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Rothko revisited

With one of the Rothko Seagram murals now back on display after a long restoration, Jonathan Ives returned to Tate Modern to revisit a modern masterpiece that inspired a lifelong fascination with art and galleries.

In October 2012 Black on Maroon, one of the canvases in the Rothko Seagram series on display at Tate Modern, was daubed with indelible ink in a deliberate attack by a member of the public. While the police concerned themselves with the arrest, prosecution and subsequent conviction of the perpetrator, a self-styled art world activist, the Tate's conservation team began the process of examining the picture to assess the damage. After eighteen months of painstakingly detailed work, the painting was returned to Tate Modern's public display and a great many people with an appreciation of Rothko's work breathed a sigh of relief.

From the outset of the restoration process Tate director Nicholas Serota reassured the conservation team that neither time nor resources would be any barrier to their work, a commitment that was a reflection both of the value, in cultural as well as financial terms, of the painting and of the complexity of the task that lay ahead. It proved to be one of the restoration team's most difficult projects. The first challenge was presented by the type of ink that had been used in the attack, a very quick-drying, highly staining ink designed to be indelible. In places the black ink had seeped right through the paint, making the colour visible on the reverse of the canvas. The next problem was set by Rothko himself. In his quest for density of colour, Rothko worked with different types of paint applied in very thin layers, building the depth and intensity of colour that made the Seagram murals so distinctive. The combination of modern graffiti ink, the finesse of the artist and the fragility of the painting meant that the conservation team would need to call upon all the resources and expertise at their disposal.

In the first stage of the project the team created a large paint sample using techniques and paint similar to those Rothko used and began to experiment with solvents that might dissolve the ink without damaging the original paint. After nine months of extensive research and experimentation, including work on a canvas loaned by Rothko's family that the artist had prepared with maroon paint at the time of the Seagram commission, work on Rothko's original began. First a mixture of benzyl alcohol and ethyl lactate was applied with microscopic precision to remove the ink. Then the surface of the paint was restored. Another nine months of work brought Black on Maroon back to display condition and, although some of the ink is still visible on the back of the canvas, any trace of the attack is now invisible.

Speaking on the occasion of the rehanging, Nicholas Serota explained that the objective had been "to do as little as possible", an approach that had proved successful. "Ultimately now we have a painting which has been restored, the damage has been removed and what you see is what Rothko painted." He expressed his delight that, thanks to the work of the conservation team, the work was back on public display. "Looking after its collection, Tate has a conservation team that is one of the best in the world," he said. "Their expertise, rigour, patient work and respect for the painting has enabled us to return it to public view, as envisaged by Mark Rothko."

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Like so many others, I had been saddened by news of the damage done to the Rothko and then delighted to hear of its successful restoration. The news of the return of Black and Maroon to the public collection reminded me that I had not visited Tate Modern for quite a while and so, at the first opportunity my diary allowed, I headed over the Millennium Bridge to reacquaint myself with Rothko and Banksie.

Many years earlier the display of the Seagram murals, then in the Tate Gallery on Millbank, had been the scene of my initiation to the ability of art to make profound personal connections; and, because this revelation had occurred during one of the regular day trips into London made by me and my friends from our lives at the very end of the Metropolitan line, I was not alone. We were impressionable teenagers looking for a way to understand all the things that we thought we needed to appreciate if we were ever to graduate from our state of perpetual awkwardness and uncertainty into the sunlit uplands of self-assurance and cool. During this perpetual quest, a journey that took us to all the points of high and low culture in the capital that we thought might let us in, we happened upon the Rothko room in the Tate Gallery on Millbank.

Modern art had until that point been something that the people we admired – mostly writers, musicians, characters in films and novels – had as part of their lives, so we naturally included it on the list of things that we felt we should acquire as part of ours. At the Tate we wandered the galleries, recognising more works than we imagined we might, raising our eyebrows at some and quietly rolling our eyes at others. When we came upon and ventured into the Rothko room the idle conversation and ruthless running commentary came to a halt.

This room felt small and dark, a compact contrast to the brightness and space of the other galleries, with only one set of paintings to focus on. Here was an oasis of intensity. Here was a weight of colour, a pressure of light and emotion, that we had not come across before. Where our emotional engagement had been dominated by music and books, art forms that were accessible and immediate, here was a very different aspect of art – at first glance a collection of two-dimensional paintings hung on a wall in the dark – that worked to provoke a familiar physical and emotional reaction. The response was slower but somehow still seemed to come in a rush. We moved carefully around the space. We stood. We sat. We stayed. When we at last moved out into the rest of the gallery we kept coming back, singly, in pairs, all four of us, checking it was still where we left it and looking to see if we still felt what we had felt when we first felt it.

At the time we knew little about art and even less about Rothko but we did realise that here was something worth knowing about. In 2014 when Tate Modern welcomed the return of Black and Maroon to the Rothko room after its restoration, the curatorial team spoke of the “meditative, immersive environment which has long been a highlight of the gallery’s free displays”. Decades earlier I had discovered just how meditative and immersive art could be. Until we reached Soho we talked of little else.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review.

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