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Invisible Points of Departure: Reading Rothko's Christological Imagery*

ANDREA PAPPAS

*There are some artists who want to tell all,
but I feel it is more shrewd to tell little.*

Mark Rothko, 1958

Jewish identity increasingly figures in new histories of modernism in general, analyses of American art, and, recently, abstract expressionism.¹ Although abstract paintings have signified “Jewishness” only since the late sixties, this essay looks at the antecedents of such re-identification in one canonical figure, Mark Rothko, examining three paintings from a narrow range of time in the early days of World War II. His *Antigone* of 1940 (Figure 1) remains one of his most familiar paintings from the formative period spanning 1940 to mid-1943. It is one of a small handful of works canonized from his early production: paintings that traditionally stand as emblems of his interest in myth and tragedy and as precursors to his later surrealist works of the mid-forties. The product of a sudden shift in subject and style, this abrupt change bestows on *Antigone* an originary status that repeatedly draws the attention of scholars, although not necessarily awareness of traces of Jewishness. Nearly unknown is *Antigone*'s companion piece, *A Last Supper* (Figure 2), which sold im-

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1. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb, eds., *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (London, 1995); Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, eds., *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York 1900-1945* (New York, 1991); *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, Catherine M. Soussloff, ed., (Berkeley, 1999); Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Artists in New York: The Holocaust Years* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002); Andrea Pappas, “Mark Rothko and the Politics of Jewish Identity,” Ph.D. Diss, University of Southern California, 1997; Nancy Nield Buchwald, “Anxious Embodiments: Revenants of Post WW-II Masculine Embodiments in Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*,” Ph.D. Diss, University of Chicago, 2005.

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Fig. 1. Mark Rothko, *Antigone*, c. 1941. National Gallery of Art. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. © 2007 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Fig. 2. Mark Rothko, *A Last Supper*, 1941. © Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Reproduction courtesy Penny M. Hays and Daniel H. Hayes.

mediately, vanishing from public view, and the potentially informative relationship between the two works remains uninvestigated. Several studies on paper exist for these paintings. They display shifts in subject in the migration from paper to canvas, yet they too remain unexamined for what they reveal about Rothko's working process and the significance of imagery he considered and rejected along the way to the finished paintings. These changes, I argue, intersect with the complex workings of Jewish identity in the formation of abstract expressionism. With an eye to the changes from paper to canvas and painting to painting, I also investigate here an untitled canvas hitherto overlooked by scholars in conjunction with the canonical *Antigone* and the recently rediscovered *A Last Supper*. These three paintings and their related works on paper reveal that Rothko's struggle to find a new vocabulary established very early—earlier than previously thought—a unique process of abstraction that led, over the course of the decade, to the large abstract paintings of the fifties that constitute his signature style. This process, developed in a very short period from 1940 to mid- or late 1943 coincides with changes in the way Rothko fashioned himself as a modern artist, specifically with reference to his Jewishness.

Examining the canvases and studies together sheds new light on the works but not simply because they extend traditional interest in them for Rothko's turn to "universal" subject matter. Rather, the conjunction of these works on canvas and their studies reveals how contemporary pressures on the artist's Jewish identity and his reaction to the Holocaust and its antecedents structured these paintings, through subject matter that has, on its face, nothing to do with either. They raise the larger question of how to depict or see something that does not seem to be there, or how absence can register as a presence. Absence and its tropes figure as major themes in Holocaust Studies in the examination of postwar cultural production, a field that turns its gaze primarily to literature and film.² Sometimes visual art is included in this discourse, such as Morris Louis's early abstractions, the *Charred Journal* series (1951).³ However,

2. This fast-growing field of study cannot be reviewed here. Recent key studies and anthologies include *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, eds., (Bloomington, 2003); *Impossible Images*, Shelley Hornstein, Laura Levitt, and Laurence J. Silberstein, eds., (New York, 2003); James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 2003); Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001).

3. Mark Godfrey, "Burnt Books and Absent Meaning: Morris Lewis's *Charred Journal: Firewritten* Series and the Holocaust," and Janet Wolff, "The Iconic and the Illusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art," in Hornstein and Jacobowitz, *Images and Remembrance*, 153–74.

most studies of Jewish visual artists issue from the field of art history, focusing on artists' Jewish identity, and may or may not include the Holocaust or antisemitism as major issues shaping their work.⁴ When the Holocaust structures artwork in a major way, it is often through this notion of absence, referring to both the lost Jews of World War II and the cultural future they would have carried with them, elaborated and developed had they lived. Rothko's work of 1940–1943 provides an unusual opportunity to see an early variant of this strategy of depicting as present that which is missing, by gesturing to its very omission. I will argue inductively from the images that Rothko circumscribed this absence, rendering it visible to the alert viewer, first by substituting one narrative for another and then by coupling it with abstraction—and not just in his paintings, but in his life, as well. Looking at Rothko's process at this time provides the opportunity to see the Holocaust, with its new imperative to assert Jewishness—against pressures to assimilate and antisemitism (then at an all-time high and not experienced to the same extent by later artists)—influencing and inflecting his sudden change of imagery.⁵ He extended his solution, first developed in this brief period of about three years, through the forties, culminating in an extreme form in the abstract expressionist paintings that ultimately made him a superstar.

Contexts for the Mythic Paintings

The literature on abstract expressionism in general and Rothko in particular is extensive, far too large to review here. Hence, I confine myself to acknowledging that major studies of the movement as a whole often provide valuable links between artists and various aspects of American culture in the forties, and this has enhanced our understanding of this artistic form considerably. However, these general accounts come at the

4. Avram Kampf, *Jewish Experience in Art in the 20th Century* (South Hadley MA, 1984). Kampf briefly surveys twentieth century Jewish artists, both American and European, and locates Rothko's Jewishness as paradigmatically expressed in the abstract work from 1950 onward. Baigell, *Jewish Artists*, sees some of Rothko's World War II works as motivated by his Jewishness. I concur with much of Baigell's insightful analyses but my divergent focus—the works on paper—brings me to a different conclusion regarding Rothko's Jewish subjectivity as it affected his art. Andrea Pappas, "The Picture at *Menorah Journal*: Making 'Jewish Art,'" *American Jewish History* 90:3 (Sept. 2002): 206–38, examines the way art, especially modern art, was claimed on behalf of Jewish modernity between 1922 and 1962. Samantha Baskind's careful study of Raphael Soyer tackles both the artist and the vexing problem of how to define "Jewish art." *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill, 2004). These texts represent a range of approaches to the intersections between artists, Jewishness, and possible relationships to the Holocaust.

5. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1994), 105–49.

price of suppressing important differences between the artists—particularly those of ethnicity and religion.⁶ Monographic studies of Rothko range from a biography to a detailed examination of his work from a single decade.⁷ Finally, two authors examine Rothko specifically in terms of

6. Irving Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, (New York, 1970), is one of the earliest accounts of the movement as a whole. He focuses on the signature works of the fifties and sixties, which brought the artists international fame. Robert Hobbs and Gail Levin, in *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, 1978), first drew attention to the work of the 1940s, stressing the artists' debts to modern psychology, surrealism, and their predecessor Wassily Kandinsky. Stephen Polcari's *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge, 1991), thoroughly explores the intellectual sources and influences, particularly that of World War II, on the major artists of the movement. Polcari also situates this work in relation to Martha Graham's avant-garde dance innovations of the same time, extending our understanding of the broad cultural milieu in which these artists worked. Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, 1993), looks at the formation of the abstract expressionist avant-garde in New York beginning in 1944 and Rothko figures prominently in his examination of this phenomenon, providing evidence for Rothko's ambition to attain avant-garde status. Leja focuses on the popular rather than "highbrow" sources of the artists' understanding of the fundamentally divided psychic and psychological makeup of modern man. He refers to these popular culture texts as "the modern man literature," and Jackson Pollock is the only artist whose work receives a sustained examination. Leja sees abstract expressionism's cultural and ideological authority and staying power as rooted in its grappling with a divided subjectivity in broad terms: the unconscious vs. conscious mind, individual vs. the collective, etc. I am indebted to Leja's discussion of "man's new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self," a formulation he takes from a document by Rothko dating from 1945. However, I engage with a manifestation of such a "complex self" that differs from the ideologies of the "primitive" and the "unconscious" Leja so ably discusses—the politics of Jewish identity and how it shaped the production and reception of one artist's work. For a study of race and gender (although not religion) and its effects on artists in the broader New York School, see Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, 1997). I draw on the insights of these scholars, but I am working at different scale and from a different vantage point: a handful of paintings produced within three years, rather than a global examination of several artists over a decade or more. My argument necessarily examines aspects of Rothko's individual production that do not fit into such large-scale or general accounts.

7. James E.B. Breslin produced the most extensive full-length biography of Rothko: *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago, 1993). I draw on Breslin for details of Rothko's early religious upbringing and experiences as an immigrant in the United States. He notes in passing Rothko's "fluid" social identity, a major element in my argument here. See Breslin at 321. Anna Chave's *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, 1989) pays substantial attention—most of the book—to his work in the 1940s. Her subtle study of Rothko's compositional strategies is one of the few to attempt an extended reading of some of the early paintings, although she largely engages with the surrealist works of the mid-forties and the so-called multiform paintings of the end of the decade. She looks at structural similarities between works in order to show that the paintings of the late forties (and those that followed them) "implement traces of certain elemental and

Jewishness, both in the vast context of the entire diasporic response to the Holocaust and in the narrower range of specifically New York artists.⁸ All of these studies have greatly enriched the analysis of abstract expressionism and its multiple intersections with American culture. However, as noted above, the works on paper associated with the very beginning of Rothko's abrupt change of style and subject matter have not been linked with their associated paintings, much less with his Jewishness, key components of my argument here.

Rothko had company on his foray into his new subject matter. With his close friend Adolph Gottlieb, he started investigating myth as subject matter in the search for a profoundly meaningful art. They rejected American scene painting, overtly political art, pure abstraction, and the genre paintings widely produced in the thirties. These artists thought American scene painting (e.g., Edward Hopper) and its Midwest counterpart, Regionalism (i.e., Grant Wood, et al.) to be too nationalistic and trivial in their subject matter. By 1939, overtly political realist art smacked too much of the state-mandated realism of both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Pure abstraction they dismissed as "painting about nothing," while genre paintings necessarily engaged only local or domestic life.⁹ This series of rejections and defense of myth as subject matter found expression in a letter written by Gottlieb, Rothko, and Barnett Newman to the *New York Times* in June 1943 in response to a review in which critic Edward Alden Jewell expressed "befuddlement" at Gottlieb's and Rothko's pictures. Although the letter slightly postdates the work I discuss, it was a summative document, the result of a posi-

symbolically charged pictorial conventions." She attributes much of the visual power of his abstract paintings to their combination of the culturally loaded pictorial formats of the portrait and the landscape. Thus her study, although differing significantly from the broader texts on abstract expressionism, still has as its real subject the so-called signature works of the fifties. David Anfam, in his essay for the Rothko *Catalogue Raisonné*, surveys the artist's entire career, examining sources and influences, some of them Jewish, as a kind of extended preface to the catalogue itself. David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas, Catalogue Raisonné* (Washington, D.C., and New Haven, 1998).

8. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (New York, 1993). This massive tome examines the range of responses of Jewish artists in Europe, the U.S., and Israel from the art produced in the internment camps up the late 1980s. I am indebted to her account of the general motifs and strategies she identifies, but I produce a different reading of the intersection of Jewishness and art for Rothko. Baigell, *Holocaust Years*, 98-151.

9. Leja notes these rejections were ideologically overdetermined, and I concur with most of his analysis. As he states, no study can accommodate all aspects of culture that bore on artists of the forties. My aim here is to trace one artist's negotiations of some of these pressures, including the powerful effect of ethnico-religious subjectivity that does not figure in his account.

tion worked out after producing mythic paintings for about two years. Scholars have usually treated it as a manifesto, and seen it as a launching point for future work by both artists.¹⁰ Newman, although he was writing about myth in the early forties, did not produce any work between 1940 and 1944.¹¹ One additional future abstract expressionist showed a strong interest in this type of material: Jackson Pollock appropriated Native American imagery in combination with the Jungian concept of the archetype.¹² Myth, because of its supposed timelessness, appealed to artists beyond the future abstract expressionists; Thomas Hart Benton, a major regionalist artist whose work the abstract expressionists loathed, produced *Persephone* just three years before Gottlieb painted the same subject, and a group of artists who called themselves the "Indian Space" painters borrowed images and narratives from Native American culture.¹³ Myth thus could be appropriated for a variety of individual purposes during the war years.¹⁴

Rothko's response to World War II, well-documented, generally plays a pivotal role in accounts that discuss his search for a universalizing subject matter and imagery to go with it. As Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb declared in the famous radio interview of October of 1943 in which they offered a partial explanation for their abstracted and somewhat surrealistic imagery,

All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life. That

10. *New York Times*, June 13, 1943. Leja, *Reframing*, 51, 75. Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Christopher Rothko, ed., (New Haven, 2004) xvii. This recently surfaced text compilation contains Rothko's ruminations on various subjects from children's art to myth. These texts date from the late thirties to about early 1941, probably mostly from 1940. See also Breslin, 130-31, 160.

11. John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley, 1990).

12. Pollock occasionally used classical subject matter, as in *Shewolf* (referencing Romulus and Remus) and *Pasiphae*. However, his engagement with this material was not as organized as Rothko's. Native American culture engaged Pollock more deeply. His possession of extensive reference material in this area is well documented. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism*, 237.

13. Jackson Rushing gives an extensive history of American artists' appropriation of Native American sources in *Native American Art and the American Avant-Garde* (Austin TX, 1995). The Indian Space painters included Steven Wheeler, Peter Busa, and others. Their circle overlapped the abstract expressionists' in the late forties in the *Tiger's Eye*, a short-lived artists' magazine to which members of both circles contributed. See Pamela Franks, "The Tiger's Eye": *The Art of a Magazine* (New Haven, 2002).

14. Leja discusses this in terms of its ideological efficacy in papering over tensions inherent in modern American culture. Leja, *Reframing*, 7, chs. 2 and 4.

these feelings are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact, and to us an art that glosses over or evades these feelings, is superficial or meaningless.¹⁵

The understated and generalized tone of these sentences stands in marked contrast to their referents. Many people throughout the world in mid-1943 certainly experienced terror, fear, and brutality. These words resonate particularly strongly with the plight of the European Jews, whose dire situation the Jewish press had covered steadily for at least four years by the time Rothko and his friend gave their radio interview.¹⁶ Surely this terror was more than an “unfortunate fact”; it was a catastrophic disaster of biblical proportions. Yet, the nearly bloodless prose and the appeal to “all primitive expression” remove the reader, and the artist, from the horror of their own times and the terror of a specific group, in favor of the eternal or timeless. This indirect language and generalization amounts to a kind of abstraction, one that both followed and accompanied the increasing abstraction of Rothko’s images. While by 1943 the war had reached global proportions, it is hard not to think that a Jewish artist, undoubtedly aware of the nature of Hitler’s “final solution,” did not have his co-religionists in mind when speaking of “terror and fear.” When read carefully, Rothko’s remarkable change of imagery, together with his statements, strongly suggests that his new iconography had something to do with both the war and his Jewishness. A pattern of circumlocution and abstract language evades this connection—an evasion that had its visual parallels in the works he had completed prior to this interview.

Rothko and Gottlieb engaged with these feelings of terror and fear indirectly through the subject matter of classical myth and tragedy. Responding to the war as it affected Jews in a more overt way ran the risk of limiting their audience, particularly in the face of extensive American antisemitism.¹⁷ Turning to “universal” subject matter positioned these artists and their art so that they could respond to the social and cultural upheaval of the war in a way that, theoretically, would still appeal to a wide audience. This appeal to a broad, not just Jewish, audience was

15. Gottlieb and Rothko, interview, Radio WNYC, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist,” October, 1943. Reproduced as “Appendix B” in Lawrence Alloway and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York, 1981).

16. A month-by-month account of the newspaper coverage of the Holocaust is given in David S. Wyman’s *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York, 1984), 19–60, and in Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933–1945* (New York, 1986). The following discussion is indebted to these studies.

17. Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 105–49.

necessary for practical reasons (potential sales), and to avoid marginalization as Jewish (parochial) artists. While, as Michael Leja and others have shown, myth—and its popular-culture versions—was a constitutive element of modernist discourse at this time, choosing this particular subject matter entailed more than an engagement with either high or popular culture. Myth allowed these artists to ensure their art would not be “superficial or meaningless,” while also deflecting attention away from themselves as people—Jews—who might also be experiencing “terror and fear” of a specific kind. In other words, this approach offered a solution to Rothko's dilemma through a kind of withdrawal, one paradoxically expanding into a realm of all-encompassing generality, by abstracting a “universal” component from his particular individual experience.

Antigone

In January 1942, Rothko exhibited the painting that marked a radical departure from his portraits and genre scenes. *Antigone* was one of the first of Rothko's new images shown in public; it is also the largest canvas from the 1940–1943 years, and there are several surviving drawings and gouaches associated with it.¹⁸ *Antigone* depicts a row of several inter-meshed figures seated on a low, rectangular, bench-like box. Quasi-classical heads compose one amalgamated form sitting on top of a row of bodies in its own horizontal register. The number of heads is ambiguous, because of the impossibility of assigning an appropriate number of features to each face. Several share an eye, for instance, and they become progressively more abstract as one's gaze travels to the right. Beards identify some of the figures as male, just as the breasts on one of the torsos below mark it as female. Like the faces, the bodies cannot be enumerated, and the shapes under the “bench” do not all resolve into “feet” for the figures. The whole assemblage of figures hovers parallel to the picture plane in a frieze-like structure. Nevertheless, the title, *Antigone*, drawn from the literature of ancient Greece, and the faces in profile recall ancient Greek works and thus constitute classical references.¹⁹

18. This painting's date has never been fixed within the range 1939–1941. David Anfam argues for 1939–1940, partly on the basis of other artists having seen new work in Rothko's studio in 1940. But he also argues that *Antigone* was worked on over a period of time. Rothko reportedly stopped painting for about a year in 1940 to write a book, but as it only surfaced recently, this possible hiatus has not yet affected the dating of his paintings. I believe the relationships among *Antigone*, its studies, and other paintings strongly indicate it was not finished until 1941.

19. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism*, in particular has noted this, at 118–20.

Some readings of this painting match the fragmented figures with characters appearing in the play of the same name.²⁰ This approach treats the painting as an illustration or emblem for the play. Generally, however, scholars prefer to note the parallels between the violence thematized in the drama and that appearing regularly in the newspapers in the opening years of World War II.²¹ Although differing in the details of their readings, scholars agree that *Antigone* has something to do with Rothko's feelings about the war, generally mentioning parallels between the cycle of violence given in the text of the play and the recurring wars in the twentieth century. However, many other texts would have served this same purpose. The question these interpretations do not answer is why Rothko chose this particular narrative when we know of his familiarity with other classical texts. Furthermore, what explains his new formal vocabulary, one featuring classical references and fragmented, intersecting forms?²²

The answers to these questions lie in several places. First, Rothko considered and rejected another narrative before turning decisively to *Antigone*. That rejection is crucial to understanding his final choice of narrative, formal vocabulary, and the significance of the painting to his career. This other story emerges from the works on paper associated with this painting, and they demand serious consideration of their function as studies for it.²³ For example, one small ink drawing's format, composition, and imagery unambiguously connect it to the painting: horizontal registers organize both works, with a row of fused faces at the top and groups of fragmented bodies at the bottom (Figure 3). The center tier of *Antigone* features a row of dismembered torsos, but the corresponding motif in the drawing has an additional and startling difference. Between the heads and bodies irrupt two pairs of arms nailed though the hands to timbers, an explicit, and in its doubling, emphatic reference to the Crucifixion. Rothko eliminated references to this biblical narrative in the transition from paper to canvas. Its significance lies in the change itself, and the fact that this is just one of several instances in this short period in which this kind of change happens; at least six more drawings and gouaches related

20. Amishai-Maisels, in *Depiction and Interpretation*, 264, attempts this in spite of the fact that the number of heads depicted is ambiguous.

21. For example, Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism*, 16–20.

22. At least two other paintings of this period by Rothko refer to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* cycle: *Omen of the Eagle*, and *The Eagle and the Hare*.

23. Bonnie Clearwater, *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper* (Hudson Hills, NY, 1984), identifies several works on paper as studies for *Antigone*, but does not discuss their possible meanings.

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Fig. 3. Mark Rothko, *Figure Composition with Grid* (recto). Unknown date. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

to *Antigone* survive.²⁴ They share several of the following characteristics: a Crucifixion reference (cross pieces with arms attached to them); a sarcophagus, often with a clump of body parts in or near it; a group of dangling legs; and a row of multiple heads, graphically displaying the slippage between the Crucifixion and the classical subject of the finished *Antigone* canvas.²⁵ Because the wounds of Christ allow easy recognition of the Crucifixion, their appearance, even in isolation, establishes an association between the Crucifixion and any other imagery on the page. The conflation of both the Crucifixion- and *Antigone*-type images in the paper studies for *Antigone* shows their connection in Rothko's private visual lexicon and his strong fixation on Crucifixion. This image of the Crucifixion thus posed some special problem for him: what connected it to *Antigone* and why did he reject the Crucifixion in favor of it?

24. Studies in the National Gallery include objects with accession numbers 1986.56.295, 1986.56.295, and 1986.56.298. Related studies in the Rothko Foundation collection are nos. P22, 4W, and 90.10. I thank Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko for allowing me to view these works and Marion Kahan for her assistance.

25. Accession number 1986.56.295. The Catalog Raisonné for Rothko's works on paper is underway at the time of this writing. The National Gallery has assigned the title *Composition with Arms, Legs, and Heads* to this work.

Rothko discarded the Crucifixion only after some struggle; he produced three paintings dominated by the narrative of the Crucifixion seen in *Antigone's* related studies. For example, *Crucifix* (Figure 4), painted around the same time as *Antigone*, features rectangular compartments, like the one at the bottom of *Antigone*, filled with dismembered body parts.²⁶ Just below the top row, with conjoined heads similar to those found in *Antigone*, are two boards, each with a severed arm nailed to it through the hand. In the lower right a box with two feet featuring nail wounds again evokes the body of Christ, as does the title. Similarly, two other untitled paintings from the same year repeat these elements, and one adds a male torso with outstretched arms.²⁷ The iconographic combination of composite heads, outstretched transfixed arms, and boxes of dismembered human limbs occurs repeatedly in Rothko's work during this short period of 1940 through 1942.

However, Rothko withheld these particular paintings from public circulation. When he cast off the references to the Crucifixion appearing in the works on paper, in a sense he also renounced the few works on canvas embodying these references by refusing to exhibit them in his lifetime. Indeed, he turned one of them over to his first, Jewish, wife no later than the final dissolution of their marriage in the early summer of 1943, emphatically separating himself from it along with his former life.²⁸ His refusal to exhibit these images, indeed, quite literally disowning one, is part of his self-fashioning process. Declining to exhibit them was tantamount to saying, "I am not this kind of artist." Such rejection could not have been casual; he hid these paintings away in spite of the fact that they represent about ten percent of the canvases he produced in a two-year period. James Breslin, Rothko's biographer, notes that Rothko worked slowly, sometimes experiencing difficulties producing new work for exhibitions, frequently re-exhibiting the same paintings. Just as he kept returning to this image, he also kept retreating from it,

26. *Crucifix*, Estate of Edith Carson, CR 187. I thank JoAnne Carson for her permission to examine artworks and documents in her mother's estate. Amishai-Maisels positions Rothko's choice of *Antigone* as subject matter in response to the Spanish Civil War, rather than World War II. She situates Rothko's Crucifixion images firmly within the iconography of the "crucified Jew." She notes Rothko's "high level of Jewish identity" in this period but makes no distinction between his private and public life as I do here. Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 264–68.

27. CR nos. 190, 191.

28. Details of their separations and ensuing divorce are in Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 169–70. Departing from the usual pattern of interpreting Rothko's images, Breslin's discussion of Rothko's 1942 painting, *Omen of the Eagle*, relates the choice of the Agamemnon trilogy as subject matter to Rothko's marital difficulties, because of the plays' emphasis on domestic strife.

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Fig. 4. Mark Rothko, *Crucifix*, 1941/1942. Courtesy JoAnne Carson. © 2007 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

burying these drawings and paintings in his studio or beneath layers of paint as he reworked them into other, less disturbing images. The irruption of this particular body—the body of Jesus Christ—into the collective body drawn from ancient Greek literature, marks a site of pressure and repression in Rothko's work. The Crucifixion both compelled and repelled him at this time.

The Crucifixion and Rothko's ambivalent relation to it provides other lenses through which to read *Antigone*, lenses that include Jewishness (as will become apparent below). Rothko chose the *Antigone* narrative because he saw it as somehow connected with the Crucifixion, an image with which he was obsessed. Moreover, the repeated slippage between the two narratives suggests that something complicated happened—not just to the painting, but to Rothko himself—in the making and remaking of the works.

The conflation of the two narratives, the Crucifixion and *Antigone*, constitutes a third narrative, that of the change itself: the repression of one story in favor of another. I believe this series of confluences and displacements constitutes the most significant aspect of the production of *Antigone* and its group of related studies. Through these exchanges and transfigurations Rothko rejected any explicit reference to the Crucifixion

in the finished painting, *Antigone*, preferring instead to focus on the contention over a death and burial given in Aeschylus's ancient tragedy. This raises a pressing question, namely, what was at stake in the transition—from one set of cultural references to the other—for Rothko?

The Crucifixion

The Crucifixion is obviously associated with the visual culture of Christianity. Yet, in the thirties and early forties, Jewish artists in increasing numbers produced a type of Crucifixion known as the “Jewish Jesus,” a visual tradition dating back to the 1870s.²⁹ This tradition underscored Jesus's Jewishness by associating him with objects or figures unmistakably Jewish. Typical strategies included rendering his loincloth as a tallit and, adorning him with phylacteries, ritual objects donned for prayer, or surrounding him with Torah scrolls, rabbis, figures of the “wandering Jew,” and the like. The well-known and frequently exhibited *White Crucifixion* (1938) by Marc Chagall provides a characteristic example (Figure 5). This type of Crucifixion highlights Christ's original identity as a Jew, stressing the violence done to his emphatically Jewish body.

Magazines and newspapers of the period reproduced these images, paintings that stood as a condemnation of the persecutions of Jews taking place in Europe, and perhaps American antisemitism as well. Many of these “Jewish Jesus” images were on view in New York on a regular basis throughout the war, including the *White Crucifixion*. From April 6 to 26 of 1942, the Puma Gallery mounted a show, “Modern Christs,” consisting of fifteen paintings and eleven sculptures, which included at least two examples of “Jewish Jesus” images.³⁰ Approximately half of the twenty-six artists who participated in this exhibition were Jewish, many known at the time for producing Jewishly-identified work. One, Max Weber, had been Rothko's instructor at the Art Students' League in the 1920s. Rothko knew at least two more of these painters quite well: his close associate, Adolph Gottlieb, exhibited *Crucifixion*, and Nahum Tschachbasov, who had exhibited with Rothko and Gottlieb at least three times between December 1935 and January 1937, showed his *Christ in Chaos*.³¹ Furthermore, a few years earlier, in 1935, two years after

29. The standard study of the image of the “Jewish Jesus” is Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “The Jewish Jesus,” *Journal of Jewish Art* 9 (1982): 84–104. I am indebted to her account in my description of the significations of this image.

30. Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 437.

31. *Modern Christs* exhibition brochure, Puma Gallery file, Museum of Modern Art Library, NY. Gottlieb exhibited a *Crucifixion* in The Ten's second annual exhibition at Montross Gallery (December 14, 1936–January 2, 1937)—the group's fourth exhibition. Isabel

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Fig. 5. Marc Chagall. *White Crucifixion*. 1938, oil on canvas, 154.3 x 139.7 cm, Gift of Alfred S. Altshuler, 1946. 925, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Hitler came to power, Rothko helped organize a group of Jewish artists (including Gottlieb and Tschacbasov), suggestively called The Ten, several of whom produced work that was strongly Jewishly-identified. Twice in 1936, as part of The Ten's group shows, Rothko, himself, exhibited a Jewish Jesus, *Crucifixion* (Figure 6), that featured drapery on Christ resembling a tallit. In the background of the picture was the long box of a sarcophagus being readied to accept the body. Critical reaction to this show alluded to the Jewishness of the artists, citing the "pessimism . . . typical. . . of the Jew."³² Rothko was thus well aware of the "Jewish

Dervaux's unpublished dissertation, "Avant-garde in New York, 1935-1939: The Ten," Ph.D. Diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1992, remains the most comprehensive study of The Ten. I have relied on her compilation of exhibition checklists.

32. The painting disappeared when the group show traveled to Paris in the 1930s. In conversation with the author, David Anfam suggested that the painting probably sold while the show was overseas. As it has not yet surfaced in spite of the very high prices

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Fig. 6. Mark Rothko. *Crucifixion*. 1935. Location unknown. © 2007 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Jesus” as an assertion of the artist’s Jewish identity and the way it could be received in stereotypical terms. In contrast to many other Jewish artists in 1941–1942, Rothko’s *Crucifixion* images reject the overt identification of the historical Jesus with modern European Jewry. His *Crucifix* (1941/1942) and its companion images make this refusal conspicuous. These images do not even feature a coherent body of Christ. Rather, as in *Antigone*, he dismantles the body into its component parts—head, legs, arms, etc.—each group of limbs placed in a rectangular compartment. The dismembered body loses the lower torso and, crucially, its loincloth, a primary vehicle for registering Jesus’ Jewishness when rendered as a tallit. However, because the familiar narrative and image carry a strong charge, it takes few cues to put the two together. The deployment of the

commanded by Rothko’s work since his death, it is likely that it was lost or destroyed in World War II. Waldemar George, review of *The Ten*, quoted in Dervaux, “Avant-garde in New York,” 69. My translation and abridgement.

Crucifixion by so many other Jewish artists at the time seems to have made Rothko's mangled image one that, in spite of departures from the standard "Jewish Jesus," potentially signified Jewishness. Rothko's previous experience with the "Jewish Jesus" image makes his decision in 1942 to avoid exhibiting such potentially "Jewish" work quite telling.³³

Publicly exhibited pictures play a significant part in the construction of the artist's public identity. For example, an abstract artist is such because he or she produces and exhibits abstract art. Likewise, in 1941, a "Jewish" artist was one who produced and exhibited images with recognizably Jewish references, such as rabbis, menorahs, and the like.³⁴ When Rothko produced but withheld from exhibition images relating to the Crucifixion and its possible "Jewish Jesus" resonances, he created and then rejected a possible, if only partial, identity for himself as an artist. In refusing to exhibit an image of the Crucifixion, even one featuring a Jesus stripped of all references to his original Jewishness, Rothko evaded the possibility of these images emphasizing his own Jewishness. However tightly he held to his Jewishness in private, he was unwilling to link his professional, and therefore public, identity—artist—to Jewishness.³⁵ This recurring deletion of and distancing from the Crucifixion, present in the studies for *Antigone*, indicate that, for Rothko, the finished, classicizing image of *Antigone* functioned as a site of displacement, repression, or substitution for his Jewishness.

(Dis)Connections

Visual resemblances in Rothko's work aside, what is the connection between the Crucifixion and *Antigone*? This particular narrative, *Antigone*, concerns a human body, its humiliation, and its burial, as does the story of the Crucifixion. *Antigone* opens with an unburied body, the result of severed ties of loyalty within the ruling family that lead to an abortive attempt to overthrow the ruling king. Indeed, the desecration

33. One work on canvas depicting the Crucifixion, a version of *A Last Supper* (known as *Heads*), and a painting titled *In Limbo*, all dating from 1941–1943, were in the estate of his first wife, Edith Sachar (Carson), upon her death. Presumably, Rothko gave them to her upon their final separation early in the summer of 1943. The dissolution with Sachar thus took with it these potential markers of his identity as a "Jewish" artist.

34. Pappas, "Picture," 206–38.

35. His ambivalence about his public identity registers in his selections of works shown in 1943, *American Modern Artists: First Annual Exhibition*, at the Riverside Museum, where he exhibited expressionist figurative works painted, for the most part, much earlier—in 1938 and 1939. These works are portraits, often of artists at work or works that signal "art" by their subject matter (such as nude studies), and cannot be identified with Jewishness in spite of their adherence to his expressionist style. See CR 156, 157, 179 for examples.

of the unburied body of the rebel brother drives the subsequent action of the play. *Antigone* is also a tale of resistance and sacrifice; Antigone's willingness to resist the king's authority, even at the price of death, in order to fulfill her religious duty to bury her brother's body parallels Christ's resistance to his persecutors and his self-sacrifice. The image of dismemberment figures in *Antigone*, although metaphorically—the family is dismembered by the struggle for political power and religious righteousness. Antigone hangs herself with her torn-apart garments, and the main implement used in the violent deaths within the text is a cutting instrument—a sword. These parallels no doubt contributed to Rothko's choosing of this particular drama in particular as the substitute for the Crucifixion.

The most striking difference between Rothko's Christ and the "Jewish Jesus" of other artists is Rothko's repeated dismemberment of the body and placement in groups of other dismembered bodies; it appears as the main motif common to Rothko's Crucifixion, *Antigone*, and its related studies.³⁶ As noted above, the most finished studies feature the arms of the crucified Christ nailed down on top of an image of a broken and brutalized group of bodies. Such an image suggests that those bodies form a collective, a collective that is savagely dismembered. These images resonate strongly with the notion of Jewry as a body, one that, as Rothko was painting this very picture, experienced violent dismemberment in Europe. For example, in October 1941, the *New York Times* reported on the deportation and subsequent killing of Jews from Hungary.³⁷ This was just one in a series of reports of deportations and executions of Jews increasingly appearing in the mainstream and Jewish press beginning in 1936 and intensifying by 1941, during the months Rothko worked on *Antigone* and its related studies.³⁸ The concurrence between the appear-

36. These untitled drawings are in the collection of the National Gallery: accession numbers 1986.56.295, 1986.56.298 and 1986.56.299.

37. On October 26, 1941, the *New York Times* ran a story describing "victims being machine-gunned as they prayed in their synagogues" in Hungary. *New York Times*, October 26, 1941, 6. The death toll of the previous six weeks was given at 15,000. Two days later, on October 28, 1941, the *New York Times* ran a story with the headline, "Nazis Seek to Rid Europe of all Jews." The first sentence reads, "Complete elimination of Jews from European life now appears to be fixed German Policy."

38. As early as April 1936, in a book review of *The Brown Network*, a report on Nazi activities around the world, *Jewish Frontier* described the persecutions of Jews in Europe as a "most carefully organized plan for the extermination of our European heritage." Harry Slochower, "'The Brown Network' and 'Die Gelbe Flecke,'" *Jewish Frontier* 3, No.4 (April 1936): 34–35. Alex Grobman documents the extensive coverage of the persecutions, ghettoization, and killing of groups of Jews, large and small, in the Yiddish and English-language Jewish press in America, especially New York. A large number of

ance of Rothko's new visual vocabulary and the press reports strongly suggests that the news coming out of Europe prompted this new kind of imagery in both the Crucifixions and the first quasi-classical paintings. The imagery in both the press accounts and Rothko's paintings refers to the bodies of the individual victims and the collective bodies of Jewish communities—exiled, imprisoned, murdered.

The conflation with *Antigone* and the elision of Christ's body presents one resolution to Rothko's complex problem. The events leading up to the Holocaust exerted pressure on Jews either to accelerate their assimilation or, instead, to assert their Jewishness. Rothko did remain Jewish after his marriage to a Christian woman in 1945, celebrating some Jewish holidays and in 1959 refused to exhibit in Germany because of its Nazi history.³⁹ However, Rothko desired a place as an avant-garde artist, and this identity position was one that precluded a publicly paraded Jewish subjectivity. The two identity positions—Jewish artist and avant-garde artist—were incompatible. (That Jewish artists working in a modern mode who continued to explicitly reference Jewish life and rituals—e.g., Ben-Zion, Jack Levine—have until recently been marginalized in the history of American art makes this clear.⁴⁰) Rothko found himself caught between two mutually exclusive cultural imperatives.

In this set of works (*Antigone*, its studies, and the suppressed Crucifixion images), Rothko takes a narrative that, although Christian, was at the time appropriated by Jewish artists. He transforms and hides that narrative in another—a classical play that avoids any assertion of Jewishness in favor of the presumed universal appeal of myth, a notion that enjoyed widespread currency in the forties. These transformations metaphorically embody Rothko's own predicament: how, and how much, to excise his Jewishness from his public persona as an artist. The very

the newspaper stories he cites date from before December 1941. Alex Grobman, "When Did They Know? The American Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1 September 1939–17 December 1942," *Journal of American Jewish History* 68 No. 3 (1979): 327–52. It is hard to think that Rothko, who spoke Yiddish to the end of his life and worked in a prominent Jewish synagogue center since 1929, did not read these accounts. Even if he did not, it is unlikely that he could have avoided the inevitable discussions of these news stories among his fellow employees. Rothko finished *Antigone* no later than mid-December of 1941, as it and at least two other related paintings were seen in his studio before December 31, 1941. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 159–60.

39. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 407. Werner Haftmann, untitled essay, *Mark Rothko*, exh. cat. Kunsthau, Zurich, March 21–May 9, 1971, p. viii.

40. Negative receptions of Newman's early "zip" paintings, with titles such as *Abraham*, *Joshua*, *Jericho*, etc., show, among other things, that explicit Jewish references were unwelcome in avant-garde discourse. Thomas B. Hess discusses the critical reaction to Newman's shows of 1950 and 1951 in his monograph, *Barnett Newman*, Ex. Cat., Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1971). See page 87 and *passim*. See also Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 202.

process of burial that Rothko engaged in—the burial of the images on paper in the finished canvases—may have contributed to the compelling nature of *Antigone*'s narrative. At the same time, the abstraction and distortion of the images both denotes his art as modern and conceals a subject matter that was personally necessary and professionally threatening. *Antigone* is a solution that rejects Jewish identity; in the painting, the erasure of any imagery signifying Jewishness is complete. However, the history of the production of the painting—the displacements from paper to canvas, from one narrative to another—reveals that which is missing in *Antigone*. Without this history, namely of the studies and their interpretive context that invoke Jewishness, one cannot see the absence of these markers of Jewishness in *Antigone*. In other words, they are absent in the painting because of their presence in the studies. Here assimilation, another process of erasure, becomes visible in the elisions of Crucifixion images in the studies on paper, works that constitute the invisible points of departure for the quasi-classical imagery of *Antigone*.

The existence of the studies in Rothko's studio allowed him to respond to the persecution of Jews at home and abroad and yet not publicly identify with Jewishness as an artist. The divergence between his private and public personas both creates and is created by the transformations and distance between the two sets of images. The answer to Rothko's dilemma—how to be a modern artist and a Jew—was a kind of abstraction of "Jew" from "artist," the very process of abstraction and elision he employed in the moves from paper to canvas. What I am inviting here is not that we consider these works as simply a case of covert "Jewish discourse" but rather that we focus on the series of slippages and confluences between the sets of images themselves. Doing so forces us to focus on the works as a chain or pool of significations and the slippage and splitting of Rothko's public and private identities.

Last Supper

The Crucifixion is not the only Christian narrative in Rothko's oeuvre coupled to the production of *Antigone*. His painting, *A Last Supper* (Figure 2), dates from the same period as *Antigone*, and although sold in early January of 1942, was exhibited once in February of 1943.⁴¹ *A Last Supper* bears a strong resemblance to *Antigone*. Both paintings share a tiered composition, with a row of heads that merge into one another sitting on top of a row of bodies. This row of bodies, in turn, rests on a box-like form filled with body parts. Like the relationship between *Antigone* and

41. CR 184. For the painting's sale, see Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 159. The CR lists the exhibition: the *New York Artist Painters: First Exhibition*, February 13–27, 1943.

the Crucifixion, an examination of the related works, especially those on paper, exposes a series of elisions in the development of the imagery from paper studies made in private to a painting on canvas seen in public.

A Last Supper presents an unusual rendering of this familiar theme. Like the final study in gouache (Figure 7), the painting recapitulates Leonardo's familiar tri-part structure in its composition, heightening its resemblance to that most familiar depiction of the Last Supper. However, *A Last Supper* depicts five, six, or seven figures instead of the canonical thirteen, depending how the viewer assembles the collection of overlapping faces and profiles. Its title, also, departs from the familiar: this is not *The Last Supper*; it is *A Last Supper*. By undercutting the usual Christian reference of the title, Rothko reminds the viewer that the Last Supper actually began as a Jewish ritual—a Passover meal. The Last Supper of the New Testament lends itself to a reading of changing religious identities: Jesus begins a Jewish observance, and via his transformation of the Passover ritual to the first Eucharist by distributing the wine and bread as his blood and body, he concludes it as a Christian rite. Rothko accomplishes the slippage between the two narratives of Passover and the Last Supper by the change in the title to the indefinite article and in the painting's non-canonical number of figures. He retains a title close to the original Christian reference, inviting us, in light of the above discussion of *Antigone*, to see a possible reference to the Jewish Jesus in a narrative connected to the Crucifixion. Rothko, himself, saw the narrative connection between the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. For instance, a small ink drawing shows the tri-partite wall division behind the figures in pencil, a row of five, or perhaps six, heads sitting on a box or table covered in a striped textile, and below the box, very faintly and rapidly drawn with pencil, something that looks like a human arm (Figure 8).⁴² This human arm, shown from the elbow down, arranged horizontally on a slim, rectangular, board-like form, recalls the explicit depictions of Christ's arms seen in other works. Similarly, a loose gouache study depicts two dismembered arms hanging down from the left side of the table. The presence of this shorthand reference to the Crucifixion in two studies for *A Last Supper* shows that Rothko thematically and conceptually linked the two narratives.

However, Rothko's changes in title and size of the cast of characters in the finished painting barely suggest a link between the two stories. He could thus afford to venture a little closer to this Christological subject, with its potentially "Jewish" references, because there is no tradition in Jewish visual culture for a "Jewish Last Supper," and therefore the subject

42. National Gallery accession number 1986.56.505.

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Fig. 7. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

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Fig. 8. Mark Rothko, *Study of Five Heads*, Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

matter is not as loaded in terms of Jewish identity as that of the Jewish Jesus at the time. The result is an image that is easy to read as reference to a Christian, rather than Jewish, story, particularly for non-Jewish viewers. Again, Rothko avoids producing a finished painting that could contribute to the public perception of himself as a Jewish artist.

Why, once departing from the usual number of participants, did Rothko settle on five figures in particular? He arrived at the choice of five figures early in the production of this work; in the several existing studies five, sometimes at most six or seven, faces appear, never any number close to the thirteen given in the New Testament. The most fully developed study for *A Last Supper* is a small gouache containing all the major features of the finished painting: figures in red and blue striped garments, their heads in an amalgamated row, interior space divided into three main sections by the architectural details in the background, and a box-like table behind which the figures "sit" (Figure 7).⁴³ These motifs appear in at least two other paintings and in the other, less finished studies as well.⁴⁴

Just as thirteen male figures seated at a table strongly invites a reading of the image as the Last Supper, so five male figures seated at a table invites a reading of the image according to a different story, one that is familiar to Jews but not to Christians. If we turn to a narrative associated with the Judaic tradition, we find that the five figures summon a comparison with the story of the Rabbis at Bnai Brak.⁴⁵ According to the story, five rabbis gather at Bnai Brak and spend the night discussing the liberation of the Jews from Egypt, until called at dawn to resume their daily duties. This brief narrative is part of the Passover service, a ritual celebration commemorating the departure of the Jews from Egypt, and one linked by both the Bible and by Rothko to the Last Supper.

Further, the exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses resonates strongly with the situation of persecuted Jews trying to escape from Nazi-occupied Europe, of which Rothko was certainly aware. Indeed, the Bnai Brak story, illustrated more conventionally, appeared on the cover of *Menorah Journal* (Figure 9), a prominent and

43. National Gallery accession number 1986.43.474. Other surviving studies in the National Gallery are nos. 1986.56.612, 1986.56.493, 1986.56.505, 1986.56.481, 1986.56.292b, 1986.56.298, and a related painting is in the Carson Collection: CR 186. The National Gallery holds two related paintings, CR 183 and 185.

44. CR 185 and 186. CR 183 shares all but the architectural division into thirds.

45. This illustration (*The Rabbis at Bnai Brak*) appeared on the cover of *Menorah Journal*, a magazine familiar to Rothko, in the spring of 1941, just months before *A Last Supper* was completed. Rothko did some freelance illustration for the magazine in the mid-1920s. It was more than likely available at his work place, the Brooklyn Synagogue Center, as that institution represented exactly the type of audience at which the magazine was aimed: middle-class, English-speaking Jews, largely of the second generation.

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Fig. 9. Arthur Szyk, *Rabbis at Bnai Brak*. (The full Hebrew text did not appear on the cover of *The Menorah Journal*.) Reproduced in cooperation with Alexandra Szyk Bracie and The Arthur Szyk Society, Burlingame, CA. www.szyk.org. This image initially appeared in *The Haggadah*, London, 1940, illuminated by Arthur Szyk.

explicitly Jewish publication, in the spring of 1941, earlier in the same year that Rothko painted his *A Last Supper*. We cannot know precisely what Rothko was thinking, but the fact that three of the six surviving studies for this painting unambiguously depict five figures indicates the number had a special significance. His insistence on five figures in the final study firmly anchors this image in Jewishness. In the painting, he has added one or two extra faces, creating possible readings of six or seven figures rather than five, and in the process slightly dissociating *A Last Supper* from the explicitly Jewish narrative of Bnai Brak.

Rothko accomplishes the slippage from Bnai Brak and Passover to Last Supper, from Jewish to Christian narrative via the title and elimination of references either implicitly or explicitly Jewish. Rothko also noticeably avoids rendering these five figures as rabbis; only the number of

figures and the conflation of the narratives associated with Passover and the Last Supper invites reading them as such. In this way, he preserves some semblance of the story associated with Passover for an audience familiar with the Passover Seder and the stories told during the course of the service. A Jewish audience could read easily the story of Bnai Brak, but Rothko transformed the image and gave it an ambiguous title, making it less intelligible for Jews and Christians alike. The unsafe or loaded narratives that engage Jewishness and Jewish history—Passover and Bnai Brak—are buried in the less Jewish narrative of the Last Supper. Once again, the first story remains invisible unless we look to the studies on paper.

However, this answer to the question of how Jewish Rothko wanted to appear in public differs from that seen in *Antigone*. Jewish artists had not appropriated the Last Supper as an image of Jewish protest. In this case, the burial of the first narrative, Bnai Brak, in the second, the Last Supper, is not as complete as in *Antigone*. The small change in the title, the non-canonical number of figures, and the composition support the title, but incompletely fix the narrative. Rothko, through this double process—narrative conflation and abstraction—again abstracted Jewishness from his public persona as an artist. Exhibiting pictures that laid a claim to the status of “Jewish artist” would have circumscribed his audience and therefore eliminated the possibility of aspiring to the “universalizing” art on which Rothko had staked his claim to membership in the avant-garde.⁴⁶

The Disappeared

1942 saw more works with similar changes. One painting underwent an even more drastic evolution from study to finished work than that seen in either *Antigone* or *A Last Supper*. The study is a small gouache on heavy paper (Figure 10). In the lower right is a small black rectangular box, filled with what appear to be hands and arm bones. The most striking features of this work are the two groups of figures separated by a field of red and white chevrons. The left-hand group is a pale, grayish green, the bodies indicated only by long vertical forms. The large round heads hang down, as if in sorrow or resignation. The faces have only sketchily indicated eyes and noses, with grimacing mouths that voice the

46. For a similar rejection of the label “Jewish artist” on the part of one of Rothko’s contemporaries, see Baskind, *Raphael Soyfer*. For an extended study of the problem of the identity of black, lesbian, gay and female artists in relation to abstract expressionism, see Gibson *Other Politics*.

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Fig. 10. Mark Rothko. *Abstract Composition*. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

figures' anguish. A surviving ink drawing for the left side of the gouache study identifies these as human figures: seven heads sit atop cylindrical bodies, the front figure's feet visible below its wrapping. The wrapping also suggests shrouds, a reading more strongly suggested in the succeeding gouache. Here, these figures look like corpses, the pale color and white over-painting evoking bloodless flesh and the addition of hanging heads suggesting broken necks.⁴⁷

The group on the right shares a similar form, but is a rich mahogany brown. Rothko more clearly differentiated the bodies in this group from one another, picking out individual figures with brushy black shading and striping. A single black band, like an iron barrel hoop, encircles this group, while below, the bodies merge into a single mass. The effect is one of community, but also confinement, even imprisonment. The large number of heads, indicating many individuals crammed into a small area, reinforces the sense of claustrophobia. These heads also have more clearly drawn faces, some with wide, grimacing or gaping mouths that contrast, in their apparent agony, with the mute figures opposite. Rothko lightly over-painted with white gouache many of the heads on both sides, as if

47. I am grateful to Mary MacNaughton for suggesting this reading of these figures as corpses. Private correspondence, February 15, 1996.

to suggest the descending pallor of death. Overall, the image appears to depict prisoners on the right, herded together, separated by a red and white striped expanse from the mourners or corpses on the left.

This gouache on paper is a study for an untitled painting that has a pictorial organization and palette nearly identical to the gouache (Figure 11).⁴⁸ As in the study, we see two major sections separated by a large area patterned with rows of red and white chevrons with indications of black outlines. However, the figural green group on the left is absent; the “mourners” or “corpses” literally disappear beneath a simple green field. The captive brown crowd on the right divides into three or four clumps, shrouded in striped or chevron-patterned brown drapery. Many blank, spherical forms crowd out of the tops of the wrappings, corresponding to the heads of the figures in the earlier gouache, but here their softly brushed, pearly gray surfaces suggest bony skulls instead of faces. Hovering just behind the blank heads is a darker gray, lightly striated form that suggests a ram's skull, which may therefore be a reference to the traditional sacrificial animal of the Old Testament. Below, Rothko transformed the solid brown area on the right-hand side of the study into fans of gray and black tail feathers spreading from the bottom of each form, and birds that suggest eagles or vultures escort the remaining figures.

In the lower left of both works lies a rectangular box, filled with fragmentary forms. The study is unclear as to whether these are plants or hands. In the painted version, these ambiguous forms appear alongside several gray spheres reminiscent of the tops of skulls, a reading reinforced by the use of similar forms for “heads” on the crowd of figures at the right. A rectangular box filled with body parts again recalls the idea of a coffin or sarcophagus. Matthew Baigell has pointed out that this box-like imagery, complete with body parts, probably refers to Jewish burial practices. In particular, he notes that “for Jews all parts of a body must be buried together and in containers if they have been severed.”⁴⁹ Yet the transformation of human figures to birds, and their interment in the green field, undercuts any such explicit Jewish readings, especially for a non-Jewish audience, unfamiliar with Jewish funerary traditions. Even for a Jewish audience, the finished painting, with its missing figures and their attendant emotional affect, has little to connect the image with Jewish funerary practices. Moreover, the reading of the box as a classical sarcophagus further undermines any such “Jewish” reading of the final canvas. With this image, one that oscillates between Greco-Roman sar-

48. CR 200.

49. Baigell, *Holocaust Years*, 124.

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Fig. 11. Mark Rothko. *Untitled*, 1942. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. Image © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art. © 2007 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

cophagi and the traditional Jewish burial box, Rothko elicits a range of references to death and burial and manages, again, to repress any overt references to Jewishness. The transformation of the figures also inhibits, if not completely blocks, any narrative interpretation made possible by the study; the painting seems to request a metaphoric reading—again, another form of abstraction.

The final painting lacks an explicit link, either iconographical or titular, to a narrative from classical, Jewish, or Christian traditions; it seems unrelated to any story, obvious or obscure. The absence of a narrative anchor makes the image more difficult to comprehend, a problem shared with many of Rothko's other paintings in this period. Although we lack the assistance of a pre-established narrative (as we had for *Antigone* and *A Last Supper*), we can still place the study alongside some events of the early 1940s, as a way of supplying a context for the image. The front page of the *New York Times* covered the Russian invasion of the Baltic States—Rothko's birthplace—on June 17, 1940.⁵⁰ By July 1941 the New York Yiddish dailies were reporting massacres of Jews by Nazis in the area of Rothko's former home. These reports appeared later in

50. *New York Times*, June 17, 1940. Breslin notes that Dvinsk, Rothko's hometown, had long housed a Russian garrison. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 12.

the mainstream press; seventeen months later, the *New York Times* ran a similar story.⁵¹ In December 1941, the *New York Herald Tribune* ran an editorial on the subject of the persecution of Jews mentioning the “callous deportations in which groups of Jews were herded into railroad cars, with far less consideration than would be given to beef cattle headed for the slaughter pen.”⁵²

Rothko's gouache study resonates strongly with this description: the crowded figures herded together, the patterned surface of the brown group suggestive of the board and batten siding used in railroad car construction, and the yawning red and blue field that separates these prisoners from their grieving or dead brethren. Yet for all its similarities to the study, the finished painting evades these resonances with contemporary news reports. Instead, Rothko has cast the painting's elements in terms of birds, sarcophagi, and fish. The painting shares these motifs with his other paintings that are usually described as “mythic,” not least because of their titular assimilations to classical Greek myths and dramas, such as *Antigone*, and, drawing from the Agamemnon cycle of Aeschylus, *The Omen of the Eagle*, the title of which refers to the repeated imagery of eagles in the play. Rothko's solution here differs from both that found in *Antigone* and *A Last Supper*. Although suggesting current events in the antecedent study, both it and the finished painting lack specific underlying texts. Rothko could therefore proceed directly to the abstraction that resulted in the elision of the figures on the left and the formal transformation of those on the right. Rothko here has quite literally interred these figures in the ground of the painting, along with any possible resonances with European Jews. In so doing, he again curtailed any possibility that this painting could identify him as a “Jewish” artist.

Entombments

The theme of burial links the narratives of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, *Antigone*, and the transition seen from paper to canvas in the untitled painting numbered 200 in the Rothko *Catalogue Raisonné* (henceforth CR 200). The first two events lead up to the Christian story of the Entombment on the one hand and on the other, *Antigone's* trajectory originates in her conflicting duties towards her brother's unburied

51. Wyman, *Abandonment of the Jews*, 20.

52. *New York Herald Tribune*, December 5, 1941, 26. Reproduced in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, (13 vols.), Vol. 1, “Confirming the News of the Extermination,” (New York, 1989), 3.

body; she buries him, and as punishment is herself entombed alive.⁵³ After *Antigone* and these other paintings, Rothko embraced this burial theme explicitly, turning to images of the Entombment, producing several canvases with this title. The image of the Entombment and its subject of burial resonate with a contemporary narrative of Jewish persecution, one then very visible in the Jewish press: the mass grave. Reports of mass burials of European Jews circulated well before the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps began in 1944; *Life* magazine ran a small picture of a mass grave of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto in its February 13, 1942 issue.⁵⁴ A month later, a particularly lurid eyewitness report appeared in the Jewish publication *Congress Weekly*:

In the city of Borisov the Nazis had ordered Jews to dig a communal grave, into which 7,000 men, women and children—some shot to death, others only wounded—were thrown and covered with earth, and it was by the living breath of those interred that the field was heaving like the sea.⁵⁵

Congress Weekly's report made it clear this was one incident among many:

Another 8,000 Jews were brought to the city from neighboring towns and the burial of corpses and living alike in a common grave was repeated. In the district of Kiev no less than 240,000 Jews . . . found their death in common graves.⁵⁶

As the mass grave repeatedly appears in the extended accounts in the Jewish press, so this motif of burial frequently occurs in the images Rothko produced in the same short time-span. However, the abstraction of the image undermines the specific reference of the title. The Entombment is a narrative that again centrally concerns a burial, that of Jesus, who would appear three days later with a new identity as the risen Christ. The Entombment canvases do not have works on paper differing as significantly from the finished image as do *Antigone*, *A Last Supper*, and other earlier paintings. Rothko did not need to translate a Jewishly-identified narrative into a Christian form inasmuch the Entombment already contains such a transition within its narrative: the Entombment, like the Last Supper,

53. The quotation is from the 1899 R.C. Jebb translation, now available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/sophocles-antigone.txt>. Rothko may have had this or the 1912 F. Storr translation published by Harvard, which also describes the intimate positioning of the bodies.

54. *Life*, February 13, 1942, 27.

55. *Congress Weekly*, March 20, 1942, 3-4. Reprinted in Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 11.

56. Wyman, *America and the Holocaust*, 11.

occupies a liminal position in Christ's transformation from Jew to Gentile.⁵⁷ It also parallels the changes Rothko wrought in his own identity, as he continued to drain his public persona of overt markers of Jewishness. Because the narrative contains the transition from one tradition to another, he could directly abstract this already Christian image into a modern form. By early 1943, Rothko expanded the method of direct abstraction developed first in the untitled painting discussed above and extended in the *Entombments*. In 1943 the images in his work turned emphatically to biomorphic abstraction, eventually becoming so abstract that the figure/ground distinction would dissolve in 1946.⁵⁸

Examination of the paintings from this brief period (1941 to mid 1943) in light of the studies that precede them reveals that the figures in the paintings are not as important as those they replace—figures rejected and buried in the process of creating the finished work. These studies reveal more than a new set of images with which Rothko was working; they display unwanted meanings for both the works and the artist's position in the public world. Attention to the artistic process the studies record shows that process to be difficult, one marked more by refusal, rejection, replacement, and displacement than by a simple exploration of a literature revered in Western culture for its “timeless” significance. Jewishness, it turns out, had a great deal to do with Rothko's sudden transformations and his turn toward abstraction. Jewishness was precisely at the center of this transformation of the work and the artist, and contributed to his move toward abstraction. The abstraction process of the works proceeded at a time when other public markers of Rothko's Jewishness were disappearing.

These changing markers of public identity included changing his name in 1940 from Rothkowitz to the—if not Gentile—at least less overtly Jewish “Rothko.” Significantly, some of Rothko's friends later attributed this name change to the need to submerge his Jewish identity in order to contribute to his success as an artist. Joseph Solman, a friend of Rothko since at least the mid-thirties, related that J. B. Neumann, the prominent art dealer, suggested that Rothkowitz change his name for an upcoming show at Neumann's gallery. According to Solman, Neumann said to Rothkowitz, “Marcus, I have so many Jewish painters; why don't you make your name Rothko? It sounds interesting.”⁵⁹ Neumann's comment

57. Baigell makes a detailed and convincing reading of Rothko's *The Entombment* of 1944, identifying several abstracted markers of Jewishness. Baigell, *Holocaust Years*, 126.

58. See CR 323.

59. Joseph Solman, interviewed by Avis Berman, May 6, 1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Hereafter SI/AAA.) Transcript

implies that “Rothkowitz” identified the artist as “just one more” Jewish painter, and so, less “interesting” than “Rothko,” who would perhaps also be less Jewish. Neumann himself may have wanted to limit the perceived number of Jewish artists in his stable, which could perhaps have threatened the prestige of his gallery. In any case, that it was possible to speak of “so many Jewish painters,” i.e., too many, clearly indicates that the intersection between Jewishness and the art world at that time was problematic. By the end of 1941, Rothko moved out of the Lower East Side, a neighborhood historically associated with Jews, to one in central Manhattan, in which the 1940 census counted slightly more than one percent of the population as Jewish.⁶⁰ The artists’ group, The Ten, broke up shortly after their last exhibition, which closed on November 4, 1939. Rothko participated in the formation of and joined other artists’ groups which were not exclusively composed of Jews. Although he divorced his first, Jewish, wife in 1943 and married a Christian woman in 1945, he remained at least nominally Jewish and Jewishly-identified in private. However, these external markers of public artistic identity—artworks, name, address, artists’ groups, and exhibition venues—progressively lose Jewish significations between 1939 and 1944 and parallel the development of his work in 1940–1943.

Although moving toward a somewhat secularized identity in public, Rothko, raised in an observant Jewish household and schooled at the yeshiva, must have been deeply offended and disturbed at the deaths of his coreligionists and the desecration of their bodies. The sarcophagus or burial container appearing repeatedly in his work of these early war years attempts symbolically to provide a proper burial receptacle for the victims.⁶¹ The production of these paintings reveals both kinship and tension between the images of Passover and the Last Supper, and *Antigone* and the Crucifixion. Abstraction, dispersal across a gridded structure, and “mythic” or “tragic” superimpositions bury the original significations of the figures, shrouding or undercutting easy readings of these as “Jewish” discourse. Via these strategies, Rothko subjected his identity to a kind of splitting and veiling, redirecting his artistic persona away from his personal life. In this diversion, Rothko was successful. Most importantly, the abstraction of the images made them ineligible for inclusion in the

of interview, part II, page 17. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, 125, n. 33, notes that Rothko’s friends, Boffie Johnson and H.R. Hays, also related this anecdote.

60. Breslin tracks Rothko’s frequent changes of address. Census data for New York City from C. Morris Horowitz and Lawrence J. Kaplan, *The Estimated Jewish Population of the New York Area 1900–1957* (New York, 1959) 26, 51–52. (Post-1959 figures are projections.)

61. Baigell, *Holocaust Years*, 124.

magazines and books of the period that celebrated past and present Jewish artistic achievement.⁶² Although Rothko remained Jewishly-identified in his private life, he suppressed his public Jewishness, uncoupling it from his identity as an artist. The repeated images of mass death and burial that occur in his work at this time, against the backdrop of the reports in Jewish periodicals, indicate it is the persecutions of Jews and the mass graves in Europe that Rothko confronted in his work at this time. However, as an ambitious artist who sought to avoid marginalization as a "Jewish artist," he could not do so directly. The suppression of explicitly Jewish images in his paper works in favor of classical references on canvas also provided the psychic and emotional distance he needed in order to produce art that responded to the war's impact on European Jewry, art that could be received as avant-garde—as indeed it has been.⁶³ A measure of Rothko's success is that it is only now, more than sixty years after their production, that these early works are being interpreted in light of his Jewishness. However traumatized by the Holocaust as he was, and however creatively and passionately he responded to it, his art began to garner great acclaim only after he stripped markers of Jewishness from his work and from his public image as an artist. The studies for these paintings provide a literal paper trail of this process.

Conclusion

Rothko never spoke explicitly about Jewishness in relationship to his art. However, in light of the testimony of the images, I find his statements from the period to exhibit a pattern of circumlocution that marks the imagery as a place where he struggled with his identities as an artist and as a Jew. This conflicted identity becomes visible if we question the artist's own assertions and statements regarding his work and his motives for the pursuit of classicizing, "universal" subject matter.⁶⁴

In this period Rothko was at his most vocal; he issued more comments on his work during the 1940s than he did in the rest of a career spanning nearly five decades. For example, there is his repeated insistence that his work had subject matter and was to be read as "tragic," that "the subject is crucial" to his art, which he saw as "the anecdote of the

62. The construction of a history of "Jewish art" was underway at this same time. In the United States, this took place principally in the pages of *Menorah Journal* and in the publication of a few books in the U.S. and England. See Pappas, "Picture," 205–38.

63. On avant-garde, see Leja, *Reframing*, especially chapter 1.

64. In general, Rothko's statements have been read more or less at face value. A major exception is Leja, who compares them to the discourse of the "modern man." *Ibid.*, 26–41.

spirit.” These statements seem to claim some kinship between his art and traditional high culture and its concern for the human condition. Likewise, he insisted that his work occupied a middle ground between narrative and mystical abstraction: “I repudiate [the abstract artist’s] denial of the anecdote just as I repudiate the denial of the material existence of the whole of reality.”⁶⁵ As noted above, in 1943 Rothko and his close friend, Adolph Gottlieb, insisted “on subject matter, a subject matter that embraces these feelings [terror and fear] and permits them to be expressed.”⁶⁶ Thus the work, he is telling us, while it is not narrative illustration, should be intelligible to the alert viewer who has been following world events. Rothko’s statements are elliptical in tone and phrasing; as in his paintings, he seems to be talking around something, rather than pointing to it directly. The very existence of so many of these documents strongly indicates that he preferred a certain viewpoint on his work, while striving to preclude another body of interpretation. These statements comprise a series of attempts to set parameters on the readings of the works, boundaries I have overstepped based on the visual evidence provided by the works themselves.

These works have much to tell. Examining just this handful of paintings and the changes that occur between them and their antecedent studies reveals an artist struggling with his professional persona and its relationship to his private identity. Attending to this double self-fashioning yields deeper insight into the paintings from this brief but crucial period in his development. These works point in two directions: forward toward the development of postwar abstraction, and backward, toward Rothko-as-Rothkowitz. The fulcrum on which these works hinge is the Holocaust and its antecedents. Without attending to the importance of both Rothko’s changing identification with Jewishness and to the works on paper, the doubled absence structuring the paintings remains invisible.

In contrast, postwar artists often turn to the Holocaust in part to assert their Jewish identity and place in a continuous tradition. These paintings and sculptures run the gamut from explicit depictions of the Holocaust—documentary and fictional, to indirect but easily read images, to what Janet Wolff calls “allusive” abstract imagery.⁶⁷ Examples of these types, respectively, are Jerome Witkin’s *The Butcher’s Helper*, depicting

65. Gottlieb and Rothko, 1943 radio interview, and “Personal Statement” from David Porter’s 1945 exhibition, *Painting Prophecy—1950*. Exhibition brochure in the David Porter Papers, SI/AAA, roll N70-27, frame 390.

66. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, 1943 radio interview.

67. Janet Wolff, “The Iconic and the Illusive,” 153–74, offers a more extended discussion of this range of imagery and its implications, moral and historical.

naked women with amputated hands and feet, among other gruesome figures; Ed Kienholz's assemblage sculpture, *History as a Planter*, featuring a Wandering Jew plant set on an oven filled with manikin feet; and Morris Lewis's *Charred Journal* series of 1951. All these objects work to document the Holocaust's far-reaching impact, keep alive the memory of the Holocaust, and to mourn lost people and cultures. Except in the case of explicitly realist works, absence functions to give voice to the magnitude—too large to contain within a single image—and effects—so extensive it is still felt today in many spheres—of the Holocaust on Jewish cultures. Absence, however, functions differently in these early works by Rothko. Rothko did not know at the time he created them the full extent of the Holocaust, and was subject to different pressures on his ambition as an artist and on his Jewishness. He mobilized strategies of elision, displacement, and abstraction, producing significant erasures in the final works to create an artistic persona distinct from his private identity. Simultaneously, this same process—deflection and abstraction—created a private vocabulary that spoke of disaster befalling European Jewry. This double process ultimately resulted in the abstract, veil-like paintings of the fifties and ensured his success, not as a “Jewish” artist but as an American artist.

I have argued that, by attending to the process of the production of the works and the contexts of their reception, the way that visual images construct and deconstruct the ethnic and artistic identities of the artist becomes visible. Rothko's position as an American artist forced him to bear witness to what was transpiring in Europe at a distance. An acculturating Jewish immigrant, by 1940 he was claiming a position in the American avant-garde, a place predicated on a de-Judaized public persona. The tension between these two imperatives, to bear witness as a Jew and yet to submerge that witnessing in public so as to accommodate his professional ambitions, produced a haunted “art of allusion” (Janet Wolff's term), a condition and strategy hitherto primarily discussed with reference to postwar artists of later generations of survivors and their children. His response as an ambitious modern artist conflicted with another powerful force, namely, his previous public identity, one shaped by the yeshiva, and one whose presence haunted him.

The institutions of the New York art world in the mid-century decades, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim museums, and to a slightly lesser extent, art critics and magazines operated with a system for valuing modern art that excluded religion. How this worked and why is beyond the scope of this study but is worthy of investigation inasmuch as it ought to throw considerable light on the workings of modernism in America in the twentieth century. That there is no study

that treats the topic of religion in twentieth-century American art indicates the degree to which this issue has been ignored.⁶⁸ Many artists took their faith into the studio with them and exhibited religious art. However, in the main, artists or small, marginal galleries organized such exhibitions, not major museums or “blue-chip” galleries.⁶⁹ The tension between these two sets of values (religious and modernist) is what forced Rothko into a box. His achievement was to find a way out of the box, indeed, to incorporate the box into his signature paintings. Yet he left clues in the works on paper—his hitherto invisible points of departure—to the part of himself he had left behind.

68. At the time of this writing, one is underway: Erika Doss is working on a book-length study of religion in twentieth-century American art. I thank Professor Doss for sharing this information with the participants in the *Mind the Gap* Symposium at Stanford University, April 2004. The situation in scholarship of nineteenth-century art is better. Sally Promey, Gail Husch, John Davis, Sally Webster, and a handful of others have begun to explore the role of religion in American art in this period. The traditional divide in the field of American art studies that “ends” American art in 1930s has no doubt also contributed to the lack of crossover of these questions into the mid and late twentieth century.

69. The “Modern Christs” exhibition discussed above is one example. This phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article but is the subject of a current study by the author.