**MARSDEN HARTLEY**
*Race, Region, and Nation.*
*By Donna M. Cassidy.*
*Illustrated. 395 pp.*
*University Press of New England. $39.95.*

**By GAIL LEVIN**

AMONG the few paintings most Americans recognize from the first half of the 20th century are scenes of New England and Yankee fishermen by Marsden Hartley. His pictures are as familiar as the lonely cityscapes of Edward Hopper, the outsized sensuous flowers of Georgia O'Keeffe and the gaunt farm couple of Grant Wood's "American Gothic." But Hartley's path to iconic status was not smooth. Even when his "genius was beginning to be recognized," another American icon, William Carlos Williams, recalled in his autobiography, "his pictures were too bold in conception, too raw in color. No one ever felt comfortable near them." Donna M. Cassidy, in her important book, suggests new reasons for not feeling comfortable near Hartley's works: the incorporation of Nazi influences into his all-American art.

Born in Lewiston, Me., in 1877 to working-class English immigrants, Hartley was open to the impact of cultural fashions that shifted as often as his abodes. At the same time, he struggled to find personal and cultural identity. When Hartley depicted American Indian motifs in 1914, he was living in Berlin and named the series, "Amerika." Then, and again years later, Hartley found much in Germany to absorb, including, as Cassidy documents, racist and nationalist ideologies.

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*"Adelard the Drowned, Master of the 'Phantom,' " by Marsden Hartley, about 1938-39.*

After early experiments with native landscapes, Hartley was attracted by the European avant-garde. Soon he was also painting with the bright color of Matisse and in the simplified forms of Cézanne and Picasso. Actually moving to Europe, Hartley soon invented his own brand of abstraction, inspired by mystical texts and German folk art. His emblematic compositions broke new ground and attracted attention from Gertrude Stein, as well as from significant European vanguard artists. But after making his mark as a modernist, Hartley abandoned abstraction and returned to representation by 1920.

**Marsden Hartley enthusiastically followed Nazi Party athletic events and the uniforms and pageants of the Hitler Youth.**

He then wandered among various representational subjects and styles in France, Germany, Bermuda, Mexico and Nova Scotia, as well as in New York, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Only from 1937 until his death in 1943 would he return to inhabit and interpret Maine in paintings of heroic mountains, vernacular architecture and rugged men, achieving during those final years new heights of powerful ex-

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**Gail Levin's** books include "Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography" and "Marsden Hartley in Bavaria." She is completing a biography of Judy Chicago and a catalogue raisonné of Marsden Hartley.

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*Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) in an undated photograph.*

pression that some consider his best work.

Cassidy, who teaches art history and American and New England studies at the University of Southern Maine, attempts to recast Hartley's identity from the "archetypal modern artist, romantic and mystical" — that is, apolitical —to one who integrated political perceptions into his artistic visions. In the 1930's, Hartley had responded to a widespread demand for Americanism by staging his own nativist rebirth as a Yankee artist. He participated in the effort among leading cultural figures to define what constituted American art and was motivated to create "a usable past."

But after returning to Germany in 1933, his painting was nonpolitical, as in the Bavarian Alps landscapes that some opportunistic American dealers would rename "Mountain in Maine" to obviate anti-German sentiment. Bavaria offered Hartley not only landscapes, but the spectacle of Nazi parades and propaganda. Their appropriation of the German folk tradition played on his own early interest in German peasant genre painting and Bavarian folk art. This led him, Cassidy argues, to treat his subjects back home as "the North Atlantic folk." Hartley found in Maine and Nova Scotia a new folk to embody "the ideal antimodern."

Hartley's letters document that he was familiar with Nazi propaganda, and followed with enthusiasm Nazi Party athletic events and the uniforms and pageants of the Hitler Youth. Cassidy points to similarities between Hartley's "Down East Young Blades" (1940), whose central fisherman sports both an Alpine hat and a typical Bavarian folk jacket, and images from Nazi poster art. Harley's heroic Expressionistic male figures, she writes, are "exactly the kind of Nazi images that Hartley would have seen in Germany in 1933 and 1934 and that resonate in his late figural art."

Nazi ideology dovetailed only too well with the essentialist notions of race and belief in Anglo-Saxon supremacy that were commonplace in early 20th-century American culture and that Hartley had absorbed. His letters from Germany in 1933 reveal racist attitudes, some of them common among the Anglo-American middle and upper classes of the era. Cassidy documents just how pervasive and accepted such racist speech was, even citing tourist literature promoting Maine during the 1930's. "Where else in the United States can be found an equal homogeneity of Anglo-Saxon blood?" asked one writer, boasting of Maine's high percentage of "native-born white stock" with little "foreign parentage" and "only a thousand Negroes and less than a thousand Indians." In Maine and Nova Scotia, Cassidy infers, Hartley saw "the youthful, masculine type that dominated German culture." She shows that he blended into one vision "the primitive Other" of the folk, and an ideal of racial purity.

Cassidy has written a courageous book. While she does not argue that Hartley was "a Nazi ideologue or vocal fascist supporter," she places him rather close to the minds of creative talents like Ezra Pound. Paradoxically, Hartley benefited from a number of Jewish supporters besides Stein, including the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (Hartley's first dealer), the critic Paul Rosenfeld, the art dealer Edith Halpert and the salonist Ettie Stettheimer, sister of the artist Florine Stettheimer. Hartley even wrote to Halpert from Germany, taking a vastly different tone from that he used with his non-Jewish friends. He asked her help to find a teaching position at a private school or "a Jewish institute."

Such disconnects, always disturbing, shock even more now that Cassidy has shown how Hartley integrated his prejudices into his artistic program. Hartley's art and life hold important lessons about the value of studying art in cultural context and the danger of the self-censorship that kept earlier generations of Americans from studying Nazi art and recognizing these uncomfortable links. □