

Mark Rothko, painter in the making

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Some rare and hitherto unpublished writings by Rothko provide invaluable insight into the making of one of the iconic painters of the 20th century, placing him squarely in the historical and artistic context of 1930s and '40s America.

A review of: Mark Rothko, *The Artist's reality*, edited and with an introduction by Christopher Rothko, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, 136 p. ; Mark Rothko, *Writings On Art*, Edited and with an introduction, annotations, and chronology by Miguel López-Remiro, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, 172 p.

The Artist's Reality

Discovery of an art theorist

The Artist's Reality is a document of tremendous interest. It was long thought lost for good until fortuitously rediscovered by archivist Marion Kahan in 1988, nearly 20 years after the artist's death. It constitutes a turning point in Mark Rothko's career, a synthesis of the ideas that would subsequently lay the theoretical foundation for the approach to painting that earned him his latter-day fame. The artist's meditations seem to have germinated in the mid-1930s and flowered into written form around 1941–1942. We owe their publication to the tenacity of his heirs, especially his son Christopher Rothko.

The book brings together some highly diverse projects in a clear and ordered manner based on snatches of manuscripts and scattered papers. In fact, the file the artist had left behind was an old bubble pack folder, literally bursting with incomplete typescripts riddled with crossings-out, handwritten corrections and interruptions. The present edition is divided up into 20 chapters running from "The Artist's Dilemma" to "Indigenous Art" by way of "Plasticity," "Space" and "Beauty" as well as "The Myth" and "The Attempted Myth of Today," to cite only the topics most representative of the theorist's approach. This reconstituted clutch of writings may be regarded as a contribution by Mark Rothko to the critical fortune of the New York School and, by its very nature, as a striking theoretical basis for the advent of postwar abstract painting. On the rebound, after grappling with most of his theoretical issues from 1942 on, his own painting seems to have crystallized by 1949.

So the reader would be well advised to recontextualize these writings, for that was a period in which Rothko's work was still largely conceived along lines close to those that informed and inspired the likes of André Masson and Max Ernst. The issues addressed in *The Artist's Reality* include viewer participation, painting as process and becoming, painting in dialogue with images and places of spatial proximity, the defeat of discourse to render an

affect, and the importance of and constraints on the hanging of paintings to avoid spoiling their effect. This range of topics goes to show that Rothko was clearly part of the extended family of exiled artists in New York and attuned to their latest theoretical concerns.

New light on the painter's development

This publication demands a rereading of the reception and perceptions of Rothko's work from the 1930s on and his contact with the Surrealists. Rothko's exegesis of painting would seem to suggest that, far from constituting a break with the age of Surrealism, "color fields" were actually the culmination of a highly nuanced transformation of the works of his youth. Rothko does not have two distinct artistic periods, as is customarily claimed in the study of other artists' work; rather, there is a sort of linear continuity to his works that little by little reduces the sign to its simplest apparatus: namely, to color as its very substance. Rothko was in his 40s when he started in on his abstract paintings, and that was not a breaking-off: on the contrary, it was the advent of a profound maturity, the manifestation of "the artist's reality."

The very nature of these essays, firmly rooted in the 1940s, makes them an incomparable source because Rothko never revised them and eventually forgot them in turning his attention to more immediate studio matters. We discover here, as in an inviolate tomb, an almost overly precise and documented X-ray of Mark Rothko's state of mind as he started in on the large canvases that would change the course of the history of artistic representation. Rothko strikes the philosopher's pose here, groping his way along towards certitudes, questioning art as an object that can transform the world.

Likewise, the reader will appreciate Mark Rothko's reflections on the structure and function of myth. It should be pointed out that at the time he frequented exponents of a European avant-garde seeking to construct a new myth that would generate a new view of the world, at a time when the nations were sinking into the maelstrom of fascisms triumphant. And lastly, the reader will discover the learned art historian in Rothko who formulated a new take on light, color and composition through the prism of the Renaissance masters.

A near-exemplary translation

Far from being an arid treatise, however, *The Artist's Reality* is a fascinating book about Rothko's previous work and a harbinger of his work to come in the ensuing years, as though writing down his ideas about art had paved the way for their visual expression. Furthermore, a few words should be said here about Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat's translation. The adaptation is faithful and reveals the translator's solid grounding in the philosophical concepts running through the artist's reflections and the painting of the period. However, when Rothko talks about the "subject" in painting, this should be seen merely as a way of talking about pictorial reality rather than a return to some form of narration. Some justification should have been provided for rendering "subject" as " *sujet*" in French so as to avert confusion about the multiple meanings of the French term. Here, Rothko always means "content" in the sense of his statement: "The subject of a painting is the painting itself." Apart from this tricky semantic issue, the close rendering of the various chapters is quite exemplary for this sort of writing, so lay readers and scholars alike can blindly put their trust in the French adaptation without having to fall back on the English original. In a word, this French publication provides an invaluable key to Rothko's painting as well as Abstract Expressionism as a whole.

Writings on Art

Writings on Art is a collection of all the Rothko essays that were preserved by his heirs, along with a hodgepodge of various and sundry other writings, including correspondence and interviews, a reception speech, notes and suggestions on how to hang pictures and even a brief autobiography. The bulk of these texts go to make up the annexes to the PhD thesis of the editor, Miguel López-Remiro (*La Poetica de Mark Rothko*, presented to the philosophy department of the University of Navarra, Spain, in 2003).

Rothko the educator

In the artist's first writings we discover that he was a teacher of painting, or rather a committed educator intent on leading children towards a creativity free from the dogmas and constraints that society consciously or unconsciously imposes on everyone. Children act on internal necessity, insists Rothko. This aligns him willy-nilly with Vassily Kandinsky, even though he seems to have disdained the latter, according to Fischer (p. 212). One sees here that it is no easy matter to collate writings of a vastly different nature and purpose.

"A child learns to use the plastic tongue as easily and naturally as he uses word speech," observes Rothko, thus setting the tone of the artistic education he advocated. We learn further on that "Man receives and therefore must expel. The alternative is strangulation." Suchlike statements take up a central preoccupation of the Surrealists he frequented in New York in the 1940s. He notes in a rough draft dating from 1941 that "education is not concerned with the making of artists as an end. It no more predicts that the child who paints will be an artist than that the one who adds and subtracts will be a mathematician.[...] It must contribute to the child's social attitude, psychological stability, the formation of proper habits and a host of additional orientations towards environment essential to his development as a social individual." This vision of education seems to belong to a golden age, especially given the current professionalizing trend of European universities, in stark contrast to Rothko's conception of the free and flourishing "social individual." Rothko's educator should leave plenty of room for adventure, in the sense that the child who expresses herself need not conform to prevailing tastes, but should master artistic techniques – in order to break loose from them. This is the price, he adds, of satisfying the creative urge.

An epistolary manifesto

The book goes on to showcase the various drafts of a letter, co-written with Adolphe Gottlieb in June 1943, to Edward Alden Jewell, an illustrious journalist and art critic for *The New York Times*. Barnett Newman, another exponent of the New York School, also helped to formulate this epistolary manifesto, which was of quasi-mythical importance to historians of contemporary art, for it served as a basis for their exegesis of this movement, affirming the quest for truth in painting at the expense of creating illusions. Although historians focus on the version of the letter that was published in the *Times*, a study of its embryonic stages shows that it may well be necessary to relativize, even substantially qualify, the arguments of an entire literature around it and to reconsider the historical issues involved in the manifesto.

The rest of the correlations with other "mythmakers" sheds light on the painters' relationship to abstraction, figurative representation and reality. We know how central and seminal these preoccupations were to abstract expressionism in its confrontation with

European exiles like Marcel Duchamp, Roberto Matta and André Breton, to name only the ones who stayed in Manhattan. From August 1946, Mark Rothko wrote to his friend Barnett Newman how highly he regarded Harold Rosenberg, the theorist of action painting, who seemed to him a genius at expressing things impeccably – despite his declared uselessness? It is precisely this sort of anecdote that provides a sort of roving bird’s-eye view of the history of Western painting since the mid-19th century, so art lovers couldn’t ask for more.

Letters on exhibiting and curating

In a different register, Rothko’s correspondence with Katharine Kuh, an art critic and curator at the Chicago Art Institute, serves as a sort of documentary about how the artist’s works were hung and presented. It is a type of document (which Rothko and Kuh rightfully decided to publish) that needs to be reassessed by exegetes insofar as it highlights the importance of extra-pictorial considerations and proper arrangements for the exhibition of artworks. The effectiveness of Mark Rothko’s paintings is closely contingent on the lighting, the number of works displayed and the presence of works by other artists. In his letters to Katharine Kuh, Rothko explains the meaning and rationale of his painting quite simply by warning curators and collectors against a number of risks involved in showing his works. His prescriptions and proscriptions yield a whole philosophy and invaluable insights for a better understanding of his paintings. Rothko is as clear and precise in his advice and observations as a physician prescribing preventive treatment.

Secondary sources

So what shall we make of the inclusion of the notes on Rothko’s conversation with Selden Rodman or John Fischer’s notes (15 pages!) for *Harper’s Magazine*? Rothko’s *Writings on Art* should have been more aptly titled “A collection of writings by and about Mark Rothko,” in spite of Miguel López-Remiro’s commendable forewarning. The recollection of a meeting with the painter and conversations chronicled here and there should often be taken with a pinch of salt, for they are invariably the fruit of interpretation by the chronicler and are *de facto*, in academic jargon, “second-hand” sources. So as “second-hand” sources they must be handled with care so as not to distort the thought of Mark Rothko. In my estimation, there should not have been so much proximity between texts of such disparate status, which have the artist contradicting himself in places, although we know that he was sufficiently exacting to spend years working on clarifying a concept or even a single word. It would probably have been more prudent of the editor to group Rothko’s own correspondence and writings with the above-reviewed corpus in *The Artist’s Reality*. Regardless of this editorial choice, which can be made good by obtaining the latter title, it can only be applauded that *Writings on Art*, which was long-awaited and fantasized about by specialists on the period and Rothko devotees, is now available in a handy format at a democratic price, enabling the reader to form a mental image of the life and work of one of the most iconic artists of the second half of the 20th century.

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