

# MARSDEN HARTLEY

(American, 1877-1943)

Lot 109 | January 9, 2021 | Premier Gallery Auction

## CONTACT

Bryan Laughlin  
Executive Director  
Email: [bryan@selkirkauctions.com](mailto:bryan@selkirkauctions.com)

## UNTITLED (POPOCATÉPETL, MEXICO)

circa 1932-33

Oil on canvas

28 x 30 inches

Framed: 40 x 42 inches

also known by title *Coastal Landscape in Red* <sup>[1]</sup>

Unsigned

Labels, stamp and inscriptions verso

## PROVENANCE

The Artist

Carl Sprinchorn, New York,  
acquired from the above by 1943

Hudson D. Walker, New York,  
acquired from the above, 1949

N. McCullough Winters, Quincy, IL

John M. Winters, Quincy, IL,  
by descent (his father), 1975

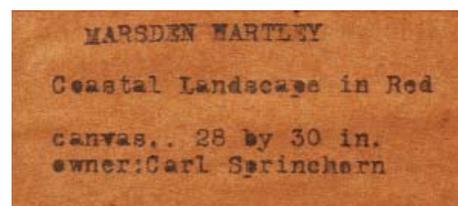
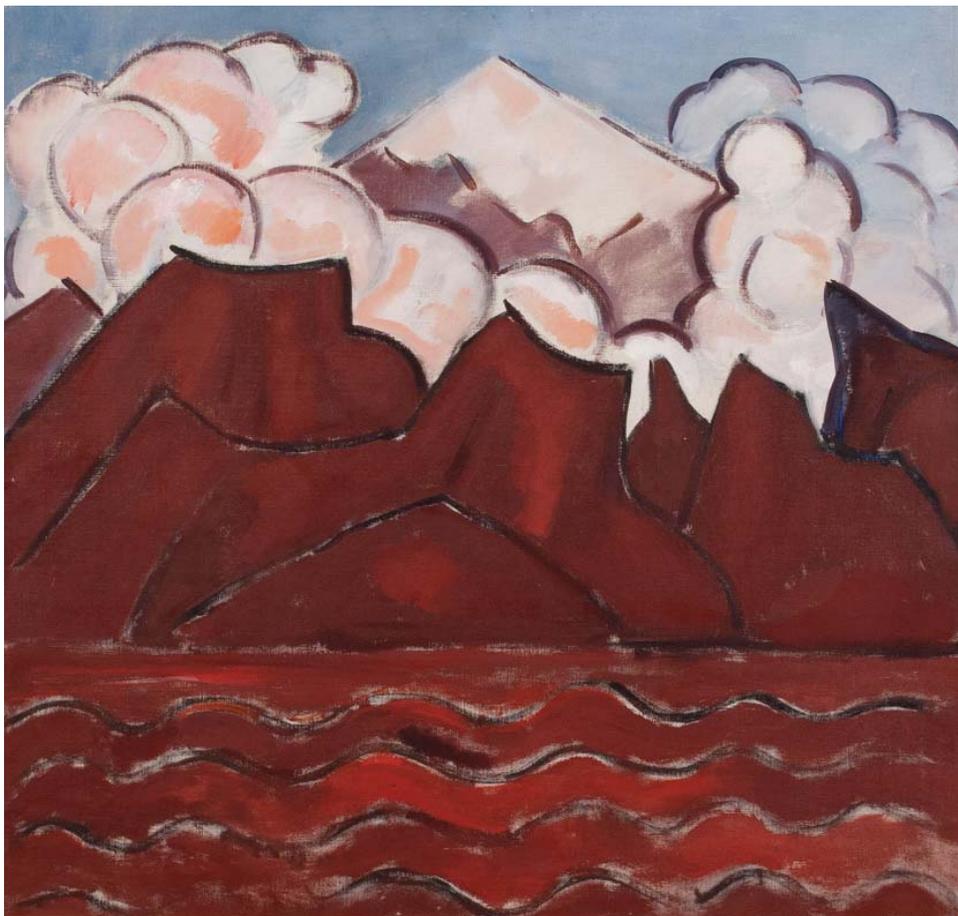
Susan W. Caine, St. Louis,  
by descent (her uncle), 2011

Private Collection, by descent, 2020

## LITERATURE

Elizabeth McCausland papers, 1838-1995, bulk 1920-1960, Marsden Hartley Catalogue Raisonné Files, Series 6.2, box 15, folder 7, item 11. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This work will be included in the forthcoming *Marsden Hartley Legacy Project: Paintings and Works on Paper*, online at the Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine.



**ESTIMATE** \$150,000-\$250,000 USD

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Selkirk Auctioneers & Appraisers is grateful to Sarah B. Cunningham of Walker-Cunningham Fine Art for her cataloguing of this lot and preparation of the following essay. We also acknowledge with appreciation the assistance of Gail R. Scott, leading Hartley scholar and manager of the Marsden Hartley Legacy Project at Bates College for her review of the cataloguing.

Renowned American modernist Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) began his career in earnest with a breakthrough solo show at Alfred Stieglitz's iconic 291 Gallery in 1909.<sup>[i]</sup>

After spending the better part of two decades traveling, painting and building his reputation as a leading American modernist, often abroad in Europe, Hartley was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1931 which stipulated a stint outside the US.<sup>[ii]</sup> He took the opportunity to travel to Mexico and before his departure, he wrote to his beloved niece describing the excitement he felt for the "superb adventure ahead of me."<sup>[iv]</sup>

Hartley arrived in Mexico City in March of 1932, but his initial enthusiasm vanished shortly upon his arrival after receiving news of the tragic death of friend and poet Hart Crane by suicide at age 32.<sup>[v]</sup> In grief and increasingly dissatisfied with the accommodations in Mexico City, Hartley sojourned to Cuernavaca to settle and paint in what he described as the "opalescence" of the landscape.<sup>[vi]</sup> In his studio, he found a clear view of "the majestic rise of Popocatepetl always in snow and certainly one of the handsomest of the volcanoes of the world – ... an almost flawless triangle. I am doing several [motifs] of it..."<sup>[vii]</sup>

Along with the stunning views came his fortuitous access to a library of writings on the occult and thus, as Hartley scholar Gail R. Scott observes, his "visionary mountain portraits coincided with his continuing involvement with mysticism."<sup>[viii]</sup> Hartley's infatuation with the volcanic landscape along with his study of visionary writings built upon his intention to "reveal the covert, occult forces vested in the earth itself."<sup>[ix]</sup> Hartley biographer Townsend Ludington puts it simply: "He never abandoned his fascination with the mystery of nature..."<sup>[x]</sup>

Hartley painted four versions of Popocatepetl. Three of the paintings are oil on board in cobalt blues and bright whites. These three were exhibited in February 1933 at the Galería de la Escuela Central de Artes Plásticas in Mexico City to celebrate the culmination of Hartley's Guggenheim Fellowship. Two of the three exhibited paintings now reside in public collections: *Popocatepetl, One Morning* (The Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, NE) and *Popocatepetl, Spirited Morning – Mexico* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC). The third Popocatepetl work was sold at Sotheby's in November 2012.<sup>[xi]</sup>

Lot 109, offered herein, is the fourth and largest in Hartley's Popocatepetl series.<sup>[xii]</sup> He painted the oil on canvas in a palette of rust red, azure blue and white with a foreground of undulating lines perhaps representing the lava flows that he described as "the best kind of geologic theatre."<sup>[xiii]</sup> The snow-capped volcano, nestled in by surrounding white clouds, thrusts up from behind an outcropping of lower profile formations. Hartley's close friend and fellow artist Carl Sprinchorn (1887-1971), who owned the painting at one time, posited that the work may have been painted as a recollection possibly accounting for its absence from the Mexico City exhibition.<sup>[xiv]</sup> Whether it was painted on site or after he left Cuernavaca, we can see that the work is emblematic of Hartley's continued quest for enlightenment through sublime treatment of his natural subjects.

This work will be included in the forthcoming *Marsden Hartley Legacy Project: Paintings and Works on Paper*, online at the Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine.

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[i] By 1945, the painting was known to depict Popocatepetl according to Carl Sprinchorn as told to Elizabeth McCausland in her unfinished catalogue raisonné listing for the painting [see endnote xiv]. The origin and author of the alternate title "Coastal Landscape in Red" found on two typewritten labels verso is unclear but may have been given by Hudson D. Walker or Passedoit Gallery.

[ii] Haskell, Barbara. "Marsden Hartley," Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980, p. 187.

[iii] Appleton Read, Helen. "The Guggenheim Awards," The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 5, 1931, p. 6E.

[iv] Hartley, Marsden. "Letters." Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Letter to his niece Norma Berger dated November 19, 1931.

[v] Hokin, Jeanne. "Pinnacles and Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley," University of New Mexico Press, 1993, p.85.

[vi] Hartley in a letter to Adelaide Kuntz, August 24, 1932. Elizabeth McCausland papers, 1838-1995, bulk 1920-1960. AAA.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Scott, Gail R. "Marsden Hartley," Abbeville Press, New York, 1988, p.97.

[ix] Hokin, Jeanne. "Pinnacles and Pyramids: The Art of Marsden Hartley," University of New Mexico Press, 1993, p.87.

[x] Ludington, Townsend. "Marsden Hartley: The Biography of an American Artist," Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1992, p.20.

[xi] Sotheby's New York, November 12, 2012, Lot 29 - Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Popocatepetl, oil on board, 15 ¼ x 25 inches, sold for \$392,500 (inclusive of buyer's premium).

[xii] Scott, Gail R. catalog note for POPOCATÉPETL, Lot 29, Sotheby's sale of American Art, November 19, 2012.

[xiii] Hartley, Marsden. "Somehow a Past: The Autobiography of Marsden Hartley," edited by Susan Elizabeth Ryan, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 155.

[xiv] Marsden Hartley Catalogue Raisonné Files. Elizabeth McCausland papers, 1838-1995, bulk 1920-1960. Series 6.2, box 15, folder 7, item 11., Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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