

## George Tooker Dies at 90; Painter of Modern Anxiety

By WILLIAM GRIMES

George Tooker, a painter whose haunting images of trapped clerical workers and forbidding government offices expressed a peculiarly 20th-century brand of anxiety and alienation, died on Sunday at his home in Hartland, Vt. He was 90.

The cause was complications of kidney failure, Edward De Luca, director of the D C Moore Gallery in Manhattan, said.

Mr. Tooker, often called a symbolic, or magic, realist, worked well outside the critical mainstream for much of his career, relegated to the margins by the rise of abstraction. As doctrinaire modernism loosened its hold in the 1980s, however, he was redis-

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covered by a younger generation of artists, critics and curators, who embraced him as one of the most distinctive and mysterious American painters of the 20th century.

He specialized in eerie situations with powerful mythic overtones. Luminous and poetic, his paintings often conveyed a sense of dread, but could just as easily express a lover's rapture or spiritual ecstasy. Whatever the emotion, his generalized figures, with their smoothly modeled sculptural forms and masklike faces, seemed to dwell outside of time, even when placed in contemporary settings.

The harried figures in "The Subway" (1950), gathered in a low-ceilinged passageway, could be characters in a Greek tragedy, stalked by the Furies. In "Landscape With Figures" (1965-66), the disembodied heads of despairing office workers peep out of a mazelike set of cubicles, like the damned in a modern version

of the Inferno. The men and women in "Waiting Room" (1957) simply wait, catatonically and existentially, as if they were extras in a play by Beckett or Sartre.

"These are powerful pictures that will stay in the public consciousness," said Thomas H. Garver, author of the monograph "George Tooker." "Everyone can say, 'Yes, I've been in that faceless situation,' even if it's just standing in line waiting to apply for a driver's license."

Mr. Tooker's lyrical, poetic paintings were no less enigmatic than the angst-filled works he called his "protest paintings." In "Sleepers II" (1959), wide-eyed heads, swaddled in a cloudlike blanket, stare fixedly upward, like souls captured midway between death and transfiguration.

"His narratives are so mysterious that viewers have to look deeply into the paintings," said Marshall N. Price, chief curator at the National Academy Museum in New York, which organized a retrospective of Mr. Tooker's work in 2008. "You cannot look quickly at a Tooker and then turn away. And the work is filled with so many references to Renaissance painting, there is so much mysterious iconography, that for art historians it's just fascinating."

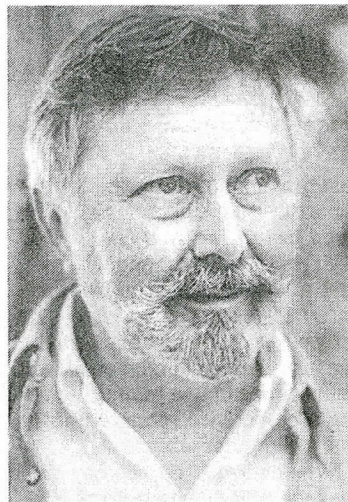
George Clair Tooker Jr. was born on Aug. 5, 1920, in Brooklyn and grew up on Long Island, in Bellmore, where he studied painting with a local artist. To please his parents, he entered Harvard after attending Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. At Harvard he studied English but continued to draw and do watercolors.

After graduating in 1942, he enlisted in the Marine Corps' officer candidate school, but the psychological stress of bayonet drill reactivated an old intestinal complaint, and he was discharged on medical grounds.

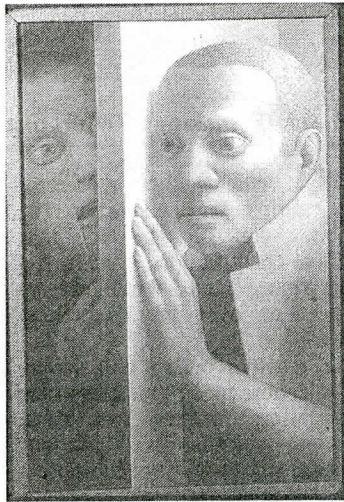
Mr. Tooker began studying with Reginald Marsh at the Art Students League of New York. There he met the painter Paul Cadmus, who introduced him to egg-tempera technique, which



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George Tooker specialized in eerie situations with powerful mythic overtones. Above, "Waiting Room, 1957"; far left, Mr. Tooker in 1988; near left, "Voice II" from 1972.

enforced a slower style of painting much more congenial to Mr. Tooker's contemplative nature. Working on wood panels or Masonite board, Mr. Tooker painstakingly built luminous matte surfaces, inch by square inch; soft, powdery colors complemented the rounded forms and fabrics of the paintings.

Mr. Cadmus's exuberant use of homosexual themes in his work

also encouraged Mr. Tooker to address that aspect of his identity in paintings like the terrifying, Bruegel-esque "Children and Spastics" (1946), in which a group of leering sadists torment three frail, effeminate men.

Equally influential was Jared French, part of Mr. Cadmus's intimate circle, whose interest in Jungian archetypes and in the frigid, inscrutable forms of archa-

thy C. Miller included Mr. Tooker's work in the "Fourteen Americans" show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, and his work also appeared at the Whitney Museum of American Art and other major museums.

With his partner, the painter William Christopher, Mr. Tooker moved into a loft on West 18th Street in Manhattan, making custom furniture to supplement his art income. By the late 1940s he had developed his mature style and settled on the themes that would engage him for the rest of his life: love, death, sex, grief, aging, alienation and faith. Working in isolation in rural Vermont after 1960, he produced two to four paintings a year.

Mr. Tooker's magical images were drawn from mundane experience. The bureaucratic shuffle he experienced when trying to get city permits to renovate a house in Brooklyn Heights led to "Government Bureau" (1956). One of his best-known works, it depicts disconsolate supplicants being stared at, impassively, by workers behind frosted-glass partitions, only their noses and eyes visible. Across the street from his home, the open windows in a Puerto Rican rooming house provided the raw material for his Windows series of the 1950s and '60s, like the young man strumming a guitar while his female lover sleeps behind him in "Guitar" (1957).

In 1973 Mr. Williams died in Spain, where the two men had been living for six years, plunging Mr. Tooker into a spiritual crisis that he resolved by embracing Roman Catholicism. In Mr. Tooker's later work, he often addressed religious themes, notably in "The Seven Sacraments" (1980), an altarpiece he produced for the church of St. Francis of Assisi in Windsor, Vt.

Mr. Tooker, who is survived by a sister, Mary Tooker Graham of Brooklyn, was notoriously reticent about the meaning of his work. "I don't examine it myself, and I don't want to," he once said. But he did reflect on the change in his later work. "I suppose I don't paint such unpleasant pictures as I used to," he told American Art magazine in 2002. "I got to be known for unpleasant pictures. I think my pictures are happier now, with fewer complaints."

ic Greek and Etruscan art inspired Mr. Tooker to take a more symbolic, mythic approach to his subject matter.

"Symbolism can be limiting and dangerous, but I don't care for art without it," Mr. Tooker told the cultural critic Selden Rodman in 1957. "The kind that appeals to me the most is a symbolism like a heraldic emblem, but never just that alone: the kind practiced by Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca."

At the same time, he fended off attempts to define him as a surrealist or a magic realist. "I am after reality — painting impressed on the mind so hard that it recurs as a dream," he said, "but I am not after dreams as such, or fantasy."

At the insistence of Lincoln Kirstein, who was Cadmus's brother-in-law, the curator Doro-