

By Bennett Schiff  
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# For Mondrian, Art was a Path to the Universal

*Through trial and error, he moved lines  
and primary colors into harmony, only to  
start all over in his last years of life.*

**In 1942 photographer  
Arnold Newman caught  
Mondrian among the  
ordered grids of his  
New York City studio.**

When I stayed at the Mondrian in Los Angeles during its opening celebrations in 1984, the hotel had less to do with its namesake than with the entrepreneurial enterprise of its owners. The fact that so pure, ascetic and astringent an artist should have made a mark on Sunset Boulevard, of all places,

has something to say about the effect that Mondrian has had on a world so far removed from his art. And it hardly stops there.

Piet Mondrian's influence has extended for half a century, since the artist's death in New York in 1944, into our daily lives. In architecture, design, clothing, Mondrian is present whether we know it or not. Not that long ago, fashion designers were turning out jackets, skirts, dresses and bathing suits divided into bright red, blue and yellow rectangles--the primary colors used as if they had never before been seen. Which they had not been in quite that way. The style ran its course and disappeared. But the art remains.

Fashion was hardly what Mondrian had in mind when he thought and dreamed of a universal art--pure, spiritual and transcendent. It was, in the end, to be so fine that, having induced a radiant harmony and balance throughout society, the need for painting itself would no longer be necessary.

In fact, Mondrian is so much with us, consciously or unconsciously--and it is the unconscious awareness of art that he pursued all of his life--that it is startling to realize he has been dead for half a century. He seems so much more modern than that; part of the continuing present, the tense that is never out of date.

Last year in the Netherlands, his birthplace, they raised Mondrian to the level of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, designating 1994 the Year of Mondrian. The celebration was marked by a number of nationwide exhibitions and observances. Mondrian, you came to realize as you went about the country tracking them down--from the consummate retrospective exhibition at The Hague's Gemeentemuseum, to a full-scale recreation in Amsterdam of his Paris studio, to the cottage in Amersfoort where he was born in 1872--was one of the basic pivots on which 20th-century art turns. It hardly seemed necessary to commemorate him in his native country. All you needed to do was look out the train window as building after building stood proudly in that flat land, proclaiming his spirit and idea. And yet it made you sit up when you saw, painted on the side of a building in The Hague, the dictum: "Art has to be forgotten. Beauty must be realized. ...Mondrian. "

The timing couldn't be better, then, for the compelling review of his work that will be at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., with support from Heineken USA and the Shell Oil Company Foundation, from June 11 through September 4. It will then proceed to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it will be on view from October 1 through January 23, 1996. Essentially the same exhibition that opened in The Hague last December, it was assembled from museums and collections in Europe, the United States and Japan by a group of distinguished scholars who, for a change, could not be more clear in dealing with a difficult subject. Mondrian, for all the clarity of his work, was all theory in back of it. The catalog maybe unsurpassed for the quality of its reproductions and the lucidity of its essays, the work of the art historians Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Yve-Alain Bois of Harvard, Hans Janssen of the Gemeentemuseum, the Mondrian specialist Joop Joosten and John Elderfield of the Museum of Modern Art.

There probably isn't in all of art history a more logical and orderly progression of an artist's developing ideas than Mondrian's; it extended in a steady line from 1912, when he took up Cubism, to his final days. That does not, however, mean that things came easily to him. Although his life was quiet, his manner gentle, warm and modest, and his dress sober, his spirit was daring and profound, and his art radical. The writer John Russell has pointed out that "in looking at a Mondrian of no matter what period it is important to remember that he was a man of almost angelic purity, a high-souled mystic who put up uncomplainingly with a long lifetime of isolation and near-penury. "



Indeed, his art, which was his life, was a continuing battle, an exhausting search for peace and a universal harmony and balance. It was very hard work, a kind of battlefield. His life began quietly enough in the town of Amersfoort, some 25 miles southeast of Amsterdam, where his father, Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan, an ardent supporter of the Dutch Reformed Church, was principal of a Protestant elementary school. An accomplished lithographer, Mondriaan senior gave his son, who was named after him, lessons in drawing as well as in religion and comportment.

The boy's path was set early. Frits Mondriaan, an uncle who was a professional artist, gave his young nephew lessons and guidance. Mondrian (he dropped an *a* from his name as being excessive when he got to Paris), called Piet (PEET), was the second of five children. He completed primary school at the age of 14 and, with the encouragement of his father, learned and taught drawing. In 1892, at age 20, he moved to Amsterdam where he studied for two years at the Rijksacademie.

Mondrian's life in Amsterdam was typical of a young professional artist's. He made copies of paintings in the great Rijksmuseum and put them up for sale; he showed with local art associations; he painted a ceiling of angels for a client's home. Twice he applied unsuccessfully for a Prix de Rome. His life as a poor artist had begun.

Although in later years his art and writing, which were extensive, were known and highly respected by artists and critics, Mondrian never made any real money. There were many times when he couldn't pay the rent for a heatless studio, and he had to resort to writing letters to friends asking for funds, the most bitter thing for a man of his courtly pride to do. At one point he thought seriously of giving up painting entirely and going to work on a farm. When you consider Mondrian's cast of mind, life on a farm would not have been so farfetched an idea as it might seem at first. Interested in the universality of spirit advanced by the Theosophical Society (*SMITHSONIAN*, May 1995), he joined that reflective and mystical group in 1909. He also befriended the Dutch philosopher M.H. J. Schoenmaekers, whom he met in 1915. Working close to the earth would keep his body busy while his mind speculated on the problems of spirit and philosophy that so much concerned him.

Mondrian combined the idealism and spiritualism of Theosophy with Schoenmaekers' belief that it was possible, by intense concentration, to come to a spiritual comprehension of the Universe through mathematics. That knowledge, the philosopher thought, would enable the believer to live in balance and harmony with the Universe and all within it, including Man, society and nature. And with oneself as well.

You might think, then, that Mondrian's work would be a diagrammatic, calculated sort of thing, but that is not how it was. Mondrian depended utterly on instinct in determining where he put a line, doubled it, moved a color block, widened or narrowed a space. Since each move changed everything else in the painting, he could go on and on until he had reached some form of resolution. Within a rectangle, to be filled only with straight lines, right angles, three pure colors and white and black, was a limitless space that could be changed without end, in a hunt for just the right combination. The way to find it was in the rhythm, balance and harmony that could be placed on the flat surface, just so.

Then, inevitably and always, he went on to another problem, searching for still another solution, going on as far as he could until the very end. Even when that came, at the age of 72, there were two startling works that predicted an entirely new direction in his art--*Broadway Boogie Woogie* (see end of article) and, on his easel, the unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie*. It had taken Mondrian all of his life to get to the point at which he could, in effect, throw out all



**Mondrian's *Blue Tree*, one of a series of tree pictures that chart his early evolution, was painted in 1908. In that year, Mondrian made a major shift toward the expressive use of color and emphatic use of line.**

Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



***Mill in Sunlight* (1908) drew barbs when exhibited; its sky, said one critic, had "holes as in a Swiss cheese."**

he had done before. With these paintings, he discarded the solid black lines that had for so long delineated his work, replacing them with blinking progressions made up of solid-color lozenges interspersed with white and gray blocks. And with *Victory Boogie Woogie*, he stood the square canvas on one of its corners to make a diamond, creating within it a work of pulsating vitality and dynamic harmony.

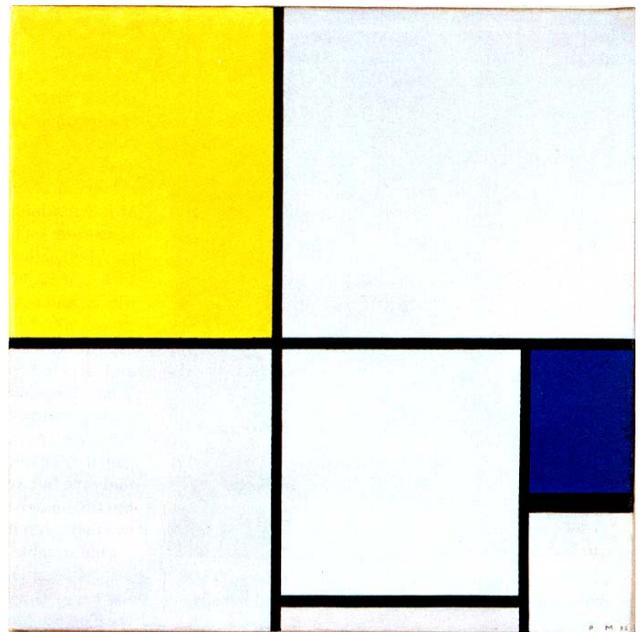
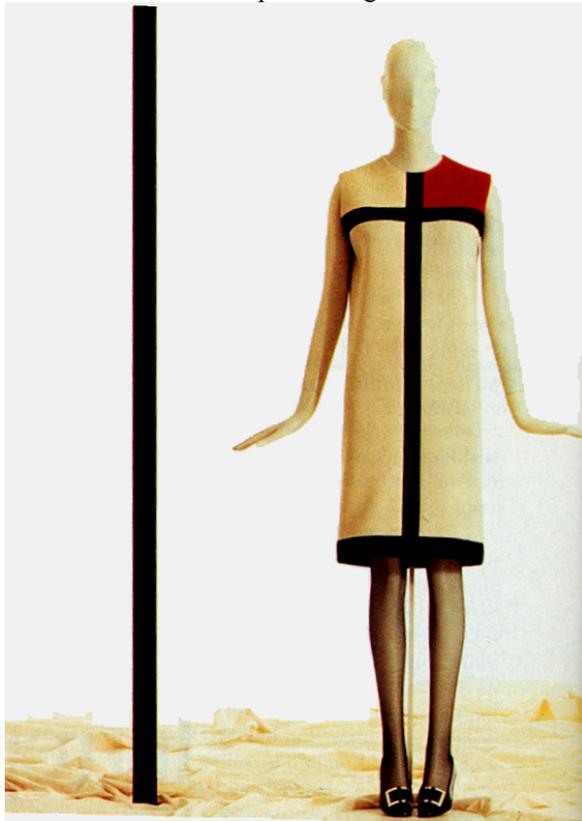
The exhibition shows clearly, phase by phase, how Mondrian got there, beginning with his paintings from 1907--lines of silhouetted trees, a skyscraper in pink and raspberry against a solid blue sky, a red blank-faced windmill in a dusty blue field. There are traces here of symbolism and Fauvism. A windmill in rust red, chrome yellow and pale blue seems to have come out of late Van Gogh in its writhing intensity (above). Mondrian's early landscapes are moodscapes; it never seems to have been his intention to record a scene so much as to order his sensations.

The advent of Cubism in France, which is to say Picasso and Braque, fell on Mondrian like a beam from heaven, and it was this more than anything else that drew him to Paris in 1912. There, he began to take apart the appearance of things. Perspective slipped away, eventually to be discarded forever. The colors grew muted--lavender, rose, the subtle shadings of gray and the smudgy earth tones that Picasso and Braque employed in their early Cubist masterpieces.

After two years in Paris, Mondrian went home to visit his ailing father; he remained there during World War I, continuing his explorations of abstraction. Piers extending into the ocean in that water-locked land became studies of the horizontal and vertical, which he saw as a framework for comprehending the Universe.



Mondrian's paintings had become abstract by 1913, as in *Tableau No.2*, which shows influence of Picasso.



In his 1965-66 collection, fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent paid homage to Mondrian's paintings. The dresses were inspired by earlier works such as *Composition with Yellow and Blue*, from 1932. With its vertical and horizontal black lines on a white field, and primary colors, it is in Mondrian's classic style.

Mondrian returned to Paris in 1919; he would remain there until World War II sent him to London and then New York, where he applied for American citizenship. It was during that second sojourn in Paris that Mondrian came into his own. By then, through his long and radical essays in *De Stijl*, a pathfinding magazine conceived by Theo van Doesburg, he had become well known in the art world. His paintings had been collected in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, England and the United States. His essays were published in the leading avant-garde journals of Europe. He had a pronounced effect on the Bauhaus group in Germany, the predominant architectural force of the century.

Yet, he was still very poor. In his large-minded way, Mondrian understood that paintings such as his were a hard sell. In time, he thought, people would catch on, catch up. Meanwhile, to pay the rent in the early 1920s, Mondrian painted flowers, investing them with a kind of delicate force that reminds one of the flowers of Van Gogh and the botanical studies of Durer. He considered these paintings as being another field entirely. "If buyers demand naturalistic art," he wrote, "then the artist can use his technical skills to produce it, but it remains *distinct* from his own true work. "

Of his true work the Baroness Hilla Rebay, who visited him along with the critic Felix Feneon and the painter Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in 1930, wrote: "He hardly paints. He constructs 2 or 4 squares, but he is a wonderful man, very cultivated and impressive. He lives like a monk, everything is white and empty, but for red, blue, and yellow painted squares, that are spread all over the room of his white studio and bedroom. He also has a small record player with Negro music. He is very poor, and already 58 years old. ..." Rebay, who later directed the forerunner of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, bought one of his paintings "(for myself, for nobody will like it...) I love it but it was mainly in order to keep the wolf from the door of a great, lovable man. ..."

Those who knew Mondrian well, however, had a different story to tell. He was a fervid dancer, a lover of jazz, and a strong fan of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Josephine Baker. He took with him, wherever he went, a little gramophone and his prized collection of jazz records. In New York he discovered boogie woogie, which he called "enormous, enormous." In jazz was one of the reasons Mondrian loved New York City when he eventually moved there; he had written a long essay in Dutch on its importance and its relevance to his art.

In Paris, Mondrian's favorite recreation was to go out in the evenings to cafes where he could dance without inhibition, fully absorbed in the music. An admirer of Fred Astaire, he saw Astaire's dancing as high art as well as delectable entertainment; Mikhail Baryshnikov, a half-century later, would agree. When Van Doesburg wrote him from Germany that he and his wife, Nellie, were learning the two-step, Mondrian, who had already mastered that little shuffle, answered that he himself was learning the shimmy. And when, in 1926, he heard that there was talk of banning the Charleston in the Netherlands because of the dance's "sensuality," an impassioned Mondrian responded, "If the ban on the Charleston is enforced it will be a reason for me never to return."

Meanwhile, Mondrian's two-room studio at 26, rue du Depart in Montparnasse had become famous. Lit by gas fixtures and heated by a coal-burning stove, it was so outstanding a space that modernist artists and thinkers made pilgrimages to it. A young Alexander Calder, brought to the studio by the architect Frederick Kiesler and already fascinated by the idea of art in motion, suggested that Mondrian rotate the colored rectangles on the white walls. To which Mondrian, in his dry and pungent way, responded that his paintings were "already very fast." Calder later wrote, "This one visit gave me a shock that started things." The things, of course, are his mobiles, which are landmarks of 20th-century art.

Last year, Mondrian's studio was reconstructed—even to the views from his windows—in the cavernous Beurs van Berlage, a concert and exhibition hall in Amsterdam. After climbing a scaffold 28 feet high, one could get a diagrammatic view of the space from above. Then, from ground level, a ramp led right into the studio itself, exactly the same size and with the identical furnishings of the original. It was a brilliant idea, since Mondrian had made his entire studio into a work of art by painting both rooms of the studio white, building simple, rectangular, black furniture and placing rectangles of pure primary color—blue, red and yellow—at balanced and meticulously positioned places on the walls. He moved into a painting of his own creation and worked right there, inside it.

Later, in New York, he would do the same thing. As before, his studios at 353 East 56th Street and then at 15 East 59th Street would become gathering places for artists, poets, composers and writers. "I think that the logical outgrowth of painting is the use of pure color and straight lines in rectangular opposition; and I feel that painting can become much more real, much less subjective, much more objective, when its possibilities are realized in architecture," he wrote. "I have studied the problem and practiced the approach with removable color and non-color planes in several of my studios in Europe, just as I have done here in New York."

An impassioned pacifist who wrote that the first rule of life was not to take it, Mondrian had sailed for England in 1938 as World War II approached. Once there, a group of artists including Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo, Henry Moore, Paul Nash and the writer Herbert Read made him welcome. The following year, American abstract artist Harry Holtzman, Mondrian's good friend and eventual executor, sent him money and paved the way for him to come to America. In September 1940, after a bomb exploded near enough to shatter the windows of his London studio, he left for New York. Mondrian fit right in; he later called his New York years the happiest of his life.

Soon after he arrived in New York, Holtzman writes, Mondrian had said, "'Tell me Harry, why don't I see prostitutes on the streets here? ...Don't misunderstand me,' he laughed; 'it has been some time since I've had such a need, but why is it?'" Holtzman asked Mondrian why he had never married. "'Well,' answered Mondrian, 'to tell you the truth, I never could afford it. ...Once I did live with a woman for a time, but when we differed and decided to separate, she took all the furniture.'" When Mondrian died, Holtzman reports, the Dutch press mentioned three women "who proudly claimed to have been his very intimate friends." He had been engaged to be married just before he left for Paris the second time but wrote to a friend, "I almost got married...but fortunately I realized just in time that all that beauty was merely an illusion."

One notable woman Mondrian befriended was heiress, collector and gallery owner, the colorful, freewheeling Peggy Guggenheim (*SMITHSONIAN*, July 1986). She recalled the Mondrian of his New York days in her autobiography *Out of This Century*. "One evening I went to Piet Mondrian's studio to see his new paintings and hear his boogie-woogie records," she wrote. "He kissed me and I was surprised to discover how young he still was at 72." Mondrian was a frequent visitor to Guggenheim's gallery to see the work of his modernist

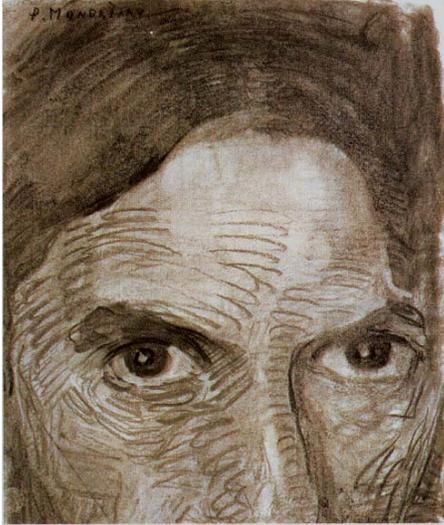
contemporaries and to bring in his own work, wrapped in white paper. Guggenheim remembered, "When I once asked him to clean one of his own paintings...he arrived with a little bag and cleaned not only his picture but also an Arp and a Ben Nicholson relief. "

One day Mondrian walked into the gallery and asked if Peggy Guggenheim could recommend some nightclubs where he could dance. "I was rather astonished, but when I danced with him I realized how he could still enjoy himself so much," she reminisced. "He was a very fine dancer with his military bearing and full of life and spirits although it was impossible to talk to him in any language...I somehow doubted that he even spoke his own native tongue."

Mondrian would surely have appreciated the humor of Guggenheim ' s remark, secure in the knowledge that his true language did not have to be spoken to be heard. His hope was to change the world with his painting; he was really that innocently ambitious. It is not to be held against him that he failed. What he did do that is so rare was to add a certain order of clear and radiant dynamic rhythm to it--a new way of seeing.

**Mondrian's last completed painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), with its staccato bands composed of small blocks, broke with his earlier solid-lined works. "I am not quite satisfied," he stated. "There is still much of the old in it."**

Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



**Mondrian's charcoal self-portrait dates from 1908-09, around the time he joined the Theosophical Society.**

