

# Mark Tobey and the Northwest Modernists

By James Reed



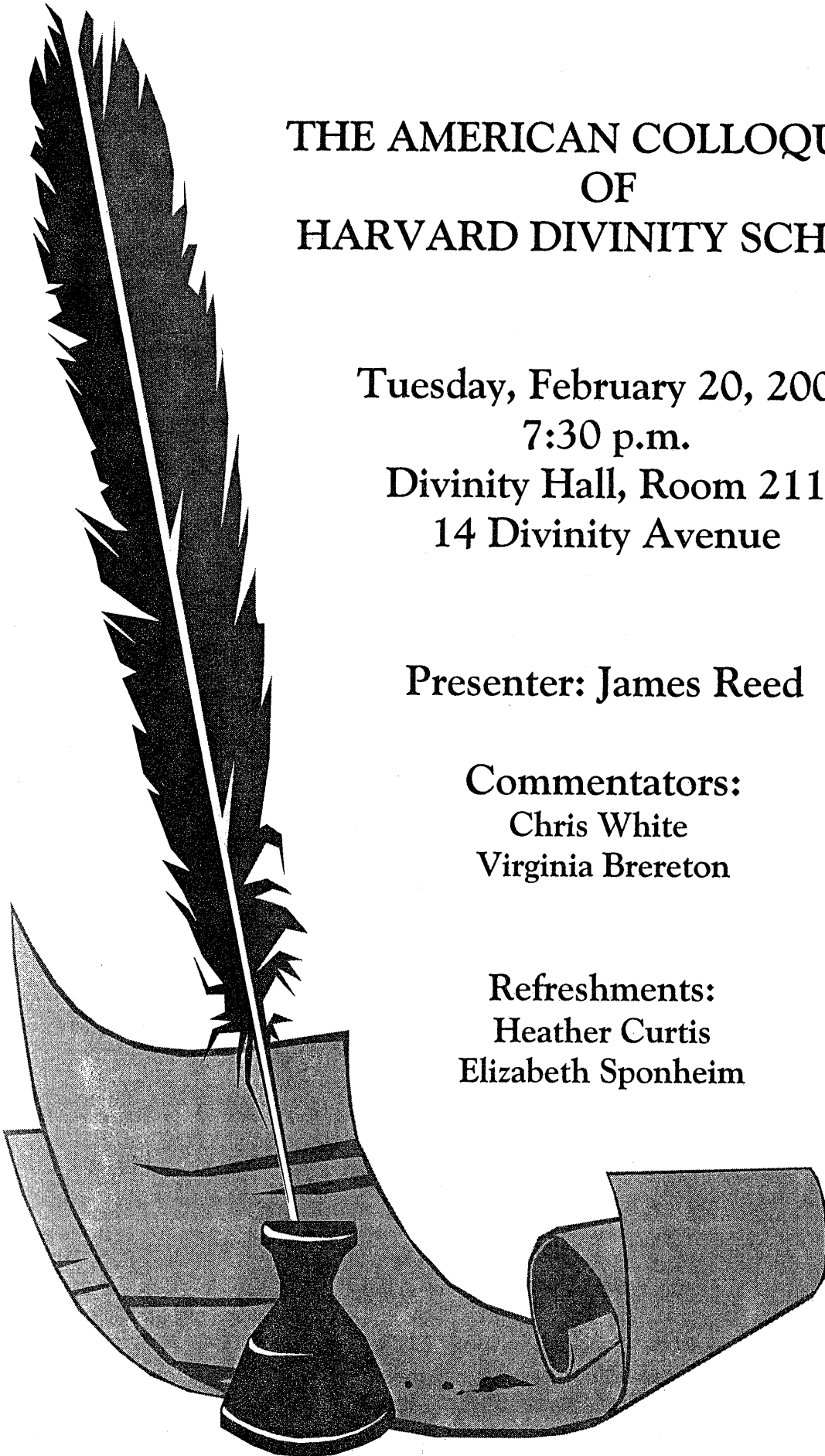
THE AMERICAN COLLOQUIUM  
OF  
HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

Tuesday, February 20, 2001  
7:30 p.m.  
Divinity Hall, Room 211  
14 Divinity Avenue

Presenter: James Reed

Commentators:  
Chris White  
Virginia Brereton

Refreshments:  
Heather Curtis  
Elizabeth Sponheim





*“And men go to wonder at the heights of the mountains and the mighty waves of the sea and the wide sweep of rivers and the circuit of the ocean and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not.”*

Augustine, *Confessions*, as quoted in  
Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

## Quest for the Absolute

In a 1946 article entitled "Pacific Northwest" in the influential New York-based publication *Art News*, Kenneth Callahan, who functioned as the spokesman and interpreter for the Northwest School, noted that "over the period of some fourteen years" he and his colleagues had "mulled over such questions as the interrelation of man and nature, the infinite, Picasso and Cubism, Chinese painting, and Oriental and Christian philosophies." The result of these spirited and aesthetic discussions, Callahan said, was a distinctive body of work, often in broken forms and hues of gray, and executed in tempera, "leaning toward symbolism and expressionism; and the influence of Oriental art . . . a mystic essence."

To members of the New York School, which was just then reaching its stride, Callahan's words must have seemed innocent indeed. Yet, though phrased in language perhaps suggesting an overreaching provincial intellectual, Callahan was accurately portraying the religious and philosophical seriousness of the Northwest painters, individually and as a close-knit group of fellow artists and friends. Chinese painting, with human figures fitting unobtrusively into mountain landscapes, was a preoccupation, as was Japanese painting, which could be studied in detail at the Seattle Art Museum in Volunteer Park, where Callahan was longtime curator. The interrelation of man and nature was an inescapable subject in the Northwest, and devilishly complicated once you dug into it, but the sharp philosophical differences could be discussed at length in a seminar at Mark Tobey's studio, a picnic in the park, or a gay party at Morris Graves's beautiful house in the woods at Edmonds. In Seattle during the mid-1940s, Picasso and Cubism still seemed worthy of study, the infinite remained inexhaustible, and Oriental

and Christian philosophies – more the latter than the former it is true – held practical lessons for the working artist. Everybody read religion and philosophy. One holiday season, Guy Anderson related, Morris Graves was deep into the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and so he gave them all the *Gita* for Christmas, only to discover that “everybody had read it.”

Like so many of the pioneers of abstract art both in Europe and America, the Northwest School painters believed and acted as if they were “on the path to some new ultimate pictorial truth or certainty, to a visual absolute.” This was in part the case because they were obliged to search objectively for their own artistic idiom – traditional forms and conventional wisdom simply wouldn’t do – but in part also because the artists had been raised in religions traditions in which they could no longer believe, yet retained a spiritual craving that still needed to be satisfied. Their problem was precisely that of so many modern intellectuals, as expressed classically by André Maulraux: What do you do with your soul if neither God nor Christ exists?

For Morris Graves, the problem was particularly acute because he had undergone a radical loss of faith in the Christian religion but never seemed happy for long with the alternative faiths he tried on for size. Introspective, hermit-like, and given to black moods alternating with exhilaration, Graves had grown up in the Methodist Church in Richmond Highlands, where he expressed his love for his personal savior by creating exquisite flower arrangements for the altar every Sunday – flowers from his own garden. In his subsequent and protracted spiritual quest, Graves spent six months at Father Divine’s Faith Mission in Harlem, practiced Dada exhibitionism for a season, then discovered Buddhism in Seattle’s International District, finding a *sensei*, attending Noh theater performances, learning tea ceremony, and visiting the Buddhist temple.

Graves made many trips to Japan and China and his knowledge of the East, particularly of its visual arts, was extensive. There can be no doubt that the Japanese visual aesthetic, with which Zen Buddhism was closely related, had a major influence on Graves's treatment of his characteristic subject matter: those delicate studies of flowers, insects, small animals, and especially birds. But it is one thing to pursue the Zen world-view – through the artist's "inner eye," to use Graves's key phrase, and thereby create a painting of a bird experiencing this illusory world of suffering and death in all its existential meaninglessness – as, for example, in Graves's brilliant *Bird Sensing the Essential Insanities* (see Plate ). It is far more difficult, typically, for the lapsed practitioner of a salvation religion to slough off those insanities as he faces the void; and this was clearly the case with Graves. As his agent at the Willard Gallery in New York wearily observed of his spiritual perplexity in a 1943 letter, "You are beating around rather desperately in a fog, literally between animism and God."

Of all the Northwest artists Morris Graves was the most spiritually restless and anguished *in extremis*. This inner tension was doubtless key to the originality of his vision and his prolific creativity as an artist. (His philosophically acute probing of the problem of nature, and of man's relationship to nature, will receive treatment later). Yet his personal religious struggle remained largely unresolved throughout his lifetime. On occasion Graves would say that his goal was to unite the best of Eastern and Western philosophy; but this was more easily asserted than achieved. Piecemeal truth, or a patchwork truth, was finally no substitute for the absolute. His 1960 painting *Ground for a New God* expressed a recurrent longing. Graves continued with his Zen, not as a mere meditation technique but as his religion, never achieving *satori*. A 1973 photo by