

Lewan

AR 695
Concentration

ROTHKO - MYTH & MAGIC

What is pure art to the modern idea? For Mark Rothko (1903-1970) it was the creation of an evocative magic maintained by or relying on myth. Through this reliance on myth Rothko sought to explain the unexplainable as his emotional attitude toward the universe evolved from magic and animism. Rothko's art reflected his humanism as he sought an agent for controlling those natural phenomena over which his control was limited - birth, life, and death. The form of Rothko's art was designed to express a spiritual meaning and give this meaning a visual presence which could serve as a reminder for the "Eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas." (1)

Rothko's subject matter was in part influenced by Fredrich Nietzsche's book on the nature of artistic creativity, THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF MUSIC. Nietzsche's book was a pioneering work on the psychology of the artist and the Greek psyche. For Nietzsche, and later Rothko, the knowledge of the nature of the world as unknown to man's reason was an inherent characteristic of Greek mythology. In examining the nature of this knowledge, Nietzsche defined ancient tragedy as a fusion of the Dionysian - the spirit of music, with the knowledge of creation's sources - with the Apollonian. This fusion, Nietzsche felt, restored man to nature; he felt there was a primal universe speaking through the artist. He says,

"What spoke here - was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself." (2)

This was the Nietzschean conception of myth that Rothko adapted to his own. Rothko began studying Greco-Roman myths, some of which he later selected as themes. To Rothko, the myths of antiquity possessed the potential for fresh human content and contained timeless symbols inherent in man's psychic makeup which were tragic because they expressed man's "fears and predatory passions" (3) and that these passions were moved by the Aeschylean voice, the voice that Nietzsche said creates the stage that represents and symbolizes man's psychic makeup.

Rothko derived from Nietzsche the idea that the Greeks were not, as men of the Enlightenment had thought, a people of balance and moderation. On the contrary, they were unusually passionate and violent, and that anyone who looked closely at Homeric and pre-Homeric man will see the "Abyss of a terrifying savagery of hatred and the lust to annihilate." (4) The Greek dramatist Aeschylus as well as Sophocles, for instance, were fully aware of the abyss, but were strong enough to look into it and still create works of art. The calm of mind achieved in their dramas should not deceive us as Nietzsche says:

"The luminous images of the Sophoclean heroes - those Apollonian masks - are the necessary productions of a deep look into the horror of nature; luminous spots as it were, designed to cure a eye hurt by the ghastly night. Only in this way can we form an adequate notion of the seriousness of Greek "serenity"; whereas we find that serenity is generally misinterpreted nowadays as a condition of undisturbed complacency." (5)

Rothko realized from the Greeks that a work of art was not static but dynamic; it reflects a continuous tension, an overcoming of opposing forces and that artistic achievement is won. It is the outcome of a struggle against intractable materials and a competition for supremacy against other artists. This competition is why the Agon, or contest, was so important in Greek life. The institution of ostracism, the educational practices of the Sophists, the musical theories of Pindar and Simonides, the dialogue form in which Plato wrote - all of these were expressions of the Greek preference for competition. "The Greek knows the artists only as engaged in a personal fight", (6) and it is the omnipresence of competition in Greek society that brought about the superiority of Greek culture. Nietzsche held that artistic creativity is an expression of power' it is the overcoming of passion. Without passion there would be no creativity. Or, as Nietzsche put it more succinctly, "One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star." (7) Thus frenzy is the precondition of creativity, but only the precondition. There must be achievement of order and pattern. That which is given order and pattern animates, it adopts a spiritual soul - a living presence.

Rothko held that art should express a spiritual meaning and could be invested with a visible presence through animism. The animistic belief that everything in nature has a soul as well as a body relates to C. J. Jung's theory of the expression of the collective unconscious in archetypes and myths. Rothko believed that primitive man, from his experience of dreams and other related phenomena, conceived of the soul as the conscious animating entity within its own body. Rothko also believed that

from this conception of the soul, primitive man concluded that things such as trees, streams, clouds, sun, moon, stars as well as objects derived from the creative process, possessed souls that animated them, giving them life and movement. In this sense a consciousness of personality existed in the earliest stages of culture and the attitude of mind dictated by awe and fear of the mysterious, illustrated the true significance of the myth behind the imagery. Rothko explained that myths "are the external symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Islandic or Egyptian, and our modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life." (8)

But Rothko also held that men can never get back to the original text; they are confined to interpretations that reflect their biases and preconceptions. Rothko didn't copy Greco-Roman art but tried instead to create new forms in relation to the spirit of old. As Rothko said:

"Our presentation of these myths, however, must be on our own terms, which are at once more primitive and more modern than the myths themselves - more primitive because we see the primeval and atavistic roots of the idea rather than other graceful classical versions: more modern than the myths themselves because we must redescribe their implications through our own experience." (9)

Around 1947, Rothko came to believe that any reference to nature and existing art, because they were known, finite and limiting, conflicted with the idea of a universal "Spirit of Myth". (10)

"Art consists in 'fresh illusions' while, truth, which we contrast with it (as we contrast art with nature, fiction, fact) consists in stale illusions." (11)

Rothko believed our primitive mode of contact with the world was essentially as artists - as makers of images and metaphores, transforming fresh illusions rather than reproducing our experiences. These metaphores were the finite references that Rothko felt limiting because - metaphores - through time and use became resolved into concepts, and concepts eventually elaborated into systems. Rothko believed art should not be restricted to the structure of a collective intellect. Where our concepts are residue of metaphors, this residue of metaphors forces us to "dwell in a structure we have built for ourselves, and could not for a moment survive as recognizably ourselves outside the prison walls of these beliefs." (12)

This desire to create a modern mythic art brought about the purging of any ideographic symbols or Surrealist calligraphy from Rothko's art, eventuating in abstraction. Rothko began to paint washes of color that float in the canvas plane becoming deliberately ambiguous. To be misunderstood by many was the risk Rothko ran to be understood by the few. Rothko didn't want to pass along bits of meanings unchanged to his viewers; he wanted, rather, to induce them into being creative by finding new meanings for themselves in his paintings. This is why his paintings

seem to involve an implicit aphorism. Rothko's paintings were designed to shock, to challenge convictions and prejudices. "An aphorism that has honestly been struck cannot be deciphered simply by reading it off; this is only the beginning of the work of interpretation...". (13)

Paradoxically, Rothko desperately wanted to be understood - he wanted to establish a real communion with his viewers. At one and the same time, then, he wanted his paintings to be both a text and also a starting point for other men's interpretations. This paradox reflects the basic division Nietzsche described in "Birth of Tragedy" about Greek personality and his view of man: On the one hand, man is a creature capable of transcending himself and becoming an "overman" (14) *ibid.* On the other hand, he is an evolutionary quirk, an oddity. From this point of view, the whole conception of the overman is a rationalization - a rationalization that we men never quite believe in. Hence, if men cannot learn to laugh at themselves, their only alternative is to weep. This is Nietzsche's central message and one Rothko couldn't apparently regard in a realistic assessment of the human condition.

It has been the role of the expressionist painter to look within himself, to adopt a subjective attitude which through the act of art becomes a perception to be shared by everyone. These perceptions were also the universal symbols of primitive man and existed as a function of worship and ritual. Primitive man appeased the unseen spirits and the fears of things not understood in the external world through his art. Rothko maintained contact with nature, obsessed with the spiritual qualities of light, repeating the procedures of American

Luminism and its evocation of inner contemplation, only by negating the landscape representation could Rothko maintain the process of elevating art to experience but turning inward with increasing concern with self discovery. Rothko, freed of the desire to communicate in traditional terms sought to reveal a highly personal but more universal reflection. Rothko accepted the isolation of the artist in favor of subliminal expression and embraced the psychological manifestation of color and form. Rothko's paintings are equivalents of inner forces rather than pictures. In them are embodied the resolution of symbols that express basic psychological ideas.

Notes

- (1) The Triumph of American Painting, A History of Abstract Expressionism, Irving Sadler, Icon Editions, Harper & Row, 1970, pp 63
- (2) The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, Friedrich Nietzsche, trans Walter Kaufman, New York, 1967.
- (3) I.B.I.D. , pg 63
- (4) The Genealogy of Morals, Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. F Goldfing, Doubleday, New York, 1956, p. 255.
- (5) ibid., pg 209-210.
- (6) On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense, in Portable Nietzsche, edited by Walter Kaufman, Viking Press, New York, 1954, p 44.
- (7) Beyond Good and Evil, Friedrich Nietzsche, trans, Cowan, Doubleday, New York, 1959, pp 18-19.
- (8) Triumph at American Ptg, Pg 65.
- (9) ibid., pg 68.
- (10) Ibid., pg 175.
- (11) Nietzsche as Philosopher, Arthur Danto, Macmillan Press, New York, 1970, pg 38.
- (12) Ibid., pg 39.
- (13) Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Kaufman New York, 1966, Viking Press, pp 24-26.
- (14) Ibid., pg 35.

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