

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analyses, and any additional information you have gathered to try to understand what a work of art means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed interpretations are those based on strong visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might include:

What sort of experience was Mark Rothko interested in creating for the viewer with his paintings?

What other art forms does this type of painting remind you of? Poetry? Music? Dance? Theatre?

In what ways are they similar?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment involves questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you? Is it relevant to your life? Why or why not?

We hope this approach enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each object:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, and Brian Kennedy, former Director of the Hood Museum of Art.

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Mark Rothko, American, 1903–1970

No. 8 (Lilac and Orange over Ivory)

1953

Oil on canvas
Gift of William S. Rubin; P.961.123

No. 8 (Lilac and Orange over Ivory) is a prime example of Mark Rothko's signature compositional style. Spare and frontal, his painting format is consistent: simple rectangular forms defined by luminous, atmospheric colors are stacked two or three high, nearly filling the canvas. Characteristically, the canvas is large in scale, so as to create an intimate experience for the viewer. Rothko's paintings were meant to be seen in relatively close environments, so that the viewer was virtually enveloped by the experience of confronting the work. As the artist wrote, "I paint big to be intimate."

Rothko was an abstract expressionist and, later in his career, part of the Color Field movement. He believed in the expressive potential of color and wanted his glowing, soft-edged rectangles to provoke in viewers a quasi-religious experience. In Rothko's words, these works express "basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point." The emotional experience the viewer has in front of Rothko's paintings is integral to his work.

Like many other abstract expressionists, Rothko aimed to create a truly original statement that was universal and roused the viewer's primal instincts and emotions. His work evolved from paintings of the human figure in the 1920s to abstraction in the

mid-1940s. By the time his signature compositions appeared in 1949, he had eliminated from his work all of the elements that he considered irrelevant. Instead, he concentrated on the tactile qualities of paint to produce a space that would appeal to the viewer's sense of touch, the most elemental means for understanding one's environment.

Rothko achieved an exciting tension in his painting by altering the width, length, and tangible weight of the rectangles, and manipulating thin layers of pigments so that their depth appears to shift. All of the action on the canvas takes place in a very shallow space—close to the picture plane—and the narrow border around the edges leaves just enough room for the rectangles to expand and contract.

The arrangement of color and form is essential to the impact of Rothko's paintings. There has been some debate over which way this, and other Rothko paintings, should be displayed. Rothko himself was known to experiment with the orientation of his completed paintings before settling on a final decision for exhibition. In this orientation, the heavier orange rectangle grounds the painting at the bottom while the more ethereal lilac floats on the top. Drips visible in the lilac paint indicate that much or perhaps all of this section was executed with the lilac at the bottom of the canvas. But rotation of the canvas during execution makes sense because Rothko's very thin dilutions of paint were given to run. Recently, after removing the backing of the painting, assessing all of its markings, and re-examining our records, the Hood Museum of Art decided to reproduce and exhibit the work with lilac above and orange below, as it is believed was the artist's intention in 1953.

Art © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A Closer Look



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NUMBER THREE IN A SERIES

A Closer Look

As a teaching museum, the Hood Museum of Art is committed to helping visitors develop visual literacy skills—the ability to construct meaning from all that we see. One way it does this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art they encounter.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?

What do you notice about its size?



Art © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

What do you notice about the shapes in this painting? Consider their edges, their relative sizes, and the way they are arranged.



What do you notice about the colors?

Does each section contain just one color or more than one color?



What do you notice about the paint?

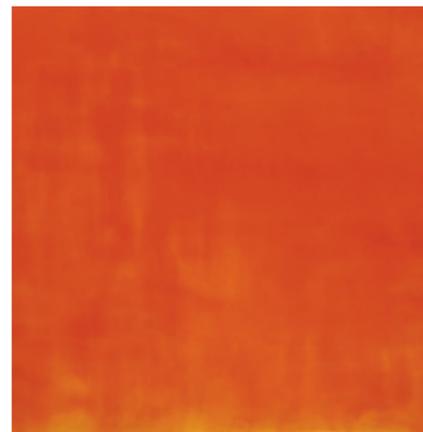
Does it look thin or thick?

Dry or wet?

Is it fully absorbed into the canvas, or did it drip in some places?



How do you experience this painting when you stand close to it?



How does your experience change when you are farther away?

Sit for a while with this painting and allow your eyes to travel over its surface. How does the painting change over time?

Do you see movement or are the shapes and colors fixed and static?

Step 2: Analysis

Without reading the label, think about what you have observed. Then, consider the following questions. Look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.

What steps do you think the artist used to create this canvas? Where did he begin? What did he do next? In which direction do you think each color was painted? How can you tell?

What creates the sense of movement, the shifting, expanding, and contracting in this painting?

Why do you think the artist chose not to frame this work?

Does this painting remind you of anything in the natural world? If so, what?

How does this painting make you feel? Why?

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the label on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading the label, consider the following:

Did the information reinforce or contradict what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the label mention anything you had not seen or thought about? What?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you had read the label first?