

# The School of the Pacific: The Asian Side of the Postwar Transatlantic Exchanges

**Catherine Dossin**

Affiliation – Purdue University

---

**Contact:** Catherine Dossin, [cdossin@purdue.edu](mailto:cdossin@purdue.edu)

---

## **ABSTRACT**

In the 1950s, many people in Paris were talking about a School of the Pacific. The term referred to various artists connected with the West Coast of the United States, including Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Sam Francis. Parisians praised those artists for the meditative quality of their works, which they contrasted with the action painting of the New York School.

Relying on a systematic study of the reception of American art in postwar France, my paper will show that the artists associated with the Pacific School were then highly visible in Paris, where they enjoyed public and critical favor. Unlike their "European" colleagues from the East Coast, they were deemed to be truly American, because they belonged to the Far West and from there to the Pacific world, and so had their roots not just outside Europe but most importantly in Asia.

In Postwar France, Asian culture played an important role, and many artists and thinkers were deeply influenced by Buddhism and calligraphy. By a complex play of cultural transfers, this interest, fed by several important exhibitions of Chinese and Japanese art, shaped the French reception and interpretation of American art scene of the 1950s.

## **KEYWORDS**

Postwar American Art, American Art in France, Neo-Japonism, Mark Tobey, Sam Francis, Jackson Pollock, Claire Falkenstein, Lawrence Calcagno, Michel Tapié, Pierre Restany, Georges Duthuit

In the 1950s, there was talk in Paris of a School of the Pacific. The term referred to a group of American artists connected to the San Francisco-Seattle area, including Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Sam Francis, to only mention the most famous. Parisians praised these artists for the meditative intensity of their works, whose sources seemed to come from Asia, and juxtaposed them against the Expressionist, Action paintings of the New York School. For the Parisians, there was no doubt that the West Coast artists represented the most original contribution of American art to contemporary art practices, and that their works were equal, if not better, than the finest of the New York School.

Despite numerous articles, exhibitions, and allusions in the literature of the time, the School of the Pacific is absent from most accounts of the postwar art worlds which remain focused on Paris and New York. When asked, art historians either do not know about it or dismiss it as a French invention to thwart the growing power of the New York School with a divide and conquer strategy—something to which Clement Greenberg alludes to in his famous 1955 essay "American-Type Painting".

To dismiss the School of the Pacific so lightly is, I believe, to discard an important dimension of the reception of American art in Western Europe, if not to say an important page of American art history. Whether such a School did or did not exist is of little importance in my mind. What matters is that people were talking about it, so at least it existed in the discourse and consciousness of the time. Thus it demands serious consideration, even more so since the idea was, as we will see, brought to Paris from the United States. My intention here is neither to prove nor disprove the existence of a School of the Pacific. Rather, my ambition is to understand why Parisians could have formed such a view on American art history.

First it is important to consider that by claiming that the "French" were trying to thwart the School of New York by inventing a School of the Pacific we grant them an all-encompassing understanding of the American and international art scenes that they could not and did not have. In the 1950s, Western Europeans knew very little about American art in general. As Dutch curator Edy de Wilde explained: "Over here, in Europe, in the 1950s, we did hear about a 'New York School,' but we had never seen anything of it".<sup>1</sup>

Because Europeans' perspective on American art was and could only be limited, investigation of transatlantic exchanges must start with some essential, factual questions: What could Western Europeans see of American art? When could they see it? And where could they see it? Focusing on the "what", "when", and "where", i.e. the concrete modalities of the European public's exposure to American art, promises to deliver a more accurate picture of Europeans' representation of American art — a picture in which, I argue, the West Coast played a major role.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edy de Wilde, "Memories and Afterthoughts," in *60' - 80' Attitudes - Concepts - Images* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1982), 6.

## Seen from Paris: West Coast American Art

In 1960, the French critic Pierre Restany published a long essay on the history of postwar American art entitled "L'Amérique aux Américains".<sup>2</sup> By then, Restany was the rising star of the Parisian art critique. Well positioned on the international scene and genuinely interested in American art, he was in a perfect position to write about American art.

Working on this essay, Restany made several drafts in which he tried to organize the major figures and movements of postwar American art as he saw it. On one page, he listed the most important artists. In Restany's ranking Tobey was at the same level as Pollock, above Rothko, while Sam Francis occupied the fourth place, so to say, as the "American of Paris". On another page Restany had as a main header the "Pacific influence", which covered San Francisco, the Northwest, and included Tobey, Still, and Rothko. In his final draft, Restany devoted 6 out of 20 typed pages to what he called the "Pacific period". This long section evokes in great details the lively scenes of Seattle and San Francisco in the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the specific contributions of Tobey, Still, and Rothko, and their influence on other American artists such as Franz Kline and Philip Guston.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not Restany's understanding of postwar American art was correct is, I believe, of little importance; what should interest us rather is how he and other Parisian critics — for he was not the only ones to see American art that way — came to see West Coast art as important or even more important than the art produced in New York.

Let us first recognize that such a view was grounded in the fact that Seattle and San Francisco had indeed lively art scenes in the 1940s and 1950s and that many Americans were convinced of the region's leading role. Michel Tapié, one of the most active Parisian art critics of the postwar period and a proponent of the Pacific School, learned about it in 1948 on a trip to New York when Francis H. Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, drew his attention to "the collective experimentations started during the War around Seattle and San Francisco".<sup>4</sup> In January 1955 Paul Wescher, then director of the Getty Museum, sent an open letter to the editor of the French art journal *Cimaise*, in which he provided some background and clarifications on the events that took place in San Francisco and that led to "the creation of an art of the Pacific different from that of Europe and the East Coast".<sup>5</sup>

Coming from men in such prestigious positions, statements about the importance of the Pacific region could only be taken seriously in Paris, all the more since they were complemented and reinforced by numerous publications and exhibitions on the subject that came from the United States. In 1953, for instance, *Life Magazine* devoted a six-page spread on "The Mystic Painters of the Northwest", that featured Tobey, Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson<sup>6</sup>. In 1958, the Seattle Museum of Art sent to Europe *Eight American Artists*, which was shown in France under the title, *Peinture de l'ouest, sculpture de l'est*

---

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Restany, "L'Amérique aux Américains," *Ring des Arts*, no. 1 (1960): 22-31.

<sup>3</sup> This document can be found in Rennes at the Archives de la critique d'art, Fonds Pierre Restany (PREST.X E007).

<sup>4</sup> Julien Alvard, Michel Tapié, and Fitz Simmons, "L'Ecole du Pacifique," *Cimaise* (June 1954): 6.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Wescher, "Ecole du Pacifique," *Cimaise* (April 1955): 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Callahan, "Pacific Northwest," *Art News*, July 1946, 22; Dorothy Seiberling, "Mystic Painters of the Pacific Northwest," *Life Magazine*, September 28 1953, 84-98.

*des États-Unis*. Yet, the greatest source of knowledge and appreciation for the Pacific Period came from artists associated with it, many of whom spent time in Europe, starting with Mark Tobey (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.**

Mark Tobey, *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era*, 1942. Tempera on board, 55.3 x 76.0 cm.

© 2014 Estate of Mark Tobey / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

In 1960 when Restany wrote his essay, Tobey was very well known in Europe, where his work was regularly presented in exhibitions devoted to American art, such as *American Painting from the eighteenth century to the present day* (London, 1946), *Amerikanische Malerei, Werden und Gegenwart* (Berlin, Munich and Vienna, 1948); *Regards sur la peinture américaine* (Paris, 1952); *Le dessin contemporain aux États-Unis* (multiple venues, 1954); *Modern Art in the United States* (multiple venues, 1955-1956); *50 Ans d'art Moderne* (Universal Exhibition in Brussels, 1958); *Eight American Artists* (multiple locations, 1958); and *Modern American Painting, 1930-1958* (multiple locations, 1958). He was also featured in the 1959 *Documenta* in Kassel.

Tobey represented the United States at the Venice Biennale on three occasions, in 1948, 1956 and in 1958 when he was awarded the Painting Award of the city of Venice.<sup>7</sup> That year all the International Awards

---

<sup>7</sup> This recognition was particularly important, since that year all the international prizes had gone to Italian artists and thus regarded as invalid by the international community. Tobey is sometimes listed as the winner of the Grand Prize

went to Italian artists, stirring a huge controversy, so much so that Tobey came to be regarded as the true winner of the year. In addition to being featured thrice in the US pavilion, Tobey's work was also featured in 1952 at the Venice Film Festival through Robert Gardner's documentary *Mark Tobey, the Artist*, which was subsequently presented at several film festivals in Europe. In contrast, Pollock was featured only once in the US pavilion in 1950. In 1948, two of his works were shown in the Greek pavilion as part of the Peggy Guggenheim's collection of Abstract and Surrealist art, where they received little attention.<sup>8</sup>

Not only was Tobey prominently featured in exhibitions sent to Europe by American institutions, he was also featured in exhibitions organized in Europe by Europeans. Tobey's first Parisian solo-show was a great success. It took place in 1955 at the Galerie Jeanne Boucher, a very well-established Parisian gallery. Tobey had been working with the gallery since 1945, when Jeanne Boucher, its then owner, met him in New York and bought several of his works. Yet, the gallery was never able to bring enough paintings to Paris to make a solo-show, until 1955, when Tobey was able to spend six months in France preparing for the show. His presence in Paris played an important role in the commercial and critical success of the exhibition. Tobey became part of the European art scene and Europeans could relate to him on a personal and concrete level. He befriended artists and critics including Michel Tapié and the painter Georges Mathieu, with whom he engaged in a long correspondence.<sup>9</sup> The show was reviewed not only in the specialized press, but also in newspapers such as *Le Monde* and I could not find any negative reviews.<sup>10</sup>

If Pollock's first solo-show in France took place three years earlier, in 1952, it took place in a much less prestigious venue: the studio of the photographer Paul Facchetti, newly transformed into an art gallery. It therefore had a far lesser reach and impact.<sup>11</sup> It received very little attention in the local press and, apparently, only two paintings sold, including one to a Swiss collector whose name was Pollack.<sup>12</sup>

The same is true for their first museum retrospectives in France. Pollock's first museum solo-show happened in 1959 at the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, when the touring exhibition organized by

---

for Painting, which is not exact. For detailed information on the Venice Biennale prizes, see Enzo di Martino, *Storia della Biennale die Venezia, 1895-2003* (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2003), 129.

<sup>8</sup> The exhibition of Peggy Guggenheim's collection was a success, as people were eager to see works by Brancusi, Miro, etc. However, reviewers hardly commented on the new American painting. See for instance Egon Vietta, "Panorama der europäischen Moderne: Die XXIV Biennale in Venedig", *Die Zeit* (June 15, 1948), <http://www.zeit.de/1948/29/panorama-der-europaeischen-moderne>. Or Douglas Cooper, "24th Biennial Exhibition, Venice", *The Burlington Magazine*, October 1948. Adrian Duran who examined the Italian reviews of the Biennale came to the same conclusion: Adrian R. Duran, "Abstract Expressionism's Italian Reception: Questions of Influence", in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 142-43.

<sup>9</sup> See Mark Tobey's archives, which are housed at the University of Washington in Seattle.

<sup>10</sup> For a complete bibliography, see Catherine Olivier and Martine Stoecklin, *Mark Tobey, chronologie, expositions, bibliographie* (Paris: Université de Paris X, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> The guest book of the gallery suggests that the exhibition was well-attended. The guestbook is, however, not a completely reliable as it was common to sign guestbooks with famous names as a joke or self-fulfilling wish. A practice that Julie Verlaine, who studied the Parisian galleries in those years, discussed in general and in relation to this exhibition. Julie Verlaine, "La tradition de l'avant-garde. Les galeries d'art contemporain à Paris, de la Libération à la fin des années 1960" (Doctorat d'histoire, Université Paris I, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Pacquement, "La première exposition de Jackson Pollock à Paris, Studio Paul Facchetti, mars 1952", in Pontus Hultén, ed. *Paris-New York* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977), 536-41.

MoMA's International Program reached Paris. It was an important show because it was the first time the Parisian public had the opportunity to see a large selection of the artist's work. Françoise Choay, writing for the Swiss magazine *L'Oeil*, explained: "Until today the work of Pollock has been presented in a fragmented manner that rose doubts".<sup>13</sup> With this exhibition it was finally possible to "definitely place Pollock". Tellingly, Choay made reference to Tobey, with whom her readership was much more familiar, to explain Pollock's work, placing him in the relation to Tobey. She wrote, for instance, "before Pollock, Tobey is the only one to have an acute consciousness of the sharp consequence of his action, fills his canvas according to a radically new structure".<sup>14</sup> While Pollock's retrospective was a discovery sent from the United States which received mixed reviews, Tobey's 1961 retrospective at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in the Louvre was a consecration offered by the French to an artist they admired. It was organized by the French museum in collaboration with the artist, without the intervention of any US agency, and it came after similar retrospectives of Marc Chagall and Jean Dubuffet.

Reviewing the European press of the 1950s it is obvious that Tobey was considered as as important, if not more important, than Pollock. In 1955, J. Lusinchi could conclude his critique of the exhibition *50 ans d'art aux États-Unis*, with the following statement: "It is unmistakably Mark Tobey who dominates the abstraction called expressionist of the last rooms".<sup>15</sup>

Before dismissing this comment as biased or misinformed, we need to consider that Pollock was represented in this show by two dissimilar paintings, whereas Tobey was not only represented by a larger and more consistent body of work, he also had the show I mentioned earlier at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher. In 1961, even after Pollock's retrospective when Parisians had the chance to become better acquainted with his work, Parisian critics continued to favor Tobey. Questioned by *Art in America*, the critic Jaeger said: "Personally, I find that Tobey's art expresses a remarkable essence of inner life and, accordingly, I feel it to be more profound and rich than the bigger, more spectacular paintings of Pollock. I consider Tobey to be the greatest living American artist for he goes beyond the bounds of painting".<sup>16</sup>

That year, the French magazine *Connaissance des Arts* asked major players in the European art world to vote on the most important living artists. Mark Tobey was number 8, tied with Max Ernest, while Sam Francis was eleventh. Rothko and de Kooning received many less votes.<sup>17</sup> In such context, vision of Tobey as *the* major figure of American art compared to Pollock makes perfect sense.

---

<sup>13</sup> Françoise Choay, "Jackson Pollock", *L'Oeil*, July-August 1958, 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> J. Lusinchi, "Cinquante ans de peinture aux États-Unis". *Cimaise* (May 1955) : 10. Translation is mine.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Watt, "Paris Letter: Mark Tobey". *Art in America* 49, no. 4 (1961): 114.

<sup>17</sup> Rothko ranked 15, equally placed with Asger Jorn, Balthus, Alberto Burri, Georges Mathieu, and Maurice Estève. De Kooning ranked 17, equally placed with Alberto Giacometti, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Roberto Matta and Raymond Legueult.



The other West Coast artist who topped Restany's list was Sam Francis (Fig. 2). Francis, who had moved to Paris to 1950, had indeed become *the* most famous American of Paris.<sup>18</sup> He was part of a larger group of Californian artists who came to Paris in 1950 after Douglas McAgy was dismissed as the director of the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. McAgy had championed innovative approaches and hired Clyfford Still, Richard Diebenkorn, and Rothko to teach at the school, whereby he made San Francisco one of the liveliest art scenes of the country. When he was dismissed by the upper-administration, staff and students left the school. Many students chose to go to Paris to finish their education. Thanks to the extremely favorable exchange rate for American dollars, one could live very well in France on the \$75 monthly allowance of the GI Bill. One just needed to enroll in an art school to receive the GI stipends. Sam Francis, who enrolled in Léger's studio, explains: "It was only to get the money of the GI Bill. I went there once a week. It was nice. Nothing to do. Just come to touch the money".<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2.**

Sam Francis, *Around the Blues*, 1957-62. Oil paint and acrylic paint on canvas, 275.1 x 487.1 cm.

© 2014 Sam Francis Foundation, California / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo Credit: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY

---

<sup>18</sup> On Francis's time in Paris, see Sam Francis et al., *Sam Francis, les années parisiennes, 1950-1961* (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Henri Michaud, "Sam Francis, Années 50". *Art Press*, Summer 1988, 18.

But unlike most Americans GIs who came and went, Francis made Europe his permanent residency until 1961 when he moved back to the United States, but even then he continued keeping a studio in Paris and maintained a correspondence with his Parisian friends and colleagues. And unlike most Americans who kept to themselves and rarely interacted with the local actors, Francis quickly became a visible presence on the Parisian scene to the point of being regarded and exhibited as a member of the School of Paris.

In Paris, Francis built strong friendships not only with other expatriates like the Canadian Jean-Paul Riopelle or the Chinese François Cheng; he also met influential art critics, such as Georges Duthuit who, something rare at the time, spoke English fluently and served as editor of *Transition*, a Parisian journal published in English. Through Duthuit, Riopelle and Francis gained entrance to the Parisian art world. Duthuit, who was also Matisse's son-in-law, introduced them to the late work of Matisse, which became a strong source of inspiration for Francis. In Paris, Francis also met Tapié, who included him in several group shows, such as *Un Art Autre* (1952), and *Singifiants de l'Informel* (1953). And, through Alexander Calder, he got to know Arnold Rüdlinger, the director of the Kunsthalle in Bern. In 1954, Rüdlinger organized a show titled "Tendances 3", which aimed at presenting an international panorama of Tachism. In this show, Francis was the only American featured besides Pollock and Tobey. In 1955, Rüdlinger became the director of the Kunsthalle in Basel where he continued collecting and displaying Francis's works. Through his friendship with Francis, Rüdlinger became very interested in American art, including West Coast American art. He therefore wished to go to the United States to select works for a comprehensive survey of Contemporary American art. Interestingly enough it was Sam Francis who paid for Rüdlinger's trip to New York in March 1957. But there Rüdlinger discovered that it would be extremely difficult and expensive to put together a show on his own, and had to turn to the curators at MoMA, who organized *The New American Painting*, which toured Europe in 1958-1959, with Basel as its first stop and Sam Francis as the representative of the new generation.<sup>20</sup>

Comparing Francis's and Tobey's number of exhibitions in Western Europe with those of Rothko, Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, we see that Francis and Tobey were the most visible American artists (Chart 1 and 2). And if we consider the situation in France, the gap between the New York and the Pacific artists is even greater: Francis and Tobey were by far the most exhibited American artists in Paris between 1945 and 1962, and this was especially true before 1955 (Charts 2 and 3).<sup>21</sup>

Although Tobey and Francis were the most famous West Coast artists in Europe they were not the only ones. As mentioned earlier, when Douglas McAgy was dismissed as director of the California School of

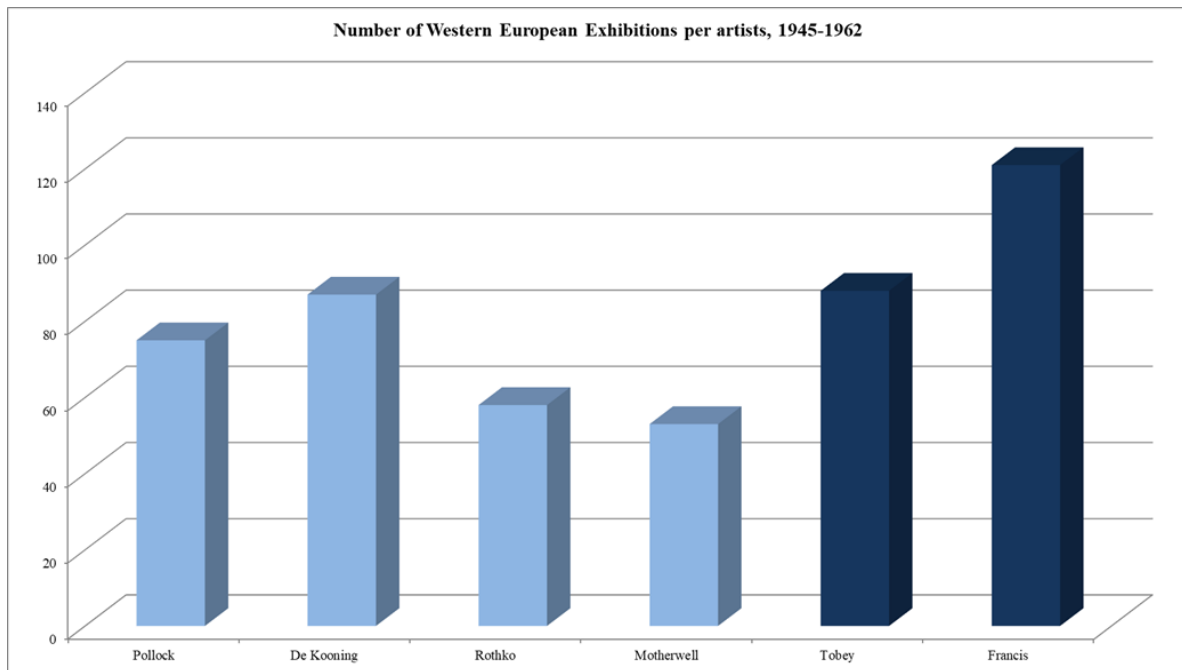
---

<sup>20</sup> Eberhard Kornfeld, "Rüdlings Reise nach New York 1957", in Lukas Gloor, *Die Geschichte der Basler Kunstvereins und der Kunsthalle Basel, 1839-1988* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1989), 228-29.

<sup>21</sup> These figures were gathered as part of a research project I conducted on the reception of US-American Art in Western Europe in the framework of Artl@s— a digital humanities project led by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel which is building and publishing sources, including a global database of exhibition catalogues in the 19th and 20th centuries. With its mapping and analysis tools, the databases contribute to expanding sources available to scholars, and to building bridges between artistic geographies. Structured around its seminar and review, Artl@s also initiates training workshops on digital and transnational approaches. The group regularly organizes international meetings on world art history, social art history, and digital humanities. For more information, see: <https://artlas.huma-num.fr>

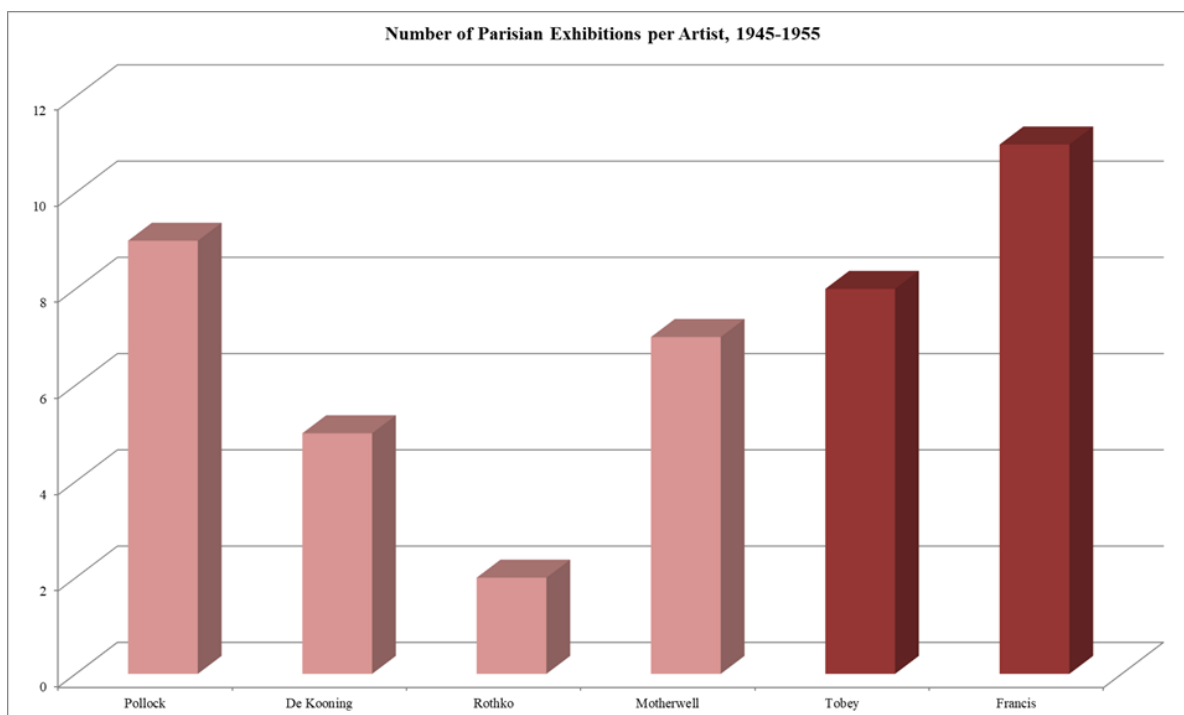


Fine Arts, many students and faculty chose to go to Paris, where they brought knowledge of the lively San Franciscan art scene. Among these artists was Claire Falkenstein. Although she is little known today, she was undoubtedly one of the most influential Californians of Paris.



**Chart 1.** Number of Western Exhibitions per Artist, 1945-1962.

Based on data collected by the author as part of the Artl@s project (<https://artlas.huma-num.fr>)



**Chart 2:** Number of Parisian Exhibitions per Artist, 1945-1955  
Based on data collected by the author as part of the Artl@s project (<https://artlas.huma-num.fr>)



**Chart 3:** Number of Parisian Exhibitions per Artist, 1945-1962  
Based on data collected by the author as part of the Artl@s project (<https://artlas.huma-num.fr>)

A sculptor, Falkenstein was a professor at the California School of Fine Arts. When the school changed direction, she left and moved to France where she stayed from 1950 to 1962. In Paris, she shared a studio with two former students of CSFA, Walter Kuhlman (1918–2009) and Frank Lobdell (1921 - 2013). But Falkenstein did not just integrate with the American circle of Paris; she also quickly gained entrance to the local art scene. She actually worked as the Parisian correspondent for the Los Angeles based art magazine *Art & Architecture*, which gave her access to the studios of many Parisian artists. But her most important contact in Paris was Michel Tapié, who held her work in high regard. He included her in many shows starting with *Un Art Autre* in 1952 and wrote most of the introductory texts to her numerous exhibitions. Falkenstein was indeed an active member of the Parisian art scene throughout the 1950s and an enthusiast spokesperson for the Pacific School.<sup>22</sup>

However, when it comes to the visibility of the West Coast in postwar Paris, the most important figure was undoubtedly John Franklin Koenig. Born in Seattle, Koenig was familiar with the Northwest School of Art, particularly the work of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves. In 1948, Koenig moved to France where he studied French at the Sorbonne while making art on the side. In Paris he met Jean-Robert Arnaud, the owner of a bookstore, which they slowly transformed into an art gallery, the Galerie Arnaud, before founding the international art magazine *Cimaise*. Thanks to the gallery and the journal, Koenig played a very influential role in the Parisian art scene.

He was close to several Parisian art critics, including Michel Ragon, with whom he traveled through the United States for two months in 1958, starting in New York and finishing, naturally, in Seattle.<sup>23</sup> Koenig was also close to Herta Wescher, another important figure of the Parisian postwar scene. They became friends after she saw and reviewed one of his earliest Parisian exhibitions. She then started writing for *Cimaise*.

Another regular contributor was Pierre Restany who greatly appreciated Koenig's work to which he devoted many articles over the years. The extent of French critics' appreciation for Koenig was manifested in 1959 at the first Biennale de Paris, when Koenig was awarded the Grand Prize of the Art Critics.

Koenig's position within the Parisian art world made him a wonderful promotor of the Pacific region. Not only did he draw Parisian critics' attention to the works of his West Coast colleagues, he also featured their works in the gallery and in the pages of *Cimaise*. Between 1954 and 1955, *Cimaise* actually published

---

<sup>22</sup> On Falkenstein see, for instance, Susan M. Anderson, Michael Duncan, and others, *Claire Falkenstein* (Los Angeles: Falkenstein Foundation, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Visiting the United States in 1959, Michel Ragon for instance, commented extensively on the art scene in California and Seattle, even though New York occupied the greatest part of his report. See Michel Ragon, "L'Art actuel aux Etats-Unis". *Cimaise* (Spring 1959): 6-35.

several essays on the School of the Pacific, including a conversation that took place in Falkenstein's studio in which Tapié and Francis participated.<sup>24</sup>

## Parisian Enthusiasm for the School of the Pacific

If the presence of West Coast artists in Parisian galleries, magazines, and cafés may explain Parisians' knowledge of their works, it cannot alone account for their enthusiasm. To understand Parisian keenness for West Coast artists, we need to consider what this particular region of the United States would have represented for the French in the 1950s.

Before the development of commercial jet airliners in the early 1960s, which transformed transatlantic travels, very few Europeans had the opportunities to visit the United States. The journey was long, expensive, and required hard-to-obtain visas and US currencies. Among those who managed to go to the United States, only a happy few had the time and resources to go to the West Coast, whose remoteness fascinated them. French people would have only had very vague images of this vast Far West, which most certainly involved cowboys, trappers, gold-prospectors, and Indians.<sup>25</sup> For them, this was the *true* America. In many ways, the West Coast of the United States fascinated the Europeans because they knew so very little about it and imagined it as being radically and fundamentally different from Europe.

This was the main reason, I believe, why Parisians and Europeans preferred West Coast to East coast artists: in their eyes, the New York artists were simply too European to be interesting. This was born out by the artworks that were sent from New York to Europe and Paris. The most widely exhibited work by Pollock was the *She-Wolf*, which was shown 20 times in Western Europe between 1953 and 1959 (Fig. 3). The title of the work, which refers to Roman legend of Remus and Romulus, would have been read by European critics as a proof of Pollock's connection to the old European culture. Stylistically, the painting would have appeared to postwar Parisians as a combination of Surrealism and German Expressionism.

Another Pollock frequently shown in postwar Europe was the *Moon-Woman* (1942). While its title was thought to refer to a poem by Charles Baudelaire ("Favors of the Moon"), its color palette and style would also have prompted comparisons with Surrealism and Expressionism. Among the drip paintings often seen in Europe in the 1950s was *Full Fathom Five* (1947). Here the title refers to Shakespeare. As for the drip technique, it may have appeared to Parisian viewers as an expressionist version of automatic

---

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Sawyer, "L'expressionisme abstrait: la phase Pacifique". *Cimaise* (June 1954): 3-5; Alvard, Tapié, and Simmons. "L'Ecole du Pacifique" 6-9; Wescher, "Ecole du Pacifique", 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> In 1943, the young Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote an essay on "The art of the Northwest coast at the American Museum of Natural History", in which he discussed the work of the indigenous populations and their connection to Asia. At the time, Lévi-Strauss was not yet famous but in the early 1950s he became a very important scholar whose influence extended far beyond the realm of anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The art of the Northwest coast at the American Museum of Natural History", *Gazette des beaux-arts*, no. 24 (1943): 175-82. He will publish *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* in 1949 and *Tristes tropiques* in 1955.

drawing.<sup>26</sup> Romulus and Remus, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, German Expressionism, Surrealism... to a French viewer of the 1950s, Pollock's work would have seemed very European.

Not only was Pollock's work too European, it had the wrong European precedents. In postwar France, Surrealism was regarded by many as passé and irrelevant. During the Second World War, young artists had moved away from Surrealism, because the movement was too international to have real symbolic power in Occupied France and because its main practitioners had fled the country. Their attention went rather to Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, who stayed behind. The post-Cubism and post-Fauvism they practiced offered young artists a national source of inspiration to create a visual language that could be read as French and opposed to the violence of German expressionism.<sup>27</sup> In the postwar period, Cubism, Fauvism, and Impressionism remained major references for Parisian artists. Hence their lukewarm reaction to the works of the New York artists: while the Surrealist influences would have made their works look passé, the Expressionist violence would have been rejected as too German.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Data on Pollock's works exhibited in Europe was compiled using *catalogue raisonné* [Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).] and exhibition catalogues.

<sup>27</sup> Even though German expressionism had been condemned as degenerated and anti-German by the Nazi regime, it continued to represent German art in the eyes of the French people. On the arts in France during the War, see Sarah Wilson, "Les peintres de tradition française", in Pontus Hultén, ed. *Paris-Paris, 1937-1957 - Création en France* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981), 106-15. Michèle C. Cone, "«Abstract» Art as a Veil: Tricolor Painting in Vichy France, 1940-44", *The Art Bulletin*, June 1992, 191-204.

<sup>28</sup> Even if the German expressionists had been condemned by the Nazi as degenerated, in the French imaginary Germany was associated with Romanticism and Expressionism, that is to say deeply emotional, excessive and even violent styles. In contrast, French art was thought to be clear, measured, and rational.





**Figure 3.**

Jackson Pollock, *The She-Wolf*, 1943. Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 106.4 x 170.2 cm.  
© 2019 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

In contrast, the works of the West Coast artists seemed free from European influences, as Tapié explained in the catalogue of Claire Falkenstein's 1953 London show:

From Seattle to San Francisco, the names of TOBEY, GRAVES, STILL, SAM FRANCIS and FRED MARTIN in painting, and of CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN in sculpture, lead the contemporary venture in its most authentic and unexpected contribution as concerns our ingrained habits of vision and thought. In the U.S.A., Pacific art is the only kind of art which owes absolutely nothing to European emanations and it is, for this reason, of particular interest. Its genuine creativeness first disconcerts, then fascinates as it confuses us, compels us to think, and to modify some of our ideas about such things as dynamism, space, structures, and even the elements of mysticism. The Pacific coast is the direct and real point of contact between the most adventurous descendants of the pioneer and the highly complex civilisations of China, Japan and Indonesia. Without passing through Europe. It is an exceptionally favoured geographical

situation. These then are the conditions of extreme audacity and complete freedom within which such works as this is likely to develop.<sup>29</sup>

Reviewing Lawrence Calcagno's one-person exhibition at the Studio Paul Facchetti in 1955,<sup>30</sup> Louis-Paul Favre explained to his readers: "Calcagno spent his youth on a ranch in California, on this extreme western border that is the West Coast of America. The East is closer than distant Europe...".<sup>31</sup> Discussing the same exhibition Julien Alvard also praised Calcagno's landscapes for their specifically Pacific style:

Without trying to insist one more time on the phenomenon of differentiation, we can indicate the appearance of a particular arrangement in Calcagno's painting, the one which divides the canvas into two layers sweeping the space on both sides of a line of force which evokes by its fixedness the disproportionate horizons of the desert. To a style born on the Pacific coast, this exhibition brings something new.<sup>32</sup>

Not only did Parisian critics endorse this American Pacific style but they also saw it as a positive influence on Parisian artists. In the introduction of his 1953 study of the contemporary art scene, Robert Lebel evoked this particular Pacific influence on the Parisian avant-garde:

Besides this unknown begins to manifest itself to us by the appearance of the American continent on the field of the artistic creation. It is hereby an event the impact of which we cannot exaggerate. The fascination that Europe had always experienced for distant civilizations, and that was translated during the last half century by a particularly effective use of the archaic and native arts, could soon be updated. If the said school of Paris maintains its influence, already the Mexican claw finds itself on many representational works of Europe and the imprint of the oriental extreme calligraphy or the layout, through Mark Tobey and the school of the Pacific, is detectable on the Parisian avant-garde.<sup>33</sup>

Introducing an exhibition of American artists based in Paris, Tapié also considered that the influence of the Pacific style on the Parisian art scene: "The first point for us is the contribution that the presence of a 100% American or «Pacific» painting—can make on the turntable of the Paris scene. That is to say, an art which emanates possibly for the Orient without passing through Europe; and then finally to observe how certain temperaments have been able to assimilate the essential elements of our present epoch".<sup>34</sup>

In the context of the postwar years, the idea that the United States was or could be a meeting point between Europe and Asia, a place where a synthesis of the cultural traditions of the two continents could emerge and flourish, had a strong currency in France. The War and the American engagement on the Pacific front had indeed made Europeans strongly aware of the United States' geographic connection to

---

<sup>29</sup> Michel Tapié, "The Formal Universe of Claire Falkenstein" (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1953).

<sup>30</sup> For more information on Calcagno, see Suzan Campbell, *Journey Without End: the Life and Art of Lawrence Calcagno* (Albuquerque: Albuquerque Museum, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Louis-Paul Favre, "Les Paysages de Calcagno". *Combat*, June 27 1955.

<sup>32</sup> Julien Alvard, "Calcagno". *Cimaise* (July 1955): 17.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Lebel, "Confrontations". In *Premier bilan de l'art actuel*, ed. Robert Lebel (Paris: Le Soleil noir, 1953), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Tapié, *Peintres américains en France* (Paris: Galerie Craven, 1953), nonpaged.

Asia. In the catalogue of the 1952 Pollock exhibition, Tapié could thus write: "at the moment when the artistic future, as many other futures, is situated on a global scale—America has become the real geographical crossroads of the confrontation for the deepest problems of the major artistic movements of the East and the West, in interferences where the surge of the calligraphic significance and the colorable intensity of the plastic-pictorial drama collide in a violent shock...".<sup>35</sup>

Tobey's connection to Asia played no small part in shaping and spreading this new geopolitical representation of the United States, all the more since it was repeated in every written account of his work. After moving to Seattle in the 1920s, Tobey had indeed come into contact with the large Chinese and Japanese communities of the region. He had befriended a Chinese artist, whom he visited in Shanghai in 1934. During his trip to Asia, he spent a month in a Zen monastery in Japan. Upon his return to the United States, Tobey developed *White Writing*, which was regarded as providing a synthesis between East and West.<sup>36</sup>

Such a synthesis made Tobey and other West Coast artists attractive to the French public because in the 1950s France was deeply fascinated by Asian art and culture (Fig. 4). European artists and intellectuals had been engrossed in Asian art since they first encountered it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it became a continuous source of inspiration and renewal for artists. In France, Asian art had never been regarded as primitive; on the contrary, from the first Chinese ceramics to 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese prints, the works of Asian artists were regarded as extremely sophisticated. They were admired by artists and collected by museums and collectors. Asian poetry, literature, and philosophy were also admired, translated, and studied.<sup>37</sup> The postwar period was marked by a renewed fascination with Asia that it is sometimes described as a neo-Japonism.<sup>38</sup>

The main feature of neo-Japonism was a strong interest in calligraphy and Zen Buddhism. Chinese calligraphy provided Parisian artists with a poetic and controlled alternative to the Surrealist automatic drawing and the violent gesture of Expressionism. Likewise, Zen Buddhism offered them a way to achieve personal freedom and enjoy spirituality outside the rigid framework of traditional Western religions — two dimensions that were missing from Existentialism and Marxism, the two most important schools of thought in postwar Paris. The Zen practice of achieving liberation through self-knowledge also offered a welcomed alternative to psychoanalysis in the years preceding Jacques Lacan's revision of Sigmund Freud's ideas.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Michel Tapié, "Jackson Pollock avec nous". In *Jackson Pollock* (Paris: Paul Facchetti, 1952), nonpaged.

<sup>36</sup> See in particular Janet Flanner, "Tobey, mystic errant", *L'Oeil* (June 1955): 26-31.

<sup>37</sup> On Mark Tobey, see William Chapin Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962); Michael Russell Freeman, "«The eye burns gold, burns crimson, and fades to ash»: Mark Tobey as a Critical Anomaly". Ph.D., Indiana University at Bloomington, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> To give a few examples: Paul Claudel's poems written while he was in China before the War were re-published in the early 1950s, widely read, and greatly admired. Henri Michaux's 1933 book *Un Barbare en Asie* was re-published in 1947 and 1967 which confirms the appeal of the region among the younger generation.

<sup>39</sup> For more information on this Neo-Japonisme see EunJung Grace An, "PAR-ASIAN Technology: French Cinematic, Literary and Artistic Encounters with East Asia since 1945". Ph.D., Cornell University, 2004; Anik





**Figure 4**

Mark Tobey, *Northwest Drift*, 1958. Tempera and gouache on paper on board, 113.5 x 90.5 cm.

© 2019 Estate of Mark Tobey / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Photo Credit: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY

As for the arts of the American West Coast, knowledge about Zen and calligraphy was spread in Paris through the numerous Chinese and Japanese artists who were then living in Paris, of whom Zao Wou Ki and Kumi Sugai were the most prominent figures.<sup>40</sup> The influence of these Asian artists on the Parisian visual arts cannot be underestimated when considering the reception of Californian artists.

To only take one example, the painter Pierre Alechinsky came to his signature style through his contact with the Asian artists of Paris, as he recalls:

In October 1954, I observe in Paris Walasse Ting, in his room of the Chinese district, passage Raguinot: he squats in front of his paper. I follow the movements of the brush, the speed. Very important the variations of the speed, the line, the acceleration, the braking. Immobilization. The light irremovable spot, the heavy irremovable spot. The whites, all the greys, the black. Slowness and speed. Ting hesitates, then out of the blue the solution, the fall of the cat on its legs. Last graceful figures beyond the paper.<sup>41</sup>

Shortly thereafter Alechinsky discovered *Bokubi*, a Japanese journal devoted to ancient and modern calligraphy. He then contacted Morita Shiryû the director of the journal, with whom he started a correspondence. As a result, he said: "Until 1955 I would have no other goal: to go to Japan".<sup>42</sup> In October 1955, Alechinsky flew to Japan, where he made a film documentary on Japanese Calligraphy. He also wrote an essay for the French magazine *Phase* entitled "Au-delà de l'écriture" (March 1955) and organized an exhibition *L'encre de Chine dans la peinture japonaise*, which was held in Paris and in Amsterdam in 1956.

This exhibition was just one among the many exhibitions devoted to ancient and modern Asian art that took place in France in the 1940s and 1950s. Although I do not have exact data on these exhibitions from what I have collected so far it is obvious that there were more museum shows devoted to Asian art than to American art in postwar France and I would even venture to say that there were also more exhibitions of modern and contemporary Asian art than of modern and contemporary American art. There were indeed two museums devoted to Asian art in Paris—the Musée Cernuschi and the Musée Guimet—in addition to the Louvre's Asian collections.

As early as 1946 the Musée Cernuschi presented *La peinture chinoise contemporaine*, the first show exclusively devoted to contemporary Chinese art in France. In 1953, the museum inaugurated a series of one-person shows of Chinese contemporary artists and that year the collector Guo Youshou gave his collection to the museum. It was the beginning of the museum's permanent collection which resulted in additional

---

<sup>40</sup> The writings of Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, whose essays on Zen were translated in French during the War and republished in the early 1950s, also played an important role, along with the writings of French scholars.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Alechinsky, *Roue libre*. Genève: Skira, 1971, 116.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Alechinsky, *Baluchon et ricochets* Paris: Gallimard, 1994, 99.



donations by artists and collectors. In 1956, the Chinese artist Zhang Daqian had a solo-show at the Cernuschi museum and one at the Musée d'Art moderne, three years before Pollock.<sup>43</sup>

In fact in 1959, when the retrospective of Jackson Pollock came to Paris along with the show *The New American Painting*, an important show of Chinese Art, *Cent ans de peinture chinoise (1850-1950)*, was taking place in Paris at the Maison de la Pensée Française. Comparing the reviews of the shows is extremely telling. While the Chinese show was generally praised, the American show received mixed reviews. For instance, *Connaissances des Arts* did not review *The New American Painting*, but encouraged their readers to visit *Cent ans de peinture chinoise*. Of particular interest to my argument is the fact that many critics who reviewed the American exhibition regretted Tobey's absence from the show. One cannot help wondering what connection the critics would have drawn between the Chinese artists and the father of the Pacific School if he had been included.

### Conclusion: A Case Study of Cultural Transfers

West Coast artists appealed to the Parisian public because they appeared to have a special connection with Asia and because their work offered a synthesis between Asia and Europe. If this was perfectly true for Mark Tobey who had lived and studied in Asia, was it equally true for other West Coast artists or did such a connection only exist in the French imagination?

It was indeed in Paris that Sam Francis came in contact with Japanese artists and critics, and befriended Walasse Ting and François Cheng. And it was from Paris that he travelled to Japan. The same is true for Koenig who seemingly discovered his Asian roots in Paris. It thus seems to me that the French neo-Japonism and Tobey's involvement with Asia combined to influence an entire generation of West Coast artists to embrace their supposed Asian or Pacific association. It also appears that Tapié who was fascinated by Asian art, and Georges Duthuit, who had written a text on Chinese mystic and modern painting in 1936, were particularly influential in shaping that vision of the American West Coast.<sup>44</sup>

It is tempting to believe that it was through their contact with Tapié, Duthuit, Alvard, Lebel, and other French enthusiasts for Asia and believers in the American synthesis between Asian and European art that the West Coast American artists became interested in their relationship to the Pacific world. It is tempting because it would provide a perfect example of a complex *cultural transfèr*, but the fact that I am a French art historian working in the United States is also a perfect case study of *Histoire croisée*.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Eric Lefebvre, "Chinese Painting in Paris: The Legacy of 20th Century Master Artists". *Arts of Asia* 41, no. 4 (2011): 82-89.

<sup>44</sup> Georges Duthuit, *Mystique chinoise et peinture moderne* (Chroniques du jour, 1936).

<sup>45</sup> On cultural transfers and *histoire croisée*, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufman, "Interpreting Cultural Transfer and the Consequences of Markets and Exchange: Reconsidering Fumi-e," in *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900. Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections*, ed. Michael North (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010), 135-61; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: "Histoire Croisée" and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History & Theory* 45, no. 1 (February 2006): 30-50.

In any case, the story I just outlined stands as a perfect example of the dynamism of cultural exchanges and the complexity of cultural transfers. It demonstrates that one cannot study cultural exchanges in a bilateral way, because it is never just about Paris and New York. It is also about Paris and Shanghai and Berlin, and about New York and Seattle and San Francisco.

## Bibliografia

- Alvard, Julien, Michel Tapié, and Fitz Simmons, "L'Ecole du Pacifique". *Cimaise* (June 1954): 6-9.
- Alvard, Julien. "Calcagno". *Cimaise* (July 1955): 17.
- Callahan, Kenneth. "Pacific Northwest". *Art News* (July 1946): 22.
- Duthuit, Georges. *Mystique chinoise et peinture moderne*. Paris: Chroniques du jour, 1936.
- EunJung, Grace An. "PAR-ASIAN Technology: French Cinematic, Literary and Artistic Encounters with East Asia since 1945". Ph.D., Cornell University, 2004.
- Favre, Louis-Paul. "Les Paysages de Calcagno". *Combat* (June 1955): 27.
- Flanner, Janet. "Tobey, mystic errant". *L'Oeil* (June 1955): 26-31.
- Francis, Sam et al. *Sam Francis, les années parisiennes, 1950-1961*. Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1995.
- Freeman, Michael Russell. "«The eye burns gold, burns crimson, and fades to ash»: Mark Tobey as a Critical Anomaly". Ph.D., Indiana University at Bloomington, 2000.
- Ragon, Michel. "L'Art actuel aux Etats-Unis". *Cimaise* (Spring 1959): 6-35.
- Restany, Pierre. "L'Amérique aux Américains". *Ring des Arts*, no. 1 (1960): 22-31.
- Seiberling, Dorothy. "Mystic Painters of the Pacific Northwest". *Life Magazine*, (September 1953): 84-98.
- Tapié, Michel. "The Formal Universe of Claire Falkenstein". London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1953.
- Tapié, Michel. *Peintres américains en France*. Paris: Galerie Craven, 1953.
- Wescher, Paul. "Ecole du Pacifique". *Cimaise* (April 1955): 3-5.