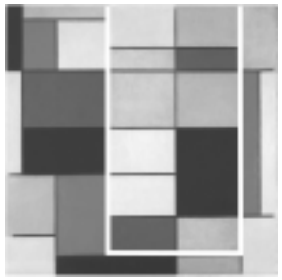
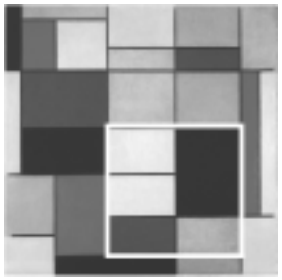
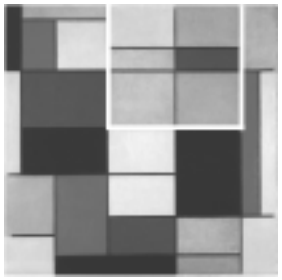
After the wholly regular grid-plan of the two checkerboard compositions, Mondrian embarked on a new series of works in which the formal layout opened up once more. The planes of the new canvas **51.2** all differ from one another in terms of form. A composition expressed as a chromatic variation of the same measurements (**51**) gives way to a space where there is change even in the size and shape of each individual colored plane. Multiplicity is now expressed both through color and through form. As noted above, what takes shape in these new works is the distinction (initiated in **51.1**) between lines crossing the entire canvas and linear segments that stop together with the planes. These canvases mark a return to the use of "non-color" (black, white, and gray) after **51.1**.

With respect to **51.2**, where everything changes, **51.3** presents a more homogeneous set of planes. Those highlighted in the diagram **51.3** a display analogous proportions that are repeated almost identically also in terms of color (white) in one case.
As a whole, these planes form a vertical field stretching from the bottom to the top of the canvas, whereas those outside this area are developed more freely. The vertical field corresponds to two square forms placed one above the other (diagrams 51.3 **b** and **c**).


51.3 **a**


51.3 **b**


51.3 **c**

Observation of **51.2, 51.3, 52,** and **52.1** in sequence reveals that the compositions tend toward a certain order.
While everything changes in **51.2**, a part of the composition develops various combinations of the same basic module in **51.3, C 52,** and **52.1**.
As in the case of some compositions of 1919 (**49** and **50**), Mondrian again adopts a constant parameter serving to establish a more controlled rhythm in the alternation of planes. The painter thus returns to a basic module but uses it in a different way from two years earlier. Let us now see how this is done.

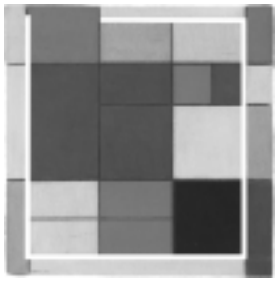
In **C 52** we note two contiguous yellow planes of rectangular proportions verging on squares. The same shape reappears lower down once in red and once in light gray. On the right, a large blue area proves to be the sum of the initial module repeated twice vertically. Lower down we have three rectangles-one yellow, one black, and one dark gray-presenting proportions that are half the initial module. Though different both in color and in size, these planes are based on the same parameter. Each is an expansion or contraction, either vertical or horizontal, of a pre-established unit of measurement.
As in the lozenges of 1918-19, a proportional development of space returns in these works. Now, however, it is only a part of the composition that reflects this layout, unlike the works of 1919 (**49, 50, 51**), where the whole of the space was based on the same unit of measurement. The planes close to the edges of the canvas suddenly assume anomalous proportions that are no longer related to the module. After a phase of greater constancy to be observed in the central area, everything changes unpredictably. This is clearly evident in the planes to the sides and in the upper section of the canvas but not so definite in those lower down (one gray and one blue), which appear at first sight to reflect the basic parameter. Closer examination shows, however, that the two planes are slightly less developed in height than those corresponding to the basic module. Moreover, the lines stop short before the bottom edge of the canvas, which makes the two planes less sharply defined than those above.

Returning to the eight planes in the central area (the ones that are wholly proportional to the module), we note that they form a large square when viewed all together (**C 52**). The space in this square field displays a certain degree of constancy whereas everything changes around it. The space of **45** comes to mind.
In the same way as a vertical segment (symbolizing the spiritual) and a horizontal segment (symbolizing the natural) are counterbalanced inside a square in the drawn space of **45**, in the new canvas (**52**) we see a square field made up of horizontal and vertical planes, colors and "non-colors", i.e. the elements of the Neoplastic language used respectively to symbolize the natural and the spiritual, the object and the subject, just as two black perpendicular signs did in 1915.
With a large square visibly structured and colored within, Mondrian seeks here to present a unitary synthesis open to multiplicity, almost as though intent on effecting interpenetration between the white unity of **51** and the three rectangles-one yellow, one red, and one blue-in its immediate vicinity (**C 51**). This is what he had already attempted in a different way with **51.1**, where the space succeeds, without concentration into a single plane, in remaining poised between multiplication on the one hand and a tendency toward synthesis on the other. The same thing is now to be seen in **52**, where the central area displays constancy, as in **51.1**, but with the substantial difference that now the formal structure of the composition no longer corresponds in every respect to a regular and symmetrical layout, as in **51.1**. The *Checkerboard with Dark Colors* is an intermediary stage between **51** and **52**.

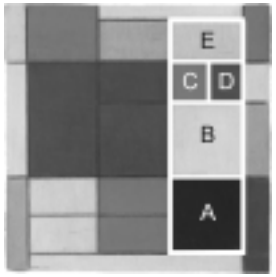
On observing the sequence **C 45, 47, 51, 52**, we can visualize a drawn square (**45**) that opens up to color (**46**), multiplies, and gathers around a white unit (**51**), which then opens up to the different colors (**52**) in a bid to express both unity and multiplicity at the same time.
As we know, the unitary synthesis (the square) already opens up to duality, i.e. multiplicity, in the upper section of **45**. Following this indication, the unitary space of the square seeks interpenetration with manifold space over a span of five years.
In Mondrian's view, any synthesis worthy of the name must take shape visibly in all the parts it wishes to represent.
Consider what this vision would mean in social reality.
The one and the many are for Mondrian different or rather opposite aspects of the same unique reality that he would almost like to be able to show simultaneously.
I have used the example of a flower looking like a simple patch of color when observed from a certain distance but revealing a far more complex structure on closer examination. Moving in the opposite direction, the complex structure of a flower once again returns to a condensed patch of color. There is a constant alternation of unity and multiplicity in our experience of everyday life. It depends on our point of observation if one thing looks small and simple and another large and complex. These adjectives have no meaning in themselves, as Oriental wisdom has long taught us: *"Infinitely small things are as large as only large things can be because external conditions do not prevail here. Infinitely large things are as small as only small things can be because objective limits are immaterial here."* [20]
In perspective space based on a single viewpoint (naturalistic or figurative painting), reality is necessarily one and tends toward the static, being based on the assumption that the point of observation of the human subject is always the same, like a sort of privileged observatory from which it is possible to know and describe the reality of the world once and for all. This no longer holds today. Present-day reality is poised in a state of dynamic equilibrium between subject and object without ever assuming certain and definitive form. Reality is born out of interaction between the two terms. Interaction between the horizontal (symbolizing the natural) and the vertical (symbolizing the spiritual) generates Neoplastic space, in which everything changes and, at the same time, something endures.

The idea of a flower can, of course, be expressed by painting it from a single viewpoint. A flower need not be painted from all possible viewpoints in order to pay tribute to its beauty. It is, however, ingenuous at best to claim that one particular image of the flower (the figurative vision) is truer or more real than all the other possible images of a flower, which necessarily lead to an abstract vision.

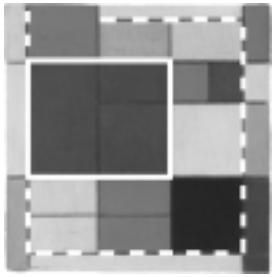
What we have observed in **52** is borne out in **52.1**, where there is once again the gradual perception of a proportional rhythm lending greater homogeneity to one part of the composition. We see a set of planes including two verging on the square, the upper white (a grayish white) and the lower black: two square forms placed one above the other, as in **51.3**.
We see two square fields to the left of the black square, one red and one yellow. These have the same proportions as the two previous squares but are cut in half by a horizontal segment. Developed above them is a large blue area of color that is a sum of multiples of the initial square. The gray and yellow planes in the upper section to the right are half the size of the initial square.
Here too, as in **52**, we can see a central area (which actually occupies almost the entire surface of the canvas) that is formally organized in terms of the progressive growth or division of a basic module of proportions tending toward the square (diagram 52.1 **a**). Once again, as in **52**, the planes outside the central area are no longer based on this module.
The large square form appears to open in the top left corner and expand upward through a red plane that is no longer based on the initial module. The contrast between black and blue in the lower right section appears so faint (in the original more so than in reproductions) as to suggest continuity between one hue and the other and hence a reopening of the form. Chromatic value has an influence on the clarity with which the form is perceived.
Observation of the red shows how variations in size and proportion can make the same color look different. This is accentuated by relations with the neighboring colors. The red appears lighter alongside black than gray or yellow, next to which it appears to acquire greater weight and solidity. Things have no value in themselves but are defined and acquire value in relation to one another. It is not possible to single out an entity and appraise it independently of its context. A space of this nature can serve as a sort of gymnasium in training the mind to discern relations between different things more than individual things in themselves, in perceiving the value of things as they take on relative and temporary qualities through reciprocal influence. Such space can be a stimulus to contemplation of the changing complexities of present-day reality.
The two squares, one black (A) and one white (B), in diagram 52.1 **b** express a condition of equilibrium between opposites. The two squares are placed one above the other, one darker and heavier, the other lighter in both senses. The composition displays a balance of vertical and horizontal and of black and white in this area, i.e. a synthesis of opposites in terms both of form and of color. Here too, however, as in **52**, the synthesis is not concentrated in a single area, as it is in **51**.
Above the whitish square we can see another square field of analogous proportions made up of a red square (C), a vertical blue rectangle (D) and a horizontal yellow rectangle (E). Added together, the three parts form a square made up of the three primary colors.
Reading the composition again from the bottom up, we see a black square, a white square, and a third made up of yellow, red, and blue. These three squares give birth to a unitary synthesis dynamically transposed into the vertical. We have black



52.1 **a**

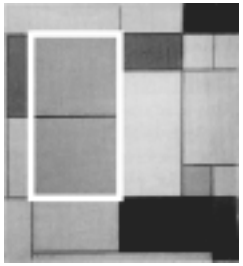


52.1 **b**



52.1 **c**

and white (opposites in terms of thought and the spiritual) at the bottom and a synthesis of the three primary colors, symbolizing the natural, higher up. Proceeding vertically, we sense a synthesis of the two opposite values (black and white) that opens up to the three primary colors, as well as the vertical (D) and horizontal (E), a dynamic synthesis of spiritual and natural.

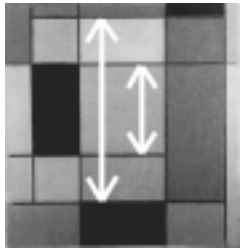


52.2 **a**

As previously in **52**, Mondrian again seeks interpenetration of unity and multiplicity, but realizes in doing so that the unitary synthesis is weakened and does not manifest itself with sufficient clarity.

In **52.1** a large blue area (diagram 52.1 **c**, continuous line) is made up of a square and two rectangles, one vertical and one horizontal. The blue area predominates with respect to the others and seems intent on presenting a single plane holding for the composition as a whole. With respect to the more complex and variable synthesis shown in diagram 52.1 **b**, the one generated with the blue area, albeit comparatively manifold (the three different shapes), is of a single color. The blue area seems to suggest synthesis more effectively than the large, composite form (dotted line). Mondrian thus opens up to variety on the one hand (diagram 52.1 **b**) while tending on the other toward closure through the uniformity of the large blue area.

He needs a synthesis manifested with greater visibility.



52.3 **a**

52.2 presents a pair of vertically arranged squares that are uniform and thus appear with greater immediacy (diagram 52.2 **a** alongside).

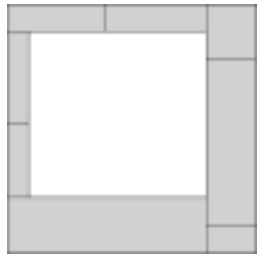
These two squares appear to interpenetrate in **52.3** (diagram 52.3 **a**) and generate a single square, which occupies the center of the canvas in **53**. The large square of **52** can be seen as purging itself of all multiplicity to become a homogeneous white field defined by black lines (diagram 53 **a**). The three primary colors (symbolizing the natural) return to the outer area. The composition thus expresses a clearly visible unity once again.

The number of planes decreases in the transition from **51** to **53** and the composition now displays a greater degree of synthesis. The square area in the center suggests a certain parameter of constant space, whereas all the rest displays free variation of the perpendicular relationship oscillating between the predominance of one direction or color and another.

53 **a**

In short, the artist returns here to the conception of unity expressed in the *Checkerboard with Light Colors* (**51**), i.e. a unity of the two opposite values, black and white, but with the substantial difference that, with respect to **51**, the composition has become wholly asymmetric and the sense of variation is no longer expressed solely through color but also through form. The composition now develops freely and is no longer subject to any pre-established module.

The layout of **53** was to become the model for nearly all the canvases painted by Mondrian in 1922 (**54**) (**54.6, 54.7, 54.8, 54.9, 54.10, 54.11, 55.1, 55.2**), where the compositions develop a large white square in the context of a variable set of whitish, gray and/or yellow, red, and blue planes. I shall call this type of composition, as exemplified in the diagram alongside, layout N. I.

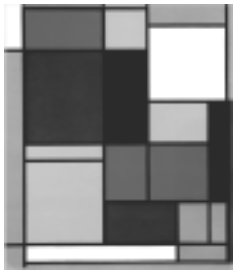


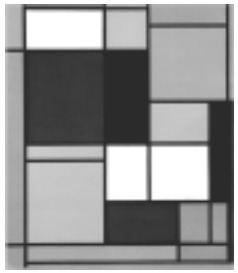
Layout N. I (54, 55)

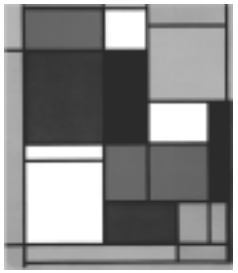
It should be stressed that the adoption of this layout was not immediately subsequent to the painting of **53**. Mondrian worked in 1921 on a series of paintings in which he appears to have still been seeking equilibrium between unity and multiplicity. These works constitute the phase of transition from **53** to **54** and **55**. Numbered progressively from **53.1** to **54.5**, they appear in sections **B2** and **B3**.

As we were saying, these new compositions no longer present a constant parameter inhibiting the development of the planes and the space reverts to wholly uncontrolled variation. Consider for example **53.1, 53.4,** and **53.6**, where all the planes assume new proportions and change in appearance also through the use of different colors.

Everything seems subject to change in **53.4**, where all the planes differ from one another in terms of form or color.
The yellow in the lower section of diagram 53.4 **a** presents a rectilinear shape with a clear predominance of the horizontal. The same color appears in the upper left section in vertical form and attains an equivalence of the two opposite directions on the right.
The red in diagram 53.4 **b** appears in horizontal form in the upper section and in the center toward the right, where it generates a horizontal predominance that splits into two areas, one vertical and one in which the opposite directions attain equivalence.


53.4 **a**


53.4 **b**


53.4 **c**

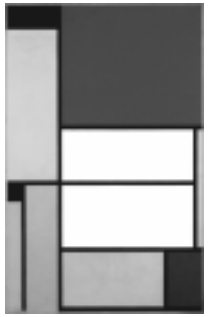
The same happens with white (diagram 53.4 **c**), which displays vertical predominance in the lower section, horizontal in the center, and equivalence in the upper. A horizontal segment divides the vertical rectangle in the lower part, suggesting a potential new equivalence. The space is in motion; everything changes. More balanced syntheses are generated every so often in one color or another between the areas with a predominance of one direction or the other.

Other works present a large square form in color (**53.3, 53.5, 54.4, 55**) (the reproduction of **53.5** is in black and white).
It is color more than form that generates a large blue field of square shape in **53.2**.
Elsewhere it is instead form that establishes equivalence while color reopens it (**53.6**, red field; **54.12**, blue field).
Some canvases present a large white square that is left open on one side (**54.5, 54.12**) or two sides (**54.3**).

It is with **54**, which also forms part of this group of works of 1921, that the layout developed the previous year in **53** takes shape: a large white square defined on four sides by black lines and placed in a state of dynamic equilibrium by asymmetric fields of color and non-color.
Mondrian endeavors in all these compositions to present space poised in unstable equilibrium between a constant parameter and a variable set of measurements and colors.
He appears intent on breaking free of the pre-established schemata and modules that informed the works of 1918-20. He now glimpses a space that is asymmetric, dynamic, and comparatively manifold and yet capable of expressing synthesis and permanence: a white square in the center (**54**) or large red

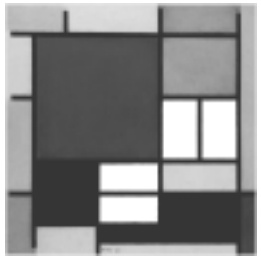
squares (**55**), i.e. a synthesis of form that opens up again to color, but only one color, so as to maintain visibility and avoid being lost, as in **52**.
The square shapes that stand out through color (**53.2**) or expand with color while form brings them back into proportion (**53.6**) or open up on one side (**54.3**) and then close to attain greater clarity of expression (**54.4**) are all ways of expressing a space that simultaneously evokes variety and dynamic expansion on the one hand and concentration and equilibrium on the other.

We thus see in these works of 1921 how the artist endeavors to open up and multiply the unitary synthesis in more discreet and prudent fashion than in **52** and **52.1**, where he divided the unity but thereby almost lost it because it no longer possessed sufficiently visibility. Mondrian now seeks to keep the unitary synthesis visible while it is subjected to broader variety in terms of form and color. He appears to be seeking a compromise in the works of 1921 between the insufficiently visible unitary synthesis of **52** and its clearly evident but perhaps overly dominant counterpart in **53**.



54.1 **a**

Some canvases display splendid subtle variations of gray, whereas the yellows, reds, and blues sometimes appear understated.
54.1 presents a set of planes including a more or less square field of light gray crossed by a horizontal line (diagram 54.1 **a**) and a red area of analogous proportions higher up. While the grayish-white square is closed on all four sides, the red field remains open and expands beyond the perimeter of the canvas. A relationship is established between a closed square of "non-color" and a probable open square of color, i.e. "contaminated" by variety and becoming.
The horizontal line running through the closed square is drawn to the left by the yellow and seems to help maintain the tension of the equivalence generated in the grayish-white square. The blue counterbalances the red and yellow just enough to keep the entire composition in a state of dynamic equilibrium.
The small black accent (over the yellow) concentrates the space while the black surface in the upper left section expands it: the same thing seen an instant before and an instant after.
The clear vertical predominance manifested with the yellow is toned down in the blue surface and neutralized in the white square, where vertical and horizontal are equivalent, before opening up to a new predominance (this time horizontal) with the red plane.
The composition should not be seen as an assemblage of separate entities placed one beside the other but rather as a series of relations through which the same entities are progressively transformed by taking on different shapes and colors.
Unlike other works of this period, this composition constitutes in my view a highly successful example of the resolution of complex, articulated space in a harmonious, dynamic unity. The parts all differ from one another but contribute irreplaceably to the smooth functioning of the whole. The space is kept taut to the right degree. There is a clear contrast between vertical and horizontal that generates tension while a deft reciprocal distribution and calibration of color and proportion works at the same time to generate the felicitous impression of an optimal balance of weight. The space is markedly asymmetric but everything is kept in perfect equilibrium. It does the mind good to think that asymmetry and the broadest diversity can be resolved in a harmonious space. If only this could be achieved more often in social life.

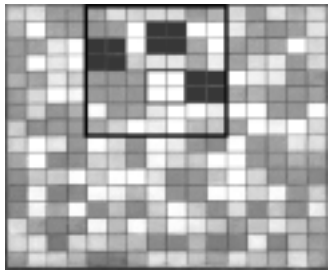


54.4 **a**

In **54.4**, to the right of the large red square and to the right of the smaller black square below, we can see a whitish square field crossed by a vertical segment and a grayish square field crossed by a horizontal segment (diagram 54.4 **a**). This too is a

way of evoking a sense of variation while keeping the space comparatively constant, with the same configuration changing position or two apparently different things being related to the same pattern, as in **48** (see page 61). A large red square, a smaller black square, a white square with a vertical segment, and a gray square with a horizontal segment. Here too, multiplicity invokes unity and unity is already multiple.

54.6, 54.7, 54.9, 54.11, 55.1, 55.2 are compositions of 1921-22 based on what I have called the N. I layout. As pointed out, these canvases present a large square form occupying most of the surface. Developed around the white inner field are areas of a similar or slightly different white (differences that cannot be seen in the reproductions) and three areas of variable size, each of which in a primary color. The colored shapes are arranged in such a way as to create asymmetry and "decenter" the square.
The planes are again reduced in size with respect to the compositions of 1920 (**52, 53**). The lines increase in thickness while the primary colors tend to be purified of hybrid tonalities such as the greenish yellow, orange-red or pink hues present in some compositions of 1921.


51 **I**

Observe the sequence **51, 52, 53, 54**. All the variety of **51** is gradually reduced over a span of nearly three years until all that is left on the canvas is what could be interpreted as a part (see diagram 51 **I** alongside) on which the painter seems determined to concentrate. This detail includes the white unity and three planes, each in a primary color and each now differing from the others in size and shape.
There is a choral sense of variation in **51** with a large number of equal shapes varying in appearance only through color. The new canvases (**54, 55**) present a smaller number of parts that vary both in form and in color to make every point in the space unique and unrepeatable. There is a decrease in the number of parts but an increase in their reciprocal diversity. The sense of multiplicity expressed in primarily quantitative terms now gives way to a sense of multiplicity expressed through difference in quality.
Like **51**, these compositions also show transition from the marked differentiation of yellows, reds, and blues to a more tenuous contrast between grays and whites culminating in the white of the central square, where all chromatic variation is cancelled out for an instant. This is a splendidly painted white, saturated with life and seeming to encapsulate all the colors. The area of absolute and constant space then reverts to change through slight variations of white and gray leading up to the more immediately visible and discordant variation expressed with yellow, red and blue.
Mutatis mutandis, it is still the space of **45** that reappears. As in **45** and then in **51**, albeit now in smaller and more concise form, every canvas of 1921-22 expresses space in a state of unstable equilibrium between a variety of heterogeneous situations and a component tending toward greater uniformity and constancy. There is an alternating predominance of horizontal and vertical, of yellow and red, or cooler and warmer shades of white. Each part seeks in a more or less obvious way to distinguish and separate itself from the others in terms of size and shape and/or tonality of color or non-color. The space grows and multiplies through diversification while remaining more homogeneous in the center, where it expresses a synthesis of all the variation in shape, size and color between two opposite values.
Opposite concepts are an expedient devised by human thought to reduce and concentrate the vast range of variation present in nature. Given the impossibility of conceiving and representing the real extension and variety of the world, the human mind has recourse to the two most different values. It is a device serving to make finite-i.e. thinkable and comprehensible (in the sense of including, containing, encompassing)-an extension that is actually infinite and hence unthinkable as a whole.

To give a concrete example, there is a virtually infinite range of grays between black and white that we really cannot conceive in all its real breadth and variety. The reference to opposite values is a mental stratagem serving to encapsulate the multiplicity of reality. It should always be remembered that this reduction is not the reality of nature but rather of thought.
The Neoplastic compositions of the early 1920s provide a necessarily limited exemplification of the variety of the world, since the canvas can only contain a certain number of planes. The Neoplastic lines thus began to continue uninterruptedly as from 1923 in order to allude to the wealth of forms and colors of real space, which no canvas will ever be able to present exhaustively.

I cannot say how far the square form is involved in endowing the composition as a whole with harmony. The square cannot be singled out and isolated from its context, and in any case it was certainly not the square in itself that interested Mondrian.
Certain critics have often stressed the geometric aspect of Neoplastic painting, thereby prompting reactions on the part of others who reject the reductive view of Mondrian's art as geometrism for its own sake. This may be because few have understood the marginal role actually played by geometric schemata in the evolution of his visual thinking and in the work of true abstract painters in general.
Mondrian does not see the square as a closed and pre-established geometric shape but rather as the given moment in which the relationship between horizontals and verticals attains a certain balance.
This equilibrium confers greater stability and duration on space that is characterized by the constant predominance of one aspect or the other over its opposite. This is transformed in the square into an equivalence that is then lost when the different aspects again start to challenge and attain predominance over one another. The balance of the composition is influenced by all the elements and not only by the square. Every part is unique and unrepeatable but nevertheless contributes to the overall economy of the work, and it is precisely a vision of the whole that determines the relative value of each individual part.

Certain North American critics have superficially chosen to describe abstract art and especially the type involving precise, clear-cut shapes by means of the term "hardedge", as though we were talking about the outer aspect of some object.
The value of Neoplastic painting lies instead precisely in the abolition of every particular form in favor of the expression of relationships.
The measurements, proportions, and chromatic or tonal variations in Neoplastic compositions are not pre-established but generated out of one another through reciprocal influence. Neoplastic squares are never really such because it is the eye rather than mathematics that decides on their proportions. Their extension can be slightly more vertical in some cases and horizontal in others depending on the spatial context in which they are developed. Every canvas presents a different square that serves, however, to meet the need for equilibrium in that particular composition and not in others.
There are no elements in Neoplastic space endowed with absolute and universal validity.
It is therefore not the square in itself but the whole, i.e. a space that starts from a condition of change, attains momentary equilibrium, and then flows back into the unstable alternation of situations. If constancy predominates, the space is atrophied in a static square and bears little resemblance to life. Conversely, if change prevails, the space is in danger of becoming chaotic and appeals less to the human mind. The subtle balancing tricks produced in Neoplastic space are a transposition of the far more complex and never achieved equilibriums of existence.
How many times in our lives have we had the impression of being able to attain a stable and lasting balance that is then always challenged by existence?

As already pointed out, the lines in these compositions again stop short of the edge of the canvas. It is almost as though they were blocking one another, as though the painter wanted to make the colored surfaces more independent and give greater freedom to color, which is defined and limited on the canvas but expands freely in the vicinity of the edges and outside.

Mondrian returned to the lozenge format used between 1918 and 1919 (**49, 50**) in 1921 and worked on a new composition (**54.2**) that was to constitute the basis for a canvas painted in 1924-25 (**56**). He also used this format for nine other compositions between 1925 and 1933.

Both **54.2** and **56** present a variable set of white and whitish surfaces together with a yellow, a red, a blue, and a black surface.
The proportions of the black surface in **54.2** are almost square with a slightly greater degree of vertical development. To its right we see a larger white surface, again almost square but more horizontally developed. A fully attained equivalence of white can be seen in the upper section.
All of the surfaces except the black continue partially outside the painting to a greater or lesser extent. The colored ones in particular present uncertain proportions with respect to the black surface and the two large white surfaces.

The layout takes clearer shape in **56** with the introduction of a few modifications. The lines now display greater thickness to differing degrees. The black surface now occupies a lower position and the only area that appears to be fully included inside the canvas is a white square (diagram 56 **a**) that develops, as in **54.2**, above another square extending partially beyond the canvas.
The square completely included inside the canvas is a different shade of white, which helps it to convey a sense of greater completeness and permanence than the others. All the other shapes could be described as variations on that particular square, as though it demonstrated the possibility of an ideal balance that is practically never attained in everyday life (whose relative condition is expressed by all the other planes).
Here too, as in the rectangular canvases of 1922, we are faced with an asymmetric space made up of different elements depending on the alternating predominance of horizontal and vertical and the different colors. Diversity is cancelled out where the opposite values, which generate all this variety, attain a temporarily equivalence in a unitary synthesis while the space around them is already reverting to change.

56 **a**

The surface positioned above the square in the top corner of the lozenge seems to present a shade of white similar to that of the square field below. If this is so, the upward continuation of the white brings the square form into a dynamic state.
The two squares can therefore be read in vertical sequence as the same entity making its appearance in incomplete form in the lower section, attaining highly visible equivalence in the wholly closed square, and then dissolving toward the top. The black surface below acts as a counterweight to the upward expansion and thus lends it greater impetus. The three planes in primary colors emphasize the asymmetry of the composition.

Like some canvases of 1920 (**51.3, 52.1, 52.2), 54.2** and **56** thus also present a vertically duplicated unitary synthesis.

A subsequent lozenge (**56.1**) also involves the duplication of a square, but this time through the shifting of a single plane. The composition presents a large

56.1 **a**

56.1 **b**

56.1 **c**

56.1 **d**

more or less square area (diagram 56.1 **a**) generated by the interaction of two opposing rectangles that extend partially outside the canvas, one to the right (diagram **b**) and the other toward the bottom (diagram **c**). Red, black, and yellow externally define a larger shape that expands beyond the canvas (diagram **d**) while the blue draws the field back toward the interior (diagram **a**).
This is a square in a state of dynamic equilibrium between horizontal and vertical predominance, a probable square that undergoes expansion and concentration at the same time through variation in size and shape.
The idea of the two squares manifested in **54.2** and then in **56** is expressed here in a different way but with the same intent, namely to make the equivalence of opposites more dynamic, to multiply unity. This takes place in **56** with the simultaneous presence of two distinct squares that are to be read as successive moments of the same entity "halted" in the course of its becoming, in this case through the simultaneous expansion and contraction of a single square field that persists on the one hand and expands beyond the finite plane of the canvas on the other.

* * *

As we have seen, some works of 1921-22 present a large or medium-sized square form, sometimes red and sometimes white, left open on one side (**53.3, 53.5, 53.6, 54.5, 54.12**) or two sides (**53.2, 54.1, 54.3**).
This trend took shape around 1925, when some canvases of rectangular format (**56.3, 56.5, 56.7, 56.11, 56.13, 57, 57.3**) began to present the common characteristic of an opening on one side of the large square previously bounded on all four sides (all the compositions based on the N. I layout).
The square is unbounded on the right side (**56.11, 57**) or the left (all the others) and its white field appears to expand beyond the finite surface of the canvas.
To be precise, the white field seen in **56.7** is no longer a square but a vertical rectangle. Can we be sure that it was or still is a square expanding beyond the perimeter of the canvas? The same thing occurs in **56.2** and then in **57.1, 57.5, 57.6,** and **57.7**, where we can do no more than sense the presence of a large square form, only a part of which can actually be seen on the canvas.

This tendency to open up and expand the square beyond the boundary of the canvas is developed in new lozenge compositions.

One horizontal and two vertical lines run across the canvas in **56.4** and divide it into sections. The horizontal and the right vertical appear to be of equal thickness while the vertical on the left is thicker, which seems to make up for its lesser extension.
The thickness of a line can also serve in a space moving toward ever-greater synthesis to calibrate the weights and influence the overall economy of the composition. The layout appears to derive from **56.1**, lightened here by the elimination of some parts.
The more or less square surface to be seen in the central area of **56.1** now becomes a field that is open at the top and appears simultaneously to expand also toward the right by virtue of the fact that the area corresponding to the right corner of the lozenge is the same shade of white as the square field, whereas the area below is gray. A small yellow plane appears in the lower right section and the overall balance is restored toward the left by the thicker line and the blue plane.
Examination of the horizontal line in relation to the right vertical reveals a rectangular area extending upward (diagram 56.4 **a**), while the relationship between the same horizontal and the left vertical generates a horizontal field that the right corner of the lozenge draws toward itself (diagram **b**).
The eye is drawn respectively downward and upward by the horizontal (**b**) and the vertical (**a**) areas, the relationship between which generates an indefinite square field that expands and contracts under the influence of the contending directions.
The space as a whole is in a state of unstable equilibrium and attains unified expression for an instant through the progressive and almost simultaneous recombination of parts, none of which-it should be noted-constitutes in itself a definite unitary synthesis like the square bounded on four sides.

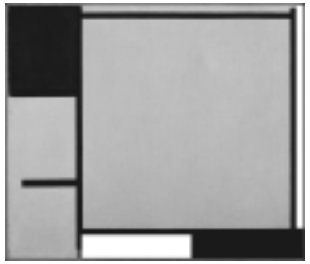
56.4 **a**

56.4 **b**

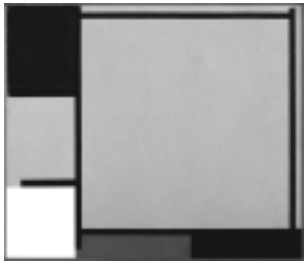
The virtual square expands upward beyond the perimeter of the canvas, projected ideally toward the infinite, while the notes of color (above all the blue on the left) draw the eye back toward the lower central area. White symbolizes the spiritual and the primary colors the natural in the Neoplastic vocabulary.
We can therefore imagine this composition as a metaphor of the relationship between the absolute drives of the spirit drawn back toward the concrete by the part of man that is closest to the natural world: a dynamic relationship between opposite drives that attain equilibrium for an instant through reconciliation.

The space in **56.8** is pared down even more to the bare essentials with two perpendicular lines running across the canvas and alluding to a square field now open on two sides. The top and right corners of the lozenge seem to expand the inner area of the square. It is, however, legitimate to wonder whether this is still a square or instead an evocation of a possible square that has already moved outside our visual field before being able to make its appearance. The lines expand the white field to infinity; the blue draws the space back toward a more concrete dimension.

In the meantime, we see that all the lines now continue resolutely beyond the edges of the canvases in order to evoke the continuity of space manifested in less explicit form since 1919 (**51**).



54.9 **a**



54.9 **b**

While the large square opens up and expands in various works of this period, Mondrian was working on other compositions where a large square again appears in a closed form clearly defined by four sides (**56.6, 56.9, 56.10, 56.12, 57.2, 57.4**).
Whether open or closed, the large squares appearing in all the works produced during the first half of the 1920s are always counterbalanced by planes with a marked horizontal or vertical predominance as seen in **54, 54.6, 54.7** and **54.9** (see diagram 54.9 **a** alongside) but also by planes in which the imbalance between the opposing directions is reduced, i.e. attains proportions verging on the square (**54.10, 54.11, 55.2, 56.3, 56.11, 56.13**) (diagram 54.9 **b**) .
When the planes are rectangular (diagram **a**), they endow the large central square with dynamism. When they approach and/or attain the proportions of a square (diagram **b**), they seem intent on competing for the space with the large white square, which therefore appears less absolute because the moment in which the opposites attain equivalence is no longer expressed solely through a single large square but also in the form of smaller squares (**54.10, 54.11**). Equivalence is diversified and unity multiplied.

Let us consider the example of **57.2**, where the red surface and especially the two white surfaces below it approach square proportions while the yellow and the blue present a clear predominance of horizontal or vertical. The former express a section of constant space that appears as a variation on the large central square. The latter express a marked predominance that strives to split and reopen the equivalence of opposite values attained with the square forms.

56.12 presents a vertical yellow plane with the proportions of a linear segment developing around a large area tending toward the square. We then see a horizontal blue area where the imbalance between horizontal and vertical is less marked than in the yellow, and finally a red field where the horizontal component increases again and the imbalance between the opposites is further reduced.
A horizontal line divides the red field into two areas, the lower of which presents square proportions while the other is a rectangle of greater horizontal development.
On rereading this as a single sequence, we see a vertical yellow plane that passes through a horizontal blue field, gradually attains an equilibrium of vertical and horizontal (the red square), and then opens up again to predominance, this time horizontal, with the red rectangle positioned above. The marked predominance of one value gives way to a momentary equilibrium of opposite values that then opens up again to new forms of predominance and imbalance.
All this happens around a large white square that appears to constitute a sort of ideal vision or model of absolute equilibrium attained by the various areas of different colors in a temporal and hence relative succession that could be described as reflecting everyday reality.
The ideal vision of absolute equilibrium is expressed in white, a color Mondrian identified with the spiritual, while the relative vision developed in a spatio-temporal sequence is expressed with the three primary colors, which the artist identified with the natural.

In **56.10** we see a large white square and a smaller colored square. I do not know what color the small square is because I have never seen this work or color reproductions of it. The large square shows a slight vertical predominance and the smaller a barely perceptible horizontal predominance, just enough

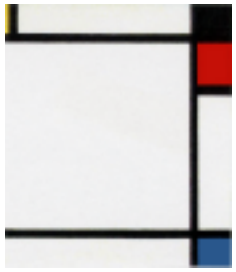
to keep the composition in motion.

In **57.4**, which I have again been unable to find in color reproduction, we see a large white square form placed in a state of unstable equilibrium by three planes (one yellow, one red, and one blue). These work through addition and subtraction with alternating horizontal and vertical predominance to create a state of tension enveloping the large square field. The two colored planes on the right present horizontal proportions that are counterbalanced by a slight vertical predominance of the central square field. This predominance is strongly accentuated in the colored area that practically corresponds to the left side of the large square. The large white field seems to be torn between this strong vertical thrust and the two planes displaying horizontal proportions. In other words, equilibrium is generated by contrasting entities and unity is the fruit of diversity.

A square field is once again the momentary homogeneous outcome of reciprocally heterogeneous components (yellow, red, and blue, horizontal and vertical) in **57.8**.

* * *

We spoke earlier of works in which the large square form opens up and its inner field expands beyond the finite area of the canvas. Among these, we identified some in which this process is so accentuated as to leave within the canvas a vertical rectangle that can only be seen intuitively as part of the large square (**56.7, 57.1, 57.5, 57.6, 57.7**). Let us now consider the following sequence of works:

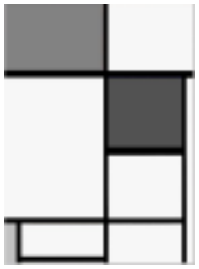


56.3 1925

56.7 1926

57.7 1927

58 1928



60.3 1930

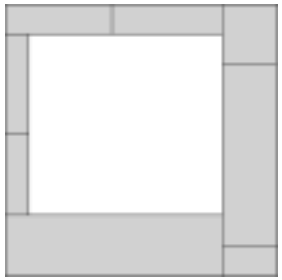
61 1931

Observing the first three compositions, we see that in **56.3** the large white field of square proportions is nearly all contained inside the perimeter of the painting. The large square expands toward the left in **56.7** and is mostly outside the canvas in **57.7**, where the surface to be seen is in actual fact a vertical rectangle.

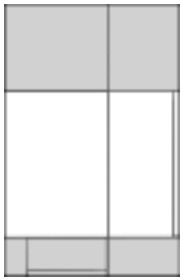
If we broaden the visual horizons, however, and consider all the area of space in **57.7** between the two horizontal lines, we realize that it combines with the two vertical sides of the canvas to form a new shape tending toward the square, a square with a vertical line running through it. The same thing is to be seen in some later works (**58, 60.3, 61**).

I shall call this new type of compositional layout developed between 1927 and 1928 N. II.

There is a vertical line running through the square in the N. II layout. Indications of infinite space (lines) appear inside the finite space (the square); the dynamic and ever-changing element (the line) penetrates the constant element (the square).
There appears to be interpenetration of the large square form and the changing space expressed by the lines and the other planes, especially in the last three works of the above sequence.



Layout N. I (54, 55)



Layout N. II (58, 61)

The relationship of equivalence (the square) expressed in the new layout N. II appears less peremptory than in layout N. I.
The vertical line running through the center of the canvas is another of the tendencies sporadically manifested in the works of 1921 (**53.3, 53.5, 53.6, 54.3, 55.3**). Having subsequently given way to the large square (N. I), the vertical now reappears.
Mondrian seems to find a point of balance in layout N. II between the need to maintain the visibility of the section of constant space that is expressed when horizontal and vertical attain equilibrium and the desire to make this equilibrium more complex and dynamic. The opening up of finite space to infinite space and the interpenetration of unity and multiplicity constitute a process underway since 1920 (**52**).

As noted, in **57.7** two horizontal lines and the two vertical edges of the canvas form a large square. The vertical line seems intent on attracting and concentrating the square area, which is left open on either side to continue with the two horizontals beyond the finite plane of the canvas.
The vertical line combines outside the square with the lower horizontal to generate a red rectangle and with the upper to form a small yellow square.
The two colored surfaces perform the function of accentuating the asymmetrical nature of the whole but also of emphasizing the square block of the central area in a complementary fashion, the red at the bottom occupying the part not filled by the yellow at the top and vice versa. Added together, the two colored surfaces would express the absolute continuity of the horizontal lines, which are instead disrupted and distanced by the intervention of the vertical. It is necessary to imagine the two horizontals an instant before the appearance of the vertical, when they presumably formed a single line that was then forced apart by its passing to create the white central block that works with the edges of the canvas to generate the large square. The vertical line shatters the uninterrupted continuity of the horizontal, which thus shifts from an absolute to a relative condition in which one part appears as red and another as yellow; one is situated below and the other above; one partakes more of the horizontal (the red surface) and the other to the same degree of both contrasting directions.
It could be said that the interaction between the vertical (symbolizing the spiritual, i.e. the subject) and the horizontal (symbolizing the natural universe) gives birth in the twinkling of an eye to all the variety of shapes and colors, just as the interaction between an observer and the continuity of the natural landscape generates a whole variety of parts that we develop into mental content and then call reality.
As it remains open on either side, the space between the two horizontal lines is in a state of unstable balance between a square shape (if seen in relation to the edges of the canvas) and a rectangle expanding beyond the perimeter of the canvas (if the eye is left free to follow the two horizontal lines in their continuation toward virtually infinite space).

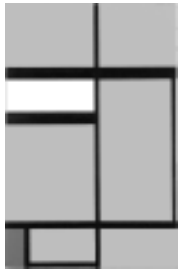
A relationship arises spontaneously between the red rectangle, the yellow square, and the larger, unstable square shape in the middle, which would close up in the absence of the vertical line and revert to its prior state, with the horizontal lines reconnecting to form a single and once again absolute line of horizontal tension, red and yellow dissolving into white, and the relative again becoming absolute also in terms of color.

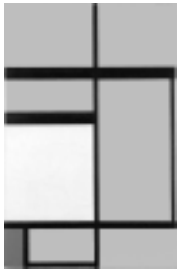
57.7 leads to **58**, where the layout is analogous but the resolution different. The vertical line is shifted further toward the center and two horizontal lines generate areas of different proportions including a large square, as in **57.7**. The vertical line divides the square into two vertical rectangles, one white and the other blue.
We see a yellow surface in the lower section and in the upper section a red surface that works together with a blue one to give the composition a strongly asymmetric character. Reading from the bottom up, we see a yellow horizontal rectangle that becomes a blue one and then a red vertical rectangle. With respect to the other two rectangles, the opposing directions approach equivalence in the red surface. Moving upward from the bottom, the vertical line guides a development of the composition that shows the three colors and the opposing directions generating different and complementary situations that are then encompassed in the large square to be glimpsed between the two horizontal lines. Equivalence is attained here for an instant between the opposite directions, while in terms of color the square already appears to be on the borderline between white and blue. The square form appears to be torn between the blue rectangle, which pushes it from inside toward the right, and the yellow and red rectangles, that pull it from outside toward the left.

Nearly three years later, **61** reiterates the compositional development of **58** while purging it of color. The only one of the three primary colors to be seen in **61** is red, which acts as an accent, while most of the composition develops through a rhythmic arrangement of white planes. In comparison with **58**, the vertical line typical of the N. II layout is shifted still further toward the center of the canvas.
Starting from the red surface and following the lower horizontal line, the space opens up toward the right while being simultaneously pushed upward by the vertical, thus giving rise to a square form (diagram 61 **a**) divided into a number of areas (diagrams **b, c, d**) by the same vertical and a horizontal segment.
The lines and segments present at least five different thicknesses. Starting from the vertical segment corresponding to the right side of the large square, which is the thinnest, we have the vertical line in the center and the two small segments, horizontal and vertical, near the red surface followed by the lower horizontal line, the upper horizontal line, and the horizontal segment inside the square. Following this succession, we notice an almost impeceptible increase in thickness.
The artist reduces the elements in this period, often working with white, black, and small accents of color (see also **59.3, 60.2, 60.4, 60.5, 61.3**).
While the elements are reduced, the painter increases their reciprocal diversity with subtle variations, as exemplified in this case by the differing thicknesses of the lines. The whole is thus rich in nuances that help to evoke the sense of multiplicity to which the artist attached such importance, even in a space moving toward ever-greater synthesis.


61 **a**


61 **b**

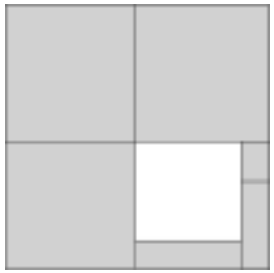

61 **c**


61 **d**

In the large square field we see a vertical rectangle (diagram **b**), a horizontal rectangle (diagram **c**), and one in which the opposite directions approach equivalence (diagram **d**), which is finally attained in the large square (diagram **a**) constituting a synthesis of three different situations.
The proportions of the small red plane are similar to those of the canvas as a whole. We can therefore start from the red surface and proceed to the plane (diagram **d**) followed by the large square (diagram **a**). When we focus on the red plane, the development of the composition opens it up again toward the right (diagram **a**). When we contemplate the variety (diagrams **b, c, d**) present in diagram **a**, the red accent calls out to concentrate the manifold aspect within itself once again. It appears to be color more than equivalence (the square) that works in this composition to maintain the unity of a space multiplying in flight.

* * *

As we have seen, the large central square of layout N. I opens up and expands beyond the finite field of the canvas in some works between 1925 and 1927 (**56.3, 56.7, 56.11, 56.13**) while remaining bounded on all four sides in others (**56.6, 56.10, 56.12, 57.2**).
The large square in **58.1** (which is slightly vertical to compensate for the horizontal pull of the red toward the right) is again closed on all four sides and very visibly positioned inside the canvas. Unlike the other canvases of 1925-27, however, the large square decreases in size here and leaves space for a second square colored red, which assumes greater weight within the composition.
The size of the square decreases still further in **58.2**, where the only area that actually appears closed on all four sides is a horizontal rectangle (lower right), while **58.3** again presents an authentic square that, as already seen in **58.1**, coexists with another smaller red square generated in the upper left corner (the same layout as **58.1** but with a mirror-image resolution). The large square is now less vertical because the blue balances the red.
58.1 and **58.3** display the tendency to reduce the size of the large square of previous compositions and leave more space for a second square assuming greater weight than the small colored planes previously formed alongside the large white square field. Compare **58.3** with **56.10, 56.11, 56.12,** and **56.13**.
This tendency to reduce the proportions of the large white square in favor of small colored surfaces gave rise around 1928-29 to two new types of compositional layout:
N. III, generated for the first time in **58.2** and then developed with **59** and **62** and with **58.9, 60.2, 60.6, 61.1, 61.2, 61.4, 62.1, 62.2,** and **62.3**
N. IV, seen for the first time in **58.4** and then developed in **60** and **63** and in **58.6, 58.8, 58.10, 59.1, 59.2,** and **60.1**.



Layout N. III (59, 62)

Layout N. III is born out of the meeting of two perpendicular lines that run through the center of the canvas to generate four areas with proportions not too far removed from equivalence. The lower right area is further divided by three segments that work with the two lines to produce a more or less square area and a smaller colored surface to its right.
This layout appears to have developed out of the vertical line that comes to occupy the center of the canvas in the N. II layout, where the line runs through the square area, which remains open on the sides. In the N. III layout the square area is reduced in size and moved to the lower right section but remains closed and its inner field remains whole, unlike what happens in layout N. II.
The peremptory presence of the large square, which occupied the center of the composition in 1922 (the N. I layout), gives way first to a vertical line (the N. II layout) and then to two perpendicular lines (the N. III layout). Where there was once a finite space (the square), we now see a space that continues uninterruptedly (lines). This makes the center of the canvas

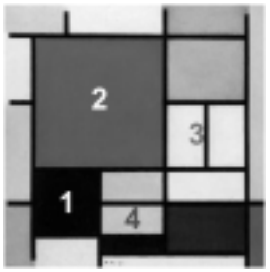
more dynamic.
As we have seen, the central area of the canvas always plays a crucial role in Mondrian's compositions. Recall the tree trunks joining in the upper central area (**5**) and the imprecise circles of the apples finding an ideal synthesis in the center with the precise circle of the plate (**7**). Recall also the trunk of the naturalistic tree uniting the multiplicity of branches in the center and then the square of **45** or the black and white rectangle of **51** and the large square form of **53, 54,** and **55**. All this always involves the central area of the composition.
With the works based on layouts N. II and N. III, Mondrian appears to have felt the need to inject greater dynamism into the center and with it the equivalence of opposites and the composition as a whole.

The two perpendicular lines in **60.2** seem intent on opening the square toward the upper section and the left, while the accent of color again exerts a pull to the right. The composition is therefore in dynamic equilibrium between a space expanding to infinity and the same space momentarily concentrated in a finite relationship.

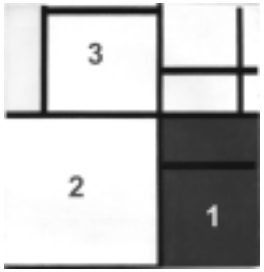
Something similar is observed in **62.1**. The three areas that remain open seem designed to express possible variants of the square that remains closed. The horizontal predominates slightly in one case and the vertical in another. The impression is sometimes of a square, but the differences are minimal. A slice of definite space (the closed square) coexists with slices of indefinite space. The three areas that remain open appear in fact as vertical and horizontal rectangles or as squares only if seen in relation to the sides of the canvas. In actual fact, we do not know how each area develops beyond the boundaries of the painting. These surfaces therefore express a variable space in relation to the square, in which the opposite values attain definite equivalence.
The painter appears to have wished to express various possible squares simultaneously a moment before or a moment after they attain equivalence, to express a variety of possible unitary syntheses, i.e. to multiply unity.

The white area in the upper right section of **62.2** is the only one in which horizontal and vertical achieve equivalence, while the closed square in the lower right section becomes a horizontal rectangle here.
Something similar is seen in **62.3**, where the closed surface presents greater vertical development while the surface in the upper right section is an authentic square.
I prefer to read **62.3** as follows. I start from the closed area (1) and find a form on the left that is analogous but open on two sides (2). The blue surface exerts a pull to the right and leads to the yellow plane. The vertical proportion of the yellow surface expands horizontally and becomes the plane (5). This must be seen in relation to the horizontal segment constituting the bottom of the closed area (1). The segment restrains and concentrates the space while the surface above opens up and expands toward the right.
In this sequence we are faced with five situations that verge on equivalence without ever attaining it in stable and definitive form.
The two colored areas are similar in their proportions but differ in measurement and color. Despite their difference in size, color makes them equivalent because the blue of the smaller weighs more than the yellow. Color makes equivalent what would be unbalanced in terms of form. The same thing can also be seen in **61.2** and **61.4**.

62.3 **a**



54.4 **b**



54.12 **a**

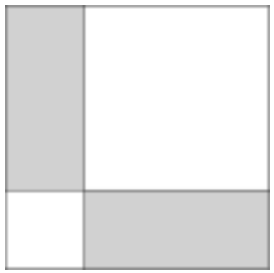
On observing these works, we are faced with a space that lasts and is already different a moment later.

A tendency to multiply and color the synthesis was displayed in some works as early as 1921, e.g. **54.4** (see diagram **b** alongside), where the equivalence of opposites is expressed through four different square forms: one black (1), a larger one in red (2), and two alternated by opposing segments (3, 4).
The same thing can be seen in **54.12** (diagram **a**), which presents three different square forms, two of which are left open while the other is colored.

Multiplication of the synthesis thus began in 1921 and took shape toward the period 1928-29 in the two layouts N. III and N. IV.

Among the compositions based on the N. III layout, I find that those presenting a field of greater horizontal extension in the upper right section (**61.4, 62.1, 62.3**) work better than those where this area is square or vertical (**60.6, 61.2, 61.4**). This is because when the horizontal predominates in the upper right section (as it does, for example, in **62.3**), the square below displays greater tension and the space as a whole is more dynamic.

I am aware of the perhaps slightly aseptic minuteness of these descriptions, which certainly lack all the vitality communicated by the original works through the texture of the painted surface, the expressive force of the colors, and the tangible rightness of the composition. Unfortunately, these things cannot be fully appreciated in the reduced scale of the reproductions. It would certainly be better if these explanations could be alternated with visits to museums.



Layout N. IV (60, 63)

The N. IV layout again develops out of the tendency observed in **58.1** and **58.3** to move the large square and make way for a smaller second square. In all the new compositions based on the N. IV layout, the large square of 1922-27 is in fact repositioned toward the top right corner and opened on two sides while a second square is consolidated in the opposite bottom left corner (**58.4**). This is essentially the layout of **58.1** and **58.3** turned upside-down, i.e. with a small square in the bottom left instead of the top right (**58.1**) or top left (**58.3**).
In **58.6** Mondrian develops a composition similar to **58.3** but enlarges the colored surfaces and distinguishes more clearly (with black) the square in the upper left section, which is red in **58.3**. The canvas seems to be divided here between a large white square and a smaller black square. The equivalence begins to waver with the blue surface and is wholly lost with the red and yellow. The colors reopen the syntheses of white and black.

An interpenetration of unity and multiplicity is sought as from 1920 (**52**), but the large composite square form does not appear in an evident way. It becomes white once again (**53, 54**) but then opens up to a single color (**55**) and divides (**58**). Synthesis is subsequently achieved in a variety of measurements and proportions close to equivalence (the compositions based on the N. III layout). With N. IV, this multiplication is effected above all through color.
A variety of squares is thus to be seen in **58.8**, including two in color and two in white, one large and three smaller. The same holds for **63**, with two colo-

red squares and two white squares. The large square and the smallest appear to contend for the space in **60** and **63**. The large square and the small one are respectively red and blue in one case and blue and yellow in another. Small black segments or accents of color serve to redistribute the weight and keep the whole in a state of dynamic equilibrium.
As previously observed for the N. III layout, in the N. IV layout it is again the sides of the canvas that determine the proportions generating the composition. The two perpendicular lines running through the painting actually divide its surface into a series of open sections that expand, together with the lines, beyond the perimeter of the painting toward virtually infinite space. We see the inner sections as squares only by relating them to the perimeter of the painting. The square fields, large or small, are in unstable equilibrium between the infinite extension of the lines and the finite surface of the canvas. The squares are finite and infinite at the same time. This interaction between infinite space and finite space generates the relations and proportions that work together with the weight of the colors toward a dynamic balancing of the whole.

Though apparently similar to **60, 59.2** is a different canvas. While its squares are slightly vertical, the horizontal segment in the upper left section has greater weight than the one in 60. Mondrian sometimes returned to a composition and made slight adjustments that struck his visual sense as crucial to its successful resolution. My own experience as a painter bears this out.

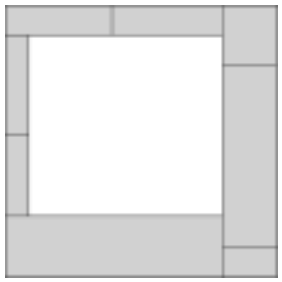
In **58.10** two opposing lines generate different equivalences of white. A red surface and a black one express different but equivalent weights that help to emphasize the expansion of the lines by increasing the dynamic aspect of the squares that keep the space in a state of unstable equilibrium between change and constancy.

59.1 presents three different situations that move from a marked vertical predominance (yellow) to a progressive equilibrium (red, blue) that is then encompassed in a large white square.

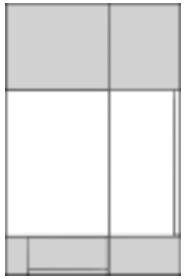
In **60.1** the composition is based on the interaction of two perpendicular lines and two segments, which generate planes tending toward square proportions. Six of these can be seen, one of which is larger (with a slightly greater degree of vertical development) and one yellow. Though colored white or grayish-white, the others are in turn differentiated through barely perceptible variations in their proportions. The horizontal line is slightly thicker than the vertical. The two segments are visibly thicker than the two lines and have greater weight, especially the vertical one, which also serves as a counterweight in the lower right section to the visual weight of the yellow square in the upper left section. The segments act as intermediaries between the dynamic and infinite space of the lines and the more stable and finite space of the squares. The three squares in the lower section appear more balanced than the others, which instead develop a slight vertical predominance. Only two planes (lower left section) are authentic squares. While the lines "run away", something remains to generate a variety of more or less square fields on the point of change. We are thus faced with the idea of a probable but not definite square.

The message of the compositions based on the two new layouts N. III and N. IV seems to be that there is nothing more different than entities that appear to be *almost* the same.

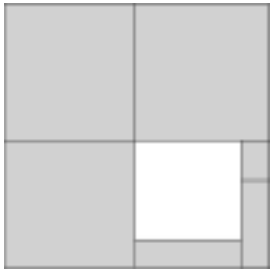
* * *



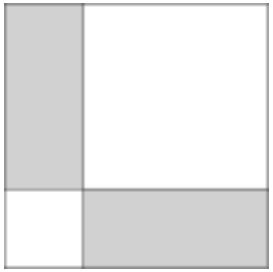
Layout N. I (54, 55)



Layout N. II (58, 61)



Layout N. III (59, 62)



Layout N. IV (60, 63)

Neoplastic space evolves through the 1920s. On the one hand, the closed square of the N. I layout (**54, 55**) opens up (**57**) and its inner field is made more dynamic with N. II (**58, 61**) by running a vertical line through it. On the other, the field inside the square remains whole with N. III (**59, 62**) but is reduced in size and exposed to the dynamic influence of two lines running through the center of the composition. With N. IV (**60, 63**), the large square opens up on two sides, splits in two, and multiplies in red, blue, and yellow.
The common denominator of the three new layouts is the effect of making the equivalence of opposites more dynamic and relatively multiple while opening it up to color.

With respect to the compositions of the early 1920s (the N. I layout), the lines acquire greater autonomy and the composition becomes more dynamic in the three new layouts (N. II, N. III, N. IV). In the compositions of 1922 (**53, 54**), the lines can in fact almost be seen as framing the large square that occupies most of the central area and thus inhibits their dynamic continuity. In the compositions based on layouts N. III and N. IV in particular, the square instead seems to be generated by the space of the lines and to share their infinite quality. This happens in all the works produced between 1928 and 1932 on the basis of the three new layouts, whose common denominator is the effect of driving the equivalence of opposites (the square) toward the greatest possible variety of measurements, proportions, and colors.

It should be pointed out that the schemata I use here for explanatory purposes (the four layouts) are to be understood as interpretive models that can clearly be applied to Mondrian's work but in no way exhaust it. They must be seen in an open and flexible way. In actual fact, the work proceeds as a single corpus and we can therefore find combinations and overlappings of the various layouts that constitute different solutions to a single need, namely to make the equivalence of opposites dynamic.
Mondrian made sketches and used them as a basis for the compositions he wished to produce. These sketches were, however, like variations on a single inner design that took different forms on emerging at his fingertips.
To give an example, **60.4** looks like a condensed reduction of **60.3**, which is based on layout N. II, but is also related at the same time to **60.5**, a composition born out of the inversion of layout N. IV (the large square in the bottom left instead of the top right). On comparing **60.3, 60.4,** and **60.5**, we can therefore see how layout N. II (**60.3**) turns into N. IV (**60.4** and **60.5**), thus bearing out the assertion that the painter proceeded intuitively and that the schemata used in this explanation should not distort what was actually a fluid and uninterrupted process by making it rigid and discontinuous.

With respect to the works of 1920-22, the primary colors display saturated tonalities in these canvases of 1928-32. The greenish yellows of the early 1920s have become fully yellow.

The composition seems to undergo distillation and deft calibration in some of these canvases. The parts express an intimate sense of permanence and duration while everything is nonetheless on the verge of flux and motion. The impending inconstancy of life transforms our equilibriums, our definite squares, into variable entities.

The play of equilibrium regards not only form but also very subtle vibrations of color. The surfaces appear to have been painted there and then, thus suggesting intuition more than cool elaboration. The fields of red are splendidly rendered, as indeed are those of white, which have none of the flatness unfortunately seen in reproductions. It is not easy to give an adequate description of the painterly quality of these canvases, the masterly combination of hues, the fine textural layering, or touches such as a sparkling note of yellow. It is also and perhaps above all essential to see the original canvases, which are endowed with energy that no reproduction will ever be able to convey, energy imparted by the man who brought them lovingly to life.

Michel Seuphor describes the canvases of the period 1928-30 as classic Neoplasticism, perhaps because nearly all the surfaces in these compositions approach square proportions, unlike the canvases of 1921-22 (**54, 55**). I agree. Some of these works are indeed authentic little masterpieces.

* * *

A further variation on the theme of the painter's drive for a dynamic transformation of the equivalence of opposites-or another type of layout, if you prefer-is to be found in the lozenge compositions Mondrian produced between 1921 and 1933. We have already examined five of the ten lozenges painted during those years. Let us now examine the other five, which Mondrian produced at the same time as the rectangular canvases we have just discussed.

The choice of the lozenge format has been described as an implicit response to van Doesburg's "deviationist" reintroduction of the oblique line. While this may be true, it does not strike me as the most important reason. The artist had in fact already used the lozenge in 1918-19.

As Welsh rightly points out, *"in the lozenge Mondrian reaffirms the supremacy of the horizontal/vertical relationship by freeing the rectilinear elements inside from an overly close relationship with the sides of the painting's format."* [21]. The lozenge gives greater breadth to the composition. It makes it possible to use lines of various lengths. New relations of tension are established between the orthogonal surfaces and the diagonal sides of the painting. The four corners of the lozenge generate a centrifugal energy and seem to expand the surface of the canvas along its two median axes. The lozenge therefore already

54.2

56

56.1

56.4

56.8

seems in itself a way to make the composition more dynamic without challenging the perpendicular axiom upon which Neoplastic space is grounded.

Unlike what happens in the rectangular canvases, the painter tends to concentrate solely on the large square form in the lozenge compositions.
As we have in fact seen, the first five works (**54.2, 56, 56.1, 56.4, 56.8**) present a gradual reduction of elements to the point where the finite space of a probable square practically coincides with the infinite space of the lines (**56.8**).

We shall now see the continuation of this process, noting first that it takes place over a span of seven years (1926-33).
56.9 belongs to the set of 1926-27 compositions, in which the square is again bounded. The square field expands slightly beyond the perimeter of the canvas toward the right and the bottom. The upper and left sides are of equal and the lower and right of increased thickness.
The field outside the square in the lower section is gray. Note how the point of intersection between the horizontal and vertical lines becomes less visible inside the canvas. Two lines still meet in the upper left section but practically on the edge. The other lines express no points of visible opposition.

In **58.6** the artist reworks the layout of **56.4** while eliminating color. With respect to **56.9**, the square field is again open and projected upward.
The differentiation of the lines in terms of thickness is more obvious here. Clockwise observation of the lines reveals a progressive increase in thickness.
The vertical on the left almost appears to have the proportions of a plane. It is shorter than the others but of greater weight by virtue of its thickness. While the square field expands upwards, this heavier line pulls it downward. While it was the colored surfaces that restrained expansion in **56.4**, now it is the thickness of a line. Infinite space (the line) seems intent on becoming finite space (the plane).
In this phase Mondrian is like a composer who gradually reduces the orchestra to a solo instrument, an almost imperceptible sound that can still be varied in an effort to express the whole. It is relations that count in Neoplastic space rather than things in themselves. In a white field crossed by three black lines, a slight variation in thickness becomes more obvious than a red or yellow in a field full of colors.
Weniger ist mehr (less is more) was the credo of Mies van der Rohe. It is obviously necessary to know what this "less" that succeeds in expressing "more" actually consists in. The approach is in any case somewhat rare nowadays, when people resort so frequently to redundancy in order to disguise a lack of substance.


56.9


58.6


59.3


61.3

64

The lozenge composition **59.3** again presents a square defined by four sides. We use the term "square" in order to facilitate communication even though this is not really the shape. We shall, however, continue to describe it as such for the sake of convenience.
The meeting points of the opposite directions are practically no longer visible in this work. The contrast and opposition between vertical and horizontal lines is resolved here in a continuous space that finds unity by following the square form uninterruptedly from one side to the other.
For the first time, all the four lines forming the square field differ in thickness, which increases as we proceed clockwise from the vertical on the right. We thus see a square that progressively tends to expand beyond our field of vision (the canvas). The tendency toward expansion generated by the position of the lines (above all the upper horizontal) is counterbalanced by an opposite tendency toward concentration. The line moving furthest away (upward) is in fact also the thickest and therefore the one that exerts the greatest downward pressure. Proceeding clockwise from the right vertical side, we see a square that grows heavier as it exits the canvas, i.e. tends to become more solid and permanent while it desappers: a simultaneously changing and comparatively constant space.

Mondrian seeks in these works to expand the square and maintain its visibility at the same time. The concept of space here is still essentially the one that inspired his work from the very beginning: opening up to variety on the one hand while tending to concentrate on the other and thereby generating an ideal synthesis of opposite values, between which there is in actual fact infinite multiplicity.
In the *Pier and Ocean* composition of 1915 (**45**), the unity expressed by means of an oval is replaced with a unity taking the shape of a relationship between horizontal and vertical (the square field). From then on, the oval is projected beyond the finite field of the paintings to coincide with the reality of the world, of which the canvas constitutes a part that seeks to represent the whole.
With the gradual withdrawal of the oval, the square remains inside the painting as the subjective symbol of an assumed but no longer visible objective unity. If the subjective unity (the square) is to symbolize the objective unity (the oval), it will need to contemplate all of its multiplicity. As we have in fact seen, after seeking to open the synthesis up to color (**52**), the painter closes it again momentarily (**53, 54**), and then opens it up again to differences in size, proportion, and color (**55, 57, 58, 59, 60**).
Mondrian endeavors with these lozenge compositions to open up unity to multiplicity by operating exclusively on the one, i.e. on the square, which is opened to the point of practically coinciding with the infinite space of the lines (**56.8**), in other words, with the oval. This tendency of the square to expand toward infinite space while at the same time maintaining its visibility as a finite unity inside the canvas constitutes an attempt to make the square coincide with the oval, the subjective with the objective.

The lozenge compositions constitute the moment of greatest correspondence between the one and the many.

The peak is reached with **61.3**. As in **56.8**, but here with no colored surfaces whatsoever, just two black lines allude to a square field that can barely be intuited, a square that is no sooner generated than it becomes an infinite space. Here too, the top and right corners of the lozenge accentuate the dynamic expansion of the central field. The space of the square is no longer delimited by the lines but extends with them far beyond the canvas. The finite space almost seems to coincide with infinite space. The subjective unity (the square) extends so as to encompass ideally all the multiplicity of objective space that the canvas can never contain (the oval). It is like the squaring of the circle.

After this extreme synthesis, we see in **64** a square that again appears to be defined by four sides but extending partially beyond the edges of the painting. The square in this lozenge composition has the same proportions as the canvas and the relationship between the two appears more balanced than in **56.9** and **59.3**.
Once again, the four lines show a progressive increase in thickness as we move clockwise from the vertical on the right.
This composition appears to constitute a synthesis of the previous lozenges but above all of the attempts made with **56.9**, where the square expands downward and the lines begin to differ in thickness, and **59.3**, where the square expands upward and there is a gradual increase in thickness from one line to the next. With respect to **56.9** and **59.3**, the square now displays more balanced expansion both upward and downward as well as to the right and the left. The increase in the thickness of the lines can be seen as the vertical incorporating a slight horizontal expansion or conversely as the horizontal growing thicker in response to barely perceptible vertical pressure. For a fraction of a second, the space of the lines is simultaneously vertical and horizontal, i.e. a unitary synthesis of the opposite directions.

Our analysis of these ten lozenges has shown the gradual disappearance of visible points of contact between the lines. We have seen in **56.9** how two lines, which still touch on the edge of the canvas, express a sign of mild opposition. The lines never meet inside the canvas in this lozenge of 1933, the only Neoplastic work in which this happens.
The more important innovation is, however, obviously the fact that, for the first time, the lines are no longer black but yellow.
The field is uniformly white and the yellow shape almost appears to be born out of the white rather than in opposition to it, as in the case of the black. Yellow is an intermediate value between black and white, sufficiently dark to be differentiated from white but, at the same time, not so radically opposite as black.
The opposite values now seem communicate and achieve unitary expression in terms both of form and of color, with horizontal and vertical simultaneously present for an instant in every line and the synthesis of black and white in an intermediate color, which yellow appears to constitute in this case.

On observing this square and contemplating the differing thickness of the lines, we are faced with a unity undergoing transformation from one side to the other. We see a unitary synthesis that already appears comparatively manifold in itself. We perceive a changing unity that tends to become rather than to be. It endures but changes at the same time.
In **64** we encounter a square that is open, dynamic, asymmetric, and full of color.
In the rectangular canvases on which the painter worked at the same time as the lozenges, the square opens up (**57**), undergoes interpenetration with the lines (**58, 61**), moves off-center and decreases in size (**59, 61**), and becomes red or blue in some cases (**60, 63**), but never attains expression with such a degree both of articulation and of synthesis as in this lozenge of 1933. **64** goes to the heart of the problem: to show the manifold in unitary form; to open up unity, i.e. the postulate of consciousness, to the changing aspect of the natural universe and existence in time but without losing sight of it. This is a fundamental issue. The one and the many appear as antithetical realities in the human dimension; in actual fact, they are the same thing.

With the canvases of 1928-33, and above all this lozenge of 1933, the artist appears to have given material expression to an idea that had guided him, canvas after canvas, for roughly twenty years of work, namely to express the multiple in unitary form and endow it with the stability required by consciousness without, however, causing it to atrophy in overly rigid and constant geometric forms. The artist felt for a moment that he had achieved his objective

with a square undergoing transformation while remaining relatively stable.

As Seuphor puts it, *"Sometimes he thinks he has found it. So he stops, observes the work, and says: It's done. But the clock of his life keeps on ticking and is already driving him forward. He soon realizes that nothing is done and everything has to start all over again."* [22]

If we compare **64** with the previous works and in particular with those produced up to 1920, it appears immediately obvious that by 1933 the multiple aspect of Neoplastic space had been considerably reduced almost to the point of elimination. Around 1930 Mondrian painted in black and white or with one or two colors inside predominantly white fields.

In the span of a decade, the multiple space of the *Pier and Ocean* (**45**) or the *Checkerboard* (**51**) appears to have been completely absorbed by the square, which was used between 1922 and 1933 in an attempt to reformulate in conceptual synthesis a space that is in reality far more structured and complex. The square of **64** is a symbolic (mental) representation of real space that does not present all the variety of the world. With colored lines changing also in thickness, this square alludes to multiplicity without, however, showing it in all of its far greater breadth. The variety found in the early Expressionist or Cubist works-an aspect to which the artist had always been very sensitive and which formed the starting point of his plastic explorations- was absent at the beginning of the 1930s.

In 1933 the space of external reality had undergone marked internalization in the far more condensed forms of thought; the physical seemed to be expressed in excessively mental terms. The painter was soon to realize that his canvases did not convey all of the variety perceived by the eye in nature or urban space, the rich and multiform aspect of color previously captured with his dunes and trees, his Cubist works, and his checkerboard compositions.

While **64** can therefore be regarded as a point of arrival, at the same time, as in other moments of Mondrian's artistic development, the work also represents a new point of departure.