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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

AND THE

UNCONSCIOUS

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INTRODUCTION

The Abstract Expressionists were a group of American artists who emerged in New York during the 1940s. They borrowed the Surrealist technique of automatism and carried it to new extremes. They acknowledged the need for metaphysical release, and believed that through the exploration of the psyche and the cultivation of the miracles of objective chance, they would learn, to express a more dynamic reality.

In this thesis, I shall be illustrating how, through the use of automatism and the release of the unconscious mind, Mark Rothko worked within the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism.

In an article, which appeared in Der Sturm (Berlin) in 1913, Wassily Kandinsky gave a definition of his theory of art which is relevant to the unconscious and to Abstract Expressionism. Kandinsky's theory is based on the argument, that form and colour in themselves, constitute the elements of a language completely adequate to express emotion, that just as musical sounds act directly on the soul, so do form and colour. The definition of 'the work of art' is based on a comparison, more or less unconscious, of painting to music.

It was Schopenhauer, who first said, that all arts aspire to the condition of music. In music, it is possible for the artist to appeal to his audience directly, without the intervention of a medium of communication in common use for other purposes. It was this freedom which Kandinsky, and later Abstract Expressionists aspired to.

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Kandinsky wrote:-

"A work of art consists of two elements, the inner and the outer. The inner is the emotion in the soul of the artist; the emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer".

Kandinsky continues by saying the soul is affected through the medium of the senses, emotions being aroused by what is felt.

"The sequence is: emotion (in the artist) → the sensed → the art work → the sensed → emotion (in the observer)".

Kandinsky maintains that unless a piece of work is generated from 'the inner element', namely the unconscious, it is 'a sham'. Form itself being the expression of inner meaning, 'intense in the degree that it is presented in harmonic relations of colour'.

In 1911, Kandinsky wrote in his essay 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art':-

"Every epoch is given its own measure of artistic freedom, and even the most creative genius may not leap over the boundary of that freedom".

In Jung's opinion, it is the aim of the modern artist to give expression to his inner vision of man, to the spiritual background of life and the world.

For one unaccustomed to Modern Art as a whole, or Abstract Expressionism as a movement within modern art, it can be difficult to recognise whether the artists' intentions are genuine, the expression spontaneous, deriving from the unconscious through automatism, or just another gimmick without depth.

However, there have been countless manifestoes written by artists and poets of the 20th century, to explain and justify themselves and their art. One can only assume that unconscious guidance inspired and helped them to produce their work.

Many 20th century artists felt the need to defend themselves against a critical and uninformed public, especially in non-representational work.

Abstract Expressionists' prime concern was to explore and express their inner selves in a subtle fashion, unfamiliar to the viewer, yet demonstrating an intrinsic and natural truth, which if not immediately understood, could at least be recognised occasionally albeit unawares.

From the 1940s onwards, the Abstract Expressionists' work was characterized by a sense of spontaneity and a rejection of traditional artistic conventions. They sought to express their inner emotions and experiences through a variety of techniques, including gestural brushstrokes, drips, and splatters. This movement was a response to the limitations of representational art and the desire for a more direct and personal form of expression.

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Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Abstract Expressionist movement continued to evolve and expand. Artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko became prominent figures, pushing the boundaries of abstraction further. The movement's influence was felt across the world, leading to the development of similar styles in other countries. The Abstract Expressionists' legacy is a testament to the power of art to express the human condition in a way that is both universal and deeply personal.

CHAPTER I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement - certainly not as well as, if successful, it does the others. Yet without the definition something essential in those best, is bound to be missed. The attempt to define is like a game in which you cannot possibly reach the goal from the starting point but, can only close in on it by picking up each time from where that last play landed. (Harold Rosenberg, Art News, 1952). (1).

To understand the birth of a cultural phenomenon such as Abstract Expressionism, circumstances of the age must be taken into consideration. Abstract Expressionism, like any other art movement, reflects the social and political situations of the age in which the creators live. As Mark Rothko said - it is our intention to make the viewers see the world our way, not theirs.

Prosperity during the 1920s in America was grounded in the expansion of industry, resulting in modern consumerism, technology and mass culture. The dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki gave America a psychological superiority which made the Americans feel politically powerful. This was reinforced by their role in the Armistice negotiations with Germany and Japan, and in the allies own war time conferences. This is the basis for what is called American Imperialism. Many artists and writers began to see America as the political and cultural centre of western democratic power, the protector of cultural values which had been enshrined in European civilization before the rise of Fascism.

Clement Greenberg (2) claimed that painters are seen as having assumed the mantle of the international avant-garde, this assumption can be interpreted as a post World War II assessment of the difference between war-torn Europe and the United States who experienced the war from a distance.

In 1939, Greenberg published an essay entitled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in the Partisan Review which discussed the role and nature of avant-garde revolutionary literature and art. This essay is considered the manifesto and programme for the art movement known as Abstract Expressionism.

In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Greenberg begins by saying that artists in western culture have produced an entirely new 'avant-garde' culture. The first settlers of bohemia - then identical with the avant-garde - turned out to be demonstrably uninterested in politics. The artists emigrated from 'bourgeois society to bohemia' and in the migration turned to art for art's sake. Further more, in search of the absolute, the avant-garde arrived at non-objective art because it was trying to turn away from the subject matter of common experience. 'The artist turns to the medium of his own craft' - this becomes the subject matter, the expression of the artist thus becomes more important than what is expressed. Greenberg says this is the only way to create art and liberation of a high order.

Following the disillusionment of the Left from the 1930s to the 1940s, 'The Partisan Review' was where the intelligentsia aired their debates. These debates culminated in the late 1940s with the demise of Marxism as a credible bulwark of the New York intelligentsia. (In the immediate post-war period, before the stranglehold of McCarthyism virtually silenced American Marxism, for nearly a decade, Sidney Finklestein laid out with clarity a marxist aesthetic that was both attentive to details of American culture and remained congruent with orthodox socialist realism.) Founded

in 1934 by William Philips and Philip Rahu, The Partisan Review had a tradition of American radicalism, originally orientated towards the publishing of communist ideals and the promotion of Marxism as a complex theory to establish the criteria for a new culture. The Partisan Review ended briefly in 1936, re-appearing in 1937.

In 1935 the third Communist International meeting redefined the policy of the stalinist communist parties. The Soviet Party of the Popular Front attempted to encourage unaffiliated intellectuals, both marxist and liberal, to join with the Soviet Union's campaign against fascism.

In 1938 Trotsky and Breton had come by dissimilar routes to similar conclusions. Trotsky, through leadership of the Russian Revolution and subsequent exile by Stalin, Breton by way of leadership of the Surrealist movement. Both men were outraged by Stalin's policies as well as by the concept of art as a weapon. The Partisan Review, in 1938, published Dwight MacDonald's translation of Trotsky and Breton's manifesto towards a free revolutionary art.

Trotsky and Breton wanted creative individuals to be exempted from State controls of every kind even if restrictions were placed on other categories of people. Thus, the manifesto advocated centralised control for the masses and anarchism for artists. In 1939, nearly a year after the Breton-Trotsky essay appeared granting 'permission' for the politically minded artist to make art free from political or social commitments, Greenberg - a devoted Marxist-Trotskyist, submitted his essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. The Trotsky-Breton statement, that art should not submit to discipline, that anarchist individualism is necessary to creative fulfilment, can be read as the basis for Greenberg's espousal of the abstract expressionist

dissolution of context into form.

Abstract Expressionism, began to impinge itself onto the consciousness of the New York art world - in the late 1930s and early 1940s, its sources were identified as being located in contemporary political, social and economic circumstances, Freudian theory of the 1920s, surrealism and to a lesser extent cubism.

Surrealism - founded by Andre Breton in 1924 developed from the Dada movement and made positive claims for logic and method. Dada 'is a state of mind' (3) wrote Breton in 1920 - It was the first anti-art movement and was developed in Zurich in 1916. Nonsense text, abstract works of art and performances were used as a protest against the lofty pretensions of the western civilization, which had produced the war. In Paris, the Dada exploration of the irrational led to Surrealism. As a coherent movement Surrealism did not survive the Second World War, but its basic doctrine of 'automatism' had penetrated deeply into the artistic consciousness of Europe and America. It was the last great movement before the war, just as Abstract Expressionism was the great movement of the post-war period. Surrealism, influenced by the doctrines of Freud, claimed to liberate the riches of the unconscious through the primacy of dream and the suspension of conscious control. As written by Breton in the first surrealist manifesto, 1924 - Surrealism was:-

"pure psychic automatism by which an attempt is made to express either verbally or in writing, or in any other manner, the true functioning of thought. Surrealism rests on the belief in the higher reality of certain neglected forms of association, in the omnipotence of dream in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to destroy the other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of life's principle problems."

The manifesto covers not only the work of the surrealists, but also phases of Picasso's work, the early 'metaphysical' style of Giorgio de Chirico, and even some of Henry Moore's sculpture. The Surrealist Movement began to

form in 1919 having as its direct precursor the Dadaists. At the same time in Munich Kandinsky had painted the first non-representational or 'abstract' composition, and the Blue Rider group had by 1913 reached the point of Expressionist Abstraction. (4)

This drive towards expression of the real process of thought - Kandinsky called it the expression of an inner necessity - had been a long-maturing phenomenon of general historical significance, manifested not only in the plastic arts but also in poetry, music, philosophy and drama.

Surrealists became dispersed during the war, some such as Miro stayed in Europe. Others, including Breton and Masson, went to the United States. With the arrival of European surrealists there arose a movement known as 'Action Painting'. Action painting developed to be called Abstract Expressionism. Gorky arrived from Armenia to America in 1920, he was known as the transitional figure between European and American art. Max Ernst, an active surrealist, arrived in New York. After the first war, Ernst founded the Cologne Dada group in 1919. His invention of 'frottage' paralleled the automatic writing of Breton and Elvard in eliminating the conscious creative role of the artist. He married Peggy Guggenheim who provided the group of European artists with a gallery. Breton - who had invented a version of automatic writing - had a comforting influence on the surrealists and a tangible impact on some of the young American artists who were to become Abstract Expressionists.

For American artists, from their experiences of the Depression, the war and their contact with Surrealism, came a continuing concern for the morality of their art and their total commitment to it. But, this was art without subject matter in the conventional sense, projecting its message by

direct impact, form and structure and their generalised associations.

From 1929 MOMA^A - The Museum of Modern Art, mounted exhibitions with the emphasis on French Modernism. The French artists set a standard which the Americans realised must be matched if they were to be taken seriously.

Conventionally, it is claimed that 'Modern Art' was introduced into America with the Armory Show (17 February - 15 March 1913), an exhibition of international art. The Eight, a group of eight American painters, played a vital role in organising the Armory Show. These eight, Henri, Luks, Sloan, Glackens, Shinn (previously the 'Philadelphia Realists'), joined by Prendergast, Lawson and Davies - formed in 1907 as a gesture of protest against the National Academy. As well as playing a major part in organising the Armory Show, they also founded the Society of Independent Artists (1917).

There were sixteen hundred items, three quarters being American. The exhibition was said to be the most complete ever. The Armory Show was the first real platform for European Modernist art but it made a relatively transient impact upon an ingrained realist predisposition. It was an empirical eye which stretched back to the 19th century becoming renovated by the Ashcan painters. (5)

The exhibition demonstrated the wide gap between the two continents and generally magnified the crisis of American art. This was not to happen again.

In 1929 The Guggenheim Museum, then known as the Museum of Non-Objective Art, displayed the works of Mondrian, Klee and Kandinsky as well as some American non-objectives. Under Guggenheim and Baroness Rebay an assistance

programme was designed to encourage non-objective work. 15 dollars a month covered materials, and in exchange the Baroness was permitted to be critic of their work.

The artists who are linked together under the name of Abstract Expressionism are the product of the tension that belonged to the formations and deformations of their history. They established a form of painting, as the identity that rules all objects, near or far. They created a vagueness in spatial arrangement of the planes and colour values, hence the continuous search for opposing ideas. What was common between the Abstract Expressionists was not a style - de Kooning and Pollock worked with brush painting concerned with gesture, colour and actions, whilst the likes of Newman, Still and Rothko dealt with large unified shapes or areas of colour, - but an attitude which caused them to be seen as an authentically American movement, renouncing the European art traditions.

The word 'Expressionist' had quite a different meaning for the American Abstract Expressionists than it had originally for the German Expressionists, who thought of it in terms of one who 'dissents or expresses' himself against the fashions of the time. For the Americans, Expressionism dealt with the process of making art. This explains the reasoning behind 'action painting'. Rothko said:

"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". (6)

It was the departure from natural representation which increased the intensity of the expression or mood of the subject suggested in the painting.

In 1943 Edward Alden Jewell, art critic of the New York Times, wrote a review of the third Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. He wrote of his 'bafflement' at Rothko's 'Syrian Bull', and his 'befuddlement' at Gottlieb's 'Rape of Persephone'. Annoyed at Jewell's lack of understanding, Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko drafted a reply to the New York Times which was printed on 13 June 1943. Their letter summed up the artists' principles and became their manifesto; it also outlined the main points of Abstract Expressionism. They proclaimed their involvement with 'eternal symbols', their 'kinship with primitive man', their 'conviction of the expressive power of myth' and their 'insistence upon the primacy of subject matter'. Their beliefs were clearly stated as:

- "1. To us, art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take chances.
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 had the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to re-assert 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 archaic art."

The letter ends on a humorous note:

"Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration." (7)

In the 1950s and 1960s it was customary in New York to celebrate the success of the Abstract Expressionists over European, and especially French, art - the blossoming acceptance of these paintings from an

international audience made it clear, to artists such as Rothko, Kline, Pollock, Motherwell, Newman, de Kooning and Gorky, that the core of artistic vitality had crossed from Europe to America after the war. The implication of this was that these artists, whose work was beyond the specifics of time and place, had at last overcome the provincialist 'small town' character of American painting, and they could now proclaim that their art belonged to the world at large - they could move on from the parochial traditions of pre-war America.

It was generally assumed by Europeans and Americans alike, that the paintings of Abstract Expressionism were totally new forms of pictorial art, created after the apocalyptic conclusion of World War II.

CHAPTER II

PART ONE: THE UNCONSCIOUS

PART TWO: ROTHKO AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

PART ONE: THE UNCONSCIOUS

"Unconscious a. 1712 (un - 1)

1. Unaware (of); not realising the existence, occurrence etc. of something.
2. Not endowed with the faculty of consciousness. 1712. Temporarily insensible. 1860. Not present to or affecting the conscious mind; of the mind; of which the workings are not present to consciousness. 1909. Also as sb. in the v. 1920.
3. Of qualities; of which the possessor is unaware 1800.
4. Done, used, etc. without conscious action 1820." (8)

In this chapter, it is intended to show how important the unconscious mind is in the process of creating art. I hope to demonstrate this through the Abstract Expressionist, Mark Rothko.

It is part of the doctrine of Zen that if one has not been shocked out of his rational habits of thought he can not be enlightened.

In China, the mastery of brush work was highly appreciated; it was the ambition of the masters to acquire such a facility in the handling of brush and ink that they would write down their vision while their inspiration was still fresh. In France this concentration on the mark left by the brush was called 'tachisme', from tache, meaning blot. Most of all it was probably Pollock who became absorbed with the idea of automatism and the application of paint without pre-meditation (see page no. 30). Pollock, like other Abstract Expressionists, on the one hand longed for childlike simplicity and spontaneity, and on the other hand wanted to reach the

sophistication of 'pure painting' which captured the likes of Rothko, Newman and Gottlieb.

Like the Chinese, these automatist paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, must not be pre-meditated. There is little doubt that in advocating this approach artists and critics were influenced not only by Chinese art, but also by mysticism from the Far East - in particular, Zen Buddhism. Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian can all be remembered as mystics who wanted to break through the veil of appearances to a higher truth.

This 'pure' style of painting - Abstract Expressionism - involved different methods. Not all the followers used Pollock's extreme ways, but all believed in the need to surrender to spontaneous impulse.

Romantic writers such as Coleridge experimented with drugs, so that they could release themselves from the conscious mind, drive out reason and let their unconscious minds reach a 'divine madness'. It was Coleridge's quixotic wish for one central perspective point where all the fragments of truth would knit together. This 'divine madness' was courted by the surrealists whose interest lay in Freud, especially his analysis of the unconscious mind. According to Freud's theory of the 'repetition compulsion', - one could experience situations that had happened before. The element involved, which made these incidents seem both familiar and unfamiliar, was change.

Carl Jung called for the existence of channels necessary for the release of unconscious expression. Visionary image was to be one such outlet. It was the intention of Abstract Expressionists, such as Gottlieb and Rothko in dealing with myth, to reconcile old and new models, for the expression of inner states which the Surrealists had shown existed. Rothko declared that

a prophetic dream can exist side by side with casual events of today.

The Abstract Expressionists try to circumvent the symbols that lie in the ante-room of the unconscious mind and to reach a deeper level where the real process of thought is, as yet unformed. Their paintings are projections of this deeper level of awareness, and for this reason they call their art informal.

Jung contended that people contained in their unconscious, inherited psychological 'archetypes' which belong to the collective unconscious - this unconsciousness expressing itself in the form of dreams or nightmares.

The importance of memory and its workings, as stipulated by Theodule Rebot, emphasised the importance of the past in our lives. This work showed that memory disappears according to a law of regression from the past to the most recent. Rothko endeavoured to express his unconscious, declaring in 1943 that myths exist as much in our unconscious today, as they have in the past.

The psychological discovery of the unconscious came about in 1775 by Franz Messer. In 1951 it was proposed that in examining temporal experience, the perception of duration was indirect. (In order to understand duration, an interaction of elements, based on the information which is given to the senses, has to come about). This knowledge is formed by 'cues', which alter by the passing of time. One can then assume that the artist provides certain elements and information to his work, and from this, allows this process to transpire.

It could be supposed that references to sudden inspirations, or flashes of

insight, may stem from an unconscious desire to appear as the privileged master of some philosophical demons. Yet, the evidence for large chunks of irrationality embedded in the creative process, not only in art (where it is more readily accepted), but in the sciences as well.

The American Abstract Expressionist painters were more attracted to Jungian rather than Freudian theories of the unconscious, subconscious and even pre-conscious. Pollock, while being interviewed by Selden in 1956 said 'I've been a Jungian for a long time ... painting is a state of being ... painting is self-discovery.'

One of the objectives of Abstract Expressionism was reality as a substitute for the previously accepted dichotomy between the real and the imaginary. Acknowledging the human need for metaphysical release, the Abstract Expressionists believed, that through the exploration of the psyche, the cultivation of the miracles of objective chance, and the understanding that 'the act of painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artists' experience' (9) they would learn to express this more dynamic reality.

Henri Poincare proposed a theory concerning the nature of unconscious guidance. He believed that results or combinations are engineered by the 'subliminal self'. He believed in two possibilities, the first; the unconscious is capable of discernment, it has tact, delicacy, knows how to choose, to divine. It knows better how to divine than the conscious self since it succeeds where that has failed. In a word, is not the subliminal self superior to the conscious self? However this idea is rejected by Poincare favouring his second theory; the unconscious is an automation which mechanically runs through all possible combinations.

H. G. Wells lamented that it is often difficult for scientists, painters,

musicians and writers alike to convert their ideas into verbal currency. 'The forceps of our minds are clumsy things and crush the truth a little in the course of taking hold of it'. (10)

The processes of randomness, free association, dissociation of syntax - all qualities adopted by the Abstract Expressionists - allowed these artists to achieve anonymous expression, the resulting expression being no longer of the self but of the world. Also this premise of self effacement before the forces implied a total investment in the creative act.

Automatism - an involuntary action - was used by the Surrealists in the 1920s. They believed in automatism working from the unconscious mind. Paalen suggested using psychic automatism as a tool for reaching into the unconscious in search for inner truths. Psychic automatism could also be seen as 'an attempt to give a new collective basis to artistic creation through the liberation of the unconscious'. (11).

Automatism was a way of revealing buried truths, a method which captivated Rothko and others in his circle. William Baziotes was reportedly so taken in by this phenomenon that he was virtually unable to paint for a year.

The 'automatism' in a work is in direct proportion to the efforts the artist has made to embrace a whole psycho-physical field of which consciousness is only a small fraction. In these unfathomable depths there prevails, according to Freud, a total absence of contradiction, a release from the emotional fetters caused by repression, a lack of temporality, and the substitution of external reality by psychic reality obedient to the pleasure principle and no other. Automatism leads us straight to these regions.

PART TWO: ROTHKO AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Although Mark Rothko (1903-1970) rejected his inclusion under the umbrella of the Abstract Expressionists, he was, by definition an Abstract Expressionist. However in response to Elaine de Kooning's article in Art News, 1958, where she labelled Rothko and Kline 'action painters' Rothko responded to E. de Kooning with 'the author must know that to classify is to embalm'.

Markus Rothkowitz, an immigrant jew from Eastern Europe, arrived in the United States in 1913. He was an anarchist in his teens, and politically active during the common front, so remaining an Abstract Expressionist was an indication of the intensity of his commitment. Rothko obtained a scholarship to Yale University, however being a jew he was not well received. Accusations from his fellow students, concerning his involvement in the Russian Revolution, proved to be too much - Rothko left after completion of two years. In 1925, Max Webber a fellow Russian jew, was giving art classes, Rothko enrolled and developed a traditional figurative and landscape style.

In 1934 Rothko became involved in the socio-political aspects of the art scene. He joined the Artists' Union which had a basic doctrine of anti-provincialism. Although at this time Rothko's work still had aspects of provincialism, and was only beginning to develop. A group of artists opposed to social realism, formed a group in 1935 known as 'The Ten'. Each artist worked within the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism - Rothko working on what he considered avant-garde art. But, as a member of the avant-garde he sold little.

Rothko, like other members of the Union, did not withdraw formally from membership of orthodox Marxism, Trotskyism and finally liberalism. Rothko was already liberated from political groups, individual freedom being fundamental to his art and sense of self.

The next stage for Rothko was his mythological period - this coincides with the fall of France and the victories of Japan on the Pacific with Pearl Harbour. Rothko, like Gottlieb, was very aware of being Jewish. After the patriotism following Pearl Harbour Rothko removed himself from the American scene, away from Jewish orthodoxy in a more cosmopolitan direction.

First Freud and subsequently Jung, proposed that myth articulated the deepest levels of experience and so voiced a universal language. Myth became a major focus for some of the Abstract Expressionists, and by 1946 Rothko could refer to the "small band of myth makers who have emerged here during the war".

Myth is a purely fictitious narrative involving supernatural stories or legends of a primordial kind. 'Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea', 1944, is an example of Rothko's work during his mythological period. When used pictorially myth tends towards an illustrative approach which is far from immediate, negating the whole concept of automatism. In 1943, Rothko said that his aim was - 'dealing not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the spirit of myth which is generic to all myths at all times'.

To the creative eye, 'Psychology' represented a mixture of poetic images with an existential edge, especially since Jung claimed, that myth came from the same depths as art.

From 1941 to 1943 Rothko's drawings seem to derive formally from 'Etruscan or Roman sarcophagus reliefs'. (12) Involvement with myth and surrealist theory was Rothko's concern during this period. This involved dealing with 'automatism', free association and the unconscious.

As already mentioned in Chapter I, the fall of France brought many artists to America - the physical presence of these artists and their work stirred challenging emotions amongst the New York artists, who rapidly set to the task of moving away from provincialism.

By 1940 Rothko's work became more painterly, involved more directly with the Abstract Expressionists, primarily Gottlieb, Newman, Still and Motherwell, less so, than with de Kooning, Pollock or Gorky.

Like many others, Rothko was drawn to the work of Miro. Some of Rothko's works of 1945 and 1946 are reminiscent of those of Miro's, from the 1920s, in which schematic and calligraphic forms are simultaneously floated upon and embedded in a soft, deep, opaque ground. Paintings such as 'Geologic Reverie' of 1946, can be compared to Miro's landscapes of the 1920s.

On a number of occasions Rothko had suggested that Surrealism was one of the strongest influences on his work. In particular the painting 'Birth of Cephalopods' (1944) (see page 24) displays lines, which loop with the characteristics of automatism. In employing this method of painting, Rothko was endeavouring to arrive at a special level of communication. A sense of the unconscious was to be transmitted to the viewer, for it was believed that myth resided therein. Rothko praised the Surrealists for 'rediscovering mythical possibilities in everyday life'. (13)



MARK ROTHKO

'BIRTH OF CEPHALOPODS', 1994

By 1945 Rothko's work was governed by elements of his inner self, allowing the world of the unconscious to guide him, trusting the thought process to act as mediator between the person's inner and outer experiences. Through Nietzsche, Rothko sensed that the problem of painting was how to transcend, in a plastic image, the consciousness of self. Barnett Newman said the basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea. It is only the pure idea that has meaning, everything else has everything else.

In the 1930s Nietzsche's reputation had suffered many indignities, not the least being his appropriation by Nazi academics. Only the most intrepid liberals in America could bear to face squarely the implications of Nietzsche's writings. Amongst artists, Nietzsche's reputation remained fairly concrete, probably because the whole modern movement had been titilated by his emphatic address to the darker region of emotions, hidden away in the psyche. Nietzsche's work encouraged the artists to examine the irrational realm. For Rothko, the interest in Nietzsche began with his interest in anarchism, there was also much reference to Nietzsche by the Surrealists. 'The direct knowledge of the nature of the world unknown to his reason' was for Nietzsche, and later for Rothko, a most ardently desired knowledge.

In 1946 Rothko began to think that specific references to nature, and to existing art conflicted with the idea of the spirit of myth, or what he began to call 'transcendental experience'. The two terms are related but are not of the same meaning. The one seems to issue from some deep barely accessible stratum of being - i.e. Jung's collective unconscious, the other more readily available and directly apprehended.

In affirming that artists could involve the unconscious in determining and realising their subjects, and in shaping subjects that were purposely enigmatic, the Surrealists made strides down a path, initially ventured by the Symbolists. The artists in Rothko's circle found this equally alluring and they travelled even further along it. As the Americans experimented with ways of working from the unconscious, they discovered multi-valent subjects, half-revealed, half-concealed. Rothko and his contemporaries worked hard to retrieve subject matter from their inner selves - subject matter which would act as an arena to express the needs, concerns and emotions, when they felt most urgently the need to do so.

In principle, to act in a free spontaneous way, acting from a welling up of unconscious internal forces, free of moral and intellectual inhibitions, and without the influence of learned aesthetic criteria, (14) would be a strictly automatist practice. However, to make the unconscious conscious can be considered fallacy. The truth of the unconscious and automatism, in relation to the creative process, within the bounds of spontaneity, is primarily an ideal. The New York artists remained reasonable to an abstract notion of the unconscious, as a mental space and to an ideal of a process of working which engaged that space. The approach adopted by Rothko and some of his contemporaries, was to use automatism as a starting point, a spring board - and from there, in a more specifically conscious mode of thought - develop the painting. The initial drive being unconscious, the development being conscious.

Although 'automatism' has been more commonly linked to the concerns of the Surrealists, it was the New York artists who realised more seriously the meaning behind automatism. The Surrealists rendered most of their imagery to make it legible for their audience, whilst the Abstract Expressionists subscribed to the notion that automatic techniques could yield images or

symbols capable of communicating on a deeper level." (See page no. 27 - Mark Rothko's 'The Syrian Bull', 1943).

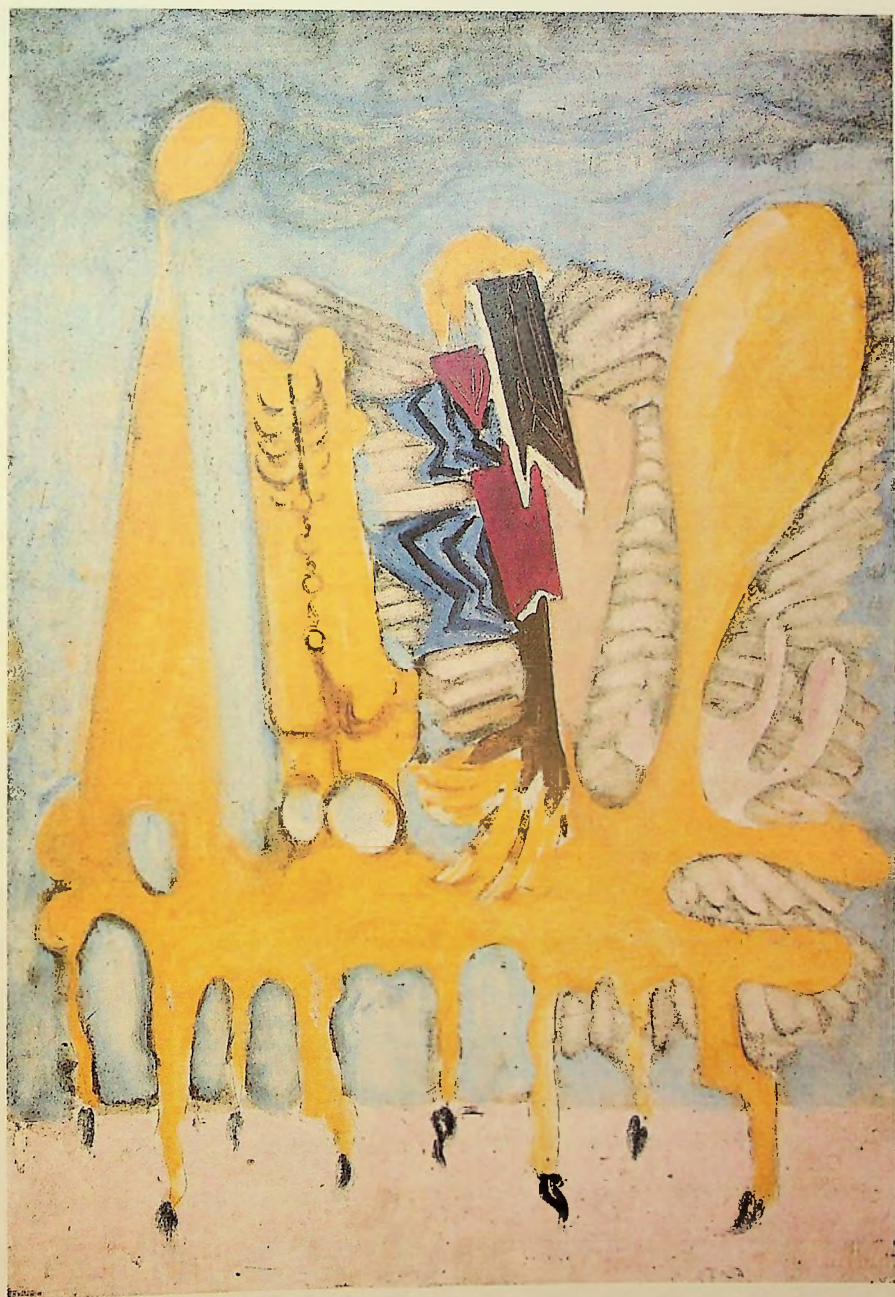
Rothko began with a pre-existent structure in mind, building up layers of colour reminiscent of the 'mystic writing pad' that Freud used as a metaphor for the memory and the unconscious. He aimed to illuminate the relation between the personal fantasy image and the image of the collective unconscious.

Rothko developed a large-scale mode of automatic drawing, making large physical strokes with household paint brushes - Robert Motherwell said of himself and Rothko:

"When I talk about automatic drawing - the method we used - I don't mean doodling, something absent minded, trivial and tiny. If we doodled - and perhaps you can say we did - it was ultimately on the scale of the Sistine Chapel. The essential thing was to let the brush take its head, and take what ever we could from the results." (15)

Rothko's untitled paintings of around 1947 develop a broad spontaneous technique, veering away from his figurative images such as 'Birth of Cephalopods', 1944. These paintings seem to have a disorganised searching quality.

Rothko's interest in the unconscious and automatism has been associated only with his art of the early to mid 1940s, but in a sense it has lasted throughout. Motherwell said of Rothko in 1967 - 'when he developed his style in the late 1940s, for which is is now famous, he told me that there was always automatic drawings under those large forms'. (16)



In comparison with the work of Pollock, de Kooning, Still, Kline and Gottlieb - Rothko's work is known as non-gestural - removed from the automatist practice of painting out of the unconscious. Rothko's art does seem to contain less 'gestural' strokes than for example, Pollock, whose whole canvas is a collaboration of gestural drips, lines and other motion gestures. But at the other end of the scale there is Newman with his hard-edged paintings. Compared with Newman, Rothko's work is decidedly gestural. The main difference being Rothko's strokes were done in subtle colours, an orange over a rust, a navy over a royal - whereas de Kooning would have a pink over a luminous green, thus making his strokes more obvious, and giving the superficial impression that Rothko's work appeared less obviously gestural, than they in fact were.

The artist must have the gift of emotivity - the transcendental emotivity, so grand and so precious, that makes the soul tremble before the pulsing drama of abstraction. Symbols, that is ideas, arise from the darkness.

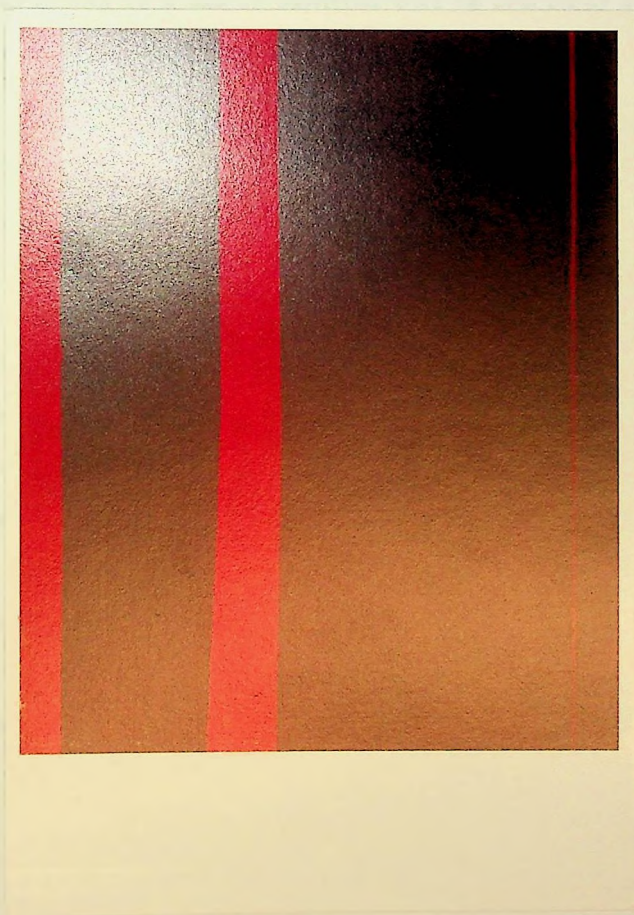
(17)

Having eliminated line, all that remained to convey his content was colour. By building up layers of colour, from lightly stained blotted 'touches' which culminate in a chromatic crescendo. The colours used in large expanses, seeming suggestive of void, and because they do not seem to relate to anything in this world, they become other worldly evoking inner emotions. If the colours are related to mood - this is how I see it - the emotion can be seen to vary from painting to painting. Some may depict an expression of sadness, others aggression, or sorrow. Rothko has talked of his expressing basic emotions, yet there is always a sombre feeling of seriousness, even in paintings such as Untitled 1951, where purples and yellows predominate. What seems to me most confusing is Rothko's determination that he is 'no colourist' and to judge him so is to



JACKSON POLLOCK

NUMBER 23, 1948



BARNETT ADAM
'ADAM', 1951-2

misunderstand his work entirely. If, as he says, he is no colourist, one should accept that Rothko's creative source of information came from within his unconscious, and this is demonstrated on his canvas by means of emotion, which one superficially sees as colour.

Automatism led Rothko to a way of painting that he practiced as long as he painted - it was not merely a technical device but by, probing the unconscious, a way of realising subjects. He tried to go back in historical time in order to reach the roots of personal consciousness, basing this on the idea, that individuals eventually yield to the evolutionary history.

The implication is, that in his later abstract works, he approached very nearly an image of the state of the unborn and newly born child. The state of the uncreated universe, in which there are no objects external to the omnipotent self, was how he sought to explore myth.

Rothko established a growing reputation amongst the Abstract Expressionists, and in 1948 through positive and concrete expression amongst peers, the subject of the artist was formed.

CONCLUSION

The aim of Abstract Expressionism was to suggest, that there exists a certain region of the mind where the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, cease to be perceived as contradictory. Mark Rothko, through his knowledge of automatism, archaic mythology, romantic anthropology and his quest for the unknown, was able to reveal a creative universe of colour. He shall always be recognised as a true 'Abstract Expressionist'. However not wanting to be labelled, Rothko said 'to classify is to embalm'. So he rejected the negative aspects of the movement and took advantage of the positive.

He was a genius, an artist who knew no bounds, a man with a passion to learn as much from painting as humanly possible. He found a freedom, images became emptied of all conventional meaning, and purified to a primordial presence. It was this found freedom, and also the unprecedented structural and semantic possibilities, that were discovered with randomness, dreams and automatism, which made his paintings so powerful and interesting.

These processes, randomness, free association, dislocation of syntax - all qualities of automatism - allowed Rothko to achieve an anonymous expression, the resulting expression being no longer of the self but, of the world. Also the premise of self effacement before the forces implied a total investment in the creative act, which was however, completely peculiar to Rothko.

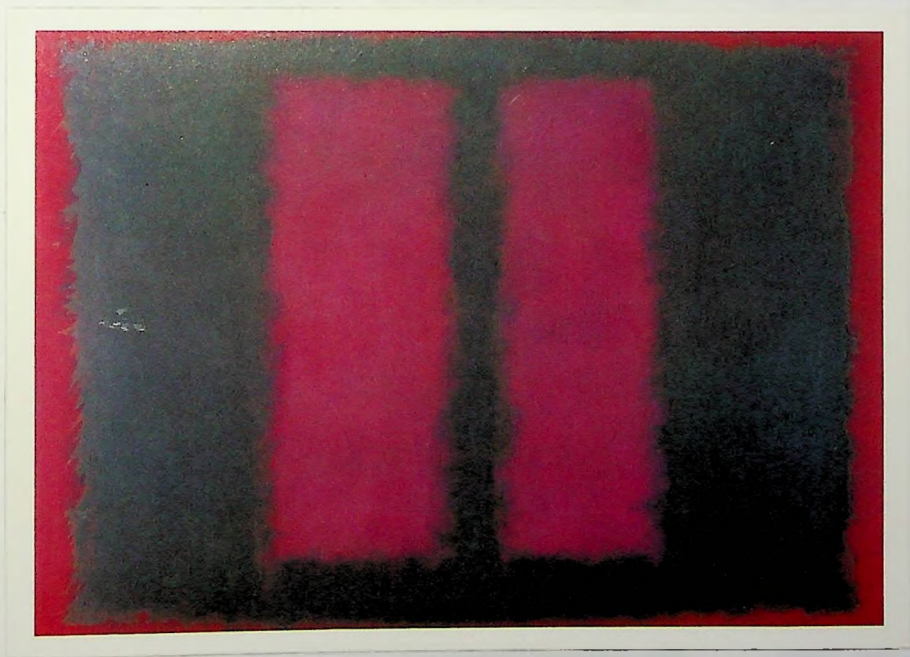
The tumultuous entrance of Mark Rothko into Abstract Expressionism, marked an important stage in the development of the movement. He shared their

common goal, - Abstract Expressionism being a dedication to a vital contemporary American art. But, more importantly they believed that this art should embody the personal experience of each artist.

In 1969 - eight months before Rothko's death, he received an honorary degree in The Fine Arts from Yale University. Kingman Brewster, President of Yale, spoke of Rothko:

"You have made an enduring place for yourself in the art of this century, your paintings are marked by a simplicity of form and magnification of colour. In them you have attained a visual and spiritual grandeur whose foundation is the tragic vein of human existence."

Through the unconscious, Rothko used automatism as the ignition to a life full of exploration into painting. On 13 June 1943, in a letter to the New York Times, Rothko, Newman and Gottlieb wrote:- 'Art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take chances'.



MARK ROTHKO
BLACK ON MAROON 1958



MARK ROTHKO

UNTITLED 1951-5



MARK ROTHKO

LIGHT RED OVER BLACK 1957

FOOTNOTES

1. Harold Rosenberg (1906 -) U.S. art and literary critic, coined the phrase 'Action Painting', a term interchangeable with 'Abstract Expressionism'.
2. Clement Greenberg (1909 -) leading American art critic who was instrumental in bringing to attention Abstract Expressionism.
3. Andre Breton, Dada Manifesto, Litterature , May 1920, no. 13.
4. In 1907, Kandinsky was moving towards a new concept of art; by 1909 a number of artists resigned from various art bodies and formed Neue Kunstlervereinigung - New Artists Association. These artists had in common the desire to experiemnt without restriction. Members included Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Kubin, Kanoldt, Franz Marc and Hofer. In 1911 Kandinsky resigned - Marc resigned too forming a new society; Der Blaue Reiter - The Blue Rider - from Kandinsky's painting of the same title.
5. The Ashcan School were a school of American realist painters of the early 20th century interested chiefly in the depiction of everyday urban scenes.
6. Maurice Tuchman, New York School First Generation, p. 142.
7. Letter to New York Times, 13 June 1943.
8. Unconscious - Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Volume 2, p.2,406.
9. Harold Rosenberg, American Action Painters, December 1952.
10. Koestler, Arthur, The Act of Creation, 'Thinking Aside', p. 174.
11. Breton, Andre, 'Artistic Genesis and Perspectives of Surrealism', 1941, p. 68.
12. Compton, Michael, essay 'Subject of the Artist - Rothko', p. 43.
13. Chave, Anna, 'Mark Rothko', p. 77.
14. Chave, Anna, 'Mark Rothko - Myth Making', p. 68
15. Simon, Sidney, 'Concerning the beginning of the New York School', 1939-1943, an interview with Robert Motherwell, 1967.
16. Simon, Sidney, Interview with Robert Motherwell, p. 23.
17. Aurier, George Alber, 'Symbolism in Painting'.

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