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GOTTLIEB/ROTHKO: THE SURREALIST YEARS





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INTRODUCTION

ARNE GLIMCHER

Following *Gottlieb/Rothko: The Realist Years* in 2025, 125 Newbury and Pace are honored to present *Gottlieb/Rothko: The Surrealist Years*, our 17th exhibition of Mark Rothko's work including one-person and duet shows. Those duet shows have included *Miró and Rothko: Magnetic Fields and Murals*, *Bonnard/Rothko: Color and Light*, *Rothko/Sugimoto: Dark Paintings and Seascapes*, *Correspondence: Lee Ufan and Mark Rothko*, and *Gottlieb/Rothko: The Realist Years*. It also marks 45 years since our presentation of *Mark Rothko: The Surrealist Years* at Pace 57th Street in 1981.

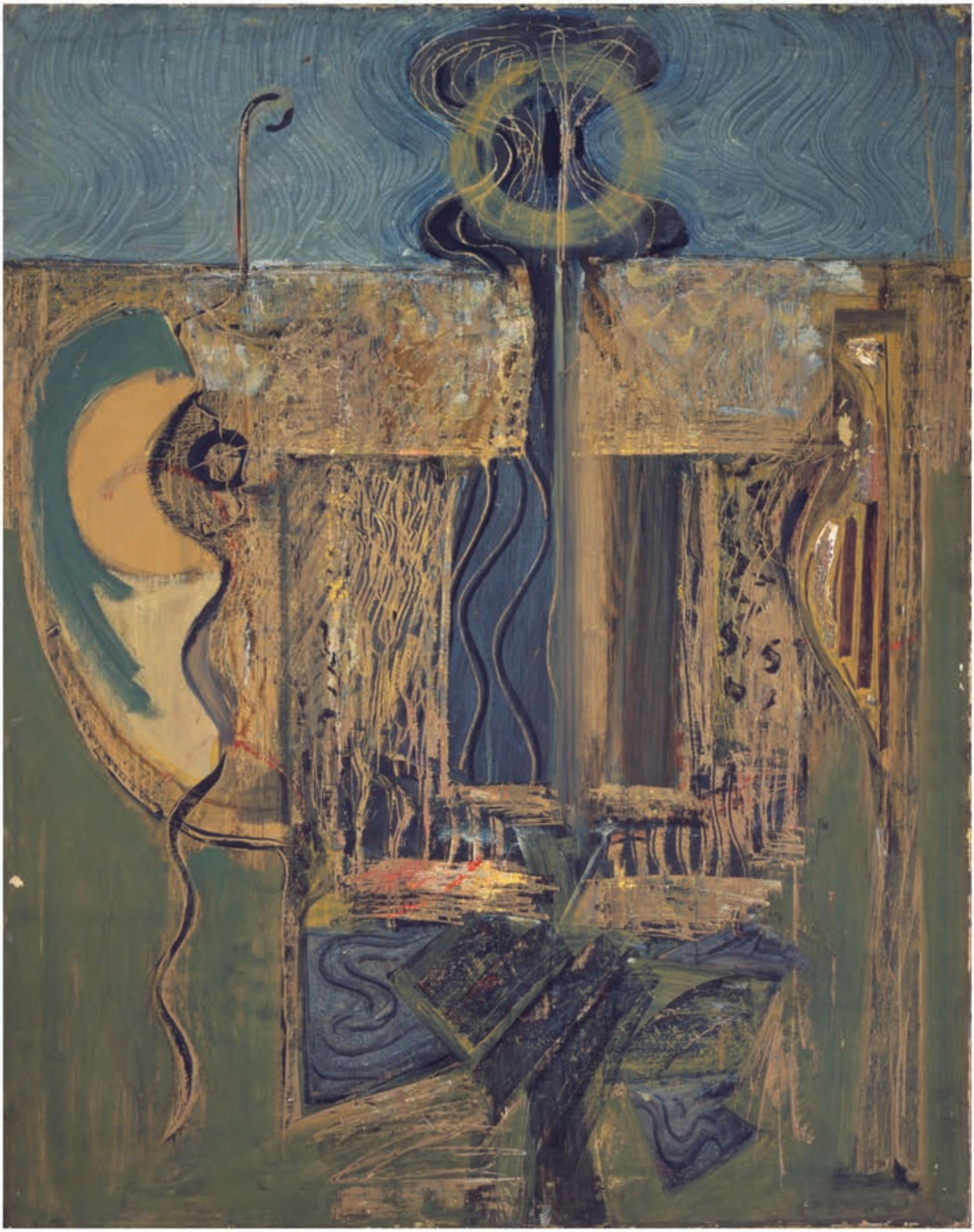
It has been our objective and our pleasure to slowly reveal the layers of beauty in Rothko's oeuvre. More recently, we have done the same in presenting 11 exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb's work since the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation joined the gallery in 2001.

We are indebted to Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko for their confidence, enthusiasm, and intellectual contributions to this series of exhibitions of which we are so proud to have been able to present. I would also like to acknowledge the unwavering support of Kate's husband Ilya Prizel, and of Christopher's wife Lori Cohen.

Since 2001, Sandy Hirsch, who has encyclopedic knowledge of Gottlieb's oeuvre, has guided us through the presentation of our series of exhibitions revealing Gottlieb's achievements. He knows the whereabouts of nearly every work, and his incomparable advice has made the exhibitions grand. This exhibition could not have been presented without him. Of the many exhibitions that Sandy has overseen and curated, this will be his last after 50 years, as he is retiring from his stewardship of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation. We know that he will be available with his keen mind for future scholarship, and Marc and I wish him well.



Adolph Gottlieb, *Pictograph—Tablet Form*, 1941. Oil on canvas. 48" × 36" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 39¼" × 31½" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled*, 1942. Pastel and charcoal on paper. 24½" × 18½" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation





Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1946. Watercolor, scrubbing on Watercolor paper. 22" × 15¼"; Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1946. Watercolor, ink, graphite on Watercolor paper. 40¾" × 27¼" © 2026 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

NOTES ON ROTHKO'S SURREALIST YEARS

BY ROBERT ROSENBLUM
Originally published in *Mark Rothko: The Surrealist Years*, Pace Gallery, 1981

In the beginning was the Big Bang theory of Abstract Expressionism. By the 1950's, everyone on both sides of the Atlantic knew that something so drastic and overwhelming had happened in New York in the late 1940's that "The New American Painting"—to use the Museum of Modern Art's title for its international traveling exhibition of 1958–59—seemed to have mythical origins, forged of thunder and lightning. The signature styles of the masters of this new art appeared so extreme in their distillations of primordial elements-energy, color, atmosphere, even the brink of nothingness—that they made one gasp in their willingness to jettison, so it seemed, the entire baggage of Western painting. But after absorbing the impact of what first looked like totally unfamiliar art, spectators and historians became more curious about how these heroic images of rockbottom purity came into being. For those who wished to support the stunning visual evidence that the grand tradition of European modernism had suddenly crossed the Atlantic, like an American Athena sprung full-grown from the head of a European Zeus, sweeping new genealogies could be constructed. For instance, the floating, expansive colors of Rothko, Newman, and Still might be seen as belonging to a dynasty founded by such ancestors as Matisse and the later Monet; and the crackling, dark-light structure of deKooning, Kline, and Pollock might be read as an electrifying transmutation of the scaffoldings that underlay Analytic Cubism. Similarly, in broader cultural terms, the transcendental vistas and breast-beating individuality of many of the Abstract Expressionists could be located as the most recent manifestations of the legacy of Romanticism.

But what was amazingly slow in permeating our view of this new art was the fact that its origins were not the equivalent of a cosmic explosion, but the product rather of a long, slow generative process. So exciting was what looked like the swift emergence of a grand, mature American style that we ignored and were even embarrassed by what was thought of as an awkward incubation period. Checking birthdates alone, it was obvious that most of the major Abstract Expressionists were only a little younger than the century itself, and that in the late 1940's, when their art seemed to be born, they already were in their forties. But what on earth had they been doing before that? Occasionally, historical surveys would include illustrations of a few "premature" works, in order to fill quickly the gap of decades—the 1930's and the early 1940's—in our knowledge of these masters, but usually they raced ahead to 1947–50, when the action really began. The situation was comparable to the mid-20th-century view of Mondrian, whose pre-abstract work (which covered, in fact, a good two decades of his painting career) was usually swept under the carpet, only to be uncovered later as not only an indispensable means of understanding what his abstract art was about but as offering in itself a body of painting and drawing that is every bit as compelling as Mondrian's signature style work of the 1920's and 1930's.

Nowadays, our view of Abstract Expressionism is also shifting focus. A younger generation of inquisitive art historians and spectators has registered dissatisfaction with the traditional and patently censored legend that would consign to the scrapheap what used to be considered tentative first steps that had better be left unseen. But was it really possible to understand the art of Rothko and his colleagues, if one entered the unfolding drama of their art only at the beginning of the great last act? So now, the lion's share of youthful energy, basic research, and fresh ideas is going into the *terra incognita* of the 1930's and 1940's, in an effort to discern what passionate ambitions, what modern and ancient, Western and non-Western sources could produce eventually a pictorial art of such magisterial purity and grandeur that it seemed, indeed, to come from nowhere, to be the very first light cast upon a new era.

In thinking about such matters, one of the key words is regression; and in the case of Rothko's art, the leap from the present to the past, from a contemporary urban environment to a remote mythic world, from 20th century man to squiggling protoplasm was made with jarring abruptness. In 1938, Rothko could still paint the prosaic facts of a Brooklyn subway station, complete with turnstiles, the identifying monogram N (Newkirk Avenue? Nevins Street?), and passengers in contemporary clothing who descend to the tracks below. We know we are in New York in the 1930's every bit as clearly as we do before a Depression painting by Reginald Marsh or Raphael Soyer. But in the same year, 1938, Rothko decided to close his eyes to these facts of modern urban life, and plunged back into time, back into the unconscious, back into biological origins to an art from which it is impossible to deduce explicitly that he lived in any historic time and place, least of all New York City in the mid-20th century. Between 1938 and 1946, Rothko invented a strange Babel of primitive tongues. We find rude fragments of birds, heads, hands, eyes that, like the pictographs of Gottlieb, might have been uncovered during archeological expeditions anywhere from Mesopotamia and Greece to Mexico and the Northwest Pacific. We find, with the help of the titles, allusions to archetypal legends that equate Greek and Christian tragedy, whether it be the SACRIFICE OF IPHIGENIA or the ENTOMBMENT OF CHRIST. And on quite another level of the primitive, we find wriggling, microscopic creatures that evoke a biology student's composite fantasy of the pulsating origins of life. Indeed, in one of these works, an untitled watercolor of 1944, these regressions reach an astonishing point of near-zero. In the lower right-hand corner, Rothko has actually signed his name inside the rounded, throbbing contour of a primitive cell that seems to be dividing before our eyes, as if the artist had projected himself back to the beginning of not only his own biological life, but of all of life in this cosmos. To be sure, many Surrealists had already tried to recreate the mythic and biological origins of the universe—one thinks of Miró's BIRTH OF THE WORLD of 1925—but Rothko's empathy into this science-fiction journey reaches a uniquely personal extreme.

Younger scholars like Robert Carleton Hobbs, Stephen Pólcari, and Ann Gibson have recently published many important revelations about the specific cultural and artistic milieu that nurtured Rothko and his colleagues.[1] They have told us, for instance, of the importance of Rothko's undergraduate studies in the natural sciences at Yale (1921–23)[2], of the way in which textbook diagrams of geological stratification or cell development might have planted images that could be transformed, two decades later, as an artist's poetic excursions into natural history (a transformation also achieved in the 1940's by Baziotes, who we now know haunted the American Museum of Natural History,[3] and one which goes back not only to Ernst, but to that 19th-century world where museums of art and of natural history were often housed harmoniously under the same roof in their common

display of truth and beauty). They have also emphasized the importance of thinkers like Nietzsche, Jung, and Frazer in establishing the mythmaking components and tragic goals of Rothko's art, not to mention the personal, inward search for archetypes. Moreover, they have indicated the inspiration of primitive art, especially that indigenous to America as displayed in many exhibitions held in the 1930's and 1940's at the Museum of Modern Art.

But focusing anew on Rothko's Surrealist work of the 1940's, there are still many questions to be asked and sometimes answered. For one, there is the big issue of the timing of these works, which, it turns out, coincide grimly—1938–46—with the immediate eve and apocalyptic aftermath of the Second World War. To live in New York at that time was a strange amalgam of the mythical and the contemporary. The daily chronicle of evil reported in newspapers and on the radio, the living presence in the United States of growing numbers of refugees from hell were ample testimony to the actuality of the Nazis, of the war, of the atom bomb; yet the remoteness and monstrosity of these events in Europe and the Pacific could also give them an unreal, almost symbolic character that only an eye-witness observer could force into contemporary fact. For artists like Rothko, the impulse during those years of dread must have been a familiar one in times of unthinkable terror: an eyes-shut flight to primitive beginnings, to the vital sources of life, art, myth. It was a path already taken by Marc and Kandinsky on the eve of the First World War in their blanket rejection of the unbearable present of modern history in favor of a prehistoric world where all might begin again. In Rothko's case, these impulses would continue still further. If ever there was an image of the world after Hiroshima, when all of matter, all of man, all of history might be annihilated, it was to be found in the pictorial format of a numbing, atmospheric void that he began to define fully in 1947.

Rothko's weighty variations upon the cosmic themes of regression existed, to be sure, on an exalted level of 20th-century cultural history; yet it should not be forgotten that there was at least one immensely popular adventure in this primitivist realm which had vast audiences in the 1940's. I'm referring to Walt Disney's *Fantasia* of 1940, which, seen again in a post-Abstract Expressionist world, seems to herald almost every primeval image attained so arduously by Rothko, Still, Newman, or Pollock. Most particularly, the Stravinsky Rite of Spring episode provided a spectacular anthology of biological and geological ultimates, in which primeval landscapes, where water, sky, and earth seem interchangeable, were gradually animated by a quivering, microscopic life that unforgettably metamorphosed the biology textbook illustrations of our distant school memories to the territory of myth and art. There, within the huge dimensions of a movie screen, the role of modern men and women in a manmade environment was usurped by oozing, unicellular creatures that throbbed, fed, and reproduced in a life-giving aqueous element, a Darwinian fantasy that, in 1940, coincided precisely with Rothko's first efforts, as in a watercolor of that year, to visualize a primitive universe of protozoic beings that, milleniums later, would take on human configurations.

Disney aside, there are, of course, legions of high-art sources for Rothko's explorations of the 1940's, and many have been pinpointed in general and specific ways. But I should like to add a few which strike me as having been unusually fertile. Miró, naturally, has been often enough singled out as a major inspiration for Rothko's Surrealist period,[4] but one work in particular, THE FAMILY of 1924—a work included in the Museum of Modern Art's Miró retrospective of 1941—cast an especially long shadow. Not only does its lucid format—a wide field clearly divided by a horizon line—recur throughout many of Rothko's works, but so, too, does the perpendicular trio of spindly, near translucent creatures who shuttle back and forth in biological and historical time from modern pipe-smoking or bejeweled hominids to ciliated protozoans in urgent need of the life supports of food and sex. And Miró's central figure of Mother Nature, with her huge, treetrunk genitals and her paramecium head, provided Rothko with a prehistoric deity who often presided over the mythic lands he conjured up for a swarm of images which usually went untitled but which, when named, might turn out to be the Jewish female demon, Lilith. Rothko's own penchant for a hazy, Northern ambiance, where blurred, frail shapes at once coalesce and evaporate, was at opposite poles from Miró's Mediterranean clarity of light, shadow, and contour; but this one drawing, at least, could meet Rothko halfway, if only by accident. The incomplete product of many changing ideas at a critical moment in Miró›s evolution, THE FAMILY is atypically clouded by visible ghosts of earlier, partly erased drawings that hover like X-rays in the background. For Rothko, this shadowy compatible with his own evocations of a filmy, submarine environment whose dimly discernible inhabitants might vanish in the strong sunlight which customarily floods Miró's art.

I should also like to point out another particular Surrealist source, a book which, published in New York in 1943 by Curt Valentin (whose gallery was central to the New York art world's beaten path), must have generated many of the humanoid fantasies of Rothko and his colleagues. This was Andre Masson's Anatomy of My Universe, an illustrated encyclopedia of mythic beings who race across history and prehistory to create hybrid, imaginary species, within human molds, of everything from plants, trees, insects, and reptiles to demons, astrolabes, and architecture. These metamorphic images, teemingly abundant in their variations, seem to reverberate in many of Rothko's totemic figures of 1944–46, and most fruitfully in one of the most ambitious and successful of these works, SLOW SWIRL AT THE EDGE OF THE SEA of 1944. As Diane Waldman suggested in her Rothko catalogue,[5] this large oil painting may be a symbolic portrait of the artist and his wife-to-be, but the male-female couple on the water's edge is so potently mythologized that it can evoke, like Masson's inventions, endless duos of universal Adams and Eves, or biological diagrams describing sexual differentiation, or even awesome nature deities from some primitive culture, like the large Navaho sand painting of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother recreated in 1941 for the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "Indian Art of the United States". But for all its suggestions of Masson and Miró, of tribal totems, and even of American colleagues like Gorky, Gottlieb and Pollock (whose MALE AND FEMALE of 1942 precedes and parallels Rothko's image), SLOW SWIRL AT THE EDGE OF THE SEA seems now fully to repay its debts, creating a personal world of mysterious fixity and solemnity in which we feel the subliminal ripples of timeless nature—the trinity of sand, sea, sky—as a setting for the magnetic forces of coupling and sexuality that echo light-years backward from a pair of modern human beings to deep and terrifying roots in biology, myth, magic. Figure and landscape, anatomy and pictograph, substance and atmosphere fuse and plummet, with science-fiction speed, towards a veiled, primordial world. Everything, from the muted, evasive colors to the shimmering spiderweb of gossamer angled and rounded lines, conjures up a Book of Genesis universe of as yet unformed images. In its stark confrontation, its ritualistic symmetry, and its exquisitely changing nuances of vibrant shape, tone, and feeling, SLOW SWIRL offers the fullest synthesis of Rothko's ambitions up to 1944, as well as the richest prophecy of the abstract work to come.

For it is inevitable that many of these works will intrigue us as prefigurations of the later Rothko. For instance, one may trace here, via the motif of a "primeval landscape"—to use Rothko's own title for a painting of 1945—the evolution toward that elemental format of floating horizontal strata that make us feel we are facing something akin to this planet on the day of its creation or perhaps on the day after its apocalyptic obliteration. Or one may follow the gradual mastery of fluid and translucent pictorial techniques, whether in oil or watercolor, that make us sense that the very nature of organic process has been seized, as if the image were somehow changing quietly before our eyes, reforming

its shapes and altering its colors against a deeper, concealed structure that conveys a total, ultimate stillness. And if one is concerned with the covert religious drama of the late works, especially in the Houston Chapel, there are many overt glimpses here of these preoccupations with Christian tragedy, as in GETHSEMANE of 1945 or a version of THE ENTOMBMENT, a theme essayed with several variations in 1946. And in the same solemn domain, there are surprising adumbrations of the monastic, grisaille tonalities we tend to attribute too exclusively to the penultimate works. For instance, an untitled oil of 1945, already establishes the funereal tiers of black and grey that will recur with an even greater sense of renunciation in many works of 1969–70. And if there are hints here of the total darkness and asceticism to come, there are equal celebrations of Rothko's opposing impulse toward an almost Epicurean sensibility of color, in which unnamable, fragile hues blossom and waft away within a steamy, hothouse atmosphere. Rothko, the monk, versus Rothko, the voluptuary, are already at odds here, as they will continue to be throughout the 1950's and 1960's.

But if we are tempted mainly to read these works as evolutionary, embryonic previews of the great Rothkos we know so much better, they are also beginning to look backwards to traditions of modern art much older than the Surrealist movement, which may be claimed as their most immediate source. I am thinking particularly of their many affinities with the Symbolist aesthetic and goals of the late 19th century, which so often attempted to conjure up, as in a seance, the most elusive, mysterious states of feeling through a vocabulary of evanescent shapes, colors, and tones, and which equally eschewed any contact with the vulgar realities of the contemporary world and its material contents. Even the iconography of many major and minor artists of the Symbolist school foreshadows Rothko's own concerns, whether we consider Redon's Darwinian dreams of submarine or botanical mutations from which human heads may blossom; Gauguin's anthropological speculations about the common universe of myth and mysticism shared by all distant faiths, whether Christian, Maori, or Buddhist; or Munch's terrifying sense of conflict between the human race in the modern world and the overpowering forces of eternal nature, often symbolized as a sperm cell, an image that Rothko himself, a half-century later, would amplify in his own meditations upon the unicellular origins of life. But doubtless Rothko's Surrealist period will go on disclosing a complex network of connections with its past and its future. Its high seriousness, its search for forms and symbols that could awaken a sense of awe and tragedy not only assured the emotional gravity of the abstract art that, after 1947, absorbed these mysterious hieroglyphs, but also revealed Rothko's place in a long tradition of modern artists who grappled with an encyclopedic repertory of symbols culled from biology and anthropology in a heroic effort to convey the ultimates of life, death, and faith.

NOTES

1 See especially Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism; The Formative Years*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978, pp. 8–26, II6–21; Stephen Polcari, "The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism: Mark Rothko", *Arts*, v. 54, September 1979, ·pp. 124–34; and Ann Gibson, "Regression and Color in Abstract Expressionism: Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still", *Arts*, v. 55, March 1981, pp. 144–53. For an excellent early account of some· of these issues, see Lawrence Alloway, "The Biomorphic 40's", *Artforum*, IV, September 1965, pp. 18–22, reprinted in *Topics in American Art since 1945*, New York, 1975, pp. 17–25.

2 For further remarks on these connections, see the unpublished qualifying paper: James Ward, "The Function of Science as Myth in the Evolution of Mark Rothko's Abstract Style", New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 1979.

3 As discussed in Barbara Cavaliere, "An Introduction to the Method of William Baziotes", *Arts*, v. 51, April 1977, I) p. 28–29.

4 See especially Gail Levin, "Miró, Kandinsky, and the Genesis of Abstract Expressionism", in Hobbs and Levin, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–40.

5 Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903–1970; A Retrospective*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1978, p. 45.



Mark Rothko, [Untitled], c. 1946. Watercolor, ink, scrubbing, scraping on Watercolor paper. 40½" × 27⅜" © 2026 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

PORTRAITS OF IDEAS: GOTTLIEB, ROTHKO, AND THE 1940S

OLIVER SHULTZ

It was somewhere around 1928 or 1929 when the young artists Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, who had both begun exhibiting at the Opportunity Gallery on New York's 56th Street, met and became friends. For the next four decades, they would maintain a close dialogue and a vital artistic exchange. Their relationship would influence both the artists' individual trajectories and the broader story of American postwar art. In the 1940s, as a second World War unfolded, both Gottlieb and Rothko encountered and grappled with Surrealism and its possibilities. The resulting developments in their work, which unfolded in parallel over the course of the decade, would prove deeply significant, forming the core of an exciting new movement in American painting that the critic Robert Coates would, in a 1946 article for *The New Yorker*, influentially refer to as "Abstract Expressionism."

During the 1930s, the bond between Gottlieb and Rothko was evident in their kindred approach to realism. As the decade progressed, however, each found they shared a deeper conviction: the belief that painting might possess more than merely a mimetic power—that it could go beyond the magic of representation. Painting also had an older kind of magic, a more primal way of summoning a world—through the immediacy of form and material in itself. Both Gottlieb and Rothko wanted this new painting to make visible the truth *beneath* the surfaces of things, to make palpable what the eye alone could never reveal. Not just to picture the world, then, but to express the essence of what it was to be alive in it.

As the gears of history turned and the 1930s drew to a close, Rothko and Gottlieb both grew increasingly dissatisfied with the conventions that dominated American painting. In their pictures of the decade—urban scenes, interiors, portraiture, and still life—neither had been committed to the kind of naturalistic description that defined academic painting. They came together as kindred spirits in the circle of Milton Avery, whose aesthetic radicality and spiritualist ethos resonated with both their sensibilities. In Rothko's images of city life, there is a stark, painterly immediacy marked by isolated and stylized figures, compressed spaces, and an atmosphere of psychological unease. Already in the paintings of the later 1930s, the scraped and scumbled, luminous and diaphanous treatments of surface are infused and pulsing with psychic charge. Gottlieb's domestic scenes, his urban tableaux, and his landscapes of the decade employ increasingly simplified and abstracted forms, spaces and surfaces flattened into arrangements of planar elements, stacked or layered zones of transparent color. In different ways, both artists were already questioning the notion of painting as image and beginning to explore the possibilities of the autonomous painterly mark.

For Gottlieb, the beginning of this movement away from realism came as an acute crisis. In 1939, disturbed by the growing war in Europe and uncertain about the direction of his work, he turned inward. He later recalled that he felt compelled to "dig into myself" to discover what he wanted to express.[1] He had long felt himself in opposition to the movement known as American Scene Painting and to the 1930s stylistic powerhouse of Social Realism, both of which he regarded as inadequate to the vicissitudes not only of a rapidly shifting society, but to understanding the inner life of human beings. In its embrace of irrationality, dreams, and the unconscious, Surrealism offered a powerful alternative, though Gottlieb remained suspicious of its illusionistic tendencies, and critical of the Cubists and their notion of nonobjective art. As he would later explain, he felt the problem was how to get beyond the "traps" of Picasso and Surrealism while transcending the limitations of American provincialism and Social Realism.

Gottlieb's answer was to bring together elements of these seemingly opposed traditions in the Pictographs, a series which he began in 1941. Marrying the flattened space of abstraction with the subjective imagery of Surrealism, the Pictographs incorporate biomorphic forms, fragments of the figure, and suggestive symbols that evoke the mystery of archaic pictorial languages. Surrealism was in the air in New York. The late 1930s had seen important Surrealist exhibitions in New York, such as *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* at MoMA in 1936. By the war years, émigrés from Europe began pouring in, and with them came artists such as Max Ernst, André Masson, Miró and Dalí. Their presence in New York, as well as exhibitions at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, had a major influence on both Gottlieb and Rothko. The latter's paintings of the late 1930s had already departed more dramatically from naturalistic representation than those of Gottlieb, but for a time the human figure remained Rothko's principal subject. Around 1940–41, Rothko began to break apart and recombine the figure in new ways. Drawing on classical mythology, archaic art, and the Surrealists' interest in the unconscious, increasing degrees of abstraction began to take hold. Rather than simply adopting a surrealist style, Rothko adapted the strategies of surrealism toward his own interest in myth, tragedy, and the origins of meaningful life.

The historical circumstances of these changes are difficult to separate from the artists' search for new forms. The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki exposed the terrible contradictions within a civilization that had placed its faith in reason, scientific progress, and cultural achievement. Bertrand Russell's reflections on the nuclear age and the atomic bomb as a "universal death" sentence for humankind, or Theodor W. Adorno's postwar questioning of the possibilities of art after Auschwitz, suggest the degree to which the rupture of the atomic age shaped the broader intellectual and artistic life of the period. For both Rothko and Gottlieb, the turn toward myth and abstraction was not an escape from the modern world, but the search for a language fitting for the scale of its tragedy.

How to make painting meaningful when received modes of representation felt insufficient? At such an impasse, surrealism seemed to offer a powerful new set of tools. Myth provided a means of addressing subjects that were at once ancient and contemporary—violence, sacrifice, mortality, the precariousness of human existence—while the unconscious served as a wellspring for imaginings beyond the limits of Enlightenment reason (the telos of which, Adorno argued, had been the Holocaust itself).[2] Surrealism—and the abstract impulse at its core—becomes a strategy for recuperating art after the barbarism of war.

Initially, both artists made reference directly to Greek and Christian stories. In Gottlieb's *Eyes of Oedipus* (1941), the painting suggests a direct relationship to narrative, but its imagery resists illustration. The face is fragmented into a series of eyes, distributed across a structured pictorial field—a grid—becoming signs rather than images, whose meanings remain suggestive rather than fixed. The myth supplies a framework, but the painting does not depend on the recounting of a story. Instead, it translates the psychological and tragic dimensions of the subject into a visual form, which is itself an abstraction. The grid, which

would become central to Gottlieb's Pictographs, is already present as an organizing structure: it divides the picture plane while allowing disparate forms to coexist within it, or "hang" from it.

Gottlieb's turn toward this pictographic language was also rooted in his longstanding interest in art outside the Western tradition. He had collected so-called "primitive art" since the mid-1930s, and had encountered examples of prehistoric and Indigenous pictographs through exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere. But it was around 1941 that these interests entered his painting in a sustained way. The term Pictograph itself evokes an archaic form of inscription whose original meaning may have been lost. Gottlieb was not attempting to reproduce the style of any particular culture; rather, he sought to evoke a generalized sense of mystery as a vehicle for expressive necessity. Ideas about primitive art, Picasso, and the unconscious in the writings of John Graham helped articulate a connection between archaic imagery and the release of psychic content.[3]

In *Pictograph – Tablet Form* (1941), an organic, biomorphic vocabulary is organized within a flattened pictorial space. The image suggests an archaic inscription or a fragment of an unknown symbolic system, but its signs do not resolve into a readable language. Their ambiguity is essential. Rather than illustrating a recognizable world, Gottlieb creates one through a language of abstraction. The painting, held together in a lozenge-shaped structure, brings together a synthesis Gottlieb would later describe as a "wedding of abstraction and surrealism."[4]

The grid is crucial to this development. In the 1970s, Rosalind Krauss described the grid as the defining structure of modernist art, severing image from nature, narrative, and historical precedent. By mapping nothing but its own flat surface, it declares the visual arts entirely autonomous and self-contained. "The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic," wrote Krauss in her famous essay in the catalogue for the 1978 Pace Gallery exhibition, *Grids*.[5] The grid, for Gottlieb, is therefore more than a compositional device or a container for images: it provides an epistemological framework within which signs accumulate, interact, and acquire meaning. Gottlieb's pictographs combine the spontaneity of surrealist automatism with the discipline of modernist autonomy. Working directly on the canvas, without preparatory drawings, Gottlieb sought a "direct, improvised, fresh" feeling. The resulting marks are not simply uncontrolled gestures. They are adjusted and tuned to the compartments of the grid, which organizes without imposing a fixed sequence or a single interpretation. Gottlieb's signs do not describe a preexisting world; they produce one.

Rothko approached related concerns through a different set of pictorial means. Like Gottlieb, he turned to classical mythology and ancient sources, seeking subjects that could carry meanings beyond the particularities of contemporary life. But his images tended to be less graphic, more fluid, with figures and forms emerging from—or dissolving back into—the surrounding atmosphere. In his watercolors of the early and middle 1940s, the boundaries between figure and ground become increasingly unstable. Fragments or echoes of human or animal bodies, bits of organic life, are just barely suggested and never fully described, as if an image were struggling to be recalled from memory.

Robert Rosenblum described the strange range of archaic and biological forms that populate Rothko's work during these years: fragments of birds, heads, hands, and eyes, alongside microscopic organisms that evoke the origins of life. These images move between the mythic and the organic, the human and the primordial.[6] The two artists' shared interest in myth was made explicit in 1943, when they jointly addressed the role of subject matter in modern painting. In June of that year, Rothko and Gottlieb, with the assistance of Barnett Newman, wrote to The New York Times in response to a review by the critic Edward Alden Jewell, who had expressed bewilderment at their paintings in an exhibition at the Wildenstein Gallery. The works in question included Rothko's *The Syrian Bull* and Gottlieb's *The Rape of Persephone*. The artists rejected the notion that modern painting should be understood primarily through its technical innovations, insisting instead on the importance of subject matter. "We favor the simple expression of complex thought," they famously wrote, asserting that "the subject is crucial" and that valid subject matter must be both "tragic and timeless."[7] This would become one of the most important manifestos of Abstract Expressionism.

Several months later, Rothko and Gottlieb appeared in a broadcast on WNYC called "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," where they elaborated further on these ideas. Responding to questions about their use of mythological figures in paintings presented as portraits, they challenged the assumption that a portrait must describe a person's outward appearance. Rothko argued that the modern artist was no longer constrained by that definition: "The whole of man's experience becomes his model," he explained, and in this sense "all of art is a portrait of an idea."[8] Abstraction was not held up as an end in itself, nor myth lauded as literary subject. Gottlieb and Rothko's concern was to find forms through which painting could give shape to an experience that exceeded the visible likeness of things, which could unpeel what our human belonging to history and time actually *felt like*. The letter and broadcast document the closeness of their intellectual exchange: at the very moment their pictorial languages were evolving, they were articulating a shared position on the purposes and responsibilities of modern painting.

Completed the year after the WNYC broadcast, Gottlieb's *Images* (1944) offers a revealing window into the evolution of this thinking. Its forms suggest a lexicon or itinerary of biomorphism: a succession of organic, mutable shapes that oscillate between the bodily and the amorphous. They appear to belong to a world of signs, but their relationships remain open and indeterminate. The painting is related in its interests to *The Rape of Persephone* (1943), in which myth similarly provides a point of departure for the transformation of recognizable forms, as the "head" of Persephone is also a collection of abstract resemblances, forms that may or may not map onto anatomical truths. In *Images*, the pictographic language has become less dependent on a specific narrative. The signs themselves—and the relationships established among them—are freed to operate untethered, the fact of their form increasingly becomes the subject. The painting demonstrates how Gottlieb began to move away from the narrative grounding of myth and toward a more autonomous visual vocabulary.

For Rothko, the painting *Gethsemane* (1944) marks a particularly significant moment in a parallel movement away from representation and toward a different conception of picture-making. The painting's title evokes the biblical episode of Christ's agony before the Crucifixion, and the painting suggests a figure in a state of suffering or supplication. Yet it does not depict the scene through recognizable narrative detail or established religious iconography. The figure is reduced and transformed, its presence carried by the expressive force of the painted form. The subject remains legible as an emotional and spiritual proposition, but it is no longer conveyed through mimesis. Instead, Rothko allows form itself to bear the weight of narrative.

In this sense, *Gethsemane* marks both the culmination of Rothko's Surrealist investigations and a turning point in his development toward something totally new. The painting retains a reference to a specific story, but its emotional force does not depend on the viewer's ability to reconstruct that story. Rothko is demonstrating, in a tour de force, how form, color, and line can possess the power to produce meaning in their own right. The image becomes less a representation of suffering than an embodiment of it. This distinction would become increasingly important as he moved toward the more fully abstract paintings of the later 1940s.

Simultaneously, Rothko was making works on paper that reveal the gradual loosening of figuration and the development of a more fluid, atmospheric pictorial language. In the watercolors of

the mid-1940s, lines and washes seem to drift into one another; forms are less firmly bounded, and the relationship between image and ground becomes increasingly permeable. The medium allowed him to explore the effects of transparency, luminosity, and surface with an immediacy that would inform his work in oil. Gottlieb's works on paper, by contrast, reveal the continuing evolution of his more linear and graphic language. Pastel and watercolor allowed him to develop the biomorphic vocabulary of the Pictographs while exploring the relationship between spontaneity of mark-making and the anchor of the grid.

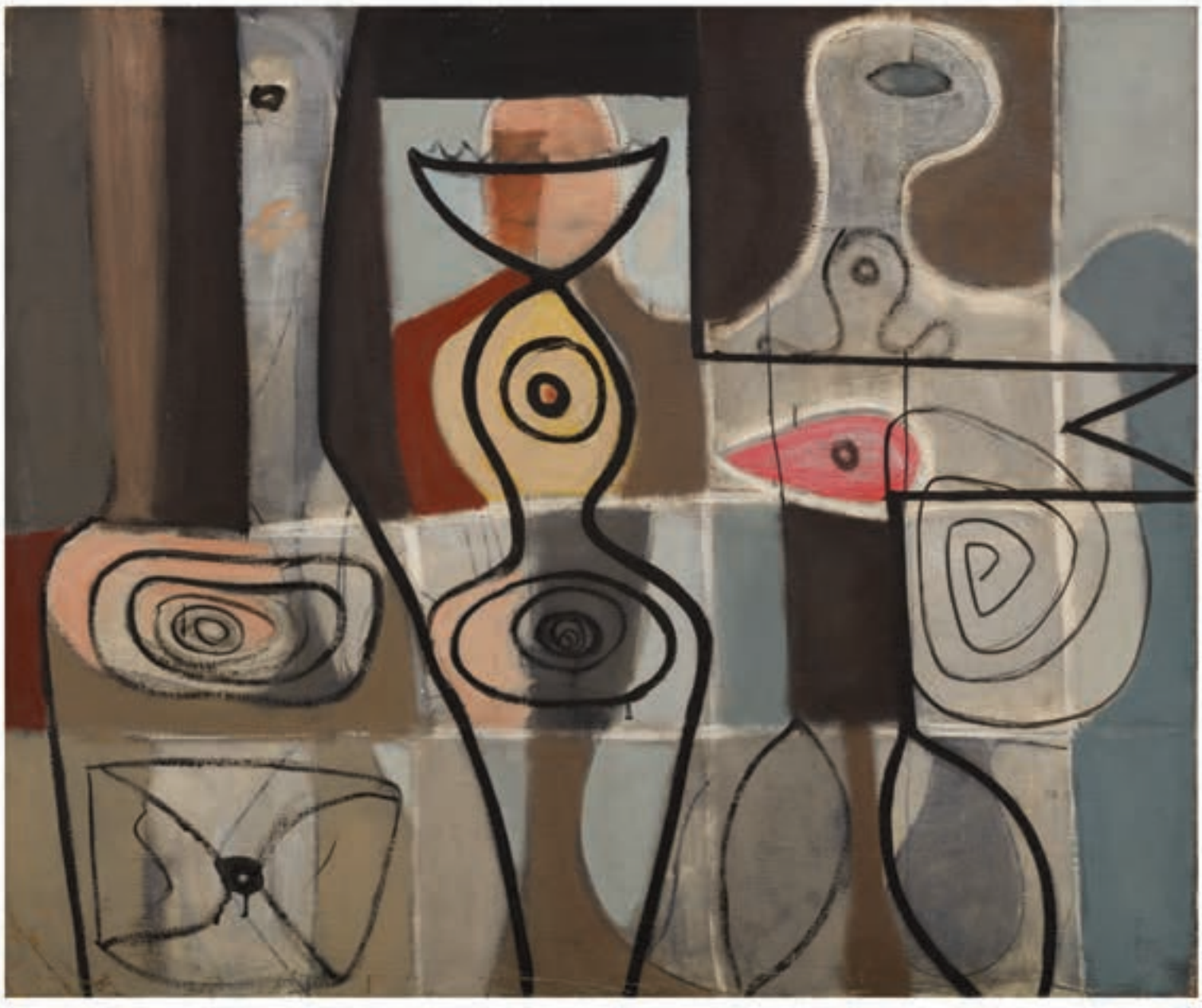
By the end of the decade, the two artists' aesthetic paths had become increasingly divergent. Gottlieb continued to develop the Pictographs, refining the relationship between the grid and the signs suspended within it. Rothko, meanwhile, moved toward the floating, increasingly autonomous fields of color that would define his mature painting. Yet the two artists' investigations remained connected by a fundamental question: how might painting communicate something essential about human experience without relying on representation?

The painting *Interior Garden* (1951) offers a crucial coda to Gottlieb's development in the 1940s, pointing toward a new relationship between symbolic form and the expressive power of the mark. The earlier vocabulary of recognizable signs gives way to a more distilled language. Gesture itself becomes increasingly consequential. The paintings not only suggest the conclusion of the Pictographs, but a hinge toward the Imagined Landscapes that would follow. Seen in relation to *Eyes of Oedipus* and *Images*, it reveals how far Gottlieb had traveled from mythological figuration toward a painting in which the organization and energy of mark-making could generate a new kind of visual power.

The 1940s are therefore more than a prelude to the achievements for which Rothko and Gottlieb would later become known. Their Surrealist period was one of sustained invention. Both artists tested the capacity of painting to carry meaning beyond the visible world. They shared an engagement with myth, the unconscious, and the archaic, which brought them into unusually close artistic proximity, even as their pictorial languages developed in distinct directions. What emerges is not a story of influence or imitation, but of two artists pursuing parallel questions and arriving at different possibilities for modern painting. Abstraction is revealed not as the renunciation of subject matter, but as the search for a new way to give form to thought—to make portraits of ideas.

NOTES

1 Oral history of Adolph Gottlieb by Andrew Hudson. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 25 Oct. 1967.
2 Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002
3 Mary Davis McNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs, 1941–1953* (New York: André Emmerich Gallery, 1979).
4 Adolph Gottlieb, Introduction, *Selected Paintings by the Late Arshile Gorky* (Kootz Gallery, 1950).
5 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979), 50-64; originally published in the exhibition catalogue for *Grids* (Pace Gallery: New York, 1978)
6 Robert Rosenblum, *Notes on Rothko's Surrealist Years*.
7 Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, letter to Edward Alden Jewell, June 7, 1943, published in Edward Alden Jewell, "The Realm of Art: A Platform and Other Matters; 'Globalism' Pops into View," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, p. 9. The letter was written with the assistance of Barnett Newman.
8 Mark Rothko in "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," transcript of broadcast "Art in New York," WNYC, October 13, 1943.



Adolph Gottlieb, *Composition*, 1945. Oil, gouache, casein and tempera on linen. 29 15/16" × 35 7/8" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Mark Rothko, *Gethsemane*, 1944. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 54⅜" × 35½" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

"A WEDDING OF ABSTRACTION AND SURREALISM"

MARY DAVIS MACNAUGHTON

Excerpted from *Adolph Gottlieb: The Pictographs, 1941–1953* published by André Emmerich Gallery, 1979.

CENTERED COMPOSITIONS, 1941: BIOMORPHISM AND AUTOMATISM

Surrealist biomorphism was the most important source for Gottlieb's centralized formats. Lawrence Alloway has identified two types of biomorphism: planar "one cell biomorphs" and "groups of such forms."[9] In these works of 1941 Gottlieb was clearly influenced by the former, although in Pictographs of 1944–46 he also experimented with the latter. While Alloway noted the influence of biomorphism on Abstract Expressionism of the mid-forties, Gottlieb's first Pictographs indicate that he had absorbed this aspect of Surrealism by 1941. Gottlieb, as well as Baziotes and Pollock, may have become interested in abstract biomorphic images through seeing illustrations of the microbic world revealed by the electron microscope, which was commercially developed in 1940.[10] This minute realm, which exists but cannot be seen, parallels the real but invisible imagination.

For Gottlieb, biomorphism was a way to freely express his unconscious, in which he had become fascinated via Graham, Freud, and Surrealism. And automatism-the painterly technique for Freudian free-association-was the method Gottlieb used to generate biomorphic shapes, which were forms spontaneously conceived in his unconscious.[11] Joan Miró's art was the primary example of biomorphism for Gottlieb's painting of this time. He knew Miró's art through exhibitions in New York during the thirties. Before beginning the Pictographs Gottlieb also may have seen the 1940 Miro show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and the 1941 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art.[12] Gottlieb's *Untitled (Still Life)* of 1941, which displays a large organic shape against flat color planes, resembles certain Miro abstractions of the early thirties. In *Female Forms* and *Pictograph-Tablet Form*, Gottlieb expands this amoeboid shape into a rounded rectangle, suspended against an undivided background. This central form also owes a debt to the single biomorphs of other European artists, Jean Arp and Wassily Kandinsky. Gottlieb's interest in 1941 in biomorphism and automatism was shared by Baziotes, Gorky, Motherwell, and Pollock. In the fall of 1942 these artists, along with Peter Busa and Gerome Kamrowski, met in the Ninth Street studio of the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta Echaurren to experiment with automatism.[13] Gottlieb was not part of this group, but he surely was aware of automatism through looking at Surrealist painting and reading Surrealist theory in John Graham's book *System and Dialectics of Art*. According to Graham, automatism was a direct means of expressing feelings: "Gesture, like voice, reflects different emotions. . . The handwriting must be authentic, and not faked ... (not) conscientious but honest and free."[14]

Like those in the Matta circle, Gottlieb understood automatism as a way to transmit the contents of his unconscious onto the canvas. He said his method of painting the Pictographs was "akin to the automatic writing of the Surrealists."[15] To achieve an immediate expression, Gottlieb worked directly on the canvas. Given his training with Henri and Sloan-who advocated painting quickly-Gottlieb easily adopted this technique, applying it to Pictographs in both oil and gouache. He painted these works without preparatory sketches in order to capture, as he explained, "the direct, improvised, fresh sort of feeling." After laying out his free-associated images, there was "very little editing or revision."[16]

But Gottlieb utilized automatism in a more limited way than other Abstract Expressionists. Although to a large extent he moved his hand freely as he painted, at the same time he checked this tendency in the grid, carefully adjusting his images to the frames of their compartments. In contrast to the apparent swiftness of Pollock's and Rothko's calligraphy in their works of the mid-forties, Gottlieb's fluid but considered lines seem controlled. "It wasn't just picture writing. . . . I was involved with the painting ideas and making things painterly,"[17] Gottlieb said. Instead of a device to indulge the unwilled movement of his hand, automatism was primarily a means of releasing his imagination to generate images from his unconscious. He adopted Graham's approach to *ecriture automatique* as "free-association based on memories of the racial past."[18] Through Graham, Gottlieb believed he could tap not only his personal unconscious but also the collective unconscious in his free-associated images.

JUNG AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

Several writers have noted the Jungian theme of the collective unconscious in the Pictographs, though none have documented Gottlieb's interest in Jung.[19] Before he began these works, Gottlieb was indeed fascinated with Jung's thought. In 1967 he said, "I was reading Jung at the time ... it was Jung who came up with the idea of the collective unconscious."[20] Jung's theory of the expression of the collective unconscious in archetypes and myths was available in 1939 in English translation in Jung's The Integration of the Personality.[21] But Gottlieb did not have to read this book because Graham was an immediate source of Jung's ideas. Both Graham's 1937 article in Magazine of Art, "Primitive Art and Picasso," and his book *System and Dialectics of Art* are infused with Jungian references to the collective unconscious.

With Graham as his source, Gottlieb absorbed various aspects of both Freudian and Jungian thought in his work. In the Pictographs, for example, there are certain images which are distinctly sexual: oval shapes seem breastlike and serpentine forms appear phallic. While in Freudian terms these originate from the personal unconscious, in Jungian terms they are universal, thus products of the collective unconscious.

There is no doubt that Jung had a special impact on Gottlieb's painting of the forties. In fact, Esther recalled that when Gottlieb began the Pictographs, he was more interested in Jung than Freud.[22] Gottlieb adopted in the titles of several Pictographs Jungian themes of myth and alchemy, which will be discussed later. But like Pollock, who was also influenced by Jung,[23] Gottlieb did not reflect Jung's concepts in any programmatic way. His pictographic images do not have specific meanings; rather, in the spirit of Jungian symbols they are deliberately ambiguous. Moreover, Jung was only one among many sources that Gottlieb assimilated in his works of the forties.

THE GRID

In his Pictographs at the beginning of the war, Gottlieb sought to balance the irrational images of his unconscious with a clear formal structure. The defined limits of the grid, presaged in the comparmented boxes of the sea still lifes, first appear in *Pictograph-Tablet Form* of 1941. The grid in conjunction with au-



Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled*, 1949. Pastel on paper. 24" × 18" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

tomatism satisfied his interest in both rational and subjective expression. While the grid communicates a sense of order, the images convey randomness. Gottlieb's actual use of these two elements, however, was more complex: He spontaneously invented the images, but carefully placed them in the composition. In addition, he used the grid to create pictorial structure, but he drew it freely. Thus he emphasized the grid's inherent ambiguity: Although he organized images with the grid, he did not give them logical sequence. Therefore, the pictographic signs cannot be read as a rebus, but form multiple associations in vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions.

The system of intersecting lines in the interior of *Pictograph-Tablet Form,* as well as its palette of browns and grays, point to the example of Cubism. But in contrast to the fractured planes of analytical Cubism, Gottlieb creates definite shapes derived from synthetic Cubism. The merger of the grid and organic shapes in this painting is a pictorial device also found in. the work of the late thirties by American Abstract Artists George L. K. Morris, George McNeil, and Vaclav Vytlacil, who reinterpreted the esthetic doctrines of the European Abstract-Creation movement of 1931–37. Though like these artists Gottlieb combined curvilinear and rectilinear synthetic Cubist forms, unlike these non-objective painters he was interested in a subjective content. Gottlieb's expressionist outlook, formed under Avery, gave him the belief that forms were carriers of feeling.

John Graham and Arshile Gorky did influence Gottlieb's work at this time. As a friend of Graham's since the twenties, Gottlieb was certainly familiar with his work. He later described Graham's art as "very influential."[24] During the thirties, Gottlieb met Gorky through Graham. Gottlieb admired Gorky's abstract painting, especially because it was not non-objective. "Gorky was one of the first good abstract painters in America. He was never a non-objective painter, because his work was always about something, and non-objective painting is about nothing," Gottlieb said.[25] The biomorphic Cubism in Graham's and Gorky's works of the thirties are precedents for Gottlieb's semi-abstract style in *Pictograph-Tablet Form.*

Another example for Gottlieb at this time was Paul Klee's art, which he could have seen in a 1941 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art. Klee's influence on the Abstract Expressionists in general and on Gottlieb in particular is clear. Andrew Kagan has said that Klee's impact on these artists was "precisely formal."[26] In other words, Klee's automatic drawing and flat space were more important to them than the whimsical content of his art. Klee's paintings of the thirties, which bring these pictorial elements together, had a significant effect on Gottlieb's work of the forties. Indeed, in *Pictograph-Tablet Form* the fusion of abstraction and representation is reminiscent of Klee's *Arab Song* of 1932. But the major source for Gottlieb's *Female Forms* was Picasso's synthetic Cubist style of the late twenties and early thirties. Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* of 1932, which The Museum of Modern Art had acquired in 1938, was the probable model for Gottlieb's fusion of grid and circular forms. His title confirms that he was thinking of the feminine shape; his biomorphic, oval forms bear some resemblance to the girl's breast and torso in Picasso's picture. Here Freudian sexual imagery, which had first appeared in the magic realist style of the sea still lifes of 1939–40, re-emerges in 1941 in more abstract form.

[. . .]

THE OEDIPUS PICTOGRAPHS, 1941: THE ALL-OVER COMPOSITION

Gottlieb' s centralized compositions of 1941, with their sources in American Indian art, Picasso, Klee, and Miro, are the predecessors of later works, such as *Persephone* of 1942 and *Rape of Persephone of* 1943 (Private Collection, New York). But the grid within *Pictograph-Tablet Form* also points to the other kind of Pictograph Gottlieb developed in 1941. The works in this second group, represented by *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus,* have an overall design, which Gottlieb devised by stretching the grid in four directions to the picture's edge.

According to Gottlieb this method had two purposes. The first was to create an "all-over sort of image in which there was no single focal point."[31] Thus Gottlieb, along with Pollock, was one of the first in The New York School to develop a composition which dispersed the viewer's attention over the entire field instead of concentrating it in one area. But unlike Pollock, who evenly distributed linear rhythms to create no single focus, Gottlieb produced multiple focal points. The second purpose of the grid was to create the illusion that it had "no beginning and no end."[32] But in doing this, Gottlieb revealed the grid's dual nature: By extending the lines to all four edges, he suggested that the picture was a fragment of a larger, unlimited whole. At the same time, he stated the grid's definite limitations in the repetition of discrete compartments.

The grids in *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus,* in contrast to the boxes of the sea still lifes, produce no illusion of three dimensional space, but are flat frameworks. There are several sources in older and modern art for Gottlieb's combination of continuous, two-dimensional grids and fields in the Pictographs. He claimed that his initial source of inspiration was early Italian panel painting, which he had admired since his first trip to Europe in 1921–22. In 1941, as he was searching for a new means of expression, Gottlieb again thought of this kind of painting, with its flat space and compartmented but interrelated scenes. Indeed, in 1943 Gottlieb compared his Pictographs to this late Medieval art:

Like those early painters who placed their images on the gold grounds of rectangular compartments, I juxtapose my pictographic images, each self-contained within the painter's rectangle, to be ultimately fused within the mind of the beholder.[33] Unlike these painters, however, Gottlieb does not create a hierarchy of images or arrange them in a narrative sequence.

Gottlieb was aware of the grid in modern art through Cubism. But the most important and obvious source for *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus* of 1941 was the art of Mondrian. "I admired Mondrian and was very much aware of what he was doing," Gottlieb said in 1962.[34] During the thirties he probably saw Mondrian's paintings, such as *Composition with Red* of 1936 at the A. E. Gallatin Museum of Living Art, then on view at New York University. In 1941 Gottlieb would have been especially aware of Mondrian, whose arrival in New York in October 1940 had been publicized. Gottlieb, in his search for an ordered compositional format, was drawn naturally to Mondrian's rational grids. Like Mondrian, he employed empty spaces in his Pictographs to balance occupied compartments. But Gottlieb inhabited these sections with images instead of pure color planes. And in contrast to Mondrian, he invented irregular, painterly grids.

Another possible source for the Pictographs is the painting of the Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres-Garcia. "The fact is that I didn't know too much about Torres-Garcia," Gottlieb said in 1962. "I had just seen one of his paintings in the Gallatin collection many years ago."[35] This picture was Composition of 1929 which, like the Pictographs, displays a grid containing representational and abstract signs. Gottlieb said, "I wasn't influenced by him [Torres-Garcia]. I think he was a kind of mechanical cubist."[36] But Torres-Garcia surely reinforced Gottlieb' s interest in the grid; indeed, he admitted that the impact of Torres-Garcia on his work may· have been "unconscious."[37] Yet whereas the Uruguayan painter used an analytical Cubist linear scaffolding and shallow space, Gottlieb utilized a totally flat grid derived from synthetic Cubism and Mondrian.

THE MEANING OF MYTH

Gottlieb introduced mythological themes in the Pictographs in the titles of *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus.* Though Gottlieb has been described as "only one of the advanced artists to seize ea-

gerly upon archaic themes,"[38] he along with Rothko, was in the vanguard of this direction in the early forties. Gottlieb recalled that he and Rothko adopted mythological themes in their painting after discussions they had together in 1941. Gottlieb viewed myth as an alternative to realism, which he wanted to avoid. He recalled saying to Rothko, "'How about some classical subject matter like mythological themes?' And we agreed . . . Mark chose to do some themes from the plays of Aeschylus, and I played around with the Oedipus myth, which was both a classical theme and a Freudian theme."[39]

Gottlieb arrived at myth in 1941 in various ways. He may have noticed Graham's mythological titles like "Zeus" on paintings in a one-man show in the spring of 1941 at the Artists Gallery.[44] But it was undoubtedly through reading Freud that he focused specifically on the Oedipus myth, to which he alluded in several works of the early forties, including *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus* of 1941, *Oedipus Pictograph Totem* of 1942, *Hands of Oedipus* of 1943, and *Eyes of Oedipus* of 1945. In 1941, as America plunged into war, Gottlieb was pulled toward the Oedipus myth because he found in it a powerful statement of man's tragic nature. Through Freud he saw Oedipus as a symbol of man's eternal conflict within himself and against society. He also may have seen Oedipus's quest for truth through the personal unconscious as a metaphor for his own search for meaning during this world crisis. [...] Since the truth of the Oedipus myth was timeless, Gottlieb could use it as the basis for his own modern expression. "I think anyone who looks carefully at my portrait of Oedipus or at Mr. Rothko' s *Leda* will see that this is not mythology out of Bullfinch. The implications have direct application to life,"[41] Gottlieb said in 1943. For him, the Oedipus myth, with its themes of incest and patricide, was a compelling expression of man's basic savagery, confirmed again in war.

Around 1941 Gottlieb also may have come across the Oedipus theme in Surrealist literature. Feeling isolated in his search for a personal style, he would have identified with Parker Tyler's discussion in the American Surrealist magazine *View of Oedipus* as a tragic hero, alienated from society. As an artist concerned with his own inner vision, Gottlieb also would have been drawn to Hilary Arm's description of Oedipus as a seer of truth, wrongly punished by the gods.[42]

In *Oedipus* and *Eyes of Oedipus* Gottlieb reflects this theme of tragic self-knowledge in Oedipus's blind visages. By turning Oedipus's eyes in upon themselves and using the image of the single eye, as in the upper right of Oedipus, Gottlieb adopts the Surrealist theme of inner vision.[43] The isolated dream eye is present in Surrealist paintings, such as Miró's The Family (1924) and Rene Magritte's *The False Mirror,* both of which Gottlieb could have seen at The Museum of Modern Art. The pair of mysteriously staring eyes at the left of Oedipus also recall those in Klee's *Arab Song* (1932).

In addition, Gottlieb could have found images of the single eye in both Egyptian and Coptic art-The former he knew from visits to The Metropolitan Museum, and in 1941 he may well have seen an exhibition of late Egyptian and Coptic art at The Brooklyn Museum.[44] The image of the solitary eye that appears on the one-dollar bill is a Coptic symbol, while in other Egyptian art the single eye is prevalent as a symbol of the sun. Gottlieb's arrangement of images in vertical tiers in Oedipus and Eyes of Oedipus recalls hieroglyphics. The faded brown and mauve tones in these works and their textured surfaces-scraped with a palette knife and roughened with paint skins-also creates an effect of antiquity.

In addition to choosing classical and mythological themes, Gottlieb and Rothko naturally looked to ancient art to evoke a sense of the archaic in their own art. But they drew on different sources. Whereas Gottlieb's flat space and schematic drawing in the 1941 Pictographs indicate his interest in Egyptian art, Rothko's shallow space and series of modelled forms in works such as *Untitled* suggest the example of ancient relief.[45] In *Untitled* Rothko further echoes Near Eastern relief sculpture in his stratified horizontal composition, his decorative architectural patterns, and the stylized human features with tightly curled hair. Yet the two artists also shared a fascination with certain motifs. Like Gottlieb, Rothko repeats the eye and the double face in several of his works of the early forties, also alluding to the inner dream world.

[....]

Critics noted the primitive expression in Gottlieb's work when he first began exhibiting his Pictographs in 1942. Of *Symbol*, the first Pictograph shown, which appeared in May 1942 in the Second Annual Exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, Carlyle Burrows of *The New York Herald Tribune* said it was "richest in symbolic invention, suggesting American Indian culture."[58] *The New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell strongly reacted against the primitive aspect of the Pictographs. In June 1943, in his review of the third Federation show, Jewell criticized Gottlieb, saying he was not prepared to "shed the slightest enlightenment when it comes to Adolph Gottlieb's 'Rape of Persephone. "'Jewell similarly derided Rothko' s work: "You will have to make of Marcus Rothko's 'The Syrian Bull' what you can."[59]. Angered by Jewell's antagonism toward their art, Gottlieb decided to respond and enlisted the aid of Rothko. In a now-famous letter to *The New York Times* of June 7, 1943, Gottlieb and Rothko (with the assistance of Barnett Newman) answered Jewell by stating their own views on their art.

LETTER TO THE NEW YORK TIMES, 1943

In retrospect, this letter to the *Times* is historically significant because in it Gottlieb and Rothko first articulate the themes of myth and primitivism, which later became identified with The New York School. But the letter does not express a group credo. At this point Gottlieb and Rothko speak only for themselves in announcing their belief in subject matter and two-dimensional space and their fascination with myth and primitive art. What is important is that Gottlieb and Rothko were the first Abstract Expressionists to stand up to critical opposition and publicly assert their own position. Their willingness to do this is not surprising in view of their earlier protest in *The Whitney Dissenters*. Gottlieb's and Rothko's vigorous defense of their art helped build the confident attitude of The New York School, which was later reflected in the historic artists' panels of 1948–50 in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts, where artists presented their views to critics, museum directors, and the public.

It is important to examine the letter to the Times and a subsequent radio broadcast in 1943, as in these Gottlieb and Rothko set forth the themes of myth and primitivism, which they had been exploring in their painting since 1941. (See Appendix for full texts of the letter and broadcast.) In these statements Gottlieb and Rothko articulate the esthetic issues of their time. It was Gottlieb who initiated the letter to the *Times*, phoning Jewell to ask if he would accept a written response to his review of their art. Jewell agreed, so Gottlieb met with Rothko, drafted a statement with him, then went to Newman, who edited it for them and added an introduction. According to Gottlieb, Newman conceived the letter's first section, Gottlieb wrote the first four points in the letter's second part, and Rothko contributed the last proposition.[60] Jewell printed the letter in the *Times* on June 13, 1943, in an article entitled, "The Realm of Art: A New Platform and Other Matters; Globalism Pops Into View." Predictably, Jewell's derisive comments about their letter succeeded only in drawing attention to Gottlieb' s and Rothko' s art.

In the first part of the letter the artists criticized Jewell's inability to understand their paintings: "Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is *prima facie* evidence that they carry some communicative power." They continued, "The point at issue. . . is not an 'explanation' of the paintings but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have signifi-



Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled*, c. 1943. Pastel and watercolor. 26" × 20" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation





Top to bottom: Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled (Still Life)*, 1941. Oil on canvas. 25¹³⁄₁₆" × 34"; Adolph Gottlieb, *Home*, 1943. Oil and pencil on linen. 23⅛" × 19⅛" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

cance."[61] These ideas are: 1) their interest in "a poetic expression of the essence of myth," not its narrative aspect; and 2) their belief (reflecting the influence of Jung) in the modern relevance of archaic expression. "Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then."[62]

In the second part of the letter Gottlieb and Rothko outlined their views. The assertive tone and content of the first four points, written by Gottlieb, recall the style of Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*. First, their emphasis on art as "an adventure into an unknown world"[63] echoes Graham's belief that the "purpose of art in particular is to re-establish lost contact with the unconscious."[64] Second, their statement that the "world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense"[65] parallels Graham's idea that the imagination operates "irrespective of reality."[66] Third, their advocacy of the "simple expression of the complex Thought"[67] recalls Graham's conviction that artists should transpose observed phenomena into simple, clearer terms."[68] Finally, their "wish to reassert the picture plane"[69] follows Graham's idea that a painter abstracts three-dimensional phenomena on a two-dimensional plane."[70] The last point, written by Rothko, criticizes non-objective abstraction for its exclusive concern with formal issues, saying, "there is no such thing as good painting about nothing." They also allude to their interest in myth, asserting that "only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." For that reason, they "profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art."[71]

NOTES (excerpted)

9 Lawrence Alloway, "The Biomorphic Forties," *Artforum*, 4, No. I (September 1965), n. pag.
10 In 1940, Dr. Hillier and Dr. Vladimir K. Zworykin at the RCA labs in Princeton, New Jersey, developed the first commercial electron microscope.
11 Alloway said, "Automatic drawing is a natural begetter of biomorphs, charged with organic life but not descriptive of any single organism. Biomorphic forms enabled artists in the forties to invent freely while avoiding non-objectivity. Their allusive though nondescriptive forms have a strong potential for erotic, pathetic, or aggressive meanings. Introduction, *William Baziotes: A Memorial Exhibition, exhib. cat. (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1965), n. pag.*
12 Joan Miró's art was exhibited annually at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York from 1936–41. It also appeared in the 1936 shows at the Museum of Modern Art, *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*, as well as in a Miró retrospective there in December 1941–January 1942. For a discussion of Miró's influence on Abstract Expressionism, see Alloway, "The Biomorphic Forties," pp. I&–22, and Gail Levin, "Miró, Kandinsky, and the Genesis of Abstract Expressionism," *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*, exhib. cat. (The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1978), pp. 27–40.
13 The date of fall of 1942 was given by Peter Busa in Sidney Simon, "An Interview with Peter Busa and Matta," Minneapolis, 1966, quoted in Gerome Kamrowski, exhib. cat. (Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, 1978), n. pag. See also Max Kozloff, "An Interview with Robert Motherwell," *Artforum*, 4, No. I (September 1965), pp.23–26, 3 3–38.
14 John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, p. 88.
15 Jones, Interview, p. 1.
16 Seckler, Interview, p. 18.
17 Ibid.
18 Graham, *System and Dialectics*, p. 31.
19 Although Gottlieb's interest in Jung has been mentioned by Martin Friedman, Diane Waldman, Irving Sandler, Dore Ashton, and Karen Wilkin, it was not documented by Gottlieb's own statements until my article "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb: A Synthesis of the Subjective and the Rational," *Arts Magazine*, 52, No. 3 (November 1977), pp. 143, 147.
20 Seckler, Interview, p. 17.
21 Carl G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," *The Integration of the Personality*, trans. Stanley M. Dell (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1939), pp. 52–53.
22 Conversation with Esther Gottlieb, September 16, 1976.
23 For a discussion of Jung's influence on Pollock, see Judith Wolfe, "Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery," Artforum, 11 No. 3 (November 1972), pp. 65–73, and Elizabeth Langhorne, "Jackson Pollock's *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*," *Arts Magazine*, 53, No. 7 (March 1979), pp. 138–141. William Rubin criticizes the tendency among these and other writers to interpret Pollock's works from 1938–46 as literal illustrations of Jungian concepts. See "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," Part I, *Art in America*, 67 (November 1979), pp. 72–92; Part II (December 1979), pp. 104–123. While Rubin's objection is valid, it does not erase the definite impact Jung had on Pollock's work.
24 Andrew Hudson, Dialogue with Adolph Gottlieb, New York, 1968, unpublished typescript, p. 17.
25 Gottlieb, *Selected Paintings by the Late Arshile Gorky* (1950).
[...]
31 Gottlieb in John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, p. 258. The concept of the endless grid is discussed in John Elderfield's "Grids," *Artforum*, 10, No. 9 (May 1972), pp. 52–60, and in Rosalind Krauss, "Grids, You Say," *Grids: Format and Image in 20th Century Art*, exhib. cat. (The Pace Gallery, New York, 1978).
31 Ibid.
33 Gottlieb in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), p. 119.
34 Friedman, Interview, Tape 1A, p. 5. Gottlieb also said, "I was always a little bit puzzled the whole time I was doing these (the Pictographs) because nobody ever brought up Mondrian in connection."
35 Ibid., Tape 2B, p. 15. Irving Sandler points to Torres-Garcia's influence on Gottlieb's Pictographs in *The Triumph of American Painting*, p. 193, as does Robert Hobbs in "Early Abstract Expressionism," p. 15.
36 Seckler, Interview, p. 21.
37 Friedman, Interview, Tape 2B, p. 15.
38 Karen Wilkin, *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs*, exhib. cat. (Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, 1977), n.p.
39 Hudson, Dialogue with Adolph Gottlieb, p. 5. Diane Waldman said that "the form and mythic content of archaic art appeared in Rothko's art as early as 1938." (Mark Rothko, 1903–70: *A Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), p. 38). But this date seems early for Rothko to have changed to work in one style while experimenting with another," she bases this observation on Rothko's dating of early works which she admits is "problematic." (*Rothko*, p. 26). In 1938 he was still painting urban genre scenes in an expressionist style and he continued to show these works as late as 1941. *Antigone*, the first work with a mythological title dated by Waldman 1938, was not exhibited until January 1942 in a group show at R.H. Macy Department Store, New York. Though Waldman said that Rothko "often continued to work in one style while experimenting with another," she bases this observation on Rothko's dating of early works which she admits is "problematic." (*Rothko*, p. 26).
Whereas Rothko dated most of his works years after painting them—according to Waldman "without records and relying entirely upon his memory" — Gottlieb, beginning in 1941, made records of his works as he produced them. Moreover, Edith Carson, Rothko's wife at the time, said that it was the early forties when Rothko's art changed. (Letter to Waldman, January 5, 1978, in *Rothko*, p. 70).
40 Carl G. Jung, "Symbols of Transformation" (originally published as *Psychology of the Unconscious*, 1916) in *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung, ed. V.S. de Laszlo* (New York: Modem Library, 1959) p. 8.
41 Gottlieb in Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, "The Portrait and the Modem Artist," typescript of a radio broadcast on WYNC, October 13, 1943 (see appendix).
42 "Poor blind Oedipus! ... Theirs (the gods) was the ignorance, his was the knowledge. He solved the riddle of the Sphinx." Arm's phrase "the stupidly mysterious eyes of the gods" seems to be echoed in the Oedipus works. Hilary Arm, "Nostradamus Against the Gods; An Assertion of the Active Principle of Prophecy," View, 1, Nos. 7–8 (Fall 1941), p. 5.
43 James Johnson Sweeney said of Miró's art: "The pure eye is the dream eye . . . or the eye subordinated to the workings of the subconscious." ("Joan Miró," *Cahiers d'Art*, 9' annee (1934), p. 46.) Several images of the dream eye appeared in the 1936 show *Fantastic Art, Dada,* and *Surrealism*, including Odilon Redon's *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* and Rene Magritte's *The Eye.*
44 *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt* (The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, 1941).
45 Waldman, *Rothko*, p. 40.
[....]
58 Robert Hobbs, "Early Abstract Expressionism," p. 10.
59 Carlyle Burrows, "Review," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1942, p. 12.
60 Edward Alden Jewell, "Modem Painters Open Show Today," *The New York Times*, June 3, 1943, p. 14.
61 Friedman, Interview, Tape IA, p. 17. Alloway noted this information in "Melpomene and Graffiti," p. 27, as does Sandler in The Triumph of American Painting, p. 70, note 2.
62 Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko (with the assistance of Barnett Newman), Letter to Edward Alden Jewell, Art Editor, *The New York Times*, June 7, 1943, printed in Jewell, "The Realm of Art: A Platform and Other Matters; 'Globalism' Pops into View," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943, p. 9.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Graham, *System and Dialectics*, p. 15.
66 Gottlieb and Rothko, Letter.
67 Graham, *System*, p. 15.
68 Gottlieb and Rothko, Letter.
69 Graham, *System*, p. 13.
70 Gottlieb and Rothko, Letter.
71 Graham, *System*, p. 13.



Adolph Gottlieb, *Eyes of Oedipus*, 1941. Oil on canvas 32¼" × 25" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled*, 1946. Gouache and pencil on paper. 18" × 24" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation







Top to bottom: Adolph Gottlieb, *Interior Garden*, 1951. Oil on canvas. 24" × 30"; Adolph Gottlieb, *Images*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 25⅛" × 33⅛" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Adolph Gottlieb, *Voodoo*, c. 1945. Gouache on paper. 29½" × 20¾" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945/1946. Oil on canvas. 39" × 27¼" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 27⅛" × 20" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





Top to bottom: Mark Rothko, [Untitled], 1944/1945. Watercolor, ink, scrubbing on Watercolor paper. 22½" × 31¹⁄₁₆"; Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1945. Watercolor, ink, scrubbing on Watercolor paper. 20⁷⁄₁₆" × 28⅛" © 2026 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 39¼" × 31¼" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

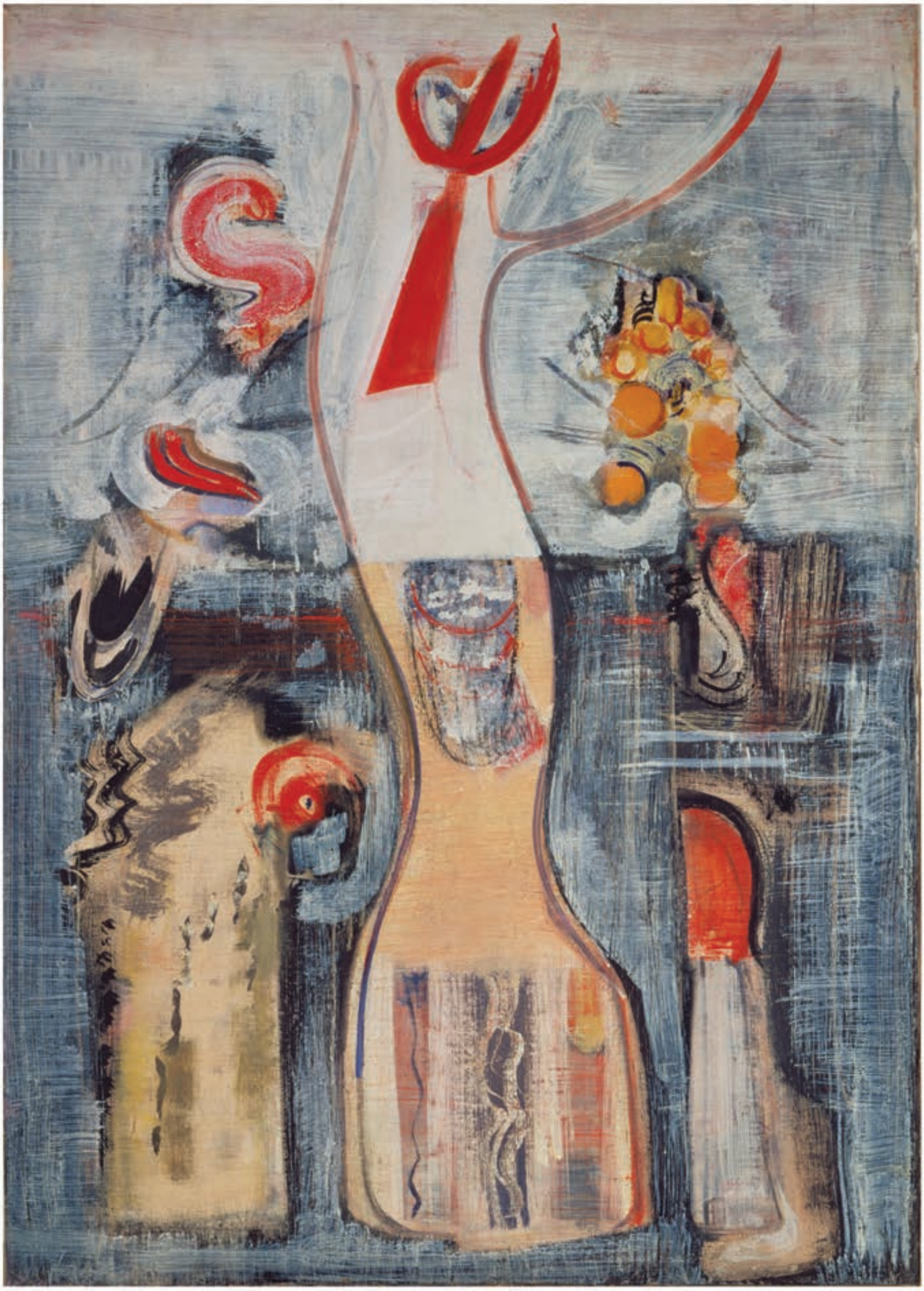






Per the Catalogue Raisonné of *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper* produced by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the versos of the two above works reveal an "abrupt cropping [which] indicates that Rothko painted on the full sheet (a standard size of 22 × 30 inches) before he cut it in half and used the other sides."

Top to bottom, left to right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1944. Watercolor, ink and graphite on paper. 22 9/16" × 14 7/8"; Mark Rothko, *[Untitled]*, c. 1944. Watercolor, ink, scrubbing on Watercolor paper. 22 9/16" × 15 1/8"; Mark Rothko, [Untitled], c. 1944. Watercolor, ink, scrubbing, scraping on Watercolor paper. 22 11/16" × 15 1/2" © 2026 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945/1946. Oil on canvas. 38¾" × 27½" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



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Cover: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1945–1946. Watercolor on paper. 30 3/16" × 21 7/8" © 1998 by Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Mark Rothko smoking a cigarette. Image courtesy of bridgeman images; Adolph Gottlieb, Courtesy of the Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation; Adolph Gottlieb, *Inscription*, 1954. Oil on canvas. 49 7/8" × 39 5/8" © 2026 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

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