

**PRESS RELEASE**

Contact:

Rebecca Mongeon

Addison Gallery of American Art

978.749.4342

rmongeon@andover.edu

***Mark Tobey: Threading Light*, the first comprehensive retrospective of the artist's work in 20 years, to open at the Addison Gallery November 4**

Andover, Massachusetts (August 23, 2017) – This fall, the Addison Gallery of American Art, located on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, MA, will present *Mark Tobey: Threading Light*, an exhibition that traces the evolution of the artist's groundbreaking style and his significant yet under-recognized contributions to abstraction and mid-century American modernism. With 70 paintings spanning the 1920s through 1970, *Threading Light* surveys the breadth of Tobey's oeuvre and reveals the extraordinarily nuanced yet radical beauty of his work. Organized by the Addison and guest curator Debra Bricker Balken, who also authored the accompanying catalogue, *Threading Light* opened earlier this year at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, and will be on view at the Addison from November 4, 2017, through March 11, 2018.

The first comprehensive retrospective of Tobey's work in two decades, and the first in the United States in four decades, *Threading Light* provides a thoughtful re-appraisal of Tobey's work. 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 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.

While he had always led a nomadic life, Tobey spent more time in Paris during the 1950s, and in 1960 he moved Basel, Switzerland, where he set up a studio. Participating in numerous international exhibitions, he was the first American painter after James McNeill Whistler to win the City of Venice Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1958.

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 midcentury modernism, a connection that has been previously unexplored in the discourse on postwar art. *Threading Light* re-examines and recontextualizes 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, which documents many of Tobey's most accomplished works. This first-ever monograph 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.

In celebration of the opening of *Mark Tobey: Threading Light*, the Addison will host a reception on Saturday, November 4, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.

*Mark Tobey: Threading Light* was 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.

The Addison Gallery of American Art is open to the public from Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., and Sunday 1:00 – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed on Mondays, national holidays, December 24, and the month of August. Admission to all exhibitions and events is free. The Addison Gallery also offers free education programs for teachers and groups. For more information, call 978-749-4015, or visit the website at [www.addisongallery.org](http://www.addisongallery.org).

#### **ABOUT THE CURATOR**

Independent curator Debra Bricker Balken, an expert in 20th century art history, has organized exhibitions on subjects relating to American modernism and contemporary art for major museums nationally and internationally. Her books include *Philip Guston's Poor Richard* (2001) and *Abstract Expressionism: Movements in Modern Art* (2005), and exhibition catalogues *Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence* (2009), *John Storrs: Machine-Age Modernist* (2010), and *John Marin: Modernism at Midcentury* (2011). Recipient of an Inaugural Clark Fellowship at the Clark Art Institute (2001), a Senior Fellowship from the Dedalus Foundation (2002), a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship (2006), and an Arts Writers Grant from Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation (2008), Balken has taught at Brown University, NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, RISD, and Williams College.

#### **ABOUT THE ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART**

Devoted exclusively to American art, the Addison Gallery acquires, preserves, interprets, and exhibits works of art for the education and enjoyment of all. Opened in 1931, the Addison has one of the most important collections of American art in the country that includes more than 17,500 works by prominent

artists such as George Bellows, John Singleton Copley, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, Lorna Simpson, and Kara Walker, as well as photographers Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Eadweard Muybridge, Cindy Sherman, and many more. The Addison Gallery, located in a stand-alone building on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, offers a continually rotating series of exhibitions and programs, all of which are free and open to the public. Phillips Academy welcomes visitors to its beautiful, walkable campus year-round. For more information, call 978.749.4015, or visit the website at [www.addisongallery.org](http://www.addisongallery.org).