

Mark Rothko: Heritage, Environment, and Tradition

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# Mark Rothko

## *Heritage, Environment, and Tradition*

Stephen Polcari

*heritage: the condition into which one is born*

*environment: the aggregate of all the external conditions and influences affecting the life and development of an organism, human behavior, society*

*tradition: something handed down from the past*

—Webster's Dictionary

Throughout his career Mark Rothko (1903–1970) sought to evoke the totality of the human experience. Declaring that painting is a “means of philosophic thought” and more than mere visual reactions or sensations, Rothko differentiated his art for these reasons from mainstream School of Paris art, especially from that of Picasso.<sup>1</sup> Although his assessment is oversimplified, Rothko criticized Picasso’s work for lacking “any very deep or esoteric philosophy,” for being purely physical, for being concerned with sensuous color, form, and design, which it did not transcend. In contrast, he advised young artists not only to master the skills of painting but, more importantly, to formulate a personal philosophy of painting by gaining some “general understanding of psychology, philosophy, physics, literature, the other arts, and the writings of mystics.” Rothko clearly stated his art was one of ideas, not merely of sensuous form and color.

One complex of ideas which Rothko used throughout his career was that of archaic heritage and tradition. Through symbols, first of an architectural frame and then of inheritances of nature, psyche, and tradition, he posited an archaism that endures and is a determining force in contemporary life. For Rothko, the disasters of contemporary history—especially World War II—had their roots in the past. His symbols represent a tradition of tragedy that not only envelops modern life, but also the future.

All too often Abstract Expressionism is portrayed as yet another manifestation of primitivism—the emulation of tribal artistic form and culture—in modern art.<sup>2</sup> While this is true of the work of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Clyfford Still (1904–1980), and to a degree, Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), it is *not* completely true of Rothko’s art. On the contrary, from the very first Rothko set forth an “Americanist” view that individuals are a product of their mental environment and heritage. This concept, widespread in American art and thought in the 1930s, was embraced by painters such as Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) and Grant Wood (1892–1942), whose works reflected American habits, customs, and traditions. Even to the American Cubist Stuart Davis, whose work repudiated Benton’s and Wood’s representational style, modern art reflected the American “mental as well as the ordinary ma-

Portrait of Mark Rothko. *Mary Fuller McChesney Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*



terial environment.”<sup>3</sup>

Rothko combined this environmental determinism with a search for archaic roots and patterns. He was thus in accord with the descriptions of modernism in the 1930s that emphasized its traditional sources. As critic Sheldon Cheney observed in *Expressionism in Art*, “The Moderns, indeed, go to man’s past reverently. They recognize the life of the ages as soil from which contemporary art takes nourishment.” For Cheney, the moderns had to step back into the past in order to go forward. James Johnson Sweeney put forth similar sentiments when he wrote: “It was realized that a new epoch could grow only out of a new archaism. The surface soil had become exhausted. It had to be turned deeply and completely to produce anything young in vigor or sap.”<sup>4</sup>

Rothko’s investigation of human life and habit—tradition—partially sprang from the coming of World War II, the latest of the catastrophes that seemed to be a continuing part of modern life. The war led to psychological introspection among many artists, just as the Great Depression had led to cultural introspection in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Rothko, Gottlieb, Barnett Newman (1905–1970), and others participated in a search for the root causes, historical precedents, and emotional effects not only of the Second World War but of warfare throughout time. For the Abstract Expressionists, art became an investigation of the history of inner rather than outer social life. Depth psychology and Surrealism became two of the tools to examine the origins of human behavior. Freudian and especially Jungian psychology—with its emphasis on the ancient, archaic, and primitive, and on mythic and collective behavior—provided the instruments for understanding and defining contemporary history.

Rothko expressed his concur-

rence with the notion of a collective psychology during a 1943 radio broadcast with Gottlieb. He declared that such a common psychology could be traced back to antiquity and was evident in myths. These myths and their underlying concepts expressed the primaries of human experience, whatever their topical differences:

*If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. 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, be they Greek, Aztec, Icelandic, or Egyptian. And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life.*<sup>6</sup>

Rothko’s approach to the past—the archaic and the antique—was further clarified in 1943 in the original draft (before it was altered by Gottlieb and Newman) of his now famous letter to the *New York Times*:

*Anyone familiar with the evolution of modern art knows what potent catalyzers Negro sculpture, and the art of the Aegean were at its inception. Ever since this inception the most gifted men of our time, whether they seated their models in their studios, or found within themselves the models for their art, have distorted these models until they awoke the traces of their archaic prototype and it is their distortion which symbolizes the spiritual force of our time.*

*To say that the modern artist has been fascinated primarily by the formal relationship aspects of archaic art is, at best, a partial and misleading explanation. For any serious artist or thinker will know that a*

1 *Untitled, ca. 1939–40. Oil on canvas, 29¾ × 36 in. Collection Richard E. and Jane M. Lang*



*form is significant only insofar as it expresses the inherent idea. The truth is therefore that the modern artist has a spiritual kinship with the emotions which these archaic forms imprison and the myths which they represent. The public therefore which reacted so violently to the primitive brutality of this art, reacted more truly than the critic who spoke about forms and techniques. That the public resented this spiritual mirroring of itself is not difficult to understand.<sup>7</sup>*

In this passage, Rothko states many of his lifelong interests and commitments, including the idea of archaic art as a prototype, of which modern art reveals traces, and his sense of a spiritual and emotional kinship with earlier art and myth. In the preamble to the constitution of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, written in 1940, Rothko and another artist, probably Gottlieb, condemned art that negated the “world traditions” on which they felt modern art was supposed to be founded.

A serious student of ancient culture, Rothko was drawn to ancient art, particularly the religious and mythological scenes found in Greek painting and architecture. He often visited the Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman rooms of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and in the 1920s he copied images from books on ancient art to illustrate a Bible.<sup>8</sup> The results of these studies are perceptible in his art. Rothko’s youthful work presents a lifelong symbolic theme—the unity of the architectonic, the environmental, and the figurative. The compositions of some of his important formative work from 1940–41 to 1946 generally consist of horizontally segmented frieze bands inspired by Greek vase painting, architecture, and architectural sculpture. These works incorporate barely perceptible fragments and quotations of ancient art, which function as evocations and signs of the past.<sup>9</sup> Rothko used his ancient fragments to join the past to the present as part of a new creation and a “spiritual mirror” of contem-



2 Akhenaten/Amenhotep IV (*Egyptian*), ca. 1365 B.C. Limestone, 44 in. high. State Museums, Berlin



3 Arrival of a Warrior, red-figured hydria (southern Italian), fourth century B.C. Terra-cotta, 23½ in. high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

porary life. For him, the past was the origin of the Western inner and outer world.

In an untitled painting from 1939–40, Rothko suggested the variety, yet continuity, of humanity and the roots of civilization (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> The painting contains three rows of forms. The top band comprises heads representative of various ancient civilizations. To the extreme right is the head of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, recognizable by the distinctive curving chin (fig. 2). This head flows into a double profile head with a Greek or Assyrian beard, into what appears to be an Oriental head with swelling cheeks in profile, which in turn shares a nose with the head having the elongated lips of a face with an archaic kouros-like smile. A profile of a warrior in a Corinthian helmet completes the upper frieze at the left. All the heads are joined by a scalloped, wavy line that is similar to a Greek decorative band called running dogs, many examples of which could be found in vases at the Metropolitan (fig. 3).

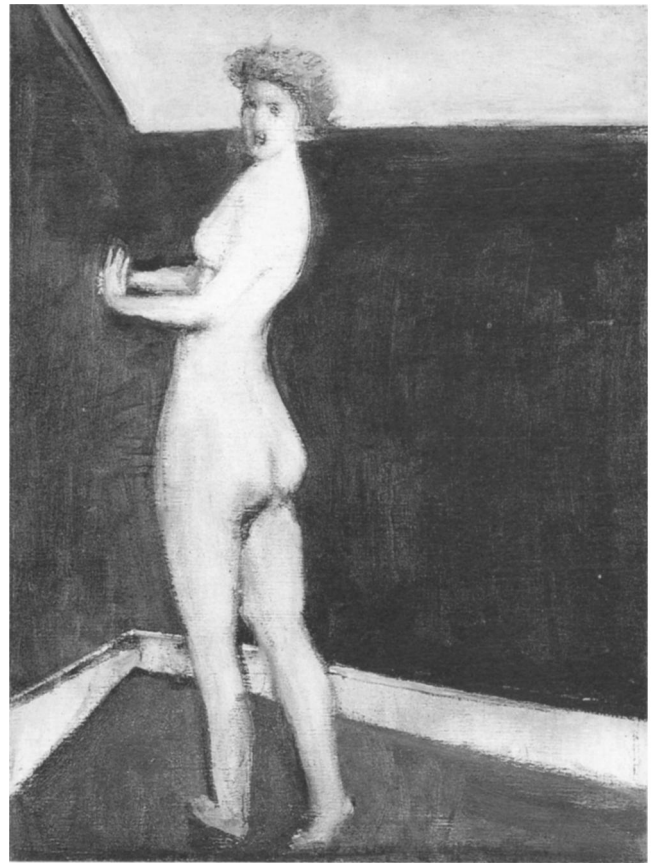
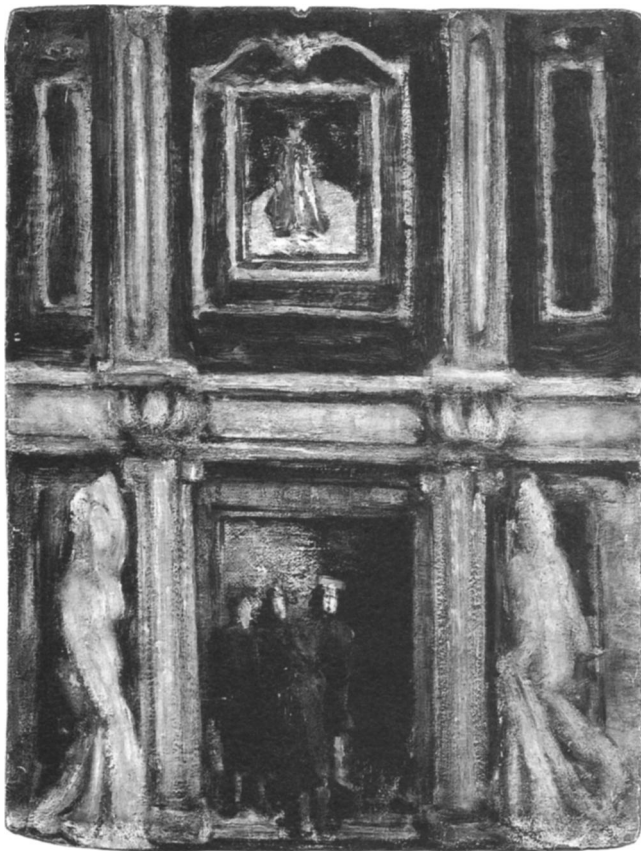
The center tier consists of classic Greek architectural fragments. In the bottom register, ancient architectural ornaments (including acanthus leaves), also suggestive of claws, tentacles, and bones, signify our dual roots in nature as well as Greek civilization. These forms thus function as signs of our ancient and biological past. (Similar ancient claw bones make up the roots of the figures in Rothko's later *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea* [1944, The Museum of Modern Art]).

Rothko's painting suggests a combination of figural and architectural compositions typical of some of the Boscoreale frescoes at the Metropolitan that he, William Baziotis (1912–1963), and other Abstract Expressionists loved.<sup>11</sup> This combination of figural and architectural elements originated in

Rothko's work in the 1930s. For example, *Interior* consists of elements of classical architecture, and architectural sculpture and "real" figures that are difficult to distinguish from one another, and an untitled work from 1936–37 depicts a nude woman walking toward the corner of two walls, looking back over her shoulder (figs. 4, 5). The walls seem to place the figure in an embracing environment and significantly *enclose* the figure. But by the 1940s, Rothko transformed his concept of the space that encloses one. The enveloping environment had become ancient and mythic. Rothko symbolized this transition by inserting ancient architectural fragments into the figural frames; these later paintings now embodied the internalization of tradition.

This shift in approach is particularly evident in another untitled painting of the 1940s, in which the artist combines several figures in an architectural frame reminiscent of classical niches (fig. 6). Here Rothko created a multisided human/organic form and enclosed it within a classicizing architectonic environment reminiscent of Greek funeral steles. Moving vertically (from top to bottom) the composition consists of several Greek bearded heads fused together in profile and frontal views; several breasts and a flat (Miró-inspired?) phallic or hip shape combined with what appear to be buttocks; and, at the bottom, curling tendrils, thistles, and roots, all in earthtones.

The use of composite figures in these works reflects Rothko's decision to make the human figure the centerpiece of his art. Both he and Gottlieb wanted to portray the human figure but not mutilate it. They felt compelled, however, to create representations of the human figure that would address complex ideas of the fates and forces at work on humanity. Thus, their work would have to be both figura-



- 4 Interior, ca. 1932. Oil on masonite,  $23\frac{15}{16} \times 18\frac{5}{16}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.
- 5 Untitled, 1936–38. Oil on canvas,  $23\frac{7}{8} \times 18\frac{1}{8}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

tive and conceptual. For this, the conventional whole human shape was simply inadequate. A composite form was needed. Gottlieb decided on a pictograph structure, partially inspired by Renaissance predellas, in which he placed parts of the human body, objects, and shapes and signs evocative of primitive and ancient forms in a series of compartments. Rothko experimented with a similar compositional scheme in at least one painting, in which he filled compartments with fragments of the Crucifixion and Greek/Christ heads (fig. 7). His primary solution, however, was the architectonic frieze figure. Such a figurative composition allowed him not only to suggest the conventional human frame—head on top, feet below—but also integrate and layer his conception of the roots and sources of its human nature.

Rothko's figures, then, are not actual figures in any conventional sense. They are not single beings but complexes: they are varied, dynamic forms, shapes, ancient traces and fragments, and conceptual signs and philosophical or literary symbols. Figural appearance or form is not important except as some function, attribute, or sign of the past. Like most Abstract Expressionists' work at this stage, Rothko's consists of personifications of concepts, not forms drawn from everyday life or objects.

#### Tragic Myth

Rothko drew on Greek literature to expand and develop his notion of environment to include a heritage and tradition of disaster. He was particularly interested in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, which portrays the history of the Greek



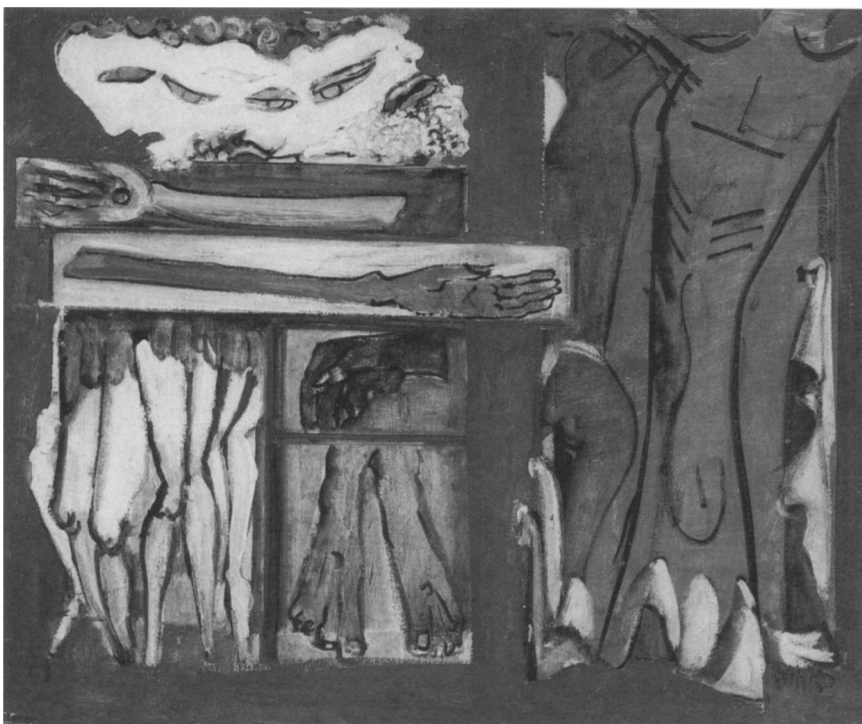
6 *Untitled, ca. 1940. Oil on canvas, 31<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 23<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Collection Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.*

world as a sequence of intergenerational murders, insatiate discord, perennial menace, and political, religious, and familial disaster. It depicts the conflicts and legacy of the Greeks' world war, the Trojan War,

and creates a drama of extreme emotions and violent situations, of life and death, and of inward conflict and obligation. Rothko was not the only one to draw on Greek tragic themes in the 1940s. That sev-



Untitled, early 1940s. Oil on canvas, 30 × 36 in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



eral artists, including Seymour Lipton and Martha Graham,<sup>12</sup> simultaneously chose themes from the same source strengthens the argument that Rothko's art was partly rooted in the reaction to World War II and the prevalent sense of uncertainty among contemporary American artists about the fate of humanity and civilization. Cassandra's description of the House of Atreus in *Agamemnon* could have been a description of Rothko's world: "... the house that hates god, an echoing womb of guilt, kinsmen torturing kinsmen, severed heads, slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming blood." For many in the 1940s, "the storms of ruin live[d]."

Rothko's interest in Aeschylus and ancient tragic drama was derived from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, a work that greatly influenced him as a young man.<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche's description of an art of tragic myth, Dionysian energies, and extreme joy resulted from his valuation of Aeschylean drama. Assertions in

*The Birth of Tragedy* that art should dramatize the terror and struggles of existence must have seemed to Rothko to support his understanding of the artist's role under the terror of contemporary history. Nietzsche's own "primitivization" of the root cultures, history, and art of the West through his focus on preclassical and pre-Socratic Aeschylean drama as well as his advocacy of a visionary art provided the link between concepts of the primitive and the classical that lies at the base of Rothko's art. Rothko's classicism was a Nietzschean, Dionysian archaism—preclassicism in Nietzsche's terms—new to twentieth-century art and thought. It reflected the modern vision of the classical world that, for many, replaced Johann Joachim Wincklemann's "a calm simplicity, a noble grandeur." Through Nietzsche, Rothko modernized classicism to conform to his world: he made it archaic.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche argued that Aeschylean tragedy and tragic myth represent



universal truths that are infinite and eternal. For Nietzsche and Rothko, myth concentrates the tragic Dionysian nature of life in symbolic form. As Nietzsche wrote:

*Dionysian truth takes over the entire domain of myth as the symbolism of its knowledge which it makes known partly in the public cult of tragedy and partly in the secret celebrations of dramatic mysteries, but always in the old mythical garb. . . . Through tragedy the myth attains its most profound content, its most expressive form.*<sup>14</sup>

Originally a god of fertility, Dionysus became a symbol of tragic suffering. In early rites, he symbolized suffering, dismemberment, and restoration. Nietzsche pictured the Dionysian spirit as a kind of god and savior who could lead mankind by means of art to accept suffering. In Nietzschean tragic drama and myth, Dionysus infused the individual with a larger set of values and a higher form of life than the merely individualistic. Through its forms—the tragic myth and music (another of Rothko’s interests)—the Dionysian spirit advanced culture and awareness.

A belief in the necessity of myth, and especially the suprapersonal or communal, underlies Rothko’s art. In 1945, for example, Rothko indicated his belief that a “Myth-Making” movement had begun during the war.<sup>15</sup> In the catalogue of Clyfford Still’s exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, Rothko wrote:

*Bypassing the current preoccupation with genre and the nuances of formal arrangements, Still expresses the tragic-religious drama which is generic to all Myths at all times, no matter where they occur. He is creating counterparts to re-*

*place the old mythological hybrids who have lost their pertinence in the intervening centuries.*<sup>16</sup>

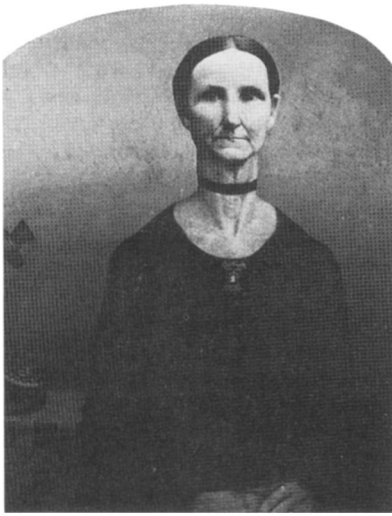
Here Rothko states his desire to get to the central theme of all myths. He sees the modern mythmaker—himself—as the truly creative power whose myths reflect the course of the human spirit in all its aspirations, vicissitudes, powers, and wisdom.

*The Omen of the Eagle*, a key visual representation of the complex of ideas with which Rothko was engaged in the early 1940s, presents his concerns with all-encompassing myth and origins (fig. 8). *The Omen of the Eagle* combines, in hybrid images, the past and present, the primitive and the classical, the artistically ancient and modern, and the mythic and tragic.

As with many works of this period (e.g., *The Omen*, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*), Rothko took the subject of *The Omen of the Eagle* from Greek literature. Here his source is *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia*, in which two eagles swoop down upon a pregnant hare and devour her unborn young, symbolizing the coming war with Troy and the coming sacrifice of the innocent Iphigenia.

The imagery of Rothko’s painting is at once classical and mythological. At the top is a series of Greek heads and at the bottom a corresponding set of human feet below a horizontal line, the derivation of which can be traced to chiton-clad figures in Greek vase painting. Between the heads and feet are eagle heads and wings, surmounting an architectural arcade echoing classical forms and receding into the background. Again a symbolic architectural environment has been internalized in a figure. Two of the arcade’s columns are rounded and pendulous, summoning to mind an image of nurturing breasts, while other col-

8 *The Omen of the Eagle*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 25¾ × 17¾ in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



9 Grant Wood, *Victorian Survival*, 1931. Oil on composition board, 32½ × 26¼ in. Private collection

umns end in hooks, suggesting talons or tentacles.

The composite human-bird-architectural figure of *The Omen of the Eagle* additionally represents, according to Rothko, a mythic creature. In describing the work, he indicated his intention to make of his figures something primitive and religious. He, however, also declared that he was *not* interested in illustrating mythological stories, only in evoking their general spirit, meaning, and pattern:

*The theme here is derived from the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus. The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths at all times. It involves a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree, the Known as well as the Knowable—merge into a single tragic idea.*<sup>17</sup>

The figure is therefore the point of reference, as in most of Rothko's work, and is made to embody and express the complex nature of man. *The Omen of the Eagle* is a single-figure totem intended to represent Rothko's ideas about the phylogeny of culture and consciousness. Although it resembles surrealist hybrids, especially those of Miró and Ernst, in its composition of dissimilar and variegated parts and spatial dimensions, its allusions to the historic past distinguish it from them. In some ways, Rothko's figural structure, with its simultaneity and interrelated but disjointed parts, is a pictorial equivalent to T. S. Eliot's and James Joyce's stream of consciousness. (Eliot and Joyce were extremely important figures in the development of the concept of the continuity of the past with the present in Abstract Expressionism.)<sup>18</sup>

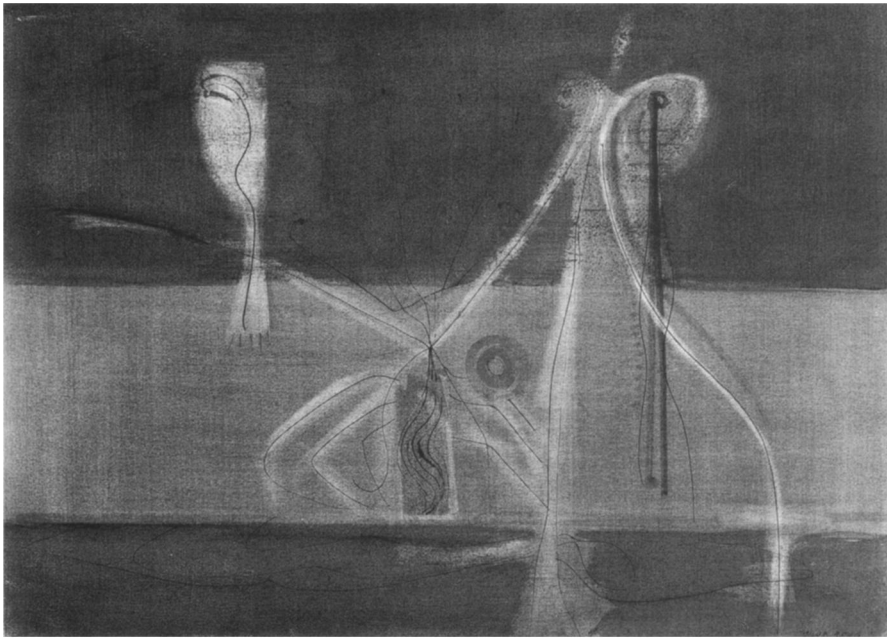
Rothko's figures of 1941–42 thus extend his theme of the absorption of the figure by the environment. After the 1930s, Rothko developed

a concept of the mental environment as the Graeco-Roman tragic past to which contemporary America and Western Europe belong and which shapes their experience. In 1948 an anonymous critic succinctly related Rothko's idea:

*... the thing he is trying to say I'm told is that forms and space are one, that there is no beginning or end of anything, that we all are part of our environment.*<sup>19</sup>

Rothko evoked the past not only as environment but also as memory and survival. As he observed in 1949, "an atavistic memory, a prophetic dream, may exist side by side with the casual event of today." Such a remark accords with discussions, for example, in the American surrealist magazine *View*, where in 1946 one author noted that the modern artist is seeking the subconscious where the "prenatal memory, the survival of ancestral customs and the automatic and instinctive activity of the spirit" lie. The survival of customs and rites was a theme common to the writings of many on whom Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists drew, including Sir James Frazer, Jessie Weston, and Carl Jung, and it informs the definition of tradition that was part of the American art of the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the anti-modernist American artists of that time also sought primal roots and traditions in the evocation of archaic American ancestries. Grant Wood, in his own deliberately archaic style (based on Flemish, German and nineteenth-century American primitives)—*American Gothic* and *Victorian Survival* (fig. 9)—personified American inheritances much in the way Rothko created totems of Western legacies.<sup>21</sup>

Several of Rothko's works, including *Ancestral Imprint*, *Dream Memory*, *Prehistoric Memory*, and *Tentacles of Memory* (fig. 10), refer specifically to ancient memories

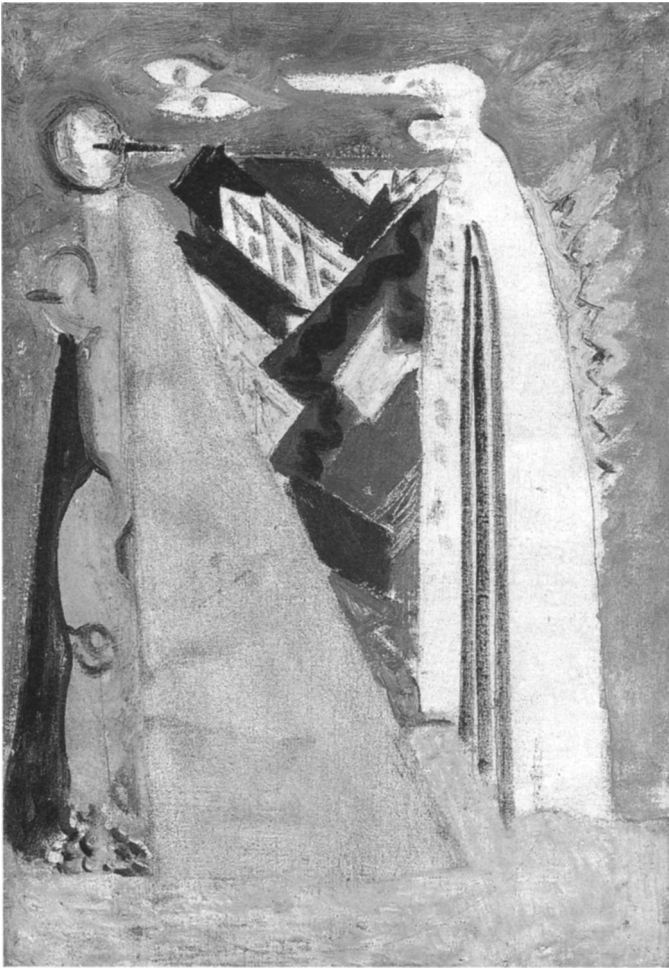


- 10 *Tentacles of Memory*, 1945–56. Watercolor and ink on paper, 21¾ × 30 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, Albert M. Bender Bequest Fund
- 11 Attributed to Sophrilos, *Confrontation of Two Boars*. *Volute krater* (Greek), early sixth century B.C. Terra-cotta, 19¾ × 21⅞ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Fried

and to the subconscious within which the memories are buried. The dark bands and the image of attenuated filaments found in *Tentacles of Memory* are drawn from the bands, the incised lines, and the contours of figures in Greek vase paintings, such as *Confrontation of Two Boars* (fig. 11). The tentacles probing layers of darkness seem a fitting representation of Eliot's notion that the contemporary writer must select words with a "network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires," to the level of experience all humans share.<sup>22</sup>

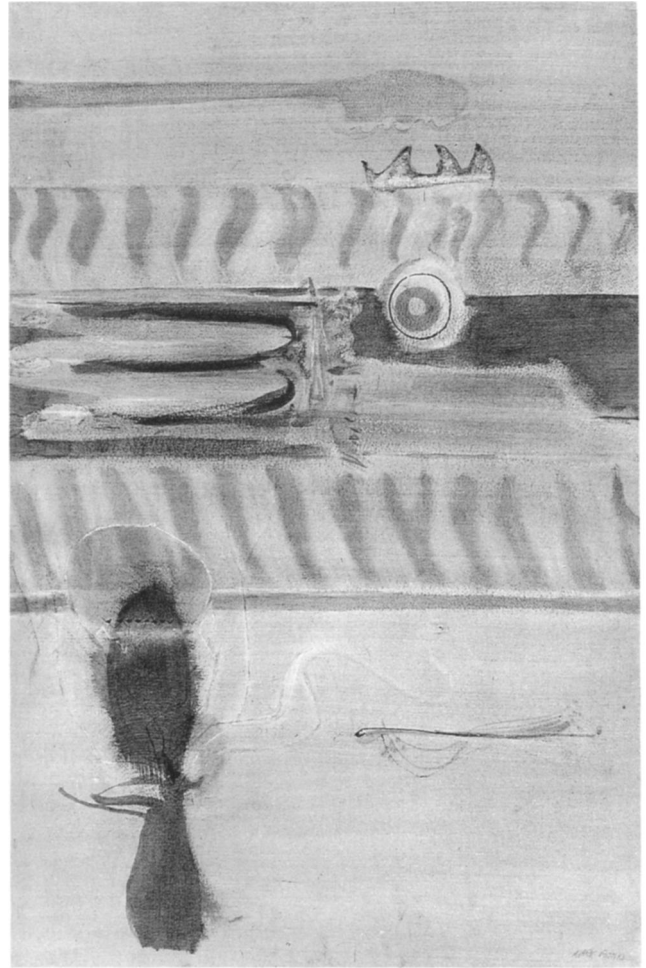
Rothko's references to the classical underpinnings of contemporary society became more abstract in sign and form by the mid 1940s. He combined more refined versions of his established themes with more frequent borrowings from surrealist imagery, often using thin washes and watercolor. His allusions to Graeco-Roman art and architecture became increasingly fugitive and abbreviated, as for example with slight suggestions of toga folds and fluted columns. Rothko used fluted lines to accent the costume of one of the bird-

seers in *The Omen* (fig. 12), as well as the figures in *Personnages Two* (1946, Mark Rothko Estate). In *Sacrifice*, the end of a fluted column and the scroll of an Ionic capital turned on its side are combined with a Miró-like figure (fig. 13). One source for the capital scroll may have been the Metropolitan's Ionic column from the Temple of Artemis at Sardis (fig. 14). In another work, vertically stacked planes, fluted shafts—perhaps derived from the same Ionic column—and volutes evoke both architectural and human curves (fig. 15). An untitled work from the early 1940s (fig. 16) unites a row of heads, a group of arms, and a series of satyrlike cloven feet with architectonic wall planes drawn from the cubiculum of the Boscoreale frescoes at the Metropolitan. Some paintings allude to triglyphs and guttae; others contain rectilinear outlines that have been simplified from architectural structures;<sup>23</sup> in *Vessels of Magic* (1946, The Brooklyn Museum) handles of Greek vases and chiton-clad figures appear. Furthermore, Rothko's tonalities echo the ochres of Greek vases or the Aegean blues associ-



12 *The Omen*, 1943. Oil and pencil on canvas, 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>6</sub> in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

13 *Sacrifice*, 1943. Gouache on paper, 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 26 in. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, and The Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, New York

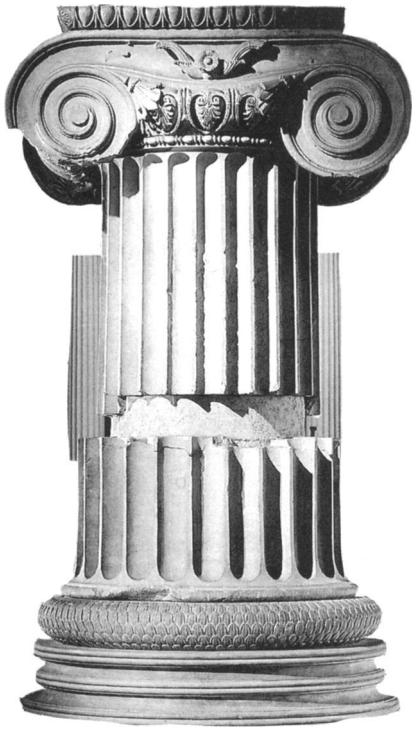


ated with the sea around Greece.<sup>24</sup>

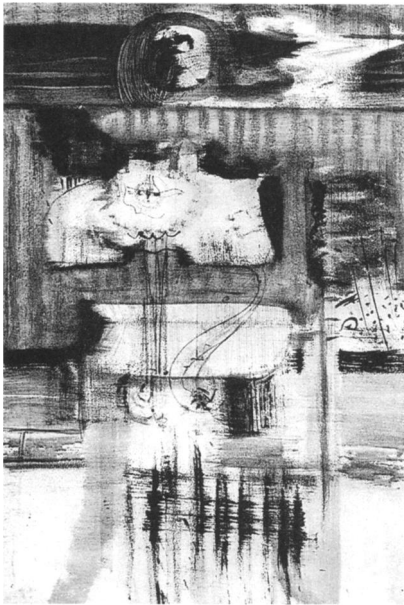
*Archaic Phantasy* is a summation of Rothko's early work, a layering of associations, symbols, and signs within combined figural and architectural organisms suggestive of the internal and external human environment (fig. 17). While this organism or figure may at first seem to be a variant of a surrealist form created by automatist meanderings, it is, in reality, a deliberate, layered complex, a "compound ghost", to use Eliot's phrase, made up mostly of signs, fragments, and memories that define human fate as Rothko conceived it. *Archaic Phantasy* combines a triangular figure-form similar to that in Ernst's *The Couple* (1924, Collection Madame Jean Krebs, Brussels) with other forms that bring to mind the spidery

arms of an insect, scales (from the top of the Artemis column), curvilinear folds of a toga, and a crown or capital. The whole is placed below an earth stratum of fluted striations and the center of what looks like an Ionic scroll. *Archaic Phantasy* is a totem of humanity's past, a conflation of Rothko's concepts of all external/internal beginnings and ends, and a reflection of the idea that human fate is to be explained by its original rather than by its final causes.

In *Archaic Phantasy*, as in most of his early work, Rothko presents art as a specter, formed from shades or ghosts of the forms and experiences of the past made into modern form and expression. Rothko's modernist art reflects a self-conscious examination of a civi-



14 *Ionic capital from the Temple of Artemis at Sardis (Greek), fourth century B.C. Marble. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the American Society for the Exploration of Sardis*



15 *Untitled, 1945-46. Watercolor on paper, 40½ × 27 in. Copyright © 1988, The Estate of Mark Rothko*

16 *Untitled, early 1940s. Oil on canvas, 35¼ × 24 in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.*



lization in which the contemporary is merely a momentary fragment. The character of this early work is clearly stated in an anonymous introduction, which Rothko must have approved, to the catalogue of his exhibition at the Art of This Century gallery in 1945:

*Rothko's painting is not easily classified. It occupies a middle ground between abstraction and surrealism. In these paintings the*

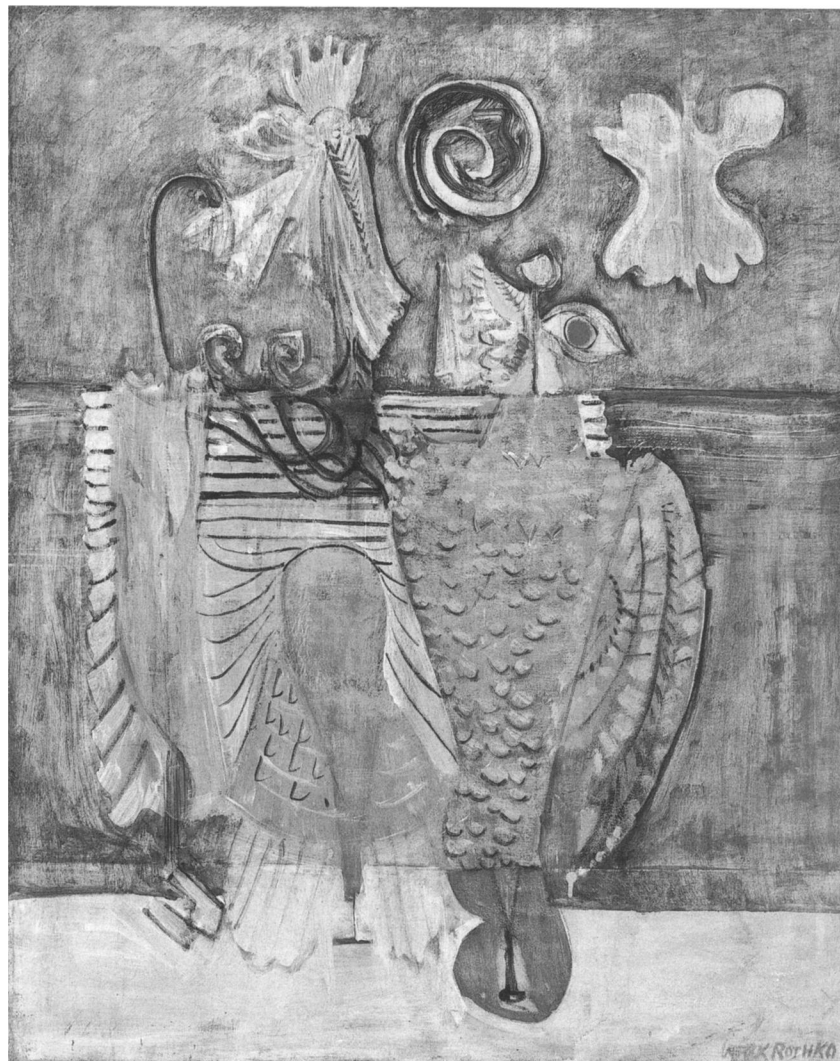
*abstract idea is incarnated in the image. Rothko's style has a latent archaic quality which the pale and uninsistent colours enforce. This particular archaization, the reverse of the primitive, suggests the long savouring of human and traditional experience as incorporated into myth [emphasis added]. Rothko's symbols, fragments of myth, are held together by a free, almost automatic calligraphy that gives a peculiar unity to his paintings—a unity*



17 Archaic Fantasy, 1945. Oil on canvas,  
48<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 24<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. National Gallery of Art,  
Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



18 Hierarchical Birds, ca. 1944. Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 31 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



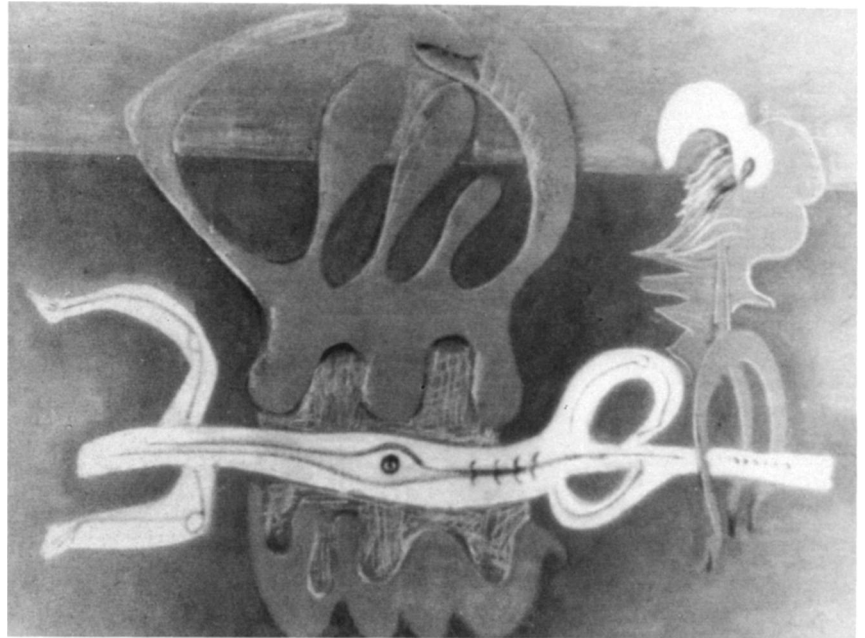
*in which the individual symbol acquires its meaning, not in isolation, but rather in its melodic adjustment to the other elements in the picture. It is this feeling of internal fusion, of the historical conscious and subconscious capable of expanding far beyond the limits of the picture space that gives Rothko's work its force and essential character.*

His work is not primitivism per se—a search for fundamentals and the elemental—but a combination of archaism and its apparent opposite, tradition. His emphasis on roots is not a primitivist repudiation of civilization, as Gauguin's

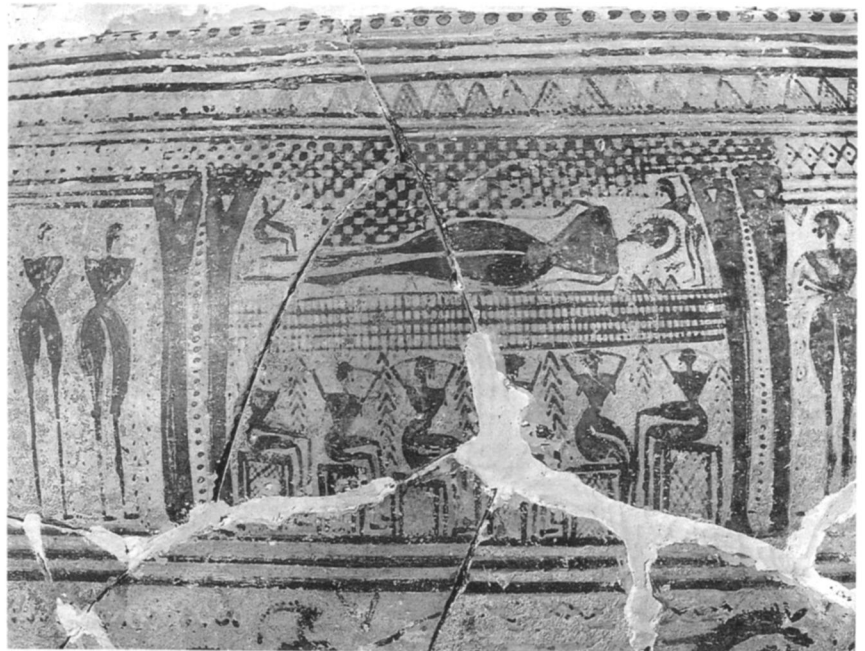
primitivism was, but part of an argument for an archaism as civilization. In his mythmaking Rothko intended to begin a new and modern version of humanity's uninterrupted chain of existences; like Joyce, he offers a *reincarnation* of tradition in the new forms of the present.

Between 1944 and 1946 Rothko also began to symbolize the legacy of early civilization and human life in a new way. One set of signs was based on evolutionary biology. Like most of his generation, Rothko was interested in the parallel origins of the physical past and consciousness, a concept he explored through images in which biological

19 *The Entombment*, ca. 1946. Oil on canvas, 23 × 40 in. Collection Herbert Ferber



20 *Geometric dipylon (detail)* decorated with funeral scenes showing mourners, chariots, and warriors (Greek), eighth century B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund

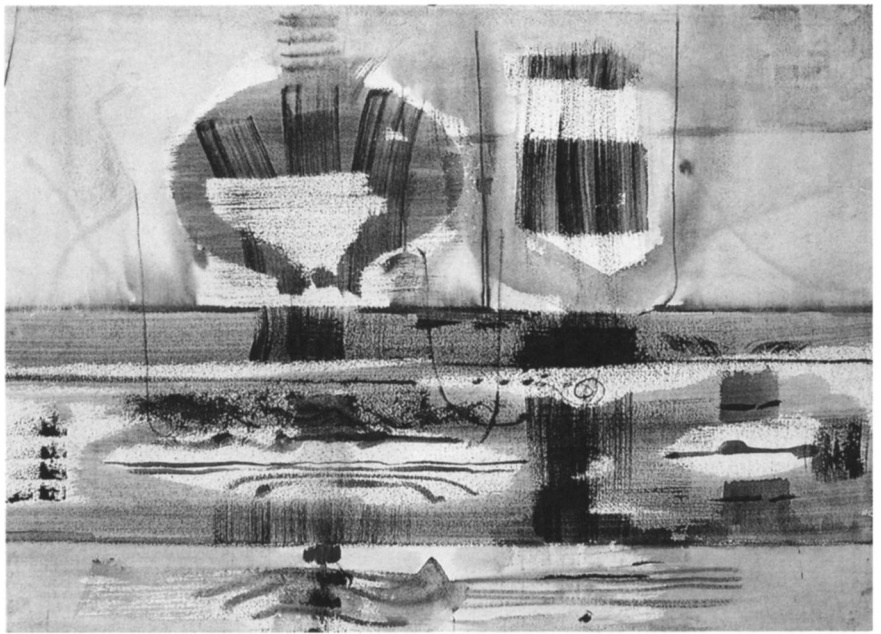


roots fuse with cultural and psychic roots.<sup>25</sup> In *Hierarchical Birds*, for instance, he divided the canvas into horizontal strata differentiated by tone or color like the bands of Greek vase painting (fig. 18). These variously colored strata are typical of paleontological diagrams, which were also a major influence on Rothko's work. Contained within and cutting through the strata are

the biomorphic shapes of birds, fish, and other elemental (and mythic) forms.<sup>26</sup> Through the conflation of diagram and vase bands, Rothko associated primal civilization with primal earth.

Rothko symbolized the depth of time with these evolutionary structures. A geological time scale invokes the ancient forces that shaped the planet and its inhabi-

21 *Untitled*, ca. 1944–46. Watercolor and ink on paper, 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 39<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (image). National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



tants throughout time and thus implies the continuation of vast epochs into the present. Rothko's ideas echo those of James Hutton—considered by many to be the father of geology—who in 1780 observed that, peering into the geologic records of the past, he could see “no vestige of a beginning, no prospects of an end.” Fossils and earth strata are nature's hieroglyphs or “unconscious,” giving us signs of humanity's past while also making prophecies of its future. Rothko's paleontological and evolutionary pictures suggest a return to the past to find the fundamentals that underlie and foretell the present and the future. They also evoke the constant change and evolution of all species.

Rothko also symbolized the continuity of the past in his *Entombment* series. The entombments take their basic compositions from Renaissance Lamentations or pietàs.<sup>27</sup> For example, *The Entombment* consists of a biomorphic, multibreasted Virgin Mary with raised arms and an Ernst-derived, scissorslike biomorph lying across her lap (fig. 19). The apparent wail-

ing pose and the prominent display of the body also seem to relate to Greek *protheses* or public displays of the dead (again, evident in vases at the Metropolitan; fig. 20).

By placing most of the figure underground as if it were part of a paleontological diagram and using a surrealist biomorphic form for the body, a claw for an arm, and a shell-like shape for the figure's lower body, Rothko combined the legacy of entombments with his idea of the legacy of nature. In other words, he declared that such death scenes are part of natural life, that death is part of a natural cycle. Other entombments, such as *Entombment I* (1946, Whitney Museum of Art), repeat the basic structure of horizontal and vertical crossings but contain no allusion to human forms. Instead, Rothko naturalized the figures found in pietàs and protheses, making them appear organic. The compositional structure becomes a sign of man's mortal fate, an index of the eternal fate of all things; it finds a permanent place in Rothko's work, including both the semi-abstract art, with its burgeoning, spreading forms



22 Clyfford Still, 1945–H, 1945. Oil on canvas, 90 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 68 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of the artist

23 Number 17, 1947. Oil on canvas, 48 × 35 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



24 Number 11, 1949. Oil on canvas, 68 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 43 $\frac{5}{16}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.

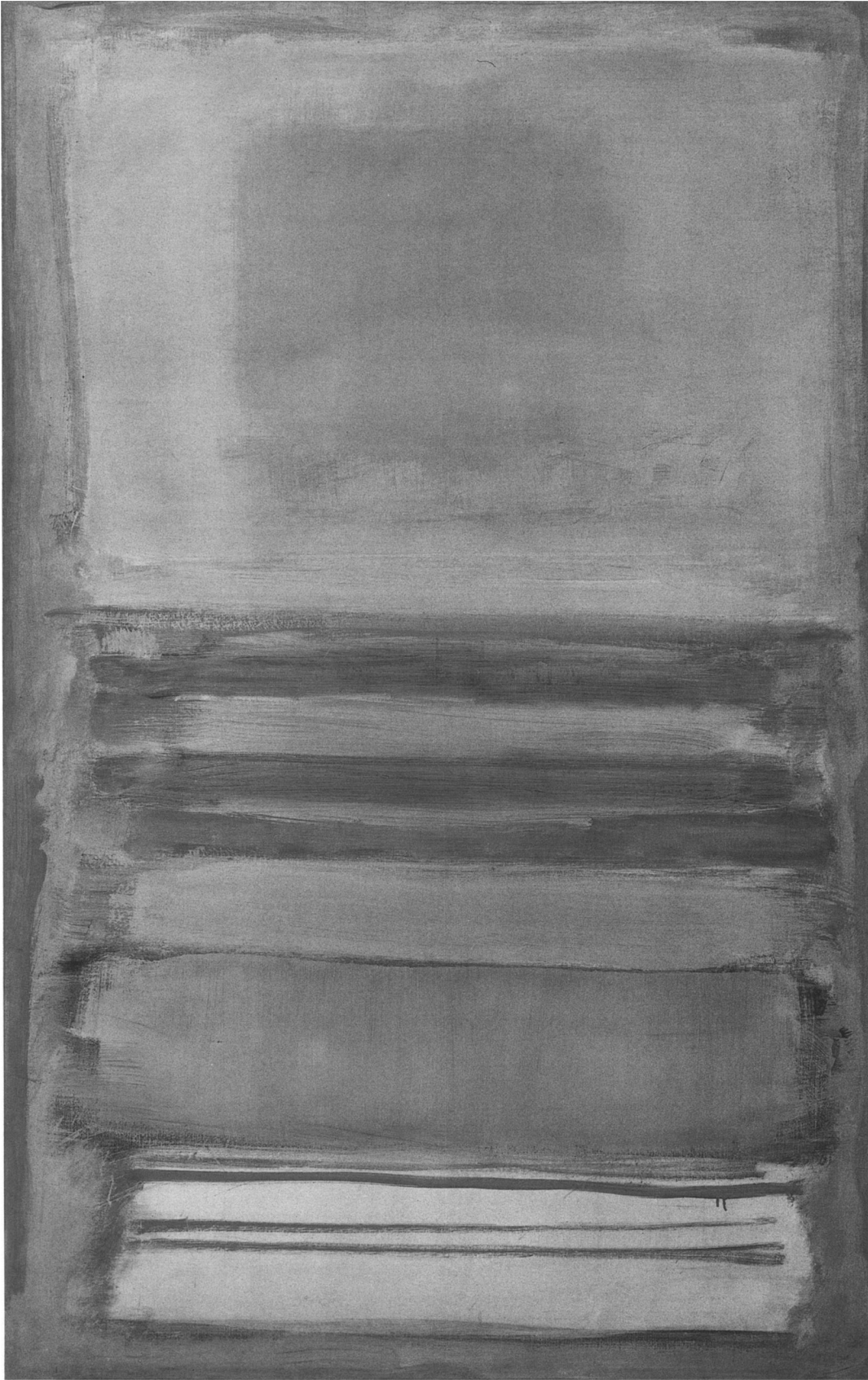
above the horizontal line (fig. 21), and the fully abstract work.<sup>28</sup>

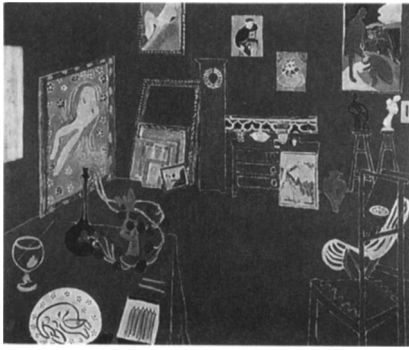
#### Walls of Color

In 1946, partially under the influence of Clyfford Still, Rothko's work became increasingly abstract, and his forms became rougher and more painterly in edge and shape. During the same time, Still made his dramatic totemic images less representational (fig. 22),<sup>29</sup> which taught Rothko to eliminate details and blur outlines. Still also showed Rothko how to equalize light and

dark values in an all-over composition and how to further incorporate naturelike surfaces into the figure. Rothko, however, translated Still's example into his own language—the classicizing figure/landscape and, eventually, colored light.

Rothko began transforming his earlier compositions into more abstract shapes, which he described as organisms. In addition to reflecting the influence of Still, *Number 17, 1947* (fig. 23) suggests a figure holding a vase or harp-shaped object, a typical subject found on





25 *Henri Matisse, The Red Studio, 1911. Oil on canvas, 71¼ × 86¼ in. The Museum of Modern Art, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund*

Greek vases. *Number 11, 1949* (fig. 24) recalls Rothko's classical figures—like *Tiresias*, *Untitled* (see fig. 15)—and columnar fluting. Because Rothko was trying to end legible associations at that time, the pictorial elements and structure—not the symbolic image and form—shoulder the content of the work.

To balance the more naturalistic imagery of his work of the late 1940s, Rothko looked to a planar colorist who constructed more architectonic settings than Still: Henri Matisse. Rothko specifically studied Matisse's *The Red Studio*, which provided what Still's color figures did not—a reinforcement and rethinking of an architectonic environment (fig. 25).<sup>30</sup>

Matisse's single color environment envelops both an architectural setting and the specific objects within. Paintings, furniture, and other objects exist mostly as color squares and independent, floating scenes within a unified color world. The combination of an architectonic field of color shapes, Still's color figures, and Rothko's own idea of enclosure by ancient architecture paved the way for the artist's mature conception of a color wall and figure.

The influence of Matisse's colors, such as the red of *The Red Studio*, appears in many of Rothko's works of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and was reinforced by the influence of Milton Avery's (1893–1965) subtle, vibrant paint handling. By the end of the 1940s, Rothko's work was poised for a new flowering of his original figural complex.

#### Environments of Inwardness

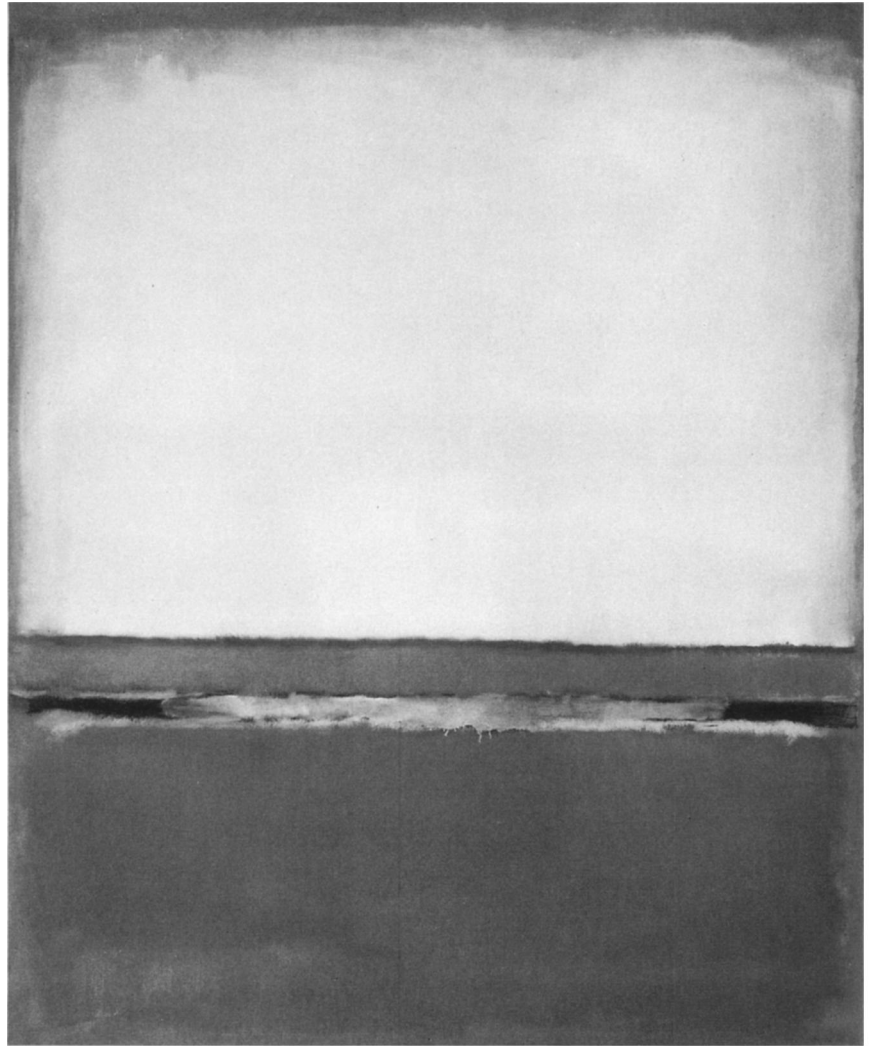
From 1950 onward, Rothko translated and transformed his earlier tiered figures into his mature abstract pictorial forms by completely eliminating specific symbolic

forms, thus arriving at a mode of more general allusions, signs, and evocations. The development of his work seems to follow comments he had written in the 1930s about children's art—that it is possible to continually simplify form as children simplify a round shape to a mere circle.<sup>31</sup> Rothko developed this idea in his early works by using fragmentary forms, traces, and memories. Later he used abstract form that makes it nearly impossible to follow the traces and signs; instead the new work depended on abstract leitmotifs, general compositions, metaphors, and emotional effects.

Like the mature works of other Abstract Expressionists, Rothko's mature art can be considered emblematic, totemic, or "ideographic." In 1948, Barnett Newman organized the exhibition *The Ideographic Picture* in which Rothko's *Tiresias* (1944, Estate of Mary Alice Rothko) and *Vernal Memory* (date and present whereabouts unknown) appeared along with the work of other Abstract Expressionists such as Stamos and Still. In the catalogue Newman characterized the artists' work as ideographic, which was defined as

*a character, symbol or figure which suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name. . . . Representing ideas directly and not through the medium of their names; applied specifically to that mode of writing which by means of symbols, figures or hieroglyphs suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name. . . . A symbol or character painted, written or inscribed, representing ideas.*

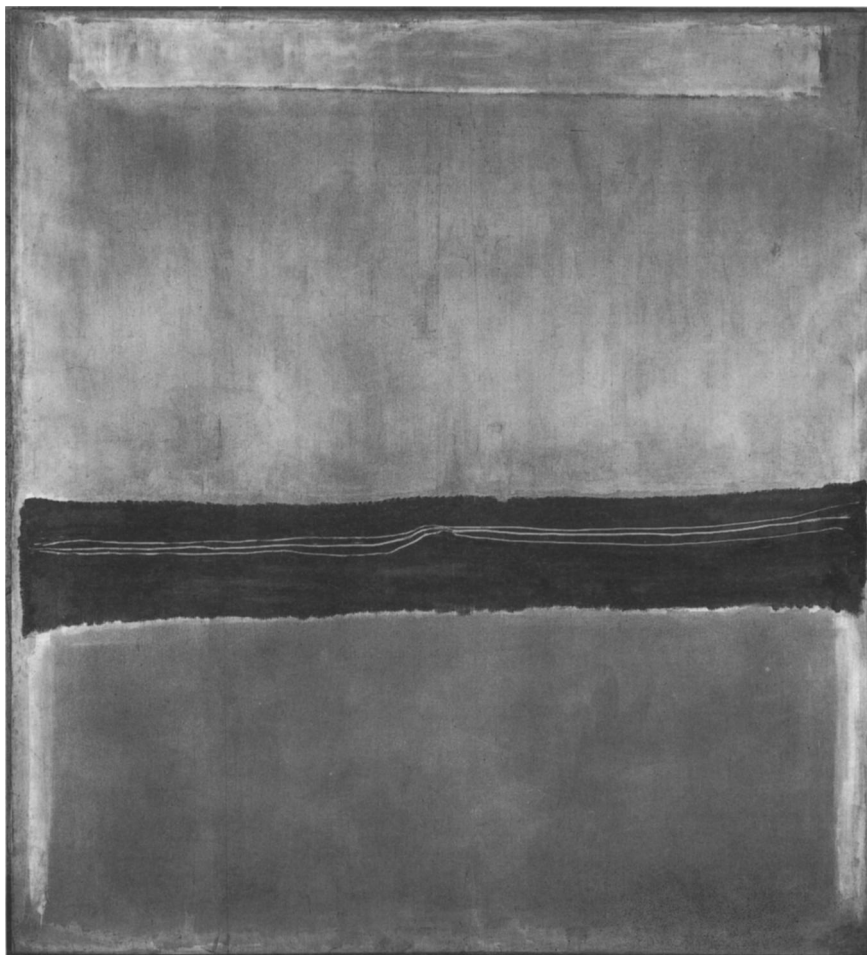
Newman argued that Kwakiutl art is ideographic because it uses abstract shapes as a plastic language directed by "ritualistic will towards metaphysical understanding." Shapes were a living "vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a car-



rier of . . . awesome feeling.” Rothko’s mature art, even more than Newman’s, can be characterized this way. It consists of an ideographic form—part figure, part architecture, part nature; part past, part present, part future; part entombment, part subconscious, and part emotion. His paintings are ideographic signifiers or totems of the history and tradition of inner life, not abstract paintings, that is, mere abstractions of natural forms and phenomena. The totemic shape or abstract thought-complex ultimately refers to the more specific early forms—the rectilinear architectural fragments, the Greek column figures, the stratigraphic zones, the tiered figures, the en-

tombment composition—his totems of the roots and tradition, the materialistic and spiritual events and forces of life. Rothko could render his earlier personifications of fate, not only through vestigial, half-figure, half-form signifiers and disguised substitutions, but within and through formal features and activity.

Traces of Rothko’s earlier themes and their complex associations can be seen in the vertical tiered arrangement, the shapes of which Rothko himself described as figures.<sup>32</sup> These tiered paintings recall the segmented nature of bodies and his earlier figures. *Number 18*’s zones resemble the column and late 1940s figures (fig. 26);



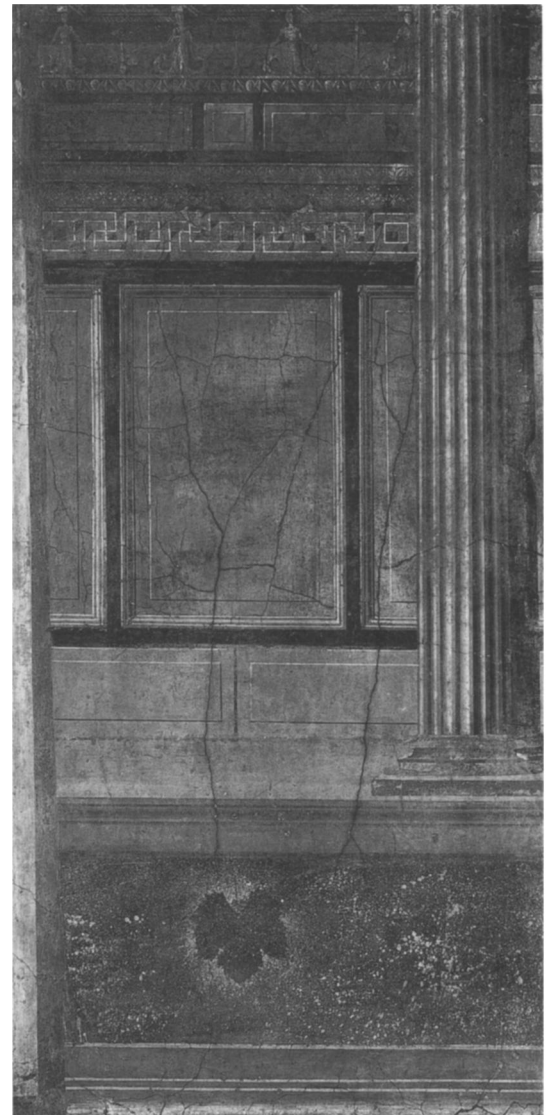
*Number 11, 1949* holds an intermediate position between the earlier figure and the mature ones, and the middle zone of striated lines in *Number 22* (fig. 27) recalls Rothko's use of classical fluting and the simplified reclining figure of the pietà or prothesis watercolor (see fig. 21). An untitled work from 1949 with a middle section of dentils also relies on the columnar figure (fig. 28). Rothko soon gave up even these remote allusions to architectural forms for an architectonic layout.

Rothko's abstractions, consisting of stacked rectilinear color panels framed by thin bars of color, generally recall the architectural and figural ensembles fundamental to his work from the 1930s onward. This relationship is enhanced by the new resemblance of his abstract

work to the painted walls of Roman murals,<sup>33</sup> such as the Boscoreale panels (fig. 29) and the Boscotrecase frescoes, recently reexhibited at the Metropolitan Museum after an absence of almost forty years (fig. 30). Many of the Second- and Third-Style paintings are composed of rectilinear panels of opaque color framed by illusionistic columns or planes of color; others are architectural facades devoid of figures. Rothko seems to have turned the panels on their sides for his more horizontal works or stuck to the basic combination of vertical and horizontal panels in others.

Although Rothko considered his mature paintings to be "facades,"<sup>34</sup> it was not until the late 1950s before he completely realized that he had been painting Greek temples all his life. During his second trip





- 28 *Untitled, 1949. Watercolor and tempera on paper, 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (image). Copyright © 1982, The Estate of Mark Rothko*
- 29 *Boscotrecase fresco (Italian), first century B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund*

to Europe, while standing in front of the vermilion walls of Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries—which depict the sacred mystery plays and initiation rituals of Dionysus—he saw the habitual architectonic structure of his work and its relationship to sacred myth and drama.<sup>35</sup> Rothko had thus replaced his earlier references to ancient architectural forms with references to ancient Roman color walls.

Descriptions of the Boscotrecase frescoes seem to fit Rothko's mature painting as well. In both, settings are ambivalent and actual distances indeterminable. Landscape

and natural forms seem suspended in midair and the wall suggests active sky and water. The primary artistic innovation found in the frescoes is the creation of an undefined air and depth: the two-dimensional surface alone produces the illusion of three dimensions. Representation becomes suggestion; reality, vision; and the picture, a mirage world in which "Gods and legends become fairy tales."<sup>36</sup> In both the frescoes and Rothko's paintings, ambiguous perspective and color create their own magical and mythical world.

Rothko also used symbols from

30 *Boscotrecase fresco (Italian), red panel with candelabrum, 31 B.C.–50 A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund*



his earlier entombments in his mature work. The thin horizontal plane that he often placed between two larger planes and that echoes the general configuration of his earlier prothesis scenes and Renaissance entombments became a leitmotif scattered throughout his mature work. In *Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red* (fig. 31), a symbolic black line resides between a vertical color figure with

two upraised red arms, as in a combination of the Virgin Mary with Christ on her lap and a Greek wailing figure. Like the mature works of earlier modern artists, such as Brancusi in his *Sleeping Muse* or *Maiastra* series, Rothko too eliminated details and substituted more abstract, unified, and concise structures for what previously were more heterogeneous and descriptive forms. These changes led to

31 Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red, 1949. Oil on canvas, 81½ × 60 in. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Gift of Elaine and Werner Dannbeisser and the Dannbeisser Foundation, 1978



a greater expressiveness in the shape itself.

Rothko also gave up specific references to his hybrid nature totems, but not to their internal life, spirit, and existence, which he considered as natural as any organic form. If there has been a consistent interpretation of Rothko's mature work, it has been in terms of nature—of landscape forms in the horizontal shaping and of natural lighting in the evocative color. Such perceptions reflect Rothko's continuing symbolic use of nature as an aspect of human roots, identity, and fate. And nature appears not only in the suggestions of figure and form, but in the sense of a new metaphor of organic process

through color action and allusion. Through fluid transitions—slow expansion, agitation, contraction, and quiescence in paint and color—Rothko created a new metaphor of organic and human process. He identified this process as “life, dissolution, and death.”<sup>37</sup> Human destiny for Rothko was rooted in and represented by abstract natural form, action, and organic movement. His abstract forms reenact natural process as a pictorial rhythm of expansion and contraction. In this, Rothko again parallels other artists of his time. A critic described the techniques of rhythmic expansion and contraction of the “Abstract Expressionist” of dance, Martha Graham, in much the same

terms as Rothko's concept: "One has inescapably the sense of observing *natural* events, courses of action that are a part of and are taking place directly within a natural order."<sup>38</sup>

Rothko's ideographic emblems of energy represent in abstract terms his concept of organic, geologic, and human change over time. He condensed in the tremulous throb of color inner life, the past and the present, and gave "material existence to many unseen worlds and tempi."<sup>39</sup> The structure of Rothko's mature paintings suggests the cyclic motion of eternal time. The writer Baron Friederich von Hardenber Novalis (1772–1801), popular among the Surrealists, wrote of colored light in a way that illuminates Rothko's abstract process: Light is the "breath of life itself, simultaneously decaying and being formed anew . . . an action of the universe . . . a divining agent."<sup>40</sup>

In 1949 Rothko prophetically wrote that his purpose was to move toward "clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between painter and idea."<sup>41</sup> The same might be said of the relationship between the viewer and the paintings. The viewer is engulfed in a mature Rothko painting just as Rothko's earlier figures were engulfed by their environments. It has often been noted that Rothko's shapes move toward the viewers and draw them into the work. The "figure" of the mature work and the viewer in front of it are now equally enveloped in supra-personal effects and forces. As he said of his work in a symposium on combining architecture and painting, "You are in it. It isn't something you command."<sup>42</sup> By sign, image, pictorial structure, and active effect, the individual viewers are concretely engulfed and may feel shaped by forces of destiny and fate beyond their own personal powers. Giving up his previ-

ous means of symbolization of ideas, Rothko now employs large color emblems whose symbolic activity confront us directly with what he considered to be humanity's past and destiny. Typically for his generation of artists, Rothko increasingly made his theme physically concrete, not merely cerebral.

The challenge facing Rothko in the 1950s, however, was to transform his ideas not only into a new pictorial form but also into an immediate emotional experience. His paintings intentionally cultivate the emotional power of color. He observed:

*I'm not an abstractionist. . . . I'm not interested in relationships of color or forms or anything else. . . . I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows I communicate those basic human emotions. . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experiences I had when I painted them. And if you . . . are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!*<sup>43</sup>

He painted because he wanted to be very "intimate and human."<sup>44</sup> In the 1950s his lifelong interest in the human drama was rendered with more direct power. He had rid himself of previous conventions, so that he could have a direct transaction with what he conceived to be the viewer's need and spirit. His means was abstract painting's capacity to form signifying analogies and metaphors with simple pictorial elements.

Undoubtedly the existentialism and emotionalism in cultural circles of the late 1940s and early 1950s played a role in Rothko's new directness of expression, though he had long been interested in basic human emotions.

Existentialism was more than a fascination with Sartrean fluency, openness, and directness. It was part of a major shift toward involvement in individual life as opposed to the deep concern with cultures and civilizations that had characterized intellectual life in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>45</sup> Søren Kierkegaard's writing, with its emphasis on personal feeling and mood, on individual anguish and pain, and use of words like "fear" and "trembling," "sickness" and "death," parallels Rothko's new sense of intense and specific emotionality. His segmented figures seem to stand for various and contrasting states of emotion. Rothko's mature paintings cultivated fully such emotionality in a way that has been largely unacceptable until recent years. As with his entire generation, extreme, even melodramatic, statements of emotion seemed as much his subject as any idea.

Criticism in the early 1950s reinforced this emphasis on emotionality.<sup>46</sup> So did the popularity of Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Feeling and Form* (1953), both of which sold thousands of copies. Langer's idea that the artist portrays feeling that transcends mere personal experience parallels aspects of American art at this time. It should be understood, however, that many of the artists, and Rothko in particular, portray detached, universal, and not merely autobiographical, emotion. Their art remains as a testament to a generation that condensed concepts of human history into concepts of universal human feelings such as "tragedy, ecstasy, and doom." It is as if the artist could give a concrete shape to feeling.

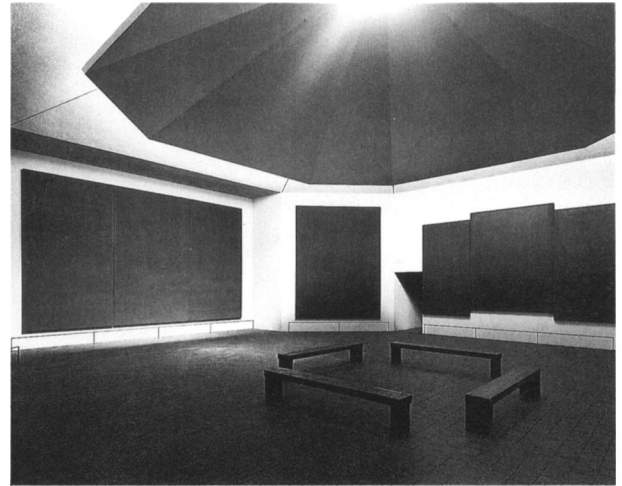
Rothko managed to intensify and make immediate an impersonal emotional embrace of human origins and fate. Like his colleagues, he transfigured the forms

and emotions of tragedy into those of melodrama, as he surrounded the viewer with a pictorial environment, form, and theater of emotion.

In Rothko's development of a greater physical realization of his themes, it was perhaps inevitable that a more concrete mode of environmental art—that is, mural painting—would arise. In the late 1950s opportunities arose for a series of architectonic presentations of groups of his work. At the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., several of his paintings were hung together, creating a dramatic interaction between works and parts of works as though they were a linked series that surrounds the viewer. Rothko was also commissioned to do several paintings for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York. These works were eventually given to the Tate Gallery in London with the condition that they were to be exhibited together to form an environment. Rothko also painted murals for Harvard University in 1961 and Houston's Ecumenical Chapel for Human Development in 1964–71 (figs. 32, 33). Even more than before, Rothko intended the works in these new series to surround and enclose the viewer.

Rothko visited Pompeii and Florence in 1959 and was impressed by the blank, interior classicizing walls of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library. When he returned home he had found a new architectural symbol. Rothko's Harvard murals stressed the concept of portals and windows as well as architectonic enclosure, combining references to Michelangelo's rectilinear doorways and windows with the small rectangles and illusionistic architecture of the Boscoreale and Boscotrecase panels.<sup>47</sup> But again, there is no escape from enclosure, since the forms once again close in on the viewer.

The Ecumenical Chapel in Hous-



- 32 Triptych, *panels 1–3, Harvard University, early 1960s. Oil on canvas, 104 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 117 in. (left); 105 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 180 in. (center); 104 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 96 in. (right)*
- 33 Ecumenical Chapel for Human Development (The Rothko Chapel), Houston, 1965–66. *(left to right) north, northeast, and east wall paintings. Oil on canvas*

ton concludes Rothko's representations of spiritual life and mythic, sacred traditions. Although he struggled with the architect Philip Johnson over the design and lighting of the chapel, its octagonal shape successfully echoes one of Rothko's favorite buildings, the baptistry and church in Torcello, Italy. The paintings, too, evoke the sacred past. In solemn and grave blacks and maroons—perhaps inspired by the ebony landscapes of Pompeii in combination with earlier sources such as black-figure vase painting and the deep brown and black Boscotrecase frescoes with their immeasurable depths and floating darknesses (fig. 34)—some of the panels are arranged in triptychs with raised central sections. This structure alludes to Renaissance Crucifixion and Deposition scenes.<sup>48</sup> He may also have considered the painting a Stations of the Cross series, a sacred Chris-

tian ritual of death and rebirth: Rothko explained, "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."<sup>49</sup>

Such work climaxes a lifelong subject: the absorption of the individual by his environment. The paintings and chapel together, the within and the without, fulfill Rothko's theme of the enclosing, embracing world of humanity's inner tradition and the gradual realization of inherited sources and fate. He always wanted his work to move out into space and envelop the viewer within his own cultural and emotional tradition. To the end, Rothko, like Tiresias, publically adopted the role of the artist-seer of the human spirit, as-saying and foretelling the fate of humanity.

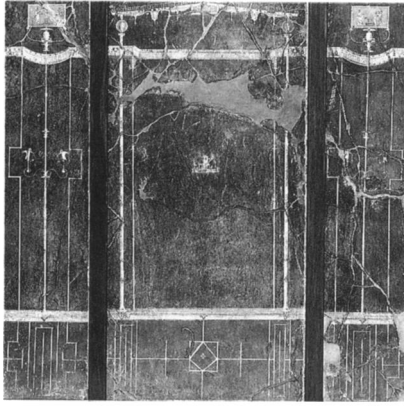
#### Notes

This essay is excerpted from "Resurrection: Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience," a book in preparation. I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities, Irving Lavin and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton for their support in 1982–83 for this project.

1 From notes of Clay Spohn, "Questions to Mark Rothko," 1947–49, California

School of Arts, San Francisco, on deposit at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Immediate subsequent statements are also excerpted from that questionnaire.

2 Rothko's early work is seen as biological, mythical, and psychological primitivism. For recent discussions, see



34 *Boscotrecase fresco (Italian), three panels including center panel with bucolic landscape, 31 B.C.–50 A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund*

- 3 Stuart Davis, "Abstract Painting Today," in *Art for the Millions*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 127.
- 4 Sheldon Cheney, *Expressionism in Art* (New York: Liveright, 1934), p. 17; James J. Sweeney, *Plastic Redirections in Twentieth Century Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 3.
- 5 For a discussion of the crucial effects of World War II on the development of Abstract Expressionism, see Polcari, "Resurrection."
- 6 Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," mimeographed script of broadcast at WNYC, 13 October, 1943, reprinted in Mary Davis MacNaughton and Lawrence Alloway, *Adolph Gottlieb*, (New York: The Arts Publisher and the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981), pp. 170–71.
- 7 Letter in the collection of the George C. Carson family; cited in Bonnie Clearwater, *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1984), p. 26; copy on deposit, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
- 8 Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 59, chronicles Rothko's trips to the museum. Bonnie Clearwater, "The Statements and Writings of Mark Rothko"; paper delivered at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, New York, 13 February, 1986. In her confirmation of Rothko's use of trace and fragment, Clearwater noted:

*In 1927 Rothko illustrated a book by Rabbi Lewis Browne entitled The*

*Graphic Bible. . . . The illustrations consist of maps of Israel and its neighboring countries historiated with scenes and symbols that reflect the accompanying text. Rothko sued the author and publisher for not giving him appropriate credit as the illustrator and for not paying him his full fee. In the 731 page transcript of the trial we learn that Browne instructed Rothko [as to] which archaic images to copy from handbooks of ornament and other sources, and explained their meaning to him. . . .*

*In his testimony Rothko stated that it was acceptable for an artist to copy or trace images from another source. . . . He stated that he studied the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of Assyrian art, and . . . copied such images as . . . a sphinx and lion from a book by Fredrich Delitzsch called Babel and Bible. In the 1940s . . . he apparently modeled some of his forms on the images in The Graphic Bible. Although it is generally believed that Rothko relied on pure psychic automatism for his Surreal paintings, he actually worked from preconceived images. For example, the arm of destruction in The Graphic Bible corresponds to the two disembodied arms in his painting the Sacrifice of Iphigenia of 1942, and the snake representing the invasion of Israel by Egypt closely resembles the serpent in his 1946 watercolor Vessels of Magic.*

- 9 It is interesting to note that the use of fragments of the past is a common artistic theme that crosses cultures in the interwar period—from Kurt Schwitters *merz* collages of nostalgic letters, tickets, and so forth; to T. S. Eliot's lines from *The Waste Land*, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins"; to Van Wyck Brooks's influential historical concept of "usable past."
- 10 For a discussion of the Abstract Expressionist search for a universal tradition and its representation through the interlocking and overlapping of images from different art and cultures of the past, see Polcari, "Resurrection." One particularly representative example is Gottlieb's Pictographs. The structure and imagery of the rectilinear compartments in his Pictographs of the early 1940s deliberately fuse the associations of their sources, including Renaissance predellas; primitive pictographs; African, Native American, and Oceanic art; and modern painting (Cubism, Klee, and Mondrian).

- 11 For Baziotes, see Mona Hadler, "William Baziotes: The Subtlety of Life for the Artist," in Michael Preble, *William Baziotes: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Newport Harbor, Calif.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1978), p. 55.
- 12 Graham's famous mythic dance dramas began in 1946.
- 13 Peter Selz, *Mark Rothko* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 12. Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition," *Arts Magazine* 35 (March 1961): pp. 42–45, questions Selz's reference to Greek drama. Irving Sandler, *Mark Rothko/ Paintings 1948–1969* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1983), interrogates both Selz and Goldwater. For additional discussion of Nietzsche's influence on Rothko's early work, see Ashton, *About Rothko*, pp. 50–57; Ann Gibson, "Theory Undeclared: Avant-Garde Magazines as a Guide to Abstract Expressionist Images and Ideas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1985), pp. 239–53; Anna Chave, "Mark Rothko's Subject Matter" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1982), pp. 61–63; and Polcari, "Resurrection." For a discussion of his influence on the later work, see Polcari, "The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism: Mark Rothko," pp. 131–33.
- 14 Friederich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random Vintage, 1967), pp. 74–75.
- 15 It is unusual that Rothko capitalized "Myth-Maker." Nietzsche did not, but Ernst Cassirer did in his *Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), pp. 81–95. It is not known whether Rothko knew Cassirer's work, but the poet and Rothko's friend Stanley Kunitz said unspecified poets did; personal communication, 21 March, 1978.
- 16 In *Clyfford Still* (Art of this Century gallery, February 1946), reprinted in *Mark Rothko*, (London: The Tate Gallery, 1987), pp. 82–83.
- 17 Quoted in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), p. 118.
- 18 For a discussion of Joyce's influence, see Evan Firestone, "James Joyce and the First Generation New York School," *Arts Magazine* 56 (June 1982): pp. 116–21. For Rothko's and Gottlieb's interest in Eliot, see Ashton, *About Rothko*, p. 25. For the interest in both Joyce and Eliot, see Polcari, "Resurrection," and Chave, "Mark Rothko's Subject Matter," pp. 88–89.
- 19 Anon., "Indefinite Idea," unspecified newspaper review on file, Betty Parsons Papers, Archiver of American Art, Washington, D.C., frame no. 493.
- 20 Rothko, quoted in Douglas MacAgy, "Mark Rothko," *Magazine of Art* 42 (January 1949): 20–21. Leon Kochnitsky, "A Magic Portico," *View* 6 (May 1946), p. 19. See Polcari, "Resurrection," for a discussion of the survival of customs and rites as a theme.
- 21 Used here "totem" suggests a hybrid, composite form consisting of ancestrally or fraternally related roots. The term has been extended by anthropologists to refer to tribal groups that regard themselves as descended from some mythic plant or animal. See Ruth Underhill, *Red Man's Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 44–46.
- 22 T. S. Eliot, "Ben Jonson," cited in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 41.
- 23 See Clearwater, *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper*, p. 27.
- 24 Ashton, *About Rothko*, p. 68.
- 25 For a discussion of Rothko's use of paleontological diagrams, see Polcari, "The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism: Mark Rothko," p. 125.
- 26 Clearwater, "The Statements and Writings of Mark Rothko," indicates that the central birdlike form is lifted from an image of the Roman eagle which he had copied earlier.
- 27 Chave, "Mark Rothko's Subject Matter," pp. 138–40.
- 28 For a discussion of the abstract *Entombments*, see *ibid.*, pp. 142–60.
- 29 For a discussion of Still's primitivism, see Stephen Polcari, "Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism: Clyfford Still," *Art International* 25 (May–June 1982): pp. 18–35; for his shamanism, see Polcari, "Resurrection." For additional discussion of Still's influence on Rothko, see Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Abrams, 1978), p. 52.
- 30 Ashton, *About Rothko*, pp. 112–13.
- 31 Rothko, unpublished notebook on children's art in the collection of the George C. Carson family.



- 32 Rothko, interview with William Seitz, January 22, 1952. Clearwater, "The Statements and Writings of Mark Rothko," noted that he said: "It was not that the figure had been *removed*, not that the figures had been swept away, but the symbols for the figures, and in turn the shapes in the later canvases were new *substitutes* for the figures." A copy of the interview is on file at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 33 Vincent Bruno, "Mark Rothko and the Second Style," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, Toronto, 1984.
- 34 Rothko, quoted in Dore Ashton, "Letter from New York," *Cimaise* 6 (December 1958): pp. 37–40.
- 35 Ashton, *About Rothko*, p. 157.
- 36 Peter H. von Blanckenhagen and Christine Alexander, *The Paintings from Boscotrecase* (Heidelberg: F. H. Kerle Verlag, 1962), pp. 58–60.
- 37 Dore Ashton, "The Rothko Chapel in Houston," *Studio International* 81 (June 1971): p. 274.
- 38 Leroy Leatherman, *Martha Graham/Portrait of the Lady as an Artist* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), p. 79. For a discussion of Graham's form, structure, and thought and its relationship to the evolution of American art of the 1930s and 1940s, see Polcari, "Resurrection."
- 39 Rothko, *A Painting Prophecy—1950* (Washington, D. C.: David Porter Gallery, 1945), n.p., Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 40 Quoted in Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee* (New York: Abrams, 1955), p. 286.
- 41 Rothko, "Statement on His Attitude in Painting," *The Tiger's Eye* 9 (October 1949): p. 114.
- 42 Quoted in "A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture," *Interiors* 60 (May 1951): 104.
- 43 Quoted in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Capricorn, 1961), p. 93.
- 44 Quoted in "A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture," p. 104.
- 45 For a discussion of the concept of historical process in American art of the 1930s, see Polcari, "Resurrection." See also O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*.
- 46 See Phyllis Rosenzweig, *The Fifties* (Washington, D. C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1980).
- 47 Bruno, "Mark Rothko and the Second Style," noted that the Second-Style murals Rothko studied also symbolized passage through gateways to the realm of the transcendental.
- 48 Brian O'Doherty, "The Rothko Chapel," *Art in America* 61 (January–February, 1973): 18.
- 49 Cited in Lee Seldes, *Legacy of Mark Rothko* (New York: Holt Rinehardt, and Winston, 1978), p. 51.