

# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

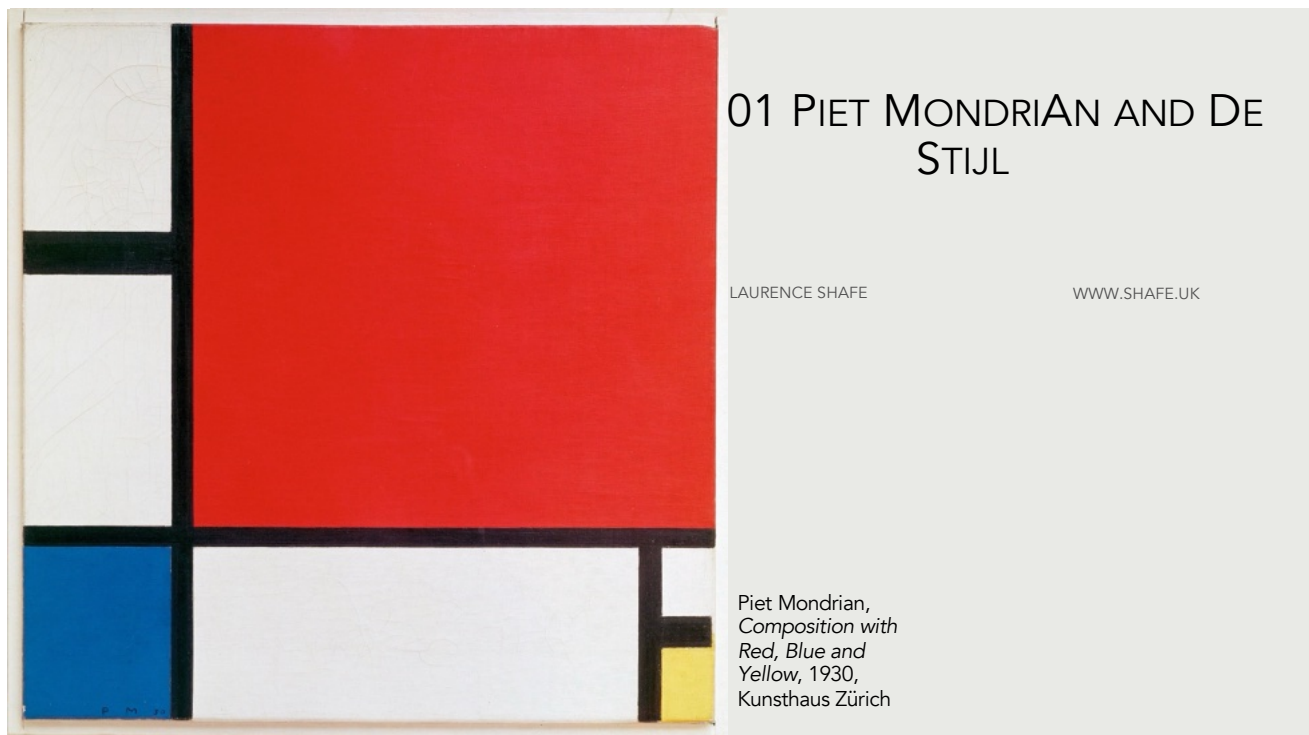
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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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- This is Section 48 on **Piet Mondrian** and **De Stijl** (pronounced “du steye-uhl” or “style”). He was a **Dutch painter** who became the leading figure of **De Stijl** or **The Style**, an influential art movement **founded in 1917** that sought to express a new utopian ideal of **spiritual harmony** and order. He developed a signature style known as **Neo-Plasticism**, which restricted visual elements to the purest forms: **straight lines, right angles, and a palette of primary colours plus black and white**.

### NOTES ON PIET MONDRIAN

1. He was classically trained and started out painting conventional Dutch landscapes
2. He was not commercially successful until the end of his life.
3. He started to experiment with abstraction in Paris
4. He was a pioneer of the De Stijl movement
5. He loved music and dance, particularly jazz.
6. He developed his own form of abstraction called Neo-Plasticism.
7. He was targeted by the Nazi regime for his “degenerate art”.
8. He spent his later years in new York.
9. Today, everyone recognises a Mondrian painting and six of his paintings have sold for over \$20 million since 2004. The highest price is \$51 million in 2022 for *Composition No. II*.

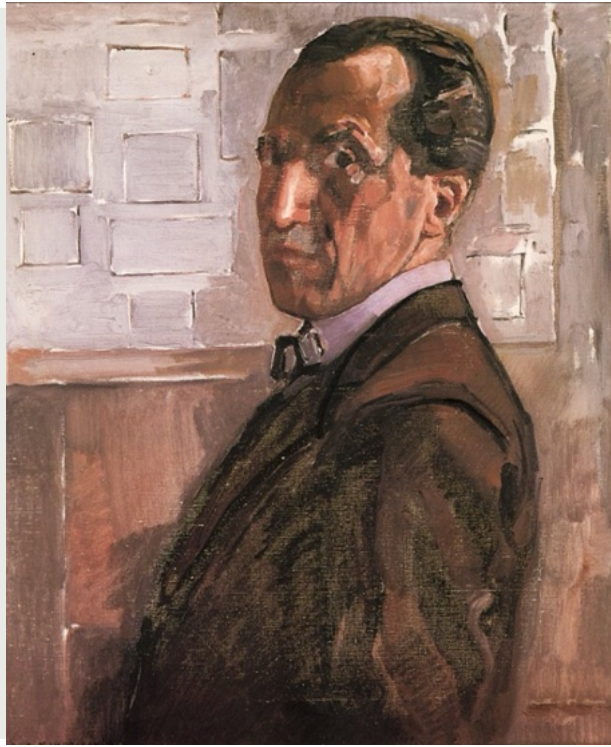
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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Self-Portrait*, 1918, 88 x 77, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Self-Portrait*, 1918, 88 x 77, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- This is the **only known self-portrait** Mondrian painted as a mature artist. He stares directly out, severe and unsmiling. Dark suit, pale face, penetrating gaze. He was **forty-six** when he painted this, already committed to abstraction but here representing himself with **complete realism**.
- Born **Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan in Amersfoort**, he trained as a teacher before attending Amsterdam's Rijksakademie. His father and uncle were both drawing teachers, pushing him toward respectability. But by his mid-thirties he was questioning everything Dutch tradition taught.
- **De Stijl** (pronounced "du stay-ul") emerged in 1917 during the First World War. **Theo van Doesburg founded the movement** and magazine with Mondrian, **architect J.J.P. Oud**, and others. They sought universal harmony through reduction: primary colours, straight lines, right angles only. The name means "The Style" in Dutch.
- This portrait reveals **the man behind the abstraction**. He looks **austere, almost monastic**. That matched his lifestyle—he **lived simply**, owned little, **devoted everything to painting**. But there's intensity in those eyes. He wasn't retreating from life. He was searching for something deeper.
- Friends described him as **contradictory. Ascetic yet passionate. Silent for hours then talking unstopably about theosophy and cosmic order**. He joined the **Theosophical Society in 1909**. **Helena Blavatsky's** writings on spiritual evolution obsessed him throughout his life.

- By 1918 he'd already begun developing **Neoplasticism**—his term for **pure abstraction** using only primary colours and black lines. Yet here he paints himself traditionally. That paradox defined him: mystic and realist, visionary and craftsman.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Rijksakademie: RIKES-ah-kah-deh-mee

Neoplasticism: nee-oh-PLAS-tih-sism

Mondriaan: mon-dree-AHN

Blavatsky: blah-VAT-skee

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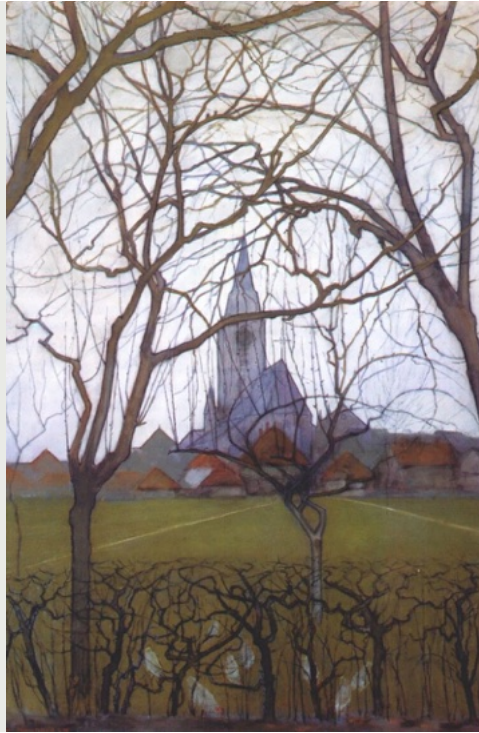
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Piet Mondrian (1872–1944),  
*Village Church*, 1898

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Farm near Duivendrecht*, 1898

- This painting captures **Mondrian's interest in landscape**. His father was a headmaster of a primary school and a qualified drawing teacher who introduced him to art at an early age. He went to the Academy of Fine Art in Amsterdam in 1892 and qualified as a teacher. He painted naturalistically and experimented with a variety of styles and techniques.
- The church is still recognisable—buildings, fields, horizon line visible.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Duivendrecht: DOW-ven-drekht

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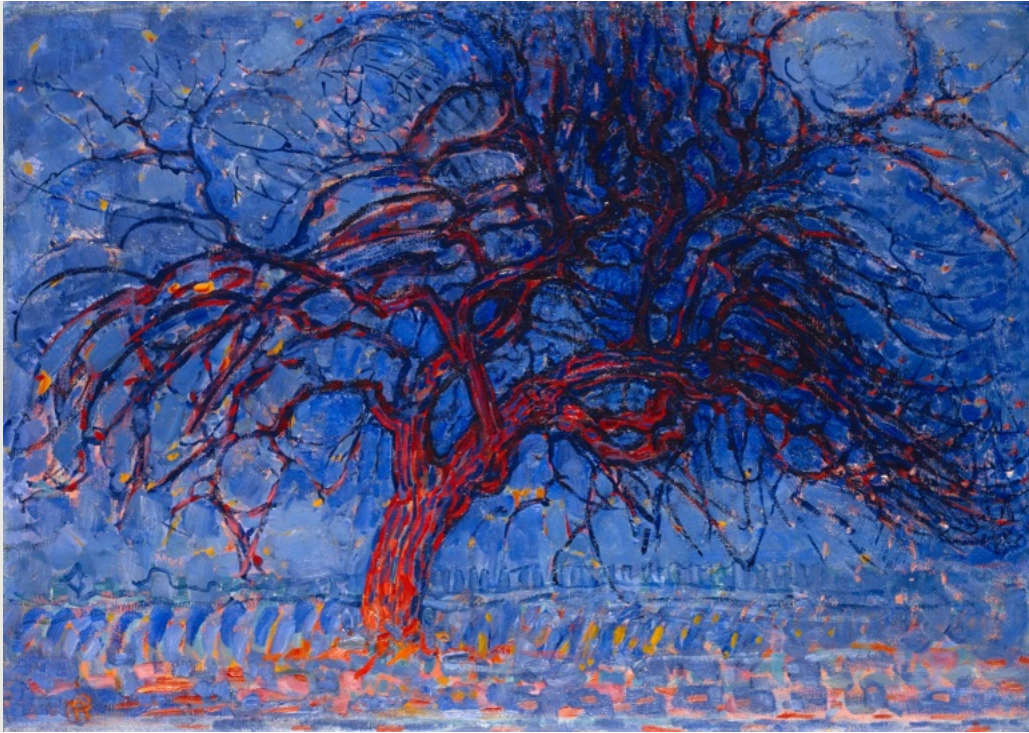




Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Willow Grove: Impression of Light and Shadow*, c. 1905, 35 × 45 cm, Dallas Museum of Art

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Willow Grove: Impression of Light and Shadow*, c. 1905, 35 × 45 cm, Dallas Museum of Art

- The transition to abstraction is often illustrated by the following sequences of trees.
- There is an element of abstraction in a series of painting he produced between 1905 and 1908 but perhaps it is knowing his later work that makes us search for abstraction. At this stage he was still experimenting and trying different styles.
- In 1908, he became interested in the Theosophy Movement of Helena Blavatsky and in 1909 he joined the Dutch branch of the Theosophical Society. The work of Blavatsky profoundly affected the development of his aesthetic. Blavatsky believed one could achieve a profound knowledge of nature following their practices and much of his 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**", referring to a book written by Blavatsky.



Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *The Red Tree*, 1908, 70 x 99, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *The Red Tree*, 1908, 70 x 99, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- ***The Red Tree*** explodes in vivid red against deep blue ground. Mondrian painted it near his studio (in Oele, Overijssel). The branches twist dramatically, still completely recognisable as a tree but already **moving beyond naturalism**. Critics dismissed it as too wild, too uncontrolled.
- He was **thirty-six, desperately poor**, teaching to survive. His early work had followed Dutch landscape tradition—greys, browns, atmospheric effects. Then he **saw Van Gogh's work in 1908**. That changed everything. Suddenly colour could be emotion, structure, spiritual force.
- The red isn't autumn leaves. He painted this tree in different seasons, different times of day. Each version explored colour as independent element. **Red here represents life force, energy, something beyond description but felt absolutely**. The **Fauves in Paris** were doing similar experiments, though **he hadn't seen their work yet**.
- His family worried. **Brother-in-law supported him financially but tension grew** over these **increasingly strange canvases**. Amsterdam **dealers wouldn't touch them**. Other artists mocked them. He kept painting anyway, driven by conviction he couldn't yet articulate.
- Theosophy provided the framework. Their teachings said material **reality masked deeper spiritual truths**. Art could reveal those truths through meditation and reduction. The tree began that quest—stripping away accident to reveal essence.



- He **painted obsessively**. Multiple versions of single subjects. Trees, windmills, dunes, churches. Each time **removing more detail**, pushing toward something purer. This red tree started a journey that wouldn't end until all representation disappeared.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Oele: OO-luh

Overijssel: OH-ver-ice-el

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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *The Gray Tree*, 1911, 78.5 x 107.5, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *The Gray Tree*, 1911, 78.5 x 107.5, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- Three years later, the **tree has transformed**. **Colour drains away**—just greys and blacks now. The **branches fracture** into angular lines radiating from centre. It's **still recognisably a tree** but geometry is taking over. He painted this after moving to Paris.
- **Paris was revelation**. He arrived in **January 1911, age thirty-eight**. Montparnasse was exploding with **Cubism**. Picasso and Braque were **fragmenting reality into planes**. That gave him permission. He wasn't crazy—other artists were also questioning representation's limits.
- He found studio at 26 rue du Départ. Tiny room, **barely affordable**. He lived on **almost nothing—bread, coffee, cigarettes**. His **health suffered** but his work accelerated. He saw every exhibition, argued in cafés, absorbed Cubist lessons about multiple viewpoints and geometric structure.
- The grey palette was deliberate. **Colour was too emotional**, too subjective. He wanted **objective truth**. Grey reduced distractions, let structure emerge clearly. The tree became network of relationships—line to line, angle to angle, rhythm across surface.
- He was **unknown in Paris**. Dutch painter among French masters. Language barrier isolated him further. He changed his name from Pieter to Piet and removed the double “a” from his last name. Isolation helped. He wasn't trying to impress anyone. He was working out problems that obsessed him privately, methodically.

- This painting shows Cubist influence directly. The faceted planes, the shallow space, the fracturing of forms—all borrowed from Picasso. But Mondrian was already **moving beyond them**. Cubism still depicted things. He wanted abstraction that depicted nothing but pure relationship.

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Montparnasse: mon-par-NAS

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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Flowering Apple Tree*, 1912, 78 x 106, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Flowering Apple Tree*, 1912, 78 x 106, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- **The tree is barely visible now.** Curved lines loop across the surface in shallow arcs. A few suggestions of branches, maybe blossoms, but mostly it's abstract pattern. He painted this series at Domburg on Dutch coast during summer visit from Paris.
- Cubism was fragmenting objects. Mondrian went further—**he was dissolving them**. The apple tree existed as starting point, meditation subject. But the painting isn't about the tree. It's about rhythm, about how lines create movement across flat surface.
- **His Cubist friends didn't understand this direction.** They thought he'd **misunderstood their lessons**. They were analysing objects, **showing multiple views simultaneously**. He was eliminating objects entirely. That difference would separate him from **every other modernist movement**.
- He exhibited with Cubists at Salon des Indépendants that year. **Critics ignored him**. The Dutch press back home **mocked him viciously**. One reviewer wrote that he'd "**lost his mind in Paris**." His family begged him to return to normal painting.
- **Financial situation was desperate.** No sales, no prospects. His **brother-in-law's patience was exhausted**. He considered quitting, finding real work. But something drove him forward. He couldn't articulate it yet but he felt it absolutely—he was **close to breakthrough**.



- The **curves here still bothered him**. Curves were natural, organic, accidental. He wanted something more fundamental. **Straight lines only—verticals and horizontals**. That thinking was already forming. These trees were last gasp of nature before complete abstraction.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Domburg: DOM-burg

Salon des Indépendants: sal-ON dayzan-day-pon-DON

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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944),  
*Composition Trees II*, 1912-  
1913, 98 x 65,  
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition Trees II*, 1912-1913, 98 x 65,  
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- **The tree has vanished completely. Vertical and horizontal lines** create grid-like structure. **A few curves remain** but they're disappearing. Dark and light areas suggest depth but barely. This is the moment—representation dying, abstraction being born.
- **He worked on this through winter 1912-1913** in Paris. The process was **agonising**. Every line required decision. Remove this curve? Straighten that angle? Each change moved him further from everything he'd been trained to do, everything audiences expected.
- **His father had died in 1911**. That loss freed him somehow. **Parental disapproval no longer mattered**. He could pursue his vision without guilt. His mother lived until 1922 but they'd grown distant. Art had become his only family.
- Other artists thought he'd **reached dead end**. Pure abstraction meant giving up painting's fundamental purpose—showing the world. They couldn't see what he saw. **Abstraction wasn't abandoning reality**. It was revealing reality's hidden structure.
- He was **reading constantly**. Theosophy, mathematics, philosophy. **Schopenhauer's ideas about music** as pure form influenced him deeply. Music didn't represent anything. It was pure relationship—rhythm, harmony, structure. Why couldn't painting do the same?

- This canvas still shows hesitation. The grid isn't regular. The lines aren't purely vertical and horizontal. He was working toward something but hadn't arrived. That final step—complete commitment to pure abstraction—took another year of struggle.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Schopenhauer: SHOW-pen-how-er

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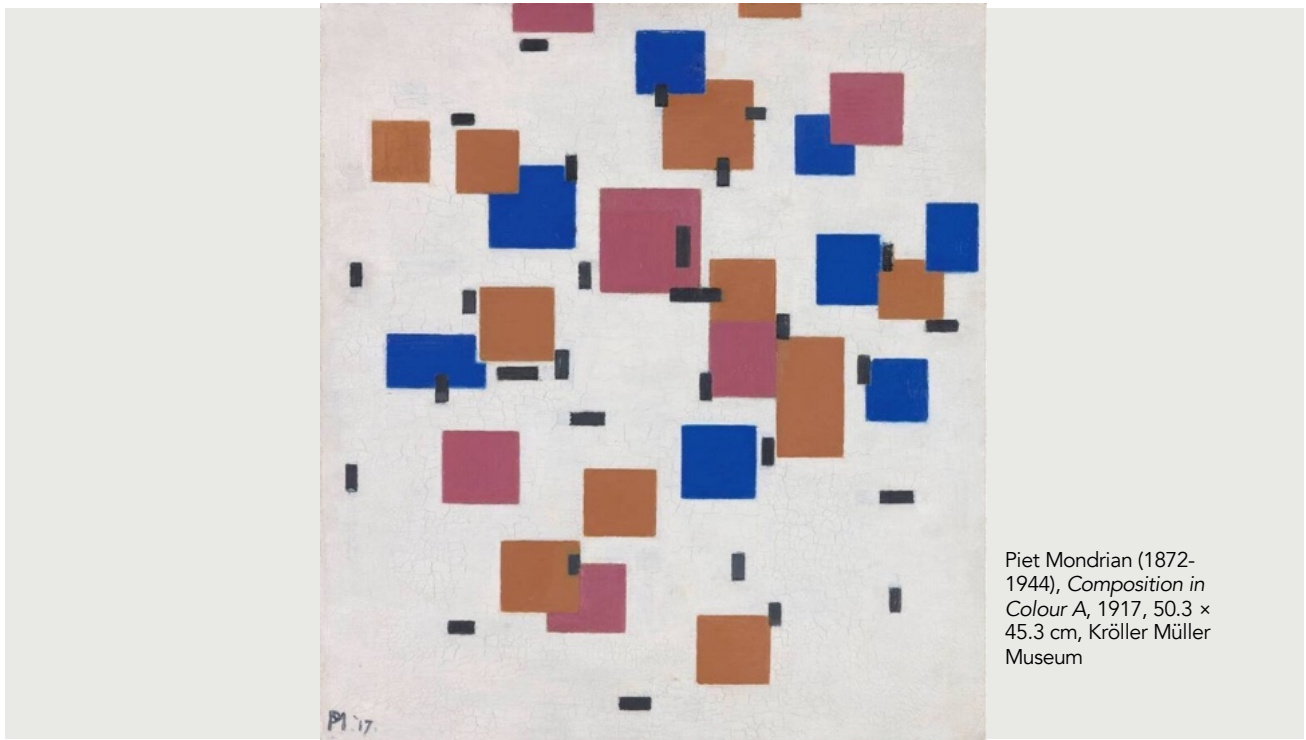
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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition in Colour A*, 1917, 50.3 × 45.3 cm, Kröller Müller Museum

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition in Colour A*, 1917, 50.3 × 45.3 cm, Kröller Müller Museum

- Piet Mondriaan, together with Bart van der Leek and Theo van Doesburg, **establish the De Stijl** (pronounced "du stay-ul") **movement in 1917**. They aim to create a new kind of art, for a new and better world. In his work, Mondriaan seeks a balance between lines and colours and **strives for an abstraction** that evokes a universal and timeless image.
- Piet Mondrian's "**Composition in Colour A**" and "**Composition in Colour B**" (both circa 1917) are **key early examples** of his move towards Neoplasticism, using **grids, black lines, and primary colours** (red, blue, yellow) with white and grey to represent universal harmony, exploring dynamic balance through asymmetrical arrangements and contrasting forces like the natural and spiritual, often with colours appearing to extend beyond the canvas.
- **Neoplasticism is the name of Mondrian's specific philosophy of pure abstraction and De Stijl = The wider movement that adopted and expanded that philosophy across many art forms.**

## NOTES

- Neoplasticism = Mondrian's specific philosophy of pure abstraction.
- De Stijl = The wider movement that adopted and expanded that philosophy across many art forms.
- Neoplasticism (Dutch: Nieuwe Beelding, literally "new forming" or "new imagery") is the artistic philosophy developed by Piet Mondrian around 1917–

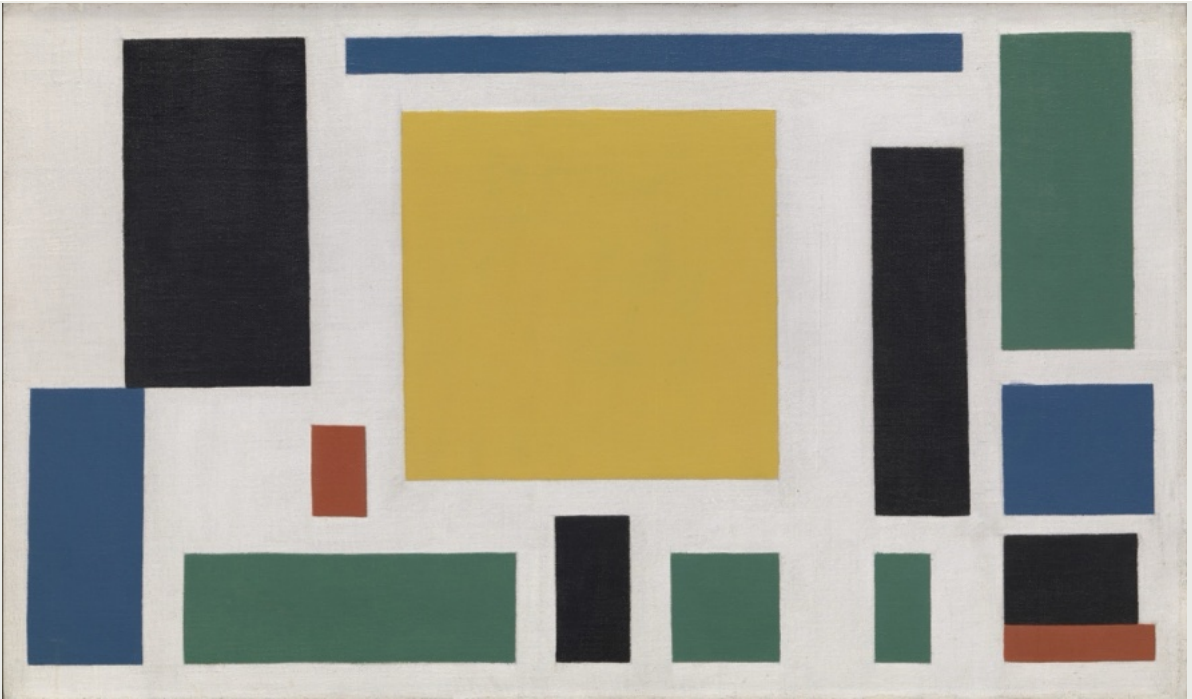


1920. It proposed a radically purified form of art based on:

- Pure abstraction
- Straight horizontal and vertical lines
- Primary colours (red, blue, yellow) plus black, white, and grey
- Asymmetrical balance rather than traditional composition
- Mondrian believed that by reducing painting to these essentials, art could express universal harmony, free from the chaos and subjectivity of the natural world.
- Relationship to De Stijl
- De Stijl ("The Style") was the broader Dutch avant-garde movement and journal (founded 1917 by Theo van Doesburg). It included painters, architects, designers, and typographers such as:
  - Piet Mondrian
  - Theo van Doesburg
  - Gerrit Rietveld (designer of the Red and Blue Chair and Schröder House)
  - Bart van der Leek
  - Vilmos Huszár
- Neoplasticism is the core aesthetic theory within De Stijl.
- Mondrian's writings in De Stijl magazine set out the movement's central principles.
- De Stijl applied Neoplastic principles beyond painting, into architecture (Rietveld), furniture, and graphic design.
- The idea was to create a total environment of equilibrium and clarity.
- Van Doesburg later introduced diagonal lines ("Elementarism"), which Mondrian rejected because he insisted on vertical–horizontal purity. This led to Mondrian leaving the group in 1924.

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Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), *Composition VIII (The Cow)*, 1918, 37.5 x 63.5, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), *Composition VIII (The Cow)*, 1918, 37.5 x 63.5, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **Van Doesburg created this in four stages**, each visible in surviving studies. Stage one: realistic cow in meadow. Stage two: simplified forms. Stage three: geometric blocks. Stage four: pure abstraction with rectangles floating free. It became De Stijl's teaching tool.
- Born Christian Emil Marie Küpper in Utrecht, he adopted "**van Doesburg**" from his **stepfather**. He **trained as actor and poet** before turning to painting. That theatrical flair never left—he was De Stijl's impresario, Mondrian's opposite in temperament.
- **He wrote manifestos** while Mondrian painted. He **lectured across Europe**, spreading their gospel of pure plasticism. He **edited De Stijl magazine** from 1917 until his death, publishing architects, designers, poets. Without him, the movement would've remained Dutch and obscure.
- **This cow series answered critics who called abstraction arbitrary.** Van Doesburg demonstrated systematic reduction from nature to essence. Each stage removed unnecessary detail while preserving structural relationships. The final version contains the cow's energy without its form.
- He was contentious, brilliant, exhausting. His wife Nelly played piano—he'd paint to her Bach. **He loved pranks.** In 1922, **he invented "Dada" persona I.K. Bonset** and published absurdist poetry **mocking his own seriousness.** Mondrian never found that funny.

- By 1918, the war was ending. The Russian Revolution promised new worlds. Van Doesburg believed **art could create utopia**. This cow wasn't livestock—it was proof that reality could be remade through thought.

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Küpper: KUP-per

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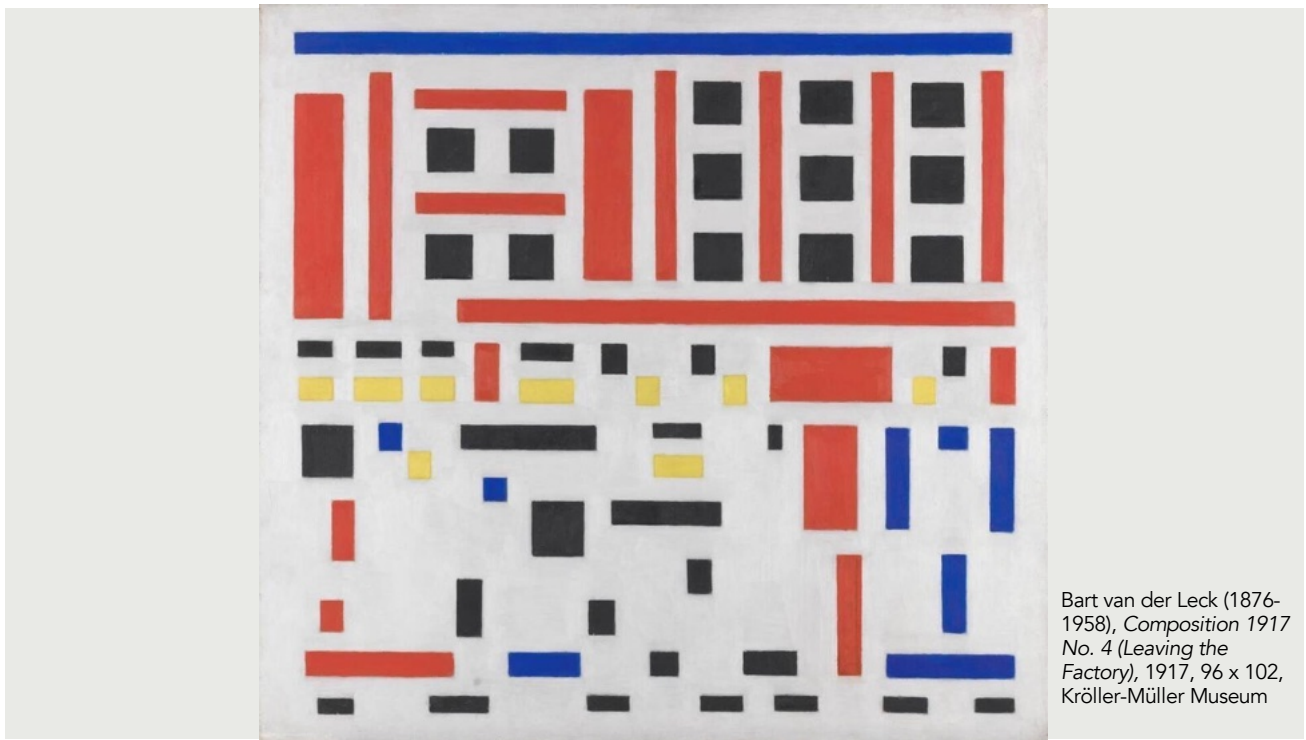
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Bart van der Leck (1876-1958), *Composition 1917 No. 4 (Leaving the Factory)*, 1917, 96 x 102, Kröller-Müller Museum

Bart van der Leck (1876-1958), *Composition 1917 No. 4 (Leaving the Factory)*, 1917, 96 x 102, Kröller-Müller Museum

- **Van der Leck painted factory workers in pure geometry.** Figures became coloured rectangles on white. Red, yellow, blue only. He'd been designing stained glass and posters—that flatness influenced everything. Critics called it cold. He called it honest.
- Born in **Utrecht** to house painter, he knew working people intimately. Early works showed **labourers with social realist sympathy**. Meeting Mondrian in 1916 transformed his approach but never his subject. He kept painting ordinary people while others pursued pure abstraction.
- This work emerged during their intense collaboration. **Mondrian and van der Leck visited daily**, debating reduction and colour. Van der Leck's **insistence on figurative reference frustrated Mondrian**, but his bold colour blocking influenced Mondrian's emerging grid system. The exchange ran both directions.
- **He was difficult, principled, and impossible to control.** Van Doesburg courted him for De Stijl's first issue. Van der Leck designed the magazine's typography—those clean sans-serif letters became the movement's visual voice. But he left after just one year, finding the group too dogmatic.
- **Helene Kröller-Müller commissioned him repeatedly.** She built a museum partly to house his work **alongside her Van Goghs**. He designed her villa's interior, creating geometric carpets and stained glass. That patronage let him maintain independence while others scrabbled for sales.



- The factory subject was pointed. While Mondrian sought timeless universals, van der Leek grounded abstraction in labour and class. Those coloured blocks were people leaving work—capitalism's daily rhythm made geometry.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Kröller-Müller: KRUL-ler MUL-ler

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Vilmos Huszár (1884-1960), *Composition with Female Figure*, 1918, 91 x 61, Private Collection

- **Huszár fragmented the female figure into coloured planes** while keeping her recognisable. She sits, perhaps reading, but her form splinters into geometric shards. It's **halfway between Cubism and pure De Stijl**—Huszár's unique position in the movement.
- Born in **Budapest**, he studied there before moving to Holland in 1905. He never fully naturalised Dutch restraint. His work kept expressionist heat while adopting geometric rigour. That tension made him valuable to Van Doesburg, who recruited him immediately for De Stijl's launch.
- He designed the magazine's first cover in 1917—a woodcut of abstract woman's head. It announced De Stijl's intentions before Mondrian perfected his vocabulary. Huszár worked across media: painting, prints, furniture, stained glass. He saw no hierarchy between fine and applied art.
- This painting shows his **struggle between figuration and abstraction**. The woman remains present, unlike Van Doesburg's vanished cow. Huszár argued that **total abstraction risked becoming decorative**. Keeping human presence grounded the spiritual in lived experience.
- He married Dutch woman Mies Loebner. They collaborated on **textile designs and interiors**, creating De Stijl environments in wealthy homes. His "**Mechanical Dancing Figure**" toys were proto-Bauhaus experiments in kinetic sculpture. He thought constantly about movement and time in static media.

- His **relationship** with Van Doesburg **soured** by 1923. Creative differences, ego clashes, the usual story. He continued working in De Stijl vocabulary but independently. **Later life brought obscurity**—he's the movement's forgotten pioneer, overshadowed by Mondrian's fame.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Vilmos Huszár: VIL-mosh HOO-sahr

Mies Loeber: MEES LOO-ber

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Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964),  
*Red and Blue Chair*, 1918-  
1923, 86.5 x 65.5 x 82.5,  
Multiple Collections

Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964), *Red and Blue Chair*, 1918-1923, 86.5 x 65.5 x 82.5, Multiple Collections

- **Rietveld's chair translates De Stijl painting into three dimensions.** Thirteen pieces of wood, no curves, primary colours against black. It looks uncomfortable—and it is. That wasn't the point. It demonstrated that furniture could embody universal principles.
- Born in **Utrecht to carpenter father**, he left school at eleven to join the family workshop. He knew wood intimately—joinery, grain, structure. That craft knowledge grounded his radical designs. He wasn't theorist playing with shapes. He understood making.
- He **designed the chair in 1918** in natural wood, painted it in De Stijl colours around 1923 after joining the movement. The timing matters—it shows furniture catching up to painting's revolution. Each element stays visibly separate: back, seat, arms, legs. No part dominates. It's democracy in wood.
- The **design influenced Bauhaus and entire modernist furniture tradition.** **Marcel Breuer** saw it and imagined tubular steel. **Mies van der Rohe's** Barcelona chair owes debt here. But **Rietveld got there first**, with cheaper materials and more radical implications.
- He built the Schröder House in 1924 with client Truus Schröder-Schräder, who became his lover. That house is three-dimensional De Stijl—sliding walls, primary colours, spaces flowing together. They lived there together after her husband died, defying convention for thirty years until his death.



- Mass production never happened. The chair costs thousands now, handmade by Italian manufacturers. The irony would've amused him—his democratic design became elite status symbol.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Gerrit Rietveld: GHER-it REET-felt

Schröder-Schräder: SHROE-der SHRAE-der

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Georges Vantongerloo (1886-1965), *Construction of Volume Relations*, 1921, 41 x 20 x 16, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **Vantongerloo took De Stijl into sculpture.** This painted wood construction stacks coloured blocks in mathematical relationships. Each element's size derives from the one below through algebraic formula. It's not intuitive composition—it's calculated structure made visible.
- Born in **Antwerp**, he studied sculpture at academies in Belgium. First World War service left him wounded. He spent 1914-1918 interned in Holland, where he met De Stijl members. Mathematical precision appealed to someone who'd seen war's chaos firsthand.
- He wrote treatise "**L'Art et son avenir**" ("**Art and Its Future**") in 1924, arguing that **mathematics should govern all aesthetic decisions**. Art wasn't self-expression—it was discovery of universal laws. That aligned with De Stijl philosophy but took it further than even Mondrian accepted.
- His sculptures embodied fourth dimension theories circulating through European avant-garde. **Time, mathematics, space beyond perception**—these obsessed interwar intellectuals seeking frameworks to prevent another catastrophe. Vantongerloo believed rational art could produce rational society.
- He **moved to Paris in 1919**, became friends with **Mondrian**. But his personality was warmer, more open than Mondrian's asceticism. He married, had children, maintained normal life while making radical art. That balance was rare among De Stijl purists.

- Later works became increasingly abstract—curved forms, transparent plastics, light experiments. **He outlived most of his De Stijl colleagues**, dying in **1965** having witnessed abstraction become mainstream. His mathematical approach influenced minimalism and conceptual art decades after De Stijl ended.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Georges Vantongerloo: zhorzh van-TONG-er-loo

L'Art et son avenir: LART ay son ah-ven-EER

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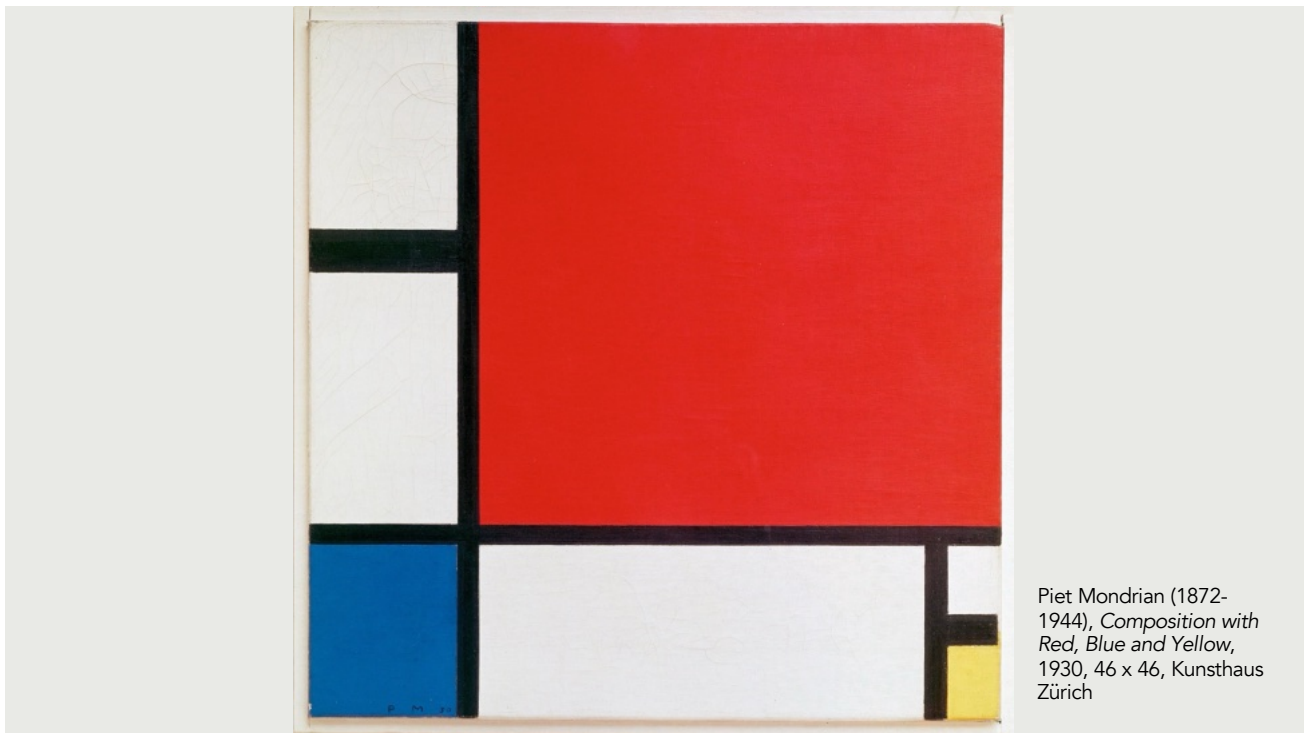
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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1930, 46 x 46, Kunsthaus Zürich

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1930, 46 x 46, Kunsthaus Zürich

- We now return to Mondrian. **This square canvas represents the culmination of Mondrian's quest for pure abstraction.** By 1930, he'd perfected his **vocabulary**. Black verticals and horizontals form grid. One red square, one yellow rectangle, one blue rectangle. Everything else white. The asymmetry creates dynamic tension.
- He'd been working toward this for nearly two decades. Every earlier experiment led here—the trees dissolving, the grids tightening, colour reducing to primaries. This wasn't endpoint though. He never stopped adjusting, refining, seeking impossible perfection.
- His Paris **studio at 26 rue du Départ became legendary**. He painted **everything white—walls, furniture, easel**. He **made paper flowers** in primary colours, the **only decoration**. Visitors described walking into a Mondrian painting. He lived inside his aesthetic completely.
- **Each painting took months.** He'd **tape cardboard squares** to canvas, **move them daily**, repaint constantly. Friends reported him **staring at canvas for hours**, then **adjusting one line by millimetres**. That obsessive precision defined his practice. Nothing was arbitrary. Every decision carried weight.
- **Jazz kept him sane.** He'd paint all day then hit Montparnasse clubs at night, dancing to American jazz until closing. That rhythm—improvisational yet structured—reflected what he sought on canvas. Fellow De Stijl members never understood that connection. They thought jazz was chaos. He heard

mathematics.

- This painting type—large, asymmetric, sparsely coloured—became his signature. It influenced graphic design more than painting initially. Book covers, posters, corporate logos—everyone borrowed his grid. Most never understood the spiritual mathematics underneath. They saw style, not philosophy.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Montparnasse: mon-par-NAS

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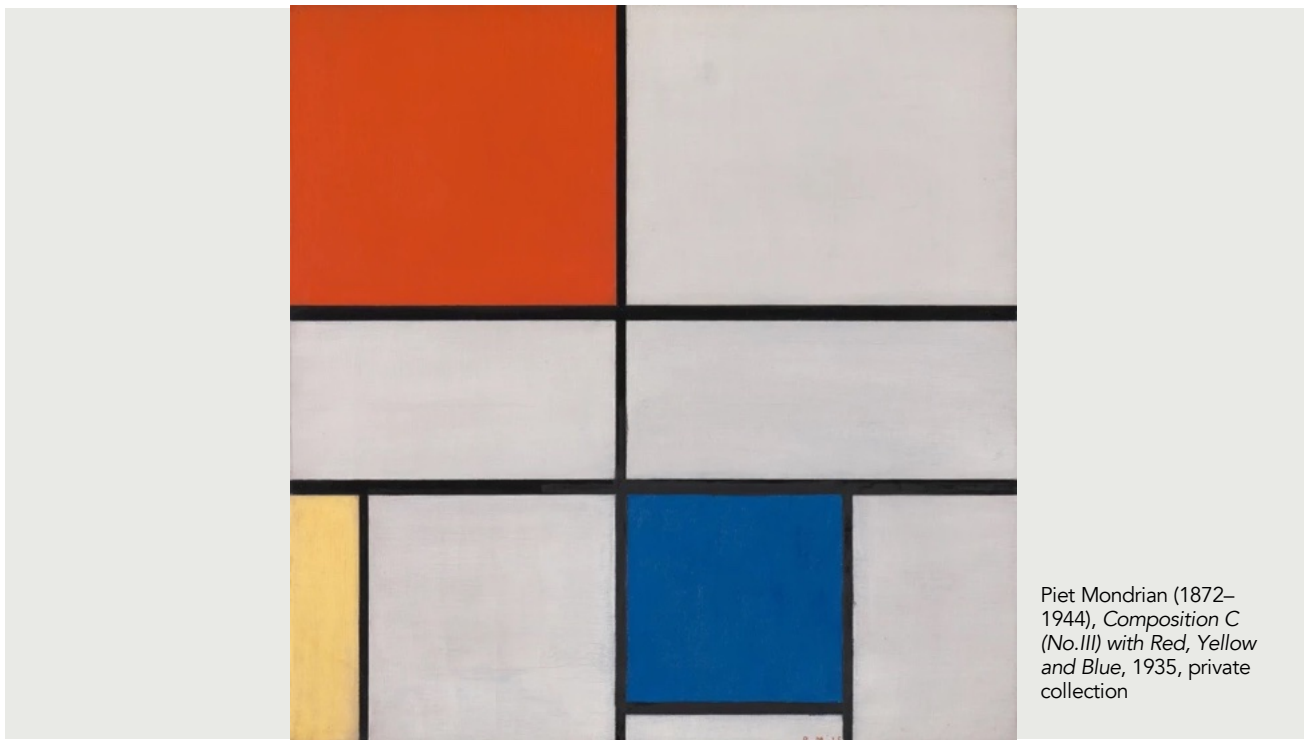
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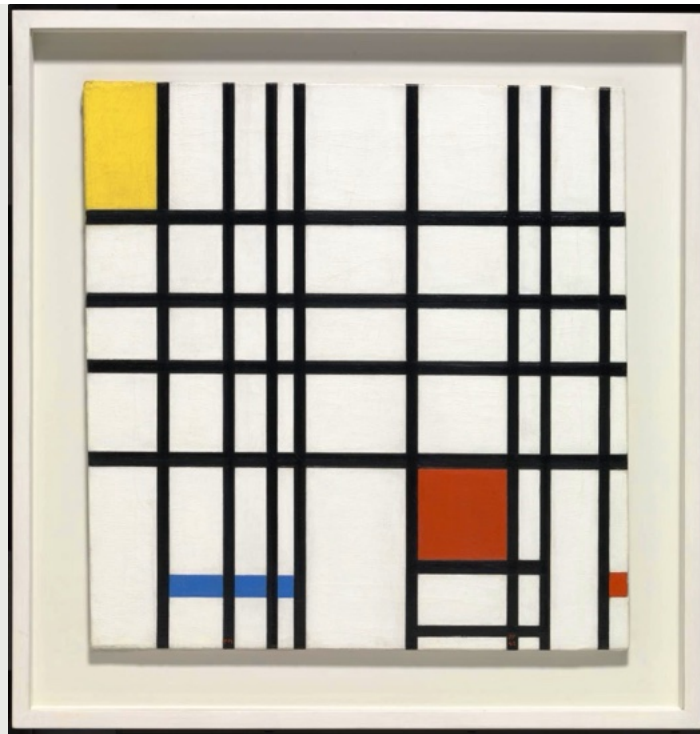




Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1935, private collection

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1935, private collection

- Painted in **1935 in Paris** and exhibited at the "Abstract and Concrete" exhibition in Oxford in 1936, it was subsequently purchased by Nicolette Gray, who was one of the **very first English collectors of Mondrian**.
- I think you can see in this image that his art is not static or pure. The colours are impure with shades of other tones, the whites are dirty grey, the black lines are hand-painted and vary slightly in width. It is hard to see in a photograph but up close the original is irregular and uneven. It was important to Mondrian to leave traces of the art making in the final work. He was one of the last artists to believe that art could literally change the world if the viewer spent enough time immersed in the work and thought deeply about it.
- Academic research shows the computer analysis can identify authentic Mondrian works with around 70% accuracy, often finding that computer-generated fakes lack the subtle, intentional compositional balance of the original. However, although some people can recognise a genuine Mondrian from a fake many prefer computer-generated, more "perfect" versions.



Piet Mondrian (1872-1944),  
*Composition with Yellow,  
Blue and Red*, 1937-1942,  
72.5 x 69, Tate Gallery,  
London

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, 1937-1942, 72.5 x 69, Tate Gallery, London

- **Mondrian worked on this canvas for five years across two countries.** He started it in Paris, continued in London after fleeing Nazis in 1938, finished nothing because perfection was impossible. The painting embodies his late style—fewer colours, thicker lines, more white space.
- **Paris became dangerous.** Hitler declared modern art "degenerate" in 1937. Mondrian's work appeared in the Nazis' condemnation exhibition. His dealer **Peggy Guggenheim urged him to leave.** At **sixty-six, he moved to London** with almost nothing.
- London suited him initially. The Nicholsons—**Ben and Barbara Hepworth**—welcomed him. **Herbert Read championed his work** in writing. He found studio in Hampstead, painted through Munich crisis and worsening European situation. But war was coming.
- **The Blitz terrified him. Bombs fell nightly** from September 1940. His studio survived but nearby buildings burned. He couldn't work with explosions shaking the walls. At **sixty-eight, he fled again—this time to New York**, arriving October 1940.
- This canvas stayed unfinished. That's significant—it shows his process. The tape marks where he considered colour placement. The repainted sections. The endless adjustment seeking impossible balance. Most people see finished Mondrians and miss the obsessive labour underneath.

- His London period was brief—just two years. But it connected him to British abstract artists who'd been working in isolation. That network would matter after the war when the American CIA made abstract art its cultural weapon against Soviet realism even though the art was hated by senior politicians. Through the Congress for Cultural Freedom it secretly funded exhibitions, magazines and lectures.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Peggy Guggenheim: PEG-ee GOO-gen-hime

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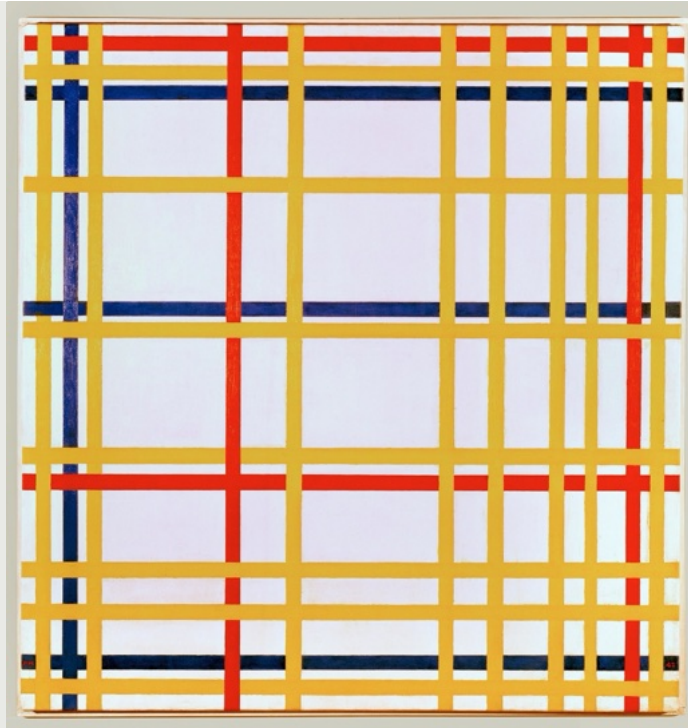
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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *New York City*, 1942, 119.3 x 114.2, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *New York City*, 1942, 119.3 x 114.2, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

- **New York electrified him.** This **unfinished canvas explodes with energy** absent from his Paris work. **Coloured tape replaces painted lines**—he'd discovered **industrial materials** matched his vision better than paint. The grid multiplies, vibrates, pulses like Manhattan itself.
- He lived at **353 East 56th Street, fifth floor walkup**. Landlord Fritz Glarner was fellow abstract painter. The **studio became legendary** again—**white walls, painted furniture, paper flowers, jazz records everywhere**. Visitors described ecstatic atmosphere, him dancing to boogie-woogie between painting sessions.
- **American art world embraced him immediately.** **Museum of Modern Art gave him retrospective** in 1945, just after his death. **Suddenly he was influential, not obscure.** Young American painters—**Pollock, de Kooning, Newman**—studied his work intensely. **His poverty finally ended at seventy.**
- The coloured tape was revelation. He could move lines instantly, try compositions in hours instead of months. It matched jazz's improvisation—structure remaining while details shifted constantly. These late works suggest movement impossible in earlier paintings.
- **He died suddenly, February 1944, age seventy-one.** Pneumonia turned to fatal infection. **His funeral drew hundreds**—artists, dealers, collectors, jazz musicians. Harry Holtzman and Fritz Glarner organised it. His estate was chaos—unfinished canvases, tape experiments, decades of searching made visible.

- **This painting never got finished.** It exists as process, not product. That feels right—his whole life was becoming, never arriving. He painted toward perfection knowing it was unreachable, and that contradiction created everything.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Fritz Glarner: frits GLAR-ner

Harry Holtzman: HAR-ee HOLTS-man

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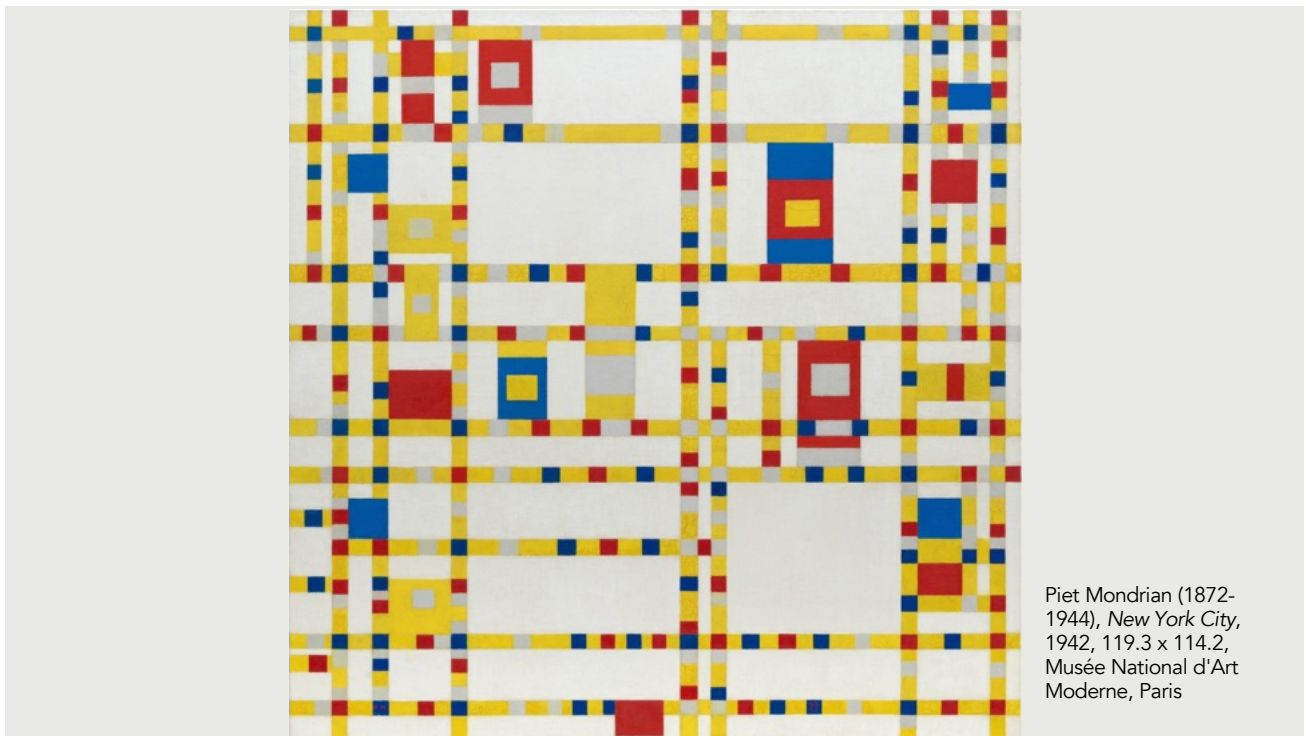
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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *New York City*, 1942, 119.3 x 114.2, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942-1943, 127 x 127, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- **This became his most famous work.** The grid transforms into **Manhattan streets**. Small coloured squares pulse along the **lines like traffic**, like neon, like jazz rhythm made visual. It's joyful—his only painting anyone calls joyful—and it's unfinished. He was still adjusting it when he died.
- **Broadway's lights amazed him.** He'd **walk for hours**, watching signs flash, traffic move, the city's endless rhythm. That energy appears here for the first time. Earlier works feel European—contemplative, spiritual, inward. This one feels American—fast, optimistic, democratic.
- **Boogie-woogie was everywhere in 1942 New York.** He bought records constantly (Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis) and played them while painting, trying to match their rhythmic drive. The music's structure—repetitive bass, improvised treble—mirrored what he'd always sought in painting.
- The squares were painted, not tape. That matters—he'd found final solution. Colour could move within the structure now. The painting breathes in ways earlier works don't. It suggests animation, film, technologies he'd explored theoretically but never captured visually until now.
- His **health was declining**. The pneumonia that killed him was already developing. He knew this was important—he **pushed himself harder**. Friends reported him **painting through nights**, fuelled by coffee and cigarettes, **racing against time running out**.

- **It sold after his death for \$800**—nothing. **Now it's worth over \$100 million conservatively.** It appears on everything—t-shirts, album covers, advertisements. Most people who recognise it don't know his name. That would've pleased him—the image becoming universal, the artist disappearing behind pure visual fact.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Pete Johnson: peet JON-sun

Albert Ammons: AL-bert AM-uns

Meade Lux Lewis: meed luks LOO-is

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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942-1944, 177.8 x 177.8 cm., Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942-1944, 177.8 x 177.8 cm., Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

- **He died working on this.** It remained in his studio, unfinished, when pneumonia killed him. The canvas is **diamond-shaped**—forty-five degrees rotated, **larger than anything he'd attempted**. Coloured shapes cluster densely, suggesting celebration, victory, life's abundance.
- The title referenced Allied war progress. **By 1943, victory seemed possible.** He'd lived through two world wars, watched Europe tear itself apart twice. This painting imagines peace, reconstruction, modernity fulfilling its promise finally.
- The technique became almost sculptural. **He glued painted paper squares** to canvas, building layers. Colours overlap, creating optical mixing—secondary colours appear without being painted. It's more complex than anything previous, suggesting directions he'd never explore.
- He'd been healthy, active, **dancing weekly**. Then **fever, cough, hospital**. Fritz Glarner visited daily. He kept talking about the painting, about changes he'd make when recovered. He died February 1, 1944, surrounded by unfinished visions.
- His estate passed to **Harry Holtzman**, who'd supported him in New York. **Holtzman preserved everything**—letters, sketches, failed canvases. That archive reveals the man behind the myth. He wasn't mystical sage—he was **obsessive craftsman** who happened to dance.
- The Dutch government **bought this painting in 1998 for \$41 million**, keeping

it in Holland. It hangs in Gemeentemuseum Den Haag alongside his largest collection. Visitors see his evolution complete—from grey Dutch landscapes to this explosion of colour and rhythm. **That journey took fifty years of daily work, most of it in poverty and obscurity.**

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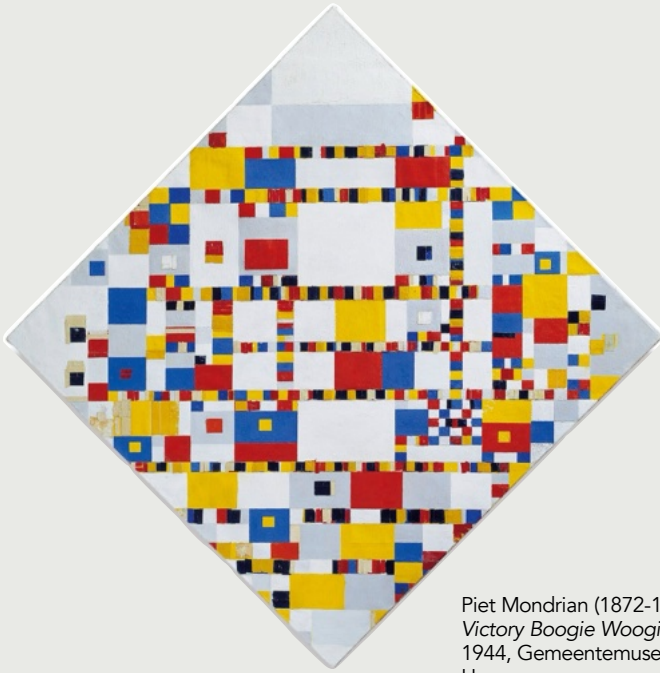
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## 48-01 PIET MONDRIAN AND DE STIJL

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Piet Mondrian (1872-1944),  
*Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942-  
1944, Gemeentemuseum Den  
Haag

- Mondrian explored order and harmony and his **legacy can be seen all around us** from the clean lines of **Bauhaus design** to the **grid-like facades** of **modern skyscrapers**. He turns up in **fashion**, he is perhaps the most “**wearable**” **artist in history** and I could even argue that the design of the **computer screen** in front of you with its **grids and windows** was inspired by Mondrian’s exploration of how to divide a rectangular space efficiently.
- That brings me to the end of today’s talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.





## A spiral collage of various artworks, including classical portraits, modern abstracts, and pop art, arranged in a circular pattern. The spiral starts from a small white center and expands outwards, containing numerous small images of famous paintings and sculptures. Recognizable works include Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Michelangelo's David, Vincent van Gogh's Starry Night, and various abstract and modernist pieces. The collage is set against a white background.

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