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Modernism and the American Idiom: A Conversation with Film-maker, Michael Maglaras

September 29, 2014 [Richard Friswell](#)



*“No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about [America] where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is the case with my dear happy land. It will be very long time, I trust, before romance-writers may find congenial and easily handled themes, either in the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual lives. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need ruin to make them grow.” *(see end note citing above image)*

~Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*, 1859

And “ruin” would indeed follow on the heels of Hawthorne’s ebullient claim about the idylls of mid-19th century American life. The trajectory of history would soon have the nation embroiled in a civil war, pitting brother against brother on the battlefield, and facing off former military school classmates in a deadly pursuit, where nothing less than the future of the country and its moral integrity were at stake.



President Theodore Roosevelt, pre-1900, photographer unknown. National Archives, Washington, DC.

What followed in the post-bellum decades—even in the face of renewed national prosperity and a collective sense of “united” purpose—was a protracted, insidious devolution on a slippery slope to codified racial violence on this side of the Atlantic, and a reordering of Old World boundaries and expansionistic ambitions, inevitably subsuming American interests in the great

European conflicts on the other side of the Atlantic. In the midst of this chaotic global reordering, American industrial and military dominance served to rebalance the scales of power in the Western European theater. American imperialist ambitions, particularly at the hands of “rugged individualist,” Theodore Roosevelt at the *fin de siècle*—aimed at controlling territory and raw materials in far-flung parts of the world—led to hegemonic land grabs and ‘false wars’ aimed at positioning the United States at the top of the pecking order in the eyes of the world.



On location: Michael Maglaras, Terri Templeton

With this historical background in mind, I sought out a conversation with Michael Maglaras, documentary film maker, who, along with his wife, Terri Templeton, have produced a number of “essays in film” under the banner, *217 Films*. Maglaras and Templeton have taken an interest in these vital, yet tumultuous years of the early 20th century, with particular focus on American artists from the early modern period. He points out that, “Early American Modernism comes as an antithesis of what you’d expect. We were at the height of social, economic and imperialist growth. We were swaggering across the world stage at that time. Right in the middle of that expansionistic period in our history comes a group of artists engaged in what I would call a period of superb self-examination.

Just as we were gaining an understanding of who we were as a nation, a handful of painters, musicians and writers ‘whack’ us with a new truth!”



Young American Artists of the American School (c.1911). John Marin, far right; Marsden Hartley, back left. Photographer unknown. Bates College of Art.

Specifically, Michael Maglaras and his ‘217’ movie makers have chosen to focus on a small group of artists whose lives and work are emblematic of those changing times, as they adopted a personalized sense-of-style regarding the shifting cultural scene around them. To date, he has produced a number of videos, dealing with such early modernist artists as John Marin, Marsden Hartley and the little-known but deserving, Lynd Ward. In a monumental gesture, for example, Maglaras has turned his resonant vocal skills (he is a formally-trained opera singer) to a recitation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s lengthy prose poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, whom he characterizes as, “America’s first super hero.”

I asked Michael what he hopes people will learn about these artists and their work. He said, “I look for a crucial combination: great art and a great story behind it. There is no way to put the viewer in the middle of the art, itself, without a narrative generated by the artist’s own life and writings. This all helps to illuminate the art, itself. In my research, I always ask, ‘why

should I care?’ When the paintings have value—that is, artistic merit—the story behind them helps to accentuate our appreciation of them. There has to be a story there...what I call ‘essays in film’...otherwise, that’s not where I want to go.”



Lynd Ward, From ‘Gods’ Man’ (1929),. Wood engraving. © The Estate of Lynd Ward.

These ‘essays in films’ assume a granular examination of artists’ lives and their work. For example, the two-volume, beautifully-bound, Library of America edition (2010), of three illustrated novels of Lynd Ward (1905-1985), originally published in the 1930s, serves as an unfolding narrative—in the form of hundreds of woodcut images of characters—whose fate is shaped by the social forces of the years between two world wars. An author and illustrator of adult and children’s books, Lynd’s tomes become a dark meditation on art, inspiration, and the disparity between the ideal and the real. Maglaras calls Lynd Ward “the father of the American graphic novel and one of the most prolific book illustrators and printmakers in the history of American art.” His 90-minute film, undertaken in light of the book’s publication,

and completed after exhaustive research and interviews with Ward's daughter, Robin Ward Savage in 2012, brings the creativity of Ward to life, illuminating his mastery of narrative without text. The film demonstrates how Lynd's work chronicles American life in the 20th century, as well as his deep personal commitment to social justice and the plight of the workingman surrounding the years of the Great Depression.



John Marin (1870-1953), *Woolworth Building, No. 28*, 1912. Watercolor over graphite, 18 1/2 x 15 9/16". National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer. © 2013 Estate of John Marin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In another exploration of innovative artistic expression, *217 Films* looks at the life and work of painter, John Marin (1870-1953). Marin had the good fortune to be part of the early Modernist movement in New York in the formidable years of American art, just prior to World War I. Part of progressive photographer, Alfred Stieglitz's *291* studio 'in crowd,' Marin was

able to exhibit work over his lifetime that redefined the urban landscape with his bold deconstruction of some of New York's greatest architectural icons (The Brooklyn Bridge, the Woolworth Building), as well as bold, expressionistic renditions of the Maine seacoast.

When asked about Marin's contribution to American Modernism, Maglaras explains, "He was the first artist in the new century to experiment with water color, treating it much like oils. They took on a life of their own on paper, as he asserted, 'let the paint be paint.' His work is sensuous and self-revelatory in the style of poet, Walt Whitman. Marin is a good example of what I mentioned earlier: recognizing that the art is exemplary, then



John Marin (1870-1953), *From Seeing Cape Split*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 23 x 29 1/2 in. Courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art, Gift of John Marin Jr. and Norma B. Marin. © Estate of John Marin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

work backwards to find the narrative to support it. That combination is not always to be found with many otherwise deserving artists—but, when it does, putting it all in context is the essence of effective story telling.”



Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), 'Mt. Katahdin, Maine, No. 2' (1939-1940). Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 40 1/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Edith and Milton Lowenthal Collection, Bequest of Edith Abrahamson Lowenthal, 1991.

Maglaras and *217 Films* have devoted considerable time, resources and creative energy in the telling of the Marsden Hartley story, with two films of his life currently in distribution. Another early 20th century modernist, Hartley's life is one of tragedy, isolation, and deep personal anguish. But, it is also a reflection on his extraordinary drive as an artist and writer to interpret sensation and emotion with images and paint. In an interesting departure, Michael not only narrates his meditative work on Hartley, *Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy*; through the magic of makeup and period-authentic settings, the director becomes the character, himself. This very personal identification with the artist and his life adds poignancy and dramatic import to a painful 1936 episode in Hartley's life. When asked about his interest in Hartley, he explains that, "Hartley was also part of the Stieglitz group in New York and had a strong start to his career in the `teens. But, he was drawn to the natural world, which manifested itself in landscape painting. I am reminded of parallels in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing in that regard. He was a remarkably skilled diarist, in addition to his artistic output."

Hartley was a native of a working-class family in Maine, but travelled widely with fellow artist and lover, Charles Demuth.



He spent some time overseas (pre-war Germany, specifically, which was more conducive to his homosexual lifestyle). One of his best-known paintings, *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914), left, (Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art), is a tribute to a lover killed in battle. However, as a painter he remained closely tied to his Down-east roots. “What appealed to me, in Hartley’s writing, his paintings, and emotional life, for that matter, was the spiritual healing achieved through his work. He was deeply conflicted about intimacy, moving toward it and away from it his entire life—with relationships constantly coming and going, either due to his own restlessness or others’ untimely death. He turned emotional conflict into a positive aesthetic value, claiming that great art arises from emotional distance,” Maglaras says. “Desire and distance—mutually contradictory emotions—marked much of Hartley’s life, and his paintings. My focus on the two



Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), *The Sustained Comedy (Portrait of an Object)*, 1939. Medium oil on board. 28 1/8 x 22". Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg, PA. Gift of Mervin Jules in memory of Hudson Walker.

years he spent living with a family of fishermen and farmers in Nova Scotia, and about which he wrote passionately in the last years of his life, powerfully illustrates this conflicting motif and his struggle to come to terms with death and find love in his life.”

In another project that explores an artist’s relationship to the natural world, Maglaras undertook the monumental task of performing the entire text of Longfellow’s 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha*. “I read the poem in its entirety one summer afternoon, coming to the realization that this had to be our next project.” The year was 2007, the bicentennial of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s birth (1807-1882). A beautiful, unabridged edition of

the poem had been produced by David R. Godine Publishers (2004), including all 400 pen-and-ink drawings created by Frederic Remington for the 1891 edition, was then available.



Illustration by Frederic Remington for 1891 edition of, 'The Song of Hiawatha'

“I hope this recording, which took three months to produce, will revitalize interest in a poet and a seminal work that has, in a sense, fallen out of political fashion. It is an idealized treatment of the Native-American issue, from a white author’s perspective. And yet, I see in the person of Hiawatha—who actually lived, by the way—a true hero. It is an epic romantic tragedy, where the protagonist doesn’t die in the end. Hiawatha is tested and tried in changing times, learning to evolve and change along the way. In the end, he concedes that Christian teachings may now trump traditional Indian folklore, thus bidding his people to adopt their words of wisdom, as he paddles off into the sunset. It may be viewed as politically incorrect, but for me, it stands as a classic tale of spirituality and personal strength. After all, it’s ultimately the story that counts most.”



Marcel Duchamp (French 1887-1968), 'Nude Descending a Staircase (No 2),'1912, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950

Most recently *217 Films* has focused its energy and attention on the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art. Known as the Armory Show, because of its 69th Regiment Armory venue, it was organized by the progressive Association of American Painters and Sculptors. It was the first large exhibition of modern art in America. As the hundredth anniversary of the event drew close, Maglaras turned his attention to an in-depth investigation of this pivotal and defining event in the history of American art—what he terms, “the great confusion.” For several weeks in three cities (New York, Chicago and Boston), many thousands of Americans attended, triggering a debate in the press and public arena as to who was “for or against” Modern Art. European artists such as Cezanne, Renoir, Van Gogh, and the upstart Marcel Duchamp (with his *Nude Descending a Staircase*), as well as Americans such as Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Charles Sheeler gained mass exposure.

What Americans saw at the Armory Show challenged their understanding of 'art' and, by extension, what it meant to be living in the modern era. Maglaras notes that, "What they saw would annoy and infuriate some...while captivating, delighting, and inspiring others.



William Glackens (1870–1938) *Family Group*, 1910-1911. 71 15/16 x 84 in. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ira Glackens.

This film features more than 60 works by American and European painters and sculptors, probing deeply into the history of how the show was organized. It provides fascinating glimpses

into the backstage efforts of the American artists and show organizers, Arthur B. Davies, Walter Pach, and Walt Kuhn, as they worked under severe time constraints to introduce a new art forms to an uninitiated American audience. Our goal as film makers was to bring the drama of that time back to life.”

“Our next project will deal with the Works Progress Administration’s, Federal Art Project, the 1930s Roosevelt program that put thousands of artists, craftspeople and writers to work documenting the American experience. The film, *Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA*, is due for release in early 2015, so much work still needs to be done, but the overarching theme, in words and pictures, is to highlight the extraordinary artists involved, the work they produced and the tenor of the times when this program was at its peak, recognizing that it probably could never happen again.”

“I believe that America offers an important legacy in the art world,” Michael tells me, “based on the idea that there was incredibly original art being turned out in the early part of the 20th century that was like no other in the world. The Armory Show called attention to some of those artists and their work, but the narrative extends much beyond that. My goal as a film maker, along with my wife and producer, Terri Templeton, is to pursue stories that appeal to us—where the features of an artist’s own life shed light on the brilliance of their work. For this reason, we may not fall into the category of typical documentarians.”



Michael Maglaras, on site in Maine, in character of Marsden Hartley, for filming of 'Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy' (2006).

Maglaras has more than the usual amount of pride in his American roots in the art world and believes that his films can increase public awareness about the contributions of American artists to the body of work that can be so easily overlooked when in thrall to Europe's great master painters and writers from previous centuries. "My 'essays in film' are an opportunity to share what moves me about the painter I am examining—whether in a detailed examination of an artist's life and his motivation, or by fostering an appreciation of particular works that move me personally. Museums play an important role in bringing art to an audience eager to engage the work and develop an opinion about it. I am one of those who regularly goes to museums and tries to connect with the art on the wall. And, when I see an artist's work that moves me and whose engagement with the world becomes a wonderful story to tell, I feel an obligation to make that film and tell that story."

By Richard Friswell, Managing Editor

To learn more, go to: <http://www.two17films.com/>

Films available through 217 Films:

The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show

O Brother Man: The Art and Life of Lynd Ward

John Marin: Let the Paint be Paint!

Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet

Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy

Coming, Winter, 2015: *Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA*

Audio Recordings available through 217 Records:

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*

John Greenleaf Whittier, *Snow-Bound*

John Greenleaf Whittier, *Barbara Frietchie & Other Poems*

***Opening Image:** Jasper Francis Cropsey, (American, 1823 – 1900), *Autumn on the Hudson River* (1860), oil on canvas, 59 3/4 x 108 1/4". National Gallery of Art: Gift of the Avalon Foundation, 1963.9.1.