

In 1872 Claude Monet painted a canvas depicting a harbor at dawn and entitled it *Impression Soleil Levant*. It was a landscape rendered almost instantaneously, as though the painter had been intent on capturing a reality that would soon change.

The term "Impressionist painters" derives precisely from this canvas, which was the object of a hostile review accusing the artist of shortcomings in finishing, draftsmanship, and the handling of detail. The official culture of the time preferred an art rich in academic virtuosity and designed to celebrate life in the showy aspects that appealed to the upper classes. These young painters instead dared to paint everyday life rather than the heroic deeds of established historical figures that no longer had much to do with real life.

Everything began to change in human life halfway through the 19th century with the process of industrialization and its attendant social transformations, the advent of photography, a magical device making it possible to "paint" a scene in real time, and the increase in the speed at which people traveled and perceived the world around them. The Impressionist painters shared the perception of a reality undergoing transformation and introduced this sense of the flux and change of life into their canvases. The focus was not on immanent and lasting aspects but those of a fleeting, everyday nature.

In 1893 Monet painted several versions of the façade of Rouen cathedral at different hours of the day, with the appearance of the solid and imposing edifice altering in relation to the light of the moment. Light changes the appearance of things.

Light is not an entity that settles on things from above but is emitted by things and expressed through the position of objects in space. Light was space for the Impressionist painters.

Shadows are not darker tonalities derived from a hypothetical immanent color of objects, as the masters in the art academies taught, but have their own color and are often the product of various colors dynamically counterbalancing one another. The goal was to break light down into its basic components, namely colors.

Color and sign acquired an autonomous role designed to express the feelings of the painter beholding reality.

Gauguin painted a crucifixion with a yellow Christ and red trees in 1889, the same year that Van Gogh painted a starry night with every star as a vortex of light and energy pervading all the heavens. Landscapes were no longer painted in the way they appeared but rather as the artists saw them or indeed felt them inwardly.

Edvard Munch painted a human figure (we do not know whether it is a man or a woman) screaming from a bridge. The external space is pervaded by that scream, which is propagated all over the surface of the painting in sinuous lines. The sky as a whole is transformed into a scream, which becomes a high-pitched shriek with the use of red. The artist's inner world pervades and distorts the normal appearances of the outer.

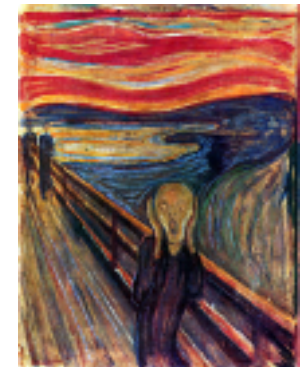
In the wake of the Impressionist painters, Seurat, Signac, Matisse, Derain, and De Vlaminck accentuated the use of color still further, again provoking indignant protests on the part of a critic, who was to describe them as "fauves" (beasts).



Claude Monet *Impression Soleil Levant* 1872



Vincent Van Gogh *Starry Night* 1889



Edvard Munch *The Cry* 1893

Matisse: *"I can bring together the armchair beside me in the studio, the cloud in sky, and the rustling leaves of the palm by the water's edge with no effort to differentiate the places and without dissociating the different elements of my motif, which are all one in my spirit."* <sup>7</sup>

Outer reality is constituted and assumes meaning in the inner space of consciousness. While this has obviously always been true and is a fact implicit in every human activity, the painters most sensitive to the new developments at that time appear to have focused on this fundamental truth.

While Monet's addressed the light enveloping and molding everything, Cézanne sought a more solid structure of space capable of expressing change but also a certain sense of duration and permanence at the same time. As he put it, *"Nature is always the same, but nothing remains of it, of what appears. Our art must give the shiver of its duration and enable us to appreciate its eternity."* <sup>8</sup>

Like Mondrian, Cézanne wanted to find some indication of greater constancy among the changing appearances of the external world. *"Everything in nature is modeled on the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder. We must learn to paint in these simple figures. Later on it will be possible to do whatever you want."* <sup>9</sup> He searched for a way to reduce the immense variety of the world to a common denominator and suggested, purely as a preliminary measure, that nature should be seen in terms of the elementary forms of the sphere, cone, and cylinder. He needed to find a solid basis from which to address the changing variety of appearances.

Faced with a reality that was multiplying its appearances at the end of the 19th century, Cézanne strove to concentrate and unify.

His work endeavors to abolish the perspective illusion of the third dimension by integrating the different planes in one.

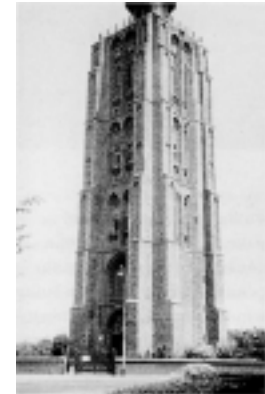
Objects and space tend to interpenetrate; solids and voids acquire the same value.

This also holds for Mondrian. Observe the photograph of the Westkapelle lighthouse, which the artist depicted in a drawing (**30.2**) and in some oil paintings (**28, 31**) (**25.5, 26.2, 30.4**).

The drawing displays an attention to detail that disappears in the paintings. Solids and voids are treated in **28** as though they were on a single, uninterrupted plane. Object and space find a common denominator in the pointillistic structure.

According to Henri Matisse, *"the painter should no longer be concerned with details, the multitude of which can be handled a hundred times better and faster by photography. The purpose of painting is no longer to describe history, which is to be found in books. We have a higher view of painting as an art through which artists express their personal visions."* <sup>10</sup>

Between the end of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, painters used color to varying degrees in order to accentuate their interpretation of the visible world.



Lighthouse at Westkapelle  
Photograph 1960

After painting in a naturalistic style for a long time, Mondrian also began between 1907 and 1908 to use colors corresponding more to his inner vision than the more immediate appearance of things (**18, 19, 20, 21**).

In **23** a wood in the vicinity of Oele has none of the colors one would expect to see in nature; greens, browns, and shades of ochre give way to blues, reds, and yellows that give birth to a dynamic space evoking the intense and discordant emotions aroused in the artist by nature.

The tree trunks faithfully depicted in **5** become quick vertical lines contrasting with the horizontals of the ground in **23**.

The opposition between horizontals and verticals generates in the background a sinuous horizontal line (highlighted with yellow dots) whose winding course seems to absorb the vertical thrust of the trunks. In the upper section the arched form of some trunks is concentrated in the circle of a sun, suggesting a synthesis of vertical and horizontal (**C 23**).

One would say that Mondrian was intent above all at that time on expressing a strong contrast, not only with a marked accentuation of color but also with a gradual orientation of his compositions more toward a decided opposition of horizontal and vertical lines within the same canvas (**21, 23**) or through the

## Sequence N. 1



5.2



10.2



15



30

alternation of canvases in which the predominant space is practically all horizontal (**18, 22, 26, 30**) or wholly vertical (**24, 28, 31**).

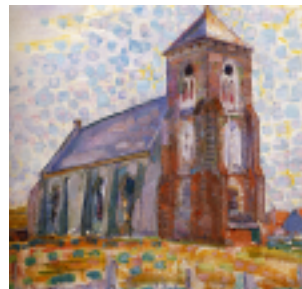
In point of fact, examination of this period reveals a gradual opening up of the landscapes, which now appear, with respect to the rural scenes of previous years, like boundless expanses.

The landscapes are gradually stripped of trees, houses and any other sign of human presence (see Sequence N. 1), and seem designed to emphasize the infinite aspect of natural space (**22, 26, 30, 33**) (**25.2, 26.1, 30.1, 30.3, 30.5, 30.6, 31.2, 33.1**).

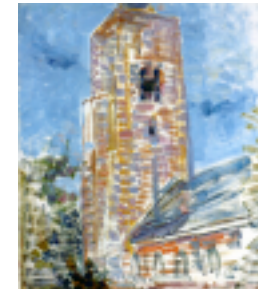
## Sequence N. 2



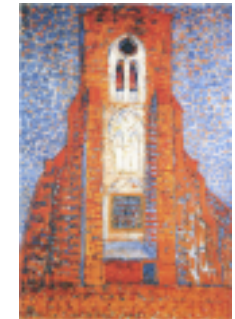
3.1



Church in Zoutelande 1909 J.W. A688



25.4



31.1

The painter's attention also focused at the same time on individual objects like a windmill, a lighthouse or a church façade (**24, 28, 31, 34**) (**25.1, 25.3, 25.4, 25.5, 26.2, 30.2, 30.4, 31.1, 33.2, 34.1**). In Sequence N. 2 a church depicted in 1898 as immersed in a natural setting (**3.1**) becomes the central motif occupying the entire canvas in 1909-10 (**31.1**). All that remains of the natural space is the sky in the background, which sometimes assumes the same material consistency as the building (**28**) (**31.1**).



10.1



16.2



30



30.5



It almost appears that, on observing the landscape, Mondrian tended on the one hand to extrapolate the natural element, which he began to identify with a primarily horizontal space (see the images shown above) and on the other to accentuate in the opposite direction, i.e. the vertical, the shape of the non-natural spaces, the artificial, man-made spaces (windmills, lighthouses, churches) (see the images shown below).



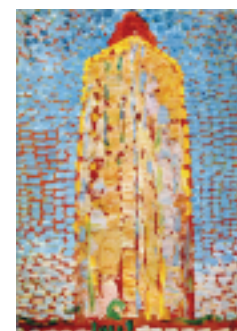
10.1



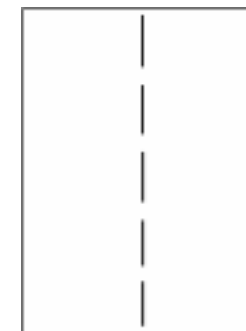
16.2



25.1



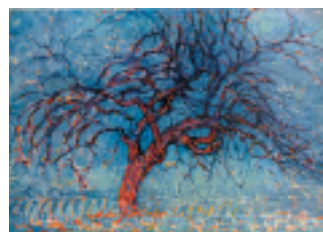
28



*Farm with Long Row of Trees on the Gein*  
c. 1905-06 J.W. A 491



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



29



35



At the same time, the numerous canvases presenting rows of trees gave way to canvases concentrating on the figure of a single tree (**25, 29**) (**24.1, 24.2, 24.3, 24.4**), upon which the painter's attention had already focused sporadically in previous years.

Another recurrent motif of the period 1908-10 is the single flower (**21, 27, 32**) (**21.1, 21.2, 21.3**), on which the artist had already worked in previous years.

Mondrian thus devoted himself between 1908 and 1910 to deserted landscapes, buildings, single trees, and flowers. Apart from a few portraits, some of which he was commissioned to paint, these are dominant subjects in this period.

Most of the landscapes are of the sea and the dunes in the region of Zeeland in the vicinity of the village of Domburg on the island of Walcheren in the south of the Netherlands. The buildings are the Westkapelle lighthouse, the church in Domburg, and the bell tower of the church in Zoutelande, not far from Domburg.

The space of the dune landscape stretches away out of sight and the painter perceives nature in all its vastness. Unlike the landscapes of previous years, what we seem to see here is unspoiled nature reigning supreme over everything.

As Jaffé observes, *"This dune theme was something new to him, virtually the first appearance in his work of nature in its vastness and all-encompassing magnitude (...). Not until he reached the island of Walcheren did Mondrian encounter nature in its endless breath, which the Netherlands possesses only at the shore, along the line of dunes (...). His confrontation in 1909 with the infinity of nature coincides with his joining the Netherlands Theosophical Society, where man's union with the infinitude of the universe was a central problem."*<sup>11</sup>



Beach at Domburg

Photograph



Church at Domburg Photograph

While Mondrian contrasts the absolute horizontal expressed by means of the dunes with the sudden and massive vertical thrust of buildings, the two opposing directions interpenetrate and relativize one another in the tree. The branches expand toward the sides of the canvas while the trunk leads them back toward the center. Space simultaneously expands (the dunes) and contracts (the buildings) in the figure of the tree.

Mondrian produced seven naturalistic versions of the tree, six of which (two are drawings) are dated 1908-09. The seventh came in 1912, during his Cubist period. One of the first six (**29**) bears a double date (1908-10) because it was begun in 1908, exhibited in January 1909, and probably retouched in 1910. The depictions of dunes and buildings were nearly all produced in 1909-10 and hence in the same period as or slightly later than those of the tree. I believe nonetheless that the spatial structure evoked with the tree should be regarded as a synthesis of the space generated by the dunes and buildings, even though the tree works would be slightly earlier judging solely by the dates. It is a synthesis in visual rather than strictly chronological terms.

This appears still more plausible in view of the fact that the figure of the tree was to return between 1911 and 1913 as the key motif guiding the transition from naturalistic to Cubist space (**35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41**).

Between 1908 and 1910 the painter saw the shape of a tree as a symbol of union and equilibrium between vertical and horizontal, whereas the space in



the depictions of dunes and buildings opens up again to the predominance of one direction or the other.

The genesis of the trunk as unifying moment can also be traced by observing the following works as a sequence:



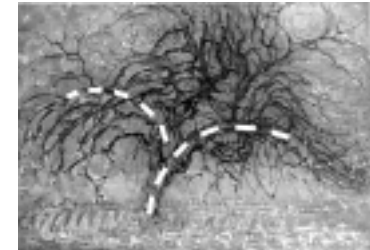
*Wood with Beech Trees* c. 1899 J.W. A 87



**5 a**



*Beech Trees along a Pathway* 1898-99 J.W. A 89



**29 a**

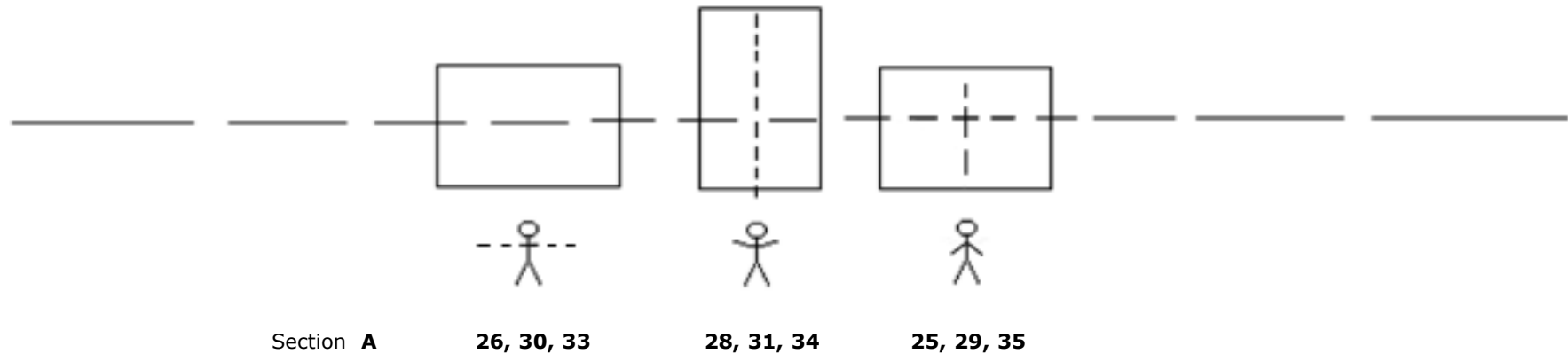
The multifarious expanse of vertical trunks seen in the first drawing attains a moment of unitary synthesis in the second work (**5**), where the horizontal extension of the line of the ground joins up in the center with the vertical lines of the trunks. The vertical concentrates a horizontal that expands toward the sides. The formal layout of **5** is inverted in the third work, where a single trunk now acts as a synthesis of all the others. Note how the trunk splits into two parts toward the top; the one becomes two and opens up to multiplication, which takes shape with all the other trunks in the background.

Finally, the fourth work (**29 a**) underscores the unifying function of the trunk, which maintains the cohesion of a multitude of branches. It is now the branches that express the sense of multiplicity conveyed in the other works through the trunks. The trunks are multiple in the first drawing. In the second the multiple finds a unitary synthesis. In the third and fourth a trunk assumes a unifying function, and in the last canvas the branches perform the function previously carried out by the trunks.

The first three works were produced in the same year (1898-99) and **29** in 1908. Here too, I would establish a relationship between some coeval works and one that the artist was to paint only eight years later. Mondrian painted a number of landscapes, still lifes, and portraits between the first three works and the fourth. When he concentrated on the figure of a single tree in 1908, those first three works were over and done with but the seed that generated them was still bearing fruit.

\* \* \*

As pointed out above, the dunes, buildings, and trees that Mondrian painted during those years have no value as such. The artist did not paint a tree in 1908 in order to show us how it is made. While unquestionably concerned with the beauty of what he saw around him, he felt that every description of the outer world depends on the coordinates of the inner world and that the two realities (which we perceive simultaneously as a single phenomenon) are in a state of continuous reciprocal dependency. Every image that we perceive is the result of stimuli from the natural universe (an infinite space) translated into a mental space (a space organized and expressed through sequences of finite space). On the basis of the diagram presented here below, we can interpret the relationship between the buildings and the dunes as the beginning of a process of interpenetration between a human subject and the boundless natural horizon.



In the tree, the horizontal of the dunes is concentrated in the trunk, which is equivalent to the vertical of the buildings.

The trunk appears as an ideal projection on the canvas of the viewer in the act of mentally appropriating the natural space beheld. The trunk would thus constitute a metaphor of the unifying consciousness addressing the infinite variety of the world.

The tree appears as a miniature universe that succeeds through its trunk in isolating itself from the unbroken continuity of the line of the ground (the infinite space evoked by the dunes). It can therefore be contemplated as a manifold space that tends toward complexity (like the real world) while maintaining its unitary nature at the same time, unlike the dunes, whose uninterrupted continuity disintegrates our field of vision.

Around 1909 the painter began to concentrate on a number of motifs enabling him to evoke contrast and opposition. The choice of antithetical colors and forms reveals the need to express his inner world-characterized by marked duality but at the same time by a deep drive for synthesis and unity-on the canvas. The artist's mind addresses fundamental issues such as the relationship between the one and the many, mind and matter.

Human beings have been aware of nature as a hostile force throughout their history. Mankind is part of nature but distinct from it at the same time. There is often conflict in the life of the individual between the natural instincts and what we call intellect, reason or mind, and hence opposition between a part of us that is closer to the natural world and another that separates us from it and often clashes with it.

The history of mankind has been a slow and laborious process of emancipation from natural conditions ever since the Stone Age: from huts of mud and straw to houses of glass and concrete; from oxen to tractors; from an average lifespan of 35 years to one of 75. In striving to improve their living conditions, human beings alter the landscape with architecture and transform nature into artifice (the countless objects and tools used for human life today).

How are we to define artifice? Is it a natural product or only a human product? And if mankind is part of nature, are the plastic, concrete, and aluminum used to alter the landscape and defeat the force of gravity so as to move more quickly between the continents and set foot on other celestial bodies the result of natural evolution?

Nature creates non-nature through mankind—a curious contradiction.

The dunes represent nature; the buildings express human artifice. The need Mondrian felt to evoke a balanced relationship between opposing realities takes on meanings that stretch far beyond simple pictorial representation to become fundamental philosophical issues regarding the human condition. From a present-day perspective, as noted above, they can involve the relationship between mankind and the natural environment, i.e. the ecological question in all its various aspects, but also, for example, the ethical and philosophical aspects of biological research, through which human beings are now acting on the very mechanisms of natural life.

In the individual sphere, the equivalence of opposites regards the constant search for equilibrium within oneself between the alternating predominance of the natural part (the instincts) and the more specifically human part (the reason).

The relationship between vertical and horizontal regards all of the pairs of opposing values to which human beings so often resort in their efforts to comprehend the immensity of life.

The painter used dunes and buildings to express the most radical of the oppositions (horizontal-vertical) that can be expressed in two-dimensional pictorial space. At the same time, he used the figure of a tree in an attempt to establish dialogue between the opposing drives, almost as though wishing to produce on canvas the synthesis and unity that he felt the need to attain in the depths of his spirit. These are needs that transcend individual trees or dunes or church façades, spiritual necessities expressed, however, through felicitous combinations of color and harmonious formal solutions.

It is a great pity that the reading of these explanations cannot be accompanied by enjoyment of the brilliant greens, the thrilling oranges, and the deep and graceful shades of blue used to tone down the vivid yellows and bright reds of these wonderful canvases.

One of the most interesting aspects, to which we shall be returning at length, is the fact that Mondrian's sensitivity to philosophical and spiritual themes does not transcend but indeed takes concrete shape in the beauty of the world, its colors, and its forms.

Van Gogh, the Fauves, and then the Expressionists used the accentuation of color to highlight the relationship between the outer world and inner space, between the object and the subject, in other words, the interpretation of reality. Mondrian found himself in harmony with this approach from his naturalistic phase on (**5, 7, 12, 15**). Unlike the Expressionists, however, he addressed the issue in greater depth and breadth between 1907 and 1910, considering the relationship between subject and object no longer solely through the chromatic transposition of sensory data (as Van Gogh had done and as the Fauves and Expressionists were doing at that time) but also through the search for a more solid formal structure (as suggested by Cézanne's work) with the progressive orientation of his compositions toward dynamic interaction between horizontal and vertical (seen respectively as plastic symbols of the external and internal worlds). With the dunes, the buildings, and the tree, Mondrian was unconsciously channeling the work of Van Gogh and Cézanne into a single approach.

Mondrian opened up the canvas to the infinite space of nature with the dunes and concentrated it all before him for an instant with the buildings. The two things reached interpenetration in the tree. This marked the dawn, the very beginning of a dialogue between the two opposing directions that was to occupy the artist for his entire life, a dialogue that essentially meant the search for greater equilibrium between inner and outer reality, the human subject and the natural universe.

Let us now have a closer look at some works.



We have said that the seascapes and dunes express a predominantly horizontal space, and this is true. While some of the dune paintings present a space tending toward the rectilinear and uniform (**22, 30**) (**26.1**), however, others show the horizon with a slightly raised profile (**33**) (**30.5, 31.2**) that coincides with a hypothetical vertical axis running through the center of the composition.

**30** is a small canvas with bright, contrasting colors that nevertheless expresses felicitous and harmonious equilibrium. Blue, yellow, ochre, magenta, and a whole range of intermediate shades of these colors alternate between darker and lighter tonalities. Quick brushstrokes create a rhythm of elements grouped together by an uninterrupted horizontal flow.

A yellow accent in the central area seems to detach and isolate itself for an instant from the horizontal continuity.

**26.1** again presents a dark accent standing out in con-



22



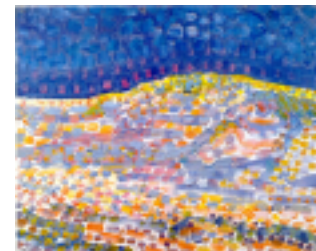
30



26.1



33



30.5



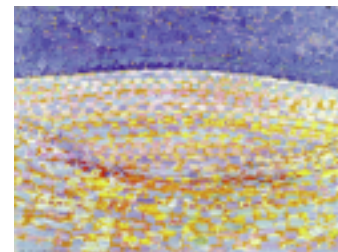
31.2



26



30.1



30.3



30.6

junction with a median axis of the canvas. These accents recall the black segment noted in the center of **15**.

While **22**, **30**, and **26.1** emphasize the continuity of natural space, a sign appears in the center (in the form of a cloud or accent of color) that expresses a finite entity within an infinite space, as though to evoke a correspondence with the point from which the landscape is being observed.

In **26**, **30.1**, **30.3**, and **30.6** we see a curved line in the lower part of the composition that seems to draw all of the space into itself. Together with the horizon, which presents a slight upward curve in some cases, this line suggests an oval shape. This is seen most clearly in **30.1** and **30.3**. A similar allusion to an oval shape has already been noted in **12**, **13**, and **15**. Mondrian was to use the oval again and in still more explicit form (**40**, **44**, **45**) at the height of his Cubist phase (1913-14).

The line of the horizon rising in the middle in some canvases and the accents placed in the center highlight the area where a wholly vertical space is presented in other paintings, namely the ones of buildings. The allusion to a possible oval shape seems designed to contain and endow with greater permanence a space undergoing endless expansion with the dunes.



25.5



26.2



30.2



30.4

Similarly, but in the opposite sense to what we have just observed in the dunes, the buildings present exclusively vertical volumes (**25.5**, **26.2**, **30.2**, **30.4**) and volumes in which a lateral offshoot appears to mediate between the vertical of the building and the horizontal of the ground (**25.3**, **31.1**, **33.2**) (**34**).

**25.1** appears to display interpenetration between a dune-type landscape (in the lower part) and a building (in the upper).

On observing the works painted in this period, we notice that some compositions suggest a slight opposing thrust both when the space is predominantly horizontal (dunes) and when it is predominantly vertical (buildings). Though wholly enveloped in the prevailing



25.3



31.1



33.2



34

direction, this opposition is nevertheless perceptible.

While some canvases display the use of fluid material applied in broad brushstrokes (**30, 31, 33**), others present a surface divided into small dot-like marks (**24, 25, 26, 28**). Certain works have been described as "pointillist" or "divisionist" (**24, 25, 28**) (**24.4, 30.3, 30.4, 30.5**). It should be pointed out, however, that Mondrian's "pointillism" has very little in common with the work of Seurat, Signac, and Cross. While the latter used the dotted structure in order to translate variations in light and capture them on canvas, the Dutch painter, like Cézanne, adopted it in his search for a sort of common denominator underlying the variation of different forms and colors presented to the eye by the space of the world.

It is above all in **28, 30.3, 30.5** and **31.1** that the closely-knit pattern of dots creates a strong contrast between shades of cold color (blue) and shades of warm color (yellow or orange). The painter appears to have wanted to let the underlying color filter through so as to heighten the contrast of the chromatic material. Mondrian seeks to express space in a state of tension; he addresses oppositions and strong contrasts, which he then endeavors to resolve in a balanced whole that ultimately expresses harmony.

Some dunes present blue fields crossed by yellows and pinks or emerald green areas with sudden patches of orange. Some of the buildings present blue backgrounds with red outlines or a figure in magenta on a green/blue ground. The three primary colors are present in some cases.

**29** and **34.1** present a very strong contrast of color. On the basis of personal experience, I believe that red/blue is perhaps the most difficult contrast to balance in painting. The depiction of the tree presents innumerable shades of red and blue serving to soften the impact between the two colors and ensure their reciprocal enrichment. The blue becomes almost black in some areas and acts as an outline emphasizing the shape. Countless patches of bare canvas appear between the colors to create accents of light that counterbalance the strong contrast between red and blue. The canvas expresses tangible matter that is not, however, the matter of Van Gogh or Munch. Everything vibrates but the sound emitted is a deep and graceful note rather than a high-pitched shriek.

I have referred to these works as expressionistic. This is obviously not the type of Expressionism that was to develop around 1910, above all in Germany, inspired by a critical stance toward the society of the time and, in a more general sense, by chronic malaise with respect to the life typical of a certain north European culture. These canvases by Mondrian have never given me the impression of clumsy, overwrought space to be seen in many works of German Expressionism. Even the bright greens, reds, magentas, and yellows of these paintings are always somehow classical and measured. The expressionistic phase was for Mondrian an initial step toward the process of abstraction that was to guide him throughout his existence.

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In addition to the subjects mentioned so far (still lifes, single flowers, landscapes, dunes, buildings, and trees), Mondrian produced a series of works between 1900 and 1911 that are normally described as symbolist. I refer to his female figures in attitudes of contemplation (**6**) (**6.2**) or devotion (**23.1**) with one or two flowers as symbols of purity and equilibrium. The flower gazed upon by the child in **23.1** or the two flowers on the shoulders of the mature woman in **6.2** are thus supposed to symbolize a process of inner purification.

I believe that it is perhaps exaggerated to speak of symbolism here. These are works that show Mondrian's sensitivity toward themes of a more universal nature and constitute a prelude to his later interest in the theosophical doctrine. This was to inform works such as *Evolution* (**34.2**) but constituted no more than a phase of transition toward the development of a wholly visual language. As Seuphor says, *"The development of Mondrian's religious thought can therefore be summarized as follows: Calvinism is superseded by theosophy, which is itself absorbed (after 1916) by the New Plasticism called upon to*

*express everything wordlessly."* <sup>12</sup>

Mondrian often had conversations with his friend Albert van den Briel on themes of a spiritual character in this period. He read Edouard Schurè's book on the "Great Initiates", one of the few he was to keep with him all through his life, it being his habit to give books away after reading them so as to increase the circulation of good ideas. Schurè's initiates were those capable of perceiving the universal truths concealed behind the changing appearances of everyday life.

Mondrian's symbolism can be seen in a small group of paintings. I shall discuss the one I regard as most representative, namely *Evolution* (34.2).

The work consists of three rectangular panels of vertical proportions juxtaposed to form a triptych. The central panel is slightly raised with respect to those on either side, which has been interpreted as a sign of its greater importance.

The painting represents three fundamental stages in the spiritual evolution of a human being. The figure seems to be a woman but is in actual fact devoid of any female characteristics and should more probably be seen as a symbol of the human being, i.e. both male and female.

As noted above, the subject of a female figure with two flowers had already figured in previous works such as 6.2 for example. In this case, the flowers become geometric shapes that I shall, however, continue to call flowers. The critics have interpreted the painting as follows.

The work is to be read starting with the panel on the left and continuing with the one on the right before finishing off with the one in the middle.

The panel on the left represents the human condition in the stage of life that is still lived unconsciously, following the emotional urges of the moment rather than any clear inner vision. The face is in fact shown in a state of slumber. The red color of the two flowers evokes the sphere of the passions. The black triangles seen in the center of the two red flowers are pointing downward to indicate the earth. The panel on the right represents the awakening of the spirit. The two flowers are lightened with yellow and the black triangles become white and point upward. Finally, the figure with open eyes in the central panel represents the attainment of fully conscious life.

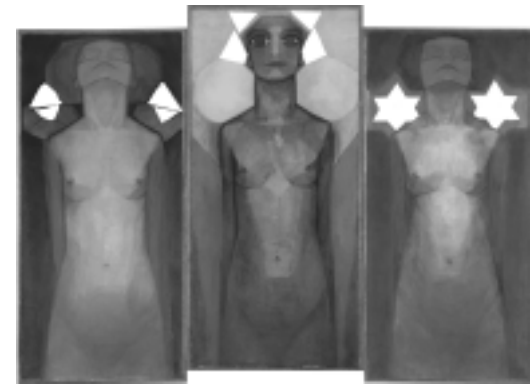
Reading from left to right and then returning to the center, we thus see the evolution of a human being

from a condition in which life is lived "blindly", so to speak, to a condition of full self-awareness. I believe that while this interpretation is essentially correct, it does not wholly correspond to what is seen in the painting.

I would read the image in a different way.



34.2



34.2 a

While I agree that we should start from the panel on the left and interpret it as stated above, I see the second stage of the process, i.e. the phase of awakening, as represented by the central panel rather than the one on the right, which would instead represent the conclusion of the process of evolution.

If we observe the two stylized flowers on either side of the face in all three panels, we note that in the first panel they are red and irregular in shape with an upward-pointing apex in contrast to the clearly visible downward-pointing black triangle in the middle (diagram 34.2 **a**).

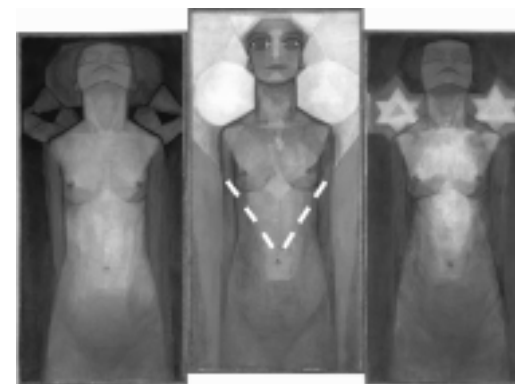
In the central panel the two red flowers become white halos of a circular shape with two juxtaposed white triangles above them (diagram 34.2 **a**).

These two triangles can be seen as originating from those in the previous panel, where the black triangle (pointing downward) predominates with respect to the red field that evokes an embryonic triangle (pointing downward).

34.2 **c**

In the third panel, finally, the two triangles become yellow and interpenetrate to form a six-pointed star, thus indicating a synthesis and unity between upper and lower, the earth and the heavens, matter and spirit. The progressive interpenetration of the triangles shows that the central panel is not the last stage but rather phase of transition in a process moving from a condition of duality (the first panel) toward the synthesis and unity of opposites (the third panel). A small white triangle pointing upward can be seen inside the six-pointed star, just as two faint white triangles can be seen pointing upward in the round halos of the central panel. This is probably meant to express a predominance of the spiritual with respect to the natural, which is considered necessary for human life.

During the phase of enlightenment (the central panel), the yellow space around the head seems to converge toward the stomach of the figure (diagram 34.2 **b**) as though to establish communication between the spiritual vision and the more humoral and visceral part. This panel represents attainment of the unity of mind and body.

34.2 **b**

gle pointing upwards. Although it is pointing upward, the latter remains imprisoned by the red.

In the second panel the two triangles emerge from the "flower" and assume the same color, thus acquiring the same value in the eyes of the figure. A triangle pointing down alludes to matter while a triangle pointing up indicates spirit. There is an equivalence of matter and spirit, body and mind, the moment of enlightenment.



The duality of spirit and matter is faintly perceived in the first panel, where the sharply defined black triangle points downward and an embryonic red triangle points upward somewhat less forcefully. It then appears with greater clarity and luminosity with the two white triangles openly juxtaposed in the second panel. In the third panel it is finally resolved in a unitary synthesis (the yellow stars).

That the third panel expresses a synthesis of the first two can also be deduced from other details. The two nipples and the navel are represented by triangular shapes that point downward in the first panel and upward in the second before combining in the third to form a rhombus, i.e. a geometric shape made up of two triangles (one pointing upward and the other downward) joined together (diagram 34.2 c).

While the eyes are again closed in the right-hand panel, the face is not tilted backward as strongly as in the first.

The expression of the face in the left-hand panel shows a lack of consciousness, whereas the face on the right seems to suggest a secret awareness acquired in the moment of enlightenment and then internalized.

The fact that this is a process of internalization is also indicated by the yellow field in the central panel and its concentration in the two stars of the third panel, which make the awareness achieved visible.

The color of the body also changes. The blue in the left panel is warmer than in the central panel and even more so with respect to the one on the right, where the blue appears the coldest of all. While this is certainly related to the need to balance the red with a warmer shade of blue, I believe that it also stems from a desire to express a gradual movement of inner space toward the outside (the yellow and the cerulean blue of the central panel are in fact external space with respect to the figure) and, conversely, from the outside toward the inside with the yellow of the central panel concentrating in the two stars of the right panel, which, as noted above, represent inner life. There is an externalization of interiority from the left to the center (with the warmer blue moving from the body of the figure to the outside) and then an internalization of exteriority from the center to the right (with the outer yellow concentrated in two stars symbolizing interiority).

Externalization of the inner and internalization of the outer: this is essentially the process that every human being carries out during life. Externalizing the inner means taking cognizance of oneself and becoming aware of one's unconscious or real nature. Internalizing the outer means learning from one's experience of the world.

I am therefore inclined to read the process of evolution as the representation of the transition from a condition devoid of consciousness (left panel) to awareness (central panel), a mental vision (the eyes wide open) that is then introjected and assimilated in the right panel, where the vision thought becomes a vision felt, a vision of the spirit that sees everything with no more need to look. No one lives in a permanent state of enlightenment. This cannot be so even for the most inspired mystics. There is the moment of clear vision and then abandonment to what has been understood, abandonment to a faith that no longer needs to see in order to believe.

I suppose that the purpose of the raised position of the central panel is to indicate a moment of particular spiritual intensity that Mondrian—but not only Mondrian—identifies with the vertical. The vertical thrust contrasts with the horizontal sequence of the three panels and therefore reinforces the reading from left to right. The act of raising does not serve the central panel so much as the one on the right, where the figure is concentrated within itself. By opposing the horizontal sequence, the vertical thrust strengthens its last stage, namely the moment of concentration within oneself.

This interpretation of *Evolution* will find further confirmation with our examination of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (72).