

*Distinctly Hartell*



Artist, architect, and teacher John Hartell lived, in the most active sense of the word, for most of the twentieth century. He was born in 1902 in Brooklyn but spent the majority of his ninety-three years in Ithaca. Raised in a creative environment (his father founded an interior design firm in Manhattan), Hartell developed an inquisitive and inventive mind early on. He published drawings in his high school's newspaper, and when it was time for college, he studied architecture at Cornell (Class of '24).

In 1926 Hartell received the American-Scandinavian Foundation fellowship for advanced study in architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Upon returning to the United States, he worked for three years in various architecture offices in New York and taught architecture at both Clemson College and the University of Illinois. During this time, he married fellow Cornellian Sylvia Muller (Class of '23), who would be his companion for sixty-seven years. In 1930 he joined the architecture faculty at Cornell and moved to Ithaca.

A highly motivated artist, Hartell spent most mornings painting in his studio. These efforts were rewarded in 1937 when the Kleeman Gallery mounted his first solo exhibition in New York. One of the paintings, *Portrait of a Child* (1934), was reproduced on the cover of *Art News*, with an accompanying review by Alfred M. Frankfurter.<sup>1</sup> The portrait of Hartell's golden-haired daughter Mari appears as radiant and adored as an early Renaissance Christ child.

Seen from an adult's-eye view, she is surrounded by her mother's orange-red skirt, the carefully painted folds of her security blanket, and her basket of colorful toys.

Over time Hartell's brushstrokes grew looser and his canvases gained both depth and translucency. A master of gray, he knew when to add more saturated hues. In his hands, color and object—yellow walls, green doorways, red dresses—merged, a recombinant single subject. In *Aegean III* (1981), for example, luminous off-white cliffs push against a vessel-shaped, deep blue-violet sea. As in his paintings of "fragments," "passages," and "open doors," the view is through to an enticing elsewhere. Always a searcher, Hartell probed the nonverbal depths of two-dimensional art, investigating the mysterious power of pigments on a flat surface. Describing Hartell's pursuit, the artist Michael Boyd wrote, "He was engaged in a kind of visual alchemy, where the visible world is transmuted into pure color and light, where objects seem to condense out of light."<sup>2</sup>

A self-imposed taskmaster, Hartell wrote to his friend Gerald Sykes, "[H]aving shifted from oil to watercolor I find myself after a whole week with only one of many attempts. The others, a dozen made, have been torn up, but there are no regrets. I seem to have enjoyed the whole week. Still I don't want, the objective is not, to produce things that must be torn up."<sup>3</sup> Despite his critical eye, many years of seascapes and still lifes survive, a testimony to the concise skill he brought to this allusive medium.

The critic Fairfield Porter wrote, “[Hartell] composes like an architect and paints as a naturalist, and these two aspects of his work are as equal as the opposite sides of a square.”<sup>4</sup> This description fits his drawings as well: spare delineations in ink or pencil, his line is sure, the image acutely abstracted. Even his most minimal works—the folded-paper pieces—reveal a strong, precise poetry.

Porter’s assessment also reminds us that Hartell was, in fact, a practicing architect. Highlights of his built career include designs for the 1939 New York World’s Fair and several Ithaca residences. One, the Lauristan and Ruth Sharp house at 880 Highland Road, was the writer Vladimir Nabokov’s “favorite” sabbatical rental.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Hartell was also an inspiring teacher. He led the first-year architecture design studio at Cornell for thirty-eight years, and chaired the Department of Art for twenty. Among his students was the 1984 Pritzker Prize-winning architect Richard Meier (Class of ‘56). Remembering his college days, Meier wrote, “I took courses in painting and art history as well as architecture, and I was exposed to the brilliant teaching of painter John Hartell. . . .”<sup>6</sup> About Meier, Hartell said, “I knew enough to leave him alone.”<sup>7</sup>

Another student, Judith K. Burns (MFA ‘67), a graphic designer for Cornell, described Hartell’s graduate seminar in fine arts as an eclectic mix of graduate and visitor presentations, coffee, and student grousing, and noted that “his quiet demeanor and obvious intelligence in dealing with the seminar situation were the same qualities that informed his quiet but very smart paintings.”<sup>8</sup>

Hartell’s long and influential association with Cornell was acknowledged in 1968, when he was designated Professor Emeritus of Art and Architecture, and again in 1982, when the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning named the Sibley Hall gallery in his honor. At the time, Dean Jason Seley wrote, “He gave of himself unstintingly in critiques; he held nothing back. Yet, at the same time, he steadfastly pursued his own career in painting and achieved a national reputation of distinction.”<sup>9</sup> This reputation involves a sixty-year association with the Kraushaar Galleries in New York and group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Art Institute in Chicago. In addition, his work is held in numerous collections throughout the country, including (as this exhibition attests) many in Ithaca.

VERLAINE BOYD  
*New York City, 2006*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alfred M. Frankfurter, “John Hartell: An American Objectivist,” *Art News*, April 10, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Boyd, Hartell memorial service tribute, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> John Hartell to Gerald Sykes, 23 May 1975. Columbia University Archives, courtesy Matthew Quint.

<sup>4</sup> Fairfield Porter, review of John Hartell at Kraushaar Galleries, New York, *Art News*, February 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Cody, “The Exile,” *Cornell Magazine*, July/August 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Meier. *Building the Getty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997): 7.

<sup>7</sup> Karin Hartell Cattarulla, e-mail message to author, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Klein Burns, e-mail message to author, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Jason Seley, foreword to *John Hartell*. Ithaca: Cornell University College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, 1982.