

CHRISTIE'S

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CHRISTIE'S TO PRESENT FIVE WORKS FROM THE COLLECTION OF FRANÇOIS AND SUSAN DE MENIL

"I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on, and the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions." - Mark Rothko



MARK ROTHKO (1903-1970)
Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum), 1962,
oil on canvas, 60 x 57 in.
Estimate: \$35-45 million

New York – On 15 November, Christie's Evening Sale of Post-War and Contemporary Art will be highlighted by **Works from the Collection of François and Susan de Menil**. Encompassing five lots, this grouping encapsulates the impeccable tastes of architect and filmmaker François de Menil, and his wife and business colleague Susan.

Leading the selection is a consummate painting by post-war master, Mark Rothko, who is represented by *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)* (estimate: \$35-45 million). Painted in a period of creative ferment between his two greatest series, the present work was executed shortly after the completion of the Seagram Murals in 1960. During this time, he began to contemplate the shimmering dark plums, blacks, and purples that became the predominant palette in the panels at the Rothko Chapel commission that was soon to follow. Completing the selection, is an exemplary group of four works by Joseph Cornell, made between the 1930's and 1948.

Ana Maria Celis, Senior Specialist and Head of the Post-War and Contemporary Art Evening Sale, remarked: “It is a privilege to offer five exquisite examples from the distinguished collection of François and Susan de Menil. This group presents a wonderful opportunity to juxtapose the brilliant work of two markedly different artists, Mark Rothko and Joseph Cornell. Although their styles varied dramatically, through the eyes of farsighted collectors, one can see the interconnectedness of two visionary artists who not only worked at the same time, but were inspired by one another’s passions.”

The painting first came into the possession of its current owner in 1978, the same year as Rothko’s stunningly successful retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. However, the history between the de Menil family and *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)* dates back much further.

Dominique and John de Menil, the legendary collectors who founded the Menil Collection and the Rothko Chapel, both located in Houston, Texas, had first visited Rothko in his studio in 1960, where the painter showed them the Seagram Murals. The series had originally been commissioned for the Seagram Building on Park Avenue, designed by Mies Van der Rohe, but when Rothko discovered that they had been slated to hang not in the lobby but in the building’s Four Seasons restaurant, he returned the commission and kept the paintings himself. This notorious fit of pique did not deter the de Menils from returning in 1964 and offering him a commission of their own, to paint a series of his own devising that would hang in a chapel in Houston. During the frequent visits that ensued as the couple consulted with the artist and followed his progress, *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)* caught the eye of Dominique.

As the construction of the chapel neared completion, Dominique de Menil, then Chairman of the Art History Department of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, proposed arranging an exhibition, “Six Painters,” at the University, which was near the site of the forthcoming Chapel. She requested five works by Rothko, including *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)*, which she had seen on the walls of the artist’s personal sitting room in his 69th street studio. The paintings were exhibited with works by the five other midcentury masters, Piet Mondrian, Phillip Guston, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock. When the show concluded at the end of the year, the painting returned to Rothko, who possessed it until his death.

Growing up in the environment that he did, François formed a natural affinity for the mysterious and mystical qualities of Rothko’s darker canvases. Some months before the Guggenheim Exhibition, François de Menil approached Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace gallery who represented the Rothko estate, to express interest in purchasing a painting featuring Rothko’s darker palette. Glimcher offered de Menil, *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)*, which would grace the Guggenheim retrospective later that year.

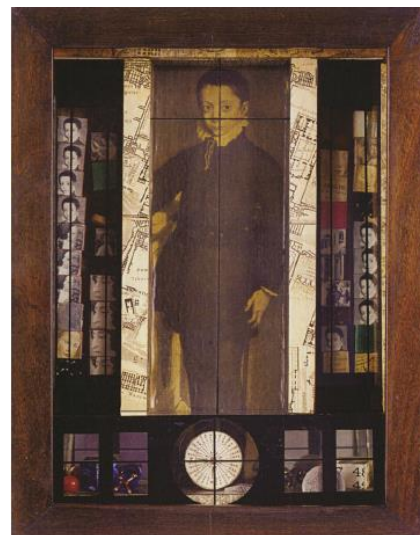
In his review of the Rothko retrospective, the art critic for the New York Times, Hilton Kramer, took the unusual step of describing the museumgoers attending the show before turning to the works on display: the crowds were “hushed” “awestruck,” “transfixed,” and they tended to linger, “often turning away from the paintings in front of them to look across the great open space of the Guggenheim spiral at paintings in the distance.”

The Christie’s sale on November 15th will present the second instance that *Untitled (Rust, Blacks on Plum)* has ever changed hands.

Accompanying the Rothko offering from the collection of François and Susan de Menil, is a quartet of examples by Joseph Cornell. The works are exquisite, speaking fluently in an imagistic language that feels just beyond grasp. The intangible mystery possessed by Cornell’s work runs parallel to a similar quality inhabited by the enigmatic paintings of his close friend Mark Rothko. The two were born just three months apart in 1903, Rothko in Dvinsk, Russia and Cornell in Nyack, New York. They first met by chance in 1949, at the Horn & Hardart automat on 57th Street, where they struck up a friendship that seems to have lasted throughout their lives. In 1957, Cornell sent Rothko’s daughter Kate a book on Fra Angelico, and Rothko’s wife sent back a thank you note with a hand-colored angel that Kate had

made for the family Christmas tree. Rothko, despite a reputation as a formidable and imperious figure, was notably gregarious. Nevertheless, he envied the ease and generosity that Cornell displayed around other artists. “*I wish I could approach your genius for expressing to people how you think about them and what they do,*” he wrote to Cornell in 1959. Then, he gave a wonderful example of his own brand of artistic appraisal: “*I do want to tell you that I think of you and the uncanny magic of the things you make.*”

Leading the selection of examples by Cornell is *Untitled (Medici Slot Machine)*, 1942 – pictured right. Executed in 1942, *Untitled (Medici Slot Machine)* comes from the celebrated eponymous series and emerges as an archaeology of poetry. In this body of works, Cornell adapts three different Renaissance portraits as their sources. Here Cornell reproduces a painting by Sofonisba Anguissola, titled *Portrait of Marquess Massimiliano Stampa* in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Although Cornell was known to have almost never traveled beyond the bounds of New York, he was an inveterate traveler of the mind. He was enchanted and obsessed by ideas of the travel of bygone years, in the same way that he was obsessed by the ballerinas of prior centuries. In this sense, his accumulation of materials for his boxes resembled the souvenir-gathering of the Grand Tour. Here in the present work, Cornell himself brings the magpie tendency of the romantic imaginary traveler of yesteryear to his box, filling it with snippets of different works and maps, subliminal and seemingly random scatterings of thought, interrelation, memory and association. This is a very personal museum of the mind.



JOSEPH CORNELL (1903-1972)
Story without a Name- For Max Ernst
sixteen elements—printed paper collage on paper
Executed circa 1930s.



JOSEPH CORNELL (1903-1972)
Untitled (Object)
box construction—wood, glass, clay pipe,
printed paper collage and velvet
Executed in 1940.



JOSEPH CORNELL (1903-1972)
Untitled (Star Game)
box construction—wood, glass, colored glass and
found objects
Executed in 1948.

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