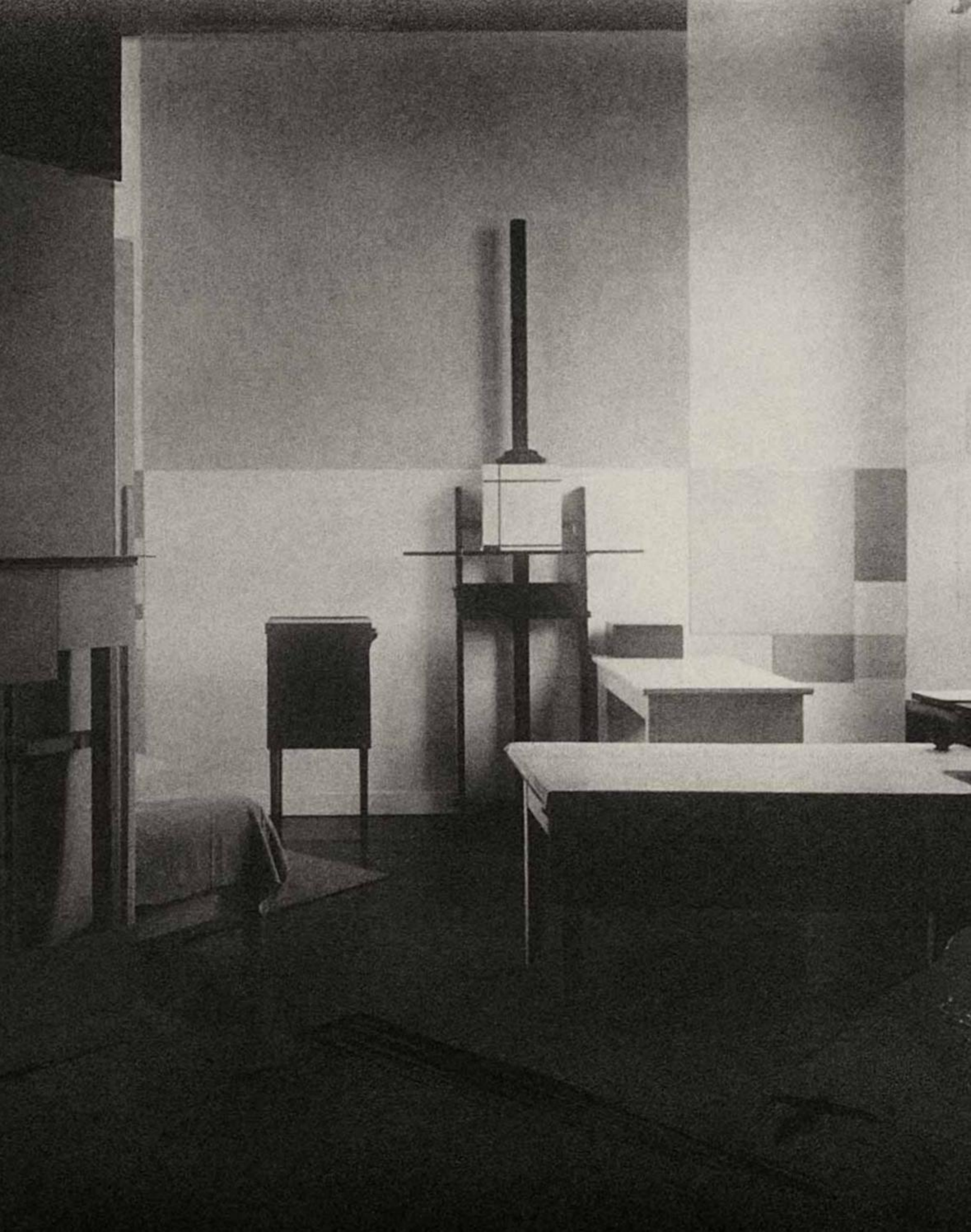
& DE

STIJL MONDRIAN

Mondrian & De Stijl



MONDRIAN STIJL & DE

A leading member of De Stijl, the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian is considered one of the founders of abstract art and a key figure in the profound transformations undergone by the art world in the first half of the twentieth century.

His early works, pieces in a naturalist and symbolist idiom, show Mondrian to be a painter of considerable technical skill. Little by little, he incorporates influences from emerging artistic tendencies such as pointillism, fauvism, and cubism. This development would eventually lead to his revolutionary artistic philosophy, neoplasticism, an abstract trend characterized by rigorous geometry and a palette of primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—and noncolors—white, black, and gray.

"Only when we are in the true absolute," Mondrian said, "will art no longer be necessary." Today his assertion may seem paradoxical when we consider how popular culture has trivialized his work and spread it through countless copies and reappropriations.

The exhibition now dedicated to Mondrian by the Museo Reina Sofía in collaboration with the Stichting Kunstmuseum Den Haag surveys the artist's oeuvre both transversally and panoramically while also exploring the important role played in the configuration of his art and discourse by the movement known as De Stijl (The Style) and the figures linked to it, such as Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, and Vilmos Huszár.

Special mention must go to the important work of research and contextualization performed by the show's curator, Hans Janssen. His critical revision of Mondrian's oeuvre and the effervescent historical and artistic contexts in which it developed allows us to rediscover an artist who never ceased to rethink himself and without whom we would be hard pressed to understand some of the most fascinating paths followed by the visual arts over the last century.

José Manuel Rodríguez Uribes
Minister of Culture and Sport

Traditionally, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Joan Miró have been viewed as the key figures of artistic modernism in Spain. Picasso has held this status uninterruptedly since the 1930s, Dalí above all in the 1920s and under Francisco Franco's regime, and Miró since the 1950s and 1960s. Notwithstanding the evident differences between these artists, all three share a certain gestural vocation, an interest in the unconscious and the imaginary and the persistence, to a greater or lesser extent, of a figurative component or echo. On the international level, this gestural and figurative line has been given preferential treatment by institutions like New York's Museum of Modern Art, which has made these three figures, and especially Picasso and Miró, highly central to the construction of its historiographic and museographic discourse.

However, other variants of artistic modernism do not fit into this canon. One is that of Latin America, on which the Museo Reina Sofía has been working and researching for some years. With such potent experiments as neo-concretism and optical and kinetic art, the historical roots of this modernism are very different. One of those roots is without doubt the figure of Piet Mondrian. The current exhibition is intended to revise the work of the Dutch artist while helping to further an understanding of the genealogical foundations of a modernism we are less familiar with.

Although retaining a certain otherness, Latin American modernism has progressively acquired a canonical status, and no museum today does not own or hope to possess works by artists such as the Brazilians Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. In this process of assimilation, however, Latin American modernism has been shorn of critical elements that are essential to it, largely because they conveyed an interrogation of the logic constituting the Eurocentric modernist project. The current exhibition's rereading of Mondrian's oeuvre can help to bring out these elements and reactivate them.

The novelty of this rereading rests on two fundamental arguments. The first is based on Mondrian's relationship with the movement De Stijl. This highlights not only the impossibility of understanding the artist's life and work in a purely autonomous and self-referential light but also the fact that it is wrong to view the movement itself as homogeneous and free of contradictions and tensions, since it functioned at all times as a space for dialectic and conflict. The second line of reasoning stems from Mondrian's attempt to

generate connections among his pieces through the care and attention he paid to the way they were displayed to the public. With this gesture, he moved away from the concept of the unitary or freestanding artwork and instead stressed continuities and discontinuities within a broader span or narrative while at the same time attaching importance to the reception of the oeuvre as a whole. When the artist was selecting works for most of the exhibitions that he devised in the course of his career, he would give precise instructions on their sequence of presentation and often introduced changes in both the selection and the order when the shows were already running, emphasizing the expressive possibilities of the specific combination of works.

By highlighting these two aspects of Mondrian's practice, the exhibition allows us to resignify not only the figure of Mondrian but also the genesis and constitution of modernism itself, since it shows that "the quintessential modern artist," as exhibition curator Hans Janssen describes Mondrian, was distanced from modernist precepts and ideals, as was the artistic movement or context that permitted him to fill such a role. The recurrent controversies among the members of De Stijl over their understanding of Mondrian's modernity, or his determination to establish relationships among his works and seek an overall effect that would transcend the "intentional visual interest" of the individual paintings, reveal an artistic cosmovision in which forms are not conceived platonically as pure immanence but in a profoundly relational sense.

Another thesis propounded in this exhibition project moves in the same direction. This is the importance attached here to the artist's earliest pictorial production, before his shift into abstraction, with strong influences from the Dutch landscape painting tradition and from what is known as the Hague School, a sort of local version of impressionism. This period is normally interpreted as a mere phase of apprenticeship that equipped the artist with outstanding technical skill. However, the interest in landscape and nature that informs these works makes it evident that Mondrian's artistic discourse cannot be reduced or read solely on the basis of the keys to the modernist project, which include the radical separation of nature and culture. Highly pertinent in this regard are the reflections of Bruno Latour in his celebrated essay *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). According to Latour, modern society has never functioned in accordance with the foundational paradigm that separates nature and culture, since in practice modern subjects have continued to create hybrid objects that relate to both. With regard to Mondrian's early period, the exhibition points out that his oeuvre, a totem of European artistic modernity, actually possesses a complex and heterogeneous dimension that cannot be described in unambiguous terms.

The critical vindication of Mondrian by Latin American artists such as Clark and Oiticica suggests that they somehow perceived this polyhedral nature. The insistence of these artists on the need to surpass the limits of the picture and transform the artistic experience into something corporal and vital, conceiving the viewer as an integral part of the work, led them to interpellate the apparent self-absorption of Mondrian's utopian artistic project and its planned withdrawal from nature in search of an ideal plastic reality. However, these interpellations were aimed less at Mondrian himself than at the most widespread interpretation of his work from a purely formalist and rationalist standpoint. For this reason, perhaps aware that Mondrian was a complex figure who resisted reduction to the paradigm of the modern artist, they examined him with admiration and sympathy, something evident, for example, in the "letter" in the form of an artistic and poetic manifesto that Clark addressed to him in 1959, or in the way Oiticica, when designing installations like *Tropicália* (1967), drew inspiration from Mondrian's abstract compositional strategies.

The rereading of Mondrian's artistic corpus that is proposed by this exhibition likewise differs from that canonical interpretation and does so by noting that the Latin American artists' goal of surpassing and expanding pictorial—and artistic—space, of taking the picture out of the frame and placing the processual and relational dimension of aesthetic creation at the center, was already implicit in Mondrian's work. In this way, *Mondrian and De Stijl* invites us to render this artist's figure more complex, further evidence of the need to rethink the Eurocentric notion of modernity itself.

Manuel Borja-Villel
Director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

p. 2
Piet Mondrian's Studio, 26 rue du Dèpart, Paris, 1926

p. 8
Piet Mondrian at his studio, 278 Boulevard Raspail, Paris, 1937

A Unique Personal Quest

Hans Janssen

Introduction

A strong case can be made that Piet Mondrian, a hero of modernism in the visual arts, is the quintessential modern artist. He managed like no other artist to break away from his nineteenth-century roots, this being the only possible road to unfeigned, radical modernity. His abstract works lack external reference, as indicated by his use of neutral titles such as *Composition*, *Tableau*, or *Picture*. These titles were once taken as proof of the works' absolute autonomy and unassailable self-reference. Few remarked that they are often followed by numbers, characters, or Roman numerals, suggesting a particular order, position, or relationship with other works—as opposed to complete independence. Recent research shows that Mondrian used the additional numbers and characters to indicate a specific order for the works he exhibited. He even retitled his paintings when preparing them for new exhibitions and must have ascribed some significance to their order.

The present exhibition aims to use this knowledge to dispel the modernist notion of autonomy and self-reference that has guided the perception of Mondrian's work for far too long. That notion holds that each and every work was a bead on a string stretched inevitably from a clear point in the past to a clear point in the future, a logical, progressive evolution from one self-contained statement to the next, each of which came to fruition in the seclusion of the studio. By showing the development of Mondrian's works on the basis of the careful selections he made for the many exhibitions to which he contributed work—all within the larger context of the struggles, dialogues, and conflicts of De Stijl, the art movement that helped shape modernity after the First World War—we hope to shed light on the evolution of and rationale behind the work of the artist, especially, but not exclusively, after 1909.

From the start of his career, Mondrian was keen to ensure that his art functioned in a well-defined way, often in close relationship with the audience for which it was intended. The order in which he presented his paintings in any exhibition was indicative of the position and role he wished to accord these paintings within a broader artistic discussion. He was well aware that the choice of works for the exhibitions to which he was invited—or which he occasionally organized himself—singled out and underscored his intentions, giving him the opportunity to convey something about his position and development by selecting works that could, in a carefully prescribed sequence of presentation, state in a visual manner what he intended at that point in his development. We hope something of that intent is communicated in this exhibition, which reconstructs groupings of works that Mondrian himself arranged or stipulated for various shows during his lifetime.

Art and Audience: Mondrian's Case

Mondrian rarely commented on the relationship between his art and his audience. He believed a work of art should radiate, a bit like the sun casting its light over the world. Other than that, he said little on the matter. From as early as 1909, he worked indefatigably to "give explanations *about* his work but not *of* it."[1] In his opinion, all painting reveals itself only through the actual work, in the act of seeing, and any explanation cannot replace this experience. But the modern artist was bound to cultivate the field of art, before and after the work of art was ready. The modern artist could and should explain about art in general and the way the beauty of life—the deepest essence of art, which he also described as the expression of the vital, removed from time—could be made visible and tangible and, above all, perceptible. So Mondrian's purpose was not to explain his art directly but to provide a parallel discourse that mirrored the work, that testified in its turn about the texts. The aim of the present exhibition is to demonstrate how Mondrian dealt in a similar way with the exhibition of his work during his lifetime. There, too, it was a matter of making public. He did not set out to educate, to explain what his art was about. He was concerned with enticing the viewer *in a visual way*, through the act of looking at the exhibited work, into an awareness of what was actually happening on the walls of the gallery. So when Mondrian declared, in the first issue of *De Stijl*, that today's artist did not offer explanations, at least not of his work, the same also applied to the selection and presentation of work in exhibitions. "Explaining means that one has reached clarity along the path of feeling and reason," he wrote, "by working and thinking about what has been achieved. Explaining means gaining consciousness, even through clashing ideas—through

conflict. Thus explanations concerning plastic expression make it more profound and more precise."[2]

Mondrian's articles were intended not as a guide but as an alternative strategy for looking at what naturally manifested itself in his paintings, in the act of looking. Just as his paintings focus on a viewer, whose presence is always implied in Mondrian's writing and who needed to be instructed in order to better understand what those strange paintings were for, so his presentations from 1909 onward were designed to help the audience understand his work better.

The avalanche of words Mondrian produced is best regarded as "thoughts on" his own work—or rather, "thoughts of" his work—that is, examples of how one might approach the paintings. The potential of the works can be unleashed by treating them as the artist himself did in his writing: not literally, by reading his articles as a guide, but figuratively, by seeing the paintings as a sounding board for all kinds of ideas about reality. Anyone who reads the texts as a guide limits the potential of the paintings, allows the words to tie down the art. On the other hand, anyone who reads them to expand the potential of the paintings liberates them.

De Stijl

From 1917 to 1925, Mondrian's art functioned in the context of De Stijl, the modernist movement born in the Netherlands. Under the passionate leadership of Theo van Doesburg, it sought to achieve an art that was truly "visual"—an art that no longer separated illusion and reality and that allowed art and life to merge. The real effect of areas of pure color would bring about a new perception of space in art, architecture, and design, and these disciplines would then be barely distinguishable from one another. To achieve this, artists could no longer engage in representation. Art was more a question of ordering, strict ordering. And artists must strive for the greatest possible contrast. To Mondrian's way of thinking, that could best be achieved with taut vertical and horizontal lines and pure, flat red, yellow, and blue, plus white, gray, and black—"noncolors" that could help prevent the primary colors from clashing too violently.

From 1914 to 1919 Mondrian steadily perfected these visual elements, in search of the best way of giving the clearest and most objective concrete expression to the phenomenon of beauty, without any disruptive factors like symbolism, reference, meaning, and the narrative principles that had dominated Western art for centuries. Certain laws, he believed, governed true beauty, the innermost core of beauty. And why not? Isaac Newton had discovered the immutable laws of gravity, and Albert Einstein the laws of relativity, so why should the immutable laws of "beauty" not also be discoverable? Mondrian unfolded his theory in the first few volumes of the magazine that gave the De Stijl movement its name. He then adhered to it for the rest of his life, though after 1925 he had more and more opportunity to expand on and deepen his ideas, which meant that his work ultimately underwent huge changes.

Thus, while the laws themselves might be immutable, how they manifested themselves was not. Van Doesburg, for example, was less concerned with harmony, purity, and order. He believed in the beneficial effects of the disruption, fragmentation, and alienation that a work of art could bring to bear. This was how he interpreted Mondrian's new art. There was something disturbing about abandoning representation, and the "new plastic," as the new art soon became known, was strange compared to most other visual art. Mondrian and van Doesburg were united in their views on destruction. The new plastic would have to knock the old world of art off its pedestal, for good. The disruptive aspect of the new plastic tied in with the modern person's experience of the world.

While for many artists of De Stijl the new visual idiom soon became a trademark, a symbol of modernity, and ultimately in the footsteps of Van Doesburg meant advocacy of a clinical, systematic approach to art and architecture, from the outset Mondrian was much more concerned with the content of his art. It was intended first and foremost for pleasure and to make people aware of the beauty of reality. His art was made for the viewer. In that sense, he took with him into the twentieth century a nineteenth-century view of art, though he managed to give it a new twist.

The Pictorial Space

Mondrian was one of the first artists to break with the nineteenth-century model of merely producing

artworks and then transferring them to a market where they would find their way to an owner, a viewer. In this system, the art was shown and enjoyed in a different sphere from that in which it was produced. Mondrian saw things quite differently. In dialogue with van Doesburg, he arrived in the period 1918–1920 at the idea of making an art that was purely plastic, in which the illusion would no longer be confined to the pictorial space but would enter the world around it, controlling the space in which the viewer existed. Illusion and reality, art and life, would operate in the same field, the surroundings of the viewer. The artwork would change the environment, enter the space of the viewer, who would be invited to relate to this pictorial space.

Mondrian did not use the term *pictorial space* himself. In the early years of his adventure in abstraction he wrote about the universal, about harmony and balanced relationships. He was concerned that his paintings should exude equilibrium. Toward the end of the 1920s, rhythm became more important to him, and the notion of equilibrium gradually made way for the concept of "dynamic equilibrium," which Mondrian used to denote the disruptive and increasingly intense impact of his paintings. What I wish to encapsulate in the term *pictorial space* is not therefore space as defined in a perspectivist sense or space as we might experience it in daily life. Pictorial space is a special charged space that occurs in the perception of the viewer, a more real existence, as perceived by someone looking at a painting by Mondrian.

For a contemporary audience to imagine this is difficult, accustomed as we are to seeing the abstract paintings of Mondrian in cool, bare museum spaces, behind protective glass. In this context, they appear like trophies or representatives of a brand. In the early 1990s, I had the privilege of seeing a Mondrian on display in a private home, the environment for which it was originally intended. The painting was *Tableau*, made in 1923, and was hung in an exuberantly furnished dining room in Turin, full of rugs, old sideboards, antique cupboards, and heavy curtains. Single-handedly, that painting modestly yet determinedly transformed the setting, controlled it, changed it into a space the like of which I had never seen. It appeared as an art installation: an intervention designed to have a real impact on the perception of space.

Here, production, presentation, and consumption were no longer different spheres managed by actors with different responsibilities, as was commonplace in the nineteenth century. Artists at that time created their work for a market. In the Netherlands, where for a long time dealers did not run art markets, artists would present their work and that of others through the societies they formed. At art society exhibitions, the paintings would generally be arranged by size or by medium. Presentations where the works on display aimed to be more than the sum of their parts simply did not exist. The ensemble was never seen as more important than the succession of individual paintings. Sales were the main concern. A presentation with a message of its own, an artistic statement, was simply unheard of.

The Individual Painting

What happens when we look closely at a neoplastic painting by Mondrian, say his *Composition V* of 1927. The canvas is just discernibly taller than it is wide. But the one vertical on the right cannot prevent the composition from appearing to be fairly horizontal, due to the two horizontal elements—a plane against the bottom edge and one some distance from the top edge of the canvas. The blue plane on the right and the small area of yellow in the bottom left also introduce a diagonal movement as we look, the opposite of the dynamic evoked by the lines. Mondrian introduced visual dynamism on a third level, too, through the gradual differences in the white planes.

The frame consists of four thin slats of wood, reconstructions of those that originally framed the work. They have been painted white, and they are set back from the canvas, something Mondrian had been doing since 1914. He commented on the practice in a 1941 interview. "I was the first to bring the painting forward from the frame, rather than set it within the frame. I had noted that a picture without a frame works better than a framed one and that the framing causes sensations of three dimensions. It gives an illusion of depth, so I took a frame of plain wood and mounted my picture on it. In this way I brought it to a more real existence."[3]

Bringing it "to a more real existence." Mondrian seems to have been concerned with the reality of the painting—the painted surface, the illusion of color—as an enhanced reality. This therefore also applies to the lines and color planes in—or rather on—the painting. Consider again *Composition V*. If we walk past the painting, stand at a distance, come closer, look slightly from the side, we see that, even though the lighting remains the same, the planes gradually change in space. The change is subtle, but it is there nevertheless. From the right, the blue in the white suddenly becomes a little more pronounced, whereas it softens from the left. The yellow is also changeable, as is the white. Given time, the entire thing becomes a force field in which all kinds of dynamic relationships and tensions emerge. This is because of the way the planes were painted, using vertical or horizontal brushstrokes. *Composition V* turns out to be an extraordinarily complex world in itself, which also has a huge impact on the space in which the viewer is located. The space of the viewer is changed as he or she looks at the painting in a pictorial space.

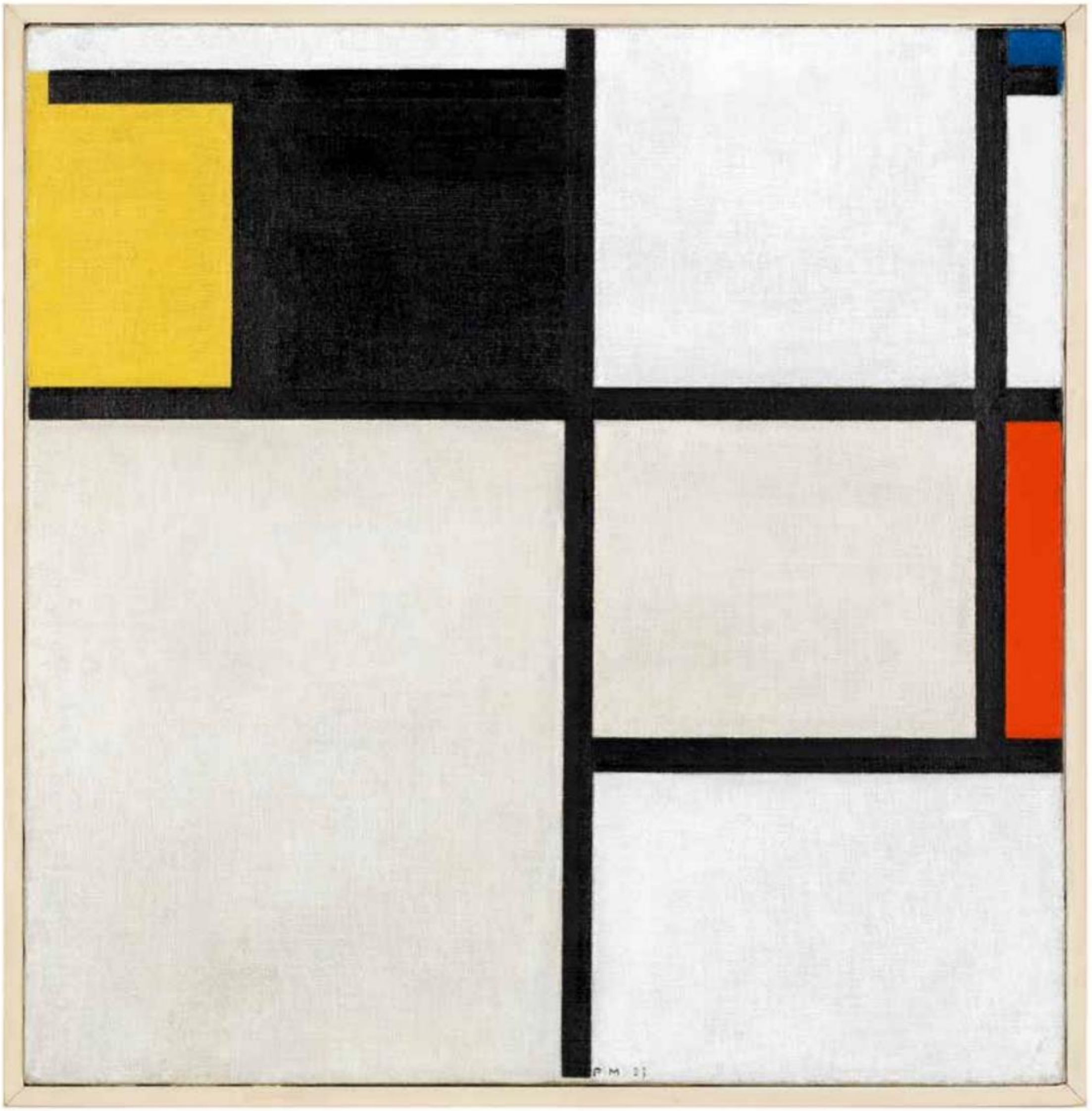
The force field that emerges over time as we look at *Composition V* also presents itself to the eye all at once, as an image, an immutable, self-contained reality that appears to the eye as a painting, a reality out of time. This double effect—a reality removed from time that manifests itself as an experience in time—is important for our definition of the pictorial space. For what Mondrian did, in every painting he made from 1919 onward, was to create a reality that came as close as possible to the experience, attempted to coincide with it, even. That is why he worked on his paintings for extended periods of time. Sometimes it would take him more than a year to apply the color to a particular plane, or an area of white, applying layer after layer to achieve the right effect, to create a level of energy that guaranteed a radiating effect, one that was real, that brought reality and illusion together, that evoked a quintessentially pictorial space.

Bringing it "to a more real existence." An artist aiming for this effect also relies on the viewer to play his or her part in the game of looking. The viewer becomes a participant in a game designed to demonstrate something. Something that is captured in the painting. The thing demonstrated is not necessarily part of the artist's intention. The artwork simply demonstrates something. So when we refer to intention, it is more likely to be the intention of the artwork than of the artist. The viewer goes along with that intention, is actively involved in reconstructing that which is being demonstrated.

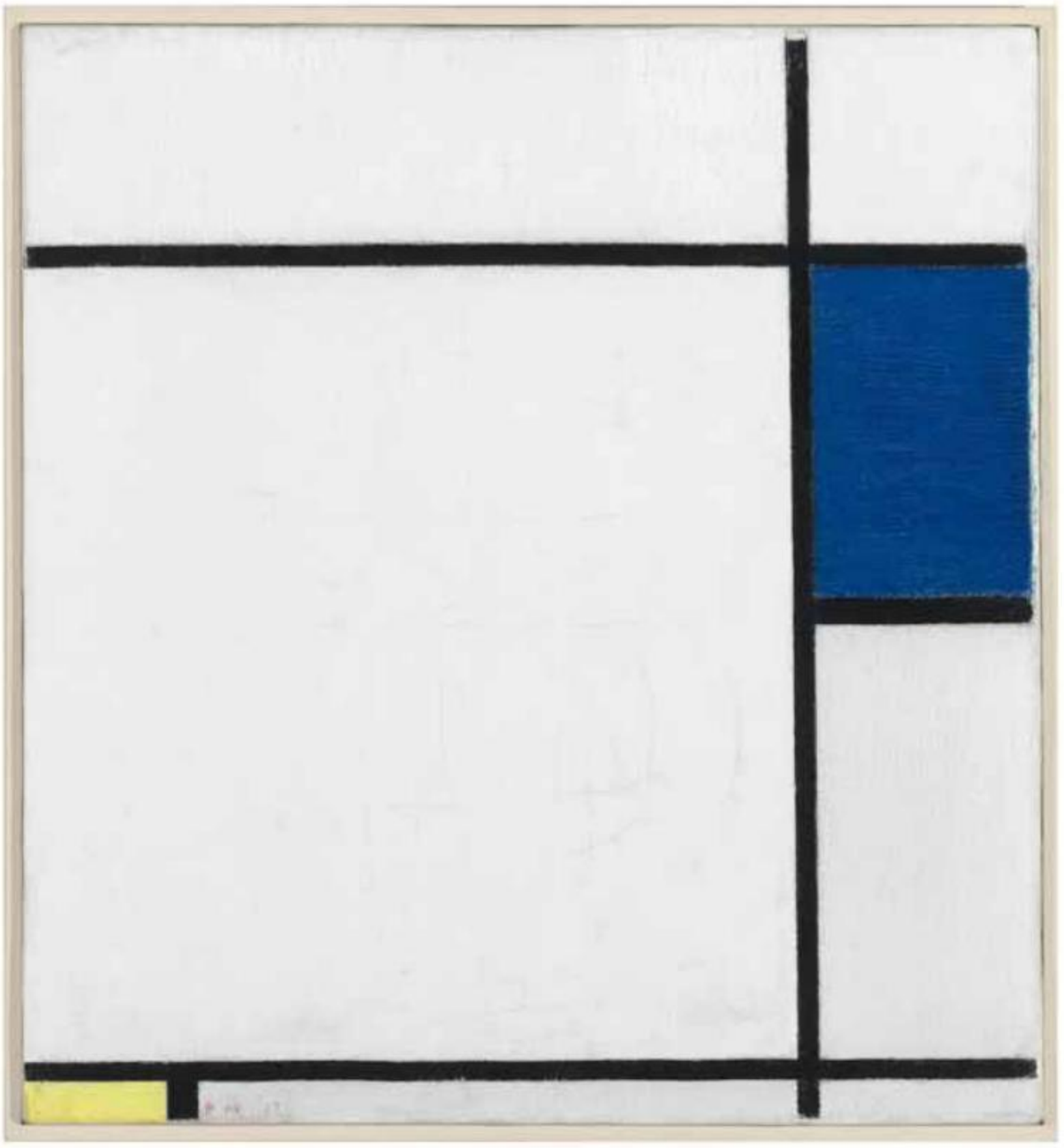
This is something quite different from the strictly formal, autonomous, self-contained world that Mondrian's paintings were once believed to represent. In the twentieth century people generally assumed Mondrian had deployed the pictorial elements—perpendicular lines, colored planes, and the noncolors gray and white—in a closed formal system. Attributing meaning to the image would have given the paintings a symbolic effect. The only thing that counted was the relationships between the elements. Neoplasticism was a pictorial vocabulary that Mondrian developed around 1920 and then, step by step, dismantled and destroyed in the course of the 1920s and 1930s.

Van Doesburg and, to a lesser extent, Georges Vantongerloo and Vilmos Huszár saw things differently. They regarded their works as worlds in themselves, structures with an agitative, destabilizing effect. They did not invite viewers along; they overwhelmed them. In 1918 van Doesburg had already announced that art should confuse viewers in confronting them with the abstract. He took quite literally the enhanced perception of reality that Mondrian wished to achieve. Van Doesburg believed color dissolved in the architectural space. Color did not lift viewers *out* of time; it placed them right *in* it. In 1924 he employed this principle in the architecture exhibition he organized at Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris, which put "les architectes du Style" on the map. Van Doesburg combined the destructive and destabilizing idiom of De Stijl with a manner of construction that attempted to open up mass, plane, and space by giving time, light, and color free rein. He blurred the distinction between interior and exterior, and he sought a space-time continuum in which there was no longer any hierarchy and the only thing that mattered was the interplay of color and perception.

But neoplasticism was not a game to Mondrian. It was a special form of art he had developed that, for future human beings, would signify the precise visual expression of the universal—the spiritual, perceptible, that which is always thus, remains immutable, and is characteristic of life. A painted composition, therefore, was about opposites and relationships, about "plastic



Piet Mondrian
Tableau (Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray)
1923



Piet Mondrian
Composition V
1927

equivalence," as Mondrian once called it, whereby the greatest possible oppositions in his compositions did not merge or dissolve, and there was no hierarchy among the contrasts.[4] The result was a radiant composition that appeared to the eye to have immense energy, a piece of art that controlled and manipulated the space around it. Art must no longer give the illusion of another reality—a representation—it must express as clearly and directly as possible the experience of the beauty of life, using color and line reduced to their essential forms: primary colors and horizontals and verticals.[5]

Multiple Paintings

For the viewer, this experience—guided and assisted by the compelling nature of the painting and the real sense of the pictorial space—defines the intended visual interest of the painting. When a single painting is exhibited, the "mechanics" of viewing is simply an exchange between the viewer and that particular work. But where multiple paintings are shown together, in a selection, a narrative emerges, an assertion, in which the various paintings conspire, carrying the viewer along in the game, which transcends the intended visual interest of the individual painting.

Mondrian was aware of this, but he never developed the idea. He perhaps considered it to be simply a part of the tacit knowledge available only to a craftsman, practical knowledge that needs no discussion. He did occasionally give a glimpse of his thoughts on the matter in letters about exhibitions and presentations, however. In a 1934 letter to Jean Gorin he suggested that the diverging intentions of artists were why he preferred to exhibit alone.[5] Exhibiting with others automatically prompted an urge to compare, and other artists' work might outwardly resemble his. Other artists, however, were unaware of the major differences in intention.

And what mattered was intentions. Intentions needed to be revealed through comparison of the selected works on display. In a letter to architect J.J.P. Oud in Rotterdam, who had asked him about a request for work for an exhibition in the Netherlands, Mondrian replied that he had nothing. "One must be enough for an exhibition. Of course they want 'fillers,' but other work would serve this purpose just as well!"[6] And two days later, when he finally acquiesced, he wrote, "I would not loan any paintings to be exhibited (paintings of your own, I mean) for they generally become slightly damaged. And two is sufficient. Too many together is not good, in fact."[7] What Mondrian was concerned with at that moment was what the combination of works would tell, if anything. They were a painting from 1920 and one from 1927, two works that revealed nothing in combination, apart from where he was in 1920 and where he had arrived by 1927.

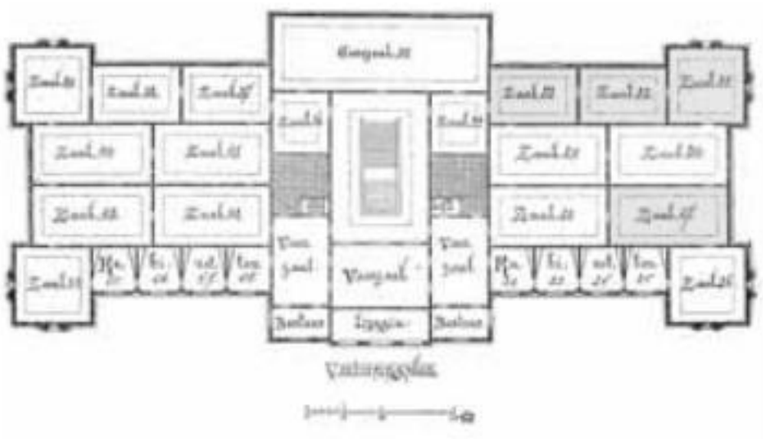
Not every exhibition had underlying intentions. Sometimes Mondrian simply submitted what he had available at the time—perhaps only a single painting or a selection of work that might sell well. This was, for example, the case in 1912, when he tried to sell some old work at an exhibition in Domburg, and in 1926, at an exhibition at Kühl & Kühn in Dresden, where he hoped to sell a large portion of his current production. Nor did he concern himself much with exhibitions organized by others, such as the major retrospective mounted by his friend Salomon Slijper in 1922 in honor of Mondrian's fiftieth birthday. Mondrian did not want to be involved, other than shouting some encouragement from the sidelines.

We must also bear in mind that, at the time Mondrian was active, the actual hanging of the paintings in the exhibition space was left to others. This meant that any intentions might well come to nothing because the person who actually hung the work had no idea what was meant. Nevertheless, Mondrian insisted on his work being arranged as he had envisaged by giving the paintings titles that indicated the order in which they should be viewed. He ordered them using numbers, characters, or Roman numerals so as to safeguard the visual interest of the order of presentation and to highlight the relationship between the paintings rather than their autonomous nature.

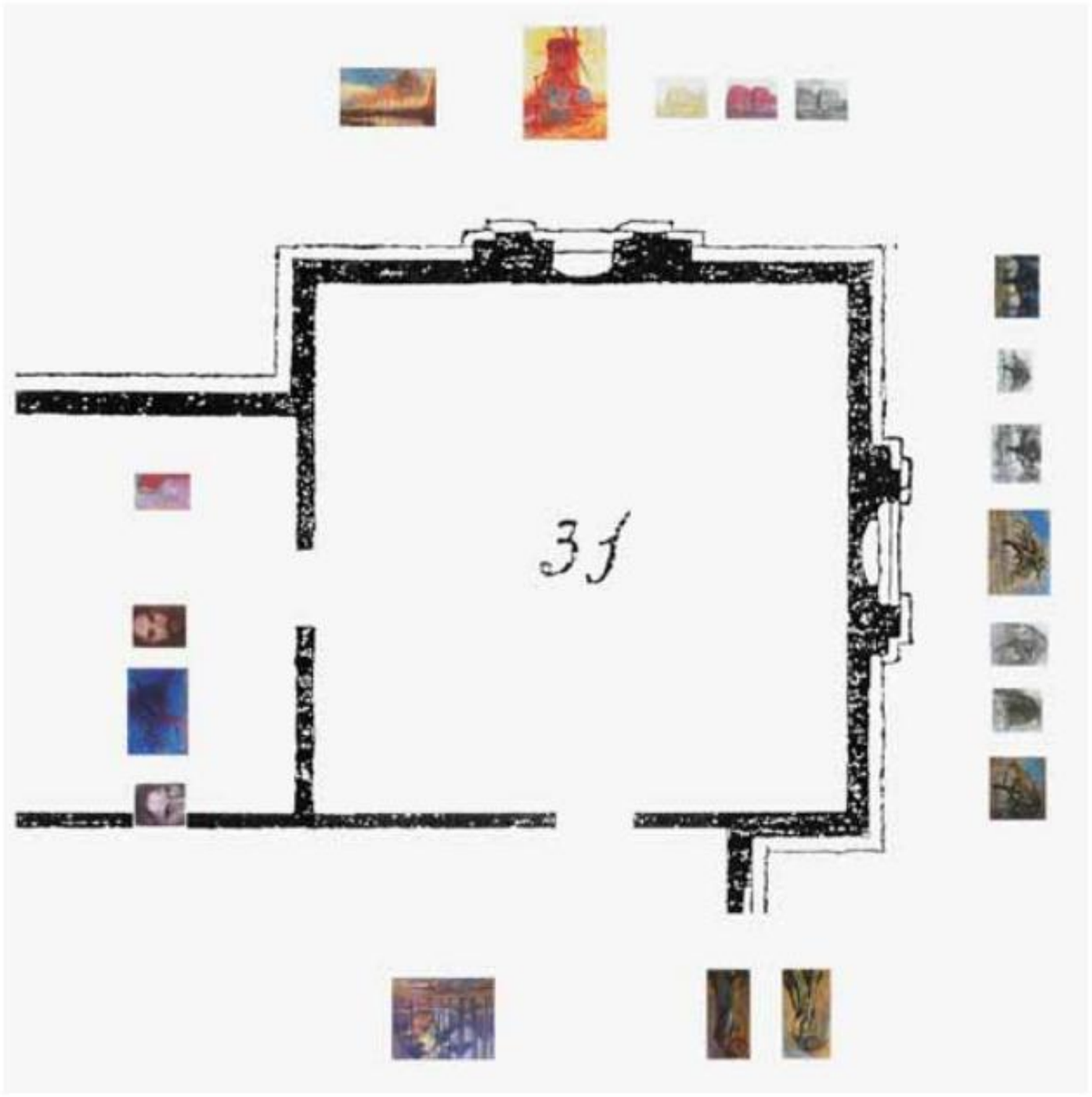
Exhibiting

Mondrian did not take this approach to exhibiting right from the outset. His first presentations were traditional, concerned with convincing the viewer of the quality of the artist and his work. The artist was creating a market, as explored in chapters 1 and 2.

The exhibition at St. Luke's in Amsterdam in 1900, which is the second to feature in this show, demonstrates perfectly what Mondrian intended. By



Floor plan of the Stedelijk Museum first-floor exhibition spaces; rooms in which Mondrian showed his works are indicated in gray



Floor plan of the corner room of the Stedelijk Museum's first-floor exhibition space, showing the possible locations of the works by Mondrian in the exhibition of January 1909

exhibiting many small works, early landscapes, he was able to showcase his technical skill and the intimacy, as he put it, of his representation, and the addition of a couple of large works attracted attention.[8] Both the first and second installations in the present exhibition show Mondrian as a participant in a commercial market, an artist who entered a public arena where fellow artists, critics, and the public determined who got the spoils.

Though Mondrian occasionally sold work through these channels, he was apparently not satisfied with this mechanism of making, showing, and selling, as evidenced by a letter he and fellow artists Jan Sluyters and Cees Spoor sent to the Amsterdam city council in autumn 1908.

> To their Honors the Mayor and Aldermen of Amsterdam,
>
> The undersigned, C. Spoor, P. Mondrian and J. Sluyters, all painters of Amsterdam, take the liberty of turning to the council to respectfully request access in the month of January 1909 to the space at the Stedelijk Museum necessary to stage an exhibition of their art.
>
> The reason that has given rise to this request lies in the fact that each of the undersigned is on a unique personal quest in his art which, because of the many and various artworks surrounding them, and the very small number that can necessarily be submitted and admitted, can never be seen to its full advantage at larger exhibitions.
>
> In the hope that your honors will look favorably upon this, our request, we remain, with due esteem,
> Your willing servants, C. Spoor, P. Mondrian, J. Sluyters[9]

The artists presented three arguments to the city council: theirs was a personal quest, their work was not seen to its full advantage in normal exhibitions, and they were not able to show enough to make their

point. The letter had the desired effect, and the three soon began to prepare for the exhibition.

Each of them chose a different strategy for the Stedelijk exhibition. Spoor opened proceedings in the side galleries and two main galleries with paintings hung symmetrically by size, in a classic nineteenth-century manner, with no concern for development or position. To indicate some form of development, however, the artist used the letters A to D to indicate to which of the four periods of his development the works belonged.

Sluyters opted for a thematic strategy. He opened with a gallery full of caricatures and intimate portraits. The next gallery featured mythological, academic images combined with impressionist cityscapes he had just painted in Paris. In his final gallery he showed his large *Bal Tabarin* of 1907, surrounded by portraits and landscapes notable for their coarse design and expressive use of color. In his presentation, the random subjectivity of successive forms of expression would reveal some kind of history.

Evolution

Mondrian took a quite different approach to presenting his work in Amsterdam. He arranged his contributions as a triptych, with his most recent work in the corner gallery, sketches in one of the side galleries, and his more sophisticated landscapes in one or two other galleries.

This was a cyclical approach. While the creative process is inherently chaotic, going off at tangents over time without any clear progression emerging, it can still be represented as a model if presented as a sudden metamorphosis—unguided and uncontrolled—from the travails of working with the material to the spiritual clarity of the completed work; that is, as a creative act. Making art is a question of progress, though the destination is not known, and the only compass is the reality of the individual painting, so Mondrian believed.[10] The process was repeated over and over again.

For Mondrian, who never explored in depth the scientific theories of evolution, the idea of the trinity came from theosophy, particularly from the lectures

Piet Mondrian, *Self-Portrait*, 1908
Evening; The Red Tree, 1908–1910
Self-Portrait, 1908

Rudolf Steiner gave in Amsterdam in 1908, which Mondrian attended. Theosophy thus briefly supported the development and articulation of ideas that formed themselves while he worked.

But how precisely should we interpret Mondrian's practice at this point? Mondrian was silent on the matter. He did, however, paint a triptych a year later that he called *Evolution*. This painting has either been embraced by modernist-minded critics and Mondrian specialists as a key work or dismissed as an anomaly, a complete failure: too symbolist, too theosophical, a bombastic representation of human history. Too often the critics overlooked the fact that what they were condemning were interpretations, the various readings offered of the painting. And there were many. The one that probably comes closest to the truth was offered by a critic who wrote his review in 1911, probably after speaking to Mondrian and agreeing on an interpretation with him.[11]

With *Evolution*, Mondrian created a pictorial space in which three canvases hung alongside each other and could be seen at a single glance, like three individual parts of a single visual message. The outer panels were hung slightly lower than the central panel, emphasizing its elevated nature. Less well known is that the central panel, as well as being placed higher, also protruded an extra three centimeters or so, as if attempting to enter the viewer's space. In 1910 this was Mondrian's way of making the pictorial space tangible and perceptible. The three parts remained separated to emphasize the step-by-step development from one to the other, and the sum equaled more than the parts, the visual impact of the whole transcending the individual elements. Mondrian's presentation of his works in 1909 at the Stedelijk Museum, where they were spread across three or four galleries, worked the same way.

In Amsterdam the paintings conspired and collaborated, but they also worked against one another in the pictorial space they created, the galleries more or less working in collaboration, yet the relationship of one gallery to the next intended to be conflicting. The presentation in Amsterdam showed, in a synchronous way, diachrony, or development over time. It was a model of the ideal of art, the ultimate artwork. That is, Mondrian took what normally occurs over time in a linear manner—the process of making art—and folded it in on itself, divided into three, making the linear suddenly appear cyclical. This implies a process of growth, decline, and progress and also suggests something about the function of art in society as a whole. It is an image, an example, of how society behaves and develops.

Piet Mondrian, *Evolution*, 1911
(reconstruction of the original hanging)

Mondrian stuck to this model his entire life. The trinity played a crucial role in the underlying meaning of all the larger exhibitions he curated himself, from the show at Galerie Walrecht in The Hague in 1914 to his first solo exhibition at Valentine Gallery in New York in 1942.[12] This mechanism was also at play in some of his smaller presentations in Paris, London, and New York. From 1929 to 1938 Mondrian worked on a manuscript, "L'art nouveau—la vie nouvelle, L'art et la vie."[13] In the text, which Mondrian never published, he explored how art, after centuries of slow evolution, had suddenly become abstract. Mondrian called this change a "mutation," an evolutionary concept denoting a sudden leap from an existing genus to a completely new one.[14] He saw the sudden emergence of his own abstract art—from 1907/1908 to 1918, over a period ten years—as an example of such a mutation. Painters had always tended to deviate from the real world as they depicted it. That tendency had grown inexorably stronger. At the same time, Mondrian wrote, every painter had the tendency in every painting to emphasize the relationships of the line, plane surface, and color.[15] Those relationships had become ever more pronounced, a combination that prompted a leap to a completely new art.

And just as the new art had emerged among the art of old—new, somewhat awkward but very much alive—so the new life would appear, Mondrian argued. Art showed how the new life would emerge by freeing itself of the tyranny of the representation of old patterns and by deliberately focusing on achieving pure relationships among people. "If art is an expression of life and has proceeded further than many can imagine," he wrote, "then we can take it as read that the new life will be a civilization of pure relationships."[16] Abstract art and the presentation of abstract art, individually or in select groups, provided the living proof.

This is not a teleology, however, an explanation of something as a function of its end—an accusation sometimes leveled at Mondrian. The pictorial space must not be confused with the real, political, or social space. It is a space of the imagination. Mondrian was a painter, not a politician. He could show only the power of the image, time and again, the persuasive nature of the pictorial space, which became apparent in his unique personal quest to reveal the power of painting.

1. Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 41. For the Dutch original, see *De Stijl* 1, no. 5 (March 1918): 78.

2. Ibid.

3. James Johnson Sweeney, "Piet Mondrian," *Museum of Art Bulletin* 12, no. 4 (1945): 2–12.

4. Piet Mondrian, *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe général de l'equivalence plastique* (Paris: Edition de L'Effort Moderne, 1920). The artist later used the concept in "L'Art nouveau—la vie nouvelle," the manuscript on which he worked until at least 1938. See *The New Art*, 248.

5. Mondrian, *Le Néo-Plasticisme*, 3.

6. Piet Mondrian to Jean Gorin, January 31, 1934, as cited in Yve-Alain Bois, "Lettres à Jean Gorin," *Macula* 2 (1977): 130.

7. Piet Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, December 17, 1927, in Oud-archive, Fondation Custodia, Paris.

8. Piet Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, December 19, 1927, in Oud-archive, Fondation Custodia, Paris.

9. For Mondrian, the notion of *innigheid* was of great importance. For want of a better term, it is here translated as "intimacy." In the Dutch it connotes the *reciprocity* of intimacy; that is, the exchange between work and viewer on one side, work and artist on the other, and, in the middle, the relation between the reality of the picture and the reality depicted by the picture. See Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan: Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven. Een biografie* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2016), 299, which quotes a May 3, 1916, letter by the artist to his friend Sal Slijper in which Mondrian brings up the notion of *innigheid*.

10. Letter by Cornelis Spoor, Piet Mondrian and Jan Sluyters, December 1908, in Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.

11. Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*.

12. Arnold Saalborn, "Piet Mondriaan en Anderen," *De Kunst* 4, no. 197 (November 4, 1911): 74–77.

13. For an elaborate description and interpretation of the 1914 Walrecht exhibition in The Hague, see Hans Janssen, *Mondrian and Cubism: Paris 1912–1914* (London: Ridinghouse, 2016).

14. For the most extensive publication history of this text, see Louis Veen, *Piet Mondrian: The Complete Writings: Essays and Notes in Original Versions* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2017), 376–80.

15. Mondrian, "The New Art—The New Life," in *The New Art*, 246.

16. Ibid., 149.

1.

Dutch Beginnings

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Jug with Onions*
1892

In May 1892, at the age of twenty, Piet Mondrian took part in the annual exhibition of the Kunstliefde artists' society in Utrecht. The society was a bulwark of conservatism, devoted to the making and appreciation of art, and its members came mainly from the Utrecht nobility. Mondrian, born in Amersfoort to a family with an "anti-revolutionary" (i.e., royalist) tradition, moved easily in such circles. The Mondriaan family was petit bourgeois. People of modest means who clung to the national values of king and fatherland, they were supported by their Protestant faith, which gave them a means of coping with the dangers of modernity, whose approach could be felt even in the small town of Amersfoort.

Mondrian's father was headmaster of an elementary school in Amersfoort. He also spent much of his time fighting for the rights of the anti-revolutionary petit bourgeoisie. In 1880 he moved the family to Winterswijk, where he became head of a larger school with a more promising future. But there the contrasts were greater between his anti-revolutionary ideals and the unstoppable advance of the modern age, which sought to recast modern life in a more materialistic form.

By 1880 Winterswijk had grown into a center of the textile industry. The Mondriaans lived in an elegant house next to a steam-driven mill that produced textiles day and night. On the other side of their house was the Hoogere Burger School (HBS, literally the School for Higher Citizens), a government-run high school of the type introduced throughout the country in 1863. The Winterswijk HBS was established in 1870. Its graduates were technically and commercially oriented, people who could contribute to the emerging materialistic culture. The impact of the new school was huge. A modern, materialistic culture had found its way to rural Winterswijk, resulting in a period of great prosperity around the turn of the century, a golden age for the region.

The local population, socially and culturally rooted in a much older world governed by traditional values, did not value all the innovations. The community clung to an old way of life focused above all on day-to-day survival, and neither religion nor technological progress mattered much to them. Modern society with its modern forms of organization—including the Protestant education offered by Mondriaan senior—had little traction in this world.

Against this background Mondrian, around 1888, decided to devote his life to painting. The style of painting he initially engaged in is nicely illustrated by his submissions to the exhibition in Utrecht—three exceedingly traditional still lifes. The key signs of craftsmanship in traditional Dutch art were whether one could paint the fur of a hare in such a way that even the seventeenth-century master Jan Baptist Weenix paled in comparison; whether one was able to paint apples in such a way that they were lifelike and juicy enough to approximate the still lifes of Michiel Simons; or whether one could paint onions and a jug as convincingly as Jan Davidszoon de Heem.

The seventeenth century was the benchmark. Yet none of Mondrian's three paintings took the theatrical approach common in seventeenth-century art. The hare and the jugs loom out of a deep, indefinable darkness and lie bare on what appears to be a table, evenly lit in a room that is otherwise empty. Only the apples are highlighted—by a strange bright light from an unknown source, shining on the apple that has rolled out of the tilted basket.

Mondrian did not select these objects because of any deeper symbolic meaning. Only their shape mattered, the texture of the surface, the colors. The choice to emphasize these characteristics suggests the influence of nineteenth-century French artists like Gustave Courbet and Antoine Vollon and, even further back, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. This can be explained only by Piet Mondrian's early association with Jan Braet von Überfeldt, an elderly artist who lived in Doetinchem, some thirty kilometers from Winterswijk. Braet had portfolios full of drawings, engravings, lithographs, and etchings. At around the age of sixteen or seventeen, Mondrian liked to visit him and would borrow pictures to help develop his own work.

The three paintings he entered in the Kunstliefde exhibition thus testify to a maker who was doing his utmost to become a modern artist. They suggest a desire to allow room both for representation and for

Piet Mondrian
Dead Hare
1891

letting it take flight at the same time. However, the shortcomings in his method impede the visual effect. An attentive viewer is almost forced to conclude that someone has *attempted* to make something here. The works show barely any magic of illusion. On April 27 the critic of the local *Utrechtsch provinciaal en stedelijk dagblad* newspaper wrote, "He can, it seems to me, do more than he gives us here. With great exactitude he paints a hare, apples, onions, pots and pans—pretty in color, irreproachable in form, brightly lit, but there is something essential lacking: poetry, mood."[1]

The reviewer highlights two aspects that would come to characterize Mondrian's early work: the need to render as truly as possible a depiction of the characteristic, the natural, without idealizing or generalizing, completely in agreement with the seventeenth-century Dutch art tradition in which he was rooted; and, at the same time, the urge to reject all tradition and trust solely his own experience, cautiously and attentively interrogating the object of experience in search of a real meeting point, a veritable mutuality, in which the uniqueness of the object might announce itself—here, the texture and the tactile qualities of the hare, the sweet roundness of the apples, and the stubborn heaviness of the earthenware—something that had not yet been seen by anyone else, let alone been captured in a painting. This principle was regarded as a timeless feature of Dutch art. The artist, if unfettered and pure in the face of nature, free of convention, and fundamentally driven by a modest attitude, would almost automatically reveal something higher, something divine. These are the characteristics of a tradition of Dutch realism of which Mondrian was also part. It was a tradition set in stone, one that was difficult to escape.

1. "e..." [pseudonym for an anonymous critic], [untitled review], *Utrechtsch provinciaal en stedelijk dagblad*, April 27, 1892, as cited in Robert Welsh, *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1966), 30.

Piet Mondrian
Basket with Apples
1891

2.

The Potential of Modernity

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian
Evening on the Weesperzijde
1901–1902

In 1892, Piet Mondrian left Winterswijk for Amsterdam, to study at the Rijksacademie van beeldende kunsten (State Academy of the Visual Arts). This was a concession to his parents, who were concerned their son would not be able to earn a living as an artist. In the eight years that followed, Mondrian evolved into an urban nomad. By 1900 he had moved house six times, revealing himself as a "modern" citizen who paid rent weekly for a garret in one of the speculator-built houses that were proliferating all over Amsterdam, in one neighborhood after another, all built of cheap materials, with shoddy workmanship, and rented out for large sums.

His earliest biographer, Michel Seuphor, was the first to write that Mondrian was impoverished, that he never sold anything, and that he found it difficult to make ends meet.[1] Many of the scholars who followed made the artist's impoverishment into an unwavering truth. This may partly be true, especially in the first years after he moved to Amsterdam. He later wrote in an autobiographical text that he had to do all kinds of things to earn a living.[2] He painted portraits, copied paintings in museums, and even drew bacteria for a scientific researcher at Leiden University. But he also received a royal stipend, a privilege that was not available to all. Mondrian studied diligently at the academy, though without excelling. He attempted to improve his drawing skills, training himself in stable shapes, compact compositions, and accurate execution. In his free time, however, he enjoyed life on the outskirts of Amsterdam, producing small oil paintings that he sold from door to door.

From 1898 onward, all signs are that things were going well. Mondrian had rented a large studio above a bar on the southern edge of the city by around 1900, as well as a garret on Albert Cuypstraat, on the other side of the Amstel River, in the heart of the Pijp neighborhood, a new working-class district. While a laborer would pay an average of two to two-and-a-half guilders a week for a small dwelling, young Mondrian was paying seven guilders rent for these two residences. This suggests the artist was not short of money. Mondrian seems also to have been spending a lot at this time. He dressed fashionably, frequented the better tailors, and was keen to be seen when he went to concerts or the theater, either alone or with friends. He also appears to have taken financial responsibility for his two brothers when they joined him in Amsterdam around 1902.

The twenty-seven-year-old artist became acquainted with the nightlife of the capital's bars, nightclubs, cabarets, and brothels. The Pijp had a flourishing Jewish culture that added a multicultural flavor to life in the neighborhood. But none of this was reflected in Mondrian's work. He modestly continued to make studies and sketches of landscapes in and around Amsterdam, on the edges of the city, trying to attain a heartfelt "closeness" or "intimacy"—as he would later refer to it—that connected to his own perception.[3]

Amsterdam was an artistic melting pot at this time. The solid tradition of the seventeenth century was the main ingredient. When plans were announced to erect a statue in Haarlem to the seventeenth-century master Frans Hals, Mondrian joined many of his fellow artists in donating a work of art whose sale would help fund the statue. This somewhat antiquated artistic environment nonetheless provided fertile ground for a range of artistic movements around 1900. The calm, self-confident artistic tradition of the Netherlands was gradually opening itself up to unfamiliar foreign influences.

This was reflected in the looser impressionistic brushwork of Amsterdam artists like George Hendrik Breitner and Isaac Israëls; the meticulous japonist serenity in the work of Floris Verster; the symbolism first revealed in the Netherlands in the work of Jan Toorop, Antoon Derkinderen, and Johan Thorn Prikker; and the free representation combining the formal and the spiritual that typified the work of Paul Gabriël. In 1942 Mondrian was at pains to point out to a journalist that he had grown up in a conservative atmosphere, surrounded by painters who were either pedantic and naturalistic or were influenced by some mystical attitude.[4] The young artist trying to maneuver between these two trends—that is, the Scylla of tradition and the Charybdis of modern tendencies—faced a difficult task.

Mondrian's contribution to the 10th Annual Exhibition of the Guild of Saint Luke was a showcase of precisely these tendencies. He selected five paintings: a large, detailed still life; a simple and intimate arrangement of

Piet Mondrian
Still Life with Oranges
1900

four oranges and a Chinese porcelain dish; a resolute portrait of the youngest member of the Dutch royal family; a tranquil view of Amsterdam's waterways; and a sketchy painting of two chrysanthemums. Mondrian apparently chose these paintings to show that he could turn his hand to anything. But that is only partly true. He was not a hail-fellow-well-met artist. In conversation with the same journalist who interviewed him in 1942, he stressed his good fortune to have been part of the most firmly rooted tradition in art, one that went back to Jan van Eyck and Pieter Breugel the Younger and included both Rembrandt and Vincent van Gogh, a tradition both realist and spiritual.[5] And that had consequences for his attitude to making art. Mondrian was painting "in the first person"; that is, he was not seeking to conform to external norms, to the fashion of the day. He did not set out to process influences or to "copy" anything. In a modest range of idioms—the portrait, the still life, the symbolist evening landscape—he explored the potential of experimentation, of painting. For him, "looking through your own lens" was of paramount importance.

He made these comments more than forty years after the Guild of Saint Luke exhibition, so it is unlikely that around 1900 he would have had such a clear self-image. Still, in the paintings he selected for the exhibition, Mondrian leaned on tradition as he sought his own visual idiom.

Note: Since the present whereabouts of *Still Life* is unknown, the reconstruction of the contribution of Mondrian to the 10th Annual Exhibition of the Guild of Saint Luke was supplemented with a similar painting, *Still Life with a Plaster Bust*, of 1902.

1. Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1956), 51.

2. Jay Bradley, "Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944: Greatest Dutch Painter of Our Time," in *Knickerbocker Weekly* 3, no. 51 (February 14, 1944): 17.

3. Piet Mondrian to Sal Slijper, May 3, 1916, in Sal Slijper Archive (0150), Dutch Institute for Art History, The Hague, as quoted in Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan: Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven: Een biografie* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2016), 299.

4. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Meaning of Mondrian," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2, no. 8 (December 1943): 64.

5. Ibid.

Piet Mondrian
Portrait of Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands (1880–1962)
1896

Piet Mondrian
Still Life with Plaster Bust of G. Benivieni
1902–1903

Piet Mondrian
Two Chrysanthemums
1899–1900

3.

Individuals and Communities: Art and Architecture ca. 1905

Michael White

H.P. Berlage, Stock Exchange of Amsterdam,
also known as the Beurs van Berlage, 1903

Modern trading in stocks and shares was invented in Amsterdam at the beginning of the seventeenth century. By the late nineteenth century, the city was undergoing a revival as a financial center, parallel to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the Netherlands as a whole. The city council did not want their newly planned stock exchange to be the preserve of just an elite group of traders, though. The council wanted it to reflect the whole community's stake in the country's economic success. Council members had radical social goals, too, including wanting to expand democratic participation and improve living conditions for all. They therefore entrusted the project to a like-minded architect, Hendrik Petrus Berlage. To build with, he chose neither stone nor marble, the distinguished materials of classical antiquity. This was not to be a temple of Mammon. Instead, Berlage selected humble brick as his principle element, enormous expanses of which he left unadorned. Brick spoke to him of the capacity for a multitude of smaller elements to work together to create something much greater than each on its own or, as he dramatically stated, "as a lone individual nothing, as a mass great power."[1]

When the stock exchange, or Beurs van Berlage as it has come to be known, opened in 1903, it was received as a defining example of what was termed in the Netherlands *Gemeenschapskunst*, or community art. In addition to its acres of brick and limited decoration, the exchange also included sculpture, wall paintings, tiles, stained glass, and even poetry that Berlage had commissioned from a group of artists. He intended for the exchange to become an artistic demonstration of collectivity. As part of their contribution, the artists graced the stock exchange with images representing industrial labor and women's rights, as well as poetic inscriptions prophesying world unity.

Gemeenschapskunst, a term first used as far back as 1892 to identify a major trend in Dutch art, was understood in multiple ways, each of which figured in the stock exchange and would later echo in the activities of De Stijl. The term meant an art intended for public consumption embedded in the revival of the monumental arts that gathered pace in the Netherlands through the second half of the nineteenth century. It also meant an art that aimed at social cohesion, either by recovering earlier ideas of community life founded on religious faith or by proclaiming the formation of newly imagined communities in the modern age. Finally, it meant artists working collaboratively, performing the kinds of community their art represented. The stock exchange was one of Amsterdam's most prominent public buildings. Berlage used his commission to ensure that it spoke to the aspiration for a free and fair social order and did so by bringing together a group of artists who shared his political views.

The impact of the Beurs van Berlage on other architects and artists was manifold. Some of Berlage's ambition to create a collective style would later resurface in De Stijl. Some of his adroit use of materials, such as brick and tile, would inspire the architects of what came to be known as the Amsterdam School, briefly rivals to De Stijl. For the editor-in-chief of the influential journal *Architectura*, J.L.M. Lauweriks, the Beurs was a major step toward defining the essence of architecture itself. Lauweriks, like many Dutch architects and artists of the day, was seeking the underlying laws of existence and believed art could provide the link between modern scientific and religious ideas. In 1894, he joined the Theosophical Society, an organization dedicated to universal unity and the study of the unexplained and comparative religion. Within a few years, Lauweriks helped found the society's Vahana Lodge in Amsterdam, at which he and others taught courses in drawing, art criticism, and aesthetics based primarily on the use of geometric systems, alongside the society's usual focus on esoteric thought.

For all the sense of collectivity in the air, the year 1903 was not one of great social unity in the Netherlands. Instead, it was a moment of intense political unrest, with Amsterdam at its epicenter. The year began with a dispute in the docks over compulsory union membership. This quickly spread into a larger confrontation between unions and government over workers' rights, leading to a railway strike that brought the transport infrastructure grinding to a halt. The governing anti-revolutionary party, led by Abraham Kuyper, to whom the Mondriaan family was close, panicked and pushed through emergency legislation. Kuyper used mass sackings and military force to break up the strike, but his vigorous action led to his political downfall in elections two years later.

Against this backdrop Piet Mondrian decided to leave the city for a while, and, on the invitation of a friend who had recently moved to Brabant in the south of the country, he spent the whole of the year 1904 in the small village of Uden, painting the local scenery and residents. Similar to the close-by village of Nuenen, where Vincent van Gogh lived and worked in the early 1880s, the inhabitants of Uden were mainly land workers whose way of life had little changed in recent years, although new train and tram connections were bringing different people to the area, such as artists. Whether the example of van Gogh in particular is what attracted Mondrian to Brabant is unknown; he might simply have desired to be closer to his friend. Nevertheless, he shared something of van Gogh's attraction to the lives of the small farming communities in the region. As van Gogh, who was born and raised in Brabant, once wrote nostalgically to his brother while living in the United Kingdom, "Brabant is ever Brabant, and one's home country is ever one's home country and lands of exile lands of exile."[2]

On his return to Amsterdam in 1905, Mondrian furnished his new studio apartment with simple items that would not have looked out of place in a Brabant cottage. He also had the opportunity to see a huge van Gogh exhibition staged at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; it included over four hundred items. Two of the contributors to the stock exchange building had long been admirers of van Gogh and had played important roles in the first exhibitions dedicated to him. Jan Toorop, who later provided tile paintings depicting female emancipation and agricultural labor to Berlage's project, organized the first van Gogh retrospective in The Hague in 1892. For its second showing, in Amsterdam, Richard Roland Holst, who made wall paintings showing mining and dock work for the stairwells of the stock exchange, produced a frontispiece and foreword for the catalog.[3]

Jan Toorop, *The Past*, 1903, tile painting at the entrance of the Beurs van Berlage

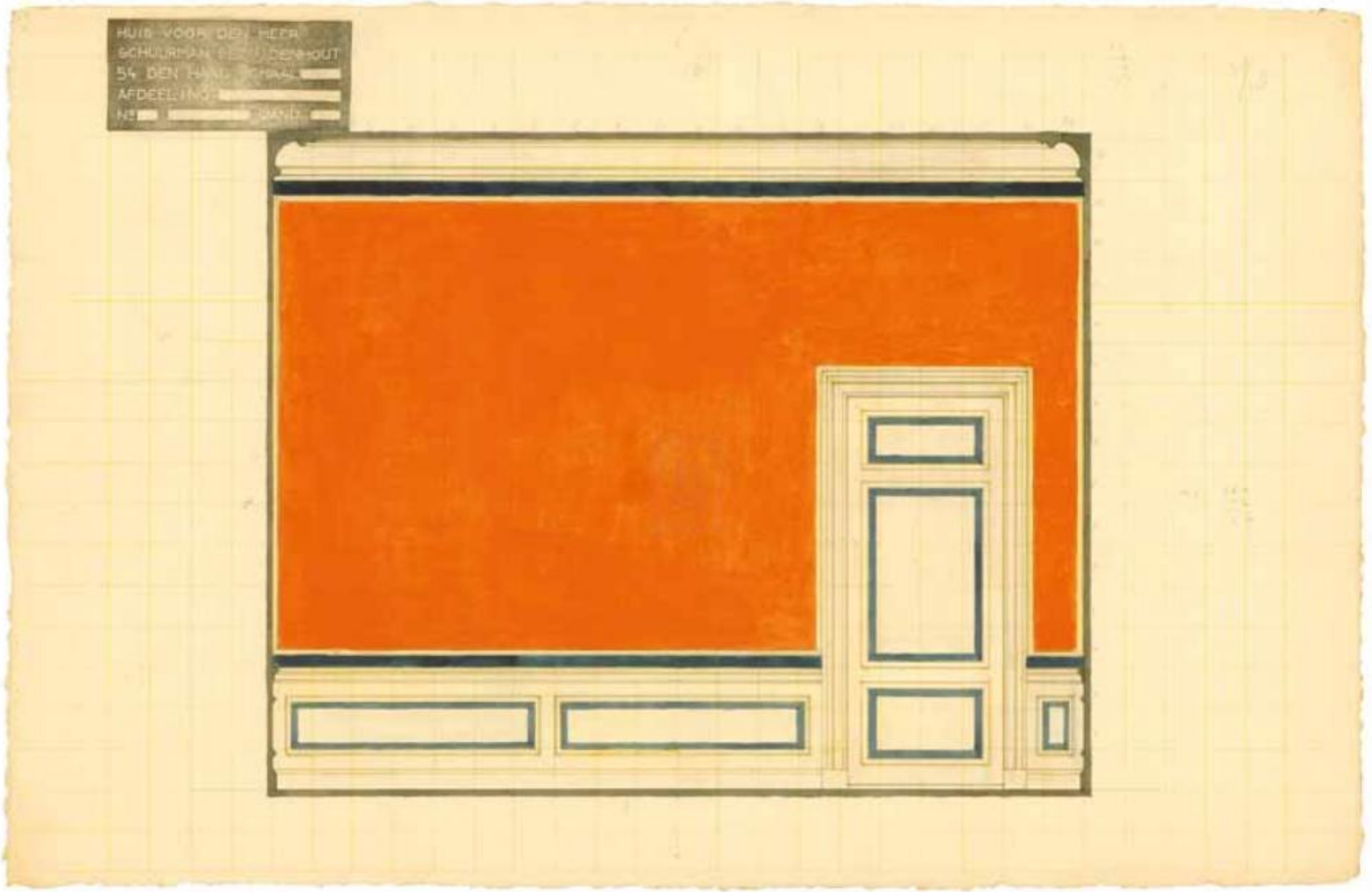
The 1892 exhibitions had focused primarily on the artistic qualities of van Gogh's paintings and drawings. Innovatively for the time, the works on display were all put into plain white frames, which made them stand out dramatically against the blue-green wall covering. However, by 1905, critics and the public were paying more and more attention to van Gogh the person; stories about his troubled life and untimely demise dominated the discussion. Plans to publish van Gogh's correspondence had been drawn up almost immediately after his death in 1890 but were not realized until 1915. Roland Holst was one of the first to quote parts of van Gogh's letters in his 1892 catalog foreword. By 1905, many further sections had found their way into print as interest in van Gogh's life grew. Roland Holst found himself needing to defend van Gogh against the relentless attention to his personality. Ironically, one of the key artists of "community art," with all its aspirations to produce a collective style for the modern age, demanded that everyone "leave a great lonely person like van Gogh alone. Misunderstanding fits his art. It is the fate itself of his art."[4] These debates would later be replayed in connection to Mondrian and De Stijl.

1. Berlage quoted in B.W., "Baksteenbouw" [a report on a lecture given by Berlage in Delft in 1911], *Klei* 3, no. 5 (1911): 71.

2. Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 26 August 1876, "Vincent van Gogh: The Letters," Van Gogh Museum / Huygens ING, http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let089/letter.html.

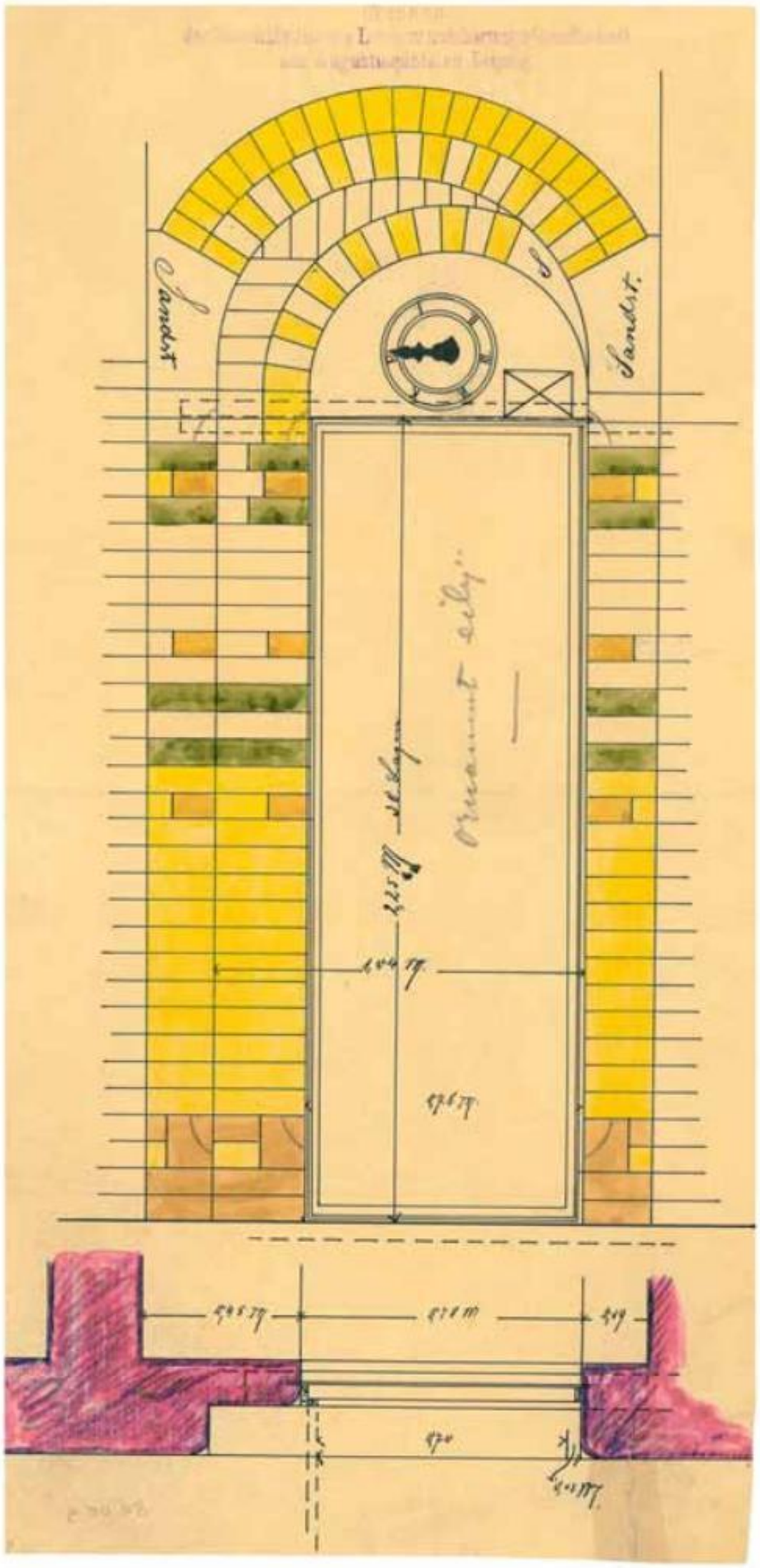
3. Richard Roland Holst, foreword to *Tentoonstelling der nagelaten werken van Vincent van Gogh* (Amsterdam: Kunstzaal Panorama, 1892), n.p.

4. Richard Roland Holst, "Antikritiek," *De Kroniek* (1905), quoted in Lieske Tibbe, *R.N. Roland Holst: Arbeid en schoonheid vereend* (Amsterdam: Archtectura & Natura, 1994), 64.



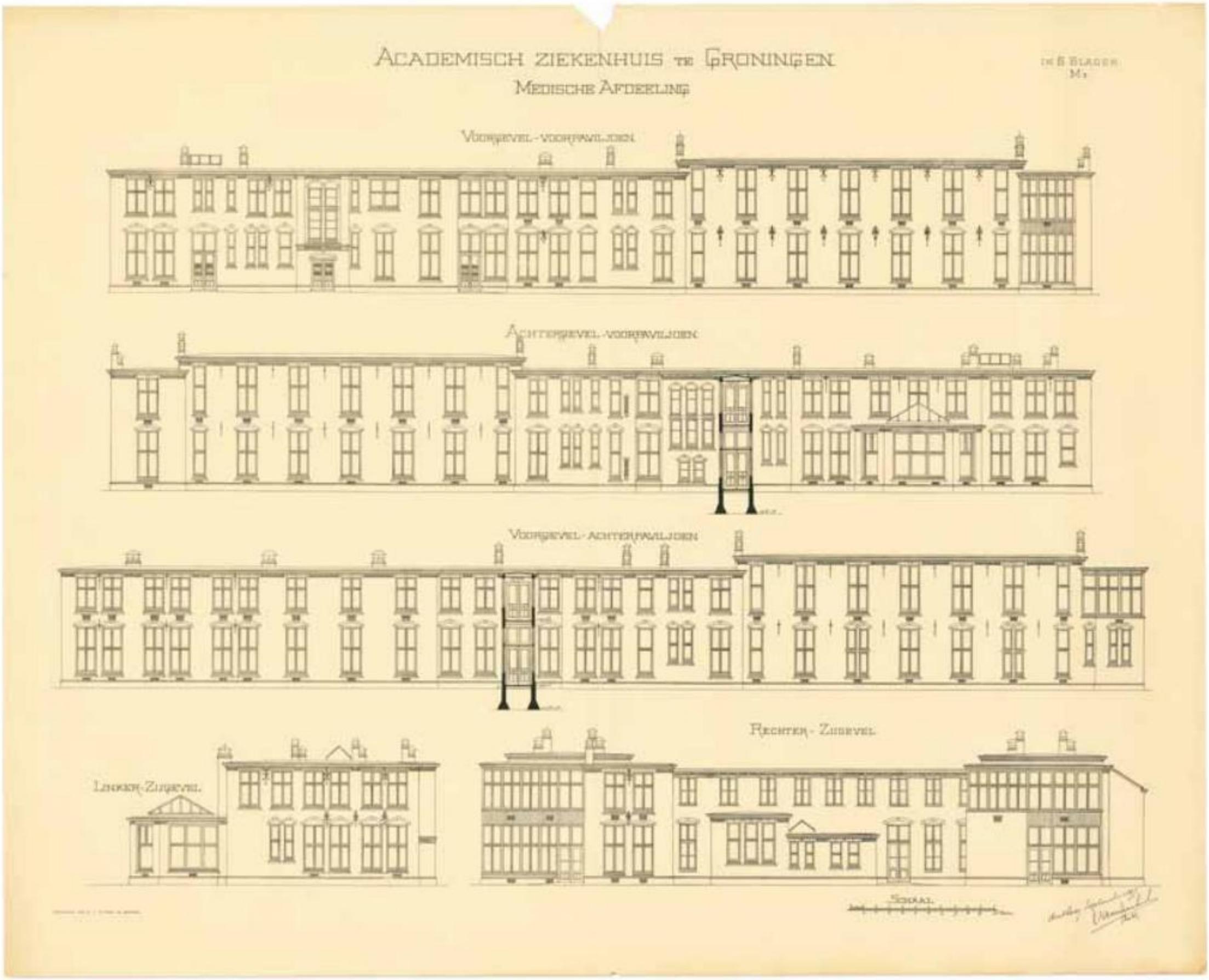
Karel Petrus Cornelis de Bazel
Color design for the living room of the Schuurman-Gentis family, The Hague
1895–1896

Hendrik Petrus Berlage
Design for decorative tile from the office of the General
Society of Life and Annuity Insurance of Leipzig
1901



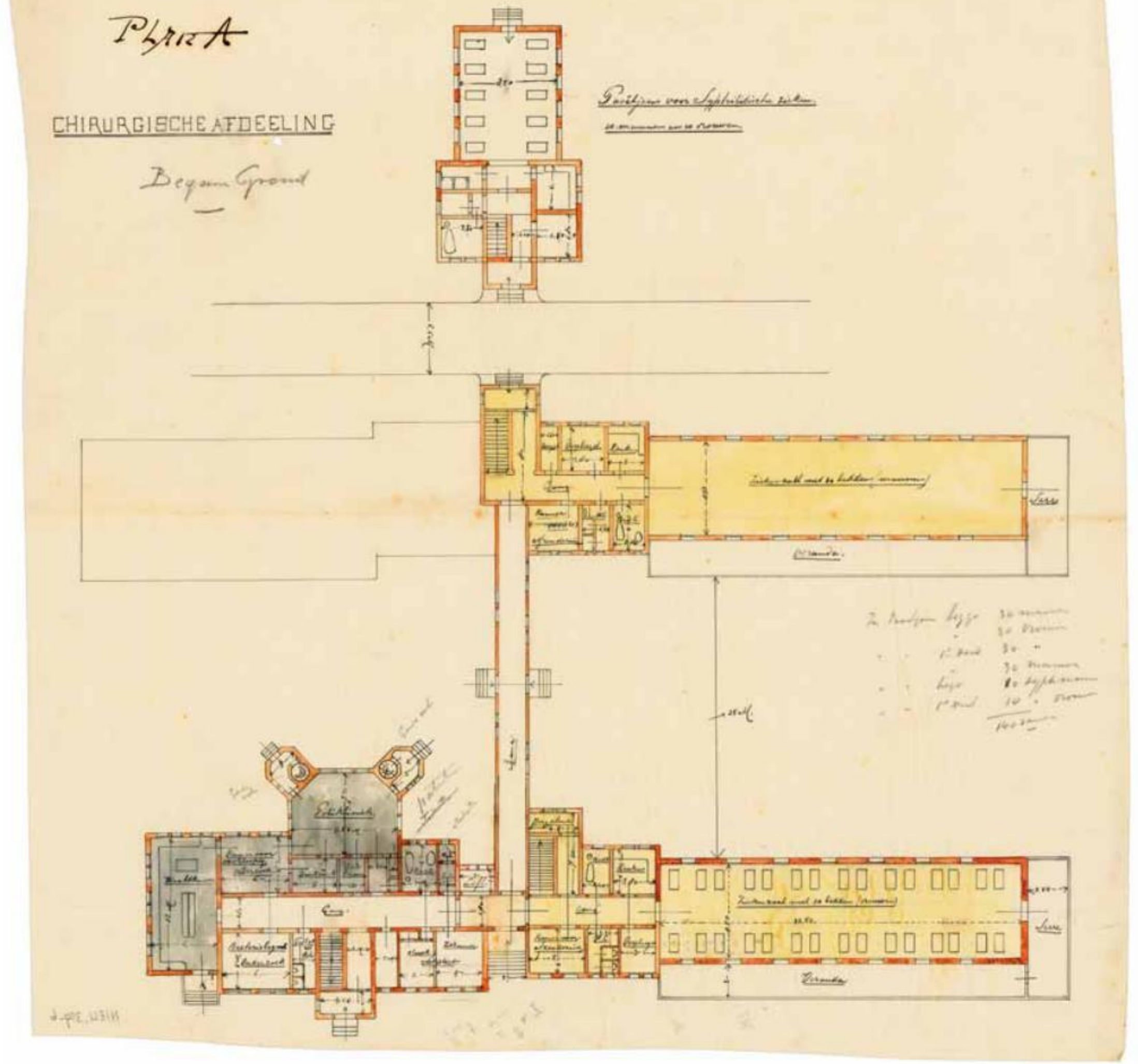
Hendrik Petrus Berlage
Design for insurance offices in Leipzig
1901

Michel de Klerk
Design for a doorway
1904

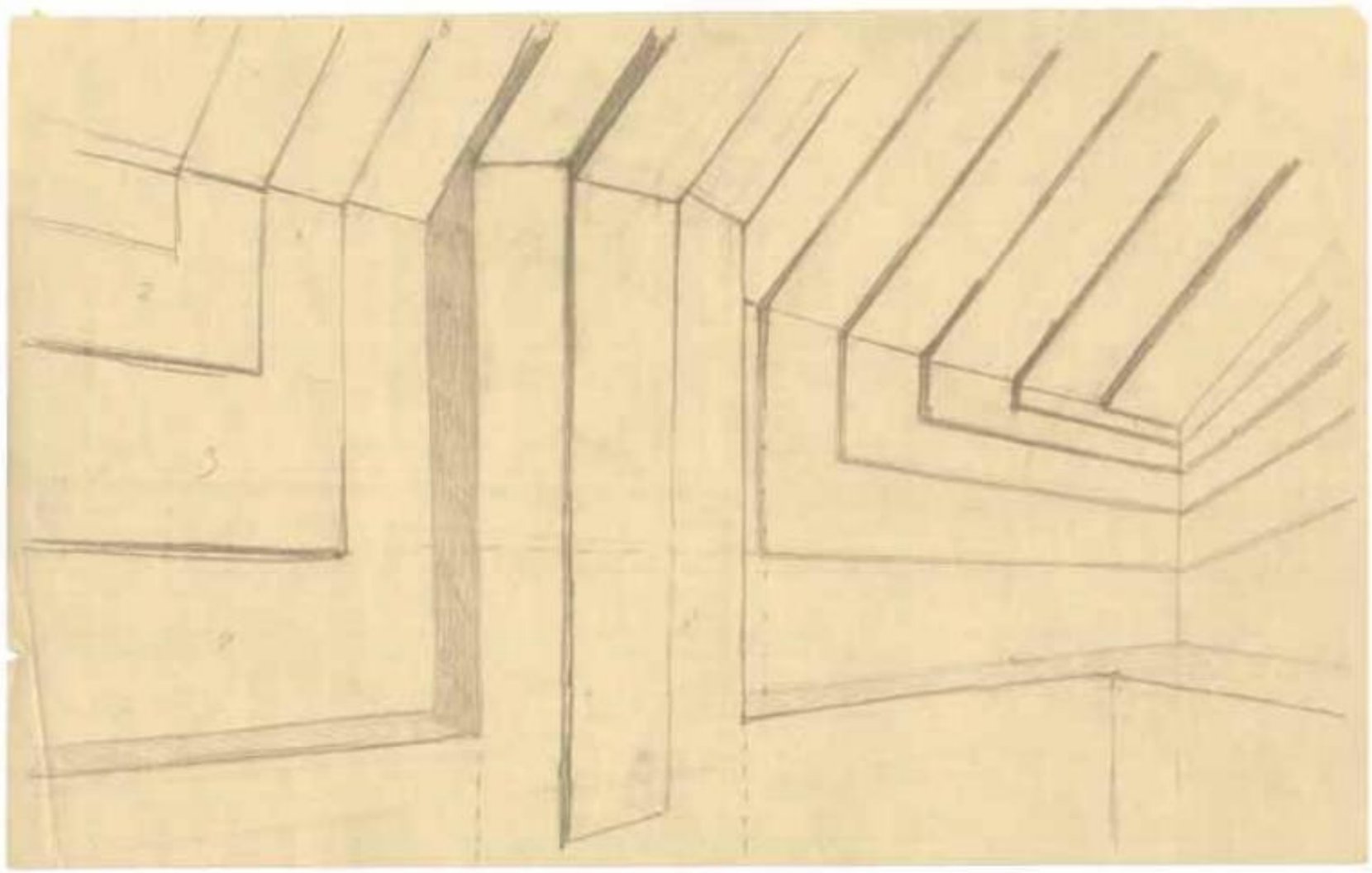


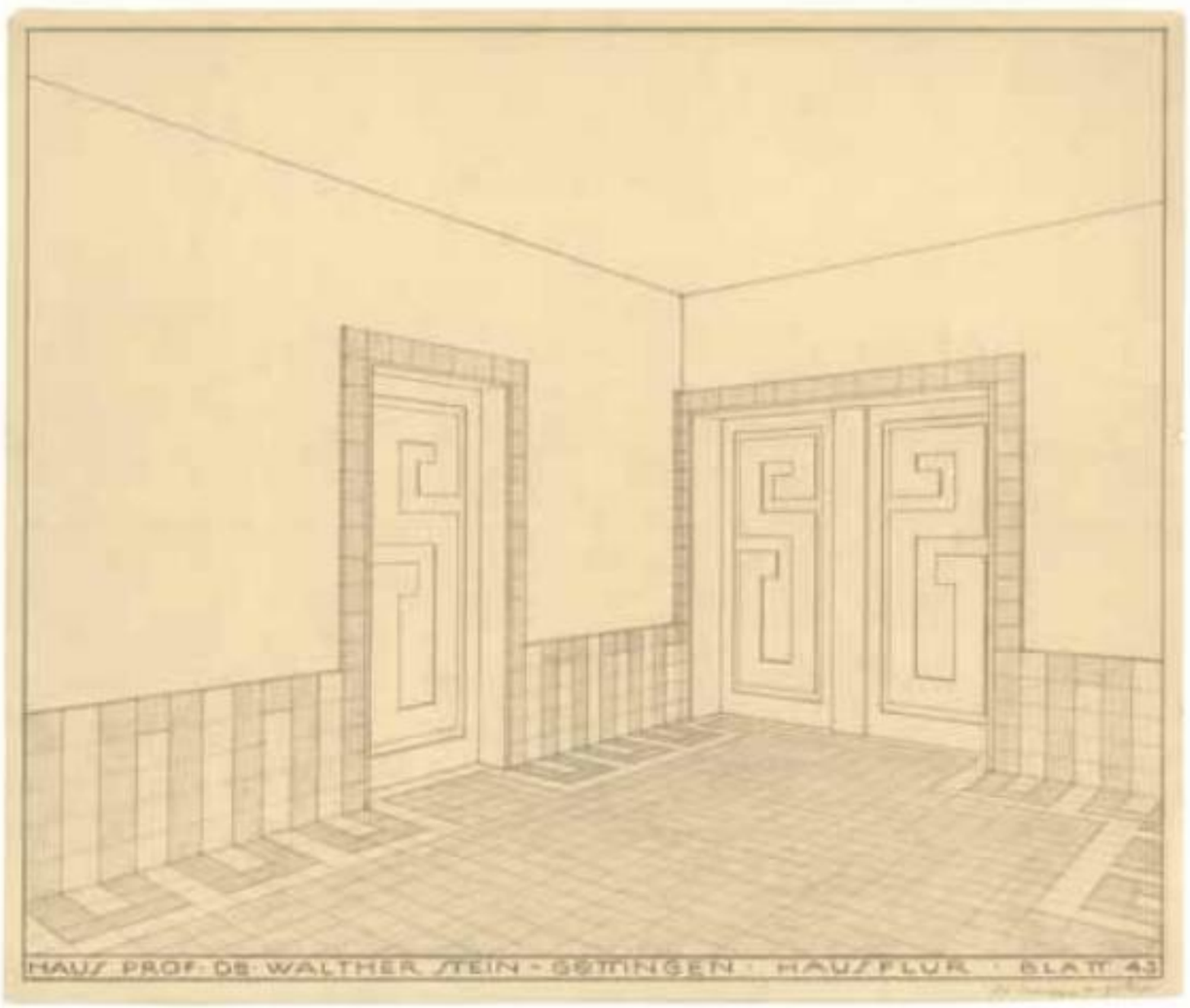
Johannes Jacobus van Nieukerken
Elevation for the expansion, with modern medical department, of the General Provincial City and University Hospital, Groningen
1891–1901

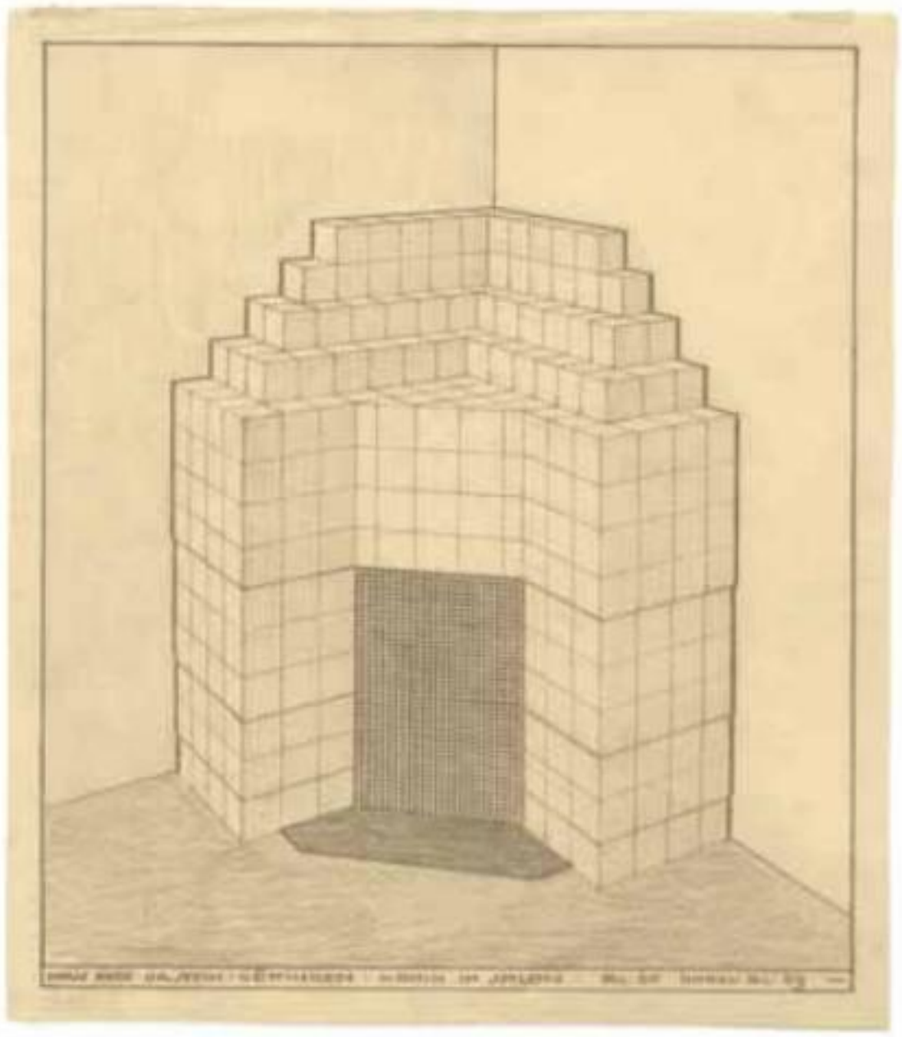
Johannes Jacobus van Nieukerken
Bathroom in the General Provincial City and University Hospital, Groningen
1891–1901



Johannes Jacobus van Nieukerken
Plans for the expansion, with a modern surgical department, of the General Provincial City and Academic Hospital: front, side, and rear views of the surgical department, Groningen
1891–1901



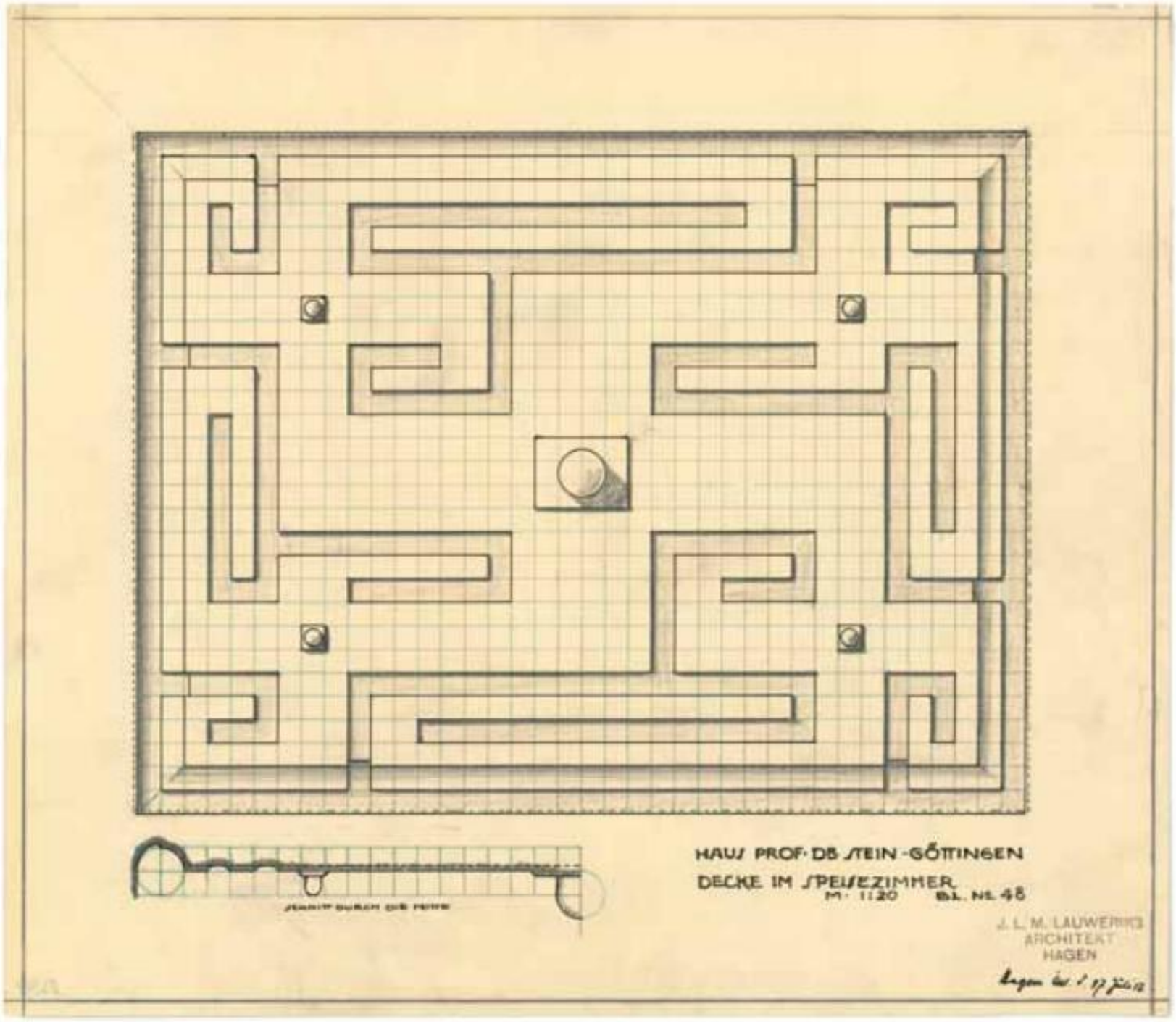


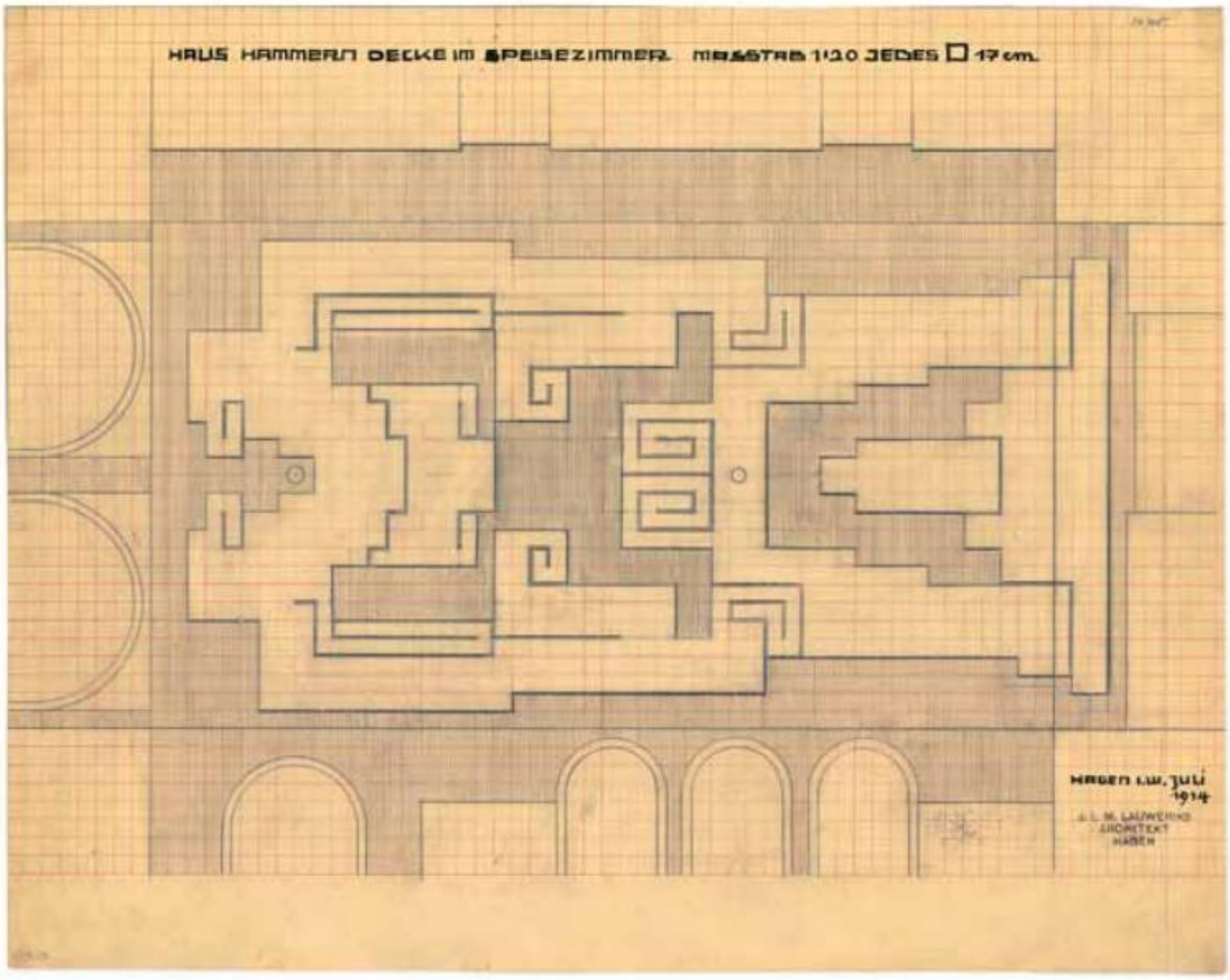


Johannes Ludovicus Mathieu Lauweriks
Sketch for the wall and roof of the Thorn Prikker house, Hagen
1910
Design for a corridor, Stein residence, Göttingen
1911
Design for the chimney in the living room, Stein residence, Göttingen
1911

Design for the roof in the dining room,
Stein residence, Göttingen
1911

Design for the dining room ceiling in the
Schüngeler-Harmann family house, Hagen
1914


HAUS PROF. DR STEIN - GÖTTINGEN
DECKE IM SPEISEZIMMER
M. 1:20 Bl. No. 48
J. L. M. LAUWERIKS
ARCHITEKT
HAGEN


HAUS HAMMERAN DECKE IM SPEISEZIMMER. MASSTAB 1:10 JEDES □ 17 cm.
HAGEN I.W. JULI 1914
J. L. M. LAUWERIKS
ARCHITEKT
HAGEN

4.

A Modern Evolution

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Bleachworks on the Gein*
ca. 1900–1902

In autumn 1908, Piet Mondrian and two fellow artists—the slightly older Cees Spoor, who painted in a realistic style, and the brash young painter Jan Sluyters—wrote a letter to the mayor and aldermen of Amsterdam. They asked to rent part of the first floor of the Stedelijk Museum in order to show their work. They had not previously been able to showcase the development of their art, or the personal nature of their work, in a large group exhibition. The city council agreed. The three artists could have access to the space from January 3, 1909. They rented half the museum's upstairs galleries for 600 guilders. Sluyters had three galleries, Spoor had two plus some side rooms, and Mondrian got the corner galleries.

He had been working toward this for years. Development—that is, improving and better understanding what he actually wanted to do with his art and how beauty comes about—had always interested him. As a child of his time, he was also interested in exploring spiritual depth. That was how he had come to befriend Spoor, who was also seeking the finer beauty of the spiritual. They were convinced that theosophy, which held that any religious quest aims to raise humankind to a greater level of perfection, could be helpful in their quest.

Growth and development, Mondrian had found over the previous few years, also played a key role in his art. A lot had happened since 1906, in particular. His palette had grown lighter, his drawing style had loosened, and his execution had begun to display technical virtuosity. His brushwork had become more intuitive. Mondrian had discovered that, as he grew more skilled, his technique was separating itself from illustration. His paintings thus became more "plastic," to use the term he would later favor. He even discerned similarities with the free brushwork in the art of Vincent van Gogh and Jan Toorop, artists whose expressiveness had had no bearing on his own art prior to 1906 but whose work he now, albeit reluctantly, started to revere.

Things had started to change—and at a much earlier date than usually credited by art historians.[1] The inwardness or intimacy he sought in his smaller sketches had preoccupied him for a long time. Until 1905–1906 his experimental "finger exercises" had fascinated him, and he still turned to smaller formats to challenge himself, to try out new approaches to technique. From 1905 onward he also produced more and more large, accomplished landscapes, paintings made in one go, with a broad sweep and a deep breath, depicting a world in which viewers could lose themselves, as in a symphony. Now came this curious development in his technical skill. Clarity of thought, he realized, went along with clarity of technique.[2]

Mondrian feverishly set to work on a series of new paintings that would allow this latest development free rein. Along the river Gein he painted *Summer Day* in which a row of trees on the other side of the river partly shields the sunset at the close of a hot, lazy summertime day. He painted an apple tree at dusk, not as an element of any real world but as an independent motif, almost an apparition. Energetic brushwork combined concentrated blues and reds with the weave of the spreading branches, making the image expansive and restless and giving it its own rhythm.

In October he painted a windmill, backlit as he had seen near Abcoude, a village just outside Amsterdam. He had sat looking for a long time as the sun set. At home in his studio he had found equivalents for his experience: the shadow of the windmill in red and blue, surrounded by sharply contrasting strokes of red, yellow, and orange; in the sky, yellow and blue became visual echoes of the holes that occur in one's vision when one looks into a light. The result flickered and cascaded like nothing else in Dutch art, or well beyond.

Mondrian also went a few times to Twente, in the east of the country, and stayed near Winterswijk. There, he quickly painted a landscape with a pink cloud. He also made a large painting of a wood, with tall trees through which a low sun shone—again a backlit image. Mondrian first set out the structure in dilute red and blue. He highlighted this with glowing, saturated colors in a partially articulated, diffuse painting style. And then he stopped, happy with the result. It was a painted sketch.

At home, in Amsterdam, he tried his hand at a meticulously painted, accomplished image of a single, withering chrysanthemum on a long stem, losing himself in the lilacs and ochres of the shriveled leaves and the bleak whites of the dying flower. He titled the image *Metamorphosis*, the transformation from one form into another, more distinct stage.

In Twente, he also came up with the plan of painting three haystacks, as a triptych. The first panel showed the haystack in the warm light of sunset, the central piece showed it in the plain colorless light just after the sun had set, and the panel on the right showed the stack as a silhouette, in a ghostly blue and red against a dark sky. Some have said Mondrian was emulating Claude Monet, who painted an entire series of haystacks in 1891.[3] But this is nonsense. Mondrian did not paint in series. Here his objective was a triptych. Different from anything else at home or abroad. It was all quite unconventional.

More surprises followed. For the opening in January, Mondrian hung his paintings in an entirely new way. In the first gallery he showed only the early studies, in coarse pine frames. They reinforced the transient, experimental nature of the work. The second gallery, the middle one, featured only recent work: two giant self-portraits with a tree in between. The portrait on the right was more focused on the eyes than the one on the left. So the result appeared to be a triptych in which Mondrian clearly showed how the changes in the work in the gallery were the result of simply looking, nothing else. Everything he had made recently was on show in the central gallery: the colorful landscape with trees and the windmill; the three haystacks; some sunflowers; several blue trees, big and small but always highly expressive; a red cloud; *Metamorphosis*, his painting of a dying chrysanthemum; and a painting entitled *Devotion*. Meticulous analysis of the reviews reveals that several cycles—haystacks, sunflowers—were on display here, revealing the metamorphosis of life. The final gallery (or two galleries; the number is difficult to establish from the reviews) returned to calmer waters with the monumental evening landscapes Mondrian had made a few years before.

The work was thus not hung in chronological order. The overall presentation was itself a triptych of galleries, with sketches on one side, the most recent work in the center, and the sophisticated landscapes on the other side. Many critics complained that it was not clear what came first and what came later. Had Mondrian gone from agitated to calm? Or the other way around, the calmer pieces portending the wild romantic period? Good questions. Mondrian forced his audience to look for themselves, to form an impression of his development without clinging to a formal chronology. It was a deliberately crafted artistic statement.

Mondrian might have taken the idea for this visual intervention from a lecture that Rudolf Steiner gave in Amsterdam on March 6, 1908. Steiner discussed the Hegelian system of the triadic development of ideas: first there is the *idea in itself* (Mondrian's sketches in the first gallery), then the *idea out of itself, in nature* (the detailed landscapes in the final gallery or galleries), and finally culmination in the *idea in and for itself* (the unconventional pictorial forms in the central gallery). The triptychs in the central gallery—the haystacks, dying sunflowers, the blue trees, farmhouse, and landscape—gave visitors another key to the presentation as a whole.

By presenting his work in this way, Mondrian offered a unique visualization of the concept of "development." Making art was a question of evolution. The Amsterdam presentation revealed, in a carefully ordered manner, what occurred in chaotic fashion during the creative process. Mondrian presented something that unfolded over time as a system, in the form of a triptych. It became a model for the artistic process and the way works of art come about as if in a metamorphosis, a transformation from the material to the finer and more spiritual. The exhibition drew a lot of attention. By the time it closed on January 29, three thousand people had seen it.

1. Essentially all of the extant Mondrian literature seems reconciled to Mondrian's own description of his development, as published by Valentine Gallery in New York in January 1942 in the pamphlet titled *Towards the True Vision of Reality*. Mondrian describes there how "[the] first thing to change in my painting was the color. I forsook natural color for pure color." This happened around 1907–1908. In my biography, published in 2016, I meticulously analyze how Mondrian had already, in 1906, attained such a mastery over drawing that he changed from rendering forms in order to depict, to marking and hatching in order to give rhythm and energy to his images. This had grave consequences for his use of color. See Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan: Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven: Een biografie* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2016), 317–65.

2. Expressed in a letter from Piet Mondrian to the critic Israël Querido, published by the latter in "Van Menschen en Dingen," *De Controleur*, October 23, 1909.

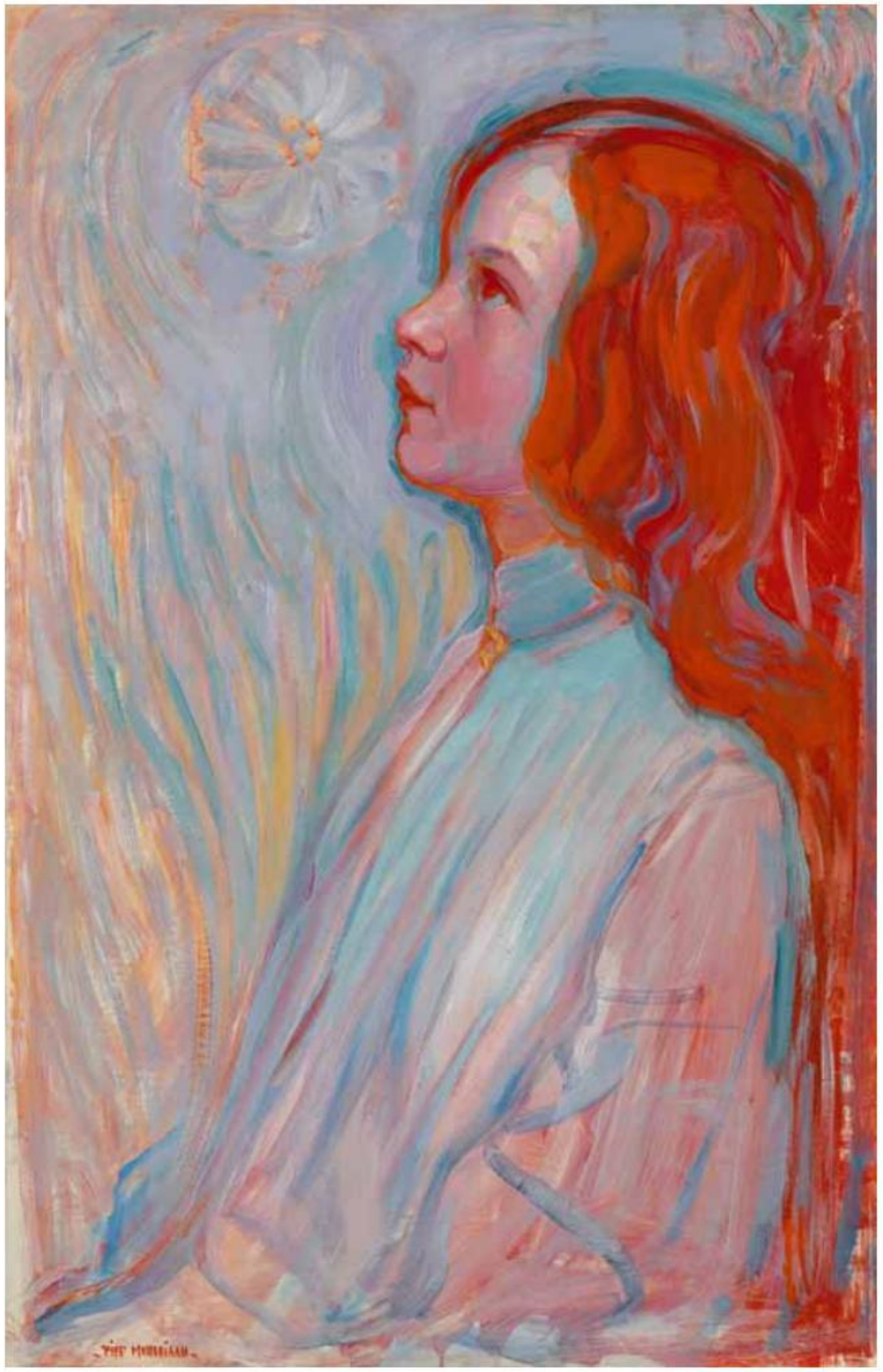
3. See Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, Angelica Rudenstine, and Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944* (Milan, 1994), 313. The author based his argument on William Seitz, "Monet and Abstract Painting," *Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1956): 43–44; and John Coplans, "Piet Mondrian," in *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968–1969), 38–45.

Piet Mondrian
Evening Landscape on the Gein
1907

Piet Mondrian
Summer Night
1906–1907

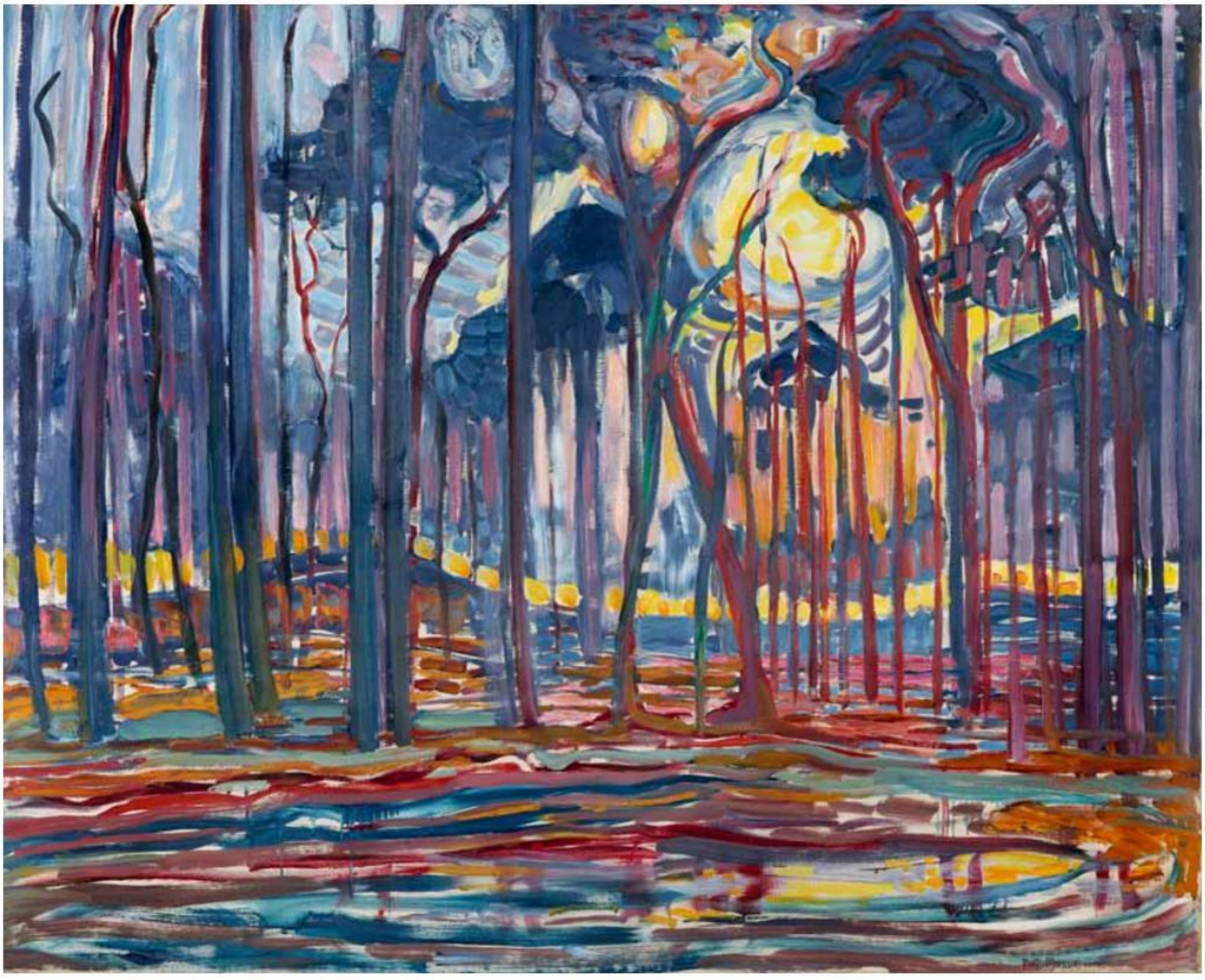
Piet Mondrian
Large Landscape
1907–1908

Piet Mondrian
Metamorphosis
1908



Piet Mondrian
Devotion
1908

Piet Mondrian
Summer Day
1908



Piet Mondrian
Woods Near Oele
1908

Piet Mondrian
Blue Tree
1908

Piet Mondrian
Apple Tree, pointilist version
1908–1909

5.

A New Art for a Modern World

Hans Janssen

Bart van der Leck
Exercises with Guns
1911

Many changes occurred in Dutch art around 1910–1911. A younger generation turned its back on the nineteenth-century tradition, which over the previous fifty years had largely consisted of landscapes. The Dutch polder landscape had been the main focus of the Hague School. But it had been apparent for years that the cozy parlor of Dutch art needed a breath of fresh air to bring some color to its cheeks. For Dutch art to engage with what was happening in other countries, windows needed to be thrown open. There was much to be learned.

In 1910, young Dutch artists and critics came up with a plan to organize an annual autumn exhibition following the Paris example; it would be open only to progressive artists. The time was ripe. A leading critic lamented the apathy in painting, or at least among the majority of painters, remarking, "Art left long ago."[1] What remained of a once venerable tradition was an empty house. The weight of that seventeenth-century tradition, which had set the tone until recently, was also dissipating. The Moderne Kunst Kring art society was officially established on November 28, 1910. Piet Mondrian served as the board secretary. It was the start of a turbulent period during which many young Dutch artists made great strides toward a truly modern art, one that suited the modern view of life.

We are concerned here with three artists: Mondrian, Jacoba van Heemskerck, and Bart van der Leck, each of whom, in their own way, expressed a new artistic awareness, a new way of defining the imaginative space, in work that was slowly but surely moving toward the final step to abstraction. Van Heemskerck was four years younger than Mondrian. They knew each other from the Guild of Saint Luke in Amsterdam, where Mondrian had been a member for ten years and where Jacoba began showing her work in 1906. They got to know each other better in 1908 in the fashionable seaside resort of Domburg, in Zeeland, where van Heemskerck and her partner, Marie Tak van Poortvliet (1871–1936), had bought a summer home. They shared a more than passing interest in theosophy.

After spending the summer of 1911 in Domburg, Mondrian painted *Zeeland Church Tower*, a view of the Dutch Reformed church that stood a hundred meters from the beach in the heart of Domburg. He truncated the spire at the top of the image and left barely any room along the bottom, so the body of the tower and the adjacent side aisle command all our attention. The facade is lit by a strange pinkish-red glow that gradually transitions to dark purplish-blue at the bottom of the painting. The sky is green, shot through with blue triangles that partly overlap onto the face of the tower toward the top.

The work's execution was influenced by a visit to Paris, where Mondrian encountered the latest trends at the Salon des Indépendants exhibition, which also included some of his paintings. There, he saw the work of the Montparnasse cubists—Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger, and Henri Le Fauconnier. He had already seen a lot of work by Paul Cézanne in autumn 1910 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. A Dutch collector, Cornelis Hoogendijk had been the first collector to buy paintings from Cézanne, at a time when the artist was hardly known, and he had arranged for a long-term loan of twenty-eight works to the Rijksmuseum, which then exhibited them, the first national museum to do so. The display caused considerable debate among Dutch artists. Cézanne's work especially taught Mondrian about the importance of structure, of composition. A flat, decorative effect with strong contrasts and differences in tone could suggest space in an extraordinary way, a space liberated from perspective, whose unusual effect the viewer experienced more as an imaginative space.

Zeeland Church Tower was Mondrian's first attempt at painting in this way. The painting admits almost no room for perspective. The simultaneous contrast between the green and the blue of the sky, which almost screams for our attention, precludes any suggestion of sky; it simply becomes a flickering surface. But Mondrian was not seeking the unfamiliar for its own sake. On closer reflection, the colors in the image must be seen as the sunlight illuminating the church front as the sun sinks (behind the viewer), blood-red, into the sea. The first shadows of the little village houses between the church and the beach slowly begin to creep up from the bottom. All the colors lie at the surface of the painting, offering barely

any suggestion of space. What space is conveyed (the setting sun, the light on the church) is imaginative.

In autumn 1911 Mondrian exhibited *Zeeland Church Tower* in Amsterdam, at the exhibition of the recently established Moderne Kunst Kring. The exhibition also included work by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. After seeing and digesting their work, Mondrian concluded that he could develop a truly contemporary art only if he went to Paris and experienced the new trends up close. A year later, he sold *Landscape*, his first hesitant step toward cubism, to Tak van Poortvliet. The painting still had a subject: two trees, Scots pines, their trunks inclined toward each other, their tops intertwined, an image from the dunes at Domburg. Mondrian had struggled with this and other paintings for a year, seeking a new way of blending the subject with something like a structure. In *Landscape* he translated the idea of structure into the short horizontal and vertical lines that dominate the foreground and sky. His search was a long one. His idea was to completely let go of the idea of "representation" and get closer to the imaginative space. *Flowering Trees* was one of the first paintings in which he succeeded.

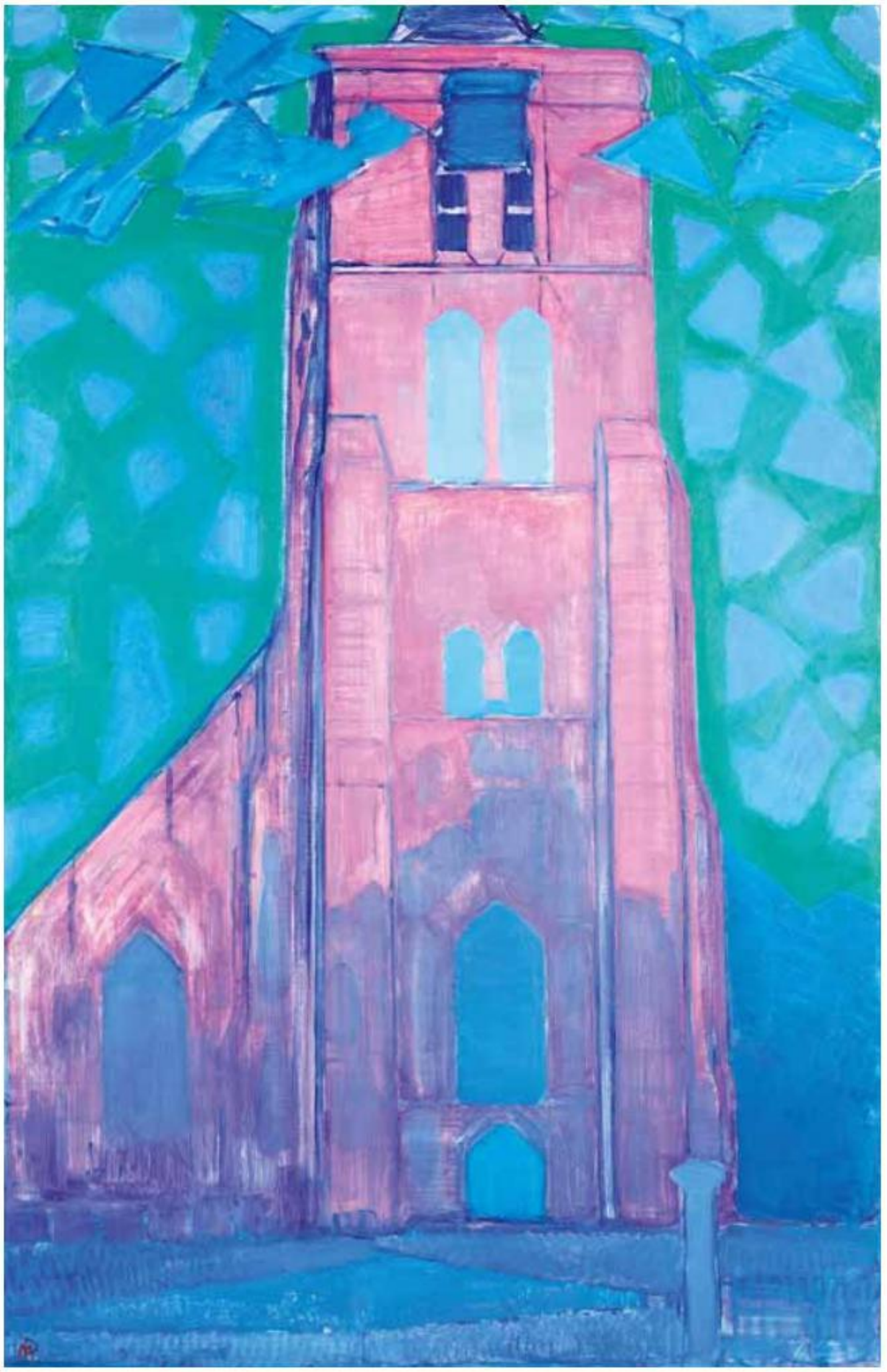
Van Heemskerck had frequent contact with Mondrian at this time. She was also painting trees. In *Forest I* of 1913 she chose a bright palette and light colors almost as schematically as Picasso and Braque with their color palette. In *Forest II*, also painted in 1913, she used saturated colors, closer to the cubists of Montparnasse, particularly the more expressive work of Le Fauconnier. Her easy fusion of subject and structure remains somewhat confused, however. The sense of space is still perspectivist, with trees growing smaller from front to back and the network of lines growing denser. After 1913 she turned to an expressionist idiom in which color was unleashed and the subject was increasingly subordinated to the expressive quality of the image.

Bart van der Leck was the same age as van Heemskerck. He had trained as a stained glass artist in his hometown of Utrecht, as an apprentice in a workshop, and at the School of Arts and Crafts and the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam. He and Mondrian did not meet there, due to their age difference and his prior period of training in stained glass making. This training had its benefits. Van der Leck taught himself to simplify, to generalize—which essentially came down to objectivizing and abstracting. Like Mondrian, he was calmly and with great concentration seeking his own style, his own personal signature.

In his images he sought basic forms that expressed the essential elements of structure. And so, gradually, he felt the need to flatten the image. His background in stained glass helped with this. But this development was not a conscious decision, a conceptual contrivance. It came about purely through experience and by translating that experience to the flat surface of the canvas. By then looking at and analyzing what he had painted, van der Leck managed to depict what he called "the visual life." That visual life was revealed in the structure, the balance, and the openness of a fine work of art. In 1910–1911 he was working on *Exercises with Guns*, a painting mainly in grays, with a touch of yellow or red here and there.

Van der Leck was not concerned with the excitement of the action, the thrill of the charge. The soldiers were for him an ideal vehicle for casting the realism of the scene into an impersonal, cool, neutral design. This generalization and the reduction of the individual allowed him to emphasize the functionality of the visual means. As with Mondrian, the image was flattened, as this allowed van der Leck to optimize the effect of form and color. The light in the painting becomes superficial, lying quite obviously at the surface. As a result, just as in Mondrian's *Zeeland Church Tower*, the viewer is encouraged to construct a different imaginative space, one in which the real colors and forms dominate.

1. Albert Plasschaert, "Opmerkingen," *De Amsterdammer: Weekblad voor Nederland*, no. 1746 (December 11, 1910): 6.



Piet Mondrian
Zeeland Church Tower
1911

Piet Mondrian
Summer, Dune in Zeeland
1910

Piet Mondrian
Flowering Trees
1912

Piet Mondrian
Landscape
1912

Jacoba van Heemskerck
Woodland I
1913

Jacoba van Heemskerck
Woodland II
1913

6.

International Publicity

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Geinrust Farm*, 1907

In 1913 the French poet and art critic Alexandre Mercereau organized a major exhibition, to be shown in Prague, of work by twenty-nine artists. As a poet, Mercereau was interested in the type of art produced by artists who withdraw, monk-like, from society to seek the spiritual source of art. In his introduction to the exhibition he explained his belief that in the new age, with its electric power, dynamism, and intensity, our way of looking had also become multifarious. "The art of today does not have any specific realism. Our artist is not a mystery, as the painters of the 13th and 14th centuries were, but they desire fervently to discover an integrated truth that can withstand the new reality. Entirely in accordance with the innovations in science, today's art seeks to discover ultimate laws that go beyond those of yesterday."[1]

Piet Mondrian submitted three paintings to the Prague exhibition. They are listed in the catalog as numbers 73–75, with the simple title "Obraz. Olej," meaning "picture in oils" or "image in oils." We can deduce from this that Mondrian wanted them to have the most neutral title possible. Number 73 can be identified as *Composition No. II* from early spring 1914, which is now in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.[2] Mondrian completed the other two paintings earlier, even though they were numbered higher in Prague. Catalog number 74, now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York and known as *Composition No. VII* (because Mondrian exhibited it with that title in The Hague in summer 1914), was long in the making. He began working on it in Paris in the winter of 1911–1912 and toiled on it until the summer of 1913.[3] Catalog number 75, now at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, was begun and completed in spring 1913. Mondrian then submitted it as *Painting 1* to the Erste Deutsche Herbstsalon (First German Autumn Salon) in Berlin, from September to December 1913.[4]

This is a strange order. The first work submitted to the exhibition was from early spring 1914 and had just been completed. The next is from summer 1913, and the third was finished in spring 1913. Mondrian therefore presented the works in reverse order: the most recently finished one first, and the oldest last. What prompted him to do this?

Mercereau invited Mondrian to take part in the exhibition at a point when the painter had just managed to get to grips with his exploration of cubism. He was seeking line and color combinations that would reveal a universal beauty (a beauty that transcended the specific beauty of a scene, such as an evening sun or a windmill or a woodland view). He wrote about this in a letter from January 1914 to Dutch art critic H.P. Bremmer, who had just bought some of Mondrian's work for the modern art collection of Hélène Kröller-Müller.[5] Mondrian wrote that he wanted to see universal beauty in the sharpest possible focus and to come as close as possible to its truth. And so he felt the urge to abstract everything, like Pablo Picasso and other artists, to get to what he called "the foundation of things."[6]

In summer 1912, while on holiday in Domburg, he had created large drawings that helped him fathom how to develop a large painted composition he had been struggling with for more than a year in Paris into something that reflected his ideas on cubism. He probably started the painting from one of these drawings, one of which depicts a broad, spreading tree at the center, a tree that clearly had mass and could be apprehended as an object among other objects. To translate such an image into a cubist composition, Mondrian—like Picasso and other cubists—could not avoid embedding the tree in a cubist structure, as he had done before in *Landscape*.

In Paris he had drawn the woods again, now in a style less flowing, less concerned with the mass of tree trunks and branches. The branches and the trunk dissolve in stumbling, angled lines that seem to want to conform to the underlying pattern of horizontal and vertical lines. In the autumn of 1913, he removed all vestiges of the original composition from the canvas and began again, with this new drawing as a "plan." He first used thin blue paint, soon evolving a swiftly rendered, angular sketch. The lines ascend in steps, forming structures of short horizontals and verticals that sometimes join up to create squares and rectangles. In the bottom half of the image Mondrian applied more diagonal lines. He then used chrome yellow, gray, and ochre to fill in the pattern he had created, ensuring that the viewer would realize this was a matter of searching,

of combining. He did so quite deliberately. In 1915, in a conversation with a critic, he said that the subjects of his paintings no longer interested him; they simply served to arouse his interest in the relationship between line and color and that he wished to make that interest visible.

The eventual result became catalog number 74 in the Prague exhibition. Average viewers would not have recognized this painting as a woodland view. They would, however, have sensed something of the expansion at the top of the image, of the push upward in the bottom half, and perhaps even of the flanking movements to the left and right of the passage through the center—all that remained of the trunk—movements that were themselves derived from the smaller trees in the drawing. And that was what Mondrian had set out to achieve.

The average viewer in Prague would also not have recognized catalog number 75 as another woodland view. Yet again a drawing was the source of the composition. The variously applied curved sections of line, instead of suggesting woodland, cause a kind of twinkling that spreads across the image. There is also a stepwise shift in the lines from bottom right to top left, the upright, vertical lines significantly longer than the short horizontal lines. The painting therefore gives the impression of a slanting upward movement. The subject and source of inspiration are no longer of any consequence. Mondrian discovered in spring 1913, when he was working on what was to become *Gemälde I* at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon, later renamed "Obraz number 75" in Prague and again renamed in July 1914 as *Composition N.XIV* for an exhibition in Holland, that disrupting the form gives the image a rhythm that separates itself from

Piet Mondrian, *Forest (Study of Trees I)*, 1912

Piet Mondrian, *Study of Trees II*; study for *Tableau No. 2 / Composition No. VII*, 1913

representation and acquires its own plastic quality, provided it is executed with a meticulous sensitivity.

Catalog number 73 was the most recent work, barely dry when Mondrian sent it to Prague around New Year's Day 1914. It now differs from the version sent to Prague, as Mondrian continued working on it after it was returned in April. We cannot know for certain how it looked in Prague. Mondrian changed the frame at some point after the work came back from Prague in March 1914 (replacing a corbel frame with the slats that still frame the work today), smudged the edges of the composition with gray paint, and applied color highlights in the center (in shades of green, yellow, and red, mixed with gray to harmonize them). The composition is based on—or perhaps we should say "grafted onto"—a drawing of a river view near Amsterdam, *Geinrust Farm*. In the resulting *Composition No. II*, the basic subject is again no longer recognizable; it has melted away in the joy of combining horizontal and vertical lines and in the colors and forms conjured in the process.

Mondrian's decision to show the most recently completed painting as the first in the series might simply be an expression of the artist's enthusiasm for his latest work. But the explanation might also lie in the intentions both of the exhibition curator (who was seeking an art that could provide a spiritual counterbalance to the modern age) and of the artist (who was seeking a beauty that was the foundation of our perception of reality).

Piet Mondrian, *Fir Tree Woods*, 1906

1. Alecandre Mercereau, "Introduction," in *Modern Art: 45th Exhibition SVU Manès in Prague* (February–March 1914), n.p., quoted from a photocopy in the archive of Joop M. Joosten, Joosten-archive, RKD, Dutch Institute for Art History, The Hague.

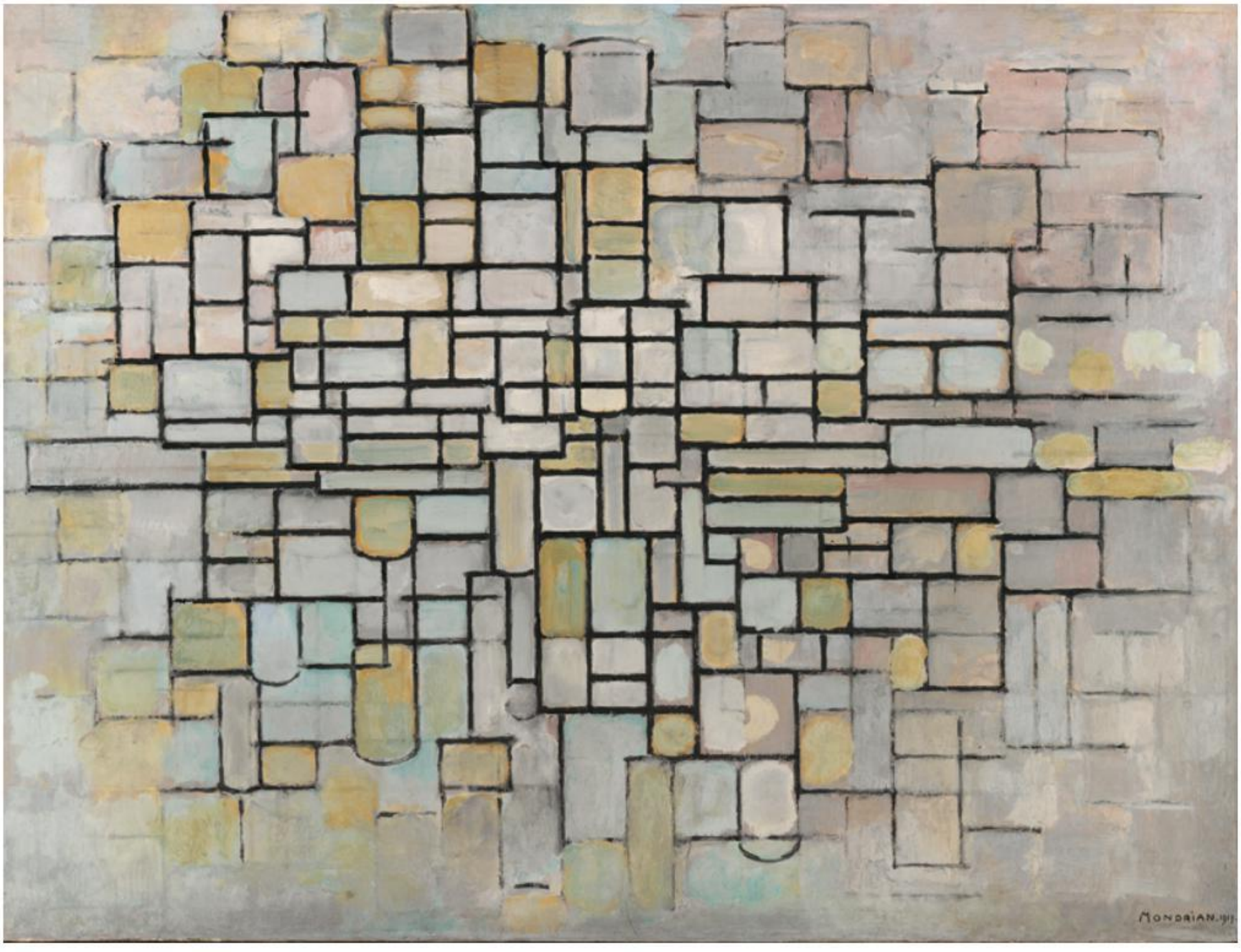
2. Mondrian worked on the painting again after it returned from Prague. See Hans Janssen and Margje Leeuwenstein, "Composition No. II," in *Mondrian and Cubism: Paris 1912–1914* (London: Ridinghouse, 2014), 80–83.

3. Corey d' Augustine and Hans Janssen, "Composition No. VII," in *Mondrian and Cubism*," 104–9.

4. Hans Janssen, "Composition No. XIV," in *Mondrian and Cubism*, 132–35.

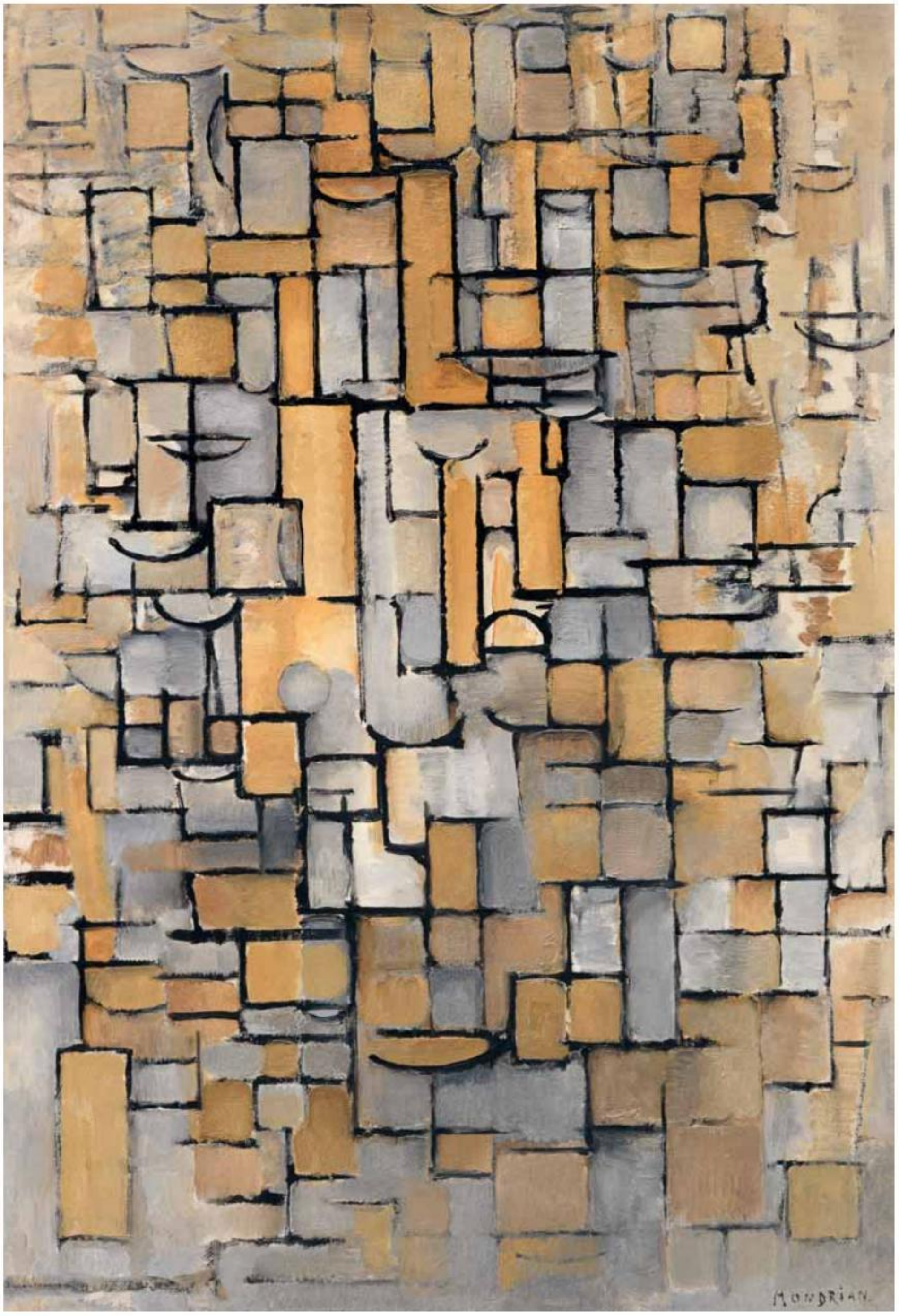
5. Piet Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914, in Bremmer-archive, Municipality of The Hague.

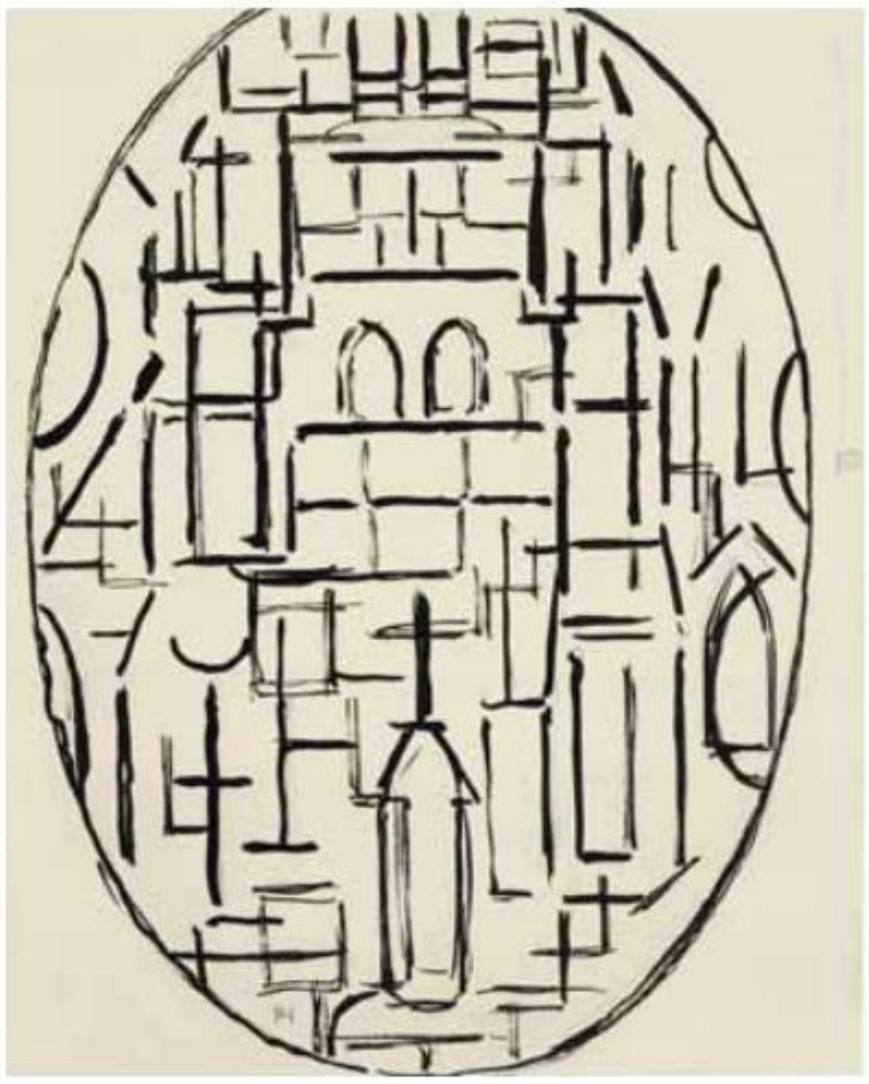
6. Ibid.



Piet Mondrian
Composition No. II
1913

Piet Mondrian
Composition No. XIV
1913


MONDRIAN



7.

A New Spirituality, Revealed by the Structure of the Artwork

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian
Church Facade 1: Church at Domburg
1914

Piet Mondrian arrived in the Netherlands from Paris for a short visit on July 25, 1914. He planned to go to The Hague, where art critic H.P. Bremmer had helped arrange for the exhibition of no fewer than sixteen of Mondrian's recent paintings at Galerie Walrecht. The exhibition was not well publicized, however, and because it was summer holiday season few people had come. Only one review was published, and it was negative. Yet several of the paintings sold: to Hélène Kröller-Müller, to Bremmer, and to Hendrik van Assendelft, a Remonstrant pastor from Gouda who bought three pieces. Mondrian decided to visit him. He also wanted to go to Arnhem to see his father, who would be celebrating his birthday. And he wished to take a holiday, though it would not be a long one, as he was busy and had to return to Paris quite soon.

On July 28 the Austro-Hungarian empire declared war on Serbia. Four days later Germany declared war on Russia, and on August 3 France was drawn into the conflict. Though Mondrian wished to return to Paris, his father and sister insisted that it was too dangerous. And so Mondrian became peripatetic. He stored the three crates containing the unsold paintings from the Walrecht exhibition with Pastor van Assendelft and went to stay first with a female friend in Laren and then to Domburg, where he stayed briefly with another friend before renting a small house. He purchased paper, charcoal, ink, and white gouache and until October immersed himself in work in the sitting room of the otherwise empty house in autumnal Domburg.

The months in Paris leading up to the Netherlands visit had been occupied with preparations for the Walrecht exhibition. Yet Mondrian had also found time to start three large paintings featuring short horizontal and vertical lines that he had constantly shifted around the center, creating a structure in which hastily applied blue, light ochre, pink, and white had produced a dazzling result. Mondrian took as a starting point for the three compositions the scaffolding that concealed the facades of buildings under renovation in Paris. But that was only the trigger. "When you have found your problem, many accidental things stimulate you," he would remark to a friend much later, in New York, in response to a question about the scaffolding, before immediately adding, "if you have nothing in you a spot on a wall is just a spot on a wall."[1] Ultimately, what he was concerned with was the endlessly fascinating interplay of lines and colors that, once positioned correctly, began to sparkle and radiate.

Mondrian tried to pick up the thread in the little house in Domburg. He based his new work not on the facades of Paris but on motifs closer to home: the church in Domburg; the breakwaters that reached into the sea from the beach; or the sea itself, with a starry sky above; or just the waves, with a high horizon. He called these works "nature drawings," as they were based on things in the real world. When he was not drawing, he wandered around the woods and dunes near Domburg, apparently undisturbed by the global disaster then unfolding. During a late walk by the sea in the company of Mies Elout-Drabbe, under a sky teeming with stars, he made a quick sketch of the sea and the stars. "For days he worked on that little drawing, every day a step further from reality and a step closer to its spiritualization," Elout-Drabbe would recall in 1914.[2]

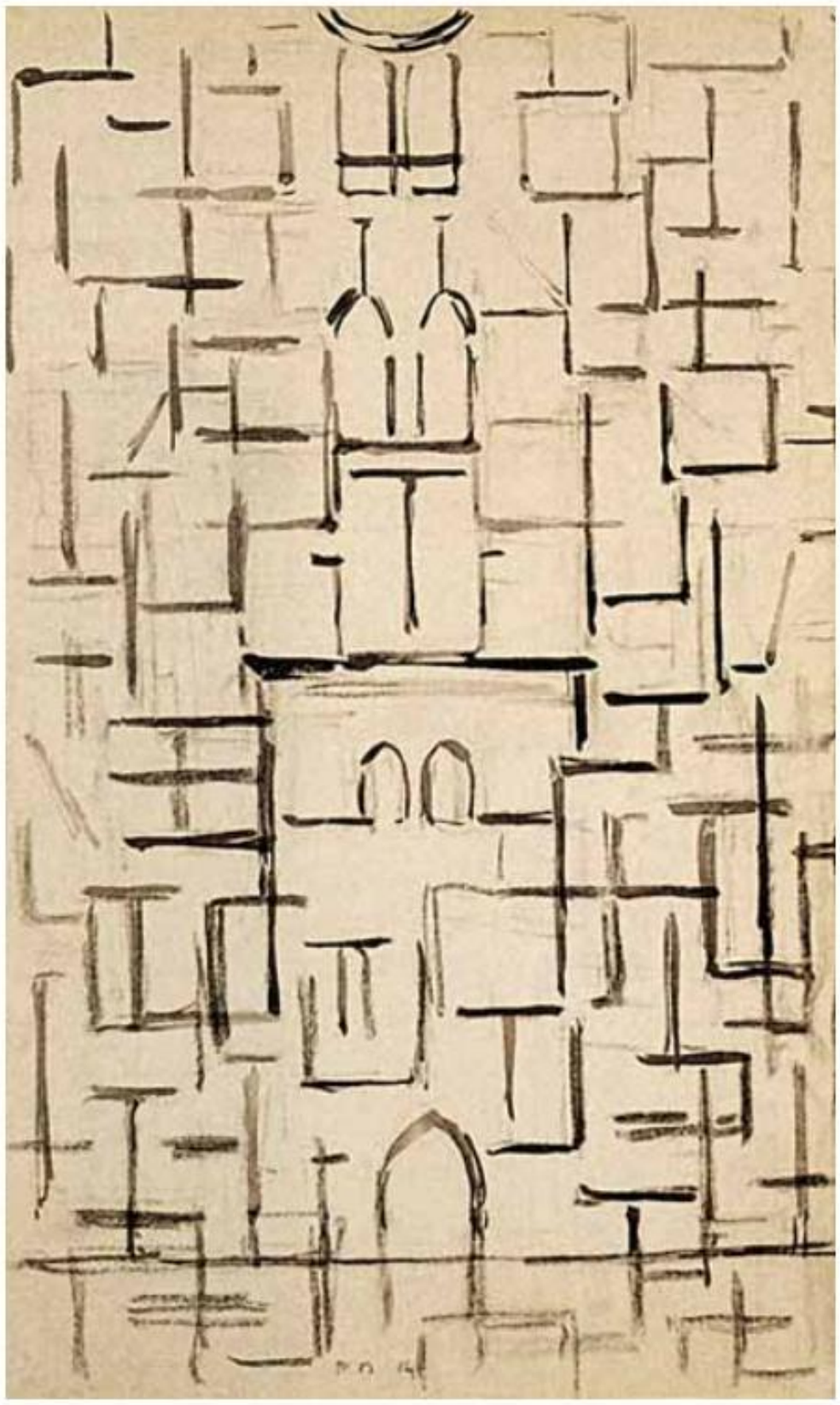
Without access to a decent studio, Mondrian was trying to pick up the thread he had let go of when he traveled to the Netherlands. Now that he had no paint or canvas, he decided to forget color for a while and focus on line. This might allow him to develop his idiom further, as he had done before with the sketches he made around 1912. Ultimately, after many attempts, he found something he liked. Each short line indicated direction, movement. Where they crossed, they created a highlight. He enjoyed creating dense areas of lines, or making openings, inserting hooks to the left and right that suggested movement, placing two identical lines close above each other to create focal points, letting four lines conspire to enclose an empty space, or introducing curved sections of line—always in the center, as if not to disrupt the symmetry—to link one half of a drawing to the other, creating a rhythm and a movement that brought the work as experienced close to the living reality. He also liked to choose starting points in the real, visible world that featured planes running parallel to the picture plane (a church facade, for example), planes that receded into the infinite distance (a sea with a pier in the foreground), and planes that suggested absolute infinity in all dimensions (a starry sky), all rendered in the image with those same short lines.

In these drawings from the late summer of 1914, he managed at the same time to let go of spatiality, which was replaced by the contexture itself. Waves rolling onto the beach from the distance—what had more depth than that? And how beautifully this could be suggested by packing the lines closer together toward the top. This was the way in which he could capture that depth in the fabric of the image itself. In the meantime, he tried to order his thoughts about his work by writing about it and the thoughts that propelled it. Writing began to fascinate him more and more and started to evolve into something that might end up as a book about how to achieve a "new plastic" in visual art that flouted all visual conventions, a way of looking at reality entirely free of representation and completely abstract, unhampered by our usual mode of perception—a way uniquely equipped to reveal beauty.

Thanks to the drawings he made in Domburg, Mondrian realized that, to create a thing of beauty in visual art, concepts such as "subject," "invention," and "inspiration" need not play a significant role. Structure and relationships, proportion, the way the visual elements relate to one another—these things were much more important. Herein, Mondrian thought, lay the key to a new interpretation of the image, one that afforded direct access to what he regarded as the "universal," that which is true at all times and in all places in matters of beauty and which raises life to a higher level of perception. These ideas had an element of radiation to them, of sparkle and expansion, which became visible and tangible in his Domburg drawings. He left Domburg in October and ended up in Laren, where he would remain until he returned to Paris in summer 1919.

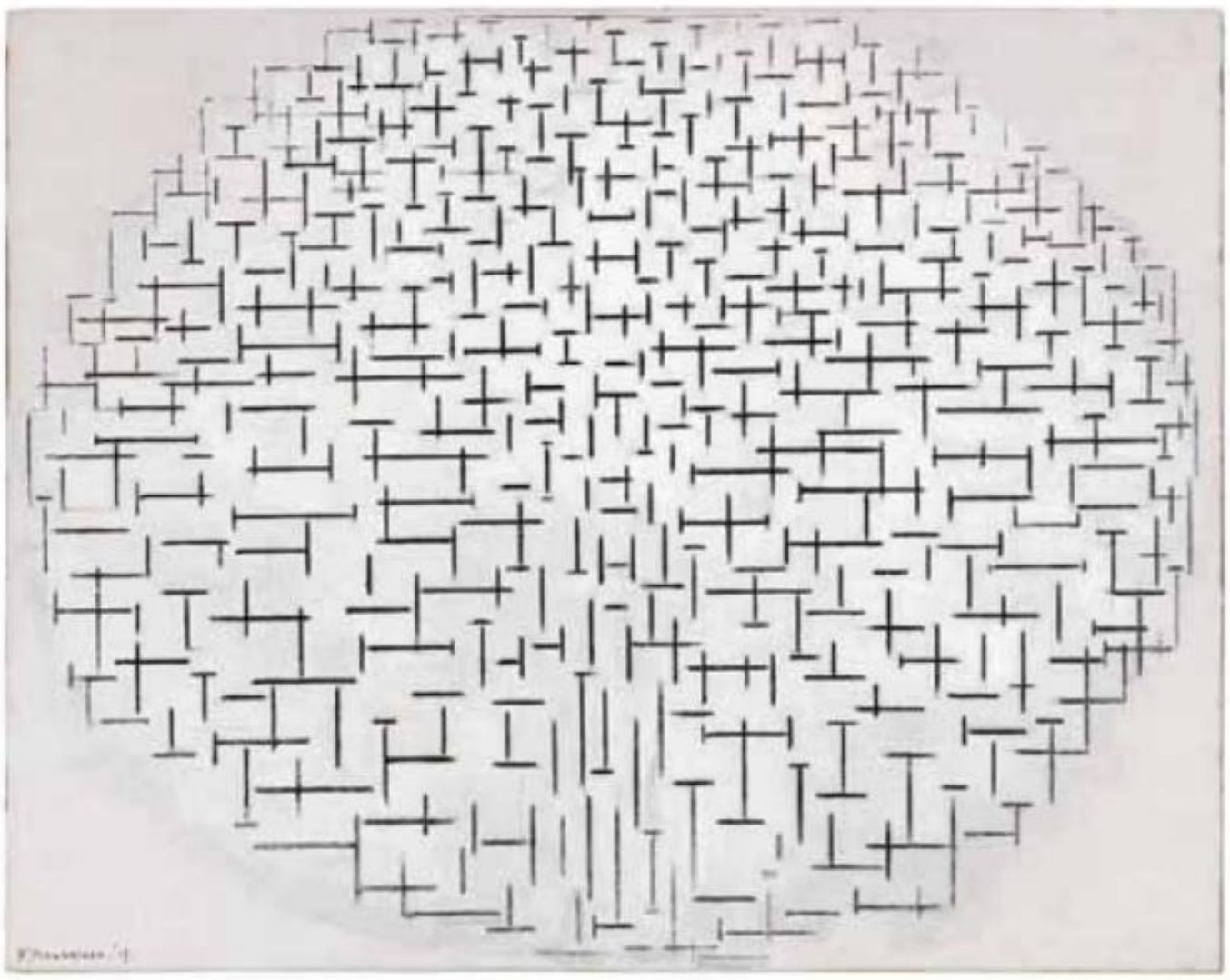
1. Carl Holty, "Mondrian in New York: A Memoir," *Arts* 31, no. 10 (September 1957): 17–21.

2. A.M. Hammacher, "Piet Mondriaan 1872–1944," *Kroniek van kunst en cultuur* 8 (1947): 233–37.



Piet Mondrian
Church Facade 2
1914

Piet Mondrian
Pier and Ocean 1
1914



8.

True Colors: Unity, Diversity, and the Formation of De Stijl 1915–1918

Michael White

Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 10 in Black and White*, 1915

Ever keen to show his work, Piet Mondrian took part in an exhibition in early 1915 at the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring, together with Peter Alma and Henri Le Fauconnier, two other artists who had found themselves temporarily stranded in the Netherlands. On this occasion, he created a mini retrospective for himself, with works dating from 1908 to 1914, including many of those he had shown at the Galerie Walrecht in July 1914. As he explained to Lodewijk Schelfhout, another artist he had come to know in Paris, his intention was to exploit the market for his older work to generate funds for his return to Paris, but he sold nothing.[1]

A change of attitude to the production of new works as well as new opportunities to exhibit them, was evident by the end of the year, though. Mondrian submitted many of the Walrecht paintings to another group show at the Stedelijk Museum in October. This time, however, he also sent a brand-new work inspired by the drawings he was making at the coast. He titled it *Composition X*, as it was the tenth of the eleven works he included. To distinguish it from the colorful paintings that preceded it, he subtitled it "in zwart wit" (in black and white). Despite its stark monochrome character, Mondrian decided to price it a third higher than his other paintings. The painting attracted a lot of attention, and leading art critic H.P. Bremmer snapped it up on behalf of his client, the collector Hélène Kröller-Müller.

One of those excited by the radicalism of *Composition X* was an upcoming artist, writer, and critic, Theo van Doesburg. Although in the army at the time and based in Utrecht, van Doesburg was able to attend many events and had begun to establish a reputation as an advocate of advanced artistic concepts. In a review of the exhibition, he dwelt on *Composition X*: "To restrict the means to so little and then give such a pure impression of art with nothing more than some white paint on a white canvas with horizontal and perpendicular lines is extraordinary."[2] The review prompted correspondence between Mondrian and van Doesburg, and then a first meeting in Laren in February 1916. Van Doesburg was already planning to launch a new journal to promote modern art and culture, and Mondrian indicated a willingness to be involved. He had spent a lot of time writing while in the Netherlands but had yet to find an outlet for the substantial text he had produced, which he referred to in his letters as "my book."[3]

Van Doesburg's attraction to Mondrian's rigorous new form of painting was not exactly matched by his own practice at the time, however. One of the first works he made shortly after his demobilization in early 1916 was *Heroic Movement*, which does not share the perpendicularity of *Composition X*. Its dramatic arabesque form is more reminiscent of expressionism or even art nouveau, with which it shares a desire to emulate the underlying force of nature if not its outward appearance. Also unlike Mondrian's restriction of his palette to sober black and white, van Doesburg used a powerful array of unmixed colors: red, blue, yellow, and green. At the time, he expressed no particular rationale for this selection, but an encounter with the work of another artist would establish a basic color vocabulary for his nascent journal, simultaneously setting in place the ingredients for later dispute.

In April 1916, the painter Bart van der Leck also moved to Laren. Four years younger than Mondrian, van der Leck was a well-established artist and also benefitted from Kröller-Müller's patronage. His experience in works of monumental art had led him to adopt simplified forms and colors, and he increasingly expressed his commitment to ideas of collectivity in social life in his painting through the reduction of form to basic shapes. In two such works from this moment, *Dock Work* and *The Storm*, he used only unmixed red, yellow, and blue, along with black and white. By the end of the year, in a work adopting the architectonic form of a triptych, titled *Composition 1916, no. 4 (Mine Triptych)*, he reduced the scene of a mine entrance and two miners working underground to a series of lines and the same small range of colors. Van Doesburg, who, together with another new acquaintance, the painter Vilmos Huszár, went to see the painting following its installation in Kröller-Müller's collection in The Hague, wrote to van der Leck that it struck him "with its qualities of universal life, solved in harmony with the pure means of painting."[4]

The combination of terms van Doesburg adopted here—*universal* and *pure means of painting*—set the agenda for his new journal, finally launched in late 1917 with the title *De Stijl* (The Style). Its first issue included the opening instalment of Mondrian's "book"—now turned into an extensive article, "De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst" (The new plastic in painting), as well as a major statement from van der Leck on "De plaats van het moderne schilderijen in de architectuur" (The place of modern painting in architecture). Using his article to make a case for the specificity of painting, van der Leck made the bold claim that "color in modern painting is the formation of light, primary color, the direct formation of light."[5] Mondrian, who had been inspired by van der Leck to reintroduce color into his painting and was experimenting in 1917 with a series of works using only color planes, had a more complex concept of color but one similarly based on its universal properties. He outlined his ideas a couple of months later in *De Stijl*. Interspersing references to "primary color," "foundational color" (*grondkleur*), and "abstract color," he explained that the presentation of color ever more as itself rather than as representation of something else was connected to the passage from individualism to universalism, for which his art was a lightning rod.[6] A few issues later, in April 1918, van Doesburg introduced yet another descriptive term, *pure color*, identifying the new art of *De Stijl* with "blue, red and yellow, which appear abstractly as black, gray and white."[7]

At the time, van Doesburg was working on a painting that owed a lot to van der Leck's "Mine Triptych," not least to its side panels with their black backgrounds against which float blocks of red, yellow, blue, and white. *Composition VII (The Three Graces)* of 1917 has an unusual square format that cancels out associations with either the figure (portrait) or the environment (landscape). Only a single shape touches the edge of the canvas, the vertical yellow bar in the lower left. In doing so, it provides the sole gravitational anchor to tell us which way is up and which down. At the time, van Doesburg was making numerous sketches of individual figures, which he then "abstracted" into geometric blocks, but it is impossible to read this composition as in any way derived from those works. Instead, *The Three Graces* refers to something less tangible: ancient mythological goddesses representative of particular qualities, such as charm and beauty, of whom a great many representations exist in European art. With no other visual clue to go on, the temptation is to read the "graces" as the colors red, yellow, and blue themselves, colors that have since become almost synonymous with De Stijl.

The ideas expressed about color in the foundational years of De Stijl are replete with idealistic and universalizing terminology that, for all its connection to modern art, is of quite ancient standing. The Renaissance Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino described

Bart van der Leck, *Work at the Docks*, 1916

Bart van der Leck
The Tempest
1916

universal colors as "three graces" in the fifteenth century. In the *De vita libri tres* (*Three Books on Life*) of 1489, for example, he developed an entire cosmology around his three chosen colors—green, gold, and sapphire-blue—which he attached to Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn respectively. For the artists of De Stijl, a Renaissance concept of a universal triad or trinity was more attractive than recent scientific inquiry into the nature of color.

This became evident at the end of the first year of the journal, when Huszár tried to introduce the theories of the German chemist Wilhelm Ostwald, who had produced the most comprehensive scheme for plotting color relationships to date in his *Farbenfibel* (Color Primer) of 1916. Ostwald's systematic and comprehensive approach was incredibly seductive, offering what Huszár referred to as "clarity and exactitude." Furthermore, by plotting color geometrically, Ostwald offered not only a model for predicting color harmonies but for determining their spatial relationships, which ought to have been useful for controlling its spatial properties. Following the research of physiologists and psychologists, however, Ostwald had four primaries, including green, based on the phenomenological opponent relationships of blue and yellow, red and green, something neither Mondrian nor van Doesburg would ever accept. Furthermore, as outlined by Huszár and demonstrated in his painting *Composition in Gray* of 1918, Ostwald considered gray to be a color in its own right, rather than a noncolor as frequently presented elsewhere in *De Stijl*. If Mondrian's reduction of *Composition X* to simple black and white had initiated the conversation that gave birth to *De Stijl*, it did not in itself answer the question of what might be considered the "pure means of painting."

1. Piet Mondrian to Lodewijk Schelhout, 1 February 1915, quoted in Joop Joosten and Robert Welsh, *Piet Mondrian: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–14* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 107.

2. Theo van Doesburg, "Kunst-kritiek: Moderne Kunst," *De Eenheid*, no. 283 (1915), quoted in Joosten and Welsh, *Piet Mondrian*, 252.

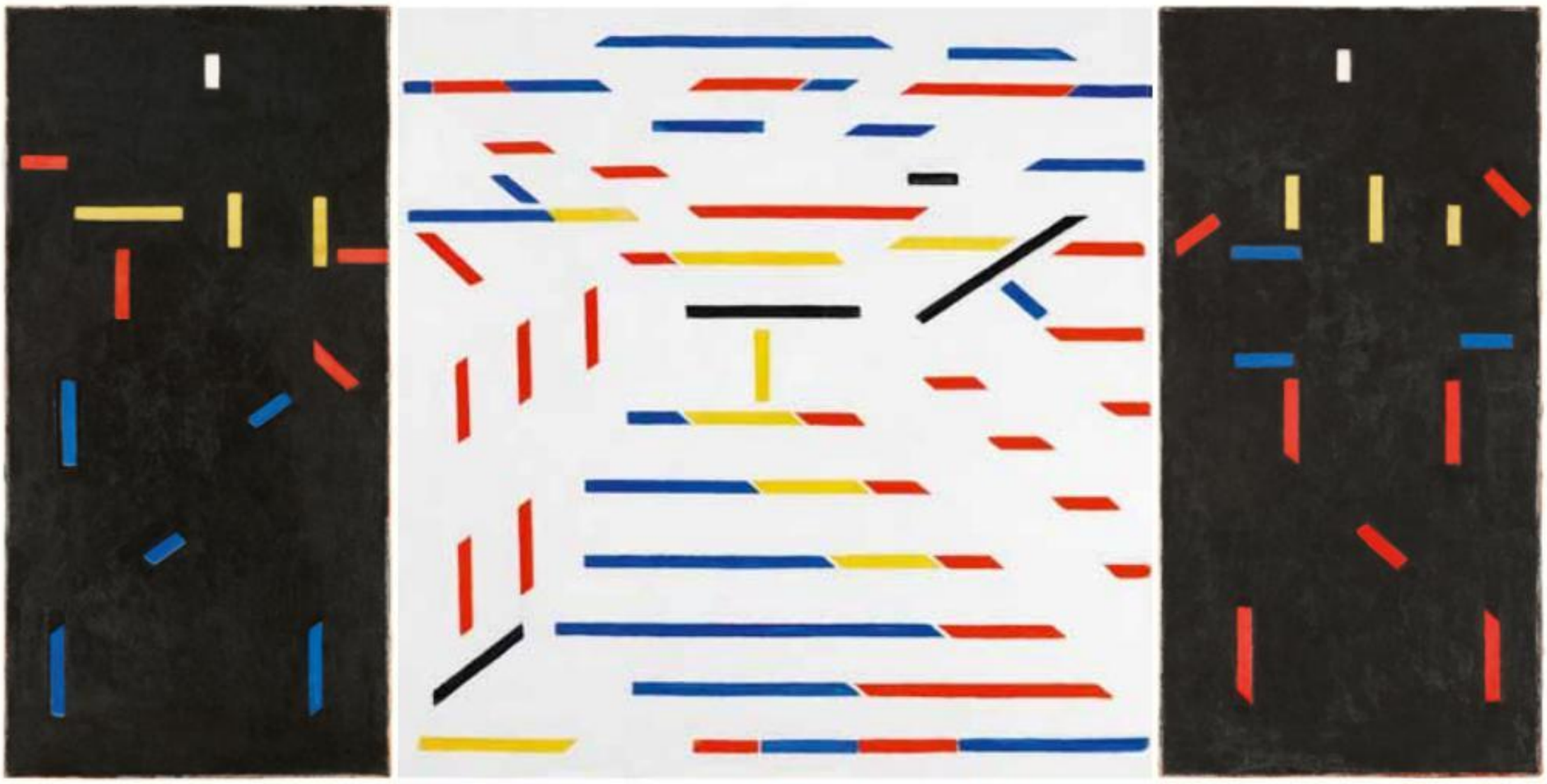
3. Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, 20 November 1915, quoted in Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg, 1883–1931: Een documentaire op basis van materiaal uit de Schenking Van Moorsel* (The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij, 1983), 42.

4. Theo van Doesburg to Bart van der Leck, 31 December 1916, quoted in Carel Blotkamp, "Theo van Doesburg," in *De Stijl: The Formative Years: 1917–22*, ed. Carel Blotkamp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 12.

5. Bart van der Leck, "De plaats van het modern schilderij in de architectuur," *De Stijl* 1, no. 1 (November 1917): 7.

6. Piet Mondrian, "De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst," *De Stijl* 1, no. 3 (January 1918): 30.

7. Theo van Doesburg, "Antwoord aan Mejuffrouw Edith Pijpers en allen, die haar standpunt innemen," *De Stijl* 1, no. 6 (April 1918): 66.



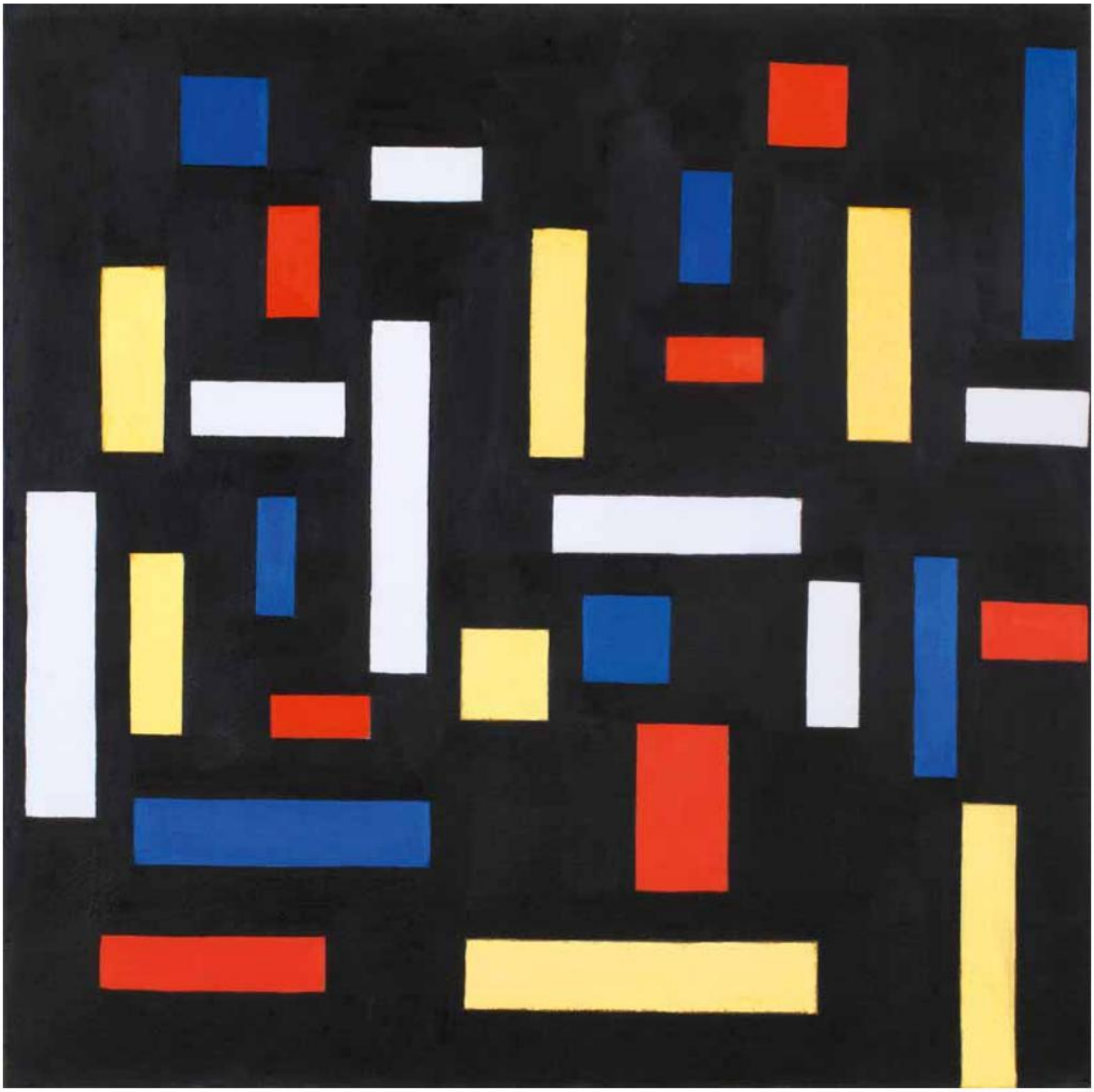
Bart van der Leck
Composition 1916 No. 4
1916

Vilmos Huszár
Composition in Gray
1918

Theo van Doesburg
Girl with Buttercups
1914

Theo van Doesburg
Heroic Movement
1916

Theo van Doesburg
Composition I (Still Life)
1916



Theo van Doesburg
Composition VII: “The Three Graces”
1917

9.

Origins of De Stijl: Painting as Architecture

Marek Wieczorek

Vilmos Huszár (color scheme) and Pieter Jan Christophel Klaarhamer (furniture design)
Boys' bedroom at Villa Arendshoeve, the Bruynzeel Family, Voorburg
1918–1919 (vintage photograph)

Famous for its use of primary colors and right angles in abstract painting, sculpture, architecture, and furnishings, the avant-garde movement called "De Stijl" (The Style)—thus suggesting it aims to go beyond the individual styles of particular figurative artists—reaches into all fields of culture. De Stijl's influence today is evident not only in high art and architecture but also in design, film, fashion, advertising, and popular culture. The breadth of this influence makes it difficult to define what properly belongs to De Stijl, particularly since it is best known from a small number of often-reproduced works. Artworks or design items that emulate such works, or the innumerable knockoffs that aspire to a "De Stijl look," have also helped to cement the movement's recognizability and fame, although, ironically, have thereby obscured the fascinating history of its evolving internal principles.[1] One way to rediscover these principles is through an examination of the movement's origins.

During two formative years from 1917 to 1919, a remarkable synergy—a clarity of technique, vision, and purpose—emerged among a group of abstract painters. Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, and Vilmos Huszár all published essays in this period in the journal *De Stijl*, calling for a new form of plasticity or *Nieuwe beelding*, which Mondrian, the greatest exponent of the movement, translated in 1920 as "Le Néo-Plasticisme" (Neo-Plasticism).[2] Before they collectively became De Stijl with the launch of the journal in October 1917, each of the contributing artists underwent his own unique development toward abstraction. What brought them together was a shared interest in transforming the world around their abstract compositions by merging painting with architecture.

Van der Leck was the first to use pure primary colors, doing so in monumental works from 1916 such as *The Storm* and the large abstract titled *Composition 1916, No. 4*, also known as *Mine Triptych*. These appear to have been conceived as wall murals, building on the legacy of *Gemeenschapskunst* (community art), the Dutch variant of art nouveau that sought to integrate the visual arts with architecture toward a higher social ideal.[3] In a process van der Leck called *ombeelden* (to transform), he abstracted the figure of a miner emerging from the dark surroundings of the two flanking panels of his *Mine Triptych*. Similarly, in *Composition 1917, no. 1 (dog cart)* and *Composition 1917, no. 2*, the motif of a dog pulling a cart is reduced to essential elements of yellow lines (head, legs, trunk, and cart), which in the second version are expanded to become planes. That same year, in his essay "De Plaats van het moderne schilderen in de architectuur" (The Place of Modern Painting in Architecture) in the first issue of *De Stijl*, van der Leck wrote about abstract painting's "spatial planarity," which he explained as "expansion, in contrast to the space-limiting flatness of architecture."[4] Mondrian similarly wrote that, in contrast to the "enclosing" and "limiting" function of architecture, "the rectangular plane is expansive in character."[5] The dynamic, "expansive" abstract planes of color in De Stijl paintings were intended to remake the flat, neutral walls of the enclosed interior. Already in Mondrian's early De Stijl works, the color planes visually relate both to one another and to the rectangular canvas, often suggesting extension beyond the boundaries of the artwork.

Van Doesburg, Huszár, and the Belgian sculptor and painter Georges Vantongerloo all developed compositions along similar lines as Van der Leck, translating figural motifs into abstract forms in which planes on a neutral background play a key role. Van Doesburg made a series of increasingly abstract compositions based on the motif of a grazing cow, of which a red snout and green grass at the bottom and top right are the few remaining recognizable parts in the final composition. Like van der Leck, van Doesburg also took liberties in adapting motifs to balance the whole, as with the yellow square that both anchors the composition and creates an effect of outward relationships. Van Doesburg, who as the editor of *De Stijl* saw other artists' works in reproduction and during studio visits, had a tendency to appropriate his peers' ideas and inventions, as with the black background in *Composition VII: "The Three Graces"*, which he first saw in van der Leck's work. The use of the plane to establish dynamic relations is most acutely expressed in Huszár's typography for the De Stijl logo. Letters are typically presented as a whole, indivisible figure that derives meaning from opposition to a uniform background, but Huszár's

iconoclastic transformation breaks up each letter into constituent elements that all the letters share, in a relational, inward-outward play. Huszár added a period, not typically included in logos, and playfully placed it at the top right, completing the invisible frame of the box in which "De Stijl" appears.

Along with a sense of social engagement derived from community art, primary intellectual sources that early on shaped the theory of neoplasticism included the writings of nature philosopher Mathieu Schoenmaekers and the writings of Gerard Bolland, a professor of philosophy at Leiden University and a disciple of the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who systematized thinking in oppositional (dialectical) relations. De Stijl artists adapted Schoenmaekers's notion of "complementary opposites" among nature's laws and rhythms, such as vertical and horizontal, interior/exterior, open/closed, and, especially, "expansion and limitation," as oppositional forces in compositions.[6] Both Mondrian and van der Leck read Schoenmaekers's books during 1915 and 1916 when they all lived in Laren, engaged in extended discussions with him, and recommended his books to other soon-to-be De Stijl members.[7] Schoenmaekers saw "expansion and limitation" as dynamic forces that constitute a substratum of both natural growth and architecture: trees grow vertically and spread their branches horizontally, and architecture composes through these forces in structures made of walls and floors (planes). The term *Nieuwe beelding*, adopted as a credo of De Stijl, was coined by Schoenmaekers and was intended to convey how "the plane" results from a fabric of vertically and horizontally intersecting "force lines," generating new formations of plasticity.[8]

De Stijl painters sought to transform the entire building through the expansive thrust of their intensely colored compositions. The initial architect members of the group, J.J.P. Oud, Robert van 't Hoff, and Jan Wils, wanted to collaborate but could not accept how the painters' color designs radically transformed the appearance of their buildings. Conversely, the painters felt limited when the architects interfered with their design or gave them little more than trim or part of the wall to paint.

In 1918, van Doesburg completed his first collaboration with Oud, received commissions for stained-glass windows, and designed an interior color scheme for Bart de Ligt. Van Doesburg called for a fully "*complementary* relationship between architecture and painting," yet his coloristic designs for Oud's Spangen housing blocks visually undermined the structure of the building through color, leading to a break with the architect in 1921.[9]

Huszár was more successful and received commissions for interiors in which he also often designed the furniture, as with the boys' bedroom at Villa Arendshoeve for the Bruynzeel family (1918–1919). In 1918, both Mondrian and Huszár also independently began experimenting with a regular division, parsing the composition into repeating modules. In the writings in *De Stijl* repetition was rejected as a principle of art because of its association with nature. Approaching painting more as a form of architecture, where repetition is norm, Huszár and Mondrian both appear to have taken on regularity to subvert repetition from within. In Huszár's *Composition in Gray*, the alternation of white and light gray makes the arrangement of dark gray planes appear to swell and throb, an effect that is far from the rigidity or regularity with which this and other comparable works with modules are usually associated.

Likely reacting to van der Leck's earlier failed collaborations, Mondrian generally distrusted actual architects, whom he called "valets of the public."[10] After an extended exile in Holland during World War I, Mondrian, back in his Paris studio and independent of any architect, was inspired to make the promise of painting as architecture concretely real in the interior of his own studio. There he worked through modularity in his compositions in 1919 and 1920 and even extended his paintings onto the studio wall through movable pasteboards, thereby counteracting the enclosure or "limitation" these walls provided. In his mature neoplastic compositions of 1920–1921, consisting of planes of primary colors (yellow, red, blue) and "noncolor" (white, gray, black) framed by vertical and horizontal black lines, repetition is abolished, and an asymmetrically placed conspicuous element is systematically displaced through oppositional

Vilmos Huszár (color scheme) and Pieter Jan Christophel Klaarhamer (furniture design)
Boys' bedroom made for Villa Arendshoeve, home of the Bruynzeel family, Voorburg
1918–1919
(Reconstruction Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2011)

relationships to all the other elements. Viewed through the perspective of the underlying principles that informed the De Stijl artists—and particularly though the long, complex development evident throughout Mondrian's extended, dynamic career—these works can be seen not as the overly familiar formulas that have been adapted to every conceivable commercial purpose but as a unique, manifold, and magnificent form of pictorial architecture.

I express my deep gratitude to Angela Thomas Schmid for her friendship and generosity.

1. See Nancy Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

2. Piet Mondrian, *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe générale de l'equivalence plastique* (Paris: Editions de l'Effort Moderne, 1920).

3. See Michael White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003). For one of the first systematic accounts of community art, also called *Nieuwe Kunst* (new art), see Louis Gans, *Nieuwe Kunst: De Nederlandse Bijdrage tot de Art Nouveau* (Utrecht: Libertas, 1960).

4. Bart van der Leck, "De Plaats van het moderne schilderen in de architectuur," *De Stijl* 1, no. 1 (October 1917): 7.

5. Piet Mondrian, "Natuurlijke- en abstracte realiteit: TRIALOOG (gedurende een wandeling van buiten naar de stad) (Natural and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 110.

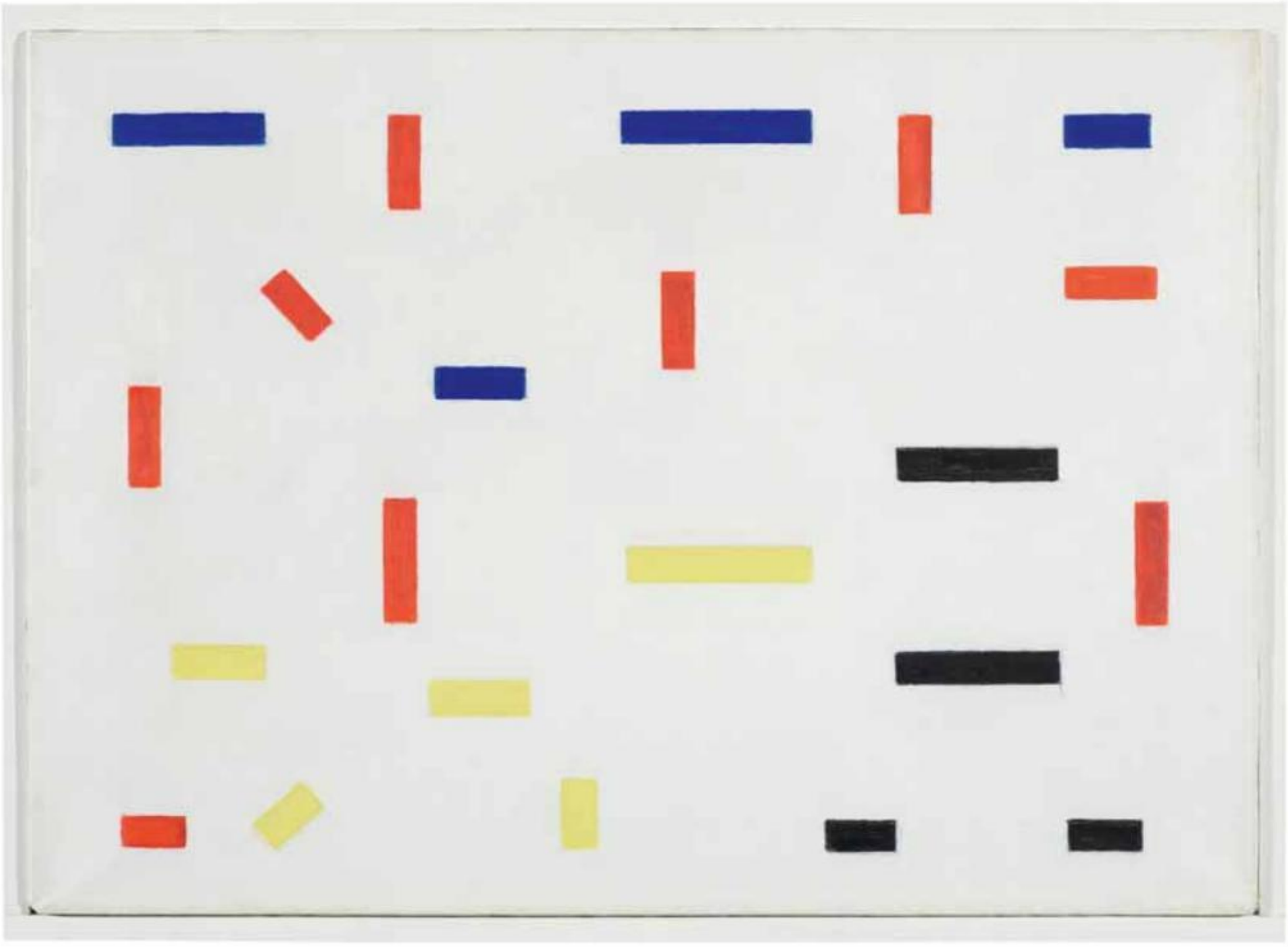
6. In his first text in *De Stijl*, Mondrian wrote that "from expansion and limitation . . . is born the equilibrated relationship of position—the rectangular." Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," in *The New Art*, 38. (Today, most scholars translate the title of Mondrian's essay "De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst" as "Neo-Plasticism in Painting.")

7. Both Mondrian and van der Leck devoured Schoenmaekers's books, particularly *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* (*New Image of the World*) (1915) and *Beginselen der beeldende wiskunde* (*Principles of Plastic Mathematics*) (1916). When van Doesburg first met his future colleagues on a visit to Laren in February 1916, he was also introduced to Schoenmaekers, and he in turn suggested his books as essential reading to Belgian sculptor Vantongerloo, as is clear from a letter fragment from June 7, 1918, reproduced in Marek Wieczorek, *The Universe in the Living Room: Georges Vantongerloo in the Space of De Stijl / Het heelal in de huiskamer: Georges Vantongerloo en de Nieuwe Beelding van De Stijl* (Utrecht: Centraal Museum, 2002), 76. Mondrian likely encountered Schoenmaekers's writings as early as summer 1913, possibly as early as 1911 in *Eenheid: Weekblad voor maatschappelijke en geestelijke stroomingen* (Unity: Weekly for social and spiritual movements).

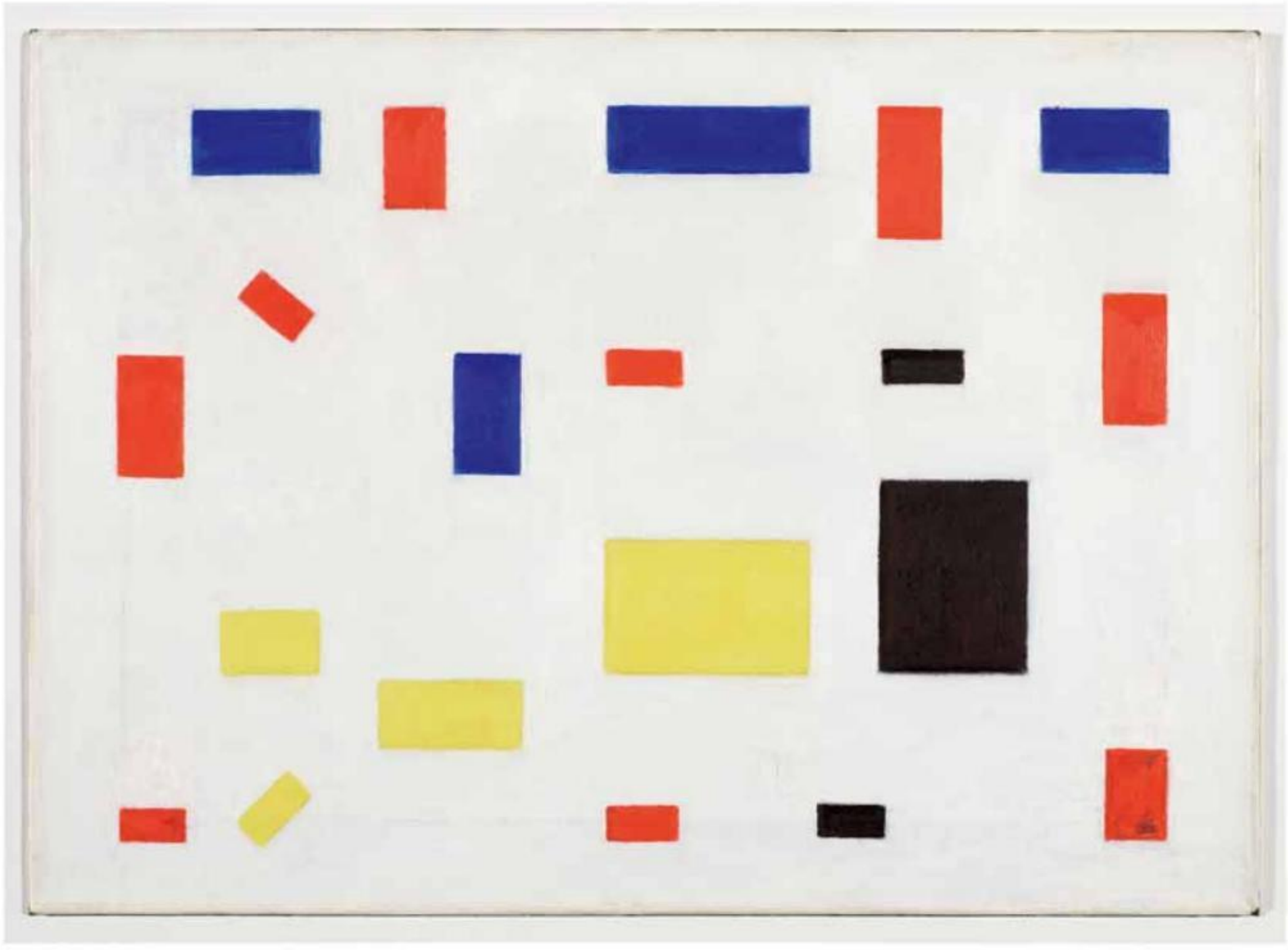
8. "Real form is closed or round or curved," Mondrian wrote, "in opposition to *the apparent form of the rectangle*, where lines intersect, touch at tangent, but continue uninterrupted." Piet Mondrian, "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence," in *The New Art*, 138.

9. Theo van Doesburg, "Aanteekeningen over monumentale kunst," *De Stijl* II (November 1918): 11.

10. Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, 1922, cited in H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986), 162.

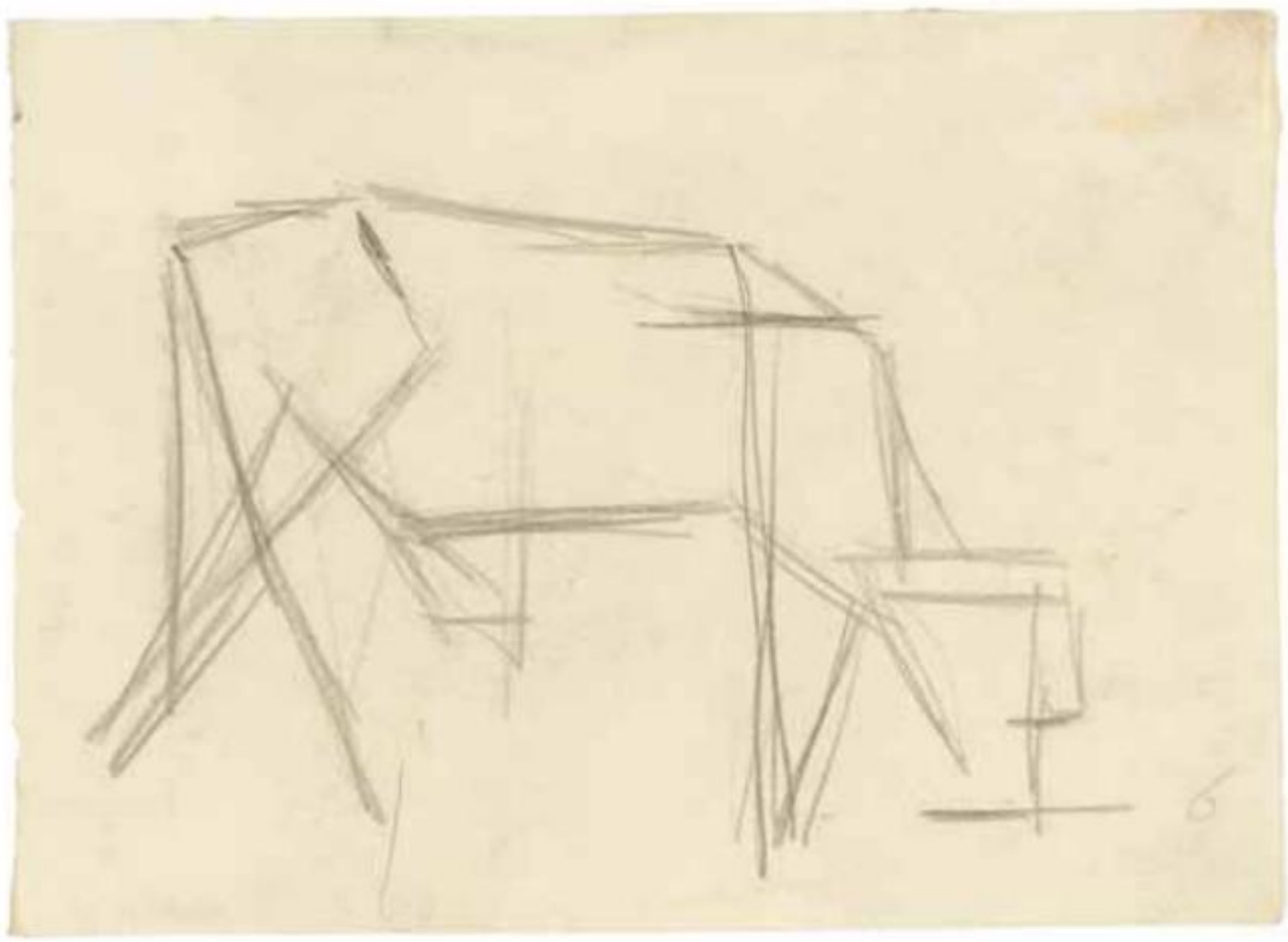


Bart van der Leck
Composition 1917, No. 1 (Dog Cart)
1917



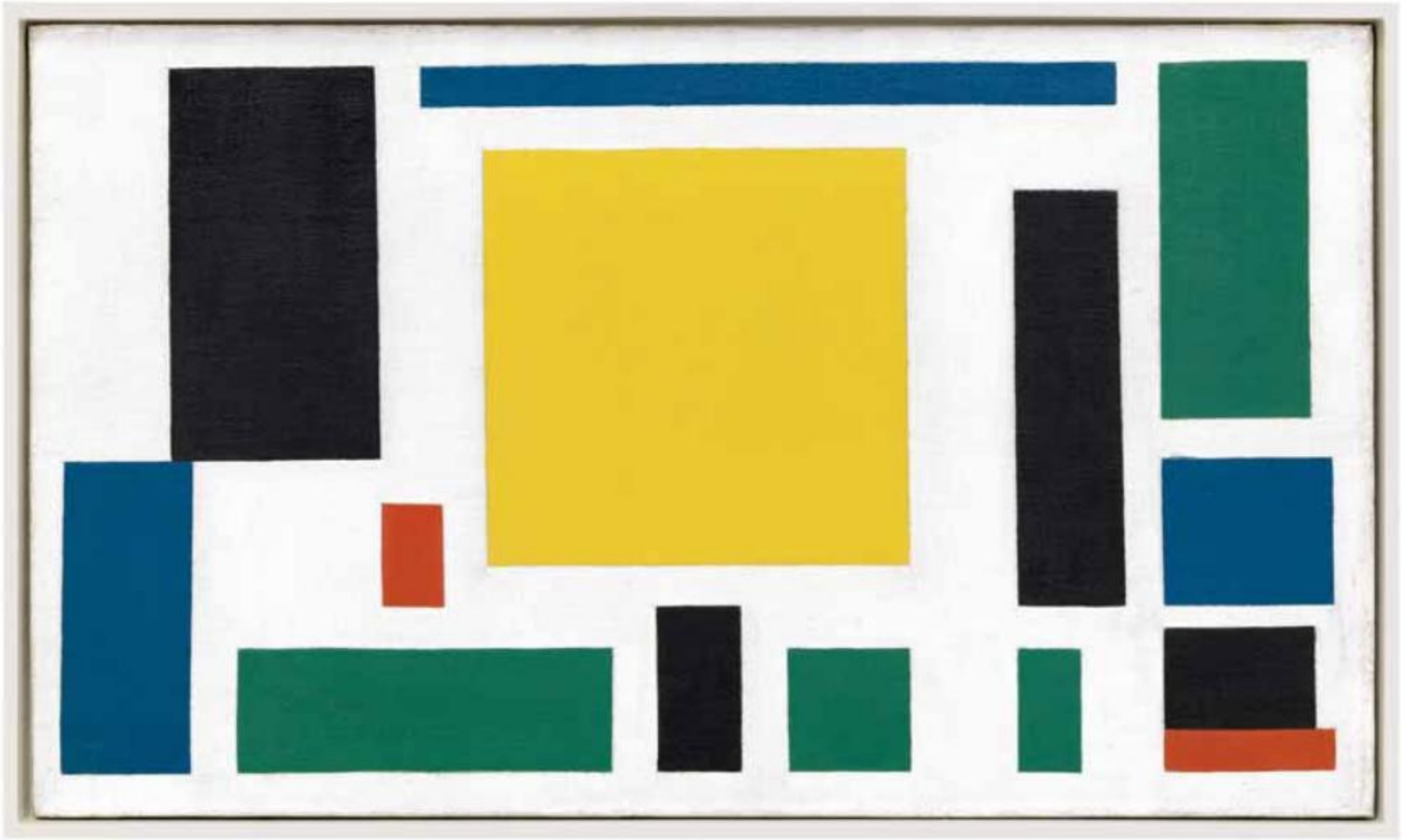
Bart van der Leck
Composition 1917, No. 2 (Dog Cart)
1917

Theo van Doesburg
Stained Glass: Composition IV for the De Lange Villa, Alkmaar
1917



Theo van Doesburg
Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1917

Theo van Doesburg
Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1917



Theo van Doesburg
Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1918

Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. 2 / Composition No. VII*, 1913

10.

The Gradual Evolution of Mondrian's Neoplasticism

Marek Wieczorek

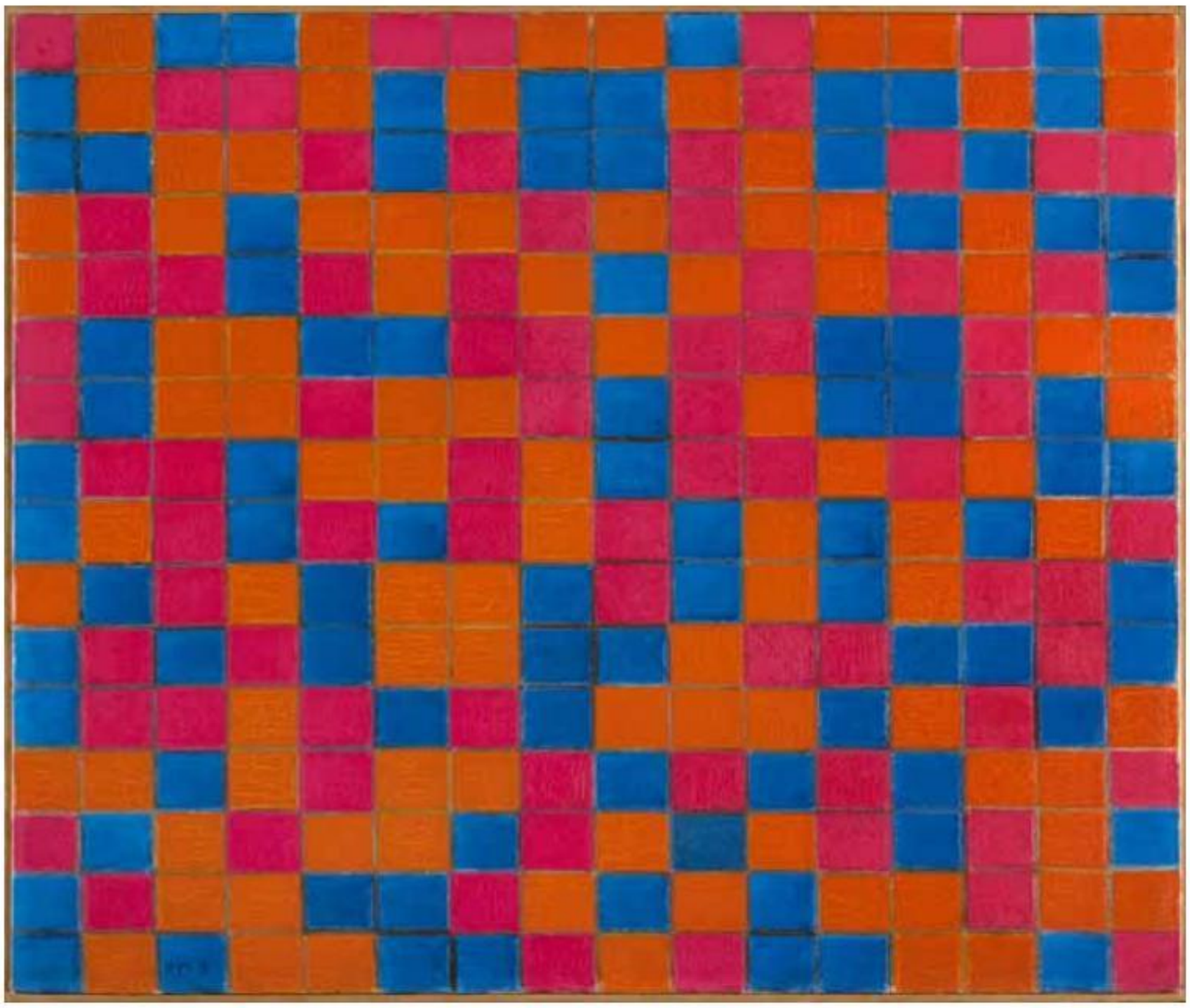
Piet Mondrian's fame ultimately rests on his "neoplasticism," although exactly what that entails remains unclear to this day. We can best follow Mondrian's complex development and consummate achievement using his own extended commentary on his art as a guide. As he explained, he sought to realize a new form of plasticity or pictorial space without recognizable objects, in which figure and background become interchangeable, and where all abstract elements are defined in relation to one another, with color revealing its own spatial qualities. This outlook helps us to see and understand his works anew—above all, the gradual evolution of his neoplasticism in the years 1914–1921.

Before he became a pioneer of abstraction, Mondrian was a successful figurative painter, especially strong at still lifes and dark landscapes. Reading with the benefit of hindsight, we can perhaps already see the distant origins of his abstraction in his early *Still Life with Oranges* of 1900. Behind the foreground oranges molded or spatially shaped in the traditional manner of chiaroscuro (light-and-dark), the rearmost orange derives its plasticity primarily from its position within the rim of the upended plate. The concave of the plate is underscored in turn by darker strokes that appear to radiate from its edge and into the background cloth. Mondrian would later describe such transformations in painting, but also in natural processes, in terms of "the spherical seeking to be plane."[1]

Mondrian had begun to experiment with various international modernist movements by 1908, but his approach to pictorial space changed most dramatically in October 1911 when he saw a large group of works by French postimpressionist painter Paul Cézanne and various early cubist works by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at an exhibition in Amsterdam. The cubists exaggerated Cézanne's parallel, "constructive" brushstrokes and his merging of slanted planes into pictorial structure, called "*passage*." In Mondrian's *Flowering Trees* of 1912, the soft modulations of color, oblique planes, and diagonal brushwork, especially in the bottom third, constitute his response to Cézanne's *passage*. His "cubist" tree from the year after, which has constructive brushstrokes, is closer to Picasso's muted colors and sense of the motif bulging out toward the viewer—known as cubist "convexity"—yet also demonstrates his original ability to create convexity while keeping his planes even. Gone are the chiaroscuro effects that defined the small, canted, faceted planes through which Picasso merged his fractured figures with the background. Mondrian credited the cubists with "the breaking of form (contour)" but said this was still done with the intent to "express volume," whereas his own aim was "the destruction of volume by the use of the plane."[2] His aim was palpably realized in his magnificent tree from 1913, which shows a skeleton of emphatic lines and horizontally striated brushwork that together form planes that do not tilt back in space but are kept even with the picture plane while still invoking the convex protrusion of the whole.[3]

From 1914 to 1916, Mondrian made several discoveries that would guide his search for a new form of plasticity, both conceptually and formally. In a letter of August 1915 referring to a recent drawing of a church facade, now lost, although close in appearance to *Church Façade 2* of 1914, he wrote that with such works he sought to express "rhythmical expansion in height and width." Inspired by nature's vital, dynamic forces rather than its actual forms, he added in quasi-mystical tones that his works embodied "the beautiful movement of the universe," which he set out to capture.[4] His phrase "expansion in height and width" derives from nature philosopher Mathieu Schoenmaekers, a neighbor in Laren whose books and ideas would become key to the theory of neoplasticism. Schoenmaekers's view of the eternal flux of the cosmos as a complex "unity of opposites" inspired Mondrian to render both natural motifs (trees, a sea) and architecture as a response to the vertical/horizontal and interior/exterior forces at work on them. From 1917 to 1921, Mondrian elaborated on these dynamic oppositional principles in his own original pictorial plasticity. He increasingly aligned the dialectic of "the plane," which emerges spontaneously from expansive vertical and horizontal forces, with the plane of the canvas, forming a unity that is both abstract and real—his term *abstract-real* later became a synonym for neoplasticism.

Mondrian's first major breakthrough work to show his commitment to the plane throughout the entire painting is his remarkable *Composition in Line* of 1917, the culmination of various series of graphic or painted works (1914–1916) with short vertical and horizontal lines with rounded tips that show traces of the hand. In the 1917 work the lines are changed from a painterly to a more conceptual mode as little planes with a sharp, rectangular definition, some even square, like the format of the canvas. Rectangular and relational oppositions rhythmically dance across the entire composition, with planes unapologetically meeting the edge of the canvas, manifesting cubist convexity without blurring at the edges. In the next series, five *Compositions with Color Planes* from 1917, Mondrian reintroduced color yet abandoned black lines completely. The sharp, straight edge of the color plane has effectively "internalized" the former function of line as outline or boundary, or, as he would later put it, "the lines are absorbed by the color planes."[5] The colors in this phase, but also during much of the 1910s, are still mostly tempered, subdued derivatives of the primaries. Because the planes seem to be floating and are each placed ever so slightly off the perpendicular, the whole attains an energetic, "alive" appearance. In the last of the five works in the series, the background is activated, too, and divided into planes in different off-white values.



Piet Mondrian
Composition Checkerboard with Dark Colors
1919

In his next breakthrough work, *Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines* of 1918, an early glimpse into Mondrian's mature phase, the independent planes seem to have floated together, the neutral ground has disappeared, and all are connected by lines in an attempt to unify the planar composition with the canvas. Colors are brighter, as are whites and grays, but still adapted, attuned in value to the neighboring planes, as though in mutual acknowledgment, a strategy also evident in the lines. "Dimensions in height and width oppose each other without foreshortening, and depth is manifested through the color difference of the planes," Mondrian wrote in the same year, 1918, describing the paradigm of his art for years to come: "Neo-Plasticism expresses the essence of space through the relationship of one color plane to another."[6]

Mondrian soon concluded that unity was still lacking and encountered the question of what motivates the internal division in this particular way, which made him resort to the regularity of a grid. Fearing stasis, the painter had previously avoided regularity and repetition because these correspond to the outward appearance of nature, in contrast to its internal, generative forces. In both his first diamond composition and his so-called checkerboard compositions, regular division produces modules that each reflect the whole, yet Mondrian counteracted their repetition by way of a vital inner force. In the diamond composition, the "allover" rapport between the canvas and internal division, with lines that stretch for the first time from edge to edge, is countered by an inner, expansive force that seems to radiate across the plane from points caused by optical popping effects. In the checkerboard composition, clusters of color create an intense irregular rhythm and inner force in a comparably lively, spatial play.

Two of Mondrian's mature neoplastic compositions of 1921 show how repetition is abolished and an asymmetrically placed, conspicuous element is systematically displaced through oppositional relationships to all the other pictorial elements. In the first of these, the large red plane is visually offset by the surrounding planes of color and noncolor that all engage a new form of plasticity. In the second work from 1921, optical dynamism is replaced by a simpler, sparser approach to composition that would endure through the so-called classical phase of 1927–1932. The largest plane, if imagined as a figure, is made white and thus also the opposite of figure as background, "emptied out" by the heavy defining lines it shares with five other planes, placed off-center, yet still corresponding with the frame through its vertical orientation. The colors connect inwardly as primaries, yet, placed on the periphery, also suggest extension, the blue plane in fact just as wide as the black line by which it is bound—therefore the blue is both line *and* plane, which explains why the large white plane is placed exactly there. Other compositional subtleties abound in the grays and whites and the plastic effects of the yellow and red, the lines stopping short of the edge, and the neutral, recessed frame that further facilitates extension beyond. Turning the work upside down or sideways will upset its dynamic balance. The only line stretching from side to side acts like a built-in floor of sorts, portending the merger of neoplasticism with architecture.

1. Piet Mondrian, "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 135.

2. Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," in *The New Art*, 39, 64. Mondrian would repeat these claims in 1943. See Piet Mondrian with J.J. Sweeney, [untitled interview], in *The New Art*, 357.

3. The effect is enhanced by cubist blurring toward the edges in Mondrian's trees and buildings, a "very abstract Cubism," as French poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire would characterize such works in March 1913 in the first international review of Mondrian's art. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Chroniques d'art 1902–1918*, ed. LeRoy C. Breunig (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 378. Joop M. Joosten, *Piet Mondrian: Catalogue Raisonne of the Work of 1911–1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams; Blaricum, The Netherlands: V + K Publishing, 1998), 2:224, wrote of *Composition No. XIV* that "the composition seems to be based on a façade, possibly even the façade of a church (Domburg?)."

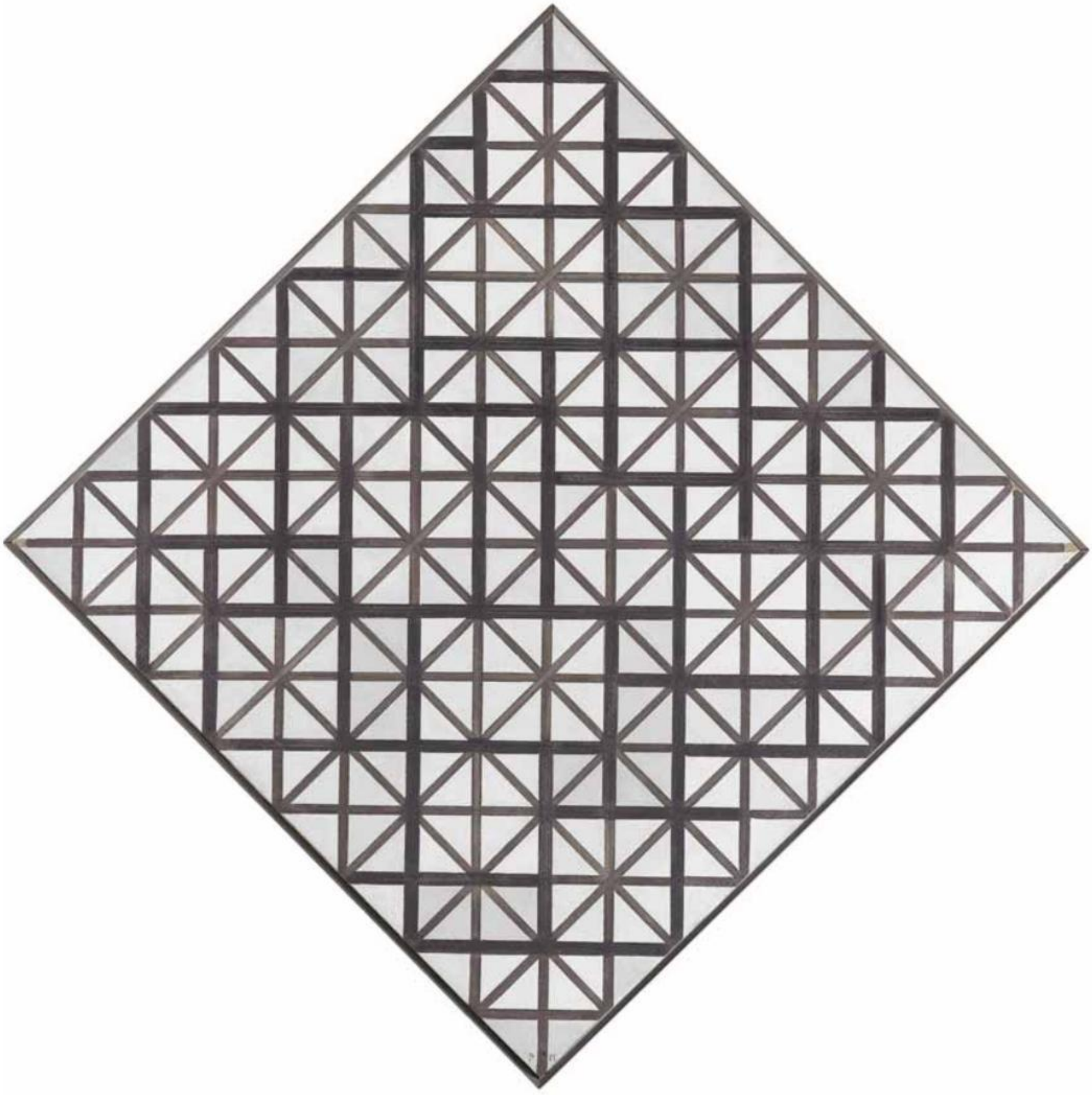
4. The letter is cited in full in W.H.K. van Dam, "Een onbekende brief van Mondriaan," *Oud Holland* 104, no. 3/4 (1990): 341–43.

5. Mondrian, cited in James Johnson Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and De Stijl," *Art News* 50, no. 4 (1951): 62.

6. Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," 38.

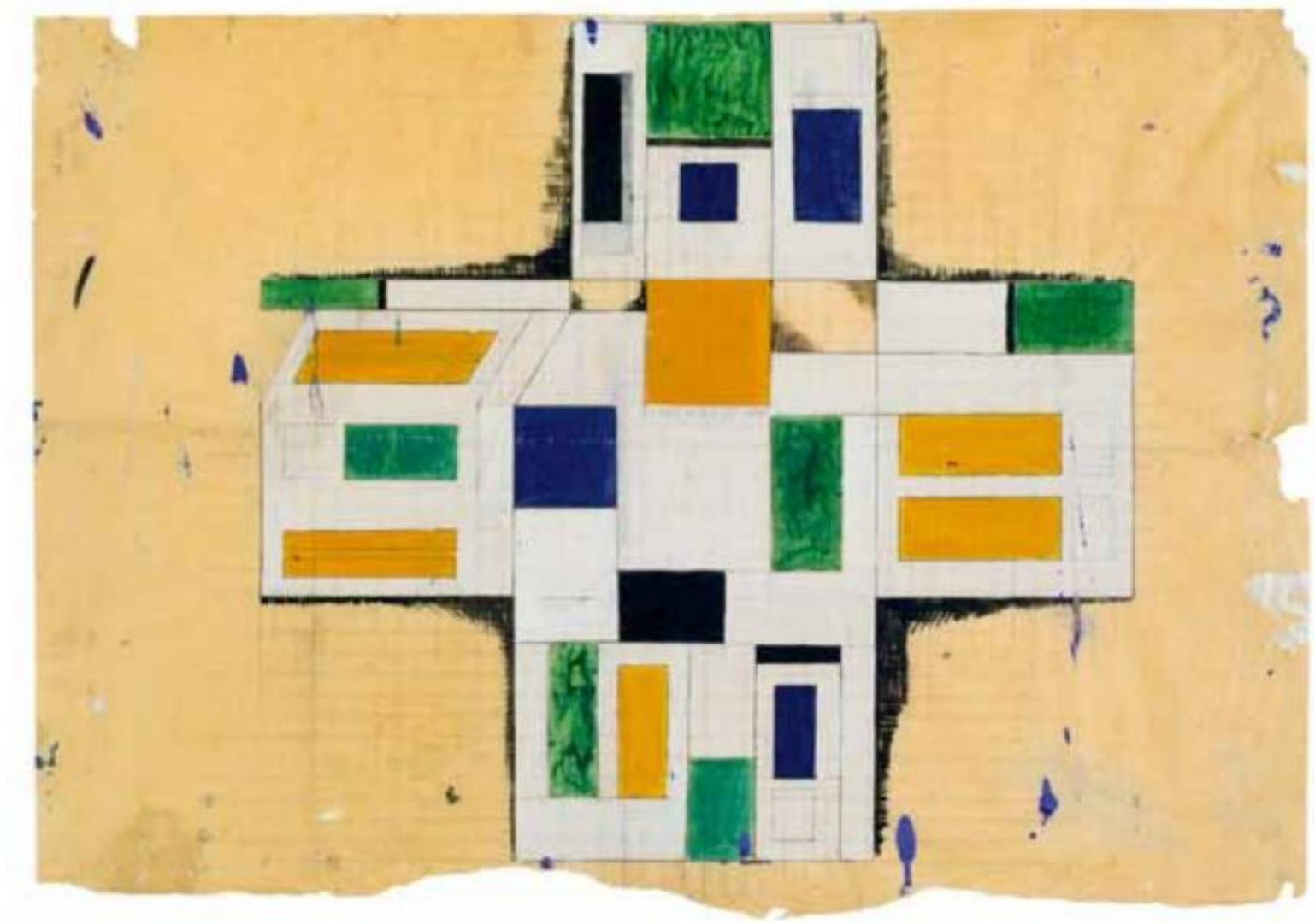
Piet Mondrian
Composition No. 5 with Color Planes
1917

Piet Mondrian
Composition No. 3 with Color Planes
1917



Piet Mondrian
Composition with Gray Lines
1918

Piet Mondrian
Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Gray, and Blue
1921



11.

Living in Color: Painting, Architecture, and De Stijl, 1917–1921

Michael White

Theo van Doesburg, Color design for a room in Bart de Ligt's house, Katwijk aan Zee, 1919–1920

Piet Mondrian was not the only major figure Theo van Doesburg hoped to recruit as a contributor to *De Stijl*. One of the key personalities he aimed to enlist was the most famous modern architect in the Netherlands of the day, H.P. Berlage, who had written extensively on the question of style in modernity. Berlage argued vigorously in numerous articles and books that the current lack of a collective style signified a lack of social cohesion. A dysfunctional relationship between the individual and society was mirrored, he thought, in the hodgepodge of competing styles visible in the architectural landscape. Here is one of the roots of the De Stijl project to bring about radical social change through aesthetic means—specifically, through collaboration among art forms.

By late 1917, it was clear to van Doesburg that Berlage was not going to participate, but van Doesburg had in the meantime made important connections with some of the architect's key contacts. In particular, he had met J.J.P. Oud, an upcoming architect who had known Berlage since 1910 and whose career was benefitting from the older man's patronage. Through Oud, van Doesburg also met Jan Wils, who was then working in Berlage's drawing office. Both young architects gave van Doesburg opportunities to work with them and thereby establish the interaction of painting and architecture as a fundamental concern of De Stijl. Berlage's reluctance to become involved with the movement's journal may have resulted from his uncomfortable relationship with another important contributor. He had worked closely with Bart van der Leck on projects for the Müller Company until 1916, when the latter withdrew from further collaboration, complaining of being treated as no more than a "decorator's supervisor." Underlying tensions between painters and architects would manifest in many subsequent De Stijl projects that, on the face of it, seem to show the two working in unison.

The first projects on which van Doesburg, Oud, and Wils worked together primarily involved the design of stained glass windows. Then, in early 1917, Wils commissioned van Doesburg to devise the complete color scheme and a large window for a town house for a notary in the small town of Alkmaar. Van Doesburg did not hold back. He made the hallway yellow and purple with a green dado, he painted the dresser in the dining room deep blue with yellow trim, he gave the drawing room and living room green and purple panels "freed by white," and he produced even bolder schemes for some of the bedrooms: red, green, and blue, with ceilings painted violet. "I integrated the cellars—wine racks and fruit-crates and all," he wrote effusively to a friend. "Alkmaar is up in arms. You can imagine how people stared. They don't understand a bit of it but don't dare to say anything." As for the window he installed over the main staircase, van Doesburg described its composition as "completely free in space."[1]

Shortly afterward, van Doesburg began work for Oud on a holiday home on the coast at Noordwijkerhout, intended for children from working-class families. This time, van Doesburg not only devised color schemes for painted areas of the building, such as doors, but for its tiled floors and some glazed brick mosaics on the exterior. He reproduced images of the hallway and upper landing in *De Stijl* in the same issue as its first manifesto in November 1918, which called for "international unity in Life, Art, Culture."[2] As van Doesburg explained later in the same issue, this unity would be achieved by architecture and painting not simply melding into one but acting in their essential manner. "Architecture joins together, binds. Painting loosens, disintegrates."[3] Van Doesburg's color designs resisted the bilateral symmetry of the building by using complex rotational patterns, particularly on the floor. As he explained, this was the most "closed" surface in the building, and therefore its gravitational pull needed the most resistance.[4]

Not all of the De Stijl painters were of the same view. Vilmos Huszár read van Doesburg's article skeptically. He was also receiving commissions to work on architectural projects but did not believe painting would necessarily find its true identity in such a context. In these collaborations, he thought, compromises would always need to be made and practical problems accommodated, and, when applied to real life situations, terms such as *constructive* and *destructive* were completely relative. The best the painter could do was "work with the whole building" rather than against it and treat all surfaces as part of the composition.[5] Using Wilhelm Ostwald's *Farbenfibel* (Color Primer) as a guide, Huszár believed

he could control the spatial effects of his colors in an interior and ultimately produce a feeling of balance, rather than trying to counteract the architectural structure.

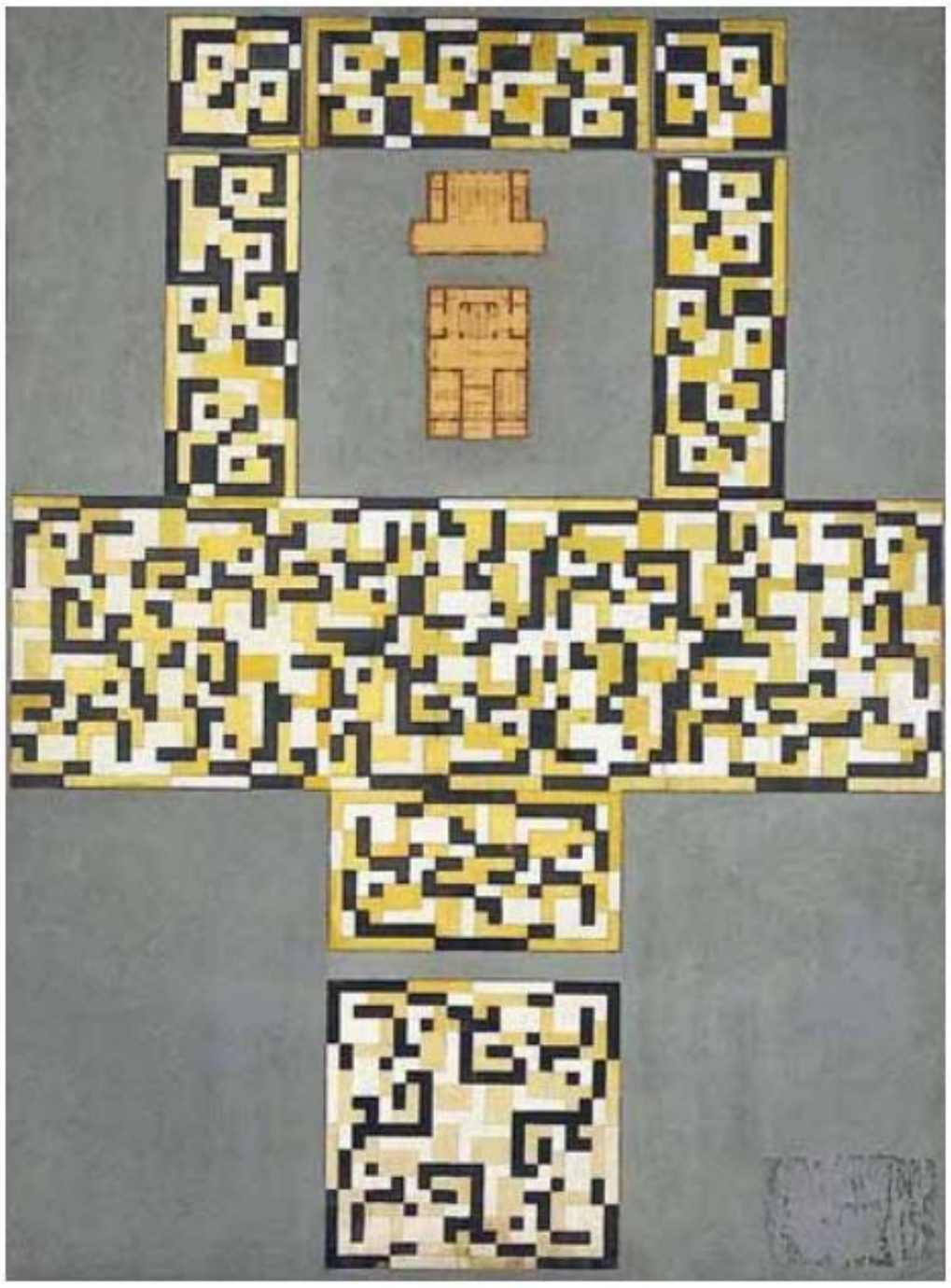
Huszár's major opportunity to test out his ideas was a commission from Cornelis Bruynzeel, the owner of a large wood manufacturing company that had been advertising its products in *De Stijl* from the outset. Bruynzeel wanted his sons' bedroom redesigned and gave Huszár full artistic license. The result was a room painted in a typical De Stijl range of reds, yellows, and blues. The alcove in which Huszár positioned the two beds illustrates the difference of approach. As he wrote a few years later, "the cupboard door divides the two beds, and I tried to find a connection between the two beds by painting the wall above one of them white and above the other gray, with the planes on the wall reversed."[6] While Huszár treated the two sides of the alcove differently, he did not disrupt their strong symmetry. Rather than contrast, relationships between color and architecture dominate here.

Jan Wils, De Lange house, Alkmaar, 1917

Van Doesburg was unimpressed by the boys' bedroom for Bruynzeel, but Huszár was certainly ahead of him in the use of a complete range of color primaries in the interior. Van Doesburg was still working with oranges and greens, even where he had a client of a more progressive character, such as the pacifist intellectual Bart de Ligt, for whom he remodeled at least two rooms in 1918 and 1919. Van Doesburg considered the second of these more successful, even though it was of modest dimensions and had a door that cut off one corner at an unfortunate angle, making a peculiar five-sided shape. Indeed, it was a room full of doors, with built-in seating and cupboards as well. However, this did not prevent van Doesburg from imagining it as a "painting in three-dimensions."[7] What was particularly notable on this occasion was his treatment of the ceiling, which he painted using large color planes, the proportions of some of which he derived from the architecture. That others were decidedly not so derived led to a far greater sense of visual uncertainty regarding the spatial boundaries of the room. A new contributor to *De Stijl*, the carpenter Gerrit Rietveld, designed furniture for the room, two chairs and a table that seem to extend beyond their physical limits. He painted the ends of the laths from which they were constructed in a contrasting color, enhancing the perception that they continued outward into space.

Ultimately, the idea of spatial extension caused a rift between architects and painters. Van Doesburg in particular overstepped the mark, at first subtly so in his color designs for some middle-class housing in the northern town of Drachten, the first occasion where he whole-heartedly used red, yellow, and blue in the interiors and on the exterior of all of the properties. Here the problem was the reverse of the holiday home in Noordwijkerhout. The houses were too disparate, too individualistic and disconnected from one another, and van Doesburg wanted them to be seen as unified. He imagined the colors connecting across space, drawing different buildings into relationship with one another.

While van Doesburg was able to persuade the local architect in Drachten to carry out his plans, he had less success with Oud, for whose major social housing project in the Spangen district of Rotterdam he had made similar color designs. Oud was concerned in



Theo van Doesburg, Tiled floor design for De Vonk vacation retreat, Noordwijkerhout, 1917

Theo van Doesburg, Color scheme for front wall Potgieterstraat (block VIII), Drawing A and A', Spangen District, Rotterdam, 1921

particular about the abundant use of yellow on doors, which would become dirty quickly, and also about the use of black on the facade, which might be seen as negative space. As van Doesburg's drawings show, he imagined his color scheme as enlivening the architecture and making it far more dynamic, relieving what he described to Oud as its "somewhat monotonous normalization."[8] However, most revealingly, he accused Oud of disturbing the chain of his development "as an architect-painter."[9] No longer seeing De Stijl as a collaboration between painters and architects, van Doesburg had come to see it as an opportunity to create a new type of artist, one who could create space with color alone, leaving easel and canvas behind to paint a new life in three dimensions.

1. Theo van Doesburg to Antony Kok, September 9, 1917, quoted in Alied Ottevanger, ed., *"De Stijl overall absolute leiding": De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en Antony Kok* (Bussum: Uitgeverij Thoth, 1998), 204–5.

2."Manifest 1 van "De Stijl," 1918," *De Stijl* 2, no.1 (November 1918): 2–3.

3. Theo van Doesburg, "Aantekeningen over monumentale kunst," *De Stijl* 2, no.1 (November 1917): 11.

4. Ibid., 12.

5. Vilmos Huszár to Chris Beekman, April 11, 1919, quoted in Sjarel Ex, ed., *Vilmos Huszár: Schilder en ontwerper, 1884–1960* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1985), 203.

6. Vilmos Huszár, from a 1922 lecture on the modern applied arts, quoted in Ex, *Vilmos Huszár*, 59.

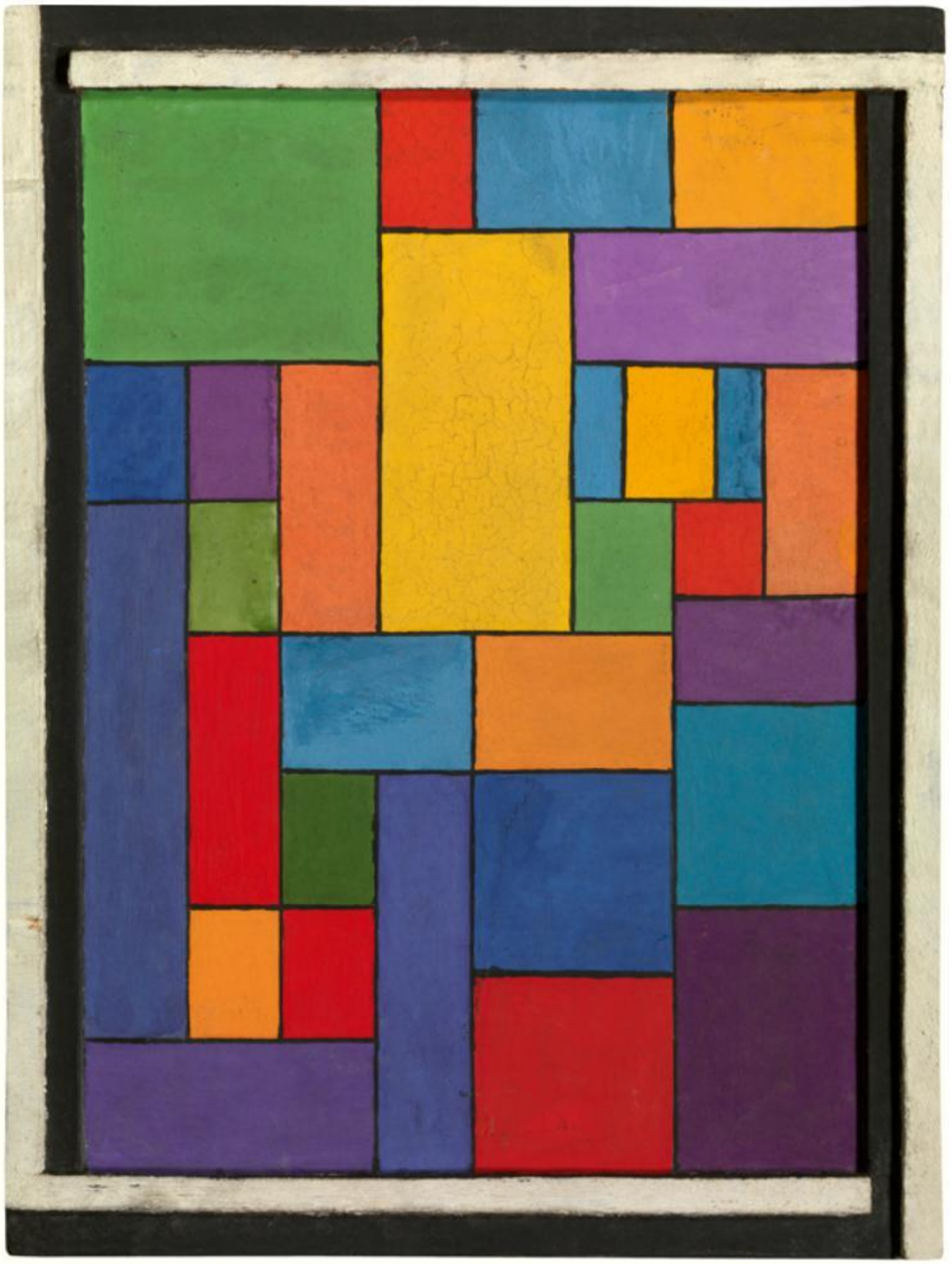
7. Hans Janssen and Michael White, *The Story of De Stijl : Mondrian to Van Doesburg* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 192.

8. Theo van Doesburg to J.J.P. Oud, October 20, 1921, quoted in Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg, Painter and Architect* (The Hague: SDU Publishers, 1988), 75.

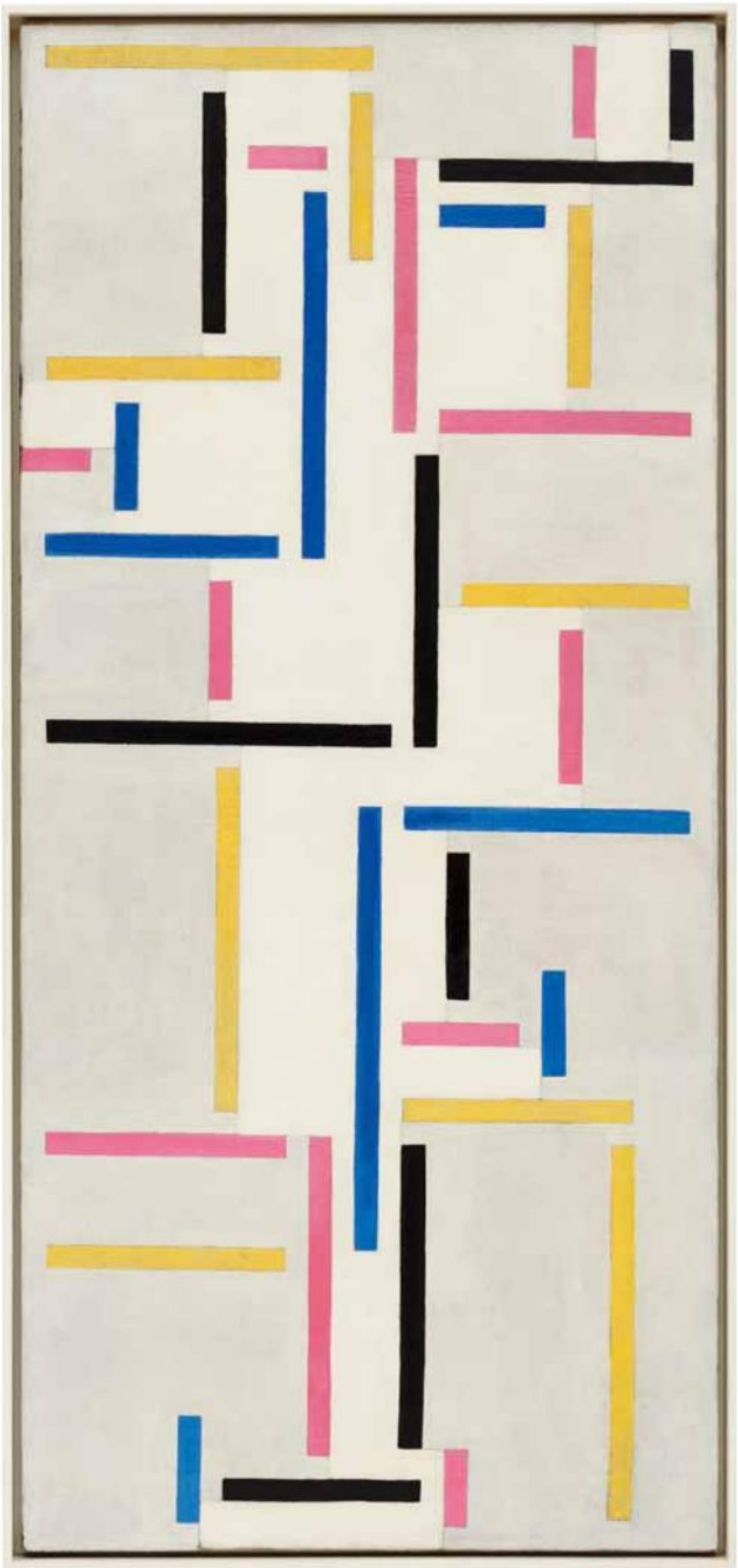
9. Ibid.

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Sideboard
1919/1972

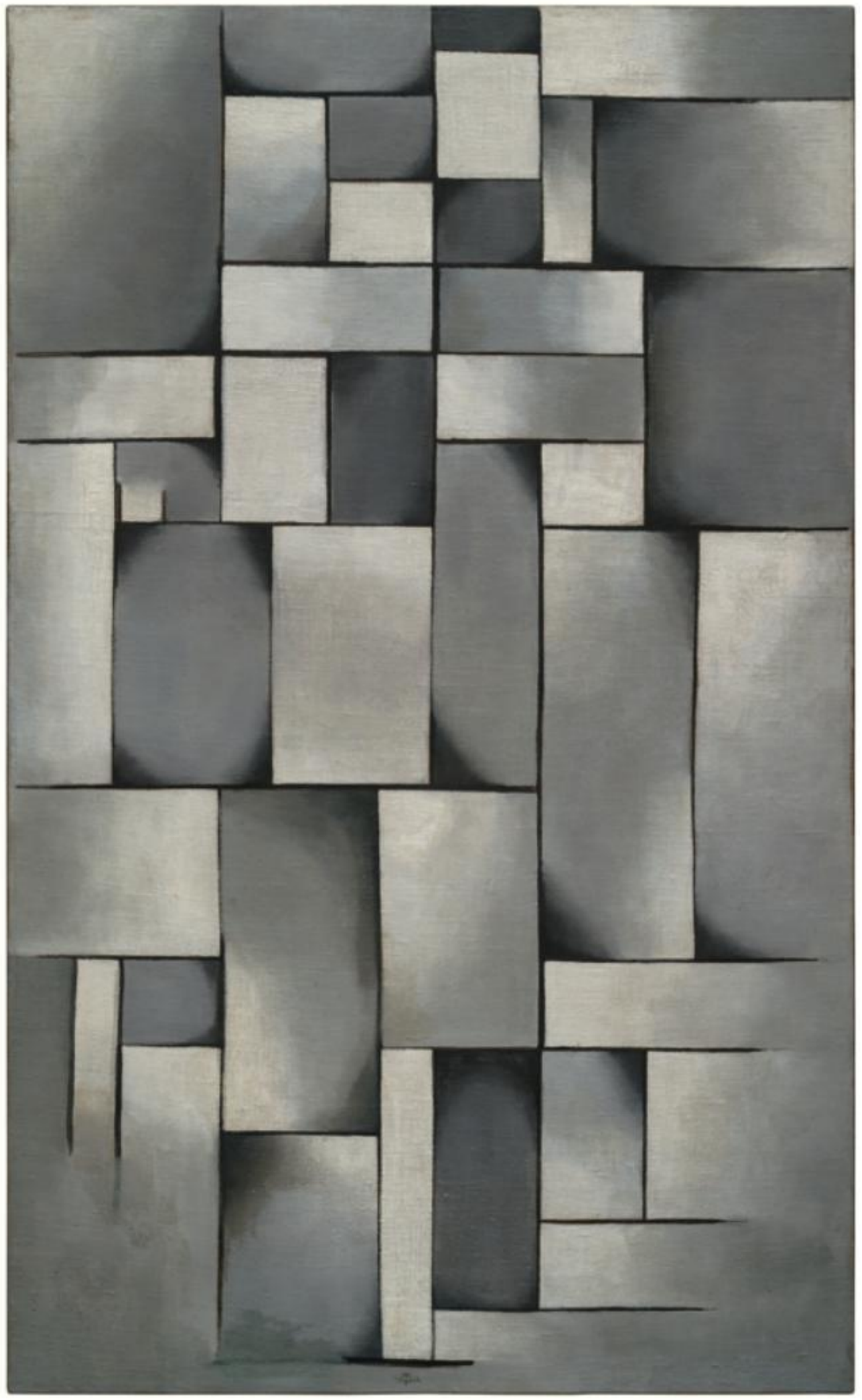
Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Witteveen high chair
1918–1921



Georges Vantongerloo
Study No. III
1920



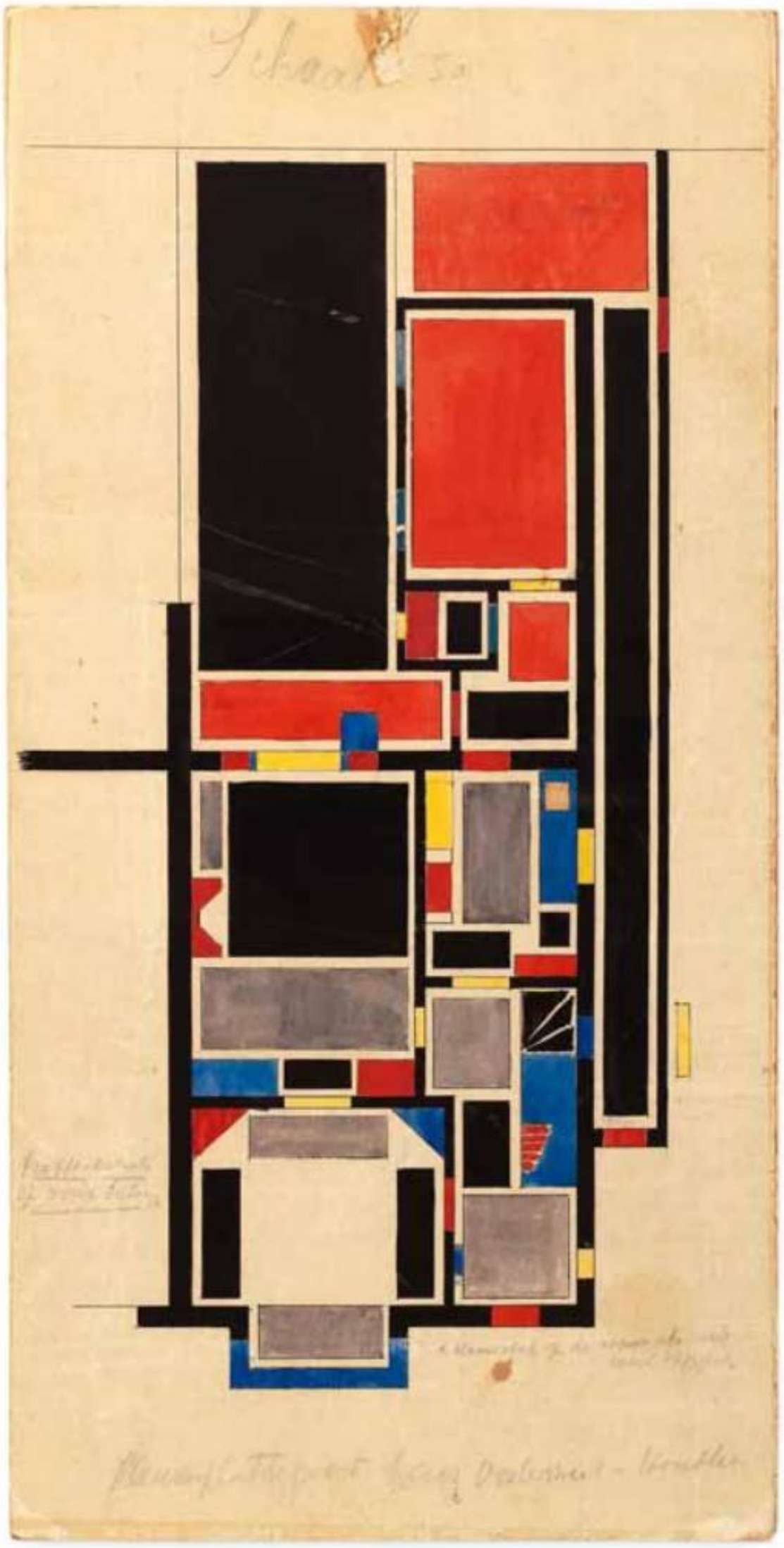
Theo van Doesburg
Rhythm of a Russian Dance
June 1918



Theo van Doesburg
Composition in Grey (Rag-Time)
1919

Theo van Doesburg
Composition XX
1920

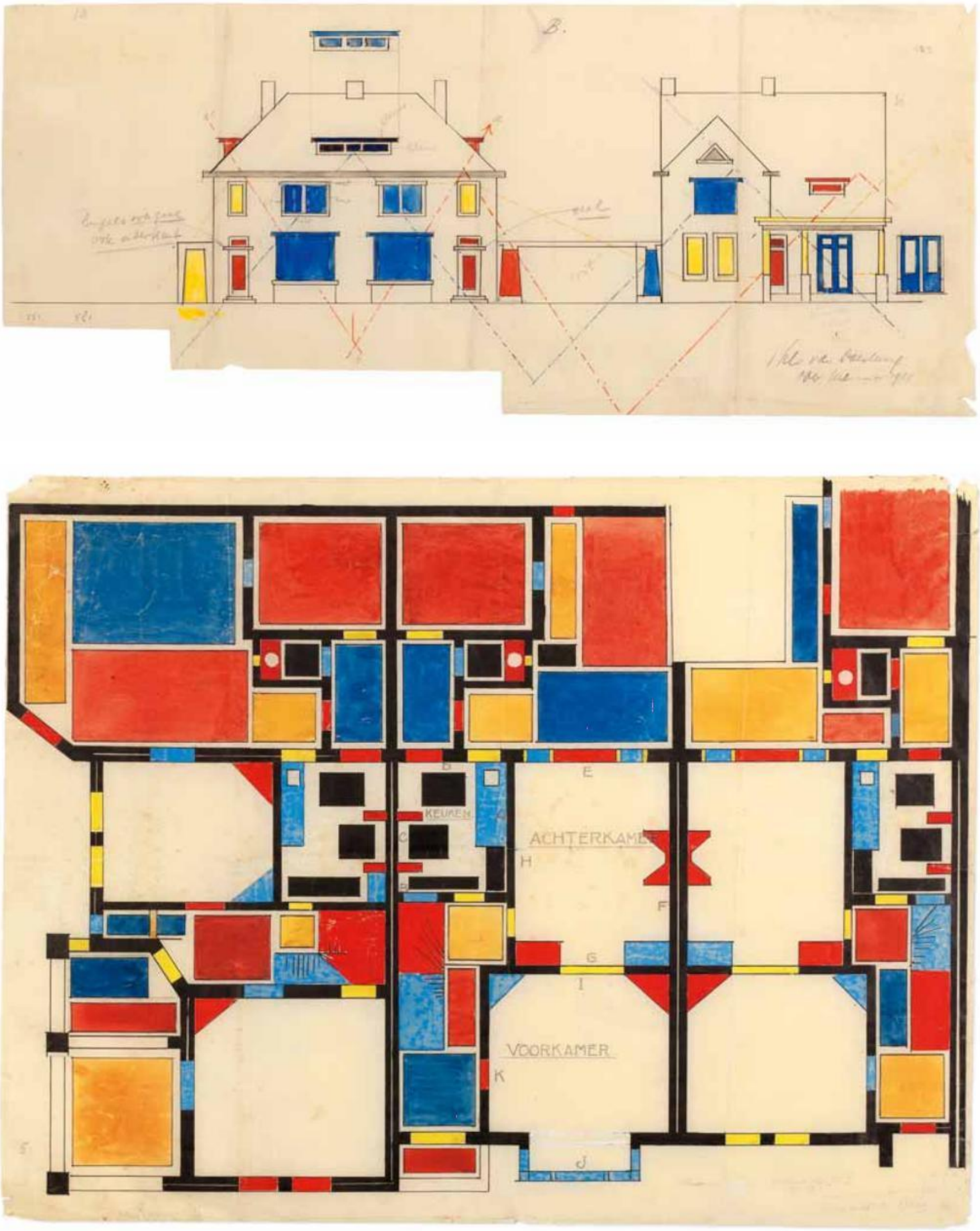
Christ Beekman
Composition
1920



Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis Rienks de Boer
Design for the floors of the Oosterstraat and Houtlaan, Drachten
1921

Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis Rienks de Boer
Design for the facade of Oosterstraat 23-27, Drachten
1921

Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis Rienks de Boer
Plan for the floor (Composition in Color No. 110)
1921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Kurt Schwitters
Abstract Composition
1923–1925

Hans Arp
Flower Hammer
1916

12.

The 1923 De Stijl Exhibition at the Galerie de L’Effort Moderne

Michael White

Les Architectes du Groupe De Styl, Galerie de l’Effort Moderne,
Paris, 1923

"VIVE LE NEO-PLASTICISME! VIVE DADA!
VIVE DE STIJL!"
At the turn of 1923, Theo van Doesburg used these words as his New Year's greeting in a letter to the architect C.R. de Boer.[1] Most of the rest of the letter concerned the color and stained glass designs he was producing for architectural projects in the small town of Drachten in the north of the Netherlands. However, van Doesburg's focus was clearly no longer on Drachten—where the local inhabitants had first received the aesthetics of De Stijl with horror and then with much enthusiasm—but on the city that still represented the beating heart of modern culture: Paris.

Piet Mondrian had returned to Paris in 1919. Van Doesburg visited him in 1920 and made use of his friend's contacts to insert himself as quickly as possible into the current artistic scene. He took on a role as the Dutch representative of the leading artistic group, the Section d'Or, for example. He made contact with the Parisian figures involved in Dada, including Francis Picabia and Tristan Tzara, and he set in motion plans for a Dada magazine of his own to run in parallel to *De Stijl*. He also met leading gallerist Léonce Rosenberg, who was representing Mondrian at the time and would later that year publish his major theoretical text, *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe général de l'équivalence plastique* (*Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence*). Here, Mondrian's idiomatic Dutch phrase *Nieuwe beelding* was translated as *Le Néo-Plasticisme* for the first time, a rendition of lasting consequence. Van Doesburg picked it up in his New Year's letter to de Boer as a way of registering the internationalization of De Stijl and its alignment with other international movements, such as Dada. In the summer of 1920, van Doesburg redesigned the cover of the magazine *De Stijl*. While it featured "NB" printed in large red letters as a cryptic remnant of *Nieuwe beelding*, its subtitle indicated a significant change of direction. *De Stijl*, which had begun life as a "monthly for the modern visual arts," was now an "international monthly for new art, science and culture."

Van Doesburg and Rosenberg continued to correspond following their meeting, and gradually an exciting idea emerged. Rosenberg told van Doesburg of his plans to have a country house built for himself outside Paris. By February 1921, when Rosenberg visited the Netherlands, they spoke at length about the project, which also involved the construction of a gallery for his extensive art collection. Van Doesburg imagined it could be a great collective project, involving all the artists and architects of De Stijl working together under the direction of himself and Oud. When van Doesburg next visited Paris a couple of months later, they continued the discussion, and Rosenberg offered his gallery as a venue for a De Stijl exhibition. At the time, van Doesburg was in the middle of an extensive European tour. He traveled through Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, and Austria, meeting important contacts along the way and giving lectures, before arriving in Weimar at the end of April, where he stayed until the end of November. After a brief return to the Netherlands during the winter, he returned to Weimar in early 1922 and spent most of the year there, running his own De Stijl course as a rival to the Bauhaus, putting the Rosenberg project on hold.

At the time he wrote his 1923 New Year's wishes to de Boer, van Doesburg was again in the Netherlands and about to embark on a Dada tour of the country, accompanied by Nelly van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszár, and the German artist Kurt Schwitters, whom he had gotten to know well in Germany. Schwitters had his own one-man art movement, Merz, which was closely aligned with Dada, although one of the stunts of the Dutch tour was for its contributors to deny their Dada credentials, much to the frustration of the audience. The scandalous reputation of Dada and the publicity it attracted was useful fuel for van Doesburg and Schwitters—for the former, to revive De Stijl after several of its founding members, such as Oud, had declined to participate further; for the latter, to spread the name "Merz" across Europe. At this point, however, Rosenberg came back to van Doesburg, this time with specific details for his country house. A project of such scale and significance was unlikely to come his way again.

Fortunate for van Doesburg, a talented young Dutch architect, Cor van Eesteren, had sought him out in

Weimar the year before. Van Eesteren was on his own tour of Europe, after winning the Dutch Prix de Rome, and was busy with a project for his final student work, the design of a new university in Amsterdam. Working together in Weimar, van Doesburg and van Eesteren produced a bold, radial plan for the university, with a dramatic octagonal central hall featuring a dynamic, asymmetrical composition on the ceiling in full De Stijl idiom. The radicalism of this design was the launch pad for van Eesteren's career as one of the most influential modern architects of the early twentieth century. However, it also meant the end of the road for his Prix de Rome: the unimpressed committee declined to renew his grant. He was in little position to refuse, then, when van Doesburg asked him to collaborate on the Rosenberg project. Van Doesburg's ambition for the project had grown following his permanent move to Paris in the spring of 1923.

Van Doesburg had hardly settled into his small studio in the rue du Moulin Vert in the Montparnasse district, not far from where Mondrian was based, when Rosenberg again offered his gallery for a De Stijl exhibition. This time, van Doesburg no longer imagined it as the great collective enterprise he once had but as a golden opportunity for him to demonstrate his own ideas. He would work with new associates, Rietveld and van Eesteren, the latter of whom also came to Paris, and together they embarked on a series of interrelated projects spinning off from Rosenberg's country house idea.

When the exhibition opened in October 1923, it included five rooms. The first was dominated by a large model of the Maison Rosenberg, made by Rietveld, which arrived only just before the exhibition opened, leaving no time to apply color. Squeezed into a corner, and also just completed, was a much smaller but in every way more extraordinary model of an ideal house for an artist. This model was colored—or, rather, used color constructively. It had much in common with another model in the second room, a design for an imaginary private house that van Doesburg surrounded with his "counter-construction" drawings showing it forming and dissolving in space. Rooms three and four contained models by Rietveld and the less-well-known Dutch artist and architect Willem van Leusden, along with drawings by the future Bauhaus director Mies van der Rohe. The color designs for van Doesburg and van Eesteren's university project provided the finale in the last room.

Cornelis van Eesteren and Theo van Doesburg, Design of a university hall in Amsterdam, 1923

Theo van Doesburg with Kurt Schwitters, Programme and poster for the Little Dada Soirée, 1922

To accompany the exhibition Rietveld, van Doesburg, and van Eesteren put their names to a new De Stijl manifesto, "Vers une construction collective" (Toward collective construction). While their initial declaration of architecture as the creation of the unity of the arts is familiar from the beginnings of De Stijl, more radical was their claim to have produced a new dimension of time and space through the use of color and to have eliminated the division of interior and exterior space "through the destruction of enclosure (walls)."[2] Some of that ambition is evident in the model of the Maison d'Artiste, with its ambitious cantilevers thrusting the rooms outward from the center (very unlike the conventional block of a house) and its use of color to define space. The manifesto's statement that "painting separately from architectural construction (that is to say easel painting) has no reason to exist" is better exemplified in the counter-construction drawings, which use axonometric projection to create a sense of an architectural space hovering or floating, creating volume and division but also completely penetrable.

None of the models van Doesburg and van Eesteren exhibited were ever realized. Nor did the commissions van Doesburg hoped the exhibition would generate ever materialize. Having declared easel painting dead, van Doesburg returned to precisely that medium soon afterward. Having discovered in the production of the counter-construction drawings the power of diagonals to produce expansive and destabilizing spatial effects, van Doesburg would begin to deploy them in his painting and launched what he considered to be the next phase in abstract art, "elementarism." Implied as the surpassing of neoplasticism, this won him no favors with Mondrian, who, initially impressed with aspects of the exhibition at L'Effort Moderne, wrote in *De Stijl* in similar ways about the potential for art and architecture to "dissolve into each other," but then distanced himself from both van Doesburg and De Stijl.[3] Abandoning easel painting was not something he imagined doing anytime soon.

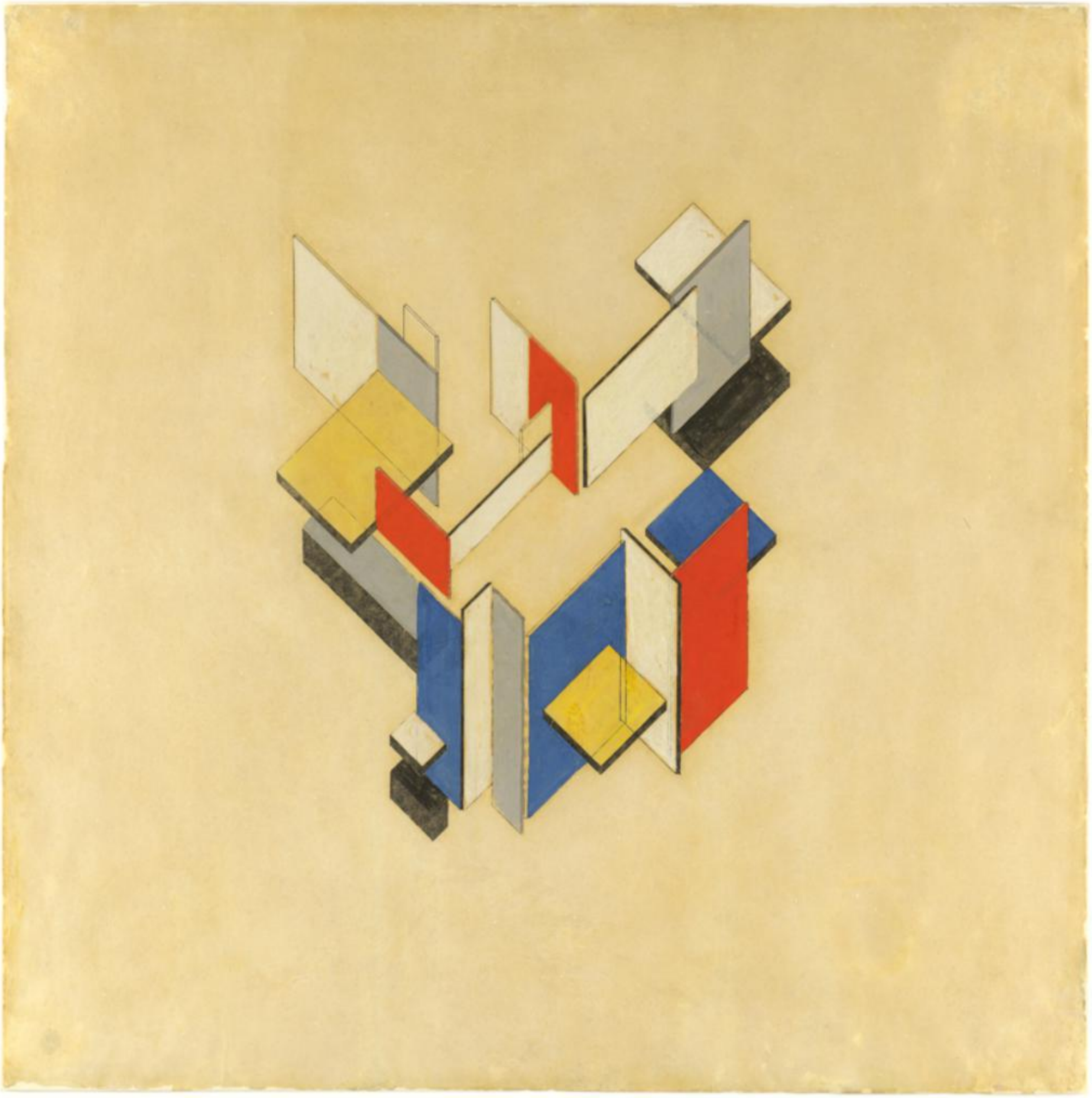
1. Theo van Doesburg to C.R. de Boer, December 29, 1922, quoted in Allan Doig, *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into Architecture, Theory into Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 117.

2. Cor van Eesteren, Theo van Doesburg, and Gerrit Rietveld, *Vers une construction collective: Manifest V de groupe "De Stijl"*, flyer distributed during the exhibition *Les architectes du groupe "de Styl"*, at the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne, Paris, 1923, as illustrated in Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg, 1883–1931: Een documentaire op basis van material uit de Schenking Van Moorsel* (The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij, 1983), 120. The manifesto was subsequently published with very minor changes as "- +=R4," *De Stijl* 6, no. 6/7 (1924): 91–92, on this occasion with only van Eesteren and van Doesburg as signatories.

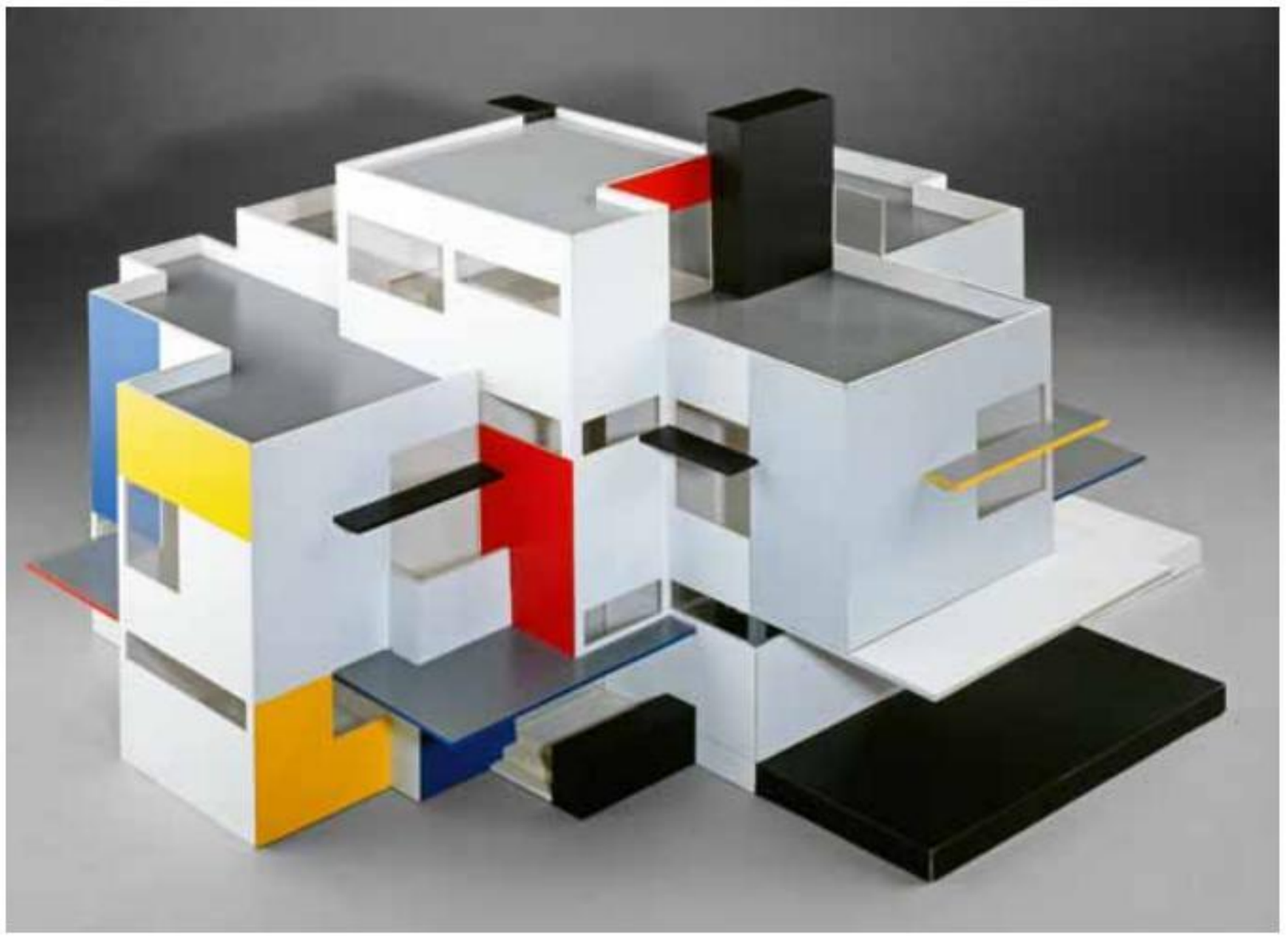
3. Piet Mondrian, "Moet de schilderkunst minderwaardig zijn aan de bouwkunst?" *De Stijl* 6, no. 5 (1923): 64.

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Red and blue chair
1917-1923

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Uncolored slatted armchair
1919



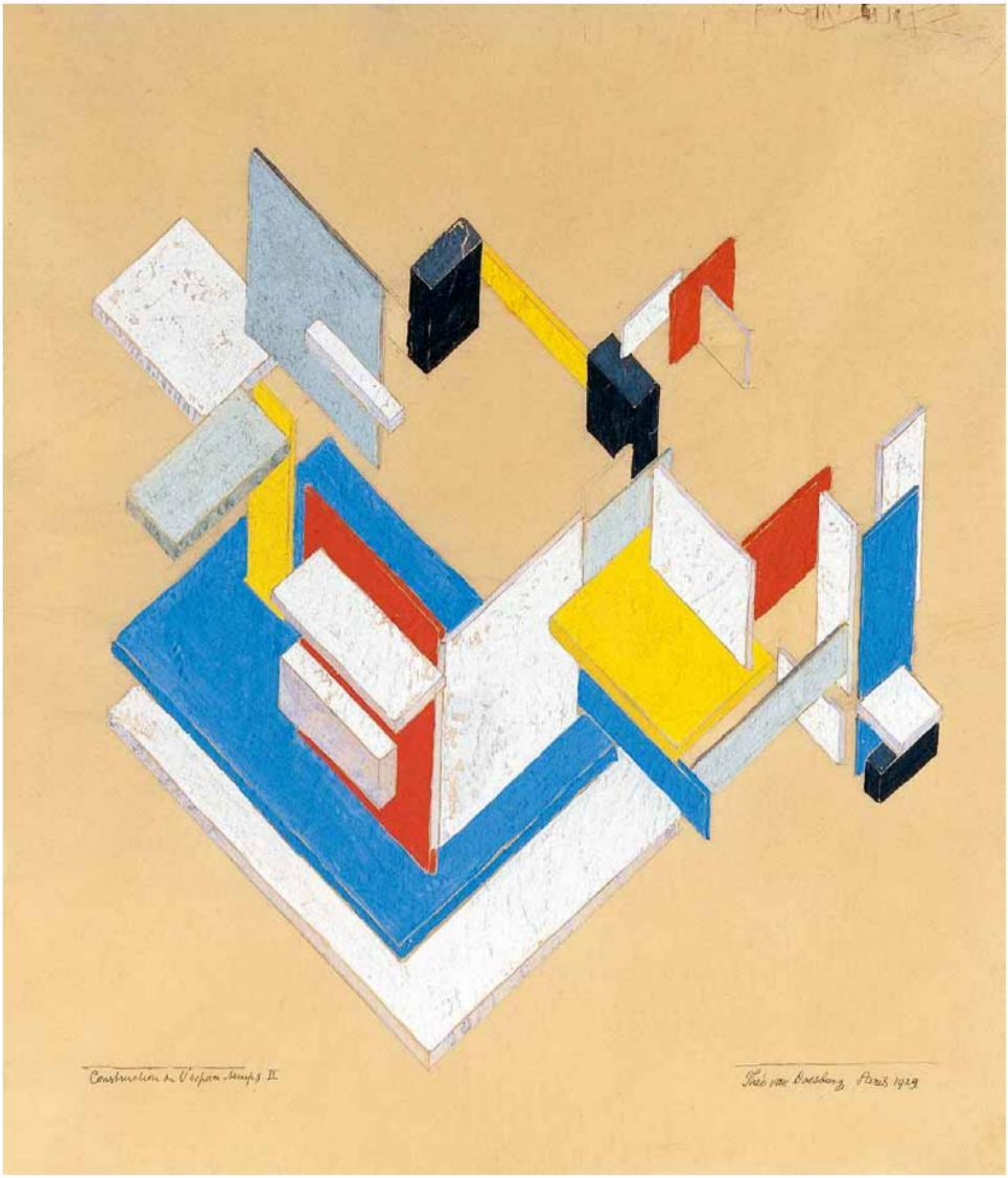
Theo van Doesburg
Contra-construction
1923



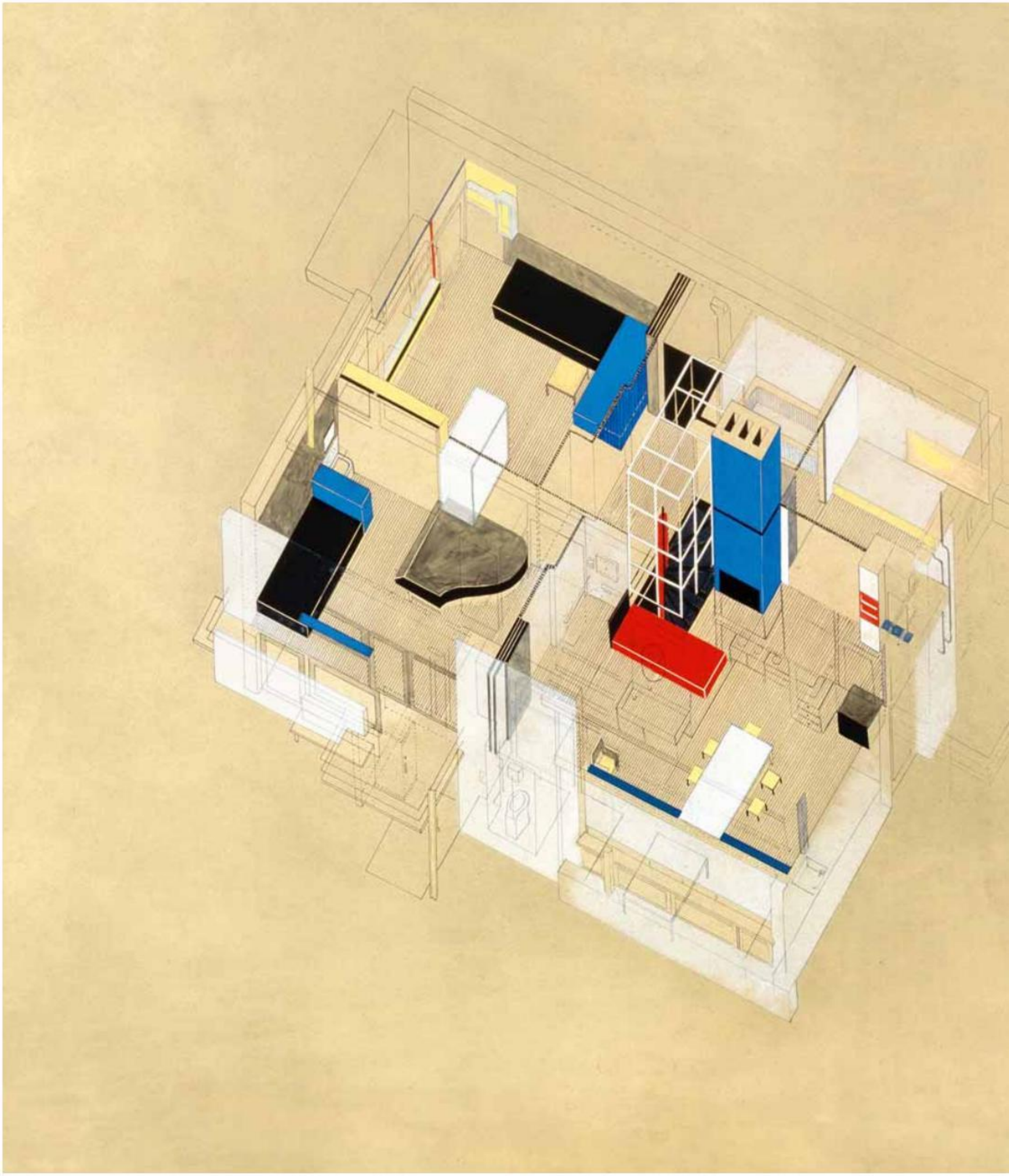
Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren
Model for a private house
1923/1982

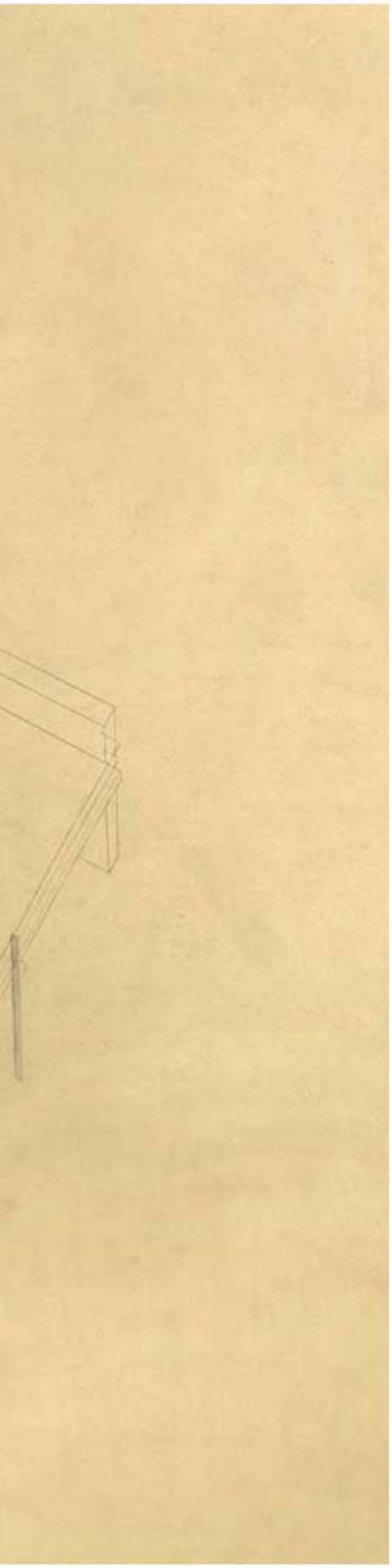
Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Model for the Rietveld Schröder house, Utrecht
1924

Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis Rienks de Boer
Model for an artist's house
1923/1982

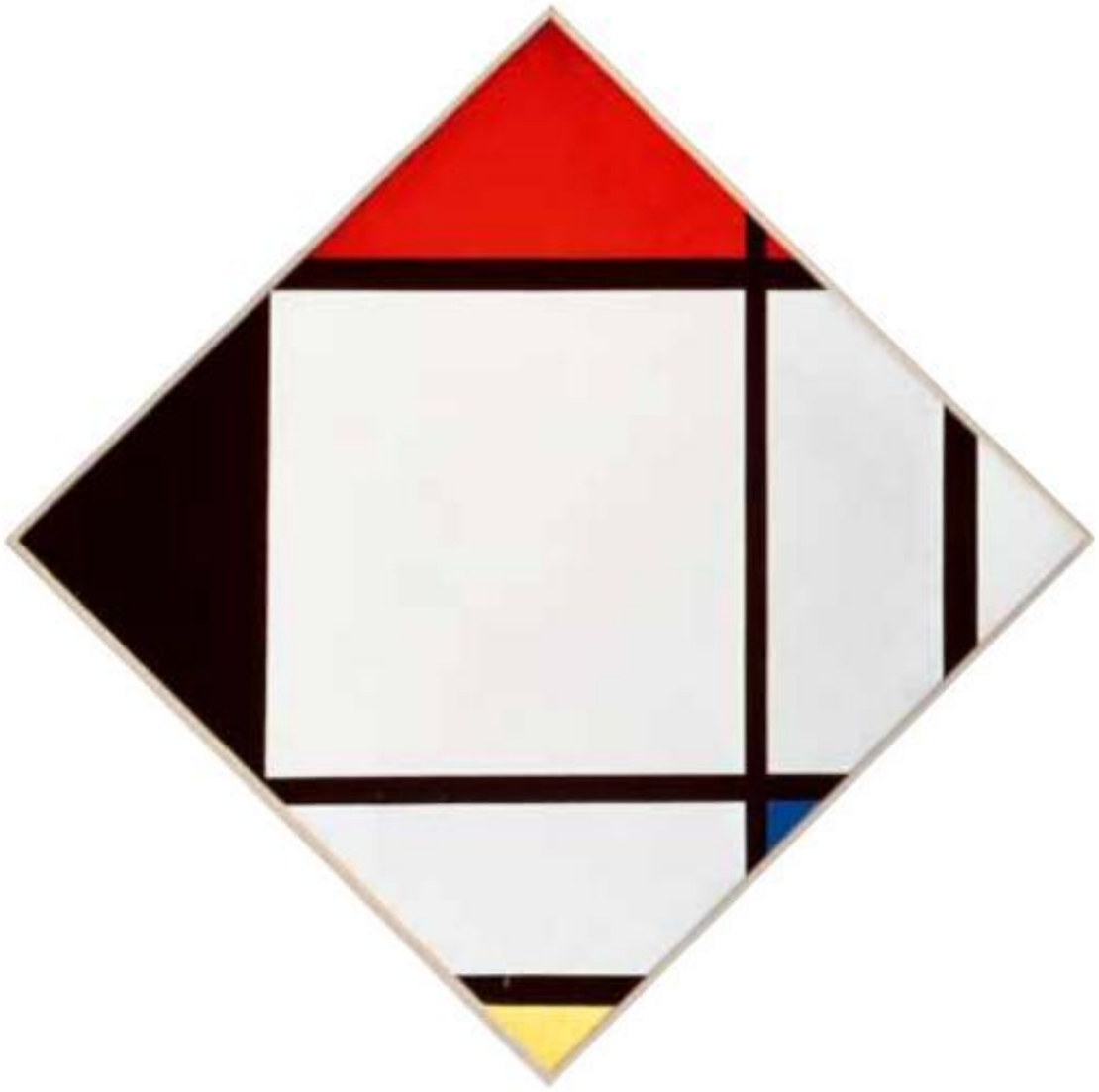


Theo van Doesburg
Construction of Space-Time II
1924





Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Axonometric drawing of the House Rietveld Schröder
(Schröder-Schräder home), Utrecht
1950



13.

A Fully Abstract Art

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow*, 1925

Following the successful presentation of work by Les Architectes du Groupe De Stijl at Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in 1923, Piet Mondrian was inspired to resume his "little project" of abstract art, as he dubbed it in 1925.[1] He had assumed that the project had more or less come to an end after 1921. He had achieved what he regarded as a convincing abstract art. But when it attracted little interest, he could no longer afford to invest more time in it. The exhibition at L'Effort Moderne made him realize that the potential of the spatially forming and transforming effect of Le Néo-Plasticisme had by no means been exhausted.

What struck him was not so much the perspective the architects had taken. Mondrian was not concerned with architectural functions or structural forms. He was purely interested in the spatial effect of his art, in the radiating effect that could transform space. He produced only three paintings in 1923 and 1924. But he was experimenting with rectangles of colored card on the walls of his studio. He wanted to create an environment that surrounded him like a painting, that lived and breathed the "plastic expression of relationships" and nothing else. The continual experimenting and rearranging had an impact on his art, and from 1925 to 1926 developments in his paintings and in the studio mutually influenced each other. Each time he learned something that he would put into his paintings, and vice versa.

In March 1925 Mondrian was asked whether he would like to take part in an exhibition, due to open in May, being staged by De Onafhankelijken (The Independents) in Amsterdam. Mondrian had just finished a painting that he was very pleased with, a large diamond-shape canvas with a large, almost square white area in the middle—actually, just off center. The two corners on the left neatly abutted the left edges of the diamond, leaving room for a large red plane along the top and a large black plane on the left. On the right, the corners did not meet the edge, leaving room for a collection of gray and blue-gray planes to the right and below, some of which were truncated, while others left space for smaller red, yellow, blue, and white triangles. One of the vertical lines on the right was double the width of the other lines.

This description is confusing. What the viewer sees at a single glance is dissected here and enumerated in terms of "squares," "triangles," "lines," and "corners." But that is not how it works when we look at it, and Mondrian knew that. In a 1922 essay about music, he had described how he looked at his own work. "After the total impression," he wrote, "our eye goes from a plane to its oppositions, from oppositions to plane. From this arises no repetition but continually new relationships through which the total impression is fixed in us."[2] We see what the entire painting presents to us in one go. At the same time, as we look, all kinds of relationships develop between the different pictorial elements that keep revealing new aspects of the image. The red on the left drifts outward, and the yellow and blue try to escape the steadfast gray and blue-gray as new movements and interactions continually unfold. The painting assumes a vivid, almost living presence. In our perception, the expansive aspect of the painting alternates with a sense that something strictly defined is pulling it all back together.

Mondrian was proud of his achievement, and two months later he sent it to Amsterdam with the title *Painting No. 1*. He combined it with another, smaller square canvas from 1923 that he had left with a friend in The Hague for safekeeping and in the hope of finding a buyer. The combination was significant. The small painting, which was simply called *Painting No. 2* in Amsterdam, was organized quite differently. Horizontal and vertical lines, long and short, left room for a yellow, a red, a blue, and a black plane. The rest was painted in shades of white. The entire thing is somewhat top-heavy, appearing to balance on a long vertical that does not touch the bottom edge of the canvas. That is what we see.

But it is not what we experience. None of the colors are primary; they are in fact subtly harmonized. This subtly changes the pictorial space, from plane to plane. One plane recedes as another comes to the fore, depending on how the eye travels from one to the next. It always happens subtly, largely because the black lines keep everything nicely under control.

Yet the changing relationships can be sensed—it is a question of context. The visual weight of a color, of a shape, of a relationship, changes constantly as we look. As we experience it, if we take enough time, we find that *Painting No. 2* is an extraordinarily complex little world in itself.

Yet it is also a reality just like the other painting, the diamond, which, as an object, as a "thing," is absolute, sovereign, does not depend on perspective and is free of time and space. It exists in the here and now. And this is how we see both works. Our experience of *Painting No. 1* and *Painting No. 2* is of two realities lifted *out* of time and revealing themselves *in* the time we experience them, and both works transform their surroundings. Mondrian had learned from the continual changes to his studio that the experience of space this created was also distinct from the normal, perspectivist, and functional view of space. Architects continued to rely on three dimensions, while Mondrian came to the conclusion that the act of looking is immediate, both in form and content. This was entirely different from the perspectivist visual view of space we apply in our daily lives. Mondrian believed the perspectivist way of looking was abolished by neoplasticism. One did not look at these works from a single point, after all. Our vantage point was "everywhere, and not limited to any one position." Mondrian concluded that the "new vision is *not bound by space or time*."[3] He was concerned with the vivid experience of space that the paintings completely subverted. Mondrian was convinced that such awareness could best be described as "a multiplicity of planes: once more the plane. So this multiplicity composes itself (abstractly) into a plane image."[4]

The combination of two paintings in Amsterdam would make this clear. The one—large, expansive, diamond-shaped—beside the other, a small, imploding, almost square painting, would demonstrate to the Dutch public in the space of the gallery at the Stedelijk Museum how the spatial effect of the paintings was driven by their composition. Provided that they were hung as Mondrian stipulated (i.e., next to each other), first *Painting No. 1* and then *Painting No. 2* would reveal at a single glance the boundless potential of structure and rhythm.

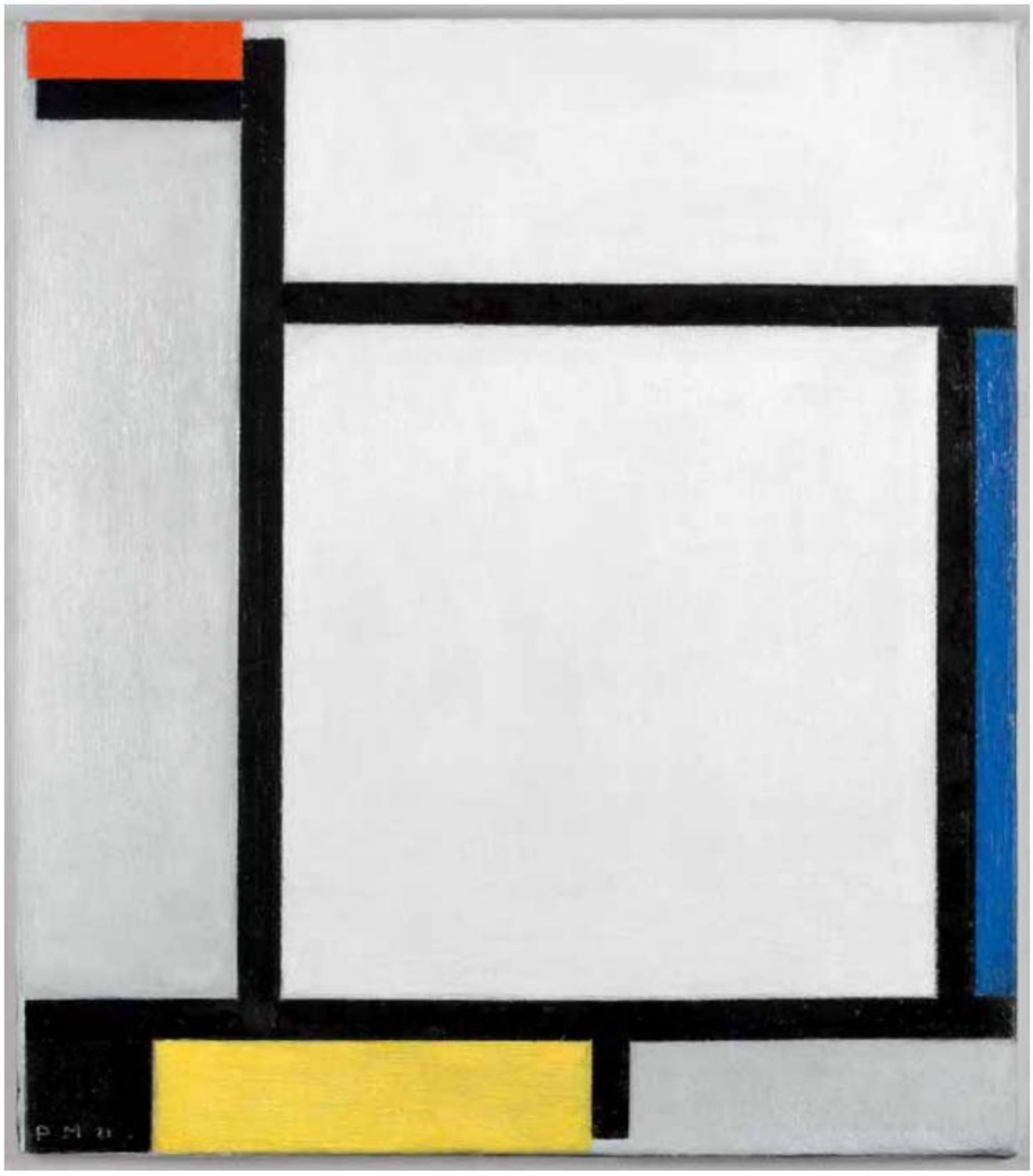
Alas, the real world had other ideas. Workers at the museum dropped a crate on the large painting, causing a large tear. The damage could not be repaired. Mondrian managed to arrange for his friend in The Hague to send another painting to Amsterdam, so he was still able to show two of his works. Fortunately, the substituted painting—*Composition with Blue, Yellow, Red and Blue* of 1922—proved an ideal replacement for the large diamond painting. The 1922 painting, too, was dominated by a large white square flanked on all sides by divisions, color planes, lines, and smaller white planes. Here, too, the effect was expansive, just less exuberant than in the large diamond. Nevertheless, the combination of it with the smaller *Painting No. 2* still gave a subtle idea of how Mondrian had managed to further develop "neoplasticism," as he had dubbed his new form of art.

1. Piet Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, March 10, 1925, in the archives of the Fondation Custodia, Paris; and Piet Mondrian to Sal Slijper, March 10, 1925, in the archives of RKD—Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague.

2. Piet Mondrian, "Neo-Plasticism: Its Realization in Music and in Future Theater" (1922), in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 162. For the Dutch original, see *De Stijl* 5, no. 2 (February 1922): 20.

3. Piet Mondrian, "The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today" (1922), in *The New Art*, 171. For the Dutch original, see *De Stijl* 5, no. 5 (May 1922): 68.

4. Ibid.



Piet Mondrian
Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray
1921

Piet Mondrian
Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow,
and Gray
1921


P M '21

14.

Le Néoplasticisme Pure

Hans Janssen

Van Doesburg's studio seen from above with the concrete built-in table, Meudon-Val-Fleury, Paris, 1930s

In September 1925 the Paris art world was in the grip of the grandly conceived Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels modernes (International Exhibition of Applied Arts and Modern Industrial Design). The best examples of art and design from around the world had been brought together in a show with a heavy focus on the modern age and on reconstruction following the devastation wrought by the First World War. Art deco had been born, and commerce had managed to create a new popular culture in which spectacle and bedazzlement went hand in hand with mandatory consumption and uncritical acceptance. Art became fashion. The artists of the avant-garde, with their often scandalous statements and actions, were good for many column inches in the tabloid press; it was reported, for example, how, when Henri Matisse was ill, Pablo Picasso paid him a visit. Constantin Brancusi was described as a gnome. And the idea of Piet Mondrian as the solitary hermit of Montparnasse became entrenched.[1]

Artists decided to respond with a grand exhibition that would focus on the abstract trends of the time. Mondrian, who initially had little interest in participating, got on board when he heard that Fernand Léger was involved, that Picasso had committed, and that organizers were giving serious consideration to calling the exhibition "L'Art abstrait" (Abstract art).

In the runup to the opening, Mondrian realized that the event marked a change and a renewal in the field of art. The exhibition made no place for realist tendencies, the figurative art of the return to order (although some surrealists peppered their abstract work with figurative ingredients). *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* (Art now) set out to tell the story of how abstract art grew out of cubism. This was precisely the story Mondrian had been telling since 1914, after he had spent a couple of years germinating his own abstract visual idiom in the fertile soil of that movement.

He decided to submit two of his most recent paintings: a large diamond-shape canvas he called *Painting No. I* and a small square painting with the title *Painting No. II*. He apparently intended for them to be hung in that order, the diamond on the left and the square canvas on the right. The two paintings were radical because they had been created using minimal means. Three lines and three colors in each—and really not even that in *Painting No. II*, as gray is a noncolor. *Painting No. I* has a long horizontal line and a long vertical line that intersect near the bottom right of the painting, creating space for a small area of yellow. The intersection creates a center of gravity and a certain motion, which the yellow promptly neutralizes. On the left, the corner is cut off by a thick vertical black line that leaves room for a dark blue area. The motion is halted by the broad line but resumes with the blue. The space below the horizontal line is filled with a light gray, creating a kind of foundation as a counterpoint to the white that fans out toward the top of the painting.

Painting No. II has simple horizontal and vertical lines defining rectangles of black, white, and gray. On the right the tone is gray, and the rectangle is vertical. This pulls the eyes, which the large white area has drawn to the left, back over to the right, as if they were on a piece of elastic. All the other rectangles are horizontal. Some "halt" our view, while others give it room to escape. The rhythm activates our perception, helping us to see better what is actually there; at the same time, however, it causes us to see the canvas as slightly out of square. This divergence energizes our vision. The tones suggest a lack of depth, although some planes appear to lie deeper. Still, the shallowness is hardly perceptible. Unusually for Mondrian, the black lines appear remarkably dull. He had mixed a touch of white into the black of the lines to soften the contrast slightly.

These two paintings were the perfect expression at the perfect moment. With a minimum of visual means, Mondrian created maximum effect. The economy of the ever-sparser means gave the image more and more room to develop. While his compositions from the early 1920s had been structurally elaborate, he now seemed to need less and less. The motion suggested by proportion and position in the two paintings ultimately fueled the tonal contrasts. Everything happened at once: dynamically, actively, and physically. Mondrian associated this with the rhythm and dance he liked so much—for example, as manifested in Josephine Baker, who was causing a

sensation in Paris around the time Mondrian completed *Painting No. II*. He had started the painting in June 1925, working on the basis of pure intuition, with no plan or mathematical scheme. The process of painting was very much visible in the result, which was all about releasing energy.

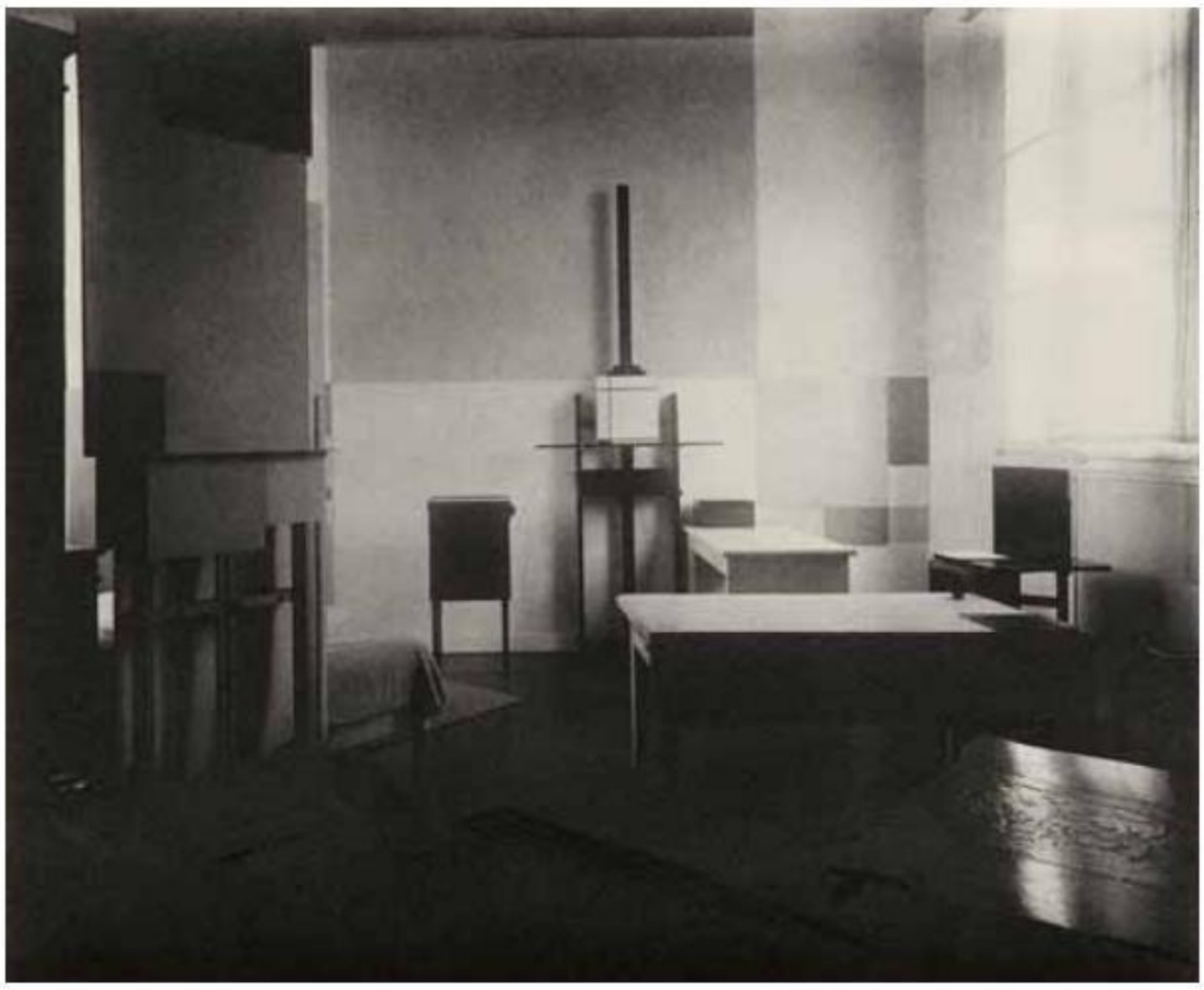
A year later, correspondent W.F.A. Roëll of *De Telegraaf*, a leading Dutch newspaper, interviewed Mondrian.[2] He asked for his views on the relationship between the painting and the space around it. "I do not believe in an absolute contrast as does Léger," Mondrian replied, "who distinguishes between easel painting as a summarized inwardness and the outwardly pleasing decorative mural. Just as my painting is an abstract surrogate for the whole, the abstract-real mural is part of the deeper substance of the entire room. Rather than being superficially decorative, the entire wall gives an impression of the objective universal state of mind that is revealed in the strictest forms of style."[3] By then, Mondrian's work and studio had become an iconic feature of the Paris art world.

1. See Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan: Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven: Een biografie* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2016), 154–79.

2. [W.F.A. Röell], "Bij Piet Mondriaan: Het kristalheldere atelier—Apologie van den Charleston," *De Telegraaf*, September 12, 1926, 3rd sec., 9.

3. Ibid.

Piet Mondrian
Painting No. II, 1925 (with Black and Gray)
1925



15.

The De Stijl Environment: A Studio Utopia

Marek Wieczorek

Piet Mondrian's studio, 26 rue du Départ, with *Composition*, 1926 (b175) on the easel, April 7, 1926

De Stijl is best known today for the greatest achievements of its two most famous artists; for example, Piet Mondrian's "classical" neoplastic paintings and Gerrit Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair*. Yet these works were not meant to stand alone, as they now tend to do in museums. Instead, they were intended to be integrated into a complete, all-encompassing "De Stijl environment."[1] Less familiar is the way De Stijl artists saw their artworks not as ends in themselves but as models whose dynamically equilibrated appearance would inspire a more harmonious world. The degree to which individual De Stijl works contributed to an envisioned merger of the arts through dialectical principles is thus also a measure of their success and quality on a spiritual level. Asymmetrical, dynamic, oppositional arrangements of abstract lines and color planes often extend in outward direction, are open-ended, or cross over to reach out beyond the frame, modeling an *expansive equilibrium* to an outside world from which such harmony is still lacking. No other avant-garde movement redefined space through a purely relational play of color planes and on such a scale. In the De Stijl paradigm, the internal composition breathes a new form of openness toward the outside, a model of expansive connectivity for people and things.

De Stijl artists were offered few opportunities to put their ideals into practice. Environments that can be seen as De Stijl proper were often more successful when single artists designed them, notwithstanding the ideal of collaboration touted in early writings in the movement's journal *De Stijl*, but often doomed to compromise or outright failure. The first time such environmental projects were publicly exhibited *as* De Stijl was in Paris in 1923 at the Galerie de L'Effort Moderne, the first group show and also, as it turned out, the last to exhibit architecture only. Mondrian thought it premature to showcase De Stijl as environment and believed that neoplasticism needed to be defined first in the interior and from the inside out, claiming that the interior was a thing of the future.[2] While Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren designed some of the more advanced and now also iconic De Stijl projects for the exhibition, such as the scale models for the Maison d'Artiste and the axonometric colored drawings for this and other architectural projects, their emphasis was not on the interior.[3] Rietveld sent scale models from Utrecht to Paris based on designs by van Doesburg and van Eesteren, but none of his own work.

Out of this exchange came what some see as the only De Stijl environment proper, Rietveld's Schröder House of 1924, designed in collaboration with his patron Truus Schröder.[4] Rietveld later said that he conceived this house from his *Red Blue Chair* of 1918, whose color was likely added at the time of the Rosenberg exhibition. Equally inspirational was his *Hanging Lamp* of 1922, which, seen in a prominent spot in the interior view of the Schröder House, consists of nothing but three "lines" of light that extend in space at right angles and float independently of one another around an empty center. What had largely remained theoretical ("paper") architecture in the Rosenberg projects—that is, too advanced for the construction methods available at the time—was rearticulated in Rietveld's Schröder House as a totality, from the inside out. He transformed unlikely cantilevers and sliding screens into an actual structure constantly reconfigured, both inside and outside. The walls that slide and fold along a colored railing on the ceiling in the open interior move asymmetrically around an empty center from which they nevertheless appear to emanate. They also get extended farther outward when large horizontal windows that lock on the corner, once opened, displace the structural axes of the building, shooting past the boundary of the artwork. Where Mondrian's paintings engaged the dialectic of framing through expansion/limitation, interior/exterior, vertical/horizontal, Rietveld added the opposition supporting/supported in many parts of the house. The supporting/supported dynamic is already evident in his chair, where the black bar that supports the armrest also hangs off another bar and stops just short of the ground, suggesting extension downward beyond where it cannot literally go. The effect is not unlike that in a Mondrian composition from 1921, where the black line that drops down from the large plane stops short of the bottom edge. Rietveld's Schröder House is not the only De Stijl environment but is certainly the most complete, in large part because the dynamically expansive equilibrium it conveys was created from scratch, not defined in relation to the limitations of an existing building.

Van Doesburg had to work with such limitations in 1928 in his designs for two sizable rooms for L'Aubette, a large entertainment complex in Strasbourg, France, that included restaurants, cafés, cinemas, and dance halls. In his Salle des Fêtes, he used primary-color panels in different shades recessed into the walls and ceilings. His Ciné-Bal, where people danced between tables or watched films, is an apparently dramatic departure from De Stijl's adherence to architecture's vertical/horizontal dichotomy by way of diagonal planes and lines, as well as "dissonant" colors (greens, ochres) used as "construction material."[5] In both rooms, van Doesburg used wider bands in relief as a synthesis of painting, sculpture, and architecture, based on his recent studies in drawings and paintings of higher-dimensional mathematical space ("hyperspace") based on a rotation on the diagonal. Both interiors at L'Aubette therefore still adhere to De Stijl's core spatial principles of dynamic expansion, albeit now on a monumental scale, opening up the existing structure in thoroughly innovative ways and placing the viewer not *in front of* painting but *within* it, as van Doesburg would write in 1929.[6]

A last example of a successful De Stijl environment is Mondrian's Paris studio on 26, rue du Départ, in which he attached pasteboards in primary color and noncolor to walls and furniture and used the rear wall of the awkward pentagonal studio as a kind of mechanical sketchbook for new compositions in neoplastic space. Mondrian sought to merge painting with architecture as "a composition of contrasting and self-neutralizing planes," as a dynamic "multiplicity of planes . . . equilibrated in space." During 1926, Mondrian made subtle changes to the rear wall of his studio, replacing two overlapping planes at lower right, which diagonally counterbalanced a large plane at top left, with a neutral plane surrounded by color planes to the bottom and right.[7] The new arrangement corresponds exactly to the two compositional types Mondrian soon after explored in a large series of paintings from 1927–1932, now celebrated as his "classical" compositions but which clearly derive from what he learned from his neoplastic studio environment. The first type, of which there are no fewer than fourteen paintings, shows the diagonal configuration seen on the wall as a whole, whereas the second type, of which there are ten, matches the smaller section of the wall to the right of the easel. Mondrian's easel was not used for painting, which he did flat on a table, but for assessing his work, although in this photograph the easel is also part of the De Stijl environment, demonstrating a merger of media, progressing backward from pictorial to sculptural to architectural modalities of the neoplastic plane.

Art historians long assumed that Mondrian hung no paintings on the rear wall of his studio. The recent discovery of the earliest full view of that wall from 1924, however, shows one of his diamond compositions carefully balanced in relation to various planes, including the background area that frames it and extends upward to elevate the whole.[8] The ensemble may well have been an answer to van Doesburg's diagonals during an intensive period in which the two artists were apparently working together, although they would also soon part ways over precisely this issue of the diagonal.[9] When he reworked the diamond composition into its current state, Mondrian seems to have drawn lessons from van Doesburg's innovations, such as the thicker lines, which play with the ambiguity of whether they are lines or planes. In some places in his studio Mondrian even used overlapping planes that extend past corners, pointing to the influence of Rietveld, whose Schröder House Mondrian had seen only in reproduction in *De Stijl*. The two most representative artists of the movement, who never met, clearly looked at and learned from each other's work, establishing a paradigm based on the expansive, oppositional articulation of planes and lines in a dynamically equilibrated manner. Just as Rietveld later said his Schröder House started with his chair, Mondrian's work influenced his studio environment, which influenced his paintings in turn. The works of De Stijl were both created in and created a "studio utopia," an engagingly dynamic space of oppositional relations expressing underlying forces of nature and presenting a model-in-microcosm of lofty spiritual principles for society as a whole.

1. See Nancy Troy's groundbreaking *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

2. Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg of his conviction that "the interior is going to be the thing. But in the future. . . . I am convinced that we are now only capable of doing it on paper." Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, 1922, cited by H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 162.

3. If the drawings with their diagonally sliding planes were to model walls, each wall in the interior would have only a single color; that is, lack the internal division that engenders De Stijl's hallmark expansive principles.

4. Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 119.

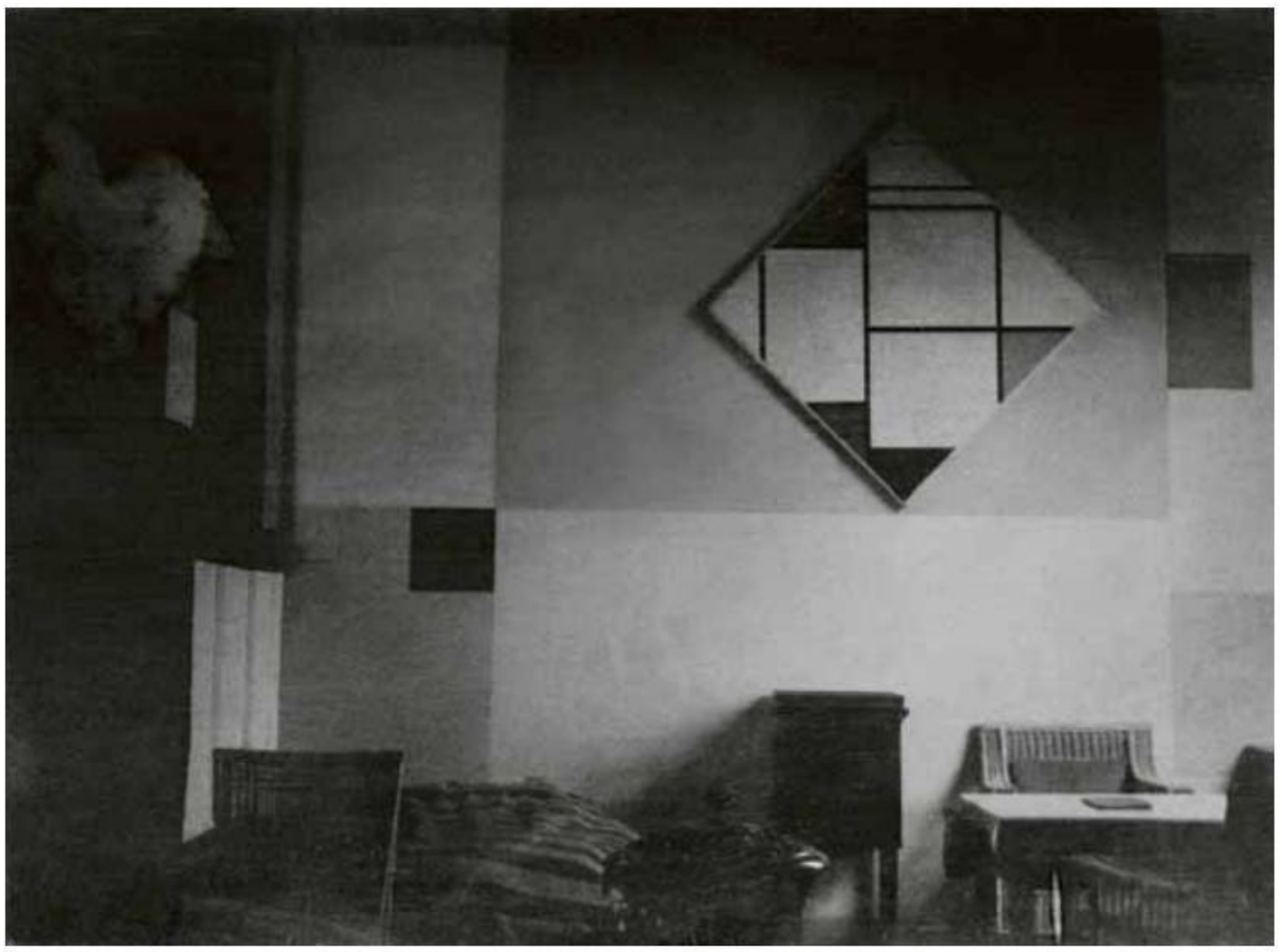
5. Theo van Doesburg, "Notices sur L'Aubette à Strasbourg,' in special issue on L'Aubette, *De Stijl*, nos. 87–89 (1928).

6. Theo van Doesburg, "Farben im Raum," *Die Form* 4/2 (1929): 35. See also Marek Wieczorek, "L'Aubette as Spatio-temporal Marvel in Color and Sound," in *Into the Night: Cabarets and Clubs in Modern Art*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 2019).

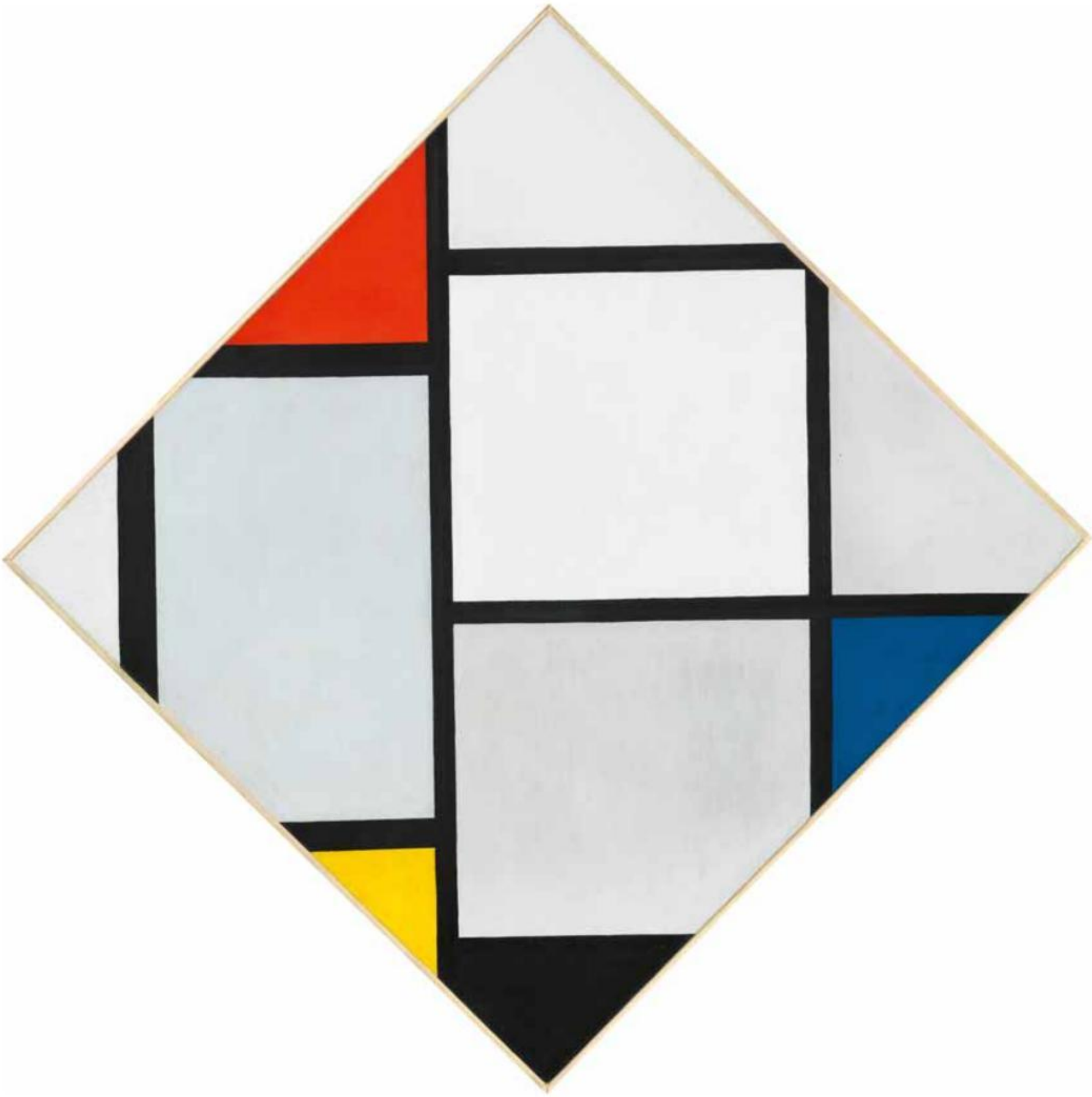
7. See Marek Wieczorek, "Piet Mondrian's Studio Utopia, 26, rue du Départ," in *Mondrian and His Studios: Colour in Space*, exh. cat., eds. F. Manacorda and M. White (London: Tate Publishing, 2014).

8. Ibid.

9. See Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg: Constructor of the New Life* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1994), 53. Mondrian would later write that with van Doesburg's diagonals "the feeling of physical equilibrium" is lost and the "relationship with architecture and its vertical and horizontal dominants" broken, which is not the case for a diamond composition, where "only the borders of the canvas are on 45° angles" and verticals and horizontals can now be longer. Piet Mondrian with J.J. Sweeney, [untitled interview], in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 357.

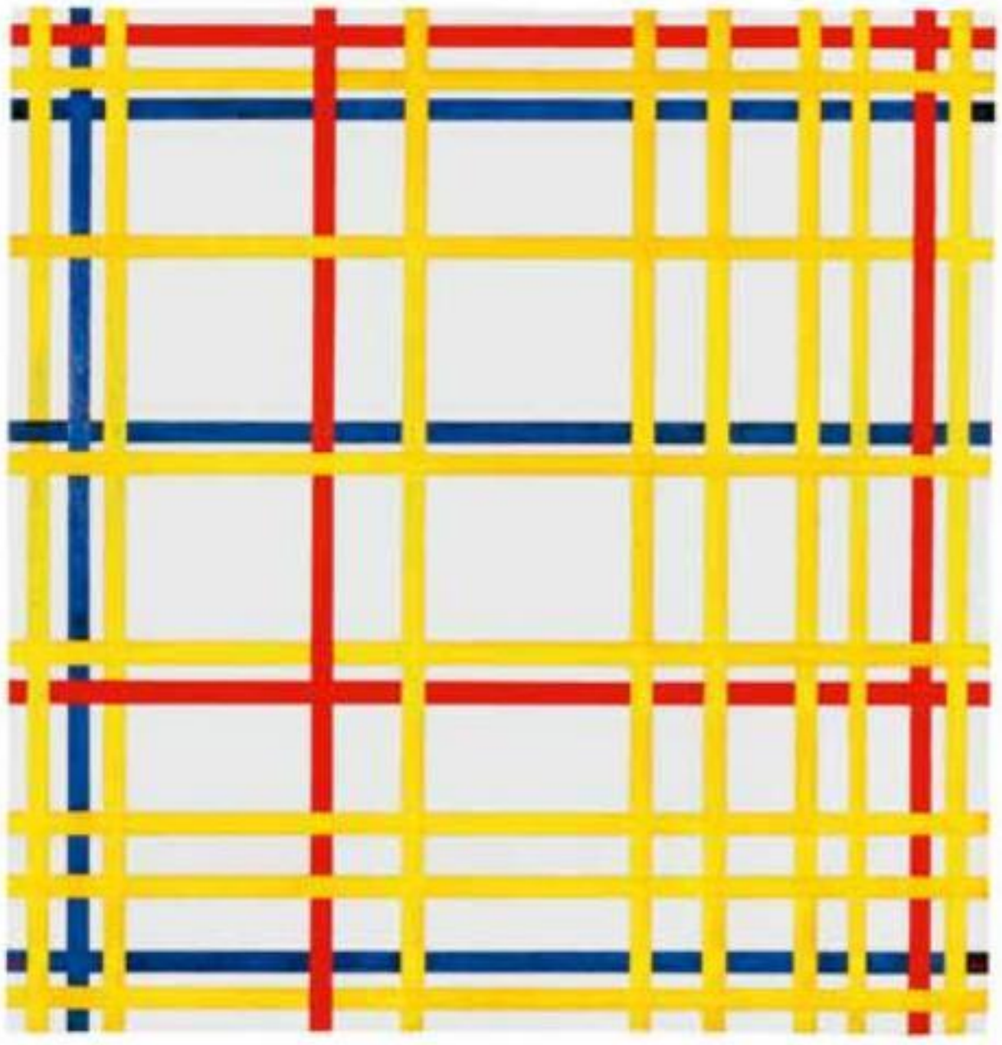


Piet Mondrian's studio, 26 Rue du Départ, ca. July 1924, with *Lozenge Composition, 1924*, on the wall



Piet Mondrian
Painting No. IV / Lozenge Composition
with Red, Gray, Blue, Yellow, and Black
ca. 1924–1925

Piet Mondrian
Composition II
1929



16.

Color and Line: Recovering Mondrian's Lost Paintings and Broader Arc

Marek Wieczorek

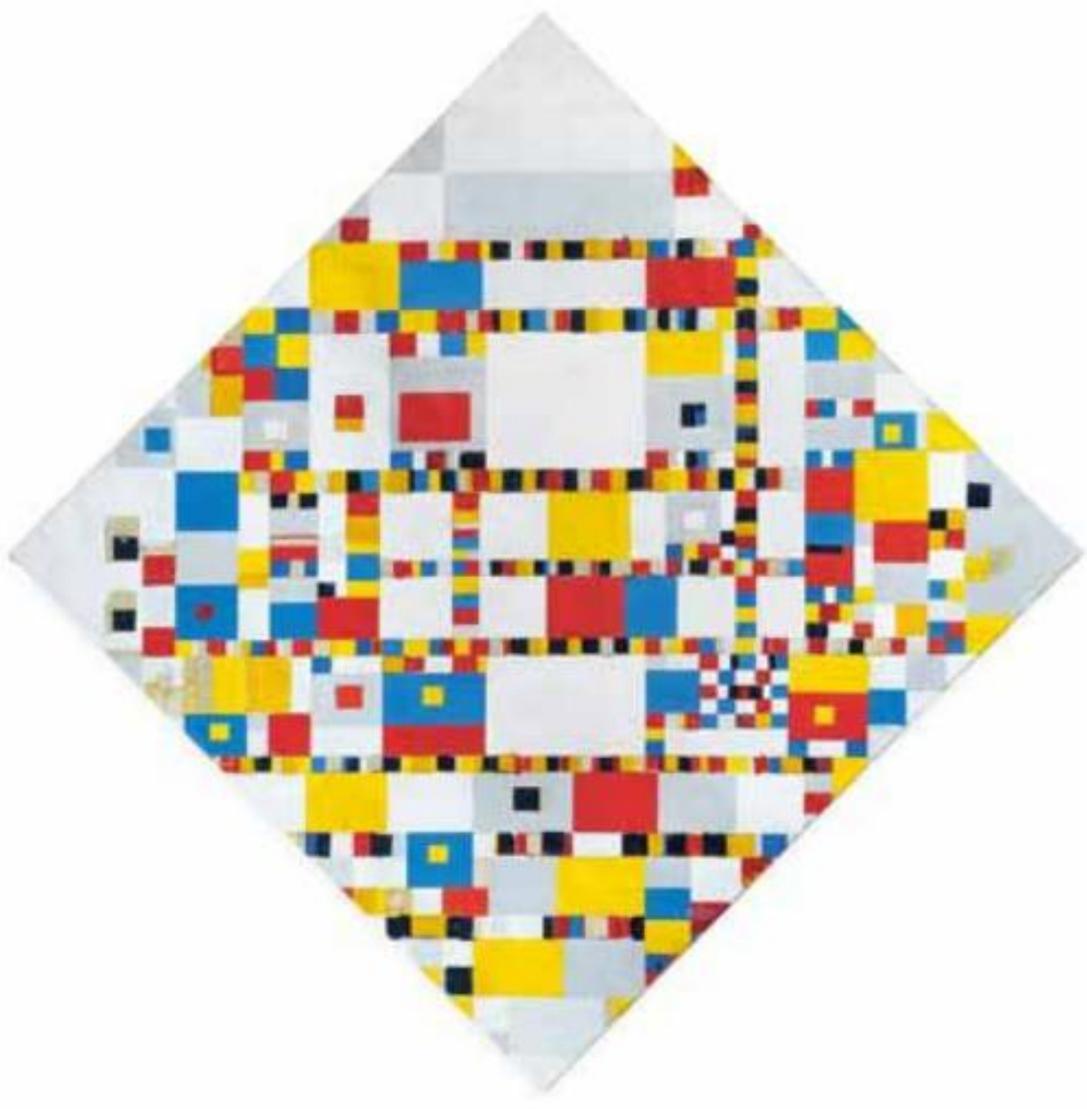
Piet Mondrian, *New York City*, 1942

Piet Mondrian's New York period (1940–1944) is now universally celebrated as a radically new direction in in the septuagenarian artist's work, a transformation in old age to a remarkable "late style." Mondrian's last masterpieces, *New York City* of 1942, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* of 1942–1943, and *Victory Boogie Woogie* of 1944, left unfinished at his death on February 1, undeniably display the astonishing vitality of a late efflorescence. A jazz aficionado and avid dancer, Mondrian also chose to emphasize the rhythmic vitality of his paintings through his titles in reference to a newly popular, propulsive form of piano blues.[1] On the other hand, Mondrian's complaint at this time, that many had not understood that his earlier work also expressed "dynamic movement in equilibrium," has gone largely unnoticed.[2]

Emphasis on Mondrian's last "American" paintings as exceptions is not the only factor in this oversight regarding his broader evolution. Another is one-sided emphasis on his earlier, "classical" compositions (1927–1932) and their interpretation, particularly under the widespread influence of the American art critic Clement Greenberg, as flat and static.[3] Other contributing circumstances have been the esoteric terminology adopted by Mondrian and his peers in *De Stijl* and the loss of some of his essential paintings. What has been lost in the process is the achievement of Mondrian's broader (European) career. Fortunately, some of Mondrian's lost paintings can be recovered, along with the broader arc of his development, particularly his continual attempts to integrate color and line, efforts that culminated in his late New York City paintings.

For Mondrian, line and color were the two fundamental elements of painting; they engaged in a rhythmical play of expansive relations to create a new form of plasticity or space (neoplasticism). In figurative art, color and line are not equivalent or seen for their own sake. Color is often muddled by *chiaroscuro* (light and dark) and perceived as an attribute of a depicted object, therefore as secondary, appearing only within its outline or contour, never as color per se, whereas a line by itself is related to geometry and is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Only when "color is freed from the naturalistic" can it appear by itself, Mondrian wrote.[4] Mondrian had written about the pure primaries in his first essay in *De Stijl*, "Neo-plasticism in Painting" (1917–1918), but was not ready to use them in his work until 1920. Later he explained that he had adapted himself to his viewers and the darker environment in which they lived.[5]

Mondrian had noticed the oppositional, spatial workings of blue and yellow described in texts by Gerard Bolland and Mathieu Schoenmaekers and also cited a diagram from a book by Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, who showed yellow and blue as antitheses, displaying protruding and receding as well as "excentric" and "concentric" forces.[6] Once he introduced the pure primaries in 1920, Mondrian sought to contain these by means of his trademark thick black lines, to prevent intense colors from irradiating or bleeding into neighboring planes.



Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942–1944

During a brief period in 1917, in a series of five *Compositions with Color Planes*, Mondrian had first shown that the "liberation" of color from black (out)line was one of his main goals, yet he had used subdued colors to prevent bleeding.[7]

Mondrian's exceptional *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines* of 1933 is habitually cited as a single, puzzling precedent to the appearance of colored lines in the last years. Yet two other paintings already had colored lines in 1926, although these are no longer extant: *Composition I: Lozenge Composition with Three Lines*, sent to Dresden and now presumed lost, possibly destroyed by the Nazis; and *Painting II*, sent to the United States, exhibited there, and sold by Katherine Dreier but since vanished. Newly discovered black-and-white photographs from a private archive prove these works each had a single blue line. Inscriptions in Mondrian's hand on the back of the photographs, when held up against the light, indicate the colors on the front of the paintings. Previously known only from poor reproductions, the new photographs show brushstrokes and other details, their quality allowing for an enhanced reproduction of the painting in color. When we connect Mondrian's first attempt at freeing color from (outlined) form in the 1917 series of five *Compositions with Color Planes* to the works with colored lines from 1926, to the diamond with yellow lines from 1933, and finally to a full commitment to pure color in New York (1940–1944), a new arc is revealed. The black lines familiar from his mature compositions were in many respects a merely temporary expedient. Colored lines and unbound color planes were always Mondrian's true objective and lifelong pursuit.

Both the diamond with blue line from 1926 and the diamond from 1933 with four yellow lines show lines that are rather wide, so wide that they double as planes. One of the best-known instances of Mondrian playing with the ambiguity of line and plane is his response to people who saw his compositions as static: from 1932 onward he doubled and multiplied his black lines. Here he was inspired by the British painter Marlow Moss, who used the typology of Mondrian's "classical" compositions and introduced a double black line that allows the negative space in

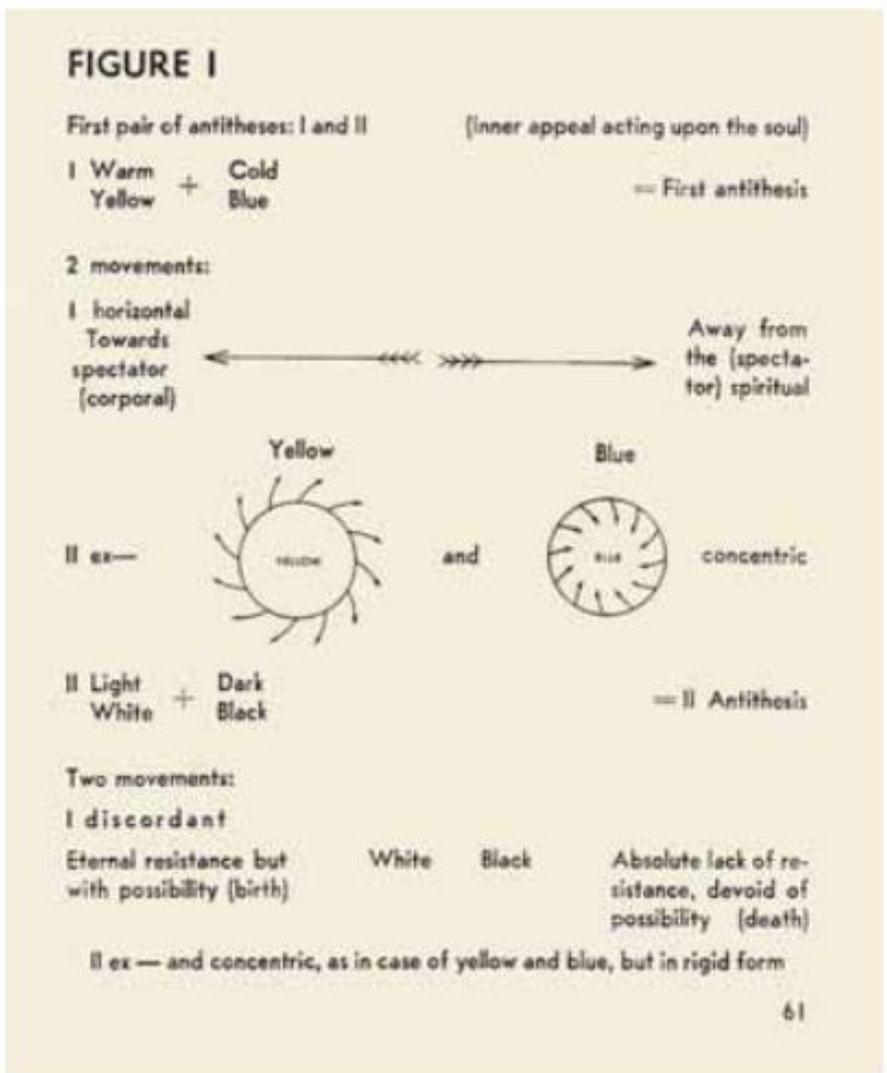


FIGURE I

First pair of antitheses: I and II (inner appeal acting upon the soul)

I Warm Yellow + Cold Blue — First antithesis

2 movements:

I horizontal
Towards spectator (corporal) ←<<<< >>>>→ Away from the (spectator) spiritual

Yellow Blue

II ex— and concentric

II Light White + Dark Black — II Antithesis

Two movements:

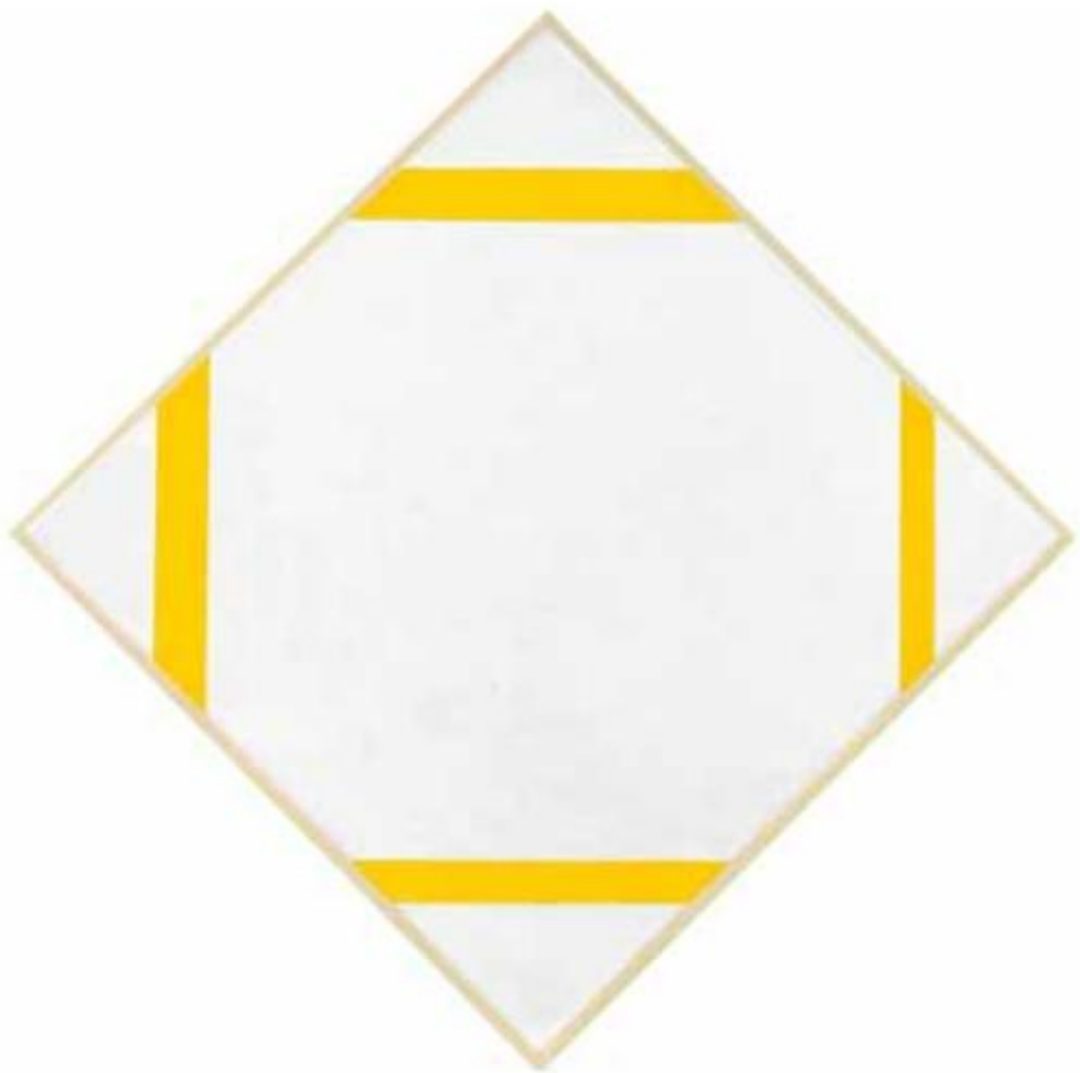
I discordant

Eternal resistance but with possibility (birth) White Black Absolute lack of resistance, devoid of possibility (death)

II ex — and concentric, as in case of yellow and blue, but in rigid form

61

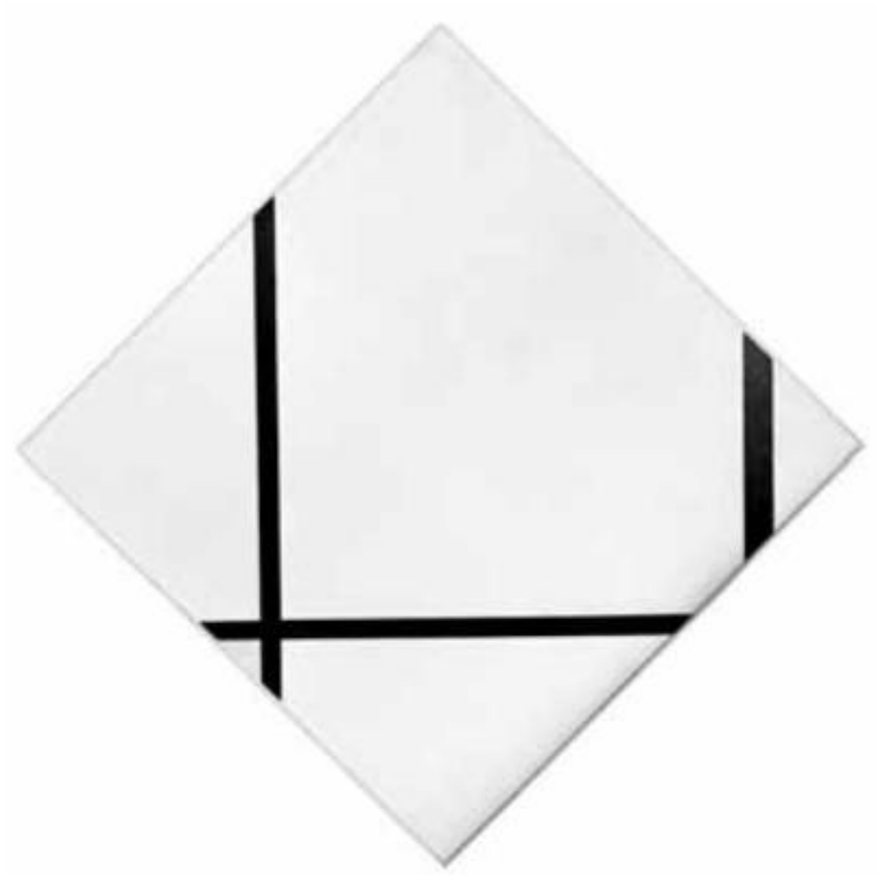
Wassily Kandinsky, Diagram from his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1911



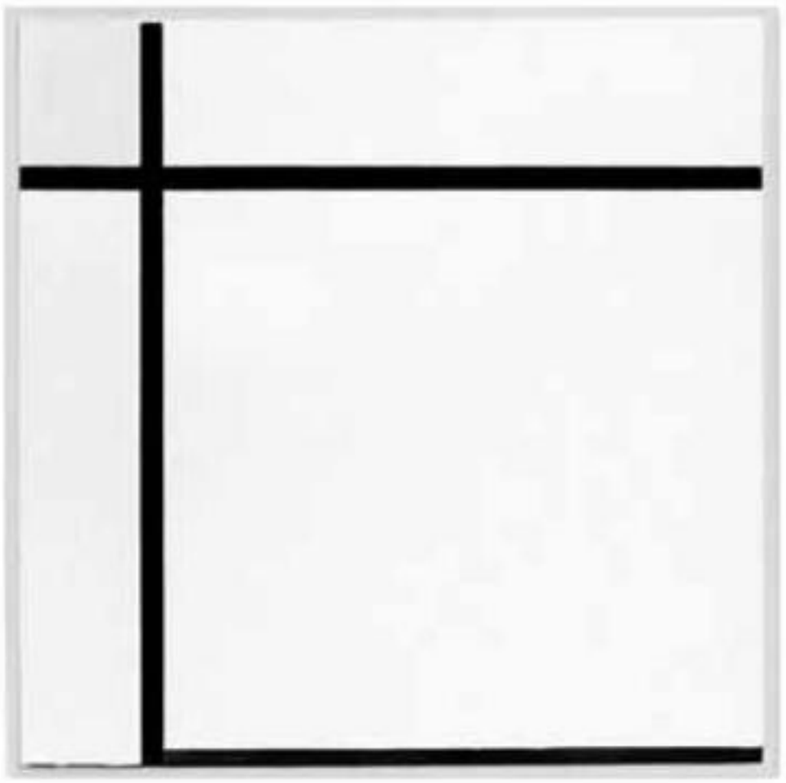
Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines*, 1933

between to be read as itself a line, thereby also doubling as plane. Similarly, as Mondrian further developed his own "classical" typology in 1934, but now with multiplied lines, he made the negative spaces between his black lines so narrow they could be both line and plane. The wider blue line in the diamond from 1926 seems to have been invented in response to three diamond compositions from the year before, in which Mondrian first introduced lines that were at least double in width.[8] These wider lines from 1925, although all black, were likely painted in response to van Doesburg, with whom Mondrian had worked closely during the period that the diamond composition seen hanging on the rear wall of his studio underwent a transformation toward thicker lines.[9] Unlike his former De Stijl colleague, however, Mondrian introduced the radical innovation of a single colored line while engaging the blue color by way of oppositions.

That Mondrian engaged the forces of color as described in Kandinsky's diagram can best be seen from the magnificent diamond from 1925 that is now in Zurich, and the lessons we learn from it apply in turn to the diamonds with colored lines from 1926 and 1933. In the Zurich diamond, only the triangles are colored, with the larger blue plane exposed to the exterior along two of its three sides because it will stay within bounds—that is, not be perceived as extending beyond the boundaries of the canvas due to its inherently inward, concentric force—whereas the excentric force of the smaller yellow triangle is held in check by the black lines that border two of its three sides.[10] Similarly, the blue line in the diamond from 1926, although a single color, still engages the dialectic of color and line: not only is the blue both a colored line *and* a color plane; it also creates the



Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. I: Lozenge with Three Lines*, 1926. Below: its verso, photographed on a light board to show Mondrian's handwriting with title and destination and indicating colors on the recto; color reconstruction at the bottom



opposite spatial effect from what one would expect.[11] The blue appears not so much to recede as to come forward, because its value is lighter compared to the black and because of its inherent, concentric containment.

Seven years later, Mondrian introduced comparable mitigating and oppositional strategies for the excentric force of the yellow lines in the 1933 diamond. By way of a slightly dull, matte treatment of the surface and by the positioning of the lines farther away from the center, a countering, inward force in the four white corner triangles acts against detachment from the whole.[12] In *Painting II* from 1926, Mondrian painted a long, narrow line along the bottom canvas edge, as he had done before, but always contained by black. In this case, the concentric blue does not need such a boundary. Despite being one of the thinnest lines Mondrian had painted up to that point, it still suggests an outwardly extending plane.[13]

Whereas few painters in the modernist pantheon successfully managed to "draw in color"—other than, say, Henri Matisse or Jackson Pollock—Mondrian united color and line, formerly irreconcilable opposites, in his own, inimitable way, making a leap in 1926 that allows us to reevaluate the arc of his abstract career. Mondrian did not have to wait until he arrived on the new continent for liberation, and his late style is thus not merely a swan song or final epiphany. Rather, the colored lines and propulsive dynamic of his last paintings are the culmination of a long, complex period of gestation of his new plasticity involving a rhythmic play of color and line that we are still in the process of discovering.

Piet Mondrian, *Painting No. II*, 1926.
Below: its verso photographed on a light board to show Mondrian's handwriting with title and destination and indicating colors on the recto; color reconstruction at the bottom

1. The idea was taken much further by those who compared the bright color planes to taxi cabs speeding along Broadway seen from above, or the view of a lit-up high-rise skyline at night. See Marek Wieczorek, "The Rhythms of Life: The Reception of Mondrian's *Victory Boogie Woogie*," in *Inside Out Victory Boogie Woogie: A Material History of Mondrian's Masterpiece*, ed. M. van Bommel, H. Janssen, and R. Spronk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

2. "Many appreciate in my former work just what I did not want to express," Mondrian complained to J.J. Sweeney in 1943, "but which was produced by an incapacity to express what I wanted to express—dynamic movement in equilibrium." Piet Mondrian with J.J. Sweeney, [untitled interview], in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 357.

3. See Marek Wieczorek, "Greenberg's Connoisseurship in Mondrian's Space," *Netherlands Art History Yearbook* 69 (2019). Among Dutch Mondrian scholars, L.J.F. Wijsenbeek, *Piet Mondrian* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 119, claims that Mondrian's paintings are "strictly two-dimensional, without any hint or suggestion of a possible third dimension." This view is repeated by later Mondrian experts, such as Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 229. Former Greenberg disciple Kermit Champa, *Mondrian Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xxvii, writes that Mondrian's aim was "the abolition of space," which is also the view of Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944*, exh. cat. (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1994), 360, 364n12. On the ostensibly static nature of Mondrian's compositions from the 1920s and early 1930s, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, 'New York City,'" *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1988): 249: "In the early thirties, the immobility of repose, then associated with symmetry, but also with 'similitude' or repetition, was laid aside little by little on behalf of the notion of dynamic equilibrium (which first appeared in 1934)." In "The Iconoclast" (315, 361), Bois reiterates that "In the early thirties, both the art and the theory undergo a radical change. The immobility of 'repose' is displaced in favor of the concept of 'dynamic equilibrium,'" culminating in the final works in pure color in "a collage of elements woven in thickness, in a shallow cut of actual (not illusionary) space." Mondrian in fact defined *repose* as "equilibrated movement" in 1918 in "De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst" and would continue to do so throughout the 1920s and 1930s. See Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1918), in *The New Art*, 47.

4. Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," 39.

5. Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg in February 1919 to justify the discrepancy between his call in his writings for the use of primary colors and the muted derivatives of the primaries (ocher, gray-blue, a very muted pink) that he used in his actual work, saying that he took "these *subdued* colors for the time being, adapting myself to the present environment and world." Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, February 13, 1919, in Theo van Doesburg Archives, Rijksdienst voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague, letter 68.

6. Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," 44. Note "u" on that page refers to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which the diagram appears.

7. The demarking function of line was "internalized" through the sharp edge of the color planes, a sharp definition that Mondrian at the time called "the determination of straightness." Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting," 39. Mondrian later wrote that color would no longer be bound by black lines because "the lines are absorbed by the color planes, but the limitation [contour] of the planes show themselves as lines." Cited in James Johnson Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and De Stijl," *Art News* 50, no. 4 (1951): 62.

8. Aside from the 1925 diamond compositions in Zurich and Washington, DC, the third diamond with a wider line is *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow*, from a private collection.

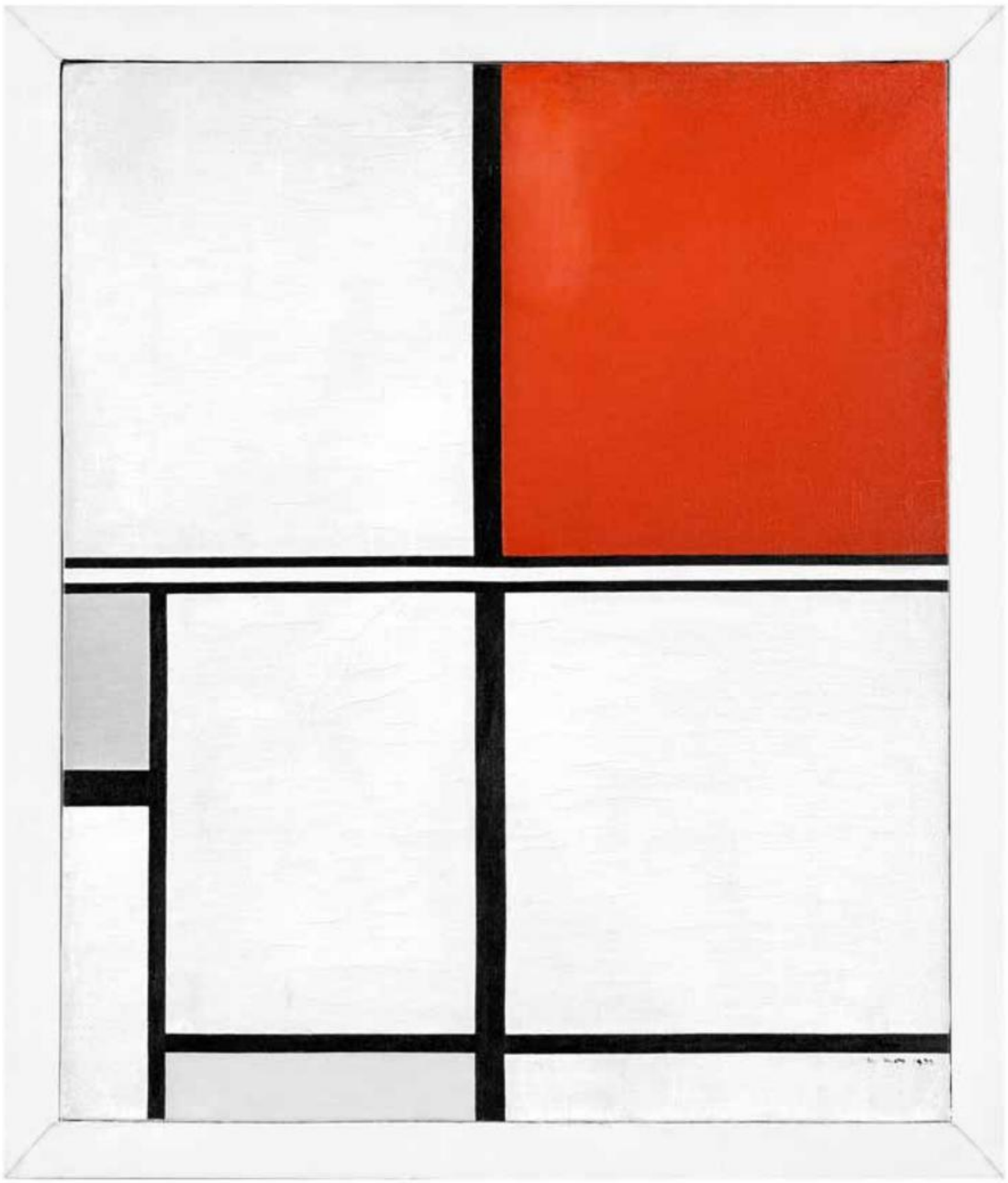
9. Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg: Constructor of the New Life* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1994), 53.

10. I thank my former student Danielle Barr for the latter insight.

11. This analysis is necessarily based on the color reconstruction. By 1926, when he first introduced standalone blue lines, Mondrian wrote that, although "the third visual dimension disappears in the new painting, it is nevertheless expressed by the values and color within the plane." Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic Expression in Painting" (1926), in *The New Art*, 203. For the French original, see "L'Expression plastique nouvelle dans la peinture," *Cahiers d'Art* 1 (1926).

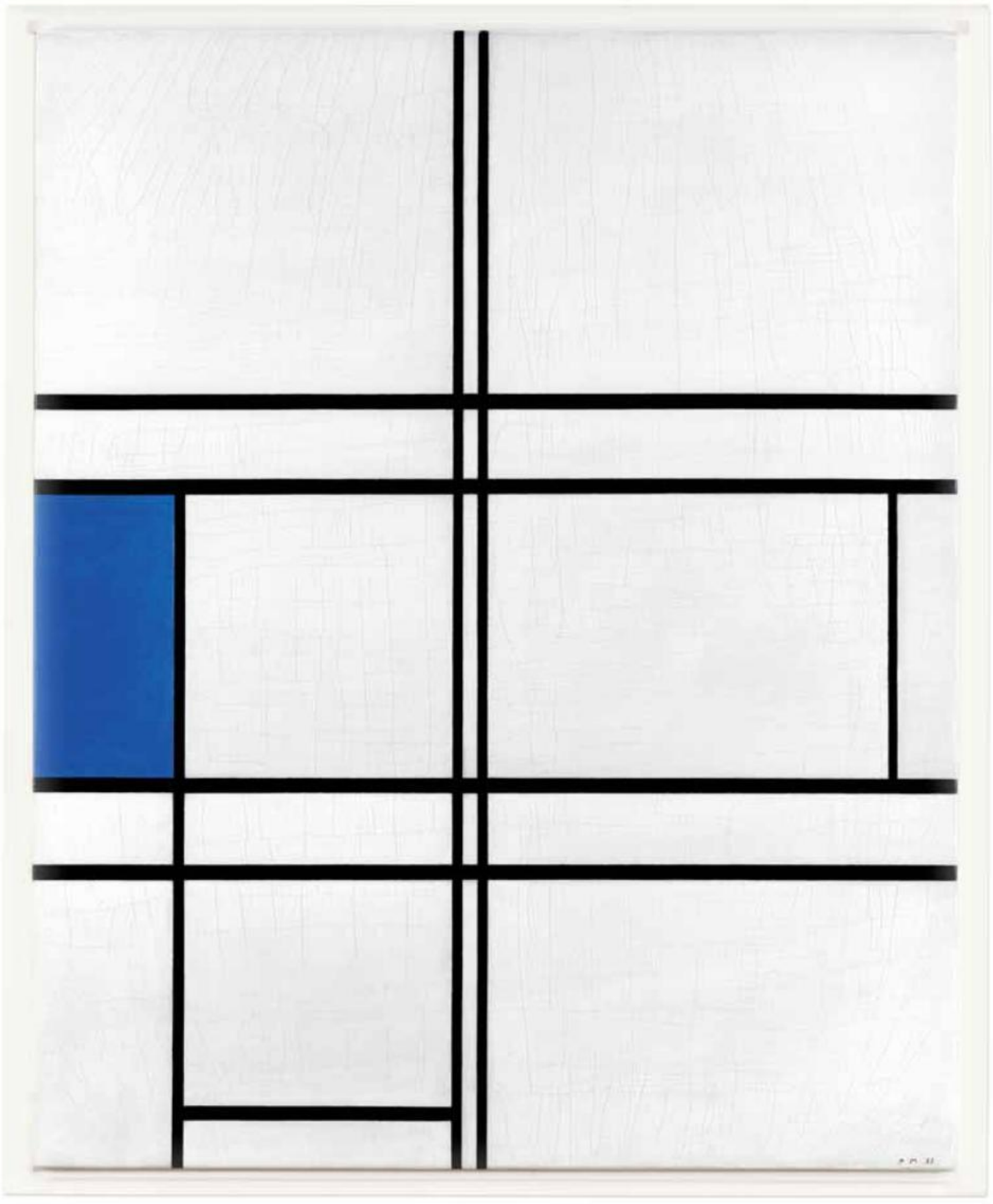
12. As commentators have noted, in the 1933 *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines* Mondrian did not paint the yellow lines on top of the white but was at great pains to make them abut the white as though the two met each other halfway, the yellow and white being more matte than in almost any other work.

13. He would begin painting thinner lines the year after, in 1927.

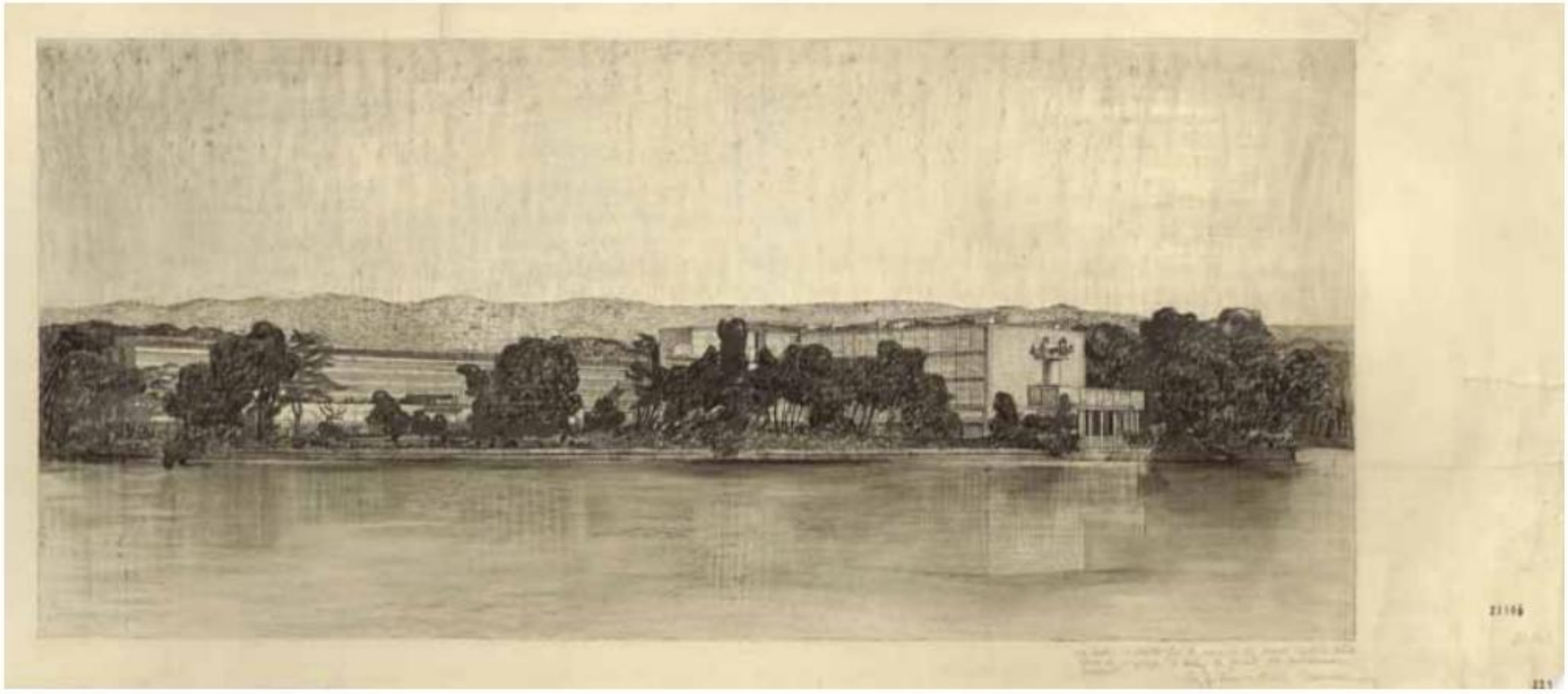


Marlow Moss
White, Black, Red, and Gray
1932

Piet Mondrian
Composition in Blue and White
1935



Piet Mondrian
Composition (III) White-Yellow
/ Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1935–1942



17.

A Modern Architecture, a Modern World: De Stijl's Impact on the Built Environment

Marek Wieczorek

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret
Perspective of the project of the Palace of the League of Nations from the Leman Lake in Geneva, with annotations
ca. 1927

The De Stijl movement is widely acknowledged to have made an important contribution to the way our cities look. It was among the first modern movements to advance abstract aesthetic principles in analogy to the dynamism of the metropolis: a new sense of space, openness, and light, created through the rectangular, asymmetrical opposition of simple planes and lines in dynamic, transparent relationality. As with most strong ideas in history, De Stijl has both inspired and been misinterpreted. The movement's influence in the 1920s and 1930s on the Bauhaus school and on what came to be known as the International Style in architecture is well known, yet this came at the cost of sacrificing color and attention to the interior and to human scale, which had constituted the ideological underpinnings of the De Stijl environment. At its best, De Stijl turned transparent relations between interior and exterior, part and whole, individual and collective into a transcendent, spiritual experience of space.

De Stijl's influence was mostly manifested without its signal primary colors. Few examples of the De Stijl environment were actually built, and most designs on paper were reproduced in black-and-white, so color simply could not have much of a signal function. Photographs of the house Gerrit Rietveld designed with Truus Schröder in 1924, which is iconic in many respects, were reproduced in black-and-white in *De Stijl* over the course of 1925–1927. For some commentators, this house is the only complete example of De Stijl architecture ever built. The other, unbuilt representative projects were the colorful scale models and works on paper that Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren presented at Léonce Rosenberg's Galerie de l'Effort Moderne in Paris in 1923. Judged by these standards, the mostly brick buildings by the professional architects who were briefly associated with the movement's inception in 1917—J.J.P. Oud, Jan Wils, Robert van 't Hoff—seem to diverge through their use of symmetry and repetition, disregard of color, and sometimes blatant imitation of the style of the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.[1] At least one of Oud's social housing projects, Kiefhoek in Rotterdam (designed 1925, built 1928–1930), was able to provide a new sense of urban space, light, and hygiene at the minimum subsistence level, with long white facades with yellow strip windows, red doors, and blue gates.

If we apply somewhat looser categories (sans color) for assessing De Stijl's impact, two influential moments in the early 1920s reverberate for years to come. The first is van Doesburg's presence in Weimar from April 1921 to December 1922 near the Bauhaus school, which at that time was still expressionist and did not include architecture in its curriculum. Van Doesburg taught a "De Stijl course" in his own studio to eager Bauhaus students, who were treated to images from more than 400 lantern slides of works by his compatriots and who drew "De Stijl" building designs and made scale models. This effort, along with the influence of constructivists such as the Russian avant-gardist El Lissitzky and the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy—the latter was appointed to the Bauhaus teaching position van Doesburg had coveted—changed the course of the Bauhaus movement from expressionism to the "machine aesthetic," espousing the merger of art and industry, for which it became widely celebrated. Clean, flat surfaces and modular forms in industrial materials can be transcendent in space and light, but they can also feel soulless, colorless, and cold, as with many of the (corporate) glass and steel buildings that populate today's large cities.

During his time in Weimar, van Doesburg developed and published his ideas on the necessity of a universal, monumental style, which included Oud's views on standardization and industrial production methods that had appeared in *De Stijl*. The mechanical aesthetic had initially also attracted van Doesburg to the writings of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, yet the front man of De Stijl would never relinquish the importance of the visual arts. His position was clearly in evidence in the second moment of De Stijl's international influence, at Rosenberg's gallery, the movement's first and only group exhibition, which toured cities in France and Germany in 1924 and consisted of architectural projects only. The show influenced several French architects, such as Pierre Chareau and Robert ÇMallet-Stevens, a teacher at the École Spéciale d'Architecture, and even Le Corbusier, although he would not admit that he was impressed by

van Doesburg's and van Eesteren's scale models, use of interior color, and radical axonometric drawings, which tilted buildings without foreshortening through orthogonal projection, thus revealing multiple sides by allowing rotation. Although the technique had been around for centuries, van Doesburg and van Eesteren gave axonometry new purpose in modern architecture. Furthermore, the tilted planes may have inspired van Doesburg, in turn, to begin using oblique lines and the ideas of higher-dimensional mathematics in his paintings and at L'Aubette in 1927–1928. The Belgian De Stijl sculptor Georges Vantongerloo also used mathematics in his work, for the purpose of suggesting the idea of infinity through the geometric shape of the hyperbola. Inspired by Le Corbusier's never-realized radical plan for the heart of Paris, Vantongerloo designed an airport for the city center, its armature also based on the hyperbola, its horizontal surface an almost unimaginably large structure serving as a runway for planes to lift off and land high above the surrounding houses.[2]

Van Eesteren, who as a young architect won a Prix de Rome competition, met van Doesburg in Weimar in 1922 and first gained fame in 1925 by winning a prestigious competition for the reorganization of Unter den Linden in Berlin. He became a well-known urban planner, responsible for, among others, the Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan (Amsterdam General Extension Plan), and he was president, from 1930 to 1947, of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). The extent to which his schooling in De Stijl, which he got from van Doesburg, shaped his work rooted in urban social issues is difficult to assess. They coauthored the text "Vers une construction collective," the fifth De Stijl manifesto. Signed also by Rietveld, it calls for collective construction, architecture as a plastic unity of all the arts merged into "life," and a bringing together of interior/exterior, space, time, measure, and color. The fourth CIAM congress of 1933, chaired by van Eesteren, became the basis for his thinking on the functional city and what came to be known as "comparative urban planning."

Van Eesteren had not been able to attend the first, preliminary CIAM congress at the Château de la Sarraz, near Lausanne, in June 1928, but Rietveld was there, as was H.P. Berlage, the doyen of Dutch architects. Although French (including Le Corbusier) and German factions could not agree on artistic and technical matters, they still signed the collective declaration. The theme of the actual first CIAM congress of 1929 was the minimum-standard dwelling. Rietveld, who no longer used primary colors, came up with ingenious solutions that involved prefabricated elements. However, they were never built. Yet, as he continued to demonstrate in his designs for individual buildings, larger housing projects, and his writings, Rietveld always began from a human-centered worldview in which the inhabitant of his buildings would become aware of the essence of architecture: space.[3] As was characteristic of his De Stijl–period work, as well as of Mondrian's attitude, Rietveld's point of departure was always the interior.

Most commentators discuss van Doesburg's final building of 1929–1930—his own studio and house in Meudon outside Paris—as a clear nod to the International Style and, because of his use of columns, an indirect reference to Le Corbusier's use of pilotis. Yet a few important and little-understood aspects of the house link it to van Doesburg's earlier interest in so-called hypercubes, or tesseracts. These are higher-dimensional renditions of cubes corresponding to either a rotational or rectilinear model of expansion: the former can be seen in the obliques at L'Aubette, and the latter in the stepped cubes in his house in Meudon. His many studies of tesseracts show a cube lifting up and extending upward and outward in a manner similar to his studio house, where a plain white cube sits in front of a blind wall (hiding a staircase), followed by an upward succession of cubes, the last one on pilotis. Inside, a hidden rotation by way of two large doors reconfigures the interior space at the intersection of the staggered cubes that form the exterior. Van Doesburg died before he could finish and live in the house, yet an extant color study shows it was to be colored to an extent far greater than the current minimal application of color.

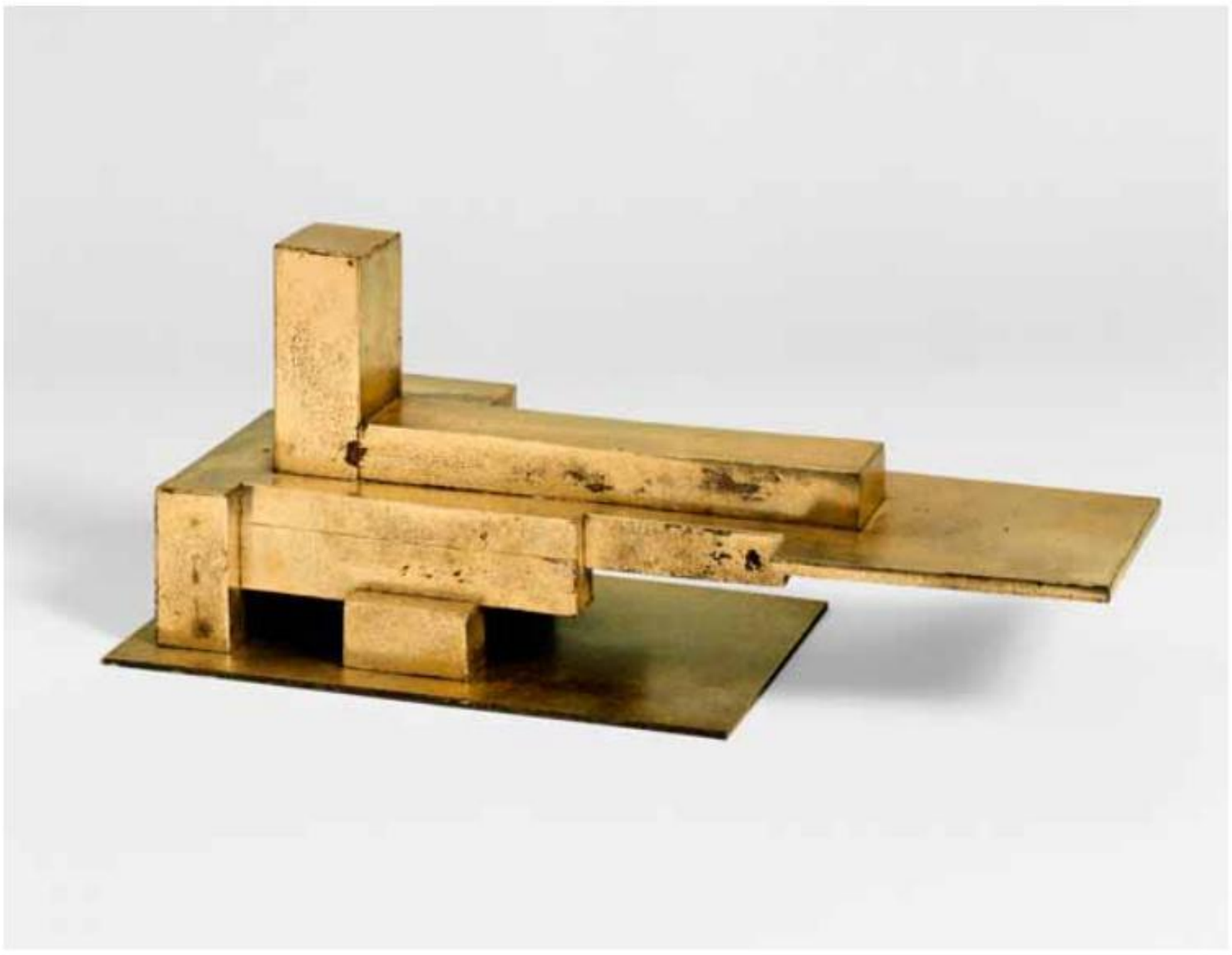
De Stijl was a loose group of avant-garde artists with continually shifting allegiances and ideas, one that nevertheless set itself the goal of merging the arts into

an all-encompassing built environment. Because few examples of this goal materialized and most of the De Stijl environment was designed beyond the available technical means for construction, we now see more and more references to De Stijl in our cities as both a blessing and a curse: a blessing when De Stijl gains wider recognition, but a possible problem if De Stijl's internal and external principles are ignored, as with the legion examples that follow a "look" that requires only a coat of paint in the three primary colors.

1. See Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Ideas," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 113–19.

2. See Marek Wieczorek, "'Für die neue Welt': Georges Vantongerloo und das Versprechen der Kunst," in *Für eine neue Welt: Georges Vantongerloo und seine Kreise von Mondrian bis Bill*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2009), 31–32.

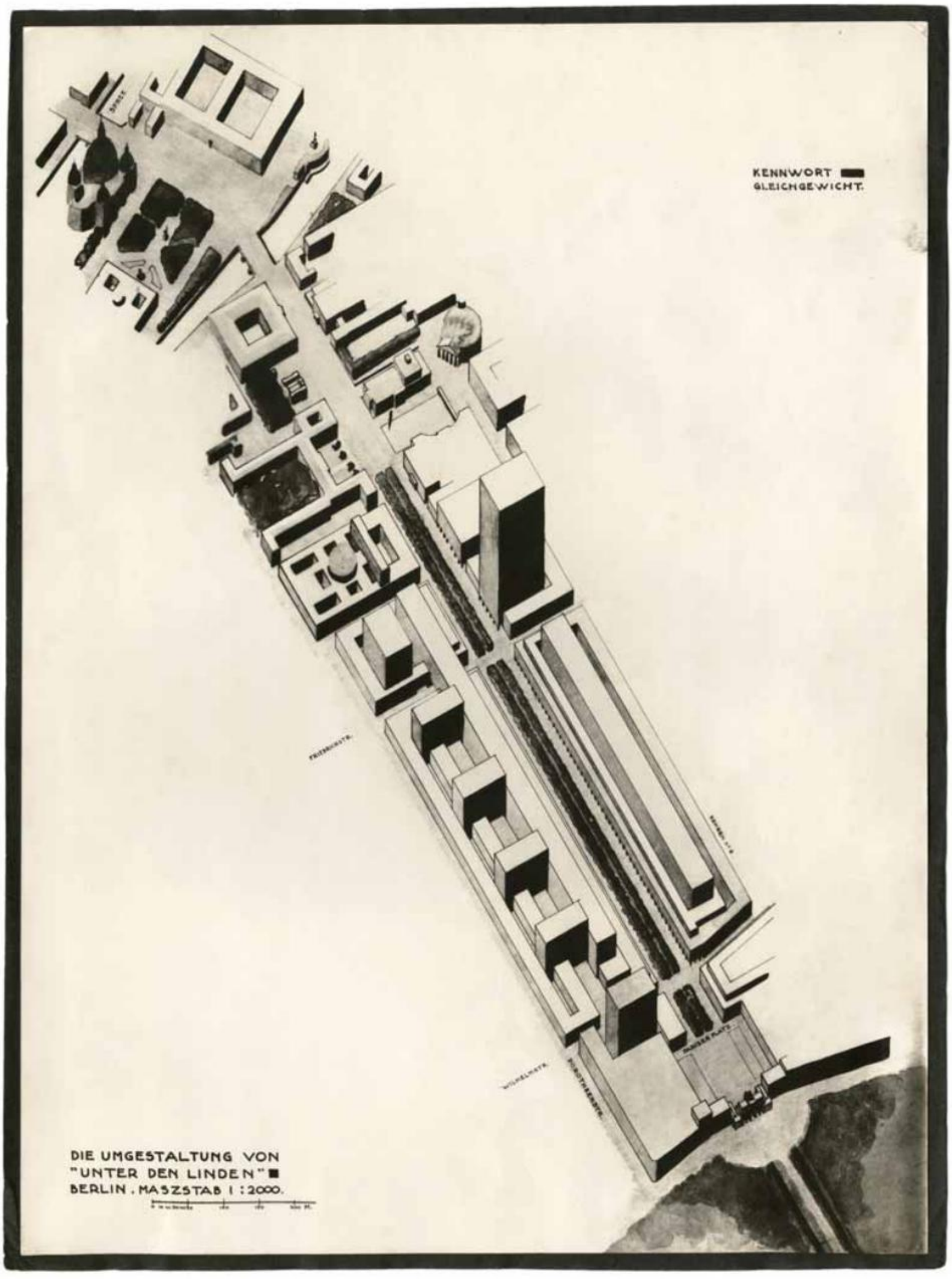
3. Marijke Küper, "Gerrit Rietveld," in *De vervolgjaren van De Stijl, 1922–1932*, ed. C. Blotkamp (Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 1996), 234.

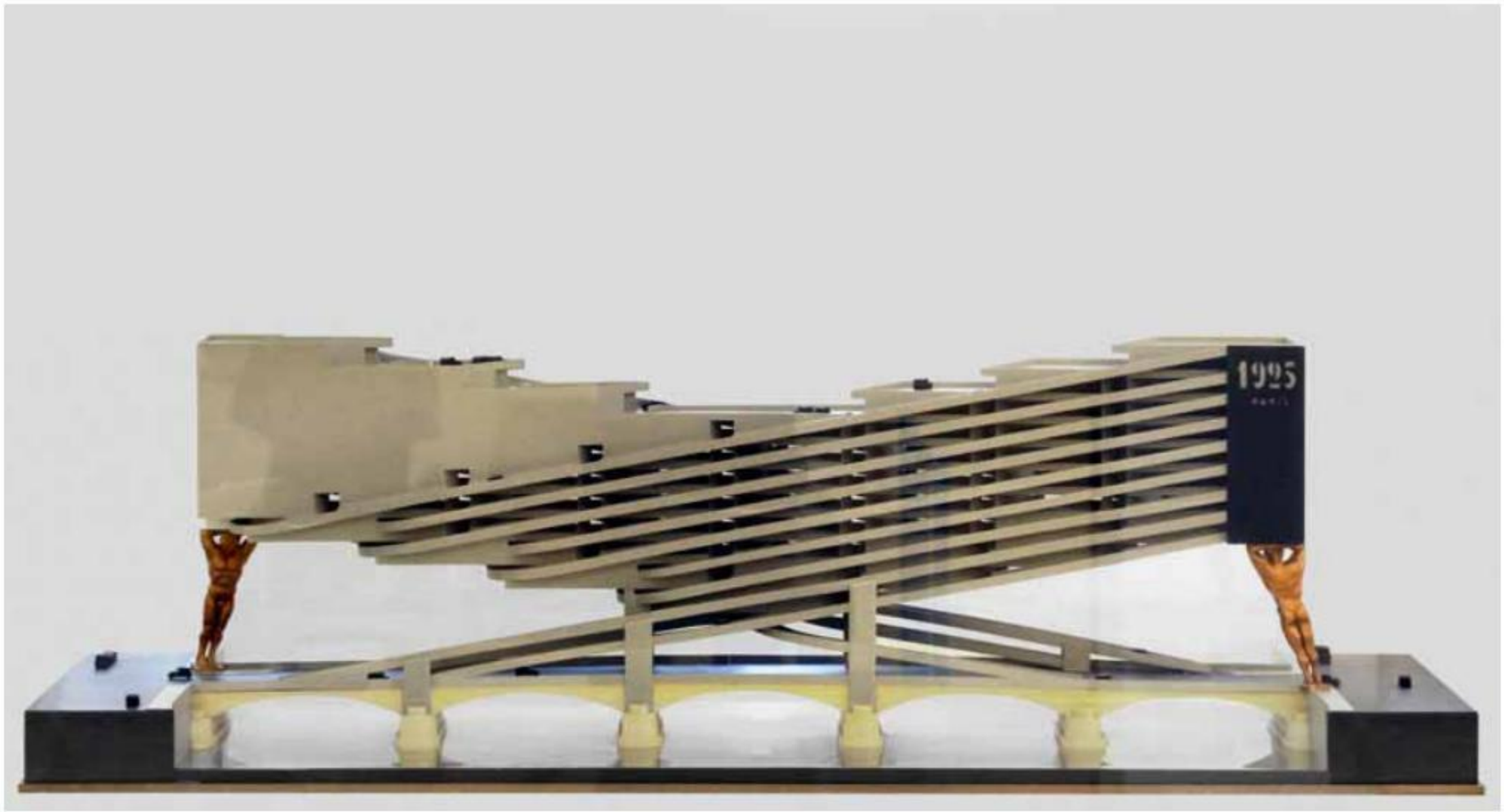


Georges Vantongerloo
Airport plus pedestel (Type A, Series A)
1928

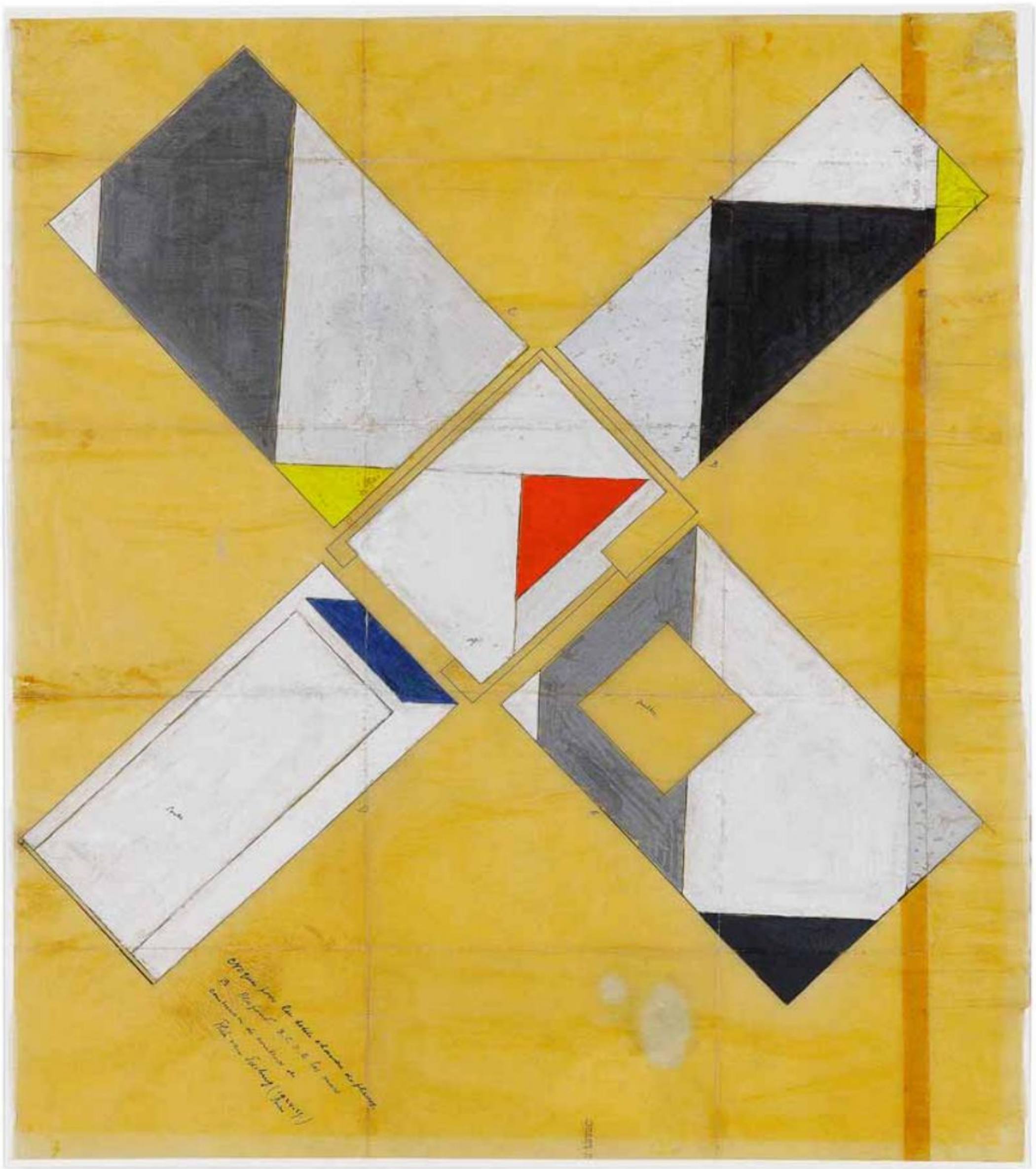
Hendrik Petrus Berlage
Aerial view of the Urban Plan of South Amsterdam
1915

Cornelis van Eesteren
Design for the reorganization of Unter den Linden, Berlin
1925


KENNWORT
GLEICHGEWICHT.
DIE UMGESTALTUNG VON
"UNTER DEN LINDEN" ■
BERLIN. MASZSTAB 1 : 2000.



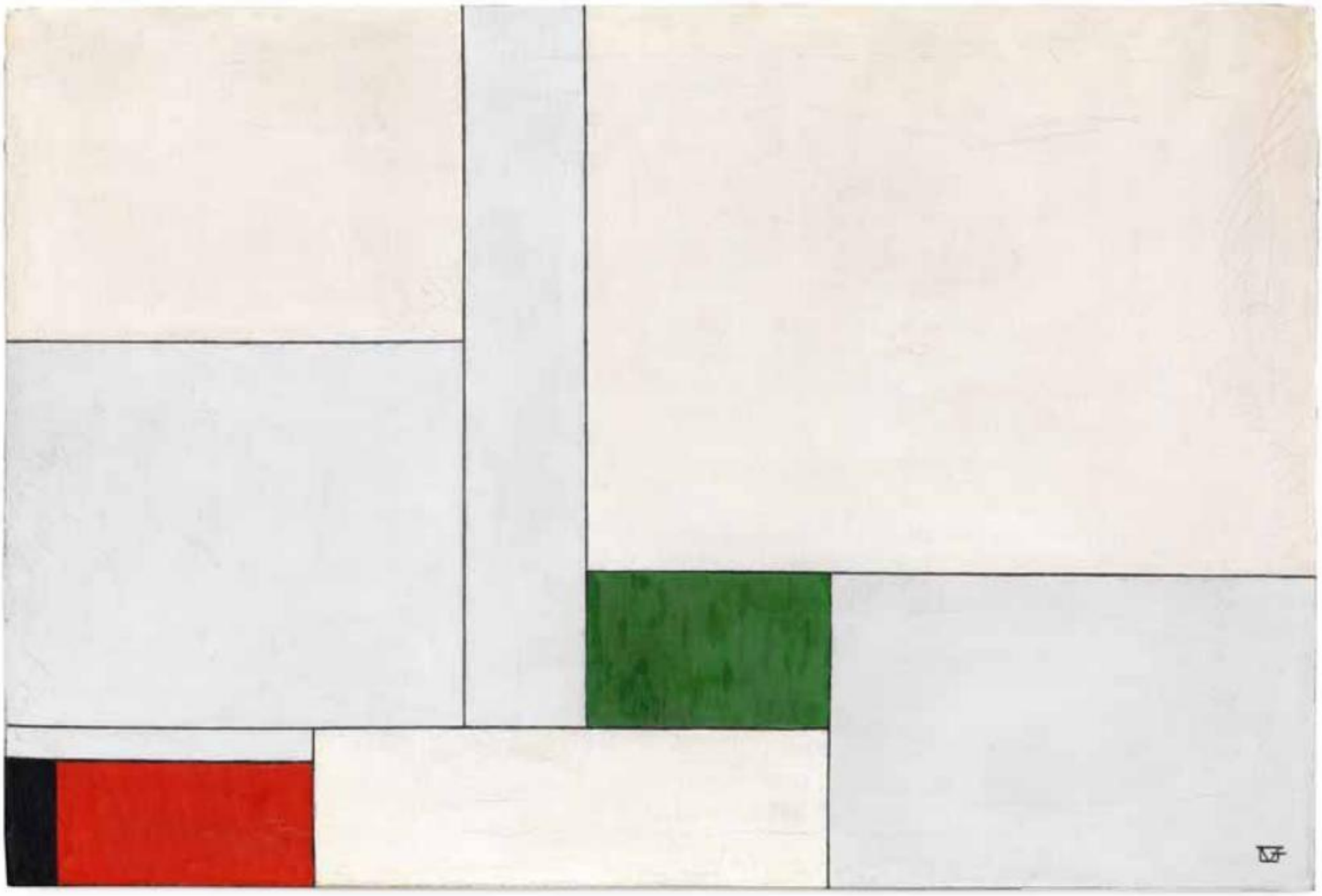
Konstantin Melnikov
Model of a parking garage for 1,000 vehicles, Paris
1925/2017



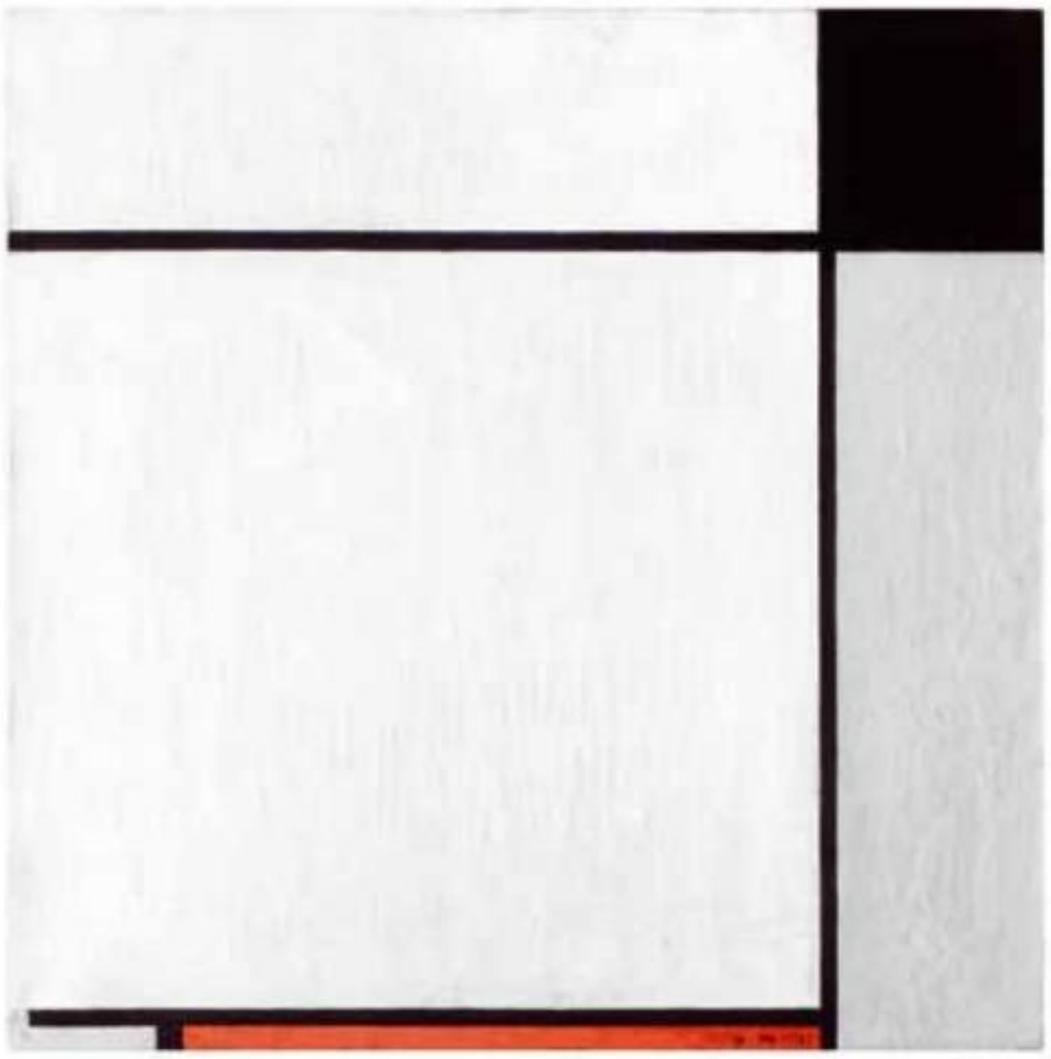
Theo van Doesburg
Sketch for the small Chambre de Fleurs, Villa Noailles, Hyères
1924–1925

Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud
Dining room furniture for the Weissenhof estate,
Stuttgart
1927/1979

Mart Stam (attributed)
Cantilever chair, model 263
ca. 1932



Georges Vantongerloo
Composition Derived from the Equilateral Hyperbole xy = k
with Green and Red Harmony
1929



18.

Pure Abstract Art

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Black, Red, and Gray*, 1927

Piet Mondrian experienced many changes in the mid-to-late 1920s. He became famous. American, German, and Swiss collectors were buying his art. He even sold three works to French collections. Critics began writing positive reviews of his work. Mondrian became known among architects and designers, and—not unimportant—the "hermit of Montparnasse" was embraced by a new generation of German, Swiss, French, Belgian, and even British artists. His studio was also a sensation, thanks to the photographs circulating in France and elsewhere. It became a place of pilgrimage that attracted many visitors from the Netherlands—mainly architects, but also literary figures, collectors, art lovers, and a stream of young artists. He was showing work at exhibitions in America, the Netherlands, Germany, and even at the Venice Biennale. But in France, beyond submitting work to the Salon des Tuileries, he had few formal opportunities to exhibit. So he showed his work at a bookshop, L'Esthétique, on Boulevard Montparnasse, a meeting place where artists and writers would exchange news. He also showed a few paintings at Galerie Jeanne Bucher, in an exhibition with the figurative work of an old friend, Nico Eekman, who also lived in Paris.

To raise awareness of Dutch art and culture in Paris, the Dutch envoy had set up a *Kunstkring*, an art circle, named "De Klomp"—The Clog (*Le Sabot* in French)—that would invite Dutch artists to meetings where they could show their work several times a year. The goal was to attract attention and encourage French critics to consider Dutch culture. On February 27, 1927, the group gathered in a small hall on rue de la Chevreuse, just six hundred meters from Mondrian's studio. A Dutch writer was scheduled to speak, and a trio would play music. Mondrian had been persuaded to show no fewer than twenty paintings. Getting them to the hall would be a major undertaking. But he had had few recent opportunities to exhibit in France, so he had to grasp this one. Artist and journalist friends also urged him to accept the invitation.

The response of the mainly Dutch audience was not positive, however. The artistic director of the event (an embassy employee) gave an address in which he tried at length to explain the deeper meaning of the paintings. It did not help. He did not understand the works and got no further than presenting a superficial interpretation, explaining that the artist felt a need, consistent with modern life, to create an art that was as far removed from nature as possible. Nobody grasped that the twenty paintings highlighted the artist's intention to fully dissolve architecture "in a rhythmic fashion," as a Dutch paper later wrote.[1] It did not even help that during the evening a magazine was circulated containing photographs of the studio where Mondrian had put his ideas into practice. Some thought it cheery, while others though it an abomination and grew angry. But no one could claim that De Klomp's artistic director had sought to deprive its guests of the very latest in modern art or deny that it "preferred the airplane to the night ferry," as a report in the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* noted.[2]

The twenty paintings were of four types. Mondrian referred to them in a letter to architect J.J.P. Oud, who had offered in January 1927 to promote Mondrian's work in the Netherlands. Each of the four types has a different compositional concept. Each also has a different spatial effect.

In the first type, a large, white, square (or almost square)—a stable element—is positioned off-center—introducing instability—often in a horizontal format, each side having a different relationship with the planes arranged outside it. Sometimes one plane borders the square on each side, colored in one case, gray in another. Sometimes several planes occur in the periphery, in which case there are also more divided planes in color and in gray. All these shifts prevent the central square from acting as a stable element. They create an internal revolving motion because the sides impact on each other. The motion is "internal" because everything is grouped along the periphery and there is no enclosing line along the edge of the canvas, allowing an open, free relationship to develop with the surroundings. Because the "non-whites" are anchored to one another, however, the eye perceives the movement as remaining within the confines of the painting.

The second type is not a closed composition. The central white square or almost-square plane on one

side abuts the edge of the canvas, with no enclosing line, causing instability as we look. At the same time, there is little relationship between the colors and noncolors in the periphery. The red is placed bottom center, a thin base supporting the image. The black in the top right can escape in visual terms, like a diagonal valve. The grays, the black, and the red are not so tightly bound together, so everything is visually unconstrained. The large white square (or almost-square) no longer keeps the visual machinery together but sings its own part in the melody of the painting.

The third type has a subtle similarity to the second. It is sometimes described as "central" because a vertical divides the picture plane. This type takes two forms: a vertical format and a horizontal format. In the vertical version the internal vertical dynamism is neutralized by white planes and planes of gray, red, yellow, and blue bordered by horizontal sections of line. The arrangement and the "volume" of each color or noncolor is a matter of harmonization.

Finally, in the fourth type the color and line are further reduced in a horizontal or almost square format. A large white almost-square (a stable element) is positioned along the edge, off-center—introducing instability—in a horizontal format. The square is supported by lines that extend from one side to the other. This emphasizes the horizontal, and the vertical line is given more or less free rein, enhancing its visual presence. Color (yellow and blue in this particular painting) is thus positioned on the "outside" of the composition in such a way that it further emphasizes the horizontal.

The last two types demonstrate that the properties of color and line are not the same in all directions. The eye assesses horizontal and vertical elements differently. A vertical plane and a horizontal plane have different effects, and the same applies to lines and to the format of the painting. Since his cubist period in 1912, Mondrian had believed that vertical formats tended toward a more "tragic" effect. In the paintings from the second half of the 1920s he came to realize that the properties of pictorial elements change when they are positioned horizontally or vertically. Qualities and attributes also change within a context—including the space in which the painting functions. Our experience is also unconsciously guided by the way we ourselves approach life.

Mondrian was becoming more and more aware of the fact that how we look, how we perceive is a projection of our own physicality. "The human eye is not yet free of the body," he wrote in a 1927 article. "Vision is inherently bound to our normal position. Only the mind can move more freely . . . but as human beings we must consider human balance (which is also cosmic), even though the new spirit of the times allows for more breadth of vision. Upsetting this balance is not the way to create 'the new,' not in these times."[3]

As if to further explore this awareness of our own vision, Mondrian made the lines in his compositions thinner and thinner and reduced the number of colors further and further—just as Igor Stravinsky, in his *Poetics of Music*, claimed that "his freedom would be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly he limited his field of action and the more he would surround himself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit."[4]

1. "Our Paris Correspondent" [W.F.A. Röell], "Eyquem in de Parijsche Klomp: Strijkje in Holland—Zang en trio—Beeldende maximen van Mondriaan," *Het Vaderland*, March 1, 1927, evening ed. B, n.p.

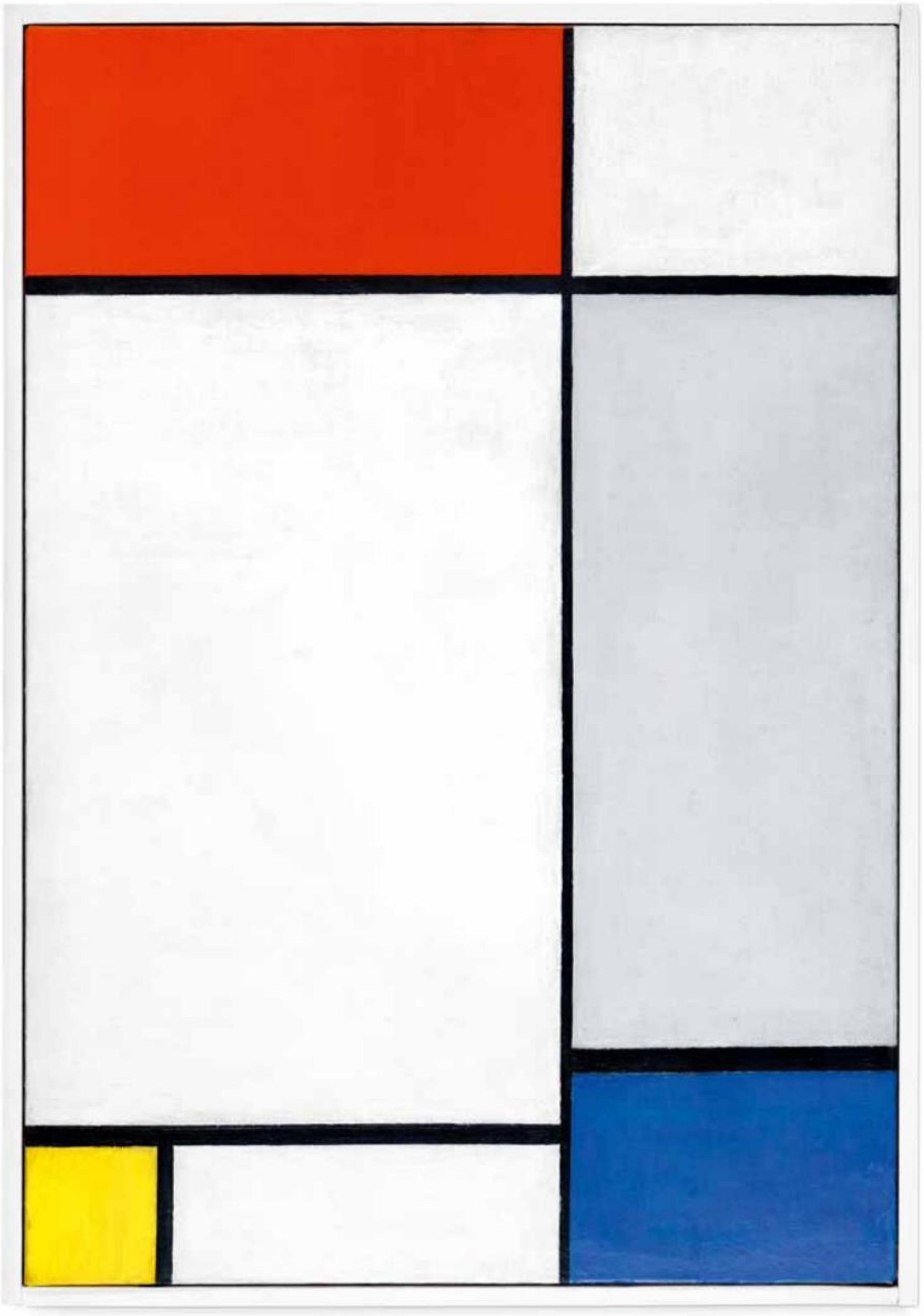
2. "Our Paris Correspondent," "De Klomp," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, March 1, 1927, evening ed., 3rd sec., 9.

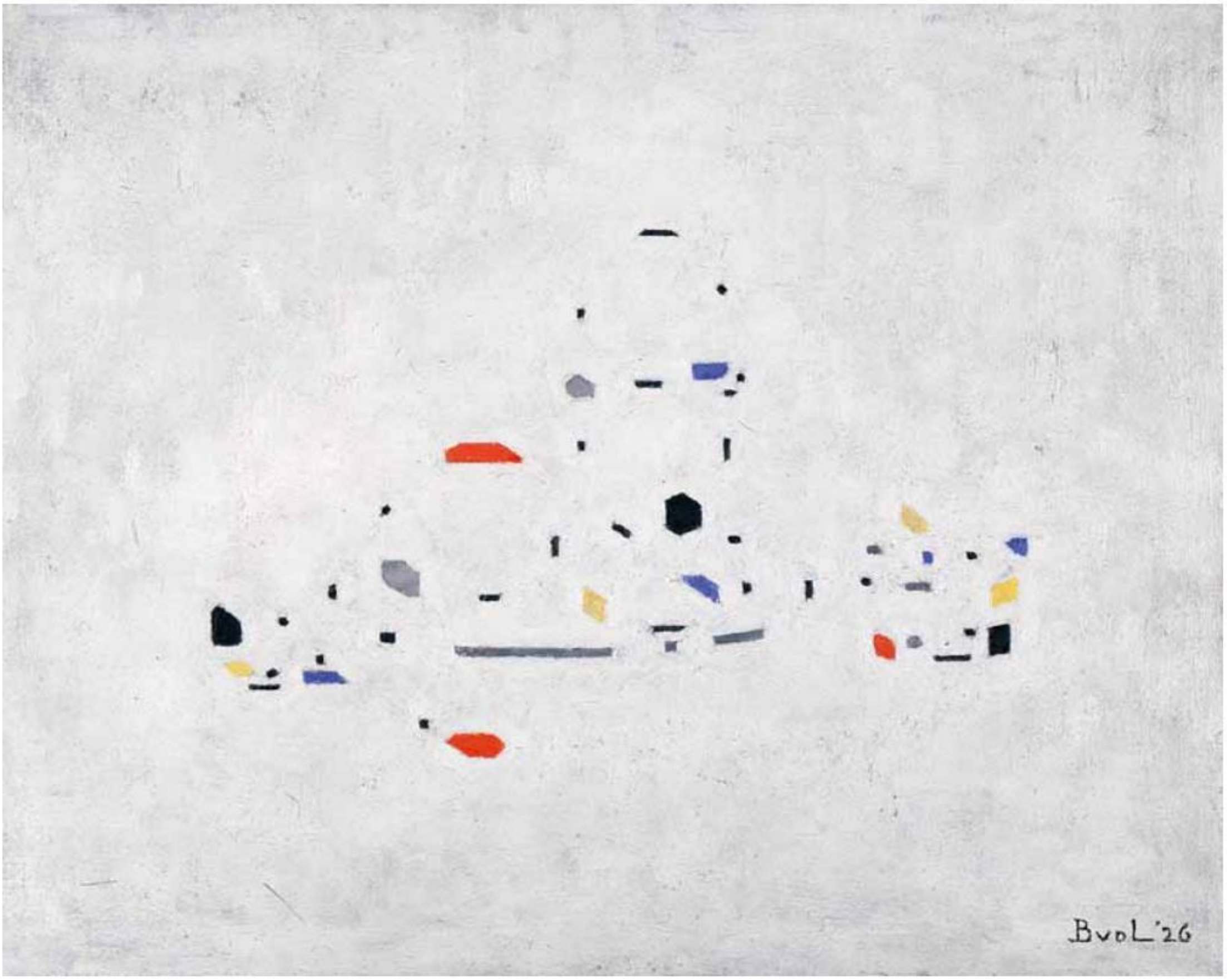
3. Piet Mondrian, "Home-Street-City," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 210. For the Dutch original, see "Neo-Plasticisme: De Woning-De Straat-De Stad," *i10*, no. 1 (January 1927).

4. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 57.

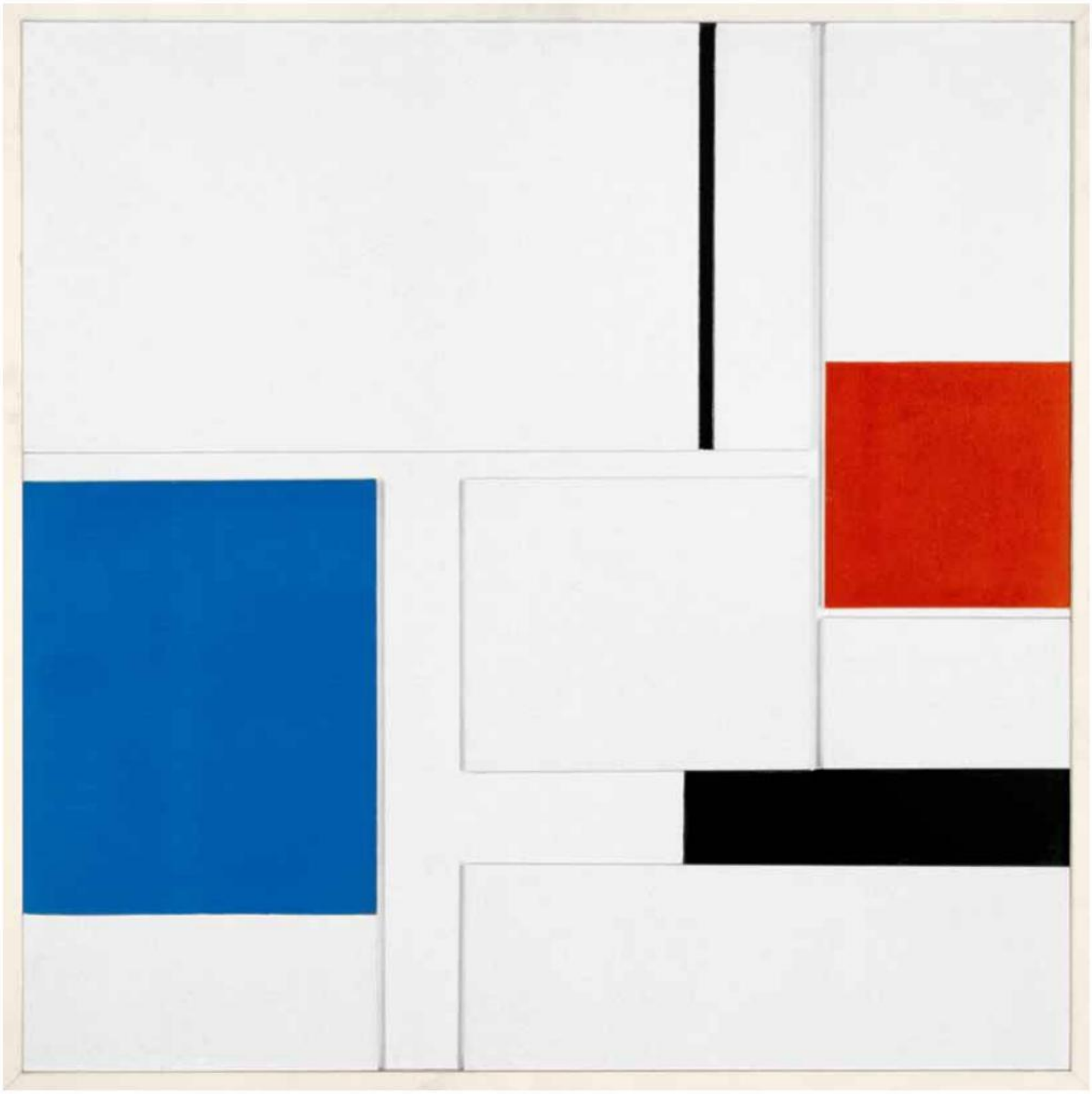
Piet Mondrian
Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1927

Piet Mondrian
Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1927

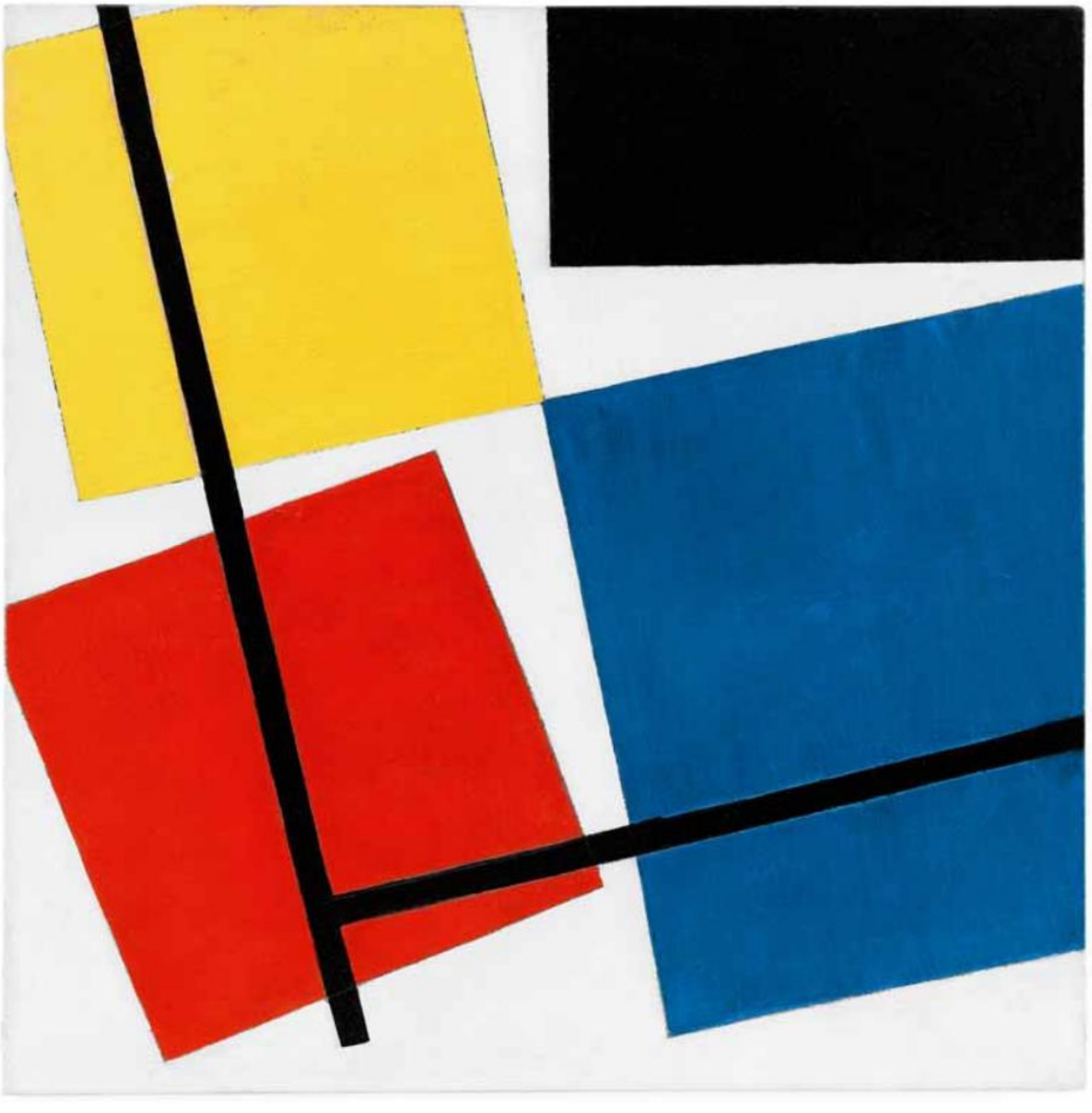




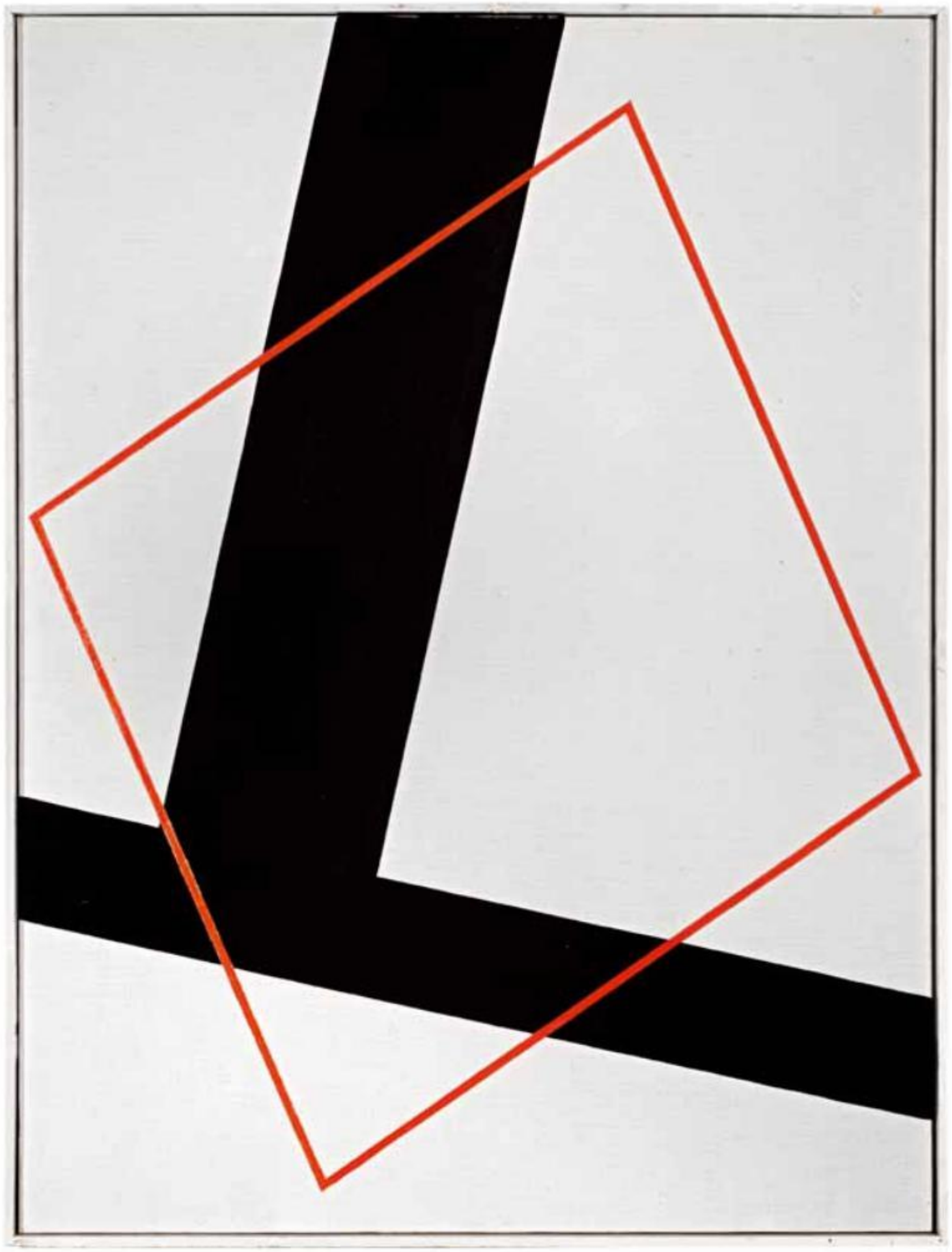
Bart van der Leck
Still Life
1926



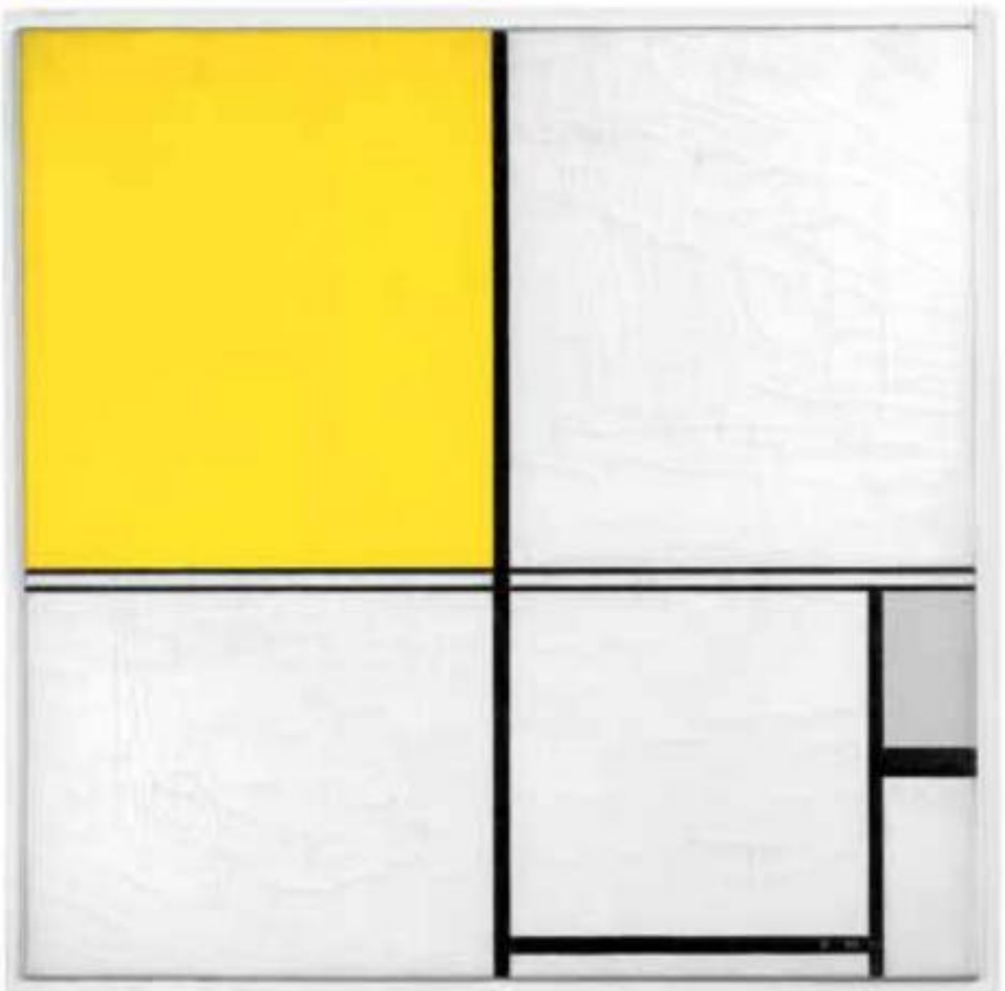
Jean Albert Gorin
Neoplastic Composition with Hollow Lines No. 29
1931



Theo van Doesburg
Simultaneous Counter-composition
1929–1930



Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart
Composition No. 79
1934



19.
A Classic Beauty

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Composition B with Yellow and Gray*, 1932

From the sidewalk tables at artists' café Les Deux Magots on Boulevard Montparnasse, one could see from a distance, "like a joyous cry"—as Piet Mondrian's friend, correspondent W.F.A. Roëll put it—one of Mondrian's paintings hanging in the window of Galerie Zak on rue de l'Abbaye, beside the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.[1] The painting hung there like a signal, a red, white, and blue flag, the correspondent enthusiastically reported.[2]

Inside the gallery was an exhibition of work by thirty-five Dutch painters and sculptors. The motley collection of works was dominated by expressionist tendencies and had nothing contemporary to add to the artistic debate in 1932 Paris, which was focused above all on surrealism. The Dutch embassy had helped organize the exhibition as a gesture of appreciation for the major exhibition of French painters that had just taken place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam—an exhibition Mondrian had also taken part in. He had submitted two paintings, one made in 1919, the other in 1931, highlighting two extremes of his abstract experiment.

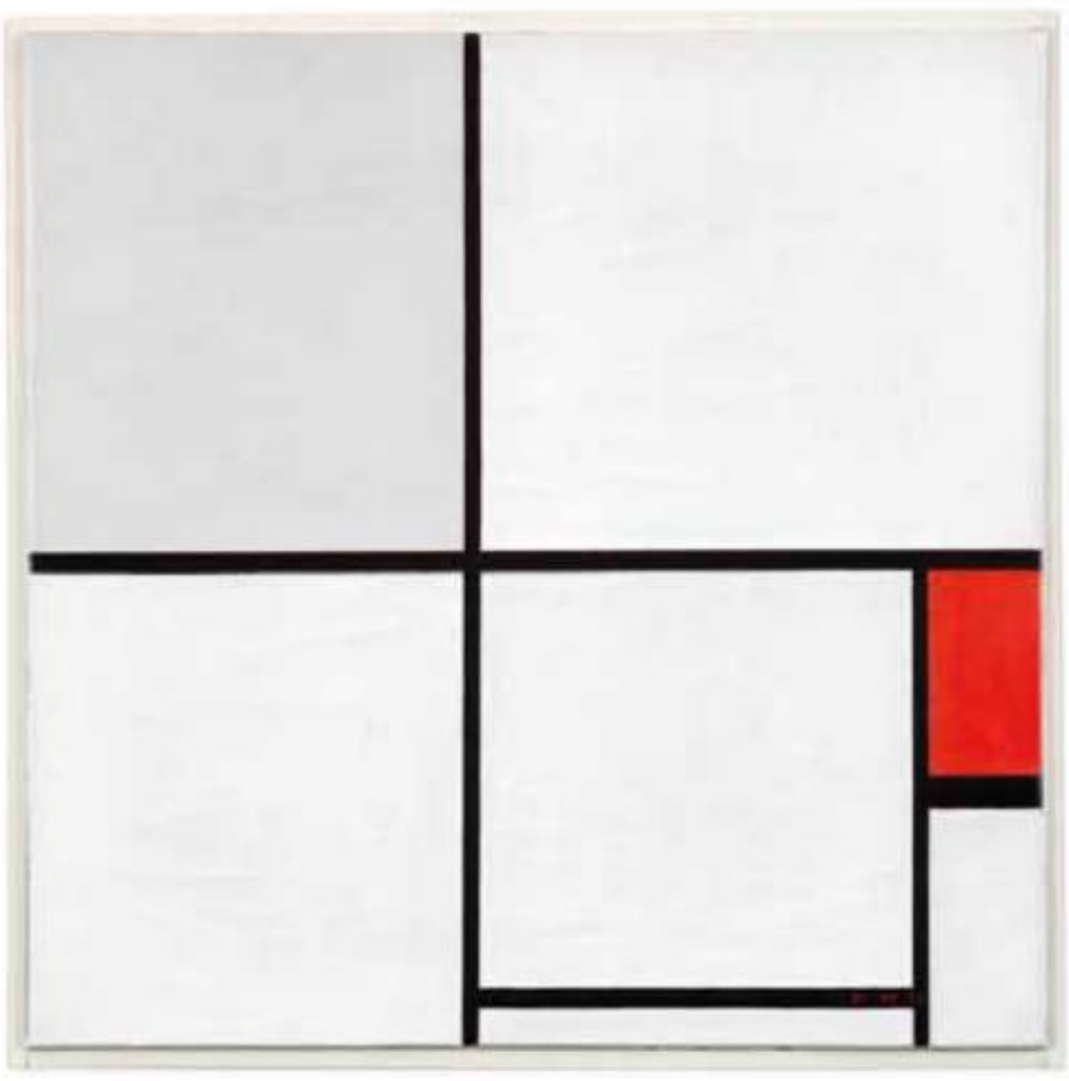
Mondrian had four paintings in the show at Galerie Zak. They were almost identical in composition, and they had all just been completed. He had submitted three compositions for the exhibition brochure, labeled "A" to "C." When he came to set up the exhibition, he added a fourth, *Composition D*, perhaps as a result of the hanging committee's decision to place *Composition A* in the window, thus thwarting Mondrian's plan of hanging the three paintings together. The addition of the fourth painting gave him a triptych again and kept intact his idea of revealing something of an evolution.

Composition A is square and slightly larger than *Composition B* and *Composition C*, each of which is 50 × 50 centimeters. *Composition D* is considerably smaller and is not square but slightly vertically elongated. *Composition A* commands a lot of attention because of its use of color and size. Even at a distance of a hundred meters, from the tables outside Les Deux Magots, it was an eye-catcher. Mondrian had quartered the square picture plane by crossing a horizontal and a vertical line to the left of the center and slightly below the halfway point of the canvas. In a letter to the young artist Jean Gorin, he called this off-center intersection of a single horizontal and a single vertical line "the simplest neoplastic composition."[3] He had filled the segment in the top left with a vibrant signal red. The segments in the top right and bottom left were painted in a brilliant white. The segment in the bottom right has a subordinate system of lines and a dazzling blue plane. In the same letter to Gorin, Mondrian called these subordinate systems "sous-compositions" (sub-compositions) and explained that they allowed various emotions and ways of seeing ("conceptions de voir") to be introduced into the composition.

The lines in the painting are narrow and have the intense sharpness that was already typical of Mondrian's late 1920s compositions. Yet, differences in thickness are apparent: the horizontals are slightly heavier than the verticals. This slightly—almost imperceptibly—reinforces what we sense as we look at the painting: that the vertical, the extension of our own vertical position as viewers, has a certain "speed" and "brevity" compared to the horizontal, which presents itself more in terms of "motion" and "duration," probably because in our perception the horizontal is related to the horizon and gravity. He also made the bottom line in the blue plane extra wide, like the horizontal at the bottom of the image, partly to emphasize the horizontal (i.e., to play the horizontal and vertical off each other, heightening the contrast).

This created contrasts and interactions in all directions, including—indeed especially—diagonally. The fact that not a single line completely enclosed any plane along the edges created an open structure that played a key role in the radiating, expanding effect. Mondrian was concerned with giving the clarity of the canvas a nonmaterial, cerebral quality. The painting asserted that the new life of the future would no longer have to settle for merely attractive, pleasant forms. The pure quality of *Composition A* infallibly proved, to Mondrian—simply because the painting showed it, in immediate perception—that society was becoming gradually more receptive to a completely new vision. A new life was possible. A life in which balanced relationships—as visualized in the lines and colors and planes of *Composition A*—would dominate. Painting proved it to him by its sheer aesthetic quality.

The other paintings hung inside the gallery, on the ground floor, among all kinds of predominantly brown Dutch expressionism. All three have virtually the same composition, executed in different colors and with lines positioned slightly differently. Compared with *Composition A*, *Composition B* and *Composition C* are reticent, diffident. *Composition B* has a large yellow plane and a smaller gray plane. *Composition C* combines a large gray plane with a smaller red plane. Mondrian "neutralized" the horizontal line in *Composition B* rather than emphasize it as in *Composition A*. He left only the outer edges of the line in place, "removing" the rest with a grayish-white. The pure, clear effect of the white in his paintings increasingly prompted Mondrian to temper the effect of the horizontal, or to neutralize it altogether, to achieve even greater clarity, more focus and impact. This was not, however, possible without any line at all. The line was a necessary evil, needed to separate the colors (which would fight without the mediation of the line) and to make the white tangible.



Piet Mondrian, *Composition C with Gray and Red*, 1932

Mondrian left the lines intact in *Composition C*. He painted the large plane in the top left gray, the small plane in the fourth quadrant a bright red. In their color scheme both of these paintings differ from the exuberant, expressive, joyful materiality of *Composition A*. Compared with it, they are gentle, intimate, almost timid. This makes them feel more spiritual. The difference between the ecstatic greeting in the window and the more restrained encounter inside must have been sensed by every visitor.

Composition D is entirely different. It has a smaller vertical format, but with its dazzling red, blue, and yellow it holds its own with its companions. Using virtually the same means, a composition with minimal differences and a similar distribution of colors and noncolors, Mondrian managed to abolish any sensation of dull repetition and create instead an exciting variation. Here, for the first time in Western art, was a minimalism that would not become commonplace in artists' studios and exhibitions until well after the Second World War.

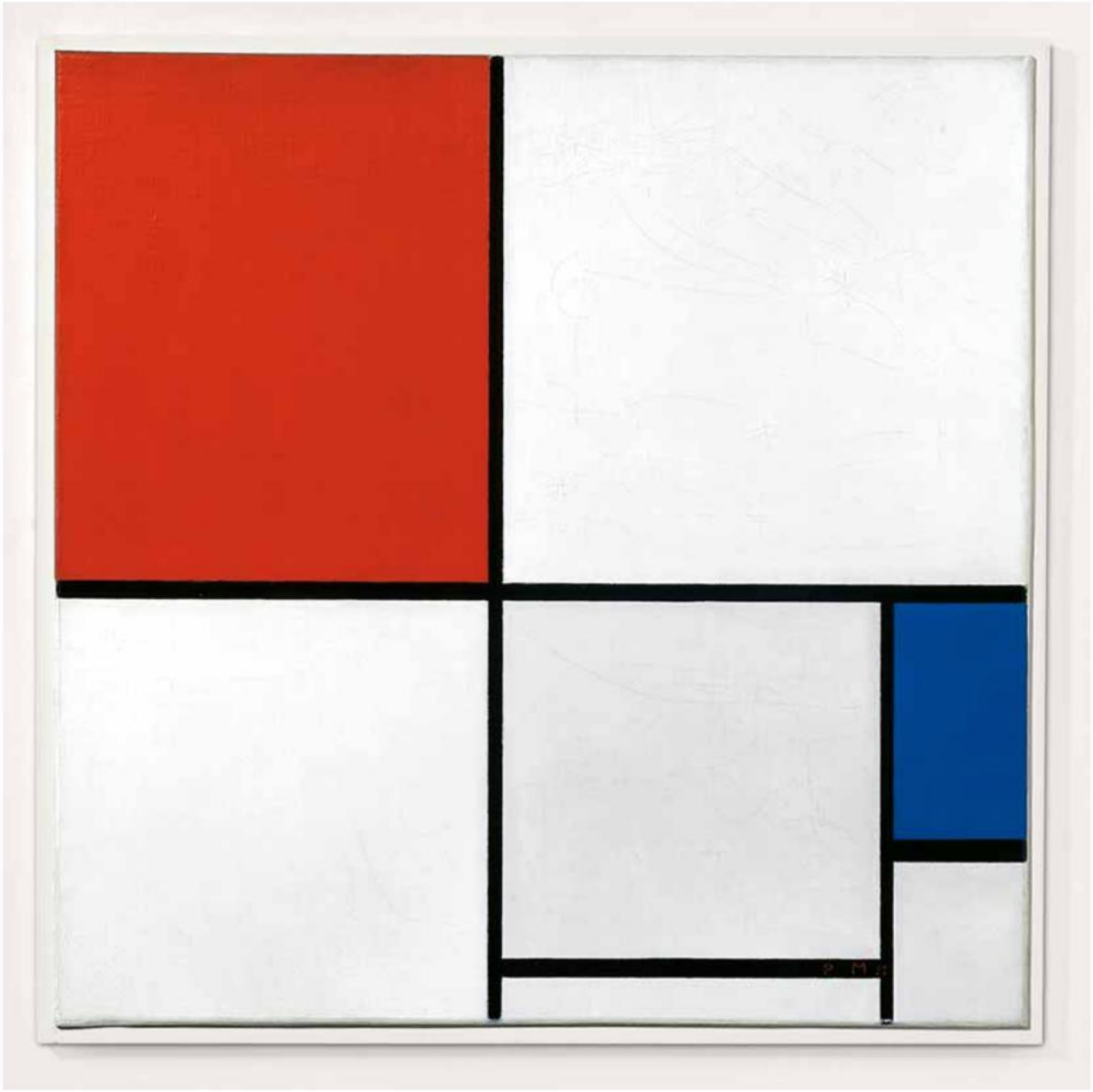
In March 1933, Mondrian wrote to the architect Alfred Roth that it was "good to express the different aspects of life through different compositions."[4] Mondrian's contribution to the exhibition at Galerie Zak was a fine example of this, showcasing the development of a refined beauty that moved from the material, via the spiritual, to the classic.

1. [W.F.A. Roëll], "Onze Hollandsche modernen te Parijs," *Het Vaderland*, May 28, 1932, evening ed., sec. C, 1.

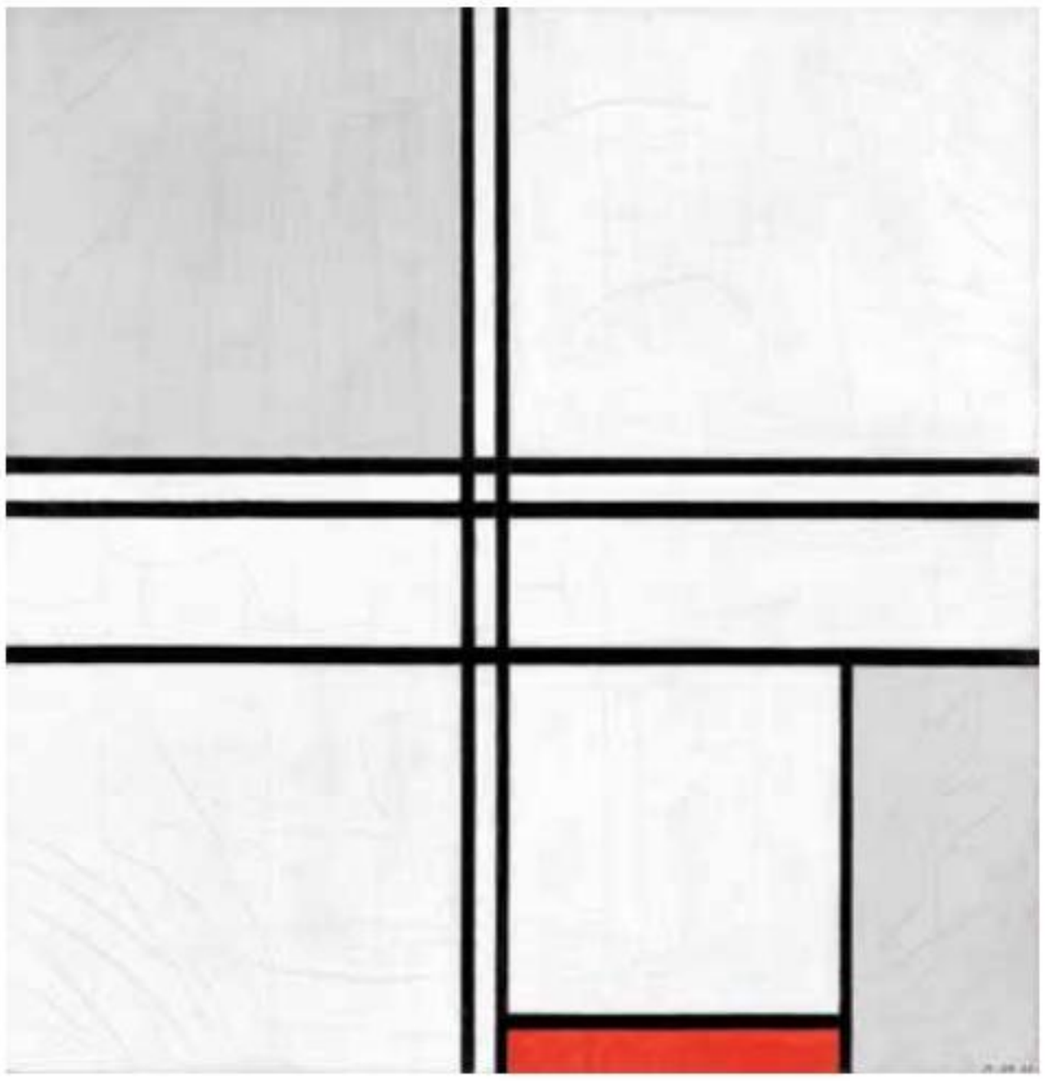
2. Ibid.

3. Piet Mondrian to Jean Gorin, January 20, 1933, in Yve-Alain Bois, "Lettres à Gorin," *Macula 2* (1977): 128–34.

4. Piet Mondrian to Alfred Roth, March 6, 1933, in *Piet Mondrian/Alfred Roth correspondance*, ed. Serge Lemoine (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 86.



Piet Mondrian
Composition A (Composition A, with Red and Blue)
1932



20.

A Culture of Pure Relationships

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Composition (No. 1) Gray-Red*, 1935

In 1935 and 1936, Piet Mondrian participated in two important exhibitions, one in Britain and one in the United States. They affirmed his international breakthrough outside continental Europe.

The British exhibition, the first to introduce modern abstract art to that country, was organized by two young, enthusiastic women: art critic Myfanwy Evans and art historian Nicolete Gray. It was a bold undertaking. The British were traditionally fans of a literary, figurative type of art that did not admit external influences. *Abstract & Concrete* did not therefore attract much interest beyond a band of initiates.

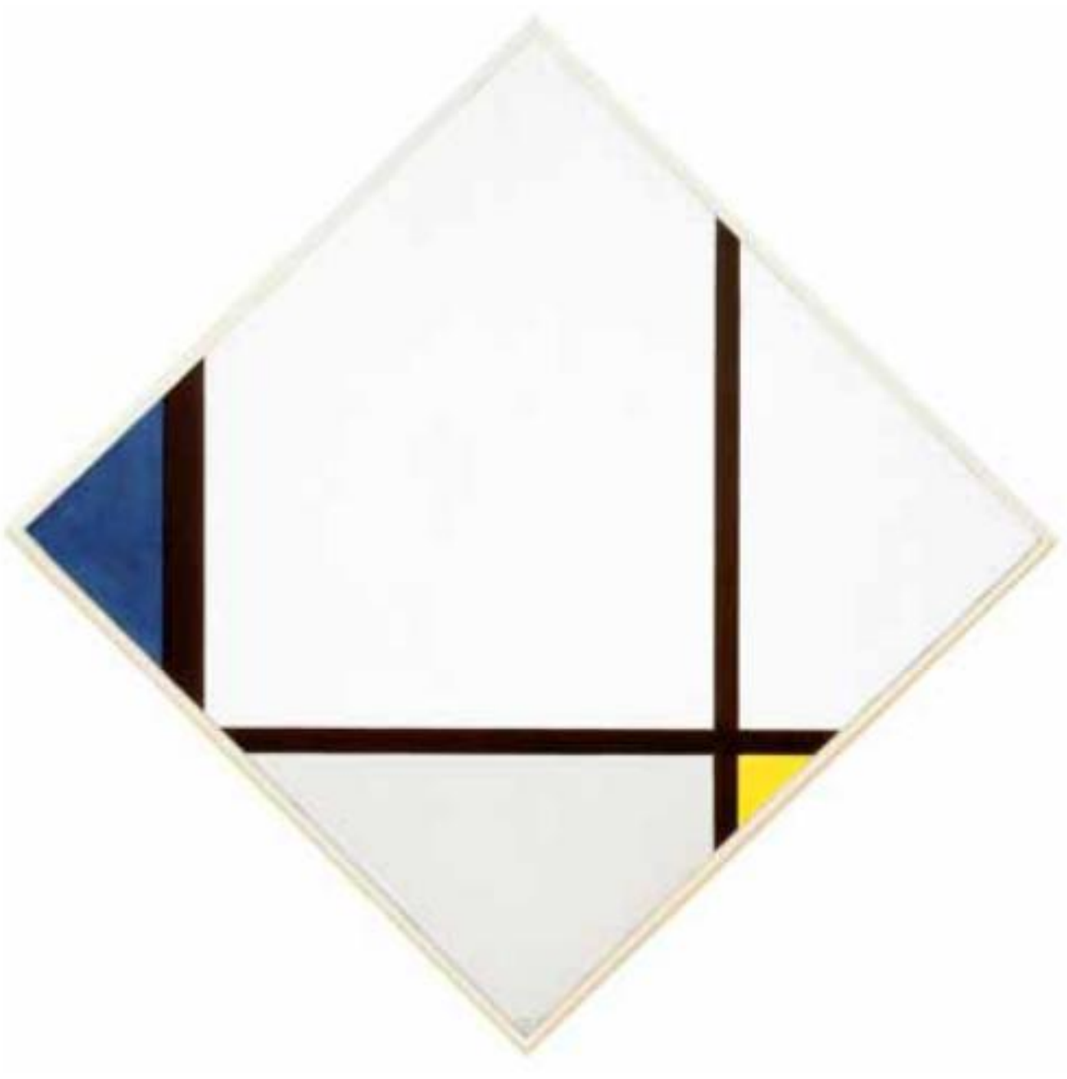
But this did not diminish Mondrian's delight. For a few years now, a young generation of British painters, sculptors, and architects had shown they were receptive to his work, and Evans and Gray's initiative was born of enthusiasm. He had little work to present, however. In 1934 he had suffered from a long bout of ill health and had managed to complete only four paintings. Then, to make matters worse, he became seriously ill in February 1935 and was not able to do much work until December. Nevertheless, he summoned all his strength and managed to complete three paintings for Oxford and Liverpool.

He had started the paintings in spring 1934 but had had to abandon them for a time because he lacked energy. With a great deal of effort, he had managed to complete *Composition B (No. II)* by February 1935, just before he collapsed entirely. The parallel lines, horizontal and vertical, had evolved from the strange double line in *Composition B* of 1932. He had a tendency toward repetition and symmetry, which he avoided by visually anchoring the lines to the picture surface rather than to each other. He had sent the painting to Lucerne for an exhibition that also included work by Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, and several young artists. He did not want to be left out of such company. After the work returned from Lucerne, he changed some elements before sending it on to Oxford, including moving the top horizontal line up slightly, thus emphasizing the upward movement, and moving the short vertical along the left edge slightly further outward, increasing the tension with the long verticals on the right.

Composition A (No. I) has a more complicated history. Mondrian completed a first version in July 1935, after working on it intermittently for a year. Then he sent the painting to Oxford. He remained dissatisfied with it, however, for in 1941 he made considerable changes to the composition before exhibiting it in New York in January 1942. What we see today is that final version. The first version was much sparser. It must have seemed like a hugely magnified detail of another painting. The two long vertical lines emphasized the upward movement and were far enough apart and from the edges to suggest a slight forward movement in the vertical white plane. To compensate for this visual effect, Mondrian connected the left vertical to the edge using a broad black band—almost a rectangle. On the right, he introduced two horizontal sections of line, one halfway down the bottom half of the canvas and one along the top. He filled the plane that this created with a harsh red.

Composition C (No. III) (1935) is almost square and is half the size of *Composition A (No. I)*. Mondrian set out the first version in July 1934 and was not satisfied with the result until July 1935. He found the energy to work on the painting again around December 1935, just before he sent it to Oxford. He compensated for the almost square format (the canvas is slightly taller than it is wide) with two horizontals that emphasize the width. An almost centrally positioned vertical cuts through the central section, which he left white. Along the top, Mondrian painted a red plane. A short vertical line in the bottom left creates room for a yellow plane. And on the right, as in his classic compositions from around 1931, a blue plane is enclosed by two adjacent lines.

While the vertical is visually emphasized in *Composition A (No. I)*, *Composition C (No. III)* plays with the horizontal. *Composition B (No. II)* combines both mechanisms in the same work. Two horizontals and two verticals intersect in the center, the horizontals dividing the canvas into three almost equal sections. Only, the top line in *Composition B (No. II)* has been moved up slightly, creating a visual dynamic. The two verticals have been shifted to the right to make room for the large red plane at the top of the painting.



Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. I: Lozenge with Three Lines and Blue, Gray, and Yellow*, 1925

Again, in an almost educational manner, Mondrian revealed a principle in his work without taking into account the actual moment of creation. The numbering indicated that the earliest painting was to be hung between the more recent ones. This manufactured relationship between the paintings revealed something that was outside time, concerned only with an experience that existed purely in its perception. As a triptych, it symbolized the spiritual growth a person undergoes in the pilgrimage of the soul.

While Mondrian was still working on the set of paintings for Oxford and Liverpool, he readied another group to send to the United States at the invitation of A. Everett Austin, director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Mondrian selected four paintings for the show, which opened in Hartford at the end of October and moved to Chicago in January 1936. Thus, Mondrian would have made his selection in mid-September. Three of the four works had a composition based heavily on the classic compositions from the early 1930s, though the horizontal line was now doubled, pulled apart to form two lines related to the planes, and then doubled again.

In *Composition (No. 1) Gray-Red* only the top line was doubled, along with the only vertical. The large plane in the top left had been painted gray, as had the significantly smaller plane in the bottom right. The red provided a firm base on the bottom edge of the composition, differing little from the gray in terms of color contrast. The result was a “nervous” offsetting and shift in perception. In *Composition (No. II) Blue-Yellow* both horizontals were doubled, stabilizing our perception of the image. The yellow and blue enhanced this by introducing the appropriate sharp color contrasts. This resulted in a much more emphatic composition.

Composition (No. III) White-Yellow was almost half as big again as the first two paintings in the series and was also sparse in its composition: two verticals dominated the vertical format, this time to the left of center. Two horizontals led to the edge of the canvas over on the right, and the plane at the top was filled with a bright yellow. To the left, the bolt of white in the continuous central plane was offset by two subdued broader black lines that, in their proximity

Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow*, 1928

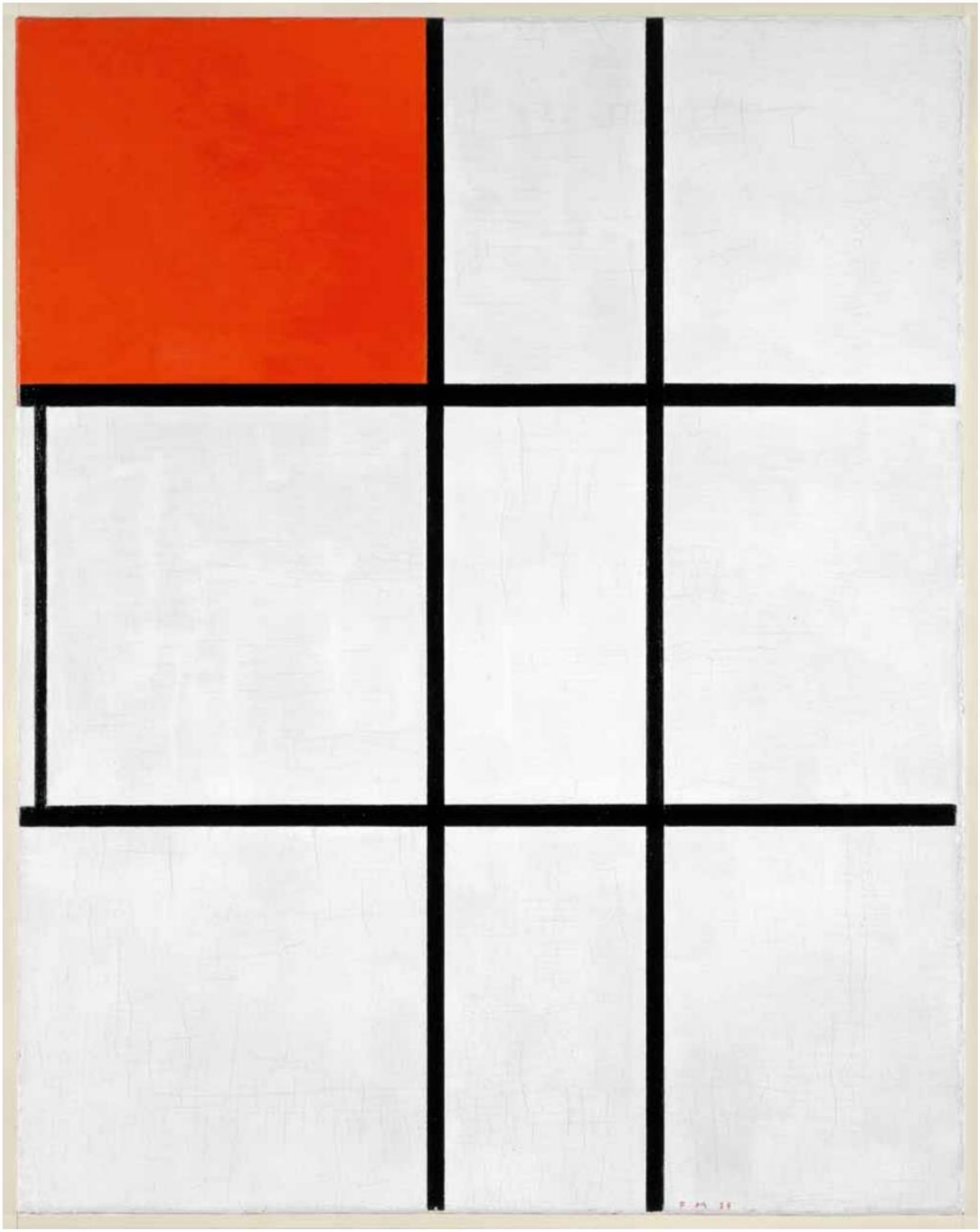
to the edge, resembled little black squares. This painting no longer exists in that form. Mondrian heavily revised it in New York in 1941, adding a horizontal on the right and slightly moving other horizontals. On the left, he replaced one of the small black blocks with two small red blocks that float freely in the white, and he added a blue segment along the bottom.

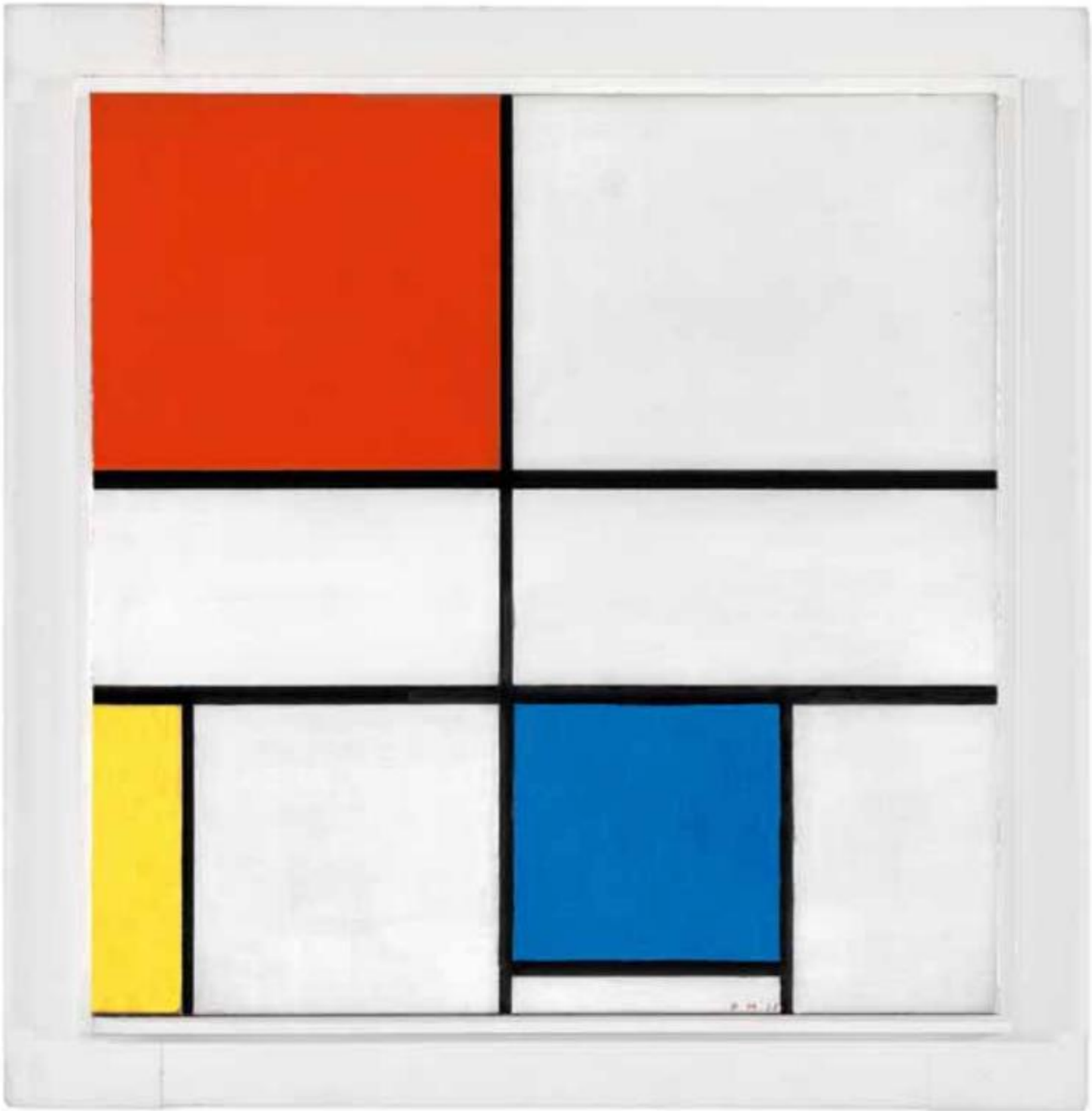
Composition (No. IV) blanc-bleu (*Composition (No. IV) White-Blue*) is the earliest in the series. Whereas the others were begun in summer 1934 and completed with difficulty a year later, Mondrian had begun this painting in spring 1934. It was finished by the time a French magazine reproduced it in spring 1935.[1] Yet he continued working on it—above all, to temper and better "orchestrate" the effect of the lines. The double vertical remained the same, but he pulled the double horizontals farther apart. This had a broadening effect, which "sandwiched" the blue plane on the left. Perhaps this was why Mondrian added a vertical along the right edge. One might be tempted to think of it as a counterbalance, but that is not the right word, as its effect is more that of a surge setting the entire thing in motion.

Composition (No. III) and *Composition (No. IV)* illustrated that the mechanisms of expansion and condensation—in that order—were the basic ingredients of Mondrian's art. He had been aware of this since the early 1920s, but here he used both mechanisms to explain his work and his method to a new, American audience. *Composition (No. I)* and *Composition (No. II)*, "classic" compositions executed in the combinations of grey and red (more "material") and blue and yellow (more "spiritual"), showed his point of departure. The crossing via the third to the fourth painting designated a leap, a mutation, into another world, sparking new developments.

1. Jean Hélion, "La Réalité dans la peinture à propos de l'exposition du musée de l' Orangerie', *Cahiers d'Art* 9, no. 9–10 (October 1934): 261–63.

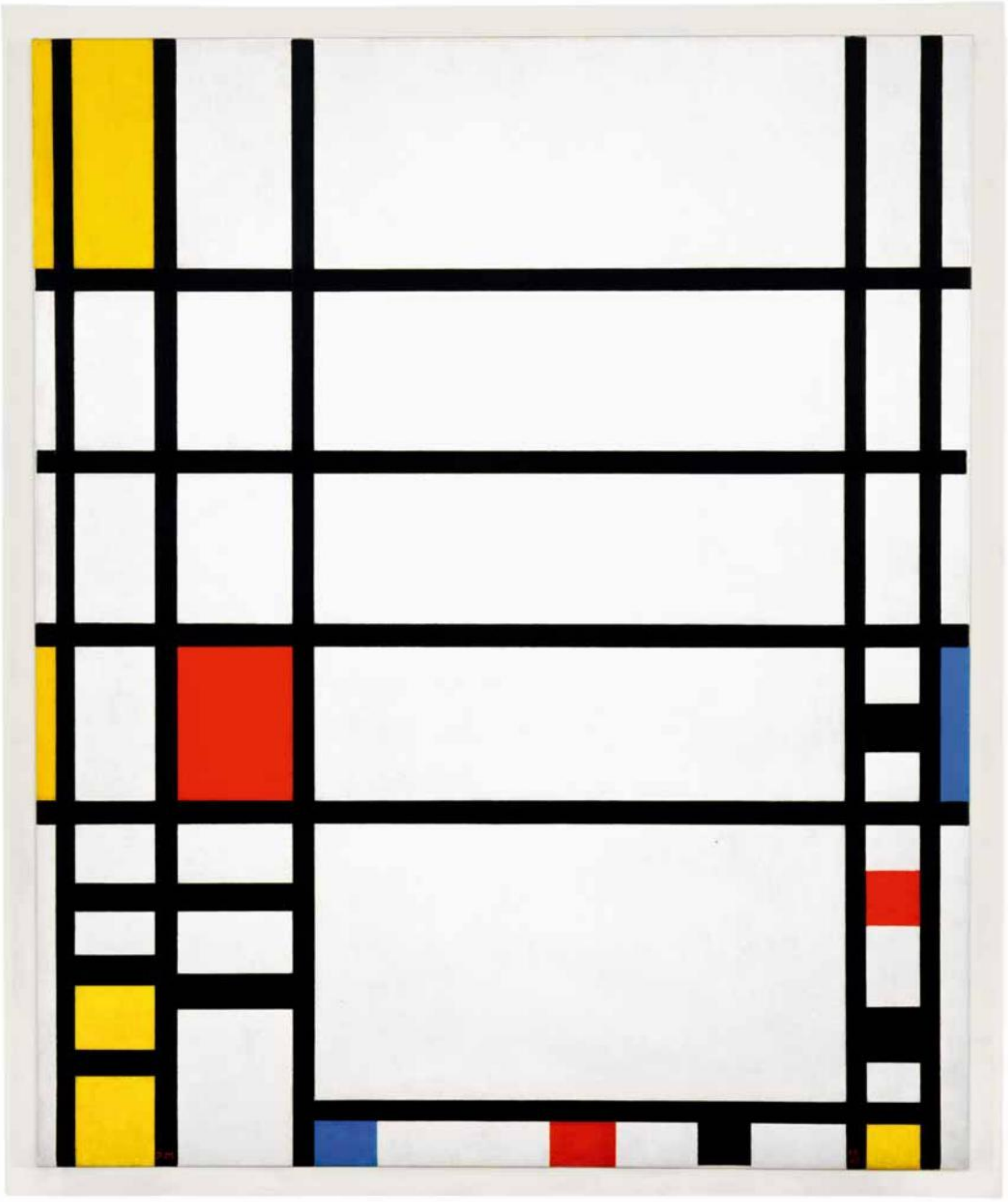
Piet Mondrian
Composition B (No. II) with Red
1935

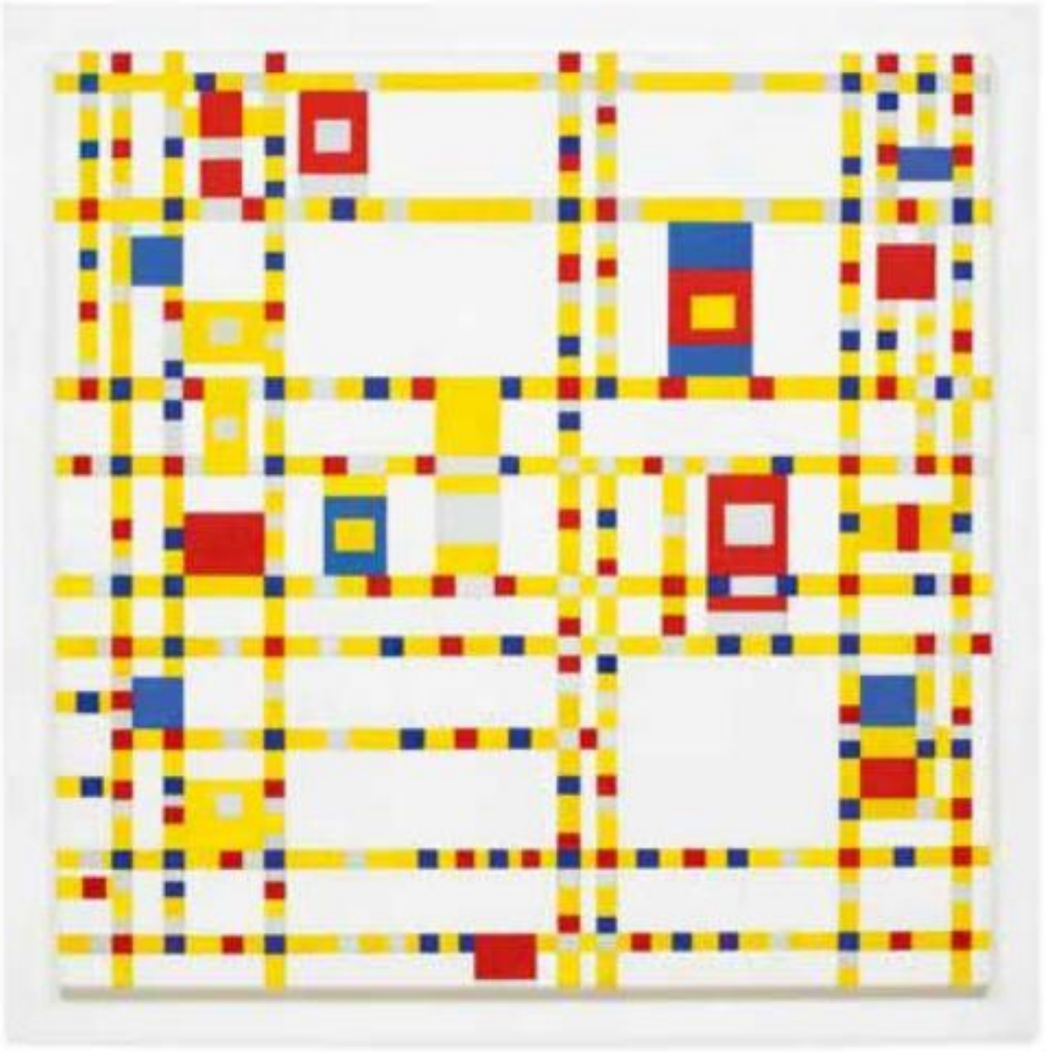




Piet Mondrian
Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1935

Piet Mondrian
Trafalgar Square
1939–1943





21.
L’Art Révélateur

Hans Janssen

Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–1943

Piet Mondrian first had contact with Valentine Dudensing of Valentine Gallery in New York in 1936. Since opening his gallery in 1926, Dudensing had been eager to showcase the most abstract trends in art. In 1927 he showed work by Henri Matisse, a year later he staged a Giorgio de Chirico exhibition, and in 1930 he hosted the first solo exhibition of work by Joan Miró. In 1931 Dudensing firmly established his name as the leading New York gallery for abstract art with an exhibition of twenty abstract paintings by Pablo Picasso made from 1914 to 1930. Exhibitions of work by Wassily Kandinsky, Georges Braque, and Amedeo Modigliani followed. In 1936 Dudensing sought contact with Mondrian with the idea of organizing a group exhibition with work by Mondrian, Jean Arp, and Jean Hélion. The plan never materialized, but Mondrian was delighted when Dudensing offered to represent him in the United States.

Thus Mondrian already had a gallery when he arrived in New York in October 1940, an unprecedented luxury for an artist who throughout his career had been able to show his work only in group exhibitions. He arranged for a solo exhibition with Dudensing as soon as a crate of materials arrived. The crate contained work he had already started in Paris and London. But upon inspecting these European paintings while unpacking, it all appeared too simple, too incomplete. It needed to be more open, more unrestrained, more restless, more in tune with New York, the bustling metropolis that was now the background to his daily life.

The exhibition opened in January 1942. Thirty-one works were displayed, starting with three watercolors of flowers, under the heading “Naturalist Period.” This was followed by an “Abstractions” section featuring fifteen paintings, the vast majority of which had two dates, by which Mondrian made clear that he had started these paintings sometime in the 1930s and completed them in 1942. They were canvases with an occasionally dense network of horizontal and vertical lines and sparse areas of color. Here and there he had positioned along the edges small blocks of color that were no longer escorted by black lines. This introduced a note of casual instability that electrified the white of the planes. He had tinkered with each canvas until the image glowed and radiated in a new way and became enchanting. The exhibition continued under the heading “Transition Period,” with two paintings from 1913 and a group of drawings from 1912–1914.

Again, Mondrian was showing the evolution of his art in the form of a triptych, the first and second phases being presented as side panels to the central focal point showcasing his latest developments.

Mondrian sold no fewer than ten works. This gave him enough money to buy new stretchers and start new paintings. The success of the exhibition was matched by an equally successful lecture, entitled “A New Realism,” for American Abstract Artists. He explained that, since the emergence of abstract art, its core had been thought to be “spatial expression.”[1] This, however, was a misunderstanding, he believed. The empty space leaves viewers alone with the wondrous images and subjective sensations that the mind produces as soon as it loses contact with reality. Abstract art was not so much about *expressing* space, as *determining* space.[2]

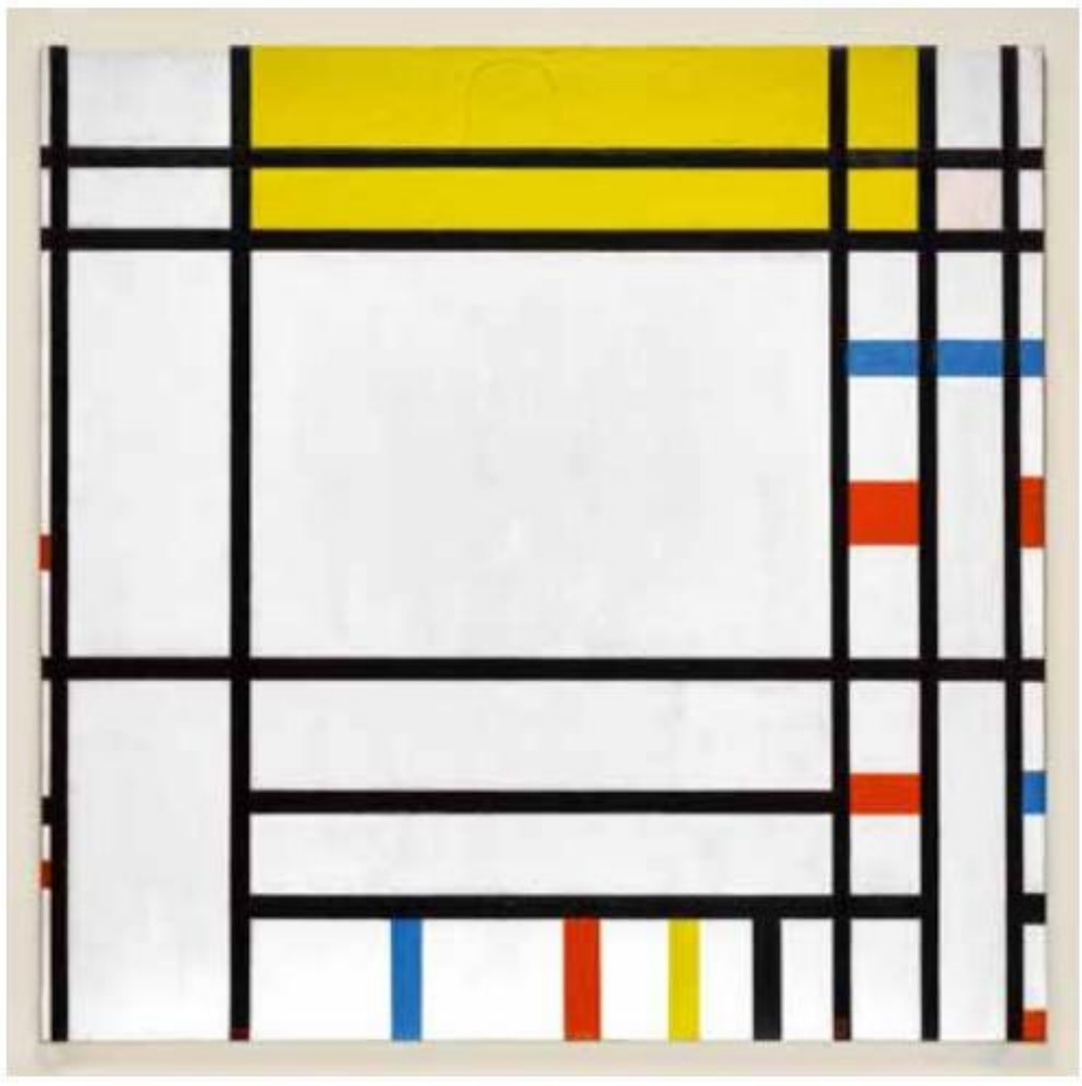
A metropolis like New York was a good example. With its concrete determination of space, it expressed the vitality of modern life. Thus, like an artwork, the metropolis became a living reality in which two kinds of balance dominated: a static, almost architectural balance; and a dynamic balance that existed mainly in perception. The latter emerged through constant oppositions, contrasts, the expansion that was also visible in the radiating effect of an artwork. Structure was everything: it was much more important than expressing any natural quality. The more structure, the stricter the organization of the lines and planes, the stronger the determination of space and the more exuberant and radiant the effect. Thus was the universal aspect of the real revealed in a work of art. The expression of a pure lust for life revealed in every dynamic movement: that was the true substance of art.

Mondrian’s new compositions were along the same lines as *New York City*, the large new painting that opened the “Abstraction” section at Valentine Gallery. In this painting, Mondrian largely let go of his

idiom, replacing the black lines with a dense grid of yellow lines that accumulate on the right of the painting. Horizontal blue lines run under the yellow lines. A blue vertical closes off the image near the left edge. The yellow seems to be a superimposed grid, with the red beneath it and the blue under the red. But on the left the blue crosses over the yellow, and in four places the red is on top of the yellow. This creates a strange sensation. While the density of the yellow grid on the right (and the virtual absence of red and blue) disrupts our vision due to the contrast with the adjacent white, toward the left the image becomes steadier, the contrasts of the primary colors taking over the "struggle."

The new paintings Mondrian set to work on after the show at Valentine's closed produce the same acceleration in our vision. After a little more than a year, a new show opened on March 22, 1943, with six paintings. Three were named in tribute to the places where they were created. The largest was *Trafalgar Square*, a painting Mondrian had started in London four years earlier but had only just managed to finish. Completing the painting had mainly been a matter of fine-tuning, with minimal shifts in the verticals—slightly to the left, a little to the right—to achieve the right visual effect. He had also added little blocks of red and blue to the white along the bottom edge and in the narrow vertical space between the two verticals along the right edge. These made the painting considerably more exciting.

The two other paintings related to real places were *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Place de la Concorde*. The first marked another step toward an entirely new concept in which squares and rectangles appeared entirely unconstrained in dazzling arrangements. In comparison, *Place de la Concorde* was old-fashioned.



Piet Mondrian, *Place de la Concorde*, 1938–1943

Taking an old grid from around 1938 in which a large yellow plane had played a defining role along the top, Mondrian had added broad strips of red, yellow, and blue on the right, along the side and bottom edges. Along the left edge were two or three vague echoes of this.

The other three paintings were from a seemingly different life. Mondrian called them *Picture I*, *Picture II*, and *Picture III*. Which came first is not clear, but he had exhibited the second painting in 1937 with the title *Opposition de lignes de blanc et jaune*. Originally, it was entirely off-kilter: a structure consisting of four closely positioned verticals was barely counterbalanced by two broad horizontals that, positioned at the bottom, gave the lower half some rigidity to support the top-heavy upper half, featuring three wide horizontals running from edge to edge and a solid yellow plane. He then put a lot of effort into making the grid calmer, while also introducing small blocks of red and yellow in the blocks of white, which had an unconstrained effect on the white, and a blue plane along the bottom, which had the opposite effect.

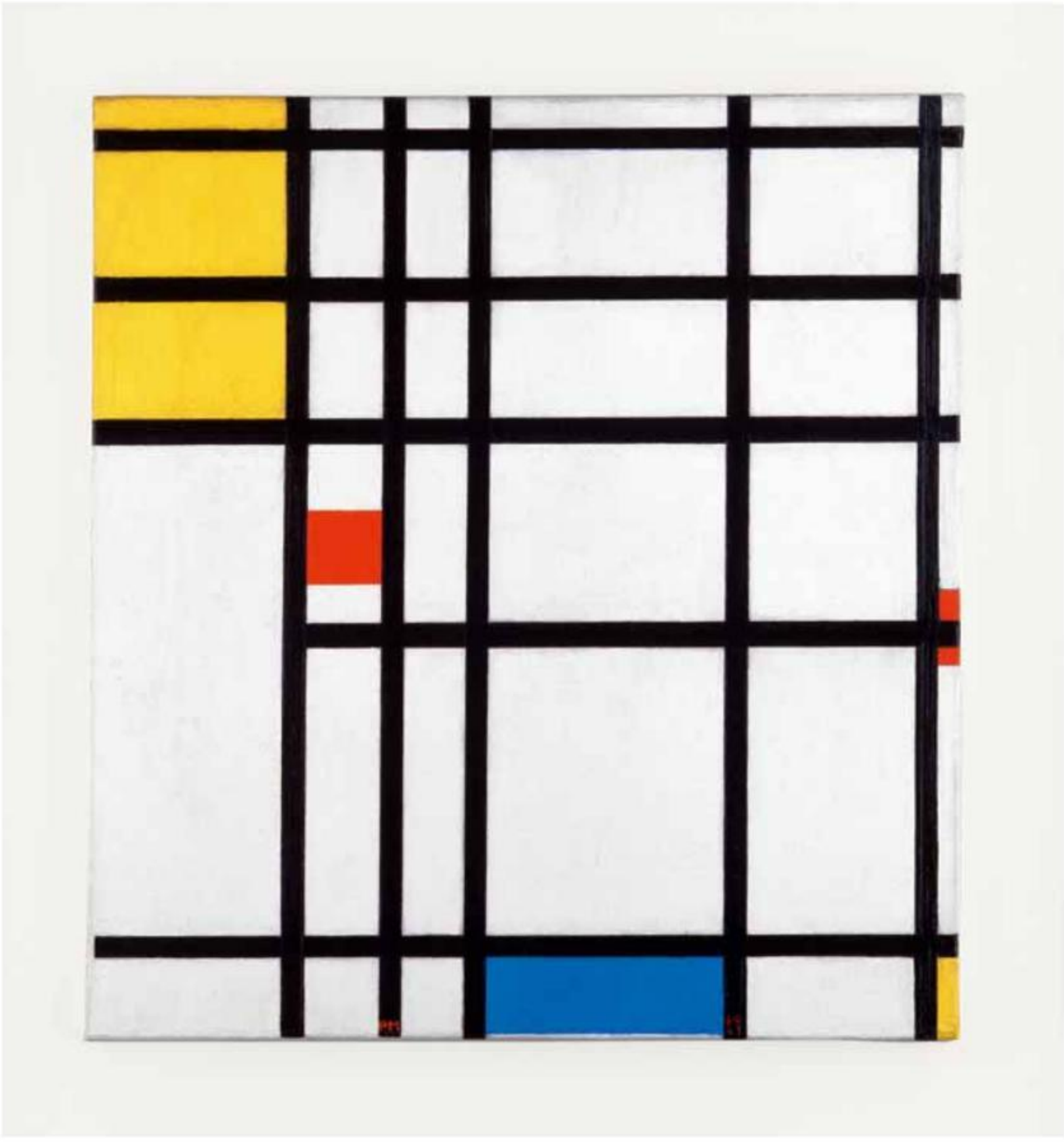
It is unknown which picture can be identified as the painting exhibited as *Picture I*. *Picture III* was diamond-shaped. Its lines had the same disruptive dynamism and unrestrained harmony as all the other work in his studio at that point. The solid movement of the broad vertical lines and the lone horizontal along the top contrasted with the confusing staccato of the three lines along the bottom and the two verticals on the left. The imbalance was kept in check by the shape of the painting.

The six paintings in combination, ordered as two separate series, made a clear statement. The first three, named after the places where they were created, were the outcome of a method that had been used as a guide in the second series of three.

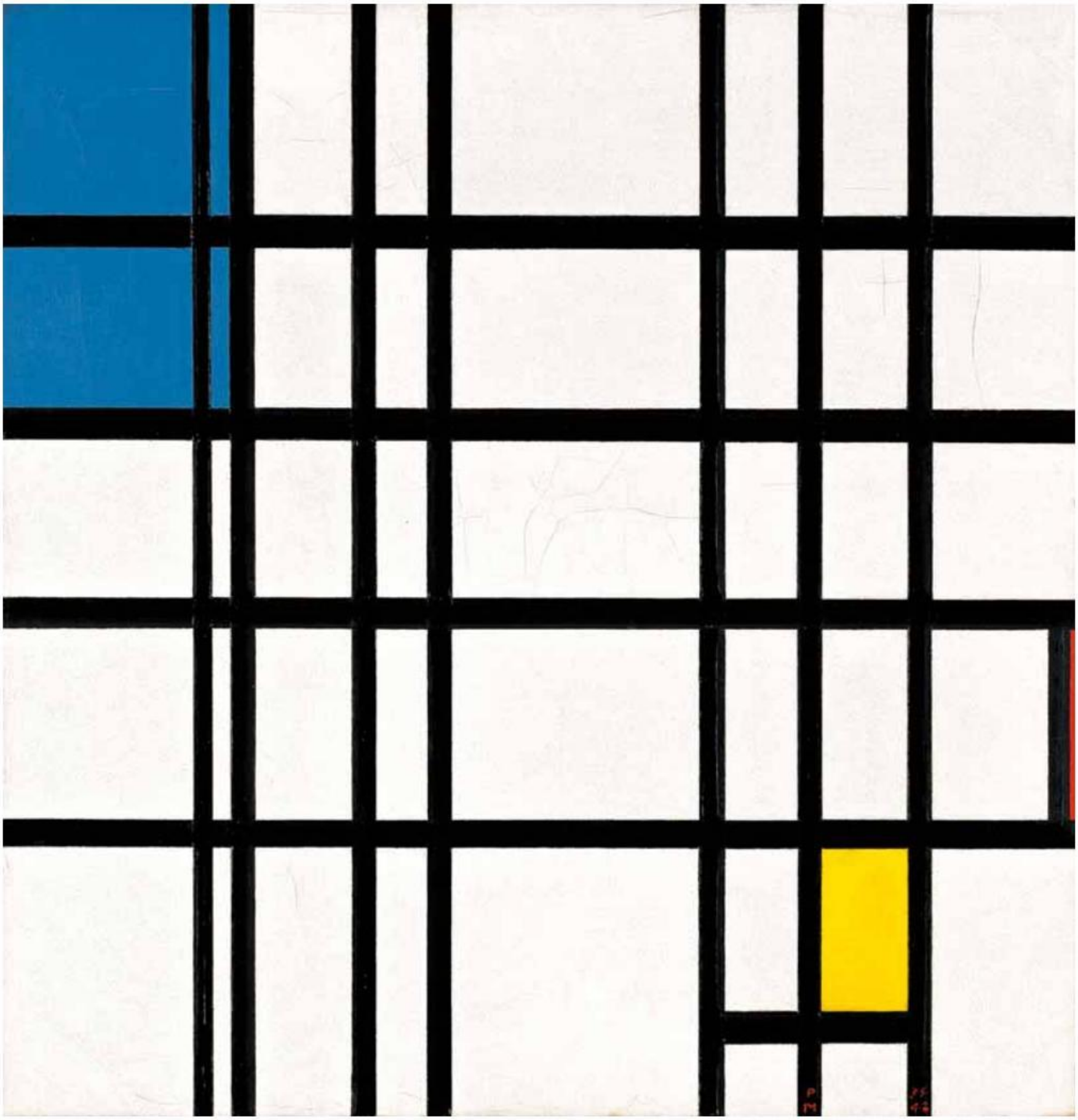
Around this time Mondrian must have changed the title of the long essay he had been working on since 1929, about the relation between the new art and the new life the artist was envisaging. He scrapped the original title ("L'Art nouveau—la vie nouvelle") and changed it in his shaky handwriting to "L'Art révélateur." *Révélateur* in French means "one who reveals" a belief or a religious truth, but it is also the term for the chemicals used when developing photographs. What art reveals, Mondrian was suggesting, could be seen both as the metaphorical truth about life *and* the equivalent of that life. Art is the very substance with which the essence of life is uncovered and made visible. In beauty. Mondrian made the title change around the time the United States was dragged into a war whose outcome was still far from certain. The change says something both about Mondrian's optimism and about the power he ascribed to art.

1. Piet Mondrian, "A New Realism," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 347.

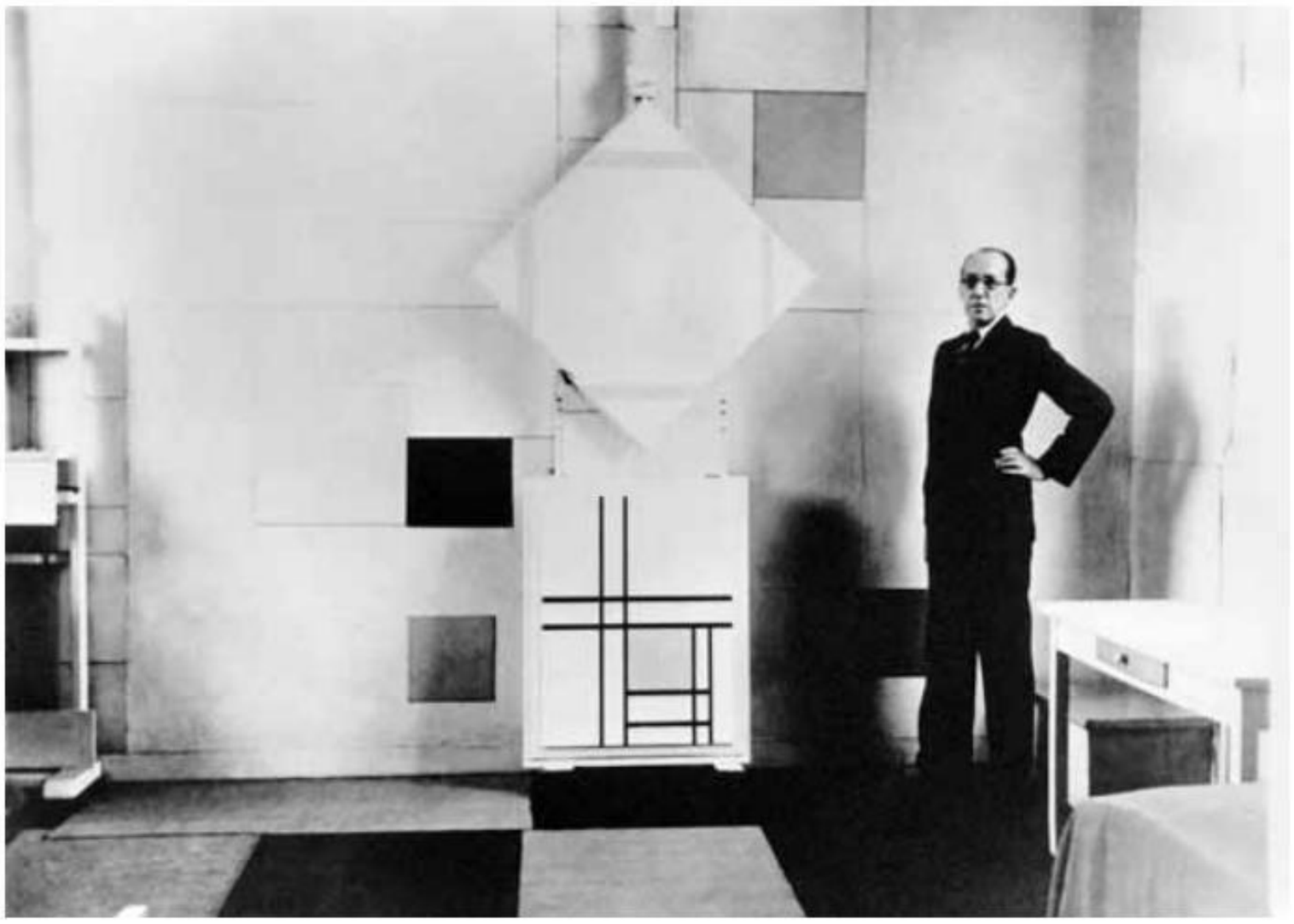
2. Ibid., 348.



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



Piet Mondrian
Rhythms with Black Lines
1937–1942



22.

The End of De Stijl— Long Live De Stijl

Hans Janssen

Mondrian in his Paris studio with *Lozenge Composition with Four Yellow Lines* and *Composition with Double Lines and Yellow*, 1933

Theo van Doesburg died of heart failure at a sanatorium in Davos on March 7, 1931. He had suffered from severe asthma in the year leading up to his death. The pure mountain air, free of dust and microbes—so van Doesburg believed—was supposed to purify his blood and reinvigorate him. For the past few years he had held similar beliefs about the making of his art. A note written in July 1930 makes his feelings clear: "Your studio must have the cold atmosphere of the mountains at 3000 meters; there must be eternal snow. The cold kills the microbes."[1]

Van Doesburg—more so than Piet Mondrian—had always been against allowing personality, temperament, and subjectivity into art. Letting oneself go was a sign of weakness, he believed. The studio must be like a bell jar or a hollow crystal. The artist must be clean, the palette glass, the artist's brush sharp, square, and hard, always free of dust, and as clean as a surgical instrument.[2]

Mondrian's beliefs about art at this time were quite different. For him, intuition had always been the mysterious driving force behind the artistic process. It was an uncontrollable force that, more than any endeavor, was able to introduce clarity to the artistic process. From 1929 to 1930 his paintings grew more and more empty, the compositions based on two or three patterns that constantly repeated, making it seem that any trace of spontaneity had been banished from his work.

Mondrian had discovered that with maximum "regulation" came maximum expressive potential. In the years after van Doesburg's death, this counterintuitive, minimalist idea became a key characteristic of the abstract geometric art that would conquer the art world under the name of "De Stijl." Nelly van Doesburg, Theo's widow, was largely responsible for the promotion of abstract art as minimalist, geometric, and systematic. Faced with a chronic lack of income and a studio full of art, she evolved into the first, and best, marketing agent for an entire artistic movement.

She organized important exhibitions in Amsterdam (1951), Venice (1952), New York (1952), and Rome (1960) and made contact with Peggy Guggenheim. The two women were responsible, in the postwar years, for promoting De Stijl as a full-blown art-historical phenomenon. Their approach was contrary to the experience of most witnesses: that the magazine had been marginal, that van Doesburg was a schemer who in the end could only quarrel with his colleagues, and, most important, that there had never been a well-defined idea of De Stijl. To the contrary, De Stijl, at best, had been a fight around an idea. The journal *De Stijl* was known only among insiders in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and its reputation was that of an inaccessible rag in which all kinds of unconnected, premature, and sinister ideas were aired. Van Doesburg's overbearing manner also colored people's image of the publication.

Nelly van Doesburg ensured that De Stijl as a movement was not approached too open-mindedly. She emphasized the perspective of her husband in his final years; namely, his belief that the clinical, geometric, and numerical led to an elementary art. Such art had never been well received. The art of De Stijl had never had a big market, either in the Netherlands or elsewhere. Only Mondrian—who in many respects had gone his own way—had been appreciated and acquired reliable buyers. The other artists in the movement had barely received any recognition, partly because optimism about a new world had been somewhat tempered in the second half of the 1920s, and partly because figurative tendencies had come to dominate again.

De Stijl had even gone into something of a decline in the mid-1930s. When Vilmos Huszár moved from Voorburg to Hierden, forced to downsize for lack of funds, he burned a large proportion of the art he had produced as a De Stijl artist in his back garden. There was simply no market for such work, and it was not worth the bother of moving it to Hierden. When, after the war, Nelly van Doesburg succeeded in making De Stijl the focus of international attention, the loss of those early works was keenly felt. Partly under the influence of a growing market for the art of De Stijl, Huszár allowed himself to be persuaded to repeat some of his compositions from that period.

Composition 1916 is one example. It is executed in red, yellow, and blue against a ground of black and gray. Huszár painted "De Stijl" at the top in large block capitals. In the bottom right he painted, in smaller letters, "Comp. 1916." The inclusion of "Comp." might

be a signal that the painting is a re-creation. The work, which had never been mentioned or published before, did not emerge until 1955, when a retrospective exhibition of Huszár's career was held in Gouda. At that exhibition, and later, other works turned up that, though stylistically or thematically similar to older work from the De Stijl period, were clearly made after 1955. The growing market persuaded the artist to re-create—or create—De Stijl works, if only because the minimalist, geometric, and systematic approach by the promotors of the new style allowed them to do so. It was all a matter of market forces.

The market was therefore largely determined by how van Doesburg's widow understood De Stijl; that is, through the eyes of her deceased husband. Several not unimportant features of the movement were simply swept under the carpet. Van Doesburg's rational, structured, almost cold view of art was not the whole story. Other features troubled the case for De Stijl. Gerrit Rietveld is an example. He made his *Zig-Zag Chair* in 1933, and strictly speaking it is not part of the De Stijl idiom, for three reasons. First, he designed it in 1932 after van Doesburg had died. Second, it features diagonals. Third, Rietveld dreamed of taking the chair into production—and succeeded in 1937—which was unheard of in the world of De Stijl.

The chair's experimental nature caused structural problems, however. That experimental aspect was reminiscent of De Stijl, which as a movement must be seen above all as a virtual workshop where artists worked on, and argued about, an art that was more suited to modern life. Rietveld's use of diagonals also aligned the chair with the constructive methods of van Doesburg. And its way of looking (as opposed to its manner of construction) aligned it with the work of Mondrian, who more than anyone else had set out to create dynamism and rhythm. Rietveld called his design "a constructive joke," "a leap into space, as it were."[3]

The chair was the result of an experiment, just as everything that can be linked to De Stijl was ultimately the result of an experiment designed to contribute to a new, achievable world. Not a utopia, as De Stijl is often accused of pursuing, but a world that, thanks to collaboration between architects and artists, would abolish hierarchy in the arts, leaving them free to meld into something new, something more in line with the world that lay in wait, the world of modernity.

However, "as long as the world was not ready" for the transformation that would ensure neoplasticism triumphed over everyday reality, the artists of De Stijl would continue to use production methods straight out of the nineteenth century. This is apparent, for example, in the work of Mondrian, who remained devoted to old-fashioned easel painting. He did not know what the new reality would be like, but he knew it would not be a utopia. It was merely a matter of time before the new life would be established.

The old production methods were also reflected in Rietveld's practice. Perhaps the most experimental of the De Stijl artists, in 1944 he made a large version of the zig-zag chair for Jesse, the son of the man who photographed all of his work. Rietveld loved to design chairs for the children of his customers. The very first was a children's chair he designed in 1918 for the newborn child of H.G.J. Schelling, an engineer with the Dutch railways, that was published in an issue of *De Stijl* as part of a 1919 article on a new method of joining wood.[4] It brought Rietveld fame. For the chair he made in 1944, he took the minimalist, geometric, systematic zig-zag chair and carved a singing bird at the top of the back, and to prevent the child from falling through the open structure he mounted flower stems on either side which ran through the entire structure and ended in two flowers under the child's arms. Both the Schelling chair of 1918 and the zig-zag chair made for Jesse in 1944 were custom-made, and in that respect they are firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century tradition of bespoke furniture, pieces created in a direct interaction between client, designer, and craftsman. De Stijl was more a matter of *manual intuition* than of an idea or an ideology; it was the result of interaction between ideas and real situations.

1. Theo van Doesburg, "Elementarisme," *De Stijl*, (dernier numéro), 1932, 16.

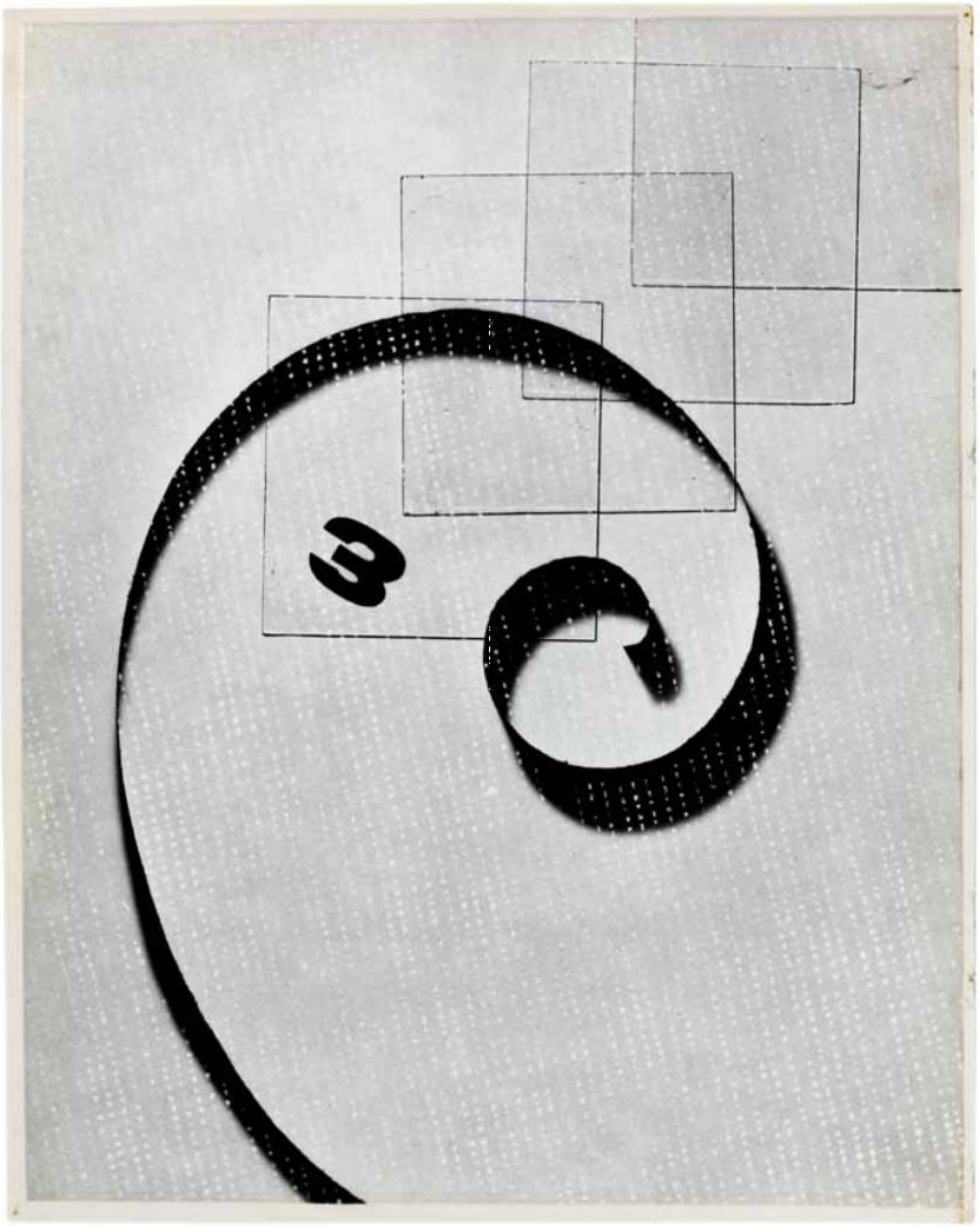
2. Ibid.

3. P. Timmer, *Metz&Co: De creatieve jaren* (Rotterdam, 1995), 24.

4. Gerrit Rietveld, "Aanteekening bij kinderstoel" (bijlage No. 18), *De Stijl* 2, no. 9 (September 1919); and citations of Rietveld in Theo van Doesburg, "Aantekening bij een leunstoel van Rietveld" (Appendix 23), *De Stijl* 2, no. 11 (November 1919).

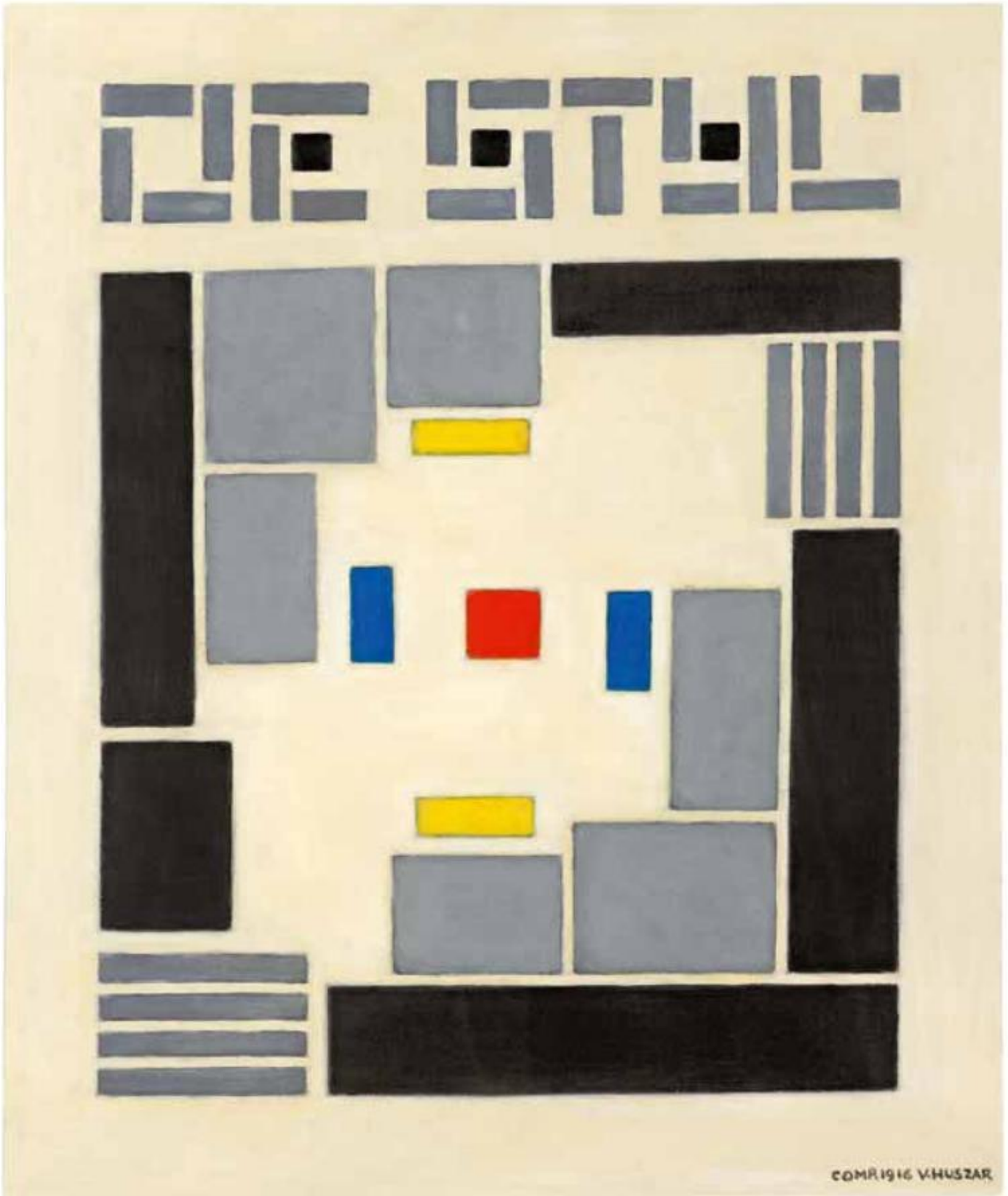
Gerrit Thomas Rietveld
Zig-Zag Chair
ca. 1932

César Domela
Relief No. 14 B
1938



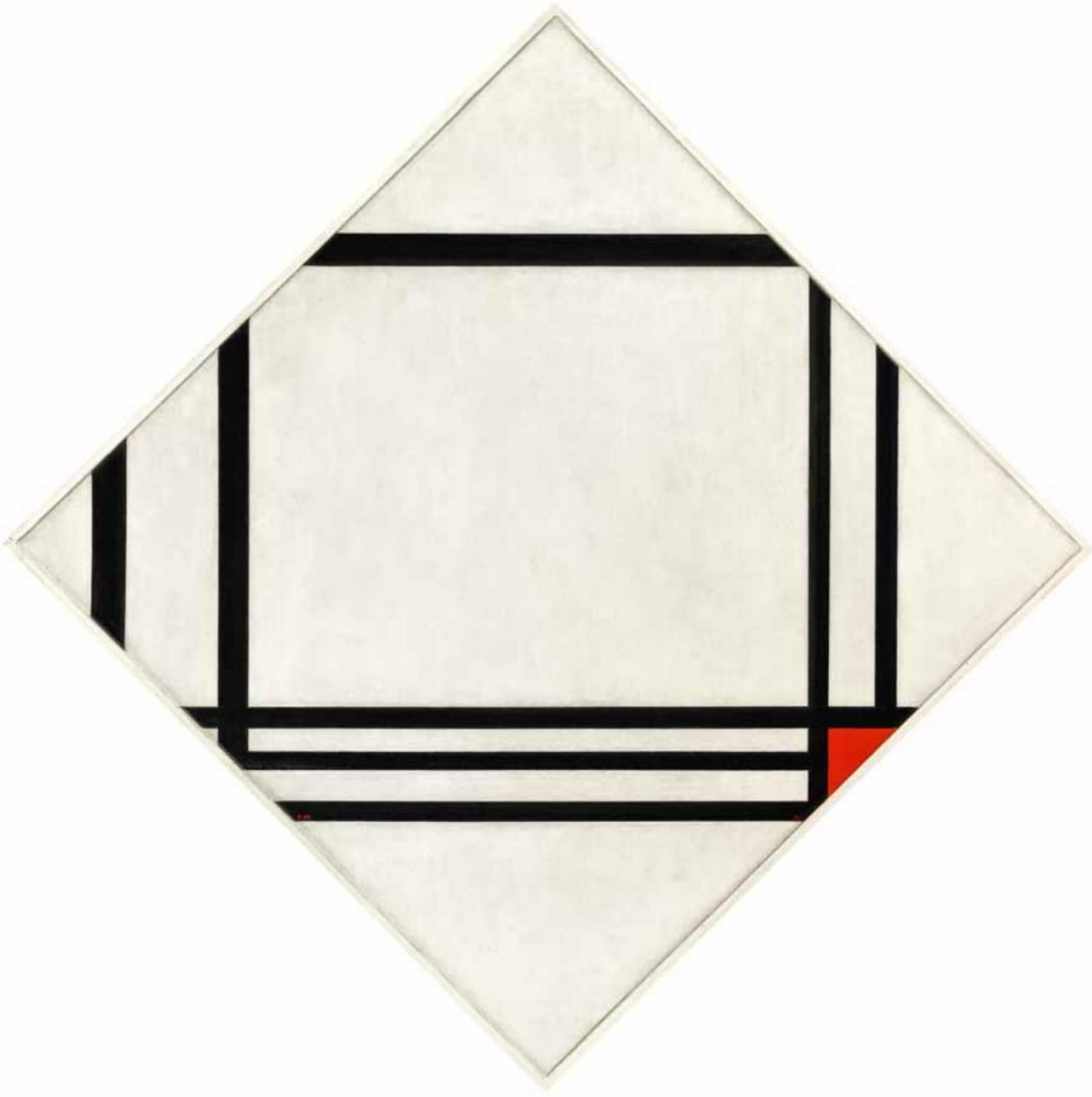
László Moholy-Nagy
Photogram—Abstract Composition with Number 3
1934

Marlow Moss
Composition in White, Blue, Yellow, and Black
1954



Vilmos Huszár
Composition “De Stijl”
1950–1955

Piet Mondrian
Lozenge Composition with Eight Lines and Red (Picture No. III)
1938



Piet Mondrian's studio, East 56th Street, New York, which Mondrian used prior to 15 East 59th Street, 1944

List of Works in Exhibition

Hans Arp

Flower Hammer
1916
Wood relief and oil paint
62 x 50 x 8 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 113

Christ Beekman
Composition
1920
Oil on canvas
48 x 28 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 109

Hendrik Petrus Berlage

Design for insurance offices in Leipzig
1901
Pencil, ink and watercolor on tracing paper
43.5 x 21 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 37

Design for decorative tile from the office of the General Society of Life and Annuity Insurance of Leipzig
1901
Pencil and watercolor on paper
64 x 88.2 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 36

Aerial view of the Urban Plan of South Amsterdam
1915
Pencil and color pencil on paper
133 x 153.5 cm
Amsterdam City Archives
p. 154

Karel Petrus Cornelis de Bazel

Color design for the living room of the Schuurman-Gentis family, The Hague
1895–1896
Pencil, watercolor, and stamp on paper
26 x 40 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 35

Michel de Klerk

Design for a doorway
1904
Paper, watercolor, and ink on paper
29.5 x 14.5 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 37

César Domela

Relief No. 14 B
1938
Copper, walnut, brass, and Plexiglas
59 x 46 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 192

Jean Albert Gorin

Neoplastic Composition with Hollow Lines No. 29
1931
Oil on panel framed by a strip of wood covered in oil paint
66.7 x 66.7 x 2.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 167

Vilmos Huszár

Composition in Gray
1918
Oil on canvas
60.3 x 44.9 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Acquired with support of the Rembrandt Association
p. 79

Vilmos Huszár (Color scheme) and Pieter Jan Christophel Klaarhamer (Furniture design)

Boys' bedroom made for Villa Arendshoeve, home of the Bruynzeel family, Voorburg
1918–1919
Partial reconstruction
Wooden furniture (cupboard: 135.5 x 127.5 x 53.0 cm; beds: 120 x 210 x 95 cm; chairs: 90 x 40.3 x 42.2 cm; bedside cabinet: 90 x 45 x 41 cm; wool carpet: 299 x 189 cm; cushions: 42 cm x 42 cm; bidet of porcelain, wood, and metal: 47 x 32.5 x 52 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 85

Photographer unknown
Vilmos Huszár (Color scheme) and Pieter Jan Christophel Klaarhamer (Furniture design): Boys' bedroom at Villa Arendshoeve, the Bruynzeel Family, Voorburg
undated
Silver gelatin on paper
21 x 27.9 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 82

Johannes Ludovicus Mathieu Lauweriks

Sketch for the wall and roof of the Thorn Prikker house, Hagen
1910
Pencil on paper
21 x 23.3 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 40

Design for the chimney in the living room, Stein residence, Göttingen
1911
Pencil on paper
29.5 x 26 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 40

Design for a corridor, Stein residence, Göttingen
1911
Pencil on paper
39.3 x 46.5 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 40

Design for the roof in the dining room, Stein residence, Göttingen
1911
Pen and ink on tracing paper
39.3 x 46.5 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 41

Design for the dining room ceiling in the Schüngeler-Harmann family house, Hagen
1914
Pencil on paper
46 x 57.5 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 41

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret

Perspective of the project of the Palace of the League of Nations from the Leman Lake in Geneva, with annotations
ca. 1927
73 x 183 cm
Black pencil and black charcoal on copy with silver salts suspended in gelatin on Canson paper
Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris
p. 150

Konstantin Melnikov

Model of a parking garage for 1,000 vehicles, Paris
1925/2017
Mixed media
41.5 x 136.5 x 43.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Long-term loan from Architectural Collections and Productions, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft
p. 156

László Moholy-Nagy

Photogram—Abstract Composition with Number 3
1934
Silver gelatin on paper
30.2 x 24 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 193

Piet Mondrian

Dead Hare
1891
Oil on canvas
80 x 51 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 24

Basket with Apples
1891
Oil on canvas
49.5 x 72.8 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Long-term loan of P. J. van den Berg
p. 25

Portrait of Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands (1880–1962)
1896
Oil on canvas
69.5 x 59.5 cm
Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, The Netherlands
p. 29

The Kostverlorenvaart
ca. 1896–1898
Oil on canvas on cardboard
28.5 x 39 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Two Chrysanthemums
1899–1900
Oil on canvas on cardboard
45 x 33.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 31

Still Life with Oranges
1900
Oil on canvas
46 x 30 cm
Myron Kunin Collection, Minneapolis
p. 28

Evening on the Weesperzijde
1901–1902
Black crayon, watercolor, gouache, and opaque white on paper
55 x 66 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 26

Farm with Ditch and Trees
1901-1904
Oil on paper
26 x 32.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Still Life with Plaster Bust of G. Benivieni
1902–1903
Oil on canvas
78 x 65.5 cm
Groninger Museum
Inv. no. 1919.0225
p. 30

Willow Grove
1902–1904
Oil on canvas, on canvas, on cardboard
43.5 x 31 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Summer Night
1906–1907
Oil on canvas
71 x 110.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 46

Evening Landscape on the Gein
1907
Oil on canvas
76 x 135.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 45

Large Landscape
1907–1908
Oil on canvas
75 x 120 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 47

Woods Near Oele
1908
Oil on canvas
128 x 158 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 51

Devotion
1908
Oil on canvas
94 x 61 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 49

Metamorphosis
1908
Oil on canvas
84.5 x 54 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 48

Summer Day
1908
Oil on canvas
69 x 112 cm
Collection Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle and Heino/Wijhe, The Netherlands
p. 50

Blue Tree
1908
Oil on canvas
37 x 32 cm
Kunstmuseum Appenzell / Heinrich Gebert Kulturstiftung Appenzell
p. 52

Apple Tree, pointillist version
1908–1909
Oil on composition board
56.83 x 74.93 cm
Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for the Arts Collection. Gift of the James H. and Lillian Clark Foundation, 1982
26.FA
p. 53

Composition No. II
1913
Oil on canvas
88 x 115 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands
p. 68

Composition No. XIII/ Composition 2
1913
Oil on canvas
79.5 x 63.5 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Composition No. XIV
1913
Oil on canvas
93.8 x 64.7 cm
Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
p. 69

Church Facade 1: Church at Domburg
1914
Pencil, charcoal, and ink on paper
63 x 50 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 70

Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1927
Oil on canvas
75 x 52 cm
Museum Fokwang, Essen
p. 165

Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue
1927
Oil on canvas
49.5 x 49.5 cm
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Contemporary Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art
1967.215
p. 163

Composition V
1927
Oil on canvas
38.4 x 35.6 cm
The Baltimore Museum of Art. Bequest of Saidie A. May
BMA 1951.343
p. 16

Composition II
1929
Oil on canvas
45 x 45 cm
National Museum, Belgrade
p. 139

Color Composition / Composition No. I with Red and Blue
1931
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Composition A (Composition A, with Red and Blue)
1932
Oil on canvas
55 x 55 cm
Kunst Museum Winterthur. Dr. Emil and Clara Friedrich-Jezler Bequest, 1973
p. 173

Composition in Blue and White
1935
Oil on canvas
104.1 x 96.5 cm
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Collection Fund
p. 147

Composition B (No. II) with Red
1935
Oil on canvas
80.3 x 63.3 cm
Tate: Accepted by HM Government in lieu of tax with additional payment (General Funds) made with assistance from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Art Fund, the Friends of the Tate Gallery and the Dr V.J. Daniel Bequest 1999
p. 179

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
p. 180

Rhythms with Black Lines
1937–1942
Oil on canvas
72.2 x 69.5 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
p. 187

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)
p. 186

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
p. 197

New York City, 3 (unfinished)
1941
Oil, pencil, chalk and coloured tape on canvas
117 x 110 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Marlow Moss

White, Black, Red, and Gray
1932
Oil on canvas
54 x 45 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 146

Composition in White, Blue, Yellow, and Black
1954
Oil on canvas
76 x 61 cm
Kunstmuseum den Haag
p. 194

Jacobus Johannes Piete Oud

Dining room furniture for the Weissenhof estate, Stuttgart
Design: 1927
Production: Écart International, 1979
Painted metal, wood, and rubber
Table: 75 x 90 x 140 cm; chairs: 90.7 x 42.3 x 45 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 158

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld

Red and blue chair
Design: 1923
Production: Gerard van de Groenekan, 1930
Painted beechwood and composition board
86.6 x 65.9 x 82 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
p. 118

Witteveen high chair
1918–1922
Ash wood, oak, and leather
123 x 44 x 55.5 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht / Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Acquired with the support of the Mondriaan Fund and the Vereniging Rembrandt
p. 104

Uncolored slatted armchair
1919
Beechwood and banana wood, originally stained black
89.5 x 60.4 x 82 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
p. 118

Sideboard
Design: 1919
Production: Gerard van de Groenekan, 1972
Painted beechwood
103.5 x 200 x 45 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 104

Model for the Rietveld Schröder house, Utrecht
1924
Wood, cardboard, glass, and composition board
10.5 x 21.5 x 9.7 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
p. 120

Zig-Zag Chair
ca. 1932
Pinewood
74.8 x 37.4 x 41 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
p. 191

Axonometric drawing of the House Rietveld Schröder (Schröder-Schräder home), Utrecht
1950
Gouache on collotype
83.5 x 86.5 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
On loan from Rietveld Schröder Archive Foundation (RSA)
pp. 122–123

Kurt Schwitters

Abstract Composition
1923–1925
Oil and pencil on canvas
50 x 45 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 112

Mart Stam (attributed)

Cantilever chair, model 263
Design: ca. 1932
Production: Gebrüder Thonet AG
Metal and wood
76 x 45.5 x 47 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 158

Bart van der Leck

Exercises with Guns
1911
Oil on canvas
50 x 100 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Long-term loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) (Collection Will van Eck-Nieuwenhuizen Segaar)
p. 54

Composition 1916 No. 4
1916
Oil on canvas
113 x 222 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands. Transferred from the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2005
p. 78

The Tempest
1916
Oil on canvas
120 x 160 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands
p. 77

Composition 1917, No. 2
(Dog Cart)
1917
Oil on canvas
45 x 63 cm
On long-term loan to the
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 87

Still Life
1926
Oil on canvas
29 x 36.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 166

Theo van Doesburg

Girl with Buttercups
1914
Oil on canvas
80 x 80 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht
p. 80

Heroic Movement
1916
Oil on canvas
136 x 110.5 cm
Centraal Museum, Utrecht.
On loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of
the Netherlands (RCE)
p. 80

Composition I (Still Life)
1916
Oil on canvas
67 x 63.3 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands
p. 80

Composition in Grey
(Rag-Time)
1919
Oil on canvas
96.5 x 59.1 cm
Peggy Guggenheim
Collection, Venice,
The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation,
New York
p. 107

Composition XX
1920
Oil on canvas
100 x 70 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid
p. 108

Contra-construction
1923
Gouache on blueprint
on paper
57.2 x 57 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands.
Van Moorsel donation
to the Dutch State
p. 119

Construction
of Space-Time II
1924
Gouache, pencil, and ink
on blueprint on paper
47 x 40.5 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid
p. 121

Sketch for the small
Chambre de Fleurs,
Villa Noailles, Hyères
1924–1925
Gouache, pencil, and ink
on blueprint on paper
102.2 x 82.2cm (incl. frame)
Collection Van Abbemuseum,
Eindhoven, The Netherlands
p. 157

Chambre de Fleurs,
Villa Noailles, Hyères
1924-1925/2020
Reconstruction

Theo van Doesburg
and Cornelis Rienks de Boer

Design for the floors
of the Oosterstraat
and Houtlaan, Drachten
1921
Gouache and pencil
on paper
46 x 23.5 cm
Collection Museum Drachten
p. 110

Design for the facade of
Oosterstraat 23-27, Drachten
1921
Gouache, ink, and pencil
on paper
17 x 42.8 cm
Collection Museum Drachten
p. 111

Plan for the floor (Composition
in Color No. 110)
1921
Pen, ink, and gouache
on paper
33.2 x 43.2 cm
Collection Museum Drachten
p. 111

Theo van Doesburg
and Cornelis van Eesteren

Model for a private house
1923
Reconstruction: Tjarda Mees,
1982
Wood, silk screen, Perspex,
and Plexiglas
60.5 x 90 x 90 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 120

Cornelis van Eesteren

Design for the reorganization
of Unter den Linden, Berlin
1925
Gelatin silver print
22.3 x 16.5 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut
Collection, Rotterdam
p. 155

Jacoba van Heemskerck

Woodland I
1913
Oil on canvas
81 x 102 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 62

Woodland II
1913
Oil on canvas
80.5 x 100.4 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 63

Johannes Jacobus van
Nieukerken

Elevation for the expansion,
with modern medical
department, of the General
Provincial City and University
Hospital, Groningen
1891–1901
Drawing on paper
76 x 92 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut
Collection, Rotterdam
p. 38

Plans for the expansion, with
a modern surgical department,
of the General Provincial
City and University Hospital:
front, side, and rear views
of the surgical department,
Groningen
1891–1901
Drawing on paper
50.5 x 49 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut
Collection, Rotterdam
p. 39

Bathroom in the General
Provincial City and University
Hospital, Groningen
1891–1901
Gelatin silver print
24 x 29.8 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut
Collection, Rotterdam
p. 38

Georges Vantongerloo

Study No. III
1920
Casein on wood
30 x 22.5 cm
Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, Belgium
p. 105

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
p. 159

Airport plus pedestal (Type A, Series A)
1928
Silver-plated copper
Two parts, 16 x 39,5 x 15 cm
Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg
p. 153

Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart
Composition No. 79
1934
Oil on canvas
80.5 x 60 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 169

Other Illustrations

Vilmos Huszár

Composition "De Stijl"
1950–1955
Oil on canvas
66.7 x 57 x 5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Long-term loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE)
p. 195

Piet Mondrian

Jug with Onions
1892
Oil on canvas
65 x 75 cm
Private collection
p. 22

Bleachworks on the Gein
ca. 1900–1902
Oil on canvas on cardboard
25.5 x 38.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 42

Fir Tree Woods
1906
Black crayon on paper
111 x 67 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 67

Geinrust Farm
1907
Watercolor on paper
31 x 41 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 64

Self-Portrait
1908
Charcoal on paper
28 x 23.3 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 19

Self-Portrait
1908
Charcoal on paper
28 x 24.4 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 19

Evening; The Red Tree
1908–1910
Oil on canvas
70 x 99 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 19

Summer, Dune in Zeeland
1910
Oil on canvas
134 x 194.9 cm
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
On permanent loan from the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands
L149.75
pp. 58–59

Evolution
1911
Oil on canvas
Triptych: side panels
178 x 85 cm and central panel 183 x 87.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 20

Zeeland Church Tower
1911
Oil on canvas
114 x 75 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 57

Flowering Trees
1912
Oil on canvas
60 x 85 cm
Collection Bert Kreuk
p. 60

Forest (Study of Trees) I
1912
Black crayon on paper
73 x 63 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 66

Landscape
1912
Oil on canvas
63 x 78 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 61

Tableau No. 2 / Composition No. VII
1913
Oil on canvas
104.4 x 113.6 cm
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection
49.1228
p. 92

Study of Trees II; study for Tableau No. 2 / Composition No. VII
1913
Charcoal on paper
66 x 84 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 66

Pier and Ocean 1
1914
Ink and gouache on paper
50.2 x 62.9 cm
Collection Stephen Mazoh
p. 73

Church Facade 2
1914
Pencil and charcoal on paper
62.2 x 37.5 cm
Collection Stephen Mazoh
p. 72

Composition No. 10 in Black and White
1915
Oil on canvas
85.8 x 108.4 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum
KM 104.241
p. 74

Composition No. 3 with Color Planes
1917
Oil on canvas
48 x 61 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 97

Composition No. 5
with Color Planes
1917
Oil on canvas
49 x 61.2 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. The Sidney and
Harriet Janis Collection, 1967
Acc. no.: 1774.1967
p. 96

Composition with Gray Lines
1918
Oil on canvas
84.5 x 84.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 98

Composition Checkerboard
with Dark Colors
1919
Oil on canvas
84 x102 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 94

Composition with Large
Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow,
and Gray
1921
Oil on canvas
60.3 x 49.8 cm
Dallas Museum of Art,
Foundation for the Arts
Collection. Gift of Mrs. James
H. Clark
1984.200.FA
p. 129

Composition with Large
Red Plane, Yellow, Black,
Gray, and Blue
1921
Oil on canvas
59.5 x 59.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 99

Composition with Red, Blue,
Black, Yellow, and Gray
1921
Oil on canvas
39.5 x 35 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 127

Painting (Yellow, Black, Blue,
Red, and Gray)
1923
Oil on canvas
54 x 53 cm
Museu Coleção Berardo,
Lisbon
p. 15

Painting No. IV/Lozenge
Composition with Red, Gray,
Blue, Yellow, and Black
ca. 1924–1925
Oil on canvas
142.8 x 142.3 cm
National Gallery of Art,
Washington. Gift of Herbert
and Nannette Rothschild
1971.51.1
p. 138

Lozenge Composition with Red,
Black, Blue, and Yellow
1925
Oil on canvas
77 x 77 cm
Private Collection
p. 124

Tableau No. I: Lozenge
with Three Lines and Blue,
Gray, and Yellow
1925
Oil on canvas
80 x 80 cm
Kunsthaus Zürich. Gift of the
Vereinigung Zürcher
Kunstfreunde, 1956
p. 176

Painting No. II, 1925
(with Black and Gray)
1925
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 cm
Kunstmuseum Bern,
Sammlung Professor Dr. Max
Huggler- Schenkung, 1966
p. 133

Composition with Black,
Red, and Gray
1927
Oil on canvas
56 x 56 cm
Private Collection (since 1993
on loan to the Brandenburgische
Kunstsammlungen, Cottbus)
p. 160

Composition B with Yellow
and Gray
1932
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 cm
Private Collection
p. 170

Composition C with Gray
and Red
1932
Oil on canvas
50.2 x 50.4 cm
Private Collection
p. 172

Composition with Red,
Black, Blue, and Yellow
1928
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 cm
Private collection
p. 177

Composition (No. 1)
Gray-Red
1935
Oil on canvas
57.5 × 55.6 cm
Art Institute of Chicago.
Gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman
1949.518
p. 174

Composition (III) White-Yellow /
Composition with Red, Yellow,
and Blue
1935–1942
Oil on canvas
101 x 51.12 cm
San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art. Purchase
through a gift of Phyllis
C. Wattis
p. 149

Place de la Concorde
1938–1943
Oil on canvas
94.62 × 94.62 cm
Dallas Museum of Art,
Foundation for the Arts
Collection, gift of the James
H. and Lillian Clark Foundation
1982.22.FA
p. 184

Trafalgar Square
1939–1943
Oil on canvas
145.2 x 120 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. William A.M. Burden,
1964
Acc. no.: 510.1964
p. 181

New York City
1942–1944
Oil on canvas
119.3 x 114.2
Musée National d'Art Moderne
– Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris. Purchase with special
credit and assistance from
the Scaler Foundation, 1984
AM 1984-352
p. 140

Broadway Boogie Woogie
1942–1943
Oil on canvas
127 x 127 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Given anonymously
Acc. no.: 73.1943
p. 182

Victory Boogie Woogie
1942–1944
Oil, tape, paper, charcoal,
and pencil on canvas
178.4 x 178.4 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 141

Bart van der Leck

Work at the Docks
1916
Oil on canvas
91 x 242 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum
KM 109.115
p. 76

Composition 1917, No. 1 (Dog Cart)
1917
Oil on canvas
45 x 63 cm
Collection Matthijs Erdman.
On long-term loan to the
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 86

Theo van Doesburg

Tiled floor design for De Vonk vacation retreat, Noordwijkerhout
1917
Gouache on paper
98 x 73.5 cm
Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden. On loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, since 1995; Van Moorsel's gift to the government, 1981
p. 103

Stained Glass: Composition IV for the De Lange Villa, Alkmaar
1917
Stained glass
3 parts, 286.5 x 56.6 cm each
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands. Transferred by the Dutch Government Buildings Agency, 1980
p. 89

Composition VII: "The Three Graces"
1917
Oil on canvas
85 x 85 cm
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in Saint Louis
p. 81

Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1917
Gouache, oil, and charcoal on paper
39.4 x 58.4 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase, 1948
Acc. no.: 226.1948.a-b
p. 90

Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1917
Pencil on paper
11.1 x 15.6 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase, 1948
Acc. no.: 227.1948.5
p. 90

Composition VIII (The Cow)
ca. 1918
Oil on canvas
37.5 x 63.5 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase, 1948
Acc. no.: 225.1948
p. 91

Rhythm of a Russian Dance
June
1918
Oil on canvas
135.9 x 61.6 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 1946
Acc. no.: 135.1946
p. 106

Color design for a room in Bart de Ligt's house, Katwijk aan Zee
1919–1920
Pencil, india ink, and gouache on tracing
Paper
60.5 x 43 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam
p. 100

Color scheme for front wall, Potgieterstraat (block VIII), Drawing A and A', Spangen District, Rotterdam
1921
Pencil, india ink, and gouache on paper
29 x 32 cm
Fondation Custodia. Collection Frits Lugt, Paris
p. 103

Simultaneous Counter-composition
1929–1930
Oil on canvas
50.1 x 49.8 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967
Acc. no.: 588.1967
p. 168

Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren

Design of a university hall in Amsterdam
1923
Pencil, gouache, and collage on paper
62 x 144 cm
Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection, Rotterdam. Van Moorsel
p. 116

Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis Rienks de Boer

Model for an artist's house
1923
Reconstruction: Tjarda Mees, 1982
Wood, silk screen, Perspex, and Plexiglas
62 x 60 x 60 cm
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
p. 120

Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters

Programme and poster for the Little Dada Soirée
1922
Lithograph
30.4 x 30.4 cm
Archivo Lafuente
p. 117

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Archivo Lafuente: 117

Art Institute of Chicago: 174

Centraal Museum: 80 (left and top right), 104, 118, 120, 191, 122–123

Colección Stephen Mazoh: 72, 73

Colección Ver Kreuk: 62

Dallas Museum of Art: 53, 129, 184

Fondation Beyeler: 197

Fondation Custodia: 103

Fondation Le Corbusier: 150

Groninger Museum: 30 (photo: Marten de Leeuw)

Het Nieuwe Instituut: 36, 37, 100, 116, 155

Kröller-Mu̲ller Museum: 89; 68, 74, 77, 78, 80 (bottom right), 119 (photos: Rik Klein Gotink, Harderwijk); 76 (photo: Tom Haartsen, Ouderkerk a/d Amstel)

Kunshaus Zürich, Collection of Photography: 176 (photo: Fritz Glarner)

Kunstmuseum Appenzell: 52

Kunstmuseum Bern: 133

Kunstmuseum Den Haag: 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 31, 42, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 54, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 70, 79, 85, 86, 87, 94, 97, 98, 99, 104, 109, 112, 113, 120, 127, 141, 146, 156, 158, 167, 169, 192, 193, 195

Kunst Museum Winterthur: 173 (© SIK-ISEA, Zürich (photo: Jean-Pierre Kuhn))

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen: 187

Lehmbruck Museum: 153 (photo: Peter Schälchli)

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum: 81

Minneapolis Institute of Art: 28

Moderna Museet: 186

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid: 108, 121

Museu Coleção Berardo: 15 (photo: Bruno Lopes)

Museum de Fundatie: 50

Museum Drachten: 110, 111

Museum Folkwang Essen/ARTOTHEK: 165

Museum of Fine Arts Ghent, www.lukasweb.be – Art in Flanders: 105 (photo: Hugo Maertens)

National Museum in Belgrade: 139

Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Netherlands: 29

Peggy Guggenheim Collection: 107

San Francisco Museum of Art: 149 (photo: Katherine du Tiel)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York: 60–61, 92

Stichting Het Nieuwe Instituut: 35, 36, 37, 40, 41

Tate: 179, 180

The Baltimore Museum of Art: 16 (photo: Mitro Hood)

The Cleveland Museum of Art: 163

© 2020, Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence: 91, 90, 96, 106, 168, 181, 182

The National Gallery of Art, Washington: 138

Van Abbemuseum: 69, 157 (photos: Peter Cox, Eindhoven)

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: 147 (photo: Allen Phillips)

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