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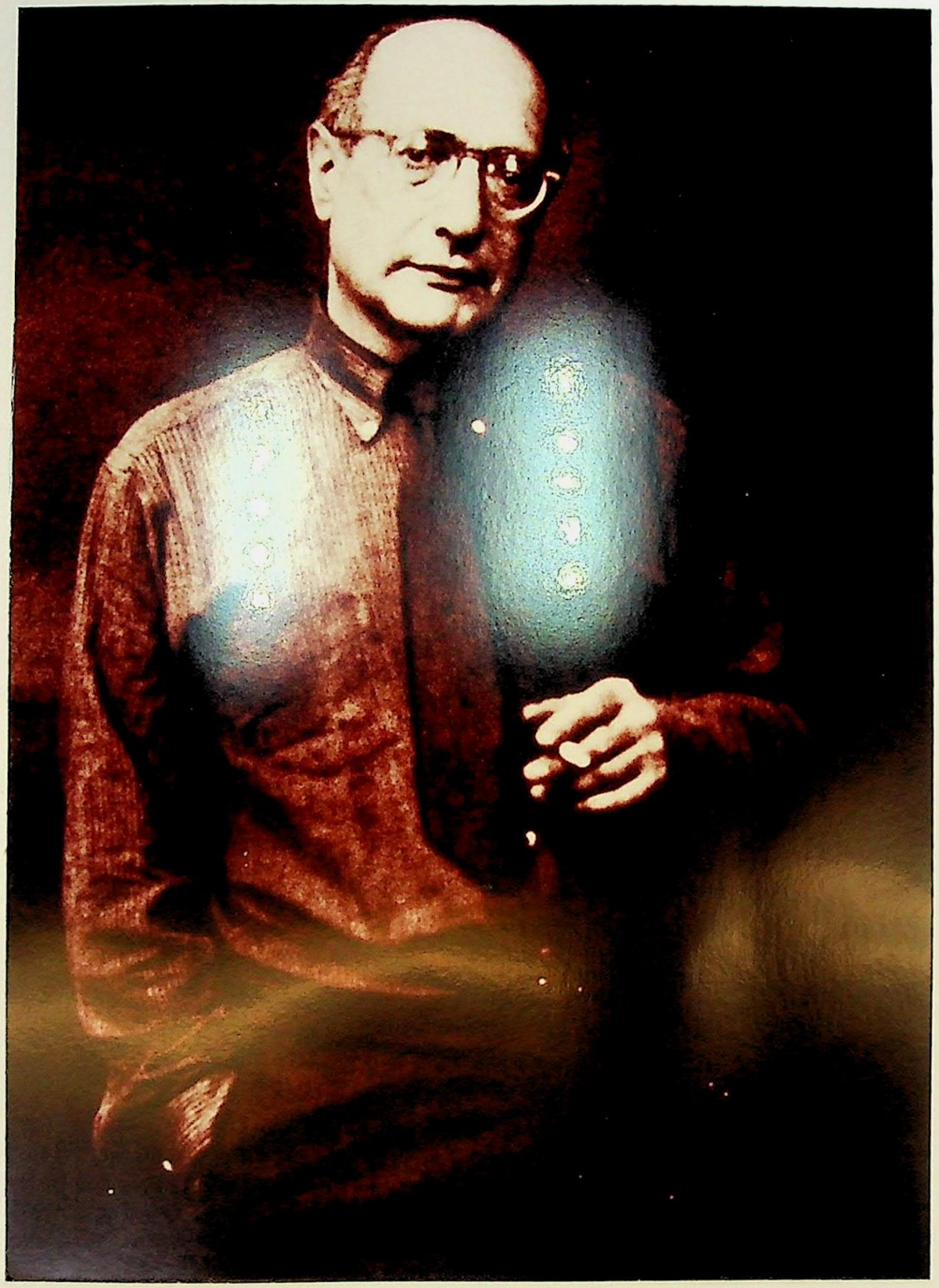
Mark Rothko, 1960



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank both my tutor, Sue McNab and Moira Dolan for their valuable help and assistance in the preparation of this thesis.

ILLUSTRATIONS

BIOGRAPHY

1903 Born Marcus Rothkowitz in the town of Divinsk, Russia. Youngest of four children by eight years - two brothers and one sister. Parents, Jacob a well-off Jewish pharmacist, and his wife Anna.

Attends Hebrew School, studies scriptures and the Talmud.

1910 Father emigrates to Portland, Oregon in the United States.

1913 Marcus arrives in the U.S. with his mother and sister. On to Portland, Oregon. Only speaks Russian and Yiddish.

1914 Father dies suddenly. Family have to work. Marcus becomes a delivery boy and takes on a newspaper route. Attends Lincoln High School. Completes high school in short time of three years. Finds school "ridiculously easy". Also studies drawing and painting. Plays piano and mandolin. Studies literature, social studies, labour and radical causes.

1921-23 Attends Yale University in New Haven. Studies English, French, History, Mathematics, Physics, Economics and Philosophy. Sketches often. Has odd jobs on the campus. Publishes a pamphlet called Saturday Evening Pest. Tone unusually liberal and progressive.

1923 Moves to New York. Takes odd jobs.

1924 Takes anatomy lessons in the Art Students League. Returns briefly to Portland. Joins acting company.

1925 Moves back premanently to New York. Paints in Max Weber's class at Art Students League; studies still life and figure. Paints in Realist style; does urban scenes, still life and landscape. Influenced by Weber.

1926 Becomes member of the League.

1928 Has first group exhibition at the Opportunity Galleries, New York, aged 25. Milton Avery also exhibits. Rothkowitz meets Avery. Becomes close friend of Avery.

1928 Becomes part-time art teacher of children at Center Academy, Brooklyn Jewish Center. Keeps position until 1952.

1929-30 Meets Adolph Gottlieb, continues to work - paints cityscapes, nudes, figure studies, domestic scenes.

1932 Marries Edith Sachar, Jewish costume jewellery designer.

1933 First one man show at the contemporary Arts Gallery, New York. Reviewed by Jane Schwartz in Art News, vol. xxxii, No. 9, Dec. 2nd, 1933, p. 16.

1934 Various group shows at the Uptown Gallery, New York. Artists Union formed in New York. Rothkowitz among 200 initial members. Concerned with artists problems and general labour issues.

1935 Under the Works Art Project, President Roosevelt set up the Federal Art Project, on which Rothkowitz is employed doing easel painting until 1937. Others employed include William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Jack Iworkov.

With Gottlieb and seven others, sets up group called The Ten (which rarely consisted of more than nine artists). Often referred to as "The Ten Who are Nine". Members paint in loose, flat manner, admire Expressionism and are sympathetic to abstract art. Hold various exhibitions. Rothkowitz interested in archaic art of Aegean, Egypt and Africa.

1936 Meets Barnett Newman. The Ten Exhibit at Galerie Bonaparte, Paris.

1938 Becomes U.S. citizen. Begins to adopt name form Mark Rothko. Experiments with automatic drawing. Fascinated by Oedipus myth. Reads Nietzsche's 'Birth of Tragedy'. Makes profound impression on Rothko. Renewed interest in theatre. Adopts Surrealist technique.

1940 The Ten break up. Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors founded in New York. Rothko among members. Continues to exhibit. Working closely with Gottlieb.

1943 Rothko shows "The Syrian Bull", and Gottlieb "The Rape of Persephone" at Third Annual Federation exhibition. Gets negative response from Edward Alden Jewell, 'New York Times' art critic. Famous reply of Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman published in 'Times' of June 13th. Sets forth their aesthetic position. Also discusses artistic principles with Gottlieb on WNYC radio broadcast.

1945 Has one man show in Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery, Art of this century. Shows "The Syrian Bull" among others. Reflects influences of Miro, Masson, Ernst. Favourable reviews.

Paints "Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea". Marries second wife, artist Mary Alice Beistle, known as "Mell". Mell aged 23, Rothko, 42.

1946 Betty Parsons opens gallery. Signs on Rothko, Pollock, Still. Beginnings of recognition. Hugely successful shows in San Francisco and Santa Barbara Museums of Art.

1947 Shows at Betty Parsons Gallery. First of five annual one man shows. Teaches at California School of Fine Art. Becomes fascinated with work of Clyfford Still.

1947-49 "Tiger's Eye", general cultural magazine, published. Rothko contributes articles.

1948 First magazine to deal exclusively with contemporary American art, "Possibilities", published. Only one edition. Includes statement by Rothko. Heralds beginnings of mature styles of the New York School of painters. Rothko formulating mature style.

Rothko, Motherwell, Baziotes establish the "Subjects of the Artist School" in a loft. Guest speakers invited to open lectures on Friday nights. Subjects include philosophy, aesthetics, music, psychoanalysis, astronomy, Rothko speaks.

1949 "Subjects" closes and "The Club" is formed. Is focal point of Abstract Expressionist activity for next decade. Rothko very active in The Club. Painting continuously - configurations simplified, reduced, colours intensified, and canvases become larger. Begins to number works.

Still lives with Mell in comparative poverty - proud of circumstances and feels misunderstood.

Critic Thomas Hess favourably struck by 1949 exhibition at Betty Parsons. Others aghast at what they consider lack of content. Rothko well into mature style.

1950 Annual Betty Parsons show a smash hit. Critics, including Hess, enthralled.

Embarks with Mell on tour of Europe.

Daughter Kate born.

1951 "Life" magazine describes group of artists, including Rothko, Newman, Still, Pollock, Gottlieb, Reinhardt, de Kooning, as "The Irrascibles".

1952 The Museum of Modern Art shows "15 Americans", Rothko included. Again, critical response good. Refuses to let his work travel to Europe.

1954-55 Two important one man shows, at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Clement Greenberg discusses Rothko and others in famous article "American-Type Painting", in the "Partisan Review", 1955.

1956 Article in "Time", "The Wild Ones", discusses "rumpled, testy" Rothko and others of the New York School.

Exhibition in Tate Gallery, London of M.O.M.A. works, including Rothko's. Badly received by British press - Times refers to "Yankee-Doodles".

Rothko visits Colorado and New Orleans as visiting lecturer.

Works appear in Venezuela, most of Europe, and India. Money still scarce.

Sidney Janis, art dealer exhibits Rothko. Favourable reviews.

1957 Writes letter to editor of New York Times refuting Elaine de Kooning's article "Two Americans in Action", Art News Annual, 1957, which labels Rothko and Kline as "action painters". Rothko writes "to clarify is to embalm".

1958 Shows paintings at Venice xxix Biennale.

Moves to bigger studio and begins first commission, monumental canvases for House of Seagram Building Four Seasons Restaurant. Works in series. Employs horizontal format with vertical elements. Restricts palette to two colours. Never installed in restaurant. Now in Tate Gallery, London.

Gives lecture at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn and disassociates himself from Abstract Expressionist movement.

Refuses Guggenheim Museum's International award of $1,000. Reputation continues to rise and money pours in.

Makes another trip with Mell to Europe.

1961 Becoming even more famous. He and Mell appear at John F. Kennedy Inaugural Ball as guests of Kennedy.

Major retrospective at M.O.M.A., includes 54 of his works. Directs installations himself. Retrospective travels to Europe.

Is under increasing psychological pressure. Drinking heavily and health declining.

Begins work on murals commissioned by Holyoke Center, Harvard, designed by Jose Luis Sert.

1962 Attends White House Dinner celebrating the Arts. Completes Harvard Murals.

1963 Son Christopher born. Rothko aged 60.

Joins Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York.

1964 Starts work on last series of Mural commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil for new chapel in Houston, Texas.

1964-65 Moves into last studio and begins work on Houston Chapel murals.

1965-66 On January 3rd Milton Avery dies. Rothko delivers moving eulogy at New York Institute of Ethical Culture.

Participates in White House Festival of the Arts, and in "Two Decades of American Painting" organized by M.O.M.A.

Makes last trip to Europe.

1967 University of St. Thomas, Art Department, Houston, "Six Painters", organized by Dominique de Menil, Rothko, Mondrian, de Kooning, Pollock.

Teaches at Berkeley, California. Revered by students as a master.

Houston murals basically complete.

1968 M.O.M.A. Exhibition, "Dada Surrealism and their Heritage". Exhibits "Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea" (1944).

Suffers from aneurysm of the aorta. Forced to stop working for some time. Depression increases and drinking heavily. Also suffering marital problems.

Begins working on small acrylics on paper, gradually becoming larger. Spreading colour with huge brushes and sponges.

1969 Leaves home and moves into his studio. Remains in contact with Mell and children.

Gallery of Art, Washington University, St. Louis, "The Development of Modernist Painting", in which Rothko is represented. Rothko's now feth huge sums of money.

Receives honorary degree, Doctor of Fine Arts, from Yale University.

Mark Rothko Foundation formed to provide financial assistance for older painters, sculptors, writers and composers.

Donates Seagram Murals to Tate Gallery.

1969-70 M.O.M.A. exhibition "New York Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation", organized by Henry Geldzahler.

Rothko now very ill - depression increasing and relying heavily on drink and drugs.

Begins black and grey or brown series of paintings. They are remote, quiet, sombre.

1970 - February 25 Rothko commits suicide.

1971 The Rothko Chapel, Houston, is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

On June 9th, 1969, just eight months before his death, Mark Rothko was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts from Yale University. At the occasion Kingman Brewster, President of Yale, spoke of what Rothko's lifeswork had meant;

> . . .you have made an enduring place for yourself in the art of this century. Your paintings are marked by a simplicity of form and a magnificence of color. In them you have attained a visual and spiritual grandeur whose foundation is the tragic vein in human existance.

In these simple words Brewster summed up the achievement of Mark Rothko.

This essay deals in essence with an attempt to "demystify" Rothko, to set out in clear terms the ideas and influences which motivated him, and to try and show how these ideas and influences were brought to bear directly on his work. It is also an effort to demonstrate that the progression of his work from the very beginning was towards a perfect clarification of the ideas and principles which he held.

Rothko the artist and Rothko the human being are inseparable - his personality had a tremendous bearing on his art, and certainly his psychological state towards the end of his life influenced his work directly.

Mark Rothko was an extremely complex human being. The American reviewer Peter Schjeldahl has described him as "spectacularly

neurotic",[1] a fact that in artistic terms is neither here nor there, but without which the individual achievement of his life becomes unintelligible. His awareness of the transitory nature of human existance began early on with his hearing as a child in Divinsk of the pogroms directed against the Jews. His "clear preoccupation" with death must have had its earliest beginnings then. As a boy in America he was nervous and highly strung. As an adult he could often successfully camoflage this intensity of disposition, so that to some he could appear benign, affectionate and jovial, while to others he was arrogant, pompous and remote.

In the middle to late 1950's Rothko's often melancholy moods deepened into depression. As his fame increased his feelings of isolation grew. The comradeship and support of the New York School had disappeared as the artists gradually severed contacts with each other. Fame had not mellowed their dispositions. Barnett Newman, always pugnacious, became increasingly so, and he and Rothko fought and stopped speaking, a break which caused Rothko some anguish. Clyfford Still sent Rothko a prickly letter which resulted in he and Rothko also falling out in the mid 1950's.

The increased identification with the Abstract Expressionists and Colour-Field painters also increased Rothko's feelings of isolation.

He developed pronounced hypochondriacal tendencies, bundling himself up in layers of clothes at the slightest change in the weather. At the same time,when he became genuinely ill, he could

only with great difficulty be persuaded to see a doctor. He had a well developed distrust of other figures of authority such as lawyers and bank managers, which in part led to the chaotic state of his legal and financial affairs at the time of his death.

In January 1957 Time Magazine did a feature on the New York School, which depicted them as suffering from huge persecution complexes, and gave "rumpled testy" Rothko as the supreme example.

The rapturous reviews of the 1950's and 1960's, far from pleasing him, made him feel trapped. For many years he had refused to compromise his lofty principles in the face of day to day survival, but as his fame grew and his pictures began fetching astronomical prices, he felt himself to be increasingly compromised by the blatant materialism of the New York Art world of the 1960's. Pressures grew and he became unable to cope, relying on others for even the most pragmatic decisions. His marriage was also in difficulties, and in 1968, by now drinking heavily and taking large quantities of pills for depression, Rothko suffered an aneurysm of the aorta. Physically he recovered to a large extent but psychologically he never healed, and in the morning of February 25th, 1970, he committed suicide in his studio in New York.

Rothko was a victim of the greed and corruption of the art world. After his death his estate of some 800 paintings was unlawfully sold to the Marlborough Galleries for a fraction of their real worth. After a legal battle lasting four and a half years, his daughter Kate finally regained control of his paintings, and some of the

so called friends and advisors of his later years were exposed as charlatans and crooks.

FOOTNOTES: INTRODUCTION

1. Peter Schjeldahl, Mystifying the Mysterious, Art in America, Dec. 1983, p. 15.

CHAPTER I MARK ROTHKO

Philosophical and Artistic Influences.

> In the Dionysian dithysamb[1] man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties; something never before experienced struggles for utterance - the annihilation of the veil of Maya, oneness as the soul of the race and of nature itself.[2]
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche (1845-1900)
> The Birth of Tragedy, 1872

From the moment that Rothko encountered the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, some time in the middle 1920's, at the Art Students League in New York, where he was taking drawing and painting lessons, he felt an immediate sympathy and kinship with his philosophy, especially as expressed in his youthful masterpiece The Birth of Tragedy (1872). Rothko's subsequent identification with Nietzschean thinking is quite striking, to the extent that many of Rothko's statements on art sound as if Rothko was engaged in a kind of lifelong mental dialgoue with Nietzsche on the subject of painting in particular. The great works of the last twenty yeras of his life were an heroic attempt to give to painting the level of significance and power which Nietzsche attributes to music, in The Birth of Tragedy.

At this point is it important to give an account of Nietzsche's view of art as set forth in The Birth of Tragedy, and contrast it with the many statements Rothko made throughout his life on the subject.

In the following passage from the book, Nietzsche contrasts the two world views of art which he saw in operation since Greek times, and which he called the Dionysian and the Appollonian.[3]

> . . .In contrast to those who are intent on deriving the arts from one exclusive principle, as the necessary vital source of every work of art, I shall keep my eyes fixed on the two artistic deities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus, and recognise in them the living and conspicuous representatives of two worlds of art differing in their intrinsic essence and in their highest aims. I see Apollo as the transfiguring genius of the principiam individuationis, through which alone the redemption in appearance is truly to be obtained: while by the mystical triumphant cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost heart of things. This extraordinary antithesis, which stretches like a yawning gulf between plastic art as the Apollonian, and music as the Dionysian art, has revealed itself to only one of the great thinkers, [4] to such an extent that even without this clue to the symbolism of Hellenic divinities, he conceded to music a character and an origin different from all the other arts, because, unlike them, it is not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself, and therefore compliments everything physical in the world and every phenomenon by representing what is metaphysical, the thing in itself.[5]

In this long and somewhat rambling passage, Nietzsche is in effect saying that the plastic arts can only touch the world of representation, while music reaches the world of will. Oddly enough, it did not occur to Nietzsche that the music of Mozart which Rothko had a lifelong passion for, could hardly be called Dionysian in the Nietzschean sense of the word.

It also did not occur to Nietzsche, in his youthful enthusiasm, that the great European painters were more than just faithful recorders of the world of representation, or that they represented

Apollonian rather than Dionysian views. But it occurred to Rothko, (admittedly when he was a mature painter, and well into his last great phase) when he stated, in 1958, that:

> It must be noted that the great painters of the figure [6] had this in common. Their portraits resemble each other far more than they recall the peculiarities of a particular model. In a sense they have painted one character in all their work. What is indicated here is that the artist's real model is an ideal which embraces all of human drama rather than the appearance of a particular individual.
> . . . The whole of man's experience becomes his [the artist's] model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea.[7]

However, Nietzsche, as Rothko well knew, was right in one sense. The plastic arts, and painting in particular, had for centuries relied on the world of appearances to depict man's experience. When Nietzsche was writing The Birth of Tragedy, the Impressionists had not yet made their impact, but Rothko was responding to Nietzsche's words in a totally different climate for painters. Twentieth century movements like Cubism and Surrealism had stretched the possibilities of painting so much that Rothko could say;

> Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance. Freed from the need of describing a particular person, the possibilities are endless. [8]

Again, Rothko sensed the importance of what Nietzsche was saying, so that in later years he could look back at his beginnings and say that his purpose as a painter was that he ". . .wanted to raise painting to the level of poignancy of music and poetry".

Rothko became obsessed with Nietzsche's idea that music alone could express this "thing in itself" of every phenomenon. He knew that painting could have similar power, and he determined to show that his own painting could have that power. He would later often repeat the notion that, as he put it, "a painting is not about an experience, it is an experience".

After his discovery of Nietzsche,[9] Rothko began to sense that that problem of painting was how to transcend, in a plastic image, the consciousness of self.[10] Music could do it, so why not painting? Merleau-Ponty puts it another way:

> Modern painting presents a problem completely different from that of the return to the individual: the problem of knowing how one can communicate without the help of a pre-established Nature which all men's senses open upon the problem of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own. [11]

Nietzsche goes on to say that;

> From the nature of art as it is usually conceived according to the single category of appearance and beauty, the tragic cannot honestly be deduced at all: it is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihiliation of the individual. For only by the particular examples of such annihiliation are we made clear as to the external phenomenon of Dionysian art which gives expression to the will in its omnipotence, as it were, behind the principium individuationis, the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihiliation. [12]

Painting, according to Nietzsche, was failing in what he considered to be a primary function of art - the expression of the tragic universal impulse in man. Only in music, he felt, was to be found this essential ability to transcend the triviality of individual expression. Examples of Dionysian art gave full expression to

those things which go beyond "the veil of Maya", such as joy, tragedy, and the power of will.

Rothko instinctively knew Nietzsche to be correct, he wanted to create art which would have no sense of this "principium individuationis", but which would express not one man's vision, but "every-man's" vision, and also express universal concepts.[13]

The Birth of Tragedy also deals with the whole phenomenon of Greek civilization, the place of myth in that civilization, and its special relevance for modern man.

Rothko's "Subway Scene" painting of the early 1930's bring to mind the timeless qualities of the frescos of ancient Greece. They are not, as some would think, primarily scenes of social commentary, common among artists in the United States at the time of the Depression. The figures are classical in feel, dignified and remote, and their muted pastel colours recall the wall frescos of Pompeii. Again we see the influence of Nietzsche and Existentialism in these paintings - the image of the immobile, human figure, confronting the terrors of existance, and resembling the single tragic figure of the chained Prometheus confronting Zeus in the Aeschyclean tragedy, Prometheus Bound.

In 1947, Rothko referred to this himself when he said that,

> . . .the great achievements of the centuries in which the artist accepted the probable and familiar as his subjects were the pictures of the single human figure - alone in a moment of utter immobility.
>
> But the solitary figure could not raise its limbs in a single gesture that might indicate its concern with the fact of mortality. . . Nor could the solitutde be overcome. It could gather on beaches and streets and in parks only through coincidence, and, with its companions, form a tableau vivant of human incommunicability.[14]

In his choice of subject matter alone, Rothko had already indicated his propensity for melancholy and dissonance. He was moving towards Nietzsche's idea, that man, in order to be able to bear this dissonance, would "need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty." The early Greek dramatists understood this perfectly, Rothko felt. He said again in 1947, that,

> even the archaic artist, who had an uncanny virtuosity, found it necessary to create a group of intermediaries, monsters, hybrids, gods, and demigods. The difference is that, since the archaic artist was living in a more practical society than ours, the urgency for transcendent experience was understood and given official status. As a consequence, the human figure and other elements from the familiar world could be combined with, or participate as a whole in the enactment of the excesses which characterise this improbable hiararchy. [15]

However, Rothko, in agreement with the author of The Birth of Tragedy adds,

> With us the disguise must be complete. The familiar identity of things has to be pulverised in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment. [16]

Nietzsche had stated, quite strongly, that, "Myth, the necessary prerequisite of every religion is already paralyzed everywhere". [17] Rothko was bent on restoring its place in man's minds. He knew that without a recognition of the value of myth as an indicator of man's sublimity, art becomes merely a recorder of everyday banality, of trivial anecdotes, as thus loses all its power -

> Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama: art's most profound moments express this frustration. When they were abandoned as untenable superstitions, art sank into melancholy. It became fond of the dark, and enveloped its objects in the nostalgic intimations of a half lit world. [18]

Again we find Rothko echoing Nietzsche with his harsh denunciation of "modern theoretical man" in The Birth of Tragedy, "mythless man", as he puts it, who stands,

> eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig for them among the remotest antiquities.[19]

The purpose in dealing at such length with the very vital connection between these two philosophers is to demonstrate that, far from permitting Nietzsche to "roll by as another car in a freight train of 'influences'",[20] I want to bring him to bear directly on the form of Rothko's work. Rothko's response to Nietzsche should form the core of any discussion about his paintings and I do not think it is possible to reach any understanding whatever of Rothko's intention throughout his life without first looking closely at the great German philosopher's thoughts on the arts and on painting and music in particular.

Of course Rothko was an extrememly well read man, with a knowledge not only of the philosophy of Nietzsche, but also that of Schopenhauer. He also had a good working knowledge of thinkers like Carl Jung, whose insistance on the importance of the part myth plays in the formation of a healthy human society, accorded with Rothko's own ideas and helped him to formulate his surrealist views. Nietzsche issued a challenge to painting in his early

masterpiece, and Rothko took him up on it, making a desperate bet on the commicative capacities of abstract painting.

He declared that he "wanted to raise painting to the level of poignancy of music and poetry", and when we discuss his great works of the last twenty years of his life, it will be seen how closely he came to achieving his wish.

Part II: Influences on Rothko's Stylistic Development.

At this point we will deal with two artists who had a considerable influence on Rothko's stylistic development and broadening of the painterly options open to him in the 1920's and 1930's. These two artists, Max Weber and Milton Avery, were the most influential in the development of Rothko's own painterly 'vocabulary', which would be best fitted to express his developing philosophy.

When Rothko enrolled in 1924 in his first drawing and painting classes in New York, he began producing sensitive, if conventional studies of the landscape, the nude, and urban scenes. They reflected a trend dominant in American painting at the time which Diane Waldman has termed "Regionalism",[21] and which had little to do with the continuing painting revolution in Europe. The "Isms" of Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivisim, Dadaism, Cubism, and Surrealism were alien to the experience of most artists working in the United States at the time. As Rothko himself said later

"Realism was what we inherited."[22] World War I and the Depression had turned many artists against abstraction. American Social Scene painting and Social Realism were the accepted genres, and painting had become topical, journalistic, illustrational.

However, Rothko was fortunate to have as his teacher Max Weber (1881-1861) and like himself, of Russian Jewish origin. Although he was with Weber only a short time (from October through December of 1925, and from March through May of 1926), his influence on the young Rothko was considerable. His sophisticated knowledge of European painting made a considerable impression on his student. He introduced him to Cezanne, the Cubists, the Fauves, and later on to a form of Expressionism, but it was mainly Cubism, and indeed Weber's own Cubist-type paintings, with their curiously shifting planes and spatial ambiguity, that influenced Rothko's Surrealist pictures of the mid 1940's. [figs. 1, 2] Under Weber's influence Rothko began painting pictures like Untitled, 1930, [fig. 3], a bulky nude which he showed at his first group exhibition in 1928 (when he was 25) at the Opportunity Galleries in New York. This work echoes shimilar nudes of Picasso and Matisse, and its ponderous structure recalls Cezanne. Weber's technique of heavily laden, scrambled brushwork is also apparent. In other pictures of that time, such as pastoral scenes and groups of bathers, the triangular organization of the images recalls the art not only of Cezanne, but of the Renaissance.[23] Already these paintings, done in an expressionist manner, have a romantic and brooding introspective feeling that was to mark his paintings of the late 1950's and 1960's.

The greatest and longest lasting single artistic influence on Rothko, however, was the New York painter, Milton Avery (1893-1965).

Avery exhibited some works alongside Rothko's at the Opportunity Galleries exhibition of 1928, but they did not actually meet until a few months later, when there began an immediate and long lasting friendship which was to be very important for both artists.

Although Avery's influence on Rothko was immediate, it was in his works from the late 1940's on that his background presence was most deeply felt.

Milton Avery was a quiet, gentle, unassuming man, whose favourite dictum was "Why talk when you can paint" - unusual in an art world becoming attuned to long discussions about contemporary theoretical concerns. Avery was not interested in discussing the intellectual or spiritual aspects of art - to him to paint was the vital thing, and the formal implications of art as outlined by such critics as Greenberg were not important; he had incorporated them into his painting years earlier.

This steadfast conviction that he was on the right track in spite of what others might think impressed the young Rothko just as much as Avery's undoubted talent. Although he and Adolph Gottlieb were eighteen years his junior they made frequent visits to his apartment and while his wife Sally cooked they would look at and discuss his latest works. Rothko in particular was always eager for Avery's evaluation of his work and would often invite

him back to his studio to elicit his comments. Avery's occasional incisive remarks were always highly valued by him as was demonstrated by the moving address delivered by Rothko at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, two days after Avery's death.[24] In his eulogy, Rothko dealt in simple terms with the greatness of Milton Avery, a greatness not always given the recognition it deserved by the critics, and the debt he and others owed him,

> This conviction of greatness, 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. This conviction has never faltered. [25]

Rothko went on to mention the frequent visits to Avery's studio, where, he said,

> We were, there, both the subjects of his paintings and his idolatrous audience. The walls were always covered with an endless and changing array of poetry and light. [26]

Avery strongly believed that a painting should be flat and lie on one plane rather than evoke what he termed photographic depth. He liked simplified, precisely delineated forms and flattened colour masses. He had an extraordinary ability to evoke the mood of a place or situation with particular colours. Rothko called him a great poet.

> His is the poetry of sheer loveliness, of sheer beauty. Thanks to him this kind of poetry has been able to survive in our time.

Avery's use of soft, lyrical colour to evoke various emotions, and his simplification of form and luminous colour harmonies had a tremendous effect on Rothko. Although many of Rothko's works of

the late twenties and thirties begin to closely resemble Avery's in style [figs. 4a,b,c], it is his works from the 1950's on which truly show how seriously he took Avery's lessons.

In comparing Avery's painting Coney Island (1936) and Rothko's work Subway Scene (1938) we can see that Rothko was beginning to adopt the scrubbed, thinly layered painting technique of the older man, and its figures are very clearly derived from Avery's own forms. The muted pastel colours also show Avery's influence, and it is also possible to see that Avery's flattening of figures and background was beginning to impress Rothko in Subway. He developed this over the years until he arrived at the frontal structures of his mature works. There are many similarities between Avery and Rothko, often only sketchily referred to in books and articles.[27] Their methods of working were similar also, by the late forties and fifties Avery had stripped his design to essentials, although he never totally got rid of recognizable forms, unlike Rothko. He did not want the "distractions" of thick paint and heavily visible brushwork interfering with his colour harmonies and to ensure a dry, unobtrusive surface, he mixed his paint with large amounts of turpentine rather than linseed oil. He also worked on canvas that was slightly absorbent and not too rough. In Rothko's mature works of the 1950's and 1960's he was adopting similar methods, and it is interesting that in the late 1950's both painters were using sponges as well as brushes to apply heavily diluted paint to the canvas. Like Rothko, Avery in the 1950's began to apply thin washes of paint, one over the other, to create veiled fields of colour. He handled edges like Rothko also -

fuzzy and diffuse and never hard or abrupt. This haziness of edges has parallels in ideas of Eastern philosophy - something Avery himself was probably unaware of, but that Rothko no doubt had come across - the concept that edges are not fixed and static, and that there is fundamentally an essential unity between all things in which distinctions between objects are merely illusions, and made for the sake of convenience. All objects and the space between them are really in a state of constant interchange and flux, and therefore no specific boundary exists between them. This philosophical view has been supported by twentieth century scientific debates and discoveries, and the notion of an indeterminate reality is reflected in much of twentieth century art and psychology. One has only to think of Cezanne and Freud as examples of this.

The two painters differed in their choice of subject matter - Avery's consisted of;

> His living room, his wife Sally, his daughter March, the beaches and mountains where they summered; cows, fish heads, the flight of birds; his friends and whatever world strayed through his studio; a domestic and unheroic cast.[28]

Rothko, on the other hand, could not deal easily with the domestic, the "unheroic", and in the mid forties he jettisoned recognisable form altogether, in his quest for a monumental universal statement. However, he recognized that Avery could also transcend the overt banality of his material when he said that;

> from these there have been fashioned great canvases, that far from the transitory implications of the subjects, have always a gripping lyricism, and often achieve the permanence and monumentality of Egypt.

Through their differing content they were both after the same thing. In the 1950's when the Abstract Expressionists were nearing the zenith of their popularity, Avery was increasingly ignored, both because he adhered to recognizable forms in his work and because he refused to engage in what he considered were futile arguments about the "whys", of art. The label of "Abstract Expressionist" was one which Rothko rejected also. Both of them saw the potential of colour to express all that was great and eternal in man and both also saw its tremendous emotional power.

Rothko's words themselves express the debt he knew he owed to Avery, when he remarked in the commemorative essay that the vision he pursued,

> . . .took great courage in a generation[29] which felt that it could be heard only through clamour, force and a show of power. But Avery had that inner power in which gentleness and silence proved more audible and poignant. . . He always had that naturalness, that exactness and that inevitable completeness which can be achieved only by those gifted with magical means,by those born to sing.
>
> There have been several others in our generation who have celebrated the world around them, but none with that inevitability where the poetry penetrated every pore of the canvas to the very last touch of the brush. For Avery was a great poet - inventor who had invented sonorities never seen nor heard before.

Diane Waldman in her book about Rothko,[30] quite rightly says that Milton Avery served also as a bridge between Matisse and Rothko. He tended in his art not to focus on the psychology of

the figures in his paintings, for example, but on formal relationships. His emotional reaction to them was subservient to the design of the picture. What his pictures reveal is a mood. As Barbara Haskell says[31] "When one thinks of an Avery painting one thinks of a world of low-key emotions from which anger and anxiety are absent." His paintings project a sense of contentment and harmony very reminiscent of Matisse. Rothko often spoke of his veneration for Matisse and his ability to manipulate colour - he used to spend hours gazing at The Red Studio [fig. 6] in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Matisse himself had written[32] that he

> . . . wanted to abandon the imitation of the local colors of nature and sought by experimenting with pure color to obtain increasingly powerful - obviously instantaneous - effects, and also to achieve greater luminosity.

This greater luminosity and chromatic brilliance was also the desire of Avery and Rothko. Looking, for instance, at Avery's painting Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea (1959) [fig. 7], we can see how well Avery captured this. This painting is also a good example of how close Avery and Rothko were in their methods - the luminosity is achieved by applying thin layers of colour, one over the other, and allowing the lighter colours to show through. In feel and structure also this painting closely resembles Rothko's mature works.

Finally, although Rothko's personal relationship with Avery had begun to deteriorate in the mid to late 1940's, his respect for him as an artist never faltered. In 1945 Rothko had remarried, and had stopped seeing many of the people whom he associated with

his first wife. HOwever, also, and I think a more likely reason is that Rothko was developing pronounced hypochondriacal tendencies in the late 1940's and 1950's and could not bear being near anyone who was sick - Avery's health began to deteriorate in 1948 and he suffered a major heart attack in 1949. Rothko's frequent visits to the Avery household ceased after that, according to Sally Avery.

Whatever the reasons, Rothko's respect for, and gratitude to Avery endured and his Commemorative Essay on Avery is a testimony to this.

Finally, the powerful impact of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche on the personality of Rothko, and the artistic influences of Max Weber and Milton Avery served to fuse together, and produce in Rothko the perfect synthesis of philosophy and means of expression that led ultimately to the great masterpieces of 1950-1970.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

1. A choral song or hymn of wild character and usually irregular in form, originally in honour of Dionysus or Bacchus.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, trans. Walter Kaufman. Pub. Random House Vintage Books, 1967, p. 40.

3. This particular translation of The Birth of Tragedy by Walter Kaufman, follows closely Nietzsche's way of expressing himself, which was sometimes unclear and confused. Nietzsche himself admitted this in a later preface, "Attempt at Self-Criticism", which he wrote for insertion. He also questioned the basis of some of the conclusions reached in the book, but stood by its basic theses.

4. Here Nietzsche refers to Richard Wagner. At the time of writing this book, he was one of Wagner's most ardent disciples and friends, although later he broke away from him, disagreeing violently with him on many issues, which he sets forth wittily in one of his last books, The Case of Wagner.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, pp. 99-100.

6. Rothko here has in mind Rembrandt, whom he mentions a few lines previously.

7. Maurice Tuchman, New York School - The First Generation, New York Graphic Society Art Library, p. 142. Citing statements: Excerpts from Pratt Lecture, 1958.

8. Ibid.

9. Rothko was also well read in other German philosophers, especially Schopenhauer, whom Nietzsche also regarded highly. The Birth of Tragedy shows his heavy influence in places.

10. This view of Rothko's was in direct contrast to another of the New York School Willem de Kooning, who said in 1948: "The only certainty [in painting] is that one must be self conscious."

11. Dore Ashton, About Rothko. Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 123. Citing Merleau-Ponty "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in Signs, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 52.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

13. It had already been done not so long ago in literature by Joyce with his character of Leopold Bloom, who epitomised twentieth century's "everyman".

14. Mark Rothko, "The Romantics were Prompted", Possibilities 1, (1947), p. 84.

15. Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art - A Source Book by Artists and Critics. University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1968, p. 549; from Mark Rothko, op. cit., p. 48.

16. Mark Rothko, op. cit., p. 48.

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, op. cit., p. 111.

18. Herschel B. Chipp, ibid.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, op. cit.

20. Peter Schjeldahl, "Mystifying the Mysterious", Art in America, December 1983, p. 15.

21. Diane Waldman, Mark Rothko, Thames and Hudson, 1978, p. 23.

22. Ibid; quoted in "A Certain Spell", Time, vol. lxxvii, no. 10, March 3, 1961, p. 75.

23. This rational harmonious order of the triangular device was however, at odds with Rothko's Expressionist technique and use of colour - stylistic constancy was something he had yet to achieve.

24. On January 7th, 1965, at 2 West Sixty fourth Street.

25. Barbara Haskell, Milton Avery, Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Harper and Row, New York, 1982, p. 181.

26. Ibid.

27. For instance, Dore Ashton's latest book, About Rothko, 1983, in which only fleeting references are made to Milton Avery.

28. Mark Rothko. Commemorative Essay, New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 West Sixty-fourth Street, 1965.

29. The first generation of the New York School.

30. Diane Waldman, op. cit.

31. Barbara Haskell, op. cit., p. 158.

32. Barbara Haskell, op. cit., p. 72.

CHAPTER II CONTENT OF WORKS - EARLY, MIDDLE AND LATE PERIODS

Part I: 1930 to 1949.

> The essence of nature is now to be expressed symbolically; we need a new world of symbols; and the entire symbolism of the body is called into play, not the mere symbolism of the lips, face and speech but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member into rhythmic movement. . . To grasp this collective release of the symbolic powers, man must have already attained that height of self-abnegation which seeks to express itself symbolically through all these powers. . . [1]
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

This section deals with Rothko's works beginning with the 1930's *Subway Scene* paintings, and going through his surrealist years from 1939 to 1947, and dwelling especially on his mature phase, which lasted twenty years, from 1947-50 to 1970. Although for the purposes of convenience his works can be divided into three separate phases, no such division exists in the ideas and theories which gave rise to these paintings. Rothko's entire work from the late 1920's onwards, which is about the time he encountered the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, the Existentialists, Freud, Jung, and the ancient Greeks, shows a remarkably consistant development, both philosophically and sylistically. His art, throughout his life, reveals a continual movement towards the "self-abnegation" which Nietzsche speaks of. Even his practice

of numbering his paintings (with the one exception of his Homage to Matisse, 1954) was in accord with this idea that no trace of an individual presence must intrude into the work, and take away its power and ability to express the two universals of human existance, tragedy and extasy.

In the 1930's,[2] Rothko painted a number of pictures on the subway theme - one of which is Subway-Subterranean Fantasy, 1936 [fig. 8]. He was not the only person to paint subway themes, but he was the only one to imbue the figures with a sense of timelessness, dignity and remoteness that recall both the Italian Renaissance, and the classical frescos of Herculaneum. Comparing the bulky nude of Untitled, [fig. 3] with Subway, [fig. 8] we can see how much Rothko had pared down the human figure to Giacommetti-like narrowness of form, until it nearly ceases to exist. There is that same stillness and lack of communication between the figures which echo his awareness of twentieth century man "alone in a moment of utter immobility". The execution of the picture is different from his earlier expressionism. The paint is thinly applied, and wan, pastel colours are used. Space is compressed, and the figures are flattened to the point of disappearance. In all this these "Subway" pictures prefigure his mature abstract works. It is difficult to know whether this painting has any symbolic meaning, but certainly it suggests a strange nether region or other world that recalls his surrealist inspired subterranean fantasies of the mid 1940's [fig. 9]. The calm and fragile mood evoked in Subway again echoes his great abstracts

of the 1950's and 1960's.

By 1939, Rothko had moved away from his urban and subway scene paintings. He began experimenting with automatic drawing and finding himself frustrated at the inability of the "real" world to express his concerns. He began to dwell more and more on Nietzsche's view of the role of myth and the consequences to modern man, of its abandonment. Along with Adolph Gottlieb, he searched for ways to express himself and his increasing interest in Greco-Roman myths and Greek drama. He found this in surrealism, just beginning to be introduced into America. Most of the great European Surrealists were arriving in the United States to escape the war in 1939, people like Andre Masson, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy were showing their works in galleries around New York.

For the next eight years, Rothko was to embrace Surrealism with great fervour, creating pictures of such beauty and power as The Omen of the Eagle, 1942 [fig. 10], The Syrian Bull, 1943 [fig. 11], Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea, 1944 [fig. 12]. Untitled, 1945 [fig. 9] and many others. The very titles betray his interest in Greek myths and drama, especially the Oedipus tragedy and the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus. These paintings are characterized by the flat application of beautiful pastel colours and linear, amorphic elements. In The Omen of the Eagle [fig. 10] the structure is more concrete, resembling the facade of a building with its frieze-like appearance, and its suggestion, at the top, of masks similar to those used in Greek drama. Rothko himself stated that:

> I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarassment and execute gestures without shame. [3]

The Omen is divided into recognizable sections, where bird, animal forms and facial features appear. According to Rothko, the theme was derived from the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus, but the picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth itself,

> It involves a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree - the known as well as the knowable - merge into a single tragic idea.[4]

The Syrian Bull [fig. 11] painted in 1943, is perhaps a more immediately dramatic picture, as it seems to conjure up a life giving struggle, (the Bull himself emerging from the earth or the sea). There is a Mediterranean sensibility to it, in keeping with the idea, among the ancients, that around the Mediterranean Sea was to be found the beginnings of life. The Syrian Bull was shown in 1943 at the 3rd Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in New York, along with Gottlieb's Rape of Persephone, 1943. The "befuddlement and bafflement" expressed on viewing these works by the critic Edward Alden Jewell provoked the famous manifesto of Rothko, Gottlieb and Barnett Newman to the New York Times in 1943, setting forth their aesthetic positions, and which heralded the beginnings of what was later to be known as The New York School. This is dealt with at length in Chapter III.

While Omen and Syrian Bull are somewhat ponderous, from the mid forties on Rothko was to paint some very beautiful and more typically surrealist pictures, characterised by the luminosity and clarity which was to distinguish his late great works. Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea [fig. 12] was painted in 1944-45, around the time of his courtship and second marriage. It marked a significant departure because it was larger than previous paintings and whereas Omen is divided into four clearly defined sections, Slow Swirl contains amorphic images that float in space and are semitransparant and appear to ebb and flow like aquatic forms in liquid. A few years later Rothko was to achieve that same quality of movement with colour alone in which sections of the canvas receded or came forward and glowed like the sun [fig. 13].

In Untitled [fig. 9] the paint is more wash-like and fluid, the shapes more unlifelike and transparent and both paintings have a lyricism and humour that the previous two lack. His imagery was now becoming looser, and the close colour-values and overt flatness of his great breakthrough of the late 1940's was also becoming apparent. Rothko and Gottlieb, in exploring ancient myths and adopting Surrealism, were, however, confronting formal painting problems which they had not anticipated. Gottlieb referred to this when he remarked

> Because obviously we weren't going to try to illustrate these themes in some sort of a Renaissance style. We were exploring. So we suddenly found that there were formal problems that confronted us for which there was no precedent. We were in unknown territory.[5]

These formal problems dealt with how to express in painterly terms the condition of man, and in a special sense, Twentieth Century man. To Rothko especially, painting presented a philosophical dilemna which Surrealism did nothing to answer ultimately. Beautiful as Rothko's Surrealist pictures are, their ultimate value for him as a painter was in enabling him to develop the formal means of expression that led to his mature "abstracts". The ancient myths as interpretated by Rothko and others did not convey the universal meaning they were supposed to. The symbols used, when removed from their original culture, lose their context and become abstract signs without mythic content. In a real sense, they were the "mythless man" that Nietzsche referred to,[6] who were searching desperately for some kind of continuity for roots, for a way of expressing man's collective unconscious. Perhaps Rothko sensed this himself because by 1947-48 he was moving away from Surrealism and embarking on his mature works. His search for the "timeless" in art was also a search for a new vocabulary in which he could best express the great universals of tragedy and extasy, which the Greeks through their own vocabulary had expressed so well.

By the late 1940's Rothko had abandoned all figurative imagery in his work -

> It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purpose. . . But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it. [7]

He began producing watercolours which reflect the luminosity, flatness, frontality and lose colour values of his breakthrough of 1949-50.

Rothko had met Clifford Still in New York in 1947 when he paid a brief visit there from his home in California and was deeply impressed by his works. Still's equation of colour as space and his commitment to stylistic constancy reinforced Rothko's own inclinations. Over the next two years they met at intervals, either in New York, or in San Francisco, where Rothko taught at the California School of Fine Arts, in the summers of 1947-49, and during that time Rothko was formulating his mature style, and what was to be his definitive statement.

Part II: 1949 to 1970.

> The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be towards clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer. As examples of such obstacles, I give (among others) memory, history or geometry, which are swamps of generalization from which one might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts), but never an idea in itself. To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood.[8]
>
> Mark Rothko, 1949

By the late 1940's and early 1950's the painters of the New York School were deeply involved in Abstract Expressionism. It is not intended here to go into detail about the milieu of the New York School, except to say that the painters were roughly divided into two groups, a "downtown" group which included artists

like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, and others. The "uptown" group were more involved in aesthetic debate, and included Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell. All these artists, whatever group they belonged to, shared a common sensibility at that time, an awareness of the past and present in art, and they were each others primary audience and critics. They were all deeply influenced by Existentialism, which in turn had been heralded by Nietzsche. They perceived the imaginative act as something totally divorced from reality, a position held by the French Existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre. They viewed abstraction as an act of the mind, reducing the role of external reality to a minor place in their art. Barnett Newman said that

> The basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea, it is only the pure idea that has meaning. Everything else has everything else.

Because the imaginative act had no foundation in reality, it represented a manifestation of "nothingness" (Sartre). In his 1952 article "The American Action Painters"[9] the critic Robert Rosenberg conceived that the Abstract Expressionists were working out of the "nothingness" of that void;

> The artist works in a condition of open possibility, risking to follow Kierkegaard, the anguish of the aesthetic which accompanies possibility lacking in reality. To maintain the force to refrain from letting anything he must exercise in himself a constant No. . . the most comfortable intercourse with the void is mysticism.

Rothko's ambition was to eliminate all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and the idea and the observer, and ultimately to move towards clarity. This, I think, he succeeded in doing in his last great works, which ultimately, speak for themselves even, more powerfully than Rothko's own words could have put it. From the late 1940's onwards he dramatically increased the sizes of his pictures. He had something to say about why he did this:

> I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however - I think it applies to other painters I know, is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command. [10]

Rothko also commented on the fact that his mature paintings were considered works of abstraction, when he said quite emphatically that;

> Neither Mr. Gottlieb's painting nor mine should be considered abstract paintings. It is not their intention either to create or to emphasize a formal color-space arrangement. They depart from natural representation only to intensigy the expression of the subject implied in the titles not to dilute or efface. . .[11]

From 1949 onwards Rothko rejected the decorative qualities of paint, and colour had now become for him volume, form, space, and light. No other artist had done this before. He emptied his paintings of the superfluous and the trivial. By doing this he was able to express both the material reality of abstract painting,

and the immaterial reality of the sublime. He said

> There are some artists who want to tell all, but I feel it is more shrewd to tell little. My paintings are sometimes described as facades and, indeed, they are facades.

In this sense, Rothko's paintings are evokations, rather than presentations, of the world, and its spiritual dimensions. By presenting little, Rothko, in fact, implies everything, in his paintings. His works resemble Nietzsche's veil of Maya - they are in a real sense doors to the universality of the material and spiritual world. Art for him now became acts of revelation and exaltation, which are both religious experiences, and also a complete embodiment of universal truth. Other artists were capturing aspects of reality - Rothko wanted to capture total reality, both material and immaterial. One has only to confront a Rothko painting and become aware of the emotions it can arouse to experience that this is true. As far back as 1949 Rothko could paint pictures that have all the characteristics of his best mature work. For example one of his most beautiful is entitled Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red [fig. 13]. All the elements of his mature style can be seen here; he uses a series of horizontals within a vertical format and he achieves an astonishing harmony by means of a very precise placement of a reduced number of shapes and colours.

In this lovely work we see Rothko's supreme ability to hold on a single plane colours that appear to advance and retreat.

Rothko achieved this very simply. The large violet shape in the top portion of the cnavas is far heavier than the small bands of orange and yellow below it. Rothko prevents this rectangle from toppling because of its weight by holding it within the thin bands of black directly below it and with two vertical red bars, which, despite their narrowness, counter the strength of the violet mass. Also, the soft yellow and white ground lends density to the lower half of the canvas and prevents it from receding totally.

Rothko continued to enlarge his canvases, and manipulate colour. It does not allude to landscape, as some viewers of Rothko's works like to believe, nor does it support shape as a secondary element. Crucial to this, colour expression is Rothko's method of handling paint. As was mentioned in Chapter I, Rothko thinned down his paints with turpentine to the consistancy of consomme, and then soaked them into the canvas, giving it a transcendent dematerialized quality that a thicker application of paint would not have.

To create illusions of depth, and a veil-like sensation, Rothko would apply thin coats of different paint, one over the other, as in Number 16, 1958 [fig. 14]. It is interesting to compare this technique with the similar one of Milton Avery's in his painting of the same year, Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea [fig. 7], where he applies thin layers of paint with the preceding one showing through. We can see also how similar the

two painters are in the simplification of their forms, although Avery, as said previously, never abandons his representationalism completely. As Rothko grew more and more confident throughout the late 1950's and early 1960's, Milton Avery began to increasingly look towards him for means of clarifying, simplifying, and reducing his own expression, so that towards the end of his life, he was in turn the pupil and Rothko the teacher.

In 1958 Rothko was commissioned to do a series of murals for the new House of Seagram Building in New York. The panels he did were, on his own admission, inspired by Michelangelo's architecture works in the Medicean Library, Florence;

> After I had been at work for some time
> I realized I was much influenced by
> Michelangelo's walls in the staircase rooms
> of the Medicean Library in Florence. He
> achieved first the kind of feeling I'm
> after - he makes the viewers feel they
> are trapped in a room where all the doors
> and windows are bricked up so that all
> they can do is butt their heads forever
> against the wall. [12]

Rothko's Seagram Murals [fig. 15] have a similar effect. Now in the Tate Gallery, London - Rothko, after completing them, objected to their setting (the walls of an opulent restaurant called the Four Seasons). In characteristic fashion, he said that he had taken the commission with

> strictly malicious intentions. I hope to
> paint something that will ruin the appetite
> of every son-of-a-bitch who ever eats in
> that room. [He continued] If the restaurant
> would refuse to put up my murals, that would
> bethe ultimate compliment. But they won't.
> People can stand anything these days. [13]

A decade later Rothko gave them to the Tate Gallery with the stipulation that they were to be housed in a room of their own, under controlled lighting and hanging conditions. Initially, Rothko finished three sets of paintings - the first in orange and browns, and the last in maroon and black. It is this last set that eventually found its way to the Tate.

These works have tremendous spiritual power, and have an overwhelming impact on the viewer. They are brooding, forbidding and tragic. They are in the shape of rectangles with open centres that reveal the paint behind them, thus suggesting doorways. He restricts his palette to only two colours for each panel, which was a new departure. The gallery has recently rehung them, in accordance with Rothko's expressed wishes, and now they are placed high on the walls, thus increasing their dramatic and looming quality.

Robert Goldwater, in describing the room in which the Seagram Murals were being shown in an exhibition[14] in 1961, wrote

> It is significant that at the entrance to this room one pauses, hesitating to enter. Its space seems both occupied and empty.

Goldwater, perceptive critic that he was, sensed this duality in Rothko's work, very evident in the Tate's Rothko Room. This inner drama, manifest in his works, represents some of the concerns of twentieth century philosophy;

> Each painting appears both as filled with a living presence and as an empty space. While they engage the spectator on both levels, the paintings also assert themselves unequivocally as objects, precisely by virtue of the formal means by which this dichotomy is achieved. Thus the dual content of these works is both intrinsic to the works themselves and also finds its necessary fulfillment in the relationship between the spectator and the painting. [15]

In December 1961 Rothko began work on his second commission, murals for the Holyoke Center Harvard, designed by Jose Luis Sert [fig. 16]. These murals, completed the following year, consist of five panels with plinth-like shapes linked at the top and bottom by very narrow bands and small rectangles. They resemble Greek columns, as indeed many of Rothko's works do. In 1959 Rothko, during a trip to Europe, had visited Pompeii and Paesterum. When asked by an Italian boy if he was there to paint the temples, he replied "Tell him I have been painting Greek temples all my life without knowing it."

The murals are more aggressively painted than many of his earlier canvases, with vibrant brushstrokes and uneven forms. The colour impact is mainly red, from a plum purple to deep alizarin. Red was one of Rothko's favourite colours (indeed the painting he was working on when he died was red). Perhaps for him it had metaphysical and biblical connotations. The Existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard, whom Rothko deeply admired, spoke of red in terms which Rothko must have identified with;

> The result of my life is simply nothing, a mood, a single colour. My result is like the painting of the artist who has to paint a picture of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. To this end he painted the whole wall red, explaining that the Israelites had already crossed over, and that the Egyptians were drowned. [16]

This comment refers to Rothko's statement that his departure from natural representation was only to increase the intensity of the expression or mood of the subject implied in the picture -

humanity according to him, is present even more strongly because it is not immediately visible. Matisse's Red Studio (1911) [fig. 6] has a similar effect - everything is there but the artist, and yet his presence is felt to an even greater degree than his rendering would have permitted. The colour red was for both artists a way of evoking that, which was not visible to the eye. Brian O Doherty, in his book, American Masters,[17] refers to this when he asks;

> But what has passed through Rothko's art? That whole history that we cannot see, or can see only with difficulty: the history of the means, a mythology, and an atmosphere. This atmosphere has, as Robert Goldwater pointed out, a definite history. In Rothko's art, it consumes what is suspended in it and becomes itself a subject, a theme, a form.

Colour was vitally important to Rothko, not for its own sake, but as a means of expressing something more. He used to protest "I'm not interested in relations of color or form. . . . I'm not an abstractionist". Colour, for him was a means of expressing

> . . . basic human emotions, - tragedy, extasy, doom. . . and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate these basic emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them, and if you, as you say, are moved only by their colour relationships, then you miss the point. [18]

In 1964 philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Rothko to do a series of murals for a chapel and ecumenical centre to be built in Houston, Texas and which was to be affiliated with the Institute of Religion and Human Development. Rothko worked on these high murals, [fig. 17] (fourteen in all and some measuring

twelve by fifteen feet) until 1967, and considered them to be the crowning achievement of his life's work - his lifelong ambition had been to create a monument that would stand in the great tradition of Western religious art. He did not live to see his project realized - the chapel was dedicated a year after he committed suicide. The murals were comprised of three triptychs, five single panels, four alternatives. The theme is the Passion of Christ. Two triptychs, and one single panel were composed of black/brown hard edged rectangles on maroon fields. One triptych and four single panels were entirely black, veiled with maroon wash. Rothko varied the paint thicknesses which produced nuances of colour. These massive works covered the walls of the octagonal interior of the chapel. At the dedication ceremony in 1971 Mrs. De Menil spoke of the artist and the painting:

> The deep brownish and purplish red appeared already in large canvases painted in 1958-1959. From this time on it became his basic and recurrent color, the color elected to bring his paintings to their maximum of poignancy as he said. As he worked on the chapel which was to be the greatest adventure of his life, his colors became darker and darker, as if he were bringing us on the threshold of transcendence; the mystery of the cosmos; the tragic mystery of our perishable condition. The silence of God, the unbearable silence of God. [19]

These words give us an idea of how Rothko viewed this commission. There is no doubt that he must have had Matisse's famous Chapel of the Rosary in Vence in mind as a precedent for executing the murals. Matisse had finished the chapel just thirteen years earlier in 1951, and the de Menils had visited it in 1964. On visiting

Rothko's studio soon afterwards, and seeing the Seagram Murals there, they immediately grasped the suitability of his work for a chapel.

These works show, along with his two previous commissions, how much Rothko's paintings depend on the surrounding conditions of space and light (during the making of the Chapel Series he placed a parachute over the skylight in his studio to darken the environment, and set to work in subdued light). In the Chapel itself the lighting is very subtly controlled, so that, as Diane Waldman put it, the murals appear ". . . as tranquil, tragic, twilit dreams of color."

Rothko also insisted, in the commissions and the exhibitions of his works, that they be hung in their own separate environment, with nothing to interfere with their effect. He regarded his paintings as extensions of himself, saying;

> A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is, therefore, a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world. How often it must be permanently impaired by the eyes of the vulgar and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally.[20]

With the Houston Chapel Murals Rothko had replicas of the walls of the octagonal chapel built in his studio. He also requested to the de Menils that the ceiling of the chapel be low, the paintings be without frames and mounted on thin stretchers - all to the end that they identified as much as possible with the walls. Such a close identification of the paintings with

the wall could very easily have detracted from the duality of the paintings as both a self contained object and an infinitely spreading area. Rothko brilliantly solved this by making the paintings nearly monochromatic. They thus dominate the space, both defining it architecturally and at the same time creating a unifying mood. The infinite space of the paintings dissolve the architectural boundaries of the room. Rothko had said that he "wanted to paint both the finite and the infinite",[21] and this was what he succeeded in doing.

Although Rothko was working on a red canvas when he died, the series of Brown and Grey [fig. 18] paintings of 1969, and the Black paintings of 1970 are considered his final statement [fig. 19]. His increasingly sombre palette, culminating in these works, reflect an intensification of the ideas that guided him throughout his life's work, that of expressing tragedy and extasy. He was fond of saying that art for him must have "A clear preoccupation with death. All art deals with intimations of mortality."[22] The Brown/Black on Grey paintings, mostly acrylics on paper, represent a more intimate and personal avowal of that same idea, expressed on a grander and more titanic scale in the Houston Chapel Murals. They are a more overt statement of the unrest his paintings always contained. Also during the last two years of his life especially, he was very depressed and introspective, and this state of mind is revealed in the brooding final quality of the work.

These paintings are also exceptional in their immediacy and accessibility. His varied use of acrylics introduces subtle spatial dimensions. A soft light appears to come from the works. Although

he limits his palette to two colours, he gets an astonishing range of effects in these paintings, by varying their proportions and handling.

Rothko must have been aware of the inevitable and tedious comparisons to landscape which would be made in the minds of the unknowing with regard to his work. Of course, any comparison to landscape is purely imaginary and Rothko avoided it by reversing the normal process of placing the lighter area on top, representing the sky and the darker area at the bottom, representing land, the horizon line being in between. [figs.18,|19].

The content of Rothko's work, and especially his Brown/Black and Grey Paintings is both his own experience, and inevitably, each individual's experience. Barnett Newman once spoke of

> the idea-complex that makes contact with mystery - of life, of men, of nature, of the hard black chaos that is death, or the grayer softer chaos that is tragedy.[23]

He might very well have been writing about Rothko's late works. Even though the last Black paintings seem more monumental, more austere, and more iconic than anything done before, Rothko's art had always focussed on the single individual's experience. The richness of his development arose from both his perpetual self questioning, and his awareness of the great European tradition from which he sprang. De Kooning once remarked to him that of all the abstract Expressionists, he was the most modern. Rothko replied indignantly "What do you mean? I'm straight out of Rembrandt."[24] He never would accept the idea that he was not a

traditionalist, and he always maintained that he was in direct line from the great architects of the Greek temples.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, op. cit., p. 40.

2. See Chapter I, p.

3. Herschel B. Chipp, op. cit. Rothko had a practical interest in drama. He had been involved with an acting company in Portland, both as stage hand and actor, before he finally settled in New York in 1925.

4. Diane Waldman, op. cit., p. 40, quoted from Sidney Janis, Abstract and Surrealist Art in America, New York, 1944, p. 118.

5. Karen Wilken, Art International, "Adolph Gottlieb", the Pictographs, in an interview by Andrew Hudson, no. 21 (Dec. 1977), p. 28.

6. Chapter I, p.

7. Maurice Tuchman, The New York School - The First Generation, New York Graphic Society Art Library, Greenwich, Conn., p. 139.

8. Diane Waldman, op. cit., p. 61, quoted from "Statement on his attitude in Painting", The Tiger's Eye, vol. 1, no. 9, October 1949, p. 114.

9.

10. Maurice Tuchman, op. cit., from Interiors, vol. 110, May 151, p. 104.

11. Maurice Tuchman, op. cit., p. 142.

12. Lee Seldes, The Legacy of Mark Rothko, Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., London, 1978, p. 44.

13. Ibid., from conversations with Rothko aboard U.S.S. Constitution which were recorded by John Fischer, ed. of Harper's and published after Rothko's death.

14. 1961 Rothko major Retrospective at the M.O.M.A. from Eliza E. Rathbone, American Art at Mid Century, p. 256.

15. Ibid.

16. Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin, Princeton, New Jersey, 1971, vol. 1, p. 28.

17. Brian O Doherty, American Masters - The Voice and the myth in Modern Art, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1982, p. 199.

18. E.A. Carmean, Jr. and Eliza E. Rathbone with Thomas B. Hess, American Art at Mid Century, The Subjects of the Artist. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978, pp. 249, 250. Mark Rothko in an interview with Seldon Redman; Conversations with artists, New York, 1957, p. 93.

19. Jane and John Dillenberger, Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth Century American Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1977. Catalogue p. 5. Address given by Mrs. Dominique de Meuil at the opening of the Rothko Chapel, February 27, 1971. Robert Hughes also described the Rothko chapel as ". . . the last silence of Romanticism". Shock of the New, pub. B.B.C., London, 1980, p. 323.

20. Maurice Tuchman, op. cit., p. 140 from Tiger's Eye, op. cit., p. 44.

21. Eliza E. Rathbone, op. cit., p. 252.

22. Maurice Tuchman, op. cit., p. 142 from Rothko - Pratt Lecture, 1958.

23. Eliza E. Rathbone, op. cit., p. 265, from New York School, by Dore Ashton, p. 133.

24. Eliza E. Rathbone, op. cit., p. 266. Paraphrased by Lee Eastman, in conversation with Eliza E. Rathbone, 1978.

CHAPTER III

The Critics and Rothko.

> The individual genius is one whose inner essential structures correspond to the elemental and conflicting forces of the time in which he lives and who can reveal and express them through characters, myths, legends, musical or poetical compositions which are concrete projections of his own consciosness. This consciousness. . . is. . . connected both to time and timelessness. . . and it carries with it . . .an essence or form which belongs to all men at all times.[1]

The nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties were for Rothko a period of great development. He began showing at various group exhibitions and occasional one man shows in New York, and critical response was sparse if encouraging, being mainly confined to descriptions of him as a promising newcomer.[2] Diane Waldman says that during the 1930's he was labelled as an expressionist,[3] which, if so, was an early indication of the misconceptions that were to characterize the critics' responses to his work throughout his life. At that time he was doing the Subway paintings, and, while expressive, they have little in them that is Expressionist [figs. 5,8].

However, it was not until 1943 that Rothko had his first major brush with a critic. That critic was Edward Alden Jewell, of the New York Times, and a man who knew the value of publicity.

In June of that year Jewell wrote a long review of the Third Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. In his commentary, which was interlaced with humourously barbed comments, he expressed his "befuddlement" at Gottlieb's painting, the Rape of Persephone and his "bafflement" at Rothko's Syrian Bull [fig. 11]. He returned to this theme a few days later, referring in scathing terms to the "enigmas" of Rothko and Gottlieb, and concluding that the Federation must be spawning a new movement called "Globalism".

Incensed at this lack of perception, Rothko, along with Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, drafted a long reply to Jewell, and he in turn published it in the New York Times of June 13th.[4] This now famous manifesto was a perfect summing up of these artists' principles and the main ideas expressed were obviously Rothko's. It has also served as a summing up of some of the principles of Abstract Expressionism. It is so important that lengthy quotes from it are necessary.

The letter opens with some sarcastic jibes at the workings of the critical mind, which was, the writers declared ". . . to the artist, one of life's mysteries." It was, they continued, an event ". . .when the worm turns and the critic quietly, yet publicly, confesses his 'befuddlement', that he is 'nonplussed', before our pictures at the federation show".

They declared that they did not intend to defend their pictures, save to ask with reference to the Rape of Persephone;

> would you have no present this abstract concept with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?

The manifesto continues;

> The point at issue. . . is not an "explanation" of the paintings, but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance.

The three artists then declared their aesthetic beliefs, which were;

1. To us, art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
2. The world of the imagination is fancy free and violently opposed to common sense.
3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way - not his way.
4. We favour the simple expression 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 flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.
5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

The letter ends with the statement that,

> consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration. [5]

The strong influence of the ideas of Rothko can be seen in this manifesto, especially in points 4 and 5.

This generally unsympathetic attitude from the critics was instrumental in bringing together Rothko and the other artists[6] into what was to be known afterwards as The New York School. The artists felt themselves to be misunderstood by public and critics alike and developed a healthy anger against society which was a tremendous motivating force for them.

As late as 1949, critics were aghast at what they felt was the lack of content in Rothko's paintings. At his exhibition of that year at the Betty Parson's gallery, one reviewer (unnamed) wrote; "The famous 'pot of paint flung at the canvas' would apply here with a nicety." The critic Sam Hunter often reviewed the abstract Expressionist shows, in which Rothko was included. He found it difficult to understand how a painting divested of apparent subject matter could still retain content and this fundamental problem crops up in review after review. He described Rothko's work in particular as "an impasse of empty formlessness."[7]

The critic Thomas B. Hess was favourably struck by his abstractions. It is interesting to note however, that Hess was off the mark at first. He criticized Barnett Newman, who was at the time in close collaboration with Rothko, and described him as "one of Greenwich Village's homespun aestheticians."[8]

Newman, probably because of his long aesthetic forays into print, was the chief whipping boy, but the abuse levelled at him reflected a general attitude towards Rothko as well. Many of the critics simply did not take so called "Colour-Field painting"[9] seriously, and when they did deal with it at all, they in general mistook it for an exercise in aesthetics, rather than, as Rothko

Still and Newman believed, an embodiment of transcendental experience.

There were a few people who responded with immediate sensitivity and clarity to Rothko's work, and one of them was the critic Hubert Crehan, who wrote in 1954 that in our culture light is a metaphor for spiritual essence. "Rothko's work is charged with what we mean by matters of the spirit." Crehan went on:

> Rothko's vision is a focus on the modern sensibility's need for its own authentic spiritual experience. And the image of his work is the symbolic expression of this idea. Now it is virtually impossible to articulate in rational terms what this might be; we can have only intimations of it which came first to us from our artists. [10]

Rothko himself refers to exactly the same things when he stated that modern man had exactly the same need for myths as the ancients did, and in 1958 in his Pratt Lecture that all art dealt with intimations of mortality. As a critic of the New York School of painters, however, Crehan was on the periphery.[11]

In contrast Clement Greenberg was widely recognized as a leading critic of the New York School. In one of his more important articles titled American-Type Painting, 1955, he described Rothko as "a brilliant original colorist". He said that his

> big vertical pictures, with their incandescent color and their bold and simple sensuousness. . . are among the largest gems of abstract expressionism.

This was all right, but Greenberg continued in a vein that certainly would not have pleased Rothko. He related the works of Rothko, Still and Newman to those of Monet and the

Impressionists, saying that Rothko and the others had "achieved a more. . . radical suppression of value contrasts than seen so far in abstract art."[12] His implication was that Rothko was primarily interested in painting flat colour fields and experimenting with light and colour in the manner of the Impressionists. Rothko also disliked Greenberg's purist point of view - the notion that painting ought to refer to nothing beyond itself, to be self-contained, like an object -

> Visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience. [13]

Rothko had dismissed this idea as far back as 1945, when he said,

> I would sooner confer anthropmorphic attributes upon a stone, than dehumanize the slightest possibility of consciousness. [14]

Even critics who were themselves respected painters misinterpreted Rothko's work. Elaine de Kooning had written an article in the Art News Annual of 1958 in which she labelled Rothko and Franz Kline as "action painters."[15] De Kooning's efforts were well intentioned - she esteemed both painters highly.

Rothko, however, was angry at this summing up of his work, especially in a term invented by the critic Harold Rosenberg, whom he disliked.[16] In a letter to the editor of Art News, he said;

> I reject that aspect of the article which classifies my work as "Action Painting". An artist herself, the author must know that to classify is to embalm. Real identity is incompatible with schools and categories, except by mutilation. To allude to my work as "action painting" borders on the fantastic. No matter what modifications and adjustments are made

> to the meaning of the word action,
> Action Painting is antithetical to
> the very look and spirit of my work.
> The work must be the final arbiter.

Of course Rothko was right. He was rejecting his inclusion within the umbrella of the Abstract Expressionists. His works were devoid to a great extent of idiosyncratic signs of "action", i.e., visible brushwork and drawing. Elaine de Kooning herself admitted this further on in her article when she said;

> His image seems to settle on the canvas
> indirectly, leaving no trace of the
> means that brought it there.

This probably would have pleased Rothko, were he not so upset by the Rosenbergian sound of much of the writing. That same year (1958) Rothko gave a public talk at the Pratt Institute, New York, in which he disassociated himself even further from Abstract Expressionism. He rebutted the notion that he was an unpremeditated "action" painter, by stressing how deliberate was his process. He listed seven ingredients that were necessary for him in order to paint,

1. a clear preoccupation with death;
2. Sensuality. . .
3. tension. . .
4. Irony. . .
5. Wit, humor,
6. the ephemeral and chance
7. 10% worth of hope.

Rothko said that he then mixed his ingredients with craft, and also with shrewdness. "There is more power in telling little than in telling all."

This listing of Rothko's was also an ironic comment on the formalist analysis of Greenberg, i.e., elements of human content were mentioned as if they could be measured, just as formal components of art were supposed to be. This talk at Pratt was Rothko's last public pronouncement on art. He had begun to believe that frequent public statements by artists served only to instruct the viewer as to what to look for and thus stunted his or her imagination. In his Pratt talk however, he felt he had to strongly deny any concern with self expression and thus with Expressionism. He insisted to those who could not see that his aim was to formulate a message which transcended self, and was about the human condition generally, or, as he put it, the human drama. He denied that his purpose was to make formal innovations, although he did allow that he "used color and shapes in a way that painters before have not."[17] Besides the more well known exponents of Abstract Expressionism, there were other critics who irritated Rothko. Emily Genauer had been either unfavourably reviewing him or alternately ignoring him ever since his first important one man show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery in 1945. She had described his work in the 1950's as "primarily decorations", and in 1961 she wrote in the New York Herald-Tribune that his paintings were "first class walls against which to hang other pictures."[18] This type of vulgar popular criticism was matched by Frank Getlein who wrote the following month that Rothko's paintings

> get bigger and bigger, like an inflating baloon. Similarly, in the work. . . the surface gets thinner and thinner, the content gets purer and purer hot air. [19]

Not unnaturally, Rothko could and did on occasions unleash ferocious abuse on these critics and others involved in the "whole machinery" for popularizing art, "universities, advertising, museums, and the Fifty-seventh Street salesmen."[20]
Rothko also agonized over whether his unprecedented abstractions were comprehensible to anyone else. This caused him great anxiety which was exacerbated by the hostility they generated. But he also spoke of being surprised that there was an audience for his work, and that that audience seemed to be waiting for "a voice to speak to them". Rothko was not served either by those critics who conjured up improbable and wildly romantic meanings to his work. At the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, Peter Selz enthused in the monograph for the exhibition;

> The open rectangules suggest the rims of flame in containing fires, or the entrances to tombs, like the doors to the dwellings of the dead in Egyptian pyramids, behind which the sculptors kept the kings "alive" for eternity in the Ka. . . these paintings - open sarcophagi - moodily dare, and thus invite the spectator to enter their orifices. . . these murals bring to mind an Orphic cycle;. . . the artist descending to Hades to find the Eurydice of his vision. The door to the tomb opens for the artist in search of his muse. [21]

These musings were matched in 1965 by those of Werner Haftmann, who, however, changed the setting to ancient Israel and the religion to Judaism,

> If we allow ourselves to be drawn into the atmosphere of these walls of meditation, these wafting, wafted dissimulating scenic flats will impressively evoke old Jewish metaphors of the hidden God, images of hangings in the biblical tabernacles, the veil of the temple, the walls of the tent of Moses. They are not actual pictures,

> they are walls of light, tent walls, protecting us from a numinous power. . .

The latest book about Rothko, written by the critic Dore Ashton, and published in 1983,[22] also falls into this trap. Ashton, who knew Rothko well, cannot see him in any reasonable persepctive, although she writes with great sympathy. The bulk of the work consists of a piling up of literary and philosophical references, and includes little biographical detail. In the end Rothko is again left hostage to the murky rhetoric of his era, and defenseless against charges that his art was concerned with Colour-Field aesthetics, or worse still, that he was pretentious and sentimental. Rothko's enigmatic and mysterious paintings seemed to summon forth this kind of inflated rhetoric that the critic Robert Goldwater warned against, or as Robert Hughes puts it, when critics write of Rothko's work "out came the violins, the woodwinds, the kettledrums, everything."[23]

Goldwater himself was one of the few critics and art experts whom Rothko admired and trusted. He had chosen him to write the official book about his work, a project cut off by Goldwater's untimely death during the beginning of the notorious Rothko trial in 1973. His practical approach to Rothko's work included a regard and respect for the artist's own opinions. Of the Rothko Retrospective in 1961 he wrote;

> Rothko claims that he is 'no colorist' and that if we regard him as such we miss the point in his art. Yet it is hardly a secret that color is his sole medium. In painting after painting there are. . . surprising and disquieting harmonies, and supposedly difficult colors are made to work together with

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> apparent ease. . . There is a sense in which one is inclined to agree with him. . . that Rothko has been determined to become something other than a colorist. . . [what] Rothko means is that the enjoyment of color for its own sake, the heightened realization of its purely sensuous dimension, is not the purpose of his painting.

Goldwater then makes the final point that Rothko had, over the years;

> . . . handled color so that one must pay ever closer attention to it, examine the unexpectedly joined hues, the slight. . . modulations within the large area of any single surface,. . . all the while suggesting that these details are means, not ends. [24]

Amazingly, a question remains to some about Rothko's work - were his paintings of "the human drama" too private, too vulnerable, too reduced in their pictorial means to be major? Robert Hughes thought so. While allowing them their mystic and quasi-religious significance, he said

> In an age of iconography, he might have been a major religious artist. . . He did not live in such an age. [25]

Obviously Rothko could not use the fusion of symbols, myths, and dogmas that gave inspiration to the great religious artists from Cimabue to Fra Angelico to Blake. But even in this age of modernist doubt, when leading philosophers like Sartre have said that our universe lacks ultimate meaning and coherence, and that it is absurd, there remains the longing for the transcendental art of Rothko. The same impulse that made earlier artists invent their monsters and gods prompted Rothko to seek a transcendental meaning through his non objective painting. Rothko described it as a

"revolution in viewing", which he sensed, a 'well at last, that's exactly what should have been done', reaction from his viewers. He said that "This was a reaction based on life not on art. This is the thing to be explained."[26]

When viewed calmly and in retrospect, our age too will be found to have its ikons, and Rothko's art will be counted among the finest.

Finally, the visual richness of Rothko's works often generate the idea that they are exclusively objects of "aesthetic delectation,"[27] yet their sombre mysterious impact, felt especially in the Seagram and Houston Chapel commissions, should be enough to convince the viewer that they belong to a sphere of experience very different from the French art for art's sake of, for instance, Matisse. Although Matisse provided the clue to Rothko's pictorial means,[28] all that Rothko said, even apart from the testimony of his paintings, proved that he was antiformalist and antihedonist, seeking only to express unvarying universals in a world that had set itself againt them.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

1. Joseph Chiari, The Aesthetics of Modernism. Vision Press, London, p. 97.

2. Jane Schwartz, Art News, "Around the Galleries," vol. xxxii, no. 9, Dec. 2nd, 1933, p. 16.

3. Diane Waldman, Mark Rothko, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978, p. 26.

4. Jewell stated at that time that "personally I don't believe that any vital new movement has been started at all. . ., there isn't enough that is 'new' and there is too much that is obscure and contradictory and involved and irrelevant to our present outlook and purpose as a nation."

5. Ellen H. Johnson, American Artists on Art, Harper and Row, New York, 1982 citing Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman. Letter to the New York Times, June 13th, 1943.

6. As well as Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman, these included Motherwell, de Kooning, Pollock, Kline, Reinhardt, Baziotes.

7. Sam Hunter, Diverse Modernism, New York Times, March 14th, 1948, sec. 2, p. 8.

8. Irving Sandler, The New York School - The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties, Harper and Row, New York, 1978, p. 13.

9. I use this term only to distinguish between the paintings of Rothko, Still and Newman, and those of de Kooning, Kline, Pollock and others of the "downtown" group.

10. Irving Sandler, Mark Rothko, Paintings 1948-69. Catalogue - The Pace Gallery, New York, April, 1983.

11. He was a Californian admirer of Clyfford Still, displaced in New York. Rothko himself was greatly impressed by Still, whom he had met in New York and California between 1946 and 1949.

12. Irving Sandler, ibid., p. 5.

13. Ibid.

14. Maurice Tuchman, The New York School - the First Generation, New York Graphic Society Art Library, Greenwich, Conn. 1965, p. 140.

15. Elaine de Kooning, Two Americans in Action, Art News Annual, 1958.

16. Harold Rosenberg, The American Action Painters. Rothko had a long list of betes noires, and high on that list was Rosenberg. He deemed him "pompous", and he accused him of "trying to interpret things he can't understand and which cannot be interpreted". Perhaps part of his criticism was defensive-Rosenberg rarely mentioned him in his writings, while devoting great space to Gorky, Pollock and de Kooning.

17. Irving Sandler, ibid., p. 10.

18. Edition 18th January, 1961.

19. Frank Getlein, Art - The Ordeal of Mark Rothko, The New Republic, 6th February, 1961.

20. Rothko and John Fischer, editor of Harpers had discussions in the late 1950's about the sorry lot of the artist both in the world in general and in the art world. Rothko fumed, "I hate and distrust all art historians, experts and critics. They are a bunch of parasites, feeding on the body of art. Their work is not only useless, it is misleading. They can say nothing worth listening to about art or the artist. Aside from personal gossip, which I grant you can sometimes be interesting." Lee Seldes, The Legacy of Mark Rothko, p. 44.

21. Selz went on so far in this fanciful vein that his monograph was considered a parody which was itself parodied by others.

22. Dore Ashton, About Rothko,

23. Robert Hughes, Blue Chip Sublime, The New York Review, 21 Dec. 1978, p. 16.

24. Robert Goldwater, Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition, Arts, March 1961, p. 44.

25. Robert Hughes, ibid.

26. Irving Sandler, ibid., p. 12.

27. Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko, p. 215.

28. The Red Studio, fig. 6.

Figure 1: Chinese Restaurant, 1915 - Max Weber

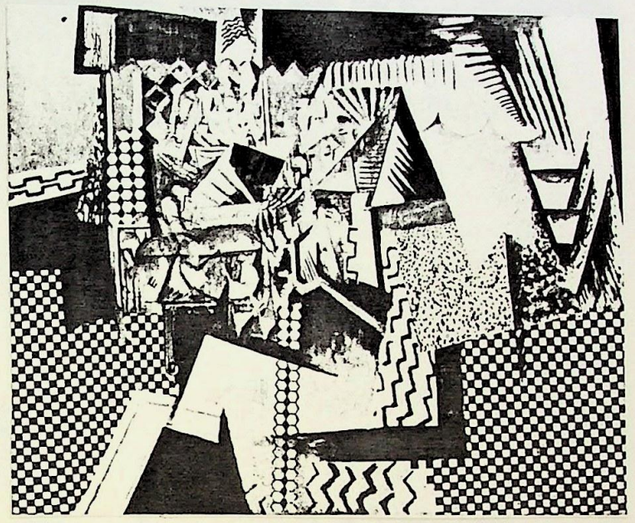


Figure 2: Conversation, 1919 - Max Weber

Figure 3: Untitled, 1930 (28 x 17") - Mark Rothko

Figure 4 (a): Untitled, late 1920's - Mark Rothko

Figure 4 (b): Pasture, late 1920's - Mark Rothko

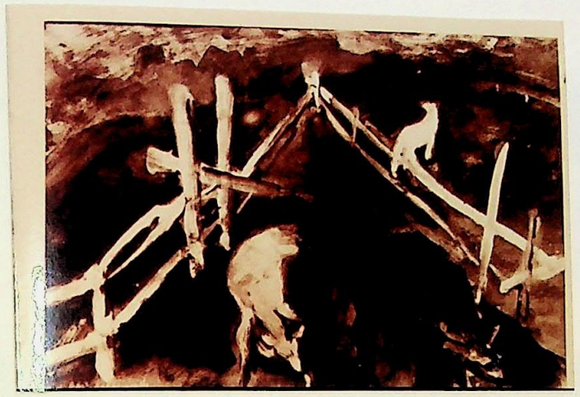


Figure 4 (c): Coney Island, 1936 - Milton Avery

Figure 5: Subway Scene, 1938 (35 x 47 1/4") - Mark Rothko

Figure 6: The Red Studio, 1911 - Henri Matisse

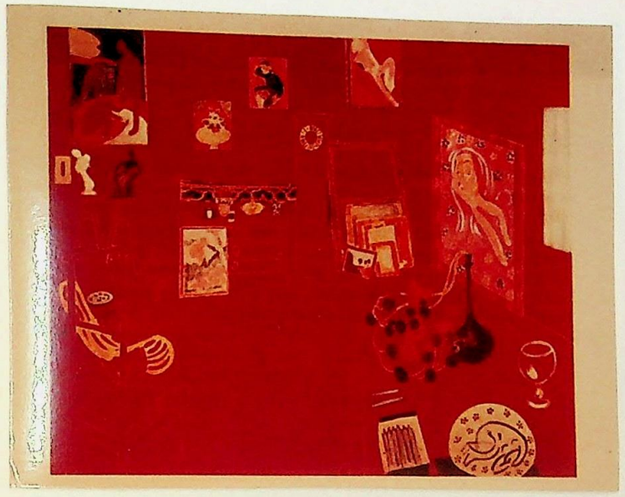


Figure 7: Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea, 1959 (50 x 72") - Milton Avery

Figure 8: Subway - Subterranean Fantasy 1936 (33 3/4 x 46") - Mark Rothko

Figure 9: Untitled 1945 (40½ x 27½") - Mark Rothko

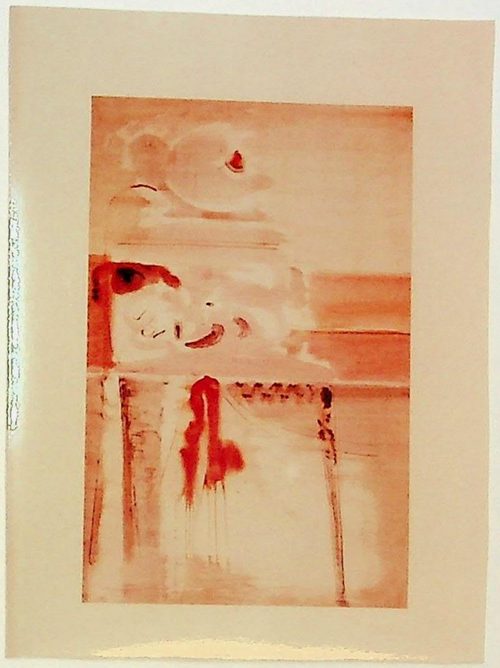


Figure 10: Omen of the Eagle - Mark Rothko 1942.

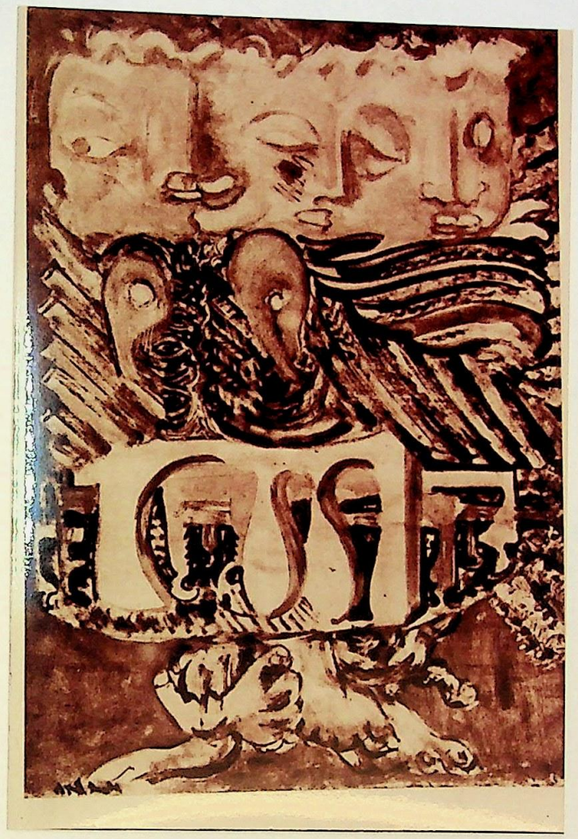


Figure 11: Syrian Bull, 1943 (39½ x 27½") - Mark Rothko

Figure 12: Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea 1945 (75 x 84 3/4") - Mark Rothko

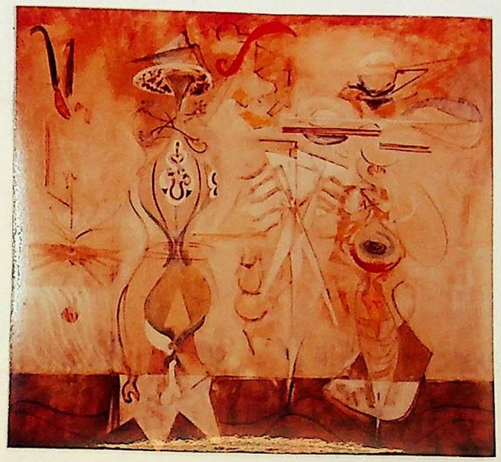


Figure 13: Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red, 1949 (98 x 65") - Mark Rothko

Figure 14: Number 16, 1958 (91½ x 60") - Mark Rothko

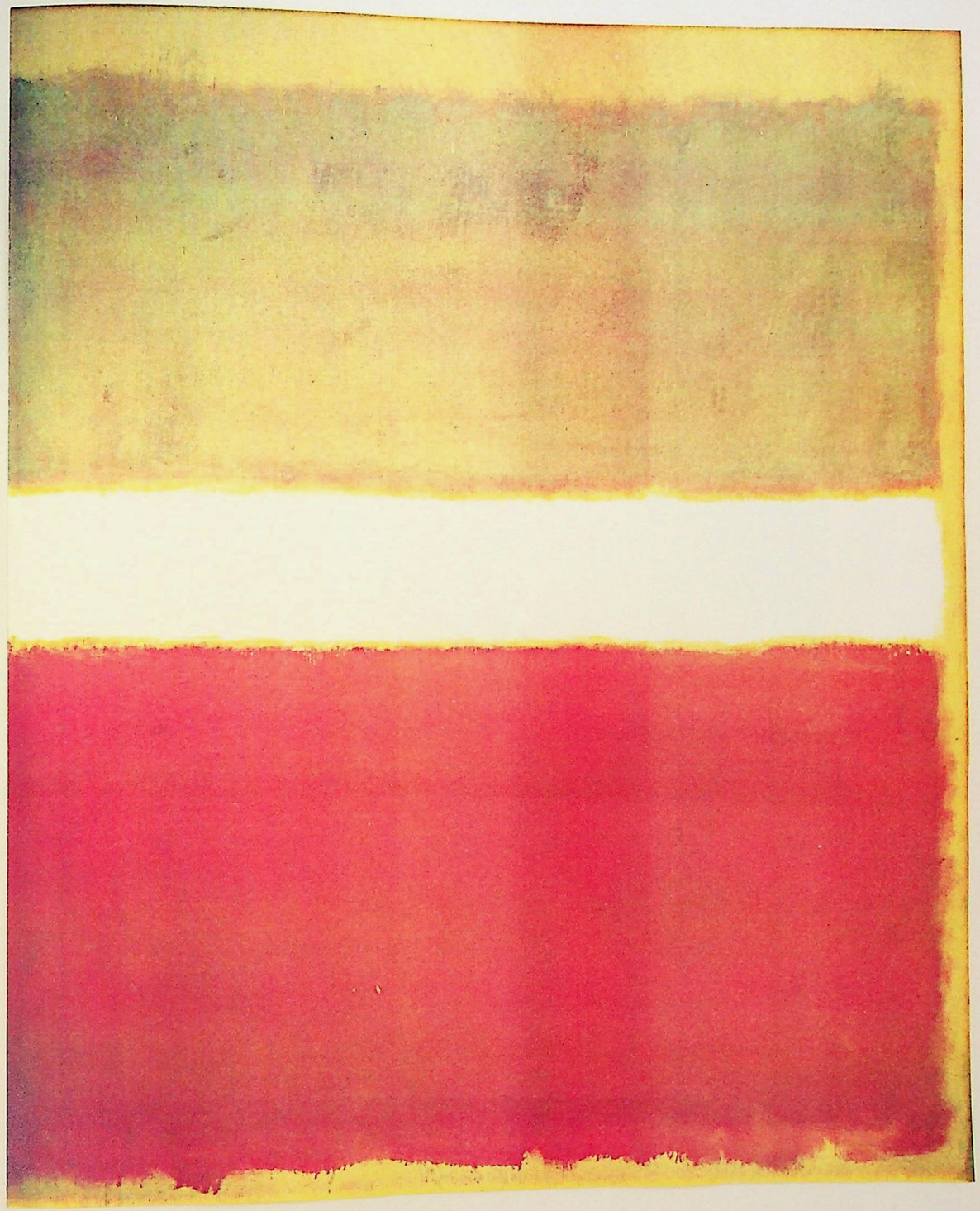


Figure 15: Seagram Murals, 1958 - Mark Rothko

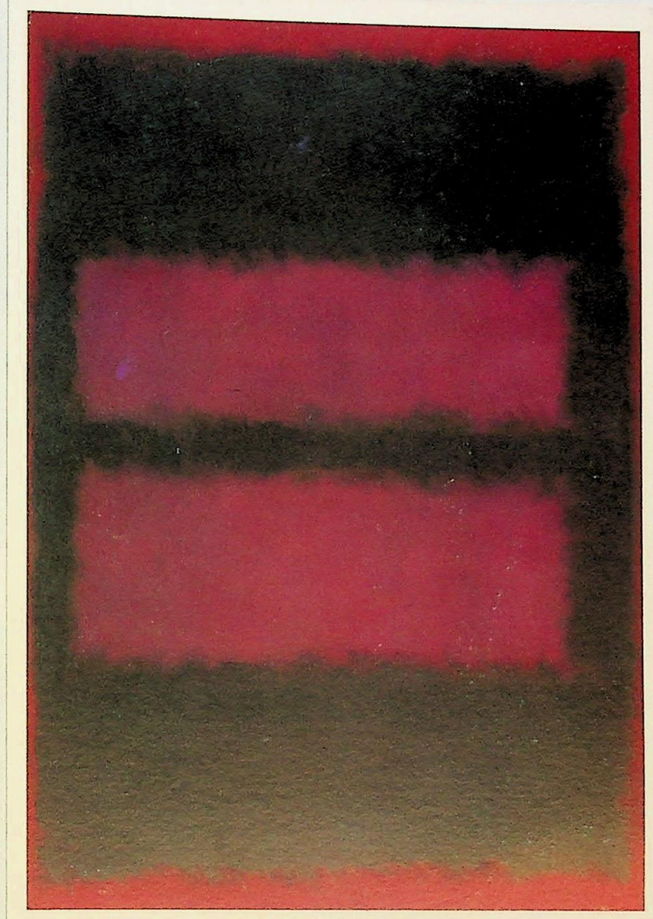
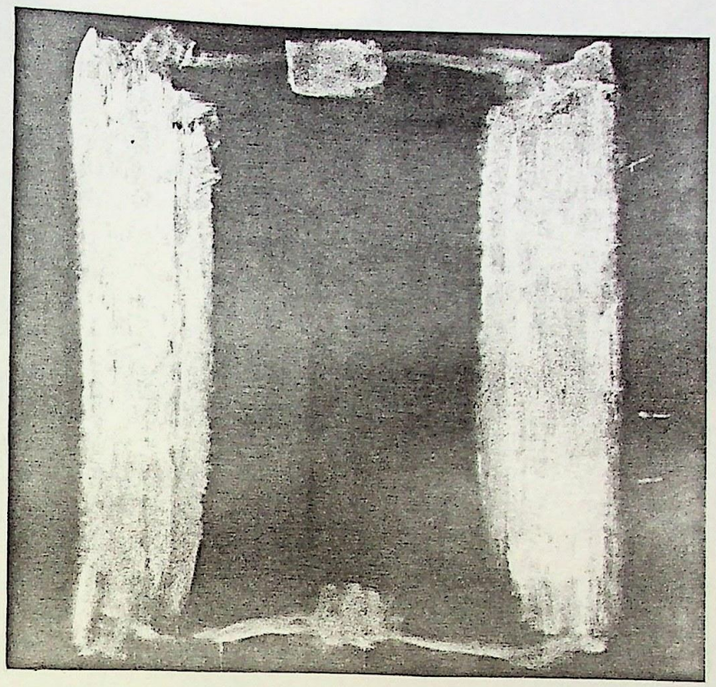


Figure 16: Harvard Murals, 1961 - Mark Rothko



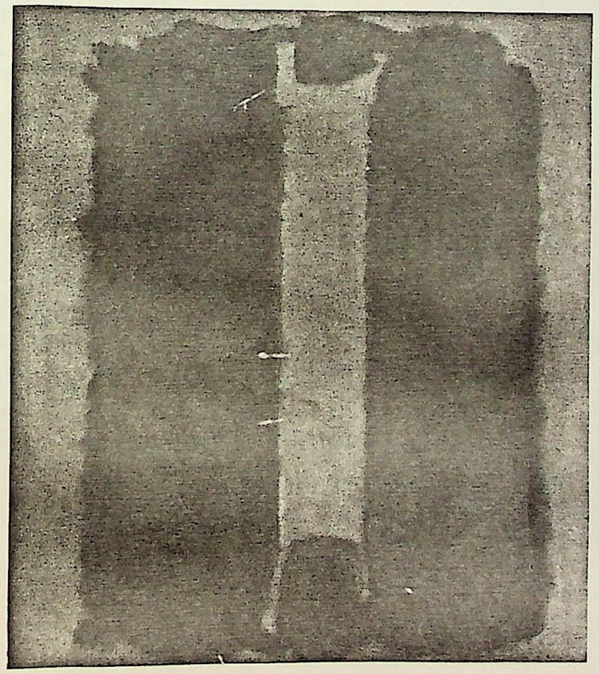


Figure 17: Houston Chapel Murals, 1967 - Mark Rothko

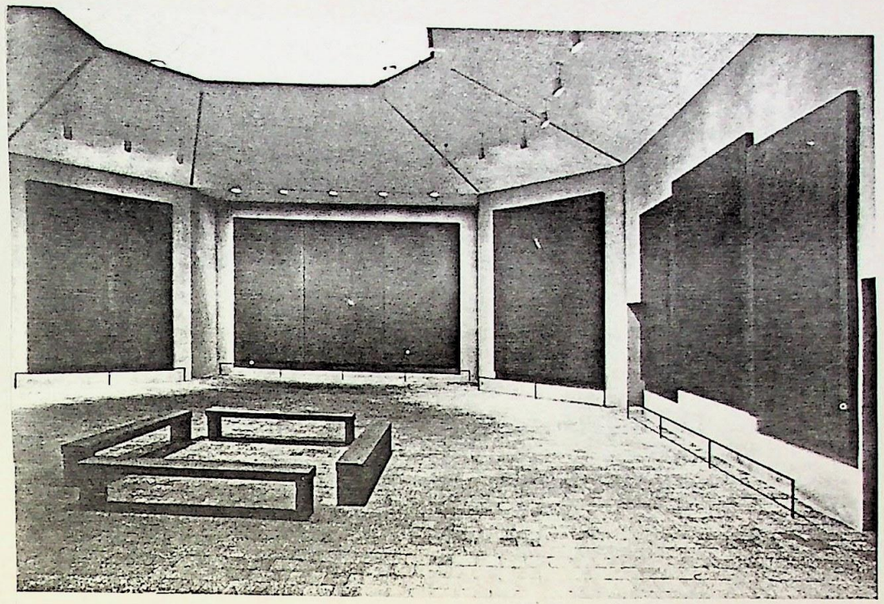


Figure 18: Brown and Grey, 1969 (60 1/4 x 48 1/4") - Mark Rothko

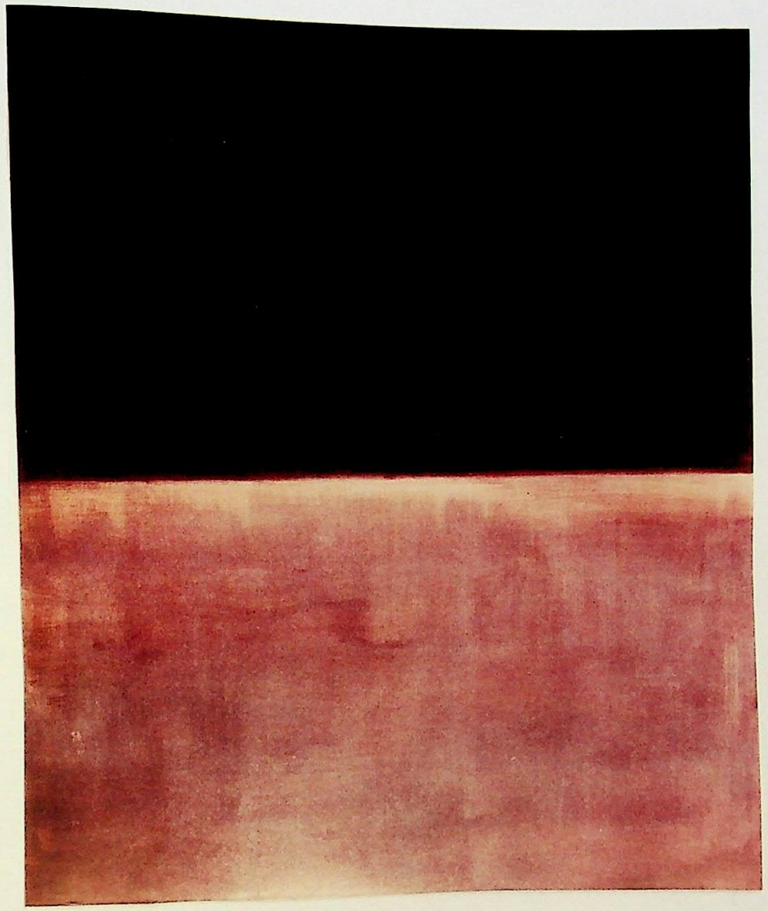
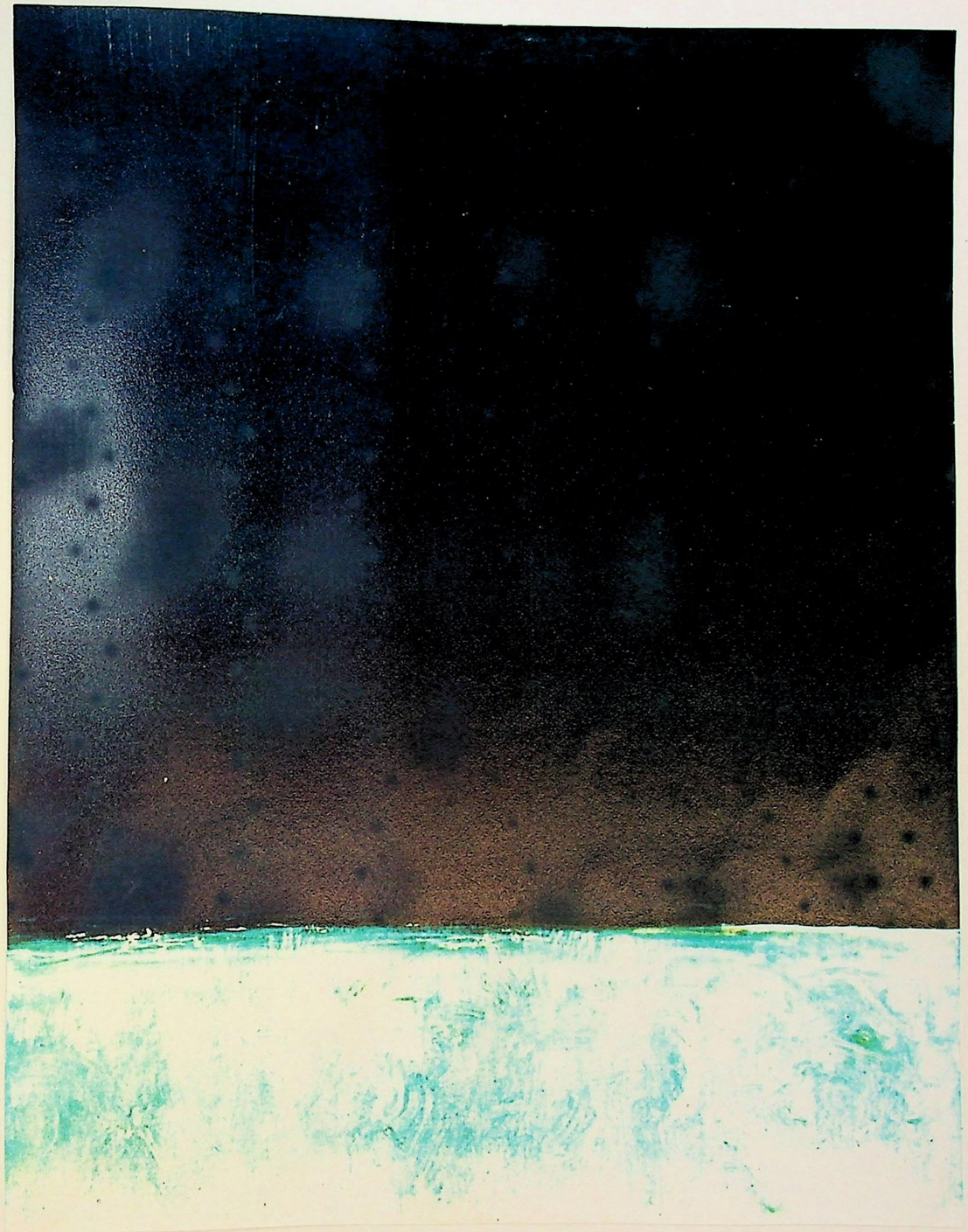


Figure 19: Black on Grey, 1970 (80 1/4 x 69") - Mark Rothko



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