

## Rothko in Britain

9 September 2011 – 26 February 2012, Pat Matthews Gallery (Gallery 4)

Whitechapel Gallery revisits its ground-breaking exhibition of works by Mark Rothko on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In 1961 the Whitechapel Gallery held the first solo show of American artist Mark Rothko in Britain. This now iconic exhibition is brought vividly to life through the Gallery's archives of original photographs and letters from the artist shown alongside Rothko's painting *Light Red Over Black* (1957), the first work by Rothko to be bought by a British public collection, and material from other archives never exhibited before.

Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970) was part of a generation of New York painters whose style became known as Abstract Expressionism. Whitechapel Gallery Director Bryan Robertson (Director 1952 - 69) championed contemporary artists from the US, also showing Jackson Pollock's work for the first time in the UK in 1958, and exhibiting Robert Rauschenberg in 1964.

Rothko reached his mature style in the mid-1950s. From then on, he used muted, deep colours such as dark blues, reds and greens to make luminous rectangles seemingly hover on the surface of the canvas. While realising his Whitechapel Gallery exhibition in London he outlined the height at which he wanted his works to be hung as well as the light levels to create the atmosphere most conducive to his work. All this was done with the intention of giving his saturated colourfields a greater sense of depth and creating an immersive experience for the viewer.

The Whitechapel Gallery's 1961 exhibition introduced the work of Mark Rothko to Britain for the first time, and included paintings from 1945 - 60. It was visited by artists including John Hoyland and Roger Scruton and became influential on their work.

*Rothko in Britain* now presents rarely seen archive material such as letters from the artist and original photographs including installation photographs of the 1961 Whitechapel Gallery exhibition - never seen before in public and lent by the Rothko estate -, shown alongside Rothko's *Light Red Over Black* (1957). One rare letter describes Rothko's warm feeling for England, saying 'I feel so in tune with people like Shakespeare and Dickens I often think that they must really have been Russian Jews who emigrated to New York.'

In addition, the display sheds new light on the connection between Britain and one of America's foremost artists of the post-war period by highlighting some of the strong relationships Rothko formed during his trip in the summer of 1959, when he visited England for the first time and spent time with the painter William Scott in Somerset and Peter Lanyon in Cornwall. In St. Ives he met the artists Michael Canney, Alan Davie, Paul Feiler, Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Bryan Wynter and others.

## Press Release

.....

**Whitechapel Gallery**  
77-82 Whitechapel High Street  
London E1 7QX

T +44 (0)20 7522 7888  
F +44 (0)20 7522 7887

[whitechapelgallery.org](http://whitechapelgallery.org)

Whitechapel Gallery Trustee Limited is a private limited company, registered in England and Wales, registered company no. 4093862 and the corporate trustee of Whitechapel Gallery, registered charity no. 312162. VAT no. 863586582.

The Whitechapel Gallery exhibition in 1961 played a crucial role in fostering this ongoing relationship with Britain, which culminated in one of the most exceptional donations by an artist to a public gallery, that of a group of Seagram murals to Tate in 1969.

The exhibition is part of the Whitechapel Gallery's dedicated programme of highlights from its century-old archive of showing modern and contemporary art. The exhibition is displayed in Gallery 4 (Pat Matthews Gallery).

#### Notes for Editors

- Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia (today Daugavpils, Latvia) in 1903 but emigrated to the United States with his family when he was ten years old. He attended Yale University in 1921 but gave up his studies in 1923 and moved to New York. Rothko's Surrealist-inspired biomorphic paintings of the mid-1940s were devoted to mythological themes and sought to express the tragedy of the human condition. By 1950, however, Rothko had eliminated references to the natural world and arrived at his signature style. He painted large vertical canvases with two, three or four rectangular forms in brilliant hues set against a coloured ground. His paintings created an intimate experience for the viewer and have been linked to profound themes of tragedy, ecstasy and the sublime. Rothko's work was to darken dramatically from the late 1950s onwards. This development is related to his work on a major mural commission for the Seagram Building in New York – from which Rothko later withdrew – and consequently on the large panels for the Rothko Chapel at the University of St Thomas, Texas. During that period Rothko travelled to Britain and was in regular correspondence with the British painters he met there during his trip in Cornwall and London. In 1961 he had a major solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York which travelled to the Whitechapel Gallery in October of the same year and was curated by Bryan Robertson, Whitechapel Gallery director. In the mid 1960s Norman Reid, director of the Tate Gallery visited Rothko's studio and started exploring the possibility of adding more of Rothko's works to the collection. These negotiations lasted until 1969, culminating in a major donation by Rothko, his gift of 8 of the Seagram Murals. Rothko died on 25 February 1970, coincidentally, the day that the Seagram Murals arrived at the Tate Gallery.
- *Rothko in Britain* (2011) is curated by Nayia Yiakoumaki, Archive Curator.
- *Rothko in Britain* (2011) is supported by The Foyle Foundation, and, The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

#### Visitor Information

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm, Thursdays, 11am – 9pm. Admission free. Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX. Nearest London Underground Station: Aldgate East, Liverpool Street, Tower Gateway DLR. T + 44 (0) 20 7522 7888 info@whitechapelgallery.org whitechapelgallery.org

For further press information please contact:

Rachel Mapplebeck on 020 7522 7880, 07811 456 806 or email

RachelMapplebeck@whitechapelgallery.org

Charlotte Hogg on 020 7539 3309 or email CharlotteHogg@whitechapelgallery.org