

## An unlikely blending of visions a century apart

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### The Seduction of Light: Ammi Phillips/Mark Rothko Compositions in Pink, Green and Red, American Folk Art Museum, New York

How did the American Folk Art Museum come to pair two artists who lived a century apart, shared no common history, religion or method, whose goals were different and who followed wholly divergent paths? And how is it that the result of all this apparent incompatibility is an unexpectedly stunning show?

The answer to both questions is Stacy Hollander, the museum's senior curator, who perceived a profound resonance between the 19th-century folk artist Ammi Phillips and the master modernist Mark Rothko, and had the courage to trust her instincts. *The Seduction of Light: Ammi Phillips/Mark Rothko Compositions in Pink, Green and Red* results from the humming in Hollander's brain.



Untitled, Mark Rothko (1956)

"I was in love with Rothko for most of my life," Hollander tells me. "When I became familiar with Phillips, I realised I was responding in the same way to the portraits as I did to Rothko: I got lost in the colour, surface and texture." Phillips pushed the subjects of his portraits up against the surface and focused on the soft glow emanating from gowns and shadowed backgrounds. "I stopped seeing faces," Hollander says – just luminous shapes, akin to Rothko's abstractions.

Hollander has underscored the parallels in her sensitive selection of first-rate paintings. Rothko's "No. 1" (1961) hangs next to a diptych of Phillips's serious young boys. "Blond Boy with Primer, Peach and Dog" (c1836) and "Frederick A. Gale" (c1815, pictured below) are both ostensibly portraits, but they echo Rothko's broad blocks of cordial colour. The little blond

sage clutches a red book and stands against a majestic eggplant backdrop. The other solemn young master sports red shoes and his green suit stands out against an ochre wall. It's impossible to miss the similarities between the planes of colour, the slashes of scarlet, velvet green expanses, and foundations of dusky purple. The atmosphere is the same too – the tension between serene composition and agitated, nocturnal hues.

To most viewers, the concord between Rothko's rhapsodies and Phillips's portraits might on its own be enough to justify their juxtaposition. But Hollander is a scholar and so feels the need to make a more rigorous argument as to why they belong together. She labours hard to find connections between a rustic unknown and a modern Manhattan



celebrity, especially since there's no evidence that Rothko had ever even heard of Phillips. So Hollander links them by means of an elaborate theoretical triangle whose third point reaches into the distant past. The two painters are joined by their allegiance to the palette and techniques of antiquity.

Her argument is necessarily asymmetrical. Rothko was born in Tsarist Russia and died an American in 1970 after a copiously documented career. He wrote the way he painted, with passion and exalted rage. Critics who could not detect the spiritual depths behind his lustrous surfaces inflamed him. He was acutely aware of history and his place in it, and was not averse to some universalising self-aggrandisement. In her catalogue essay, Hollander quotes his quasi-scriptural dictum that "the progression of a painter's work as it travels in time from point to point will be toward clarity; toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer". Rothko received his own personal revelation from the frescoes of Fra Angelico in Florence and from those of ancient Rome, and Hollander notes his responses in technical terms, especially the way he ground his own pigments and applied paint thinly in pursuit of pure luminescence.



'Frederick A. Gale', Ammi Phillips (c1815)



'Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog', Ammi Phillips (c1830-1835)

Phillips's mostly uncharted biography allows for more speculation. He lived in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts and died in 1865, utterly unknown until a trove of canvases showed up at an antiques sale in Connecticut in 1924. On this rather delicate foundation, Hollander builds a character steeped in the neoclassical aesthetic of the early 19th century and the folk art techniques of grinding pigment and mixing paint. The curator believes that what Rothko the urban sophisticate had to rediscover, Phillips already knew. He had a direct connection to classical, Renaissance and medieval painting that he may never actually have seen.

It's possible that Rothko and Phillips shared a vocabulary drawn from antiquity and its various reincarnations, that they developed similar techniques and that they both aspired to an effect of timelessness. But Hollander's arguments form a slender support for a rock-solid intuition: that the works of

these two artists look spectacular together.

Rothko's coloured rectangles and Phillips's vermilion fields vibrate in unison like strings in a well-tuned lute. The force that binds them is more psychic than historical – a common intensity, or a spiritual sensibility. Both saw a world woven out of threads of light, and combining their separate records of those ecstatic observations makes for a dazzling show.

*The exhibition continues until March 29*

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