

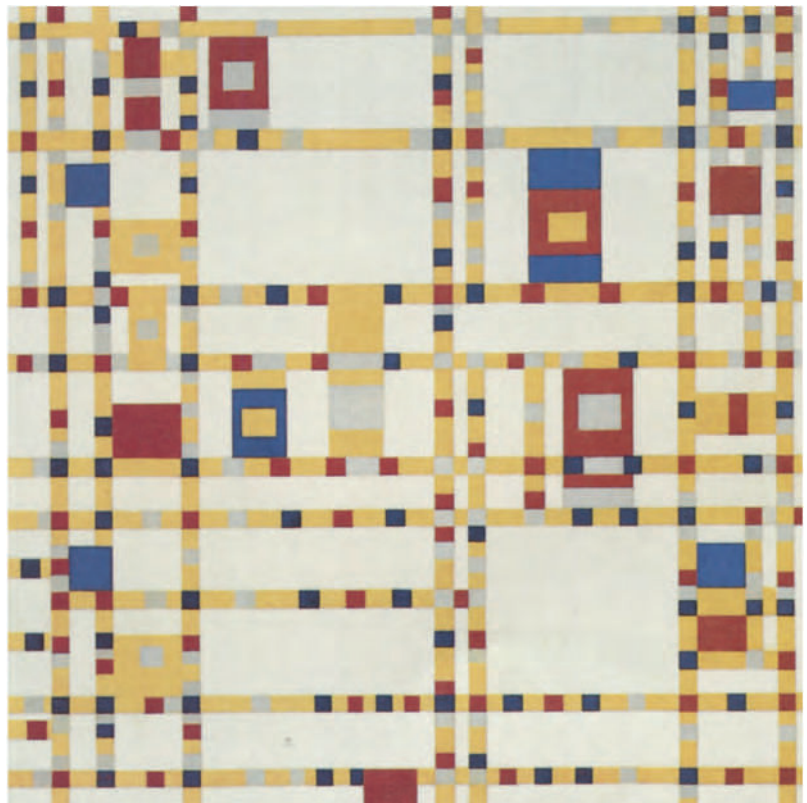


do not know how I shall turn out, ...'

*The Development of the Work of Mondrian,
from Naturalism to Victory Boogie-Woogie*

Photographs of the last studio used by Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) show a large lozenge-shaped canvas standing in the corner. This painting is entitled *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, and is built up of planes of colour which dance across the surface of the painting. Mondrian worked on the painting until a few days before his death on 1 February 1944. It shows some similarities with *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, which was completed in 1943.

Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. 1942-43.
Canvas, 127 x 127 cm.
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York.



Broadway Boogie-Woogie is composed of horizontal and vertical lines, with red, blue, yellow and grey blocks of various sizes arranged along them. The horizontal and vertical lines are distributed over the picture in an irregular pattern. The lines are closer together at the left and right edges of the painting, and here and there the rectangular areas between the lines are painted in the same colours as the rest of the painting. Due to the succession of blocks of strongly contrasting colour, the eye does not come to rest at any point, but jumps along the lines across the painting. This evokes a feeling of rhythm and speed. Mondrian was living in New York when he worked on *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, having fled from Europe as war threatened in 1940. He had already left Paris in 1938, after living in the city since 1919, but stayed in London for another two years before moving to New York.

The New York period saw the beginning of a new phase in Mondrian's work. Since 1919 he had been composing his paintings with horizontal and vertical lines and red, yellow and / or blue colour planes. However during the New York period the black lines gave way to coloured ones, and in *Victory Boogie-Woogie* and *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, as described above, the lines were made up of coloured blocks placed side by side. The titles of both paintings refer to the Boogie-Woogie music which Mondrian – who was a great Jazz enthusiast – was hearing in New York clubs and on gramophone records. The fast, pulsating rhythm of this music bears some similarities to the rapid succession of coloured blocks in the *Boogie-Woogie* paintings.

In 1943 Mondrian mentioned the analogy between his work and Boogie-Woogie music in a letter to the American art historian James Johnson Sweeney: 'True Boogie-Woogie I conceive as homogeneous in intention with mine in painting: destruction of melody which is the equivalent of destruction of natural appearance, and the construction through the continuous opposition of pure means-dynamic rhythm.

I think the destructive element is too much neglected in art.'

At first sight this is quite a cryptic comment, with Mondrian saying that the destructive element plays an important part in his work. As his oeuvre developed, the part played by the destructive principle became clear.

This artist, who was born in 1872 in a small provincial town in the Netherlands, came from beginnings which were far from spectacular. Pieter Cornelis Mondrian trained as an art teacher, and in 1892 he registered at the National Academy of Visual Arts in Amsterdam.

Although he became proficient at various genres, such as still life and life studies, Mondrian was mainly a landscape painter. His painting technique followed the work of the Amsterdam painter George Hendrik Breitner and the tradition of the Hague School. Around 1870, painters such as Willem Maris and Anton Mauve had shocked the Dutch art world with representations of the Dutch polder landscape painted with unusually broad brushstrokes for the time. Their intention was not particularly to give an accurate representation of their subjects, but rather to capture the atmosphere and the light. Mondrian further developed the atmospheric compositions which his predecessors had created with their broad brushstrokes, and also began to show some interest in the structure of the landscape.

A good example of this is the painting *Summer Night* from 1906-07. This painting shows a Dutch landscape by moonlight. In the foreground we see a



Piet Mondrian. *Summer Night*. 1906-07.
Canvas, 71 x 110 cm.
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague.

piece of land at the water's edge. The water reflects the silver-grey light of the moon, which is at the top of the painting on the right. The lefthand half of the painting, behind the water, is taken up by trees and a farm painted in just a few brushstrokes. All this is set against a dark grey sky.

In 1909, the Dutch writer / psychiatrist Frederick van Eeden wrote in the journal *Op de hoogte* (Well-informed) about Mondrian's early work: 'There are some truly splendid designs in his earlier period. His vision of nature is majestic and noble. His colours are sometimes magnificent.' This article was written after an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where Mondrian exhibited work alongside the painters Jan Sluymers and Cornelis Spoor. Mondrian had also sent in some recent work for this exhibition. Van Eeden mentioned this also: 'I have never seen such obviously classic cases of acute decadence before. These are what the medical people call "typical pathological pictures".' A few paragraphs later Van Eeden speaks of '... a dreadful orgy of the coarsest, brightest and most barbaric colours he (Mondrian) could scrape together'.

Mondrian's atmospheric naturalistic landscapes had given way to paintings in bright colours. One of the most noticeable paintings at the exhibition was *Mill in Sunlight* from 1908. This painting depicts a windmill as a prominent feature. The canvas is painted in strokes of bright red, yellow and blue colour, which reproduce the sensation of a windmill in the sunshine.

The rapid change of direction in Mondrian's work no doubt had something to do with the fact that in about 1908 he was developing closer links with contemporary avant-garde artists in the Netherlands.

First of all he came into contact with Jan Sluymers again, who had returned from Paris in 1907. In the French capital Sluymers had seen the latest developments in the field of painting, where colour was playing a prominent role.

Piet Mondrian,
Composition No. 3 (Trees).
1913. Canvas, 95 x 80 cm.
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague.



Piet Mondrian, *Mill in Sunlight*. 1908.
Canvas, 114 x 87 cm.
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague.



Works by Gauguin, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec inspired Sluyters to produce colourful, expressive paintings.

Another important acquaintance for Mondrian was Jan Toorop, the doyen of the moderns of that time in the Netherlands. Toorop was well-informed about recent developments in France, and was experimenting with the divisionist technique, placing powerful strokes of paint of various colours side by side. In *Mill in Sunlight* we see Mondrian using this technique. However it is noticeable that Mondrian went much further in his approach than Toorop had done. The strokes and the use of colour are much more powerful, and the subjects seem to lose themselves in a jumble of brush-strokes.

Mondrian's rather sudden change of direction was not just an experiment; it was a serious matter, as is shown in a letter sent by Mondrian in response to a report on the exhibition by the critic Israël Querido. Mondrian wrote the following: 'I consider that the great masters of former times were very great and their works very beautiful, but in my case you will find that at the present time everything has to be represented in a very different way; even using a different technique. For the present I consider it necessary for the paints to be placed alongside each other as purely as possible, in a stippled

or diffuse way. I know this is putting it strongly, but this fits in with the idea behind the principle of representation as I see it.'

According to this letter, Mondrian thought the time was ripe for different means of expression, stating that he was not only concerned with form, but that he wanted to give his works a deeper meaning. In the same letter he also wrote: 'I believe that you are also aware of the close connection between philosophy and art, which is precisely what most painters deny ...'. Mondrian did recognise that connection, and he tried to give his works a more spiritual content. He was not entirely clear on how to do this. He wrote: 'I do not know how I shall turn out, ...' and later in the same letter: 'For the time being, however, I want my work to stay within the normal domain of the senses, because that is where we still live. But art can form a bridge to finer regions: perhaps I am wrong to call them spiritual realms, since everything which still has form is not yet spiritual, so I have read ... But it is still the ascending path, away from the material.'

The idea of a path from material to spiritual realms links in with Mondrian's interest in the doctrine of theosophy. In 1909 Mondrian became a member of the Theosophical Association and remained a member until his death. With a single exception, Mondrian did not use picture-language to point directly towards the teachings of theosophy. However, the idea held by theosophy of an evolution towards a higher, harmonious world is important in Mondrian's work and thought. In his study entitled *Mondrian, Theosophy and Rudolf Steiner* (Mondriaan, theosofie en Rudolf Steiner, 1987), Professor Carol Blotkamp argues that evolution is associated with the concept of destruction, in the sense that destruction of the old forms is a precondition for evolution towards a higher world. The destruction of old forms did have a part to play in Mondrian's work. By destroying the forms as they are perceived in visible reality, it should be possible to create a more spiritual world.

In 1909 and the following year, Mondrian turned his attention mainly towards colour, attempting to elevate objects to a higher plane by using colour in an unrealistic way. He left the shapes themselves more or less intact. During this period Mondrian painted a lot of lighthouses and church towers, seen from a point low down and virtually right up against the surface of the painting, so that they seem to rise up before the viewer.

In 1910, Mondrian was involved in the foundation of a new artists' association called *De Moderne Kunstkring* (The Modern Art Circle), which aimed to exhibit work by contemporary Dutch and foreign artists.

At the first exhibition given by *De Moderne Kunstkring* cubist works by Le Fauconnier, Picasso and Braque were exhibited. These had an enormous influence on Mondrian, as he said himself. Cubism, where objects were dismembered into basic geometric shapes, offered him the opportunity to become free of the 'natural shapes of things'. First of all Mondrian reduced his subjects to geometric shapes in such a way that the original point of departure was still recognisable. In 1912 Mondrian moved to Paris, the cradle of cubism, where he became better acquainted with the work of Picasso and Braque. The cubist works which Mondrian produced in Paris give an impression of intricacy; the subjects have been thoroughly abstracted and disappear into a pattern of planes and lines. In the painting *Composition No. 3 (Trees)* from 1913, the trees are no longer recognisable as such. The

painting is built up from geometric shapes in brown, ochre-coloured and grey shapes, partly bounded by dark contour lines. However, Mondrian went further still. In *Composition No. 3 (Trees)* there are still some lines with jagged or curved shapes. In later paintings these have disappeared, and the horizontal and vertical lines form a pattern consisting of mainly rectangular shapes. Between 1914 and 1917 these rectangles were broken open, and the black lines came to form a pattern of intersecting horizontal and vertical black lines.

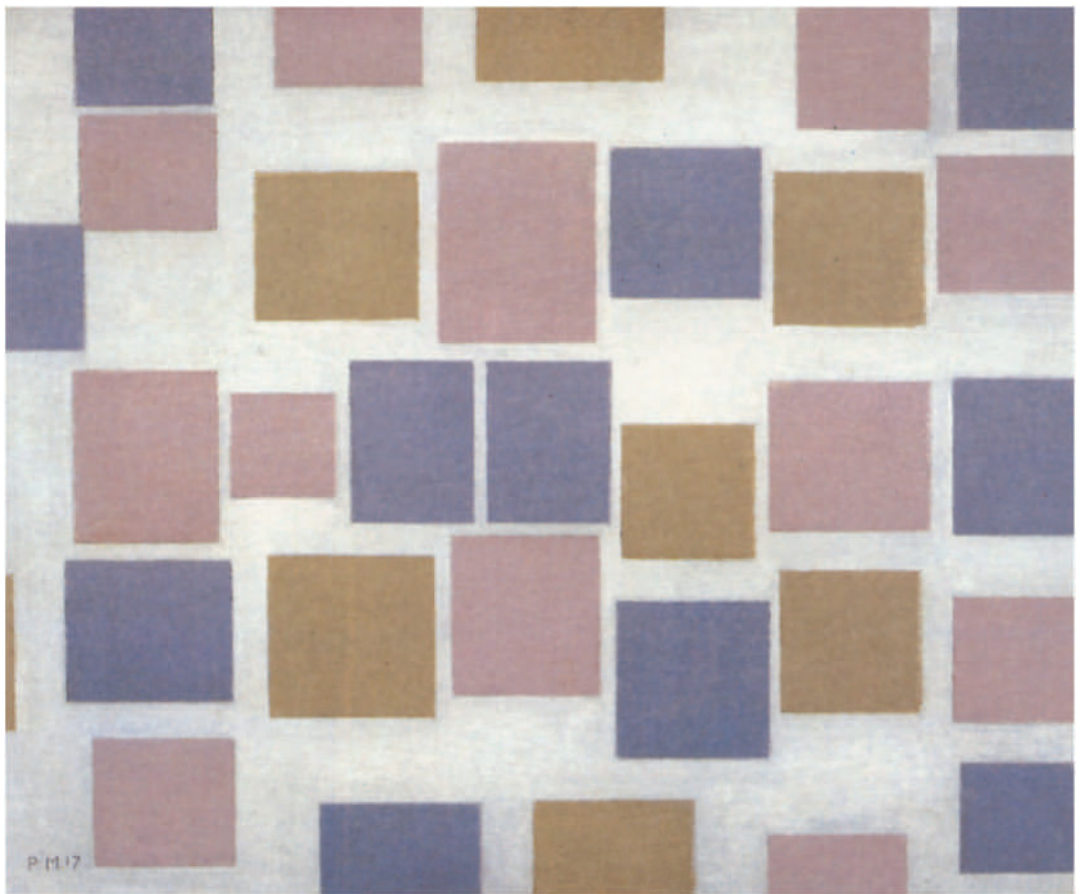
Although Mondrian's paintings were still based on visible reality, his work had left the 'normal domain of the senses' which he mentioned to Israël Querido in 1909. In a letter written in 1914 to the art teacher H.P. Bremmer, Mondrian was able to be much more specific about what he was doing. He wrote: 'For I construct lines and combinations of colours on a flat surface in order to represent universal beauty as consciously as possible. Nature (or what I see) inspires me, it moves me just as much as any painter and puts that urge in me to make something, but I want to come as close to the truth as possible, and therefore I want to abstract everything until I reach the foundation (still an external foundation!) of things. I consider it a true statement that by not wishing to say anything specific one says the most specific thing of all – the (universal) truth.'

In his striving towards a higher reality, Mondrian was attempting to achieve a universal harmony. According to him, this harmony which was universal or always true could not be expressed by representing 'something specific' or a visible reality, because beauty does not depend on coincidental, external or individual characteristics as in the 'natural manifestation of things'. Mondrian attempted to express this harmony by juxtaposing basic abstract shapes and bringing them into equilibrium with each other. He thus avoided subjects taken from visible reality, which have individual, external and coincidental characteristics, and also avoided associated phenomena such as volume, space and perspective.

In the meantime, Mondrian had been forced to settle in the Netherlands again, because due to the outbreak of World War I he was not able to return to Paris after a visit to his father. In the Netherlands he came into contact with 'like-minded' artists such as Theo van Doesburg, who founded the journal *De Stijl*. At van Doesburg's invitation Mondrian became involved in planning and setting up the journal in 1917, and wrote articles expounding his views about art.

Bart van der Leek, whom Mondrian had met in 1916, was also involved in *De Stijl*. At that time Van der Leek was painting strictly stylised shapes in equal areas of colour against a white background. Van der Leek's work inspired Mondrian to place rectangular shapes against a white background. This can be seen in *Composition with Colour Planes No. 3* (1917). In this painting red, light blue and yellow rectangles are set against a light background. The painting is composed entirely of abstract shapes, and no longer has any source in visible reality. However, one problem is that the coloured planes seem to hover above the background, thus giving a feeling of space which Mondrian did not want. Mondrian found a solution to this problem by anchoring the planes, so to speak, in a regular grid pattern.

In the letter to James Johnson Sweeney mentioned above, Mondrian looked back over these developments and described them as follows: 'This



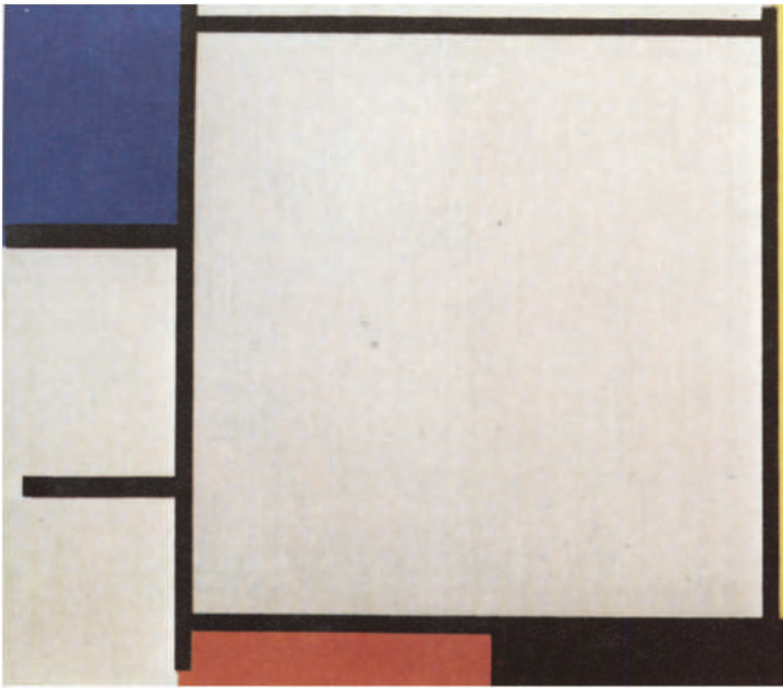
Piet Mondrian,
*Composition with Colour
Planes No. 3*, 1917.
Canvas, 48 x 61 cm.
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague.

attitude of the Cubists to the representations of volume in space was contrary to my conception of abstraction, which is based on the belief that this very space *has to be destroyed*. As a consequence I came to the destruction of volume by the use of the plane. This I accomplished by means of lines cutting the planes. But still the plane remained too intact. So I came to making only lines and brought the colour within the lines. Now the problem was to destroy these lines also through mutual oppositions.'

Mondrian succeeded in destroying the lines as well. In 1920 the regular grid pattern gave way to carefully placed horizontal and vertical black lines and different-sized areas of primary colours and shades of white.

Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue is an example of the work which Mondrian was producing around 1920, and which he gradually perfected in the years which followed. In this painting, horizontal and vertical black lines form a large square approximately in the centre, which is a very light grey in colour. Around the square there are narrow rectangular areas of varying sizes in white, black, yellow, red and blue. The horizontals and verticals and the coloured planes hold each other in balance. Any reference to time, space, form or volume has gone. What remains is a clear manifestation of universal relationships.

During the course of the 1920s, Mondrian reduced the size of the coloured



Piet Mondrian,
*Composition with Red,
Yellow and Blue*. 1922.
Canvas, 42 x 50 cm.
Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam.

planes or transected them by lines. In the 1930s the lines were doubled, and during the New York period they became coloured.

In *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie* Mondrian added a new and quite significant dimension to his work. The prominence of the lines was broken by using small successive blocks. In both these stimulating paintings, not only is the 'natural manifestation of things' destroyed and a new harmony established through the subtle balance between opposites, but also the static character of the paintings from the 1920s has given way to a dynamic equilibrium.

SASKIA BAK

Translated by Steve Judd.