



Mark Rothko: A Biography

By James E. B. Breslin

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A book of heroic dimensions, this is the first full-length biography of one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century—a man as fascinating, difficult, and compelling as the paintings he produced. Drawing on exclusive access to Mark Rothko's personal papers and over one hundred interviews with artists, patrons, and dealers, James Breslin tells the story of a life in art—the personal costs and professional triumphs, the convergence of genius and ego, the clash of culture and commerce. Breslin offers us not only an enticing look at Rothko as a person, but delivers a lush, in-depth portrait of the New York art scene of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s—the world of Abstract Expressionism, of Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, and Klein, which would influence artists for generations to come.

"In Breslin, Rothko has the ideal biographer—thorough but never tedious, a good storyteller with an ear for the spoken word, fond but not fawning, and possessed of a most rare ability to comment on non-representational art without sounding preposterous."—Robert Kiely, *Boston Book Review*

"Breslin impressively recreates Mark Rothko's troubled nature, his tormented life, and his disturbing canvases. . . . The artist's paintings become almost tangible within Breslin's pages, and Rothko himself emerges as an alarming physical force."—Robert Warde, *Hungry Mind Review*

"This remains beyond question the finest biography so far devoted to an artist of the New York School."—Arthur C. Danto, *Boston Sunday Globe*

"Clearly written, full of intelligent insights, and thorough."—Hayden Herrera, *Art in America*

"Breslin spent seven years working on this book, and he has definitely done his homework."—Nancy M. Barnes, *Boston Phoenix*

"He's made the tragedy of his subject's life the more poignant."—Eric Gibson, *The New Criterion*

"Mr. Breslin's book is, in my opinion, the best life of an American painter that has yet been written . . . a biographical classic. It is painstakingly researched,

fluently written and unfailingly intelligent in tracing the tragic course of its subject's tormented character."—Hilton Kramer, *New York Times Book Review*, front page review

James E. B. Breslin (1936-1996) was professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* and *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist*.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"I became a painter because I wanted to raise painting to the level of poignancy of music and poetry." Born Marcus Rothkowitz in a small Russian town, Mark Rothko immigrated to Portland, Oregon, in 1913, when he was 10 years old. "You don't know what it is to be a Jewish kid dressed in a suit that is a Dvinsk, not an American, idea of a suit traveling across America and not able to speak English," he later told fellow abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell. Rothko was a weak child, an abandoned son (his father had gone to America in 1910 and died of cancer just seven months after the family was reunited), a Jew excluded from high school clubs, a Yale freshman on scholarship, and a college dropout determined to become an Artist with a capital A. James Breslin has written an exhaustive biography of the painter. He pulled together all the facts of Rothko's life and carefully examined all the strata of the artist's personality--Rothko's sensitivity, his sense of displacement, his pride and his diffidence, his combativeness, his love for his children, his hatred for Marlborough Gallery director Frank Lloyd, and his difficulties with money. The book is flawed only by Breslin's ticlike use of italics, which give the sense of the author tugging at our sleeve in an unnecessary effort to persuade: "Rothko's last and most severe renunciations were made not to remove obstacles between the observer and the idea but in a gesture of personal *withdrawal*." But this is a relatively minor trifle that does not unduly detract from this large--and large-spirited--book about a tormented, brilliant Artist. --Peggy Moorman

From Publishers Weekly

A hefty, bear-like man with voracious appetites, an alcoholic who withdrew into isolation and took his own life, Mark Rothko (1903-1970) made paintings that transformed despair into transcendent beauty. Breslin's biography, a splendid achievement, exorcises Rothko's private demons and explores how he invented a modern art which enacted his inner drama. Born Marcus Rothkowitz in Russia, raised in Portland, Oregon, from age 10, the painter launched an iconoclastic underground newspaper at Yale, became a "self-made proletarian" in the Depression, and progressed from expressionist urban moodscapes to surreal mythic pictures to the free-floating stacked rectangles that are his trademark. A melancholy man who never felt fully at home in his adopted country, Rothko festered with indignation as an outsider, but once he achieved fame and insider status, he felt corrupted and doomed by it, according to Breslin, a UC-Berkeley English professor and biographer of William Carlos Williams. Illustrated. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Kirkus Reviews

The full-bodied fruit of seven years' labor--a zealous, uncommonly kind portrait of one of Abstract Expressionism's irascible masters--from Breslin (William Carlos Williams, 1970). Marcus Rothkowitz, born in 1903 in the Russian city of Dvinsk, emigrated with his family in 1913 to Portland, Oregon. Rebellious as a youth, he dropped out of Yale after a taste of refined Eastern anti-Semitism, turning instead to Manhattan and the painter's life. Impoverished, Rothko lived in a series of cold-water flats and run-down neighborhoods during the Depression and WW II, often confronting the city's museum establishment, which then had eyes only for European art. The painter's first wife's money demands--as well as the success of her jewelry business, which turned him at times into her salesman--resulted in divorce; but with remarriage in 1945 to the young, adoring Mell, Rothko came to be seen as one of a distinctly American group of artists. In the late 1940's, he embraced the abstract luminous colors and rectangular forms that became his trademark, and, in the hands of aggressive dealers, he went rapidly from rags to riches. Still defiant, he returned, after two years' work, a commission to paint panels for the celebrated Four Seasons restaurant when he realized that his efforts could be only decorative. Other commissions followed, but Rothko's colors darkened as his

health and marriage deteriorated. In 1970, in despair and pressured by his dealer to sell more paintings, he committed suicide. Providing an expansive view of Rothko and his milieu, and rich in information about the New York art scene--but a breathless enthusiasm for his subject leads Breslin to descriptive excess, especially with regard to individual paintings. (Color & b&w illustrations) -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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