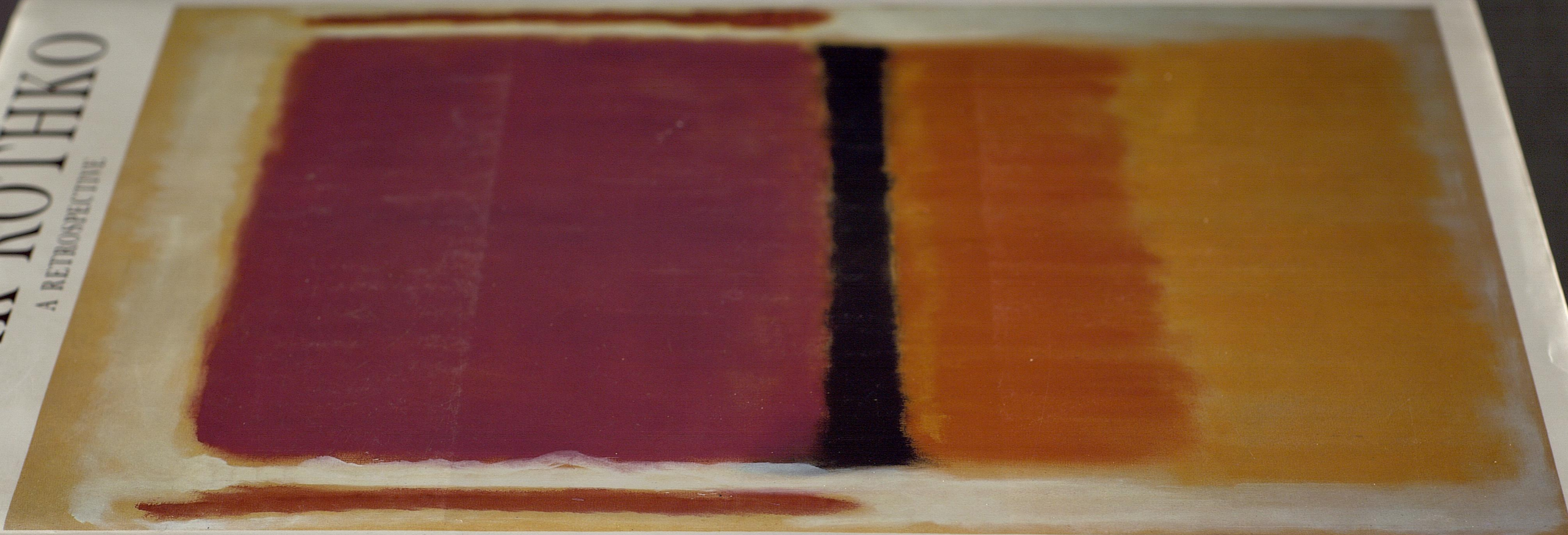


MARK ROTHKO  
A RETROSPECTIVE



DIANE WALDMAN

MARK ROTHKO

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum / Abrams

# MARK ROTHKO

A RETROSPECTIVE



Mark Rothko's luminous art is presented here for the first time in a definitive work. Diane Waldman has written a major historical and critical essay on this pioneer of abstract color painting, now regarded as one of the leading artists of the mid-twentieth century. Based on the important retrospective presented at the Guggenheim Museum in 1978, the book treats Rothko's work in unprecedented richness and depth. The works in the exhibition, which date from the 1920s until shortly before Rothko's tragic and untimely death in 1970, were borrowed from the Rothko Estate as well as from public and private collections here and abroad; thus the Guggenheim, as the first institution granted full access to the Estate, was able to draw upon a previously untapped resource.

In addition to reproductions of 198 oils and watercolors, 96 in full color, the book contains a wealth of supporting illustrations, including photographs of the artist and his family and friends, many published for the first time.

Diane Waldman, Curator of Exhibitions at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and author of numerous fine books on contemporary art, writes of Rothko's childhood as an immigrant from Russia, his student days at Yale, his early career as a struggling artist, and his crucial role in the development of the New York School. The progression of his work is sensitively analyzed as it evolves from his early figurative efforts of the 1920s, through an abstract Surrealist phase, to the emergence, in 1949, of his characteristic mature abstract style. Particularly illuminating is the author's discussion of the artist's late canvases, in which Rothko achieved an expression of ultimate calm and transcendent spirituality. A detailed chronology of the artist's life and an exhaustive exhibitions list and bibliography are valuable ancillary features of the book.

*198 illustrations, including 96 plates in full color*



DIANE WALDMAN

MARK ROTHKO, 1903-1970  
*A Retrospective*

This project is supported by grants from  
Atlantic Richfield Foundation and the National Endowment  
for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency

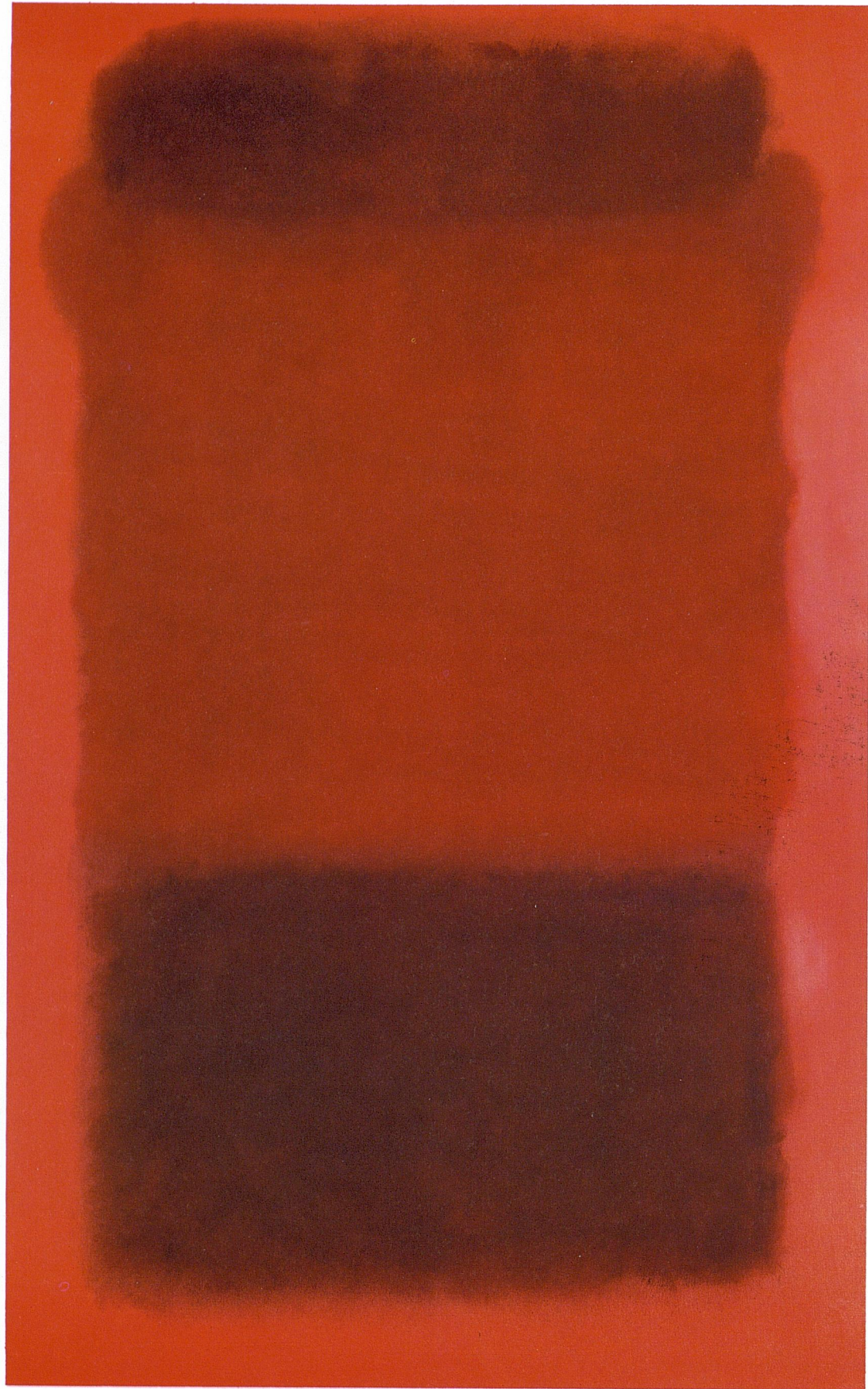
Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York,  
in collaboration with The Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Foundation, New York, 1978

## Lenders to the exhibition

Mr. and Mrs. Donald Blinken Leonard and Ruth Bocour	Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
Honorable and Mrs. Irwin D. Davidson Gerald S. Elliott, Chicago	Art Gallery of Ontario The Brooklyn Museum
Arnold and Milly Glimcher, New York Graham Gund	Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries, Hanover, New Hampshire The Fort Worth Art Museum
Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller, New York MH Holdings Inc. ( courtesy Mr. & Mrs. Donald B. Marron)	Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf Milwaukee Art Center
Barbara and Donald Jonas Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kardon	Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Michael Klebanoff, New York	Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh
Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Kolin Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Lang, Medina, Washington	Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence
Steingrim Laursen, Copenhagen Dr. Paul Todd Makler	The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston The Museum of Modern Art, New York
McCroory Corporation, New York Mrs. Barnett Newman	The Phillips Collection, Washington, D. C. The St. Louis Art Museum
Betty Parsons, New York Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips, New York	Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art The Toledo Museum of Art
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. Tiziana de R., Geneva	University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York
Estate of Mark Rothko Estate of Mary Alice Rothko	Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Mrs. Hannelore Schulhof Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc., New York	Galerie Beyeler, Basel Gimpel & Hanover Galerie, Zürich
Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Meriden, Connecticut	The Pace Gallery
Frederick Weisman Family Collection Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright	

## Table of Contents

Lenders to the Exhibition	p. 6
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	Thomas M. Messer, p. 9
<i>Preface</i>	Thomas M. Messer, p. 12
<i>The Aquamarine Sunrise: A Memory of Rothko</i>	Bernard Malamud, p. 13
<i>Mark Rothko: The Farther Shore of Art</i>	Diane Waldman, p. 16
Plates	p. 73
Chronology	Clair Zamoiski, p. 265
Exhibitions and Selected Reviews	p. 280
Bibliography	p. 292
Photographic Credits	p. 296



139. *Four Reds*. 1957  
Oil on canvas, 81 x 50"  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Schwartz



140. *Untitled*. 1957  
Oil on canvas, 79½ x 69½"  
Frederick Weisman Family Collection

# Rothko and Belief

Disagreeing with a recent dismissal of Rothko's "sublime," the author offers a definition of the term, delineates its formal source in the painter's "dramaturgy of color" and argues for its philosophical importance to modern experience.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

A recent article on Mark Rothko by Robert Hughes<sup>1</sup> brings to the consideration of this artist a measured coolness, not to say a cynicism, that seems new in criticism of the major Abstract Expressionists. It was probably inevitable. How long could the virtual religiosity of the First Generation's own self-image and its opposite pole, the compliment of near-total rejection paid by the pragmatic '60s avant garde, remain in force? The '70s were unlikely to end without efforts being made to take the beclouded reputation of the Abstract-Expressionist masters firmly in hand. In bare outline (he talks only briefly about the paintings), Hughes indicates what will almost certainly become a dominant view of Rothko, at least for some considerable time: "Rothko, far from being Yahweh's official stenographer . . . was a painter, a maker of visual fictions—better than most, but still prone to repetition and still able to fall victim to his own formulas and reflexive clichés."

Hughes regards Rothko's ambition "to render the patriarchal despair and elevation of the Old Testament" (a distorting phrase, but apt in tone) as distinctly misguided, though "very moving," because what he had to work with—"the vocabulary of Symbolism—the fluttering space, the excruciatingly refined, sensuous color, the obsession with nuance"—was simply unequal to "a genuine religious

art." Hughes isn't out to debunk Rothko entirely. He praises the "rhapsodic airiness" of "the best of Rothko's paintings in the Fifties" and allows that "perhaps no other American painter had ever devoted himself so wholeheartedly to the cultivation of feeling. On that score alone, Rothko was a major though uneven painter." But he is definitely hostile to the imputation of "the sublime" to Rothko's art, the "awe-inspiring spirituality" claimed, for the Rothko Chapel in Houston, by Diane Waldman in her introduction to the Guggenheim catalogue.<sup>2</sup> On the grounds that such fancy rhetoric is "coercive," Hughes closes his article with what amounts to a blanket *ad hominem* indictment of Rothko's appreciators:

Sublime, sublime, sublime, the reflexes go clickety-clack, all the way down the Guggenheim ramp. What role does cultural nationalism play in the persistent desire to treat Rothko as an American blend of Turner and Michelangelo? How far are the responses dictated by the uneasy feeling that if verbose obeisances to the Ineffable stopped, the work might suffer? To what extent did Rothko's suicide confer a profundity on the paintings which, had he lived, they might not quite have had? But how can one dare think such things, in the presence of blue-chip masterpieces?

It should be noted that the bulk of Hughes's article is not about Rothko's art but about the horror of his last years ("a tragedy of infantilism") and grisly death, the famous trial ("Victorian melodrama of the fruitiest sort") and, in particular, the disastrous effects of great wealth and esteem on an artist deeply conditioned to being an outsid-

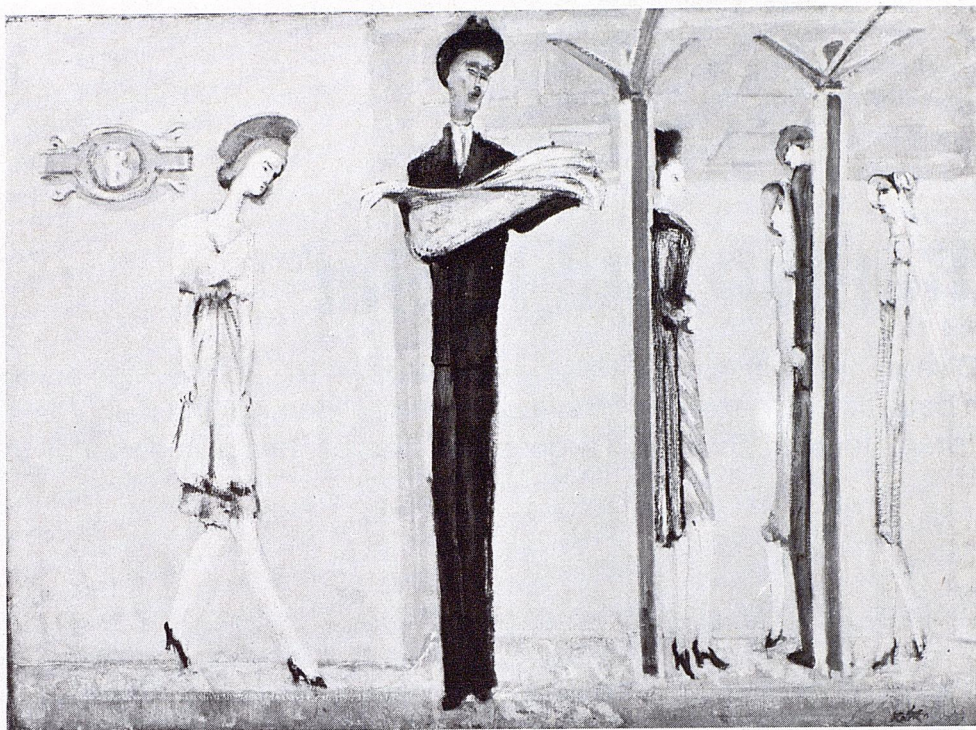
er. There is also a mordant and entertaining excursus on financial machination in the art world, seen as "the last refuge for nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism." Good journalist that he is, Hughes goes after the Rothko lowdown with "investigative" élan, and his article is invigorating reading. But in his peroration suggesting establishment or market intimidation, or anyway chauvinism, or at least morbid sentimentality as the basis for high estimations of Rothko, he comes awfully close to espousing a populist Philistinism. For myself, I do not think the issue of "spirituality" in Rothko's work is so easily disposed of, or that the testimony of those who believe an elevating experience is to be had there—not least, Rothko himself—can be lightly dismissed. On this count, Hughes's valuable corrective stands in need of some correction.

Rothko was a Russian Jewish immigrant who grew up in Oregon, started painting only after leaving college (Yale) and settled into New York and the life of art in the gradual, fortuitous way typical of his generation. In the mid- to late '20s he studied briefly with Max Weber, did some imitation John Marin watercolors, fell under the lucky influence of Milton Avery (whose works he later praised, in words that fit his own, for their "poetry and light") and developed a tentative and nervous realist style, mainly involving vague nudes in uneasy circumstances. As often at retrospectives of the Abstract Expressionists, one is struck by the unpromising look of the early work, painted at a time when, whatever the

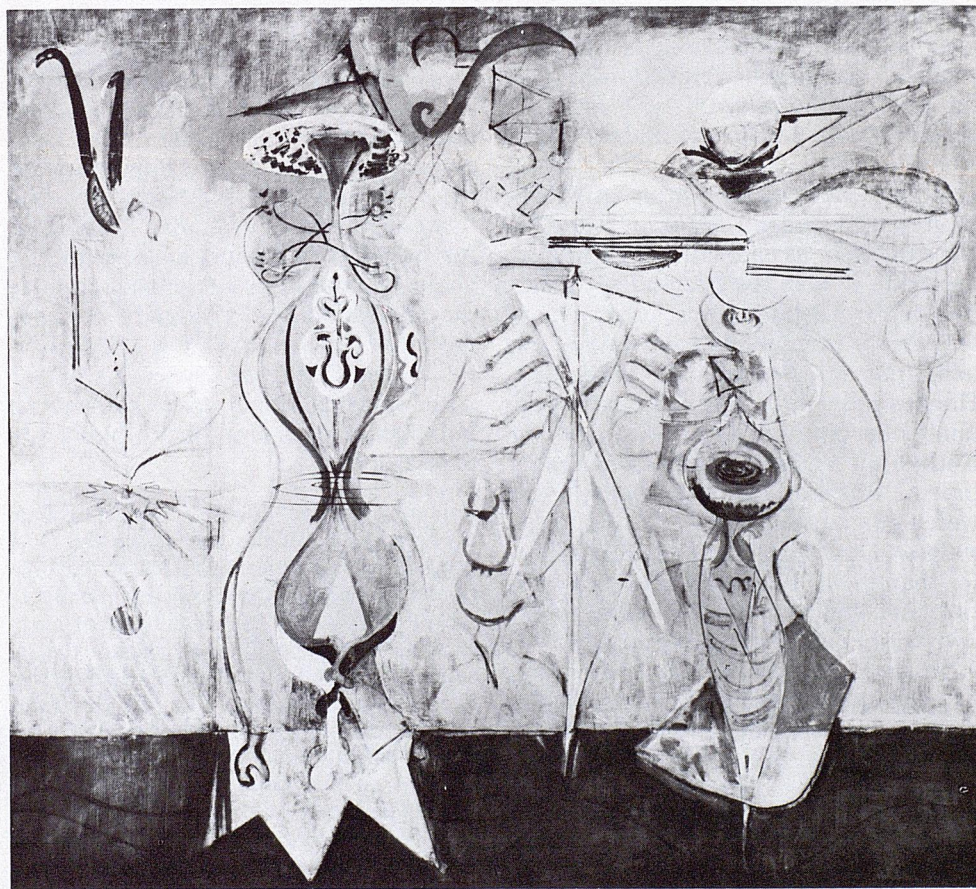
**Author:** Peter Schjeldahl is a New York critic and poet whose *Since 1964: New and Selected Poems* was just published by Sun Press.

artist's individual gifts and sophistication, a debilitating provincialism was still the American climate. Indeed, Rothko's first really articulated style, in the mid-'30s, was fashionably urban-realist with overtones of social *angst*. The best of these pictures are of severely attenuated citizens on subway platforms, their tense elongation expressive of withdrawal and isolation in a way that brings to mind later Giacometti; the drawing, which has a kind of anguished sprightliness, is some of the most effective of Rothko's career. But he was not to become a poet of the urban scene.

As is well known, the late '30s and the '40s were, for the rising generation of American artists, a time of assimilation of European modernism, a process intensified by a sense of world crisis, a collapse of political idealism and, not least, by the presence, in exile, of important members of the European avant garde. The Americans picked up the momentum of the Europeans in mid-stride—in late Surrealism, with its conviction that the unconscious was the fountainhead, and ideally the director, of all creativity. But, as Irving Sandler has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> the Americans veered immediately from the European course, which was hedged by rationalistic commitments to Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Rothko, Pollock, Still, Newman, Gottlieb and, to some degree, nearly all the others tended to the Jungian view of the unconscious as the receptacle of timeless myth and source of highest truth. This doctrine sat well with their temperamental individualism and encouraged their belief in art as a medium for profound and practically unlimited inner experience, superior in both kind and degree to the "objective." Much subsequent criticism has seemed embarrassed—as the Europeans were scandalized—by the mingled egocentrism and mysticism of this mind-set, and Hughes is only the latest of many to scoff at its pretensions. But, however grandiose (and one can fairly argue that it proved personally destructive), the Abstract Expressionists' belief in art's access to invisible reality was the very point of their departure from late Surrealist figuration toward a new kind of abstract art—one that promised to yield the reality firsthand. That there were also strictly artistic calculations involved in the creation of Abstract Expressionism is undeniable, of course; these were painters consciously competitive with the old masters. In the happiest instances, like



*Subway (Subterranean Fantasy)*, ca. 1936, 33¾ by 46 inches. Estate of Mark Rothko.



*Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944, 75 by 84¾ inches. Estate of Mary Alice Rothko. Photos pages 80, 84 Robert E. Mates and Mary Donlon.

Rothko's, spiritual program and stylistic ambition pulled together.

Diane Waldman writes, of Rothko's myth-obsessed Surrealist work of the mid-'40s, "Contrary to the opinion of

some critics, who maintain that Rothko could not draw, and even of the artist himself, the calligraphy of this period is brilliant."<sup>4</sup> Well, I'm afraid I have to join those contrary critics, for to me



Number 18, 1948-49, 67¼ by 55⅞ inches. Vassar College Art Gallery. Photo Herbert Vose.

Rothko seems an astonishingly mediocre draftsman, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the ambitious linear networks and totems of the period Waldman mentions. Rothko at this time is full of ideas about the uses of line; he just can't seem to make a line do anything. The attempts at lyrical agitation in a painting like *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944, are clear enough in their intention, but they are like diagrams for an engine that simply won't kick over. The spirals don't twirl; the scribbles don't jump; the long curves don't whip, and there is no tautness in the sharp diagonals. Where he seems to want to draw like Miró or Gorky or Klee, he rarely draws even as well as Matta or Baziotès. I found myself thinking, with amazement, of Dufy, of that kind of facile linear embellishment of color areas. This is an

incapacity quite as baffling, as mysterious, as Rothko's genius, which is simultaneously obvious in the quavering, light-drenched gray atmospheres of this period. For he was equally incapable of painting other than beautifully.

If ever the evolution of a radically abstract style seemed absolutely right, the one perfect outcome of an artist's peculiar gifts, it does in Rothko's case to a degree unrivaled except, perhaps, by Mondrian's. With the virtual disappearance of drawn line from Rothko's work around 1947, one feels a nearly physical relief and a sudden exhilaration, as at sighting ahead, after a hard journey, the marvelous destination one always suspected was there. For as an applier of paint Rothko is Rothko right from the start. Surely a lot of viewers have been struck by such

early "Rothkoesque" passages as the moody, red-streaked sky in a small picture of three seaside nudes dated (dubiously, like all his early work) 1930. An improvisatory chiaroscuro—the washing or scumbling of darker pigments over lighter, or its (infrequent) reverse, the veiling of dark with light, or their alternation in layers—is the fundamental Rothko technique early and late. A dramaturgy of color, a sense of its infinite capacity for poignance and shock, is the fundamental Rothko talent, the ground of his absolute originality.

Great colorists persuade us that, in them, the eye is somehow more than a merely optical organ, that by itself it can perform the functions, however faintly and indirectly, of touch, taste, smell or hearing. Rothko, too, was certainly capable of playing the whole synesthetic keyboard, had his temperament inclined that way, but the locus of sensation that his colors excite is more internal and, yes, ineffable than that of the senses. It's easy to see how this is enforced by Rothko's design, with its many studied vaguenesses, its impossible range of subtleties that, going beyond our ability to register them fully, at once ravish and frustrate the eye. The main device is the blurred contour. Part edge and part blend, it appears to knit color-shape to color-surface when you're looking right at it (which is hard to do, by the way), but when you're peering into the shape it serves to jiggle the color loose, letting it advance or retreat (the same color can seem to do both in the course of a single viewing) or just hover in the indeterminate overall plane. Such effects multiply, of course, with the number of different shapes and colors in a particular painting. Rothko's greatest paintings, which I think occur mostly between 1949 and roughly 1957, attain a really staggering diversity within the always deceptively simple format. But it is not the delicate mechanics of the pictures that one notices, except analytically, on purpose; these are only instrumental in delivering the color, which in turn releases a tide of reverie and introspective feeling.

Hughes is undoubtedly correct in relating the interiority of Rothko's color sensation to Symbolism. (One thinks of Moreau blacks and yellows, Redon reds and blues.) He is also right that Rothko overestimated the communicating power of his stylistic means; in my view, however, this "mistake" was responsible for his major glories. The most important difference between Rothko and the Symbolists is the obvious one; they were figurative and he—

having worked through late Surrealism's elaborate glossaries of myth, which might be seen as the culmination (and extinction) of Symbolist metaphor in painting—was abstract. He had gotten rid of everything except color, color relation, light and atmosphere (and had stressed scale), but, audaciously, he retained the intent to stir particular emotion, an intent not easy even for the Symbolists with their literary or hallucinatory subject matter. Rothko proceeded *as if* sheer color, mediated by a design adjusted to giving it maximum impact and versatility, could convey specific inner experience—in his words, the “basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom”—and as if this precise linkage of image and emotion could be made without any equation so vulgar as light-happy/dark-sad. “The people who weep before my pictures,” Rothko declared in the mid-'50s, with a manic confidence soon to be dashed, “are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” He plainly failed to make his filmy images bear the weight of anything like a discernible subject matter. However, this failure must be seen as relative to his enormous success, which was to deepen and fortify the connection, the circuit, of color to inner experience. The messages that travel this circuit may be unclear, but they arrive. The emotion that accompanies their arrival, that plays around it like St. Elmo's fire, is the sublime.

The introduction of the sublime needs, alas, some defense. People besides Hughes are having trouble with the word these days, but while a distrust of high-sounding phrase is commendable, I don't believe as experientially useful an idea as the sublime is quite ready for junking. The relevant definition of “sublime” in my Random House dictionary is this: “impressing the mind with a sense of grandeur or power; inspiring awe, veneration, etc.” Not an everyday thing, but not so extraordinary, either, for anyone regularly drawn to the stronger sensations of art or nature. (I assume, and hope, that such people are numerous, for it is to them I speak.) The implication is that it's somehow inauthentic or otherwise embarrassing to appeal to this experience by its proper name. But is it even possible, in a willing and receptive state of mind, to visit, say, the Metropolitan Museum—or the Mojave Desert—and *not* come away with a whiff of the sublime, with at least one

instant of riveted, ego-eclipsing attention, of “a sense of grandeur or power,” of “awe, veneration, etc.”? It is a vague word, as the dictionary indicates with that exasperated “etc.,” but how precise can one be about an experience that is, in its essence, speechless? There is a distinct arrogance of the rational in Hughes's mockery, as of an old-school mechanist insisting that dreams be explained in terms of sleep position and what one ate for supper.

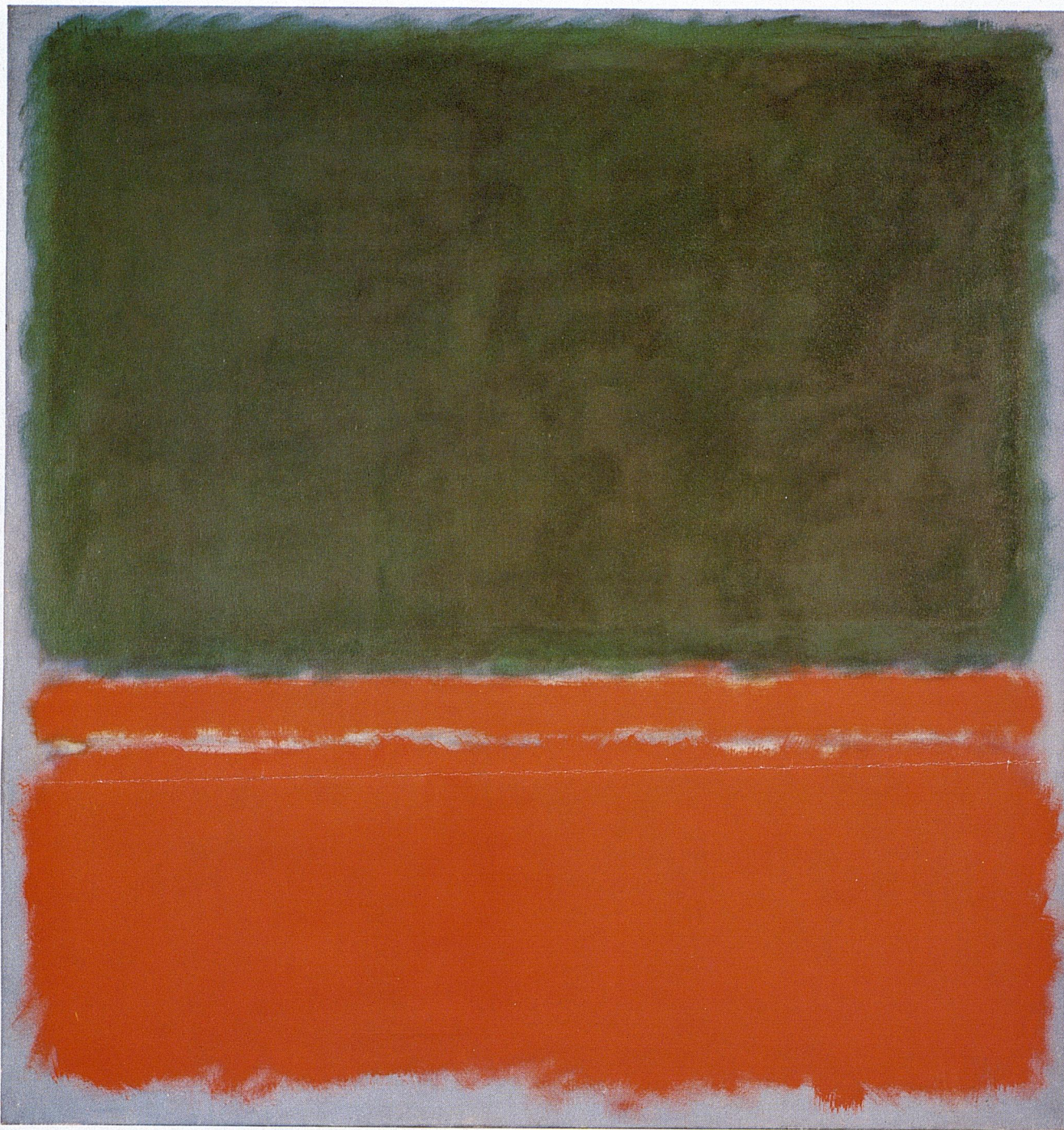
The proper debate about the sublime should revolve around its relation to particular belief. Obviously the Christian's sublime, in a cathedral, will seem to differ from the esthete's, though the mental events might register identically on any brain-monitoring apparatus. Neurologically we're all pretty similar. It's in what we think and feel about what we sense that variety arises, and it's quite legitimate for reason to critique this variety and especially the language in which it's expressed. But reason that is bent on undermining or insulting belief itself is not going to be much help here, for I don't think the sublime can occur except in a context of belief—belief in something, specifically, that is perceptible by the self and greater than the self. (That this something may be the self, in its widest comprehension of unconscious and “collective” elements, is the Jungian opinion, which Rothko apparently shared.) There's no need to get overly solemn about all this. The average viewer's “belief system” may come down to simple openness, a suspension of disbelief. The fact remains, however, that in the epiphanic moment—which may be quite mild and fleeting, the barest ripple in consciousness, or may be wrenchingly intense—one is, perforce, a *believer*.

That one can experience the sensation of belief, of “confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof” (the dictionary again), without having a mental object or even a word for that belief is a major bet of Rothko's as of much other modern art. It is not, one must add, a feature of much sophisticated art today. The present “era of limits” is nowhere more apparent than in the scaled-down ambitions of our artists. Art as substitute religion—and it was no less than this for Rothko, as for Mondrian—has disappointed us, and there is a general understanding, I think, that artistic grandeur is not worth the terrible human investment required to attain it. That's

the way things are. It would be more than a shame, however, to let our understandable present cynicism be made retroactive, denigrating great work created at the last high tide of artistic faith, roughly the decade around 1950. It's not piety I'm recommending, just a decent respect for values that, though perhaps we can't share them, are responsible for an extraordinary legacy. For it is the pressure of the values that creates the intensity of the work, and to assume otherwise is to have no comprehension of how art actually happens.

It is also necessary, of course, to look at the paintings. It may be schoolmarmish to say so, and to remind the reader of what he or she undoubtedly well knows, that until you see a large abstract painting in person you have scarcely begun to see it at all. But in the case of no other Abstract Expressionist is the photograph, including the best color plate, more mendacious than in Rothko's, so perhaps the caveat bears repeating. The exact physical scale of Rothko's paintings and their presence as objects (emphasized by his habit of painting the edges and leaving them unframed) are as critical as in any art until Minimalism fetishized these qualities in the '60s. The felt relation of the painting as a (partially disembodied) body to one's own, the viewer's, body is the very fulcrum of Rothko's art, commented on by his most discerning critics, for instance Brian O'Doherty—who provocatively speculates that the viewer of large Abstract-Expressionist painting is, in effect, the displaced “figure banished [from art] by the imperatives of abstraction,” “a figure for which Rothko had the highest regard and regret, a ‘picture of the single human figure—alone in a moment of utter immobility’ . . .”<sup>5</sup> It must be noted, however, that this physical relation of canvas-to-viewer has little of the sensuousness later achieved by, say, Brice Marden. In its effect, it is quite as heady as O'Doherty's characterization of it. The viewer is no less disembodied, in contemplation, than the endlessly ambiguous color shapes he or she contemplates. The physical relation is mainly a means of enforcing reverie.

If the word “sublime” has been devalued in our increasingly skeptical age, the word “tragic,” a touchstone for Rothko and his earlier critics, has been practically abolished, except as a synonym for lamentable. In a world where, as the pop ethic declares,



Green, Red, Blue, 1955, oil on canvas, 81½ by 77¾ inches. Milwaukee Art Center, gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley.

you're responsible for everything that happens to you, the notion of a special, noble class of destruction is hardly imaginable. It's elusive in my own mind, and a struggle for me to conceive exactly what Rothko meant by it. If one *could* experience Rothko's sense of the tragic, it might be in precisely the severe disembodiment his paintings both represent and evoke. Irving Sandler states the case succinctly: "The passivity and impersonality of Rothko's brush and reductive design . . . suggest a desire on his part that the viewer

vacate the active self. This can lead to cosmic identification, but that has a tragic dimension, for it evokes the ultimate loss of self—death."<sup>6</sup> I can't say whether this adds up or not—it remains unreal to me—but it's true enough that the experience I do have with Rothko's art is anything but entirely pleasant. To be shoved back into the febrile jumble of one's semi-conscious, half-formed thoughts and feelings—without chemical assistance, and in a public place—can be plenty discomfiting. (If it weren't, if it were always fun, perhaps no

one would ever have thought to replace Surrealism!) But I'm unwilling to give the honorific "tragedy" to this discomfiture. The implications, for instance in granting some kind of poetic dignity to Rothko's ghastly suicide, are just too distasteful to me.

In any case, Hughes's breezy assurance that Rothko "was [only] a painter, a maker of visual fictions" must seem brutally inadequate to the experience of anyone who has intensively contemplated the paintings. There's something a lot more real, even appalling, in Roth-



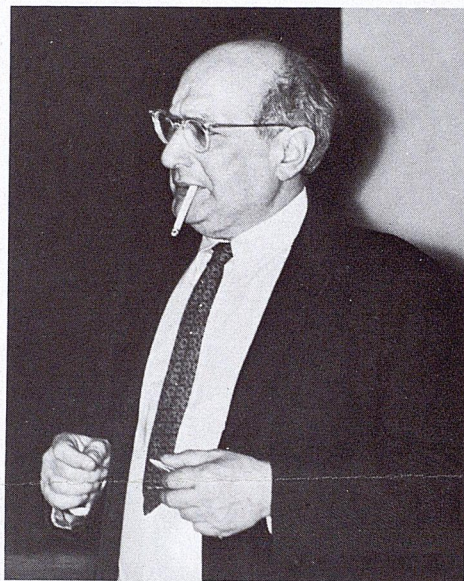
ko's best work than is touched on by the aridly correct phrase "visual fictions." However, any implication that the paintings are somehow too transcendent for their effects to be analyzed in formal terms would be equally objectionable. Besides scale, there is (until about 1960, at least) the peculiar quality of the color combinations, which might be called "atonal." In the most effective paintings, hues harmonize and saturation is more or less consistent, but variations of light and dark, even slight variations, are felt as dissonance. The dissonance, the tonal jump, at once disrupts and intensifies one's sense of the paintings' almost preternatural beauty. It absolutely prevents the work from seeming decorative. It puts the viewer's mind on edge, subtly irritated into an effort to supply a missing equilibrium, a perfected bliss. This device is, for me, the key to the particular kind of subjective involvement one has with Rothko at his best, and its increasing suppression in his work of the 1960s, more than anything else, contributes to the decline of his art—a relative decline, to be sure, for he is rarely less than impressive.

Rothko's paintings start becoming tonally unified (as they hadn't been since his transitional phase in the late '40s) in about 1958, and by 1961 the tendency is dominant, to be significantly reversed only in the very last works. Thereafter, sharp tonal contrasts do occur, but almost invariably they seem calculatedly melodramatic, a flare of red or white in prevailing gloom. Throughout this period his work does indeed flirt with the decorative, a term that holds little terror for present-day painters but which Rothko was bound to regard as the most unforgivable sin. His compensation was an almost unrelieved succession of dark and glowering hues, a kind of theatrical hermeticism most striking (and most successful) in his mural projects. To put it cruelly, his only recourse against the decorative was the corny. (Or the *almost* corny; even at his pompous worst, Rothko, unlike Still, is incapable of being truly vulgar.) He had clearly lost faith in the specific communicability of his emotions, or, perhaps more accurately, in viewers' ability to comprehend them. His later paintings no longer seek to involve; rather, they preach. The spirituality is still there,

*Brown and Grey*, 1969, acrylic on paper, 62 by 48 1/8 inches. Private collection.

but no longer as an open field for artist's and viewer's mutual discovery; now it is more like a set of conclusions. The sublime still occurs, if one is willing to welcome it, but it is a narrowed, darkened, *depressing* sublime, a connection to consciousness dim and deathly. This is an experience that, once having registered, one may well opt to forego, as masochistic, forever after.

Rothko's last, acrylic paintings, gray with black or brown, usually on paper, miss narrowly—but decisively—being major works of a new kind for him.



Mark Rothko, 1963. Photo Robert E. Mates.

They literally miss by a margin, the inexplicable (to me) narrow white border defining the horizontal image, of two roughly equal rectangles whose abrupt tonal contrast makes for piercing drama along their sensitively brushed common edge. Rothko reportedly fussed about the width of this border, but why? It adds nothing. On the contrary, it devastates the already minimal play of illusion in the dense, matte surface of acrylic paint. Its assertion of the literal surface is unnecessary in painting this inherently flat. Like a graphic mat, it removes the image from the viewer's physical space, isolating it for purely visual contemplation—but this is not a graphic image, it's a painterly (physical) one, on a confrontational scale. (It may also be the only Rothko motif ever that looks better in reproduction than in person.) The procedure of the border seems so self-defeating that it might almost be read metaphorically as a sign of the compulsive psychological withdrawal that preceded the artist's death. Another, less lurid

possible explanation is vanity—a determination to be *different* from Kelly and Marden and other painters, in the then-crowded field of reductive abstraction, by whom he was obviously being influenced. Whatever the truth, Rothko's lonely ambivalence, at the end, is excruciatingly evident. So, too, is his incredible, unkillable gift for sheerly painting, the like of which we will probably never see again.

Rothko's art failed to fulfill his spiritual program for it, and both he and his art suffered terribly from this failure. But to attribute the failure to the program itself, as Hughes seems to, is just too cozy, too self-flattering a conclusion. If belief never had the highest and best human consequences, we could be rid of it in a moment and—"beyond freedom and dignity," in the arch behaviorist's phrase—could pass our lives in untroubled rationality. The fact is that when Rothko's belief faltered, so did his art. If his great works of the '50s lack for us the fullness of a "genuine religious art," that's less the fault of the works than of a world that shifted beneath the artist's feet—as it is continually shifting beneath everybody's—at the moment he gained a heroic footing on it. In my opinion, Rothko's talents and post-Symbolist esthetics were more than equal to a highly developed religious expression—if only the modern world could hold still long enough for any belief to do more than bud before the frost is on it. Rothko lacked the wisdom of the '70s, which seems to be that to believe in anything at all is messy and dangerous, and this does give us an edge on him. But it's a petty edge, as witness the disheartening littleness and shallowness of nearly all new artistic development of the past few years. Look at our wised-up contemporary art, then look at '50s Rothko. Can we, for survival's sake, learn to prefer the former to the latter? □

1. Robert Hughes, "Blue Chip Sublime," *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 11, 1978, pp. 8–16.
2. Diane Waldman, "Mark Rothko: The Farther Shore of Art," in *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective*, Abrams, 1978, p. 68.
3. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, New York, Praeger, 1970. See Chapter 4.
4. Waldman, op. cit., p. 48.
5. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth*, New York, Random House, 1973, p. 161, p. 159.
6. Sandler, op. cit., p. 183.

## The 'straw man' in the Rothko case

After the final judgment against the executors of the Rothko estate and Frank Lloyd, the final irony emerges: it all could have been avoided, says a prominent law professor, by the inclusion of a simple clause in the will

by John H. Merryman

**T**he sensational trial and judgment in the Mark Rothko case, now on appeal, have received a great deal of publicity. However, few realize that if the will had been competently drawn, the deal between the executors, Marlborough Galleries and Frank Lloyd would probably have gone unchallenged. For want of a routine verbal formula in the will, the way was opened for the artist's children to challenge the con-

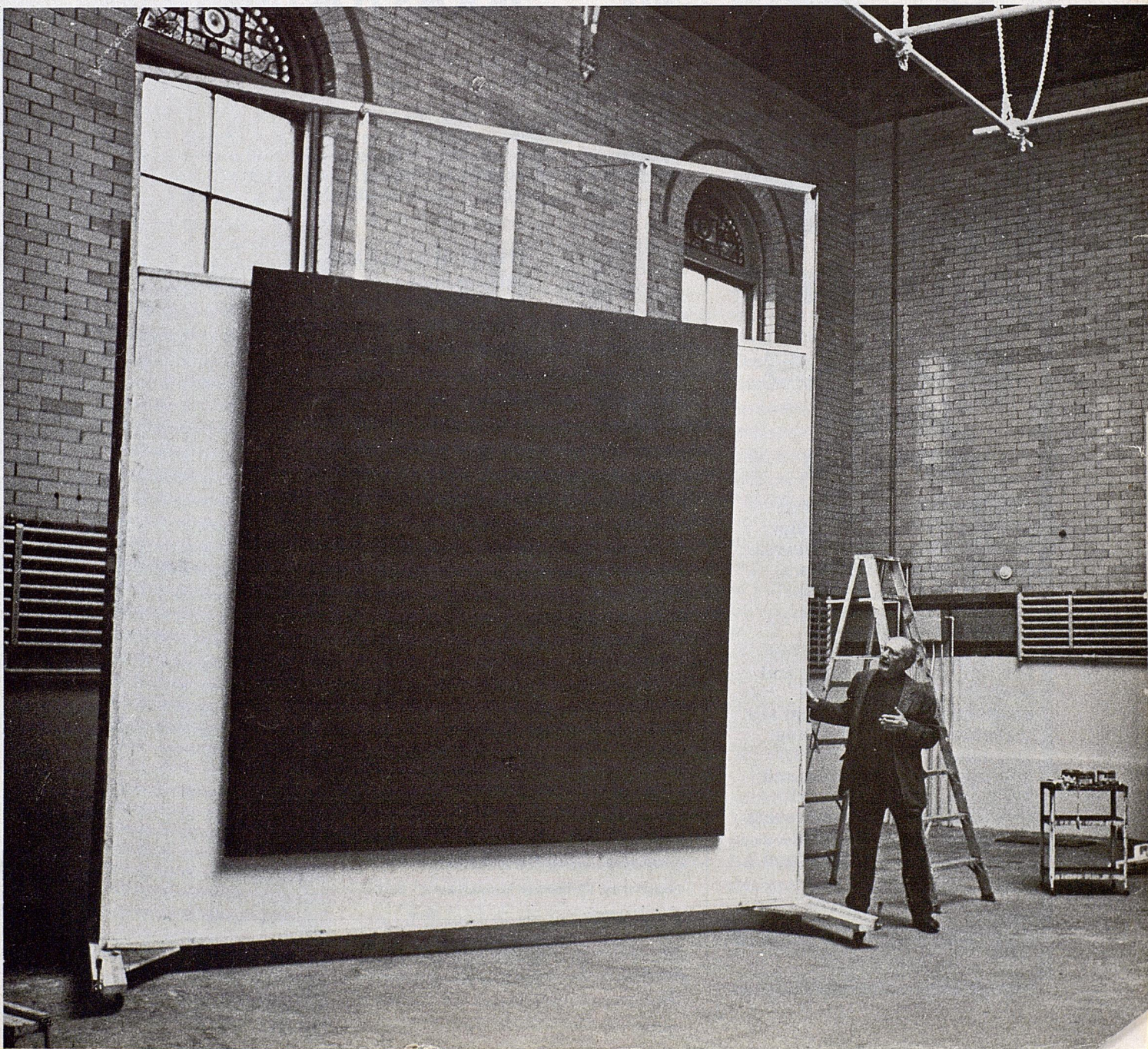
tracts between the estate and Marlborough Galleries, to call into question the actions of the individual executors, Lloyd and Marlborough, to stimulate the Attorney General of New York State, Louis Lefkowitz, to intervene and to arouse the interest of the Collector of Internal Revenue. One is reminded of a Greek drama: a great treasure (hundreds of paintings by a heroic artist) falls into the hands of crafty men who pro-

---

*John H. Merryman is Sweitzer Professor of Law at Stanford University. He teaches on art and the law and is writing a book on law and the visual arts with Albert Elsen.*

---

Hans Namuth



fess, worthy purposes but act for unworthy ends. All seems lost, but the gods are at work. The artist's children are shown a way to recover the treasure, put it to good purpose and avenge the dishonor to their father's memory. The malefactors are punished in epic measure. The gods smile and turn to other pleasures. A happy ending, unless one identifies with the defendants; then it is true tragedy, for the victims have, as we shall see, destroyed themselves.

It looked airtight. During his life the artist established the Mark Rothko Foundation, which provides aid to needy artists. Bernard Reis (an accountant and official of Marlborough Galleries who was also Rothko's accountant and advisor), the painter Theodoros Stamos and Morton Levine (a professor of anthropology at Fordham University), all close friends of the artist, were named as trustees of the foundation (Rothko was also a trustee. There were three other

trustees, but they appear not to have been particularly active or influential in foundation affairs). Thus Reis, Stamos and Levine controlled the foundation, together with the artist, during his life; after Rothko's death their control became, in practice, absolute.

Mark Rothko's will left a specific group of his paintings to the Tate Gallery in London; gave his home and its contents (including 44 paintings) and \$250,000 to his widow and children; and left all the rest of his estate (consisting of 798 paintings) to the Mark Rothko Foundation. The will named Reis, Stamos and Levine executors of the estate.

Consider the situation: Reis, Stamos and Levine control the residual estate, consisting of a large number of Rothko paintings. The only beneficiary under the will who stands to gain or lose by the way the executors dispose of the paintings is the Mark Rothko Foundation. The foundation, however, is controlled by Reis, Stamos and Levine, who as trustees are unlikely to complain of their own acts as executors of the estate. Neat. The executors actually entered into contracts with Marlborough Galleries at prices and on terms later found to be unfair to the estate, but highly advantageous to Marlborough and its alter ego, Frank Lloyd.

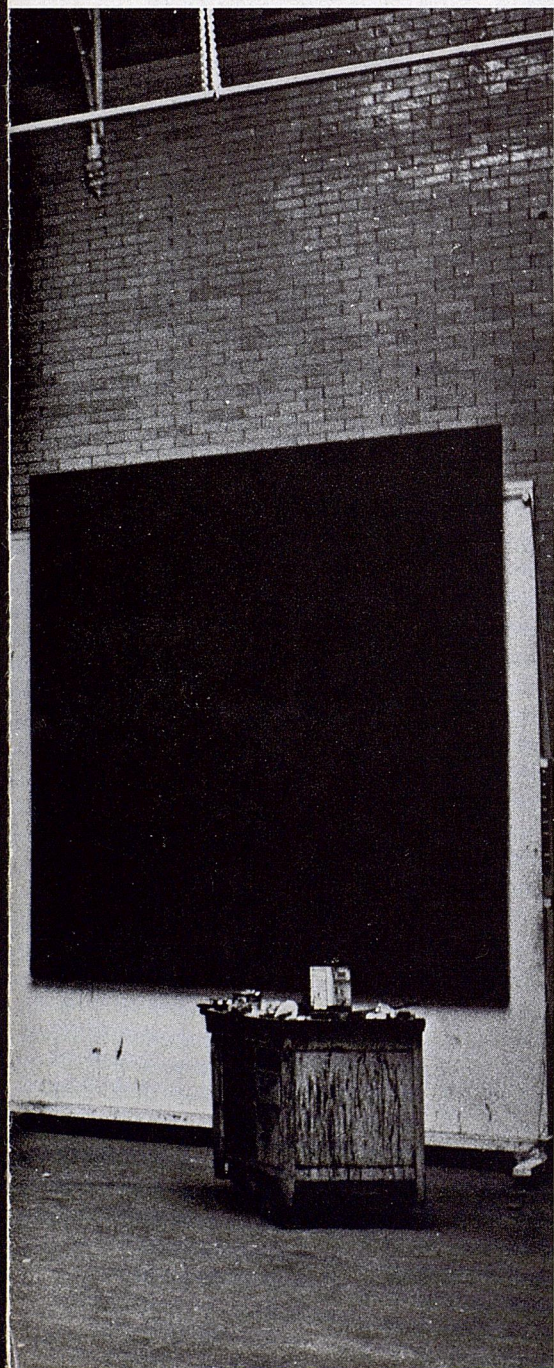
Of course, the Attorney General of New York State has the duty to oversee the operation of charitable foundations, like the Mark Rothko Foundation, but there are so many of them that his oversight is necessarily limited in scope. Only someone with a substantial interest in the estate would be likely to take the trouble to find evidence of illegal activity and bring it to the attention of the Attorney General's busy staff. The Mark Rothko Foundation itself was such a person, but its controlling trustees were Reis, Stamos and Levine. It is also true that the Surrogate oversees the probate and distribution of estates, but he is likely to question executor actions only when irregularities are drawn to his attention by some interested party. Here the only party with such an interest was the foundation, controlled by you know who. For all practical purposes it seemed likely that, so long as care was taken with the formalities, the substance of dispositions by the executors would go unexamined. This was particularly true since the estate consisted of works of art, a market in which the Surrogate and the Attorney General would be unlikely to have strong, authoritative opinions even if they felt moved to look at prices and terms.

As everyone knows, the whole thing fell apart. What went wrong? The answer requires us to look at some law, specifically

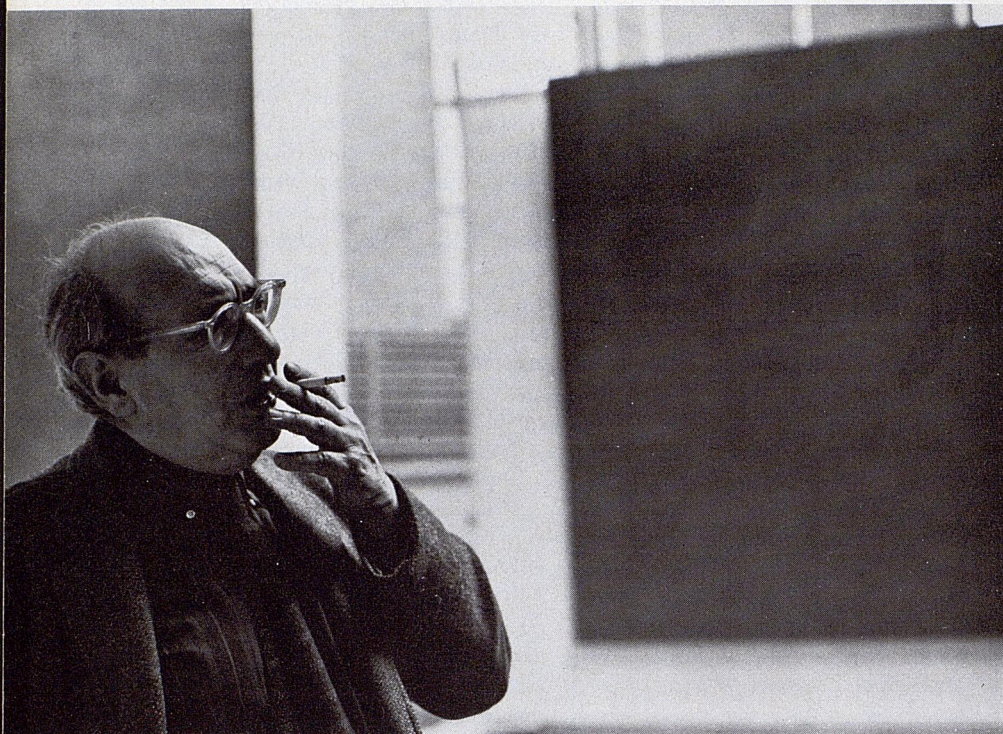
New York Estate, Powers and Trust Law (EPTL) Section 5-3.3, which provides that a gift to a charity is valid only up to one-half of the estate. It was clear that even by the most conservative estimates the value of the gift to the foundation was far greater than half the value of the estate. Accordingly, unless some alternative provision was made in the will, Rothko died intestate as to the excess of the gift and his children (the widow had since died) would inherit it. The children would thus have a direct financial interest in the estate and in the way the executors dealt with it, the sort of interest that would lead them to bring questionable deals to the attention of the Surrogate and the Attorney General. As we know, that is what the children did. In a case decided in 1972 they had the excessive charitable gift set aside as in violation of EPTL Section 5-3.3. This gave them the interest to pursue the principal action.

It is chilling to realize, however, that EPTL Section 5-3.3 could have been neutralized by a simple trick of drafting. The trick has to do with "standing"—with who is permitted to sue. EPTL Section 5-3.3 provides that an excessive gift to charity shall be invalid only if contested by "surviving issue or parents . . . who will receive a pecuniary benefit from a successful contest . . ." The gimmick is to insert a clause in the will stating that if any portion of the gift to charity is invalid it shall go to some person who is not a child or parent of the deceased. Thus: "If for any reason any portion of the gift to the Mark Rothko Foundation is invalid, then I give that portion to John Doe." Such a provision creates a simple Catch-22 situation: the children now have no standing since they will receive no "pecuniary benefit from a successful contest." John Doe has no standing since he is not a child or parent of Rothko. The gift to the foundation exceeds the legal limit, but no one can do anything about it. As the court in the 1972 decision stated, "But issue can still be disinherited in favor of charity by a skilled will draftsman, because an issue or parent may only contest a charitable bequest if he will receive a pecuniary benefit from a successful challenge. . . . Thus an issue is deprived of standing to make an election against a charity if the testator makes a gift over of a failed gift to charity to some unrelated person."

This "straw man" clause (one of two ways EPTL 5-3.3 can be evaded in New York) is well known. Barbara Goldsmith wrote a novel, *The Straw Man*, about it. Every law student learns about it. All the standard form books include it. Until recently California had the same provision, which could be evaded in the same way. However, the Rothko will contained no straw man clause. For some unaccountable



Mark Rothko with his paintings. The foundation he established is ironically better-off due to the weakness in his will.



Mark Rothko.

reason the draftsman left it out. The children brought the action to have the excess gift to the foundation set aside and were successful. This gave them an interest in the way the executors had dealt with the assets in the estate and led directly to the principal action. It is a little like the "for want of a nail a kingdom was lost" story: for want of a straw man clause a complex set of transactions was rescinded, the executors were removed, enormous judgments for damages were awarded against the executors, Marlborough Galleries and Lloyd, reputations were damaged or destroyed, a criminal investigation was begun by the Attorney General and the Collector of Internal Revenue was aroused.

In Surrogate Midonick's long but readable and interesting opinion two principal villains emerge. One is Frank Lloyd. The other is Bernard Reis, who seems to have been the dominant force among the executors of the estate and the trustees of the foundation. Reis was closely associated with Marlborough Galleries and Frank Lloyd and was influential in negotiating the contracts between the estate and Marlborough that were set aside in the Rothko case. Surrogate Midonick has hard words for Reis: he was clearly in conflict of interests and he clearly acted more for the benefit of Marlborough than of the estate (or the foundation) in promoting and approving the "sweetheart" contracts with Marlborough.

If an enormous judgment and public exposure can ruin a man, Reis is ruined. Accordingly, except for one crucial fact, he would reasonably have a grievance against

the person who, in drafting the will, neglected to include a straw man clause. The difficulty is that Reis himself drafted the will.

Why did Reis omit the straw man clause? Was it because, as an accountant, he was unfamiliar with the legal niceties of will drafting in New York? Reis had taken a law degree but was not a member of the bar; his career was in accounting, so simple ignorance might be the answer. Was it instead human error, a failure to check out the will provisions against standard forms or to take other routine precautions to insure validity? Was his attention diverted at a critical moment by some righteous divinity? Was a deep subconscious urge to self-destruction at work? We do not know the answer. We do know that the omission was crucial. The architect built a faulty structure and was inside it when it collapsed.

For Reis and the other defendants the judgment in the Rothko case is a disaster, and it would be unseemly to dwell on their misfortunes. There is, however, a brighter side: a number of people are better off as a result of the case, principally the Mark Rothko Foundation, Rothko's children, quite a few lawyers and all the rest of us. The foundation lost something in 1972 when the excess gift to charity was set aside, but it gained a great deal in the principal case. Freed from the terms of the Marlborough contracts, the paintings can be sold for higher prices and on better terms, so that the foundation's share of the estate is more valuable. The children are obviously better off for the same reason.

Armies of lawyers were employed in the Rothko case—lawyers for the children, lawyers for the executors, lawyers for the foundation, lawyers for Lloyd, lawyers for Marlborough, lawyers on the Attorney General's staff. There is an old lawyers' song in England in praise of "The Jolly Testator Who Makes His Own Will" and thereby creates work for lawyers when the inept will produces litigation. Perhaps the New York bar should adopt a revised version in praise of "The Jolly Accountant Who Wrote the Will."

Finally, we are all better off. The estate will have to pay additional taxes to the public fisc, from which we benefit. The life work of a heroic artist has been rescued. Justice has been done (subject to modification in the pending appeal, itself a component of the system of justice); a wrong has been righted, and when that happens our society is enriched just as it is demeaned by injustice.

However, it was a near thing. If the will had contained a straw man clause, the deal with Marlborough might never have been questioned. It is difficult to feel relaxed about justice that triumphs only when someone cooperates by making a mistake. There should be a better way, and there is. It is obvious that Reis, Stamos and Levine had conflicts of interests in their capacities as executors of the estate and as dominant trustees of the foundation. Indeed, that conflict was evident in the principal Rothko case, in which the foundation, through its lawyers, *opposed* the children. Since there was a prospect of substantial profit to the foundation if the children won, the foundation should have been on their side. That it was not is explained by the power of Reis, Stamos and Levine as foundation trustees. But even in the absence of the children, the foundation would have questioned the Marlborough deal since it stood to lose by it, if it had not been dominated by Reis, Stamos and Levine. The conflict of interests is blatant. At the time the will was offered for probate, Reis, Stamos and Levine should have opted, or should have been compelled to opt, to choose one or the other. They could be executors or foundation trustees, but they could not be both.

Surrogate Midonick, in the Rothko case, identified and condemned Reis' conflict of interests as executor of the estate and as an official of Marlborough and close associate of Lloyd, and Stamos' conflict as executor and as an artist seeking (and getting) a Marlborough contract. The Surrogate does not, however, discuss the more basic executor-trustee conflict. If that conflict had been detected and corrected when the will was submitted for probate, the entire drama of the Rothko case could have been avoided. That would have been an even better outcome. ■

# The Rothko Chapel six years later

It has become a magnet to people of all ages and nationalities and the setting for everything from a Buddhist wedding to international colloquia on world peace and religion

by Ann Holmes

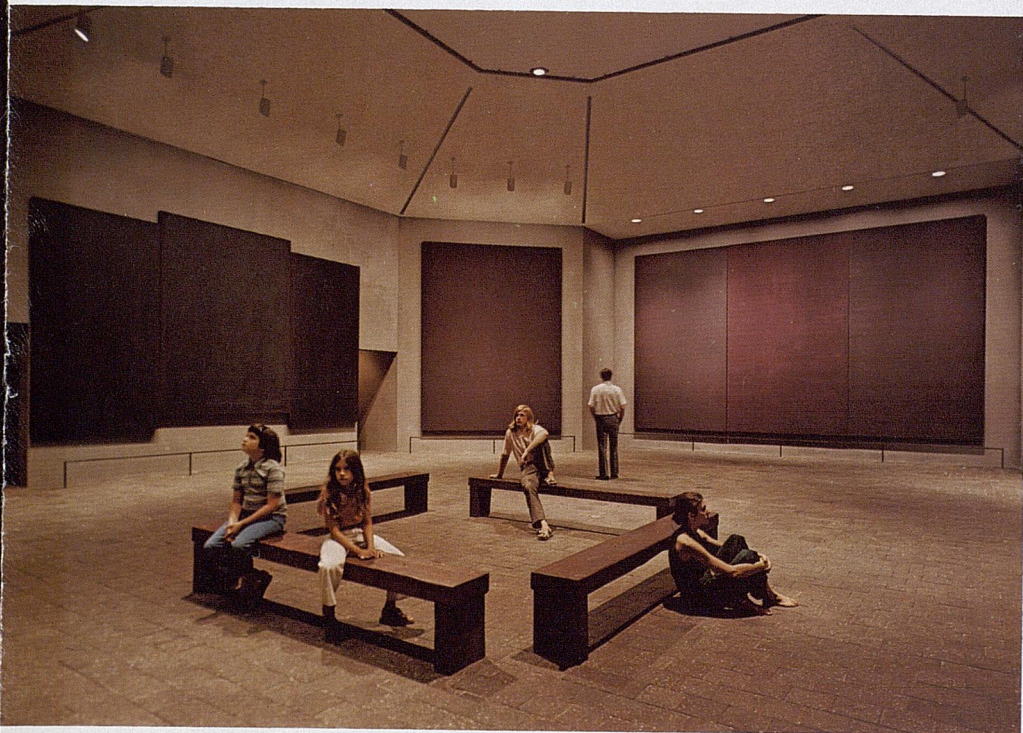
Though it may be internationally known, and in a category with the Vence Matisse chapel in the south of France, the Rothko Chapel rises unexpectedly in a jumble of old-style residences on the south side of booming Houston. Car passersby, crawling the narrow, tree-shaded streets, are still surprised by the sight of it. Serene, beautiful and inviting, the windowless, buff brick chapel in contemporary style is perfectly situated on an axis with a long reflection pool that is punctuated by the cosmic exclamation mark of Barnett Newman's most famous sculpture, *The Broken Obelisk*.

Opened on a windy winter afternoon in February 1971, the chapel is the unusual repository for 14 large abstract works by Mark Rothko, who did not live to see this realization of a tenuous idea conceived almost a

decade before by John and Dominique de Menil, French-born Americans who had chosen to live in Houston. Dominique, heiress to the Schlumberger (international oil well surveying) fortune, and John, a banker/business executive who died in June 1973, together had acquired one of the great private collections now in this country, and were internationally known for their art patronage. Perhaps the de Menils wondered how the general public would respond to this small, severe building, its inner walls totally covered by somber color field paintings, its interior empty except for rude wooden benches and standing candelabra of monastic simplicity.

Among the visitors at the opening were critics from the national media. One or two protested the crepuscular gloom of the place and, noting that Rothko had taken his own life, observed that the chapel itself was suicidally doleful. Those turned out to be minority reactions. Today, the chapel is an

*Ann Holmes is an ARTnews correspondent in Houston and fine arts editor of the Houston Chronicle.*



The interior of the Rothko chapel, empty except for the paintings, wooden benches, standing candelabra and people.

important and fixed entity in the city's artistic and religious life, its story brighter than was ever anticipated.

While it remains small, special and essentially quiet, it has become a magnet to people of all religions, ages and nationalities. Because of two worldwide colloquia—on “Traditional modes of contemplation and action” and “What is human reality”—held there in 1973, the Rothko Chapel is recognized as a center of international thought and inquiry on vital issues. A third international colloquium—“Towards a New Strategy of Development”—tentatively planned for late 1977, will focus on economic and social problems of underdeveloped nations. While some papers have been commissioned from leading European and African economists whose names were not available, Malcolm McCorquodale, attorney and executive vice president of the Menil Foundation, said he is not certain whether the papers will be delivered in a colloquium format or published.

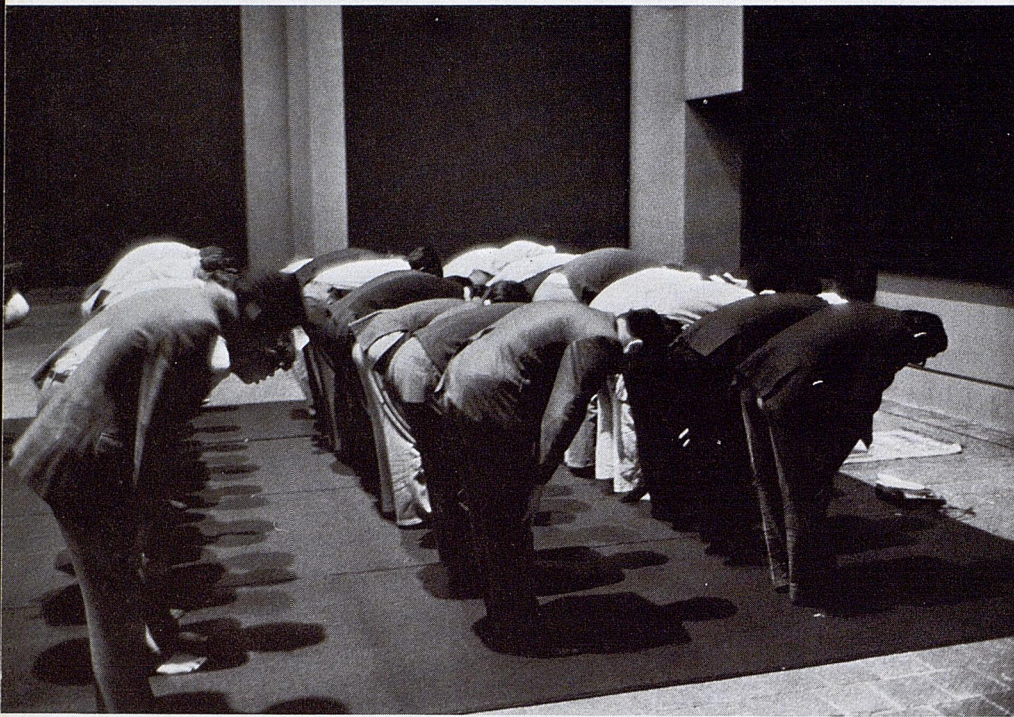
The activities of the Rothko Chapel, including the colloquia, are supported by funds set aside in the separate Menil Foundation and are guided by an international board, with day to day operations in the hands of a small staff. On the board are Dominique de Menil, filmmaker Roberto Rossellini, and a Lebanese Moslem, Nabila Drooby who lives in Australia. Drooby was an important cog in expediting the first colloquium and has been close to the subsequent projects. Shortly after its completion the Rothko Chapel was put into the hands of Houston's Institute of Religion and Human Development, but later came back under its own board, for administration.

But the chapel's real magic lies in its steady availability to everybody. It is open every day of the year without exception from ten A.M. to six P.M. Because the chapel is nonprofit there is no admission fee—the revenue from a donations box helps to defray operational costs.

Early visitors were a bit self-conscious in this open chapel filled with blood-dark paintings; they saw no cross, no icons, no paraphernalia, no regularly scheduled services. But the Rothko Chapel has since become a meaningful place in many lives. Ann Mead, coordinator of the chapel's activities, says, “The chapel has been enhanced in these years by the constant usage, by the things that have happened here. It is truly an ecumenical place.”

There is a steady stream of about 2000 visitors per month. “That's not a big figure compared to major museums,” Mead pointed out. “But then our ‘exhibit’ never changes.” The activities do, though, from weddings to tours of art students.

Mostly, the chapel is used for meditation. People enter quietly the large open room



An Islamic religious observance. The Chapel has also been the scene of a Buddhist wedding, a Quaker meeting, a Bar Mitzvah, a Hindu Puja rite.

with its dark walls—actually imageless paintings—and octagonal ceiling illumination, and they seem at ease there. They come alone or in couples; they may sit for as long as an hour on benches, or may bring sheets or rugs to practice yoga on the floor. Some come to soak in the Rothko art for its own sake. Mrs. de Menil points with special interest to the warmth in the paintings and “the faint glow—like a whispering voice” in the central panel of one of the deep and winy triptychs.

But the Chapel is frequently alive with louder voices and song, too. It has held a Bar Mitzvah, a Buddhist wedding of a Vietnamese couple, a Quaker meeting, a Moslem celebration of Eid al-Adha, a Hindu Puja observance, a Christian Yom Kippur, a memorial service, an Eastern Orthodox



Dominique de Menil. The de Menils felt a religious quality in Rothko's work.

Church of India Eucharistic service.

Although there is no charge, excessive private use of the chapel is discouraged and the rush of enthusiasm for weddings is quelled by the tightness of the rules—no pictures, no flowers, no more than 20 people and no reception in the chapel afterwards, due to the vulnerability of the paintings. People, in their excitement, forget the paintings are there, according to Mead. Nevertheless, there's an average of one wedding a month, often unorthodox in one way or another, and, since there is no organ, with guitar or other music.

A highpoint of the spring is the Palm Sunday blessing of palms around the reflection pool with a procession into the chapel, followed by mass conducted by the ministry of neighboring St. Thomas University.

Pass the chapel almost any day and you might hear a flutist practicing, or a viola student from St. Thomas working over some passages. Important musical events have occurred too: Ralph Kirkpatrick played the complete Bach “Goldberg Variations” on the harpsichord to dwindling daylight and brightening candles, and composer Morton Feldman, who had known Rothko, dedicated a tone poem to the chapel, where it was played by a small ensemble led by Maurice Peress.

Many circumstances coincided to make the Rothko Chapel happen and acquire the character it eventually did. During the 1960s, the de Menils had supported a number of activities at the University of St. Thomas in Houston's south side. Through their influence and benefactions, Philip Johnson had been commissioned to create

the campus' master plan and to design some of the buildings. Johnson envisioned a fantastic chapel for the end of a longish mall with an 85-foot cone as a spire. At the same time the de Menils visited Rothko in his New York studio where they saw works including some of the paintings that had once been planned for the Four Season Restaurant in the Seagram Building. Instantly, the visitors felt an unexpected quality in the works—a religious aspect. “I felt I should walk softly and whisper,” Mrs. de Menil later said of the occasion. Out of that experience came their project to commission works from Rothko for a chapel similar to the one in Venice. The commission was to occupy Rothko profoundly in his last years.

The Johnson cone was never to rise above the Rothkos. The de Menils moved their focus to Rice University. There they established the Institute for the Arts with its Rice Museum (where Dominique has staged a string of internationally important exhibitions including the “Grisaille” and “Art Nouveau” shows) and the Media Center (where Rossellini is often to be found as teacher and resident artist).

The chapel idea remained alive, but the de Menils had to acquire new land, west of St. Thomas, for it. Johnson's scheme didn't fit a tract with shorter vistas, and associate architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry carried on, Aubry himself completing it. He claims the building is “in every real sense, Johnson's,” without the tower.

“Rothko was extremely concerned with every detail of the chapel building,” Aubry recounts. “The width of every doorjamb to the fraction of an inch.” Rothko had wanted to duplicate the light source he had in his studio. But an old New York skylight covered with years of soot and dust is not the same as a clear wire glass under the bright Texas sun. Rothko had dimmed his light, when he chose, by pulling the strings of a specially rigged parachute. In Houston Aubry had to devise a tight canvas “diaper” to sift the sun's brightness, which was painfully glaring. Even this has not been the perfect answer; the light still filters to the center of the room making it very difficult to see the dark pictures outside the ring of light. Only the foundation had been poured, and Rothko was grumbling that the walls inside weren't going to be concrete instead of stucco, when he died.

At the same time, *The Broken Obelisk* by Newman went through a seemingly rootless period. The de Menils had agreed to match a National Endowment for the Arts grant to provide a major sculpture for a municipal site, and Newman's work was chosen. But after a long search, the de Menils could find no appropriate sites except the terrace of City Hall itself. The donors decided to dedicate the piece to Martin Luther King, which

was not acceptable to the NEA or the city. A second suggestion, involving the legend "forgive them, for they know not what they do," (in reference to the assassins of the 1960s), provoked an injured outcry from the city fathers, who thought the comment applied to their handling of city affairs. It was a terrible misadventure for a work that Houston Museum of Fine Arts director William Agee was later to call "probably the greatest sculpture of the late 20th century." To ease tensions, the de Menils acquired the large sculpture outright and chose to place it in the reflection pool of the Rothko Chapel. Newman wrote to the de Menils that his *Obelisk* "is concerned with life," and said, "I hope I have transformed its tragic content into a glimpse of the sublime."

The pyramid base, the obelisk, the rectangle of the reflecting pool and the octag-

onal chapel create a formal configuration that is anything but static. People, the weather and the landscape animate and alter the scene. So, too, does the extraordinary real estate activity around this island of repose that will probably lead to the creation of a home—not actually a museum—for the vast collection, ranging over many periods and schools, owned by the de Menil family and the Menil Foundation. Few are aware of the character or extent of these holdings, which are under security in a variety of locations and are now being carefully inventoried by curators working at Rice University.

In midsummer, 1974, as preparation for the building of the repository, the foundation sent eviction notices to many residents of bungalows along the streets adjacent to the chapel. The purchase of 71 properties,

stretching over the two blocks, was accomplished, but instead of razing the houses as had originally been planned, the foundation awaited a more favorable financial climate and postponed construction. The bungalows were modernized, and each painted gray with white trim, like those in a company town. Tiny white numerals identify each. "We didn't want open empty spaces there; the chapel is a people oriented place," Mrs. de Menil said.

Now there are signs that the neighborhood project—which has already cost an estimated \$3 million—is underway again. Workmen are putting electric lines underground; the empty lots beside the chapel are to be resodded; a group of Tony Smith sculptures is being reshuffled around the sites. A few neighbors have held out; one even puts out mocking constructions in answer to the Smith sculptures.

The building was to have been designed by Louis Kahn who envisioned it as "a space of frugal beauty where all the pieces be visible . . ." But he died before he could begin workable designs and other architects have been asked to draw up concepts.

Meanwhile the troublesome skylight in the chapel may undergo revisions. Johnson, away from the project since it left St. Thomas, is once more involved. He is working with Aubry to bring the light closer to the pictures, possibly piercing the roof with an outer ring of skylights and diffusing all the light through layers of silk—Rothko's parachute again. A wooden mini-chapel on the lawn outside is exactly one half the size of the main chapel, and serves as a laboratory. Painted "de Menil gray," it suggests the dwarfed temple on the grounds of Johnson's own famed Glass House. "We have to go to these lengths," Aubry explained, because "to close the chapel, roll up the paintings and store them safely, while we undertake the construction is delicate and extremely expensive. We can't afford to make any mistakes."

Nevertheless, interest in the chapel continues to grow. Visitors have gotten off a plane, specifically to see the chapel. They arrive from the airport by taxi, which they have wait. Some enter in clerical robes or in blue jeans. One wealthy Minnesotan said she was awed, and told the guard, "I've experienced something in the Rothko Chapel I've only felt one other place—in my silo." She left, vowing to create her own midwest chapel—in a silo.

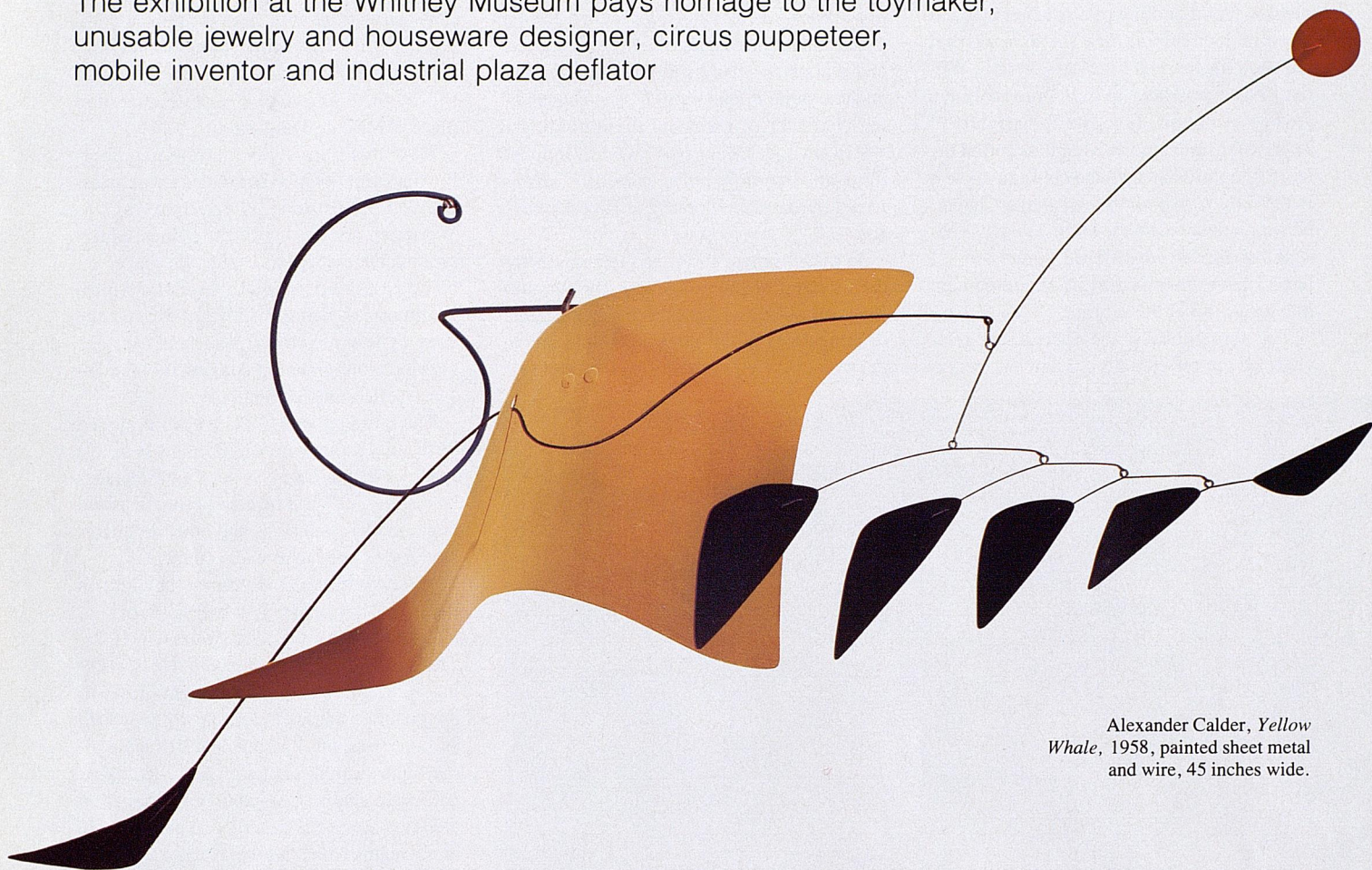
Some chapel visitors ask, "But where are the paintings?" "How can you explain?" Mrs. de Menil responds. "We just let the paintings work." She wonders if, in fact, it is not "prophetic that Rothko should have left us the one message that can be totally accepted by everyone, believers as well as non-believers: the sense of mystery." ■



After a rootless period, Barnett Newman's *The Broken Obelisk* came to rest in the reflecting pool in front of the octagonal windowless chapel.

# The witty, inventive, anti-monumental "Universe" of Alexander Calder

The exhibition at the Whitney Museum pays homage to the toymaker, unusable jewelry and houseware designer, circus puppeteer, mobile inventor and industrial plaza deflator



Alexander Calder, *Yellow Whale*, 1958, painted sheet metal and wire, 45 inches wide.

by Janet Hobhouse

**A**lexander Calder in late age looks disarmingly like a man who hates, barks at, snatches toys from, children. Bearish, surly, growling, we see him in the Vilardebo film that accompanies the Whitney Museum exhibition, "Calder's Universe," as an enormous, ogreish crank, down on his knees and totally absorbed in the performance of his tiny circus. With bulbous pink fingers he unrolls a tiny red carpet, sets trapezes in order, leads on and off the performers, for whom he also supplies appropriate, well-remembered voices. [Calder died as this issue went to press. An appreciation will appear in the next issue.]

What is most appealing about the man, apart from the delightful incongruities of that enormous-bellied figure crouched over the miniatures, is his total engagement in this make-believe world. Calder's absorption requires the elaborate pretense of a child that stick-legs are real legs, that a piece

*Janet Hobhouse's book on Gertrude Stein was recently published by Putnam.*

of cloth adequately conveys the whole costume, that sound effects don't approximate but are real voices. This child's abstraction of things that can stand for other things is characteristic of Calder's art: a makeshift shorthand rather than a sweeping intellectual condensation of the whole into its essence. It is one of the reasons for the appealing tackiness of his retrospective at the Whitney, where so many of the exhibits are grubby, the motorization unreliable, the bolts and seams indifferently displayed along with the clean lines of the mobile and stabile parts. Achieving the point where the piece in question adequately conveys the intention of its maker is clearly more important to Calder than its final look. The priority is to make something come alive—a circus, a drawing, a mobile, an animal shape—and not necessarily to make something finished. It is a child's priority, and it contributes to the eccentricity and lack of pomposity of this exhibition.

Calder's imagery, as well as his method, derive from the experience of the child—not the primitive, naive, or Rousseauian

child, but the serious, upright, information-gathering kind, who spends his weekends with books and telescopes, inside museums and homemade chemistry labs, taking machines and animals apart to see how they work. Calder's abstractions—even those of the Mondrian-influenced period of the '30s—are rooted in this childhood imagery. Though it derives from nature it is not from nature directly observed, but rather as it is originally presented to children in natural history museums and planetariums. So, many of Calder's mobiles look like displays of dinosaur or fish skeletons; his stabiles like huge prehistoric animals in display-case poses, his motorized sculpture like planetary maquettes from the children's wing of a science museum.

The busy, dour-faced child that made jewelry for his sister's dolls grew to make circus miniatures, wooden toys, fish anatomies and coffee-can birds (Calder's art seems the product of a lifelong rainy afternoon). His household inventions—the kitchenware, lamp covers, latches and so on—have been praised for their grown-up

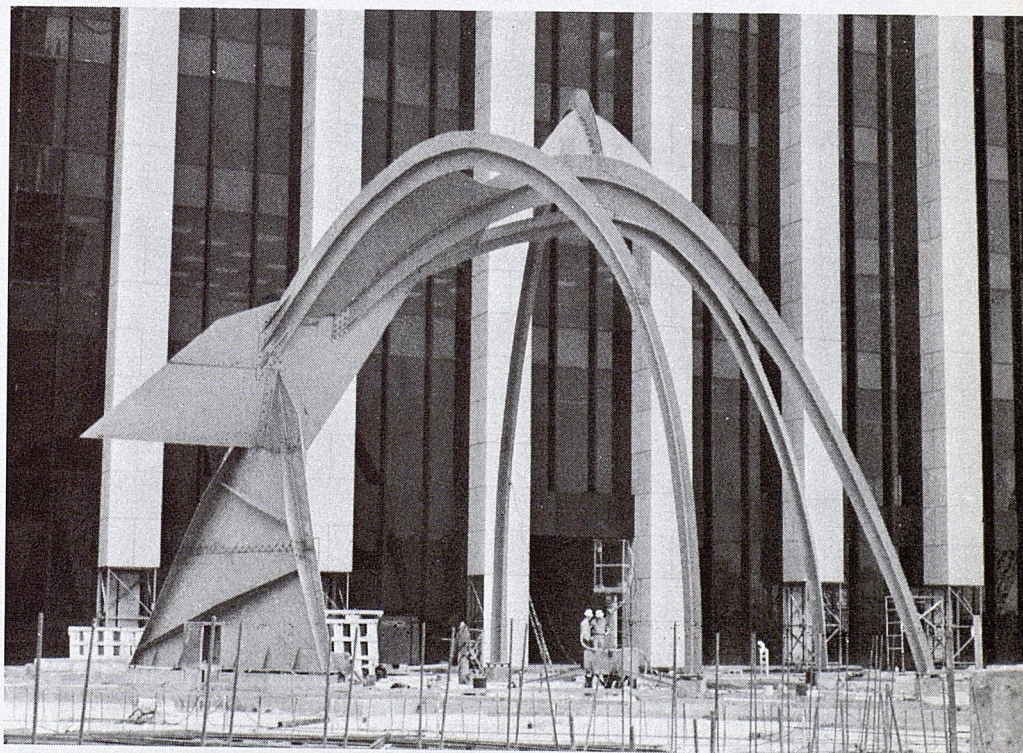
"Yankee ingenuity." But these are not inventions that improve on the originals: try using and cleaning afterwards a Calder cooking utensil, or avoiding spills and burns with a Calder (metal spring) coffee cup holder. In conception Calder inventions are antithetical to those gleaming contemporary streamlined houseware designs. They are as useful as the miniature brooms or pie pans a child makes to mimic its mother's; they parody more than they serve and the joy of their making clearly overrides considerations of their future usefulness. The same is true of the Calder jewelry, much of which must surely stab and prod its wearers; certainly by now some of it must have corroded and snapped or finally been confined to nonhuman exhibition space.

The mimicry of the grown-up world of real objects, real postures, runs through Calder's work and provides it with much of its wit. It was clearly significant to Calder that his father and grandfather had engaged their lives in the pursuit of "high art." The images of that world—muscle-thighed Indians astride muscle-finned fish, bare-breasted maidens clashing cymbals, city-dominating monuments to William Penn and George Washington—were clearly as much an influence on Calder's art as the experiments in modernism he witnessed in Paris in the '20s and '30s. The relationship between Calder's art and that of his father and grandfather is maintained by its distance and its occasional hint of parody. Even Calder's own city-dominating monuments, the great stables such as the dinosaur-backed *Teodelapio* in Spoleto, *La Grande Vitesse*, which mocks its site in Grand Rapids, Michigan, *Le Guichet*, which calls attention to the commercial rather than spiritual intent of its site at Lincoln Center, make fun while complying with the finer intentions of the architects whose buildings they enliven. But perhaps in this respect Calder is as much used by architects as they by him: monolithic contemporary building may need this humor to relate it to its human users. Hence the Dubuffets, the Oldenburgs, the King Kongs of contemporary industrial plazas; subtle propaganda that corporate ambition has a sense of proportion, a sense of humor of its own.

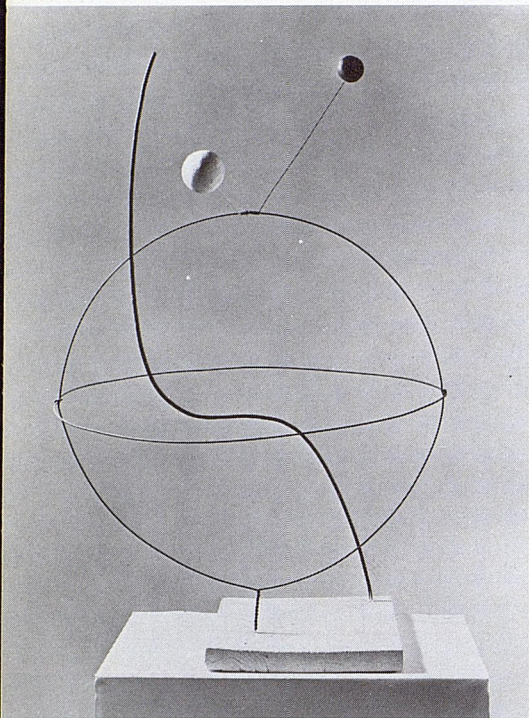
What else can it mean to come from a family of monumental sculptors, to set up as an artist in Paris in the '20s, to mix with Pascin, Miró, Arp, Léger, and then to produce one's first sculpture in the form of wire caricatures, to make sculpture an arm of the "low art" of drawing, and not just drawing but single-line cartooning in which there is room for every childish joke from pun to dangling genital? Even the more "serious" work, under the sobering influence of Mondrian, appears to mock its source of inspiration, and the room full of motorized



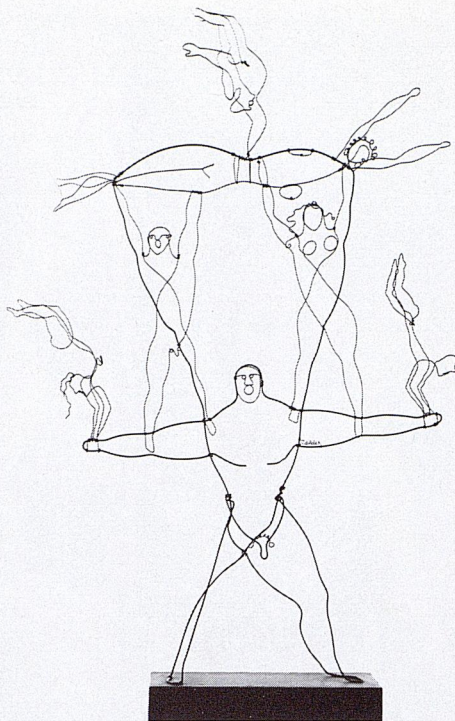
Alexander Calder and Jean Lipman installing *The Circus* at the Whitney Museum in 1975. Photo courtesy of Champion International Corporation.



A Calder stabile, *Four Arches*, being installed at the Security Pacific National Bank in Los Angeles, 1974. Calder's monuments have added a touch of humor to industrial plazas.



Alexander Calder, *Universe*, 1931, wire and wood, 36 inches high. Collection of the artist.



Alexander Calder, *The Brass Family*, 1929, brass wire, 64 inches high. Whitney Museum.

The New York Times



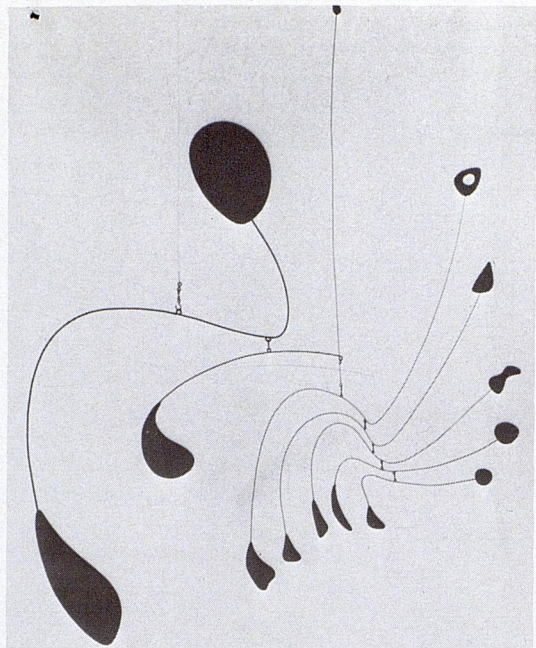
Alexander Calder and Georgia O'Keeffe at the opening of "Calder's Universe" at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

constructions at the Whitney, from Calder's "Abstraction-Création" period, seems an elaborate, though nonetheless homage-bearing spoof on the likes of Gabo, Pevsner, Héliou and the ultra-serious school of Constructivism.

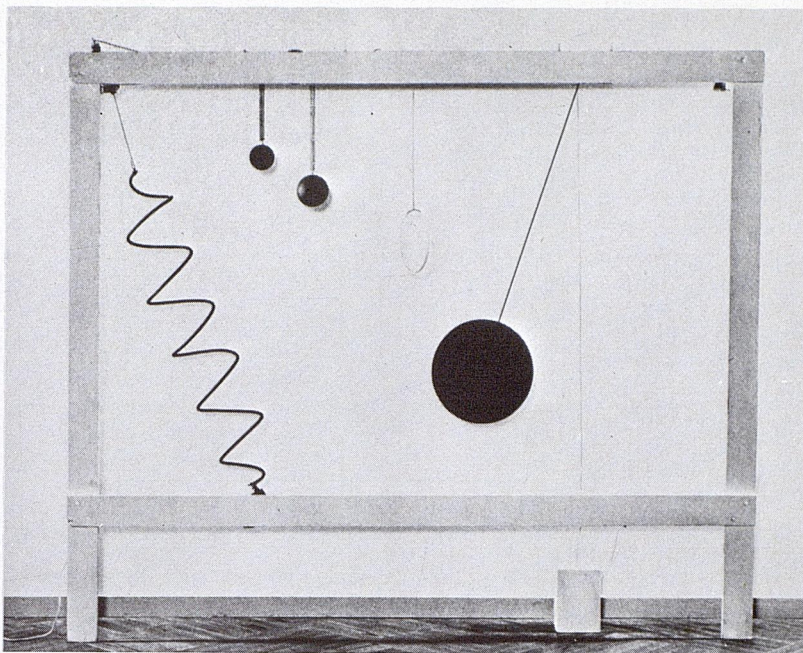
Calder's most famous creations are as anti-monumental as his early wire sculpture, his cartoons, his wooden toys. A Calder mobile intends literally to make light of abstract sculpture, to deny its gravity. The intention is clearly to wed the sketch, the quick invention, to the permanent. Thus permanent shapes are made mobile and Calder surrenders to chance (to the chance movements of air) the relationships between parts that the artist has traditionally sought to render permanent. Calder is the first to renounce the claims of the traditional, laurel-bound, even frontier-pushing, artists of his grandfather's time and his own, and the last to take seriously such claims and poses in other artists. His attitude to his own work, though hardly diffident, is always unassuming: for years he carried his oeuvre to exhibitions in a bale of wire, or stuffed into trunks (in the case of the circus), or posted it to galleries in manila envelopes (in the case of the smaller mobiles). He preferred gouaches to oils when he branched out into painting because gouaches were "fast," and though as a toy-maker, welding-overseer, mobile-constructor he could spend hours engrossed in the making of the object, once it was made nothing could induce him to provide any form of pedestal for it.

So it is a pleasure to have an exhibition at the Whitney paying homage to the toy-maker, unusable jewelry and houseware designer, wire caricaturist, circus puppeteer, mobile maker, industrial plaza deflator, as "America's foremost sculptor." It manages to pay tribute to those qualities in Calder's work which, though imposing and significant, are "fast," inventive, witty, and above all anti-monumental. To the extent that Calder alters the definition of whatever category of object he touches (so much so that who among the flying-nervous would willingly board a Calder Braniff) so he has managed to induce delight in a palace of high-seriousness. ■

"Calder's Universe" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York until February 6, 1977, and will then travel to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia (March 5-May 1), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (June 5-August 14) and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (September 14-October 30). The exhibition was organized by Jean Lipman, who also wrote the book that accompanies the show *Calder's Universe*, Viking Press), and sponsored by Champion International Corporation.



Alexander Calder, *Hanging Spider*, ca. 1940, painted sheet metal, wire. Col. Mrs. John B. Putnam.



Alexander Calder, *The White Frame*, 1934, painted wood, sheet metal, wire, motor, 7½ feet by 9 feet. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

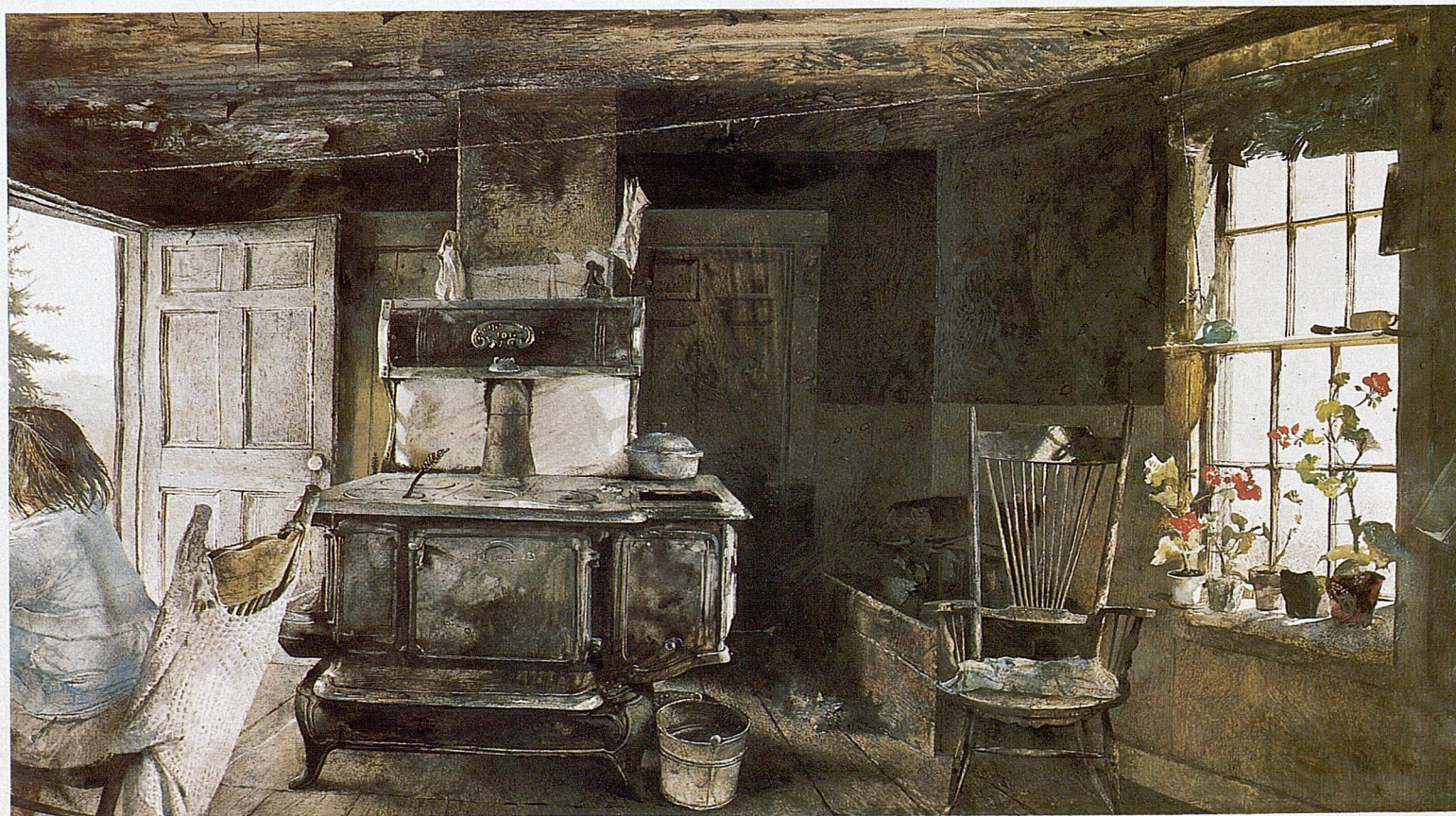


Alexander Calder, *Longnose*, 1957, painted steel plate, 8 feet 2 inches high.

Wyeth's spook-like portrait of *Anna Christina*, 1967; his "supernaturalist" message often obscures the schematic nature of his painting. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Wyeth's *Wood Stove*, 1962, with Christina's back turned. Loneliness, isolation and separation from things form the notes in Wyeth's Stygian mode. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum.



In a dry, dour and oddly depressing exhibition, Andrew Wyeth's works are currently spread throughout the upstairs galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The fact that they are there at all may well be one of the most interesting facets of the show. Wyeth himself, though his work indeed may be "somewhat misunderstood," as the Met's press release suggests, is not exactly one of America's undersung contemporary artists, nor is he among those who, one could speculate, might otherwise have been chosen for the honor. But there he is, down the hall from the Greek vases, one floor above the relics of Egypt, around the corner from the Rembrandts and Gainsboroughs. Wyeth's career seems to be taking care of itself, and one would not normally feel compelled to help it along, but the Met has said "take notice" and so we must.

"Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons" is the only one-man show the Metropolitan will mount this season. It has been organized by Thomas Hoving, the museum's director (Henry Geldzahler, the curator of 20th-century art, has absented

The Met's observation that Wyeth's work has been misunderstood is undoubtedly true. Though he threatens to be swamped in a sea of words, Wyeth has a maddening habit of evading and confounding serious critical inquiry, partly because of his enormous popularity and partly because Wyeth has kept himself alone in left field, unclassifiable, neither unschooled primitive nor mainstream sophisticate, neither wholly representational nor wholly a supernaturalist. But one wonders whether the Metropolitan is not helping to muddle the critical discussion by calling his work a "subtle, profoundly abstract realism" and Wyeth himself "one of America's greatest living artists," a description that must threaten the gods with hubris as much for the creation of the category as for Wyeth's presence in it.

"Two Worlds" is divided up as is Wyeth's life—by two farms, Kuerners' in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and Olsons' in Maine—where Wyeth does much of his painting and where he feels a strong emotional resonance. Tempera paintings and a

tive who has set himself apart (a category that would imply no disadvantage in any case). Part of the confusion around him is that he grows out of several decidedly non-mainstream traditions—his father N.C. Wyeth's romantic magazine illustrations, a severely classical education in mimicry (he painted "wild and free" until his father introduced him to the glories of cube, ball and pyramid), and a scarcely recognized echo of American 1930s social realism. The last connection is perhaps the most confounding, because, as with all Wyeth's associations, one can't carry the comparison too far. Yet his early paintings, especially, carry the stylistic flavor of that era. If he seems oddly anachronistic it is in part from the associations that still cling to him and set him outside his space and time, like a person who has developed a separate but parallel course on another planet.

But Wyeth's ghosts from the past are at best irregular visitors. Of far more importance is what he performs upon what he sees. The studies, which in general hang near the paintings they describe, catch

## Andrew Wyeth: Monotone in a minor key

In spite of his enormous popularity, which has tended to overwhelm serious inquiry, Wyeth's show at the Metropolitan is a depressing list of deficiencies. The painter is still speaking to the world, rather than the world to the painter.

by Kay Larson

himself from the preparations) and is the subject of a major merchandising step by the Met, which is marketing posters and reproductions at the exhibition's exit doors and is putting out facsimile editions of ten paintings and ten drawings, which will sell for \$2500 and \$1850, respectively (half the proceeds will go to the museum and half, by arrangement with movie producer Joseph E. Levine, whose gift made the show possible, will go to the New York University Medical Center).

Saying that it wants "to complicate, not simplify, the visitor's response to [Wyeth]," the Met has mounted about 300 works from all phases of the artist's career (the catalogue begins with two pencil drawings that he executed at age eight). The visitor's response, whether complicated or not, has been overwhelming: the catalogue itself went into a second printing before the show ever opened; the first three weeks of the show itself drew 96,627 people.

sizeable number of casual studies all show the familiar conventions of Wyeth's art: brown, scratchy, faded hillsides, drybrush splotches that mimic every blade of grass and splinter of wood, stony frozen hillsides and dramatic rays of light, the Bergman-like silences. Wyeth is always talked of in terms of "worlds," and the Met's show is no exception. It is perhaps an unconscious admission of something that Wyeth himself freely acknowledges—that his painting begins and ends with emotion (in the catalogue he says that he starts every painting with a feeling), and that his obsessively precision-hungry technique is simply a means, as he says, to other ends. "Technique is not what interests me," says Wyeth. "To me, my art is deeply the question of whether or not I can find the thing that expresses the way I feel at a particular time about my own life and my own emotions." Emotion and technique are the two poles between which Wyeth's work is strung. It is no accident that the concerns which have pervaded 20th-century painting never enter into the discussion.

But Wyeth is more than a simple primi-

Wyeth in an unposed mood and leave one with a somewhat clearer picture of his draftsman's skills, which sometimes are deft and economical but which never seem to hold peak performance. But when he puts the studies together to make a painting—winter light streaming through a window, the butt end of a log, a sketch of wall-paper—they suddenly have to carry an awful burden. In *Ground Hog Day*, 1959, composed of those separate parts, a feeling intrudes and intones in wintery harmonies, "This man who is not here. . . ." Metaphorically, *Ground Hog Day* is Wyeth's attempt to convince his audience that the painting is important for what it is not—for an absence, rather than a (painter's) presence. One practically hears the clink of the machinery.

Observation is the backbone of art. Wyeth manipulates observation to extract from it every last drop of sentiment, something that other painters may do but for other ends. Anecdote is nothing new in art, nor is sentiment; but like the difference between soap opera and high drama, the complexity

Kay Larson is an associate editor of ARTnews.



Andrew Wyeth's *Ground Hog Day*, 1959. The wintery light, the empty plate and cup, the chopped-off logs are carefully orchestrated for effect. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

emerges *through* observation and not in spite of it. Every painting in the show shares the flaw: in *Christina's World*, 1948, for instance, the horizon line is raised almost to the top of the picture, far above "normal," to place it out of reach of the eternally crawling and stricken form of Christina. *Snow Flurries*, 1953, which may be the most esthetically intriguing work in the show for its evocation of the brown, flat "nothing" that fills most of the canvas, is still at the mercy of something *other*—once again the horizon line, with its light dusting of nearly-hidden snow, is lifted so far above the brown grass that the picture has been subjected to a mysterious, slightly supernatural and ominous "message." In another portrait of Christina, her eyes do not gaze in parallel; the one closest to us lolls toward us, spooklike, its socket bathed in white.

But what is Wyeth's art apart from anecdote? He is an amazingly evocative draftsman who is able to catch the textures of things with an uncanny eye and a hand that looks precisionist; but on closer inspection the draftsmanship is almost as schematic as

in a Japanese brush drawing. (The catalogue's back cover enlarges a section of painting to make the point.) But he loves surfaces to the point of indulgence, as though the leaf could be frozen by its veins, or the barn reduced in its essence to splintered wood surfaces.

Looked at closely, Wyeth's much-discussed "photographic realism" is also artifice, as carefully arranged as his story line. The famous clarity of "every blade of grass" (a phrase which has assumed a strangely laudatory importance in Wyeth's popularity) is clear only from a distance of three feet; in fact, texture is brushed in over an amorphous, almost unidentifiable background. His style appears photographic because every little lump and wiggle in the top layer of the surface is outlined as though by klieg lights. It is important to Wyeth, though, that the grass *appear* to be real, and to be comparable to a photograph, because he depends on the truth implied in photography to make the painting, and the emotion in the painting, seem true. (It helps give credibility to the supernaturalism.)

Wyeth's manipulations suggest a curious metaphysic. There is a one-sidedness about his paintings, an introverted self-absorbed preoccupation with his own feelings, a disinclination to look beneath the surface of things or to see and respect things in *their own* essential nature, and a strong inclination to use them for his own ends. The world presents itself to Wyeth for what he can make of it. Things are used, wrung dry and abandoned. It is a kind of "manifest destiny" imposed on the visible world; its parallels to the way the American continent was (and is being) settled may be no accident. Wyeth's rural nostalgia is perhaps part of something larger—a sense of isolation and suffering, the essential separation that the exploitive view enforces on us, to be not a part of things, to be the rulers of a continent that we cannot master. In the dry bones of the Olson/Kuerner farmhouse on its eternal brown hill, Wyeth has perhaps tapped into a metaphor for the costs that cultural arrogance exacts—one thinks of the famous Walker Evans photo of slab-sided houses on the vast Western plains, huddled together like chickens before the distant ridges of a pitiless range of mountains—a scarcely-articulated and still-contemporary American loneliness. The frozen landscapes, the guns, the meat hooks, dead birds and gutted deer in Wyeth's work speak of a sense of being at odds with things, and a concealed violence; in Christina's crippled body and empty sievelike house is an essential emptiness. Wyeth paints her death (and her brother's, several months before her) in the 1969 *End of Olsons*: two tiny birds are barely visible, one perched on the Olsons' steep roof ready to fly, the other already flown and almost swallowed up into the dark ring of trees beyond the house.

But the frustration one feels around Wyeth is that his manipulative metaphysic also applies to the way he conceives of art—not as a thing in its own right but as what he can wring from it. The painter is still speaking to the world rather than the world to the painter. That art might find its greatest strength when it allows itself esthetic (and formal) license has never occurred to Wyeth, who is too busy trying to orchestrate a response. And that is why he is fundamentally a reactionary in a century that has come to respect art's unique possibilities and to allow it the freedom to find its own ends.

Other painters have used Wyeth's devices—*anecdote*, *story-telling*, *verisimilitude*—but in differentiating Wyeth one has to say something more difficult, which is not what he is, but what he is *not*. His metaphysics may make him more than an illustrator, but his manipulations make him less than an artist. ■