

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—CHAPELS—MALLORY

Story by Randy Mallory

Solace in the City

**Three chapels blend art and architecture
with reverence and reflection
in the heart of Houston**

OR

Sanctuaries of Solace

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Trinity of Chapels

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Year-round, art lovers congregate in a quiet neighborhood in the Montrose area of Houston's near-west side.

They gather to view one of the world's top private art collections, the Menil Collection, comprising 15,000 masterpieces dating from antiquity to the 20th century. The Menil—plus nearby museums, the Cy Twombly Gallery and Flavin Pavilion—showcase the life's work of influential art patrons, the late John de Menil and his oil heiress wife, Dominique Schlumberger de Menil.

Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Peter Marzio, calls Dominique de Menil "probably the single greatest cultural force in the history of Houston." She remained, he adds, an "apostle" of art until she died at age 89 on

New Year's Eve, 1997. About art, Mrs. de Menil once said, "...what is art if it does not enchant? Art is incantation. It is the fusion of the tangible and intangible."

On a half-day pilgrimage to Montrose, I discover that the same holds true for a trinity of chapels near the Menil Collection, each blessed directly or indirectly by Mrs. de Menil's apostolic touch. Situated a pleasant stroll apart, the three—the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, the Rothko Chapel, and the Chapel of St. Basil—enchant by merging art and architecture with reverence and reflection.

Rothko Chapel

The Rothko Chapel rests in a park-like setting one block from the Menil Collection. As I approach, what catches my eye is not the chapel—a plain, windowless, pink brick building—but rather the reflecting pool near the entrance.

At one end of the still water rises a 26-foot-high sculpture by New York abstract expressionist, the late Barnett Newman. Entitled *Broken Obelisk*, the work features an Egyptian-style pyramid, the tip of which touches and supports the tip of an upside-down broken obelisk. Dedicated to the memory of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the raw steel sculpture has taken on a rich rust-colored patina in Houston's humid air.

With such a striking introduction, my expectations are high going into the Rothko. Fresh from a \$1.8 million restoration, the chapel's inner sanctum and its daring art doesn't disappoint. Now more than ever, the space reflects the original concept of its creators, chapel executive director Suna Umari tells me.

In 1964, Dominique and John de Menil commissioned abstract artist Mark Rothko to create a religious environment which would appeal to people of all faiths or no faith. Russian-born Rothko, who died in 1970 (a year before the chapel opened) proposed an octagonal plan to house 14 abstract paintings he created for the chapel. In fact, he built a full-scale model of the chapel in his New York studio to assure that the paintings and structure worked in unison.

The design, begun by New York architect Philip Johnson and completed by Houston architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubrey, embodies what Dominique de Menil called “the mystery of the cosmos.”

At first glance, I find the spare space more art gallery than chapel.

I take my place alongside other visitors on one of four dark wooden benches arranged in a square in the center of the large open room. A few visitors sit cross-legged on round black pillows. Surrounding us, filling eight gray-colored walls, hang Rothko’s austere canvases. Their brooding colors, lit evenly by natural light baffles overhead, range only from deep brown to purplish red to black.

As I settle into the quiet of the place, my gaze fixes on a triptych of three abutted canvases. I look into the dark pigmentation for meaning, and my mind relaxes. Unexpected thoughts surface, as I slip into a sort of art-induced daydream. Then I recall what a friend had told me. A fan of the Rothko, she said the chapel makes people receptive to contemplation and spirituality.

That attitude of receptivity is, as Dominique de Menil said, “indispensable in art...[and] also necessary for ecumenism.”

To that end, the de Menils dedicated the Rothko not only to worship and meditation but also to multi-faith discussion on religious freedom and human rights. Throughout its 30-year history, the Rothko has hosted evocative colloquia featuring notables such as the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and former South African president, Nelson Mandela.

That seems fitting, considering that Mark Rothko considered the chapel project an expression of the “timelessness and tragedy of the human condition.”

Byzantine Fresco Chapel

A stone’s throw from the Rothko Chapel sits another intriguing de Menil creation, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel. Designed by the de Menils’ son, New York architect François de Menil, the structure takes the shape of a reliquary, a box within a box holding a sacred object.

The chapel’s blockish limestone-and-concrete exterior forms the outer box, lending no hint of the treasures hidden within. Past a pool of still water, through two sets of doors, I enter the chapel’s inner box—a large dimly-lit cubical space encased in black steel framework and smooth concrete walls. In the center of the darkened space hang large greenish laminated glass panels and black steel supporting rods bent in arches and circles to replicate an ancient cruciform chapel. In the abstracted chapel’s dome and apse reside the sacred objects—two brightly-colored Byzantine frescoes.

When Turkish military forces occupied northern Cyprus in 1974, looters stripped antiquities from many Greek Orthodox churches, including the Church of St. Themoniados at Lysi. Thieves cut two 13th century frescoes (murals painted

on fresh plaster) from the tiny chapel's dome and apse into 38 fragments and packed them off to Europe.

In 1983, Dominique de Menil learned that a smuggler in Germany had the treasures on the black market. If sold piecemeal, she feared, the frescoes would be lost forever. So, with encouragement from the Cypriot church and government, she paid more than \$1 million to ransom and restore the frescoes.

London conservator Laurence J. Morrocco spent three and one-half years returning the masterworks to their original curvatures and coloration—brilliant blues, golds, reds, and browns. From the dome's fresco, Christ Pantocrator ("All Sovereign") looks down in a transworldly gaze, surrounded by a frieze of angels. In the apse fresco, the Virgin is attended by the archangels Michael and Gabriel.

In 1997, the restored frescoes went on public display in their new Houston home, the \$4 million, 4,000-square-foot chapel which has received design awards from the American Institute of Architects and the Texas Society of Architects.

While the frescoes remain on indefinite display, the Church of Cyprus still owns them and even consecrated the chapel as an Eastern Orthodox church, with services held regularly.

According to the government of Cyprus, the chapel is the only site outside the Byzantine world displaying complete 13th century frescoes. By what I read in the chapel's visitors register, people from around the world seem astounded to discover such treasures in Texas. Similar comments appear over and over: incredible, peaceful, enlightening, inspirational, spiritual. A Swiss visitor noted

that she “came all the way from Europe to see these marvels.” A Greek visitor reported sensing the same “mystical light” he experienced years ago at the frescoes’ original chapel in Lysi.

Long-time chapel attendant J.D. Griffin tells me that Mrs. de Menil used to sit in the chapel for hours, pondering the frescoes’ importance. I can imagine her sitting in the simple pews admiring the brightly-colored dome and apse.

“Wounds to beauty,” she once wrote, “are not as innocent as they look...They pull us all down.” By rescuing two priceless Byzantine frescoes, she healed at least one wound and lifted the human spirit in the process.

Chapel of St. Basil

The same year the Byzantine Fresco Chapel opened, another architectural wonder opened just a short walk away. Designed by Philip Johnson, the Chapel of St. Basil (named after 4th-century bishop, St. Basil the Great) stands out as the signature feature of the University of St. Thomas campus.

In 1990, the university recruited Johnson (co-designer of the Rothko Chapel) out of retirement to complete the campus plan he started decades before, says Frank D. Welch, Dallas architect and author of *Philip Johnson and Texas*, a history of Johnson’s many Texas projects.

In the mid-1950s, Dominique and John de Menil hired the influential architect to draw up a campus master plan for the Basilian fathers who founded St. Thomas in 1947. Johnson employed the “academic village” concept of Thomas Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia.

Johnson laid out an elongated quadrangle, with buildings facing a common mall. At one end of the mall lies the library, a place for scholarship. At the other end lies St. Basil's, a place for worship.

Johnson (who turned 95 this summer) advocated architecture as art. So, for St. Basil's, he juxtaposed three geometric shapes as if an abstract sculpture: A 115-foot-long, 57-foot-tall polished black granite plane or wall slices dramatically through a 50-foot-tall white cube. Surmounting the cube is a 20-foot-tall gold hemisphere or dome. Atop the dome, a gold cross juts into the blue Texas sky.

As if that wasn't dramatic enough, Johnson added an entrance into the cubical chapel that looks like a giant tent flap. The "flap" symbolizes the opening of the Tent of Meeting in the Old Testament, Father Janusz Ihnatowicz, St. Thomas theology professor emeritus, tells me as we enter the spacious, white-washed interior. "The sanctuary offers a subtle yet complex unity of space," he adds.

I see what he means as I settle into one of 29 pews built from Texas black walnut by Michael Dobbins of Houston. Interior illumination, I realize, comes only from natural light.

Outside light filters in from a clerestory above the entrance, a skylight above the altar, and a slender chimney above a bronze statue of the Madonna and Christ Child fashioned by David Cargill. The Beaumont sculptor also made the chapel's altar table, tabernacle, candlesticks, and processional cross.

Light also pours from a massive cross slanting across the west wall above my favorite Cargill creation—the stations of the cross, portraying the life of Christ. My eyes tell me that the 14 figures are carved into the wall, intaglio style. But the interplay of light on the figures seems to make them move—some coming toward me and some away in a three-dimensional march through time.

A splash of color (greens, reds, and golds) comes from an icon of Saint Basil, painted by Polish iconographer Michal Ploski in a 15th-century Ukrainian style. In the semicircular apse behind the main altar rests a figure of Christ crucified—a Gothic corpus carved in the 14th century in central Europe, a gift of Dominique de Menil.

As I leave the chapel, three bells mounted in the black granite wall strike the half-hour, and I run into Houstonian Laura Holliday, a regular at St. Basil's, as well as the Rothko and Byzantine Fresco Chapels. "I've visited the chapels many times," she says, "and the experience always gives me undeniable tranquility and also energy."

Dominique de Menil once said: "To me art is like faith...you cannot teach art any more than you teach faith; you must experience it."

Tucked away in an art-filled neighborhood in the heart of Houston, three sacred spaces offer that experience. Through art and architecture, the chapels invite quiet contemplation.

Inspired by my chapel experiences, I pull my car onto West Alabama Street into the rising din of the city. Then, as I reach busy Loop 610, it dawns on

me: These enchanting sanctuaries of solace do, in fact, fuse the tangible with the intangible...just as Dominique de Menil predicted.