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Mark Tobey, His Art, and the Seattle Baha'i Community

ROBERT G. WILSON

'Preserve us from popular "success". One's own standard is the touchstone.'
Lyonel Feininger¹

Abstract

Mark Tobey achieved international recognition as one of the foremost artists of the twentieth century. Born in Wisconsin, he attended classes at the Chicago Art Institute and then moved to New York, where he worked as an illustrator for McCall's Magazine and did freelance illustrations. In 1918 Mark Tobey became a member of the Baha'i Faith. He moved to Seattle in 1923, 16 years after the establishment of the Baha'i community in Seattle. Over the next 40 years he considered Seattle his home and between frequent travels, Mark Tobey participated in Seattle Baha'i activities. He attended meetings, spoke at events, played the piano at the Nineteen Day Feast and gave firesides (introductory Baha'i meetings) at his home in Seattle's university district. He served on committees and on the Seattle Spiritual Assembly. He invited artist friends to attend Baha'i events. His years of service, friendliness and active participation in Baha'i activities endeared him to the Seattle Baha'is.

Mark Tobey quickly aligned himself with young Northwest artists. A school of art consisting of common ideas resulting in a unique style grew around these younger artists. It was sometimes called the 'Pacific Northwest School of Mystics', or 'The Northwest School'. Mark Tobey brought a vision of the world into this school. He was the first, if not the only, Seattle artist from the Pacific Northwest to have visited Europe, the Middle East, China and Japan. His impressions of cities, the people he saw and the art, both contemporary and historical, found their way into his paintings, not as objective statements but often as symbols. In Seattle, Tobey gained an appreciation of Asian calligraphy. In 1934, on a trip to China and Japan with the English potter Bernard Leach, Tobey lived in a Zen temple in Kyoto where he studied calligraphy and Buddhism. The abstract expressionist movement flourishing in New York was influenced by Tobey's work through his exhibitions in New York at the Willard Gallery, and in the 1940s and 1950s at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. Mark Tobey received international recognition through major exhibitions of his work, most notably the Venice XXIV Biennale and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

The ideas of universality and oneness expressed in the Baha'i Faith, with its emphasis on the unity of humanity, the oneness of religion and that the earth is one country, formed the philosophical basis of Tobey's work. This belief played out in a lifetime of paintings that explored symbolism using calligraphic loops of light breaking form into a symbolic personal

¹ Stephen E. Hauser, *Feininger and Tobey, Years of Friendship 1944-1956: The Complete Correspondence* (New York: Achim Moeller Fine Art, 1991), 101; from a letter from Lyonel Feininger to Mark Tobey, 10 September 1952.

language, religious symbolism, Zen Sumi painting and masterful drawings of the human figure.

There are few painters today who successfully express religious ideas in contemporary art. Paul Klee, whose planes, colours and textures indicated latent worlds beyond the objective world; Wassily Kandinski, who explored the spiritual in art; and Georges Rouault, successfully defining Christian sentiment with passion and nobility, are a few. The aura of spirituality that surrounds many of Mark Tobey's paintings and the beauty and profundity he achieved make him a lasting and major voice, one of the greatest painters of the last century.

That Mark Tobey left his footsteps in Seattle, yet was a citizen of the world, has immeasurably enriched the Pacific Northwest. Besides the richness of his intellect, brilliant conversation on just about any subject, and sense of leadership, Tobey brought to the Pacific Northwest knowledge of contemporary European and New York art. His sense of heightened awareness fused vision into a loosely collaborative group of Northwest artists. This group, consisting of Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson, along with lesser known but important painters such as Paul Horiuchi, Fay Chong, George Tsutakawa, James Washington Jr., Malcolm Roberts and Helmi, enriched the Pacific Northwest with paintings diffused with opalescent light, bounding shapes, haunted birds and beasts, and mystical references to transcendental themes. This 'school' of artists was loosely called the 'Northwest Mystics'.

Mark Tobey stated, 'It is alas hard to carry within one two powers like Baha'i and Art,'² while it was stated of him that 'during his years of productivity Tobey was continually faced with the problem of how to divide his time and energy between his art and direct service to the Baha'i Faith.'³ Only in retrospect do we see how successful he was in expressing both of these powers, frequently blending them into one coherent statement. Tobey spoke passionately about art and Baha'i. He spoke with passion about the importance of art to the individual and to civilization, the high place of art in the scheme of things, and the transforming power of religion – a transformation at work not once a millennium, but in daily life. Commenting about his painting *Arena of Civilization* (1947), Tobey boldly stated, 'The draped forms of the East symbolize the spirit of Baha'i which I believe to be the religion of our time and of the future, even if it is little known at the moment . . .'⁴

Tobey's ideas magnetized those with whom he came into contact. It is no wonder, then, that he influenced the young artists of his day in the Pacific Northwest. 'The major formative influence upon Graves – at least among painters – was Mark Tobey.'⁵

Mark Tobey was a generation older than the next oldest of this group of Northwest painters. When Tobey arrived in Seattle in 1923, on the heels of a broken marriage, in a part of the country removed from all contemporary art movements, his knowledge and experience were welcomed. He made friends easily, and many of his students and admirers became lifelong supporters and friends.

² *Mark Tobey: Paintings from the Collection of Joyce and Arthur Dahl* (sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Roosevelt University, Department of Art and Architecture, Stanford University 1967) 15.

³ Arthur L. Dahl, *Mark Tobey: Art and Belief* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984) 9.

⁴ *ibid* 38.

⁵ Frederick S. Wight, *Morris Graves* (University of California Press, 1956) 16.

Mark Tobey and the Baha'i Faith

Mark Tobey became a Baha'i in 1918 and describes the event in his own words:

One night after an evening at a party at Marcel Duchamp's studio [in New York City], while waiting for a train I kept wondering if by chance there might be something else greater than art. This idea remained with me for several days – during which I thought considerably about the expression 'the love of God,' what it is, what it could mean to one like myself. This led to prayer to know about this profound state. After a short period of days I was called up by Mrs. Sterner, who . . . asked me to dinner . . . That night in her beautiful house I sat beside a portrait painter named Juliet Thompson. After the evening was over we found we lived in the same direction. Fortunately, when we reached Fifth Avenue she said, 'Let's walk.' Since I didn't have ten cents in my pocket I couldn't have taken her on the bus very well. And so we walked, and before we parted she asked me to pose for her. Well, I had no money, nothing to do in particular, I owed my landlady forty dollars, so why not go and pose? . . .

Upon a wall near where I was seated there was a photograph of a man with a white beard, wearing a white turban – a remarkable face, but I had no curiosity about him. During this period of posing I had a very strange and powerful dream which concerned this person in the photograph, or seemed to. When I told Miss Thompson about the dream she grew quite excited, but didn't say anything.

After a while she decided to go to Green Acre. I took her to the train and upon leaving she said, 'I have a plan for you; you will hear from me.' After a week or so there came a letter from a man called Harry Randall, living in Little Boar's Head on the Maine coast. It contained \$25 and an invitation to visit them, as they were friends of Miss Thompson. In Green Acre nearby there was a small group of Baha'is speaking of a new religion, claiming that the Day of Judgement was upon us and all the prophecies were now fulfilled. Also, I found out that Miss Thompson was a Baha'i and had met the man in the photograph while he was in New York in 1912. Gradually it dawned on me that this little group of people with their prayers, their smiling faces and their unbounded enthusiasm regarding this new religion really had new spirit, anyway something I couldn't exactly put into words, but convinced me that what they believed was the truth.⁶

After becoming a member of the Baha'i Faith, Tobey attended Baha'i study classes in New York with such Baha'i notables as Lillian Randall, Juliet Thompson, Mountfort Mills and Horace and Doris Holley. He continued his job as an illustrator at *McCall's Magazine* and became known for his caricatures of theatrical people. In 1922, after a failed marriage, a friend of Tobey's, returning home to Seattle, invited Tobey to accompany him. Wishing to get away from New York for a while, Tobey agreed, arriving in Seattle in 1923.

Mark Tobey felt at home in the Pacific Northwest. No doubt the atmosphere there, with muted, rain-soaked colours and the soft, fog-choked forests, influenced his art and the art of

⁶ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 2-4.

the other ‘Northwest Mystic’ painters. For most of the year, pale light covers everything. The sun, even at noon, is more silver than gold, and there are no shadows. But it was essentially Mark Tobey that gave the disparate modernist painters in the Northwest, at this critical time, vision and purpose.

Seattle had no art museum or gallery that championed contemporary art. Tobey supported himself solely by painting and teaching art. He assiduously sought for greater understanding of his work, locally and abroad, by nurturing relationships with gallery owners, museums and collectors. He also taught art by giving private lessons. Tobey and the other Northwest artists of the time were almost solo artistic voices in a cultural climate that offered few outlets for remuneration. In his formative years Tobey fought hard against poverty. His first residence in Seattle was a small rented cabin on Summit Avenue near Tenth Avenue and Broadway, which was within walking distance of the Cornish School, where he taught art, downtown Seattle and the Pike Place Market. Years later the Pike Place Market, an open farmers’ market, would become the source for many of Mark Tobey’s drawings and paintings. ‘One of Tobey’s pleasures was sketching in the Public Market in downtown Seattle, and a number of newspaper articles and photographs attest to this activity bringing him some public recognition.’⁷

As an art teacher Tobey was exceptional. ‘Many of his students from both the Cornish School and his private classes have testified that he was a masterful teacher.’⁸ He encouraged the development of his students’ vision, their sense of aesthetics. He had them look and observe. He took his classes into Seattle’s Volunteer Park and had his students collect leaves, twigs, moss and other verdure they thought were interesting. He encouraged them to pay particular attention to the veins in leaves, a patch of matted grass, a stone or wet



Mark Tobey sketching at the Pike Place Market, Seattle, Seattle Times 1946

bark. He discussed drawing the microcosm.⁹ He was gentle and thoughtful in his criticism of student work, looking for the good and promising results and helping the student identify and redefine the weak or rougher parts of a painting. In every studio he had, and later in his house in the university district of Seattle, Mark Tobey proudly hung the drawings and paintings of his students alongside his own paintings and those of his established peers.

⁷ Sheryl Conkelton and Laura Landau, *Northwest Mythologies* (Seattle: Tacoma Art Museum and the University of Washington Press, 2003) 64.

⁸ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 4.

⁹ From notes taken at an interview with Anne Gould Hauberg, 24 June 2002.

Tobey said,

My sources of inspiration have gone from those of my native Middle West to those of microscopic worlds. I have discovered many a universe on paving stones and tree barks. I know very little about what is generally called 'abstract' painting. Pure abstraction would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable to me.¹⁰

The Early Baha'i Faith in Seattle

The first Baha'i in the Pacific Northwest was Nathan Ward Fitzgerald. Colonel Fitzgerald became a Baha'i in Washington, DC, in 1902. On 29 April 1902, he received a letter from 'Abdu'l-Baha that encouraged him to teach the Baha'i Faith. In late 1904 Nathan Fitzgerald went on pilgrimage to visit 'Abdu'l-Baha. He received a second letter from 'Abdu'l-Baha, again telling him to travel and teach. In 1905, after returning from pilgrimage and settling his affairs in Washington, DC, he moved to Tacoma, Washington, becoming the first Baha'i in Washington. At this time, before World War I, Tacoma and Seattle were about equal in population. Both were important port cities for the Pacific Northwest. The Alaska-Yukon Exposition held in Seattle in 1906 and the arrival of the United States naval shipyards helped to make Seattle the predominant port city.

Colonel Fitzgerald had been an officer in the Union army during the Civil War. His mother was one of the original followers of the Millerites, a Christian sect that believed that Christ would physically return, on 23 May 1844, to Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. Miller's followers, including Fitzgerald's mother, donned ascension robes, gave away all earthly possessions, and waited all night on Mount Carmel for their Lord to appear. The newspapers of the time called this event the 'Great Disappointment'.

As soon as Colonel Fitzgerald arrived in Tacoma he asked to address the Tacoma Ministers' Alliance. In April 1905, before about seventy ministers, he was allowed exactly fifteen minutes to speak on 'the great and glorious news of the fulfilment of Prophecy'. His remarks were immediately struck from the minutes of that meeting, and he was asked to leave.

Not discouraged by the cold reception of the Tacoma ministers, Colonel Fitzgerald quit his job. He devoted himself full-time to teaching the Baha'i Faith in Washington, visiting Spokane, Walla Walla and Seattle. He also published a book called *The New Revelation: Its Marvelous Message*.¹¹

In January 1907, in Seattle, Nathan Fitzgerald held a well-attended and rather sensationally advertised public meeting titled 'The Second Coming of Christ'. He sold copies of his book in the back of the meeting hall after his talk. The hall was packed. There was standing room only.

Seattle resident Wallace Busselle, who was to become one of the founding members of the Seattle Baha'i community, attended Nathan Fitzgerald's lecture. After the meeting Busselle worked his way through the crowd to the front of the room and asked Colonel Fitzgerald how he could become a Baha'i. As a lecturer, author and former Millerite minister, Colonel Fitzgerald probably viewed himself more as a presenter of the Baha'i

¹⁰ Wesley Wehr, *The Eighth Lively Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) 38.

¹¹ Nathan Ward Fitzgerald, *The New Revelation: Its Marvelous Message* (Tacoma, Washington, 1905).

message than as one who enlisted new members. He did not know how people became Baha'is.

As a result of Wallace Busselle's request, however, Colonel Fitzgerald arranged, in March 1907, for a visit by Mrs Isabella Davis Brittingham, who was an illustrious and articulate Baha'i author, teacher and lecturer. She was later given the title 'Disciple of 'Abdu'l-Baha' by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith. She was one of the few people to become a Baha'i before 1900, and one of the first women Baha'is in the United States. She was an active and ardent travelling Baha'i teacher and author of the respected book, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh in a Sequence of Four Lessons*. Her husband, James Brittingham, was the first person to become a Baha'i in New York City. As a travelling Baha'i teacher Isabella Brittingham had already achieved remarkable success. She was known to have 'converted' many people in her church in New Jersey to the Baha'i Faith. When souls expressed sincere interest in Baha'u'llah, Isabella Brittingham sent their names to 'Abdu'l-Baha.

The first talks Mrs Brittingham gave in Seattle were in the homes of Wallace Busselle, Mrs Loue Bush, and Mrs Ida A. Finch, who was the first Seattle Baha'i. The talks became so popular and well attended that they were moved to the Theosophical hall in Seattle and then to the Hotel Potter. Ada Finch had become a Baha'i in New York in 1906, while on a visit to her mother, and she moved back to her home-town of Seattle while Mrs. Brittingham was there. Mrs Finch was also elected delegate from Seattle to the Baha'i National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, in 1912, which was attended by 'Abdu'l-Baha. At the National Convention she was introduced as the 'Mother of the Pacific Northwest'.

On 15 April 1907, just before Mrs Brittingham had to leave Seattle, at the last meeting she attended there, held in Ida Finch's home at 2916 Beacon Avenue South, the first Baha'i assembly in Seattle was formed, at 3.15 pm.

Mark Tobey and the Seattle Baha'i Community

Mark Tobey first arrived in Seattle in 1923, penniless but determined. He procured a job as an art teacher at the fashionable Cornish Art School and taught individual art lessons for a dollar a lesson. 'He evolved a unique method of teaching, concentrating more on stimulating the imagination of the student, encouraging a love for art and overcoming the barrier of lack of confidence, than on following structured procedures and principles.'¹² Teaching at Cornish gave Tobey access to many of Seattle's more prominent families, and he nurtured those relationships. Although his later career would glisten with awards, recognition, honours and accomplishments that spanned continents, it was not until late in life that he had financial security. This was partly due to his restlessness. He travelled frequently and extensively – England, Italy, Switzerland, Israel, the Middle East, China, Japan, Mexico – and back and forth across the United States. He incorporated images from many of the cities he visited into each of his cityscapes.

He was particularly fond of the Pike Place Market in Seattle. Some of the market's imagery found its way into Tobey's paintings of other cities – fish, noisy crowds, racks of fruit and vegetables, graphic signs, caricatures of nomadic humanity, disjointed architectural roof-lines and alleys meandering into gentle perspective. 'In Seattle, Tobey was himself a fixture of such a teeming environment, between 1940 and 1943, in the Pike Place Public Market. Here, he constantly observed hawking merchants and grotesque shoppers; auctioneers, seamen and cowpunchers; and vagrants who resembled birds and animals, and

¹² Dahl, *Art and Belief* 4.

rolled themselves into balls to sleep.’¹³ Regarding the Pike Place Market, Tobey said, ‘The Market will always be within me. Established back in 1907 by the farmers themselves – not for the tourist trade, but as a protest against the high prices paid to commission men – it has been for me a refuge, an oasis, a most human growth, the heart and soul of Seattle.’¹⁴

Mark Tobey maintained correspondence with hundreds of students and fellow artists – such as Lionel Feininger and Morris Graves – and with Baha’i friends. On his travels, Tobey visited museums and galleries, kept in touch with the latest artistic movements and ideas throughout Europe and America, and visited Baha’is.

Tobey’s involvement with the Seattle Baha’i community took place mostly between the late 1930s and mid 1950s, beginning immediately after his return from living in a Zen monastery in Kyoto, Japan. As a Baha’i, Tobey not only struggled to introduce a new artistic vision into a sceptical and largely unresponsive local climate, but was also an active participant in a religion no one knew about.

Tobey made two visits to the Baha’i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, where he visited Baha’i holy places on Mount Carmel and met with the Guardian of the Baha’i Faith, Shoghi Effendi. Locally he involved himself with the Seattle Baha’i community and served on the Seattle Baha’i assembly from 1939 into the early 1940s. A Baha’i community is comprised of individuals who come together because they recognize Baha’u’llah’s claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behaviour and to build the institutions that promote the unity and safeguard the interests of mankind.

‘Baha’i provided Tobey with aesthetic as well as social and religious principles,’ wrote William C. Seitz, curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, at the time of the Museum’s 1962-63 exhibition of Tobey’s work. ‘He has often stated that there can be no break between nature, art, science, religion, and personal life . . . Few religions have given the concept of *oneness* such pointed emphasis, and few modern artists have dealt with it as explicitly as has Tobey.’¹⁵

In his lectures about art or Baha’i, when he was teaching art and in conversations with artists, collectors and gallery owners, Tobey mentioned the effect the Baha’i Faith had on his art. ‘I believe that a considerable amount of what might be called my better work is derived from Baha’i love. That, I think, has had the strongest effect on me.’¹⁶ At times, his enthusiasm for the Baha’i Faith created suspicions among some of his students and resulted in more than a few withdrawing from his classes.¹⁷

Tobey was continually faced with the challenge of how to divide his time and energy between his art and direct service to the Baha’i Faith. While he lived in Devonshire, England, at Dartington Hall, he served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles. He once moved briefly to Victoria, in British Columbia, Canada, to prevent the membership of the local spiritual assembly there from falling below the prescribed minimum of nine members. While in Switzerland he was chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Basel for sixteen years. During his years in Seattle, Tobey frequently attended the Geyserville Baha’i School in California, which he loved. Tobey also gave generous financial support to Baha’i pioneers – Baha’is who moved from their homes to live in faraway countries to teach the Baha’i Faith.

¹³ William C. Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962) 36.

¹⁴ Introduction to *Mark Tobey: The World Of A Market* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964) .

¹⁵ Seitz, *Mark Tobey* 10.

¹⁶ Chisaburoh Yamada, *Dialogue in Art: Japan and the West* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1976) 304.

¹⁷ From notes taken at an interview with Anne Gould Hauberg, June 2002.

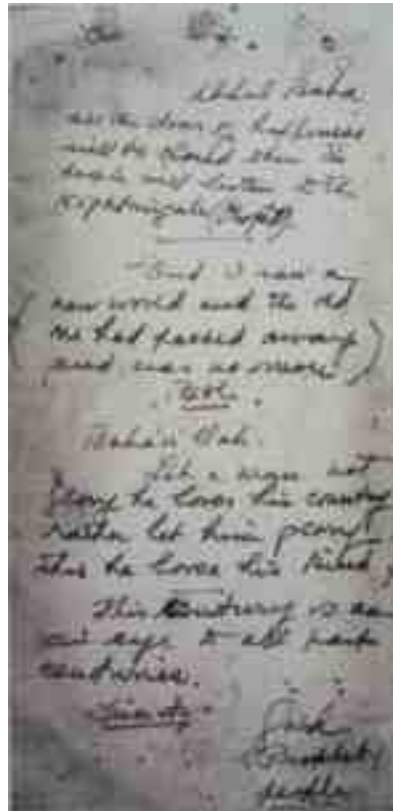
Tobey taught the Baha'i Faith to his friends, often coaxing them into philosophical dialogue. He frequently discussed topics that were at variance with the common thought of the time, such as equality of women and men, world unity, elimination of racial and class prejudice, and the unity of the human race. As an example, one Northwest artist writes in his memoirs how he attempted to passionately discuss the importance of collectivism and socialism with Tobey. At the time, the Spanish civil war was the favoured political topic. Tobey, on the other hand, listened politely but never commented. Instead, at a pause in the one-sided conversation, Tobey began to discuss cosmic order, the importance of unity, and the three internal powers: imagination, inspiration and intuition. This frustrated the young artist. He was seeking a political discussion. Tobey was not trying to avoid a discussion, but to put the discussion into a grander context – a higher vision of the great forces moving in the world today. Years later, as an older man, the artist wrote that he finally understood the importance of what Tobey had said.¹⁸

Tobey had a studio on Brooklyn Avenue, in Seattle, near the University of Washington. He later moved his studio to a large house at 52nd and University Way. Whenever he was in town – and he travelled frequently, often without notice – he was actively engaged with the Seattle Baha'i community, attending Baha'i gatherings, such as the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Day events, and giving talks.

One of Tobey's most noteworthy contributions to the development of the Baha'i Faith in the Northwest was the daily 'open house' meetings, or 'firesides', he held at his studio during the late 1940s and through the 1950s. He informed the Baha'is, his artist friends and students, that his studio was always open for conversation every evening at 7 pm. He encouraged Baha'is to bring their friends to these evening gatherings at his studio but warned them, as he did his artist friends and students, not to show up before 7 pm as this was his time to work. Some Baha'is took advantage of his generous offer. Many of Tobey's artist associates, students and admirers, were frequent visitors at these popular evening gatherings.

A Baha'i who frequently attended the evening 'firesides' recounted the following:

There were always a number of people present. It was a very casual yet chaotic place. Sometimes Mark just started playing the piano, either one of his own compositions, or a nice classical piece that he liked. I was always concerned because his studio was very, very messy. Piles of papers were everywhere. I tried to clean up a little once but he scolded me, telling me to sit



Note by Mark Tobey for a Baha'i talk

¹⁸ William Cumming, *Sketchbook: A Memoir of the '30s and the Northwest School* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984) 108-9. Also from notes taken in an interview with the painter Windsor Utley at his gallery and studio on Second Avenue and Lenora in Seattle, February 1974.

down and not touch anything. I once shared the big overstuffed couch with a wet painting taped to glass. There were unfinished paintings scattered about the room. He also had primitive artefacts, Indian baskets, and clay pieces on the bookshelves. A few of the papers he would help me move at times so people could sit down. Papers and books were on the piano, under the piano, on the large table behind the couch, everywhere. Paintings were taped to the wall, not only his own, but works by his students and friends, as well. Yet there was a certain energy in the room, a hush of expectation, as you sometimes get in a theatre just before the curtain opens. Depending on who was present, Mark would usually give a short talk. He almost always talked about the Baha'i Faith, or some Baha'i principle, usually about something he had just read or understood. But sometimes he talked about art, as well.¹⁹

A favourite local visiting place of Tobey's was the small Baha'i centre, which until 1962, when it was sold, was a cabin surrounded by tall cedars and pine trees, just north of Seattle on Aurora Avenue. It contained a stone fireplace, a piano, tables, pine panelling, a small kitchen and a large library. Tobey visited whenever he had the chance, and many local Baha'is met Tobey there for the first time. One Baha'i recounted that Tobey would sit at a favourite table by the window, reading a book and conversing with anyone who would sit and talk with him. He often did drawings while sitting at the table and frequently gave the drawings to appreciative Baha'i friends.²⁰

Elizabeth Johnson, who had a small home in Tacoma, Washington, had collected Tobey's drawings and many small watercolours over the years, besides being the recipient of his handmade greeting cards. She kept the drawings in a large photo album and proudly displayed them to those who were interested. The only reason Mark gave them to her, she insisted, was because she liked to watch him draw and asked for them when he had finished.²¹

Mark Tobey spoke frequently about the Baha'i Faith. He was not always easy to listen to, if you judge public speaking by dynamics and clear, linear presentation. His voice was soft. He often sat, rather than stood. He talked, rather than pontificated. Tobey's gentle and thoughtful speaking style may have prompted him to comment 'Today they (the people) want not only the gift but the giver,'²² implying that subject matter seemed to take second place to skilful presentation. Tobey was frequently asked by the Seattle Baha'i community to be a fireside speaker or give a public presentation, and he always accepted.

Mark Tobey not only achieved international fame as an artist, but also wrote essays, published poetry, and, of course, expressed his love of music through his own compositions. When he spoke at the University of Washington in the spring of 1966 – one of his last visits to Seattle from his home in Switzerland – at a programme that was part of the distinguished visiting lecturer series, Tobey mostly spoke about the Baha'i Faith. His subject was advertised by the university as being about art. Several people complained because they came to hear an art lecture, not a religious lecture.²³ When Tobey was asked by Baha'is to

¹⁹ From notes taken at an interview with Florence Winship, who served with Mark Tobey on the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Seattle, at her home in Shoreline, Washington, August 1978.

²⁰ From notes taken at an interview with Elizabeth Johnson at her home south of Tacoma, Washington, April 1972.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Paintings from the collection of Joyce and Arthur Dahl* 15.

²³ From notes taken immediately after the lecture, interviewing several artists who had attended the lecture.

speak about the Baha'i Faith, he often spoke about art. When asked by a Baha'i why he did that, he replied with a shrug, 'I tell people what they need to hear.'²⁴

Art and Baha'i

Mark Tobey's experience as a Baha'i enriched his art with religious symbolism, a fusion of occidental and oriental art motifs, and low-key, unobtrusive mysticism. His paintings are quiet and unpretentious. They communicate an aura of reverence. They speak of profundity. While chaos, materialism, World War II and the explosive energy of abstract expressionism all screeched for attention, Mark Tobey offered the world small paintings that seem great in size. They are loud only in that they give voice to the spirit.

Tobey was the first artist to successfully incorporate Japanese Sumi, Far Eastern designs, Arabic calligraphy, African motifs, Byzantine, Greek and Renaissance images into his work. He was an older brother to the younger Northwest artists, well travelled and wise. Northwest artist William Cumming says, when recalling years later the founders of the Northwest school,

Mark, I never saw as wedded to this earth. He had a cosmopolitan's eager awareness of the unique qualities and tone of the region and this is refracted in his paintings. Mark is surely of the [Northwest] school, and how do I see him? Perhaps as a much-travelled older brother of us all, a sensei, one who was here first, who has seen much if not just about all, who returns and passes through us and leaves clinging to each of us some bit of his awareness. Without his touch, we should have all lacked the true beginner's mind, which in a sense is one of the primary qualities of our stance toward art and the world.²⁵

Mark Tobey's intense and thoughtful paintings were studied by Jackson Pollock and other New York abstract expressionists. At an exhibition of Tobey's 'white writing' paintings at the Willard Gallery in New York, Marian Willard, the gallery's owner, told Tobey that Jackson Pollock came to her gallery twice to view Tobey's work and spent the whole afternoon there on both occasions.²⁶

Tobey gave visual representation to spiritual imagery using a variety of metaphorical techniques, 'white writing' being one of his major artistic innovations and the style for which he is perhaps best known. Most of Tobey's 'white writing' paintings were done between 1935 and the late 1940s. This style was partly derived from his calligraphic studies in Japan and China and his exposure to Persian and Arabic calligraphy during sojourns in the Middle East. He attributed 'white writing' to light, stating, 'the addition of white describes form as if in light'.²⁷ This light could be considered to reflect the word of God, or divine knowledge, expressed by Tobey in many of his paintings with Baha'i themes. Baha'u'llah wrote: 'Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.'²⁸ For Tobey, 'The teachings of Baha'u'llah are themselves light with which we

²⁴ From notes taken in an interview with Anne Gould Hauberg, June 2002.

²⁵ Cumming, *Sketchbook* 135.

²⁶ From notes taken in an interview with Anne Gould Hauberg, June 2002.

²⁷ Conkelton and Landau, *Northwest Mythologies* 48.

²⁸ Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i-Iqān, the Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974) 46.

can see how to move forward on the road to evolution.’²⁹ Tobey confirms his intention of his white lines being consciously fused with spiritual characteristics: ‘The multiple space bounded by involved white lines symbolizes higher states of consciousness or dimensions spoken of in the Father’s Kingdom.’³⁰

Tobey used light, or ‘white writing’, to create objects framed with shimmering planes that emerge from deep within a picture. The eye travels easily through a new perspective and into depths of hidden colour. The viewer’s vision touches a maze of shapes at the moment of creation. Images, symbols, logos, and hieroglyphs emerge where none had been before. Look at any Tobey painting from his ‘white writing’ period and let the eye follow a line – any line. The line takes you on an adventure. It was also a personal explosive revelation for Tobey, at the age of 44, when he ‘discovered’ ‘white writing’ and recognized its importance to his work. He said, ‘I’ve painted *Broadway* like Watteau³¹ in spirit . . . It astonished me. Such a feeling of Hell under lacy design – delicate as Watteau in spirit but madness.’³²

Tobey’s discovery of ‘white writing’ occurred at Dartington Hall in Devonshire, England, where he taught art for about eight years. Far from the clamour of New York and the provincialism of Seattle, Devonshire offered Tobey a place to meditate and experiment. He said, ‘The nights were so silent you could hear the horses breathing.’³³

In this ideal setting, among the oak trees, Mark Tobey ‘began to improvise a little picture very different from his others, a mesh of whitish lines on a brown background criss-crossing in a jumble of movement . . . With sudden intuition he realized that he had been using the Chinese calligraphic impulse with a vision of the energy of the city, but that the result was occidental and was, in fact, New York.’³⁴

William Seitz relates,

To anyone who has followed the pattern of Tobey’s thinking and feeling, it will be evident that categories of subject must break down: Broadway is a river; cultures are separated by canals; a photograph of a crowd is a flower garden; a city is a crystal . . . As Gorky³⁵ did Tobey sees in visual metaphors. Because of this Tobey is a symbolist, a series of intangible themes runs through his art that is independent of overt subject matter. *Light*, following its traditional symbolism, is associated with divinity, enlightenment, and spirituality.

And Seitz then quotes Tobey as asserting that ‘Turner is greater than the Impressionists’ because ‘he dissolved everything into light.’³⁶

²⁹ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 33.

³⁰ Mark Tobey, ‘Mark Tobey Writes of His Painting on the Cover’, in *Artnews* 44 (1-14 January 1946) 22.

³¹ Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) was an 18th-century French romantic artist. His distinctive, naturalistic but airy style evoked grace, enchantment and poetic fantasy during decades of war and social change. The ‘spirit’ Tobey refers to here possibly represents the artist’s ability to transcend with style the underlying turmoil of social upheaval.

³² Conkelton and Landau, *Northwest Mythologies* 48.

³³ Seitz, *Mark Tobey* 49.

³⁴ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 6.

³⁵ Arshile Gorky (1904-1948) was an abstract expressionist painter, who was born in Armenia, immigrated to the United States in 1920 and moved to New York City in 1925. Gorky painted linear abstractions representing dark moods of disassociation and alienation.

³⁶ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 22.

In commenting on his use of ‘white writing’, Tobey wrote, ‘White lines in movement symbolize light as a unifying idea which flows through the compartmented units of life bringing a dynamic to men’s minds, ever expanding their energies toward a larger relativity.’³⁷ These compartmented units of life reflect three levels, or spheres, where human activity takes place. On the lowest level – the natural, or animalistic, level – there is fear, power, anger, hatred, war, revenge and destruction. On the middle – or human – plane, there is philosophy, art, science, aesthetics, civilization, law, fellowship, technology and education. On the highest level – the divine plane – there is justice, humility, kindness, mercy, love, compassion, wisdom and understanding. According to the Baha’i teachings, man’s spiritual journey is ever upward – away from the limitations of the natural, which is the realm of chaos and imperfection, and toward the divine, which is wholly spiritual, and where the attributes of God are reflected in pure splendour: dominion, glory, perfection, might, power, forgiveness, majesty, kindness, and mercy. Even though ‘white writing’ was a major breakthrough for Mark Tobey, propelling him forward as a major American artist, he said, ‘I must say I don’t see much future for the white-writing . . .’³⁸

Above all Mark Tobey considered himself an explorer, an innovator, someone who always broke new ground, like a scientist in a laboratory moving forward with his discoveries. He once wrote, ‘Artists don’t repeat but always change as nature does.’³⁹ He warned his students not to become locked into a style, idiom or innovation that made their work – and consequently themselves – suddenly popular. This could be their artistic death – keeping them from what they might eventually discover.⁴⁰ Tobey himself went on to explore many other styles and dramatically succeeded at each. From the 1940s to the early 1950s, when Tobey was in his 60s, he painted works with Baha’i themes and titles. The Sumi paintings, very different from his other works, but in Tobey’s judgement among his most significant paintings, were created in 1957, when he was 66 years old. His experimentation with monotypes, which went on for more than ten years, began just before the Louvre exhibition in 1961. Tobey was never content to stay with a popular or saleable style. During every stylistic development, however, he returned to the human figure. Tobey built the human figure. He sketched and drew the human figure constantly.

Mark Tobey’s early art dealer in Seattle, Zoe Dusanne, was well connected to international artists and collectors, such as Peggy Guggenheim. In an interview, she said, ‘Good drawing is the basis of art. No matter how abstract the painting, or contemporary the style, you can tell with just a glance at the painting if the artist has the basics down. And the basic of drawing is the human figure.’⁴¹ She then pulled from her desk drawer an unframed painting by the Californian abstractionist artist Sam Francis who was influenced by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and other New York abstract expressionists. It was composed of floating blue orbs, yellow lines, and red explosions. ‘See,’ she said, ‘here’s a man who can draw. Notice the careful placement of his forms, attention to detail, the sense of completion. He left nothing to chance. He created chance.’⁴²

Tobey insisted that the best way to learn to paint was to study art.

³⁷ Cited in *ibid* 34.

³⁸ Conkelton and Landau, *Northwest Mythologies* 72.

³⁹ Cited in Dahl, *Art and Belief* 8.

⁴⁰ From notes taken at an interview with Wesley Wehr, January 1961.

⁴¹ From notes taken in an interview with Zoe Dusanne at her gallery on Broadway on Capitol Hill in Seattle, Spring 1962.

⁴² *Ibid*.

Art comes from Art, as men come from men and flowers from flowers, and there is a Pacific Art which seems to be rising, although first noticed in Paris, and myself named as originator, which I feel is true. Art, if Pacific, must have roots either in the Orient or the American Indian as no environment per se gives 'Art'. The language of Art comes from man and migrates as man does.⁴³

Mark Tobey developed profound understanding of the artistic styles he explored. George Tsutakawa, a sculptor, painter and University of Washington art professor, internationally known for his fountain sculptures, commented about Morris Graves' and Mark Tobey's ability to adapt sumi expressions into their work:

They don't rely, mainly, on these sweeping gestures. But they rely on their manipulation of the brush in bringing out certain peculiarity of nature – it doesn't matter whether it's animal, or bird, or plant form, or just a cloud form, or just the atmosphere. They, I think, had the uncanny ability to differentiate between big sweeping lines and delicate expression that the Chinese and Japanese did so well for a thousand years.⁴⁴

Tsutakawa also offers a glimpse into Tobey's involvement with Asian artists and his understanding of technique:

And about that time [early 1950s] we used to have small dinner parties for some of these artists, especially Mark Tobey. And he came to this house, had dinner with us, and usually when we had these evenings, Paul Horiuchi joined us, and John Matsudaira, and then we had some visitors from Japan like Kiyoshi Saito, and some of the printmakers, who happened to be around. And at those sessions, after dinner, I would clear this table here, and then bring in a thick pile of rice paper, mulberry paper, and sumi for everyone. And we all sat and painted. And Tobey did most of these sumi paintings right here on this table. We have quite a collection of those things he did here. And when he got excited he painted people, just abstract, just everything. One after another; he would do maybe twenty or thirty in the evening, during the evening, while we were just sitting and talking. And of course everybody else got drawn in to this state of mind, and we all tried to paint each other or something. Well, I used to sit next to Tobey and watch him and he would, if he liked something, he would sign it and give it to us.⁴⁵

Mark Tobey poured into his paintings microscopic life, birds, animals, human beings and their thoughts, artefacts, art and architecture of religions and cultures, graphics, symbols modern and ancient, and calligraphic writings drawn from every age and culture. His paintbox was universal – the collected symbols of mankind.

⁴³ *Paintings from the Collection of Joyce and Arthur Dahl* 12 .

⁴⁴ Martha Kingsbury, oral history transcript of an interview with George Tsutakawa in Seattle, Washington, 8, 12, 14 & 19 September 1983, from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, 100.

⁴⁵ *ibid* 101.

Seattle Farewell

In 1960 Mark Tobey left Seattle to live in Basel, Switzerland, though he kept his studio in Seattle and visited it during summer months. He left Seattle with some bitterness, and made his feelings known. He was particularly incensed at the young Seattle artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s who tried hard *not* to paint like Mark Tobey – to the point of deprecating Tobey’s achievements and reaching out into the broader areas of pure abstractionism which Tobey considered to be the dehumanization of art. The younger artists tended to do everything possible to avoid the ‘mystical’, or to be associated with the fabled ‘Northwest School’.

Mark Tobey never considered himself an abstract painter. He said, ‘Pure abstraction for me would be a painting where one finds no correspondence to life – an impossibility for me. I have sought a unified world in my work and use a movable vortex to achieve it.’⁴⁶ While viewing an exhibition of contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum, Mark Tobey announced to his companion, ‘Modern art is the graveyard of the centuries.’⁴⁷

Mark Tobey’s work is not about modernism or abstractionism. His work is the unification of form and symbol into a progressive whole. He is a romantic and an idealist, who paints in symbols and metaphors. Each of his paintings is a thoughtful expression of a personal discovery, deeply understood, deeply felt. The clamour and in-your-face confrontation of so much contemporary art, the overt striving for originality to the point of sacrificing beauty and reason, create a graveyard of unpolished ideas.

Tobey’s inspiration for paintings often came from studying crystals, rock formations and patterns in minerals – the minutiae of cosmic order. He often made daily visits to the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle, attracted by certain displays of minerals.⁴⁸

Tobey did, however, paint the noise and excitement of his times. In paintings like *Broadway* (1936), *Forms Follow Man* (1941) and *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* (1942), he was often motivated by, and successfully expressed, elements of concern and dissatisfaction with the tearing down of the old and its replacement with a sub-standard new. This romantic undercurrent in his art led one observer to comment, ‘Mark Tobey often paints what he most professes to dislike.’⁴⁹

Some of his [Tobey’s] most recognizable derivations are from Near Eastern, medieval, and Oriental calligraphy and ornament, and from those primitive styles having graphic signs compatible with twentieth-century form. A list of such instances, some confined to a single work, would include Egyptian pictographs, cuneiform, Coptic and Peruvian textiles, Australian bark painting, Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew script, and Celtic illumination. This list could be augmented with another from contemporary environment of billboards, street signs, scientific symbols, punctuation and other graphic devices, unexpected effects in picture-magazine photographs, the end papers of old books, and an endless inventory of markings, patterns, and structures in nature. More revealing, perhaps, than to ferret out the scattered sources of

⁴⁶ Deloris Tarzan Ament, *Iridescent Light: The Emergence of Northwest Art* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2002) 41.

⁴⁷ Cumming, *Sketchbook* 108.

⁴⁸ Wehr, *The Eighth Lively Art* 43.

⁴⁹ Seitz, citing ‘a friend’ in *Mark Tobey* 15.

Tobey's graphic language is to indicate the ideology that explains its diversity: 'when I was a young man, I never heard of Byzantine art . . . now, above the horizon has come the beauty of Byzantine art – not only that, but the art the coloured people have, and the art of the Coptics, and all of the Orient and everything that has flooded the world.'⁵⁰

In the struggle between the spiritual and the material, the United States, and especially New York, is a major battlefield. Tobey said,

No doubt I did them [his paintings of cities] because I am an American painter. I cannot be indifferent to the swarming crowds, multitudes, neon signs, movie theatres, to the noises that I hate of modern cities . . . Of course when I did *Broadway* I did it because I loved it, because I had experienced it. It was in my bones, but I could paint it best when I was farthest from it.⁵¹

Tobey expressed once that there were three distinct motivations that drove society: romanticism, the return to classical ideals, or conquest by religion.⁵² Within this context Tobey was perhaps a romantic in character. Dahl comments,

In New York, as elsewhere in America, however, Tobey sees the colour, individuality, camaraderie, fantasy, and tradition that pleased him disappearing. Double-decked buses on Fifth Avenue are gone, and fine old buildings are being callously demolished: 'These city planners and these boxes have killed all that. There isn't any roof line any more. The new glass buildings rising overnight from gutted sites are for Tobey not an international style – they are international death.'⁵³

Mark Tobey was acutely aware of the dangers of change undertaken without a spiritual or visionary basis. Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, stated,

Indeed the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is the lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind that people in general do no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence . . . The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes. The spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man's outlook on life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate himself into the higher realms of the spirit . . . The Baha'i Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Seitz, *Mark Tobey* 18.

⁵¹ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 18.

⁵² From notes taken by the author about a talk given by Mark Tobey in spring 1964, at the Fischer Studio Building, 1515 3rd Avenue, Seattle.

⁵³ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 18.

⁵⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1972) 84.



The Void Devouring the Gadget Era (1942). Mark Tobey painted this the same year he painted Broadway Boogie. Filled with action and mystery, the eye actively seeks structure and coherency in the chaos quickly overtaking every shape and design. There's not much time left in this painting . . . it's a snapshot moments before the end.

Tobey painted paradoxes. He was a futurist who looked favourably toward, and anticipated, the eventual spiritualization of humanity. At the same time he lamented the tragic disregard sometimes held toward the wonders of the past – an old coat on a shivering man in a doorway, a challenging roof-line in an old city, lichen and stain discolouring a cathedral, worn stepping-stones.

The void in this painting actively blurring and refurbishing intricate and prized gadgets may be benign, as opposed to a void that obliterates and renders all extinct. This void, a spiritual void, is the void of oneness, where the spirit is freed from materialism and embraces the inevitability of its divine nature. The gadgetry and paraphernalia presently occupying humanity's attention will soon lose its glamour and be devoured by a new age.

Note the cuneiform designs and the intricate, puzzling shapes that easily represent the curious workings of larger machinery. The gadgets of this era dance. They are attractive and interesting. One would like to reach into the picture and pick one out. And the void isn't solid darkness or nothingness. It is a variable hued curtain, or veil of mysterious colour that transforms rather than obscures.

Seattle held other disappointments for Mark Tobey. By 1960 most of his friends had left the city, or had died. By the mid-1960s the Seattle galleries were disinclined to champion the ‘Northwest School’ artists of the 1930s and 1940s. And the city itself did not afford Tobey the respect his international reputation deserved.

One instance is the magnificent mural Tobey painted for the Seattle Opera House. Titled *Journey of the Opera Star*, it is the largest painting he ever did, at 12 feet by 7 feet. The mural was commissioned by John and Anne Hauberg. The Haubergs helped support Mark Tobey for many years. Anne Gould Hauberg’s father, Charles F. Gould, was a prominent Seattle architect. One of his achievements was designing the outstanding art-deco-style Seattle Art Museum in Volunteer Park. Anne is one of the founders of the Pilchuck Glass School. She was the only one of Mark Tobey’s art students to become a Baha’i and continues to hold Baha’i meetings in her home in Seattle.

Tobey was distressed that his mural was placed high above the main doors in the entryway to the opera house. This may seem petty, but the mural is an intricate weave of logos, glyphs, graphics, and symbols – impossible to view and appreciate from the distance and location from which one was forced to view it. The painting shouts with an intense voice, as though it has something to sing. There is movement in the spiral and vortex of its imagery. To look at the mural, one has to crane the neck upwards while standing in front of the main doors as people stream through the open doors.

At this point in his career Mark Tobey had achieved immense artistic stature. William Seitz, of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, writes,

After his retrospective exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1961 [at the Louvre Museum, Paris] an English critic wrote that ‘Tobey is considered by the prominent painters of the School of Paris, as well as by established European art dealers, to be the foremost living American artist.’ A critic of France – that country which in the past has occasionally been less than hospitable to the art of outsiders – wrote that ‘Tobey is perhaps the most important painter of our epoch.’⁵⁵

Otto Seligman, Tobey’s long-time friend and art dealer in Seattle, commented, ‘Mark called me from Paris – collect, of course – during his exhibition at the Louvre Museum. He said, “Otto, add a zero at the end of the price to each one of my paintings.” So I did. That’s how well his career has taken off. Europeans really appreciate Tobey’s paintings.’⁵⁶

Mark Tobey’s closeness to the Seattle Baha’is, however, only grew. He was always welcome at Baha’i functions and enjoyed seeing old friends and making new friends. He spoke often at the Baha’i Centre on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Union Street, in the Eagles Auditorium. Often when he was the honoured speaker for the Baha’i Faith, people from the University of Washington attended, as well as former students and old friends. Tobey said, ‘Baha’i crowds are the only crowds I can bear.’⁵⁷

Tobey believed there would never be a ‘Baha’i’ art, but rather an evolution towards, and acceptance of, all art and a universality of expression.

⁵⁵ Seitz, *Mark Tobey* 7.

⁵⁶ From notes taken in an interview with Otto Seligman at his gallery in the Wilsonian Hotel on University Way in November 1962.

⁵⁷ *Paintings from the Collection of Joyce and Arthur Dahl* 15.

Of course we talk about international styles today, but I think later on we'll talk about universal styles . . . the future of the world must be this realization of its oneness, which is the basic teaching as I understand it in the Baha'i Faith, and from that oneness will naturally develop a new spirit in art, because that's what it is. It's a spirit and it's not new words and it's not new ideas only. It's a different spirit. And that spirit of oneness will be reflected through painting.⁵⁸

Mark Tobey always insisted that he was not a 'Baha'i artist,' but an artist who was also a Baha'i. He let the Baha'is in Seattle know they should never introduce him as a 'Baha'i artist', but that he should be introduced as a Baha'i or as an artist who was a Baha'i.⁵⁹ Tobey wrote, 'You know the Guardian freed art before his death,' and he cited Shoghi Effendi's words: 'There is no official Baha'i Art, as this is not a new religion but religion renewed.'⁶⁰

The art of Mark Tobey paves the way for rich artistic themes expressing an abundance of spirit. More than an artist – teacher, friend, and sage – he affected everyone he met. He enjoyed people and people liked him. An art school did blossom around him – the 'Northwest School' in the Pacific Northwest. His work – and his thought – had a significant influence upon the artists of that short-lived group.

To the Baha'is, however, he was Mark – a member of the Seattle assembly for a time, a committee member, a helper at the Baha'i Nineteen Day Feasts, teacher of Baha'i adult classes and public speaker. He opened his home for discussions about art and religion and played the piano at Baha'i gatherings. His life of creativity and service reflected the two powers in his life, art and Baha'i.

⁵⁸ Dahl, *Art and Belief* 15.

⁵⁹ From notes taken in an interview with Florence Winship, August 1972.

⁶⁰ *Paintings from the Collection of Joyce and Arthur Dahl* 15.