

# The Guide

## A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Collin Lawson & Ryan Mooney for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

### *Red*

by John Logan  
directed by Rose Riordan

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## A Table of Contents

Rothko Returns to Portland.....	2
About the Playwright.....	2
Mark Rothko: Life and Work.....	2
Early Years.....	3
Math & Symbols.....	4
Toward Abstraction.....	5
Classic Paintings.....	6
Late Works.....	7
Art, According to Painters.....	8
The Seagram Building.....	8
Further Reading.....	9
Discussion Questions & Group Activities.....	9

# Rothko Returns to Portland

Portland Center Stage's production of *Red* completes a circle. The painter Mark Rothko graduated from Lincoln High School in Portland in June 1921, and his first solo show was at the Portland Art Museum in 1933. Now, Rothko's roots in Portland are honored not only *Red*, but also Portland Art Museum's Rothko exhibit and a collaboration between Resonance Ensemble and Third Angle Ensemble performing Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel. All these events coincide to celebrate the life of an extraordinary artist. Surprisingly enough, however, *Red* is hardly a play about Rothko. Rather, playwright John Logan uses a galvanic period in Rothko's life—the commission to create paintings for the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building—to explore themes of the commercialization of art, the old making way for the new, and the very identity of the artist. 🏰



## John Logan

John Logan was a successful playwright in Chicago for many years before turning to screenwriting. His first play, *Never the Sinner*, tells the story of the infamous Leopold and Loeb case. Subsequent plays include *Hauptmann*, about the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, and *Riverview*, a musical melodrama set at Chicago's famed amusement park.

Logan wrote *Any Given Sunday* and the television movie *RKO 281*, before gaining an Academy Award nomination for co-writing the Best Picture-winner, *Gladiator* in 2000. He gained another nomination for writing 2004's *The Aviator*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and directed by Martin Scorsese. Other notable films written by

Logan include *Star Trek: Nemesis*, *The Time Machine*, *The Last Samurai*, and the Tim Burton-directed musical, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, for which he received a Golden Globe Award. 🏰



# Mark Rothko: Life & Work

A cursory glance into the real-life titan of *Red*.

from  
The National  
Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC

One of the preeminent artists of his generation, Mark Rothko is closely identified with the New York School, a circle of painters that emerged during the 1940s as a new collective voice in American art. During a career that spanned five decades, he created a new and impassioned form of abstract painting.

Rothko's work is characterized by rigorous attention to formal elements such as color, shape, balance, depth, composition, and scale; yet, he refused to consider his paintings solely in these terms. He explained: It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it

does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing.

By 1949 Rothko had introduced a compositional format that he would continue to develop throughout his career. Comprised of several vertically aligned rectangular forms set within a colored field, Rothko's "image" lent itself to a remarkable diversity of appearances.

In these works, large scale, open structure and thin layers of color combine to convey the impression of a shallow pictorial space. Color, for which Rothko's work is perhaps most celebrated, here attains an unprecedented luminosity.

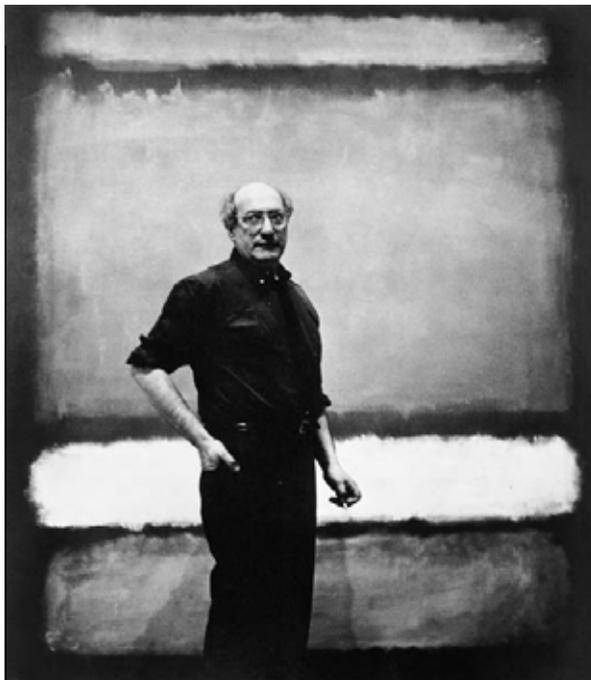
His classic paintings of the 1950s are characterized by expanding dimensions and an increasingly simplified use of form, brilliant hues, and broad, thin washes of color. In his large floating rectangles of color, which seem to engulf the spectator, he explored with a rare mastery of nuance the expressive potential of color contrasts and modulations.

Alternately radiant and dark, Rothko's art is distinguished by a rare degree of sustained concentration on pure pictorial properties such as color, surface, proportion, and scale, accompanied by the conviction that those elements could disclose the presence of a high philosophical truth. Visual elements such as luminosity, darkness, broad space, and the contrast of colors have been linked, by the artist himself as well as other commentators, to profound themes such as tragedy, ecstasy, and the sublime. Rothko, however, generally avoided explaining the content of his work, believing that the abstract image could directly represent the fundamental nature of "human drama."

### EARLY YEARS

Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia (today Daugavpils, Latvia), on September 25, 1903. He was the fourth child of Jacob Rothkowitz, a pharmacist (b. 1859), and Anna Goldin Rothkowitz (b. 1870), who had married in 1886. Rothko and his family immigrated to the United States when he was ten years old, and settled in Portland, Oregon.

Rothko attended Yale University in 1921, where he studied English, French, European history, elementary mathematics, physics, biology, economics, the history of philosophy, and general psychology. His initial intention was to become an engineer



or an attorney. Rothko gave up his studies in the fall of 1923 and moved to New York City. In New York, Rothko attended classes at the Art Students League, briefly studying under Max Weber, who encouraged him to work in a figurative style reminiscent of Cézanne.

In the late 1920s, he met the modernist painter Milton Avery, whose simplified and colorful depictions of domestic subjects had a profound influence on Rothko's early development, particularly his application of paint and treatment of color. Avery's home became a meeting place for artists, who attended weekly life drawing sessions there. Bernard Karfiol, an instructor at the Art Students League, included Avery and Rothko in Group Exhibition: Artists Selected by Bernard Karfiol, at the Opportunity Gallery in 1928.

In 1929 Rothko began teaching children at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, a position he retained for more than twenty years. In the 1930s Rothko painted mostly street scenes and interiors with figures. Rejecting conventional modes of representation, he stressed an emotional approach to the subject--an approach he admired in children's art--and adopted a style characterized by deliberate deformations and a crude application of paint.

Rothko was given his first one-person exhibitions in 1933 at the Museum of Art in Portland, Oregon, and a few months later at the Contemporary Arts

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Gallery in New York. The latter exhibition included landscapes, nudes, portraits, and city scenes.

At the end of 1934 Rothko participated in an exhibition at the Gallery Secession, whose members included Louis Harris, Adolph Gottlieb, Ilya Bolotowsky, and Joseph Solman; several months later these artists formed their own group, the Ten, which exhibited together eight times between 1935 and 1939. Rothko's paintings in the Ten's exhibitions were expressionist

in style. During this period he worked in the easel division of the WPA (Works Progress Administration), a federally-sponsored arts project.

Rothko's street scenes and subway pictures of the 1930s have been compared to examples of Ashcan School and Depression-era realist painting, but this resemblance is likely based on the perception of a shared urban motif. Rather than providing a "realistic" portrayal of the city life, Rothko seems far more interested in conveying the perceptual experience of architectural space, using abstract compositional arrangements to explore the relationship between the painting and its viewer, an element that would play a critical role in the artist's later works.

### MYTHS & SYMBOLS

During the 1940s Rothko's imagery became increasingly symbolic. In the social climate of anxiety that dominated the late 1930s and the years of World War II, images from everyday life--however unnaturalistic--began

to appear somewhat outmoded. If art were to express the tragedy of the human condition, Rothko felt, new subjects and a new idiom had to be found. He said, "It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes....But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it."

In a 1943 letter to the *New York Times*, written with Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, Rothko said, "It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints, as long as it is

well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess a spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art."

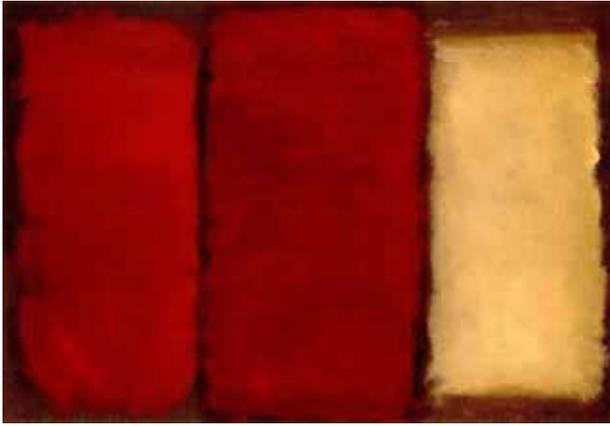
*Sacrifice of Iphigenia* exemplifies Rothko's interest in classical literature. Describing another painting also inspired by the writings of Aeschylus, Rothko explained: "The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths at all times."

The Old and New Testaments also became a rich source of inspiration, as seen in *Gethsemane*. The title refers to the garden near Jerusalem that was the scene of the agony and betrayal of Christ.

In a radio broadcast Rothko responded thoughtfully to the question:

Are not these pictures really abstract paintings with literary titles? If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance....Our presentation of these myths, however, must be in our own terms which are at once more primitive and more modern than the myths themselves--more primitive because we seek the primeval and atavistic roots of the ideas rather than their graceful classical version; more modern than the myths themselves because we must redescribe their implications through our own experience....The myth holds us, therefore, not through its romantic flavor, not the remembrance of beauty





of some bygone age, not through the possibilities of fantasy, but because it expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves, as it was to those who first stumbled upon the symbols to give them life.

Some works are composed in horizontal bands, which have been said to represent geological strata—possibly a metaphor for the unconscious.

Devoted to themes of myth, prophecy, archaic ritual, and the unconscious mind, Rothko's paintings of the mid-1940s are characterized by a biomorphic style stimulated by the example of the surrealists, several of whom had recently immigrated to New York from war-torn Europe.

Inspired by the surrealist technique of automatic writing—letting the brush meander without conscious control in an attempt to release the creative forces of the unconscious—Rothko loosened up his technique and developed a more abstract imagery. In remarkably free watercolors of the mid-1940s, related to the art of the surrealists Joan Miró, André Masson, as well as Arshile Gorky, Rothko explored the fluidity of the medium to evoke a vision of primeval life.

Biomorphic forms dance before a background of horizontal bands that resemble the layers of a submarine universe. Luminous and transparent, Rothko's watercolors of this period mark a turning point in his career.

### TOWARD ABSTRACTION

In their manifesto in the *New York Times* Rothko and Gottlieb had written: "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." By 1947 Rothko

had virtually eliminated all elements of surrealism or mythic imagery from his works, and nonobjective compositions of indeterminate shapes emerged.

Figurative associations and references to the natural world disappeared from Rothko's paintings of the late 1940s. Linear elements were progressively eliminated as asymmetrically arranged patches of color became the basis of his compositions. The paintings of 1947-1949 are sometimes referred to as multiforms to distinguish them from the more distilled compositions that follow. Certain multiforms retain the play of figure, line, and ground that Rothko employed in his works on paper from 1944-1946, and various textural effects are directly related to his experiments in watercolor and gouache.

In these multiforms the liquid paint soaks the canvas, leaving soft, indistinct edges, while whitish outlines surround some of the shapes like haloes. Rothko now relied on these shapes, which replaced the earlier biomorphic motifs, to convey emotional states. Throughout this series the artist's work reveals a greater breadth of both composition and scale and a heightened attention to color. At this point Rothko began to paint the edges of his stretched canvases, which he displayed without confining frames.

For him, eschewing representation permitted greater clarity, "the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer." As examples of such obstacles, Rothko gave "memory, history, or geometry, which are swamps of generalization from which one might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts) but never an idea in itself. To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood."

During the late 1940s, Rothko described the conception of a painting in which "shapes"—or "performers"—first emerge as "an unknown adventure in an unknown space." In the journal *Possibilities* he explained that these "shapes have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them, one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms." He later wrote: "...art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness."

Like many New York artists of his generation, Rothko struggled with categorical distinctions between abstraction and representation and his ambition to invest nonfigurative art with transcendent content that would rival the elemental role of myth and ritual in archaic culture. In this regard, "unknown" pictorial

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space describes a realm that somehow surpasses two dimensions while avoiding the illusive three-dimensional space of conventional representation.

### THE CLASSIC PAINTINGS

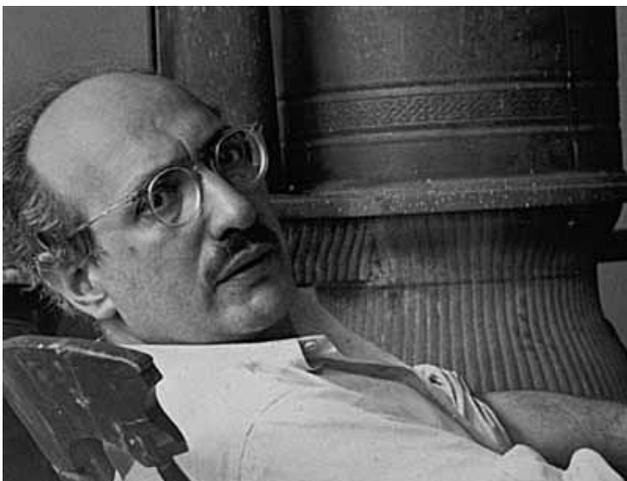
Rothko largely abandoned conventional titles in 1947, sometimes resorting to numbers or colors in order to distinguish one work from another. The artist also now resisted explaining the meaning of his work. “Silence is so accurate,” he said, fearing that words would only paralyze the viewer’s mind and imagination.

By 1950 Rothko had reduced the number of floating rectangles to two, three, or four and aligned them vertically against a colored ground, arriving at his signature style.

From that time on he would work almost invariably within this format, suggesting in numerous variations of color and tone an astonishing range of atmospheres and moods.

Now applied in thin washes (often composed of both oil and egg-based media), Rothko’s color achieved a new luminosity. The artist’s technique appears simple, but on close examination is richly varied in its range of effects. At times, paint can be seen running upward across the surface; this is because Rothko often inverted a picture while working on it, sometimes changing the final orientation at a late stage.

In these paintings, color and structure are inseparable: the forms themselves consist of color alone, and their translucency establishes a layered depth that complements and vastly enriches the vertical architecture of the composition. Variations in saturation and tone as well as hue evoke an



elusive yet almost palpable realm of shallow space. Color, structure, and space combine to create a unique presence. In this respect, Rothko stated that the large scale of these canvases was intended to contain or envelop the viewer—not to be “grandiose,” but “intimate and human.”

In 1954 Rothko asked that his largest pictures be installed “so that they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture.” He said:

Since my pictures are large, colorful, and unframed, and since museum walls are usually immense and formidable, there is the danger that the pictures relate themselves as decorative areas to the walls. This would be a distortion of their meaning, since the pictures are intimate and intense, and are the opposite of what is decorative; and have been painted in a scale of normal living rather than an institutional scale. I have on occasion successfully dealt with this problem by tending to crowd the show rather than making it spare. By saturating the room with the feeling of the work, the walls are defeated and the poignancy of each single work...become[s] more visible.

I also hang the largest pictures so that they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture. This may well give the key to the observer of the ideal relationship between himself and the rest of the pictures. I also hang the pictures low rather than high, and particularly in the case of the largest ones, often as close to the floor as is feasible, for that is the way they are painted. And last, it may be worthwhile trying to hang something beyond the partial wall because some of the pictures do very well in a confined space.

(quotation courtesy *The Art Institute of Chicago*)

Through his pursuit of a deeply original pictorial language, Rothko maintained a commitment to profound content. Although he rarely specified a precise interpretation for these works, he believed in their potential for metaphysical or symbolic



meaning. In a lecture at the Pratt Institute, Rothko told the audience that “small pictures since the Renaissance are like novels; large pictures are like dramas in which one participates in a direct way.”

### LATE WORKS

Rothko’s work began to darken dramatically during the late 1950s. This development is related to his work on a mural commission for the Four Seasons restaurant, located in the Seagram Building in New York City. Here Rothko turned to a palette of red, maroon, brown, and black. The artist eventually withdrew from this project, due to misgivings about the restaurant as a proper setting for his work. He had, however, already produced a number of studies and finished canvases. In the Seagram panels, Rothko changed his motif from a closed to an open form, suggesting a threshold or portal. This element may have been related to the architectural setting for which these works were intended.

With some exceptions, the darkened palette continued to dominate Rothko’s work well into the 1960s. He developed a painstaking technique of overlaying colors until, in the words of art historian Dore Ashton, “his surfaces were velvety as poems of the night.”

His work on the Rothko Chapel paintings, originally commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil for the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, occupied Rothko between 1964 and 1967. In turning away from the radiance of the previous decade, Rothko heightened the perceptual subtlety of his paintings, making distinctions between shape and ground more difficult to discern. He also transformed the impact his canvases have on the experience of space, which is now characterized by a sensation of enclosure.

This quality, which lends itself to meditation, can be clearly related to the spiritual nature of a chapel.

Rothko’s reading of Nietzsche, the 19th-century German philosopher, suggests that his work could represent the opposition between a rational or abstract element and an emotional, primal, or tragic one (referring to Nietzsche’s discussion of the polarity between an Apollonian and a Dionysian principle). Certain qualities such as radiance or the duality of light and dark have a symbolic meaning in Western culture from which Rothko clearly drew. An impression of vast space is said to represent the historical concept of the “sublime,” a quasi-religious experience of limitless immensity. The installation of these canvases also produces its own sacrosanct environment.

At different times during the 1950s and 1960s, Rothko produced a substantial quantity of small works on paper. It is not certain whether these are studies for larger paintings or simply smaller variations employing a similar dynamic of form and color. Rothko had many of them mounted on panel, canvas, or board in order to simulate the presence of unframed canvases. The smaller format especially suited Rothko in 1968, when his physical activity was dramatically curtailed by a heart ailment. Rothko continued to work predominantly on paper even after he returned to a relatively large format in 1969.

Physically ill and suffering from depression, Rothko committed suicide on February 25, 1970. At the time of his death, he was widely recognized in Europe and America for his crucial role in the development of nonrepresentational art. His vibrant, disembodied veils of color asserted the power of nonobjective painting to convey strong emotional or spiritual content. With an unwavering commitment to a singular artistic vision, Rothko celebrated the near mythic power art holds over the creative imagination.

*Based on the exhibition catalogue essay and wall texts by Jeffrey Weiss; the Rothko chronology compiled by Jessica Stewart, exhibition specialist, twentieth-century art; the exhibition brochure by Isabelle Dervaux, associate curator; exhibition programs; and the Rothko exhibition catalogue* 🏛️

*A plethora of painters are made mention of in Red. Here is a collection of words they had to say on the subject of painting and art.*

**Bruegels** “Because the world is so faithless, I go my way in mourning.”

Caravaggio “All works, no matter what or by whom painted, are nothing but bagatelles and childish trifles... unless they are made and painted from life, and there can be nothing... better than to follow nature.”

Dali “Drawing is the honesty of the art. There is no possibility of cheating. It is either good or bad.”

de Kooning “What you do when you paint, you take a brush full of paint, get paint on the picture, and you have faith.”

Goya “Fantasy, abandoned by reason, produces impossible monsters; united with it, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of marvels.”

Jasper Johns “I have no ideas about what the paintings imply about the world. I don’t think that’s a painter’s business. He just paints paintings without a conscious reason.”

Roy Lichtenstein “Art doesn’t transform. It just plain forms.”

Manet “Black is not a color.”

Matisse “There are always flowers for those who want to see them.”

Michelangelo “A man paints with his brains and not with his hands.”

Motherwell “Abstract expressionism was the first American art that was filled with anger as well as beauty.”

Barnett Newman “Aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for birds.”

Jackson Pollock “The modern artist is working with space and time, and expressing his feelings rather than illustrating.”

Rembrandt “Choose only one master... Nature.”

Robert Rauschenberg “An empty canvas is full.”

**Frank Stella** “I don’t like to say I have given my life to art. I prefer to say art has given me my life.”

Turner “If I could find anything blacker than black, I’d use it.”

Van Gogh “An artist needn’t be a clergyman or a churchwarden, but he certainly must have a warm heart for his fellow men.”

Velasquez “I would rather be the first painter of common things than second in higher art.”

Andy Warhol “Don’t pay any attention to what they write about you. Just measure it in inches.”

## The Seagram Building

*In Red, Rothko receives a commission from the Seagram Building to create paintings to decorate the walls of the Four Seasons Restaurant. These events are historically accurate. Here is a description of the Seagram Building and the Four Seasons Restaurant within.*

The Seagram Building is a skyscraper, located at 375 Park Avenue, between 52nd Street and 53rd Street in Midtown Manhattan, New York City. It was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in collaboration with Philip Johnson. The building stands 516 feet tall with 38 stories, and was completed in 1958.



Like a towering jet obelisk, the Seagram Building is a testament to the power and reign of corporate modernism. It was designed as the headquarters for the Canadian distillers Joseph E. Seagram's & Sons with the active interest of Phyllis Lambert, the daughter of Samuel Bronfman, Seagram's CEO.

Within the Seagram Building is the Four Seasons Restaurant. Opened in 1959, the Four Seasons is a

hub of New York wealth and affluence. It has been critically acclaimed for both its architectural design and its cuisine, with a complete collection of the Four Seasons Restaurant furniture permanently housed in the Museum of Modern Art. One can only imagine the revulsion revolutionary painter Mark Rothko would have felt to have his paintings displayed next to furniture under the umbrella of the Seagram Building's ownership. 🏠

### **Simon Schama's "Power of Art" Part 8: Rothko**

This evocative BBC documentary is a passionate look into the force of Rothko's art.

### **Mark Rothko: A Biography by James E. B. Breslin**

An in-depth, comprehensive biography in which "Breslin impressively recreates Mark Rothko's troubled nature, his tormented life, and his disturbing canvases. . . . The artist's paintings become almost tangible within Breslin's pages, and Rothko himself emerges as an alarming physical force." —Robert Warde, *Hungry Mind Review*

### **Art by Yasmina Reza**

This award-winning play examines the nature of friendship in the light of art.

## Discussion Questions

How did watching *Red* change your conception of what the role of the artist is?

If you were in Rothko's position, would you have made his decision to turn down the Seagram commission? Why or why not?

What does Rothko mean when he says, "There is only one thing I fear in life, my friend ... One day the black will swallow the red"?

If you were in Ken's position, would you have continued to work with Rothko for as long as he did? Why or why not?

What's more important—being true to yourself as an artist or making a living?

1. Divide into groups. Each group is assigned two colors. Multiple groups should share at least one color. As a group, discuss what emotions and associations that color stirs up for you. Share your insights with the other groups. Discuss what similarities the same color has between different groups.
2. Divide into groups. Imagine your group is the board of directors for a high-powered restaurant, like the Four Seasons. Discuss how you want to decorate your restaurant. What kind of art will you have on the walls? Share your designs with the other groups.