

“This is what we are forced to suffer . . .
this is what we should be.”

The Art of George Tooker

BY DANA GIOIA

IN 1950 WHEN Abstract Expressionism was all the rage and representational art was declared hopelessly passé, a young painter in Greenwich Village began creating a series of haunting masterpieces in a realistic style. The paintings depicted ordinary people in everyday settings—offices, waiting rooms, subways, cafeterias—but conveyed in a manner that made the scenes seem fantastic, even supernatural. Today these dreamlike paintings would be called magical realism, but that term did not yet exist in English. The artist was George Tooker.

Tooker's work survived and eventually flourished because he had a genius for creating images of modern life that seem simultaneously astonishing and ordinary. In *Lunch* (1964), rows of office workers hunch over their meals seemingly oblivious of one another. In *Teller* (1967), identical bank clerks sit listless isolated behind steel-barred counters. In *The Subway* (1950), commuters stand, anxious and afraid, in a concrete underworld. Once seen, the paintings stay fixed in the memory.

Recognition came slowly. For many years Tooker existed on the margins of the art world. The artist was 65 when the first full-length book on his work appeared. He was 87 when he received the National Medal of Arts. Tooker never complained about neglect. He was too absorbed by his own contrarian passions. They led him to surprising places. When other young painters followed Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock, Tooker studied the early Renaissance master Piero della Francesca. When the leading critics praised abstract formalism, Tooker emphasized content. His central concern was never style. It was the human condition.

Even Tooker's creative process differed from the methods of his more celebrated contemporaries. The abstract expressionists practiced “action painting,” in which paint was dripped, splashed, smeared, or even fingered onto the canvas in a self-consciously spontaneous performance. Tooker meticulously planned his paintings with preliminary drawings, arranging his figures in geometric perspective as carefully as an Old Master. Tooker even mixed his own paints using egg yolks and pigments—just as Giotto or Botticelli did before the introduction of oils. Tooker's mature paintings were executed in tempera, a difficult and unforgiving medium. He applied the tempera in tiny strokes, carefully layering the colors, taking weeks or months to finish a work.

*Modern life,
astonishing
and ordinary.
The Subway (1950),
and Lunch (1964).*



LUNCH, 1964, EGG TEMPERA ON GESSO PANEL, 20 X 26 INCHES ©THE ESTATE OF GEORGE TOOKER, COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO; MUSEUM PURCHASE, DERBY FUND, FROM THE PHILIP J. AND SUZANNE SCHILLER COLLECTION OF AMERICAN SOCIAL COMMENTARY ART 1930-1970. THE SUBWAY, 1950, EGG TEMPERA ON COMPOSITION BOARD, 18 X 36 INCHES ©THE ESTATE OF GEORGE TOOKER, COLLECTION OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; COURTESY OF DC MOORE GALLERY, NEW YORK.



The Seven Sacraments on seven panels: George Tooker's painting in the St. Francis of Assisi Church in Windsor, Vermont. The church is also home to Tooker's Stations of the Cross.

Tooker not only shared technique with the Old Masters. He also adopted their metaphysical vision of painting, which tries simultaneously to present both the body and the soul of a subject. Tooker's artistic development reflects the slow transformation of his spirit. His early work emanated existential anxiety and terror. The intervening years were marked by his struggle for identity and meaning. His later work presents mysterious states of rapture, vision,

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and grace. Shortly after the death of Tooker's partner, William Christopher, in 1973, the artist resettled permanently in Vermont. Three years later he joined the Catholic Church.

Tooker's Catholicism was both genuine and profound. His partner's death provided the catalyst, but the artist's conversion reflected his lifelong search for community, justice, and religious faith. For years, he had followed Dorothy Day's *The Catholic Worker* and participated in the civil rights movement. His early paintings contained subtle Christian themes and symbols, which simply became more explicit after his conversion. At his parish church, St. Francis of Assisi in Windsor, Vermont, Tooker attended daily Mass and helped distribute the Eucharist. He patterned his daily life on Franciscan simplicity.

When the church was destroyed by fire, the pastor asked Tooker to contribute a painting for a charity auction. Instead, the artist offered to create a new altar-

piece when the church was rebuilt. In 1980 he finished *The Seven Sacraments*, a powerful re-creation of the Renaissance tradition. Each of the seven panels presents a sacrament in contemporary terms. The kneeling penitent in the radiant and compassionate depiction of "Reconciliation" is Tooker's self-portrait. Four years later he painted the 14 Stations of the Cross. No American Catholic church has more impressive paintings than this modest parish.

Tooker's originality is understated but abundant, though he never calls attention to his own innovation. What is most new in his paintings is inextricable from what is most ancient, because the two impulses have merged into the same vision. Let one example of his visionary originality suggest his meaningful newness. Starting in the late 1940s, Tooker began mingling the races in his work—white, black, Latino, mixed. The inclusivity is striking. The gesture has resonance, but race itself is

never the real subject. His paintings depict the trials and redemption of all humanity. "In one kind of painting," he disclosed, "I'm trying to say 'this is what we are forced to suffer in life,' while in other paintings I say, 'this is what we should be.'"

George Tooker never met the critical expectations of the art world. He was both too far behind the times and too far ahead of them. But history has vindicated his outsider's vision of the spiritual struggles and consolations of the modern age. When he died in 2011 at the age of 90, *The New York Times* praised him as "one of the most distinctive and mysterious American painters of the twentieth century." By then the press was only stating the obvious.

DANA GIOIA served as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and under his guidance George Tooker was presented with the National Medal of Arts in 2007. Gioia is the California State Poet Laureate and the author of many books of poetry and criticism, including *99 Poems: New and Selected*. Read his essay "The Catholic Writer Today" in our Summer 2014 edition.