

Mondrian produced a new variation on the *Pier and Ocean* theme, which he called *Composition 10 in Black and White (45.1)*, in 1915.

Unlike the previous works drawn in charcoal or pencil on paper, this version is painted in oil on canvas, for which reason some scholars tend to regard it as the final work and the others as preparatory studies. It is true that this is a work of greater beauty in which texture and color are expressed with the utmost sincerity. I say color because even though the canvas is painted in black and gray, it is a superb gradation of grays that, as in certain Chinese paintings, become more brilliant and eloquent than colors in the literal sense. The original work glows with a light is truly magical.

The compositional layout is similar to **45** but displays some significant differences.

Here too, as in **45**, the lower central area is marked by vertical segments (the pier) that rise to meet the opposing direction of the sea. The latter appears to show itself more clearly in the middle of the canvas, where the horizontal lines are more extended and thus express greater continuity. Here too, the interaction between the two contrasting directions generates a multitude of signs that are once again expressed exclusively through orthogonal juxtaposition, which was henceforth to constitute one of the cornerstones of the embryonic new language. Unlike the previous version, the oval returns as a light presence remaining open at the top.

The square used in **45** to symbolize the equivalence of opposites is dissolved here. In its place we can glimpse a sign of "almost equivalence" that fails to attain completion, attracted as it is by the constant interchange of elements (diagrams 45.1**a** and 45.1**b**, where **b** corresponds to the area indicated in **a**).

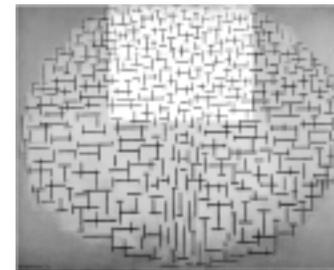
All of the signs show greater imbalance in one direction or the other and everything is in a state of constant flux. The signs in the lower half of the painting display greater extension than those in the upper.

The symmetrical layout making the left part identical to the right in **45** also disappears and the whole now develops in accordance with an asymmetric rhythm. Each point appears different from every other point, but the overall impression is nonetheless of a sober and well-balanced space.

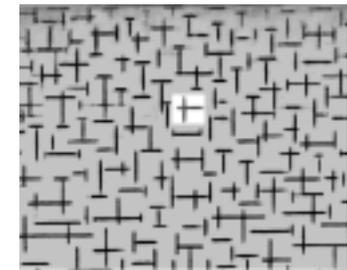
Mondrian thus calls everything into question once again with this new work by abolishing symmetrical order and jettisoning unitary synthesis. In short, it marks a return to variable appearances and hence to the natural world. The unity found by Mondrian in **45** opens up again to multiplicity here and, as we have seen, the idea that the one should open up to the many had already manifested itself in the previous version. I therefore cannot agree with those who regard this canvas as the final version of the *Pier and Ocean* series. I see it instead as marking a new beginning after the previous version (**45**), in which far more significant progress was achieved. This canvas of 1915 represents a moment of transition toward new works.

The artist started work on two new canvases, **45.2** and **46**, in 1916.

The formal structure of the *Pier and Ocean* series is still present in both. While **45.2** was to be reworked and finished only in 1917, **46** was already completed in 1916. I believe, however, that **46** should be placed after **45.2**, even though their dates would seem to indicate the opposite, and will shortly outline the grounds making me lean toward this interpretation. Let us first examine the two paintings.



45.1 a



45.1 b

45.2 is again painted in oil on canvas. Mondrian developed the composition in two phases: the first in 1916 and the second, as it appears today, in 1917. During the reworking that led to the second version, the linear strokes grew in thickness and were expressed with two slightly different shades of black that cannot be seen in reproductions of the painting but only in the original. This is one of the many paintings by Mondrian to which the reproductions commonly available do a great disservice. It is essential to see the original in order to fully appreciate the superb tonalities of dark gray and black standing out fresh and graceful against whites brimming with energy, all of which becomes flat and uniform in photographs. Here too, the multiplicity of signs is expressed through variation of the perpendicular relationship. A certain number of signs are formed by the intersecting of a horizontal line and a vertical. As in the previous compositions, each sign differs in relation to the amount of one direction encountering a different amount of its opposite.



45.2 First State



Many other signs instead consist of a single direction, being exclusively horizontal or vertical (diagram 45.2 **a**). Some lines that are identical in terms of direction and size are laid out parallel and adjacent to one another to form a pair (diagram 45.2 **a**), a pattern that already appears in some drawings of the sea produced by Mondrian in 1915 (**44.10**, **44.14**).

On reading the multitude of linear strokes and observing them in their particular uniqueness, we are confronted with a space in which everything changes, a manifold space held together by the perpendicular common denominator and the oval arrangement of the whole.

The signs expressing a single direction include some lines that are very short but so thick as to take on the appearance of small planes. This seems to occur to a greater degree in the upper central area of the composition (diagram 45.2 **ab**, area **b**), the section occupied by the unitary synthesis of the square in **45**. The horizontal-vertical opposition appears to decrease in that area practically to the point of disappearing.

While the equivalence of opposites was expressed in **45** with two linear marks of same length inside a square, it appears to manifest itself here in the form of a small plane tending toward the square. A variety of possible equivalences are expressed in different areas of the composition but above all in the upper central section. This composition displays a space of greater synthesis in the area where unity is generated in **45**.

The linear signs of **45.1** seem intent on becoming planes, which actually appear in **46**. After the series of works constructed with linear signs of a graphic nature, painting now appears to reassert its rights. In **46** we see planes of blue, pink, and ocher interspersed with black signs and splendid shades of gray. Blue, pink, and ocher are the colors used by Mondrian for various canvases painted in Paris in the period 1913-14, Cubist canvases with the oval in which the artist would have used bright colors but for their ultimately disruptive effect on the composition. Compare **46** (1916) with **44** (1914), for example. Now that the form has attained a certain order with the "orthogonal rule", color no longer appears capable of disrupting the space unduly.

In **46** color sometimes emphasizes the panels formed by the black signs and sometimes expands them. This produces a pleasing rhythm in which the black lines alternate with the sometimes restrained and sometimes overflowing development of the colored areas. The gray seems to suggest a sort of matter ideally uniting the black signs and the colored planes.

While everything in this composition moves and leads from one point to another, the space nonetheless maintains a condition of joyful and harmonious equilibrium.

On observing the original-but not so much, curiously enough, in the reproductions-I noted an ocher plane that appears to stand out against the others in the upper central area of the canvas (diagram 46 **a**). Together with another positioned lower down, this plane is in fact lighter than the dominant shade of ocher. I observed the canvas from different distances and the plane continued to stand out. I cannot say whether this depends on the power of suggestion but, by virtue of its position in the composition, that ocher plane inevitably brought to mind the unitary synthesis of **45**.



46 a

The pink also appears in different shades ranging from magenta to flesh tones.

Color thus returns after the phase focusing on form, i.e. the *Pier and Ocean*, *Sea*, and *Church Façade* series that made it possible to solve the problem of the synthesis and unity of Cubist space. Color returns and the background gray, which flows between the colored planes in **46**, becomes white in two subsequent works (**46.1**, **46.2**).

These two new canvases show a decrease in the number of signs, which become sporadic dashes forming a counterpoint to the colored planes. It is, moreover, in these two canvases that the latter assume sharply defined contours for the first time. Mondrian was later to say that this came about under the influence of the painter Bart van der Leek, with whom he was in contact at that time.

This was followed by five compositions (**47**) (**46.3**, **47.1**, **47.2**, **47.3**) using only planes of color.

The black dashes, which are still sporadically present in **46.1** and **46.2**, disappear completely here. The period 1915-17 can thus be regarded as marking their transformation into colored planes.

The sequence from **45.1** to **46.3** displays gradual transition from a space that is almost exclusively "drawn" to one that is wholly painted. This is why I believe that **46** should be placed between **45.2** and the two small canvases **46.1** and **46.2**. While the painter reworks the graphic layout of **45.2** (which derives from **45.1**), colored planes blossom in **46** and then assume sharply defined outlines in **46.1** and **46.2**. There is no trace of the black signs in **46.3** and **47**, only colored planes. The transition is visually homogeneous.

I therefore disagree with those who regard **46** as prior to **45.2** solely on the grounds of the dates.

It is instead probable that the artist began the two canvases at the same time in 1916, conceiving the great composition in black and white (in the wake of the *Pier and Ocean* series) first and taking more time over it. It was thus completed in 1917 whereas **46**, which took him further ahead along the path of subsequent developments, was finished in 1916. While the two canvases were thus started more or less simultaneously, **46** displays a more advanced conception in visual terms.

It should be noted once again that appraisal on the basis of dating gives little indication of the real developments in Mondrian's work.

Let us now examine the five compositions with planes of pure color.

The group comprises one gouache painted on paper (**46.3**) and four oil paintings on canvas (**47**, **47.1**, **47.2**, **47.3**). The predominant colors in these works are again pink, blue, ocher or magenta and dark blue together with white. Some are rectangles with greater vertical or horizontal development while others are closer to square forms.

Observing the variety of planes, we note that some have the same color but differ in terms of proportions while others are analogous in form but differ in color. The planes are sometimes practically the same both in form and in color. The whole is thus made up of a variety of entities evoking a range of different situations.

Of the five works, **46.3** is the composition that presents the greatest degree of complexity, with the planes in the three colors alternating constantly between horizontal rectangles, squares, and vertical rectangles. The space appears as a heterogeneous manifold in which the only constant elements are the orthogonal relationship and the three alternating colors continuously transformed in terms of position, size, and proportion.

In **47** nearly all the yellow planes are similar in terms of proportions, while variations in this sense are more visible with the blue and above all the magenta.

In some cases two or three contiguous planes can be seen that appear similar in proportions, size, and color, e.g. where three yellow squares are laid out in a vertical row. Something similar can be seen in **47.1**, where two blue vertical rectangles of the same size are placed side by side in a horizontal sequence. With the repetition of the same entity, regardless of whether it is rectangular or square, the degree of changeability is reduced and we catch a glimpse of something more constant, while the surrounding planes have already returned to multiplication and differentiation in terms of form and/or color. The entities repeated recall the double horizontal dashes noted in **44.14** and **45.2**.

The space of these five compositions can be read as the development and variation of an ideal parameter (the square form) that changes in color, size, proportion, and position to suggest a manifold. The rectangles-whether horizontal or vertical-can in fact also be seen as "squares" overbalanced by a sudden predominance of one direction or the other. This is essentially the space of the *Pier and Ocean* (**45**) expressed entirely in color.

While the heterogeneous variety of the linear relations attained synthesis with a square in **45**, now that the linear relations have become colored planes, we are faced with a variety of squares, some yellow, some pink, and some blue. The square is no longer a unitary synthesis of the entire composition in these works (as it is in **45**) but only the part expressed in that particular color. An authentic unitary synthesis of the composition, like the one seen in **45**, would need to be attained in these canvases also between the different colors.

The planes are separate from one another in **46.3**, **47**, and **47.1** but connected in some cases in **47.2** and **47.3**.

47.2 presents pairs of planes colored blue and ocher, blue and pink (upper left), and ocher and pink (lower right). Clusters of ocher and pink or pink and blue planes can be seen in **47.3**. In joining the planes, it is almost as though Mondrian wished to join the colors so as to obtain greater cohesion between the parts.

47.3 is the composition presenting a greatest degree of spatial synthesis with a smaller number of colored areas developed in larger and homogeneous proportions. The shades of color are also less pronounced. With respect to **46.3**, the sense of variation and complexity decreases in **47.3** in terms both of form and of color. Mondrian now appears to focus on overall perception of the composition. This recalls the initial Cubist phase, when the painter again reduced the range of colors in response to insufficient unity.

46.3 and **47** appear to present a white square in the center surrounded by three planes of the same color: three yellow and one red in **46.3** (diagram 46.3 a), three magenta and one yellow in **47** (diagram 47 a). The three planes of the same color endow the central area of the composition with greater stability around a white square.

Is the white square perhaps intended to suggest an ideal synthesis of all the colors?

In **47.3** the center of the canvas is occupied by a large ochre square that seems designed to stand out with respect to the others.

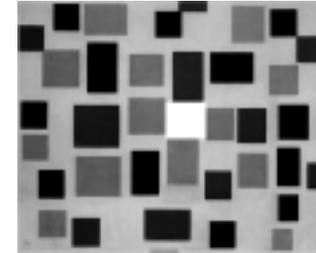
The painter appears to seek synthesis and unity by reducing the number of planes, softening their colors, connecting them with one another, and suggesting possible "centers".

It is in **48** that Mondrian joins all the planes for the first time, having allowed them to float freely on the white ground in the previous canvases. This is what the artist wrote in an autobiographical note in 1941: *"Feeling the lack of unity, I grouped the rectangles together: the space became white, black, and gray; the form became red, blue or yellow. Joining the rectangles was equivalent to continuing the verticals and horizontals of the previous period over the entire composition."*¹³ An interesting innovation with respect to the previous canvases is found in the fact that the white now also assumes the concrete nature of a plane, having previously appeared to perform the function of a background in relation to the colored planes. Mondrian attaches to the supposed "void" of white the same solid value as is expressed through the more concrete planes of color. For Mondrian the visible is equivalent to the invisible.

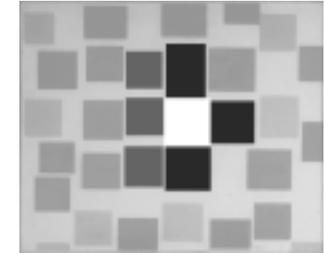
48 again presents planes of blue, magenta-pink, ochre, gray, and white alternating to develop predominantly vertical areas, more balanced proportions, and horizontal rectangles of different sizes. Some planes seem to extend beyond the edge of the painting.

Two vertically arranged planes, one blue and the other magenta, develop analogous proportions in the upper central section (diagram 48 a, 1 and 2). A similar pair of planes is repeated in the lower section but this time with the blue to the right of the pink and a slight decrease in overall size with respect to the pair above.

Two squares of different color join in the center. The pair appearing in horizontal alignment in the lower part is rearranged vertically in the upper. Once again, the horizontal is concentrated to become vertical.



46.3 a



47 a



48 a

The two pairs of planes 1+2 and 2+1 express an area of space in which something endures while changing in appearance. The "same thing" appears in a different form or two different things can be traced back to the "same" pattern.

Once again, the central area of the composition suggests a more constant area of space while all around we see the uncontrolled variation of size, proportion, and color. The composition alternates constant parameters and changing entities.



49.1 a

Having joined the planes of the previous compositions, Mondrian still appears dissatisfied with the result. The lack of unity he noted in the canvases of 1917 still awaits a solution.

Color is thus relinquished once again in order to concentrate on formal layout in the two subsequent works **48.1** and **49**.

In **48.1** a basic layout is drawn on a lozenge canvas. Lines running parallel to the sides of the painting are used to divide its surface into a number of sections with the same proportions as the canvas. These sections are divided in turn by diagonal lines (perpendicular with respect to the viewer) running across the entire surface of the painting and increasing in thickness in some sections. This can be seen more clearly in **49**, the second composition of this type. The variation in thickness disrupts the regular basic pattern, which is thus transformed into an asymmetrical rhythm. With respect to **48.1**, it is the irregular rhythm that prevails over the regular schema in **49**. While the first version seems to be informed by a need to establish order, there appears to be greater balance between order and mutation in the second.

The thicker lines seem to suggest rectangular fields, which in fact take shape in the three later works **49.1**, **50**, and **50.1**, where Mondrian introduces color once again after injecting order into the formal structure.

While the composition thus varies again through color, this variation appears to be balanced after **48.1** and **49** by a certain constancy of the formal structure. The basic schema is in fact repeated in **49.1** and **50**, but no longer clearly drawn out as in the two black and white lozenges. Though barely visible, the schema is, however, present and underpins the arrangement of the colored planes, which can in fact all be traced back to the basic parameter of a square module.

Consider diagram **49.1 a** alongside. The basic unit (A), a small square, doubles to form a rectangle, either vertical (B) or horizontal (C), which is then duplicated to generate a larger square (D). Larger rectangles (E and F) are then born out of the combination of the square and the smaller rectangle. The large rectangle is formed by six small squares, the large square by four, and the small rectangle by two. The space changes from the smaller planes to the larger but retains something constant. The composition no longer develops in a wholly random way, as it does in **48**. Every plane now stems from the aggregation and gradual growth of a single entity that, as Jaffé says, "tends to form larger units".¹⁴

The same shape appears different because it is in another color and the same color differs in appearance in relation to its proportions and relations with neighboring parts. An element of the same size and the same color can then appear once in the horizontal and once in the vertical. In this way, a variety of situations is produced that can nevertheless be traced back to certain constant values. Everything changes but something remains.

We thus have once again, in a new form, the same space with two contrasting tendencies: opening up to the heterogeneous appearance of the world on the one hand and contemplation of what connects the variety of different things on the other. When variable appearance prevails (**47**, **48**), the painter seeks order (**49**); once this is re-established, he opens up again to variable appearance (**50**).

In a new work (**51**) Mondrian draws a new schema in which the linear segments of **50** become continuous straight lines running across the entire surface of the canvas, giving the composition a more dynamic appearance.

The painter begins once again in **51** with a schematic division of space. Each side of the painting is divided into 16 units so as to divide the surface into 256 rectangles of the same size with the same proportions as the canvas. This gives birth to a wholly regular and constant layout in terms of form that is transformed by the alternation of color into a whole of variable appearance. We observe a multitude of planes colored yellow, red (a light red verging on pink that I shall in any case call red), and light blue mixed with other planes of gray and white. At least three different shades of gray can be seen. The straight lines are a darker gray that becomes almost black in some sections. The rectangles alternate with one another to create a variously articulated space.

The colors are not flat and uniform, as they appear in standard reproductions. There are extremely subtle variations of every primary color, as there are of every shade of gray.

As Jaffé wrote: *"The painter let himself be guided by his feeling for colour and rhythm, and he made alterations and corrections as he worked; over paintings to change the colour of some of the areas can still be detected. The skilled treatment and masterly balance of the canvases are the result not of a theory but of almost thirty years experience as a painter."*¹⁵

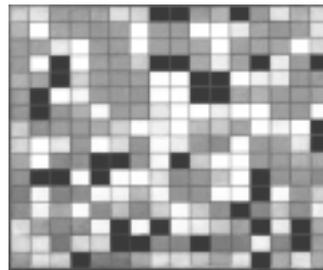
On observing the multitude of colored rectangles, we note that two, three, and even four rectangles of the same color gather in some areas to form larger units. We see a larger rectangle of a yellow color, one of blue, and three of red (diagrams 51 **a**, **b** and **c**).

Here too, as in the previous canvases, Mondrian therefore employs a grouping of basic entities that generate larger ones. The composition as a whole is not, however, governed by the process of aggregation and growth, as it was in **50**. This process now manifests itself sporadically.

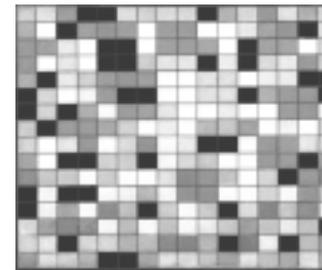
The entire composition is a succession of sequences made up of small rectangles of different colors that finds a moment of comparative rest in the larger rectangles. The ephemeral progression of new events (the small rectangles) is transformed in the larger units into a space of greater duration. This recalls the Cubist compositions, in which certain signs are isolated from the others in order to suggest a more constant space (see p. 46).

Having identified a larger unit, the eye spontaneously seeks others and is obliged in this search to address many other situations involving the absence of one or two basic units needed to form a homogeneous rectangle, the others being of a different color.

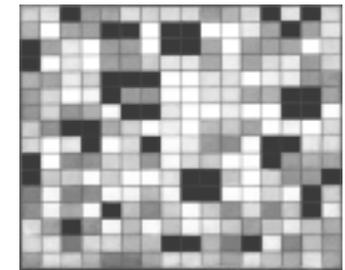
Let us take yellow as an example (diagram 51 **a.a**). We see three small rectangles in the lower section and a fourth shifted toward the right. The upper left section presents two pairs of rectangles almost touching one another vertically.



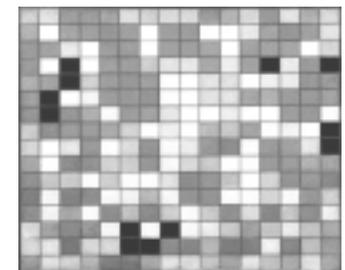
51 a Yellow



51 b Blue



51 c Red



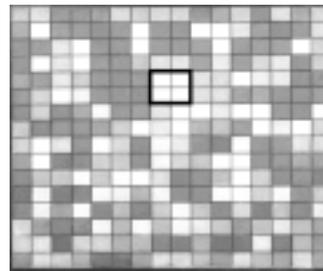
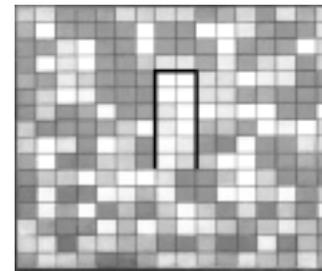
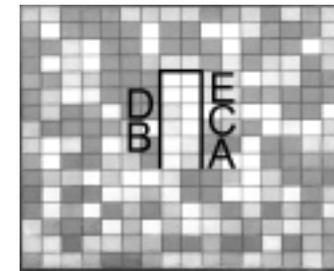
51 a.a

Elsewhere the aggregation reduces to just two small rectangles mixed up with the other colors until they are lost in a sea of combinations that create an ever-changing space. The same holds for the other colors (diagrams 51 **b** and **c**) and for the shades of gray.

In seeking larger rectangles of a single color, the eye is stimulated by multiplicity and contemplates the virtually infinite variation of entities born out of different combinations of same elements.

The heterogeneous appearance generated by the quick succession of small rectangles becomes more homogeneous in the larger rectangles, where space momentarily attains greater constancy before flowing back into the constant interplay of combinations: from the ethereal, fluid, and random to greater solidity and stability before returning to the haphazard succession of different things and moments; from the variety of the external world to mental syntheses that then open up again to multiplicity. Being abstract, the composition represents both the variety of the natural landscape and the still more dynamic variety perceived in the urban landscape.

Note how the opposition between vertical and horizontal lines manifests itself with greater clarity and balance in a homogeneous field of color like that of the larger rectangles. The perpendicular opposition instead proves less stable when the colors change around the point of intersection between vertical and horizontal. What appears in synthetic and unitary form in the larger rectangle is unbalanced elsewhere by the various colors gathered around the points where the lines intersect.

51 **d**51 **e**51 **f**

It is color that highlights the most balanced syntheses of the two opposite directions in this composition. While form alone is responsible for the greater or lesser balance of opposites in **45**, here it is color that decides when horizontal and vertical achieve synthesis. This happens once in yellow, once in blue, and three times in red.

On returning to color (**45, 46**), Mondrian finds himself grappling with unstable compositions (**47, 48**). He therefore exercises greater control through form (**49**) before again allowing color its due freedom (**50, 51**).

In addition to the five larger rectangles expressed in the three primary colors, **51** presents one in white that also contains black lines forming a sign of equivalence (diagram 51 **d**). This is the only white rectangle of larger size present on the canvas. Its position is perfectly central with respect to the sides and slightly raised. We recall the white squares in the middle of **46.3** and **47** (see page 63).

The white rectangle appears to be generated through a progressive purification of the colors that takes place along the vertical axis running through the center of the canvas (diagrams 51 **e** and **f**). The vertical field highlighted in diagram 51 **e** can be seen as a dynamic upward progression leading to the white rectangle.

Letters are used in diagram 51 **f** to mark the proportions of some larger rectangles positioned inside the vertical field highlighted in 51 **e**. The height of each letter corresponds to the height of the rectangle it is used to indicate.

In diagram 51 **f**, starting from the larger red rectangle and moving upward, we see a series of rectangles made up respectively of three grays and a yellow (A), three grays and a white (B), two grays and two whites (C), three whites and a gray (D), and finally four white rectangles forming a larger unit (E). The white gains ground, so to speak, as it moves upward until it finally attains the scale of a larger rectangle.

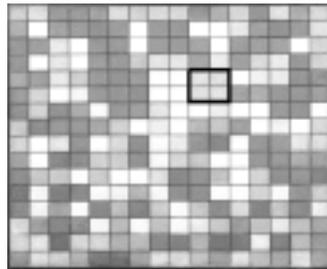
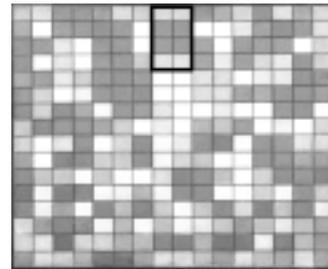
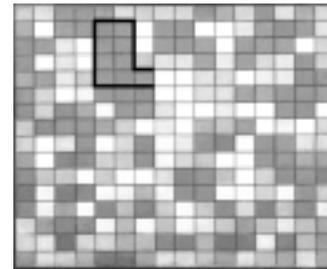
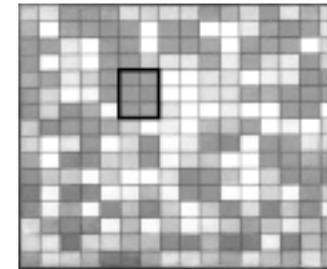
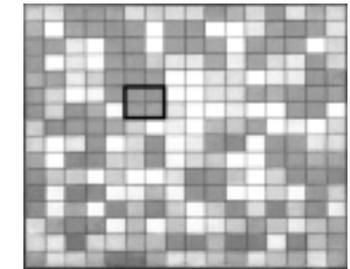
All this recalls the development of the *Pier and Ocean* series (**45**). Here too, as in 1915, we can see an upward progression from the bottom that develops along the central vertical axis of the composition and generates a synthesis in the upper central area of the canvas. Like the square of **45**, the white rectangle of **51** expresses a unitary synthesis of the composition. It is in fact the place where vertical and horizontal and black and white attain unitary interpenetration in a homogeneous field of more constant space. It is in that point that the entire surface attains a synthesis and equilibrium of opposite values in terms not only of form (horizontal/vertical), as in the other larger rectangles, but also of color (black and white).

I shall endeavor to explain. The painter still distinguishes in this phase between color (yellow, red and blue) and non-color (white, black, and gray) seeing the first as a plastic symbol of the natural and the second as symbolizing the spiritual.

Mondrian: "*The unchangeable (the spiritual) is expressed in the composition by means of straight line or planes of non-color (black, white, and gray), while the changeable (the natural) is expressed by means of planes of color and rhythm.*" ¹⁶

For Mondrian yellow, red, and blue constitute a plastic symbol of the purest and most intense colors in the world. He uses the three primary colors here to express contrast and diversity, and white, black, and gray to produce an equally broad range of variation that appears, however, more homogeneous than the contrasting variation generated with the primary colors.

On observing the range of grays, we note that the darkest shade appears to be as dark as the blue, just as the lightest shade of gray appears to be equivalent to yellow. It is as though the range of the three primary colors had been transposed into a parallel range of grays that intrinsically appear more unified than yellow with respect to red or red with respect to blue precisely because they are different shades of the same "color".

51 **g**51 **h**51 **i**51 **j**51 **k**

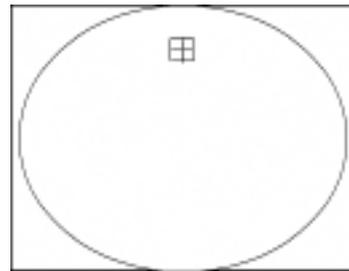
The artist appears to be seeking a common denominator in terms of color. I am reminded of the gray that flows between the colors in **46**.

The colors of **51** are therefore to be seen as a whole that, on the one hand, blossoms in a showy and discordant variety of colors (the three primary colors) symbolizing the variety of the world and, on the other, is recombined in synthesis through the most homogeneous variation of grays between the two opposite values of white and black, which attain unitary expression in the central rectangle. Through the colors of the spirit, multiplicity becomes unity in that point for an instant.

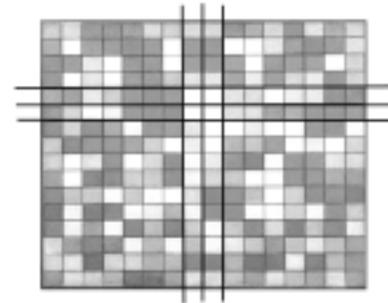
We are faced with a space that is exposed, on the one hand, to the pressures of the boundless and multiform physical extension of reality (which is expressed also through the dynamic continuity of straight lines) and tends, on the other, to concentrate inside the painting in an ideal synthesis.

We can thus see how this work of 1919 marked the return of a clearly visible unitary synthesis of space that had not appeared in the artist's work since 1915 (**45**).

Four years later, Mondrian rediscovered in a new form the unity that had been dissolved in color since 1915 in works where the colored rectangles lacked unity (**46, 47, 48**). This unity was now visible once again and expressed, unlike **45**, in a space made up entirely of color. The transition from drawn space (**45**) to painted space (**51**) took four years.



unitary synthesis in **45**



unitary synthesis in **51**

In 1919, as in 1915, the unitary synthesis produced in the center showed signs of opening up again to manifold space. Consider **C 51**. We can see a yellow synthesis to the right of the white, a red synthesis in the upper section, and a blue synthesis to the left of this in a slightly lower position. There are three syntheses of yellow, red, and blue around the single white synthesis. The painter appears intent on gathering together and uniting the three colors in this area.

Now consider the five diagrams below in order.

The white unity becomes yellow on the right (diagram **51 g**) and the yellow rectangle is split higher up by a red synthesis (**51 h**), which is split in turn by blue (**51 i**). Red and blue compete to form a larger rectangle (**51 j** and **k**) and then flow back into the partial dimension of small rectangles.

Synthesis was achieved in a large white rectangle through a gradual transition from colors to different shades of gray. We can see the white, gradually purified of color and shades of gray, as an ideal synthesis of colors.

The five diagrams (**g, h, i, j, k**) now show the white opening up again to yellow, the yellow to red, and the red to blue. The white synthesis opens up to the colors and these flow back toward manifold appearance. What appears constant in the central area becomes variable once again.

As we turn our gaze from the white rectangle toward the yellow rectangle on its right in **C 51**, our eye creates a horizontal dynamic sequence. In **C 45** it is precisely the horizontal that reopens the synthesis. The horizontal is a symbol of the natural in the Neoplastic language, as are the three primary colors that reopen the unitary synthesis of black and white (the spiritual) in **51**.

A substantial innovation of this new work with respect to 1915 lies in the fact that the synthesis produced in 1919 appears to be ideally connected with real physical space by means of the straight lines, which express a sense of continuity that seems intent on expanding beyond the finite boundaries of the canvas. The synthesis of 1915 instead appears to be suspended in a universe that is still metaphorically enclosed within an oval.

The oval dissolves between 1915 (**45**) and 1917 (**47**), but does so gradually. It is still present after **45** in **45.1** and **45.2**, a shadowy presence in **46**, vaguely suggested in **46.1** and **46.2** in the arrangement of the colored planes and small black signs, and wholly absent in **46.3**, **47**, **47.1**, **47.2**, and **47.3**.

In concomitance with this progressive dissolution of the oval, we see that some planes begin to move beyond the edge of the canvas. This takes place in the upper part of **46.1** and **46.2** before spreading to the sides and the lower part in **46.3**, **47**, **47.1**, **47.2**, and **47.3**.

In response to a need for synthesis, while the oval makes its exit the painter brings the planes closer together and thus obtains lines (**48**). He then discovers a proportional module enabling him to express the broadest possible range of variation without losing sight of the required degree of constancy (**49**, **50**, **50.1**). Some planes continue beyond the edge of the canvas here too, but the composition actually appears rather congested. The planes interlock and the linear segments block one another in **49.1**, **50**, and **50.1**, works in which the space seems to be hampered by its own development.

The composition opens up in **51** to the dynamic traversal of straight lines that evoke a more open and continuous space than in the previous compositions. It should be noted, however, that the lines in **51** do not reach the edge of the canvas. Observation of the original work reveals that they stop a few millimeters short, especially at the bottom of the painting. While the lines certainly inject dynamism into the composition, they have yet to assume the independent role acquired during the 1920s. The lines used by Mondrian after 1922 are thicker and run from one edge of the painting to the other, thus giving the impression of extending beyond the boundary of the canvas to evoke a space of virtually infinite expansion (**56**, **57**, **58**, **59**, etc.).

Previously expressed within the closed form of an oval (**45**), the totality of space opens up and is transformed over a span of four years into a sense of totality expressed through the continuity of straight lines (**51**). Mondrian appears to use these lines, which he describes as continuing uninterruptedly, in order to connect the unitary synthesis within the composition with the totality of space (the oval). This has expanded in the meantime beyond the canvas and now coincides with the space of reality, of which the work of art constitutes a part that aspires to stand for the whole. As Maurizio Calvesi points out, the canvas is *"an ideal center in which the spatial event is determined in its wholeness and totality no less than in its dynamic continuity. Mondrian wrote in 1920 that the straight lines intersect and touch one another tangentially but continue uninterruptedly. The result radiates out in fact from the painting to the infinite, but the canvas exhausts the intuition of the whole within itself."*¹⁷

Both previously present inside the composition (**45**), the square and the oval now coexist virtually. The oval is now the real world and a white rectangle (**51**) reminds us from inside the canvas that all the variability of the real world is an indissoluble unity. Everything that creates opposition in our common experience of everyday life, dividing and separating one thing from another, actually belongs to one and the same process.

Through the lines, which continue uninterruptedly, the subjective unity (the white rectangle) is ideally connected with the assumed unity of real space, the immense space of nature that can no longer be represented as a simultaneous whole (the oval) but remains clearly present to the painter's mind. The totality of space is now expressed through the continuity of the lines, which is why Mondrian was to abolish the use of any frame around his canvases in the subsequent works. The frame interrupts the ideal continuity envisaged between the work of art and real life.

While the oval served to express an idea of the whole, it appeared at the same time as an overly absolute form. As pointed out above, Mondrian sought to address the absolute and the universal but starting from the relative and the particular, i.e. from the real condition of everyday existence.

It took four years to open up the all-inclusive space of the oval and express it in a new form through straight lines. The oval constituted a limit to Mondrian's vision and in the following years, when solid foundations had been laid for Neoplastic space, he explained his rejection of any circular form by stating that *"the compact, rounded line expressing no relationship in plastic terms was replaced by the straight line in the duality of the orthogonal position, which expresses the purest relationship."*¹⁸

Closer examination reveals that this predilection was already present in his naturalistic phase, albeit still in a wholly embryonic form. The oval of **12** opens up in **13** to a rectilinear continuity (toward the right) that becomes a horizontal predominance (the sky) in **14**. The space seeking enclosure within the oval in **15** coexists with a space that opens up and continues uninterrupted (the river). A black segment (the roof of the house) concentrates the rectilinear flow that expands on the sides, thereby expressing a synthesis from within itself.

The expressionistic phase saw a breakdown of **14**, with the sky becoming the wholly horizontal space of the dunes and the windmill the vertical space of the buildings. The two contrasting directions are combined in the figure of the tree (**29, 35**), where the trunk performs a unifying function.

Here too we see a unity that, unlike the oval, is generated from inside the composition.

The figure of the tree became the abstract space of **41** and **42** over a span of four years. The loss of the internal unity expressed by the trunk was again compensated by an oval form (**43, 44**). The oval was then transformed over a period of three years into an internal synthesis manifesting itself through a relationship between horizontal and vertical inside a square (**45**). In other words, the oval of **13** is transformed in **45** into the relationship between vertical and horizontal of **14**.

This shows that Mondrian's Cubism served mainly to develop and clarify his naturalistic phase.

Four years later, **45** became **51**, where everything is now expressed through the continuity of straight lines. The nascent Neoplastic space provides further clarification of the basic idea manifested ever since 1905-06 (**13, 14, 15**).

It should be pointed out here that some critics have attributed the oval used by Mondrian in those years with meanings related to theosophical symbolism. It has been described as a symbol of life, like the egg. It is certainly true that circles and ovals have always suggested a sense of universality, and Mondrian was unquestionably aware of this. I do not believe, however, that Mondrian looked up the oval form in the dictionary of theosophical symbols one fine day and decided to include it in its paintings. I am rather convinced that the painter was prompted to use the oval more by his eye than by literary disquisitions and arguments. While these were certainly not extraneous to his decision, I do not believe they had all that much influence on the development of his paintings.

As he wrote, *"The ancient sages used the cross to represent the eternal relationship of interior and exterior, but neither this nor any other symbol can serve as the means of plastic expression of abstract-real painting. On the one hand, the symbol constitutes a new limitation; on the other, it is too absolute."*¹⁹ Painting cannot be explained in terms of pre-established symbols, especially when it involves abstraction. Abstract or rather true abstract art-i.e. the type that really has something to say-acquires its truest meanings when the relations of form and color are read and interpreted with the mind free of preconceived ideas.

The oval was necessary at that time as form, which I regard as the truest substance of painting. While many still consider it reductive to speak solely of form, this is precisely where the vital sap of art is to be found. Unfortunately, certain critics of art, being reluctant to attribute importance to form and color and hence incapable of finding the true content of art there, are still obliged to hunt for it in old works of literature. I instead believe that the painting itself offers an abundance of explanations, especially in this case.

Let us now consider the second checkerboard composition (**51.1**), known as the *Checkerboard with Dark Colors*.

I have always regarded this version in the course of my studies as later than the one with light colors, but do not actually know which Mondrian painted first. Joosten's catalogue assigns the version with dark colors an earlier number than the one with light colors, which would suggest that the light-colored version is later than the dark one. In all honesty, I attribute little importance to this point because I think it probable that the artist worked on the two canvases at the same time. What concerns me here is to draw attention to some differences between the two versions that, regardless of the order in which they were produced, place the version with dark colors closer to the works following the two checkerboards, e.g. **52**.

This version starts from the same formal layout as the version with light colors. Once again we see a regular layout made up of 256 small rectangles of the same size, a heterogeneous set of entities that combine in some areas to form larger units of the same color (diagram 51.1 **a**). Two are yellow and two blue in color, whereas red never attains the synthesis of a larger rectangle.

Unlike the light-colored version, the dark presents only what Mondrian referred to in that phase as "color", whereas "non-color" (black, white, and gray) is wholly absent. Only a few short stretches of line appear to be black.

All the planes are yellow (a golden yellow verging on ochre), red (almost amaranth), and dark blue. The chromatic substance is denser and richer than in the version with light colors. The painter thus appears to accord priority in this work to matter and color, i.e. to what he identified most with the natural world.

A unitary synthesis like the white rectangle appearing in **51** cannot be seen here.

Following the changing rhythm of the colors, we observe some small rectangles that are symmetrically arranged in the central area (diagram 51.1 **b**). Moving upward from the bottom, we see a yellow rectangle alternating with a blue rectangle, then two red rectangles and two blue rectangles, while the symmetry expands on the sides. The symmetrical arrangement exists but is not immediately visible.

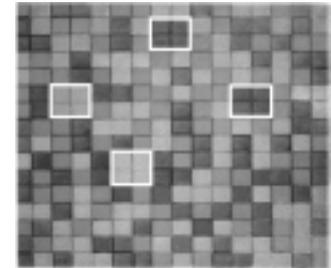
While the *Checkerboard with Dark Colors* thus lacks a unity of opposite values (black and white), we can see in its place an area of space that, though entirely colored, maintains greater homogeneity with respect to other areas of the painting, where everything instead changes at random.

Where a unitary synthesis of opposite values is seen in **51**, there are now the three primary colors, which appear with their symmetrical arrangement to provide the element of constancy required by the consciousness on beholding the ever-changing appearance of the world but without concentrating to form a single white plane, as happens in the other checkerboard composition.

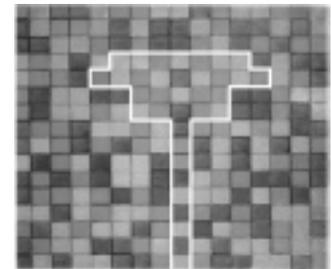
The unitary synthesis of **51** appears to open up to color here and spread itself all around. The black and white unity now opens up to the variety of intermediate hues (yellow, red, and blue); the colors of the spirit open up to the three primary colors that symbolize the natural world in the Neoplastic language. In **51** we saw the white unity open up to the syntheses of color located in its immediate vicinity.

We are thus faced once again, but in a completely new form, with the space of the *Pier and Ocean* (**45**).

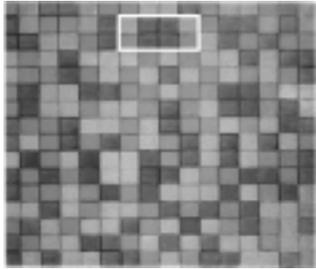
Here too, around a central axis running from the bottom to the top, the composition suggests progression toward a certain order. Observe the larger blue



51.1 a



51.1 b



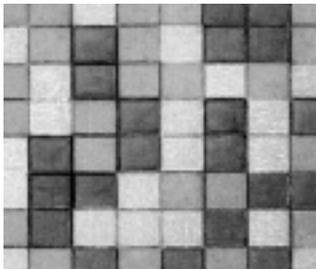
51.1 c

rectangle in the upper central area of the composition (diagram 51.1 **c**). The pair of small rectangles (yellow and red) on its left is repeated in identical form on the right. It is really as though the painter were seeking here to express a unitary synthesis of yellow, red, and blue.

Through its great symmetry (diagram 51.1 **b**) and the aggregation of the three colors (diagram 51.1 **c**), the central area of this composition suggests a certain tendency toward synthesis that, however, remains open with respect to the light-colored version.

There appears to be a fusion of unitary and manifold aspects in this work.

There is also another noteworthy characteristic.



51.1 d

As pointed out above, while the lines in the previous canvases (**48, 49, 50**) intersect and limit one another, they extend in **51** and **51.1** to give the whole composition a sense of open continuity.

On observing the two checkerboards at the same time, we can see that the lines of the version with dark colors display less continuity than those in the light version. The lines are almost completely uniform in the latter but show a slight variation in thickness in the former as well as changes in hue, ranging from a dark gray verging on black to shades of brown and ochre that almost arrive at yellow. Diagram 51.1 **d** shows an enlarged detail where this discontinuity can be seen. It should be recalled that the artist had already disrupted the regular grid of the formal layout by varying the thickness of the lines in the two black and white lozenges of 1918-19 (**48.1, 49**).

With respect to the version with light colors, the lines in the dark version seem to be divided into finite intervals or linear segments.

The perpendicular lines in the two checkerboards generate planes that are areas of finite space.

Through discontinuous values of thickness and color, the straight lines of the dark version seem to partake of the finite and relative nature of the rectangles more than in the version with light colors, where the lines appear to be more absolute and their continuous, uniform space to be uncontaminated by the changing and discontinuous space of the planes. The discontinuous lines of the dark grid seem designed to suggest a point of transition between the virtually infinite space of the lines and the finite dimension of the planes. The formal layout remains wholly constant in the light version and the only variation is in color. In the dark version the form also begins to express a sort of rhythm in the irregular alternation of linear sections.

I am therefore inclined to believe that the *Checkerboard with Dark Colors* should be regarded as subsequent to the *Checkerboard with Light Colors* in the sense that it lays the foundations for the developments observed in the subsequent works (**52, 53, 54**), where the formal layout also becomes asymmetrical and a more obvious difference is seen between linear segments and lines.

As pointed out above, Mondrian may have begun the dark version before the light one. On the basis of what I can see and in the light of the later developments, however, I regard the dark version as intermediary between **51** and **52**.

Mondrian completed a process lasting nearly five years with these two works. *The Checkerboard with Dark Colors* constituted his first exhaustive formulation of what was to become the Neoplastic vocabulary underpinning all the subsequent work, which can be summed up as the interaction between lines,

segments, and planes.

From now on, Mondrian's painting was to be a complex and dynamic set of relations between **lines, segments, and planes** (of color and "non-color"); between infinite space (lines) that becomes finite space (segments and planes) and then expands to the infinite. Multiplicity becomes unity and unity reverts to multiplicity. The dynamic and multiform aspect of natural and/or urban space is transformed on the canvas into a whole endowed with greater synthesis and equilibrium before returning to a dynamic state. The canvas serves as a model of space in equilibrium between disharmonies of real space and harmonies of plastic space.