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TOBEY AT WAHLSTEDT: PROTO-POLLOCK?

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Tags: Mark Tobey

Mark Tobey, Sharp Field, 1960. Tempera, 6 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy Anders Wahlstedt Fine Art.

If you believe everything you read online, **Jackson Pollock** owed his celebrated "all-over" style entirely to the "white writing" of **Mark Tobey**. This anyway is how Tobey's Wikipedia entry tells it, To me, this is like comparing a candle to a bonfire, but that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy **"Mark Tobey: Nature's Patterns,"** eighteen mostly-small but still highly enjoyable works at **Anders Wahlstedt Fine Art** (through May 12). A candle can be beautiful, too -- and even a candle may ignite a blaze.

TOBEY'S PLACE IN ART HISTORY

I dealt with Tobey in my 509-page dissertation with the jaw-breaking title of "Directions, Concerns, and Critical Perceptions of Paintings Exhibited in New York, 1940-49: Abraham Rattner and His Contemporaries."

The point behind all its longueurs is that in the 1940s, the art scene was evolving away from the hard-edge, extroverted realism exemplified equally by the cornball regionalism of Thomas Hart Benton and the Krafft-Ebing fantasies of Salvador Dalí.

I argued that paintings on display in New York with each passing year were evolving in a more romantic, subjective, painterly and above all more abstract direction

The dissertation had been inspired originally by **Abraham Rattner,** a representational expressionist painter whose brushwork was freer than what had gone before.

Rattner's moment of glory had come in 1945, when his painting "Kiosk" won the Temple Gold Medal at the annual show of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

The painting upset a reviewer because it was so abstract he couldn't tell what it was supposed to depict (anybody today can see that it's a newspaper vendor in his kiosk).

By December 1949, the abstract expressionists had gone all the way to pure abstraction. This could be seen by the paintings of **Pollock & de Kooning** at the Whitney annual (now it's only a biennial, but at that time it was still an annual).

Between the discussions in my dissertation of the representational expressionists and the abstract expressionists, I included a group of artists whom I characterized as "semi-abstract."

The senior one among them was Tobey, and around the later 1940s was his moment of glory in the art-historical sense -- his time to be at the cutting edge.

FORMATION OF AN ARTIST

Born in Wisconsin in 1890, Tobey studied art in Chicago and spent time as a very young man in New York. There he converted to the Baha'i faith, a mystical religion that traces its origins to mid-19th century Iran.

In 1921 Toby settled in Seattle and was eventually introduced to Chinese calligraphy by a painter/student at the University of Washington. He achieved a mature style around 1935: it reflected both his mystical convictions and Chinese calligraphy.

Tobey spent most of the rest of his life in Seattle. He didn't attract attention from New York's critics until "Broadway" (1935-36) won a $500 purchase prize at "Artists for Victory," a huge show staged by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1942.

He also won a $1000 fourth prize in a 1945 competition sponsored by Pepsi-Cola with "Sale." He was included in MoMA's "Fourteen Americans" in 1946; the museum had already acquired his "Threading Light" (1942).

More importantly he began showing regularly at the Willard Gallery in New York, with solo exhibitions in 1944, 1945, 1947 and 1949.

He was known as a member of the "Northwest School"-- which also in the 1940s principally included Morris Graves.

Throughout the decade, Tobey's exhibits seem to have ranged from recognizable images to some that were described as "non-objective." However, the pictures that got the most publicity were also the more recognizable ones.

"Broadway" is a cityscape. "Sale" is a market scene. "Threading Light" is less recognizable in its imagery than either, but the forms are still discrete.

CRITICAL RECEPTION IN THE 1940S

In the 1940s, no fewer than four of New York's daily newspapers had full-time critics reviewing the city's art shows. Among them, Tobey's greatest admirer was **Henry McBride,** of the New York Sun.

McBride (1867-1962) had the most advanced taste of any of the city's newspaper critics; he had been known for his support of modern art since the 1920s. And he reviewed Tobey's shows regularly & enthusiastically.

Clement Greenberg, a much younger critic who was reviewing shows regularly for The Nation during this period, also wrote about Tobey's 1944 show and said some very nice things about it.

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He maintained that the artist had "already made one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting."

He praised the "intensity, subtlety, and directness with which Tobey registers and transmits emotion usually considered too tenuous to be made the matter of any other art than music."

Then, however, he went on and criticized the work as "not major." He expanded on this theme in his longest and best-known treatment of the New York art scene of the decade, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" (1947).

Here he once again praised Tobey as "original" and added that he was ""uniquely…American," but insisted that his sensibility was too narrow to allow him to attain the greatness of Pollock..

As best I understand it, Greenberg felt that Tobey's sensibility was descended from **Klee,** whereas that of Pollock was descended from **Picasso**, and that Picasso had offered Pollock immeasurably more sustenance to build upon.

Still, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that Pollock read that 1944 review by Greenberg, and on the strength of it went to see the show at Willard..

Certainly, he seems to have liked what he saw.

According to **Steven Naifeh & Gregory White Smith** in their biography of Pollock, a letter of Pollock to his friend **Louis Bunce** describes Tobey as an "exception" to the rule that New York was "the only place in America where painting (in the real sense) can come thru."

True, Naifeh & Smith also cite a lot of other possible artistic influences on Pollock, but at least Tobey comes as the grand climax to the paragraph describing them all.

BRINGING OUR STORY UP TO THE PRESENT

At one point, Tobey was even regarded as a member of the abstract expressionist movement.

He was included – alongside Pollock, and a myriad of other artists – by the **Samuel Kootz Gallery** (which represented Hofmann, Motherwell, Baziotes & Adolph Gottlieb) in its landmark group show of abstract expressionism, "The Intrasubjectives" of 1949

Tobey was also included --- INSTEAD of Pollock—in the first dissertation on abstract expressionism ever written---by **William C. Seitz,** in 1955, for Princeton. The only other artists featured by Seitz were **de Kooning, Gorky, Hofmann, Motherwell, & Rothko.**

Though Seitz's dissertation wasn't published in book form until 1983, it was widely circulated in manuscript form before then.

Tobey's art in later years enjoyed even broader exposure.

In 1958, he won the International Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale. In 1962, he was accorded a solo exhibition at MoMA, and in 1966, he achieved the same distinction at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

A major retrospective of his work took place in 1974, only two years before he died, at the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington DC (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). And there have been other big shows of his work since.

THE CURRENT SHOW

The excellent exhibition of Tobey's work now on view at Wahlstedt belongs to this later period of recognition.

The earliest pictures in it – "Early Playground III," "Cattails" and "Western Pagodas" – were all created in 1953. (The latest, a large, luminous brown-on-brown oil on canvas called "Owl's Light," was done in 1968).

In many ways, this later period of creation makes these works more worth looking at.

For one thing, Tobey moved with the times. Unlike the works that received the most publicity in the 1940s, most of these pictures are pure abstracts.

"Early Playground" is the exception, though one could also argue that the russet-colored "Western Pagodas" anticipates the trees in swamps of **Wolf Kahn**, and that "The Path"(1956), an exquisite row of vertical whites and browns, suggests a row of **John Marin**- like cubist city skyscrapers)

Tobey may also well have perfected his technique during this laler phase of his career.

I say "may" because I'm not too familiar with what his work of the '30 and '40s actually looked like, in the flesh – with hundreds of artists to deal with in my dissertation, the bulk of my visual research was conducted through photographs.

I can say, to judge from this show, that in the '50s and '60s, he was creating very elegant little pictures (mostly in tempera, though "Cattails" is ink on paper, and looks startlingly like minimalism before its time).

These are sweet paintings, delicate and restrained instead of mammoth, manic and/or aggressive. They are like chamber music instead of symphony (Pollock) or opera (de Kooning) —but to say truth in music, I've never had much use for opera myself.

In art, I am also a great fan of **Klee,** and it is easy to see analogies of scale and the use of precise little shapes and forms between Klee and Tobey.

In retrospect, it's not too hard to see differences between Tobey and Pollock, beyond the differences in scale.

Tobey's lines, especially in works like "Sharp Field" (1960) that utilize his celebrated "white writing," are short, sedate and straight or only gently curved. Pollock's lines are dynamically curled, swooping and/or twisted, into extravagantly active forms.

Also, the "white writing" – as its name implies—features paler lines on darker fields. In this show, not only "Sharp Field" but also the delightful little "Pendulum" (1959) and the serene "Desert Window" (1960) display lighter lines on darker fields.

More often (though not always) Pollock employed darker designs on lighter fields.

But hey, as **Dogberry** so rightly remarks, in "Much Ado About Nothing," "Comparisons are odorous." So why not leave them lay? And go enjoy this show…..

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