It should be reminded that the paintings in Section **A** always bear a whole number from **1** to **73** and those in **B** a one-point decimal number (**1.1, 1.2, 1.3** etc.).

Mondrian painted some 350 works, nearly a third of his entire output, during his naturalistic phase.
I shall present about 33 works of this period here, 17 which can be seen in Section **A** (**1 - 17**) and 16 in Section **B1**. I say "about 33" because there is of course no clean break between the naturalistic phase and the subsequent development toward Expressionism. Some of the works produced between 1907 and 1908 can in fact still be described as naturalistic while others are already characterized by a more accentuated use of color.
The works selected illustrate the variety of subjects from which the young artist drew inspiration, making it possible in some cases to highlight aspects that were to become salient characteristics of his approach during the subsequent phase of development. While certain works are considered at some length, I shall not spend all that much time on the naturalistic period because my purpose is to explain the transition from figuration to abstraction and above all to offer indications for the reading and interpretation of the abstract works.

The works produced between 1893 and 1907 were predominantly still lifes, portraits, and above all landscapes.

In the still lifes (**1, 7**) (**19.2, 19.3**) the painter combines human artifacts (plates, vases, and bottles) with natural products (fruit, fish, and flowers), thus creating attractive contrasts and alternations between precise, sharply defined shapes and organic forms; harmonious alternations of lines, surfaces, and volumes that open and close on interacting to generate finely balanced compositions in terms both of form and of color.

The landscapes depict rural areas of the Netherlands, showing houses, churches, farms, and scenes of everyday life (**2, 4, 9**) (**1.1, 3.1, 5.2, 10.2**), woods (**5**) and rows of trees (**11, 13, 16**), moored boats (**8**) or windmills silhouetted against the horizon (**14, 17**) (**10.1, 16.2**)
The artist describes the scene with a certain abundance of detail in some landscapes (**4, 9**), while in others the hand seems to follow a quicker form of vision intent on capturing the whole rather than lingering on its elements (**10, 12, 15, 16**).
Mondrian often painted riverside landscapes, sometimes using the reflection of trees or houses in the water to accentuate or complete the partial shapes of the objects. In **11.1** and **12** the arched profile of the trees is reflected in the river to create an oval form suggesting a sense of totality. The same thing can be seen in **13** with the difference that the oval form melds here on the right with the horizontal line of the river.
On observing **11.1, 12, 13,** and **15** as a sequence, we see a horizontal line that runs through the central area of the paintings and seems designed to express the uninterrupted continuity of the natural landscape. At the same time, we note a tendency to enclose the horizontal extension within an oval form as though in an effort to contain and keep it inside the painting.
In **15** a black segment corresponding to the roof of the farmhouse seems designed to halt and concentrate within itself the flow of the river, which extends boundlessly beyond the finite field of the canvas. To a greater extent than in **12**, the oval here is left open to the pull of the horizontal at the sides.

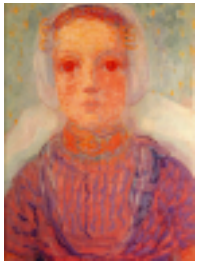
The human figures consist of a variety of characters. Some are portraits produced on commission and others prompted by the painter's own interests. The latter are mostly female figures, often presented in contemplative attitudes (**6**) or together with one or more flowers (**6.1, 6.2, 23.1**). The female figure with one or more flowers is a subject connected with the theosophical theories that interested the artist in that period.

Mondrian's mastery of draftsmansip can be appreciated in **3**, a work produced in quick and lively strokes but apparently designed to pin down and capture something deeper and more essential.

The human figures painted by Mondrian are not those of Renoir, Van Gogh or the Picasso of the blue and pink period; they are not people intent on performing actions of everyday life. What Mondrian sought in the human figure was not a particular and characteristic aspect of a certain person with his or her burden of transient emotions and situations but rather a truer and deeper sense of humanity. What interested him in a face were the eyes, a link with the soul. He seems intent on capturing some secret, intimate reality in the outward appearance of a face.

Portrait of Young Woman in Red 1908-09 J.W. A636

Self Portrait 1908-09
Seuphor 224



Zeeuws (Ch) Neisje (Zeeland Girl) 1909-10
J.W. A676

Nude Study for Evolution
1911 J.W. A 646

The works of the naturalistic phase include drawings in pencil or charcoal (**3**), watercolors (**4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9**), and works in oil on canvas (**1, 2, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17**)

It is difficult and indeed probably useless to try to describe a painting in words because it is something that must be seen in the original. At the same time, I do not believe that the purpose of a critique is to talk about the beauty of paintings. These works must be seen if we are to appreciate the genuine and straightforward handling of texture, the deft combination of colors, and the mastery of lively and harmonious compositional resolution. While a critique can offer a method for reading and interpreting the images, it is up to the reader to visit the museums and see and enjoy the original paintings on the basis of the explanations acquired. What we can do here is point out some recurrent features that attract our attention.

Mondrian was drawn to the simplicity of a flower while contemplating its complexity at the same time (**21, 27, 32**) (**7.1, 21.1, 21.2, 21.3**).
As pointed out above, if we observe a meadow full of flowers from a certain distance, we see a homogeneous expanse of color stretching away out of sight. When the distance is reduced, that homogeneous expanse gradually breaks down into a variety of parts (the individual flowers), patches of color each of which reveals great complexity on closer examination. The whole (the field of flowers) becomes a part (the individual flower) and that part again reveals a whole (the complex structure of a flower).
As the artist was to write in 1919, *"The one seems to us to be only one, but is in actual fact also a duality. Each thing again displays the whole on a small scale. The microcosm is equal as composition to the macrocosm, according to the wise. We therefore have only to consider everything in itself, the one as a complex. Conversely, every element of a complex is to be seen as a part of a whole. Then we will always see the relationship; then we can always know the one through the other."* [6]

The petals of the flower in **21.1** are rectilinear but all together form a circle; the rectilinear is contained in the circular.

We see the boundless horizon of the sea as a straight line, whereas it is actually curved. Is what we see true reality?
While some flowers are painted at the peak of their lifecycle (**21, 32**), others are depicted in the phase of their slow, inevitable withering (**21.2, 21.3**), a process that evokes the cycles of natural life.

Like Cézanne, Mondrian often went back to the same subject and painted it in different ways. We shall take as an example a series of still lifes that presents a common characteristic of interest:

Study of Apples 1897 J.W. A93

Apples, Coffee Pot and Large Copper Pan 1900 J.W. A95

Apples, Round Pot and Plate on a Table c. 1901 J.W. A99

7

In the first painting we see some apples lying at random on a table. Each apple differs from the others in terms of position and appearance.
In the other three paintings we see apples together with a large round plate positioned vertically in such a way as to present a circular shape acting as a background to the apples.
In the two last paintings we see a vase in addition to the plate. The plate is now turned to the wall and its base appears as a circle of similar size to the apples. This circle is located in the center of the composition, especially in the case of **7**.
A relation is born between this perfect circle and the imperfect circles of the apples, as though the painter wished to show the changing appearance of natural forms (the apples) and a form of greater constancy and precision (the circle presented by the plate, a man-made, artificial object). The perfect circle placed in the center evokes an ideal model of the variable and multiform natural appearance.
The first painting is dated 1897, the second 1900, and the last two 1901. Mondrian did not, of course, think of the four works as they have just been explained when he produced them. He painted them one by one but, probably without realizing it, followed a thread that shows a relationship between the first and the last over the space of about three years.

In a different way, something analogous can be seen in **5**, where Mondrian paints only the trunks of some beech trees in a wood. Each trunk has its own particular appearance and, all together, they express the sense of variety seen in nature. The line of the ground seems intent on joining up with the trunks in the upper central area of the composition, where the vertical trunk and the predominantly horizontal line of the ground become the same thing. This

composition gives the impression that the painter wanted first to express the contrast between the horizontal line of the ground and the vertical lines of the trunks and then to make the two opposite directions meet in a unitary synthesis.
It is as though Mondrian wanted to concentrate in front of himself the boundless expanse of the natural landscape, which he saw as a predominantly horizontal extension. The same thing was to be seen a few years later (**12, 13**) with the oval apparently designed, as noted above, to contain the uninterrupted continuity of the natural landscape (the river that flows and constantly changes in appearance while remaining the same).
While the varied and multiform appearance of nature is displayed with the tree trunks in **5**, it is expressed in **7** with apples and in **12** and **13** with uninterrupted spatial continuity alluding to the immensity of natural space, a suggestion of unitary synthesis can be seen in the central area of the paintings: the confluence of vertical and horizontal in **5**, the precise circle of the plate in **7**, the oval shape enclosing the entire composition in **12** and **13**, and the concentration (the black segment) of an expanding horizontal (the river) in **15**.
In the paintings of those years, both still lifes and landscapes, the artist saw nature on the one hand as multiplying its appearances and prompting the consciousness to contemplate an extended, multiform space, and on the other as always remaining the same. Mondrian's gaze settled on the variety of particular aspects without forgetting that all that variety is ultimately an indissoluble unity.

Mondrian often painted also in the light of evening and by moonlight (**16, 17**) (**16.1, 19.4**).
Unlike sunlight, which accentuates colors by creating reflections and shadows that increase the manifold appearance of the landscape, the light emitted by the moon is faint and makes it possible to see the broad outline of the landscape. The details are reduced and the multiform natural appearance appears more condensed.

The artist painted different types of landscape, sometimes returning to subjects that evidently suggested something very precise to him.
I shall offer just two examples, the first being a view of the River Gein with a row of trees, one of which standing out from the others (once again in the center of the composition). As we have seen, Mondrian was to concentrate on the shape of a single tree between 1908 and 1912 (**25, 29, 35**).

Isolated Tree on the Gein with Raw Boat 1906-07 J.W. A 454

Isolated Tree on the Gein with Gray Sky 1906-07 J.W. A 457

Isolated Tree on the Gein 1906-07 J.W. A 460

Isolated Tree on the Gein in Late Evening c. 1907-08 J.W. A 463

Irrigation Ditch with Young Pollarded Willow 1900 J.W. A 211

Irrigation Ditch with Young Pollarded Willow 1900 J.W. A 214

Irrigation Ditch with Young Pollarded Willow 1900 J.W. A 215

Irrigation Ditch with Young Pollarded Willow 1900 J.W. A 216

Irrigation Ditch with Mature Willow c. 1900 J.W. A 218

Another theme repeatedly addressed around 1900 is a landscape with a tree standing beside an irrigation ditch, of which Mondrian produced at least eight versions (four oil paintings, three drawings, and one watercolor).

The trunk of the tree expresses a vertical line that displays a tendency to expand horizontally in its upper section, where the branches begin. The ditch instead appears as a vertical that tends to expand horizontally as it moves downward. The vertical trunk opens out horizontally from the bottom toward the top and the ditch does the same thing but in the opposite direction. The two tendencies meet in the central area of the composition to suggest the inter-penetration of opposing realities. Here too, as in **5**, we see the dawn of the dialectic of opposites that was to inform all of Mondrian's subsequent work.

We could, of course, go on examining the naturalistic works, and I am certain that we would find further aspects worthy of note. As explained above, however, I do not intend to spend any more time on the works of this phase but rather to proceed with the examination of the subsequent phases leading to the more properly abstract work. I shall therefore defer for the present any more detailed examination of Mondrian's naturalistic phase, which certainly stands in need of deeper and more complete analysis.