

By Carter Ratcliff

a quiet Master





Mark Tobey transformed the fluid lines of Eastern calligraphy into a unique style of abstract painting.

In 1929, Mark Tobey exhibited a few recent paintings at Romany Marie's Café Gallery in Greenwich Village. Romany Marie's was a bohemian hangout far from the posh galleries on Manhattan's 57th Street, and Tobey's show would have faded into oblivion long ago if it had not somehow managed to attract the attention of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. The founding director of the recently inaugurated Museum of Modern Art, Barr was energetic and adventurous and—most important of all—had a good eye. By including Tobey in a 1930 exhibition titled "Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans," he launched one of most notable careers in the history of 20th-century American art.

Nothing in Tobey's early life foretold a notable future. Born

in Wisconsin in 1890, he moved with his family to Chicago three years later. His father, a carpenter and building contractor, carved animals from stone—a weighty material very different in spirit from the ethereal refinement of his son's mature style. Young Mark attended the school at the Art Institute of Chicago, but there is no evidence that his exposure to the Institute's extremely conservative curriculum had much effect. Leaving after two years, he found work as a fashion illustrator, first in Chicago and then in New York, where he settled in 1911. Branching out, he became a portraitist. By 1917 he was proficient enough to attract the attention of the Knoedler Gallery, which exhibited a selection of his charcoal portraits.

Previous page: Mark Tobey, *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*, 1942, tempera on board, 21.875 x 30 in. (55.56 x 76.2 cm).

This page: *Pacific Transition*, 1943 tempera on paper, 23.25 x 31.25 in. (59.06 x 79.38 cm).

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This page: *Eventuality*, 1944, tempera on paper mounted on board, 10 x 14.9 in. (25.4 x 37.94 cm). Following page: *Northwest Drift*, 1958, tempera and gouache on paper laminated on board support, 44.69 x 35.625 in. (113.5 x 90.5 cm).

In 1921, Tobey traveled cross-country to Seattle, the first of a series of journeys that would take him, eventually, to Europe and the Middle East, Latin America and Asia. At the Seattle campus of the University of Washington, he met a student named Teng Kuei, who pointed him toward the Chinese calligraphy that would have profound influence on Tobey's understanding of what painting is—or might become. During the mid-1920s, Tobey traveled to Paris, where he met Gertrude Stein, and on to Spain and Greece. His appetite for non-Western penmanship having been whetted in Seattle, Tobey studied Arabic and Persian writing in Beirut, Haifa, and Constantinople.

Before he left New York, Tobey had met a painter named Juliet Thompson. A friend of Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese poet and visionary philosopher, Thompson was also a convert to the Bahá'í faith, which was founded in the mid-19th century on the belief that all religions, like all people, are of equal value. Devoted to the ideal of a unified world, members of the faith are anti-nationalist and implacably pacifist. While having his portrait painted by Thompson, Tobey read some Bahá'í literature. Impressed, he visited the Green Acre Bahá'í School in Eliot, Me., and became a member of the faith.

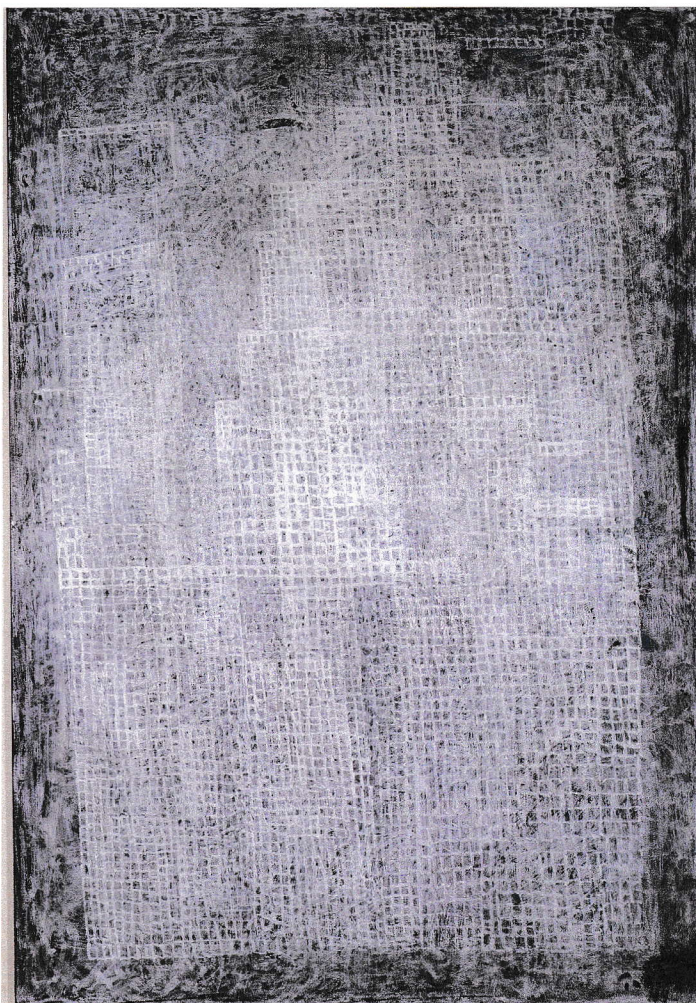
Though the connection between, say, Catholicism and Italian painting in the 16th century is clear, such links are not as trust-

worthy in the modern era. What, for example, does Jackson Pollock's teenaged enthusiasm for the teachings of Krishnamurti have to do with his drip paintings of the late 1940s? In Tobey's case, however, his Bahá'í faith at the very least meshed with the spirit of his art and may well have shaped it. The Bahá'í belief that all people are equal has as a corollary the equality of all cultures, an idea that finds in echo in Tobey's openness to the world's various styles of calligraphy. And an equalizing energy flows through his paintings, creating a luminous mesh of intertwined forms.

An artist who wants to make the scene is well advised to show up, a maxim lost on Tobey, who was forever departing for parts unknown to denizens of the New York art world. Traveling to Devon, in Southwest England, in 1931, he taught at the Elmhurst Progressive School, taking time out to supply the school with frescoes and induct one of the faculty members into the Bahá'í faith. From England he visited Mexico, France, and what was then known as Palestine. A few years afterward, he visited Teng Kuei, his former student, in Shanghai and, near the Japanese city of Kyoto, studied calligraphy at a Zen monastery. By 1935, Tobey was back in Seattle, where the city's Art Museum mounted his first major solo exhibition. It was on this occasion that the world got its first extensive glimpse of his "white writing."



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Though many of art criticism's standard phrases are more than a little awkward, "white writing" makes a good if not a perfect fit with Tobey's quietly shimmering imagery. Strictly speaking, his thin streaks white paint are brushstrokes, yet they perform none of the brushstroke's usual tasks. They neither generate an image of an object in pictorial space (as in realist painting) nor do they convey some personal attitude or quality of feeling (as in, for example, Abstract Expressionism). Closely spaced and often connected by angular zigs and zags, Tobey's marks seem at once precise and utterly spontaneous. Filling the surface of a canvas edge to edge, his "white writing" creates a web one would call dense if it were not so airy. Filled with subtly modulated space, Tobey's paintings are unquestionably pictorial, as are the marks of his brush. These works are in no sense written. Yet one senses in their linear inflections the artist's lifelong immersion in calligraphy, and that justifies to some extent the critics' talk of "white writing."

During the 1940s, the Willard Gallery was one of the few in New York to show work by members of the contemporary American avant-garde. Tobey's first exhibition at Willard was in 1944, and he

showed there almost yearly until the late 1950s. Among the painters drawn to Tobey's work was Pollock. Impressed, he wrote to a friend that Tobey, seen in Manhattan as a West Coast artist, proved that New York was not "the only place in America where painting (in the real sense) can come thru." This remark joins with the similarities between the two painters to raise the question of influence. About the time that he first encountered Tobey's work, Pollock began making the allover paintings that led, toward the end of 1946, to the drip paintings that vaulted him to art-historical prominence. Did Pollock learn alloverness from Tobey? Possibly he did, though all we can know with any certainty is that his flung and spattered colors have a flair, a pictorial drama, that Tobey deliberately avoids. When asked about the subject of his webs of color, Pollock said that "every good painter paints what he is"—a self-centered response at odds with the temper of Tobey's imagery. The equalizing impulse that evens out the latter's fields of "white writing" carries over to his relationship with his audience. Tobey does not address us with the bravura of the maestro. His mastery is quiet, drawing us into the subtly varied rhythms of implicitly infinite fields of incandescent white.

From left: *Threading Light*, 1942 tempera on board, 29.25 x 19.75 in. (74.3 x 50.2 cm);

Untitled, 1944, tempera on paper 20.25 x 14 in. (51.44 x 35.56 cm).

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Untitled (Sumi Drawing), 1957, ink on paper 20.375 x 28.5 in. (51.75 x 72.39 cm).

By the end of the 1940s, the Abstract Expressionists were proclaiming a postwar triumph. With a series of spectacular breakthroughs on the pictorial front, they had moved the capital of the avant-garde from Paris to New York. Tobey did not stay in town for the celebration, which went on until the early 1980s, when New York was suddenly flooded by German and Italian painting and the city's dominance came to an end. In 1951 he accepted Josef Albers' invitation to serve as a guest critic at Yale's School of Art. That same year, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, in San Francisco, presented a retrospective of his career. The Parisian Galerie Jean Bucher gave him a solo exhibition in 1955, and three seasons later he was the recipient the International Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale—the second American to have been so honored. The first was James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

By then, *Life* magazine had singled Tobey out as the leader of the Northwest School, a group of painters that included Morris

Graves, Guy Anderson, and Kenneth Callahan. Far from the art-critical rhetoric and quickening art market of New York, these artists responded to the landscape in the vicinity of Seattle, especially the shores of Puget Sound, with paintings that transform natural forms into symbols of ultimate things—birth, death, regeneration.

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If American art has a mystic wing, it is to be found here, in images that reiterate the paradox of Tobey's painting: in transcending the self, each of these artists developed a thoroughly individual style.

Tobey, however, never locked himself into a single mode or manner. Constantly varying his “white writing,” he invented a seemingly unlimited variety of intricately interwoven forms. On occasion, his

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White World, 1969 oil on canvas 60 x 35.875 in. (152.4 x 91.12 cm).

“writing” wasn’t white but vividly red or a vibrant blue or found its way to some gorgeously unnamable color as his marks merged into textures that evoke life at the cellular level. After studying Japanese drawing in the 1950s, he set aside paints and brushes to experiment with thrown ink. In works on paper from this period, he comes as close to calligraphy as he ever does. Always, he continued to experiment, staying true to his belief that “search becomes the only valid expression of the spirit.” For it is only through unending search that the spirit stays alive.

With his partner Pehr Hallsten, Tobey settled in Basel, Switzerland, in 1960, and lived there for the rest of his life. An exhibition of his paintings went on view at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962. There was another at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in 1966 and, the following year, a full-scale retrospective at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. And the Smithsonian Institution’s National Collection of Fine Arts organized yet another retrospective two years before the artist’s death. Once he arrived at his aesthetic maturity, Tobey was never neglected. Moreover, his “white writing” has long been recognized as a major contribution to the evolution of abstract painting. Still, he does not assert his presence—his ego—through his art in the manner of Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and other Abstract Expressionists. Though there is something heroic about Tobey’s diffidence, it has often taken him out of the spotlight.

From the late 1990s until recently, only the Reina Sofia, in Madrid, had staged a major exhibition of his work. Then, in 2016, Tobey was included in “Abstract Expressionism,” a sweeping sur-

vey seen at the Royal Academy in London. This was an audacious inclusion, for it redrew the historical map to provide a place in New York's first homegrown art movement for a painter who, as Pollock noted more than six decades ago, was not a New Yorker. And last year the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice offered "Mark Tobey: Threading Light," a survey that began in the 1920s and continued through every stage of the artist's career. Indifferent to the wars of style, Tobey never considered for moment going in any direction but his own. Thus his paintings never looked dated, and they look as new now, two decades into the 21st century, as they were when they were fresh from the easel.

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Window, 1953 casein on board, 44 3/8 x 28 1/2 in. (112.7 x 72.4 cm).