

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## MAJOR MONDRIAN RETROSPECTIVE OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

*In light of my experiences here [New York],  
my paintings now have more boogie-woogie.*

-- Piet Mondrian

The first comprehensive retrospective in more than twenty years of the work of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 1, 1995. With more than 160 works, including nearly half of Mondrian's paintings from the 1930s and 1940s, **PIET MONDRIAN: 1872-1944** differs from previous retrospectives by focusing on his identity as a modern, abstract artist. Mondrian's last, most daring canvases -- *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-44) -- are on view exclusively at this final showing of the internationally touring exhibition, fully revealing the culmination of the artist's long and distinguished career. Also in conjunction with The Museum of Modern Art's presentation is a reconstruction of Mondrian's final New York studio.

On view through January 23, 1996, **PIET MONDRIAN: 1872-1944** is organized jointly by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. It has been granted an indemnity by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The New York showing is made possible by KPN Royal PTT Nederland, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The reconstruction of Mondrian's studio is made possible by EXOR America (Agnelli Group).

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PIET MONDRIAN was organized by an international curatorial team, led by Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Guest Curator, National Gallery of Art, including Yve-Alain Bois, Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. Professor of Modern Art, Harvard University; Joop Joosten, author of the forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of Mondrian's Cubist and Neoplastic work; Hans Janssen, Curator of the Modern Collection, Haags Gemeentemuseum; and John Elderfield, Chief Curator at Large, The Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition, which was installed at the Museum by Mr. Elderfield with Beatrice Kernan, Associate Curator, comprises some 116 paintings and thirty drawings from museums and private collections in Europe and North America. It focuses on Mondrian's achievement in abstraction -- the steps that led to it and the evolution of the artist's abstract style, which he called "Neoplasticism" (his own translation of the Dutch "nieuwe beelding" or "new structuring") -- providing an unprecedented opportunity to reevaluate his legacy as a painter. A selection of nineteen unfinished compositions and working drawings demonstrates the artist's creative process and reveals that Mondrian's art is not mathematical in its origins or its expression. Rather, it is the product of a highly intuitive mind and hand, gradually working toward carefully modulated compositional solutions.

"By severely limiting his art to rectilinear forms and primary colors, Mondrian stressed the universal and objective," states Mr. Elderfield. "He made his carefully nuanced variations on this restricted vocabulary the locus of subjective feelings. An idealist and a utopian, Mondrian believed that his abstract paintings revealed an essential order behind the veil of natural appearances, and that their balance of opposed elements could suggest how harmonious social structures might be created."

The exhibition opens with selected examples of Mondrian's early work made around the turn of the century. These landscapes in the Dutch naturalistic tradition already reveal his tendencies to simplification and to working in series. Mondrian's art was transformed by his first encounter with French modernism in 1907, which introduced him to pure, bright color and led, in the following year, to the ambitious paintings *Mill in Sunlight* and *Woods near Oele*.

The two versions of *Still Life with Gingerpot*, from 1911 and 1912, show Mondrian's increasing command of the vocabulary of Cubism. Mondrian had moved to Paris in 1912, anxious to see recent work by Picasso and Braque. His series of Tree paintings (1912-13) and Paris Façades (1913-14) develop his unique interpretation of Cubism, characterized by planarity and the unifying device of a rectilinear grid.

Stranded in Holland during World War I, Mondrian experimented with linear compositions -- among them, the famous "Pier and Ocean" drawings -- which gave rise to his first fully abstract painting, *Composition in Line* (1916-17). In this work, the traditional distinction between figure and background is undermined; the white field no longer simply lies behind the vibrant black lines, but contributes to the formation of the picture's delicate, circular composition. Mondrian next turned to the problem of uniting figure and background while using color, in such works as *Composition with Color Planes 5* (1917).

In 1917 Mondrian was a founding member of De Stijl ("The Style"), an association of artists, architects, and designers committed to pure abstraction. In 1918-19 he began to experiment with systematic grids, which resulted in some of the most radical works in the history of abstraction,

including two "checkerboard" compositions and four paintings in the unprecedented shape of a diamond.

Mondrian returned to Paris in June 1919. By the end of the next year, he had invented Neoplasticism. The new style, first evidenced in *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray*, is marked by thick, uniformly black lines organizing pure primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) and "non-colors" (white, black, and gray). Throughout the 1920s, Mondrian elaborated on his Neoplastic style, leading to a series of austere balanced works of 1929-32, five of which are reunited for the first time in this exhibition. These paintings, which are all based on a central cross, demonstrate the subtle variations of line and color that are the foundation of Mondrian's aesthetic. As in jazz, which had captivated Mondrian since 1920, the central cross serves as the steady, underlying beat upon which the artist improvises with syncopated color.

In 1932, with a number of painters already following his style, Mondrian dramatically changed course. In *Composition B* (1932), he introduced the double line into his visual vocabulary. Over the next five years, in his search for a "dynamic equilibrium," Mondrian gave line an even greater role in his compositions, doubling and redoubling it to obscure the definition of planes and explode the cross, which by 1936 is barely recognizable.

During World War II, Mondrian fled Paris for London in 1938 and New York in 1940, where he remained until his death in 1944. For his first-ever full-scale exhibition, in 1942, Mondrian reworked paintings he had finished in Europe, giving them "more boogie-woogie" (as he explained, referring to his latest jazz discovery). He added flashes of thickly brushed color to their margins and, on occasion, multiplied their lines to create an effect of optical flicker. He often repainted larger areas as well, as in *Place de la*

*Concorde* (1938-43), inscribing the work with a second date to indicate the year of his revision.

In his last years, Mondrian experienced an extraordinary renewal of artistic vitality. The major change was the introduction of colored lines, interwoven across the canvas, as in *New York City* (1941-42). The culmination of his New York period is fully represented exclusively at this concluding venue of the exhibition with the addition of the optically dazzling *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) and his final, unfinished painting, *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-44).

**MONDRIAN** completes its international tour in New York, opening in December 1994 at the Haags Gemeentemuseum and traveling to the National Gallery of Art.

The reconstruction of Mondrian's New York studio, which was coordinated for the Museum by Beatrice Kernan, incorporates original colored panels and other artifacts from the principal room of the studio Mondrian occupied at 15 East 59 Street during the years 1943-44. Mondrian's New York studio appears courtesy of the Mondrian Estate/Holtzman Trust. The Museum acknowledges the cooperation of Jason Holtzman in the design and of the Trust in the planning of the studio reconstruction.

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**PUBLICATION**

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