

A still life painting of several peaches in a woven basket. The peaches are rendered with warm, golden-yellow and reddish-orange tones, showing soft highlights and shadows. They are piled together in a shallow, woven basket that occupies the foreground. The background is a soft, out-of-focus wash of light brown and beige, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall style is characteristic of 19th-century academic painting, with a focus on naturalistic detail and harmonious color.

LEARNING TO LOOK AT **Modern Art**

Mary **Acton**

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Colour plate 15 *Black on Maroon* by Mark Rothko, 1958

This is one of a series of paintings which, when hung together, create a sombre mood conducive to spiritual contemplation. All are large and this one is 15 ft wide by nearly 9 ft high (4.6 × 2.7m). The two purple oblongs appear like two openings in the centre of the picture. As you look at them you feel you could go through them into another world, or they can appear to float in relation to the black sections. In fact both the black and the purple are painted over a colour field of maroon. The edges of the shapes are soft and blurred, and this contributes to their ambiguity. Are they openings or are they floating on the surface? One is reminded of stained-glass windows except that there is no pattern or decoration. The size of the picture makes you feel you could move into it and beyond it, that you could literally become part of it. In fact the purple is thinly painted and you can see the maroon background coming through. The black edges to the extreme right and left are blurred against the maroon so that the whole picture can appear like a black window frame with space beyond. None of the meanings is certain (see *Learning to Look at Paintings*, pp. 115–16).

This whole series of pictures started as a commission for the decoration of the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram building in New York designed by Mies van der Rohe. In the end Rothko withdrew from the project because he did not feel the paintings would be suitable for the materialistic and consumerist world of a fashionable restaurant. Rothko was anti-Stalinist but had Communist and anarchist sympathies; now the paintings have a gallery to themselves at Tate Modern in London, where you often find people talking in hushed voices as if they were in church. The maroon shade dominates and one is aware of the power of colour, shape and size to influence the mind and spirit of the spectator.

One is reminded of Kandinsky and his ideas expressed in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and the influence of Theosophy and the Anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner, which we looked at earlier. Like Kandinsky, Rothko was Russian and his preoccupation with the spiritual is shown in the way he expressed his ideas. In 1945, before an exhibition in Washington he said this:

The abstract artist has given material existence to many unseen worlds and tempi. But I repudiate his denial of the anecdote just as I repudiate his denial of the material existence of the whole of reality. For art to me is an anecdote of the spirit and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness.

(Catalogue of *Mark Rothko*: 82)

So painting can act as a bridge between the world of the spirit and the soul of the spectator, just as the Expressionists had believed earlier in the century. The size and scale were important too, as Rothko makes clear here:

I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however – I think it applies to other painters I know – is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However, you paint the larger picture you are in it. It isn't something you command.

(Ibid: 85)

Just like his contemporary, Jackson Pollock, whom we will look at in Chapter 6, Rothko believed in immersion in the painting, and certainly the cumulative effect of this group when seen together is one of total involvement.

At the time of the Second World War a number of major European artists came to live in America. Avant-garde art was forbidden by Hitler. Expressionism was banned in Germany and so was Surrealism; they were replaced there and in Russia by Social Realism. Rothko's family were Jews and they escaped from Russia to America. This diaspora helped to push New York into the limelight as a centre for art and in particular for this large-scale work known as Abstract Expressionism (see also Jackson Pollock in Chapter 6 and Barnett Newman in Chapter 8).

CONFRONTING MEMORIES

More recently, Postmodernist artists in Germany have sought to at least try to come to terms with their country's terrible past: Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter (see Chapter 8) and the

architect Daniel Libeskind have all sought to confront it. In doing so they have taken Expressionism and the idea of self-expression further in different ways.

Plate 41 *The End of the Twentieth Century* by Joseph Beuys, 1983–5

This installation is made out of basalt, clay and felt. The basalt is not carved or crafted in a traditional way but instead is left in a more or less natural form and laid out in an apparently random formation on the floor of a large gallery. The circles in each piece of basalt are cones of stone fixed in place with clay and felt. The whole work relates of course to the idea of the readymade, in the sense that the basalt pieces are virtually 'found objects', and also to Conceptual Art because the artist has not 'made' them but only been responsible for the arrangement.

The use of felt has an autobiographical content in the famous story of how Beuys, who was a *Luftwaffe* pilot, was shot down in the Crimea in 1944 and picked up by a group of Tartar tribesmen who looked after him by wrapping him in felt and fat. The intensely personal nature of this reference is important for the kind of expression which is behind this installation. Beuys took this experience as a starting point for much of his work, where he often uses both felt and fat.

There appears to be no order and no logic in these lumps of basalt and the way they are arranged. They are large, irregular and strewn about as if they were lying on a beach. But the scale and the idea behind the project are impressive. You can walk in amongst the stones in any way you wish and experience a feeling that the state of the world is beyond control. *The End of the Twentieth Century* does make you think about the environment as many land installations are meant to do, but Beuys intends other meanings to be communicated as well. He expresses ideas that are more philosophical, moral and political, connected with the state of the world and man's responsibility within it. As you walk round and among the basalt lumps you can be reminded of skeletons, of bones, of concentration-camp victims and the destructive side of humanity. Many members of Beuys' own family died in the Holocaust. The largest version of *The End of the Twentieth Century* consists of forty-four pieces of basalt. Sometimes the sites Beuys has chosen are deliberately historically resonant, as when this piece was installed in

the former gallery built by Hitler for the officially approved art of Nazi Germany.

Beuys was politically active: he was a founder member of the Green Party, with its anti-nuclear stance; basalt, which he has used here, does contain traces of radioactive material. He believed that Germany should confront its past and that art and artists should be able to help with that. A number of younger German artists like Gerhard Richter, whom we shall look at in Chapter 8, believed that too. Beuys also influenced artists of Arte Povera like Michelangelo Pistoletto (see Chapter 6). Beuys belonged to the Fluxus movement which believed in the power of art to change the world through action. We can see the origin of these ideas in Nietzsche and Beuys was very interested in that philosophy, which he had studied in Weimar in 1941.

In an interview in 1972 entitled 'Not just a few are called, but everyone', Beuys was asked 'Why do you turn almost all your energy towards education and enlightenment?' and he replied:

It is the consequence of widening the concept of art. The 'Political Office' has self determination as its focus. And art has the same focus. Every man is a plastic artist who must determine things for himself. In an age of individuation, away from collective groupings, self determination is the central concept. But one should not lose sight of actual practice, daily coming into being under one's hands.

(Joseph Beuys, in Harrison and Wood (eds), *Art in Theory*: 891)

Beuys is beginning to sound like Nietzsche here, in the idea of the creative urge of the individual being the driving force behind us rather than religion or some other belief system. There are also traces of Rudolph Steiner in the concept of art education as the basis of all learning and the development of creative potential in everybody:

A total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole of society. Everyone will be a necessary co-creator of a social architecture and, so long as anyone cannot participate, the ideal form of democracy has not been reached.

(Ibid: 891)

Beuys believed that art is a political act and that everyone should participate; you cannot have true democracy without universal art education.



Plate 41 Joseph Beuys, *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1983-5). Installation: basalt, clay and felt.

© DACS 2003. Photograph © Tate, London 2003.

Plate 42 The Jewish Museum, Berlin by Daniel Libeskind, 1999

The question of confronting the past can also be applied to architecture; it has been described by the architect Daniel Libeskind as 'the space of encounter'. It seems strange perhaps to be including architecture in a chapter on Expressionism and Self-Expression. There is an autobiographical reference here too as Libeskind lost many members of his family in the Holocaust. His Jewish Museum in Berlin could certainly be described as expressionist architecture in the sense that it tries to use the design and structure of the building to encompass the history of the Jews of Berlin in a psychological or symbolic way. It is a building that expresses the tragedy of the Jews in Nazi Germany through Libeskind's design, which tries to make the spectator feel the history through the organization of the space and light.