

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

Press Release

Mark Tobey: Threading Light

May 6 – September 10, 2017

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

#MarkTobey

Mark Tobey: Threading Light is the first comprehensive retrospective of the American artist's work in twenty years in Europe, and the first in Italy. Opening May 6, 2017, at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the exhibition traces the evolution of the artist's groundbreaking style and his significant yet under-recognized contributions to abstraction and mid-century American modernism. With **66 paintings** spanning the 1920s through 1970, *Mark Tobey: Threading Light* surveys the breadth of Tobey's oeuvre and reveals the extraordinarily nuanced yet radical beauty of his work. *Mark Tobey: Threading Light*, organized by the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and guest curated by the independent curator **Debra Bricker Balken**, will be on view at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection through September 11, 2017. Following its run in Venice, the exhibition will travel to the Addison Gallery, where it will be on view November 4, 2017–March 11, 2018.

One of the foremost American artists to emerge from the 1940s, a decade that saw the rise of abstract expressionism, Mark Tobey (1890–1976) is recognized as a vanguard figure whose “white-writing” anticipated the formal innovations of New York School artists such as Jackson Pollock.

When Tobey's small paintings composed of intricate, pale webs of delicate lines were first exhibited in New York in 1944, they generated much interest for their daring “all-over” compositions. His unique calligraphic renderings largely invoke the city—its dizzying, towering architecture, thoroughfares, and pervasive whirl of electric light. As such, they are the outcome of a lyrical combination of both Eastern and Western visual histories that range from Chinese scroll painting to European cubism. This unique form of abstraction was the synthesis of the artist's experiences living in Seattle and New York, his extensive trips to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kyoto, and Europe, and his conversion to the Bahá'í faith. As curator Debra Bricker Balken explains, “Within this mix of sources, Tobey was able to skirt a specific debt to cubism—unlike his modernist peers—by fusing elements of like formal languages into compositions that are both astonishingly radical and beautiful.”

As the New York School emerged in the aftermath of World War II, Tobey was only marginally integrated into the movement because he was averse to the cultural nationalism and “American-ness” of the rhetoric imposed on its paintings. Unlike the brasher, more aggressive pictorial statements of Jackson Pollock and others, Tobey's quiet, inward-directed work could not easily be folded into the new critical discourse intent on the formulation of a national identity for American art. Tobey rejected scale and monumentality to create “microscopic” worlds and intimate compositions, based on an intense observation of nature, the city, and the flow of light. His signature “white writing” or labyrinths of interconnected marks and lines evoked the spiritual.

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

While he had always led a nomadic life, Tobey spent more time in Paris during the 1950s, and in 1960 he made his home in Basel, Switzerland where he set up a studio. He participated in numerous international exhibitions, and in 1958 he was awarded the City of Venice Prize at the Venice Biennale. During the last phase of his life, Tobey enlarged the scale of his painting, producing epic works that expanded on his signature concept of “white writing.” Like the inventive features of his earlier works, these larger canvases extend an aesthetic of transcendence and ethereality. As Tobey stated, his work was not bound by a geography or a country but aimed for a “higher state of consciousness.” Innovative and distinct in its influences and beauty, Tobey’s work bridges the international dimensions of mid-century modernism, a connection that has been previously unexplored in the discourse on postwar art. *Mark Tobey: Threading Light* re-examines and re-contextualizes the work and influence of this important painter, weaving in the rich but occluded histories of the global intersections of late modern art that have evaded many of the interpreters of culture in United States.

Mark Tobey: Threading Light is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 208-page scholarly catalogue, published by Skira Rizzoli in English and Italian, that documents many of Tobey’s most accomplished works and includes a comprehensive examination of Tobey and his cultural context by Balken, whose thorough and original research addresses the prescience of Tobey’s style and his unique place in American art.

The exhibition is made possible with generous support from the Sidney R. Knafel Exhibition Fund, Peter and Elizabeth Currie, Stephen C. and Katherine D. Sherrill, and the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. An important contribution from Douglas and Janet True made the catalogue possible.

Mark Tobey: Threading Light in Venice is made possible by Lavazza as Global Partner of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. This four-year collaboration highlights how the avant-garde is a source of inspiration for Lavazza and an inherent value engrained in the company since its founding in Turin in 1895.

The exhibition program of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection is supported by the museum’s Institutional Patrons - EFG, Lavazza, and the Regione del Veneto, by Guggenheim Intrapresæ and by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Advisory Board. Education programs surrounding the exhibition are funded by the Fondazione Araldi Guinetti, Vaduz.

Institutional Patrons

EFG

Lavazza

Regione del Veneto



Acqua di Parma + Aermec + Allegrini
Apice + Arclinea + Arper + Corriere della Sera
Distilleria Nardini + Florim + Foodies Bros
Gruppo Campari + Hangar Design Group
Istituto Europeo di Design + Mapei + MST-
Gruppo Maccaferri + Reggiani Illuminazione
René Caovilla + Rubelli + Safilo Group +
Swatch + Trend