# Mark Rothko

**Mark Rothko** (/ˈrɒθkoʊ/), born **Markus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz** (Russian: Ма́ркус Я́ковлевич Ротко́вич, Latvian: *Markuss Rotkovičs*; September 25, 1903 – February 25, 1970), was an American painter of Russian Jewish descent. Although Rothko himself refused to adhere to any art movement, he is generally identified as an abstract expressionist.

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**Mark Rothko**

Rothko visiting the Scott family in 1959

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| **Born** | Markus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz<br>September 25, 1903<br>Dvinsk, Vitebsk Governorate, Russian Empire (now Daugavpils, Latvia) |
| **Died** | February 25, 1970 (aged 66)<br>New York City, U.S. |
| **Nationality** | American |
| **Education** | Lincoln High School, Portland, Oregon |
| **Alma mater** | Yale University |
| **Known for** | Painting |
| **Movement** | Abstract expressionism, Color Field |
| **Spouse(s)** | Edith Sachar (1932–1943)<br>Mary Alice "Mell" Beistle (1944–1970) |
| **Patron(s)** | Peggy Guggenheim, John de Menil, Dominique de Menil |

## Childhood

Mark Rothko was born in Dvinsk, Vitebsk Governorate, in the Russian Empire (today Daugavpils in Latvia). His father, Jacob (Yakov) Rothkowitz, was a pharmacist and an intellectual who initially provided his children with a secular and political, rather than religious, upbringing. According to Rothko, his pro-Marxist father was "violently anti-religious".[1] In an environment where Jews were often blamed for many of the evils that befell Russia, Rothko's early childhood was plagued by fear.[2]

Despite Jacob Rothkowitz's modest income, the family was highly educated ("We were a reading family", Rothko's sister recalled),[3] and Rothko was able to speak Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Following his father's return to the Orthodox Judaism of his own youth, Rothko, the youngest of four siblings, was sent to the cheder at the age of five, where he studied the Talmud, although his elder siblings had been educated in the public school system.[4]

## Emigration from Russia to the U.S.

Fearing that his elder sons were about to be drafted into the Imperial Russian Army, Jacob Rothkowitz emigrated from Russia to the United States. Markus remained in Russia, with his mother and elder sister Sonia. They arrived as immigrants, at Ellis Island, in late 1913. From that point, they crossed the country, to join Jacob and the elder brothers, in Portland, Oregon. Jacob's death, a few months later, from colon cancer,[1] left the family without economic support. Sonia operated a cash register, while Markus worked in one of his uncle's warehouses, selling newspapers to employees.[5] His father's death also led Rothko to sever his ties with religion. After he had mourned his father's death for almost a year at a local synagogue, he vowed never to set foot in it again.[1]

Markus started school in the United States in 1913, quickly accelerating from third to fifth grade. In June 1921, he completed the secondary level, with honors, at Lincoln High School in Portland, at the age of seventeen. He learned his fourth language, English, and became an active member of the Jewish community center, where he proved adept at political discussions. Like his father, Rothko was passionate about

issues such as workers' rights, and women's right to contraception. At the time, Portland was the epicentre of revolutionary activity in the U.S., and the region where revolutionary syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was strongest.

Markus, having grown up around radical workers' meetings, attended meetings of the IWW, including anarchists such as Bill Haywood and Emma Goldman, where he developed strong oratorical skills he would later use in defence of Surrealism. He heard Emma Goldman speak on one of her West Coast activist lecture tours.[6] With the onset of the Russian Revolution, Rothko organised debates about it. Despite the repressive political atmosphere, he wished to become a labor union organiser.

Rothko received a scholarship to Yale. At the end of his freshman year in 1922, the scholarship was not renewed, and he worked as a waiter and delivery boy to support his studies. He found the Yale community to be elitist and racist. Rothko and a friend, Aaron Director, started a satirical magazine, *The Yale Saturday Evening Pest*, which lampooned the school's stuffy, bourgeois tone.[7] In any event, Rothko's nature was more that of a self-taught man than a diligent pupil: "One of his fellow students remembers that he hardly seemed to study, but that he was a voracious reader."[8] At the end of his sophomore year, Rothko dropped out, and did not return until he was awarded an honorary degree, forty-six years later.[9]

# Early career

In the autumn of 1923, Rothko found work in New York's garment district. While visiting a friend at the Art Students League of New York, he saw students sketching a model. According to Rothko, this was the beginning of his life as an artist. He later enrolled in the Parsons The New School for Design, where one of his instructors was the artist and class monitor Arshile Gorky. This was probably his first encounter with a member of the American avant-garde. However, the two men never became close, due to Gorky's dominating nature. Rothko referred to Gorky's leadership in the class as "overcharged with supervision."[10] That same autumn, he took courses at the Art Students League taught by Cubist artist Max Weber, a fellow Russian Jew. Weber had been a part of the French avant-garde movement. To his students eager to know about Modernism, Weber was seen as "a living repository of modern art history."[11] Under Weber's tutelage, Rothko began to view art as a tool of emotional and religious expression. Rothko's paintings from this era reveal the influence of his instructor.[12] Years later, when Weber attended a show of his former student's work and expressed his admiration, Rothko was immensely pleased.[13]

## Rothko's circle

Rothko's move to New York established him in a fertile artistic atmosphere. Modernist painters were having more shows in New York galleries all the time, and the city's museums were an invaluable resource to foster a budding artist's knowledge and skills. Among the important early influences on Rothko were the works of the German Expressionists, the surrealist art of Paul Klee, and the paintings of Georges Rouault. In 1928, Rothko exhibited works, with a group of other young artists, at the appropriately named Opportunity Gallery.[14] His paintings included dark, moody, expressionist interiors, as well as urban scenes, and were generally well accepted among critics and peers. Despite this modest success, Rothko still needed to supplement his income, and in 1929 he began giving classes, in painting and clay sculpture, at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center. As it later turned out, he would remain active in teaching at that location for twenty-two years, until 1952.

During the early 1930s, he met Adolph Gottlieb, who, along with Barnett Newman, Joseph Solman, Louis Schanker, and John Graham, was part of a group of young artists surrounding the painter Milton Avery, who was fifteen years Rothko's senior. According to Elaine de Kooning, it was Avery who "gave Rothko the idea that [the life of a professional artist] was a possibility."[15] Avery's stylized nature paintings, utilizing a rich knowledge of form and color, would have a tremendous influence on Rothko.[14] Soon, Rothko's paintings took on subject matter and color similar to Avery's, as seen in *Bathers, or Beach Scene* of 1933–1934.[16]

Rothko, Gottlieb, Newman, Solman, Graham, and their mentor, Avery, spent considerable time together, vacationing at Lake George and Gloucester, Massachusetts. In the daytime they painted artworks, then discussed art in the evenings. During a 1932 visit to Lake George, Rothko met Edith Sachar, a jewelry designer, whom he married later that year.[17] The following summer, his first one-person show was held at the Portland Art Museum, consisting mostly of drawings and aquarelles. For this exhibition, Rothko took the very unusual step of displaying works done by his pre-adolescent students from the Center Academy, alongside his own.[18] His family was unable to understand Rothko's decision to be an artist, especially considering the dire economic situation of the Depression.[19] Having suffered serious financial setbacks, the Rothkowitzes were mystified by Rothko's seeming indifference to financial necessity. They felt he was doing his mother a disservice by not finding a more lucrative and realistic career.[20]

## First solo show in New York

Returning to New York, Rothko had his first East Coast one-person show at the Contemporary Arts Gallery.[21] He showed fifteen oil paintings, mostly portraits, along with some aquarelles and drawings. Among these works, the oil paintings especially captured the art critics' eyes. Rothko's use of rich fields of colors moved beyond Avery's influence. In late 1935, Rothko joined with Ilya Bolotowsky, Ben-Zion, Adolph Gottlieb, Lou Harris, Ralph Rosenborg, Louis Schanker and Joseph Solman to form "The Ten (http://www.LouisSchanker.info/tendisc.htm)" (Whitney Ten Dissenters). According to a gallery show catalog, the mission of the group was "to protest against the reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting."[22]

Rothko was earning a growing reputation among his peers, particularly among the group that formed the Artists' Union.[23] The Artists' Union, including Gottlieb and Solman, hoped to create a municipal art gallery, to show self-organized group exhibitions. In 1936, the group exhibited at the Galerie Bonaparte in France, which resulted in some positive critical attention. One reviewer remarked that Rothko's

paintings "display authentic coloristic values."[24] Later, in 1938, a show was held at the Mercury Gallery in New York, intended as a protest against the Whitney Museum of American Art, which the group regarded as having a provincial, regionalist agenda. Also during this period, Rothko, like Avery, Gorky, Pollock, de Kooning, and many others, found employment with the Works Progress Administration.[25]

### Development of style

In 1936, Rothko began writing a book, never completed, about similarities in the art of children and the work of modern painters.[26] According to Rothko, the work of modernists, influenced by primitive art, could be compared to that of children in that "child art transforms itself into primitivism, which is only the child producing a mimicry of himself." In this manuscript, he observed that "the fact that one usually begins with drawing is already academic. We start with color." Rothko was using fields of color in his aquarelles and city scenes. His style was already evolving in the direction of his renowned later works. Despite this newfound exploration of color, Rothko turned his attention to other formal and stylistic innovations, inaugurating a period of surrealist paintings influenced by mythological fables and symbols.

Rothko's work later matured from representation and mythological subjects into rectangular fields of color and light, culminating in his final works for the Rothko Chapel. Between his early style of primitivist and playful urban scenes, and his later style of transcendent color fields, was a long period of transition. This development was marked by two important events in Rothko's life: the onset of World War II, and his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche.

## Maturity

Rothko separated temporarily from his wife Edith in mid-1937. They reconciled several months later, but their relationship remained tense.[27] On February 21, 1938, Rothko finally became a citizen of the United States, prompted by fears that the growing Nazi influence in Europe might provoke sudden deportation of American Jews. Concerned about anti-Semitism in America and Europe, Rothko in 1940 abbreviated his name from "Markus Rothkowitz" to "Mark Rothko". The name "Roth", a common abbreviation, was still identifiably Jewish, so he settled upon "Rothko".[28]

*Mark Rothko, Yorktown Heights*, ca. 1949. Brooklyn Museum, by Consuelo Kanaga

### Inspiration from mythology

Fearing that modern American painting had reached a conceptual dead end, Rothko was intent upon exploring subjects other than urban and nature scenes. He sought subjects that would complement his growing interest with form, space, and color. The world crisis of war gave this search a sense of immediacy. He insisted that the new subject matter have a social impact, yet be able to transcend the confines of current political symbols and values. In his essay "The Romantics Were Prompted", published in 1949, Rothko argued that the "archaic artist... found it necessary to create a group of intermediaries, monsters, hybrids, gods and demigods", in much the same way that modern man found intermediaries in Fascism and the Communist Party. For Rothko, "without monsters and gods, art cannot enact a drama".[29]

Rothko's use of mythology as a commentary on current history was not novel. Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman read and discussed the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. In particular, they took interest in psychoanalytical theories concerning dreams, and archetypes of a collective unconscious. They understood mythological symbols as images, operating in a space of human consciousness, which transcends specific history and culture.[30] Rothko later said that his artistic approach was "reformed" by his study of the "dramatic themes of myth". He allegedly stopped painting altogether in 1940, to immerse himself in reading Sir James Frazer's study of mythology *The Golden Bough*, and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.[31]

### Nietzsche's influence

Rothko's new vision attempted to address modern man's spiritual and creative mythological requirements. The most crucial philosophical influence on Rothko in this period was Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.[32] Nietzsche claimed that Greek tragedy served to redeem man from the terrors of mortal life. The exploration of novel topics in modern art ceased to be Rothko's goal. From this time on, his art had the goal of relieving modern man's spiritual emptiness. He believed that this emptiness resulted partly from lack of a mythology, which, according to Nietzsche, "The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young soul grows to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles."[33] Rothko believed his art could free unconscious energies, previously liberated by mythological images, symbols, and rituals. He considered himself a "mythmaker", and proclaimed that "the exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source of art".

Many of his paintings in this period contrast barbaric scenes of violence with civilized passivity, using imagery drawn primarily from Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. A list of Rothko's paintings from this period illustrates his use of myth: *Antigone*, *Oedipus*, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, *Leda*, *The Furies*, *Altar of Orpheus*. Rothko evokes Judeo-Christian imagery in *Gethsemane*, *The Last Supper*, and *Rites of Lilith*. He also invokes Egyptian (*Room in Karnak*) and Syrian (*The Syrian Bull*) myth. Soon after World War II, Rothko believed his titles limited the larger, transcendent aims of his paintings. To allow maximum interpretation by the viewer, he stopped naming and framing his paintings, referring to them only by numbers.[34]

### "Mythomorphic" abstractionism

At the root of Rothko and Gottlieb's presentation of archaic forms and symbols, illuminating modern existence, had been the influence of Surrealism, Cubism, and abstract art. In 1936, Rothko attended two exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, "Cubism and Abstract Art", and "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism".[35] Both experiences greatly influenced his celebrated 1938 *Subway Scene*.

In 1942, following the success of shows by Ernst, Miró, Wolfgang Paalen, Tanguy, and Salvador Dalí, artists who had immigrated to the United States because of the war, Surrealism took New York by storm.[36] Rothko and his peers, Gottlieb and Newman, met and discussed the art and ideas of these European pioneers, as well as those of Mondrian. They began to regard themselves as heirs to the European avant-garde.

With mythic form as a catalyst, they merged the two European styles of Surrealism and abstraction. As a result, Rothko's work became increasingly abstract. Perhaps ironically, Rothko himself described the process as being one toward "clarity".

New paintings were unveiled at a 1942 show at Macy's department store in New York City. In response to a negative review by *The New York Times*, Rothko and Gottlieb issued a manifesto, written mainly by Rothko. Addressing the *Times* critic's self-professed "befuddlement" over the new work, they stated "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." On a more strident note, they criticised those who wanted to live surrounded by less challenging art, noting that their work necessarily "must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration."[37]

Rothko's viewed myth as a replenishing resource for an era of spiritual void. This belief had begun decades earlier, through his reading of Carl Jung, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Thomas Mann, among other authors.[38] Unlike his predecessors, Rothko would, in his later period, develop his philosophy of the tragic ideal into a realm of pure abstraction.

## Break with Surrealism

On June 13, 1943, Rothko and Sachar separated again.[39] Rothko suffered a long depression following their divorce. Thinking that a change of scenery might help, Rothko returned to Portland. From there, he traveled to Berkeley, where he met artist Clyfford Still, and the two began a close friendship.[40] Still's deeply abstract paintings would be of considerable influence on Rothko's later works. In the autumn of 1943, Rothko returned to New York. He met with noted collector and art dealer Peggy Guggenheim, but she was initially reluctant to take on his artworks.[41] Rothko's one-person show at Guggenheim's The Art of This Century Gallery, in late 1945, resulted in few sales, with prices ranging from $150 to $750. The exhibit also attracted less-than-favorable reviews from critics. During this period, Rothko had been stimulated by Still's abstract landscapes of color, and his style shifted away from surrealism. Rothko's experiments in interpreting the unconscious symbolism of everyday forms had run their course. His future lay with abstraction:

> I insist upon the equal existence of the world engendered in the mind and the world engendered by God outside of it. If I have faltered in the use of familiar objects, it is because I refuse to mutilate their appearance for the sake of an action which they are too old to serve, or for which perhaps they had never been intended. I quarrel with surrealists and abstract art only as one quarrels with his father and mother; recognizing the inevitability and function of my roots, but insistent upon my dissent; I, being both they, and an integral completely independent of them.[42]

Rothko's 1945 masterpiece, *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, illustrates his newfound propensity towards abstraction. It has been interpreted as a meditation on Rothko's courtship of his second wife, Mary Ellen "Mell" Beistle, whom he met in 1944 and married in early 1945. Other readings have noted echoes of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, which Rothko saw at an "Italian Masters" loan exhibition, at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1940. The painting presents, in subtle grays and browns, two human-like forms embraced in a swirling, floating atmosphere of shapes and colors. The rigid rectangular background foreshadows Rothko's later experiments in pure color. The painting was completed, not coincidentally, in the year the Second World War ended.[43]

Despite the abandonment of his "Mythomorphic Abstractionism", Rothko would still be recognized by the public primarily for his surrealist works, for the remainder of the 1940s. The Whitney Museum included them in their annual exhibit of contemporary art from 1943 to 1950.

## Rothko's "multiforms"

The year 1946 saw the creation of what art critics have termed Rothko's transitional "multiform" paintings. Rothko never used the term multiform himself, yet it is an accurate description of these paintings. Several of them, including *No. 18* and *Untitled* (both 1948), are less transitional than fully realized. Rothko himself described these paintings as possessing a more organic structure, and as self-contained units of human expression. For him, these blurred blocks of various colors, devoid of landscape or the human figure, let alone myth and symbol, possessed their own life force. They contained a "breath of life" he found lacking in most figurative painting of the era. They were filled with possibility, whereas his experimentation with mythological symbolism had become a tired formula. The "multiforms" brought Rothko to a realization of his mature, signature style, the only style Rothko would never fully abandon.

In the middle of this crucial period of transition, Rothko had been impressed by Clyfford Still's abstract fields of color, which were influenced in part by the landscapes of Still's native North Dakota.[44] In 1947, during a summer semester teaching at the California School of Fine Art, Rothko and Still flirted with the idea of founding their own curriculum, and they realized this idea in New York in the following year. Named "The Subjects of the Artists School," they employed David Hare and Robert Motherwell, among others.[45] Though the group separated later in the same year, the school was the center of a flurry of activity in contemporary art. In addition to his teaching experience, Rothko began to contribute articles to two new art publications, *Tiger's Eye* and *Possibilities*. Using the forums as an opportunity to assess the current art scene, Rothko also discussed in detail his own work and philosophy of art. These articles reflect the elimination of figurative elements from

his painting, and a specific interest in the new contingency debate launched by Wolfgang Paalen's *Form and Sense* publication of 1945.[46] Rothko described his new method as "unknown adventures in an unknown space", free from "direct association with any particular, and the passion of organism". Breslin described this change of attitude as "both self and painting are now fields of possibilities – an effect conveyed ... by the creation of protean, indeterminate shapes whose multiplicity is let be."[47]

In 1949, Rothko became fascinated by Henri Matisse's *Red Studio*, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art that year. He later credited it as another key source of inspiration for his later abstract paintings.[48]

# Late period

Soon, the "multiforms" developed into the signature style; by early 1949 Rothko exhibited these new works at the Betty Parsons Gallery. For critic Harold Rosenberg, the paintings were nothing short of a revelation. After painting his first "multiform," Rothko had secluded himself to his home in East Hampton on Long Island. He invited only a select few, including Rosenberg, to view the new paintings. The discovery of his definitive form came at a period of great distress to the artist; his mother Kate had died in October 1948. Rothko happened upon the use of symmetrical rectangular blocks of two to three opposing or contrasting, yet complementary, colors, in which, for example, "the rectangles sometimes seem barely to coalesce out of the ground, concentrations of its substance. The green bar in *Magenta, Black, Green on Orange*, on the other hand, appears to vibrate against the orange around it, creating an optical flicker."[49] Additionally, for the next seven years, Rothko painted in oil only on large canvases with vertical formats. Very large-scale designs were used in order to overwhelm the viewer, or, in Rothko's words, to make the viewer feel "enveloped within" the painting. For some critics, the large size was an attempt to make up for a lack of substance. In retaliation, Rothko stated:

*No. 3/No. 13 (Magenta, Black, Green on Orange),* 1949, 85 3/8" × 65" (216.5 × 164.8 cm), oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art

> I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however ... is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command!

He even went so far as to recommend that viewers position themselves as little as eighteen inches away from the canvas[50] so that they might experience a sense of intimacy, as well as awe, a transcendence of the individual, and a sense of the unknown.

*No. 61 (Rust and Blue),* 1953, 115 cm × 92 cm (45 in × 36 in). Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

As Rothko achieved success, he became increasingly protective of his works, turning down several potentially important sales and exhibition opportunities:

> A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world. How often it must be permanently impaired by the eyes of the vulgar and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend the affliction universally![51]

Rothko's aims, in the estimation of some critics and viewers, exceeded his methods.[52] Many of the Abstract Expressionists discussed their art as aiming toward a spiritual experience, or at least an experience that exceeded the boundaries of the purely aesthetic. In later years, Rothko emphasized more emphatically the spiritual aspect of his artwork, a sentiment that would culminate in the construction of the Rothko Chapel.[53]

Many of the "multiforms" and early signature paintings are composed of bright, vibrant colors, particularly reds and yellows, expressing energy and ecstasy. By the mid-1950s, however, close to a decade after the completion of the first "multiforms," Rothko began to employ dark blues and greens; for many critics of his work this shift in colors was representative of a growing darkness within Rothko's personal life.

Rothko's method was to apply a thin layer of binder mixed with pigment directly onto uncoated and untreated canvas and to paint significantly thinned oils directly onto this layer, creating a dense mixture of overlapping colors and shapes. His brushstrokes were fast and light, a method he would continue to use until his death.[54] His increasing adeptness at this method is apparent in the paintings completed for the Chapel. With an absence of figurative representation, what drama there is to be found in a late Rothko is in the contrast of colors, radiating against one another. His paintings can then be likened to a sort of fugue-like arrangement: each variation counterpoised against one another, yet all existing within one architectonic structure.

Rothko used several original techniques that he tried to keep secret even from his assistants. Electron microscopy and ultraviolet analysis conducted by the MOLAB showed that he employed natural substances such as egg and glue, as well as artificial materials including acrylic resins, phenol formaldehyde, modified alkyd, and others.[55] One of his objectives was to make the various layers of the painting dry quickly, without mixing of colors, so that he could soon create new layers on top of the earlier ones.

### European travels: increasing fame

Rothko and his wife visited Europe for five months in early 1950.[48] The last time he had been in Europe was during his childhood in Latvia, at that time part of Russia. Yet he did not return to his homeland, preferring to visit the important painting collections in the major museums of England, France and Italy. The frescoes of Fra Angelico in the monastery of San Marco, Florence, most impressed him. Fra Angelico's spirituality and concentration on light appealed to Rothko's sensibilities, as did the economic adversities the artist faced, which Rothko saw as similar to his own.[56] All that was about to change, however.

Rothko had one-man shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950 and 1951 and at other galleries across the world, including in Japan, São Paulo and Amsterdam. The 1952 "Fifteen Americans" show curated by Dorothy Canning Miller at the Museum of Modern Art formally heralded the abstract artists and included works by Jackson Pollock and William Baziotes.[57] It also created a dispute between Rothko and Barnett Newman, after Newman accused Rothko of having attempted to exclude him from the show. Growing success as a group was leading to infighting and claims to supremacy and leadership.[58] When *Fortune* magazine named a Rothko painting as a good investment, Newman and Still branded him a sell-out with bourgeois aspirations. Clyfford Still wrote to Rothko to ask that the paintings he had given him over the years be returned. Rothko was deeply depressed by his former friends' jealousy.

During the 1950 Europe trip, Rothko's wife became pregnant. On December 30, when they were back in New York, she gave birth to a daughter, Kathy Lynn, called "Kate" in honor of Rothko's mother.[59]

## Reactions to his own success

*Four Darks in Red*, 1958, Whitney Museum of American Art

Shortly thereafter, due to the *Fortune* magazine plug and further purchases by clients, Rothko's financial situation began to improve. In addition to sales of paintings, he also had money from his teaching position at Brooklyn College. In 1954, he exhibited in a solo show at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he met art dealer Sidney Janis, who represented Pollock and Franz Kline. Their relationship proved mutually beneficial.[60]

Despite his fame, Rothko felt a growing personal seclusion and a sense of being misunderstood as an artist. He feared that people purchased his paintings simply out of fashion and that the true purpose of his work was not being grasped by collectors, critics, or audiences. He wanted his paintings to move beyond abstraction, as well as beyond classical art. For Rothko, the paintings were objects that possessed their own form and potential, and therefore, must be encountered as such. Sensing the futility of words in describing this decidedly non-verbal aspect of his work, Rothko abandoned all attempts at responding to those who inquired after its meaning and purpose, stating finally that silence is "so accurate". "My paintings' surfaces are expansive and push outward in all directions, or their surfaces contract and rush inward in all directions. Between these two poles, you can find everything I want to say."

Rothko began to insist that he was not an abstractionist and that such a description was as inaccurate as labeling him a great colorist. His interest was:

> ...only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationship, then you miss the point.[61]

For Rothko, color is "merely an instrument". The multiforms and the signature paintings are, in essence, the same expression of basic human emotions as his surrealistic mythological paintings, albeit in a purer form. What is common among these stylistic innovations is a concern for "tragedy, ecstasy and doom". It was Rothko's comment on viewers breaking down in tears before his paintings that may have convinced the de Menils to construct the Rothko Chapel. Whatever Rothko's feeling about interpretations of his work, it is apparent that, by 1958, the spiritual expression he meant to portray on canvas was growing increasingly dark. His bright reds, yellows and oranges were subtly transformed into dark blues, greens, grays and blacks.[62]

Rothko's friend, the art critic Dore Ashton, points to the artist's acquaintance with poet Stanley Kunitz as a significant bond in this period ("conversations between painter and poet fed into Rothko's enterprise"). Kunitz saw Rothko as "a primitive, a shaman who finds the magic formula and leads people to it". Great poetry and painting, Kunitz believed, both had "roots in magic, incantation, and spell-casting" and were, at their core, ethical and spiritual. Kunitz instinctively understood the purpose of Rothko's quest.[63]

In November 1958, Rothko gave an address to the Pratt Institute. In a tenor unusual for him, he discussed art as a trade and offered "[the] recipe of a work of art—its ingredients—how to make it—the formula.

1. There must be a clear preoccupation with death—intimations of mortality... Tragic art, romantic art, etc., deals with the knowledge of death.
2. Sensuality. Our basis of being concrete about the world. It is a lustful relationship to things that exist.
3. Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.
4. Irony, This is a modern ingredient—the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.
5. Wit and play... for the human element.
6. The ephemeral and chance... for the human element.
7. Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable.

I measure these ingredients very carefully when I paint a picture. It is always the form that follows these elements and the picture results from the proportions of these elements."[64]

## Seagram Murals–Four Seasons restaurant commission

In 1958, Rothko was awarded the first of two major mural commissions, which proved both rewarding and frustrating.[65] The beverage company Joseph Seagram and Sons had recently completed their new building on Park Avenue, designed by architects Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. Rothko agreed to provide paintings for the building's new luxury restaurant, the Four Seasons. This was, as art historian Simon Schama put it, "bring[ing] his monumental dramas right into the belly of the beast."[66]

For Rothko, this commission presented a new challenge, since it was the first time he was required not only to design a coordinated series of paintings, but to produce an artwork space concept for a large, specific interior. Over the following three months, Rothko completed forty paintings, comprising three full series in dark red and brown. He altered his horizontal format to vertical, to complement the restaurant's vertical features: columns, walls, doors and windows.

The following June, Rothko and his family again traveled to Europe. While on the SS *Independence* he disclosed to journalist John Fischer, who was publisher of *Harper's Magazine*, that his true intention for the Seagram murals was to paint "something that will ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who ever eats in that room...." He hoped, he told Fischer, that his painting would make the restaurant's patrons "feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall."[67]

While in Europe, the Rothkos traveled to Rome, Florence, Venice and Pompeii. In Florence, he visited Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, to see first-hand the library's vestibule, from which he drew further inspiration for the murals.[68] He remarked that "the room had exactly the feeling that I wanted ... it gives the visitor the feeling of being caught in a room with the doors and windows walled-in shut." He was further influenced by the somber colors of the murals in the Pompeiian Villa of the Mysteries.[69] Following the trip to Italy, the Rothkos voyaged to Paris, Brussels, Antwerp and Amsterdam, before returning to the United States.

Vestibule of the Laurentian Library

Once back in New York, Rothko and wife Mell visited the nearly-completed Four Seasons restaurant. Upset with the restaurant's dining atmosphere, which he considered pretentious and inappropriate for the display of his works, Rothko refused to continue the project, and returned his cash advance to the Seagram and Sons Company. Seagram had intended to honor Rothko's emergence to prominence through his selection, and his breach of contract and public expression of outrage were unexpected.

Frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries

Rothko kept the commissioned paintings in storage until 1968. Given that Rothko had known in advance about the luxury decor of the restaurant, and the social class of its future patrons, the motives for his abrupt repudiation remain mysterious. A temperamental personality, Rothko never fully explained his conflicted emotions over the incident.[70] One reading is offered by his biographer, James E.B. Breslin: the Seagram project could be seen as an acting-out of a familiar, in this case self-created "drama of trust and betrayal, of advancing into the world, then withdrawing, angrily, from it ... He was an Isaac who at the last moment refused to yield to Abraham."[71] The final series of *Seagram Murals* was dispersed, and now hangs in three locations: London's Tate Modern, Japan's Kawamura Memorial Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.[72] This episode was the main basis for John Logan's 2009 play *Red*.

In October 2012, *Black on Maroon*, one of the paintings in the Seagram series, was defaced with writing in black ink, while on display at Tate Modern. Restoration of the painting took eighteen months to complete. The BBC's Arts Editor Will Gompertz explained that the ink from the vandal's marker pen had bled all the way through the canvas, causing "a deep wound, not a superficial graze", and that the vandal had caused "significant damage."[73]

## Rising prominence in the United States

Rothko's first completed space was created in the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., following the purchase of four paintings by collector Duncan Phillips. Rothko's fame and wealth had substantially increased; his paintings began to sell to notable collectors, including the Rockefeller family. In January 1961, Rothko sat next to Joseph Kennedy at John F. Kennedy's inaugural ball. Later that year, a retrospective of his work was held at the Museum of Modern Art, to considerable commercial and critical success. In spite of this newfound notoriety, the art world had already turned its attention from the now passé abstract expressionists to the "next big thing," Pop Art, particularly the work of Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Rosenquist.

Rothko labeled Pop-Art artists "charlatans and young opportunists," and wondered aloud during a 1962 exhibition of Pop Art, "Are the young artists plotting to kill us all?" On viewing Jasper Johns's flags, Rothko said, "We worked for years to get rid of all that."[74] It was not that Rothko could not accept being replaced, but that he could not accept what was replacing him: he found Pop Art vapid.

Rothko received a second mural commission project, this time for a wall of paintings for the penthouse of Harvard University's Holyoke Center. He made twenty-two sketches, from which ten murals were painted, six were brought to Cambridge, MA, and only five were installed: a triptych on one wall and opposite two individual panels. Harvard President Nathan Pusey, following an explanation of the religious symbology of the Triptych, had the paintings hung in January 1963, and later shown at the Guggenheim. During installation, Rothko found the paintings to be compromised by the room's lighting. Despite the installation of fiberglass shades, the paintings were all removed

by 1979 and, due to the fugitive nature of some of the red pigments, in particular lithol red, were placed in dark storage and displayed only periodically.[75] The murals were on display from November 16, 2014, to July 26, 2015, in the newly renovated Harvard Art Museums, for which the fading of the pigments has been compensated by using an innovative color projection system to illuminate the paintings.[76][77]

On August 31, 1963, Mell gave birth to a second child, Christopher.[78] That autumn, Rothko signed with the Marlborough Gallery for sales of his work outside the United States. In New York, he continued to sell the artwork directly from his studio.[79] Bernard Reis, Rothko's financial advisor, was also, unbeknownst to the artist, the Gallery's accountant and, together with his co-workers, was later responsible for one of art history's largest scandals.

### The Rothko Chapel

Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas

The Rothko Chapel is located adjacent to the Menil Collection and The University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. The building is small and windowless. It is a geometric, "postmodern" structure, located in a turn-of-the-century middle-class Houston neighborhood. The Chapel, the Menil Collection, and the nearby Cy Twombly gallery were funded by Texas oil millionaires John and Dominique de Menil.

In 1964, Rothko moved into his last New York studio at 157 East 69th Street, equipping the studio with pulleys carrying large walls of canvas material to regulate light from a central cupola, to simulate lighting he planned for the Rothko Chapel. Despite warnings about the difference in light between New York and Texas, Rothko persisted with the experiment, setting to work on the canvases. Rothko told friends he intended the Chapel to be his single most important artistic statement. He became considerably involved in the layout of the building, insisting that it feature a central cupola like that of his studio. Architect Philip Johnson, unable to compromise with Rothko's vision about the kind of light he wanted in the space, left the project in 1967, and was replaced with Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry.[80] The architects frequently flew to New York to consult and on one occasion brought with them a miniature of the building for Rothko's approval.

Rothko's studio on 153 East 69th Street in New York's Upper East Side

For Rothko, the Chapel was to be a destination, a place of pilgrimage far from the center of art (in this case, New York) where seekers of Rothko's newly "religious" artwork could journey. Initially, the Chapel, now non-denominational, was to be specifically Roman Catholic, and during the first three years of the project (1964–67) Rothko believed it would remain so. Thus, Rothko's design of the building and the religious implications of the paintings were inspired by Roman Catholic art and architecture. Its octagonal shape is based on a Byzantine church of St. Maria Assunta, and the format of the triptychs is based on paintings of the Crucifixion. The de Menils believed the universal "spiritual" aspect of Rothko's work would complement the elements of Roman Catholicism.

Rothko's painting technique required considerable physical stamina that the ailing artist was no longer able to muster. To create the paintings he envisioned, Rothko was forced to hire two assistants, to apply the chestnut-brown paint in quick strokes of several layers: "brick reds, deep reds, black mauves." On half of the works, Rothko applied none of the paint himself, and was for the most part content to supervise the slow, arduous process. He felt the completion of the paintings to be "torment", and the inevitable result was to create "something you don't want to look at."

The Chapel is the culmination of six years of Rothko's life, and represents his gradually growing concern for the transcendent. For some, to witness these paintings is to submit one's self to a spiritual experience, which, through its transcendence of subject matter, approximates that of consciousness itself. It forces one to approach the limits of experience, and awakens one to the awareness of one's own existence. For others, the Chapel houses fourteen large paintings whose dark, nearly impenetrable surfaces represent hermeticism and contemplation.

The Chapel paintings consist of a monochrome triptych in soft brown, on the central wall, comprising three 5-by-15-foot panels, and a pair of triptychs on the left and right, made of opaque black rectangles. Between the triptychs are four individual paintings, measuring 11-by-15 feet each. One additional individual painting faces the central triptych, from the opposite wall. The effect is to surround the viewer with massive, imposing visions of darkness. Despite its basis in religious symbolism (the triptych) and less-than-subtle imagery (the crucifixion), the paintings are difficult to attach specifically to traditional Christian motifs, and may act on the viewers subliminally. Active spiritual or aesthetic inquiry may be elicited from the viewer, in the same way a religious icon with specific symbolism does. In this way, Rothko's erasure of symbols both removes and creates barriers to the work.

As it turned out, these works would be his final artistic statement to the world. They were finally unveiled at the Chapel's opening in 1971. Rothko never saw the completed Chapel, and never installed the paintings. On February 28, 1971, at the dedication, Dominique de Menil said, "We are cluttered with images and only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine," noting Rothko's courage in painting what might be called "impenetrable fortresses" of color. The drama for many critics of Rothko's work is the uneasy position of the paintings between, as Chase notes, "nothingness or vapidity" and "dignified 'mute icons' offering 'the only kind of beauty we find acceptable today'."

## Suicide and aftermath

In early 1968, Rothko was diagnosed with a mild aortic aneurysm. Ignoring doctor's orders, Rothko continued to drink and smoke heavily, avoided exercise, and maintained an unhealthy diet. "Highly nervous, thin, restless", was his friend Dore Ashton's description of Rothko at this time.[81] However, he did follow the medical advice given not to paint pictures larger than a yard in height, and turned his attention to

smaller, less physically strenuous formats, including acrylics on paper. Meanwhile, Rothko's marriage had become increasingly troubled, and his poor health and impotence resulting from the aneurysm compounded his feeling of estrangement in the relationship.[82] Rothko and his wife Mell (1921–1970) separated on New Year's Day 1969, and he moved into his studio.

*Untitled (Black on Grey)*, 1970

On February 25, 1970, Oliver Steindecker, Rothko's assistant, found the artist in his kitchen, lying dead on the floor in front of the sink, covered in blood. He overdosed on barbiturates, and cut an artery in his right arm with a razor blade.[83] There was no suicide note. He was 66. The Seagram Murals arrived in London for display at the Tate Gallery on the day of his suicide.[84]


Rothko's grave at East Marion Cemetery, East Marion, New York

Shortly before his death, Rothko and his financial advisor, Bernard Reis, had created a foundation, intended to fund "research and education", that would receive the bulk of Rothko's work following his death. Reis later sold the paintings to the Marlborough Gallery, at substantially reduced values, and then split the profits from sales with Gallery representatives. In 1971, Rothko's children filed a lawsuit against Reis, Morton Levine, and Theodore Stamos, the executors of his estate, over the sham sales. The lawsuit continued for more than 10 years, and became known as the Rothko Case. In 1975, the defendants were found liable for negligence and conflict of interest, were removed as executors of the Rothko estate by court order, and, along with Marlborough Gallery, were required to pay a $9.2 million damages judgment to the estate. This amount represents only a small fraction of the eventual vast financial value, since achieved, by numerous Rothko works produced in his lifetime.[85]

Rothko's separated wife Mell, aged 48, like Rothko a heavy drinker, died 6 months after him. The cause of death was listed as "hypertension due to cardiovascular disease".[83]

## Legacy

Rothko's complete works on canvas, 836 paintings, have been catalogued by art historian David Anfam, in his *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas: Catalogue Raisonné*, published by Yale University Press in 1998.

A previously unpublished manuscript by Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, about his philosophies on art, edited by his son Christopher, was published by Yale University Press in 2004.

*Red*, a play by John Logan based on Rothko's life, opened at the Donmar Warehouse in London, on December 3, 2009. The play, starring Alfred Molina and Eddie Redmayne, centered on the period of the Seagram Murals. This drama received excellent reviews, and usually played to full houses. In 2010 *Red* opened on Broadway, where it won six Tony Awards, including Best Play. Molina played Rothko in both London and New York.

The family collection of Rothko works, owned by the Mark Rothko Estate, has been represented by the Pace Gallery in New York since 1978.[86]

In Rothko's birthplace, the Latvian city of Daugavpils, a monument to him, designed by sculptor Romualds Gibovskis, was unveiled on the bank of the Daugava River in 2003.[87] In 2013 the Mark Rothko Art Centre opened in Daugavpils, after the Rothko family had donated a small collection of his original works.[88]

*Monument to Rothko*, by Romualds Gibovskis at Daugavpils, Latvia

A number of Rothko's works are held by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía[89] and by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid.[90]

## Resale market

Art collector Richard Feigen said that he sold a red Rothko painting to the National Gallery of Berlin for $22,000 in 1967.[91]

In November 2005, Rothko's 1954 painting *Homage to Matisse* broke the record for any postwar painting at a public auction, selling for $22.5 million.[92]

In May 2007, Rothko's 1950 painting *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)* broke this record again, selling at Sotheby's in New York for $72.8 million. The painting was sold by banker David Rockefeller, who attended the auction.[93]

In November 2003, an untitled red and brown Rothko painting from 1963, measuring 69 by 64 inches, sold for $7,175,000.[94]

In May 2011, Christie's sold a previously unknown Rothko painting, accounting for the work as #836. The work was added to the existing Rothko catalog of 835 works after expert authentication. The newly discovered painting, *Untitled, #17*, created in 1961, came to light when a private collector put it up for sale, claiming he bought it directly from the artist. A seven-foot-tall oil on canvas in red and pink on an ochre background, the painting opened with a house bid of $13 million and sold for $30 million.[95]

In May 2012, Rothko's 1961 painting *Orange, Red, Yellow* (#693 in Anfam's *catalogue raisonné*) was sold by Christie's in New York for $86,862,500, setting a new nominal value record for a postwar painting at a public auction and putting it on the List of most expensive paintings.[96][97][98][99]

In November 2012, his 1954 painting *No. 1 (Royal Red and Blue)* was sold for $75.1 million at a Sotheby's auction in New York.[100]

In 2014, Rothko's *No. 21* (1953) sold for $44,965,000. The painting had been part of the Schlumberger collection.[101][102]

In May 2014, *Untitled (Red, Blue, Orange)* (1955), which had been owned by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, sold for $56.2 million.[103]

In November 2014, a smaller Rothko painting in two shades of brown sold for $3.5 million, within its estimated range of $3 to 4 million.[104]

In May 2015, *Untitled (Yellow and Blue)* (1954) sold for $46.5 million at a Sotheby's auction in New York.[105] The painting was owned by Rachel Mellon.[106]

In May 2015, *No. 10* (1958) sold for $81.9 million at a Christies's auction in New York.[102]

In May 2016, *No. 17* (1957) was sold for $32.6 million at Christie's by an Italian collector.[107]

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28. Baal-Teshuva, p. 31.
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107. "Basquiat sets artist record at Christie's sale at $57.3M" (http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ffc40458474d4b6b8f9efdac1d3b3270/rothko-basquiat-highlight-christies-contemporary-sale). Associated Press. May 10, 2016.

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# External links

- Raduraksti (Latvia for "lineage") (http://img1.lvva-raduraksti.lv/rabinati/004359-0002-000008/LVVA-004359-0002-000008-0185-M3.jpg) and Daugavpils Rabinats Fonds 4359 Apraksts 2 Lieta 8 (http://www.lvva-raduraksti.lv/en/menu/lv/7/ig/7/ie/3402/book/28635.html), show his birth and circumcision in 1903 on September 12 and 19 on the Russian calendar (equivalent to September 25 and October 1 in the west) in male record #392 (top-right corner of image #185)
- Mark Rothko on Wikiart.org (http://www.wikiart.org/en/mark-rothko)
- The Pace Gallery (http://thepacegallery.com)
- Mark Rothko (https://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=5047) at the Museum of Modern Art
- National Gallery web feature on Mark Rothko (http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko) includes an overview of Rothko's career, numerous examples of his art, a biography of the artist
- The Rothko Chapel (http://www.rothkochapel.org) in Houston, Texas, is dedicated to Rothko paintings and non-denominational worship
- Mark Rothko (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/907) at Find a Grave
- ArtCyclopedia (http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/rothko_mark.html) contains links to galleries and museums with Rothko pieces and articles on Rothko.
- Essay on Mark Rothko – in Examinations Archives (https://web.archive.org/web/20060912230851/http://www.mentalcontagion.com/archive_first5years.html)
- Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko video screener (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2C8ziyOWR8)
- *Guardian* slideshow (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2008/sep/24/rothko.tate?picture=337928721) including pictures of works and photograph of the artist
- Mark Rothko Web Portal (http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rothko-mark.htm) The Art Story Artist Information on Rothko
- *Independent* slideshow (https://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/thomas-sutcliffe/tom-sutcliffe-you-can-have-too-much-rothko-949330.html) has several works
- BBC's *Power of Art* (https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/powerofart/rothko.shtml) The documentary series *Simon Schama's Power of Art* featured Mark Rothko.

- *Mark Rothko, an abstract humanist* DVD. A documentary film by Isy Morgensztern.French/English NTSC. http://www.editionsmontparnasse.fr/p926/Rothko-DVD
- Mark Rothko Art Centre, Daugavpils, Latvia (http://www.rothkocenter.com/)
- Mark Rothko Centenary, Latvia 2003 (http://www.rothko.co/) Mark Rothko Centenary celebration in Latvia. Conference and exhibition photo gallery.
- Mark Rothko Broadcast, Utrecht 2015 (http://www.concertzender.nl/programmagids/?date=2015-01-30&month=-1&detail=76089) Mark Rothko radio podcast on ConcertZender Radio, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

**Tate Modern exhibition**

- Mark Rothko exhibition at Tate Modern, London, September 2008 – February 2009 (http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/markrothko/) includes curator interview
  - Press reviews:
    - *The Times* (http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article4820285.ece) (includes video)
    - *The Times* (http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article4811134.ece), a second *Times* review
    - Welcome to his dark side ... (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/sep/28/art), Laura Cumming, *The Observer*, guardian.co.uk, 28 September 2008
    - You can have too much Rothko (https://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/thomas-sutcliffe/tom-sutcliffe-you-can-have-too-much-rothko-949330.html) – Tom Sutcliffe, *The Independent*, 3 October 2008.
    - *The Telegraph* (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/09/25/barothkoreview125.xml)

**Whitechapel Gallery exhibition**

- Rothko Britain exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 9 September 2011 – 26 February 2012 (http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/rothko-in-britain)
  - Reviews:
    - *The Guardian* review (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/sep/11/rothko-in-britain-whitechapel-review) September 11, 2011
    - *The Guardian* review (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/sep/08/rothko-in-britain) September 8, 2011
    - *The Telegraph* review (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/8753386/Rothko-in-Britain-at-Whitechapel-Gallery-Seven-magazine-review.html) 9 September 2011
    - *Timeout* article (http://www.timeout.com/london/art/event/89893/rothko-in-britain)
    - *The Independent* article (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/rothko-in-britain-whitechapel-london-2352547.html) 11 September 2011

**Smithsonian Archives of American Art**

- Interview with Bernard Braddon and Sidney Schectman (http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/braddo81.htm) Conducted by Avis Berman, New York City, New York, 1981 October 9. Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art (Braddon & Schectman were owners of the Mercury Gallery which exhibited the works of the Ten in the 1930s).
- Oral history interview with Sonia Allen, 1984 Sept. 15; Rothko's sister (http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sonia-allen-13014)

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