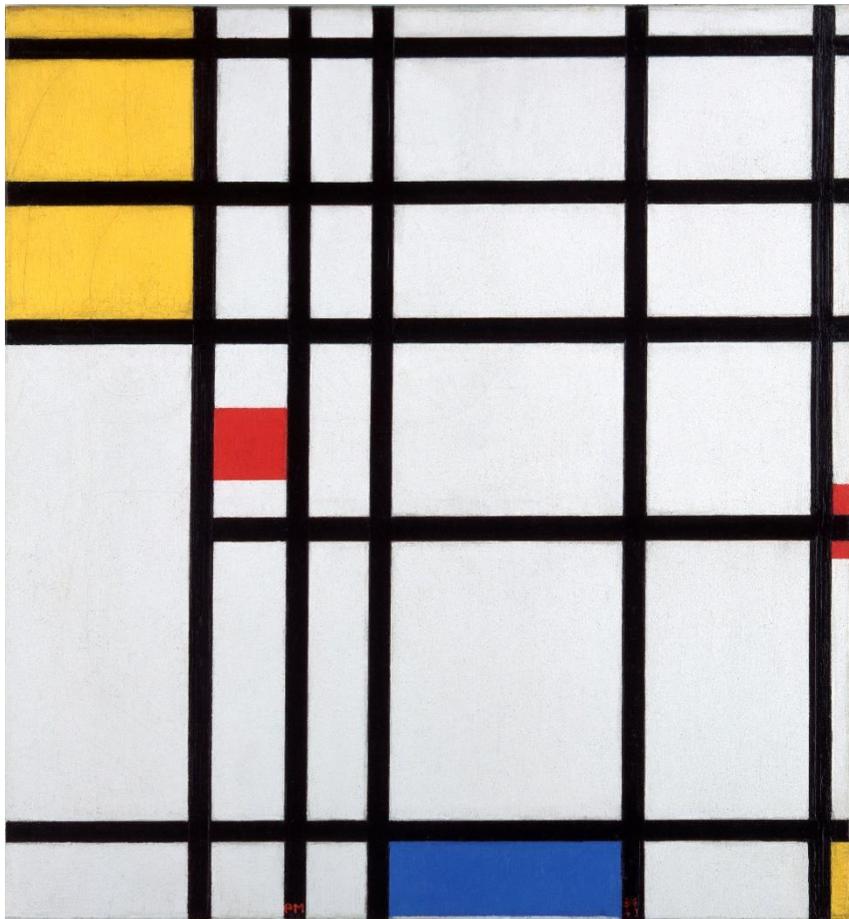


## Mondrian and De Stijl



### **Piet Mondrian**

*Picture II 1936–43, with Yellow, Red, and Blue*, 1936–1943

Oil on canvas

60 x 55 cm

Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

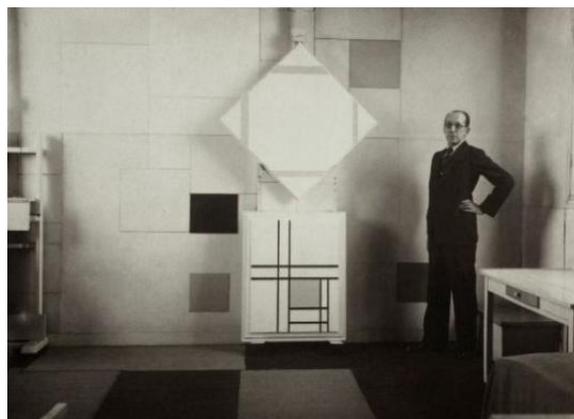
Purchase 1967 (The Museum  
of Our Wishes)

© 2020 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

<b>DATES:</b>	November 11, 2020 - March 1, 2021
<b>LOCATION:</b>	Sabatini Building. First floor.
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b>	Museo Reina Sofía and Stichting Kunstmuseum den Haag
<b>CURATORSHIP:</b>	Hans Janssen
<b>COORDINATION:</b>	Belén Diaz de Rábago and Beatriz Jordana

*Mondrian and De Stijl* is an exhibition organized by the **Museo Reina Sofía** and the **Stichting Kunstmuseum den Haag** with the collaboration of **Comunidad de Madrid**, that addresses the work of **Piet Mondrian** (1872, Amersfoort – 1944, Nueva York) in the context of **De Stijl**, a Dutch artistic movement that shaped the future of geometrical abstract art and originated a profound change in visual culture after World War I.

Mondrian's concept of beauty based on the surface, on the structure and composition of color and lines, shaped a novel and innovative style that aimed at breaking down the frontiers between disciplines and surpassing the traditional limits of pictorial space. *De Stijl*, the magazine of the same name founded by the painter and critic Theo van Doesburg, was the platform for spreading the ideas of this new art and overcoming traditional Dutch provincialism. The first issue appeared in 1917, and the publication continued to offer information until 1931 on the international development of abstract art. Piet Mondrian, who was born fifteen years before the rest of the members of *De Stijl*, was the patriarch of the movement.



CHARLES KARSTEN  
Piet Mondrian en su estudio, 26 Rue du Départ, Paris, 1933  
[Piet Mondrian in his studio, 26 Rue du Départ, Paris, 1933]  
Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Róterdam / KARS, e3.238-2

The artists of *De Stijl* sought a world where collaboration between all disciplines would make it possible to abolish hierarchies among the arts. These would thus be freed to merge together and give rise to something new, a reality better adapted to the world of modernity that was just starting to be glimpsed. Artists around the world adopted this multidisciplinary approach and worked intensely on it together. Participants in the project communicated through the magazine and by letter.

### The modernist artist by definition

The exhibition, which forms part of the commemoration of the **30th anniversary of the Museo Reina Sofía**, takes this perspective to review the career and enormous influence of Mondrian, regarded together with Picasso as the great reference point of modernism. The curator of the exhibition, Hans Janssen, corroborates this in the exhibition catalogue, pointing out that “there are strong reasons for affirming that Piet Mondrian, a hero of the visual arts, is the modernist artist by definition.”

The artists associated with Mondrian and *De Stijl* operated in a world where other artistic developments were under way. Each of the nine galleries in the exhibition therefore counterpoises the philosophy of this movement with other attempts of the period to create an art that could rightly be called contemporary. Visitors to the exhibition will be able to see **95 works, 35 by Mondrian** and **60 by artists of De Stijl**, such as **Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, Georges Vantongerloo** or **Vilmos Huszár**, among many others, as well as historical documentation (*De Stijl*'s magazines, letters, photographs, catalogues, etc.).



PIET MONDRIAN  
*Still Life with Oranges*, 1900  
Oil on canvas  
46 x 30 cm  
Myron Kunin Collection, Minneapolis  
© 2020 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

### Mondrian's beginnings

The exhibition begins its itinerary with a room dedicated to Mondrian's first steps as an artist. He began his career in 1892 as a painter of Dutch still lifes and landscapes, a classic genre that allowed him to spend nearly twenty years acquiring extraordinary skill as a painter.

Early works like *Still Life with Oranges* (1900) or *Evening at Weesperzijde* (1901-1902), which can be seen here, are pieces in a naturalist and symbolist vein which show Mondrian gradually incorporating influences as a painter from emerging artistic trends like Pointillism, Fauvism and Cubism.

To explain the environment in which Mondrian worked and the influences he received before the development of De Stijl, the second gallery also looks at the strong sensibility in the Netherlands at that time for the social function of art, especially architecture.

Indeed, the innovative impetus of De Stijl emerged in 1916 largely from this particular devotion to architectural space and collective projects, such as the one undertaken from 1896 to 1903 by the architect **Hendrik Petrus Berlage** for the new stock exchange building in Amsterdam, in which he managed to involve painters, sculptors, poets and writers. Here, visitors can thus see examples of different designs drawn up in the early 20th century by Berlage himself and other artists like **Karel Petrus Cornelis Bazel** and Johannes **Jacobus van Nieukerken** for interiors, buildings or urban layouts in cities like The Hague, Leipzig and Amsterdam.

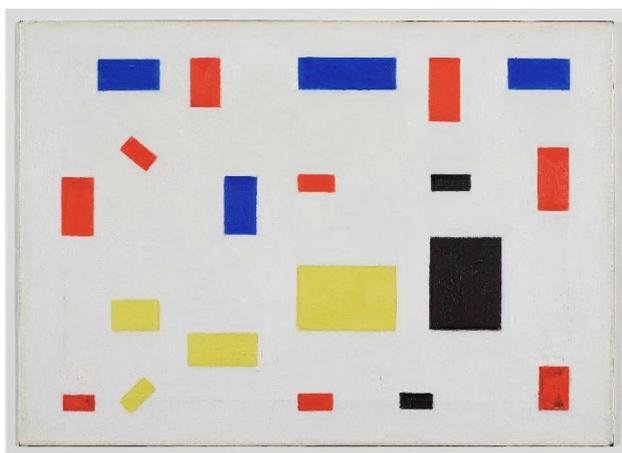
The next gallery returns to Mondrian's work, with pieces like *Summer Night* (1906-07) and *Large Landscape* (1907-08). These calm, sophisticated and highly expressive scenes suggest that here was an artist who believed in progress, in a world that could be improved by art. Mondrian had the opportunity to exhibit these works in a retrospective at the prestigious Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1909.



PIET MONDRIAN  
*Large Landscape*, 1907-1908  
Oil on canvas  
75 x 120 cm  
Kunstmuseum Den Haag  
© 2020 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

To conclude this section dedicated to Mondrian's different phases prior to his connection with De Stijl, the exhibition explores the Dutch artist's quest for "universal beauty", which motivated him to go to Paris in 1911. *Composition No. II* (1913), displayed in the fourth gallery of the exhibition, is one of the first paintings that satisfied him in this respect.

Mondrian wrote in this sense that “in visual arts, reality can only be expressed through the balance of the dynamic movement of form and color, and the pure media (cleansed of functionalities of representation) offer the most effective means of achieving it.” According to the curator of the exhibition, **Hans Janssen**, “a new visual language was then born, which four years later was christened Neo-Plasticism, the art of De Stijl.”



BART VAN DER LECK  
*Composition 1917, No. 2, (Dog Cart)*, 1917  
Oil on canvas  
45 x 63 cm  
On long-term loan to the Kunstmuseum Den Haag

### Revolutionary proposals

During World War I, Mondrian found himself part of multiple attempts to develop a formal language that was both simple and structured, and which conjured forth the illusory space of the artwork, making it accessible to all.

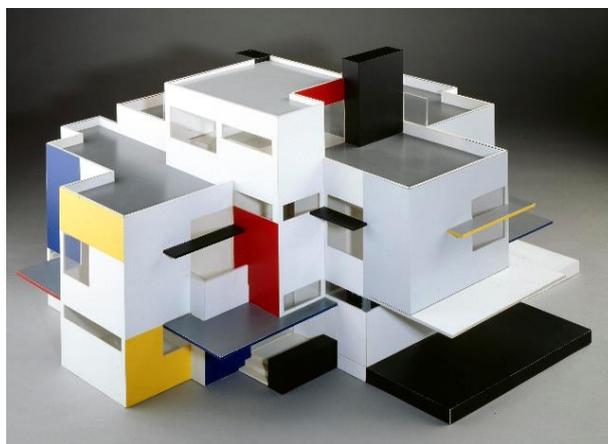
As can be seen in the next three rooms of the exhibition, now fully centered on the movement of De Stijl, other artists of the time like **Gerrit Rietveld**, **Vilmos Huszár** and **Georges Vantongerloo** were of the same mind as Mondrian, seeking a new, completely abstract art that appealed directly to the emotions.

It was then that **Theo van Doesburg** managed to bring these forces together in the magazine *De Stijl*, which first appeared in 1917. The beginnings of the movement show the enormous diversity of experimental interests among the artists of the group, as the viewer can see in **Bart van der Leek's** *Composition 1917, no. 2 (Dog Cart)* (1917).

For all of them, forms of expression served only one purpose: to express modernity. An architectural model like the ones by Theo van Doesburg and **Cornelis van Eesteren** shown in this part of the exhibition, or even a chair, could thus become a sculpture.

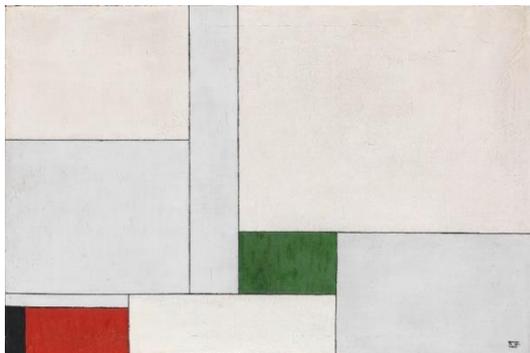
This experimental drive and the diversity of a collective enterprise carried out like a virtual debating chamber would prove to be both the great strength and also, as would shortly become apparent, and as the exhibition reflects, the key weakness of the movement.

In the 1920s, indeed, what initially appeared to be a utopian movement that spoke with one voice in its joint mission to develop a truly abstract art actually turned out to be a melting pot of conflicting views and opinions about art. What remained was the image of an ‘international style’ whose defining features were abstraction, the drastic reduction of the visual means and geometry, but the roads parted all the same.



THEO VAN DOESBURG Y CORNELIS VAN EESTEREN  
*Model for a private house*, 1923  
Reconstruction: Tjarda Mees, 1962  
Wood, silk screen, Perspex, and Plexiglas  
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

With the collaboration of:



GEORGES VANTONGERLOO  
*Composition Derived from the Equilateral Hyperbole  $xy = k$   
with Green and Red Harmony*, 1929  
Oil on canvas  
51.1 x 75.2 cm  
Private Collection, The Netherlands

In 1927, for example, Van Doesburg launched his own new style, 'elementarism'. In works like Georges Vantongerloo's *Composition derived from the equilateral hyperbole  $xy=k$  with green and red harmony* (1929), visitors to this part of the exhibition can see how unlike Mondrian, who painted completely intuitively, this other artist belonging to De Stijl was more systematic in his approach, basing this picture on a mathematical formula.

After these vicissitudes, De Stijl went into decline in the mid-1930s. Only Mondrian continued to enjoy international prominence. The other artists had barely

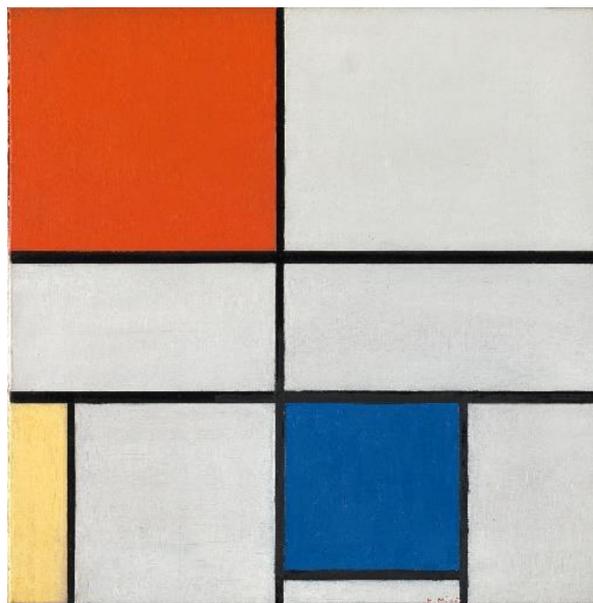
any recognition, partly because the optimistic notion of a new world had dwindled in the second half of the 1920s, and partly because figurative tendencies had once more come to the fore.

### An eternally new art

The exhibition closes with two galleries devoted to Mondrian's last periods. Although he thought in 1922 that his abstract experiment was over, he continued to work with his limited repertoire of visual resources – horizontal and vertical lines defining areas of white, red, yellow or blue – to discover to his great surprise that an unlimited range of hidden compositional possibilities were possible.

His great skill consisted precisely of making use of these limited resources. In the late 1920s, he was increasingly fascinated by linking forms, but in the 1930s the more classic balance in his compositions made way for a dynamic balance, as can be seen in *Composition C (no. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1935).

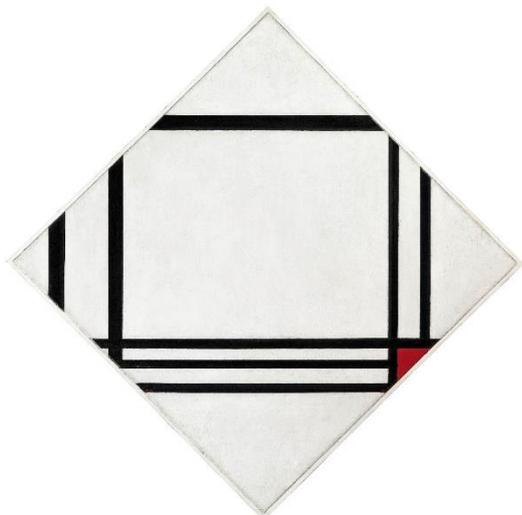
Mondrian finally emigrated to the United States in 1940. He took with him seventeen paintings that he had produced during his stay in Paris in the previous years, where dense grids of horizontal and vertical lines are superimposed, as the viewer can appreciate in *Picture II* (1936-43). Mondrian started to change these paintings and his visual language once more, introducing blocks of colored paint that move freely to complicate the rhythmic structure of his art, something he pursued until the end of his life.



PIET MONDRIAN  
*Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1935  
Oil on canvas  
56 x 55.2 cm  
Tate. Lent from a private collection, 1981  
© 2020 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

## A career of continuous experimentation

Piet Mondrian was born Pieter Cornelis Mondrian on 7 March 1872 in Amersfoort (Netherlands). In May 1892, he took part in the annual exhibition of the Genootschap Kunstliefde, an artistic society in Utrecht. That same year, he started to study at the School of Fine Arts (Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten) in Amsterdam, where he began to experiment on the basis of the Dutch landscape painting tradition and symbolism, and to practice as a teacher.



PIET MONDRIAN  
*Lozenge Composition with Eight Lines and Red (Picture No. III)*, 1938  
Oil on canvas  
100.5 x 100.5 cm  
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler Collection  
© 2020 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

In 1907, his discovery of the work of the Post-Impressionist painters completely changed his prior notions of color, whose treatment he approached much more boldly from then on. In January 1909, Mondrian had the opportunity to exhibit at the prestigious Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam along with Jan Sluijters and Cornelis Spoor, and that same year he joined the Theosophical Society. In 1909 and 1910 he experimented with Pointillist techniques before fully embracing Cubism in 1911. After the impact made on him by seeing an exhibition with works by Braque and Picasso at the Moderne Kunstkring of the Stedelijk Museum, he decided to move to Paris. Once settled in the French capital, his work initially respected Cubist precepts, but after 1913 advanced clearly towards abstraction.

Mondrian was visiting the Netherlands when the First World War broke out in 1914, preventing him from returning to Paris. During that period in Holland, he further restricted the use of colors and geometrical forms in his work. There he met Theo van Doesburg, and with him and two other artists (Van der Leek and Huszar) founded the magazine and movement De Stijl in 1917, proposing a complete rejection of surrounding reality as a referent for the artwork and the reduction of pictorial language to its basic elements. Mondrian was to call this Neo-Plasticism. The precepts of De Stijl also extended the principles of abstraction of painting and sculpture to architecture and graphic and industrial design.

In July 1919, he moved back to Paris, where he exhibited with De Stijl in 1923. Some artistic disagreements with Van Doesburg led him to leave the group in 1925, and he subsequently exhibited with the Cercle et Carré movement (with artists like Joaquín Torres-García and Fernand Léger) in 1930, and joined the association of abstract artists Abstraction-Création in 1931.

The imminence of the Second World War obliged Mondrian to flee from Paris to London in 1938, and after a brief but productive two-year stay in the English capital, he moved to New York in 1940. There he joined the American Abstract Artists association and continued to publish texts on Neo-Plasticism. His work in this final phase was greatly influenced by the dynamism of urban life and the rhythms of American music. In 1942 he had his first solo exhibition at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery in New York. Mondrian died in that city on 1 February 1944.

**30**  
YEARS

MUSEO NACIONAL  
CENTRO DE ARTE  
REINA SOFIA

KUNSTMUSEUM  
DEN HAAG

## Catalogue

The exhibition Mondrian and De Stijl is accompanied by a catalogue in Spanish and English that contains an analysis of the figure of the Dutch artist written by the director of the Reina Sofía Museum, **Manuel Borja-Villel**, as well as various texts by **Michael White**, **Marek Wieczorek** and curator **Hans Janssen** who seek to shed new light on the strategies developed by Mondrian to present his own works. The catalog also includes images and a list of works.

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