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## The effect of war on art: the work of Mark Rothko

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THE EFFECT OF WAR ON ART:  
THE WORK OF MARK ROTHKO

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

My goal for this thesis was to adequately illustrate the effect war can have on art and artists. I chose to single out one particular artist who lived and worked during a time of war and explore his life and work. My choice of artist was not random: I chose an individual who was particularly concerned about his external environment, and was active in the political and social issues of the time. My subject is Mark Rothko, a Russian-Jewish artist who emigrated from Russia as a boy and spent his life in the hotspot of artistic inspiration, New York City. Rothko was sensitive to socio-political matters and his involvement with politics affected his work. In order to fully comprehend the artist and his creations, I did a thorough investigation into the artist's life; studying his influences, exploring his philosophies, and examining his works. It is difficult to trace the evolution of the style and themes Rothko employed at certain stages in his life because the artist rarely dated his paintings. Only years later, when he made an inventory of his work, did he date them, but without records and entirely relying on his memory. Even so, I was able to assess his work and came to the conclusion that Rothko was heavily influenced by the war going on around him, as well as the aftermath of the First World War and the instability of the Great Depression. From this research, I can deduce that Mark Rothko was a product of his war-torn environment, of which his work was a true reflection.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world was rocked by two world wars and the Great Depression. Economic shortcomings and violent threats on personal freedoms were common to some. Emigration was at an all time high while Europeans were struggling to find solace, which most had done by coming America. Every aspect of life was affected by some strain of the wars or the Depression, and the art world was not an exception. Artists before, during, and after the First World War found influences and inspiration from their violent and unsteady surroundings, birthing several art movements. World War II did the same for many American artists. The war and Depression gave plenty of topics for artists to paint and discuss, which resulted in America's first big movement of its own, Abstract Expressionism. Also called Color Field or Action Painting, this movement was born from artists in New York who were at the center of the international art world, which had relocated to the States when Paris was captured by the Nazis in 1940. Emerging from Surrealist influences and having deep roots in mythology, Abstract Expressionism was not quick to surface; many artists were exploring primitive subjects and biomorphic origins in order to escape the reality of their situation in the world. However, these influences soon gave way to the idea that art is an expression, and the experience of art is the experience of creating the work itself. Representations and symbols disappear while forms, shapes and colors were used as mediums.

One of the most influential artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement did not consider himself an Abstract Expressionist. Mark Rothko did not wish to be categorized in any group, and did not consider himself to be a part of the Abstract Expressionists, even though he was one of the most prominent of the artists. Rothko found his way to expressionism by exploring the past, desperately looking for a way to express himself in his dismal world. In the

progression of his works, one can see Rothko's influence move from the Greeks and primordial to expression and freedom. He traded his figures and myths for shapes and colors. Mark Rothko was a sensitive, nervous man who did not fare well in the turmoil of his lifetime. His only consolation was his art, which he continued to alter and perfect until his death.

## 2 EARLY LIFE

The Russian Pale of Settlement, also called the Jewish Pale, was the area extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dubbed “the world’s largest ghetto at the turn of the century,”<sup>1</sup> it was the home of nearly five million Jews who had been forced there by the edict of the czar. The province of Vitebsk was in the northeast part of the Pale, now the Latvian S.S.R. The largest city of Vitebsk was Dvinsk.<sup>2</sup> In this city in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Czarist Russia, Marcus Rothkowitz (changing name to Mark Rothko as an adult) was born on September 25, 1903. Before the First World War, Dvinsk had a population of roughly 90,000, with almost half being Jewish, and was a busy railroad junction as well as an unusually developed industrial town. After the turn of the century, labor unrest was constant, but Rothko’s father managed to make a comfortable living as a pharmacist.<sup>3</sup> The first revolution broke out in Russia when Rothko was two years old. The revolution of 1905 succeeded only in driving the Czar to further extremes and resulted in the city of Dvinsk being carefully watched by the Czar’s secret police, or Cossacks.<sup>4</sup>

The name *Cossack* is derived from the Turkic *kazak*, meaning ‘free man’, originally referring to anyone who could not find his appropriate place in society and went into the steppe (grasslands of Southern Ukraine), where he acknowledged no authority. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the term applied to those (chiefly Russians and Poles) who went into the steppes to practice various trades and engage in hunting and fishing among other crafts.<sup>5</sup> These peasant-soldiers in Ukraine and in several regions in Russia held certain privileges, including exemption from taxes and labor services, in return for rendering military services. Each man had to equip

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Seldes, *Legacy of Mark Rothko* (New York: De Capo, 1996), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Town Cossacks” in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1984)

himself with a horse, arms, uniform, and supplies.<sup>6</sup> Originally autonomous, they were organized on principles of political and social equality. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> c. the Cossacks had lost most of their political autonomy and had been made the privileged military class, integrated with the Russian military forces. Under the last czars they were often used to quell strikes and other disturbances.<sup>7</sup>

When the Cossacks came to break up strikes using merciless and violent methods, the Jews were their first target. In 1903, Rothko's birth year, there was a particularly violent three-day pogrom in the Russian town of Kishinev.<sup>8</sup> Pogroms were violent mass attacks instigated by the czarist government<sup>9</sup> and, between the years of 1902 and 1906, were occurring in other Russian towns with increasing frequency. With slogans sanctioned by the czar like "Destroy the Jews and Save Russia," Jewish communities lived in fear.<sup>10</sup> Czarist Russia for Jews was a life of extreme repression. In most towns, Jews were unable to move about freely and were restricted to living in certain quarters. Advanced education was a privilege denied to all but a small minority.<sup>11</sup> Jews in Dvinsk were a part of that tiny minority. Dvinsk had an educated Jewish populace and was a place where progressive political views were common.<sup>12</sup> Dvinsk managed to avoid the horrifying pogroms that took place in other towns of the Jewish Pale,<sup>13</sup> but were not spared other frequent indignities all Jews in Czarist Russia endured. There were alarms and threats as well as rapes and rampages by the soldiers.<sup>14</sup> While old friends of Rothko have remained skeptical that Rothko ever encountered the rampaging of the Cossacks, Rothko most

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<sup>6</sup> "Town Cossacks", Encyclopedia of Ukraine

<sup>7</sup> "Cossacks" in The Columbia Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia.com; Internet; accessed 1 Feb 2010

<sup>8</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903 – 1970: A Retrospective* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1978), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 11.



often recalled his childhood situation as a Jew among hostile Russians.<sup>15</sup> Rothko came from a family of emancipated Jews but his father still saw fit to send him to a Cheder, a religious school. He studied the Talmud and learned Hebrew Scriptures. With the demands on young scholars and the strictness of the regime, Rothko's hatred for authority could have stemmed from his early childhood.<sup>16</sup> Rothko often commented on never having a chance to be a kid, and with siblings that were much older, he was robbed of playmates. His later interest in the artwork of children could be an innate curiosity and respect of something he never got to experience himself.

When Rothko was seven, Rothko's father, Jacob, decided it was best for his family to escape to America, as so many other Russian Jews had done between 1881 and 1914.<sup>17</sup> Jacob left in 1910 to establish himself and would call for the family later. The next year, Rothko's two older brothers, who were facing a general conscription in the czarist army, made the break to America through the underground. Marcus stayed with his older sister and mother until 1913, when Rothko's father sent for the rest of the family.<sup>18</sup> They settled in Portland with family members. Portland had only been settled sixty years earlier, and much of the population were just as rootless as the Rothkowitzes.<sup>19</sup> However, when Jacob died only seven months after they were settled in their new country, hardships came fast and hard for the family. While his two older brothers were employed by their cousins, Rothko was enrolled in public school, where he learned English with impressive ease. He also held odd jobs, working in a stockroom and selling newspapers, and graduated high school at the age of seventeen. His family closely followed and applauded the Russian Revolution, and Rothko found an outlet for his passionate temperament in the stimulating discussions of social radicalism that were held in Jewish communities. His

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<sup>15</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>17</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 11.

brother has said that Rothko developed quite a skill as a debater, and Rothko had a reputation for being a defender of labor and radical causes, with idols like Emma Goldman and William Haywood.<sup>20</sup> He dreamed of being a labor leader and, along with other youths of his generation, was inspired by the revolution to fight reaction and to stand for the working man's rights. During high school, Rothko showed interest in music and art, but the expectations of the immigrant Jewish community were much higher than the arts. In 1921, Rothko and two other Russian-Jewish immigrant friends were granted a scholarship to Yale. Rothko left for college, hoping to find a respectable profession that his background and formation would honor.<sup>21</sup>

### **Yale Years**

Yale was not very welcoming to a young Jewish immigrant. The college was extremely anti-Semitic, with a quota system that made it an extremely difficult task for an Eastern European Jew to assimilate. There was no Jew on the regular staff until 1943, with the first Jewish tenure granted in 1947. As a Jewish student, there were no membership offers from clubs, fraternities, or societies.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Rothko maintained an average GPA studying biology, psychology, philosophy, economics, history, and even excelling in mathematics. His scholarship was terminated in his second year, but Rothko continued his education, finding jobs with his New Haven relatives to support himself. Surrounded by WASPs and typical Ivy League scholars, Rothko's social issues did not abate and was known as a rebel. Along with two classmates, Rothko published a short-lived weekly pamphlet, *Saturday Night Pest*. The publication was a response to Rothko's disaffection with Yale and contained articles, comments, editorials, and criticism on all things Yale. The paper had a liberal point of view and its

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<sup>20</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 13.

propagandic nature was unusual for Yale in the twenties.<sup>23</sup> Essentially, Rothko left the school in 1923 and headed for New York, where possibilities were abundant and more opportunities were available; a much more appropriate atmosphere for a young, politically outspoken Russian-Jewish radical than Yale's stuffy halls.

### **Beginning of Life as Artist**

Rothko's move to New York signified a turning point in his life. He had reached a decision about his future, and it was not to be an engineer or writer, but an artist. His compelling

interest in art led him to a commitment in painting. He

remarked years later, "I became a painter because I

wanted to raise painting to the level of poignancy of

music and poetry."<sup>24</sup> He eked out a living finding odd

jobs in the garment district, but by January of 1924, he

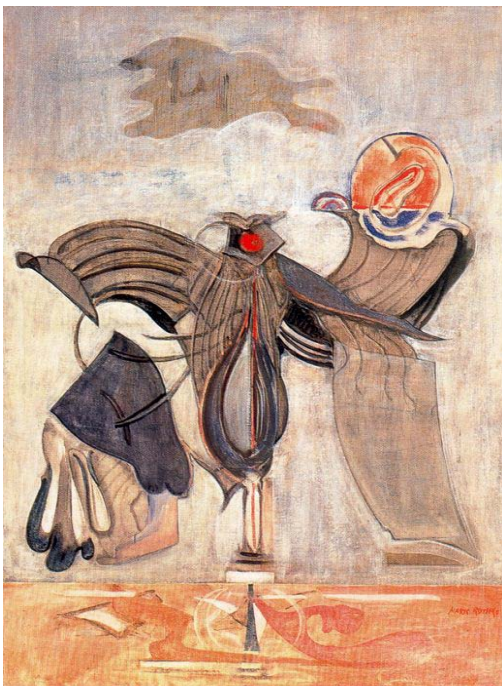
was enrolled in life drawing classes at the Art Student's

League. Besides a brief stint in Portland in mid-1924,

where he studied acting in a theatre company, he stayed at

the Art Student's League until May 1926.<sup>25</sup> The classes

were freely structured and taught by established artists



**Mark Rothko**  
***Gethsemane*, 1945**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**54 3/8" x 35 3/8"**

like George Bridgman and Max Weber. For Mark, who already had a

substantial aversion to authority, the intensive yet laid-back atmosphere

was a very comfortable fit.<sup>26</sup> During his years at the Art Students League,

<sup>23</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 14.

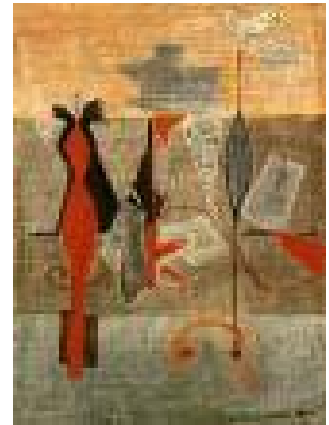
<sup>24</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Wick, *Rothko* (Milan: Skira, 2008), 211.

<sup>26</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 15.

the young artist took a few classes with Max Weber, a man who would be a tremendous influence to Rothko's early career.

Max Weber, like Rothko, was a Russian-born Jew who had come to America at the age of ten. Weber was also a pupil of Matisse, who will prove to be highly influential on Rothko's later career. By the time Rothko encountered him, Weber had already picked up inspiration from El Greco, Cezanne, and important players in the French avant-garde, and had already been celebrated for his early works, which were primitive with traces of tribal art and Cubism. During the 1920s, Weber had left Cubism behind and started concentrating on expressionist figure studies in landscape settings and still-lives. Rothko studied under Weber in still-life and life sketching, where Weber emphasized the expressive gesture of the nude. Weber's expressionist goal was apparent in his nudes. He taught that the nude was to be the vehicle of the artist's emotion and its environment was to be an evocation of the mood.<sup>27</sup> Years later Rothko



**Mark Rothko**  
***Primeval***  
***Landscape***  
**1945**  
**Oil on canvas**

would not accept the idea that self-expression was the proper function of art, but through Weber he learned to respect the direct expression of feelings.<sup>28</sup> These expressionistic views can be seen in Rothko's early work but it is Weber's Cubist work that was to leave an imprint on Rothko's later paintings. Rothko's *Gethsemane* and *Primeval Landscape*, both 1945, contain emblematic forms juxtaposed on a flat backdrop in a manner that recalls Weber's combination of trompe l'oeil technique and collage-like images.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>29</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 24.



**Max Weber**  
***The Geranium*, 1911**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**39 7/8" x 32 1/4"**

In his earliest sketches, Rothko's figures in their expressive distortions echo the work of Weber, but Weber's principles were more influential on Rothko as he experimented with his own subjects.<sup>30</sup> Rothko's young talent could be seen in his works of the late twenties; in his conventional yet sensitive urban scenes, spontaneous landscapes and studies of nudes.<sup>31</sup> In his experiences at the League, Rothko had his first

taste of the nature of artistic life in New York. He made friends with other students at the school and began attending gallery shows. From

the mid-1920s on, he spent most of his time checking out galleries and browsing museums, his favorite being the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>32</sup> At the age of twenty-five, Rothko had his first big step towards becoming a legitimate artist. In 1928, Rothko was included in his first group exhibition at the Opportunity Galleries in New York. Other artists included in the show were Rothko's friend Louis Harris and the artist Milton Avery,<sup>33</sup> who would prove to be a tremendous influence on Rothko.

### **Milton Avery**

Rothko's first encounter with a committed professional artist had been with Max Weber, who had exposed Rothko to some artistic expression, but Rothko, getting into his late twenties, was beginning to seek more guiding principles which would help him to define his task as an

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<sup>30</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Wick, *Rothko*, 211

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

artist. He found what he was seeking one afternoon in 1928 when a friend from Portland, violinist Louis Kaufman, brought him to the home of Milton and Sally Avery.<sup>34</sup>

Milton Avery was everything that Max Weber was not. Weber was a loud, cynical man with a forceful personality. Avery was calm; a composed man who practiced quiet self-containment yet emanated sound confidence.<sup>35</sup> These were the traits, along with Avery's gentle accessibility, that drew Rothko to the esteemed artist. He was moving in spirals of confusing creativity when the talented Avery stepped into Rothko's life, thus becoming a beacon in Rothko's sporadic artistic journey. His steady devotion to his career and modest living as an artist was inspiring, but it was his "naturalness" that Rothko truly appreciated. He described it as, "...that exactness and that inevitable completeness which can be achieved only by those gifted with magical means."<sup>36</sup> The reclining beach figures and child portraits that Avery was working on around this time portrayed a tenderness that Rothko valued highly, and his ability to minimize the use of shapes and colors while maximizing their importance was an influential technique that caught the attention of Rothko and other young artists.<sup>37</sup> It was through these suggestive color harmonies and simplification of gesture that Rothko benefited, especially since his lack of formal training in drawing hampered his skill for small details, such as fingers or feet.

Avery's pastoral subject matter and themes were not shared by Rothko, but his simple approach to the subjects of his paintings was admired by the novice, who was still trying to find his own form of pictorial expression. Rothko was intent on trying to fulfill an intense desire to establish a prevailing mood. His works during this period were mostly dark, moody, expressionist interiors, but his watercolors began to show a clarification of purpose after meeting

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<sup>34</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 28.

Avery. In Rothko's subway canvases, one single specific theme is used in a group of works; a technique Rothko had never used before. The collection of works does not constitute a true series, but the effort to clarify his ideas in a number of related works was apparent. Avery's influence could also be seen in the elongated figures and muted colors Rothko used in his subway scenes and other paintings in the early 1930s.<sup>38</sup>



**Milton Avery**  
*Untitled (Seated Woman in Blue)*  
 n.d. Oil on canvas, 24" x 20"

Avery exuded modest domesticity and lived within the perceived world with great ease and success, something Rothko longed for and appreciated. However, Rothko's innate interest in cosmology, and later, his emotional pull towards mythology, leads him on an artistic voyage much different from Avery's. Nevertheless, the peacefulness of Avery's studio, along with his simplified and colorful depictions of domestic subjects, left a lasting impression on Rothko, particularly his application of paint and treatment of color, and was the inspiration and

direction for which Rothko was desperately searching. Rothko's work began to diversify as soon as Avery made an appearance in his life.<sup>39</sup>

Around the same time, Rothko found a close friend in Adolph Gottlieb. Gottlieb was near Rothko's age and also a painter. The two shared an intense interest in finding an expressive language of his own. The pair would meet at Avery's studio, along with several other artists, including Byron Browne, Louis Harris, and Wallace Putnam, for weekly life drawing sessions. During this period, which started in 1928 and continued through the early 1930s, Rothko created a number of nude studies. These meetings eventually included John Graham, Yankel Kufeld,

<sup>38</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 21-23.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 23.

Louis Schanker, and Joseph Solman, and readings of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens were added to the agenda.<sup>40</sup> The weekly get-togethers would prove to be extremely influential on Rothko and his artist friends. Rothko spoke on Avery's powerful influence during the eulogy he presented at Avery's funeral in 1965, "...the feeling that one was in the presence of great events was immediate on encountering his work. It was true for many of us who were younger, questioning and looking for an anchor..."<sup>41</sup> While the coterie of artists met once a week at Avery's studio, Gottlieb and Rothko, along with Louis Harris, made the artistic couple's home an almost daily meeting place. Sally Avery recalls their routine of spending the days furiously painting, then comparing, works. Avery was always ready and willing to hear the younger artists' criticism of his work, and these intimate experiences bolstered Rothko's confidence.<sup>42</sup> The long, evening discussions touched on literature, philosophy, and politics. In 1932, Rothko and Gottlieb began spending summer vacations sketching and painting with the Averys in Massachusetts. These group holidays were an occasional occurrence throughout the 1930s.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wick, *Rothko*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Wick, *Rothko*, 211.



### 3 GREAT DEPRESSION EFFECTS

As Adolph Gottlieb recalls, “In those days, painters were sort of silent men,” but Gottlieb and his “very verbal and...continual raconteur”<sup>44</sup> of a friend, Mark Rothko, indulged each other in their great need to talk. One of their favorite topics to rant about was the obnoxious and opinionated art critics who liked to denounce “foreign” influences in American art. In the midst of the Great Depression, there was a united front from American Scene painters calling for an



**Thomas Hart Benton, *Cut the Line*  
Oil on board, 1944**

American art that the man on the street could identify with. One such painter, Thomas Hart Benton, converted from abstractionism after World War I and attacked European sources, asking American artists to separate their art “from the

hothouse atmospheres of an imported, and, for our country, functionless aesthetics.”<sup>45</sup> His violent turn

against avant-garde was prompted by the country’s political, social, and aesthetic conservatism, its isolationism and chauvinism, and its mood of profound despair that was born in the war and deepened by the Depression.<sup>46</sup> While some American painters, like Arthur Dove and Stuart Davis, along with a few Europeans, like Josef Albers and Hans Hoffman, continued to work in advanced styles, most painters were content with the theme of everyday reality, their works

<sup>44</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 23.

depicting the poverty and disillusionment of urban masses or celebrating rural life. Thomas Hart Benton had set the standard for American painting, and Regionalism, American Scene painting, and Social Realism prevailed in the American artistic climate until World War II, producing works that were often topical, journalistic, and illustrational.<sup>47</sup> Gottlieb and Rothko responded by refusing American Regionalism, along with total abstraction and Cubist decoration. They preferred the moody European Expressionism over the patriotic yet propagandistic American Scene art.<sup>48</sup> They exposed themselves to many kinds of painting by reading art journals and looking over reproductions of works by Picasso, Derain, and the French Surrealists. They were also paying attention to the Italian painters, who would often be reviewed in art periodicals. A few of Rothko's gouaches between the late 1920s and early 1930s recall the metaphysical paintings of Carrà, and the whitened tones used by some Italian painters (Morandi and de Pisis)



**Mark Rothko**  
*Entrance to Subway, 1938*  
 Oil on canvas, 34" x 46 1/4"

appear in his street scenes and still-lives.<sup>49</sup>

During the 1930s, Rothko produced a number of haunting images of the New York subway, where he uses windows, portals, and walls to serve as structural and expressive devices of confinement. He portrays the subway as an eccentric place, containing a dramatic contrast of perspective extremes. Walls and railings are represented as flat screens while tracks recede sharply, and the figures seem to represent commuters, shoppers, or schoolchildren,

but they are largely attenuated, faceless, and flat. He was rejecting conventional modes of

<sup>47</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 23

<sup>48</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid..

representation and stressed an emotional approach to the subject – an approach he admired in children’s art – and adopted a style characterized by deliberate deformations and a crude application of paint. Rothko’s street scenes and subway pictures have been compared to Depression-era realist painting, but this resemblance is likely based on the perception of a shared urban motif. Rothko did not like to portray realistic scenes of city life, but was more interested in conveying the perceptual experience of architectural space. He used abstract compositional arrangements to explore the relationship between the painting and its viewer.<sup>50</sup>



**Mark Rothko**  
*Subway (Subterranean Fantasy)*, 1936  
 Oil on canvas, 34 5/16" x 46 1/2"

### Artists' Union

Rothko and Gottlieb were also keeping a close eye on social and political events. The entire country was frantic over the stock-market crash in 1929 that resulted in the Great Depression. There was an atmosphere of

emergency throughout the country, but there was plenty to worry about all over the world during the

1930s, and Rothko and his painter buddies were paying attention: the northwestern province of China was invaded by Japan in 1931; the Nazis became an ever-growing threat as Hitler became a chancellor of Germany in 1933, then repudiated the Treaty of Versailles in 1935, annexed Austria and occupied Czechoslovakia; and Mussolini consolidated his power.<sup>51</sup> The world was at a universal unrest, but Rothko and his peers had an abundance of distractions in their own New York neighborhoods. From bread lines to soapbox orators, signs of the grim reality seemed

<sup>50</sup> Donna Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition* (National Gallery of Art: Yale UP), 1998.

<sup>51</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 30.

to be on every corner. Unemployment rose to an overwhelming 37% for all nonfarm workers. Bohemian artists in New York were no exception. Rothko (who had married in 1932 and now had a family to support) and many others found themselves without means by 1934. An attempt to pull the economy out of its enormous slump was initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 called the New Deal. The New Deal was a program that was created to stimulate the economy through social and economic reforms, and Roosevelt pushed his project hard and quick, which resulted in reforms that were unclear, contradictory, and administered poorly. Included in the Deal were the creation of two federal art programs administered by the Treasury Department – the Public Works Art Project and the Section of Painting and Sculpture. The purpose of these ventures was to support art and artists during the Depression, but the forces of bureaucracy and individualism in art were in conflict. Both organizations favored the representational styles generally associated with American Scene painting or Regionalism, and the minor artists they employed were encouraged by the government to create works within those themes rather than exercise their own personal expression. This government policy and the indifference of the artists it employed outraged the young, politically active, mostly immigrant group of artists that supported social progressivism.<sup>52</sup> Artists felt their civil liberties were threatened, and these more progressive artists rallied together and formed organizations that protested the conservative bias of the government's programs and demanded more effective programs for the unemployed. One such organization, organized in New York with local chapters elsewhere, was the Artists' Union. With more than two-hundred participants in the inauguration of the Union, it did not confine itself to the problems of artists but other areas of labor as well.<sup>53</sup> The Union held monthly meetings and began a publication in November of 1934 called *Art Front*. Max Weber

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<sup>52</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 30.

contributed to the journal once, saying, “My heart is full; welled to the brim with resentment for I see clearly – as other artists who are socially conscious – how Nazism, chauvinism and fascism are worming into the life of art and artists...”<sup>54</sup> Rothko regularly attended the meetings, heavily supported the *Art Front*, and was active in demanding the municipal gallery, but he also struggled with forces within the Artists’ Union that mistook provincialism for a new brand of American art.<sup>55</sup> Rothko was passionate about the political situation and did not react to chaotic political events lightly. Politically, he was at conflict with himself: as an artist, he hesitated to join any group, but his individual liberties were at risk and he felt obliged to support group activities in the name of social justice. Artistically, however, he knew exactly where he stood: he hated everything that smacked of social realism.<sup>56</sup> Rothko’s friend and writer H.R. Hays confirms that Rothko, “had no objection to picketing for the immediate preservation of jobs but he strenuously opposed the injection of politics into art which he felt simply resulted in bad art.”<sup>57</sup> During this time, Rothko and others formed a smaller, more intimate circle of artists who shared the same political and artistic convictions, called The Ten.

### **The Ten**

The Ten began as a group of artists, most Jewish and several Russian born, who were in an exhibition together in December of 1934 at Gallery Secession. The original members of the group, which sometimes called itself, “The Ten Who are Nine,” included Rothko and Gottlieb, Louis Harris, Joseph Solman, Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Yankel Kufeld, Louis Schanker, and Nahum Tschacbasov. Late joiners were Lee Gatch, John Graham, Karl Knaths, Ralph

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<sup>54</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 31.

Rosenborg, and David Burliuk.<sup>58</sup> Gottlieb describes this rebellious and progressive group as, “...outcasts – roughly expressionist painters. We were not acceptable to most dealers and collectors. We banded together for the purpose of mutual support.”<sup>59</sup> After showing in the Gallery Secession, the group decided to form its own exhibiting society, hoping to persuade different galleries to hold their shows (one of them being the Municipal Art Gallery that Rothko and others had fought for), which they succeeded in doing for the next five years. The group held monthly meetings at each other’s studios, where discussions grew heated and lasted through the night. Rothko was said to be the most articulate participant with enthusiastic interjections. Subjects varied (the 1930s brought many topics of discussion), but most debates were focused on the perplexing artistic issues emerging in the chaotic world. The entire group paid close attention to what was going on in Europe with Picasso, Matisse, and the German Expressionists, took notice of exiting exhibitions at the Met, and tried to find a middle ground between social realism and abstraction. The Ten also had an influence on the Artists’ Union, particularly its publication, *Art Front*. As a representative of The Ten, Josef Solman wrote a manifesto complaining about the appearance of the journal (“...it should look like an art magazine and not only a union newssheet.”<sup>60</sup>), and accusing the editors of being unaware of the educational value of the Met. The editorial board’s response to Solman: an invite to join the board.<sup>61</sup> Solman took advantage of his position and, in one of his first acts, published a lecture by Fernand Léger given at the Met, which also happened to be one of The Ten’s favorite topics of discussion. Léger’s lecture focused on artists of the past fifty years and their struggle to free themselves from restraints, one of them being subject matter. He continues to explain that the Impressionists have

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<sup>58</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 33.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

freed color and he and his peers have “carried the attempt forward and freed form and design.”<sup>62</sup> His proclaims that subject matter is dead and color and geometric form have their own reality, “independent and plastic.” Léger’s central theme was that the question, “What does that represent?” was no longer relevant. He concludes in the defense of painters and their craft, “There was never any question in plastic art, in poetry, in music of representing anything. It is a matter of making something beautiful, moving or dramatic – this is by no means the same thing.”<sup>63</sup> This theory stayed with Rothko for the rest of his career. Through the evolution of his works, we can see his increasing use of color and form.

## **WPA**

In response to the national outcries for a better government program of recovery, the Works Progress Administration was formed in August of 1935. It was the most extensive and most effective of all the New Deal art relief programs and engaged artists without bias in regard to style.<sup>64</sup> Rothko, together with Harris, Solman, Ad Reinhardt, and many others, was hired in the easel-painting division, earning close to \$100 a month; a small stipend but still the main support for most artists. Most of the works created at this time disappeared into schools, hospitals, and institutions throughout the federal bureaucracy. During its existence, more than 100,000 paintings and murals and over 18,000 sculptures were created. There were about 2,000 New York artists involved in the program, and to them it was more than a paycheck.<sup>65</sup> While there was pandemonium going on around them, the artists found a new unity, which was a welcome break from the feeling of isolation, with which so many artists were struggling. It was during this time that Rothko met Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Arshile Gorky. New

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<sup>62</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 34.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 16.

York became America's safe-haven for the revolutionary, just as Paris had nurtured foreign artists along with its native French masters. Seedy downtown lofts and greasy all-night diners were the American equivalent to the Parisian studios and cafés where the painters and sculptors would share discoveries and debate ideas. Like their European counterparts, these meetings helped the Americans develop strength and an independent spirit.<sup>66</sup> During this time, no one sold anything but the Project had its own gallery that regularly exhibited artists' work. It was while Rothko and the others were involved in the WPA that The Ten was formed.

### **Child Art**

Until Rothko became a financially successful artist, he supported himself by teaching at the Brooklyn Center Academy, a job he retained from 1929 until 1952. While some friends maintain that Rothko did not enjoy teaching, he took an intense interest in children and their artwork. In 1936, he began writing a book about similarities in the art of children and the work of modern painters. The book was never completed, but in his manuscript he concluded that "child art transforms itself into primitivism, which is only the child producing a mimicry of himself." Rothko claimed he never had the chance to experience childhood, growing up in strict religious schools in Russia then working at a young age after his father died in America. His interest in children's art might have stemmed from his lack of childhood experience, making him curious about the naivety of children and their creative expression. While studying under Weber, he had learned to respect the direct expression of feelings evident in the work of children, and his job at the Academy gave him the opportunity to study the work of children and show how art can release and inspire personal expression, which is important, especially in children. Rothko maintained that art is man's expression of his total experience of the world, and, accordingly, he believed children's art was like a barometer of truth. Rothko stressed the emotional approach to

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<sup>66</sup> Sam Hunter, *Modern Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005), 266.



the subject, and he admired this approach in children's art.<sup>67</sup> The art program at the Center Academy had made the public aware of children's art by which they could learn "the difference between sheer skill and skill that is linked to spirit, expressiveness and personality."<sup>68</sup> In older methods, children were given examples of works and asked to create an exact replica, which gave the child the opportunity to perfect themselves...in imitation. Rothko argued that in his approach, "the result is a constant creative activity in which the child creates an entire child-like cosmology which expressed the infinitely varied and exciting world of a child's fancies and experience..."<sup>69</sup> He also observed that "the fact that one usually begins with drawing is already academic. We start with color."<sup>70</sup> His rebellion against the old academic method is characteristic of his anarchist personality, but his curious attraction to the work of children seemed to be spurred by his own urge to contemplate the nature of art. In his first one-man show in Portland, Rothko showed his art next to work from children in his classes. It was clear that he believed whole-heartedly in the values inherent in the work of the uncorrupted.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>68</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

#### 4 SURREALIST YEARS

A fellow painter and writer for *Art Front*, Jacob Kainen, praised an exhibition of The Ten in February of 1937. He commented on their attempt to reduce the interpretation of nature or life in general to the rawest emotional elements; noted their complete and utter dependence on pigment; and acknowledged their intensity of vision.<sup>72</sup> It is these three aspects of art, along with the introduction of Surrealism and the oncoming of World War II, that shaped the works of Rothko and his fellow artists over the next decade.

Rothko's most recognized works are those that were produced in the late 1930s and 1940s, which was considered his 'transition' period. Rothko's 'transition' period, also referred to as his Surrealist years (1938 to 1946) coincided with the eve and aftermath of World War II. In 1938, the same year he legalized his citizenship for fear of Nazi influence and deportation of Jews, and a year after separation from his wife, Rothko decided to turn his back on modern urban reality and thrust himself back into the unconscious. Rothko leaped from the present to the past, from contemporary urban environment to a remote mythic world.<sup>73</sup> The resurrection of myth during the late 1930s, experienced by many artists, was to have special consequences for him. The Surrealists exhibitions in the 1930s introduced the idea of returning to myths and origins; an idea that freed Rothko and allowed him to be mobile in the realm of the imagination.<sup>74</sup> Rothko was sensitive to the world situation and felt the descending chaos, and his work of the late 1930s reflects his preoccupations. He had an increasing need to find the pictorial language to express his intimations of disaster; his increasing interest with the life cycle, and his growing awareness of the tragic, in which death played a major role.<sup>75</sup> His subway scenes of the late 1930s relay

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<sup>72</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Rosenblum, *Mark Rothko: Rothko's Surrealist Years* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1981), 6.

<sup>74</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

tragedy and human fate through his stylistic simplifications, which stress individual isolationism; the beginnings of his mythic explorations can be seen in some works of the subway series.<sup>76</sup> Rothko needed a new way of controlling and ordering his experience in a time he found to be out of joint, and the atmosphere of removal was essential in order to formulate his point of view of existence. The myth for Rothko was the source of a dramatic confrontation between nature, ruled by law, and the human imagination, free in its expression.<sup>77</sup> Several influences pushed Rothko deeper into his obsession with tragedy, myth, and origin of life: his reading of Nietzsche, a hero of the anarchist vanguard in the 1920s; his interest in personal archeology, which resulted in his reading of the ancient Greeks, specifically Aeschylus; and, of course, the arrival of European refugees (artists, musicians, poets) pouring into New York from Paris in 1939, escaping the nightmares of the Holocaust and the looming war.

### **Nietzsche**

Friedrich Nietzsche, by the 1930s, was known for his appropriation and misrepresentation by Nazi academics, a hard blow to his reputation. His courage in examining the irrational realm, however, did not fail to incite poets, painters, and composers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His appeal to the darker region of emotions hidden away in the psyche and his artistically heightened exposition of psychological phenomena alerted the burgeoning modernists. Rothko's interest in Nietzsche was sparked by his interest in anarchism. Anarchists who were influential to Rothko, including Emma Goldman, often referred to Nietzsche's writings and his insistence on the freedom of superstition. To Rothko, the renewed interest in myth found its definition in Nietzsche's very first book – *The Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>78</sup> Rothko found a connection with Nietzsche when he realized they shared an immense emotional stimulation

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<sup>76</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 50.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>78</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 51-52.

when listening to music. Rothko turned to music for solitude, inspiration, and contemplation, and was particularly attuned to Nietzsche's vision of the importance of music. Nietzsche's flow of thoughts in *The Birth of Tragedy* went from music to myth, as was the natural trajectory of Rothko's own thoughts.<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche later criticized his early work, calling it "rhapsodic." He claimed that it was "'music' for those dedicated to music, those who were closely related to begin with on the basis of common and rare aesthetic experiences..."<sup>80</sup> Rothko, by the nature of his inmost sensibilities, was closely related.

Rothko also shared with Nietzsche a desired knowledge – the "direct knowledge of the nature of the world unknown to his reason."<sup>81</sup> In examining the existence of such direct feelings, Nietzsche applied his definition of ancient tragedy – a fusion of the Dionysian with the Apollonian. The Dionysian represented the spirit of music with its direct knowledge of creation's sources while the Apollonian was the daylight revealing "the beautiful illusion of dream worlds in the creation of which every man is truly an artist."<sup>82</sup> Rothko and Nietzsche claim to have *felt*, rather than *thought*, in the presence of music. Therefore, Nietzsche insisted that the Dionysian restored man to nature and "he feels himself a god...He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art."<sup>83</sup>

Rothko began to move toward a distancing from the "everyday" world, and his works began to reject the modern tradition in visual art. He claimed to see a materialist bias in the tradition, and formed a deep disregard for its sources. In an effort to escape a world in which he never felt comfortable, Rothko entered a psychological state in which he accepted and welcomed

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<sup>79</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 53.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 54.

Nietzsche's firm denunciation of the "theoretical man."<sup>84</sup> The theoretical man was an idea that seemed to dominate the modern world and, through his works, Rothko endorses Nietzsche's contrasts of the theoretical man and the artist. Nietzsche observes that while the theoretical man finds an infinite delight in whatever exists, the artist will always cling to what is still covered after the uncovering. Rothko's later compositions (discussed later in the work) can be seen as "what still remains covering." As Nietzsche moved toward clarity and calmness, so would Rothko, or at least he would attempt to do so. Rothko said, "The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity."<sup>85</sup> This clarity Rothko strived for, however, was slow in coming.<sup>86</sup>

### **Ancient Greeks**

Like Nietzsche, Rothko also turned to the ancient Greeks for answers and direction. During his 'transition' period, Rothko was preoccupied with personal archaeology as he wandered towards his "self." He read the ancient Greeks, especially Aeschylus, which played an important role in Rothko's psychological evolution. Several of Rothko's paintings of his Surrealist period were based on the Agamemnon trilogy. Rothko returned to the Greek tragedies when the state of the world was as menacing as in ancient times. In his early works, Rothko conveyed melancholy responses to the human situation, but the need for a more remote inspection was apparent. He read Aeschylus from a need to be moved, and this need transformed into a moving encounter with King Agamemnon.<sup>87</sup> Rothko, an extremely sensitive artist who had a difficult time comprehending the destruction surrounding him, found an answer to his own artistic dilemma in Aeschylus, who understood human frailty and meditated passionately on war

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<sup>84</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 43.

and death. Remembering the violence he encountered during childhood, to which he was sensitive as a man, Rothko was searching for a way to accurately depict his sentiments on the eve of the Second World War, his reading of Aeschylus being influential in his search. The undertones in Aeschylus are born in images, often the image of the bird.<sup>88</sup> What stirred him in Aeschylus was the way in which the images lightened but did not banish the underlying tragedy.



**Mark Rothko**  
*The Omen of the Eagle*  
1942

Rothko's birds that he began to portray on canvas were not the typical Surrealist symbols, but birds of the Greek and Old Testament configuration. The birds were images of the soul; stand-ins for the invisible; embodiments of dreams of freedom and wholeness. Reading of the Greeks and his search for the ancient and mythical led Rothko to the Spirit of Myth idea. A reproduction of his work, *The Omen of the Eagle* in 1942, was released with a statement from Rothko:

“The theme here is derived from the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus. The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths of all times. It involves a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree – the known as well as the knowable – merge into a single tragic idea.”

This “single tragic idea” turned out to be Rothko's most persistent quest; one that was neither direct nor easy. In his first works from this period, he attempts to transform the visible and present into the direct and unmediated “Spirit of Myth.”<sup>89</sup> His subway scenes are good examples of his portrayal of isolated souls in scenery flats, but by 1938, he abandoned the subterranean illusion and began meditating on the freedom of fantasy.<sup>90</sup> In 1940, Rothko quit painting for the

<sup>88</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 44.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 50.

year and focused on his reading of Freud and Frazer. He also changed his name from Marcus Rothkowitz to Mark Rothko.

His paintings during his Surrealist years he called dramas. He conceived of his “pictures as dramas; the shapes...are the performers.”<sup>91</sup> Rothko felt he created an atmosphere that was “tragic and timeless,” and allowed his ‘actors’ to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.<sup>92</sup> In the journal *Possibilities*, he explained that the “shapes have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them, one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms.”<sup>93</sup> He continues to refer to his paintings in a similar manner throughout his career, calling his paintings “an unknown adventure in an unknown space.”<sup>94</sup> It seemed Rothko had created an environment where his creations could exist in a peaceful truth; a place where Rothko and his friends were forever searching.

### **European Masters – Fall of Paris**

In 1939, streams of refugees poured into New York, and, with the fall of Paris in 1940, Manhattan became the adopted cultural capital of the world, a temporary refuge for many celebrated artists, writers, and musicians.<sup>95</sup> The New Yorkers found themselves in the center of the international art scene and physically surrounded by Mondrian, Matta, Duchamp, Léger, Masson, Chagall, and Breton. For several years, the New York artists had despaired of their situation in a country that increasingly endorsed a nationalistic art pretending to epitomize a new aesthetic; they reacted actively to the arrival of the European masters.<sup>96</sup> While there was much to be learned firsthand by these seasoned European professionals, the New York artists had

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<sup>91</sup> Irving Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings: 1948 – 1969* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1983), 6.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 17.

<sup>96</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 70.

already built enough backbone to take what they needed from their superiors, while rejecting some of their retrograde, academic forms that reminded the Americans of little more than Regionalists or Social Realists paintings.<sup>97</sup> When American abstract artists sought new means to express their flight from the crude material values of contemporary life, they were driven not into an art of private dreams, but instead into an art of immediate sensations.<sup>98</sup> They eagerly followed Matta in his exploration of automatic drawing, and drew from the nonobjective, biomorphic Surrealism of Miró and Masson. These artists tapped into the inner wells of feeling from which the Americans wanted to extract their art while also yielding freshness and individuality.<sup>99</sup> Personal contact with the Surrealists provided Americans direct access to their work. It was an exhilarating time for the artists: a moment in history that gave them the freedom and challenge they needed to cut the cord that tied them to provincial American art.



**Mark Rothko, *Rites of Lilith*  
1945, Oil on canvas,  
81 5/8" x 100 5/8"**

Surrealism first appeared in Paris in 1924 in reaction to the widespread atrocities witnessed during World War I. Escaping the horrors of war, Surrealists created absurdities for their own sake and invoked wonders to combat the harsh realities war had imposed on humanity. The function of the Surrealist artist or poet was to employ symbols that corresponded to myths, parables, and metaphors of the past. Their aim was to stimulate the senses to arouse multiple emotions, differing according to the viewer. The unconscious took the role of being the essential source of art instead of the events in the external world. Surrealists did not turn their back to the reality of the world, but retained elements of the external world in their work by unifying it with

<sup>97</sup> Hunter, *Modern Art*, 267.

<sup>98</sup> Sam Hunter, *American Art* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1972), 164.

<sup>99</sup> Hunter, *Modern Art*, 267.



the dream form to become one reality, called “surreality.” The Surrealists used these techniques to develop art that was fantastic, accidental, and illogical.<sup>100</sup> Americans were quick to seize on this alternative and used it to enlarge the expressive possibilities of their art, eventually subordinating Surrealist intuitions completely into their own artistic needs and purposes.<sup>101</sup>

Devoted to themes of myth, prophecy, archaic ritual, and the unconscious mind, Rothko’s paintings of the 1940s are characterized by the biomorphic style stimulated by the Surrealists.<sup>102</sup> Rothko’s reach back to the primitive inspired several new styles for him. On one level of the primitive, Rothko projects himself back to the beginning of not only his biological life, but of all life in the cosmos. He depicts microscopic creatures and dividing cells. He also regresses back to the ancient Greeks, in his portraits with fragments of birds, heads, hands, and other random parts.<sup>103</sup> He derives these from Greek bas-reliefs, employing Greek tragedy as his source. Tragedy as a richly suggestive subject in itself, inspired by his reading of the Greeks, began to emerge in his sketches and paintings. The overtones of his meditation on tragedy occur in the increasing flatness of his compositions.<sup>104</sup> Many of his paintings take on the frieze form, planes of color in the background of his archaic figures. It has been said that the bands represent geological strata – possibly a metaphor for the unconscious.<sup>105</sup> Formalist critics see these horizontal divisions as the source of his later abstractions with their two, three, or four levels of division. At the time, they provided Rothko with the means to pictorialize his intuitions of layered time: of the metamorphic character of myth, of the clear structure of Aeschylean drama.<sup>106</sup> In works such as *Gea* and *Pagan Void*, 1945 and 1946 respectively, the notion of

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<sup>100</sup> Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, 35.

<sup>101</sup> Hunter, *American Art*, 165.

<sup>102</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>105</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>106</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 69.

origin is explored on three registers, including natural or organic cycles of life, mythological accounts of In works such as *Gea* and *Pagan Void*, 1945 and 1946 respectively, the notion of origin is explored on three registers, including natural or organic cycles of life, mythological accounts of such cycles, and finally the Abstract Expressionist imperative to take painting back to its own origins.<sup>107</sup> One such cycles, and finally the Abstract Expressionist imperative to take painting back to its own origins.<sup>108</sup> One of the most ambitious and successful of these metamorphic images is the 1944 *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*. Diane Waldman suggests that the large oil painting may be a symbolic portrait of the artist and his wife-to-be, Mary Alice Beistle, whom he married later the same year. However, the male-female couples is so heavily mythologized that it an evoke endless duos of universal Adams and Eves, or biological diagrams



**Mark Rothko**  
*Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*  
 1944  
 Oil on canvas, approx. 6' x 7'

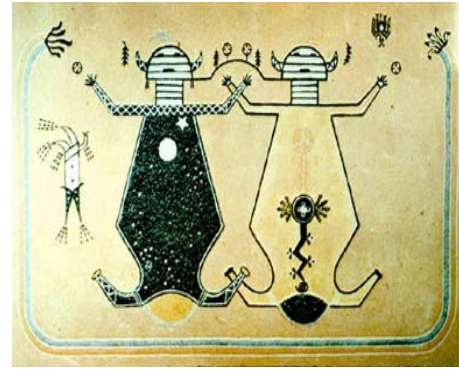
describing sexual differentiation, or even nature deities from a primitive culture, similar to the Navaho sand painting of the *Sky Father and the Earth Mother*. *Slow Swirl* creates a personal world of mystery and solemnity, allowing the viewer to feel the timeless nature of sand, sea, and sky as a setting for the magnetic forces of coupling and sexuality that echo backward from a pair of modern human beings to deep roots in biology, myth and magic. Everything from the muted colors to the shimmering spider web of delicate angled, rounded lines invokes a universe of unformed images. With its stark confrontation, its ritualistic symmetry, its exquisitely changing nuances of vibrant shape,

<sup>107</sup> David Joselit, *American Art Since 1945* (London: Thames & Hudson: 2003), 21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

tone, and feeling, *Slow Swirl* offers the fullest synthesis of Rothko's ambitions up to 1944, as well as the richest prophecy of the abstract work to come.<sup>109</sup>

Rothko's flight back to the vital sources of life, art, and myth during a time of unthinkable terror was not a new path. Symbolists of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. shared the same aesthetic goals, attempting to conjure up the most elusive, mysterious states of feeling through a vocabulary of shapes, colors, and tones, which avoided any contact with the crude realities of the contemporary world and its material contents.<sup>110</sup> Artists on the eve of the First World War turned toward the primitive in their rejection of the



***Sky Father and the Earth Mother***  
**Navajo Sand Painting**  
**1941**

unbearable present of modern history, in favor of a prehistoric world where all might begin again. Author Robert Rosenblum makes the direct connection between Rothko's work and war, suggesting that the artist's pictorial format of a numbing, atmospheric void represents an image of the world after Hiroshima, when all of matter, man, and history might be annihilated.<sup>111</sup>

Another technique used by the Surrealists that inspired Rothko and others was automatic writing – letting the brush meander without conscious control in an attempt to release the creative forces of the unconscious.

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<sup>109</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 7.

Rothko loosened up his technique and began to develop a more abstract imagery.

In his watercolors, Rothko explored the fluidity of the medium to evoke the vision of primeval life.<sup>112</sup> The fluid watercolor medium released the linear impulse with which the Surrealists had limbered up their conscious.<sup>113</sup>

It is inevitable that many of the works from this period are intriguing as prefigurations of the later Rothko. One may trace the evolution toward the elemental format of floating horizontal strata that give the impression of something akin to this planet at its beginning, or even after its apocalyptic end. One may also follow the gradual mastery of fluid and translucent techniques, whether in oil or watercolor, that make the viewer sense that the nature of organic process has been seized and the image is somehow changing before one's eyes, reforming its shapes and altering its colors against a deeper, concealed structure that conveys a total, ultimate stillness.<sup>114</sup> Rothko's Surrealist period is high in seriousness; its search for forms and symbols that could awaken a sense of awe and tragedy not only assured the emotional gravity of the abstract art that, after 1947, absorbed these mysterious hieroglyphs, but also revealed Rothko's place in a long tradition of modern artists who grappled with an encyclopedic repertory of symbols culled from biology and anthropology in a heroic effort to convey the ultimates of life, death, and faith.<sup>115</sup>

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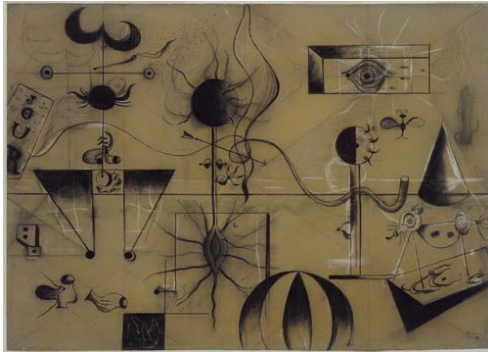
<sup>112</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>113</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 73.

<sup>114</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

## Miró



A major inspiration for

### **Joan Miró, *The Family*, 1924**

Rothko's Surrealist period was Surrealist artist Joan Miró.

His work, *The Family*, of 1924, proved to be extremely influential in Rothko's works from this period. Its format, a wide field clearly divided by a horizontal line, recurs throughout many of Rothko's works. An even more perceptible element seen in Miró's work that Rothko draws on is the translucent creatures that do not adhere to any specific biological or historical period.

Biological forms with squirming cilia share space with modern pipe-smoking figures. Certainly, Miró's central figure of Mother Nature provided Rothko with a prehistoric deity who often presided over the mythic lands he conjured up for a throng of images that usually went untitled. When named, the figure usually turned out to be the Jewish female demon, Lilith. While Miró's works were usually ones of clarity, light, shadow, and contour, Rothko hid in his own hazy atmosphere with blurred shapes and frail forms.<sup>116</sup> However, reaching common ground even for a few works, Miró managed to make a lasting impression on Rothko and his creations.

In his group of works of roughly 1944-1946, Rothko enthusiastically used accents of dramatic color, mostly red, that bear associations with primitive ritual. He also experimented with saturated blocks for the first time, using them to symbolize recession. In 1945, Rothko got his first one-man show at the popular gallery Art of this Century, run by Peggy Guggenheim. He

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<sup>116</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 7.

hoped he would finally find critic acclaim, but the show hardly made a stir. The daily newspapers ignored it and the art journals reviewed him only briefly. In response, Rothko prepared a statement explaining his unexplained territory for an exhibition a month later. He opened with his usual insistence that he adhered to the material quality of the world and the



**Mark Rothko**  
***Untitled/No. 9***  
**1948**  
**Oil on Canvas**

substance of things, continued on with his recourse to philosophical events being discussed in New York, and finished with his separation from Surrealism on the basis of humanism.<sup>117</sup> Rothko was known for his speeches and writings about his work. Rothko contributed often to art journals and publications. Rothko

often offered carefully composed statements of his beliefs to two postwar publications, *Possibilities* and *The Tiger's Eye*.<sup>118</sup> His public statements of the late 1940s were usually on invocations of tragedy and sublimity.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, he was in the habit of trying to control everything connected to his work, including written commentary. Rothko's show at Art of this Century was introduced with an unsigned forward, possibly written by Guggenheim's assistant, but most likely articulated by Rothko.<sup>120</sup> Rothko was also infamous for his fussy insistence on controlling the installation of his paintings in galleries and exhibitions to a painstaking precision. He even forbade his works from being included in a show overseas because he was unable to travel with the works and insure their proper installation. However, his concern over the precise environments in which his work was to be displayed and his continual anxiety over misinterpretation of his work only supported the idea that success of a Rothko painting not only hinges on the details of pigment but also on the nature of the viewing encounter

<sup>117</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 91.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>119</sup> David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 16.

<sup>120</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 90.

itself, as if the work is only successfully completed when it generates a particular, perhaps profound, effect in a properly receptive viewer.<sup>121</sup>

In 1946, Betty Parsons opened her gallery and signed three painters: Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko, all of whom had exhibited in Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century. The gallery was friendly and informal almost to a point of unprofessionalism: contracts were based on one's word or poorly typed, records of sales were hit-or-miss, and the prices were only in three figures. Parsons remembers "skating on thin ice...and every time we were about to fall through, we would hope to sell another painting."<sup>122</sup> Later that summer, Rothko was ecstatic to learn that both the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art mounted exhibits of his surrealist seascapes. The museum in San Francisco was considering purchasing a painting, and Rothko was thrilled to be on the West Coast. He wrote to Parsons "...I cannot describe the adulation I have received from the artists in San Francisco."<sup>123</sup> Returning to New York, was soon to embark on the great adventure of his life: his work would take a turn towards surrealistic abstraction.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ed. Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow, *Seeing Rothko* (Detroit: Getty Trusts Publications, 2005), 1.

<sup>122</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 23.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>124</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 24.

## 5 POST-WAR PERIOD

By the mid – 1940s, the majority of Rothko’s work included biomorphic forms dancing before a background of horizontal bands that resemble the layers of a submarine universe. These transparent watercolors of this period mark a turning point in the artist’s career.<sup>125</sup> Rothko wrote that changes in his style or its “progression” were motivated by a growing clarification of his content, and content was primary.<sup>126</sup> There was despair among painters in New York in the early 1940s; not only an aesthetic despair, but one born of events, among which one could include aesthetic events.<sup>127</sup> Living in New York during this period was a mixture of the mythical and the contemporary. On a daily basis, newspapers and radios chronicled events of evil. The United States became host to a growing number of refugees, which forced Americans to face the reality of the Nazis and their war, yet the remoteness and monstrosity of these events in Europe and the Pacific gave them an unreal, symbolic character.<sup>128</sup> However awful and evil these horrific events were for the artists, the war also helped them in perfecting their methodology and in their search for significant content. This led them to rely on the automatic process itself, the graphic equivalent to free association. This methodology gave precedence to process over conception, which allowed a way of transforming color and drawing into a visual metaphor of the transient, ambiguous, and tragic nature of the human condition.<sup>129</sup> Rothko felt that if art were to express this tragic nature, new subjects and a new idiom had to be found. On using myths and symbols, Rothko said, “It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could

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<sup>125</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>126</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 7.

<sup>129</sup> Hunter, *Modern Art*, 267.



not serve my purposes...But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.”<sup>130</sup>

## **Abstract Expressionism**

The postwar period was confusing and left artists with an uncertainty about their place in the art world. Gottlieb, Rothko, Still, and a few others were considered little more than promising yet somewhat unsophisticated students of European modernism. By newspaper accounts, their work was crude and unfinished, and their abstract styles had struck out at such an advanced age that there was little hope for a mature and rich originality. American artists were emerging from their preoccupation with social themes of the Depression era, and were confronted with the achievement of international modernism that intimidated them by its completeness. Nevertheless, in an atmosphere of postwar social crisis, a loose new artistic movement arose in New York City; one of newfound native energy and confidence. A mood of continuous discovery was to change the character of American painting, and this episode is one of the most fascinating and vital developments in American cultural life of the century. Signature styles of new art included primordial elements of color, energy, atmosphere, and nothingness.<sup>131</sup> The artists responsible for the new and original American art of the postwar period have been called Abstract Expressionists, the New York School, or Action painters. None of the terms is entirely adequate, but taken together they refer to the certain characteristic aspects of the artists' evolving work: the connecting of constructed and fluid elements of abstract form with intense personal emotion; the oblique reflection of a metropolitan locale, of its energy, dynamism, and human degradation, its visual confusion and aseptic, functional order; and most

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<sup>130</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>131</sup> Rosenblum, *Surrealist Years*, 5.

significantly, the concept of the work of art as liberating and vital action to which the artist is committed with his total personality.

The principal leaders of the new movement in painting were Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, Rothko, Arshile Gorky, and Hans Hofmann, among others.<sup>132</sup> These artists abandoned mythic and primitive content in favor of purely abstract idioms, as they discovered new resources for painting in elucidating the creative act as primary expressive content. There was a shift in emphasis from what was taking place in the artist's mind to the image that was developing under his hand. Their work embodied a new time sense, insisting that the painting be experienced urgently as a unified action and an immediate concrete event. Therefore, the painting came to symbolize an incident in the artist's drama of self-definition rather than an object to be perfected or a structure made in accordance with prescribed rules. The term "Action Painting" thus implies engagement and liberation from received ideas of method and style.<sup>133</sup> While Rothko is considered to be the most original of pioneer abstract artists, he never considered himself to be part of the movement and was never willing to categorize himself or his work as Abstract Expressionism, or any other term used to describe this period of American painting. His self-image as an artist was not that of a formal problem-solver or self-revealing Expressionist but of a contemporary seer who, on the authority of the inner voice, envisions and reveals new truths about the human drama.<sup>134</sup> Style among Abstract Expressionists was closely aligned to individuality, and Rothko's own signature motif consisted of two or more rectilinear clouds of color in a vertical canvas.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Hunter, *American Art*, 190-191.

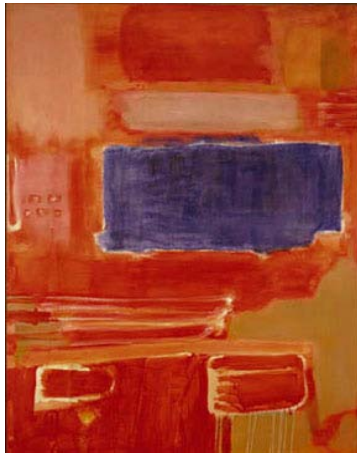
<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>134</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Joselit, *American Art*, 14.

## Multiforms

By 1946, Rothko began to question the role of his mutilated figures, hybrids of animals and humans, and primitive forms. He decided that specific references to nature and existing art conflicted with the idea of the “Spirit of Myth”, or what he began to call “transcendental experience.”<sup>136</sup> Transcendental experience generated through the creation and apprehension of art is analogous to that generated through religion. Because such an experience is “real and existing in ourselves,” it is intense, dramatic, and human; it calls to mind death.<sup>137</sup> Like other



**Mark Rothko**  
*Untitled*  
1948

artists in his generation, Rothko struggled with categorical distinctions between abstraction and representation and his ambition to invest nonfigurative art with transcendent content that would rival the elemental role of mythic and ritual in archaic culture.<sup>138</sup> Conventional subjects were to be replaced by Rothko’s own self-transcendent experience as revealed through art, painting, and the inherent expressiveness of color.<sup>139</sup> By the late 1940s, figurative association and references to the natural world disappeared from Rothko’s paintings.

Linear elements were progressively eliminated as asymmetrically arranged patches of color became the basis of his compositions.<sup>140</sup> He maintained that “the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer” would allow the viewer a better understanding of the work and, therefore, permit the artist to achieve clarity. In their manifesto in the *New York Times*, Rothko and Gottlieb wrote: “We favor the simple expression

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<sup>136</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 6.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>138</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>139</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 12.

<sup>140</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for the flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal the truth.”<sup>141</sup> By 1947, Rothko had virtually eliminated all elements of surrealism or mythic from his works, instead creating nonobjective compositions and indeterminate shapes.<sup>142</sup> These visual elements of luminosity, darkness, broad space, and the contrast of colors were linked, by Rothko, to themes such as tragedy, ecstasy, and the sublime. He also stopped titling his works for the most part, using numbers or colors in order to distinguish one work from



**Mark Rothko**  
**No. 11/ No. 20**  
**1949**  
**Oil on canvas**

another. With the abandonment of lines, he also left behind explanation, claiming that “silence is so accurate.” He feared that words would only paralyze the viewer’s mind and imagination.<sup>143</sup> He had a growing conviction that words could not substitute for a painter’s making his paintings. Along with Clyfford Still, he had begun to make an issue of the uselessness of words and the triviality of art criticism. Their defiance of what they saw as the vulgarity of the art world is hinted at throughout the late 1940s, becoming more arrogant in the 1950s.<sup>144</sup>

In his multiforms, which was the term used to describe his paintings from 1947-1949 to distinguish them from his later works of similar compositions, Rothko relied on large shapes to convey emotional states. Soft, indistinct edges formed from paint soaking into the canvas and whitish outlines surrounding the shapes replaced the wriggling personalities of the earlier biomorphic motifs. He felt the blurring of

<sup>141</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 103.

demarcations dislodged the shapes, causing them to hover. Rothko created a new technique of dissolving colored paste in thin washes, leaving the canvas weave exposed and aesthetically active. This technique influenced a significant new direction of abstract painting.<sup>145</sup> He was able to fuse the forms to the flatness and format of the canvas with his diluted pigments, mostly using sponges and rags to allow the paint to bleed and blur properly.<sup>146</sup> At times, paint can be seen running upward across the surface; this is because the artist often inverted a picture while working on it, sometimes changing the final orientation at a late stage.<sup>147</sup> He liked how this method turned his canvas into an all-over field of oneness, spreading rectangles to the edges of the canvas to create a wholeness of his work.<sup>148</sup> His love of thin, radiant color and his conviction that color constituted a self-sufficient medium powerful enough to express any idea or emotion allowed Rothko to create works that expressed his transcendental vision.<sup>149</sup> His work began to reveal a greater breadth of composition and scale and a heightened attention to color. He also began to display his paintings without confined frames.<sup>150</sup>

### **Color Blocks**

Toward the end of 1949, Rothko progressed from his irregular washes of color, finding them too diffuse and drifting. He had introduced a compositional format that he would continue to develop until the end of his career. He reduced his former amorphous areas into a few softly painted and edged rectangles of atmospheric color, symmetrically above each other on a more opaque vertical field.<sup>151</sup> In these works, large scale, open structure and thin layers of color

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<sup>145</sup> Hunter, *American Art*, 211.

<sup>146</sup> Hunter, *Modern Art*, 277.

<sup>147</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>148</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 8.

<sup>149</sup> Hunter, *Modern Art*, 277.

<sup>150</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>151</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 6.

combine to convey the impression of a shallow pictorial space where color attains an unprecedented luminosity.

By 1950, Rothko had reduced the number of floating rectangles to two, three, or four and aligned them vertically against a colored background. This was to be known as his signature style, and from this time on, he would work almost invariably within this format, suggesting in numerous variations of color and tone an astonishing range of atmospheres and moods. In his large



**Mark Rothko**  
*Untitled (Blue divided by Blue)*  
1966

floating rectangles of color, he explored the expressive potential of color contrasts and modulations. These paintings of the early 1950s, often referred to as his “classic” style, are characterized by expanding dimensions and an increasingly simplified use of form, brilliant hues, and broad, thin washes of color.<sup>152</sup> The abstractions were at once unprecedented and the culmination of

a long development, anticipated not only by the

abstractions that immediately preceded them but by the

banded backgrounds of the Surrealist pictures and even by his insistent regularity of his subway scenes of the thirties.<sup>153</sup>

During this period, Rothko’s paintings increased dramatically in size. He scaled his canvases to human size, intending the works to envelop the viewer, not to be “grandiose” but “intimate and human.”<sup>154</sup> In a lecture at the Pratt Institute, Rothko told the audience that “small pictures...are like novels; large pictures are like dramas in which one participates in a direct

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<sup>152</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>153</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 6.

<sup>154</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

way.”<sup>155</sup> He desired an intimacy with his “bigness.” His goal was to detach observers from their mundane environment and attachments which prevent self-transcendence and at the same time to convey this experience dramatically, purely with color. He intended for his canvases to be backdrops in front of which observers are transformed into live actors. This evolution of Rothko’s painting can be interpreted in dramaturgical terms as the assimilation of myth inspired by action – the shapes as performers against banded backdrops – into the scene – the horizontal rectangles as a kind of stage set. Rothko wanted an immediate and intimate communion between the painting and the viewer. He was obsessed with the observer’s response to his work.<sup>156</sup>

Rothko generally avoided explaining the content of his work, believing that the abstract image could directly represent the fundamental nature of “human drama”, but most did not see art his way. Because they were nonobjective, his “classic” abstractions only succeeded in bewildering the viewer and most art critics.<sup>157</sup> It was equally discouraging that an exclusive emphasis was given to painters like Gorky and de Kooning, distracting critics from paying sufficient attention to the less aggressive type of chromatic abstraction emerging from the hands of Rothko, Still and others.<sup>158</sup> Even so, Rothko maintained a commitment to profound content, and he believed in the potential of his works to reveal metaphysical or symbolic meaning.<sup>159</sup> Through it all, he managed to preserve the original insights drawn from Nietzsche, and he still saw his art as an effort to express his sense of tragedy.<sup>160</sup>

Painting was Rothko’s means, his only means to convey what he called human values that were experienced as passing beyond. The problem of modern painting, as Rothko understood,

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<sup>155</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>156</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 8.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>158</sup> Hunter, *American Art*, 213.

<sup>159</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>160</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 111.

was how to transcend consciousness of self.<sup>161</sup> The urge for self-transcendence had not lessened; the same impulse that prompted earlier artists to invent monsters and gods motivated Rothko to seek self-transcendence through nonobjective painting.<sup>162</sup> In 1950, an experienced painter-turned-art historian, William Seitz, attempted to explore the foundations of the movement called Abstract Expressionism through examining the works of several artists, one of whom was Rothko. Seitz had his preferences, and Rothko seemed to him to be the most extraordinary of painters. His conversations with Rothko were intense and helped inform his view of certain aspects of the movement, such as the way American painters approached the notion of the transcendental. He noted the importance of the matter itself and the artists' commitment to process, then carefully defined the way these painters used the word transcendental to "indicate values, which, though subjective, are not merely personal. They are ideal or spiritual, but still immanent in sensory and psychic experience."<sup>163</sup> Rothko, above all, was concerned with such values, and in his instinctive drive toward an absolute, Rothko was struggling to elicit means unmediated by discursive language, or its formal equivalent in painting.<sup>164</sup> In his multiform paintings, reds are moving both inward and to the surface without visible boundaries, and are sent floating behind a rough rectangle of blue. Shapes that are deliberately stripped of boundaries are posited in order to speak of verticality, or of the masking of space by means of light. The experiences Rothko has known in the act of painting and in his moving around from point to point are given their equivalents in reductions to essences. The rectangular shapes disembody the "meanings" known to Rothko in his mythic phase, but they are meanings nonetheless. By 1950, Rothko was absorbed by an enormous will to work toward transmitting

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<sup>161</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 122.

<sup>162</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 12.

<sup>163</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 123.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-126.



the unnamed passions with which he had lived for so long, and for so long sought to express. He assumed that, as he felt the difference between one canvas and the next, so would the viewer. Since he had reduced his composition to just a few divisions of color, color would be the carrier of the mood. For him, each canvas was different from the last. For those who could live in the painting itself, like the phenomenologists, it was not difficult to understand Rothko's continuing struggle to make more and more precise the nature of his experience. He would repeat the Existentialist notion that "a painting is not about experience, it is an experience."<sup>165</sup> Despite the



**Mark Rothko, *Number 22*  
1950, Oil on canvas, 117 x 107 1/8**

fact that his fame was growing and his financial situation was improving, Rothko secluded himself in his studio where he worked on his huge canvases for most of the late 1950s. In this cramped space, he could only have a few large works out at a time; one that was kept against a wall was one of his earliest large abstractions, *Number 22*. This early work was consumed

with huge areas of floating yellow and orange, interrupted by only a red band hugging the canvas from side to side. Rothko

had not quite reached the ambiguity he would shortly perfect, and he had scored the red region of the painting with scraped lines in order to call attention to the picture plane and its function as the final determinant of image. The painting, by its scale alone, could be equivalent to an epic drama, and while most thought it was an optimistic piece with its bright reds and yellows, Rothko emphasized it was instead supposed to be the embodiment of tragedy.<sup>166</sup> The time it takes to reach a visual resting point in scanning the canvas is enough to endow it with faintly disturbing qualities that Rothko could see in terms of tragedy. Even yellow, with its

<sup>165</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 135.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 135.

conventional association to sunlight, would undergo Rothko's transformation of meaning.

Rothko admitted that behind his final surface of rectangles lurked hidden events. He recalled the classic technique of chiaroscuro, having been moved by old masters like Rembrandt and Fra



**Mark Rothko, *Number 61*  
1953**

Angelico. Where there was a plane, there was a shadow; in each case an underpainting was meant to be sensed as the shadow while the oscillating surface was meant to be sensed as light.<sup>167</sup> Rothko was attempting to generate light by overpainting, masking, thinning, and thickening the work. Reaching for these rare effects, Rothko managed to invent juxtapositions that were

unprecedented.<sup>168</sup> The language of feeling that Rothko developed through the weighing out of measures of color intensities depended

as much on an occult vision of shadows as it did on light. These masked chiaroscuro effects established moods to which Rothko would give their weight, and each painting was weighted and balanced differently. In his 1953 *Number 61*, Rothko weights the canvas by brushing a brownish-red over a blue background. It is read as density and transparency, but mostly as a darkness against which the scraped and airy blue horizontal beneath it plays, opening out into an azure of infinity and seeping into the darker blue below.



**Mark Rothko, *Whites and Greens in Blue*, 1957**

These weighted and balanced densities have a kind of lyrical grandeur, but another work keyed to blue, in *Whites and Greens in Blue* of 1957, the feeling is enormously different. There is little exuberance and the three forms lying on a blue background have a sort of finality. The

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<sup>167</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 137.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

unpainting is controlled within the tightly organized central scheme. At the time this painting was completed, Rothko claimed he had created the most violent painting in America, without offering further explanation. His claim is taken to mean that by a supreme effort of will he had harnessed turbulence and was painting the paradox of violence; that the colors that produced immeasurable tensions among themselves were conceived as symbols. Refined a thousand times and all echoes of the everyday world removed, for Rothko, they were equivalents of complex emotions.<sup>169</sup> There is a sense of aura in these paintings, which recall his earlier obsession with the subtle, invisible emanation or exhalation. He was already endeavoring to paint the suspended, infinitely extensible air that hung about his mythic visions of the 1940s, and if he was to find the doorway of which he spoke, leading beyond the everyday, he would need to be able to conjure up his aura. After all, the idea of the aura is that it must be more than perceived, as were his paintings.<sup>170</sup> His painting was to be immediately perceived while at the same time unfolding its communication in time. A slow rhythm of apprehension would be established as light from outside would slowly reveal the light within.<sup>171</sup> Rothko's paintings of the 1950s continued, with each canvas expressing in its own unspoken language an aspect of vision of the entire human drama; of the single idea that would represent all the ideas of human feelings.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, Rothko was concerned that his abstractions were comprehensible to anyone else. He was skeptical, and this caused him great anxiety and was constantly exacerbated by the hostility they elicited.<sup>173</sup>

In a speech at the Pratt Institute in 1958, the first time he spoke out about his paintings and objectives as an artist since 1949, he denied any concern with self-expression. Art was not self-

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<sup>169</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 138.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>173</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 12.

expression, as he had thought in his youth.<sup>174</sup> His aim was to formulate a message which transcended the self and was about the human condition in general. He denied his purpose to make formal innovations, even though he “used colors and shapes in a way that painters before have not.” He described his process by revealing his seven components of his work: above all, his paintings had to possess intimations of mortality; he included sensuality – a lustful relation to things that exist; tension; a modern ingredient was irony – the self-effacement necessary for an instant to go on to something else; to make the awareness of death endurable; the ephemeral and chance; and finally hope. He enumerated these elements of human content as if they were measurable quantities.<sup>175</sup>

In the early 1950s, Rothko was invited to teach a few summer semesters at the newly reorganized California School of Fine Arts. Rothko offered studio instruction as well as lectures, and the students came to admire him and treated him like a master. His work was known to them from the preceding year’s retrospective at the museum, and students were all too eager to submit to Rothko’s meditative approach. Many of the students were young men who had returned to school on the GI Bill, and were ready to believe that there could be a totally new expression in painting. Most were quite willing to hear Still, who also taught at the school, denounce the European forebears and exhort them to follow their intuitions. Rothko was stimulated by the school’s atmosphere, a slightly hysterical environment where students and teachers knew they were making history. Rothko was described as a “very inspiring teacher,”<sup>176</sup> and as Douglas MacAgy, the man whom invited Rothko to teach, put it, if one subscribes to the notion of painting as a symbolic act, then one can understand what Rothko means when he says a painter commits himself by the nature of the space he uses. MacAgy was one of the few who

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<sup>174</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 146.

<sup>175</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 10.

<sup>176</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 102

understood that the “theatre of Rothko’s imagination” displays the basic assumptions from which philosophies are formed. He continues to say that although the work is visual, presented through sight, the experiences transcend the limits imposed by visible particularities. This was, undoubtedly, one of Rothko’s principles.<sup>177</sup>

## **Murals**

For several years, Rothko’s desire to immerse himself in the spaces his paintings proposed became more and more imperious until he realized that in order to satisfy his desire, he had to be literal; canvases that would surround the viewer as murals. His opportunity to move into his “jointed scheme”, as he called it, occurred in 1958, when Philip Johnson invited him to paint murals for the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building. During this time, he was having an intense debate with himself about the meaning of art. He sought out friends who were also exploring themselves and struggling with searching questions. One of his most stimulating associations was with the poet Stanley Kunitz, who describes Rothko as “a primitive, a shaman who finds the magic formula and leads people to it.” Kunitz and Rothko shared the same vision of the contemporary world as fraught with distressing problems. They also discussed the moral dimensions in poetry and painting. They agreed with the idea that moral pressures were exerted in poetry and art, and that there was an effort to seek unity in the variety of experience; art constitutes a moral universe. These wandering conversations between painter and poet fed into Rothko’s enterprise. They gave him confirmation of his intuitions.<sup>178</sup> As Rothko continued to work on his Seagram murals, he stressed vertical elements, no doubt because of the architectural nature of this endeavor.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 104-105.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 151-153.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 153.

As he worked painting by painting, he held in his imagination the effect he wished to receive when they would finally find their form as an ensemble. By 1959, he was deeply immersed in the problem of making his scheme conform to his inner vision. His theatrical use of fiery reds reminded one of the flickering of candlelight, and the burning quality was heightened



**Mark Rothko, *Untitled*  
(*Harvard mural sketch*)**

deliberately as Rothko mixed raw pigments into the final surfaces of the canvas. In these panels, Rothko changed his motif from a closed to an open form, suggesting a threshold or portal.<sup>180</sup> The portal-like shapes are not echoes of real architecture, but the vanishing, never-to-

be entered portals of the Law.<sup>181</sup> The study of proportions in

Rothko's mural cycles was not so much rooted in practical needs

of the Seagram restaurant as in Rothko's need to understand the abstract notion of proportion.<sup>182</sup> In fact, Rothko's paintings never found a home in the Seagram Building. He installed his works in an interior space of his own, one in which no other location could compare.<sup>183</sup>

Soon after Rothko completed the Seagram works, Wassily Leontief, a Nobel Prize winning economist who had admired Rothko and been a friend for years, approached his colleagues of the Society of Fellows at Harvard University with a proposal that Rothko be commissioned to create murals for their future quarters. Most of the men were baffled by Rothko's work, but Leontief managed to persuade them with his enthusiasm. Rothko went



**Mark Rothko, *Untitled*,  
*Mural for End Wall*, 1959**

<sup>180</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>181</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 155.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

through the ceremonious interview with the Fellows and a private interview with Harvard's president. Rothko was eager to get another opportunity to create his own environment via painting in a public place since his first mural commission was never made public. The possibility of "translating pictorial concepts into murals which would serve as an image for a public place"<sup>184</sup> excited Rothko. Even when the room the murals were intended for changed from the Fellows penthouse to an official dining room, Rothko remained calm. His reaction to the modification reflected his general attitude of the late 1950s and early 1960s; he was more confident and had experienced several moments of inner satisfaction.<sup>185</sup>

Rothko's last commission was in 1964 by Dominique and John de Menil. The De Menils were patrons of art, favored the avant-garde, and also the chief benefactors of the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic institution. Dominique de Menil proposed that Rothko execute a set of paintings for the interior of a chapel to be built for the university in Houston, Texas. Rothko was given the opportunity to finally realize his dream in full: to shape and control a total environment. The environment was to encompass a group of fourteen paintings especially created for the meditative place. The paintings created by Rothko from 1964-1967 for the project represent the fulfillment of the artist's lifelong ambitions as well as a breakthrough in twentieth-century art. Rothko had the opportunity to determine the architectural setting and lighting in which the paintings would appear. By doing this, Rothko found the catalyst for a new mode of pictorial dynamics based on the interaction of paintings, architecture, and light previously unknown.<sup>186</sup> While much of Rothko's work is unprecedented, the Rothko Chapel was the culmination of the artist's aspirations as a painter. The Rothko Chapel is a marriage of religion, art, and architecture, functioning as a chapel, a museum, and a forum. The Chapel

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<sup>184</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 158.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>186</sup> Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 33.

provided diverse programs, stressed the importance of human rights, and hosted events that drew such icons as Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama. The Rothko Chapel serves as a sanctuary to everyone, regardless of faith, religion, or denomination. It provides a temporary place for major religious holy days and celebrations for communities that have not yet found a place of their own.<sup>187</sup> Unfortunately, Rothko never got to see the opening of the cathedral. It opened its doors in 1971, a year after the artist's death.

### Darkened Works



**Mark Rothko**  
*Untitled (Black on Gray)*  
1969/1970

Rothko's work began to darken dramatically during the late 1950s; a development related to his Seagram murals, in which he used a palette of red, maroon, brown, and black.<sup>188</sup> By 1957, his work began to take a serious direction toward "a clear preoccupation with death." His works in the late 1940s and early 1950s were preoccupied with the theme of tragedy, but Rothko's conception of tragedy was not always bleak. The earlier "classics" were tragic because they evoked the sensual world and its dissolution into the spirit, or death, but this awareness of death gave rise to an urge for life. However, by the late 1950s, life, as well as death, was barely endurable. The artist's growing anguish caused him to darken his palette, making his atmosphere oppressive and difficult to breathe and stretch, figuratively.<sup>189</sup> In 1958, author Dore Ashton accounted for his change in tone, suggesting that the general misinterpretation of his earlier works of yellow, orange, and pink exasperated the artist, who turned to a dark palette so his images could speak "in a great tragic voice."<sup>190</sup> With some exceptions, the darkened palette continued to dominate

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<sup>187</sup> "About the Chapel," *The Rothko Chapel*.

<sup>188</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>189</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.



Rothko's work well into the 1960s. He developed a technique of painstakingly overlaying colors until, as Ashton recalls, "his surfaces were velvety as poems of the night."<sup>191</sup> One of the exceptions during this dark period was a series of works where Rothko used a softer range of pinks and blues, recalling his smaller works from the mid-1940s. In a series of brown, black and gray paintings produced from 1969-1970, he divided the composition horizontally and framed the image with a white margin formed by applying masking tape before painting the canvas. The sharply defined edge establishes a complex interplay between the work and viewer, an effect Rothko constantly attempted to achieve. The viewer is drawn into the painting by its sensuous surface, yet kept at a distance by the stark framing device.<sup>192</sup>



**Mark Rothko**  
***Number 1***  
**1964**

While Rothko pinched pennies for most of his life and career, he did succeed in selling several paintings in the early 1960s, fetching high dollar amounts. In the early 1960s, an Italian collector offered \$100,000 for the Seagram murals. He backed out on his offer before Rothko could accept, but bought two other works for \$20,000 each. In 1962, a large Rothko was sold for \$30,000. Money was finally pouring in for Rothko, and his high income made his gallery representations impractical. In one year, Rothko could

sell five paintings from his studio for the same amount he could sell ten from a gallery, and did not have to pay the one-third commission. He became a well-known artist, receiving invites and requests to attend parties and events. The Rothkos even attended President Kennedy's inauguration dinner, sharing a table with Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson. Even so, Rothko was acutely depressed.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>191</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 11.

<sup>192</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>193</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 49-50.

At different times during the 1950s and 1960s, Rothko produced a substantial number of small works on paper. While some were studies for his murals, others were simply smaller variations of employing a similar dynamic of form and color.<sup>194</sup> One series of his works on paper were dark, foreboding works of blacks, purples, and browns with a decisive line separating two rectangular areas, in which, as he said, “the dark is always on top.” He himself was startled by these works and wondered if it were agony or persuasiveness they represented.<sup>195</sup> Many of them were mounted on panel, canvas, or board in order to simulate the presence of unframed canvases. The smaller format especially suited the artist in 1968, when his physical activity was dramatically affected by a serious aneurysm. He continued to work predominantly on paper even after he returned to a relatively large format in 1969.<sup>196</sup> Late in his career, he felt estranged from the art world and its young generation of artists. Chain smoking, highly nervous, thin, and restless, Rothko spent his last years talking intermittently with close friends. He spoke of his aesthetic despair and the hollowness of his fame. He was convinced that on the whole he had never been properly understood.<sup>197</sup>

There were many paintings from the last two years of Rothko’s life; some reverting to his older version while most were new departures for another destination. In some, he initiated the glaring white border, emphasized by the perfect angles that held in loosely painted interiors. Sometimes during these last years, there were paintings in oil in which Rothko used only gradations of black invoking his magical sheens. At the end of his life, Rothko had no need for a range of colors; there was only one kind of light.<sup>198</sup> The restrained palette in most of his last painting is related to Rothko’s earlier technique of oppositions, but now the effect was heavy and

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<sup>194</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 49-50.

<sup>195</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 188.

<sup>196</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>197</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 188.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

airless.<sup>199</sup> In many pictures painted in the last two years of his life, particularly in the hopeless “black” ones, there is little but the intimations of mortality.<sup>200</sup> Rothko discovered in his large paintings a “door into an internal realm.” This interior realm is perhaps where Rothko wished, or could only, live, and what he hoped to express. If his last two years were hellish, his paintings reflected them faithfully. It would be futile to see them as anything other than a mournful reckoning of his life’s preoccupations, birth, dissolution, and death.<sup>201</sup> Physically ill and suffering from depression, Rothko committed suicide on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1970. At the time of his death, he was widely recognized in Europe and America for his crucial role in the development of nonrepresentational art. His vibrant, disembodied veils of color asserted the power of nonobjective painting to convey strong emotional or spiritual content. With an unwavering commitment to a singular artistic vision, Rothko celebrated the near mythic power art holds over the creative imagination.<sup>202</sup>

Rothko’s death was the end of his life, but it was not the end of his struggles. The long, vicious settlement of his estate became the subject of the famous Rothko case. After his death, Rothko’s three trusted friends, Professor Morton Levine, painter Theodoros Stamos, and accountant Bernard J. Reis, as named in Rothko’s will, acted as executors of the estate. They did not do so honestly. They sold his entire legacy of 800 paintings for a fraction of their real worth on terms suspiciously unfavorable to the estate. Later, when the details of the dealings became known, the subsequent lawsuit brought on by Rothko’s daughter would drag in and out of the courts and press for years.<sup>203</sup> However, not all publicity after his death was bad. In early November, 2005, Rothko’s 1953 oil painting, *Homage to Matisse*, broke the record selling price

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<sup>199</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 189.

<sup>200</sup> Sandler, *Mark Rothko Paintings*, 11.

<sup>201</sup> Ashton, *About Rothko*, 191.

<sup>202</sup> Mann, *Mark Rothko Exhibition*.

<sup>203</sup> Seldes, *Legacy*, 9.

of any post-war painting at a public auction, fetching \$22.5 million. In 2006, Rothko's son Christopher edited a previous unpublished manuscript by Rothko about his philosophies on art, entitled *The Artist's Reality*, published by Yale University Press. In May, 2007, a Rothko painting broke record sales again, selling a 1950 painting, *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)*, for \$72.8 million at Sotheby's New York. More recently, a play based on Rothko, "Red," written by John Logan, opened at the Donmar Warehouse in London on December 3, 2009.

## 6 CONCLUSION

From the very first Rothko set forth an “Americanist” view that individuals are a product of their mental environment and heritage. Mark Rothko was no different. A Russian-Jew who was transferred to America, Rothko never felt fully comfortable with himself. Choosing a career as a painter, Rothko found an outlet through which to express his anguish. Rothko grew up in the midst of the Russian Revolution, experienced effects from the First World War, and managed to scrape by through the Great Depression and World War II. These effects of war effected and defined his career. Whether it was growing up in suppressed Russia, starving through the Great Depression, or suddenly being among European artists who fled to America to escape the war, Rothko lived most of his life in some state of war or hardship. Because of his volatile surroundings, Rothko dedicated his life and work attempting to evoke the totality of the human experience. In order to do this properly, Rothko had to slip back through time as so many artists had done before, summoning up origins from the past. Rothko found his signature style, the 1950s motif of soft, rectangular forms floating on a stained field of color, which are characterized by meticulous attention to color, shape, balance, depth, composition and scale, through influences of Nietzsche, Greek tragedy, and his Russian-Jew heritage.

Active in political issues and debates, Rothko maintained the social revolutionary ideas of his youth throughout his life. He expounded his views in numerous essays and critical reviews. He fully supported the artist’s total freedom of expression, which he felt was compromised by the market. During times of war and struggle, American Scene art, which Rothko had an aversion to, was in high demand. This put him at odds with the art world, and he never seemed to recover. Enjoying moderate fame and a meager living, Rothko’s life as an artist never seemed settled or fulfilled. During his lifetime, Rothko strived to be a leader and example, but never got

adequate recognition from critics or the public he felt he fully deserved. Even though he was a prominent leader of the New York School and now considered the most renowned of all Color Field painters, Rothko felt that he had accomplished little. The period in which he lived offered him plenty of inspiration, albeit mostly negative. Rothko focused on the tragic throughout his lifetime; he was constantly being faced with Depression and war issues. While the war did bring him several influences from European masters who helped define his work, it still did great damage to the sensitive artist emotionally.

Rothko was a product of his violent, unsteady environment, which made him a nervous, anarchic revolutionary who felt that the answers to life were in the past. While Rothko's work focused on the tragic, his life seemed to be a tragedy in itself. Rothko's personal life left much to be desired. He separated from two wives and lived most of his later life in lament and anguish. Believing that he had nothing more to offer the art world, and assuming he had lived his life in vain, Rothko left the world in true "tortured artist" fashion: he took his own life. Contrary to what Rothko might have thought, his influence on the art world was and is substantial, and his contribution to art has been nothing less than educational and inspirational.

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