

October 27, 2008

ART REVIEW | MARK ROTHKO AND AMMI PHILLIPS

Yankee Spirit in Disparate Masters

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

Comparisons may be invidious, but they can also be illuminating. Consider the small, tightly focused exhibition of works by [Mark Rothko](#) and the 19th-century American folk artist Ammi Phillips at the American Folk Art Museum.

On the face of it this is a stretch. Phillips, a prolific itinerant portraitist active in New England between 1811 and 1865, was a self-taught neo-Classical realist, a kind of folk-art Ingres. His figures are simplified and flattened, but their faces are so sensitively drawn that they seem like real individuals and not just the generalized types that the subjects of folk portraiture often seem.

Rothko, who emigrated from Russia to the United States as a boy in 1913, was an intellectual omnivore. He attended Yale and studied briefly in New York with the Modernist painter Max Weber. In the 1940s and '50s, along with artists like [Jackson Pollock](#), [Willem de Kooning](#) and Clyfford Still, Rothko pushed abstract painting to unprecedented formal extremes. His signature canvases, in which large, fuzzy-edged rectangles of color are arranged in mysterious hovering stacks, would seem to be far from Phillips's earthbound portraiture.

As organized by the museum's senior curator, Stacy C. Hollander, the exhibition nonetheless reveals parallel ways of dealing with surface, color and light. Both painters favored broad flat areas of color, and Ms. Hollander has underlined that connection by selecting paintings by both artists that feature red, pink and green. An untitled 1970 composition of bright-red soft-edged rectangles by Rothko echoes the red dresses worn by children in several paintings by Phillips.

(Comparisons aside, Phillips's painting of a girl in a red dress holding a white cat is heartbreakingly lovely.)

Some of Phillips's paintings have velvety dark backgrounds that rhyme with the big nearly black, green square in Rothko's "No. 1" from 1961. And the soft, misty colors in Phillips's portrait of Harriet Campbell, wearing a pale-pink ankle-length dress and standing against a beige background, evinces a subtlety of light and shade that reflects luminous parts of Rothko's paintings.

More intriguing than these formal parallels, however, is a question that Ms. Hollander does not address: that of national identity. Each painter is, in his own way, a distinctly American artist.

In his 1955 essay " 'American-Type' Painting, ' " the critic Clement Greenberg lauded the painters identified with Abstract Expressionism, including Rothko, for their bold assertion of the elemental properties of painting, which is to say, its flatness, color and shape.

Greenberg was talking about the mid-20th-century vanguard, but he might also have been describing Phillips,

whose paintings similarly have a pragmatic, Yankee economy of means and style.

American-type painting is not fancy painting. It avoids the slick technique and showy gimmickry of academically overtrained European painters.

Yet there is, too, in both painters, a metaphysical dimension, which the archformalist Greenberg ignored. Rothko's painted surfaces give way to ambiguous, illusory depths implying ethereal realms of mind and space. Phillips's portraits have a timeless, ghostly quality; they're like pictures of undying, archetypal souls. This direct connection between the terrestrial and the transcendental, unmediated by complicated symbolism, is also in the American grain.

"The Seduction of Light" runs through March 29 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.

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