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Getting to the heart of Hartley

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As he scouted locations to film the narrated sequences of his new movie about the late modernist painter Marsden Hartley, filmmaker Michael Maglaras gravitated toward the Bates Mill in Lewiston.

The empty mill held the history of Hartley's hometown, resonating with the echoes of a proud, working-class river town. Maglaras found the now-quiet space both appealing and appropriate, with its creaky floors and sun-filled windows.



Michael Maglaras at Lewiston's Bates Mill, where he shot scenes for "Visible Silence." Courtesy of 217 films

"Empty space was emblematic of his life and work," Maglaras said of Hartley.

The Connecticut filmmaker will show his new movie "Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet" at 7 p.m. Friday at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, at the Abromson Community Education Center, 88 Bedford St.

This is the second movie Maglaras and his company, 217 Films, have made about Hartley since 2005. The first, "Cleophas and His Own," focused on a single episode in Hartley's life.

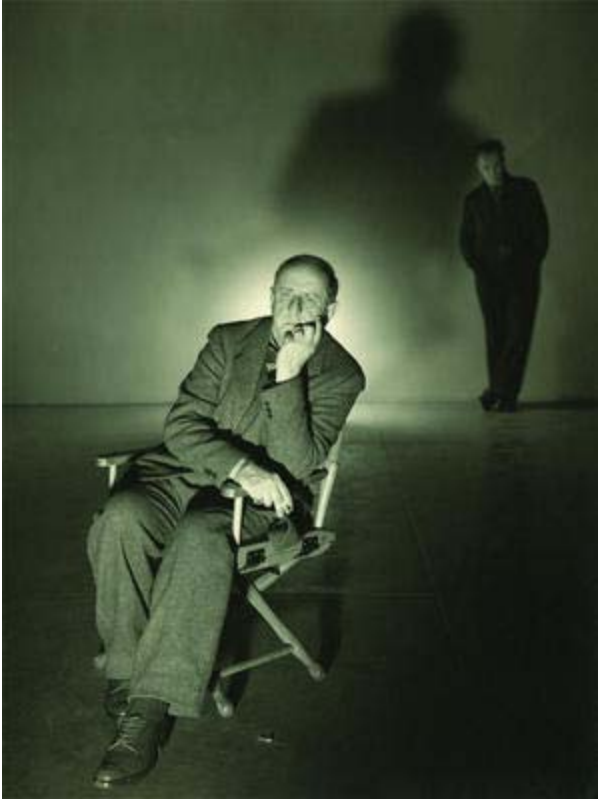
"Visible Silence" is more encompassing, telling Hartley's life story as an essay in film.

Maglaras had no intention of making this movie. But as often happens with Hartley, once one begins to probe, there is no easy out. There is always another page to turn, and another twist in a remarkable and ultimately sad, lonely story about one of the great modernist painters.

"When we finished the first film, my wife and I were touring with it across the country. We had ideas left over. We simply found out that we weren't done with him. It was time we tried to give a broader view," Maglaras said.

"Visible Silence" satisfies a deep curiosity about Hartley, an enigmatic figure whom Maglaras describes as "the most profound painter that Maine has ever produced or is likely to produce."

A generation ago, that argument might have been met with skepticism. Today, as biographers learn more about Hartley's life and the magnitude of his work comes into greater focus and is met with greater appreciation, there's no disputing it.



Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Used by permission

Marsden Hartley photograph by George Platt Lynes, from the movie "Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet" by filmmaker Michael Maglaras. "Visible Silence" is the second film that Maglaras has made about the Maine-bred artist. The first, "Cleophas and His Own," was a dramatization set in Corrae, where Hartley spent the final years of his life.

Hartley, who died in Ellsworth in 1943 at age 66, was a world-class figure. He rubbed shoulders with Ezra Pound in New York and Gertrude Stein in Paris. He traveled to many of the world's major cities, and in the end made a determined decision to return home to Maine, to paint the state and leave his mark as Maine's greatest painter.

In the film, Maglaras argues that Hartley's Mount Katahdin paintings, as well as a series of early works completed in western Maine, are among the most important paintings in America's Modernist lexicon.

Hartley had a fine reputation during his day, but never enjoyed popular recognition as a great painter. In the end, just as he lived much of his life alone and on the outside, he died lonely, misunderstood and mostly unloved.

The last few years, he lived in a spare room in the home of a Corrae family, who gave him a place to paint and one meal a day. He never made much money throughout his life, and at one time resorted to slashing 100 finished canvases because he could not afford the \$241 it cost to store them.

Thus, Maglaras reacted with a touch of sadness when he learned that a Hartley painting fetched more than \$6 million at auction this spring, setting a new record for an American Modernist. Here was a man who spent his entire life living on the outside, rejected personally and professionally, and now his work is setting auction-house records.

The record sale also surprised Maglaras. "What's amazing about that particular sale, it was a painting of a lighthouse – a stylized lighthouse – painted in 1915 in Berlin. It was in Nazi hands, and emerged a few years ago. It's a good Hartley. But a remarkable Hartley? Absolutely not."

A remarkable Hartley might sell for as much as \$20 million, he speculated.

Mark Bessire, director of Bates College Museum of Art, which opened its large collection of Hartley artwork and research material to Maglaras for the movie, said there is an awakening among the larger art world about Hartley and his place in art history.

Scholars have been on board with Hartley's prominence and importance, but the spring sale caught the attention of the general public, he said. Anytime a painting sells for more money than a Georgia O'Keeffe, people notice.

"Yes," Bessire said, "some people still don't like his innovative style and want to see more representational Homer. But there is a really dedicated following of Hartley fans that is growing."

He hopes the movie raises awareness about Hartley, particularly in Maine and in Lewiston, where Hartley spent his early years and never really left – at least in a spiritual sense.

Maglaras hopes the movie leads people to consider Hartley as a man committed to his beliefs, determined to persevere no matter the costs or sacrifices.

"He did not cater to current tastes," Maglaras said. "He went his own way. He painted what he saw and thought about, and followed his own obsessions. When you go your own way in the art world, sometimes your vision resonates. Sometimes it doesn't."

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