In the American tradition

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While he may not be a household name in the art community, Marsden Hartley influenced such better-known American artists as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol.

Much of the museum’s modern art collection is from the State Department’s “Advancing American Art” exhibition that contained works by American artists. The exhibition toured Europe and Latin America in 1946 but was halted after the communist sympathies of several of the artists created controversy. The art was put in storage and later sold as war-surplus property.

The University of Oklahoma purchased 36 works, while Auburn University bought another 36. The rest were sold to other public institutions.

Another of the museum’s significant collections, the Fleischaker Collection, features a heavy emphasis on Southwestern art. If someone offered the museum a work by Hartley — especially a New Mexico landscape — the Fred Jones Museum would snap it up, Lee said.

Hartley, who painted intensely colored landscapes, still lifes and Cubist-inspired portraits, would be the perfect artist to complete these collections, he said.

But for a short time beginning Saturday, the museum, 410 W. Boyd on OU campus, will nearly overflow with 56 works by Hartley as the exhibition “Marsden Hartley: American Modern” will go on display through March 7. The works in the traveling exhibition were selected from the Ione and Hudson D. Walker Collection at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum of the University of Minnesota, which owns the largest collection of Hartley’s work in existence.

Patricia McDonnell curated the exhibition for the museum, selecting works from the Weisman’s collection of 61 paintings and 54 works on paper including pastels, drawings, prints and watercolors.

Tom Topzer, former director of the Fred Jones Museum, scheduled the Hartley exhibition shortly before he left his post and returned to teaching at OU a few years ago.

Topzer knew of the exhibition through his friend Lyndel King, director of the Weisman Art Museum. He thought the exhibition would appeal to Oklahoma audiences.

“I think his subject matter is very much rooted in American tradition, and a lot of his work is very patriotic,” Topzer said.

“His work rings true to the American spirit.”

The exhibition opened at the Weisman Art Museum on June 4, 1997, and has been to the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University, the Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., and the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University in New Orleans.

After its stop at OU, the exhibition will continue on to the Parrish Art Museum in Southhampton, N.Y., the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., the Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum in San Antonio and the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Neb.

Hartley was born Edmund Hartley in 1877 in Lewiston, Maine, and died 66 years later in Ellsworth, Maine.

At 21 years old, Hartley began taking art lessons with Cleveland painter John Semon and then took classes at the Cleveland School of Art. He also studied at the New York School of Art and the National Academy of Design.

His willingness to change his style and his views was reflected early in his career. When he was 29 years old, Hartley changed his identity by taking Marsden, his stepmother’s family name, as his first name.

Hartley was a very American artist. A voracious reader, he studied and connected to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. His early paintings — landscapes created in an late Impressionist style — drew on those influences and his bond with his native state of Maine.

While Hartley’s name may not be a household word among the general public, the names of many of his friends and colleagues are. Hartley was very close to photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his wife, the painter Georgia O’Keeffe.

From 1905 to 1917, Stieglitz owned the famous gallery called 291, named for its address at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York. The gallery was a place for emerging artists such as Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Paul Cezanne to display their works.

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The gallery also highlighted several emerging American artists including O'Keeffe, Hartley, Arthur Dove and John Marin. But it has only been within the last 10 years that these artists have become better known to the general public, McDonnell said.

"The whole circle of artists surrounding Arthur Stieglitz were not deemed as important as the generation of American artists who came after them," McDonnell said, citing Jackson Pollack and William DeKooning as examples of abstract artists who achieved fame. Today, things are different.

"In the art world, Marsden Hartley is a very revered artist," McDonnell said.

"His generation is the first avant garde in the United States."

The artists displaying their works at 291 were considered quite radical in their time. Their avant garde style was a reaction to the traditional painting taught in the art academies, much like the paintings of John Singer Sargent, which are more realistic than Hartley's, she said.

"Many artists felt that the conventions of the academy had been so used and reused that they had become very limiting," McDonnell said.

Hartley was very influenced by modern European painters. Once he saw Matisse and Rodin exhibitions at 291, he began painting with bright colors. After he viewed a 291 Picasso exhibition in 1911 and saw Cezanne's paintings at another gallery, Hartley incorporated elements of those artists' styles into his work.

With Stieglitz's help, Hartley traveled to Europe in 1912 and became a part of the inner circle of American artists and writers who lived in Paris during the World War I. He was close friends with writer Gertrude Stein, who nurtured his career and boosted his self-esteem by buying his art and placing it alongside that of Picasso and Cezanne in her apartment.

By 1913, Hartley had visited Berlin and Munich and began painting abstract works with German military symbols. He began painting portraits without depicting the subject's likeness. Instead, he would paint symbols related to the person, such as military insignia to portray a soldier. These abstract portraits "allude to a person, but don't depict the person expressly," Lee said.

Through his abstract paintings, Hartley also found a covert way to express his closeted homosexuality. While living in Germany, Hartley became very close to Karl von Freyburg, a
German lieutenant. After von Freyburg died in battle on the Western Front, Hartley created a series of paintings.

"These works are many things at once," states the exhibition's catalog. "A memorial to von Freyburg and an elegiac tribute to the masses of war dead, a major synthesis of modernism's pictorial vocabulary, a heavily coded expression of Hartley’s life in Berlin's vibrant homosexual culture and the role of the German military in that culture..."

While Hartley’s homosexuality was common knowledge among his closest friends, the general public didn’t have a clue. But Hartley found veiled ways to express himself in his art.

One painting in the exhibition is a portrait of a soldier with a large rose behind his ear.

"It just looks perfectly flagrant to us, but it wouldn't have to people in the 1920s," Lee said.

Audiences in the Thirties may not have thought anything about the painting “Finnish-Yankee Sauna” that Hartley painted from 1938 to 1939. The painting depicts four beefy naked men covering themselves with leaves. But in the Nineties, the painting has clear homosexual overtones.

Admitting his homosexuality publicly would have meant certain death for Hartley’s career.

"You couldn’t really deal with it at that time," Lee said.

"I think it would have been a lot easier for him had he lived in the 1990s."

Hartley, gay or not, was a great artist, Lee noted.

"Hartley became an icon to a lot of gay art historians in the 1990s because of that."

Although Hartley’s German paintings are considered today to be some of his most significant work, they weren’t recognized as such when he returned to the United States from Germany in 1915, McDonnell said. As World War I intensified, Hartley could no longer receive money by wire and came home.

"He was living in a country that the people of the United States considered the enemy. We were on the verge of going to war with them," McDonnell said.

"And he comes back from this country [with paintings that featured] imagery from German military uniforms. It just didn’t fly."

Hartley was faced with trying to reinvent his art. Following the war, “countries began to think about what defined them as distinctly American, or distinctly French,” McDonnell said.

"Many Americans turned to the landscape."

As did Hartley. He headed to New Mexico, at the invitation of patron Mabel Dodge, where he attempted to connect, once again, to the land. This time, he painted landscapes that

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absorbed the American Indian influence of the region.

Hartley wrote to Stieglitz that he was “copying nature as faithfully as possible,” according to the exhibition’s catalog.

“The pastel drawings of arroyos and paintings of sweeping New Mexican vistas in the Weisman collection show Hartley in the process of reshaping his art and his ideas,” McDonnell wrote in the catalog.

During the Twenties, Hartley traveled throughout Europe while painting New Mexico from memory, according to the book “In the American Grain: Dove, Hartley, Marin, O’Keeffe, and Stieglitz” by Elizabeth Hutton Turner. He also painted still lifes and European landscapes and wrote essays and poetry.

After a major exhibition at Stieglitz’s Intimate Gallery failed, Hartley returned home. He painted more landscapes along the East Coast and read works by Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett and T.S. Eliot, according to “Seeking the Spiritual” by Townsend Ludington.

After painting, reading and writing on travels through Mexico, Hartley again headed for Germany in 1933 and later the Alps. When he returned to the United States in 1934, he was troubled financially. And in 1935, Hartley had to destroy 100 paintings because he could not afford to pay to have them stored.

Hartley’s career and his life ended much as they began — painting in Maine. In his later years, Hartley painted primitive portraits of the people who lived in Maine, such “Adelard the Drowned, Master of the ‘Phantom,’” a portrait representing his friend Alty Mason, who died in 1936.

'Still Life,' 1912, by Marsden Hartley
Hartley died of a heart attack on Sept. 2, 1943, in Ellsworth, Maine.

"Unlike the Lost Generation artists and writers who were his peers, Hartley never became a hardened skeptic. Nonetheless, his world fell apart just as radically as did theirs in the wake of the Great War," McDonnell wrote in the exhibition catalog.

"He changed his mind and opened up and closed his heart in a time with the staggering world events that he witnessed over the course of his life. His art ultimately reflects the savvy and dexterity of this American modern and the impact of world events that forged the Twentieth Century as we know it."

Because of his friendships with Stein, Matisse, Picasso and the writer Ernest Hemingway and the fact that he moved around so much, Hartley "was a major conduit for ideas moving from one place to another," Lee said.

Hartley was traveling the world, rarely settling in any one place for very long, at a time when most Americans stayed put, unlike today, when Americans relocate and travel frequently.

"He was an artist who constantly moved around, and there is a rootlessness in his art," Lee said.

"People do see him as ahead of his time." Hartley's work can be appreciated on several levels. The bold colors and thick brush strokes are appealing to look at and study. But knowing the details of Hartley's life can add another layer to their meaning.

"You have to know the secret language that he uses, and in many cases, he's the only one who gets it," Lee said.

Part of what is so appealing about Hartley's work to Americans is that many of his paintings deal with the military and with landscapes, Toperzer said. While Americans are not as militaristic as Germans, they have a great appreciation for the military and its symbols, he said. Americans also have an affinity for landscapes, including mountain and ocean scenes.

"Marsden Hartley: American Modern" received high praise from the New Orleans Times-Picayune when the exhibition visited Tulane's Newcomb Art Gallery last fall. Hartley painted "some of the most emotionally charged pictures ever made by an American," art critic Chris Waddington wrote.

While this exhibition may not be enough to make Hartley's name as common as O'Keeffe's — it often takes a retrospective of an artist's work at a major museum such as the Louvre or the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C. — it will raise his profile in Oklahoma, Toperzer said.

"It will be a great opportunity to expose a lot of people who haven't seen his work," he said.