**Mondrian, Piet [Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan] (1872 - 1944)**

The Dutch artist Piet Mondrian was one of the pioneers of abstract art who produced some of the most radical painting of the 20th century. An early influence was Cubism which led him to adopt a semi-abstract linear style as in his paintings of trees and buildings made in Paris and Holland over 1912-14. During the inter-war years, Mondrian developed an esoteric theory of art and an austere style of geometric abstraction he called Neo-Plasticism. In this work, for which he is best known, Mondrian abandoned all reference to nature and aimed to express a higher reality beyond the world of appearances. He reduced his painting to basic elements and their interplay: black horizontal and vertical lines, planes of primary colours, grey and white as in *Composition C (III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* from 1935. His final paintings made in America in the early 1940s are characterized by vibrant grids animated by small coloured squares reflecting an interest in the syncopated rhythms of popular music and urban life. Mondrian was also a consummate draughtsman, prolific writer and member of the influential De Stijl (‘The Style’) group that sought to reform the arts and society.

Piet Mondrian was born in Amersfoort, the Netherlands, in 1872 into a middle-class Calvinist family. In 1892, he entered Amsterdam’s Rijksacademie to study art. His early work of 1895-1910 was predominately landscapes influenced successively by 19th century naturalism, Impressionism, Symbolism and Neo-Impressionism. He also experimented with Pointillist-type optical effects and the vivid colouring of Fauvism as in the 1908 painting *Windmill in Sunlight*. He had his first retrospective in a 1909 group show at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum. In 1911, Mondrian had an epiphanic encounter with Cubism which led him to adopt its faceting, shallow pictorial space and muted colouring, but not its multiple perspectives, preferring a single viewpoint. Mondrian’s work became increasing non-naturalistic and rarefied. For instance, the 1915 painting *Composition 10 in Black and White: Pier and Ocean*, in which the landscape is reduced to an overall pattern of cruciform fragments.

Mondrian had a keen interest in philosophy and religion. A major influence on his art was Theosophy, a popular mystical creed that advocated spiritual evolution and the idea of a latent universal order something Mondrian wanted to evoke through the harmonious yet dynamic arrangement of line and colour. In 1917, Mondrian with the Dutch artist and critic Theo van Doesburg founded the journal *De Stijl* as a platform for their ideas and an idealistic avant-garde group of the same name. De Stijl extended its principle of abstraction beyond art to architecture and design in order to unify them, engender social harmony and cultural renewal in the wake of the First World War. During 1919-38 Mondrian lived mostly in Paris developing his Neo-Plasticism abstraction, evangelical-style writing and exhibiting across Europe affirming his position as a key player in the international avant-garde. Mondrian worked intuitively and meticulously, often spending months on a single canvas. In 1931, he joined the Paris-based Abstraction-Création group, making friends with the British modernist Ben Nicholson. In 1936, Mondrian was part of the group show *Cubism and Abstract Art* at MOMA in New York. He spent 1938-40 in London supported by Nicholson. To escape the war in Europe, Mondrian moved to New York in 1940, where he had a profound effect on American artists especially the Abstract Expressionists. While in New York, Mondrian made a number of technical innovations like the use of coloured adhesive tape which allowed him to produce work of increasing complexity and vitality as in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* of 1942-43, the last painting he completed before his death in 1944.

References and further reading

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Image suggestions:

Title and date: *Composition 10 in Black and White: Pier and Ocean*, 1915.

Media and dimensions: Oil on canvas, 85 x 108 cm

Location: Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterloo, Netherlands

Copyright holder: Kröller-Müller Museum/Holtzman Trust c/o Warrenton VA.

Title and date: *Composition C (III) with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1935.

Media and dimensions: Oil on canvas, 56 x 55 cm

Location: Tate Gallery, London.

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