In Marsden Hartley’s painting *The Iron Cross* (1915), recognizable symbols and abstract shapes intertwine in a boldly colored composition. The black and white cross of the painting’s title hangs from the top edge of the canvas, embedded in a red and green circle. A commanding band of red color sweeps across the frenetic composition of this square painting. Inscribed with white serpentine lines, this red band weaves through an unglued collage of checkered patterns, colored bars, letters, numbers, and key-shaped insignia, terminating behind a set of black, white, and green concentric circles surrounding a red cross. The deep black background appears to thrust this jumble of brightly colored shapes outward beyond the painting’s frame, yet the rapid and loose brushwork accentuates the materiality of paint on the canvas.

Painted during Hartley’s two-and-a-half-year stay in Berlin (May 1913 to December 1915), *The Iron Cross* is part of the artist’s War Motif series—a group of paintings begun in 1914, after the start of World War I and the subsequent death of Karl von Freyburg, Hartley’s close friend and possible lover. This series of twelve paintings has frequently been the subject of scholarship aimed at deciphering Hartley’s pictorial codes through his personal biography. In *The Iron Cross*, the white and blue checkered Bavarian flag, the number 4, the letter E, the black and white grid of a chessboard, and the Iron Cross itself have been interpreted as direct references to von Freyburg and the regiment in which he served until his death in the first campaigns of World War I.

An approach based primarily on biographical facts, however, limits our understanding of this complex painting, which can be seen as more than a symbolic portrait of Hartley’s lost lover. Through the advanced visual vocabulary evident in Hartley’s entire War Motif series, *The Iron Cross* offers a snapshot of the vibrant yet fragmentary visual experience of modern life as mediated through the artist’s own subjective perceptions. As this essay will explore, the work negotiates a complicated network of urban modernity and military spectacle—a central presence in imperial Berlin at the cusp of World War I.

While living in Berlin, Hartley experienced the metropolis during a particularly aggressive surge in urban spectacle. Electrical lighting, bold advertising signs, speeding streetcars, and other urban amusements flooded the city’s streets. In a letter to Gertude Stein, Hartley described his immediate impression of Berlin:

There is an interesting source of material here—numbers + shapes + colors that make one wonder—and admire—It is essentially mural this German way of living—big lines and large masses—always a sense of pageantry of living. I like it—.
Assimilating formal elements from both Cubism and German Expressionism, Hartley invented a radical pictorial vocabulary of visual fragments and saturated colors to mediate his visual “observations” of modern Berlin. As art historian Patricia McDonnell suggests, the abstracted insignia, chance numerals, and flag patterns “jostle for space in the compacted image and replicate the disjunctive but invigorating experience of the urban environment.” The Iron Cross assimilates the dynamic, vibrating spectacle of the imperial capital packed with a “live-wire feeling,” as the artist himself described it. Flashing colors emerge from the black background like brightly lit signs on a city street. The small red, yellow, and green circles in the upper left of the painting almost resemble a modern traffic signal.

The ubiquitous display of military pageantry was also a central aspect of the imperial capital’s urban spectacle during this time, as evidenced throughout many of Hartley’s Berlin paintings. Under the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II, large formal parades of martial guard units in full regalia were staged to show off Germany’s military power. Even before the war broke out, Hartley adopted military symbolism into his artistic language, as in his prewar pageantry paintings (1913–14) and his Amerika series (1914). His Berlin paintings showcase his keen attraction to military costume, choreography, and the macho spectacle of the warrior. In The Iron Cross, circles, bars, and patterns mimic the array of colorful buttons, collars, ribbons, cuffs, and flags that decorated the parading cavalrymen in Berlin. In addition, varying combinations of black, white, red, yellow, green, and blue serve simultaneously as unit colors, state colors, and national colors.

Readings of this painting, as with the entire War Motif series, were strongly informed by the public and widespread affiliation between the German military and homosexuality—a perception largely shaped by the Eulenberg Affair. While lost on most current audiences, these commonplace associations would have been more readily apparent to Wilhelmine Berliners at the time. Berlin sustained a large and active gay subculture beginning in the late nineteenth century. Just prior to World War I, the visual vocabulary of pageantry, muscularity, and virility were utilized in constructing notions of both masculinity and homosexuality. Hartley’s Berlin paintings celebrated the homoeroticism and cult of manliness in Wilhelmine German military culture, conditioned by the artist’s own identity as a gay man and his involvement in Berlin’s gay subculture.

With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 and the death of von Freyburg in October of the same year, the realities of modern warfare challenged Hartley’s previous idealized aesthetics of military pomp and parades. His work shifted with the War Motif paintings, concentrating on the formal vocabulary of the military uniform within the milieu of Berlin. In The Iron Cross, the tangle of military insignia, flags, and regalia is depicted in a fragmented, flattened manner. The inclusion of the Iron Cross itself engages a military decoration awarded to over four million German soldiers for bravery in the battlefield, frequently awarded posthumously. Additionally, the red cross nearer to the center of the painting makes a reference to the International Red Cross, a symbol that became commonplace in Berlin after the war broke out. In the context of conflict, the recognizable military regalia and crosses depicted in the painting become a reminder of wartime trauma, which gained immediate significance in Germany and across Europe as the devastation of World War I deepened. In The Iron Cross, therefore, Hartley not only created an assemblage of the exuberant paraphernalia of military tradition as central to the urban spectacle of Berlin, but also linked this experience to the deadly results of modern warfare.

The Iron Cross thus occupies a unique position between notions of modernity and military tradition, private and public, subjective and objective. Moving away from mimetic
representation yet embracing recognizable visual referents, Marsden Hartley forged a new syntax to represent a reality transformed by technology, war, and the jolt of modernity.

1 See Jonathan Weinberg, Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Patricia McDonnell, “‘Essentially Masculine’: Marsden Hartley, Gay Identity, and the Wilhelmine German Military,” Art Journal 56, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 62-68. While little concrete information exists regarding Hartley’s relationship with Karl von Freyburg, it is generally accepted that the two were lovers.

2 After Marsden Hartley’s death in 1943, Karl von Freyburg’s cousin, Arnold Rönnebeck, wrote a letter to an American collector that gave his own interpretation of the iconography of the War Motif paintings, which has become the basis for scholar’s interpretations. See Patricia McDonnell, Dictated by Life: Marsden Hartley’s German Paintings and Robert Indiana’s Hartley Elegies (Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 1995), 28.

3 Letter from Hartley to Gertrude Stein, August 1913, as cited in McDonnell, Dictated by Life, 23.


5 Hartley to Stein, May 1913, as cited in McDonnell, “‘Portrait of Berlin,’” 49.

6 Interestingly, the first modern traffic light with all three colors was installed in the United States during the same year Hartley began this painting.

7 See Wanda Corn, “Marsden Hartley’s Native Amerika,” in Marsden Hartley, 69-85, for a discussion of Hartley’s attraction to military pageantry through his Amerika series.

8 See Donna M. Cassidy, Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), 228-32.

9 The Eulenberg Affair was a highly publicized controversy surrounding a series of court-martials and trials regarding accusations of homosexual conduct among prominent cabinet members and close friends of Kaiser Wilhelm II during 1907–9. This scandal was imprinted into the public imagination and would likely have been the topic of conversations during Hartley’s time in Berlin (four years after the final trial was concluded). See McDonnell, “‘Essentially Masculine,’” 65-67.