

Mark Rothko: Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man

by John Fisher (1970)

In the Spring of 1959 Mark Rothko was famous but not yet rich. He also was tired from eight months of labor-nine to five everyday-on a set of murals, the biggest commission he had ever received. He was not satisfied with the way the work was going, so in June he took off for a rest and a change of scene. With his wife and eight-year-old daughter he headed for Naples, traveling tourist class on *the USS Constitution*.

After dinner on the first night out of New York he wandered into the tourist class bar looking for someone to talk to.

Talk, as I later found, was a necessity for him, like breathing. As it happened, I was the only other person in the bar: everybody else was up in the lounge at one of those jolly shipboard get-togethers, which I had long since learned to avoid. Rothko peered around the room through his thick-lensed glasses, then ambled over to my table with his characteristic elephantine gait. He introduced himself, and began a conversation which continued-intermittently and with long lapses – until he killed himself last February. At the time of his death I had not seen him for several years, but I had taken it for granted that we would meet again any day now and that he would pick up the talk where it had broken off. So the news brought me a special sense of loss, as if an engrossing story had been interrupted in the middle and now could never be completed.

During our first few minutes in the ship's bar Rothko probed to see whether I knew anything about the art world. When he assured himself I did not – that I had no acquaintanceship whatever among fashionable painters, critics, dealers, museum curators, or collectors – he began to talk freely about his own work. He would never have done so, as he told me later, if I had had even a tenuous connection with the *cognoscenti*: for such people he distrusted.

I had never met anybody like him. Consequently, when I got back to my stateroom long after midnight, I made notes on what he has said – as I did on subsequent occasions. I am transcribing some of them here in hopes that they might provide a useful footnote to the history of contemporary art.

Rothko first remarked that he had been commissioned to paint a series of large canvases for the walls of the most exclusive room in a very expensive restaurant in the Seagram building – “a place where the richest bastards in New York will come to feed and show off.”

“I’ll never tackle such a job again;’ he said. “In fact, I’ve come to believe that no painting should ever be displayed in a public place. I accepted this assignment as a challenge, with strictly malicious intentions. I hope to paint something that will ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room. If the restaurant would refuse to put up my murals, that would be the ultimate compliment. But they won’t. People can stand anything these days.” To get the oppressive effect he wanted, he was using a “dark palette, more somber than anything I’ve tried before.”

“After I had been at work for some time;’ he said, “I realized that I was much influenced subconsciously by Michelangelo’s walls in the staircase room of the Medicean Library in Florence. He achieved just the kind of feeling I’m after -he makes the viewers 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.

“So far I’ve painted three sets of panels for this Seagram job. The first one didn’t turn out right, so I sold the panels separately as individual paintings. The -second time I got the basic idea, but began to modify it as I went along-because, I guess, I was afraid of being too stark. When I realized my mistake, I started again, and this time I’m holding tight to the original conception. I keep my malice constantly in mind. It is a very strong motivating force. With it pushing me, I think I can finish off the job pretty quickly after I get home from this trip.”

As things turned out, the murals were far from finished, and they were never hung in the dining room which he so despised.

His verbal ferocity was at first hard to take seriously, because Rothko looked anything but malicious. He was sipping a Scotch and soda with obvious gusto: he had the round, beaming face and comfortably plump body of a man who enjoys his food: and his voice sounded almost cheerful. Never, then or later, did I ever see him display any outward sign of anger. His affection for Mell, his wife, and Katie, their daughter, was touchingly obvious: and with his friends he was more companionable and considerate than most people I have known. Yet somewhere inside he did nurse a small, abiding core of anger-not against anything specific, so far as I could tell, but against the sorry state of the world in general, and the role it now offers to the artist.

He had been nursing it for a long time, ever since he was a boy growing up in Portland, Oregon. His father, a pharmacist, had moved from Russia when Rothko was ten years old, and the youngster never was able to forgive this transplantation to a land where he never felt entirely at home. Although he spoke little about his parents, I gathered that they were political radicals, like many Russian emigrants of that time. At any rate, Rothko “grew up as an anarchist, long before I could understand what politics was all about.”

“While I was still in grade school;’ he said, “I listened to Emma Goldman and to the IWW orators who were plentiful on the West Coast in those days. I was enchanted by

their naïve and childlike vision. Later, sometime in the Twenties I guess, I lost all faith in the idea of progress and reform. So did all my friends. Perhaps we were disillusioned because everything seemed so frozen and hopeless during the Coolidge and Hoover era. But I am still an anarchist. What else?”

A few times during our eight-day voyage I ventured a tentative remark about current politics, in which I was then deeply involved as a minor henchman and speech writer for Adlai Stevenson. Rothko made no effort to conceal his boredom. Formal religion bored him too, as he made plain when we were joined from time to time by a priest, Father Joseph Moody, who also took refuge in the tourist-class bar most evenings. Invariably the conversation soon drifted around to the world of the artist, and his enemies.

Here, for example, are my notes on the Rothko view of critics:

“I hate and distrust all art historians, experts, and critics. They are a bunch of parasites, feeding on the body of art. Their work not only is useless, it is misleading. They can say nothing worth listening to about art or the artist, aside from personal gossip-which I grant you can sometimes be interesting.”

Two of his special hates were Emily Genauer, who had described his paintings in a *New York Herald Tribune* article as “primarily decorations” - to him the ultimate insult-and Harold Rosenberg, whom he regarded as “pompous.”

“Rosenberg,” he said, “keeps trying to interpret things he can’t understand and which can’t be interpreted. A painting doesn’t need anybody to explain what it is about. If it is any good, it speaks for itself, and a critic who tries to add to that statement is presumptuous.”

If he had still been around to read it, I think Rothko would have regarded Rosenberg’s elegiac interpretation of his work in *The New Yorker* last March 28 as a case in point.

In addition to critics, Rothko detested “the whole machine for the popularization of art-universities, advertising, museums, and the Fifty-seventh Street salesmen.”

“When a crowd of people looks at a painting, I think of blasphemy, I believe that a painting can only communicate directly to a rare individual who happens to be in tune with it and the artist.”

For this reason, he generally refused to lend his pictures for group exhibits. (Also I suspect, he disliked having them shown in the company of artists he disdained.) He was, however, going along with the plans of the Museum of Modern Art to give him a one-man show-although he did not exempt MoMA from his general condemnation of museums.

“I want to be very explicit about this,” he said, “They need me. I don’t need them. This show will lend dignity to the Museum. It does not lend dignity to me.” Why was he so bitter about the Museum of Modern Art? “Because it has no convictions and no

courage. It can't decide which paintings are good and which are bad. So it hedges by buying a little of everything."

Nevertheless, when the Museum opened his exhibition in 1961 with a private showing for invited guests, he gave every sign of being pleased with the occasion. For all his gregariousness, he was shy: and since he was on display as much as his paintings, he began the evening in an agony of stage fright. Later, as one guest after another came to congratulate him-and usually to express an almost reverent admiration for his work-he relaxed and started to glow with affability, even when he was talking to a curator or critic. His ego, like everybody else's, evidently was not indifferent to homage.

Rothko's attitude toward his own work, as expressed during our shipboard talks and later, occasionally struck me as contradictory. He insisted that a painting ought to be savored only by that "rare individual" who really could appreciate it, in the privacy of his own home. Yet his canvases, at least in the later period for which he became famous, were so large-and so expensive-that they could be displayed only in museums, or in homes with lots of costly wall space. As an anarchist, he disapproved of the wealthy and questioned their taste; but his pictures seemed designed to end up in their hands. Moreover, he repeatedly remarked that "no picture can be judged by itself" Everything an artist produces, he believed, was a part of his continuous development, and therefore his entire output should be regarded as a single whole. This view, it seemed to me, implies a museum or a private collection large enough to keep at least a substantial sequence of a painter's work on permanent display. Ah, well, if some contradictions lurk here, never mind. Nobody has a right to insist that an artist be consistent.

Once I asked him a silly question: What did he think his pictures were worth?

"Whatever I can get for it," he said. "Fifteen years ago I was lucky to sell a canvas for sixty dollars. Today my price is six thousand or better. Tomorrow it may be six hundred."

Like most people who grew up during the Depression, and worked long years for small return, Rothko was keenly aware of the value of money. One day in 1961 he asked my wife and me to meet him in his studio for a drink, before going on to his apartment for dinner. The studio was a converted gymnasium in what once had been a YMCA on the Bowery. Inside it he had erected a scaffold of the exact dimensions of that dining room in the Seagram building, for which he supposedly was painting the murals. He still had not been able to finish them to his satisfaction, and on the day of our visit he had turned away from them to work on another canvas. It was typical of his later work: a rectangle of about 9 by 14 feet, covered with a solid color over which he had painted three smaller rectangles in contrasting colors.

“This kind of design may look simple,” he said, “but it usually takes me many hours to get the proportions and colors just right. Everything has to lock together. I guess I am pretty much of a plumber at heart.”

Big racks built along one side of the studio, and in adjoining quarters which apparently had been the gymnasium dressing room, were stacked full of similar outsize paintings—at a quick estimate, several dozens of them. “I can’t afford to put them in the market just now,” he explained. “This year I already have to pay too much income tax. And if my prices hold up, I can probably get more for them next year anyhow.”

He added that he was a little nervous about holding them indefinitely, because he well knew—and resented—the speed with which fashions shift in the New York art market. Sometimes he spoke as if every painter, and every school of painting, were locked in mortal competition with every other. He thought of himself as belonging to a group which included Motherwell, Klein, Still and de Kooning, all of whom he respected. He had nothing but contempt, however, for Kandinsky and for Ben Shahn — “a kind of cheap propagandist.”

“Nobody can deny,” he once said, “that my group accomplished one thing. We destroyed cubism. Nobody can paint a cubist picture today. But we didn’t destroy Picasso — he is still valid.”

I couldn’t resist asking him whether he had any idea who the young painter might be who eventually would destroy Rothko & Co. “If I did, I would kill him,” he said. He sounded as if he meant it.

A moment later, he added that he had no doubt such a destroyer would come along sooner or later. “The kings die today in just the same way they did *Fraser’s Golden Bough*.”

According to his account, Rothko became a painter almost by accident. He had dropped out of Yale in 1923, after a couple of years of liberal arts, and moved to New York with no clear idea of what to do with his life .

“Then one day,” he said, “I happened to wander into an art class, to meet a friend who was taking the course. All the students were sketching this nude model — and right away I decided that was the life for me.”

For a short time he attended Max Weber’s class at the Art Students League and then — when he got bored with nude models — he launched out on his own. For years he painted realistic pictures, and what critics later were to describe as paintings with expressionist and surrealist tendencies. None of these experiments brought him either fame or much money, so he turned for two years during the Depression to work with the WPA Federal Arts Project in New York. Only about 1947 did he develop a style which caught the attention of important critics and patrons — among them Peggy Guggenheim — and from then on his rectangles floating in colored space found a

growing market, first through the Betty Parsons and then the Sidney Janis galleries. By the early Sixties he was widely regarded as one of the country's half-dozen leading painters.

My wife once told him that she thought he must be a mystic, because his paintings conveyed, to her at least, a sense of magic and ritual, verging on the religious. He denied it.

"Not a mystic. A prophet perhaps-but I don't prophesy woes to come. I just paint the woes already here."

Even I could see that, in the unfinished Seagram Murals. In their latter stage the color masses-purple and black and a red like dried blood-breathed an almost palpable feeling of doom. And, in spite of his denial, an almost religious mysticism. Peter Selz of the Museum of Modern Art described them as "celebrating the death of a civilization ... their subject might be death and resurrection in classical, not Christian mythology ... a modern Dance of Death."

In the end Rothko apparently came around to a similar conclusion. He decided that this series of canvases, on which he had spent so much labor and emotion, amounted to a good deal more than a malicious gesture to rich gourmands, and deserved a better setting than a fashionable dining room. Not long before his death he arranged for them to be hung in a building created especially for them-a nondenominational chapel in Houston, built to his specifications and commissioned by the de Menil family.

Only twice in my hearing did he hint that his work might be an expression of some deeply hidden religious impulse.

At the end of that 1959 voyage, his family and mine both stayed for a few days in and around Naples to see usual tourist sights, sometimes separately, sometimes in company. After he had visited Pompeii, he told me that he had felt a "deep affinity" between his own work and the murals in the House of Mysteries-"the same feeling, the same broad expanses of somber color."

Our two families went together on a day-long expedition to Paestum, the site of an ancient Greek colony which contains the ruins of three of the most interesting temples this side of Athens. (During World War II Paestum was taken by American troops as part of the Salerno beachhead, and the Temple of Neptune was commandeered for a headquarters and communications center. It is a miracle that it was not destroyed by the German Artillery on the hills surrounding the battlefield.)

On our early morning train ride south from Naples, two Italian boys on holiday from high school struck up an acquaintance with my teen-age daughters, and presently decided to join our party. They would be glad, they said, to serve us as guides-although the arrangement was a little awkward, since they spoke no English and none of us spoke Italian. Our group conversation, such as it was, had to be carried on in

French, which they spoke imperfectly and which my elder daughter, Nic, managed only a little better.

The ruins turned out to be even more awesome than the guidebooks had led us to expect. We wandered through them all morning; Rothko examined every architectural detail with bemused attention, rarely saying a word. At noon I picked up some bread, cheese, and a bottle of wine at a nearby grocery and all of us settled down in a shady patch inside the shell of the temple of Hera for a picnic lunch. Nic hardly got a bite, because she was busy trying to interpret the boys' questions. Who were we? What were we doing there?

Turning to Rothko she said, "I have told them that you are an artist, and they ask whether you came here to paint the temples." "Tell them," he said, "that I have been painting Greek temples all my life without knowing it."

This is pure speculation, but I suspect Rothko's death may have been related to the fact that artists these days are not encouraged to paint temples.

For centuries, of course, that was one of their main functions. Art was intimately connected with religion, in such places as the House of Mysteries and later in the churches and monasteries of Byzantium and Europe. The great artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were largely preoccupied with teaching the lessons of the Bible to the illiterate, by means of fresco, mosaic, portraits, sculpture, stained glass—the visual aids of their time. The Church was their chief patron. Their role in society was explicit and secure. Their work was both necessary and honorable: indeed, almost holy since it was recognized as God's work.

Gradually, this function diminished, with the invention of the printing press, the decline of religion, and finally the advent of the camera. By the twentieth century artists were no longer performing a unique role: the creation of images which filled a deeply felt need of their culture, and which they alone could provide. Inevitably many people began to regard their work as "primarily decorative"—a cosmetic of society rather than food for its soul.

Recently the artist has been assigned a still more demeaning role: the production of artifacts which can be exploited by the art world—that is, the dealers, the critics, fashionable collectors, and speculators. Even a mutual investment trust, the Fine Arts Fund, recently has been organized to deal in such artifacts; its managers obviously have no interest in the artist's message, but only in his appreciation potential. Will a Warhol rise in price faster than a Rothko?

Such a question can infuriate a man like Rothko. So too can the judgement of a critic such as John Canaday, in his review of Rothko's Museum of Modern Art show. He commented that, to a large degree, "the painter today has become a man whose job it is to supply material in progressive stages for the critic's aesthetic exercises. This is a distressing cart-before-the-horse relationship, but it has its legitimacy—no question

about that-in a day when other arts supply most of the needs that painting used to supply, and leave painting only its more esoteric functions. In such a situation it is quite natural that the critic may be tempted to find most in the painter who says least, since that painter leaves most room for aesthetic legerdemain.”

Rothko, I believe, deeply resented being forced into the role of a supplier of “material” either for investment trusts or for aesthetic exercises. I have heard several explanations of his suicide-that he had been in ill health, that he had been unproductive for the last six months, that he felt rejected by an art world which had switched its momentary fancy to younger and inferior painters. There may be something in all of them; I don’t know. But I have a hunch that at least a contributing cause was his long anger: the justified anger of a man who felt destined to paint temples, only to find his canvases treated as trade goods.

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