

## MARK ROTHKO

The whole of man's experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea.<sup>1</sup>

Mark Rothko

The quietly beautiful abstract paintings by Mark Rothko (1903-1970) have been described as “pure color in amounts large enough to express invisible states of mind,” and “no longer earthbound but galactic in [their] vistas.”<sup>2</sup> These spare abstractions—high-keyed and light-filled or darkly brooding—date to the last twenty years of Rothko's life. Rothko's earlier achievements, which include hundreds of canvases and works on paper are considerable as well, either as independent works of art or for their keen relationships to his late work.

This exhibition includes twenty-seven drawings, watercolors, gouaches, and paintings on canvas and paper in oil and acrylic, that date from the late 1920s through 1970, and are on loan from the National Gallery of Art, Washington. These works offer an overview of Rothko's artistic evolution over five decades: early representational images of figures, landscapes, and cityscapes are followed by works from the transitional decade of the 1940s which reveal Rothko's embrace of key modernist concerns, and culminate with his signature late abstractions.

Apart from classes at the Art Students League (1925-1926) with Max Weber, Rothko was self-trained. In 1928 he met painter Milton Avery whose spare forms and subtle colors profoundly influenced his direction. Philosophy and psychology -- including the writings of Aeschylus, Plato, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud -- were of profound importance to him as were an interest in drama and a lifelong love of music, especially that of Mozart, Wagner, and his friend Morton Feldman (1926-1987).

Rothko painted woodland scenes in watercolor between about 1928 and 1932, working *en plein air* in a variety of settings including the Adirondack Mountains in Pennsylvania and the rugged environs surrounding Portland, Oregon, where he spent his childhood and would return to visit family. His first solo exhibitions in 1933 included some of these works, presumably close in character to the earliest work in this exhibition, *Untitled (Landscape)* (no. 1). His affinity for both subject and medium is vivid in this loosely painted composition in which pulsating color patches interact with bright white paper. His method and medium as well as the subject suggest Rothko's interest in the art of French painter Paul Cezanne and John Marin, one of the best-known landscape watercolorists in the United States at the time.

The organic meanderings of the landscape were rapidly superseded in his art by the geometric structuring of the city, a subject that would yield paintings and watercolors of a more poignant and personal nature. But whatever the setting—interior views, city streets, the beach—much of Rothko's early work includes representations of the figure, individually or in groups. During these years Rothko participated in weekly life-drawing

sessions at Milton Avery's apartment, and hundreds of drawings from these gatherings survive. Rothko also created many studies in graphite and ink of men, women, and children as part of his daily routine: family and friends engaged in life's rituals, such as knitting, reading, and playing cards.

*Untitled (Portrait of a Woman Wearing a Hat)* (no. 2) is a typical example of his brush drawings of the early 1930s for which he employed black water-based paint or ink. He inscribed lines into the rapidly executed, velvety strokes with a sharp, pointed tool, revealing the off--white surface of the distinctive linen-textured paper specific to these drawings. From these early years, Rothko's approach to materials and tools was always experimental, using various methods and combinations.

In the late 1930s, Rothko exhibited with an artists' group called "The Ten," whose members he described as consistent in their "opposition to conservatism, in their capacity to see objects and events as though for the first time, free from accretions of habit, and divorced from the conventions of a thousand years of painting...[as well as] diverse in their intellectual and emotional interpretations of the environment."<sup>3</sup> Rothko also exhibited with the American Artists' Congress during the 1930s. *Street Scene* (no. 3) was included in exhibitions organized by both of these groups in late 1937 and mid-1938 respectively. Dramatically lit city settings such as this one, comprised of a tightly interlocking geometric structure, were among Rothko's favored motifs during these years; they are often populated by stilted figures that relate formally but are isolated psychologically. Frequently they are anonymous, their faces either blank or dotted with

nonspecific features. Similar figures also are found in Rothko's opaque watercolors of this date, such as *Untitled (Figure Standing at a Portal)* (no. 4).

Rothko consistently worked on both paper and canvas throughout his early career. He frequently painted more than one version of a subject, sometimes in various media on different supports. For example, the brilliantly colored *Untitled (Seated Woman with Crossed Legs)* (no. 5) exists in a second version also on colored construction paper in the National Gallery's collection. Rothko used colored construction papers for many opaque watercolors at this time, setting the stage for the painted color fields of his later canvases. The dense black in *Untitled (Figure Standing at a Portal)* plays a dominant role in the velvety color relationships that establish a sense of mystery and loss; this is in contrast to the red underlying *Untitled (Seated Woman with Crossed Legs)*, which provides essential warmth to the figure's environment. Both works are painted with what appears to be inexpensive opaque watercolor called show-card, the paper and paint being materials Rothko would have had available for the children's classes he taught from 1929 through 1952 at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center.

In this early work, Rothko already tended to paint in layers and veils, building up surfaces in ways that produced complex color relationships and spatially ambiguous forms, both of which look forward to the layered luminosity of his later abstractions. In addition, the softly rendered, open-edged, blocklike shapes in works from the 1930s have visual parallels in Rothko's later work.

Architectural settings, both interior and exterior, remained prominent in Rothko's art through the end of the 1930s, prefiguring his concern for the late architectonic structures. These carefully constructed compositions include *Untitled (Seated Figure)* and *Underground Fantasy* (nos. 6 and 7). The latter was one of Rothko's last scenes of the subway, a subject that had preoccupied him since 1935, and he exhibited it in the first annual exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in 1941. The spare mysterious horizontal composition is prescient of some of Rothko's symbolic/surrealist abstractions of the mid-1940s, following the fractured-figure based works at the start of that decade.

Rothko contributed articles to avant-garde journals including *The Tiger's Eye* and *Possibilities*, and wrote introductions to exhibition catalogues of works by his friends. In 1945 he praised Clifford Still for expressing "the tragic-religious drama which is generic to all Myths at all times," a personal concern of Rothko as well.<sup>4</sup> He also spent several years working on a dense text that has been edited by his son, Christopher Rothko, and recently published by Yale University Press as *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (2004). It suggests his turmoil as he moved from the expressionist figuration that had preoccupied him throughout the 1930s and makes ever-more clear that Rothko's vision essentially was rooted in tragedy, with Rembrandt among his primary painter "mentors", and Nietzsche among his writer "mentors."

About 1940 Rothko's art changed radically as he moved away from his birth name, Marcus Rothkowitz, and started using the name Mark Rothko. He was acting in

parallel with other artists associated with the New York School all of whom were responding to the Depression in the United States, the war in Europe, and ideas brought to New York by artists who had fled the conflict, such as Marcel Duchamp and Joan Miro. In a 1943 radio broadcast, Rothko discussed “the artist’s eternal interest in the human figure, character and emotions—in short in the human drama,” fifteen years later affirming that his generation “was preoccupied with the human figure and...it was with utmost reluctance that I found that it did not meet my needs.”<sup>5</sup>

By this time Rothko’s art had moved from representation based on visual cues from the quotidian world to a practice rooted in the mythic content that was dominating contemporary avant-garde art. Rothko’s work of the early 1940s fits into the broad category of surrealism but divides into two groupings. From about 1940 to 1942, the fragmented figure dominates, usually multiple repetitions of forms fractured and encased within segmented areas of the plane: individual features within multiple heads, arms and legs overlapping intertwined as in *Untitled* (no. 8). This is when Rothko’s lifelong concern for mythology was most overtly visible. A passionate seeker of his place within the lineage of art and history, Rothko described his generation as embracing the myths of antiquity “because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological idea. They are the symbols of man’s primitive fears and motivations no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance...modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams.”<sup>6</sup>

Between 1942 and 1946 Rothko's work again changed radically and he returned to the aesthetic possibilities of transparent watercolor, exploring color and form with an experimental abandon that would be carried into his later abstractions. More complex than the transparent watercolors of the late 1920s, those of the 1940s incorporate areas of opaque paint, graphite and pen or brush and ink, as well as incised lines that all together developed as a vast compendium of marks and surfaces. This period is exemplified here by two *Untitled* watercolors (nos. 9 and 10), and two oils, *The Source* and *Aquatic Drama* (nos. 11 and 12). The human figure is recognizable as an occasional fragmentary and/or a metaphorical form, augmented by architectonic elements, and suggestions of birds, fish, the sea, foliage—shapes that “have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms.”<sup>7</sup> In many works the horizontal divisions associated with Rothko's later classic compositions come into play.

By 1947 working on canvas gained prominence in Rothko's art as he moved into the works that have posthumously been referred to as “multiforms.” 1947 to 1949 was a period of immense formal experimentation for Rothko, in the orientation and shapes of his canvases, the kinds of forms he created on them, and their color range: earth tones dominate some canvases, whereas either a warm or a cool palette marks others. The multiforms in this exhibition, *No. 22*, *No. 9*, *No. 10*, and *No. 7/No. 11* (nos. 13-16) all on canvas, demonstrate Rothko's evolution toward the compositionally spare, exceedingly complex surfaces of his classic style. Amorphously shaped forms that feel like they are moving across the plane, as in *No. 22*, shift to confined shapes of a more geometric

nature in *No. 9*. This last was reproduced several times shortly after it was painted, including in a 1951 *Art News Annual* piece by Thomas B. Hess entitled “Introduction to Abstract” in a segment of the article devoted to “the colors of freedom” and annotated as “color drifting across the surface provides the drama.” The multiforms assumed a greater sense of serenity, as in the soft, hovering squares and rectangles that dominate *No. 10*, whereas in *No. 7/No. 11*, the movement of horizontal bands across the field has begun to align itself with Rothko’s classic compositions. *No. 7/No. 11* was included in Rothko’s 1950 exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, as well as in *Mark Rothko*, a 1961 retrospective exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art that traveled to six European countries.

Rothko’s late, luminous color-forms were achieved in part through his practice of mixing media in unorthodox ways and his immensely diverse sense of touch. In his early work Rothko had developed complex ways of manipulating veiled and layered surfaces with great dexterity, using a palette knife for scraping and a pointed tool for incising. With his shift to abstraction, he worked in a variety of orientations, and his paint drips can be seen moving in multiple directions. From the point at which surface (i.e., process) overtook image in Rothko’s complex of concerns, relationships between the works on paper and on canvas become essential to any understanding of this art.

The range of Rothko’s late signature work is represented in this exhibition by eight paintings on canvas and three on paper. The one horizontal canvas, *Untitled*, 1950 (no. 17), dates to the first year Rothko’s classic style was fully present. Four canvases --

*Red Band*, *Untitled*, and two *Untitled* works from 1956 (nos.18-21), are marked by red fields that interact in radically different ways with the rectangular orange, white, black, and red forms hovering within them. The 1957 canvas, *Untitled* (no. 22), marks Rothko's move that year toward a darker palette. Two *Untitled* paintings from 1968 and 1969 (nos. 23 and 24), further reveal the drama and poetry evoked by Rothko's use of blacks, browns, blues, and violets. Smaller and lighter in measurable weight than paintings on canvas, Rothko's many paintings on paper from 1968 and 1969 are thought to reflect his physical limitations after suffering an aortic aneurism in April 1968, and other health problems.

Given Rothko's history of working on paper at times of transition in his work, it seems likely that reasons additional to physical limitations were at play in his choice of paper at this time, when his compositional strategy was changing from rectangles hovering on a field to rectangular divisions of a field; a white border most often encloses the divisions. The works on paper enabled him to experiment with the nature of that border, and they are marked by brushwork of enormous energy and ambition, brushwork that is more immediately visible on paper than on the woven surface of canvas whose texture modifies brush strokes.

As to Rothko's use of color at the end of his life, two *Untitled* paintings on paper from 1969 (nos. 25 and 26) make clear that Rothko's late work was not wholly engaged by the velvety darkness that is often said to reflect the deepening depression generated by

his health and other personal problems. Many works on paper from 1968 and 1969 include passages of bright reds, pinks and oranges, pale greys and blues, and whites.

Rothko's deep humanistic concerns expressed at the start of his career by means of the figure are carried into the late abstract work through the attention to scale in his paintings and through relationships between the paintings and the measurements, proportions, and span of his body. "I would sooner confer anthropomorphic attributes upon a stone," he wrote "than dehumanize the slightest possibility of consciousness."<sup>8</sup> In the early 1950s the size of Rothko's paintings -- measuring ten feet high and up to fifteen feet wide -- was considered gigantic for the time. In addition to scale, color was the painterly quality in Rothko's work that was most frequently commented upon. Rothko himself tended to downplay the importance of color to his work. Nonetheless, from the start of his career subtle color relationships and unusual hues were key in both paintings and works on paper.

Rothko was immensely concerned about the display of his paintings, eventually refusing to participate in group exhibitions and refusing to sell paintings if he thought they would be put on view unsympathetically. The first semipermanent museum installation of a "Rothko room" that reflected his views on how his work should be seen (hung relatively low to the floor and without the diversion of works by other artists) opened at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., in 1960, when three canvases in that collection (a fourth was added in 1964) were installed in an intimate gallery intended to provide a meditative space.

Rothko's installation interests were further carried out in his mural commissions of late 1950s and 1960s. He commented in 1959 upon seeing Paestum that he had "been painting Greek temples all my life without knowing it," presumably referring back to his mythic work from the early 1940s, considering the sacred spaces created within his then current classic compositions, and looking forward to his mural cycles, the first of which was underway at the time. The most successful of Rothko's three mural commissions was the Rothko Chapel commission in Houston. Although the fourteen canvases for the Houston Chapel were completed by 1967, Rothko never saw his paintings installed; the Chapel opened in 1971. Plagued by side effects from illnesses and medications as well as profound personal problems, Mark Rothko had taken his life the previous year on February 25, 1970.

The feelings one experiences when confronting Rothko's paintings are profoundly difficult to translate into words, and it was important to him that viewers be permitted to interact with and respond to his art in a personal manner. Supporting this view are his comments when a group of his paintings was about to be installed in the Art Institute of Chicago, and he was concerned about the production of any text that would tell the public how the pictures should be looked at and what to look for.

While on the surface this may seem an obliging and helpful thing to do, the real result is paralysis of the mind and imagination (and for the artist a premature entombment)...If I must place my trust somewhere, I would invest it in the psyche of sensitive observers who are free of the conventions

of understanding. I would have no apprehensions about the use they would make of these pictures for the needs of their own spirits. For if there is both need and spirit, there is bound to be a real transaction.<sup>9</sup>

Ruth Fine

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<sup>1</sup> Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," typescript of a broadcast on "Art in New York" Radio WNYC, 13 October 1943, reprinted in *Mark Rothko 1903-1970* [exh. cat., Tate Gallery] (London, 1987), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation by George Segal in Jeffrey Weiss et. Al., *Mark Rothko* [Exh. Cat., National Gallery of Art] (Washington, 2004), 372; and Hubert Crehan, "Rothko's Wall of Light: A Show of His New Work at Chicago," *Arts Digest* 29 (1 November, 1954), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Braddon and Mark Rothko, "Writings of Mark Rothko," in Tate 1987, 76.

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to the catalogue for a 1946 exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery, Tate 1987, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Tate 1987, 79.

<sup>6</sup> Tate 1987, 80

<sup>7</sup> Mark Rothko, "The Romantics were Prompted," *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947/1948), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Rothko, Personal Statement [David Porter Gallery] (Washington, 1945), in Tate 1987, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Katharine Kuh, "Mark Rothko," *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly*, XLVIII, no. 4 (15 November 1954), 68.

### *The Art of Mark Rothko: Selections from the National Gallery of Art* Brochure Checklist

All works are from the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1986.

- 1) *Untitled (Landscape)*, late 1920s/early 1930s, watercolor on paper.
- 2) *Untitled (Portrait of a Woman Wearing a Hat)*, c. 1932, gouache on paper.
- 3) *Street Scene*, 1936/1937, oil on canvas.
- 4) *Untitled (Figure Standing at a Portal)*, 1938/1939, gouache on paper.
- 5) *Untitled (Seated Woman with Crossed Legs)*, c. 1935, gouache on paper
- 6) *Untitled (Seated Figure)*, 1938/1939, gouache on paper
- 7) *Underground Fantasy*, c.1940, oil on canvas

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- 8) *Untitled*, 1941/1942; oil on canvas
  - 9) *Untitled*, c. 1945; watercolor, graphite, ink on paper
  - 10) *Untitled*, c. 1945; watercolor, graphite, ink on paper
  - 11) *The Source*, 1945/1946; oil on canvas
  - 12) *Aquatic Drama*, 1946; oil on canvas
  - 13) *No. 22*, 1948, oil on canvas
  - 14) *No. 9*, 1948, oil and mixed media on canvas
  - 15) *No. 10*, 1949, oil on canvas
  - 16) *No. 7/No. 11*, 1949, oil on canvas
  - 17) *Untitled*, 1950, oil on canvas
  - 18) *Red Band*, 1955, oil on canvas
  - 19) *Untitled*, 1955, oil on canvas
  - 20) *Untitled*, 1956, oil and acrylic on canvas
  - 21) *Untitled*, 1956, oil on canvas
  - 22) *Untitled*, 1957, oil on canvas
  - 23) *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on paper
  - 24) *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on canvas
  - 25) *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper
  - 26) *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper
  - 27) *Untitled*, 1970, acrylic on canvas