

One Portrait of One Woman: The Influence of Gertrude Stein on Marsden Hartley's Approach to the Object Portrait Genre

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Marsden Hartley's 1916 painting *One Portrait of One Woman* is an object portrait of the American abstractionist poet and writer Gertrude Stein (Figure 1). Object portraits are based on an object or a collage of objects, which through their association evoke the image of the subject in the title. In this portrait, the centrally located cup is set upon an abstraction of a checkerboard table, placed before a half-mandorla of alternating bands of yellow and white, and positioned behind the French word *moi*. Rising from the half-mandorla is a red, white and blue pattern that Gail Scott reads as an abstraction of the American and French flags.¹ On the right and left sides of the canvas are fragments of candles and four unidentified forms that echo the shape of the half-mandorla. Inside the cup floats a yellow cross and behind the cup is a vertical projection that ends in a circle. The prominent position of the cup suggests that it is a metonymic substitute for the physical likeness of Stein.

Most scholars agree that the publication of Stein's literary word portraits of Picasso and Matisse in Alfred Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work* in August of 1912 provided the inspiration for the invention of the object portrait in the visual arts.² Susan Elizabeth Ryan notes that "within the cultural context surrounding Hartley's artistic development before and after World War I, portraiture was a signature genre, and the liberation of portraiture from its traditional focus on faces was the avant-garde practice par-excellence in Paris and New York."³ Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Marius de Zayas, Charles Demuth, and Georgia O'Keeffe were among those in

Hartley's circle that assembled abstract and/or symbolic forms in works called "portraits."⁴

Although several monographs address Stein's impact on Hartley's object portraits, none explores the formal aspects of this relationship.⁵ This paper first argues that Hartley's initial approach to the object portrait genre developed independently of that of other artists in his circle. Secondly, this discussion posits that Hartley's debt to Stein was not limited to her literary word portraits of Picasso and Matisse but extended to her collection of "portraits" of objects entitled *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*, published in book form in 1914. And finally, this paper concludes that Hartley's *One Portrait of One Woman* pays homage to Stein's objective in *Tender Buttons*, which was to align poetry to painting through the formal elements of their structure.⁶

Months before their publication in *Camera Work*, Stein's literary word portraits of Picasso and Matisse were displayed in manuscript form at Stieglitz's gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. Ryan suggests that Hartley would have seen the manuscripts before he left America for Europe in the spring of 1912.⁷ Among his first stops in Europe was the home of Stein in Paris where he became a participant in her legendary Saturday evening discussions on art.⁸ Hartley's dual interest in poetry and painting contributed to a long-standing friendship between the two.

In terms of locating Stein's influence on the other members of the Steiglitz circle, however, the contact comes later. For example, Mabel Dodge introduced Picabia to the word

¹ Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1988) 39.

² James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974) 189. Not only Ryan and Mellow note this influence, but also Wanda Corn in her book *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, notes the influence of Stein's word portraits on this circle of artists as well. (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999) 202. Stein's word portraits of Picasso and Matisse can be found in Gertrude Stein, *Portraits and Prayers* (New York: Random House, 1934) 12-20.

³ Susan Elizabeth Ryan, "Marsden Hartley: Practicing the "Eyes" in Autobiography," in *Marsden Hartley, Somehow a Past: The Autobiography of Marsden Hartley* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997) 9.

⁴ Ryan 9.

⁵ Very little research has been done on this period in Hartley's life or on *One Portrait of One Woman*. Other than brief discussions in Scott's book,

Barabara Haskell's *Marsden Hartley* (New York: New York UP, 1980), and an entry from Patricia McDonnell's catalogue *Marsden Hartley: American Modern* (Seattle: The U of Washington P, 1997), no substantial research has been done. The majority of the research on Hartley's work has focused on his first and second European period, from 1912-1914 and 1914-1915, and rightly so since these paintings, especially the German series, are quite significant. Gail Levin has done extensive research on Hartley's German series. There has also been much research done on Hartley's later work from Maine. The influence of Stein's work on Hartley is often mentioned, but not given the same attention as has been given to the relationship between Picasso and Stein.

⁶ Michael J. Hoffman suggests in *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein*, that Stein wanted to continue the traditional liaisons between poetry and painting by dropping subject matter from her literary portraits. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1965) 162.

⁷ Ryan 211. Ryan notes this in footnote 11.

⁸ Scott 37.

portrait of herself written by Stein after his arrival in New York for the Armory Show in February of 1913.⁹ By that time Hartley had been in Europe for almost a year. Picabia did not meet Stein until he returned to Paris in April.¹⁰ His exploitation of the genre did not fully develop until his return to New York in 1915, where he renewed his friendship with Steiglitz. With Marius de Zayas he helped create *291*, the central publication of the Dada movement in America. It is to the period of this collaboration that Picabia's machinist portrait of Stieglitz entitled *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz*, belongs (Figure 2).¹¹ Not until the 1920s did other artists of the Stieglitz circle produce object portraits, long after Hartley's initial response to Stein's work.¹² For this reason, their object portraits must be considered second generation.

Hartley's portrait of a word, *Raptus*, 1913, can be considered his first step towards the new object portrait genre (Figure 3). *Raptus* was intended to be the first in a series of word portraits.¹³ The word *raptus* refers to a chapter in William James's 1902 book *Varieties of Religious Experience* in which the author describes the state of *raptus* experienced by Christian mystics, like Saint Teresa. Stein and Hartley shared a common interest in James, who had been Stein's mentor at Harvard. Stein lent Hartley a copy of James's book in the summer of 1912.¹⁴

In *Raptus*, Hartley adopts the cubist convention of incorporating incidental words into the composition. The painting focuses on the word itself, which lies across a white recessed plane below concentric circles. The letters are intersected by one of the converging planes, symbolizing the mystical union achieved in this state.¹⁵ Jo Anna Isaak notes in "Gertrude Stein: Revolutionary Laughter" that there is a "correlation between the introduction of typography into painting and the decrease in representation of analytic cubism." She further notes that it is just at the moment when the conventions of pictorial representation were breaking down that language was introduced into painting. This introduction asks the viewer to respond to a sign system alien to the canvas, but one that can equally

"provide visual counterparts to reality." In this, the reading of the page and painting are aligned. Picasso acknowledged the importance of this correlation to Stein's writing in *The Architect's Table*, 1912, when he included a hand-painted version of her calling card within the painted reality (Figure 4).¹⁶

In much the same way, Hartley equally acknowledged the alignment of the written word and the painted reality by illustrating a concept plastically. This type of illustration is traditionally reserved for the written word or illustrated in painting and sculpture through the expressive gestures of the human form. Hartley's elimination of the physical body to illustrate the concept *raptus* is closely aligned with Stein's *Tender Buttons*. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein's attempt to emulate the techniques of painting culminates in a set of "portraits" of still lifes, a traditional subject of painters. Michael J. Hoffman suggests that Stein chose this subject because it is unobtrusive and lends itself completely to matters of technique. This is of course one reason why artists choose the subject as well.¹⁷

The emulation of the techniques of painting leads Stein to dispense with the figure and turn instead to objects. This switch is often related to Picasso's use of collage as a means of portraying the fragmented world of things.¹⁸ The central concern of *Tender Buttons* is diction, the selection of words based on association. Stein's "portrait" of an apple from *Tender Buttons* is a good example.

"Apple"

Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam,
colored wine, calm seen, cold cream, best
shake, potato, potato and no no gold work
with pet, a green seen is called bake and
change sweet is bready, a little piece a little
piece please.

A little piece please. Cane again to the
presupposed and ready eucalyptus tree, count
out sherry and ripe plates and little corners
of a kind of ham. This is use.¹⁹

In the portrait "Apple," the nouns used in the poem are

⁹ *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*, 1913, can be found in Stein's *Portraits and Prayers*, 98-102.

¹⁰ Dodge wrote a letter to Stein on February 13, 1913 stating that Picabia understood the portrait. The letter stated: "Picabia the painter is here & very intelligent & understands it all [the portrait] perfectly. I asked him to write down what he said & I will send it to you. I will give him a letter to you as you & Leo will both (strangely enough) like him." See Patricia Everett, *A History of Having a Great Many Times Not Continued to Be Friends: The Correspondence Between Mabel Dodge and Gertrude Stein, 1911-1934* (Albuquerque: U of Mexico P, 1996) 167. Stein wrote to Dodge on May 2, 1913 that she had been seeing the Picabias [Francis and Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia]. See Everett 183.

¹¹ Mellow 191. Picabia produced an object portrait of the exotic dancer Stacia Napierkowska entitled *Mechanical Expression Seen Through Our Own Mechanical Expression* in 1913 while in New York for the Armory Show. But this appears to have been an isolated experiment. For a discussion of this object portrait see Willard Bohn, "Picabia's Mechanical Expression and the Demise of the Object," *The Art Bulletin* (December 1985): 673-677, or Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Francis Picabia, Radiometers, and X-Rays in 1913," *The Art Bulletin* (March 1989): 114-123.

¹² Mellow 192. With the exception of Marius de Zayas whose abstract caricatures can be considered a precursor to the object portrait. See Willard Bohn, "The Abstract Vision of Marius de Zayas," *The Art Bulletin* (September 1980): 434-452.

¹³ *Raptus* was the only painting done in this series. Hartley never followed up on the idea. Scott 39.

¹⁴ Scott 39.

¹⁵ Scott 39.

¹⁶ Jo Anna Isaak, "Gertrude Stein: Revolutionary Laughter," in *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Arts and Texts* (UMI Research Press, 1986) 100. The calling card is located in the lower right.

¹⁷ Hoffman 181.

¹⁸ Hoffman 176.

¹⁹ Stein's "Apple" can be found in *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1990) 48.

referential but do not provide a description of the object. Joanna Isaak notes that the poem is instead a series of “quasi-metaphoric expressions relating to apples and various dishes made from apples.”²⁰ Stein’s explanation of this mode of writing captures the difference between description and resemblance. She states:

I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description.²¹

The question is, can a collection of nouns in a written work “look like,” or resemble, the object without the use of adjectives intrinsic to description?

The problematic nature of this question as it is addressed to Stein’s work and the aspect of this question that correlates with the invention of object portraits in painting may best be addressed by looking at the elements that determine the object portrait genre. As mentioned earlier, object portraits are based on an object or a collage of objects, which through their association, “look like” the subject, as Stein states. In Hartley’s *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914 (Figure 5), the artist uses an arrangement of objects associated with the German military to capture a “likeness” of the German officer Karl von Freyburg.²² The letters *KvF* are his initials and the letter *E* stands for his regiment, the Bavarian Eisenbahn. Elsewhere are regimental patches, flags, banners and the Iron Cross that von Freyburg was awarded.²³ Here, Hartley arranged objects in the same freely associative way that Stein arranged nouns in “Apple” to capture the “likeness” of the object. He then synthesized this approach to “likeness” with synthetic cubism’s appreciation of the materiality of the object. This kind of synthesis is the objective of Stein’s experiment with language in her attempt to explore the “plastic” potentialities of language itself. Thus, Hartley’s approach to object portraiture at this point is a by-product of his exposure both to cubism and to Stein’s experiments with the formal aspects of language in *Tender Buttons*.

However, Stein’s “portraits” are nominally of objects. Yet, as Wendy Steiner notes, the author’s capricious use of genre designations and her merging of genres like portraiture and still lifes makes it difficult to tell which of her works are portraits.²⁴ But at the same time, the merging of the two genres is

consistent with tendencies begun in painting in the late nineteenth century. For instance, is Edgar Degas’s *Woman with Chrysanthemums*, 1865 (Figure 6), a portrait or a still life? Similarly, in Vincent Van Gogh’s *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 1890,²⁵ the viewer is given as much information about the subject through the inclusion of the two books by the Goncourt Brothers and the digitalis plant as through the pose and the rendering of Gachet’s physical appearance. Distinctions between genres become more problematic in *Gauguin’s Chair*, 1888 (Figure 7), when van Gogh suggests that one can know Gauguin through a chair, an arrangement of objects, and the space within which these objects are placed. As James R. Mellow notes in his article, “Gertrude Stein Among the Dadaists,” Stein’s contribution to this transaction was “the notion of a species of ‘portraiture’ that was far different from the old fashioned likeness.” He further notes that New York Dada artists like Picabia used the object portrait as a “protest gesture, a putdown of an academic convention.”²⁶ In contrast, Stein and Hartley recognized the merging of still life and portraiture as the next step towards the exploitation of the “plastic” potentialities of their art.

It has often been noted that Picabia’s portrait of Stieglitz is less than flattering in its depiction of him as a broken camera with the eye of its lens pointed toward the ideal realm. For this reason, *One Portrait of One Woman* may have been produced in response to both Picabia’s satire of Stieglitz and to his disregard for the formal aspects of Stein’s writing. Yet, at the same time, Hartley’s collection of objects can hardly be considered a continuation of the portraiture genre. Wanda Corn notes that object portraits often escape detection and decoding because they are very private or “intentionally elusive.” She further notes that these non-mimetic portrayals are often called symbolic portraits, which is equally problematic because the symbols have no fixed meanings but are instead dependent upon the context within which they are placed.²⁷ This observation further acknowledges Stein’s contribution to this genre because her literary portraits were highly personal and could only be understood within the context of her immediate circle.

So then, how are we to read a likeness of Stein in *One Portrait Of One Woman*? The best place to begin is with the title of the painting, which is a play on Stein’s repetition of the word *one* in her word portraits of Picasso and Matisse.²⁸ For instance, the first line of the Picasso portrait states “One

²⁰ Isaak 115.

²¹ Isaak 115.

²² World War I began in August of 1914. Only twenty-four years old, Karl von Freyburg was killed near Arras on October 7, 1914. He and Hartley were good friends. Noted in W. H. Robinson, “Marsden Hartley’s Military,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, v. 76, no.1 (1984): 10.

²³ Scott 53.

²⁴ Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) 64.

²⁵ A black and white reproduction of Vincent van Gogh’s *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* can be found in Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson’s *19th-Century Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1984) 416. Oil on canvas, 26 x 22 3/8 in., Private Collection, United States. For a color reproduction see Jan Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh: A Dual Biography*, edited by James H. Miller (Ann Arbor: Fuller Publications, 1990) colorplate 16.

²⁶ James R. Mellow, “Gertrude Stein Among the Dadaists,” *Arts Magazine* (May 1977): 124.

²⁷ Corn 203. Corn defines symbols as surrogate images for qualities or abstract thoughts that people in a common culture understand and agree upon.

²⁸ Scott 39.

whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming.” This line is repeated four times in the first paragraph. Throughout both portraits Stein never mentions the artists’ names but only refers to them as *one*. Thus, the title of Hartley’s painting references his appropriation of Stein’s literary style in the painting.

At the same time, the title can also be linked to a curious play Stein wrote entitled *IIIIIIIIII* (*one* or *I*) which included Hartley as a character.²⁹ The title of the play can be taken as a series of the Roman numeral one or as ten instances of the first person singular pronoun. This is further referenced by the word *moi* in the foreground of the painting. A segment of the play was published in the catalogue for an exhibition of Hartley’s paintings at Stieglitz’s gallery in January of 1914.³⁰ As a result, the play on the word *one* in Hartley’s painting would have been well understood by those people who frequented Stieglitz’s gallery and read *Camera Work*. For this reason, Hartley did not have to include Stein’s name in the title.

In much the same way, the cup itself may allude to Stein’s “portrait” of a cup in *Tender Buttons*. In “Cups,” Stein refers to the rendering of the illusion of objects in painting through the phrase “a cup is readily shaded.”³¹ Considering that Hartley has rendered most of the forms in the painting through flat planes of pure color, the suggestion of shading on the cup must allude to Stein’s “portrait” of this object. Also, in “Cups” Stein includes the word *candle*, the forms of which are also shaded in the painting. But, at the same time, these forms are more than just objects abstracted from the text. In fact, some forms not only escape decoding but also appear to be more mystical than physical.

For instance, the circular shape behind the cup is repeated in several paintings from Hartley’s German period, like *Forms Abstracted*, 1913 (Figure 8). Gail Levin notes in her article “Marsden Hartley and Mysticism” that an interest in esoteric religions was a shaping force in his development as a painter.³² Hartley often combined motifs from both Eastern and Christian religions in a style he referred to as “cosmic cubism.”³³ As a metonym of Stein then, the placement of the cup before the half-mandorla suggests that she is an icon of sorts with

attendants. This is further confirmed by the floating cross shape in the cup, the color of the cup, which in theosophy is symbolic of spirituality, and the cup itself, a container of holy wisdom. Many scholars note that Stein and Hartley often had tea during their discussions of painting and poetry.³⁴ The cup, then, would have been a private symbol, which suggests that she was his own personal spiritual and intellectual adviser as well as an important figure in the transatlantic dissemination of modern art.

After Stieglitz, Stein was arguably the second most influential person in Hartley’s career.³⁵ Her presence in Paris was crucial to the development of an American avant-garde. For this reason, the flag at the top of the painting is not only symbolic of Stein’s identity as an American expatriate living in France but also of her contribution to modern art on both continents. The flag may also allude to American support of the French at this juncture in World War I. In 1916, when this painting was done, Stein was actively engaged in the American Fund for the Relief of the French Wounded in France.³⁶ Hartley, forced to return to New York because of the war, suffered the repercussions of anti-German sentiment regarding the paintings he had done in Berlin.³⁷ As a result, he was forced to abandon his German subject matter and “reconsider his artistic objectives;” thus an American subject was an appropriate choice.³⁸

This leads me to conclude that Hartley conceived of this portrait not only as an homage to Stein’s influence on the development of his approach to the object portrait genre, but also as a symbol of his admiration for her both as a friend and mentor. Furthermore, Hartley was a defender of modernist principles even as a participant in New York Dada.³⁹ Therefore he may have resisted Picabia’s satiric approach to this genre. *One Portrait of One Woman* not only illustrates Stein’s experiments with language, but also questions the construction of the portrait genre in the visual arts. In this, Hartley satisfies Stein’s objective in *Tender Buttons*, which was to align poetry and painting through the formal elements of their structure.

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²⁹ A copy of this play can be found in Gertrude Stein, *Geographies and Plays* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1967) 189-198. I could not find anything in the play that could be linked to the objects in the painting other than a reference to a “check board.”

³⁰ Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company*, 187.

³¹ Stein’s “Cups” can be found in *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*, 49; There is also a “portrait” entitled “A New Cup and Saucer” in *Tender Buttons*, 20. Ryan notes that the cup is a recurrent subject in *Tender Buttons*. See Ryan 212, footnote 31.

³² Gail Levin, “Marsden Hartley and Mysticism,” *Arts Magazine* (November 1985): 16.

³³ Levin 16.

³⁴ Ryan 19.

³⁵ Ryan 15.

³⁶ Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *American Artists in Paris, 1919-1929* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1988) 77.

³⁷ Haskell 52.

³⁸ McDonnell 49.

³⁹ Estera Milman, “Dada New York: An Historiographic Analysis,” in *Dada/Dimensions*, edited by Stephen C. Foster (Michigan: UMI Research Press) 173.



Figure 1. Marsden Hartley, *One Portrait of One Woman*, c. 1916, oil on fiberboard, 30 x 25 inches. Collection Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the Lone and Hudson D. Walker Collection.

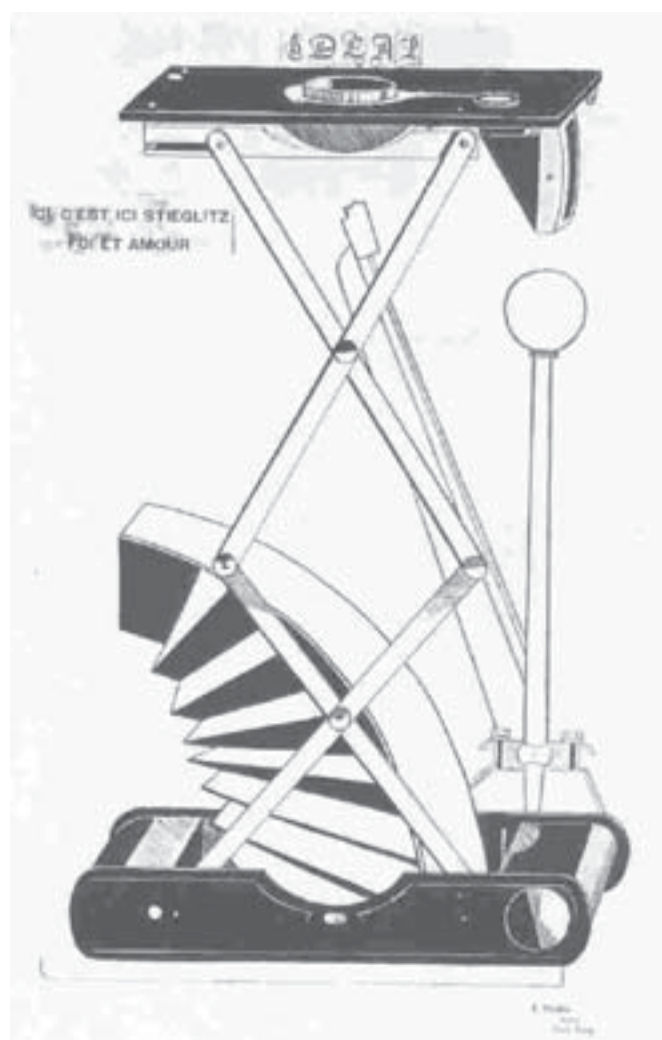


Figure 2. Francis Picabia, *Here, this is Stieglitz Here [Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz]*, 1915, pen and ink on paper, 29 7/8 x 20 inches (75.7 x 50.8 cm). ©Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949. (49.70.14)



Figure 3. Marsden Hartley, *Raptus*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 32 inches. Gift of Paul and Hazel Strand in Memory of Elizabeth McCausland. (1965.4)



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), *The Architect's Table*, 1912, oil on canvas, mounted on oval panel, 28 5/8 x 23 1/2 inches. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. The William S. Paley Collection. (697.71) Digital Image (c) The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.

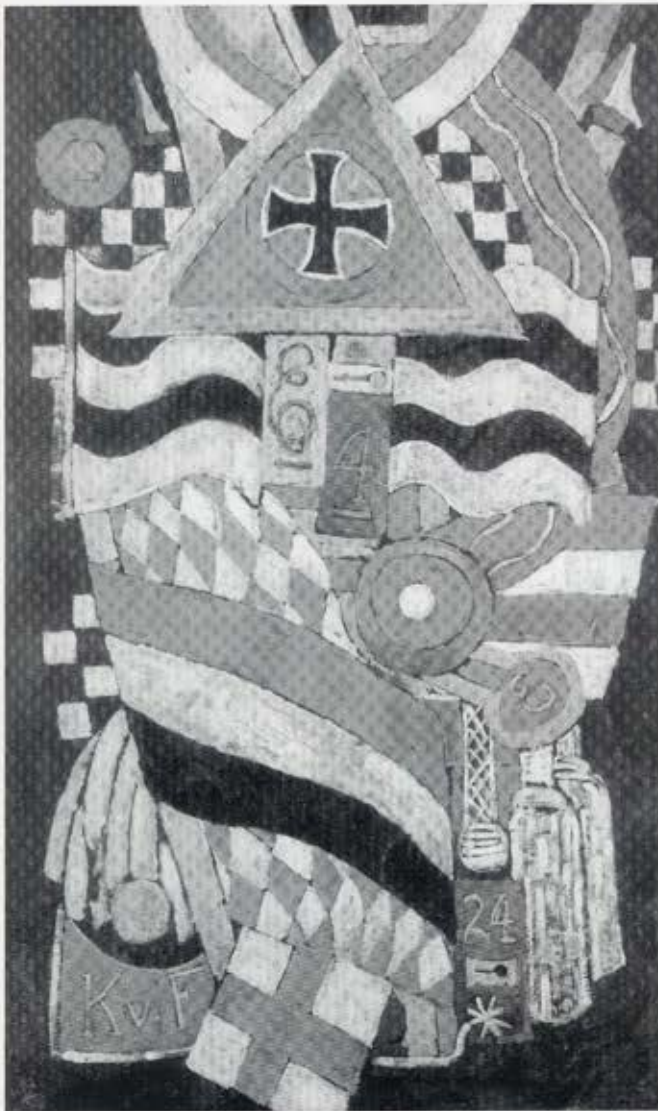


Figure 5. Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914, oil on canvas, 68 1/4 x 41 3/8 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949. (49.70.42)



Figure 6. Edgar Degas, *A Woman Seated Beside a Vase of Flowers (Madame Paul Valpincon?)*, 1865, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/2 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The H.O. Havemeyer Collection. Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929. (29.100.128)

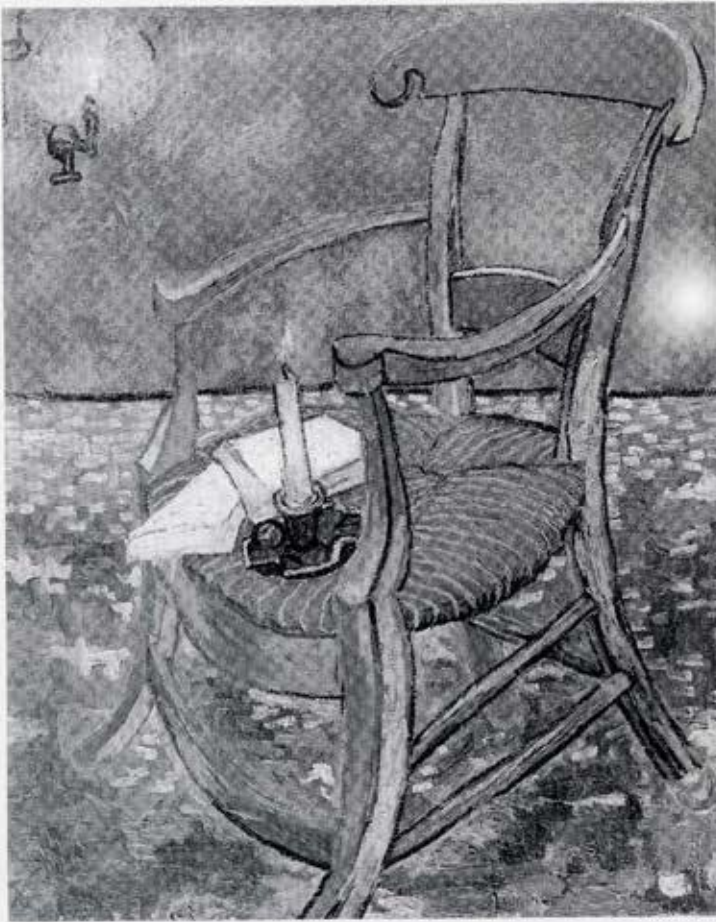


Figure 7. Vincent van Gogh, *Gauguin's Arm Chair*, Arles 1888, oil on canvas, 90.5 x 72.5 cm, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).



Figure 8. Marsden Hartley, *Forms Abstracted*, 1913, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 31 3/5 inches (100.33 x 80.65 cm). Whitney Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Hudson D. Walker and exchange, 52.37.