

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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PRESS PREVIEW

Friday, March 16, 1984 10 a.m. - Noon

MARK TOBEY: CITY PAINTINGS
Four Decades of Stylistic Development
Go On View at National Gallery of Art

WASHINGTON, D. C. December 23, 1984³. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to explore the stylistic development of Mark Tobey, a major twentieth-century American abstract painter who anticipated the style of Jackson Pollock.

Approximately forty-five paintings executed by Tobey between 1933 and 1970 in a variety of media --- tempera, watercolor, gouache, and oil --- go on view March 18 through June 3, 1984 in the National Gallery of Art's East Building. These delicate works of art, many of which are on paper, are not readily accessible and are not often on public view. Eliza E. Rathbone, assistant curator in the Gallery's Department of Twentieth-Century Art, has organized the exhibition and written a fully illustrated catalogue.

While recent Tobey exhibitions have focused primarily on Tobey's later works, this exhibition includes his paintings executed in the 1930s and 1940s, works which are essential to a full understanding of Tobey's mature style. The focal point of this exhibition is a painting from the Gallery's permanent collection, New York (1944), considered to be one of Tobey's finest works. It shows his characteristic use of "white writing," a network of fine white lines which capture the vitality and restless pulse of the city and his fascination with night lights.

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The exhibition is designed to reflect the centrality of the theme of the city in Tobey's oeuvre -- both stylistically and iconographically. Tobey first seriously considered the city as subject matter when he saw the crowded streets of Hong Kong and Shanghai. His paintings of the city reflect his concern for the brotherhood of man, a conviction which resulted from his conversion in 1918 to the Bahai World Faith, a religion espousing universal consciousness and the ultimate union of all faiths. Tobey found in the city --- and most particularly New York City --- a microcosm of the world and painted it frequently.

Upon his return to the west from the Orient in 1934, Tobey painted San Francisco Street (1934), a scene in San Francisco's Chinatown, for the artist an American equivalent of the streets of Shanghai. Tobey lived in Seattle off and on from 1922 to 1960. While some of his paintings of this city are similar in style to his seminal work, Broadway (1935), other scenes were inspired by the market place in Seattle and present a contrast to the New York paintings. In E Pluribus Unum (1942), the subject matter is the diversity and immediacy of the milling crowd.

Tobey was also influenced by his exposure to Oriental calligraphy, which he studied in Shanghai with a young Chinese student, Teng Kwei. The energy and liveliness of the Oriental brushstroke (the calligraphic impulse, as Tobey called it) inspired his invention of what came to be known as "white writing." Two works on view painted in 1935 mark the beginning of his abstraction of moving figures through the use of white writing. Broadway Norm and Broadway capture the human density and complexity of city life. Broadway is filled with figures superimposed with a mesh of white lines suggesting the white lights of Broadway.

In addition to the impact of Tobey's religious beliefs and the Oriental tradition, he was intrigued by the hidden vitality of nature and the

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interdependence of natural organisms. Born and raised in the American midwest, Tobey took great pleasure in studying nature as a boy. While he lived in cities the rest of his life, his continued interest in nature gave him an insight that allowed him to treat the city as a living organism. This appreciation for the natural world was furthered during the time he spent in a Zen monastery in Japan, where he intently studied nature as well as the effects of light.

In Tobey's work of the 1950s, he abandons the figure which played such a central role in his earlier work. New York Tablet (1946) forecasts this trend as the painting depicts a tablet, like a window on the city, filled with white writing. In the paintings of the fifties, Tobey turns from specific city scenes to his vision of a universal city. In doing so, he shifts from a descriptive approach to a more abstract one, as we see for example, in The Avenue (1954), Traffic (1954), or Battle of the Lights (1956). In the last painting in the exhibition, Coming and Going (1970), Tobey presents the ultimate distillation of the city theme by reducing his subject to the pure activity which had inspired his first city paintings. Tobey spent the last years of his life in Basel, Switzerland, where he died in 1976.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION and photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Public Information) or Carolyn Engel Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, (202) 842-6353.