

MARK ROTHKO: A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Exhibition dates: December 16, 2003 – 8 March 2004

Exhibition location: Room _ 28-32 by the Saltykov entrance

Press Preview: December 16, 2003, at 1.00 p.m.

Press release

On December 16th, 2003 The Winter Palace presents “*Mark Rothko. A centennial celebration*”. The exhibition has been organized by The State Hermitage Museum in collaboration with The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. The display includes 21 original works, 11 oil paintings and 10 works on paper put together to celebrate the centenary of Mark Rothko’s birth, one of the most distinguished artists of America.

Among the preeminent artists of the twentieth century, Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970) is best known for his enigmatic, hypnotic, and highly seductive paintings. Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia (today Dugavpils, Latvia), on September 25, 1903. His family immigrated to The United States when he was ten years old, settling in Portland, Oregon in 1913. In 1921, Rothko entered Yale University. His initial intention was to become an engineer or an attorney, but after two years in Yale, he moved to New York City and studied briefly at the Art Students League with Max Weber, who introduced him to Cubism and the work of Paul Cezanne.

As with many artists of his generation, Rothko pursued several stylistic movements prior to arriving at his signature style at mid-century. During the 1920s and 1930s, he produced hundreds of figurative works on paper and canvas, depicting nudes, portraits, interiors with figures, urban cityscapes and landscapes. The three portraits in the exhibition from the mid-1930s demonstrate his emotional approach to his subject at this time. The deliberate distortion of forms and crude application of paint in these pictures are characteristics shared by expressionist art, some non-western visual traditions, as well as children’s art, all of which Rothko admires greatly. In 1929, he began teaching children at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, a position he kept for over twenty years.

In the course of the 1930s figures became increasingly distorted as evident in two paintings from the end of the decade, *Street Scene* (1936-1937) and *Underground Fantasy* (c.1940). The latter picture is an excellent example of Rothko’s exploration of the subterranean world of New York subways as a locus for human alienation. Flat, faceless and highly attenuated figures merge with their architectural setting in the confinement of the grid-like underground.

By 1947 Rothko had eliminated all representational elements from his work. Figurative associations and references to the natural world disappeared in favor of asymmetrical arrangements of cloud-like forms floating freely across the composition.

By 1950 Rothko had altered his compositions considerably by shifting to more rectangular forms, reducing the number to two to four, and aligning them vertically against a colored ground, what was to remain his signature style: paintings that achieved his ideal of the simple expression of the complex thought". The exhibition's *Untitled* (1955), a dramatic orange and white paintings filled almost to the edges with two float in rectangles of saturated color, is a classic example of Rothko's mature style, an austere, elemental composition which he explored with variation for the rest of his career. While working primarily within this format, Rothko used a broad spectrum of colors and tones, and a variety of formal relationships to create a range of moods and atmospheric effects, ranging from dramatic, to somber, to lyric, as seen herein the late works on paper and on canvas.

Rothko's work began to darken dramatically during the 1950s and around the year 1958, he abandoned some of his radiant colors in favor of a darker palette of red, maroon, brown, and black. This development was related to his first environmental project, a series for the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York. Following an aneurysm in 1968, Rothko was forced to abandon his work on large canvases and concentrated on painting on a smaller scale with acrylics instead of oil on paper, many of which were mounted on panel, canvas, or board, giving them the appearance of unframed canvases. From that point onwards, he worked primarily on paper, even after returning to a larger format in 1969. Examples in this exhibition are two works on paper from that year, which along with a painting on canvas, *Untitled* (1969) are part of a group of brown or black and gray paintings produced from 1969 to 1970. In those monochromatic works, Rothko further condensed his composition, reducing his paintings to a fundamental opposition of colors, hues and textures. The seemingly rigid and static format of the dark paintings is enlivened by their dynamic and expressive brushwork which animates the surfaces creating great depth and movement.

The exhibition has been curated by Alexander Babin, Ph.D., Keeper of French paintings in The Department of Western European Art, The State Hermitage Museum. A variety of programs and educational resources will be scheduled in conjunction with the exhibition. These will include a Symposium organized by The State Hermitage Museum in collaboration with The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. on December 16, 2003, at The Hermitage Theatre at 4.00 p.m. There will be famous art critics, artists, curators of contemporary art from different countries. This program is free, no tickets or reservation are required.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with essay by Laili Nasr, curator of National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., sponsored by V. Kantor. The additional support was provided by Grand Hotel Europe. The Web site of The State Hermitage Museum (www.hermitagemuseum.org) will feature the exhibition.

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