

Abstract art was the inevitable result of the reaction against naturalism that began in the 1880s. As we have seen, it took two main directions, according to whether the emphasis was placed on content or on form. In the first category were the symbolists, with their emphasis on the spiritual meaning of painting; in the second were the post-impressionists, who did not deny art its spiritual rôle but thought that a renewal of pictorial language should come first. It needed a particular conjunction of both streams for abstract art to emerge.

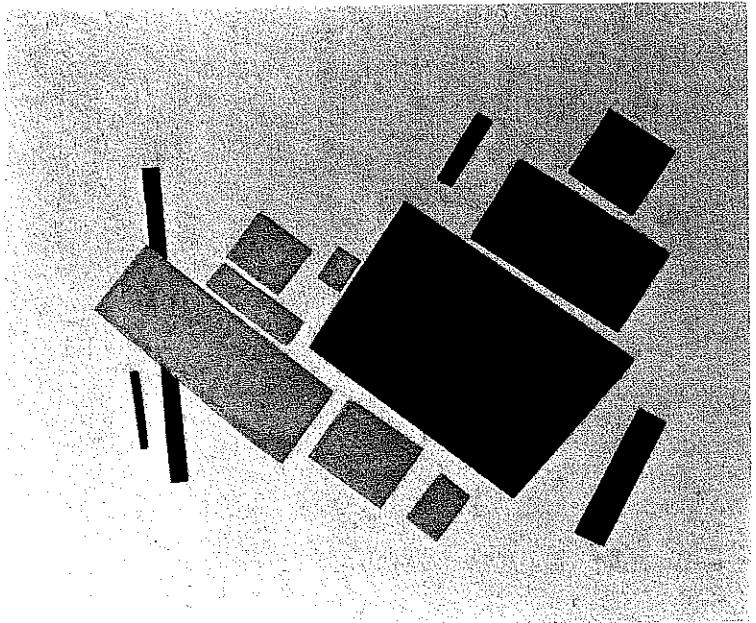
It is perfectly clear that art grew more *abstracted* in the last decades of the 19th century and the first of this, but that is not quite the same thing as a totally *abstract* art, which for all this time was no more than an unattainable idea. An original concept is unthinkable until it occurs to somebody: from that moment on it tends to be a commonplace. This is what happened with abstract art, and the two men who can really be said to have invented a new kind of painting were Kandinsky and Mondrian. Unlike Picasso and Braque in the making of cubism, they worked independently and their painting has nothing in common stylistically. But Kandinsky provided the philosophical justification for an abstract art and Mondrian showed what it could look like.

The story begins with the exhibition in Moscow in the late 1890s of one of Monet's *Haystack* paintings. It was seen by a young Russian intellectual, Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), on whom it left a lasting impression. As he said many years later: 'Deep inside me was born the first faint doubt as to the importance of an "object" as the necessary element in painting.' Kandinsky suspected what now seems plain, that in the *Haystack* pictures, like the contemporary series of *Cathedrals*, Monet was more concerned with recording his own changing perceptions than with depicting the object.



125 VASSILY KANDINSKY  
(1866-1944) *Study for Composition IV*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 3' 1" x 4' 5" (95 x 128). Tate Modern, London

126 KASIMIR MALEVICH  
(1878-1935) *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 23" x 19" (56.5 x 48.5). Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York



It was not until 1910, however, that Kandinsky felt ready to postulate the objectless picture. He had left Russia to settle in Munich, and soon became a leader of the German *avant-garde*; he spent some months in Paris, where he was able to familiarize himself with French developments up to and including the fauve paintings of Matisse. This gave him the further necessary clues; he realized that colour had been the first constituent of painting to be 'liberated', particularly in the work of Gauguin and Van Gogh, who had found it easier to paint grass red than to distort the forms of a house or a figure. He also perceived that lines as well as colours could have symbolic meanings, and it is likely that he made a serious study of Seurat's ideas in this area. In fact, Seurat's theorizing about the different elements of painting – colour, line, tone, composition, rhythm – almost adumbrated an abstract art.

In his own paintings, Kandinsky concentrated on colour, which he saw as the prime liberating factor, with its own expressive power. He painted landscapes of the countryside around Munich, like the *Painting with Houses* of 1909 (Ill. 127). It was this picture, or one very like it, which gave rise to another decisive moment in his development. He has told us in his own words what happened:

'I was returning from my sketching, deep in thought, when, on opening the studio door, I was suddenly confronted with a picture of indescribable incandescent loveliness. Bewildered, I stopped, staring at it. The painting lacked all subject, depicted no recognizable object and was entirely composed of bright patches of colour. Finally I approached closer, and only then recognized it for what it really was – my own painting, standing on its side on the easel ...

'One thing became clear to me – that objectiveness, the depiction of objects, needed no place in my paintings and was indeed harmful to them.'

The main problem, however, was how to create a non-objective picture that was not simply pattern or decoration. What form would it take, and what would it mean? These were the two questions that now preoccupied Kandinsky.

As far as the picture's appearance was concerned, Kandinsky determined to push the abstracting process

as far as it would go, hoping that in doing so he would evolve an independent and abstract pictorial language. The *Study for Composition IV* of 1911 (Ill. 125) shows him at the mid-way stage, where every shape in the picture still has a recognizable source. The subject is a battle between Russian warriors in mountainous country – a dream-like fairy-tale setting which had always fascinated Kandinsky. At first glance perhaps the picture looks as abstract as the one on Kandinsky's easel, but after a little contemplation it can easily be deciphered. In the centre are two horsemen, armed with lances, locked in conflict; on the right are red-hatted pike-men; in the background a castle with a great entrance; in the sky a flock of birds; sun and falling rain account for the rainbow; and so on.

Kandinsky also introduces some interesting innovations. He suppresses the line of the horizon, which is the dominant line in landscape painting; the mountain scenery gives him an excuse to break it up into diagonals. This immediately affects the whole space of the painting – gone is that ever-present, restful, dividing horizontal, which is so familiar that we overlook its psychological significance; instead, there is pictorial space organized on an all-over basis, as in cubist painting.

Line and colour begin to take on an independent existence. Lines break away, creating dynamism and setting up rhythms which act and interact across the surface. Colour alone expresses form, in terms of flat planes, parallel to the picture surface, hovering in an indeterminate space. Objects and landscapes are no longer lit from an outside source: the light comes from the colour itself. Composition is the all-important unifying force. Kandinsky had begun to give all his pictures abstract musical titles: *improvisations, studies*, and *compositions* for the seven major pictures of the 1910-14 period.

By the time he had reached the enormous *Composition VII* (Ill. 128), late in 1913, Kandinsky considered himself at the threshold of abstraction. Yet subject-matter persists. For this is a resurrection painting, the culmination of a series of *Last Judgments, Deluges, All Saints' Days* and similar compositions in which Kandinsky's apocalyptic, visionary imagination is at work. Like the contemporary *Fate of Animals* (Ill. 101) of his friend Franz Marc, *Composition VII* seems prophetic of the



127 VASSILY KANDINSKY (1879-1944) *Painting with Houses*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 3'2" x 4'6" (97 x 130). Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam



128 VASSILY KANDINSKY  
(1866-1944) *Composition VII*,  
1913. Oil on canvas, 6'7" x 9'10"  
(200 x 300). Tretyakov Gallery,  
Moscow

impending war: there is both a desperate unease and a cry for spiritual revelation in the painting, as if it were an image of the struggle between good and evil.

Kandinsky was a man of great energy and drive. He was interested in the relationships between all the arts, and explored equivalence between colour and sound and action in short plays entitled *Green Sound* and *Yellow Sound*. He was a natural leader, and in Munich organized one *avant-garde* art society after another, culminating in 1911 with the expressionist group, the *Blauer Reiter*. The name comes from the title of one of Kandinsky's early pictures: it was chosen because he liked the image of the horseman, which for him symbolized the artist's aspirations, and because Marc liked the colour blue.

Most important of Kandinsky's extra activities was his theoretical writing, and in particular his essay of 1910-11, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), which in effect justified the development towards the abstract which he was contemplating in his painting. His argument is more emotional than rational, and can easily be faulted, but it does give us Kandinsky's definition of a non-objective painting, and thus answers the question posed earlier in this chapter.

Kandinsky considers the meaning of the painting from two angles - psychological and spiritual. He discusses at some length the effects that colours have upon us, inviting general agreement for the proposition that blue is a heavenly colour; that green is restful, 'lacking any undertone of joy, grief and passion'; that yellow is aggressive and dynamic; and so on. Like Seurat,

he goes on to associate colours with linear directions, and later, in another essay, with forms, because colour in painting must assume some form. Kandinsky believed that these 'form and colour combinations' had intrinsic expressive significance. In such paintings as *With the Black Arch* (1912, Ill. 129), he tries to isolate them without reference to the forms from which they derive: as we have already seen this is not completely successful, and only later in his career was he able to invent totally abstract forms.

In both painting and writing in these years, 1910-14, Kandinsky was a man struggling in the dark. He was aware of this - it is part of his historic importance that he admitted that neither the creation nor the appreciation of a work of art is an exclusively conscious process. The artist's urge to make the painting comes from what he called 'inner necessity'. Thus the artist is a kind of visionary, or seer, offering, through his work, glimpses of a reality more profound than the material world we know.

Kandinsky, a Russian Orthodox Christian of strong religious convictions, had, like so many of his generation, come to believe in the need for a spiritual revival in the materialistic West. He went further to feel, as did both Mondrian and Brancusi, that this could come about only through the study of the ancient teachings of the Hindu and Buddhist religions, which accepted the interpenetration of physical and spiritual. After all, if the material appearance of nature was an illusion (and contemporary science was confirming this supposition), was not the artist justified in trying to discover some super-reality? Thus Kandinsky's attempt as a painter to break away from representation assumed tremendous importance - it had to be a way to a new kind of religious art of far greater human significance than anything hitherto practised. Hence Kandinsky's later remark that Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling depiction of God creating Adam was eclipsed for him by the meeting of a triangle and a circle.

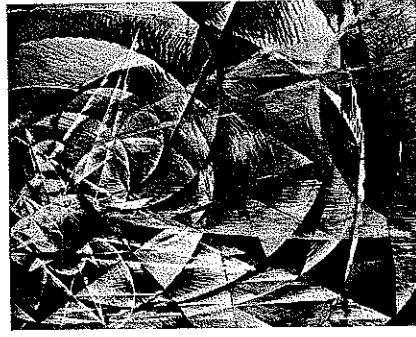
Other artists were thinking along these same lines. Every late 19th-century artistic development seemed to point towards increasing abstraction, but, as we have seen, the implications of this could be interpreted in different ways. It was from the conjunction of French post-impressionism with a symbolist belief in the spiritual



129 VASSILY KANDINSKY (1866-1944) *With the Black Arch*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 6'2" x 6'5" (188 x 195.5). Musée d'Art Moderne, Georges Pompidou, Paris



130 FRANK KUPKA (1871-1957)  
*Amorpha, Fugue for two Colours*,  
1912. Oil on canvas, 6'11" x 7'3"  
(211 x 220). National Gallery,  
Prague



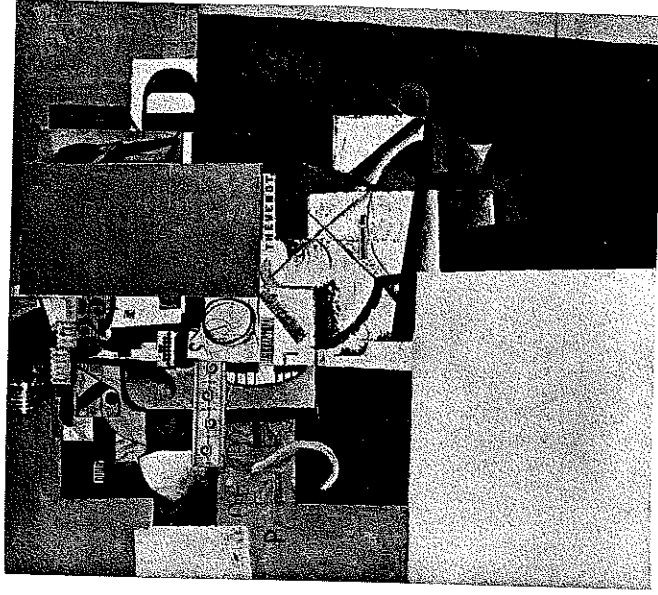
131 GIACOMO BALLA (1874-  
1958) *Mercury passing before the  
Sun*, 1914. Tempera on canvas, 39 3/8" x  
47 1/4" (100 x 120). Collection Gianni  
Mattioli, Guggenheim, Venice

values of art that abstract art emerged. One without the other was not enough, as Kandinsky saw very clearly. Artists primarily concerned with formal problems, like Picasso and Braque and Matisse, could not conceive of an objectless painting except as pure decoration, whereas many late symbolists, particularly in France and Russia, were ambitiously and unsuccessfully trying to paint pictorial equivalents of music or architecture, or representations of the origins of life and of the universe.

Working in Paris, in contact with Delaunay and Duchamp, the Czech painter, Frank Kupka (1871-1957), pursued all these ideas, calling the results *Fugue, Philosophic Architecture, Creation, Cosmic Spring* and the like. But the few pictures that he exhibited at this time - for example *Amorpha, Fugue for two Colours* (1912, but subsequently repainted: Ill. 130) at the Autumn Salon of 1912 - attracted no public attention and influenced no other painter. In any case, the forms of the *Amorpha, Fugue* painting can be easily traced back to Kupka's earlier pictures of a girl with a multi-coloured ball; and slightly later work, like *Vertical Planes III* and *Solo of a Brown Line*, shown in 1913, probably confirmed the universally-held Parisian belief that a wholly abstract art could only be meaningless pattern-making. Even Delaunay's *Discs* (Ill. 116), like certain contemporary works of the Italian futurist, Giacomo Balla (1871-1958; Ill. 131) are properly regarded either as cosmic symbolism or as straightforward pictorial exercises, but not as true abstract paintings.

It is important to make this distinction, and to establish clearly the difference between abstracted and abstract (i.e. non-representational) paintings, if only to appreciate the crucial historical position of Mondrian. Kandinsky's uncertainty about the practical application of his theories was demonstrated during his return to Russia during the war, when he found other painters experimenting with abstraction and fell under their influence.

The outstanding personality in Moscow was Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), who by 1913 had worked through impressionism, symbolism, primitivism, cubism and futurism to reach the stage of what he called 'non-sense realism'. In the *Woman beside an Advertising Pillar* of 1914 (Ill. 132), Malevich is in process of converting a playful use of cubist collage and *trompe-l'œil* into something more rigorous by the introduction of painted squares



132 KASIMIR MALEVICH (1  
1935) *Woman beside an Advertising  
Pillar*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 2  
25 1/4" (71 x 64). Collection  
Ijke Museum, Amsterdam

and rectangles. These later became the elements of suprematism, the ultimate destination of Malevich's pictorial development, allegedly first demonstrated in the backdrop of a futurist opera, *Victory over the Sun*, performed at St Petersburg in December 1913. The first suprematist pictures, including *Black Square on a White Ground*, were exhibited in December 1915: the date of their actual execution is uncertain.

Malevich's rejection of the objective world was much more thoroughgoing than Kandinsky's. He defined suprematism as 'the supremacy of feeling in art', and invented a vocabulary of regular shapes to serve as equivalents for physical sensations. Suprematist paintings can be attempts to define and extend this new formal vocabulary, or to represent feelings; for example, a painting with a diagonal arrangement of slim rectangles across the canvas is called *Airplane Flying* (Ill. 126). The sensation paintings can be quite elaborate in design, presumably attempting a pictorial analogue for complex feelings, but Malevich must have been immediately confronted with the intractable problem of interpretation. Can there be an objective reading of such works?

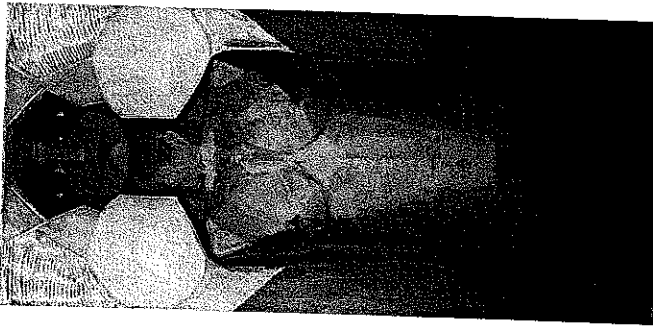
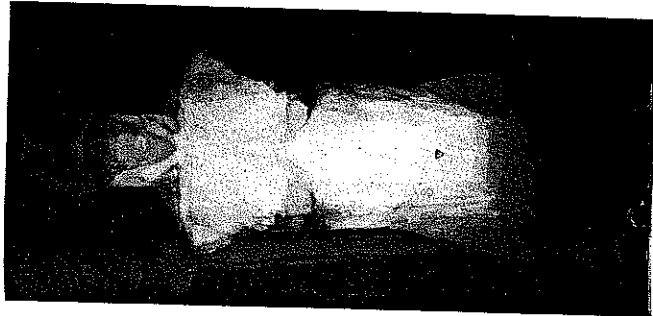
Malevich's younger followers, like El Lissitzky (1890-1941), were inclined to think not, but could see how such formal arrangements might be usefully adapted to serve architecture and design (see p. 208).

Malevich himself clung to a mystical view of art. A devout Christian, his paintings aspire to the form of the cross, and to the virginal purity of the colour white. Thus the culmination of suprematism (and apparently Malevich's last picture) is the *White Cross on a White Ground* of 1918. After this there was nothing more for Malevich to paint, so he stopped. In the early 1920s he made some abstract architectural models (Ill. 198) which unquestionably helped to shape the developing international style in architecture, but his contribution to fine art was at an end.

Almost all the painters who launched out at some kind of abstraction in the years after 1910 found themselves in a similar impasse. Formally they were confronted with a limited and sometimes arbitrary pictorial vocabulary, and it became difficult to justify the assertions made for the meaning of abstract pictures. There was an evident relevance for design and architecture, as the Russians and later the Germans realized, but this seemed to be the only possible application of the abstract experiments of the 1910-18. And had it not been for the persistence of the Dutch painter, Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), abstract art might have disappeared entirely.

The pattern of Mondrian's career is very similar to Kandinsky's: he follows a parallel course with a comparable end in view. As a young artist he had been attracted by both naturalism and symbolism, each of which had a strong following in the Netherlands. Then his work had an expressionist phase when nature was charged with the painter's emotions, conveyed in the colours and forms of clouds, trees, haystacks and sand dunes. Windmills, lighthouses and church towers stand isolated yet illuminated, emblems of the painter himself. Mondrian went through a religious crisis, and came into contact with Rudolf Steiner and the theosophists. Like Kandinsky, he shared their interest in Oriental religion, and their belief that this source alone could nurture the great spiritual rebirth of the West.

The *Evolution Triptych* of 1910-11 (Ill. 133) is a theosophical altarpiece: it has that magic triadic structure that other symbolist painters made use of - for example,



Munch in his *Dance of Life* (Ill. 80). A figure stands in a state of trance, attaining spiritual illumination; the dominant colour is a heavenly blue, with yellow stars and passion flowers. It is a most curious picture, which marked for Mondrian the turning-point from symbolism to abstraction. The title, *Evolution*, is a cryptic one - Mondrian throws some light on the reasons for his choice in a 1914 notebook entry:

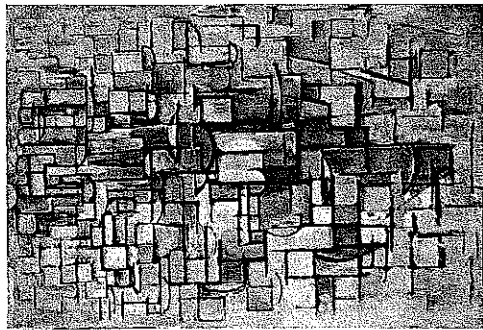
'Two roads lead to the spiritual: the road of doctrinal teaching, of direct exercise (meditation, etc.), and the slow but certain road of evolution. One sees in art the slow growth of spirituality, of which the artists themselves are unconscious.

'To approach the spiritual in art.'

Paradoxically, the triptych does not in fact illustrate the slow road of evolution: it is an attempt to get quick results, a doctrinal picture, an immediate incentive to meditation. Mondrian found that he had to take another path if his aims were to be realized.

He began by making a special study of the paintings of Cézanne and, early in 1912, moved to Paris so that

133. PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) *Evolution Triptych*, 1910-11. Oil on canvas, each 5'10" x 2'9" (178 x 85). Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



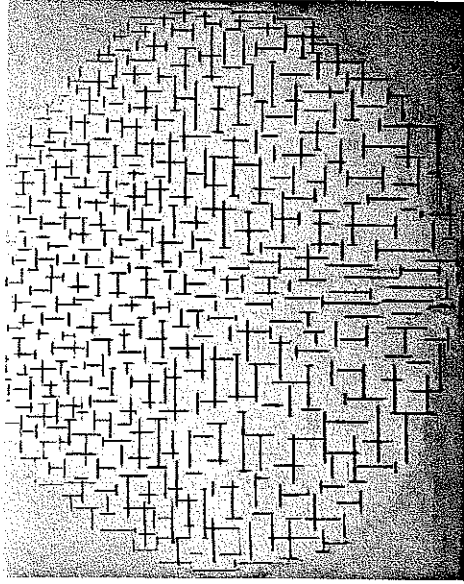
134 PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) *Tableau No. 1, 1913*. Oil on canvas, 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (96 x 64). Rijksmuseum Kröller Müller, Otterlo

he could identify with that progression of French painting which leads from impressionism to analytical cubism. No outsider ever painted such convincing cubist pictures: some are so close to Braque and Picasso's work of 1910-12 as to be almost indistinguishable. It was the hermetic, most abstract phase of analytical cubism that interested Mondrian; so too did the experimental *Contrast of Forms* pictures that Léger was painting, with their primary colours, rhythmic movement and simple contrasting shapes.

Mondrian's work in this first Paris period is abstracted, not abstract painting. True, cubist analysis is taken to an extreme, where the subject all but disappears into the texture of the painting. But there are always clues left behind, and the pictures can be grouped together according to the limited number of subjects from which they formally derive — the single tree, the church façade, the Paris buildings with hoardings or scaffoldings. The painting that Mondrian called *Tableau No. 1* (Ill. 134) is based on a façade: the structural elements are emphasized by exaggeration of horizontal and vertical lines. The composition fades at the corners: it seems to grow outward from the centre, an effect that is later to assume great importance in Mondrian's work.

Mondrian exhibited *Tableau No. 1* in Amsterdam in the autumn of 1913. He kept in close touch with Holland, and was at home in the summer of 1914 when war broke out. Prevented from returning to Paris, and away from the stimulus of its intensive artistic activity, Mondrian now had time to consider the position he had reached. Living by the sea, he painted the *Pier and Ocean* pictures (Ill. 135). Traditional perspective is here eliminated in favour of a new concept of space in which atmospheric effects disappear and the picture surface pulsates with a rhythmic pattern of linear forms. The *Pier and Ocean* pictures are also known as *Plus and Minus Compositions*, for the very good reason that the formal elements begin to take on a life of their own.

Even so, Mondrian was still not satisfied. As he later wrote: 'Looking at the sea, sky and stars, I represented them through a multiplicity of crosses. I was impressed by the greatness of nature, and I tried to express expansion, repose, unity . . . But I felt that I still worked as an impressionist, and expressed a particular feeling, not reality as it is.'

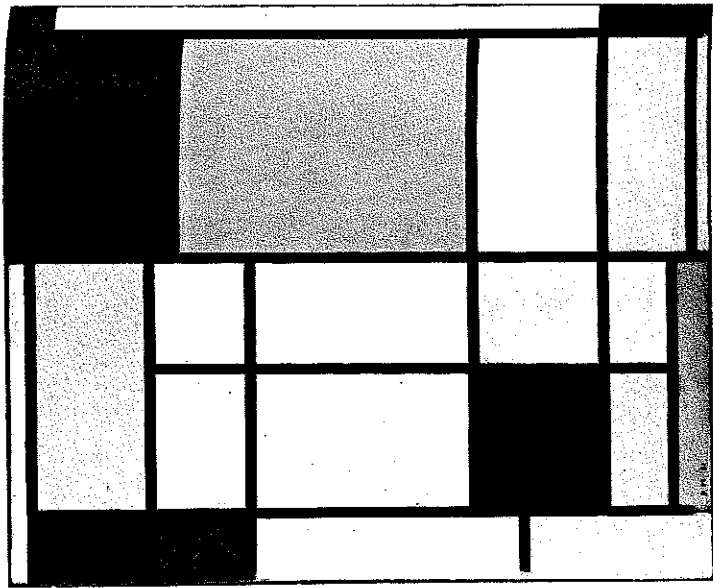


135 PIET MONDRIAN (1944) *Composition No. 10: and Ocean, 1915*. Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (85 x 108). F. museum Kröller Müller, Otterlo

In 1916 Mondrian completed only a single picture. He told a friend that he considered his work finished; his artistic development seemed to have come almost to a halt. If one took the abstracting process to its logical end, but one remained an impressionist, as Mondrian admitted he was, what could the next step be? He was in precisely the position that Braque and Picasso found themselves at the end of 1911, when analytical cubism reached the point at which they had to choose between giving up the link with the object altogether, or making some new connection between painting and reality.

Mondrian, however, still believed in the possibility of an objectless picture that was not a pattern or a piece of decoration. Just at this point he happened to meet a former Catholic priest turned theologian, M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, who was propounding a neo-Platonic system which he called Positive Mysticism, or Plastic Mathematics. Schoenmaekers claimed that his system would enable its initiates to penetrate, by contemplation, the hidden construction of reality. Plastic Mathematics depends on the resolution of a fundamental pattern of contradictions — active and passive, male and female, space and time, darkness and light, and so on — in its geometrical reduction of horizontal and vertical. These in turn were related to cosmic forces — the vertical to the rays from the sun, and the horizontal to the earth's constant movement around the sun. Schoenmaekers also concerned himself with colour: he recognized the

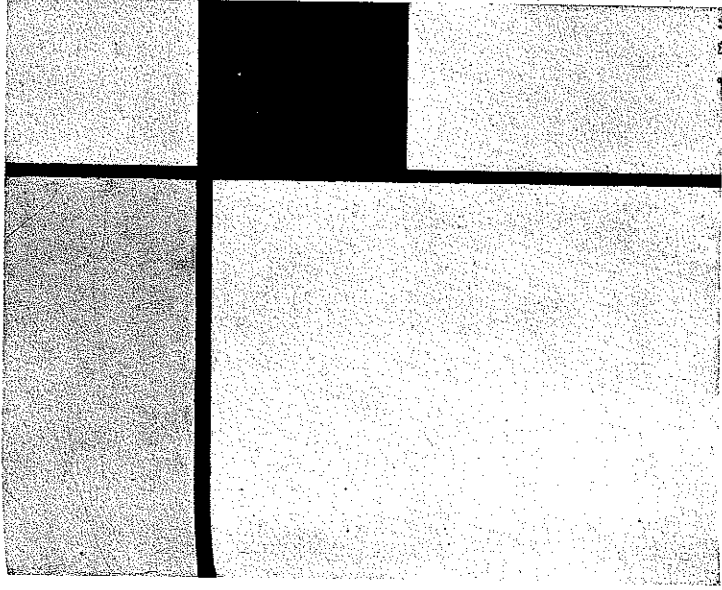
136 PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) *Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1921. Oil on canvas,  $31\frac{1}{2}'' \times 19\frac{1}{4}''$  (80 x 50). Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



existence of only the three primaries. Yellow for him was the radiant movement of the sun's beam and blue the infinite expanse of space; the contrasting colour, red, was the median, mating colour.

Schoenmaekers had no more interest in the visual arts than the theosophists, Mrs Annie Besant and the Rev. C. W. Leadbeater, who had provided abstract thought forms to meditate upon. But for Mondrian these ideas were a revelation, because they provided what all the other near-abstract artists had been unable to discover – a way of investing a painting with spiritual significance without external reference. The symbolic meaning that prevents abstract art from being no more than aimless pattern-making is inherent in the work itself. This is because, according to Schoenmaekers, the spiritual is best expressed in such pure plastic terms as the primary colours, and the contrast of darkness and light, of horizontal and vertical.

It took Mondrian a year or two to apply these ideas to his own painting, with results that can be best described as the invention of abstract art. He suspended coloured



137 PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) *Composition with Blue and Yellow*, 1932. Oil on canvas  $16\frac{1}{4}'' \times 13''$  (41.5 x 33). The Philadelphia Museum of Art (A. E. Gallatin Collection)

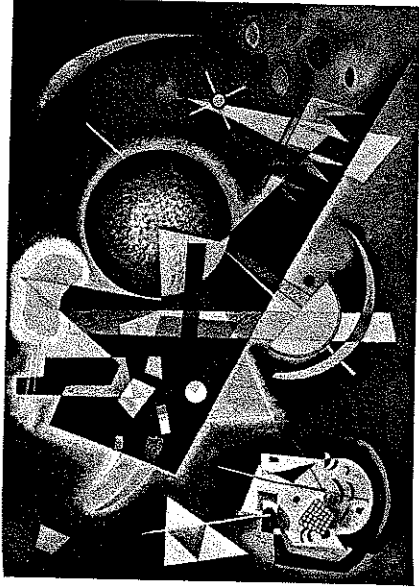
rectangles against a white ground; he made the forms overlap, and then held them with a grid that covers the entire picture surface. In the lozenge pictures of 1919 he broke away from the traditional rectangular picture format, only to revert to it almost immediately. Finally, by 1927, he had found the kind of composition that adhered to his basic principles: three primary colours, three tones (black, grey, white), and the symbolic opposition of horizontal and vertical. The lines inevitably produce rectangular planes, and whether a Mondrian painting like the *Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue* of 1921 (Ill. 136) is a pattern of coloured rectangles on a black ground or a grid of black lines against coloured space is part of the essential ambiguity, the ultimate mystery of any work of art.

Like Kandinsky, Mondrian felt it necessary to use words to defend his artistic position. In a series of articles he defined neo-plasticism, as he called his new kind of painting, adapting a term from Schoenmaekers. Neo-plasticism transcends romanticism and expressionism, because it takes art beyond the personal, and one of

Mondrian's main objectives is to eliminate the ego in art. It is the universal force within us all that art should be concerned with: our deep, unconscious responses to the world we inhabit. The aim of neo-plastic art is to achieve harmony and balance: disequilibrium creates tragedy, which is 'a curse to mankind'. Thus Mondrian's art is revealed as essentially utopian. As he said, 'The new way of seeing . . . must lead to a new society, as it led to a new art: a society combining two elements of equivalent value, the material and the spiritual. A society of harmonious proportions.' The paintings proffer this ideal of universal concord; they are balanced, ordered, optimistic, embodying the human values of non-violence, serenity and clarity. 'In the vital reality of the abstract,' Mondrian claimed, 'the new man has outgrown the sentiments of nostalgia, joy, rapture, sadness, horror, etc.: in the emotion made constant by beauty these are rendered pure and clarified.'

As with Matisse, this anti-tragic orientation necessarily limits the emotional appeal of Mondrian's art: it has no purgative function. In the *Composition with Blue and Yellow* of 1932 (Ill. 137) there is a suggestion of a cruciform composition, and the absolute simplicity, purity and rightness of the work may invite a religious analogy, but, unlike Malevich, Mondrian was not tempted into regarding his paintings as Christian icons. Clearly one might interpret the meeting of vertical and horizontal as symbolic of salvation and damnation, life and death, light and darkness, male and female or any other pair of oppositions, but the paintings exist as self-sufficient objects, representing nothing but themselves. They are full of ambiguities – for example, though strictly confined to the picture rectangle, the planes and black lines of the compositions are infinitely extendable. Space loses its illusionistic quality, and becomes something inseparable from the forms in the picture, yet we are always uncertain of the relative situation of one element *vis-à-vis* another.

Despite the apparent limitations of his pictorial vocabulary, and the fact that he seemed to have arrived at a final statement in the mid-1920s, Mondrian persisted in defining the law of his own artistic development as 'always further'. After a period of simplicity with the white square dominating the composition, came the repeated black horizontals and verticals of the late Paris



138 VASSILY KANDINSKY  
(1866-1944) *In Blue*, 1925. Oil  
cardboard, 31 1/2" x 43 1/4" (49 x 111  
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,  
Düsseldorf)

and London pictures. Mondrian was a committed city-dweller: the greens and browns of nature had no more place in his life than in his art. He spent his last years in New York, and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* of 1942-43 (Ill. 139) shows him capable of a new response to a new situation. Static balance gives way to a more dynamic equilibrium. That obsession with the rhythmic throb of existence, evident in the *Pier and Ocean* pictures, now returns in the rectangles of pure colour that displace the black lines. Mondrian came to regard his earlier work as 'drawing in oil', implying that this final insistence on colour points the way forward for painting.

Mondrian's influence, direct and indirect, has been considerable, possibly greater than any other 20th-century artist. In 1917 it was already obvious to Theo van Doesburg (born C. E. M. Kupper, 1883-1931) that the principles of the new abstract painting and the new plastic awareness were applicable to both architecture and design. He conceived of an all-embracing modern style, entirely devoid of ornament, and based on three primary colours and on the right angle – and thus on rectangles and cubes. It was a fundamental enough conception to be called simply *De Stijl* (style), and this was the name of the movement and of the monthly magazine through which the indefatigable van Doesburg disseminated his ideas.

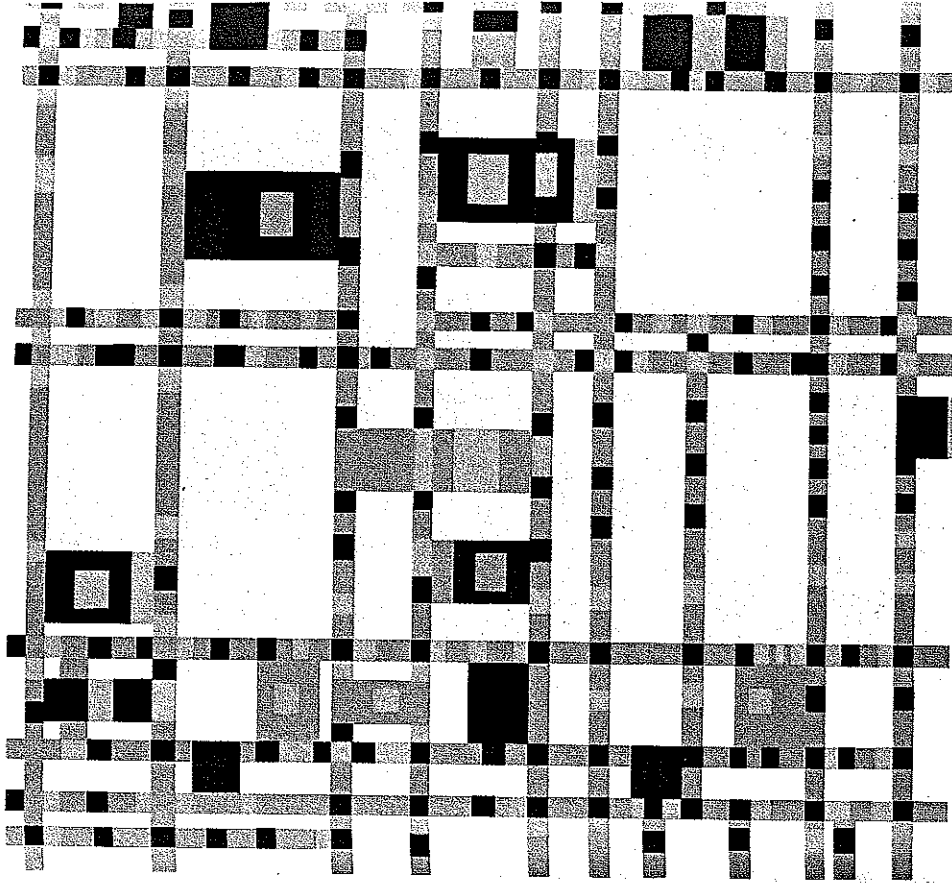
In post-war Europe there was an irresistible attraction in this revolutionary new beginning which swept aside the now-tarnished romantic individualism of expressionist art and architecture with a vision of an ideal and



universal just society. In 1920-21 van Doesburg transferred his activities to the aesthetically fertile, war-scarred soil of Germany, and for a time *De Stijl* was published from Weimar. In 1923 he exhibited projects for *De Stijl* architecture in Paris, which caught the interest of Léger and Le Corbusier. Van Doesburg soon discovered that his point of view was close to that of the Russian constructivist followers of the suprematist Malevich (e.g. Lissitzky) who were being driven out of Soviet Russia by an increasingly reactionary artistic policy. How the impact of these combined aesthetic philosophies transformed the most influential art and design school in Europe, Walter Gropius's Bauhaus at Weimar, and thereby revolutionized modern architecture, will be discussed in the last chapter.

The Bauhaus was also important as one of the few places to offer a haven for abstract painters, then and for many years an embattled minority facing public apathy and artistic hostility. Another Soviet refugee, Kandinsky, joined the teaching staff in 1922 and remained there until the school was closed by the Nazis in 1933. Kandinsky's Russian years (1914-21) had been relatively unproductive, and largely occupied with the administration of art schools and museums. When he began to paint again, the influence on his work was clearly that of the younger suprematists and constructivists, Malevich in particular. The informal elements of the pre-1915 pictures are now disciplined into neat, geometric shapes - straight lines, regular curves, parallel bars, squares, circles, triangles.

Kandinsky's Bauhaus paintings, like such theoretical essays as *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), are the direct extension of his expressionist, Munich, period, and they continue to parallel Mondrian's development. But the later compositions conspicuously lack the serene simplicity of Mondrian's neo-plasticism: they resolutely persist in their latent symbolism, offering suggestions of mysterious rituals and the movements of strange worlds. In the toy-like harbour and boats of *In Blue* (1925) (Ill. 138) Kandinsky shares the fantasy of his Bauhaus colleague, Paul Klee (see p. 159), but within the context of what might otherwise be regarded as an abstract composition they are a curiously disturbing element. In his final period in Paris, from 1933 to 1944, Kandinsky also developed a distinctive decorative style, which revived certain art nouveau mannerisms (a whip-



lash line, for example), and drew on patterns and symbols from such exotic cultures as those of Egypt and pre-Columbian America. His rich and convoluted pictorial vocabulary becomes increasingly difficult to interpret: the personal isolation of his last years is reflected in this private hermetic language that altogether lacks the universality of Mondrian's abstract art.

Mondrian himself kept somewhat detached from van Doesburg's activities on the part of *De Stijl* - though he by no means disapproved of this radical extension of his ideas, which he thought equally applicable to literature, to the dance and to every field of human endeavour. Living in Paris from 1920 to 1938, he lent his support

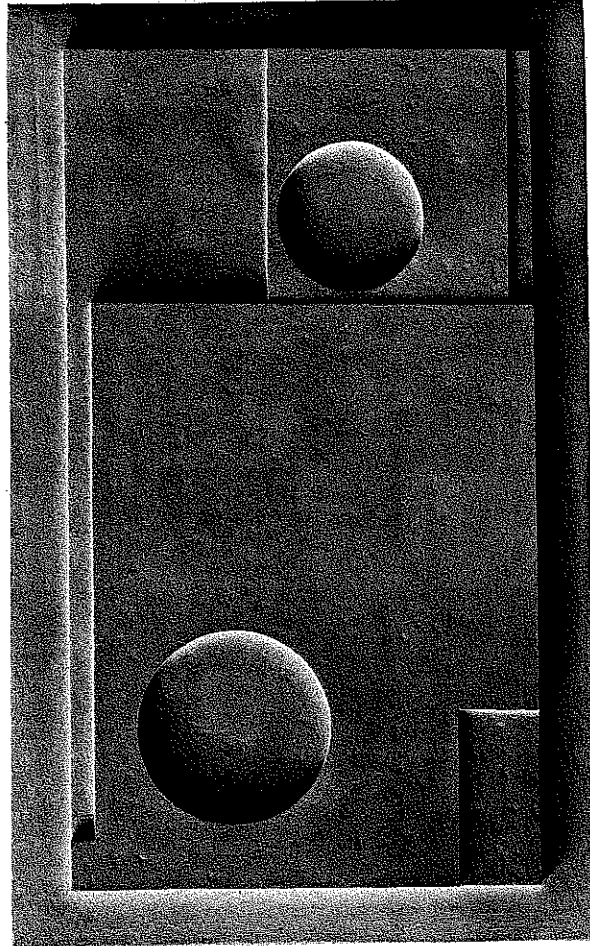
139 PIET MONDRIAN (1944) *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43. Oil on canvas, 4'2" (127 x 127). Collection *Modern Art, New York*)

## Abstract Art

to those groups of abstract artists, like *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square) and *Abstraction-Création*, which offered the only real *avant-garde* opposition to the surrealists in the 1930s. Mondrian was always the outstanding painter member of such groups, though the sculptors associated with them included Brancusi, Ayr and Gabo, whose work will be discussed later.

Slowly Mondrian's ideas spread to a younger generation, who found it possible to accept abstract art for itself, without needing to justify its existence as the emanation of some kind of spiritual force. Thus the abstract painting was seen as the embodiment of abstract qualities - vitality, serenity or what you will - that were consequently held up for our admiration. In a series of white reliefs in the 1930s, Ben Nicholson (1894-1982), manipulated circles and rectangles on subtly carved shallow planes (Ill. 140), setting up a mysterious spatial movement that carries a poetic message of harmonious relationships. Nicholson had painted his first abstract pictures in 1924, but, like Mondrian himself, found that he needed the discipline of a study of Cézanne and of cubism before he could make the kind of statement he wanted.

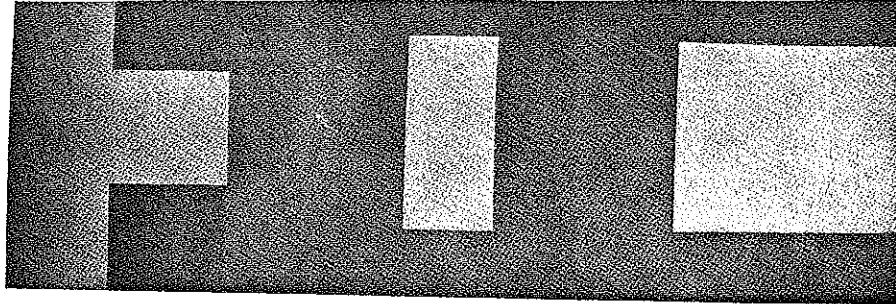
140 BEN NICHOLSON (1894-1982) *White Relief, 1935*. Oil on board, 3' 4" x 5' 6" (101.5 x 166.5). Tate Britain, London



Though his meeting with Mondrian in 1934 was a revelation, Nicholson never saw the necessity for an exclusive commitment to an abstract art. Abstraction meant liberation for him, and he felt free to continue to paint post-cubist still-life compositions, often imbued with the light and texture of landscape. Pursuing such an undogmatic approach, he did much to show that abstraction is an extension, not a replacement of existing ways of painting. The same lesson is to be learned from Jean Dubuffet (1901-85), a very different kind of painter.

Though Mondrian had some close disciples in the United States, his influence was, again, more generalized and all-pervasive. Despite the superficial similarity between paintings by Jackson Pollock (1912-56) and those of Kandinsky executed between 1910 and 1914, it was Mondrian and not Kandinsky who had the respect and admiration of the so-called abstract expressionists. And Mondrian was of course one of the European wartime refugees present in New York when American art assumed international status. Even his final insistence on colour in painting seems to have found a response in the achievements of Mark Rothko (1903-70), Ad Reinhardt (1913-67) and Barnett Newman (1905-70), who all regarded painting as an heroic religious act. Rothko's paintings (Ill. 142) are about the working of colour in space, but they are, at a fundamental level, icons for contemplation and meditation. Reinhardt was a life-long student of Oriental art and philosophy, and his dark paintings (Ill. 141) adopt the symbolic cruciform composition, sometimes mystically translated into three-times-three squares of identical size. And Newman did not hesitate to call a sequence of enormous, spare, abstract canvases, each with a single vertical stripe on a plain ground, the *Stations of the Cross* (1960).

The spiritual ambitions of Kandinsky and Mondrian indeed spawned a continuing progeny.



141 AD REINHARDT (1913-6) *Abstract Painting, Blue, 1952*. Oil canvas, 29 1/2" x 11" (75 x 28). Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh