

An exhibition of International Modern Art opened in October 1911 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It featured twenty-eight works by Cézanne, some Cubist paintings by Braque and Picasso, and works by various other artists. Called upon to assist in organizing the exhibition, Mondrian was to be strongly influenced by the Cubist works.

The Dutch artist worked in the first half of 1911 on a new version of the church façade in Domburg (**34**), a windmill (**34.1**), and the *Evolution* triptych (**34.2**). He returned to the theme of the single tree now interpreted from the new Cubist viewpoint (**36**), in the summer of the same year.

While Mondrian also addressed other subjects in this period, the tree constitutes his guiding motif in the process of transforming plastic space from the naturalistic vision to the Cubist. This transition can be observed by considering the sequence **29, 36, 37, 38** in order.

The artist did, however, paint another version of the naturalistic tree (**35**) in 1912, which then served as the basis for works of a typically Cubist nature such as **41**. No crucial importance attaches to dates in the examination of Mondrian's work. Throughout his career, as we shall see, the painter often lingered over certain motifs whereas others were resolved in ways that opened up the path for subsequent developments.

The work of Braque and Picasso is usually regarded as marking the birth of Cubism. In actual fact, however, the Cubist revolution had already begun with Cézanne's last canvases. What was Cubism? The term was invented by an art critic who used the term "cubist" to describe a painting by Georges Braque presenting a landscape as a group of juxtaposed volumes, which the critic interpreted as cubes. This obviously does not explain the true meaning of Cubism. Painting had previously been based on a conception of space grounded on linear perspective, a system of visual representation developed in Italy between the end of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th. Perspective space assumes a constant relationship between an immobile observer and an object, series of objects or landscape, again more or less immobile. Movement at that time was basically geared to the walking pace of human beings, at which speed the world appears to be practically motionless. The societies of that era changed far more slowly than today also in social, economic, and political terms.

People at the beginning of the 15th century needed to believe that the universe was measurable, governed by symmetry, and centered on mankind.

The vanishing point of Renaissance perspective is nothing other than the projection onto the painted surface of the fixed position from which mankind believed itself able to observe and know the universe. The whole of the visible world converges on that single point.

Reality altered drastically toward the end of the 19th century, above all in the cities, where electrical lighting and the new means of transport and communication changed ways of life and introduced previously unknown forms of acceleration. The progress ushered in by technology changed social, economic, and political relations but above all helped to transform mankind's ideal relationship with the world. Philosophy, science, and above all the new rhythms of urban life born in the wake of ever-increasing speed worked at the beginning of the 20th century to undermine the foundations of some certainties, one of which was pictorial space based on linear perspective.

The new rhythms of life accelerated the relations between the observer and the scene observed, especially in the cities. As a result of increasing speed, visible reality tended to become an ephemeral sequence of views running into one another; a landscape, a building or a tree appeared in a quick succession of different viewpoints.

Albert Einstein posited the inseparable linkage of space and time in 1905.

The fourth dimension (time) is connected with space in the first Cubist works by Braque and Picasso, where an object appears on the canvas in all the forms it takes when observed from a moving position: the strange faces with three, four or five eyes, the single bottle that seems to multiply beneath the gaze

of an observer moving around it. Unlike naturalistic painting, Cubism is a way of seeing and representing the world from a dynamic viewpoint.

As pointed out, Mondrian was to regard Cubism also and above all as a way of giving concrete shape to his intimate vision of reality.

How long is the duration of a tree, a building or a landscape when observed from a moving position? What characterizes and unifies within the observer's consciousness all the forms that suddenly appear and disappear a moment later?

All this was very clear to Mondrian long before he took up Cubism. He had seen the "landscape" since 1908 as a relationship between exterior and interior. With the dunes, the buildings, and the tree, he constructed space as a relationship between subject and object. Intent on finding balance between the ever-changing appearances of the world and a sense of synthesis and duration invoked by awareness, he was already on the path toward a process of abstraction. The new Cubist perspective, which involves the subject in its changing relations with the object, prompted developments opening up the way to new formal solutions.

Mondrian moved to Paris at the beginning of 1912. While getting to grips with the new urban environment, he continued for some time to work on the tree motif already addressed in the Netherlands. The tree acted as a guiding thread while naturalistic space was opened up to the new Cubist stimuli.

Objects seen from the Cubist viewpoint expand and become one with space. Solid and void interpenetrate to become a single connected structure (**29, 36, 37, 38**). It is no longer possible to separate objects from space in a dynamic vision like the Cubist, where the objects considered a moment before and a moment after constitute space, which becomes the vehicle of their continuation and metamorphosis.

While the tree was the central motif in the transition toward Cubist space, there was no lack in this period of canvases addressing other themes, e.g. the *Still Life with Ginger Pot*, which Mondrian painted in two versions, the first in 1911 (**34.3**) and the second in 1912 (**36.5**). Landscapes (**36.1, 36.3**), human figures (**36.2**), and the sea (**36.4**) were also featured. It was obviously no longer the apparent form of individual things that counted now but rather a spatial structure capable of connecting all the objects and placing them in a dynamic relationship to one another. The naturalistic (or figurative) space modeled on the more static and certain appearance of things now began to adapt to the changing form that things assume while interacting with one another beneath the gaze of a mobile observer.

As we have seen, it is the trunk that connects the many branches in the formal structure of the naturalistic tree.

The solid figure of the tree was shattered with the Cubist transformation of space; object and space interpenetrate and thus put an end to the unifying function of the trunk, which dissolves and tends to become one with the many branches (**36, 37, 38**). While this happens, space can be seen to thicken toward the middle in some canvases (**37, 38**). This can be seen in **37**, where a touch of ochre highlights two curvilinear signs that are more closely connected than the others, as though in an effort to hold the space together, in **38** with two semicircles in the central area that appear designed to evoke a synthesis of the composition, and in **36.5** with the light blue jar, again placed in the center. Compare **36.5** and **38**: two different motifs but a similar structure.

Also to be noted in **37** and **38** is an upward convergence of lines that recalls the compositional development of **5** (see p. 43). There is the impression in **5** of motion upward from the bottom and in **37** of motion down from the top toward the central area of the canvas and spreading out on the sides.

An analogous structure can be seen in the series of landscapes produced earlier in 1900 (see p. 21) with a tree standing out against a river, where the latter broadens from the top toward the bottom.

While the definite form of objects is gradually lost, the painter seeks compositional cohesion and synthesis. He endeavors to anchor the parts, which now float freely in space in the absence of the unifying profile of the objects. Mondrian seems to be looking for a mainstay or fulcrum.

A faint trace of the two central axes identified in **35** with the trunk and the branches can be still noted in **41**. With the dissolution of the trunk, however, the space of the tree is soon transformed into a sea of fragments.

A sense of unity is given in **34.3** and **36.5** by the vase in the center of the canvas and in **36.1** by the stylized crown of a tree placed in the upper central section. Spatial unity is again provided by the shape of the object—a female figure—in **36.2** and the profile of a landscape in **36.3**. In **36.4** the entire composition seems once again to be expressed through a marked horizontal predominance, as with the dunes. A small oval is sketched out in the lower central section of **38.1**, where the trunk was placed in the naturalistic versions. A faint oval shape apparently intended to enclose the entire composition can be seen in **38.2**. Mondrian appears to be in difficulty in compositions like **38.3** and **38.4**.



5



37

Uncertainty appears to manifest itself also through the very format of the paintings. All the naturalistic trees are horizontal rectangular canvases (**25**, **29**, **35**) (**24.1**, **24.2**, **24.3**, **24.4**). While the first Cubist versions of the tree are also painted on horizontal canvases (**36**, **37**, **38**), the vertical format gradually comes to predominate in the subsequent renderings (**38.5**, **38.6**, **38.7**) (**39**).

In these works, which all have one or more trees as their subject, there is a transition from horizontal to vertical canvases. Just as Mondrian had appeared intent with the buildings on drawing the infinite horizontal expansion of the dunes toward himself, he now appeared intent with the predominantly vertical tree on concentrating and somehow holding together the space subjected to the disintegrating effect of Cubist analysis.

In the lower part of **39** we again see an absolute vertical (like the buildings) that displays a tendency to expand horizontally in the upper section. This work is similar in structure to **21**.

Something similar but developed in the opposite sense can be seen in **36.4**, the subject of which is the sea. The composition is in fact generally horizontal in its development. A reading from below toward the central area of the image gives the impression of the bottom of the canvas converging in a triangular shape on a central point highlighted by a small vertical segment. A predominantly horizontal tendency is then reasserted.

While horizontal and vertical interpenetrate in the other Cubist canvases in a multitude of small, juxtaposed signs, the painter appears to have endeavored in these two works (**36.4** and **39**) to maintain compositional coherence based on one predominant direction.

In one case (**39**), a vertical undergoes slight horizontal expansion; in the other (**36.4**), the horizontal suggests a vertical that avoids manifesting itself too clearly so as not to disrupt the composition as a whole. The spatial development alternates between horizontal and vertical and almost suggests a desire to return to the structure of the dunes and buildings. Mondrian appears for a moment to opt once again for the more absolute predominance of one direction or the other in an attempt to endow the fragmented Cubist space with a certain degree of synthesis and unity.

**39.1** is a drawing dated 1912-13 by Seuphor but not included in Joosten's catalogue raisonné. I shall therefore consider it subject to confirmation.

It repeats the schema of the naturalistic tree with its trunk expanding horizontally as it rises from the bottom toward the center. This expansion is circum-

scribed by an oval, appearing here for the first time in such explicit form.

As we have seen, the painter had already suggested an oval outline as early as 1906 in some landscapes (**12, 13, 15**) (**11.1**) and some depictions of dunes (**30.1, 30.3, 30.7**). The crown of the tree in **24.4** also appears to be enclosed within an oval.

Mondrian used an oval explicitly in a second pencil drawing (**39.2**). This constitutes a preparatory study for a subsequent work painted in 1913 (**40**), where the composition is set clearly and unhesitatingly within an oval for the first time on canvas.

The oval appears capable of endowing the Cubist compositions with synthesis and unity.

Braque and Picasso also used the oval in some works of Analytical Cubism. While Mondrian was to adopt the oval in nearly all the canvases of 1913, 1914 and 1915, this was not the sole means employed in his search for synthesis.

He also chose in this phase to reduce the chromatic range in order to maintain greater compositional unity, at least in terms of color. The strong contrasts are attenuated and the bright yellows, magentas, blues, and greens used in previous works give way to tonal variations of ocher, brown and gray, as can be seen in **36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41** and in **41.1, 41.2, 41.3, 41.4, 41.5**.

Barely suggested in **41, 42, 43** and **41.1, 41.2, 41.3, 42.2**, the oval becomes more sharply defined in **40, 44, 45** and **43.2, 44.1, 44.2, 44.3** but is absent in some cases (**43.3, 43.4**) before disappearing entirely as from 1916 (**46, 47, 48**).

It is as though, having introduced the oval, the painter wished to express it in increasingly discreet form practically to the point of elimination.

In his efforts to endow Cubist space with greater synthesis and unity, Mondrian employed an oval and reduced the chromatic range while working at the same time to unify his complex tissue of signs. An alternation of curvilinear and rectilinear can be seen in **41.2, 41.3**, and **41.4**, the latter apparently seeking to open up the space and the former to close it. The curvilinear signs can be seen as oval fragments, as though the oval had interpenetrated with the multitude of signs.

The first Cubist canvases (**37, 38**) also display signs in the central area of the composition alluding to a circular reorganization of space, which tends to concentrate and to maintain coherence from the inside.

While the oval unquestionably helps to endow the composition as a whole with a sense of unity, it does not appear to form part of the multitude, of which it is intended as a synthesis. It appears to be too absolute and detached from the multiplicity of signs within it. It evokes unity but not exactly the unity that the painter wishes to see manifesting itself on the canvas. Mondrian is in fact seeking a unity that generates itself from inside the composition: as in **5**, where the verticals of the trunk converge from the inside toward the upper central section of the composition; as in **7**, with the precise circle of the plate placed in the center as an ideal model for the imprecise circles of the apples; as in **23**, where the verticals of the trunk and the horizontals of the terrain find an instant of synthesis in the circular form of the sun in the upper right section; above all in the naturalistic tree, where the trunk unites the multitude of the branches. On the one hand, all the variety of the branches (horizontal) is born out of the trunk (vertical); on the other, the multitude of the branches flows back into the symbolic unity of the trunk. The space is unified from within. Mondrian is intent also in the new Cubist space on expressing a unity that generates itself from within the composition and is not, like the oval, applied from the outside.

If we translate all this into existential terms, we realize that the idea of unity he so cherished is something of an everyday nature depending on the human subject in its relationship with surrounding reality. Unity for Mondrian is not something absolute, a priori, outside the world.

We saw in the previous chapter that the virtually infinite space expressed with the dunes is concentrated into the wholly vertical and finite space of the buildings. At the same time, the trunk of the naturalistic tree becomes a plastic symbol of the relationship between infinite space and finite space, a visual metaphor of the unifying consciousness addressing multifarious reality.

Synthesis and unity are questions posed by the human being with respect to the immensity of nature. Mankind and its consciousness can, however, only operate inside the natural universe, as any desire to stand outside it would inevitably entail falling into a surrealist metaphysical condition. The unified external synthesis expressed with the oval appears to be precisely this, and Mondrian could hardly feel satisfied with it.

The oval thus appears (**40**), is expressed in more discreet form suggesting a desire to interpenetrate with manifold space (**41.2, 41.3, 41.4**), and disappears almost entirely (**41.5, 42.1**) before reappearing, first faintly (**42, 43**) (**42.2, 43.1**) and then once again in a more sharply defined form (**44, 45**) (**43.2, 44.1, 44.2**).

The oval is in fact expressed in some cases with a bold black outline (**44**) (**43.2, 44.1**), which in any case opens toward the top and bottom of the canvas, with respect to the oval of **40**. In other works (**41, 42, 43**), the signs fade away toward the edges of the canvas and an oval shape can be glimpsed but with no visible outline as such.

The oval appears to become more tenuous when the colors are more subdued (**42, 43**) and more clearly expressed when the colors once again become bolder so as to accentuate the contrasts and thus the manifold aspect of the space (**44**). Form and color are connected. When the range of chromatic variation is reduced, everything is bathed in the "same light" and the eye perceives a greater sense of cohesion between the parts, in which case the oval can therefore be toned down. When the colors emphasize the individual parts, the oval instead encloses them firmly to recall that all this variety is still a unified whole.

The oval appears in one case (**44**) to have been applied from the outside in order to enclose all the variety within it, and in another (**43**) to be intent on springing from the internal space itself, which fades away toward the edges to suggest an oval. I believe that this is a way of evoking the desire for unity to be generated from inside the composition.

In the canvases where the oval is bolder, we note that the chromatic range is again enriched with the bright, contrasting blues, ochers, and pinks that the artist had previously abandoned so as to avoid any further fragmentation of Cubist space.

The "monochromatic" phase (see the works in sequence from **35** to **41**) gave way to a phase in which the surface is colored discreetly (**42, 43**) (**42.1, 42.2, 43.1**) or more boldly (**44**) (**43.2, 44.1**). Mondrian is involved in a difficult game of balance between form and color, being concerned in this phase to make the structure more unified while at the same time avoiding any undue sacrifice of color.

Still curved, oblique, horizontal, and vertical in 1913-14 (**37, 38, 39, 40**), the heterogeneous variety of signs gradually gives way to a more homogeneous alternation of horizontal and vertical lines (**41, 42, 43, 44, 45**). The formal structure of the compositions thus attains greater clarity.

By reducing the ever-changing appearance of the world to a multitude of orthogonal signs, the artist unquestionably performs an arbitrary operation with respect to everything we see in the most immediate reality. This enables him, however, to express the greatest possible variety on the canvas (every sign differs from the others in terms of the greater or lesser predominance of one direction or the other) while at the same time maintaining something more constant (the perpendicular relationship).

While space is multiplied in a thousand different forms evoking all the manifold aspect of the world, a common denominator now underpins all the dynamic and multiform appearance of physical reality, and this satisfies the human mind. Mondrian's Cubist space thus builds a bridge between the multifarious

universe and the unifying consciousness. Expressing the broadest diversity through variations of one and the same thing means in fact finding the one in the many.

I am thinking now of the works of 1909-10, windmills, trees, and dunes in which we can see a pointillistic structure that already appears designed to suggest a sort of common denominator (**24, 25, 28**).

As pointed out, Mondrian regarded Cubist space not as the interpenetration of objects in motion (as it was for other Cubist and Futurist painters) but rather as the representation of a common, intimate structure of things: opening up the consciousness to contemplation of the immense variety of the world while at the same time generating a synthesis capable of holding the multiplication imparted by external reality together as much as possible; opening up to the world without getting lost.

With the gradual reduction of the plurality of signs to a variation of the perpendicular relationship, every point of space appears to be different but now partakes of the same essence, just as every organism appears to be different in reality while sharing the same intimate nature as all the others.

In the age of photography, painters looked no longer to the particular and contingent form of each individual thing but rather to the sum of things in search of a common denominator at the level of visual representation. In order to do so, they needed a mainstay. A fixed point is essential if you are to contemplate becoming: Cézanne found this in the stereotypes of the cone, the sphere, and the cylinder; Mondrian was to find it in the perpendicular relationship.

In **C 42** the two directions produced by the relationship between the dunes and the buildings interpenetrate to generate a multitude of small signs that are nearly always orthogonal. Some of these have greater extension and thus express a greater sense of spatial continuity. They correspond to the median axes of the canvas, and especially the horizontal.

As already observed in **C 41**, the viewer thus once again has the impression of seeing a trace of the two central perpendicular axes, i.e. of the basic structure of the naturalistic tree. The linear strokes intersect, combine with one another, and separate once again in a constant alternation of the predominance of one direction or the other. Everything is different but can always be traced back to a single intimate reality constantly changing in appearance.

The intersecting of these linear strokes produces areas or surfaces that differ from one another through slight variations in color.

Some of these surfaces contain a sign made up of a horizontal and a vertical stroke, which could suggest a building intersecting a dune or the basic structure of the tree.

These signs appear in different areas of the composition and assume different configurations.

#### **C 42:**

1. Here the horizontal prevails.
2. Here horizontal and vertical are equivalent.
3. The two directions now display greater interpenetration but with the horizontal expanding toward the right.
4. Here the horizontal expands toward the left.
5. Here we see another possible combination of the two opposite directions.

While all the other signs are closely interconnected and constantly slide into one another (thus proving almost impossible to pin down), these signs appear to isolate themselves in an internal space so as to express something more lasting. The same thing is observed in **42.1, 42.2** (see diagrams **a** and **b** along-

side), and **43**.

One of these signs appears in the center of the composition (6) in **C 42**, shifted slightly upward and contained inside a rectangular area.

Unlike the situation observed for the other signs (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5), the opposite directions appear to attain a more stable equilibrium in this central rectangle.

The rectangle is similar in its proportions to the canvas.

As pointed out, it is still possible in this painting to glimpse a faint trace of the two median axes running through the entire composition.

A relationship is thus established between the canvas and the rectangle of analogous proportions placed in the center. The rectangle seems to concentrate the two median axes within itself so as to express a synthesis of the composition as a whole. The central rectangle appears as a sort of model in which a perfect equilibrium is attained, while all the other signs suggest situations that approach that ideal situation to differing degrees and thereby express life in all its becoming.

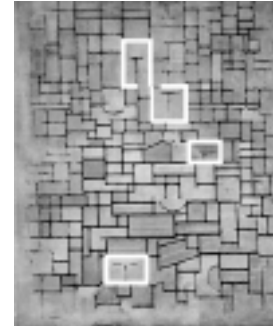
Recall the still life of 1901 (**7**), where a perfect circle (the bottom of the plate) can be seen in the center above a variety of imperfect circles (the apples).

With a gap of twelve years between them and differing completely in form, the two paintings say the same thing: physical reality multiplies its appearances while the consciousness strives to draw everything back toward an ideal model of greater synthesis.

Both works combine the manifold appearance of the world (the apples in 1901 and the various orthogonal signs in 1913) with a unified synthesis (the perfect circle of the plate in 1901 and the central rectangle with the best possible balance of opposites in 1913).

The expression of all this in the naturalistic or figurative painting is veiled by the contingent appearance of a certain vase, that particular plate, and those apples. It is precisely through abstraction from the particular appearance of those few objects that the Cubist painting holds for a far greater variety of forms and situations. No longer dwelling on details, the abstract painting reveals a reality common to a range of things; it presents a broader spectrum of reality.

Can the rectangle inside which the best possible balance of opposites is generated be seen perhaps as suggesting a unified synthesis of Cubist space, the internal compositional unity that the painter sought while using the oval to keep the space cohesive from the outside? We shall return to this point shortly after examining another group of works.



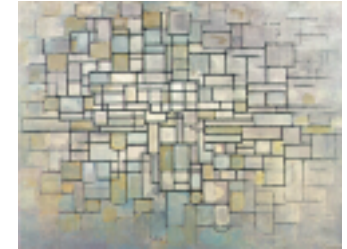
42.1 a



42.2 a



7



42

Another interesting comparison can be drawn between **42** and **14**.

In the naturalistic canvas we see a horizontal section (the sky) suggesting boundless space juxtaposed with the vertical shape of a windmill.

The painting of 1905-06 can be seen from this viewpoint as a premise of the dialectic between dunes and buildings that Mondrian was to develop three years later.

The continuous strip of sky is in fact equivalent to the extended space of the dunes, whereas the windmill corresponds to the vertically concentrated space that was to be expressed with the buildings.

The two sails of the windmill encapsulate and reproduce the contrast between the white stretch of sky and the windmill itself, the horizontal constituting a concentration of the former and the vertical a concentration of the upright shape of the building and its reflection in the water.

As in **42**, we thus see a space generating a synthesis of itself. As in **42**, this synthesis is produced in the central area of the composition.



14



42

Comparison of the two works could suggest that the abstract canvas is a sort of schematization of the figurative. This is not so. It is only by seeing the original canvas of 1913 that you can appreciate all its beauty, which I am quite incapable of describing in words. Every point of the abstract composition pulsates with energy and everything appears to be connected, just as when we observe a natural landscape and see every patch of green melding and mingling with its neighbor in a succession of light and dark, of boldly defined and more subdued features. The abstract painting is like a concentrate of natural vitality distilled into spiritual energy, especially for viewers of the original.

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Mondrian went to visit his family in the Netherlands in the summer of 1914; his father was sick. He was prevented from returning to Paris by the war, which broke out during his stay, and found temporary accommodation with friends in Domburg. Deprived of the brushes, paints, and canvases left in his studio in Paris, Mondrian began a series of drawings, the subjects of which were once again a church façade and the sea. The subjects addressed in naturalistic and "expressionist" terms in previous years were thus tackled anew at the height of his Cubist experience.

The drawings of the church façade present vertical development (**44.2, 44.4, 44.5, 44.6, 44.7**) while those of the sea have a primarily horizontal orientation (**44.8, 44.9, 44.10**). The proportions of the composition are equivalent in only one drawing (**44.15**).

The works inspired by the church façade display the structure typical of the Cubist compositions (**43, 44**) with horizontal and vertical linear signs. In some there is an all-enclosing oval. In certain cases (**44.2, 44.4**) an explicit reference to the object is still visible in the shape of two windows in the upper central section, a doorway in the lower part or a cross above the doorway (**44.2**). The place occupied by the two windows in **44.2** and **44.4** is taken in **44.5, 44.6**, and **44.7** by a square form containing a segment that is vertical in one case (**44.6**) and horizontal in another (**44.7**).

There is something rather unusual about **44.15**. Is it a church façade? The oval becomes an almost perfect circle here and we can see a square form in the center in which horizontal and vertical attain equivalence.



The drawings of the sea can be divided into those showing only the sea (**44.8, 44.9, 44.10, 44.14**) and those including a pier in the locality of Schweningen jutting out from the beach into the waters (**44.11, 44.12, 44.13**) (**45**). The latter are therefore also called *Pier and Ocean*.

The landscape shown alongside is similar to those that the painter must have taken as a model.

As with the dunes, the towers, and the tree, Mondrian must have been attracted by the subject of the pier and ocean due to certain spatial characteristics.

Even though less and less importance attached to the particular and contingent appearance of a certain landscape in 1914, the external space must have struck a deep inner chord in this case. The artist probably saw the pier structure as a solid element, the symbol of permanence, interpenetrating with the dynamic flow of the sea.

As with the buildings that curb and counterbalance the extension of the dunes, here too the vertical (the pier) appears designed to express something more constant while the horizontal (the sea) heralds multiplicity and change.



Dune at Domburg with Pier

Photograph

Once again, as when Mondrian took the tree as his subject, the artist's eye turns spontaneously and in no way fortuitously toward a landscape presenting an intrinsic relationship between the two contrasting directions.

In the *Pier and Ocean* series, as previously in the trunk-branch structure of the tree, the vertical starts from the bottom and rises to interpenetrate with the horizontal direction of the sea.

With respect to the tree, however, the Cubist subject of the pier immersed in the sea reveals more dynamic interaction between unitary element (the pier) and manifold element (the sea) than between the mutually static trunk and branches.



35



45

A general symmetry governing the compositional layout can be seen in the *Pier and Ocean* drawings (**44.11, 44.12, 44.13**) (**C 45**). Around the central axis of the pier (a symbolic projection of the viewer, like the tree trunk in previous works), the changing space of the sea is transformed into one of comparatively greater order and constancy.

Some drawings of the sea instead present a double horizontal line in the upper central section (**44.10, 44.14**).

While I do not know the exact chronological sequence of these drawings, and frankly attach little importance to this aspect, interesting connections emerge when some of them are examined in a certain order. Let us consider **44.8, 44.9, 44.11, 44.12, 44.13**, and **C 45** as a single sequence.

**44.8** is a drawing of the sea produced in 1914 that recalls the space of the dunes addressed by the artist four years earlier.

The line of the horizon is enclosed in a faint oval. Two points placed in the central area like the foci of an ellipse appear to mark out a segment set slightly below the uninterrupted line of the horizon. This segment evokes a sense of permanence within the boundless horizontal extension as though the horizon, which continues uninterruptedly to the right and left, had paused and concentrated for an instant inside the composition. I am reminded of the black segment in the center of **15** or the yellow accent in the central section of **30**.

**44.9** is a drawing of the sea characterized by primarily horizontal and curvilinear lines with a few faint and isolated vertical elements. The whole is again enclosed within an oval projecting slightly beyond the edges. In the central section we see two juxtaposed curvilinear signs that appear to have developed out of the central segment in the previous drawing. These signs seem to suggest a small oval inside the oval enclosing the whole, which recalls the concentration of space toward the center already noted in some compositions of 1912 (**37, 38**).

The vertical direction takes shape in the drawings **44.11** and **44.12** through the pier jutting out into the sea.

On examining the four compositions in sequential order (**44.11, 44.12, 44.13, 45**), we can see the small, faint oval (**44.9**) transformed in the center of **44.11** into a vaguely quadrangular area that is then concentrated in the upper section (**44.12**) to become a square (**44.13**), which contains a sign of equivalence between the two opposite directions in **C 45**. The number of signs, i.e. the degree of spatial multiplicity, gradually increases from **44.11** to **45**, and it is only in the latter that all the signs are expressed solely and exclusively through perpendicular relations.

Every sign expresses something different in **C 45** and something changes every instant. Despite its general symmetrical layout, the composition depicts a reality in a state of becoming, the reality contemplated by the Cubist painters.

The duality expressed through the relationship between vertical and horizontal, which generates the manifold space as a whole, is cancelled out in the square, where the two very different and indeed opposite things are equivalent, i.e. assume the same value while remaining different. The eye can linger on that point and contemplate in a more stable form what constantly changes in appearance in the surrounding space through alternation of the prevailing direction. In that area, for an instant, becoming is transformed into being and multiplicity becomes unity.

The sign of equivalence between opposites is born inside a square and thus suggests an inner space. This square symbolizes the space of consciousness in which the changing external space is captured for an instant in synthesis.

Examination of **C 45** reveals in fact that other areas of the composition suggest potential squares, which do not, however, attain the balance of the one in the center. Unlike the central square, they appear unable to hold the dynamic external space and transform it into a more constant and permanent internal equilibrium. The incomplete attempts to internalize external reality evoke the moments in life when something escapes us and we cannot make the rationale of becoming our own. The central square instead expresses one of those rare moments in which we understand (internalize) the fact that everything is connected and that each thing depends on its opposite.

The unity manifested during the first Cubist phase as an external oval (**44.8**) becomes an internal oval (**44.9**) and is then gradually transformed into a square representing synthesis and unity. An external and absolute unity is transformed in an internal and relative unity that now partakes of the manifold space inside which it is born.

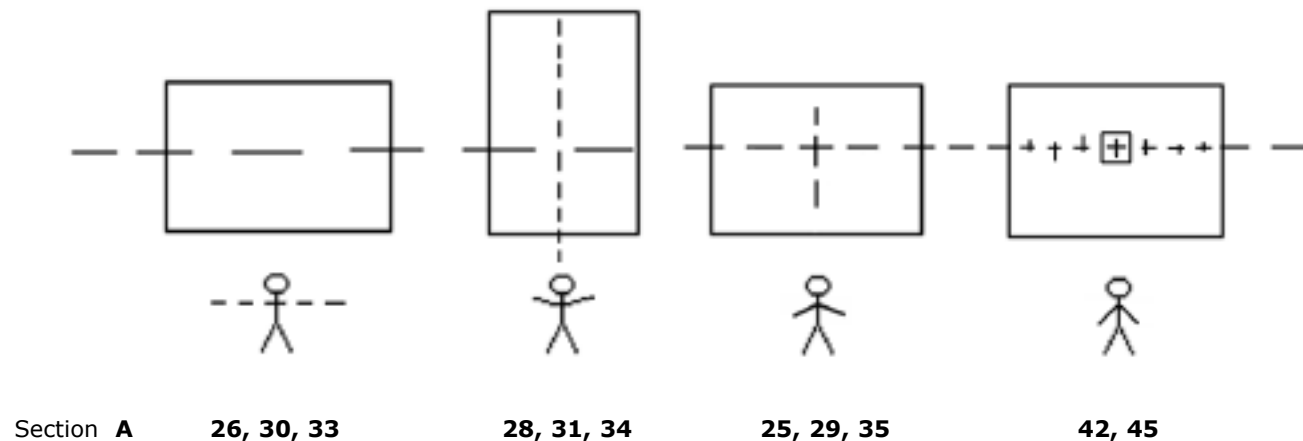
On examining **45** in the original, we can see erasures and constant adjustment of the different parts. This creates no disturbance and indeed contributes to the dynamic effect of the whole. While using the overall symmetrical layout to keep everything under control, the artist also seeks to disrupt the symmetry by means of a fluid mass of white. The white mass seems designed to connect the fragmentary discontinuity of the signs by introducing an element that acts more as a painted surface than a linear feature.

I see the white as the embryonic form of the color that was to reappear in Mondrian's canvases the following year (**46**) after this phase devoted exclusively to drawings.

The nature of the "landscape" that Mondrian was aiming at now appears evident. Starting from the most immediate reality, the painter no longer stopped at the particular and contingent appearance of a church façade, the sea or a starry sky but extracted the essence of all those fleeting appearances to transform them into an ideal representation of all possible landscapes. What is a landscape essentially? In a dynamic reality such as that of the modern era, every landscape is the outcome of new and different forms of interaction between subject and object.

The unifying function metaphorically assigned to the tree trunk (**25, 29, 35**) gave way over a span of four years to a unity of space in itself: a square was used in 1915 as a metaphor of the unifying consciousness (**42, 45**).

A square is the symbol of the consciousness that interpenetrates and interacts with the ever-changing appearances of physical reality (see the diagram below).



It is, however, obvious that the consciousness can only produce partial and temporary syntheses; it clearly cannot exhaust all the possible relations with the external world. Human consciousness cannot contain within itself the totality of the world and will never be able to comprehend reality as a whole (the space of the oval).

Every synthesis generated by thought is necessarily partial and temporary, and must therefore open up again to the multiform and ever-changing aspect of physical reality. This is what all sensible people do when they call their certainties into question in the light of experience. This is what philosophy has been doing for centuries, as have the arts and above all the experimental sciences.

A second square can be seen in **C 45** above the square that we have identified as a unitary synthesis of the composition as a whole. Inside the second square we see a vertical segment divided by two horizontal segments that extend beyond the boundary of the square to the right and left.

The two small horizontal segments form two crosses with the two vertical sides of the square.

These two signs tell us that unity is opening up to duality. The unitary synthesis achieved for an instant in the lower square in the form of the equivalence of opposites is again broken up into a duality that then flows back toward the variety of different situations marked again by the alternating predominance of one direction or the other. The unity generated with the first square opens up again to manifold space with the second.

For Mondrian the unitary synthesis generated in **45** is therefore a plastic symbol of the manifold space of nature (horizontal), which attains measure and a harmonious condition for an instant in the space of consciousness before opening up again to nature.

The equivalence generated in the square suggests the possibility of establishing balance and harmony between opposite entities. And this holds both for the subject's relationship with the object (the external world) and for the subject's relationship with itself: finding equilibrium between the contradictory drives within oneself, e.g. between the uncontrollable urges of the instinctual life (the horizontal) and the action of controlling and guiding the instincts performed by the mind or spirit (the vertical).

The spatial development observed in **C 45** tells us that while equilibrium can be attained, it is a dynamic equilibrium that does not necessarily last for long once achieved. The vertical rises, interpenetrates with the horizontal, and produces a unitary synthesis that opens up again to the horizontal higher up. Unity reveals itself for an instant and then appears again as multiplicity. The variable becomes constant and then reverts to variation.

This is now a dynamic unity and no longer the static unity exemplified by the perfect circle of a plate (**5**), the trunk of the naturalistic tree or the rectangle in the center of **C 42**.

The unity that Mondrian strove to express is a temporary synthesis generated momentarily by the subject in its changing relationship with the world, not something to be attained once and for all. Establishing equilibrium between the manifold appearance of nature and the synthesis invoked by the consciousness does not mean attaining fixed points and immutable truths. The square of **45** is not a potentially static and all-inclusive unity like the oval but a dynamic unity intrinsically linked to the manifold space in which it is born and toward which it returns a moment later.

The series of drawings produced in the Netherlands can be considered a sort of conspectus of Mondrian's work between 1908 and 1915, as though the Cubist space developed at length in his studio in Paris had finally found an outlet in contact with the Dutch countryside from which it originated. I believe it right to say that these developments came about spontaneously without full awareness on the part of the artist.

I further believe that while Mondrian still made explicit reference to certain landscapes (a dune, the sea or the pier and the ocean) in this phase, these were actually subjects that he had internalized back in his Expressionist phase with a very clear idea of their plastic value. I believe that when Mondrian returned to these subjects in 1915, he drew them more from within himself than from the countryside in front of him. He addressed them again in order to tie up some loose ends left in the Cubist canvases painted in Paris. In doing so, he provided a *de facto* summary of the work carried out between 1912 and 1914.

In 1914, at the height of his Cubist phase, Mondrian started again in fact from a naturalistic space (**44.8**) (as expressed with the dunes around 1910) and arrived at an abstract space (**45**) in which, having lost the metaphorical unity evoked by the naturalistic tree trunk (**35, 36, 37**), he rediscovered an inter-

nal unity of Cubist space that he had searched for in all the compositions produced between 1912 and 1914 (from **38** to **44**).

Through the six drawings (**44.8**, **44.9**, **44.11**, **44.12**, **44.13**, and **C 45**), external unity is visually translated for the first time into internal unity. Objective unity (the oval) and subjective unity (the square) coexist and, from that moment on, all of Mondrian's plastic space was to rest on this idea of unity (the square) as the subjective symbol of an assumed and no longer visible objective unity (the oval). On examining the sequence **45**, **46**, **47**, we see how the oval dissolves and a square form emerges from inside the composition (**C 51**, **52**, **53**).

It should be stressed that the process whereby Mondrian attained the synthesis of Cubist space is in no sense linear. The artist experienced many moments of uncertainty between 1912 and 1915. The results he achieved with **45** were not only the fruit of those five drawings.

Between the indication of unitary synthesis generated in **C 42** (1913) and its full attainment in **C 45** (1915), Mondrian produced at least 22 works, some of which afford glimpses of occasional efforts to express partial syntheses (**C 42**) (**42.2**, **44.6**, **44.7**, **44.15**) whereas many others appear to disregard this aspect.



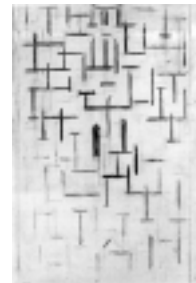
42



42.2



44.6



44.7



44.15



45

We must therefore suppose that Mondrian came close to the synthesis in 1913 (**C 42**) and then opened up to new possible solutions before finally reaping the fruits in 1915. It can be deduced from the unresolved attempts to be seen in some works of 1914 that he proceeded in a wholly intuitive way between the intimation of the synthesis (**42**) and its full attainment (**45**).

The six drawings I have grouped together reveal a precise sense when seen in sequential order but were probably not produced one after the other as states on a path that can now be identified retrospectively. That path existed like a trail in the artist's mind but, like all the processes of life, followed a slow and winding course with moments of progress and others of backtracking. Mondrian followed his intuition and this drew inspiration from a "project" that he could not have seen in all its true breadth, as we instead can with the benefit of hindsight.

The processing of Cubist space was therefore completed over a period of about four years (1912-15).

Everything changed in Mondrian's painting between 1893 and 1915, or rather there was a change in the plastic means serving to give clear shape to a vision of the world that can already be glimpsed implicitly in some works of the naturalistic phase.

After Cézanne, who died in 1906, Braque and Picasso gave strong impetus to the birth of Cubist space between 1907 and 1911. In 1915, however, when Mondrian achieved a synthesis of Cubism, they instead went back to addressing the apparent forms of individual objects.

Mondrian was to say later that they failed to develop the premises inherent in their initial analysis.

Braque and Picasso went in fact from Analytical Cubism to what has been erroneously called Synthetic Cubism without pinpointing the precise moment in which the Cubist vision began to live in its own right, became space in itself, and found a basis in the one true reality of painting expressed in the two dimensions.

Mondrian replaced an illusionistic use of the pictorial surface (the supposed third dimension) imitating the transitory appearances of the world with a concrete use of the canvas that, without resorting to optical illusions, presents itself as a possible interpretive model of reality, which was for him constituted at the same time by an external space and an internal space in their inseparable relationship of dynamic interaction.

The label of Synthetic Cubism attached by critics to the work of Braque and Picasso strikes me as incorrect. In my view, it is not in fact a synthesis but a hasty aggregate of elements as yet unresolved at the level of vision. So-called Synthetic Cubism was a clumsy attempt to amalgamate the multiplicity generated by the Cubist analysis of reality without subjecting it to a common yardstick capable of uniting the fragments no longer under the apparent form of the individual objects from which they originated but in terms of their intrinsic spatial qualities. The synthesis was effected without taking into account the data resulting from the analysis. Synthetic Cubism thus left the fundamental issue of the dichotomy between objects and space unresolved.

This contradiction was to become in the hands of Picasso a particular form of Surrealism that consists in seeking a synthesis between different objects without succeeding in breaking away from their apparent form, i.e. without accomplishing a real process of abstraction. As such alchemy obviously cannot work, things become deformed and take on a surrealist appearance. Picasso's Surrealism can be described as a sort of rusty Cubism.

This is not to detract from works such as *Guernica*, which remains a masterpiece of painting, but rather to scale down the role of inventing genius attributed to Pablo Picasso in the development of modern plastic space.

\* \* \*

Let us return for a moment to **45** and consider some aspects of a general character. The human dimension and that of the natural universe are not and never will be symmetrically commensurable (suffice it to mention the immense physical disproportion between the two terms). In certain situations, however, they can assume equivalent value for human awareness and attain an equilibrium taking into account the rationale both of mankind and of nature. And since mankind is part of the natural universe, this essentially means reconnecting a part of nature (humanity) with the whole.

There is talk today of the Earth as one unique organism, of complexity, and of biological diversity to be protected. It is not only the scientific community but also the Christian church that seeks to act as an interpreter of the environmental question. As I have already noted, ecology is a concrete example of the attempt to redress the balance between mankind and nature, subject and object, what manifests itself in the two-dimensional space of a canvas through the relationship between vertical and horizontal.

Mondrian establishes a relationship between two infinite directions: the horizontal (the plastic symbol of the outer world) and the vertical (the plastic symbol of the inner world). For consciousness these are two virtually infinite spaces because our inner world is no less complex and elusive than the immense variety of the outer world. Consider the frequency in our everyday lives of situations of disproportion and conflict between the parts of us that are closer to the natural world and those that instead characterize us as the human species, namely intellect and reason: conflicts between emotional drives and ethi-

cal rules; the predominance of one direction or the other. In some cases, reason and moral rules oppress and limit the vital impulse; in others, life turns common sense and reason upside down. How are we to get by?

Disharmony between body and mind; internal imbalances that end up being projected onto the external world to create friction and conflict between individuals and between individuals and their environment.

How rare and precious are instead those moments in which we see and understand the reasons of both parts of ourselves, when we manage to expand the space of our consciousness to such an extent as to contemplate all the diversity present within us as a dynamic unity. We perceive our limitations with sorrow and feel at the same time both bigger and smaller. Duality disappears for an instant. We feel that we are all one and everything outside appears to be in a state of harmony because there is harmony within. Contemplating that synthesis, reveling in the instant of an eternal joy that seems to unite us with the whole (the unity of **45**), then opening up again to see things separate and clash with one another in the multifarious disintegrative rhythms of everyday life (the multiplicity of **C 45**).

That idea of unity remains in the heart, a taste of universal life that is no longer revealed in the particular but of which our fleeting emotions and our constant pursuit of equilibrium are a component-albeit infinitesimal-capable of making an essential contribution to the whole.

The sign of equivalence between opposites urges us to attribute one and the same value to the part of us that is closer to nature and the part that is more typically human; to understand that one thing depends on the other in a dynamic vision: a vertical that yields little to the horizontal but is at the same time incapable of opposing it to the bitter end, as certain moral doctrines demand. Mondrian's plastic space suggests that the unity of being is not moral law but method: a dynamic equivalence of contrary aspects that, in a static vision of rigid content, work instead to divide consciousness, separating us from ourselves and from the world.

Mondrian's aesthetic space therefore also contains an ethical message calling upon us to balance the opposites and neutralize the imbalances within us before thinking about others and the world as a whole (the oval is the entire world...).

Immanuel Kant spoke of the starry sky above and moral law within.

The moral law consists in the rule that accommodates the instincts but keeps them under control. For Mondrian it is a balanced relationship between the natural urges and the control exercised by the spirit, as expressed in the sign of equivalence inside the square.

The starry sky is for Kant the whole world, external reality, everything that can influence our inner balance, i.e. all the space around the square in Mondrian's composition.

The equivalence of opposites means that morality must not be bigoted but also that the freedom is not the unbridled satisfaction of every desire. Kant defined freedom as being able to set oneself rules, i.e. being free to choose rules that are in any case necessary, both in coping with one's inner contradictions (individual life) and in the relationship between oneself and others (social life).

In interpreting the formal relations of Mondrian's paintings, we can develop contents that speak to us about life, not in its fleeting appearances, however, but in its most intimate and authentic ways of being.

Mondrian's talent and intellectual honesty ensure that form acquires depth and reveals his intimate vision of things. With Mondrian form becomes content and aesthetics acquires an ethical value.