Alternate Possibilities: Reimagining the Rothko Chapel

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ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES: REIMAGINING THE ROTHKO CHAPEL

by

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B.A., Fort Lewis College, 2008

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Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Alternate Possibilities: Reimagining the Rothko Chapel
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has been approved for the Department of Art History

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, has long been recognized as a spiritual landmark and symbol of American postwar modern art. Blurring the boundaries between what is commonly considered sacred and secular, the Rothko Chapel functions as a space for non-denominational worship, private contemplation and meditation, a center for civic action, and as a showcase of the late work of Abstract Expressionist painter, Mark Rothko. The fourteen massive paintings that adorn the chapel space are renowned for their dark and ominous shades of maroon and black. What most visitors to the site do not know, there are six additional panels associated with the chapel but not included in the final arrangement. The alternate panels, currently on display next door at The Menil Collection, exemplify Rothko’s practice of creating alternates or “extras” for the three mural commissions of the last decade of his career, and have remained a mystery since the dedication of the chapel in 1971. This study not only brings the alternate chapel paintings to light, but also explores their potential role in the commission and impact on the space for the first time. In a fictional reimagining of the Rothko Chapel interior, alternate chapel paintings “Pair A,” “Pair B,” and “Pair C” are incorporated into the space in five alternate possibilities, encouraging scholars and visitors alike to imagine what could be.
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This work is dedicated to my parents for their constant support, encouragement, and seemingly limitless patience.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Peter Selz wrote the following in his catalogue essay for Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko’s one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art:

“Like much of Rothko’s work, these murals really seem to ask for a special place apart, a kind of sanctuary, where they may perform what is essentially a sacramental function...Perhaps, like medieval altarpieces, these murals can properly be seen only in an ambience in total keeping with their mood.”

Although Selz was referring specifically to the series of paintings that Rothko created for the Four Seasons Restaurant of New York’s newly completed Seagram Building, his suggestion was realized exactly ten years later in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. In this ideal commission for an artist who became increasingly preoccupied with control and creating the maximum effect with his work, Rothko agreed to “make a sufficient number of paintings to illumine adequately” the interior of a Catholic chapel for the University of St. Thomas. The result is an octagonal structure—an environment created to contain and compliment the ambiance that Rothko’s paintings exude. With an intriguing variety of functions and missions, unlike anything else in the canon of modern art, the Rothko Chapel is a highlight of American postwar art and architecture.

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1 Peter Selz, “Mark Rothko,” in Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960 exh. cat., London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1961, 19. The exhibition, curated by Peter Selz, was originally featured at the Museum of Modern Art (January 18-March 12, 1961), then traveled to London’s Whitechapel Art Gallery from October-November, 1961. Selz’s essay was reprinted in the Whitechapel exhibition catalogue, which is cited here. Robert Goldwater made a similar observation regarding the same exhibition. He wrote, “For this reason the most successful arrangement is the small chapel-like room in which had been hung three of the mural series of 1958-59. Partaking of the same somber mood, they reinforce each other, as they were designed to do.” See Robert Goldwater, “Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition,” Arts 35, no.6 (March 1961): 42-45.

2 The numerous paintings associated with the so-called ‘Seagram Murals’ will be discussed in Chapter Two: Alternate Possibilities.

3 Commission contract signed by Mark Rothko and Reverend John F. Murphy, C.S.B., President of the University of St. Thomas, February 13, 1965. Rothko Chapel Archives.
As the name suggests, the unassuming brick chapel is home to fourteen large-scale, non-representational paintings, created exclusively for the space by the artist, who also contributed to the building’s overall architectural design (Fig. 1). The combination of triptychs and enormous individual paintings is often referred to as the greatest achievement of Rothko’s career and the panels are known for their dark, ominous purple and black tones (Fig. 2). Though the paintings are not overtly religious in a traditional sense, many scholars have argued that the transcendental quality of this collection of Rothko’s late work taps into the realm of the sacred or divine, and may perhaps be considered aniconic images. Indeed, the chapel itself was dedicated on February 27, 1971, as “a sacred place open to all, every day.” In keeping with this mission, the chapel hosts a wide variety of interfaith ceremonies, celebrations, and associated gatherings and activities year-round, which leads to its status as an internationally-recognized spiritual landmark.

In addition to operating as a space for organized worship and individual contemplation and meditation, the chapel is also a center for community engagement as well as civic action. Several programs in the chapel’s calendar of events speak to this aspect of its mission. What is more, the chapel functions as a museum space, and perhaps a monument, dedicated to the late

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4 David Anfam, a leading scholar on Mark Rothko, cites the practice of aniconic imagery as the cultural lineage of the Rothko Chapel paintings. To this end, Anfam states, “Instead of depicting their nominal subject, such images either replace it metonymically with another one or, sometimes and most significantly, with blankness.” See David Anfam, “To See, or Not To See,” in Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding (Houston: The Rothko Chapel, 2007): 65-77.

5 Susan J. Barnes, The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith (Houston, TX : Austin: Rothko Chapel ; Distributed by University of Texas Press, 1989), 15. Although originally commissioned as a Catholic chapel for the University of St. Thomas, a dispute between the patrons and the university administration caused the two parties to split. The chapel was dedicated as and remains an independent non-denominational space.
work of a major modern artist. Thus, when trying to describe the Rothko Chapel, one finds that it is not so easy to categorize. Given the complexity and scope of functions, the Rothko Chapel inhabits a unique liminal space between what is commonly defined as sacred and secular. This is what makes the Rothko Chapel such an interesting object of study. In the decades since its dedication, scholarly interest in the Rothko Chapel and Mark Rothko has yet to cease; with each new publication, however, one major gap in the scholarship surprisingly remains.

Even though thousands of visitors travel to the Rothko Chapel each year, most are likely unaware six additional paintings are also associated with the chapel commission and are currently on display next door at The Menil Collection (Fig. 3). The alternate chapel paintings, as they are known, consist of three mutually identical pairs, referred to as ‘Pair A,’ ‘Pair B,’ and ‘Pair C.’ Each follows the same color scheme and format: a hard-edged black square painted over a cherry-maroon ground. Like the paintings inside the Rothko Chapel, the alternates dwarf viewers with their scale, surrounding them on all sides in the gallery. While they have much in common with the plum and black paintings installed in the chapel, the alternates are also very different, both visually and in their effect on the viewer. For such a popular destination and area of research, why is no one studying the paintings next door?

The alternate paintings are regularly ignored in the discourse surrounding the Rothko Chapel. This oversight may be due in part to the fact that the alternate chapel paintings are

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6 The Rothko Chapel may be the first example of a “one-man chapel” in the United States, but other sites were planned or now exist as modern art pilgrimage destinations. It was announced in early 2015 that the University of Texas in Austin would be the site of Austin, Ellsworth Kelly’s proposed chapel. For more information see, “Will Ellsworth Kelly’s Austin Sanctuary Out-Transcend Houston’s Rothko Chapel?” Hyperallergic. Accessed July 2, 2015. http://hyperallergic.com/180695/will-ellsworth-kellys-austin-sanctuary-out-transcend-houstons-rothko-chapel/.

7 Susan Barnes and Sheldon Nodelman are to be commended for the studies of 1989 and 1997, respectively, which provided the research base for this project.
rarely exhibited and remain somewhat obscure, especially to the general public. Rothko’s untimely death one year prior to the chapel’s completion left many questions regarding the intended role and placement of the six mysterious alternates. We cannot possibly know what Rothko’s intentions were for these panels, created nearly fifty years ago, but that does not mean they should be discounted. This project seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on the Rothko Chapel by drawing attention to the six little-studied alternate paintings that were created for the chapel interior, but ultimately not selected in the final arrangement. I argue the alternate chapel paintings hold value in the study of art history and are deserving of more than a single page, brief mention, or footnote. They should be considered first in their own right, then as part of the larger commission—not as two separate bodies of work. Beyond my primary goal of exposing the six alternate panels, I will also provide a visualization of their potential placement within the chapel interior. For the first time, one can begin to imagine what alternate possibilities these six paintings hold for the Rothko Chapel.

**Structure of Thesis**

The Rothko Chapel is but one example of a sacred modern space. Chapter one provides the historical context for the chapel by exploring its twentieth-century roots in both the United States and in Europe, particularly France. The highly influential and progressive views of Dominican Father Marie-Alain Couturier, co-editor of the journal *L’Art Sacré*, led to radical changes in religious architecture and church decoration in France following World War II. Suddenly, it was not uncommon for well-known contemporary artists to adorn, or even design

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8 The alternate chapel paintings have been exhibited only a handful of times to date. Two pairs were included in a 1975 exhibition at Rice University. All six were displayed at the 1996 “Mark Rothko: The Chapel Commission” exhibition at the Menil Collection, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the dedication of the Rothko Chapel (December 13, 1996-March 29, 1997). At the time of my thesis research, all six alternate chapel paintings were on display in The Menil Collection’s ‘Modern & Contemporary’ gallery.
Catholic chapels, regardless of their own personal religious beliefs. Products of the *L’art Sacré* revival movement include the Church of Notre-Dame de Tout Grâce on the plateau d’Assy (1938-1949), Chapel of the Rosary in Vence (1951), and Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1954). In the United States, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s design for the chapel on the Illinois Institute of Technology campus (1952) altered the expectations of what a house of worship *should* look like. Its austere brick and glass exterior, commonly referred to by students as the “God box,” is a far cry from traditional Gothic style cathedrals and may be considered a precursor to the Rothko Chapel design. In this chapter, I argue that the Rothko Chapel is a product of these transatlantic influences and contains elements from previous twentieth-century developments in religious art and architecture from the work of both Mies van der Rohe and *L’art sacré*.

Chapter two will focus primarily on the six alternate chapel paintings. In addition to the alternates created for the chapel commission, I will also explore Rothko’s compulsion of creating alternate paintings for the two other large-scale mural projects in the final decade of his life: the Seagram Murals (1958-59) and the Harvard Murals (1961-1962). Elements of Rothko’s early biography will come into play here, as I argue this practice of repetition may relate to his difficult childhood as a Russian, Jewish immigrant, struggling to find acceptance. Then, what little scholarship that does exist on the alternate panels will be compiled in one location and critically analyzed for the first time. Previously unpublished archival materials from the Rothko Chapel and The Menil Collection archives will aid in the discussion of the six alternate paintings in order to establish a foundation of study for this frequently ignored aspect of the Rothko Chapel.
Rothko’s suicide in 1970 prevented him from seeing the chapel paintings in situ, and thus, from making any final modifications once inside the actual space. The unfortunate timing of this tragic event poses several questions pertaining to the installation of the chapel paintings in Houston: How was the current arrangement determined? What would the Rothko Chapel look like if the alternate paintings were included in the final arrangement? How would they potentially impact the viewer’s experience inside the already highly-charged space? Except for structural repairs and conservation efforts, the interior of the Rothko Chapel has remained unchanged since its dedication. Chapter three is thus a fictional reimagining of the Rothko Chapel with combinations of the alternate panels incorporated into five potential arrangements, or alternate possibilities, for the space.

It is difficult to reimagine a permanent installation of a body of work. The task becomes inevitably more challenging when the artist in question was particularly secretive about his work and often denied any associated meanings. The epilogue will likely generate more questions than answers, which is my intention. With the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the Rothko Chapel approaching, why not consider all of the possibilities? Why limit ourselves to what currently exists? Rothko’s oeuvre seems to only be increasing in popularity, as evidenced by new publications, an upcoming major retrospective, the development of new technologies to restore some of his more damaged works, and a Broadway play dedicated to one of his mural commissions. The alternate chapel paintings offer a fresh, new piece of the puzzle that is quickly reaching a point of saturation.
CHAPTER I
MODERN SACRED SPACES:
RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE AND DECORATION IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

The terms “modern” and “sacred,” are two loaded words that seem antithetical to one another. When one thinks of the modern era, sacred spaces and organized religion are likely not the first thoughts that come to mind, especially when considering the visual culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.9 Yet to ignore the existence of modern religious or sacred art and architecture is to deny access to an enormous body of work, equally as engaging as secular art of the same period. Although many of the most prominent modern artists departed from the traditional religious institutions of their upbringing, their formative experiences had a major impact on their lives and their art. As Charlene Spretnak reminds us in her recent publication The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present, “To relate to, enjoy, and even cultivate spiritual sensibilities long after one has parted company with organized religion is a widespread phenomenon within the modern condition.”10

The Rothko Chapel, while unique in many ways, was not necessarily an unprecedented feat of modern art and architecture. Many examples of sacred modern spaces can be identified throughout the early-to-mid-twentieth century, in which a prominent artist or artists and architect were able to express the divine in their work in new ways. The majority of these spaces and the

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9 During the modern period, however, the lines dividing the once rigid distinctions between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ became increasingly blurry as aspects of the secular realm (such as art) began to fulfill what was traditionally a sacred function. Religion became less social and communal and more of an individual choice and expression and continues today.

art that fills them are understudied due to their location outside of art museums and galleries. Upon closer investigation though, one finds modern artists, no strangers to pushing boundaries, exploring what was acceptable and appropriate in religious art and architecture and ultimately blurring the line between sacred and secular. These spaces beg the questions: What is “sacred” art? Also, who has the right to create it? Who can decide? Within these modern religious structures, a few of which will be detailed in the chapter that follows, art and architecture work simultaneously to affect the viewer and create a spiritually charged place.

In this chapter, I argue that the Rothko Chapel has firmly-planted roots both in France and America. Beginning with the revival of religious art and architecture in postwar France, led by figures such as Maurice Denis, and continuing with the well-known projects of Dominican Father Marie-Alain Couturier and L’art Sacré, I will highlight several chapels and churches and their role as distant cousins to the Rothko Chapel. Next, while many scholars of the Rothko Chapel commission acknowledge the important influence of L’art Sacré, most have not looked for any influence from within America. Therefore, after departing from France, I will focus on Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s architecture in America, and one structure in particular that shares many of the same characteristics as the Rothko Chapel. Finally, I will settle on Houston, where the story of the Rothko Chapel commission unfolds in the early 1960s. In my conclusion, the Rothko Chapel will briefly be explored as a product of twentieth-century revolutionary and transatlantic ideas concerning art, architecture, and religious expression in the modern era.

L’Art Sacré and the French Revival of Religious Art

The first step in investigating the transatlantic roots of the Rothko Chapel takes us to postwar Europe. Following the devastation of World War I, new and updated expressions of religious faith were called for, especially by a radical few from within the church institution. Though many factors were at play, far too many to describe here, the reinvigoration of Catholicism and its associated visual culture point to a modern search for meaning in a particularly tumultuous and violent time for humanity. As one scholar explains, “Catholic revivalism became a salient influence in postwar France because it was an act of memorialization, an attempt to restore meaning and self-identity to a traumatized culture.”

France was long known as “the eldest daughter of the church” for both the historical closeness between church and state and its large Catholic population, so it is not surprising that we first turn to French expressions of the sacred in church decoration and architecture.

The revival of religious art in twentieth-century France can be traced back to Ateliers d’art sacré (Studios of Sacred Art), a group formed in Paris in the wake of the First World War. Founded in 1919 by painters Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and Georges Desvallières (1861-1950), the members of Ateliers were passionately concerned with reuniting the Christian church with modern civilization, a movement also known as renouveau catholique. Ateliers d’art sacré functioned under the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), especially his theories concerning beauty and art, and can be considered a revival of medieval aesthetics and workshop-

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14 *Renouveau catholique* has been described as an artistic and literary movement, especially attractive for the cultural elite because it demonstrated that one could be both Catholic and an intellectual. Stephen Schloesser discusses *renouveau catholique* throughout *Jazz Age Catholicism* (2005) beginning on page 4.
style practice. The group had two goals: “To train and educate (young people), and to produce works of art that serve God, the teachings of the truth, and the decoration of places of worship.” To some extent, Ateliers d’art sacré became a way for Denis to proselytize and has also been described as a “crusade for the modernization of religious art.”

Denis, a devout Roman Catholic from an early age, dedicated the majority of his career to decorative paintings for the Church, exclaiming, “Every Christian artist is personally responsible for the beauty of churches.” This sentiment is apparent throughout much of his oeuvre, as evidenced by titles such as: Catholic Mystery (1889), Calvary (The Way to Calvary) (1889), Green Christ (1890), Easter Morning (Holy Women on the Tomb) (1894), The Visitation (1894), The Sacred Heart Crucified (1894), and Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary (1896). Many of the aforementioned works were completed very early in Denis’ career, with Catholic Mystery, a painting that depicts the Annunciation scene yet in a modern setting, finished before the artist’s twentieth birthday. Throughout his career, Denis received several commissions to decorate the interiors of war-damaged churches, which often included mural-sized paintings like the one that will now be examined.

Of central importance and an illuminating early example of Denis’ treatment of religious subject matter, is his decoration for the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Le Vésinet, just outside of

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17 Ibid., 63.
the Paris metro area. In 1899, Denis was commissioned by the Brothers of the Holy Cross of Neuilly to decorate the chapel of their recently constructed teaching institution in Villa Saint-Rémy. The resulting mural, titled *The Glorification of the Cross* (Fig. 4), was Denis’ largest project to date and the first of many similar church commissions. The lower five panels (left to right: Preparing the Censer, Angels and Children with Censers, Landscape, Angels and Children Throwing Petals, and Preparing Baskets of Flowers) serve as the base for the larger, upper panel, *The Exaltation of the Holy Cross*. From the reconstructed photograph which demonstrates the original in situ appearance, one can see that the panels created a decorative altarpiece for the chapel and were designed and executed specifically for the space, much like the Rothko Chapel paintings.

The six panels are highly characteristic of Denis’ work. Though Classical in style, the garden-like landscape could very well represent a modern property, just as Denis’ many offspring could serve as models for the painting’s children (Fig. 5). Denis was also known for using his first and second wives as models for Marian and other female figures from the Christian narrative. Denis’ insistence on the flatness of the picture plane is evident in his simplified shapes and spatial relationships. The subdued pastel color palette is also common in Denis’ work. The *Glorification of the Cross* panels highlight Denis’ expertise at color, with the bold red robes and floor tiles offset by the lush, yet manicured, greenery in the distance. Thus,

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20 Paul-Louis Rinuy, “Ambitions, Doubts, and Paradoxes: A Catholic Painter in Modern Times,” 256–257. In 1903, the panels had to be removed due to the closure of the Holy Cross institution, however, they were a highlight of the 1911 international exhibition of Christian modern art, held at the Pavillon de Marsan by the Société de Saint-Jean. The panels have rarely been exhibited since and never together until the 2006-2007 retrospective, for which this essay was written.

21 Denis’ first wife, Marthe Meurier, was his favorite model. Her image can be found throughout Denis’ oeuvre, in both religious and secular works. In addition to portraits of her, Marthe makes an appearance in *April, September Evening, and October Evening (Panels for a Girl’s Room)* (1891-2), *Mystical Allegory* (1892), and as Mary in both *The Visitation* (1894) and *Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary* (1896), among many others.
Denis combined his interest in Symbolist painting and deep religious faith to create modern day biblical scenes. After the war, Denis primarily devoted himself to the *Ateliers d’art sacré* school and his decorative commissions were few after the early 1920s.

*Ateliers d’art sacré* functioned as a training workshop and religious art studio for many years. Though countless artists were affiliated with the group throughout its existence, one particularly stands out: Denis’ protégé, Dominican Father Marie-Alain Couturier; formerly known as Pierre-Charles-Marie Couturier (1897-1954). Before joining the Dominican Order in 1925, Couturier was an aspiring artist working primarily in stained glass. Couturier and Denis were close at first, even creating the stained glass windows for a church in Le Raincy together in 1923. However, over the years the two grew apart over at least one fundamental difference between them concerning modern art and the Church. For Denis, great religious art was produced by artists *within* the faith, as evidenced by the following correspondence: “The duty of religious art is, above all else, to externalize the artist’s religious emotion in an enlightening and decorative way.” He also wrote, “Christian art requires a specific sensibility of the artist, not one that is cultivated through reading Plato or the education of an *honnête homme*, but one developed according to the dogma of the Church tradition.” As the following paragraphs will explain, Fr. Couturier had a much different opinion of what constituted “good” religious art, and more importantly, who could create it.

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22 *Ateliers d’art sacré* functioned on the model of a medieval workshop, based on theology and liturgy. It was one of several parallel movements such as *Les Catholiques des Beaux-Arts, L’Arche, Les artisans de l’autel, and La Rosace*. See *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art & Architecture*, edited by Tom Devonshire Jones (Oxford University Press, 2013) for basic information.


25 Ibid., 61. Rinuy cites Denis’ response to a survey on Christian art conducted by the magazine *L’Action française* between 1912-1913. The following question was posed, “Should artists who work with religious subjects practice a form of painting that is different from ordinary painting, one that is specifically Christian?”
In 1937, Couturier became co-editor of the journal *L’Art Sacré* (Fig. 6).\(^{26}\) In this venture, he joined Fr. Pie-Raymond Régamey, a trained art historian and former curator at the Louvre. The two proved to be an excellent team, leading the review together until Couturier’s death in 1954. Both strongly believed in the inclusion of contemporary art in church decoration and successfully encouraged several of the greatest artists of their time, regardless of religious faith or lack thereof, to participate in the revival of church decoration in France. Recognizing the wealth of artistic talent that existed locally, Fr. Couturier declared:

“We shall keep in mind that France has the greatest living painters and sculptors. Today they are covered with glory and universally recognized. They are the ones we must turn to. As a matter of principle. And even if they refuse, they must be called upon first. Go elsewhere only if they refuse. That way we shall save and maintain a tradition and a will to greatness, which are indispensable if the salvation and honor of Christian art are to be saved.”\(^{27}\)

With this both nationalistic and progressive message, *L’Art Sacré* became the mouthpiece for the reintegration of religious art and modern society: an institutional critique from within the institution.

A 1951 article penned by Couturier for *Magazine of Art* clearly defined the two-fold mission of *L’Art Sacré* as a radical movement in the history of religious art. First, Couturier noted the practical importance of summoning the greatest masters of modern art for the decoration of religious structures. Referencing artists such as Bonnard, Matisse, Rouault, Braque, Léger, and Chagall, Couturier explained, “We called on them purely and simply because they were the greatest—because, in fact, they were the best painters and sculptors of our day. We

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\(^{27}\) Marie-Alain Couturier, *Sacred Art*, 35.
believed that it was our duty to procure for God and our Faith the best art of the present.”

Secondly, firmly believing that traditional religious art was “dead,” Couturier felt that by turning to masters of contemporary art, “We might be able to bring about a renaissance of Christian art in general.” This was a major turning point in Christian art and church decoration. No longer did personal faith matter, as evidenced by several of Fr. Couturier’s postwar churches. Like Matisse, Le Corbusier, and other artists that he worked with, Couturier believed that artists were approaching the divine through their art, not through their personal beliefs. Couturier initiated and encouraged a number of church commissions with the intention of reintegrating contemporary art and Christianity, as we will see below.

The Church of Notre-Dame de Tout Grâce du Plateau d’Assy (1938–1949) near Mont Blanc was the first of Fr. Couturier’s large-scale projects and marks the first time modern artists were commissioned to create work for the Church (Fig. 7). This Roman Catholic church was built for patients of a nearby sanatorium and is exemplary of Couturier’s interest and influence within the modern art world. As such, the list of artists who contributed to the decoration of Assy reads like a “greatest hits” of twentieth-century European art and includes Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, Jacques Lipchitz, Jean Lurçat, Henri Matisse, Germaine Richier, and Georges Rouault, among others. The inclusion of Jewish artists (Chagall and Lipchitz) is important to note, as this project spanned over the war years when work was not commissioning Jewish artists.

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29 Ibid., 269.

30 Samuel, *Sacred Concrete*, 33.

31 The Church of Sacré-Cœur d’Audincourt (1950–1955) has been omitted from this discussion of *L’art Sacré* but it also exemplifies Fr. Couturier’s mission and features the work of Fernand Léger (stained glass) and Jean René Bazaine (mosaic).

delayed until it was finally consecrated in 1950. Regarding the artists who contributed to Assy, Couturier wrote the following in an issue of *L’Art Sacré*, “Art lives only by its masters—the living masters. Not by its dead masters, precious as their legacy may be.”

The wide range of artistic mediums on display at Assy is also worthy of examination. A view of the cavernous interior (Fig. 8) highlights the enormous tapestry by textile artist Jean Lurçat inspired by the fourteenth-century *L’Apocalypse* tapestry at Angers, which he studied in great detail. Also visible are Richier’s controversial crucifix on the altar and to the left, Matisse’s ceramic altarpiece of St. Dominic. Other mediums include the mosaic façade designed by Fernand Léger and stained glass windows by Rouault—the first works by Rouault permitted in a church. The church was an international success and was even featured in the American *Life* magazine shortly before its consecration. The article summarized the church decoration at Assy as follows:

> “Instead of the standard portrayals of saints, the Assy church windows and walls are a blaze of abstract designs by 15 of France’s leading modern artists, including Bonnard, Rouault, Léger, Lurçat—with two stained glass windows by Couturier himself. The decorations have aroused considerable opposition, not so much because they are abstract as because most of the artists who did them are disbelievers. Some are even known to be Communists. But Couturier declares that the Church must lay priority on the creative genius of the artists, not on their beliefs.”

By including the “considerable opposition” to the church decoration at Assy, the *Life* magazine article demonstrates the degree to which Couturier’s projects were radical for their time.

Perhaps the most well known example of the *L’Art Sacré* movement in France is the pilgrimage Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp of 1954 (Fig. 10), designed entirely by

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33 Couturier, *Sacred Art*, 52.
34 Richier’s faceless, crossless, torment Christ (Fig. 9) was ordered to be removed by the Bishop Auguste Cesbron of Annecy, after he decided that it was “a caricature representing nothing.” See “Removal at Assy: Crucifix by G. Richier,” *Time* 57, April 23, 1951, 68.
35 Couturier, *Sacred Art*, 56.
famed twentieth-century architect, Le Corbusier. An outspoken agnostic, Le Corbusier initially refused the commission to rebuild the war-damaged chapel. It is likely that he finally accepted after Fr. Couturier’s encouragement and insistence. Although Le Corbusier was reluctant to be a part of what he considered a “dead institution,” he was very interested in creating a specific kind of space.

Le Corbusier wrote about l’espace indicible, a phrase he invented, in a number of his writings beginning in 1946. For Le Corbusier, l’espace indicible, or ineffable space, is a space in which, “We are riveted by our senses; we are ravished in our minds…no question of religious dogma enters in…there is nothing but pure forms in precise relationships.” In a 1961 interview, Le Corbusier described ineffable space in the following way:

“When a work reaches a maximum of intensity, when it has the best proportions and has been made with the best quality of execution, when it has reached perfection, a phenomenon takes place that we may call “ineffable space.” When this happens these places start to radiate. They radiate in a physical way and determine what I call “ineffable space,” that is to say, a space that does not depend on dimensions but on the quality of its perfection. It belongs to the domain of the ineffable, of that which cannot be said.”

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39 Le Corbusier’s essay “L’Espace indicible” was published in 1946 and translated into English two years later as the opening of New World of Space (1948).


The Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, a structure that by all photographic accounts does radiate, exemplifies Le Corbusier’s notion of ineffable space. As one scholar describes, “Although brutally empty and raw at a physical level, these elemental spaces are, strangely, metaphysically full, due to a captivating light that fills and relieves the material voids, gaining added strength when set against such utterly plain and vacant things.” Light is especially important at the otherwise dim chapel at Ronchamp. Once inside, the senses take over, resulting in an experience that defies words.

Sitting atop a hill overlooking the small town of Ronchamp, the approach to the chapel has been likened to that of the Parthenon on the Acropolis. This of course has great symbolic meaning: physical ascension as a means of becoming closer to a higher power or the sacred, much like Frank Lloyd Wright’s contemporaneous design for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (1959). The rich, textural white walls are the antithesis to the Rothko Chapel’s brick exterior and smooth concrete interior walls. They appear rough, almost like pumice stone (Fig. 11). The walls catch and absorb light from the various painted glass windows situated in deep recesses along the southern wall. Most of the irregularly spaced windows are composed of only a few panes of painted glass, many in primary color schemes. Some contain abstracted religious symbols and references, others just simple words, like étoile (star), or Marie, signifying the Virgin Mary. The corners untouched by light recede back into a dark chiaroscuro.

The chapel at Ronchamp greatly differs from traditional church architecture in one major way. Unlike Gothic style church architecture, one is hard-pressed to find more than one ninety-degree angle at Ronchamp, with even the roof curving at unusual angle. Although their exteriors

could not be more different, Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp and the Rothko Chapel do share commonalities.\textsuperscript{44} Both are rather empty physically speaking, yet metaphysically full. One could argue that both chapels radiate with Le Corbusier’s notion of ineffable space.

Finally, the \textit{L’art Sacré} structure most closely linked to the Rothko Chapel is Chapelle du Rosaire (Chapel of the Rosary) in Vence, France.\textsuperscript{45} Also commonly referred to as “The Matisse Chapel,” it was the artist’s last major work and self-proclaimed masterpiece, completed for the Dominican Sisters in 1951. The intimate rectangular chapel was designed entirely by Matisse, including the vestments and liturgical furnishings in addition to more standard decorative elements. Matisse created several large-scale line drawings, painted in black directly onto glossy white ceramic tiles. Depicted throughout the chapel are The Virgin and Child, the Stations of the Cross (Fig. 12), and St. Dominic (Fig. 13), who was modeled after Fr. Couturier.\textsuperscript{46}

From the outside, it is a deceptively simple structure, not unlike the Rothko Chapel. Once inside however, the space becomes a jewel box of pure color. The entire south façade of the building is covered in stained glass floor-to-ceiling windows, which blanket the interior space in color. Vibrant primary colors dominate the otherwise white, sparse chapel interior. The focal point, the “Tree of Life Window” behind the altar, is comprised of a slightly abstracted pattern of green background panels, blue prickly pear cactus leaves, and yellow blooms, which as one

\textsuperscript{44} For a rare direct comparison between Notre-Dame du Haut and the Rothko Chapel, see Philip James Tabb, “Semantic Cosmologies of the Ronchamp and Rothko Chapels,” in \textit{Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding}, 89-99.


\textsuperscript{46} Matisse’s line drawings on the ceramic tiles at Vence are quite similar to the painting he provided for the Church of Notre-Dame de Tout Grâce du Plateau d’Assy. St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order, is depicted by Matisse in both commissions.
A scholar argues, are meant to symbolize the way life resists drought and death. As with most stained glass, colored light has heightened spiritual significance by making the invisible visible. Dependent on so many windows, the interior is quite sensitive to changing light, as is the Rothko Chapel.

There is a strong link between Chapel of the Rosary and the Rothko Chapel. As later observed by Dominique de Menil, “Each presented a major artist---Matisse on the one hand, Rothko on the other—with an opportunity for a new departure, a new direction in experimentation, enabling him to eventually transcend the space offered to him.” Both artists recognized the importance of these, the most important commissions of their respective careers. About Chapel of the Rosary, Matisse wrote, “This chapel is for me the culmination of a lifetime of work, and the fruit of immense effort, heartfelt but difficult.” A mere fifteen years later, Rothko expressed a similar sentiment in a letter to his patrons, Dominique and John de Menil, “The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me. For this I thank you.” Both statements beautifully reflect the gravity of each commission to the artists and demonstrate the unprecedented effort required of both Matisse and Rothko to complete works of this nature, both late in life.

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50 Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel*, 18. Barnes cites the excerpt from a letter to the de Menils dated January 1, 1966—one year before the chapel paintings were finished.
51 The fact that the two chapels were the last major commissions for both artists is significant. Matisse died just three years after Chapel of the Rosary was consecrated. Rothko committed suicide on February 25, 1970, almost exactly one year before the chapel in Houston was completed and dedicated.
There also exists a very real personal connection between Matisse’s Chapel of the Rosary and the Rothko Chapel. At the onset of World War II, Fr. Couturier was caught abroad in North America, spending his time between New York City and Canada. This event turned out to be instrumental to the conception of the Rothko Chapel, for it was during this time that Fr. Couturier met John and Dominique de Menil, Houston area philanthropists also originally from France. The de Menils visited Couturier while he was in New York between 1943-1945. Together they spent time at museum exhibitions and in galleries, and the de Menils made their first modern art purchases. After Couturier returned to France, the de Menils again visited him and toured Assy, Audincourt, Vence and the site at Ronchamp where Notre-Dame du Haut would be constructed. Very much wanting to emulate Chapel of the Rosary, the de Menils proposed a chapel to the president of the University of St. Thomas upon their return to Houston. Their proposal stipulated that Philip Johnson, who had already designed most of the campus and also the de Menil’s home, work on the design for the chapel. They also specified that Mark Rothko, a contemporary abstract artist, create a series of paintings for the interior. As in the aforementioned examples, neither the artist nor architect was particularly known for their religious beliefs, but the resulting structure became a renowned spiritual space.

Mies van der Rohe and the IIT Chapel

While the chapels associated with L’art Sacré provide the French lineage of the Rothko Chapel, contemporaneous religious architecture in America cannot be overlooked, particularly

52 See Pamela Smart’s chapter “Faith” in Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) for more information on Fr. Couturier’s impact on the de Menils.
53 Barnes, The Rothko Chapel, 33.
54 Philip Johnson was no stranger to Texas; in fact, he designed several projects for the Lone Star State and later declared Texas “his favorite country.” See Frank D. Welch, Philip Johnson & Texas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).
the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969). Declared one of the four founders of the International Style, Mies quickly rose to fame in the United States after the Museum of Modern Art’s landmark exhibition, “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition,” in 1932.\textsuperscript{55} The exhibition was organized by Philip Johnson, then the Director of the Department of Architecture at the museum, along with Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Alfred Barr, Jr. Over the next several decades, Johnson, the original architect of the Rothko Chapel, would become Mies’ friend, protégé, and competitor. Traces of this professional relationship are evident in the early stages of the Rothko Chapel commission, if not the final product.

After serving as the Head of the Bauhaus School from 1930-1934, German-born Mies immigrated to the United States where he became the Director of Department of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in 1938. His architectural influences included the Neo-Classical structures of fellow German Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who was known as “the greatest architect of the Romantic period in Europe.”\textsuperscript{56} Like Maurice Denis, Mies was influenced by the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and believed in the importance of “spirit in architecture,” which, for Mies, was partly achieved through aesthetics and fine materials. In 1927 he wrote:

“The leaders of the modern movement must recognize and come to terms with the spiritual and material forces of our time and, without prejudice, draw the necessary


conclusions from them. For only when architecture derives from the material forces of a time can it activate its spiritual decisions."57

To this end, Mies reduced the materials he employed to an extreme degree. The Abstract Expressionists, including Rothko, would later employ the same approach in their paintings.58 In addition to the expressive value of materials, he was also interested in “space as an architectural problem” and “proportion as a means of architectural expression.”59 Combined, these elements had the potential to produce a transcendental experience of space.

One of the most significant projects of Mies van der Rohe’s career in America was the Illinois Institute of Technology (1941), which he transformed into a “wholly modernist campus.”60 Of Mies’ twenty buildings for the IIT campus, the structure most closely aligned with the Rothko Chapel is the Robert F. Carr Memorial Chapel of St. Savior, constructed in 1952 (Fig. 14). The Carr Memorial Chapel, or the IIT Chapel, is the only ecclesiastical structure completed by Mies. It is a brick, steel, and glass cube-like building in a style that has been described as “the skin and skeleton type of construction,” with the load-bearing components providing the skeleton and the walls filling in the gaps as the skin.61 As evidenced by the exterior photograph, the IIT Chapel is modest structure, completely devoid of any religious signifiers, much like the Rothko Chapel.

58 Ibid., 227.
59 Werner Blaser, *Mies van Der Rohe: IIT Campus, Illinois Institute of Technology*, Chicago (Basel; Boston: Birkhäuser, 2002), 38. Blaser cites an article that Mies wrote for the IIT Bulletin in 1944/45, in which he also declared the importance of “painting and sculpture in their relationship to architecture” as a means to achieve clarity. Rothko was interested in many of the same ideas in his own work and its manner of display, as chapter two will demonstrate.
One of the many things that Philip Johnson admired about his mentor was his use of “opulent materials,” especially in his design for the Tugendhat House early on in Mies’ career (1930). As evidenced by the drawing, Johnson’s original plan for the chapel is quite different than what one encounters at the site today. It was initially designed to be constructed of steel and masonry in a near-cube, which eventually evolved into the octagon that Rothko insisted upon. Johnson imagined the chapel would be the climax of the campus mall that he himself had designed. It would be crowned by a grandiose, pyramidal dome, which became a point of contention between artist and architect nearly immediately after Rothko accepted the commission and was ultimately overruled.

The similarities between the two chapels extend beyond the surface, although it has been noted that Philip Johnson’s designs were “Miesian” in appearance through the late 1950s. As described on the official website, “The Rothko Chapel is an independent institution, a sacred place open to all people every day.” How is this mission reflected in the architecture of the chapel? First time visitors to the Rothko Chapel are often taken aback by the intimidating façade

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of the structure (Fig. 16), which could very likely be a common reaction at the IIT Chapel as well. In fact, the Illinois Institute of Technology employs similar language to describe the Carr Memorial Chapel. Their website currently states, “Individuals and groups of all faiths are welcome to use the chapel for meetings, services, and meditation.” Both chapels were dedicated to be inclusive, nondenominational spaces: one to engage the IIT student body, and the other to fulfill a mission of contemplation and peace.

The exteriors of the IIT and Rothko chapels work to achieve this aim. Both appear simplistic in their geometric design and are constructed of industrial materials such as brick, concrete, and glass. To be frank, both are decidedly unconventional looking sacred places. Because both structures are so unique in their design, they do not necessarily exclude any particular group of people, suggesting the possibility of a universal sacred space. Without visual or physical obstructions, the interior layout of each of the chapels creates a communal space and experience. A view inside the Rothko Chapel (Fig. 17) demonstrates the lack of separation or barriers between visitors and between visitors and the paintings. The space exists as one large, octagonal room with all visitors to the site on the same level. Similarly, the interior of the IIT Chapel also consists of one, largely empty, rectangular room. Deceptively stark in their designs, the IIT Chapel and Rothko Chapel are American icons in twentieth-century religious architecture.

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68 When I had the opportunity to visit the Rothko Chapel recently, a pair of international tourists asked me repeatedly if “that was it” as they approached what was certainly an unexpected sight.

http://www.iit.edu/spiritual_life/iit_chapel.shtml

70 For more on universal space as it applies to Mies’ plans for the IIT campus, see Werner Blaser, Mies van Der Rohe: IIT Campus, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 9-11.
The Rothko Chapel as a Product of Transatlantic Ideas

The aforementioned examples of the *L’art Sacré* movement in France and Mies van der Rohe’s work in America are integral components to the genealogy that makes up the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. In her dedication address on February 26, 1971, Dominique de Menil made the relationship between the Rothko Chapel and the *L’art Sacré* very explicit:

“In the summer of 1952 we visited with Father Couturier, another Dominican, the church where Léger and Matisse, two towering artists of their time, had contributed their greatest work. We visited also the site where Le Corbusier was going to build his famous Chapel at Ronchamp. We saw what a master can do for a religious building when he is given a free hand. He can exalt and uplift as no one else.”

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In their own commission, the de Menils were not unlike Fr. Couturier in their insistence that the chapel be designed and decorated by a great architect and great artist of their time, despite conflicting religious beliefs. John and Dominique de Menil were no strangers to Rothko’s work by the time they asked him to create paintings for their chapel at the University of St. Thomas. Dominique first visited Rothko’s studio in 1959.72 In 1964, when Dominique returned to officially offer the chapel commission to Rothko, the de Menils owned three of his paintings and entrusted him with the interior of the chapel. Rothko would be working with architect Philip Johnson, with whom he was quite familiar, on the building’s design.73 When the two personalities came to an impasse in 1967, Eugene Aubry and Howard Barnstone took over and

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71 Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 21.
72 Dominique visited Rothko to view the then-placeless Seagram Murals. They were briefly considered for the chapel but ultimately the de Menils decided that new works should be created in conjunction with the new space that would be designed for the University of St. Thomas.
73 See Chapter two, “Alternate Possibilities,” for more information on the previous relationship between Philip Johnson and Mark Rothko.
completed the architectural program.\textsuperscript{74} *Broken Obelisk*, a sculpture by Barnett Newman shares the site of the Rothko Chapel and occupies the space on the other side of the reflection pool, accredited to Philip Johnson.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, very much like the Church of Notre-Dame de Tout Grâce du Plateau d’Assy, the Rothko Chapel can be seen as a product of the work of many different artists: Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Philip Johnson, Eugene Aubry, and Howard Barnstone.

As stated previously, the Rothko Chapel also pulls elements from Mies van der Rohe’s Robert Carr Memorial Chapel. Although it was originally intended to be a Catholic chapel for the University, the final product is a nondenominational space for all types of worship. A wide variety of holy books are available in the lobby, further adding to the universal aspect that we also find in the IIT chapel. The exterior of the Rothko Chapel, though nondescript in appearance, carefully guards the interior space, creating a sense of mystery and separating the sacred realm from the everyday beyond the chapel’s brick walls.

Where does the Rothko Chapel fall in the sacred versus secular debate? Is it a nondenominational worship space for people of all faiths? A sacred site for meditation and reflection? A tourist attraction? A one-man art museum? A monument? It is not possible to tackle such subjective questions here, but one thing is for certain: the art and architecture of the Rothko Chapel are inextricably linked, both drawing from transatlantic influences.

\textsuperscript{74} Sheldon Nodelman describes the impasse between artist and architect as a “bitter power struggle” between an “ill-assorted pair.” Both men were likely still reeling from their first (and rather unsuccessful) attempt at collaboration for the Four Seasons Restaurant in New York’s Seagram Building, only a few years prior. It is interesting that the de Menils thought a second attempt at collaboration would be successful. See Nodelman’s chapter, “The Architectural Program,” in *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning*, 43-79, for detailed information on the chapel’s architecture.

CHAPTER II
ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES

Much like Mies’ chapel for the IIT campus and the Matisse Chapel, the Rothko Chapel is a structure without frills and only minimal decoration. Inspired by the Byzantine chapel of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, Italy, Rothko decided on the octagonal layout very early on in the commission, with Philip Johnson as the architect selected by the de Menils. Rothko was reportedly interested in the tension created by The Last Judgment mosaic on the entrance wall and the Virgin and Child of the opposing apse (Fig. 18). The summer before he began the paintings in earnest, Rothko described his vision to Dore Ashton, an art critic and close friend of Rothko for twenty plus years. She recalled that Rothko’s idea was to “make East and West merge in an octagonal chapel.”

Regarding Rothko’s love specifically for the Byzantine chapel in Torcello, Ashton continued:

“The central apse in the basilica in Torcello also stimulated Rothko’s vision of spiritual light. There is a rare apparition of an elongated Madonna and child, standing on a symbolic, disembodied small rectangular platform against a vast absence created in gold. The totally abstract gold ground of the curving wall of the apse gives a immense sense of transcendence.”

James Breslin elaborates on the religious connotations of an octagonal-shaped chapel: “The octagon, most often used by Christian architects for baptisteries and tombs, structures with a

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76 Stephen Fox, “Visionary Builders: John and Dominique de Menil as Architectural Patrons,” in Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding, 32. Fox argues that Rothko wanted visitors to the chapel at the University of St. Thomas to “experience the profound emotions he had felt at Torcello.” Dominique de Menil also remarked on this connection in her inaugural address, February 26, 1971, and in her article “The Rothko Chapel,” Art Journal 30, no. 3 (Spring 1971): 249.

77 Annie Cohen-Solal, Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel, Jewish Lives (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015), 189. Cohen-Solal describes Rothko “had been deeply shaken by the mosaic of the Last Judgment over the altar, but his fears were soon swept away by the sight of the gold-background Madonna and Child opposite the altar, in the apse. This was precisely the tension, between condemnation and promise, he sought to re-create in the Houston chapel.”


79 Ibid, 172. Ashton also describes Rothko’s interest in the exterior of the old Byzantine chapels, as they were “unadorned” and “merely the keepers of the treasures inside,” much like the exterior of the chapel in Houston.
hallowed space at the center, would in Rothko’s design, surround, enclose—or perhaps enwomb—the viewer within his paintings.”  

The result in Houston is a modest brick building situated in Menil Park in the historic, bungalow-lined Montrose district of the city. The University of St. Thomas campus—the chapel’s original home—has always been the neighboring property on the eastern side. The expansive Menil Collection campus nearly surrounds the remaining three sides of the chapel and now consists of the Rothko Chapel offices, the Cy Twombly Gallery, the nearby Dan Flavin Installation, as well as the Menil Collection itself to the immediate west, designed by Renzo Piano in 1987. A new structure for the Menil Drawing Institute, the first facility for modern and contemporary drawings, is projected to open on the campus in 2017. This small yet culturally rich area of the city would likely not exist as it does now without the Rothko Chapel at its center.

As discussed in the previous chapter, in order to fully appreciate the Rothko Chapel, it must be considered as one piece of a larger complex; not as a singular structure. Directly across from the chapel’s south-facing entrance stands Broken Obelisk, a sculpture by one of Rothko’s contemporaries, Barnett Newman (Fig. 19). This monument, dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is constructed of Cor-Ten steel plates and reaches over twenty feet in height. It is installed at the far end of a shallow rectangular reflecting pool designed by Philip Johnson to accompany the chapel entrance and sculpture. Due to the sculpture’s alignment along the same

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81 Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings*, 75. Nodelman also stresses this fact, referring to the site as “a studied, if quietly understated, monumental complex,” consisting of chapel building, pool, and sculpture.
axis as the chapel entrance, at least one scholar has suggested that “one may perhaps see in this alignment a silent accolade on Newman’s part to his old and long-estranged friend, whose memorial service he would attend a few months later.”\textsuperscript{83} Thus, \textit{Broken Obelisk} and the reflecting pool may be considered integral components of the Rothko Chapel complex.

The south and western sides of the reflecting pool are sheltered by a thick band of tall bamboo reeds. Approaching the site from this corner, the viewer can be in for quite a shock once they pass through the dense greenery. Dore Ashton perhaps described the chapel’s humble exterior best when she referred to it as a “barren concrete shed.”\textsuperscript{84} Two dark brown doors are the only distraction from the plain brick façade, which looks more like the mouth of a cave or the entrance to a mineshaft than an art museum or place of worship. The entrance sign is tucked inconspicuously into the chapel’s doorway, (Fig. 20) and is only visible once the visitor is about to enter the foyer.

Two doorways lead from the small foyer into the chapel, one on either side of the staff desk. Once inside, the space opens up into a symmetrical cavern, usually illuminated only by a central skylight. Rothko strongly preferred for his paintings to be viewed in natural light. He reportedly told architect Eugene Aubry that he wanted the chapel paintings to be seen as if stumbled upon in a natural setting, like a forest: in daylight, you would see them, and at night, you would not.\textsuperscript{85} The sparse furnishings inside the chapel are a number of simple wooden benches arranged around the center of the room. Three black meditation cushions are also provided for visitors on the asphalt block flooring.

\textsuperscript{83} Nodelman, \textit{The Rothko Chapel Paintings}, 75.
\textsuperscript{85} Nodelman, \textit{The Rothko Chapel Paintings}, 69. Nodelman received this information in a 1991 telephone interview with Aubry.
On the chapel’s eight somewhat discolored gray concrete walls are the fourteen large-scale non-objective paintings: three sets of triptychs and five individual panels. Every wall is employed to its fullest potential, displaying either one massive painting (the largest of Rothko’s oeuvre), or a grouping of three with little extra space surrounding each panel. In this way, it is truly an interior designed for the paintings. For the viewer, the effect is a dizzying sensation of being surrounded by the immense panels of pure and dark color. It is difficult, if not impossible to focus on one singular painting, as the adjoining walls and panels continuously enter the periphery vision. Viewers are also eerily aware of the murals behind their back while directly facing any one wall.

Both entrances into the space are located on the southern wall, meaning no matter which door the visitor chooses, they are immediately confronted by the north wall and the apse triptych (Fig. 17 and Fig. 21). Spanning at nearly 25 feet wide and 15 feet tall, the apse triptych is comprised of three monochrome panels, each stained a similar shade of dark plum. The apse triptych (along with the angle wall monochromes that will soon be discussed) marks the first and only monochromatic paintings of Rothko’s career. As evidenced by the photograph of the apse wall, the surface of the paintings do not appear uniform or flat. Each one is unique in its

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86 Due to their immense size, the panels of the north apse triptych (as well as the four angle wall monochromes) were completed by two assistants; one starting at either end of the canvas and working towards the middle. In this way, as Breslin notes, Rothko operated as “a kind of small-scale Renaissance master, controlling, directing, supervising the work of his young assistants.” Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 470. For more information on Rothko’s process and methods behind the chapel paintings, see Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings*, 83-115.

87 Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings*, 93. Nodelman notes three innovations in Rothko’s chapel paintings: “monochromy, triptych configuration, and “hard-edged” geometric composition.” According to Nodelman the three variables are uncharacteristic of Rothko’s previous work, however, it seems he momentarily forgot about the triptych included in the Harvard Mural commission (1961-1962). Following the chapel commission, Rothko resumed his practice of dividing the canvas into at least two stacked horizontal rectangles of differing colors.
distinctive brushstrokes and markings, creating a varied and layered appearance not unlike a threatening storm cloud overhead.

Adorning each of the chapel’s “angle walls” (northwest, northeast, etc) are four more purple monochromatic panels (Fig. 22). The monochromes were executed in the same manner as the apse triptych. Each is displayed on its own angle wall of the chapel, breaking up the triptychs by creating an alternating pattern. The color of the monochrome panels is the lightest of all the chapel paintings. In bright light, they appear to be a vibrant shade of purple and gradually darken as the day passes. Again, brushstrokes and surface variances are obvious and add depth to the four paintings.

The monochrome paintings were certainly innovative for Rothko, as are the so-called black-form triptychs (Fig. 21). A pair of identical triptychs, twenty feet in length, occupy both the east and the west side walls. Each panel contains a large black rectangle imposed on a dark maroon background of the same tone. The rectangles nearly cover the entire canvas, with only a thin border of alizarin crimson left visible on all sides. Regarding the large black rectangles, Dominique de Menil wrote, “at first, the [black] field occupied only the central part—an opening in a wall into the night. Step by step, the field was enlarged, leaving only a narrow margin of color. The night had invaded the wall.”88 The center panel, wider than the surrounding panels by 2.5 feet, is raised slightly higher, yet all three paintings are the same height.

The remaining chapel painting is the most interesting. The lone painting on the south wall is situated in between the two entrance doorways (Fig. 23), hence it is commonly referred to as the “entrance wall panel.” It is unlike any of the other paintings installed in the chapel.89 First, the ground layers do not match any other paintings inside the chapel. Instead of the stained

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89 The entrance wall panel, however, is very similar to the six alternate chapel paintings that will become the focus of this chapter.
bluish purple of the monochromes or the eggplant shades of the black-form triptychs, the entrance wall panel has more of a red or burgundy hue. Like the black-form triptychs of the side walls, the entrance wall panel also contains a geometric form at its center, though it does not follow the same format. A black hard-edged rectangle expands over roughly 4/5 of the height of the canvas from just shy of the top edge downwards, leaving the lower fifth of the painting’s merlot-colored ground layers exposed. In height, the entrance wall panel is identical to its opposite across the chapel, the apse triptych. Once referred to as “an impending doom,” the entrance wall panel interacts with the apse triptych that it faces and is the last painting viewers see as they exit the chapel.90

The colors of the Rothko Chapel murals have often been compared to blood. Shortly after the chapel’s dedication, Dominique de Menil and Dore Ashton both described the paintings as “the colors of blood and wine”91 and “rich in their oxblood depths,”92 respectively. Referencing Rothko’s suicide just one year and two days prior to the chapel’s dedication, one reporter dramatically wrote, “The colors of the panels in this chapel are of shadows soaked in blood.”93 It is too easy to find correlations between dark paintings and depression. Those who incorrectly relate the chapel paintings to Rothko’s suicide have clearly not viewed his very last works, best described by Robert Goldwater in an article for Art in America shortly after Rothko’s death. When comparing the final group of paintings (Fig. 24), begun in 1968, to the chapel murals, Goldwater concludes, “Immobility and silence (aspects of timelessness) had long been qualities of Rothko’s art, but never the loneliness these last pictures seem to suggest. They reject

91 Ibid., 249.
92 Ashton, “Rothko Chapel in Houston,” 274.
participation and withdraw into themselves.” To most, it is as though Rothko’s artistic production ceased after the completion of the Houston chapel, which is simply inaccurate; an entire collection of works on paper were produced in Rothko’s final years. As Brian O’Doherty reminds us, Rothko’s very last painting was not black, grey, or dark brown, but bright red.

At its dedication, the Rothko Chapel was praised in newspapers for its likeness “in beauty and religious importance to the Sistine Chapel in Rome and the Matisse Chapel in France.” The space has since been known worldwide as a quiet sanctuary for private worship and meditation. Many visitors spend hours in the chapel sitting quietly, reading, or meditating. The Rothko Chapel also offers opportunities for more structured, communal spiritual activities. One of the chapel’s current programs, “Living Mindfully,” for example, offers Tai Chi by the reflecting pool, an interfaith lecture series, and a wide variety of guided meditations, such as Twilight Meditation, Christian Meditation, Hindu Meditation, and Jewish Meditation. In keeping with its mission to promote human rights and social activism, the Rothko Chapel has organized an additional program, called “Living As If: The Art, Spirituality, and Practice of Non-Violence.” Firmly placed within a neighborhood, the Rothko Chapel also acts as a community space. Concerts are held both inside and outside of the chapel each year, as well as film screenings. The space can be activated in many different ways, to suit all visitors and faiths.

The Rothko Chapel is a major achievement in the history of American modern art and architecture. Each year over 80,000 visitors travel to the site, many of them reflecting upon their

94 Robert Goldwater, “Rothko’s Black Paintings,” Art in America 59 (February 1971): 62. Goldwater was Rothko’s chosen biographer and therefore spent a great deal of time with the artist in the final years of his life.
97 The Rothko Chapel was recently named number one of “11 Art Destinations that Double as Therapeutic Retreats,” by The Huffington Post (December 2014).
experiences in the lobby’s comment books.\textsuperscript{98} Unless visitors have studied the chapel commission, or happened to also explore The Menil Collection next door, most would not know six additional paintings are also associated with the Rothko Chapel. This chapter seeks to bring the alternate chapel paintings to light, as well as for the first time explore existing scholarship and archival evidence questioning their intended role within the commission. Specific aspects of Rothko’s biography and psychological nature will also come into play as I argue that his practice of creating “extras” for each of three large commissions (the Seagram Murals, Harvard Murals, and Rothko Chapel paintings) in the final decade of his life, may relate to past experiences and his general state of being.

**The Alternate Chapel Paintings**

In 1970 the Rothko Chapel paintings traveled from storage in New York where they had laid dormant for three years to their final destination in Houston, Texas.\textsuperscript{99} Accompanying the fourteen paintings that now occupy the Rothko Chapel were four additional panels, referred to as “extras” or alternates. Dominique de Menil made the first mention of the extra panels in her 1971 *Art Journal* article: “Rothko decided on fourteen paintings. He painted eighteen, for alternate possibilities. The four extra panels do not seem actually fit in the scheme and it is difficult to


\textsuperscript{99} By all accounts, the Rothko Chapel paintings, including the six alternates, were completed by April of 1967. The alternate panels may have even been finished by 1966. See Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “The Rothko Chapel Paintings: A Personal Account,” in *Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding*, 81. Mancusi-Ungaro adds that Alexander Lieberman’s photo-shoot with the artist and the murals commemorates their official completion. See also Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith*, 67; Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings*, 115; and Interview with Ray Edwards, Rothko’s Assistant, Houston, April 1977, The Menil Collection Archives.
know exactly what Rothko had in mind.”100 Two more ‘alternate possibilities’ arrived in 1986 as a gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation to equal a total of six additional panels associated with the chapel commission. These six paintings, categorized as three sets of mutually identical pairs, now constitute the “Alternate Chapel Paintings: Pair A, Pair B, and Pair C,” currently on display at The Menil Collection.101

Similar to the chapel itself, visitors enter a gallery devoted solely to this series of Rothko’s work (Fig. 25). Though not evident in this particular photo of the installation at The Menil Collection, two plush benches offer seating for visitors and remain the only three-dimensional objects in the space. One large alternate chapel painting occupies each brightly painted white wall, surrounding the visitor in a similar, though not all-embracing, manner as the chapel. The entryway and two doors to the connected gallery rooms puncture the space in a way that cannot occur inside the insulated interior of the Rothko Chapel. During a recent visit to The Menil Collection, sound from a nearby video installation filtered into the gallery, greatly disrupting the experience and reminding one that this is not a place apart. This is very much a public space; distractions, both auditory and visual, are present. Visitors speak in louder voices, children race through the halls, attendants communicate with one another on walkie-talkies, and unlike the Rothko Chapel just one block away, it is not a space of reverence or meditation.

The alternate chapel paintings are visually imposing. They are six vertically oriented monoliths, each consisting of the same format and color scheme. Their size is overwhelming, especially when viewed together. ‘Pair A’ (Fig. 26) and ‘Pair B’ (Fig. 27) are identical in size,

100 de Menil, “The Rothko Chapel,” 251.
101 The alternate chapel paintings have been on semi-permanent display in the Menil Collection’s ‘Modern and Contemporary’ Gallery since 2011 when they were installed to honor the 40th anniversary of the dedication of the Rothko Chapel. The Rothko Chapel owns four of the paintings (Pairs A and B), the Menil Collection owns the other two (Pair C). It has been suggested in the press release that the alternate chapel paintings will be included in the upcoming major Rothko retrospective at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, September 20, 2015-January 24, 2016.
measuring 177 ½ by 96 inches, which translates to a towering 14.75 feet high and 8 feet across; similar dimensions to the angle-wall monochromes and the black-form triptychs inside the chapel. ‘Pair C’ (Fig. 28) is the same height but measures much wider at 114 ¼ inches, or 9.5 feet. Each is painted in a deep wine-like shade of red and black. All six paintings follow the same format: a large black square on nearly solid plane of maroon, the square placed just too high to be dividing the maroon canvas in half. Horizontally, the square leaves a small strip of approximately four inches of maroon on either side, creating a distinct sense of tension along the vertical edges of the paintings.

Although squares and rectangles can be found in much of Rothko’s work, most notably in his previous “multiform” paintings (Fig. 29), which began in the late 1940s and are referred to as Rothko’s “mature style,” the shapes that inhabit the alternate panels are quite different.\(^\text{102}\) Gone are the soft, hovering forms with loosely brushed outlines. Here, cloud-like forms have been replaced with hard edges and lines, systematically superimposed, first in charcoal with the aid of tape and painted over in layers of rich black paint.\(^\text{103}\) The black rectangles are far from flat. Instead, as one scholar has noted, “they seem to emanate light, the central rectangle acting not unlike a blank cinema screen, its velvetiness suggesting a space of indeterminable depth.”\(^\text{104}\) The alternates do not have the noticeable brush marks that are evident in the purple chapel.

\(^\text{102}\) Rothko’s classic “multiforms” have been studied extensively, almost as if the artist’s style did not change after the peak of his career. Figure 29, Orange and Yellow of 1956, demonstrates their typical format of two soft rectangles, stacked vertically, and executed in bright, pure colors. The background is a solid, lighter shade of orange. For more information on Rothko’s “multiforms,” see Chave, Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction, especially Chapter 4. The Portrait and the Landscape: Microcosm and Macrocosm. Also see David Anfam’s Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas: A Catalogue Raisonné, “The Classic Years: 1951-1970,” p. 70-106.

\(^\text{103}\) Nodelman, The Rothko Chapel Paintings, 113. The dimensions and placement of the black rectangles were reached with “painstaking effort.” Once he was satisfied with the location of the square, Rothko brushed them in using an egg-oil emulsion, painting as many as five layers to achieve the luminous effect he desired. Thus, the black rectangles are far from flat, matte voids, but appear to have depth.

\(^\text{104}\) Achim Borchardt-Hume, “Shadows of Light: Mark Rothko’s Late Series,” in Rothko: The Late Series (London: Tate, 2008), 24.
monochromes, completed earlier, but the surface is not exactly uniform. Around the edges of the squares, the red-maroon canvases give off a subtle glow, particularly evident in ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B.’ Upon close inspection, a lighter ring is visible around the perimeter of the black field.

It is hard to imagine that these paintings are alternates to the lighter, purple stained panels that occupy four walls of the chapel and the apse triptych, or even part of the same body of work. They are more visually similar to the black-form triptychs on the east and west walls of the Rothko Chapel (Fig. 21). In fact, the alternates are most like the entrance (south) wall panel (Fig. 23 and Fig. 30). Though similar in format and color scheme, the entrance panel is clearly not part of the alternate chapel paintings as a group, as some have suggested. First, the alternates are grouped in identical pairs with matching external dimensions. The entrance wall panel has no partner and is even larger than the alternates, at 180 by 105 inches (15 by 8.75 feet). In addition to the differing black shape, the ground color also varies. The entrance wall painting is lighter in color, giving off more of a reddish-brown hue when viewed in the chapel. The ground of the alternate paintings remains a consistent dark crimson red.

As this chapter will demonstrate, both biographical and archival information aid in setting the stage for the chapel commission and may provide some insight as to why Rothko included the six extra paintings, when he knew that there was not a place for them inside the structure he designed. There is an overabundance of scholarship on Mark Rothko as an American artist, as a mythmaker, and as a key figure in Color-Field Painting and Abstract Expressionism.

105 Susan Barnes makes this suggestion in her brief discussion of the alternate paintings in The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith, 63.
106 When comparing the alternate chapel paintings to the entrance wall panel, it is important to consider that the entrance wall panel has been almost consistently exposed to the harsh Texas light and humidity since its installation in 1971. The alternate chapel paintings have not been subject to the same conditions, and therefore, the colors may appear to be more vibrant because they have been better preserved in storage and on display at The Menil Collection. The way the light changes daily inside the chapel must also be taken into account, as any of the paintings might not appear in the same way from hour to hour.
This chapter will in no way attempt to summarize the life and works of the artist, however, certain biographical and personal information needs to be considered when exploring the possible role and function of the alternate chapel paintings. The chapel commission did not simply occur by happenstance or by Rothko being in the right place at the right time, or knowing the “right” people. Instead, it may be seen as the culmination of a series of events and the ideal commission for an artist who truly wished to create and control an environment with his work.

**Mark Rothko: Portrait of a Restless Man**

A photograph of Mark Rothko in his studio from 1964 (Fig. 31), around the time he was preparing to begin the alternate chapel paintings, can perhaps offer a window into his personal workspace and also his troubled nature. Most are familiar with Rothko’s self-inflicted death in the same studio in 1970, just six years after this photograph was taken. Here we see a sixty-year-old Rothko standing near a couch and makeshift coffee table, about to light an ever-present cigarette. He appears anxious, as if ready to pace the surprisingly tidy interior of the studio. His furrowed brow and stern expression almost suggest that the camera has caught him off guard, as if the camera and subsequently the viewer are not welcome in this private space. Behind him, we note two large paintings, one hanging on a wall, executed in a familiar format: a square within a rectangle. Based on the varying gray tones of this black and white photograph, we can almost imagine that the paintings consist of two contrasting shades of red, as seen in this similar photograph by Hans Namuth from the same year (Fig. 32).

Dore Ashton, mentioned previously as a close friend of the artist, described him as a “restless” man. According to Ashton, “Rothko was never quite able to make it through a meal, and he would scrape the back of his chair, light a cigarette, and pace the kitchen in his gumsole
shoes, trailing smoke.”

As one might expect, this sense of restlessness seeped into Rothko’s painting practice. He has been described by more than one source as “neurotically anxious about his work.”

Several biographical factors in Rothko’s life can account for such a high degree of restlessness or anxiety, including forced immigration, loss of his father at a young age, religious and cultural intolerance, and finally, a constant sense of never truly belonging anywhere, even in his own family.

Biographical Factors

Marcus Rotkovitch was born in 1903 in Dvinsk; then part of Russia, now in Latvia. Just months before his birth, a pogrom of “unprecedented scale” took place in Kishinev, now the capital of Moldova. The massacre took place over 700 miles from the Rotkovitch home, yet it was enough to rattle the secular Jewish family. The youngest of four children by eight years, Marcus was raised quite differently than his older siblings due to mounting political tension. Though his siblings attended nonreligious schools, it was decided that Marcus would be enrolled in the Talmud Torah, as Talmudic students were usually exempt from the army. Thus, Marcus spent his days diligently learning Hebrew and studying the Torah. In her very recent biography, Annie Cohen-Solal questions how Rothko tolerated being the only child in his family to “endure such austere discipline.” Could Rothko’s years at Talmud Torah impact the rest of his life? Was he resentful of this partial treatment?

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109 Cohen-Solal, Mark Rothko, 3.
110 Ibid., 12.
111 Ibid., 14. Cohen-Solal notes the immense amount of responsibility placed on Rothko’s shoulders at such a young age.
In 1913, along with nearly one million other European immigrants, many of them Jewish, Rothko, his mother, and his sister left their home to join the family father in Portland, Oregon.\footnote{Jacob Rotkovitch, a pharmacist, emigrated to the United States in 1910 to escape increasing political and economic pressures in Eastern Europe. In Portland, he joined his brother and extended family, who owned a successful clothing business. For an excellent discussion on Rothko’s father and Rothko’s childhood years abroad, see Annie Cohen-Solal, \textit{Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel}, 3-20.} Rothko was just ten years old at the time and the experience affected him profoundly. Even though his family likely would not have survived the wars, Rothko resented his forced migration to America for the remainder of his life. Following Rothko’s death, John Fischer of \textit{Harper’s Magazine}, who first met the artist and his family aboard the USS Constitution en route to Naples in 1959, recalled the following regarding their initial conversations:

“Somewhere inside he did nurse a small, abiding core of anger—not against anything specific, so far as I could tell, but against the sorry state of the world in general, and the role it now offers to the artist. He had been nursing it for a long time, ever since he was a boy growing up in Portland, Oregon…the youngster [Rothko] had never been able to forgive this transplantation to a land where he never felt entirely at home.”\footnote{John Fischer, “Mark Rothko: Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man,” \textit{Harper’s Magazine}, July 1, 1970, 16–17. John Fischer, former editor in chief of \textit{Harper’s Magazine}, was also the recipient of Rothko’s infamous “rant” regarding the failing Seagram Mural commission on this voyage, to be discussed later in this chapter.}

Imagine young Rothko’s dismay when his father passed away of chronic stomach problems less than one year after his family arrived in America. Transplanted to a strange country across the globe, forced to learn a new language, and now suddenly fatherless, Rothko did not adjust well to his new life. Rothko stopped attending school at the synagogue after his father’s death. He attended a public high school, which was his first encounter with a primarily non-Jewish population and the discrimination that followed.\footnote{Jews were restricted from participating in Lincoln High School’s clubs, including the Debating Society, which Rothko surely would have excelled at. For more on Rothko’s high school years in Portland, see Cohen-Solal, \textit{Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel}, 29-38.} One could argue that such devastating childhood and adolescent experiences were the cause of what would be an anxious and
distrustful existence, ultimately ending in the artist taking his own life in 1970 at the age of sixty-six.

After a rocky childhood, Rothko traveled east in 1921 to study at Yale University.\textsuperscript{115} While enrolled, he reportedly experienced an intensifying degree of anti-Semitism\textsuperscript{116}, which may have been one of the factors in his leaving the university prematurely. After spending a short period of time living on both coasts, Rothko settled in New York City and began attending classes at the Art Students League. Once permanently in New York, Rothko began to meet other artists from similar backgrounds, namely Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, two fellow painters also associated with Abstract Expressionism.\textsuperscript{117} As noted by Rothko’s biographer James Breslin, the three men had much in common: all were products of Jewish immigration, led secular and urban lives, had broad intellectual interests, and all three chose art, “then a particularly insecure profession in America and one in which they, as Jews, were “aliens.”\textsuperscript{118} Rothko had found other outsiders.

The writings of Irving Howe, a Jewish-American literary and social critic and roughly a contemporary of Rothko, may provide some insight into the anxieties that Rothko and others surely felt as Jewish-Americans living in New York during and after the atrocities of World War II. Howe writes as though representing the Jewish-American collective, often using the terms “they” and “we” to describe the population that he considered himself to be a part of and refers to in his work. Howe’s 1969 essay titled, “The New York Intellectuals,” though it focuses

\textsuperscript{115} Much to his family’s disappointment, Rothko left Yale after only two years and did not earn a college degree. He did, however, receive an honorary doctorate from the institution in 1969.
\textsuperscript{116} Breslin, \textit{Mark Rothko}, 47. Breslin describes increasing anti-Semitism in Ivy League schools in the 1920s, adding that Yale was known to be “one of the least friendly environments for Jews.”
\textsuperscript{117} Rothko also sought “a familial closeness” in The Ten, a group of nine New York-based artists, including Gottlieb, that frequently exhibited together in 1930s. For more information on The Ten, see Breslin, \textit{Mark Rothko: A Biography}, 101-106 and Irving Sandler, \textit{The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism} (New York: Praeger, 1970), 23, 62.
\textsuperscript{118} Breslin, \textit{Mark Rothko}, 202.
specifically on writers, can perhaps also be applied to Jewish-American artists working in New York.\textsuperscript{119} Rothko has also been frequently described as an intellectual, likely influenced by his father who reportedly had a library of over 300 volumes in their home in Dvinsk.\textsuperscript{120} In the beginning of his essay, Howe is quick to address the degree of separateness that Jewish immigrants felt in America: “The Jewish immigrant world branded upon its sons and daughters marks of separateness even while encouraging them to dreams of universalism.”\textsuperscript{121} Separateness is something that Rothko likely felt for the majority of his life in America. Later in the same essay, Howe discusses the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish-American immigrants, an event that without a doubt also greatly impacted Rothko:

“We were living directly after the holocaust of the European Jews. We might scorn our origins; we might crush America with discoveries of ardor; we might change our names. But we knew that but for an accident of geography we might also now be bars of soap. At least some of us could not help feeling that in our earlier claims to have shaken off all ethnic distinctiveness there had been something false, something shaming. Our Jewishness might have no clear religious or national content, it might be helpless before the criticism of believers; but Jews we were, like it or not, and liked or not.”\textsuperscript{122}

Certainly this sense of shame and guilt applied to Rothko, who shortened his Eastern European, Jewish name, Marcus Rothkowitz, around 1940, shortly after he became an American citizen.\textsuperscript{123} As far as his personal religious practices, Anna Chave has noted in her scholarship that although Rothko tried his hand at traditional Christian imagery early in his career in the 1930s, he

\textsuperscript{119} Howe also discusses the notable ‘New York Critics,’ Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, in section three of the essay, pages 247-251. Meyer Schapiro is also mentioned briefly in this section.
\textsuperscript{120} Cohen-Solal, \textit{Mark Rothko}, 7.
\textsuperscript{123} Breslin, \textit{Mark Rothko}, 125. Breslin finds that Rothko’s name change coincided with a dramatic change in his painting style, as though he had created a new identity for himself.
personally was never given to religious orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{124} As Rothko’s eldest child has reported, “Religion didn’t play a role in the Rothko house, but the Jewish holidays were observed.”\textsuperscript{125} Instead Rothko relied strictly on paintings as a means to channel his own ambiguous spiritual realm.

\textit{Rothko’s Letters}

In addition to his biography, we can also examine Rothko’s correspondence for hints of this conflicted and lost identity. Rothko’s letters from the late 1940s and early 1950s offer a glimpse into the struggles that he faced, both externally and internally. A collection of letters to his then close friend and art world ally Clyfford Still documents their mutual distrust and contempt for the New York art scene and many of its key players.\textsuperscript{126} Also evident is Rothko and Still’s “us versus them” attitude concerning other artists in their loose circle of Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock was a frequent target), as well as their frustrations regarding exhibitions, critical reviews, sales, and teaching positions. Rothko had certainly found a likeminded individual in Still even though Rothko was in New York and Still was based out of the San Francisco Bay area. Though an entire country apart, Still passionately echoed Rothko’s same concerns in his own colorful way of writing. One of the letters states, for example, “In fact,\textsuperscript{127}

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\textsuperscript{124} Anna Chave, \textit{Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction}, 44–45. Chave provides Rothko’s \textit{Crucifixion} of 1936 as an example.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{126} As evidenced by their correspondence now at the Clyfford Still Museum Archives, Rothko and Still had a warm friendship, writing regularly between 1946-1951, when suddenly their correspondence (and relationship) came to an abrupt halt. Still’s scathing letter to Sidney Janis, a New York gallery owner, dated 1955, offers some explanation as to why Still could no longer associate himself with Rothko, including Rothko’s “expediency, hypocrisy, or worse,” and the unavoidable “morbid implications of Rothko’s works and the shrewd ambivalence of his verbalism and acts.” Letter from Clyfford Still to Sidney Janis, April 4, 1955. Clyfford Still Museum Archives. Many factors contributed to Still’s withdrawal from his peers in the 1950s, but he especially perceived Rothko of “selling out” commercially. See Hilarie Sheets, “Clyfford Still, Unpacked,” \textit{Art in America} 99 no. 10 (2011): 118-127.
\end{flushright}
recent brief contacts with a new breed of smug and ignorant, rich brats has put me in a mood to carry some brass knuckles whenever I meet anyone remotely connected with the art world.”

Aside from the practical matters of daily life as an artist in the American postwar era, the letters also provide valuable evidence of Rothko’s troubled mental state and intermittent, yet severe, depression. Statements such as, “I am just emerging from one of the blackest depressions which I have ever experienced which struck at me physically as well as in my thoughts,” and “If anyone alive can have a glimpse of real hell, I suppose I have had it,” appear throughout his correspondence with Still, who at the time seemed sympathetic to Rothko’s struggles and offered encouragement and support.

Regarding professional matters, Rothko’s letters to Still are riddled with anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurities. Gallery shows seemed to only worsen Rothko’s often fragile emotional state. In an unpublished 1948 letter to Still, Rothko expressed the following concern: “My show is now lumping into its third week with the usual hollow and futile feeling at the pit of my stomach. The papers of course have assassinated the show.” He confessed a similar sentiment again in 1950: “My own show had its usual adherents and enemies. I sold 3 things which gives a little money. But all in all it was the same nerve wracking, and humiliating experience.”

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127 Quoted from one of Still’s last letters to Mark Rothko, in which Still arranges for the two artists to return each other’s work from their respective personal collections. January 12, 1956. Clyfford Still Museum Archives.
128 Letters from Mark Rothko to Clyfford Still. December 1, 1948 and March 17, 1950. Clyfford Still Museum Archives. David Anfam cites an almost identical quote in his essay “To See, or Not To See,” in Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding, 68. In 1948, Rothko wrote to Still, “I am just emerging from one of the blackest depressions that I have ever thought I would experience. It stuck at my physically, as well as in my thoughts. That is a depression.” Clearly Rothko wrote often of his bouts with depression.
Creating a Place: Rothko’s Mural Commissions

Given these remarks, a series of three large commissions in the late 1950s and early 1960s must have been a welcome relief for Rothko, who clearly appeared to dread gallery exhibitions and the reactions and criticisms of the general public. Each commission called for a permanent installation of Rothko’s work, and when considered in sequence, lead up to both the height of the artist’s career and the tragic end of his life. Rothko was finally able to create, and better yet, control, an environment for his work, much like Michelangelo’s Medici Library in Florence: a major source of inspiration for him at the time.131 Regarding one of the commissions, Rothko wrote, “What was obvious that there was in me the need to undertake a conception of a place contained and absolutely mine.”132

The Seagram Murals (1958-59), Harvard Murals (1961-1962), and Rothko Chapel paintings (1964-1967) have individually been thoroughly examined in existing scholarship, however, there are remarkable commonalities between these commissions that relate to the alternate chapel paintings. A number of shifts occur in Rothko’s paintings during this period. Most obviously we observe an increase in scale. The commissions offered Rothko the opportunity to work on a very large scale; so large, in fact, that he employed assistants for the first time. Relatedly, the commissions brought in enough income for Rothko to afford assistants and to rent larger studio spaces. This poses the interesting dilemma of Rothko’s no longer being the sole hand involved in his work. Also, with each mural commission, one observes a noticeable shift in Rothko’s color palette towards deep reds, purples, and even black. A somber tone begins to envelop the work, and continues into the very last paintings that Rothko completed before his

131 Breslin, Mark Rothko, 400–401. As Breslin notes, Rothko originally visited the Michelangelo’s Medici Library at San Lorenzo during his 1950 voyage to Europe and returned to the site once more in 1959, during a break from the Seagram project.
132 Borchardt-Hume, Rothko, the Late Series, 95. Rothko was referring specifically to the Seagram Murals.
Lastly, and most relevant for the discussion of the alternate chapel paintings, Rothko created extra panels for each mural commission preceding and including the chapel.

**Strictly Malicious Intentions: The Seagram Murals**

The Seagram Building, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, opened its doors on Park Avenue in 1958. Phyllis Lambert, the building’s Director of Planning, had the enviable task of developing the corporation’s contemporary art collection and so began Rothko’s most notorious commission. Artwork was needed for the Four Seasons Restaurant. Johnson and Lambert acquired work by Richard Lippold and Pablo Picasso before asking Rothko to complete a series of murals for the mezzanine of the “Pool Room.” The contract, signed June 1958, called for approximately 500-600 square feet of paintings, priced at $35,000. For the first time in his career, Rothko had the chance to create a “painterly environment.” He rented a large studio (a former YMCA gymnasium) and built a near life-size mockup of the mezzanine. According to Rothko’s assistant at the time Dan Rice, “He [Rothko] accepted the mural project because he realized the challenge that it offered him to build an environment.” But as the well-known story goes, Rothko returned the payment and the murals never made it to the Four Seasons Restaurant.

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133 See Brian O’Doherty, “Rothko’s Endgame,” in *Mark Rothko: The Dark Paintings 1969-1970* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1985), written to accompany the exhibition at the Pace Gallery, March 29-April 27, 1985. O’Doherty ponders the meaning behind Rothko’s last works, in which he abandoned his usual practice, in a new direction towards the notion of tragic.

134 For more information on the artwork purchased for the Four Seasons, see Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*, 2013. Commissioned to “lower” the height of the 20-foot ceilings, Lippold’s sculpture consists of countless vertical bronze rods suspended on stainless steel wires above the bar in the Grill Room of the Four Seasons. Additionally, in 1957, the team acquired Picasso’s stage curtain, *Le Tricorne*, designed for Sergei Diaghilev’s 1919 ballet, which occupied the entrance to the building and Four Seasons restaurant until late 2014 when it was carefully transported to the New York Historical Society.


An untitled manuscript of notes and reflections likely dating to the fall of 1960 holds numerous significant statements regarding the Seagram Murals. At first, Rothko describes his position at the start of the commission: “My one condition that the place be an enclosed space. In so far as I have always maintained that if I should be given an enclosed space which I could surround with my work it would be the realization of a dream that I have always held.”\textsuperscript{137} He concludes this note with the following foreshadowing, “Then I saw the completed destination. It was obvious that the two were not for each other. Then if not for this place, what other places. Banks, lobbys, chapels.”\textsuperscript{138}

John Fischer, mentioned previously as the former editor in chief of \textit{Harper’s Magazine}, heard Rothko’s frustrations with the commission first hand while the Rothko family took a much-needed vacation after eight months of intense work on the Seagram Murals. As Fischer famously reported, Rothko exclaimed:

\begin{quote}
“I’ll never take on such a job again. In fact I’ve come to believe that no painting should ever be displayed in a public place. I accepted this assignment as a challenge, with strictly malicious intentions. I hope to paint something that will ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room.”\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

Rothko returned his payment and nine of the Seagram Murals were arranged to be donated to the Tate in London in the late 1960s, arriving on the very same morning that Rothko’s body was found in his studio.\textsuperscript{140} The “Rothko Room” at the Tate remains an iconic and popular destination.

\textsuperscript{137} Borchardt-Hume, \textit{Rothko, the Late Series}, 94–95.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{139} Fischer, “Mark Rothko: Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man,” 16. This quote has been published extensively by Rothko scholars, including: Breslin, \textit{Mark Rothko: A Biography}, 449; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “The Rothko Chapel Paintings: A Personal Account,” 79; Lambert, \textit{Building Seagram}, 162, among others.
\textsuperscript{140} The Seagram Murals featured prominently in Rothko’s 1961 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. From New York, the show traveled to London’s Whitechapel Gallery. In addition to the Tate, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art in Sakura, Japan also own a large portion of works associated with the Seagram commission.
The Seagram Murals marked a major turning point in Rothko’s oeuvre. The paintings are predominantly dark and unlike anything Rothko had created previously. Instead of solid rectangular fields of color occupying a vertically oriented canvas, most of the paintings associated with the Seagram commission are open rectangles on a horizontal plane. *Red on Maroon Mural, Section Five* (Fig. 33) demonstrates this new orientation and format in Rothko’s oeuvre. Like the other sections of the Seagram Mural, *Section Five* consists of only two colors. The outline of a rectangle, unsymmetrical in its border, is painted in a dark shade of burgundy on a brighter red ground layer. The rest of the murals are executed in similar combinations of cherry red, maroon, fiery orange, gray, and black.\(^{141}\) Their tone is decidedly somber, and Rothko alluded to intentionally creating dark work for the elite clientele that he so despised. Instead of solid squares and rectangles, the Seagram Murals are comprised of window-like forms with blurred, uneven parameters.

While entire books could be written about the visual qualities of the Seagram Murals, the purpose of this project narrows the focus to one important fact: over the two years that Rothko spent on the Seagram Murals, he completed over thirty panels (three different sets) for a space that could only fit five or so of his works.\(^{142}\) Rothko never devised a final scheme for the Seagram Murals, as the commission was not fulfilled. Here we see the first example of Rothko’s

\(^{141}\) Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 398. At this time Rothko was drawn to the House of Mysteries frescoes at Pompeii, especially for their broad expanses of bold reds.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 406. See also Borchardt-Hume, “Shadows of Light: Mark Rothko’s Late Series,” in *Rothko, The Late Series*, 21. Borchardt-Hume notes the extraordinary cost of materials required to execute such a high number of paintings, bearing in mind Rothko’s preference for costly pigment mixed with rabbit glue for the first layer of his works.
obsession with repetition, recurrent imagery and themes, or as one scholar describes, his commitment to “exhausting all possibilities of his art” in one commission.\textsuperscript{143}

In addition to becoming a major attraction at the Tate Modern, Rothko and the ill-fated Seagram Murals were recently the subject of a Broadway play, titled “Red,” proving that the story and artist remain relevant to the public imagination.\textsuperscript{144} Described as “a visceral exercise in art appreciation, a portrait of an angry and brilliant mind that asks you to feel the shape and texture of thoughts,” “Red” depicts the intense working relationship between Rothko (Alfred Molina) and his assistant Ken (Eddie Redmayne).\textsuperscript{145} Perhaps more so than the relationship between artist and assistant, “Red” captures the relationship between the artist and his work, as Molina’s Rothko looks at his paintings with “a fraught, fatherly anxiety, and wonder.”\textsuperscript{146} A still from the play (Fig. 34) demonstrates the intensity of Molina’s character, as he stands before a high-contrast, dramatized copy of one of the Seagram murals, gazing upward in a pleading, agonized gesture. Molina’s tormented expression may be an outward display of how Rothko truly felt about this commission.

\textit{The Harvard Murals}

The story of Rothko’s murals for the Holyoke Center at Harvard University is another infamous tale in the modern art world, although for different reasons. Shortly after the demise of the Seagram commission, Rothko was offered another opportunity to create a space with his

\textsuperscript{143} Bonnie Clearwater, \textit{Mark Rothko, Works on Paper}, 1st ed (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Mark Rothko Foundation and the American Federation of Arts: Distributed in the U.S. by Viking Penguin, 1984), 42. As Clearwater notes in her text, Rothko continued the same practice of repetition in his smaller works on paper throughout his career as well.

\textsuperscript{144} Directed by John Logan, “Red” debuted in London in December 2009, then transferred to Broadway in early 2010. “Red” won the 2010 Tony Award for Best Play, with Eddie Redmayne also winning a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play.


\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
paintings, this time for the Harvard Society of Fellows. In 1962 Rothko completed a series of paintings as a gift for the university’s Holyoke Center. Interestingly, the Holyoke Center also functioned as a dining area, however, because it belonged to a university as opposed to a strictly commercial enterprise, Rothko may have felt this was a space more worthy of his work than a dining establishment for New York’s elite businessmen.\(^{147}\)

Rothko insisted on creating a *room*, and a provision for remodeling the space to his standards was part of the university’s agreed upon costs for the commission.\(^{148}\) Working with Wilder Green, a former designer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rothko was heavily involved with the cosmetic renovations of the room, from selecting the olive-green fabric for the walls to the fiberglass curtains to filter out sunlight.\(^{149}\) Several changes were made during the planning and installation of the murals, as Rothko was dissatisfied with many of the details of the room and sought to control every aspect of the environment.

The Harvard Mural series is comprised of five paintings: one triptych and two individual panels. Many of the colors are similar to the Seagram Murals but two panels are executed in green, blue, and other cooler colors, which have significantly changed in hue over time. Like most of the Seagram Murals, the panels also appear to be vertically oriented windows or references to architectural elements. They follow the same basic format of an open square shape on a dark background, loosely brushed in with soft edges. While they vary in width, each is over eight feet in height.

\(^{147}\) Karyn Esielonis, “The History of Rothko’s Harvard Murals,” in *Mark Rothko’s Harvard Murals*, edited by Harvard University (Cambridge, MA: Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard University Art Museums, 1988), 9. Esielonis suggests that the space at Harvard “passed muster because it belonged to a university, an academic as opposed to purely commercial concern.”

\(^{148}\) Ibid, 8. Mark Rothko gifted the murals to Harvard University in exchange for the costs of canvas, materials, transportation to and from Cambridge, and “the costs of any remodeling to the room that Rothko deemed necessary.”

\(^{149}\) Harvard University, *Mark Rothko’s Harvard Murals*, 9.
Ultimately, the paintings had to be removed from the space in 1979 due to severe deterioration caused by sun exposure and the typical wear and tear to be expected in a dining space. As one scholar observed:

“What the viewer sees today and what Mark Rothko intended him to see when he painted these five panels constitute markedly different experiences. The pigment of three of the murals has faded, wine red has turned light blue. All the panels show numerous abrasions and one bears a vandal’s name scratched in its corner. Another displays traces of food and yet another was torn, the victim of a misdirected chair.”\(^{150}\)

For these reasons, the panels were removed and stored. This year marks the first time the Harvard murals have been exhibited together since their removal (Fig. 35).\(^{151}\) The paintings have been virtually restored to their former glory, thanks to a non-invasive projection technology developed by a team of art historians, conservation scientists, and scientists at Harvard Art Museums and the MIT Media Lab.\(^{152}\) The somewhat controversial, yet reversible, technique allows viewers to experience the original colors without further harming the delicate canvases. Most interesting for the purposes of this paper, however, is the fact that the exhibition includes a sixth panel created for the space, but never before seen by the public (Fig. 36).\(^{153}\) The additional panel, white on a cherry red background, is incredibly similar to Panel One and Panel Five of the commission, differing only in color and a few inches in width. Since Rothko was personally involved with the installation of the Harvard Murals, we can assume that he made the decision to exclude the sixth panel after careful consideration of multiple combinations of the murals.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{151}\) The inaugural exhibition, “Mark Rothko’s Harvard Murals,” (November 16, 2014-July 26, 2015) at the Harvard Art Museums was curated by Mary Schneider Enriquez, Harvard Art Museums, and includes 38 completed works and studies associated with the commission.
\(^{153}\) In his catalogue raisonné, Anfam notes that the sixth panel was returned to Rothko and not kept by Harvard University as part of the commission.
In the opening essay of his impressive catalogue raisonné, David Anfam accurately describes Rothko as a “serial painter.” Indeed, repetition is a defining characteristic of Rothko’s work and is especially evident in the mural commissions that dominate the last decade of his life. Rothko shared with a fellow artist, “If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again—exploring it, probing it, demanding by this repetition that the public look at it.” This idea evident throughout most of Rothko’s oeuvre; for instance, once Rothko had achieved the “multiform” style of his classic paintings, their format remained largely consistent (with few exceptions, including the mural commissions) until the end of his life. The colors, size, and overall “mood” may have changed, but the general format of floating geometric forms, layered vertically and centered on the canvas, remained consistent. Anfam claims, “Rothko knew the double-edged power of repetition. While repetitiveness is linked to monotony, stasis, the mechanical and the inhuman, it has another side as well. Repetition generates difference, which leads to meaning.”

Can Rothko’s insistence on repetition be traced back to his own search for identity or meaning? Perhaps his practice of “serial” production helped Rothko create consistency and order in his life. Perhaps this “restless man” found some amount of solace pushing each visual concept to its limit, and in doing so, creating large bodies of work in order to maximize the effect of his painterly environment. Rothko’s repetition might also relate to his strong need to control the


155 Clearwater, *Mark Rothko, Works on Paper*, 42. Clearwater cites Ida Kohlmeyer, “About Rothko,” *Arts Quarterly*, 4, no. 4 (October-December 1982), 59. Also a Jewish abstract painter, Kohlmeyer met Rothko when he was invited to be a visiting artist at Tulane University, New Orleans, in 1957. Their meeting was highly influential in her own career.

environments in which his work was displayed. As we know, he withdrew from the Seagram commission because he could not control the space or the audience. Soon after, he had a heavy hand in controlling the environment of his Harvard murals, although ultimately, it too was unsatisfactory. Creating alternates allowed Rothko to control the final arrangement of his work and the effects that could potentially be evoked.

It is important to note in both the Seagram and Harvard commissions, the number of completed works greatly exceeded the physical space allotted for the paintings. Given the fact that Rothko created many extra paintings for his two previous large-scale commissions, it comes as no surprise that six additional panels were eventually shipped to Houston as part of the suite of chapel paintings. Expecting such a surplus, John de Menil wrote to the University of St. Thomas authorities early on in the commission to request proper accommodation and display for as many as 30-40 chapel paintings! In the forty-five years since their arrival in Houston, how have others considered the role of the alternate paintings when studying the chapel commission?

Examining the Role of the Alternate Chapel Paintings

Since Rothko’s death in 1970 and the dedication of the Chapel the following year, there have been only four major publications on the chapel paintings; coincidentally each one was co-published by either The Rothko Chapel or The Menil Collection. All four publications mention the alternate paintings to varying degrees, but the panels have unfortunately never been the central focus of these studies. Additionally, few records in the Rothko Chapel and Menil Collection archives contain any substantial information on the alternates. Before imagining the

158 To this scholar, this information suggests that The Rothko Chapel and The Menil Collection as institutions have ultimate control over the content that is published and the public “image” of the Rothko Chapel.
possibilities of the alternate chapel paintings, it is necessary to review what has previously been explored and documented regarding their creation, potential purpose, and function within the commission.

*Scholarship on the Alternate Chapel Paintings*

The first major publication on the chapel, Susan Barnes’ *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* of 1989, provides basic background on Dominique and John de Menil and Mark Rothko before reporting on the makings of the chapel structure and paintings. As the title suggests, Barnes, a native of Houston who witnessed the construction and installation, places a heavy emphasis on the spiritual quality of the Rothko Chapel. One of several books sold at the small desk inside the Rothko Chapel, Barnes’ text serves as a brief overview for a curious tourist or appreciator of modern art and architecture. As such, her treatment of the alternate panels is both lacking and now outdated.

Barnes devotes one small paragraph to a group of *five* black-form paintings; of which, she suggests, Rothko chose one for the entrance wall of the chapel. She claims, “Apart from the six canvases comprising the eastern and western triptychs, five other individual black-form paintings were completed for the chapel. Of these, Rothko finally placed only one in the ensemble: it hangs alone of the south wall, opposite the apse.”\(^1\) This would imply that the entrance wall panel is part of the same group of mutually identical pairs of alternate paintings, which it does not visually match in a number of ways. The remaining four, Barnes correctly notes, are in The Menil Collection. She concludes, “What place the extra paintings might finally have had in the scheme is uncertain; Rothko had intended to oversee the chapel installation

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\(^{1}\) Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel*, 1989, 63.
personally, and he included these four additional black-form paintings in the shipment to Houston, leaving possible alternatives open.”\(^{160}\)

In 1996 and 1997, two publications were released in conjunction with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the dedication of the Rothko Chapel. The first is a modest catalogue to accompany the exhibition, “Mark Rothko: The Chapel Commission,” with brief essays by guest curator Dr. David Anfam and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the chief conservator of The Menil Collection.\(^{161}\) The introduction to the catalogue describes the alternates as “magnificent ‘pairs’ of black-form paintings,” originally meant for the east and west sidewalls where the black-form triptychs now reside.\(^{162}\) Anfam limits his essay to the gradual darkening of Rothko’s palette in the late 1950s, citing a letter that the artist wrote to the Tate Gallery in 1960: “I can only say that the dark pictures began in 1957 and have persisted almost compulsively to this day.”\(^{163}\) Anfam discusses preparatory black-form paintings dating to 1964, but does not directly address the alternate chapel paintings in this essay.

Mancusi-Ungaro, on the other hand, devotes a portion of her essay to the technical details, materials, and processes involved in the alternate chapel paintings. Due to several issues with the Rothko Chapel building structure, Mancusi-Ungaro has been tasked with conservation efforts since shortly after the chapel’s dedication when the black-form triptychs began to show

\(^{160}\) Ibid.
\(^{161}\) Carol Mancusi-Ungaro spent sixteen years investigating Rothko’s techniques for the chapel paintings and remains the authority on their materials and conservation treatment. For detailed information on the Rothko Chapel restoration, see Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “The Rothko Chapel: Treatment of the Black-Form Triptychs,” in Cleaning, Retouching, and Coatings (London, 1990), pp. 134-37. More recently, the Rothko Chapel was closed in 1999 for a period of eighteen months for a $1.8 million renovation.
\(^{162}\) Paul Winkler, “Introduction,” in Mark Rothko, the Chapel Commission (Houston, Tex.: The Menil Collection, 1996), 5.
signs of premature aging. Her first challenge was to uncover the cause of a white film that was beginning to appear on the black surfaces of the paintings. The culprit was eventually determined by laboratory tests: fatty acid from the egg yolk in the earlier egg/oil emulsion layer on the canvases was rising to the surface and crystalizing, likely due to Houston’s high level of humidity.

Throughout her career as the chief conservator, Mancusi-Ungaro has become a Rothko expert. In terms of the six alternate chapel paintings, which were displayed together for the first time in this commemorative exhibition, Mancusi-Ungaro determined that “Rothko certainly regarded Pairs A and B differently from the other full-scale studies because they were the only paintings transferred to finished restrainers and allowed to leave New York.” Their material components, she continues, “embody the full array of surface effects that Rothko explored in the course of completing the chapel commission,” thus setting them apart from any other preliminary studies.

Sheldon Nodelman’s publication of 1997, The Rothko Chapel: Origins, Structure, Meaning, greatly influenced the aforementioned exhibition and remains the most substantial resource on the chapel to date. “Part One: The Origins of the Chapel Installation, The Pictorial Program” features several pages specifically addressing the creation of the alternate chapel paintings, termed as such by Nodelman. Details covered include the materials used, names and

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164 Lighting, humidity, a leaking skylight, and sinking foundation are just some of the problems the Rothko Chapel has endured since its construction.
165 Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “Nuances of Surface in the Rothko Chapel Paintings,” in Mark Rothko, the Chapel Commission, 26. Aided by Ray Kelly, one of Rothko’s assistants at the time of the chapel commission, Mancusi-Ungaro learned that the egg/oil emulsion layer of the black-form triptychs consisted of “unmeasured amounts of tube oil paint, beaten whole eggs, turpentine, and dammar resin.”
166 Ibid., 29. The remaining two paintings (“Pair C”) followed in the 1980s as a gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation.
167 Ibid. 
responsibilities of assistants, specific measurements, analysis and the first scholarly attempt to determine the role of the paintings.

Nodelman reports that the alternates were created during the second campaign of the commission, beginning in January of 1966.\textsuperscript{168} It was a complicated process. Two assistants (Roy Edwards and Ray Kelly) quickly applied the dark red ground in two layers, while Rothko supervised the process, “giving commands, very nervous,” as they later recalled.\textsuperscript{169} If the red ground layers met Rothko’s approval, the black square was then superimposed. They were first directly sketched onto the canvas, and once Rothko had painstakingly adjusted the dimensions, a fresh canvas was produced and the squares were transcribed upon the red ground in masking tape. Rothko relied on his assistants to apply the great expanses of paint for all of the chapel paintings; however, he reserved the black squares (and rectangles in the triptychs) for himself.\textsuperscript{170} The rectangles were then painted in egg-oil emulsion, the aforementioned mixture that caused the whitening phenomenon.\textsuperscript{171}

Additionally, Nodelman suggests that Rothko withheld “Pair C” (Fig. 25) from the rest of the commission for a number of reasons. One theory is that Rothko recognized that this commission was “the supreme undertaking of his life” and perhaps wished to keep the final pair close to him.\textsuperscript{172} As previously noted, Rothko had no problem withholding his paintings from their destinations, especially if he felt that the placement, environment, or audience in any way deviated from his expectations. Another possibility according to Nodelman is the following: “Rothko’s reason for delivering exactly four paintings in addition to the fourteen panels destined

\textsuperscript{168} Nodelman, \textit{The Rothko Chapel Paintings}, 112.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid. Here Nodelman explains Rothko’s choice of medium, similar to egg tempera, as a result of his interest in Renaissance painters’ manuals and the surfaces of quattrocento paintings.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 135.
for installation was likely of a different order: it may be that he wished the consignment specifically to make up a total number of eighteen, an auspicious number in traditional Jewish culture.\textsuperscript{173} Nodelman explains that in Jewish numerology, the number eighteen is a “familiar symbol of good luck.”\textsuperscript{174} Relatedly, Nodelman questions whether or not Rothko included the extra panels to avoid Christian associations with the number fourteen, specifically the standard number of Stations of the Cross.\textsuperscript{175} This possibility seems strange because as far as Rothko was concerned, he was creating paintings for a Catholic chapel, for a Catholic university. It was not until later in the commission’s history that the chapel was transformed into an ecumenical space. At any rate, the number of paintings inside the chapel remains, and assumedly will always remain, fourteen.

Regarding the intended placement of the alternates, Nodelman rules out a number of possible installations. He claims, “Neither the four panels of pairs ‘A’ and ‘B’ nor the remaining two of ‘Pair C’ could have been intended as replacements for the present monochromes on the angle walls. Their sizes and proportions are infelicitous in relationship to these walls, very much in contrast to the monochromes, which fit them perfectly.”\textsuperscript{176} Instead, Nodelman suggests that the east and west side walls, where the black-form triptychs are now displayed, could have potentially been intended for one matching pair of alternate paintings, perhaps ‘Pair A’ or ‘Pair

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Coincidentally, Barnett Newman’s series of fifteen paintings entitled The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani was exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1966, just as Rothko was finishing the chapel paintings. It can be assumed that Rothko was well aware of this series, as he and Newman were quite close for a time.
\textsuperscript{176} Nodelman, The Rothko Chapel Paintings, 117. This conclusion is reached after Nodelman originally matches the four identical alternates to the four identical (angle) walls of the chapel, causing some confusion in his line of thinking.
B,’ though ultimately, he concludes that “only one such pair is possible or necessary.”\textsuperscript{177} Although Nodelman’s text is certainly comprehensive and should be credited as the first in-depth study of the alternate chapel paintings, it reads like a scientific study, leaving no room for multiple interpretations and lacking in imagination and creativity.

The most recent chapel publication to come out of Houston is \textit{Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding—The Rothko Chapel Art Series}. This collection of brief essays documents a lecture series presented by the Chapel from January to June 2005 in an effort to introduce the Rothko Chapel to new visitors, highlight its individual importance and significance within the Houston community, and lastly, to ignite conversation about the space. Contributors included a variety of Rothko experts: art and architectural historians, directors of Houston-area art museums, Dore Ashton, and Rothko’s son and Chair of the Board of Directors of the chapel Christopher Rothko, among others. Two familiar names, David Anfam and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, reappear in this publication. Anfam provides an intriguing essay on the cultural lineage of the Rothko Chapel, relating the paintings to Stonehenge, as well as contemporaneous popular culture such as The Rolling Stones hit “Paint it Black” (released in 1966) and Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey}, but he unfortunately ignores the alternate paintings in this piece.\textsuperscript{178} Again it is only Carol Mancusi-Ungaro who addresses the alternate chapel paintings. In her essay, “The Rothko Chapel Paintings: A Personal Account,” Mancusi-Ungaro discusses her conservation work with the chapel paintings and brings up the alternates as one of the many questions surrounding the Rothko Chapel. She states,\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 117–118. Nodelman goes on to exclaim that more than one pair of alternates would reduce the space “to a senseless chaos,” an argument which will be disputed in the following chapter.
\textsuperscript{178} See Anfam’s essay “To See, or Not To See,” in \textit{Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding}, 65-77.
“Everyone involved with the chapel project believed that the current scheme of fourteen paintings was the final configuration in his mind. They knew it was Rothko’s custom to send along extra paintings, from which to choose during an installation, as he had for the Harvard commission. Yet, art scholars can only wonder about his thoughts concerning the disposition of the extra paintings.”

Mancusi-Ungaro brings reinforces an important point. The chapel paintings were installed according the last notes that Dominique de Menil received from Rothko concerning the chapel layout after the paintings had been completed. In his need for ultimate control, Rothko had planned on being present for their actual installation, but never made it Houston.

Without concrete evidence from the artist himself, it is difficult to reach any conclusions regarding the role and meaning of the alternate chapel paintings beyond casual speculation. In sum, the four major publications on the Rothko Chapel that exist today have each largely overlooked the possible significance of the alternates. Luckily, primary sources and archival documents can provide a strong starting point in the investigation of the alternates and many are cited here for the first time.

**Alternates in the Archives**

Ever since four alternates (‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B’) arrived as part of the same consignment that included the fourteen paintings to be displayed in the chapel, those involved with the commission have questioned the role of the additional panels. More questions were undoubtedly raised after the addition of ‘Pair C’ in 1986. Documents in both The Rothko Chapel and The Menil Collection archives record the discussion surrounding the alternate chapel paintings. Though gaps in information are present, with this evidence it is possible to trace the general conversation, ranging from practical questions about number and measurements to purchase offers from other art institutions.

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The original contract between Mark Rothko and the University of St. Thomas, dated February 13, 1965, states that Rothko “will undertake to make a sufficient number of paintings to illumine adequately the interior of the new chapel at the University of St. Thomas…Since it is an octagonal shape with an apse, it seems at the present moment that there will be ten units—one to each of the sides, and three for the apse. This, of course, may be altered in the course of the work.” Part four of the contract specifically states that the “sketches and trial paintings made during the period of 24 months relating to the creation of the paintings for this project shall become the property of the Art History Department of the University of St. Thomas.” If sketches and trials are to be included in the commission, this statement indicates that any alternate or additional paintings associated with chapel would also become property of the university.

A 1977 interview with Roy Edwards, another of Rothko’s assistants during the chapel commission, provides insight into the order the paintings were completed, as well as the possible original intention for the alternates:

“Edwards says that it is difficult to tell which of the paintings was done first. He does believe that the five similar black line paintings, of which one hangs on the south wall of the Chapel, and four of the same dimensions are in storage, were painted one right after another. He thinks they were painted to replace the four monochromes at the off-compass points, but that this idea was rejected.”

If Edwards was here referring to the four alternates that arrived with the consignment (‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B), he was incorrect on their dimensions, for they are not the same size as the entrance

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180 Contract signed by Mark Rothko and Reverend John F. Murphy, C.S.B., President of the University of St. Thomas, February 13, 1965. Rothko Chapel Archives.
181 In one of the clauses within this section of the contract, Rothko states that the “sketches or trial paintings” may be exchanged with other museums, universities, or institutions of learning, after January 1, 1968.
182 Interview with Roy Edwards, Rothko’s Assistant, Houston, April, 1977. The Menil Collection Archives.
wall panel which he related them to. The entrance wall panel is larger than the alternates by several inches on each side. The discrepancy in size suggests, again, that the entrance wall panel is not part of the alternate chapel painting group.

Still questioning the intent and purpose of the alternate paintings, Dominique de Menil wrote to Eugene Aubry, one of the chapel’s final architects, about the matter in 1978. In her letter, she states the following possibilities, “The alternate paintings are in pairs, thus they cannot be for the “backwall.” It does not make sense. More and more I wonder if Rothko has not conceived at some point of the chapel as a symmetrical “crescendo” from the entrance to the apse.” She continues, “The long panel with the biggest black rectangle, which has no twin, was to be, as it is now, at the entrance. The two pairs were to be where the large monochromes are now. First the pair with the biggest black rectangle, then the pair with the smallest black rectangle.”

According to archival evidence, the possibility of selling the alternate chapel paintings individually has come up on more than one occasion. In May 1971, just three months after the Rothko Chapel opened its doors, the newly rebuilt Walker Art Center in Minneapolis inquired about the alternates. Martin Friedman, Director, wrote to the de Menils:

“I have heard that you were considering disposing of several large Rothkos which have not been placed in the handsome chapel. If the Art Center could be considered as a recipient for one of these paintings, I would be very pleased to discuss this with you. This is a young museum with a prime focus on works of the 1960s; we are trying to acquire certain key works to help balance the collection.”

John de Menil was not able to gift one of the alternate paintings to the Walker Art Center, as Friedman had hoped. Talk of purchasing one of the alternate paintings (valued then at $100,000)

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183 According to Anfam’s catalogue raisonné, the entrance wall panel measures 180 x 105 inches, while the alternate paintings of both ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B’ are 177 ¼ x 96 inches.
185 Letter from Martin Friedman, Director of the Walker Art Center, to Mr. and Mrs. John de Menil, May 21, 1971. Rothko Chapel Archives.
continued until early 1972, when John de Menil and the board of the Rothko Chapel came to the decision that “the paintings should be kept together as a unique example of Rothko’s late work.”  

The insistence that the paintings stay together as one unit continued into 1974. In a letter to Dominique de Menil dated April 14, Houston area art historian Helen Winkler pleaded:

“The 18 panels were all conceived as one idea. The four extras were to play with, but they were part of the whole. Together they give four times the feeling of one, would demand a meditative environment, and afford the participant a most knowledgeable experience. Please keep them together. When you have an opportunity for a strong emotional response from a great artist, why let it become fragmented?”

Winkler’s letter was clearly written before the third and final “pair” was donated to the Rothko Chapel, but already the desire to keep all panels together is very clear. What is most important about Winkler’s letter is her reasoning for keeping the paintings together: their power to evoke a “strong emotional response” as a group. The possibility of selling “the four alternative Rothko murals” was again discussed in a board meeting in September of 1991. It was expressed that “Perhaps we could find a sensitive buyer who would install the four murals together.”

Fortunately, to this day the alternate chapel paintings remain together under the care of The Menil Collection and The Rothko Chapel.

There is no way for scholars to be sure of the intended role of the alternate chapel paintings. We can safely conclude that Rothko, in his preference for repetition and serial bodies of work, completed extra paintings for all three of his large-scale commissions in the 1950s-

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186 Letter from John de Menil to Martin Friedman, February 14, 1972. Rothko Chapel Archives.
187 Letter from Helen Winkler to Dominique de Menil, April 14, 1974. Rothko Chapel Archives.
188 The 1991 board meeting minutes were the most recent documents concerning the alternates made available to me in my research at the Rothko Chapel archives. I suspect the discussion of selling the alternates as a group has continued, but likely to a much lesser degree as the value of Rothko’s work has increased exponentially. Most recently (May 2015), No. 10, a brown and rust-orange painting in Rothko’s “multiform” style of 1958, sold for $82 million at a Christie’s International auction. The possibility that six large-scale paintings could be purchased together now seems financially unfeasible, if not outlandish.
189 Board Meeting Minutes, September 17, 1991. Rothko Chapel Archives.
1960s. We can also be certain that the alternate chapel paintings were meant to be kept together, and so far remain that way. But what if changes could be made to the Rothko Chapel? What if the six alternate paintings could be viewed in their originally intended place? How would this affect the experience of the chapel? These questions and more will become the focus of the next and final chapter.
CHAPTER III

THE ROTHKO CHAPEL: A REIMAGINING

“I’m only interested in precision now.”190
-Mark Rothko

In April of 1967, after three years of painting, adjustments, and seemingly endless contemplation, Mark Rothko informed John and Dominique de Menil that at last the chapel paintings were ready. Two months later, Dominique de Menil visited Rothko’s studio. Paintings were displayed on the three-walled interior mock-up that Rothko had built. As for the other five walls, “Rothko had written out, to the fraction of an inch, the exact placement he wanted, and these dimensions were conveyed directly by telephone from Rothko’s studio to Barnstone’s office in Houston.”191 It seems that there was no mention of the alternate paintings whatsoever by Rothko at this point; however, eighteen (not fourteen) paintings went into storage together. The paintings were not seen again until their arrival in Houston. When the chapel was finally under construction nearly three years later, Rothko signed off on the final drawings for the building.192 He died only two weeks later.

The fourteen chapel paintings were installed according to the final documented arrangement and instructions recorded from Dominique de Menil’s visit in 1967. Rothko, though he had planned on personally supervising the installation (much like with the Harvard Mural commission), never went to Houston and his suicide prevented any such direction. Since 1971, the Rothko Chapel has honored the artist’s final arrangement. The paintings have only been

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190 Ashton, *About Rothko*, 179. This statement, shared with Ashton in Rothko’s studio in 1966 while he contemplated one of the mural panels, demonstrates Rothko’s primary interest in details, shapes, and proportion. It recalls Le Corbusier’s definition of *l’espace indicible*, which is dependent upon precise relationships.
192 Ibid., 85. The meeting took place in early February 1970. Finishing materials such as the brick of the exterior of the building and the flooring were also approved. Rothko seemed enthusiastic about traveling to Houston for the dedication at this time.
removed for the major eighteen-month restoration effort between 1999-2000, during which the chapel was closed. Speaking about the renovation, Paul Winkler (the former director of The Menil Collection) stated, “We could not change what Rothko knew to be the chapel.” The paintings have never been exhibited elsewhere and no other paintings have invaded their space. Therefore, the chapel paintings have remained largely untouched since their initial installation.

With the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the Rothko Chapel approaching, now seems like an appropriate time to not only reflect on the commission, but to also reinvigorate the scholarship by going beyond what is and imagining what could be. How did Rothko reach the final arrangement in his studio? What other combinations might have been considered? And finally, how might the interior of the Rothko Chapel appear if the alternate paintings were included? This chapter is a fictional reimagining or hypothetical exploration of the space with combinations of the six alternate paintings both included with and in place of the existing panels.

The Effects of the Ensemble

“"I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions."”

-Mark Rothko

One of the most famous statements Mark Rothko made in his lifetime was in response to praise as a “master of color harmonies and relationships on a monumental scale.”

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firmly denied this compliment. He continued, “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!”

Rothko may have bristled at the thought of being celebrated as a master of color harmonies, but he was, in fact, very interested in “relationships on a monumental scale,” especially towards the end of his career. There is no better evidence of this than the Houston chapel commission.

Rothko had long been more interested in the interplay of multiple paintings than the qualities and effects of just one standing alone. This interest only became stronger over time into the 1960s. Rothko’s notes to the Whitechapel Art Gallery concerning the installation of his 1961 retrospective provide a perfect example. Regarding the placement of his paintings, he wrote, “It is best not to follow a chronological order but to arrange them according to their best effect upon each other.”

In his catalogue essay for the same exhibition, Peter Selz commented, “Seen up close and in penumbra, as these paintings are meant to be seen, they absorb, they envelop the viewer. We no longer look at a painting as we did in the nineteenth century; we are meant to enter it, to sink into its atmosphere of mist and light or to draw it around us like a coat—or a skin.”

Surely the same can be said about the Rothko Chapel, which is so much more than an exhibition in a museum or gallery, but a place truly apart, devoted entirely to the paintings inside.

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196 Ibid., 93–94.
197 Borchardt-Hume, Rothko, the Late Series, 2008, 96.
198 Peter Selz, Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960 (London: Printed by Fosh & Cross, 1961), 15. It should be noted that this quote closely aligns with Robert Rosenblum’s essay “The Abstract Sublime,” (also of 1961) in which Rosenblum discusses the “dwarfing immensity” of both Romantic landscape paintings (famously using Caspar David Friedrich’s The Monk by the Sea, 1808-1810 as his reference) and Abstract Expressionist paintings. Regarding Rothko’s works specifically, Rosenblum states, “…we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures as if we were looking at a sunset or a moonlit night.” See Robert Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” ARTnews 59 (February 1961): 38-41.
Inside the chapel in Houston, the most important commission of Rothko’s career, the placement of the paintings was integral to the meaning and experience of the overall space. Finally Rothko had free reign to create an environment exactly to his liking. As described by Dore Ashton, “Rothko had come to think of his chapel as a matter of finding the right proportions in an almost mystical way, like the alchemist.”\textsuperscript{199} We already know the degree of precision Rothko desired in creating the black-form panels by requesting his assistants to adjust the perimeter of the black shapes by even a fraction of an inch at a time. To ensure the correct proportions of his overall vision, extra measures were taken to decide upon the most appropriate arrangement of the panels. The painstaking process of preparation, trials, contemplation, and adjustments associated with this commission again speak to Rothko’s need for ultimate control.\textsuperscript{200} For Rothko, proportion equaled effect, and for a commission of this magnitude, “it was effect he sought and not a mechanical scheme.”\textsuperscript{201}

In order to accommodate the massive size of the commission, Rothko rented a new studio: a carriage house on New York’s Upper East Side, primarily lit by an all-important skylight. The large space allowed Rothko and his assistants to construct a full size mock-up of three of the chapel walls. Rothko then designed a pulley system, which enabled him to easily adjust the height of each painting once they were hung on the mock walls. According to Roy Edwards, Rothko’s assistant from approximately December 1965 to early 1967, “Rothko and he spent about a month hanging the various paintings on the mock Chapel walls, in various combinations of colors and numbers. One day the studio would be filled with black rectangles,

\textsuperscript{199} Ashton, \textit{About Rothko}, 173.
\textsuperscript{200} Rothko was very secretive about his process and was known to put away all brushes and paint mixtures before visitors arrived at this studio. Much of the information that now exists regarding the chapel commission was recollected by his assistants after his death.
\textsuperscript{201} Ashton, \textit{About Rothko}, 173.
one day entirely with monochromes, one day with a combination of the two.”202 A photograph by Alexander Liberman (Fig. 37) demonstrates the degree to which the chapel’s proposed interior was replicated in Rothko’s studio. At first glance, Rothko appears to standing in a doorway in the actual Houston chapel in an unfinished state, however, upon closer inspection, the pulley system of ropes is apparent behind the triptych.

In addition to the mock-up and pulley system, Rothko also employed a scale architectural model of the interior “to help envision the effect of the entire ensemble.”203 When he first started working as Rothko’s assistant, one of the first tasks that Edwards was charged with was “to paint small cardboard rectangles—around 20 or 30 of them—in different colors, including plum monochromes and black figures. These were placed inside the model to give an idea of the effect of the larger works.”204 Photographic evidence of the model is scarce, but it is helpful to refer to a similar model that Rothko used in 1969 for the installation of the Seagram murals at the Tate Gallery (Fig. 38).205 This aerial view of the cardboard model provides insight into Rothko’s working process. The gallery’s walls and doorways are represented to scale, with each wall displaying a miniature painting from the Seagram series. The appearance of dried glue on the cardboard walls suggests that several changes took place in the arrangement as Rothko worked toward a final solution for the space allotted. The same method of trial-and-error was used in the Houston commission. Rothko later recalled that the process had lasted one year, and that instead

202 Interview with Roy Edwards by Dominique de Menil, Houston, April, 1977. The Menil Collection Archives. It should be noted that Roy Edwards’ name has been misprinted as “Ray” each time in the interview transcript. This was likely a common error, as Rothko’s second assistant’s name was Ray Kelly.

203 Barnes, The Rothko Chapel, 1989, 63. The model, provided by Philip Johnson’s office, was actually open at the bottom so one (presumably Rothko) could fit their head inside and “approximate the experience of standing within the chapel space.”

204 Interview with Roy Edwards by Dominique de Menil, Houston, April, 1977. The Menil Collection Archives.

205 For more information and a photograph of the actual cardboard chapel model, see Nodelman, The Rothko Chapel Paintings, 110.
of a period of creative freedom and experimentation, it was a time of “frustration and torment.”

The Current Rothko Chapel and the Power of Purple

In order to reimagine the Rothko Chapel, its current arrangement must first be examined. Figure 39 demonstrates the layout of the interior of the Rothko Chapel as it is known today. Although this illustration has not been designed to scale, each wall’s paintings are represented and color-coded to provide a general sense of the space. The plum colored apse triptych appears at the top of the illustration, which indicates the northern wall of the chapel. Light purple monochromes occupy the angle walls, and the black-form triptychs are located on the east and west side walls. The two entryways are marked on the southernmost side of the octagon, to both the right and left of the entrance wall panel. A circle in the center of the interior space represents the building’s skylight and around it are the benches and three black meditation cushions that one usually finds inside the chapel.

In its present state the Rothko Chapel is predominantly purple, fluctuating from shades of violet and plum to eggplant and wine. Beginning with the entrance wall, the panels are installed in an alternating pattern of black-form paintings and monochromes until the northeast, north, and northwestern walls which all display large purple monochromes, culminating in the three panels that make up the apse triptych. Though much has been written about the Rothko Chapel paintings, not many have considered the significance of their limited color palette. The lighter shades of violet that one finds in the apse triptych are uncommon in Rothko’s largely red and yellow works of the 1950s and early 1960s. Even as Rothko’s palette gradually darkened in his

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Breslin, Mark Rothko, 469. Breslin cites a conversation between Rothko and two fellow painters in which Rothko explained that he placed the small paintings inside the cardboard model from Philip Johnson and “changed their shapes until he thought of a perfect relationship and then had them enlarged.” He confessed that this process ultimately failed and the effect he had achieved in the small scale did not translate to the actual panels.
last decade towards maroon, blazing orange, deep browns, and black, fields of pure purple remain rare. This leads to the key question of why Rothko would choose to cover five of the chapel’s eight walls in purple monochromes? Furthermore, what is the potential symbolic significance of that decision and how does it impact the viewer experience?

The color purple, “the most enduring status symbol of the ancient world,” has a long and privileged history in the West as a symbol of both royalty and the divine. The color was reportedly favored by Alexander the Great and written about by both Plato and Pliny the Elder. The imperial associations of purple can be credited to the Roman Republic and the reign of Augustus, when use of the color was highly restricted and regulated. The Egyptian stone porphyry (lapis porphyrites) also gained popularity in imperial sculpture for its exotic purple appearance. Skipping ahead to the eighteenth century, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe created a color wheel in which he included the symbolic significance of each hue. He found purple and violet to be in-between reason and imagination, symbolic of monarchs and also scholars and philosophers.

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208 Alexander’s royal costume ensured that he was covered in purple from head to toe. It is reported to have consisted of a purple tunic, robe, diadem, and hat. For more information, see Reinhold, History of Purple, 29-36. In Book IV of The Republic, Plato described painting a sculpture and asked, “Why do you not put the most beautiful colors on the most beautiful parts of the body—the eyes ought to be purple, but you have made them black.” Pliny also commented on the value of Tyrian purple as being most appreciated when it is “exactly the color of clotted blood.” I am indebted to Charlene Elliott, “Purple Pasts: Color Codification in the Ancient World,” Law & Social Inquiry 33, No. 1 (2008): 173-194 for these ancient quotations.
209 Reinhold, History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity, 48. Reinhold cites Augustan Age literature where “purple garments and other applications of the status color are found used as symbols of royalty, mythological heroes, gods and goddesses, and general affluence.”
Despite the well-documented royal connotations of purple, it seems more likely that Rothko was interested in its spiritual history and significance, dating to the Byzantine emperors.\textsuperscript{212} Rothko’s insistence on an octagonal shape similar to traditional Byzantine baptisteries strongly supports this argument. In her international exploration of the color wheel, author Victoria Finlay travels to the Mediterranean in search of the origins of purple. Her quest takes her to Tyre, Lebanon, to locate the species of shellfish with potential for purple, the most expensive dye in antiquity.\textsuperscript{213} Finlay describes the value of the purple dye in ancient Phoenician marketplaces as “one of the most prized products of the coastline,” for it was “seen as symbolic of both the heavenly world and the best of the human world.”\textsuperscript{214} Finlay also discusses the elevated status of purple in the Jewish Tabernacle as well as in secular contexts before focusing on the Romans’ obsession with the dye.\textsuperscript{215} Even today, purple retains its spiritual significance in literature and popular culture.\textsuperscript{216}

When considering the color significance of the Rothko Chapel paintings, it is crucial to remember that it was conceived as a fully functioning Catholic chapel for the University of St.

\textsuperscript{212} Charlene Elliott, “Purple Pasts: Color Codification in the Ancient World: Purple Pasts,” \textit{Law & Social Inquiry} 33, no. 1 (February 29, 2008): 192. The Byzantine emperors were seen as Christ's representatives on earth, and thus dressed in purple robes to signify their divine power. When exploring the spiritual significance of colors, it is necessary to reference Wassily Kandinsky, pioneer of abstraction, who firmly believed that each color produced a corresponding spiritual vibration in the viewer. See Wassily Kandinsky, \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art: And Painting in Particular}, 1912, Documents of Modern Art, v. 5 (New York: G. Wittenborn, 1966).
\textsuperscript{213} Victoria Finlay, \textit{Color: A Natural History of the Palette} (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 366. Finlay searches for two specific types of shellfish in Tyre: \textit{murex brandaris} and \textit{murex trunculus}, described by Pliny during his travels to the same location in \textit{The Natural History}, 3, 62, p.133.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 359.
\textsuperscript{215} Finlay cites Exodus 26,1, which states that the Tabernacle was to be made “with ten curtains, of fine twined linen, and blue and purple and scarlet,” 359.
\textsuperscript{216} For instance, see Alice Walker, \textit{The Color Purple} (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), along with various “new age” websites, which suggest a purple aura “means you are in a good space spiritually, and that you are close to experiencing a state of equilibrium and open awareness.” See http://paranormal.lovetoknow.com/Purple_Aura_Meaning.
Thomas. The purple apse triptych and angle wall monochromes take on additional meaning once the Catholic liturgical calendar is taken into account. In the Catholic faith, Easter Sunday, celebrating the resurrection of Christ, is preceded by forty days of Lent. During this extended period of penance and atonement, Catholic priests don violet or purple vestments. One source describes the liturgical symbolism of violet as such, “Violet or purple is used during Advent and Lent as a sign of penance, sacrifice, and preparation. Purple vestments may also be used for Masses of Christian Burial or Masses for the Dead.” Additionally, it has often been noted that the number of the panels in the chapel corresponds with the traditional fourteen Stations of the Cross, commonly observed by Catholics during Lent. However, when Rothko was questioned about these types of religious associations, he was quick to reject them. As Roy Edwards later reported, “He hated that kind of talk.”

A Fictional Reimagining of the Rothko Chapel

Reimagine: to reinterpret imaginatively; to rethink. A multitude of questions, many of them unanswerable, guide a reimagining of a permanent installation of work. If given the opportunity to view his paintings inside the chapel—not in a cardboard model or a partial mock-up—how might Rothko have altered their final arrangement? Would the alternate panels come

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217 Breslin, Mark Rothko, 465. During the three years that Rothko worked on the commission (1964-1967), he believed they would be housed in a Catholic chapel.


219 Letter from Jane Dillenberger to Rachel Berry, Curatorial Assistant, Menil Foundation, April 30, 1975. Menil Collection Archives. Dillenberger wrote that she specifically asked Rothko about this association during two studio visits while he was working on the chapel paintings, when they also discussed Barnett Newman’s Stations of the Cross, which had been exhibited the year before at the Guggenheim. See also Barnes, The Rothko Chapel, 67.

220 Interview with Roy Edwards by Dominique de Menil, Houston, April, 1977. The Menil Collection Archives. Edwards also shared that at one point he asked Rothko directly what the paintings were about, “but Rothko would say nothing.”
into play? If so, would they indeed reduce the space to a “senseless chaos,” as Sheldon Nodelman has argued? Additionally, if the alternate paintings were included in the ensemble, how might the function and overall effects of the Rothko Chapel change? In this fictional reimagining of the Rothko Chapel, I present five alternate possibilities for the interior of the space, while at the same time questioning their potential impact on the viewer’s experience and the chapel’s mission as a place for contemplation and action.

Imagine that the number of variables inside the Rothko Chapel has increased from the fourteen paintings on view today to twenty, including all six alternate panels. To begin with, there is simply not adequate room for all twenty of the associated panels in the chapel, just as Rothko knew that there was nowhere near enough space for the 30-40 paintings he ultimately created for the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building. Secondly, it does not make sense for any of the chapel walls to be left empty. Therefore, a series of combinations of ten to fourteen panels makes the most sense as a starting point for this initial hypothetical exploration of the Rothko Chapel interior. In each alternate possibility presented here, a number of the extant chapel paintings (consisting of the apse triptych, four angle wall monochromes, two black-form triptychs, and the entrance wall panel) will remain in place and will be joined by varying combinations of the six alternate panels (‘Pair A,’ ‘Pair B,’ and ‘Pair C’) to create new arrangements. When applicable, archival information and previous scholarship will be included to support each imagined arrangement.

Alternate Possibility #1

The logical first step in reimagining the Rothko Chapel interior is to replace the angle wall monochromes with the alternates that arrived with the commission (‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B,’ refer to Figures 26 and 27), as assistant Roy Edwards assumed was their position at the time of Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings*, 117.
their creation in Rothko’s studio. This arrangement makes sense for a number of reasons. There are four angle walls, four plum monochromes, and when the paintings arrived in Houston, four alternate panels. In addition to existing as two groups of the same number of panels, the monochromes and two pairs of alternates are the same height, with each measuring 14.75 feet tall. The width, however, differs between the monochromes and ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B’ by over three feet. Installing ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B’ on the angle walls would thus leave significantly more space surrounding the canvases on their respective walls, surely impacting the overall sense of scale and careful proportions inside the chapel.

Dominique de Menil supported this possible scenario in a 1978 letter to Eugene Aubry, first mentioned in chapter two. Her opinion was that, “The long panel with the biggest black rectangle, which has no twin, was to be, as it is now, at the entrance. The two pairs were to be where the large monochromes are now. First the pair with the biggest black rectangle, then the pair with the smallest black rectangle.” We can assume that the two pairs Dominique de Menil references are ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B,’ as the Menil Collection had not yet received ‘Pair C’ (Fig. 28) at the time of this letter. Based on visual analysis, although their external dimensions are identical, the black square in ‘Pair B’ does appear to be slightly larger than ‘Pair A.’ In this ensemble then, ‘Pair A’ would replace the southeast and southwest monochromes, and the larger black squares of ‘Pair B’ would replace the northeast and northwest monochromes.

Replacing the angle wall monochromes with four alternate paintings would result in a predominantly dark interior space (Fig. 40). Between the black-figure triptychs on the east and west walls, the two pairs of alternates, and the entrance wall panel, the viewer would be surrounded by black-form paintings on all sides but to the north, as the only remaining purple would be the three panels that constitute the apse triptych. This installation would then place

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great emphasis on the apse, which could possibly be the intention behind such an arrangement. Could this arrangement be the ultimate expression of tragedy and doom, two of Rothko’s coveted basic human emotions? Surrounded on seven of eight sides by black squares on dark maroon ground, the viewer might seek visual comfort in the plum depths of the apse triptych.

Visitors to the Rothko Chapel already experience a wide range of emotions, ranging from nothing at all to comfort to deep sadness. The most moving reactions have been the subject of James Elkins’ book *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. Elkins devotes his first two chapters to the Rothko Chapel and early on declares, “There is no survey to prove it, but it is likely that the majority of people who have wept over twentieth-century paintings have done so in front of Rothko’s paintings. And of all Rothko’s paintings, people have been moved most by the fourteen huge canvases that he made for the chapel that now bears his name.”²²³ During his visit to Houston, Elkins investigated the “confession books,” or visitor entries, which the chapel has kept since its dedication. He includes several examples of the visitor remarks such as, “Once more I am moved—to tears,” “A religious experience that moves one to tears,” and “This place makes me fall down.”²²⁴ If some visitors are deeply affected by the Rothko Chapel paintings in their present arrangement, it seems reasonable to assume that the sensation of being surrounded by intense and empty black squares

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²²⁴ Ibid., 11. Elkins himself reported, “The paintings are like black holes, absorbing every glint of light, sopping up every thought. Wherever you turn, they face you, and show you nothing but blackness. They say nothing and depict nothing: they just bear down.”
on dark maroon grounds might prove to be even more overwhelming, especially for a sensitive viewer.225

Alternate Possibility #2.

If the previous arrangement leaves the chapel interior too dark, perhaps instead of replacing the angle wall monochromes, Rothko created the alternate pairs to potentially occupy the east and west walls where the visually similar black-form triptychs now exist. In this scenario, multiple pairs could have been created so Rothko would have the ability to choose which matching pair would be permanently installed once he was on site.226 For example, ‘Pair A’ or ‘Pair B’ would leave much more vacant wall space than the wider panels of ‘Pair C.’ Rothko would have been very perceptive of these seemingly small details and their impact on the overall ensemble and likely would have preferred to study each alternate on the designated wall in order to reach a decision. To start, what if just one pair of alternate chapel paintings was incorporated into the ensemble, mirroring each other across the chapel from east and west?

If the black-form triptychs were removed and replaced by one alternate painting on each wall, the chapel would retain its symmetrical balance (Fig. 41). One painting, evenly spaced, would occupy the center of every wall except for the apse, again drawing the viewer’s attention to the northern wall directly opposite of the entrance. As in the extant chapel interior, three of the eight walls would display black-form panels in an alternating pattern, until the culmination of the northern side of the interior. This arrangement lowers the total number of panels inside the

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225 Unless the viewer happens to be Kazimir Malevich, creator of the infamous Black Square of 1915, who might quite enjoy such an experience. The comparisons between Malevich and Rothko are strong; Dore Ashton wrote about this connection at least twice. See About Rothko, 178 and “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” in Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding, 55-63.

226 Recall the Harvard Mural commission, in which six paintings were created for a space that could accommodate only five. The sixth painting returned to Rothko’s estate once it was determined by the artist that it did not belong in the final arrangement.
chapel to ten. It seems clear that this would be the bare minimum, as any fewer panels and the chapel would feel too empty and perhaps not as powerful.

**Alternate Possibility #3**

One of the most memorable details of the Rothko Chapel interior is how well each of the paintings fits on its designated wall, as the chapel and the panels were designed and measured specifically for one another. The black-form triptychs, for example, are centered perfectly on the east and west walls and leave mere inches on either side to the right or left. ‘Alternate Possibility #2’ disrupts that tension between active and inactive space by leaving too much of the surrounding walls visible. A pair of alternates (Fig. 42) on the east and west walls, however, would restore the current ratio of painting to wall.

Sheldon Nodelman suggests that the alternate pairs ‘A and B’ were created before the black-figure triptychs that now occupy the east and west side walls in the second phase of the commission. Working under this information, he posits that because the side walls are so large, they could each display one mutually identical pair: “Since the two walls are identical in size and configuration and face one another in equivalent positions within the octagonal plan, one pair of mutually identical paintings would be required to occupy them.”227 In this arrangement (Fig. 43), one pair of alternate chapel paintings would occupy the east wall, and another pair would occupy the west wall. Since ‘Pair A’ and ‘Pair B’ are the most similar and have identical external dimensions, it would make sense for those two pairs to be employed in this layout.

Recall that several years after the dedication of the chapel, Dominique de Menil speculated in a letter, “More and more I wonder if Rothko had not conceived at some point of the chapel as a symmetrical ‘crescendo’ from the entrance to the apse.”228 The visual effect of this

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228 Letter from Dominique de Menil to Eugene Aubry, November 4, 1978. Rothko Chapel Archives.
particular arrangement most closely resembles a crescendo from one painting at the entrance wall, to two on the east and west sides, culminating in the three panels of the apse triptych—each perforated by one angle wall monochrome. The potential effect of this visual crescendo would move the viewer, with growing intensity, from entrance to apse—typically the focal point of any chapel.

*Alternate Possibility #4*

Although the alternate chapel paintings differ in width, each of the six panels are the same height. Could they be arranged into two triptychs themselves? Figure 44 illustrates what three alternate paintings (for example, one of ‘Pair A,’ ‘Pair C,’ and the other panel of ‘Pair A’) would look like as a triptych, with the center panel slightly raised, just as the black-form triptychs are arranged in the extant chapel. Could the three pairs indeed constitute two separate triptychs for the east and west walls? While the previous possibilities have replaced the black-form triptychs with one and two pairs of alternate panels, Figure 45 demonstrates what the chapel might look like if each of the six alternates were arranged into two triptychs.

This is the only scenario in which all six of the alternates are employed in the arrangement. Are they more or less powerful than the black-form triptychs? How do they differ? The visual effect is perhaps more or less the same as the extant chapel, although there is less black space and a lighter ground in the alternates. The ground of the alternates appears much brighter and more of a cherry red when compared to the less visible “oxblood” ground of the black-form triptychs which appears very near the same value as the black rectangles. The major fault with this scenario lies in the fact that the alternate panels are much larger than the black-form triptych panels, which already fit closely on the east and west walls. Replacing the black-
form triptychs by the alternate panels on the east wall, for instance, would increase the width of the triptych by five feet!

Alternate Possibility #5

There is, though, one wall in the chapel that is large enough to accommodate a triptych of alternate panels. The previous four fictional re-arrangements have manipulated only the angle wall monochromes or the black-form triptychs. In the final and most drastic reimagining of the Rothko Chapel, the plum apse triptych is replaced by a combination of three alternate panels. Unlike the black-form triptychs, the panels of the apse are aligned evenly. Suppose three alternate panels (perhaps one panel from ‘Pair B,’ one of ‘Pair C,’ and the other of ‘Pair B’) were arranged in the same manner (Fig. 46). How would this triptych function as the apse?

This arrangement would dramatically alter the experience inside the chapel (Fig. 47). Upon entering, visitors would directly face three black squares, mirroring the entrance wall panel behind them. The angle wall monochromes would be the only remaining lighter plum inside the chapel, and their alternating pattern would evenly break up the black-form panels. Unlike any other arrangement, each wall of the chapel would visually relate to its opposite. The black-form triptychs would remain facing each other on the eastern and western walls, the purple monochromes on the angle walls would continue to create diagonal pairs, and the entrance wall panel would now face the paintings it is most like. This arrangement creates the most balanced composition from every viewing angle. Because of this balance and proportion, it is my opinion that this scenario would be the most engaging alternate possibility.

Conclusion

The five alternate possibilities described in this fictional reimagining provide only a small fraction of the hundreds of arrangements that could be encountered inside the Rothko Chapel. So
far, only one variable has been altered at a time; the entrance wall panel has been left untouched, the angle wall monochromes could be paired and relocated, and much more complex arrangements could be designed. Though by no means extensive, perhaps these sample arrangements are similar to the ones that Rothko contemplated in his chair in the dark studio on 95th Street. Perhaps these are they types of arrangements Rothko inspected as he peered into the cardboard model. This exercise, though entirely hypothetical, does answer one key question. The alternate possibilities presented here are proof that incorporating the alternate chapel paintings into the arrangement does not reduce the space into a senseless chaos. Instead, as I argue, the alternates have the potential to enhance and reinvigorate the viewer experience while at the same time allowing visitors access to the entire series of paintings associated with the commission.
EPILOGUE

The Rothko Chapel is a complex example of a sacred modern space. It blurs the boundaries between sacred and secular, gallery space, and spiritual sanctuary. Christopher Rothko, now the Chair of the Board of Directors for the Rothko Chapel, certainly understands the difficulties with grasping his late father’s work:

“For thirty-five years now, the world has been struggling to make sense of the Rothko Chapel. In trust, this struggle marked the reception of most of Mark Rothko’s work long before he embarked on the chapel mural project. Viewers often found his paintings obscure, inscrutable, almost willful in the way they guarded their secrets.”

In addition to the general obscurity of Rothko’s paintings, the seemingly contradictory functions of the Rothko Chapel as an institution further cloud our understanding of the space. A place for art, contemplation, meditation, interfaith worship, and community and civic action, the chapel continues to evade a clear definition. As one author questioned: “Sacred or secular…presence or absence…fullness or emptiness…satisfaction or deferral? It remains uncertain.”

Perhaps some of the trouble lies in the possibility that the Rothko Chapel does constitute what Le Corbusier termed “ineffable space,” and therefore defies words. Art and architecture work in conjunction to create a place and viewer experience that cannot be adequately described, although many have tried. However difficult it is to characterize, ambiguity should not prevent scholars from trying to make sense of the Rothko Chapel and the related paintings.

Though physically divided and currently displayed in two separate collections, we need to remain cognizant of the fact that there is more to the Rothko Chapel than meets the eye. The commission, as we now know, includes twenty paintings in all. Instead of being discussed as the rejected panels, or mere by-products of the final selected arrangement, the alternate chapel


paintings should be considered as essential parts of one commission—as six pieces of the twenty-piece puzzle. These mysterious black and maroon panels, with their matching size and hard edges, can offer scholars insight into Rothko’s thought process, painting practice, and perhaps, even his psyche. Rothko’s compulsive need for repetition, precision, and most of all, control, in the final mural projects of his life likely relate to childhood experiences as an outcast, as I have suggested in chapter two. The artist’s serial production of work and habit of creating far “too many” paintings for the spaces allotted him, are both areas of scholarship that could greatly be expanded. Those involved with the chapel commission (John and Dominique de Menil, Rothko’s studio assistants, art historians, and other professionals) have questioned the purpose and role of the alternates since their arrival in Houston. In the nearly five decades since, no one has ventured to imagine a substitute arrangement inside the chapel, let alone multiple possibilities.

Chapter three, the fictional reimagining, may in a sense be considered a direct challenge to Sheldon Nodelman’s intriguing suggestion that the alternate chapel paintings would diminish the quality and effect of the chapel’s powerful and guarded interior. Instead of the “senseless chaos” that Nodelman predicted, the five alternate possibilities that I have imagined and presented here retain order, balance, and often symmetry, as well. Placed in varying positions and patterns with the existing panels, the alternate paintings reach their full potential and compliment—not subtract from—the space. Many of the possible arrangements achieve the same degree of ambiance (if not more) as the extent chapel interior, which may cause us to wonder, what if we have been missing six pieces crucial to Rothko’s intended ambience this entire time?

The five reimagined interiors of the Rothko Chapel, though only an initial step and certainly not exhaustive, open unexpected doors to new approaches in the study of modern art. One might assume that because of the vast amount of scholarship that has been produced
concerning Mark Rothko and the Houston chapel, the subject long ago reached a point of saturation. Or, given the personal nature of the effects of the chapel space, there is no prospect for objective study remaining. Neither of these assumptions are so. Because of Rothko’s untimely death, it is the responsibility of art historians to explore the overlooked pieces of his oeuvre and attempt to put them together, even in a fictional manner as I have done here. As art historians, we are inherently interested in creativity and products of the imagination. Why not use these same qualities in our own work? The goals of this project could easily be applied to the work of any artist. What other alternates exist, hiding in storage or dislocated from their intended places? What other permanent installations could be reinterpreted imaginatively?

In closing, I urge fellow scholars in the discipline to challenge the limits of their research endeavors by finding these relatively unknown pieces and daring to imagine new, alternate possibilities.
Figure 1  Exterior of Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas
Photograph by Katie Kisiel
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Image courtesy of *Maurice Denis: Earthly Paradise (1870-1943) Exhibition Catalogue*
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Image courtesy of Artstor
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Image courtesy of Artstor

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Photo by Hickey Robertson
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Photograph by Katie Kisiel
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Photograph by Katie Kisiel
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Photo Credit Hickey Robertson
Image courtesy of The Rothko Chapel
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Photo Credit: George Everard Kidder
Image courtesy of Artstor
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Photo Credit Hickey Robertson
Image courtesy of The Rothko Chapel
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Image courtesy of npr.org and Paul Hester/The Menil Collection
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Image Courtesy of The Rothko Chapel

Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled* (alternate panel for chapel from “Pair A”), 1966 [RC 65-10] Photo Credit: Douglas Parker
Image Courtesy of The Rothko Chapel
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Image courtesy of The Rothko Chapel.

Image courtesy of The Rothko Chapel.
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Photo Credit Hickey Robertson, Image courtesy of The Rothko Chapel

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