

## Program Summary (19 September 2013)

At 7:00 p.m., President Byrnes welcomed the membership to the 659th meeting of the HPS, which was founded in 1920.

At 7:50 p.m., President Byrnes introduced Jack Agee, and visitors were introduced by the members. The new sustaining members were also recognized.

At 8:05, President Byrnes reconvened the members and asked Wil McCorquodale introduced the evening's speaker **Emilee Whitehurst**. Emilee is Executive Director of Rothko Chapel. She holds a BA in Biology from Stanford, a MS from Harvard, and is an ordained Presbyterian minister.

The title of this evening's talk was **Rothko Chapel in the Twenty-First Century**. The membership warmly welcomed Emilee Whitehurst. This is the 659th meeting of the Houston Philosophical Society.



Emilee mentioned that Wil is a member of the Rothko trustees. She has been involved for six years as steward of this architectural treasure and its unusual art.

As an introduction, Emilee provided a little history of the Rothko Chapel. The de Menils conceived of the chapel. It is open 365 days a year. The broken obelisk in the pond is a work of Barnett Newman and is dedicated to Martin Luther King; the interior artwork is all by Mark Rothko. Every dimension of the space was designed by Rothko, working initially with Philip Johnson, but other architects finished the space. The chapel opened in 1971, a year

after the artist's suicide. But the chapel does not house his final art, which had been in storage for four years as the chapel's construction evolved.

The Rothko Chapel hosts a number of public programs throughout the year. Champions of human rights have visited the chapel over its history, including President Carter and Nelson Mandela.

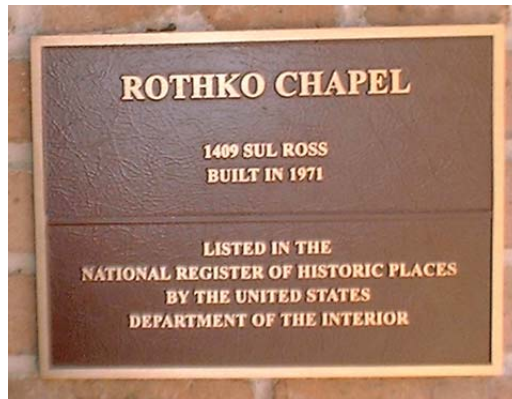
What are the forces that shaped this institution? The de Menils sought to reconcile the modern with the sacred. Priests in Paris and Vatican II influenced the de Menils: the Rothko Chapel would not exist otherwise. They believed in the redemptive power of art, and the church's role is bringing art to the people. The Rothko Chapel came to life during the turbulent times of the 1960s, and great doubt in religious institutions.

Mark Rothko shared the de Menils' views, although he did not share their Catholic values. Thus the chapel, originally viewed as part of the University of St Thomas, evolved into an independent institution. The de Menils traveled and visited with the Dali Lama among many other religious leaders to understand how an independent institution could yet be a sacred place.

During the opening in 1971, it fell to Dominique de Menil to introduce Rothko's stark paintings, which were shockingly different than the colorful paintings expected. But Whitehurst argued that the works are ideal as a vehicle for reflection and contemplation.

But has the Rothko Chapel outlived its mission? Is the wildly expensive art market made it a commodity? Is allowing the space to be used on "yoga day" appropriate? These questions were on the speaker's mind as the institution tries to evolve and find its place tomorrow and for years to come.

Reading some of the comments left by visitors, one is impressed by the surprising impact the space has on the community and those who enter into the dark spaces inside. The future seems assured.



Reverend Whitehurst wrapped up her remarks at 8:45 with an invitation to visit the chapel, perhaps for the first time or for the tenth time. The audience warmly thanked the speaker. A number of questions were entertained.

For example, the original skylight had to be replaced four times to better reflect the Houston lighting conditions. Rothko's studio in NYC envisioned an open skylight, but that vision has not yet been realized in Houston.

After another round of applause, and the meeting adjourned at 8:55 p.m.

David W. Scott  
Recording Secretary