

In the Tower: Mark Rothko



National Gallery of Art, Washington
February 21, 2010–January 2, 2011

The exhibition is made possible by the generous support
of the Aaron I. Fleischman Foundation.

Rothko's Black Paintings: Facts and Imaginings

THE PREDOMINANTLY BLACK PAINTINGS that Mark Rothko produced in 1964 were a startling departure. In more than a dozen large canvases, he renounced the multiple hazy rectangles of glowing color that had defined his much-admired works of the 1950s. Instead he turned austere, limiting himself to a single black rectangle in a black or nearly black field. Never sold or exhibited during his lifetime, these little-known works have often been seen as tokens of the depression and illness that began to plague Rothko after his 1961 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, even as harbingers of his suicide in 1970. This exhibition, the first one to focus on the black paintings, offers the chance for a reappraisal.

Let us begin by taking a look over the artist's shoulder (fig. 1). In the summer of 1964, Rothko sits in an Adirondack chair in a converted garage in Amagansett, New York, considering a reddish-brown-on-red painting whose hot glow seems palpable.¹ At right is a black painting, perhaps in progress or at least still wet, as it rests on small blocks. But for their color, the two are strikingly similar: they share a radically spare composition, sharp-edged forms, and a restricted palette.

As he smokes, let us imagine that Rothko looks back and forth, assessing the variable of color within the two works. The face-off between red and black puts him in mind of one of his heroes, Henri Matisse. We know that Rothko's favorite modern painting is Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911), a work notable for its great expanse of a single color (fig. 2).² He also admires Matisse's famously abstract *French Window at Collioure* (1914) with its domineering black rectangle (fig. 3). Of this work Matisse said, "I began to use pure black as a color of light and not as a color of darkness."³ If, as the photograph suggests, Rothko's black paintings grew from a red version that he kept close at hand,



1 Mark Rothko, c. 1964, photograph by Hans Namuth, Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate.



2 ABOVE Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1911, oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY.



3 LEFT Henri Matisse, *French Window at Collioure*, 1914, oil on canvas, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: CNAC/ MNAM/ Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY.

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then perhaps what he sought in the realm of black was an “inner light,” a Matissean radiance equal to that of an intense field of color.⁴

Rothko also thinks of one of his contemporaries, Ad Reinhardt, who, after exploring the possibilities of red and then blue, limited himself to black from 1960 on (fig. 4). Despite their similar palette, Reinhardt’s black paintings are quite different from Rothko’s, employing a grid to display nearly undetectable differences of hue. In 1969 Rothko noted another difference: “[Reinhardt’s] paintings are immaterial. Mine are *here*. Materially. The surfaces, the work of the brush and so on. His are untouchable.”⁵

The comment calls our attention to the surface. While the central rectangle of the red canvas in the photograph is unusually textured, the rectangle of the black canvas has a smooth, high sheen. Here, in the realm of reflectivity, lies part of the drama of the black paintings. Without color to differentiate the central rectangle from the outer border, the only distinguishing element is that of gloss, a slippery indicator at best, for a change in angle of light or viewing can flip any given area from matte to reflective or vice versa. In *No. 2* (cover), for example, the central rectangle is either black velvet or a silver screen, or it may modulate from one to the other as our gaze travels up and down its surface. Black becomes light.⁶ A closer look reveals still more surprises. The edges are not so sharp after all, nor are the hues all black: hints of a violet underlayer appear along the borders of the rectangle. The black paintings are not simply voids. As their nuances gradually unfold, so their range of feeling expands as well.



4 Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5*, 1962, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London, Presented by Mrs. Rita Reinhardt through the Federation of Arts 1972. Photo: Tate, London/Art Resource, NY. © 2010 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



5 The Rothko Chapel interior with original skylight grid, 1971. Photograph by Hickey-Robertson, Houston, Courtesy The Rothko Chapel.

Let us intrude on the artist once again, this time a few months earlier, in Rothko's Manhattan studio. Two young collectors, Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, are there:

We visited Mark Rothko at his studio... and he invited us to select... any one of the five paintings he was making at that time. To my knowledge, it was the first time, other than his mural work, that he did a serial group of paintings. To us, they were overwhelmingly large, too dark, and frighteningly mysterious. Brightly colored edges of earlier paintings protruded temptingly from the bins but he was adamant in denying us even a peek.⁷

This report anticipates the difficulty that the public would have with Rothko's black paintings. It also raises the question of the relationship between them and the mural-like cycles that absorbed much of his late career.

A month after the Meyerhoffs' visit, the collector Dominique de Menil called on Rothko and proposed a series of paintings for a Catholic chapel in Houston, today the non-denominational Rothko Chapel (fig. 5). Having recently worked on multicanvas commissions for the Four Seasons Restaurant (1958 – 1959) and Harvard University (1961 – 1963), Rothko was already thinking serially and had begun to find individual paintings "inadequate and episodic."⁸ "If Rothko never received the chapel commission," writes Rothko scholar David Anfam, "he would have had to invent it."⁹ The artist eagerly accepted de Menil's commission, which absorbed him from the fall of 1964 through the spring of 1967. He produced fourteen large paintings and four alternates, many of them direct successors to the black paintings of 1964.



6 Mark Rothko, *Street Scene*, 1936/1937, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



7 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

THE PRESENT EXHIBITION OFFERS two contexts for the black paintings. One is a selection of earlier paintings by Rothko from the National Gallery that features black. Black plays only a small role in Rothko's classic work of the 1950s, and yet it was a frequent, often imposing presence in his earlier paintings, from the figurative works of the 1930s through the surrealist-inspired canvases of the mid-1940s (figs. 6 and 7) to the "multiforms" of the late 1940s. Thus Rothko's turn to black in 1964 was something of a return, but one whose significance remains uncertain.

A second context offered by the exhibition is *Rothko Chapel*, a piece of music by Rothko's close friend Morton Feldman, commissioned by de Menil in 1971 when the chapel opened, a year after Rothko's death. It was performed live in the chapel with

two facing choirs so that, in Feldman's words, the music would "permeate the whole octagonal-shaped room and not be heard from a certain distance." As a result, he felt the sound was "closer, more physically with you than in a concert hall." This was his attempt to reflect the paintings' placement on opposing walls around the perimeter of the chapel as well as the fact that their "imagery goes right to the edge of the canvas."¹⁰

Clearly, it is not possible here to duplicate these relationships within and between the art and the music of the Rothko Chapel; at most, the music can offer a free-floating commentary or obbligato. In its unusual (for Feldman) lushness and lyricism, even concluding with a Hebrew melody, the composition suggests that the brooding quality of the black paintings was less an artifact of biography than an abiding philosophical concern with "the tragic and timeless." Rothko said he wished to raise painting to the "level of poignancy of music and poetry," and he found support for this hope in his frequent reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872).¹¹ From that book Rothko concluded that aesthetic harmony was empty if it did not reflect the range of human passions, from terror to joy.¹²

And so, as you look at Rothko's black paintings of 1964, listen to Feldman's music, and study Rothko's earlier paintings featuring black, we invite you to question the simple equation of darkness and despair and to re-imagine blackness as a medium of light — nuanced, expansive, and even hopeful.

- 1 Although Rothko dated the red painting (*Untitled*, Collection Kate Rothko Prizel) 1960, David Anfam suggests a date of 1964 based on its close similarity to one of the black paintings. Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas* (Washington and New Haven, 1998), 95; 105 n. 310.
- 2 James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago and London, 1993), 283.
- 3 Quoted in Stephanie Rosenthal, *Black Paintings* (exh. cat., Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2006), 15.
- 4 In his instructions to the curators of the Whitechapel Art Gallery venue of his 1961 retrospective organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Rothko wrote: "The pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light, the color in the picture is washed out." Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 412.
- 5 Rothko to Rita Reinhardt in 1969. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 529.
- 6 Carol Mancusi-Ungaro notes: "The progression in the rest of the series is toward an even tighter form and away from the dance of opposing media effects that characterizes No. 1 and No. 2." Mancusi-Ungaro, "Material and Immaterial Surface: The Paintings of Rothko," in Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko* (exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998), 296.
- 7 Jane Meyerhoff, "The Collector's Perspective," in Nina Sundell, *The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection, 1958 - 1979* (Baltimore, 1980). The Meyerhoffs would buy No. 2 in 1977.
- 8 Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 459.
- 9 Anfam, "Dark Illumination: The Context of the Rothko Chapel," in *Mark Rothko: The Chapel Commission* (Houston, 1996), 11.
- 10 Feldman, notes to *Rothko Chapel*, Columbia Records Y 34138, quoted in Steven Johnson, "Rothko Chapel and Rothko's Chapel," *Perspectives of New Music* 32:2 (Summer 1994), 29.
- 11 Rothko to Barbara Novak, quoted in Barbara Novak and Brian O'Doherty, "Rothko's Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void," in Weiss, *Mark Rothko*, 266. The 1943 letter written by Rothko with Adolph Gottlieb and edited by Barnett Newman asserted that "only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." See Bonnie Clearwater, "Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to *The New York Times*," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24:1 (1984), 23 - 25.
- 12 Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 357 - 359.

Exhibition Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are Mark Rothko, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

Untitled (Man with Green Face), 1934/1935, oil on canvas, 71.5 × 60.9 cm (27¹¹/₁₆ × 23¹¹/₁₆ in.)

Street Scene, 1936/1937, oil on canvas, 91.5 × 55.8 cm (36 × 22 in.)

Untitled (Reclining Nude), 1937/1938, oil on canvas, 60.9 × 45.6 cm (24 × 18 in.)

Untitled, 1942, oil on canvas, 32.4 × 47.4 cm (12⁷/₈ × 18³/₄ in.)

Untitled, 1945, oil on canvas, 56.4 × 76.5 cm (22¹/₄ × 30¹/₈ in.)

Gesture (?), 1945/1946, oil on canvas, 79.7 × 100.7 cm (31³/₈ × 39⁵/₈ in.)

Untitled, 1946, oil on canvas, 99.9 × 69.9 cm (39⁵/₁₆ × 27¹/₂ in.)

Vision at End of Day, 1946, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 127.1 cm (40 × 50 in.)

No. 10, 1948, oil on canvas, 164.2 × 108 cm (64 × 42¹/₂ in.)

No. 2, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 266.5 × 203.2 cm (105 × 80 in.), Collection of Robert and Jane Meyerhoff

No. 4, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 264.1 × 226.5 cm (104 × 89¹/₂ in.)

No. 5, 1964, oil, acrylic, and mixed media on canvas, 206.2 × 193.7 cm (81¹/₈ × 76¹/₄ in.)

No. 6 (?), 1964, oil, acrylic, and mixed media on canvas, 236.2 × 193 cm (93 × 76 in.)

No. 7, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 236.4 × 193.6 cm (93¹/₈ × 76¹/₄ in.)

No. 8, 1964, oil, acrylic, and mixed media on canvas, 266.7 × 203.2 cm (105 × 80 in.)

Untitled, 1964, oil and mixed media on canvas, 175.5 × 167.6 cm (69¹/₈ × 66 in.)

Morton Feldman, *Rothko Chapel*, 1971. Philip Brett, director; UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus; David Abel, viola; Karen Rosenak, celeste; William Winant, percussion. From *Rothko Chapel; Why Patterns?* (NA039), 1991, Courtesy New Albion Records, Inc.

In 1986, the Mark Rothko Foundation gave hundreds of paintings and drawings to the National Gallery of Art, making it the foremost public repository of the artist's work. The present exhibition, part of an ongoing series in the Tower Gallery focusing on contemporary art and its roots, extends our commitment to the study and presentation of Rothko's work.

This exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art.

This brochure was written by Harry Cooper, curator of modern and contemporary art, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office at the National Gallery of Art. Text copyright © 2010 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

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COVER No. 2, 1964, Collection of Robert and Jane Meyerhoff