Off the Coast:
A Landscape Chronology

Bates College Museum of Art
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Museum Reader
The Art of Landscaping

Landscapes are the forms of history meeting the earth. They are expressions of the human imagination working within the bounds – the inscrutable bounds – of finitude. The very word *Landschaft* means “land worked,” “land shaped.” Landscapes are outward manifestations of an enduring [human] resistance to being homeless and hence bewildered by the expansiveness and terror of nature. Landscapes are confirmations that the earth is fit for diversity of life and for the disparate yearnings of all creatures to be enfolded in its unfolding.

So the ants build their hills, the raven weave the twigs, the deer stomp out their yards. And we human folk lace the meadows with stone fences, plant in near-perfect rows the corn, muster vision to design the glass house on the knoll…pollute the rivers, tear the taiga, smear the deserts and deep waters with the oil of greed. Landscapes are the signatures of those passing through and, in the human regard, of those drawn by a distant goal or by a felt sense of destiny. Yes, landscapes are the forms of history meeting the earth.

The works in this exhibition are in continuity with these larger, all-pervasive renditions of life on earth. Using pen and brush rather than claw and spade, the artists shape and fashion the elemental forces of nature to serve the dictates of their imagination and to satiate the hunger of their aesthetic needs. Their translations of light and shadow, color and form, texture and movement into patterns of meaning focus the human eyes and hence engage the human mind. Through their constructions, informed by the history of visual arts and by their own journeys, they capture moments and condense places so that we, their companions, can see more clearly.

Here, before us in this little gallery, are moments for pause, perhaps compelling us to remember the primordial yet delicate structure of grace which is life on earth.

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Carl Benton Straub
Professor of Religion and
Clark A. Griffith Professor of Environmental Studies
When I first became acquainted with Marsden Hartley’s work, it was his poetry rather than his paintings that attracted my attention. Every other year I teach a course at Bates called “Reading the Watershed.” In it I use the concept of bio-regionalism as a way of approaching literature and I explore with students some of the stories and poems of our home watershed of the Androscoggin. Hartley’s 1940 collection of poems, *Androscoggin*, seemed a natural choice for the course syllabus. His poem “Lewiston is a Pleasant Place” in that collection strikes me as a particularly compelling example of the capacity of our childhood encounter with place to shape a lasting sense of a home landscape, something we carry with us into adulthood, often experiencing it with increased emotion as the years go by.

Hartley was born in Lewiston in 1877, the youngest in a family of nine children. He left Lewiston while still a sixteen-year-old youth and as an adult seemed never to have a permanent residence, moving restlessly between major cities such as New York, Paris, Berlin, Mexico City and well-known artists’ haunts such as Provincetown on Cape Cod or Aix-en-Provence in Southern France. But he always returned to Maine and to Lewiston, and he openly termed himself, especially in the last years of his life (1937-1943), as a Maine native. As a poet, Hartley portrays many scenes from Lewiston, especially in his *Androscoggin* collection, but as an artist he seems to have preferred...
to depict “native” subject matter from out of town, rendering the feel of Maine’s mountains, woods, coasts and streams.

Hartley’s *Shady Brook, Maine* has a particular connection with Lewiston through the fact that the artist himself gave the painting to the Lewiston Public Library (which continues to hold it today). It dates from 1907 before Hartley’s many trips abroad at a time when the artist liked to spend the summer months at Lovell near the mountains and lakes of western Maine, sometimes setting up a studio in Lewiston in the winter. The title probably is descriptive rather than a reference to the brook’s name. The artist’s name “Edmund Marsden Hartley” is a unique signature, the only time he used the three names together to sign a painting.

Hartley wrote in 1910 that he “work[ed] almost wholly from the imagination...using the mountains only as a background for ideas.” Knowing this, it is probably wise not to assume that any of his oil landscapes from this early period, including “Shady Brook” were painted “from nature,” and yet I like to think of this work that way. These are Maine woodlands, Maine waters painted here. The bare whitish tree trunk rising in the middle ground of the scene shows the distinctive annual whorls and clean vertical lines of our native white pine. In the lower left-hand corner of the painting we recognize the rounded leaves of the water lily in company with what appears to be spikes of arrow arum. Even the ripples on quiet water look familiar to anyone who has ever dipped a canoe paddle into a quiet Maine stream.

As an early work, *Shady Brook, Maine* is not held in as high regard aesthetically as the brighter and more vigorous Maine landscapes Hartley painted later in his career, but for me it will always be a favorite. In its darkly inviting depths I seem to share with the artist a pathway home.

Sarah Strong  
Japanese Language and Literature
James Fitzgerald


oil on canvas

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Hubert

Returning to New England after the U.S. entry into World War II, and his failed attempt to gain a commission in the Navy, Fitzgerald settled by the end of the 1940s into the schedule that dominated the rest of his life. Spring and summer would be spent on Monhegan Island, where he took over first the studio, and later the cottage, of Rockwell Kent. In October, he would go to the Cobb family camp at the southern end of Katahdin Lake to study and sketch “the bloody hill,” which he came to honor as a spiritual entity. Winters were spent in New York City, working as a custom gilder. Parsimonious habits and devoted patrons made it possible for him to survive as a fulltime painter without having to pursue exhibitions and sales of his pictures.

The subject matter rules out any date before 1948, but Fitzgerald’s oils come overwhelmingly from the last decade of his life, which ended with a massive heart attack on April 9th, 1971, so this work is almost certainly from the 1960s. Close examination reveals that it was done in a technique that he derived from Louvre technician Jacques Maroger’s notorious *Secret Formulas and Techniques of the Masters* of 1948, which misled a generation of artists into thinking that the canonical masterpieces of European art had been painted using “black oil,” a disastrous combination of linseed oil with various amounts of lead monoxide and resins, both of which function as harsh drying agents, with effects that are more deleterious of the
paint film over time than those of the turpentine they replaced. Fitzgerald’s method was to combine this with red pigment and brush the mixture on to his painting surface a day in advance, so that the final image could be painted on the tacky red ground thus produced. Given the odd attachment of the fabric to the stretchers, and the presence of another painting on the reverse, this work was probably created while the material was pinned to the studio wall.

But ultimately, what are we to make of this image from the end of Fitzgerald’s complex artistic evolution? Any realistic detail in the eastern wall of the great mountain is lost in a vast shadow that engulfs the forest at its foot, and even seems to boil up into the angry clouds in the upper left. The sickly rubescence of the sunset is reflected in small bodies of water in the foreground, arrayed in one of the triplets that were a favorite compositional device. In the lower right corner, the bifurcated reflection of a tree helps to create a tiny inverted miniature of the painting’s main shape, repetition of which was another formal goal that is conspicuous in many of his works. More surprising from such a consummate technician is the very raw paint handling. In the central lake, heavy impasto is juxtaposed with an area where the weave of the support shows clearly through the scraped-back paint. Sweeping black strokes reinforce the northern profile of the peak, while the crest has been edited in rough little pats butted up against buttery swipes of paint that suggest the possible use of a palette knife. The aggressive disregard for any consistency of finish is echoed by the unconventional framing, that by revealing the raw support beyond the painted area denies us the familiar illusion of looking through a window. This is a landscape painting that doesn’t care if you are in the room or not – like Katahdin, it intends to do its own thing, regardless. It’s a hard painting to love, but given that it makes so few concessions to being liked, only love will do.

Dennis Grafflin
History
Felling a tree by axe, chainsaw, or crosscut is an exhilarating experience. You can make the tree fall through a narrow slot left open by its neighbors by estimating carefully its height and lean to determine where to cut. The ever present danger looming overhead as you open up the trunk inch by inch adds a charge of adrenaline. And when the final fibers tear and the tree comes crashing down right where you want it to hit —sometimes hurtling to the forest floor, other times gliding slowly through the air— the feeling of power and elation, tempered by respect and gratitude to the tree for giving up its life and not taking yours, is complete.

The falling tree slicing diagonally through the picture and the blurred white of swirling snow surrounding its trunk allow us to imagine the call of ‘timber’, the crackling of branches splitting off, and the final ‘whoomp’ as it hits the ground. This picture is not landscape in the traditional sense as it captures an event up close and in motion, instead of a distant perspective on static scenery lacking a human presence. Indeed, the snowshoes sticking up and the logger whose eye carefully follows the descending tree make humans not only present, but creators of this countryside. You get a sense of passing time from this picture, with the trampled snow to the right of the falling tree signifying trees already cut, and the spruce to the left soon to be devoured by the hungry chainsaw. What, I wonder, does this spot look like today?
This picture is a fascinating mingling of land and water, order and chaos, human and nature’s labor, and motion and stasis. I am amazed by the details visible, from the distinct bark on different trunks to the ripples on the water that laps against the logs. This miniscule indicator of movement reminds us that the logs are on a long trip from forest to mill. The trees on the bank are perhaps waving goodbye, counting their good fortune at being spared, or regrowth of areas already cut. Human’s labor is evident in the straight edges of the similar length logs. Nature’s labor is evident in the species specific bark patterns and jumble of trunk girths. As the river recedes into the distance, the logs appear to merge into a never-ending mass, but an up close focus would reveal unique groupings of logs as visible in the foreground. I wonder at the orientation and spacing of the logs, maybe there is some math equation, fractals or spatial statistics, which could account for it. The scenery appears to be so tranquil and orderly, neatly chopped logs lounging in a bath, masking the intense human effort to get land-loving vegetation into water in the first place, potentially roiling currents beneath the water’s surface, and danger of coming in between thudding logs as the water pushes them along.

Why does this picture allow the deliberate shot of the boat corner and chain? It is a jarring glimpse of human artifact in the midst of nature, although a nature replete with more cut logs and thus already molded by human activity. No people in action as with the logger, but a purposeful acknowledgement of our ability to sculpt landscapes with our tools. Perhaps it should not be seen as such a juxtaposition, modern materials and transportation means in sharp contrast to trees and water, but instead as a reminder of the myriad ways that people and nature always have intersected in Maine.
The logs in the river do not stand out as individuals as much as in the previous picture, but instead form part of dense clumps. The pattern is in the groupings of log clusters, rather than in the detail of individual tree barks. The background, too, is different. No longer do logs stretch out towards infinity, with an open ended destination. Here, the horizon is closed. Was the shot taken backward or forward along the river? It is difficult to tell.

Keely Maxwell
Environmental Studies

Elke Morris
_Domicile VII, 2004_
_iris print_
_Courtesy of the Artist_

The picture is taken in downtown Lewiston, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Maine. These are the streets no one wants to look at, or acknowledge: urban blight, generations of poverty, the backside of the American dream. And here the photographer asks us to look for a while at this place, to meditate on its form and promise. The house to the left is a version of the American dream, with its picket fence and shade tree just coming into leaf. The green tree, the tiny band of grass on the right, the puffy-cloud-perfect-sky: there’s something resilient here, _nature_ that just won’t go away, regardless of how close we build the houses. But what of the place’s emptiness? – only garbage bags and hung-out laundry to suggest people live here. It’s a mix of emotions that shape my response to the picture: the stubborn, vacant optimism; the flat blankness of shared space, and an uncanny harmony of greens, that finally draws me into the picture – I can’t keep standing here on the edge – as the doorways recede into deeper ground, drawing us back toward that pale lime facade in the distance. Emptiness? Hope? Illusion? or just a sunny early summer day when everyone’s inside watching TV?

Jane Costlow
Environmental Studies, Russian
Marsden Hartley’s small painting of Kezar Lake at sunset in July 1910 shows rocky Speckled Mountain from the Center Lovell side of the lake. Both form and color evoke his shift from landscapes to abstraction, much as the Russian Expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky was doing in the village of Murnau in southern Bavaria at this time.

“I do not sketch much these days,” he wrote his niece, Norma Berger, that July, “for I work almost wholly from the imagination—making pictures entirely from this point of view using the mountains only as backgrounds for ideas.”

The mountains of western Maine and New Hampshire had inspired Hartley’s painting since 1901, when he discovered the Kezar Lake area and Lovell after a summer at an art colony in adjacent North Bridgton. Hartley spent nearly every summer around Lovell and Stoneham until 1911, when he moved to New York, and then Paris and Berlin. A few months before he did this painting, Hartley had his first one-man show at the 291 Gallery in New York City of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, where he met fellow painters John Marin, and Albert Ryder.

He found life in western Maine to be “rough living” with a backdrop of mysterious,
bleak mountains. “And if there is a finer view anywhere in this country,” he wrote in 1906, “I should like to see it.” At times he felt overcome by “mountain madness” and a “fine insanity.” He walked five or six miles daily, went to Saturday night dances, and met a number of other gay men to whom he could relate. “This is really my home,” he wrote Norma in September 1910.

In Lovell, Hartley lived in a variety of tents, cabins, and abandoned farmhouses, ate bear and venison shot by local friends and neighbors, and got to know the portrait painter Leonard Volk and his wife, who inspired his interest in the folk art of New England.

When he sent this painting to Norma as a gift, the sunset colors and dark mountains, with thick paint textures, evoked a somber mood (Hartley may have contemplated suicide the previous year) on a beautiful lake that tourists were reaching for the first time by automobile. Hartley had come to Lovell by a “real Buffalo Bill coach and four” from the railroad station in nearby Fryeburg. But by 1910, the first automobiles were appearing around town.

Hartley remained drawn to the regional folk culture of Maine and Nova Scotia for the rest of his life. In his paintings, the powerful bodies of lobstermen, hunters, trappers and fisherman represented a North Atlantic race of muscular new beings that Hartley greatly admired. The little known period of isolation and introspection in Lovell around Kezar Lake and in view of majestic mountains marked an important beginning of his mystical love for landscape, people, and shapes of the North, as well as his contribution to modernism and abstract painting.

Robert C. Williams
History