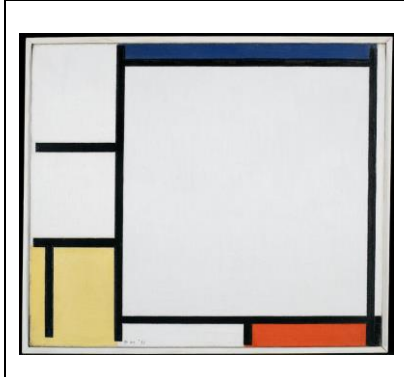

Title of Object

Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow, and Black

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Piet Mondrian

Country: Netherlands

Date of Object: 1922

File Created: 6/26/2017

Accession Number: 65.5

Author of File: Kathleen Steiger

Material/Medium: oil on canvas

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Paintings

Last Updated/Reviewed: 9/7/2017

Culture: Dutch

Tour Topics

Abstraction, De Stijl, Neo-plasticism, Modern Art, Highlights of World Art, Geometry/Math, Primary Colors, innovation/avant-garde, harmony, rectangles, influence on Minimalism, influenced by Cubism, influence on Bauhaus

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

- Take a quiet moment to look carefully at this Abstract painting. If we eliminate one of the color rectangles, how would it change the picture? Would it upset the balance of the work?
- What if it was painted in black and shades of gray and white? How would it change the impact of the piece?
- Take a moment to look at the painting. Describe an emotion it communicates, using one or two words. What do you see that makes you say that?

- Why do you think Mondrian painted this using only straight lines, in a grid, rather than using diagonal lines? How would diagonals change the feeling of the painting?
- Mondrian wanted the color of his paintings to be representations of spirituality and ethical values, not “the material of reality.” What spiritual or ethical value do you think Mondrian had in mind when he painted this? Does the title (Composition in Blue, Red, Yellow and Black) give us any clues?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- Piet Mondrian’s impersonal, non-representational style of painting, which he called Neo-plasticism, became the basis of De Stijl (The Style), an international art movement that began in Holland in 1917. Striving for absolute simplicity, purity and clarity, Mondrian eventually limited himself to using only rectangles, straight horizontal and vertical lines and primary colors plus black, white and gray. He was consciously attempting to create spiritual harmony through the unification of opposites, and the absence of any reference to natural forms or recognizable objects was intended to give his art a timeless, transcendent quality. *Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black* typifies Mondrian’s disciplined, austere approach. Despite its asymmetry, the composition is so carefully balanced that the omission of an element would destroy the unity of the whole. (Selected Works of MIA, 1988)
- The painting uses only primary (red, blue, yellow) or neutral colors (white, black). It is structured in a grid, yet the lines do not go the very edge of the canvas in places. Think of the impact that the incompleteness of those lines has on the viewers.

“His use of the term “*composition*” (the organization of forms on the canvas) signals his experimentation with abstract arrangements. Mondrian’s “Compositions” demonstrate his commitment to relational opposites, asymmetry, and pure planes of color. Mondrian composes these paintings as a harmony of contrasts that signify both balance and the tension of dynamic forces. For example, Mondrian viewed his black lines not as outlines but as planes of pigment in their own right; see how the lines stop in areas just short of the canvas edge. Mondrian eradicates the entire notion of illusionistic depth predicated on a figure in front of a background. He achieves a harmonious tension by his asymmetrical placement of primary colors that balance the blocks of white paint....Mondrian also used varying shades of blacks and whites, some of which are subtly lighter or darker. Seen up close, this variety of values and textures create a surprising harmony of contrasts. Even the visible traces of the artist’s brushwork counter what might otherwise be a rigid geometric composition and balance the artist’s desire for a universal truth with the intimately personal experience of the artist.” (Khan Academy)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Artist bio: Piet Mondrian, born Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan, Jr. grew up as the second of five children in a devoutly Calvinist home in central Holland. Art and music were encouraged in his household. His father, the headmaster of the local school, was an enthusiastic amateur artist who gave drawing lessons to his son, while Mondrian's uncle was an accomplished artist who taught his nephew to paint.

In 1892, Mondrian enrolled in the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, or the Royal Academy of Visual Arts in Amsterdam. His three years of academic training focused on drawing from the model, copying old masters and genre painting. In the following years, he would rely on these skills to support himself by producing scientific drawings and copies of museum paintings, as well as giving private drawing lessons in his studio.

"Always further," is how Mondrian termed his drive to transform his artwork. Starting in 1905, his traditional landscape compositions began to reveal a new sense of drama and light. Jan Toorop, a leading artist of Dutch Luminism, introduced Mondrian to the French Post-Impressionists. Mondrian's paintings changed dramatically as a result, integrating, for example, the bold color and brushwork of Vincent van Gogh and the pointillist technique of Georges Seurat. Even in these early works, it is apparent that Mondrian had a tendency to work in series, focusing on a singular subject. Both of these facets would be invaluable to the development of his mature, abstract style.

In 1911 Mondrian visited an Amsterdam exhibition of Cubist paintings by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso and was inspired to go to Paris, where he began to develop an independent abstract style. Seeking to refine the rhythms of what he saw, Mondrian began drawing the area in which he lived. After sustained work and many adjustments, these initial compositions evolved into flat planes of interlocking rectangles that no longer showed objects. Although Mondrian's sources exist in the natural world, his images are reduced to the essentials."

Mondrian had returned home to the Netherlands just prior to the outbreak of the First World War and would remain there until the war ended. While in the Netherlands he further developed his style, ruling out compositions that were either too static or too dynamic, concluding that asymmetrical arrangements of geometric (rather than organic) shapes in primary (rather than secondary) colors best represent universal forces. Moreover, he combined his development of an abstract style with his interest in philosophy, spirituality, and his belief that the evolution of abstraction was a sign of humanity's progress."

Forced to escape Paris after the Nazis targeted his work, labeling him a "degenerate" artist, he moved briefly to London, with the help of his artist friends. After just barely surviving the Blitz, he traveled to NYC on a Cunard ocean liner at the height of the U-boat war, in a convoy that sailed only by night with all the lights turned off. In his Manhattan studio his work became every more dynamic and abstract. At night, he traveled to Harlem to hear Jazz jam sessions with artist like Thelonious Monk, and his pounding, fractured sounds. Mondrian died of pneumonia in 1944, at the age of 71, while living in NYC.

For Mondrian, art and philosophy were deeply intertwined. He was a prolific writer and theorist, and was drawn to spiritual and philosophical studies. In 1909, he joined the Theosophical Society, a spiritual organization with widespread influence in Europe in the early decades of the 20th century, based on the teachings of Buddhism. Theosophy directly influenced his representational style, expressed in paintings of flowers, and more specifically, the work *Evolution* (1910-1911) that echo the Buddhist and Theosophist cycle of death and rebirth. Mondrian explains the role of spirituality in his artwork, "All the time I'm driven to the spiritual. Through Theosophy I became aware that art could provide a transition to the finer regions, which I will call the spiritual realm." Though he later disagreed with some members of the group, Theosophy influenced Mondrian's goal of representing complete, pure harmony, which he expressed by the balance and tension of form and color in his paintings. (The Art Story; Khan Academy; Mondrian's World, NYT; and Guggenheim)

Legacy: “The refinement of Mondrian's abstractions as well as the utopian ideals behind his work had an immense impact on the development of modern art, both while he was still alive as well as after his death. His work was immediately referenced by the Bauhaus, particularly in the simplified lines and colors of the school's aesthetic, as well as its ideal in which the arts could bring concord to all aspects of life. Later on, Mondrian's style can be seen in the developments of the Minimalists of the late 1960s, who also opted for reduced forms and a pared down palette. Not only influential within modern art, Mondrian's far-reaching impact can be seen across all aspects of modern and postmodern culture, from Yves Saint Laurent's color-blocking in his "Mondrian" day-dress, to the use of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic style and palette by the rock band the White Stripes for the cover of their 2000 album, *De Stijl*, as well as his name as the moniker for three hotels, the "Mondrian" hotel in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami.” (The Art Story)

Artist quote: "I wish to approach truth as closely as is possible, and therefore I abstract everything until I arrive at the fundamental quality of objects."

Mondrian, and the artists of *De Stijl*, advocated pure abstraction and a pared down palette in order to express a utopian ideal of universal harmony in all of the arts. By using basic forms and colors, Mondrian believed that his vision of modern art would transcend divisions in culture and become a new common language based in the pure primary colors, flatness of forms, and dynamic tension in his canvases. (The Art Story)

“Like many pioneers of abstraction, Mondrian’s impetus was largely spiritual. He aimed to distill the real world to its pure essence, to represent the dichotomies of the universe in eternal tension. To achieve this, he privileged certain principles—stability, universality, and spirituality—through the yin/yang balancing of horizontal and vertical strokes.” (Guggenheim)

“Mondrian, exploring for such a long time the theme of the horizontal-vertical, proved that this theme had a reality of its own, that it was a universal principle, a source of both life and language. .. Mondrian’s theme and his ‘single’ picture were constantly evolving. .. Mondrian always moved toward an ideal perfection, he never paused, and the differences between one canvas and another, which might appear insignificant to the layman, were, for him, often a great step forward. Mondrian’s canvasses in gray tones sometimes recall the compositions in brick one frequently comes across in Holland (in ordinary dwelling houses, the tiling of interiors and even the paving, often brick, of the streets. The Dutch masons always had a reputation for imaginative utilization of brick.” (from Piet Mondrian, *Life and Work*)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Like many artists living in Paris in 1912, Piet Mondrian experimented with Cubism—depicting a subject from multiple viewpoints at once, often creating a fractured and disjointed image. After returning to Holland in 1914, he developed his own brand of abstraction, reducing natural forms to simplified geometric patterns. Unlike the Cubists, Mondrian eventually abandoned recognizable subjects even as a starting point, adopting instead a rational and intellectual style that he called Neo-Plasticism.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Sandra LaWall Lipshultz, *Selected Works – The Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, 1988

Piet Mondrian, Guggenheim: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/piet-mondrian>

Essay by Dr. Stephanie Chadwick, *Mondrian, Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow*, Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/later-europe-and-americas/modernity-ap/a/mondrian-composition>

Piet Mondrian: Dutch Painter, The Art Story: <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-mondrian-piet.htm>

Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian, Life and Work* (in the Mia Library)

Nina Siegal, *Mondrian's World: From Primary Colors to the Boogie Woogie*, *New York Times*, May 24 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/travel/piet-mondrian-netherlands-abstract-painter-de-stijl-design.html?mcubz=0>

In the silent footage from the Degenerate Art exhibition, you can see one of Piet Mondrian's composition, similar to our painting:
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/arts/design/10000002764882/degenerate-art-exhibit-of-1937.html>