

## SEEKING TRANSCENDENCE – 6



Mark Rothko, No.14, 1960, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, USA

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Rothko, born a Lithuanian Jew, grew up knowing raw fear. His parents, intellectuals with Marxist sympathies, fled to America shortly before the First World War. It was comparatively late in life before the artist, Yale drop-out, artistic free-thinker, discovered himself in the 'Color Field' form.

These large paintings (No. 14 measures 298cm x 268cm) are hard to appreciate in small-scale reproductive form, but they present in real time and in real (gallery) space something of the transcendent. Let me try to explain.

Such paintings, composed of blurred blocks of complimentary or contrasting colours, are entirely devoid of landscape, the human figure, or symbol. The wilfully flat form, removes even the merest hint of illusion (historically the function of art), yet behind this apparently simple expression lies complex thought.

In blocks of pure but uneven colour, without outline, the artist demands concentrated vision, although you have no clear point of focus. If you give it time the result is unsettling, disturbing even: the colours seem to vibrate, you lose your sense of place (is the painting moving, or are you?) and of time (just how long have I been here?). In the end you are "enveloped within" the painting, drawn in by the luminosity of unadulterated colour. In large scale and up close the impact is overwhelming, unequivocal.

In a very real way this is art that destroys illusion to reveal truth (to rephrase Rothko's own words), an art that possesses life force, which is filled with possibility.

This is an art that demands, time, energy and concentration to reach for its meaning. It doesn't always work, but now and then we might get there – in a way it is something like prayer.

Times of epiphany when we know we have been in the presence of God are rare. They cannot be demanded of him. Moments when we rise beyond the everyday can arrive suddenly and disappear with equal speed. We may desire transcendence but this will not come on demand. To have the expectation will not command God into action. Sometimes God knows we are not ready. We need to wait in prayer with concentration, energy and persistence and the prayer on our lips: *Lord I would like to rise very high and borrow your eyes* and when the time is right and in a way that fits us God will answer our prayer.