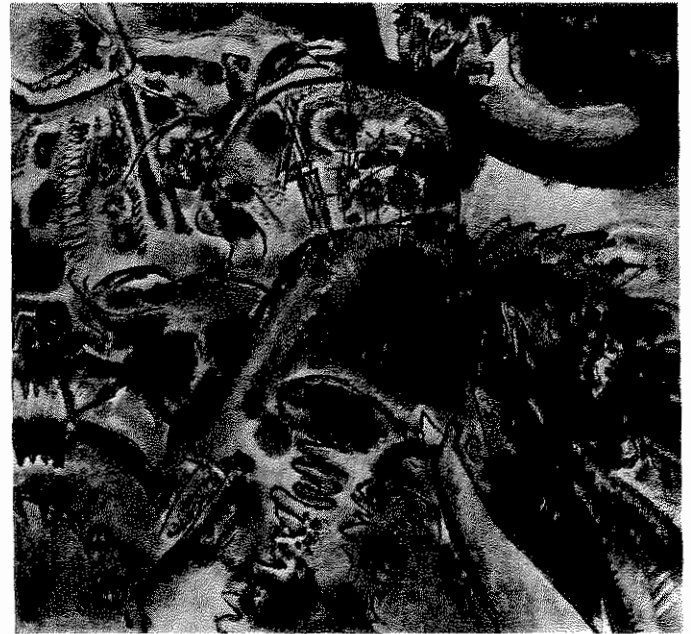


Fig. 2. Gabriele Münter, *Still-Life with St. George*, 1911. Oil on cardboard, 20 x 26 1/4". Courtesy Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus.



Fig. 3. Marsden Hartley, *Oriental Symphony*, 1912-13. Oil on canvas, 39 x 31 1/2". Courtesy Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.

Fig. 4. Marsden Hartley in Paris, June 1912. Photograph. Rockwell Kent Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



▲ Fig. 7. Wassily Kandinsky, *Small Pleasures*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 43-1/4 x 47-1/8". Courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

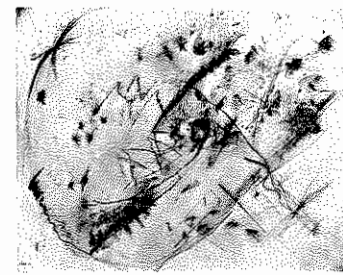


Fig. 8. Wassily Kandinsky, *Light Picture*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 30-5/8 x 39-1/2". Courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.



Fig. 5. Unknown Primitive (Italian?), *Reproduced in Der Blaue Reiter*.



Fig. 9. Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 1*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 39-3/4 x 31-7/8". Courtesy F. M. Hall Collection, University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln.

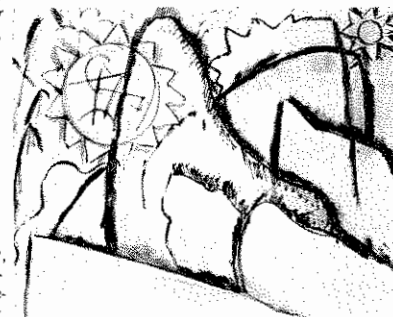


Fig. 6. Marsden Hartley, *Abstraction*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 25 x 31-1/4". Private Collection, New York.



Fig. 10. Wassily Kandinsky, *Study for Composition No. 4*, 1911. *Reproduced in Der Blaue Reiter*. ▼

Arnold Rönnebeck's diary in German provides another description of this meeting.<sup>8</sup> Rönnebeck wrote of Kandinsky's relaxed nature, remarking that he was "certainly a brilliant dialectician." Evidently the two visitors were captivated by Kandinsky's art collection which Rönnebeck noted as including Bavarian glass pictures, old Chinese wood sculptures from Siberia, and Russian folk art.

Hartley wrote to Stieglitz on January 14, 1913, that he had now entered his really creative period and had found his place in the art circles of Europe; he announced his intention to go to live in Germany as soon as he could make arrangements. While calling Kandinsky "a splendid man . . . free of convention" with "a most generous and constructive attitude toward art," Hartley proclaimed in February, 1913, that he alone had produced:

the first expression of mysticism in the modern tendency—so far as I can learn no one has presented just this aspect . . . Kandinsky is theosophic—Marc is extremely psychic in his rendering of the soul of animals. It is this which constitutes the most modern tendency which without knowing until I had been to Munich, I find myself directly associated. . .

Kandinsky had suggested that he and Hartley exchange photographs of their work and Hartley wrote that he was confident that Kandinsky would respond favorably to his art: "I know that what I have to express coincides perfectly with his notion of *Das Geistige in der Kunst*."

Although Hartley dismissed Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy as totally different from his own mysticism, his painting *Oriental Symphony* of 1912-13 (Fig. 3) may be one indication that he did find certain aspects of Theosophy of some interest. Kandinsky had written in his treatise of Madame Blavatsky's many years in India and that she was the first person "to see a connection between these 'savages' and our 'civilization.'" In this same letter to Stieglitz, Hartley mentioned his interest in Meister Eckhardt, Jacob Boehme, and in the *Bhagavad Gita*, all interests he shared with the Theosophists. In late May of 1913, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz from Berlin that he expected to meet Dr. Rudolph Steiner and Edouard Schuré whom he described as occultists. Yet Hartley, while stressing his personal mystical outlook, insisted that he was ignorant of such ideas.

Hartley's earlier fascination with the East may be hinted at in a photograph (Fig. 4) of him dressed in "Oriental" costume which he sent to his friend Rockwell Kent. Hartley is, however, dressed in pseudo-Arabian attire for the occasion of the *Bal des Quatres Arts* in Paris in June, 1912.<sup>9</sup> At the very least, his love of pageantry is illustrated by his enthusiastic masquerade.

In *Oriental Symphony*, Hartley included in the upper right corner beneath an exotic arch a Buddha-like figure. Another evocative Eastern arch is found in the top center above three hands raised toward the sun. These hands appear to give the *abhaya mudra*, or the hand sign found in Indian religion indicating "have no fear." Eight-pointed stars are also found across the top half of this painting—as if it is the "heavenly realm." In a letter to Stieglitz of August, 1913, Hartley remarked on the mystical significance of these stars which appear in many of his other paintings:

Of course you know that mysticism was very strong in Germany . . . One instance is that everywhere in Berlin one sees the eight pointed star—all the kings wore it over their heart—the soldier on the forehead—I find also the same stars in the Italian primitives. . .

Hartley's mention of Italian primitives is a clue to turn once again to the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* where he found inspiration in a painting by an unknown Italian primitive (Fig. 5). Not only does one find Hartley's beloved eight-pointed stars sprinkled liberally across the background, but here is also a possible source for his strange scalloped arches in *Oriental Symphony*. Hartley may also have borrowed the idea of the interlocking circles found in the center of *Oriental Symphony* from the circular shapes of these overlapping halos. A comparison of still other works by Hartley to the illustrations in

Hartley's choice of a musical theme for this and other abstract paintings of 1913 is a significant one. Kandinsky had written in his treatise of comparing "the elements of one art with those of another" and of the painter who applies "the means of music to his own art"; in conclusion to his book, Kandinsky defined what he called symphonic composition.<sup>9</sup> Hartley's musical theme paintings seem to indicate both the impact of the illustrations in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* and his superficial understanding of Kandinsky's treatise.

Around the middle of April, 1913, Hartley left for his extended stay in Germany. Stopping in Munich on his way to Berlin, Hartley lost no time renewing his earlier acquaintance with Kandinsky, Münter, and Franz Marc. Marc, with whom Hartley had corresponded from Paris, arranged to have these artists, as well as Albert Bloch, the only American contributor to the almanac, gather at the Galerie Goltz in order to see his work. At least one postcard, sent by Marc to Kandinsky, to arrange this meeting has been preserved.<sup>10</sup> In his letter to Stieglitz of late May, 1913, Hartley, describing this meeting, had already begun to express growing reservations about Kandinsky and his work:

In my heart of hearts I think he is not creative—I think he is an interpreter of ideas . . . Gertrude Stein is right when she says that true art cannot explain itself. . .

These remarks were perhaps, in part, the result of Hartley's jealousy that Stieglitz had spent five hundred dollars to purchase Kandinsky's *Improvisation No. 27* from the Armory Show, while he was struggling financially and Kandinsky appeared to have achieved a degree of financial success. By early June, 1913, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz again, expressing the opinion that Kandinsky's writings succeeded but his painting did not. He called Kandinsky "the Philosopher painting—the theorist demonstrating, not the artist's soul bent on creating." In August, 1913, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz that Kandinsky's paintings were like "laboratory demonstrations" and that the Russian's recent works were too large to exhibit at "291."

In spite of his remarks at the time, some of the works that Hartley completed in 1913 demonstrate a direct borrowing from Kandinsky's style. Hartley's *Abstraction* (Fig. 6), an oil sketch of 1913, adapts the heavily outlined simple forms of mountains and the wavy lines frequently found in Kandinsky's paintings of 1912 and 1913, such as *Small Pleasures* (Fig. 7). The fuzzy effect of Hartley's mountains, emphasized by the many short blurred lines, is a mannerism used by Kandinsky in many works of 1913 such as *Light Picture* (Fig. 8).

The source for Hartley's abstractly titled *Painting No. 1* (Fig. 9), with its imaginary mountain peaks and rainbow-like arch, is again Kandinsky's work, such as *Composition No. 4* of 1911. Hartley was familiar with the study (Fig. 10) for this work as it was reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*. After experimenting in the direction of the emotional lyricism and fluid abstraction of Kandinsky in these and other works of 1913, Hartley chose to tighten his abstract images into more personal hard-edged emblems. By 1914, Hartley appears to have paid more attention to what Kandinsky advocated in his writings than to what he was actually painting.

Of those close to Hartley at this time, the artist and stage designer, Lee Simonson, observed his friend's infatuation with Kandinsky and Germany which he affectionately recorded in a watercolor caricature (Fig. 11). In this cartoon, Simonson depicted Hartley in September, 1913, as a now Germanic blond in the dress of a Prussian soldier, marching, flag in hand, before a scene of Berlin in the distance. Hartley's flag is composed of colorful triangles and abstract shapes with the letters KANDINSKY superimposed in an abstract way. Hartley's uniform is emblazoned with the numbers "291" on both his hat and epaulettes, representing his first allegiance to Stieglitz whose letter Simonson quotes in the upper left corner: "Hartley has about made up his mind to become a permanent citizen of Germany." Simonson's caption reads: "Marsden adopts Germany to the tune of 'Ich bin ein Preusser. Kennt ihr meine Farben,' etc." Appropriately, Hartley holds his paintbrush in a beer stein.

Fig. 11. Lee Simonson, Caricature of Marsden Hartley, 1913. Watercolor on paper, 17 x 11". Collection of American Literature, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



Fig. 12. Marsden Hartley, Forms Abstracted, 1913. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 31 1/4". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art.



Fig. 13. Marsden Hartley, Berlin Series No. 2, 1914. Oil on panel, 18 x 15". Collection Mimi Gross Grooms, New York.

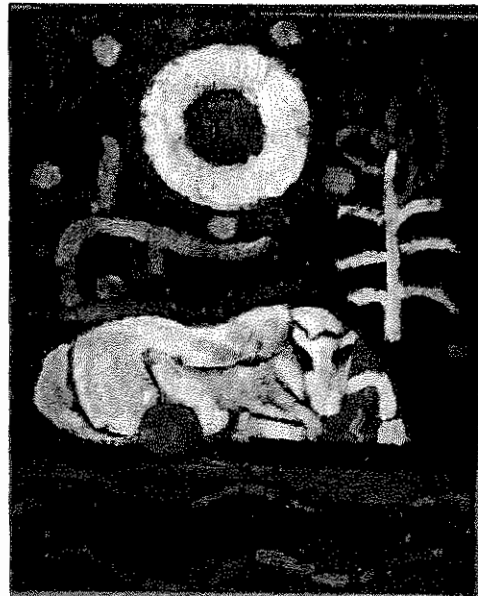
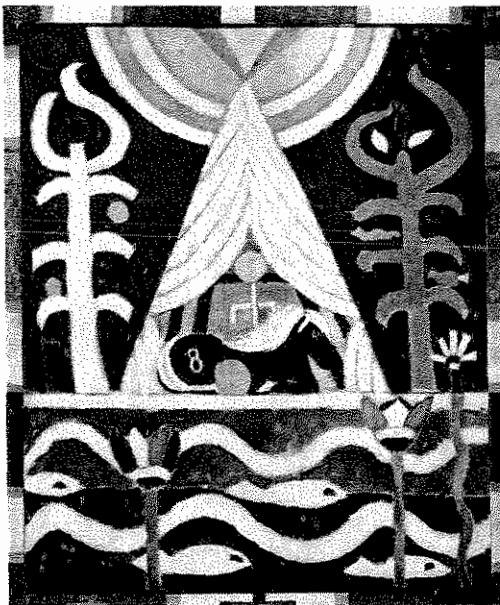
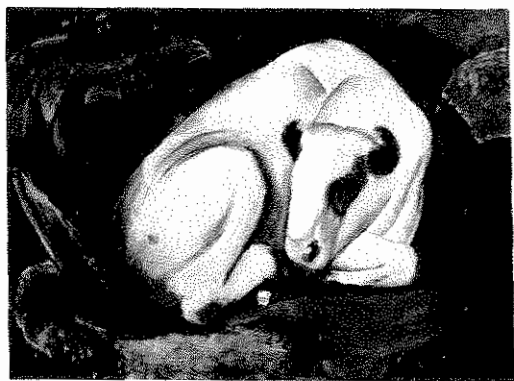


Fig. 15. Marsden Hartley, Painting No. 4 (Black Horse), 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 32". Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection.

Fig. 14. Franz Marc, White Bull, 1911. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 53". Courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.



▲ Fig. 16. Birth of Christ, Bavarian glass painting. Reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*.

Fig. 18. Marsden Hartley, Indian Fantasy, 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 47 x 39 1/2". Courtesy North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

Fig. 19. Indian Chieftain's Cape from Alaska. Reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*. ▼



Hartley. Hartley sent both Stieglitz and Gertrude Stein a postcard dated April 29, 1913, from Sindelsdorf where he was visiting Marc. After he had seen his work, Marc wrote to Hartley in English praising the sincerity of his art, but suggesting that with more experience, Hartley would be able to do more with color and form. Before long, Hartley found aspects of Marc's work that he could adapt for his own purposes. Several of Hartley's prewar paintings depict horses which appear to have been influenced by Marc. In both Hartley's *Forms Abstracted* (Fig. 12) of 1913 and in his *Berlin Series No. 2* (Fig. 13) which was probably painted during the summer of 1914, the compact crouching white horse appears to owe a debt to a painting by Marc that Hartley knew well. Marc's *White Bull* of 1911 (Fig. 14) was reproduced in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*. Even the horse's red eyes and red outline repeat details on Marc's bull.

In a letter to Stieglitz of October 31, 1913, Hartley, planning to return briefly to New York to raise additional funds, informed Stieglitz that he would bring with him six Bavarian glass *bilder* which he owned. He explained that these were:

wonderful expressions of religious symbolism. I bought them for fifty cents each . . . they are one hundred years old and are part of the art expression of Europe. You have seen reproductions in *Der Blaue Reiter*. I think how fine it would be to show them among my own, simply to show the public another species of art expression—I am fortunate in having these few as they are rare now—Kandinsky owns over one hundred. . .

Although Bavarian glass painting was highly regarded and popular with the artists of *Der Blaue Reiter*, who tried the technique, Hartley did not try glass painting until after his return to the United States during the First World War.

After his return to Germany in the spring of 1914, Hartley, perhaps as a result of his trip home to America, began a series of abstract paintings based on the theme of the American Indian. In several of these paintings, Hartley seems to have adapted various designs that he had seen in the Bavarian glass paintings reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter*. Hartley's *Painting No. 4* (Fig. 15) includes a black horse, kneeling before a white Indian teepee which is bordered by abstract forms representing large cactus-like trees. Below these images, separated by a white ground line, are two wavy horizontal white lines on a blue ground. Here adapting a motif found in many Bavarian glass paintings such as that depicting the *Birth of Christ* (Fig. 16) which was illustrated in *Der Blaue Reiter*, Hartley doubled the wavy horizontal line, usually found between two straight lines, placed just beneath the main image. In his painting, Hartley used the horizontal wavy lines for a literal as well as a decorative purpose. The wavy lines have become ripples indicating water and four red-eyed fish swim in their midst.

The flat, symmetrical, frontal arrangement in this work and in Hartley's *Indian Composition* (Fig. 17) also corresponds closely to this Bavarian glass painting of the *Birth of Christ*. Hartley's teepees are decorated and shaped in a fashion similar to the triangular top of the shed over the Holy Family. Here the teepee is open, revealing a mandorla-like shape which corresponds exactly to that surrounding the Christ Child in the Bavarian painting. Hartley placed his favorite eight-pointed star and a cross on the mandorla shape.

In a related work, *Indian Fantasy* (Fig. 18), Hartley placed a red teepee in front of a larger yellow tent. Inside is the same mandorla complete with star and cross. Where Joseph and Mary flank the Christ Child in the Bavarian composition, Hartley has substituted two seated Indians wearing feathered headdresses. On a black ground, Hartley has placed green horizontal wavy lines denoting water and inhabited by fish and Indians in canoes. Above the large symmetrically placed teepee, in the top third of the canvas, Hartley painted an immense eagle-like bird shown with its wings spread and surrounded by six circles containing eight-pointed stars.

Although one might assume that Hartley had chosen a specifically American theme in the Indian motif, in order to distinguish himself in Germany, these paintings are directly related to the Bavarian glass paintings that Hartley studied and

American Indian themes as early as 1910. The illustrations for Macke's essay, "Masks," in *Der Blaue Reiter*, were obtained from the Völkerkundemuseum in Munich and they include an American Indian *Chieftain's Cape* (Fig. 19) from Alaska. The eagle image in Hartley's *Indian Fantasy* is perhaps linked to his familiarity with this illustration. One finds that the geometrical facial features of the eagle are similar to this design and that the eagle's wing feathers resemble the fringe on the cape.

Hartley was acquainted with Macke and he had seen his work well before he had begun his own paintings with American Indian themes. In 1913, Hartley had seen Bernhard Koehler's collection which included Macke's *Mounted Red Indians* of 1911. Yet, Hartley's Indian theme paintings are much more abstract and emblematic than those of the same theme by Macke. Bold in design and sometimes approaching total abstraction, Hartley's paintings are an original and courageous statement from a struggling artist.

Despite the signs of impending disaster, Hartley chose to stay on in Germany after the declaration of war in August, 1914, when Kandinsky had to leave. His two closest friends were Prussian officers. One was wounded in the late fall of 1914, but the other was killed in action in France on October 7, 1914. At this time Hartley stopped working on the Indian theme paintings and began his well-known series of emblematic military pictures which are among his most original abstract works.

Hartley's association with Kandinsky and the other painters of *Der Blaue Reiter* was an important phase in his artistic development. Several writers on Hartley have emphasized a statement he made in reference to the influence of Kandinsky on his work. Although often cited, no writer has ever identified this statement as a sentence taken out of context from a letter of January 29, 1929, that Hartley wrote from Paris to his friend, the painter Rebecca Salsbury Strand.<sup>11</sup> In this letter, Hartley revealed that his reason for wanting to have an exhibition in Paris was to demonstrate that he "did not slide down the Kandinsky kaleidoscope." He also mentioned that Kandinsky was then showing watercolors in Paris which he considered to be no more than "infantile splatterings."

Actually, the acerbity of Hartley's remarks was provoked by a statement made by his old friend Lee Simonson in the foreword he had written for the exhibition catalogue of Hartley's current show at Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery in New York. Simonson had written:

In the interval between Maine and Aix-en-Provence, Hartley did, like Alice thru the looking glass, seem to disappear down Kandinsky's kaleidoscope and be lost among its colored fragments. Fortunately, he has come thru the other end. . .<sup>12</sup>

In this context, Hartley's defensive response is understandable. Nevertheless, during the few years that Hartley worked in the ambience of Kandinsky and *Der Blaue Reiter*, he produced his best abstract paintings.

This article was presented in a similar format in Chicago on February 2, 1976 at the annual meeting of the College Art Association. For an amplification of this topic, see Sandra Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde," 1912-1950, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, 1976.

1. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, unpublished letter, July, 1912. The Alfred Stieglitz Archives, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. This and the following letters and postcards from Hartley to Stieglitz are at Yale and are quoted with the kind permission of Norma Berger, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Yale University.
2. M. T. H. Sadler, "After Gauguin," *Rhythm, Art, Music, Literature*, 1 (Spring 1912), pp. 23-24.
3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Munich, 1912). Wassily Kandinsky, extracts from "The Spiritual in Art," *Camera Work*, no. 39 (July 1912), p. 34.
4. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *Der Blaue Reiter*, (Munich, 1912). Reprinted and translated as *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, Edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Documentary Edition by Klaus Lankheit, New York, 1974.
5. Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz, undated postcard of early September 1912 and postcard of September 27, 1912.
6. Arnold Rönnebeck, unpublished diary, entry of January 24, 1913. Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Author's translation from the German.
7. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York, 1947), p. 46.
8. Although this photograph is inscribed June 1913, Hartley, as is indicated by his letters, was already in Germany. Hartley may have incorrectly inscribed the year. The Ball was an annual event in Paris.
9. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 40 and 76.
10. Franz Marc to Wassily Kandinsky, postcard of April 1913. Collection of the Städtische Galerie, Munich, accession number GMS 726.
11. Marsden Hartley to Rebecca Salsbury Strand, fragments of letters from Paris of January 26, 1929. Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.