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“Cubism and Abstract Art: Piet Mondrian” by Daniel Robbins, 1962

DANIEL ROBBINS

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this, the fifth and last [01:00] in my series called cubism and Abstract Art. This lecture is about Piet Mondrian. I wish that it could be about the whole series. If I saw in front of me consistently the faces that I saw two weeks before and two weeks before and two weeks before, I'd feel better that I could summarize what I've been trying to talk about.

Mondrian is, however, kind of in the nature of a summary, because Mondrian is known to you all probably as the nonobjective artist. I think we've all heard it said about certain authors that they write the same book [02:00] over and over, because they have the same thing to say about the world. Perhaps this is true of Mondrian also. At any rate, it's something to keep in mind this afternoon during the course of this lecture.

It may turn out that when he decided what reality was he painted it over and over, and yet I think we'll see that these paintings, like the one you see in front of you now -- a kind of characteristic Mondrian of the '30s in a very bad slide -- have a different quality, an extraordinary liveliness, and a kind of expressiveness which many people who are willing to grant that Mondrian made a [03:00] distinct contribution to the modern style, a contribution that we can see all over, especially on Park Avenue today, that many people are not willing to grant to him.

That is, paintings, even like the one you see in front of you, have a quality of personal expression, and this quality of personal expression, this quality that is traditionally associated with the plastic arts with painting in particular, is something that Mondrian himself had a great deal to say about, and it was usually in a negative fashion; that is, he did not consider the chief function of painting to be personal expression. In fact, personal expression didn't enter into it at all. He was interested in something called plastic truth. This [04:00] is something I've talked about a great deal in the last four lectures. I hope I'll get a chance to talk about it a little bit more today.

When you look at a characteristic Mondrian like this, you see the tight geometry; you see everything reduced to squares; you see the black lines of subtly different thickness. You're aware, as you look at this, that this line is thicker than this line. You see the use of the primary colors -- here, blue and yellow; usually red as well -- and you see the also characteristic asymmetrical balance. Asymmetrical balance, we might consider it while looking at this painting, is nothing but the thought that something very small and intense can balance something, achieve harmony with something, [05:00] that's very large and not so intense.

If you look at a patch of white next to coal heap, the blackness of coal heap will tend to make it look smaller and more concentrated. If you drop an orange scarf on a coal heap, then suddenly that whole mass will come to life, and in its importance and in its vividness, it will equal quality and weight whatever you want to balance it against. This is a formal characteristic of all the traditional Mondrians that you can conjure up in your mind, which are rather like this.

So, how did Mondrian attain to the kind of art we traditionally associate with him? How did he arrive at that? How did he arrive at the use of only three primary colors, plus black, white, and

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gray? How [06:00] did he arrive further at the notion that he should never tamper the purity of these three primary colors, and he should never dilute a black or dilute a white? He came to this conclusion, as we will see, that enabled him only to use a middle grey and a pure black and a pure white and the three primaries and still to achieve, as I think we'll see, tremendous intricacy in his formal patterns.

Mondrian was born in 1872, a good 10 years before that generation that we've been talking about in the last four lectures; that is, before the cubists, before Picasso and Braque and Léger, all of whom, as you know by now, were born in 1881. He began painting when he was around 19 or 20 [07:00] years of age. On the right, you see one of these early painting, and I suspect on the left you'll see another one as soon as the man operating the slide projector fixes the bulb that has just burned out.

The painting you see on the right is called *Farm on Nistlerode* [sic]. It was made in 1904. It's a very traditional-looking painting. In fact, to those of you who remember the kind of children's storybooks that were popular in the '20s, it would probably evoke just that kind of expression. A little thatched cottage from the North from Holland or from Germany, very simply treated in the kind of vaguely flattened forms that were characteristic of turn-of-the-century art. Well, listen to Mondrian on the subject of his origins [08:00] as a painter.

He wrote, “I began to paint at an early age. My first teachers were my father, an amateur, and my uncle, a professional painter. I preferred to paint landscape and houses seen in grey, dark weather or in very strong sunlight, when the density of atmosphere obscures the details and accentuates the large outlines of objects. I often sketched by moonlight cows resting or standing immovable in flat Dutch meadows” -- like the one you see here at last on the left. Very Dutch; the canals, trees in the background, the moist-looking land, the gray, misty sky. Paintings such as these were not divorced of the impressionist influence which by [09:00] this time had crept into painting in every corner of Europe.

“But,” says Mondrian, “I never painted these things romantically, but from the very beginning I was always a realist.” Now, what is a realist? This is a question we take up in every lecture, and it's a question we probably should take up in every lecture. Lots of painters and lots of the public around 1902, when this was made on the left, or 1904, when the painting on the right was made, would say that it wasn't realistic, because the brushwork, as you can see in the foreground, is much too fresh, much too vibrant, much too broad to be realistic. It doesn't describe individual blades of grass or patches of dirt. Nevertheless, the space moves back in such a soft and easy way there's no mistaking what it is. Masses of land are broken up [10:00] on the canvas, just as masses of land are broken up.

Nevertheless, it's important that Mondrian should have said, “I was always a realist, not a romantic,” because an artist who is concerned with plastic truth is concerned not, he likes to think to himself, with the private nature of his own emotions, but rather with the visual truth of what he see. And he generally believes that truth, something to him universal and absolute -- something to Mondrian universal and absolute -- has very little to do with his own private feelings. This too is something that we've seen and heard before in our discussion of some of the cubists painters.

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Mondrian [11:00] and many Mondrian followers believe that he was the artist above all in the twentieth century to actually realize this dream of an absolute visual plastic truth. I stress now that that’s simply what plasticity means. You all know the expression of “the plastic arts.” It’s used interchangeably often with “the visual arts.” That is what plastic means: visual; something apprehended entirely visually; having, in Mondrian’s thinking, very little to do with a man’s particular emotional reaction to life. Let’s explore some more of Mondrian’s early work.

He like to paint, as I read to you, by moonlight. [12:00] And I might mention that the dating of all of Mondrian’s early painting is very obscure; he rarely dated them himself. They’ve been scattered, and sometimes he repeated. This on the left is such a painting, done in the moonlight of early evening. Now his touch is much more vibrant, much freer. He paints on cardboard; you can see the patches of cardboard that he’s left exposed.

It has a kind of vibrancy that you might think odd in a painter who finally formalized his structure to such a point where you’d think that a piece of pasted red would serve as well as the brush strokes that make the red or the blue or the yellow in one of his large formal compositions. Here, simply a series of white trees, the kind of trimmed trees that one sees in Holland or in Belgium or in Northern France, [13:00] against the sky and melting into the sky, and some houses and some hills and a foreground. But on the right, something still different but equally in the air.

Those of you who remember the lectures from last semester on the art nouveau will instantly, I hope, recognize that in that curvilinear pattern -- again, like children’s storybook illustrations from this time right through the ’20s, and even beyond -- in those curvilinear patterns is the predominant style of the 1890s, predominant insofar as it touched Gauguin, that it was behind all art nouveau design, and that it was even used by certain expressionist members of the same general tendency, like the Dutch painter Jan Toorup.

I showed you this painting once a long time ago. It’s called *The Three Brides*. Now, [14:00] this is an example of Dutch art nouveau painting. But Mondrian would say, if he looked at it when he was the full-blown Mondrian of the 1920s and ’30s, that this was not realist painting, as it obviously isn’t, but romantic painting. This is Expressionist painting. You see, though, that there is a similarity in the forms, that the curvilinear patterns that Toorup likes to exploit in hair, just as Beardsley liked to exploiting it in hair, are present in the way he treated the tops of the trees and the ground and the hills in the background. The similarities in color are much less evident, because indeed they are not so similar.

But the Toorup is a mystical painting that involved kind of complicated emotional statement about life. Three [15:00] brides; the bride of God, pure, innocent, with all this long hair flowing upward. The bride of humans; woman, as she lives on earth, presumably. And here, the bride of the devil, Evil, with all the hair twirling downward. This is what Mondrian would later describe as romantic painting, not realist painting.

It didn’t have anything to do with plastic truth, but I stress again that the common root of both is in this linear, arabesque, serpentine style which was the complex art nouveau of the 1890s and

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which itself generated so much, both in terms of form and in terms of its double-pronged ideology, one social [16:00] and mystical and the other social and formal, that spread through the twentieth century and is with us very much today.

Here is an extremely delicate rendering of a chrysanthemum, *Blue Chrysanthemum* [sic], of about 1909 or 1910. I'm going to quote Mondrian again: “Even at this time, I disliked particular movement, such as people in action. I enjoyed painting flowers. Not bouquets, but a single flower at a time in order that I might better express its plastic structure. That is, how is it put together? What is the truth of it visually? Because apart from its visual truth, there is no other truth value to it.”

This was Mondrian's belief. How different it is from [17:00] Kandinsky's belief or how different it would be from the response of a present-day American abstract expressionist I needn't stress. But by looking at it, by studying each petal, by studying the stem, by studying the leaves around it, by looking all around each form, he thought then he could find its structure, and its structure was its truth.

“My environment” -- I continue quoting Mondrian -- “conditions me to paint the objects of the ordinary vision, even at times to make portraits with likeness.” For this reason, much of this early work has no permanent value. They don't feel that way in the art galleries on Madison Avenue or 57th Street today, I can assure you. “At the time,” he says, “I was earning my living by teaching and commercial drawing.”

That's true. His father also had been a teacher before [18:00] him. This preoccupation with individual objects and objects from Nature may strike as odd in a painter who is so totally purged of nature when he achieves his own style; may strike as odd in terms of the following absolutely true story, which was told to me by the widow of a French painter in Paris.

In 1934, the Mondrian who had painted this red tree and that black tree -- the same tree, of course -- around nine hundred ten and for whom trees, as we shall presently see, were so important in discovering the whole formal nature of his art, was invited to dinner at the home of Albert Gleizes in the late afternoon on a Sunday in the late '20s. The Gleizes lived in a magnificent apartment on the Boulevard Lannes [19:00] in Paris. It faced the Bois de Boulogne. A more breathtaking view you couldn't find anywhere in Paris, full of trees, full of nature.

Mondrian was seated at table, facing the windows, a position that was sought by all guests at dinner, a position of honor. After about five bites of the first course, he asked if he couldn't be moved, because it distressed him so to have to look at nature, and yet this man got a great deal from trees. First, you see of the freedom of color.

The tree, its twisted branches against the blue sky, some indication of the ground below, and in the second version -- about the same time; 1909, 1910 -- reduced to a kind of black silhouette which emphasizes its design and its structure, its rhythm, its motion, [20:00] and much more. And the ground, taking on a kind of geometrical order, which of course will become much more evident as we continue.

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From the black tree, how much of a jump was it to the *Red Tree*, which is almost like the black tree seen from the other side, only now fused with a background behind. That is, Mondrian wrong independently, like his compatriot -- not compatriots; that's the wrong word -- like his fellow artists in France, was discovering that the painting was a two-dimensional surface and should be treated as a two-dimensional surface. So, the distinction between background and foreground grows less.

This tree, as I say, you can see is the reverse of the tree you just saw. [21:00] He walked to the other side, and suddenly, instead of seeing [deep?] space, he saw it fused against the sky, and he concentrated on the negative areas, we would say, as much as the positive. The spaces between the branches emerge and become important. This, plus the fact that there is no more sense of deep space, creates a much more throbbing kind of pattern and movement.

And in the painting to the right of about the same time -- perhaps 1910, 1911; some even say early 1912 -- called *Flowering Trees*, this is carried much further. Many trees, many trunks, many branches, but the negative treated as strongly and as importantly as the positive, and a great sense of the rhythm and the movement of these trees dominating [22:00] the vision in the painting.

It's very easy to follow Mondrian as he makes these steps from nature into abstraction. The pictures that I've shown you thus far have been rather limited in color. Mondrian develops along several fronts at once, and it's rather difficult to make it as orderly as one would like to be, because, after all, a person's life is never as orderly as a historian would like to make it.

At the same time as he was finding out that a painting with a two-dimensional surface, just like everybody else in Europe was finding the same thing out, he was discovering the color that the German expressionists and the Fauves had discovered, and he was experimenting with techniques like pointillism, which of course had been invented by Seurat and Signac much, much before and were still being practiced by those who were about [23:00] to become the cubists in France.

So, look at this windmill from that point of view; it's blazing and flaming. It's called *Mill in the Bright Sunlight* [sic]. The sky is reduced to a kind of pointillist pattern except it has a vibrancy of touch that belies the scientific origins of pointillism as it was invented by Seurat and practiced by Signac. The painting on the right is called *Sand Dune* [sic], and this too is but an isolated phenomenon, one visual hill broken up into a variety of small dots, but the dots are put on with a kind of painterly verve and splash. He too was exploring all means of expression around, searching, trying to find his way, but always, as he said, dwelling on one single phenomenon.

“After several years,” says Mondrian, [24:00] “my work unconsciously began to deviate more and more from the natural aspects of reality. Experience was my only teacher. I knew little of the modern art movement,” and essentially that seems to be the case. Perhaps not as little as he would like us to believe, but nevertheless, little enough. “When I first saw the work of the impressionist Van Gogh, Van Dongen, and the Fauves, I admired it, but I had to seek the true way alone. The first thing to change in my painting was the color. I forsook natural color for

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pure color. I had come to feel that the colors of nature cannot be reproduced on canvas. Instinctively, I felt that painting had to find a new way to express the beauty of nature.”

Now, that remark was not written when Mondrian was painting these canvases. [25:00] It was written after 1940, when he was a refugee from the Nazis in New York, and he still believed, even after all those squares of pure color and asymmetrical balance, that he was finding the beauty of nature even when he didn't want to look at a tree out the window. He was expressing, he felt the beauty of order. Mondrian went to Paris, he said, about 1910. It seems more likely that he went in December of 1911. It was at that time that he saw the work of the cubists on a large scale.

We'll go into this in a moment, but I have to show you now, in order to show how Mondrian evolves his characteristic style, paintings from [26:00] before and after at the same time. Just before he went to Paris, he used to spend summers at a place called Domburg. There was a church at Domburg, and on the left you see a painting he made of this church in 1909. In the summer of 1914, he was called away from Paris -- Paris, which he loved, incidentally -- one month before the war broke out. He was called back to Holland because his father had died.

He went to Domburg again, and he made the drawing you see on the right of the same church façade. You can see, I think, the relation quite easily, that already in 1909 he had begun to simplify the church facade in an extraordinary way, to flatten out the canvas to reduce the background to just shimmering greens of the tree and the blue of the sky behind [27:00] and to concentrate on its simple structure.

By 1914, he's come to realize that the structure is not so simple. He is perhaps infected with a cubist idea that to understand a reality in its full plastic sense, you have to look at it all around. You have to consider its plan, all of its elevations, and if this doesn't visually make its point as well as it might, I think perhaps this will. Here is a drawing of the church you just saw on the left of 1909, and another drawing of the same church in 1914.

I needn't point out for too long the piers. Can you see this dot, I hope? These great buttresses here and here, and in the drawing -- this realistic, sensible drawing [28:00] -- a touch of the buttress on the other side that hold the same tower. Here, of course, they are reduced to simple lines; here, too, but a great feeling of all the stonework that holds the tower up is there; everything reduced to simple verticals and horizontals. Only a touch of the double-arched windows remaining, as the great tower thrusts its way to the sky.

It isn't a very forceful or a dynamically rhythmic version as you would see in a tower like Danet's *Eiffel Tower* or Gleizes's great views of the whole earth in motion, but it is nonetheless a very scientific and a very closely reasoned study of structure. Paris; in Paris, cubism was in full blossom. [29:00] In 1911, at the Salon des Indépendants, cubism had been such a sensation that it was immediately denounced in the Chamber of Deputies.

The painting on the right, called *Trees* again, is by Mondrian. The painting on the left is by Metzinger, one of the early cubists most influential at that time. In the painting by Metzinger you have a sense of the cubist preoccupation with structure. You see how they still retain a kind

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of chiaroscuro around a tree trunk but more than anything are concerned to give this painting a feeling of underlying form, because one of the tenants of all of the cubists was that everything does have a kind of [30:00] underlying structure, a kind of formal truth.

Some of the cubists, notably Picasso, soon abandoned this idea, and we never know -- at least, we have no verbal evidence -- to what extent they believed it. Others of the cubists, notably Albert Gleizes, always retained this belief in an absolute structure underneath the world and painted it forever after. But surely it was the contact with this kind of doctrine and more this kind of structure that was decisive in Mondrian's future development.

Listen to him again on this subject: “It was during this early period of experiment that I first went to Paris. The time was around 1910” -- actually, as I said, it was late 1911 -- “when cubism was in its beginnings. I admired Matisse, Van Dongen, and the other Fauves, but I was immediately drawn to the [31:00] cubists, especially by Picasso and Léger” -- actually, I think he was more drawn by de la Fresnaye and by Metzinger -- “of all the abstractionists,” he continues, and then, in parentheses, he writes, “(Kandinsky and the Futurists) I felt that only the cubists had discovered the right path, and for a time I was much influenced by them.” Well, that is certain. He was very much influenced by them.

What he meant by saying, “Of all the abstractionists (Kandinsky and the Futurists) I felt that only the cubists had discovered the right path,” was what I just said. In 1912, Kandinsky was painting an abstraction out of himself; he was painting how he felt. The Futurists also, in their dynamic expanding art, were too emotional for him; they were not concentrating on the pure visual nature of things. The [32:00] cubists, on the other hand, were. Let's look at some of this cubist development next to some of the cubists themselves. This is a Mondrian called *The Ginger Pot* [sic].

Now, the flat table on which this still life sits is clearly visible. One reason it's so visible is because this, probably a cut of cheese, has a line of perspective that goes back and unmistakably, because of this open blank space -- or, let's say, space that is less dense than up here -- a receding plane seems to go back. The ginger pot -- this great blue pot -- while dissected in a way, is seen very simply; simply, really, as a silhouette. It's not examined, as in many cubists painting, a jug or a bowl is examined from the point of view of both a [33:00] plan and an elevation.

And curiously enough, Mondrian retains in it even one very realistic effect, and that is a spot of light, a white reflection on that part of the ginger pot that is closest to the spectator. Picasso at the same time was painting this kind of classic cubism which we so frequently associate with the beautiful *Ma Jolie* on the right, *Ma Jolie* being a kind of double pun: A pun on the song popular at the time, and a pun on the fact that the painting was made for his then-current mistress.

Notice how in the Picasso -- and perhaps those of you who have been here for the last eight weeks are sick of seeing this painting and hearing the same things about it -- the forms are oriented vertically throughout the canvas; how the space is very shallow but nevertheless quite [34:00] distinctly present. That is, this area, and this area on the side, is not treated in the kind of relief that all in the center is treated with. Also, notice that you cannot -- and it's foolish to waste

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your time trying -- recognize any particular aspects of reality except this curious [nail?] casting its shadow, which is just a reminder to you that you are dealing with a new reality.

And notice one other thing about it, because we may see it in Mondrian, how each one of these forms, divided by lines that seem to make the fragments and the facets that we associate with this kind of painting, blends into the other, either by use of color -- a brown here and a brown here -- or, at the same time, by the use of brushstroke, horizontal strokes like this carried in here, carried in here, [35:00] and carried in here, so that the whole thing creates a kind of [fugue?] of formal rhythms extraordinarily exciting to look at.

Back to Mondrian's trees. They grow more abstract. The one on the right is perhaps, next to the Picasso that you just saw, a rather sloppy pace of organization. He seems not to have made up his mind whether he's going to follow a kind of absolute rhythm of the universe, twirling and whirling, as one would see in a Delaunay or a Gleizes or rather the kind of close, tightknit [feudal?] relationship that you would see in a Picasso and Braque and which is perhaps more evident in this tree here on the left, where the two kind of feelings are combined.

He even experimented with the figure, treating it as certain [36:00] of the cubists would. This is a nude of about 1913, with its one eye. Those of you who are familiar with the École de Paris will probably be immediately reminded of Marcel Gromaire, a kind of second-generation cubist who immediately fastened upon this kind of volumetric cubism and made it his own for the rest of his life. But at the time that Mondrian made the nude on the left -- or, actually, the painting that you see on the right is a year later, 1914; a war picture, the *Artillerymen* [sic] -- Roger de la Fresnaye, whose great *Conquest of the Air* you probably all know from the Museum of Modern Art, was painting pictures such as you see there. Again, broad volumetric treatment.

All of these things Mondrian saw, and all of them he experimented with. When he went back to Holland, however, [37:00] he was cut off from all further developments in Paris. He was cut off for six years. The cubists scattered, some into the army; some to Spain; some to Portugal; some to the United States. Some died. He went back to Holland, which was neutral. He went to that same village by the sea shore, and he came up with this painting, which I can only show you in black and white, which is called *The Essential Rhythm of the Sea*.

Last night, I saw a painting at Hartford by Milton Avery which is so close to this it is extraordinary. The feeling of the waves breaking on the beach. You don't see the horizon; you just [38:00] see one wave after another finally coming to the land, which meets it. I think you can see this and accept it. The next step, because this is the crucial moment in Mondrian's development, is that drawing on the right called *Pier and Ocean*, because at this village there was a pier that had bravely marched out into the water and broke the waves.

Here, the waves come in. You can, if you like, visualize this as being seen from above. All the intricate motions of the wave sweeping down on the land, and here, the pier swinging out. I think we can show this still more clearly. Here, the pier; here, the waves broken on either side of it; [39:00] here, the eternal rhythm. For Mondrian, the waves had an eternal, true rhythm, breaking on either side, and here, now in something that you can see a very clear root of the

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Mondrian you know, the same subject with the beginning of color treatment. But I see that I'll never get done with Mondrian if I don't go a little faster, so I'll try to.

This is what happens. Everything becomes reduced to the vertical and to the horizontal, because the vertical and horizontal are the two dominant rhythms in all of life. How this ties up with a great mystical movement, even with theosophy, which Mondrian was a devotee of, is something that I'll have to rely on your attendance [40:00] at previous lecture to fill in. But I'll quote Mondrian again, because now he's departing from cubism, and he knows it, and he says, “Gradually I became aware that cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries. It was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality.

“I felt that this reality can only be established through pure plastics in its essential expression, pure plastics is unconditioned by subjective feeling and conception. It took me a long time to discover that the particularities of form and natural color evoke subjective states of feeling which obscure pure reality. The appearance of natural forms changes, but reality remains constant. To create pure reality plastically, [41:00] it is necessary to reduce natural forms to the constant elements of form and natural color to primary color.

“The aim is not to create other particular forms and colors with all their limitations, but to work toward abolishing them in the interest of a larger unity. The problem was clarified for me when I realized two things. A” -- even the way he writes is a little bit the way he paints -- “in plastic art, reality can be expressed only through the equilibrium of dynamic movement of form and color, and, B, pure means afford the most effective way of attaining this.”

During the war, in Holland, Mondrian met another Dutch painter named Theo van Doesburg, who had been working along roughly similar lines, and van Doesburg persuaded him to join [42:00] together to organize a magazine and a movement which has since been known as De Stijl, “The Style.” The Style had had an enormous influence in the creation of the modern art and the Modernism that everybody thinks of in the '20s and the '30s and the '40s and sees all around him in the streets of New York and Toronto and London and Paris and every place else today.

On the right is a van Doesburg. It's called *A Space-Time Construction* [sic], and if you can't see how easily it relates to a house, to a modern house, even, God knows, to a ranch house as they're put up today, I think I'd better give the same series of lectures over next time. On the right is a characteristic Mondrian of the '20s, and beside it is a Mies [43:00] van der Rohe house in Czechoslovakia, built in 1930. I just want you to compare the ground plans to get a vague sense, or perhaps a precise sense, of their similarity.

How the Mondrian, in its asymmetrical equilibrium, even though it achieves this through colors - red, yellow, and blue -- and black lines of varying thickness, how it achieves this kind of balance and interest is reflected in the van der Rohe ground plan setting the house on a terrace. These are things you can see all around you in New York when you walk. I think we burned out another bulb. No, there is it. That's Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology, in Chicago. I think it was built around 1950 or 1948.

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The façade, as well as the ground plan, [44:00] is clearly influenced by the Mondrian by [pulling?] shades, and if van der Rohe wanted it to make the shades of different colors, the resemblance would be even more startling. The shades, the colors, the curtains, the partitions break the essential symmetry of the building. Thus, I suppose, it is the essential symmetry of the building that would made it different and foreign to Mondrian’s ideal.

And just two more of these examples, the great Lake Shore Apartments by Mies in Chicago, where citizens used to like to make jokes about its relationship to Mondrian, again saying that if Mies wanted, or if Mondrian had been alive, he would have installed different window shades and absolutely regulated on the basis of aesthetic desire which people in which apartments could pull which shades when. [45:00] And again, a back view of the same structure.

Now, everyone, I think, must be prepared to admit that the style of Mondrian, the neoplasticism of Mondrian, had an extraordinary influence and is still having an extraordinary influence on the structure of our cities all over the world. But we are truly to consider something a little bit further; we’re trying to see, as I said in the very beginning, if these paintings are more than a simple expression of what became a dominant style in our living. And I would like to say that Mondrian would have considered this a good thing, had he lived to see it.

He wouldn’t have necessarily considered all the buildings [46:00] that have been put up in the name of this style as good buildings, but he aimed, eventually, as did so many of the other artists conditioned by the same belief in an absolute relief, at an art that was so universal and so pure and so social that it did not any longer have to be made by individuals. He, like, again, so many of his contemporaries in cubism, felt that the ultimate of all was to be integrated with life, not in the sense of reducing personal artistic expression to the utilitarian, but to raising the utilitarian so that every aspect of it became art.

Now, let’s go on and look at the few slides I have remaining and investigate this question of individual painted expression. And one way we can investigate it is by [47:00] looking at Mondrian’s painting as it changed and by pointing out some very obvious relationships between the style of each painting in different periods and where Mondrian was and what he was looking at and what was the reality which, although, essentially, he would believe universal and absolutely, nevertheless seems to have had distinct references to where he was and what he saw.

The slide on the left I think is somewhat out of focus. That’s better. This is *Black, White, and Red [sic]* on the left from 1936, a very simple and descriptive title. It is in perfect balance, perfect harmony; this small black dot against this long, easy [48:00] red. Now, as you look at it, enjoy the Mondragon for the way it breaks up the spaces; this one so big, with a thin black line; this one smaller, with a thicker black line; this one slightly bigger, with a black line like this, but extending to the edge so that it moves very gradually. It’s really rather breathtaking how interesting it is.

The painting on the right is very different. What is its difference? Its quality is so much more lively; its harmony is absolutely, as is the one on the left, but the nature of this harmony, the feeling that it gives you, is quite different. Why? Because the yellow is so much more

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“Cubism and Abstract Art: Piet Mondrian” by Daniel Robbins, 1962

overwhelming; because the patches of color -- the blue, [49:00] the red, the yellow, and the black acting as a color on the bottom -- are so lively; because the spots of red are smaller; because the structure is somehow more intricate. It has a kind of almost gay feeling.

And if you are willing to accept this all-too-brief analysis of the painting, perhaps it won't surprise you to know that it's called *Place de la Concorde*, and then, if you know the Place de la Concorde, if you've stood in it, you can see, you can feel the balance of those two heavy, beautiful Jacques-Angé [*sic*] Gabriel buildings on this side of the square; the comparative gaiety and the weight of the entrance to the Tuileries on the right [50:00] with its two buildings; the bridges that go across to the Chamber of Deputies down here; and the big empty spaces that lead up to the Champs over here on this side. The equivalent, I think, is fantastic.

Just before the war, the Second World War, Mondrian was forced to leave Paris. His first stop was in London. The painting on the left is called *Trafalgar Square*. Do you know it? I expect many of you do. This too has an entirely different feeling. It has a quality totally different from the quality of the *Place de la Concorde*. It is busier; it is less elegant; it is vibrant; it is full of activity. And yet it too [51:00] retains a kind of essential harmony, but a different kind of harmony.

And so, I expect it won't surprise you that when dear friends of Mondrian, who was by then 70 years old, to rescue him from the Blitz, brought him to New York in 1940, his style should have taken an enormous leap. The painting on the right is called *New York City*. In fact, it took such an enormous leap that many fans of Mondrian, many of his ardent followers in France, felt that he'd taken leave of his senses and had ruined his style. Because what is missing from that painting on the right that is present in all the other Mondrian paintings of the 1920s and '30s? He has abandoned black lines so that his color should be even more vital and throbbing, [52:00] and his rhythm even more jazzed up and fast-paced than it ever was before.

And where a yellow crosses underneath a red there is a new sense of space and height, and where a yellow crosses a yellow -- there, or there, or there, or there -- although it'd be the same yellow, that intersection point has a greater luminosity, a kind of new brightness. The same is true of where this blue passes under the red. This is the same red, but to you now, even in a slide, which is but a faint reproduction of the real painting, that red takes on a jarring extra [note?], a new intensity.

Everybody knows this painting, and I think, [53:00] it being done in 1942 and 1943, it may even evoke very distinct, very sharp memories of those years. It's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Mondrian lived on 59th Street near Fifth Avenue in a building that's since been torn down. He used to walk around at night, and he used to see the blazing lights flashing on and off. And he used to look up, and he used to say that the whole city and all the skyscrapers at night lit up with their thousands and thousands of windows, were *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.

And this then doesn't become anything so simple as looking down on the ground plan of New York City from an airplane on a clear day or looking down on Broadway at night with all its lights, but it is facade and elevations and rhythms and movement, the essential [54:00] regularity and rhythm and excitement of the city. This is a great painting, and if it does have the

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individuality I think, for example, that it does, and the individual expression, [for all that?] at the same time, this, like a painting of the '30s or like a painting of the '20s, has a kind of absolute harmony.

Then, his very last painting, which is an unfinished painting which is called *Victory Boogie Woogie*, has even more of that. It is ablaze with light. Now, that's all I've got to show you of Mondrian, and I've run out of time, but I want to say a few concluding words. Mondrian, of all these painters who I've talked of who experienced cubism [55:00] and went into abstract art, is the most well-known. Everywhere he went, he had followers: In Paris, in London, in New York. He inaugurated a kind of painting that is still very much with us.

And behind it all was that idea from the early twentieth century and from the late nineteenth century that the function of art was to make man aware of universal truth, and that this function was not simply the function of putting a painting on the wall for an individual to look at. It was a function that could even be not usurped but participated in by a whole variety of artists who could paint picture interchangeably. It was a desire to integrate decoration with life and raise the whole of it to something beautiful and stimulating, stimulating to [56:00] the imagination, to the eye, to the mind.

This was a whole optimistic century at its beginning. This was a century, in many artists' belief, that felt that, socially, something could be done to reshape the world according to the absolute structure and logic of the world which they all fundamentally believed existed. Thanks very much. (applause)

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Piet Mondrian / Daniel Robbins, 1962/4/12. Reel-to-Reel collection. A0004. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York