

The acceleration triggered by the process of industrialization and the new rhythms of life, not to mention the advent of photography, contributed to the transformation undergone by the arts as from the second half of the 19th century. No longer required to provide a faithful depiction of detail, painters felt freer to interpret the appearances of things.

In the wake of the so-called Dutch "luministic" painting, as well as the work of Van Gogh and the Fauves painters, Mondrian began around 1907 to use colors corresponding more to his inner vision rather than the more immediate appearance of things. A cloud became red (PLATE 2 / 10) if that could serve to express the strong contrast felt between the immensity of the natural horizon and the minuscule presence of the person beholding it. The earth took on a blue tinge (17) if the painter saw this color as best expressing the vital energy connecting earth and sky through the shape of a tree. The artist's inner vision influenced the outer appearance of things.

It is certainly no coincidence that psychoanalysis was born at the same. Psychoanalysis focuses precisely on the relationship between exterior and interior, i.e. between horizontal and vertical in Mondrian's visual terms.

Examination of this period reveals a gradual opening up of the landscapes, which now appear, with respect to the rural scenes of previous years, like boundless expanses (Fig. 1 and 2).

As Jaffé observes, "His confrontation in 1909 with the infinity of nature coincides with his joining the Netherlands Theosophical Society, where man's union with the infinitude of the universe was a central problem."



Fig. 1 - Pointillist Study of a Dune, Central Wave, 1909, Oil on Cardboard, cm 29,5 x 39

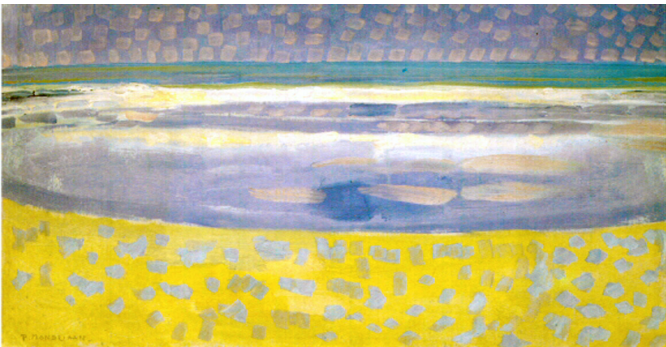


Fig. 2 - Sea Towards Sunset, 1909, Oil on Cardboard, cm 41 x 76

Mondrian's attention also focused at the same time on objects like lighthouses or church towers (Fig. 3 and 4).

With the compositions that extend horizontally, the gaze opens to the immeasurable dimension of nature, while with the vertical architecture everything is concentrated towards the finite context in which man thinks, designs and builds to rise from a primitive condition of nature.

The painter appears to focus in this phase on expressing contrast, both with the alternation of opposing thrusts and through the use of strong colors. Yellow is opposed to pink or green; red is opposed to blue; horizontal compositions are juxtaposed with others characterized by marked vertical development.

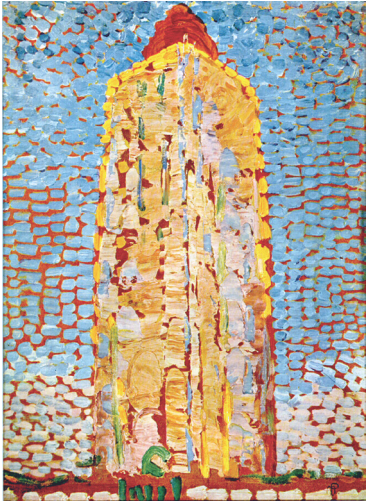
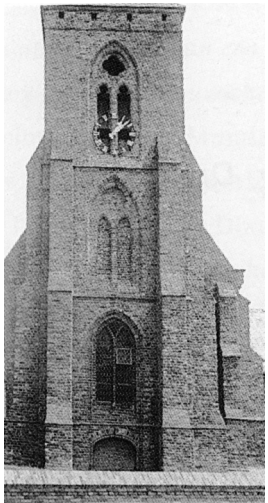


Fig. 3 - Lighthouse at Westkapelle in Orange, 1909-10, Oil on Cardboard, cm 29 x 39



Picture of Zoutelande Church



Fig. 4 - Zoutelande Church Facade, 1909-10, Oil on Canvas, cm 62,2 x 90,7

The existence of human beings is marked by the search for equilibrium between contradictory drives. Mankind is part of nature but distinct from it at the same time. There is often conflict in the life of the individual between the natural instincts and what we call intellect, reason or mind, and hence opposition between a part of us that is closer to the natural world and another that separates us from it and often clashes with it.

The history of mankind has been a slow and laborious process of emancipation from natural conditions ever since the Stone Age: from huts of mud and straw to houses of glass and concrete; from oxen to tractors; from an average lifespan of thirty-five years to one of seventy-five. In striving to improve their living conditions, human beings alter the landscape with architecture and transform nature into artifice (the countless objects and tools used for human life today). How are we to define artifice? Is it a natural product or only a human product? And if mankind is part of nature, are the plastic, concrete, and aluminum used to alter the landscape and move more quickly between the continents the result of natural evolution?

It seems as if nature creates a "non-nature" through mankind. A curious contradiction. Nature and "non-nature" or, as Mondrian used to say, the *Natural* and the *Spiritual*, find in the horizontal-vertical opposition a plastic equivalent.

While horizontal extension predominates in the landscapes and vertical development in the architectural volumes, the two opposing directions interpenetrate in the figure of a tree which is another recurrent motif of this period (Fig. 5 and 6). The fact that the artist finds in a tree the synthesis between nature and non-nature suggests that he has wished for a "non-nature", or human artifice, in balance and harmony with nature. Think of today's ecological question.

The branches of a tree expand toward the sides of the canvas while the trunk leads them back toward the center. Space simultaneously expands (the infinite horizontal natural landscape) and contracts (the finite and measured vertical volumes created by mankind) in the figure of the tree.

The subsequent abstract compositions of horizontal and vertical lines are already present in the figure of a tree, albeit in a form still veiled by appearances. This marked the beginning of a long path toward the development of a plastic space capable of expressing equivalence between opposite aspects of life.

Contemplating the duality within oneself and the multiplicity around us; opening up the self to the diversity that life brings with itself but without forgetting that all that variety is a unity. Multiplicity and unity, infinite and finite, universal and individual: painting was becoming a form of spiritual exercise for Mondrian.

Mondrian was a great painter capable of transforming the surface of the canvas into a precious artifact as regards richness of texture, combinations of color, and dynamic balancing of the composition. It is essential to see the original works in order to appreciate all their beauty. His aim in painting those landscapes, mills, lighthouses and trees was not, however, solely to reproduce the fleeting appearance of things. The artist read and interpreted those objects as plastic symbols of a deeper reality, as visual metaphors of existential meanings. Mondrian's eye addressed the objects and situations of the external world but pulsated with a wholly internal rhythm.



Fig. 5 - Final Study for The Red Tree (Evening), 1908, Charcoal and Stumping on Paper, cm 32 x 49



Fig. 6 - Apple Tree in Blue, 1908-09, Tempera on Cardboard, cm 75,5 x 99,5

Piet Mondrian was born on 7 March 1872 in Amersfoort, a small town not far from Utrecht, half-way between the Nord-see and the German border. The demon of painting bites Mondrian already at the age of fourteen, as he himself will say. However, his father wants him to become a teacher and therefore the young man takes a first and then a second diploma to teach drawing.

In 1892 the artist became member of an association of painters in Utrecht where he exhibited until 1909. In 1897 he joined the Amsterdam society of St. Lucas and "arti et Amicitiae", where he exhibited regularly between 1897 and 1910. During these years Mondrian earned a living with portraits and copies of paintings in the Rijksmuseum and with a variety of commissioned works.

By entering the Prix de Rome contests Mondrian hoped to obtain official recognition as an artist, but his attempts - in 1898 and again in 1901 - were unsuccessful. In 1910 his entry at the Salon d'Automne was rejected. In the same year Mondrian took part with other artists in the foundation of the Moderne Kunstkring whose goal was to mount annual exhibitions of the work of the most progressive artists.

The work of Braque and Picasso is usually regarded as marking the birth of Cubism. In actual fact, however, the Cubist revolution had already begun with Cézanne's last canvases. What was Cubism? The term was invented by an art critic who used the term "cubist" to describe a painting by Braque presenting a landscape as a group of juxtaposed volumes, which the critic interpreted as cubes. This obviously does not explain the meaning of Cubism.

Painting had previously been based on a conception of space grounded on linear perspective, a system of visual representation developed in Italy between the end of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th. Perspective space, commonly known today as realistic or figurative, assumes a constant relationship between an immobile observer and an object, series of objects or landscape, more or less immobile. Movement at that time was basically geared to the walking pace of human beings, at which speed the world appears to be practically motionless. The societies of that era changed far more slowly than today also in social, economic, and political terms.

People at the beginning of the 15th century needed to believe that the universe was measurable, governed by symmetry, and centered on mankind. The vanishing point of Renaissance perspective is nothing other than the projection onto the painted surface of the fixed position from which mankind believed itself able to observe and know the universe. The whole of the visible world converges on that single point.

Reality altered drastically toward the end of the 19th century, above all in the cities, where electrical lighting and the new means of transport and communication changed ways of life and introduced previously unknown forms of acceleration. The progress ushered in by technology changed social, economic, and political relations but above all helped to transform mankind's ideal relationship with the world. Philosophy, science, and above all the new rhythms of urban life born in the wake of ever-increasing speed worked at the beginning of the 20th century to undermine the foundations of some certainties, one of which was pictorial space based on linear perspective. The new rhythms of life accelerated the relations between the observer and the scene observed, especially in the cities. As a result of increasing speed, visible reality tended to become an ephemeral sequence of views running into one another; a landscape, a building or a tree appeared in a quick succession of different viewpoints.

Albert Einstein posited the inseparable linkage of space and time in 1905. The fourth dimension (time) is connected with space in the first Cubist works by Braque and Picasso, where an object appears on the canvas in all the forms it takes when observed from a moving position: the strange faces with three, four or five eyes, the single bottle that seems to multiply beneath the gaze of an observer moving around it. Unlike realistic or figurative painting, Cubism is a way of seeing and representing the world from a dynamic viewpoint. How long is the duration of a tree, a building or a landscape when observed from a moving position? What characterizes and unifies within the observer's consciousness all the forms that suddenly appear and disappear a moment later? Does it still make sense to paint a tree from one static point of view (18) and pretend that this is reality? We humans see the boundless horizon of the sea as a straight line, whereas it is actually curved. Is what we see true reality?

With Impressionism and then with Cubism the naturalistic (figurative) space modeled on the more static and certain appearance of things began to adapt to the changing form that things assume while interacting with one another beneath the gaze of a mobile observer. It was no longer the apparent form of individual things that counted now but rather a spatial structure capable of connecting things and placing them in a dynamic relationship to one another.



17 - The Red Tree (Evening), 1908-10



Fig. 7 - The Gray Tree, 1911, Oil on Canvas, cm 79,7 x 109,1

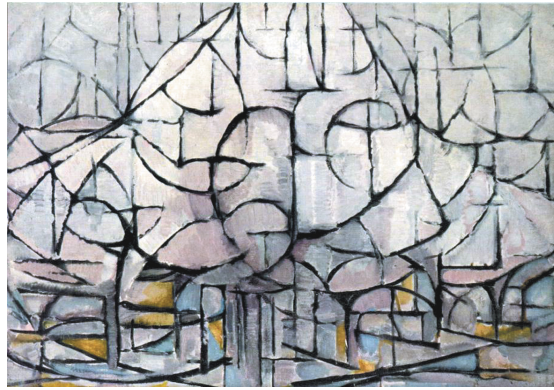


Fig. 8 - Flowering Trees, 1912, Oil on Canvas, cm 60 x 85

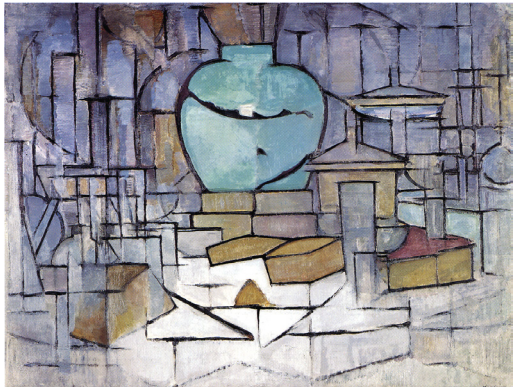


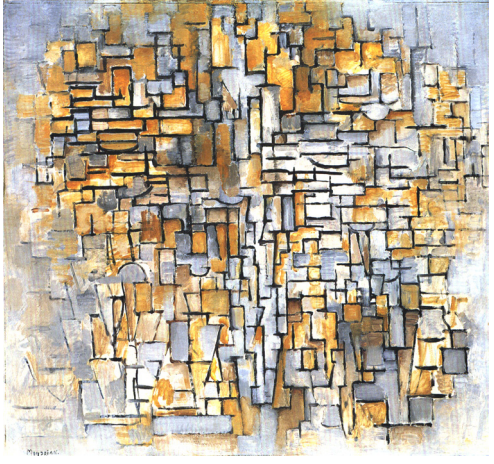
Fig. 9 - Still Life with Ginger Pot 2, 1912, Oil on Canvas, cm 91,5 x 120



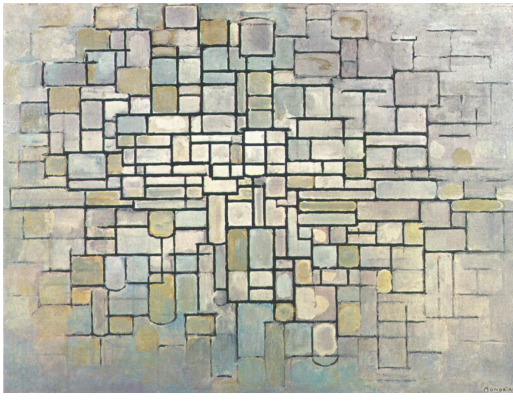
Fig. 10 - Tableau N. 3, Composition in Oval, 1913, Oil on Canvas, cm 78 x 94



Fig. 11 - Tableau N. 4, Composition VIII, 1913, Oil on Canvas, cm 80 x 95



19 - Tableau 2, Composition VII, 1913



20 - Composition II, 1913

An exhibition of International Modern Art opened in October 1911 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It featured 28 works by Cézanne, some Cubist paintings by Braque and Picasso, and works by various other artists. Called upon to assist in organizing the exhibition, Mondrian was to be strongly influenced by the Cubist works.

The Dutch artist moved to Paris at the end of 1911. While getting to grips with the new urban environment, he continued for some time to work on the tree motif already addressed in the Netherlands. The tree acted as a guiding thread while naturalistic space was opened up to the new Cubist stimuli (Fig. 7, 8). Objects seen from the Cubist viewpoint expand and become one with space. Solid and void interpenetrate to become a single connected structure. It is no longer possible to separate objects from space in a dynamic vision like the Cubist, where the moving objects are perceived a moment before and a moment after and therefore in their continuation and reciprocal interaction and metamorphosis.

Mondrian, however, regarded Cubist space not as much as the interpenetration of objects in motion (as it was for other Cubist and Futurist painters) but rather as the representation of a common, intimate structure of things. The Dutch painter was to regard Cubism as a way of giving concrete shape to his intimate vision of reality.

With the horizontally extended landscapes, the vertically concentrated architectures and the tree which brings together the two opposite directions, Mondrian was intent on finding balance between the ever-changing appearances of the world as well of the unpredictable developments in life (the *Natural*) and a sense of synthesis and duration invoked by awareness (the *Spiritual*). In doing so, he was already on the path toward a process of abstraction. The new Cubist perspective, which involves the subject in its changing relations with the object, prompted developments opening up the way to new formal solutions.

As we have seen, it is the trunk that connects the many branches in the formal structure of the naturalistic tree. Between 1911 and 1913 the solid figure of the tree was shattered with the Cubist transformation of space; object and space interpenetrate and thus put an end to the metaphorical unifying function of the trunk, which dissolves and tends to become one with the many branches.

The artist did, however, paint another version of the naturalistic tree in 1912 (PLATE 2 - 18). Throughout his career Mondrian often lingered over certain motifs whereas others were resolved in ways that opened up the path for subsequent developments.

While the tree trunk dissolves, Cubist space can be seen to concentrate toward the center with two semicircles (Fig. 8) or, in a still-life, toward a vase (Fig. 9) that appear designed to evoke a synthesis in the central area of the composition. While the definite form of objects is gradually lost, the painter seeks compositional cohesion and synthesis. In other works the artist uses an oval shape to unify the whole composition from outside (Fig. 10). In point of fact, the oval appears capable of endowing the fragmented Cubist compositions with synthesis and unity.

While the artist was to adopt the oval in many canvases of 1913, 1914 and 1915, this was not the sole means employed in his search for synthesis. He also chose in this phase to reduce the chromatic range in order to maintain greater compositional unity, at least in terms of color. Besides employing an oval and reducing the chromatic range the artist worked at the same time to unify his complex tissue of signs. Still curved, oblique, horizontal, and vertical (Fig. 10, 11, 12), the heterogeneous variety of signs gradually gives way to a more homogeneous alternation of horizontal and vertical lines in other canvases (PLATE 2 - 19). The formal structure of the compositions thus attains greater clarity (20).

With the gradual reduction of the plurality of signs to a variation of the perpendicular relationship, every point of space appears to be different but now partakes of the same essence, just as every organism appears to be different in the real world while sharing the same intimate nature as all the others. “*There is a common design to all things, plants, trees, animals, humans and it is with this design that we should be in consonance*” (Henri Matisse). Mondrian seems now intent in finding an “ideal landscape” capable of evoking a universal image of the outer world. Photography was meanwhile taking care of the fleeting appearance of things.

As pointed out, Mondrian regarded Cubist space as the representation of a common, intimate structure of things.

Opening up the consciousness to contemplation of the immense variety of the world while at the same time generating a synthesis capable of holding the multiplication imparted by external reality together as much as possible; opening up to the world without getting lost.

PLATE 2 - 20: The linear strokes intersect, combine with one another, and separate once again in a constant alternation of the predominance of one direction or the other. Every sign turns into something different but can always be traced back to a single intimate reality (the perpendicular relationship) constantly changing in appearance. One of these signs appears in the center, shifted slightly upward and contained inside a rectangular area. Unlike the situation observed for the other signs, the opposite directions appear to attain a more stable equilibrium in this central rectangle which pears as a sort of model in which a perfect equilibrium is attained, while all the other signs suggest situations that approach that ideal situation to differing degrees and thereby evoke the multiplicity of the *Natural* and the ever-changing situations of life in all their becoming. That rectangle evokes a sense of stability and unity (the *Spiritual*) in a space which multiplies and diversifies elsewhere. Expressed through the metaphor of a tree when still veiled by appearances (PLATE 2 - 17, 18), the relationship between multiplicity (the branches) and unity (the trunk) was now expressed in abstract form, that is to say in a clear form, with a variety of imbalanced perpendicular dashes and a central rectangle showing equilibrium and synthesis (20).

It is only by seeing 20 in original that you can appreciate all its beauty, which I am quite incapable of describing in words. Every point of the composition pulsates with energy and everything appears to be connected, just as when we observe a natural landscape and see every patch of green melding and mingling with its neighbor in a succession of light and dark, of boldly defined and more subdued features. The abstract painting is like a concentrate of natural vitality distilled into spiritual energy. Nature and life still remain the primary source of inspiration for abstract art. The ten thousand different lines and colors that we see around us prove on closer examination to be a single “line”, because in nature everything appears different, manifold, infinite, and is at the same time one. The immensity of earthly nature is one bluish-white spot in the infinite space of the macrocosm and the apparent simplicity of a flower is a small universe.

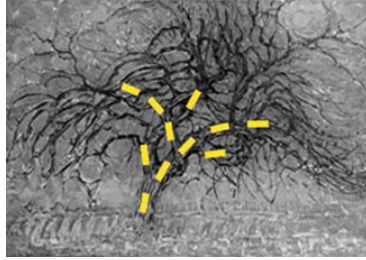
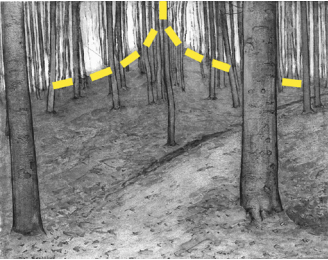
The immensity of earthly nature is as simple as a flower, which is as complex as the entire planet.

Multiplicity invokes unity and unity reveals multiplicity.

An interaction between multiplicity and unity can be traced back in some early naturalistic works.



Fig. 12 - Wood of Beech Trees, 1899, Watercolour and Gouache on Paper, cm 45,5 x 57



17 - The Red Tree, Evening, 1908-10

Around 1899 Mondrian takes as its subject a beech wood, focussing on the trunks. Each trunk has its own particular appearance and, all together, they express the sense of variety seen in nature. Toward the sides of the painting the horizontal line of the ground sharply contrasts with the vertical shapes of the trunks whereas in the central upper part of the painting horizontal and vertical merge together to become one.

It is as if the painter wanted to ideally concentrate in front of himself the endless extension and variety seen in nature which expands horizontally to the sides; expansion which he would express years later with the landscapes and with the dunes (12) whereas the vertical trunks here will then become the vertical mills, lighthouses and church towers (16). Nine years later the single tree will show an analogous structure to Fig. 12 but in a reversed mode i.e. upside down.

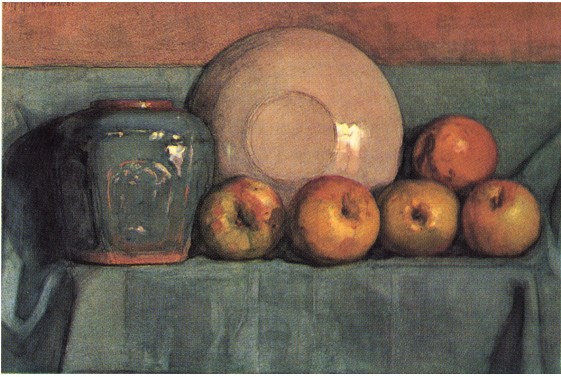
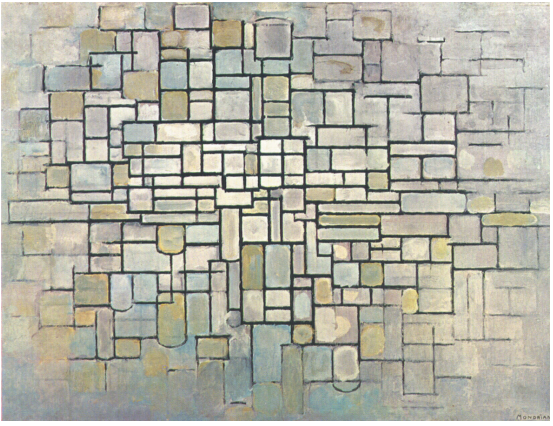
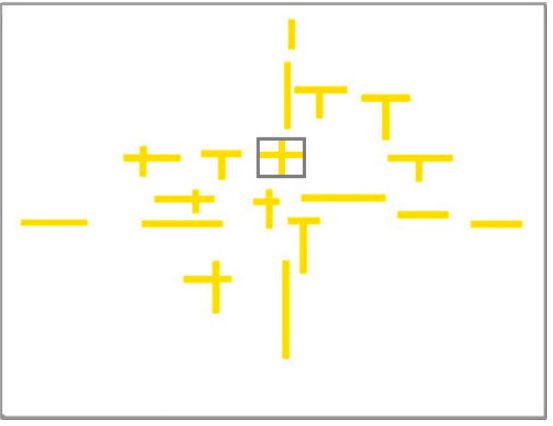


Fig. 13 - Apples, Ginger Pot and Plate on a Ledge, 1901, Watercolour on Paper, cm 37 x 55



20 - Composition II, 1913



20 Diagram

Another example of a relationship between multiplicity and unity can be detected in a still-life of 1901 (Fig. 13). We see some apples, a vase and a plate whose base forms a circle of similar size to the apples; the circle is located in the center of the composition. Each apple differs from the others in terms of position and appearance. A relation is born between the perfect and stable circle of the plate and the imperfect and different circles of the apples, as though the painter wished to show the changing appearance of natural forms (the apples) and a form of greater constancy and precision (the circle presented by the plate, a man-made, artificial object). A visual metaphor of the relationship between the *Natural* and the *Spiritual*.

Everything changed in Mondrian's painting between 1901 and 1913, or rather there was a change in the plastic means serving to give clear shape to a vision of the world that can already be glimpsed implicitly in some works of the naturalistic phase.

In Fig. 13 a perfect circle (the bottom of the plate) is placed in the center above a variety of imperfect circles (the apples). In 20 a central rectangle appears as a sort of model in which a perfect equilibrium is attained, while all the other signs suggest situations that approach that ideal situation to differing degrees. With a gap of twelve years between them and differing completely in form, the two paintings say the same thing: physical reality multiplies its appearances (the apples in 1901 and the various orthogonal signs in 1913) while the consciousness strives to draw everything back toward an ideal model of greater synthesis (the perfect circle of the plate in 1901 and the central rectangle with the best possible balance of opposites in 1913).

The expression of all this in the naturalistic or figurative painting is veiled by the contingent appearance of a certain vase, that particular plate and those apples. It is precisely through abstraction from the appearance of those few objects that 20 holds for a far greater variety of things and situations. No longer dwelling on details, the abstract painting suggests an ideal broader spectrum of reality. As mentioned, the very few things shown by the realistic painting can be dealt with today much more effectively by photography whereas the relationship between multiplicity and unity, the *Natural* and the *Spiritual*, outer and inner worlds is conveyed by the abstract composition in a universal form.

After 20 Mondrian works at new paintings where he tries to introduce brighter colors after the reduced chromatic range he had used during the first Cubist phase (Fig. 7 to 11 - PAGE 2) The painter is involved in a difficult game of balance between form and color, being concerned in this phase to keep the composition unified while at the same time avoiding any undue sacrifice of color.

While the oval unquestionably helps to endow the composition as a whole with a sense of unity, it does not appear to form part of the multitude, of which it is intended as a synthesis. It appears to be too absolute and detached from the multiplicity of signs within it. It evokes unity but not exactly the unity that the painter wishes to see manifesting itself on the canvas. Mondrian is in fact seeking a unity that generates itself from inside the composition as in Fig. 12 - PAGE 2, where the verticals of the trunk converge from the inside toward the upper central section where opposites (the horizontal of the ground and the verticals of the trunks) become one; or as in Fig. 13 on this page, with the precise circle of the plate placed in the center as an ideal model for the imprecise circles of the apples; above all in the figure of a tree (17), where the trunk unites the multitude of the branches; on the one hand, all the variety of the branches (horizontal) is born out of the trunk (vertical); on the other, the multitude of the branches flows back into the symbolic unity of the trunk. In all these cases the space is unified from within.

Mondrian is intent on expressing a unity that generates itself from within the composition and is not, like the oval, applied from the outside. If we translate this into existential terms, we realize that the idea of unity he so cherished is something of an everyday nature depending on the human subject in its relationship with surrounding reality. Synthesis and unity are questions posed by the human being with respect to the immensity of nature. Mankind and its consciousness can, however, only operate inside the natural universe, as any desire to stand outside it would inevitably entail falling into a surrealist metaphysical condition. The external synthesis expressed with the oval appears to be precisely this, and Mondrian could not feel satisfied with it.

The oval thus appears (Fig. 10 - PAGE 2), is expressed in more discreet form suggesting a desire to interpenetrate with manifold space (PLATE 2 - 19, 20) before reappearing, once again in a more sharply defined form (Fig. 15). The oval is expressed in some cases with a bold black outline (Fig. 10, 15, 17). In other works the signs fade away

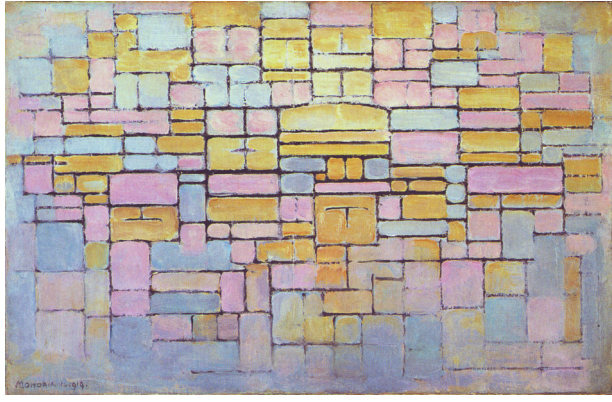


Fig. 14 - Composition N. V, 1914, Oil on Canvas, cm 54,8 x 85,3

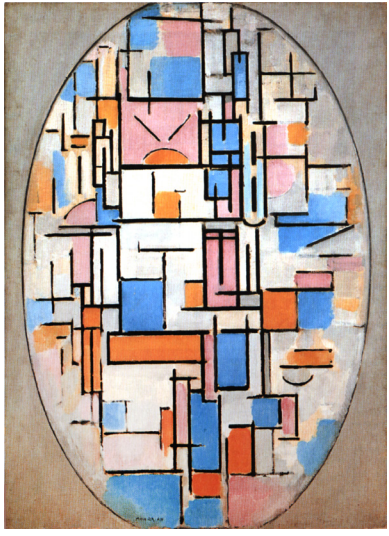


Fig. 15 - Composition in Oval with Color Planes, 1914, Oil on Canvas, cm 78,8 x 107,6

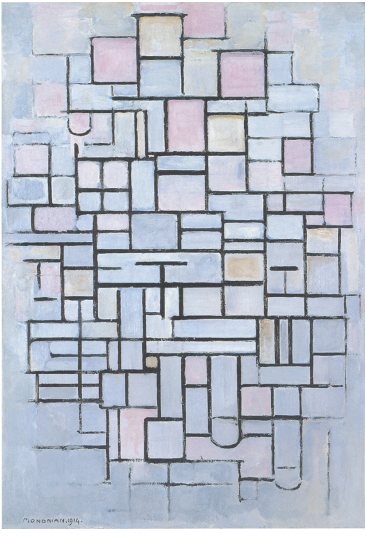


Fig. 16 - Composition N. IV, 1914, Oil on Canvas, cm 61 x 88

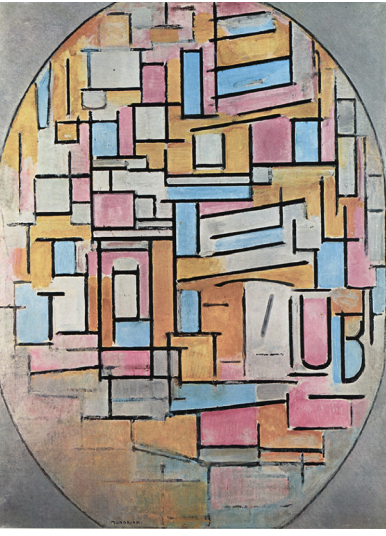
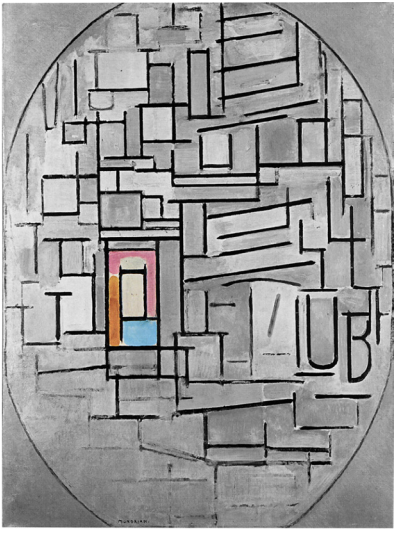


Fig. 17 - Composition in Oval with Color Planes 2, 1914, Oil On Canvas, cm 84,5 x 113



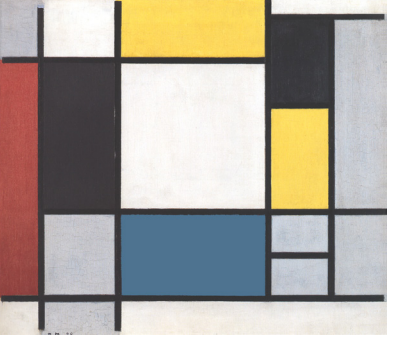
toward the edges of the canvas and an oval shape can be glimpsed but with no visible outline as such (19, 20 and Fig. 14, 16). The oval appears to become more tenuous when the colors are more subdued (Fig. 14, 16) and more clearly expressed when the colors once again become bolder so as to accentuate the contrasts and thus the manifold aspect of the space (Fig. 15, 17).

Form and color are connected. When the range of chromatic variation is reduced, everything is bathed in the "same light" and the eye perceives a greater sense of cohesion between the parts, in which case the oval can therefore be toned down. When the colors emphasize the individual parts, the oval instead encloses them firmly to recall that all this variety is still a unified whole. The oval appears in one case to have been applied from the outside in order to enclose all the variety within it (Fig. 10, 15, 17), and in another to be intent on springing from the internal space itself, which fades away toward the edges to suggest a faint oval (19, 20) (Fig. 14, 16). The second solution is a way of evoking the desire for unity to be generated from inside the composition.

The painter is searching for an internal synthesis of compositions which have meanwhile become brightly colored.

In Fig. 17 black linear signs generate a rhythm of ochre, magenta, light blue and gray areas that alternate between vertical expansions, horizontal contractions and oblique digressions. Some of these areas are closed on all four sides and therefore appear more stable than others that remain open and slide into each other. While the enclosed areas consist of one color at the time, all the colors (ochre, magenta and light blue) appear united in a more stable vertical pattern. The three colors, which elsewhere are dispersed, appear interpenetrated in a compact rectangular form that presents a central gray area. In this rectangular pattern we can glimpse a more stable synthesis of form and color with respect to the multiple and ever-changing forms and colors all around. A unity not only in terms of form, as in the rectangle of PLATE 2 - 20, but of the colors as well. However, while the synthesis of form appears quite evident in 20, the attempted synthesis of both form and colors we see in Fig. 17 does not emerge with sufficient clarity.

With these colored works of 1914 the issue of expressing an internal unity of the composition remains unresolved.



28 - Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray, 1920

In 1920 Mondrian will paint 28 which, in a total new way, somehow reminds of the synthesis attempted almost six years earlier in Fig. 17.

In October 1915, Theo van Doesburg published an article in a small Dutch newspaper in which he spoke intelligently and comprehensively about the paintings of Piet Mondrian, who was exhibiting with several other painters in the Amsterdam Municipal Museum. This article was the beginning of a friendship from which two years later the magazine De Stijl was born.

The artist went back for one of his regular visits to the Netherlands in the summer of 1914 and was then prevented from returning to Paris by the outbreak of the First World War. He found temporary accommodation with friends in Domburg and Laren. There he met Salomon Slijper who became his friend and foremost collector of his representational and cubist works.

Deprived of the brushes, paints, and canvases left in his studio in Paris, Mondrian begun a series of drawings, the subjects of which are once again a church façade and the sea (Fig. 17, 18 - PAGE 4). The subjects previously addressed in "expressionistic" terms between 1909 and 1911 (12) were thus tackled anew during his Cubist experience (1911-1915).

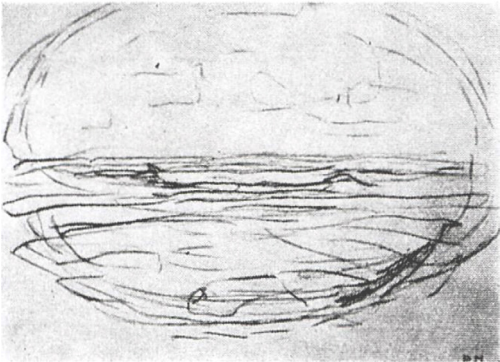


Fig. 18 - Sea, 1914, Sketch 19 from Sketchbook 1, Pencil on Paper, cm 11,4 x 15,8

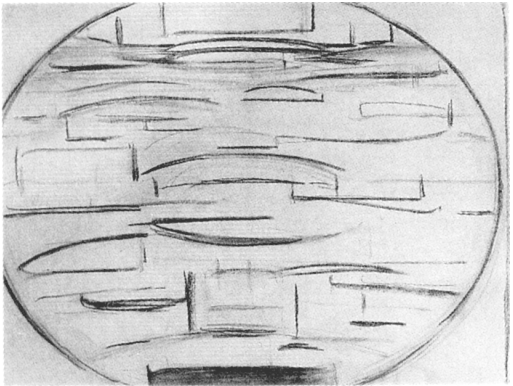


Fig. 19 - Ocean 2, 1914, Charcoal on Paper, cm 58,7 x 76,5

PLATE 2 - **21**, **22**: Once again, as when Mondrian took the tree as his subject, the artist's eye turns spontaneously and in no fortuitously way toward a landscape presenting an intrinsic relationship between the two contrasting directions. In these works the horizontal extension of the sea (a space similar to **10**, **11**, **12**) interpenetrates with a vertical element (the pier, that is to say a man-made, non-natural element such as **13**, **14**, **15**, **16**). The vertical pier appears designed to express something more constant while the horizontal flow of the sea heralds mutability. The plastic symbols of the *Spiritual* (the vertical) and the *Natural* (the horizontal) interact in a variety of situations where each aspect prevails for a moment onto the opposite one.

Fig. 18 is a drawing produced in 1914 that recalls the seascapes and dunes addressed by the artist four years earlier. The line of the horizon is enclosed in a faint oval. Two points placed in the central area like the foci of an ellipse appear to mark out a segment set slightly below the uninterrupted line of the horizon. This segment evokes a sense of permanence within the composition as though the infinite space of the horizon, which continue uninterruptedly to the right and to the left, would for a moment concentrate before the observer into a finite space.

Fig. 19 is a drawing characterized by primarily horizontal and curvilinear lines with a few faint and isolated vertical elements. The whole is again enclosed within an oval projecting slightly beyond the edges.

In the central section we see two juxtaposed curvilinear signs that appear to have developed out of the central segment in the previous drawing. These signs seem to suggest a small oval inside the oval enclosing the whole; an external synthesis seem to be transformed here into an internal one.

The vertical direction takes shape in the central lower part of Fig. 20 through the pier jutting out into the sea. As previously in the trunk-branch structure of the tree, the vertical pier starts from the bottom and rises to merge into the horizontal direction of the sea. With respect to the tree, however, the Cubist subject of the pier immersed in the sea reveals more dynamic interaction between unitary element (the pier) and manifold element (the sea) than between the mutually static trunk and branches of the tree layout.

The vertical pier draws the extended line of the horizon into a vaguely quadrangular area that is then concentrated in the upper section (**21**) to become a defined square which contains a sign of equivalence between the two opposite directions in **22**. The horizontal extension of the sea (the *Natural*) and the vertical, man-made pier (symbol of human presence or the *Spiritual* as Mondrian used to say) find a perfect balance within the square proportion.

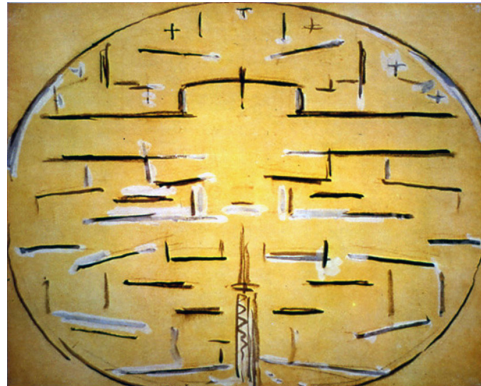


Fig. 20 - Pier and Ocean 2, 1914, Charcoal, Ink and Gouache on Paper, cm 50 x 62,6



Mondrian around 1912

The number of signs, i.e. the degree of spatial multiplicity, gradually increases from **21** to **22**, and it is only in the latter that all the signs are expressed solely and exclusively through perpendicular relations. Expressing the broadest diversity through variations of one and the same thing (the perpendicular relationship) means finding the one in the many and this is satisfying on a spiritual level.

22: Every sign expresses something different and something changes every instant. The duality expressed through the relationship between vertical and horizontal, which generates the manifold space as a whole, is cancelled out in the square, where the two opposite directions are equivalent in size, i.e. assume the same value while remaining different. In the square, for an instant, duality appears as unity and becoming is transformed into being.

The eye can linger on that point and contemplate in a more stable form what constantly changes in appearance in the surrounding space through alternation of the prevailing direction.

The sign of equivalence between opposites is born inside a square and thus suggests an inner space. The square symbolizes the space of consciousness. A multifarious imbalanced reality (the overall space inside the oval) finds a balanced synthesis within the unifying space of consciousness (the square). An external presumed unity (the oval) transforms into an internal one (the square).

Examination of **22** reveals that other areas of the composition suggest potential squares, which do not, however, attain the balance of the one in the center. Unlike the central square, they appear unable to hold the dynamic external space and transform it into a more constant and permanent internal equilibrium.

The incomplete attempts to internalize external reality evoke the moments in life when something escapes us and we cannot make the rationale of becoming our own. The central square instead expresses one of those rare moments in which we understand the fact that everything is connected and that each thing depends on its opposite.

As mentioned, the central square symbolizes the space of consciousness in which the external changing space is captured for a while in synthesis. It is, however, obvious that the consciousness can only produce partial and temporary syntheses; it clearly cannot exhaust all the possible relations with the external world. Human consciousness cannot contain within itself the totality of the world and will never be able to comprehend reality as a whole (the oval). Every synthesis generated by thought is necessarily partial and temporary, and must therefore open up again to the

multiform and ever-changing aspect of physical reality.

This is what all sensible people do when they call their certainties into question in the light of experience.

This is what philosophy has been doing for centuries, as have the arts and above all the experimental sciences.

A second square can be seen in **22** above the square that we have identified as a unitary synthesis of the composition as a whole. Inside the second square we see a vertical segment divided by two horizontal segments that extend beyond the boundary of the square to the right and left.

The two small horizontal segments form two crosses with the two vertical sides of the square. These two signs tell us that unity is opening up to duality. The unitary synthesis achieved for a while in the lower square in the form of the equivalence of opposites is again broken up into a duality that then flows back toward the variety of different situations marked again by the alternating predominance of one direction or the other. The unity generated with the first square opens up again to manifold space with the second.

The unity that Mondrian strove to express is a temporary synthesis generated momentarily by the subject in its changing relationship with reality, not something to be attained once and for all. Establishing equilibrium between the manifold appearance of nature and the synthesis invoked by the consciousness does not mean attaining fixed points and immutable truths. The square of **22** is not a potentially static and all-inclusive unity like the oval but a dynamic unity intrinsically linked to the manifold space in which it is born and toward which it returns some time later. This is now a dynamic unity and no longer the static unity exemplified by the perfect circle of a plate (PAGE 3 - Fig. 13), the trunk of a tree (PLATE 2 - **17**, **18**) or the rectangle in the center of **20**.

For Mondrian the unitary synthesis generated in PLATE 2 - **22** by means of a square proportion is therefore a plastic symbol of the controversial space of real life which attains measure and a harmonious condition for a moment in the space of consciousness before opening up again to nature and life.

The equivalence generated in the square suggests the possibility of establishing balance and harmony between opposite entities. And this holds both for the subject's relationship with the external world and for the subject's relationship with itself: finding equilibrium between the contradictory drives within oneself, e.g. between the uncontrollable urges of the instinctual life (the horizontal symbol of the *Natural*) and the action of controlling and guiding the instincts performed by the mind or the *Spiritual* (symbolized by the vertical).

Mondrian establishes a relationship between two infinite directions: the horizontal (a plastic symbol of the outer world) and the vertical (a plastic symbol of the inner world). For consciousness these are two virtually infinite spaces because our inner world is no less complex and elusive than the immense variety of the outer world.

The human dimension and that of the natural universe are not and never will be symmetrically commensurable (suffice it to mention the infinite physical disproportion between the two terms). In certain situations, however, they can assume equivalent value for human awareness and attain an equilibrium taking into account the rationale both of mankind and of the natural universe. And since mankind is part of nature, this essentially means reconnecting a part of nature (human being) with the whole.

Consider the frequency in our everyday lives of situations of disproportion and conflict between the parts of us that are closer to the natural world such as the instincts and those that instead characterize us as the human species, namely

intellect and reason: conflicts between emotional drives and ethical rules; the predominance of one direction or the other. Disharmony between body and mind; internal imbalances that end up being projected onto the external world to create friction and conflict between individuals as well as between individuals and their environment. How rare and precious are instead those moments in which we see and understand the reasons of both parts of ourselves, when we manage to expand the space of our consciousness to such an extent as to contemplate all the diversity present within us as a complex, dynamic unity. Duality disappears for an instant. We feel that we are all one and everything outside appears to be in a state of harmony because there is harmony within.

Contemplating that synthesis, reveling in the instant of an eternal joy that seems to unite us with the whole and then inevitably opening up again to see things separate and clash with one another in the disintegrative rhythms of everyday life (the multifarious space around the square unit of **22**). That idea of unity remains in the heart, a taste of universal life that is no longer revealed in the particular but of which our fleeting emotions and our constant pursuit of equilibrium are a component - albeit infinitesimal - capable of making an essential contribution to the whole.

The sign of equivalence between opposites urges us to attribute one and the same value to the part of us that is closer to nature and the part that is more typically human; to understand that one thing depends on the other: a vertical that yields little to the horizontal but is at the same time incapable of opposing it to the bitter end, as certain moral doctrines demand. Mondrian's plastic space suggests that the unity of being is not moral law but method: a dynamic equivalence of contrary aspects that, in a static vision of rigid content, work instead to divide consciousness, separating us from ourselves and from the world.

Mondrian's aesthetic space contains an ethical message calling upon us to neutralize the imbalances within us before thinking about others and the world as a whole.

Immanuel Kant spoke of the starry sky above and moral law within. The moral law consists in the rule that accommodates the instincts but keeps them under control. For Mondrian it is a balanced relationship between the natural urges and the control exercised by the spirit, as expressed in the sign of equivalence inside the square. The starry sky is for Kant the whole world, external reality, everything that can influence our inner balance, i.e. all the space around the square in Mondrian's composition.

The equivalence of opposites means that morality must not be bigoted but also that the freedom is not the unbridled satisfaction of every desire. Kant defined freedom as being able to set oneself rules, i.e. being free to choose rules that are in any case necessary, both in coping with one's inner contradictions (individual life) and in the relationship between oneself and others (social life).

In interpreting the formal relations of Mondrian's compositions, we can develop contents that speak to us about life, not in its fleeting appearances, however, but in its most intimate, authentic and universal ways of being.

Mondrian's talent and intellectual honesty ensure that form acquires depth and reveals his intimate vision of things.

With Mondrian form becomes content and aesthetics acquires an ethical value.



Mondrian, 1922

After the series of works constructed with linear signs of a graphic nature PLATE 2 - **21**, **22**, painting now appears to reassert its rights. In PLATE 2 - **23** we see planes of blue, pink, and ocher interspersed with splendid shades of gray and black signs. Color sometimes emphasizes the panels formed by the black signs and sometimes expands them. This produces a pleasing rhythm in which the black lines alternate with the sometimes restrained and sometimes overflowing development of the colored areas. The gray seems to suggest a sort of matter ideally uniting the black signs and the colored planes. While everything in this composition moves and leads from one point to another, the space nonetheless maintains a condition of joyful and harmonious equilibrium. Color returns and the background gray, which flows between the colored planes (**23**) becomes white (Fig. 21). This small canvas shows a decrease in the number of black linear signs, which become sporadic dashes forming a counterpoint to the colored planes. It is, moreover, in this painting that the latter assume sharply defined contours for the first time. Mondrian was later to say that this came about under the influence of the painter Bart van der Leek, with whom he was in contact at that time.

As seen on PAGE 4, between 1914 and 1915 an external and absolute unity (the oval) is translated into an internal and relative unity (a square). Oval and square coexist in PLATE 2 - **22** but, from that moment on, the oval progressively dissolves (a faint trace of an oval is still to be found in **23** and Fig. 21) and plastic space was to rest on this idea of unity (the square) as the subjective symbol of an assumed and no longer visible objective unity (the oval). On examining **22** to **26** we see how the oval dissolves and perpendicular lines, which expand beyond the canvas, express a virtually infinite space, i.e. an idea of continuity and of totality which was previously conveyed by the oval.

PLATE 3 - **24** and Fig. 22 can be read as "squares" overbalanced by a sudden predominance of one direction or the other. This is essentially the space of **22** expressed entirely with color planes instead of linear segments.

Fig. 22 : Observing the variety of planes we note that some have the same color but differ in terms of proportions while others are analogous in form but differ in color. The planes are sometimes the same both in form and in color. With the repetition of the same entity, regardless of whether it is rectangular or square, the degree of changeability is reduced and we catch a glimpse of something more constant, while the surrounding planes have already returned to multiplication and differentiation in terms of form and/or color.

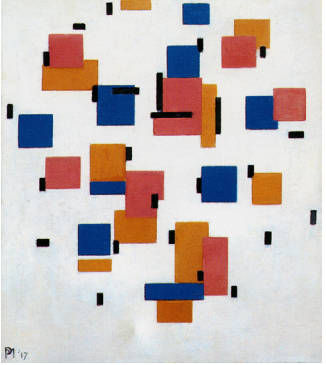


Fig. 21 - Composition in Color B, 1917, Oil on Canvas, cm 45 x 50

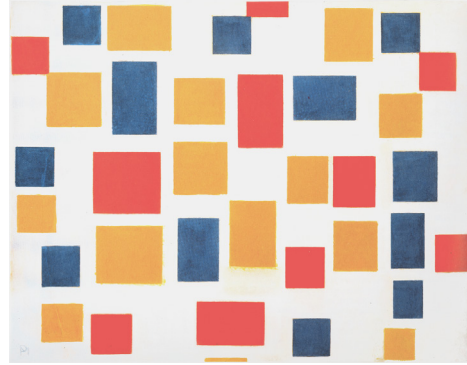


Fig. 22 - Composition with Color Planes 1, 1917, Gouache on Paper, cm 48 x 60

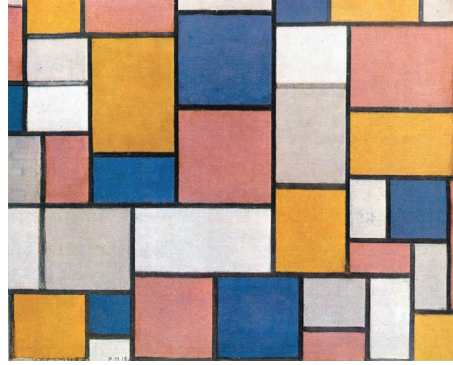
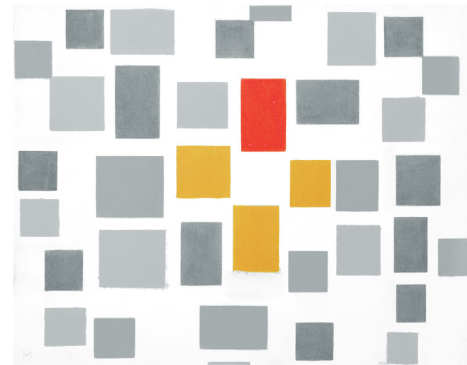
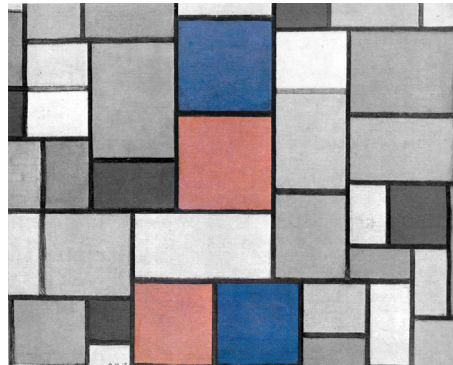


Fig. 23 - Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines, 1918, Oil on Canvas, cm 49 x 60,5



Having joined the planes, Mondrian still appears dissatisfied. The lack of unity he noted in the canvases of 1917 still awaits a solution.

Color is thus relinquished once again in order to concentrate on formal layout.

Fig. 24: A basic layout is drawn on a lozenge canvas. Lines running parallel to the sides of the painting are used to divide its surface into a number of sections with the same proportions as the canvas. These sections are divided in turn by diagonal lines (perpendicular with respect to the viewer) running across the entire surface of the painting and increasing in thickness in some sections. The variation in thickness disrupts the regular basic pattern, which is thus transformed into an asymmetrical rhythm.

The thicker lines suggest rectangular fields, which in fact take shape in two later works (Fig. 25 and PLATE 3 - **25**).

The painter joins the planes together (Fig. 23) and introduces a certain constancy of the formal structure (Fig. 24, 25). In Fig. 25 the planes can in fact all be traced back to the basic parameter of a small square module (A) which doubles to form a rectangle, either vertical (B) or horizontal (C), which is then duplicated to generate a larger square (D). Larger rectangles are then born out of the combination of square D and the smaller rectangle (C). The large rectangles are formed by six small squares,

In PLATE 2 - **22** the square expresses a balanced unitary synthesis of horizontal and vertical which otherwise overbalance through the entire composition. When that drawn square opens up to colors Mondrian is faced with a variety of squares, some yellow, some red, and some blue.

A synthesis of the composition equivalent to the one expressed in **22** would now need to be attained not only between horizontal and vertical but also between the different colors.

Same as in PLATE 3 - **24** the variety of shapes and colors reduce in the center of Fig. 22 where three yellow planes and one red plane gather around a white area emerging from the background. As in **24** the white area has the proportions of a square; a white square which seems to suggest an ideal synthesis of form (horizontal and vertical) and colors.

This solutions, however, does not represent a satisfactory answer to the lack of unity the artist perceives in these works where "the planes float freely in space and the whole composition lacks cohesion".

When van Doesburg talked to Mondrian about founding an art magazine, Mondrian was initially reluctant. He thought that the times were not ripe, that Doesburg should be satisfied with a column in a small newspaper and that the spread of new ideas could only go slowly, gradually. Nevertheless, van Doesburg's entrepreneurial spirit won out and in October 1917 the first issue of De Stijl was published.

When Mondrian returned to Paris in February 1919, the magazine De Stijl regularly published monthly sequels to essays written by the artist. Eager to make his ideas known to the French, Mondrian had been writing more than he painted for over three years. He got help for the translation and publishes in 1920 at his own expense a brochure entitled "The Neoplasticism" that however did not arouse the hoped for interest also because of a rather clumsy translation. The publication will also be ignored by art critics.



Mondrian, Seuphor, Prampolini, Kertesz (clockwise)

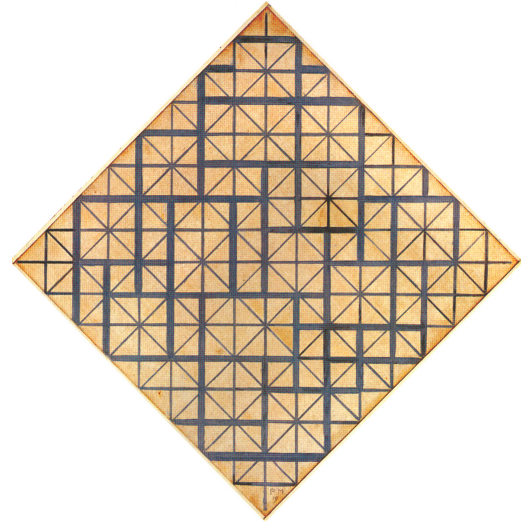


Fig. 24 - Composition with Grid 4, Lozenge Composition, 1919, Oil on Canvas, Diagonal cm 85

the large squares by four, and the small rectangles by two basic squares. The space changes from the smaller planes to the larger but retains something constant. The composition no longer develops in a wholly random way, as it does in in Fig. 21, 22, 23.

Fig. 25: The same shape appears different because it is in another color and the same color differs in appearance in relation to its proportions. An element of the same size, color and proportion can then appear once in the horizontal and once in the vertical. In this way, a variety of situations is produced that can nevertheless be traced back to certain constant values.

In these new works everything changes (the natural) but something remains (the spiritual).

The same concept is to be found in PLATE 3 - **25** where three squares of the same size but different colors, one blue, one red and one yellow, form a compact and regular layout which suggests a possible unity if compared with other parts of the composition where forms and colors disorderly change. The solution of three superimposed squares tried out in **25** must have been unsatisfactory to Mondrian as well because the synthesis appears as a juxtaposition of three separate squares.

In the spring of 1925, the art critic Paul Sanders is in Paris and frequently visits Mondrian in his studio. The painter entertains Sanders by telling him about the great potential of radio and phonographic music reproduction, jazz, and electronic music. Before returning to Amsterdam, Sanders asks his brother to purchase a painting by Mondrian to help him financially. On receiving the money, the painter decides that the sum is excessive and sends two works.



Fig. 25 - Composition with Grid 5, Lozenge Composition with Colors, 1919, Oil on Canvas, Diagonal cm 84,5

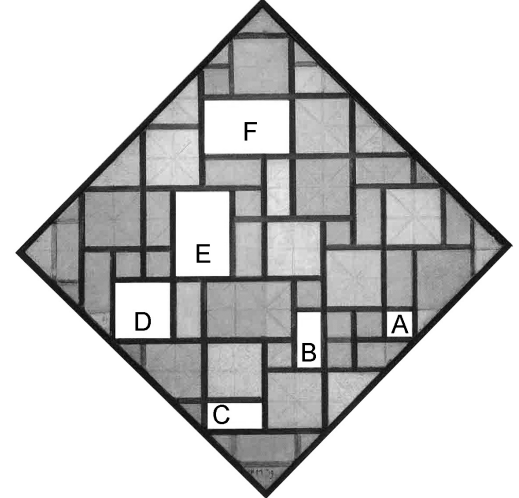


PLATE 3: Due to the unsatisfactory solution of three superimposed squares tried out in **25** on a new canvas (**26**) the painter opts again for a central white area which could work as an ideal synthesis of the colors (as assumed while examining **24**). With **26** the artist introduces though some fundamental innovative aspects.

The central area is a rectangle which recalls the rectangle of PLATE 2 - **20** appearing now in a brightly colored composition. Mondrian traces here straight horizontal and vertical lines that, unlike his previous works, cross the entire space of the painting without interruption. This gives dynamism to the composition if compared with **25**.

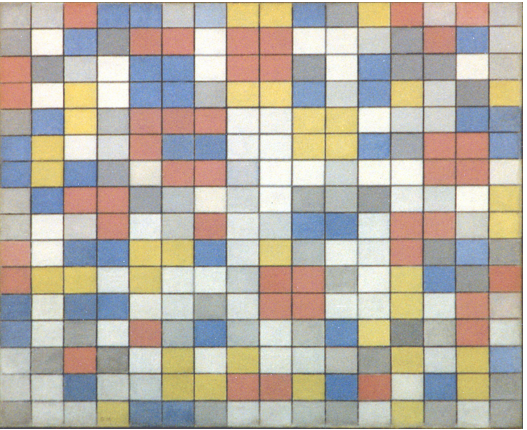
The painter begins once again with a schematic division of space. Each side of the painting is divided into 16 units so as to divide the surface into 256 rectangles of the same size with the same proportions as the canvas. This gives birth to a wholly regular and constant layout in terms of form that is transformed by the alternation of color into a whole of unpredictable variable appearance. We observe a multitude of planes colored yellow, red (a light red verging on magenta), and light blue mixed with other planes of gray and white. At least three different shades of gray can be seen. The lines are a darker gray that becomes almost black in some sections.

On observing the multitude of colored rectangles, we note that two, three, and even four rectangles of the same color gather in some areas to form larger units. We see a larger rectangle of a yellow color, one of blue, and three of red. Here too, as in **25**, Mondrian therefore employs a grouping of basic entities that generate larger ones. The composition as a whole is not, however, so strictly governed by the process of aggregation and growth, as it was in the previous canvas. This process now manifests itself sporadically.

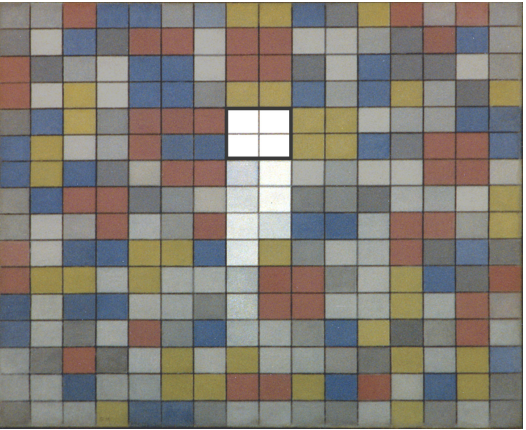
Note how the opposition between vertical and horizontal lines manifests itself with greater clarity and balance in a homogeneous field of color like that of the larger rectangles. The perpendicular opposition instead proves less stable when the colors change around the point of intersection between vertical and horizontal. What appears in synthetic and unitary form in the larger rectangle is unbalanced elsewhere by the various colors gathered around the points where the lines intersect. It is color that highlights the most balanced syntheses of the two opposite directions in this composition. If in PLATE 2 - **22** the balance between opposites depended only on form (horizontal and vertical), five years later it mainly depends on color.

In addition to the five larger rectangles expressed in the three primary colors, **26** presents one in white that also contains black lines forming a sign of equivalence. This is the only white rectangle of larger size present on the canvas. Its position is perfectly central with respect to the sides of the canvas and slightly raised. The white rectangle appears to be generated through a progressive purification of the colors that takes place along the vertical axis running through the center of the canvas (**26** Diagram B). This seems to confirm the assumption of white suggesting a synthesis of the colors we have made during examination of PLATE 3 - **24** and PAGE 5 - FIG. 22.

The painter still distinguishes in this phase between color (yellow, red, blue) and non-color (white, black, gray) seeing the first as a plastic symbol of the *Natural* and the second as symbolizing the *Spiritual*. As the artist put it: *"The unchangeable (the Spiritual) is expressed in the composition by means of straight line or planes of non-color (black, white, and gray), while the changeable (the Natural) is expressed by means of planes of color and rhythm."*



26 - Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors, 1919



26 - Diagram B

Just as the artist chose out of all the possible relations of form the fundamental one expressing the utmost contrast (horizontal-vertical), in terms of color his eye preferred the primary colors yellow, red, and blue because they seemed to him the best able to transform the painted surface into a living and exuberant reality.

The colors are not flat and uniform, as they appear in standard reproductions. There are extremely subtle variations of every primary color, as there are of every shade of gray. As Jaffé wrote: *"The painter let himself be guided by his feeling for color and rhythm, and he made alterations and corrections as he worked; over paintings to change the color of some of the areas can still be detected. The skilled treatment and masterly balance of the canvases are the result not of a theory but of a long experience as a painter."*

Mondrian uses the three primary colors to express contrast and diversity, and white, black, and gray to create an equally broad range of variation that appears, however, more homogeneous than the contrasting variation generated with the primary colors. On observing the range of grays, we note that the darkest shade appears to be as dark as the blue, just as the lightest shade of gray appears to be equivalent to yellow. It is as though the range of the three primary colors had been transposed into a parallel range of grays that intrinsically appear more unified than yellow with respect to red or red with respect to blue precisely because they are different shades of the same "color". The artist appears to be seeking a common denominator in terms of color.

If yellow, red, and blue symbolize the contrasting and vivid diversity of the real world, with grays and whites the painter brings into play an equally wide but more homogeneous variation.

On the one hand, the composition blossoms in a conspicuous and discordant plurality (yellow, red, blue), symbol of the manifold and changing appearance of the world, and - on the other hand - reconnects in synthesis through the most homogeneous variation of the grays between the two opposite values of black and white, which in a central rectangle express themselves as a unit. Through the colors of the spirit (white, gray and black) the manifold aspects of the world (yellow, red and blue) find an ideal synthesis.

PLATE 3: A yellow, red and blue larger rectangles are positioned around the white rectangle placed in the center (**26** Diagram). The painter appears intent on gathering together the three colors in this area and therefore reassert the

function of synthesis attributed to the white rectangle here and to the white square areas emerging from the ground in **24**. The genesis of the white unity can be traced back to the mass of white that was first seen in 1915 (**22**), became a square area with precise edges (**24**), reappeared two years later as a rectangle (**26**), and then turned into a dynamic white field of square proportions as from 1920 (**28**, **32**).

26 constitutes Mondrian's first exhaustive formulation of what was to become the Neoplastic vocabulary underpinning all the subsequent work. From now on, Mondrian's painting was to be a complex and dynamic set of relations between lines, segments, and planes (of color and "non-color"); between infinite space (lines) that becomes finite space (segments and planes) and then re-expands to the infinite. A process Mondrian used to define as *"subjectification of the objective and objectification of the subjective"*.

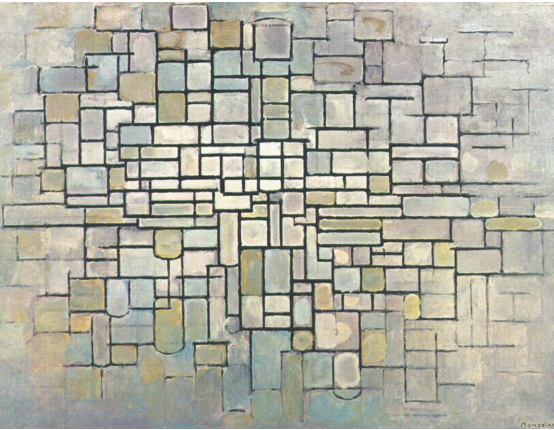
Now detached from the outward appearance of things, the painting holds no longer for natural landscapes alone but also for "artificial landscapes", i.e. for the urban environment in which human beings spend today most of their lives. The dynamic and multiform aspect of natural and/or urban space is transformed on the canvas into a dynamic whole endowed with greater synthesis and equilibrium before returning to a dynamic state. The canvas serves as a model of space in equilibrium between disharmonies of real space and harmonies of plastic space.

In 1919 the German architect Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in the German city of Weimar.

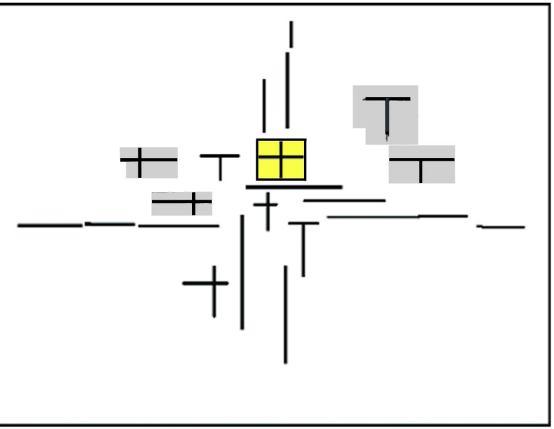
In 1921 financial problems induced Mondrian to consider abandoning painting altogether. However, various friends in Holland helped him to obtain commissions either for copies, watercolors and drawings of flowers which finally enabled him to keep his head above water. In the same year a painting by Mondrian was included in the exhibition "Les Maitres du Cubisme" organized by Léonce Rosenberg at his Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris. Rosenberg was unable to sell Mondrian's work.

In 1923 Mondrian met the Belgian writer, poet, painter and art theorist Michel Seuphor who became Mondrian's colleague and friend. In the first Mondrian biography (1956) Seuphor writes: *"Once he had laid the foundations for the new language called Neoplasticism, Mondrian worked to explore all its possibilities without ever exhausting its potential. How many times, during this long Parisian period, did I have to listen to comments referred to Neoplastic compositions such as "laziness of spirit", "stupid stubbornness", "incapacity for renewal" etc.? I used to caricature these kind of remarks by ironically stating that Mondrian did in fact repeatedly paint only one work."*

A performance of futuristic music in Paris (1922) introduced by Marinetti and performed by a group playing a mixture of noise and music led Mondrian to write a series of articles in De Stijl on the application of Neoplastic principles to music. Sometime later Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg that for lack of money he could not buy an "electric" instrument as he would have liked.



20 - Composition II, 1913

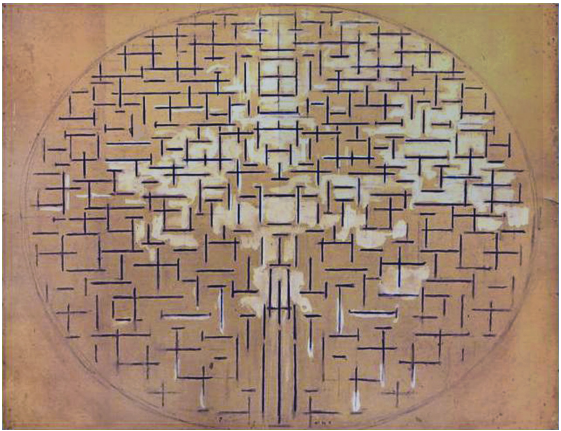


Let us compare for a moment **20** to **26**.

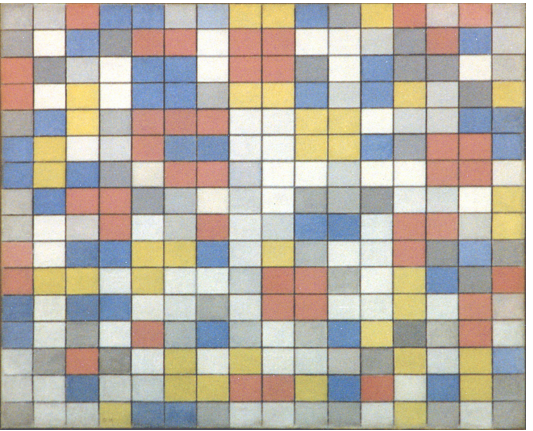
20: Around the central rectangle we see an endless variation of horizontal and vertical entities prevailing over one another. Some enclosed areas (marked in gray) show attempts of a more balanced relationship between opposites which is then fully attained in the central rectangle.

In a new way we see the same idea expressed in **26**: the relationship between horizontals and verticals appears imbalanced when observed through the random rhythm of the small rectangles whereas it achieves equilibrium with the larger colored rectangles. The achieved balanced relationship between opposites is, however, only a partial one, either yellow, red or blue, whereas the central rectangle evokes an ideal synthesis of opposites in terms both of form (horizontal-vertical) and color (black lines on a white ground).

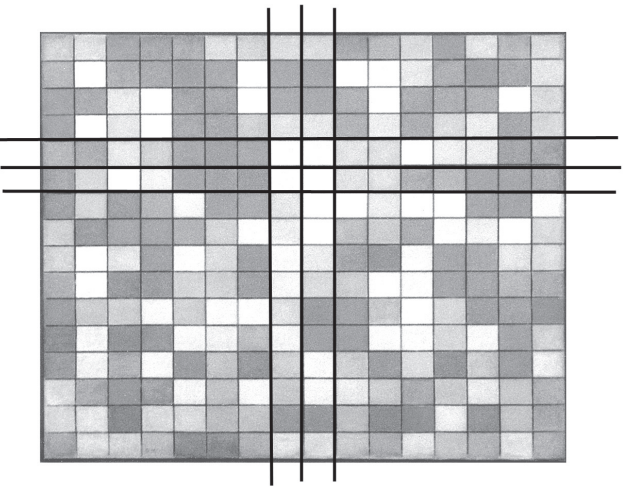
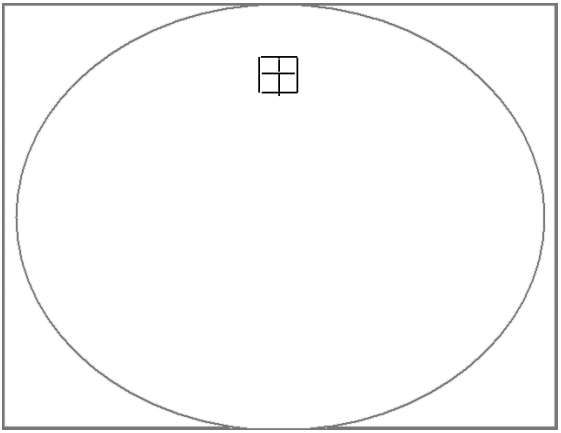
Around 1925 Theo van Doesburg introduced what he called "Elementarism" in his new works: the composition based on the diagonal. Mondrian, who had regarded van Doesburg as one of the few people with whom he had a close spiritual affinity, was bitterly disappointed by van Doesburg's failure to understand the dynamic equilibrium of opposites (horizontal and vertical) Mondrian had set forth as a fundamental element of his work and De Stijl. The artistic break with van Doesburg was definitive; on a personal level, however, they resumed contact some time later.



22 - Pier and Ocean 5, 1915



26 - Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors, 1919



Let us now compare **22** to **26**.

With **26** the composition opens up to the dynamic traversal of straight lines that evoke a more open and continuous space than in the previous compositions (PLATE 3 - **25**). It should be noted, however, that the lines in **26** do not reach the edge of the canvas. Observation of the original work reveals that they stop a few millimeters short, especially at the bottom of the painting. While the lines certainly inject dynamism into the composition, they have yet to assume the independent role acquired during the 1920s. The lines used by Mondrian after 1922 are thicker and run from one edge of the painting to the other, thus giving the impression of extending beyond the boundary of the canvas to evoke a space of virtually infinite expansion.

Previously expressed in a metaphorical way within the closed form of an oval, the totality of space opens up and is transformed over a span of four years into a sense of totality expressed through the continuity of straight lines. Mondrian appears to use the lines, which he describes as continuing uninterruptedly, in order to connect the unitary synthesis within the painting with the totality of space, that is, connect the internal, subjective unity - the square (**22**) or the rectangle (**26**) - with the external, objective unity formerly expressed with the oval. This has expanded in the meantime beyond the canvas and now coincides with the space of reality, of which the work of art constitutes a part. A part which aims at ideally concentrating the whole in its essence.

As Maurizio Calvesi points out, the canvas is *"an ideal center in which the spatial event is determined in its wholeness and totality no less than in its dynamic continuity. Mondrian wrote in 1920 that the straight lines intersect and touch one another tangentially but continue uninterruptedly. The result radiates out in fact from the painting to the infinite, but the canvas exhausts the intuition of the whole within itself."*

Both previously present inside the composition (**22**), the square and the oval now coexist virtually (**26**). The oval is the real world and a white rectangle reminds us from inside the canvas that the endless variability of the world and the unpredictable course of life (the whole composition around the central rectangle) is an indissoluble unity. Everything that creates opposition in our common experience of everyday life, dividing and separating one one thing from another, actually belongs to one and the same process. While the oval served during the cubist phase to express an idea of the whole, it appeared at the same time as an overly absolute form. Mondrian sought to address the absolute and the universal but starting from the relative and the particular, i.e. from the real condition of human everyday existence.

The infinite extension of the real world, is now expressed through the continuity of the lines, which is why Mondrian was to abolish the use of any frame around his canvases in the subsequent works. The frame interrupts the ideal continuity envisaged between the work of art and real life.

It took four years to open up the all-inclusive space of the oval and express it in a new form through straight lines. The oval constituted a limit to Mondrian's vision and in the following years, when solid foundations had been laid for Neoplastic space, he explained his rejection of any circular form by stating that *"the compact, rounded line expressing no relationship in plastic terms was replaced by the straight line in the duality of the orthogonal position, which expresses the purest relationship."*

It should be pointed out here that some critics have attributed the oval used by Mondrian in those years with meanings related to theosophical symbolism. It has been described as a symbol of life, like the egg. It is certainly true that circles and ovals have always suggested a sense of universality, and Mondrian was unquestionably aware of this. I do not believe, however, that he looked up the oval form in the dictionary of theosophical symbols one fine day and decided to include it in his paintings. I am rather convinced that the painter was prompted to use the oval more by his eye than by literary disquisitions and arguments. While these were certainly not extraneous to his decision, I do not believe they had all that much influence on the development of his paintings.

As Mondrian wrote, *"The ancient sages used the cross to represent the eternal relationship of interior and exterior, but neither this nor any other symbol can serve as the means of plastic expression of abstract-real painting. On the one hand, the symbol constitutes a new limitation; on the other, it is too absolute."*

Abstract painting cannot be explained in terms of pre-established symbols. Real abstract art, acquires its truest meanings when forms and colors are interpreted with the mind free of preconceived ideas. The oval was necessary at that time as form, which I regard as the truest substance of the art of painting. While many still consider it reductive to speak solely of form, this is precisely where the vital sap of art is to be found. Unfortunately, certain critics of art, being reluctant to attribute importance to form and color and hence incapable of finding the true content of art there, are still obliged to hunt for it in old works of literature. I instead believe that the painting itself offers an abundance of explanations, especially in this case.

"At no price would Mondrian have wanted to appear as a bohemian artist like so many inhabitants of his neighborhood of Montparnasse. He wanted to be considered as a gentleman of the city, a bourgeois of Paris. His gestures and his gait were of great distinction, but even more so he was distinguished by nobility of character and a rare mind delicacy. If the physical attitude and the moral behavior were those of an aristocrat, the very nuanced voice, a little veiled, denote the exquisite sensitivity of the spirit. We are in the presence of a man for whom speculation is as natural as breathing. He cannot live without trying to weigh the imponderable. Mondrian reconnects with the great tradition of the complete man, the royal man who thinks not only with the hands but also with the head, whose head sees not only with the eyes of flesh but also with the eyes of the spirit, the man maker of admirable works but also generator of utopias ("machine to make Gods" says Bergson) and who expresses himself entirely in the work." (Seuphor)

After the wholly regular grid-plan of **26**, Mondrian embarked on a new series of works in which the formal layout opened up once more.

PLATE 3 - **27**: We note here two contiguous yellow planes of rectangular proportions verging on squares. The same proportion reappears lower down once in red and once in light gray. On the right, a large blue area proves to be the sum of the initial module repeated twice vertically. Lower down we have three rectangles - one yellow, one black, and one dark gray - presenting proportions that are half the initial module. Though different both in color and in size, these planes are based on the same parameter. Each is an expansion or contraction, either vertical or horizontal, of a pre-established unit of measurement. As in **25** a proportional development of space returns here. Now, however, it is only a part of the composition that reflects this layout, unlike **26**, where the whole of the space was based on the same unit of measurement. In **27** the planes close to the edges of the canvas suddenly assume anomalous proportions that are no longer related to the module. After a phase of greater constancy to be observed in the central area, everything changes unpredictably. This is clearly evident in the planes to the sides and in the upper section of the canvas but not so definite in those lower down (one gray and one blue), which appear at first sight to reflect the basic parameter. Closer examination shows, however, that the two planes are slightly less developed in height than those corresponding to the basic module. Moreover, the lines stop short before the bottom edge of the canvas, which makes the two planes less sharply defined than those above. Returning to the eight planes in the central area (the ones that are wholly proportional to the module), we note that they form a large square when viewed all together. The square shows a slight horizontal prevalence to compensate the vertical format of the canvas. The space in this square field displays a certain degree of constancy whereas everything changes around it. With a large square visibly structured and colored within, Mondrian seeks here to present a unitary synthesis open to multiplicity, almost as though intent on effecting interpenetration between the white unity of **26** and the three rectangles - one yellow, one red, and one blue - in its immediate vicinity. Because it is chromatically so heterogeneous, however, the synthesis (the large square) does not manifest itself with sufficient clarity.

Fig. 26: Here too, as in **27**, we can see a central area (which actually occupies almost the entire surface of the canvas) that is formally organized in terms of the progressive growth or division of a basic module of proportions tending toward the square (Diagram A). As in **27**, the planes outside the central area are no longer based on this module. The large square form appears to open in the top left corner and expand upward through a red plane that is no longer based on the initial module.

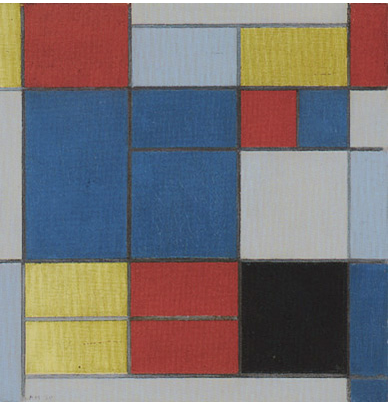


Fig. 26 - Composition C, 1920, Oil on Canvas, cm 60,3 x 61

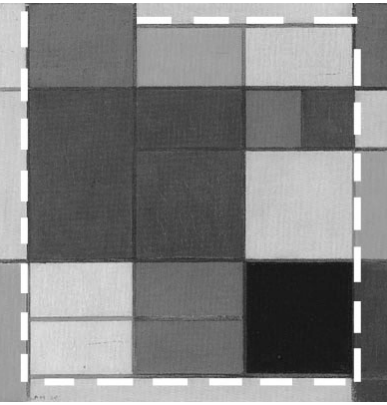


Diagram A

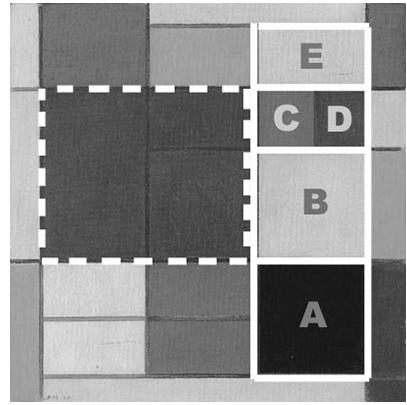


Diagram B

Chromatic value has an influence on the clarity with which the form is perceived. Observation of the red shows how relations with the neighboring colors as well as variations in size and proportion can make the same color look different. The red appears almost lighter alongside black than gray or yellow, next to which it appears to acquire greater weight and solidity. Neoplastic space shows how things have no value in themselves but are defined and acquire value in relation to one another. It is not possible to single out an entity and appraise it independently of its context. A space of this nature can serve as a sort of gymnasium in perceiving the value of things as they take on relative and temporary qualities through reciprocal influence and this can be a stimulus to contemplation of the changing complexities of present-day reality.

The two squares, one black (A) and one grayish-white (B), in diagram B express a condition of equilibrium between opposites. The two squares are placed one above the other, one darker and heavier, the other lighter in both senses. The composition displays a balance of vertical and horizontal and of black and white in this area, i.e. a synthesis of opposites in terms both of form and of color. Here too, however, as in PLATE 3 - **27**, the synthesis is not concentrated in a single shape, as it is in PLATE 3 - **26**. Above the whitish square we can see another square field of analogous proportions made up of a red square (C), a vertical blue rectangle (D) and a horizontal yellow rectangle (E). Added together, the three parts form a unity made up of the three primary colors as well as a strong horizontal predominance (E), a light vertical prevalence (D) and an equivalence of the opposite directions (C). These are all unified by the larger square area (C, D, E).

Reading the composition again from the bottom up, we see a black square, a whitish square, and a third made up of yellow, red, and blue. These three squares give birth to a unitary synthesis dynamically transposed into the vertical. Proceeding vertically from the bottom, we have the two opposite values (black and white squares) that open up to the primary colors, as well as to variations in the vertical-horizontal relationship (D and E). With the three vertically placed square forms we contemplate a dynamic synthesis of elements which Mondrian identified as plastic symbols for the *Spiritual* (vertical, white and black) and the *Natural* (horizontal, yellow, red and blue).

As previously in **27**, Mondrian again seeks here to express a unity made up of diversity, but realizes in doing so that the unitary synthesis is weakened and does not manifest itself with sufficient clarity. Moreover, the painter had already tried to express a synthesis with three superimposed squares (**25**) and the result was unsatisfactory. Once again the artist is searching for a balance between multiplicity and unity.

Between 1915 and 1920 Mondrian works to open up the square unit (PLATE 2 - **22**) to colors (PLATE 3 - **24**) but "*feeling a lack of unity*", he joins the colored planes and with three superimposed squares unsuccessfully tries to suggest a synthesis (**25**). So he returns to a white synthesis (**26**) but then tries again to open it up to multiplicity with a large square made of all the colors (**27**). Because scarcely identifiable as a synthesis, the large square becomes white again (**28**). This shows how the painter works to express unity as multiple as possible (without, however, losing sight of it) or, vice versa, to express multiplicity in synthetical form (without, however, atrophying space). This indication was given in **22** where a variety of imbalanced perpendicular signs find equilibrium and synthesis within a square which then opens up again to the manifold space around. We shall now see how the process of interpenetration between unity and multiplicity continues from 1920 up to 1942 (**28** to **38**).

Why does Mondrian need to visualize multiplicity and unity at the same time?

As mentioned, every synthesis generated by thought is necessarily partial and temporary, and must therefore open up again to the multiform and ever-changing aspect of physical reality. Moreover, Mondrian thinks of an intrinsically articulated unity and a multiplicity which can be perceived as one because he believes that everything is at the same time one and multiple. To give a concrete example: a tree looks like a small patch of green when seen from a great distance but then grows larger and reveals an increasing number of parts as we draw closer before finally displaying an enormous degree of complexity when we observe the microscopic structure of each individual leaf which becomes a small universe. The initial green spot (we perceived as one) has become very complexed (multiple); the initial finite reality appears now infinite. If the process is reversed, the tree loses its complexity and reverts to a simple patch of green. Depending on the positional relationship established in each case with the object observed, every single thing becomes multiple and then the multiplicity concentrates again into a unity.

What is the "true" nature and reality of a tree? Does it still make sense to paint a tree from a single viewpoint (the so-called realistic view) and claim that this is reality? How can we paint things that changes so quickly today in accordance with the changing positional relationship we establish with them? And how can we define realistic a way of painting the outer appearance of things if every single thing unveils an intrinsic endless reality? How can we simultaneously show the manifold and unitary aspect of each individual thing if not in abstract form?

The number of planes decreases in the transition from PLATE 3 - **26** to **28** and the composition now displays a greater degree of synthesis. There is a decrease in the number of parts but an increase in their reciprocal diversity. The sense of multiplicity expressed in primarily quantitative terms (**26**) now gives way to a sense of multiplicity expressed through difference in quality (**28**, **29**, **30**) (Fig. 27, 29, 31).

With **28** Mondrian returns to the idea of unity expressed in **26**, i.e. unity of the opposite values, black and white, but with the substantial difference that, with respect to **26**, the composition has now become wholly asymmetric and the sense of variation is no longer expressed solely through color but also through form. The composition now develops freely and is no longer subject to any pre-established module.

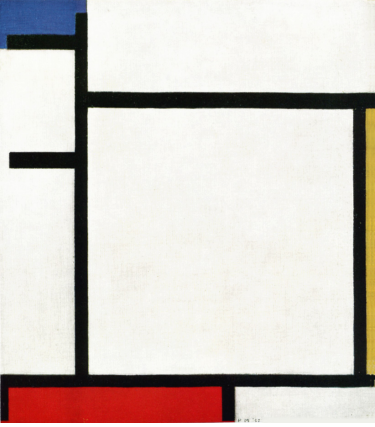


Fig. 27 - Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Grey, 1922, Oil on Canvas, cm. 34,8 x 38

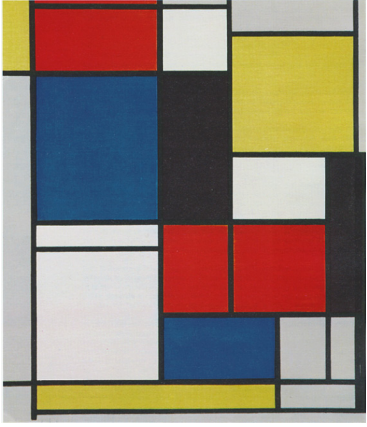


Fig. 28 - Tableau N. II with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Grey, 1921-25, Oil on Canvas, cm 65 x 75

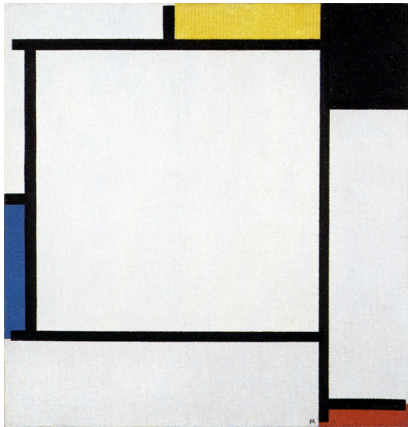


Fig. 29 - Tableau 2 with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red and Grey, 1922, Oil on Canvas, cm 53,4 x 55,6

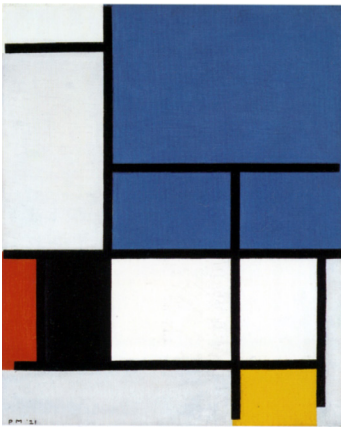


Fig. 30 - Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow and Grey, 1921, Oil on Canvas, cm 50 x 60

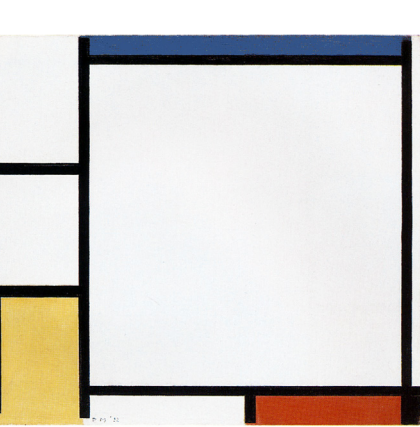


Fig. 31 - Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black, 1922, Oil on Canvas, cm 42 x 48,5

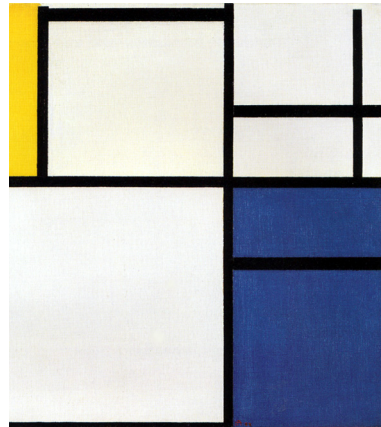


Fig. 32 - Composition with Yellow, Blue and Blue-White, Oil on Canvas, cm 53,3 x 55,3

28 presents a set of straight lines that generate a dynamic space in a state of unstable equilibrium between heterogeneous entities (areas of different sizes and colors) and an opposing tendency to concentrate and unify that variety in an ideal synthesis of opposite values (the white square field defined by black lines).

While one direction prevails over its opposite elsewhere, the two directions are equivalent in the square. In other words, though different, they acquire the same value, duality disappears and all of the multiple space generated by the continuous predominance of one direction over the opposite one is condensed into a relatively stable and unitary synthesis. The continuous interaction between opposites that produces open and unstable situations elsewhere is transformed into interpenetration that generates balance and harmony in the central square.

The layout of **28** was to become the model for nearly all the canvases painted by Mondrian between 1922 and 1927 where the compositions develop a large white square in the context of an asymmetrical and variable set of whitish, gray and/or yellow, red, and blue planes (Fig. 27, 29, 31).

At the same time Mondrian worked on a series of paintings in which he appears to have still been seeking interpenetration between unity (the white square) and multiplicity (planes of different size, proportion and color). Fig. 28, 30, 32 represent an example of these works.

Everything seems subject to change here, where all the planes differ from one another in terms of form or color. The space is in motion. More balanced syntheses are generated every so often in one color or another between the areas with a predominance of one direction or the other (Fig. 28).

It is color more than form that generates a large blue field of square shape (Fig. 30). Elsewhere it is instead form that establishes equivalence in the lower-right corner while color blue reopens it (Fig. 32).

As mentioned, while a defined square takes shape for the first time in PLATE 2 / **22**, other areas of the same composition suggest potential squares, which do not, however, attain the balance of the one in the center (**22** - Diagram).

We shall see this unstable nature of the square, that is, a symbol of unity, in all subsequent compositions.

Between 1920 and 1942 the square will be a constant module always changing in size, proportions and colors just as the waves of an ocean that appear different from one another but they are all made of the same water. Every square proportion of each individual composition is different from the other according to the context: here we see a slightly more vertical square and there a square which expands horizontally. It is important to reassert that we use the word „square“ to describe a dynamic balanced relationship between horizontal and vertical and not a preconceived geometrical form. I believe that mathematics have nothing to do with Neoplastic space.

The "square" is the given moment in which the relationship between opposite drives attains a certain balance which is then lost when the different aspects again start to challenge and attain predominance over one another. The balance between opposites is of an instable nature same as the equilibrium between contrasting impulses we often try to reach within ourselves.

The continuous interaction between opposites that produces open and unstable situations elsewhere is transformed into interpenetration that generates balance and harmony with the square.

We are constantly stimulated by the unforeseeable flow of existence in everyday life and open up to innovation on the one hand while seeking to maintain the integrity of our established equilibriums on the other.

Every Neoplastic composition expresses this dialectic between the changing aspects of life and the human need to stabilize them and find something of greater constancy and duration. A square form keeps space constant while differences in proportion and color change it.

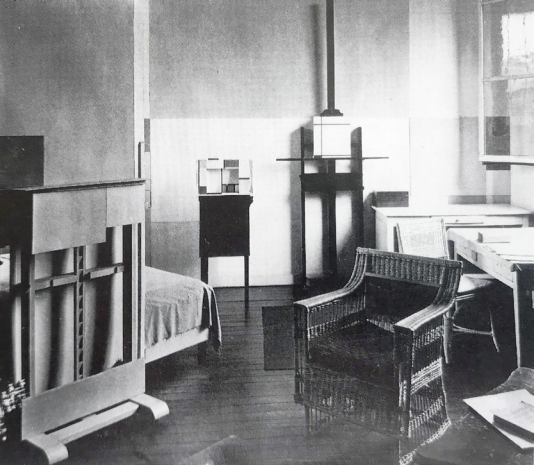
The balance of the composition is influenced by all the elements and not only by the square. Every part is unique and unrepeatable but nevertheless contributes to the overall economy of the work, and it is precisely a vision of the whole that determines the relative value of each individual part.

In an article published in September 1926 in the newspaper "De Telegraaf", the author recounts a visit to Mondrian's studio where, among other things, he spoke of his passion for Josephine Baker's dances, declaring that "*if the Charleston is banned in Holland, I will have a reason never to return there again*".

Around 1925 Mondrian's work was becoming increasingly well-known, he even had buyers and admirers in Germany and Switzerland. This enabled him to devote himself entirely to his abstract work without the frustration of having to produce works on commission simply to survive.

"Le Neoplasticisme" was published as "Die Neue Gestaltung" in the series of Bauhaus Bücher. During this period Mondrian was represented in various exhibitions in Germany, France, Holland, USA.

"Mondrian's studio at Rue du Depart in Paris was a large, bright room with high ceilings that the artist had irregularly divided up using a large black painted cabinet which was partially covered by an out-of-use easel covered with large red, gray and white cardboard. Another easel was placed against the large black wall which often changed its appearance since Mondrian often exercised his Neoplastic virtuosity on it. The second easel was entirely painted white and was usually only used to show finished paintings. The real place of work was the table." (Seuphor)



Mondrian's atelier in Paris (1926)



Mondrian with Willy Baumeister and Michel Seuphor

Between 1920 and 1942 Mondrian works at not less than 198 canvases.

During this period the lines increase in thickness while the primary colors tend to be purified of hybrid tonalities such as the greenish yellow, orange-red or bluish-white present in some compositions of 1921. The basic meaning of this whole group of paintings is to open up the white field of the square area (PLATE 3 - **28**) to various colors, sizes and proportions without, however, losing sight of it. Works such as those from PLATE 3 - **28** to PLATE 4 - **38** show fundamental aspects of this long and very articulated process which will lead to the two final canvases PLATE 5 - **39**, **40** representing Mondrian's visual thinking in the most comprehensive form.

PLATE 3 - **29**: The white square field (**28**) opens up appearing now once in a larger form in red (1) and once in a smaller form in black (2); to the right of the large red square and to the right of the smaller black square below, we can see a grayish square field crossed by a horizontal segment (3) and a whitish square field crossed by a vertical segment (4). This too is a way of opening up unity (the square form) to multiplicity and at the same time express multiplicity verging on possible unities (four different squares).

30: We see here a variety of squares including two in color and two in white, one large and three smaller.

The large blue square and the smaller yellow one appear to contend for the space previously occupied by a large white square (**28**) whereas small black segments or accents of color serve to redistribute the weight and keep the whole in a state of dynamic equilibrium.

The square module opens up again to color, but only one color at the time, so as to maintain visibility and avoid being lost, as in **27**. There is a clear contrast between vertical and horizontal that generates tension while a deft reciprocal distribution and calibration of color and proportion works at the same time to generate the felicitous impression of an optimal balance of weight. The space is markedly asymmetric but everything is kept in perfect equilibrium. It does the mind good to think that asymmetry and diversity can be resolved in a harmonious space. If only this could be achieved more often in social life.

The two perpendicular lines running through **30** (see also Fig. 33, 35, 37) divide its plane into a series of open sections that expand, together with the lines, beyond the perimeter of the painting toward virtually infinite space. We see the inner sections as squares only by relating them to the perimeter of the painting. It is the sides of the canvas that determine the proportions we actually perceive. The square fields, large or small, are in unstable equilibrium between the finite space of the canvas and the infinite extension of the lines. In point of fact they are quite indefinite entities which we interpret as square proportions. They are defined and undefined entities at the same time. This interaction between infinite space and finite space generates the relations and proportions that work together with the weight of the colors toward a dynamic balancing of the whole. On observing these works, we are faced with a space that lasts and is already different a moment later.

Fig. 35: The composition is based on the interaction of two perpendicular lines and two opposite segments, which generate planes tending toward square proportions. Six of these can be seen, one of which is larger (with a slightly greater degree of vertical development) and one yellow.

The horizontal line is slightly thicker than the vertical. The two segments are visibly thicker than the two lines and

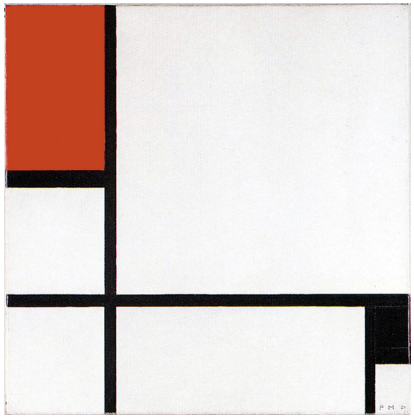


Fig. 33 - Composition N. I with Red and Black, 1929, Oil on Canvas, cm 52 x 52

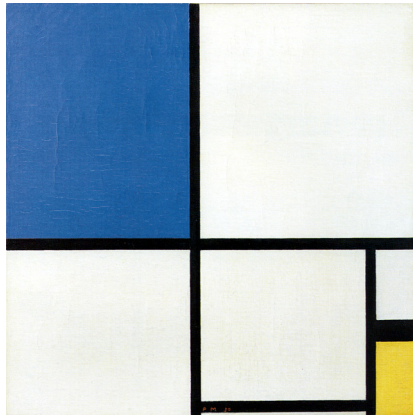


Fig. 34 - Composition N. II with Blue and Yellow, 1929, Oil on Canvas, cm 50,5 x 50,5

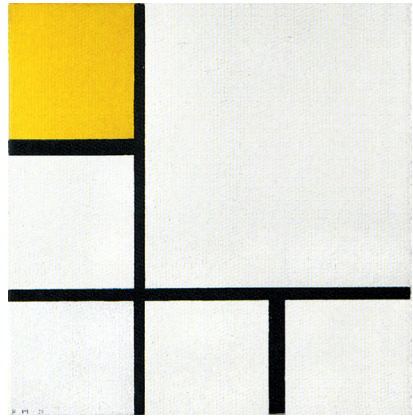


Fig. 35 - Composition N. I with Yellow and Light Grey, 1930, Oil on Canvas, cm 50,5 x 50,5

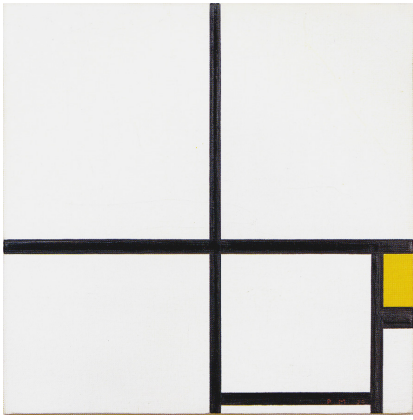


Fig. 36 - Composition with Yellow, 1930, Oil on Canvas, cm. 46 x 46,5

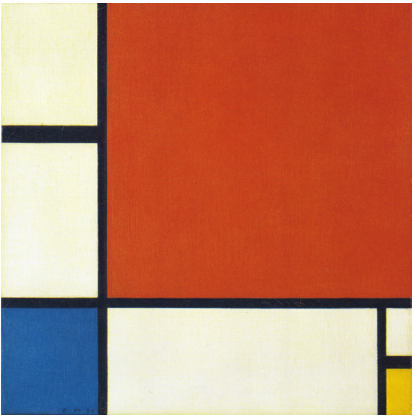


Fig. 37 - Composition with Blue, Red and Yellow, 1930, Oil on Canvas, cm 51 x 51

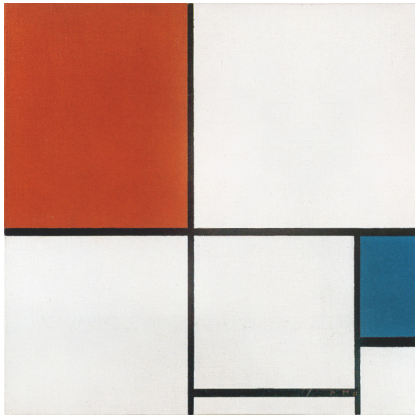


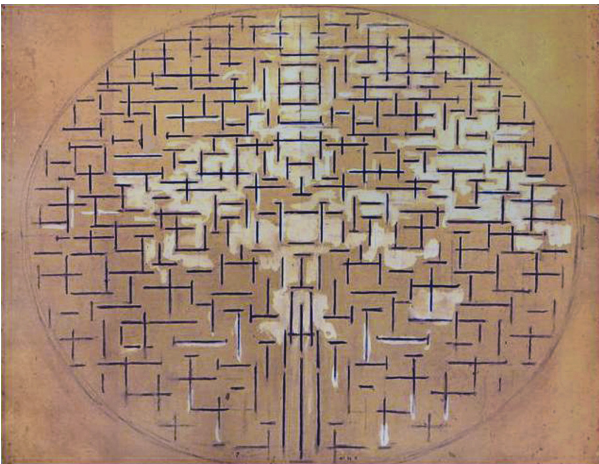
Fig. 38 - Composition A with Red and Blue, 1932, Oil on Canvas, cm 55 x 55

have greater weight, especially the vertical one, which also serves as a counterweight in the lower right section to the visual weight of the yellow square in the upper left section.

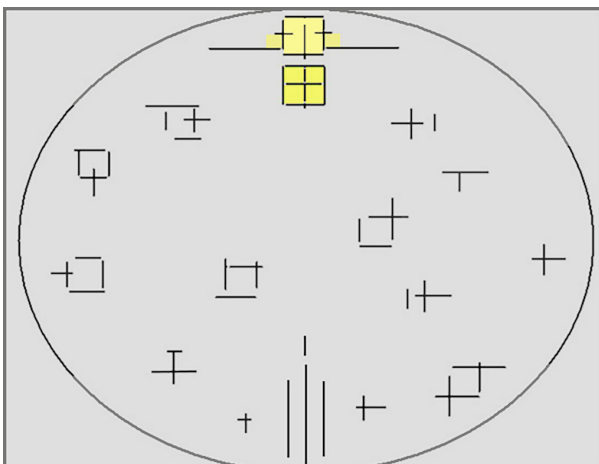
Through minimal variations the composition acquires a certain complexity. The segments act as intermediaries between the dynamic and infinite space of the lines and the finite space of the planes.

The three squares in the lower section appear more balanced than the others, which instead develop a slight vertical predominance. While the lines "run away", something remains to generate a variety of more or less square fields on the point of change. Unity multiplies here and multiplicity suggests unstable unities.

PLATE 3 - **31** and Fig. 34, 36, 38: Two perpendicular lines that run through the center of the canvas generate four areas not too far removed from equivalence. The lower right area is further divided into a closed square and a smaller blue plane (4). The closed square shows a slight horizontal predominance counterbalanced by a blue plane and by a slightly more vertical development of area 3. Area 2 is the only actual square where opposite reach equivalence. This connection between a completed square and a series of open, uncertain squares reminds of **22**. (below). We are faced with four situations (1, 2, 3, 4) that verge on equivalence, that is to say, to square proportions, without ever attaining it in stable and definitive form.



22 - Pier and Ocean 5, 1915



Because in **22** the fully achieved square presented itself in the centre-upper part of the composition as a perfectly balanced synthesis of all the unstable space inside the oval, it was necessarily compelled to take into account all the unachieved squares spread all around without thereby losing itself. This is why the painter works now to express unstable squares a moment before or a moment after they attain equivalence, that is to say, he works to open the square unit to multiplicity.

This is the goal Mondrian pursued between 1920 and 1933 (**29** to **33**) and Fig. 27 to 40.

The works of this phase express an intimate sense of permanence and duration while everything is nonetheless on the verge of flux and motion. The impending inconstancy of life transforms our equilibriums (our definite "squares") into unstable situations. The play of equilibrium regards not only form but also very subtle vibrations of color. The surfaces appear to have been painted there and then, thus suggesting intuition more than cool elaboration. It is not easy to give an adequate description of the painterly quality of these canvases, the masterly combination of hues, the fine textural layering, or touches such as a sparkling note of yellow. It is also and perhaps above all essential to see the original canvases, which are endowed with energy that no reproduction will ever be able to convey, energy imparted by the man who brought them lovingly to life.

North American critics often describe abstract art and especially the type involving precise, clear-cut shapes by means of the term "hard-edge", as though we were talking about the outer aspect of some object. The value of Neoplastic visual thinking lies instead precisely in the abolition of every particular object in favor of the expression of pure relationships. The measurements, proportions, and chromatic or tonal variations in Neoplastic compositions are not pre-established but generated out of one another through reciprocal influence. The squares are never really such because it is the eye rather than mathematics that decides from case to case on their proportions. As mentioned, their extension can be slightly more vertical in some cases and horizontal in others depending on the spatial context in which they are developed. There are no elements in Neoplastic space endowed with absolute validity. It is therefore not the square in itself but the whole, i.e. a space that starts from a condition of change, attains momentary equilibrium, and then flows back into the unstable alternation of situations. If constancy predominates, the space is atrophied and bears little resemblance to life. Conversely, if change prevails, the space is

in danger of becoming chaotic and appeals less to the human mind and spirit.

The subtle balances produced in Neoplastic space are a transposition of the far more complex and never achieved equilibriums of existence. How many times in our lives have we had the impression of being able to attain a stable and lasting balance that is then always challenged by existence?

We often suffer conflicts between the opposing impulses of instincts and mind and we would always like to find balance, synthesis and unity, that is, our own inner paradise. Many times during an existence one can reach paradise and many times one can find oneself in hell; what Mondrian called the tragic; when duality (diabolus - from the Greek *dia* = through and *ballo* = to put in the middle, to separate) lacerates the integrity of consciousness and unity is lost.

Neoplastic compositions suggest an equivalence of horizontal and vertical (the square proportion) while elsewhere the horizontal prevails and dominates over the vertical and vice versa.



Mondrian's atelier in Paris (1926)

To help Mondrian financially, in June 1930 Walter Gropius (founder of the German Bauhaus), Gideon, Arp, and Moholy-Nagy organized a lottery, the proceeds of which were used to buy a painting by Mondrian for the winner. The drawing took place in Mondrian's studio in January 1931. Twenty-five people bought a ticket and the prize, a composition from 1930, was won by a German graphic artist.

Mondrian's contacts with American art collectors grew. His leading position on the modern movement was recognized by James Johnson Sweeney and by Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Works by him was also shown at exhibitions in Stockholm, Brussels and in The Netherlands.

Together with Michel Seuphor, in the early 1930's Mondrian took part in the group exhibitions of "*Cercle et Carré*" and "*Abstraction et Création*".

PLATE 3 - **32, 33**: The choice of the lozenge format gives greater breadth to the composition.

It makes it possible to use lines of various lengths. New relations of tension are established between the orthogonal planes and the diagonal sides of the painting. The four corners of the lozenge generate a centrifugal energy and seem to expand the plane of the canvas along its two median axes. The lozenge therefore already seems in itself a way to make the equivalence of opposites, i.e. the square, more dynamic.

32 presents a square defined by four sides.

The meeting points of the opposite directions are practically no longer visible in this work.

The contrast and opposition between vertical and horizontal lines is resolved here in a continuous space that finds unity by following the square form uninterruptedly from one side to the next one.

For the first time, all the four lines forming the square field differ in thickness, which increases as we proceed clockwise from the vertical on the right. We thus see a square that progressively tends to expand beyond our field of vision. The tendency toward expansion generated by the position of the lines (above all the upper horizontal) is counterbalanced by an opposite tendency toward concentration. The line moving furthest away (upward) is in fact also the thickest and therefore the one that exerts the greatest visual weight, that is, a downward pressure. Proceeding clockwise from the right vertical side, we see a square that grows heavier as it exits the canvas, i.e. tends to become more solid and permanent while it disappears: a simultaneously changing and comparatively constant space.

Mondrian seeks in these works to open and expand the square while maintaining its visibility at the same time. The concept of space here is still essentially the one that inspired his work from the very beginning: opening up to variety and mutability on the one hand while tending to concentrate on the other and thereby generating an ideal, more constant synthesis which then re-opens to variety and mutability.

In the rectangular canvases Mondrian opens the synthesis to multiplicity (the square duplicates, undergoes interpenetration with the lines and becomes yellow, red or blue) whereas in the lozenges the composition concentrates on one single square which should intrinsically express the highest possible degree of multiplicity.

In this phase Mondrian is like a composer who gradually reduces the orchestra to a solo instrument, an almost imperceptible sound (the slightly different thickness of the lines) that can still be varied in an effort to express the whole. In a white field crossed by four black lines, the thickness of a line can also serve in a space moving toward ever-greater synthesis to calibrate the weights and influence the overall economy of the composition.



Mondrian around 1930

"Every human being is born with a natural vocation towards the universal and those who believe that painting means using only brushes and not the head are incapacitated who would like to reduce man to less than what he really is." (Seuphor)

33: The square in this lozenge composition has the same proportions as the canvas and the relationship between the two appears more balanced than in **32**.

Once again, the four lines show a progressive increase in thickness as we move clockwise from the vertical on the right. The increase in the thickness of the lines can be seen as the vertical incorporating a slight horizontal expansion or conversely as the horizontal growing thicker in response to barely perceptible vertical pressure. For a fraction of a second, the space of the lines is simultaneously vertical and horizontal, i.e. a synthesis of the opposite directions. From this point of view the lines seem to transform into embryonic planes.

We actually talk about a square that we do not really see in full since the lines never meet inside the canvas. In point of fact each line could well continue on its own towards infinite space without being really concerned to relate with the opposite lines as to give birth to a square proportion.

Our mind translates infinite space (the uninterrupted lines) into a presumed finite space (a square form).

An albeit reduced multiplicity (each line presents a different thickness) hints at a probable unity (the square) which is, however, beyond our field of vision. Doesn't an invisible unity bring to our mind what some call God while others try to investigate and eventually explain through a rational never ending process named science?

The more important innovation is obviously the fact that, for the first time, the lines are no longer black but yellow. The field is uniformly white and the yellow shape almost appears to be born out of the white rather than in opposition to it, as in the case of the black. Yellow is an intermediate value between black and white, sufficiently dark to be differentiated from white but, at the same time, not so radically opposite as black.

The opposite values now seem communicate and achieve unitary expression in terms both of form and of color, with horizontal and vertical simultaneously present for an instant in every line and the synthesis of black and white in an intermediate color, which yellow appears to constitute in this case.

On observing this square and contemplating the differing thickness of the lines, we are faced with a unity undergoing transformation from one side to the other; a synthesis that already appears comparatively manifold in itself.

We perceive a unity that tends to become rather than to be. It endures but changes at the same time; a square that is open, dynamic, asymmetric, and entirely expressed by color. This composition goes to the heart of the problem: to show the manifold in unitary form; to open up unity, i.e. the postulate of consciousness, to the changing aspect of the natural universe and existence in time but without losing sight of it. Open up to the *Natural* without losing the *Spiritual*.

With the canvases of the late 1920's and above all with this lozenge of 1933 (PLATE 3 - **33**), Mondrian appears to have given material expression to an idea that had guided him, canvas after canvas, for roughly twenty years of work, namely to express the multiple in unitary form and endow it with the stability required by consciousness without, however, causing it to atrophy in overly rigid and constant geometric forms. The artist felt for a moment that he had achieved his objective with a square undergoing transformation while remaining relatively stable.

Nonetheless, if we compare **33** with the previous works and in particular with those produced up to 1920 (**19 to 26**), it appears immediately obvious that by 1933 the multiple aspect had been considerably reduced almost to the point of elimination. Around 1930 Mondrian painted in black and white or with just one or two colors inside predominantly white fields. In the span of a decade, the manifold space (**19 to 26**) appears to have been completely absorbed by the square, which was used between 1922 and 1933 (**30 to 33**) (Fig. 33 to 40) in an attempt to reformulate in conceptual synthesis a space that is in reality far more structured and complex.

The square we see in **33** is a symbolic representation that does not suggest the variety of the real world.

In 1933 the space of external reality had undergone marked internalization in the far more condensed forms of thought; the physical seemed to be expressed in excessively mental terms. The painter was soon to realize that his canvases did not convey a sense of the variety perceived by the eye in nature or urban space, the rich and multiform aspect of color previously captured with his dunes and trees, his Cubist works, and his checkerboard compositions. While **33** can therefore be regarded as a point of arrival, at the same time, as in other moments of Mondrian's artistic development, the work also represents a new point of departure.

As Michel Seuphor puts it in his beautiful biography of Mondrian: "*Sometimes he thinks he has found it. So he stops, observes the work, and says: It's done. But the clock of his life keeps on ticking and is already driving him forward. He soon realizes that nothing is done and everything has to start all over again.*"

Let us now go back for a moment and examine two more lozenge compositions (Fig. 39 and 40) which Mondrian painted respectively in 1925 and 1931.

Fig. 39: Two vertical and one horizontal line run across the canvas and divide it into various sections. The horizontal and the right vertical appear to be of equal thickness while the vertical on the left is thicker, which seems to make up for its lesser extension.

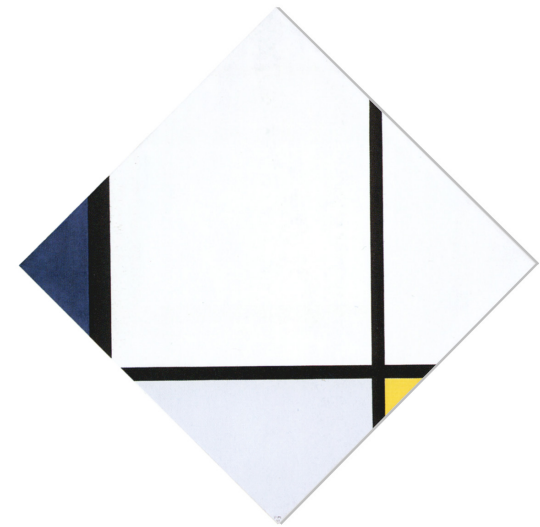


Fig. 39 - Tableau N. 1, Lozenge with Three Lines, Blue, Gray and Yellow, 1925, Oil on Canvas, cm. 80 x 80 - Diagonal cm 112

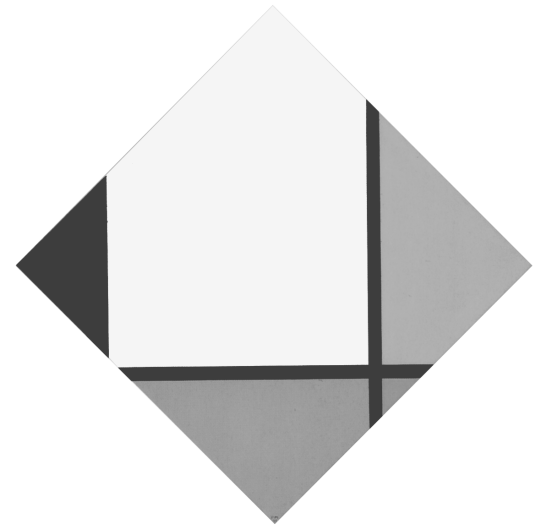


Fig. 39 - Diagram A

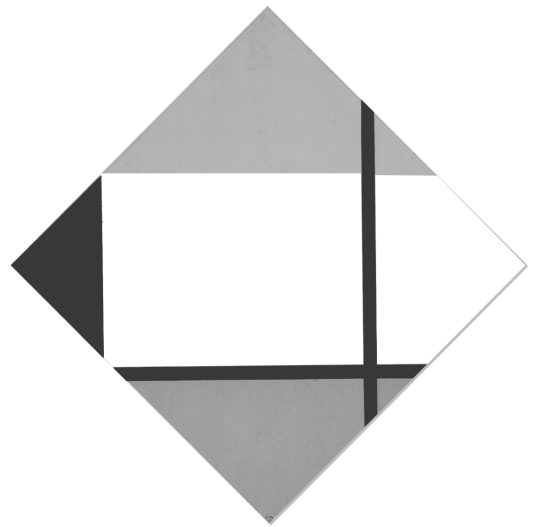


Fig. 39 - Diagram B

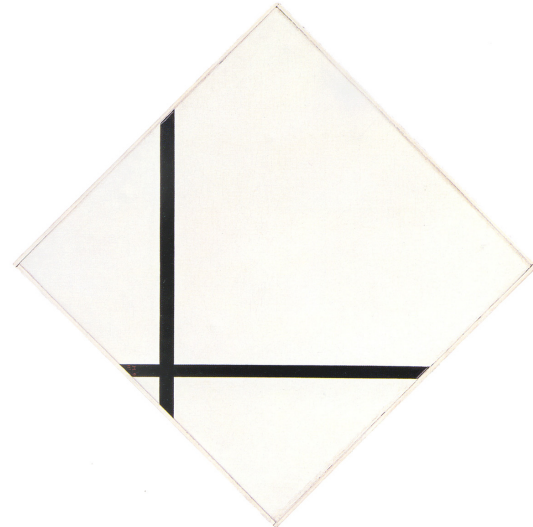


Fig. 40 - Lozenge Composition with Two Lines, 1931, Oil on Canvas, cm. 80 x 80 - Diagonal cm 112

Examination of the horizontal line in relation to the right vertical reveals a rectangular area extending upward (diagram A), while the relationship between the same horizontal, the left vertical and the blue plane tends to generate a horizontal field that the right corner of the lozenge draws toward itself (diagram B). The eye is drawn respectively downward and upward by the horizontal (diagram B) and the vertical (diagram A) areas, the relationship between which generates an indefinite square field that expands and contracts under the influence of the contending directions. The space as a whole is in a state of unstable equilibrium and attains unified expression for an instant through the progressive and almost simultaneous recombination of parts, none of which - it should be noted - constitutes in itself a definite square.

The virtual square expands upward beyond the perimeter of the canvas, projected ideally toward the infinite, while the notes of color (above all the blue on the left) draw the eye back toward the lower central area. In the Neoplastic vocabulary white symbolizes the spiritual and the primary colors the natural. We can therefore imagine this composition as a metaphor of the relationship between the absolute drives of the *Spiritual* drawn back toward the concrete by the part of man that is closest to the *Natural*: a dynamic relationship between opposite drives that attain equilibrium for an instant through reconciliation.

These lozenge compositions constitute the moment of greatest correspondence between the one and the many.

The peak is reached with Fig. 40 where just two black lines allude to a "square field" that can barely be intuited, a square that is no sooner generated than it becomes an infinite space. Here too, the top and right corners of the lozenge accentuate the dynamic expansion of the central field. The space of the square is no longer delimited by the lines but extends with them far beyond the canvas. The finite space almost seems to coincide with infinite space. The subjective unity (the square) extends so as to encompass ideally all the multiplicity of objective space (formerly expressed by an oval) that the canvas can never contain. It is like the squaring of the circle. In this work the square and the oval we see in **22** tended now to become one and the same thing.

PLATE 4 - **34** is the first Neoplastic composition with two horizontal lines running very close to one another in place of the single horizontal to be seen in all the previous works. The thickness of the two horizontal lines is half that of the vertical. It is almost as though the two thin black horizontals served to mark out a white line opposing the black no longer solely at the level of form (horizontal or vertical) but also in terms of color (black or white). Black seems ready to open up to white. The small plane on the right is gray, which is an intermediate value between black and white. The yellow plane on the left counterbalances the gray. Yellow was to become the intermediate value between black and white the following year (**33**).

34 presents an area of square form closed on four sides in the lower right section. The square field expresses a moment of equilibrium between the opposing directions, which elsewhere give birth to variable proportions and then expand in a univocal and absolute way (in exclusively horizontal or vertical terms) beyond the canvas toward infinite space. The large yellow field in the upper left section and the gray one lower down to the right help to keep the square in a state of unstable equilibrium.

35: The double horizontal line running through the central area of **34** expands here into two distinct horizontal lines crossed by two vertical lines. The interaction between verticals and horizontals generates a small square in the center (Diagram C). The place of the closed square form seen in **34** is taken here by a more complex structure made up of two juxtaposed rectangles (Diagrams A and B) whose interaction generate a square form (diagram C).

A relationship is established between a small square of sharply defined and definite size appearing in the center and a larger indefinite square placed in the lower section, which could almost be seen as the smaller one an instant after the lines have passed. By adopting a dynamic vision different parts of the composition become successive moments of one and the same element undergoing transformation. The dynamic movement of the lines drags along the small central square, which opens up while remaining in unstable equilibrium between vertical (A) and horizontal (B) predominance. Another way to open unity to multiplicity, certainty to the uncertain.

Only by adopting a dynamic vision of reality we shall be able to interpret the temporary imbalances and asymmetries of our daily life as necessary fragments of a much wider picture where a universal balance is to be found. A picture, however, daily life does not show us at once. Every situation in life which appears as an obstacle today may become part of a unitary, more balanced process tomorrow. Every opposition today may turn to our advantage in the course of time. This is a message of universal wisdom and of Neoplastic geometry as well.

36: The two horizontal lines running through the central area of **35** become four in this composition. The field inside the square form is no longer white here but yellow and presents a vertical segment echoed by an external horizontal segment in the lower section. The square form appears in a state of unstable equilibrium between an internal vertical and an external horizontal. In this respect, one should recall that Mondrian saw the vertical as a symbol of concentration towards a thoughtful interiority (the *Spiritual*) and the horizontal as an openness to the unpredictable stimuli of both interior and exterior life (the *Natural*). The linear segments seem designed to indicate the beginning of a process of interpenetration between square and lines.

37: Thirteen black lines intersect in the central field of the canvas generating a large number of white planes. Areas of greater or lesser horizontal and vertical extension can be seen (Diagram A). Vertical and horizontal attain equivalence in some points to form smaller or larger squares.

Space expands and contracts under the pressure of the two contending directions, which attain equivalence and a more stable equilibrium for an instant before opening up again to the more or less marked predominance of one or the other. Equivalences of opposite values are born and dissolve, are lost and found again in forms that are always new, without ever being fully attained. The idea of the square, i.e. an equivalence of opposites, seems to be expressed here too more as a process than a state. The solid and well defined square of the 1920s now appears to undergo dilution on contact with the lines. The latter interact to expand and contract the space, above all in the central area, outside which they become entities in their own right; all horizontals or all verticals, one thing excluding the other. The space becomes absolute and eliminates any possible relationship between the parts.

In the lower right section, the central field flows toward an area of greater synthesis where we can pause to observe a smaller number of planes (Diagram B). One of a bright blue color appears as the fourth part of a larger form that recalls the closed square of **34**, **35**, **36** by virtue of the position it occupies. We move from an area of extremely variable space (the central field), where equivalence appears in a state of becoming, to one in which the space is more constant (the smaller field of diagram B) and then to a more stable synthesis of opposite values highlighted by color. The blue accent of color seems designed to draw attention to a square, which appears as a sort of model of which the planes observed in the central area constitute a variation (Diagram A).

37 appears to offer a summary of all the compositions that Mondrian produced between 1929 and 1932 involving variations on the theme of the square, such as for instance **30** with a large blue square, a smaller yellow square, a white square left open at left and a white similar square which is however left open at left and on top or with six different square proportions (PAGE 10 - Fig. 35) or with Fig. 36 with a closed square, an area of greater horizontal development (lower left), a shape of greater vertical development (upper right), one of less greater development (upper left) and a yellow rectangle. We seem to see all these different proportions brought together in **37**.

In 1937 Mondrian published an important essay in a book of the English Constructivist group *Circle*, entitled "*Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*". Interest in his work increased steadily in England, but especially in the United States, among both collectors and fellow-artists.

The artist leaved Paris which had been occupied by the Nazis and moved to London in September 1938 bringing all his work (some paintings begun in Paris will be later completed in London and New York). In January 1938 he wrote to Harry Holtzman that he had in mind the project for a modern school of aesthetics that, as an alternative to the New Bauhaus in Chicago, would promote a new teaching of art, architecture and industry.

Settled in London, in the month of October of the 1938 Mondrian arranged the shipment of the paintings of greater dimensions, the gramophone, twelve discs and one case of manuscripts. Hoping to overcome his recurring sense of weakness and frequent respiratory infections, Mondrian adopted a vegetarian and salt-free diet.

PLATE 4: It appears to be a short step from **37** to **38**. In actual fact, however, the process of spatial multiplication was a quite laborious undertaking that took seven years of patient effort and a far larger number of works. Mondrian produced no fewer than sixty-five canvases between 1932 and 1942, some of which were reworked in New York City after 1942 while about a dozen were left unfinished.

38: We see no fewer than 23 lines in this work, 15 of which are yellow, 4 red, and 4 blue. The visual weight of the colors seems to influence their distribution. Blue and red have greater visual weight and are therefore present in smaller quantities than yellow, which is visually the lightest color (the closest to white). A larger quantity of yellow is needed to compensate for the greater visibility of red and blue. The painter seeks to redress the qualitative balance of the colors through quantitative distribution, providing an example of the dynamic and asymmetric conception of equilibrium he had in mind.

Yellow, red, and blue lines expand and contract the white surface of the canvas, which is maintained in a state of unstable equilibrium between the two opposing directions. There is an alternating predominance of horizontal and vertical together with different combinations of colors. Horizontal and vertical sometimes attain equivalence and assume proportions of comparatively greater stability.

Diagram A presents a series of square forms numbered from 1 to 7, some of which interpenetrate. Each square differs from the others also in relation to the position assumed within it by lines of the same color. Squares 1 and 2 are similar in terms of form but differ as regards their respective distribution of colors. The same holds for 3 and 4. Squares 1, 2, and 7 are formed by six or eight lines of different colors and therefore appear to be less sharply defined. The painter seems to have been intent above all in square 2 on combining the three colors so as to express not only balance between horizontal and vertical but also a synthesis of yellow, red, and blue. The yellow lines expand square 2 toward the right transforming it into an horizontal rectangle where the former equivalence of opposites and unity of colors is lost. Other squares are formed of only two colors (5 and 6). In 6 a yellow horizontal rectangle attains equivalence with a red line; the same thing happens in 5 with blue.

In 1 a field formed by four yellow lines presents slightly horizontal proportions. The rectangle attains an equivalence of vertical and horizontal if seen in relation to the blue line above or without this but in relation to the red line below. If the yellow rectangle is instead observed in relation to both the blue line and the red, the initial slightly horizontal proportion becomes slightly vertical. We thus see a dynamic square that oscillates between a horizontal predominance (entirely yellow) and vertical predominance (yellow, red, and blue).

Diagram B shows red and blue which tend to concentrate a yellow rectangle into a square form made of the three primary colors (8). It seems here as if each color needs the other one to reach a square proportion, that is to say balance and unity of opposites.

With 9 we glimpse at a yellow horizontal rectangle which becomes for a moment a square if seen in relation to an horizontal red line on top. The space inside the square form presents blue as well. The square is then pulled away toward the left by an imposing red vertical line. The horizontal red plays an opposite role as the vertical red. The same color may play here a constructive and there a disruptive role.

The different visual weight of the colors has an influence on the immediacy with which the relationships are perceived. The eye travels along the lines, stops, singles out a certain configuration, and lingers on it, but all around the space is set in motion again with the alternating predominance of the opposite directions and different colors. Square forms generate and dissolve in a variety of combinations between yellow, red and blue lines. The permanent black and white square unit of the 1920's has now become dynamic and multiple; not only in terms of form as we have seen in **37** but also in terms of color.

38 Diagram B: It strikes me as important that in the lower right section (10) it is yellow and yellow alone that expresses rectangles with a predominance of one direction or the other. In this case, the variable relations between the opposite directions are wholly homogeneous in chromatic terms and it is form alone that expresses mutation. The rectangles that remain entirely yellow are smaller than those that are formed by lines of different colors. They can be seen as small basic units that can only grow if they open up to diversity by mixing with the other colors. Which is what happens with the fourth shape to the right which attains balance (square proportion) by combining with red (Diagram B - 10).

As mentioned, the single black and white unity of 1920 (PLATE 3 - **28**) has undergone interpenetration with manifold space and is now (**38**) wholly imbued with color and dynamism. As a result, the colored planes, which had been almost always present in former Neoplastic compositions (from PLATE 3 - **24** to PLATE 4 - **37**), disappear. In Neoplastic space planes expressed finite space and lines virtually infinite continuity. When planes disappeared and color was applied to lines, Mondrian found himself grappling with compositions in never-ending development. In **38** the dynamic aspect seems to overwhelm the more measured and constant aspect previously expressed with planes; infinite space prevails over finite and multiplicity over unity. The eye scarcely has time to identify a more stable relationship before finding itself immersed in the dynamic and continuous flux of lines. Even the segments that had always been present in the previous Neoplastic compositions disappear in **38**, which lacks a finite and more durable component to counterbalance the dynamic movement of the lines and thus suggest a certain degree of spatial permanence. While the need felt as from 1934 had been to open up the unitary synthesis to multiplicity (from **34** to **37**), it was now necessary to re-establish a greater degree of synthesis and constancy in a space that had undergone considerable multiplication in the meantime and continued uninterruptedly with the lines alone.

As mentioned in PLATE 5, the superimposition of lines of different colors we see in **38** creates an unsatisfactory three-dimensional effect which will be brought onto one plane when sections of yellow, red and blue begin to interpenetrate within every line in the shape of small squares (PLATE 5 - New York City - Diagram C) and this will be the genesis of Broadway Boogie Woogie (**39**).

In February 1940 Mondrian begun to write an article to say that art makes evident the evil inherent in Nazi and Communist conceptions. The German invasion of the Netherlands on May 10, 1940 and the Dutch surrender five days later deeply upset Mondrian, who was increasingly worried that London would be bombed. The surrender of France on June 22 of that year caused Mondrian to stop working for as long as he remained in London. The American artist Harry Holtzman, who had visited Mondrian in 1934 in Paris to hear about his theories in person, persuaded Mondrian to move to New York. Following intense Nazi bombing raids Mondrian decided to leave London for the USA. Many European artists and intellectuals had preceded him. The artist arrived in New York City on 3 October 1940.

Broadway Boogie Woogie is referred to as BBW from now on. My explanation of it will be based on the diagrams shown in PLATE 5, in which I have broken down and analyzed the composition. Viewed as a sequence, the diagrams help us to visualize a dynamic process. The diagrams should not be intended as an indication of how Mondrian did progressively paint the canvas, rather as a visual aid to understand its meanings.

The uniform lines of **38** come into direct communication in BBW, with fragments of the horizontal entering the vertical and vice versa. The interpenetration of colored lines generates a multitude of gray, yellow, red, and blue small squares (BBW Diagram A). To be more precise, there are no yellow squares but only larger intervals of space between the gray, red, and blue squares. Yellow appears rarely in the form of a small square and more frequently as a linear segment. This is why the lines of BBW appear mostly yellow.

The univocal, absolute space of every single line (entirely horizontal or vertical) becomes a relative space within the small squares where both directions simultaneously coexist. The dual and finite character of the small square thus contrasts with the univocal and infinite nature of every single line. The small squares are therefore entities in a state of unstable equilibrium continuously moving along the lines trying to balance the momentary opposition between their horizontal "soul" with the vertical line they become part of and vice versa. The concomitance of horizontal and vertical, which constitutes the very nature of every small square, is "inevitably" called into question by each line in which the small square is located. Careful observation shows in fact that the small squares continuously undergo slight expansion and contraction inside the lines. Every human being too is an entity which is part of an infinite space as the natural universe and live a condition of inner duality, always contended between instincts and thought. This generates imbalances that lead individuals to act in order to establish more stable and durable balances with themselves and their environment.

BBW Diagram A: Everything seems to change incessantly, where every point and every moment appear unique and unrepeatable, changing slightly in form when repeated in color and vice versa. Every point lasts for just an instant before changing into the next point-instant. A space of this sort is well capable of representing both the changing variety of shapes that follow one another in the space of physical reality and a succession of drives lasting only a few seconds in our inner space.

Observation of the frenzied succession of small squares reveals some that join up with others to generate several symmetrical configurations along the lines (BBW Diagram B). The changing space of the lines - i.e. the ephemeral progression of different small squares - is endowed with greater constancy through symmetries which present an orderly rhythm generated by a constant alternation of same colors. The symmetries highlighted in diagram B can be seen as portions of ordered and hence measurable space born inside a virtually infinite space like that of the lines, as though the space of the lines contracted for a moment into a finite segment (the symmetrical sequence) before reverting to infinite expansion. Recall PAGE 4 - Fig. 18. The symmetrical configurations generate a dialectic between the tendency of the small squares to concentrate the infinite space of the opposite lines toward a finite dimension (i.e. toward their own nature) and a contrary tendency of the lines to expand boundlessly toward an absolute space (only one direction or the other). Concentration and expansion: two opposing tendencies of one and the same space.

Careful observation of the symmetries formed on the lines shows that these are not wholly regular and precise geometric structures. While the alternation of colors is symmetrical, both the size of every small square and the space between them vary. We are thus faced with flexible symmetries under constant pressure from the dynamism of the lines. The symmetries should be seen in an elastic way as they seek to restrain and articulate the infinite space of the lines, which instead subject the concentration triggered by the symmetries to an expansive momentum.

A certain vertical correspondence between two horizontal symmetries can be seen in the section of diagram B Section 1. The correspondence appears to be slightly staggered by the movement of the lines. An analogous situation can be seen between two vertical symmetries at Section 2, where the correspondence is now fully attained. Two vertical symmetries with a red center establish a horizontal symmetrical arrangement. Through the act of contemplating a horizontal relationship between two vertical symmetries, we actually generate a field of greater extension, i.e. a plane, which covers the space between the two vertical lines. In that very point, we see the birth of a small blue plane and then of other planes which are being shown in diagram C.

In the planes the relationship between horizontals and verticals is consolidated, that is, the intimate nature of the small squares gains ground. In the planes the relationship between opposites appears more stable and durable even if it is always subject to temporary prevalence of one or the other direction. Some undergo greater horizontal influence, some vertical predominance, and some appear to attain a relative condition of equilibrium between the two opposite directions. The relationship between horizontal and vertical lasts for a longer period of time in the more extended space of a plane than in the small squares inside the lines.

Some planes are still partially combined with the space of the lines (3), some are partially isolated (4, 5, 7) and some appear to be totally self-contained (6). The two planes 5 and 7 appear to be equal on first sight but closer observation shows that 5 has slightly greater vertical development. As a whole, the planes indicated in diagram C represent a space of change but tending toward greater synthesis than its counterpart in diagram A.

Plane 8 extends downward and drags with it a fragment of horizontal gray line, which is transposed into the vertical becoming a rectangular field inside plane 9 (Diagram D). Planes 8 and 9 should be seen as two successive moments in a dynamic sequence transforming a yellow plane into one made up of yellow and gray. If the painting is observed in a static way, the two planes are seen as a single vertical band. When viewed in dynamic terms, which is what Neoplastic painting demands, this band looks like the transformation of plane 8 into 9.

New planes are thus born, as shown by diagram D, that differ from those observed in diagram C by presenting an inner space marked with a different color. Due to the vertical predominance in plane 9, the internal gray band displays slightly greater horizontal development. Analogously, but in the opposite sense, plane 10 is counterbalanced by a red vertical segment just as the red vertical predominance of plane 11 is offset by a gray horizontal segment. The space of BBW is made up of constant contrast opposition. Observation of the sequence 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 shows that the process of spatial internalization (beginning with 9) continues in other planes where the gray field, which is still open on the sides in 9, is concentrated and stabilized in the form of a small quadrangular area (12, 13, 14). While some planes (9, 10, 11) manifest an internal radical contrast with a short segment opposing the layout of that plane, other planes show an internal more balanced configuration between opposites (12, 13, 14).

Let us consider plane 12 in relation to plane 13. The former undergoes greater horizontal influence while the latter develops a marked vertical predominance. The two internal quadrangles seem to reduce the imbalance manifested so obviously with the respective yellow parts of the planes. The internal quadrangles are the first timid sign (gray is the most tenuous chromatic value) of a shared inner nature that is more constant and detached from the frenzied and contradictory movement produced on the external lines.

We shall now summarize the various phases of spatial transformation observed so far as visualized in a single sequence. The intersecting of individual lines that continue uninterruptedly (New York City - Diagram A) generates a multitude of small squares (BBW - Diagram A) that cluster to produce symmetrical configurations (BBW - Diagram B). The symmetries extend beyond the thickness of the individual lines to become planes (BBW - Diagram C). The space undergoes gradual transformation from the condition of lines (an infinite, immeasurable and absolute space) to the condition of planes (a finite, measurable and relative space). Moreover, the lines can be regarded from now on as an external situation and the planes as the genesis and development of an internal condition (Diagram D) of the same space that proceeds uninterruptedly from an outer to an inner space.

Going on with our examination of BBW, we see at points 15 and 16 of diagram E how the self-internalization of space continues and there are now four colors concentrated in the area of just two planes: blue and yellow in 15, red and gray in 16. The two planes are equivalent in their degree of formal development (a segment and a squarish area) but prove opposite and complementary in terms of color, each being in fact characterized by the colors lacking in the other.

A single plane expressing a synthesis of the three primary colors is finally reached at point 17.

The opposite lines colored yellow, red, and blue, which disrupted our visual field at the beginning of the process by keeping the eye in constant motion (PLATE 5 - **38** and BBW Diagram A), attain unitary synthesis (BBW - Diagram F).

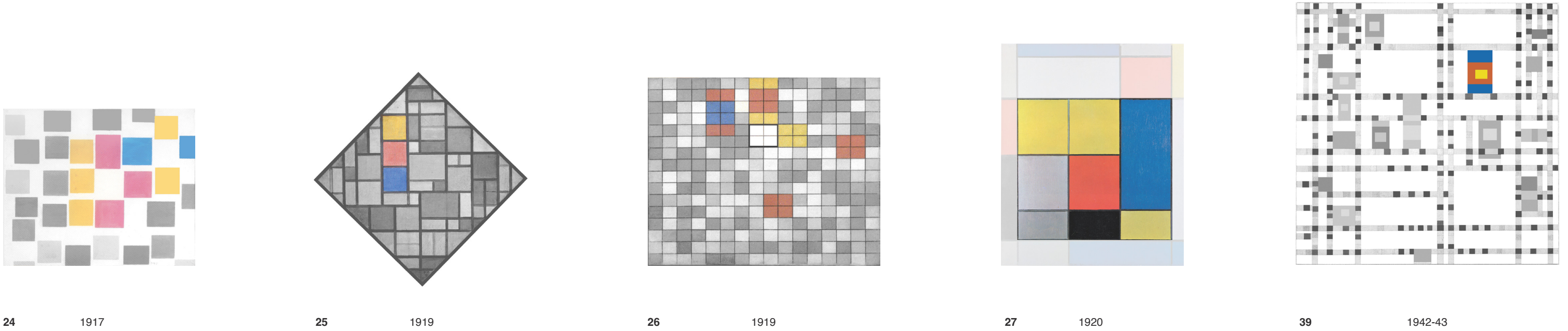
Manifold and fragmentary external space (BBW - Diagram A) is united in inner space (BBW - Diagram F). Color yellow, which define the lines is the one which most interiorize within the unitary plane 17.

Though partaking of the interaction between the opposite directions, this "vertical-horizontal" unity seems to resolve the opposition and contrast in felicitous equilibrium. The space of plane 17 expresses a comparative state of calm, albeit in a dynamic way, by comparison with the surrounding space.

PLATE 3: I am reminded of the scattered rectangles lacking unity (**24**); of three superimposed squares (one yellow, one red and one blue) trying to suggest unity in terms of color (**25**) and those three larger rectangles of primary colors surrounding a white rectangle in the center of **26**. The unsuccessful attempt to attain unitary interpenetration of the white rectangle and the colored rectangles in one large square form (**27**) is now finally achieved in BBW, where a synthesis of horizontal, vertical, yellow, red, and blue is attained with great visibility.

Again recapitulating the geometry analyzed so far in its individual parts, we see that the lines in BBW generate a multitude of small squares, which give rise to symmetries that then generate monochromatic planes. These are transformed into a certain number of two-colored planes that then become a single plane constituting a synthesis of the three primary colors. Space undergoes uninterrupted transformation from a condition of multiplicity to one of unity, from the many to the one.

It is necessary to observe BBW in a state of dynamic equilibrium between one stage and another of the process highlighted in these diagrams; we need to see the geometry in a state of becoming; to see the planes an instant before, as they develop out of symmetries, and to see the symmetries while they are generated by the small squares, which are in turn born from the interaction of opposing lines, each of which, taken in itself, expresses an absolute and infinite space that eliminates any possible relationship.



BBW - Diagram G: Plane 18 is the same size as plane 17 but consists solely of red and gray rather than the three primary colors. The inner space of the plane presents a gray quadrangle and two gray segments, one of which is part of a horizontal line running through the plane. The quadrangle is a sign of permanence and greater equilibrium between the two opposing directions while the two segments, especially the one belonging to the line, are signs of movement that accentuate the horizontal direction in sharp contrast to the vertical layout of the plane itself. After the equivalence and synthesis of three primary colors attained in plane 17, the colors are again reduced in plane 18 and the external dynamism of the lines reappears to generate new opposition. The horizontal line running suddenly through the vertical plane tends visually to disrupt the previously attained equivalence of opposites. After the degree of comparative calm, constancy, and unity achieved in plane 17, spatial movement thus seems to reappear in plane 18. Unity opens up to external space and the colors are separated and flow back toward the more dynamic and variable space of the lines (19, 20).

The indication provided by plane 18 finds further confirmation in plane 19, where blue, yellow, and red are juxtaposed but no longer interpenetrate as they did in plane 17. The juxtaposition produces the impression of three separate planes, whereas the interpenetration combines the three colors in a single structure of greater stability. Note how the yellow on the right of 19 already seeks to cross the perimeter of the plane and flow into the yellow of the surrounding lines. Plane 19 can therefore be seen as plane 17 in the process of dissolution. Configuration 20 possibly represents the conclusion of the process of reopening the unitary synthesis in that it can be seen as a continuation of the disintegration of 19.

Space proceeds from a comparatively static and wholly internal condition (17) toward one of growing instability (18) that is gradually transformed into the more dynamic and variable external space of the lines (19, 20).

Observe the seven BBW diagrams as a single sequence: The lines are first concentrated into small squares and then into various planes that became a single plane which expresses a synthesis of the composition which then re-opens to a multiplicity of lines. A variety of colored lines become a single plane of those three colors that then returns to the manifold and virtually infinite condition of the lines.

Objective unity (the totality of space, as previously expressed with the oval - PLATE 2 - **22** - and then with the continuity of the lines - PLATE 3 and PLATE 4 - From **26** to **38** - becomes a subjective unity (the unitary plane) and then returns to the objective dimension expressed by the virtually endless lines (formerly the oval). It is the same thing appearing alternately in unitary and multiple form.

Mondrian called this process the *subjectivization of the objective*. The brightest colors of the world and its infinite extension become a measured—i.e. thinkable—space that then opens up again to the infinite extension of the world; the physical becomes mental and then reverts to physical. From expansion toward increasing concentration and then from concentration back to expansion: this is the way BBW breathes.

The idea that multiplicity should become unity and that this should then open up again to multiplicity had already been manifested twenty-seven years earlier with PLATE 2 - **22**, where the unitary synthesis (a drawn square) reverts to duality in the upper section and then flows back to multiplicity.

As in **22**, it is again a horizontal in BBW that expands the concentration put into effect by the vertical. Everything is one and multiple at the same time. I recall the example of a tree seen from close and far distance. We address relations between unity and multiplicity every time we summarize something that strikes us as unduly complex. We create a relationship between the parts and the whole both when we strive to see all the different facets of reality and when we are driven by emotion to trace everything back to a few elements and make generalizations. Though aware that reality is far more complex, we often tend to make narrow, summary judgments. The reality before us is always more complex than our descriptions but we cannot always concentrate on it and investigate every single aspect in depth, not least because every single aspect is in fact an infinite reality in itself. This has always been true and is even more so today given the level of complexity attained by modern societies. I therefore believe that the question of the one and the many is one of the most relevant to the present day. Nor is this something purely intellectual. We often experience a drive for concentration when rational explanations give way to an urge that transforms all the complexity and fragmentation of a vision thought into the almost absolute synthesis of a vision felt. When we fall in love, for example, the whole of our fragmented daily life seems to come together in a concentrated form of energy that makes us feel in harmony with the world. Here too we can talk of fragmented multiplicity becoming unity. Of course the relationship between the many and the one pertains to spiritual, philosophical and scientific thinking.

In his biography of Mondrian Seuphor writes: *"For the first time in history, one of these prophets is an artist, a painter. For the first time, the presence of another world in this world is entrusted to a creator of images. This time it is not a question of reading or interpreting but of seeing. For those who know how to see, I believe that he succeeded in shedding light on the mystery."*

Broadway Boogie Woogie presents a spiritual path that is expressed in a precise language and is therefore no longer necessarily in conflict with rational thinking. Expressing themes of a spiritual nature through pure relationships of form and color means presenting them in a universal way that transcends the different languages and cultures for new human beings and citizens of the world. More on this at www.piet-mondrian.eu as well as at www.pietmondrian.eu.

The process observed in BBW is not the result of a plan of the moment. This is a work constituting the compendium of an entire life, an image in which the artist finally succeeds in adequately expressing the synthesis he had always sought within himself in response to the immensity of the world. A world which was rapidly changing and therefore demanding new ways of visual representation. Reconnecting the outer world with the inner world was the purpose of the Dutch artist's entire life.

I do not believe that Mondrian ever consciously visualized the process showed in BBW even after finishing the work. In his interview with J.J. Sweeney in 1943, he declared his inability to express with sufficient clarity what he was doing. Mondrian did not conceive BBW in the way it is explained here. He painted it, and for a painter, for a true artist, painting is equivalent to thinking. The reflections and explanations come only later, if at all, when it is all over and done with. A true artist is wholly involved in the intuitive interplay dictated by the eye and not in reflective reasoning.

Processes of this nature can certainly not be thought out but only carried through, step by step, following your intuition. If your intuition reaches such depths and succeeds in seeing so far, the results acquire all the astonishing and organic coherence that, it should be recalled, is displayed only upon completion. It is much easier for me today to see the entire work as a whole. It was certainly impossible for the painter to take full cognizance of everything he was creating when he let himself be guided by his eye in addressing the canvas with his brushes.

Mondrian's pictorial evolution shows that, contrary to common belief, the artist had no intention whatsoever of forcing existing reality into rigid geometric schemata but rather of making his geometry as open and flexible as possible. In BBW every form is born, grows and develops as every natural form does. As in natural space, nothing lasts forever; no entity is pre-established but becomes such in that particular situation, in that particular positional relationship with respect to the other forms undergoing reciprocal determination. Every point of BBW is unique and unforeseeable but, at the same time, part of a process that brings all of the elements together like a universal rhythm. A fluid space that gives concrete form to becoming more than being, to relations more than the individual things in themselves; a geometry that is anything but rigid, cold, or exclusively rational; a space that strikes me instead as very similar to life. Neoplastic geometry has very little to do with the rather antiseptic geometric approach of certain forms of abstract concrete art in the second half of the 20th century.

I think it necessary to say a few words also about the title Mondrian gave this painting. It may have been as a tribute to the place that offered him a home, as he had already paid tribute to Paris with a work entitled *Place de la Concorde* and to London with *Trafalgar Square*. The title has, however, given rise to no small number of misunderstandings by suggesting superficial parallels with the outward appearance of New York City. The painting obviously has very little to do with the theaters of Broadway, the lights of the skyscrapers, the traffic or the street plan of Manhattan. If we really want to stick to the city where the painting took shape, we could if anything think in terms of its pulsating rhythm, of the contrasts, the constant movement, the infinite variety of humanity, situations, and disparate elements that make up a place like New York City.

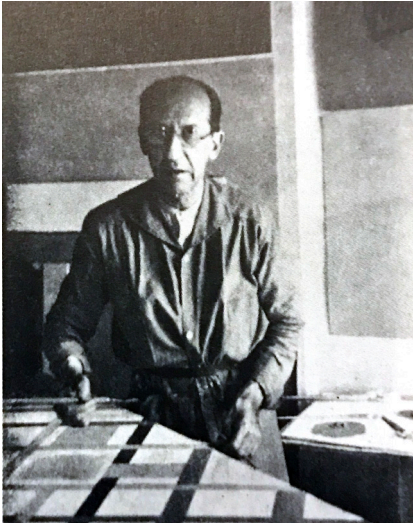
I would attach little importance to any direct links with Boogie-Woogie music, which the painter certainly loved. He pointed out in his interview with Sweeney that he saw true Boogie-Woogie *"as harmonizing in intention to his own aim in painting: the destruction of melody, which is equivalent to the destruction of natural appearances, and construction through the constant opposition of pure means: dynamic rhythm."* Always keenly aware of the educational function of art, Mondrian used an analogy with Boogie-Woogie, as earlier with the Fox Trot and Jazz, to suggest a parallel helping us to understand plastic expression at a different level from the image, with a language, i.e. that of music, which is perhaps the closest to Neoplastic painting, since music has been expressed in abstract terms from the very outset. I do not believe, however, that Mondrian ever intended with BBW, as with other works of his, to give pictorial form to a certain type of music, or indeed that music was the primary source of inspiration for his compositions. What the Fox Trot or Boogie-Woogie may have in common with Mondrian's paintings is the fact that both music and images tend to create dynamic sequences. The analogy with music must, however, should serve toward the full understanding and enjoyment of painting.

No, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is not to be understood through reference to its title. The substance of things lies and remains wholly in the visual data. Those capable of seeing in the painting only what the title suggests to them will have to wait until their vision becomes more finely honed and reveals the deeper reality, which lies always and exclusively in images and not in words, at least in the case of the visual arts.

As Mondrian observed, *"A true critic can, simply by drawing upon the depths of his humanity and observing with purity, write about the new forms of art even without a knowledge of the working technique (...). But a true critic is somewhat rare."*

Victory Boogie Woogie (PLATE 5 - **40**), (from now on VBW) is a canvas that Mondrian worked on at the same time as BBW and that was to remain unfinished after various episodes of reworking. It should again be stated (for lovers of dates) that Mondrian appears to have begun VBW before BBW. As in other periods of his development, however, the dates on which individual canvases were begun and completed do not coincide with the progress actually achieved, which it is our present concern to indicate and explain.

I regard BBW as coming immediately after New York City (**38**) and VBW as a continuation of BBW. My grounds for this will be stated below. The canvas is the same size as the one used for BBW but this time in the lozenge position.



Mondrian working at Victory Boogie Woogie

What characterizes the composition at first sight is a further increase in multiplicity. Another significant difference with respect to BBW consists in the almost complete absence of continuity in the lines, which are reduced to seven horizontal and two vertical rectilinear sequences. The lines appear continuous in BBW because the space between the small squares is predominantly yellow. The rectilinear sequences of VBW are instead made up of a tighter rhythm of small, differently colored rectangles and squares, so closely arranged as to reduce the sense of linear continuity to the absolute minimum.

In BBW the planes are generated by the lines and return to them; in VBW lines and planes seem to become one and the same thing. While the space is nevertheless very dynamic (not least because of the lozenge format), its dynamism is the result of a virtually unlimited number of planes interacting with one another. While the finite dimension of the planes appears to predominate now, their enormous number and variety tend to evoke an infinite space. The infinite space of the lines is now expressed through a very thick space made of finite planes.

Everything varies in VBW, as it does in BBW, but we no longer see any process leading to a unitary synthesis. It is multiplicity that predominates here. VBW appears to present an endless sequence of possible syntheses of yellow, red, and blue manifested in constantly varying forms (Diagram A). In actual fact, this is precisely what BBW tells us: the unitary synthesis opens up to multiplicity. We encounter a great many instances of partial unities in VBW, but not one that holds for the composition as a whole. They are all relative and there is not one that establishes itself as a synthesis of all the others. I am reminded of the multiethnic society of New York, where all cultures and all religions necessarily assume relative value.

A white form verging on the square can be seen in the upper section (Diagram B - Section A). On the left we see a white plane (B) (with the same proportions as the unitary synthesis of BBW) inside which two small notes of color (yellow and red) are born. Opposite linear sequences develop inside a third white area (C), which is analogous in its proportions to the square (A). The synthesis we see in A appears manifold at the same time (C). All the colors (C) blossom from the white (A): first the two small accents of yellow and red (B) and then more substantial sequences of yellow, red, and blue (C). I am reminded of PLATE 2 - **24** and **26** where white was suggesting an ideal synthesis of all the colors.

A quick view taking in the composition as a whole picks out a group of yellow planes that seem to evoke something more constant (Diagram C). On closer observation, we note that the nine yellow planes present approximative amounts of color but vary in their proportions or present the same proportions but vary in terms of position and relations with the surrounding parts.

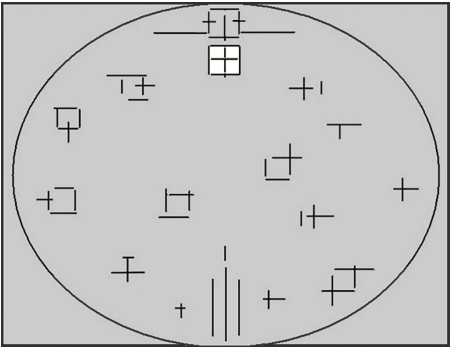
We are thus observing either different entities that are related to the same basic "pattern" or the "same" pattern in a state of becoming, constantly changing in appearance, i.e. the one and the many. The artist shows us this broader variation of yellow in order to suggest that the variety he intends to evoke is in actual fact far greater than the canvas can display. It prompts us to imagine all the other different shapes, sizes, and proportions that the white, gray, red, and blue could also assume in all the possible positions and reciprocal relations: a truly infinite "landscape".

To his friend Charmion von Wiegand, who visited him on January 17, 1944, Mondrian said that in Victory Boogie Woogie everything was in place except for the top part, which still needed to be reworked. A friend visited him to see the painting in progress and stayed late into the night, leaving Mondrian still working at four in the morning.

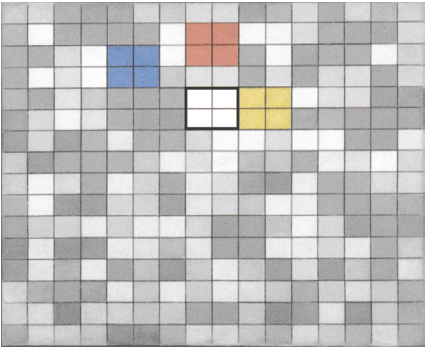
As noted above, VBW is characterized by the almost complete disappearance of lines, a crucial component of Neoplastic space all the way up to BBW. In VBW lines and planes become the same thing and the sense of multiplicity or totality previously expressed through the continuity of the lines now appears to be wholly concentrated inside the canvas. This has a precise meaning upon which it is necessary to reflect.

PLATES 2 and 3: Neoplastic lines were born when the oval of the Cubist period (22) expanded beyond the finite space of the canvas (23) and the planes (24) joined to generate linear segments (25) that then became continuous lines (26). The totality of space expressed by the oval as a whole within the canvas (22) opened up and became a totality manifested through lines that continue uninterruptedly (26). The idea of totality conceived in a metaphysical form (the oval) gave way to the assumed totality of real space, to which the canvas belongs and the lines allude. As from 1919 the manifold aspect of space underwent constant reduction (26 to 33).

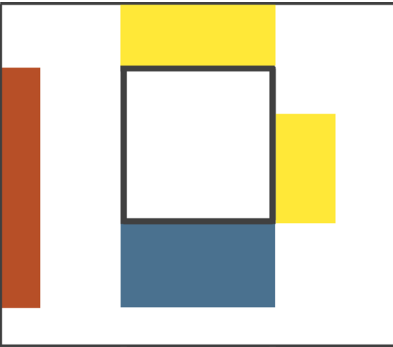
Mondrian's Neoplastic compositions attained greater synthesis during the 1920s because the artist perceived the finite space of the canvas connecting with the infinite space of the world through the endless lines.



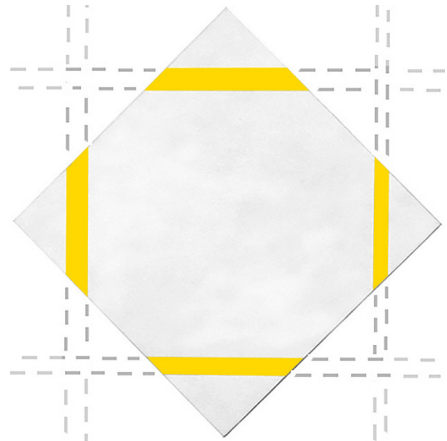
22 - 1915



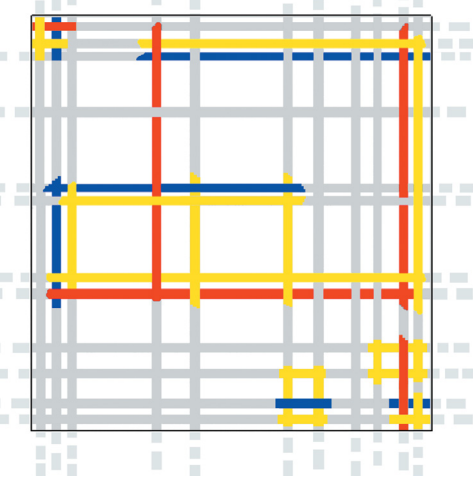
26 - 1919



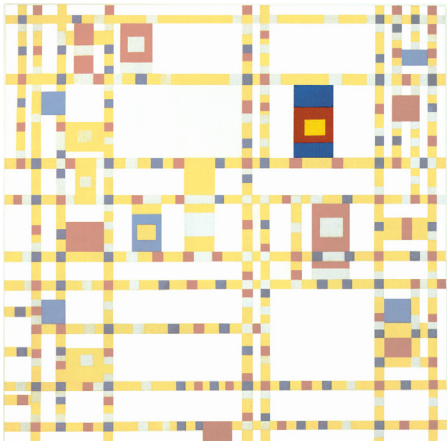
28 - 1920



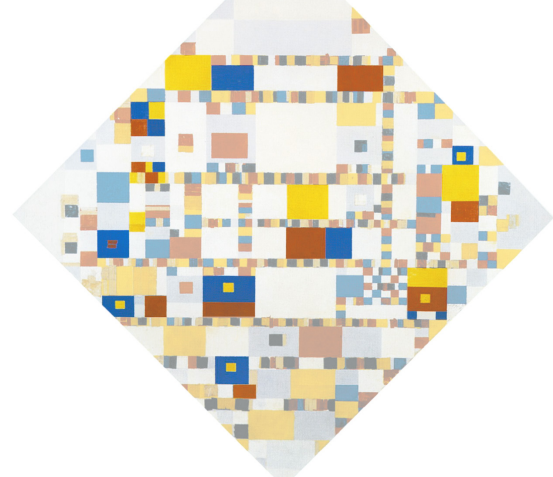
33 - 1933



38 - 1942



39 - 1942-43



40 - 1944

The lines performed the vital function of maintaining an ideal link between the limited space of the pictorial representation and the infinite space of reality. The compositions attained greater synthesis up to the point where everything was expressed by means of four yellow lines (33).

In PAGE 10 - Fig. 40 two black lines suggest a "square field" that is no sooner generated than it becomes an infinite space expanding beyond the canvas almost as though in an attempt to coincide with the infinite space evoked by the lines, that is to say, with the totality of space formerly expressed by the oval.

PLATES 4 and 5: As from 1934, when the compositions gradually opened up once again to complexity (35, 36, 37), the lines blossomed into color (38) and then turned into a multitude of small squares and planes (39), the sense of totality displayed in a virtual way only by the endless lines manifested itself in tangible and concrete form within the canvas (40). It was as though in this last composition the lines had contracted to draw all of the variety virtually situated outside the painting back into the canvas. Manifold space, formerly expressed as assumed and non-visible infinite extension (the continuity of the black lines), gives way to manifold space understood as the largest amount of variation wholly visible inside the painting: variety that had not been seen since 1919 (PLATE 3 - 26); multiplicity that the painter had endeavored between 1920 and 1933 (28 to 33) to drive beyond the canvas with lines in order to concentrate on a unity designed to express both the one and the many at the same time (33).

From this viewpoint, the Neoplastic lines could be seen as a sort of "memorandum" serving for over twenty years as an ideal link between the representational space of art and the space of reality and then dissolving on the return of the latter (the variety of planes).

While it is unity that alludes to virtual multiplicity in 33, it is multiplicity that alludes to possible unities in 40.

This is probably what Mondrian felt in his heart but was not yet able to explain clearly when he said that there was too much that was old even in BBW. While the painting does express a high degree of multiplicity, he probably saw something old in the fact that it was still necessary to evoke a part of reality virtually through the continuity of the lines. In talking about BBW, the artist is also said to have expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of yellow, which is tantamount to saying the same thing. He must have felt that lines were still excessively present in BBW. Lines are the primary means of expression in drawing, just as colored planes are in painting.

The lines become planes in Broadway Boogie Woogie and everything is a plane in Victory Boogie Woogie. Mondrian wrote as follows in a note sent to J.J. Sweeney on May 24, 1943: *"Only now I become conscious that my work in black, white and little color planes has been merely "drawing" in oil color. In drawing, the lines are the principal means of expression; in painting, the color planes"*.

In the European Neoplastic compositions the black lines performed the function of drawing and the fields of color the role of painting. Drawing (lines) controlled painting (colored planes) from the outside with no participation, and painting accentuated and varied the proportions pre-established by drawing. Drawing and painting, intellect and emotion, engaged in dialogue but kept their distance. The black lines became colored in 1941-42, i.e. drawing is born in color and therefore painting is already drawn. When the colored lines then became planes with BBW and VBW, there was no longer any distinction between drawing and painting. Thought and emotion became one.

The astounding consistency found in the Dutch master's artistic trajectory brings to mind certain wonderful processes of nature that human thought has to trace back to a precise concatenation of causes and effects, in other words to a designing mind. I do not know whether nature really is based on a "design", but if so then Mondrian, like all true artists, did nothing throughout his life other than act in spontaneous obedience to it.

The regular schemata used by Mondrian during the evolution of his work served to support the construction and definition of the new space that was slowly taking shape. Having taken the steps he felt necessary, the artist freed himself from the schemata just as a building is freed from the scaffolding that served to support it during the various phases of its construction. The center of the composition, which had always been the key point for manifestation of the unitary synthesis (PLATES 2 and 3 - 20, 22, 26, 28), lost its importance all along the pathway toward BBW and VBW.

The regular layouts and proportional modules used to curb the uncontrolled development of form (25, 26, 27) dissolved along the way. In the last two Boogies (39, 40) everything is in a state of becoming. One thing calls another and the first two become a third that gives birth to a process in which the only fixed elements are the orthogonal relationship and the five colors (white and gray included). All the rest is a free and unforeseeable development of elements differing from one another. The distinction between color and non-color drawn by Mondrian in the early 1920s had also disappeared by 1943, when everything had become color.

The Dutch artist chose his rules and schemata in complete freedom and followed them for just as long as he

considered necessary. This is true freedom. In art, as in life, freedom is not the absence of rules, contrary to what superficial minds believe. Freedom means being able to choose rules that are in any case necessary.

Mondrian worked throughout his life to adapt the reductive forms of the human mind to the far broader variety of the real world and mutability of existence so as to maintain equilibrium between thought and nature.

Neoplastic space is born out of a vision that takes into due consideration the non-rational aspects of life and is therefore capable of generating a geometry that we can describe as organic but that is nevertheless expressed in the clear and precise forms of rational thought. Neither aspect must ride roughshod over its opposite. This is typical of the artist's way of proceeding: attaining a certain degree of synthesis and control and then opening up again to variability while always seeking to maintain a certain balance between the two aspects. VBW shows that the lines themselves—a crucial element of Neoplastic space for over twenty years—were no longer necessary. It is difficult to imagine a geometry more flexible than this, so free in its innermost spirit as to reformulate itself continuously.

At the end of his life Mondrian worked also on compositions of colored rectangles juxtaposed on the walls of his studio (PLATE 5 - 41, 42). This can be interpreted as if the representational space of the canvas would open up to the space of reality. On the one hand, the multifarious aspect of the world populated the canvas (VBW); on the other, the subjective reality of art left the canvas and was transmitted to the world. Either way, the space of art became the space of life. Victory Boogie Woogie is a sort of spiritual testament containing an exhortation addressed to future artists and mankind in general: art must be able to transform the discord of the real world into plastic harmonies serving as a model for the future developments of life; art must be able to improve the world.

Victory Boogie Woogie remains incomplete because every human action aimed at improving the world will necessarily be left unfinished. It is an open process that will never come to an end.

"By a duly notarized act Mondrian instituted Harry Holtzman his universal legatee. There has been much talk about this in the New York art circle even before Mondrian's death since the artist had not made a secret of the donation. This will in favor of an American makes the works remain in their homeland of election where they are also the best protected against the decrees - "degenerated art", "bourgeois formalism" - of the police regimes." (Seuphor)

Unfortunately we still have people nowadays who talk about "formalism" when dealing with Mondrian. (my note)

"On Monday, 24 January 1944, Hans Richter, a painter and film-maker, receives a card from Mondrian who, due to a bronchitis, declines an invitation to a cocktail. In point of fact at that time Mondrian was already affected by pneumonia. For two days the artist stayed at home all alone. Nobody would go visit Mondrian without making an appointment as the painter disliked being disturbed while working. Fritz Glarner heard about Mondrian's health problems and decided to pay him a visit. He found the artist in very bad conditions, almost unable to speak. Glarner asked Harry Holtzman to call a doctor who certified a very bad pneumonia. Against the artist's will (Glarner and Holtzman will need one hour to convince Mondrian), the artist is brought to the hospital. Once in bed in a private room, he is happy and believes he will soon be cured. But the disease had progressed too far. For five days, Mondrian declined little by little. On January 31, his condition is considered hopeless. Glarner and Holtzman kept watch over him all night. Miss von Wiegand came to visit. No one spoke and you could hear the faint gasp of someone who was working to get out of life. At 5 o'clock in the morning of February 1, we learn that everything is over." (Seuphor)

The substantial meaning of Piet Mondrian's oeuvre can be summarized in three fundamental paintings.

In the figure of a bare tree (17) we see the horizontal line of the ground presenting a sequence of small vertical strokes that consolidate to form the trunk, from which a multiplicity of branches project before joining up again with the line of the ground on the right. The same can be seen in PAGE 1 - Fig. 5 and Fig. 6.

The horizontal line of the ground continues to the right and to the left suggesting a boundless extension which was emphasized in the landscapes of the same years with a dominant horizontal space (PLATE 2 - 10, 11, 12).

The trunk is vertical like the architectural volumes (PLATE 2 - 14, 15, 16).

Through the unifying action of the trunk - the boundless, manifold space of nature (the ground) is condensed into a finite space (the set of branches) which manifests the unpredictable multiplicity of the *Natural* while maintaining a synthetical wholeness at the same time (the unity invoked by the *Spiritual*). By *Natural* Mondrian meant not only the natural landscape but also anything that around us and within ourselves constantly changes during our lives.

Through the concentrating action of the trunk (the *Spiritual*) the fragmented and virtually boundless line of the ground (symbol of the *Natural*) is condensed into the set of branches which then, on the right, flows back toward the line of the ground (the *Natural*). It is in fact a circular process. Circularity seems to be reasserted by a circle that can be seen in the upper right section of the painting.

In 22 the interaction between the upward vertical progression of a pier and the horizontal expansion of the sea generates a whole variety of relationships between horizontals and verticals where something changes every instant.

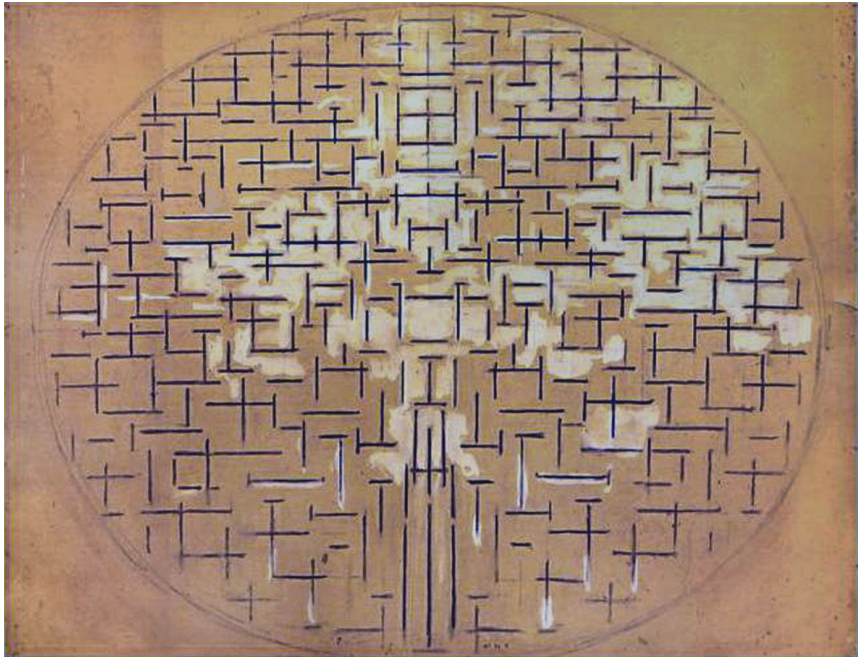
The ever-changing signs find a more stable and lasting situation in a square where horizontal and vertical assume the same value and therefore express an ideal unity of the opposite directions, i.e. of the whole composition.

The square acts as a plastic symbol of the unifying consciousness of man dealing with the multifarious aspect of the world symbolized by the variety of orthogonal signs. A second square can be seen above the square that we have identified as a unitary synthesis. Inside the second square we see a vertical segment and two horizontal shorter segments that extend beyond the boundary of the square to the right and left. The horizontal segments form two crosses with the two vertical sides of the square. These two signs tell us that unity is opening up to duality. The unitary synthesis achieved in the lower square is again broken up into a duality that then flows back towards the variety of different situations marked again by the alternating predominance of one direction or the other. The unity generated with the first square opens up again to manifold space with the second square. Here too we see a circular process: the horizontal flow of the sea (the *Natural*) is concentrated by the vertical pier (symbol of the *Spiritual*) into a synthesis (the lower square) that opens higher up to the horizontal (the *Natural*) and flows back toward manifold space.

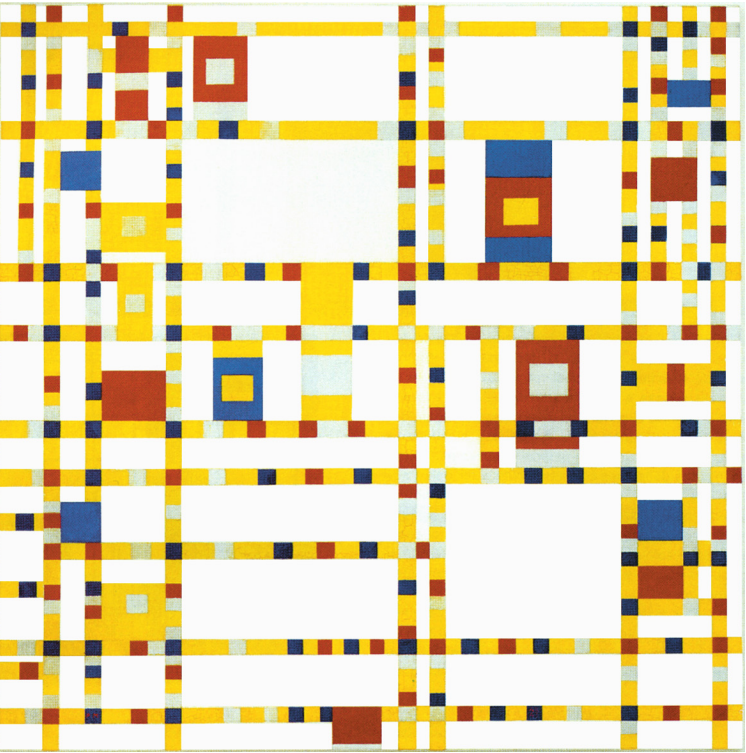
PAGE 12 and 13 show how a circular process from multiplicity to unity and from unity to multiplicity, as just seen in 17 and 22, takes place in a totally new form in 39. In all the three paintings the horizontal opens up the concentration exercised by the vertical. The horizontal (symbol of the *Natural*) re-opens the synthesis generated by the unifying action of the vertical (the *Spiritual*). The tree of 1908-10 thus already reveals in wholly embryonic form the process that took shape in 1915 (22) and was expressed with the brightest colors in 1942-43 (39).



17 -The Red Tree (Evening), 1908-10, Oil on Canvas, cm. 70 x 99



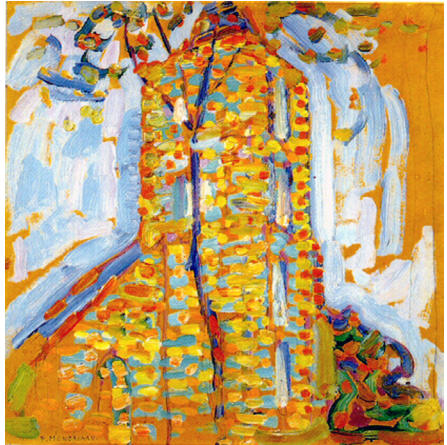
22 - Pier and Ocean 5, 1915, Charcoal, Ink (?) and Gouache on Paper, cm. 87,9 x 111,7



39 - Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942-43, Oil on Canvas, cm. 127 x 127

In BBW the color yellow goes from a dynamic and external condition (the lines) toward a greater degree of internalization and comparative rest inside the unitary plane. The innermost part of the unity is in fact a yellow area developing a slight horizontal predominance.

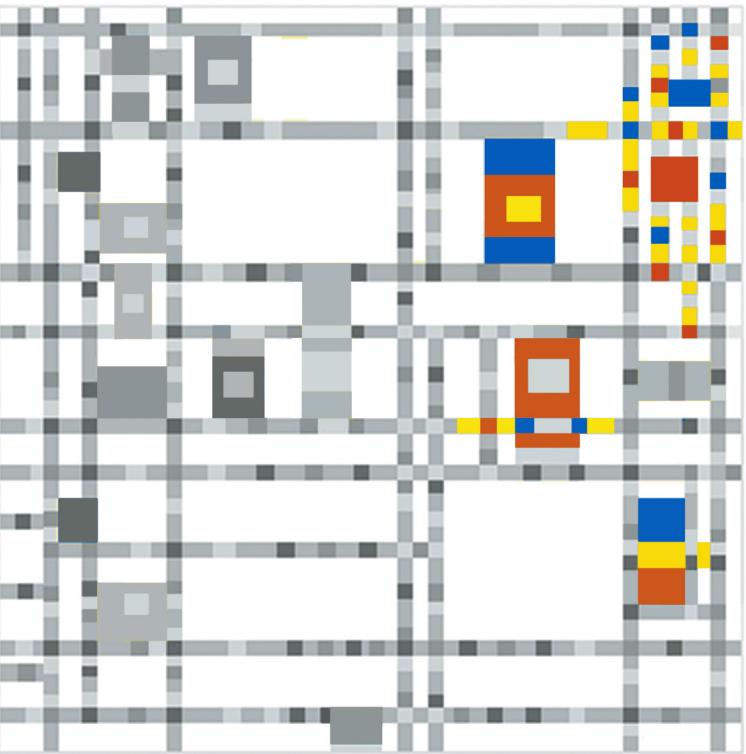
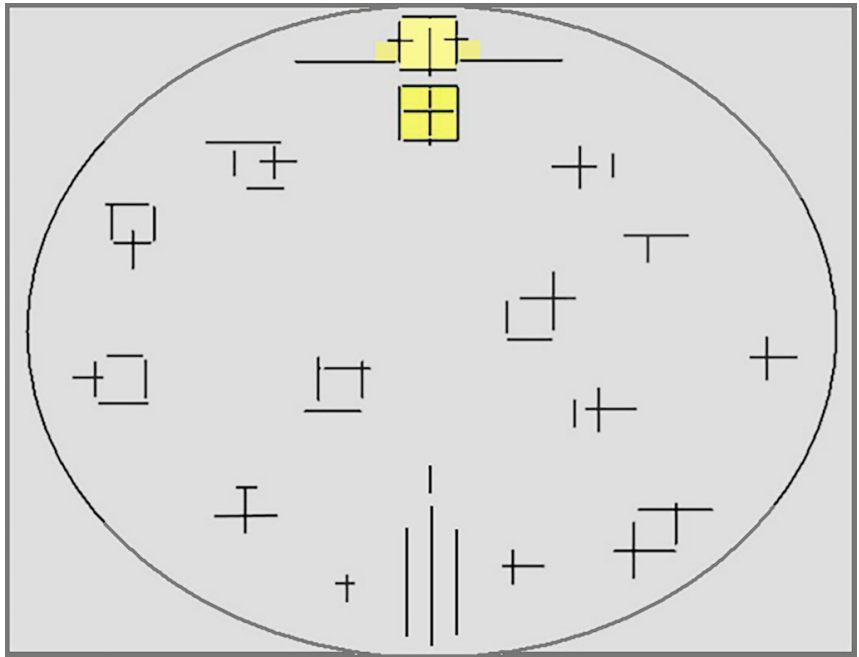
Mondrian painted Church at Domburg with Tree in 1909. Sketched out in quick strokes, the painting presents the façade of a church enclosing the shape of a tree, i.e. a symbol of the *Natural* condensed into the *Spiritual*. In the unitary plane of BBW, the vertical, which Mondrian identified with the *Spiritual*, internalizes a horizontal yellow (symbolizing the *Natural*).



The painting of 1909 appears to act as a sort of memorandum for everything that developed over the next thirty years.

"Life is a continued examination of the same thing in ever-greater depth" (Mondrian)

Church at Domburg with Tree, 1909. Oil on Cardboard, cm 36 x 36





Unknown Japanese Artist

Seventy-five years after the death of Piet Mondrian, we still find ourselves halfway between a system that is old but still real for many, namely naturalistic or figurative painting, and a newer and more functional system used by a growing number of people that is not yet capable of constituting a tried and tested language, a canon serving as a yardstick to establish what the art of painting consists in today.

Has the time perhaps come to sketch out a code for the new form of painting? What can we take as the grammar and syntax of the new space? I am obviously not referring solely to painting as traditionally understood but also to the whole range of expressive possibilities offered by the new techniques of visual representation.

Even though I believe that the new space depends to a great extent on the work of Piet Mondrian, a code for the new painting will not be based solely on Neoplasticism as handed on to us by the Dutch painter. I am also thinking of Matisse’s last period and his masterly use of color, Mark Rothko’s vibrant textures, the “repetitions” or variations introduced by Andy Warhol, and the spontaneous, uninterrupted continuity of space evoked by Jackson Pollock.

As a matter of fact, I do not believe it necessary to paint like Mondrian in order to produce true abstract art. To give just one example, consider the work of an unknown Zen painter of the 18th century, which appears at first sight to be the very antithesis of a Neoplastic work. It is a painting of a circle that opens up again just when it is about to close, a circular process where the end coincides with a new beginning, as in Broadway Boogie Woogie where a yellow, red and blue plane originating from endless lines generate a new set of endless lines.

Unlike the geometry constructed by Mondrian, that of the Japanese artist requires a rapid gesture of the hand. But how much practice was needed before such a well-formed circle could be painted in one go. It is an open and imprecise circle that resembles nature and at the same time manifests the striving for perfection typical of human thought, a circle that expresses our idea of a universal cycle of life but with the spontaneity that life alone possesses. The circle seems to contain all the impermanence of the moment within itself while nevertheless striving for almost absolute fulfillment, a circle in a state of becoming balanced between the everyday and the eternal.



Henri Matisse, The Snail, 1953, Cut-Out Paper Collage

Like Broadway Boogie Woogie, this image is again capable of evoking the unity of all things, a unity that can only be attained through a dynamic vision. That gesture, as fast as lightning, seems to enclose the secret of life itself. While a circular process evoking the cycles of nature is generated in both images, in one case (the circle of the Japanese artist) it is a matter of immediate intuition that captures unity without too much concern for its manifold aspect. Broadway Boogie Woogie instead presents a mediated vision that proceeds through a variety of particular forms, all differing from one another, before showing how they belong intrinsically to a unitary process.

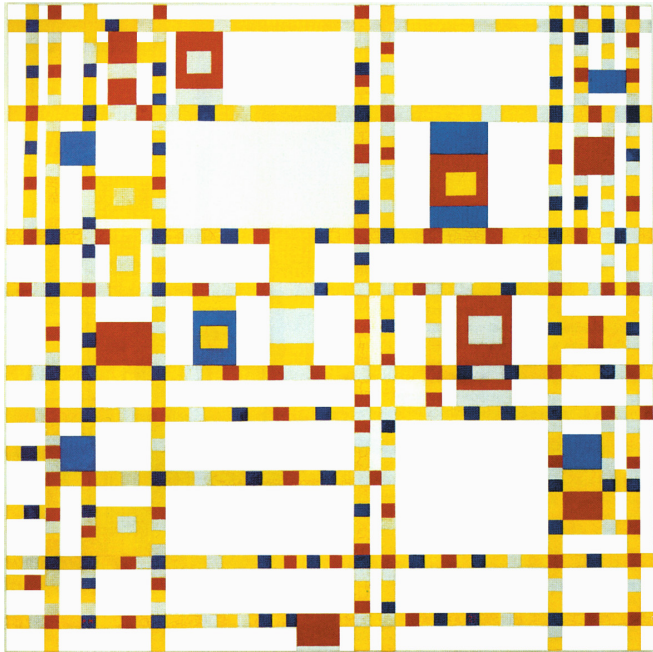
The image that takes the form of a spontaneous gesture in the Japanese painter is broken down in Mondrian and arranged in a complex pattern of forms that are developed, juxtaposed, and finally brought together.

We could say that the western painter seeks to break the spontaneous gesture down into a succession of considered moments. Both are sacred visions of life, but the Japanese work tends toward a mystical and absolute mode of expression while Broadway Boogie Woogie endeavors to organize itself, to explain itself, and to assume the relative nature always possessed by our fragmented experience of reality.

I wish to make it clear that the spontaneity I am talking about corresponds to the most advanced stage of a long and patient exercise of discipline that must be completed before you can let go without missing the “target”.

This is what Matisse writes about spontaneity: *“Novice painters think they are painting from the heart. Artists at the peak of their development also think they are painting from their heart, but they alone are right, because the training and discipline they have imposed upon themselves enable them to accept its impulses.”*

Another example of true abstract painting (even though the title could prove misleading here too) is a work that Matisse produced in 1952. I refer to a cutout or papier découpé: paper colored by the artist (or his assistant, to be more precise) then cut out in accordance with compositional requirements and glued onto canvas.



Piet Mondrian, Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942-43

Every plane has a certain color and assumes its particular shape in relation to the configuration and color of the neighboring planes. As a whole, the planes evoke a circular motion that can also recall the spiral shape of a snail’s shell, whence the title *L’escargot*. As pointed out with respect to Broadway Boogie Woogie, this work too should have been given a more neutral title so as to avoid prompting the inexpert observer to see nothing but a snail in this splendid composition. Once again it is an image that seeks to evoke a dynamic unity made up of the most disparate entities. While every surface differs from the others both in shape and in color, they all form part of a unitary process. As in Broadway Boogie Woogie and the work of the Japanese painter, we again see a circular structure that generates an impression of variety and evokes synthesis and unity at the same time.

The extreme synthesis generated in the Zen painting is arranged here in a series of parts. The immediate and very visible circle of the eastern painter becomes a circular motion that takes shape in a more gradual and structured way. Matisse’s work can be described as being midway between the almost absolute circle of the Japanese painter and the circular process generated by means of straight lines in Broadway Boogie Woogie. It expresses a degree of multiplicity that is greater than the Zen painting but not so great as the Neoplastic composition. I will not even try to describe the beauty of the colors and the healthy energy that emanates from this masterpiece by the French painter. It is well worth a trip to London and a visit to the Tate Gallery to observe the work at first hand.

Broadway Boogie Woogie, a painting by an anonymous Japanese artist, and Matisse’s *L’escargot*: three images that speak to us in their very different ways about the same things. Abstraction does not mean adopting a certain style but rather the capacity to capture the essence of things, each in his or her own way.

Through the deft use of shapes and colors, abstract art can evoke the intimate nature concealed behind the changing appearances of life, contemplating it as one might contemplate the immensity of a sea with all its waves, every new wave appearing to be different from all the others but always consisting of water. There is a form of painting that

looks to the particular appearance of a few waves and one that is capable of concentrating on the state of becoming of the water and hence of seeing all the possible waves. This presupposes an uncommon sensitivity that succeeds in looking beyond manifold appearance, but also something more, namely the ability to give concrete form to one’s inner visions, which requires a great amount of talent if the images are to gladden the eye and be transformed into content that enriches the mind and the spirit.

All this is very rare on the contemporary artistic scene.

We are today presented with a great amount of self-styled abstract art that actually has more in common with wallpaper. Even among those prompted by honest intentions, there are very few works of abstract art born out of the fertile observation and distillation of reality. Most of the time, contemporary abstract painting presents syntheses that prove empty. This is what Matisse said to Verdet about a canvas by Cézanne: *“It takes a great deal of analysis, invention, and love to arrive at the simplicity of the bathers you see at the end of the garden. You have to be worthy of them, to deserve them. As I have already said, when the synthesis is immediate, it is schematic, lacking in density and impoverished in expression.”*

It is not necessary to paint like Mondrian. It is possible to talk about the same things in different ways. But filling a canvas up with just any shapes and colors is not enough to produce a work of abstract art, just as any combination of words or notes is not enough to create a work of literature or music. The beauty and the rightness of certain combinations of color and forms are things that cannot be taught or learned and still less explained in words. They are either there or not there. You either know how to recognize them or you do not. Color has its own inherent expressive strength that a good painter must know how to calibrate, like the notes of a musical composition. Just as the same words can be used in verbal language to come out with nonsense or to construct splendid phrases rich in meaning, so it is with the language of forms and colors. The dictionary is the same but the difference between an image of fully expressed significance and one devoid of sense mainly depends on the use made of that dictionary. In the absence of established rules and canons for the new form of painting, we are today at a primitive stage where everyone thinks themselves capable of creating an abstract work of art. We seem to be surrounded by a great mass of illiterates who want to make us believe that they can write poems.

Variations of form become content in Broadway Boogie Woogie, but it is not just any variation of form that can evoke content in the art of painting. There are unfortunately not many people capable of seeing and distinguishing compositions in which form becomes content from ones where content never come to life. And those few no longer count in a society where mass consumption predominates, hence the confusion prevailing in the contemporary artistic panorama. As always, confusion means a great opportunity for fraud. This is why most of what is put forward as “contemporary art” today does not really possess the qualities one would expect to find in a genuine work of art.