

LESSON TWO: Color and Environment



IMAGE FIVE: Mark Rothko. American, born Latvia. 1903–1970. *No. 5/No. 22*. 1950 (dated on reverse 1949). Oil on canvas, 9' 9" x 8' 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (297 x 272 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE SIX: Barnett Newman. American, 1905–1970. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. 1950–51. Oil on canvas, 7' 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 17' 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (242.2 x 541.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller. © 2007 Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

The artists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman are also considered Abstract Expressionists. This lesson compares two of their large, abstract, colorful canvases and examines some of the ideas that informed their artistic processes.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider the choices artists make with regard to painting, focusing on **color, shape, composition, proportion, balance, style, and scale.**
- Students will learn how to discuss and compare nonrepresentational works of art.
- Students will think about their relationship as a viewer to works of art and will consider how an **abstract work** can evoke a sense of atmosphere or place.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to review some of the artistic choices Kline, Pollock, and Frankenthaler (discussed earlier in this guide) made when creating their work. How did they use color? Line? Scale? Tell students that they are going to compare works by two different artists, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who were working at around the same time as Pollock, Kline, and Frankenthaler. They will be looking closely at the manner in which Rothko and Newman painted.
- Ask students to consider how they might represent an idea or emotion in paint, without showing a specific subject. How might their use of paint convey this idea? How might line or color convey ideas or emotions?
- Ask your students to discuss the ways that an artist might seek to convey a sense of place, atmosphere, or environment in an abstract work of art. We will return to this idea later in the lesson.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Mark Rothko, *No. 5/No. 22*, 1950 (Image Five)

Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51 (Image Six)

- Ask students to spend some time looking at Rothko's *No. 5/No. 22*. Have them write down ten descriptive words. Then have them circle their five favorite words. Ask them to write these words on separate note cards. Split the class into groups of five and have each group create a free-form poem using their words. Ask them to refer back to the painting as they build their poem. When they are finished, ask them to read their poem out loud. Ask the other students to comment on each poem. Do these poems help them to see the painting in a different way? How so?
- Now ask your students to look at Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Ask them to write a few sentences describing this work. Encourage them to be creative with their description. Have the students share the sentences.
- Show both works to the students again. Lead students in a discussion comparing and contrasting the two works of art. Students may consider how each artist uses color, paint, proportion, composition, and shape. They may compare the two artists' brushwork, the horizontal and vertical aspects of the paintings and the sizes of the two canvases.

Rothko was a largely self-taught artist who experimented with many kinds of painting, including representational, social realist, Surrealist, and abstract. He once worked as a theatrical set painter. He is known for his Color Field painting, which has large areas of color with no obvious focus of attention. Rothko simplified forms as much as possible, creating rectangles that seem to float on a field of color.¹¹

- Ask students to look closely again at Rothko's painting. What do they notice about the colors? How many different colors can they list? How might they describe the brushwork? What kinds of shapes do they notice?

No. 5/No. 22 follows a compositional structure Rothko worked on for more than twenty years. In this painting, narrowly separated rectangular blocks of red, yellow, and orange color hover in a column against a background of yellow. The blocks' edges are soft and irregular and tend to fade and blur. Rothko applied the paint with a large, broad brush. The paint has differences in tone, intensity, and saturation.

11. Paul Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 50.

- **Ask students to define horizon line.** Where do they usually see horizon lines in paintings? Point out the horizontal line in the red band toward the middle of the painting. How is this different from traditional horizon lines?
- **Rothko scraped lines into the painting.** This creates a sort of horizon line. Ask students why he might have chosen to do that. What effect does it have on their viewing experience?

Newman was an American painter, sculptor, printmaker, and writer who worked at the same time as Rothko. Like Rothko, he lived in New York and painted large, color-saturated canvases.

- **Read students the title of this work, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*.** In English, this title means “Man, Heroic and Sublime.” Newman wrote an essay on the sublime. Ideas about the sublime have to do with beauty and elements in nature that might inspire awe. Newman was interested in how the sublime might exist in the modern moment.
- **Ask students how this title relates to the painting.**

Newman insisted that his canvases were charged with symbolic meaning. Like the artists Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich (for more information, see *Modern Art and Ideas 4* [<http://www.moma.org/modernteachers/>]), Newman believed in the spiritual content of abstract art.

Newman eliminated evidence of the action of the painter’s hand. He preferred to work with broad, even expanses of intense color.

- **Read students the dimensions of this painting.** Ask them to measure it out using string. Rothko once said, “I paint very large pictures...the reason I paint them, however—I think it applies to other painters I know—is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human.”¹² This quote applies to Newman’s work as well.
- **Ask students to close their eyes and imagine that they were standing in front of this vast red field broken by five thin vertical strips.** Ask students how the size of a painting can affect their viewing experience.

This painting is so large that when the viewer stands close she is engulfed in the environment it creates. In fact, at Newman’s first solo exhibition in 1950, a note from the artist advised, “There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.”¹³

- **Newman called the vertical strips in his work “zips.”** Ask the students to look closely at the zips. What do they notice?

These zips have been compared to figures standing against a void. They vary in width, color, and intensity. The two coral-colored strips were applied directly to the canvas, while the other three lie on top of the red paint. The surfaces of Newman’s paintings were built up using many layers of paint that were applied slowly and carefully.¹⁴

- **Ask students to discuss what effect the zips have on their viewing.** How would the painting look different if they were not included? If they were moved to a different part of the painting?

12. Mark Rothko, quoted in Ann Temkin, *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), p. 41.

13. Barnett Newman, quoted in Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, p. 178.

14. Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, p. 178.

Newman believed that by looking at his work up close people could become more self-aware. He said, “I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality.”¹⁵

- **Ask students how they think someone could learn something about themselves by looking at art. Have they ever learned something about themselves by looking at a work of art? Ask them to share their experience.**

In 1952, Rothko stated, “A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world.”¹⁶

- **Read this quote to students and ask them to consider what Rothko might mean by this. Ask students to consider the role of the viewer. As a viewer, what is your “job”?**

In a 1957 interview, Rothko stated, “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom. If you...are moved only by...color relationships, then you miss the point.”¹⁷ In 1947, Newman stated that any art worthy of consideration should address “life,” “man,” “nature,” “death,” and “tragedy.”¹⁸

- **Ask students to consider these quotes. What emotion or idea might they assign to Rothko’s or Newman’s paintings? Why?**
- **Ask students to identify a powerful feeling, mood, or emotion. If they were to represent that feeling in paint, how might they do it? If time permits, have students create their own non-representational work based on an emotion or feeling such as tragedy or ecstasy. Ask them to carefully consider their use of shape, composition, and color.**
- **Now that your students have looked at these two works closely, ask them how the paintings might evoke a sense of place or environment. What kind of place? How does each work’s size, use of color, and composition contribute to a sense of place? Ask students to spend a few minutes writing about this, then share their ideas.**

ACTIVITIES

1. Art and Ideas

Newman said, “The basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea...the idea-complex that makes contact with mystery—of life, of men, of nature, of the hard, black chaos that is death, or the grayer, softer chaos that is tragedy. For it is only the idea that has meaning.”¹⁹

Ask students what they think Newman means by this. How are Rothko and Newman translating ideas into paint? What choices are they making? How are the intentions of these two artists different from the intentions of Pollock and Frankenthaler?

2. Compare and Contrast

Ask students to select one of the works in this guide by Kline, Frankenthaler, or Pollock and write an essay comparing it to Rothko’s or Newman’s work. They can consider how these artists use paint. How are their working processes different? Similar?

15. Barnett Newman, quoted in Tate Modern, “Barnett Newman,” <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/newman/>.

16. Mark Rothko, quoted in *Visions of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), pp. 221–22.

17. Mark Rothko, quoted in *MoMA Highlights*, p. 196.

18. Barnett Newman, quoted in Tate Modern, “Barnett Newman,” <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/newman/>.

19. Barnett Newman, quoted in *The Ideographic Picture* (pamphlet) (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1947).

3. Art and Spirituality

Rothko created murals for a chapel in Houston, Texas, which he considered one of his most important works. Ask students to research this project. How did he attempt to infuse his work with spirituality?

4. Monuments

Newman also created sculpture. He created a huge steel sculpture called *Broken Obelisk*, which is in MoMA's collection (see www.moma.org/collection). Ask students to research this work of art. What is it a monument to? If they had to create a monument, what would it be? What would it symbolize?