

Mark Rothko, No. 3 and No. 21:

A Comparative Analysis

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Mark Rothko's works *No. 3* and *No. 21* portray abstract figures and themes. While neither painting is meant to depict anything directly, *No. 21* was possibly inspired by *The Red Studio*, painted by Henri Matisse. As Rothko said himself regarding *The Red Studio*, "When you looked at that painting, you became that color, you became totally saturated with it" (The Met, *No. 21*). The same can be said about *No. 21*, which is similarly a fully red canvas with other bodies floating within it.

Both pieces are made in a style where nothing is clearly defined. Rather, the usage of pigmentation on the canvas incoherently creates its style. Both are created in the abstract style. Neither painting is limited to a single understanding, and the deeper meaning of the works is purely subjective and based on each independent viewer's biases.

Mark Rothko was born in 1903 and died in 1970. He painted both works. The full titles of the works are *Number 3* and *Number 21* and were made in 1953 and 1949, respectively. Both are made with oil and acrylic paint, though when creating *No. 21*, Rothko also employed the usage of powdered pigment as well. The support of both pieces is canvas. *No. 3* is 7' 1-3/18" x 65" and *No. 21* is 80" x 39 3/8". Neither piece employs the use of a frame. Both *No. 3* and *No. 21* are painted from edge to edge, without a single centimeter of canvas free from paint and/or pigmentation.

The compositions of the pieces are very similar. However, *No. 3* has much more defined shapes while *No. 21* only suggests shapes and otherwise employs non-geometrical figures - an example being the gray pigmentation outline in the top two-thirds of the work that suggests a rectangular shape. Rothko, in painting *No. 3*, created it in a style that "he sometimes called 'doors' and 'windows' in luminous color" (The Met, *No. 3*). Combining the dimensions of the picture—which are specifically around those of a person with outstretched arms—with the square figures painted upon it, *No. 3* almost becomes a door into an abstract world.

Rothko was originally a painter of scenes depicting human life. However, starting in 1949 (the same year that *No. 21* was created), "he stopped making direct reference to the human figure", and instead opted for "amorphous masses of color that spread across the entire surface of the canvas" (Bonnie Clearwater, *The years 1947...*). These same concepts apply for both *No. 21* and *No. 3*. Another source, an article published in *The Architects' Bible*, emphasizes this point. The article states that by the mid-1940s, Rothko "abandoned even line, leaving almost formless shapes, with color carrying the message" (Rothko, pp. 72-86). The emphasis of the paintings is not the forms contained within them, but rather the use of color that creates those

forms. It can be inferred that the shapes, according to Rothko's ideals when creating this series of abstract works, were merely a byproduct of his employment of color.

Neither piece employs the usage of three-dimensional space aside from overlapping shapes and figures. However, it is possible that in both paintings, the shapes are floating in space - suspended in a two-dimensional void. Rothko himself went into a deep study of the MoMA's galleries and began "a long, patient, and breathtaking study of an artwork... that had just been acquired by the museum: Matisse's *Red Studio*" (Cohen-Solal, p. 108). Taking into account this Matisse inspiration, it could very well be that this is an abstract form of the *Red Studio* and that the pigmentation is meant to symbolize the pieces of furniture that are seen in Matisse's work. The works both have shapes of varying sizes. *No. 3* contains overlapping figures, with the red rectangle sitting resting on the much larger, assumed rectangle that is the painted canvas itself. *No. 21*, on the other hand, contains no such overlap, as all gray forms of pigmentation would blend if attempted to be laid upon one another.

The mediums and volumes are again similar in these pieces. The brushwork in both pieces is obvious to the viewer, and in both paintings, the oil paint gives the impression that it was applied liberally, with the intent that it does not come together in one logical way. The lines and contours of the pieces are also both very soft, and there is not a single hard edge in either painting.

Both paintings achieve their abstract expressionist styles very clearly. Abstract expressionism involves art of some actual figure but through an abstract style. Both the "door" style of *No. 3* and the potential Matisse inspiration in *No. 21* represent these, but in obviously different regards, as they are of different levels of abstraction and are of different subjects.

Bibliography

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