Using a fine brush and red pigment, Piet Mondrian inscribed his painting *Trafalgar Square* (plate 40) in two places. In the black vertical line second from the left are the artist’s initials: PM. In the fourth line from the left are two dates, one above the other: 39 on top, 43 below. These two dates refer to two different campaigns by the artist, in two different cities and with two different goals. These pairs, however, are less a matter of doubling than of cleaving—what curator Harry Cooper has called the painting’s “split personality.”

*Trafalgar Square* is one of a group of works that Mondrian took with him when he traveled from Paris (1935–38) to London (1938–40) and finally New York, arriving in the fall of 1940. These canvases were begun and in some cases finished in London or Paris, then completed and in some cases recompleted in New York. Photographs of the painting in the artist’s New York studio and accounts of visitors document that *Trafalgar Square* was first finished in London and then reworked in New York. The painter Charmion von Wiegand, for example, wrote in her diary (on September 3, 1941) about seeing the picture in Mondrian’s Manhattan studio, commenting that the “lines were still smudged” and “the red was a piece of paper.”

Instead of following typical practice and offering up a single final date, one that would mark the end of the artist’s work on the painting and the moment of its release from the studio into the market, Mondrian’s double date in *Trafalgar Square* inscribes a two-part process: a period of labor in London that he later would call “unproductive” and, after the disruption of moving across the ocean, a return to productivity in New York and the creation of a second life for this canvas. Cooper evocatively describes this two-step procedure in almost medical terms: “At some level he determined that he would heal the rift [of his relocation], not simply making the old works new, for that would have
been a denial of the gap that now formed part of this evolution, but rather by reworking the paintings in such a way that the gap was both registered and healed.4

This healing, however, was also a kind of annihilation, for in Trafalgar Square and other paintings from this period, Mondrian destroyed his own self-imposed system by introducing repetition into the pictorial scheme. By rhythmically repeating both his vertical and horizontal lines, he undermines the equilibrium he had achieved in what he called Neo-Plasticism. But I have gotten ahead of myself. To understand how radical this act of repetition was, we need to go back to the beginning of his career, to see how Mondrian found a path to London’s Trafalgar Square and eventually to New York’s Broadway.

This path was seemingly a straight shot from figuration to abstraction: from Symbolist work in which serial investigations of motifs like dunes, beaches (plate 49), windmills, and flowers were meant to be read for particular meanings; through a revelatory encounter with Cubism, in which subject matter was rejected in favor of a focus on the canvas’s own surface; to a further reduction to verticals and horizontals and ultimately a grid; and finally to the complete dissolution of “all particularity, all center, all hierarchy” in favor of absolute balance and repose.5 In order to achieve each step, however, Mondrian needed to reject and alter the previous work, his route shifted between achievement and destruction. “He explicitly,” Yve-Alain Bois has argued, “conceives of his paintings as outstripping, and in a sense destroying, its predecessor.”6

Mondrian’s key move toward Neo-Plasticism happened around 1914, when he returned to Holland for the summer. There he revisited some of the motifs he had investigated more than five years before. Using an openwork scaffolding borrowed from Cubism, he “dehierarchized” the picture’s field, reducing church façades (plate 49) and piers (fig. 1) to a series of vertical and horizontal marks (these have been called “plus and minus” signs).7 Mondrian then made a leap to paintings based on the regularity of the grid, eliminating any trace of figure and ground (fig. 2). But even this was not enough for the artist: based on a pattern that runs vertically and horizontally across the painting’s surface, the grid seemed to Mondrian too connected to nature, calling to mind other sorts of repetition, like “the repetitive rhythm of a machine and that of the seasons.”8 This regularity was then destroyed and replaced with another kind of balance, one based on tension and opposition.9 Each vertical line was to be balanced by its horizontal opposite, each plane of color balanced by a section of white. Moreover, Mondrian’s Neo-Plastic “repose” depends on the complete elimination of optical effects: no interaction between colors, no vibration between lines.10 The result, Bois explains, is painting that “is reduced to a group of universal, atomic elements: planes of primary color opposing planes of ‘non-color’—gray, black, white, vertical lines opposing horizontal lines while probing the various planes that they delimit on the surface of the canvas.”11

Though Mondrian abolished subject matter, concentrating solely on the surface of the painting, the effects of such reduction, he believed, would extend beyond the edges of his canvas and outside the space of the gallery to “all human activity, all cultural production, all social existence.”12 His goal of balance and repose was essential to a broader search for what he called “universal vision.” “Art—although an end in itself, like religion—is the means through which we can know the universal and contemplate it in plastic form.”13 Mondrian’s aesthetic theories became central to the work of artists including Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leck, and Georges Vantongerloo as well as architects J. J. P. Oud and Jan Wils, among others, whose activities were documented by a Dutch journal called De Stijl. Given his involvement with architects, it seems logical that the

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destructive/creative impulse of Mondrian’s paintings extended to the space of his studio. Using colored squares, Mondrian turned his studio into a three-dimensional abstraction, and he would rearrange the space whenever he embarked on a new project.6

Neo-Plasticism’s balance and repose is rejected—or destroyed—in Trafalgar Square and his other paintings of the period, known collectively as “the transatlantic paintings.”7 In these works, the lines are doubled and crossed, creating a network of interconnections. In Trafalgar Square, the repeating verticals on the left spark an optical flicker. Similarly, the doubling on the right side creates a ladder with horizontal bars that alternate in terms of color and thickness, resulting in a dynamism akin to a filmstrip.8 These visual effects would be taken even further in Mondrian’s last works. In Boogie Woogie, for example, he completely eliminated the black lines and the large planes of color (fig. 3). Instead, using bits of colored tape to plan his compositions, Mondrian built a complex weave of small bars and squares.

It is sometimes said that the synopthesis of Broadway Boogie Woogie resulted from Mondrian’s encounter with New York City—but the energy of its street traffic and the sounds of its jazz (Mondrian was a fan) —and that the verticals and horizontals actually represent the city itself. This representational reading may not surprise, given that it was in New York, in fact, that Mondrian began to use titles more specific than “composition” or “picture,” including Trafalgar Square and Place de la Concorde.9 It is perhaps best, however, not to see these pictures as representations of the places whose names they borrow, but instead, as Carel Blotkamp has argued, “as an expression of the bond between Neo-Plasticism and the culture of the metropolis.”10 This bond can be found in their similar rhythm and dynamism, stimulation and energy, opposition and repose, but also in the kinship between Mondrian’s path of achievement and destruction and the city’s restless, avaricious growth. — J H

8. For more detailed technical information, see Bois, “The Iconoclast,” p. 340.
11. Ibid.