TRANSCRIPT

Discussion with Kate Rothko Prizel, Christopher Rothko & James Scott

Moderated by Anita Rogers

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

Anita Rogers Gallery

494 Greenwich Street, GFL

New York, NY 10013

PRE-RECORDING (the below is cut off at the beginning of the video):

ELIZABETH THOMPSON KIRKPATRICK:

Kate Rothko Prizel is a retired physician and is also the daughter of the abstract painter Mark Rothko.

Kate was born in 1950 and grew up in New York City. She attended Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and went on to practice Clinical Pathology and Transfusion Medicine and teach Pathology in the Baltimore-Washington area.

As a young woman and still a college student, Kate successfully sued one of the most powerful art galleries in New York City to reclaim her father's paintings, which he had always wanted to be available to the public after his death. After she won the return of more than 650 of her father's paintings, she became the administrator of his estate and was involved in reconstituting the Mark Rothko Foundation which, in turn, donated the bulk of the art works to 19

RECORDING BEGINS:

ELIZABETH THOMPSON KIRKPATRICK:

...museums allowing public access to some of the most important paintings of the twentieth century. Since that time, Kate has been actively involved with maintaining her father's legacy, through planning exhibitions, overseeing the creation of the Mark Rothko catalogue raisonné, and writing about her father. Thank you for being here, Kate.

Christopher Rothko, up next. He is the second of Mark and Mary Alice Rothko's two children. He is a psychologist, writer, and for the last thirty years, custodian of the Rothko legacy, in

partnership with his sister Kate. He is the editor of his father's book of philosophical writings, *The Artist's Reality*. His book of essays, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, was published in 2015 by Yale University Press. Rizzoli published a new landmark monograph on Rothko in 2022, created by the two Rothko children. Dr. Rothko has prepared more than two dozen Rothko exhibitions at museums and galleries around the globe and is co-curator of the upcoming Rothko exhibition at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris. He is past chair of the Rothko Chapel board and is currently head of the *Opening Spaces* Campaign, guiding the restoration of the chapel and enhancement of its campus. Thank you, Christopher for being here.

Next up, James Scott. James is the son of William Scott. He is an artist and an Academy Award winning filmmaker. He's made a series of groundbreaking films on artists, including David Hockney, Richard Hamilton, Claes Oldenburg, and his father, William Scott. He's just completed a film on Antoni Tàpies which recently premiered in Madrid. We actually have a DVD on sale tonight, if anyone's interested, featuring several of these art films, including the narrative feature *Every Picture Tells a Story* starring Natasha Richardson as Scott's art teacher. He also founded Urban Street Collective, along with Marc Karlin, Humphry Trevelyan, and the artist Mary Kelly, to produce political films. Along with his brother Robert, James manages the William Scott Foundation and the archive, which, while preserving their father's archives and legacy, is dedicated to raising awareness, support, and money for the Alzheimer's Society and its research into possible treatments into the disease from which Scott died. James first met Mark Rothko and his wife Mel and his daughter Kate when they visited the Scott home in England in 1959. Thank you, James for being here.

And last, but certainly not least, we have Anita Rogers, as I think most of you know, the gallery owner and director. As a child, Anita and her mother traveled across Greece, Turkey, and Italy with her father. He was the artist and musician, Jack Martin Rogers. Her father introduced her to the work of Rothko and the abstract expressionists, as well as William Scott's work, at a very young age. She grew up with them as household names. This exposure to art and music at such a young age fueled her passion for the arts. She's a classically trained opera singer as well as a harpist, and in 2016 she opened the gallery. We've been working closely with the Scott estate for the last five years and we're thrilled to have you all here tonight.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you, Lizzie. The gallery would not exist without Lizzie. Who will read your bio?

[*laughter, people getting situated in their seats.*]

So welcome everybody and thank you for being here. In the summer of 1959, the Rothko family went to visit the Scotts in Somerset, England. Can you talk a little bit about your memories of that – if you remember? And that doesn't include you, Christopher [*pointing to Christopher Rothko*], so Kate and James.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Hello? Can you hear me? Okay. I wish I could say I had more adult memories of the visit because I was eight years old. But I distinctly remember a day standing in the rather rainy garden in front of the beautiful stone wall and listening to my father and William Scott talk. And they could talk. I wish I could tell you all the entire philosophical discussion they had, which I cannot, but I can tell you they… it was intense. And they clearly had a great deal to say to each other. And I can imagine that this is just the time when they both would've been discussing their respective mural projects, because at that time my father had sort of taken the trip to Europe, which ended in England, as – I don't know, say, a break, you know, relaxation a bit after working for about a year and a half on what has been called the Seagram Murals series. And I'm sure it was very much on his mind. And I understand that your father [looking at James] was at the same time undertaking a similar project, maybe for a very different venue, but a similar project, and they must have had a great deal to talk about on that subject. I, being a rather sullen–I won't say a sullen eight-year-old… I had spent, by the time we got there, about three months going around museums in Europe as essentially an only child, Christopher not being on the scene yet, so perhaps I was allowed to be a little sullen. But I do wish looking back that I could remember more of this discussion.

JAMES SCOTT:

Oh, yes, yes. I mean it's quite extraordinary because I was eighteen at this point, so I probably have a slightly clearer memory than Kate. But I happened to be at home at the time when the Rothko family arrived to stay with us. It was only one night actually that you stayed. And I remember it very very clearly as eighteen-year-olds do – and things stand out. Like now, I wouldn't remember any of it. But I do remember the discussions they had together on a number of – I don't remember it raining, actually, though…

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Maybe I've been looking at these gray pictures all along, these black and white pictures, and I thought it was rainy, but maybe it's influenced by that…

JAMES SCOTT:

It wasn't rainy. But my parents were so happy to have you staying. We had lunch, we picked you up in Bath, the city of Bath, and you went and saw all of the sort of things you do in Bath. And then you came home to us and we had lunch and I remember exactly the lunch, I remember the conversation, and you stayed the night. And then we went out to this very fancy hotel that evening and had dinner, and then the next day we took you in our little Hillman Minx car to the station in Bath and you went to Cornwall. And then you met with Patrick Heron and many of the other British artists at that time. And then I think you went home. That was it. So yes, it was quite a clear memory to have.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you, James. Grateful you were eighteen. That's wonderful. So behind us are the preparatory studies for the murals, so just a little bit of background. They're very different commissions. William Scott was commissioned by – actually an architectural firm approached him – but by the Altnagelvin hospital, and these were preparatory studies in preparation for one very large mural that was meant to look a specific way, and ended up looking very different, and we'll discuss that more later. And the hospital was an NHS run hospital, so that means it's a government institution and a public institution. These are the preparatory studies by Rothko that were done in preparation for the Seagram murals which are now hanging in the Tate. But these were meant to be hung in one of the smaller dining rooms of the Four Seasons, a private institution, which attracted wealth, which we'll discuss later too. So two very, very different commissions for which both artists were approached in 1958. So the timing aligned. And there's a letter I'm going to read out which discusses, which Rothko wrote to Scott.

So it was the summer of 1959 that the Rothkos went to the Scotts. So in December of 1959 your father, Mark Rothko, wrote to William Scott, which I'm going to read out now, saying he's backed out of the commission. He didn't want to do it. And he had a contract which allowed him to back out. So he must've had doubts from the start. I will read the letter because it's hanging up there, but it's very difficult to read:

"Dear William Scott, first our fondest Christmas greetings from my family to yours. Then our belated thanks for your warm friendship, our laughs, and the day at Somerset, which is memorable to me. Just a few days ago we looked at the photographs taken then by your son and have mounted two of them for the family gallery, which graces our hall. I would like another set. If your son can make them, I would like to pay him for them." Did he?

JAMES SCOTT:

I'm not going to answer that–

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I know we have 'em. [*laughter*]

JAMES SCOTT:

–because my father was rather loose with his arrangements.

ANITA ROGERS:

Of course he did. "Since we had discussed our respective murals, I thought you might be interested to know that mine is still with me. When I returned, I looked again at my paintings and then visited the premises for which they were destined. It seemed clear to me at once that the two were not meant for each other. I informed my patrons that I could not deliver the pictures and the matter was terminated just a few days ago, thank heaven, without too much pain. The decision was easy and inevitable. What is depressing is the thought that there is really

no real place for them. Where in the world are the edifices which share the motives from which our pictures are painted? I remember your beautiful murals in the shed and I hope that there is gratification for you in the way they are being used. The Ferbers are very well. Herbert is having a show with his paintings within the month and I believe they are well worth seeing. We all talk about you often and wish you the best. MARK ROTHKO."

Isn't that lovely. Christopher, James, Kate: can you expand a little on that?

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Well, I can just say that I think that in my father's acceptance of this mural project there was probably a fair amount of self-delusion – in accepting a project for this private institution. I don't think he truly envisioned exactly the nature of the dining room until he actually dined there after he returned from Europe in the summer of 1959. But I think at that point in his career, he was really yearning to create a space – as he often called an enclosed space – where the audience would be surrounded by his paintings and really be immersed in them and experience them. And you know he was actually kind of a socialist in his leanings, so you would think this is the last place he would want his paintings. But he always talked, and I still remember this at the time, of thinking that this was going to be a dining room for workers in the building *[laughter, muffled*]… or at least could be seen from the cafeteria. And I'm actually not the only one who remembers a lot of these conversations because actually the younger artist who was assisting him in the studio – particularly when he worked on something large, he often needed someone else to help him lift the paintings, complete the backgrounds in a very rapid fashion so the paint didn't dry – and he said very similar things to this artist. So I look back and I say it must have had an element of self-delusion. But I truly think he undertook the commission with an idealism in view. And not the idea, I know it's often quoted, that he was thinking of the audience he was going to have being rich and somehow wanting to put something in their face that maybe would disturbed them. But I actually am not really sure about that side of the story. I really think he went into the project with a great deal of idealism. Maybe because it was his first opportunity, and he just sort of somewhat closed his eyes to what it was truly going to consist of. But once he was at the restaurant dining in it, he just couldn't go ahead. And I guess it was relatively painless, as he said to your dad, but I do understand that he had to return a fairly hefty advance he had been given for the commission. Which I suspect at that time may not have been a terrible burden but was not easy for him even in 1959.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

I just wanted to add. This is an interesting—it's not something we usually talk about but now that you're mentioning that the commission for William Scott came from an architectural firm, I think that's also true for our father, and this may have had something to do with it. Because first of all it came from Philip Johnson, who is responsible for the interior of the Seagram building, who was somebody who had a strong reputation, who already owned an important Rothko painting that now hangs at MoMA, but in addition to that this was a Mies van der Rohe building – there was a tremendous amount of celebration and excitement about this building. It was an early

piece of European modernism coming to New York. It was a very prestigious building. So to be asked by architects of stature to have his work in a building like that – it probably filtered into his mind somewhere. And then, as my sister suggests, he altered conversations, so it was more palatable to him. But it must've tickled his ego a little bit and as much as he was not somebody who was all about "I" – you know, he is an artist, he wants his paintings out there, and he wants them to be respected. So if he could get a little bit of external – a piece that would bolster his reputation, that probably played into his thinking a little bit.

ANITA ROGERS:

What was he trying to invoke with them, do you think?

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Well, despite the fact that they are essentially modeled on Michelangelo's Laurentian Library with its closed-up windows, I've often thought that the influence of the library may be more of an architectural one. I think he was in his mural series very involved with architectural concepts. But I've always thought of the paintings, at least when I look at them, as—rather than being closed windows—being windows that actually open space beyond up to the viewer. So I really have trouble seeing them as something that is trying to shut the viewer out. I think my father was always very interested in drawing his viewer in, and very concerned with his audience, and I think he thought that by surrounding them with the paintings he would be best able to accomplish that.

ANITA ROGERS:

Very interesting, thank you. And James, to you: so your mother was a copious note-taker and record-keeper, and she has recorded when the Altnagelvin mural was unveiled - it's a huge mural in the entrance hall of the hospital – that it was received with silence and the room emptied very quickly. Now, this was in 1962 because in 1961 it hung in the Tate. And he had visited America in 1953 and your Dad (*gesturing to Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel*) had come over in 1959. So the large abstract piece was a shock to the audience. What was your father's reaction to the audience's reaction? Did it bother him? Do you remember?

JAMES SCOTT:

I was not there when that happened. I did of course hear the whole story. Just to go back, the Altnagelvin hospital was actually the very first hospital built by the NHS after the war. So it was a unique sort of hospital in that it was the very first one that they actually built from scratch. And, as you said, it was the architect Rosenberg, who was a friend of my father, was a collector, and asked my father to do the mural. And he actually donated the mural to the hospital. He said, you can have this mural, I'm not charging you for it. There was another piece that he also donated, a sculpture by F.E. McWilliam which was another Northern Irish artist … because the Altnagelvin is in Northern Ireland, and my father was Northern Irish. So it was very much for him a return to where he was brought up. So the question, sorry, to go back…

ANITA ROGERS:

His reaction to not being particularly popular.

JAMES SCOTT:

Yes, the response. Yes, well, it was kind of funny really. Because it started with all the councilors and the local people who were brought in and he sat down for many meetings with the local people and they more or less had it completely worked out what the mural was going to be. It was this forty-foot-long mural. And it was going to be the Battle of the Boyne and it was going to do this and it was the whole Protestant Ascendancy of Northern Ireland and it was basically a very, you know, it was charted out for him. And I think my father said "yes, yes, yes," and "I think my interest is really more in Celtic symbolism and he said that's really what I want to bring into this." But he didn't say "I'm not going to do this," - the soldiers and the battles and all that stuff. And so he went his own way, which he always did. And did these abstract paintings which you know on a forty-foot scale. And my mother was asked to unveil, and it was veiled, like a ship, and she had to pull the veil down and the audience just looked at it in silence and then some of the councilors made some polite remarks about "can you explain what this modern art is?" And then within twenty minutes no one was in the room. So they said, well, maybe we'd like a little bit of dinner. My father just went his merry way. My father was not really worried about people's reactions. He knew what he should do. And it was very much based on his research into Celtic symbolism, which he felt was more appropriate.

ANITA ROGERS:

A wonderful answer and good for your dad. Was your father the same? Did he particularly care what other people thought? [*to Kate and Christopher*]

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I think he did, but it would depend on his audience. So he wanted to select the audience in many ways. So he was looking for that sensitive audience, but I think there was a recognition that not everyone was going to fit that bill, if you will. So I can see a similarity in that sense.

JAMES SCOTT:

Another interesting aspect is that the restaurant for the Seagram was called *The Four Seasons* and my father's mural was also called *The Four Seasons*.

ANITA ROGERS:

Oh, I didn't know that.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Maybe they got the commissions confused.

JAMES SCOTT:

I never understood the Four Seasons. I've always been looking for that… it was remarkable that for both the titles were *Four Seasons*.

ANITA ROGERS:

Well possibly I'm guessing Mark Rothko discussed his commission with your dad for the Four Seasons and maybe they made an agreement that his would be called the *Four Seasons* too, don't you think? It seems like way too much of a coincidence. That's fascinating.

JAMES SCOTT:

Maybe. Yes, yes.

ANITA ROGERS:

So questions about process. If you remember, or if you know, what were your fathers' processes around creating these murals? I do understand that they went through several iterations. And I think both mural and murals became darker. And how different was this process to their "regular" process, if there is such a thing – the way that they created their paintings that were not the murals?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Sure. I think fairly typical for our father: not a tremendous amount in the way of studies. So I think the commission was actually for five paintings plus a painting that went over the door for a frieze-type painting for a private dining room off the main dining room in the Four Seasons. We have these five studies and much smaller sketches actually at the National Gallery. But just a few of those. It's not like what you'll see for Scott's, where they were many many many of these collaged and painted mural studies. Fairly typical for our father: not a whole lot of preparatory work, I'm sure a whole lot of preparatory thinking. You see a fairly significant shift in his style, as with your father – one thing was expected, and he delivered something else. I think they were expecting a room of sunny 1950s Rothko paintings and he had something else in mind. But you know artists are going to just pursue their vision and if you give them carte blanche, they're going to take it. So the commission was only for a few paintings. He ends up painting, depending–there are a couple works that are debatable whether they're part of the series or not–but thirty-two or thirty-three paintings. So he ends up painting three complete series to complete the commission, and then additional works, all of which are finished paintings, but we're pretty sure we know which ones were actually intended for the restaurant. But that's not what he actually ends up gifting to the Tate Gallery. He ends up gifting a mixture of works from across those different series he painted. So he's constantly thinking through… again, the ensemble. For him, from the beginning, it's not a painting–it's an ensemble. He's creating what he called a place. He wants to create a space for you to dwell in and he changes the whole way you interact with his paintings because he understands that the conversation is going to go on for much longer if you're there for two hours at dinner than if you were cruising

by in a museum. But again I think, as with his easel paintings – "easel paintings" – there's a little bit of painting, and a lot of thinking, and a little more painting, and a lot of thinking, because the forms are fairly simple. And there are a few layers of color but compared to, for instance, that 1950 work over there—only a few there, not six or seven or eight layers of color, but he's constantly thinking about how each one of those is going to work, and then how it's going to work with its cousin next door.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you. Thank you, very interesting. And then James.

JAMES SCOTT:

It's interesting because a lot of the discussion that they had when he visited, when the family visited in 1959, was about the problem of: where is the space for public art? I remember that specifically. And for my father, I think it was not really an issue, because you know for him, you had this hospital and he was happy to do the mural, so he wasn't really thinking quite in those same terms. Although I think that behind it, there was very much a sense that art should go beyond just doing a piece of art and a collector buying it and then it going to someone's house and sitting in their house. They wanted the art – both of them, I think – to speak to a general audience, they wanted that to happen. I do remember that my father when he first met Mark Rothko in 1953 in New York, he came back and no one had actually heard of Mark Rothko at that point in London. And my father was talking to his artist friends and he actually on the back of an envelope, he would draw Mark Rothko and say "it's like this" [laughter]. Patrick Heron, who was a very great friend of my father, the artist, was very much excited by this whole idea. And they together sort of said yes we've got to – the British public have got to know about what's going on in New York and they've got to start sort of appreciating that there is something else happening. Because they thought that the only art that was happening was in Paris. It was still… nothing happened in New York. In fact, it's sort of strange because my father sort of helped Mark to make a proposition to the Tate for this work, and along the lines that you're saying: that it should be shown like this, that it should be kept together. And they said oh, we can't do that, we can't take requirements from the artist. And they turned down the offer. They didn't take the work. And that was shortly after he decided that he wasn't going to let the Seagram building have it, and so I think it was many years later that it was represented to the Tate, and they then realized that they should take it. And they did. So that's just a bit of a story.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you, and that brings us to the next question actually, and you've answered some of it. How was your father influenced or abetted by the abstract expressionists and what was his relationship to America? I know he came in 1953 through Martha Jackson and he met Pollock, Kline, de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. And I know David Anfam touched on it a little bit in the essay but he didn't want to [further] because he didn't know absolute, so this is a question really for the children.

JAMES SCOTT:

My father basically in the summer of 1953, he was asked to go to the Banff to teach for the whole summer. And that was his plan, he was going to return to England straight away. He had no plans to come to New York. It was just by chance actually that he had an exhibition on in London in the summer that was seen by Alan Ritchie of the MoMA and there was another someone from the Guggenheim saw that show and said to Martha Jackson, who was the gallery dealer, you must meet William Scott. And so she called my dad in Banff and she said I've got to meet you. You've got to come to New York. He said no, I'm going back to England, and she said no, you've got to come here. "You can stay in my house; you can use my car; and I will introduce you to all the artists." And so he went. And he met with all these people at that time. He was really quite amazed because – he said what hit him was the scale of the work. Franz Kline was another of the artists. He was just absolutely blown away by the scale of the work and the confidence. There was nothing like that in England at the time. But he had mixed feelings. Because he said there's something about it, I think they're too technical. There's a slickness about it. They're not European. It's a far cry from Matisse. "I consider myself a European artist and I love this." And he went back to England and started painting on a scale that he'd never done before. So that really affected him. But he actually went back to still life. So, oddly enough, although he was really blown away by it, he still held onto his roots.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you. Thank you, James. For Christopher and Kate now the same question the other way around. How was your father influenced or abetted by these St Ives and British artists at the time, and what was his relationship to the UK specifically – not Europe, but the UK?

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I really feel just from what I know, not only of that summer of 1959, but also from his later travels, that most of his connections with contemporary artists of his period really were in the UK. And I guess what always stands out to me – aside from the trip where we actually visited, first in Somerset and then in St Ives, where we visited the artists' studios and their homes – what always stood out to me was the fact that when he had the show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961 the only other venue was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. And I suspect that, first of all, the choice of the Whitechapel Gallery in London may well have been because he felt that connection, but in addition, my father basically was not a traveler. He would not get on the airplane. And there were many exhibits which he simply didn't get to, for example the 1954 exhibit in Chicago. So the fact that he went by boat to England to see the Whitechapel show – it was like a three-week trip by the time he finished, and I'm sure saw all the artists that he knew in England at the time, I think says a great deal. That he clearly felt a strong connection to the English art scene.

JAMES SCOTT:

And I would say that on your trip you'd been in Europe. And you'd been to Pompeii and you'd been all over Italy. And you came to London. And I remember your dad saying "I spent so much time with Turner." Turner was really the one. You know he said he was going to the British Museum. He was really spending a lot of time studying Turner. That was absolutely essential to him. So it wasn't so much about contemporary British art at that time — it was actually about older British art.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Yes, and at least with the second iteration of the offer to the Tate it was very much with the idea that his paintings should be hanging just outside the Clore Gallery where the Turners are at the Tate. If you haven't been: go right now! Greatest art in the world. He was passionate about Turner and the idea that his paintings would be hanging essentially next to the Turners moved him infinite amounts. And today because the Tate has, I think necessarily, had to split into Tate Britain which is at the original building and Tate Modern which is where the Rothko murals are, we always feel a little pang of separation on behalf of our father… though they have on two occasions brought some of the Seagrams back to be near the Turners. So they haven't forgotten.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I would just add that the connection with older art was certainly true across the board, not just with British art, although he was an incredible admirer of Turner and particularly Turner's use of light and color. But it was true in his visits on the continent as well. So I'm not sure I think he was ignoring what was going on at the time in England; it was simply that he always had that reference from what came before him. So many abstractionists may have wanted to throw out the past but I certainly think that was anything but his attitude.

JAMES SCOTT:

Following on from that: both my father and Rothko had, in looking at old art… they saw the same thing, I think, in a way. There was something not just about the light but it was also about the flatness. And that was something my father never stopped talking about was the flatness. And so I think that they see things in Giotto and these artists that it was not the perspective that they were interested in, it was the flatness.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

There's actually a wonderful quote I saw when I was flipping through that terrific monograph today, the one quote from your father saying that he was concerned that American art had lost its touch with art history. That he felt very much that he was painting in a tradition. That no matter how modern he became, that he always had that connection. I think my father would have said the same thing about himself but your father was quite explicit about it. He felt it and

felt that there had been some connection lost for the Americans. He may have been talking about the next generation on as well.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Yeah, and picking up on the flatness – I think that's something that our dad actually wrote about quite a bit. And it may have been why he was so attracted to frescoes in Pompeii and to Giotto etc.

ANITA ROGERS:

So both artists built on the canon of the past and they probably – I know you can't remember the conversations, but I imagine that because they were two artists with the same values, I imagine that there were many conversations about that.

JAMES SCOTT:

Yes, I mean they had seen each other's work, so they knew exactly, in a way, where they were coming from. Although you know they were reaching this place from very different places. My father was from Northern Ireland and your father was from Latvia. So they had completely different journeys. But in a sense they had – and they talked about this at the table. Both of them had this sort of same issue of dealing with being an immigrant in a different country. That was also something that they talked about.

ANITA ROGERS:

So I'm going to delve a little bit into philosophy now because it's delicious. And Kate and Christopher, your father considered himself a philosopher to some degree, right? And I think philosophy played a large part in his motivation behind painting. Could you expand on this a little bit – or did he consider himself a philosopher?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Maybe he aspired to be a philosopher. So in his book of philosophical writings, he talks about the artist. And by the way, he never talks about himself or even the fact that he's an artist in this book. And it's written quite early in his career, before he starts making anything you would necessarily recognize as a Rothko – even this painting [*points*] is about five years or so after he writes most of the book, which he never finishes by the way. But he talks about the artist adopting the role that used to be held by the priest and the scientist and the philosopher back in ancient times. And it's for the artist today to sort of knit society together, to help people see what's in the world and see how it comes together and sort of summarize the human experience of the world. So he sort of made the artist the philosopher-king, at least theoretically or ideally, that was the idea. He never specifically said he was stepping into that role but I think it's certainly what he was hoping to do with his artwork – be able to come up with a language that would sort of summarize human experience. Which is at least one thing that philosophers do.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Yeah, and I think in a sense that connects with how he came to be a visual artist. Because I don't think it was a spontaneous thing that necessarily grew out of his obsession with drawing and painting as a younger person—I think of it as an active decision he made. That this was the way he felt he could get his message across the world best. But that wasn't a decision I even think he thought of before he thought he had something he wanted to put across about humanity and the human condition. But he didn't know how he wanted to do it, and it wasn't till maybe he was in his mid-twenties that he began to think that visual art was the best way to accomplish it for him.

ANITA ROGERS:

What philosophers did he read? I know Plato is mentioned a fair bit. And which do you think influenced him the most?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Certainly Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* was there for him quite early on and was very influential. I mean he's referencing ancient cultures and mythologies and of course with Nietzsche is talking about - the real origins of Western culture. So certainly Nietzsche was important. And then he gives a lecture at the Pratt Institute – still going strong, my sister has a daughter graduating from there in just a couple weeks, right? – in 1958 where he specifically calls out Kierkegaard and *Fear and Trembling*. So we unfortunately don't have a lot of his library, but we certainly know that those two philosophers were central to his thinking. As well as Plato.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I think we actually suspect that much of his library actually came from the library in the early days. We weren't left with a big collection.

ANITA ROGERS:

Both artists came from very different religious backgrounds obviously. So I imagine most of you know Mark Rothko is Jewish– and went to yeshiva, I think, he was the one child who did end up going to yeshiva, and has the background in Judaism. And then your father William Scott was by default Protestant because he's from Northern Ireland. I mean there are some non-Protestant but very few. And so very different backgrounds–both I suppose where they were from and where they were born. Did both artists renounce religion completely, and if so, did they believe in – and I know your father was a socialist – but did they believe in some kind of metaphysical entity or in a search towards the metaphysical? Or was it just something that wasn't particularly important anymore? James, and then Kate and Christopher.

JAMES SCOTT:

Yes, I mean my father was a deeply unreligious man. He couldn't be really bothered with it. Although we were brought up in the Church of England, my mother was English. But he had

no time for that. And I don't remember that religion was a very big part in our family. But philosophically, I think my father was very much interested in the roots of where things happen. I do remember that he just was so influenced by cave painting. We visited the Lascaux caves in France when they were open in 1955 and he was absolutely staggered by those paintings and there is something spiritual about that work because it is about people who are looking for meaning in some way. They're looking for something that is beyond just the tragedy of what they're going through in a way – they're looking for something more. That always translated for him through symbolism - Celtic symbolism – through paintings by mentally-ill people, through art by children, he was always looking for something way beyond just art being something that you could learn and you could be a great artist – that didn't interest him at all. He was looking for some kind of meaning and, in a way, the very basics of which he painted. He painted very simple things: pots, pans, eggs – he felt that those things could tell you a lot more than a painting describing the resurrection or something like that. The obvious sort of religion was not in his paintings in that way.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you, James. And then the same – Christopher, Kate – what were your father's views on religion? Was it replaced – I know he didn't turn his back on it, but he let it go, right?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Pretty close to turning his back on it, certainly in terms of formal religious practice. Also, you did get the reference to Christmas greetings in that card. Certainly I think, perhaps in a slightly different way but in parallel to what your father was doing – he's looking for origins, I mean religion, as much as anything, is a way we try to come to grips with where we come from, what are we are doing here, where is there meaning – and I think he is on that journey the whole time through his art and he's not saying specific prayers to do it, he's not worshiping a specific deity but the process of trying to find meaning in something bigger than oil on canvas is similar, I think.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I think both looking at origins and looking for something beyond, if you will. I think that was very integral to his deciding to take on the commission for the murals for the Rothko chapel – because I think he had that spirituality deep down inside; he was interested in doing that even though he knew at the time the chapel was commissioned that it was intended to be a Catholic chapel. I think he had that yearning to try and create a spiritual space which would somehow take people beyond. I've also wondered whether his very contemplative approach – back and forth, paint a day, take two days or three days off to look at the painting – might have had something to do with his original religious upbringing, although clearly he had had a pretty clear break with it, I think for some traumatic reasons in his childhood. He walked out of synagogue at the age of 11 and said he would never enter a synagogue again and he indeed went through with that.

ANITA ROGERS:

Man of his word.

JAMES SCOTT:

I think another thing – in a way, I think both with Rothko and with my dad, is that both of them felt that the work itself should speak for itself. That there was no way that you could explain it. People would always say *well can you explain the work* and my father would always say *well I'm sorry you have to look at it*. The explanation is in the work, it is in the vehicle. You cannot explain it. People always want artists to come up with answers, be able to answer all these questions. They don't want to do that. The painting is there to sort of start something. And hopefully that's what happens.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you. And the last topic is in honor of your mothers - Mary and Mary, or Mell. James – your mother was, again, a copious note taker. And in the William Scott archives, there's many, many records of notes written by Mary Scott and there is a little note written in circles actually by your mother of when Rothko came and took I think one floor of a hotel. Christopher, you were on this visit. She said – William Scott met with Mark Rothko at that point as well – and little Christopher was riding his bicycle around and around in circles. It is in the archive. It is wonderful to read those little snippets.

JAMES SCOTT:

I think it was the Ritz Hotel. I think he took the penthouse.

ANITA:

Yes. An artist doing well financially.

(laughter)

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

I'm sure that was paid for by Marlborough Gallery – he would never have paid for that. I hope they bought me that bicycle too.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I have to say one of the dreariest hotel rooms I've ever stayed in. Elegant I guess in a certain Victorian sense but it was really dreary.

ANITA ROGERS:

The dark oak and the dark red.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

Deep mauve bedspreads, satin bedspreads.

ANITA ROGERS:

It is the British trying to make you feel that you're less than, that's what we do. But your mother was very supportive of William Scott, and I think your mother, Mary, was very supportive of your father. In what ways did they support your respective dads?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

I'll just point out that these are two women artists who essentially put aside their careers for their husbands, which we're probably the poorer for. Although, certainly, there's a pretty rapid trajectory - she meets him around the time he's making this painting *Personage* and there's a pretty rapid trajectory to him moving into abstraction and having the confidence to really make his best-known work which I think is as much as anything a leap of confidence as it is an amazing discovery or a new technique. I will also say that my sister appeared on the scene just as that was happening too so perhaps, she was also a little boost in his morale.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

I think she was incredibly supportive – maybe rather quietly, behind the scenes - that was kind of her personality. I also would have to say for my father, it was perhaps particularly welcome because he did not have that kind of support in his earlier marriage. I also feel she was supportive of him throughout the time and also she, for example, was very aware of his concern about his artwork, about his paintings, what he wanted done with them. And I guess one of my biggest regrets over the years is that she declined being on his foundation and I do wonder looking back whether that could have made any difference in the trajectory of history but it would've been wonderful because I think she was so in tune with what he wanted. So it's certainly a personal regret I have.

JAMES SCOTT:

Well, yes my mother and father met when they were students at the Royal Academy. She was a student of sculpture, and he was a painter. And I think that my mother recognized something immediately in him, coming from a sort of English upper-class family which she did, and he came from this Irish working-class family which was really something frowned upon in this relationship. They obviously loved each other and for me it was very sad that my mother could not go on being an artist because she really gave so much to him. She was his model, she was his critic, every evening she would come and look at his work and they would review it and he would want to scrap it and turn it over, paint over it, throw it away and she would just say *no no no* and she would keep the art and stop him from destroying it. She was also his secretary, she was on her little Olivetti typewriter writing out inventories, letters to galleries, and things. And it was really rather sad because she slowly had to sort of let go of her own work and then sadly she had a stroke and she couldn't go on with it. And it was, I think, my father was really... that

was for him a terrible moment, really. He sort of lost her in that way. In a way, reflecting on it, women were always very important to my father – my father was the eldest in the family of twelve children – he was the eldest boy. He had two older sisters but he was the oldest boy so his mother doted on him, and he left school when he was 15. He had very little education and his art dealer in London, Erica Brausen, was an amazing person and an amazing support to him, and she had in her gallery – Francis Bacon, Richard Hamilton, Giacometti, and you know she supported all these artists in an amazing way. And then he came to America and met Martha Jackson who was similar – a woman who was absolutely supportive of him in every way, so my father was very lucky to have my mother and many supportive women around him.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

And now Anita and Lizzie!

ANITA ROGERS:

Absolutely! We are here! So now I'm going to turn over the questions to the audience. We have time for about four questions. Gentleman in the front row.

AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Can you say something about the history of the mural since its first reception which was obviously a bit negative – how did this change? Have they treated it with respect?

JAMES SCOTT:

The question is what is the history of my father's Altnagelvin mural after it was presented and installed in the hospital. Unfortunately, it was not treated with great respect, it was put into a corridor where only people who were being wheeled to the operating room were being rubbed up against it, it got damaged, it was not really treated with very much respect. Eventually, it was put into a basement, away. It was not seen for many years until someone took it upon themselves to rediscover it. It was then the hospital was renovated and luckily the mural was considered to be then an important part of the renovation, so they renovated the mural. And it was going to be brought back to the Tate Gallery for a short time so an exhibition could take place with the Seagram at the Tate Modern and the Altnagelvin at Tate Britain and people could get on a boat and come down the Thames and sort of see the two – but that never happened. But it's now back reinstalled in the Altnagelvin, in the hospital. Sadly they've put it way up so you can't really see it properly. It's had a rather checkered history, I'm afraid.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you. Question number two.

AUDIENCE MEMBER:

[*to Christopher and Kate*] Your father was a philosopher. Did he train in art? He had a fabulous palette for art and eye for art, so how did he make a transition if he didn't have any training in art school or things like that?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

So the question is – you said our father was a philosopher. But what kind of formal art training did he have? And I think the answer is very little. As far as we know, just a couple of classes at the Art Students League here on 52nd Street.

ANITA ROGERS:

That's amazing.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

He was invited by a friend to a live drawing class, thought it was fabulous. There was some question about [when he was in Portland…] whether he may have taken an art class at the museum. But he was certainly not somebody who was constantly drawing and painting as a young person or had a lot of training. But quite shortly after those couple classes he's teaching art at a small school in Brooklyn where he taught for the better part of twenty years.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

It was twenty years. Yeah, as far as we know only those two courses. The only teacher from the art school, the particular name that stands out, is Max Weber. Again, I think of just one class with him.

ANITA ROGERS:

Question number three.

AUDIENCE MEMBER:

[*to Christopher and Kate*] Did your father ever go back to Latvia or did he talk about it? If yes, what would he say about it?

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Kate has a very up to the moment answer for that.

KATE ROTHKO PRIZEL:

He never did get a chance to go back to Latvia. Of course when he passed away it was still part of the Soviet bloc, and I don't think he would've traveled. Now, to him of course when he left, it was not truly Latvia. It was still part of the Czarist Empire. And indeed the city which is now Daugavpils in Latvia was in the southeastern part of the country and was a very diverse city. It was about 50% Jewish. There were a lot of Poles, a lot of Old Believers. And then the surrounding area was actually a local Latvian population, and also the Russians. So he sort of,

growing up there till the age of ten, was not in the heartland of Latvia, you'd say. But he was always very specific, always taking the globe and he'd show me – here was Dvinsk when he was born part of the Russian Empire, but now it's part of Latvia. So he was very aware. But about twenty years ago now an amazing woman discovered if you will that Rothko had been born in Daugavpils, Latvia and decided to organize a centenary celebration for him. And I can only say that the connection has grown since.

I know on my first visit I thought – the city has an amazing diversity now, too, which is nice. You see pretty good harmony between all these different populations in the city. And I was very taken by that on that visit. And this woman who had organized this centenary had basically taken it upon herself to bring Rothko back to his home city, if you will. And with an incredible amount of persistence, she was able to get a large EU grant to renovate a beautiful old nineteenth-century building. She thought maybe she'd renovate a quarter of it – suddenly she had money to renovate this whole arsenal building and opened what is called the Mark Rothko Art Center in Daugavpils. And I actually just came back from a celebration of the tenth anniversary there.

And it's a very nice feeling because I feel that there really is a connection with the city and I feel that in many ways this has made Daugavpils – it's the second largest city in Latvia, but it really hadn't had anything to draw people from the outside, to draw in tourists. And now they're kind of on the map and I think so much of the city really appreciates that. And so the warm relationship really continues. It was nice, the mayor of the city spent two days at this celebration and believe me I'm sure he had other things to do with everything that is going on nearby. So that was very nice for me.

ANITA ROGERS:

Thank you, and last question. I see a hand up at the back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Mr. Scott, you spoke about your mother having to talk your father out of destroying some of the work and there are a lot of stories in fiction and truth of artists destroying their work. For any of you: is it more about disappointment in the craft or disappointment in the message? I'm curious as to why artists would want to destroy their work.

JAMES SCOTT:

In a very simple way it was that my father was trying to save money.

[*laughter*]

You know, if he painted something on a canvas and he thought it was not very good he didn't want to just throw it away, he wanted to paint something better. So he had the idea that he would just paint over it or else just turn it around, turn the canvas around and paint on the back of it. Until he discovered that my – in our house we had a lot of paintings that had belonged to

my family on my mother's side which were sort of old portraits of family, and he just took these and just painted over them [*laughter*].

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

Sounds like your family was cancelled.

JAMES SCOTT:

Yes. On some paintings, if you turn a William Scott around, you will see a portrait of an admiral – you know, these were my relatives.

ANITA ROGERS:

We have to turn them all around now.

CHRISTOPHER ROTHKO:

This too could be your fate. And our father similarly was *I'm so broke, so broke* – many many paintings painted on both sides, works on paper painted on both sides, works on paper about the size of that horizontal one. He cut it in half and made two smaller works on the backside. But to get back to your real question. To my mind – I have thought about this before – there are two primary impulses. One is just tremendous perfectionism. Brahms apparently burned much more than what's been handed down to us.

Then the other thing is – and I know this just from experience since I know a lot of artists – artists do a lot of the amazing work they do because they are living right now, in this very moment. And sometimes I think even what they painted a couple weeks ago feels not relevant the way that their new idea does. So especially if you have limited resources, you don't have a canvas to hand, you know – take that and you got something better to say. And you know it's horrible on one level, but we have the sort of art historical viewpoint – but for the artist who has a vibrant idea bursting out of them in that moment, maybe that's why some great art happens. Because it happened right now rather than *oh, I'll get to it tomorrow*.

JAMES SCOTT:

And on that note, the artist always thinks that they can do better. That what they've done is good, maybe it's okay, but they can do better.

ANITA ROGERS:

Yes, definitely. Perfectionism crippled my father, for sure. But really good point about the 'right here right now.' Very good point. So I think we're going to end – that was four questions, it's past eight. I want to thank everybody [*points to speakers, audience applause*]...