PIET MONDRIAN: THE EVOLUTION OF HIS NEO-PLASTIC AESTHETIC 1908-1920.

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ABSTRACT

One of the most decisive careers in the history of twentieth-century painting is that of Piet Mondrian. Not only did he singularly commit himself to the development of non-figurative art and take this development further than any contemporary, but he also was able to formulate an articulate theoretical program upon which his aesthetic decisions were founded.

The neo-plastic art by which Mondrian is best known, executed between 1920 and his death in 1944, is only the climax of a long development which began with his break away from a regional landscape painting about 1908, and crystalized in the formulation of his neo-plastic aesthetic between 1914 and 1920. This essay will trace this development in an effort to reconstruct the impulses, the decisions, and the resolutions which led to the birth of a pure non-figurative painting.

The impulse of this evolution is rooted in Mondrian's personal, obsessive search for the unity of a philosophical and formal ideal. About 1908, he felt the need to express a philosophic ideal, or a 'content' which was incompatable with his early regional style. This led him to move at first hesitantly, then with complete freedom, into contemporary developments in abstraction in the search for a form which would satisfy the demands of a content. As he expanded upon the formal innovations of cubism from 1911 to 1914, he began to

realize a totally unique mode of picture-building which would not 'express' the content but 'be' the content:- not only the physical embodiment, but also the creative function of the philosophic ideal. This ideal began with Theosophy, but married to his art, it became neo-plasticism. This evolution of form, which this essay will concentrate upon, was achieved essentially through the development within the medium of painting itself, and through the recognition of the absolutely essential, non-arbitrary, non-metaphorical components of a painting. The 'content' becomes implicit through the concentrated but intuitive ordering of these components according to both the plastic laws of the universe and the plastic laws of the medium itself. Despite the theoretical and philosophical inclinations shown in his abundant writings, he was above all a painter, and his most immediate concern was always to come to terms with the means of expression. When his painting began to take upon an abstraction that could almost be considered as being non-art, his theorizing took on a greater importance as a philosophical substantiation for an unfamiliar non-figurative image. His neo-plastic philosophy, fully articulated by 1920, recognized above all the plastic laws of painting, and thus the non-figurative image, but it also kept within this formal exingency that ideal residing outside and beyond art which has guided artists throughout history:- the recognition of the universal laws of creation.

The uncompromising nature that led Mondrian to a perfected art,

an ultimate and complete synthesis of form and content, forced him to eliminate the most sanctified traditions of art. But rather than destroy art, he gave it a new life. He revealed an arena of expression that had never been apparent or possible to artists of any previous age, and which is the heritage of contemporary art today.

Within the context of this essay, a study in the evolution of form, it might seem irrelevant to comment upon matters of taste, something which Mondrian himself considered irrelevant to his immediate aims, but now that his accomplishment and his theoretical assumptions are taken for granted, it is mandatory that the quality of his work not be overlooked. He will be remembered in the future not so much for the fact that he was a pioneer of non-figurative art, something ultimately important only for his own generation, but rather for the power of beauty he evoked within an imagery that claims nothing more than an absolutely exclusive perfection, a sensibility rare in any period of art history and which he shares in this century with Giorgio Morandi, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt.

Not all of his work is successful. Mondrian was at his best when he worked in depth with a preordained, self-effacing system, not when he was working with forms that demanded a capricious sense of invention. He was a penetrator, not an expander; his sense of form was

analytical, not synthetic. When he strayed away from an art that expressed his innate sensibility for form into an area where form is sacrificed for the idea, such as happened in his 'stylist' period of 1911, his work was considerably weakened. Also less successful are his earliest cubist pictures, awkward in the new style, and the 'plus-minus' pictures of 1914-1915, which attempt an expression of space which cubism could never handle.

The majority of his works, however, are unqualified masterpieces, and one feels the temptation to view him as a twentieth-century Vermeer. This leads one to sense that the spiritual power that lurks within the constructive obviousness of Mondrian's art, lurks, with equal strength, within the prosaic realism of Vermeer's art. Both artists are concerned ultimately with a sense of order which finds its metaphysical source in the physical world, and both communicate this sense of order through an expression of tensions of space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I: THE EARLY YEARS, 1890 - 1907.

Mondrian's reputation, and all that his work stands for, is based upon the paintings that he did after the first mature neo-plastic works of 1920. Yet in 1920 Mondrian was already forty-eight, and had been painting steadily for about thirty years. It is an extremely unusual situation that an artist mature so late in his life, and doubly so when, at such a late point in his career, he evolved from what was a fairly conservative style to what might be called the most radical work of his generation. For this reason Mondrian does not fit easily into a generalized account of the artistic movements of the early decades of the century. He is a unique figure who consistently followed his own path and in doing so opened avenues of expression that declared a definite, uncompromising view of the world.

Although Mondrian's mature painting involves a direct repudiation of both the style and the content of what preceded it, his early work and the transitional period between the two stages of his life are very important for an understanding of not only the measure of Mondrian's final hypothesis but also the evolution and implications of the phenomenon of the appearance of non-figurative art in the period 1910-1920.

Mondrian's early years were quite unremarkable. He received his first painting lessons from his uncle, Fritz Mondrian, who was himself a well-known painter of landscapes and interiors. Fritz had studied at one time under Willem Maris, who stood above all for the regional tendancies of Dutch art in the 1880's.[1] Following his father's wishes that he become a teacher, Mondrian received in 1889 his diploma to teach drawing in

elementary schools. He received a second diploma for teaching in secondary schools in 1892, but Mondrian at this time seems to have decided to devote his whole life to paintings and not teaching. Late in his life Mondrian described the situation as thus:

> When it became clear that I wanted to devote my life to art, my father tried to discourage me. He lacked the money to pay for my studies and he wanted me to get a job. But I clung to my art ambitions, and that was my father's sorrow. Another man paid for my studies for three years. 2.

This extra three years of schooling was spent at the Amsterdam Academy of Fine Arts between 1892 and 1895. The director and teacher of the academy was August Allebe, an academic painter who was nevertheless sympathetic to some of the more moderate aspects of modernism in painting, notably impressionism, and who encouraged his students to assert their own individuality. During this time, in the early 90's, Amsterdam painters were splitting into two camps; both fostering from Allebe's studio: a group of restrained impressionists, painting with a freer brush than the older The Hague realists, yet using their earth colours; and a group of stylists who were moving towards an expressionistic abstractionism. The first group, which included Mondrian, turned their attention towards elaborating upon traditional pictorial problems and using the regional rural and urban landscape for a subject matter. The second group were more interested in expressing the new spiritualism and internationalism which was sweeping Europe in the wake of literary symbolism and abstractionism in painting which had overtaken impressionism by the 1890's. Much later Mondrian himself was to embrace symbolist stylism, but in this early period he was more influenced by The Hague realism and the urban realism of

George Henri Breitner[3].

In an autobiographical essay written in 1942, Towards the True Vision of Reality, Mondrian gives us a description of his early style.

> I preferred to paint landscapes and houses seen in grey, dark weather or in very strong sunlight, when the density of atmosphere obscures the details and accentuates the large outlines of objects. I often sketched by moonlight - cows resting or standing immobile on flat Dutch meadows, or houses with dead, blank windows. I never painted these things romantically, but from the very beginning, I was always a realist. 4.

This question of realism and romanticism is difficult yet important, for this dualism was a problematic feature of his art until it was finally resolved in his neo-plasticism after about 1916. The Hage painters, who analytically yet sympathetically studied an unglorified world in the tradition of Gustave Courbet, identified themselves thus as being 'realists'[5]. The stylists, who were abstracting and transforming the subjects of their paintings according to their emotional and spiritual moods, were identified with a neo-romanticism which was sweeping Europe in the form of symbolism after 1885, and which was a reaction against realism in both literature and art. The problem is that although Mondrian identified himself with realism and an analytical view of the world, in the early landscape painting he also possesed a strong romantic and emotional attachment to his subject matter.

The realist predeliction of The Hague painting expressed itself in two directions. One direction was that of social realism, the image of the common man in both the urban and rural scene. Breitner's urban realism

is reflective of the work of Degas while the rural realism of Joseph Israels and Vincent Van Gogh (in his Brabant period, 1883-1885), who had worked with Breitner in The Hague, followed the example of Millet and Courbet. The other direction of realism was 'constuctive' realism, that is, a relatively impersonal treatment of the subject matter in favour of a detatched compositional structuring of picture elements[6]. Mondrian had paid little attention to social realism. In fact, he rarely included people in his compositions and he wouldn't even paint the urban enviro n-ment which gained both fame and notoriety for his friend Breitner. Instead, he ostensibly focused his attention to pictorial composition, and it was in this area that Breitner was able to influence Mondrian.

In the milieu of representational painting, two areas of freedom that the artist has in structuring his composition are in framing the view and in balancing tonal weights. It is highly probable, but cert-ainly not inevitable, that Breitner instructed Mondrian in the original use of both techniques. Breitner would often cut off figures at the waist at the bottom of the picture in a manner similar to, but not necessarily influenced by, Degas, in order to achieve a striking composition. He would also group different objects of a dark tonality against objects of a light tonality (often snow), creating exciting outlines and shapes of light/dark areas[7]. Details were often overlooked in favour of general masses and contours. Mondrian applied this compositional interest to rural land-scape subjects by playing dark masses of trees against a light evening sky, or in a motif and a manner that was a favorite with Mondrian and The Hague

realists as a whole, the windmill thrusting its thick body and long thin angular arms above the pervading flatness of the horizon (S. 211)[8].

At the same time that Mondrian was seemingly painting these landscapes in a disinterested compositional manner, hence from the viewpoint of structural realism, an element of romanticism entered the picture in the sense of mood that often filled Mondrian's early landscapes. Although it was not as obviously cultivated as the emotional, transcendental and literary romanticism of the stylists, the lyrical and 'poetic' moodiness of Mondrian's early work certainly appears romanticised when it is compared to the landscapes of the French impressionists. There is something very personal and sentimental about the mill which rises both pathetically and heroically alone, from the dark, bleak landscape, black against the moon, or as Rembrandt once painted it, with the arms lit by the last rays of the setting sun. Again, this romantic undertone is felt even more strongly in such a painting as Farm near Duivendrecht (S. 213) where the twisted branches of trees set against the stark light of the moon remind us of the work of the German romantic painter Caspar David Fiedreich (1774-1840)[9]. There is, in effect, a rather happy balance between the poetic feeling that Mondrian has for his subjects, and the more detatched interest in creating an interesting and balanced composition, a balance which would soon be upset when Mondrian turned his attention to the occult spiritualism of the Theosophical movement and towards the more aggressive and emotive stylisms of the modern movements coming out of Paris.

CHAPTER II: THE SEARCH FOR A STYLE, AN EXPERIMENT WITH FAUVE EXPRESSIONISM, SYMBOLISM AND STYLISM, 1908-1911.

In his autobiographical essay, Toward the True Vision of Reality, Mondrian relates how, around 1907, the first major changes towards 'modernism' began to enter his painting.

> After several years my work unconsciously began to deviate more and more from the natural aspects of reality. Experience was my only teacher; I knew little of the modern art movement. When I first saw the work of the impressionists, Van Gogh, Van Dongen and the fauves, I admired it. But I had to seek the true way alone.
>
> The first thing to change in my painting was the colour. I forsook natural colour for pure colour. I had come to feel that the colours of nature cannot be reproduced on the canvas. Instinctively, I felt that painting had to find a new way to express the beauty of nature. 1.

Colour was something that painters all over Europe were discovering around 1905; the fauves in France, the Russians Kandinsky and Jawlensky, the Die Brucke painters and individuals such as Emile Nolde. It is difficult to judge the degree to which Mondrian's colour changes were influenced by these other activities, but seems certain that news of these new movements must have reached him through his friend Conrad Kickert, a painter and critic who was in close touch with Paris, and through men such as Jan Sluyters who had visited Paris in 1906 when the talk of the art world at the time was the fauve painters, Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck[2]. Furthermore, Van Dongen, the first Dutchman since Van Gogh to make any kind of impression in Parisian avant-guard circles was exhibiting and painting with the fauves. Mondrian's essentially regionalist and conservative character, however, was not easily moved even by the excitement of this incipient modernism, not even when one of the

inspirations for the new colouristic expressionism was the Dutchman Vincent Van Gogh. Until he discovered cubism in 1911, Mondrian's development was a slow give-and-take compromise between the new and old.

The quality of Mondrian's conservatism in his early work and its effect upon his first attempts at 'modernism' can be indicated by a comparison between Mondrian and the Dutch symbolists in their interpretation of the work of Vincent Van Gogh. In 1892, when Mondrian was a twenty-year-old art school student, Amsterdam hosted the first retrospective exhibition of the work of Vincent Van Gogh, who had died two years previously. Van Gogh's early work, before he went to Paris in 1886, was very similar to that of The Hague realist group[3]. He used the same earth colours and the same parochial, bucolic subject matter, yet with the more direct, cruder brushwork of a more impetuous personality. Young Mondrian was impressed with the directness of the early work of Van Gogh, as was Breitner, who also had a strong influence upon Mondrian at this time[4]. But Van Gogh's later work, after his introduction to Pointillism and Impressionism in Paris and his subsequent development of a highly emotive colouristic expressionism, had an effect upon another group of young Dutch artists, who were interested in the international art nouveau movement, and who saw Van Gogh's late period as the essential Dutch ingredient in this international movement. These artists, who were later to be quite influential in the Dutch symbolist movement, Jan Toorop, Thorn Prikker, and Richard Roland-Holst, inter-

preted Van Gogh from a symbolist point-of-view. The catalogue cover of the Van Gogh exhibition, designed by Roland-Holst, showed a drooping sunflower with a halo around the stem and a sunset in the background[5].

In 1892, this identification of Van Gogh's later mature style with the symbolist aesthetic, must have caused Mondrian, who aligned himself quite closely with the sober colouring of The Hague realists at this time, to shy away from such stormy and emotive colouring. It was not until much later, about 1907, when the symbolist and art nouveau movements had almost spent themselves, that Mondrian, after a lengthy exposure to the ideas of the theosophical movement[6], began to bring some symbolist elements into his pictures. And the first indication of this entry of an emotive symbolism in his canvases, was the sudden introduction into his work of the same kind of intense colouring that he had shied away from earlier. In contrast to the ethic of the The Hague realists, whose paintings were tonally modelled in olives and browns and whose subjects conveyed a nostalgic feeling for the earthly splendor of the Dutch countryside, the spirt of Theosophy pulled Mondrian closer to the transcendental, spiritual values of the Symbolist aesthetic, which was distinctly religious and international in its outlook. Despite the fact that the 'style' most closely associated with Theosophy, which was only one of a number of occult religions which sprang up in Europe in the 1890's, was the art nouveau, Jugenstil, Nabi or symbolist 'style', all abstracting from natural appearances in order to reveal subliminal or transcendental truths, Mondrian hesitated to do

a complete about-face from The Hague realism to symbolist stylism[7]. Instead, he turned to the intense colouring of Van Gogh's late period (one ingredient from which the stylists themselves had departed) as a meanse of intensifying the feeling in his landscapes[8]. Between 1907 and 1911, therefore, colour became Mondrian's device for rendering a greater intensity of spiritual feeling to his pictures while remaining fairly faithful to natural appearances. This is an important point, for of all the colourists at this time, Mondrian was practically the only painter who didn't distort the form or shape of reality as well, and this is a measure of both his conservatism and his individuality.

The entry of Theosophical ideas into Mondrian's life had the initial effect of confusing his artistic aims and forcing him to break away from Dutch regionalism although in the end it enriched his creative and conceptual faculties. Just to record sensitively the subtilities of the surface appearances of nature was no longer enough for Mondrian. He wanted to get to the forces that lay beneath the appearances of nature and to a more inclusive and specific conceptual meaning that a mere attention to appearances could give. But in order to grasp this new conceptual yearning in his work he had to begin to alter the visual approach to painting that he had developed over about fifteen years[9].

It was about the time of his visit to Domberg in the summer of 1908 that a distinctive new feeling enters his painting. Domberg was a rather isolated village on the island of Walcheren in Zeeland, the

south-west corner of the Netherlands. The high dunes that bordered the open expanse of the North Sea lent a definite 'spiritual' flavour to the setting which stood in contrast to the more domestic feeling of the populated lowlands around Amsterdam which formed the setting for his earlier work. Also at Domberg that summer was Jan Toorop and a small group of followers. As we have seen, Toorop was one of the leading members of the group of Dutch symbolists who came to prominence just before the turn of the century and who combined an art nouveau linearity with a crude pointillism as a vehicle for a very literary and allusive symbolical painting[10]. For the most part, however, it was Toorop's mystical frame of mind which gained him his following, and it was this quality of Toorop's character which interested Mondrian.

Despite the fact that up to this point Mondrian was not sympathetic to the abstract stylism of Toorop, there was an aspect of Toorop's symbolism which now directly concerned Mondrian. For Mondrian, who had been studying Theosophy casually since 1899 (he didn't become an official member of the society until 1909), Toorop's ability to incorporate his mystical philosophy directly into his art must certainly have provided Mondrian a strong stimulus to do likewise. Although Toorop's mystical philosophy was similar to Theosophy (he was ordained into the rose-et-croix society by Sar Peladan in 1892), the older artist's narrative stylizations could not have interested Mondrian; he had to find his own way.

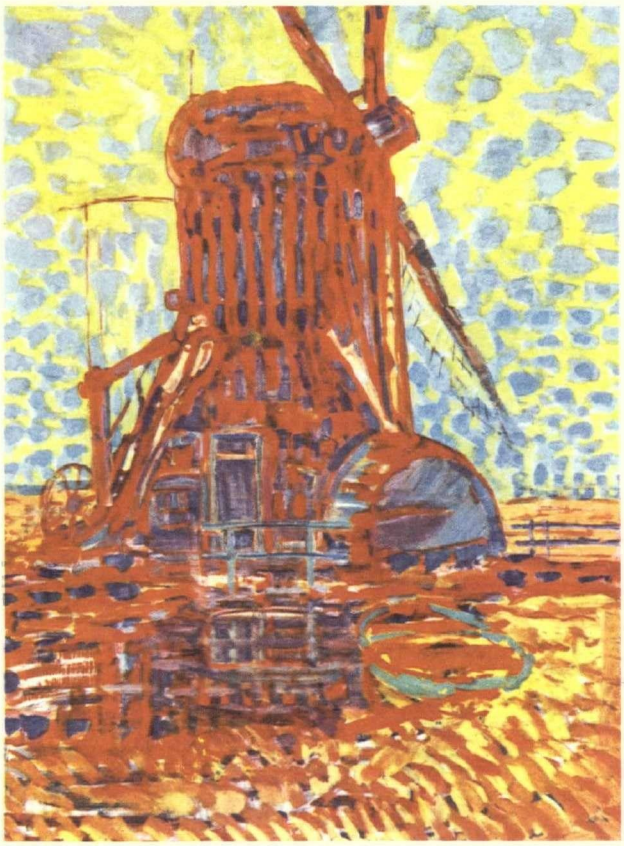
In the phase of his art following the summer at Domberg in 1908, Mondrian underwent a slow disengagement from the pictorial concerns of his earlier landscape painting. The first painting which heralds Mondrian's new colourism is the large (50 by 62 inches) landscape, Woods Near Oele (S. 71) which was probably executed in 1908, although it was first exhibited in May, 1909[11]. The brushwork is very free, alternating between long swirling strokes and short blocky accents, often with the raw canvas exposed between strokes[12]. A pulsating yellow sun hangs above the horizon behind a screen of carmine and deep blue trees, creating vibrant intervals of hot and cool colours. A sympathetic critic reviewing the 1909 exhibition described the painting as representing the "victory of the cosmic forces of light over those of fear and darkness" and Mondrian wrote back to the critic thanking him for his interpretation and indicated that he was undergoing a major evolution of his style[13]. The subject itself was typical of his earlier, more conservative style, but the expressive colouring and brushwork effectively communicated a new feeling for a more direct symbolic content.

Another group of paintings from this period, a series of haystacks (W. 52), utilizes a technique more obviously derived from pointillism, where intense reds, yellows and blues are applied in short, blocky brush strokes which are more controlled and less 'expressive' than those in Woods near Oele. The feeling of these pictures, like the similar Windmill in Sunlight (S. 95) of the same year, 1908, is

that Mondrian is attempting to retain the regional subject matter of the The Hague realists, while imparting a transcendental meaning to these motifs through an intensification of colouring. However impressive these paintings might be, they are ultimately a half-realized compromise between a traditional and a contemporary point-of-view.

Another painting in this striking group of works done in 1908 (or before May, 1909, when they were exhibited in the Amsterdam Stedelijk exhibition) is The Red Tree (S. 83[14]. The most impressive change in this painting is the way that Mondrian has flattened out the space by placing the reticular network of convoluted branches against an almost monochromatic blue background. Instead of moving back through an open space, as has been characteristic of Mondrian's work up to now, the eye is forced to remain on the surface of the configuration of twisting branches. Furthermore, we sense very little tonal modelling in this picture, something which was present in the previous pictures, despite the intensification of colour. The emphasis upon two-dimensional space, unnatural colouring, and an absence of tonal modelling takes Mondrian's style closer to that of the Dutch stylists and Toorop, although the subject matter again maintains Mondrian's strong links with traditional motifs.

Another series of paintings, water colours and drawings of this period were centered around flower studies. Structured similarly to The Red Tree, the flowers were almost always done as single items set



1. Windmill in Sunlight, 1908. Oil on canvas, 447/8 x 34¼ins.
2. The Red Tree, 1908. Oil on Canvas, 27 5/8 x 39 ins.

against a monochromatic background. The singularity of the flowers allowed Mondrian to penetrate as never before into the detailed structure of the subject. Every petal, every twist of the stem and the structural tension of the whole system were intimately recorded in these works. Yet none can really be called academic studies. As a series, and as individual works, they all seem to be a painstaking attempt to capture the inner being of the personae of the subject through its physical structure[15].

Nor does it end here. These flower studies offer the most convincing testimony that Mondrian at this time was attempting to introduce or at least experiment with a more obviously literary symbolism in his work, something which he had assiduously avoided up to this time. The flower as a symbolist device was a favorite motif in symbolist literature and painting of the late nineteenth century. An example, already cited, was the dying sunflower used as the cover design for the Van Gogh retrospective in Amsterdam in 1892. The dying flower has also entered Mondrian's repertory, both as a dying chrysanthemum and a dying sunflower, and both rather naively empathetic. An illustration of the kind of empathetic imagination that Mondrian is putting into these flowers is offered in one of his own descriptions of a painting of a dying chrysanthemum (S. 243). He relates that he wanted to convey the idea of life and death

> through a great white fading crysanthemum seen against a bright background near a black curtain. The flower was like a ghostly corpse in silhouette.. withered, with green leaves hanging down like the bony arms of a skeleton. 16.

The obvious literary effects explored in this piece are paralleled by his Evolution tryptich of 1911 (S. 237). Evolution stands as one of the most unusual accomplishments of Mondrian's oeuvre[17]. By far the largest work that he had ever done, it consists of three panels, each almost six feet by three feet, and since the nude female figure on each panel is cut off at the thighs and fills the whole painting, they are almost twice life size. In this overpowering scale and in their stiff, symmetrical and frontal pose, the figures have the static monumentality of Egyptian sculpture. On the shoulders of each of the figures stand simple geometric occult symbols which seem to have intimate significance in relation to his theosophical beliefs. The only pictures that this painting relates to are a large painting of a red mill executed in 1911 (S. 240, W. 59) and, to a lesser extent, a painting of a church facade at Domberg (S. 75) probably done at the same time, although Seuphor dates it at 1909[18]. These three pictures are particularly interesting because they reveal a strange mixture of proto-cubism and the monumental stylisms of Jan Toorop, or more specifically, they look as though Edvard Munch's Madonna were painted by Ferdinand Hodler. Carefully articulated planes and an unusually shallow space refer to his slight awareness of cubism but these paintings are equally or more so involved with Dutch stylism, which was the opposing camp to realism[19]. Besides the monumental size, the colours also relate to the decadent stylists of the time. Evolution is dominantly mauve and the Domberg Church (S. 75) is lavender, pink and turquoise. Unlike the fauve and pointillist works that characterized Mondrian's 'modern' works

up to this time, these paintings have none of the striking oppositions of hot and cool colouring nor the rough and spontaneous brushwork. The colour is applied flatly, with a relative lack of modulation. The pictures are finished off with a severe emphasis of the outlines of the structures, which destroys the loose atmospheric qualities of the fauve paintings. Mondrian is now far from his The Hague realist style, especially in Evolution, where he comes closest to the feeling of the Fin-de-Siecle symoblists, a feeling which is by 1911, sadly outmoded and indicates Mondrian's basic naivity and confusion as to how to create a satisfactory harmony of form and content, a problem which he is to solve gradually in the next two major evolutions of his style; from cubism to neo-plasticism.

In 1910 Mondrian's friend and admirer, Conrad Kickert, an influential art critic, founded the Circle of Modern Art (Modern Kunstkring) in which Mondrian, Toorop, Sluyters and Kickert were members of the managing committee. When the first exhibition was held in Amsterdam in October, 1911, it was in honour of Paul Cezanne and featured twenty-eight of his canvases, along with works by George Braque and Picasso, who carried Cezanne's discoveries into cubism, and Andre Derain, Raoul Dufy and Vlamnick, who by this time had begun to move away from the colourism of their fauve period. It is inconceivable that for this important exhibition Mondrian would have selected anything less than those pictures which, in his mind, were the most important of his whole career. The titles of the six pictures which he

exhibited were: Flowers, Landscape of Dunes, Dunes, Mill, Church, and Evolution[20]. It is highly likely that the mill and church are those just discussed and the presence of Evolution, which of all his major paintings is the most isolated, shows that he regarded at this time that his recent symbolist and stylist direction to be the most viable. He was aware in a superficial way of the contemporary importance of cubism but his increasing yearning for a more conceptual rather than a visual art kept him at first from exploring fully the possibilities of cubism. When Mondrian thought of a conceptual style he naturally thought in terms of the literary stylisations of Toorop, but we have seen that he even attempted to compromise this by stylizing his traditional subject matter to give it more iconological significance, and thus the result was somewhat hybrid and unresolved. But direct contact with the cubist works by Braque and Picasso in this 1911 Moderne Kunstkring exhibition convinced him that he was on the wrong track. He saw that the cubist handling of space and structure was more than a new variation upon an old theme - it signified a totally new approach to the essential act of picture-making, an approach which devalued both iconology and appearance of the world and concentrated all of its energies upon the organization of pictorial elements for their own sake. And from this realization Mondrian was finally able to evolve a conceptual art that did not rely upon iconology or symbolism; rather it rested only upon the organization of the mechanics of image-construction according to pre-determined, universal laws. This realization came to fruition a few years later when he evolved his theories of neo-plasticism. But

neo-plasticism did not suddenly appear to the artist in a vision. It was the result of an empirical study of cubism wedded with a heightened sense of the conceptual goals of his art.

CHAPTER III: CUBISM IN PARIS, THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORM (1911-1914).

The next phase of Mondrian's development, from the fall of 1911 to the spring of 1914, most of which was spent in Paris, witnessed the dramatic turn of his art from stylism to cubist abstraction. After seeing his work stand next to the cubist works of Braque, Picasso and their predessessor, Cezanne, in the Moderne Kunstkring exhibition of 1911, Mondrian turned wholeheartedly to a disciplined and exhaustive study of cubism. To do this he realized that he would have to move to Paris, where the first stage of cubist experiment, analytical cubism was, in 1911, almost at its full maturity. Mondrian, however, didn't wait until he arrived in Paris before he began his cubist experiments. Between the Moderne Kunstkring of October, 1911 and his arrival in Paris in late winter or early spring of 1912, he embarked suddenly upon some cubist studies that were directly influenced by the paintings by Braque and Picasso (in all likelyhood their 'hollow' cubist works of 1908 to 1910 rather their more recent flatter analytical works of 1911) in the show, giving up the symbolist and stylist direction that he was following. Most important, from this point on, Mondrian's work had a steadily evolving but thoroughly consistent and singular direction which reintegrated his work after the rather spotty character it displayed in the few years after 1907/8. This singularity of purpose was to place his work as one of the major accomplishments of modern art.

The most important factor about cubism that affected Mondrian's art is the fact that rather than interpret reality in terms of the meaning of the outside world, it interpreted reality in terms of art -

specifically painting. Expanding upon Cezanne's innovations, the cubists Braque and Picasso in 1908 began to reconstruct their motifs into an order which recognized the primacy of the flatness of the canvas support. Beginning in 1908 with modelled 'cubic' forms in a 'hollow' space, they increasingly brought their depicted forms into unity with the flatness of the canvas support, and by 1911 the illusionistic space in their works was considerably contracted[1]. Braque and Picasso 'composed' their works by freely altering the shape of reality rather than by carefully positioning realistically-rendered objects in a realistically-ordered space, which was the French tradition of Manet and Degas, and which found a counterpart in Holland with Breitner and Mondrian himself. While it is true that the Dutch stylists, especially the mural painters associated with A.P. Berlage, were approaching abstracted pictorial design in terms of the flat surface of the wall or picture support, these designs were almost always dependant upon an inconological significance apart from the design itself; something that Mondrian had reacted against until his short-lived stylist works of 1911 and which he would again react against when he turned to cubism[2]. Mondrian's training, his early influence by The Hague school and his basic anti-literary sensibility (confused, as we have seen, by the literary leanings of Theosophy) had conditioned his way of seeing in the visually realistic miliou of atmospheric impressionism[3]. So even though cubism was approaching the act of painting and the flat surface of the support from a purely abstracted and structural point-of-view, the fact that

it was without literary overtones made it more accessible to Mondrian's sensibility. Furthermore, the subjects of the cubist works by Braque and Picasso, the still-lifes and the landscapes, the same order of subject matter that had absorbed Mondrian all his life. The compositional interpretation of these motifs from a purely abstract rather than a strictly visual or impressionistic manner must have interested Mondrian as being a fruitful direction which he had not yet explored[4].

It would also be fair to add that Mondrian's sudden attraction to cubism was quite likely stimulated by a desire to free himself from what he had come to realize was an archaic pictorial and artistic outlook, and assume a modern artistic position. So long as he was isolated in the Dutch landscape tradition this was not important to him but as his intellectual horizons broadened and he came into contact with the modern spirit that motivated the international art nouveau style (encountered through his friendship with Toorop) and the avant-guard in Paris (encountered through the art critic Conrad Kickert), modernism and the approach of a new age was an increasing preoccupation with Mondrian. Above all, his committment to Theosophy in these years also committed him to the theosophical premise that there is an evolution of the consciousness of mankind through an increasing mastery over the environment[5]. When Mondrian speaks of progress he always means it in this larger sense that he as an artist had to improve his karma, and that of general mankind, by propelling the progress of consciousness through his art. It is with this missionary zeal that he applied

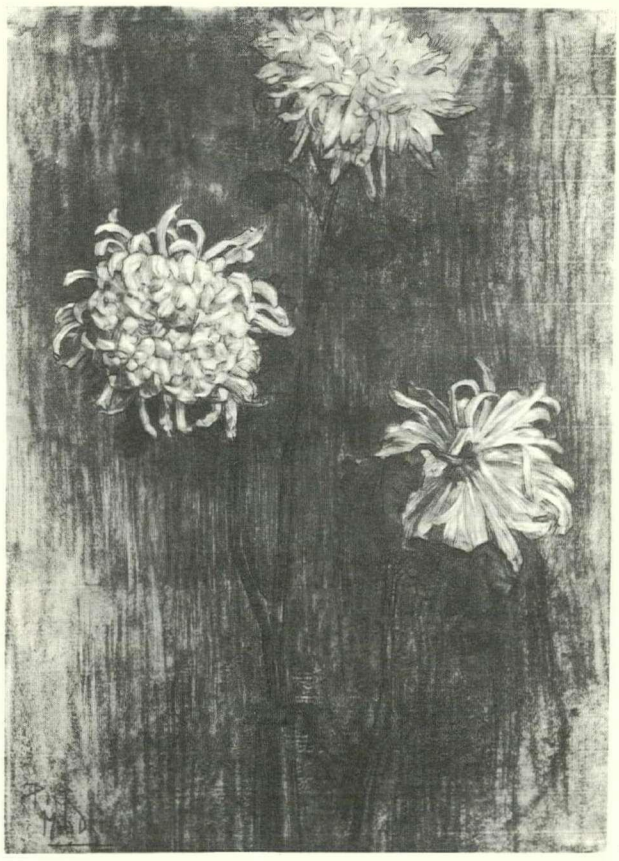
himself to his role as an artist, a role towards which he concentrated all of his energies all of his life.

The point of departure for Mondrian's cubist period is unanimously taken to be the still-life, Ginger Pot I (S. 249). Although this painting is inspired by cubism, the actual understanding of the formal inventions of cubism in this picture is quite superficial. Apart from the accent upon line and planar structure which gives it a psuedo-cubist appearance, it is in fact a reaffirmation of the kind of open, volumetric, atmospheric space which characterized his early period. Instead of reconstructing the visual fact into a pictorial fact he has resolutely maintained the visual order of things in this picture, an order in which the eye understands a logical displacement of objects in space. In some ways, particularly in the handling of the drapery in the foreground, this picture is closer in feeling to Cezanne than it is to Braque and Picasso, but it would not be long before Mondrian was able to make the transition from this protocubism to the more advanced cubism of the Parisian avant-guard. The structuring of the more abstract background into rectangular compartments bordered by horizontals and verticals hints at what was to come.

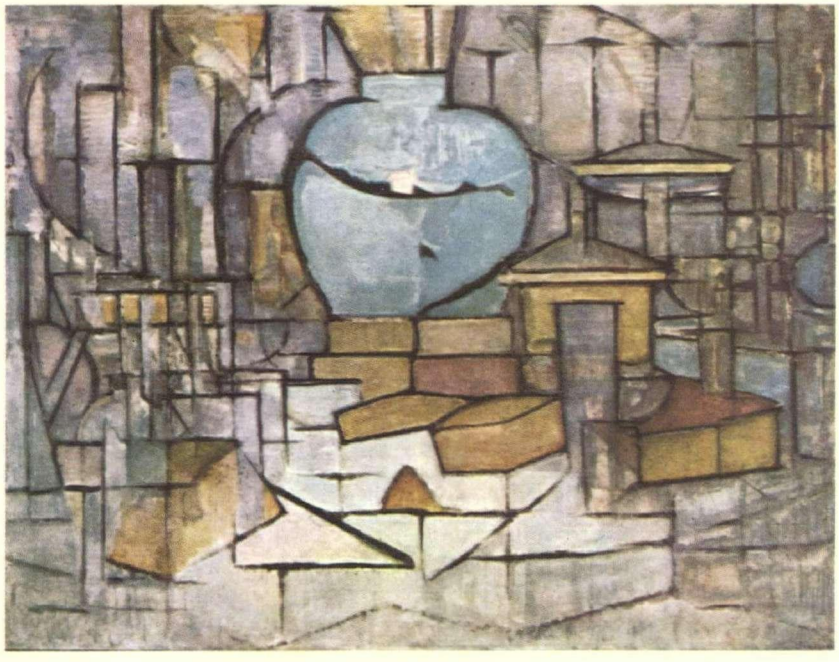
The second version of this still-life, Ginger Pot II (S. 101), did not immediately follow the first version which seems to have been done in Holland prior to his departure for Paris. For on August 26, 1912, when Mondrian was in Paris, he sent a letter to Conrad Kickert

stating that he was still at work on the still-life[6]. The latter was most likely the second version and was completed by October of the same year and included in the 1912 Modern Kunstkring show in Amsterdam. Several months, therefore, fall in between the two pictures.

A comparison of the two pictures shows the advances that Mondrian had made in this relatively short span of time. Although the turquoise of the ginger pot remains in the second pot, the overall colour scheme of the second pot is much more subdued, tinted out with whites and umbers and ochres, the standard cubist palette at this time. But the most striking and crucial change comes in the handling of space. Mondrian had abstracted to the point that there are almost no recognizable objects in the pictures at all. Except for the gingerpot, which is only hinted at, the rest of the elements in the still life arrangement are reduced to geometrical stylizations which have only the barest resemblance to their original structure. Instead of the hollowed spacial structure of the first still-life, the second has been flattened to a considerable degree, although not as much as others in the same period which will be discussed later. Instead of depending upon the broad, virtuoso strokes of the first version, in the second picture Mondrian has drawn, redrawn and drawn again, establishing the lines that he wants to keep, then filling in the spaces with colour. This had tended to create a schematized molecular structure of rectangular or wedge-shaped compartments which are frontally aligned, and



3. Chrysanthemums, 1909. Pencil drawing, 11¼ x 8½ ins.
4. Still Life with Ginger Pot II, 1912. Oil on canvas, 36 x 47 ins.



thus show little feeling for stereometric projection back into space. This tendancy was to become a feature of his Paris paintings for the next two years, and we shall see that a few months later, in the spring of 1913, Mondrian will begin to use the motif of the facade, which could be easily adapted to a two-dimentional compartmentalization.

These still-lifes, then, do not really represent the motifs that were to play a significant part in his cubist paintings. Much more important were the series of apple trees (single or in groves), facades and scaffoldings which gave a stronger feeling of a geometrically-ordered surface, with strong vertical and horizontal alignments, and in the case of the facades, a literally flat surface which required little spacial illusionism. This subject matter which has a flatness to it to begin with, in contrast to the 'hollow' space (the space between things) of the still-life motif that contradicts the flatness of the analytical cubist method, dominated his paintings until he returned to Domberg in 1914. The fact that there the 'hollow' space of the seascape forced him to break up the flatness of his Parisian works only goes to illustrate the importance that the motif of the facade played in conditioning the formal structure of his art. The translation of the facades, for instance Blue Facade of 1913/14 (W. 74), into the two-dimentional schema of the cubist composition was a fairly simple task, and the choice of this kind of subject matter primarily for its conduciveness to a two-dimensional outlook is implied

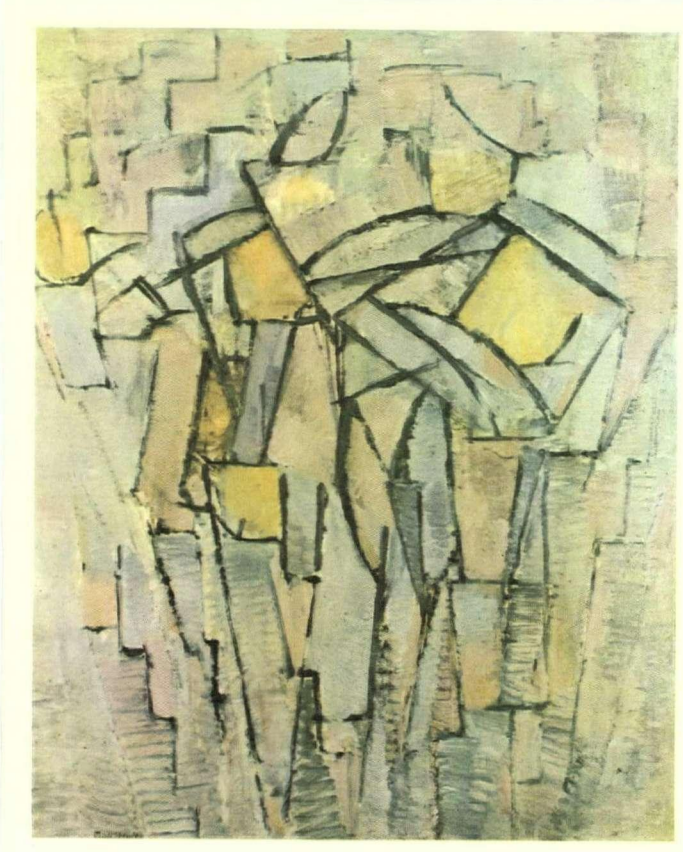
in the symbolic neutrality of these pieces[7]. The cityscape of facades is essentially a field of molecular units of horizontal and vertical forces. Coincidentally, this was also the basic 'look' of the 1911/1912 cubist works of Picasso and Braque and also such mannered cubist works of Gleizes, Gris and Delaunay. Mondrian, whose works prior to 1912 were compositions of monumental images fielded against empty space (e.g. The Red Mill of 1908 or Evolution of 1911), seems to have immediately identified the 'overall' molecular look of horizontal-vertical stresses with subject matter that easily adapted to this pictorial look with a minimum distortion of the native structure and appearance of the motif. From 1912/1913 we notice that he uses the motif of the trees, two-dimensional yet familiar to his earlier work, then after he is confidently settled into his new style by 1913/1914, he begins to use buildings and facades.[8]

Among the earliest of the abstracted tree paintings is Apple Trees in Bloom (S. cat. 179), which was included in the 1912 Moderne Kunstkring exhibition along with Still-life with Ginger Pot II, and thus falls in between his arrival in Paris in the spring of 1912 and the fall show in Amsterdam[9]. There is a more painterly version of this subject titled Grey Tree (W. 66,) which is the precident, and which ties the more abstract version to the source of this motif, found in the fauvist Red Tree (S. 83) of 1908. This 1908 piece was one of Mondrian's first explorations with shallow space, for the blue

backdrop to the tortured branches of the red tree acts more as a flat screen than endless space. Similarly, in Grey Tree the spaces between the branches seem to be as dense a material as the branches themselves. The background then, is almost on a plane equal to the tree, or, depending upon how one looks at the picture, the tree seems to be inscribed into the background. The necessary provisions are therefore set up for the more radical and abstract design of Apple Trees in Bloom, and a similar painting, Flowering Trees (S. 115).

The lineage between Apple Trees in Bloom, Flowering Trees, Grey Tree and the more representational Red Tree of 1908, is most clearly evident in the curvilinear rhythms of the branches and, in fact, the tensions of this linear matrix remains the only contact the painting has had with the original subject. When we look at the 1912 painting, Apple Trees in Bloom (S. cat. 179), the formal linear structure is built up in terms of the horizontal and vertical linear tensions which form a greek cross in the center of the picture. The subject is organic, so that the lines tend to be more scalloped than strictly geometric, although there is an underlying matrix of geometric lines which accent the predominant motif of the organic curve (the cubist organic curve is fractured, unlike the sinuous organic curve of the art nouveau style). In later paintings using the motif of the facade, where the inorganic geometric matrix is predominant, the curve or short diagonal serves as the accent. In Flowering Trees (S. 115), roughly contemporary to Apple Trees in Bloom, the organic curve seems more in conflict than in harmony with the underlying analytical

5. Apple Trees in Bloom, 1912. Oil on canvas, 30 x 41 ins.
6. Composition in Grey-Blue, 1912. Oil on canvas, 38 x 25 ins.



geometric matrix[10]. The gradual shift of Mondrian's sensibility from the organic to the geometric was not without its problems and doubts, yet the amazing sense of control which enters into every stage of this metamorphosis speaks again for the measure of order which is the cornerstone of Mondrian's temperament.

One characteristic of Mondrian's work that is evident from the very beginning is its thorough sense of order. His painting is anything but impulsive. Moreover, in the process of ordering the original subject onto the canvas he inevitably reduces it to its basic components. We have already noticed his tendancy to generalize shapes in the early landscapes and now we notice that this tendancy towards reduction and generalization is also manifested in the cubist works. There is, however, a major point of difference. In the early landscapes and the 'symbolist' works after 1908 he grouped his details into tonal masses, while in the cubist works his sensitivity towards a reductive order is expressed in terms of breaking down structures into their basic linear tensions. The former expresses volumetric and atmospheric 'landscape' space, while the latter expresses a schematization of this space into the analytical two-dimensional medium of the graph paper. The difference is interesting. In the landscapes the ordering tends to be much simpler since it entails fewer compostional elements, since it is limited by the logic of appearances and since the landscape motif itself, apart from the ordering of the composition, carries much of the interest in

the picture. In the cubist pictures, however, he had many more components which to order. The molecular units defined by the linear tensions require a far more premeditated and subtle ordering, without the visual motif, since the whole interest of the picture is in this ordering of parts. On the other hand, without the limitation imposed by the logic of appearances, Mondrian was much freer to let his compositional elements, primarily line, speak for themselves[11]. This movement towards a greater independance from the logic of appearances and a greater dependance upon the ordering of linear tensions as an end in themselves was the direction which was to lead Mondrian into his neo-plastic 'faith', which was essentially a philosophy built around the determination of meaningful relations between the 'means' of art, the compositional elements, devoid of any metaphorical significance.

Mondrian's moves towards non-figurative abstraction, between his arrival in Paris and the winter of 1912/1913, were inspired not only by the logical development of his own formal sensibility, but also by the increasingly daring abstractions by other artists involved with cubism. By 1912 there were already several different camps of cubists in Paris, each with its own position: Picasso and Braque, Gleizes and Metzinger and the Section d'Or group, including the Puteaux group centered around the Duchamp brothers, the 'orphic' cubists ranging from Robert Delaunay to Marc Chagall, and amongst others, individuals such as Juan Gris, Louis Marcoussis and Marie Laurencin[12]. They certainly

were not all united in their understanding of what cubism actually signified. Picasso and Braque did little prosetylizing, theorizing or exhibiting. This is unusual in view of the fact that there had been a tradition of carefully expounded manifestos accompanying avant-guard movements in painting.

There were two groups, however, which took a more theoretically aggressive position towards the new cubist abstractionism. The first wave of theorizers were the futurists, who had their first major Paris exhibition in February, 1912, about the time Mondrian had arrived in the city. The futurists combined some of the formal innovations of cubism with a vitalist, dynamic concept of art and life. The anarchistic, militant tone of futurist art was somewhat alien to the contemplative temperament of Mondrian. However, the aesthetics of one of the leading futurists, Umberto Boccioni, who attempted to express modes of feeling and energy through the unity of all objects within an overriding scheme of 'lines of force', might have earned the sympathy of Mondrian, or perhaps even inspired him, since in his tree abstractions beginning in the spring of 1912 (e.g. Flowering Trees, S. 114) he was also underscoring his motifs with horizontal-vertical 'lines of force'[13].

A second wave of prosetylizing manifested itself in the activities of the Section d'Or group, which held its first exhibition in October, 1912. The Section d'Or was a loose association of artists working in a generally cubistic technique, and who were entertaining

the thought of wedding the quasi-geometric character of cubist painting to a more refined aesthetic of pure line and proportion. Mondrian, as we have seen, was preoccupied with a similar aim, that is, reinterpreting a purely formal innovation in terms of an established set of aesthetic values. The tradition of the theoretical thinking of this group lay in the Nabi school, in the writings of Serusier and Denis and so they were more interested in publicising their ideas, unlike Braque and Picasso who were more empirical and less given to theorizing[14]. The group in 1912 consisted of the Duchamp Brothers; Raymond, Jacques and Marcel, Robert Delaunay, Leger, Gleizes, Metzinger, Kupka, Le Fauconnier, Picabia, Lhote, La Fresnay, Marcoussis and Juan Gris. Picasso and Braque, who only exhibited at Kahnweiler's Gallery were not included in the exhibition. Mondrian was not yet recognized by cubist circles since, by October, 1912, he had only been in Paris for six months and did not speak French[15].

The significance of the Section d'Or exhibition is the fact that, with its publicity build-up, it was the show that established cubism in the public eye and exposed a second flow of cubists, a group who took the ideas of pictorial structure pioneered by Picasso and Braque and came to their own conclusions about it in the face of the silence of the latter artists. Mondrian, a recent initiate to cubism, is exactly in this position. In this context, the exhibition had a great deal of meaning to Mondrian, and it is inconceivable that he would not

have followed the literature accompanying it.

In a magazine titled La Section d'Or, published during the exhibition, the critic Marcel Raynal gives a sympathetic appraisal of some of the principles underlying the Section d'Or aesthetic.

> What finer idea can there be than this conception of a PURE painting, which shall in consequence be neither descriptive, nor anecdotal, nor psychological, nor moral, nor sentimental, nor educational, nor (lastly) decorative? I am not saying that these latter ways of understanding painting are negligable, but it is incontestable that they are hopelessly inferior. Painting, in fact, must be nothing but an art derived from a disinterested study of forms: that is, free from any of the ulterior purposes I have just mentioned. 16.

Here we have the first clear explication of the concept of 'pure' painting which had been hovering in the air since the 1890's, when Maurice Denis wrote under the title Definition of Neo-Traditionalism:

> Remember that a picture before it is a war horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order. 17.

Gleizes and Metzinger, two fairly established artists, and members of the Section d'Or group, published a book titled Du Cubism a few weeks before the exhibition. This book was to serve as a general declaration of principles of the group as a whole. In their book, Gleizes and Metzinger substantiated these ideas with comments that would later prove to be more relevant to Mondrian's development of Cubism than their own.

They emphasis the importance of realism to modern painting (we remember that Mondrian considered himself a realist from the beginning of his career), particularly the stream of realism running from Courbet through Manet to Cezanne. This realism is the "radient reality" inherent in the "potential qualities enclosed in the most ordinary objects"[18]. But this reality is not necessarily the visual or retinal qualities of objects; rather it is the "luminous spirituality" of the primordial structures and relations of objects understood by the probing mind of the artist and revealed in his art. Their belief that art is reality as understood by the conceptual faculties and not the visual faculties is quite insistent, the "visual world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought"[19]. Conceptual art in the past had always been linked in the past with literary modes of thinking, since literature is the most specific means of communicating ideas. What Gleizes and Metzinger have in mind, however, concerns not so much ideas of things, but rather things which express their own 'idea' or platonic prototype, through their physical presence. A painting, according to these men, refers to no ulterior frame of reference:

> A painting carries within itself its raison d'etre... Let the painting imitate nothing and let it present nakedly its raison d'etre! ... ... painting is not - or is no longer - the art of imitating an object by means of lines and colours, but the art of giving to our instinct a plastic consciousness. 20.

These lines sound almost identical, in both conception and terminology to ideas formulated in Mondrian's writing of a few years later[21].

But the Section d'Or cubists never actually allowed their painting to go as far as their theorizing. Instead of discarding the literal reference to reality altogether they temper the radicalness of most of the book with one sentence which reveals the fear they felt about the thought of a completely non-figurative art:

> Nevertheless, let us admit that the reminiscence of natural forms cannot be absolutely banished; as yet, at all events. An art cannot be raised all at once to the level of a pure effusion.22.

This contradiction of aims and practical results is probably why Mondrian complained that the cubists "did not accept the logical consequences of their own discoveries"[23]. Although of this group Kupka had begun painting non-figurative works as early as 1909 and Delaunay his simultaneous discs by 1913, it was not really until Mondrian evolved his neo-plastic style that the theories of the Section d'Or cubists were consistently fulfulled, and even the works of 1913 and 1914 was far more advanced towards a pure painting than the mannered cubism of the Section d'Or or although he received scant attention in Paris.

In the spring of 1913 Mondrian exhibited at the twenty-ninth Salon des Independants[24]. Guillaume Appolinaire, reviewing the exhibition for Montjoie, wrote:

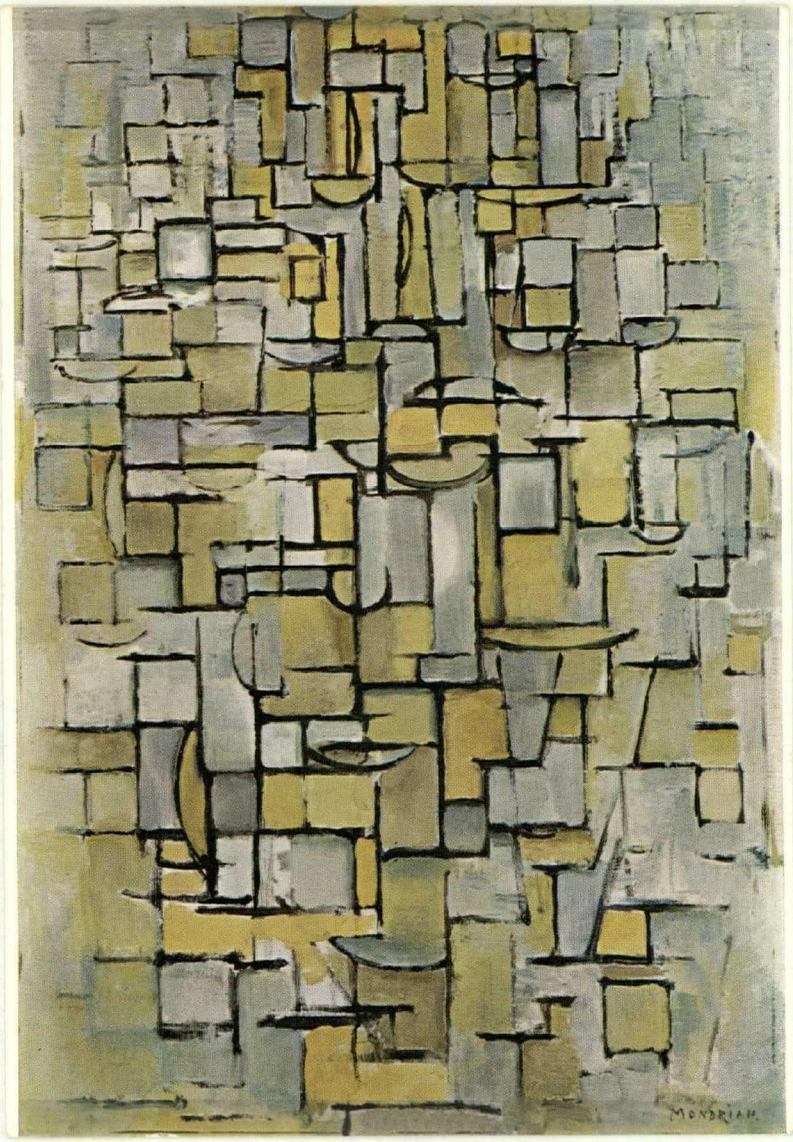
> The very abstract cubism of Mondrian - he is Dutch (cubism, as we know, has made its entrance into the Amsterdam museum; while here the young painters are jeered, there the works of George Braque, Picasso, etc. are exhibited with Rembrandts); now Mondrian, off-spring of cubism does not imitate the Cubists. He seems to have been particularly influenced by Picasso, but his personality remains

> entirely his own. His trees and his portrait of a woman show a sensitive intellectualism. This Cubism has taken a different path from the one that Braque and Picasso seem to be taking, with their interesting present explorations.25.

In this article Apollinaire not only notices that Mondrian's work already proclaims an advanced and individual kind of abstraction, but he also notices that this abstraction was moving in quite a different direction than that of Picasso and Braque[26]. The sensitive intellectualism which Apollinaire picks out as a dominating quality would seem to describe the rigorous order and organization by which Mondrian reduces his subjects to their essential elements. This, we have noticed, has been a remarkable characteristic of his 1912/1913 tree paintings. However, the reference to a portrait of a woman, which probably refers to the Nude of 1912 (S. 103), is an example of Mondrian's "intellectualism" at its weakest. The handling of the eyes and the mouth is a retrograde stylization which refers back to the stylistic abstractions of the Evolution panels of 1911. The linear matrix of this painting, unlike the tree or facade works, has only the slightest reference to the structure of the original motif, and thus appears rather astringently manneristic, with an arbitrary underscoring of the subject in order to achieve the appearance of a cubist canvas. This feeling always remained as long as Mondrian maintained the explicite reference to the original subject. Once the subject is discarded, and the subject begins to disappear in the spring of 1913, the 'checkerboard' scoring of lines across the surface of the canvas makes more sense in relation to its own rationale.

By 1913 he called his pictures 'compositions', thus removing the representative function of the picture further from the function of the subject and closer to the fact of the pictorial construction itself, and in doing so moved much closer to the concept of 'pure' painting propounded by the Section d'Or group[26]. Yet Mondrian was still concerned with the shape of outer reality, no matter how far from reality these pictures may seem. His interpretations were not what one would call an expressive order, of the nature of such a man as Vlaminck, or even the free contructive direction Picasso finally took. They are cool, objective, almost painfully objective studies of the quintessence of natural forces distilled through the process of art, specifically painting. The same subjects, by 1913 increasingly based upon facades and buildings, are incessantly repeated, becoming more and more dominated by an intellectual filtering of the original visual impression. The loosely conceived curvelinear schema which in Flowering Trees of 1912 verged upon being fractured arabesques, now become more regularized half-circles (e.g. in S. 135, 153), and serve more as a means of accenting the dominant horizontal-vertical linearity.

There are a group of tree compositions executed in the spring of 1913, for example Oval Composition with Trees (S. 131, W. 70), which mark a point of transition between theorganic and the geometric, between the representative and the abstract, and more important, between Mondrian the mature follower of Braque and Picasso and Mondrian the innovator in his own right. Oval Composition with Trees exposes



7. Composition (Tableau I), 1913. Oil on Canvas, 37 x 25 ins.

the filtering process between Mondrian's interest in the structure of the original subject and his totally free inventiveness of linear play. The business of the branches of the original subject (S. cat. 184) are certainly matched by the business of the linear structure in this painting, but the activity of the lines are less concerned with the logic of trunks and branches than they are with their own inner logic as scrambled ziggurat-formations. Moreover, the colour in this painting is much lighter than preceeding works and applied in a much looser manner, freeing the linear structure from any implication of tonal space.

The next phase of his development, the one which begins to show Mondrian as an innovator, is exemplified by Composition XIV (W. 71), which was probably executed in the summer of 1913. The original motif of trees now is almost completely obscured, betrayed only by the scattering of scalloped lines. The linear network is now free of the logic of the subject, yet at the same time it is taking upon itself an even stricter order from an independant source. Instead of following a free descriptive role, as in the 'liberated' line of Kandinsky, Mondrian's line takes upon itself new responsibilities of delineating regularized units of surface space[27]. It does not act so much on its own initiative as it functions as an activator of contained and open areas; that is, the incisive instrument of a search for order. This shows to be particularly true of the paintings of facades that follow this painting in the summer or fall of 1913. Blue Facade (W. 74)

and Oval Composition with Bright Colours (S. 133) are almost exclusively composed of horizontal-vertical lines accented very sparsely with inclining or curving lines, a situation easily explained when we realize that they derive from architectural motifs. Yet again, like the tree abstractions, these motifs are present in the paintings only through the ideosyncrasies of design such as the v-shaped configuration in top half of Oval Composition with Bright Colours and the symmetrically paired blocks in the bottom of Blue Facade (the derivation of these blocks from the original subject is indicated in a preliminary sketch (W. figure 22). Otherwise the spacing of the lines follows an intuitive feeling for the tensions of open and compressed spaces on the surface area of the canvas. These paintings have also gotten away from the tightness of molecular structure of his earlier cubist works, and work with a more looser and broadly organized interplay of areas of compressed spaces carefully balanced by areas of fluid, open spaces.

The paintings of Mondrian's 'mature' period, executed over the winter of 1913/1914 and the spring of 1914, developed into a figuratively abstract and an almost virtual two-dimensional format. These paintings, of which Composition 6 (S. 135 W. 75) and Composition 8 (S. 259) might be considered typical, differs from works of the previous year in two ways. They eliminate any remaining references to tonal modelling which are still a part of 1913 works like Composition XIV (W. 71) or Tableau 1 (S. 256). This asserts the two-dimensionality of the image and releases the linear structure to act purely as line in

itself rather than line as descriptive border to a structured object. Secondly, these 1914 works are much more tightly and self-consciously ordered than the loose, transparent quality of earlier works such as Oval Composition with Bright Colours (S. 133). This indicates that Mondrian was beginning to give his attention more seriously to the ordering and balancing of the rectangular compartments rather than concentrating upon the linear tensions of the motif. This is an important change of attitude, one that is particularly manifest in Composition 6, yet it would not be completely resolved for a few more years. The main issue with the 1914 Parisian pictures, then, is the degree of freedom from which Mondrian can release the rationale of his compositions from the rationale of the world of depicted objects.

There remains one area of structural consideration to be resolved if the image is to be totally free from a metaphorical reference to 'depicted' forms and a world outside the fact of the picture itself. This refers to the necessary virtual identification of the image with the surface of the canvas support.

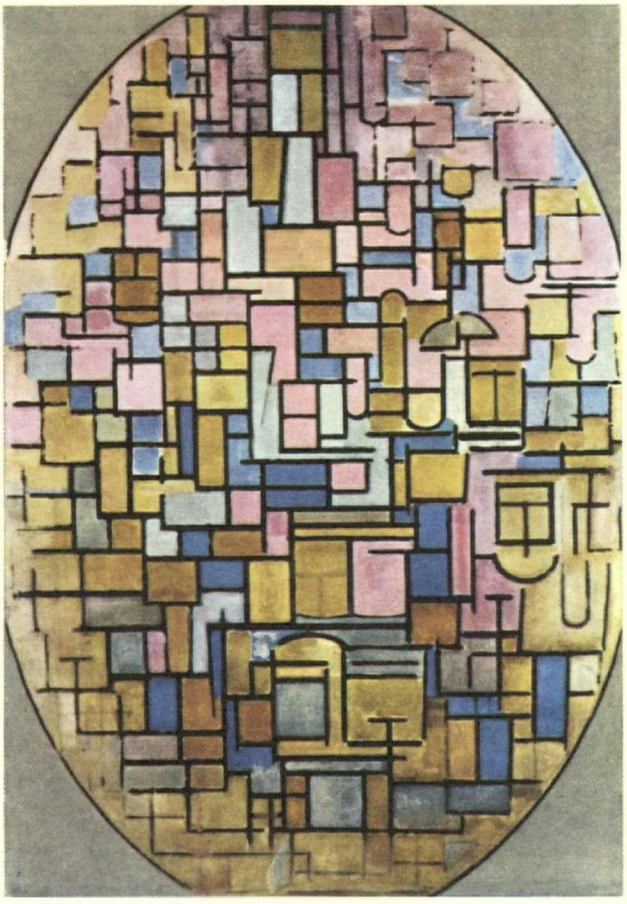
In his 1914 Paris pictures, for example Composition #6, Mondrian seems to have created a completely non-figurative image. This picture even at first sight looks like his later completely non-figurative paintings of 1918/1919 such as Composition with Grey and Light Brown (W. 86a) or Composition in Grey (S. 265). The fact that the space of the image is separated from the virtual surface of the canvas by a peripheral

fuzz, however, implies that the image is metaphorical, it relates to a point of reference that is other than the fact of the canvas as an object in itself. Since the image, so to speak, 'blooms' in the center of the picture field, it is other than the picture field when the latter is recognized as a flat, physical rectangle. In this sense the image is figurative and not actual; the distance implied in the image related to the support is visual rather than physical. One still looks into these pictures rather than onto them, and as long as this condition holds true, Mondrian's abstraction still has its basis in the world of depicted forms. It would not be until 1918, with the canvas Composition: Colour Planes with Grey Contours (W. 84), that Mondrian was to annihilate all illusionistic, visual space by extending the lines of the grid to the edges of the picture field, and thus render the space of the image virtually identical to the surface of the canvas. For the time being, however, the freshness of this new abstraction, albeit approximate, satisfied Mondrian's tendancy towards 'pure' painting. Furthermore, Mondrian's theorizing had not yet developed to a point where it would reveal the contradictions of this approximation, and force him into a completely concrete, non-figurative construction.

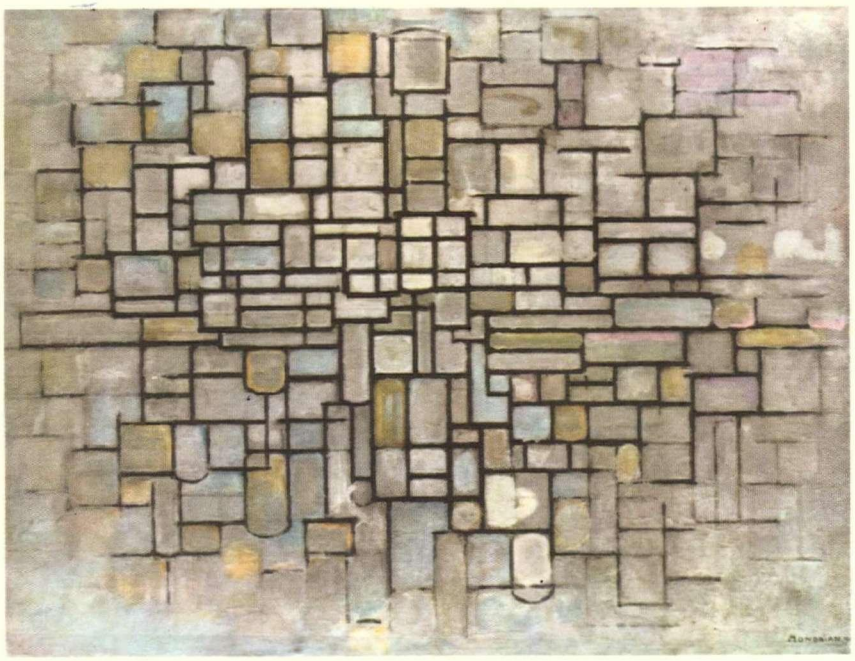
Linked with this question of the identification of the image with the virtual surface of the canvas, is the question of picture 'gravity' and its relation to visual painting. Mondrian's development from 1913 to 1914 is a classic example of the evolution of picture gravity from a visual mode of painting towards a concrete constructive mode of

painting. Picture 'gravity' is the sense that the depicted image makes in terms of the world of objects resting in visual space. The visual mode of seeing, of course, recognizes the existence of an 'up' and a 'down' as the condition of the world of literal experience. And it is our experience in the world of literal objects that gives us our sense of balance. When we depict the visual order of reality in paintings we demand a gravitational center in the image in order to remind us of the force of gravity operating in the visual order of things. For the concrete constructed image, however, gravity within the image is irrelevant, because the image is a part of the physical being of the canvas, which of course hangs on the wall or sits on the easel. In the concrete painting one does not react to the gravity operating within the frame of the picture, but rather one is satisfied by the position of the canvas as a complete object, of which the image is an integral part. But we have already noticed how the peripheral fuzzing tended to breed a distinction between the image and the canvas as an object, and thus destroy the concrete unity. Therefore there was still needed an image which has its own gravitational logic.

Sure enough, when we study even one of the most extreme abstractions of the early 1914 Parisian pictures, Composition 6, we find that there is a very subtle horizontal weight just below center. The composition at first glance seems to be without a central locus, it seems to be floating somewhere behind the surface of the canvas. But under closer observation we find that the top half of the picture is comprised



8. Oval Composition (Tableau III), 1914. Oil on Canvas 50 x 40 ins.
9. Composition in Blue, Grey and Pink, 1914. Oil on Canvas 34½ x 45¼ ins.



of staggered but fairly evenly spaced compartments, the majority being square. The bottom third of the compostion is comprised of vertically-aligned and vertically 'stacked' rectangular compartments. The middle section has a strength of character which the other sections lack. Here we find very definitely horizontally-aligned tensions, strengthened by a sense of uniqueness given to the individual proportions of the compartments. The central horizontal compartment, the largest and the longest in the composition, has an unusual 'T' formation projecting up into its belly. Above it is an odd arrangement of a rectangle symmetrically framed by two horizontally-bisected squares. Below and right of center is a long, narrow horizontal rectangle with some vertical abutments at the right end and a tiny ochre square just under the left tip. It is in the eccentric tensions of this middle section that the structural rationale of the whole composition is located, and this location is the conventional gravitational focus of visual painting. This centrally-located tension of forces places Composition 6 within the tradition of conventional figurative painting, despite the extreme abstraction and the apparent randomness of composition.

Thus the 1914 Paris pictures, even though they do not look figurative and visual, they in fact are, even if it means that they only recognized metaphorical gravity. By 1914 cubism had taken painting further away from a traditional pictorial space than any other movement in painting, but the fact that it still maintained a metaphorical space kept it within the traditional realm of painting as a metaphorical

medium. The logical consequences of the theories of Gleizes and Metzinger and others who advocated a 'pure' painting which expresses its own integral raison d'etre, remained unfulfilled. Mondrian's own painting, which had become more abstract that the majority of the cubists, excepting Delaunay and Kupka, had nevertheless reached a strange impasse, an impasse created by the fact that his work still incorporated metaphorical space. This meant that the lines and colours, the 'means' of his art, could not be handled directly, and in a purely constructive manner because they had not yet become independant from a visual system which exists outside the fact of the picture as an end in itself. But in the experiments of the next few years, Mondrian was to evolve past the cubist metaphorical space to a treatment of space which would be identical to that of the surface of the canvas.

CHAPTER IV: THE EVOLUTION OF NEO-PLASTICISM, THE MEANS BECOMES THE ENDS, 1914-1920.

In the spring of 1914 Mondrian left for Holland to visit his dying father. He then spent the summer months at the Dutch beaches of Domberg and Sheveningen. There is no doubt that he had planned to return soon to his studio in Paris where he had left all of his work behind in a crucial stage of development, but the sudden outbreak of war in August trapped him in neutral Holland. Between this first summer of the war and Mondrian's return to Paris in February, 1919, the character of his paintings and his ideas underwent a decisive evolution.

The essence of this evolution lies in the integration of his theosophical beliefs with the formal character of his painting. Researches into theosophy and related beliefs were always of prime importance to Mondrian[1]. We can be sure that the absence of a direct involvement of these beliefs, which were focussed upon a basic principle of life, from his role as an artist towards which he directed all of his energies all of his life, would have meant that both his art and his life would have been incomplete. We have seen how Mondrian had attempted to link his theosophical beliefs with the subjects of his painting in the period extending approximately from 1908 to 1911, particularly in the Evolution triptych of 1911. Sensing the weaknesses of the basically literary interpretation of these paintings, Mondrian turned to the essentially anti-literary formalism of cubism in the period extending from fall of 1911 to spring of 1914. In this cubist period we see no direct involvement of Theosophy and its

principles in his painting. This does not mean that he ceased to think about Theosophy. Rather, he separated it from his art. He developed his art from within itself instead of directing it from a point of reference outside the formal exingencies of the painting. The painting, from the classic cubist point-of-view, is at its purest when it expresses its own 'raison d'etre' rather than an ulterior content.

In effect, this meant that the painting would cease to have any representative function. That this was the direction in which Mondrian was pushing his painting, is evident from the consistent removal of all links that the final painting might have with the original motif from which it was born. This reductive process reached a climax in the abstractions done in Paris in the spring of 1914. At the same time, however, this process of reduction was creating an ever-widening gap between any possible synthesis of form and content in the conventional literary sense. If his art was to have a completeness that would include as a part of its meaning the philosophical principles that guided his daily life, yet not compromise the logical evolution of his means of expression, Mondrian had to recognize and develop a category of meaning and representation other than the literary. During his two-year period of intense activity in Paris, the rapid and exciting development of the formal aspects of his art quite likely distracted him from seriously broaching the question of content. But let us imagine him now, in the summer of 1914, returning after a two-year absence to the expansive coastal beaches of his

homeland, to Domberg, where in 1908 he first began to bring Theosophy to the foreground of his art. Cut off from his studio and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Parisian art world, yet full of the experience of the past few years spent in Paris, we can imagine him coming face-to-face with the question of content, of the harmony between man and the universe. In fact, one might even say that the conflict between his immediate desire to 'express' the feeling of the beaches and the inadequacy of the kind of art that he had developed in Paris to do so, provided him with the shock that caused him to bend his attention to the question of the synthesis of form and content for the rest of his life.

The first direct indication of this awareness of the need for a synthesis of form and content, a bridging of the gap between the world of spiritual meditation and the formal evolution of art, comes in the notes he jotted down alongside sketches of the sea in his sketchbooks of 1914. An artist who bends his art to the service of doctrinal instruction, he writes, will find that his art will degenerate. On the other hand, the artist must not lack spiritual enterprise. But

> When the two paths join, that is to say, when the artist finds himself on that plane of evolution where conscious and direct spiritual activity becomes possible, we are in the presence of ideal art. 2.

Mondrian knew in 1914 what he had to work for, but as yet he was still searching for the proper appearance that this 'ideal art' had to

take. The immediate pictorial reaction to the change of environment between Paris and Holland was quite naturally reflected in a return to the theme of the sea, but even in these works we see a more analytical and penetrating view of nature that stands in contrast to the emotional colouring of marine paintings done before his move to Paris. Despite the great feeling of spiritual release which Mondrian felt upon his return to the beaches of Domberg, his experience with cubism in Paris led him to search for the essential structural principles of nature in the spirit of objective analysis rather than subjective interpretation. In his autobiographical essay written in 1942, Toward the True Vision of Reality, this feeling is quite obvious.

> Observing sea, sky and stars, I sought to indicate their plastic function through a multiplicity of crossing verticals and horizontals.
>
> Impressed by the vastness of nature, I was trying to express its expansion rest and unity. 3.

As this statement indicates, the change of environment constituted a change of space. From the beginning of this series of drawings and paintings related to the ocean, the problems encountered by this dramatic change of space eventually forced him to abandon nature as an inceptive motif for his art, and base his work entirely upon the underlying operations of nature and art rather than the appearances of nature and art.

In the city of Paris Mondrian had come into contact with the

material world of things, of objects, of surfaces, of those structures that were close to the eye and comprehended particle by particle. If we recall the kind of subject matter that formed the basis of the Paris pictures; the trees, the facades and the scaffoldings, we cannot fail to notice that they are all composed of surfaces; flat, reticular and rather close to the eye. By early 1914 we noticed that this surface, through abstraction from the original sketches, was brought almost, but not quite, as close to the viewer as the surface of the canvas itself. On the whole, the kind of cubism which Mondrian had evolved by 1914, the division of the surface of the canvas into a molecular grid, bears a direct and harmonious relationship to the subject matter of this period.

However, once out of the compact and physical city of Paris Mondrian was suddenly struck by the limitless expanse of ocean, dunes and sky. On the beach of Domberg he was in a world where everything is distant, where space is expanding volumes rather than limited surfaces, and therefore must be comprehended at once as a unified and total feeling. The space of the beaches is hollow, characterless and general:- the exact antithesis of the specific and physical space of the city. Yet in terms of his art, Mondrian, fresh out of the cubist atmosphere of Paris, still carried over his habit of depicting nature in terms of this molecular vision of multiplicity.

With these two important factors in mind; the first being Mondrian's awareness of the need to equate his art with the structural principles of nature, that is, to cease to represent nature but rather

to be guided by the principle operations of nature; the second being the inherent contradiction between the space of the Domberg landscape and the flat molecular grid of his cubist technique, let us investigate his Pier and Ocean drawings of 1914.

There is one major change in appearance between the Pier and Ocean drawings of 1914 - 15 and the Paris paintings of early 1914. The tightness of the interlocking lines that served to delineate flat enclosed rectangles in the Paris works had become loosened in the Dutch works. The horizontals and the verticals were freed from each other. Instead of the verticals crossing the horizontals at the ends of the lines as in the Paris paintings, the verticals now move across the horizontals in a more haphazard fashion, usually near the center, giving the familiar 'plus-minus' or cruciform shapes that characterize these drawings. The lines now float in a looser spacial relationship instead of being tied to the surface of the canvas, and to each other. Whereas in the Parisian paintings the reticular configurations of lines were the result of a structural analysis of an actual structural concrete surface, we find that in these seascape drawings Mondrian is still describing the visual situation in terms of the linear network (albeit looser) even though the seascape offers no actual structural surface that would justify such a linear analysis. It would seem, therefore, that the linear network now has nothing to do with the structure of appearances, but instead is an elemental part of his artistic vocabulary; a means with its own justification apart from the visual situation which

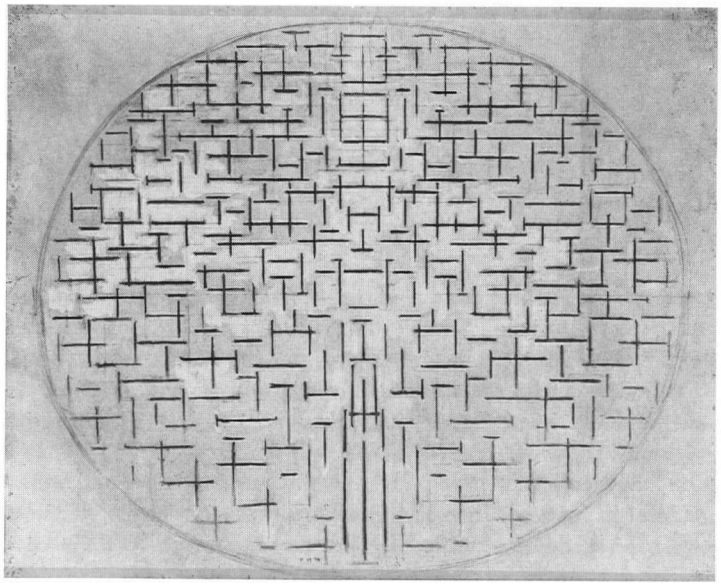
it is supposed to be describing. This of course brings us to the crucial question of content. Mondrian does in fact introduce another function to this cruciform network of lines, a symbolic function, which is mentioned retrospectively in the passage quoted above and contemporaneously in his notebooks of 1914. He assigns a masculine positive significance to the vertical element and a feminine negative significance to the horizontal element, exemplified by the horizontal line of the sea. Alone, each of these elements brings about imbalance and thus unhappiness. Together, they cancel the dynamic force of each other's singularity, bringing about repose, asexuality and happiness. These notions are the germ of his more mature reflections and will be discussed in more detail in a following argument. The cruciform shape at this time, more accurately serves a formal rather than a symbolic function, as we shall see.

These 1914 drawings can be said to be more visually oriented than his late Parisian pictures, and therefore a slight step backwards if we agree (this was Mondrian's final conclusion) that Mondrian's logical development is towards a complete repudiation of visually-based representative art. Although the lines carry the all-over effect, they are as a group given tensions, through the length of lines, tightness of inter-linear structure, and the compactness of lines, that end up describing the subject in a visual, indeed impressionistic, manner[4].

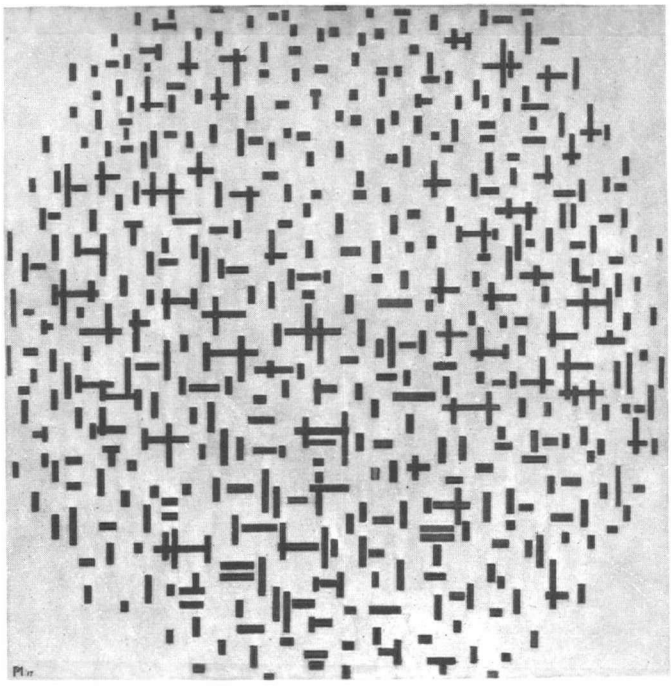
The Pier and Ocean drawings especially carry this impressionistic

feeling. Mondrian's sketches were always visually representative, while the final painting was usually extremely abstract. But the final painting (W. 79a) that marked the culmination of these sketches is almost more visually-oriented than the preparatory sketches. Given the title, Pier and Ocean the natural instinct is to try and see these things in the drawing. We do not see a rendering of things in terms of their outlines but instead, like the cubist trees of 1912, we read the shape of things through their linear tensions. We can see that the bottom two-thirds of the picture has more widely spaced crosses than the top, which is somewhat darker in tone because of the more compact placement of lines. The division between these two areas indicates the horizon line between sea and sky. Furthermore, at the bottom center running up to the horizon, the vertical lines are longer and thus have more thrust than vertical lines elsewhere in the composition. This, of course, represents the pier. What makes these seascape drawings even more visually-oriented is the fact that he has moved even more emphatically back towards an up-down natural gravity.

When he loosened up the rectangular structure of his lines in order to accomodate a more hollow spacial feeling, Mondrian was confronted with a problem regarding colour. Since the lines no longer formed an integral rectangular unit, the integrity of the colour areas, the ability to hold their own shape, was threatened. The colour planes, deprived of their linear boundaries, bleed into and overlap each other, creating an ambiguous, fluctuating surface, alternating in feeling



10. Pier and Ocean, 1914. Crayon, pencil, goache on buff paper 34 x 44 ins.
11. Composition with Lines, 1917. Oil on Canvas, 42 x 42 ins.



between flat surface and hollow space. This characteristic of undefined colour areas in Mondrian's work has already been seen in the peripheral fuzzing of his mature Parisian cubist works and in a series of facade paintings executed in 1913 - 1914 (S. 133) where this ambiguity crosses the whole image. For the moment this colour problem was avoided by creating monochromatic paintings. At least the lines floated above a flat, even, non-illusionistic surface, so that the pictorial illusion of the drawings is carried solely by the tensions of the lines as it is done in conventional drawing.

In a painting titled Composition and dated 1916, and which is the final outcome of a long series of studies of the facade of the Domberg church[5], colour returns. As hinted in the previous paragraph, the colour bleeds through the openings of the linear network and the lines seem to be floating above a pulsating, changing, illusionistic, volumetric space formed by the various tonal distances of the colours. This loose, metaphorical handling of space is again, like the visual gravity and impressionistic feeling of the pier and ocean pictures, a step back from the logical and final evolution of his style. And with less reason, for the original subject for Composition, 1916 was a facade proclaiming surface space rather than the hollow space of the seascapes. Composition 1916 is an important transitional picture preceeding his departure from the painterly picture in 1917, something that makes his loose painterly colouring

here seem all the more archaic. What it heralds is both a move away from up-down gravity and concentric gravity. Despite a slight peripheral fuzzing (this is so slight that Mondrian has painted over onto the wooden frame), there is practically no center of interest in this picture, it seems to have an equal weight distribution of tensions across the surface of the canvas. The fluctuating tonal distances of the 'floating' colour patches contradicts this lack of centralized tension in the over-all matrix of lines and colours, a factor that emphasises the surface of the canvas rather than drawing the image back into space.[6] It is the last picture that can be described as painterly, and thus it was probably done just prior to his meeting in 1916 with Bart Van der Leck who was working at the same time with hard-edge and flat unmodulated areas of pure hues, and who influenced Mondrian to move in the same direction.

Like the use of colour in Composition 1916, the linear structure, still in the cruciform pattern developed in the summer of 1914, is also incongruous with an emphasis upon the surface of the canvas. We have noted that his lines assumed this cruciform shape in 1914 for two basic reasons; the expediency of depicting hollow space and expressing the neutralization of masculine and feminine forces. The first, a formal function, is no longer necessary in 1916 when his motif is a flat facade. The second, which brings us back to the question of content, has undergone a slight qualification by 1916 after Mondrian's meeting with Dr. M.H.J. Schoenmaekers in 1915.

In the summer of 1915 Mondrian settled in the artist's colony of Laren, just outside of Amsterdam. There Mondrian met Schoenmaekers, a philosopher-mystic who wrote about theosophy and by 1916 had already published three books: The New Man's Faith (1914), The New Image of the World (1915), and Plastic Mathematics (1916). Needless to say, Mondrian spent long hours in discussion with Schoenmaekers, although it seems that the philosopher's eccentric personality was often at odds with the even, reserved temperament of Mondrian[7]. Dr. H.L.C. Jaffe, in his book De Stijl[8], documents at length the debts that Mondrian's later writings owe, both in terminology and ideas to Schoenmaeker's books, particularly Plastic Mathematics and The New Image of the World. Despite the seemingly overwhelming evidence that Mondrian's ideas originated in Plastic Mathematics, it should be remembered that Mondrian had already begun formulating the crux of his thought about art in his notebooks of 1914, before he had met Schoenmaekers. The most that Schoenmaekers did was sharpen his logic and provide him with a clearer terminology.

The "plastic mathematics" or "positive mysticism" of Schoenmaekers' was a philosophical synthesis of nineteenth century positivism, with its adherance to the primal fact of the physical world, and a unique blend of Catholic and theosophical mysticism. It is important to remember here that this synthesis of the inner and outer world, of mind and matter, of form and content is exactly the synthesis that Mondrian is trying to achieve in his own art.

In The New Image of the World, Schoenmaekers wrote:

> We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions which are controlled by reason, in order to recover these same constructions later in (given) natural reality, thus penetrating nature by means of plastic vision.9.

This concept, already outlined by Gleizes and Metzinger in Du Cubismé where they spoke of "giving to our instinct a plastic consciousness", is surprisingly similar to, and in the case of Gleizes and Metzinger, derives directly from, symbolist aesthetics of the late nineteenth century, particularly as found in the poetry of the period. It was the poets even more than the artists who had the most powerful influence in shaping the trends towards occult religions of the time, among them the Theosophical movement and the Rose-et-Croix society. The Nabi painters such as Paul Serusier, Maurice Denis and Emile Bernard were intricately involved with these movements along with a return to Catholicism, and these men, as art teachers around the turn of the century, inspired the members of the later Section d'Or group to seek a synthesis of this mystical idealism and the formal evolution of art. Mondrian also came into contact with these forces, but because he was always isolated from group efforts (at least until 1917) his solutions had a more individualistic character.

The core of the symbolist aesthetic lies in the notion that a material object can be given a spiritual or transendental significance through fracturing of the poetic syntax whereby the meaning of the object becomes divorced from the natural context and aspired to the level of a

pure 'idea', an 'idea' that is at the same time substantial, that has a point of reference in the real world yet is not of it[10]. Schoenmaekers, with his more empirical turn of mind, notably substitutes the term 'constructions' for 'symbol', but the essence of the concept, that pure thought, in order that it perpetuate itself, requires a reflection of itself in the material world, are the same.

Jaffe, anxious to establish Schoenmaekers as a forerunner of the De Stijl group, attempts to show that the philosopher's descriptions of the relationships of horizontals and verticals that all manifestations of reality conditioned Mondrian's own thinking and had a direct influence upon his art. Jaffe quotes Schoenmaekers from The New Image of the World:

> The two fundamental, complete contraries which shape our earth and all that is of the earth, are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun and the vertical, profoundly spacial movement of rays that originates in the center of the sun. 11.

And again from Plastic Mathematics:

> The figure, which objectivates the conception of a pair of absolute entities of the first order, is that of the absolute rectangular construction: the cross. It is the figure that represents the ray-and-line, reduced to an absoluteness of the first order. 12.

The similarities of this platonic mode of thought to Mondrian's own ideas seem obvious at first glance, especially in view of what we have seen of Mondrian's own selection of the cross as being the essential shape that gives meaning and absolute order to the changing appearances

of nature. But if we consider that Schoenmaekers is a theologian, given to simplifying and condensing a vast and complex philosophical concept, and Mondrian is an painter who has to make this concept function as an image on a canvas, we shall see that their application of this concept was not the same.

It is not likely that Mondrian would have fundamentally disagreed with Schoenmaekers. But for Mondrian these principles were meant to be applied directly to life through his art, and Schoenmaekers could teach him nothing about his art. For Schoenmaekers the cross is an image which symbolizes an absolute order, and this cross as an image is directly related to the hierarchic imagery of occult science. The function of this symbol, as we have already noted, is to give the vast, ambiguous scope of the 'spirit' and the imagination a concrete form which can be apprehended all at once. But for Mondrian, the cross is not a symbol in its own right but rather the result of the operation of the forces of assertion and negation, of the neutralization of a dynamic singular force with its contrary force, in terms of lines on the surface of a canvas. The resulting image is not an end in itself, but rather the result of the creative act brought to the condition of repose. It is true that in his 1914 notes Mondrian attaches a masculine positive significance to the vertical line and a feminine negative significance to the horizontal line, but this was only for the purpose of analogy, and he carried it no further than that.

In essence, Mondrian's use of these principles is 'constructive' in the purest sense. Using the language of art, specifically the lines and colours of painting, an image is 'constructed' according to the most general, absolute and essential laws of nature in operation, and not according to the appearances of nature or the appearances of any preconceived symbol. Appearances in themselves are particular forms; thus when the artist utilizes a predetermined appearance he is manifesting a personal choice reflecting a ultimately arbitrary subjective judgement rather than absolute universal laws. In 1916, however, Mondrian had still not refined his painting to the point where the constructive functioning of his lines and colours was completely clear to him, and until this does become clear, when he formulates his neo-plasticism by 1920, his theories are not fulfilled.

When he returned to Holland in 1914 he had dropped the logical formal direction of his cubist abstractions to concentrate upon the new space of the seascape in his painting. Together with the hollow, expanding space of the seascape he briefly flirts with the idea of entering content into the picture in the form of a plus-minus cruciform symbol. By 1916, perhaps inspired by the ideas of Schoenmaekers concerning the manifestation of universal laws in the material world, Mondrian begins to reapply himself to the problem of developing the formal aspect of his painting. This actually meant reducing the means of his painting to the very basic element of line in itself, straight and without tension; and of colour in itself, without expressive

implications that so often dominate colour, and of shape in itself the rectangle, which is the result of the interaction of the vertical and horizontal line. This meant eliminating any arbitrary element of his painting and effectively neutralizing as a force in themselves any of the means which he did choose to use.

One of the first arbitrary elements that were to go during this period of experiment in 1916 was the painterliness that had characterized his work from the very beginning[13]. Mondrian met Bart van der Leck at The Hague in the summer of 1916. A few weeks later they met again at Laren where Mondrian had previously met Schoenmaekers. Van der Leck had been painting in a two-dimensional figurative style since about 1913. He was one of the stylists grouped around Derkinderen and he did murals for the architect A.P. Berlage. In compliance with Berlage's insistence upon the moral and functional integrity of the wall as a flat surface, Van der Leck gradually eliminated all perspective forshortening, creating flat, two-dimensional images that had clean edges and a reduced colour scheme based upon the three primaries: red, yellow and blue. Although his paintings became progressively abstract towards 1916, he always maintained a figurative narrative content consisting of themes of contemporary life and society, themes that reflected a renewed concern amongst the symbolist and stylist factions in Holland about society in the modern world, a concern that reflected a major facet of the Jugendstil and art nouveau sensibility[14]. This same feeling was to become manifest in the avid prosetylizing of the De Stijl group, who were mainly artists and architects

directly influenced by the ideas of Berlage, Mondrian being the exception.

Bart van der Leck's non-painterly, calculated and tight lines appealed to Mondrian, whose attachment to painterly qualities in a picture is the one direct line that runs right through his development from the very beginning, when he was first influenced by the painterly technique of Breitner, Van Gogh and The Hague school. Although there were precidents of hard-edge painting before 1914, most obviously art nouveau design and more immediately the work of Franc Kupka which Mondrian must have seen in the Section D'or exhibition in the fall of 1912, it was not until he saw the work of Bart van der Leck in 1916 that Mondrian became aware of the limitations and arbitrary decisions involved in his painterly approach. Later, Mondrian described this influence.

> I arrived at suppressing the closed effect of abstract form, expressing myself exclusively by means of the straight line in rectangular opposition; thus by rectangular planes of colour with white grey and black. At that time, I encountered artists of approximately the same spirit. First Van der Leck, who, though still figurative, painted in compact planes of pure colour. My more or less cubist technique - in consequence still more or less picturesque - underwent the influence of his exact technique. 15.

Mondrian realized that the painterly qualities of his cubist paintings, the multiple modulations of colour and line, gave them 'atmosphere', and through this they became 'picturesque', that is, an interpretation of reality from a visual point-of-view. The mistiness

of these paintings tended to breed a separation between the viewer and the image that could only be bridged by sentiment and subjectivity. It was this very subjective bridge between the viewer and the painting that Mondrian wanted to eliminate. Mondrian wanted to eliminate the 'impressionist' feeling in both senses of the term. In his autobiography he describes the impressionist point-of-view as expressing "particular feelings, not pure reality"[16]. In this case, the image is a second degree removed from the original situation. It represents a feeling about something filtered through a matrix of personal emotions, rather than the recognition of the fact of the object in itself. The picture becomes an interpretation of an original situation rather than its own original situation[17].

The impressionist point-of-view also implies an atmospheric or visual record of this situation which, since the impressionists running back through Delacroix to Rubens, has been linked with the painterly picture. By sharpening the focus of his image, so to speak, Mondrian not only eliminated the sentimental and subjective distance of his image, but he also moved toward eliminating the implied atmospheric space between the image and the surface of the canvas, his last link with traditional painting. This last change did not come immediately after he sharpened his edges as we shall see, but it was a necessary prerequisite for his ultimately two-dimensional works beginning in 1918.

The insistence upon an absolute purity of form which we have already noticed in Mondrian's reduction of line to nothing other than horizontals and verticals, is also the major impetus for an abandonment of the 'painterly' picture. Mondrian did not eliminate painterliness and traces of fabrication just because he wanted a nice neat picture. It was the creation of a totally new concept of art which required that the constructive elements of the picture be absolutely pure. For example, a line must only be a line; any aberration of its direction, of its edge, or of its surface would turn it into something else[18]. Absolute purity of image is impossible when it has to be painted on canvas, a mechanical, manual operation, but the fabrication of the image must intervene as little as possible in the quality of the final image. The ideal, of course, would be to have some magical machine which would execute the perfect picture. That this thought actually passed through Mondrian's mind is a measure of how conscious he was of the radicalness of his position on this point, something that crops up more than once in his 1919/1920 essay built around a trialogue titled Natural Reality and Abstract Reality[19].

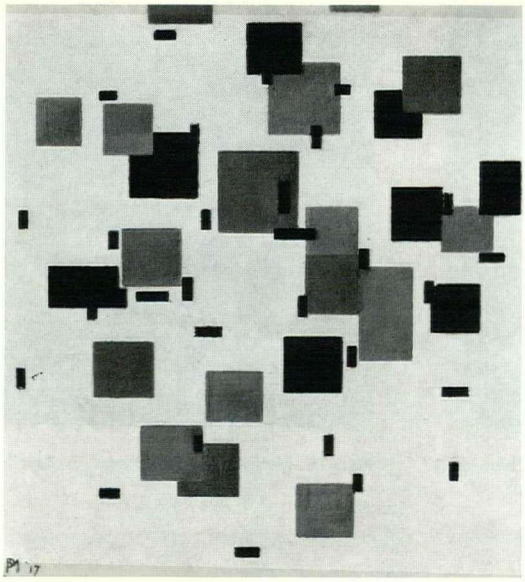
> It is precisely to make it something different that Neo-Plasticism is looking for a different technique and a different method of work.(S. page 341)
>
> The new art requires a new technique: exact plasticism requires machines that are exact. And what is more exact than a machine-made material? (S. page 343)
>
> You see that the hand of the artist is not absolutely indespensable. (S. page 343)

> Wouldn't it be marvellous to discover a machine to which the composer, the true artist, could confide all the physical part of his work? (S. page 344)

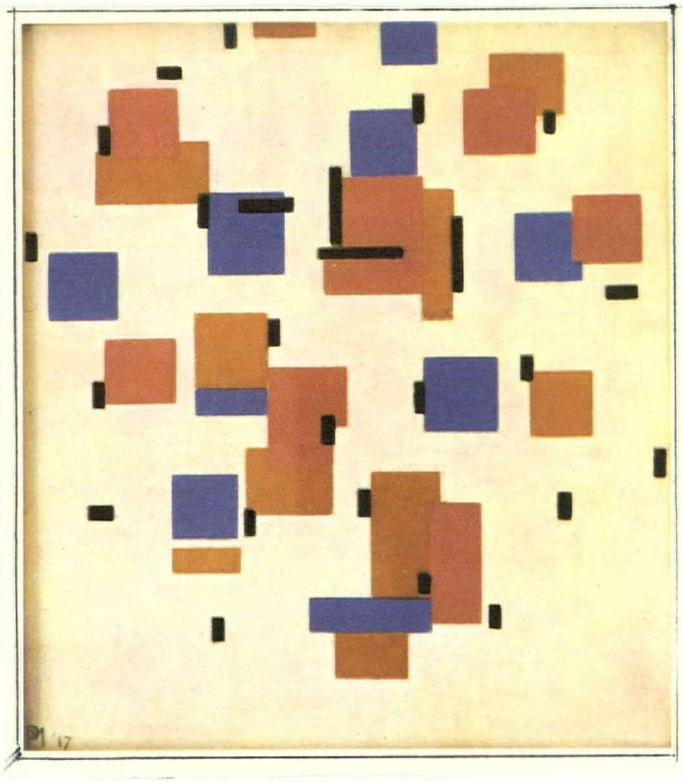
The notion that the artist is better off painting with a machine is as heretical a notion today as it was fifty years ago, but for Mondrian, art as an absolute and totally committed activity had no room for any arbitrary mystique about the hand of the creator. As these quotations clearly indicate, the crux of Mondrian's evolution after 1916, and the hard-edge image is only one of the more obvious manifestations of this evolution, is the dramatic shift from his role as an artist who interprets the world and transforms it according to his subjective genius to his role as an artist who manifests (makes obvious) certain self-evident and objective truths of the world that lie outside the personal and emotional domain of the individual human mind. If by the term "expressionistic" we imply that the artists expresses himself, his own feelings and tastes, in terms of a direct involvement with the materials of expression, we can say that Mondrian's attitude is anti-expressionistic. He submits himself to the fundamental laws of picture-making, rather than using the materials of picture-making as an expression of any personal vision[20]. It was in the years 1917 to 1920 that Mondrian spent all of his energies discovering and formulating the essential laws of picture-making and finally bridging the gap between the two major phases of his career, between his essentially cubist works and his neo-plastic works.

Although for all intensive purposes Mondrian ceased to use the visual world as a basis for his art from 1916 on, the transition to a totally non-object-art was not as abrupt as it might have been. There is no doubt that since he now was aware that his goal was, in Schoenmaekers' words, "to translate reality in our minds into constructions which can be controlled by reason"[21], it became evident that merely eliminating the 'impressionistic' and subjective painterliness of his earlier work was not enough. In fact, in his earliest 'hard-edge' works of 1917, the invisible brushwork and the sharp edges of the lines and shapes tended to make them seem to 'float' in an illusionistic space that seemed hollower than even his painterly works[22]. This presented him with the first formal problem of this period.

It seems most likely that the pictures which followed Composition 1916 were Composition with lines: 1917 (S. cat. 233), Composition with Colour Planes A and B (S. cat. 290 and 291). Even in the first picture, Composition with lines 1917, the lines, which resemble the earlier cruciform drawings, have lost the painterly quality that was Mondrian's forté up to this point. These same loosely arranged blocky lines are mingled with coloured rectangles in the other two pictures in this group. Walsh (p. 163) notes that these two pictures must derive directly from Composition 1916 because like the earlier picture, the colour planes overlap in a way that turns the flat space into a definite volumetric illusionism. But the central feeling of the volumetric space of these pictures gives them more in common with the kind of space experienced



12. Composition with Colour Planes on White Ground - A, 1917. Oil on Canvas (19 x 17 ins.)
13. Composition in Colour - B, 1917. Oil on Canvas, 19 x 17 ins.



in the Pier and Ocean series than in Composition 1916. They are the last pictures which are to be based upon sketches taken from nature, if Walsh is right in his estimation that a charcoal drawing (W. 81) serves as a preparatory sketch for them[23].

At the same time, or shortly thereafter, Mondrian executed five painting consisting of hard-edge colour rectangles, very flatly painted in pastel shades of pink, blue and ochre, similar to the colour rectangles in Composition with Colour Planes A and B. The differences, however, are striking. In Composition #3 with colour planes (W. 83). The colour planes no longer overlap, thus making them more consistent with the surface of the canvas; there are no isolated lines present, thus the two-dimensional rectangular shape makes itself more powerfully felt; and there is no center or compositional focal point as in the previously mentioned pictures. In fact the arrangement of the coloured rectangles, although they are fairly uniform in keeping with his elimination of diagonal lines, seems to follow an almost random order. The spacing is irregular and the horizontal-vertical tensions are continually interrupted. The irregular spacing of the rectangles had the effect of accentuating the sense of volume, of infinite space expressed by the white field, and thus making the rectangles 'float'. In his autobiography Toward the True Vision of Reality Mondrian articulates quite clearly that the rectangles are "never an aim in themselves but a logical consequence of their determining lines... they appear spontaneously through the crossing of horizontal and vertical

lines"[24]. In these paintings in question, however, the 'determining' lines which create the rectangular shape are absent, and, as Mondrian says himself, the rectangles "still appeared as detached forms against a background"[25]. It is really only at this time that Mondrian begins to understand the subtle differences between form and space and its relation to painting. In the world of visual apprehension form is seen as something that is opposed to space. When this visual experience is transferred to the painting the result is likewise, shapes are treated as particular forms floating in an illusionistic space. In doing so, the artist carries the fallibility of human, hence personal and subjective, vision into his art, something that Mondrian was consciously attempting to eliminate. Mondrian was probably quite aware now that as soon as the artist places a mark upon his canvas he sets into being a form that is opposed to space, and thus a depicted image, or in Mondrian's terms, a 'particular form'[26]. Up to this point Mondrian had effectively neutralized and eliminated all aspects of 'particularity' of form from his images (this is evident when we compare these colour rectangle pictures with the fauve paintings of 1911) except for the one crucial factor: that being the opposition of form to space. Whether or not an understanding of this factor was an explicit part of his ideology in 1917 is quite uncertain, but much later, in retrospect, Mondrian is able to write:

> Actually all is space, form as well as what we see as empty space. To create unity, art has to follow not nature's aspect but what nature really is. Appearing in oppositions, nature is

> unity: form is limited space concrete only through its determination. Art has to determine space as well as form and to create the equivalence of these two factors.27.

The answer to the problem of the appearance of the coloured rectangles as particular forms floating in space, and thus opposed to space, is met in exactly these terms in one of the most important pictures of his career, Composition: Colour Planes with Grey Contours of 1918 (W. 84, S. Cat. 301). When we compare this painting to Composition 111 with colour planes of 1917 we can see what a vast difference such a subtle change can make. The white 'negative' space of the latter painting has been filled in and space shares a common determining line with the colour rectangles, the forms. Now, instead of 'floating' in space, the forms operate on the same plane as space - the surface of the canvas. The determining lines, the grey contours, form a matrix that runs unmodulated in colour or tone across the whole surface of the canvas. In asserting the integrity of the picture plane, these lines serve also to keep the white and grey rectangles, denoting space, and the colour rectangles, denoting form, in unity with the picture plane. Instead of depicting forms in space, Mondrian now determines areas of form and space.

This crucial picture which we have just been discussing, Composition: Colour planes with Grey Contours, certainly stands as a major resolution of Mondrian's drive in the past few years towards a two-dimensional equivalence of form and space, but it still leaves open

a broader question: how are these modules of form and space to be ordered? Mondrian has progressively eliminated all components of painting that seemed to him to be arbitrary and if he was to be consistent in the application of the principles of reduction to the contructive elements of painting it was mandatory that he eliminate all arbitrariness in the ordering of the final image. The ordering of the colour planes in this painting in question has essentially the same quality of apparent randomness that we have already noted in the compostions with colour planes of 1917.[28] Although the colour planes in the 1918 painting are a little more uniform than in earlier compositions, they are still stacked in a loose and irregular manner. Like the earlier colour plane compositions post-dating Composition with Colour Planes A and B there is no dominating center of interest although Mondrian does tend to emphasis ever so slightly a feeling of tension at a point just above and to the left of center, an almost unconsciously 'natural' tendancy that appears in compositions all through his career. At this point, in 1918, this composing, balancing and relating of the constructive elements, space and form (i.e. the coloured modules and the monochromatic modules), is the only intuitive or subjective field of activity left in his art. Since he has stringently reduced the means of his art to line, colour and area, the only source of variability in his imagery comes from composition.

In his first article for the newly-founded magazine De Stijl, appearing in October, 1917, Mondrian expresses a concern, not without

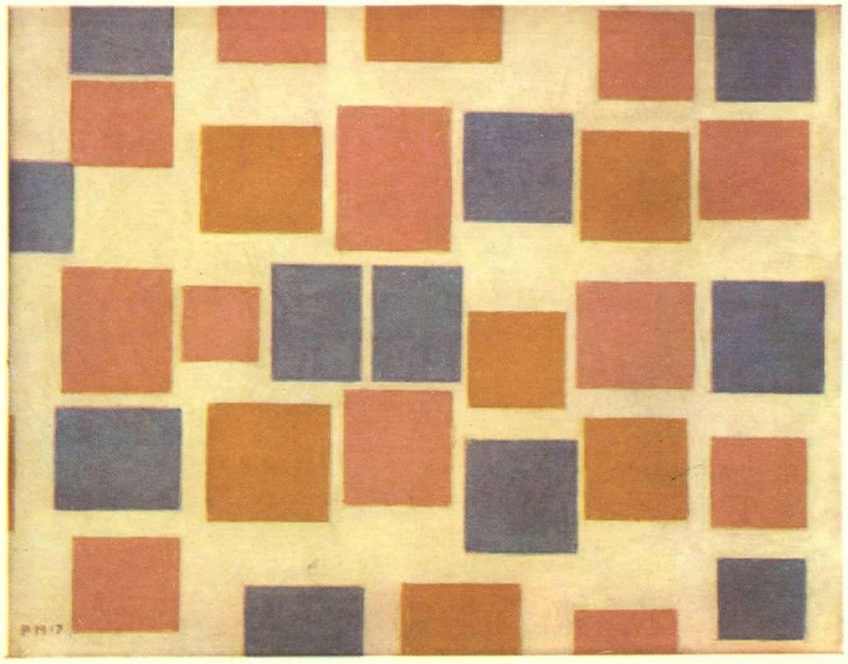
confusion, for the part that intuition and subjectivity must play in an aesthetic system that is becoming more and more positivistic, universalized and objective.

> Composition allows the artist the greatest possible freedom, so that his subjectivity can express itself, to a certain degree, for as long as needed.
>
> The rhythm of relations of colour and size makes the absolute appear in the relativity of time and space.
>
> In terms of composition the new plasticism is dualistic. Through the exact reconstruction of cosmic relations it is a direct expression of the universal; by its rhythm, by the material reality of its plastic form, it expresses the artist's individual subjectivity.
>
> It thus unfolds before us a whole world of universal beauty without thereby renouncing the human element.29.

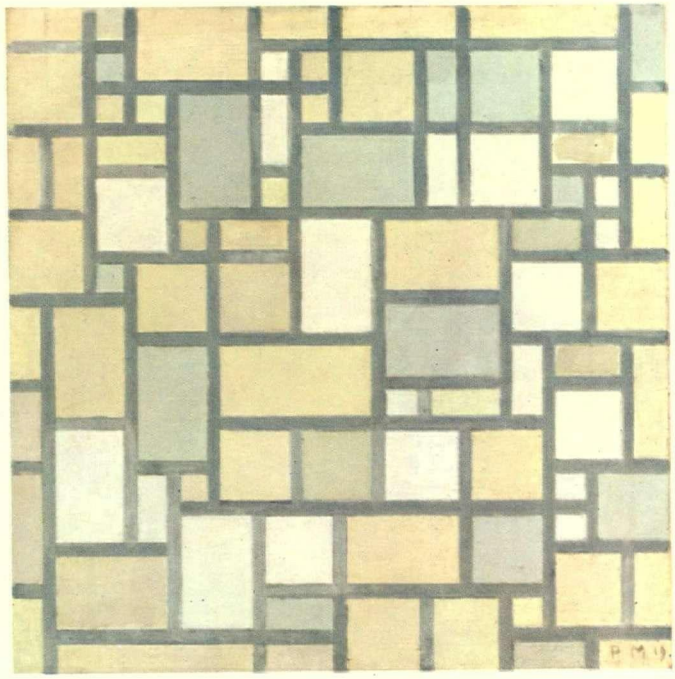
Although Mondrian's neo-plasticism pretends to a state of total universalism and objectivity, there is a sense in which it is an art of pure intuition. The means of his art is neutral and universal in the purist sense but the exact ordering of these component parts requires the participation of the sensitivity of the artist towards feelings of dynamic tension. And it is this ordering of parts, of determining (i.e. bringing into play) certain dynamic relationships between form and space, and between the forms themselves passing across space, upon which he concentrated the next major stage of his art, extending from 1918 to 1920.

Following Composition: Colour Planes with Grey Contours of 1918 we come to a series of painting which follow quite logically behind this major canvas yet are amongst the most unique of his whole oeuvre, and thus contain elements that are most inexplicable. The ordering of the following group of paintings executed in 1918 - 1919 is only conjectural, but the probable situation was that Mondrian saw the need to give the arrangement of the rectangles a more logical and controlled structure of relationships, and therefore he first dropped the problem of colour and concentrated for a time upon the linear grid. This move gave rise to the lozenge grid painting of 1918 (W. 85) which has eight modules to a side and the rectangular painting of the same year, Composition with Grey and Light Brown (W. 86a), which is based upon an invisible grid of sixteen modules to a side, each module preserving the shape of the canvas as a whole. In both paintings, the modules, delineated by weak lines, are gathered into larger groups or clusters of modules that are delineated by stronger lines of black or grey. The denseness of the clustering of the modules ranges from groups of six, which give the feeling of the most open and empty space, to individual modules which give the feeling of constricted space. The spread of these clusters is fairly even over the whole picture field so that again, there is no aggressively dominant point of focal tension in any one place. With the size of the basic module in mind the eye scans the field collecting and measuring the 'weight' of each rectangle for its modular count. The 1918 lozenge just referred to has both grids (the modular grid and the clustering

grid) so close in linear weight that they are very difficult to distinguish but similar lozenge-shaped paintings executed in 1919 (S. 266, W. 86b) are much clearer to read. For instance, Composition in Diamond Shape (W. 86b) has three clusters of six modules, eleven clusters of four modules, nine clusters of two modules and ten individual modules. Of the clusters of two modules only three are aligned in a horizontal direction, the rest are vertically aligned. But in a fashion that very subtly balances this vertical tension, we find that the clusters of six modules are arranged so that there are two horizontally aligned formations, one above the other, separated by a six-module formation which is vertically aligned, tipping on the upper left-hand corner of the lower horizontal formation. The upper edge of the vertically aligned six-module formation is separated from the upper horizontal six-module formation by exactly one module component. If there is a critical tension in the picture, it exists in this space of separation, of which we only become aware when we are sensitive to dynamic relationships between bodies of similar and dissimilar modular weights. While the relationships of that crucial painting of 1918, Composition: Colour Planes with Grey Contours were, as we noted, seemingly random and intuitive arrangements, these modular frameworks quite markedly point towards an attempt on Mondrian's part to make these dynamic relationships of parts, of form and space, more apparently measurable and thus more objective and comprehensible. The fourth lozenge of this period (S. 267) also has a light tinting of colour but the configurations of the pattern, although it is based upon the same



14. Composition III with Colour Planes, 1917. Oil on Canvas 19 x 24 ins.
15. Composition: Light Colour Planes with Grey Lines, 1919. Oil on Canvas 19 x 19 ins.

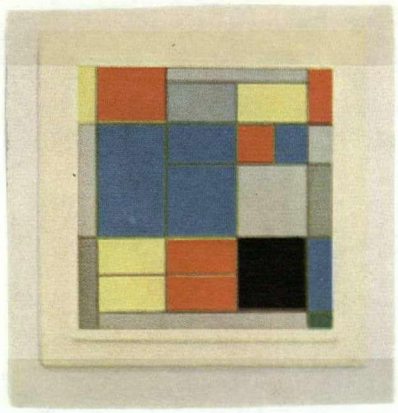


modular grid, are somewhat different from the others. The rectangles in it are aligned along a stronger vertical 'stacking' than the others, and thus is more closely related to the rectangular paintings of 1919 to 1920 which have a similar vertical stacking of rectangles.

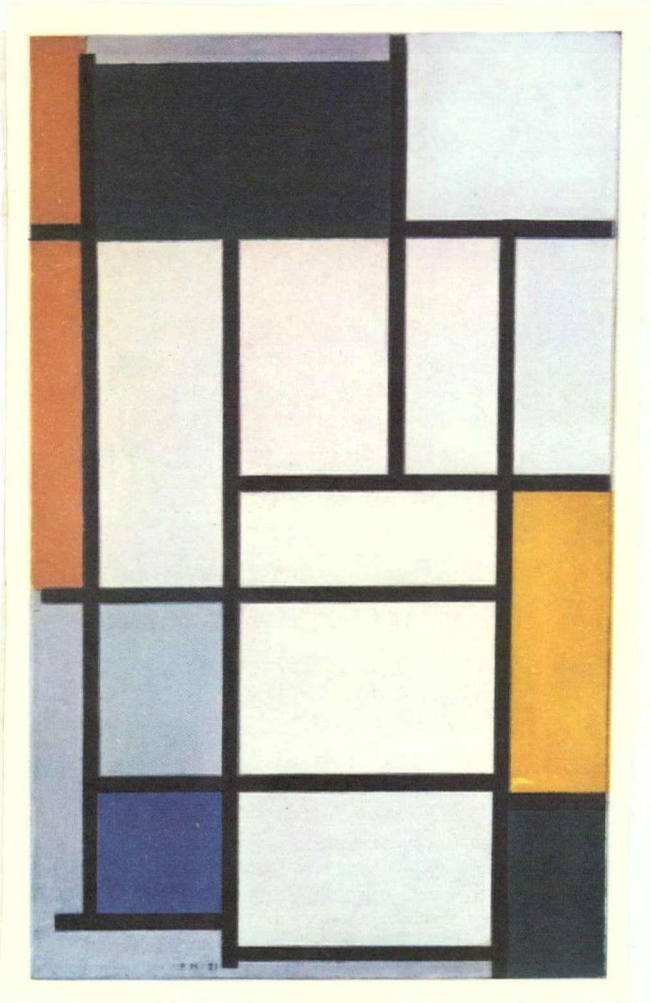
The unusual Composition: Checkerboard, Light Colours (S. 157) and Checkerboard, Dark Colours (S. cat. 293) were probably done just after the previous grid pictures and act as a study in order to introduce colour back into the reinvigorated linear grid. The colours of Composition: Checkerboard, Light Colours are stronger than in any other painting since the scaffolding series of 1913-1914, which in turn was the brightest since he left the fauve colouring in 1911. The yellow ochre has changed to a lemon yellow and there are now three shades of grey as well as white, but the pink is still to become red and there are not as yet any rectangles of pure black in the composition. These checkerboard paintings have a regular grid of sixteen modules to a side, but unlike previous modular pictures the lines of these modules are of even weight and the grid line is not erased within clusters of a similar colour.

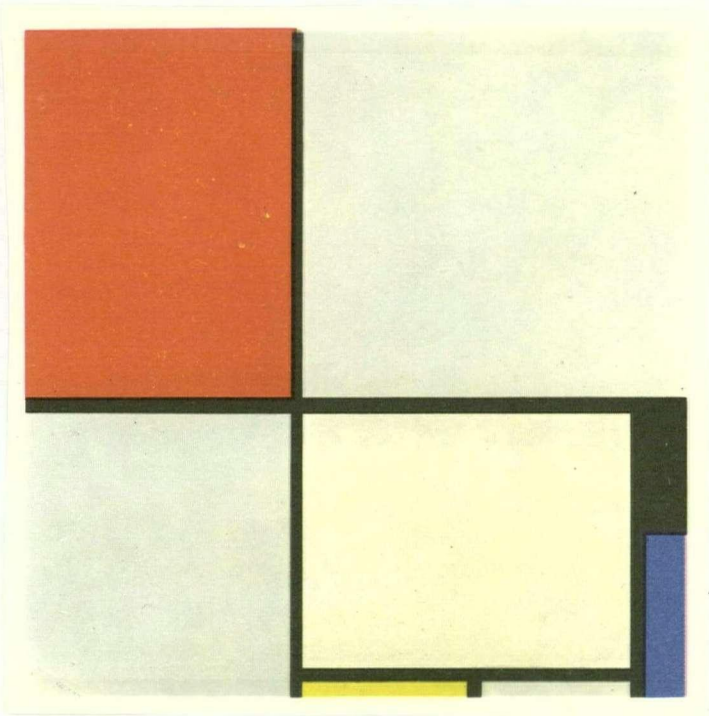
The changes that occur between these checkerboard paintings of 1919 and the final group of paintings extending between 1919 and 1921 that lead to the 'classic' neo-plastic paintings beginning in 1922 are only changes in general appearances, and do not involve any alteration

of purpose. They are, in fact, a clarification and intensification of the integrity of the picture plane and the laws of dynamic equilibrium which he had been exploring in the immediately preceeding group of paintings. The differences in appearance, however, are important. The main difference is the fact that beginning with a composition done in 1919 (S. cat. 302) there is a progressive simplification and generalization of the rectangular matrix. In contrast to the immediately preceeding group of paintings, especially the checkerboard paintings which have an extremely 'busy' articulation and no feeling of a compositional center, these late paintings eliminate the modular grid and enlarge the rectangles. There is a progressive spacing of colour areas so that each coloured 'form' is separated from another coloured 'form' by a white, black or grey 'space'. This leads to a much clearer articulation of dynamic weights, because as the space between forms becomes more obvious, the 'coalescing value' of individual form-areas, differentiated from the space-areas by their chromatic character, becomes more intense and thus the impact of the dynamic equilibrium of the image is much stronger. This signifies a definite move away from the 'all-over' molecular space which had dominated his work since his early cubist paintings towards an image of a less homogenous character where value-contrasts are more monumental. This monumentalization of the image continues through to the 'classic' Mondrian paintings of 1922 to 1930, which are dominated by a large rectangle (usually in the upper right-hand corner). A reverse process, the discussion of which is outside the scope of this essay, takes place

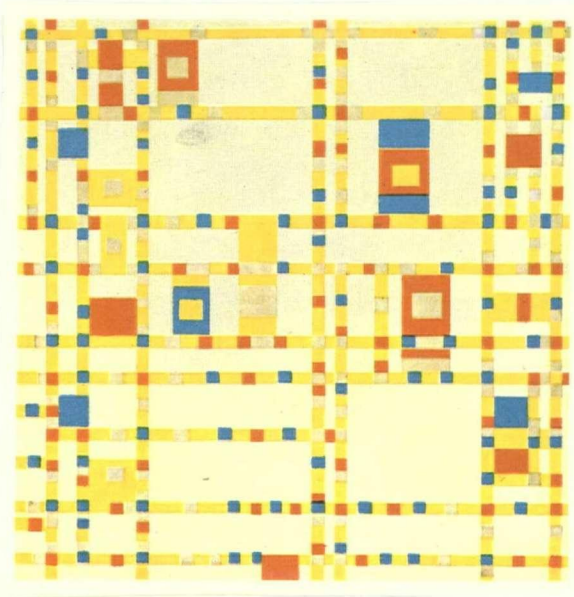


16. Composition with Red, Blue, Black and Yellow-Green, 1920. Oil on Canvas, (31 x 31 ins).
17. Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue, 1921. Oil on Canvas, 31 x 19 ins.





18. Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue, 1928. Oil on Canvas, $17\frac{3}{4}$ x $17\frac{3}{4}$ ins.
19. Broadway Boogie-Woogie, 1942-1943. Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50 ins.



between 1935 and his death in 1944, when he left unfinished his New York City (S. cat. 435), a painting composed not of coloured rectangles, but rather a complicated matrix of interlocking coloured lines.

By 1920 we find that Mondrian had solved all of the problems concerning form, content, space and order which had consumed his energies since he first broke away from his regional The Hague landscape painting about 1908. This last change, towards monumentalization of the image in 1919/1920, was merely the elimination of one of the last links with representative painting, the cubistic molecularization of a natural motif. He now has a completely concrete neo-plastic, no-objective image. But strangely enough, when we recognize that the basis of neo-plasticism is the balancing of unequal forces within a compositional framework, we find that in this mature work he has come the full circle back to his early Dutch landscapes prior to 1908, where also he focussed his attention upon balancing of dark landmasses with the light sky, of vertical windmills, masts and trees with the horizontal horizon. The only difference, a major one in terms of appearance but not purpose, is that neo-plasticism limits itself to the basic constructive elements, line and colour, while the landscape paintings concentrated upon motifs provided by the Dutch countryside. The overall evolution of Mondrian's career, therefore takes a rather curious course when seen in this light. Beginning with the assymetrical compositions of his early landscape paintings (1892-

1907) he turns to a static singular image imbued with a literary symbolism (1908-1911), followed by the over-all molecularized linear structure of his cubist period (1911-1918) which eventually formed into an assymetrical balancing of abstract forms according to the universal laws of dynamic equilibrium. The accomplishments of a decade of rigorous experiment and a shifting of his frame of reference from the visual world to the non-objective world, did not repudiate his early period of landscape painting as much as it served to take the creative essence of that period, the organization of dynamic forces into a balanced but living unity, and make it the sole concern of his art. The 'content' of neo-plastic art, as well as Mondrian's landscapes, manifests itself only during the creative process, and not in the final product. It is only in the measuring of the various choices and discriminating action made during the creative process that the true scope of feeling in Mondrian's art becomes evident. This is why the symbolist works of 1908-1911, where he attempts to make content explicable in terms of the final image, are generally unsuccessful. The creative process is a private one, especially for Mondrian, who lived and painted without an audience, and when this creative process sublimates all personal and arbitrary feelings beneath an order of absolute perfection, it is not felt so much in a single work as it is in the over-all scope of the artist's career.

Footnotes: Chapter I

1. Willem Maris (1844-1910) was the youngest of the three Maris brothers, the other two being Jacob and Mathijs. These men were leading members of the School of The Hague, a group of Dutch painters working in The Hague, who, inspired by Courbet, Millet and the Barbizon painters, turned their attention to the Dutch landscape with an eye to truth of detail and an absence of the heroic. When this group of artists were at their height in the 1870's and 1880's they were a single creative force in vivifying painting in Holland, but by the 1890's when other movements, more international and intellectual in appeal, such as symbolism and the art nouveau style in general, began penetrating Holland, The Hague realism became identified with a distinctly provincial outlook, not only in subject matter but also in attitude.

2. Quoted in Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian: Life and Work, New York, Harry N. Abrahms, 1956, P. 46.

3. Breitner (1857-1923) studied under Willem Maris, Joseph Israels and Anton Mauve in The Hague, where he met Vincent Van Gogh. In 1886 Breitner moved to Amsterdam and concentrated upon urban subject matter. During the 1890's Breitner and Mondrian were close friends.

4. Piet Mondrian, 'Toward the True Vision of Reality', Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art and other Essays, ed. Robert Motherwell, New York, Wittenborn Schultz Inc., 1951, P. 10.

5. This term only applies in a relative sense. Actually The Hague 'realism' was tinted with Barbizon romanticism and a frequent sentimental eulogizing of nature that was typical of an essentially urbane outlook.

6. This constructive 'realism' is what Mondrian eventually found in cubism.

7. For examples of Breitner's work and late nineteenth century Dutch painting in general see H. Gerson, Zes Eewen Nederlandse Schilderkunst, Contact/Amsterdam, 1962, and the Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of Dutch Art ... Burlington House (1929), London, Oxford University Press, 1930, P. 155 to 176.

8. Mondrian's early painting of windmills were almost identical in mood and technique to paintings of windmills by The Hague artists. Compare Mill on River (S. 211) by Mondrian to The Four Mills by Mathijs Maris (Commemorative Catalogue ... Burlington House (1929), plate XC IV). All plate references for Mondrian's work are taken from Michel Seuphor Piet Mondrian: Life and Work and Robert Walsh, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944. References to Seuphor are designated by (S. -), if it is taken from the body of the text and refers to the page number. If taken from the catalogue raisence in the appendix, the designation will be (S. cat. -). References to Walsh will be designated by (W. -) and refers to the plate number.

9. The motif of dark buildings and trees set against pale moonlight was also richly developed by Johan Barthold Jongkind (1818-1891), and a good deal of Mondrian's early works bear very close resemblance to this early practitioner of plein-air painting.

Footnotes: Chapter II

1. Piet Mondrian, 'Toward the True Vision of Reality', Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art and other Essays, ed. Robert Motherwell, Wittenborn Schultz Inc., P. 10.

2. Jan Sluyters studied at Amsterdam Academy and won the Prix de Rome in 1904. When he returned to Holland in 1906 his style had been affected by Gauguin and Matisse. The 'fauvist' touch that marked Sluyters' new style might have had an affect upon Mondrian's own change of style in 1908, although there is no specific evidence. See Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 76. In 1909 Mondrian, Sluyters and an older artist C.R.H. Spoor held a retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

3. In 1882 Vincent Van Gogh worked in the studio of his cousin, Anton Mauve, who was one of the leading painters of the The Hague School.

4. The loose brushstroke was a timid step towards a 'modern-looking' canvas without actually sacrificing traditional pictorial values.

5. See Martin James, 'Mondrian and the Dutch Symbolists', The Art Journal, Vol. XXIII (Winter 1963-1964), P. 103.

6. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Madame H.P. Blavatsky and by the turn of the century had gained a very large following in Europe and America although Madame Blavatsky's reputation became discredited and the society broke into several splinter groups. The essential beliefs of the movement are two-fold. One is that a man attains to a higher primordial consciousness and spiritual power by being initiated into the knowledge of the secret doctrine, an occult source of ancient knowledge Madame Blavatsky claimed to have divined from India. Secondly this evolution to a higher consciousness is paralleled by an evolution in form as man becomes more and more aware of the primordial truths in the physical world. It is this latter ideal that has the closest parallel with Mondrian's own theories. See H.P. Blavatsky, The Key to Theosophy, The Theosophy Company, Los Angeles, 1930.

7. Stylism and realism are antithetical modes. Style transforms the world into a system of expressive conventions while realism accepts the world of objects as it is and observes it analytically and detatched. Cubism was realistic in that it recognized the canvas as an object but it bordered on stylism when used for an expressionistic point-of-view, as it was with many of the minor cubists and futurists. Mondrian, however, recognized it strictly as being a realistic mode and eventually turned 'cubism' into a completely concrete and realistic mode by making the image completely non-figurative.

8. The bold colouring of The Red Tree of 1908 (S. 83) has at first glance much in common with the late work of Vincent Van Gogh, whose second major retrospective in Amsterdam was held in 1905.

9. By conceptual I mean the role of the rational and intellectual faculties in the creative act. Conceptual meaning tends to be literary or 'poetic', and since its source is the mind, it leans towards abstraction and iconic stylization. Visual art is based primarily upon the rule of sight, of the eye and of the object world outside the intelligence. Placed into the context of painting in 1908, conceptual art is associated with symbolist stylism, which is actually a poetic intellectualism, and visual art is associated with impressionism and The Hague realism. Mondrian's sensibility had been directed visually throughout his early development, although it sometimes took on a 'poetic' touch, but once the question of intelligence and philosophy entered his concerns, he had to begin to modify this visuality in order to accommodate a new content.

10. For examples of Toorop's work see H. Gerson, Zes Eeuwen Nederlandse Schilderkunst, Contact/Amsterdam, 1962, plates 123, 124.

11. Seuphor dates this picture 1907. For the justification of a 1908 date see Robert Walsh, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1966, P. 106. Walsh's study is much more thoroughly researched and consequently more reliable. This thesis therefore uses Walsh as an authority in all cases of dispute.

12. This is a significant change in technique. Previously Mondrian worked in broad masses of pigment and generalized tonal areas; now he builds a picture from a massing of individual linear elements. The implications of this become more apparent when we look at his cubist works.

13. Robert Walsh, Loc. cit.

14. Ibid., P. 112. See Seuphor, P. 77,78,79.

15. In this attention to detail we see a reversal of the generalizing process which we noted in his earlier landscapes. In the 1908 oils such as Woods Near Oele, Windmill in Sunlight and the haystacks, the new linear freedom of the brush already was declaring this move away from organized masses towards a loose 'molecular' structure. The motif of the flower offered a ready-made linear, molecular structure. Consequently the rendering holds true to the detailed appearance of the original motif, and the linearity is analytical and descriptive, rather than freely 'constructive' as in the fauve works of the same period.

16. Quoted by Martin S. James in 'Mondrian and the Dutch Symbolists', The Art Journal, Vol. XXIII (Winter 1963-1964), P. 108.

17. Mondrian had been working on similar but inconsequential versions as early as 1903. See Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, cat. 21,22,25.

18. From the 1909 through 1910 Mondrian carried the technique of the free, broken 'fauvist' brushstroke even further than in the 1908 pictures. This is especially evident in the 1909-1910 series of the Westkapelle lighthouse (S. cat. 240-245). But the flat unmodulated brushwork of the Domberg church in question (S. 75) has much more in common with the 1911 works. The colouring also has the adulterated quality which it shares with Evolution and which separates it from the pure primaries of the 'fauve' works of 1908-1910.

19. See footnote 7. The realists working in a visual and impressionistic mode, naturally depicted objects in 'hollow' space. The abstraction of the stylists had, since the 1890's become increasingly two-dimensional. There were many reasons for this, but there is one which is especially pertinant to Dutch

19 (contd.) stylism. The Dutch stylists as a whole were more inspired by the public socialism of William Morris than the private aesthetism of the french symbolists. This led them to the public medium of mural art, already pioneered in the stylized religious murals of Anton Derkinderen (1859-1925). Coincidentally, the architect A.P. Berlage had in 1903 finished the Amsterdam Stock Exchange where the walls were left as an unobstructed flat surface. Commissions for murals were given by Berlage to the prominent stylists such as Jan Toorop, Willem Van Konijnburg, and Bart Van der Leck, whom Mondrian would meet in 1916. The architectural context of stylism, especially in the case of Berlage's architecture, demanded that the socialist motifs of these murals be sublimated to the flatness of the wall while maintaining the monumentality of spirit. This naturally strengthened the stylist tendancy towards two-dimensional abstraction.

20. Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 82.

Footnotes: Chapter III

1. Unlike the Dutch Stylists, whose abstraction was expressionistic and conceptual and whose monumental, two-dimensional imagery was conditioned by architecture (see footnote 19, chapter II), the flatness of Braque and Picasso's cubism in 1911 had evolved from the visual painting of Cezanne, and was essentially a 'constructive' art building its compositions in terms of the format of the canvas support. In 1911 Mondrian was approaching stylism but the sudden appearance of the powerful, visually-based abstractions of Braque and Picasso, which was closer to Mondrian's sensibility than conceptual stylism, offered Mondrian an alternative which he took.

2. See footnote 19, chapter II. As an example of how adament Berlage was about the integrity of the unadorned flat surface of the wall he writes:

"Above all we should show the naked wall in its sleek beauty ... Pillars and columns should have no projecting capitals: the joint should be fused with the flat surface of the wall." See Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time and Architecture, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967, P. 313.

3. Atmospheric impressionism here refers to the kind of visual painting which has the painterly quality of the impressionists rather than the linear and sculptural quality of academic painting.

4. Both impressionism and cubism have a common end; the construction of a satisfying composition, and both achieve this with molecular elements, free chunks of colour in the case of impressionism and chunks of matter in the case of cubism. Mondrian's early landscapes were compositionally constructive but with a broader, more generalized organization of large masses. However, his 'fauve' period with its free divisionist brushwork took his constructivism into a more molecular mode, which prepared him for cubism. This transition took him from the use of the depicted object as a constructive element where the means itself (i.e. paint on canvas) is invisible; to the blocks of freely brushed colour as a constructive element, where the means itself is acknowledged; then finally to cubism and neo-plasticism where the means itself is again invisible, but constructive elements are planes and lines as an end in themselves, rather than depicted objects.

5. Theosophy always emphasised the necessity of control which man's intelligence must hold over his environment and which was obtained through an understanding of the cosmic forces latent in the world. Man's spiritual evolution was seen to be paralleled by a corresponding technological and social evolution. See footnote 6, chapter II.

6. Robert Walsh, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944, Toronto, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1966, P. 126.

7. As subject matter in themselves, the facades, and the majority of Mondrian's motifs, have absolutely no iconological importance to the painting. Since the motif has no meaning, the interest of the picture is in the formal treatment. The subject, then, is chosen for its conduciveness to a certain type of formal treatment.

8. As we noted in chapter I, George Henri Breitner made frequent use of facades in his cityscapes. Mondrian, between 1908 and 1911 made many studies of church facades, but rarely facades of an urban nature.

9. The exact date of Mondrian's arrival in Paris is problematic. He left his Amsterdam address on December 20, 1911, but he received mail there as late as January 30, 1912. He registered in Paris in May. See Robert Walsh, Piet Mondrian, P. 7. However, since he exhibited in the Salon des Independantes in March, 1912, it seems likely that he would have arrived in Paris in time to catch the exhibition. He might even have arrived early enough to see the highly-publicised futurist exhibition which opened in the Galerie Bernheim on February 5, 1912.

10. These motifs of blossoming trees indicate that they might have been done in the spring, but this does not necessarily hold true. The organic curve of Flowering Trees is reminiscent of the futurist dynamic spiral and gives rise to possibilities that Mondrian had seen the futurist exhibition in February, or at least was affected by the controversial ideas that came out of this show.

11. Actually there is less interest in line itself than in the spacial compartments which the line defines, or in the tensions set up by sets of lines.

12. The focus of attention in 1912 was on the futurists and futurist-inspired works. The impact of futurism was felt in Russia, in Germany (e.g. Franz Marc of the Blue Rider Group), in America (Joseph Stella and John Marin), and to a lesser-acknowledged degree in Paris, where the cubists saw themselves in competition with the futurists. The dynamism of Robert Delaunay's Fenetres and Simultaneous Discs was openly sympathetic to futurism. Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending the Staircase, which was completed in January, 1912, just before the futurist exhibition, was withdrawn from the March, 1912, Salon des Independantes because it appeared to be too futuristic, something which annoyed Geizes and Metzinger. Picasso and Braque were quietly working on the side with their new papier colles, soon to take cubism in a new direction towards synthetic cubism.

13. See footnotes 9, 10, and 12. For general references to the futurist background see Raffaele Carrieri, Futurism, Edizioni del Milione, Milan.

14. Moreover, Denis' Theories 1890-1910 was published in 1912 and provided a further theoretical basis for abstract art. Denis and Serusier, who were impressed in the 1880's by Gauguin's synthetism, the scientific aesthetic of Charles Henri and Georges Seurat, and in the 1890's by Byzantine art and the cabbalistic mysticism of the Beuron Monks, were influential teachers after the turn of the century when the Golden Section cubists were attending art school. As for Picasso and Braque, they offered no manifesto, although they were closely associated with literary circles, and were close friends of such writers as Max Jacob, Andre Salmon and Guillaume Apollinaire.

15. See Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 98.

16. Quoted in Edward Fry, Cubism, London, McGraw-Hill, 1967, P. 99.

17. Elizabeth G. Holt, A Documentary History of Art, Vol. III, Garden City, Doubleday, 1966, P. 509. This essay was included in Maurice Denis' Theories: 1890-1910, which was published in 1912.

18. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, Du Cubisme, translated in full in Robert L. Herbert, Modern Artists on Art, P. 3.

19. Loc. cit.

20. Robert Herbert, Ibid., P. 4.

21. See Mondrian's discussion of art and reality in his notebooks of 1914 (Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 117), and his first article in the first issue of De Stijl in October, 1917 (Seuphor, Ibid., P. 142).

22. Robert Herbert, op. cit., P. 7.

23. Piet Mondrian, 'Towards the True Vision of Reality', Plastic Art ... and other Essays, P. 10.

24. Mondrian had also shown in the Salon des Independantes of 1911 and 1912.

25. Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 98.

26. Picasso and Braque in 1913 began to move away from the molecular structure of 'analytical' cubism to the generalized planes of 'Synthetic' cubism.

27. This is a major point-of-difference between the non-figurative art of Kandinsky and Mondrian. Kandinsky used line in an expressive function and descriptive manner, while Mondrian gave line an analytical function of space determination, the line having no expressive value itself.

Footnotes: Chapter IV

1. According to Seuphor, Mondrian spoke very little of Theosophy after his return to Paris in February, 1919, and the feeling is that Theosophy as a philosophical basis to his work had by 1919 been replaced by the built-in philosophical premisis of neo-plasticism. See Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian P. 54. Mondrian was, however, an avid reader of Theosophical literature all through his life. Among the few books found in his possession at his death were A New Image of the World by Dr. M.H.J. Schoenmaekers, a speech by Rudolf Steiner and a book by Krishnamurti. Seuphor, Ibid., P. 57

2. Quoted in Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian: Life and Work, New York, Harry N. Abrahms, 1956, P. 117.

3. Piet Mondrian, Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art and other Essays, ed. Robert Motherwell, New York, Wittenborn Schultz Inc., 1951, P. 13.

4. The use of the term 'impressionistic' here describes a molecular complex of lines which make visual sense when seen as a whole. Mondrian uses a 'divisionism' of lines just as the pointillists and impressionists used a 'divisionism' of colour.

5. Robert P. Walsh, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1966, P. 160. See Walsh, 80 and Seuphor, 260.

6. In the 'Pier and Ocean' series the convergence of linear tension just above center gave the effect of a space that is stretched back from the picture plane. There is no such tension in Composition 1916 (W. 80, S. 260) and this heralds a return to the flatness of 1914 works such as Composition 6 (S. 135).

7. Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 134

8. H.L.C. Jaffe, De Stijl: 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art, London, Alex Tiranti, 1956.

9. Ibid., P. 55.

10. See A.G. Lehmann, The Symbolist Aesthetic in France, 1885-1895, Oxford, 1950.

11. Jaffe, De Stijl, P. 57.

12. Loc. cit.

13. Mondrian had never before given his works a slick finish. He had always acknowledged the surface as being paint; he never made his means 'invisible', and indeed, his attraction to the texture of paint and the obvious brushstroke, has the air of the mystique of the maker, something which Mondrian scorned in his later years.

14. See chapter II, footnote 19, and chapter III, footnote 2. For examples of Bart Van der Leck's work see Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 263.

15. Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 130.

16. Piet Mondrian, 'Towards the True Vision of Reality', Plastic Art ... and other Essays, P. 13.

17. Later Mondrian Wrote: "In plastic art it is necessary to choose constructive means which are of one piece with that which one wants to express" (Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art, Translated in Robert Herbert, Modern Artists on Art, P. 119). Mondrian looked askance at subjectivity which was inherent in the image, but he recognized the direct confrontation of the viewer's subjectivity with an objective, concrete image that had no subjective distance beyond itself.

18. Mondrian was adament that the line, the means, be absolutely neutral and do absolutely nothing other than determine units of space. He also saw that this neutral, straight line would have an eternal, unchanging, perfectability (Natural Reality and Abstract Reality, quoted in Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 314.

19. This essay is printed in full in Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian P. 303-352.

20. The terms 'expressive' 'expressionistic' etc., are at best only approximate and it cannot be denied that Mondrian 'expressed' himself and his attitudes towards life in his art. The fundamental uniqueness of Mondrian's aesthetic, however, is that the artist takes his inner vision from the plastic laws of the outer world, and his inner vision only asserts itself during the act of creation when the artist intuitively organizes his constructive elements according to the fundamental plastic laws of painting, the discovery of which is the basis of his formal evolution from 1911 cubist works to the neo-plasticism of 1920. See Piet Mondrian, Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art in Robert Herbert, Modern Artists on Art.

21. See footnote 9.

22. A similar effect of hard-edge forms floating through limitless space can be seen in the 'supermatist' works of Kasimir Malevich, a Russian who was developing his abstractions at the same time as Mondrian.

23. Robert Walsh, Piet Mondrian, P. 162.

24. Piet Mondrian, 'Towards the True Vision of Reality', Plastic Art ... and other Essays, P. 13.

25., Loc. cit.

26. This term can have distinct but closely-related meanings. As used here it refers to a depicted image which is isolated in a field of space. It can also refer to forms which have a static, individualistic and monolithic character and thus sets up an unequivalent or 'tragic' situation. "I saw the tragic in a wide horizon or a high cathedral", Loc. cit.. In either case the image is not absorbed and neutralized into a larger, universal field.

27. Loc. cit.

28. See W. 83 and S. cat. 285-289.

29. Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, P. 143.

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CHRONOLOGY

1872 Born on March 7, in Amersfoot, Utrecht. His father is the headmaster of the Amersfoot Calvinist Primary School.

1886 Begins training himself for a career as an artist and is tutored by his father and his uncle, Fritz Mondriaan, who was a member of The Hague school.

1889 Receives certificate to teach primary school drawing.

1892 Enters the Academy of Fine Art in Amsterdam. Vincent Van Gogh retrospective exhibition in the Amsterdam museum.

1894 Joins Arti et Amicitiae.

1897 First exhibition with the Arti.

1898 Exhibits at Arti where he is praised as "most promising exhibitor" (Walsh, P. 39).

1901 Disqualified for final Prix de Rome competition. Brief trips to England and Spain with Simon Maris, son of The Hague painter Willem Maris.

1903 Wins a prize at the Arti exhibition.

1904 Paints in isolation at Uden (January 18, 1904 - January 27, 1905).

1905 Rents a studio in Amsterdam in February and works in the area to 1908. Second Vincent Van Gogh retrospective in Amsterdam. In Paris, Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Braque, Dufy and the Dutchman Van Dongen create a sensation at the Salon D'Automne and are labelled 'fauves'.

1907 Picasso paints Les demoiselles d'Avignon, and in the following year he and George Braque begin their cubist experiments.

1908 Visits Domberg on the Zeeland Coast in September. Fauve and pointillist influences appear in works such as The Red Tree.

1909 January retrospective exhibition in the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam with C.R.H. Spoor (1867-1928) and Jan Sluyters (1881-1957). Joins Theosophical Society in May. Returns to Domberg in June.

1910 Serves as a member of the selection jury for the St. Lucas jury. Helps found Moderne Kunstkring with Conrad Kickert, Jan Toorop and Jan Sluyters.

1911 Exhibits in spring Salon des Independants in Paris. Exhibits in Domberg with Jan Toorop. His works of this period, such as Evolution, show a strong tendancy towards stylism. Exhibits in October Moderne Kunstkring exhibition, which features twenty-eight canvases by Cezanne, and cubist works by Braque and Picasso. Gives up Amsterdam address December 20, but receives mail in Amsterdam to January 30, 1912. Begins cubist-inspired works such as Still Life with Ginger Pot I.

1912 Arrives in Paris in late winter or early spring. Exhibits in Salon des Independants in March. First Paris Futurist exhibition on February 5. First exhibition of the Section d'Or group in October. Gleizes and Metzinger publish Du Cubism. He works in a cubist style derived from Braque and Picasso, and his work becomes increasingly two-dimensional and abstract through 1913-1914. Takes French lessons during the winter of 1912-1913.

1913 Exhibits in the Salon des Independants. Apollinaire, writing in Montjoie, remarks that Mondrian's cubism is "very abstract".

1914 He returns to Holland in August, just before war broke out. Visits Amsterdam and Domberg. Begins Pier and Ocean series, commonly known as the 'plus-minus' pictures.

1915 Settles in Laren, an artist's colony outside of Amsterdam in the summer and meets Dr. Schoenmaekers.

1916 Meets Theo Van Doesberg and Bart Van der Leck.

1917 Exhibits earliest non-figurative 'hard-edge' pictures such as Composition in Colour - B in the Hollansche Kunstenaarskring exhibition in May in Amsterdam. Publishes first article in first issue of De Stijl in October. First use of the term 'neo-plasticism' (nieuwe beeldung).

1918 Signs De Stijl group manifesto in November. Paints first completely two-dimensional, non figurative image, Composition: Colour Planes with Grey Contours.

1919 Returns to Paris in February. Continues lozenge-shaped and checkerboard works. Begins developing his compositions from a molecular to a simpler, more monumental spacing.

1920 Publishes Le Neo-Plasticism in Paris and writes a long trialogue, Natural Reality and Abstract Reality.

1937 Publishes Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art in Circle, a London art and architecture magazine edited by Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson.

1938 Moves to London.

1940 Moves to New York.

1944 After he had begun a new stylistic evolution signified by the return to a molecular composition in Broadway Boogie-Woogie (1942/43) and Victory Boogie-Woogie (1944), he died of pneumonia on February 1.