



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Unconscious Sources: Mark Rothko and Italian Art

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This research project concerns the influence of Italian art on the work and thought of Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and comes from the observation that Italian references, mentioned by many critics, have so far not played a very significant role in the interpretation and understanding of his work.

Consulting archival material rarely considered by scholars, I reconstruct three of Rothko's travels in Italy, in 1950, 1959, and 1966, for periods that ranged between five weeks and three months. On the one hand, I deal with the artist's relationship with art of the past, from antiquity to the Renaissance; on the other hand, I describe his bonds with contemporary artists (Toti Scialoja, Carlo Battaglia), art critics and historians (Giulio Carlo Argan, Emilio Villa, Milton Gendel, Gabriella Drudi), and Americans staying in Italy at the time (Peggy Guggenheim, Peter Selz, Bernard and Becky Reis).

In particular, I identify several crucial sites that Rothko visited: the island of Torcello and the church of the Assumption (twelfth century) near Venice; the Laurentian Library by Michelangelo in Florence; the Beato Angelico frescoes that decorate the walls of the Dominican monks' cells in the San Marco convent in Florence; as well as the ruins of Pompeii and Paestum. Rothko also saw the Mythological Room at Boscotrecase when it was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

From Pompeian painting to the frescoes of Fra Angelico, from the Byzantine mosaics to the unresolved and tense architecture of Michelangelo or De Chirico, this reconstruction accompanies a methodological reflection on how to account for the influence of Italian art on Rothko's work, avoiding the difficulties of an iconological and semiotic position.

The hypothesis is that Rothko was searching for alternative examples to the “self-aware image” (V. Stoichita) and pictorial flatness typical of Clement Greenberg's formalism. Several episodes of Italian art, which he encountered in his readings and his travels, helped him to conceive an image that frees itself, that abandons the picture and anthropology of images beyond the history of art.

Following the unexpected publication of Rothko's *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (2004)—an artistic treatise wherein Rothko refers to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives*—this project concentrates on Rothko's formation and readings that precede his travels in Italy. The research also focuses in particular on the American debate during the thirties and forties about the history and critique of Italian art.