

The Fire Was Not Consumed

As a boy, Rothko learned that visual representation of God is not allowed.

By

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Abstract Expression



‘Orange, Red, Yellow’ (1961) by Mark Rothko. Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rotkovitch in Dvinsk, Latvia, in 1903. His family, like millions of other Jews prey to virulent anti-Semitism, made the decision to emigrate. Rothko arrived at Ellis Island in 1913, along with his mother and older sister. (His father and two older brothers

had already arrived in America.) After 10 days in New Haven with extended family, the three immigrants left for Portland, Oregon, where Rothko's father had settled. They made the journey wearing badges that said they couldn't speak English. For Rothko, who knew Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew—his father had insisted that his youngest son study the language of Talmudic law—it was humiliating. “You don't know what it is to be a Jewish kid dressed in a suit that is a Dvinsk not an American idea of a suit, traveling across America and not able to speak English,” he would say years later.

Rothko excelled at school. Jews were not then allowed in the debating club at Portland's Lincoln High School, and in the yearbook, Rothko was named most likely to become a “Pawn Broker,” a cruel anti-Semitic barb. But he graduated early in 1921 and, along with two of his Jewish classmates, won admission to Yale on a full scholarship.

The Yale class of 1925 contained a record number of Jews, just at the moment when nationalist sentiment was growing across the U.S. and fueling the imposition of quotas that aimed to restrict the immigration of Eastern European Jews. Rothko and one of his high-school classmates roomed together off campus to save money, making their social integration on campus all the more unlikely. By the end of their first semester, Yale converted the promised tuition scholarships for all three Portland Jews into loans, forcing the students to seek employment in order to continue. Though his roommate dropped out at the end of their freshman year, Rothko found work doing menial jobs on campus. Along with two friends, he also published the Yale Saturday Evening Pest, a satirical paper. But in the fall of 1923, a discouraged Rothko quit school and moved to Manhattan. There, the 20-year-old decided to turn his penchant for drawing into the pursuit of a career in painting.

Mark Rothko

*By Annie Cohen-Solal
Yale, 282 pages, \$25*

Now, more than nine decades after Marcus Rotkovitch left New Haven for New York, Yale University Press has published “Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel” the first biography of a visual artist in its Jewish Lives series. It's a logical choice: Rothko's fame has surpassed that of other Jewish Abstract Expressionists, such as Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman and Lee Krasner. Indeed, Rothko, along with Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, is one of most celebrated abstract expressionists in the world. These were the “heroic” American painters who first attracted international attention and displaced Paris, making New York the center of the contemporary art world.

Rothko helped to create that milieu. In 1933, Rothko had his first solo show in New York; two years later, he joined a group of Jewish painters who showed together as “The Ten.” He caught the attention of one of the city's leading dealers, Peggy Guggenheim, who gave him a show in 1945. By the end of the decade, he had rid his work of recognizable forms and titles, developing his signature style: large canvases with rectangular colored blocks floating on a vertical field.

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How we view Rothko's life and work owes much to James E.B. Breslin's 1993 biography with its nearly 800 pages of meticulous, original research. The book established Rothko as a defiant, self-destructive genius, but an abridged version of Breslin's biography was needed for the casual reader. (Breslin died at 60 in 1996.) Yale turned to Annie Cohen-Solal, a French academic and cultural historian, who covers the painter's turbulent life in just 300 pages. "The two years I spent researching this book involved grappling with many parts of a complex puzzle, which I have tried to piece together," she writes.

What Ms. Cohen-Solal brings to Rothko's biography that is new is Gallic condescension toward American art and culture. She oversimplifies and misses key nuances: "In the United States, local artists, still seeking their way, were torn between Regionalism and internationalism," she writes of artists in years during and around World War II, suggesting a dualism when there were, in fact, many contrasting styles, not just either the burgeoning abstract expressionists or Regionalists like Thomas Hart Benton, who she claims was assisted by Jackson Pollock "in the execution of large, realistic frescoes." In fact, Benton painted his murals in egg tempera and wasn't assisted by his student Pollock—though he did depict him in one of his murals.

What's truly puzzling, however, is that this book doesn't engage with Rothko's own writings, which Yale also previously published ("The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art" in 2004 and the collected "Writings on Art" in 2006). Also missing in this biography are the voices of most of Rothko's friends, among them the sculptor George Segal, who reported that Rothko told him in 1965, "Studying Jewish history will give you the opportunity to deal with spiritual states." Most baffling of all, given the Jewish framing of this series, is that Ms. Cohen-Solal discusses neither most of the Jewish content in Rothko's work nor recent scholarship in the field of Jewish studies, particularly by Andrea Pappas and Aaron Rosen, about the relationship of Rothko's art to his Jewish identity.

Rothko began as a figurative painter, at turns realist, expressionist and surrealist. In the catalog of all of Rothko's canvases, published by Yale in 1998, we find myriad Jewish references that range from obvious (a peddler on the Lower East Side or two orthodox Jews with hats, long robes and beards, both from 1924-25) to less explicit. "Discourse" (1933-4) shows five men conferring, evoking Talmudic debate, the tradition in which Rothko was trained, while an untitled still life from 1938 features a prayer shawl (*tallit*) as a tablecloth. "Rites of Lilith" (1945) marks his difficult divorce from his first wife, Edith, with a surrealist image from Jewish folk tradition of the demonic Lilith, known as Adam's first wife, who refused to become subservient to him.

Ms. Cohen-Solal ignores the Jewish content of all of these works, as well as the connection between Rothko's abstract works and his Jewish roots. Ms. Cohen-Solal asks only: "Why, when during the previous centuries Jews had generally been absent from the visual arts, did the dawn of abstraction coincide with their entrance into the world of art, with Jewish collectors, critics, artists, and dealers detecting, supporting, and following the lessons of the first modernists?" In answer, she quotes the late art historian Leo Steinberg: "like modern painting, Jewish religious practices are remarkably free of representational content," but she does not inquire how this applies to Rothko's art. This is mystifying, considering that Rothko told the critic Selden Rodman in 1956: "The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious

experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!”

As a boy, Rothko would have learned that the ancient Hebrew name for God is never pronounced out loud and that any book containing that name must never be destroyed, erased or effaced. Like other religiously observant Jews, he would have learned to substitute other words and phrases for God’s name outside of prayer. Nor is visual representation of God allowed. Exodus recounts that God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush, visible only as a fire that was not consumed. In a similar manner, Rothko used bright light to suggest the sacred, painting many of his classic canvases in an intense palette of yellows, oranges and reds, evoking for many observers fire and light.

Examples of such attempts to reveal divine light abound from Rembrandt to Blake (both of whom Rothko admired). One such image we know he was familiar with comes from a 1903 book he studied in 1928, when he was working on illustrations for a graphic Bible: Schnorr von Karolsfeld’s “The Ancient of Days” reproduced in “Babel and the Bible” by Friedrich Delitzsch. Rothko commented, in “The Myth,” a chapter in “The Artist’s Reality,” (probably written in 1940-41), “Christianity substitutes the Hebraic abstraction of Jehovah, who cannot be seen, whose name must not even be spoken, and whose representation must never be made, for the tangible ultimates of the Greeks.”

Ms. Cohen-Solal does suggest that three of Rothko’s 1959 “Red on Maroon Murals,” originally intended for the Four Seasons Restaurant and now displayed at the Tate Modern, “may recall letters of the Hebrew alphabet: gimel, samekh, and mem sophit.” But she doesn’t explore the rich mystical symbolism associated with these Hebrew letters. Rothko referred not only to Lilith (in his painting), but also to the Golem, another being in Jewish folklore, this one magically created entirely from inanimate matter. In “The Artist’s Reality,” he wrote: “the laws of mechanics have had hovering about them the picture of the uncontrolled or morally misapplied use of the machine. The specter of the Golem or of self-annihilation from the vast energies which the scientists are unleashing is too compelling a truism for them not to have been aware of it.”

Rothko’s link of self-annihilation to the Golem of his youth is chilling. The painter suffered from depression and would tragically take his own life in 1970 at age 66.

—Ms. Levin, a distinguished professor of art history at the City University of New York, is the author of biographies of Edward Hopper, Judy Chicago and Lee Krasner.