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Abstract

This paper delves into Mark Tobey's artistic lineage, where he absorbed and synthesized Eastern artistic philosophies in a Western artistic environment, led to the formation of his White Writing and Total Abstraction styles in which his artistic practice also provokes a complex discussion of his artistic identity. In the process, Tobey's artistic practice also triggered a complex discussion on his artistic identity. On the one hand, he is regarded as a representative of American art, while on the other hand his in-depth assimilation and use of Oriental art have made him, in the eyes of some, a "subordinate of Oriental culture." This is an exploration of the background and causes of this identity controversy, discussing how Tobey navigated cultural self-confidence and foreign influences to establish his identity as a cross-cultural artist.

Key Words

Mark Tobey, Abstract Expressionism, Oriental art, identity

Mark Tobey (1890-1976) was an American Abstract Expressionist artist known for his distinctive White Writing and Ink Painting style. His work was profoundly influenced by Eastern philosophies and religions, particularly Zen Buddhism and Islamic Sufism. Tobey's artistic explorations include a unique treatment of light and space, as well as deep spiritual and cosmic themes expressed through the interplay of linearity and color. His innovative style and techniques had a significant impact on both American and international art circles in the twentieth century, contributing new perspectives to the development of modern abstract art.

1. The Search for Identity: Artistic Reconstruction in a Changing Landscape (1917-1933)

Mark Tobey was born in Centerville, Wisconsin in 1890 and resided in Seattle for many years; his formative years coincided with the diversity and vibrancy of the American art circle in the early 1920s (the Roaring Twenties), a period marked by economic prosperity and consumerist culture. This rapid economic development spurred the United States' urgency to establish itself in the cultural realm, leading to a diversification of artistic mediums and expressions. Against this backdrop, Tobey was fortunate enough to encounter various art genres and cultural influences, which ignited his interest in pursuing art. Between 1906 and 1908 Tobey received his formal art training at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1911 he moved to New York City, where he began to work in

the arts as a fashion and interior designer. In 1913 Tobey participated in the famous New York Armory Show, the first large-scale exhibition of modern art in the United States, which attracted several European avant-garde artists including Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, etc. This exposure to cutting-edge art significantly influenced Tobey's development. At the same time, he was exposed to the Dadaist style of abstractionist pioneer Marcel Duchamp, who was known for challenging art concepts and subverting the conventions of the art circle, especially with his ready-mades. Duchamp's groundbreaking ideas profoundly impacted Tobey, leaving him unsettled yet inspired. In 1915 the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco showcased the culture and art of several Asian countries, including China, Japan, and India, offering Americans a rare opportunity to engage directly with



Figure 1. Mark Tobey. *Winthrop Parkhurst* 1916. Charcoal on gray paper, 55.1×45.1cm.

Oriental culture. The exhibition heightened the Western demand for Oriental art, and galleries and private collectors began actively collecting Asian art. This changed the structure of the art market and fostered the international circulation of art trade and cultural assets, providing a hotbed for East-West artistic exchanges. During the same period, the Great Migration saw African Americans moving from the American South to northern and western cities, including the Harlem neighborhood in New York City. This migration catalyzed the cultural blending of these urban centers and led to the formation of African American cultural hubs. The resulting art and literature, which explored African American identity and experience, offered Tobey a window into non-Western culture.

In 1917 Tobey held a solo exhibition of some of his charcoal portraits (figure 1), but the overall response was mediocre, which deepened his determination to break through the existing realistic painting style.

In 1918 he converted to the Bahá'í faith under portraitist Juliet Thompson (1873-1956). The Bahá'í faith, which originated in Iran, emphasizes the unity of all humanity and the harmony of all religions, and Tobey's adventurous nature-loving character and open artistic mind for heterogeneous civilizations and cultures jibed with the teachings of the Bahá'í faith. Under the influence of the Bahá'í faith, Tobey focused on the inner connection of humanity and the expression of his spirituality, which led him to explore new directions in his artistic creation. In 1918 Tobey declared, "If I never do anything else in my painting life, I will shatter form...give a release to the light that is in space." After his conversion to the Bahá'í faith, he also began to have a great deal of exposure to Arabic literature as well as Chinese and Japanese literature and philosophy. This exposure laid a solid foundation for his later study and acceptance of Chinese calligraphy and Zen philosophy, which he incorporated into his artistic creations.

2. The Co-construction of Identity: White Writing Born in the East

In 1923, an important turning point in Tobey's artistic career occurred: he met Teng Kui (figure 2), a Chinese student pursuing a master's degree at Washington State University. Tobey took this opportunity to learn Chinese painting and calligraphy from him. At this time, when Tobey was stuck in a bottleneck in the development of his innovative painting method, Teng Kui taught him the use of Chinese brushes, and the interaction between the two artists continued for more than a decade. In 1934 Tobey traveled from Italy to Hong Kong and Shanghai,



Figure 2. A commemorative photo of Teng Baiya was presented to Tobey.

where he stayed with Teng Kui at his home in the French Concession and studied Chinese art in greater depth. When Teng Kui gave his lecture "Expressionism in Chinese Art," which coincided with Tobey's visit, Teng Kui remarked "In contrast to Western art, Chinese painting is linear...Western art is stylized by blocks of different colors." Tobey's interaction with Teng Kui and his study of Oriental art in this way jibed with his expression of linear painting, which undoubtedly laid the groundwork for the birth of his later White Writing style.

At that time, abstract artists advocated a complete departure from the dominant realism of the past, emphasizing the purely abstract nature of form, color, line, and surface, to give full and unrestrained expression to themselves. However, aside from the common object of opposition, there was little stylistic unity of style in abstraction. Through his interactions with Teng Kui, Tobey discovered that the line-dominated and ink-splashed forms of Chinese painting aligned perfectly with the expressive forms he was seeking, and he began to study Chinese calligraphy and art composition in depth under Teng Kui's guidance. While studying painting

in England, Tobey also became close friends with Bernard Leach CBE, an Asian potter born in Hong Kong who had lived in Japan for many years. The meeting with the two friends of Oriental persuasion contributed to his hunger to learn about Oriental cultures. His works also gradually took on the elements and colors of the Orient.

Shi Tao, a master of traditional Chinese landscape painting, wrote in his *The Record of Painting*: "Painting is subject to the ink, ink is subject to the brush, the brush is subject to the wrist, and the wrist is subject to the heart." As far as the traditional Chinese painting literati are concerned, it is advocated that the writing of meaning should come first, and the writing of form should come later. The interaction with Teng Kui brought Tobey into real contact with the mood of Oriental art. Through continuous learning and integration, he eventually relied on the flowing, exquisite, harmonious and unified lines to write his own emotions; he became the forerunner of American Abstract Expressionism. In 1933, under the sponsorship of Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, Tobey and Bernard Ritchie embarked on an artistic journey to the Orient. Together they traveled through France, Italy, Naples, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Japan. In Shanghai, Tobey visited Teng Kui and spent two months studying art at his art school, strengthening their friendship and leading to a long exchange of letters.

During the war, Teng Kui stopped painting and joined the war, participating in the production self-help movement in the Guilin refugee camp. A letter he wrote to Tobey in Hankou in 1938 also reflects the sincere friendship between the two: "... In three months, I built eight factories to produce the materials needed by the soldiers at the front—shoes, socks, uniforms, soaps, medical cotton, gauze, etc. The results of this work were so remarkable that the government asked me to increase the size tenfold. ...Now you can describe me to your friend as a busybody of real value to his government."

After visiting Shanghai, Tobey began his journey to Japan in the same year and spent a month at a Zen Buddhist temple near Kyoto. There he practiced meditation and studied Zen painting, Buddhism, and calligraphy to gain a deeper appreciation of the inner workings of East Asian art culture. "When I was at the Zen monastery on the edge of Kyoto, I was given an ink drawing of a large, randomly drawn circle with a brush and asked to meditate in front of this drawing. Day after day, I gazed at this painting every day. Was this a state of egolessness? Is it a cosmic state that allows me to leave my ego behind? Perhaps I had overlooked the beauty of the painting, the lines of the brush, which a trained Oriental eye can recognize in the painter's sensibility. Eventually, I left there with a new pair of eyes." This "pair

of eyes" means he scrutinized Western culture with an Eastern perspective.

As mentioned in Edward T. Hall's concept of cultural barriers, it is difficult for people from different cultural backgrounds to completely cross cultural barriers when communicating; however, they may learn the superficial forms of a certain culture. Therefore, Westerners studying Chinese painting may be able to develop their techniques well. Still, it is difficult for them to understand and internalize those cultural and philosophical meanings fully. Some scholars summarize that Tobey's experience in Japan made him feel that he was still a full-fledged Westerner. In fact, from Tobey's later creative trajectory, it can be seen that the works he studied and formed based on Oriental art were far from traditional Chinese painting in terms of form and thematic expression. His identity as a foreign culturalist also caused him difficulties in understanding the content, mainly in the technique, which borrowed a lot of calligraphy's ink and brush and formal symbols and endowed the content of the expression with a strong Oriental religious and philosophical meaning. "I studied the ink and brushwork of their ink paintings in China and Japan to figure out their calligraphy, and it was painful for me to learn, and I knew then that I could only be a Westerner and nothing more."

During this period, his works were completely free from the constraints of figuration, displaying strong abstract artistic qualities in composition and subject matter, but still always rooted in the creative motifs of Western culture. He wrote in his memoirs, "When I saw a randomly drawn dragon on top of that temple in Kyoto, I thought of Michelangelo's similar rhythm. The two are different in form, but overflowing with the same spiritual power." By the time he left Kyoto, Tobey had already begun to look at art and even life from a new perspective. In 1935 Tobey returned to England from the Orient. At Dartington Hall he began to try to utilize the lines of Oriental art, drawing a grid of white lines on black negatives, and gradually formed a unique style of White Writing. During this period, he successively created oil paintings such as *Broadway* (figure 3) and *Welcome to the City*, which were not Oriental paintings but American metropolitan scenes. Still, the innovative use of white lines and the interweaving of black and white images formed a strong visual contrast, allowing people to examine the city's traffic from a new perspective. He later recalled the experience of this inspired state of mind, describing, "My training in calligraphy in China and its rhythms gave me the calligraphic impulse to break out of the confines of form to convey an idea of the crowd, the automobile, and the full vitality of the cityscape."

Tobey began redefining his artistic identity through

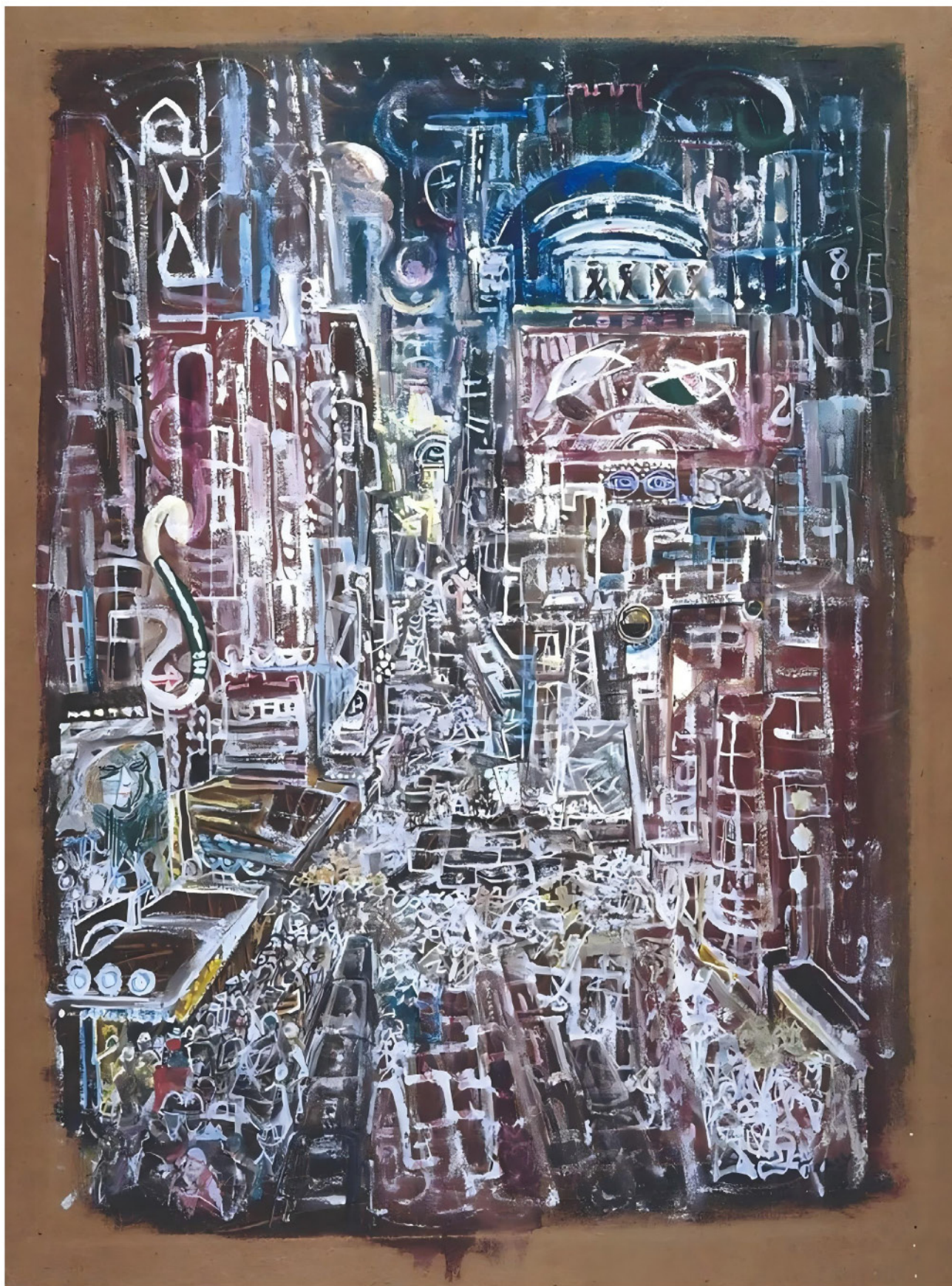


Figure 3. Mark Tobey. *Broadway*. Tempera on paper board, 66×48.9cm, 1935-36.

the years of frequent impact and collision with Eastern culture. From modern times onward, Western thought has approached the question of humanity with various perspectives, from “What is man?” to viewing humans as rational subjects and finally as non-rational entities. After accepting the Zen culture of the East, such as mediocrity, Tobey’s artistic identity gradually experienced a breakthrough. In addition to the use of lines in White Writing, He also pioneered the spread out style of composition under the influence of traditional Chinese painting’s scattered perspective method, which diluted the center and focus of the picture and gave it the characteristics of multiple centers and angles, greatly expanding the sense of space in the picture as represented by *Threading Light* in 1942 (figure 4). Such a creative mindset is very close to the meaning of state of mind advocated in Zen thought. In the Zen classic *The Sixth Patriarch’s Discipline*, Zen Master Huineng discusses the notion of enlightenment as understanding the mind and perceiving the true nature of the heart. After accepting this idea, Tobey once wrote: “The worship of space and the world of objects is very boring. The art creator needs to pay attention to the space that the person builds up in his heart, and this inner space is much closer to infinity than outer space. ...An artist should not only have an awareness of external space but also the awareness of internal space. Whoever focuses only on one side to exclude the other will lose balance and fall off the horse.”

From a Western philosophical point of view, this path of creation is also an exploration of the nature of existence, echoing the openness to the world of the Being described by Heidegger. Heidegger believed that art is a field for self-expression of the truth of existence. Tobey’s works demonstrate the unity of form and content, exploring the core issues of life and existence through abstract expression, which can support his pure pursuit of the true nature of art.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the WPA Federal Art Project as part of his New Deal. The program was designed to support artists financially so they could make ends meet and continue to create during the Depression. The program provided financial support and helped artists maintain their professional identity, and had a long-term impact on the development of American art. Although social realism was very popular at the time, there were artists in the Federal Art Project who explored abstract styles that focused more on the expression of form, color, and line than on specific social content. This style is sometimes seen as a reflection or escape from realist narratives, offering a perspective that focuses more on the ontology of art. After World War II, war themes became the subject of many artists’ works. The economic

recovery and acceptance of modernist art in the United States after the war also contributed to the rise of Abstract Expressionism, and abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock began to receive attention. During the Depression, the government’s support for artists like Tobey also gave him a firm sense of the cultural identity of his homeland, which deepened his experiencing of personal identity.

3. Rewriting Identity: An Integrated Painting Expression

As an abstract artist and a pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist painting movement, Tobey had considerable influence in Europe and the entire Western world. With the end of the war and the beginning of the Cold War, the economy of the United States gradually recovered, and its hegemony in the Western world gradually stabilized, which objectively became the leading edge of the world’s development. As the de facto leader of the Western world, the United States needed to establish its superior cultural image and began to deepen its understanding of Third World countries in more ways. This atmosphere also led to widespread suspicion and investigation of artists and other cultural figures, and many artists were investigated on suspicion of being members or sympathizers of the Communist Party in the wake of McCarthyism, which seriously affected the creative freedom and public image of many artists. Some officials, scholars, and art critics saw the political and cultural ideology behind individual free will in abstract art. They tried to mold abstraction into a representation of America’s modern cultural image through the power of the state. For a long time, there has been a culturally centered notion in Western countries, including the United States, that Western technology, political systems, and cultures are superior to those of other countries, especially non-Western countries. This notion is rooted in the experience of the colonial era and the historical and cultural context of racism. However, after the war, on the other side of the rapid spread of American culture worldwide, traditional and sophisticated elements of Eastern culture gradually took root in the cultural contexts of Europe and America. Of course, the inherent bias formed by the long-term Western cultural superiority theory made it difficult for the West to recognize the status of Eastern elements in art even during Tobey’s lifetime. Several critics, caught up in this perspective, have been highly skeptical of Tobey’s work. For example, Clement Greenberg considers Tobey “an appendage of Eastern culture.” There is a common misunderstanding in the art world that although Tobey loved Oriental



Figure 4. Mark Tobey. *Threading Light*. Tempera on board, 74.5×50.1cm, 1942.

culture, he did not want to inherit and promote it based on Oriental paintings, but expected to achieve a kind of inheritance and innovation of the local culture through the stone of other mountains.

Tobey wrote in 1957: "I have often wondered how rich our art would be if the West Coast were as open to aesthetic influences from Asia as the East Coast is to European influences! When I was in Japan in 1933, there was a gulf between East and West, and it seemed that Japan was attempting to introduce Western art forms into the East. The pitifully small amount of Eastern influence in the United States barely extended to the West Coast. ...Many contemporary American artists have expressed an interest in Zen Buddhism. As a result, it has influenced their work. Several galleries and art journals have organized seminars on such a fact. What effect this philosophy will have on our inherent culture and to what extent it will become an integral part of our aesthetics remains to be seen." The starting point of Tobey's art has always been American art and the expectation that American art will continue to evolve as East meets West and builds together, and that his Western subjective perspective has never changed.

Indeed, Tobey's steadfastness in his identity as an American artist is so well documented that in a 62-year retrospective of Tobey at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, William Seitz, as the catalog essayist, recorded to readers as follows: "Aside from being an American, he has never done anything else outside of that identity."

However, it is undeniable that Tobey deepened the artistic exchange and fusion between East and West. Seitz, who had long been committed to urging his fellow Americans to study the art of Tobey's East, believed that "Mark Tobey's unique development provides a valuable light on our culture and its relationship between European and Eastern cultures."

In his later years, Tobey's works reflected more of his thoughts and summaries of life. Eastern and Western art at this stage were completely fused and integrated, just as Taoism advocates that the small self should be integrated into the greater self in the universe. Zhuang Zi's cosmic concept of "heaven and earth are symbiotic with me, and all things are one with me" negates the confrontation between subject and object and emphasizes the way of thinking of "looking up to all the opportunities and being calm and self-contained," which is manifested in the painting that is to follow the example of nature, and to seek the harmony between man and nature, Where there is a harmony between you and me, the subject and object become one. Such cosmology is exactly opposite to the Western cognitive thinking that people should conquer

nature and "oppose things to me" with nature, under which human beings can be integrated into the object, experience the object, perceive the object, and let the subject and object become one, and reach the realm of "the thing and the self is forgotten, and all things become one." Perhaps this is also the manifestation of the integration he seeks.

Nowadays, examining Tobey from the perspective of the Other, we can be sure that he is a homeland-loving and multicultural-respecting artist. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School made the criticism that the Age of Enlightenment, while striving to promote rational thinking and human emancipation, ultimately led to new forms of irrationality and oppression and that technological rationality was transformed into a tool for controlling individuals. The American artist Tobey, in his works and especially through White Writing, not only challenged the formalism of modern art but also emphasized that art should go beyond pure visual aesthetics and carry deeper meanings and cultural reflections. This innovation in visual form is an aesthetic breakthrough and a way to explore the depth of human existence and culture. As an American artist, Tobey criticized Western-centrism and the commercialization of art, challenged the boundaries of modern art by introducing and reinterpreting Oriental aesthetics, demonstrated a multidimensional perspective of cultural criticism, and struck back forcefully against the simplification and misunderstanding of Oriental art in the Western art world, efforts that not only opened up new directions and perspectives in the development of modern art but also profoundly revealed how he reflected on and challenged the boundaries of modern art through his art to reflect on and challenge the core issues of modern art.

4. Conclusion

Despite facing numerous questions and criticisms within the historical and cultural context of his time, Tobey's work has gained significant recognition in today's era of artistic plurality and openness. Oriental art has been greatly affirmed, and many contemporary artists grapple with this powerful cultural force in their explorations. For example, the artist Achille Bonita Olivier once said, "I think that Chinese abstract art is independent of Western abstract art; it stands on the root of the Chinese philosophy of 'Tao and Zen.'" This affirms that his spirit of artistic innovation is extremely valuable and will be a model for future artists in their pursuit of innovation.

Tobey's artistic career fully reflects his unique identity as an American artist in a multicultural context. Through

in-depth study and absorption of Oriental art, Tobey successfully integrated these elements into his creations, creating his signature White Writing style, which reflects his pure understanding of and respect for culture, ignoring political considerations, and at the same time demonstrates how he promoted the exchange and fusion of Eastern and Western art while maintaining his identity as an American artist. It also demonstrates how he can promote the exchange and fusion of East and West while maintaining his identity as an American artist. Despite facing questions and criticisms from the art world about his identity, Tobey always persisted in his artistic pursuits. His artistic practice not only enriches the American cultural landscape but also contributes an eclectic perspective to global art history, showing how

an artist searches for and shapes his personal and cultural identities in an era of globalization, marking his unique position and significant influence in the fusion of art and culture. Through an in-depth reading of Tobey's life and works, we can better understand his efforts and achievements between art and cultural identity and a comprehensive examination of art and cultural exchange in the twentieth century.

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彼岸的書寫：馬克·托比藝術創作的身份之思

徐可

摘要：本文試圖通過深入分析馬克·托比的藝術脈絡，探討他如何在西方的藝術環境中吸收和融合東方的藝術哲學，從而形成了“白色書寫”和“全面抽象”風格，在此過程中，托比的藝術實踐也引發了對其藝術身份立場的複雜討論。一方面，他被視為美國藝術的代表，另一方面，他對東方藝術的深入吸收和運用，又使他在某些人眼中成為了“東方文化的附庸”。本文將分析這一身份爭議的背景和原因，探討托比如何在文化自信與外來影響之間找到自己的立場，並在此基礎上建立自己的跨文化藝術家身份。

關鍵詞：馬克·托比；抽象表現主義；東方藝術；身份