

Mark Rothko né Marcus Rothkowitz – (1903-1970)

Chronology of his Early Years

- 1859** Father Jacob Rothkowitz born in Michalishek, a shtetl south of Dvinsk. Jacob was “a well read man” whose chosen trade was pharmacy.
- 1870** Mother Kate Goldin born in St. Petersburg to a well-off German-speaking family.
- 1886** Kate, still a gymnasium student, marries Jacob in 1886 at age 16.
- 1903** Marcus Rothkowitz born Sept 25 in Dvinsk, Lithuania, then part of Russia. “A high strung, noticeably sensitive child” — his older siblings are Sonia (born 1890) — 13 years old at his birth, Moise (born 1892) — 11, and Albert (born 1895) — 8.
- 1906-'11** Intense anti-Semitic repression — “the worst in the history of Russian Jewry”
- 1913** Mother and youngest children follow father to U.S. Land in NYC August 17. Family reunited in Portland where father had joined family members renamed Weinstein who operated “haberdashery shops” in several NW cities. Family settles into home at 834 Front Street — “Little Russia.”
- Rothko enters Failing School speaking no English, a 10 year old in the first grade. Sells newspapers downtown with cousin Max Gordon (of Village Vanguard fame). His sister recalls: “Mark was a chubby little boy and he used to come home beaten up every time.”
- 1914** Family moves to 232 Lincoln Avenue and then settles at 538 2nd Street. Father Jacob dies, March 27 — buried in cemetery of the Ahavai Shalom Cemetery. Mark enrolls in the “slightly more affluent” Shattuck School... enters 3rd grade in the fall of his second year in Portland, 5th grade by the spring. “While I was still in grade school I listened to Emma Goldman and to the I.W.W. orators...I grew up as an anarchist.”
- 1918** Living alone with his mother, enters Lincoln High School (now PSU’s Lincoln Hall). Rothko completes Lincoln in 3½ years. He later terms the high school “ridiculously easy.”
- He loved to debate, recalls his friend Max Naimark — “he was quite outspoken and didn’t hesitate to express his opinions, which were quite on the liberal tone...” Jews were excluded from the Lincoln social clubs; Rothko was the target of anti-Semitic slurs... his classmates predicted he’d become a “Pawn Broker.” He read the Greeks, admiring Herodotus, who prepared him to accept life as irrational. With intense pressure toward patriotism and political conformity — 260 students enlisted during this WWI period— Rothko advocated an “open forum” in *The Cardinal*, while many students sought to “exterminate” dissent.
- Lincoln HS – Class of '21** He worked in the shipping department of the Weinstein’s New York Outfitting Company. Caught sketching, his uncle Nate told him, “Marcus, why are you wasting your time? You will never be able to earn a living that way.” He resented these rich relatives, and his need to “sell newspapers and stack pants.”
- 1921** Graduates from Lincoln in June, one of a trio winning scholarships to Yale. Close Lincoln friends Aaron Director and Max Naimark travel east with Rothko. Yale Dean Angier had assured them: “Money was no object as long as we had brains and were good students.”



Mark Rothko Early Chronology — Page 2

- 1921** Lives off campus with Naimark, taking meals with Weinstein relatives.
At the end of their first semester, their tuition scholarships were converted to loans. Angry, Naimark drops out at the end of the academic year; Rothko takes menial jobs to stay at Yale, and moves into a dormitory near Director. He summers back in Portland.
- 1923** Rothko, Director and Simon Whitney launch *The Yale Saturday Evening Post*
“In this age of smugness and self-satisfaction destructive criticism is at least as useful, if not more so, than constructive criticism” — “The Beginning of Doubt is the Beginning of Wisdom.”
His grades average a C+, and he slowly “lost interest completely” in his courses. “The whole institution is a lie and serves only as a cloak of respectability for a social and athletic club.”
Quits Yale in the fall, lamenting it as “not intellectually rigorous,” moving to New York City to “wander around, bum about, starve a bit.” Discovers painting accidentally when visiting a friend at the Art Students League. “All the students were sketching this nude model — and right away I decided that was the life for me.” He studies there for 2 months.
- 1924** Studies acting with Josephine Dillon during several months in Portland.
“I was a better actor than Clark Gable,” Rothko claimed. Dillon soon became Gable’s first wife. Returning to New York, Rothko unsuccessfully seeks a scholarship with the American Laboratory Theater. Later calls his pictures “dramas,” his shapes the “performers.”
- 1925** Enrolls in the New School of Design, studies with Arshile Gorky.
“A sad and melancholy person... art furnished him with his single greatest source of happiness.” Then takes 6 months of classes at Art Students League with Max Weber, a major early influence. In New York he found “the freedom to develop,” he later recalled. In “dull and provincial” Portland, “he would have been a bum.” In those pre-depression years, he worked as a cutter in the garment district, a bookkeeper, and an illustrator, primarily in advertising. Lives on \$5 a week.
- 1928** Sues illustration client Lewis Browne, a rabbi turned popular author, and loses.
This ends his career in commercial art. Has his first group show at the Opportunity Gallery.
- 1929** Begins teaching art at the Center Academy, a progressive Yeshiva in Brooklyn.
- 1932** Marries Edith Sachar after wooing her playing a classical mandolin. Hard times.
His finances, even in the prosperous '20s, were “harrowing.” Now no one was buying art.
- 1933** Edith & Mark hitchhike across U.S., visit brother Albert in Dufur, and on to Portland.
They camp in Washington Park, “make breakfast on a sterno stove” and are roused from the park for nudity. He paints a number of watercolors, and has his first one-man show at the Portland Art Museum, featuring his work and that of his students, reviewed favorably in the *Oregonian*.
Has first one-man show in New York that November at Contemporary Arts Gallery, with positive response to his Portland watercolors. Declares oil on canvas his favorite medium.
- Late '30s** Becomes a WPA artist.
- '40s -'50s** Mother dies 1948. Develops a unique style; recognized as a major Abstract Expressionist.
- 1961** First one-man show of his generation — two months at the Museum of Modern Art.