

## The worst thing about the damaged Rothko is that it fuels the ban-kids-from-galleries debate

By Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, *The Guardian*, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025

The news that a child damaged a £42m Mark Rothko painting at a museum in Rotterdam last month had me wondering how I'd feel if my toddler was the culprit. The work, *Grey, Orange on Maroon, No 8*, sustained small, superficial scratches to the lower part of the painting during an "unguarded" moment, which, while not a disaster, does mean it will have to be taken off display and restored. It comes less than a year after a four-year-old boy smashed a 3,500-year-old jar at the Hecht Museum in Israel.

I love Rothko. Standing in front of his paintings always feels, to me, like an almost religious experience. The emotion in his work is astonishing, transcendent. This story has brought out two categories of people that I'll admit I struggle with: people who don't get the work of Mark Rothko, and people who dislike kids. [...]

It's the usual calls for children to be banned from public spaces. They shouldn't be allowed into galleries if they can't behave, and their parents should be made to pay. Although these ostensibly seem like two very different, frankly contradictory, lines of thinking – "modern art is rubbish" versus "galleries are sacred spaces" – I have come to realise that these sentiments are interlinked.

Children respond instinctively to art. They have not built up defences, or preconceptions about it, and the earlier you take them to galleries and expose them to different styles and mediums, the more open and receptive they will be to things that are experimental, unusual or transgressive.

Children explore the world through touch. Anyone familiar with kids will be able to imagine what went through that child's mind as they stood in front of *Grey, Orange on Maroon, No 8*. Something about the unvarnished, slightly chalky surface of the paint made them want to *feel* it. And so they did. Arguably, in doing so, they connected with the work of Rothko on a deeper level than many adults.

I'm not being entirely serious, but what I do believe is that the people who love art the most have somehow managed to retain that childish spirit of openness and curiosity into adulthood, and that spirit is precious. We need it, especially, for the next generation of artists, which is why the gallery must remain an inclusive place.

"Every museum and gallery thinks hard about how to balance meaningful physical access to artworks and objects with keeping them safe. I'd say most have the balance right, but accidents can still happen," the curator and writer Maxwell Blowfield said in the aftermath of the damage. "It's impossible to prevent every potential incident, from visitors of all ages. Thankfully, things like this are very rare compared to the millions of visits taking place every day." Meanwhile, the museum that lost the 3,500-year-old jar used it as a "teaching opportunity", and invited its four-year-old former nemesis back to the museum with his family to see how the repairs were going.

There's a loveliness to that. Perhaps, rather than charge the parents, the museum in Rotterdam will get its insurance payout and do something similar. Either way, I hope that the child wasn't made to feel too bad. Perhaps it'll be a funny story that the parents tell someday, and I bet they watch their child a bit more closely in future.