



# BEYOND THE HEADLINES

## Who were the de Menils?

John and Dominique de Menil, immigrants from France, became Houston philanthropists, activists, and art collectors. They founded the Menil Foundation (1954), Rothko Chapel (1971), Menil Collection (1987), Cy Twombly Gallery (1995), and Richmond Hall (1998), which houses Dan Flavin's commissioned exhibit.

## What is the Rothko Chapel?

The Rothko Chapel, founded by John and Dominique de Menil, was dedicated in 1971 as an intimate sanctuary. It is not committed to any one religion and imposes no particular traditional environment, but is available to people of every belief.

A tranquil meditative environment inspired by the canvases of Russian-born American painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970), the Chapel welcomes over 60,000 visitors each year, including art lovers, scholars, and people of every faith from all parts of the world.

The Rothko Chapel is an independent non-profit institution, a sacred place open to all people, every day of the year.

In 2001 the Chapel was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, an honor awarded before the institution was fifty years old because it was considered of exceptional worth.

The Chapel regularly makes top ten lists of places to visit, and is a featured entry in *National Geographic's* book *Sacred Places of a Lifetime: 500 of the World's Most Peaceful and Powerful Destinations*.

It is a place alive with religious ceremonies of all faiths, and where the experience and understanding of all traditions are encouraged and made available. Action takes the form of supporting human rights, and the Chapel has become a rallying place for all people concerned with peace, freedom, and social justice throughout the world.

## When did the Chapel open?

The Rothko Chapel opened in February 1971.

## Is the Chapel part of the Menil Collection?

No, the Rothko Chapel is an independent institution not affiliated with any other organization.

## Is the land owned by the Menil Collection?

No, the Rothko Chapel owns its land, which is approximately half of the block on which it is located. It includes five grey houses and an empty lot across the street.



# ABOUT MARK ROTHKO

## Who was Mark Rothko?

Mark Rothko is now considered one of the most influential American artists of the mid-twentieth century. He belonged to a group of artists who were known as Abstract Expressionists. The group also included Barnett Newman, who created the *Broken Obelisk* sculpture at the Chapel.

Mark Rothko was born in Russia in 1903 in what is now known as Latvia. He immigrated with his family in 1913 to Portland, Oregon, where he attended public high school. From 1921 to 1923 he studied at Yale University, then moved to New York.

He became a painter by chance, having walked into an art class while waiting for a friend. Enrolling in Max Weber's course at the Art Students' League, Rothko began to paint on his own in a social realist vein. Later his work became influenced by surrealism.

It was not until the late 1940's that Rothko developed his own abstract style of blurred-edged rectangular frames of a single hue set in a field of solid color. He believed that art must be a private affair between the artist and the viewer, and as a rule refused to show his work in large group exhibitions.

## Is it true that Mark Rothko committed suicide after he completed the paintings?

Mark Rothko completed the Chapel paintings in 1967 and he continued to paint for three years until his death in 1970.

## Did he ever see the Chapel?

He never had the opportunity to visit Houston or see the Chapel, as it was built after his death.

## What religion did Mark Rothko practice?

Mark Rothko was born Jewish, but was not a practicing Jew.

## Is Rothko's family involved with Chapel?

Christopher Rothko, his son, is on the Board of Directors.



# ABOUT THE PAINTINGS

## Where are the paintings?

The 14 large panels on the walls inside the Chapel are the paintings.

There are a total of 18 paintings. Fourteen hang in the Chapel as Rothko designated, and four alternates are stored at the Menil Collection. Two more paintings came with all the drawings and models from the Rothko Foundation in 1987, but Rothko had considered them rejects for the Chapel.

## How did the paintings get into the building?

The paintings were brought in through the skylight of the Chapel. There are photographs documenting that process in Susan Barnes' book, *The Rothko Chapel: Act of Faith*.

## When were the paintings created?

John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Mark Rothko in 1964 to create a place for meditation and prayer. They gave him the opportunity to shape and control a total environment to encompass his work. He completed the paintings in 1967.

## What mediums were used in the paintings?

Oil paints on canvas. Rothko used dry pigments and laboriously mixed and boiled them in rabbit skin glue, egg-oil emulsion, and polymer to create the colors and textures he wanted.

## How did Rothko paint the paintings?

He applied the paint with housepainter's brushes that were four to six inches wide.

## Why did he choose those colors?

He did not explain why he chose those colors.

## Is there any significance in these colors?

Again, he did not share the meaning.

## Are there really images in the paintings?

Many people see images in the paintings just as they see images in cloud formations. It is not known if he wanted to achieve this effect.

## Do the paintings mean anything?

He did not explain them. The only thing we have is a quote by him about his art in general:

"The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions...the people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their color relationships then you miss the point."

## Is there something to see besides black in the paintings?

As your eyes adjust to the light, you will see that they are not all black. It is less about seeing than it is about feeling; it is up to the viewer to extract meaning or explanation.

## Are the paintings permanent?

Yes. The paintings and the space are inseparable.

## What are the dimensions of the paintings?

The south wall painting is 180 X 105 inches.  
The east and west wall paintings are 134  $\frac{7}{8}$  X 245  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
The corner wall paintings are 177  $\frac{1}{2}$  X 135 inches.  
The north wall paintings, each are 180 X 297 inches.



# ABOUT THE *BROKEN OBELISK* AND BARNETT NEWMAN

## What is the sculpture outside? Who is the artist?

On the plaza is Barnett Newman's majestic sculpture, *Broken Obelisk*, dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by the de Menils.

Since their dedication in 1971, the Rothko Chapel and Barnett Newman's sculpture *Broken Obelisk*, which faces the Chapel, have received worldwide recognition as examples of the greatest artistic achievements of the mid-twentieth century.

## Where and when was it made?

The idea of the *Broken Obelisk* was conceived in 1963, but was not manufactured until 1967. It was made by Don Lippincott's factory in Connecticut.

There are three original *Broken Obelisks* in existence. One is at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, one is at the University of Washington in Seattle, and one is at Rothko Chapel. Only recently did the Newman Foundation allow a copy to be manufactured. It is in Germany.

## What does it represent?

Barnett Newman did not give an explanation.

## How tall is the sculpture?

26 feet.



# ABOUT THE CHAPEL

## How big is the space?

It is approximately 52 feet by 56 feet.

## How many people does it hold?

According to fire codes, the Chapel can hold a maximum of 300 people, but we only allow a maximum of 200 people inside the space for public programs.

## Do you have church services here?

Different religious communities use the Chapel for their own services. The Chapel itself does not impose or favor any particular religion. The space is available for weddings, memorials, baptisms, and other sacred services.

## Is the light all-natural?

There is only natural light during the daytime, as Mark Rothko specified. Artificial lights are used for programs at night.

## What is the floor made of?

It is made of asphalt cut into squares.

## What is the noise I hear?

It is the air handling system.

## What are the walls made of?

Grey colored gypsum to look like concrete.

## What is on the floor?

They are zafu pillows for individuals who wish to meditate.

## Can other art works be displayed here?

No, it is a complete art space and its integrity must be maintained.

## Who were the architects?

Philip Johnson was the original architect. Houston architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry completed the building.

## What other buildings did Philip Johnson Design?

There are many, but in Houston, Philip Johnson's works includes the School of Architecture at University of Houston-Central campus, the fountain near the Galleria, the Pennzoil Building and Republic Bank Building downtown, St. Basil's Chapel at the University of St. Thomas, and the master plan for the University of St. Thomas. He also designed the de Menil house in River Oaks.