

Grimley, Alex: "Tomlin, Bradley Walker," in Beyer, Andreas / Savoy, Bénédicte / Tegethoff, Wolf (Eds.), *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon: die Bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, vol. CIX, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 460-461

1.1

Tomlin, Bradley Walker, American painter, *19.8.1899 Syracuse/NY, †11.5.1953 New York/NY, lived and worked in New York City.

1.2

1917-21 Syracuse University with Jeannette Scott and Carl T. Hawley; 1922 Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowship; 1923 Hiram Gee Fellowship; 1923-24 Académie Colarossi, Académie de la Grande Chaumièr.

Best known as an Abstract Expressionist painter, Tomlin was older than most artists associated with that movement, and had a successful career as both an illustrator and a painter of still-lives and floral studies before shifting to abstraction. He began working for publisher Condé Nast in 1922, illustrating 24 magazine covers before leaving the firm in 1929. His earliest New York solo exhibition, at the Anderson Galleries in March 1923, featured watercolor landscapes and still-lives. Shortly after, he met painter Frank London, who'd become a lifelong mentor to Tomlin.

During a year-long sojourn in France, Tomlin responded more to the Classical art and architecture at Versailles than to the bohemian scene of the Left Bank. His interest in monarchy, lineage, and ancestry then took him to England to visit distant relatives; research into his family history remained a preoccupation. A dedicated Anglophile, he collected neoclassical and Victorian furniture and antiques. In 1925, he joined the Whitney Studio Club and the Woodstock Artists Association, showing in their yearly exhibitions for several decades thereafter. He returned to Woodstock almost annually for the rest of his life, purchasing first a cottage, and later a Victorian home in the town.

Inspired by Georges Braque, whom he'd met in Paris, Tomlin introduced bold outlines and moody shading into his still-life scenes, as in the *Studio Window* of 1928 (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia). A mainline Protestant, Tomlin painted a series of European landscapes featuring historical architecture and religious themes following another year in France. In 1929, he signed with the Rehn Gallery, whose stable included Edward Hopper and Charles Burchfield, but sales slowed with the onset of the depression later that year.

A 1932 *Self-Portrait* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) shows the Cubist-like style that he had developed in the previous years; the individual folds of his jacket and scarf are heavily outlined and shaded using repetitious brushstrokes. Unlike many of his abstract expressionist contemporaries, Tomlin did not participate in left wing activities or public works programs in the 1930s. After a brief period of taking private commissions for oil paintings, Tomlin spent the decade teaching, initially at two private schools on New York's Upper East Side then as instructor of painting and drawing at Sarah Lawrence College until 1941. In 1932, he was included in the Whitney Museum's First Biennial of Contemporary American Painting.

Galvanized by the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 exhibition of Surrealism, he shifted into a more emphatic Synthetic Cubist pictorial manner, first in a series of small collages and then in paintings of an idiosyncratic Surrealist-inspired style. In *Still Life (Outward Preoccupation)* of 1939-42 (Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY), an array of disjunctive elements—fruit, a vase, cats, a self-portrait bust, flattened silhouettes—are arranged on a table before a sky framed by window-like boxes. Like the work of de Chirico, Tomlin's Surrealist style is suffused with allusions to classical art and architecture; his wartime "metaphysical" paintings evinced a longing for history and melancholy toward the present. These works brought him increased sales and purchases by New York museums.

In 1940, Tomlin joined the Federation of Modern Painters and in 1945 met founding member Adolph Gottlieb, whose work was a decisive influence on his shift to abstraction. *Interplanetary Greeting* of 1946 (Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY) is comprised of a vaguely defined grid of flattened planes which is overlaid with dark outlines of biomorphic shapes. The planes that comprise the gridlike scaffolding in *Number 20*, 1949 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) are larger and flatter than the former work; interwoven through the grid is broad hieroglyphic mark making. Tomlin did not practice a gestural or 'automatic' manner of painting; his compositions, though 'all-over' in design, are balanced and placid, a quality shared with contemporaneous paintings by his friend Philip Guston.

Between 1948-50, Tomlin shared a studio with Robert Motherwell; in 1949, both were included in the exhibition 'The Intrasubjectives' organized by Harold Rosenberg. Shortly after, Tomlin signed with the Betty Parsons Gallery. His largest painting, *Number 9: In Praise of Gertrude Stein* (Museum of Modern Art, New York) was shown there in his May 1950 exhibition. In that work, sharply defined black calligraphy is suspended within sketchy white and light green outlines upon a dark green field. Tomlin completed very little work in 1951: he moved his studio around Greenwich Village three times and suffered a heart attack that fall. Between 1952 and his death the following year, Tomlin's style developed increasingly toward 'all-over' composition. *Number 1* (1952, Whitney Museum of American Art) is comprised of an edge-to-edge rhythmic patterning of staccato brush marks, evenly sized and mostly rectilinear; in *Number 12* of the same year (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), the patterning of brush marks is extended into lines, glowing white and covering a variegated background.

Shortly after purchasing a house in Springs, Long Island, in May 1953, he fell ill at a dinner with Jackson Pollock and suffered a second heart attack. He died the following night. Described variously as aloof and aristocratic, "an Anglo-Saxon gentleman of the old school," Tomlin was said to have "stood out almost like a traitor to his class" in his chosen abstract expressionist milieu.¹ Renowned and celebrated for several years after his death, Tomlin had faded, by the end of the 20th-century, into relative obscurity.

2.1 Work

Brooklyn, Museum. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Poughkeepsie, Loeb Art Center. St. Louis, Kemper Art Museum. Syracuse, Everson Museum. Washington D.C., Hirshorn Museum; National Gallery of Art; Phillips Collection. Woodstock, Artists Association and Museum.

¹ Feldman 1971, see bibliography below.

2.2 Writings by the Artist

Untitled statement, New York 1958-59; The schism between art and the public, Buffalo 1975; Foreword to Frank London, Syracuse 2016; Foreword to Judson Smith, Syracuse 2016.

2.3 Exhibitions

Solo

1926, '27 Montross Gallery, New York

1931, '44 Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery, New York

1950, '53 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

1957 Whitney Museum of Art, New York (*cat.*)

1975 Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (*cat.*)

2016 Everson Museum, Syracuse (*cat.*)

Group

1952 New York, Museum of Modern Art: Fifteen Americans (*cat.*)

1955 Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne: 50 ans d'art aux Etats-Unis

1955 Washington D.C., Phillips Collection: Paintings by Bradley Walker Tomlin and Abstract Expressionists

1958-59 New York, Museum of Modern Art: The New American Painting as Shown in Eight European Countries (*cat.*)

1961 New York, Guggenheim Museum: Abstract Expressionists and Imagists (*cat.*)

1965 Los Angeles, County Museum of Art: The New York School (*cat.*)

1970 New York, Metropolitan Museum: New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940-70 (*cat.*)

2.4 Bibliography

J. Ashberry, *Art News* 56:1957, 29.

D. Ashton, *Arts and Architecture* 74:1957

M. Feldman, *Art in America*, 59:1971(2)96-99

Extensive bibliographies can be found in Buffalo 1975 and Syracuse 2016.