

Biography - English

1903-1921

Room 1 and 2

Marcus Rothkowitz is born on September 25, 1903, as the fourth child of the Jewish pharmacist Jacob Rothkowitz and his wife Anna Goldin in the Baltic Dvinsk. This then Russian town is now on Latvian territory. In 1910 his father moves to the USA and settles in Portland, Oregon, as one of his brothers lives there already. In 1913 he has his family come over as well, but dies one year later, obliging the children to work besides attending school. Yet, Marcus is a good student, commences High School in 1918, and receives a scholarship in 1921 for the renowned *Yale University*.

1922-1932

Room 1 and 2

He studies psychology and history of philosophy, but leaves Yale without a degree in the autumn of 1923 and moves to New York. There he matriculates at the *Art Students League*, but soon afterwards returns to Portland, where he takes acting classes. It is on stage, as he later claims, that he becomes aware of the world of colour and design. In 1925, he enrolls at the *New School of Design* in New York. Through the artists Sally and Milton Avery, Rothkowitz meets numerous young colleagues, among them Barnett Newman and Adolph Gottlieb. He becomes close friends with the Averys and Gottlieb.

At the end of 1928, Rothkowitz first publicly exhibits his work in a group show. The following year he teaches at the academy of the Jewish Centre in Brooklyn, and continues to do so regularly until 1955. Up to his death he gives incidental courses at various high schools, indicating his joy for teaching. In 1932, he meets the artist Edith Sachar and they marry that same year.

1933-1940

Room 1 and 2

His first solo exhibition with portraits and figure studies takes place in a New York art gallery. In 1934 he participates in group shows, organizes exhibitions for his students, is a founding member of the *Artists Union* and publishes on art. Even though they are only nine, he and eight colleagues create a group called *The Ten* in 1935. Until its dissolution in 1939, various group shows occur in New York, including one in Paris in 1936.

Edith Sachar starts designing jewellery, which becomes a profitable business, while her husband continues teaching to earn a living. During the ensuing years they separate several times.

At the time of the Great Depression, the *Federal Art Project* is meant to support American artists through public commissions. From 1936 through 1939, Rothkowitz too is admitted to this program, and in 1937 he is classified an easel painter. Yet, he attempts to receive commissions for murals, as is reflected thematically in a small series of cityscapes and subway scenes that contains extreme foreshortenings and remarkably flat perspectives. Small gesso boards also point to his interest in the fresco technique. In this period, he starts signing his work with "Rothko", as it becomes legalized in 1959. In 1938, he became a naturalized American citizen, the year from which his only known self-portrait dates.

1941-1947

Room 3 und 4

He participates in various group shows, i.e. at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery and the *Whitney Museum*. Frequent negative criticism of his work provokes him to take a public stance, resulting in art theoretical self-reflection. The ensuing book project, however, was only published recently. The crisis of World War II, make him, Gottlieb and Newman, revert to the eternal tragedies from Greek mythology. As reduced visual ciphers, these themes serve as expressions of profound human drama. Individual characters such as Antigone or Tiresias occupy him throughout the following years, whereas his preoccupation with the blinded seer Tiresias also carries a degree of self-reference.

After the final separation from his wife Edith Sachar, the artist suffers a nervous breakdown and they divorce in 1944. The following year, he weds the book-illustrator Mary Alice Beistle, called Mell. Influenced by the surrealists who had immigrated to New York, he transforms his myth-laden figurations into biomorphic, painterly structures.

1947-1951

Room 5

A solo exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim is followed in 1947 by a show at *Betty Parsons Gallery*, where his new work is now presented annually through 1951. Around 1947/48 a clear transformation occurs in his art. His imagery gains in plasticity and spatial presence. Luminous colour contrasts and, initially small, spots of colour, cause his work to vibrate. This amorphous formal language intensifies gradually, causing the coloured clouds to adopt a block-shaped structural order. Black shapes or horizons accentuate the energy of the colours.

In 1950, Rothko and his wife travel for five months throughout Europe. In the same year, their daughter Kathy Lynn, called Kate, is born. Together with 16 other artists, Rothko refuses to participate in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* contemporary art competition. Through such notorious acts of these so-called *Irascibles*, the public at large is made aware of current artistic developments in New York. From now on, works by these artists are also included in international art tours, organised mostly by the *Museum of Modern Art* and funded by the US government.

1952-1962

Room 6 and 7

Rothko's friendship with Barnett Newman and Clifford Still cools down, but he intensifies his contact with Robert Motherwell and Phillipp Guston. In 1954, Rothko signs a contract with the *Sidney Janis Gallery*, which he annuls only in 1962 out of protest against the gallerist's support for the *Pop Art* movement. In 1955, Janis organizes the first of two solo shows that presents the classic Rothko: the initial great variety and contrasts of colours in his work now concentrates on two or three coloured clouds that float over a monochrome background. Because of its physical and material presence, the viewer becomes part of the pictorial plane. In 1958, his palette darkens towards a restrained maroon. That same year, he and three others represent the United States at the Venice Biennial, and he is commissioned to decorate the Seagram Building's restaurant. He is much occupied by designing this program for an entire room, which was a long held dream. Yet, finally he turns down the commission and keeps the cycle of the *Seagram Murals* for himself. In 1959, he and his family return for several months to Europe, and in the same year, some privately owned works are lent to *Documenta II* in Kassel. Personally, however, he refuses to exhibit in Germany because of the Holocaust. In 1961, the Museum of Modern Art opens the first retrospective of his work, which then travels on to Europe.

1963-1971

Room 6 and 7

His son, Christopher, is born. In 1964, Rothko signs a contract with *Marlborough Fine Art*, which also organizes his first solo exhibition in its London gallery. The collectors John and Dominique de Menil commission him to conceive murals for a chapel in Houston, which occupies him some time to come. He now creates black on black paintings. A sole, hard-edged inner form exemplifies his quest for perfect proportions. This new iconic austerity separates his work from the earlier coloured clouds. In 1966, the Rothko family undertakes a last journey to Europe. In London, the artist visits the Tate Gallery after a proposal to dedicate an entire room to his work. Three years later, he donates nine of the Seagram Murals to the museum. In the context of a group show, his work is seen in Japan, India and Australia. In 1968, his health deteriorates so much after an aneurism, that, for the purpose of a will, he begins cataloguing his oeuvre.

His doctors advise him to work on a smaller scale and he also returns to working on paper. A hard-edged white border distinguishes these works in acrylic from his previous paintings. The border results from removing adhesive tape used to lay down the sheets of paper on a support. The effect of this purely technical process is nonetheless adopted by Rothko as a formal element in his last Black on Gray Paintings. It creates the notion of a picture within a picture, keeping the viewer at a distance, rather than imbuing him as did his earlier work.

In 1969, he leaves his family and lives in his studio. He starts a relationship with Ad Reinhardt's widow, but remains in touch with his family. He renews his contract with Marlborough and *Yale University* awards him an honorary doctorate.

On February 25, 1970, the severely ill artist commits suicide in his studio. During the summer, his gallery organizes a memorial exhibition in Venice, running parallel to the Biennial. Instead of a show still conceived with the artist himself, this survey of works mostly from his estate, then travels to Zürich, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Rotterdam and Paris.

Mark Rothko - Retrospektive 8.2. - 27.4.2008

Täglich von 10:00 - 20:00 Uhr geöffnet

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