PHOTO: B.J. FALK, 1907

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Sadakichi and America

A case of taken identity

After all, not to create only, or found only,
But to bring, perhaps from afar,
what is already founded,
To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free;
To fill the gross, the torpid bulk
with vital religious fire;
Not to repel or destroy, so much as
accept, fuse, rehabilitate;
To obey, as well as command—to
follow, more than to lead;
These also are the lessons of our New World…

—Opening of "Song of the Exposition"
by Walt Whitman, presented by him
in proof sheet to Sadakichi Hartmann
on their first meeting

Nobody called him Carl, the name he shared with his father, Carl Herman Oskar Hartmann. To Walt Whitman he was "that Japanee." To W. C. Fields he was "Catch-a-Crotchie," "Itchy-Scratchy," or "Hoochie-Coochie." To the critic James Gibbons Huneker he was "a fusion of Jap and German, the ghastly experiment of an Occidental on the person of an Oriental," and years later John Barrymore would call him "a living freak presumably sired by Mephistopheles out of Madame Butterfly." A 1916 magazine profile (calling him "our weirdest poet") insisted he was "much more Japanese than German." During World War II, because of his Japanese and German heritage, he was accused of being a spy, and he barely escaped internment. More recently, in 1978, scholars Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, in their introduction to his selected photography criticism, *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre*, presented him as "Sadakichi Hartmann (1867–1944), the Japanese-German writer and critic." And so Hartmann is usually introduced, as if his ethnicity were the most important thing about him. But despite his ancestry Carl Sadakichi Hartmann was not Japanese or German—he was an American. He lived most of his life in the United States. He wrote what stood as the standard textbook on American art for decades. H. L. Mencken, of all people, got it right: "Hartmann is an exotic—half German and half Japanese by birth," he noted, "but thoroughly American under it all."

Hartmann was born in 1867 in Desima, Nagasaki, of a Japanese mother and a German father shortly after the opening of Japan during the post-Edo Meiji period. But his mother died when he was still a toddler, and he left Japan in his father's tow shortly afterward, never to return. Still, he retained an interest in Japanese art and culture throughout his life. He is said to have introduced haiku to America. Two years after publishing *A History of American Art* he followed up with *Japanese Art*. He became expert enough on the subject to be consulted by collectors of Japanese art. Recently I encountered Hartmann in an essay by Julia Meech in *The Printer's Eye: Ukiyo-e from the Grabhorn Collection* (a book I produced for the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco). Meech writes:

> Between 1937 and 1941, when [Judson D.] Metzgar was acting as agent for Tod Ford and his brother

> Freeman, he sold the Grabhorns at least thirty-five prints, including a stunning Utamaro large-head portrait of a courtesan on an apricot mica ground. The asking price for the entire Ford group was $25,000, based on an appraisal by the art critic Sadakichi Hartmann

Hartmann's "Japaneseness" was a fundamental aspect of his identity, not only because of his interest in Japanese culture but also because everyone kept reminding him of it. Japanese had visited America, and even settled in the port of Acapulco before the closing of Japan at the beginning of the Edo period (as I described in my *1616: The World in Motion*). But after the closing of Japan, that connection was shut down, with the result that most Americans had never seen a Japanese person (apart from a few rare shipwrecked individuals) until 1860, when two ships carrying Japanese diplomats landed in San Francisco. It was Japan's first official diplomatic delegation to a Western nation in nearly two and a half centuries. And it was only a couple of decades after that first contact that Sadakichi came to an America that had never seen anything like him.

Unlike those initial ambassadors, and most of the Japanese immigrants who would follow, he arrived in America across the Atlantic. After the death of his mother he had been raised by his father's family in Hamburg. There he attended private schools and received a solid European education. (By nine he had read the works of Goethe and Schiller.) As a result, Hartmann's cultural foundation was strongly European. He was particularly interested in the theater. But around the time his father remarried, when Hartmann was thirteen, he was sent off to a naval academy. Later in life he would make several Atlantic crossings, but it is hard to imagine him a naval officer. He wasted little time in running away to Paris. Afterward he faced an enraged father who gave him $3 and packed him off to relatives in Philadelphia. Hartmann would describe them as a "plebian, philistine grand uncle and aunt." According to Hartmann's unpublished autobiography (in the archives of the UC Riverside library) he parted from his father with a mere handshake. They had little to do with each other thereafter. "Events like these," he observed, "are not apt to foster filial piety."

Maybe Hartmann's estrangement from his father contributed to his assuming his Japanese name rather than using the Western name they shared. But Sadakichi was not the only name he used. He also maintained several others. Among the pseudonyms under which he published were Caliban, Hogarth, Juvenal, Chrysanthemum, Innocent De La Salle, and even A. Chameleon. (Of Sidney Allan I will speak in a bit.) Gertrude Stein said, "Sadakichi is singular, never plural," yet in many ways he was plural. "My father was a genuine freethinker; the rest of my family were mildly Lutheran. My stepmother was a Catholic. One of my aunts a French Jewess. My mother presumably was a Buddhist," he pointed out. "These influences shaped my early view point."

Arriving in Hoboken in 1882 at the age of fourteen, Hartmann found no relatives or their agents there to meet him, and he made his own way to Philadelphia. There he worked for a time in a printmaking shop and at other jobs, though at no time in his life did he excel at steady employment. He frequented libraries and bought many books. One of the booksellers suggested he visit Walt Whitman, who was just across the Delaware River in Camden.

In November 1884, Hartmann paid a call. He was seventeen; the good gray poet was sixty-five. Lacking a father in his life, the teenager imprinted strongly on the old man. The two met often. "The depth of the relationship between the young Hartmann and the old Whitman," says scholar Jane Calhoun Weaver, "was apparently astonishingly deep." Hartmann's relationship with Whitman, she says, "adds credibility to the notion that Hartmann's zealous Americanism sprang from the purest source imaginable in the late nineteenth century, the crooning poetry of Walt Whitman's native songs."

Hartmann wrote of that first visit: "There was nothing overwhelming to me in Whitman's face, but I liked it at once for its healthy manliness. It seemed to me a spiritually deepened image of contemporary Americans: an ideal laborer, as the Americans are really a nation of laborers." Hartmann said that Whitman was the most important person in his life, next to his mother (whom he barely knew). "I am bound to thee forever, thy works were to me, except Love and Nature, the grandest lessons of my life," he wrote in an early poem. He made careful note of the poet's pronouncements and casual remarks, which he would publish a few years later in the *New York Herald*. The publication irritated the poet and most of his circle, since some of the comments were impolitic and not meant for public consumption. Whitman called the comments Hartmann reported "the projected camel of his imagination." Friends of the poet accused Hartmann of fabricating the quotes. He insisted that he had not, and he would go on to write about his recollections of Whitman on several more occasions.

He got in trouble too for his attempt to start a Walt Whitman Society in Boston, where he had relocated in 1887.

> I dreamt of having a huge sign in gold lettering across my bay window announcing "The Walt Whitman Society." Of course I would also rent the lower floor. We would have a reading room, a Whitmanea department, lectures, classes, and many other wonderful things. And I, of course, would be the curator of this self-created establishment.

Unfortunately, he appointed officers to his society without informing either them or others. When he convened the first meeting, it did not go well, and the society fizzled. Hartmann was too young, too impecunious, and too advanced and European in his literary tastes for Boston society. His attempt to introduce Bostonians to the works of Ibsen, for example, also ended in failure.

Despite these sorts of annoyances, Whitman seems to have retained an affection for Hartmann. "I have more hopes of him, more faith in him than any of the boys," he told his confidant Horace Traubel. He bequeathed his personal copy of the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass* to Hartmann. "They all seem to regard him as a humbug—or if not that, a sensationalist anyhow, or an adventurer. I can't see it that way. I expect good things of him—extra good things." George Knox and Harry Lawton, who were responsible for reawakening interest in Hartmann a few decades after his death, identified the impact Whitman had on Hartmann:

> Whitman was probably the most important single influence on the literary career of Sadakichi Hartmann. It was not so much that Whitman affected Hartmann's style of writing as that he influenced the literary pose which Hartmann adopted toward the world. As an impressionable youth in Philadelphia, Hartmann closely observed Whitman's stance and attempted to emulate some aspects of it, refining those qualities which he borrowed until he developed his own posture as a literary figure. What remained, however, was Hartmann's reliance on Whitman's techniques of self-promotion, a belief in democracy despite his tendency toward seeing art as primarily for the elite, the use of press-agentry methods pioneered by Whitman, and an assertive Bohemianism traceable to Whitman.

But just as Hartmann had multiple identities, so he had multiple mentors. After selling his library, he returned to Europe in 1885. At that time he still thought of Europe as home. It was the first of four trips he would make to the continent over the next eight years. There he attended theater performances, visited art galleries, and called on literary figures, including Stephane Mallarmé, whom he would meet in 1893, and with whom he would keep up a correspondence; he could lay claim to being the first to introduce Symbolist poetry to the U.S. He ended up in Munich, where he attached himself to its leading literary figure, Paul Heyse, who would be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1910. (Hartmann kept in contact with Heyse over the intervening years. After Heyse received the Nobel, Hartmann, in an echo of his experience with Whitman, would cause a strain in his relationship with his former mentor by publishing remarks attributed to him.) Despite winning the Nobel—one of the judges said that "Germany has not had a greater literary genius since Goethe"—Heyse is little remembered today, though some of his stories, poems, lieder, and translations from Italian are occasionally praised. Classically trained, he was the leader of a rearguard action against naturalism and other new directions in the arts. In most ways his writing could not be less like Whitman's. When Hartmann sought to introduce Heyse to the works of Whitman, Heyse remarked that he preferred flowers to leaves of grass. Hartmann was torn between mentors, and between continents. In the end, he chose America, where, as the turn of the century approached, he developed a

PUSHPA MACFARLANE

Nakama, 1980
Batik: wax-resist hand dye on cotton fabric, 18 x 24 in

COURESY THE ARTIST

PUSHPA MACFARLANE

Girl in the Mirror, 1980
Batik: wax-resist hand dye on cotton fabric, 19 x 19 in

COURESY THE ARTIST

literary and bohemian persona modeled largely on Whitman. In 1894 he became an American citizen.

Hartmann built a precarious career as a freelance writer. His literary efforts brought him a meager income. He spent Christmas 1893 in jail for his "erotic play" *Christ*—called by New York's *The Sun* "the most daring of all decadent productions"—which was judged obscene in Boston. (The New England Society for the Suppression of Vice made a show of publicly burning copies of the play.) His most ambitious theatrical efforts often met with crushing rejection. In 1902 he would attempt "A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes," a performance piece presented at New York Theatre on Broadway that was described as a "melody in odors." Hartmann was well versed in the synesthetic affectations of decadent French poetry; unfortunately, he was ignorant of the chemical and technological issues in the manufacture of aromas. He attempted to fill the theater with various scents with the aid of giant electric fans. Although the performance was planned to run sixteen minutes, it only lasted four. By that point "the audience stamped, cheered derisively," a reporter wrote, "and began to pour out of the theater." And later, in San Francisco, Hartmann revived the notion of staging Ibsen. He decided to present *Ghosts*, and he hatched a plan to light a real fire outside the play's venue, a mansion on Russian Hill, to coincide with a fire in the second act. Predictably, the fire got out of control, Hartmann was again arrested, and he was prohibited from putting on further performances in the city.

He had better success as an art critic, the role in which he would mainly support himself for three decades. In fact, Jane Calhoun Weaver asserts that "few writers were as important to the art of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century as Sadakichi Hartmann.... A reading of the 1890–1915 era in American art is virtually impossible without recourse to Hartmann's writings. From the beginning Hartmann demonstrated a remarkable ability to identify the artists and ideas that would become the primary focus of twentieth-century American art." As a boy in Hamburg, Hartmann had received an excellent education in European art. He was blessed with a discerning eye. A contemporaneous painter, E. E. Simmons, made a fair appraisal: "Hartmann may be capricious and malicious, and rather careless at times, but he is, after all, the only critic we have who knows a good picture when he sees it and who is not afraid of expressing his opinion." He helped to introduce artists such as Paul Gauguin, August Rodin, Maurice Denis, Henri Matisse, and Félicien Rops to U.S. audiences. "As an art critic, he was the most astute of his time in America," in the judgment of Kenneth Rexroth, "and spotted the right people, from Winslow Homer and Ryder to Marin, Maurer, and Weber, long before anybody else." Among other American artists he was one of the first to champion were Robert Henri, George Luks, Thomas Eakins, and Marsden Hartley.

Besides his knowledge and eye for art, Hartmann had another advantage that is uncommon in the art world: he could write well. He was hired as a roving reporter for Samuel McClure's first American newspaper syndicate, under whose auspices he traveled to Paris in the winter of 1892–93, where he met such artists as Whistler, Monet, and Maurice Maeterlinck (who would win a Nobel Prize in 1911, the year after Hartmann's Munich mentor, Paul Heyse). On returning to Boston he launched a magazine called *The Art Critic*. He traveled up and down the Eastern Seaboard selling subscriptions, and among the approximately 750 subscriptions appear the names of many leading artists and critics. The magazine's editorial perspective was strongly influenced by the European Symbolist movement. Unfortunately, it lasted only three issues, folding after the fiasco of his presentation of *Christ* in Boston. In 1902 he cobbled together many of his writings (his forte was the short essay) into *A History of American Art*, which would remain a standard textbook on the subject through the early decades of the twentieth century. (His *The Whistler Book* is actually his best book-length work on art.) Despite his familiarity with avant-garde currents in European art and literature, in his *History*, as elsewhere, Hartmann championed an assertively American art. In doing so, he quoted a version of these lines from *Leaves of Grass:*

> Others may praise what they like;
> But I, from the banks of the running Missouri,
> praise
> nothing in art or aught else,
> Til it has breathed well the atmosphere of this river—
> also the western prairie scent,
> And fully exudes it again.

Calling Whitman "a voice in the wilderness," Hartmann complained that "the artists have taken no heed of it. Only men like Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins have endorsed it to a certain extent with their work in the art of painting, and at the same time have strong, frank, and decided ways of expressing something American."

Soon Hartmann himself would explore the American heartland and, eventually, relocate west. The indirect cause was his association with Alfred Stieglitz. When the two men met in 1898, Hartmann was the better known and established, but Stieglitz quickly asserted himself. Sharing interests in art and photography and a connection to Germany, the two men established a rapport. Stieglitz considered Hartmann's writings on art of the highest value, and he cited Hartmann as his most important influence in the years between 1898 and 1907. In June of 1898, Hartmann published "An Art Critic's Estimate of Alfred Stieglitz" in *The Photographic Times*. In October his first essay in *Camera Notes*, the photographic journal of the Camera Club of New York, which was then edited by Stieglitz, appeared. It was titled "A Few Reflections on Amateur and Artistic Photography." Hartmann soon became a leading advocate for the recognition of photography as a fine art. In 1904, when Stieglitz resigned as editor to organize his landmark "Photo-Secession" and launched *Camera Work*, the most historically important publication devoted to art photography, he made Hartmann one of the mainstays of the magazine. No one wrote more or better articles for *Camera Work* than Hartmann, but he bristled at Stieglitz's imperious control of the Photo-Secessionist movement. In 1904, he wrote a letter informing Stieglitz that he had "simply got tired of your dictatorship." The breach continued until 1908, when Hartmann, typically short of funds, wrote asking Stieglitz to "lend a helping hand for old time's sake." He resumed writing for the magazine through 1912.

The break with Stieglitz may have precipitated some kind of emotional response in Hartmann, or he may simply have been looking for a new source of income. In any case, he began to publish at that time under the name "Sidney Allan." The last name was probably an homage to Edgar Allan Poe, an American poet much beloved by the French intellectual set that Hartmann hoped to connect with avant-garde America. But Sidney Allan, unlike Sadakichi Hartmann, was not really in the artistic vanguard. Nor was he merely a pseudonym. Hartmann fashioned a complete new persona for Allan. He bedecked himself with a monocle, derby hat, and three-piece suit. Sidney Allan's publications on photography far outnumber Hartmann's. While Sadakichi Hartmann wrote penetrating articles about vanguard art, Sidney Allan wrote practical guidance for aspiring photographers. While Hartmann wrote for the coastal urban cognoscenti, Allan was much beloved by the heartland. In his Allan persona Hartmann toured the country giving lectures. Allan's standard lecture was on the topic "good taste and common sense." He made quite an impression. "The photographers worship the ground over which Allan walks," enthused a reporter from the *Des Moines Register and Leader* in the paper's October 5, 1906, edition about Allan's appearance at the Iowa State Photographic Convention. "He is harsh and brutal at times in his criticism, but he hits the nail on the head every time."

While Allan was captivating the heartland, Hartmann was conquering radical New York. In 1915 most of the magazine *Greenwich Village* was devoted to (or written by) Hartmann. The magazine anointed him "the King of Bohemia." His pranks and outrages were legendary (and amount to something of a distraction in trying to understand the man and his accomplishments). "During my lifetime there have been hundreds of claimants to the throne of bohemia," said Kenneth Rexroth, "but no one who could compare with Sadakichi." It almost seemed that Sidney Allan's conservatism pushed Sadakichi Hartmann to new extremes.

In 1912, in one of his last essays for *Camera Work*, Hartmann championed the infant motion picture medium not as an entertainment for the masses but as an art form. He had written about motion pictures before, as early as 1898. He correctly predicted the coming of color, sound, and home movies. Now, in "The Esthetic Significance of the Motion Picture," taking advantage of his experiences as Sidney Allan, he wrote that "people in the larger cities can hardly imagine what this entertainment means to town and village populations. It is cheap and within the reach of all. And it is in many communities the one regular amusement that is offered. A town of six thousand inhabitants will easily support three to four houses with continuous

performances of three reels each." His championing of motion pictures as an art form echoes his earlier battles on behalf of photography. "Readers may ask whether I take these pictures seriously and whether I see any trace of art in them," he wrote. "Yes," he answered, "honestly, I do." Hartmann was less interested in the medium's narrative potential than in its visual effects: "It is generally not the story which interests me but the expression of mere incidents, a rider galloping along a mountain path, a handsome woman with hair and skirts fluttering in the wind, the rushing water of a stream, the struggle of two desperate men in some twilight atmosphere."

In 1916 he decided to move west. He was seeking relief from a serious case of asthma, and also removing himself from a failed marriage and a less than satisfactory working relationship with Stieglitz. He ended up in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he connected with the bohemian scene that centered around George Sterling and Jack London. In 1923 he moved to Los Angeles, where he became Hollywood correspondent for the English magazine *The Curtain*. He continued to lecture and write but produced mostly light journalistic work (an exception was an insightful essay on Sergei Eisenstein). He appeared in 1924 in *The Thief of Bagdad*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, in which Hartmann was cast as the Court Magician. But his alcoholism and independent spirit made him unreliable and undesirable as a character actor.

Still a flamboyant figure despite poor health, he hooked up with the Hollywood rat pack of the day, a circle that centered around Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, the painter John Decker, W. C. Fields, and others. They admired him as a somewhat comical and rather pathetic Pierrot whose stories of his association with figures such as Whitman, Mallarmé, and Stieglitz were not to be credited. This image was popularized by Gene Fowler in his *Minutes of the Last Meeting*, which describes the group's antics while purporting to be a profile of Hartmann. Fowler captures the wild and crazy figure Hartmann cut at the time, but he shows scant interest in his subject's actual accomplishments.

Hartmann spent the last years of his life in a shack he built on the Morongo Indian Reservation in Banning, California, on property belonging to his daughter Wistaria Hartmann Linton, who was married to a Cahuilla cattle rancher. Some people probably figured him for an Indian. You can't get more American than that. He relied on small donations from people like Ezra Pound, who had not forgotten him. He died in 1944 while visiting another daughter in Florida.

Identity is a kind of negotiation an individual makes with society. Hartmann refashioned his identity multiple times. At times to different audiences he presented more than one identity simultaneously. Who was Sadakichi Hartmann? In the end he had found perhaps his most enduring identity in one of the last roles he played—the Court Magician. That was an exotic role; Hartmann managed to be both exotic and fiercely American. He signaled the advent of an increasingly multicultural America.

If you search for "Sadakichi Hartmann Dances" on YouTube, you will find a short film clip that gives a sense of his expressive presence. After that you can also watch on the same site Fairbanks's *Thief of Bagdad*. "Be sure to see it," Kenneth Rexroth advised. "It's Hollywood at its best, and Sadakichi plays himself. He doesn't look as though he'd even used any makeup, and the Hollywoodized Oriental robes are the clothes he always should have been able to wear. They robe his vision of himself, for that's what he was: court magician to two generations of American intellectuals."

Thomas Christensen, nonfiction editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader* and formerly executive editor of the trade book publishing company Mercury House, has published more than twenty books as author, editor, or translator. His two most recent books, *1616: The World in Motion* and *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (a translation of the poetry of José Ángel Valente), were both nominated for Northern California Book Awards. *1616*, a global overview of the early modern world, was named one of the best history books of its season by *Publishers Weekly*. His *River of Ink: Literature, History, Art*, from which the present essay is excerpted, will be published in December by Counterpoint Press. He is currently working on a book-length study of Sadakichi Hartmann.

Sadakichi Hartman as the court magician in The Thief of Bagdad, 1924