

For decades, Mondrian, one of the most distinguished Dutch painters of the 20th century, has created paintings, that featured exclusively blue, yellow, and red squares framed by prominent straight black lines. The essayist begins to take a closer look at these works and, by utilizing his own knowledge of cultural history, film-directorial and other artistic inventions, tries to discover the painter's real intentions. By this method, the hitherto baffling mysteries of the artist and his oeuvre are being unravelled before the reader's eyes rendering a clear explanation understandable for anyone... Viewing modern artistic creations, or listening to the latest musical compositions, a great many people are often of the opinion that they too could have painted such pictures, or composed similar tunes, and so forth. The author's study reveals however, that despite appearances, this is not the case at all. He proves this by presenting the phenomena that constitute the dividing lines between the drawings of a child or an ordinary person, and a true masterpiece of a genuine artist.

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Among my impressions the most memorable are the clear, bright picture of his room and the long pauses he kept while talking as well as the silence that followed his words. In this studio one felt as if one were walking in the cave of those old hermit's visited by lions to have thorns taken out of their paws.

Ben Nicholson

Piet Mondrian

Between 1919 and 1940, this painter of the Netherlands, used to exhibit paintings of the same kind: each interwoven with fine, black stripes, intersecting at right angles; their subsequent squares and rectangles generally filled in either clear blue, yellow or red, in the purest colors that could be mixed. In addition to the above mentioned colors only grey can also be seen in the squares of these works. By the evidence established of his paintings and notes by his contemporaries (or colleagues) and according to both contemporary and later literature of art history, Mondrian was a master of drawing, and had an outstanding training as a painter. Already his still rather traditional first paintings clearly reveal the obvious existence of an artistic personality of a striking force. However, all the promising directions led to the creation of the above mentioned paintings characterized by a reduced color scale and geometrical composition, and he maintained this style with extraordinary consistency to the end of his life. It would be edifying to discover, to unveil at least the motive for all these, in order to ascertain or partially understand some of the ideas, aims, intentions that had guided him. He was unable to sell these paintings for decades even at the peak of the European avant-garde movement; he was compelled to paint watercolors of chrysanthemums and flowers for living. Many contemporary art historians regard Mondrian as one of the world's most outstanding painters of chrysanthemums, however, according to documents, the painter was not much interested in publicizing these works.

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Mondrian's efforts probably have some connections to the one of the characteristic ambitions of several avant-garde artists, the purification of painting. Kandinsky, Malevich, Picasso, Paul Klee, and many others tried to free painting of the attributes, techniques, solutions of the other arts. They tried, that is, to ban spatial effects from the canvas, because these were much more essential elements of sculptural art and architecture. The experimental painters abandoned the representation of subjects in space, did not use perspective, foreshortening, shading, and other traditional techniques for achieving these, i.e. color composition that could produce the illusion of space. They also tried to free painting from the other essential features of architecture and sculptural art, for example, the tectonic, gravitational composition, or the acceptance of horizontal and vertical directions as a basis of sights and artistic pictures. It is a fact that tectonic space, tectonically composed planes had been dominant in painting for centuries, and horizontal and vertical directions provided orientation for painter and public alike; however, the fighters for pure painting changed this. In their paintings they projected the horizontal and vertical details of reality by changing and varying the original directions, and, at the same time, they did not care to make perceptible the location of the ground. Thus, their paintings began to float, 'up' and 'down' became indistinguishable. While abandoning tectonics, many artist tried to free painting from demonstration of sights and objects, too. According to theoretical essays they did so primarily because they felt that the demonstrative method

set up strong connections between painting and the visible object, painting and the outside world, even painting and the other arts using demonstrative procedures, i.e. sculptural art, dramatic art, etc. Painting would never become isolated, or independent if it continued to be demonstrative. At this stage of the experiments, non-demonstrative works, paintings reduced to colors and lines appeared one after the other. The painters wanted to express or suggest the essence of the subjects provided by the outside world and sight, rather than demonstrate them. Adherence to the subject, however, is still perceptible here; these works frequently probe the hidden structures behind things, the shades, the essences, and try to give these to the spectator solely with the resources of drawing and painting. Several painters then went beyond this stage. They gave up adhering to the subject, attempting to express the essence, and tried to avoid giving their work any meaning whatever. Briefing their reasons: It seems improvable that having a subject, the expressions of essences, the suggestion of meaning should be closest to painting than to the other arts. At the same time it is clear that there is no art of which color is as principal a part as it is for painting. Thus, pure painting must be built up solely on colors, and the contours of colors must preserve strictly the character of flatness. So, pure painting lacks the effect of space; it is atectonic; has no subject; and is meaningless; however, according to many artists, its aesthetic qualities are contingent; it needs stronger foundations, and needs to be enriched and strengthened... Early in his career Mondrian painted farms, dunes, wet plains, canals, beaches, and forest underbush. It seems that his early paintings led slowly, with the roundabout ways of the experimental spirit toward the elimination of the illusion of space. Only in his very first paintings does Mondrian break up space into detail, with depth perspective and distant horizons. for example AMSTERDAM LANDSCAPE 1902. LANDSCAPE WITH GRAZING COWS 1902-3. His perspectives soon begin to narrow; the background loses details, sometimes virtually becoming formal (FARM AT NISTELRODE 1904. LANDSCAPE WITH A RED CLOUD 1908). The spatiality, plasticity of the subjects in the foreground often seem unstressed, or even blurred obscure (EVENING LANDSCAPE 1904. DUNES AND SEA 1909. DUNE 1910.) Looking at these paintings it becomes more and more difficult to rid oneself of the thought that the artist is using various means for intensify the flat effect of his works. EVENING LANDSCAPE: In traditional painting in order to evoke and reinforce the illusion of space it is customary to apply the axiom of the color theory, that warm, bright and clear colors push forward toward the spectator while cold, dark, and mixed colors create a sunken effect. Mondrian, on the contrary, uses cold, dark and mixed colors in abundance in the foreground of his painting while he breaks up the background with patches or masses of warm and bright colors. DUNES AND SEA: The painter here reduces nearly all phenomena that can be presented in detailed plasticity, mainly to a rhythm of horizontal lines. It seems that horizon at the top does not really create the impression of perspective; it is as if this line were only one element of the rhythm of horizontal lines. DUNE: The blue-green tonality of the sand dunes seems to merge with the blue of the sea, and the blue tonality of the air. The flat effect is strengthened by the fact that one of the dominant characteristics of the painting as a whole is its lack of detail. But perhaps it is worth calling to mind other paintings from this period of the artist's career. The subject, the tree of his painting THE RED THREE (1910) creates the impression that there are purple color crevices on the blue-painted canvas. In case of THE LIGHTHOUSE AT WESTKAPELLE (1910) his brush work makes a special impression. The entire painting is dominated by thick patchy, horizontal and vertical lines, that are so uniform and strong, that the painted surface of the picture, the paint and the canvas itself, seems more empathic, and important than the impression of the insignificant spatial depth. This is a regular method of the divisionist technique in order to diminish the plasticity of space. Mondrian had close connections at this time with Toorop, the famous divisionist painter... Some of Mondrian's early paintings show that he was approaching and trying the atectonic composition, too. About 1911 he began the gradual, cubist abstraction of his favorite subject, the tree (GREY TREE 1911. APPLE TREE IN FLOWER 1912. COMPOSITION WITH TREES 1912. OVAL COMPOSITION, TREES 1913., etc.) While in the first pictures the elements of ground and of details near to the ground have some place among the paintings' structural forms, in the later pictures this happens less and less often, and finally in the last two pictures the ground seems to be unidentifiable. These paintings that lack a definite representation of the ground begin to float, as the cubist configurations of CHURCH AT DOMBURG (1914) also have a floating quality. In the paintings, THE SEA (1914) and THE PIER AND THE OCEAN (1915) it even seems impossible to distinguish between "up" and "down". Perhaps they are paintings with a bird's-eye-view, if it is possible and justifiable to refer in these works to a familiar point of view. However, the traditional, tectonic law of composition is damaged in Mondrian's cubist experiments... The painter's cubist compositions abandon the demonstrative procedures of painting, too. They are analytical; they investigate the essence of phenomena, and at times they even simplify and reduce the elementary forms of geometry to lines, short lines, plus and minus signs. Here are the words of Heinrich Lutzeler analyzing THE PIER AND THE OCEAN to demonstrate how a composition of this kind built up of signs can express the essence of things and can even suggest a variety of meanings: 'Mondrian tries to convey the world of the sea, the sky, the stars in the sky, and the vibrations on the surface of the water. Reproducing the whole, however, seems impossible; everything seems to be too big, and too wide. So he needs a sign. The sign must contain the sacred wonderment he feels before nature; that is why he chooses the cross and the elements of the cross. He covers the surface of his painting with crosses and elements of the crosses; to render the infinite perceptible he needs many crosses and these crosses must cover the surface in every direction. These signs must not be scattered helter-skelter; there are laws, there is order in the Universe, so he arranges them in a formation that

resembles the structures of geometry, rectangle, rhombus, circle, and ellipse, that suggest some order. This formation cannot be closed, since the Universe is open, and it is in constant motion and change.' Mondrian himself explains the birth of the painting as follows: 'Upon catching sight of the sea, the sky, and the stars, I tried to represent them with a multitude of crosses. The greatness of nature fascinated me and I would liked somehow to make the compass, tranquillity, and unity of nature perceptible.' At the same time Mondrian tries to convey something of the movement of water, of the powerful waves above the calm mass of water. So, above the calm surface of the base of the painting, lines now thickening now thinning glide along, each in a different and varied connection with its neighbor. If we look at Mondrian's painting and our eyes run always different ways on the surface of the picture, again and again we gain new and new impressions about the situations of the water surfaces and stars, and the movements of the endless ocean and sky. This painting that expresses the sea, and the essence of the sea, so well conveying both' eternity and ever-changing moments, would be well placed in the homes of people living by the sea. This painting would answer the question of why they live by the infinite water. But beyond this, the painting can show us the sublime, the great, if we are suffering it can reveal to us the healing benevolent balance of the Universe: and amid our often chaotic lives full of vicissitudes it can suggest that there is meaning and interrelatedness; and sketches out the contours of the promising face of life which is open in every direction, and contains a multitude of possibilities..... It seems that THE PIER AND THE OCEAN is one of Mondrian's last works that attempt to suggest a meaning. From 1916 on, his paintings have no subject or meaning; it is as though they were nothing but restless, inquiring analytical studies of colors and lines (COMPOSITION 1916. COMPOSITION IN BLUE 1917. COMPOSITION: CHECKERED LEAF, BRIGHT COLORS 1919. BRIGHT COLORED PLANE COMPOSITION WITH GREY CONTOURS 1919., etc.). Probably even if he did take other byways, Mondrian also went along the paths Kandinsky, Malevich, and Klee took, and was now searching persistently, but restlessly, with rigorous analysis, for a way of creating the Aesthetics of purified and independent painting.

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According to the literature of art history quite a number of painters have tried to do this, now not with a further analysis of pure features of painting, but rather by applying the universal, ancient, and basic aesthetic methods that are equally characterizing all of the arts (composition, combination, accumulation, intensification, concentration, clarification, synthesis, antithesis, the assertion of the basics laws of proportion, etc.). *...I tried to achieve pure drawing, and worked out painting in complementary colors, the kind of painting constructed solely on colors; then attempted all possible syntheses of these types, continually combining them while I tried as far as possible to preserve the culture of the pure element.* This was how Paul Klee remembered his earlier efforts. Thought of Mondrian's works painted between 1916 and 1919 the attempt to create the aesthetics of pure painting seemed to happen together with a very rigorous process of clarification and selection. Selection was directed primarily at the basic elements of purified painting. During the previous years, Mondrian had already torn apart the closed, geometrical structures of cubism, and now even the curved lines disappeared totally from his paintings; and the straight lines met only at right angles on them. The color scale was reduced, too. First, to the mixed shades of white, black, blue, red, and yellow, then finally to the pure white, black, blue, red and yellow itself, plus to the solely black-and-white based grey. According to the Color Theory the basic scale cannot be narrowed further than this. These are the primary colors (except for grey) which cannot be produced from each other and from combination of which all colors, shades, variations can be formed. Based on physics, the theory of colors designates black and white and their mixture (grey) as non-colors, while blue, red, and yellow as primary colors. Mondrian's experiments in reduction and selection seem to stop at this point; he accepts perpendicular lines, primary colors and non-colors as the ultimate elements of painting, and subsequently he builds his works only on these elements. (COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE 1921. COMPOSITION 1921. COMPOSITION 1922. COMPOSITION 1923. PAINTING II. 1921-25. COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE. 1927. COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE 1929. COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE 1930. COMPOSITION 1935. COMPOSITION III. YELLOW AND BLUE 1936. COMPOSITION IN YELLOW AND BLUE 1938-43. COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE 1943-44.)...In order to render pure painting aesthetic, Mondrian endeavors to almost continually apply an archaic rule of proportion, the golden section. According to the literature of aesthetics, the golden section determines the ideal relationship between dimensions.. The relationship between two dimensions can be harmonious for the human eye if one is approximately six-tenth of the other, and where there is a new dimension, it equals the sum of the preceding dimensions. Expressed in numbers 0.618034:1:1.618034. Since before the Renaissance these have been the number values of the relationships of the smaller dimensions, the bigger ones and the new ones. In Mondrian's post 1919 paintings, the golden section seems primarily to characterize the correlation between the length of lines, but in many cases the proportions of sizes of the squares are the same. (COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE 1921. COMPOSITION 1921. PAINTING II. 1921-25. COMPOSITION IN YELLOW AND RED 1938-43.) This can be verified with the help of a simple ruler... Aesthetic reasons explain the constant use of another archaic artistic procedure, contrast. In Mondrian's works the elements used

from the wider store of painting techniques seem to be in constant opposition to each other. Among his post 1919 paintings not a single one contains solely horizontal or solely vertical lines; besides the basic colors we can always find the non-colors. Not one of the paintings is composed by solely of pure colors, everywhere there is grey that has been produced by mixing. There are always dark colors on the canvas next to the bright ones. In addition to the squares that are strictly circumscribed and closed by black contours, there are always open squares that are nearly going off the painting. The use of the golden section never seems to be total; it can be seen on some parts of the pictures inducing harmony, and cannot be seen on others dissolving the harmony. It would be good to know what those aesthetic ideals and requirements are in the name of which the elements of purified painting are selected and contrasted, and the golden section is used in Mondrian's works. *We must do more than simply look at nature which sometimes gives the impression of tragedy; we must rather to look through it, see into the depth, to perceive those elements that are universal, universally present everywhere, and stronger than any impression of the surface. These elements radiate vital energy. Pure beauty being free of the contingencies of the concrete sight of nature is the only medium thru which the universal energy present in all the phenomena of the world can be suggested.. This pure beauty built on universally valid elements is identical with the thing which in the past has been called divinity. Man badly needs the energy radiating from it... In painting, a work of pure beauty can only be achieved elementarily, with elementary colors, elementary lines, and by arranging them in elementary relationships. As a line must be open, and straight, so must a color be open and pure: that is how they can radiate energy. What is even more,, pure beauty has the important task to lead man, who is confronted by chaos inside and outside, to a world of balance and tranquility. The fine arts, including painting, have to create and make visible this balance that is valid everywhere. They must help man to create a balanced, tranquil world. .. Looking at it in an elementary way, our life consists of joy and pain. This can be represented in the pure fine arts by limitation and expansion. They meet in balance as equals in pure beauty, and in this way the special character of pain and joy are ended, and calm peace replaces them...* This way we can condense Mondrian's aesthetic views collected from his theoretical writings. And now the motives behind his procedures seem to be clearer. He most probably reduces the devices of purified painting to primary colors, because the chance of universality and the nucleus of all known colors in them are hidden. The motive for using the golden section is most probably induced by its elementary and universal nature; of all the rules of proportion only this one is recognized as the final basis of harmonic sight, moreover, has been passed down for centuries in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Erno Lendvai, writing about Bartok, mentions the use of the golden section in music, too. The permanent contrasting of the purified elements of painting probably serves the continual predominance of balance. The presence of the golden section in a painting or its absence seems to be in connection with balance, too. The omission of curved lines strengthens the effectiveness of the straight lines in radiating energy. At the same time the artist affirms in his theoretical writings that curved lines facilitate manifestations in the paintings of the individual passionate subject which lack universality and so they are to be omitted. Thick straight lines seems to enhance the effect of flatness: thin lines that cross each other especially in the vicinity of warm, bright, and clear colors seem to weaken the illusion of the plane, thick straight lines, on the contrary, seem to stick to the plane. The meeting at right angles of equally thick straight lines seem to radiate balance and calm... Many people have likened Mondrian's works to meditation tables; others to classical icons. If we study the paintings thoroughly and our eyes discover the world of lines of varied length and that of the closed and open squares that emerge in numerous variations, the world of colors that crop up again and again, we get many and many thoughts about lines, proportions, and colors. And so many small impressions emanate from the paintings: joy, freshness, sweetness or sorrow inherent in the colors, even in variations which we have never experienced before; vitality, or rigor concealed in the structures, which vanish the moment we look at a color or a well proportioned part of the painting. There is a certain playfulness in parts of the canvas, while on others an intimate and benevolent warmth. There is a great deal in these paintings that we do not understand exactly, but which seems to remind us of something. The whole world on the canvas at times seems mysterious, virtually mystical. Though its mysterious variety is alluring and wonderful, so we gaze at it almost in rapture. And suddenly we realize that we have long ago forgotten the irritating events of everyday life and pleasant calm has settled in us... The man of today's civilization is often fed up with the reality around him, and its irritating negative elements, with the absurd phenomena of life that are all too well known, with the relativity of truth, with the problem of the justification and legitimacy of statements, thoughts, of saying anything at all. There are men, who virtually do not like to say a word, and would rather retreat to another world, where nothing is disturbing, and everything is peaceful, quiet, benevolent, and lacking in meaning. Several of the leading contemporary European and American writers (Christian Morgenstern, Edward Estlin Cummings, Dezso Tandori) often simply banish from their works elements of reality that arouse disgust, they disregard thoughts, meanings, and sentences, compiling their works from neutral, empty elements, scraps of words, word fragments, rhythm and punctuation marks. From this fragmentary poetry we get the feeling that submersion in the world of these word fragments that are even more modest than elementary, the playing with these micros, must have helped their creators to live, to feel sometimes true happiness, and radiate millions of micro-impressions of joy, vividness, and fun, to the readers... It must have been the same with this artist of the Netherlands. In the course of his endless experiments he discovered a world free of the irritating features of reality, a world with a marvellous protean character, and full balance, and imperturbable tranquillity. And while revealing its

peacefulness, gentleness, and balance to people of this chaotic 20th century, this must have helped him to live, too. Let's have another look at these works which radiate the elemental beauty of life, and think on that that the man who devoted the greater part of his life in seclusion quietly arranging these noble colors, proportions, and structures, and whose experiments did not come primarily from the reality of everyday life but rather from this balanced, undisturbed and peaceful world, must have been a personality full of refreshing, tranquility and healing force. His aura reminds us of the hermit to whom lions came to have their wounds healed.

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The struggle for purity and perfection, the hard and steady search for harmony, the unswerving service of humanity, the radiation of ideals and ideas helping the humans to live - these principles of aesthetics and ethics are permanently valid in this oeuvre... Mondrian called his approach Neoplasticism, and it attracted numerous artists even during his life. Avant-garde painters of all nationalities joined the neoplasticist movement. According to the literature they would have liked to apply their principles to all the art and to everyday life as well. First the Dutch avant-garde school, then the German, the Weimar Art Group tried to apply the essence of Mondrian's approach to poetry, painting, architecture, and the applied arts. Paintings, poems, statues, building complexes, factories, workers houses, schools, even entire sections of towns were created in the spirit of neoplasticism. As can be read in the literature, parallel with all this, the variability, mobility and balance of neoplasticism appeared in furnishings and in sectional furniture. Later it appeared even more widely in plastics, printing and advertising; supporting by all of these Mondrian's idea, that neoplasticism should embrace gradually the whole of human life and after which it should dissolve into the more balanced life it has created. The books that deal with the most recent history of poetry and the fine arts mention most frequently as examples of neoplasticist art the poetry of Dutch magazine De Stijl's circle and Antonie Kok's, Vilmos Huszar's, and Van Doesburg's paintings; Vantongerloo's plastics; Van Easternen's and J.J.P. Oud's apartments; Rietveld's famous Schroeder-house; the utility goods of the Staatliches Bauhaus Institute; the interior designs of Bauhaus master, Walter Gropius; the phonetic poetry of the French group "Cercle et Carré" which had about 80 members who usually met at the "Café Voltaire" and "Lipp's Brasserie". It has often been noted that the effects of neoplasticism can be recognized even today, many new challenges of the architecture of 90s are based on this intellectual movement... Mondrian's last pictures were created at the beginning of the while he lived in the U.S. (BROADWAY BOOGIE-WOOGIE 1942-43. VICTORY BOOGIE-WOOGIE 1943-44.) These last paintings seem different when compared with his previous works. This may be due to a change in the application of techniques. The straight lines that cross the painting are not uniformly dark. They consist primarily of light grey, blue, yellow and red squares and quadrangles. Black does not appear at all in BROADWAY BOOGIE-WOOGIE and only rarely in VICTORY BOOGIE-WOOGIE. The squares framed by colored straight lines are smaller than earlier. Sometimes little squares appear in the middle center of bigger ones. Fragmentation predominates in the pictures as if a colorful and cheerful pizzicato were ringing out. The mood of the paintings is also new in the oeuvre, the balance seems to become a zest for life, the tranquillity becomes animated high spirits. This may not merely be the effect of the liveliness of American life. According to a friend of Mondrian's, Michel Seuphor, the repetition of characteristic features of Mondrian's pictures for decades turned monotonous; it became necessary by the early 40s to move beyond tranquillity, to an even more positive and more helpful human emotion, that of joy. Mondrian's theoretical writings indicate the way leading here. *Basically our lives consist of pain and pleasure. These feelings can be represented in the fine arts by expansion and limitation. They meet in balance as equals in pure beauty, and this way the pain and joy are ended, and calm peace replaces them... But we can go even further. If we dissolve the strict-delimitation of forms, pain begins to disappear together with calm, leaving only joy, which leads toward the feeling of freedom...* This is what seems to appear on the canvases of BROADWAY BOOGIE-WOOGIE and VICTORY BOOGIE-WOOGIE after dissolving the universal balance: a human faced, particular, new balance made up of elements of joy and feeling of freedom.

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When we look at Mondrian's neoplasticist works we cannot get rid of the feeling that the Dutch artist were constantly urging us not to let the irritating aspects of reality affect our lives and emotions; warning us to handle these irritations very quietly, with peaceful smiles... Mondrian painted his last two pictures weakened by illness and in the awareness of approaching death. However, the two pictures show nothing as indication of personal pain or personal gap, instead, continuously and imperturbably radiate the colorful and gay rhythms of human joy and freedom.

Sources: Michel Seuphor: Mondrian, Paris 1958. Alberto Busignani: Mondrian, Florence 1968. Umbro Apollonio: Piet Mondrian, Milano 1965. Mario de Micheli: The Avant-garde, Budapest 1969. Werner Hofmann: Foundations of Modern Art, Budapest 1974. Hans Sedlmayr: Idols of Modern Art, Budapest 1960. Heinrich

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