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The Influence of American Nationalism on Mark Tobey's Sumi Art

Jingwei Zeng

Abstract

Mark Tobey (1890-1976) was a quintessential Abstract Expressionist dedicated to applying Japanese calligraphy to the Western style painting. In 1957, he created a group of over fifty sumi abstractions, including *Space Ritual No. 1*, which was the epitome of his Japanese study. However, this strong Asian influence on his style marginalized his position in the art circles, thereby calling an end to his sumi work. American nationalism played an important role in his choice to create sumi: on one hand, he espoused sumi practice as a medium to represent American's individualism, freedom, and masculinity; on the other hand, he estranged himself from sumi work because of the rhetoric of ideological confrontation and Asian denial. In the final years of his life, the universalism of the Baha'i faith motivated him to seek the synthesis of East and West, crystalizing all the ideas and techniques that he had been accumulating over the years and creating a strong sense of wholeness in his art.

Key Words

Abstract Expressionist, calligraphy, American Nationalism, ideological confrontation, Baha'i Faith

Introduction

When it comes to the definition of "modern art," Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) suggested the so called "modern"

was not simply because it is of our century, but because it is "the work of artists who take seriously the challenge of new possibilities and wish to introduce into their work perceptions, ideas and experiences."¹ In the imme-

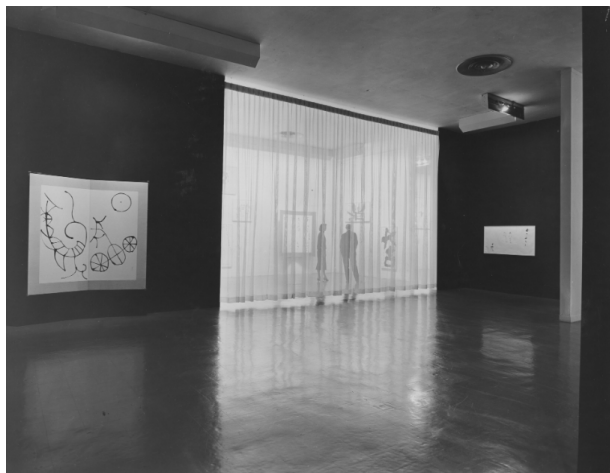


Figure 1. Modern Abstract Japanese Calligraphy.⁷



Figure 2. Major Sea Lanes Connecting the Arctic and East Asia, and the Disputed Territories.⁸



Figure 3. Mark Tobey, *Space Ritual No. 1*, 1957, ink on paper, 29 1/4×37 7/16 in. The Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection.¹⁰

diate postwar period, American artists' interest in absorbing Japanese calligraphy into their creations opened a new possibility for the first abstract art in America.² Exhibitions related to Japanese art were also a critical component of the interest in Asian art—in 1954, *Modern Abstract Japanese Calligraphy* was presented by MoMA (figure 1).³ Later the same year, no less than eight solo exhibitions in New York featured contemporary Asian art.⁴ In addition, this was a period during which the borders of American interests expanded to what was termed a “defensive perimeter,” one that included Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan into a US geopolitical coalition (figure 2).⁵ In this context, many Abstract Expressionists, such as Mark Tobey, David Smith (1906-1965), Franz Kline (1910-1962), Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), and Robert Motherwell (1915-1991), began to choose Eastern icons for inspiration.⁶

Mark Tobey was a pioneering figure in the investigation of the relationship between abstract painting and East Asian calligraphy. Actually, his connection to Japanese calligraphy might be closer than any other European American painters in the Abstract Expressionist milieu.⁹ In 1957, he made some fifty

Japanese sumi style abstractions. The black-on-white configuration, as well as the dynamic gesture against an unpainted ground, has unmistakable Japanese prototypes (figure 3, *Space Ritual No. 1*). Most significantly, the calligraphic brushwork and metaphysical inspiration of Japanese influence enhance the meaning and value of his abstraction.

However, in spite of his eagerness to consume Asian concepts and iconographies, a striking denial of this Asian root also emerged. When critics commented he was an “orientalist,” he said, “I would never be any [sic] but the Occidental that I am,” indicating a disavowal of his Asian enthusiasm.¹¹ After 1957, he estranged himself from sumi paintings, and the failure to gain recognition in the United States prompted him to move to Switzerland in 1960.¹²

Tobey's espousal of and estrangement from sumi require a further consideration of the social reality in the postwar context. American nationalism played an important role in Tobey's sumi practice. Nationalism connotes a paradoxical combination of two concepts considered mutually exclusive: it encouraged the production of sumi abstraction as a triumph of American

individualism, freedom, and masculinity; conversely, it also encumbered sumi's creation because of the apparent Asian and Chinese connection. In this sense, Tobey's espousal and estrangement to sumi was not the creative way driven by interest; instead, it was a passive reflection of artistic nationalism that was a principal rationale in twentieth-century art circles.

For the final decades of Tobey's life, the Baha'i Faith, which had the most profound and spiritual impact on his paintings, motivated him to bring different components together to create a universal abstraction.¹³ This universalism cut across national boundaries and cultural specificity, which helped him achieve a synthesis in his final works.

1. The Espousal of Sumi Painting

Mark Tobey was a devotee of Japanese art.¹⁴ He was introduced to Chinese brushwork as early as 1923 by a young Chinese artist, Teng Gui (1900-1980).¹⁵ He continued his passion with the East in 1934 with a trip to China and Japan.¹⁶ Informed by authors like Carl Jung (1875-1961) and D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), whose writings shaped American "Oriental Thought," he aspired to animate his paintings from Zen's concepts.¹⁷ Moreover, residing in Seattle was instrumental in personalizing his Japanese aesthetics.¹⁸ His passion for the study of calligraphy culminated in his 1957 sumi painting *Space Ritual No. 1*. After seeing this work in an exhibition, he was excited to say, "No one in Japan has done what I can and have done. I know Kline exists and Pollock, but I have another one."¹⁹

However, as the biggest patron of the arts, the government played a crucial role in the development of postwar Abstract Expressionism.²⁰ Flush with victory and new international political dominance, the American government lionized this artistic genre to convey the nation's changed postwar identity.²¹ Attachment to a nation's identity, therefore, bred a strong sense of nationalism in American art circles. Tobey's commitment to American national perspectives is well documented in his writings. After the defeat of Japan, for example, he wrote, "America more than any other country is placed geographically to lead in this understanding (i.e., international order and balance)."²² The strong nationalism implied in this statement was the main reason for his espousal of sumi painting. Specifically speaking, the primary value of the sumi lies in its function to represent American's individualism, freedom, and masculinity.

1.1 American Individualism

In the aftermath of Allied victory in World War II, gestural abstraction, which jettisoned overt representational imagery and was marked by splashes, slashes, drips, and flows of paint, was deemed the product of an American society that enshrines the rights of the individual.²³ Pollock, Kline, and other Abstract Expressionists adopted different methods for the experiments of gestural abstraction, which identified their works as a cultural counterpart to the Marshall Plan.²⁴ For instance, Pollock liked to splatter and dribble swirls of paint to create overlaying skeins of color; Kline brushed muscular black swaths on white backgrounds; and Morris Louis (1912-1962) allowed gravity to pull liquid color down the canvas in diagonal bands—all of them were motivated by the spirit of individuality (figure 4, 5, 6). In 1956, MoMA's international council sent gestural abstractions made by Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and others to eight European cities for exhibition.²⁵ Bert Winther has noted that Tobey had the ambition to compete with the admired gestural abstraction style associated with Pollock and Kline, but he was very careful to avert the appearance of imitating them.²⁶ His passion for Japanese art inclined him toward Japanese modern calligraphy as the inspiration for his style.

Indeed, after WWII, a similar trend of gestural abstraction was taking place in Japanese abstract calligraphy. Among the most influential and innovative of

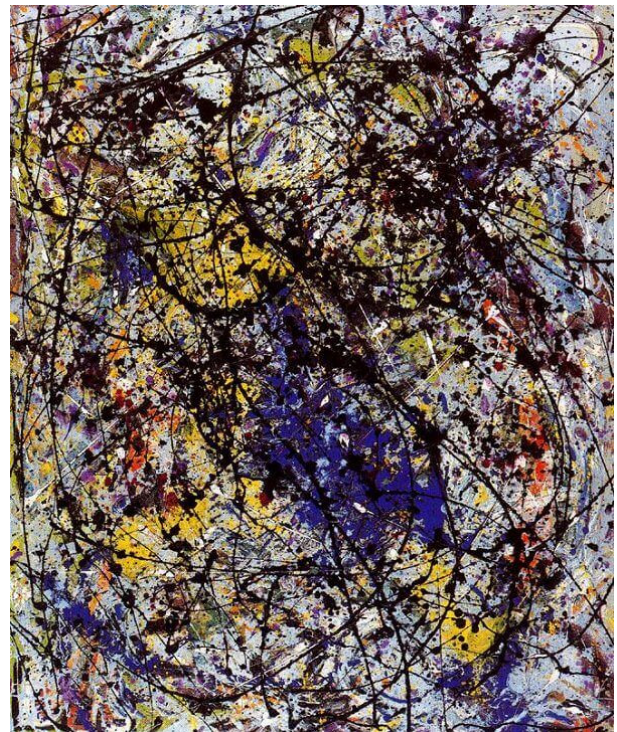


Figure 4. Jackson Pollock, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, 1947, Oil on canvas, 43 3/4×36 1/8 in. Stedelijk Museum, object number A 2971.²⁷



Figure 5. Cover of *BOKUBI*, First Issue, 1952, Title: Inoue Yuichi, Painting: Franz Kline.²⁸



Figure 6. Morris Louis, *Omega IV*, 1959-1960, acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas, 144×104 3/8 in. Estates of the artist, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark. Donation: Marcella Louis Brenner/The American Foundation of Arts, 1987. Copyright © 2014 Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA).²⁹

the calligraphic groups was *Bokujin-kai* (Ink Human Society), which was founded by Morita Shiryu (1912-1998) and Inoue Yuichi (1916-1985).³⁰ In the first issue of *Bokubi* (Beauty of Ink), Shiryu indicated that the mission for contemporary calligraphers was to reconceptualize and modernize expressionist calligraphy.³¹ Influenced by this mission, Inoue Yuichi (1916-1985) took to very melodramatic gestures to create some explosively wild works that were free of reference to any Chinese characters (figure 7). In his *Work A* (1955), the bold brushstroke negates the descriptive function of the character, and instead exhibits the gushing pulsation that would allow the author to sweep away convention and achieve individuality (figure 8). In this way, Japanese and American artists shared a common individualism in gestural abstraction.

Tobey might have seen Yuchi and Shiryu's works shown at MOMA in 1954.³⁴ And he might also have read Morita's *Bokubi*. In *Space Ritual No. 1*, the unstinting use of black on the white background, the incorporation of accident without reworking, and the dynamism of the ink explosion are evocative of Yuchi's gestural abstraction. The Japanese assimilation endowed him with a unique style, which was different from other

gestural abstractions. Most importantly, the aggressive gesture in this painting catered to the nationalist rhetoric which called for the glorification of American's individualism.

1.2 American Freedom

After 1945, the US government was fervent in celebrating individual freedom and democracy by emphasizing its abundance and opportunity.³⁵ "Freedom of choice" became the new rhetoric of national supremacy.³⁶ According to Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), this notion allowed more Abstract Expressionists to develop their artistic styles without having to justify their actions.³⁷ Since the central discipline of Zen is freedom, many artists turned to Japanese culture for more metaphysical inspirations.³⁸ The primary metaphysical concept to be considered was the "void."³⁹

Sunya, or the void, is the crucial concern of metaphysical abstraction.⁴⁰ In Zen Buddhism, the void in one's mind gives one a "ground" to experience the Self and the whole cosmos, thereby attaining great freedom.⁴¹ In Zen art, the void is an unbounded space wherein "the form of formless is seen and the sound of soundless is heard," sharing the same degree of vastness and



Figure 7. Inonu Yuichi, *Inoue wrote Bone*, 1959. Now in the collection of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. @ UNAC Tokyo.³²



Figure 8. Inonu Yuichi, *Work A*, 1955, enamel on paper, 34 1/2 x 45 3/8 in. The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. @ UNAC Tokyo³³

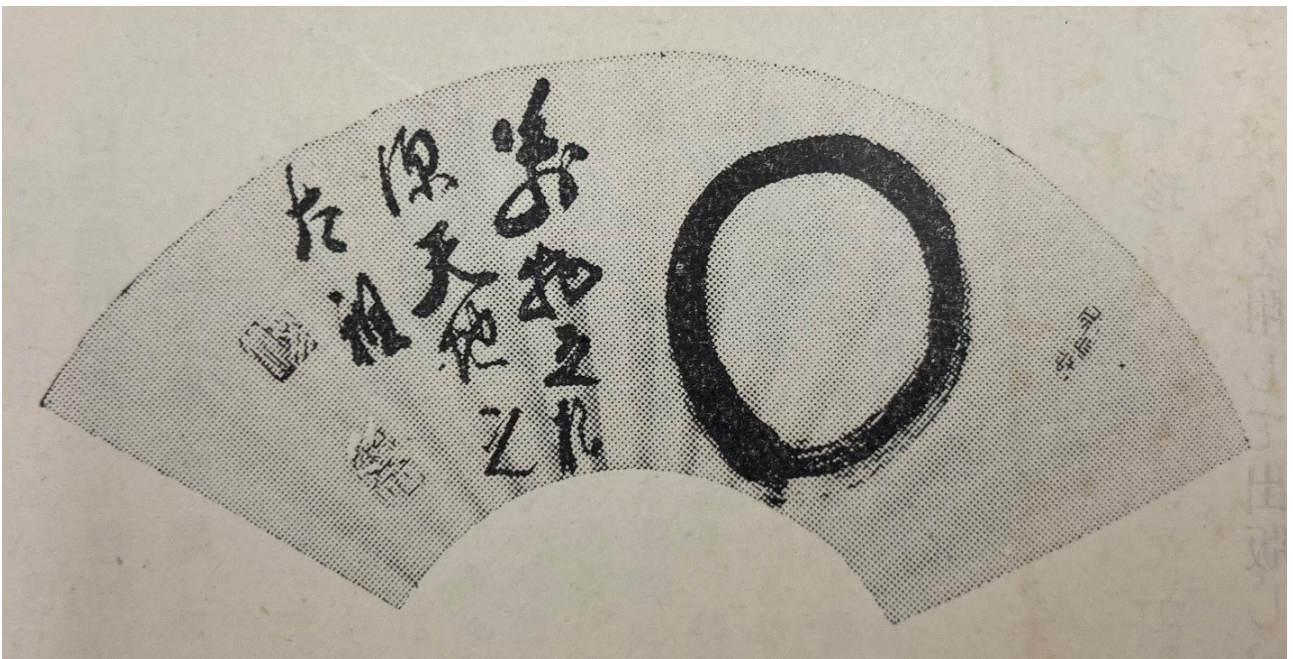


Figure 9. Tesso Kozuki, *Enso*.⁴⁵

freedom.⁴² Tobey was passionate about integrating the concept of void into his creations. He once said, “The old Japan with its Zen teaching and philosophy of Taoism found that what was in the empty cup was more palatable than what was in the full one.”⁴³ This understanding came from his time spent in the temple Enpuku-ji, back to 1934. In that temple, he was given a sumi painting with a large circle (*Enso*) to meditate upon (figure 9).⁴⁴ After days of meditation, he found himself in a state of freedom.

Indeed, in his works, the surfaces were never uniformly covered. For instance, in *Space Ritual No. 1*, the whole image is merely comprised of some scattered strokes and dots, with most of the paper left unpainted. However, the space extends far beyond the boundary of the paper, mirroring the void as the source of the forms. The vast empty area constructs a kind of visual freedom in order to release the audience from their stereotypical understandings of space and order. His pursuit of pictorial voidness was extended to the 1960s. In *Void II* (1960), the void occupies the space, and finally freedom becomes dominant (figure 10).

It is critical that while the void was a practical way for Tobey to achieve mental freedom, the most important function of the void was to “seek freedom from man’s tyranny.”⁴⁷ Here, Tobey’s nationalistic feeling for American freedom was veiled in his sumi creations, indicating that the intrinsic value of the sumi was to represent national identity.

1.3 American Masculinity

According to Daniel Bell (1919-2011), a Harvard University sociologist, Americans had a preoccupation with masculinity in the Cold War politics.⁴⁸ The “polarization of images” reflected a political culture that emphasized masculine toughness and deemed anything soft and feminine as a threat to the security of the nation.⁴⁹ This polarization was also a noticeable feature in art circles. For instance, Pollock was celebrated by Greenberg as “the most powerful painter in contemporary America” partially because his work personified the American cult of masculinity.⁵⁰ By contrast, his wife Lee Krasner (1908-1984)’s painting was described as “derivative, feminine, and decorative,” and was only seen as the “tidy” version of his violent bursts of color (figure 11).⁵¹ In brief, the desired national flavor for Abstract Expressionism had to be “strong.”

Before sumi’s painting, most of Tobey’s works seemed to lack this requisite strongness or boldness. His white writing (a script-like tangle of lines in the work), such as *Untitled*, was all too similar to Krasner’s *Continuum* (1947-49), as both of the paintings are

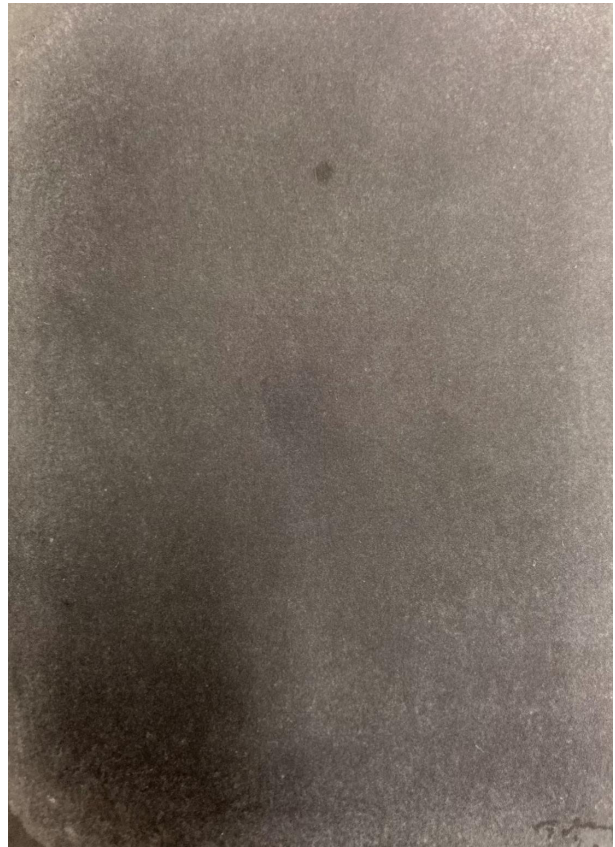


Figure 10. Mark Tobey, *Void II*.⁴⁶



Figure 11. Lee Krasner, *Flowering Limb*, 1963, oil on canvas, 57 3/4×45 3/4 in. Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.⁵²



Figure 12. Left: Mark Tobey, *Untitled*,⁵⁴ Right: Lee Krasner, *Continuum*, 1947-49, oil and enamel on canvas, 53×42 in. Collection Alfonso A. Ossorio, East Hampton.⁵⁵



Figure 13. Mark Tobey, *Universal Field*, 1949, tempera and pastel on cardboard, 27 7/8×44 5/8 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, accession number 50.24.⁵⁶

fraught with labyrinthine intimacy (figure 12). In another of his paintings, *Universal Field* (1949), the filigree of interconnected lines was rendered with an infinitesimal scale and meandering pattern, showing an overwhelming intricacy and rigidity (figure 13). Greenberg believed the mode of this painting, “which consists in dividing and subdividing within a very narrow compass of sensations,” gave the artist “too little room in which to vary and amplify.”⁵³ For Greenberg, who by this time had begun to gravitate to Pollock’s work, the contrast between the artists was too great: Pollock’s approach was masculine, balletic, voluntary, and fluid, whereas Tobey’s lines were the result of design and restraint.

Despite Tobey’s ambition for a new American art, the formal reticence and restraint of his style did not correspond to the nationalistic taste for masculinity and magnitude.⁵⁷ Therefore, in Bert Winther’s opinion, Tobey’s 1957 sumi creation was an attempt to respond to the derogatory comments made by New York’s art critics.⁵⁸ The spirited splattering and brushing was a

bold departure from his more delicate traceries of white writing. In addition, from his sumi painting, he engineered a sense of originality, differentiating his works from Pollock’s. But this was a perilous balance: while the espousal of Japanese gestural abstraction could defend against a critic’s disapprobation and lend a unique way to challenge Pollock’s supremacy, any resulting impressions of Asian-ness could only diminish the interest of people like Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978), who seemed to think it a liability. Therefore, despite all the Asian ingredients in his creation of sumi, Tobey finally became estranged from all of it.

2. The Estrangement of Sumi Painting

The peace negotiated in 1945, which brought an end to WWII, did not bring an end to international hostility. Instead, America became mired in another type of war, the Cold War. Influenced by Cold War mentality, nationalists proclaimed that artistic identity should be fundamentally contingent upon national identity. Abstract Expressionism, which had a strong connection to Asian and Chinese traditions, was seen as a deviation from the standard of American nationalism.⁵⁹ The apparent Asian-ness of Tobey’s sumi painting seemed to be unacceptable because it transgressed this nationalistic rhetoric. Finally, the antagonism to Marxist ideology and Asian denial proposed by nationalists encumbered Tobey’s further improvements of sumi practice. Tobey’s disappointment at the lack of recognition he received in the American art world brought him to move to Europe in 1960, where he would remain until he died in 1976.⁶⁰

2.1 Ideological Confrontation during the Cold War Era

During the Cold War period, modern art was a *bete noire* to nationalists because of its intrinsic “un-American” character. In 1949, Congressman George Dondero (1883-1968), an ardent nationalist, condemned modern art along with Marxist ideology. In a congressional speech which discussed the connection between modern art and Marxist ideology, he declared that modern art is approaching Marxist ideology because “it is distorted and ugly,” and “it does not glorify our beautiful country.”⁶¹ For him, abstract art was a cultural heresy, which was indicative of the chaotic image of the adversarial regimes. In this sense, Abstract Expression was relegated to the opposition of American identity, and its artists were stigmatized as Marxist subversives.⁶²

In the 1950s, fed by frustration with a US foreign policy that failed to “win” diplomatic victories against

the Soviet Union, nationalists became increasingly concerned with internal subversion.⁶³ Many artists faced scrutiny for allegedly incorporating “leftist cultural elements” in their works. Five Abstract Expressionists (some of whom were Tobey’s close friends) were deemed subversive because of their alleged associations with progressive components in their arts.⁶⁴ In 1959, HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) began to investigate Pollock (who had died in 1956) for his affiliations with progressive movements.⁶⁵

The overt Eastern calligraphic qualities in Tobey’s work placed him in political jeopardy. For instance, in *Universal Field*, the nebulous background is redolent of the blurry yet overlapping images on the rubbings of a Chinese tripod (figure 14). Further, the rigidity of the lines bears resemblance to the brushstroke carved on Chinese oracle bones (figure 15). In *Space Ritual No. 1*, the stark contrast between the dense black ink and unpainted white space is reminiscent of the similar juxtaposition in *Inscriptions on Burying a Crane* (514), a renowned Chinese masterpiece of calligraphy (figure 16). Importantly, the use of “living line” is an unmistakable Chinese artistic invention. The dynamic brushworks, some bold, some delicate, some sharp, and some soft-edged, which vary in width, length, and size, and indicate movement, speed, and direction, constitute a calligraphic rendition of a symphony orchestra. Yet within the era’s ideological lens, such features were distorted as the tools of cultural propaganda, which, according to Dondero, “have no place in American art.”⁶⁶ Therefore, when Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) saw these sumi paintings, he claimed that they appeared “less interesting than Pollocks and Klines in that they look Chinese.”⁶⁷ The tragedies of his friends and the humiliation from the critics succeeded in alienating Tobey from his sumi’s practice.

It is worthwhile to mention that the tremor and vibration unleashed in *Space Ritual No. 1* might be suggestive of the fallout from atomic weapons. In the postwar era, the destructive power of nuclear weapons made citizens in the US more apprehensive about the biblical Apocalypse. However, the US government kept cultivating a sense of prosperity and creating an illusion of security.⁷¹ *Space Ritual No. 1* expressed the underlying anxiety of the new atomic reality and revealed the grim actuality that the government was attempting to dissimulate. In an era when every hint of association with even mildly liberal causes could lead to accusations of disloyalty, it was natural that Tobey’s seemingly subversive image further marginalized his position in the artistic mainstream, which was dominated by American nationalism. This subversive nature became

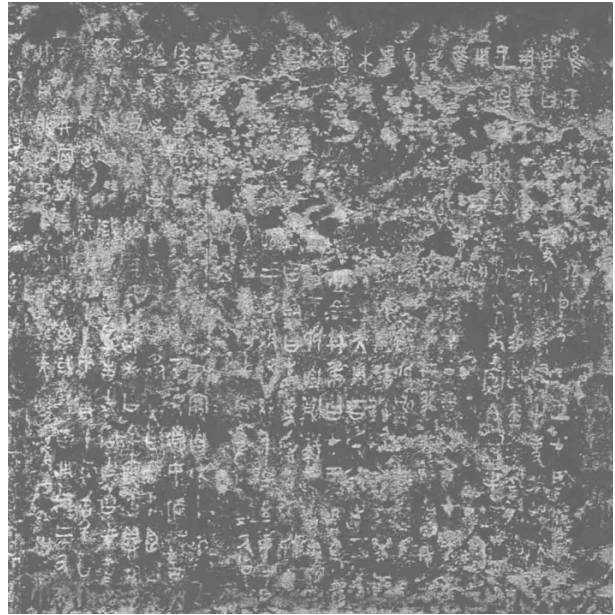


Figure 14. *The Rubbing of Hu Tripod*.⁶⁸



Figure 15. *The Sacrificial Hunting Epigraphy on Ox's Bone*.⁶⁹

one of the biggest impediments to his sumi work.

2.2 The Asian Denial

The erasure of Asian connections is a hallmark of postwar Abstract Expressionism.⁷² Immediately after WWII, artists who benefitted from Japanese culture frequently downplayed the significance of this influence



Figure 16. *Inscriptions on Burying a Crane*.⁷⁰

on their work. For example, Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) dismissed Zen as a superficial fashion, and Robert Motherwell insisted, “No fake Oriental work for me.”⁷³

Franz Kline epitomized the artists who denied this kind of Asian influence. Actually, there was a strong connection between calligraphy and Kline’s abstraction. Published on the cover of the first issue of *Bokubi*, his work was widely perceived as a representation of Japanese modern calligraphy (figure 5).⁷⁴ However, this accolade appeared futile, since Kline repeatedly denied that his work had any relationship to Asian calligraphy. As a matter of fact, he “fought this Oriental interpretation throughout his career,” and, it was reported, “one of the few things that angered him was having his painting compared to Japanese calligraphy.”⁷⁵

According to Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017), nationalists tend to assume an absolutist stance to assert the superiority of their nation above foreign nations.⁷⁶

Japan’s surrender enabled the US government to dictate policy to the Japanese people for seven years, and this relationship was sustained in more subtle forms for years to come. Though Japanese culture had provided great momentum to the efflorescence of Abstract Expressionism, the leading force of modern art was still driven by American nationalistic ideology. Sharing the same nationalistic fervor with which Greenberg viewed contemporary art, Kline would surely have been wary that any apparent relationship of his work with Japanese culture would compromise its effectiveness as a representation of American national identity.⁷⁷

Kline’s defensive gesture was rewarded with enormous recognition. Frank O’Hara (1926-1966), the curator of MoMA, envisioned an “American dream of power” in Kline’s paintings.⁷⁸ For Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989), they were “all-American in effect.”⁷⁹ Kline’s abstraction seems to have been valued as an American national script. His prominent status can be attributed, in part, to his success in distancing himself from associations with Asian components.

In fact, Kline and Tobey shared a high degree of common Asian features in their creations. In figure 5 and figure 3, they both took up wide swaths of swinging ink, evoking Yuichi’s bold and melodramatic image (figure 7). In addition, the void of space and the thrifty usage of lines implied Zen’s metaphysical teaching that the most pictorial space could be animated with the least amount of information.⁸⁰ Moreover, the black-on-white configuration was another Asian tradition. Unlike Kline, Tobey was grateful for the influence of Japanese art on his work. In case New York viewers did not notice his alliance with Japanese calligraphy, *Space Ritual No. 1* and other sumi works were officially labeled as “Sumi Paintings” in his show.⁸¹ However, this conspicuous connection became a liability for him. In Greenberg’s much-cited publication “American-Type Painting,” Tobey was used as a foil to emphasize that none of the great Abstract Expressionists (“least of all Kline”) had felt “more than a cursory interest in Oriental art.”⁸² Even a very positive review of Tobey’s sumi paintings indicated the relationship to Asia was a liability rather than an asset: “The likeness of some works to Asian calligraphy and pine-sprays does not conceal Tobey’s new plastic blossoming.”⁸³ After realizing that the close affinity to Asian art might have recoiled on him, he succumbed to pressure by adopting Kline’s defensive gesture. In 1961, when he was asked about the creation of sumi, he stopped his early invocation of Zen or Chinese art; rather, he mentioned Egyptian art as his inspiration.⁸⁴ He further indicated that he was trying “hard to forget everything about Japan, and become



Figure 17. Mark Tobey, *Sagittarius Red*, 1963, oil, India ink, and chalk crayon on canvas, 83 7/8×152 15/16 in. Kunstmuseum Basel.⁹⁵

Americanized.”⁸⁵ Finally, driven by nationalistic rhetoric, Tobey estranged himself from sumi to forestall the obsolescence of his art.

It is important to note that while the criticisms related to Tobey's art were largely interpreted under the scope of nationalistic ideology, Tobey's works did exhibit some imperfections, which were congruent with the points raised in those criticisms.⁸⁶ For instance, in *Universal Field*, he quasi-geometric lines were interwoven with rigidity and unnaturalness (as if they were carved out with a knife), which matched with William Rubin's criticism that Tobey's work had a “decorative appearance.”⁸⁷ The embedded timidity of the lines also proves that the *Art News* review, which pointed out the “delicacy” and “passivity” of his work, was a trenchant comment.⁸⁸ In *Space Ritual No. 1*, he simplified his forms into bolder, more forthright compositions as a correction to his once fussy brushwork. However, he erred in his consideration of the size of the paper. The tiny scale of this work (29 1/4×37 7/16) failed to compensate for the apparent oversimplification of his composition, making the pictorial language limited and enfeebled. This limit and restraint had already been reflected in Thomas Hess's 1951 comment.⁸⁹

3. Conclusion

Tobey was aware of these problems, as he once admitted

that he had “struggled” with the sumi art because he was always on “a zigzag into and out of old civilizations.”⁹⁰ This could be seen as a reflection of his espousal of and estrangement from sumi practice. Driven by a strong undercurrent of nationalism, he was proud to use sumi to extol American individualism, freedom, and masculinity; however, being influenced by the same nationalistic rhetoric which called for ideological confrontation and Asian denial, his sumi became an endgame project. In this sense, he lost himself amid national expression and got stuck in a paradoxical quandary.

However, his lifelong interest in the Baha'i faith gave him a “crucial spiritual redirection” to his arts.⁹¹ Baha'i opposes all social divisions and barriers, and advocates universalism of human faith.⁹² It gave Tobey a vision of the whole. Tobey once said, “all humanity, whether it be in the East or the West, may be connected through the bond of this divine affection,” indicating a conviction of East-and-West unification.⁹³ This universalism is reflected in his masterpiece *Sagittarius Red* (1963, figure 17), a painting considered by many as one of the towering paintings of the twentieth century.⁹⁴ In this work, the rigidity in the *Universal Field* is turned into a subtle beauty of Eastern brushwork. The restraint in the *Space Ritual No. 1* is liberated into a multidimensional Renaissance space. The geometrical pattern of the cuneiform is visible. The ink from India also imparts an air of chic and mysticism to the whole work. All elements are built up into a whole characterized by

firmness, often by elegance and nuance. From this whole emerges a resonance of the main idea vibrating throughout the work, which can command people's attention fully, like a monumental painting of the past. Most importantly, a much vaster universe can be found in the painting. The intertwining rhythms allude to the vastness of nature and its unknown aspect, encompassing the arc of history and time, and connecting man, nature, and God.

Greenberg later reversed his judgement of Tobey's work. In 1968, he proclaimed that "Tobey wears better and better in general; his truth seems to be enhanced by the contrast with it made by the 'impart' art of the sixties."⁹⁶ However, even before Greenberg's later epiphany, Tobey had become a fixture of American art, an integral part of its midcentury history by copious exhibitions of his work that took place internationally.⁹⁷ In the end, his passion for universalism countered the homogeneity of the nationalistic narrative and reached the great synthesis of East and West.

Tobey knew that he could never perfect the cursive languages of Asian art. Nor did he want to. Though his

art was once influenced by American nationalism, the universalism of the Baha'i faith finally enabled him to merge with an interconnected space with more spiritual communion and tolerance. By marrying Oriental line to Occidental mass, and by pioneering the expression of universalism, he created the faith of unity and the beauty of humanity in the works of his later life. Just like his perpetual wandering and cross-cultural communication, his choice endowed his hybrid abstractions with international, rather than local, attraction.

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Editor: Yao Xiao

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美國民族主義對馬克托比的水墨創作影響

曾經緯

摘要：馬克·托比（1890—1976）是將日本書法融入西方繪畫的典型抽象表現主義畫家。1957年，他創作五十餘幅水墨抽象作品，《空間儀式1號》是其研習日本藝術的代表。然而，這種強烈的亞洲風格影響使其在藝術界邊緣化，導致他停止水墨創作。美國民族主義促使他選擇水墨創作，又因意識形態對抗使其疏離。晚年，巴哈伊教的普世主義推動他實現東西方藝術的融合。

關鍵詞：抽象表現主義；書法；美國民族主義；意識形態對抗；巴哈伊信仰