

**The Experiential Sublime:
Perception, Conception, and Emotion in Mark Rothko's Classic Color-Field Paintings**

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I. Introduction

To induce an internal experience that is fundamentally beyond conceptualization through a visual image seems impossible to achieve. Nonetheless, the challenge of pictorially presenting and evoking the Sublime, the overpowering emotional experience of encountering something so vast and superhuman that it is at once rapturous and terrifying, has been taken up by countless visual artists throughout the history of art. While one may assume that the concept of the Sublime necessarily invokes religiosity and can only be explored through traditional spiritual iconography and subject matter, there is a well-established lineage of artists who explore the Sublime through a focus on the internal and subjective experience of art.

The classic color-field paintings of Mark Rothko are notable examples of this desire to affect a profound emotional experience in viewers through a purely visual stimulus. To depend on recognizable figuration or established spiritual subject matter would necessarily limit the ability of a painting to communicate a feeling of overpowering awe. Rothko's color-fields demonstrate the communicative power of light and its ability to affect notions of the Sublime outside of any established religious, spiritual or philosophical tradition. The emotional resonance of huge swathes of saturated color speaks to the inherent capabilities that lie in all humans to experience the Sublime. Rothko's visually simple canvases demonstrate our innate ability realize the infinite vastness of the universe and internally experience it as a fundamentally unknowable phenomenon. The fact that such formally simple canvases can evoke immensely complex feelings begs for an investigation into the processes of perception, conception, and emotion that are involved when one encounters a Rothko.

To begin an inquiry into how the Sublime may be evoked through Rothko's color-fields, a formal analysis is necessary. Only after an investigation of the visual information one takes from a Rothko can one analyze how a viewer conceives (or is unable to conceive) what is presented before him or her. After investigating how scholars, critics, and lay viewers alike may perceive and conceptualize Rothko's color-fields, one can then turn to the emotions that they elicit. Distinguishing the psychological processes of perception, conception, and emotion is necessary in order to demonstrate how a visually simple, yet conceptually elusive, stimulus is at the core of the emotional experience of the Sublime.

I argue that the combination of these paintings' striking visual simplicity and obscure conceptualization exemplifies the basis for a pictorial expression (and its ability to affect an internal experience) of the Sublime. Only through an elimination of particular religious or environmental referents and use of the basic processes through which humans understand and interact with their environment can the Sublime be communicated in visual art. Indeed, Rothko's reliance on the expressive power of light in his attempt to express a fundamentally ineffable experience demonstrates the necessity of a natural, universal means of communication when attempting to evoke the extremes of human emotion.

Before any investigation can begin, I must qualify the use of the term "universal." I do not wish to make any sweeping claim about the communicative power of Rothko's color-fields. Indeed, viewers differ widely in their immediate reactions and subsequent critical interpretations of these paintings. It is impossible to claim that Rothko's color-fields universally present and evoke a feeling of the Sublime for all viewers. Cultural and

social mindsets as well opinions and assumptions about art necessarily influence a viewer's experience before all types of paintings. Even if it were possible to eliminate all these natural perspective biases, it would be difficult to argue that all viewers before these blocks of saturated light would experience the profound emotions associated with the Sublime.

When I use the term "universal," I wish to communicate a notion of the potential for wide accessibility and understanding. Rothko's paintings demonstrate a desire to express subject matter in human terms. Expression of an idea (in Rothko's instance, the Sublime) in a mode that has the potential to be experienced and understood by as many viewers as possible through the elimination of as many particular referents, assumptions, and ideologies as possible is what I imply when I use "universal" to describe Rothko's artistic language of communication.

The Sublime

The philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke's conceptualizations of the Sublime have had a significant effect on how modern scholars interpret the effect of Rothko's color-field paintings. Their late eighteenth century writings generally defined the Sublime in aesthetic experience as the evocation of feelings of awe in the face of extraordinary vastness. While differing slightly in the particulars of their definitions, Kant and Burke both emphasized that perceptions of immensity and obscurity, and the simultaneous feeling of enjoyment and horror, were essential aspects of the experience of

the Sublime.¹ Kant also argued that the Sublime existed in an individual's subjective capacity for feeling; it was not an objective property of an external object, but rather the internal response when an individual's sensibilities are challenged to conceive of something that is ultimately beyond comprehension.²

The challenge of representing the Sublime (in addition to evoking an experience of the Sublime in the viewer) was addressed by countless artists, notably so by the Northern Romantic painters of the nineteenth century. Attempts to depict or inspire such a transcendental experience had previously been limited to religious subject matter. Art historian Robert Rosenblum notes how artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and J. W. M. Turner began to investigate the viability of representations of expansive natural landscapes and overpowering environments to inspire notions of the "superhuman," seen in works such as Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* and Turner's *Snowstorm*, painted in 1809 and 1842, respectively (Figures 1-2).³ Rosenblum argues that "by distilling natural phenomena to so primal a condition that mythic experiences can be evoked," the Romantics demonstrated that "great unknowables" of human experience were able to be conveyed through the "dwarfing infinities of nature."⁴

The "uncommon starkness and intensity" of Friedrich's expansive fields and skies, much like the "thundering chaos" of Turner's swirling, stormy seascapes, were not entirely realistic; rather, the Romantics distilled and intensified natural atmosphere and

¹ Burke, Edmond. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. John Bolton, Routledge & Keegan Paul, London 1958, p. 136. In Crowther, Paul. "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2. 1984, p. 52.

² Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*, trans., J.C. Meredith. (Oxford University Press 1973, p. 90). In Crowther (as in No. 1), p. 52.

³ Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 24.

⁴ Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 24.

environments to their most emotionally significant manifestation.⁵ They gave their landscape paintings elementary compositions and saturated the light to dense and affecting extremes so as to “locate [viewers] near [a] precipice of nothingness.”⁶ Through the “alien melancholy” and “haunting expanse” of exaggerated light and atmosphere, the Romantics endeavored to express the transcendental experience of the Sublime through a non-religious approach.⁷

However, representing the Sublime in natural landscape is necessarily limiting. Though freed from the particular iconography of representing the Sublime through religious subject matter, the landscapes of the Romantics were also inevitably bound by their dependence on recognizable subject matter. While not completely naturalistic, Friedrich’s expansive skies and Turner’s roiling seas were identifiable and able to be explicitly conceptualized as representations of natural environments. As Rothko himself put it “[the Romantics]...failed to recognize that, though the transcendental must involve the strange and unfamiliar, not everything strange or unfamiliar is transcendental.”⁸ To truly express the Sublime, which is by definition boundless and beyond comprehension, a furthering of the limits of artistic conventions was needed.

Rosenblum observes a progression from the Romantic Sublime of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the Abstract Sublime, culminating in the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the mid-twentieth century. Notions of “infinite vastness” and “primordial beginnings” are notably explored in the paintings of Mark Rothko and

⁵ Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 199.

⁶ Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 199.

⁷ Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, p. 12.

⁸ Rothko, Mark. “The romantics were prompted,” *Possibilities I*, 1947, p. 84. In Rothko, Mark. *Writings on Art*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 58.

Barnett Newman.⁹ Viewers before the silent expanses of saturated color and dematerialized light are drawn into somber and contemplative mental and emotional states. Without the explicit knowledge of what one perceives, a viewer is carried “beyond reason to the Sublime” as he or she is absorbed into the “radiant depths...of these infinite, glowing voids.”¹⁰

Newman and Rothko were explicitly concerned with addressing “absolute emotions” in their art. Newman, in his 1948 essay “The Sublime is Now” asserted that the Romantics had failed to express the Sublime in their work due to their “blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted or pure).”¹¹ This tradition of addressing the Sublime through fundamentally objective and external means (such as religious imagery or landscape painting) left modern artists “incapable of creating a new sublime image.”¹² Newman (and perhaps Rothko, as many of his writings which I will later examine demonstrate he felt similarly) was concerned with expressing an authentic sublimity in his works; one that “[reasserted] man’s natural desire for the exalted.”¹³ At Barnett Newman put it, their paintings were images that didn’t rely on the “outmoded and antiquated legend” but were “self-evident” in their sublimity and able to be understood by “anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.”¹⁴

⁹ Rosenblum, Robert. “The Abstract Sublime,” *Art News*, February 1961, pp. 38-41. In *On Modern American Art*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999). pp. 76.

¹⁰ Rosenblum, Robert. “The Abstract Sublime,” p. 76.

¹¹ Newman, Barnett. “The Sublime is Now.” *Tiger’s Eye*, Vol. 1, No. 6, December 1948, pp. 51-3. In Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul, eds. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 581.

¹² Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” In *Art in Theory* (as in n. 11), p. 581.

¹³ Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” In *Art in Theory* (as in n. 11), p. 581.

¹⁴ Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” In *Art in Theory* (as in n. 11), p. 582.

II. Rothko

Rothko's Iconic Image

Before an analysis of Rothko's search for a self-evident (and thus universally experiential) image of the Sublime and a discussion of how the perceptual and conceptual experience of his work may go about evoking it, it is necessary to become familiar with his signature color-field style. The multitude of paintings that are variations on the same formal characteristics indicate that Rothko felt this was a particularly emotionally resonant image. While it is limiting to describe formally only one of Rothko's many paintings in this style, a brief description of one of his classic color-field canvases provides the necessary basis to begin an investigation of how this perceptual experience can instigate emotional change.

Orange on Yellow, painted in 1956, is a massive canvas: nearly eight feet high and six feet wide (Figure 3). Two irregular rectangular shapes, one yellow, one red, are unevenly surrounded by an orange border. It is uncertain whether the yellow rectangle rests atop the larger red form, bleeding its color across the lower shape's boundaries, or if they are two separate masses, divided by orange light. The yellow mass is richly saturated, though with a distinctly nuanced and textured surface. Its edges are blurred, hazily extending outward into the surrounding orange as well as diffusing downward toward the lower form. A slight left to right rise occurs along its bottom edge; though subtle, the irregularity is undeniably attention-drawing. The red rectangle is larger than the yellow, with distinctly more defined boundaries. Again, like the yellow form, it is vividly saturated though subtly fluctuating in hue. Along its bottom edge, brushstrokes are visible, noticeably rougher and less blurred than the other limits of both forms.

Glowing throbs of yellow light touch upon the red form's sides, adding to the gauzy gradations of the orange surroundings. The forms and border are marked by a swelling and pulsing quality, by virtue of the nature of warm, saturated colors.¹⁵ The yellow form is markedly more dynamic, its cloudy and indistinct edges seem to throb outwards. By comparison the red form appears still, stolid and contained by its well-defined boundaries.

Though at first glance, *Orange on Yellow* seems like a simple painting, a yellow and a red rectangle surrounded by an orange haze, it is immensely nuanced in texture, form, and hue. The overwhelming scope of the canvases absorbs the viewer, flooding their visual field with sensation. At such a massive size, these subtle variations demand the viewer's attention, and require him or her to parse through the overwhelming amount of visual sensations presented the painting. Though a more in-depth analysis of the perceptual experience of a Rothko color-field will come later in this paper, this brief description demonstrates the vast potential for sensation and experience inherent in Rothko's color-fields.

Rothko's Artistic Intent

Often, the actual interaction between painting and viewer differs markedly from the artist's original intent. Indeed, the internal affect that a painting inspires in a viewer is a more intriguing focus of study than artist's explanations of how they desire their

¹⁵ One notable area that will be ignored throughout this thesis project is the use of color in Rothko's works. Beyond a brief mention of how warm colors appear to draw towards the viewer, there is little mention of how Rothko's use of color adds to the dynamism and emotional presence of these works. The relationship between colors, as well as how variations of form, texture, and saturation affect viewers' perceptions of color in Rothko's work is worthy of a thesis project on its own. Beyond briefly stating that the color of Rothko's forms is central to their ability to be rich perceptual stimuli, color is too large an area for analysis to be included in this project.

work to be experienced. Nevertheless, to determine how Rothko set about to achieve an experiential image of the Sublime, it is useful to examine his personal writings on art. From musings in private journals to public lectures, Rothko's statements reveal that evoking profound emotions in a clear and universally understandable manner was a primary concern in his work. While it is perhaps impossible to prove definitively if his paintings do indeed express the Sublime, an examination of his thoughts on transcendental experiences in art is a fruitful starting point for inquiry into how he approached this subject in his work.

To begin, Rothko was emphatic that he was not a formalist. To think of his works simply as investigations of color combinations and formal organization would be akin to considering them visual decoration. He was "not interested in color" or shape in the sense that his paintings dealt with much more than the visual appearance of their hue, form, and texture.¹⁶ Rothko's classic color-field paintings do have a definite subject matter, but it is one that is beyond their visual appearance. Rothko believed his works' subject matter to be the viewer's experience when interacting with their visual appearance: the emotions one felt when confronting the artwork.

Rothko insisted that his works concerned profound emotions. He was "only interested in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom."¹⁷ Refuting the claims of critics that his works were remarkable for their reassertion of the picture plane and investigation of color relationships, Rothko stated that "the public that reacted so violently to the primitive brutality of this art, reacted more truly than the critic who spoke

¹⁶ Rothko, Mark. Notes from an interview by William Seitz, March 25, 1953. In Rothko, Mark, *Writings on Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 85.

¹⁷ Rothko, Mark. Interview with Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, 1957, New York: Devin-Adair, pp 92-94. In *Writings on Art* (as in n. 15), pp. 119-120.

about forms and techniques.”¹⁸ In his journal, he wrote that “pain, frustration, and the fear of death seem the most constant binder between human beings.”¹⁹ To be concerned with the universal expression of simultaneous fear and ecstasy is necessarily to be interested in expressing the Sublime; his desire for universality and the experience of profound emotion asserts it was a central concern in his paintings.

Rothko also insisted that an artist paints for human beings, that “the reaction in human terms is the only think that is really satisfactory to the artist.”²⁰ His paintings, he felt, “[communicated] a view of the world that is not all of myself.”²¹ They were not paintings of personal self-expression, but rather a presentation of the “great scope of experience” through the evocation of universal emotions and internal states.²²

In addition, Rothko also wrote that he felt an artist’s progression was toward clarity: “the elimination of all obstacles.”²³ His desire for direct and unambiguous subject matter is directly akin to the contemporary interest in producing a self-evident and widely accessible image of the Sublime. This search for clarity of content, coupled with an interest in evoking emotional extremes in the most universal manner possible, is noticeably manifest in the stylistic progression of his paintings, which will be examined shortly.

While not directly discussing his work, Rothko’s writings indicate that he was deeply interested in the struggle to express universal human experiences in art, an

¹⁸ Clearwater, Bonnie. *The Rothko Book*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), p. 112.

¹⁹ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 35.

²⁰ Rothko, Mark. Notes from an interview by William Seitz, January 22, 1952. In *Writings on Art*, p. 75.

²¹ Rothko, Mark. Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958. In *Writings on Art*, p. 125.

²² Rothko, Mark. Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958. In *Writings on Art*, p. 128.

²³ Rothko, Mark. “Statement on His Attitude in Painting,” 1949. In *Writings on Art*, p. 65.

achievement that was hampered by the use of “particular” forms or specific figures and scenes. He therefore paid careful attention to the use of light as a tool for the subjective communication of sensual experience. On one level, he viewed light as a means for communicating sensory qualities to the viewer: the way something actually felt or looked could be communicated through manipulation of luminosity and darkness. He also wrote that light was a viable instrument for expressing certain notions or feelings in a universal manner due to the “subjective feelings that light can symbolize.”²⁴ Light could be used for expressing more than sensual qualities: it was a means for expressing emotionality because viewers “[associate] certain specific emotions with the effects of light.”²⁵ Light’s ability to relate mood then rendered “particular” objects unnecessary as it could evoke “individual emotionality” in universal terms.²⁶

Rothko’s belief that art should communicate through universally understandable means underscores the absence of recognizable figuration and reliance on pure light in his paintings. To communicate through a particular symbol or image was necessarily limiting. Expressing solely through light, the most basic means of information communication at a viewer’s disposal, Rothko’s paintings ensured that (regardless of affect or Sublime content) all viewers were able to experience them at their most basic level.

In his classic color-field works, there is no impression that a tangible object or figure is represented; rather, the communicative power of light evokes a feeling of an emotional presence. His paintings, he believed, were “dramas” and the presences of light

²⁴ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, (as in n. 18), p. 33.

²⁵ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, p. 35.

²⁶ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, p. 35.

in the pictures were “performers.”²⁷ These shapes “have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms.”²⁸ The viewer is able to perceive these abstracted forms as performing, acting, and communicating purely due to their visual characteristics. He felt that engaging with these unrecognizable (yet undeniably expressive) presences evoked an internal reaction in the viewer: an experience Rothko was deeply interested in exploring. Recognizing the expressive qualities of pure light, Rothko utilized this as a means to represent and evoke the Sublime without use of “particulars.”²⁹

Rothko also had specific notions of how his paintings should be encountered for an optimal sensory and emotional experience. His paintings were quite large, he said, precisely because he wanted them to be “very intimate and human.”³⁰ Their grand scale engulfed viewers, drawing them into complete one-on-one absorption with a sensual presence. This feeling of “mentally walking inside a painting” as one gallery director described it, was furthered through Rothko’s “hypersensitive knowledge about light and color and how they can be affected by direction and angle.”³¹ The ideal conditions in which to encounter the color-field paintings allowed individuals to view paintings up close and establish a “close and exclusive environment of color and light.”³² Each work was hung at eye-level and preferably encountered separately from all other works in its surroundings. The external lighting of the works was also supremely important; Rothko desired his paintings to be indirectly lighted, so that the “physical, optical way in which

²⁷ Rothko, Mark. “The romantics were prompted,” In *Writings on Art*, (as in n. 8), p. 58.

²⁸ Rothko, Mark. “The romantics were prompted,” In *Writings on Art*, p. 58.

²⁹ Rothko, Mark. *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, p. 35.

³⁰ Rothko, Mark. “How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture,” 1951. In *Writings on Art*, p. 74.

³¹ Robertson, Bryan. “About Rothko,” *Modern Painters*, Autumn 1998, pp. 27.

³² Robertson, Bryan. “About Rothko,” pp. 27.

his paintings made their own light, *from within* the color” was not hampered.³³ Rothko’s specifications of how individuals should encounter his massive canvases to achieve a consummate contemplative experience further demonstrate his concern for artistic communication of profound human emotion in a direct and unifying manner.

Stylistic Progression

To understand fully how this interest in expressing the Sublime was eventually manifested in his signature color-field style, it is necessary to examine Rothko’s artistic progression. The multitude of paintings he produced in his signature style indicates that he felt it was the most emotionally communicative formal combination at his disposal, but to understand how he achieved that image, one must look at the stylistic journey that came before it.

Until 1939, a recognizable figure was present in Rothko’s paintings. Beginning with his first paintings in the 1920s’ through his work in the late 1930s, landscapes, urban scenes, and human figures were rendered in somber colors, elongated forms, and blurred brushstrokes. Art historian Anna Chave notes that though the suggestive and exaggerated qualities of these early works hint at the later extremes of abstraction Rothko would achieve, other formal qualities demonstrate his adherence to a particular pictorial tradition.³⁴ The arrangement of figures within a fore-, middle-, and background and the appearance of a recognizable subject matter in such works as *Subway* and *Self Portrait, 1936* reveal a reliance on established visual practice (Figures 4-5). In *Subway*, the elongated, frail lines of ethereal creatures accentuate the despondent, tired atmosphere of

³³ Robertson, Bryan. “About Rothko,” pp. 26.

³⁴ Chave, Anna C. *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 48.

a dank, underground urban hub. Similarly, the thick and ragged blocks of browns, reds, and maroons that compose the figure and background create an unsettled, brooding aura in Rothko's self portrait. While the communicative qualities of Rothko's abstracted forms and colors effectively add to the emotional affect of the painting, his early works do not stimulate a consummate emotional experience in the viewer.

By the early 1940's, Rothko had begun to incorporate surrealist and automatist tendencies in his works. Rothko was deeply influenced by the surrealist approach to painting: enigmatic figures and cryptic imagery that allowed viewers to engage perceptually and consciously with that which was previously limited to internal, ineffable experience. Correspondingly, automatism was concerned with the expression of basic feeling through unprocessed physical action: the central idea being that uninhibited production of visual imagery somehow tapped into inexpressible realms of human experience. Surrealist and automatist notions that art could produce an internal experiences in the viewer based simply on its visual qualities freed Rothko from certain pictorial conventions. A recognizable figure presented in a consciously understandable style was no longer needed in painting.

Works such as *Tiresias*, painted in 1944, demonstrate a desire to make visual the unconscious experience (Figure 6). In *Tiresias* an eye-shaped sphere looms over a fanning series of spikes. Jagged rose-tinted projections appear to support this teetering being, at once organic and machine-like. Based simply on form, color, and line, the viewer can guess at visual allusions and allow the mind to hypothesize how this visual experience translates into something emotionally meaningful. *Tiresias* allows no simple

explanation of its subject matter, allowing for the expression of purely perceptual information.

Rothko's style further progressed in abstraction and simplicity. Surrealist and automatist-inspired works led to hovering boxes and bands of color, as seen in *No. 9*, completed in 1948 (Figure 7). Formally simpler than *Tiresias*, *No. 9* and similar works created around the same time still appear to be attempts to evoke an experience within the viewer through the qualities of form, color, and line. No discernable figure or subject is present in *No. 9*, but the hovering black mass is tantalizingly close to being a conceptually classifiable object. The foggy forms and blurring masses of color in *No. 9* extend the possibility of explicit understanding of visual information frustratingly out of reach. The blurred, stacked rectangles of color of similar paintings, such as *Number 15*, 1948 or *Number 17*, 1949 (Figure 8) are reminiscent of humanoid figures: two violet heads that hover above blue and beige bodies are emerging in a diffuse haze. In a naturalistic sense, these swaths of color look nothing like human bodies; yet in the viewer's search for meaning, the human form may be the most natural manner in which to interpret such an ambiguous presence.

Multiple blocks, bands, and lines were further pared down to Rothko's signature style: a few planar expanses of color with indistinct boundaries that appeared to shimmer, expand, and recede. Upon arriving at his signature style, Rothko painted a multitude of bands of color in a state of tension between the mid-1940s until his death in 1970. Each painting was unique in its precise details, yet its basic formal scheme remained the

same.³⁵ Rothko's "relentless editing of forms" finally resulted in what he must have felt was a particularly visually (and emotionally) rich presence.³⁶

The profusion of works that were essentially variations on the same visual stimuli indicates that Rothko felt he had finally achieved a particularly significant and expressive style of painting. In 1961, Rothko chose to exhibit his most recent abstracted works without their figural precursors. This focus on and profusion of glowing rectangles of colored light signifies that Rothko felt his work had attained a self-evident and broadly communicable pictorial expression of the Sublime.

III. Perception, Conception, and Emotion in the Sublime

We now turn to the main inquiry of this paper: why is the perceptual experience of seeing gigantic luminous expanses of rich color linked to the emotional experience of profound fear, ecstasy, and doom? Rothko's experiential image of the Sublime may express and or induce the extremes of human emotion in a variety of ways. It has been established that the ostensibly simple act of perceiving these works is indeed quite complex, as the resultant internal experience is often ineffably overpowering. To tease apart the psychological processes of perception (the act of perceiving sensation), conception (of explicit and conscious understanding) and emotion (an affective internal state of sadness, joy, or fear) that occur when one encounters a Rothko may shed

³⁵ A more complete formal analysis of the variations on Rothko's signature style is absent from this thesis project. The works examined in depth in this paper are limited to paintings of only two contrasting forms, while a number of Rothko's paintings produced between 1940 and 1970 were composed of three and even four fields of color. A conscious choice was made to examine the formally simplest works from this period, works which perhaps best exemplify the power created between the stark tension of contrasting lightness and darkness. Rothko's paintings composed of more bands of color by no means less effectively exemplify the power of expanses of saturated light to convey awe, but are slightly more difficult to analyze thoroughly and are ignored in this paper for time and simplicity's sake.

³⁶ Chave, p. 110.

significant light (pun intended) on how Rothko's paintings produce an internal experience of the Sublime.

Perception

When light that is emitted or reflected by objects in the environment is processed by our eyes and nervous system, we engage in "seeing." Humans are constantly inundated with visual information; while we may visually sense all the objects in our immediate environment, we only have the capacity to attend actively to a select few of the most immediate and important elements. For instance, while I sit in a library, I perceive massive amounts of visual information: books, bookshelves, office supplies, and computer equipment are all in my visual field, but I do not have the capacity (or the need, for that matter) to attend to and engage conceptually with all of this input. Thus, even within the perceptual process, there are varying degrees of attention paid to what is sensed. However, the focus we give to a visual stimulus is distinct from conceptually identifying and thinking about it. The visual perception of light is the first step in the psychological experience of encountering a work of art and the basis for the higher level processes of conception and emotion.

Vision is the "most efficient means" of acquiring knowledge about the world, and necessary for basic orientation and survival skills.³⁷ Humans' highly developed visual capabilities enable us to discern important presences in our environment. At a preconscious (pre-conceptual level) our physical bodies and sensory capabilities can be concentrated on external entities that, based on their visual characteristics, are pertinent to

³⁷ Zeki, Semir. (1999). Art and the Brain. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 6-7, pp. 77.

us. Once certain objects are categorized as important due to their appearance, humans can focus more energy on drawing further information from their visual characteristics, ignoring superfluous input.

Psychology Rudolph Arnheim asserts that when one selectively attends to a visual presence, it is an “eminently active occupation.”³⁸ When engaging visually with shapes, humans “scan their surfaces, trace their borders, [and] explore their texture” to gain information about what is in their immediate environment and how it may affect them.³⁹ However, it is important to note that careful observation of visual details does not necessarily imply active thought. Rather, it simply involves a more sensitive sensory reception of certain visual elements.

The basis of vision is light, though light is much more than the physical cause of perception. Arnheim writes that light is “one of the most fundamental and powerful of human experiences and understandably worshipped, celebrated, and importuned in religious ceremonies.”⁴⁰ Though variation of light is responsible for relaying information about shape, distance, space, and texture, it is also imbued with deep symbolic properties. Throughout the history of Western art, associations between light and good, dark and evil have contributed immensely to the emotional affect of visual art. Brightness and illumination have consistently been associated with truth, virtue, and godliness while darkness and obscurity convey notions of fear and death. From understanding and orienting the self in a visual environment to interpreting a work of art, the extremes of light thus appear to be inherently associated with the extremes of human experience.

³⁸ Arnheim, Rudolf. *New Essays on the Psychology of Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 43.

³⁹ Arnheim, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Arnheim, p. 303.

In visual art, obscuring the visual external world through light can have various affects. A blinding white burst of light may implicitly connote radiant revelation, a feeling of ecstasy in response to a transcendental experience of overwhelming proportions. Alternatively, the obfuscation of the environment through impenetrable shadows or murky haze may powerfully express a fear of the unknown. Arnheim writes that “the frightening existence of things that are beyond the reach of our senses and yet exercise their power on us is represented by means of darkness.”⁴¹ One could also argue that blinding illuminating is a means to represent things beyond the reach of our senses and knowledge; or more specifically, the brief moment of awareness of something greater or beyond our perceptual and conceptual grasp. One can describe the flooding of the visual system with light in the same terms as spiritual or intellectual revelation: illumination or enlightenment. Thus, the obfuscation of vision through extreme lightness and darkness appears inherently involved in visually expressing and evoking an experience of the Sublime.

Perceiving Rothko

Rothko stated that a picture “lives by companionship...expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer.”⁴² The careful visual consumption that occurs when an individual stands before a Rothko is the basis for all subsequent conceptual and emotional experiences. Thus, before delving into what one *thinks* one sees when encountering Rothko’s color-field, it is necessary to attempt to describe formally and objectively what one actually *sees*. A formal analysis of the painting *No. 14*, while

⁴¹ Arnheim, p. 327.

⁴² Rothko, Mark. “Personal statement,” *Tiger’s Eye*, No. 2, December 1947, In *Clearwater*, p. 44.

reductive in that it only examines one of many various color-fields, can effectively demonstrate the rich perceptual experience of seeing a Rothko.

No. 14, painted in 1960, occupies a gigantic canvas: nearly nine square feet in area (Figure 9). A dusty orange rectangle floats atop a dark blue form; both shapes appear to be in front of a deep maroon background. The edges of both forms blur into a foggy haze; Rothko's precise feathered brushwork renders them delicate and organic veils of color. The soft and gradual transitions between the orange and blues forms and brown background lend a sense of movement to the work. Expanding and receding in an individual's perceptual field, the "activity in the margins...[asks] for acuity of attention."⁴³ While he emphatically denied that he was a colorist, the perception of action and tension between the fields of Rothko's colored light is essential to the experience of his work. Humans' immensely sensitive capability to perceive visual stimuli and interpret the relationships between form and color renders these masses of colored light dynamic, active, and alive presences.

Rothko ideally desired his paintings hung close to the floor, with the viewer standing "around eighteen inches" from the surface.⁴⁴ To encounter *No. 14* in this manner would immerse the viewer in visual stimulation; inundation with such an enormous amount of sensory information is to achieve a feeling that one is practically "within the picture."⁴⁵ From a close viewpoint, one perceives the fine detail and impression of dynamism of *No. 14* at a massive scale. Immersion in the wide expanses of

⁴³ Crow, Thomas, *The Marginal Difference in Rothko's Abstractions*. In Phillips, Glen, and Crow, Thomas (eds.). *Seeing Rothko*. (Los Angeles: Getty Press, 2005), p. 30.

⁴⁴ Crow, In *Seeing Rothko* (as in no. 43), p. 26.

⁴⁵ Crow, In *Seeing Rothko*, p. 26.

dark blue and rich orange connote a notion of vastness to the viewer. The subsequent awareness that such vastness is innately dynamic and organic due adds to the overpowering affect of the painting.

It is important to emphasize that this initial step in experiencing Rothko's color-fields occurs at the perceptual level, outside of conscious thought. The sensitive observer is not actively thinking that the cloudy edges are pulsating or that the tension between colors creates a sense of movement. Rather, the active scanning, observing, and drawing out of relevant information that naturally occurs when one encounters any visual stimulus is all that is required for these forms to become alive.

An intimate interaction between painting and viewer occurs as the eyes of the sensitive observer apprehend the nuanced modulations within and between the fields of color. Absorption into the dynamic state of tension that inherently exists among the glowing squares of light is surely an overpowering sensory experience, one that would naturally ask for a conceptual explanation. However, the refusal of comprehension of Rothko's color-fields is central to their ability to evoke the Sublime. I argue that a visual presence that inherently evokes vastness and potent presence, yet at the same time, has no external referents and defies easy conceptualization, is central in Mark Rothko's experiential image of the Sublime.

Conceiving Rothko: Abstraction and Empathy

It is now useful to examine some theories regarding psychological processes involved in understanding what one perceives in art. Specifically, an application of Wilhelm Worringer's theories on the dual processes of abstraction and empathy (and

Rudolph Arnheim's more recent reworking of them) to Mark Rothko's color-fields allows interesting insight into how they may achieve an experiential image of the Sublime. Worringer and Arnheim's theories lend support for Rothko's assertion that his art was not abstract, but rather quite realistic. Worringer's arguments regarding humans' capabilities to empathize with unfamiliar visual stimuli highlight the communicative capacity of light without rational or explicitly defined form.

Worringer's 1906 essay, entitled "Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style," was a seminal investigation of humans' psychological reaction to their environment and the subsequent manner in which they create and interpret art. Worringer argues that as humans rely on vision to gain knowledge of their surroundings, they naturally develop a feeling of anxiety and fearfulness toward the unknown environment that is beyond their perception. A "spiritual dread of space" occurs in reaction to the "unfathomable entanglement of all phenomena of life" that is "above cognition."⁴⁶ For our own purposes, I posit that Worringer's recognition of the internal experience of fear in response to the incomprehensible vastness of the universe is related to the Kantian conception of the Sublime.

In response to this innate fear, humans developed two distinct approaches to representing nature in art, which he labels "abstraction" and "empathy." Worringer defines abstraction as the production of "rationally defined, conceivable shapes" to represent the natural; it is an act of distancing oneself from the "immediacy of a threatening and chaotic environment."⁴⁷ In addition, humans have the capacity to

⁴⁶ Worringer, Wilhelm; Michael Bullock trans, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. First published 1908, Fourth Printing 1980, New York: International Universities Press, Inc., p. 15.

⁴⁷ Worringer, p. 14.

empathize with foreign, yet naturally occurring, visual forms; with natural forms, an individual can perceive the “organic and vital” in an image and subsequently experience a “free, unimpeded activation of one’s own sense of life” as he or she projects the feelings, moods and internal states of the self onto it.⁴⁸ The process of recognizing an external form as expressive and vital is termed “empathy.”

In a 1986 essay, Rudolph Arnheim notes the limitations of Worringer’s strict dichotomy between abstraction and empathy. Specifically, Arnheim argues that humans have the capacity to empathize with abstract form, even with rationally defined, non-organic shapes. The “whole variety of perceivable shapes,” Arnheim asserts, “reflects the complexity of the mind.”⁴⁹ Humans’ ability to empathize with all forms, rational or organic, recognizable or foreign, reveals our “preeminent desire to contemplate a world in which [we are] at home.”⁵⁰ According to Arnheim’s development of Worringer’s theories, our innate capability to empathize with all manner of visual stimuli reveals the universal need for self-orientation in an overwhelming environment.

Our highly developed perceptual capabilities allow us to absorb significant amounts of visual information, empathize and extract information from it, and situate ourselves in relation to it. How then, does one empathize with a perceptual experience of pure vastness, as seen in Mark Rothko’s signature paintings? Given Worringer’s and Arnheim’s assertions of our innate need and capacity to perceive and project internal feelings onto external form, it appears that Rothko’s visual presentations of absolute immensity may indeed stimulate an experience of the Sublime through their simultaneous activation of the processes of abstraction and empathy.

⁴⁸ Worringer, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Arnheim, p. 60.

⁵⁰ Arnheim, p. 60.

Rothko's color-fields are abstract visual stimuli that evoke vastness and which call upon the process of empathy that humans utilize when attempting to understand their environment. While they are quite distanced from both rationally defined and naturally occurring forms, they are undeniably expressive, alive, and dynamic. Encountering a Rothko color-field challenges the natural tendencies to abstraction and empathy by forcing viewers to empathize with a perceptually vast, conceptually ungraspable, and emotionally overwhelming phenomenon. Rothko's color-fields activate the viewer's fundamental need for understanding and orienting the self in a visual environment, but simultaneously subvert this need as they are essentially visual expressions of the inconceivable immensity of the external environment. As one empathizes with the vitality and dynamism of the looming expanses of light, an experience of terror and fear is evoked in response to the recognition of the inherent conceptual impenetrability of these presences.

Anna Chave notes and elaborates on some critics' use the term *façade* to describe this particular perceptual-conceptual combination in Rothko's color-fields. "Façade" implies something "solid, if not impenetrable" yet also that "something more lies behind what is visible."⁵¹ Thus, the experience of having one's visual system flooded with stimulation to the point of incomprehensible "impenetrability" accounts for, as Chave puts it "the sense...of both revealing and covering, of exploring that affective brink between revelation and concealment."⁵² Thus, when confronting Rothko's color-fields, while one is perceptually flooded with vast expanses of color, he or she is conceptually blinded, leading to an intensely affective internal experience.

⁵¹ Chave, 107.

⁵² Chave, 107.

Emotion in Rothko: The Experiential Image

It would be difficult to argue that Rothko's color-fields are representations of a tangible, easily recognizable subject. Indeed, Rothko's color-fields cannot be termed "representations" of the Sublime, as the Sublime is fundamentally beyond humans' perceptual and conceptual capacities. However, their ability to catalyze a very real and widely acknowledged internal experience renders them "realistic."⁵³ Rothko himself was a proponent of the idea that there was no distinction between abstract and representational art. As he felt that the emotional experience of the viewer is the subject matter of painting, it was not necessary for the painting to represent a familiar image in order to be realistic. Rather, the universal legibility of the image in human terms and internal experience is of paramount importance.

The recognition of light and color's inherent expressiveness in human perception allows for a new artistic language. While Robert Rosenblum terms it "the contemporary language of abstraction," in light of Worringer's theories and Rothko's aspirations for realism, Rothko's color-field style might be better described as a humanistic means of communication through empathy (Rosenblum, 45).⁵⁴ Rothko's desire to evoke feelings of fear, ecstasy, and doom through light and color speaks to human's inherent capabilities for recognizing the overwhelming expansiveness of the external environment. Even though the Sublime is the internal experience of the inconceivable vastness of the external environment, one can still perceive that vastness and acknowledge it lies outside his or her conceptual grasp. Only once artistic practice was freed from the necessity of

⁵³ Rothko, Mark. Notes from an interview by William Seitz, January 22, 1952. In *Writings on Art*, pp. 77.

⁵⁴ Rosenblum, Robert. *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*. (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001), p. 45.

recognizable external referents and particular imagery could a purer image of a fundamentally ungraspable experience be realized. From a human perspective, the perception of a glowing void of luminous color seems to be implicitly associated with the inconceivable expansiveness of the universe and the Sublime.

It is important to note that Newman and Rothko's desire for a "self-evident" image of the Sublime is only possible when a sensitive observer is present to perceive it, rendering it a visual catalyst for an internal emotional experience.⁵⁵ The interaction between image and viewer is essential; the emotional subject matter can only occur within the human viewer. John Golding elaborates that Rothko's color-fields exist "suspended in some nebulous half-world until the first visitor arrives to confront them."⁵⁶ Rothko's canvases become alive in the eyes of the sensitive observer; the viewer empathizes with the organic vitality of the light. The necessity of a human observer for these paintings to become active and powerful harkens back to Kant's assertion that the Sublime is a fundamentally subjective and internal experience. While the expanses of color in Rothko's works are indeed immense, they only become overpowering when taken in from a human perspective. The giant forms throb and palpitate before the viewer, heightening the experience of one's insignificant situation within an infinite and uncontrollable cosmos. When before such large canvases Rothko felt the viewer was "in it. It isn't something [the viewer] commands."⁵⁷ As the viewer is irresistibly absorbed into the luminous and dynamic presences, the subsequent recognition of his or her insignificant place in a boundless universe evokes the Sublime.

⁵⁵ Newman, "The Sublime is Now," In *Art in Theory* (as in n. 11), p. 582.

⁵⁶ Golding, John. *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 222.

⁵⁷ Rothko, Mark. "How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture," 1951. In *Writings on Art*, p. 74.

IV. The Humanistic Sublime

Abstract Atmosphere or Abstract Figure?

The struggle to evoke the Sublime through a universally communicative aesthetic experience led Rothko to a renunciation of definable imagery and reliance on the communicative properties of light. This begs for a fuller inquiry into how expanses of light can communicate and induce an emotional experience in human viewers. Though several possibilities have been already been hinted at, they demand a more detailed investigation if we hope to gain a better understanding of how Rothko's works communicate the Sublime in human terms. Specifically, interpreting Rothko's works as either pure atmosphere or abstracted figures does not yield a complete picture of how they may inspire an experience of the Sublime. I argue that a combination of these two readings provides a better understanding of how the light of Rothko's color-fields can be internally experienced as intensely emotional.

It has already been mentioned that Rothko's works are quite formally similar to Caspar David Friedrich's landscape paintings, suggesting that Rothko's works are best understood as a type of abstracted land- or skyscape: a painting of pure atmospheric light. One may see this similarity as an indication that in the struggle to empathize with unfamiliar forms, viewers tend to try to understand and empathize with what they perceive by identifying it with something familiar. I would argue, however, that when encountering a Rothko, one does not think that they are seeing an abstract vast environmental landscape. Rather, the human experience necessitates that one must learn to orient the self in the environment, drawing upon information gained by light and the perceptual process. Past experiences with expansive environments and large visual

phenomena have imbued the viewer with the knowledge that gigantic planes of light implicitly connote vastness and immensity. Thus, while both Rothko and Friedrich's paintings are quite formally similar, their subject matter is quite distinct. Friedrich's paintings are representations of landscapes so grand and visually stunning that they may inspire a Sublime experience. In comparison, Rothko's color-fields are not representations of any naturally occurring visual phenomenon, but rather are expressions of overwhelming power, immensity, and thus evoke Sublimity via a powerfully expressive language through which humans have come to understanding their environment: light.

It is also significant that Rothko's stylistic progression from figurative to abstract may suggest that his color-fields were a renunciation of particular referents to the most point extreme point at which a viewer could empathize with abstract form. Though Rothko did refer to these shapes as "performers," interpretation of these color-fields as abstracted humanoid forms is overly simplistic. While viewers do call upon the process of empathy to understand these forms, one does not necessarily have to understand them as human figure to recognize that they are capable of expression. Even Rothko himself stated that the human figure was no longer capable of adequately expressing the extreme emotions he wished to communicate, that "whoever used [the human figure] mutilated it."⁵⁸ That Rothko felt that "another way of expression" other than representations of the human figure was needed to convey the "*scale* of human feelings" supports the idea that performers of his paintings were not abstracted humanoid forms.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Rothko, Mark. Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958. In *Writings on Art*, pp. 126

⁵⁹ Rothko, Mark. Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958. In *Writings on Art*, pp. 126.

Atmosphere as Presence

One might assume that a visual stimulus that conveys infinite expanse would necessarily imply emptiness, absence rather than presence. However, while Rothko's color-fields do express vast expansiveness, they are anything but empty. Rather than simply inert voids, they are dynamic and powerful presences when engaged by viewers. It is important to explore the idea that these expressions of the Sublime have a distinct presence: when expressing the infinite vastness of the universe, the overwhelming notion of absence become a forceful presence when internalized by the viewer. So while Rothko's color-fields are neither atmospheric landscapes nor abstracted figures, light still manages to communicate a dynamic and expressive presence. A melding of the two aforementioned (and refuted) notions of what is represented in Rothko's works provides a possible of how these works manage to evoke a potent presence via the evocation of expansive absence.

Anna Chave's analysis of Rothko's works provides an interesting explanation. She notes how some critics of Rothko's works interpret his color-fields as pure background. Figural forms have been removed, leaving only expanses of color to represent the depth, space, or stage on which the human drama is typically performed. However, Chave refutes these claims, drawing support from Rothko's personal statements as well as an examination of his stylistic progression. As we have seen, Rothko's paintings progressively increase in abstraction of figures. Forms become simpler, blurrier, and larger. His "relentless editing of forms" and "expansion of scale" substitute what were once humanoid performers for abstracted representations of

presences.⁶⁰ Rather than being removed, the figural performer has been extended and abstracted to the point of unification with the background, yet still maintains its dynamism and emotive presence.

The background for the human drama is the infinite cosmos. The boundless expansiveness of the universe, when internally experienced from a human perspective, is felt as overwhelming, ungraspable, beyond our conceptual means. Complete sensory absorption coupled with conceptual blindness results in the evocation of the extremes of human emotion, otherwise known as the Sublime. The infinite cosmos only becomes the Sublime when internally felt by an individual viewer. Thus, the melding of the human performer with the expansive background mirrors this internal experience in Rothko's work. Rather than being an empty expanse, the great depths of our surroundings are rendered overpowering when experienced in an individual. They are expressions of the external universe as a crushing void. While "crushing void" is ostensibly an oxymoron, the limitless expanse of the external world has an undeniable and powerful effect when perceived and internally experienced by an individual.

Rothko once claimed that his paintings "do not deal in space," which would appear contradictory to this argument.⁶¹ However, in the sense that the subject matter of Rothko's works was the internal subjective experience of something beyond comprehension, this statement then supports this theory. Rothko later wrote that "my pictures have space...in the expression of making clear the obscure or metaphysically of making close the remote in order to bring it into the order of my human and intimate

⁶⁰ Chave, p. 111.

⁶¹ Rothko, Mark. Notes from an interview by William Seitz, January 22, 1952. In *Writings on Art*, p. 78.

understanding.”⁶² So while Rothko’s color-fields are not representations of space or figures in space, they can be understood as evoking the presence and power of space when encountered by an individual.

IV. Conclusion

Rothko’s signature color-field style might be best understood as a “secular-humanist” approach to the Sublime. Rather than utilizing a culturally established image or even relying on particular visual referents, Rothko expressed human experience through a basic means of expression and communication: light. The massive color-fields simultaneously flood the perceptual system and reject explicit conceptual understanding. These abstract façades, with formal characteristics rich for empathy, are experienced by the viewer as potent and dynamic presences, yet are beyond conscious understanding. Pictorial catalyst and viewer are equally necessary for the experience of the Sublime to be consummated. While some critics have read Rothko’s works as either an abstraction of atmosphere or the figure, they may be better understood as an image of the moment when the limitless expanse of atmosphere is internally experienced within the individual. The color-fields’ reliance on the experience of pure light through perception, conception, and emotion (the basic processes that humans call upon to orient themselves and understand their environment) allows for a more universally communicative expression of the vast unknowables of our environment.

⁶² Rothko, Mark. “Space in painting,” ca. 1954. In *Writings on Art*, p. 112.

Figures

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Figure 1
Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809-1810,
oil on canvas, 43.3 x 67.5 in. (110 x 171.5 cm),
Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Figure 2
J. W. M. Turner, *Snowstorm*, 1842, Tate Britain,
London

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Figure 3
Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956,
oil on canvas, 91 x 71 in. (231.14 x 180.34 cm),
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

Figure 4
Mark Rothko, *Subway*, 1930s,
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

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Figure 5
Mark Rothko, *Self Portrait*, 1936, oil on canvas,
32.5 x 26 in. (82.55 x 66 cm.), Collection of Christopher Rothko

Figure 6
Mark Rothko, *Tiresias*, 1944, oil on canvas,
78.88 x 39.88 in. (200.3 x 101.3 cm.),
Collection of Christopher Rothko

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Figure 7
Mark Rothko, *No. 9*, 1948
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Figure 8
Mark Rothko, *Number 15*, 1948 or
Number 17, 1949, oil on canvas,
52.37 x 29.37 in. (133 x 74.6 cm.),
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

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Figure 9
Mark Rothko, *No. 14*, 1960, oil on canvas, 9 ft. 6in. x 8 ft. 9 in.
(289.56 x 266.7 cm.), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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