

Artist's Reality

The Artist's Reality Philosophies of Art

~~Plasticity~~

by Mark Rothko

THE ARTIST'S REALITY

**THE ARTIST'S REALITY
PHILOSOPHIES OF ART**

MARK ROTHKO

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO

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Writings by Mark Rothko

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Paintings by Mark Rothko

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Paintings and drawings on paper by Mark Rothko

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FOR KATE, WITHOUT WHOM THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NOTHING

—CR

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Christopher Rothko

Introduction

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO

THE BOOK. It was something of a legend to me, resting just on the periphery of my consciousness. It had a weightiness and grandeur that probably exceeded its contents and that were fueled no doubt by its very insubstantiality. There is nothing like mystery to swell the dimensions of the unknown or the dimly glimpsed, and in the murky and turbulent waters left in my father's wake there was indeed little that was certain to grasp.

Legends, of course, are often based on fact, but since I had never seen the book I could not know where story ended and truth began. Some of the book's aura no doubt came from my father, although little of it directly. It may have been filtered through my mother, who came on the scene not long after my father had ceased wrestling with the book. They spoke of it, but certainly not often, to friends and colleagues, but never to my sister or me. The sense of mystery surrounding the book was greatly reinforced during the battle for my father's papers that quickly followed his death in 1970. In those circumstances, the importance of this still unseen manuscript swelled to Herculean proportions.

This was part of the legacy my sister and I were left in the aftermath of our parents' sudden and unexpected deaths. It took nearly two decades to add voice to the whispers that first told us of the book. And it has taken fully thirty-four years to unwrap and then explore the full extent of the manuscript. Now that it is an edited and cleanly typeset document, a published entity, one can easily lose sight of its former state. But for most of my life, cobwebs were more visible than underlying substance.

All of this history of shadow and rumor has a certain irony in the context of my father's artwork. His best-known paintings are large and vibrant and decidedly iconic. They command attention in an immediate and physical way that this small stack of crumbling, haphazardly typed sheets could not hope to duplicate. His work communicates on a level that is explicitly preverbal. Indeed, it would be hard to find less-narrative painting. Like music, my father's artwork seeks to express the inexpressible—we are far removed from the realm of words. From their 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 only disrupt the experience of these paintings; it cannot enter their universe.

And yet these writings compel and fascinate us in a way that my father surely would have wanted. Far from discarding this book he never finished and that he wrote before his still unborn, boldly abstract style had brought him fame, my father guarded

it and, consciously or unconsciously, stoked the fires of interest in all those who heard murmurs of its existence. His words might be outside his artwork, but they communicate philosophies he still held dear even after paint became his sole vehicle for expression.

One reason this book holds such fascination is that Rothko was explicitly a painter of ideas. He said so himself, over and over, and one can feel them percolating beneath the surface of his otherwise somewhat amorphous abstractions. Indeed, one can ask, if ideas do not exist here, what else is there? But just what might those ideas be? The paintings themselves hold only the most general clues, and no small number of viewers have found themselves sensually stimulated but deeply frustrated by the works' very abstractness. With little concrete to grasp, many have walked away from the works—moved or angered—assuming that, in fact, they must be voids.

So to have in hand a book by Rothko—and not just a book, but one that sets forth his philosophy of art—is truly a gift for those captivated by his work. It is like being given the keys to a mystical city that one has been able to admire only from afar.

Or is it?

As with all things regarding my father, the truth is more elusive, even dialectic. First of all, not once in *The Artist's Reality* does he discuss his own work directly. In fact, he never even alludes to it or to the fact that he is an artist. Secondly, the book was written several years before his work became fully abstract, so if he provides clues to the secrets of his floating rectangular forms, they are oblique and, in fact, prescient. In any case, the book does not address what paintings mean, or how to go about finding that meaning. Its essays tell us about what the artist does, what his or her relationship is to ideas, and how he or she goes about expressing those ideas.

These are very concrete reasons why *The Artist's Reality* does not provide a road map to Rothko's work, but they are frankly beside the point. Divining meaning from a painting is not so simple that it can be codified in a book, and Rothko certainly would not have wanted such a guide to his work. So much of understanding his work is personal, and so much of it is made up of the process of getting inside the work. It is like "the plastic journey" he describes in his "Plasticity" chapter—you must undertake a sensuous adventure within the world of the painting in order to know it at all. He cannot tell you what his paintings, or anyone else's, are about. You have to experience them. Ultimately, if he could have expressed the truth—the essence of these works—in words, he probably would not have bothered to paint them. As his works exemplify, writing and painting involve different kinds of knowing.

The foregoing discussion may help us understand why Rothko never made the book public during his lifetime. It is not that he broke with the ideas or was embarrassed by what he had written. If this was the case, he most likely would have destroyed the manuscript, and he certainly would not have promised it to his chosen biographer, as my sister and I believe he may have done. No, I think he kept the book to himself because he feared that by offering people the beginning of an answer, or the illusion of an answer, to his artwork, they would never find a more complete one, perhaps never even ask the necessary questions. Regarding his own work, at least, he

would have been concerned that he could set people running down the wrong paths, moving blindly with their little bit of knowledge, when ultimately, if carefully regarded, his painting spoke for itself. He knew of this danger and was therefore guarded in discussing his work, often finding that, the more he said, the more misunderstanding he generated. He did not wish to short-circuit the process by which people came to know the work, and I think he understood how difficult that process could be—that is, just how quickly people would move to avoid it. By the same token, I think he knew just how rewarding the process could prove when one was fully engaged in it.

It has therefore been with a great deal of mixed feelings and soul-searching that I, in consultation with my sister, Kate, have chosen to bring *The Artist's Reality* to light. Presenting the book to the public is like unsheathing a quintessentially double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a treasure trove for scholars and a source of great interest for admirers of Rothko's work. On the other hand, because the book dates from relatively early in my father's career, was left unfinished, and does not directly address his painting, there is great potential for it to mislead. Furthermore, the book's incomplete state, and the fact that my father was not trained as either a philosopher or an art historian, make him an easy target for attack, as the arguments he puts forth sometimes lack polish, rigor, or both.

Ultimately my sister and I decided that these concerns were largely beside the point. Rothko is now so well known that most art lovers will at least have encountered his painting, and few are likely to pick up this book without a more substantial acquaintance with the artwork and how it operates. While some may wish to find a quick road map to my father's still-mysterious works, the book is sufficiently dense that this type of facile understanding is not readily at hand. Thus those readers will need to grapple with his philosophy, much as they need to with the paintings, in order to come away any wiser.

The family concerns about how the uncompleted manuscript presents our father as writer and thinker may be legitimate—the prose falls short of the level he achieved in his few published statements, and the clarity of his reasoning is not always ideal. Critical focus on these matters is not the spirit in which I believe the book will be (or should be) read, however. Readers will delve in not because they expect the most powerful new statement in the philosophy of art (although perhaps his achievement in that area exceeds the scope of my knowledge); instead, they are interested in his views because they are compelled by the way they have seen him express them in paint. The true value of *The Artist's Reality* is not the thoroughness of Rothko's arguments or how consistently he wins his debates; rather, the treasure here is that we get a rare glimpse of an artist's worldview, expressed in the written word and in considerable detail.

In the final analysis, my sister and I believe, the public—both academic and enthusiast—has a right to see this book. Had my father destroyed or suppressed it, our conclusion might have been otherwise, but, much as he treated his early paintings, he has not appeared to disavow it or give any indication that its validity or importance is compromised in light of his later directions and achievements. He guarded the manuscript as part of his legacy, and I have attempted to do the same, by bringing it

forward in as complete and faithful an edition as possible.

A brief history of the manuscript is therefore in order. My father generally did not discuss his artwork in any detail with the family, and I have no reason to believe that his behavior was any different with *The Artist's Reality*. If he did, Kate (who was nineteen at the time of his death) and I (who was six) do not have any recollection of it. As our mother, Mary Alice (Mell) Rothko, died six months after him, any knowledge she might have had of it did not come forward, at least not to us.

The manuscript first surfaced in the context of the ugly legal battles that followed my father's death. Briefly, the lawsuits pitted my sister and me (my sister, really, as I was so young) against the executors of our father's estate along with Marlborough Gallery, which had represented him during the previous decade. During the early months of contention, rumors that my father had written a book began to filter to Kate, and the alleged manuscript soon became a bone of contention between the executors and Robert Goldwater, who had agreed, the year before my father died, to write a scholarly, biographical, but primarily critical, evaluation of his life and work. As far as Kate knows, neither Goldwater nor the executors ever saw the manuscript, and, as Goldwater died within a year after my father, the issue became perhaps less hotly contested. In the end, the manuscript appears to have sat for nearly two decades in an accordion folder labeled innocuously: "Miscellaneous Papers."

How could my sister and I have let such an important document lie fallow for so long (in fact, nearly three and a half decades by the time of the publication of this book)? To understand is to know something of the ambivalent relationship Kate and I have had with our father's estate and legacy. To begin with, we spent the first fifteen years following our father's death embroiled in legal complications surrounding the estate. During this time I was in school, and my sister earned her medical degree, entered postdoctoral training, married, had the first two of her three children, and served as the new executor of the estate after the original three had been removed by the court. Neither of us was in a position to look for, evaluate, or really even think much about the manuscript.

In the aftermath of that experience, my sister was both exhausted and, frankly, rather soured on the world of art. And my own associations with my father's artwork—I had yet to hang a painting when the estate closed in the mid 1980s—were of signing lots of forms and trying to make sense of seemingly endless two-hole-punched documents in which the number of subclauses far exceeded the amount of readily graspable information. Delving into the endless boxes of largely legal paperwork in search of The Book did not seem particularly appealing to either of us.

It was not until 1988 that Marion Kahan, who has served as our registrar and helped us manage our father's works for more than seventeen years, found the manuscript in an old manila folder among the papers in storage (Plate 1). She had not been specifically engaged by us to look for it but had chanced upon it during inventory work. She promptly photocopied the yellowed, crumbling pages and informed us that she thought she had found The Book. I do not remember great certainty or fanfare coming from Marion at the time—she assures me she remembers otherwise. In any case, I was still in no position psychologically to hear this

announcement. I was in graduate school and had recently taken over the day-to-day management of matters Rothko from my sister. It was, at that time, a largely thankless and generally dull task.

I remember looking through the manuscript and related papers some time in the year after Marion had sent them to me. I did not allot a great deal of time to the process and concluded that there was not really much there. It was a foregone conclusion. I am sure I did not want to find anything of substance—it would only have been a nuisance, another matter to take care of, another distraction from my studies. And the manuscript made it easy for me to come to this judgment. It was sloppily typed, with numerous hand-marked additions and deletions—and more numerous typos—and it betrayed no obvious order or narrative direction (Plate 2). If there was something of interest—and at first glance there really wasn't—to make something of it truly *would* have been a nuisance.

And so the manuscript lay undisturbed. At times we considered making it available to scholars. We went so far as to seek out, on more than one occasion, an art historian to produce the comprehensive, critical evaluation of our father's work that Robert Goldwater never had the chance to write. Access to the book would most likely have been a part of that process. All these searches proved abortive, however, and the book remained very much in the dark—to us as well as to the rest of the world.

There were a variety of reasons that we did not make greater efforts to evaluate the manuscript and make it public. Not least of these, as I have indicated, was weariness, but there was another reason that cuts deeper: I think we were simply not ready to cede control. The paintings—our father's legacy—and the two of us had been through such a tumultuous and lengthy period of uncertainty following his death that we were still getting our bearings and making certain the ground was firm beneath our feet. It is very hard to let go of something you have fought so hard for, and such battles make you naturally wary. It is only now, with interest in Rothko at an all-time high, as witnessed by consistent public and critical praise, and by exhibitions organized almost more frequently than we can manage, that we can relax a little.

But only a little. After all, look who is editing this volume (which, after first examining this daunting manuscript, I swore I would *never* do). This, of course, leads to the questions of just why *am* I editing the volume, and why are we publishing it *now*? The first reason is that I am a known quantity (that is, to my sister and me). If I have an axe to grind, it is a family axe. An outside source, however well-informed and well-intentioned, would not bring the same type of care to the project that a family member would. This is not to say that the attention this person would bring to it would have been worse—simply different. It *is* to say, however, that based on our own personal experience with our father's artwork, placing trust in those outside the family had some disastrous results. Moreover, having now worked intimately with my father's artwork for a decade, I have come to know his output in great detail and feel I have gained sufficient understanding of it to enable me to execute the project with both care and insight.

It was thus in the context of recent inquiries from scholars, along with

independent interest from a publisher, that I took another look at the manuscript. And lo and behold, I found something very different on this pass. Without question, the work I found was incomplete and, in places, frustratingly obscure, but it was *a book*, and a substantial one. It was clearly written as a volume, its contents speaking to a public rather than constituting an artist's private musings. The time had come for it to see the light of day, and although I swallowed deeply before diving in, I knew that I was the one who should bring it out.

ROTHKO IN THE EARLY 1940S

Rothko had been painting since the early 1920s when he dropped out of Yale College and found his way to New York City. While most of his time was spent in various odd jobs and teaching art to schoolchildren, he produced a consistent flow of work from the late 1920s through the 1930s, on both canvas and paper. Until 1939 the painting was figurative; muted colors depicted urban scenes, portraits, nudes, and strange, psychologically tinged dramas.

In 1940–41, however, around the time we think he wrote the bulk of this book, Rothko's work shifted notably. Embracing aspects of surrealism, which at that point was very much in the vanguard of modern European painting, he began to produce fanciful landscapes and wildly distorted figures with multiple heads and limbs often dismembered then reconstituted in striking and disturbing synthetic beings. As Rothko makes clear in the present volume, he did not espouse all the philosophical ideas of this movement, but he certainly adopted some of the stylistic trappings, along with those artists' fascination with mythic realms and the contents of the collective unconscious.

What follows is a bit shrouded in mystery. James Breslin, Rothko's biographer, notes the artist's claim that, in approximately 1940, he stopped painting for the better part of a year to read philosophy and mythic literature. He also states that Rothko suffered a bout of depression in 1940 or 1941 and stopped painting for a significant portion of time (James Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 1993). While I have not heard these stories elsewhere, Breslin is generally accurate about the facts of my father's life, so I am inclined to trust that some sort of interruption in his painting did occur. Although it is not clear whether the shift to myth-based, surrealistic painting occurred before, during, or after the writing of the book, we can surmise that the main body of the book was written during the interruption.

I should take a moment to clarify what we do know about the dating of the book. The only concrete piece of evidence we have is on the reverse side of one page of the manuscript, on which Rothko typed a draught of a letter dated March 23, 1941. His artistic mentor, Milton Avery, however, mentions in a letter that Rothko is working on a book as early as 1936 (see Breslin). While we cannot know that this is the same book, it is unlikely that Rothko produced two lost major works.

I am not inclined to believe that the majority of the book was written this early, however. First of all, another of Avery's letters (also quoted in Breslin), dated September 1941, mentions that Rothko has "eased up on his book," implying a period of intense activity immediately prior to that time. In addition, Rothko makes a number

of references in the manuscript to later events, most notably the 1939 World's Fair and Germany's "warriors" (presumably engaged in World War II). Finally, one must take a cue from Rothko's text and paintings themselves. He spends large portions of the book discussing the role of unconscious processes in the production of art, and fully a quarter of the book on the myth in art and society. It cannot be coincidental that these are precisely the subjects that came to the fore in his painting of the early 1940s. While rehearsals of *The Artist's Reality* may have begun earlier, Rothko's painting tells us that this book, more or less as we have it, was on the scene at the time his artistic transformations were beginning.

This was the progress of Rothko the artist and thinker. In the meantime Rothko the man had been struggling through the Depression era, barely able to support himself. He had sold almost no work, had few exhibitions, and had been employed the previous several years as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) artist. His first marriage, always stormy, was at its worst point. There was a prolonged separation in 1940 or 1941, a probable source of the depression that Breslin notes. Prior to these events his wife, Edith Sachar, who during this time was becoming successful as a jewelry designer, put him to work in her studio and reportedly discouraged him from any further painting. Their marriage would end in 1943.

I have sketched this background because it provides a context in which to understand the more polemical writings of *The Artist's Reality*. The tone of those chapters is angry, resentful, and sometimes whiny. You can taste the frustration of a man who feels like he has a great deal to say and desperately wants to be heard. Here is an artist who tries to capture his notion of reality, his idea of the truth, in every painting, but he can't get anyone to notice. It is with this in mind that we should read his repeated diatribes against Maxfield Parrish, his castigation of the cartoonist, his derision of the pseudo-primitives. Rothko had no patience for anything that did not aspire to the highest ideals. It was not merely that these "artists" were producing something derivative and soulless; they were doing so *and* capturing the public's attention. Meanwhile, Rothko sat upon his proverbial dung heap, cursing the fates that kept him there. "Popular" is therefore a doubly dubious word because it denotes both superficiality and the recognition from which Rothko was excluded.

This is not to deny that much of what Rothko dismisses is as vapid as he suggests. What I comment on primarily is his tone. His own feeling of deprivation adds an extra bite to his words. Were he successful, and were that deprived feeling less immediate for him, he might not even feel the need to comment on these lesser arts. One can take the same perspective on Rothko's discussion, in the chapter on indigenous art, of different methods for evaluating art. His analysis is sophisticated enough and ultimately rather convincing, even if it lacks the polish it would have had in subsequent revision. What strikes one, however, is the vehemence with which he attacks the populists. This avowed socialist voices repeatedly a deep distrust of his fellow beings—especially when congregated—seeing them not as a force for social justice but as a dangerous mob. To Rothko, selecting great art by the numbers who endorse it is apparently a formula for enshrining the lowest common denominator.

This attitude toward the public carries through the book, from repeated citations of historic art defaced by the multitudes to pulled hair when he sees the

paintings to which typical viewers flock. Rothko feels the sting of their neglect, and, perhaps doubting his own work, he lashes out.

There is, ultimately, a more charitable way to view the artist's stance toward the art public—and not simply to find that history has largely proved him right. To understand him more fully, it is important to remember that my father maintained this attitude of deep distrust and wariness toward the viewer long after he had become strikingly successful. Yet even as he feared the public, he desperately needed them to bring meaning to his paintings. This ambivalence is summarized in his well-known 1947 statement in *Tiger's Eye* magazine: "A painting lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world." While this statement predates his rise to fame, it is typical of the comments he made privately later in his career, particularly in the context of exhibitions. Even after he had received significant adulation, he still feared, constantly, that his painting would be misunderstood and ultimately violated by an uncaring public.

Thus, while bitterness undoubtedly colored his writing of these chapters, his tone perhaps more clearly reflects how deeply personal an expression he makes in his works. He invests so much of himself in his work, and the notion of reality he expresses is so vital and internal, that it truly is a risky venture to send his paintings out into the world before the public eye. His anger therefore stems from a sense of vulnerability, one that is exacerbated by negativity from without, but which exists independent of any external reaction.

A related distinction, which Rothko makes repeatedly throughout, is between an artist's technical skill and his or her ability to communicate something profound in an immediate and moving way. He draws a clear line between illustration, or design, or decoration, and the production of fine art. While Rothko is hardly the only one to have made this distinction, and few would argue with him, one must again ask why he needs to emphasize this point so particularly. I believe that there are two primary reasons, one stemming from the nature of his art, and the other from his life.

The first reason that Rothko needs to be so dismissive of skill is because his own work from his realist period is, at first brush, so apparently lacking in it. The roughly rendered, often clumsy-looking figures, the flattened perspectives offering little illusion of space, and the typical lack of detail all can give the impression of an artist incapable of producing convincing work (Plate 3). But as *The Artist's Reality* makes clear, Rothko's style at this time reflected his own philosophical and "plastic" preoccupations. He had no interest in making a likeness; he wanted instead to communicate to his pictures a sense of real substance and sensible weight. The pictures must have their own reality—they are not a mimicking of the visually perceptible world around us.

Like many modernists, however, Rothko was attacked because he failed to produce that likeness, and no matter how strong the philosophical underpinnings of his painting were, the attacks undoubtedly made him defensive. As one can see in some of his early line drawings and illustrations, Rothko was, in fact, a capable draughtsman. His surrealist work would soon demonstrate a real fluency with pen and

brush (Plate 4), and he would go on to become a true virtuoso in the handling of color, space, luminosity, and reflectivity in his classic abstractions.

But in the early 1940s none of this mattered, and Rothko had to deal with the negative perception of his work at that time. Hence the counterattack we find in the “Art, Reality, and Sensuality” chapter and elsewhere, where those who brandish their skill are found wanting in substance, self-knowledge, and “true artistic motivation.” And again, while his arguments are largely convincing, their tone reveals Rothko’s bitterness from being unappreciated and misunderstood. At this stage he may have felt confident in his philosophies but he did not yet have the clarity in his painting that would allow him to brush off criticism of his style.

Rothko’s bitterness also stemmed from sources much closer to home. I mentioned previously the unhappiness of his first marriage, a marriage whose discord was coming to a head at this time. Because Edith apparently did not support his painting, Rothko may have had a critic in his own house—hardly a firm foundation from which to operate. No less immediate, however, was Edith’s increasingly rapid rise in the world of jewelry design. Her success, juxtaposed with his notable lack of it, must have galled him terribly, particularly when it became incumbent upon him to assist her. Hence the numerous slights made to those who practice illustration or design, and his general impatience with trappings and adornment. My father’s angry tone is personal, and clearly some of it was directed at his wife.

In addition, there are a couple of ironies that attend my father’s negative attitude toward the decorative arts. The first concerns his first wife’s jewelry, which I have seen sported on some of the Sachar family women. It is quite spectacular, with a very fluid sense of line and a wonderfully organic feel to the pieces as a whole. My father was hardly enlightened in the world of women’s fashion and had in any case a rather dismissive attitude toward finery and ornament, but clearly his envy would have kept him from seeing its worth.

The second irony concerns my father’s second wife, Mary Alice (Mell) Beistle, whom he was to meet and marry just a few years later. This was, largely, a much happier marriage, and my mother was far more supportive of his work, serving as the inspiration for his greatest painting prior to his classic abstractions, *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea (Mell-ecstatic)* (Plate 5). She was, however, an accomplished illustrator. The psychological permutations of such a choice of partner on the part of my father are too complex to delve into here. What one can conclude, however, is that a significant portion of the slights he directs at the applied arts stems from the pain of his first marriage rather than from the dictates of his philosophy of art.

Rothko repeatedly expresses another notable feeling that gives us a glimpse of his life at that moment in time: the sense of nostalgia and longing that attends his discussions of classical times and the Renaissance. As he returns time and again to the “unity” of antiquity, to the order and wholeness of those people’s worldview, there is a palpable yearning for the clarity and enlightenment of those times. He clearly wishes that he belonged to a world that had such a structure. And while the early Christian world does not lure him in quite the same way, he similarly envies the way in which the artists of that time could draw upon a cosmos ordered by its own internal logic.

Rothko, in fact, spends a good deal of time criticizing neoclassicists such as Jacques-Louis David, whose adoption of classical forms he dismisses as little but empty nostalgia. It is ironic, therefore, that we find this same nostalgia creeping into Rothko's philosophy. The crucial difference is that it does not manifest itself in his artwork. For even though Rothko is embracing classical myth in his surrealistic painting, it is a myth that has been transformed and broken down, and its dissolution can be witnessed on the canvas (Plate 6). It is antiquity referenced not out of nostalgia but for purely modernist purposes.

That nostalgia for unity may also express some of Rothko's existential concerns. A unified universe is particularly attractive in a world increasingly broken down by sciences—social and physical—into smaller and smaller constituent parts, and in a world that is being ravaged by a war whose destructiveness has never before been witnessed. His search for unity, and the society's as well, may be an attempt to fend off an incipient existential crisis—to find consistency and meaning in the face of increasing entropy.

Rothko also expresses a second type of longing: a yearning for the status that artists enjoyed in Renaissance times. For all of his reservations about the "advances" of the High Renaissance, Rothko still reveres many of the artists and marvels at their accomplishments. What astounds him, however, is the veneration many of those great figures received in their own time. We encounter here, first, a type of envy from the unrecognized Rothko who, far from receiving commissions from popes and kings, had to rely on government handouts for much of the previous decade. Rothko clearly felt humiliated by that dependency, and his resentment at the government for its control over what he painted as a WPA artist is verbalized indirectly throughout the book. In this context he marvels at the freedom of the Renaissance master to move from one powerful patron to the next, across political and even military lines, although perhaps he does not recognize the degree of control those patrons maintained.

Envy centered on monetary success is not the primary sentiment here, however. It is, again, more in the realm of a wish that he, too, could live in such times. For what was clear to Rothko was the inherent rightness of that world order. What a dream to paint what one saw and felt, one's own sense of the truth, and to be lauded for it. For these artists, as Rothko relates, were toasted by the mighty and were venerated like football heroes by the masses. And this is what Rothko wished for: to paint the truth as one feels it and to win love and respect in one's own time. He, too, wanted, a world where the artist is king and his output a matter of great expectation and excitement.

These are the primary areas where we see Rothko unbuttoned, where we catch him out, expressing feelings beyond what he intended to communicate in the text. There is also something to be learned, however, from the stances he takes and the way he presents himself in his text. The first of these is as a teacher. While not a podium from which he consistently speaks in the book, this identification as a teacher of art infuses the text and appears at key places in his arguments. He presents himself as an expert on the art of children and holds up their work as keys to understanding the process of artistic creation. He is also keenly aware of the social responsibilities of the teacher, and thus when discussing cultural stances on art (as in the "Indigenous Art" chapter) he quickly moves to education as a prime area for consideration. It is

interesting to note that the majority of Rothko's remaining papers that the family possesses concern the teaching of art. Clearly teaching was not something he did just to make a living, but something that he valued highly as well.

In contrast with these social concerns and his left-wing political affiliations, Rothko sets himself out as a keen individualist. He expresses this most directly in the chapter "Art as a Form of Action," in which he makes clear that the self-centered work of the artist—the expression of his or her personal truth—serves a more important social function than philanthropy. He still tips his cap to the idealism of the working classes, and sees the artist as working for the good of society, yet that social good is achieved by the satisfaction of the artist's individual needs. By this means—that is, by addressing the spiritual and intellectual needs of the individual—progress will take place. This is the very antithesis of socialist art and collectivist dogma.

The book itself can be divided roughly into two parts: the polemical and the philosophical. As with all such artificial categorization, this division perhaps distorts as much as it reveals. I proceed nonetheless because I make a distinction based on tone rather than on content. The polemical Rothko is angry and argumentative, speaking out forcefully about what he sees as wrongheaded in the world of art. He is not shy in voicing his opinion about the largely unnamed institutions and individuals that he sees impeding the way of the artist both in the past and, especially, at that moment. This polemical style dominates the first and last parts of the book (as I have arranged it), although one sees occasional flashes of it elsewhere. Its manner is rhetorical, its arguments sweeping and not always well-supported, and, with few names given, his foes can seem like paper tigers. Rothko is impassioned and he intends to catch you up and gather you to his cause. He does not wish to obstruct his path with footnotes and qualifications; details would obscure the larger point.

For all the noise and excitement that the polemical portions generate, the majority of the book is taken up by the more philosophical chapters, beginning more or less in the middle of the chapter "Art as a Form of Action" and carrying through to "Modern Art." The tone here is quite serious, the manner more detached, the reasoning abstract, the writing consciously dense and academic. Rothko's choice of words is consistently marked by the desire to cast himself as an intellectual. "Prolix" and "pulchritude" are not the words of a downtown radical, and even when he uses more conventional language he often uses it in obscure and arcane ways that sent this editor researching fifth and sixth definitions.

This written style is not a matter of chance or a reflection of quirks. It is an index to the world of ideas that preoccupied the author. Although he read contemporary theory, philosophy, and literature, it was to antiquity and to the nineteenth century that Rothko turned (most notably at this time to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*). Similarly, he listened to Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms, not to Stravinsky or cutting-edge jazz. And, as the book illustrates, it was the art of the great masters of the past, rather than the art of the twentieth century, that most captivated Rothko's senses. His language, therefore, reflects his identification with those older traditions, especially the philosophical. His manner is somewhat Old World, outspoken but formal, not especially New York, hip, or brash. For all his identity as an American,

Rothko, in both bearing and language, was a man of European roots.

His style is ultimately used as a deliberate means of positioning himself. He makes quite clear that he does not fit the popular notion of the artist as “inarticulate” and “moronic,” which he describes with some humor in the chapter “The Artist’s Dilemma.” He is of the artistic tradition, but he sets himself apart—he is an intellectual and to be taken quite seriously. This stance reflects a certain confidence in his ideas and, conversely, may indicate an insecurity that stems from his lack of recognition as an artist.

Most importantly, however, Rothko’s intellectual and serious manner is necessitated by the rhetorical means he frequently employs to make his arguments. If we are to be swayed by what he has to say, Rothko must first set himself up as a person of authority. As he has no credentials (or had none at that time) he must generate them by means of the impression he creates. This lays the foundation from which he makes sweeping assertions about the course of art history, or the compromised methods of an established master. And while he is not always so convincing (especially when he tries to disavow his biases!) in this early draught of the book, he often is quite effective at drawing us into the argument.

Along with the tone he sets, it is actually the simple pronoun “we” that is perhaps most responsible for the success of his rhetoric. For by means of this negligible two-letter word he transforms his readers from audience to participants. The throwaway clause “As we have found,” serves the vital function of personally involving the reader in the unfolding of the discourse. The audience is engaged in the same quest for truth as the author—the arguments are theirs as well as his—thus they are colleagues in the process. When it works, the trick is quite disarming because it short-circuits criticism. The reader is now on the inside fending off attack, rather than standing in judgment from the outside. And make no mistake, Rothko would have you on his side—he wants to persuade you of his truth.

The vehemence, rhetoric, and insistence that one finds in *The Artist’s Reality* all point to Rothko’s driving need to express something important and concrete. This book is not casual doodling but rather the product of a considered desire to communicate ideas, even if that desire was never fully realized on paper. And thus one runs headlong into the central questions raised by this volume: Why did Rothko write the book? and Why did he never finish it? Before I venture to answer these questions, I must make clear that all here is conjecture. We have no records, no statements, no material of any kind that gives substantive and substantiable answers to these crucial questions. Nonetheless, I have an answer that I will put forth with a good deal of confidence, in part because it is so simple: My father wrote the book because he could not, at that point, express the ideas it contained to his satisfaction in his own painting; and he abandoned the project because of a reawakening in his painting that allowed him to express those ideas more effectively through art than he could on paper.

My father was first and last a painter. Indeed, *The Artist’s Reality* clearly demonstrates that he thought about painting constantly. It was therefore a very radical move for him to put down the brush after nearly twenty years and devote himself to