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Rothko and the New Experience of Death

When thinking about the possibility of exploring an iconography of death in modern art, we are naturally led to ask how deep the differences between the older art and modern art are. Are there similarities or does modern art use a completely new language? Given the changing nature of the relationship of the individual to society, we can expect a change in the raffiguration of death, which like other spiritual subjects in contemporary art, tends to rely less and less on mere iconography and increasingly on more complex aesthetic languages.

To analyze this shift we must distinguish between two distinct approaches to spiritual art. One which is based on the iconographic rendition of inner harmony and beauty, aimed at elevating the soul by soothing it. The other which is a more abstract expression reaching our emotions not through harmony but rather through imbalance and irritation, what we might call the experience of „the tremendum“ which seems to refer more to our emotions and does not search for the beauty and harmony but for a kind of irritation, the „tremendum“, as a way of bringing the observer to feel intimately the greatness of the Lord. This approach can be analyzed theoretically, and indeed it is an approach which although widespread in today's art, was used regularly starting from the Renaissance.

Thus for instance, in Leonardo's Mona Lisa we are stirred by the woman's soul. But it is a soul which irritates us, which makes us think. In Rembrandt we look in the inner soul of the figures. We feel how Simeon feels death and conversion at the same time. Pictures stimulate compassion for the characters, and the beauty of the figures involves the observer, but not in a nice, harmonic way, but rather in a way which is both excruciating and intense. Stuck does not tell us about the "Sin" but lets us become aware of the sin inside of us. The emotions of the figures become more and more real, but at the same time ambiguous. This ambiguity irritates the observer and makes him feel not only the emotions inside the figures, but also inside of himself.

All these artists, through a specific use of color have been able to emphasize the ambiguities of the images, and have given a "time-flow" quality to their work which forces the observer to get involved with the painting creating a connection between the spiritual angst of the artist and that of the observer.

The full realization of this nexus is made visible in Rothko's paintings, in which we do not find only a new definition of death and a personal iconography, based on his philosophical ideas, but also a direct connection to the artist's life. He felt that people looking at his art should have the same religious emotions as he had in the moment of the creative act. We know that visitors cry and pray in front of his abstract paintings. In Houston lies his masterpiece and the culmination of his life: a Chapel with six huge black/grey, depicting the infinite eternity of death. A courageous attempt to offer his personal view, a pictorial invitation to anyone prepared to look beyond the material surface of life, the way he had done. The offering of an existential experience to be shared by the observer

While looking at Rothko's paintings, at first the viewer is disoriented, confronted with his own intellectual limitations. This experience allows the viewer to go back to his own totality, or to his own original spiritual level, uncontaminated by exterior influences. This leads the observer to experience these images of death as a personal, direct emotion, forced to face his own mortality, and paradoxically filled with a sense of joy because of that.

Thus we see in all these artists, an attempt, which culminates in Rothko, to bring the image inside the observer, to give it life by touching the mind, and the soul. A personal salvation which we must be attuned to and which we must actively seek.