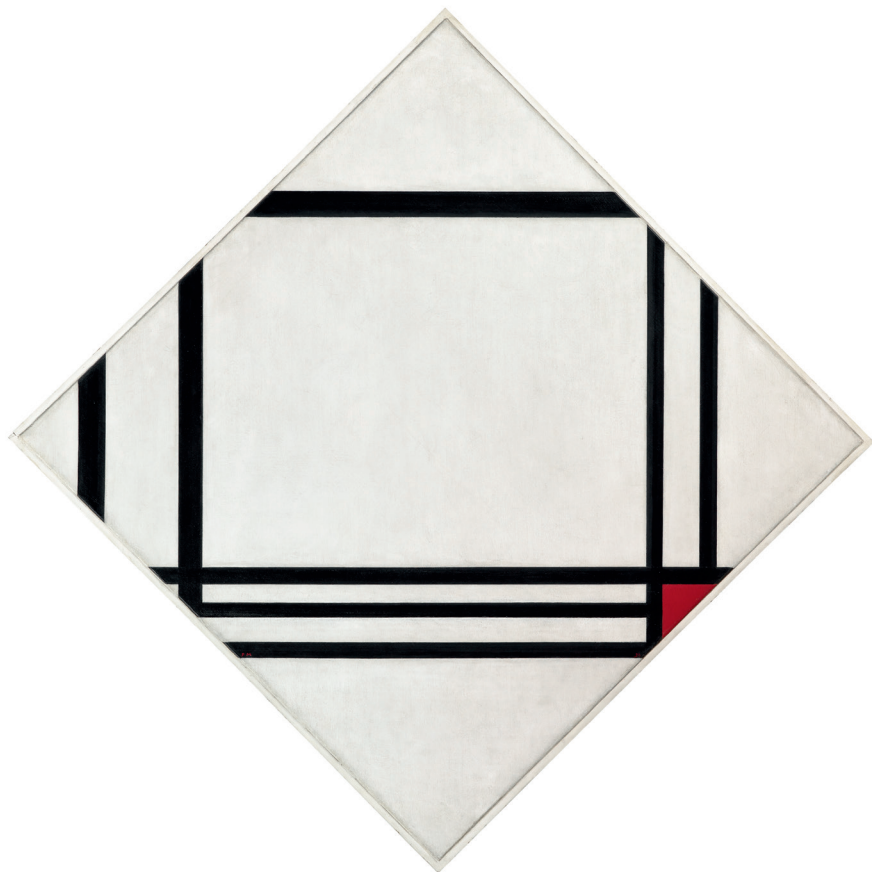


Exhibition November 11, 2020 – March 1, 2021

Sabatini Building, Floor 1

Mondrian and De Stijl



Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Eight Lines and Red (Picture no. III)*, 1938
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler Collection. © Mondrian/Holtzman, 2020

The work of the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian within the context of the movement De Stijl [The Style] set the course of geometric abstract art from the Netherlands and contributed to the drastic change in visual culture after the First World War. His concept of beauty based on the surface, on the structure and composition of color and lines, shaped a novel and innovative style that aimed at breaking down the frontiers between disciplines and surpassing the traditional limits of pictorial space. *De Stijl*, the magazine of the same name founded in 1917 by the painter and critic Theo van Doesburg, was the platform for spreading the ideas of this new art and overcoming traditional Dutch provincialism.

Contrary to what has often been said, the members of De Stijl did not pursue a utopia but a world where collaboration between all disciplines would make it possible to abolish hierarchies among the arts. These would thus be freed to merge together and give rise to something new, a reality better adapted to the world of modernity that was just starting to be glimpsed.

Piet Mondrian (Amersfoort, Netherlands, 1872-New York, 1944) is considered one of the founders of this new art. His progressive ideas about the relationship between art and society grew from the deep-rooted Dutch realist tradition inherited from the seventeenth century. The ultimate realism, however, takes over and transforms reality. Mondrian looked for ways to achieve this, driven by rhythm and dynamism, a radical reduction of the visual means, a rigorous emphasis on the purely *plastic* dimension of painting, and the integration of the new into everyday reality.

The artists associated with Mondrian and the magazine *De Stijl* operated in a world where other artistic developments were under way. Each gallery in the exhibition therefore counterpoises phenomena directly aligned with the key ideas behind *De Stijl* with other attempts, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, to create an art that could rightly be called contemporary and which was founded in reality – or was even ahead of it. Viewed in this way, the period from the Russian Revolution to the rise of Nazi Germany was a turbulent period in art and culture, a time when the artists of *De Stijl* managed to steer their own unique and totally new course.



Piet Mondrian, *Basket with Apples*, 1891
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Longterm loan of P. J. van den Berg
© Mondrian/Holtzman, 2020

A Dutch Beginning

In May 1892, Mondrian took part in the annual exhibition of the Kunstliefde artists' society in Utrecht. The society was a bulwark of aristocratic conservatism, and Mondrian's family, with its 'anti-revolutionary' background, moved easily in such provincial circles. The Netherlands was modernizing rapidly, yet that modern world had little impact on Mondrian's Calvinist upbringing, as is clearly reflected in the work he showed in Utrecht, which followed the seventeenth-century tradition of pictorial realism with its static, unshakeable, eternal standard of beauty. Yet soon after Mondrian moved to Amsterdam at the age of 18, we see him starting to experiment with that same landscape tradition, choosing high horizons, avoiding the illusion of depth, and using flat areas of color in landscapes that exude a strange calm.



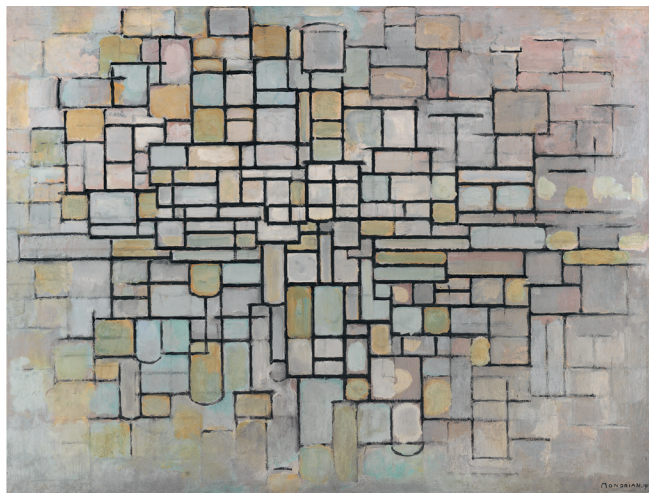
Piet Mondrian,
Summer Day, 1908
Collection Museum
de Fundatie, Zwolle
and Heino/Wijhe,
The Netherlands
© Mondrian/Holtzman,
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Form and Space in Dutch Architecture Around 1900

Where did De Stijl's urge to innovate come from in the years 1916-17? The Dutch had a strong sense that art had a social function. Art was for everyone and, as the mother of all arts, architecture had an almost religious duty to shape life. Color created awareness of space. Structure created order. And a restrained, austere design was healthy for the spirit. And so the architectural space acquires a spiritual dimension in the Netherlands, more so than elsewhere. The debate came to a head in the late nineteenth century over the design of a new stock exchange in Amsterdam. The new building was to be an ode to capitalism, but in a traditional Dutch way. The architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage managed to involve artists, sculptors, poets and authors with his project (1896-1903), producing an understated building in brick. Color, hygiene and restrained ornamentation became the new standard in the Netherlands.

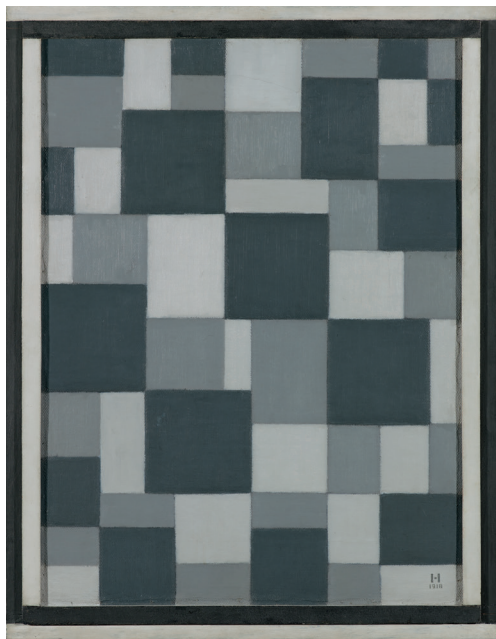
A Virtuoso Young Artist with Faith in Progress

In January 1909 Mondrian presented an overview of his work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. He divided his work in a strange manner around the four galleries he had at his disposal. Simple small sketches in oils were on display in the first – relentless experiments, highly personal quests for a strange, raw poetry. The last two galleries featured sophisticated landscapes imbued with the quiet of evening or morning. However, it was in the central gallery that the artist seemed to have gone mad. Strange bluish paintings, exceedingly expressive and self-confident, were the most recent expressions of an art concerned mainly with spiritual growth during a person's earthly pilgrimage. The succession of tones – in the form of a triptych – suggested that here was an artist who believed in progress, in a world that could be improved by art.



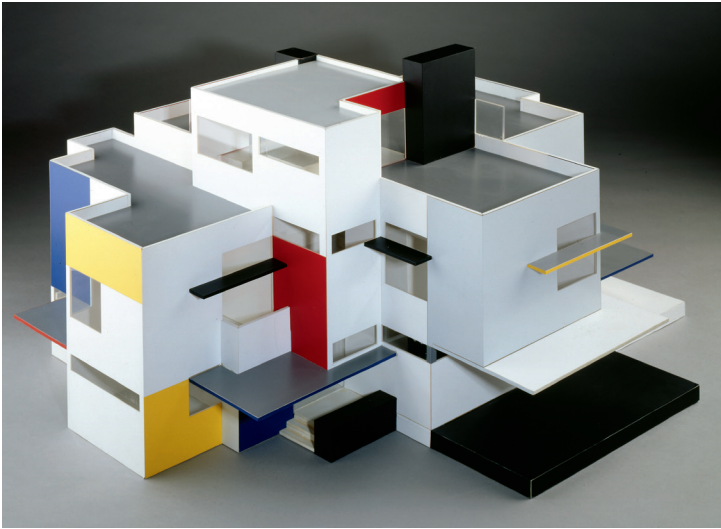
Piet Mondrian
Composition No. II, 1913
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterloo,
 The Netherlands
 © Mondrian/Holtzman, 2020

In Search of Universal Beauty



Vilmos Huszár, *Composition in Gray*, 1918
 Kunstmuseum Den Haag.
 Acquired with support of the Rembrandt Association
 © Vilmos Huszár, VEGAP, Madrid, 2020

Five years later, Mondrian wrote a long letter from Paris to H.P. Bremmer, a Dutch art critic. Bremmer had seen some recent work by Mondrian, was intrigued by his visual idiom – consisting mostly of short horizontal and vertical lines that barely managed to hold the restrained colors in check – and wanted to know more about it. Mondrian denied that his work was vague. For two years in Paris he had been seeking a *universal beauty*, free of representation, free of nature, inspired only by the truth of color and line, and guided by intuition. Bremmer invited Mondrian to exhibit his work in The Hague. The First World War then broke out and the artist was unable to return to Paris. The Netherlands remained neutral during the conflict and he continued experimenting there, drawing on paper.



Theo van Doesburg y
Cornelis van Eesteren
Model for a private
house 1923
Reconstruction:
Tjarda Mees, 1982
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Form and Space in Art

Mondrian found himself part of multiple attempts to purify art and to develop a formal language that was both simple and structured, that conjured forth the illusory space of the artwork, making it accessible to all. For Mondrian, line and color were two fundamental elements of painting, and their rhythmic interplay of expansive relationships created a new form of plasticity or space. Other contemporary artists like Bart van der Leek, Gerrit Rietveld, Vilmos Huszar, and Georges Vantongerloo were all of the same mind, seeking a new, completely abstract art that appealed directly to the emotions. Theo van Doesburg (Utrecht, Netherlands, 1883-Davos, Switzerland, 1931) managed to pool their efforts in a publication, *De Stijl*, the first issue of which appeared in October 1917. The artists associated with De Stijl were passionately engaged in a huge variety

of experiments when they first met. This variety would prove to be both the great strength and also, as would shortly become apparent, the key weakness of the movement.

Form and Space in Society

From the start the artists of De Stijl sought to blur the boundaries between the arts, like those between architecture and painting, or between decorative art and design. Even the boundaries between image, language, music and dance were to be abolished. All forms of expression would serve only one purpose: to express modernity. And thus an architectural model or a chair became a sculpture. In other words, an object in space, for the modern also meant a different interpretation of space. The painter became an architect, and the boundaries between reality and illusion became transitory and

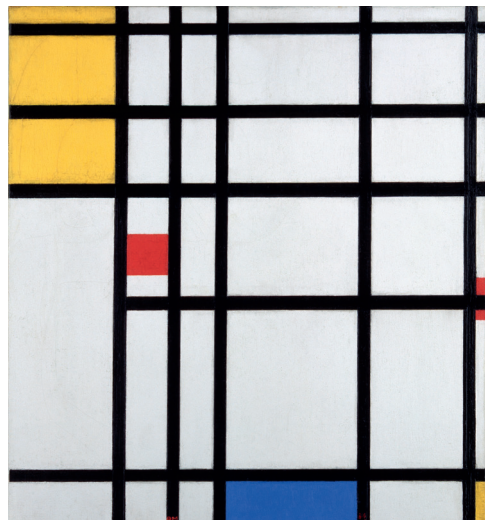
changeable. Abstraction was more important than utility, and traditional ideas about composition and symmetry were replaced by a world of the imagination in constant motion, dynamic and volatile, like life itself.

The Systematization of a New Art

In the 1920s, what initially appeared to be a utopian movement that spoke with one voice in its joint mission to develop a truly abstract art actually turned out to be a melting pot of conflicting views and opinions about art. After Van Doesburg organized an exhibition entitled *Les Architectes du Styl* at the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris in 1923, what prevailed was the image of an 'international style' in which abstraction, the drastic reduction of the visual means and geometry were the defining features of an internationally recognised brand signifying progressiveness, functionalism and radicalism. Van Doesburg supported these developments with his magazine, though in 1927 he launched his own new art form, which he called *elementarism*, in which systematics and seriality played a key role. An attempt to moderate and modify the inflexibility of Neoplastic dogma, it led to a rift with Mondrian.

An Eternally New Art

Mondrian's vision of art during this period was quite different. He had always believed that the artistic process was driven by the mysterious force of intuition. It was an uncontrollable



Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, *Red and blue chair*, Design: 1923
Production: Gerard van de Groenekan, 1930
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
© Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, VEGAP, Madrid, 2020

Piet Mondrian, *Picture II 1936-43, with Yellow, Red, and Blue*
1936-1943
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Purchase 1967
(The Museum of Our Wishes)
© Mondrian/Holtzman, 2020

force which could bring more clarity to that process than anything else. In the late 1920s, his paintings grew constantly emptier and his compositions were reduced to two or three constantly repeated patterns (horizontal and vertical lines defining areas of white, red, yellow or blue), divesting his work of any sign of spontaneity. Mondrian thought that his '*petit projet*', as he called his experiments in abstraction, would come to an end. To his great surprise, however, the limited repertoire of visual elements turned out to encompass an unlimited range of compositional possibilities: "less is more". From the 1930s, the more classic balance in his compositions made way for a dynamic balance reminiscent of constantly shifting impressions of urban life, especially after he moved in October 1940 to New York, the bustling

metropolis that became the setting for his everyday life. He packed the lines in close together, made the horizontals wider than the verticals, and suggested overlapping grids that endlessly interact.

De Stijl went into decline in the mid-1930s. In reality, its art had never been well received or had an important market. Only Mondrian, who in many ways had followed his own path, had achieved prominence. The other artists had barely any recognition, partly because the optimistic notion of a new world had dwindled in the second half of the 1920s, and partly because figurative tendencies had once more come to the fore.

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