

Piet Mondrian

Born: Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan on 7 March 1872, in Amersfoort, Netherlands

Died: on 1 February 1944, in New York, USA.

The Netherlands (1872-1911) – slides 3-21

In 1872, Mondrian was born in Amersfoort in the Netherlands, the second of his parents' children.

In 1880, the family moved to Winterswijk in the east of the country when his father, Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan, was appointed Head Teacher at a local primary school.

Mondrian had a difficult childhood – his mother was often ill and his elder sister was left with the responsibility of looking after the home – his father was a fanatical Christian and often spent his spare time supporting the church, so was infrequently at home.

Mondrian was introduced to art from a very early age. His father was a qualified drawing teacher, and the young Mondrian often painted and drew with his uncle Fritz.

When he was 22, after a strict Protestant upbringing, Mondrian entered the **Academy for Fine Art in Amsterdam**. Most of his work from this period is **Naturalistic** or **Impressionistic**, consisting largely of **landscapes**.

These pastoral images depict windmills, fields, and rivers and are often painted in the **Dutch Impressionist manner** of the Hague School.

There are a number of paintings from this period on display in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. One of these, “1908-10: Evening - Red Tree” depicts a tree in a field at dusk, in which Mondrian uses a palette consisting almost entirely of **red, yellow, and blue**. This painting points towards Mondrian’s future development and is the earliest of his painting to emphasise primary colours.

Other influences – slides 3-21

In his search for a personal style, Mondrian experimented with a **variety of styles and techniques**.

Abstraction

The earliest paintings that show a degree of abstraction are from 1905 to 1908 and they depict dim scenes of indistinct trees and houses reflected in still water. Whilst the result leads the viewer to focus on **the forms over the content**, these paintings are still firmly rooted in nature.

Cubism

Mondrian and his later work were also deeply influenced by the 1911 Moderne Kunstkring exhibition of Cubism in Amsterdam. His search for simplification is shown in two versions of Still Life with Ginger Pot. The 1911 version is Cubist and in the 1912 version, the objects are reduced to a round shape with triangles and rectangles.

Theosophical Movement

In 1908, Mondrian became interested in the **Theosophical Movement** launched by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in the late 19th century and in 1909, he joined the Dutch branch of the Theosophical Society.

The work of Blavatsky and a parallel spiritual movement, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, **significantly affected the further development of his aesthetic**.

Blavatsky believed that it was possible to attain a more profound knowledge of nature than that provided by empirical means, and much of Mondrian's work for the rest of his life was inspired by **his search for that spiritual knowledge**.

- In 1918, he wrote "I got everything from the Secret Doctrine" - a book written by Blavatsky.
- In 1921, in a letter to Steiner, Mondrian argued that his Neoplasticism was "the art of the foreseeable future for all true Anthroposophists and Theosophists."

He remained a committed Theosophist in subsequent years, although he also believed that his own artistic style, **Neoplasticism**, would eventually become part of a larger, ecumenical spirituality.

Paris (1911-1914) – slides 23-27

In 1911, Mondrian moved to Paris and changed his name to Mondrian (dropping an 'a' from Mondriaan), to emphasise his departure from the Netherlands and his integration within the Parisian avant-garde.

While in Paris, the **influence of the Cubist style of Picasso and Georges Braque appeared almost immediately** in Mondrian's work. Paintings such as “1912: The Sea” and his various studies of trees from that year still **contain a measure of representation**, but, increasingly, **they are dominated by geometric shapes and interlocking planes**.

While Mondrian was eager to absorb the Cubist influence into his work, it seems clear that he saw Cubism as a "port of call" on his artistic journey, rather than as a destination. However, unlike the Cubists, Mondrian still attempted to reconcile his painting with his spiritual pursuits, and in 1913 he began to fuse his art and his Theosophical studies into a theory that signalled his final break from representational painting.

The Netherlands (1914-1919) – slides 29-42

While Mondrian was at home in 1914 visiting his sick father, World War I began which forced him to remain in The Netherlands for the duration of the conflict.

During this time, Mondrian socialised widely within the artistic circles of Amsterdam and acquired a patron, the art historian Henricus Petrus Bremmer, who paid him an annuity in order to secure his best paintings for his collection. His output varied between the conventional pastoral paintings (for commercial reasons!) and those where he was still seeking his own personal style.

In 1916, Mondrian produced an abstract painting: “1916: Composition”. His small drawings show that the linear grid, with its reddish, yellowish-brown and blue patches evolve from the facade of the stone tower in his “1911: Church Tower at Domberg”, rising up against the blue sky.

Later that year, he attempted to make the **process of evolution of form** the subject of abstract paintings. **The search for meaning and form was now transferred in the imagination to society as a whole**. The underlying idea was that his paintings were never to appear as completed works. In order to create this illusion, it was

necessary to leave scope for the imagination within the same picture. In 1917, he created white pictures in which there is nothing to be seen apart from some free-floating coloured squares and black lines on a white background as in “**1917: Composition in colour B**”. Another example of this technique can be seen in “**1917: Composition no 3 with colour planes**”, where the black lines have been omitted and pastel coloured rectangles seemingly drift about in gentle rhythm against the white background.

Formation of De Stijl & other De Stijl artists (1916 →) – slides 44-56

Whilst in Paris before the First World War, Mondrian had sometimes recorded his thoughts on art theory in his sketch book; now he began to harbour greater literary ambitions.

During his time back in the Netherlands, he met **Bart van der Leck** and **Theo van Doesburg**, who were both undergoing their own personal journeys toward abstraction.

- **Van der Leck's** use of only primary colours in his art greatly influenced Mondrian. After a meeting with **Van der Leck** in 1916, Mondrian wrote, “**My technique, which was more or less Cubist and therefore more or less pictorial, came under the influence of his precise method.**”
- With **Van Doesburg**, Mondrian founded **De Stijl (The Style)**, a journal of the De Stijl Group, in which he first published his essays defining his theory, which he called **Neoplasticism**. This was his first major attempt to express his artistic theory in writing.

Mondrian's best and most-often quoted expression of this theory, however, comes from a letter he wrote in 1914:

- I construct lines and colour combinations on a flat surface, in order to express general beauty with the utmost awareness;
- Nature (or, that which I see) inspires me & puts me, as with any painter, in an emotional state so that an urge comes about to make something, but I want to come as close as possible to the truth and abstract everything from that, until I reach the foundation (still just an external foundation!) of things.

- I believe it is possible that, through horizontal and vertical lines, constructed with awareness but not with calculation, led by high intuition, and brought to harmony and rhythm, these basic forms of beauty, supplemented if necessary by other direct lines or curves, can become a work of art, as strong as it is true.

Paris (1919-1938) – slides 58-69

When the war ended in 1918, Mondrian returned to France, where he would remain until 1938. He even found his old studio, with everything still covered by dust sheets! He became immersed in the artistic innovation that was post-war Paris, and flourished in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom that enabled him to embrace the art of pure abstraction.

During late 1919 and in 1920, Mondrian began producing **grid-based paintings** and the style for which he came to be renowned began to appear. In the early paintings of this style, **the lines** delineating the rectangular forms are relatively thin, and they are **grey**, not black. The **lines also tend to fade as they approach the edge** of the painting, rather than stopping abruptly. **The forms themselves**, smaller and more numerous than in later paintings, **are filled with primary colours**, black, or grey, and **nearly all of them are coloured**; only a few are left white.

During late 1920 and 1921, Mondrian's paintings arrive at what is to casual observers their definitive and mature form. **Thick black lines now separate the forms, which are larger and fewer in number, and more of the forms are left white.** This was not the culmination of his artistic evolution, however. Although the refinements became subtler, Mondrian's work continued to evolve during his years in Paris.

In 1921, the black lines in many of his paintings stop short at a seemingly arbitrary distance from the edge of the canvas, although the divisions between the rectangular forms remain intact. Here, too, the rectangular forms remain mostly coloured. As the years passed and Mondrian's work evolved further, he began extending all of the lines to the edges of the canvas, and he began to use fewer and fewer coloured forms, favouring white instead.

These tendencies are particularly obvious in the "lozenge" works. The "lozenge" paintings are square canvases tilted 45 degrees, so that they have a diamond shape.

Typical of these is "1926: Schilderij No. 1: Lozenge with Two Lines and Blue".

One of the most minimal of Mondrian's canvases, this painting consists only of two

black, perpendicular lines and a small blue triangular form. The lines extend all the way to the edges of the canvas, almost giving the impression that the painting is a fragment of a larger work. **This painting may be the most extreme extent of Mondrian's minimalism.**

As the years progressed, lines began to take precedence over forms in his painting. In the 1930s, he began to use **thinner lines** and **double lines** more frequently, punctuated **with a few small coloured forms**, if any at all. Double lines particularly excited Mondrian, for he believed they offered his paintings a new dynamism which he was eager to explore.

London and New York (1938-1944) – slides 71-75

In September 1938, Mondrian left Paris in the face of advancing fascism and moved to London. After the Netherlands was invaded and Paris fell in 1940, he left London for Manhattan, where he would remain until his death.

Some of Mondrian's later works are difficult to place in terms of his artistic development because there were quite a few canvases that he began in Paris or London and only completed months or years later in Manhattan. The finished works from this later period are visually busy, with more lines than any of his work since the 1920s, placed in an overlapping arrangement that is almost cartographical in appearance. It should also be noted that Mondrian was **a fan of jazz music** and this, undoubtedly, had a deep influence on his paintings of this period.

In some examples of this new direction, such as “1938: Composition / 1943: Place de la Concorde”, **he appears to have taken unfinished black-line paintings** from Paris and completed them in New York by **adding short perpendicular lines of different colours**, running between the longer black lines, or from a black line to the edge of the canvas. **The newly coloured areas are thick, almost bridging the gap between lines and forms**, and it is startling to see colour in a Mondrian painting that is unbounded by black. Other works mix long lines of red amidst the familiar black lines, creating a new sense of depth by the addition of a coloured layer on top of the black one.

His painting “1939 - 42: Composition No. 10”, characterised by primary colours, white ground and black grid lines clearly defined Mondrian's radical but classical approach to the rectangle.

“1942: New York City” is a complex lattice of red, blue, and yellow lines, occasionally interlacing to create a greater sense of depth than his previous works. An unfinished 1941 version of this work uses strips of painted paper tape, which the artist could rearrange at will to experiment with different designs.

His painting “1942 - 44: Broadway Boogie-Woogie” was highly influential in the school of abstract geometric painting. The piece is made up of a number of shimmering squares of bright colour that leap from the canvas, and then appear to shimmer, drawing the viewer into those neon lights.

In this painting and the unfinished “1942 – 44: Victory Boogie Woogie”, Mondrian replaced former solid lines with lines created from small adjoining rectangles of colour, created in part by using small pieces of paper tape in various colours. Larger unbounded rectangles of colour punctuate the design, some with smaller concentric rectangles inside them.

In these final works, the forms have indeed usurped the role of the lines, opening another new door for Mondrian's development as an abstractionist. The Boogie-Woogie paintings were clearly more of a revolutionary change than an evolutionary one, representing the most profound development in Mondrian's work since his abandonment of representational art in 1913.

After Mondrian's death in 1944 – slides 77-80

Piet Mondrian died of pneumonia on 1 February 1944 and was interred at the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

On 3 February 1944 a memorial was attended by nearly 200 people including Alexander Archipenko, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, Alexander Calder and Robert Motherwell.