

## Article

# The Rothko Chapel: Profane or Sacred Space?

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**Abstract:** Despite the atheism of renowned abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko, the artist was commissioned by Christians to create a sacred space that was originally intended to be used by religious believers: the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. The project started out as a collaboration between Rothko and another atheist: famed architect Phillip Johnson, who designed several prominent religious spaces throughout his distinguished career. While Johnson removed himself from the Chapel project early on, Rothko would have carried his conceptual vision all the way to the end if it were not for his tragic suicide just prior to the Chapel's completion. Using as a guide the criteria for sacred space set forth in the classic work *The Sacred and The Profane* by famed historian Mircea Eliade, I will consider the question of how a religious space designed by non-believers can be rightly considered sacred, as well as ways in which it falls short.

**Keywords:** art; religion; Mircea Eliade; Philip Johnson; architecture; darkness; transcendence; painting; Menil

## 1. Rothko, Johnson and the Menils

The Rothko Chapel<sup>1</sup> is a collaborative effort between Mark Rothko and Philip Johnson commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil (originally) for the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. However, Mark Rothko's son, Christopher, argues that his father was the real architect of the chapel "for all intents and purposes" (Rothko 2015, p. 121). The two artists did not see eye-to-eye on the project, and since Johnson was famously cantankerous and Rothko famously stubborn, Johnson ended up abandoning the project early on.

Markus Rothkowitz was born into a Jewish family in 1903 in Latvia, Russia, where he was raised around various forms of Judaism and the antisemitism that was prevalent throughout the Pale of Settlement. Rothko's three older siblings all attended non-religious schools, but his father, who since became more orthodox, enrolled his youngest son in a strict cheder, which made Rothko feel as though he was being singled out, forced to follow his severe father's faith (Breslin 1998, pp. 18–19). Rothko's family eventually immigrated to the United States when he was only 10 years old. When his father died shortly thereafter, leaving the family without a primary breadwinner, Rothko swore off religion. As he grew up and entered college, he read a great deal of Freud and Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* being one of his biggest philosophical influences. As a result of the impact these guides had on his worldview, a consistent theme in Rothko's art is the spiritual emptiness of modern man that resulted, in part, from the lack of a mythology. It is important to note here at the outset that, although difficult to make sense of, Rothko's atheism was a complex, mystical disbelief—unlike the bare, materialistic irreligion of those who deny all spiritual and immaterial realities.

Phillip Johnson is known for designing many important buildings over the course of his long career but is perhaps most famously responsible for his own residence: The Glass House. Over the course of his long career, Johnson was also commissioned to design several works of religious architecture, including Thanks-Giving Square Chapel in Dallas, Texas and the Chapel of St. Basil on the campus of the University of St. Thomas, which is a mere five-minute walk from Rothko's Chapel. However, perhaps no other example is quite



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so bizarre as being hired by televangelist Robert Schuler to design his most ostentatious structure, The Crystal Cathedral, made almost entirely of glass. Johnson was hired over and over again (for religious, secular, and U.S. government-sponsored projects) despite the fact that he was a vocal atheist and a well-known Nazi sympathizer. In fact, in the late 1930s Johnson traveled from the United States to attend Hitler's Nuremberg rallies<sup>2</sup>—events of dramatic spectacle that were designed by his official architect Albert Speer, ironically dubbed "The Cathedral of Light". However, thanks primarily to his powerful friends, the Rockefellers, Johnson was somehow able to continue working as a successful architect in the aftermath of WWII and the horrors of the Holocaust.

It was not until Johnson was in his late eighties that he would attempt to distance himself from the fascism and antisemitism that was more prominent in his past; but some have been critical of such gestures, noting that it was only when Johnson was questioned about his past (directly and publicly) that he would offer any semblance of regret or apology, and that, furthermore, the architectural discipline as a whole was conspicuously silent on this aspect of Johnson's legacy (Varnelis 1995, p. 92).

John and Dominique de Menil emigrated from Paris following the outbreak of the Nazi occupation of France, settling in Houston. The Menils were wealthy oil magnates and Roman Catholics devoted to the "broadly inclusive principles" of Vatican II, with a special interest in Yves Congar's teachings on ecumenism (Rothko 2015, p. 122). The Menils were also heavily influenced by the Dominican priest Marie-Alain Couturier, who introduced them to the work of several artists working and showing in New York (their second home). Couturier commissioned the famous Brutalist style monastery, Sainte-Marie de La Tourette in Éveux, France, a UNESCO World Heritage Site designed by legendary architect Le Corbusier.<sup>3</sup>

All this led the Menils to become interested in the intersection of modern art and spirituality, which eventually led them to establish the art department at the University of St. Thomas in 1959. The Menils often personally recruited faculty members and brought many renowned artists and art historians to the university, including Marcel Duchamp who gave a talk and met with students in 1967, as well as Andy Warhol in 1968.<sup>4</sup> It was during this time that the Menils started laying plans for a new work of art and architecture that would be "something of deep meaning and religious resonance" (Rothko 2015, p. 122).

Part of these plans required a deviation from the University of St. Thomas' plans. What would become the Rothko Chapel was originally designed to be part of the university's master campus plan laid out by Philip Johnson, who previously designed other prominent buildings on campus, including Jones Hall, Strake Hall, and what would become (much later in 1997) the most iconic building on campus: the Chapel of St. Basil. In 1969 the Menils decided to part ways with the university run by the devout Basilian fathers who were worried about losing St. Thomas' Catholic identity. The split was mostly amicable because it also allowed the Menils to carry out their vision for the chapel without any interference from other entities. From there on, it became solely the Menils' project, and was to be built on property they purchased immediately adjacent to the St. Thomas campus. However, the Menils ended up moving the entire art department, including the library, works of art and the art history faculty, a few miles south to Rice University, where they were more than happy to have all of the above, but especially the Menils.

## 2. The Chapel, the Paintings, the Place

In 1958 Rothko was commissioned to produce paintings for the Four Seasons restaurant, designed by Philip Johnson and housed in the Seagram Building, and built by legendary architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Producing work for the opulent space was a new challenge for the artist in at least two respects. It was the first time he was asked to produce a coordinated series of works and the first time his paintings were intended for a specific space. Over the first few months of the project, Rothko completed dozens of paintings that diverged from the horizontal orientation he became known for, as well as his usual color palette, which was generally brighter. In contrast, the Seagram series featured

dark reds, burgundies, and browns applied to distinctly vertical shapes that complemented the architectural details of the space. However, it was not long before the artist grew weary of the project because it started to become clear that his paintings were really meant to be background decoration for the wealthy diners of the Four Seasons. Rothko would eventually decide to keep the paintings, back out of the high-profile commission, and return the large advance he received.<sup>5</sup>

By 1960, Rothko grew weary of all the commercialism and fame that came attached to his success in the world of modern art. As such, Rothko would soon expand the scope of his creative vision beyond the canvas, as well as his artistic jurisdiction, to include the nature of the architectural space in which his paintings would reside. While the Rothko Chapel pre-dates the earnest beginnings of Conceptual art, it seems as though a connection exists for it in that Rothko clearly sought a more cohesive conceptual unity for the space/place. Along these lines, his chapel was to be a place of pilgrimage far from the artworld's epicenter in New York City and all the accompanying drama of his infamous Four Seasons commission. Of all places, Houston, Texas seemed like the most unlikely location for an art pilgrimage, which made it all the more perfect a venue for thumbing his nose at the art establishment. Rothko dedicated six years of his life to the chapel project, and it is representative of his sustained and steadily growing interest in mystical transcendence.

However, Rothko's fascination with transcendence differed from the bright and positive themes of enlightenment, heaven, or nirvana that typically accompany such aspirations. Rothko once said that he was "interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom" (Baal-Teshuva 2003, p. 50) and that "the exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source of art" (Rothko and Lopez-Remiro 2006, p. 45). The chair of the Rothko Chapel's Board of Directors, Christopher Rothko, says of his father's dark canvases:

These are not paintings in the typical sense of the word. Rothko did not consider them as such, as, to the best of our knowledge, these are the only works not wholly painted by his hand. The fact that he had assistants paint the background colors indicates that he treated these works differently, more as functional pieces than as aesthetic experiences in themselves.<sup>6</sup>

An encounter with the Rothko Chapel is an experience in the subtlety of darkness, emptiness, and contradiction—if you will, the "something-ness" of nothingness—one that forces the viewer to stretch their powers of perception beyond the typical thresholds of awareness. When looking from the outside, there is not much to say about the chapel itself as a work of architecture: bland, unattractive, and even dated. If not for the directional signage on the grounds, one might never know that the austere, windowless brick structure houses a half-billion dollars-worth of paintings in a space featured in *National Geographic's Sacred Places of a Lifetime*. The only clues that there might be more to this nondescript building is that, leading up to the entrance, one is greeted by a Barnett Newman sculpture entitled *Broken Obelisk*, dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps the only other contextual clue is that the chapel is situated in an extremely concentrated area of important modern/contemporary artworks—next door to several Menil Collection buildings, including the Cy Twombly Gallery designed by architect Renzo Piano and others that house works by important artists such as Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, to name a few. Even though the much more humbly designed Rothko Chapel is just as likely to be mistaken as a maintenance building or common storage facility, the National Register of Historic Places added the Chapel to its list in 2001, a mere 30 years after it was built. To do so, the governing committee had to waive the standard requirement that all candidate sites be at least 50 years old to warrant historic status.

The building has an octagonal footprint such as that of a traditional Byzantine floor-plan; however, unlike historic Christian designs, the entrance faces to the south instead of the east. Rothko deviates again from tradition when he chooses the octagon as "a space that does not point us in any particular direction for spiritual enlightenment . . . it does not orient us towards Jerusalem or Mecca or any other seat of learning. Instead, it places *us* in

the center with an unoccluded view of the horizon in all directions. It launches us without tradewinds to push us, currents to pull us, or compass to guide us,<sup>7</sup> leaving us to find our own way in the darkness.

Once inside the structure, the visitor is confronted with a somber, mausoleum-like ambiance. All eight walls are covered with fourteen massive panels, mostly black, made up of five single canvases and three triptychs. Peter Selz points out that, “like Medieval altarpieces, [they] really seem to ask for a special place apart, a kind of sanctuary, where they may perform what is essentially a sacramental function” (Smart 2010, p. 38). All fourteen pieces come in various widths, but are all approximately 15 feet tall. Although there are fourteen different canvases in all, the series is considered to be a single work of art that operates in an architectural mode. Christopher Rothko explains that:

The Rothko Chapel is thus not a building, nor is it a group of murals that are housed there. It is a building whose interior is defined by its contents and whose exterior is largely designed in response to the demands of that interior space. The relationship between building and paintings is reciprocal, interdependent and symbiotic to the point where distinctions between the two have little importance. The chapel is truly a gestalt. It is not a building with murals, or paintings in a chapel. It is a thing. It is a *place* (Rothko 2015, pp. 122–23, emphasis mine).

At the time of my first visit to the chapel in 2019, no artificial lighting was used to illuminate the works or the interior space—instead, only a small amount of natural light was allowed to enter the room through a baffled skylight at the apex of the building, hovering above the center of the cavernous chamber. The light changes quite dramatically as the Texas sun and clouds move across the sky, making any attempt to discern real differences between the paintings very difficult. At times the light is bright, while at other times, when the sun is hidden by clouds, the room becomes so dark that I had to squint, change my position in the room, and adjust my gaze by blinking over and over in order to obtain a better sense of what was really happening on the smooth, dark surface of the canvases.

Rothko’s Chapel is an experience in subtlety. To the casual onlooker, but even to the earnestly attentive observer, these works can appear as merely solid black canvases; and yet, much more can be said of the differences if one invests the time to look closely. It takes a great deal of concentration and intense study to notice many of the details. I mention this to remind the reader that the typical descriptions one finds of these paintings, however colorful they are in their use of language, are usually amplified observations that actually fall within a very narrow gamut of variation as compared to what might be perceived by the passerby. Even the artist’s son, perhaps his most devoted advocate, describes the paintings as “massive, essentially blank panels . . . there [is] almost nothing there”.<sup>8</sup> So when anyone speaks of eggplant, purples, plums, burgundies, and warm browns in reference to Rothko’s chapel series,<sup>9</sup> it is good to keep in mind that the color is really just black in slightly different tints and temperatures. Even when people speak of different kinds of brush strokes, they are really doing their best to describe extremely subtle variations in texture and sheen that are barely perceptible, and which often depend on how the light happens to be striking the painting at the time. In short, while photographic reproductions typically do not do justice to most works of art when compared to seeing the original in-person, in this case, I found there to be much less of a difference because these paintings are essentially black monochromes. However, as is usually the case, the best advice here is to see the work in person to see for oneself and make up one’s own mind about how much variation is actually happening on Rothko’s canvases amidst the blackness.

### 3. Sign of Hope or Omen of Despair?

Rothko is best known for his non-representational color field paintings, of which his chapel series is a later variety. Because these paintings are almost wholly made up of large, abstract swaths of color adjoined with other colors, some people assume that Rothko was trying to say something about color relationships or their interaction. However, the artist denounced all such interpretations when he said if you “are moved only by their color

relationship, then you miss the point" (Baal-Teshuva 2003, p. 50). So, if not color, what then is the point? Rothko explains in the sentence just prior to this corrective: "People break down and cry when confronted with my pictures [which] shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same *religious* experience I had when I painted them".<sup>10</sup> Upon entering the gaping interior space of the Rothko Chapel, one sees positioned around the room what looks like the standard set of museum guards, and while they are just as other guards in that they are quick to rebuke if someone gets too close to a painting or forgot to silence their cell phone, *these* attendants are also there to act as counselors who offer comfort to those overcome with emotion while peering into the foreboding emptiness of Rothko's paintings.

Doom, tragedy, and weeping wrapped in fields of dark, moody color meant to initiate a religious experience; though, a religious experience of *what* is not clear. Regardless, the chapel series would turn out to be a foreboding omen. On February 25, 1970, Mark Rothko died alone in his New York City studio—a casualty of suicide. In addition to having slit his wrists, coroners discovered toxic levels of anti-depressants in his system. He left no note, only his final artistic statement to the world in canvases of black and grey. Almost one year to the day after his tragic death, the Rothko Chapel opened in Houston. At the dedication ceremony, Dominique de Menil addressed the interfaith crowd by saying that Rothko's "colors became darker and darker, as if he were bringing us on the threshold of transcendence; the mystery of the cosmos, the tragic mystery of our perishable condition: the silence of God, the unbearable silence of God" (Smart 2010, p. 45).

It is not entirely clear yet if the Rothko Chapel qualifies as a sacred or profane space because there is conflicting evidence. One thing is clear, though: it is much too easy to dismiss Rothko's Chapel as conclusive proof of the bleak perspective of an atheist who killed himself.<sup>11</sup> There is something more going on here. Could it be that Rothko's chapel is not as much a work of *art* as it is a work of *theology*? There are numerous scriptural references that evoke similar experiences. Consider the words of Christ as he hung on the cross: "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). There is Job's lament: "My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is on my eyelids" (Job 16:16); as well as the numerous psalms intended to be sung as dirges:

Your holy temple they have defiled;  
They have laid Jerusalem in heaps.  
The dead bodies of Your servants  
They have given as food for the birds of the heavens,  
The flesh of Your saints to the beasts of the earth (Psalm 79:1–2).

Even God's own words at times read as if they could be captions under Rothko's paintings: "I clothe the heavens with blackness; And make sackcloth their covering" (Isaiah 50:3). Even beyond scripture, the first question that Pseudo-Dionysius asks in *The Mystical Theology* is "What is the Divine Gloom?" and then prays to the divine Darkness, Truth, and Silence:

For the more that we soar upwards the more our language becomes restricted to the compass of purely intellectual conceptions, even as in the present instance plunging into the Darkness which is above the intellect we shall find ourselves reduced not merely to brevity of speech but even to absolute dumbness both of speech and thought (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 2007, pp. 197–98).

Lastly, consider the haunting echo of Dominique de Menil's statement on God's silence in John Henry Cardinal Newman: "What strikes the mind so forcibly and so painfully is, His absence (if I may so speak) from His own world. It is a silence that speaks" (Newman and Lash 1979, p. 309).



#### 4. Sacred or Profane?

To help us properly sort out this question, I chose to juxtapose the Rothko Chapel with Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and The Profane*, particularly his chapter on sacred space. In so doing I will focus my comments on the following three concepts: (1) Spatial Homogeneity, (2) Heavenward Orientation, and (3) a Threshold to the Divine. It should also be said that Eliade's use of the word "profane" here does not mean obscene, blasphemous, or the like. He simply means earthly or secular, as opposed to religiously sacred or holy.

First, according to Eliade, one of the major aspects of sacred space is that it should interrupt the homogeneity of profane space in a "qualitatively different" way (Eliade 1987, p. 20). However, as I already mentioned, the design of the exterior of the Rothko Chapel does very little to satisfy this criterion. Unlike the gleaming city on a hill from the Sermon on the Mount, Rothko's Chapel blends in not through a neighborly stylistic integration with the surrounding environment, but through a common nondescript-ness. The same is true of the interior space as well. There is a lack of diversity in materials and form; color is completely absent, as are religious symbols (also important in Eliade's formulation of sacred space). The only exception is a small wooden bench in the entryway, on which is laid a half-dozen holy books from various world religions. Of course, the paintings themselves, contra Eliade, leave the seeker with little if any "orientation in the chaos of homogeneity".<sup>12</sup>

Second, in addition to a thoroughgoing homogeneity, one also senses in the Rothko Chapel a distinctly horizontal character, but not in the structure of the building itself, as in Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School style, intended to feel wed to the ground in an integrated, harmonious way that considers natural surroundings. The horizontality in the Rothko Chapel is found in the gaze of its visitors—everyone in the room staring straight ahead, as it were into or *through* the paintings hung on the wall. This is quite different from most sacred spaces in which, upon entering, one expects to see heads bowed in prayerful reverence or eyes lifted toward heaven in worship. Whatever the Rothko Chapel's message is, it does not seem to be "look up" and "communicate with the sky realm".<sup>13</sup> Overall, one does not obtain the sense of being open to the sky, but rather closed off from it—such as a bunker designed to keep everything out.

Thirdly, toward the end of Dominique de Menil's dedicatory address, she repeats a similar refrain about thresholds: "We are cluttered with images and only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine" (Smart 2010, p. 45). Here, we may have the key to understanding Rothko's atheistic spirituality—but also a problem. From the literature it seems clear that Rothko truly longed for transcendence; we all do, it is part of being *homo religious* (Eliade 1987, p. 18). In fact, Rothko's apparent yearning for transcendence is one of the things that makes his death so tragic. His spirituality is a frustrated spirituality—one that takes us all the way up to the threshold of the transcendence he so desperately tried to find, but ultimately, fails to usher us in. Christopher Rothko describes his father's chapel in terms of the cruelest existential tease: "For as powerful as the chapel's voice can be, it ultimately says nothing . . . the silence is deafening. It is the most present of absences" (Rothko 2015, p. 125). The "impenetrability of the panels evokes the infinite. They are like staring into the darkness, which reveals nothing but holds everything".<sup>14</sup> Recounting one of his own experiences in the chapel, the artist's son describes it as a "room full of mirrors—dark, unwavering mirrors—and I was standing at their point of coincidence so that they were all reflecting back on me".<sup>15</sup> "Nothing comes from the paintings. It is all about you".<sup>16</sup> Can there be any wonder why there is weeping at the foot of such ominous works?

Much like the qualified atheism of his father, the nothingness that Christopher Rothko has in mind here is a qualified "nothingness". It is why he also said of his father's work: "It takes a lot of effort to make nothing".<sup>17</sup> The situation is, perhaps, very similar to the notion of evil as a privation found in Augustine and Aquinas—that is, evil as undeniably real, but real in the same sense that a hole in the ground is real. In and of itself a hole is nothing, nothing but emptiness and lack, but no one would try to argue that holes do not exist. In the same way, this is how we reconcile the notion of nothingness/emptiness with

Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb's proclamation that "[t]here is no such thing as good painting about nothing".<sup>18</sup>

Eliade describes the threshold aspect of sacred space much differently: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (Eliade 1987, p. 25). While Rothko's threshold is a dark, impenetrable fortress that only allows the viewer to peer in one direction over the edge into a nothingness that echoes back one's own loneliness, Eliade's threshold allows communication from one side to the other and the hope of actually passing *through* to the other side. Even in Newman's haunting quote, there remains a glimmer of hope, transcendence, and passage from one plane to another: "It is a silence," yes, but nonetheless, a silence "*that speaks*" (Newman and Lash 1979, p. 309). The writer of the Book of James reminds us that there is a time and place for humility, sadness, and mourning, but such times are not ends in themselves because these postures are intended to reorient our gaze upward:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (Jas 4:8–10).

Unable to compromise with Rothko's vision about the kind of light he wanted in his chapel, the infamously ill-tempered Philip Johnson quit the project toward the end of the design phase in 1967. Contra Johnson, Rothko wanted a skylight and eventually got his way with the much more compliant architects who took over. Eliade states that "[l]ife is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent" (Eliade 1987, p. 34) and makes the observation that many ancient sanctuaries were "built with an aperture in the roof . . . symbolizing break-through from plane to plane, communication with the transcendent".<sup>19</sup> He then extends this concept to an ancient Indian custom that involved breaking the top of the skull of loved ones who were in prolonged agony at the time of death to hasten the release of the soul, as well as the removal of boards from the roof so that the soul could more easily escape and find rest.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Rothko's insistence that his chapel should come with a skylight is a sign—a reason to be more optimistic about the intended meaning behind this place and his quest for transcendence.

Eliade explains that even the most intent effort to promote the profane "never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior" and that "even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world".<sup>21</sup> This certainly seems to be the case with Rothko; though, what exactly spirituality, transcendence, and religion can mean for a mystical atheist is hard to say. Perhaps all we *can* say is that, for Rothko, maybe art was his god, and the practice of painting his religion. One final note: as it turned out, the skylight that Rothko insisted upon so strongly let in so much sunlight that it started to discolor the paintings within just a few years of the chapel's opening. Ironically, in 1978, an extensive baffling system was introduced to block out most of the natural light—hanging over the space like an inescapable curse, reminding all who enter that efforts toward transcendence are futile. Only one small aperture was left open to the sky above, allowing one narrow stream of sunlight into the space. For more than forty years, the suffocating baffling system remained in place. However, in anticipation of the chapel's fiftieth anniversary in 2021, the chapel remained closed for more than a year so that a new skylight could be installed as part of a multi-million-dollar restoration and remodeling project. However, this time, the skylight was specially engineered with UV-resistant glass and louvers that allow more light into the space without harming the paintings—perhaps offering a ray of hope for Rothko and his chapel.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For imagery and additional information, readers may refer to the following documentary made in celebration of the Rothko Chapel's 50th anniversary in 2021: <https://vimeo.com/643708304> (accessed on 20 June 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> (Wortman 2016). Adapted for *Vanity Fair*, 4 April 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/04/philip-johnson-nazi-architect-marc-wortman> (accessed on 19 April 2023). Johnson recounts his personal experience at the Nuremberg rallies, "You simply could not fail to be caught up in the excitement of it, by the marching songs, by the crescendo and climax of the whole thing, as Hitler came on at last to harangue the crowd". Wortman writes that Johnson "could not separate the energy of the orchestrated frenzy from the day's sexual charge, either, feeling thrilled at the sight of 'all those blonde boys in black leather' marching past an ebullient führer". Wortman continues, "Johnson found in the Nazi Party rallies much of the spectacle of Wagnerian opera—an artistic performance encompassing all the audience's senses and beyond its power to resist. Here was a vision combining aesthetics, eroticism, and war, forces capable of sweeping away the past and building a new world. It was not lost on him that Hitler was trained in the visual arts and was obsessed with architecture and with constructing monumental works and carrying out gargantuan urban-redevelopment plans for all the great cities of Europe to serve his vision of a Thousand-Year Reich".
- <sup>3</sup> There are many interesting connections and parallels between Corbusier's La Tourette monastery and the Rothko Chapel that are worth exploring.
- <sup>4</sup> (Breslin 1998, p. 462). Eventually, the Menils became such a driving force at the university that the president of the college at the time, Father Patrick Braden remarked that "it became difficult to operate without stepping on one of their toes. It began to look more like de Menil University than St. Thomas".
- <sup>5</sup> And so, the Four Seasons commission would be the first of two failed collaborations between Rothko and Johnson (the Rothko Chapel being the second) due to a similar unwillingness to compromise his singular artistic vision.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 130.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 124.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 126.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. (emphasis mine).
- <sup>11</sup> Many of those who were close to Rothko knew that he had been struggling with depression for some time but were nonetheless shocked at the news of his suicide as it was out of character for him—particularly because he did not leave a note. Fellow abstract expressionist Hedda Sterne asked "Who was this man Rothko who killed my friend?" (Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 521).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 23.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 128.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 39.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 38.
- <sup>17</sup> See note 8 above.
- <sup>18</sup> Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, originally in *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, in (Chipp 1968).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 174 (cf. Mark 2:4).
- <sup>21</sup> See note 12 above.

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