

P I E T Mondrian

“The work of art must be ‘produced,’ ‘constructed.’ One must create as objective as possible a representation of forms and relations.”

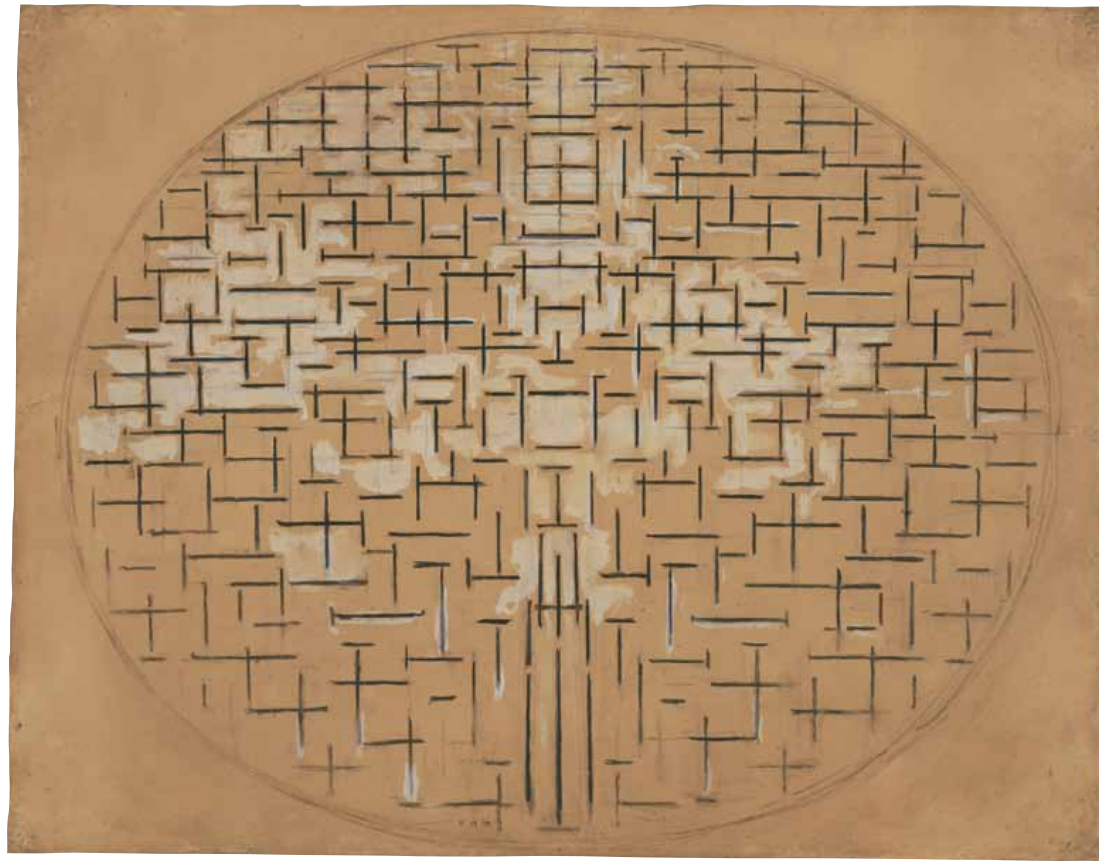
Using a fine brush and red pigment, Piet Mondrian inscribed his painting *Trafalgar Square* (plate 40) in two places. In the black vertical line second from the left are the artist’s initials: *PM*. In the fourth line from the left are two dates, one above the other: 39 on top, 43 below. These two dates 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.”¹

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.”²

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.³ 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

40 *Trafalgar Square*. 1939–43.
Oil on canvas, 57¼ × 47¼ in.
(145.2 × 120 cm). © 2011
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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 41), 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

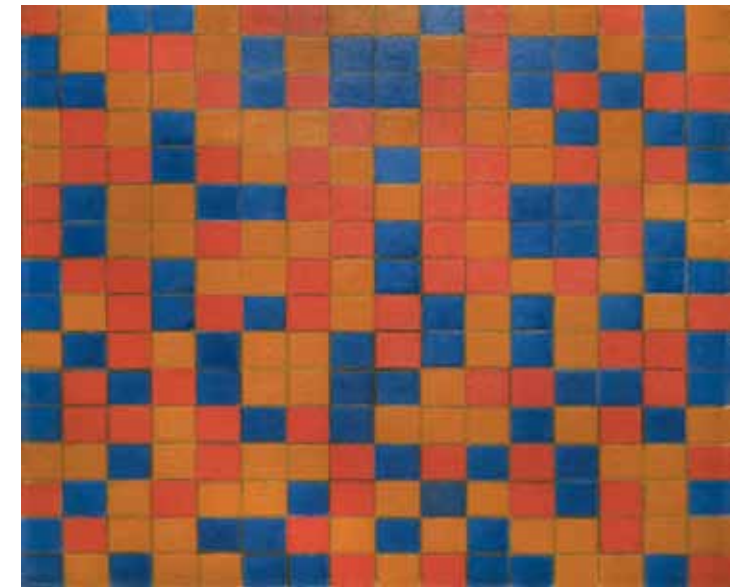
Mondrian’s key move toward Neo-Plasticism happened around 1914, when he returned to Holland for the summer. There he revisited some of the motifs he had investigated

• FIG. 1 Piet Mondrian. *Pier and Ocean 5 (Sea and Starry Sky)*. 1915 (inscribed 1914). Charcoal and watercolor on paper, 34 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 44 in. (87.9 × 111.7 cm). Glued on Homosote panel in late 1941;

removed in 1968. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. © 2011 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Virginia

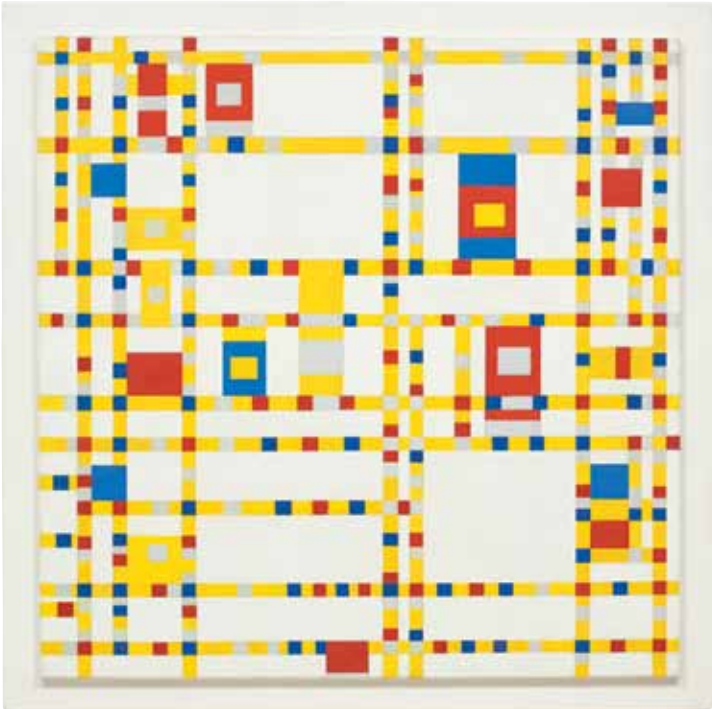
more than five years before. Using an openwork scaffolding borrowed from Cubism, he “dehierarchized” the picture’s field, reducing church facades (plate 43) and piers (fig. 1) to a series of vertical and horizontal marks (these have been called “plus and minus” signs).⁷ Mondrian then made a leap to paintings 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 Leek, 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



• FIG. 2 Piet Mondrian. *Composition with Grid 8: Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colors*. 1919. Oil on canvas, 33 × 40 in. (84 × 102 cm).

Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. © 2011 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Virginia



• FIG. 3 Piet Mondrian. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. 1942–43. Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 in. (127 × 127 cm). The Museum of Modern Art,

New York. Given anonymously. © 2011 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Virginia

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 remake the space whenever he embarked on a new project.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ These visual effects would be taken even further in Mondrian’s last works. In *Broadway 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 syncopation of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* resulted from Mondrian’s encounter with New York City—both 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*.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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 relentless, avaricious growth. — JH

Epigraph: Piet Mondrian, “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,” 1936, reprinted in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), p. 289.

1. Harry Cooper, “Looking into the Transatlantic Paintings,” in Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Art Museums; New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 39.
2. Von Wiegand, quoted in Cooper and Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*, p. 234.
3. Mondrian, quoted *ibid.*, p. 45. See Cooper’s fascinating discussion of Mondrian’s double dating, pp. 27–32.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
5. Yve-Alain Bois, “The Iconoclast,” in Angelica Zander Rudenstine et al., *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), p. 315.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
7. “Dehierarchize” is from Bois, “The Iconoclast,” p. 314. For “plus and minus,” see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 11.
8. For this description and these examples, see Hal Foster et al., “1917,” in *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 151.

9. “The principle of neo-plasticism is,” Bois writes, “a dialectic roughly reminiscent of Hegel.” This comparison between Mondrian’s work and philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s thought runs through much of the scholarship on the artist. See Bois, “The Iconoclast,” p. 315 and throughout; and Harry Cooper, “Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie,” *October* 84 (Spring 1998): 118–42.
10. Bois, “The Iconoclast,” p. 315.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting,” 1917, reprinted in Holtzman and James, eds. and trans., *Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, p. 42.
14. See Nancy Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); and Bois, “The Iconoclast,” pp. 348–49.
15. The term “transatlantic paintings” was first used by Kermit Champa in 1985. See Cooper’s discussion in “Looking into the Transatlantic Paintings,” p. 24.
16. In their close study of the materials and methods of *Trafalgar Square* and the other transatlantic works, Cooper and Spronk found that Mondrian moved, added, and altered black lines and sections of color and thickened the white areas after his arrival in New York. To make these changes, Mondrian had to scrape off the paint—a fairly labor-intensive process—to make a space in the surface. For more detailed technical information, see Spronk, “Revealing Revisions: The Transatlantic Paintings in the Laboratory,” pp. 67–106, and the entry on *Trafalgar Square*, no. 17, pp. 232–41, in *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*.

17. Cooper, “Looking into the Transatlantic Paintings,” p. 34. It is interesting to note that both places are points of circulation in their respective cities. Mondrian, though fearful of crossing the street (especially in New York City), was taken with the flow of traffic: “The Place de l’Opéra in Paris gives a better image of the new life than many theories.” Discussed in Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), pp. 225–26; and Cooper, “Looking into the Transatlantic Paintings,” p. 33. Mondrian’s words are from “The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships,” 1931, reprinted in Holtzman and James, eds. and trans., *Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, p. 275. The artist Charmion von Wiegand wrote of Mondrian, “He doesn’t like to cross streets and doesn’t yet feel at home walking here”; quoted in Cooper, “Looking into the Transatlantic Paintings,” p. 33.
18. Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, p. 226.