

Basic Detail Report



Title: Maine Islands

Date: ca. 1938

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e455

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: "Maine Islands" is one of several related versions of the subject that Hartley painted between about 1938 and 1942. (1) The works represent his attempt to naturalize and contain topics that caused him great pain, the death of loved ones and the landscape of his childhood. Between 1900 and 1912 Hartley had for the most part lived inland and painted the mountains around North Lovell, Maine, west of his birthplace in Lewiston. His only recorded painting of the coast, dating from his student days, is a timid exercise in Tonalism. (2) For much of his subsequent career, mountains and hills remained his primary landscape subject, one that he put through countless variations. But in 1935 he had visited Eastern Points, Nova Scotia, and had fallen in love with both the landscape and the people, particularly the sons of the family with whom he lived. Both seemed simple, direct, and honest: a landscape pared down to a few elements of rock, water, sky, and the people equally essential in their character: "The people that inhabit it, fine types of hard boned sturdy beings, have the direct simplicity of these unique and original places, this country being of course Nova Scotia." (3) Alty and Donny Mason accidentally drowned in 1936, and the harrowing event inspired several paintings of jagged rocky coasts and small imperiled boats under threatening skies, much as the suicide by drowning of his friend, the poet Hart Crane, in 1932 had inspired "Eight Bells' Folly" (1933; Frederick R. Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota). Leaving Nova Scotia, he retreated to New York and opened his annual exhibition at Steiglitz's Gallery "291", which was

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billed as "On the Subject of Nativeness--A Tribute to Maine": "The rocks, pines and thrashing seas never lose their power and their native tang. Nativeness is built of such primitive things. . . . I wish to declare myself the painter from Maine." (4) After this declaration there was only one thing he could do, and that was actually to go to the state where he had been born and which he had not visited for years. Hartley, however, did not go back to his birthplace inland, but the coast, to Georgetown, between Portland and Penobscot Bay. He spent the winter of 1937 in Portland and continued to paint. Just as the place was new, so were the subjects--at least for Hartley. But they are directly inspired by his elegiac paintings for Alty and Donny Mason, particularly "Northern Seascape--Off the Banks at Night" (1936; Milwaukee Art Museum). Instead of violent seas and threatened boats, however, in Hartley's paintings of Maine, the coast has been lengthened and flattened and the boats transformed into islands that are certainly sturdier but still alone. The paint is calmer and the colors cooler. Hartley, who was a poet as well as a painter, wrote at this time of islands as solitary beings hostile to change, like people, in a poem entitled "Islands in Penobscot Bay": Here they sit in the manner of black notes upon a sheet of music-- sol-fa-me-re do-- timed, tempered, toned, submerged with indigenous shapes. How often we have seen such islands--even in the faces of men and women we know... Islands say, when they are alone (do they take their speech from us?) "we are too much like ourselves... and we are left alone, so like--ourselves." "An island is something to be discouraged"-- said an aged one-- "it wants itself and hated to give it up." (5) bibliography: Marsden Hartley, "The Collected Poems", ed. Gail Scott (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1987); Gail Scott, "Marsden Hartley" (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988); Townsend Luddington, "Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist" (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992); Jonathan Weinberg, "Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Bruce Robertson, "Marsden Hartley" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995); Marsden Hartley, "Somehow a Past: The Autobiography of Marsden" Hartley, ed. Susan Elizabeth Ryan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997). Notes: 1. Other works in the group include Fox Island, Georgetown, Maine (1937; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass.); and Islands, Penobscot Bay (1939; private collection. 1. Seascape (n.d.; Baltimore Museum of Art). 2. Hartley, in Scott, ed., On Art, P. 112 . 3. Ibid., pp. 114-15. . 4. Ibid., pp. 114-15. 5. Hartley, Collected Poems.

Dimensions: Frame: 14 x 22 x 1 3/4 in. (35.6 x 55.9 x 4.4 cm) 10 1/4 x 18 1/4 in. (26 x 46.4 cm)