

## **Mark Rothko's Houston Chapel Paintings**

By Amy Sedivi

Mark Rothko's final masterpiece was his set of paintings created for the Houston Chapel in Texas. The Houston Chapel project was founded by John and Dominique de Menil, who, in 1964, "chose Rothko in part because of his well known insistence on the spiritual character of his work" (Johnson, 6). Rothko completed these paintings in 1967, though he never saw them installed in the chapel. He committed suicide in 1970, just a year before the chapel was completed. The building was originally intended to be used as a Catholic chapel. Yet, at its completion in 1971, it was decided that the site would instead be used as an ecumenical center. Either way, the chapel has a religious aura about it, which comes solely from Rothko's contribution. Indeed, Rothko's chapel paintings are truly spiritual works meant to induce a religious experience in the spectator.

These paintings truly envelop the viewer due to their massive size. In fact, the largest of the fourteen paintings in the chapel is eleven feet by fifteen feet. These huge paintings are arranged symmetrically on the walls of an octagonal-shaped structure and consist of three triptychs and five individual panels. Although architect Philip Johnson designed the floor-plan of the building, Rothko still had control over the creation of the chapel. In fact, "its octagonal shape successfully echoes one of Rothko's favorite buildings, the baptistery and church in Torcello, Italy" (Polcari, 60). The reflection of the Torcello baptistery in the Houston Chapel adds to the spiritual nature of the entire structure.

Dominique de Menil states that the color of the panels "varies from a deep maroon to a slightly more purplish and lighter maroon. Half of the paintings have a black

field” (251). While Rothko claims to have been “interested... only in proportions and shapes,” the color still plays an important role in the meaning of the work (Rothko, quoted in Johnson, 11). It is agreed upon by most art historians that the black field paintings mentioned by de Menil are “like an impending doom” and that the lighter purplish and maroon paintings spell out hope and the height of spirituality (de Menil, 251). Rothko himself stated that, “the dark mood of the monumental triptych was meant to convey Christ’s suffering on Good Friday: and the brighter hues of the last mural, Easter and the Resurrection” (Rothko, quoted in Polcari, 60). Yet, while it may be true that the darker paintings represent a time of suffering and the brighter paintings represent a time of rebirth, it is not necessarily implied that the lighter paintings are more spiritual, as most art historians conclude. In fact, both representations have the potential to be equally spiritual, since they both represent religious themes.

Yet, it is my opinion that the darker panels are actually the most spiritual works in the chapel. De Menil herself explains that “the mere suggestion of white walls threw [Rothko] into a panic. He had an abhorrence for pure white, which he equated to hospital sterilization” (249). Clearly, Rothko found more comfort, and thus perhaps spirituality, in darker colors. In fact, Rothko’s paintings became progressively darker during the last years of his career. It could be theorized that Rothko felt that the end of his life was drawing closer and that he was attempting to find some level of spirituality during those years. I argue that he found that spirituality in the dark, contemplative aspect of the black void. Thus, in the Houston chapel, the nearly monochromatic black paintings are the zenith of the religious aspect of the panels, as opposed to the purple and red paintings. The lack of simplicity in the use of the purple and red colors brings about a less

meditative experience for the viewer. Rothko himself believed that “less” was “more”, which he realized when he “did try ‘more’ and... discovered it was ‘less’” (de Menil, 251). Black is the absence of color, thus, it is “less”. Clearly, Rothko understood that more could be explained and experienced through this absence.

The use of color in the panels also adds symbolism to the work. Steven Johnson explains that:

The red occurs in two other panels, where... it suggests forms related to the sun.

In the Northeast panel, a few narrow streaks of deep scarlet run horizontally along the bottom of the picture. The effect resembles the final traces of a sun setting on a low horizon, about to be expunged by the black-purple night towering above it.

(14)

The symbolism of a setting sun is usually equated with death. Rothko apparently felt that death leads us closer to true spirituality, which seems to be evident if one takes into account that Rothko took his own life. He appeared to find a higher form of existence in the subjects of death and darkness.

Color plays an important role in the mobility of the paintings, as well. Johnson opines that “the monochrome panels seem relatively immobile, because they lack the conflicting rectangles of earlier paintings” (30). It should be noted that the monochrome panels refer to the black panels, not the more colorful panels. I believe that the immobility of the dark paintings implies peace, which relates to spirituality. The colorful paintings have more movement. Therefore, they are more chaotic and thus more humanistic and less spiritual.

The contrast between chaos and peace can also be found in the style of the paintings. The lighter colored “panels hold the most rhythmically active brushstrokes in the Chapel, taking the form of jagged, rising peaks that stretch horizontally across the canvas, one system atop another” (Johnson, 13). The active brushstrokes add to the chaos and mobile qualities of the lighter paintings. As stated earlier, chaos represents the human world, whereas peacefulness represents the heavenly world. Thus, the darker paintings that have less active brushstrokes are less humanistic and more spiritual; they are on a higher plane of existence.

When Rothko painted, he placed the most importance on the form and subject matter. Rothko “insisted that his art had subject matter, which he defined as the expression of ‘basic human emotions’ like ‘tragedy, ecstasy, [and] doom’” (Johnson, 44). One major form in Rothko’s Houston Chapel paintings is that of his dark, monochrome rectangular shapes, which could easily be equated to voids. The size of the void increases as the paintings progress, until, finally, the “night... [invades] the wall” (de Menil, 251). Some viewers might make the mistake of reading the voids as “nothingness”. Rothko, however, did not paint pictures of “nothing”. There was always subject matter in his paintings. He never “was interested... in making background ornamentation,” which he proved during the controversy over his Seagram murals (Lum, 77). Therefore, his paintings always had a presence. In fact, Rothko and his fellow artist Adolf Gottlieb wrote a statement in 1943 expressing many of their ideas, including the following: “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” (Rothko and Gottlieb, quoted in Rosenberg, 228). Thus, the voids in Rothko’s chapel paintings have a spiritual

weight, presence, and meaning. They could easily be read as a passage to a greater level of spirituality.

Harold Rosenberg, a noted art critic, however, reads the rectangles not as voids, but as meditative spaces. In his article “Metaphysical Feelings in Modern Art,” Rosenberg states that, “for his part, Rothko inclined toward atmospheric compositions suggestive of sacred grottoes or meditation cells, and his metaphysical ambition reached its zenith in the murals he executed for a chapel in Houston” (228). This supports the view that the paintings had a spiritual presence and that they should not be read as simplistically as paintings of black rectangular forms. Another art historian, Anna Chave, also views Rothko’s paintings as having a religious and spiritual meaning. However, she sees the rectangles not as voids or meditation cells, but as icons. She believes that the “rectangular spaces... [are] not meant to appear as doors” and that “by giving the painted object the status of an icon, Rothko returns his work to that traditional relationship between architecture and the privileged role accorded to the religious icon” (Lum, 78). Thus, the meaning of Rothko’s rectangular forms is highly debated. It is clear, however, that there is a spiritual quality to the forms.

The spirituality of the paintings is enhanced by the non-representational quality of the forms. Rosenberg explains that “figurative art, far from being the exclusive mode of religious expression, is actually banned in leading faiths such as Islamic and Judean” (222). He continues to discuss the views of theoretician T. E. Hulme who “considered that religion belongs to a realm totally separated from the organic and inorganic world, and that hence genuine religious art ought to be devoid of images of human being and nature” (222). According to Hulme’s view, a painting of the Virgin and Child is merely a

depiction of religious figures. It does not depict religion itself. Rothko, however, shows religion's essence. He is not merely displaying a scene of religious history; he invites the viewer to experience religion through art in its truest form. The nature of the panels allows one to focus on more than just human figures or earthly images. Rothko's paintings transcend everything familiar in the world and cause one to begin pondering aspects of existence that the human mind can barely even begin to grasp.

Similar to the rectangular forms, the arrangement of the panels themselves is steeped in religious symbolism. There are fourteen paintings, which "equal the number associated with the traditional Stations of the Cross; triptychs are commonly associated with altarpieces; and the octagon was the structure used for the Eastern Orthodox church" (Johnson, 44). The Christian cross is also referenced "by raising the middle panel above the outer ones in the East and West triptychs" (Johnson, 44). This vast amount of Christian symbolism relates back to the original intention for the space to be used as a Catholic chapel. While Rothko did not install his works, he designed the space and made plans for it before his death. Since the chapel was not religiously unaffiliated until after his suicide, Rothko was clearly working from the idea that the site would be used for solely Catholic purposes. Ergo, the religious symbolism is not accidental by any means.

Rothko mixed color, style, form, and symbolism to provide the viewer with a truly religious experience. He himself stated that "people who weep before my paintings are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them" (Rothko, quoted in Johnson, 44). Rothko clearly wanted the viewer to understand his feelings at the time of painting his works. In order for this to occur, he created an intimate experience with the viewer. This intimate experience is mostly a result of the scale of his paintings. When

discussing the massive quality of his works, Rothko once said, “I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and very pompous. The reason why I paint large pictures, however – and I think it applies to some of the other painters I know – is precisely because I want to be very intimate and very human” (Rothko, quoted in Lum, 75). By painting such large works, Rothko caused his paintings to have a more human scale. The large scale of the chapel paintings possibly caused human spectators to relate to the paintings far more than if Rothko had painted the same forms on a one foot by one foot canvas. A smaller canvas would have seemed distant and cold; it would just be a painting and nothing more. With a larger canvas, one can immerse themselves in the work and allow the painting to wrap around themselves, to take up their entire frame of vision. The relationship between the spectator and the work of art would allow the viewer to understand the meaning of the painting much more successfully than if it were a smaller painting, and thus the spectator would come to understand the level of spirituality in the panels.

It could also be argued that the scale of the panels create an overwhelming experience for the viewer, which could easily bring about the weeping that Rothko seems to hope for as a result of viewing his paintings. The overwhelming quality would cause a feeling of sublimity that is often associated with spiritual occurrences and religion. Most Abstract Expressionist artists, much like Rothko, created large works in order to create this feeling of sublimity. In fact, Barnett Newman, another Abstract Expressionist and a contemporary of Rothko, painted *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1951, Museum of Modern Art), with which he blatantly advertised the sublime nature of his work by including the Latin word for “sublime” in the title. Sublimity was a popular theme in the art world

during the era of Abstract Expressionism and it is no surprise that Rothko used this theme in order to enhance the spiritual experience of the work.

John and Dominique de Menil's choice of Rothko due to the "spiritual quality of his work" was successful (Johnson, 6). It has surely been shown that Rothko's Houston Chapel paintings are highly spiritual works. Despite the fact that they were originally created for a Catholic audience, I believe that they can create a contemplative experience for viewers of any faith. Rothko's paintings can be used as a means to a greater spirituality for anyone, whether they are trying to come to know God or attempting to reach Nirvana. His darker, nearly monochrome paintings are reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings" from the 1960s which resemble "an ecclesiastical image. With the metaphysics of negation, Reinhardt sought to bring an asceticism into painting that would be equivalent to a vow of silence" (Rosenberg, 231). Rothko's chapel paintings also resemble "an ecclesiastical image"; they, too, are also akin to a "vow of silence". Upon entering the small chapel in Houston, a hush falls upon the viewer as their mind moves away from politics, gas prices, and tabloid headlines and to a rarely traversed world of mysticism and discovery.



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