

# *Appreciation of Color-Field Paintings through Reception Theory: A Case Study of Mark Rothko*

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**Abstract:** By using Jauss and Issel's "reception aesthetics" to analyse and appreciate Rothko's Color-Field paintings, it is discovered that Rothko focuses on conveying inner emotions through pure artistic forms and emphasizes communication with the audience. This aligns with the theories of "horizon of expectations," "response-inviting structure," and "the implied reader" in reception aesthetics. Rothko does not wish to provide excessive interpretations of his works; instead, he wants the audience to have more space for personal feelings. He believes that a work is only complete when the audience engages in emotional communication and actively engages in aesthetic re-creation while appreciating the painting. The interplay between reception aesthetics theory and Rothko's art not only opens up new perspectives for appreciating his paintings but also expands the application scope of reception aesthetics from an artistic standpoint.

## 1. Introduction

Abstract art has always been a style of art that is not easily understood and appreciated by the general public, and gamut paintings is even more difficult to decipher. Taking Rothko's gamut paintings as an example, it cancels out the representation of reality, using large areas of almost evenly applied color blocks, making it difficult for viewers to determine what the painting depicts at first glance. Perhaps the large size and visually impactful colors are the most immediate sensations that Rothko's paintings give to viewers. This article takes the theory of accepting aesthetics as a starting point, aiming to make it easier for viewers to understand the rich and profound connotations and emotions contained in Rothko's paintings. Rothko emphasizes the interaction between painting and the viewer, while accepting aesthetics also emphasizes the relationship between art and the viewer. This article attempts to examine the motivations and mechanisms of abstract painting based on Rothko's gamut paintings, exploring the characteristics of gamut paintings. Based on this, from the perspective of accepting aesthetics, it critically reflects on Rothko's gamut paintings and proposes thoughts on how to reshape the aesthetic character of abstract art in the present context.

## 2. Rothko and Color-Field Painting

### 2.1. Changing process of Rothko's painting style

Mark Rothko, a renowned painter, is categorized by critics as a painter of Color-Field Painting within the Abstract Expressionism. Although Rothko did not consider himself a part of the Abstract Expressionism, he has repeatedly stated, "I am not a formalist", "I am not an abstract painter", "I am only interested in expressing human emotions (such as tragedy, ecstasy, doom)<sup>[1]</sup>, I have no interest in color, form, or other elements." However, his paintings do indeed form a branch of Abstract Expressionism together with Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. He is an important representative figure of Color-Field Painting and a source of pride in the eyes of the local art community.

Like all great masters of painting, Rothko's painting style went through a long process of self-exploration, from early representational works to mid-stage explorations of abstraction, and finally to his iconic \* paintings in the later period. Rothko's painting career can be divided into four stages:

(1) Realism Stage (1924-1940): In this stage, his main subjects were landscapes, still life, and portraits. Rothko was a Jewish immigrant from Russia who moved to America with his family at a young age. He was a talented student with broad knowledge in literature, history, philosophy, and drama. However, like most immigrants, his immigrant status resulted in discrimination during his studies, and he eventually chose to leave school. In 1923, he joined the Art Students League in Manhattan and later attended life drawing classes with painter Max Weber. Starting with still life, landscapes, and figure drawing, he progressed to a series of paintings depicting New York subway scenes. Rothko's paintings in this period exude a melancholic and aloof atmosphere.

(2) Surrealist Stage (1940-1946): During World War II, Rothko turned back to books and sought spiritual solace in philosophy and ancient Greek tragedies. The paintings in this stage mainly revolved around Greek mythology and religion, attempting to reflect the collective tragedy of humanity in times of war.

(3) Transitional Stage (1946-1949): Rothko began to experiment with abstract painting, where concrete imagery disappeared from his works and shapes and colors took center stage. He aimed to express the spiritual essence he wanted to convey through purer forms. He started using irregular blocks of color to represent his subject matter, marking the early exploratory stage of his iconic gamut paintings.

(4) Paradigm Stage (1949-1970): This stage represents the maturity of Rothko's iconic gamut paintings and is the most familiar phase of his artistic career. His painting style became fixed with indistinct and irregular rectangles as the dominant form[2].

### 2.2. Abstract painting and Color-field painting

Compared with representational painting, abstract painting severs the connection between the viewer and everyday life, making it difficult for the viewer to immediately identify concrete elements from their daily experiences within the artwork. This requires the viewer to engage in more contemplation and emotion. It also represents a significant shift for artists in terms of what they paint and how they paint.

The reasons for transitioning from representational painting to abstract painting are as follows: Firstly, representational painting involves imitating nature. After a long period of development, the act of imitation has reached a certain level of maturity. Artists desired to explore new possibilities, but representational painting hindered their innovative spirit. Secondly, with the development of Romanticism, artists began to pay more attention to expressing internal emotions. Abstract art provides a great means of expression in this regard. Thirdly, the concept of artistic purity emerged in the latter half of the 19th century, leading artists to focus on the fundamental elements of painting,

such as color, line, and structure. Lastly, the advent of photography had a tremendous impact on realistic representation in painting. Generations of artists had been continuously exploring and learning perspective and lighting techniques, only to be surpassed by the click of a shutter in photography. This led people to ponder the significance of realistic painting in the presence of photography, prompting artists to reevaluate the meaning of painting[1].

Abstract expressionism is composed of two directions, one being the "action painting" that emphasizes bodily movement, and the other being the "Color Field Painting" that employs flat, serene colors. Represented by artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still, the artists of gamut painting focus more on color itself, abandoning figurative representation and perspective, aiming to express rich emotional content through the simplest forms[3].

### 3. Reception aesthetics and reception theory

Reception aesthetics emerged in Germany in the 1970s and the main theorists behind this field were Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. They both pointed out that the study of literary works and literary history should not only focus on the relationship between the author and the work, but also consider the relationship between the author, the work, and the reader. "Reception aesthetics is an artistic theory that emphasizes the reader's emotional experience of literature"[4]. After a work is created, it is not complete in itself. It is only through the interaction and appreciation of the reader that a work can be considered complete. The meaning of a work lies not only in the work itself but also in the interpretation given by the appreciator. The work serves as the objective basis for the appreciation, and different appreciators will actively engage with the work based on their own experiences, life encounters, and personal emotions. As a result, the same work may have different effects on different individuals.

German scholar Hans Robert Jauss proposed the concept of "horizon of expectations", which refers to the potential aesthetic expectations that readers have based on their previous aesthetic preferences, personal experiences, knowledge systems, and so on[5]. The aesthetic distance between the horizon of expectations and the work is crucial. If a new work exceeds the reader's horizon of expectations, meaning it is innovative, the reader will experience a sense of freshness and be attracted to the work, thereby expanding their own horizon of expectations. On the other hand, if a work is too ahead of its time, far beyond the reader's horizon of expectations, the reader may find it difficult to accept. Conversely, if a work is too close to the reader's aesthetic distance, the reader may find it dull and uninteresting[6].

Another representative of reception aesthetics is Wolfgang Iser. He believes that the social impact and value of literary works will change over time, and even at the same time, different people have different understandings and feelings. In "The Text's Response-inviting Structure ", Iser proposes the concept of "response-inviting structure", which indicates that there are many unwritten contents in the work, namely the "blank" set by the author in the work. The author implies and allows readers to fill in these spaces through their own imagination during the reading process. This process is an interaction between the work and the reader, a process of aesthetic recreation by the reader based on the work. Different readers construct their own works based on their past experiences, which is the calling structure of the work. Iser also introduces the concept of the "implied reader". In the process of creating the work, the author assumes an implied reader and adjusts the text according to the anticipated behavior, thought processes, and reaction mechanisms of this implied reader. This is done to establish a "response-inviting structure" for the work, enabling better communication and interaction with the reader, and stimulating the reader's motivation for aesthetic recreation[7].

Classical art focuses on the dissemination of ideas, while modern art increasingly emphasizes the

exchange of ideas and the participation of the audience. Rothko, Jauss and Isel hold an open attitude and emphasize the exchange between creators, works, and appreciators. The development of interdisciplinary research provides a richer perspective for art appreciation.

## 4. Rothko from the perspective of reception aesthetics

### 4.1. Horizon of Expectations

The anticipation of vision includes three levels: textual anticipation, imagery anticipation, and connotation anticipation[8]. We use these levels to analyze Rothko's gamut paintings. At the level of textual anticipation, large formats and large color blocks are more likely to attract viewers' attention and have a stronger visual impact and atmosphere compared to small formats with many representational elements[9]. At the level of imagery anticipation, when viewers stand in front of the paintings, they will find that the content of the paintings is more than just flat color blocks. Layers of thin colors permeate each other, as if breathing, with irregular edges that compete and contend, giving the calm image a sense of movement. It is unclear whether the bright colors are trying to burst out of the canvas to show their passion to the viewers, or if the deep dark colors are intended to lead the viewers into the deep and boundless origins of the universe. At the level of connotation anticipation, viewers may become absorbed in the painting, some may be reminded of tragic stories from ancient myths, or the passion of human life, just like Rothko himself when he painted the artwork. Some may recall a winter night they experienced years ago, with a frozen lake in front of them, silver moonlight reflecting on the ice, and perhaps even feel the chilling cold wind blowing on their faces at that time. Rothko said, "Some people lose control of their emotions and shed tears after seeing my paintings, which indicates that I have communicated with them on the most fundamental emotional level"[10].

### 4.2. Response-inviting Structure

Rothko's gamut paintings do not provide excessive descriptions and explanations of his artworks. In fact, he even replaces names with numbers and colors, completely abandoning concrete imagery from reality. He no longer uses irregular shapes but relies solely on rectangles of varying sizes and blurred patches of color to serve as the external expression of the artist's inner spirit. Rothko stated, "We may be engaging in a kind of guidance, such as guiding the public on how to view a painting, which paintings to view[11]. This seems generous and beneficial to the public, but it actually leads to the paralysis of public thinking and imagination (premature burial, stifling the artist's way)." This aligns with the concept of "blankness" in Isel's summoning structure in receptive aesthetics[7], where this blankness represents a kind of "uncertainty."

Clement Greenberg wrote in "Avant Garde and Kitsch" that to appreciate abstract painting, the viewer must reflect on the direct impression of the painting's form, thus achieving an aesthetic experience in the act of appreciation. Representational painting has already digested art for the viewer, allowing the viewer's appreciation to easily attain aesthetic pleasure. Abstract painting depicts the cause, while representational painting depicts the result. Rothko's paintings eliminate the graphical associations with real objects and their names, providing viewers with a broader space for aesthetic recreation[12]. Simon Marsha said in "The Power of Art," "They are open. In any aspect, no artist in the modern art world has such openness, allowing viewers to participate in his works." Rothko "goes to great lengths to involve the viewer, not only to observe but also to participate in his artistic creation." His paintings do not aim to tell the viewers "what it is," but instead to discuss together with the viewers "what it might be"<sup>[10]</sup>. The process of Rothko's transition from representation to abstraction is his exploration of the purity of art. In a statement issued in 1943

with Newman and artist Adolph Gottlieb, Rothko said, "We prefer to express complex thoughts through simple means"[13]. All of Rothko's practices are summoning the viewers to complete the artworks together with him.

### 4.3. Implied reader

#### (1) Exhibition of works

Rothko hopes that his works can be presented to the audience in the state he created them in the studio. He believes that this is the best state for the works. Therefore, if the works are to be exhibited outside the studio, he will make many demands on the exhibition space. In terms of lighting, Rothko prefers dim lighting. He feels that too bright lighting would overshadow the internal light in the paintings. The entire painting should be evenly and softly illuminated. In terms of hanging position, the works should be hung lower, as close to the ground as possible. This way, they can create a sense of intimacy with the audience and avoid the distance between other high-hung paintings and the audience. Rothko wants his paintings to be displayed separately, without being placed alongside works by other artists. The distance between each painting should be small, which can reduce the influence of white walls on the paintings and maintain the overall atmosphere of his exhibition[11].

The requirements for displaying Rothko's paintings and his preference for large-scale paintings are the same. He hopes to create a sense of surround and impact on the audience, and to engage in communication with them. He once said, "Painting is a continuous exercise in exposition: painters clarify imagery, but they must ensure that this imagery is conveyed to the viewer"[10]. Since the Renaissance, small-sized paintings have been more like novels, while large-sized paintings are more like dramas. Standing in front of a large painting, people can directly participate in it[11].

These practices actually reflect Rothko's acceptance of the "implied reader" theory in aesthetics. When creating and displaying his paintings, Rothko always has an "implied reader" in mind. He adjusts his works based on the imagined situation of the viewers watching his paintings, hoping to communicate better with those who appreciate his art, rather than expressing solely from a self-centered perspective.

#### (2) Seagram Building

After gaining fame, Rothko received an invitation to create decorative paintings for the Four Seasons restaurant at the Seagram building. He accepted the invitation because he wanted to engage in a struggle against his own paintings and bourgeois hedonism[10]. He envisioned the wall of the Seagram building as a silent lesson, a correction for the trivialities of modern life. Rothko wanted the privileged diners at the Four Seasons restaurant to feel oppressed by his paintings, to be emotionally affected by the tragic and fateful elements depicted in his artwork. However, when he went to the Four Seasons restaurant with his wife and ordered expensive dishes, he suddenly realized that his paintings had no impact on the people dining there. They didn't even bother to look closely at his artwork. This made him angry and frustrated because his paintings were merely seen as decorations, which was the last thing he wanted. As a result, he ultimately gave up the substantial commission and rejected the order. This was not an easy decision for Rothko, who was not financially well-off, but most artists are stubborn in their principles.

Rothko ultimately rejected the order from the Four Seasons restaurant precisely because the customers who dined there were his "implied readers." He anticipated that his paintings would not have the desired impact on these patrons, so he was very dissatisfied with this "implied readership." He did not want his artworks to be regarded as mere decorative pieces by his "implied readers," but rather wished for his paintings to engage in a dialogue with them. "Manhattan bruised Mark Rothko. Or did art triumph over money?" Simon Marsha evaluated Rothko in this way[10].

## 5. Conclusion

Abstract painting always appears obscure and difficult to comprehend. However, using the theory of "reception aesthetics" of Jauss and Iser to appreciate Rothko's gamut painting, we can discern that Rothko intends to communicate with the viewers through pure forms of painting. He focuses on the spectators' experience, leaving a significant amount of "uncertainty" for them. This approach invites the audience to participate in the process of artistic creation, embodying the theory of aesthetic reception in various aspects. The interdisciplinary research broadens the aesthetic perspective of art appreciation, opening up new angles for the appreciation of Rothko's paintings. It also offers insightful implications for the development of "human-centered" and interactive design in the field of art.

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