National College of Art and Design
Fine Art-Painting

THE ORIENTAL INFLUENCE IN THE WORK OF MARK TOBEY

by

Julie Marie McDonnell

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies

in Candidacy for the Degree of Fine Art.

1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to the following people for their guidance and support in the writing of this thesis.

- Niamh O'Sullivan, Lecturer in History of Art and Design, National College of Art and Design.

- Mrs Gemma Bradley, Assistant Librarian, National College of Art and Design.

CONTENTS

Plate 1: Mark Tobey, Paris, 1925

LIST OF PLATES

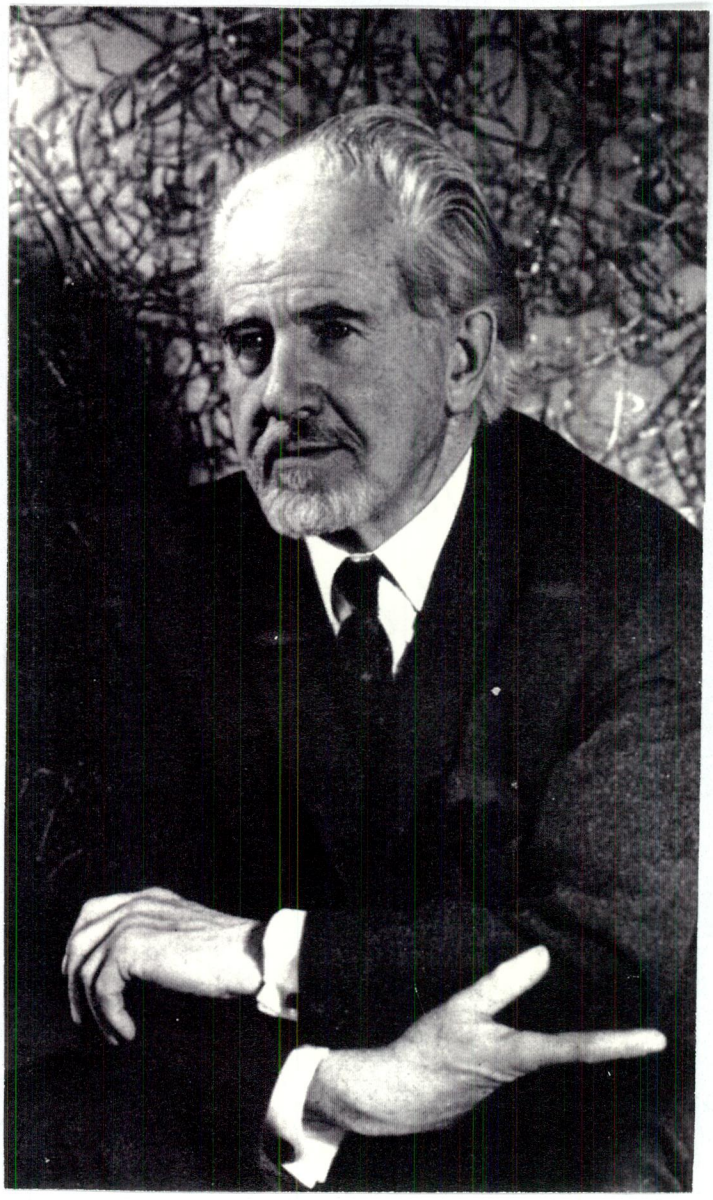

Plate 2: Mark Tobey, in his Seattle Studio, 1962

INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns itself with the influence of the Orient on the work of the American abstract expressionist, Mark Tobey. It aims to explore certain aspects of the Orient that Tobey took as his own. Also, it will examine the theory that, while he learned a valuable amount from his experience of the Orient, it confirmed for him a way of seeing that already came so naturally to him. Overall, this thesis will disclose that an appreciation of Oriental processes is an important influence for the Western artist.

In the first chapter I have isolated crucial stages in the formation of Tobey's style. These begin with Tobey's childhood and end in 1935, with the event that separates his years of preparation from his years of fulfilment, or what is also known as his mature period. These stages in the formation of his style will indicate the range of experience he had. Since "authentic personal experience is both aim and method of Zen" according to Frederick Frank (Frank, The Zen of Seeing, 1973, p.13) this chapter will reveal that Tobey was always pushing for new experiences seeking out new horizons, thus revealing that he, to a certain extent, had a way of living that was parallel to the teachings of Zen.

Chapter two is an exploration into Tobey's way of seeing, his "Zen of Seeing", and how it fed into his work. It is an exploration into his awareness of nature and of the characteristics of man. Tobey had an ability to see nature in everything, especially in the city.

Chapter three will trace the development of Tobey's calligraphic style and how it allowed him to express the frenetic energy of the city. Tracing his calligraphic style will automatically run parallel with the development of his city paintings.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FORMATION OF TOBEY'S STYLE

Mark Tobey was born on the 11 December 1890 in Centerville Wisconsin. He died in 1976. He was the youngest of four children by George Baker Tobey, a carpenter, house builder and farmer, and Emma Jane (Cleveland) Tobey. In 1893 they moved to Jacksonville, Tennessee but found the educational facilities inadequate there, so a year later they moved to Trampealeau, Wisconsin on the banks of the Mississippi. During his childhood, Tobey obviously encountered and lived with nature. It would become the essence of his work in later life. As William C. Seitz wrote, "the impressions that guide Tobey's brush today may have confronted him, his senses ten, twenty, or sixty years before." (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.42) Mark Tobey in his own words said, "my whole experience until I was sixteen was just purely nature. Not the mind at all, just nature". (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.43). Tobey could recall many images of nature from childhood, of "the leaves being raked under the great elms darkening in the evening light", "the dead sparrows", that only he, "among the students cared to preserve and stuff." "the image of the train on the Minnesota side of the river" crossing his window "like a toy, and hear the sound of its whistle." It was at this early age that Tobey first experienced his oneness with nature and his following feeling "for the sacredness and mystery of life." Tobey's urge to seek out new things, new experiences, to always search out some new untried channel seems to have been there from an early age, his mother called him "the most restless young 'on I ever had." (Fuller, Tobey's 80, 1970, p.24)

Tobey's parents were both creative and encouraged his interest in art from a very early age. They sent him to Saturday classes in watercolours and oils at the Art Institute of Chicago, the only formal training he was to receive. In 1909 when Tobey's family moved to Chicago they were too poor to continue paying for his art lessons at the Institute. Tobey, however, was frustrated by the restrictions of those classes in that there

was no room for creative freedom. Tobey wrote in 1951 of art teaching "the walls are hung with painted corpses ..... why don't art schools have classes on how to remain aware?" (Bowen, Tobey's 80, 1970, p.34). He also wrote in an essay on art and community.

> From my own experience, I have found far too many who have attended art schools, and often a four year course, have gone into the world and found themselves forced into any occupation except the one relating to their extensive training. Something must be sadly lacking when such an approach is so defeating. (Tobey, Art and Community, Art and Belief, 1984, p.41).

At the Institute of Chicago, however, there was one professor who responded to Tobey's way of using the brush, this professor called it the American handling bug. Tobey preferred flash brush techniques to the tedium of careful modelling. It is interesting to note this early brush technique as a bases for his 'calligraphic style' or 'white writing'. Tobey's experience of learning Chinese calligraphy you could say, was prepared by his early infection of the handling bug.

From 1909 to 1911, Tobey frequently changed jobs. He worked as a blueprint boy in a steelmill where he studied mechanical drawing and copied magazine covers. He also worked as an errand boy for a fashion studio. It was discovered that he had a talent for drawing there and he was given the task of drawing the faces for catalogue illustrations. During his time at the studio he studied the work of famous illustrators and portrait painters, and discovered the great masters.

By 1911 he had settled in Greenwich Village, New York, where he was determined to become successful as a fashion illustrator. For the next six years he worked both in Chicago and New york with McCall's Magazine. During this period Tobey continued to draw portraits in charcoal of many famous people which were exhibited in a modern

gallery run by Marie Sterner at M. Knoedler and Co. Arthur L Dahl wrote this of Tobey's introduction to Marie Sterner. "Mrs. Sterner was to change the course of his life." (Dahl, Art and Belief, 1984, p.33). This of course was the beginning of his introduction to the Bahá'í World Faith.

Marie Sterner introduced Tobey to a portrait painter named, Juliet Thompson, Tobey had agreed to pose for her. He discovered that she was a follower of the World Bahá'í Faith and became interested in the religious literature in her studio., Tobey was invited to visit a Bahá'í in Maine as a result. Seitz wrote of Tobey's initiation to the world Bahá í Faith "Without doubt, this was the crucial spiritual redirection of Tobey's life and of his development as an artist." (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.44) Few modern artists have dealt with the concept of oneness as explicitly as Tobey. It is said that the oneness of mankind is like a pivot around which all the teachings of Bahá' a 'Iláh (the founder of Bahá'í) revolve. Tobey explains that "all humanity whether it be in the East or in the West will embrace as long-lost lovers." (Tobey, Art and Belief, 1984, p.45) Tobey's involvement with the Bahá'í Faith obviously brought about an awareness of many cultures and religions, in particular that of the Orient and Zen, which he later visited and studied. Added to Tobey's knowledge of Oriental art and Zen were Bahá'í views on unity, humanity, and 'progressive revelation.' These views operate in every development of Tobey's painting after 1920. The world Bahá'í Faith supports the truth of all religions and some of Tobey's paintings interpret Christian themes such as The Last Supper, Homage to the Virgin, The Deposition, (Plate 3) and The Flight in Egypt.

In the development of Tobey's style were two more discoveries, his urge to destroy form and his personal discovery of Cubism Tobey responded strongly against a traditional sense of space and order. He felt that forms "should be freer and not so separated from the space around them." (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.45) He was not quite sure how this could be achieved. Tobey recalls:

Plate 3: The Deposition, 1949

> I really wanted to smash form, to melt it in a more moving way and dynamic way .... I wanted to smash the image that was in space and I wanted to give it the light that was in the form in space a release. (Tobey, [Reprod. and texts by the artist], 1971)

Tobey's ability to liberate and activate form was not revealed in his painting until 1935 with his discovery of his "calligraphic impulse" as Tobey called it. This will be discussed in greater depth in chapter three.

Tobey arrived in Seattle from New York in 1922, and began teaching a class of four pupils at a progressive school of the Arts directed by Miss Neillie Cornish. Tobey's own development was closely linked with his teaching. While teaching he came to conclusions about his own work, but he felt he needed to back these conclusions. This need brought him to analyse the work of many artists, among them Cézanne, Brague, and Picasso. Tobey, at this stage, had not a full understanding of Cubism, though he was aware of it. The result of this research was what Tobey called his "personal discovery of Cubism." It was one night at the Cornish School that this discovery took place. Tobey pictured himself, in his mind, working in a small room, centrally lit up. Within this room a portrait on an easel before him formed a second smaller room or compartment of space. He then imagined a fly moving idly around him and the objects in the room, able to move up or down, and in any other direction, to land on the artists back, head or hand, on the ceiling, wall or floor, and then to take off in another direction. As the path of movement crossed and recrossed around the central point, a complex of line was formed, and by its many crossings imaginary planes and shapes were generated. Although related to the objects in the room, this secondary moulding of form was independent of them and was entirely the product of movement. With this "personal discovery of Cubism", Tobey conceived precisely, the "structural animation of space" that is found in many of his mature paintings. It was after 1935 that this discovery, like his urge to destroy form, was realized successfully. It was again, his use of the "calligraphic impulse" or "white writing", that helped him to achieve it.

Mark Tobey's next discovery was the freely moving brush. In 1923 in Seattle, Tobey began to learn the technique and philosophy of Chinese Calligraphy from Teng Keui, who was a young Chinese artist studying at the University of Washington. He wrote:

> I have just had my first lesson in Chinese brush from my friend Teng Keui. The tree is no more a solid in the earth, breaking into lesser solids bathed in Chiaroscuro. There is pleasure and release. Each movement, like tracks in the snow, is recorded and often loved for itself. The great dragon is breathing sky, thunder and shadow; wisdom and spirit vitalised. (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.47)

What Tobey learned but didn't apply until later was the difference between volume and the living line, a means of opening solid form, giving a clear and definite feel to empty space.

Tobey also began collecting the art of the Northwest and the Alaskan Indians. He felt strongly about the idea that the west coast should look for "inspiration in its artistic expression" towards the Orient. He felt that the West was missing out on alot of opportunities. Of course this awareness directed him towards his visit to the Orient later on. He was still experimenting with many different forms of work — portraits, still life, sculptures in clay, caricatures and landscapes. His exhibitions would contain all of these at once.

In 1930 Tobey was offered a six month position in Dartington Hall by Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Elmhurst. He was appointed head of the painting department. Dartington Hall was some two hundred miles from London in Devonshire, in the South West of England. During his time there he became friendly with many artists, in particular with the potter, Bernard Leach. Leach's friendship with Tobey led to his conversion to the World Bahá'í Faith. It was with Leach that Tobey made his trip to the Orient in 1935 funded by the Elmhursts. This was a crucial milestone for Tobey. After a week in Hong-

Kong Leach and Tobey separated. Tobey stopped off in Shanghai to spend sometime with his old friend Teng Keui. There he familiarized himself with the native foods, with the theatres and concerts, he studied the painting and sculpture of the city and met many artists and musicians. Later on he travelled to Japan and spent a month in a Zen Monastery in Kyoto, studying calligraphy, painting, writing poetry and meditating. This experience, his trip to the Orient, seemed to bring together and confirm all the ideas and experiences he had accumulated over the years.

When Tobey arrived back to Dartington Hall he had not yet applied his training in brush and calligraphy. But one evening in the autumn of 1935 he began improvising a little and something surprising occurred to him. His little painting contained a mesh of whitish lines on a brown background, with a scattering of small forms in blue and other colours showing through the network. It looked anything but Oriental and Tobey came to realize that this little painting was of Broadway and not the Orient. He realized that it was Broadway, with all the people caught in the lights. Even though this painting did not represent the Orient, Tobey came to the realization that the calligraphic impulse he had received in China enabled him to convey, without being bound by forms, the motion of people and the cars and the whole vitality of the scene. This painting was later to be titled Broadway Norm (Plate 4). From then on his paintings contained the subject of the city, of Broadway and New York. What Tobey had managed to do was unite east and west. As Seitz wrote; "the Eastern dragon had been harnessed to Western dynamism." (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.51).

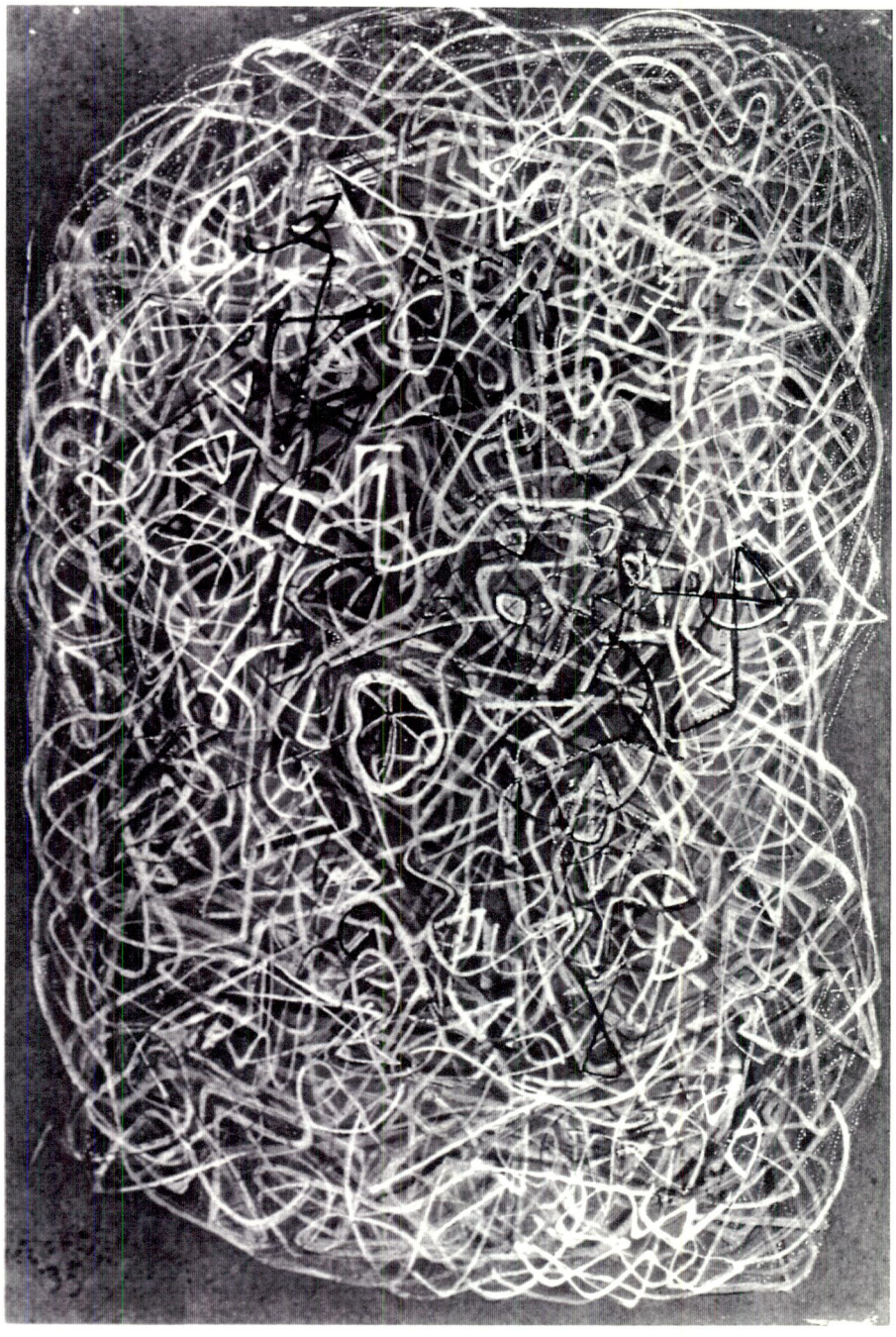

Plate 4: Broadway Norm, 1935

CHAPTER TWO: TOBEY'S WAY OF SEEING

Any writing on Zen starts out at a disadvantage as it cannot be described in words; it is an experience more basic than the level of conceptual thinking.

> It has to do with our innermost life, what the Zen masters call "our original face, before our parents were born" which is gone as soon as we analyse it. Zen is not something we can learn, or even become, because we are already it, we can only be it (Blackstone and Josipovic, Zen for Beginners, 1986, p.10).

By reading books written by people with experience in the practice of Zen I have been confirmed in my way of seeing. I believe that Tobey's experience of the Orient, confirmed for him certain aspects of his way of seeing. I am particularly interested in Tobey's awareness of nature; he could see nature in everything, from the cosmos to the microcosm. He valued new possibilities and new experiences believing that there is a fusion between internal and external experiences, that we never just experience from within, but that we absorb experiences from outside us also. Tobey wrote:

> To be aware of inner space as he is of outer space. If he ventures in one and neglects the other, man falls off his horse and the equilibrium is broken (Tobey [reproduced texts by the artist], Introd. Rossell, 1971).

When we look at Tobey's paintings we realize that our gaze never falls on something specific it continuously moves and negotiates the painting, drawing us further into the complexity of it. Take for example Partitions of the City (1945) (Plate 5), there is no focal point, instead our eyes are carried around the painting, and at the same time we tend to look deeper into the space created in the painting resolving the shapes and forms. According to Gottfried Boehm, Tobey's paintings;

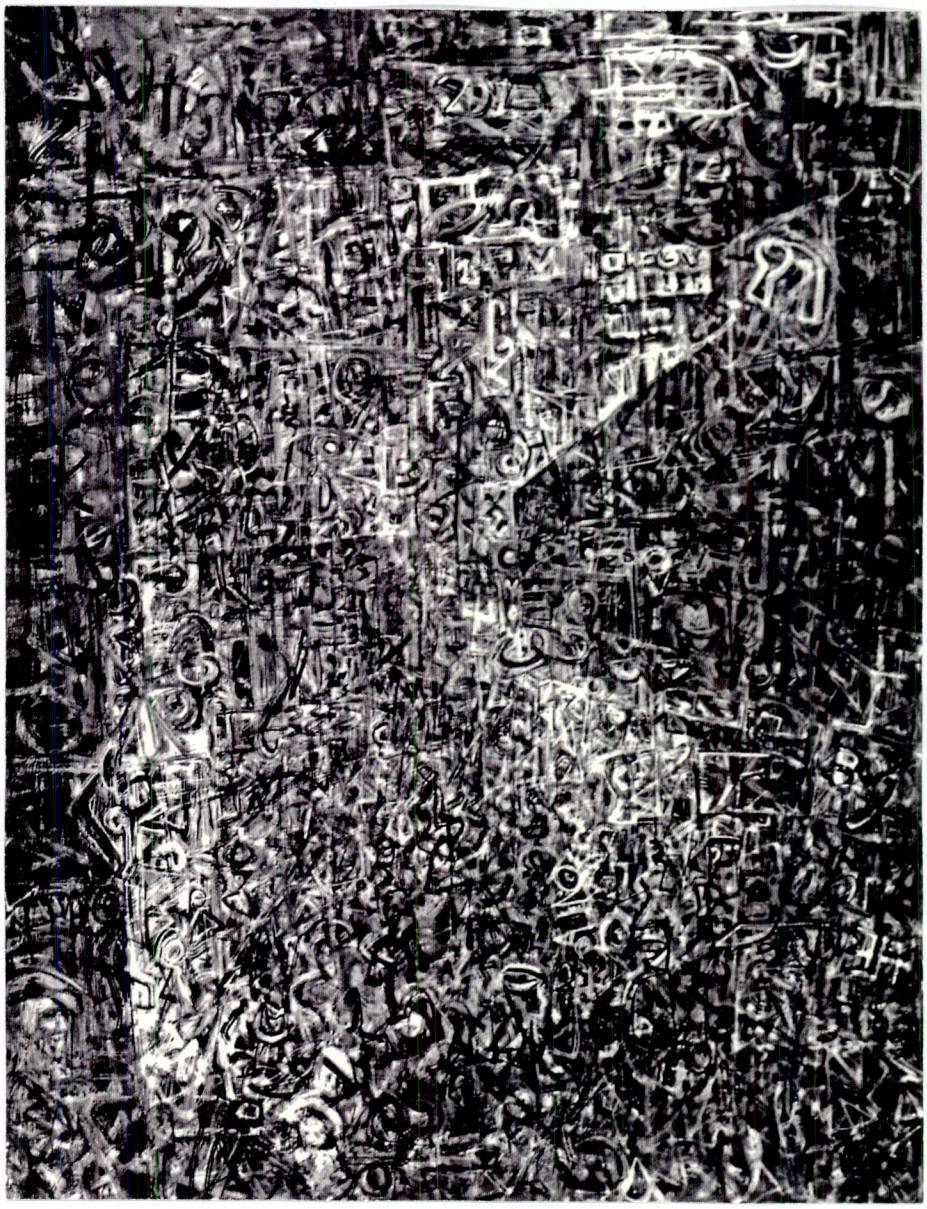

Plate 5: Partitions of the City, 1945

> address the inner as well as the external eye ..... as we look we are carried further into the complex reality of totality. Inner perception belongs to this reality as much as do external qualities ..... In Tobey's paintings internal and external experiences are fused. The artist presumably heightened his awareness of this in his encounters with the mediative cultures of the Orient. (Boehm, A Centennial Exhibition, 1990, p.28).

Siegfried Wichmann believed that it is an indisputable fact that Tobey's work found a way, in and through the East, to express what cannot be expressed, that his white writing paintings are permeated with the spirit of Zen. (Wichmann, Japonisme, 1981, p.406). Like with the calligraphy of the Zen masters, Tobey creates a balance between expressing his innerself while taking from the outer.

> The cult of space can become as doll as that of the object. The dimension that counts for the creative person is the space he creates within himself. This innerspace is closer to the infinite than the other, and it is the privilege of the balanced mind — and the search for the equilibrium is essential. (Galerie Beyeler, Mark Tobey, 1990, p.52).

Zazen or meditation is an integral part of preparation of the Zen experience; meditation is a dissolving of the dividing line between the external and the internal. It is important to talk about the meditative vision in connection with Tobey, in his vision of the world and his awareness of nature and also in the pictorial development of his painting. Because, as I stated earlier, Tobey's paintings draw us into the complexity of them (we negotiate the painting) the paintings are without beginning and end. A fusion is created, of the reality in front of us with a reality inside ourselves.

Although Tobey had this in common with some painters of the New York school, he was often ignored by the American Abstract Expressionist movement in New York partly because of his geographical position, but also because of the scale of work, (he worked on a very small scale, unlike the New York School painters who worked extremely large.)

Tobey's belief, however, that internal and external experiences should fuse was shared by Hofmann and Motherwell. When asked by the painter Ad Reinhardt (who, in many arguments supported the purist view that a work of art has nothing to do with the world outside it) whether he considered the "inter-relationship of the elements" in a work of art to be self-contained, Hofmann answered: "the means are important, but what we are concerned with is an expression of a relationship to the world. Truth and validity cannot be determined by the shape of the elements of the picture." (Seitz, Abstract Expressionism, 1983, p.129) It is the opposite view of the abstract expressionist, to say that the external world is not, cannot be, and should not be the concern of the painter. Motherwell said: "It would be difficult to formulate a position in which there are no external relations I cannot imagine any structure being defined as though it only has external meaning" (Seitz, Abstract Expressionism, 1983, p.129) I believe it would be fair to say that, Tobey had a better, and more natural, understanding and awareness of this concept. He never abandoned reference to the outside world, but this awareness was heightened by his experience of the Orient.

> Japanese vision which takes into account such small forms of life — gives them the dignity of Kakemona ..... It is this awareness to nature and everything she manifests which seems to characterize the Japanese spirit. An awareness of the smallest detail of her vastness as though the whole were contained therein and that from a leaf, an insect, a universe appeared. (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.25)

Because Tobey never abandoned reference to the outside world, he allowed himself to see nature in almost everything. The sources of his inspiration came from his native middle west to those of microscopic worlds. As is obvious from the quote above, Japanese vision confirmed this for him.

Tobey's paintings invites the viewer into the experience, of the artist creating the work, and the experience that gives rise to the work. Tobey recognised the effort he expected

on the part of the viewer, in his recognition of this he described his own experience in learning how to approach Oriental art:

> When I resided at a Zen Monastery I was given a sumi-ink painting of a large free brush circle to mediate upon. What was it? Day after day I would look at it. Was it selflessness? Was it the universe — where I could loose my identity? Perhaps I didn't see its aesthetic and missed the fine points of the brush which to a trained Oriental eye would reveal much about the character of the man who painted it. But after my visit I found I had new eyes and that which seemed of little importance became magnified in words and considerations not based on my former vision (Dahl, Art and Belief, 1984, p.36)

Tobey believed that understanding art means exchanging human experiences: "....unless the person is willing to go through some of the actual experiences of the living artist and of those whose paintings are left behind in art museums all over the world as living symbols of their own experience, they remain as persons uninitiated." (Dahl, Art and Belief, 1984, p.36) Authentic personal experience is both aim and method of Zen. The old Chinese used to say that it is better to feel a painting than to look at it. After Tobey's experience with the Sumi-ink painting of the large brush circle he said he arrived at a new vision, that he "had new eyes." He saw an importance in the things that before seemed insignificant. We often do not really see the things around us. The things in our own environment, we know they are there for we have put labels on them, we look at them but we have not really seen what they are in reality. The Zen way of seeing, is forgetting this me, it is to dive into the reality of what confronts me, thus becoming a part of it and participating in it. In order to experience you have to see, and, as Frederick Frank wrote: "when a man no longer experiences, the organs of his inner life wither away." (Frank, The Zen of Seeing, 1973, p.4)

Zagen or sitting in meditation is a way of preparing for the Zen experience, for the ability to really see. But often times it is difficult for a person to sit still for long periods

of time, especially a westerner, for we are so used to being active and running around, we do not feel comfortable sitting still. However, seeing while drawing or "seeing/drawing", as Frederick Frank names it, is another way of preparing for the Zen experience. It can be easier to meditate while focused on an object. This way of meditating, seeing while drawing, is a way of getting into intimate touch with the visible world around us, and through it, with ourselves. This is an exercise that Frank introduced to a class in practicing seeing. In his own words he said:

> Now let your eyes fall on whatever happens to be in front of you. It may be a plant or a bush or a tree, or perhaps just some grass. Close your eyes for the next five minutes .... now open your eyes and focus on whatever you observed before — that plant or leaf or dandelion, look it in the eye, until you feel it looking back at you, feel that you are alone with it on earth! That it is the most important thing in the Universe, that it contains all the riddles of life and death, it does! You are no longer looking, you are seeing .... (Frank, The Zen of Seeing, 1973, p.14)

In the twentieth century, to stop rushing around, to sit quietly on the grass, to switch off the world, to allow yourself to see a blade of grass, a bird flying, a trickle of water, a leaf, is an unforgettable experience. Through drawing or painting you can rediscover many things around you. Each object you draw, or land-scape or city-scape is rediscovered, each time you draw it you discover something new. By drawing or painting the reality of what you see you are drawing the essence of that thing rather than what you think it looks like. The Zen way of seeing is a way of inscape, it establishes an island of silence, of undivided attention and never has it been more important to see in this way. We tend to look at objects too quickly, we recognise what's around us but no longer see. I believe that Mark Tobey had a natural ability to see, and by drawing, what the Chinese called, "the ten thousand things" around him he constantly rediscovered the world. "The eye that sees is the I experiencing itself in what it sees." (Blackstone/Josipovic, Zen for Beginners, 1986, p.40) It sees things just as they

are. nothing is just a symbol of anything but itself.

The kind of nature that fascinated Tobey he could bring home in his pocket; he could find a universe in a single leaf or rock. He had an ability to see nature in everything and because of this he did not find a division between the natural and the urban worlds, but instead a similarity which allowed him to treat the city suggesting a comparison with it and the living organism. In the painting New York (1944) (Plate 6) the brush strokes resemble a mesh of grass — like structures, but the painting vibrates with the frenzy of a city. Seitz wrote: "without the remotest reference to the natural or artificial world, they nevertheless retain their power to express feeling directly." (Seitz, Abstract Expressionism, 1983, p.345)

In Zen, it is said that nature is not all meadows, cows and daisies, it is also streets and buildings, coffee cups and airplanes. A disciple of Zen asked: "is nature present everywhere?" He received this answer: "Yes there is nowhere it is not present" (Frank, The Zen of Seeing, 1973, p.21) It is this nature that Zen points at and aims to confront.

Tobey saw nature in all the corners of the city, in the markets, in Chinatown, in Broadway. He saw how the inhabitants of the cities, hustled and bustled, mingling together, how they got caught in the steams of lights. He saw the mesh of architecture and how the people intertwined among it. He said when he described his crowd paintings (such as Flow of the Night 1943, (Plate 7) and Electric Night, 1944 (Plate 8) "But when the crowds came, there were so many people I began to paint crowds, because they flooded the markets, and they flooded the streets and they worked all night. That's when I made all those crowd pictures, you know" (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.35)

Plate 6: New York, 1944

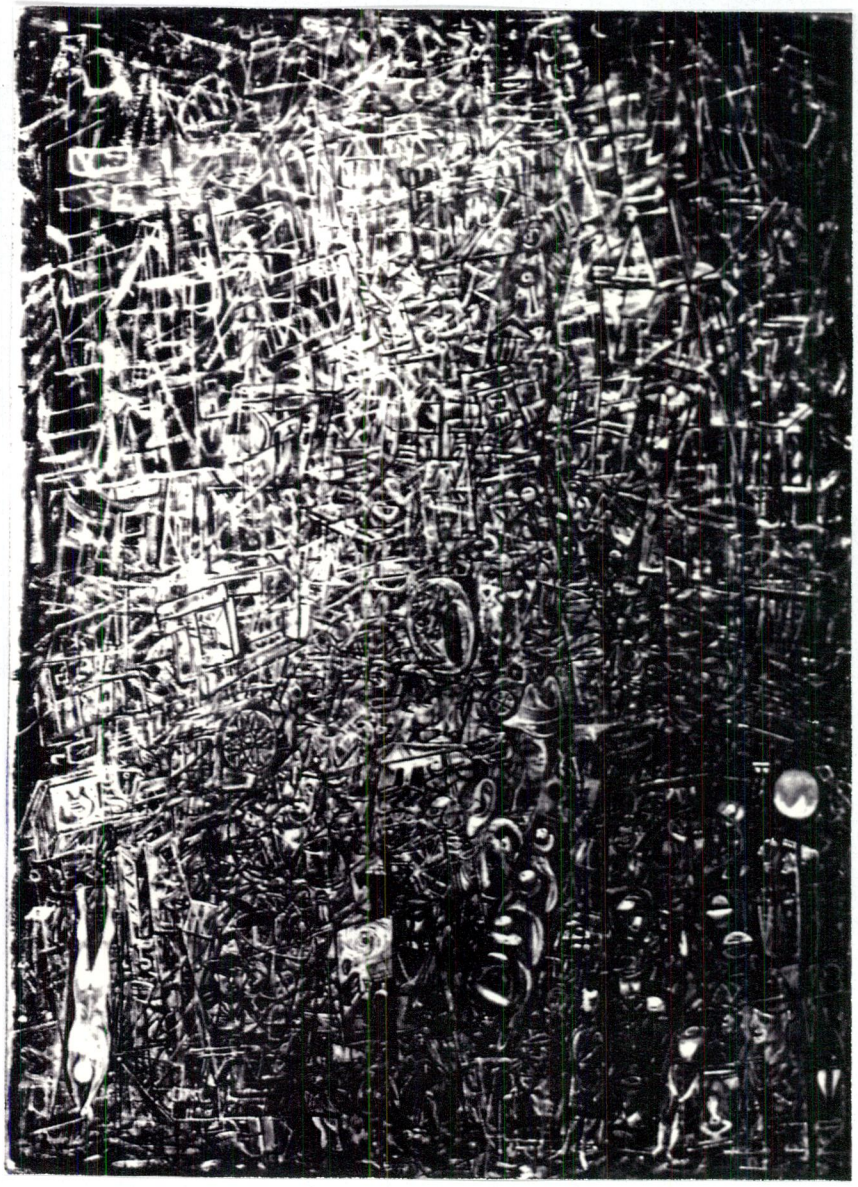

Plate 7: Flow of the Night, 1943

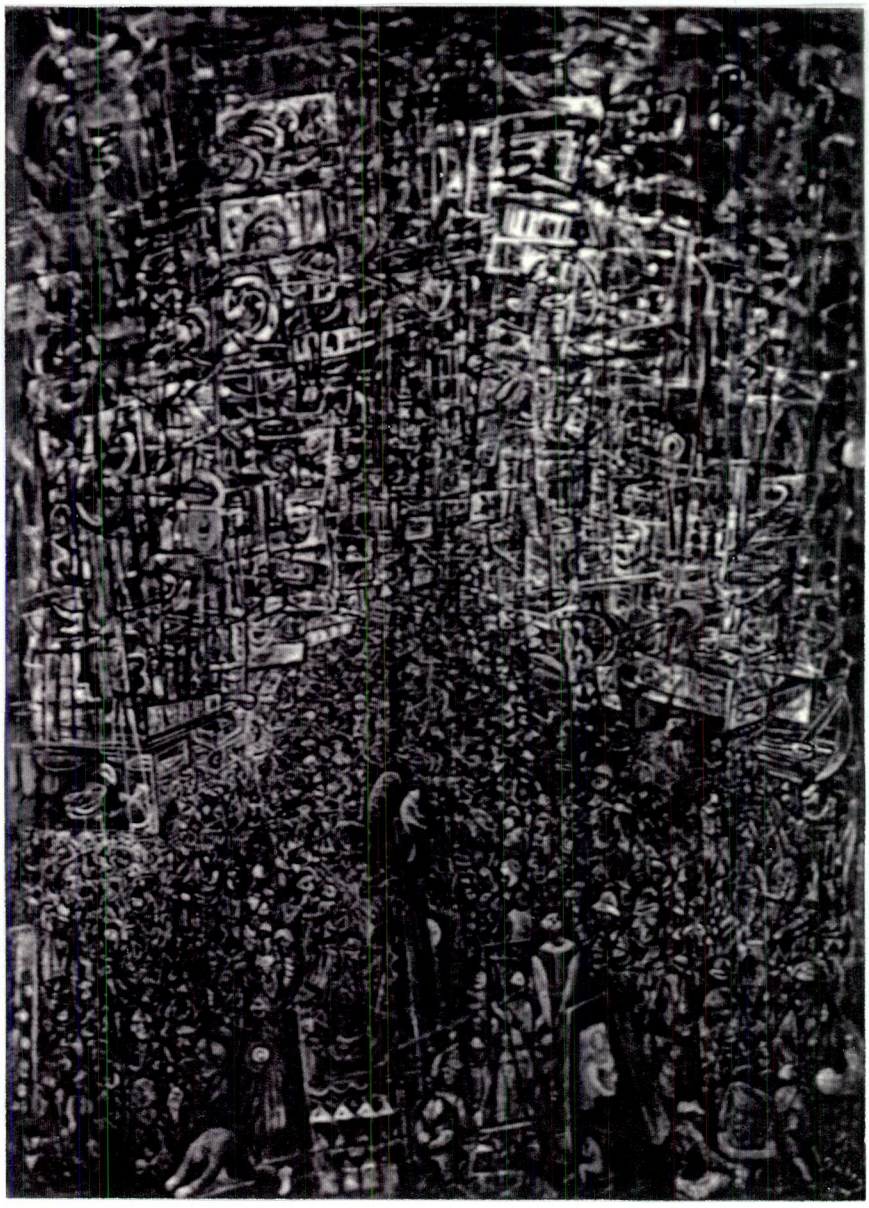

Plate 8: Electric Night, 1949

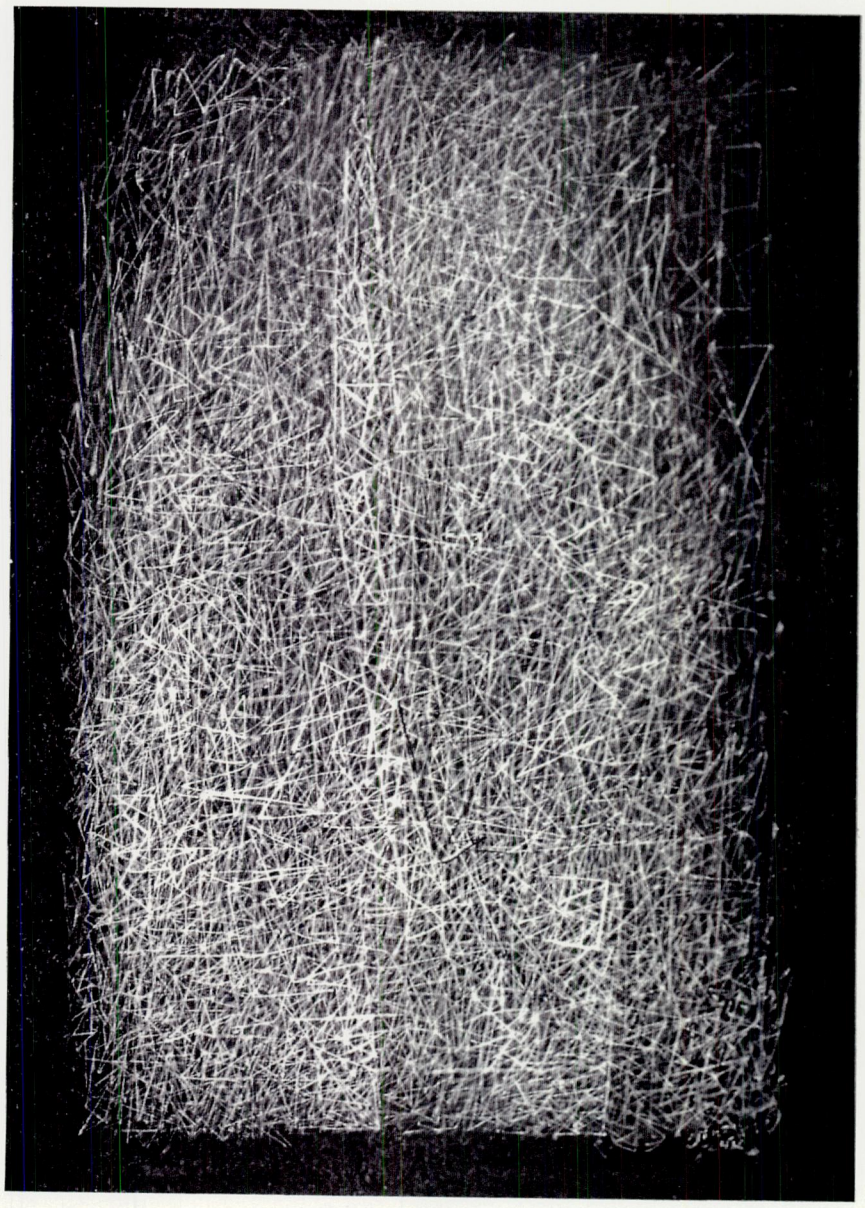

Plate 9: City Radience, 1944

Plate 10: Awakening Night, 1949

Plate 11: Traffic 1, 1954

Tobey saw architecture and buildings as very much alive, in fact the whole of the city was alive. In his paintings such as New York (1944) (Plate 6) and City Radience (1944) (Plate 9) he painted the frenzied energy of the city. In Awakening Night (1949) (Plate 10), he revealed the very essence of the night lights of vehicles and neon lights of buildings vibrantly intermingling, Zig-Zagging around the city. In Traffic 1 (1954) (Plate 11) we can sense the congestion of a busy hour in the city where people, vehicles and buildings are almost compressed together trying to find their own path through the traffic. Tobey observed and painted the structure of the city in Lines of the City (1945) (Plate 12) giving the very essence of variation in size and width of the buildings, looking at them from different angles. Universal City (Plate 13) is alive, in tobey's words, with "Oriental fragments as characters twist and turn drifting into western zones, forever speaking of the unity of man's spirit." (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.60) Battle of the Lights (1956) (Plate 14) is a powerful painting, you can really feel the agitation of the city lights, the lights are dashing and fleeting, crashing and merging together, the calligraphic squiggles resemble people caught up in these lights.

In an interview with William C. Seitz, Tobey recalled his fascination with light and the magnetic attraction it exerts on all living things. in the monastery in Japan, awake in his room at night, the lights burning, he watched the moths striking against the window, "countless in number they seek an entrance to the light." (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.30) Earlier when he lived in Paris from 1925 to 1926 he recalls:

> I used to go and look at light with people going into and going out if it. It made a light focus ..... they wanted light ..... Those foci of light are highly magnetic. Like a bee going in and out of a hive; no matter how far away a flower is and they go there and bring it back ..... people, everything, flowers, trees have to have light; more or less, there are always variations on this — some can get along with very little light; some can live in the depths of the ocean with no light, and then they create a light for themselves. (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.30)

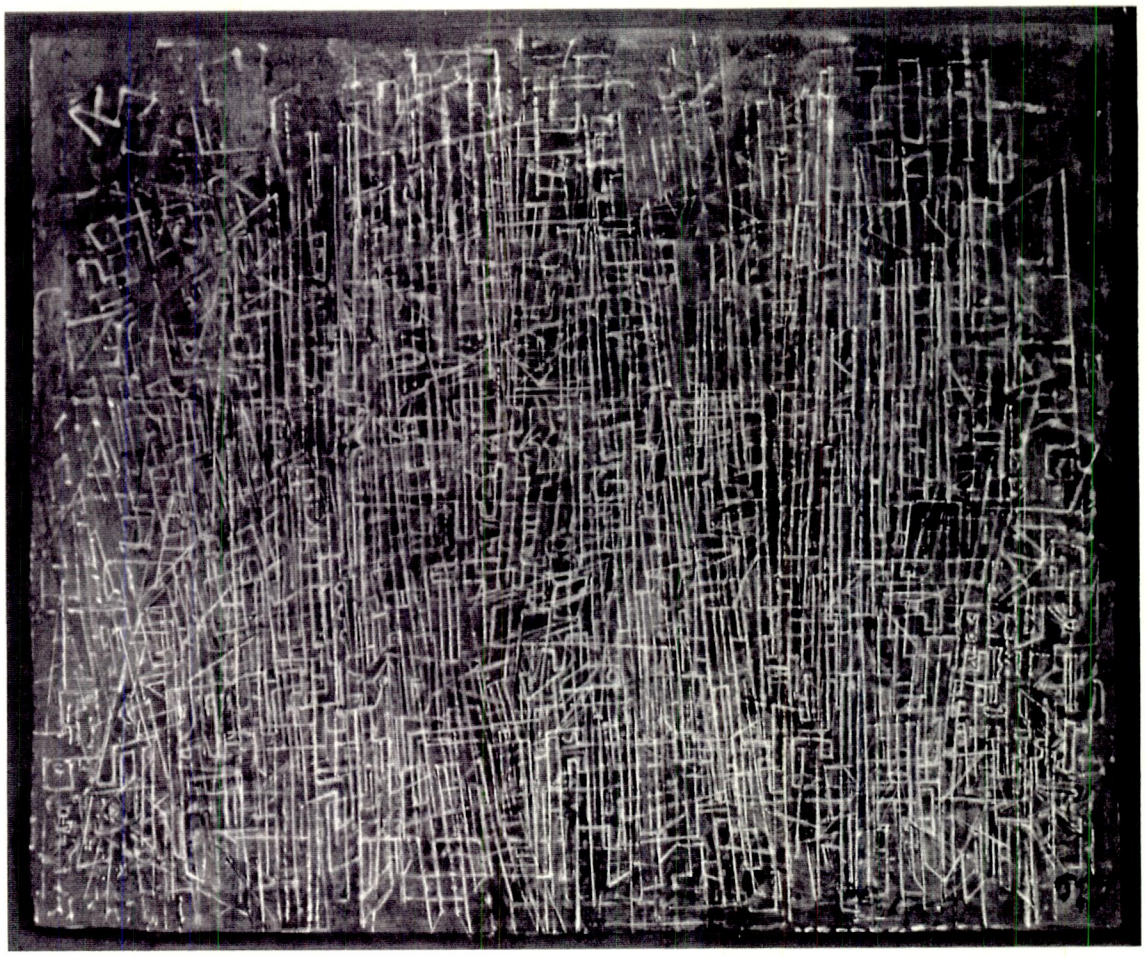

Plate 12: Lines of the City, 1945

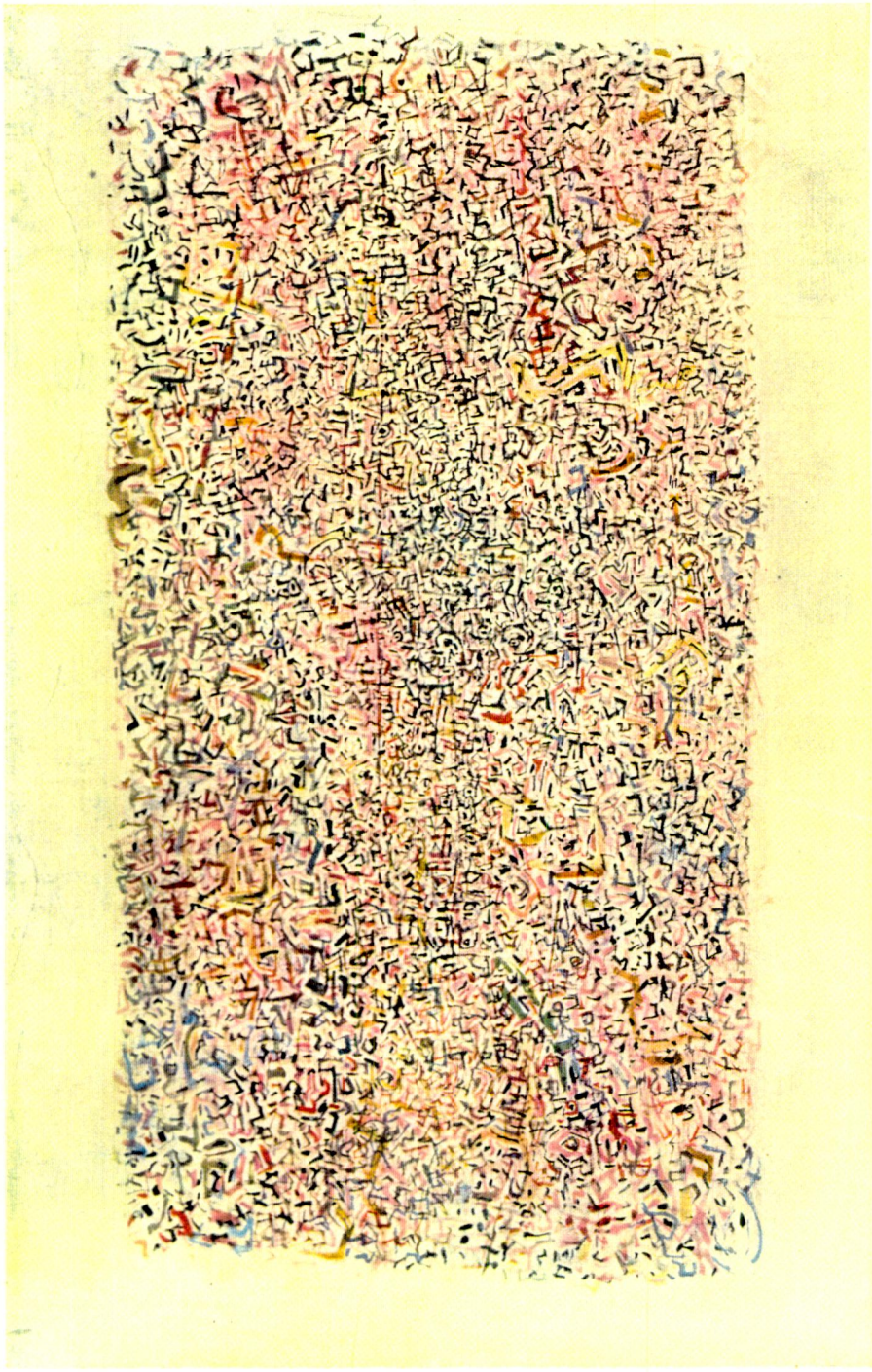

Plate 13: Universal City, 1951

Second to Tobey's fascination with light he had a fascination with man. He had a sharp eye for their mannerisms and characteristics. Tobey's observations of nature, the city man, and his experiences of these, were stored in his visual memory. In later years he drew upon these memories so vividly that they are the very essence of his later paintings, "Draw bamboos for ten years" says a Zen - artist, "Become a bamboo. Then forget all about bamboos when you draw." (Hisamatsu, Zen and the Fine Arts, 1982, p.69) Through the experience of the Orient and Zen Tobey arrived at a method in approaching his painting. He believed in forgetting about what he was painting, and allowing the subconscious to surface. By meditating by relaxing he allowed images, and his experiences of the city surface, for the city was in his bones. This method allowed for spontaneity. Tobey said:

> I never know when I can paint: I just have to arouse myself, get into a state and forget all things, if possible to make a union with what I am doing and the less I think of it — the better the result. There is a famous Zen or Tao verse, in translation thus:
>
> "Behind the technique know
> that there is the spirit (Ri)
> It is dawning now:
> open the screen,
> and "lo", the moonlight is
> shining in.
> (Galerie Beyeler, A Centennial Exhibition, 1990, p.34)

Tobey believed that behind the brush there is the spirit. He tried to approach his painting in the same way as a Zen painter of the Orient, as a man who studies technique for twenty years and throws himself on the mercy of inspiration. Thomas Hoover says that the absolute accuracy of the Zen artists brush-stroke can come only from one whose mind and body are one, that the purpose of the Zen painter is to penetrate beyond the perceptions of a mind that bases things only on reasoning, to show not natures surface but the very essence. (Hoover, Zen Culture, 1977, p.113) The Zen artist paints the enlightenment of a moment, and therefore there is no time to over

Plate 14: Battle of the Lights, 1956

BATTLE OF THE
LIGHTS 1958

exert each stroke of the brush, but instead the technique must flow thoughtlessly, from deep within, capturing"the fleeting images of the inner sense, beyond mind and beyond thought." (Hoover, Zen Culture, 1977, p.114)

It was when Tobey was in Dartington Hall in England, in the countryside, far from any city that he first experienced his subconscious coming to the surface, with the painting Broadway Norm (Plate 4) . Apart from these images of the city, all that he had learned from his friend Teng Keui and from his trip to the Orient, suddenly emerged. This he called his calligraphic impulse. Like the Zen artist, Tobey's lifes experiences and learning of technique spontaneously combined to allow him to paint, not the surface of nature, but its very essence.

Earlier, in San Francisco, on his way back to England, Tobey painted the series of the animal world under moonlight of which Three Birds (Plate 15) and Two Toads in Moonlight (1934) (Plate 16) are typical, Tobey's animals reflect the simplicity, directness and profundity that he had first observed in so many aspects of life in Japan. These works made a great impression on Tobey's fellow artist, Morris Graves. It was not the subject matter but more importantly their directness and simplicity of execution. This he had learned from Zen painting and calligraphy. From these small animals in moonlight paintings one gets a sense of confidence from the artist. The brush strokes are simple but definite, as if he allowed no alteration in line once it had been set down. Like the Zen painter, the ink is absorbed almost immediately into the rice paper which does not allow anytime for alteration. If the attempts no corrections but tears up the work and begins another. The work must flow out of a Zen discipline of no-mind. The artist never pauses to evaluate his work, the ink flows in an unending flurry of strokes - heavy or sparing, light or dark, as required — producing a sense of rhythm, movement and form.

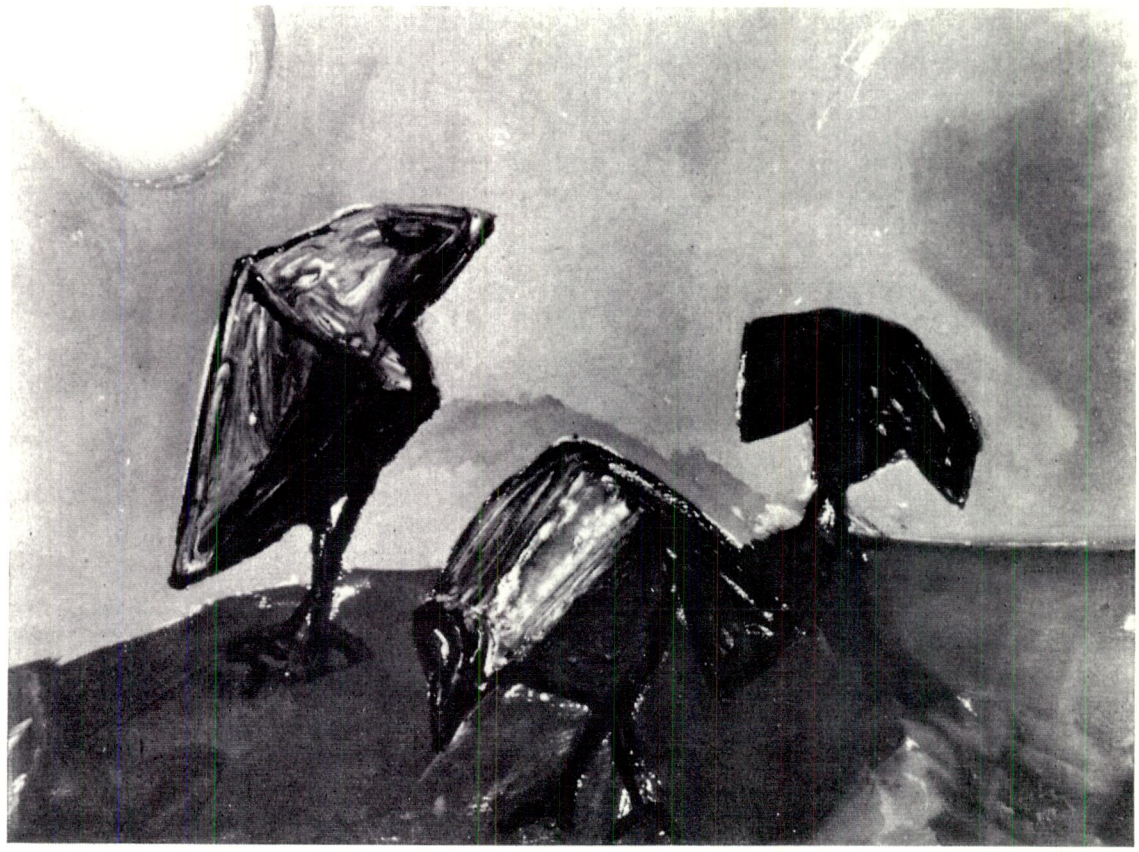

Plate 15: Three Birds, 1934

Plate 16: Two Toads in Moonlight, 1934

It is said that Zen practice is for people who don't mind always being at the beginning, because every moment is new, which means that we are new, because we are not separate from the moment. The Zen masters say that we should experience our lives as if for the first time, without any of our old fears and prejudices. "If we can forget to protect our separate selves and let life in completely, we can have a really good time (Blackstone, Josipovic, Zen for Beginners, 1986 p.17) I believe that Mark Tobey lived his life in this way:

> I have never wished to continue in any particular style. The path has always been a Zig-zag in and out of old cultures, seeking new horizons — meditating and reviewing for a better position to see ..... (Tobey/Galerie Beyeler, A Centennial Exhibition, 1990, p.68)

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOBEY'S CALLIGRAPHIC STYLE

One of the clichés of art criticism asserts that a line, as an abstraction, has no place in nature. However, a glance at Tobey's "delicate threadlike structures" of blades of grass or wheat stalks, rope or wire, will determine its falseness. A single trace of line can serve to represent a wirelike object or a movement through space. In combination with each other simple lines are capable of a great variety of expression defining three-dimensional volumes, masses, and movements; or representing natural or man-made forms.

Tobey is perhaps better known for his city paintings. This phase of city paintings is also known as his mature period. As I explained before, this period was inspired by a combination of his fascination with cities and his discovery of his calligraphic impulse. From start to finish Tobey was a master of the brush. If one were to look at any group of his paintings one would realize that they reveal the range of expression found in qualities of the brush stroke. The expression of the brushstroke is a seemingly traditional technique, but tobey applied this technique, to an undeniably original and new vision. This technique was his calligraphic style which became the central ingredient of his work.

As we know already, Tobey received this technique from the Orient where there are centuries of tradition in brush work, however, he managed, with an old technique, to create an entirely new vision in painting.

Tobey's development of the city theme would reveal his continuing interest in the human figure and the humanist viewpoint of his work, and even though he dissolved the figure later in the fifties in his more abstract style, he never lost this quality. He never stopped drawing figures either, during this period in the fifties and when he was in his seventies, he hired a model to draw from life. It could he said that Tobey's love of the figure could have come to translate the calligraphic style into an expression of the bustle of the city streets. It was in his city paintings that the calligraphic impulse first appeared. Thus, the theme of the city played the key role in the inspiration and development of the calligraphic style. Tobey said it was the perfedt means to "paint the frenetic rhythms of the modern city, something I couldn't even approach with Rennaissance techniques ..... through calligraphic line. I was able to catch the restless pulse of our cities today" (Fuller, Tobey's 80, 1970, p.30)

The development of Tobey's calligraphic style began with his paintings of Broadway. As I previously mentioned, the small painting Broadway Norm was his first breakthrough into the calligraphic style. Even though it was no major masterpiece it did play a major role in the development of tobey's style. Two days after painting Broadway Norm Tobey painted Broadway (1935) (Plate 17). In this painting, his line was inspired by the hustle and bustle of people, of figures, walking down the avenue. There is a rapid movement of the brush in this painting which conveys the frenetic quality of the crowd. As the brushstrokes move backward into the painting, into space, we cannot identify the figures as well but instead identify their path of movement. Eliza E. Rathbone states that "what is distinctive about Tobey's line is its expression its agitation and angularity — characteristics of calligraphy, which Tobey adopted in spirit, but without imitating the appearance of calligraphy" (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.30) It should never be presumed that Tobey tried to imitate calligraphy, but what he did take from the practice of calligraphy was its power of expression.

Plate 17: Broadway, 1935

To consider other American Expressionists, neither Motherwell, Hofmann nor Rothkao could be characterized as calligraphic painters (except for isolated works). Yet, all three use media and tools with expressive sensibility. The weighted surfaces of Gorky's early period, the varied impasto of Hofmann and the fluctuating areas of Rothko are as much involved in the question of brush as are Tobey's calligraphy. However, line cannot be clearly separated from brush in Tobey's paintings whereas, to Hofmann, line is only one of a variety of means. Frequently it is excluded entirely. Unlike Tobey, Hofmann never constructs systematically with a variation on a particular stroke-type. Rotko's line, when used, never defines three-dimensional structures. Deep space is never sought in his paintings. Instead, a sense of lateral activity is intensified.

Tobey's paintings are not made up of flat planes but rather an interweaving of calligraphy which results in a multiple layering of space. Seitz noted of Broadway Boogie (1942) (Plate 18).

> The layering of space in which the nearly monochromatic buildings seem to have disintegrated altogether. One is struck by the tremendous energy this work conveys, its sense of over whelming density of activity, a sensory overload to the eyes and ears. The overall effect is at once exciting and disturbing. More faces and words emerge the more one looks at it; figures with animals heads, birdmen, a boxer, a pig, dancing couples, a disembodied ear, figures in windows (Seitz, Abstract Expressionism, 1983, p.14).

In Flow of the Night (1943) (Plate 7) there is an intermingling of large and small scale, regardless of the spatial position. There is also a combination of interior and exterior views. Sometimes you can see into bedrooms and windows. The use of calligraphic line creates a transparency, allowing a view from one space into another. This creates spatial depth in the painting. elements are juxtaposed against each other, like a lamp post and a nude man standing on his hands. This juxtaposition of elements gives the whole picture a density of activity and suggests that anything and everything goes on in a city

Plate 18: Broadway Boogie, 1942

at night. From Tobey's broadway paintings one gets a sense of layering of time and place. A layering of the simultaneous activities of the city. Flow of the Night is mainly a monochromatic painting with white, beige, gray and black calligraphy layering on top of each other. Electric Night (1944) (Plate 8) is a similar painting but is much more tighter in composition. It is more detailed and dense. The use of calligraphic writing again creates an expression of density and depth.

Tobey never abandoned references to the figure during his mature period, unlike that of some abstract expressionist painting where the figure was to be found outside the painting in an implied dialogue with the viewer. His evocation of the city reflects an enormous range of responses to the subject. He found the human density, and the complexity of life in the city spellbinding. He not only found in the city an extraordinary range of subject matter and mood, but he also captured the spirit of a particular place. Tobey tends to use his calligraphic line to represent the architecture as well as the movement of the figure. The white writing in Broadway Norm (1935) (Plate 4) and Broadway (1935) (Plate 17) appears to represent the activity of people bustling along Broadway and at the same time, "the web in which they are entangled" because of their unity of energies. The energies of the lights and the people are interacting. In his Broadway paintings, Tobey continued to combine the abstract and the figurative as in Partitions of the City (1945) (Plate 5). Using a varied calligraphic brushstroke, faces or parts of faces emerge and also recede back into the painting. The whole structure seems to shift and change. Gradually, even though Tobey's concerns for the figure never changed, the role of the figure diminished in his work. This happened because he felt a need to pursue the abstract potential of his style. Even though it was the crowds that first inspired Tobey's calligraphic abstraction, he realized the full potential of the style that it was necessary to eliminate the figure somewhat. Even though the figure is seemingly not present after this stage it is implied. It is clear from this statement that he was not happy about diminishing the figure. "Yeh I had to

Plate 19: Drift of Summer, 1942

do it. And I had a hard time — out of my love for figures — I had a hard time to not carry that along, because I liked figures." (Rathbone, City Paintings, 1984, p.45) After making this decision, however, he discovered the range of expression in his calligraphic line alone. Tobey's interest in music provided an ingredient which worked alongside his decision to eliminate the figure. He became preoccupied with rhythm which helped his desire to express movement.

> When I play the piano for several hours everything is clarified in my visual imagination afterwards. Everything that exists, every human being is a vibration. (Rathbone, 1984, p.45)

Tobey's preoccupation with rhythm led him to deal with void and space and the movement between them. At this stage he no longer suspended forms in space but instead created space that breathed life and motion. Tobey initially used this technique to represent forms from nature. The painting Drift of Summer (1942) (Plate 19) was made up of a multitude of white lines. Tobey said:

> Since I try to make my paintings organic I feel that there is a relation with nature. In Drift of Summer for instance, I wanted to experience through the medium of paint a feeling of the movement of grass and floating seeds. To achieve the rhythmic impact of such I had to build the body of painting by multitudinous lines
> and:
> ..... I want vibration in it so that's why it takes so long to build this up: because I wanted to have air pockets ..... Before I get to the actual painting I have to build up a mass of line. (Galerie Beyeler, Reprod. and texts by the artist, 1971, p.58)

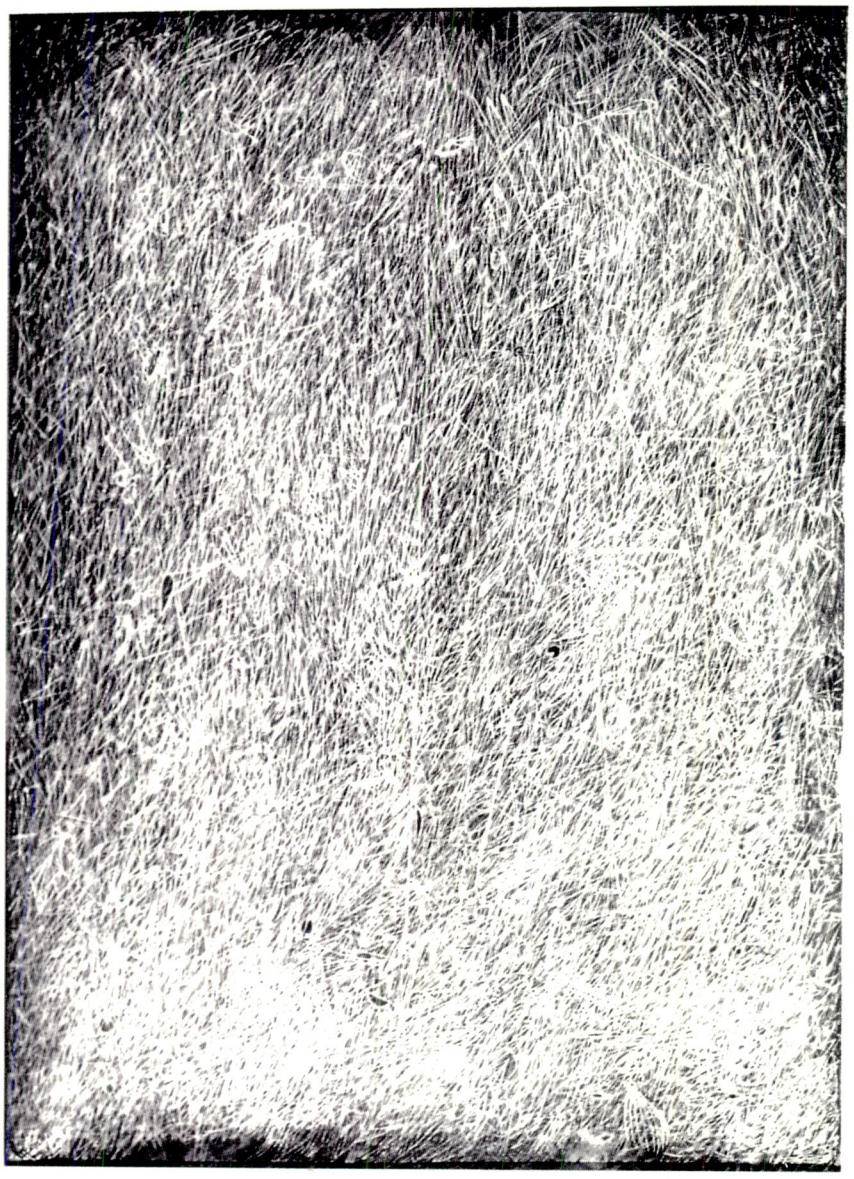

Plate 20: Transition to Forms, 1942

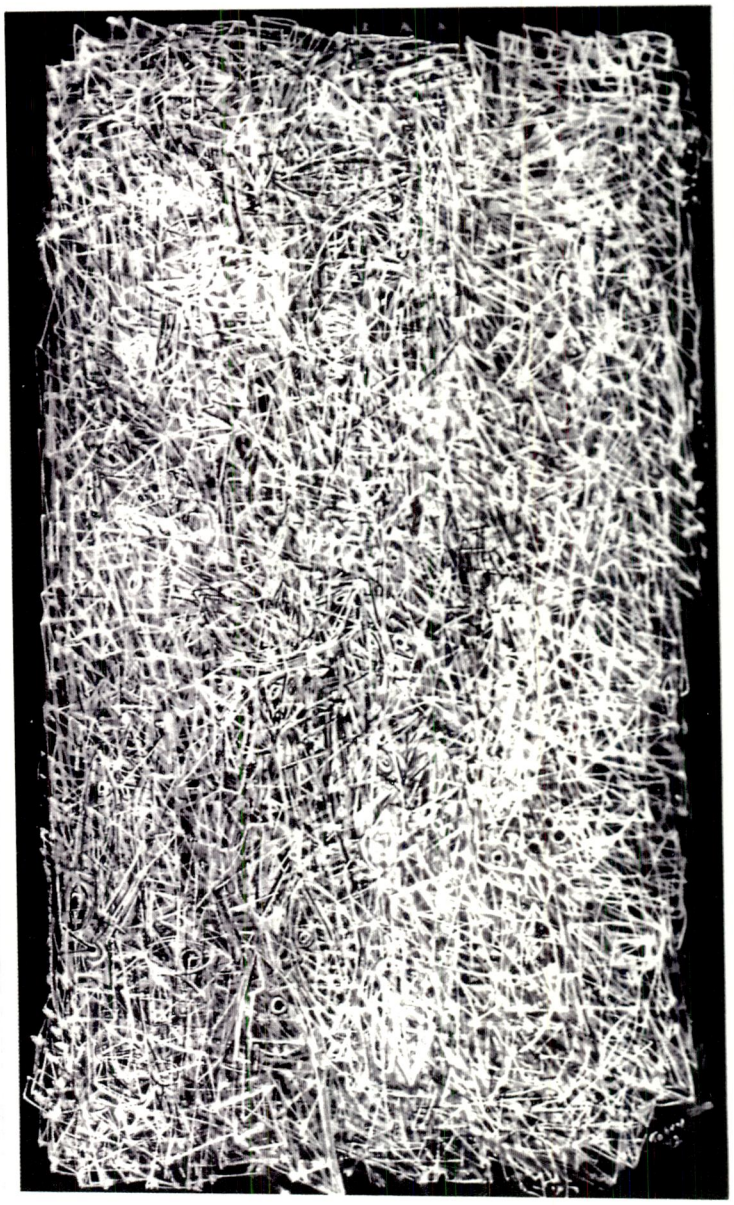

Plate 21: In the Marsh, 1942

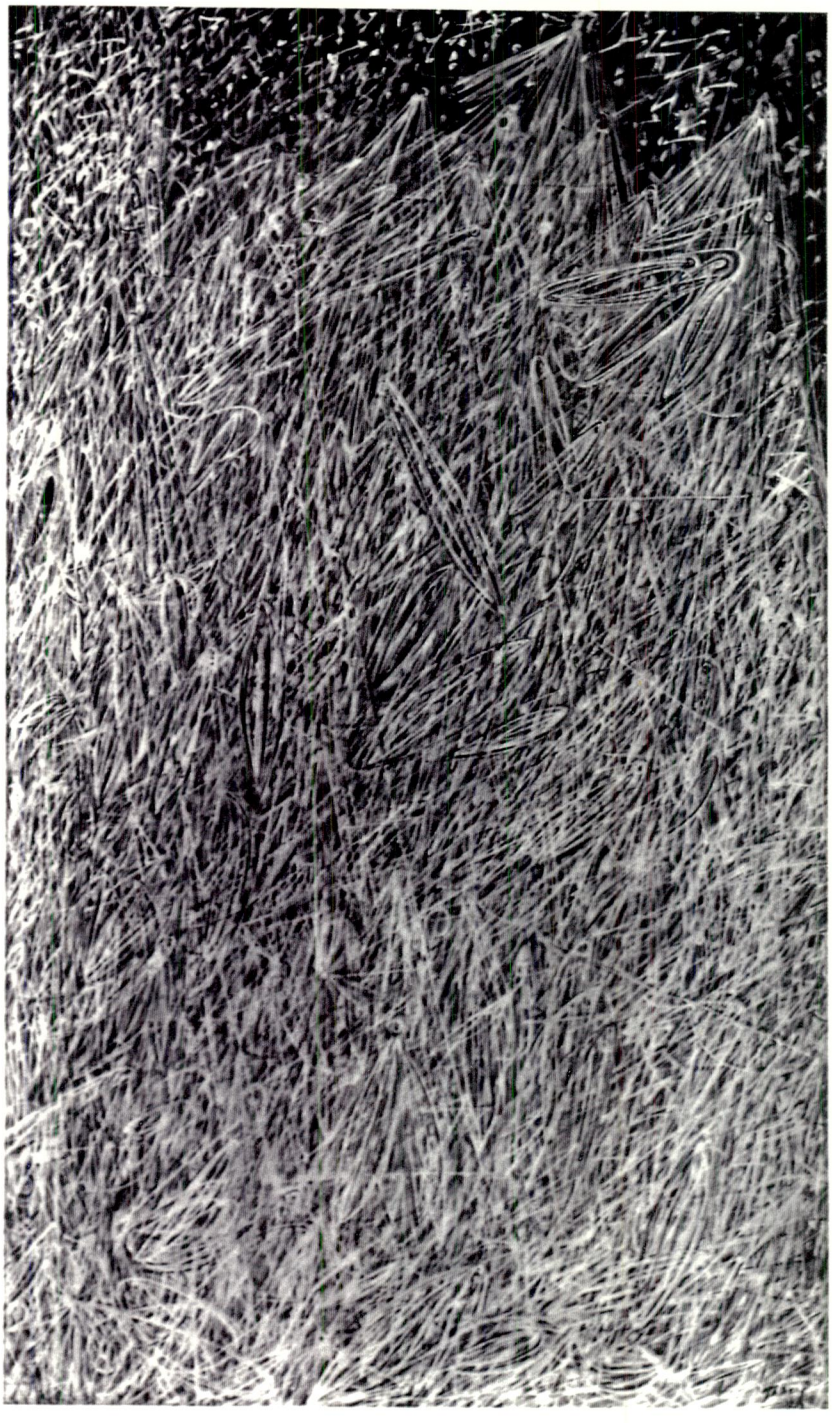

Plate 22: White Night, 1942

Another painting similar to Drift of Summer is Transition to Forms (1942) (Plate 20). This painting with many layers of fine white lines suggests movement. There is a disintegration of form in this painting. The subject of life is conveyed with the process of becoming — before form. it was an intellectual concept and a new technical challenge that led to these densely linear works. Similar to these were the paintings In the March (1942) (Plate 21) and White Night (1942) (Plate 22).

Tobey transferred his vision of nature almost directly into his city paintings. He transferred his rythmic calligraphic line into representing the city and life in the city. New York (1944) (Plate 6) is a typical example of this and probably the finest example of this type of work. Tobey wrote:

> I have always felt that New York, your New York, was my major painting of the whole white writing series .... the other paintings are varying attempts at a type of modern beauty I only find in delicate structures of airplanes, beacons and electrical transformers and all that wonderful slender, architecture connected with a current so potent and mysterious. (Rathbone, 1984, p.50).

Tobey's New York paintings utilize line in every sense. Each section of straight line in New York, however much it might differ from its neighbours in thickness or tone, maintains a unity through its length. Considering the painting as a three-dimensional entity, it is as if it were constructed of numberless girderlike structures of varying lengths and thickness.

I have already referred to Tobey's fascination with light. This fascination is quite evident in his paintings where he has eliminated the figure. However, the multitude of white calligraphic lines in New York and City Radience (1944) (Plate 9) not only represent the lights of beacons, traffic and neon lights, they also represent the movement of the figure through the city. The white lines are darting with frenetic

energy, which fills the canvas. The luminous beams of light criss-cross. Tobey's use of white representing a multitude of light sources on a dark background again creates the impression of immeasurable depth. Tobey seems to have penetrated perspective and brought the far near. In works like Awakening Night (1949) (Plate 10) line evokes the subject matter of light sources in the city. Awakening Night suggests the multiplying chain reaction of lights coming on one after the other in a city at night. It is hard to keep up with the quickness that the lights are switched on, looking from one to the other. Tobey represents a daily occurance in this painting with magic. It is said that he painted this picture in one afternoon so as not to loose the rhythmic impulse.

Traffic 1 contrasts slightly to Awakening Night in that he uses short strokes and dabs, criss-crossing over the surface of the painting with the "start-stop motion of the traffic." This painting coveys the activity caused by a multitude of human lives. Again, even in these city paintings where the human figure is unmentioned, Tobey's work manages to emphasise human energies, channelled and directed as they would be by the architectural structures of the city.

As Tobey's work became increasingly abstract it drew more and more on the basic principles of music and Oriental calligraphy. In paintings like The Avenue (1954) (Plate 23) and Battle of the Lights (1956) (Plate 14) his line is a metaphor for the subject. Tobey believed that a painting could give off only as much energy as the artist put into it.

In the art of Oriental writing and painting, the two are treated as aspects of the same art. Since the Oriental writes and paints with the same ink, brushes and brushstrokes, writing and painting almost fuse into one art. An Oriental would not find it unusual or difficult to understand the combining of writing into painting as Tobey did. In China, writing is admired for its character and energy. It is said that good writing is made up

Plate 23: The Avenue, 1954

of "bone and muscle." Calligraphic drawings are like sketches in that they are executed with speed. They become spirits of characters standing, jumping, walking and running. The white writing in The Avenue and Battle of the Lights retains the moving force, the speed and the definite execution of calligraphic writing. Tobey had managed to find and provide a language that suited New York of the 1920's so well, of "sirens, dynamic lights, brilliant parades and returning heroes. An age of confusion and stepped up rhythms," as Tobey put it.

Perhaps Tobey came closest to the Oriental method when he did a series of Sumi-ink paintings. He did them only during March and April of 1957. The sumis, for Tobey, were an experiment in artistic means and an expression of his Oriental concepts. Tobey abandoned colour for these paintings for black and white. He also abandoned control as never before. It had been suggested that Tobey's work would benefit from greater freedom and vitality of execution. The sumis were a means to that end. They also provided a chance for him to work larger. Although, more control is involved than appears, the spontaneity and risks involved with the sumis must have been liberating. It was often suggested that, for the Abstract Expressionist, an appreciation of Oriental processes was an important influence. none of the abstract expressionists, except perhaps Motherwell, came nearly as close to Oriental method and technique as Tobey did in his sumis. Tobey had entered a situation where chance and accident were paramount. Sumis cannot be reworked or painted over. Tobey threw away as many as he kept. For the abstract expressionists, on the other hand, the initial accident, more often than not, was to be submerged entirely in the finished work.

In many of Tobey's sumis the force of flung ink or the brushstroke exceeds the boundaries of the page, as in Dragonade (1957) (Plate 24). This enhances the quality of energy. A Japanese artist will frequently ignore the borders of a page. He paints by beginning his stroke upon a mosen and continuing it on the paper. This produces the

Plate 24: Dragonade, 1957

impression of great strength of stroke. It animates the work. If drops of sumi ink accidently fall from the brush upon the painting they are regarded as giving additional energy to it. These qualities that are highly regarded in Japan, appear in Tobey's sumis. This series of sumi paintings could be viewed as his farthest venture from representational work, however, examples will show that he could not resist returning to the subject of light. Suburban Hill (1957) (Plate 25) being an example of this. This painting is relatively subdued in comparison to his other sumi paintings. It reflects his continuing delight in the image of night lights. In contrast to his earlier work though, the white of the lights, in this predominantly black landscape, is the untouched paper.

In the midst of the emergence of the delicate colour of his smallest and finest works, the black and white, large and free, expression of the sumis exploded. Tobey was, typically, self-critical and felt he must "strike new ground." Despite the favourable reviews he received for his sumi paintings, he never returned to the technique.

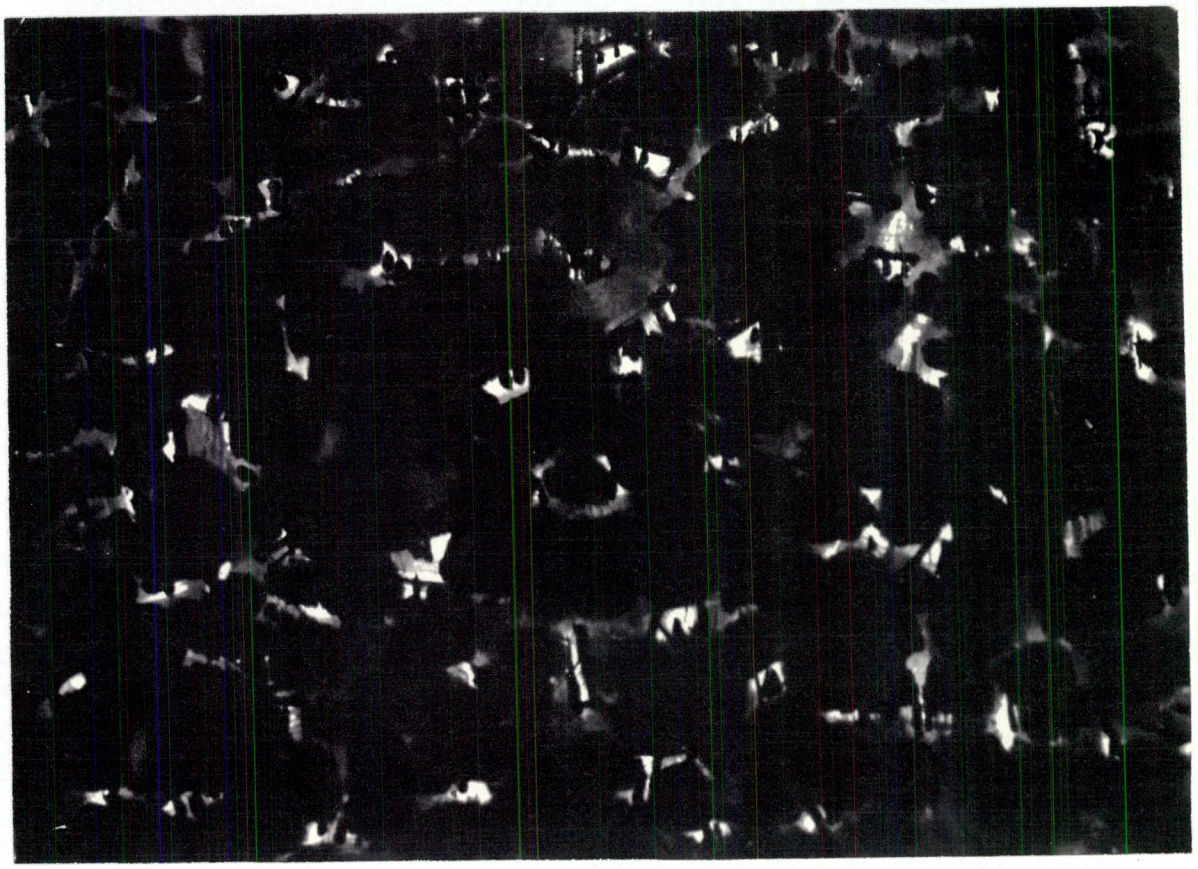

Plate 25: Suburban Hill, 1957

CONCLUSION

Before Tobey encountered the Orient, he learned of the oneness of mankind from the teachings of the Bahá'í World Faith. More than any other contemporary, Tobey has stressed the idea of unity not alone in art but in every phase of life. The oneness of mankind is a basic precept of the Bahá 'í World Faith to which Tobey adhered to for many years.

Tobey's wide travels must be seen in the light of the one-world idea, also his interest in Oriental art forms as an aspect of a total world view. Tobey was the first painter who fully realized the geographical position that the American continent occupies between Europe and the Far East, and the mediating role that the United States could play in a synthesis of what is best in both cultures.

Bahá'í and Zen were Tobey's two most important influences. I chose to concentrate more on the influence of Zen. Bahá'í as Tobey said found him, whereas it was he who sought out and found Zen. No other painter so well symbolized the influence that Oriental art and philosophy have had on American artists. Tobey learned and took from his experiences of Zen, Oriental painting and calligraphy the many polarities that are to be found — Spirit and Matter, divine and human, personal and impersonal, man and nature, tradition and originality, delicacy and power, improvisation and preparation — are also among those that made up Tobey's content and form.

Tobey, however, always remained the Occident that he was. Many of his tastes were mid-western. Much of his subject matter was American. He was the founding Master of the "Northwest School"; of painting. Yet at the same time, Tobey may well have been the most internationally minded painter of importance in the history of art.

Tobey confessed, "I could never be anything but the Occidental that I am" (Seitz, Mark Tobey, 1962, p.50) I believe it sohuld never be presumed that tobey wished to be anything but American, but he had an ability to see how he could benefit from experiencing other cultures, especially the Orient, and there is no doubt, that what he learned, successfully influenced his work. He learned from the Orient about the fusing of internal and external experiences, a greater awareness of nature and man. He accepted the idea of accident, and especially the freedom of the flung style, which he used so magificiently in his Sumis. Most important, China and Japan gave the final encouragement to Tobey's natural writing impulse and to his idea that forms could migrate from Orient to Occident.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. ADDIS, Stephen, The Act of Zen, Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Monks, New york, H.N. Abrams, 1989.

2. BLACKSTONE, Judith/JOSIPOVIC, Zoran, Zen for Beginners, New York, Writers and Readers Publishing Inc., 1986.

3. BOEHM, Gottfried, A Centennial Exhibition, Basel, Galerie Beyeler, 1990.

4. DAHL, Arthur L, Art & Belief, Oxford, G. Ronald, 1984.

5. DE KOONING, Elaine, The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism, New York, Braziller, 1994.

6. DRISCOLL, Lucy, Chinese Calligraphy, Chicago. The University of Chicago Press, 1935.

7. FARRER, Anne, The Brush Dances and The Ink Sings, London, South Bank Centre, 1990.

8. FRANK, Frederick, The Zen of Seeing, London, Wildwood House, 1973.

9. FULLER, Richard E. Tobey's 80, Seattle, Seattle Art Museum, 1970.

10. HISAMATSU, Shin'ichi, Zen and the Fine Arts, New York, Kodansha International Ltd., 1971.

11. HOOVER, Thomas, Zen Culture, New York, Random House, 1977.

12. LANIER, Graham F., The Spontaneous Gesture, Canberra, Austrailian National Gallery, 1987.

13. MACHIE, Alwynne, Art/Talk: theory and practice in Abstract Expressionism, New York, Columbia Univerisyt Press, 1989.

14. NAKATA, Yujiro, The Art of Japanese Calligraphy, New York, Weatherhill, 1973.

15. RATHBONE, Eliza E., City Paintings, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1984.

16. RUSSELL, John, Mark Tobey [reprod. and texts by the artist], Basel, Galerie Beyeler, 1971.

17. SEITZ, William Chapin, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983.

18. SEITZ, William C., Mark Tobey, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., 1962.

19. WICHMANN, Siegfried, Japonisme, London, Thames and Hudson, 1981.