

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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PRESS PREVIEW:

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11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

An exhibition of 135 paintings by the American artist Mark Tobey (b.1890) opens the 1962-63 season at the Museum of Modern Art on Wednesday, September 12. Selected by William C. Seitz, Associate Curator, Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions, who also wrote the accompanying monograph*, the show will remain on view in New York through November 4 and will later travel to Cleveland and Chicago.

Beginning in 1935, Tobey evolved a new linear, abstract style known as white writing, although according to Mr. Seitz, he was "a humanist, a traditionalist, a lover of the body as a subject and humanity as a theme. Nevertheless--under the influence of modern existence rather than modern art--he was led to fragment, obscure, and ultimately to dematerialize the human form and image entirely in search of a valid expression of the human spirit. Belatedly but by sheer awareness of modern life he found himself projected to the apex of contemporary abstract style."

As a young man Tobey was converted to the Bahá'í World Faith; Bahá'í ideas of unity, humanity and progressive revelation have strongly influenced his painting for over 40 years. In 1923 he began to learn the technique of Chinese calligraphy and in 1934 traveled in China and Japan. His mature style emerged the next year and he became the first painter successfully to fuse Western subject matter with the calligraphic painting techniques of China and Japan.

The exhibition concentrates on these white writing pictures of the past two decades, many of which have New York City as their theme, a theme which originated during the years (1911-22) when Tobey spent much time here. "He has painted New York," Seitz says, "more philosophically than Stella, Feininger, Marin, Davis, or Mondrian, with a profound sense of its interlocked lives, the boundlessness of its subterranean and aerial maze, and the complexity of its separations and interconnections." Among the urban scene pictures in the exhibition are Flow of Night, Broadway, Broadway Boogie and New York.

Other pictures have a specifically religious theme, sometimes Christian, as seen in Homage to the Virgin, Voyage of the Saints and Shroud of Christ, sometimes Bahá'í, The New Day, The Retreat of the Friend. Nature, which Tobey says was his primary interest as a young boy and still is of great importance to him is another recurring theme, appearing in such famous paintings as Drift of Summer, Edge of August and the

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*MARK TOBEY by William C. Seitz. 112 pp; 75 plates (12 in color); boards \$5.50, paper \$3.50. Published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York; distributed by Doubleday and Co., Inc.

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"Meditative Series" of 1954. The exhibition also includes some self portraits and an important group of his sumi (Japanese ink) paintings.

His unique written style "is the outcome of two other related innovations" Mr. Seitz says, "'multiple space' and 'moving focus,' which lie behind and often within the overall calligraphic picture. Space becomes multiple by its division into compartments, but more than that, each cell has its autonomous size, position and mode of visualization. In Drift of Summer, for example, Tobey repeatedly readjusted his focus as he painted so that (as in a series of photographs printed over each other in different positions) hollows are filled, bulk is opened and the surface is thus unified."

Tobey's paintings are small and usually rendered in tempera or watercolor, in unassertive colors. "His colors are worked with brush strokes that can be explosively bold, but are more often as delicate as the strands of a spider web or as ephemeral as smoke rising from a cigarette. At first some of his works seem two-dimensional, but if one is willing to look long enough, the eye and the mind are led to enter a unique world of form, space and meaning."

Biographical Note

Mark Tobey, born in 1890 in Wisconsin, spent his boyhood there and in Indiana. After a period in Chicago, including some study at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 1911 he went to New York where he remained most of the time until 1922, working as a fashion illustrator. It was during this period, about 1918, that he became a member of the Bahá'í World Faith.

When he moved in 1922 to Seattle he became an art teacher and began to learn the technique of Chinese calligraphy. The West Coast city remained his base during the 20's but he also traveled extensively throughout Europe and the Middle East during this period.

In 1930 he became resident artist at a progressive school in England where he remained, except for continuing travels, until 1938. Most important were visits to the Near East, and a trip to Japan and China in 1934.

For the past two decades he has again lived primarily in Seattle where his studio is now, although he continues to travel and recently for two years made his home in Basel.

Tobey began to achieve recognition on the West Coast in the early 40's, a few years after the emergence of his mature white writing style, and by 1944 had begun to gain a national reputation as an artist of unique importance. In 1955 he had his first one-man show in Paris. His international recognition has since included a major prize at the 29th Biennale in Venice, the first won by an American painter since Whistler, and a major retrospective at The Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (1961). A smaller version was shown in London in 1962. The Museum of Modern Art show, however, is his first large New York exhibition since a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1951.

Photographs and further information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York 19, New York. Circle 5-8900.