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| **Rothko, Mark (1903-1970)** |
| Marcus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz |
| Mark Rothko is one of the most celebrated painters from a group that matured in 1940s USA, later dubbed “The New York School.” Rothko began his career as a figurative painter. From 1938 he produced an innovative style that drew on Surrealism and incorporated disparate sources from ancient Greek and Native American art to Biblical imagery. After 1945 his paintings became increasingly abstract, moving towards the style that he is most associated with today. |
| Mark Rothko is one of the most celebrated painters from a group that matured in 1940s USA, later dubbed “The New York School.” His work became increasingly famous in the US and Europe during the 1950s, and his status was solidified by a large retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1962. Rothko began his career as a figurative painter. From 1938, he produced an innovative style that drew on Surrealism and incorporated disparate sources from ancient Greek and Native American art to Biblical imagery. After 1945 his paintings became increasingly abstract, moving towards the style that he is most associated with today. These works involve soft, cloud-like rectangles of colour, painted in multiple layers, which produce the appearance of glowing, shimmering light. Rothko had an uneasy relationship with art critics, collectors, and institutions. In 1950, he was amongst a group known as “The Irascibles,” who protested that a juried exhibition of contemporary works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was hostile to “advanced art.” In 1958, he reneged on a major commission to produce murals for the Four Seasons Hotel in New York, deciding that its atmosphere was inappropriate.  Rothko was born into a Jewish family in Dvinsk, Russia in 1903. In later years, he often spoke of his family's fear regarding hostility towards Jews in Russia, which led to violent attacks on many Jewish communities. Rothko's father moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1910, and his family followed in 1913. During his teenage years, Rothko regularly attended public speeches by political activists, and became an anarchist. He held this commitment for many years to come. In 1923, he moved to New York and began taking classes at the Art Student's League. He became interested in German Expressionist painting, as well as the art of children. For his first solo exhibition at the Portland Museum in 1933, Rothko took the unusual step of showing his paintings alongside work by child artists. His paintings of the 1930s focussed on faux-naive figures and urban scenes, with a sombre tone that reflected the mood of the Great Depression. He was vehemently opposed to abstract art at this time. He thought it was de-humanising because it lacked meaningful content.  File: Street Scene.pdf  1 Mark Rothko, Street Scene, c. 1937, National Gallery of Art, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1986. 43.21  His new style in the 1940s was connected with an increasing interest in mythology and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. He combined a distinctively modern approach with ancient imagery, and also worked in larger formats than before, using a much wider range of techniques. This new approach began to gain public interest, leading to solo exhibitions at the Art of This Century Gallery in New York in 1945, and the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946. This was also an important period of intellectual ferment, when Rothko mingled with a group of artists that would later be called “The New York School.” The ideas that these artists shared were disseminated through the journals *Possibilities* and *Tiger's Eye*, which Rothko contributed to in the late 1940s. In 1949, he was a founding member of The Club, an important venue for talks and discussions amongst artists.  File: Hierarchical Birds.pdf  2 Mark Rothko, *Hierarchical Birds*, 1944, National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.)  His abstract works of the 1950s expanded in size again, giving viewers a feeling of being enveloped by their layers of colour. By this time Rothko had abandoned politics; however, he continued to reject the label “abstract art,” claiming that his work was not abstract because it contained a human meaning. From the early 1960s, his palette became darker, and his paintings no longer displayed the shimmer of light that had characterised his 1950s works. In 1964, he was commissioned to create a suite of paintings for a non-denominational chapel in Houston, Texas. These 'black' paintings typify the solemnity and austerity of his later practice.  File: Untitled.pdf  3 Mark Rothko, *Untitled,* 1957, National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.) |
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