



Image 4

The Seagram Paintings by Mark Rothko 1958.

How does the Mark Rothko series of paintings for the Seagram Building (in New York) evoke a range of emotions and subliminal responses to the works?

Mark Rothko transforms painting material and process to impose a deep connection to the individual viewers response to the human condition.

Introduction: purpose and background. (Abstract)

This essay will research and investigate a series of paintings created and devised by the artist Mark Rothko when he was commissioned to produce a series of murals to adorn the walls of the Four-Seasons restaurant in New York City's Seagram building in 1958. It explores the relationship between artist and the viewer and concentrates on the final selection of nine paintings selected for this purpose. A series of paintings that work as one complete work. This essay seeks to throw light upon, as well as to discuss, the conditions that allow the viewer to interact with the paintings and derive a kind of meaning or content from the work.

He stated: "I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on."¹.

Mark Rothko was born in 1903 in Dvinsk (now Daugavpils), the second-largest city of what would later become independent Latvia in 1918. When he born nearly half of the city's inhabitants were Jewish; today fewer than 400 people of Jewish descent remain. Through the determination and

hard work of Chief Curator Freida Lavado who project managed and transformed Daugavpils former military cadet academy into the Mark Rothko Art Centre, where six of Rothko's works—generously loaned by his children Christopher and Kate Rothko—are on permanent display. This demonstrates the will and wish of others to create a suitable place of sanctuary and tranquillity for the work of Rothko. Something that played such an important role in subsequent works and vital to how the space in which they were to be perceived. When Rothko was ten, his family emigrated to Portland, Oregon, marking the beginning of his life in America. ³

Abstract Expressionism in context to the Seagram commission.

During the 1940- 50s Abstract Expressionism had emerged of which the American painters such as Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning and Franz Kline founded. This group, amongst others, were also known as the so-called action painters which was characterised by their impulsive and spontaneous ways of working. Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still were much more interested in thought and reason for making work that often related to religion and myth in its simplest and purest form. The viewer response was hoped to that of a meditative or compilation and be absorbed to into one's own thoughts. In an essay written in 1948 Barnett Newmann said:

'Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or "life", we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings'. ⁴

Rothko was avid member of the American Abstract Expressionists and shared both emotions and expressive forms of art. Inspired from the Surrealists and his own ideas and thoughts Rothko retrieved from the unconscious mind his aspiration was not merely to decorate but to provoke, to evoke raw emotion.

***'Automatism – The performance of actions without conscious thought or intention.'* ¹⁸**

The Seagram Commission.

Mark Rothko was commissioned to paint in 1958 for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York's Seagram Building. The commission in the mid-1958 was accompany and furnish the newly completed Seagram Building on Park Avenue in New York with a series of wall paintings. This large and imposing building was designed by Mies van der Roë, the former leader of the Bauhaus, was the architect selected to design the building along with Phillip Johnson. And is still today the headquarters of the tradition rich beverage company Joesph E Seagram & Sons. ¹⁶

This was the first time that Rothko had received such a commission of this magnitude as Rothko's assistant, mentioned.

"I believe he felt that he had gone as far as he could in painting until the proposal for the Seagram Building murals was presented to him. It absolutely supplied him with a whole new dimension," ⁵

A \$35,000 fee was agreed, with a deposit of \$7000. The rest to be paid instalments of the next four years. This was a considerable amount of money at that time and the type of commission that would help signify success and acceptance as a professional artist. This was a space that would be able to

accommodate the work of Rothko. In past collections that also house works of the artist the space itself becomes a very important factor when viewing the work. The ambience and the space have a very important role in establishing the relaxed and comfortable presence that Rothko required. ⁵

“It absolutely supplied him with a whole new dimension,” ⁵ continued Rothko’s assistant Dan Rice.

Rothko’s close friend Dore Ashton emphasises this by saying that Rothko’s desire to become immersed in the spaces of his paintings became increasingly domineering.

“Not until now did it occurred to him that the most satisfying means would be the most literal: that canvases would surround the viewer as murals.” ⁶

Still, Rothko felt ambivalent about the commission, and had a contract drawn up which would allow him to back out of the deal and retrieve his paintings if necessary. He was obviously torn between his hatred for the wealth and greed of capitalism and his desire to create his own special place for his art.

In subsequent months then years, Rothko worked on a three series of new paintings which were on an enormous scale, and he completed over forty works in all. These were large-scale paintings were specifically created with the walls of the Four Seasons restaurant space in mind. Rothko wanted his paintings began to harmonise with each other and retain a special relationship with anyone who looked at them.

The viewer was to be: ***‘all consumed ‘in an atmosphere of quiet reflection and momentary gaze.’*** ⁷

‘According to Gumbrecht’s presence-aesthetics it is a question of losing oneself in moments of aesthetic intensity. Hence, a work of art may imply a temporary loss of oneself whereby artwork and viewer are being synchronized. This synchronism requires a state of mind of the viewer that is open as well as concentrated’. ²

A warm palette of dark reds and browns and black resonate throughout the work. The choice of colours of sombre palette of black, brown and reds, help create a sense of foreboding connection between artist and viewer. The scale and application of paint seems subtly changeable and almost transparent in parts. They are intended to reach out to the viewer and almost pose questions and evoke feelings within. They are indeed very powerful works. ^{2/5}

“The most important tool that the artist shapes through his constant practice is the belief in the ability to produce miracles when they are needed.” – Mark Rothko, “Possibilities” 1947. ⁷

Inspirations.

The art critic and good friend of Rothko was man named John Fischer. They would frequently hold deep and meaningful discussions about Rothko's work and seemed quite influential in the artists decision about the Seagram Commission. Fischer was also the publisher of Harper's Magazine.

Rothko had worked on the Seagram commission for several years. Concentrating on three of the sets of murals initially with oranges, reds and browns but as time wore on, his colours darkened towards marrons and darker tonalities of browns, this carried the work to a new level in its mood and meaning. It was at this time Rothko intentioned seemed to be striving towards obtaining a

reaction to make the viewer feel somewhat uncomfortable. He was rapidly losing faith in the Seagram commission.

Disillusioned, he told Fischer:

“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.” ¹¹

And continued:

When I realized my mistake, I started again, and this time I’m holding tight to the original conception”. ⁹

A break was needed so Rothko joined the Fisher family and visited Naples and Pompeii. According to Fisher, Rothko saw “a deep relationship” between the work he was amid for the Seagram commission and those of the antique murals in the Villa Di Misteri. During the same trip they visited Rome, Florence and Venice. Florence had a profound effect on Rothko, and he visited the Michelangelo's decorated library in San Lorenzo which made a real impact on him, he wished to create a similar feeling in his paintings.



Image no 6

This can be seen to some degree in one of his Seagram works, ‘Black on Marron 1958’ at the Tate Modern. In the centre of this painting there is a part which replicates the closed off window of Michelangelo's vestibule like an architectural allusion to imitate a false opening. ¹⁶

“Rothko's paintings are translations of Michelangelo's blocked-off windows.” ¹⁰

Walking amid the city of the dead, Rothko brooded on his work. In the most atmospheric of the Pompeiian houses, the Villa of the Mysteries, he was struck by the use of surprisingly deep colours for a decorative scheme - black and red. Rothko told Fischer that in the villa he sensed "a deep affinity" between the Seagram murals and the Roman wall paintings - "the same feeling, the same broad expanses of sombre colour".

Rothko's paintings have been greatly influenced by what he saw in Pompei and Florence. Pompei with its sudden sadness and catastrophic natural events that engulf the city in still and motionless moment in time. Creating an atmosphere from which Rothko had discovered as the feeling he wanted to portray in his painting; an indescribable emotion of sadness and reflection. To conjure up such a powerful and overwhelming sense of foreboding and fearful apprehension. He wanted the deathly space of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library to push in on them, deny them exit.

Rothko spoke of himself as an architect - "I have created a place," he said when he looked at the murals in his Bowery studio. ¹¹

Michelangelo's influence.

The Laurentian Library in Florence by Michelangelo: A Mannerist Masterpiece August 14, 2024, 6 .
Was a turning point for Rothko.

Michelangelo 1475 – 1564 one of the most important artists of the Italian renaissance along with Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) Raphael (1483-1520) Donatello (1386-1466) Masaccio (1401-1428) Botticelli (1445-1510): Titian (c. 1488-1576).

These artists were some of the most influential artists who were working in the mid to late

14th / 15th centuries in Italy, creating some of most important artworks of the time and have consciously and sub-obviously influence so many. Is it no wonder that Rothko was touched by the work of Michelangelo a young man at the mere age of 27 created David 1504 for the Palazzo Della Signoria in Rome. This helps to put the magnitude of Michelangelo as an artist in context. ¹²

Rothko returns.

Shortly after Rothko visits to Italy and almost two years after receiving the commission for \$35,000, he suddenly changed his mind, returned the money, and withdrew the works. This was a major shift in his ideas and concepts but more importantly it became apparent how important the viewer had become in his concept for making work. The works were stored for a further 10 years until Rothko himself made a very generous donation of the entire Seagram Murals collection to the Tate Gallery in London 1970.

He sent very specific instructions of how he wanted the works to be shown. From the physical arrangement and order to ambiance of the gallery through low lighting and sound consideration.

Formal Elements.

In the instructions of both displaying the work and considering how they should be view was an integral part of the work. As can be seen here in a letter with a maquette giving precise instructions. This help to show that that every detail from stretching the canvas execution of the work and the hanging and placement was carefully considered and thought through. This was an essential guide of how Rothko not only wanted his work to be seen but also to create a feeling of ambiance and sense of magnitude and foreboding.

Rothko's Instructions for Hanging the Murals:

When Rothko's murals arrived at the Tate Gallery in London on 25 February 1970, the Tate had clear instructions as to how they should be hung, what wall colour should be used and what lighting was necessary. These instructions came in the shape of Rothko's personal suggestions to the Whitechapel Gallery, which had hosted a Rothko exhibition in 1961, containing eight of the Seagram Murals. To this day the Tate still honours Rothko's suggestions for the installation of his paintings.

Letter from Mark Rothko to the Whitechapel Gallery, 1961, Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive, London. ¹⁵

"Wall Color: Walls should be made considerably off-white with umber and warmed by a little red. If the walls are too white, they are always fighting against the pictures which turn greenish because of the predominance of red in the pictures.

Lighting: The light, whether natural or artificial, should not be too strong: the pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light, the color in the picture is washed out and a distortion of their look occurs. The ideal situation would be to hang them in a normally lit room – that is the way they were painted. They should not be over-lit or romanticized by spots; this results in a distortion of their meaning. They should either be lighted from a great distance or indirectly by casting lights at the ceiling or the floor. Above all, the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not strongly.

Hanging height from the floor: The larger pictures should all be hung as close to the floor as possible, ideally not more than six inches above it. In the case of the small pictures, they should be somewhat raised but not "skied" (never hung towards the ceiling). Again, this is the way the pictures were painted. If this is not observed, the proportions of the rectangles become distorted and the picture changes.

The exceptions to this are the pictures which are enumerated below which were painted as murals actually to be hung at a greater height. "

These are:

1 Sketch for Mural, No 1, 1958

2 Mural Sections 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7, 1958-9

3 White and Black on Wine, 1958

The murals were painted at a height of 4' 6" above the floor. If it is not possible to raise them to that extent, any raising above three feet would contribute to their advantage and original effect." ¹⁵

These images show Rothko's maquettes that he had constructed to give an idea to the layout of the work in the given space in the Tate Modern.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

The Tate Modern has, from a recent visit, dedicated a whole gallery space to these works and honoured as close as possible Rothko's specific hanging instructions. The space is quiet and serene and gives the viewer space and time to sit and contemplate. The influences and ideas behind them are as strong now as they ever were. The almost magical power they process on the viewer is something that is quite unusual. They do seem to touch our deepest emotions and reach out to our darkest thoughts. The paintings remain in a constant state of transformation and this constant agitation is intended to upset one's emotions. The work seems not to communicate not through a narrative but through a kind of a silent language. It is not until you spend time in front of these very large paintings does the 'magic' start to happen.



Image no 5

This collection of paintings can only be view in this manner and with sufficient time to engage and rest. They contain a rhythm from the start and work away around to the final large final maroon and deep red painting who location is by the exit of the Tate gallery space. The scale being immense and a feeling of one being absorb by the work is almost overpowering. His work and the subconscious aesthetics are prevalent and now these works in their final resting place seems most fitting. The viewer within that space which they are now housed, Tate Modern does lend itself beautifully. Its placement by the gallery's exit reinforces a sense of conclusion, almost as if the painting is gently guiding the viewer out, offering a final moment of reflection. Almost as a final point of reflection as Rothko guides you away till another time.



Image no 7

It seems very sad that he never saw his work in its new home as it is said only a few hours later of his generous donation, Rothko was found dead in his studio on East 69th Street in Manhattan. The 66 year old painter had taken his own life. In the following year, just such a place would open, a mural project that realised a very different set of intentions.

Christopher Rothko his son, wrote the introduction for the book, 'The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art' by Mark Rothko which goes some way to help explain some of the ideas and thoughts behind his late father's work in 1940s. In the book, Rothko contrasts the modern artist's fate with that of artists of the past who lived by the whims of dukes, kings, and popes. The wealthy and the powerful.

'It will be pointed out that the artist's lot is the same today, that the market, through its denial or affording of the means of sustenance, exerts the same compulsion. Yet there is this vital difference: the civilizations enumerated above had the temporal and spiritual power to summarily

enforce their demands. The Fires of Hell, exile, and, in the background, the rack and stake, were correctives if persuasion failed. Today the compulsion is Hunger, and the experience of the last four hundred years has shown us that hunger is not nearly as compelling as the imminence of Hell and Death. Since the passing of the spiritual and temporal patron, the history of art is the history of men who, for the most part, have preferred hunger to compliance, and who have considered the choice worthwhile. And choice it is, for all the tragic disparity between the two alternatives.' ¹³

This statement strengthens his dilemma between the rich capitalist society and the place where everyone could appreciate his art. Rothko was:

'...obviously torn between his hatred for the wealth and greed of capitalism and his desire to create his own special place for his art,' writes Wolfe. ⁸

"Like music, my father's artwork seeks to express the inexpressible – we are far removed from the realm of words. From the lack of identifiable figures or space to their lack of titles, my father's paintings make clear that reference to things outside the painting itself is superfluous. The written word would not only disrupt the experience of these paintings; it cannot enter their universe.' ¹⁴

The interaction between viewer and artist is a crucial element in the investigation of the possible outcomes for the encounter with Mark Rothko's late classical paintings.

According to Gumbrecht's presence-aesthetics it is a question of losing oneself in moments of aesthetic intensity. Hence, a work of art may imply a temporary loss of oneself whereby artwork and viewer are being synchronized. This synchronism requires a state of mind of the viewer that is open as well as concentrated. ¹



Image 8

Conclusion

This essay has examined the series of paintings created by Mark Rothko for the Seagram Building commission of 1958, works originally intended to adorn the walls of the Four Seasons restaurant. By looking through how the commission came to be and the events that proceeded the commission. The influences that enhance the work and the outcome. It looked at the final resting place for these works and how Rothko envisioned these large-scale canvases to be seen. Not as decorative objects, but as a unified, series of works that reach a deep emotional response from the viewer.

Considering all the formal elements and the spatial arrangement, the essay has highlighted the dynamic and often paradoxical relationship between artist and viewer. Rothko's ambition was not simply to paint, but to communicate through silence, colour and form inviting contemplation and an almost mediative sense from the work. Ultimately, the Seagram Murals transcend their original context and offer a profound statement on the human condition and the transformative power of art.

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No 16 This essay forms the basis of the final talk in *Painting Bites Back*, a course led by Jonathan Jones at Tate Modern, London SE1,

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Illustrations

Images 1,2,3. Letter from Mark Rothko to the Whitechapel Gallery, 1961, Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive, London.

Images 4, 7 & 8. Rothko Painting taken by the author of this essay **Pete Williams** on last visit to Tate Modern January 2025.

Image 5. Alexander Liberman, Rothko in his Studio, New York, 1964. Alexander Liberman Photographic Collection & Archive Research Library.

Image 6. The Laurentian Library | © Sailko, CC by 3.0 Architecture, Classic Architecture the Laurentian Library in Florence by Michelangelo: A Mannerist Masterpiece August 14, 2024

