

<http://www.courant.com/entertainment/movies/hc-prodnotes0325.artmar25.0.1729565.story>

How One Artist's Obsession Became Another's Obsession As Well

March 25, 2007

By SUSAN DUNNE, Courant Staff Writer

When the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art held an exhibit on Marsden Hartley starting in January 2003, Michael Maglaras started thinking about the American modernist painter and writer. Wondering about Hartley's life, Maglaras checked out eBay, where he bought a catalog from an old Hartley exhibit in Nova Scotia.

That catalog changed his life.

"I opened it up and saw this narrative 'Cleophas and His Own.' I read it and was deeply moved by the story on several levels," Maglaras, of Greenwich, said. "It's a beautiful poetic narrative about a family with whom [Hartley] had a very loving relationship."

"The focus of Hartley's art from 1936 to his death in 1943 was essentially devoted to painting and repainting this family. It was an enormous obsession," Maglaras said. "I read the narrative to my wife. We own a record company. I decided to record it and release it."

From that point, Hartley's obsession became Maglaras' obsession. He couldn't stop thinking about "Cleophas and His Own."

The success of the recording - Maglaras performed the poem live at several art museums - led to a film version of Hartley's elegy to this Nova Scotia family and the tragedy that befell them.

That film, "Cleophas and His Own: A North Atlantic Tragedy," will be screened Thursday afternoon at the New Britain Museum of American Art. Maglaras will introduce it, do a Q&A and sign copies of the DVD, which will be available for sale.

The museum has been showing films about artists on the last Thursday of the month for more than a year now. But this film is different from the usual fare at NBMAA, which tends to be short subjects and interviews with the artists. "Cleophas and His Own" is 2- hours and is an homage, not an interview.

Maglaras directed the film and stars as Hartley, reading the 13-chapter poem in a reproduction of Hartley's studio. Interspersed between black-and-white segments of his narration are vividly colored shots of 24 of Hartley's artworks.

"When these paintings come on the screen, I want them to startle, to dazzle, to speak," Maglaras, 57, said. "I used black and white to differentiate these concepts. I also wanted a 1936 quality to it, for the black and white to portray the time it was set."

The script, except for an opening and closing segment, is Hartley's poem.

The poem "Cleophas and His Own" tells of Hartley meeting a kind and loving family in Nova Scotia while on a fishing and painting trip in 1935. They took him in. The artist, a lonely man who had wandered from city to city his entire adult life, felt at home with the Masons, who accepted him unquestioningly. His happiness came to an end in 1936, when two of the family's sons, Alty and Donny, and their cousin Allen, were drowned in a boating mishap during a gale. He was especially devastated by the death of Alty Mason, with whom the gay artist was in love.

The tragedy - which the artist described as "crashing down upon our hearts and souls like earthquake upon ruin" - changed Hartley's life and his work.

"He really didn't do much with the human form before 1936," Maglaras said. "He worked with cubism, still lifes, landscapes. Then out of the blue, he starts painting portraits. He painted [the Masons] over and over again, obsessed. He wanted to paint them as icons rather than representations of people."

In the poem, he gave the family members romantic names. Alty became Alphonse Adelard. Donny became Etienne. The patriarch, Francis, became the Cleophas of the title. His wife, Martha, was rechristened Marie Sainte Esprit.

Maglaras said the death of Alty Mason was a tragic mirror of a previous tragedy in Hartley's life.

"Before World War I, Hartley lived in Germany and was in love with a young German military officer. He was killed at the front," Maglaras said. "Here he is, 21 years later, at a remote fishing village, and a man he loved was taken away from him again.

"That would probably be enough to put any of us down. All it did is strengthen his purpose."

In conjunction with the screening, NBMAA will have Hartley's "Maine Islands" (1938, oil on canvas) on view.

Also, the Atheneum has three Hartleys currently on display. "Military" (1913), "Movement #2" (1916) and "Down East Young Blades" (c. 1940) are in the third-floor American galleries in the Avery Memorial Building.

The film, whose musical theme is Richard Strauss' lovely tone poem "Death and Transfiguration," was produced by Maglaras' wife, Terri Templeton. It was shot entirely in Maine, including Lewiston, Hartley's birthplace. It has been shown in theaters and museums around the country. It ends its current tour with the New Britain screening.

Maglaras said he is now working on a documentary about Hartley's entire life, to be titled "Visible Silence: The Life of Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet." He will move on to other projects after that; he feels he has done his part to bring Hartley's name into more prominent recognition.

"When I was at the Atheneum show, my impression was that Hartley's time has come," Maglaras said.

CLEOPHAS AND HIS OWN: A NORTH ATLANTIC TRAGEDY is a 217 Films production, directed by and starring Michael Maglaras, produced by Terri Templeton and written by Marsden Hartley. It will be screened Thursday at 5 p.m. at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St. The screening is free with museum admission, which is \$9 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for students. Children younger than 12 are free. The film is 147 minutes and unrated. For details, call 860- 229-0257.

Contact Susan Dunne at sdunne@courant.com