# Rothko
# in Florence

FIRENZE
PALAZZO
STROZZI

14.03—23.08
2026

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***Rothko in Florence***
**Florence, Palazzo Strozzi**
**14 March–23 August 2026**

**A major exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence celebrates the master of American art, complemented by two special sections at the Museo di San Marco and the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana**

From 14 March to 23 August 2026, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi presents **one of the most significant exhibitions ever devoted in Italy to Mark Rothko**, the undisputed master of American modern art. Curated by Christopher Rothko and Elena Geuna, *Rothko in Florence* is a unique project, conceived specifically for Palazzo Strozzi to celebrate the artist's special relationship with the city. The architecture of the palazzo and Florence itself become an ideal setting in which to explore how Rothko translated the tension between classical measure and expressive freedom into painting, generating through color a renewed perception of space that transcends the two-dimensional surface of the canvas.

Organized chronologically, **the exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi** retraces Rothko's entire career: from the 1930s and 1940s, marked by figurative works in dialogue with Expressionism and Surrealism, to the 1950s and 1960s, defined by his celebrated classic paintings composed of vast fields of color capable of profoundly engaging the viewer through a language imbued with spirituality and poetry. The exhibition features works from major international museums and prestigious private collections, including The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Tate in London, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou in Paris, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

The exhibition brings together **over 70 works**, many of which have never before been shown in Italy. Its various sections illuminate the **different moments of Rothko's career**, also documenting his deep engagement with the Italian artistic tradition. His **early works** reveal an interest in symbolic and psychological approaches to the figure and in Renaissance spatial construction, as seen in *Interior* (1936), whose composition echoes Michelangelo's tomb of Giuliano de' Medici in the Sagrestia Nuova of San Lorenzo. These are followed by the **neo-Surrealist paintings** of the 1940s, which introduce a more fluid, metamorphic sensibility, anticipating the dissolution of the figure in the *Multiforms* series, suspended color fields marking his transition towards **full abstraction**. In the later large abstract canvases, such as *No. 3 / No. 13* (1949) from MoMA in New York or *Untitled* (1952–53) from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the artist turns color and light into tools for meditation. In the following years, his palette becomes more restrained, ranging from greens and blues to the earthy tones of the 1960s. The exhibition highlights the artist's **dialogue with architecture** through studies for the *Seagram* and *Harvard Murals*, with chromatic portals and closed thresholds also inspired by the Vestibule of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. Towards the end, the exhibition unfolds with the *Black and Gray* works (1969–70) and his **late works** on paper, where sienna, pink and light-blue tones attain a synthesis of introspection and rigor.

From Palazzo Strozzi, **the project extends into the city of Florence,** through special satellite interventions at two institutions of the Ministry of Culture, particularly significant to the artist: the **Museo di San Marco**, where a selection of five works will be presented in the cells with the frescoes of Fra Angelico, and the of the **Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana**, with two works in dialogue with Vestibule designed by Michelangelo.

Rothko's first encounter with Florence dates to 1950, during a trip to Italy with his wife Mell. He was deeply moved by **Fra Angelico**'s frescoes at the Convent of San Marco and by **Michelangelo**'s architectural vision in the Vestibule of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, which would inspire the *Seagram Murals* painted in the late 1950s—a dialogue that Rothko further developed during his second visit to Florence in 1966. In some of his more delicate works, one can also perceive the influence of fifteenth-century Italian art and, in particular, of Angelico's fresco technique. Rothko and Angelico shared a desire to evoke a sense of transcendence, a dimension at once distant and profoundly familiar. While Angelico achieved this through the emotional resonance of divine figures in dialogue with earthly reality, Rothko created color fields capable of accompanying viewers into different emotional depths, challenging accepted notions of abstraction and color theory.

"My father wanted his viewer to have the same religious experience seeing his paintings that he had when making them" says **Christopher Rothko**, curator of the exhibition. "Inspired by his visits to Rome and Florence, that spiritual element became even more central. Throughout the exhibition, we have arranged intimate rooms where the personal interaction with Rothko's work is maximized and also enhanced by their resonance with the historic rooms themselves."

"Rothko's personal encounter with Florence revealed to him a tradition where painting, architecture, and contemplation converge" says **Elena Geuna**, curator of the exhibition. "This exhibition situates his work within that lineage, highlighting how the quiet intensity of Fra Angelico's frescoes at Museum of San Marco and the spatial tension of Michelangelo's vestibule at the Laurentian Library influenced Rothko's quest for paintings that could unveil the deepest layers of human emotions."

"Rothko redefined the language of 20th-century painting, transforming color into experience, space, and meditation," says **Arturo Galansino**, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi Director General. "This exhibition is a unique project, conceived specifically for Palazzo Strozzi, and was born from the desire to offer a profound encounter with his work, reconstructing all the main phases of his career in our rooms through a wide selection of works and creating a dialogue between the silent power of his works and the history of the city."

*Rothko in Florence* is promoted and organized by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, in collaboration with the Ministero della Cultura: Direzione regionale Musei nazionali Toscana - Museo di San Marco and the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.

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**Biographical Note**

Mark Rothko (Markus Rothkowitz) was born in Dvinsk, Russia, in 1903. At the age of ten, he emigrated with his mother and sister to the United States, joining his father and brothers in Portland. From 1921 to 1923 he attended Yale University before moving to New York. In 1929 he began teaching at the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, a position he held for the next twenty years. In 1935 he founded the group The Ten, exhibiting with them until 1940. Between 1936 and 1937 he worked for the Easel Division of the W.P.A. Federal Art Project, painting works for government buildings. In 1940 he co-founded the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors.

His paintings and watercolors from the late 1930s to 1946 reveal his interest in Greek mythology, primitive art, and psychoanalysis. Influenced by the Surrealists, Rothko experimented with automatic drawing, creating abstract forms alluding to human and animal life. In 1945, Surrealist-inspired works were shown in his solo exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York. He also exhibited several times at the annual exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Towards the end of the 1940s, Rothko's work underwent a decisive shift: he abandoned figuration, including its Surrealist variations, to concentrate on abstract compositions that became his distinctive hallmark. His large-scale canvases were built from floating, layered expanses of color. In 1954 he held a major solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 1958 he exhibited at the Venice Biennale. That same year he accepted the celebrated commission for a cycle of paintings for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York's Seagram Building. Later, Rothko withdrew from the commission and these works were donated to Tate in London, with the agreement that they be displayed together in a dedicated room. Further exhibitions followed at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1962 and the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1963.

From 1964 to 1967 Rothko worked on a major cycle commissioned by collectors and patrons Dominique and John de Menil for a Catholic chapel designed by Philip Johnson in Houston. Now an interfaith space. In 1969 the Mark Rothko Foundation was established to provide assistance to artists in need. Mark Rothko committed suicide in his New York studio in 1970.

## FACT SHEET

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| Title | *Rothko in Florence* |
| Venue | Florence, Palazzo Strozzi |
| Dates | March 14th–August 23rd, 2026 |
| Curated by | Christopher Rothko ed Elena Geuna |
| Promoted and organized by | Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi |
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## PHOTO SHEET

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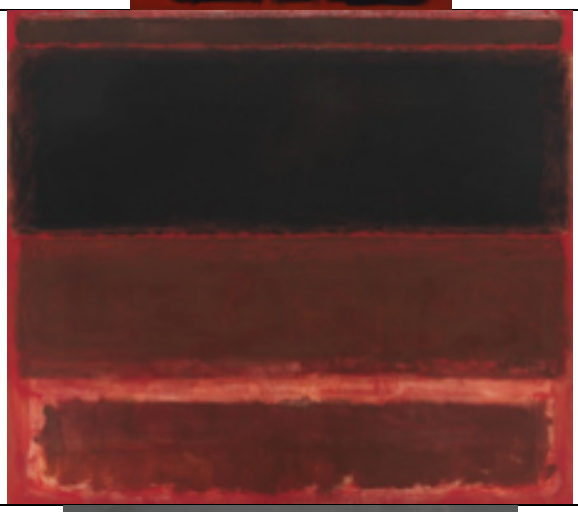
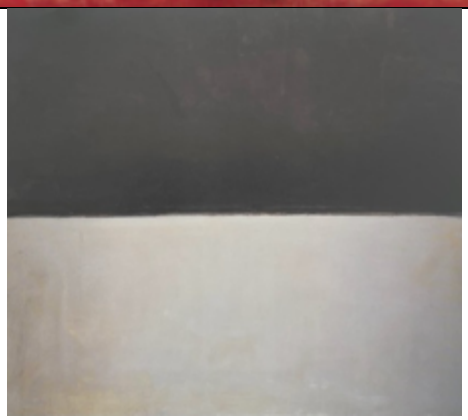
| **9.** | Mark Rothko<br>*Four Darks in Red*<br>1958<br>oil on canvas<br>258.6 × 295.6 cm<br><br>New York, Whitney Museum of American Art; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Mr. e Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz, Mrs. Samuel A. Seaver e Charles Simon, 68.9, Cat. Rais. n. 611<br><br>Digital image Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala |  |
| **10.** | Mark Rothko<br>*Untitled*<br>1969<br>acrylic on canvas<br>266.7 × 289.6 cm<br><br>Private Collection, Estate inv. 5214.69, Cat. Rais. n. 824 |  |

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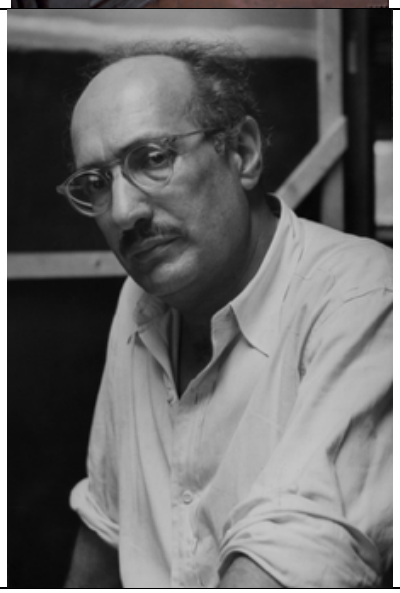
| **14.** | *Mark Rothko*<br>1952-1953 circa<br><br>Photo Henry Elkan/Courtesy The Rothko Family Archive. |  |

**EXHIBITION WALKTHROUGH**
by Christopher Rothko ed Elena Geuna

The **exhibition itinerary at Palazzo Strozzi unfolds chronologically**, allowing visitors to retrace Rothko's entire career: from the 1930s and 1940s, characterized by figurative works in dialogue with Expressionism and Surrealism, to the 1950s and 1960s, capable of deeply engaging the viewer through a vocabulary steeped in spirituality and poetry. On display are works from prestigious private collections and the world's most important international museums, with **over 70 works**—many never before exhibited in Italy. The exhibition sections trace **the different phases of the artist's research**, also documenting his relationship with the Italian artistic tradition.
From Palazzo Strozzi, **the project extends to the city of Florence**, involving two places particularly dear to the artist in special sections at two important institutes of the Ministry of Culture: the **Museo di San Marco**, with 5 works in dialogue with Beato Angelico's frescoes, and the **Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,** with 2 works in the Vestibule designed by Michelangelo.

**Room 1**
**Figuration and surrealism**
Mark Rothko did not study painting in grade school or at university. He came to art in his mid-20s, when he attended a figure drawing class at the Art Students' League in New York with a friend. Thus, almost by chance, his life-long love affair with, and untiring dedication to, visual art was launched. He began, as did all the abstractionists of his generation, by painting the figure: nudes, urban scenes, still lives, portraits. We see examples of all these genres in this gallery, the works chosen particularly to emphasize Rothko's close ties to European history and art tradition.
The smallest works shown here are all made on gessoed panels, linking him to methods employed since the Renaissance, not least by the Florentines. The tiny odalisque painting *Untitled (Woman Reclining on a Couch)* recalls famous examples by Goya, Ingres and his beloved Matisse, while *Interior*'s architectural features could well hail from an ancient temple, mausoleum or indeed Michelangelo's famed Medici tombs at San Lorenzo.
By the early 1940s Rothko had moved to a neo-surrealist style, propelled by references to classical myths of Greece, Rome, Babylon, and beyond. This provided him a path to the unconscious, a common language through which to engage his viewer. Hence, titled works such as *Room in Karnak* and *Tiresias* (over which he labored with particular intensity), which addressed core elements of our shared humanity. Similarly, these works often feature strange biomorphic figures and primordial creatures that also harken to our ancestral roots. These populate the watercolors from this period with particular frequency and poignancy. Note also the dynamism of these works; the freely drawn elements and the active scraping and rubbing of the canvas. These elements will essentially disappear from his later, color-field work and Rothko's quest to communicate will be carried forward in new guises.

**Room 2**
**Multiforms, pre-classic and early classic works**
Some time in 1946, Rothko makes a relatively rapid transition from his neo-surreal style to what will become known as his *Multiforms*. The figures of the early years become increasingly abstracted until they dissolve altogether.
The paintings of 1946-47 can seem formless, with their many irregular patches in vibrant hues. In these first pure abstractions, the bold juxtapositions of color for which Rothko is known are dominant, but as we move into 1948 and 1949, form comes to play an essential role. The surfaces become more organized, simplified, their communication more direct. They take on

architectural qualities, perhaps inspired by the ancient Greco-Roman sites that Rothko will soon see in person. By the end of 1949, Rothko is painting in his well-known classic format, of which *No. 3 / No. 13* is a striking early example.

**Room 3**
**The 1950s**
In the 1950s, Mark Rothko developed the visual language that would define his mature work. Moving away from mythological subjects and biomorphic forms, he focused on a new pictorial language characterized by two or three floating rectangles of color that seem to hover within the canvas. In 1950, Rothko travelled to Europe, visiting Venice, Florence, and Rome. The encounter with Italian art, from Giotto and Fra Angelico's frescoes to Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, left a lasting impression. The sense of balance and scale discovered in these works influenced Rothko's approach to painting, even as he pursued a language free from representation. Through the 1950s compositions, Rothko explored how color and light could create a direct emotional experience for the viewer. The palette moves from bright yellows and reds to deeper, more subdued tones. The brushwork is soft and atmospheric, with layers of thin paint that allow for light to emerge from within the surface, as seen most typically in *No. 12*, 1951, and *Orange and Tan*, 1954. We see Rothko recognize the emotional immediacy of his paintings while resisting being defined by color alone. He denied the tranquility often attributed to his work, describing each surface as containing an intense, even violent, energy which pulsates within the canvas.

**Room 4**
**The mid–late 1950s**
In the mid to late 1950s, Rothko's palette shifted toward cooler, more subdued tones. The luminous reds and yellows of the earlier years gave way to deep greens and blues, signaling a new phase of introspection. In these works, color seems to turn inward, creating a dense atmosphere of suspension and quiet reflection.
During these years, Rothko began teaching at Brooklyn College and developed a close intellectual exchange with curator Katharine Kuh, who invited him to exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1954. Their correspondence reveals his belief that paintings should speak directly to viewers, without the filter of critical interpretation. "Silence," he implied, was the most honest form of engagement with art, an idea that mirrors the meditative stillness of these green and blue works.
Between 1955 and 1957, Rothko exhibited more widely in the United States and eventually in Europe, gaining increasing recognition while defending the autonomy of his vision. His reading of Søren Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud informed a deeper exploration of the psychological dimensions of color and space.

**Room 5**
**Sketches for *Seagram Murals* and classic canvases**
The studies shown here, spanning from 1958 to 1962, chart the evolution of compositional structures that would later appear in the *Seagram* and *Harvard* mural cycles. In the *Seagram Murals Studies*, Rothko explored how closely balanced zones of tone could generate an architecture of quiet tension. Using tempera paint on textured sheets, he tested the proportions and intervals between forms, adjusting the weight of each plane to evoke a sense of inward pressure and enclosure. We observe in these works how his thinking about spatial relationships guided the development of his mural compositions. Notably these works coincide with Rothko's 1950 and 1959 trips to Italy and his immersive experiences in the architectural spaces of Rome and Florence. Stripped of chromatic force, the accompanying drawings in ink and graphite from 1962, emphasize pause and the breathing space between forms. Together,

they offer a glimpse into the precision and restraint that underpinned even the most monumental of his canvases.

**Room 6**
**Sketches for *Harvard Murals***
The studies gathered here trace Rothko's transition from the Seagram commission to the *Harvard Murals* of 1962. Executed in ink, watercolor, and graphite on modest sheets of paper, these works articulate an austere architecture of feeling.
At Harvard, Rothko sought to create an enveloping environment of color that would evoke, as he said, "death and resurrection." The preparatory drawings reveal how he conceived these meditations as a cycle, an unfolding rhythm of dark and light. The alternating vertical bands and the double-sided watercolors suggest his continual revision of proportion and balance, as if the act of turning a page mirrored the shifting register of emotion itself.
Here, scale is replaced by concentration. The translucent washes and hesitant lines expose the physical immediacy of Rothko's hand. These studies bear witness to an artist translating metaphysical ambition into fragile paper and ink. The 1959 *Untitled* oil on watercolor paper, though not part of the Harvard study series, belongs to this same moment, registering on a reduced scale the brooding chromatic weight and architectural compression that would soon unfold across the murals themselves.

**Room 7**
**The early1960s**
In 1958, Rothko was commissioned to create a series of murals for the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York, designed by Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe (sketches for which can be seen in Room 5). To fully conceive the paintings, he rented a former gymnasium on the Bowery, where he built scaffolding to match the proportions of the restaurant's walls. Working on this scale led him to think of painting as a kind of architecture, an environment that could surround and absorb the viewer.
Though he would ultimately withdraw from the commission, the paintings carry the architectural imprint of his earlier encounter with Florence. Rothko had been deeply influenced by Michelangelo's Vestibule of the Laurentian Library, whose blocked windows and heavy stillness conveyed, for him, a distinct kind of emotional intensity.

"[Michelangelo] achieved just the kind of feeling I'm after," Rothko observed. "He makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall."

The works in this room, executed in the years surrounding the Seagram project, share that same sense of compression and inward pressure.
Broad fields of maroon, umber, and black seem to contain their own restrained force, as if light was struggling to breathe beneath the surface. *Untitled*, 1962 is, in fact, an early vision of the compositional format for the Harvard mural commission of that year.

**Room 8**
**The late 1950s–early 1960s**
In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Rothko's palette deepened into a range of denser more saturated reds. In 1958, Rothko represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, alongside David Smith, Mark Tobey, and Seymour Lipton. The exhibition revealed a decisive shift in his painting with the emergence of the dark red and brown tonalities that would define many canvases of the coming decade.
The following year, he travelled again through Italy, visiting sites such as the temples at Paestum and the frescoes of Pompeii, that would continue to inspire him. The deep, weathered reds of Roman walls and the enveloping stillness of those spaces profoundly marked his sense

of color and scale. We can trace those impressions through the works in this gallery. The thin layers of pigment vary from dull brick to glowing crimson, creating a space of compressed luminosity and evoking a meditation on the endurance of light within darkness. These canvases confront the viewer with a concentrated intensity, where human emotion is held at the edge of darkness.
During the early 1960s, Rothko's international recognition grew, with retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1961) and major European institutions such as the Whitechapel Gallery in London (1961).

**Room 9**
**The late 1960s**
Much of the last decade of Rothko's career was occupied with public commissions, which inspired him to paint in series. We have gleaned aspects of these projects in the studies for the Seagram and Harvard murals in the previous galleries and can see further examples in the continuation of this exhibit at the Laurentian Library.
1964–67 would be wholly occupied with the monumental (posthumously titled) Rothko Chapel. In the years following his work on the Chapel, Rothko painted almost entirely on paper but quickly pivoted to canvas in 1969 when UNESCO sought to engage him and Alberto Giacometti to create a room in their Paris headquarters. Devising a new variation on his classic style and employing acrylic paint for the first time on canvas, Rothko proceeded to make a series of eighteen *Black and Grey* paintings, well in excess of UNESCO's commission, which was never finalized. The paintings are notable for the active brushwork and turbulent grey fields; the works framed for the first time in a white border that clearly defines the picture plane.

**Room 10**
**Late works on paper**
In the last months of his life, while working on the *Black and Grey* canvases, Rothko made three series of large scale works on paper. Some in tones similar to those canvases, some so dark they need several minutes to be fully perceived, some in gentle, ethereal washes of nearly pastel color.
Dominated by soft blues, rose-tinted earths, and terracotta tones, the chromatic range evokes a Quattrocento sensibility, as if Rothko were engaging with an archaic, contemplative mode of painting, distilled to its essentials. These are amongst Rothko's most personal utterances. Inward turning, with a quiet yet palpable beauty, they invite a spiritual journey for the viewer, parallel to the artist's own.

**At the Museo di San Marco**
In 1950, Mark Rothko was 47 and finally able to afford the trip to Europe he had dreamed of for decades. Spending much of his time in Italy, he made a career-altering visit to Florence, where he was able to enter into spirited conversation with the Renaissance masters—painters, sculptors and architects—he had admired from afar. The convent of San Marco, however, impacted him more than he could have expected. Having allotted a generous portion of an afternoon, he stayed until closing and returned the next day, clearly moved by Fra Angelico's luminous frescoes and the tangible devotional atmosphere that permeated each cell and the convent as a whole. He would return in 1966 for a renewal. Rothko would later speak of wanting to make small roadside chapels with a single painting for contemplation. No doubt, Fra Angelico's example at San Marco helped spark that idea. We have placed five small Rothko works, in different media and from different periods, in direct conversation with five of the frescos that so inspired him. (Cells 1, 3, 4, 6, 7). Similarities in color, texture and especially spirit, have dictated those choices.

**At the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana**
Mark Rothko visited the Laurentian Library, with Michelangelo's striking Vestibule in 1950, a middle-aged painter having only recently discovered his signature style. He was immediately struck by the Renaissance master's use of space, his ability to completely control the experience in the room and wholly alter the focus of all who enter. He would recall nine years later, when finishing his monumental series of mural panels for New York's Seagram building, that he had aspired to create the same effect with these murals that Michelangelo had in his Vestibule:

"After I had been at work for some time, I realized that I was much influenced subconsciously by Michelangelo's walls in the staircase room of the Medicean Library in Florence. He achieved just the kind of feeling I'm after—he makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall."

Today, we can feel the resonance of Rothko's Florence experience at Tate Modern in London and Kawamura Memorial Museum in Japan, where rooms of his *Seagram Murals* surround the visitor in a holistic space. On view in the Vestibule are two preparatory studies for Rothko's Seagram panels. They are placed in the context of the dramatically enclosed space that inspired Rothko to create one of his own. Additional studies can be viewed at Palazzo Strozzi.

## EXCERPTS FROM THE CATALOGUE

### Introduction

*by Luigi De Siervo and Arturo Galansino*
Excerpt from the exhibition catalogue published by Marsilio Arte

The Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is proud to present *Rothko in Florence*, one of the most significant undertakings ever devoted to Mark Rothko. The aim of this project is to offer a broad and extensive interpretation of the artist's work, while at the same time establishing a unique dialogue with the city of Florence and some of its most emblematic sights. The Renaissance architecture of Palazzo Strozzi, the Museum of San Marco, and the Vestibule of the Laurentian Library draw us back to the bond formed by Rothko with the city during his visits in 1950 and 1966. His encounter with Florence permits a broader interpretation of his research, presenting a unique occasion to explore the tension between classical measure and freedom of expression typical of his production.

With this exhibition, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is once again asserting its role as a cultural platform capable of connecting tradition and modernity, opening Florence to international art and linking the city's historic heritage to the most innovative artistic research. The Foundation has been furthering this endeavor for several years now, developing projects designed to highlight Florence's Renaissance identity as a meeting place for different languages and reflections on the present. Thus, Rothko's encounter with the city becomes an occasion to confirm the strength of this dialogue between past and present, offering the public new ways of experiencing knowledge and participation. The exhibition includes over seventy pieces that will allow visitors to follow the artist's evolution from the first figurative and surrealist studies of the 1930s and '40s, through the dissolution of form and the emergence of his so-called *Multiforms*, to his works from the '60s and '70s, in which color, light, and space define a new experience of vision. Each hall of the show is conceived both as a phase in time and as a sphere of sensations, thus calling attention to the chromatic evolution that mirrors Rothko's deepest interior evolution.

This project was made possible by an extraordinary collaboration with the Mark Rothko Foundation and with the institutions, museums, and private collections that contributed crucial artworks. We wish to express a special gratitude to the curators of this exhibition, Elena Geuna and Christopher Rothko, whose participation was essential to devise the layout of the show and develop its curatorship. Our sincere thanks to Kate Rothko, as well: the generosity with which both she and Christopher made available essential loans and followed every phase of the project was a precious contribution without which this show could not have been accomplished. Our thanks also go to the public supporters of Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi—the City of Florence, Regione Toscana, Città Metropolitana di Firenze and the Chamber of Commerce—along with Fondazione CR Firenze, Intesa Sanpaolo, Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati, and the Palazzo Strozzi Partners Committee, which brings together our private patrons. Further thanks go to the members of the Board of Directors, of the Board of Auditors, and of the Scientific Committee, as well as the whole work group of Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, who with professionalism and passion made this new endeavor possible through their contribution to its scientific and organizational quality.

**Rothko in Florence. Rothko in Rome. Stone, Space and Spirit**
*by Christopher Rothko*
Excerpt from the exhibition catalogue published by Marsilio Arte

CONFESSIONAL INTROIT
Writing about Rothko is always an exercise in conjecture. His paintings—regardless of period—do not immediately convey their subject matter. Nebulous, mysterious, incongruous (some would argue murky, turbid, empty) they challenge us to make sense of what we see, perhaps through the rather indirect avenue of what we feel. Near voids of seemingly shapeless color or in earlier periods, bizarre interiors with figures apparently unaware of one another—content and purport easily elude our grasp. Even the mythic titles in the neo-surreal years of the 1940s (e.g. *Tiresias*, *Room in Karnak*) are half-measures, pointing the viewer in a specific direction that is ultimately just a steppingstone to a meaning far more abstract and universal. And Rothko himself said so little. Not a journal-keeper and an indifferent letter writer—or—perhaps simply destined to write to people who were indifferent about his letters. In either case, only a few dozen have come down to us, the majority concerning the most banal of subjects. As we try to find clarity about Rothko, it does not help that my father has also been accused of being secretive, guarding his homemade small batch paint formulas jealously and cultivating a certain reclusive mystique. In truth, we should remember that in the 1950s and 60s the number of people deeply interested in a contemporary American artist was still quite small. There were few paparazzi seeking him out.

Ultimately, I believe that my father simply wanted to paint. Not document his thoughts, not write down formulas, not catalog techniques, and certainly not waste his time with small talk, spoken or written. He spoke to the world largely through his art, and if that meant he was at times isolated, that did not concern him. He left the studio and traveled reluctantly. Perhaps we are being unfair. His unfinished book, *The Artist's Reality*, written when he was in his mid to late 30s, gives a remarkably rich picture of his ideas about art, even in its fragmentary form. Only the rare artist has left such a testament. There are also numerous, strewn with a disorganized aggregation of references, scribbles, phone numbers, notes to self, but also fragmentary ideas that will find voice in more finished writings and indirectly in the paintings themselves. They are attractive crumbs that sometimes remind you of the delicious Rothko cake you have eaten, but more often suggest the cake that you wish Rothko had finished baking. How much do all these pieces amount to? How much do they lead to conclusions and how much do they simply stir the imagination? Is there perhaps more air than substance in what Rothko has left us and, by extension, in what has been written on the subject of his art? I am perhaps the guiltiest party, having published hundreds of pages of, yes, conjecture, about Rothko, the document you have in hand simply the latest in this series of musings upon ideas inflated from scraps. Italia, however, is a special case. It was the one place my father was not reluctant to travel to, and when he was not there it continually fired his imagination as he poured over its rich pictorial, architectural and archeological record.

This focus, this passion, is reflected in his writing and no doubt in his artwork as well. His three visits were notable for their length and depth, leaving scraps that are, at minimum, more numerous, at times more substantive, occasionally verifiable and always so beguiling that they simply cannot be left on the table. It is indeed my obligation, therefore, to stew these ingredients into something more digestible. *Zuppa* di Rothko, therefore, is served! Rothko's preoccupation with Italy—of the Renaissance and ancient times—stemmed from multiple sources and had multiple expressions, but it is clear from what he writes in *The Artist's Reality* that he yearned for the sense of a golden age, as so resplendently represented by 15th and 16th century Florence: The image of Masaccio, therefore, acclaimed and borne by the populace with revelry and dancing through the streets of Florence to the church of Santa Maria

Novella, and the suggestion that such great art was acceptably addressed to so many, cannot but move us deeply to a wish for emulation. Even though Rothko proceeds to express some cynicism about this scene, there is no doubt about his sense of longing as he, by contrast, looks in vain for an interested museum, gallery or even a lone buyer for his own artwork. Such struggles were set against the backdrop of Great Depression era New York, where money was hard to come by, shoppers for artwork more so, and collectors of American art rarer still. Largely self-taught as an artist, Rothko's art historical education was also the product of his own studies. His reading of the famous Bernhard Berenson made an enormous impact, but he learned primarily through immersing himself in the encyclopedic Metropolitan Museum. In *The Artist's Reality* Rothko begins to outline a broad history of art, but his primary focus, at least in the portion he finished, is the Italian Renaissance. He notes not only the greatness of what these artists achieved, not only the acclaim they received, but looking closely at their work, recognizes kindred spirits; artists grappling with the same questions as him—structural, technical, philosophical. His trips in 1950, 1959 and 1966 throughout Italy will confirm and expand what he gleaned from the many fine examples he had seen in books and the museums of New York and cement his sense of himself as a painter working in the context of an historical artistic tradition. These journeys through Tuscany, Veneto, Rome, Pompeii and the south, reinforced his determination to create a timeless art that, like the work he encounters on these visits, continues to resonate through the ages. […]

BUILDING ROTHKO BUILDINGS

The early 1950s brought Rothko recognition, but he longed for a public commission, something he had dreamed of for well over a decade. That is perhaps curious for someone living in New York in the 1940s and 50s, a city not particularly well-endowed with civic art displays. Notably, even many of the murals created by WPA artists during the Great Depression had already been painted over or left forgotten in underutilized government buildings. Rothko, as I have noted before, was not painting the world around him, but instead the world as it appeared in his mind; a mind apparently populated actively by the great piazzas and monuments of Europe. When Rothko finally received that long-imagined commission in 1958, it seems too good to be true (it was). His works would be displayed in one of New York's first and most-important, modernist buildings—the Seagram Building—designed by the legendary Mies van der Rohe. He would work directly with the young, but already notable American architect, Philip Johnson. And it paid more than he had made in his entire career to that point. This is not the place to detail the internal and interpersonal strife that ensued, crowned by Rothko's withdrawal from the Four Seasons Restaurant mural project, some 33 monumental painted panels later. That architectural backdrop is essential, however, for Rothko does not speak of his painting commission and *certainly* not of a decorating project. Instead, he reports quite succinctly, "I have made a place" [donated to the Tate Gallery with the condition not to be separated from each other. Rothko said: "They are not pictures; I have made a place."]. And of course, that "place" is in a building with no filigree in sight, but which instead celebrates simple form dictated by function. Essences. Very Rothko.

Despite this, he is hardly looking to Mies for inspiration. He would teach in a Bauhaus-informed art department shortly after this assignment and could muster *nothing* positive to say about that teaching modality. Instead, Michelangelo and Florence direct his thinking about his program, as I discussed above. The form and structure of the *Seagram Murals*, however, seem directly derived from classical architecture. Pillars and arches, friezes over doorways, portals to… The seemingly rough-hewn vertical elements of the mural paintings that seem to embody age and wear yet ultimately communicate solidity. Stone and time echoing through paint. He had seen all of this in the two months he and his young wife, Mell, stayed in Rome in 1950, reportedly spending sunup to sundown each day, poking their noses into each church they encountered and every cranny of the Roman Forum. The city and its buildings embody both

the palpable, inevitable passage of time and the sense of timelessness he hoped to capture in his paintings. The *Seagrams* were not exactly paintings, however. Rothko said as much when he envisaged not works but “a place.” But we need not listen to Rothko—we can listen to the works themselves. Proportioned to fill the entire breadth of the wall in a private banquet room, with a captive audience of diners destined to look at them for hours, these works became visually part of the walls themselves, demanding not so much our attention as our semi-conscious awareness of their incessant pulsation. If it worked, that pulsation would serve as a deeply human communication, a heartbeat that coincided with our own. That vision was not to be at Seagram, but the permanent rooms of these works installed at Tate Modern in London and in Tokyo evoke much of the murals’ same essential presence, and their slow, insistent cadence. In truth, the *Seagrams* are not murals at all, but canvas panels with no inherent attachment to the wall.

The choice of medium was primarily a matter of pragmatics, of period, of fashion. It mattered little to Rothko, whose model for making an all-encompassing painted space was the fresco. Indeed, he noted that when receiving the commission, he “immediately envisioned the refectory of the San Marco church with the wall painting by Fra Angelico.” Whether in Florence or Venice or Assisi or Pompeii, or Giotto’s glorious encirclement of the viewer in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Rothko understood the power of merging the twodimensional language of painting with the spatial command of architecture. Many of the Renaissance masters of the fresco worked closely with the architects responsible for the design of the buildings of which their frescoes became a part, and in some cases, like Raphael, they served both functions. This was the *modus operandi* Rothko himself moved towards as he sought to create spaces that spoke with true unanimity. Viewing frescos primarily in grand public settings helped Rothko understand how two-dimensional pieces, created for a specific context, could help unify even a large, highly ornamented space. He loved their sense of permanence; an integral, at times dominant, part of the room. Mated irrevocably to the structure, with a tactile presence inherent in their material and situation, the fresco established an ideal for Rothko’s own projects.

All of these visual and spatial priorities come together for my father in the Rothko Chapel, which represents his most complete and uncompromised interface with his viewer. It was the only time he was able to command and integrate all visual, spatial and architectural elements in a project. The octagonal shape that surrounds the visitor on all sides with Rothko’s enormous, nearly monochromatic, mural panels offers both utter voids and infinite vistas. The room and paintings essentially become one, all-encompassing, environment. There is essentially nothing else—no distractions from the direct interaction of viewer and room, viewer and *Rothko’s* room. Rothko admired and often envied the collaboration of the fresco painter and the architect of the Renaissance: how they worked in concert with one another, aware of the counterpart’s role in realizing the room, with a shared purpose of the glorification of God. But at the Rothko Chapel, there was room only for his one, unified, vision. As both artist and designer of the interior, he creates a choir of fourteen paintings singing in unison. The result is more distilled, more directed and more purposeful than anything else in his oeuvre. The paintings are scaled to fill nearly the entire wall space, and the walls are proportioned to exactly accommodate the paintings, as if they were one and the same. Rothko essentially reduces painting to architecture.

This in not to say the paintings are functional. Instead, they are *essential*. The work is holistic, a single utterance. This is why my father and architect Phillip Johnson’s projects broke down at both the Seagram Building and the Chapel. Johnson ultimately wanted Rothko to decorate his rooms. My father wanted Johnson’s job— to define and sculpt how we interact with the room, with our environs. He hoped to spark deep reflection… and inspiration. We should not mistake vision for voice, however.

The Rothko Chapel may embody Rothko's highly refined concept, but the building is a concentration of centuries of voices—a grand chorus echoing through Rothko's mind that continues to echo through that room. When you are in that sacred space, you are utterly alone with your thoughts, your wishes, your fears, your destiny—and—you are on a parallel journey with all your fellow beings, who are navigating/have navigated/will navigate the same existential passages as you. These are our fellow participants in the human condition, embodiments of our shared humanity. For Rothko, those centuries of voices included most essentially, the generations of philosophers and holy men, who wrestled with the same questions he did, and struggled to render them for the public. Birth. Death. Destiny. Purpose. These too form the unwavering pulse of the Chapel. Venerable thinkers may have helped shape Rothko's concept of the room, but he looked perhaps most actively, to the artists and architects of earlier eras, as he searched for the most direct way to realize his concept and address those timeless questions by means of art.

**Mark Rothko: The Silence of Color**
*by Elena Geuna*
Excerpt from the exhibition catalogue published by Marsilio Arte

Florence is a city built on the belief that the visible can lead us toward the invisible. Nowhere else is the boundary between the material and the spiritual so deliberately thinned, by the gold of an altarpiece or the hush of light on plastered walls. In the early Renaissance, artists and thinkers here believed that geometry was a pathway to grace, that proportion might reflect a divine order, and that the placement of color on a wall could alter the soul of the one who beheld it. Without separating the rational from the spiritual, beauty itself became a form of metaphysical knowledge shaped through harmony, expressed in proportion and color. Transcendence, in the Florentine sense, was found in the careful articulation of the world, in forms of expression that were anchored to physical space while pointing beyond it.

Few works embody this vision more fully than the frescoes of Fra Angelico, painted between 1439 and 1444 for the cells of the Observant Dominican monastery of San Marco. His frescoes, whether a *Visitation*, or a *Crucifixion*, were conceived to open a contemplative space where silence and color could communicate a truth beyond words. In the stillness of the monastic cells, the frescoes vibrate with ethereal hues of blue, rose, and ocher, hovering at the boundary where the image becomes inseparable from the act of inward contemplation. It was to these rooms that Mark Rothko came more than five centuries later, during his first visit to Italy in the spring of 1950. We can almost picture him, ambling through the halls of the Museum of San Marco, alone in the soft Florentine light, stopping in front of each of Fra Angelico's frescoes as well as his altarpieces. Before those radiant yet pared-down scenes emptied of spectacle, suffused with tonal restraint, he would have recognized an artistic logic remarkably aligned with his own, where meaning unfolds only through the patience of looking. From the Museum of San Marco, he made his way to the Laurentian Library, where Michelangelo's staircase presses inward and upward, as though space itself were contemplating its own form. In its grandeur and calculated disquiet, the architecture offers a drama of form that Rothko, ever attentive to the emotional valence of proportion and weight, would not have missed. Years later, Rothko would recognize in Michelangelo's architecture a theater of space and gravity, and would recall the Laurentian Library as formative, citing it directly when reflecting on a series of murals he had begun for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York, part of a commission for the Seagram Building. Though he would ultimately withdraw from the Seagram commission, the paintings carry the architectural imprint of that Florentine encounter. Rothko had been struck by the vestibule's blocked windows and heavy stillness, which, to him, expressed a very particular kind of emotional intensity, charged with an unresolved innermost pressure. "He achieved just the kind of feeling I'm after," Rothko remarked of Michelangelo. "He makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall." It is no coincidence that Florence provides the setting for this exhibition.

For Rothko, Florence was an encounter with a visual language that mirrored his own longings. If Fra Angelico's frescoes offered a model of contemplative openness, then the Laurentian Library presented an embodiment of the existential weight Rothko would later pursue in the darker, more enclosed canvases of the 1960s. The city's chromatic restraint and its capacity to stage the visible as a threshold to the invisible resonated deeply with his own evolving vision. In Florence, and its Masters, the artist was able to recognize an architecture of silence that would come to define his own painterly language.

**INSIGHTS**
**Biography**

**1903-1909**
Marcus Rotkovitch is born on September 25, 1903, in Dvinsk (Russian Empire, today Latvia). He grows up in a secular Jewish family but at his father's insistence, attends a Talmudic school, the first member of the family to receive a religious education.

**1910-1913**
Due to financial difficulties and the rise of antisemitism, Marcus's father, Jacob, emigrates to the United States, settling in Portland, Oregon. In 1913, Marcus, his mother and sister join his brothers
and father in Portland. The family name is registered as Rothkowitz.

**1914**
After his father's death, Marcus works after school as a newspaper seller to supplement family income.

**1921-1923**
Marcus receives a scholarship to Yale University, where he studies philosophy, French, European history, psychology, and literature. Scholarhip is revoked in 1922, and Marcus works to finance his studies. He leaves in 1923 without graduating and moves to New York City.

**1924-1929**
In New York, Marcus works odd jobs and searches for direction. At the invitation of a friend, he attends a life drawing class at The Art Students League. He falls in love with making art. He attends two more courses at the Art Students League but remains largely self-taught. In 1928 Marcus meets the painter Milton Avery, who will act as mentor. Marcus begins teaching art to children at the Brooklyn Jewish Center School. He paints evenings and weekends in his home studio in a more or less realist style through the end of the 1930s.

**1932-1939**
Marcus marries Edith Sachar. 1933 brings his first museum exhibition, held at the Portland Art Museum. He insists on including a room of his young students' work. Frequents museums and galleries, particularly the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the MoMA. In 1935 he participates in the founding of the modernist artist's group "The Ten". In 1936, he paints his only self-portrait, presenting himself as a descendant of Rembrandt. From 1937 Rothko works for the Federal Art Project of the New Deal. He has few exhibits and fewer sales. In 1938 he becomes an American citizen. In 1940, Marcus begins to use the name to Mark Rothko, a change that is legally formalized only in 1959.

**1941-1942**
Rothko stops painting to devote himself to the study of philosophy, and literature. He writes the majority of his unfinished book of philosophical writings, published posthumously as *The Artist's Reality*. He emerges from this period making paintings with mythological subjects on canvas and paper. He will develop this neosurrealist style into 1946.

**1944**
Rothko's highly contentious marriage with Edith Sacher ends.

**1945**
Rothko exhibits at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. He marries Mary Alice (Mell) Beistle.

**1946**
Rothko embraces complete abstraction and ceases to use titles for his works. *Multiforms* developed continuously from 1946 and are exhibited by Betty Parsons Gallery, who represents Rothko beginning in 1947.

**1947-1951**
Rothko holds five important solo exhibitions at the Betty Parsons Gallery. The classic, “sectional” canvases start in 1949 and become Rothko’s signature style.

**1950**
Rothko and wife Mell undertake their first trip to Europe. In Florence, Rothko is deeply impressed by Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library Vestibule and by Fra Angelico’s frescoes at the Museo di San Marco. Birth of their daughter, Kate.

**1954**
Rothko has his first major exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, curated by Katharine Kuh. Rothko joins the Sidney Janis Gallery and starts teaching at Brooklyn College.

**1958**
Rothko represents the United States at the XXIX Venice Biennale, together with Seymour Lipton, David Smith, and Mark Tobey. The room devoted to Rothko, featuring ten paintings, marks the first major appreciation of his work in Europe.

**1958**
Architect Phillip Johnson commissions Rothko to produce a series of works for the dining room at his Four Seasons Restaurant in Mies van der Rohe’s prestigious, modernist, Seagram Building. Rothko works on the huge mural paintings in his Bowery Street studio and conceives, for the first time, a unified series intended for a specific location.

**1959 Summer**
Rothko undertakes a second trip to Europe with his family. They arrive in Naples and visit Paestum, Pompeii, Tarquinia, Venice, and Torcello; they then travel to Paris, Brussels, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London. Rothko and his family probably do not stop in Florence.

**1959 Autumn**
Upon returning from Europe, Rothko withdraws from the Seagram commission and retains the completed works. He recognizes that his highly serious paintings do not belong in a private dining room.

**1960**
Duncan Phillips opens a room of four Rothko paintings at his Phillips Collection in Washington. It is the first “Rothko Room”.

**1961**
New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) devotes its first major retrospective of an American painter to Rothko. Through the Sidney Janis Gallery, Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo purchases three canvases selected in Rothko’s studio. These are the first of many Rothko paintings he will collect.

**1962**
Rothko breaks with Sidney Janis, whose gallery had presented the new generation of Pop Art artists. The MoMA exhibition is presented in Italy at the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Rome (March 31–October 17), organized by Palma Bucarelli. In March Rothko begins working in his new studio at 1485 First Avenue. On October 24, Rothko meets with the president of Harvard to discuss murals for the conference and dining room of the Society of Fellows.

**1963**
Rothko signs a contract with the Marlborough Gallery. Son Chirstopher is born.

**1964-1965**
Rothko receives a commission from Dominique and John de Menil for a cycle of works intended for a Catholic chapel at St. Thomas Catholic University in Houston. Rothko works on the paintings in a new studio at 157 East 69th Street, set up to create the chapel environment.

**1966**
Rothko undertakes his third trip to Europe. The family spends five weeks in Rome. Rothko attends the Spoleto Festival and then visits Giotto's frescoes in Assisi, and Piero della Francesca's cycle in Arezzo. In Florence, Rothko once again spends time admiring Fra Angelico's frescoes at the convent of San Marco and visits the Uffizi.

**1968**
Rothko is hospitalized for an aortic aneurysm. Following medical advice, Rothko works only on small format works on paper.

**1969**
Rothko paints increasingly large works on paper and eventually turns again to canvas. Despite failing health, he begins a new series, the *Black and Gray* paintings as well as two series of large scale works on paper, one in brown and gray tones and the other one in atmospheric pastel shades. Rothko decides to donate a set of the *Seagram Murals* to the Tate Gallery in London. He separates from his wife Mell.

**1970**
On February 25, Rothko ends his life in his New York studio. One year later, the Rothko Chapel in Houston formally opens.

## ACTIVITIES AND PUBLIC PROGRAM

Palazzo Strozzi pays special attention to its visitors and offers a wide range of activities designed to make the experience of art engaging for all audiences.
Discover these and all our activities on our website: www.palazzostrozzi.org

### Guided Tours

For groups: €100 adult groups, €80 university student groups; max. 20 people.
For school groups: €3 per student.
For individual visitors in italian: free with exhibition ticket every Monday at 18.00 and Sunday at 15.00, with the support of Unicoop Firenze.
Reservation required: T. +39 055 2645155 / prenotazioni@palazzostrozzi.org

### *Listening to Color*

Fondazione CR Firenze and Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi promote a series of special guided tours of the exhibition through an immersive journey into the painting of Mark Rothko, combining extended observation, listening to musical excerpts, and narration of the artist's life, discovering a selection of works in the exhibition at Palazzo Strozzi.
Tuesday 21 April, Tuesday 28 April, Wednesday 13 May, Wednesday 20 May, Tuesday 9 June, Tuesday 16 June, 18.00.
Reservation required via the Fondazione CR Firenze portal, which offers free admission and activities to residents of the Metropolitan City of Florence.

### Family Kit

Materials designed for families with children aged 5 and up to visit the exhibition together and play with art. A journey through the rooms of Palazzo Strozzi with artwork observation prompts and ideas for reflection. Available free at the ticket office and downloadable from palazzostrozzi.org. Supported by Gruppo Beyfin S.p.A.

### Family Workshops

Special exhibition tours with workshops to be shared by children and adults.
Free activities with exhibition ticket. Supported by Gruppo Beyfin S.p.A.
Reservation required: T. +39 055 2645155 / prenotazioni@palazzostrozzi.org

- *Between Two Colors:* every Saturday at 10.30 (ages 3–6)
- *Like the Sun on Your Back:* every Sunday at 10.30 (ages 7–12)

### *No Grown-Ups*

Guided tours of the exhibition reserved for teenagers, led by students from the Liceo Artistico di Porta Romana (Florence) and of Sesto Fiorentino.
Wednesday 6, 13, 20, 27 May and 3 June, 16.30.
Free activity with exhibition ticket. Supported by Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati.

### *Exhibition Kit*

Materials designed for teenagers "of all ages," created to explore the exhibition independently or with others and to approach the work of Mark Rothko. Developed in collaboration with upper secondary school students from Florence.
Available free at the ticket office and downloadable from palazzostrozzi.org.

**Accessibility Projects**

A program of activities aimed at making Palazzo Strozzi a space where differences coexist. Projects for autistic children and young people (*Nuances*), people with dementia (*With Many Voices*), people with disabilities and mental health challenges (*Connections)*, video guides and tours in Italian Sign Language (LIS), and a dance program dedicated to the wellbeing of people with Parkinson's (*Free Flowing*). More information: edu@palazzostrozzi.org

***Rothko: Space, Silence, Vision***

A series of talks at the Altana of Palazzo Strozzi designed to explore key themes in Mark Rothko's research: the evolution of painting, the relationship between works and exhibition spaces, dialogue with cinema, and the spiritual dimension of his artistic research.
All lectures are in Italian with free admission, subject to availability.
Reservation recommended at palazzostrozzi.org.

- **Tuesday 31 March, 18.00:** Chiara Ianeselli, *The Untitled. Silence as the Language of Art*
- **Wednesday 22 April, 18.00:** Francesco Poli, *Rothko. The Work and Its Installation in the Exhibition Space*
- **Wednesday 6 May, 18.00:** Giusi De Santis, *From Mark Rothko to Michelangelo Antonioni: Painting within Cinema*
- **Thursday 11 June, 18.00:** Alessandro Carrera, *The Rothko Chapel as a Spiritual Exercise*

**Special Events at Palazzo Strozzi**

**Saturday 14 March, 11.00, Sala Altana, Palazzo Strozzi**
Presentation of the volume *Mark Rothko. Inside the Work*
With Christopher Rothko and Marco Cianchi

**Thursday 28 May, from 18.00: Palazzo Strozzi Night**
A special evening dedicated to Under30s in collaboration with Unicoop Firenze

**Wednesday 3 June, 17.30, Maria Manetti Shrem Educational Center**
*Around Mark Rothko:* presentation of the seminar dedicated to Master's degree students in Art History at the University of Florence

**Wednesday 1 July, 18.00, Strozzina, Palazzo Strozzi**
*Microcosm – Deep Listening:* presentation of the magazine created with the Art Academies of Tuscany, in collaboration with Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati

**Special Events in the City**

**Saturday 21 March, 16.00 / 17.30 / 19.00, Sala Orchestra, Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino:** *Rothko Chapel* concert by Morton Feldman

**Tuesday 19 May, 18.00, Villa Bardini**
Lecture by Giovanna Uzzani, *Florence in the Years of Rothko*
On the occasion of the exhibition *'50 '60 '70 Florence. Images from the Foto Locchi Archive*

**Thursday 28 May, 18.00, Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze**
*Educare all'arte, educare con l'arte*: a conversation with Jacopo Miliani and Silvia Spadoni.

**Friday 5 June, 18.00 Musei di Fiesole, Sala Costantini**
*Around The Artist and His Reality by Mark Rothko.* Conversation with Luca Farulli

## THE MARIA MANETTI SHREM EDUCATIONAL CENTER

Opened in 2022 with **more than 50,000 people attending over 1,000 activities in the last 2 years**, the Maria Manetti Shrem Educational Center has become the heart and the starting point for all the Palazzo Strozzi's activities for schools, families, young people, and adults, with a particular focus on accessibility.

These spaces have been specifically designed to allow as many people as possible to experience Palazzo Strozzi's exhibitions through numerous activities aimed at transforming the encounter with art into an opportunity where the expressive potential of each participant is valued, and **where everyone can feel involved**.

The Maria Manetti Shrem Educational Center is a space where it is possible to forge new relationships between individuals and their families, as well as create an interdisciplinary field of work and discussion among artists, museum educators, healthcare professionals, and experts from various disciplines. A fundamental part of the activities is those dedicated to **inclusion and accessibility**, for autistic young people (*Nuances*), for people with Alzheimer's (*With Many Voices*), disabilities and mental distress (*Connections*), tours in Italian Sign Language (Signs and Words) and a dance pathway devoted to the wellbeing of people with Parkinson's (*Free Flowing*).

*"The art of living is the art of giving. I am truly pleased to support the arts and culture and, in particular, make access possible for the most vulnerable people. Art can help people by bringing them together through a holistic vision." (Maria Manetti Shrem)*

Born in Florence, Italy, Maria Manetti Shrem relocated to San Francisco, California, in 1972, where she played a pivotal role in the internationalization of iconic fashion brands such as Gucci and Fendi.
The Manetti Shrem Foundation, chaired by Maria, supports over 55 charitable programs across the U.S., Italy, France, Mexico, Africa, and the UK, contributing to the support of more than 35 foundations. The Foundation's philanthropic mission spans education, opera and symphonic music, art, hospitals and medicine, making a lasting social impact worldwide. The Manetti Shrem Foundation supports institutions such as UC Davis, UCSF, Sutter Health, the San Francisco Opera, Festival Napa Valley, the Metropolitan Opera, the King's Foundation, the Royal Drawing School, UC Berkeley-Cal Performances, KQED, the San Francisco Symphony, SF Film, SF MoMA, ArtSmart, Palazzo Strozzi Foundation, Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, the Andrea Bocelli Foundation, the Italian National Trust, Museo Novecento, Mascarade, Friends of the Louvre, Friends of Versailles, and Venetian Heritage. Maria has also funded a series of scholarships in Africa through the Global Sojourns Giving Circle, empowering the next generation of women leaders.
Maria and Jan co-founded the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, whose architectural design was recognized by *ARTnews* as "One of the World's 25 Best Museum Buildings of the Past 100 Years."
Maria has been honoured as a cultural ambassador and philanthropist. In 2019, Italian President Sergio Mattarella awarded her the *Grand Officer of the Order of the Star of Italy*. In 2022, the Mayor of Florence presented her with *the Keys to the City* for her exemplary patronage, following in the spirit of the Medici legacy. The City and County of San Francisco also declared June 22 as *Manetti Shrem Day for Philanthropy*. Her accolades include the inaugural *Angels of the Arts Award* from Festival Napa Valley, the *Spirit of the Opera Award* from the San Francisco Opera, and the lighting of the dome of the San Francisco City Hall in the Italian flag colors during *Maria—50 Years in America*, a celebration of her legacy. She also received the 2023 *UC Davis Medal*, the highest honour from the University of California system, in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to the arts. In 2024, UC Berkeley has acknowledged Maria and Jan among the *Builders of Berkeley*. In Spring 2024, Maria made history by donating to the College of Letters and Science at UC Davis the largest gift ever made for the enduring support and enhancement of the arts and humanities, through the creation of eight special funds, creating a Renaissance Zeitgeist through the establishment of a dedicated Art District, inaugurated in January 2025. In recognition of her global philanthropy, Maria received the 2024 *Premio StellaRe* from Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Torino, Italy. In Spring 2025, Maria Manetti Shrem was presented the *California Performing Arts Visionary Award* for her outstanding philanthropy, specifically underwriting the first California Orchestra Residency of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at Cal Performances, UC Berkeley. On the celebratory occasion of the naming of the *Maria Manetti Shrem Emerging Artists Program* at the Academy of Il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Maria was awarded the *Pegaso d'Oro*, the highest honor of the Region of Tuscany. Because of her impactful philanthropy, she is also a 2025 *Ellis Island Medal of Honor* recipient. Maria Manetti Shrem continues to lead with vision and generosity, shaping cultural landscapes and enriching lives across the globe.

## *ROTHKO CHAPEL* BY MORTON FELDMAN

### A special concert organized by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and Maggio Musicale Fiorentino on the occasion of the exhibition *Rothko in Florence*

On Saturday, March 21, 2026, in the Sala Orchestra of the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Florence, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi presents *Rothko Chapel*, a piece for soprano, alto, choir, viola, celesta, percussion, composed in 1972 by by American composer Morton Feldman, one of the most intense and conceptually significant works of late 20th-century music. Realized in collaboration with the Fondazione Teatro del Maggio and with the Accademia del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, the concert is held on the occasion of the *Rothko in Florence* exhibition (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, March 14 to August 23, 2026) and is part of Palazzo Strozzi's *Fuorimostra* program, offering a profound experience of dialogue between sound, space, and silence, in close resonance with Mark Rothko's work.

“I wanted to create a musical environment with the same kind of presence as Rothko's painting: not descriptive, not narrative, but purely perceptual.” With these words, Morton Feldman described his composition, conceived for the space of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas—an interfaith chapel with an octagonal floor plan housing fourteen monumental paintings by Rothko. Feldman wrote the piece as a sort of sonic response to the painting, highlighting their shared deep interest in the spiritual potential of abstraction. While Rothko used color to dissolve spatial and temporal boundaries, Feldman pursued a similar goal through sound. Both sought to suspend linear time, creating conditions for a contemplative and introspective experience. For the composer, the arrangement of the paintings in the chapel produced “an uninterrupted continuity.” It is on this principle that he creates in music a sequence of contrasting sections, perfectly fused together in a delicate interplay between sound and silence.

The concert will take place in the Orchestra Hall of the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, a space normally inaccessible to the public, which will be configured as a highly evocative and suggestive environment, evoking the atmosphere of the Rothko Chapel in Houston and creating an immersive setting for the audience, who will become active spectators—immersed, surrounded, and embedded in Feldman's sonic world. The musicians, choir, and soloists will delimit the octagonal space in which the audience is seated, with chairs arranged haphazardly around the conductor at the center of the octagon. Just as Rothko's paintings surround visitors in the Texan chapel, in line with Feldman's intention, the music will envelop the audience on all sides, inviting them to be part of the performance itself with their presence and to enjoy an immersive experience in a recreated space.

*Rothko Chapel* by Morton Feldman will be performed on Saturday, March 21, 2026, in three performances (16.00, 17.30, and 19.00). Tickets can be purchased through the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino's sales channels (online and at the Teatro del Maggio box office from Monday to Friday from 12.00 to 18.00 and on Saturdays from 10.00 to 13.00).

The initiative is promoted and organized by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, and Accademia del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino.
Partner: Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella
With thanks to: Kira A. Princess of Prussia Foundation.

***ROTHKO BETWEEN AMERICA, ITALY AND FLORENCE***
**An original video project within the exhibition "Rothko in Florence"**

On the occasion of the exhibition Rothko in Florence, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi presents a special video curated by Ludovica Sebregondi, conceived as an integral part of the exhibition path. *Rothko Between America, Italy and Florence* will be presented in a dedicated room of the exhibition as a tool for further exploration and contextualization, offering visitors an accessible and immersive interpretation of Mark Rothko and his relationship with Italy.

Created using archival materials, historical documents, and quotations from the artist, the film reconstructs Rothko's biographical and intellectual journey, highlighting a crucial aspect of his research: the dialogue with the European artistic tradition and, in particular, with Florence. From early references to Michelangelo's New Sacristy to the decisive impact of Fra Angelico's frescoes at San Marco and the vestibule of the Laurentian Library, the project emphasizes the central role of the Italian experience in shaping Rothko's vision of pictorial space and the spiritual dimension of art.

The narrative follows the main stages of the artist's career, showing how his engagement with Italian Renaissance architecture and painting contributed decisively to defining Rothko's language. This project was conceived with the aim of expanding the visitor experience and making research and documentary materials accessible, in line with Palazzo Strozzi's mission to develop interpretative tools capable of bringing together scholarly research, public outreach, and audience engagement.

We thank Enel for supporting the production of the video.

## FUORIMOSTRA

For each exhibition, Palazzo Strozzi offers an itinerary in the region, creating a connection between the exhibition and museums, cultural institutions and partners in the Metropolitan City of Florence and the Region of Tuscany. Palazzo Strozzi acts as a catalyst for Florence and Tuscany, seeking synergies and collaborations that stimulate the cultural promotion of the area. The *Fuorimostra* is a printed publication distributed free of charge, also available for free download at www.palazzostrozzi.org/fuorimostra.

Florence

- Museo di San Marco
- Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana
- Basilica di Santa Croce
- Cappelle Medicee – Sagrestia Nuova
- Galleria degli Uffizi
- Museo Ferragamo
- Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella
- Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino
- Villa Bardini

Arezzo

- Basilica di San Francesco

Fiesole

- Museo di Fiesole

Siena

- City of Siena

**The Museo di San Marco: from the reopening of the Angelico Room to Mark Rothko all the new developments for the public starting Saturday, March 14, 2026**

At the conclusion of the exhibition dedicated to Fra Angelico, the San Marco Museum began an important phase of **transformation that led not only to the reinstallation of the Angelico Room but also to a broader renewal of the entire visitor route.**

Visitors coming to the museum for the new exhibition dedicated to Rothko will find a significantly improved environment, capable of bringing together recent scholarly advances with a more accessible and contemporary visitor experience. The museum's direction has worked to incorporate into the new installation all the historical insights and chronological clarifications that have emerged from recent studies, offering a more coherent arrangement of the works and a clearer reading of the masterpieces. An emblematic example is the decision to display the **Armadio degli Argenti without its early twentieth-century frame**, allowing for a clearer appreciation and understanding of the work.

The renovation of the **Angelico Room** — **which includes as many as 33 panel paintings by the celebrated friar-painter,** making it the largest and most important collection in the world of the artist's panel works — also features paintings that had never been displayed to the public prior to the recent exhibition dedicated to Angelico. Among these is the **Franciscan Triptych from the Compagnia di San Francesco in Santa Croce, reassembled in its entirety following the masterful restoration carried out by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure**, displayed alongside the **shaped cross now attributed to the master's early production.**

In addition to its renewed exhibition design, the museum now presents itself as more inclusive **thanks to interventions funded by the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) aimed at removing physical and cognitive barriers. New access ramps, renovated restrooms**, and dedicated signage currently being developed will allow for a simple and comfortable visit for everyone.

This commitment to the public is complemented by the **museum's new Educational Services** program which, through activities designed for adults, families, and schools, will accompany visitors in discovering the museum's masterpieces throughout the duration of the temporary exhibition, ensuring a rich, accessible, and deeply renewed visiting experience.

Within this context, **a group of works by Mark Rothko from major international collections will be presented**. Five small-format works created with different techniques and belonging to different periods will be placed in **direct dialogue with five of the frescoes in cells 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7 that so strongly inspired the artist**. The selections were guided by affinities of color, material, and above all spirit.

The visitor route of this special section at the Museo di San Marco begins in **Cell 1**, where the fresco of the **Noli me tangere** is located, depicting the meeting between the resurrected Christ and Mary Magdalene in the garden of the Resurrection. Christ's words to Mary Magdalene mark a moment of transition between the earthly and the spiritual realms and invite contemplation of the mystery of the Resurrection. In dialogue with this fresco will be presented Mark Rothko's **[Untitled] (1958)**, on loan from the **Collection of Christopher Rothko.**

The path then continues to **Cell 3**, decorated with the **Annunciation with Saint Peter Martyr**, where the meeting between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary marks the beginning of the history of salvation, while the presence of the Dominican saint refers to the spiritual dimension of the convent community. Mark Rothko's **Untitled** (1954), from a **private collection**, will be displayed in this space.

The route continues in **Cell 4**, where the **Crucifixion in the presence of Saint Dominic and Saint Jerome** is depicted, a scene that centers on Christ's sacrifice accompanied by the meditation of the two saints and invites the viewer to contemplate the mystery of the Passion. Here Rothko's **[Untitled] (1958)** on loan from the **Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel and Ilya Prizel**, will be presented.

Visitors then arrive at **Cell 6**, decorated with the **Transfiguration**, represented in the presence of the apostles Peter, James, and John, the prophets Moses and Elijah, and the figures of the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic. The episode alludes to the revelation of Christ's divine nature and the manifestation of the light of glory. Alongside this fresco will be displayed Mark Rothko's **Gethsemane** (1944), from the **Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel and Ilya Prizel**.

The itinerary concludes in **Cell 7**, where the fresco of the **Mocking of Christ** is located, represented in the presence of the Virgin and Saint Dominic and associated with meditation on Christ's suffering and humiliation during the Passion. In this space Mark Rothko's **No. 21 [Untitled]** (1947), on loan from the **Collection of Christopher Rothko**, will be exhibited.

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**Director Regional of National Museums Tuscany for the Italian Ministry of Culture - San Marco Museum**

museitoscana.cultura.gov.it

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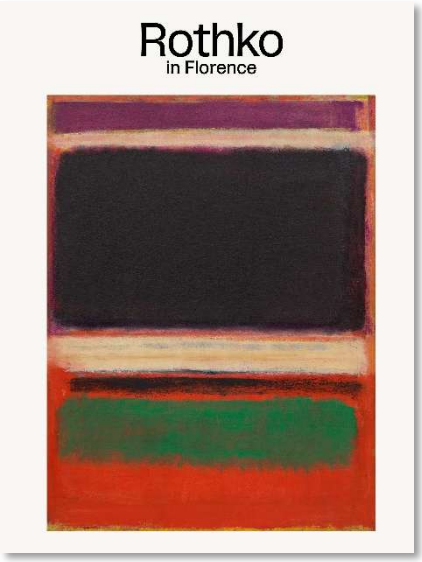


# *Rothko in Florence*

curated by Christopher Rothko and Elena Gauna

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«Writing about Rothko is always an exercise in conjecture. His paintings – regardless of period – do not immediately convey their subject matter. Nebulous, mysterious, incongruous (some would argue murky, turbid, empty) they challenge us to make sense of what we see, perhaps through the rather indirect avenue of what we feel.»
Christopher Rothko

On the occasion of the *Rothko in Florence* exhibition, hosted from March 14th to August 23rd, 2026, at Palazzo Strozzi, Marsilio Arte publishes the eponymous catalogue edited by Christopher Rothko and Elena Geuna.

The *Rothko in Florence* exhibition, promoted and organised by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi in collaboration with Museo di San Marco (Ministero della Cultura – Direzione regionale Musei nazionali Toscana) and Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, brings together an extraordinary corpus of works by the American master Mark Rothko. The show features paintings never exhibited in Italy before, sourced from prestigious private collections and major international museums such as MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Tate in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

This volume explores the artist's stylistic evolution, beginning with his early figurative stages influenced by Expressionism and Surrealism before arriving at the iconic abstract color fields of the 1950s and 1960s. The heart of the narrative remains his 1950 trip to Italy, a transformative experience that fueled Rothko's fascination with masters such as Giotto, Michelangelo, and Fra Angelico. Through a selection of works created between the 1930s and 1970, the catalogue highlights how color and light became tools for creating meditative spaces in constant tension with classical tradition.

The publication opens with essays by the curators Christopher Rothko, *Rothko in Florence. Rothko in Rome. Stone, Space and Spirit*, and Elena Geuna, *Mark*

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*Rothko: The Silence of Color.* It is further enriched by contributions from David Breslin, *Chaos, Control, Contemplation: Rothko's Lesson*; Gerhard Wolf, *Rothko's Giotto*; and *Mark Rothko and/in Florence* by Marco Cianchi, offering a choral vision of Rothko's legacy.

The catalogue includes a detailed chronology, curated by Marco Galvan, Christopher Rothko, and Kate Rothko Prizel, illustrated with previously unpublished images from the family archives, allowing readers to retrace the life and career of a central figure of modern art.

Marsilio Arte

**Christopher Rothko**, the second child of Mark and Mary Alice Rothko, is a psychologist, writer, and has spent thirty years as the custodian of his father's legacy alongside his sister Kate. He edited Mark Rothko's book of philosophical writings, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. Having collaborated on the organisation of over twenty exhibitions dedicated to his father in museums and galleries worldwide, he also served as co-curator for the monumental retrospectives of the artist at Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris and Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Furthermore, he is a former chairman of the board of the Rothko Chapel and currently leads the Opening Spaces campaign.

**Elena Geuna** is an independent curator, author and art consultant. She has curated exhibitions internationally, including the highly acclaimed *Damien Hirst: Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* (Venice, 2017).

**David Breslin** is the Curator in Charge of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and of the new Oscar L. and H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang Wing.

**Gerhard Wolf** is a member of the Max Planck Society and, since 2003, Director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz.

**Marco Cianchi** teaches History of Contemporary Art at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence and at the California State University International Program in Florence.

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# RESONANCE

## From Houston to Florence: A Listening Room for Feldman and Rothko

### The Chapel

In 1971, the Rothko Chapel opened in Houston, Texas, a non-denominational space conceived to house fourteen paintings by Mark Rothko and shaped, architecturally and spiritually, around them.

The building's design evolved through several stages. An initial project by Philip Johnson was later reworked and completed by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry as the project moved toward a single objective: a room where attention is not directed outward, but gathered inward.

It was Rothko's final commission. In the chapel, painting does not illustrate an idea. It becomes the condition for contemplation itself. Colour does not decorate the room. It shapes it.

### The Composer

After Rothko's death, Morton Feldman composed Rothko Chapel (1971), a work for choir, viola, celesta, percussion, and solo voices.

Written with the chapel's octagonal space in mind, the music expands slowly across it, filling it to the edges, much as colour saturates Rothko's canvases. Feldman did not set the paintings to music. He pursued a parallel discipline: sound that avoids illustration, resolution, and display.

Time becomes the principal material. What emerges is not narrative **but duration**, an extended present in which listening begins to resemble meditation.

### The Sacrestia

In Florence, the Sacrestia of Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella is part of a complex established in 1221 by Dominican friars. Built as a place of preparation and study, it is a room defined by proportion and restraint.

If the chapel in Houston was conceived as a complete modern work, the Sacrestia belongs to a structure that has evolved across centuries. Yet both spaces share a precise function: they frame attention and require concentration.

In parallel with the exhibition dedicated to Rothko at Palazzo Strozzi, the Sacrestia becomes a listening room, welcoming Feldman's composition within walls shaped long before modern abstraction.

One composer. Two chambers. One resonance.

**Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella**

Founded in Florence in 1221 as the convent pharmacy of the Dominican friars, Officina Profumo Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella is regarded as the world's oldest continuously operating apothecary in its historic premises.

From the cultivation of medicinal plants to the preparation of remedies, fragrances, and cosmetic formulations, its activity has always been guided by botanical discipline and Florentine craftsmanship. Recipes, methods, and archival knowledge have been preserved and transmitted across centuries.

Today, through its stores worldwide, the Officina presents fragrances, skincare, and creations for the body and home, each grounded in the same continuity of practice that defines its identity.