

Encounters with Rothko

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The following are recollections of my first experiences of Rothko's art and of my meetings with Mark Rothko himself. Everything started in early 1959 with the arrival of Arnold Rüdlinger's purchase, which formed part of the donation by the Schweizerische National-Versicherungs-Gesellschaft to the Kunstmuseum Basel. I remember how the overwhelming impact of the colours in *No. 16 (Red, White and Brown)* set completely new standards. The Rothko works included in the exhibition "New American Painting" that had opened at the Kunsthalle in Basel in April 1958 had seemed regal and majestic but nonetheless cooler, partly because the skirting-board in the room had meant that the paintings could not be hung low enough.

The situation was quite different in June 1958 in the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where Rothko's paintings, which were hung close together and reached down almost to the floor, opened themselves up immediately to visitors (fig. 7). Deeply affected by what I had seen, I took a few friends along to look at the paintings and a few hours later I also had a conversation with Serge Poliakoff while standing in front of them. He was indignant about so much "immateriality." According to him, paintings needed to be at least as material as the wall beside them, just infinitely superior. Yet I considered what I had seen to be first-class art. "Rothko's the best," I told a collector (my own father) over the phone that evening and he promptly asked Sidney Janis to send him a painting, one of the dark ones from the gallery show held shortly before in January/February 1958.

I often visited New York in the 1960s and each time I went to see Rothko in his studio, having by then met him through his friend and business adviser Bernard Reis. Rothko always used to show me a few paintings and afterwards he would remember exactly whether or not I had been impressed by them. Once I reacted negatively to a painting done in 1961, which he liked. Some time later, he told me triumphantly that Werner Schmalenbach had bought the work for Düsseldorf.

Yet there was self-criticism too. Rothko was negative about his "over-colourful" works of the 1950s, including the painting purchased for Basel. Most of the canvases he showed me were in dark tones and had a meditational quality. I did not, however, see the *Seagram Murals* for the Four Seasons restaurant, which were stored elsewhere at the time. There were two occasions on which the works I saw made a particularly lasting impression on me. The first was in 1964, when Rothko showed me new, medium-sized works with a