

“Always Further:” The Effects of Conviction and the Art of Piet Mondrian

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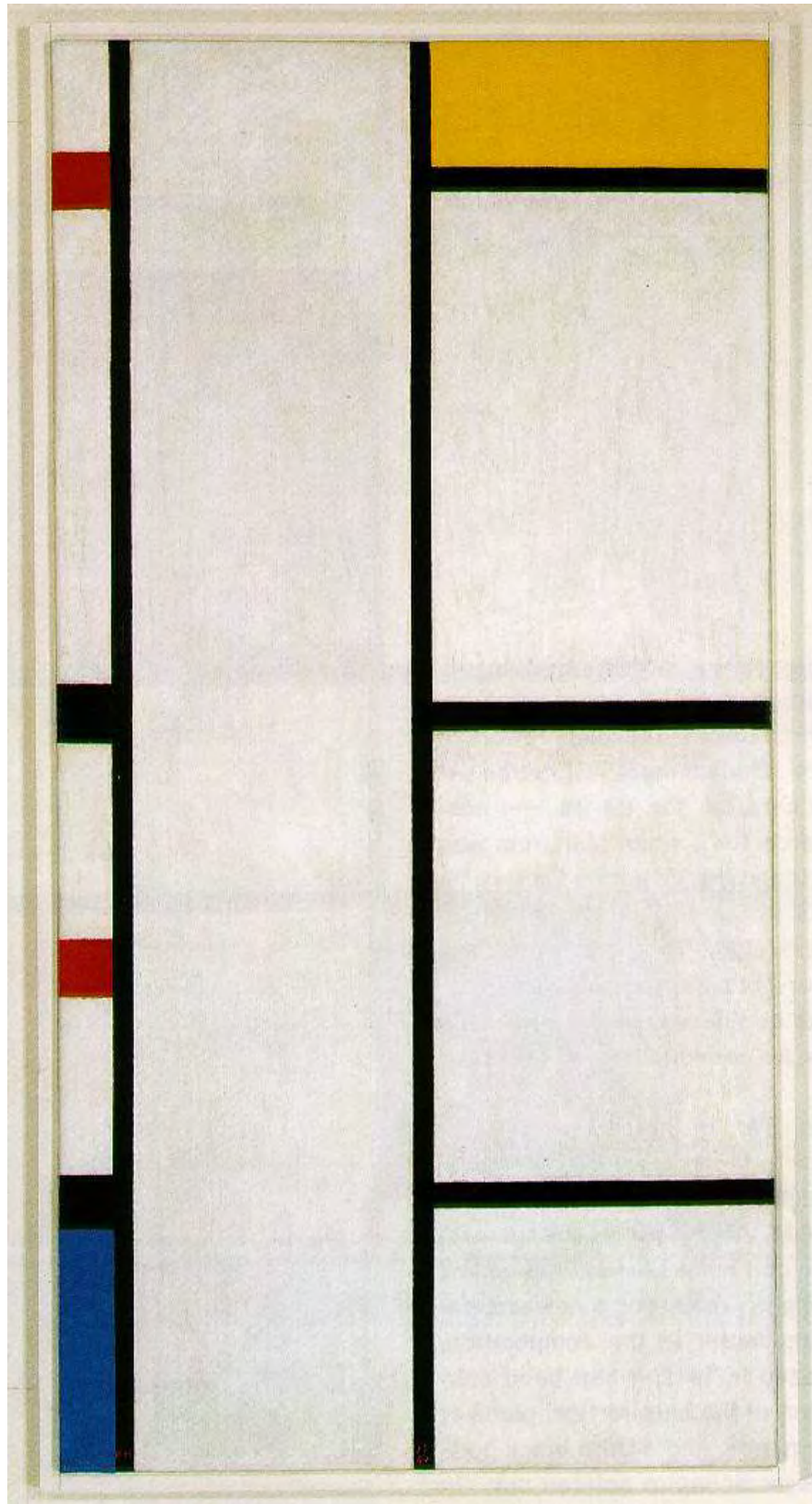


Figure 1: Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. III Blanc-Jaune/Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1935-42, oil on canvas.

In the midst of a rapidly-changing Modern world, Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan – later known as Piet Mondrian – became transfixed by the goal of representing the solid and immutable truth of what he came to see as “pure reality” – the essence of the universe – in an exact style of painting. This deeply spiritual desire to understand and communicate through his art what he saw as the greatest and purest truth of life, with the dynamic equilibrium of unequal opposites that gives it vitality, drove him “always further” onward to simplify his creative forms down to what he perceived to be their pure essence, and caused him to transition from creating representational depictions of nature to what he instead saw as nature’s core. One such painting, his ascetic *Composition No. III Blanc-Jaune/Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (Figure 1), (created in 1935 and altered in 1942), gives a window into his aesthetic perceptions and the growth and development he continued to experience in the near-decade before his death.

In 1872, in Amersfoort, Netherlands, the first son and second child of Johanna Christina and Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan Sr. was born, and christened Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan, Jr. The senior Mondriaan made his living as headmaster of the local Dutch Reformed primary school, and again was head of the local Christian primary school in Winterswijk on the German border when they moved there eight years later.¹ As this affiliation suggests, this strictly Calvinist Dutch Reformed persuasion of Christianity was an integral part of Mondrian’s early years, and it is likely that aspects of this worldview influenced his later interest in and identification with Theosophy.²

¹ Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Piet Mondrian* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1970), 11.

² Virginia Pitts Rembert, *Piet Mondrian in the USA : The Artist's Life and Work* (Dulles, Va: Parkstone Press, 2002), 15.

A love and aptitude for art apparently existed in the Mondriaan family, as Piet's father was an accomplished amateur artist who later gave his son lessons, and his uncle Fritz Mondriaan was a professional artist of the Hague school of painting. Although his uncle's influence is evident in his early painting style and subject matter, even these beginnings show Mondrian's focus on the larger movement of forms, just as later in his life his focus expanded to accurately representing the largest form – universal essence. Commenting in his *Toward the True Vision of Reality* on his early inclinations in his own painting, he noted: "I preferred to paint landscape 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."³ This same preference for large planes that would convey presence, and a sense of the "monumental," can be seen in many of his paintings, such as his series of lighthouses (at Westkapelle) and other architectural paintings like his *Church Tower at Domburg* (1911) and *Red Mill* (1911) (Figure 4).⁴ His early affinity for comprehending the whole of something is reflected in his life-long pursuit of the monumental essence of the universe, which became the driving force behind his personal motto: "Always further."

After completing his primary education around age 14, Mondrian declared to his family his desire to become an artist. Recognizing that this was not the most financially stable choice, they required that he first get his certificate in teaching drawing, to be able to support himself if necessary.⁵ Accordingly, he acquired his certificates for primary

³ Piet Mondrian, "Toward the True Vision of Reality", [exhibition pamphlet] (New York: Valentine Gallery, January-February 1942), rpt. in *The New Art, the New Life*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1993), 338.

⁴ Jaffé, 80.

⁵ Jaffé, 3.

and secondary education, and by 1892 moved to Amsterdam, where he had received a grant to study at the Royal Academy.⁶ He continued here until 1896 – meanwhile joining multiple art societies with which he exhibited – and at this time he concluded that his studies were finished.

Returning home to Winterswijk, he commenced a period of landscape painting that took some fascinating turns in expressive style over the next decade and a half, and that demonstrate the seminal influence that grew through his other styles

into his most famous linear color-plane works. Starting in 1889, with his *Wood with Beech Trees* (Figure 2), Mondrian demonstrated his affinity for Post-Impressionism in his use of cloisonné around his trees, and the sensitive but solid treatment of his forms that identified more closely with Post-Impressionism than

Impressionism. However, a marked

directionality was already occurring: by comparison with Paul Cézanne's *Chestnut Trees*



Figure 2: Piet Mondrian, *Wood with Beech Trees*, oil on canvas, 1889



Figure 3: Paul Cézanne, *Chestnut Trees at the Jas de Bouffan*, oil on canvas, 1887, 73 x 92 cm

⁶ *Paintings*, The Mondrian Trust, New York, 2008, www.pietmondrian.net, 2 November, 2012.

at the *Jas de Bouffan* (Figure 3), it is evident that a much greater vertical and horizontal emphasis exists in the structure and strokes used by Mondrian. Three of his windmills during this time – *Stammer Mill with Streaked Sky* (1905-6), *Windmill in Sunlight* (1908), and *Red Mill at Domburg* (1911) (Figure 4) – show his transition from Post-Impressionistic forms (Van Gogh’s influence is clear in *Stammer Mill*), through a semi-pointillism (*Windmill in Sunlight*) to a highly-reduced, solid and imposing mass of form and contrast of simple color (*Red Mill*) that hint at his transition in the next year (late 1911) to Cubism.⁷ The earlier *Stammer Mill* shows strong horizontality and sections of color and value as form, but not as much simplification as his later *Windmill in Sunlight*, where he uses entirely primary colors and has (in the center section of the windmill particularly) strong verticals and horizontals with an almost grid-like rhythm.⁸

During this time, Mondrian chose in 1909 to become a member of the Netherlands Theosophical Society, an esoteric theological group whose doctrines were collected from various world religions, with strong Buddhist influences. Its founder, Madame Helena Blavatsky, has been identified by many critics as a charlatan and plagiarist, but heralded by others as a visionary. Regardless of her true nature, or of which portions of Theosophical doctrines he later excluded from his belief system, the beliefs of Madame Blavatsky appear to have exerted the influence necessary to move him away from his Christian upbringing into a different worldview that would radically transform his life and painting. As his close friend Harry Holtzman expressed, “Theosophy was important to him for its philosophical exegesis, and for its vocabulary of

⁷ Jaffé, 96.

⁸ Ibid, 23.



Figure 4:

Piet Mondrian –

upper left -- *Stammer Mill with Streaked Sky*, 1905-6, oil on canvas, 25 1/4" x 31 1/8"

middle right – *Windmill in Sunlight*, 1908, oil on canvas, 44 7/8" x 34 1/4"

bottom left – *Red Mill*, late 1911, oil on canvas, 59" x 33 7/8"

abstract thought. It reinforced the universalism essential to the broadening scope of his perception. [...] by the end of 1911, its influence was thoroughly absorbed and his art completely transformed.”⁹ This became another fundamental turning point in his quest “Always further” to discover truth, as from this association and its focus on understanding the mystical unity of humanity, the cosmos, and the divine, grew his belief in the fundamental importance and purpose of art, “which is to conquer individual expression and to reveal, as far as possible, the universal aspect of life.”¹⁰ This, to him, was the most essential reality, and he deeply believed – “it is the task of art to express a clear vision of reality.”¹¹

In the beginning of his search for how to understand and represent this reality, he saw the works of Cubist painters like Picasso, Braque, and Leger in an exhibition honoring Paul Cézanne in Amsterdam.¹² As he later recalled: “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. [...] I admired Matisse... but I was immediately drawn to the Cubists...”¹³ To him, Cubism had the language necessary to express that “true way” – ultimate reality – conveying ultimate reality without reference to the transient particular forms that give visual identity to objects in the world around us. These, he frequently mentioned, must be abolished in order for “true” relationships (of unity, of everything

⁹ Harry Holtzman, *Piet Mondrian: The Man and His Work*, introduction to *The New Art, the New Life*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1993), 3-4.

¹⁰ Piet Mondrian, “Pure Plastic Art” in *Masters of Abstract Art [exhibition]*, ed. Stephan C. Lion (New York: New Art Center, 1942), rpt. in *The New Art, the New Life*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1993), 342.

¹¹ Mondrian, *True Vision*, 341.

¹² Jaffé, 13.

¹³ Mondrian, *True Vision*, 338.

Figure 5: Piet Mondrian –
All oil on canvas

Top left - *Red Tree*, 1910

Middle right - *The Gray Tree*,
1912

Bottom left - *Tree*, 1912

Bottom right – *Eucalyptus*
Tree in Gray and Tan, 1912



within the universe) to become apparent. To pursue this new direction in art, he moved to Paris in December of 1911, and immersed himself in Cubist painting. (Works like *The Red Tree* [1910], *The Gray Tree* [1912], *Tree* [1912], and *Eucalyptus Tree in Gray and Tan* [1912] (Figure 5), demonstrate the progression of Mondrian's thought.) His new palette in this period also matched the subdued colors used by the Cubists. In the middle of this period of discovery, he was called away in 1914 to his father's deathbed in Holland, and was compelled to remain there until 1919 by the beginning of World War I a few months later. This change of environment was helpful, however, as Mondrian came to realize that "...Cubism...was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality," and that he was essentially remaining an Impressionist by merely abstracting physical forms.¹⁴

While in Holland, he made the acquaintance of artists like Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leek, and others, and became a founding member of the magazine *De Stijl*; the tenets of aesthetic expression he propounded in this publication have had a lasting impact on architecture (in the movement of the same name and beyond), clothing, and art. His own writings best sum it up:

"We must not see beyond nature: rather, we must, so to speak, see *through* nature. We must see deeper, see *abstractly* and above all *universally*. ...For this we must first free ourselves from *attachment* to the external[...] ...plastic vision means becoming one with the universal."¹⁵
 "...*the abolition of all particular form* is the only way to accomplish [the unity resulting from the equivalence of opposites]. ...vertical and horizontal lines are the expression of two opposing forces; these exist

¹⁴ Ibid, 338.

¹⁵ Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," in *De Stijl*, ed. Theo van Doesburg (Laren, Netherlands, 1919-1920), rpt. in *The New Art, the New Life*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1993), 88-89, 97.

everywhere and dominate everything; their reciprocal action constitutes 'life.'"¹⁶

Regarding his progression of thought through Cubism and his time in Holland, Mondrian asserted: "More and more I excluded from my painting all curved lines, until finally my compositions consisted only of vertical and horizontal lines... [seeking to show the true reality of the tangible world through] a multiplicity of crossing verticals and horizontals [...] I forsook natural color for pure color."¹⁷ During this time, he also declared that "the right angle is the only constant relationship," and maintained this as his only way of intersecting lines.¹⁸ Upon returning to his studio in Paris, the contrast between his current work and the canvases he had been separated from five years before was evident. "The colours are applied in patches, and the horizontal and vertical lines have become absolutely straight, in accordance with the artist's avowed aim of creating 'an exact style'."¹⁹

Pushing forward, "always further," he came to see that he was treating space as a background, instead of a compositional form, and in this not expressing the fundamental unity of the cosmos. "...reality is form *and* space. [...] *Actually all* is space, form as well as what we see as empty space. ...form is limited space concrete only through its determination."²⁰ To change the expression of his colored planes as objects, and create a merging and unity of perceived figure and ground, he began to limit his use of color to

¹⁶ Mondrian, *True Vision*, 339.

¹⁷ Ibid, 339, 338.

¹⁸ Ibid., 339.

¹⁹ Michael Seuphor, *Mondrian: Paintings* (New York: Tudor, 1958), 7.

²⁰ Mondrian, *True Vision*, 339.

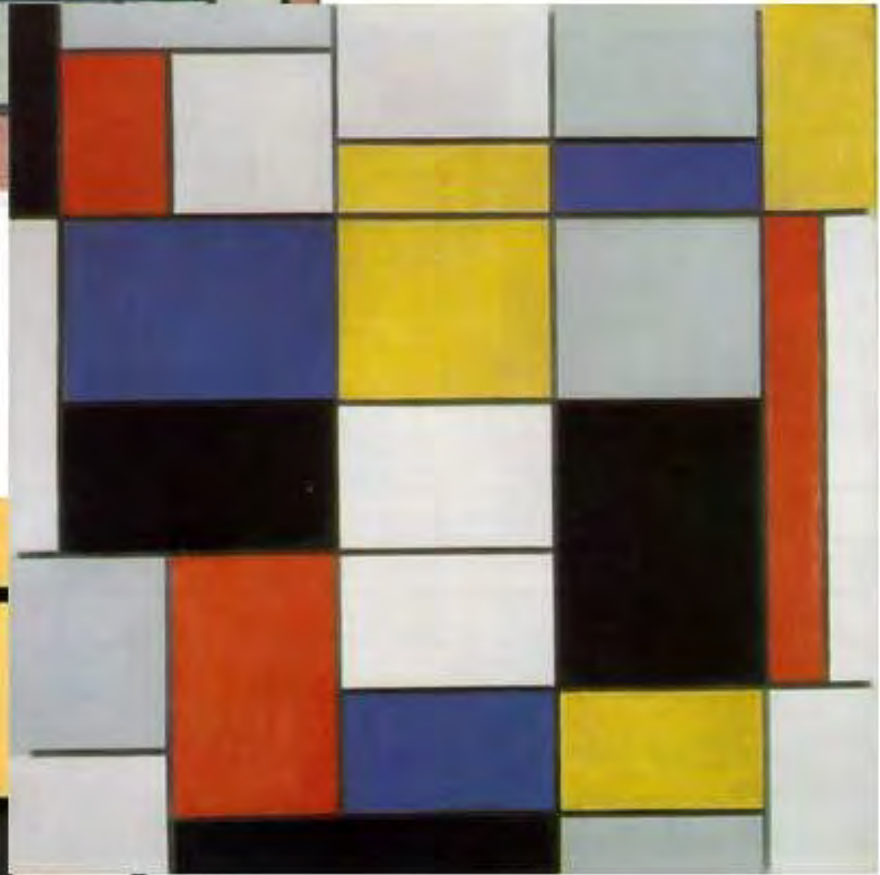
the primaries, along with white, gray, and black, using right angles and emphasizing the lines running through his compositions as well as causing them to overlap one another – “[This made] their relationships... more active, [resulting in] a far more dynamic expression. Here again I tested the value of destroying particularities of form and thus opening the way to a more universal construction.”²¹

His *Composition: Color Planes with Gray Contours* (1918), *Large Composition A* (1920), and *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black* (1921) (Figure 6) show this transition in use of line, placement of shape, and use of color, and this new style was given the name *Neo-Plasticism* by Mondrian. As Martin S. James has noted, “...after destroying all particularity in the crucible of Cubism, he turned to the grandeur and unity of space itself seen in its horizontal and vertical expansion.”²² His ensuing years in Paris (before the advent of World War II), were spent “perfecting this style. Every painting he finished became the starting point for the next one, which had to be a step forward.”²³ The transition from larger color planes to predominantly black and white works with spare use of color was made through these years, and different sizes and orientations of canvas were used in his experimentation. (Significantly, his “lozenge” works set the stage for his later *Victory Boogie Woogie*, even though upright rectangular and square canvases remained his primary format.) No longer were planes of color and line contained by the canvas, but instead began to appear to travel beyond it, unbounded. He learned as he worked, and painstakingly re-worked; as Harry Holtzman later noted,

²¹ Ibid., 340.

²² Martin S. James, "Mondrian and the Dutch Symbolists," *Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter, 1963-1964): 103-111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/774505> (accessed September 27, 2012).

²³ Jaffé, 35.



“Mondrian’s painting method, which he called ‘pure intuition,’ was the direct approach, by trial and error, to the given space of the canvas.”²⁴ To him, this intuition was vital: a way to touch and understand the unity and essence of pure reality instead of being distracted by particulars.

In 1938, with the threat of war howling, Mondrian accepted the offer of friends to move to Hampstead, England for safety, but when his studio windows were shattered by a bomb blast, he left England for New York two years later.²⁵ Received here by Harry Holtzman and other friends, he altered some canvases previously begun in Paris, including *Composition No. III Blanc-Jaune/Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*. This painting was one of a group of three, begun in 1935, that were twice as tall as they were wide, and this form factor, “entirely distinct” from the rest of his work and with its notable divergence unexplained, still arouses curiosity.²⁶ Dominant parallel vertical lines run through and off the canvas, and Mondrian later decided that this strong masculine element left the canvas without the “equilibrium of opposites” he often mentioned seeking for, and added balancing horizontal planes of color and bands of black.²⁷ In his later compositions in New York, even these signature black lines would melt away, as “inevitably, the artist began to question any use of black as unnecessary and undesirable. He associated black with the war, for him a tragic ‘conflict of particulars’ ...”²⁸

²⁴ Holtzman, 6.

²⁵ Ibid, 2.

²⁶ Jaffé, 150.

²⁷ Ibid, 150.

²⁸ Rembert, 63.

A yellow rectangle dominates the upper left corner – vivid and warm – while two small red squares and a tall blue rectangle give tension and life to the left-hand side of the canvas. Thick but smooth application of paint across the areas of white cause the black bands in some places to appear recessed in the canvas. This – en totale – was to Mondrian yet another expression of spiritual reality, and an opportunity for others to receive and understand it, for “Unconsciously, every true artist has always been moved by the beauty of line, color and relationships for their own sake and not by what they may represent,”²⁹ because the changing physical forms we see are “merely imperfect manifestations of perfect essences which comprise the true reality of the universe.”³⁰ He believed fiercely that he could introduce the world to these pure, unchanging truths.

As Arthur Chandler has said, “He envisioned all of man’s art, culture, and mind evolving irrevocably in this spiritual direction: the understanding of the real truth, and the attainment of a dynamic equilibrium everywhere in man’s existence. ... [this] infused all his art and thought with a sense of unalterable purpose.”³¹ This was indeed what spurred the lifelong transformation in his art from representational Impressionism to abstract Neo-Plasticism: confident belief that he was given the gift of vision and intuition to see through nature to its fundamental core, and as an artist had a responsibility to represent this “true reality” to others who were unaware of it. Following this abiding conviction is what urged him “always further.”

²⁹ Mondrian, *Pure Plastic Art*, 342.

³⁰ Thomas W Leavitt, Introduction to *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944: [exhibition] Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts*. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1965), 2.

³¹ Arthur Chandler, *The Aesthetics of Piet Mondrian*. (New York: MSS Information Corp. 1972), 29.

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