No. 2

Primary Maker
Mark Rothko

Date
1962

Medium
Oil on canvas

Dimensions
81 x 76 in. (205.7 x 193 cm)

Credit Line
Gift of Mrs. Albert D. Lasker

Object number
1976.161

Type
Paintings

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Large in size and composed of broad areas of color, Mark Rothko’s mature canvases, such as this one, belong to Color Field painting, a strain of Abstract Expressionism. Within this genre, Rothko’s paintings distinguish themselves by their powerful, yet ambiguous atmospheres. To make Number 2, Rothko first stained the canvas with a base coat of paint. Using sponges, rags, and wide brushes, he built the rectangles with thin washes of slightly different colors. As a result of such intricate layering and tonal contrast, the painting yields complex perceptual effects. At some moments the fields appear to hover before the canvas like mist, withdraw into depth, or look as flat as they really are. Many critics have associated this active, mutating color space with metaphysical ideas. Rothko himself came to understand his paintings’ true meaning as the viewer’s intimate physical and psychological experience of them. In doing so he anticipated later developments in American art, particularly Minimalism, a style of art characterized by austere compositions, usually of geometric forms, rendered with industrial materials or modern technology. 