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MARK ROTHKO:
THE ILLUSION OF LIGHT

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"Among the objects of perception, light is the
one that arouses the greatest desire"

Liber de Intelligentis

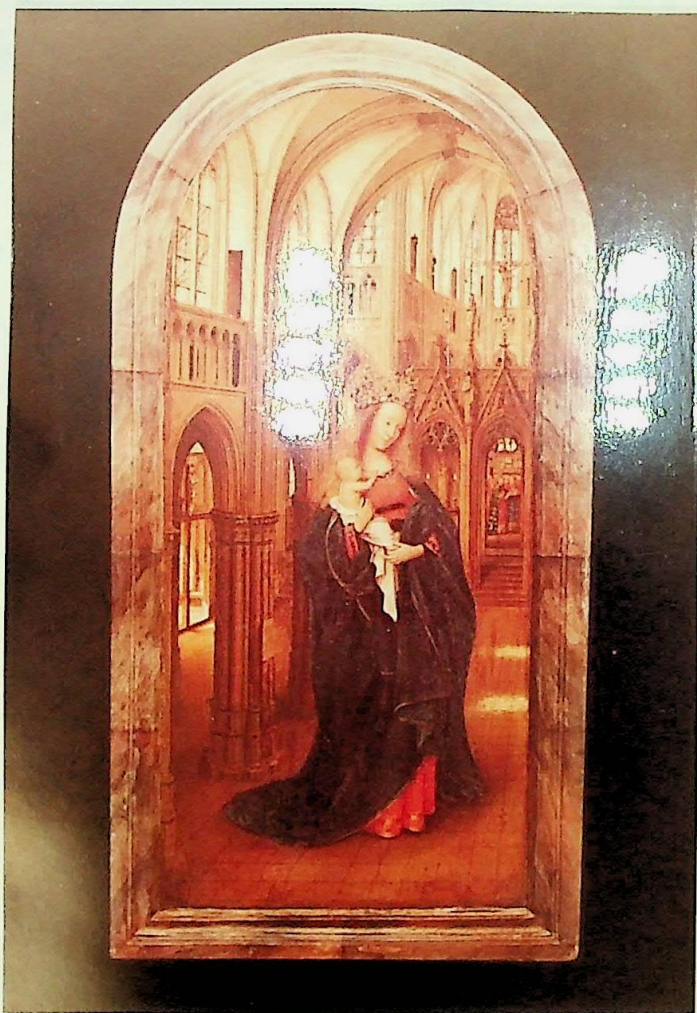
INTRODUCTION

THE WINDOW

On entering a room which I have never been in before, one of my first inclinations is to go to a window, if there is one, and see what is beyond. Humanity has an inherent curiosity to seek that which lies beyond his immediate environment be it over the crest of a hill, round the next corner or just the common view from a window. The window is an extension of the environment which one stands in. Throughout the history of art, the symbol of the window has been used as a means of extending the natural world, and for revealing another. During the Renaissance, the discovery of perspective in painting brought new possibilities to the painter. Now, all elements of the painting could share the same space, through the devices of perspective. Representations of Christian figures such as Christ and the Virgin Mary were often set in architectural spaces, with many arches and windows. Christ and the Virgin were frequently presented in enclosed spaces, which the viewer could look into, or the figures could look out from. The notion of the painting as an imaginary window was a view held by Renaissance painters, such as Alberti.¹ The canvas was the window through which one could look into the other worlds, particularly the religious or spiritual worlds. Through the windows which were depicted shone the symbolic light of God. In medieval texts, God was associated with the sun, both being sources of light, one spiritual and the other physical. The symbolism of the window in religious Renaissance

painting demonstrates the references to the real world on one side and the spiritual world beyond. In Jan Van Eyck's small painting The Virgin in the Church, he demonstrates these two worlds. Through the windows light flows into the church, lighting up the space about the Virgin and the Child. The setting of the Child of God in a real place, with the symbolic light from the heavens flowing into this setting connects the Virgin and the Child from the real world, with God, thus making the connection between the physical world of man and the spiritual world of God. The spiritual light of God creates a mysterious atmosphere, thus endowing the spiritual on earth with mystery.

The Christian symbolism attached to light and the window during the Renaissance gave way to a more general and moral theme during the 17th Century. The window still admits spiritual illumination, but implies also human involvement. The rays of light which cross the darkened space of Rembrandt's Scholar in his Study and Vermeer's Geographer symbolise wisdom and knowledge. Many of Vermeer's interiors have windows allowing light into the room, drawing the viewer to the light. The light from the window creates a peaceful atmosphere, adding to the simple everyday activities a more contemplative mood. In the Baroque period too, light was used as a powerful tool. For Carrivago the light was used to shape, obliterate, obscure or illuminate, adding intense atmospherics to a common place scene. In the 19th Century the Romantic



1 THE VIRGIN IN THE CHURCH by Jan Van Eyck

1427 - Oil on Wood - 12" x 5½"

Staatliche Museum, Preussischer Kulturbesitz,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

painters used the symbol of the window to express the other world beyond the window, to present a world to which the viewer could retreat. This world offered a sanctuary, a dream world as well as the world of the spiritual. The window became a reflection or a view of the soul incorporating the subjectivity of the artist. Casper David Friedrick in his representation of the window in his studio, this romantic association. Throughout the 19th Century the window continued to express these ideas, not only in painting but in poetry.² Often the interior of the room was adorned with objects and figures, which related the two worlds, the interior and the exterior. The view through the window became a subject to paint. The curiosity aroused by the window and its light, and what lay beyond the window, both physically and symbolically carried through to the 20th Century, with painters like Hopper, Bonnard and Matisse tackling the subject. In looking in particular at the light of Rothko's work, the various uses of this light in the past cannot be ignored. From the Renaissance to the present day the light and the window have become established subjects of painting. Rothko's light follows in this tradition, although for him, the light has acquired as a symbol new layers of meaning, and at the same time referring specifically to the romantic and the sublime. The religious implications of 20th Century light cannot be ignored, although the religious in Rothko's work plays a different role to the specific religious symbols of the Renaissance paintings. The question

is raised today about the validity of a light which sustains the spiritual. The bleakness of the spiritual in contemporary life questions the authenticity of work which tends towards the spiritual. Is it viable to question 20th Century art in this way? The question which should be asked in relation to Rothko, is how does a faint apparition of light lead to such conclusions? This question I hope to answer in the following manner:- to examine the physical illusion of light, to examine the specific relations this light has with past symbols of light, to examine the development of this light towards its unique characteristics through colour, and finally to examine the role of the religious in the work.

But first I wish to draw attention to the specific window form in his work. Light is the main concern of this discussion, but the window, being a form related to light deserves some recognition. The window is also a device which draws the viewer into the canvas, and ultimately into the light, so the window, has a purpose other than the symbolic. In Rothko's development as a painter, his forms and shapes transfigured themselves into a very simple uncomplicated format, a format which he used again and again. He manipulated not only his method of painting but the form to suit his philosophical outlook. To him it was imperative to free himself from any reference to reality. All trace of the figure had to be removed. It was the tragic and the

timeless which he felt constituted the human condition that he wanted to convey, and although it was with great distress that he abandoned the figure, he had to do so to achieve his goal. The movement in his work towards less specific forms reflected his ideas about the power and necessity of subject matter to reach beyond. He enlarged and neutralised these forms allowing them to float and breath, and allowing the colour within these forms and surrounding the forms to expand. In the Romantics were prompted

Henri Focillon wrote on form

"We must never think of forms in their different states, as simply suspended in some remote abstract zone, above the earth and above man. They mingle with life whence they come; they translate into space certain movements of the mind. But a definite style is not merely a state in the life of forms, nor is it that life itself: it is a homogeneous, coherent, formal environment in the midst of which man acts and breathes".³

Rothko, echoing Focillon's passages wrote on shapes

"They move with internal freedom and without need to conform or to violate what is probable in the familiar world. They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognises the principle and passion of organisms".⁴

After abandoning the figure, he began to paint washes of colour that seemed to drift across the canvases. He soon solidified the forms into rectangles, and in 1950, he reduced

the number of elements in each picture to two or three, forming large rectangles of approximately similar width, placing the areas one above the other. It is this particular format or shape that Rothko continued to work in, although in the three murals series which he carried out in the 60's the horizontal form changed to the vertical form. These canvases with two or three rectangular forms, either horizontal or vertical have been described as alluding to doorways or windows. Peter Selz describes one particular painting Two Openings in Black over Wire as follows

"The open rectangles suggest the rims of flame in containing fires or the entrances to tombs, like the door to the dwellings of the dead, in Egyptian pyramids behind which the sculptors kept the kings alive for eternity in the KA. But unlike the doors of the dead which were meant to shut out the living from the place of absolute night, even of patrician death - moodily dare and thus invite the spectator to enter their orifices".⁵

These doorways or windows can be seen in many other romantic paintings of the 19th Century. Friedrich's view from the painter's studio is one of these true romantic windows. Later on, Friedrich placed a figure in front of this window, his wife, yet maintained the romantic symbolism of the window. Many examples of the window can be found, not only in romantic paintings but in symbolists' work as well. Rosalind Kruss writes in her book The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernists' Myths

"As a transparent vehicle, the window is that which admits light - or spirit into the initial darkness of the room. But if glass transmits, it also reflects. And so the window is experienced as a mirror as well - something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being."⁶ As a symbol the window can function on a number of different levels, it allows the passage of light in and out, thus emphasising the space which reaches out beyond the canvas, and at the same time emphasising the space which exists between the viewer and the form. If there is glass this acts as an invisible barrier between this world and the next, between the space of the viewer which is in most cases the darker area, and the view seen from the window. This barrier can indicate that something is out of reach (i.e. the view, which may symbolise the future) or that the view is a dream. The contrast between light and dark, must also be remembered, the symbolism of light and dark suggests conflicts between good and evil. Rothko himself has described his work as facades acknowledging also the doorway appearance of the work for the Harvard Murals in particular. Even the preparatory drawings reveal the underlying form and structure of portals or windows. Rosalind kruss suggests that there exists in modern art the grid form and connects this with the window of the Romantics and the symbolists.

"Behind every 20th Century grid there lies - like a trauma that must be repressed - a symbolists window, parading in the guise of a treatise on optics."⁷

The evidence of this grid can be seen in the work of Mondrian and Malevich

in this century, and also in Rothko, although in his work the function of this form is different. In one of Rothko's earlier works Two Women at the Window we see two figures in a window looking at each other. The frame of the window neatly surrounds the two figures, enclosing them in a space which belongs to them alone. We can see them, but the frame of the window separates them from the viewer, and we become aware of two spaces - the one we stand in, and the one in which the two figures are in. In this picture, the long rectangular shapes which form the window, and the space behind the figures, relates very closely to the rectangular forms of the later work, in which the forms dominate and the figure disappears. The window, as a device for creating space and for drawing the viewer beyond the rectangular of the canvas is used in a very literal sense in this earlier work. Light does not appear to be the main concern, but enters into the later work taking the place of the figures. The Red on Maroon canvas from 1959 is suggestive of a window or door. The treatment of the paint reveals a light which in turn reveals other layers of meaning.

The window is a symbol of a space or opening that permits a light or as Rosalind Kruss suggests a spirit, in or out. Although a lot of painters have used the window form, the light which comes in or out of the window differs greatly. Comparing the light of Friedrich, Redon and Rothko in their windows, the various symbolic uses of the light can be seen.⁸ Rothko's light comes from an unknown source. The duality of it i.e. that it comes through the window as well as going out,

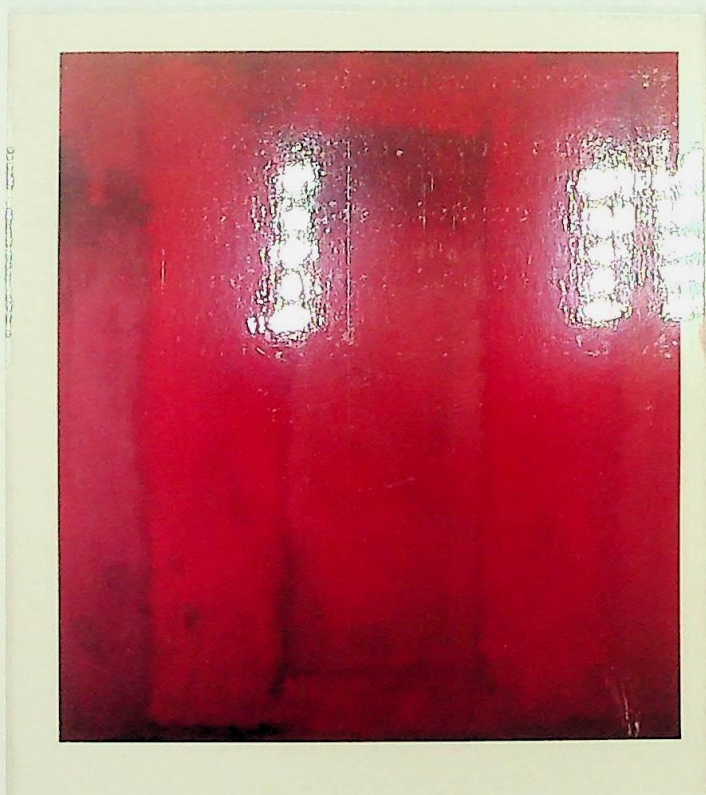


2 TWO WOMEN AT THE WINDOW by Mark Rothko

Late 1930's

National Gallery of Art, Washington.
Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation

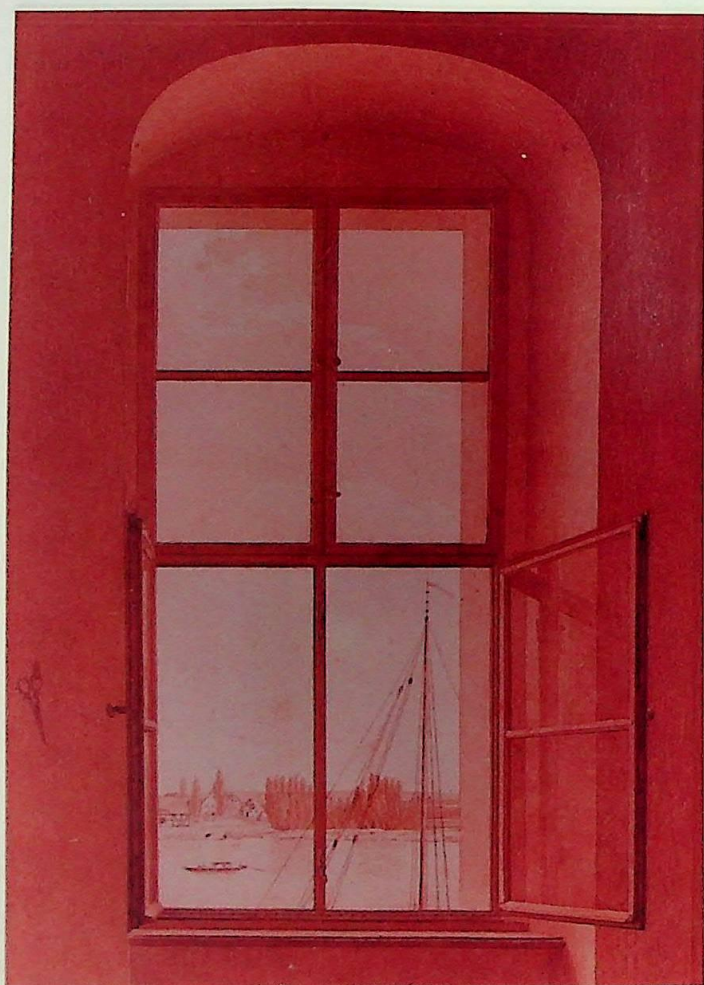
is evident through the all-over effect of light. Friedrich's light comes only from outside, slightly lightening up the space in his representation of the studio window. It does not have the polarity of Rothko's light. There are however, a lot of similarities between the three windows:- Rothko's Red on Maroon, 1959, Friedrich's View from the Studio Window, 1805-6, and Redons The Day, 1891. All three windows have two perpendicular pillars on either side of the picture, both are dark. There are two narrow bands of darkness, one across the top of the picture, and the other across the bottom, making the shape of the window frame. The area enclosed by this is lighter than the rest of the picture in all three. The difference between each piece is the kind of light which is seen through the window. In Friedrich's window the light from outside seems far away and possibly out of reach, but the hope of something in the future is symbolically embodied in the light filled atmosphere of the outside world. The darkness inside can be considered as the withdrawal of the person into themselves and the light filled atmosphere of outside offers hope, symbolically displayed by the diffused light falling softly into the room. In other words the light outside and the darkness inside are symbolically connected by the window and effect each other significantly at the transition between the two. In Friedrich's window, the open bottom window removes any barrier between the two spaces, potentially allowing the effect of one on the other. Redon's most evocative window, Le Jour presents a very different light. There is only light outside which is



3 RED ON MAROON by Mark Rothko

1959

Collection of the Tate Gallery, London.



4 VIEW FROM THE STUDIO WINDOW by Casper David Friedrich
1805-1806 - Sepia - 31cm x 24 cm
Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum



5 WOMAN AT THE WINDOW by Casper David Friedrich

1822 - Oil - 44cm x 47cm

National Galeria, Berlin (West).

very bright and full of promise, but within the room, the darkness remains, not being affected by the light from outside. The view outside is a tree in bloom, nothing else is visible. The view is not particularly inviting, the main emphasis seems to be the very dark space surrounding the window. The obstacle to the outside world seems to be this shape, this dark, silent and uncompromising form that prevents any dialogue between dark and light. In Rothko's portals, there is no focal point or no apparent source of light. It is a light filled atmosphere where the light and dark seem to have combined to create this half light or half darkness. The dialogue between the two has not been prevented and it does not come from one particular direction, but it has a dual purpose. This duality emphasises two things; the space or the view from the window, the boundless, infinite space and the space between the viewer and the canvas. The light moves in two directions inwards and outwards towards the viewer. This outward movement could be described as the feeling of the viewer being drawn into the canvas. The viewer relates to the canvas in a way that is more pronounced than Friedrick's or Redon's windows.

INTRODUCTION - Footnotes

- 1 Leon Battista Albert: On Painting and on Sculpture:
The latin texts of De Pittura and De Stutua, 1:9 p.55
"Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First
of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I
draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I
regard as an open window through which the subject to
be painted is seen."
- 2 Stephane Mallarme in 1863 wrote a poem called
The Windows and Guillane Apollinare wrote Windows
in 1918.
- 3 Henri Focillon: The Life of Forms in Art, p.14
- 4 Mark Rothko: The Romantics were prompted
- 5 Peter Selz: Mark Rothko, pp. 12-14
- 6 Rosalind Kruss: The Originality of the Avant Garde
and other Modernists Myths, Chapter 1
- 7 Idib
- 8 Rosalind Kruss makes a reference to Friedrich's
window and Redon's window but not Rothko's.

CHAPTER I

THE PHYSICAL ILLUSION OF LIGHT

People once thought that light was something which travelled from a person's eyes to an object, and then back again. Since the 1600's scientists have made many discoveries about light, that it is a form of energy that can travel freely through space. The visible part of this radiant energy is light. These light waves (for light travels in waves) make possible our visibility of the world. The light waves are natural, usually appearing as white light. But white light spreads out into a beautiful band of colours when it passes through a transparent prism. This spectrum of colours, blending into each other run from violet through green, blue, and yellow to red. And these coloured lights when combined, give white light. So light, white light, is a mixture of coloured lights. The primary colours in light are red, green and blue. In paint, the mixing of red, green and blue would not result in white, nor would a mixture of the three primary colours in paint, (red, yellow and blue) result in white, but a dark, muddy colour. What happens is that the mixture of paint absorbs all three primary colours from light, but reflects neither of the three, and bound by its physical nature, cannot reproduce the luminosity of white light. This luminosity has proven to be difficult and practically impossible to imitate in paint. In the studio, the limitations of the medium reveal themselves. It is for this reason that the art of stained glass windows which emerged during the late romanesque period and rose to prominence during the Gothic period enthralled people. Stained glass windows are pictures made up of pieces of coloured glass, held by lead strips. The quality of light and colour which emanates from the windows is what makes it different from other

forms of painting. It is this type of light which I think of in respect to Rothko - a light that emanates from within. The magical quality of stained glass windows offers a particularly unique experience in colour and light. It is this experience of colour and light which Rothko has confronted in painting. In the natural world, light and colour are inseparable. From the scientific point of view, they are combined in a unique manner. It is difficult to isolate one from the other. Scientists, in order to learn about colour, have had to explore the nature of light, how we see light, how light acts under certain conditions etc. In earlier writings on light and colour they were often considered together, for one could not be discussed without reference to the other.¹ For the purpose of discussing the light in Rothko's work, the problem still remains - can we discuss light in Rothko as an isolated idea or is it entwined with colour so much that it is actually light/colour that we discuss as a combined idea? It is necessary to discuss them separately, but they are by nature a result of each other.

One of the first interesting things about Rothko, apart from the work itself, was his very precise and detailed ideas about how his work would be lit, not only in exhibition space but in the studio where he worked as well. He was also particular about how the pictures were hung, the distance from the floor and the distance from each other. He believed that they were best viewed in a group, as in Donald Blunken's apartment in New

York. He was one of the first to buy a Rothko. In 1961 he owned four large pieces, and two watercolours. Rothko was involved in the installation himself, insisting on low lighting to evoke a contemplative mood. At parties in the apartment, guests felt the necessity to speak in hushed voices, as if before something sacred. This appealed to Rothko, for the paintings were presented in the manner which revealed qualities which he obviously felt were essential. Wilder Green, Director of the American Federation of Arts, who had worked with Rothko on the installation design of the 1960 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and later assisted with the Harvard Murals, had never met an artist so obsessed with the way in which his work was presented. "Rothko feared that his works, if not properly displayed would be considered too easy and decorative, and he agonized over every decision of their installation".²

On numerous occasions, Rothko stipulated how the work would be hung. And there are enough written instructions available for there to be no misunderstanding about this. Even at times the colours of the walls was considered by him. For the 1960 retrospective which was circulated in Europe, Rothko sent the following instructions: "The light whether natural or artificial should not be too strong. The pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light, the colour in the picture is washed out and a distortion of their look occurs. The ideal situation would be to hang them in a normally lit room - that is the way they were painted. They should not be over lit or romanticized by spots: this results

in distortion of their meaning. They should either be lit from a great distance or indirectly by casting lights at the ceiling or the floor. Above all the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not strongly."³

The point of stressing Rothko's obsession about the lighting of his work is that the type of light which he preferred was of a particular nature, a kind of light which he consistently strove for, in the work itself, through colour, through the light in the studio, and the lighting of the works in exhibitions. This light is the fading light or slightly hazy light, not harsh or strong light. Matisse noticed as the daylight was fading how his pictures "Suddenly seemed to vibrate and quiver".⁴ He asked Edward Steichen to come and look one evening at Dance which he was working on. Steichen told him that the warmer illumination of evening brought the light red and the darker blue closer together in tone and set up a complimentary reflex in the eye. This explanation was incorrect, according to Lawrence Gowing. "In all probability, the spasmodic vibration of colour which is felt when the level of illumination sinks near to the threshold of colour discrimination merely encouraged the private magic of inherent light."⁵

The magic of this type of light is present in Rothko's work as many have said when describing it. In the mural series housed in the Chapel in Houston, Dore Ashton wrote of the effect of the paintings as the light begins to fade. "Even struggling against the brash Texas light, Rothko emerged.

In the late afternoon we could have a nearly correct impression and then if you shielded your eyes, and tried hard not to see the mean proportioned doorways flanking the triptychs, you could see the ballet of interior crimson lights and the gentle contemplative gloom that Rothko knew so well to cultivate".⁶

The light had faded to a level which neared the threshold of colour discrimination, causing vibration and quivering, which did not seem to be attributed to particular colours, but something apart from the colour.

Many painters, myself included, have noticed how, late in the evenings, paintings do appear to take on a slightly different aura, a more mysterious appearance. The colour becomes affected by the dim light. How is the colour effected? How does light change the character of the colour? From a painter's point of view it is a wonderful and strange experience. In physics this event is easily explained.⁷

We are used to seeing a red apple and think very little about the colour of it, but if the apple is looked at in a dark room, it appears grey, if it is looked at under a blue or green light the red apple appears black. All objects appear grey in a dark room; under a red light, red appears normal, and green looks black. Under blue light, both red and green look black, and under green light, green appears normal but red looks black. Colour can play other tricks on the eyes, and in the situation mentioned the effect of light on colour has

astounding effects. There are a group of painters from the Northern countries of Europe, who found the magical qualities of this type of light in the atmospheric of the landscape in twilight.⁸ They found in the light, the possibility of expressing their own personal thoughts. They discovered that the awesome vistas of the North were grand and majestic in comparison to the warm sunny atmosphere of France, where many of those painters had spent some time. Further back in the history of painting, Leonardo mentioned in his extensive notes on light, the effect of this kind of fading light, or smokey light. The Renaissance painters found that this smokey light was more effective in describing objects, people and spaces. It is not that Rothko's work is related to these paintings of the twilight or landscape atmospheric, but that the particular kind of light which is being discussed here offers some clues as to how light and colour behave together under certain conditions. The fading or dim light must have affected the colours of the canvas, not to the extreme of making them appear black, but changing them slightly. It obviously made some difference for Rothko would not have taken such measures as he did to manipulate the light of his studio. In his last mural series for the Chapel in Houston, he set up his studio in 69th Street, New York to resemble the architecture of the Chapel. He fixed a sheet on a system of pulleys under the skylight, and adjusted it to modify the light in the studio. Why was Rothko so particular about the light? Was it simply an obsession on his part, influenced by his fanatical attitude towards the technical

aspects of painting, the size of stretchers (sometimes he would change a large canvas by adding half an inch to one side of the canvas!) the distance of canvases from the floor etc., or was there something behind his interest in light? He found it alluring and it aroused his curiosity enough to try to manipulate and control it. Rothko unfortunately left little information about his work, rarely talking about the colour or light, always focusing his words on the discussion of meaning and content in his work. But in one of the few mentions of light, he speaks as if he considered the work to have an inherent light.

"The pictures have their own inner light 9

If the paintings were badly lit, the inner light would be lost. So it is 'inner light' and not naturalistic light which held his interest. Does the natural light provide a complimentary atmosphere for the inner light, making the inner light visible? A contemporary of Rothko, Ad Reinhardt who although he did not follow the sublime ideas of Rothko, was also particular about the lighting of his paintings especially the dark canvases. Ideally he demanded "dim late afternoon non-reflecting twilight"

Bright direct light, rather than clarifying the dim structure and colour of Reinhardt's black paintings, obscured them. Because of the internal light of the dark paintings, the way they were lit was of importance. Rothko and Reinhardt were the only two major artists of their generation who concentrated on a light (light notably in both cases as seen

through colour). Although their approaches were different and their attitudes differ in some respects, they were both involved in light, not a naturalistic light but an inherent light. I ask the question again, was the natural light, i.e., the light which Rothko manipulated in the studio and in exhibitions, providing an atmospheric condition in which the indwelling light of the paintings could emerge.

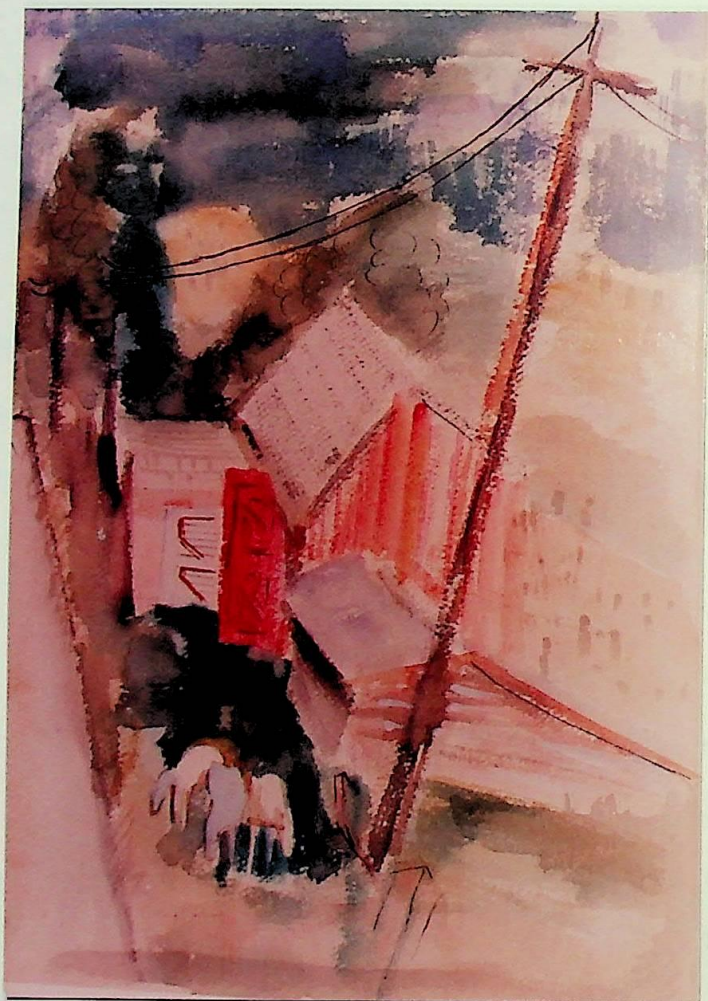
Reindhardt would have us believe this. Rothko, too, thought this. David Sylvester mentions in his essay on Barrett Newman that Rothko once said to him

"Often towards nightfall, there's a feeling in the air of mystery, threat frustration - all of these at once. I would like my painting to have the quality of such moments."¹¹

I stress that the relatively low lighting did not render the paintings so dark that they became indistinguishable, but that the light affected the colour in some slight, but yet visible way. Accepting that Rothko was aware of the internal light, do we witness this light? If we do, does the light have a meaning intrinsic to our reading of the painting.

The indwelling light of Rothko's canvases, appears mysterious at times as delightful to the eye as the stained glass windows in churches. The source of this light is hidden from our view, yet there seems to be in the light a power, which has no location or perspective to it. How in the first instance does the light appear to be indwelling? How can a canvas, and pigment emit a light of this kind?

The disparity between coloured light and coloured pigments makes it difficult to recreate luminosity on canvas. Many painters have tried to imitate light on canvas. Most attempts in this direction, are supported by the effects of Chiaroscuro, the use of white or pale pigments in contrast to darker colours. Yet these attempts are only trying to recreate naturalistic light as in the light of the landscape atmospherics. No painter has created an internal light on the scale of his imageless canvases. Rothko has painted the light and developed his method of painting to suit the character of that light. How he did this can be understood if we follow briefly his method of painting from the earlier years to the late work. His earlier work consisted of landscapes genre scenes, still lifes and figures. Generally the canvases were of muddy colours, thickly painted. The watercolours of his early period were far superior to any of the canvases, demonstrating a handling of colour and thin washes that was to become more prominent in later work. In the subway paintings of the 1940's the atmospheric light underlying the figures in the paintings was noticed by a critic of the time, when the work was exhibited in 1945, in a one-man show at the Guigenheim called Art of this century in New York "Beside his depth of colour, the light and singing hues of Mark Rothko's palette seems like a soprano apart. Entrance to Subway with its introduction of a green railing heightens a scene usually in gloomy aspects and the peace and quiet of contemplation is arrived at because of the artist's translation



6 UNTITLED by Mark Rothko

Late 1920's - Watercolour, ink, pencil on paper
20" x 14³/₁₀"

of a mood to canvas. The artist has taught children for many years and one feels that they in turn have helped to make him see and feel with their own simplicity and instinct for truth. The Party condenses the gaiety and high spirits of a childrens celebration into a design of real structural beauty".¹²

Around this time his work began to change. Aspects of his watercolours began to appear in his work. The brushwork is sparse and spontaneous. He explored and mastered his glazing methods. He learned from the watercolours of the fluidity and transparency of the colours. The effect of the transparent veil-like layers appeared in the canvases, having a far greater effect on such a large scale, than in the watercolours. The layers were dry and porous almost fresco like in appearance. By the end of the 1950's he had mastered the films of paint. He used to scrape and scratch back into the surface, revealing the white or the tinted surface which was underneath. Having abandoned traditional methods of preparing the canvas, he began to stain the canvas with glue size and powdered pigments. Coinciding with his change in technique was the increase in the size of the canvases. He also began to use eggs in his paint formula, and diluted the paint so much so that the effect of the binding element was minimal. The individual pigment particles separated from the paint film, each piece clinging to the surface of the canvas. The surface of a canvas primed with glue size

has a quality which other primers do not possess. It has a rough textured surface. It is not smooth or slippery, so that thin layers of paint cling to the surface. Each individual particle could reflect light which falls on the canvas, creating a sensation of thousands of pigment particles reflecting the light back to the viewer. In the Tate Gallery catalogue for the recent Rothko exhibition Dana Craner writing on Rothko's methods of painting says the following: "Rothko ignored the limits of physical coherence to achieve a translucency unique to his paintings. Light penetrated the individual pigment particles and bouncing back to suffuse the surface and engulf the viewer in an aura of colour... These films brushed one on top of another, have an opalescent quality. Light seems to emanate from within the paint film itself. Physically these surfaces are extremely delicate if not ephemeral. Similar to works composed of pastel, they are brittle and crack or powder very easily. They are readily affected by light and humidity...."¹³ Throughout his career Rothko carried out a lot of experiments on paper. In fact at one stage he had a preference for working on paper. There is no doubt about the influence of his watercolours and works on paper on his large oil paintings. The medium of oil paint allowed him, by its very nature, a further resolvment of the picture than the watercolour medium allowed. The way that Rothko painted and the manner in which he developed his style, regardless of the permanence of the work (for much of the work, according to Dana Craner, can

never be returned to its original brilliance) shows that his purpose was clear in his mind. For twenty years he painted in the manner mentioned above with little variation as regards method. The paint was allowed to breathe, and the translucency of the layers allowed the illusion of an inner light.

CHAPTER I - Footnotes

- 1 Moshe Barasch: Light and Colour in the Italian Renaissance theory of Art
- 2 Wilder Green quoted by Bonnie Clearwater in How Rothko looked at Rothko, Art News, November 1985, pp. 100-103.
- 3 Mark Rothko quoted by Bonnie Clearwater
- 4 Matisse quoted by Lawrence Gowing: Matisse : The Harmony of light
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Dore Ashton The Rothko Chapel: Studio, Vol. 181, No. 934, June 1971.
- 7 The World Book Encyclopedia: Vol. 12, Light
- 8 Roald Nasgaard: The Mystic North, Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe & North America 1890-1940
- 9 Wilder Green quoted in Bonnie Clearwater
- 10 Ad Reindhardt quoted by Lucy Lippard: Ad Reindhardt
- 11 Mark Rothko quoted by David Sylvester: The Ugly Duckling, Abstract Expressionism
- 12 Critic unknown: Review refers to exhibition which included Subway paintings held in 1945 at the Guigenhein called Art of this Century in New York.
- 13 Dana Cranmer: Painting materials and techniques of Mark Rothko, consequences of an unorthodox approach Mark Rothko, 1903-1970, pp 189-197

CHAPTER II

THE SUBLIME QUALITIES OF LIGHT

Accepting the fact that Rothko has created an illusion of an indwelling light, how is this illusion perceived? It is only an illusion of light and colour but in what context do we look at it? The context in which he saw his own work is removed from the physical illusion of the work. Although the manipulation of light and method of painting are of a physical nature, the ideas which he felt his work was about point it towards the symbolic or metaphysical. To understand these associations we must look to what he wrote and said about his work and what he was trying to do. In a letter that he and Adolph Gottlieb wrote, as a response to a review written by Edward Alden Jewell, on an exhibition in 1943 organised by the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, they explained that their paintings embodied the following concerns and beliefs:

1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
2. This 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 academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject matter is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. This is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art."¹

In 1949 his ideas had become more explicit.

"The progress of a painter's work, as it travels from time to time will be towards clarity, toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer."²

The following shows not only Rothko's opinion towards Picasso's achievements but also points to an aspect of art which he obviously felt should be present.

"Picasso is certainly not a mystic, not much of a poet, nor does he express having any very deep or esoteric philosophy. His work is based on a physical plane. A plane of exciting sensuous colours, form and design, but it does not go far beyond this."³

These quotes reveal his interest in subject matter. He strove to find a means to express this subject matter. He felt that Picasso lacked some mystical element and that colour and form were not enough as subject matter. This philosophical approach to his art, which is consistent in all his writings and statements, was supported by similar attitudes among his contemporaries. The advancement in art which Rothko and his contemporaries envisaged was not in form, but in content.

The artistic community engaged themselves in discussions of a philosophical and moral nature. The shift in their attitude towards content dictated the changes in their styles. They were convinced about the power of art to connect with human conditions even in the absence of signs to point to it. From this grew the idea of an abstract art suggestive of the sublime or the transcendental. They felt dissatisfied with the work of the surrealist - they did not deal appropriately with their culture and time. They saw the surrealists as having problems with presentations in an outworn academic style. Newmann stated that they (the surrealists) practised illusion "because they did not themselves feel the magic." Modern man did not have the mythology which the primitive artist had. The latter artist believed in his magic. What Newmann, Rothko, and Still wanted to create was their own modern mythology, that related to human conditions. If the art was to reveal 'transcendental experiences' it would have to rid itself of the familiar images and ideas.

"With us the disguise must be complete, the familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment".⁴

It was obvious that the painters were looking away from Cubist aesthetics, looking to the transcendental and to the sublime. Robert Rosenblum in an article entitled The abstract Sublime, he traces a connection between the Abstract Expressionists and the Romantic Painters of the 19th Century. His argument concentrates on the notion of the sublime and the

boundlessness of aesthetic experiences in the works of Still, Pollock, Newmann and Rothko. Rosenblum further investigates these ideas in his book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*.⁵ Placing Rothko's illusionary light in the context of this romanticism and romantic symbols of light, and in the context of the sublime notions of light and darkness, as proposed by Edmund Burke in his book *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* places the indwelling light of his canvases in a position which allows some symbolic meaning to be attached to it. Although the argument could be made that the indwelling light should be able to sustain itself, if there is a symbolic meaning attached to it, the context in which we understand the light has connections with past symbolic meanings of light which cannot be ignored. These meanings are inherited from the past. Throughout the history of art light was often endowed with religious symbolic meaning. And although not always intentional, light, as a visible illusion in painting carried certain characteristics which added to the mood and effect of the painting. We only have to think of George de la Tour from the 17th Century, who used tenebrist lighting in the service of clarity and monumentality of form; or Rembrandt or Claude Lorrain, who have brought to the illusion of light in painting a dramatic, symbolic and powerful force. Light by its scientific definition is energy, and all energy has force. Before the symbolic or illusionistic light of Rothko's contemporaries is looked at,

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the symbolism of light used previous to these American painters will give some clues as to what this symbol of light has inherited. Robert Rosenblum saw these transcendental aspirations of Rothko and his contemporaries relating back to the work of the Romantic Painters of the 19th Century. These painters used the landscape as a vehicle to reveal the sense of the all holy, and to convey sensations of an overpowering mystery. Religious experience for these painters embodied contemplating the presence of the divine in nature and not so much in contemplating the events of religious history.

In particular, Rosenblum connects Rothko with Casper David Friedrich. This 19th Century painter worshipped God through the paintings of vast and awesome vistas of nature, common flowers, trees, mountain summits, where these landscape images of nature provided a glimpse of divinity. He tried to evoke a certain feeling, with precise thoughts and concepts. He used light and shadow, nature and figures in an allegorical and symbolic way. He attempted to lift landscape above history and legend. To him, an object had a symbolic meaning. It did not just exist as itself. Painting meant for him a transformation of an emotion into a definite poetic form, overcoming the self and achieving piece of mind. In his painting Monk by the Sea he calls for the observer to reflect and contemplate. It is full of symbolic meaning. It is divided into two spaces. The lower space is here and now within which the monk, a small figure, stands alone with his

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- 7 MONK BY THE SEA by Casper David Friedrich
1809-1810 - Oil on Canvas - 110cm x 171.5cm
Berlin - Staatliche und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg

back to the viewer. There is a distance between the monk and the viewer. He is looking towards the horizon over the sea, and we are looking at the monk. We are not permitted to look at that which he looks at. We are left outside the experience. He looks into an infinite space, and below that space is a narrow stretch of beach and sea. The beach is close to us but the sea is far away. It's immensity is suggested although it occupies only a small surface area. The painting is of a single moment in time, but symbolically it is infinite. The sky symbolises the religious sphere and can be interpreted as the divine promise of salvation and eternal life. The sea is a symbol of the menacing vastness of the universe, as well as the superiority of death over life. The light in the painting acquires the function and position of a metaphysical entity, of spiritual illumination, delivering man from the dark prison of his subconscious mind, desires and ambitions. In the painting The Cross and the Cathedral, the power of the hovering light over the cathedral adds to its mysterious atmosphere. It is the source of light, eternal light. In the painting Monk by the Sea Rosenblum has pointed out that if we consider ourselves to stand exactly where the monk stands, it would be like standing in front of a Rothko painting. We are invited into Rothko's canvases, whereas Friedrick makes us stand outside of the experience. Rothko crosses this barrier, bringing the experience of Friedrick's landscape closer to the personal experience of the viewer.

One of the most significant contributions of the post-war American art is an evolution in which forms had become subordinate to a monumental sense of space. This limitless expanse and indeterminate form of the void was at the heart of the 18th Century aesthetic and philosophical concepts of Edmund Burke, which he expounded in his notes on the sublime and the beautiful. Common to all notions of the sublime is the notion of infinity. For Kant, who acknowledged Burke's ideas in his book *The Critique of Judgement*, the sublime evokes the idea of boundless and infinite space, and beauty was associated with form and limitation. This preoccupation with space was seen as modern by Coleridge. "The Greeks idolized the finite, and therefore were the masters of all grace, elegance, proportions fancy dignity majesty - of whatever in short is capable of being definitely conceived by defined forms of thoughts. The moderns revere the infinite, the affect of the indefinite as a vehicle of the infinite; hence their passions, their obscure hopes and fears, their wanderings through the unknown, their grand moral feelings, their more august concept of man as man, their future rather than the past - in a word their sublimity".⁶

The 18th Century notions of the sublime were discussed among Rothko and his contemporaries. In particular Barnett Newmann felt that the Abstract Expressionists were developing a new sublime. "The question now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or myths that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse

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to live in the abstract, how can we be creating sublime art?
We are making it out of ourselves".⁷

In Burke's notion of the sublime, he insisted upon the separation of beauty and sublimity thus making it possible for the sublime to transcend beauty. Bright colours, he felt did not produce the sublime, but

"sad and fuscous colours"

and

"greatness of dimensions"

as well as qualities such as

"vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence, infinity"⁸

produced sensations of the sublime. He also had particular ideas about the sublime qualities of light and darkness. He considered darkness as being the absence of light rather than the presence of darkness. As regards light he thought "to make it a cause capable of producing the sublime, it must be attended to with some circumstances besides its bare faculty of shewing other objects. Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind and without a strong impression, nothing can be sublime. Such a light as that of the sun immediately exerted on the eye as it overpowers the senses, is a very great idea, light of an inferior strength to this, if it moves with great celerity has the same power, for lightening is certainly productive of the grandeur which it owes chiefly to the extreme velocity of its motion. A quick transition from light to darkness, from darkness to light has yet a greater effect. But darkness is

more productive of the sublime than light".⁹

The work of Rothko and Barnett Newmann relates very closely to Burke's notion of the sublime and the notions of infinity. Not only in Newmann's references to the sublime and to light in his writing and his extensive essays on art, but the titles of his work, and his statements about the work relate specific associations and meanings attached to his images of boundless space. References to Jewish mysticism and evocations of primordial light are common. Titles like "Prometheus Bound", "Uriel" related to mythological beings who represented light. (Uriel is the angel of light who performs Prometheus's feat in the world of Torah. Prometheus is a super human intervention which brought light to man). The titles look beyond the pictures. Newmann's famous "zip" images imply thoughts of a flash of light or a bolt of lightening - which has the speed and violence of a revelation of light. He began to refer to the area of the canvas or its space as a "void". He realised that he had been "emptying the space instead of filling it, and that now, my line made the whole area come to life".¹⁰

In the paintings entitled Day One, Day Before One, Genesis, he refers to the extraordinary writings of the Rabbi Isaac, Lauria of Safed, named by his followers as the Holy Ari. Herbert Weiners paraphrase of Scholems translation deprives the account of some of its more subtle images (especially one that would have appealed to Newmann, which fixes the genetic moment at the appearance of a ray of divine light.



8 ONEMENT 1 by Barnett Newmann

1948 - Oil on Canvas - 27 x 16

Collection Annalee Newmann, New York.

"The next act (after Tsimtsum) involves the re-entry of God into the empty spaces. Obviously, it will not be that kind of re-entry which restores completely the condition that existed before, otherwise the drama will cease. It is only a partial re-entry. A line or charge from the divine is extended into the empty space. This is the second step of the action, called Hitpashut, and it is the opposite of the first act, the breathing out which succeeds the breathing in. Now, something begins to happen in the space which was made by the withdrawal of God.

What actually occurs is a subject for endless speculation on the part of Kabbalists, but its result is a terrible catastrophe. The something which had just begun to be formed is shattered. The outer husks or shell of what has been formed is shattered. The outer husks or shell of what has been formed is broken and the inner light, the creative life-charge of these emerging forms, is scattered in two directions. Some of this light, called holy sparks, returns to its source, that is upwards to the divine root of light, to God. But other sparks are entangled in the shattered husks, which are called klipot, and fall with them. The divine harmony has been broken: "things are not in their place." This is the end of the third action which sets the stage for the entrance of man.

The tension of the action has now been established. The sparks yearn to return to their source and the husks to their place, both want to be lifted to the roots so that the

primordial unity may be re-established. The process of "lifting the sparks" to their roots and effecting a tikkun or "repair" is the task of man, a task in which all the generations can play a role.... Through his life and deeds, he can also enable the sparks in the body and soul of man to ascend to its root, which in the mystical cosmology is identified with the image of a primordial man - Adam Kadmon... The holiest of the sparks (by their very power) are farthest away from their originating source, and the man who seeks to redeem them must descend into those depths where the power of darkness rivals the power of light.... Terrible and difficult is the struggle which must take place in these depths so far from the divine effulgence... and (man) himself may be caught in the abyss".¹¹

The space in Newmann's work is the unknown and the formless, and the light in this space symbolises the transformation of this space into something divine. The space is infinite and in this way it is a sublime space.

Taking an overall view of the symbolic light used by the two painters mentioned, the quality common to both in the symbolic use of the light is the inherent reference to infinity. Light has the ability to suggest space and taking a sublime view of this space it has implications of the infinite. With Friedrich the light symbolises God, the light of redemption. The light also occupies space, for instance, in Friedrich's work it is the light on the horizon that

suggests infinite space. The infinite space represents the infinity of the divine. In Newmann's light, he embodies the creation, the first light, God creating something out of nothing by placing a ray of divine light into the darkness. The infinity suggested by all of these renderings of light lead me to the assumption that the light is a symbol of infinity and that this light is present in Rothko's work. It gives his work that sense of space or void which some see as filled with spiritual potential, while others see it as empty and bleak. With the inherent association of infinity, the indwelling light of Rothko's canvases cannot be denied its symbolism.

CHAPTER II - Footnotes

- 1 The letter Rothko and Gottlieb sent was dated 7th June 1943, and is on deposit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 2 Statement by Mark Rothko on his attitude in Painting Tigers Eye, Vol. 1, No. 9, October 1949, p.114.
- 3 Statement by Mark Rothko, Source unknown
- 4 Mark Rothko, "The Romantics were prompted", Possibilities, No. 1, Winter 1947-8
- 5 Robert Rosenblum: Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko 1975
- 6 Coleridge quoted by K.E. Lokke: "The Role of the Sublimity in the development of Modern Aesthetics", Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Summer 1982, p.42.
- 7 Barnett Newmann: The Ideas of Art, Six Opinions on what is Sublime in Art, Tigers Eye, December 15th 1948, pp.51-53
- 8 Edmund Burke : A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.
- 9 Ibid, p.80
- 10 Barnett Newmann quoted by Thomas B. Hess in Barnett Newmann
- 11 Writings of Rabbi Isaac, quoted by Thomas B. Hess in Barnett Newmann

CHAPTER III

COLOUR AND LIGHT

When the illusion of indwelling light reaches beyond its own limits and becomes a symbol, it symbolises a space that is infinite and sublime. How does this infinity and sublimity of light relate to colour? It could not be said that Rothko's work all looks similar. Comparisons between individual canvases shows that there are huge differences between them. Is this related to the light or to something else? The light symbolizing the ideas discussed earlier on, does not express the varying moods and feelings which Rothko's canvases convey. This light may become darker or brighter, but its infinity and sublimity does not change as the colours change. This would indicate that if there are two elements involved in Rothko's work, the first would be the illusion of light and the second would be colour. The various moods or emotions which Rothko's work conveys, would seem to be attributed to the effect of colour rather than light. The infinity and sublimity implied by light do not vary in character as emotions and moods do. There are many different moods - but there is only one infinity. So what role does the colour have in relation to the light or vice-versa? Does the light add to the colours a sense of timeless emotion, or does the colour add to the light a sense of human feeling in terms of moods? Thus the infinity would be related to humanity rather than divinity. Light has the power to suggest a divine presence which is associated with religious or spiritual meaning. Has Rothko tried, through colour, to divert this divinity towards humanity? Whatever it was that Rothko tried to convey, the colours in his work has to be

looked at, not necessarily the specific colours of specific canvases, but how the colour has affected the light, if it has at all. At times the colour has hindered the light through its decorative power, and through its seductive power, and at other times the only purpose of the colour seems to be to colour the light.

In scientific terms colour and light are inseparable. This poses difficulties when trying to discuss Rothko's work. But although this is so in scientific terms, considering that the laws which govern the primary colours in light are different from those governing the primary colours in pigment, it is possible to distinguish, not between colour and light, but between the symbolism of light and the associations of colour. Maz Kozloff says of the problem of light and colour in Rothko

"The inescapable impression of light is reified in colour so delicately that it is impossible to tell whether colour is being dissolved in light or light is being tinted and suffused with colour".¹

But the associations which colour has and the associations which light has can be separated. Rothko's work was often admired for its exquisite colour sensibility. But it disturbed him that the public saw him as an abstract painter, involved in form and colour. It was not his primary concern as he pointed out on numerous occasions. In the following extract from an interview with Seldon Rodman, we can see how

strongly he felt about this.

"You're an Abstractionist to me" (Rodman)

"You're a master of colour harmonies and relationships on a monumental scale. Do you deny that?"

"I do, I'm not interested in relationships of colour or form or anything else."

"Then what is it you're expressing?"

"I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy - ecstasy - doom, and so on, and the fact that lots of people breakdown and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate these basic human emotions. The people who weep before my paintings 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."²

Kandinsky's ideas about the spiritual include extensive readings of colour as a carrier of spiritual import. He suggests that colour transmits kinds of experiences which other symbols such as words

"fail to express and which yet is the very kernel of its existence."³

He sums up a thought which he laid out throughout his book, - that for individuals of developed sensibility colour can transmit spiritual experiences "too fine to be expressed in prose".

"Generally speaking colour directly influences the soul."⁴

According to Paul Klee,

"Colour has always got something mysterious about it, that cannot be properly understood. Colours are the most irrational

element in painting. They have something suggestive about them, as suggestive power."⁵ This symbolic or associative power of colour cannot be ignored. The nature of colour, the very definite and specific character of individual colours has been widely accepted throughout history. Red has the association of something hot, fire, anger, passion, etc. Blue, on the other hand, is cool and calm. The various mixing of the colours produces various colours, warm browns, cool browns, etc. There are also colours which are more cheerful than others; colour definitely has emotional qualities attached to it. There is enough evidence produced from studies on colour in environments to prove that colour has a very marked effect upon the mind. At one stage, colour was used in hospitals to treat mentally disturbed patients.

One important element in the effectiveness of Rothko's colour is the size of the canvases which he worked on. The size envelopes you at once, drawing you closer into the picture plane, thus allowing the colour to be an experience for the viewer. Greenberg relates, in the following quote the effect of the size of the canvases painted by Newmann, Rothko and Still. "A new kind of flatness, one that breathes and pulsates is the product of the darkened value - muffing warmth of colour in the paintings of Newmann, Rothko and Still. Broken by relatively few incidents of drawing or design, their surfaces exhale colour with an enveloping effect that is enhanced by size itself. One reacts to an environment as much as to a picture hung on a wall."⁶



9 NUMBER 61 by Mark Rothko
1953

Rothko had a very definite reason for painting large - to create a sense of intimacy. He said in defence of large pictures. "I paint very large pictures. I realise that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however, 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 or with a reducing glass. However you paint the large picture you are in it. It isn't something you command."⁷

Without the largeness of scale, the colours would not effect the viewer, although the emotional association attached to the colours would still remain. By stating that colour has these associations it does not imply that colour applied arbitrarily will result in the effects achieved by Rothko. Even some of Rothko's work, does not achieve the effectiveness which he wanted. The difference has to be drawn between colour which is expressing emotion and colour which is decorative. This is a problem which large areas of colour without incident of drawing or design encounters. Placed in unsuitable environments, some of Rothko's work could be considered decorative. This is one reason why Rothko laid out clearly the way in which his work was to be hung. One painter whom Rothko greatly admired was Matisse, and Matisse's colour is admired for its decorative power. Rothko studied Matisse's work at great length, and he dedicated a painting to Matisse, indicating a very definite reference to Matisse's use of colour.



10 UNTITLED by Mark Rothko

1954

But Rothko, although admiring the material in Matisse could not immerse himself in this aspect of colour, for it was too close to reality for it to convey his intentions. This does not suggest that his work was never decorative, for there are examples of his work which appear so.

In his work, Rothko appears to have explored, over a period, a particular colour range in a series of canvases, sometimes closely related. He painted several paintings at a time, but before the late 1950's it is not clear whether they were related in any obvious way. After that his paintings were hung in groups associated chromatically rather than chronologically. The range of colours that Rothko has used is wide. Around the 1950's he began to use the most dramatic combinations of two or three principle colours, which were chosen so as to reinforce one another, mainly by relatively close harmonies. In the three mural series which he was commissioned to do in the 1960's, the earlier warm and light hues give way to more cool and deep colours, maroons and charcoals (although he did continue in other work done during the same years to use the earlier colours). Always Rothko used his colours in such a way that the individuality of each colour gave way to the effect of the canvas as a unit. To discuss the individual colours and the emotional associations attached to each colour is not the purpose of this essay. It is imperative, however, to clarify the distinctions between the light and the colour, tenable as these distinctions may

seem when looking at the work. The effect of colour has the seductive power to leave one unaware of these distinctions, making it seem that the colour has the power to produce this infinite sublimity. It seems in the earlier work that the qualities of light are more obvious. When one encounters the darker paintings of the 1960's, the possibility of light seems negated by the darkness of the colours. Dark colours used in contrast to light colours is a very effective way of producing an illusion of light. But in his dark paintings the colours used are close in hue, avoiding this chiaroscuro effect. Dark colours do have a particular character, seeming somber and sometimes depressing. Edmund Burke, in his essays on the sublime, writes on the sublime qualities of certain colours. "Among colours, such as are soft or cheerful (except perhaps a strong red which is cheerful) are unfit to produce grand images. An immense mountain covered with a shining green turf; is nothing in this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue and night more sublime and solemn than day ... and in buildings when the highest degree of the sublime is intended, the materials and ornaments ought neither to be white nor green nor yellow nor blue nor of a pale red nor violet nor spotted but of sad and fuseous colours as black or brown or deep purple and the like."⁸

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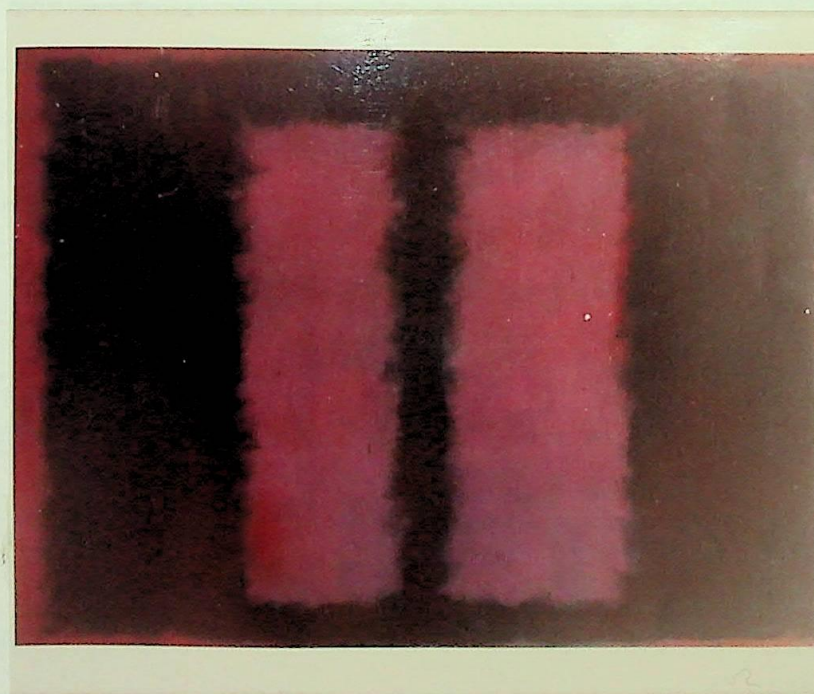
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11 SKETCH FOR SEAGRAM MURALS by Mark Rothko
1958-1959 - Tempera on Paper - $4\frac{1}{2}$ " x $16\frac{7}{8}$ "

with gouache sketches, and experimented with shape and colour. The images of fiery doorways is present even in these sketches. The forms have developed to singular rectangles. Red, black, blue and yellow are used in the sketches. In the first series he remained loyal to the sketches. The vertical stress of the shapes is well pronounced. There are many associations made to portals on seeing these murals. These canvases marked his turn towards the darker palette, using two basic colours, red and black, with tones of orange and maroon. In the second series the vertical forms although alluding to portals or entrances of solidity, are soft and trembling; giving the space within these vertical forms a more atmospheric environment. He eventually ended up with three separate series. These he decided were not suitable for the Four Seasons Restaurant and he kept the paintings. He later agreed to donate a number of these paintings to the Tate Gallery. Soon after the Seagram murals, he was commissioned to paint a series for the new Holyoke Centre of Harvard University. The work was carried out from 1961-62. The composition of these murals related to the Seagram Murals. In both series, there are subtle compositional variations which coincide with the narrow darker palette. He did continue to execute paintings in the format of the previous decade - two or three areas of colour suspended in uniform fields above each other, but in the three mural series, the rectangles develop subtly to resemble vertical rectangles, which enable the forms to be experienced as openings. In the Harvard University there is one large painting, with



12 BLACK ON MAROON by Mark Rothko

1959

Collection of the Tate Gallery

two medium sized canvases on either side and two independent paintings on the opposite wall. These paintings are more diversely coloured than the Seagram Murals, although the dark palette still remains. Dore Ashton gives a comprehensive description of these murals in the Harvard Centre:

"The major triptych on the long wall tended to change character hour by hour. In the midday light the central horizontal canvas with its plum reds reading through blacks and its irregularities of form and value took on a silvery effulgence. The same three canvases in the late afternoon became a densely textured, mysterious mass of cryptic shadows. To the right, the wine red forms of central verticals seem to curve inward, with depth given in the blue-gray tones that can be read below the surface. In the oblique light of waning day this panel with its central rectangular forms feathered on both inner and outer edges pulsates in long, slow rhythms. Contrasting with the langorous mystery of the darker panels is the leftward panel. Because of our reading habit, it is the first of the sequence, but could as well be the last. A fiery orange-red form is suspended like a flaming hoop in purple space, an apparition that appears in its own theater with its own transforming inner stage lights. It too is susceptible to time, and as it is contemplated, the low rectangular knot - the plaquette suspended on a horizontal line that is repeated top and bottom in each painting - becomes a glowing coal, with thicker brush marks and vermilion splashes like lambent sparks."⁹



13 UNTITLED by Mark Rothko

Full size study for Harvard Murals



- 13 UNTITLED by Mark Rothko
Full size study for Harvard Murals

In his palette for the murals for the Chapel of the Institute of Religion and Human Rights, Houston, Texas, he used deep crimson, black, raw amber and small amounts of blue to create closely related hues of maroon and a light purple maroon. Half of the paintings have black fields and some of the shapes have been outlined in charcoal directly on the painted surface. Dominique de Menil has described the stages of transformation of these black fields:

"At first the field occupied only the central part - an opening into a wall into the night. Step by step the field was enlarged, leaving only a narrow margin of colour, the night had invaded the wall."¹⁰

A contemporary of Rothko who had problems with colour and light, was Ad Reinhardt. His difficulties lay in the use of the colour black. Black is one of the most suggestive colours, it carries with it a store of associations and implications - the severe, the grandly formal, the tragic. The problem he encountered with black was the traditional connotations attached to it. "The Divine Dark" as Eckhardt called it, could never be far removed from the spiritual associations. Reinhardt wanted to eliminate the religious ideas about black and replace them with strict aesthetic notions. He wrote in his notes on the notion of black "black medium of the mind and luminous darkness, true light, evanescence". He saw black personally as representing "privacy passivity, the withdrawal of the recluse, rebirth, seclusion" He discouraged any evocation of mystical

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dimensions in his work, and he did not share with Newmann's or Rothko's aspirations towards the sublime. But whatever Reindhardt wanted, or wished black could represent, black, the darkest of colours represents an elimination of light. The mysteriousness of the black canvases with their slight indications of the cruciform, lies in the presentation of a space without light. The ominous dark reminds of night time, but safe in the gallery space, the threat of the night dissipates from Reindhardt's canvases. Rothko did not use black as a pure hue, his choice of colours in three murals work, however, to the same end, since the hues are so close together then an over all effect of dim or dark colours pervades. This use of black and dark plums was arrived at through a gradual development of increasing colour variations of hue and tonality, which is an approach different from that of the other painters.

Considering the power of those dark colours, is it possible that the power of the work lies in the colours and not the light? Along with these "sad and fuscous colours" used by Rothko, there exists in these dark paintings a light that is different from the light used by Barnett Newmann or Casper David Friedrich. To return again to Edmund Burke and his ideas about light and darkness: he felt that darkness was more productive of the sublime than light was. He considered darkness to be an absence of light. We know that light appears to be indwelling through Rothko's method of painting.

We know that the colour carries the different emotions and moods of the pictures. The light itself, separate from colour associations is sublime and infinite. The source of this light is not visible on the canvas - it has no location or perspective. But this light seems to have a greater symbolic and sublime meaning when obscured in some darkness. The light is hidden by semi-darkness, giving it greater mysteriousness and giving the work the obscurity and ambiguity for which it is famous for. He has subdued the light almost to the point of obliteration, and so it remains in the darker canvases, not as the light of day, but of night or evening. Rothko was aware of the mystery evoked by this experience of the evening light. The darkness of night, not through its dark colours, but through its lack of light, carries with it certain feelings and moods and a mysteriousness that is unique to darkness. We all know the obscurity of the dark and the lack of light which stands as obstacles before us. Edmund Burke considers this feeling to be sublime, for Keats darkness was comforting, for Rothko it was threatening, frustrating and mysterious. How has the colour effected the sublime and infinite light? Echardt said of light:

"One really finds light best in the darkness".

The sublime and infinite light has been hidden in a semi-darkness obscuring the already obscure. The dark colours give the illusion of light a more mysterious nature, and it becomes more meaningful and stronger. The light gives the work a sense of the sublime, a sense of the infinite and in these

dark canvases it is the light which gives the powerful feeling. If it was merely the colour which carried all the intensity, the obscurity and ambiguity would not be there. These feelings are aroused, not by colour, but by the presence of a light, a light which is unlocated, unfocused and half hidden by darkness. Colours do have the effect of intense feelings, dark colours have the effect of sadness and of gloom, and sometimes threat, but they do not suggest ambiguity or obscureness. Although colour has the emotional power in painting, it does not have the capacity for such ideas. Light itself is obscure and evasive. It has the power to arouse curiosity, it is alluring. Combined, these two elements of Rothko's create a unique effect. The power lies not in the associations of large areas of colours but in the sublime light which is infused with emotions. A clear distinction between the two provides the true character of the light. The power lies, not in the associations of large areas of colour but in the sublime light which is infused with emotions. What the colour adds to the light is intense emotional feeling. The intense emotion alone would have no sense of space or time within which to exist.

CHAPTER III - Footnotes

- 1 Max Kozloff: "The Problem of Colour - light in Rothko",
Art Forum, Vol. IV, Part 1, 1965, pp. 38-44
- 2 Rothko and Seldon Rodman. Quoted in Seldon Rodman
Conversations with Artists, pp 93-94
- 3 Kandinsky: Concerning the Spiritual in Art
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Paul Klee: Quoted by Will. Grohmann in the book
Paul Klee
- 6 Clement Greenberg: American type painting,
Art and Culture, p.227
- 7 Mark Rothko: Interiors, Vol. 110, May 1951, p.104
- 8 Edmund Burke: A Philosophical Enquiry into the
Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful
- 9 Dore Ashton: About Rothko, pp160-161
- 10 Dominique de Menil "The Rothko Chapel", Art Journal,
No. 30, Spring 1971, p.256
- 11 Thomas B. Hess: Ad Reindhardt quoted in
Ad Reindhardt

CONCLUSION

THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS

The context within which Rothko placed his work reveals a willingness on his part to associate the work with spiritual and religious meanings. By accepting the commission to paint a mural series for the Chapel of Institute of Religion and Human Development he places his work in a religious or spiritual context. Before he ever painted murals for particular environments, he often stated his likening for the work to be exhibited as a group; rather than as single canvases. Lawrence Alloway wrote in 1959 that Rothko:

"prefers his work to be hung in groups not spaced out in conventional good hanging, their united effect stresses their environmental function."¹

The environmental function which he intended for his work, indicates something about the function of the work, that there is a definite intention to effect the space which the viewer stands in, physically and mentally. He controlled this space in specific ways, by painting on large canvases, hanging the work in groups rather than singular, by controlling the way they were lit, and by controlling, as was feasible, the places where the work was hung. The work in Houston is important for its contextual role. Associating the work with an environment which indicates specific forms of thought influences the manner in which the work will be read. We assume spiritual meanings are implicit in the work, because the work is in a place where these meanings are accepted. What other indications are there that Rothko intended his work to be read in a spiritual context? If he

was interested in this aspect of the work, what sources of inspiration did he look towards, and what references did he make himself to this? In retrospect, the placement of the work in Houston, is not enough to substantiate spiritual implications. It certainly implies intentions held by the artist, for these particular paintings, but it does not conclude that the rest of the work was so inclined. The difficulty in dealing with this issue, is that, unless the artist proposed, as Kandinsky did, in written form the spiritual nature of the work, it is an area that almost always remains for the individual to decide the validity of those spiritual intentions. This certainly applies to Rothko, for it is only the experience of the work ultimately which can indicate the spiritual nature of the work. However, it is possible to uncover certain influences which reveal not only through the work which is the inspiration, but also through the statements made by the artist about these sources, to substantiate a real intention by Rothko to involve himself in this aspect of the work. This information does not confirm whether the work achieves these goals, it only indicates that the intention was held to do so. These influences not only include an implicit spiritual meaning, but also involve a symbolic use of light. Although Rothko's light connected with the light of Newmann and Friedrick, Rothko was not particularly influenced by either artist. If Rothko maintained throughout his career, an interest in light, it would seem probable that he found sources which reinforced

his inspiration. The problem with Rothko is that he maintained a language about his work which points towards the universal rather than the specific.

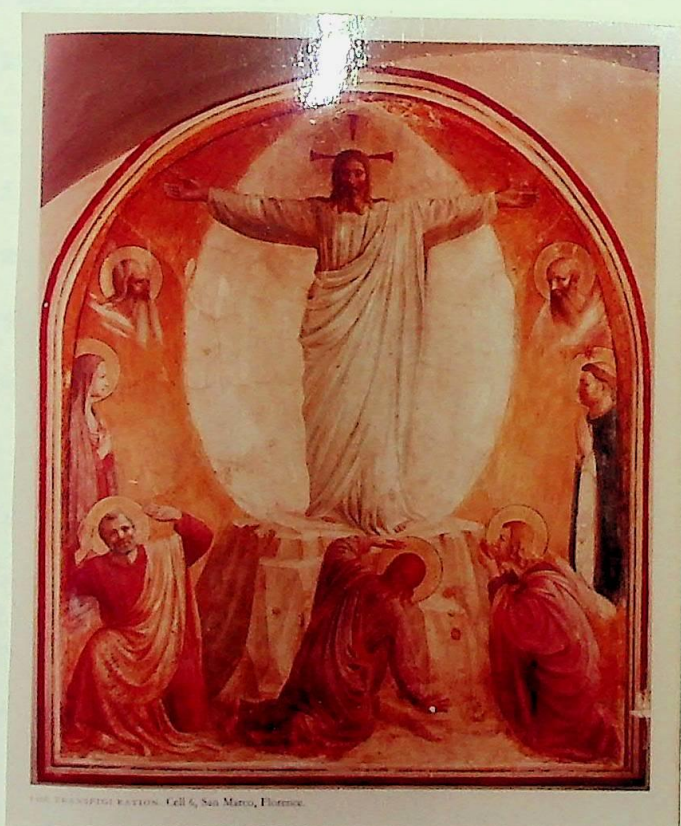
During the time that Rothko painted the three mural series, he made trips to Italy, which were reported as having a great impression on him. He spoke on many occasions about the work which he liked. In the Spring after he began the Seagram murals he went on his first trip to Italy. He visited Paestrum and Pompeii. At Paestrum where the Greeks had built a majestic doric temple, Rothko admired its beauty. In the House of Mysteries in Pompeii he felt an affinity with the atmosphere of the place. In reply to some Italian tourists inquiring if he had come to paint the temples he replied "I have been painting Greek temples all my life without knowing it".

On the second trip to Italy, Rothko discovered two other things which had a marked impression on him. One was Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, a monastic library. As Rothko worked on the Seagram murals a couple of months later, he spoke of the corridor on the Laurentian Library which he felt lingered in his mind as he worked. It is not surprising that Rothko was particularly interested in the religious architecture in which paintings and mosaics were intimately related to a space. Rothko himself was involved with the relationships between the architectural space of the paintings and the environment which the viewer would stand in. The

work to him was to be seen as an ensemble not as individual paintings. The whole was more important than the parts. For this reason the Renaissance and Byzantine art and architecture would have been inspiring to him. Another event which particularly moved him was the work of the 15th Century religious painter, Fra Angelico, especially his frescos in San Marco. He visited the murals twice, and on both occasions he spent a lot of time talking to the Italian critic Giulio Carlo Argan about Fra Angelico. Considering he spent so much time with Argan, it seems plausible to assume that the symbolism of Fra Angelico's work was discussed. Fra Angelico is the only painter, of all the painters whom Rothko took particular interest in, to whom light played a specific symbolic role. According to Argan, to Rothko, Fra Angelico was a beacon. He understood the context of the Italian painter. Fra Angelico was a churchman, a theologian who rose in the Dominican ranks and was attuned to intellectual values. He was not the naive, rapturous and angelic figure of mythical art history. According to Argan he:

"Expressed his point of view through the purely theoretical values he attached to light."²

His mission was to depict what he saw in nature in the light of its unseen source, i.e. God. When he painted, his scenes of Edenic beauty were too true to the Thomist vision of beauty as "that in which the eye delights". For the Thomist, God would be the source of all visual pleasure, the light that would grace the world of nature would always flow from Him.



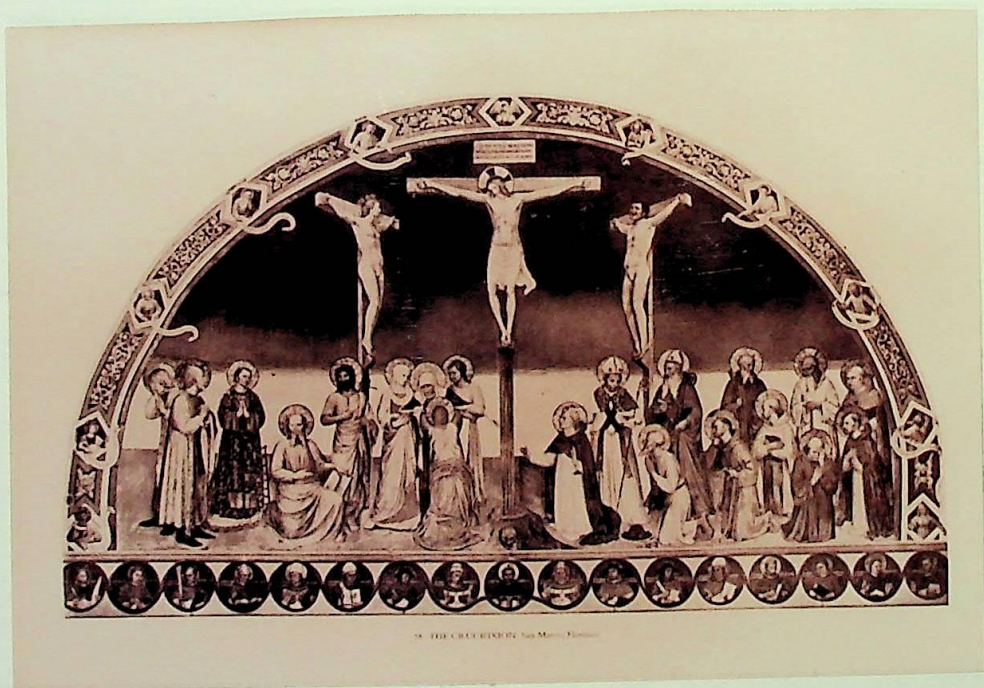
14 THE TRANSFIGURATION by Fra Angelico
Cell 6, San Marco, Florence

The light in Fra Angelico's work is evenly distributed not modified by principles of perspective. The alter piece and other works in which Fra Angelico lavished heavy pigments are different from the frescos that so moved Rothko. In his work, Fra Angelico faithfully subscribed to his religious doctrines. The idea of accepting any aesthetic theory as valid in its own right, conflicted with his religious principles, according to which art was primarily the handmaid of religion. To Fra Angelico, nature provided the only path by which earthbound man could hope to arrive at an understanding of the divine creator. The new ideas which Alberti had given to art at the time had an intellectual bias, diverting from the traditional religious vocation. It was Alberti's ideas about space and history that Fra Angelico objected to. From the Thomist point of view, space did not exist, it was an intellectual abstraction; God had created light and all existing things. As for history there were lessons to be learnt from it for it is an account of things past. Thus history is not an end in itself but only a means of learning. Argan speakes of Fra Angelico's Deposition as being the first Christian myth to be in concrete form. The religious naturalism is carried to its highest pitch. This painting was done about the same time as he planned the murals for the convent in San Marco. The religious realism has been replaced by an entirely different feeling. The function of these paintings was to help the monks in their prayers. The monk who has renounced the world needs a contact with God, by way of prayer,

which is different from the contact which the ordinary man had with God. When preaching to laymen Fra Angelico used the beauties of nature for his theme and painted these beauties. When addressing the monks he replaced naturalism with symbolism. On these occasions "he imparted to his painting an immaterial quality that of the idea in all its purity and since his aim was not didactic or sociological but exclusively religious, he was drawn unconsciously towards that form of platonism, which, latent in humanist thought from the outset, found full expression in the philosophy of Marcillo Ficino."³

The light in these murals is treated as an imaginary dimension which is not located or limited. It becomes "absolute, an omnipresence, transcendent radiance". The fusion between his philosophic and religious modes of thought between "Reason and Faith" is achieved in the cells of the convent.

The specific paintings which may have influenced Rothko was the large Crucifixion fresco with three crucified figures set against a maroon sky. The space behind the figures has no illusion to real space, it consists simply of colour. In three other frescos of the crucifixion, the space behind the figures, the sky, is black. Rothko's explanation to the President of the Harvard University, Nathan Pusey, about the murals for the University reveals his intent not to illustrate such subjects but to evoke a similar intense experience. "Rothko explained that the dark mood of the monumental triptych



15 THE CRUCIFIXION by Fra Angelico

San Marco, Florence.

was meant to convey Christ's suffering on Good Friday, and the brighter hues of the last mural, Easter and the Resurrection."⁴ Rothko tried to bring the intensity of these religious experiences down to a human level of feeling. In this way, he uses specific religious ideas to convey human feelings. Fra Angelico's influence seems to be more deeply rooted than it is known. To deny the religious aspect of the work, denies the possibility of a full understanding of what Rothko tried to convey. Intensity is a good word to describe the Harvard Murals, and the intensity of a full religious belief as is found in Fra Angelico would surely inspire a painter who was searching for a means to convey intense human emotions. It is not true to say that Rothko had the same religious beliefs as Fra Angelico, nor that it was specific religious beliefs which Rothko sought to convey. The religious in his work serves in conveying the intensity found in religious beliefs. Rothko's belief lay in his work, not in the religious convictions. The confusion between considering the work to be intensely religious or spiritual, and considering the work to be about human emotions becomes clarified. It is important to understand what role the religious plays in his work, and equally important not to confuse the intensity of the work with an intense religious belief. The description of the work as secular religious in feeling, seems to me to be too ambiguous to define clearly what the work is about. Intensity seems a far better word to describe the effect of the work on the individual. People of a religious or spiritual nature find

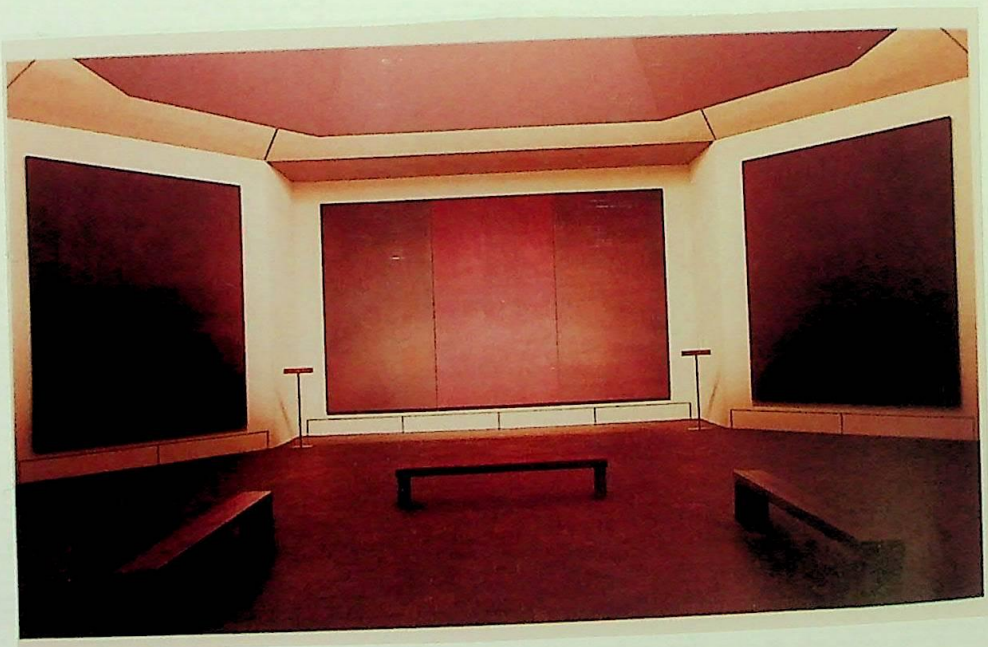
that this intensity applies to their own personal beliefs. But this does not pre-suppose that Rothko painted these religious beliefs. A clear understanding of the role of the religious in his work explains why he spoke of human emotions rather than the religious when discussing the meaning of his work, and explains why he agreed to paint the murals for the Chapel. The Chapel was a place where the intensity of feeling would be further intensified by the religious nature of the environment. The context which Rothko placed his work in is often misunderstood, and the assumption that the work is specifically spiritual or religious, clouds the true nature of the work. The religious associations attached to light, again can confuse the issue. The light is intense it is obscured by darkness at times, it mystifies, and can draw towards the work a religious reading which bases the light in a specific symbolic role. The key to understanding the light is to detach the religious from it, to see it as it is, obscure, unclarified, yet intense. Thus we are presented with a light which is not specific. To see the work in its true form, one has to see an unspecified light in the context of an intense effect. The one unifying element in the work is the intensity of the ambiguous.

The role of the religious in his work leads not towards divine aspirations, but towards a more humane level of emotion. To call his work religious is misleading, and never did Rothko himself intend it to be specifically religious. The religious plays a role for in it he found aspects of what he was trying to communicate - intense emotions. But it is a part which differs greatly from the Renaissance religious

painters, and also the work of Casper David Friedrich and Barnett Newmann. The light - a subject common to all of these painters is specifically connected to the religious in each case. The desire to connect Rothko's light with these past symbolic uses of light is great, for a subject with so many symbolic implications cannot be easily addressed without referring to these universal meanings. Rothko's light is specifically connected with the sublime and the infinite found in Casper David Friedrich and Barnett Newmann. Moving beyond the infinite, the light becomes connected with divinity - in the case of Friedrich and Newmann. With Rothko the religious plays a role which leads not towards divinity, but to humanity, the confusion between both occurring because of the intensity aroused by both. He has lead this obscure illusion of light with its sublime and infinite implications towards humanity through colour. He uses colour in a sensitive way but always the colour is subordinate to the light, for it is the light which intensifies, through its obscurity, the emotions aroused by each colour. It is the light which is sublime, and infinite and not colour so, although there is great power in colour it is the light which is most powerful element in his work. It in itself has possibilities which reach beyond the limitations of colour.

The inherent magic and mystery noted by Matisse and by Rothko himself, in naturalistic light, espically evening light, is maintained in the faint illusion of light in Rothko's canvass.

The illusion of light evokes the power of actual light. This powerful light has attracted powerful symbolic meanings of the sublime, the infinite and the religious/spiritual in the past. In the particular case of Rothko, the religious/spiritual I replace with intensity; Rothko's light is, through its colour and its physical character, sublime, infinite and intense.



16 TRIPTYCH by Mark Rothko

1965-1967

The Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas

CONCLUSION - Footnotes

- 1 Lawrence Alloway: "The New American Painting",
Art International, No. 3, 1959:23, pp.3-4
- 2 Giulio Carlo Argan: Fra Angelico
- 3 Giulio Carlo Argan and Jacques Lassaigue: The
Fifteenth Century From Van Eyck to Botticelli,
G.C. Argan, Painting in Italy : Fra Angelico,
Ch. 2.
- 4 Lee Seldes: Legacy of Mark Rothko, 1978, p.51

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