

**INNER PEACE**  
At Houston's restored Rothko Chapel, the overhead oculus has been reconfigured to allow in more daylight.



# A New Light

An extensive restoration of Houston's Rothko Chapel aims to honor the original vision of its creator, Mark Rothko.

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**HIGH POINTS**  
Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* in the chapel's reflecting pool. Opposite, from top: The chapel's exterior, with a freshly planted stand of birch trees in the background; the new Suzanne Deal Booth Welcome House, designed by ARO.

**I**NSIDE THE Rothko Chapel, light sifts through an oculus overhead, casting the newly restored space in a soft glow. As the sun shifts in the sky, so do the colors in the paintings by Mark Rothko that hang on the walls. From the purple, black and crimson canvases emerge glints of ruby and plum, tinges of green and aubergine. This interfaith sanctuary, in a residential section of Houston's Montrose area, was the vision of art patrons John and Dominique de Menil. They believed modern art was a powerful portal for spirituality, and in 1964, they commissioned Rothko to create a chapel that would become a space for all people and all beliefs. His chapel, a Byzantine-inspired octagonal building housing 14 site-specific works, was formally dedicated in 1971.

This fall, nearly a half century later, the Rothko Chapel plans to reopen after a year-and-a-half-long restoration overseen by New York firm Architecture Research Office (ARO). The project is part of a multi-year \$30 million capital campaign called Opening Spaces, addressing the institution's desire to honor Rothko's original intent as well as its conservation and expansion needs.

Central to the restoration was rethinking the chapel's skylight, a focal but troublesome component of Rothko's design. Philip Johnson, the architect working with Rothko and the de Menils, originally argued against building it, in part because he believed the intensity of the Texas light would jeopardize the artwork. Disagreements over the skylight and a spire

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Johnson proposed ultimately ended the partnership, and Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry finished the project after Johnson withdrew. Though the skylight endured, it quickly proved problematic. Efforts were made to modify it, including stretching translucent fabric over it. After that intervention came a series of attempts to partially obstruct the opening. “Rothko wanted his paintings to be viewed in daylight, as that constantly changes and animates the space,” says Adam Yarinsky, principal and co-founder of ARO. “The impetus around these changes was always to try and improve the quality of the daylighting, because it was too bright. You could sense there was light coming in but it was so throttled down that you didn't feel that kind of spiritual connection.”

Today's iteration brings the chapel back to Rothko's initial vision. Lighting design firm George Sexton Associates, working with ARO, ordered the removal of the weighty fabric baffle, reopening the space fully to the outside world. “Restoring the light makes it a very human place,” says the chapel's executive director, David Leslie. Rothko's paintings pick up the subtlest light changes, for example, as clouds pass over the sun. “This is the de Menils' and Rothko's original intent, to allow you to *feel* the transcendent power of art,” says Stephen Cassell, principal and co-founder of ARO. “That transcendent power really is strengthened by that connection to nature.”

Laminated glass and angled louvers now diffuse and redirect sunlight coming into the vestibule, while on darker days and early evenings, a ring of digital projectors delivers a fixed level of light onto the paintings. George Sexton Associates used this same system to illuminate the Star-Spangled Banner at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

During the project's first phase, retail operations and the visitor desk moved across the street into a new welcome center, which will eventually be joined by a new program center and an administration





**DARKNESS AND LIGHT**  
Two of the Rothko works in the chapel. Opposite: Mark Rothko in his studio with some of the chapel paintings in 1965; Sufi dancers at the chapel in 1978.

chapel next to a couple of buildings,” says principal Thomas L. Woltz. Hedges of Savannah holly will hug the plaza’s reflecting pool, where Barnett Newman’s *Broken Obelisk*, fabricated in 1967 and dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., rises from the water.

While the chapel’s interior offers a place of meditation and reflection, the *Broken Obelisk* stands as a call for justice. “The plaza and obelisk are very much ingrained into the life of the city,” says Leslie. Over the years, Newman’s sculpture has twice been the target of vandalism and racist attacks, most recently in 2018, when white paint was poured into the reflecting pool surrounding the sculpture and fliers printed *It’s okay to be white* were littered across the property.

To the east of the chapel, rows of multi-stem river birch trees were added to visually screen the sanctuary and create shaded spaces for introspection. “I like to imagine it as the moment you pause and reflect but also where you formulate your personal plan of action,” says Woltz. The next phase of landscaping will include an area planted with perennials, Texas redbuds and high canopy oaks, designed to soften the senses before entering the chapel.

**E**VERY YEAR, the Rothko Chapel welcomes more than 100,000 people from all over the world. The guest books on-site have recorded visitors’ wide-ranging experiences. One entry that stated simply *Here there is peace* stays in the memory of Christopher Rothko, the artist’s son, who now sits on the chapel’s board of directors. “Strangely enough, I disagree with it,” he admits. “There is no peace *in* the chapel, but it presents a uniquely promising opportunity to attain peace. So in my mind I ‘correct’ the statement to *Here I found peace* or *Here peace is possible*.”

Though Rothko’s death by suicide in 1970 meant he never saw the completed chapel firsthand, “this was a life’s journey for him,” says Christopher, “a distillation of all he had seen and thought about and learned.” Whether Rothko was reading Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, or penning his own thoughts in his book *The Artist’s Reality*, his focus on philosophical questions and causes informed his artistic process. “My father was always interested in the timeless, in those questions and matters in human existence that have enduring resonance,” Christopher says. “Walking into the restored chapel one cannot help but be swept up by the breadth and compass of his vision. We have followed that vision and allowed the chapel to speak, for the first time, with maximum clarity and resonance.”

Rothko wanted his paintings to communicate on an elemental level. By stripping away the non-essential, he created his own language of abstract forms and color fields. “His artistic language seeks to evoke your parallel human experience when viewing the painting, so that you don’t simply offer a reaction, but are engaged in a dialogue about essential questions of personhood,” explains Christopher.

While the artist is best known for his vivid color pairings, the chapel panels reflect a more somber palette representative of his 1960s work. The plum-colored monochromes and reflective black forms that fill the sanctuary were made of stretched-cotton

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duck fabric and layered with dry pigments, rabbit-skin glue, an egg-oil emulsion and acrylic polymer. The contract Rothko drew up in 1965 for the creation of the paintings states that he would be paid a total of \$250,000, disbursed over a period of nine years, plus \$25,000 in personal expenses. (Compare that with the prices his work now fetches at auction: A single 1960 Rothko painting sold last year for \$50.1 million.)

“I think the chapel is one of my father’s most challenging works because on the surface he gives you so little,” says Christopher. As in all of Rothko’s paintings, a conversation looms between the artist and the observer, though the dialogue relies heavily on the inner workings of the individual. “He is demanding you do the emotional, spiritual and psychological work to find greater meaning,” says Christopher, adding, “It’s a big demand, but it’s incredibly powerful.”

While the chapel was initially intended for the University of St. Thomas in Houston, it ultimately became an independent nonprofit institution, which freed it to pursue its own agenda. Since its founding, the chapel’s vocation has been about both contemplation and action, tying back to the de Menils’ interest in human rights, religious freedom and spirituality.

In 1971 and 1972, the couple embarked on a series of trips through the Middle East, Europe, India and Africa to meet with political and religious leaders like Pope Paul VI, Lebanon’s Cardinal Meouchi and Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. “They really welcomed being challenged intellectually,” says cultural

anthropologist Pamela Smart, an author of *Rothko Chapel: An Oasis for Reflection*, coming out next year. “The kind of ecumenism they became committed to wasn’t that we are all the same. It’s confronting the fact that there are meaningful differences that matter to people and working to bridge those chasms.”

Shortly after John de Menil died in 1973, the chapel held its first colloquium, “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action in World Religions,” led by Yusuf Ibish from the American University of Beirut. This event and the ones that followed it became a primary platform for discussing religion, social justice and other human rights interests. Over the decades, as the programming has evolved, many traditions have continued, like the Óscar Romero Award, named for Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980 and canonized in 2018. Introduced in 1986, this biennial award recognizes grass-roots human rights advocacy. In 2020, it recognized three individuals working for climate justice.

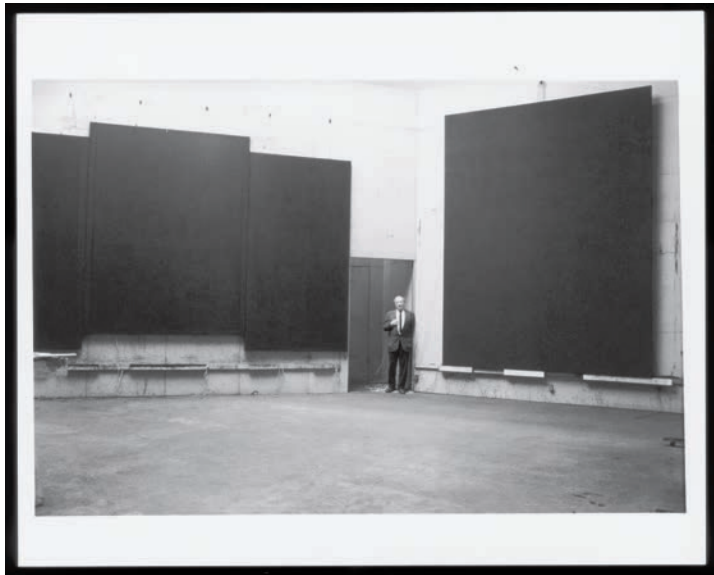
Throughout the year, the chapel convenes an intergenerational mix of thinkers and artists to address the pressing issues of the world, from climate change and mass incarceration to immigration and sex trafficking. The programming includes performances, symposia, meditations and lectures. “It’s incumbent on us as stewards to invite people into the conversation,” says David Leslie. “It’s thinking about who’s *not* at the table.” The venue’s inclusive approach and community outreach are demonstrated at events like

its annual interfaith Thanksgiving service. “What’s being explored is something universal: hope, love, fear and tragedy,” says Leslie. “That’s humanism to me at its highest level.”

Given the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, visitors to the chapel will be admitted via free timed ticketing reservations made online. The chapel continues its discussion of race amid the growing Black Lives Matter movement, sharing an extensive virtual archive of past symposia, events and lectures that confront racial justice and inequality. “It’s a continuation of the work we started years ago,” Leslie says.

The chapel’s metaphysical openness to the world is now better reflected in its physical presence. “In its previous iteration, the chapel felt hermetically sealed,” says Christopher Rothko. “With the new skylight, it is now more open, with a more immediate connection to the outside world.” Viewers have interpreted Rothko’s nocturnal paintings in many ways, seeing them as black mirrors or dark windows. Woltz says he sees the art actively absorbing light, like plants in photosynthesis. “There is a guy I know in town,” says Leslie, “and he swears up and down that he can see the face of Jesus in one of the panels.” The flat black surfaces might recall speakers, a relevant visual given Rothko’s passion for music, particularly Mozart. In this case, they are speakers stripped of sound, thanks to the chapel’s new acoustically absorptive plaster treatments and sealed doors, which amplify the haunting quiet.

“While we have literally made the chapel quieter by moving and improving the mechanicals, in some ways we have made the chapel noisier by essentially popping the cork that had been in the ceiling,” says Christopher. “The noise you see and hear is largely coming from you. The open skylight...is simply reminding us that our journey is not solitary, but rather that we forge our own path in a larger world. It makes the intersection of contemplation and action—the bipartite objectives of the chapel championed by Dominique de Menil—that much more tangible.” ●



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