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Mark Rothko
Selections from the National Gallery of Art

February 4 - April 22, 2012
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Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia, on September 25, 1903. At the age of ten, Rothko and his family emigrated to America and settled in Portland, Oregon. From 1921 to 1929 Rothko attended Yale University but left the New York City in the Fall of 1923. He found work in the garment district and took up residence in the Upper West Side. He enrolled in the Art Students League the next year, and began his life as an artist. Five years later he began teaching children at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, a position he held for over twenty years. He was his first given name exhibition in 1933 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and his first exhibition in New York a few months later at the Contempo Art Gallery.

In 1935, Rothko and several other painters formed a group, known as the Ten who exhibited together until 1939. Rothko's works show both representational and symbolic imagery. He began to express the emotional response, inspiring a meditative experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color rectangles, then you miss the point. The power of Rothko's work derives from a new compositional motif, which resembles a portal or window. This form invites the gaze, the viewer is kept at a perpetual threshold by the resistance of the dark ground.

The 1960s were a decade of professional triumph. Rothko himself said, “The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions... the people who weep before them receive the same experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color rectangles, then you miss the point.”

Rothko began to merge styles of surrealism and abstraction, creating paintings of rectangular fields of color and light, that later culminated in the late, transcendental fields of color. His work became increasingly abstract; perhaps ironically, Rothko himself described the process as being one toward “clarity.” Rothko insisted, “I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relations of color or forms or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.”

Rothko's goal was to offer the viewer an experience on the part of the viewer. The 1960s were a decade of professional triumph. Rothko himself said, “The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions... the people who weep before them receive the same experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color rectangles, then you miss the point.”

The exhibition at the Academy Art Museum, in Easton, Maryland, shows the development of Rothko's career over four decades; from representational and mythic imagery from his works and by 1947, non-objective compositions of indeterminate shapes emerged. He also largely abandoned conventional titles, sometimes resorting to numbers or colors in order to distinguish one work from another. The artist also now explained the meaning of his work, “silence is so accurate,” he said, fearing that words would only paralyze the viewer's mind and imagination. By 1949 he reached his signature format, painting two or three soft-edged, luminous rectangles, stacked weightlessly on top of one another, floating horizontally against a monochrome background. This style would typify his work until his death. Rothko received a major commission for murals in 1961 for the Holyoke Center's dining room, at Harvard University. The Untitled (Sketch for Harvard Memorial), c. 1961, executed in pen and ink, with watercolor and graphite, is one of twenty-two sketches, from which six murals were completed and only five were installed. He hoped the works would elicit an intensely emotional response, inspiring a meditative mood. Although Rothko resisted classification, he is usually considered to be part of the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field movements. During a career that spanned over fifty years, he created a new and impassioned form of abstract painting. Rothko's work is characterized by rigorous attention to formal elements such as color, shape, balance, depth, composition, and scale. His colorful, large-scale, nonobjective paintings, such as the Untitled paintings of 1952, and 1955 in the exhibition, are meant to communicate directly with the viewer, and to give a visual space in which to reflect and respond to what one is looking at. From 1968 on he worked in acrylic colors. Rothko's goal was to offer the viewer an experience on the part of the viewer. The 1960s were a decade of professional triumph. Rothko himself said, “The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions... the people who weep before them receive the same experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color rectangles, then you miss the point.”

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