
Mark Rothko's *Untitled* (1969) and the Status of His Works on Paper

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Introduction

Twentieth century American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (1903–1970) established his signature color field style of rectangular planes of color on monochrome backgrounds around 1949–50. His large oil canvas works after that have been regarded as his representative works. This is well illustrated by the Museum of Modern Art, New York retrospective in 1951, Rothko's mature period, where all paintings, except for four from 1945–46, were works on canvas.

Rothko's works on paper began to attract attention after his death. Mark Rothko Foundation curator Bonnie Clearwater's pioneering 1984 study *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper*, states that Rothko's works on paper that received little attention at the time, are essential to a fuller understanding of Rothko's career. She asserts that the prints, together with the canvas works, chart Rothko's search for an elemental language that would communicate basic human emotions and move all mankind.¹ The steady development of the subject, mainly in the United States, is evidenced in the 2023 *Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper* exhibition at The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., the world's largest Rothko collection, based on their catalog raisonné of Rothko works on paper in process since 2018.

The Ishibashi Foundation acquired Mark Rothko's 1969 work on paper *Untitled* (fig. 1) in 2015. This paper aims to explore the position of this work among Rothko's works on paper in light of the above and in the context of Rothko's overall creative output.

The Position of Rothko's Works on Paper —1930s and 1940s.

Both Bonnie Clearwater's research and the catalog raisonné currently being completed divide Rothko's works on paper broadly into drawings, sketches for murals, and acrylic and watercolor paintings. Adam Greenhalgh, curator of the National Gallery of Art's 2023 exhibition pointed out that Rothko's works on paper, unlike his continuously produced canvas works, appeared in "ebbs and flows" during Rothko's nearly 40 year career. Greenhalgh identifies trends and four particularly productive periods for Rothko's works on paper. First, works from the mid-1930s, with their figurative motifs that foreshadowed later Abstract Expressionism. Second, the iconic works of the mid-1940s with their layered compositions and bright translucent watercolors that anticipated the rectangular forms and transparent effects of Rothko's transition to full abstraction. Then, in the late 1950s, small-scale works that provided a break

and new inspiration after strenuous canvas work. Finally, in the late 1960s, vibrant works in Rothko's signature format that complicate the long-standing association between canvases in increasingly dark tones and Rothko's physical and mental decline.²

It was his watercolors, that is, his works on paper, that received particularly favorable reviews in response to Rothko's 1933 solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York. Greenhalgh points out that Rothko was at this time influenced by fellow artist Milton Avery and that his watercolor technique was also informed by his experience of teaching painting to children.³ Throughout the 1940s, Rothko was clear in his preference for oil painting but he continued to produce numerous drawings and many polished watercolor works. The relationship between his watercolor and oil paintings is of interest because there are many instances of Rothko painting a composition first in watercolor and then re-iterating it in oil⁴ This means that rather than being preparatory sketches, the works on paper were a starting point for series developed on a common theme.

Rothko's watercolor technique of combining expressive content with light flowing brushstrokes and pale color became effective in the second period outlined by Greenhalgh. From around 1940, Rothko began painting figurative motifs of fantasy images lacking in substance, almost as if shadows. The images shared commonalities with those of Rothko's contemporaries, such as Joan Miró and André Masson in Europe and Arshile Gorky in the United States, but Rothko's exquisite thinly applied subtle colors were suited more to watercolor and paper than to oil paint and canvas. During his so-called Surrealist period, Rothko continued experimenting in both oil paint and watercolor for the same subject matter but the oil paintings, generally lightly painted with pale tones, could have been mistaken for watercolor works.⁵ Again, some critics gave higher praise to Rothko's watercolor works than to his oil paintings for his 1945 solo exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery, echoing the reviews of his 1933 solo exhibition. Typically, the reviews noted that the restrained yet subtle colors produced a hypnotic effect.⁶ The 1946 solo exhibition *Mark Rothko: Watercolors* at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York, also contributed to the growing trend to focus on the distinctive qualities of Rothko's watercolor work during this period.

The Brooklyn Museum purchased Rothko's watercolor work *Vessels of Magic* (fig. 2) in 1947. In a letter to the museum, Rothko described this work, and five other watercolors, as the culmination of his efforts in the medium of watercolor.⁷ His

comment suggests that he was satisfied with the results of creating paintings with watercolors and paper.

This 'culmination' was at the same time prologue to Rothko's transition to his next goal. What Rothko called his 'classic' style of painting, established around 1949–50, was the beginning of the color field style, basically oil paintings on canvas, that became his signature in the latter half of his career. In the 1950s, his use of paper was limited to studies for the arrangement of rectangles and it was not until 1958, when he began work on the Seagram Murals for the Seagram Building's Four Seasons restaurant in New York, that he finally produced paintings with color. In the 1960s as well, except for a 1961–62 mural study for Harvard University, no independent works on paper appear until 1967. In this sense, the position of Rothko's works on paper differs greatly in his Surrealist period, up to around 1947, from those after 1949–50 when his color field style began, following a short period of Multiform painting.

An exploration of the reasons and circumstances surrounding Rothko's continued production of works on paper even after having obviously shifted to oil painting offers a clearer understanding of Rothko's creative process and the position of *Untitled* (1969) in the Artizon Museum collection.

The Position of Rothko's Works on Paper —1950s and 1960s

In 1958–59, separate from his watercolor or watercolor and oil studies for the Seagram Murals, Rothko produced a series of vertical works on paper, each composed similarly to his oil paintings, with rectangles on a monochrome background. As Greenhalgh noted, there were significantly fewer works on paper during this period than in 1940, with about 15 in 1958 and around 40 in 1959.⁸

Though their basic style of expression is similar, Rothko's oil paintings and works on paper differ markedly in size and color. Working in the late 1950s on large oil paintings, including the commissioned murals measuring over 200cm in length, the works on paper were all relatively small at less than 100cm in length (fig. 3).⁹ Rothko's son, writer and researcher of Rothko's works Christopher Rothko noted the shift in 1959 from the "institutional scale" of Rothko's murals to the "human scale" of his works on paper. He explained that Rothko's intention shifted from immersing the viewer in a painting of overwhelming size to sharing his experience and connecting to the viewer.¹⁰ It is generally believed that this was related to his feelings about the Seagram Murals, the culmination of his oil paintings at that time that were far removed from the human scale.

While dark colors predominated in Rothko's oil paintings after 1957, many of his works on paper during 1958–59 were brightly colored, like his oil paintings prior to 1956. When Rothko was commissioned to paint the Seagram Murals, he turned to dark colors and a heavy tense painting style in an effort to contradict the mid-1950s public misconception of his work as being decorative.¹¹

Rothko once said, "If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again."¹² While trying to develop the style he established,¹³ Rothko constantly had to confront public opinion that surrounded his work in the 1950s. His oil paintings, his murals, were the public face of Rothko's art, while his works

on paper related rather to his internal balance than to his external status. Christopher Rothko suggested that in addition to differences of size and color, the works on paper from this period were attempts to adjust the arrangement and size of the rectangles, and also to reconsider the spatial relations of the picture plane.¹⁴

Greenhalgh pointed out that 16 of at least 55 works on paper produced 1958–60 remained with the artist at the time of his death, others having been sold or donated and only very few acquired by public collections. This suggests that the works on paper from this period have a private character in origin. It is notable though that Rothko did not frame his works on paper from this period, instead making it a rule to mount them on panels,¹⁵ the same presentation format as his canvas works. It also means that his paper works were carried out on the same level as his works on canvas.

Rothko's production of works on paper came to an end in 1959, in tandem with his rejection of the Seagram Murals contract, and resumed only in 1967. According to Greenhalgh, Rothko produced approximately 275 works on paper between 1967 and the time of his death in February 1970. During the same period, the canvas works numbered a total of 30, meaning a reversal of the previous ratio. The year 1969 was very productive for works on paper, with 120 produced in that year alone.¹⁶

Rothko's trend to works on paper had to do with his being diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm in April 1968 and instructed by his doctors to refrain from producing works over 40 inches (101.6 cm) in height. Resuming his art, Rothko mainly worked with paper. However, by 1969, larger works, even over 70 inches (177.8 cm) in height, began to appear. At least three types of paper with different textures were used, cut to size by Rothko's studio assistant, Oliver Steindecker. Photos of the studio show paper secured to at least two large, flat easels.¹⁷ (fig. 4)

Initially, tape or staples, or both, kept the paper in place but in mid-1969 Rothko stopped using staples.¹⁸ A blank white space began to appear around the edges of the picture plane of some of the works from that year, backgrounds having previously been in monochrome, like the canvas works. This is probably the result of Rothko use of tape to secure the paper. Though the white margin is not present in all the works on paper, it is one of the defining characteristics from this period.

Additionally, some of the works have a two-tone color composition in which two rectangles of different color are in direct contact, without space in between. This characteristic, common to the canvas works of 1969 as well, is a feature of Rothko's final period and not seen in earlier works of the previous period.

Achim Borchardt-Hume, citing the series commonly known as *Black on Gray* (fig. 5) as example of this, states:

In his earlier work, Rothko has taken great pains to paint the stretcher edges of his canvases in order to transgress the material boundary of the picture surface and to create a continuum between pictorial space and the space inhabited by the viewer. In sharp contrast, space in the *Black on Gray* paintings does not extend beyond the painted surface. The white border does not frame a view. Rather it acts as a zone of separation between real and pictorial space, exposing the

painterly surface as an impenetrable membrane.

The thin layer of acrylic paint on a hard white ground declares that *Black on Gray* exists in reality as an object without pretense about its true nature. This is particularly clear in the area of the lane that divides the painting in the center horizontally where the expanses of black and gray meet. The *black and gray* colors overlap here and there emphasizing that all is surface.¹⁹

As Robert Goldwater points out, there are reservations concerning the painting edge being viewed as an attitude toward the presence of the viewers who “reject participation and withdraw into themselves.”²⁰ While the white border clearly functions to fix the space of the painting, the painting is seen by the viewer from a distance. In this respect, the *Black on Gray* series represents a change in the nature of Rothko’s paintings. The change indicated in these works, considered by Borchardt-Hume as “works of resignation” and “indicative of Rothko’s continued exploration of the possibilities of painting,”²¹ were technically done through Rothko’s intensive activity on his last works on paper, beginning in 1967.

Untitled (1969): Characteristics and Themes

Characteristics of the late *Black on Gray* series paintings can be seen in the Artizon collection’s *Untitled* that is composed of two continuous rectangular color planes: the upper surface in grayish pink and the rectangle below in salmon pink. As in the *Black on Gray* series and many of Rothko’s works, the lower rectangle in this composition is given a lighter color tone.

The rare 177.2 × 164.1 cm format of *Untitled* is an example of Rothko placing emphasis on the vertical direction. The also rare placement of the boundary between the two color planes almost at the center suggests a clear intention of creating an equilibrium between the two surfaces, with the lighter tone and rather orderly brushstrokes of the bottom color plane conveying a sense of warmth, and the darker top color plane animated with dynamic large brush strokes and a lively touch.

Even more striking is that the edges of the painting, unlike the strictly defined straight borders seen in *Black on Gray*, are jagged, showing brushstrokes spilling out from the edges of the color plane in many places and, in contrast to a neat, straight line between the two color planes, each color plane oscillates, as if variable, while maintaining a confrontational equilibrium.

At the same time, the layering of different tones of paint lends depth to the horizontal orientation. In the upper square, white and orange are applied in rough strokes over pink mixed with gray, while salmon pink is maintained overall in the lower square, with touches of red and orange at the top and near the left edge. Such seemingly unrestrained elements bring out the layered structure of each square.

Conventionally, the structure of squares floating on a monotone background creates a force that draws the viewer naturally into the interior of Rothko’s paintings, but in *Untitled* the brushstrokes and layers stand out. In terms of composition, this painting, with its swift brushwork more characteristic of acrylics that dry quickly, turns away from the heaviness of oil painting.

Although the production date of *Untitled* is unknown, its

treatment of the perimeter of the squares does not create a distance with the viewer, in comparison to the *Black on Gray* series. Rather, Rothko’s enthusiasm for new methods brings vitality to the painting to the extent that one can almost feel the sense of “play” and “hope”²² that Rothko himself cited as essential elements of his work.

From the treatment of the edges, it is surprising to find a straight pencil line just inside the bottom edge of *Untitled*. There is also adhesive remaining on the right side of the bottom edge, suggesting that masking tape had been applied. No pencil lines, however, are to be found on the top edge or on either side. Moreover, the protruding strokes on the left edge make it difficult to imagine masking tape having been applied. It is possible to suppose that the painting was completed without the size determined in advance, but not likely that Rothko would define the spatial volume of his painting after the fact. In view of the broad vertical brushstrokes of the upper left and right sides of the upper color plane, it is clear that Rothko was mindful of the given margins of the range of space. As there are no traces of holes, it is unclear how the paper was fixed to the easel.

According to restorer Mary Bustin, Rothko’s works on paper from this period were done on an easel and then sent to a framer for mounting. Initially, the framer would, according to Rothko’s instructions, paint the border in the same color as the painting but, after much hesitation and discussion, Rothko decided to leave the white border as part of the painting.²³ The sides of *Untitled* are painted white, probably to conceal the border between the paper and canvas mount and to have the effect of a continuous white tone from the edge of the painting. Given Rothko’s usual procedure, it is reasonable to assume that the framer carried this out on Rothko’s intentions. To accurately confirm this, an investigation of the method of mounting is necessary.

The back of the mounted canvas for *Untitled* is inscribed “2029 69,” in the catalog numbering the Rothko Foundation established on September 13, 1968. It was clearly Rothko’s intention to organize his works and from November 29, 1968 until January 17, 1969, Rothko’s assistant, Dan Rice, supervised the cataloging of over 800 works. For works created after January 17, 1969, Rothko himself is thought to have written a four plus two digit number in black crayon on the back of paintings.²⁴ There are, however, many works from 1969 with a signature but no catalog number, making it necessary to investigate how the catalog number came to be written on this work.

Conclusion

Though Mark Rothko’s works on paper appear in several distinct periods in his career, the final period, 1967–69, presents approaches in the treatment of borders and use of acrylic paint that were absent or very rare in his previous periods. This indicates that even in his last years, tormented by illness and pessimistic about his place in a rapidly changing art scene, he maintained his drive for new possibilities. *Untitled* in the collection of the Artizon Museum is done in bright colors, mainly pink, and has dynamic brushwork. Further, the newly adding of a white border around the edges of the painting and the elimination of a strict boundary between rectangles of color exemplifies Rothko’s continued exploration of the nature of the

pictorial space and the relationship between artist and viewer.

While Rothko's works on paper in general reveal his attempts at new possibilities, there is continuity with his works on canvas. The brushstrokes at the upper edges of the top square of *Untitled* that seem bold at first glance were meticulously and consciously controlled. To fully understand this work, it is necessary to specifically investigate it in terms of what rules were applied in its creation. Details related to how Rothko produced works on paper during this period, including how a particular type of paper was selected, how it was fixed to the easel, and then how it was mounted on canvas, need to be clarified. There is also a need for analysis of Rothko's use of acrylic paint, on the layers that make up the color fields. We hope that this paper may serve as a starting point for such future research.

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Notes

1. Bonnie Clearwater, *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper*, 1984, New York: Hudson Hills Press, p. 17.
2. *Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper* (exh. cat.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2023, p.12. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Adam Greenhalgh, associate curator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. for the valuable suggestions he provided me in writing this paper.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. Greenhalgh points out, for example, that there is an earlier watercolor with a human figure in very similar pose and composition to *Untitled (Reclining Nude)*, 1937/38 oil on canvas, 1986.43.50) in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
5. See *The Interpretive link: Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism, Works on Paper 1938–1948*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986, an exhibition focusing on works on paper, including by Rothko, that shed light on the spread of European Surrealism to the United States and the development of Abstract Expressionism.
6. "The Passing Shows," *Art News* 43, no. 19 (January 15–31, 1945), p.27.
7. Angelica Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985, p. 691.
8. *Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper* (exh. cat.), op. cit., p. 29.
9. Examples in public collections include *Lavender and Mulberry* (1959, 95.9 × 62.9 cm, Hirshhorn Museum, 1966, 66.4418).
10. Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 222.
11. See, for example, Bonnie Clearwater, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Christopher Rothko, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
14. *Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper* (exh. cat.), op. cit., p.36.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
19. Achim Borchardt-Hume, "Shadows of Light, Mark Rothko's Late Series," in A. Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Rothko: the Late Series*, exh. cat., Tate Modern, London and Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Henry N. Abrams, 2008; Sakura Japan, 2009.), p. 27.
20. Robert Goldwater, "Rothko's Black Paintings," *Art in America*, No. 59, March–April 1971, p. 62.
21. Borchardt-Hume, *op. cit.*
22. In his October 27, 1958 lecture at the Pratt Institute in New York, Rothko listed the following as the "recipe" and "ingredients" of his work: 1. Preoccupation with death, 2. Sensuality, 3. Tension, 4. Irony, 5. Wit and play, 6. The ephemeral and chance, 7. Hope. See, "Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958," *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko by Miguel López-Remiro* (ed.), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 125-128.
23. Mary Bustin, "Mark Rothko's Painting Technique," *The Rothko Book: The Essential Artist Series* by Bonnie Clearwater, London: Tate Publishing, 2006, p. 179.
24. *Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper* (exh.cat.), op. cit., p.38, p.191 (note 84).

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- fig.2—Mark ROTHKO, *Vessels of Magic*, 1946, Watercolor on paper, 98.4 × 65.4 cm, Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund, 47.106 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / ARS, New York / JASPAR, Tokyo C4800
- fig.3—Mark ROTHKO, *Lavender and Mulberry*, 1959, Oil on paper mounted on fiberboard, 95.9 × 62.8 cm, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966, 66.4418. Photo: Cathy Carver © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / ARS, New York / JASPAR, Tokyo C4800
- fig.4—One of Rothko's easels, National Gallery of Art, Washington Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington
- fig.5—Mark ROTHKO, *Untitled*, 1969, Acrylic on canvas, 229.6 × 175.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. 1986.43.164 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / ARS, New York / JASPAR, Tokyo C4800