

A Note on Rothko's UNESCO Commission

by Chris Villars

In 1967 UNESCO decided to commission a single large mural painting for one wall of the bar/rest-room then being built in its new building at 1, rue Miollis in Paris. (This was not the famous Y-shaped building at 7, Place de Fontenoy, but a nearby annex.) UNESCO's Committee of Art Advisers met on 25/26 March 1967, and under the heading "Cafeteria/Rest-room" the minutes record the following:

"The Committee recommended that a large mural measuring roughly 30 sq. m. should cover the east wall of the bar. The work should be visible from three levels, including the large entrance hall. For improved all-round visibility, the structure of the central staircase should be as light as possible.

The Committee felt that work of this kind ought to be entrusted to one of the American artists who were used to handling large areas, and it recommended in order of preference; Rothko, Noland, Indiana, Kelly."¹

Around the same time as planning this commission, UNESCO was buying contemporary artworks for its headquarters buildings in Paris, and decided to buy one of the limited edition bronze castings of Giacometti's sculpture *Walking Man I* (1960). The sculpture was initially to be sited on the patio outside the bar in the new Miollis building.

The Committee of Art Advisers met again on 20/21 March 1969, and discussed the mural commission under the heading "Single mural for the bar and rest room":

"After carefully examining the future situation of the mural, which is in full view of the patio, where the Giacometti sculpture might be set up, the Committee confirmed that the commission should be awarded to Rothko, as recommended at its previous meeting. As this recommendation has already been approved by the Director-General, it was agreed that Mr. Franz Meyer [the Rapporteur of the Committee] should be directed to make an informal approach to the artist. [...]

If Rothko declined to take part in the decoration of the new building, the Committee recommended that the work be entrusted to Kelly.

During the discussion the Architect pointed out that the commissioning of the artist should be treated as a matter of urgency, for the colour scheme for the walls and appointments of the cafeteria, bar and rest room, could be decided on only with reference to the mural, in the treatment of which the artist should be given a completely free hand."²

Shortly after this meeting, UNESCO contacted Rothko via Bernard Reis, his representative at Marlborough Gallery, New York, with their proposal. Detailed documents, plans and photos were subsequently sent.

On 21 April 1969, exactly a month after UNESCO decided to offer him the commission, Rothko visited Robert Motherwell. Motherwell wrote a short summary of their conversation on that day, which includes the following:

¹ UNESCO source: GES/WS/1, 31 August 1967.

² UNESCO source: ADM/CCA.3/Report, 29 May 1969.

“At a certain moment in the conversation, when I asked him about his present work, he told me that the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris were in touch with him about doing a room there which would also contain sculpture by Giacometti. When I asked him about how big the room was, he said it was not very large, maybe 28 by 20 feet, or something like that. Then he said that in any case, if he accepted the commission, it would be unlikely that he would make a single picture to cover the whole wall. [...] Then he mentioned [...] that he had started a new series of paintings, “a different world from myself,” that were partially inspired by the notion of having his paintings in a room with work by Giacometti, whom he obviously respects [...]. It became evident to me that if he accepted the commission he would probably fill the walls with three or four individual paintings, rather than one large one.”³

The next meeting of UNESCO’s Committee of Art Advisers was on 23 June and 3 July 1969. Again under the heading “Single mural for the bar and rest room”, the minutes for 23 June record the following:

“Mr. Franz Meyer informed the Committee of his negotiations with Rothko, through the intermediary of Mr. Bernard Reis.
The Committee also noted that all the necessary documentation, plans and photographs had been forwarded to Rothko by the Architect.
As no reply had been forthcoming from Rothko, the Committee decided to make an immediate telephone call to the artist who was at that moment in New York.
During this telephone conversation with Mr. F. Meyer, Rothko expressed regret at his inability, for health reasons, to execute this mural decoration.
After a wide exchange of views on the choice of another artist, the Committee finally decided to recommend that the Director-General entrust the mural to the American artist, Ellsworth Kelly, as had already been proposed at the previous meeting.”⁴

At the second session of this meeting, on 3 July, the committee was informed that Kelly had accepted the commission. The work Kelly produced was *Blue Green* (1969). It was installed in May 1970, and is still there today. Giacometti’s *Walking Man I* was purchased in 1969, and was installed on the patio outside the bar in December 1970. In later years, the sculpture was moved to UNESCO’s main headquarters building in Place de Fontenoy.

Robert Motherwell’s record of his conversation with Rothko in April 1969 shows that, at that time, Rothko knew that the commission was for a single large painting to go on one wall of the room, though he thought he would be able to vary that. He also had an idea of the bar as a rectangular room of a certain size, and believed it would contain sculpture by Giacometti. These impressions suggest that he had not yet seen the detailed documents sent from Paris. He may have been operating with a general outline of the project transmitted to him verbally via Bernard Reis. If this is correct, it is possible that when he subsequently got the plans and photos, and saw that the bar had a complex, open structure on three levels, and that the Giacometti sculpture – which would just be the single work, *Walking Man I* – would not actually be in the room, but visible on the patio outside through a glass wall, he may have realised that his initial idea of an environment of his paintings enclosing sculpture by Giacometti was not viable. This realisation may have been another reason – in addition to the health problems he was suffering following his serious aneurysm the year before – why he eventually declined the commission.

³ Robert Motherwell, “On Rothko”, in *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* edited by Stephanie Terenzio (Oxford University Press, 1992) pp 196-197.

⁴ UNESCO source: ADM/CCA.4/Report, 29 September 1969.



Ellsworth Kelly's mural in 1970, soon after installation in the Bar des Délégations, UNESCO Miollis Building, Paris. Patio visible to the left. (Photo by UNESCO/Dominique Roger. Used by permission.)

Though Rothko declined the UNESCO commission, he continued to work on the paintings that had been partially inspired by the idea it suggested. By the end of 1969, he had produced eighteen large “Black on Grey” paintings. Though ultimately developed as an independent series with new associations and meanings, the colours used and form of these paintings seem to retain the influence of his initial understanding that they would complement a group of Giacometti's sculptures. Robert Motherwell was the first to suggest a possible allusion to Giacometti in the colours used in the paintings:

“I was struck that they were grayish and brownish combined, rather than the extraordinarily personal hues that he usually used, indeed not unlike the colors that Giacometti himself uses in his own figure paintings.”⁵

⁵ Robert Motherwell, *op. cit.*, p197. Giacometti also used similar brown and grey colours to paint many of his sculptures.

In 1998, Jeffrey Weiss pointed out another feature of Giacometti's figure paintings that may also have influenced Rothko at this time⁶. In his figure paintings, Giacometti places the figure in a frame, or border, loosely outlined or painted onto the canvas itself. Similarly, Rothko's "Black on Grey" paintings all have narrow, white borders painted onto the canvas. This similarity may just be coincidental, but it is also possible that, here too, Rothko intended a deliberate allusion to Giacometti's practice.

To many, the "Black on Grey" paintings suggest empty landscapes. Robert Goldwater remarks on "their strange summoning of the forgotten ghosts of landscape painting."⁷ He says that Rothko "accepted the mention of such associations, and it was clear that their exact control was part of his purpose."⁸ Most of Rothko's paintings have the schematic form of a figure – albeit generally an abstract one, composed perhaps of just two or three rectangles of colour – on a ground. Unusually, in the "Black on Grey" paintings we seem to have only a ground, an empty landscape. Perhaps this was because, in Rothko's original conception, figures would have been already present in the room in the form of Giacometti's sculptures. If so, the suggestion of landscapes in the paintings may also have been influenced by the idea of sharing a space with sculpture by Giacometti.

In 2006, the Fondation Beyeler in Basel exhibited "Black on Grey" paintings by Rothko in a space that also contained sculptures by Giacometti. The photos below, taken by visitors to the exhibit, give a tantalising glimpse of what Rothko may have envisaged when first told of the UNESCO commission.



Rothko "Black on Grey" paintings and Giacometti sculptures together at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2006.

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⁶ Jeffrey Weiss, "Rothko's Unknown Space" in *Mark Rothko* edited by Jeffrey Weiss (Yale University Press, 1998) p327.

⁷ Robert Goldwater, "Rothko's Black Paintings," *Art in America* (Vol 59 No 2, March/April 1971) p 62.

⁸ Ibid.