



The Dialogue between Rothko's Aesthetic of Painting and Traditional Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract: Mark Rothko's paintings construct a spiritual space that transcends the material world, using minimalist colors and a tranquil atmosphere. Centered on emotional and spiritual experiences, his works lead viewers into realms of reflection and meditation. His artistic expression closely aligns with Daoist concepts such as "Emptiness" and "Nothingness", reflecting an artistic dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophies. This paper analyzes Rothko's use of color, space, and spirituality in specific works, exploring how his aesthetics merge with the core ideas of Daoism and the philosophical resonance between Eastern and Western cultures.

Keywords: Rothko; Daoist philosophy; Emptiness; Spiritual experience

1. The Halo of Color and the Emptiness of Space

Mark Rothko's painting style matured in the late 1940s, focusing on rectangular color blocks and soft halos, creating a visual space that is both ethereal and profound. Through blurred color boundaries and gradient effects, Rothko developed a spatial sense that transcended the limitations of figurative art, reaching into the spiritual depth of humanity. This aligns deeply with the Daoist concept of "Nothingness."

In Daoist philosophy, "Nothingness" is not simply a void, but an infinite potential filled with creative power. As the Dao De Jing states, "Nothingness is the beginning of heaven and earth; existence is the mother of all things". Here, "Nothingness" is the foundation of all existence, the source of everything. Rothko, through the layering and blending of colors, reveals an infinite vision nurtured by "Nothingness." In his painting *Orange and Yellow* (1956), the orange and yellow hues naturally blend on the canvas, their boundaries blurred and fluid, as if the colors extend into an endless space through their interaction. The orange symbolizes warmth and weight, while the yellow conveys lightness and enlightenment. These two colors, in their contrast and harmony, form a dynamic balance that transports the viewer into a spiritual realm beyond the tangible.

This emptiness of space created by color is not only a visual experience but also a spiritual openness. Daoism emphasizes the concept of "Non-action yet accomplishing everything", advocating that all things arise naturally without being constrained by external forces. Similarly, Rothko's paintings embody this principle, with the colors blending without deliberate boundaries, flowing naturally. This "Formless" language of art frees the viewer from the material constraints of the world and provokes deep reflections on life, existence, and emotions.

In another work, *Black In Deep Red* (1957), Rothko again uses the tension of color as his core. The deep red's heaviness contrasts sharply with the black's profundity, symbolizing both the passion of life and the abyss of the unknown and nothingness. Through this abstract expression, the painting creates an emotional space that is both oppositional and unified, allowing viewers to resonate with the tension between "Being" and "Nothingness".

The soft halos and gradients in Rothko's works transform his paintings into containers for thoughts and emotions, embodying inclusivity and openness. Daoist philosophy asserts that "A void room produces white", suggesting that an empty space can give rise to infinite light and possibilities. Likewise, Rothko uses abstract color to transform the canvas into a space for contemplation, in which each viewer can establish a unique connection based on their personal emotions and experiences.

Whether the brightness and warmth of orange and yellow or the depth and contrast of red and black, Rothko's art transcends specific forms, using color to build a visual philosophy where "Formlessness surpasses form." This abstract art not only resonates deeply with Daoist concepts of "Nothingness", but also provides modern art with a non-narrative spiritual expression.

2. Emotional Depth and the Meditative Experience

Rothko believed that color could directly represent the artist's inner world and spiritual state. His works were profoundly influenced by Kandinsky's theory, which suggested that "The human spirit is undoubtedly affected directly by color..."

the harmony of color can inspire and ignite the human heart". His works transcend the narrative functions of figurative art, using abstract forms to carry emotion, and through color, boundaries, and space, they create a deep and open emotional experience that touches the viewer's soul. In an interview, Rothko explained, "I am only interested in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom. Those who cry in front of my paintings can understand the spiritual world I was in when I painted it".

After 1949, Rothko began producing large-scale works, standing two to three meters tall. He believed that large paintings would evoke a sense of grandeur, but he wanted the paintings to convey intimacy and human significance. The large color fields envelop the viewer, occupying the entire visual field, and allowing the viewer to immerse themselves in the experience. This proximity between the viewer and the work allows for contemplation based on emotional intuition rather than intellectual reasoning. Rothko's later works are marked by deep melancholia, exemplified by his "Dark paintings", where colors between deep purple and black evoke heavy, oppressive emotions. The simplicity of the composition, however, is rich in layers, presenting a powerful emotional force. Some works, where black surrounds the edges, symbolize depth and the unknown. Through the contrast of colors and blurred boundaries, Rothko creates a space that is both intense and silent, drawing the viewer into a meditative state that transcends the physical world. The fusion of deep purple and black seems to articulate the eternal dialogue between life and nothingness, while the lack of specific shapes or symbols fosters a resonance of individual emotions and thoughts.

This emotional depth mirrors the Daoist concept of "Silent Observation". As the *Dao De Jing* emphasizes, through tranquility and introspection, deeper enlightenment is achieved: "Empty the mind, fill the belly". Daoist "Non-action" advocates for perceiving the world's infinite possibilities through stillness. Similarly, Rothko's work, through abstract color expression, leads the viewer to find personal emotion and meaning in a formless space. For example, in appreciating her works No. 3 and No. 13 Magenta, Black, and Orange on Green (1949), the contrast between magenta and black symbolizes calmness and depth, while orange offers the possibility of warmth and elevation. This interplay of emotions offers viewers a space for free interpretation, allowing them to pause, reflect, and even enter a dialogue with their inner selves.

Rothko's Chapel, as the culmination of his artistic philosophy, is an ultimate embodiment of emotional depth and meditative experience. The Chapel, with its dark-toned paintings and soft natural light, creates a serene and sacred atmosphere, guiding viewers into meditation and silent dialogue with the artworks. Daoist philosophy emphasizes that "Nothingness contains potential" and this idea is artistically realized in the Chapel, providing a space for emotional release and introspection. In today's fast-paced world, Rothko's abstract color language creates a spiritual sanctuary, guiding people back to the essence of life. His art reminds us that in an age of technological and material abundance, emotional depth and inner tranquility remain an irreplaceable, eternal pursuit.

3. Spirituality Beyond Form

Mark Rothko's art carries a profound spiritual essence through minimalist forms, breaking free from the narrative framework of traditional representational painting. He transforms abstract language into a bridge that directly touches the depths of human emotion. Rothko infuses his works with his own emotions, whether joy or sadness, presenting them intuitively to the viewer. "Kandinsky's painting is precisely the conveyance of his transcendent state". His works do not seek singular visual beauty; instead, they build a spiritual experience that transcends form through color and composition, resonating with the Daoist philosophy of "The formless surpassing the formed". Daoism holds that the essence of all things lies in the "Dao", which is invisible yet omnipresent, much like the spiritual connotation of art that transcends the formal limitations of visual aspects.

In *Green on Blue* (1956), Rothko uses cool tones to express profound spirituality, layering different shades of color on a green base, creating an indescribable tension. The blue symbolizes tranquility and depth, while the darkening blue hints at the unknown and nothingness. The dynamic balance between these two colors provokes profound reflections on life and existence. While simple in form, the subtle shifts in color contrast evoke infinite emotional possibilities, resonating with Daoist concepts of "Teaching without words". Through formlessness and silence, infinite meaning is conveyed.

The *Dao De Jing* states, "The great image has no form, and the great sound is silent". True beauty often lies hidden in formlessness, free from constraints of specific forms. Rothko's works embody this concept. In *Untitled* (1958), the painting appears simple yet is full of layers. The deep blue stability mirrors Daoist "Emptiness and Stillness", guiding viewers to calm their minds, while the black's depth symbolizes endless possibilities, allowing meaning to naturally emerge through observation. The blurred boundaries in his work bring it to life, evoking contemplation on the relationship between the self and the world.

Rothko's art is designed to create an open experience for the viewer, rather than a defined narrative. For him, color is not

merely a form of expression; the emotional experience conveyed through colors such as the passion of red, the melancholy of blue, and the warmth of yellow acts as a medium for spiritual experience. This openness allows the viewer to freely explore their own thoughts, mirroring Daoist principles of “Non-action”, where art does not impose meaning but instead stimulates inner exploration through its very form.

Rothko’s achievements lie not only in formal innovation but also in his ability to convey complex spiritual experiences through minimalist language. His works explore the deep relationship between life and nothingness, offering universal values that transcend specific cultural contexts and temporal boundaries. Through abstract works like *Untitled*, he provides an open aesthetic and philosophical experience, making art an important avenue for human spiritual exploration and fostering a profound dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions in the realm of visual art.

4. Conclusion

Rothko’s paintings, through their abstract forms, delve into themes of “light” and “Emptiness” using “Nothingness” to create “Being”, thereby evoking emotional and spiritual resonance. This aligns profoundly with the Daoist concept of “Emptiness and stillness giving rise to clarity”. Rothko’s art not only reveals a convergence of Eastern and Western philosophies at the aesthetic level but also highlights the potential of abstract art as a tool for cross-cultural dialogue. As Daoism states, “The Dao follows nature”, Rothko’s formless art, constructed through the language of color and space, profoundly responds to humanity’s universal inquiry into the essence of life, opening a spiritual pathway towards harmony between the inner self and the cosmos.

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