

Tobey, Mark George (11 Dec. 1890-24 Apr. 1976), painter, was born in Centerville, Wisconsin, the son of George Baker Tobey, a farmer and carpenter, and Emma Jane Cleveland. Tobey had no formal education beyond high school and, with the exception of a few Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, he was essentially self-taught, possessing a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and a catholic eye, which fueled his artistic and philosophical pursuits throughout his long career.

In 1911, restless and nomadic, Tobey left the Midwest to become a fashion illustrator in New York City. Handsome and charismatic, he rapidly became part of the artistic community, and his first solo show at Knoedler in 1917 featured tightly rendered charcoal portraits of society figures. Still, despite his attraction to fashion icons, Tobey's primary interest was the relationship of form to content, and even early in his career his notion of art was not rule-bound. In 1918 Tobey declared, "If I never do another thing in my painting life, I will smash form . . . and to give the light that was in the form in space a release" (Kuh, p. 236), a compositional goal he would not achieve until the mid-1930s. Tobey's stylistic development was one of long gestation, and he worked in many modes simultaneously. Nevertheless, the primary foundations of his artistic expression were his love of nature, derived from his rural, midwestern childhood experiences; the ecumenical Baha'i religion, to which he converted in 1918; and his exposure to modern art movements and to Eastern thought and aesthetics, acquired through many years of travel and his unceasing studies. Tobey is often mislabeled as a "Northwest mystic," an appellation he decried. Tobey was sophisticated, urbane, international, and humanistic in his outlook.

Tobey spent the 1920s and 1930s assimilating many disparate influences. Following a brief marriage about which little is known, Tobey moved to Seattle, where he would continue to live intermittently for the next forty years. To support himself, he taught drawing and painting at the Cornish School in Seattle, and by all accounts he was an inspiring instructor. Here he was introduced to the living line of Chinese brushpainting by the artist Teng Kuei and acquired new insights into the potential of cubism, an art form in which objects could be transparent, multidimensional, and dynamic, rather than only solid forms in space. Tobey was also influenced by Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, in which light, by penetrating both mass and void, is the vehicle not only for dissolving the boundaries between form and space but also for describing the energy inherent in form as it moves through space. This erosion of the fundamental dualism in traditional Renaissance illusionism, of the object solidly depicted as three-dimensional on a two-dimensional plane, was at the heart of Tobey's quest to "smash form."

In 1925 Tobey moved to Paris, beginning a two-year period of intense exposure to the European avant-garde art community. He also traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East, including a visit to the Baha'i World Center at Haifa. Although his work at this time was figurative, it reflected his experiments with cubism and expressionism and the impact of multifarious historical European forms. Continuing with his exploration, from 1931 to 1938 Tobey served as artist-in-residence in England at Dartington Hall, a progressive center for the fine and applied arts in the Devon countryside, where fellow faculty and guest artists included Bernard Leach, [Pearl Buck](#), [Walter Gropius](#), [Paul Robeson](#), and [Aldous Huxley](#). Tobey's stay at Dartington Hall was interrupted, however, by a 1934 trip to the Far East, which had a profound effect on his thinking and art. Visiting Teng Kuei in Shanghai, Tobey immersed himself in Chinese art, life, and culture, suddenly struck by the movement, lights, and energy of the urban scene. While in Japan, he lived for a month at a Zen monastery, where he studied calligraphy and philosophy. The Eastern concepts of the reciprocity of opposites, of the validity of the void, of the energy of the living line, of light representing the state of personal illumination dovetailed with Baha'i tenets about achieving a new world order, and from these concepts Tobey created a personal synthesis that would become the basis for his art. He felt that art should be a metaphor for a universal equilibrium, creating unity out of the opposing forces of life, leading the viewer on a journey of self-discovery and ultimately to a oneness among mankind.

Respected art historian and curator William Seitz wrote, "Viewed symbolically in Tobey's mind, the breakup of Renaissance perspective and illusionism in favor of multiple space and moving focus is an historical parallel to the gradual dissolution of barriers between egos, nations, and cultures" (*Mark Tobey*, p. 40).

On his return to Dartington Hall in 1935, Tobey made his first breakthrough into all-over composition with a small painting, *Broadway Norm*. It was the Great White Way with, as Tobey said, "the people caught in the mesh of their net." With a continuous white line of uniform width, he created a series of nonhierarchical spatial volumes; the line did not describe forms but was itself the composition. Tobey immediately executed two more white line paintings referring to the dynamism of urban life, although his mature nonobjective style was not realized until the early 1940s.

With war approaching in Europe, in 1938 Tobey reluctantly left Dartington and returned to Seattle, where at the Cornish School he met the emerging avant-garde composer [John Cage](#), who later remarked in an interview, "In a sense, all of my work is a response to Tobey." Tobey corroborated visually what Cage had been considering aurally: that both visual elements and sounds, outside those traditionally deemed "fine art," potentially had aesthetic merit and interest. The two also shared attitudes grounded in their Eastern studies, and both were humanists who felt that art had a didactic function as well as a purely sensory one. Two other sources of inspiration for Tobey were his studies of classical music and his fascination with the Pike Place Market in Seattle. Beginning years of lessons in piano, flute, music theory, and composition expanded Tobey's concepts of abstraction and the fusion of space and time. The Market, with its profusion of goods, people, and geometry of multilevel stalls, shops, and counters, stimulated his ideas about multiple visual viewpoints, humanity, and communication. In the Market, Tobey sketched in a rapid, spontaneous, linear manner; these drawings led to paintings in which white line gradually left the contours of the objects depicted, creating abstract planes and a sense of vitality independent of the forms themselves.

In 1942 all the disparate influences, experiments, and searching for the means to "smash form" coalesced, and, at age fifty-two, Tobey executed his first completely resolved all-over compositions. In these paintings calligraphic white line was the vehicle for the melding of form and space in a shallow field and for the expression of a vibrant electricity evocative of the dynamism and flux inherent in nature. These first mature "white writing" paintings--*White Night* (1942) and *Drift of Summer* (1942)--were based on natural phenomena; he also applied this technique to the theme of the city and the energy and visual cacophony of urban life (*Broadway Boogie*, 1942; *New York*, 1944; *City Radiance*, 1946). In both modes, Tobey incorporated the promise of spiritual awakening.

During the 1940s Tobey finally achieved national prominence with his inclusion in museum and gallery exhibitions. He also joined the Willard Gallery in 1944 and began to see his works purchased by major museums during this period. Though widely known for his "white writing," Tobey soon moved on stylistically. He worked in many modes ranging from figurative paintings with specific Baha'i narrative content (*Threading Light*, 1943; *The New Day*, c. 1945) to pictures with a Christian theme (*Gothic*, 1943; *Dormition of the Virgin*, 1945) to the nonobjective (*Transit*, 1948; *Awakening Night*, 1949). In 1949 he participated in the Western Round Table on Modern Art in San Francisco, where fellow panel members included Marcel Duchamp, [Frank Lloyd Wright](#), [Darius Milhaud](#), Gregory Bateson, and Robert Goldwater.

By the 1950s Tobey had become preoccupied with imbuing his work with universal content and with the relation between art and technology. He remarked, "Scientists say that . . . there is no such thing as empty space. It's all loaded with life" (Seitz, *Mark Tobey*, p. 23). He read voraciously in the sciences and philosophy. His paintings reflected these concerns, and he felt it necessary to abandon figuration for nonobjective imagery. Titles from this period include *Universal City* (1950), *Aerial City* (1950), *Battle of the Lights* (1956), *New Genesis* (1958), *Edge of August* (1953), and the *Meditative* series (1954).

For two months in 1957 Tobey turned to Japanese Sumi painting, a mode in direct contrast to his usual working methods of small format with meticulous layering and brushwork. Using traditional inks, brushes, and large papers, Tobey found working in this gestural, spontaneous flung ink method both liberating and revitalizing (*Space Ritual, No. 1, 1957*). His subsequent works, such as *June Night* (1957), included expanded formats and more intense color.

In the 1950s and early 1960s Tobey was the recipient of many honors, including a Guggenheim International Award for *Battle of the Lights* in 1956; election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1956; the first *Art in America* award for outstanding contribution in American art in 1958; first prize at the Carnegie Institute's Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture in 1961; and in Paris, the Commandent de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres in 1968. He was also the subject of retrospectives in San Francisco (1951); Paris (1961); New York, Chicago, and Cleveland, (1962); Amsterdam, Hannover, Bern, and Dusseldorf (1966); and Seattle (1970). Most importantly, in 1958, Tobey was the first American since [James McNeill Whistler](#), who had garnered the award in 1895, to win the grand prize for painting at the Venice Biennale. In 1961, after forty years of innovation and metamorphoses, Tobey became the first living American painter to be accorded a retrospective at the Louvre.

Nevertheless, the 1960s were paradoxical for the artist. While his reputation was at its height abroad, Tobey felt slighted at home. His triumphant Louvre exhibition received a lukewarm reception in New York when installed at the Museum of Modern Art, accompanied by a major catalog compiled by William Seitz. Those who championed the large scale, physicality, and oil pigments of the abstract expressionists felt that Tobey's smaller scale, meditative content, and water-based pigments of gouache and tempera put him outside the locus of advanced art. This climate was sufficiently painful to induce Tobey to move to Basel, Switzerland, where he remained until his death. He was treated royally in Europe, and the early 1960s were characterized by great productivity in both painting and the monotype mediums. His nonobjective works were composed with great finesse, variety of line, imagery, and color. Tobey proved he was capable of working on a larger scale, and two of his most important works from this time were *Parnassus* (1963, 84½ × 50", Seattle Art Museum) and *Sagittarius Red* (1963, 83½ × 152¾", Kunstmuseum, Basel), the latter considered by the artist to be a culminating work. Tobey's final years were marked by the death of his longtime companion, Pehr Hallsten and, after 1972, a serious decline in his own physical condition and mental clarity. Tobey died in Basel, often longing for a return, with opprobrium, to his native land.

In Europe Tobey was seen as a major innovator for his all-over composition in which space and form interpenetrated, for his use of calligraphy to create a vibrating space in which volumes are dissolved, and for bringing the Eastern aesthetic to nonrepresentational contemporary art. Europeans felt that Tobey's work presaged [Jackson Pollock](#)'s shallow depth and nonhierarchical linearity, greatly influencing the Parisian-based *informel* abstractionists of the 1950s, such as Wols, Pierre Soulages, Jean Dubuffet, and Georges Mathieu. In the United States, Tobey's achievements were marginalized, however, by the art critical establishment in the heyday of abstract expressionism. Tobey's contributions to those abstractionists whose primary concerns are light, line, melding of form with space, and/or merging the Eastern aesthetic with Western expression have yet to be fully appreciated.

Bibliography

Many collections of papers relating to Tobey are in the Archives of American Art. Good sources for Tobey's own words are his "Reminiscence and Reverie," *Magazine of Art* 44, no. 6 (Oct. 1951): 228-32, and Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (1962). Two complete and balanced works on Tobey's life

and art are William C. Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (1962), which includes an extensive bibliography; and Eliza C. Rathbone, *Mark Tobey: City Paintings* (1984). For a perspective on his place in the development of abstract expressionism, consult Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (1983). Jeffrey Wechsler, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions* (1989), contributes an important exposition on the impact of critical bias on Tobey. See also David James Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (1988). Of the many catalogs that include color reproductions of Tobey's work and essays, the most notable are Wieland Schmied, *Tobey* (1966); *Tribute to Mark Tobey* (1974), which contains an essay by Joshua Taylor and an extensive bibliography; *Mark Tobey* (1970), with essays by John Russell and John Cage; and *Mark Tobey: Works on Paper* (1990), which provides an essay by Judith S. Kays on Tobey's techniques and materials and contains information published for the first time. George Ronald, *Mark Tobey: Art and Belief* (1984), includes an essay by Arthur Dahl. Two Ph.D. dissertations provide specialized information: the last chapter of Frederic G. Hoffman, "The Art and Life of Mark Tobey: A Contribution toward an Understanding of a Psychology of Consciousness" (Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1977), is particularly useful on compositional analysis and sources, while Edward R. Kelley, "Mark Tobey and the Bahai Faith: New Perspectives on the Artist and His Paintings" (Univ. of Texas, Austin, 1983), focuses in detail on the Baha'i faith; however, for the general reader, Seitz's discussion of Baha'i is ample. An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 25 Apr. 1976.

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