

**Mark Rothko: An Alternative Name
of
Abstract Expressionism**

Mahmudul Alam

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Mark Rothko: An Alternative Name of Abstract Expressionism

Among the bunch of artists who emerged during the post World War II period, Mark Rothko was one who distinguished himself as a torch bearer of abstract expressionism. An artist with great talent, Mark Rothko, through his artistic observation and insight had discovered that if inspected properly, human emotion can even find language of expression through art in an abstract manner. Although denied personally, artistic traits and features of the paintings of Mark Rothko, his background of painting career, his approach towards art, and his brisk usage of dark color to represent human emotion undoubtedly proves him as one of the all time greats in the arena of abstract expressionism.

The great artist was born in a highly educated family in Latvia (a part of the former Russian Empire) and was then brought up in a liberal and free-thinking surrounding. In the early childhood of his life, while he was residing in Dvinsk with his family, Mark Rothko had to experience a bloody conflict that erupted between the Cossacks (A community of people living in Eastern Europe and the Asian part of Russia) and the Jews. Extracting resemblance between graves and Mark Rothko's rectangular art forms, some critics believe that the haunting images of graves, where Cossacks purportedly buried the murdered Jews they abducted, remained with Rothko for the rest of his life but no conclusion can be drawn since there is still a doubt on the occurrence of this incidence. Later, when Rothko was nine, his father in amid fear of the inclusion of his sons in the army of the czarists, migrated to the United States. An extra-ordinary meritorious student, Mark Rothko then completed his secondary level education in the US with distinction and then received a scholarship at the Yale University. Unfortunately, the blue-blooded and the racist attitude of the Yale community compelled Rothko to leave the university, and following the withdrawal, Rothko settled in New York, which was then the hub of the abstract expressionist painters (Unknown Arthur, Mark Rothko, Childhood, Wikipedia.org).

To realize the abundant influence of abstract expressionism in the life of Mark Rothko, it is essential to have an overview of what abstract expressionism is. According to the Oxford Dictionary (page-5), the word 'abstract' means "having no physical or practical existence". Therefore, abstract expressionism means to portray something in a non-figurative way. In general, abstract expressionism refers to an art movement that had gripped a part of the artists' society of the United States, particularly of New York in the mid 1940s just after the Second World War. Originally

influenced by Surrealism (mystic art), abstract expressionisms had a general attitude where paintings were neither exclusively abstract nor exclusively expressive. Although there were many abstract expressionists, the common thing among them was that they used to draw inspiration from all corners of life, and instead of typical topics like sociology, history and region, they often tried to depict something which was either mystic or tragic(Unknown Arthur, Abstract expressionism, WebMuseum, ibiblio.org). In most of the cases, the approach of the abstract expressionists was spontaneous; they used to sprinkle paint briskly or uncontrollably on huge canvases. It therefore seemed that they drew whatever came into their mind, but in fact they always premeditated in their imaginative mind and brain what they drew or painted (Unknown Arthur, Abstract Expressionism, Artlex.com).

Now the question comes: Why and how did Mark Rothko's career find its way in abstract expressionism? No wonder that human beings get influenced by some factors and close observations say that even Mark Rothko was not an exception to that. After moving to New York, he received his ABC in painting from Arshile Gorky, who was a pioneering figure in the field of painting at that time. Later he was taught by Max Weber, another Jew abstract painter, from whom Rothko thought to have gained a greater knowledge on how to use human sensation as a strategy to painting. Aside from the influence of these two great painters, he also took great encouragement from German Surrealist painters like Paul Klee and Georges Rouault whose arts were on display on New York Gallery (Unknown Arthur, Artistic Apprenticeship, Mark Rothko, Wikipedia.org). Mr. Rosanna Warren on his review essay on Rothko has attributed the traumatic condition that Rothko faced after the death of his father as a driving force of his abstract expressionist painting (<http://muse.jhu.edu>). In addition to all of this, it can also be said that the agony of the second world war may have had an impact on him because it is thought that it was the time, when the whole surrounding was filled with the news of death, tragedy and frustration. All of these episodes had such a profound influence on Mark Rothko that the turning point in his career was not accidental, rather it was inevitable.

A sparkling aspect of Mark Rothko's paintings is that most of them are without any nomenclature. Although he used to label his paintings with titles at the beginning of his career, he never did use any nomenclature after 1947 and instead, he resorted to numbers for identifying his paintings. Furthermore, he restrained himself from explaining the meaning of his art work because he believed that specific nomenclature or explanation narrows down and restricts the limit of the thinking of human minds. I think that was perfectly the right thing because art is something that greatly deals with imagination, and any nomenclature will certainly reduce the boundary of

imagination. Again, the themes like tragedy, frustration, and mystery, which Rothko depicted, can just be felt, but cannot be described with accurate words. Since our feeling and reaction towards these psychological facts vary from individual to individual, it is usual that there is no standard language that can express these emotional matters accurately. Probably Mark Rothko asked himself, "When the theme is abstract, then what is the function of the title?" Subsequently, he then proclaimed, "Silence is so accurate". In fact his decision to avoid the process of nomenclature has made his picture more silent, and this silence has made his paintings more conceptual, more vivacious, more expressive, and above all more abstract by keeping the door of imagination wide open for the viewers.

Here is a sample painting of Mark Rothko, which was retrieved from the website of US National Art Gallery. From the first glance at the picture, we can clearly see Mark Rothko's use of bright colors in his paintings. To me, the red color in this picture represents the internal bloodshed of a man's heart, which is probably experiencing a situation of tragedy. The grey color at the top corner of the painting may be a symbol of his frustrations whereas the black color depicts his hopelessness. The light yellow color at the bottom left has resemblance with barren desert, and perhaps, with this color Rothko has tried to compare the companionless situation of that man with the barrenness of a desert. The green and the blue color here signify mother earth, a place for which our love never expires even after experiencing the hardest odds in life. Lastly, the white color here definitely does not represent peace; possibly it portrays the humble submission of man to some merciless and invincible hurdles of human life. Here my explanation, however, was done from a specific point of view, but Rothko never encircled the meaning of his paintings in such a limited boundary, which is nothing but an obligatory feature of abstract painting, as he once explained: "The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths at all times" (Unknown Arthur. Mark Rothko, Towards Abstraction, nga.gov).



Apart from the above mentioned characteristics of Rothko's painting, his suicide is another incidence that heavily supports his abstract expressionist mentality. On February 25, 1970, he was found dead, lying in a pool of blood that measured 8x6 ft, which was similar to the scale of his paintings (Jones, Jonathan. 'Feeding the Fury', The Guardian). About his suicide, the Wikipedia commented, "And how can one represent human tragedy without some sort of human representation? At what point does it become too abstract, too hermetic, at what point does it surpass human communicability

which is always, including music, an aspect of form, be it of language or mathematics?”. On the other hand, Jonathan James in one of his columns in the Guardian newspaper wrote, “It transformed the meaning of his work, gave every encounter with his painting a terrible gravity”. In the synopsis of these two quotes, there lies an ultimate truth. The truth is: while his paintings are universal depiction of human emotions, his suicide is the abstract expression of his own sufferings and depressions, and this practical depiction is undoubtedly an eternal support of all of his abstract paintings.

Despite all of these evidences, which undoubtedly backs the abstract expressionism traits of Mark Rothko’s painting, it is really difficult to find an answer why he refused to accept the name tag of abstract expressionist. He once said, “I am not an abstract painter. I am not interested in the relationship between form and color. The only thing I care about is the expression of man's basic emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, and destiny” (Mark Rothko, Quotations, Wikipedia.org). It is probably because another term of abstract expressionism is ‘non-objective’, and it is non-objective in a sense that there is no recognizable object in an abstract painting (Unknown Arthur. Artists by Movement: Abstract Expressionism, Artcyclopedia). However, does this mean that Mark Rothko was a man without any objective or aim? Certainly the answer is no, as it is apparent that his mission in life was to convey a deep and profound message of mystery, tragedy, and frustration to other people, especially for those who are thoughtful through his creative and imaginative paintings. From this view point, it now becomes comprehensible to me, at least to some extent, why he declined to be tagged as an abstract painter. He declined so that no one could misunderstand him by interpreting him as a non-objective or aimless man from the absence of non-recognizable objects in the portraits of his abstract painting. If this was the fact behind his refusal to accept the title of abstract expressionist, I can then confidently say that he took the right decision, and this decision was nothing but the outcome of his great insight, introspection, and wisdom.

To conclude, we can say that Mark Rothko was an artist who found his way of painting out in the stream of abstract expressionism. In fact, it is the abstract expressionism that had erased obscurity and enlightened his life with fame and eminence. May be because of nonchalance attitude or, the fear of misinterpretation of his objectives and artwork, he had refused to be recognized as an abstract expressionist, but his art work and abstract expressionism is related so closely that it can be said without any doubt that he is one of the greatest abstract expressionists of all age.

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Opinion Page

➤ **Did you like this project? Why or why not?**

I liked this project because it was challenging. I don't know how successfully I have tackled this challenge, but I love to encounter challenge because if I can handle it successfully, I feel a sense of accomplishment.

➤ **Why do you think I assigned this topic?**

I think you have assigned this topic for the following three reasons:

First, you love art, and I have understood that from your enthusiastic description of art pieces, which you had seen during your visit to Slovakia during this Eid Break.

Second, research can be on any topic, like sociology, history, tourism, science and so on. But I think you have chosen this particular topic (art and artist) because in English 104, we study literature, not science, and art is deeply related with literature.

Third (and probably the main reason), it was a seriously challenging topic for writing a research paper, especially for students who had no prior idea about the artists you assigned, and who mainly loves mathematics and science.

➤ **What was the most difficult part?**

The most difficult part was to find an appropriate thesis from a lot of information, and then start writing on a white piece of paper. It is always difficult to start something on a blank sheet, but once started, I can then carry on smoothly and fairly from that point.

Another difficult task was to keep the whole research paper to the point. Even slight inattentiveness and carelessness was enough to deviate from the main thesis.

➤ **What was your favorite part?**

My favorite part was writing this opinion page.

➤ **What was your opinion of the artist before and after the work?**

Before working on this project, my conception was that artists are none but some crazy people. Therefore, I had the same notion about Mark Rothko. After researching on the art of Mark Rothko to write this paper, I have understood that their imagination is not worthless. Indeed, the power of imagination is a great asset of human being, because what we cannot find in reality, we can find it in our imaginative world very easily.

- **Include your favorite piece of work by your assigned artist. Tell me why you like piece you selected.**

Unfortunately, at this moment it is not possible for me to include my favorite piece of art. To select which is my favorite part, I will have to observe many of Mark Rothko's art works very deeply. I have just observed quite a few pieces of his art work, and I have understood the meaning of those to some extent. It is because understanding art requires a special mind setting, and a lot of time, and I think I do not have that mentality as well as time right now. However, in my research paper I have included a piece of art, the meaning of which I have comprehended best.

Aggie Honor Code

“An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal, or, tolerate those who do”

“On my honor, as an Aggie, I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this academic work.”



Signature: Mahmudul Alam