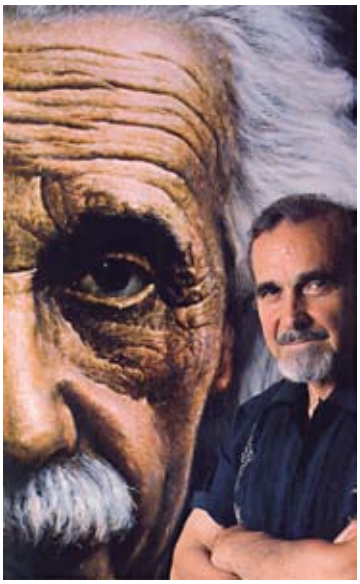
The Curvilinear Career of
Alton S. Tobey

by John Matuszak

There are no straight lines in nature, according to Einstein's theories, and the career of Alton S. Tobey—illustrator, muralist, portrait artist, and creator of a "Curvilinear" style of abstract painting based on the famed physicist's ideas—followed a similarly circuitous path. "He couldn't be pigeon-holed," said David Tobey, himself an artist and musician, of his father, who died in January, 2005 at 90.

This profusion of interests and abilities—along with a disinterest in the professional art world as a whole—has blurred Tobey's reputation, but it does not diminish his considerable accomplishments. In his decades-long career, Tobey produced illustrations for *Life* magazine's "Epic of Man" and other series, murals for the Smithsonian Institution and other organizations around the world, hundreds of scenes for the 12-volume *Golden Books History of the United States*, and thousands of portraits (including Einstein's). This was followed by the development of such innovations as his "Fragments" series that enlarged the features of portraiture to illuminate the character of the subject, and the Curvilinear style, which employed an alphabet of symbols created by Tobey himself.

This vast and varied body of work was marked by a dedication to classical technique learned at the Yale School of Art, and an insatiable intellectual curiosity. Occasionally in Tobey's paintings, the elements of realism and abstraction wound around each other. In one later work a self-portrait stares out from the swirls of color of the rest of the canvas. [see next page]

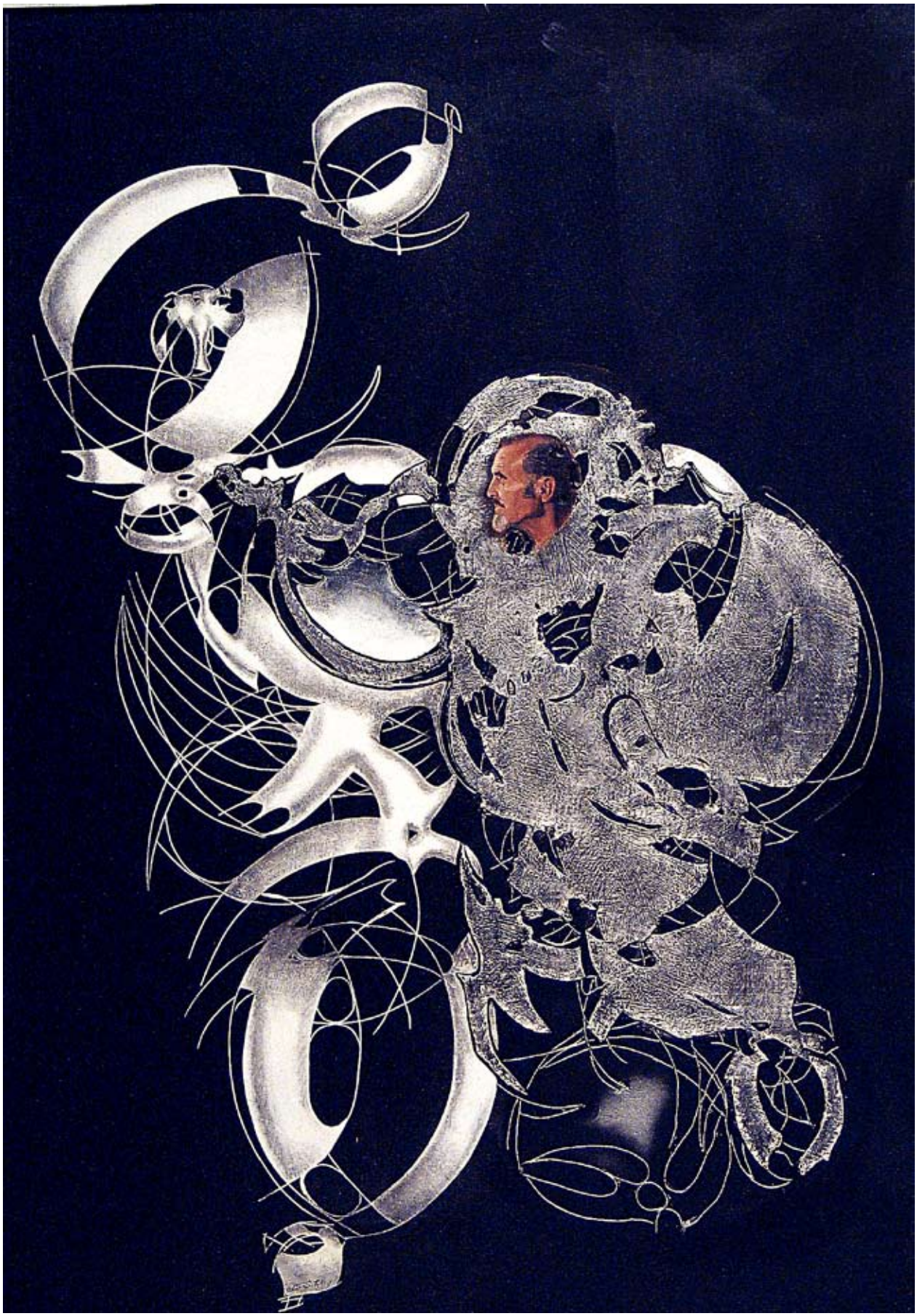


Alton S. Tobey, c. 1970s

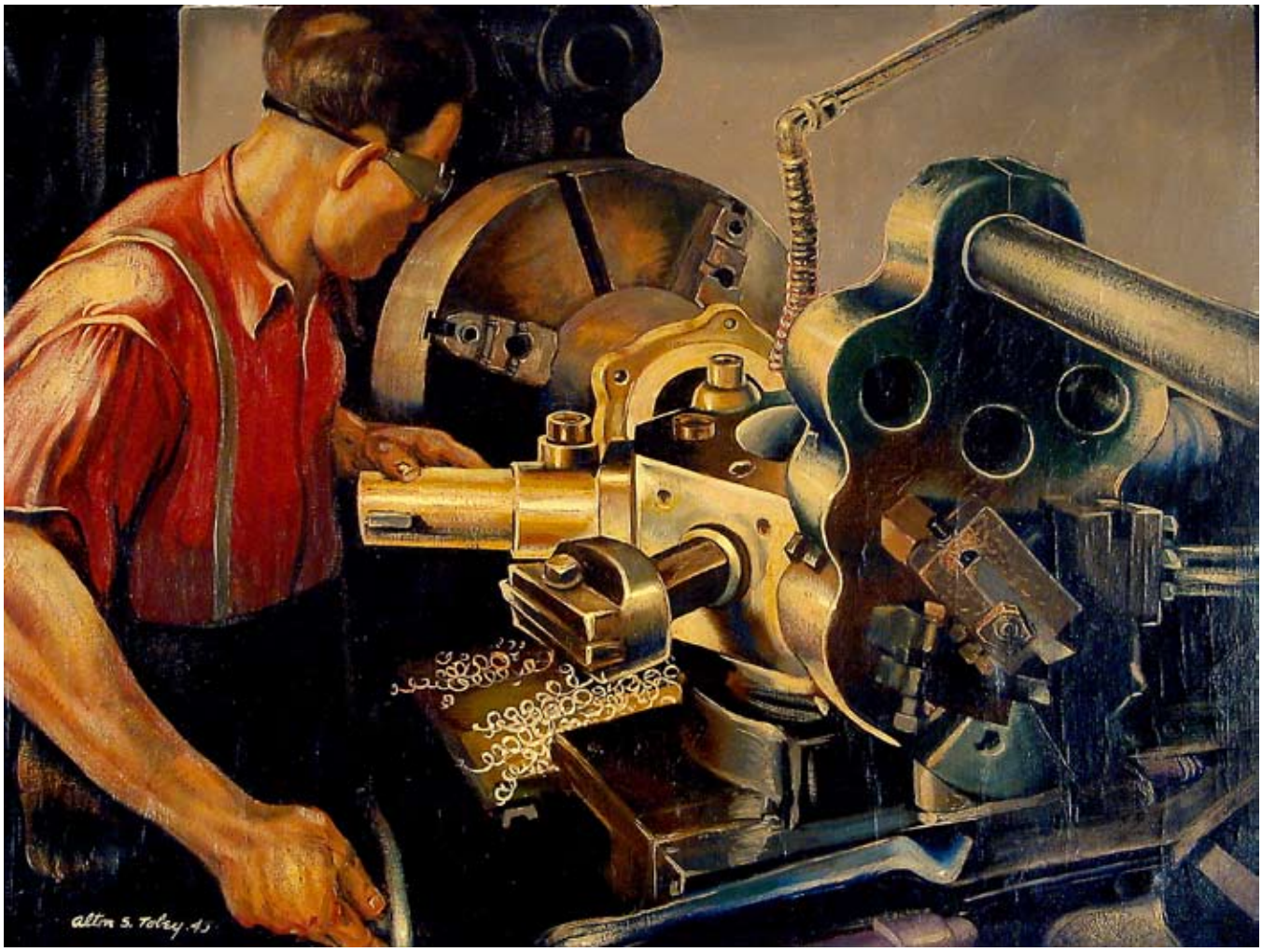
Tobey's passion for art began at a very young age and continued for the rest of his life, sustained by a rocklike work ethic and seemingly inexhaustible physical stamina. "You work even when you don't feel like it," David Tobey was taught by his father, a short but muscular man who could do one-armed chin-ups and worked long hours in his studio well into his 80s. Alton Tobey often vowed to continue painting "until they put the paintbox in the casket." And he pretty much made good on that promise, leaving behind a portfolio nearly unmatched in its breadth of accomplishment as well as its aesthetic achievement.

DRAWING ATTENTION

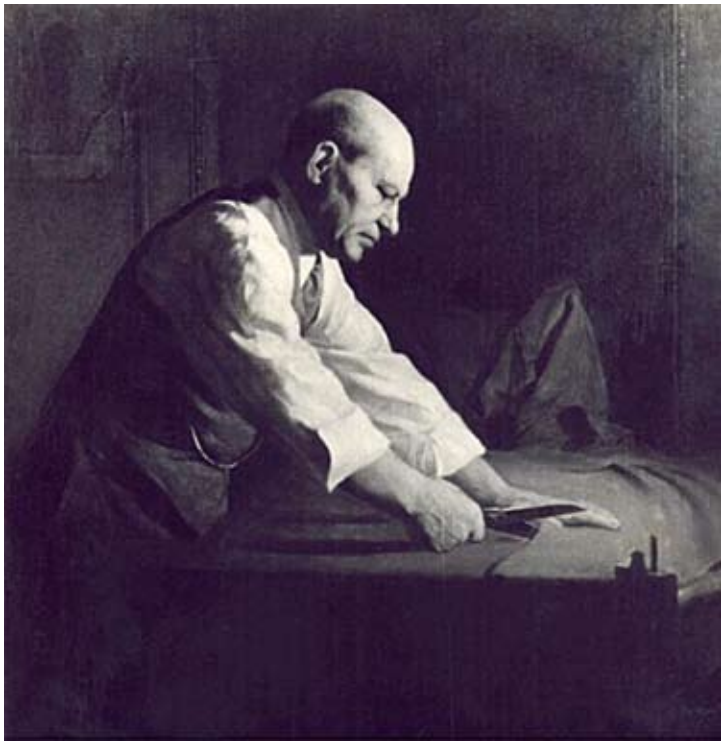
Alton Stanley Tobey's earliest artistic memories were of drawing under his mother's kitchen table, where she had placed him with pencil and paper to keep him from getting underfoot. He was three at the time. "I became an artist by bugging my mom," he recalled in one interview. It didn't take long for Rose Tobey to realize that her son had a special gift, and she supported his emerging talent.



***The Last Judgement*, c. 1975. Mixed media on canvas, 60 x 42**



***Machinist*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 24 x 32**



***The Tailor*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 28 x 32. Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum**

When they moved from Middletown, Connecticut to Lower Manhattan, young Alton was able to take advantage of the educational opportunities there, and at the age of nine won a scholarship contest for night classes from the Museum of Modern Art.

Relatives warned that the boy would be relegated to the life of a starving artist in a garret in Greenwich Village, but Rose stuck to her convictions, arguing that "if he wants to be an artist, let him be an artist."

Tobey would inherit this courage from his fearless mother, a trait that later allowed him to flout artistic trends and practices. One story has the young woman picking up revolutionary fliers in her native Russia, ignoring the warnings that even reading the literature could get her arrested. Once in America, she knocked out a burly iceman who made the mistake of uttering an anti-Semitic slur within her earshot.

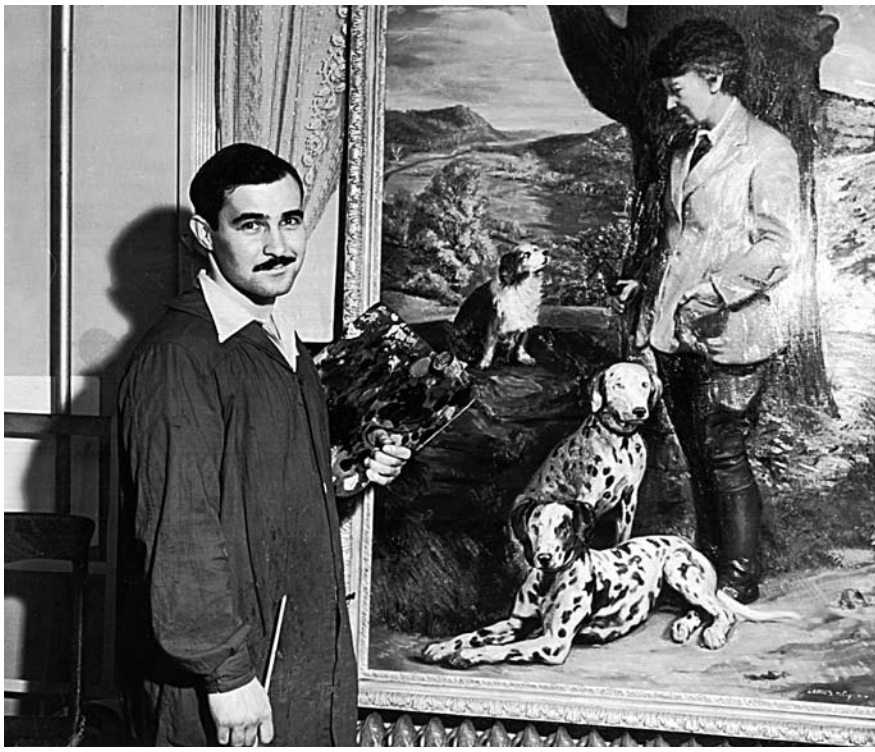
There was already an artistic streak in the family. One relative studied with Rodin and has a sculpture in the Louvre.There was also an entrepreneurial spirit, as his grandmother's father had made a fortune by buying up timber along the construction route of the Trans-Siberian Railroad and selling it for cross ties. Tobey's father, Saul,

***The Four Chaplains*, 1943. Acrylic and gouache on paper, 8.5 x 10**

from Ukraine, established himself as a successful tailor, passing along a respect for craftsmanship and an eye for detail that would be a hallmark of his son's illustrations. It was a portrait of this solitary figure, "The Tailor," that earned Alton Tobey a scholarship for his fourth year at the Yale School of Fine Arts.

The elder Tobey also taught his son about working on a large canvas, producing elaborate uniforms for the Connecticut Governor's Foot Guards for more than 20 years. One photograph shows the five-foot, four-inch Saul Tobey measuring the uniform of a six-foot, two-inch member of the Foot Guard. Some of those uniforms would include 40 silver buttons and 22 yards of lace, demanding painstaking work that would send younger assistants fleeing. But Saul Tobey kept at it into his 60s.

In addition to scholarships, Alton Tobey sustained himself during the Depression years through work for the WPA, at $49 a month. Projects included a mural for the East Hartford, Connecticut post office, depicting its founding Puritan residents. Another mural in a Hartford library—featuring Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe—was chosen from 1,470 designs submitted.



Tobey with an early portrait commission, circa 1930s

Study for *East Hartford, Connecticut Postal Station Mural*, 1939. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The post office mural would fall into disrepair, but the quality and historical significance of the work led to a restoration project in 1998. Interestingly, this would not be the last time that Tobey's work would suffer from neglect or inspire an effort at restoration.

WAR & PEACE

When America entered World War II, Tobey attempted to enlist, but was declared 4-F because of his flat fleet. He contributed to the war effort, however, by teaching math and drawing to aircraft engineers at Pratt and Whitney. He also wrote a book on camouflage for planes and tanks based on patterns found in nature, and contributed cartoons to the company newsletter, demonstrating the sense of humor that would often bubble up in Tobey's work (in the 1970s he even contributed an unsigned illustration to *National Lampoon* of a mock evolutionary tree containing kitchen appliances).

After the war, he returned to Yale, where he earned his master's degree in fine art and began teaching at the university. This is also where the movie-star handsome instructor with the dashing mustache met the equally attractive Rosalyn, a music student who had taken one of his painting courses.They would renew their acquaintance later and discover mutual interests that led to a marriage that lasted 54 years.

Alton and Rosalyn Tobey on their wedding day

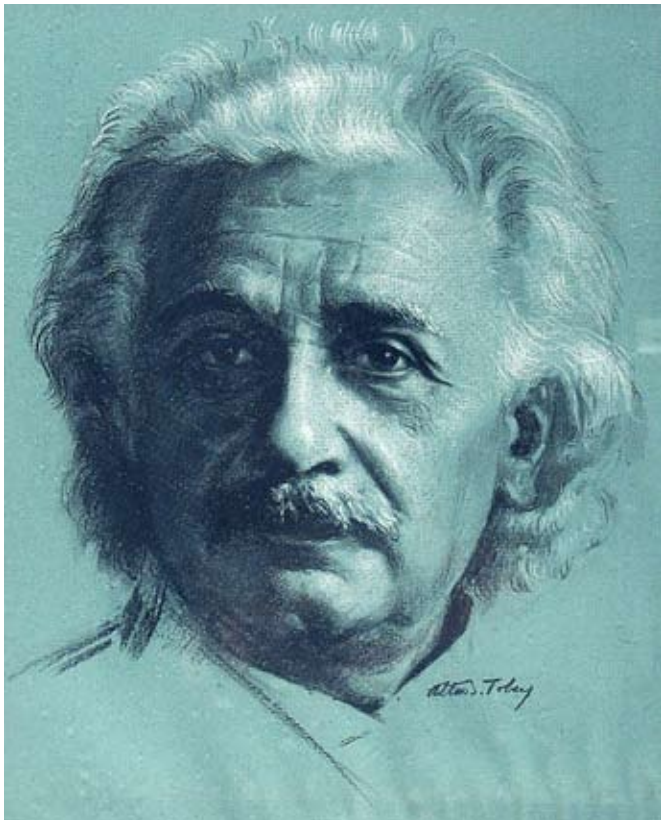
The young couple subsequently left Manhattan for Larchmont, New York. While first regarded with suspicion as bohemians by the neighbors (he had added a goatee to his mustache), the Tobeys quickly established themselves as mainstays in the community through Rosalyn's music teaching, Alton's art lessons, and their numerous civic involvements. While continuing to teach, Tobey's reputation as an artist also grew. He donated a portrait of writer Damon Runyon to the Runyon Memorial Cancer Fund. The painting held court at the famous Lindy's restaurant in New York, earned a mention in Walter Winchell's column, and was auctioned on Milton Berle's television program.

During a vacation at the seashore, a white-haired man showed interest in Tobey's open-air painting. The artist finally looked up to realize that his admirer was Albert Einstein, who agreed to have his portrait done. The scientist was so impressed with the result that he remarked that, had he not made it in physics, "I could have been a model."

Tobey's work earned him commercial assignments with *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* that allowed him to leave Yale and devote his full time to painting. But even with the demands of these projects, Tobey never abandoned experimentation.

"When I'm painting for *Life*, I'm an illustrator. I present information in art form," he explained in a 1958 interview

***Beethoven*, c. 1980. Oil on canvas**



***Albert Einstein*, c. 1950. Charcoal on paper, 18 x 15**

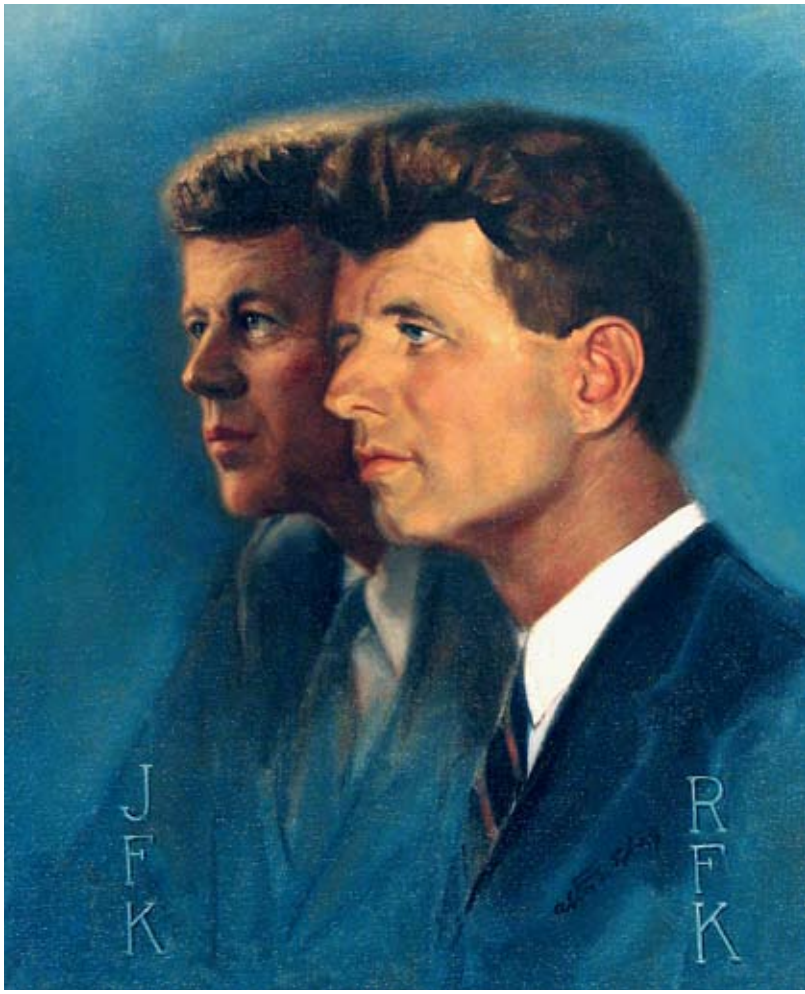
for the *Hartford Courant*. "I'm an explorer with my non-representational art. I seek new dimensions and materials."

He also never lost his love of teaching, which extended to his children, David and Judy, and students ranging in age from eight to 80, including Justice Warren Burger and the head of NBC TV.

EPIC WORKS

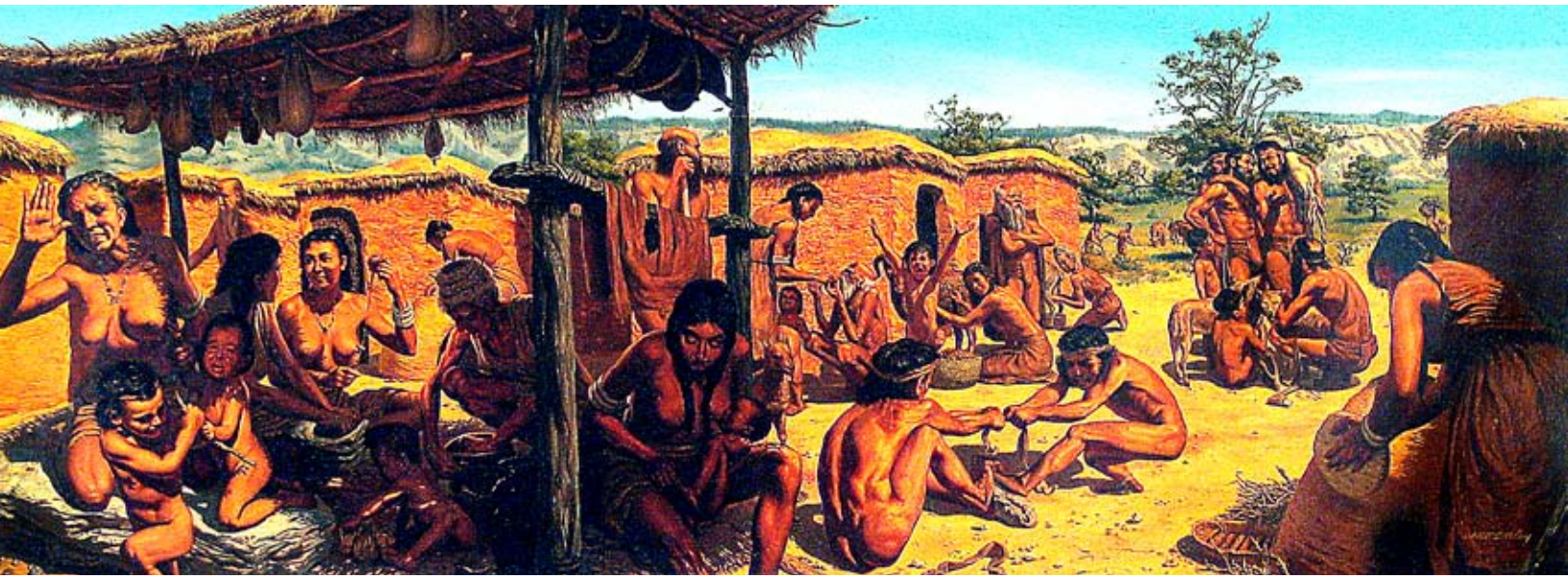
Tobey was recommended for *Life*'s "Epic of Man" series by former Yale instructor Rudolph Zallinger, who had painted the dinosaur murals at the Peabody Museum and had also contributed to the magazine. His depictions of ancient civilizations would combine Tobey's longtime interest in anthropology (his minor at Yale) with his sense of history as both a sweeping panorama and a deeply personal drama. Tobey would travel the world and absorb libraries of research material in preparation for the more than one dozen paintings for "Epic of Man."

In one scene of neolithic villagers, Tobey adheres to historical accuracy in the buildings and implements to provide a window on a vanished way of life. At the same time there is a universal quality in the tribe's activities—an elder scolds quarreling children, younger women swap stories, boys play tug of war, men brag about the hunt. In "Shang Warriors" one can almost hear the scream of the horses and smell the dust and blood of close combat. "At a Shang Banquet," meanwhile, captures a lighter and more intimate moment as a host smiles in obvious satisfaction at the mirth his story has produced in his guests. The painting is a refutation of history as a stilted series of dates and events, and instead invests it with a surprising humanity. There is a poignancy in the faces of ser-



***Brothers United*, 1968. Oil on canvasboard, 20 x 24**

***A Lion Hunt*, for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 20 x 24**

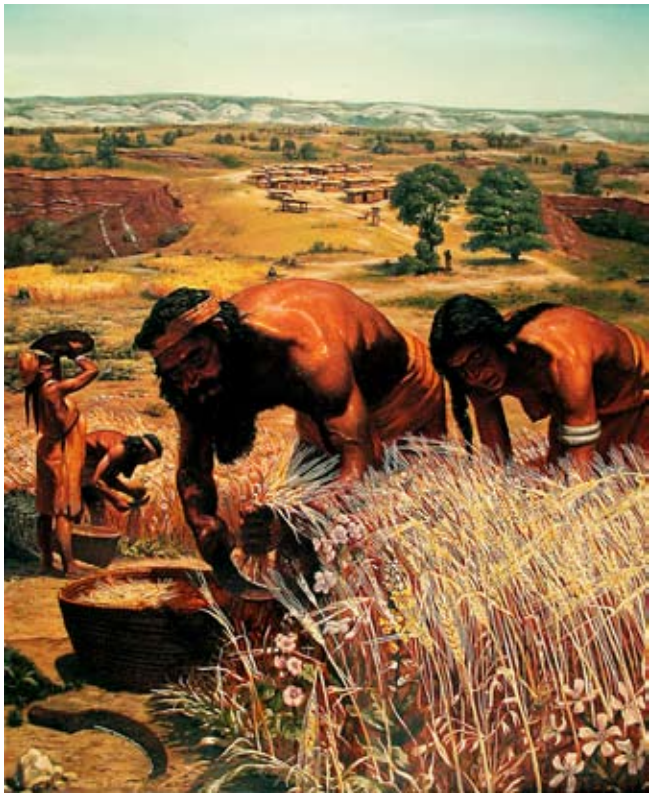


***Neolithic Villagers,* for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 17 x 48**

At a Shang Banquet, for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 16 x 22.5

BELOW: *Shang Invaders,* for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 20 x 24

***A Royal Funeral,* for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 20 x 24**

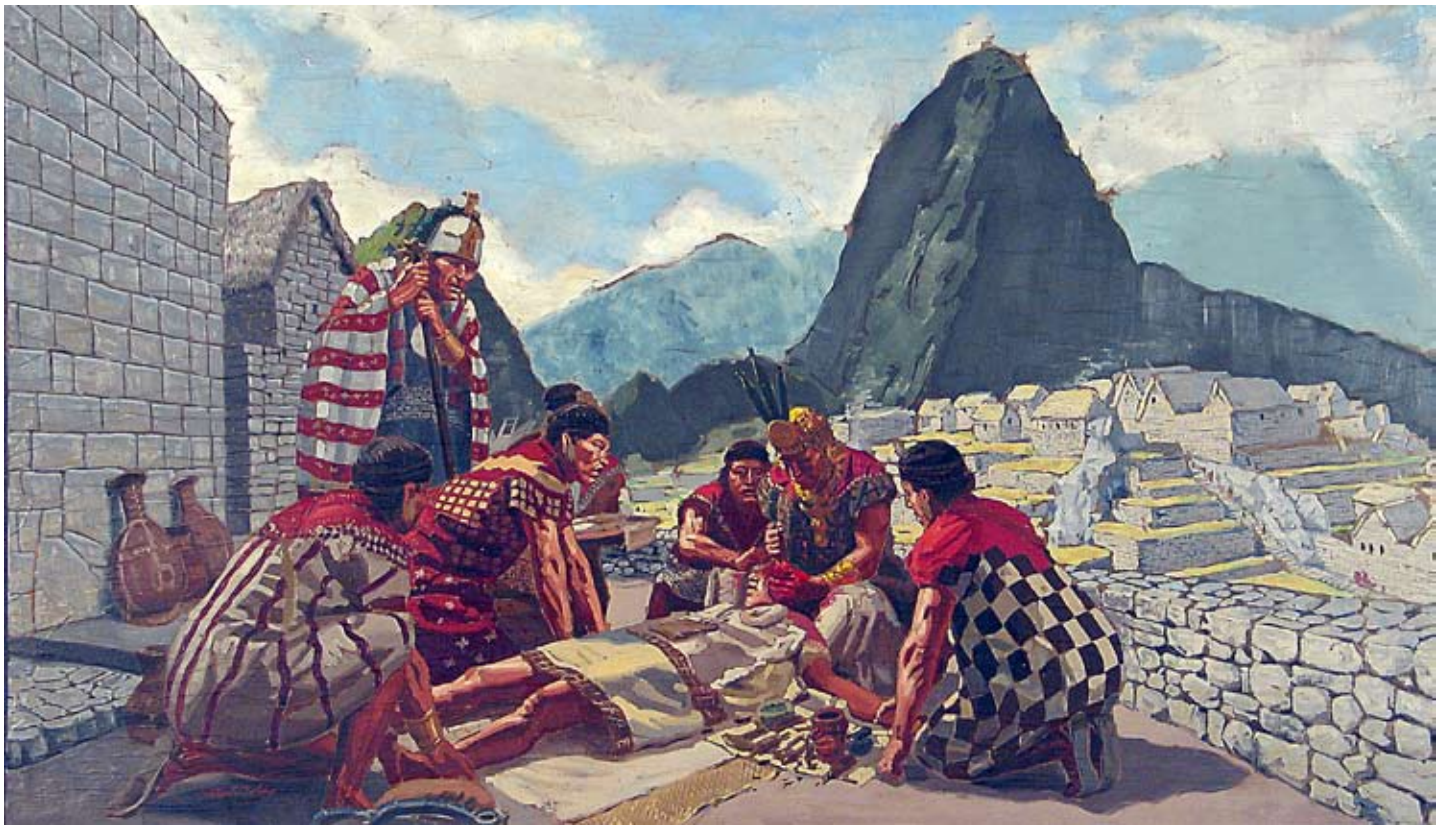


***Producing Their Own Food,* for *The Epic of Man*, 1962. Oil on masonite, 22.5 x 18**

vants at a funeral pageant taking in a Mycenaean temple—not for the loss of their master, but because they will be sacrificed to accompany the ruler in death. Tobey literally covered the globe with these paintings. There are images of Incan temples and ceremonies he researched by traveling to Peru, with an affinity for South American and Latin American culture that would continue for the rest of his life.

Focusing on the impact of larger events on the average person would continue to be one of the signature elements of Tobey's illustrations. This would come to the fore in Tobey's next assignment for *Life*, a series of paintings on the Russian Revolution, perhaps his greatest contribution to the art of illustration. He would spend over a year completing some of the paintings.

But before ever putting a brush to canvas, Tobey would characteristically dive into his research, using the magazine's archives and well as his own detective work to bring exacting detail to his canvasses. For depictions of the mutiny on the Potemkin and the "Bloody Sunday" massacre (a 1958 *Life* cover), among other events, Tobey unearthed the actual hats worn by crew members and books on the uniforms worn by the Imperial Army. He tracked down people now living in Lower Manhattan who had survived pogroms in Russia, and found an actual survivor of the massacre at the Narva Gate.The man recalled returning home after being chased by Cossacks and realizing that the back of his coat had been split by a saber. This



Inca Trephinations, **oil sketch on vellum for the Smithsonian Institution mural, 28 x 59**

Mutiny on the Potemkin, **for *Life* magazine, 1956. Oil on masonite, 24.5 x 45**

Bloody Sunday, **cover illustration for *Life* magazine, January 13, 1957. Oil on masonite, 28 x 24**

***The Mock Execution of Dostoevsky,* for *Life* magazine, 1956. Oil on masonite, 27 x 23**

recollection allowed Tobey to refute critics who questioned the authenticity of the saber-wielding Cossacks in his painting.

Tobey is able to portray the personal terror in such a moment, as a Cossack bears down on an old woman attempting to shield her head from the imminent blow. There is a sweeping symmetry to the scene, with the sword poised to fall and the rider leaning far over to strike. The horse, with breath steaming, almost jumps out of the frame, denying the viewer any distance from the barbaric act about to be committed.

For David Tobey, it is as if his father had been "embedded" in history to bring such immediacy to his illustrations.

That same eyewitness perspective would be used in Tobey's next large-scale illustration assignment, the "Golden Books" series. This would prove to be the most extensive project of his career. Tobey was hired to produce 350 paintings portraying the entire scope of American history, from the earliest landing to the splitting of the atom. He was given three years to complete the assignment, with the promise of an all-expenses paid European vacation if he finished ahead of time. The paintings were completed in an incredible 18 months, with no loss in the

***Surrender at Yorktown,* for *The Golden Books History of the United States,* 1962. Oil on plywood, 16 x 22**

historical accuracy or personal drama that had distinguished his earlier work.

Tobey accomplished this, first, by being prepared before he approached the canvas. David Tobey recalls a large, ornate table in his father's studio piled three feet deep with books and photos of historical costumes and artifacts to which the artist would look for detail. Tobey would work 18 hours a day in his studio on the canvasses. He had been known as a fast study and an efficient renderer. His wife called him "the quickest brush in the east," and this project proved it. But no sign of haste is betrayed.

As with the "Epic of Man" and Russian Revolution series, Tobey trains a camera's eye on events in American history, a portrait album of a people. And it's often the unsung, unnamed people that Tobey is most interested in immortalizing. Columbus lands, but it is the confusion and alarm of the natives to which the artist directs our attention. A grim-faced Pilgrim readies to board the Mayflower, and stares directly at the viewer, as if annoyed to have been bothered by a nosy news photographer. Washington presides over the surrender at Yorktown, but it is a subordinate who accepts the sword of a British officer, emphasizing the egalitarian spirit of the moment. Even the horse, with a leg set jauntily forward, demonstrates the "typically American...impertinent courage" that N.C. Wyeth conveyed in his own Revolutionary War paintings.

Throughout, the "Golden Book" paintings manage to be patriotic rather than jingoistic. There is real struggle and pain here, from the ragtag colonists to the men locked in mortal combat at Gettysburg. Warfare is not glorified, but becomes that small universe of battle where only survival matters. Even in his depiction of the Battle of Little Bighorn, Tobey disdains the last stand heroics of the famous Anheuser-Busch print to show the Sioux streaming down into the dust-clouded valley for what will prove to be much more their last stand.

There is a bit of sly humor to be found in the paintings, as well. Tobey portrays himself as a Gay Nineties fireman sliding down a brass pole, and his son shows up in a few panels.There is vision in his touching portrait of Lincoln and vigor in Teddy Roosevelt leading the Rough Riders. The Roosevelt painting, along with one of President Andrew Johnson's inauguration, have been accepted by the National Museum of American Illustration, in Newport, Rhode Island.

The books were bought up by the thousands—usually at grocery stores, one volume at a time—and a generation was inspired by its epic portrayal of American history. After Tobey's death, many admirers who recalled the books offered their appreciation on his website.

Michael Bierut spoke for many when he said that when he was a kid, "I had no doubt about one thing: Alton Tobey was the best artist in the world." Bierut went on to praise the paint-

***Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders,* for *The Golden Books History of the United States,* 1962. Oil on panel, 18.5 x 26.5. Collection National Museum of American Illustration**

ings he found "magisterial in scope," and recounted his later discovery of Tobey's Smithsonian murals. While tastes change and mature, Bierut, who went on to his own artistic career, never forgot his early favorite. He had the privilege of meeting Tobey twice, once at a retrospective of the "Golden Book" paintings and again in the last year of Tobey's life at an exhibition where he told him, "Your paintings changed my life."

SMITHSONIAN ASSIGNMENTS

With magazines turning more to photography and fewer illustration opportunities remaining available, Tobey focused on mural projects and portraiture, delving deeper into the psychology of his subjects. For instance, he created a six-panel mural for the Douglas MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia. One panel featured portraits of the more than 60 officers board the USS Missouri for the Japanese surrender.

***Custer's Last Stand,* for *The Golden Books History of the United States,* 1962. Oil on canvas, 17 x 16**

***Cultural Mutilations in the Pursuit of Beauty*, 1965. Oil sketch on vellum for the Smithsonian Institution mural, 28 x 48**

An assignment for the Smithsonian Institution, for a mural depicting ancient brain surgery, or trepanation, sent him back to Peru to explore the Incan ruins of Machu Pichu with his wife and son. Tobey took more than 1,200 color slides, studied ancient locations and instruments, and completed hundreds of drawings before embarking on the seven-by-12-foot mural for the new Hall of Physical Anthropology.

Another Smithsonian project, "Cultural Mutilations in the Pursuit of Beauty," had Tobey portraying the lengths to which people, from China to the Congo to the modern cosmetic surgery lab and tattoo parlor, are willing to go to adorn their bodies. "These people want to 'stand in' and 'stand out' at the same time. They want to stand in to their own groups and stand out from other groups," Tobey observed in what seems an almost prescient comment on today's obsession with body art and piercing.

FACES & FRAGMENTS

Notable portraits from this period include the mobile artist Alexander Calder and the Italian silhouette artist Ugo Mochi. One of the most accomplished Tobey portraits, however, is that of Stradivari, the violin master, a project that combined his family's love of music with the artist's dedication to historical accuracy. He studied the processes and tools that Stradivari used, and haunted master violin shops in New York City to observe their manufacturing techniques. Without any reliable portraits of Stradivari in existence, Tobey employed his friend Ugo Mochi, who had come from the region in Italy close to the master's home, as a suitable stand-in.

After the painting was completed, Tobey was informed by an expert that one of the violin frames in the portrait did not come into use until long after Stradivari's death. It is a detail that only a well-trained eye would be likely to notice. Tobey, however, went back and carefully repainted the frame. Interestingly, the accuracy of the painting is still unsurpassed today, and is being used in a series of articles on Stradivari in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

Not content with traditional portraiture, Tobey combined his fascination with the human face and his facility with the large canvas to create his "Fragments" series. Here we have Einstein's furrowed brow, Picasso's piercing eyes, Gandhi's emaciated arms—up close and larger-than-life—to enlarge the emotional experience of the viewer and the psychological reality of the subject. A series of seven portraits of Beethoven explored the composer's mind and the creative struggle within through distortions "allowing the viewer to journey into the mind of the great master as he painfully wrestles to shape the composition of his ninth symphony," Tobey explains.

***Antonio Stradivari*, for the cover of *Violin Iconography of Antonio Stradivari* by Herbert Goodkind, 1972.**
Oil on canvas. Collection of the Fine Arts Library of Oberlin College

***Alexander Calder*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 20 x 24**

Portrait of Ugo Mochi, 1975. Oil on canvas, 28 x 32

Lovers, 1969. India ink on acetate, 13.5 x 9.5

COMING FULL CIRCLE

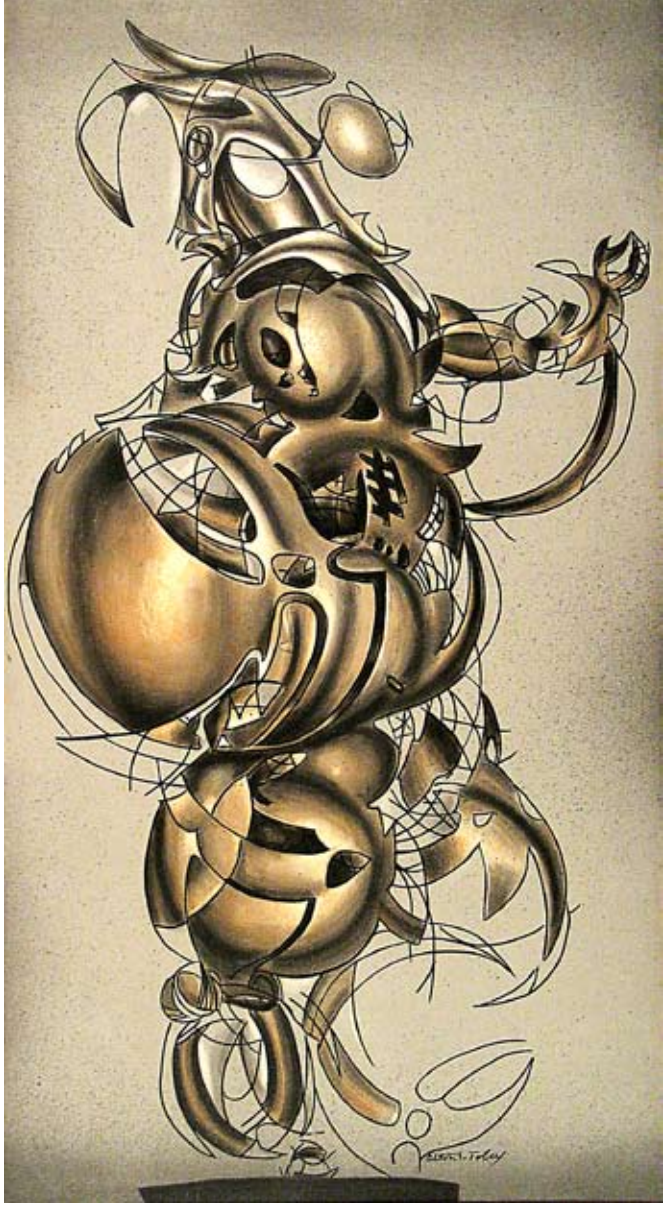
Ever since the 1950s, Tobey had experimented with abstract paintings that evolved into his "Curvilinear" style. At first the works, such as "Don Quixote" and "String Quartet," were monochromatic with more representational themes. Into the 1970s, though, Tobey added more color to his Curvilinear canvasses, and their forms became less objective. Tobey also stepped away from strictly two-dimensional perspectives, adding wire, metal, and found objects to the canvasses. This three-dimensional element was also explored in sculptures that used the Curvilinear style.

But the old master, who created more than two dozen murals in his career—from Washington, D.C., to Saudi Arabia—was not ready to give up the big picture just yet. "I have an artistic double life: one of classical realism and the other of aesthetic exploration," Tobey commented.

That devotion to realism would come to the fore again when Tobey was called upon to create a lasting historical record for the tricentennial of Westchester County, where he had lived for 40 years. There was no initial funding for the 25-by-15 foot "Roots of Westchester," to be located in the county courthouse in White Plains, New York. But Tobey, now in his 70s, was adamant that there would be a record of the county's 300-year history, and that he would be the one to do it, even without pay, declaring, "I would rather wear out than rust out."

***Dance of the Ancients*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 52**

***Don Quixote*, 1968. Graphite on board, 15 x 20**



***Achilles*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 20**

***Birds Landing*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 25.5 x 48**

***The Roots of Westchester Mural*, housed at the County Courthouse, White Plains, NY**

Tobey at work on the "Roots" mural in a local High School gymnasium, 1982

Beginning in a high school gymnasium, and later moving to the courthouse to escape bouncing basketballs, Tobey created a mural with more than 100 individual portraits of the people who had passed through the county's history. More than a narrow study of one place, the mural proved to be the story of America itself. Its chronology covers the arrival of explorer Henry Hudson, the struggle of the colonists under the leadership of General Washington, and the reading of the Declaration of Independence. The cultural as well as the military legacy of Westchester County is on display in the person of Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, along with inventor Robert Fulton and editors Horace Greeley and Adolph Ochs.

Entrepreneurs from John D. Rockefeller to Madame C.J. Walker, the nation's first black woman millionaire, are on hand, alongside Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the opposite end from Hudson's ship is a modern commuter train crowded with such familiar faces as Governor Mario Cuomo and the artist himself. Tobey left one space blank on the train, and a fundraising contest was held for a mystery commuter who was later added to the canvas.

"I told the county executive that I could only guarantee this for 500 years. After that they'll have to dig me up to fix it," Tobey said upon its completion.

There was no resting or rusting for Tobey over most of the next two decades, which included frequent trips to Mexico, where he and Rosalyn were popular guests on television talk shows. He also picked up numerous local honors, and contributed artwork to schools and other institutions. In 1996 he sculpted life-size figures of Telemachus, son of Odysseus, and his teacher, Mentor, for his grandson's school.

Rosalyn's tragic death in an automobile accident in Mexico in 2004 drained away some of her husband's vitality, as did a subsequent series of strokes. When Tobey passed away in 2005, he was remembered by friend and playwright Paul Firestone as "an artist of world-class proportions, a man of unwavering character and convictions, a generous and compassionate soul..."

In a final tribute to a man who had done so much for children and their education, Ridgeway Elementary School in White Plains, New York, posthumously dedicated its mural museum to Alton Tobey in 1996. The recognition was initiated by three students and a teacher who had been a fourth-grade student at the school 20 years before, when Tobey worked with the children on their own historical mural.

Tobey works on one of his six *MacArthur Murals* to be installed in Norfolk, VA; daughter Judy holds his brushes

Times change and memories fade. Tobey guaranteed his Westchester mural for 500 years, but he couldn't know that confining walls and shifting priorities would be a threat. Due to additions made to the courthouse, the "Roots of Westchester" mural has been relegated to a narrow corridor instead of the main entrance where a generation of school children had come to admire it. It is now becoming scuffed and worn by the people filing into a nearby office.

Tobey curator Joe Dolice and the artist's son and daughter think there is a more suitable place in the courthouse, with better lighting and room to stand back and gain a wider perspective of the historical panorama, just a matter of yards from where the mural now hangs virtually hidden. They would also like to see an interactive kiosk that would explain the significance of the people and events depicted, and they are attempting to raise funds for the restoration and moving of this mural, a work of art that the artist created essentially at no cost to the county.

Later this year, just before the 2008 celebration of the 325th anniversary of Westchester County, and the 25th anniversary of Tobey's creation of the mural, the Tobey family will be offering as gifts, prints of the mural along with a legend explaining it, to any social studies and art teachers in the Westchester schools system who may want them, in an effort to bring "Roots of Westchester" and it's history to the attention of a new generation of students.

The wall where the mural is now located is next to the room where immigrants take their oaths of citizenship and emerge as new Americans, clutching flags and posing for photographs. It would be fitting to have them spend their first few minutes of American citizenship under the gaze of George Washington and other farsighted men and women, rendered lovingly by the son of immigrants who showed what possibilities await in the New World.

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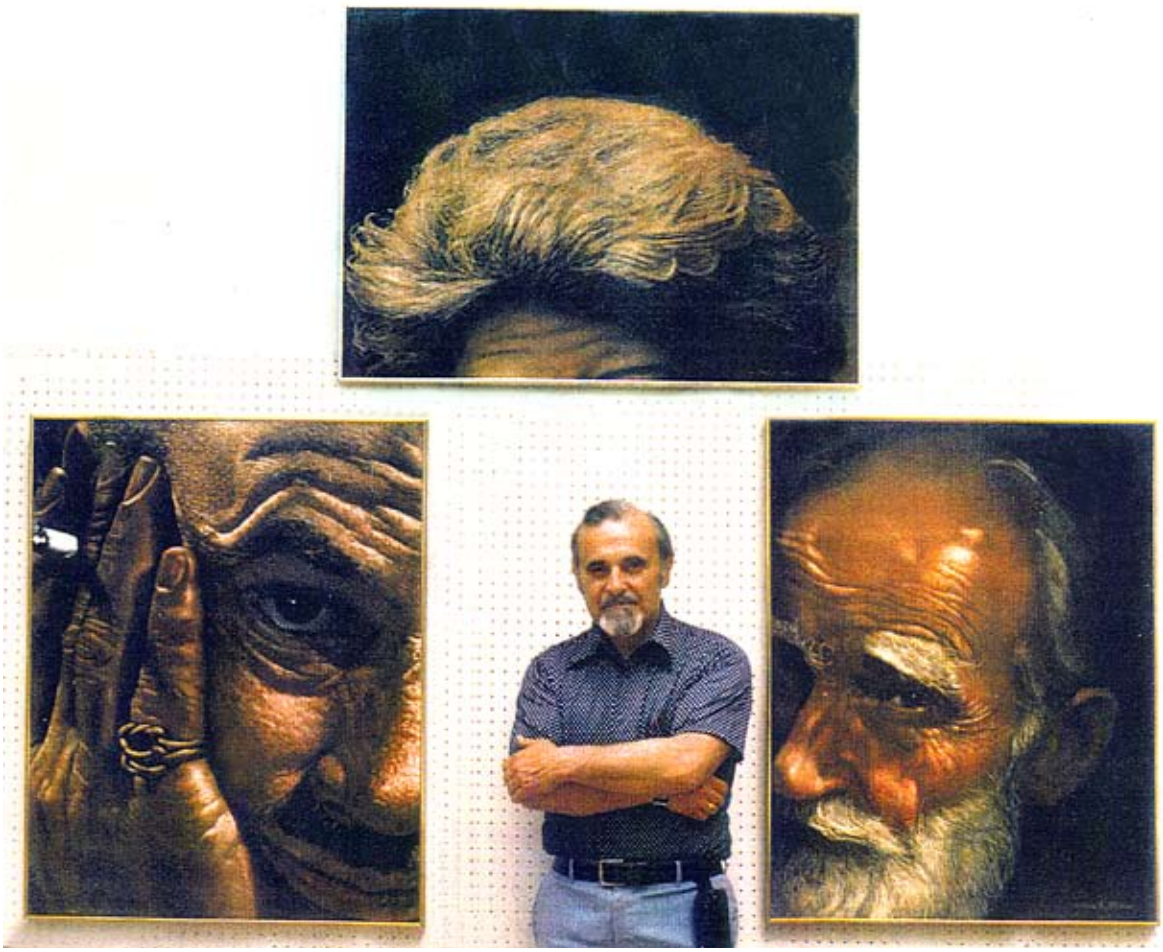
John Matuszak has been a journalist for 18 years and is managing editor of the *Columbus Messenger* newspapers in Columbus, Ohio. He has also had his black and white photographs included in exhibits at Capital University, Madlab Gallery and the Ohio Arts Council. He credits Alton Tobey's paintings in the Golden Books series for sparking his lifelong fascination with American history.

For more information, please visit the website at www.AltonTobey.org, or you may contact Curator Joe Dolice at The Alton Tobey Collection, 649 East 9th Street, New York, NY, 10009. Phone: 212-260-9240. Fax: 212-260-9217. Email: Curator@AltonTobey.org



Alton S. Tobey, circa 1970s