Breaking Modernist Conventions: The Role of Nostalgia and the Past in the Works of Marc Chagall in Comparison to the Works of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman

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Part 1: Formal and Historical Analysis of Modernist Artworks

Confronted with times of unease, the people of the late 19th and early 20th Century turned to Modernism, a movement of immense cultural diversity and expression. But within this era of such diversity came division. Many traditional Modernists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman used the abstract to ground their viewers in the present and did not consider past practices of Belle Époque (1880-1914) artists to be worthy of any portrayal at all if society was to ever move forward. Rothko and Newman were both a part of the Color-Field movement, a branch of Abstract Expressionism characterized by two dimensional portrayals of colors spread extensively on a canvas. A true traditional Modernist sticks to minimalism and focuses on a present feeling or experience, rejecting the practices of European art and representational subject matter. Marc Chagall, a poet and a dreamer, was part of the artistic experimentation of this era, but his art diverges too far to be called a traditional Modernist. Traditional Modernism grounds the viewer in the present as a way of progressing towards a future free from grievances of the past, but Chagall chooses to look back in time with feelings of nostalgia and intimacy, granting his art an elusive and fantastical presence.

Mark Rothko (Marcus Rothkowitz) was a painter of great value in the Modernist community, known for his simplistic yet emotionally revealing (amorphous) squares of color. As an American-Jewish artist living from 1903-1970, he had a close connection to the events of World War II and anti-Semitism. Although he was born in Russia, he grew up in the U.S. from 1913 and later moved to New York where he found his true calling for painting. Rothko was actively engaged in bringing to light the devastation done unto the Jewish people during WWII. He often found inspiration for his art in current events as tragic and devastating as the Holocaust, but was not known to make art inspired by his own feelings or stories from his past. Rothko's art functioned to build an experience for a general audience.[1] The product of this goal was his signature style of two blocks of colors. Rothko's style was often grouped with Color Field Painting, a part of Abstract Expressionism that was commonly applied to abstract artists and placed particular focus on the individualistic and expressive capabilities of elemental color. Rothko was also part of a group called the Ten, a group of American Modernist artists formed by art critic Robert Ulrich Godsoe, which advocated for the preservation of abstract and experimental art in the 1930s.[2] The other members included abstract artists such as Adolph Gottlieb, Louis Schanker, and Jack Kufeld. Godsoe is said to have selected such artists because

[1] Anne Goldman, "Soulful Modernism," *Southwest Review* 93, no. 1 (2008): 13-30.

[2] Isabelle Dervaux, "An Avant-Garde Group in the 1930s," *Archives of the American Journal* 31, no. 2 (1991): 14-20.

he believed they were part of "the modern expressive tradition."[3] United by the hardship of the Great Depression (which started in the 1930s), the Ten and other artists would play a pivotal role in many demonstrations and picket lines. The group was supported by the American Artist Congress, an organization that backed cultural movements to combat the wave of communism and fascism. Although the Ten was part of the general Modernist community, they oftentimes felt like outcasts when it came to exhibitions. Museums such as the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art showed work that was either American and conservative or European, which stood in direct opposition to the Ten's rejection of antiquated and traditional artistic styles from the Belle Époque. The members of the Ten were not outcasts in political activity, however, since most artists at the time of the Great Depression and WWII followed trends of painting "social" or political subjects and events.[4] Rothko was no exception to this trend, as expected of a traditional Modernist, as seen in his work *Number 14* from 1960.

Number 14, painted with oil paint on canvas, exquisitely demonstrates how pure color was employed to immerse the viewer in a present experience, evoking emotions of destruction and tragedy surrounding the misfortunes of WWII. It also exemplifies the characteristics of Color-Field Painting. In 1960 Rothko was at the height of his career, and he had a clear command of his established style and of what message he wanted to convey through his artistic metaphors. The painting displays two rectangles, or "minimally inflected scrubbed in sheets of paint," compared side by side as coherent yet disembodied rectangles.[5] On top is a deep heavy orange and on the bottom is a dark blue, encapsulating the general tenor of sadness and tragedy. The paint is spread on the canvas with an adequate amount of blank space, revealing a melancholic brown background. The darkness of the brown peeks through the unevenness of the orange rectangle, characterizing the somber orange as slightly chaotic. The dark blue settles on the bottom, like a calm sea after a storm, yet the blue is not settled, as there are still similar patterns of unevenness. The outlines of the rectangles seem to buzz with life, creating a space where the limits are defined by the radiance of hue.[6] The rather simplistic composition of the painting is perhaps a way of clearing the viewer's mind from any outside associations with the art, so that the viewer can be grounded and further impacted by the tragic destruction of WWII that the painting depicts. Some scholars say that Rothko's work even creates a more empathetic experience than that of Holocaust museums or war memorials.[7]

The scale of the painting is also notable (114.5 in. x 105 ⅝ in.), since Rothko made a deliberate choice to create paintings of larger size. In a symposium in 1951, Rothko said "to paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience...with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command." In

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[3] "The Art Marts," North Shore News, May 2, 1935. Clipping in Louis Schanker Papers, Archives of American Art (hereafter AAA), microfilm roll N68-16, frame 307.

[4] Isabelle Dervaux, "An Avant-Garde Group in the 1930s," *Archives of the American Journal* 31, no. 2 (1991): 14-20.

[5] Kare Wilkin, Carl Belz, *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2008), 13-17.

[6] Kare Wilkin, Carl Belz, *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2008), 13-17.

[7] Anne Goldman, "Soulful Modernism," *Southwest Review* 93, no. 1 (2008): 13-30.

the style of traditional Modernism, Rothko leaves only the elemental building blocks of the aesthetic experience that are detached from representational subject matter: color, scale, and time. Rotho even detaches himself, avoiding the depiction of his own stories and feelings in his painting as a way of rejecting any form of representational subject matter. Rothko only wanted to convey a sense of doom and tragedy. Combined with the physical size of the painting and the intensity of the colors, the viewer is almost forced to experience an overwhelming state of mind. Rothko thus served his role as the traditional Modernist in the political setting of WWII by ensuring that color became the emotion that replaced myth and legends that were once there.

Another traditional Modernist is Barnett Newman, who was born and raised in New York by Polish Jewish immigrants. Newman's work also aligns with Color-Field Painting, but his political involvement is more prominent than Rothko's. Taken aback by the candidates in the 1933 mayoral election for New York, Newman ran for mayor of New York on a write-in ticket campaign, not necessarily to win but to demonstrate the strength of intellectuals in New York. His decision to run was especially significant in a time where leadership was lacking, or as Newman put it, "it is humanity's tragedy that today its leaders are either sullen materialists or maniacs."[8] Newman therefore exudes qualities of traditional Modernism in his active engagement in politics and the present world. The focus of his campaign dealt heavily with the promotion of intellectual institutions and cultural programs as well as the horrors and tragedies of Nazism and the atomic bomb. Newman focused on mending and raising awareness about tragedies in current events not only through his political ambitions but also through his artistic capabilities.

As an artist Newman was in strong opposition to representational art and older European painting, declaring that "we are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of western European painting. Instead of making 'cathedrals' out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves." There is a clear rejection of nostalgia and the past in favor of a society that looks towards the future, hence his comment about "making it out of ourselves," or paving a new path, a sentiment traditional Modernists such as Rothko would agree with. Newman takes an equally strong stance in his art as well. In fact, once he established his signature style of painting (abstract Color-Field Painting), he burned all his other work from before 1930 because they were made in the traditional Expressionist style and supposedly contained traces of representational art.

Newman's art was arguably even more aligned with traditional Modernism and universality than Rothko's because of his extensive use of chromaticity and reduction of painting to its elemental pigments. Newman's *Onement I* (1948) marked a significant breakthrough in his artistic career. *Onement I* is done with oil paints, depicting a single but expressive cadmium red light line through the middle of a rectangular canvas, surrounded by a subtle maroon background. The cadmium red line defined Newman's signature motif of the zip, an image that "evokes the

[8] John P. O'Neill, *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: The Barnett Newman Foundation, 1990), 4-5.

infinite in the greatest simplicity of means."[9] This particular version of the zip was painted over masking tape, which would have originally been stripped away so there could be a solid line painted down the middle. Newman, however, strayed from that technique and painted a zip over the masking tape. The painting can also be interpreted to symbolize an expression of impulsiveness, furthering the portrayal of a present experience. Newman was also known to be concerned about concentration camps in which everyone is pushed together, and the zip perhaps also functions as a political statement. The solitude of the zip is often interpreted as a mirror for American isolation and individuality during difficult times.[10] In this interpretation, Newman is creating a broad and relevant experience for the viewers, rather than explicitly depicting his personal feelings or stories about WWII through representational art. There is no sense of nostalgia for anything from the past, since, for Newman, older artistic traditions detract from the progression of Modernist art, and recent history is only filled with the horrors of WWII.

Traditional Modernists emphasized their particular distaste for older traditions and vestiges of the past as a way of throwing cold water on the harsh realities of war and the Great Depression. However, Chagall was an artist who embraced the past and representational subject matter to construct a different world of fantasy and dreams. Marc Chagall was born in 1887 and was raised in a small Hassidic community in Russia called Vitebsk from 1887. Vitebsk would be a primary source of his artistic inspiration, although because he moved around from Russia to Paris to the U.S. so often throughout his life, motifs from the three locations would often be seen together. Paris in particular was a significant artistic breakthrough for Chagall, who was taken aback by the vibrance of color and artistic diversity in the city. However, upon moving to Paris in 1910 he noted that "all that prevented me from returning immediately was the distance between Paris and my home town."[11]

Chagall is a noteworthy nontraditional Modernist, particularly because despite all the political chaos that erupted in his life–WWI, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Great Depression, WWII– Chagall never lost touch with his Jewish roots or his artistic style. Unlike the traditional Modernists, Chagall viewed the past with nostalgia, finding artistic inspiration from his childhood, hometown, mythology (folktales), and his marriage to his first wife, Bella Rosenfeld. Some scholars group him with the Surrealists, but Chagall himself said that he didn't consider himself a part of any artistic movement, asserting that "if I create from the heart, nearly everything works; if from the head, almost nothing."[12] In fact he strongly disliked the separation of the artistic styles, saying "let us indulge our own lunacy! What is needed is...a revolution in the depths and not on the surface."[13] This quote can be interpreted as Chagall's way of saying that art needs to come from within and should not be for the "surface-like" purpose of politics. Chagall directly rejected Modernist traditions, even when given the chance to join hands with

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[9] Kare Wilkin, Carl Belz, *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2008), 13-17.

[10] Michael Lewis, "How Art Became Irrelevant." *Commentary Magazine,* July-August 2015. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/michael-lewis/how-art-became-irrelevant/.

[11] Ingo F. Walther, Rainer Metzger. *Chagall.* (Hohenzollernring: TASCHEN, 2012).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

Modernist artists like Malevich. His works were also rejected by society, particularly by the Nazis who deemed his work to be decadent and degenerate.

Chagall's depiction of a dreamworld and longing for the past even in the setting of WWII can be seen in *The Three Candles* painted in 1938. At the time, Chagall was in constant fear of internment as he lived in cultural isolation in France with his wife Bella Rosenfeld. In *The Three Candles*, there is a couple floating above a scattered village, replete with images from Chagall's hometown and representational subjects such as the cow at the bottom left corner and the angels floating throughout the canvas. There is a clear divergence from the works of Rothko and Newman, not just because of the representational subject matter, but because of how Chagall chooses to depict the struggles of the war through art. Rothko, Newman, and Chagall were all Jewish, but Chagall's Jewish identity seems to demand a much more personal narrative of WWII. In *The Three Candles,* Chagall paints a private past memory, returning to the happiness of his marriage to his wife as a way to cope with his growing fears. His fear is perhaps reflected by the lack of the blue, which often reflects freedom in Chagall's works. The only sign of blue is seen in the downhearted cow at the bottom left corner. Because his grandfather and uncle were butchers, cows in Chagall's work gained a special role as spiritual beings, half-smiling with the sad joy of sacrifice as in a crucifixion.[14] He further emphasizes his nostalgia for his peaceful hometown by painting the clown musician, who is surrounded by others in Chagall's more festive paintings but appears solo here.[15] Although the painting is called *The Three Candles,* it should perhaps be called the Four Candles since a votive-like figure stands in the village underneath the couple, holding up a candle as if in prayer or worship to those above. Like the angels, the married couple (most likely Chagall and Bella Rosenfeld) is floating, far above the village and any troubles that might ground them in reality. The angels create a sense of "distracted affiliation with the human activities" in the town below, and if there is any sort of tragedy associated with the real world, Chagall's high-flown perspective in the painting allows us to fly with him, carrying us far away from the present.[16] Unlike Rothko's *Number 14* and Newman's *Onement I* which evoke a sort of distant admiration, *The Three Candles* exudes an intimacy that enraptures its viewer. Chagall's work takes his viewers into an entirely different world, the kind that is tangible only in our most nostalgic memories and dreams.

Part II: Student exhibition design for Modernist Artworks

As a way of commemorating the differences between Marc Chagall and the traditional Modernists, my exhibition would start in a large white hall with several smaller rooms off to the sides. The main hall would function as a transition space for the viewers between their visits to the smaller rooms, each dedicated to a different artist. For Mark Rothko, I would dedicate a triangular room with an entrance adjacent to *Number 14*. It would have tall ceilings and minimal light (only illuminated on the painting), so the setting could emphasize the darkness and its relation to the emotions of doom and tragedy that Rothko wanted to convey through his work. On display would be *No. 61 Rust and Blue* (1953), *Earth and Green* (1955), and *Number 14* (1961). Although I did not discuss all of these in my paper, they all feature more sombre colors

[14] Allyn Weisstein, "Iconography of Chagall," *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 1 (1954): 38-48.
[15] Allyn Weisstein, "Iconography of Chagall," *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 1 (1954): 38-48.
[16] Anne Goldman, "Soulful Modernism," *Southwest Review* 93, no. 1 (2008): 13-30.

that express a sense of tragedy and ambiguity commonly seen in Rothko's abstract paintings. There would be one painting on each wall, so that the viewer would feel slightly enclosed by the magnitude and depth of his paintings. By having these works of art in a dark, minimalist setting, the idea of being present with your thoughts and reflecting on the experience of the painting itself would become more clear as opposed to a well-lit room that exposes everything to the plain eye. As a traditional Modernist, Rothko's work invited little "distracting" subject matter, and the viewing experience should also reflect the deeper thinking required to be submerged in the painting. For Newman's work there would be a large, well lit white room with only *Onement I* on the wall, so that the viewer would feel individual isolation, mirroring the solitude of the zip on the painting. Finally for Marc Chagall, there would be a large room with windows featuring his works in stained glass (which may not be physically feasible). I would display works such as the window from the All Saints Church in Tudeley and from the UN headquarters in New York City, both of which feature a dominant amount of blue that represents freedom of expression. This way, Chagall's art would define all boundaries of the room and would have an influence on the lighting of the exhibition, immersing viewers in the dreamworld of his paintings. Unlike the simplistic rooms of the traditional Modernists, Chagall's room would be filled with his paintings (*Cow with Parasol, The Three Candles, Blue Violinist, etc.*) on all sides. I would organize them in chronological order to show a progression yet continuation of his representational subject matter, allowing the viewer themselves to experience Chagall's work as if they were reading a story of fantasy and adventure.

Today, Modernist art is hotly debated in art history, troubled with the many ambiguous branches of Modernism, political and cultural revolutions, and change. What makes Chagall so different from traditional Modernists like Rothko and Newman is his evasion of reality through nostalgia for his hometown and past, a rare occurrence in a world where the past is corrupted by memories of war and financial catastrophe. Chagall treated his own stories and emotions with great care. This tendency is reflected in his art which creates a far more intimate and personal experience than the distant and impersonal expressions of war and tragedy seen in Rothko and Newman's paintings. The traditional Modernist may have been more appealing to people of the 20th century, but today, in a world full of possibility and knowledge, I find that Chagall's work inspires deeper thinking, imagination, and hope. His representational art is a more direct way of capturing positive and elusive memories but is also undefined by Modernist conventions, allowing his art to transcend generations of artists. Together with the wedded couple in *The Three Candles* and many of his other works, viewers are able to fly far away from the troubles of the real world into a dimension where peace and happiness are attainable.

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