

While Mondrian's work as a whole constitutes a unified process with no breaks in continuity, it can be divided into four phases for explanatory purposes.

The initial naturalistic phase stretches from his earliest work until the period around 1907 (**1-17**).

This is followed by a phase identifiable as expressionistic and symbolist, which developed between 1907 and 1911 (**18-35**).

The third phase (1911-20) can be divided in turn into a Cubist period (1911-15) (**36-45**) followed by one of development toward completely abstract plastic space (1916-20) (**46-53**) that the artist was to call Neoplasticism.

The Neoplastic phase (1921-44) occupied Mondrian for the rest of his life (**54-71**) in a gradual honing of the expressive tools that were ultimately to achieve complete fulfillment with an image that the artist painted in 1942-43 (**72**), leaving **73** unfinished.

His way of depicting reality changed between 1893 (**1**) and 1943 (**72, 73**): from images that reproduce the outward appearance of the world, to which we are accustomed, to compositions of lines and planes of color, a space that no longer seems to have anything in common with our immediate perception of reality.

At the beginning of his work as an artist and until 1906-07 at least, Mondrian painted in accordance with the tried and tested canons of naturalistic painting, otherwise known as realistic or figurative. This way of representing reality is based on the perspective handling of pictorial space, i.e. the evocation of a supposed third dimension creating an illusion of depth on the two-dimensional surface of a canvas. While sharing the same expressive language with other artists, Mondrian obviously expressed his own vision of things. During the naturalistic phase, the young artist painted a variety of still lifes, a great many landscapes, and a certain number of human figures (**1, 2, 3, 4**, etc.).

The transition toward the Expressionist phase came about when the artist began to use colors with greater freedom (**20, 22, 24**).

The acceleration triggered by the process of industrialization and the new rhythms of life, not to mention the advent of photography, contributed to the transformation undergone by the arts as from the second half of the 19th century. No longer required to provide a faithful depiction of detail, painters felt freer to interpret the appearances of the world.

Those previously wishing to create a relationship between a red and a blue were necessarily obliged to paint objects that normally have those colors. Now painters instead used colors in order to express the feelings that objects and situations aroused in them. A cloud became red (**22**) if that could serve to express the strong contrast felt between the immensity of the natural horizon and the miniscule presence of the person beholding it. The earth took on a blue tinge (**25**) if the painter saw this color as best expressing the vital energy connecting earth and sky through the shape of a tree. The sky became a reddish brown (**28**) in order to evoke the interpenetration and equivalence of solid (a building) and void (the heavens). The artist's inner vision influenced the outer appearance of things.

In addition to a freer use of color, this phase is characterized by the choice of certain subjects that appear to have interested Mondrian more than others: landscapes with a predominantly horizontal development of space (**22, 26, 30**), windmills, lighthouses and church façades standing out in all their vertical majesty (**24, 28, 31**), a single tree (**25, 29**).

The landscapes of the naturalistic phase representing scenes of rural life (**2, 4, 8, 9**) gave way to endless deserted expanses in which Mondrian seems to

be intent on emphasizing the infinite aspect of nature **(30)**. At the same time, in his paintings of buildings he evokes a man-made space which, unlike the natural landscape, is concentrated in a finite and wholly vertical volume **(31)**.

The painter appears to focus in this phase on expressing contrast, both through the use of strong colors and with the alternation of opposing thrusts. Horizontal compositions are juxtaposed with others characterized by marked vertical development. Mondrian was in search of space based on a relationship between opposing entities because he felt in his heart the contrast between the virtually infinite manifold dimension of nature and the finite and individual human condition, between the physical space of the external world stretching away beyond the horizons of sight (especially in the Netherlands) and the mental space internally developed by the human subject; the contrast between matter and spirit, between nature **(30)** and artifice **(31)**.

Every natural entity is born, develops, and returns to the universal cycle of life driven by a dialectic process of reciprocally opposing forces. It is out of contrast and opposition that life is born and develops. The entire existence of individuals is marked by the search for equilibrium and synthesis between contradictory drives.

The artist perceived and expressed reality through relations between opposites that he identified in the two-dimensional space of the painting with horizontal and vertical.

While horizontal extension predominates in the landscapes **(C 30)** and vertical development in the buildings **(C 31)**, the two opposing directions interpenetrate in the figure of a single tree **(C 35)**. What the artist sees in the figure of a tree is a vertical (the trunk) interacting with horizontals (the branches). In other words, he sees a synthesis between the canvases in which the horizontal extension of the natural landscape (equivalent to the branches) predominates and those that represent an architectural volume (equivalent to the trunk).

In this phase the tree becomes the visual metaphor of a search for equilibrium between contrasting and apparently irreconcilable entities: the infinite dimension of nature and the finite condition of the human being; the urges of the natural life of the instincts and the opposing and more typically human drives that we call spiritual.

The subsequent abstract compositions of horizontal and vertical lines are already present in the figure of a tree, albeit in a form still veiled by appearances.

This marked the beginning of a long path toward the development of a plastic space capable of dynamically expressing equivalence between the most disparate and indeed opposite things. Contemplating the duality within oneself and the multiplicity of the world; opening up the self to the diversity that life brings with itself but without getting lost and without forgetting that all the variety of the world is still in any case a unity. Multiplicity and unity, infinite and finite, universal and individual: painting became a form of spiritual exercise for Mondrian.

He painted landscapes, buildings or trees, and did so with all the mastery of a great painter capable of transforming the surface of the canvas into a precious artifact as regards richness of texture, combinations of color, and dynamic balancing of the composition. It is essential to see the original works in order to appreciate all their beauty. Mondrian was a painter and loved colors, especially when they succeeded in expressing all the vitality and splendor of nature in a balanced form. His aim in painting those landscapes, buildings, and trees was not, however, solely to reproduce the fleeting appearance of things. The artist read and interpreted those objects as visual metaphors of existential meanings, as plastic symbols of a deeper reality.

Matisse: "Beneath the succession of moments that makes up the superficial existence of beings and things, clothing them in changing appearances that soon vanish, it is possible to seek a truer and more essential character, upon which the artist will fasten in order to give a more lasting interpretation of reality." ²

Mondrian's eye addressed the objects and situations of the external world but pulsed with a wholly internal rhythm.

Painting means observing the world, experiencing the inebriation of its colors, and transforming its boundless variety into the most condensed forms of thought. Every work of art is the enactment of a finite field of relations that evoke the far more complex and elusive relations perceived by the consciousness in the infinite space of reality.

Cézanne: "Painting is not copying the object in a servile manner but capturing the harmony between numerous relations and transposing them into your own system, developing them in accordance with a new and original logic." ³

Mondrian's Cubist phase (**36-45**) can be summarized as the attempt to describe the intimate reality concealed behind the changing appearances of everyday life.

A single tree is transformed (**29, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40**) and becomes a set of lines, segments, and circular tensions (**41**) that work in the two-dimensional space of a canvas to evoke the dynamic and opposing play of forces capable of giving birth in nature to a simultaneously simple and complex structure like a tree. In actual fact, everything can appear simple or complex. Every tree we observe is different but shares some essential characteristics with other trees. The relationship between the horizontal of the branches and the vertical of the trunk transpiring from the static form of that particular tree (**C 35**) is multiplied in a variety of small relationships (**C 41, 42**) that, being abstracted from the contingent aspect of things, can express the complex structure of a single tree but also a virtually infinite number of trees and all the other forms of nature considered as a whole (**C 45**).

The point of observation is fixed in **C 35** and bound up with the apparent form of a single object observed from a single viewpoint; in **C 41** and **42** the point of observation is mobile and contemplates a reality that, while changing constantly in appearance, succeeds through compositional accuracy in manifesting equilibrium and harmony.

Mondrian thus produced paintings that sacrificed the outer and more familiar appearance of objects so as to focus the gaze on the changing relations generated between things when the observer moves with respect to the landscape and the landscape constantly changes in appearance as it slides past; a dynamic space that takes the perpendicular relationship as a fixed point of reference making it possible to open up to and address an ever-changing reality.

The modern painters no longer saw reality as something certain and permanent to be crystallized once and for all on canvas in a certain form, but rather as an endless series of relations between mankind and the surrounding space that takes shape and then dissolve at ever-increasing speed. What remains of all this fleeting reality?

What characterizes and unifies within the observer's consciousness all these forms that suddenly appear and disappear a moment later?

How long can a tree, a building or a landscape last when observed from a moving position? And if it lasts for such a short time, if the "same" landscape changes every instant, what landscape is to be pinned down on the canvas?

Realistic (figurative) painting represented just one of the many possible aspects manifested simultaneously in the dynamic modern reality at the beginning of the 20th century. Within the multitude of different landscapes, it was necessary to find one capable of expressing them all without being fossilized in any, to evoke a "landscape" encapsulating the essence of all that fleeting reality.

In **C 45** a variety of signs consisting of small horizontal and vertical dashes express a dynamic and complex space. Every sign is unique by virtue of the different type of relationship established in each case between the two opposing directions. Every sign appears different, just as the thousands of entities

populating the real space of the world are different from one another. Every sign differs from the others but they all share the same intimate nature (the perpendicular relationship), just as every human being, every tree, and every natural landscape is unique and unrepeatable but all express some fundamental characteristics that make it possible to discern an invisible overall design.

The "landscape" on which the abstract vision is concentrated overlooks the peculiar aspect of each individual thing so as to focus on what the things have in common.

As Mondrian was to put it, *"art must express the universal"*.⁴

If you want to pay tribute to the vastness and beauty of nature, what matters is not what you paint but how you paint it. What counts are the forms and colors used on the surface of a canvas. If the forms and colors are the right ones, the surface of the canvas will come to life on being observed.

Painters must be capable of evoking all the beauty and richness of the world in the simplest and clearest form possible with the means at their disposal. Mondrian therefore attached priority to purity of line and color, seeing beauty as equivalent to truth and truth as susceptible of expression only in an essential form.

In **C 45** the changing relationship between horizontal and vertical signs generates a whole variety of situations with a constantly alternating predominance of direction, one way here and another there. The painting thus expresses the broadest diversity, a two-dimensional symbol of the variety of the world. A square in which horizontal and vertical attain equilibrium can be seen in the upper central area.

While one direction prevails over its opposite elsewhere, the two directions are equivalent in the square. In other words, though different, they acquire the same value. When the opposites attain equivalence, duality disappears and all of the multiple space generated by the continuous predominance of one thing over the other is transformed into a unitary synthesis. The juxtaposition that produces open and unstable situations elsewhere is transformed into interpenetration that generates harmony. In that square, for an instant, the immense variety of the world is expressed as unity.

Mondrian saw the equivalence of opposites as the attainment of equilibrium and harmony between subject and object, between artifice and nature (between the vertical space of the buildings and the horizontal space of the dunes). Expressed through the metaphor of a tree when still veiled by appearances, equilibrium and synthesis were now expressed in clear form in a square.

What is the essence of the environmental question if not the search for better balance between subject and object, between human beings and their natural surroundings?

We can imagine the search for equilibrium and harmony between vertical and horizontal in the lives of individuals by thinking of the unstable equilibrium between mind and body, which have often been regarded as opposing entities, especially in the western civilization.

After the naturalistic and expressionistic phase in which the painter pursued the changing appearances of the world in one landscape after another, he now appears intent on finding one "landscape" capable of representing them all by evoking their truest essence: a landscape born out of the relationship between the changing appearances of external reality and the demand for synthesis and greater duration expressed by the world within.

The structure of a single tree (**C 35**) disintegrates (**C 41**) to become a complex variety of parts (**C 42**), each differing from the other but all related to the synthesis generated in a square (**C 45**). The Cubist phase enabled the artist to address the infinite variety he saw around him without neglecting the sense

of unity to which he aspired in the depths of his spirit.

Space of a graphic nature (**C 45**) opened up to color (**C 47**), and the square of 1915 became a white rectangle immersed in a field of color (**C 51**) four years later.

Just as a synthesis of opposite values is expressed in the square (**C 45**) at the level of form (horizontal and vertical), we can see a synthesis of opposite values attained also in terms of color (black and white) in the white rectangle crossed by black lines (**C 51**). All the surrounding colors seem to merge for an instant in the white. This impression is borne out when we consider a later work (**C 52**) in which a large square form constitutes a synthesis of the three primary colors.

The unitary synthesis of **C 45** opens up to color (**C 47, 51, 52**) over a span of five years. A postulate of consciousness, i.e. the spiritual, unity opens up to the natural world (color) but fails in doing so to maintain the degree of visibility the artist requires. In order to be more visible, the unitary synthesis thus reverts to expression through a homogeneous white field (**C 54**) while the colors emphasize the manifold aspect from the outside.

Visualize Section **C** as a single sequence from **30** to **54**. Neoplastic space was born out of this transition.

The pages following this short introduction will examine the transition in detail and illustrate all of its far greater breadth.

The "landscape" changed radically around 1919 (**51**) with respect to the landscapes of the earlier years of the century (**2, 4, 9, 11**). The natural aspect is now expressed through a measured set of colored planes that express the beauty of the world in abstract form, reminding us that the infinite variety of nature is born out of ever-changing combinations of same elements.

Painting is no longer concerned with the particular form of the elements as they appear but rather with their common belonging to an overall design. As regards stories, human characters, and the contingent aspects of life, the new techniques of visual representation (photography and cinema) created in the meantime perform the task of reproducing these fleeting aspects of reality better and more quickly than the painter's hand.

Just as Mondrian chose out of all the possible relations of form the fundamental one expressing the utmost contrast (horizontal-vertical), in terms of color his eye preferred the primary colors yellow, red, and blue because they seemed to him the freshest and the best able to transform the painted surface into a living and exuberant reality. As he observed, *"The appearance of nature is far more powerful and aesthetic than any imitation of it. If we wish to represent nature completely, we are obliged to seek another form of plastic expression. And it is precisely out of love for nature and reality that we avoid its natural appearance."*⁵

The compositions produced around 1921 (e.g. **53** and **54**) present a set of straight lines that generate a dynamic space in a state of unstable equilibrium between heterogeneous entities (surfaces of different sizes and colors) and an opposing tendency to concentrate and unify that variety in an ideal synthesis of opposite values (the white field in which the black lines attain equivalent proportions). Every Neoplastic composition expresses this dialectic between the changing aspects of life and the human need to stabilize them and find something of greater constancy and duration. A square form keeps space constant while differences in proportion and color change it. We are constantly stimulated by the unforeseeable flow of existence in everyday life and open up to innovation on the one hand while seeking to maintain the integrity of our established equilibriums on the other.

This square (**C 45, 54**) was to inform nearly all the works produced by Mondrian after 1920. Observe **C 55, 63, 64**, and **71**. The square form is a constant feature but in a state of continuous evolution. The square expressed with a white field (**C 54**) becomes red (**C 55**), undergoes duplication to appear once

in a larger form in blue and once in a smaller form in yellow (**C 63**), and finally attains more dynamic expression through constantly changing measurements, proportions, and combinations of color (**C 71**). The square is always different in appearance but always the same, just as the waves of the sea are always new and different but always made of water.

The goal was to express the inexhaustible variety of the world by finding within it something more certain and constant, if not exactly immutable.

The Neoplastic compositions obviously no longer tell us of nature and life in the same way as older painting. New tools now shoulder the task of representing the world in which we live alongside painting. Whenever we want to delight in the beauty and infinite variety of nature as encountered in a basket of fruit, a human face, a tree or a landscape (**1, 3, 6, 29, 33**), we will be able to use photography, film or video. When we then feel the need to contemplate the unity of all things, it will be painting that shows us a way (**71, 72, 73**). Art in our day can once again address the sacred.

Nature and life still remain the primary source of inspiration for abstract art. The beauty of a flower is certainly a model to be examined and from which to learn. I am thinking of certain watercolors by Paul Klee, the enchanting fragrance of the natural colors, and the incredible wealth of forms that the world offers to our gaze. The ten thousand different lines that we see around us prove on closer examination to be a single interminable line, because in nature everything is different, manifold, infinite, and at the same time one. Everything is one just as every individual thing is a complex set of parts. Modern technology reveals that the apparent simplicity of a leaf is a small universe and that the immensity of earthly nature is a bluish-white spot in the infinite space of the macrocosm. The immensity of earthly nature is as simple as a leaf, which is as complex as the entire planet. Multiplicity becomes unity and unity multiplicity.

To give a concrete example, a flower looks like a small patch of yellow when seen from a distance of thirty yards but then grows larger and reveals an increasing number of parts as we draw closer before finally displaying an enormous degree of complexity when we observe its microscopic structure. If the process is reversed, the flower loses its complexity and reverts to a simple patch of yellow. What is the "true" nature and reality of the flower? It depends on the positional relationship established in each case with the object observed.

How can we paint a reality that changes so quickly today in accordance with the changing positional relationship we establish with things?

Does it still make sense to paint a flower from a single viewpoint and claim that this is reality?

In their detailed explanation of Mondrian's work, the pages that follow will also seek to provide some answers to these questions.