

Harvard / News Release Art Museums

Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals Feature in Harvard Art Museums' Inaugural Special Exhibition, Opening November 16, 2014

New presentation of the murals uses digital projection technology to recapture the original hues of the five faded paintings

Harvard Art Museums' renovated and expanded facility, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, unites the three museums—Fogg Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum, and Arthur M. Sackler Museum—and their collections under one roof for the first time



Mark Rothko in front of *Panel Two* and *Panel Three* of the Harvard Murals, Holyoke Center, January 1963.
Photo: Elizabeth H. Jones, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Cambridge, MA
May 20, 2014

The Harvard Art Museums announced today the inaugural special exhibition in their newly renovated and expanded facility, opening to the public on November 16, 2014. The exhibition, *Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals*, will present innovative, noninvasive digital projection as a way to return an important Rothko mural series to public view and scholarship, as well as to encourage study and debate of the technology. This new conservation approach uses specially calibrated light as a tool to restore the appearance of the Harvard Murals' original rich colors, which had faded during the 1960s and 1970s when the five large-scale canvas paintings that make up the series were on display in a penthouse

dining room at Harvard University. Featuring 38 works created between 1961 and 1962, including the paintings commissioned by Harvard University and a majority of the artist's related studies on paper and canvas, the exhibition is also an exploration of Rothko's creative process. The exhibition will be on display from November 16, 2014 through July 26, 2015 in the Harvard Art Museums' special exhibitions gallery.

The conservation technique employs a camera-projector system that includes custom-made software developed and applied by a team of art historians, conservation scientists, conservators, and scientists at the Harvard Art Museums and the MIT Media Lab. For each mural, the camera captures images of its current state and compares them to a photograph representing the original, unfaded color. This information is then used to calculate a "compensation image," which is sent to a digital projector that illuminates the mural and restores the color, pixel by pixel. Following this calibration, the camera is removed and the projected light presents the works closer to how they appeared a half-century ago. For a certain period of time each day, the projector lights will be turned off, in order for visitors to study the paintings without the addition of the augmented color. The five paintings from the Harvard Murals series will be presented in the Harvard Art Museums' galleries in the approximate configuration of how they were originally installed in 1964 in the penthouse dining room of Harvard University's Holyoke Center (now called the Richard A. and Susan F. Smith Campus Center), the space for which they were commissioned.

"As a teaching and research facility, it is the Harvard Art Museums' role to encourage innovation, scholarship, and debate around new conservation techniques," said Thomas W. Lentz, the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums. "We think it is especially fitting that we celebrate the opening of our new home with a provocative exhibition that reinforces our core mission."

Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals marks the first time that the murals and studies on paper and canvas from the Harvard commission can be examined together. A sixth mural painted for the commission—brought to Cambridge for installation by Rothko but ultimately not included—will be presented publicly for the first time. Many of the works on paper in the exhibition also contain relevant sketches on their reverse, which will be exhibited during the second half of the exhibition beginning in March 2015. The accompanying studies on canvas provide perspective into Rothko's creative process as he worked from a small to larger scale. The majority of the studies are from the Harvard Art Museums, with loans from the National Gallery of Art, the Menil Collection, and private collections.

"Our presentation—of the five paintings and the majority of his studies on paper and canvas for the Harvard Murals commission—provides important insight into Rothko's thinking and working process,"

said Mary Schneider Enriquez, the Houghton Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Harvard Art Museums. “These works give us a lens through which we can perceive his interest in the measure of figure and ground, balance and scale, color and, ultimately, light. Through this perspective we begin to understand how he conceived the paintings as a single image for a specific architectural space.”

The exhibition will also include multimedia components accessible via interactive screens in the galleries. These components will also be accessible through a special section on the Harvard Art Museums’ website, to be launched this fall. The content includes interviews with members of the project team as well as with Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel, the artist’s children, and other individuals who have expert knowledge about Rothko and the Harvard Murals commission.

About the Harvard Murals Conservation

Mark Rothko (1903–1970) painted the Harvard Murals in 1962 and officially installed them in January 1964. High levels of natural light coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows ultimately caused Rothko’s colors to fade over time, and the five paintings showed differing patterns of color loss. Deemed unsuitable for exhibition, the murals entered storage and were largely overlooked in the past half-century of Rothko scholarship.

In the mid-1980s, Harvard conservators began studies to explore why the colors faded so quickly, and they looked for a means to restore the appearance of the original hues. The hope was that these important murals might be returned to public view. In conjunction with a 1988 exhibition of the murals at Harvard’s Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard conservators determined that one factor in the fading was the presence of Lithol Red, an unstable organic pigment that the artist used in all five paintings. Once conservators understood why the paintings had faded, they determined that a conventional conservation treatment of retouching damaged or faded paint with new paint would not be a suitable solution. Because of the large areas of color loss, and because of the delicate, thinly painted, and unvarnished surfaces, such a treatment would be irreversible and would potentially obliterate the artist’s hand—violating key principles of conservation.

In recent years, a team of art historians, conservation scientists, and conservators from two research centers at the Harvard Art Museums—the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art—worked with MIT Media Lab’s Camera Culture research group to come up with a solution. To determine the original, unfaded colors of the canvases, the museums worked with the Imaging and Media Lab (now Digital Humanities Lab) at the University of Basel, Switzerland, to digitally restore faded Ektachrome color transparencies of the murals from 1964.

In addition, key information was obtained by direct color measurements taken from unfaded sections of the sixth panel painted for the commission.

“The color restoration of the Harvard Murals is a project that called for expertise from disparate fields,” said Jens Stenger, formerly a conservation scientist in the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Harvard Art Museums, and now a conservation scientist in the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale University. “It took Ramesh Raskar, a computational photography expert at MIT, Rudolf Gschwind, a digital imaging researcher in Basel, and the art historians, conservators, and scientists at the Harvard Art Museums to break new ground in art conservation.”

“It is an extremely rare opportunity to be able to research and develop a conservation tool that presents a new solution for an old problem,” said Narayan Khandekar, senior conservation scientist in the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at the Harvard Art Museums. “The beauty of this digital technique is that it preserves the subtle and delicate surfaces of Rothko’s paintings, while still being fully reversible.”

History

In 1960, Wassily Leontief, a Nobel Prize-winning professor of economics, chair of the Harvard Society of Fellows, and friend of Mark Rothko, suggested to the artist that he create works to hang in a new space at Harvard University’s Holyoke Center. Ultimately, Rothko proposed to fill the room with several large-scale paintings; and with the support of John Coolidge, then director of the Fogg Museum, planning began for a series of paintings to be installed in a penthouse dining room on the 10th floor of the Holyoke Center. Josep Lluís Sert, who was dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design at the time, had recently designed the Holyoke Center. With the establishment of a new visual studies program, new art commissions on campus, and major new buildings, including the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts—the only building by Le Corbusier in the United States—Harvard University was flourishing with growth in contemporary art and architecture.

Between 1961 and 1962, Rothko created several studies on paper and canvas in his New York City studio and painted six large-scale paintings to take to Cambridge. In an October 1962 letter from John Coolidge to Harvard President Nathan Pusey, Coolidge wrote: “This is an unprecedented moment for visual arts in America. . . . Quite aside from the inherent artistic significance of these Rothko paintings, I believe it would be important for Harvard to accept them because thereby the University would be affirming its interest in the highly influential American painting of our time.” After visits from Coolidge, Pusey, and Sert to Rothko’s studio, the Harvard Corporation voted on November 5, 1962, to accept the

paintings as a gift of the artist. In January 1963, five of the six paintings were hung in a trial installation by the artist, assisted by a team of conservators from the Fogg Museum. A few months later, the five paintings were sent to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York for an exhibition that ran from April through June 1963. The paintings were returned to Cambridge in October 1963 and were officially installed in the dining room in January 1964. At Rothko's request, new olive mustard wall coverings and window shading had been installed in the dining room. Because high levels of natural light coming through the dining room's windows caused fading of the paintings' surfaces, one of the murals was removed in March 1974, and the remaining murals were removed in April 1979.

The Harvard Murals are one of three commissioned series painted by Mark Rothko. The Seagram Murals, painted in the late 1950s and originally destined for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City, are now in the collections of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Tate Modern in London, and the Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art in Japan. The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, which was completed after Rothko's death in 1970, was conceived by the artist and houses 14 of his paintings.

"As with the other commissions, Rothko conceived of the five Harvard Murals as an interplay of individual paintings in a specific setting established in part by an integrated color scheme," said Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, director of the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art at the Harvard Art Museums, and associate director for conservation and research at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "By color correcting the differentially faded paintings, the current system attempts to recover the visual unity of the room as accomplished by the artist."

Since their removal from the Holyoke Center, the murals have been rarely seen by the public. They were presented in two exhibitions at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum, both titled *Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals* (August 6–October 2, 1988 and May 22–November 21, 1993). The murals were also presented alongside other works by the artist in *Mark Rothko – Paintings* at the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (November 25, 2000–January 28, 2001) and in *Mark Rothko: A Consummated Experience Between Picture and Onlooker* at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel (February 18–April 29, 2001). In 2011, the murals were transferred from ownership by the Harvard Corporation to the collections of the Harvard Art Museums.

Programming

In conjunction with the Harvard Art Museums' Rothko exhibition, Harvard's Graduate School of Design will host an exhibition in the Frances Loeb Library at Gund Hall that addresses the dialogue between art and architecture over the last century, paying particular attention to works and spaces around the

Harvard campus. The exhibition will be held this fall and is curated by Timothy Hyde, associate professor of architecture in the Harvard Graduate School of Design. This exhibition is made possible by the Graham Gund Exhibition Fund, held jointly by the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and the Harvard Art Museums. www.gsd.harvard.edu

Detailed information about programs at the Harvard Art Museums related to the exhibition *Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals* is forthcoming at www.harvardartmuseums.org/calendar.

Press Preview

A preview of the Mark Rothko exhibition will be held for members of the press on Friday, November 7, 2014, 1–3pm, immediately following the press preview of the new Harvard Art Museums facility from 9am to noon. More information will be forthcoming.

Credits

The research, technical analysis, and conservation treatment on Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals have been made possible in part through the generous support of the AXA Art Insurance Corporation, the Bowes Family Foundation, InFocus Corporation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Ezra and Lauren Merkin, Novartis International AG, Lief D. Rosenblatt, and the NBT Charitable Trust. Initial exhibition funding has been provided by the Graham Gund Exhibition Fund and the Rosenblatt Fund for Post-War American Art. Modern and contemporary art programs are made possible in part by generous support from the Emily Rauh Pulitzer and Joseph Pulitzer Jr. Fund for Modern and Contemporary Art, Harvard Art Museums.

About the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art

The Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art at the Harvard Art Museums was founded in 2001 in partnership with the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Its mission is twofold: to study the materials and issues associated with the making and conservation of works of art of the modern era; and to serve as a resource for conservators, scholars, and students by collecting, preserving, and presenting relevant materials and research.

About the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies

Established in 1928, the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies is the oldest fine arts conservation treatment, research, and training facility in the United States. The Straus Center specializes in the preservation and study of works on paper, paintings, and three-dimensional objects in the Harvard Art Museums' collections. Its conservators and conservation scientists pursue technical

research on artists' materials and techniques, as well as on conservation methodologies. The Straus Center shares its work through teaching, publications, and academic and public programs.

About the Harvard Art Museums

The Harvard Art Museums, among the world's leading art institutions, comprise three museums (the Fogg, Busch-Reisinger, and Arthur M. Sackler museums) and four research centers (the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the Harvard Art Museums Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis). The Fogg Museum includes Western art from the Middle Ages to the present; the Busch-Reisinger Museum is dedicated to the study of art from the German-speaking countries of central and northern Europe, and is the only museum of its kind in North America; and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum is focused on Asian, ancient, and Islamic and later Indian art. Together, the collections include approximately 250,000 objects in all media. The Harvard Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. Integral to Harvard University and the wider community, the museums and research centers serve as resources for students, scholars, and the public. For more than a century they have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and are renowned for their seminal role in developing the discipline of art history in the United States. www.harvardartmuseums.org

The Harvard Art Museums will open their new facility, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, to the public on November 16, 2014. The renovation and expansion of the museums' landmark building at 32 Quincy Street in Cambridge will bring the three museums and their collections together under one roof for the first time, inviting students, faculty, scholars, and the public into one of the world's great institutions for arts scholarship and research. In the Harvard Art Museums' new home, visitors will be able to learn about research connected to the objects on display; explore new ideas in the galleries; gain a glimpse of leading conservators at work; and in the unique Art Study Center, have hands-on experiences with a wide range of objects from the collections. www.harvardartmuseums.org/renovation

The Harvard Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

For more information, please contact:

Jennifer Aubin / Lauren Marshall
Harvard Art Museums
617-496-5331 / 617-495-4750
jennifer_aubin@harvard.edu
lauren_marshall@harvard.edu

Isabel Sinistore / Kyla McMillan
Resnicow Schroeder Associates
212-671-5175 / 212-671-5154
isinistore@resnicowschroeder.com
kmcmillan@resnicowschroeder.com