

# Learning from ‘The East’: Mark Tobey’s ‘White Writing’ and the Shaping of American Abstract Expressionism

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**Abstract** US artist Mark Tobey (1890-1976) developed his “white writing” style under the influence of his experiences in China and Japan and his mentorship with Chinese artist Teng Baiye (1900-1980). This style integrates the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy with Buddhist and Daoist principles. This paper examines Tobey’s work as a case of “cross-pollination”, highlighting the interplay between American modernism and East Asian art. It argues that transcultural communication is a reciprocal learning process, repositioning American abstract painting within an international context rather than a purely nationalist one.

**Keywords** Mark Tobey. Teng Baiye. Chinese ink painting. American abstract expressionism. Cultural hybridisation.

**Summary** 1 Mark Tobey’s Formative Influences and the Artistic Bond with Teng Baiye. – 2 Reframing Modernism: Broader Implications of East Asian Influence on American Abstract Expressionism. – 3 Artistic Pilgrimage: Tobey’s Pivotal Journeys to China and Japan. – 4 Visual Harmonies: The Influence of Chinese Landscape Poetics and Calligraphic Flow in Tobey’s Oeuvre. – 5 Mark Tobey and East Asian Influence: Reframing Cross-Cultural Exchanges in American Modernism.

Since the twentieth century, the art world has evolved into a complex network of interconnected influences, transcending regional boundaries and fostering a global exchange of ideas and practices. This transformation has promoted dynamic interactions between diverse cultural traditions, resulting in an inclusive art scene that reflects a variety of global perspectives. While the early twentieth century was dominated by European movements, the post-World War II art landscape in the United States is characterised by a rich tapestry of interconnected artistic expressions, incorporating influences from around the world, particularly from East Asia.<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines the integration of East Asian aesthetics and philosophical principles into American art, with a focus on the American abstract artist Mark Tobey (1890-1976). It explores how Tobey absorbed and adapted these influences to develop his unique style. In particular, the paper highlights Tobey’s engagement with Zen Buddhism<sup>2</sup> and Chinese calligraphy, influences that led to the creation of his distinctive ‘white writing’<sup>3</sup> technique – a significant example of cultural and artistic fusion in postwar American painting.

This research explores the reciprocal influences between American abstract expressionism and

1 Hawkins 1957, 118.

2 I am using the term ‘Zen Buddhism’ because of its strong connection to the intellectual and cultural movement in postwar America. During the 1940s and 1950s, Zen Buddhism from Japan had a profound influence on American intellectual and artistic circles. Figures like Japanese philosopher D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966) played a key role in introducing Zen philosophy, which reshaped both the creation and interpretation of art. I will expand on this topic later in the text.

3 The term ‘white writing’ will be further interpreted on page 93.



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East Asian artistic and cultural philosophies, focusing on Mark Tobey's interactions with his Chinese contemporary Teng Baiye (1900-1980) and his studies in China and Japan. It argues that Chinese calligraphy, with its emphasis on the expressive potential of the brushstroke, significantly impacted Tobey's artistic development. Addition-

ally, Chinese and Japanese philosophies, such as Zen Buddhism, played a crucial role in shaping Tobey's painting practice. These ideas inspired a more expansive and inclusive approach to modernism, moving beyond psychological introspection and embracing a deeper connection with the surrounding world.

## 1 Mark Tobey's Formative Influences and the Artistic Bond with Teng Baiye

Mark Tobey's early career was marked by a series of personal and artistic transformations. Initially working as an illustrator, his artistic direction shifted dramatically after his conversion to the Bahá'í Faith in 1918. This spiritual shift redefined his approach to art, encouraging him to explore the integration of spiritual and artistic practices. In 1922, he moved to Seattle and spent significant periods there, contributing deeply to the region's cultural life. Tobey's art was profoundly influenced by his environment in Seattle, a city that offered a stark contrast to the culturally intense New York art scene, which was still deeply rooted in European traditions. Seattle's proximity to Native American culture and the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest provided Tobey with a unique spiritual and metaphysical connection to nature, which became a central theme in his work. This connection fostered an appreciation for interconnectedness and spirituality, both of which are evident in his paintings. Seattle's isolation and cultural diversity allowed Tobey to cultivate a style that was open to varied influences and less constrained by the norms of Western art.<sup>4</sup>

A key influence on Tobey's artistic evolution was his relationship with Teng Baiye, a Chinese artist and scholar he met in Seattle in 1923 [fig. 1]. On May 18, 1928, *The Seattle Daily Times* reported on Teng's solo exhibition at the Henry Gallery at the University of Washington, noting that Seattle modernist Mark Tobey had served as one of the guides for Teng's exhibition.<sup>5</sup> Teng's artistic activities and achievements in Seattle were significant and multifaceted. From 1927 to 1928, he taught Chinese painting and art history at the University of Washington, making him one of the first Chinese artists to teach at a European or U.S. university. During this time, he also lectured extensively on the history and philosophy of Chinese art along the West

Coast, discussing topics such as the comparison between Western and Chinese painting.<sup>6</sup> In 1928, Teng exhibited both brush and finger paintings at prominent galleries, including the Henry Gallery in Seattle and the East West Gallery of Fine Arts in San Francisco. His finger-painting technique was a relatively rare practice in Chinese art. Without the use of a brush, it was noted for its spontaneity and direct engagement with the medium [fig. 2]. His works were commercially successful, with paintings selling for up to \$500, and his innovative methods were highlighted in publications such as *Town Crier*.<sup>7</sup>

Teng, well-versed in both Eastern and Western artistic traditions, introduced Tobey to traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy techniques. Teng contrasted Eastern and Western art, criticising Western art for its focus on realism. He argued that in the "mechanical age", Western artists overly emphasised depicting things exactly as they appear, rather than capturing their essence or a romantic perspective. He believed that people would eventually tire of this strict realism and turn toward "Oriental art", which offered a more imaginative and expressive approach.<sup>8</sup> Teng also noted that, "the modern art of Europe is too intellectual, with an over-emphasis on form, disregarding texture and losing all sentimentality".<sup>9</sup> These ideas would later profoundly influence Mark Tobey's rethinking of Western and Eastern art, leading him to integrate the spiritual depth and fluidity of Eastern aesthetics into his own abstract works. As Tobey concurred,

I wanted a picture that one felt more than one looked at. [...] The Chinese have always talked about this feeling that exudes from a painting, and I've for a long time wanted something to come slowly to you. (Birnie Danzker 2014, 8)

<sup>4</sup> Jones 1993, 639.

<sup>5</sup> Birnie Danzker 2014, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Clarke 2014, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Clarke 2014, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke 2014, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Clarke 2002, 174.



**Figure 1** Portrait of Teng Baiye with dedication to Mark Tobey. 1926. Photograph, 12.7 × 8.9 cm. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, neg. UW 23723z



**Figure 2** Teng Baiye, *A Chicken Family*. s.d. Photograph, 12.7 × 8.9 cm. Location unknown. Illustrated in Teng 1933 and in "Finger-Tip Painting and the Painter...", *Town Crier*, 25 December 1928 (with the title *Cock and Family*)

The most significant turning point came in the 1920s when Teng began giving Tobey lessons.<sup>10</sup> Teng's teachings on Chinese brushwork enabled Tobey to incorporate calligraphic dynamism into his art, playing a pivotal role in helping him fuse Eastern artistic principles with his broader vision. This integration distinguished Tobey from mainstream American art practices, giving his work a unique cross-cultural dimension. Tobey's personal writings reflect the profound impact of Teng's teachings. He noted:

I have just had my first lesson in Chinese brush from my friend and artist Teng Kwei (Teng Baiye)... There is pressure and release. Each move-

ment, like tracks in the snow, is recorded and often loved for itself [...] All is in motion now [...] The tree in front of my studio in Seattle is all rhythm, lifting, springing upward. (Seitz 1983, 66)

The fluid linearity of Chinese brushwork served as a gateway for Tobey to engage with the philosophical perspectives of Buddhism and Daoism, both of which prioritise process over substance. This exposure significantly altered his perception, offering him an entirely new way of seeing the world. This reflection reveals how Tobey began to see nature not as a collection of static, solid forms but as interconnected energies in constant flux, a con-

<sup>10</sup> Clarke 2002, 174.

cept rooted in the Chinese philosophy of *qi* – the ever-changing currents of cosmic energy. His exposure to this idea shifted his artistic perspective toward a more holistic understanding of the world, where every brushstroke represented the flow of energy rather than the depiction of shape. His art dematerialised form, much like in Chinese philosophy, reducing objects to pure rhythm and movement rather than solid structures.

After his time in Seattle in the 1920s, Tobey further refined his artistic vision during his tenure at Dartington Hall in England from 1931 to 1937. As Tobey reflected,

when I was in peaceful Devon in England, my experience in the East unexpectedly bore fruit, and I drew a number of white lines amidst a few dark forms in blue. (Kelley 1983, 86)

This realisation inspired the creation of Tobey's signature 'white writing' style.<sup>11</sup> This style features intricate white or light-coloured calligraphic patterns layered over an abstract background of thousands of densely interwoven brushstrokes.

Dartington Hall, under the patronage of Dorothy Elmhirst, provided Tobey with a conducive environment for artistic experimentation and cross-cultural exchange. As a patron with a deep interest in Asian culture, Elmhirst funded Tobey's travels to Japan and China in 1934, alongside potter Bernard Leach (1887-1979).<sup>12</sup> This opportunity enabled Tobey to fully immerse himself in East Asian cultural practices, which played a crucial role in fostering his integration of Eastern aesthetics into his artistic style and fuelling his innovative ap-

proach to abstract expressionism, ultimately establishing him as a key figure in the movement.<sup>13</sup>

Tobey's approach to art sharply diverged from the predominant themes of the New York School, which often portrayed the artist as an isolated, tormented figure grappling with internal chaos.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Tobey embraced a more contemplative and holistic perspective, influenced by his deep engagement with Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies. His work shifted focus away from the individual psyche, presenting a broader, interconnected view of the world and suggesting a more expansive vision of modernism. This philosophical and stylistic contrast highlights Tobey's distinctive role in American modernism, setting him apart from the ego-centric approaches of his New York contemporaries.

John Cage, another pivotal figure influenced by East Asian philosophies, shared Tobey's critique of the New York School's focus on the solitary, ego-driven artist.<sup>15</sup> Cage's artistic practices, which celebrated concepts like silence, randomness, and depersonalisation, offered an alternative to the emotion-intensive methods prevalent in New York. This comparison underscores the varied ways in which Eastern philosophies influenced American art, highlighting the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural exchanges in the development of modernism. Both Tobey's and Cage's works introduce a distinct narrative within the history of American modernism – one that emphasised spiritual connection and cultural integration over personal expression. This approach highlights a more inclusive understanding of modern art, expanding its scope beyond traditional Western perspectives.

## 2 Reframing Modernism: Broader Implications of East Asian Influence on American Abstract Expressionism

The influence of East Asian philosophies on Tobey and Cage not only shaped their personal styles in art creation but also reframed the larger narrative of modernism. To fully appreciate Mark Tobey's artistic contributions, it is essential to explore both the context of his interactions with fellow abstract artists and his involvement in the broader New York art scene. Understanding these dynamics provides deeper insight into how Tobey's

work was received and valued, especially in relation to his engagement with Zen Buddhism and related philosophical movements.

Tobey operated within a postwar U.S. 'climate of ideas' that was heavily influenced by Eastern thought. This intellectual and cultural milieu of the 1940s and 1950s in the U.S. – especially the widespread interest in Zen within the art circles – was instrumental not only in the American

<sup>11</sup> A deeper examination of this painting will follow in the subsequent text.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald 2012, 43.

<sup>13</sup> MacDonald 2012, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg 1961, 217.

<sup>15</sup> Jones 1993, 639.



Figure 3 Mark Tobey, *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*. 1942. Tempera on board, 55.3 × 76.0 cm. © 2024 Estate of Mark Tobey/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

creation of art but also in how critics and contemporaries interpreted these works.<sup>16</sup> Figures like D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), whose writings on Zen provided accessible introductions to Buddhist philosophy, were central to this movement. Artists like Tobey and Cage were deeply influenced by Suzuki's teachings. These artists not only engaged with his ideas through books but also attended his public lectures at Columbia University, allowing Suzuki's philosophies to permeate the artistic community and redefine the relationship between East Asian thought and American art.

The growing interest in Zen philosophy among these artists marked a significant shift in American abstract expressionism, broadening the movement's scope to encompass a more spiritual and universal vision. Tobey and Cage's engagement with Eastern philosophies demonstrated how American artists could break away from the West-

ern tradition of focusing on the artist's psyche and personal turmoil, moving instead toward a more interwoven and comprehensive understanding of the world. This reframing of modernism, enriched by East Asian influence, challenged conventional notions of what modern art could represent and opened new possibilities for artistic expression.<sup>17</sup>

Mark Tobey's engagement with Zen philosophy is reflected both in his approach to painting and his lifestyle. He believed that spiritual awakening could arise from the appreciation of everyday encounters, a belief that shaped his distinctive 'white writing' technique. This style, characterised by fluid, expressive brushstrokes, integrates Zen philosophy, seeking to capture the interconnectedness and impermanence of reality. This integration is particularly evident in his work *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* (1942) [fig. 3], where translucent tempera wash is used

16 Gallery label of Mark Tobey's *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*.

17 Clarke 1993, 360.

to partially obscure a complex background filled with fragmented symbols. This technique invites viewers to look beyond the surface, much like Zen practices encourage a deeper engagement with the present moment. Two years later, Tobey moved away from iconography altogether, developing all-over patterns that deliberately avoided a single focal point. John Cage, who acquired one of these works shortly after its completion in 1944, recalled: "I happened to look at the pavement, and I noticed that the experience [...] was the same as the experience of looking at the Tobey".<sup>18</sup> This moment underscored for Cage the transformative power of Tobey's art, highlighting its ability to alter perception by encouraging a more mindful way of seeing.

Cage recounted a walk to a Japanese restaurant that extended over many hours because Tobey was "constantly stopping and pointing out things to see".<sup>19</sup> During this walk "down to Skid Row" for Japanese food, Tobey taught Cage a new "way of seeing, which is to say involvement with painting, or my involvement with life even".<sup>20</sup> Cage later reflected on this walk as a profound revelation.<sup>21</sup> He explained:

It was the first time that someone else had given me a lesson in looking without prejudice, someone who didn't compare what he was seeing with something before. (Cage 1981, 158)

Cage immortalised this experience in a mesostic (a poem with a key term spelled out vertically through the centre of the lines):

*each Thing he saw*

he asked us tO look at.  
By thE time we reached the japanese  
restaurant  
*our eYes were open.*<sup>22</sup>

This poem encapsulates the essence of Tobey's influence on Cage, demonstrating how a simple walk became a transformative lesson in observation and openness. Cage and Tobey shared a philosophical kinship, both seeking to expand the boundaries of traditional art through the integration of Eastern thought. However, while Cage used disruption and chance as his tools, Tobey sought a more integrated and spiritually cohesive approach to his art. Their shared philosophies yet differing methodologies highlight the varied ways in which similar influences can manifest in artistic expression.

These anecdotes underscore the significant role that Zen Buddhism and its principles played in shaping the artistic practices of Tobey and Cage. The pervasive influence of Zen not only informed their creative processes but also provided a philosophical framework that questioned the conventional boundaries of Western art. The integration of Eastern philosophical concepts, particularly those related to a metaphysical state of mindfulness and presence and the impermanence of reality, significantly influenced the avant-garde movements in the U.S. Tobey's work, and the broader movement it was part of, should be seen as a part of an international narrative of artistic expression rather than a purely American story. This approach challenges the traditional nationalist perspective and emphasises the importance of transcultural communication as a mutual process of learning and exchange.

### 3 Artistic Pilgrimage: Tobey's Pivotal Journeys to China and Japan

In 1934, Tobey's journey to China and Japan had a profound impact on him, particularly during his stay in Shanghai with Teng Baiye at 364 Rue Lafayette - now Fuxing Zhong Lu - located in the French Concession, a district known for its distinctly cosmopolitan atmosphere.<sup>23</sup> Tobey further refined his skills under Teng Baiye's tutelage, deepened his appreciation for the expressive potential of line and movement - fundamental aspects of Chinese art.

This influence is evident in works such as *China* (1934) [fig. 4], where Tobey's use of ink on paper demonstrates his mastery of Chinese brush techniques. The overall impression of the piece is one of movement and flow, emphasised by the fluid ink wash and varied brushwork. The tonal shifts and brushstroke techniques add to a meditative or contemplative quality, inviting viewers to explore the forms and relationships between the shapes. The painting's skilful use of ink wash and brush-

<sup>18</sup> Gallery label of Mark Tobey's *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*.

<sup>19</sup> Gallery label of Mark Tobey's *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*.

<sup>20</sup> Reed 2016, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Cage 1981, 158.

<sup>22</sup> Cage 1973, 187.

<sup>23</sup> Clarke 2014, 57.



**Figure 4**  
Mark Tobey, *China*, 1934.  
Ink on paper, 24.1 × 18.4 cm.  
Private collection

work highlights Tobey's ability to manipulate tone, depth, and texture while maintaining a strong abstract aesthetic. The interplay between structured forms and free-flowing ink encourages multiple interpretations and a deeper engagement with the medium. Tobey later mentioned that he generally steered clear of using colour, as he believed it interfered with the "linear clarity" of his work.<sup>24</sup>

During Tobey's time in China, he also visited various cultural sites with Teng Baiye, including the gardens of Suzhou and an art exhibition showcasing paintings, calligraphy, and ceramics. Before departing for Kyoto by ship on June 8, 1934, Tobey

travelled with Teng to Hangzhou, where he continued his studies of formal calligraphic brushwork at an art school [fig. 5]. Teng's influence on Tobey's understanding is evident in his lecture *Expressionism in Chinese Art* where he explained: "In contrast to Western art, Chinese painting is lineal [...] whilst Western art is the massing of different colors to make a form". Teng's teachings played a pivotal role in shaping Tobey's artistic development, particularly his emphasis on line over mass. This influence is particularly noticeable in works like *Broadway Norm* (1935) [fig. 6], which will be further explored in the following discussion.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Seitz 1962, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Birnie Danzker 2014, 10.

Additionally, Teng Baiye's attitude towards nature highlights a contrast between the Western and Chinese approaches. He emphasises that Chinese artists view themselves as "only a small part of this realm, and not the conquerors of nature, as the Greeks had believed".<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, he argued that an artist "must absorb its feeling and have it penetrate his head and eye, mind and heart" when painting, stressing the importance of connecting with the subject on a deep, emotional level.<sup>27</sup> In a conversation recalled by Tobey, Teng questioned "why Western artists choose to paint a fish only after it is dead", characterising still life as "a rather dead way of looking at life".<sup>28</sup> This critique and approach led Tobey to discover "an alternative kind of subject matter", focused on the "new understanding of the world in terms of process or dynamic interconnectedness".<sup>29</sup>

Alongside his time in China and interactions with Teng Baiye, Tobey's stay at a Zen monastery in Japan had a profound impact on his artistic approach, fostering a deep sense of spiritual introspection and encouraging him to seek inspiration from nature. Zen Buddhism's emphasis on mindfulness, simplicity, and the beauty of imperfection resonated deeply with Tobey, inspiring him to create works that reflected these principles. Tobey observed that Western society tends to concentrate on the artificial environments it has constructed, often to the detriment of the natural world. In the West, nature is frequently taken for granted, with animals primarily seen in controlled settings like zoos, which Tobey interpreted as emblematic of humanity's desire to exert dominance over the natural world. In contrast, he was deeply impressed by the Japanese attitude towards nature, which he perceived as open and profoundly respectful. Tobey noted that the Japanese possess a profound sensitivity to nature in its entirety, valuing even its minutest details as integral elements of a larger cosmic order.<sup>30</sup> He recounted his experience at a Zen monastery, where he was given a sumi ink painting of a large free brush circle to meditate upon. He reflected,

What was it? Day after day I would look at it. Was it selflessness? Was it the Universe-where I could lose 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

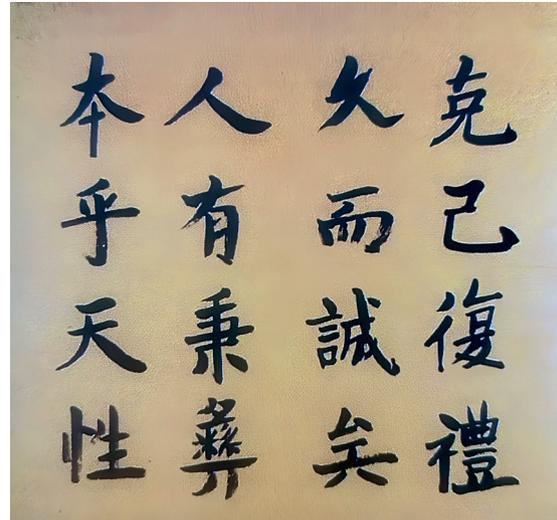


Figure 5 Mark Tobey, *16 Chinese Characters*. 1934.  
Brush and Indian ink, 27.3 × 31.1 cm.  
By permission of The Dartington Hall Trust, Totnes.  
© 2014 Estate of Mark Tobey / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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. When I saw a great dragon painted in free brush style on a ceiling in a temple in Kyoto I thought of the same rhythmical power of Michelangelo-the rendering of the form was different-the swirling clouds accompanying his majestic flight in the heavenly sphere were different but the same power of the spirit pervaded both. 'Let nature take over in your work'. (Tobey 1958, 24)

Inspired by Zen Buddhism, Tobey believed that artists should set aside their ego and preconceived notions when creating art. He emphasised the importance of cultivating a specific state of mind - one of peace and calm - before beginning to paint. For Tobey, this mental state was crucial for guiding the creative process, allowing the artist's true expression to flow naturally onto the canvas. His engagement with East Asian philosophy reflects this idea of transcending painting itself to forge a deeper connection with the universe, aligning with his more expansive artistic aspirations.

This artistic approach is profoundly influenced by the principles of East Asian calligraphy and ink

<sup>26</sup> Clarke 2014, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Clarke 2014, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Teng 1933, 488-9.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke 2014, 59.

<sup>30</sup> Clarke 1993, 364.



**Figure 6** Mark Tobey, *Broadway Norm*. 1935. Tempera on cardboard, 33.6 × 24.7 cm. Collection of Carol Ely Harper

painting, where the artist's brushwork is seen as a direct manifestation and extension of their inner state. In these traditions, the act of painting is not about faithfully replicating reality but about capturing the essence and spirit of a subject through spontaneous and free gestures. This emphasis on fluid and expressive lines had a significant impact on Tobey's abstract painting style, inspiring him to adopt techniques that convey a sense of perpetual motion and transformation. Just as calligraphic strokes embody a reality in constant flux, Tobey's

'white writing' paintings reflect the dynamic energy of calligraphy, with brushstroke-like forms that emerge and dissolve on the canvas. These intricate webs of lines and splashes of paint capture the fleeting nature of existence.<sup>31</sup> Tobey's artistic practice looks to 'the East' to explore spirituality within abstraction – offering a way to experience oneself from an external perspective, as an 'other', which serves as a starting point for deeper self-understanding.

#### 4 Visual Harmonies: The Influence of Chinese Landscape Poetics and Calligraphic Flow in Tobey's Oeuvre

Mark Tobey's 'white writing' reflects an all-over continuum style in which there is no clear focal point or division between image and background. Instead, his compositions present a network of interconnected lines, inviting viewers to engage with the entire surface rather than focusing on one specific area. This approach is reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting, which emphasises a rhythmic flow and the interconnectedness of elements throughout the composition. Notably, while all-over composition in abstract painting is often associated with Jackson Pollock, Tobey had introduced works without a central focal point as early as 1944 – two years before Pollock's emergence with this style. Pollock's most renowned works, produced during his 'drip period', came later, between 1947 and 1950.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, Tobey's incorporation of Chinese artistic principles, particularly calligraphy, offers an additional layer of complexity to his approach. Chinese calligraphy, with its emphasis on fluidity, spontaneity, and the dynamic interaction between ink and surface, led Tobey to explore new forms of abstraction. This cross-cultural exchange encouraged a deeper appreciation of the surface itself as a critical component of composition, rather than merely a background or support for the image. Tobey's all-over painting style draws from this tradition, treating the surface as an active participant in the creative process.

The comparison between Tobey and other American abstract expressionists like Pollock is particularly compelling. While both artists are often associated with the concept of 'action painting', their approaches diverge in important ways. As John Hay points out, New York School action painting – exemplified by Pollock – focuses heavily

ly on the physicality and expressive power of the splashing and dripping.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Tobey's work is distinct in its incorporation of the disciplined, rhythmic, and spiritual qualities of Chinese calligraphy. This difference underscores Tobey's unique ability to bridge Eastern and Western artistic traditions, creating a form of abstract expressionism that emphasises not only the physical act of painting but also its spiritual dimensions.

In *Threading Light* (1942) [fig. 7], Tobey's mature use of the 'white writing' technique brings this concept to a new level of complexity. The painting is characterised by a dense, all-over network of fine, interwoven white lines that generate a luminous, almost ethereal quality, reflecting the interconnectedness of all elements – a core principle of Eastern philosophy. This composition deliberately avoids a single focal point, encouraging the viewer's gaze to wander freely across the canvas, much like the contemplative experience of engaging with a traditional Chinese landscape painting. Additionally, as Marguerite Müller-Yao argued, Tobey's calligraphic painting is distinguished by his integration of *kaishu* (standard Chinese script) and *caoshu* (cursive script), which reflect both symbolic and gestural elements. His brushwork is fluid and continuous, characterised by two levels of joining: within individual characters and across two characters, creating a sense of rapid, spontaneous connection through his strokes. Müller-Yao describes *kaishu* in Tobey's work as more symbolic and semantic, while *caoshu* emphasises a gestural, process-oriented approach. This method underscores Tobey's mastery of ink wash, allowing for subtle gradations of colour and variation in form. His process unfolds incrementally, "step by step, line by line", creating a sense of inherent simulta-

31 Clarke 1993, 359.

32 Ding 2020, 405.

33 Hay 1985, 98.



**Figure 7** Mark Tobey, *Threading Light*. 1942. Tempera on board, 74.5 × 50.1 cm. © 2024 Estate of Mark Tobey/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

neity that culminates in what Müller-Yao refers to as “sculptural unity”.<sup>34</sup>

The impact of these techniques is also evident in works like *Broadway Norm* (1935), where Tobey experimented with purely linear methods, forming a complex network of lines that evoke the rhythmic and flowing essence of Chinese calligraphy. The painting is marked by an intricate interplay of positive and negative space, capturing the essence of both the bustling urban environment of New York and the contemplative tranquillity of Eastern aesthetics.

Explicitly referring to *Broadway Norm*, Tobey stated that,

the calligraphic impulse [he] had received in China [had] enabled [him] to convey, without being bound to forms, the motion of people and cars and the whole vitality of the scene. (Seitz 1962, 371)

He explained:

Line became dominant instead of mass, but I still attempted to interpenetrate it with a spatial existence. ‘Writing’ the painting, whether in color or neutral tones, became a necessity for me. I often thought of this way of working as a performance since it had to be achieved all at once or not at all—the very opposite of building up as I had previously done. (Kuh 1962, 240)

Tobey prioritised line and movement. As he observed, “East artists have been more concerned with line and in the West with mass”.<sup>35</sup> Tobey believed this aesthetic contrast was deeply tied to cultural and social differences, with Eastern art embracing fluidity and interconnectedness. This understanding shaped his own artistic philosophy, driving him to explore the dynamic and expressive possibilities of line.

Furthermore, Tobey adopted the ‘flying white’ technique from Chinese calligraphy, a method involving swift brushstrokes with dark ink on a relatively dry brush, resulting in white streaks where the ink does not fully adhere to the canvas. This technique, defined by the dynamic interaction between ink and surface, creates a unique textural effect. In Tobey’s ‘white writing’ style, the expressive streaks created through these rapid brush movements become a defining visual element. By incorporating this method, Tobey not only intro-

duced a sense of fluidity and texture into his paintings but also bridged East Asian artistic principles with American abstract practices.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the Chinese concept of the calligraphic line, noted for its “thickening-thinning” quality and expressive movement, had a significant impact on Tobey.<sup>37</sup> This type of line, which conveys a deeper meaning and spirit, became a central element in his work. His dynamic use of line was not only a method of representation but also an integral part of the subject itself, blending Eastern aesthetics with his unique approach to abstraction.

Mark Tobey’s painting *China* (1934) exemplifies a profound synthesis of Western abstract expressionism and Eastern artistic traditions. It draws heavily on the techniques and philosophies of Chinese ink wash painting and even incorporates traditional Chinese painting mediums, such as ink and paper. Tobey places a strong emphasis on the gradations of ink washes, which create a sense of depth and movement across the paper. His experimentation with Chinese ink painting materials allowed him to delve deeper into Eastern methods and aesthetics. By manipulating the ink, Tobey was able to capture the fluidity and spontaneity that are hallmarks of Chinese painting techniques, skilfully blending dark, opaque areas with lighter, translucent washes to create a dynamic interplay of light and shadow.

This manipulation of ink in *China* aligns with the Chinese concept of ‘ink as colour’, where the ink is treated not just as a single hue but as a medium capable of conveying a wide range of tonal variations. In Chinese painting, the phrase ‘ink as colour’ reflects the technique of using water to adjust the intensity and gradation of ink, allowing the artist to depict the full spectrum of colours found in nature. Different schools of thought interpret these ‘five colours’ in various ways – some define them as burnt, dense, heavy, light, and clear, while others describe them as dark, light, dry, wet, and black. Despite these variations, the underlying principle remains the same: black ink should be capable of expressing a rich diversity of shades and tones. In *China*, Tobey’s gradations of ink reflect this philosophy, capturing the vivid and dynamic essence of the subject matter through the layers of colour created by the ink’s varying densities. By embracing the concept of ‘ink as colour’, Tobey reinterprets traditional Chinese ideas within his abstract expressionist framework, bridging cultural artistic traditions and demonstrating how

<sup>34</sup> Müller-Yao 1985, 331-2.

<sup>35</sup> Tobey 1958, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Powers 2013, 324.

<sup>37</sup> Hawkins 1957, 122.

a single medium can convey a multitude of visual experiences.

Additionally, inspired by Chinese art, Mark Tobey reinterpreted the concept of void and emptiness by using negative space as an active, positive element in his compositions. This approach mirrors the Chinese landscape painting tradition, where the void between forms is considered as meaningful as the forms themselves. In Tobey's work, the empty spaces are not merely backgrounds but dynamic entities that embody both fullness and emptiness, creating a visual tension against the contrasting calligraphic lines. In the painting *China*, the voids actively interact with the inked areas, generating visual tension and harmony that reflect Eastern aesthetic philosophies, where what is left unpainted holds as much significance as what is depicted. The empty spaces invite the viewer's gaze to wander freely, fostering a meditative experience similar to that of viewing a traditional Chinese landscape painting.

The careful gradation of ink washes in *China* enhances the painting's complexity, transitioning smoothly from one tonal area to another and capturing a sense of movement and transformation. This technique reinforces the idea of an interconnected and ever-changing universe, a core tenet of Eastern philosophy. The subtle shifts in tone and the seamless blending of washes mimic natural elements like water or mist, creating a composition that feels both expansive and intimate. By focusing on the nuances of tone and the balance between filled and unfilled spaces, Tobey creates a work that is visually dynamic and philosophically resonant, inviting viewers to engage with the interplay of form and emptiness, presence and absence.

In addition to his painting *China*, Mark Tobey's *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* (1942) exemplifies his mastery in blending Eastern philosophy with Western abstract expressionism. This work captures the chaotic, fragmented nature of modern life while deeply exploring concepts of space and void. The lower portion of the canvas features intricate white lines, spirals, and geometric shapes, which resemble a web-like structure. These complex forms are reminiscent of Tobey's 'white writing' technique, but in this instance, they appear more deliberate and almost mechanical. The shapes reference the 'gadget era' in the title, symbolising the tension between human creativity and the encroachment of technology. The lines float within the space, contributing to the all-over composition, which denies the viewer a single focal point and encourages an exploration of

the entire surface, much like a traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Tobey's use of gradations of colour and tonal variation is particularly effective in this work, where dark, opaque areas blend seamlessly into lighter, misty and ethereal zones. These transitions reflect the Chinese ink wash tradition, where tonal shifts in ink represent light, shadow, and the *qi* – or life force – flowing through nature. This fluidity captures the tension between form and formlessness, embodying Tobey's understanding of *qi* as the force that animates all forms and balances emptiness with substance.<sup>38</sup>

In Chinese painting, the surface is not merely a passive background but an active participant, emphasising the interpenetration of form and space. John Hay discusses this concept, noting that the surface in Chinese art plays a vital role in the creation of meaning, engaging directly with the energy of the medium. Tobey's work reflects this approach, as his paintings often highlight the interaction between brushstroke and surface, with each stroke serving as an expression of the artist's *qi*. This aligns with the Chinese tradition, where the brushstroke becomes a manifestation of the artist's life force, creating a living, dynamic composition.<sup>39</sup>

The void and emptiness in *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* become central to the composition, echoing Zen philosophy, in which the absence of form is as significant as its presence. The sweeping, translucent colour washes suggest vastness and evoke the idea of the void – not as an absence, but as a space full of potential. These voids surround and interact with the intricate mechanical forms, highlighting the tension between the organic and artificial, between life and technology. Tobey's work lacks a clear horizon or structured separation between foreground and background. Instead, the forms seem to float, much like mist through a mountain landscape. The absence of a focal point allows the viewer's eye to wander, inviting a reflective exploration of the intricate lines and shapes throughout the composition. This reflects the Daoist and Zen Buddhist concept of interconnectedness, where all forms, from the smallest detail to the larger void, are part of a unified whole.

In comparison, the renowned Zen painting master Yujian (13th century)'s *Mountain Village in the Mist* (c. 1250) [fig. 8], similarly explores the dynamic relationship between form and void, though within the context of a natural landscape. In Yujian's painting, the mist envelops the mountains and village, creating a seamless transition

38 Hay 1985, 100.

39 Hay 1985, 100.



Figure 8 Yujian, *Mountain Village in the Mist*. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo. From *So Gen no kaiga*. 2nd ed. Kyoto: Benrido Co., 1971, pl. 123

between solid and empty space. The brushstrokes are sparse, leaving much of the canvas blank, yet this blankness is active, shaping the visible forms and guiding the viewer's gaze through the composition.

While Yujian's work evokes a meditative atmosphere through the interplay of form and emptiness, Tobey's painting reflects the complexities and tensions of urban life. Yet both works transcend their material boundaries. In both, the concept of *qi* – the life force – flows through the compositions, linking the forms to the surrounding space. This connection between form and void is central to both Tobey's abstract expressionism and Yujian's Zen-inspired landscape, reflecting a shared aesthetic principle that crosses cultural boundaries.

Both *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* and *Mountain Village in the Mist* emphasise the fluid interaction between presence and absence, form and void. Tobey's work reinterprets these traditional concepts through the lens of modern urban life, while Yujian's painting offers a more contemplative reflection on nature. Yet in both, the spirit of *qi* animates the compositions, guiding the viewer through a meditative exploration of interconnectedness, whether in the natural world or the technological age.

As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, Mark Tobey became increasingly devoted to his sumi ink paintings, influenced by his previous experiences

in Japan and China, as well as a growing desire to explore new artistic directions. He described this period of experimentation with ink as a "natural growth" from his experiences with the brush and sumi ink in Asia. While he attributed much of his inspiration for his sumi paintings of 1957 to his time in Asia, his experimentation deepened through community painting sessions in Seattle with Japanese American artists such as Paul Horiuchi (1906-1999) and George Tsutakawa (1910-1997) [fig. 9].<sup>40</sup> He also had strong ties with Zen master and kendo teacher Tamotsu Takizaki (1882-1962), who owned Far West, an antiques store in Seattle. Takizaki played a key role in Tobey's creative philosophy, encouraging him to "let nature take over" in his work, which Tobey interpreted as getting out of the way to allow a deeper state of mind and spirit to influence the painting process. This connection helped Tobey further integrate Eastern philosophy into his artistic practice, which became central to his work in the late 1950s.<sup>41</sup>

In his recollections of visits to Tobey's studio, George Tsutakawa emphasised Tobey's dedication to his craft and his philosophical approach to art. Tsutakawa noted that Tobey was meticulous about his materials, often bringing out a collection of brushes and fine paper. Tobey also owned an old collection of sumi paintings, landscapes and small Zen scrolls from San Francisco, which he

<sup>40</sup> Birnie Danzker 2014, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Tobey 1958, 20.



**Figure 9**  
Joshel Namkung,  
Photograph of Paul Horiuchi,  
George Tsutakawa, Mark  
Tobey, and Kiyoshi Saito  
(1907-1997) painting in the  
home of George Tsutakawa,  
1960. Gelatin silver print.  
Courtesy of Irene Namkung

would hang in his studio and discuss at length. These conversations frequently centred around Tobey's deep engagement with Eastern aesthetics and the spiritual dimensions of art. After World War II, Tsutakawa recalled intimate dinner gatherings where Tobey would clear the table and begin painting on rice or mulberry paper, sometimes completing twenty or thirty sumi works in an evening. The artist's process was as contemplative as it was prolific; if Tobey felt a piece was successful, he would sign it and gift it to his friends, but if dissatisfied, he would unhesitatingly discard or destroy the work. This perfectionist approach reflected Tobey's ongoing search for a deeper connection between artistic form and spiritual expression.<sup>42</sup>

Tobey's sumi paintings, particularly *City Reflections* (1957) [fig. 10], illustrate his evolving artistic philosophy, contrasting with earlier works such as *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* (1942). Whereas the latter exemplifies his signature 'white writing' technique, *City Reflections* employs black ink and a horizontal format, representing the frenetic energy of urban life. In this work, Tobey captured the tumultuous interplay of light, movement, and human activity within the fabric of the city. The horizontal composition, with its implied horizon, stands in sharp contrast to his vertical 'white writing' pieces, suggesting a shift in Tobey's focus from the metaphysical to the lived experience of modern urbanity. This work serves as a reflection on the complexities of modern life, presenting the city as a mesh of intertwined lights and streams

of people, a direct response to the postwar world's intensified pace and complexity.

In *City Reflections*, Tobey's use of black ink on white paper recalls traditional Chinese ink wash, with its emphasis on fluidity and negative space. The movement of splashes and variations in brushwork, from broad, sweeping strokes to sharp, scattered splatters, creates a sense of controlled chaos. The splashing technique evokes spontaneity, akin to the 'flying white' method in Chinese calligraphy, while the overall composition's lack of a focal point aligns with the all-over painting style. This integration of energetic, expressive brushwork with deliberate control reflects a sophisticated blend of Eastern artistic principles and modern abstract expressionism.

In conclusion, Tobey's work reflects a synthesis of these diverse influences, resulting in a distinctive artistic expression that challenges traditional Western art forms and expands the possibilities of abstraction. By integrating the 'flying white' technique, 'thickening-thinning' calligraphic line, use of voids, and the fusion of spirit and technique into his practice, Tobey created a unique style that blended Eastern and Western artistic traditions. He not only contributed to the development of American abstract expressionism but also broadened the scope of modern art to include a more global perspective. His paintings serve as visual metaphors for the fusion of cultures, offering a nuanced commentary on the interconnectedness of global artistic traditions.

<sup>42</sup> Birnie Danzker 2014, 20.



**Figure 10** Mark Tobey, *City Reflections*. 1957. Sumi ink on paper, 59.1 × 87 cm. Collection of Janet and Doug True. © 2014 Estate of Mark Tobey/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## 5 Mark Tobey and East Asian Influence: Reframing Cross-Cultural Exchanges in American Modernism

Mark Tobey's distinctive contribution to American modernism lies in his fusion of Eastern and Western traditions. His relationships with Chinese and Japanese artists, like Teng Baiye, and his travels to East Asia were reciprocal, fostering mutual exchanges that shaped both American and East Asian cultural landscapes. Tobey played a mediatory role, bridging these two worlds and contributing to a richer cross-cultural understanding. By integrating East Asian artistic and philosophical concepts into his painting, he broke away from the dominant New York School narrative, presenting a more holistic and inclusive vision of modernism. His work emphasises spiritual engagement and a global perspective, moving beyond the ego-driven focus common in much of American abstract art.

The exchange between American abstract expressionism and East Asian artistic philosophies should be seen as a dynamic process of mutual learning rather than a one-sided influence. A more thorough exploration of the collaborations between American and East Asian artists would offer a more nuanced view of the evolution of modern art. Ultimately, this paper underscores the vital role of East Asian aesthetics and philosophies in shaping modern art movements in the U.S., demonstrating how these influences have contributed to a more global understanding of artistic expression. It argues that American abstract painting should not be viewed within a nationalist framework but as part of a broader international narrative.

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