

Artist Alton Tobey lived a life as large as his canvasses

June 18, 2007

Some things from childhood stick with you, but when revisited in adulthood can diminish in stature. We grow physically and intellectually and that fondly remembered place seems smaller, a favorite book less impressive. Even a friendship can fade.

In a few fortunate instances, however, a scene revisited proves to be larger than we expected. This has been the case with my re-acquaintance with an artist named Alton S. Tobey.

This is not a household name. But at the height of his career, in the 1950s and '60s, Tobey was a featured illustrator for *Life* and other magazines, had murals on display in the Smithsonian and dozens of other locations, had rendered portraits of such giants as Albert Einstein, and made American history come to life with 350 paintings for the 12-volume "Golden Books" series.

This last project is how I first became aware of Mr. Tobey. The books for young readers, published in 1961, were purchased one at a time - for 99 cents each - at the grocery store. We collected the entire set and I spent many hours pouring over the pages that spanned the country's history from Viking exploration to the Space Age. The texts were informative and detailed, but it was the paintings that really fired my imagination. They put me right in the scene as natives watched, alarmed, as large ships sailed toward their shores, colonials fought off the redcoats, and blue and gray clashed at Gettysburg.



*Armies of blue and gray clash at Gettysburg in one of Alton S. Tobey's 350 dramatic paintings for the Golden Book History of the United States. The artist, who died in 2005 at 90, was an illustrator, portrait artist, muralist and abstract painter, who created thousands of works in his career that appeared in *Life* and other magazines, and are still exhibited all over the world. Used by permission of the Tobey estate*

The faces spoke of pain and struggle and hope. It was the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the American experience.

Eventually, most of my books were passed on to younger family members. I did keep two of the volumes, on the Civil War and World War I and the Great Depression. My regard for the artwork never diminished, and I regretted letting the books out of my grasp. For years I searched used-book shops, hoping to come across a set, particularly when my daughter entered school. I wanted her to inherit her father's love of history through these illustrations. I never found them, and few people seemed to remember them. But I never forgot.

Last year I decided to google Alton S. Tobey to see what I could find. I struck gold, and more. I found a site dedicated to Tobey that outlined a career that extended far beyond what I had been aware of. Sadly, the artist himself had died in 2005, at 90, so I would not be able to personally express my admiration and gratitude for his work. I was impressed at how extensive that body of work had been. As important, I learned that Tobey had lived an exemplary life as a devoted family man and engaged citizen who was able to fully explore his muse in all its guises, from realism to abstraction.

Born in 1914, Tobey was the son of immigrants from Russia and Ukraine who instilled in him an unflagging work ethic and a strong sense of independence. They moved from Connecticut to New York City when Alton was a boy. At 9 he won an art contest through the Museum of Modern Art. He attended Yale Art School by earning scholarships through his work, including a portrait of his father, a tailor. He also produced murals for the WPA during the Depression years. He was 4-F during World War II, due to flat feet, but he aided the war effort by teaching drawing to aircraft engineers, and writing a book on camouflage. After the war, he resumed his studies at Yale, earning a master's degree and teaching for several years. This is where he met his future wife, Rosalyn, a music student who enrolled in one of his art classes.

Commissions for illustrations, when magazines such as the Saturday Evening Post still employed top-notch artists, allowed Tobey to give up teaching full-time (although he continued to offer lessons to young people and neighbors such as Justice Warren Burger). Major accomplishments during this period included Life illustrations of ancient peoples and places that were later collected in a volume titled "The Epic of Man." Tobey also created a series of paintings of events during the Russian Revolution, including the "Bloody Sunday" massacre and the mutiny on the Potemkin. These and other paintings demonstrated his dedication to historical accuracy and his mastery of composition, exemplified by the image of a Czarist guard about to bring his saber down on a fleeing peasant woman. His reputation for re-creating historical scenes brought him the Golden Books assignment. He was given three years to complete the hundreds of illustrations, with the promise of a European vacation if he brought the work in ahead of schedule. Tobey finished in 18 months, sacrificing none of the detail or drama by careful preparation and working 18 hours a day.

Tobey extended his reach into abstract art, creating a "Curvilinear" style of painting based on Einstein's theory that there are no straight lines in nature. Tobey's civic-mindedness came to the fore with the creation of a 20-foot mural for Westchester County's tricentennial. He donated his services to paint the panorama that extends from Henry Hudson's arrival to the modern commuter's experience, with everyone from Rip Van Winkle to Madame C.J. Walker to FDR in between.

He worked well into his 80s. The Web site, created with the assistance of curator Joe Dolice, was a final gift from his children David (also an artist) and Judy, on his last birthday. They are also engaged in bolstering his place in the history of American illustration, as well as the art world as a whole. The Smithsonian murals are no longer on public display. And due to renovations at the courthouse, the Westchester mural has been relegated to a narrow back hallway instead of its previously prominent place. But efforts are underway to have it moved to a more visible location, accompanied by an interactive kiosk. Two of Tobey's Golden Books paintings have been accepted by the National Museum of American Illustration in Rhode Island.

This spring, I had the great privilege of traveling to New York City to view Tobey's original paintings, in preparation for writing an article for Illustration magazine, slated for fall publication. Like Alton Tobey's Curvilinear creations, here I had come full-circle from the child who had been stirred by these illustrations so many years ago. Now I had the opportunity to keep those ripples spreading.

Alton S. Tobey showed that the dedicated illustrator can touch lives, in a way that some other, more seriously regarded artists, can miss. He also proved that it's possible to be a great human being as well as a great artist. More information is available at the Web site www.altontobey.com.

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