

Piet Mondrian

1872-1944

Piet Mondrian was born in 1872. His father was principal of a Dutch Calvinist primary school. His uncle was a painter. Piet wanted to be an artist, but his family insisted that he be able to support himself and art was too risky. And so he got a teaching certificate to teach drawing.

Every artist, like every human being, is born and raised in a time and place. Mondrian was Holland 20 to 30 years after Van Gogh. But art was the same as it had been when Van Gogh went away into the marshes to paint.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Drenthe*, 1883



Dusk, 1890

And so Mondrian, child of his time, also
painted that way seven years later.



House on the Gein, 1900.

That way of a rather somber, muted color, and the rich, "spontaneous" brush stroke.



Windmill, 1905-6

The way of homage and record by the Dutch of their land. Mondrian is most sensitive to those evening lights, to their contrasts of light and dark, their colors dimmed but glowing, to glazes and scumbles. He has full control of the rich "facture" of late 19th century Romantic painting. It's been fifteen years since the *Dusk* of 1890, and a steady growth and clarity of shape and of vertical/ horizontal form.



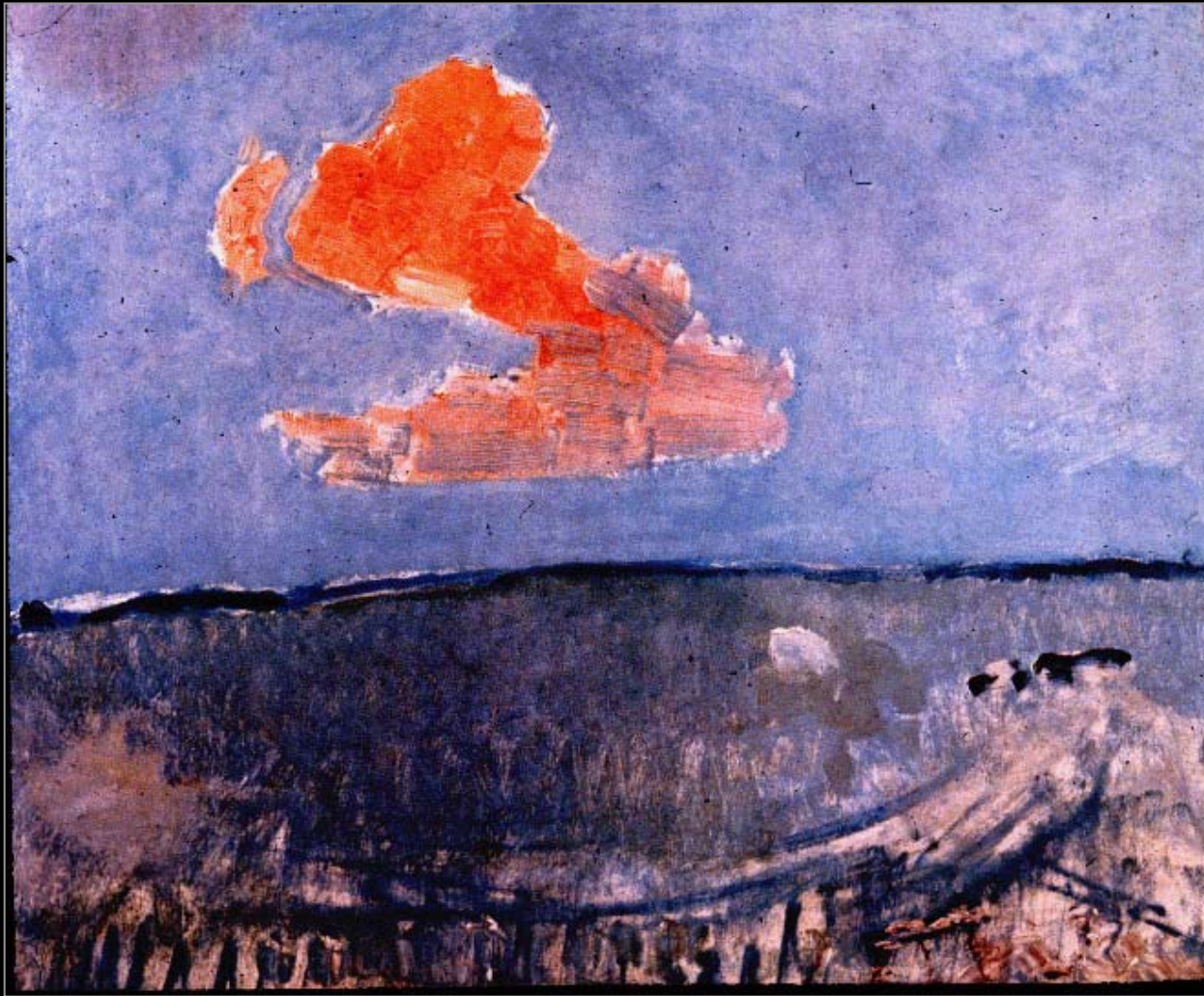
Mondrian in His Studio, ca. 1905-6.

He said that the studio reflects and reinforces what the artist does.
Remember this studio and its furniture as he begins to move on.



Mondrian in His Studio, ca. 1905-6.

Every artist is child of his time and place, is brought up on the nurture—the cultural food, in this case—of that place, but, as he grows, he learns of the discoveries of other places. There is added to his native equipment the complement or parallel of what they're doing elsewhere; and for Mondrian now at the age of 35, it became time to find out what was beyond the Dutch horizon.



The Red Cloud, 1907.

He saw a show of the French Fauves and learned, suddenly, that “Color, as an independent emotional value, may dominate the painting, may set its stamp on it.” His aim became no longer an equilibrium derived from the forms of visible nature; he discovered color and realized how its power can disrupt a previously attained equilibrium.



Trees on the Gein with Rising Moon, 1897-8.

A new period began of search for the means to integrate the power of color into his native striving for equilibrium, a time marked by continually intensifying colors.

And the holding of these intensifying colors by means of vertical/horizontal compositions, and by a sense of radiance ... that the painting has somehow a radiant core somewhere shining out around or through the vertical horizontal shape and line structure



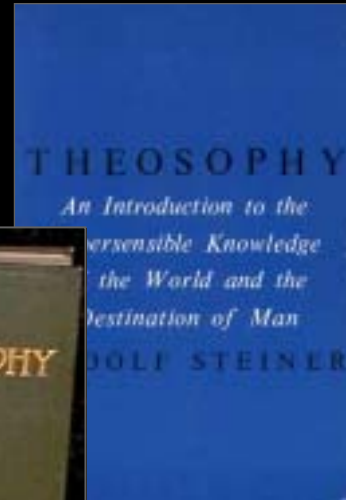
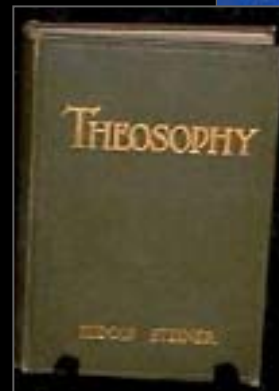
Woods near Oehle, 1908.

That there be a radiant core , a shining out from between the dark lines that hold, that structure the light ... The “exhibition title” was *May Morning*. At about this time he began to be interested in Theosophy, and by the following year had joined the Dutch Theosophical Society. In some ways, it was a “May Morning” for him..

Theosophy was a mystical doctrine, compounded rather at random from large and small pieces of all religions that Madame Blavatsky, its founder, could string together along with a heavy dose of the occult and the paranormal. When you see their stuff now, or read their books or about their people, there is so much silliness and humbug that you can't understand how anyone could ever take it seriously. But many people did, and it had a very strong effect on both Mondrian and Kandinsky, for Mondrian leading to a sense of a life force energy at the driving core of things, for Kandinsky leading to ideas about spirit forms and methods of color meditation that helped him to abstract art. Though in retrospect, Theosophy I think seems foolish, it was for them what Zen is now, a way for those with a sense of the unseen power behind experience to deal with that sense in the totally materialist 19th 20th C. Western world.



Madam Helena Blavatsky



Rudolf Steiner had his own version of Theosophy. He called it Anthroposophy. Mondrian wrote to him in the early 1920's but never got an answer. Most Theosophists/Anthroposophists did not like any kind of "modern art."



Windmill in Sunlight, 1908.

That unseen power came to be the very core of Mondrian's work, in such things as this windmill in sunlight.



(Remember the windmill from 1905?)



Red Tree, 1908.



Lighthouse at Westkapelle, 1908..



Dune II, 1909.

As a friend and critic said, “Not until he reached the island of Walcheren did Mondrian encounter nature and its endless breadth ... this confrontation with the infinity of nature coincides with his joining the Netherlands Philosophical Society, [a parallel to the Theosophical Society] where man's union with the infinitude of the universe was a central problem.”



Dune III, 1909.

He used the "luminist" technique of broken colors applied in mosaic dabs. It was the most advanced international style he had come across. That another style, cubism, was developing he did not know.



Dune V, 1910.

By 1910, he had begun to move away from the "luminist" method, whose goal was to dissolve forms in light. He became more involved as he had been before in the power of shape... shapes now, however, which also had the power of color, color related to—but intensified from—nature. His friend said, "The esoteric content of these paintings, their expression of a cosmic world view, is in concordance with the philosophical insights and meditations that preoccupied Mondrian during these years."



The Red Mill, 1911.

As a friend said, Mondrian “Set out to express the feeling that the nature and the grandeur of creation are most adequately rendered by the simplest of forms and colors.”



The Red Mill, 1911.

So, from the art and the life and the objects of his native land with which he began his art, synthesized with the advanced international art forms of color and shape, and the transcendental, mystical, Theosophical doctrines of man and cosmos, Mondrian at age 39 had arrived at a high plateau in his work.

But his motto was “Always Further,” and in the moment that he saw this painting first exhibited, he also saw his first cubist painting and gained a sense of where that onward way might lead.



Still Life with Ginger Pot I, 1911/12.

Following the analytical cubist practice of the time, the role of color is reduced, all emotional energy is removed from it. Line assumes the major role as organizing force, and shape begins to drift, to expand beyond its boundaries. There's a sense of semi-transparency to all volume. And the ginger pot, the most strongly colored element in the composition, a round, egg-like form, is central. All other elements move around the semi-sphere, in an almost planetary movement, orbiting in deep space. At this time, he gave up his studio in Amsterdam, and prepared to move to Paris.



Still Life with Ginger Pot II, 1912.

A few months later he painted this version in Paris. Deep space has almost disappeared, and the emphasis has moved from line as the notation of objects to line as notation itself; from art as the representation and imitation of reality, from art as a secondary form of reality for which nature is the primary element and to which one always refers, from art as second to art as first—toward the painting as the thing in itself. Thus, within the painting, linear elements begin their own interaction, regardless of what the motif might have offered ... particularly in the curves on the left which echo curves originally found in the shape of the ginger pot.



The Gray Tree, 1912.

He reinvestigates the motif of the tree, with those same, increasingly abstract goals in mind.



The Flowering Apple Tree, 1912.

And then again, reducing the tree further and further toward its rhythmic, linear forms and their interplay, or, in another way of saying it, finding more and more in the tree motif the opportunity to express the flowery, the expanding and opening, by means of curving linear elements which reached, echoing, outward from the center toward and far beyond the age of the frame. And, as this process of exploration of the more and more open “universal” aspects of the motif develops, so does the “universal” aspect of his actual painting process come to the fore.



The Flowering Apple Tree, 1912.

The “individual,” particular, personal aspect—the “signature” brush stroke, the painterly virtuosity—drop away. It seemed to some, that Mondrian was more and more abandoning all that made art worth loving—painterly texture, beautiful and astounding color, remarkable and useful subject matter. But for him it was not the negative process of abandoning the interesting, the particular, but the positive process of seeing through the particular to the universal that Theosophy says is behind, within, and above all the only particular manifestations of our ordinary experience. .



Composition No. 3, 1912/13.

A few months later, the tree motif (we will have to call it that, though such words or image-types as "Tree" limit, particularize, the universal toward which he is striving) ... The composition is now vertical, with earth colors in the lower, sky colors in the upper; larger, heavier, more horizontal and more incoherent shapes in the lower, smaller, lighter, vertical shapes the upper.



Composition No. 3, 1912/13.

He wrote in his notebook, "To approach the spiritual in art one will make as little use as possible of reality because reality is opposed to the spiritual" ... and now his tree, his flowering apple symbol of life, has become a golden mass of planes, darkened and thickened where the trunk would once have been, but opening upward, flowering outward into flickering opalescent planes that sing across the sky.



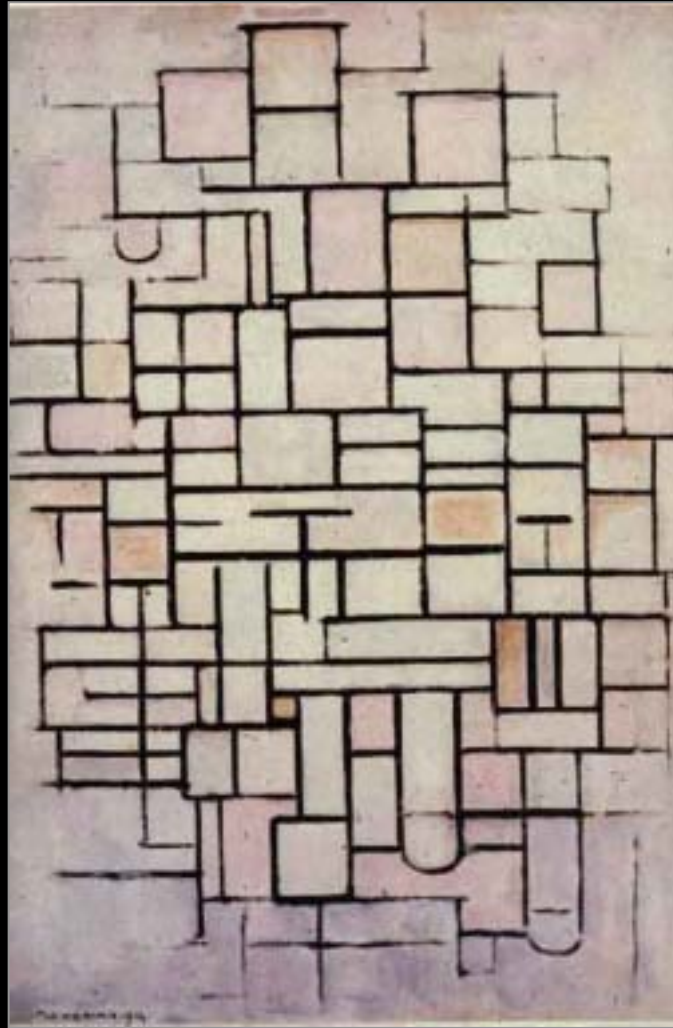
Oval Composition (Trees), 1913.

Until, in this final version, the particular flowering apple tree of nature has become a universal, golden flower; has become the Theosophist's "World Egg," that original state of perfection from which all ordinary things came, that state of perfection to which (in Theosophist's doctrine) art might lead the way toward a re-ascension.



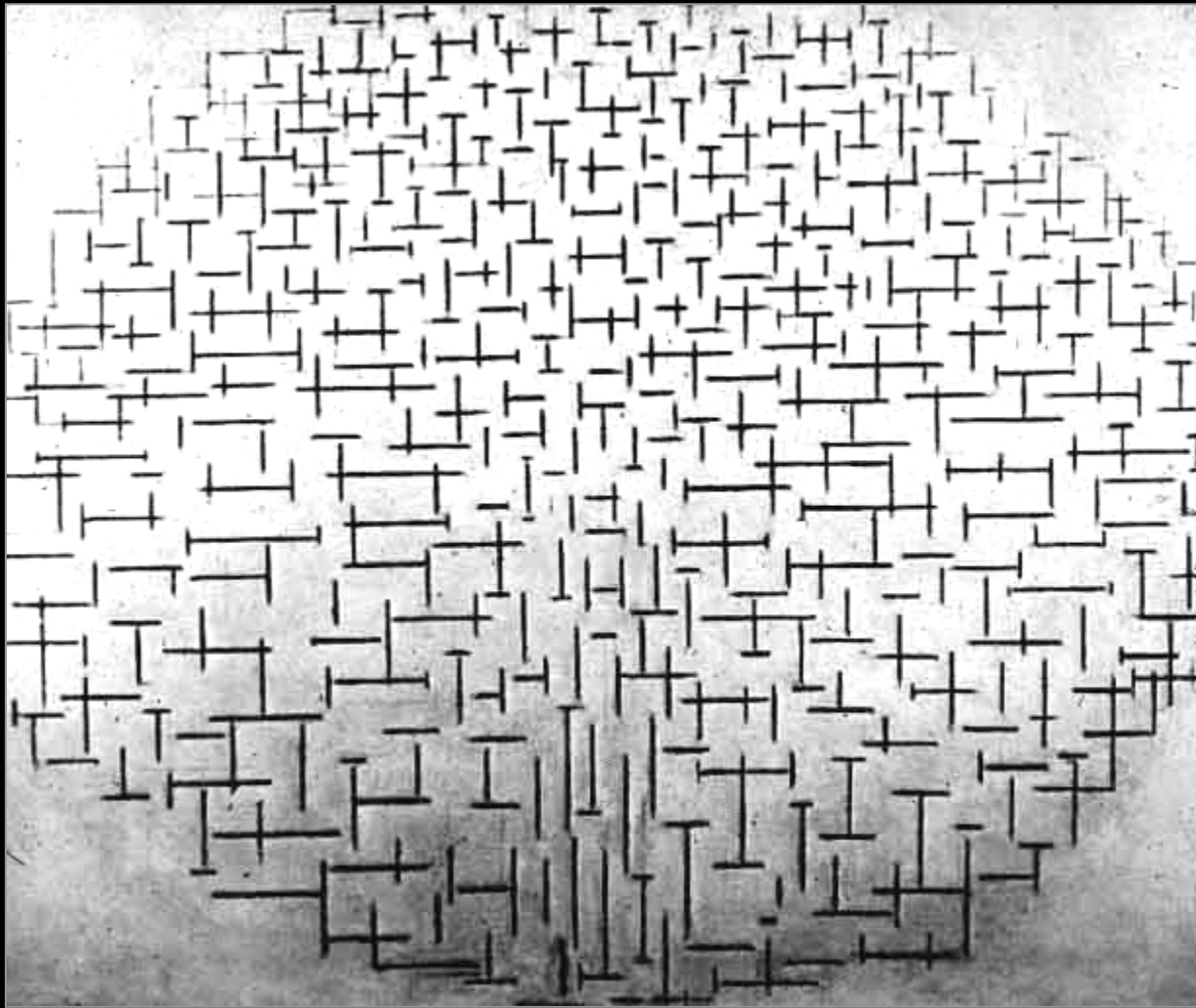
Oval Composition, 1913/14.

He made compositions based upon architectural motifs also, such as this one, of some buildings outside the window of his studio ... more and more emphasizing the vertical and horizontal, and so far as color was concerned, moving more and more toward black, white, and the three primaries: moving toward the essentials, the elements, the fundamental forms of the elements: light and dark in the fundamental forms of black-and-white, color in the fundamental forms of the primaries; and also toward the fundamentals of pictorial structure—line, that first of all elements as defined by the Florentines 500 years before.



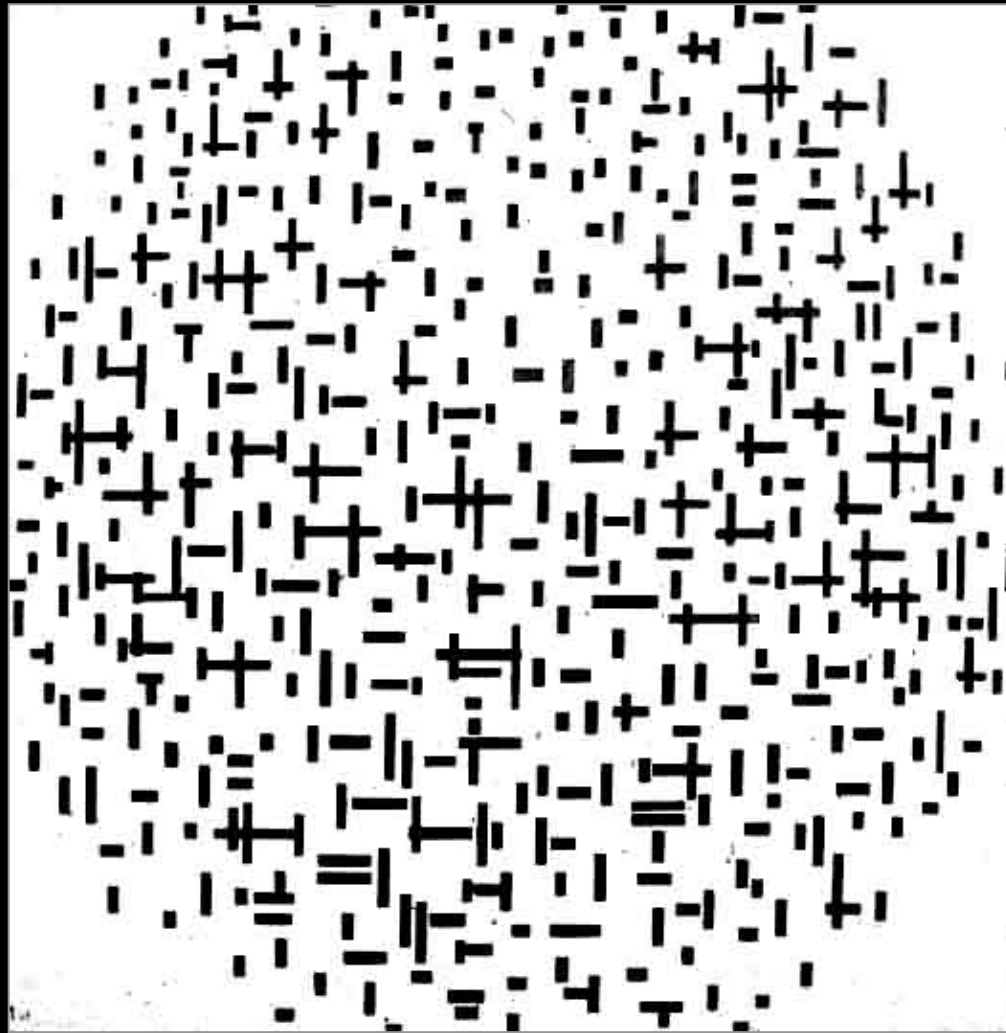
Composition No. 6, 1914.

Onward, ever onward, as he would say. Toward the essential; abstracting away from the motif, creating toward the essentials of visual experience in themselves. Toward “Non-objective” art, toward an art that is not about objects, an art free from objects so that it may concentrate upon, reveal, the “plastic elements”... toward what he called “Neo-plasticism.” In 1914, his father became very ill, and Mondrian returned to Amsterdam. By the time his father died, the war had begun, and he could not go back to Paris and went to live in a town near Amsterdam, by the sea.



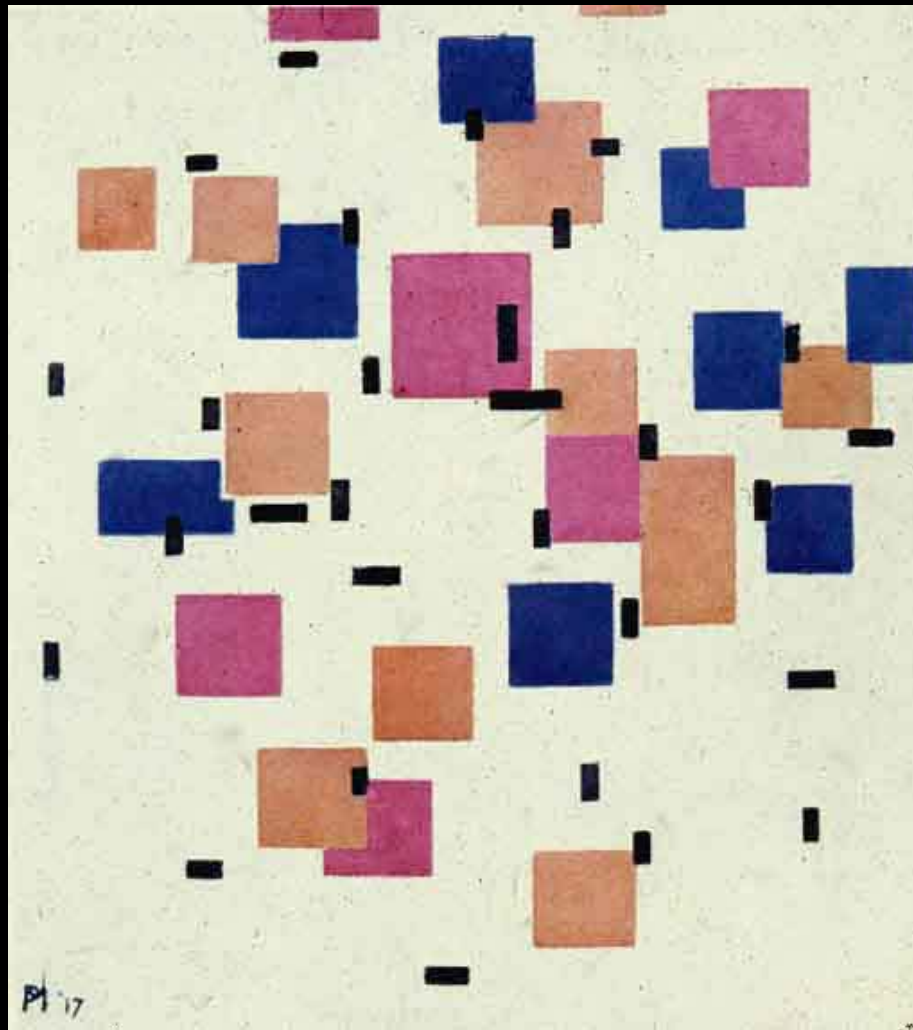
Composition No. 10, Pier and Ocean, 1915

And to watch the sea, the waves, and a pier that jutted out into them, and to paint this pier and ocean, and also the sea of boundless energy to which Theosophy tells the soul returns after death and which it might come to know, even in life,



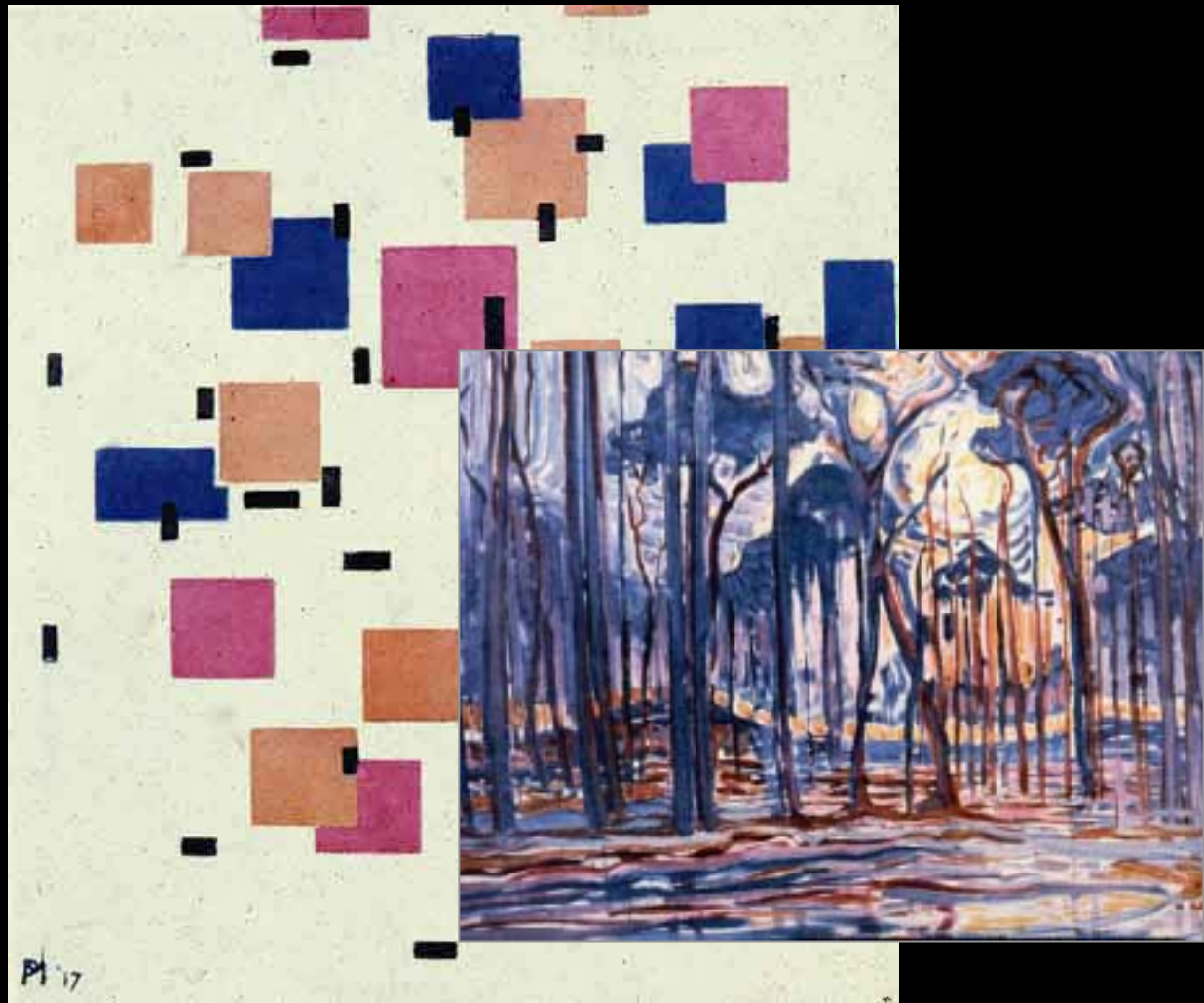
Composition with Lines, 1917.

Even in life, as here, in the final form of Pier and Ocean, where the ocean of energy is itself dissolving into light, just as for the Theosophist the ocean of things dissolves into the One ... and just as for Mondrian, the ocean of things to represent, to represent in no matter how abstract a way, had dissolved into the essentials of Black and White, Vertical and Horizontal. The only particularized in this universal was the various events where the lines cross, for only they can become a configuration.

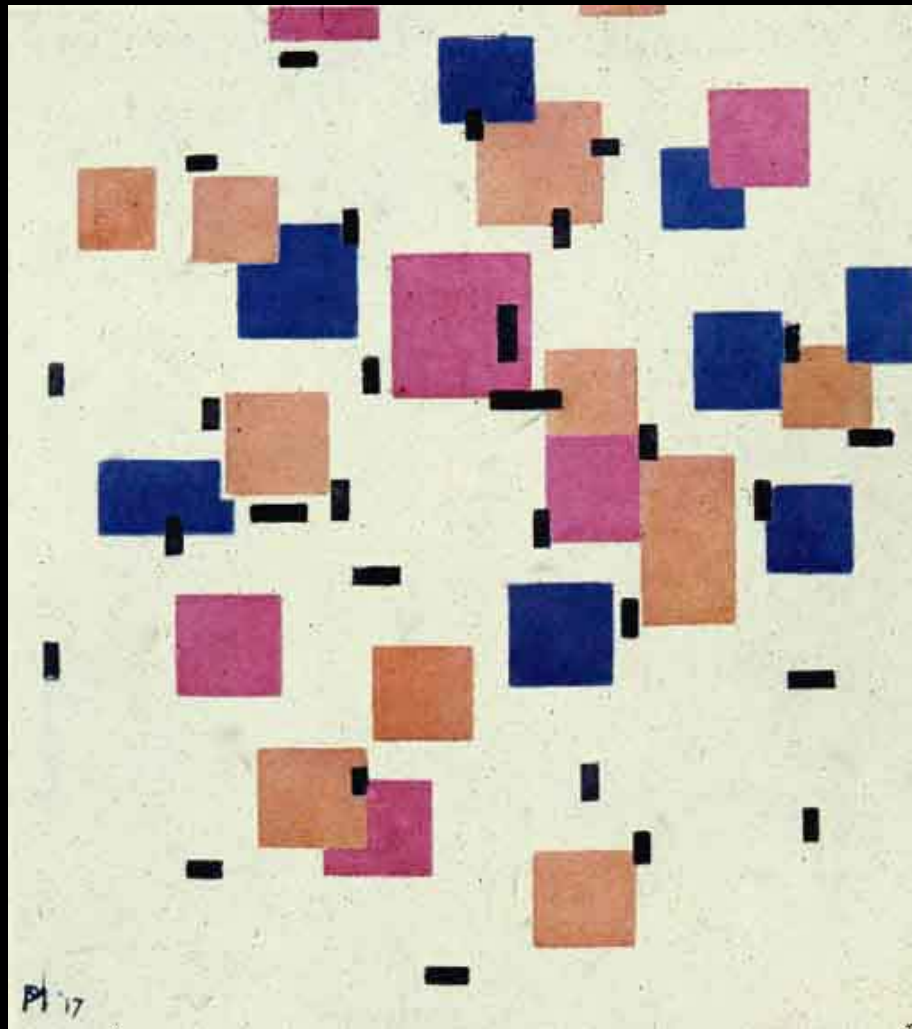


Composition in Color A, 1917.

The configurations of lines were to be done away with in the next paintings, where, in the radiant sea of the universal, only direction (black) and quality (that is, color) materializes ...

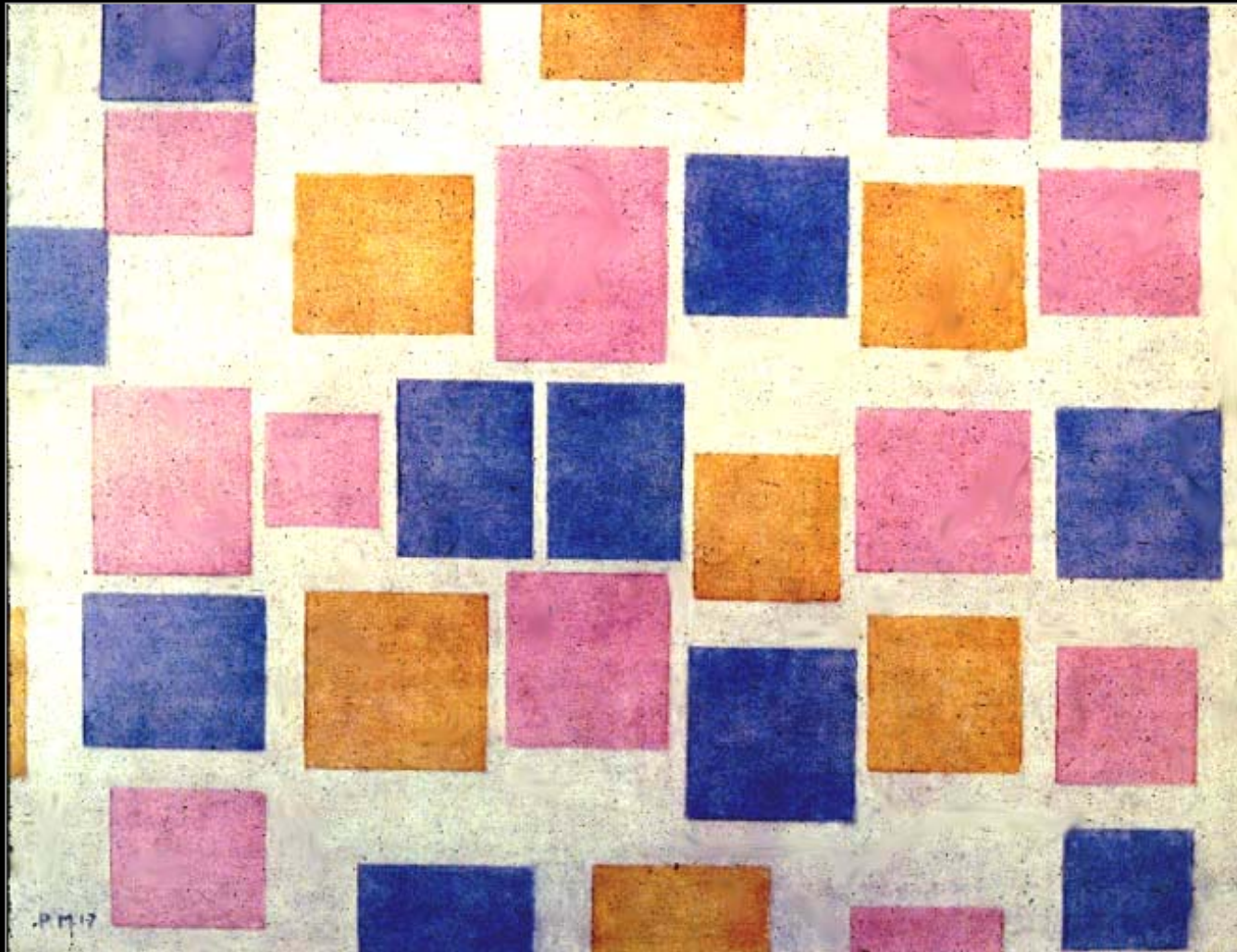


You may remember the 1908 Woods near Olney and its radiant core ...



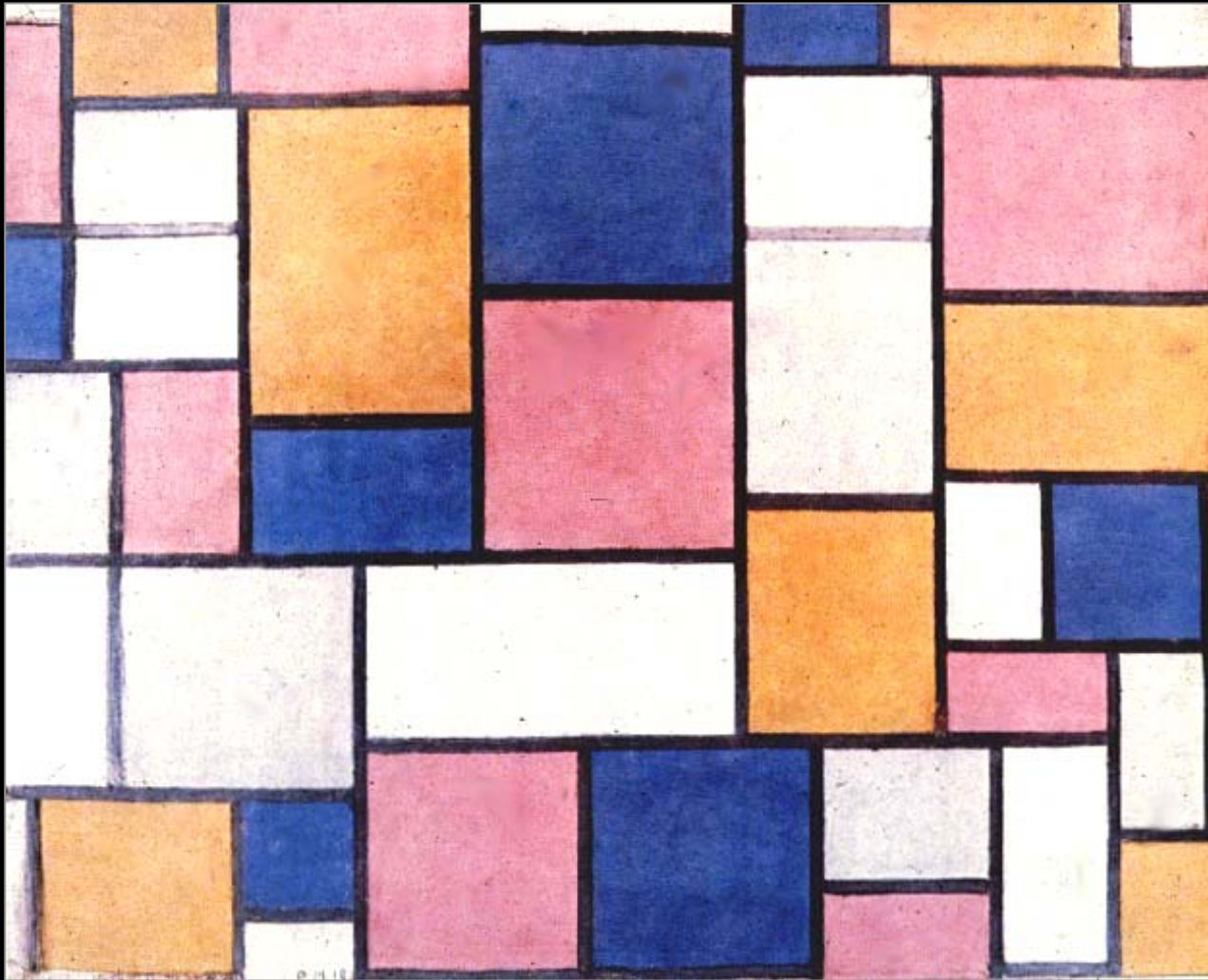
Composition in Color A, 1917.

... here also there is a radiant center, an empty space, a void. And the motion is spiral from this void, spiraling outward, spiraling inward. And, one may trace the painting to a charcoal drawing and then to an earlier one, and find that void/source to have been where the stained-glass rose window was in a drawing of a church.



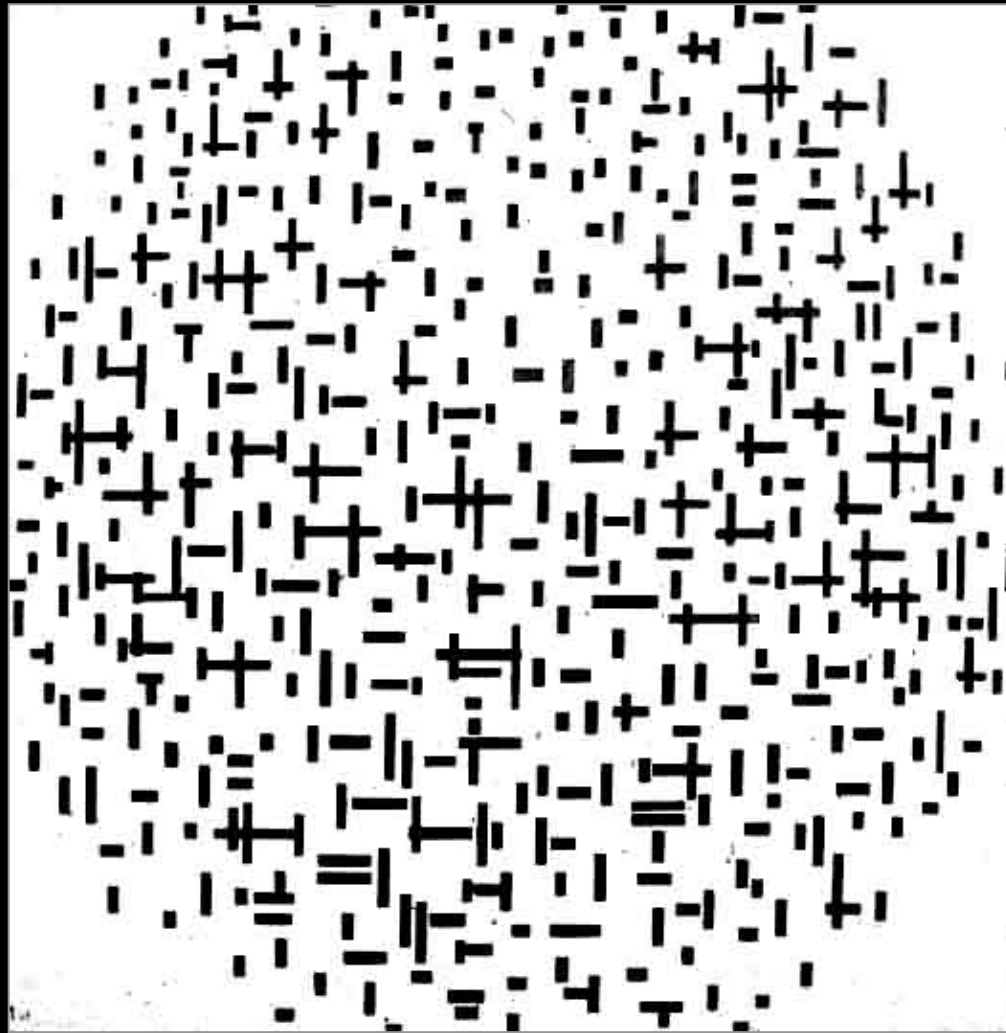
Composition III with Color Planes. 1917.

The next phase no longer is based on a core, a central space from which/to which things relate ... although the two blue squares mark a center—an off-center. Rather, the movement spreads in all directions, outward and beyond the format of the canvas... And every rectangle can be seen as a color itself, takes on motion, the white void in which it all takes place becomes secondary, and the movement, instead of being contained in a general oval or circular form, either declared as in the ovals, or implied as in such works as *Composition in Color A* [slide 48], spreads evenly in all directions beyond the edge of the format, spreads throughout all space (except on the right) because we are now no longer looking at the source from outside it but have become so close as to start to enter the source from within.



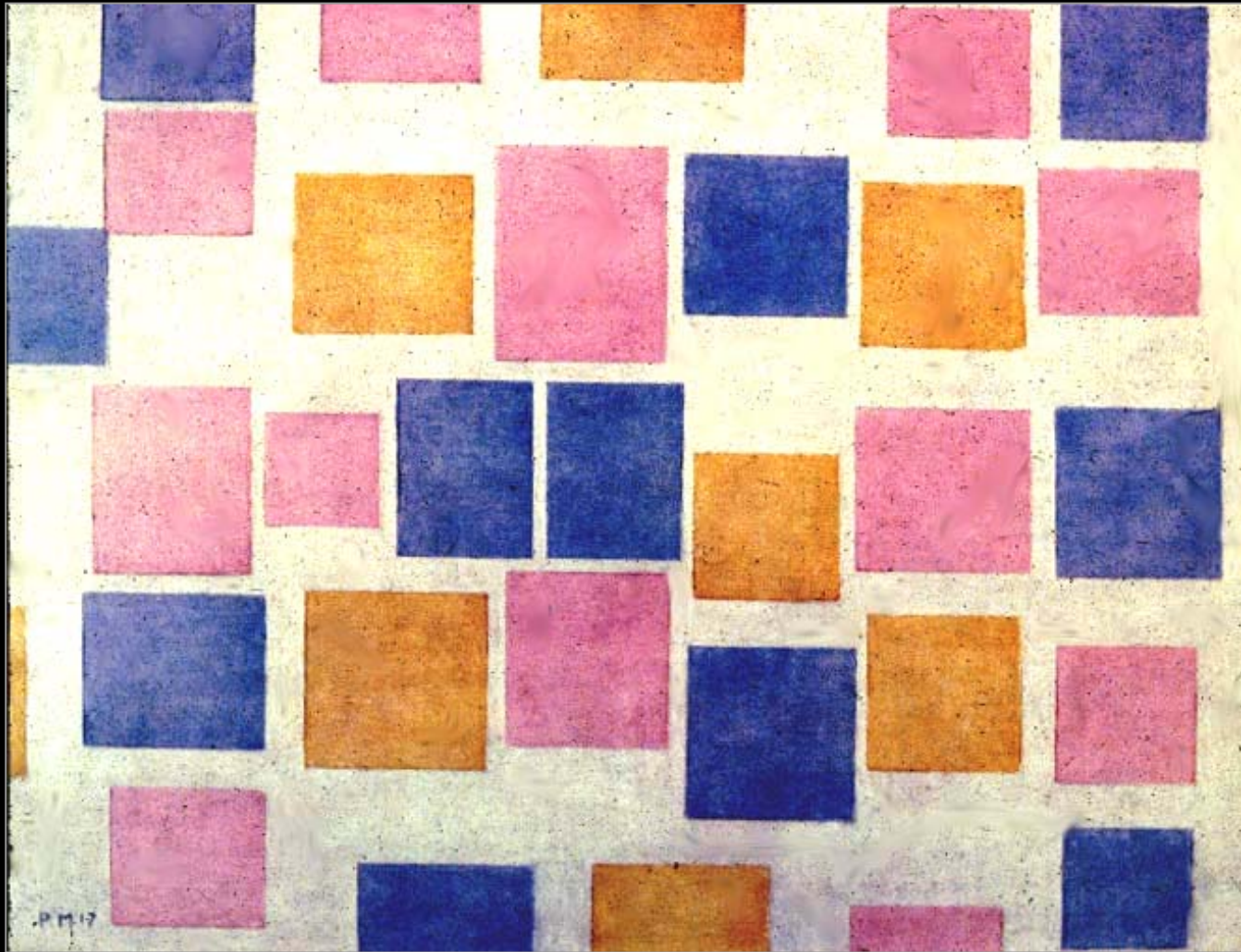
Composition: Color Planes with Gray Contours, 1918.

This is the next step, and it is also the beginning of the long series that will end only with his final works more than thirty years later in New York during the Second World War. The colored planes and the ground, the shapes and their directions, have joined to become one. He described the sequence as follows...



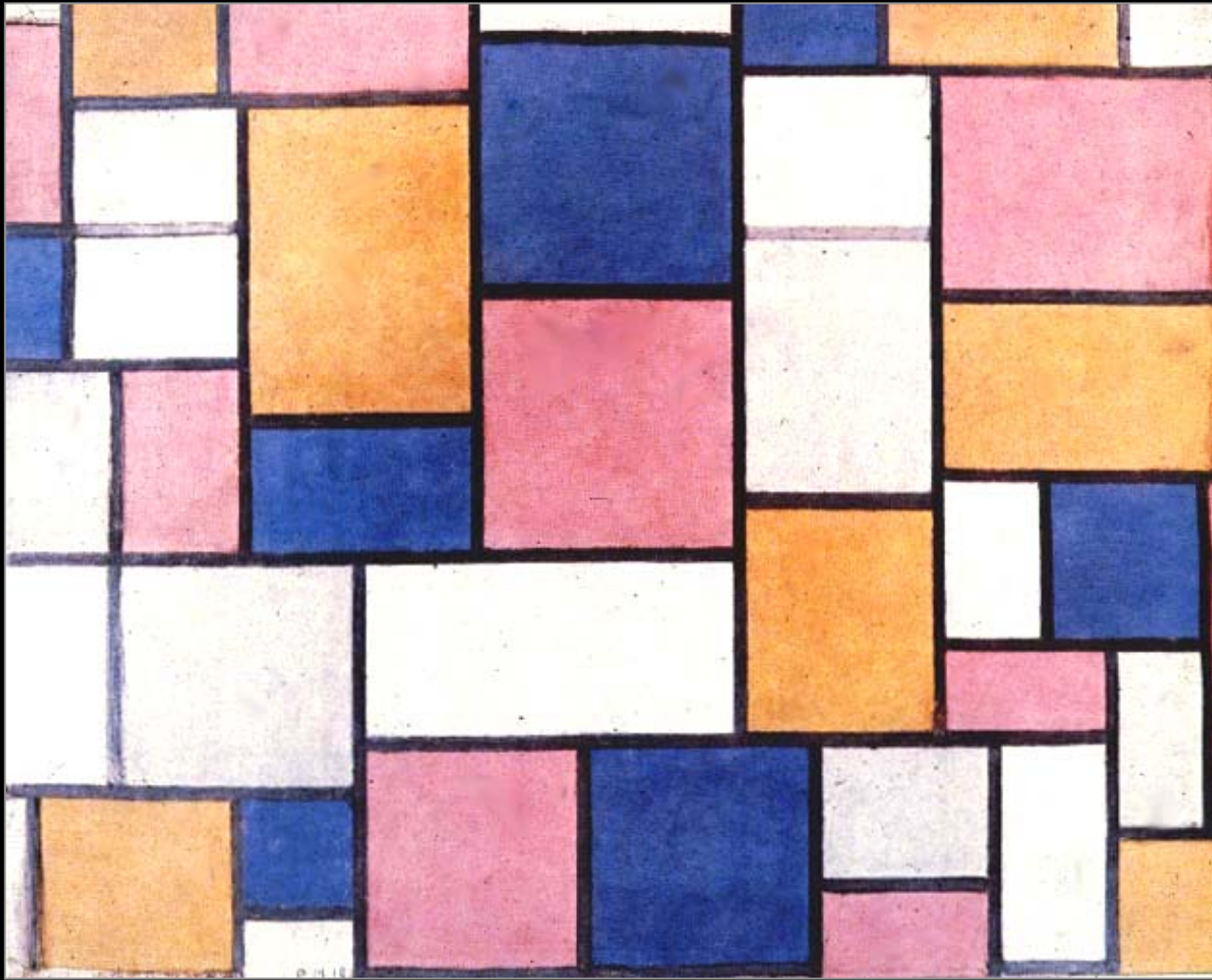
Composition with Lines, 1917.

“In my early pictures, space was still a background [as it was in all his and everyone else’s pictures]. I began to determine forms: vertical and horizontal...”



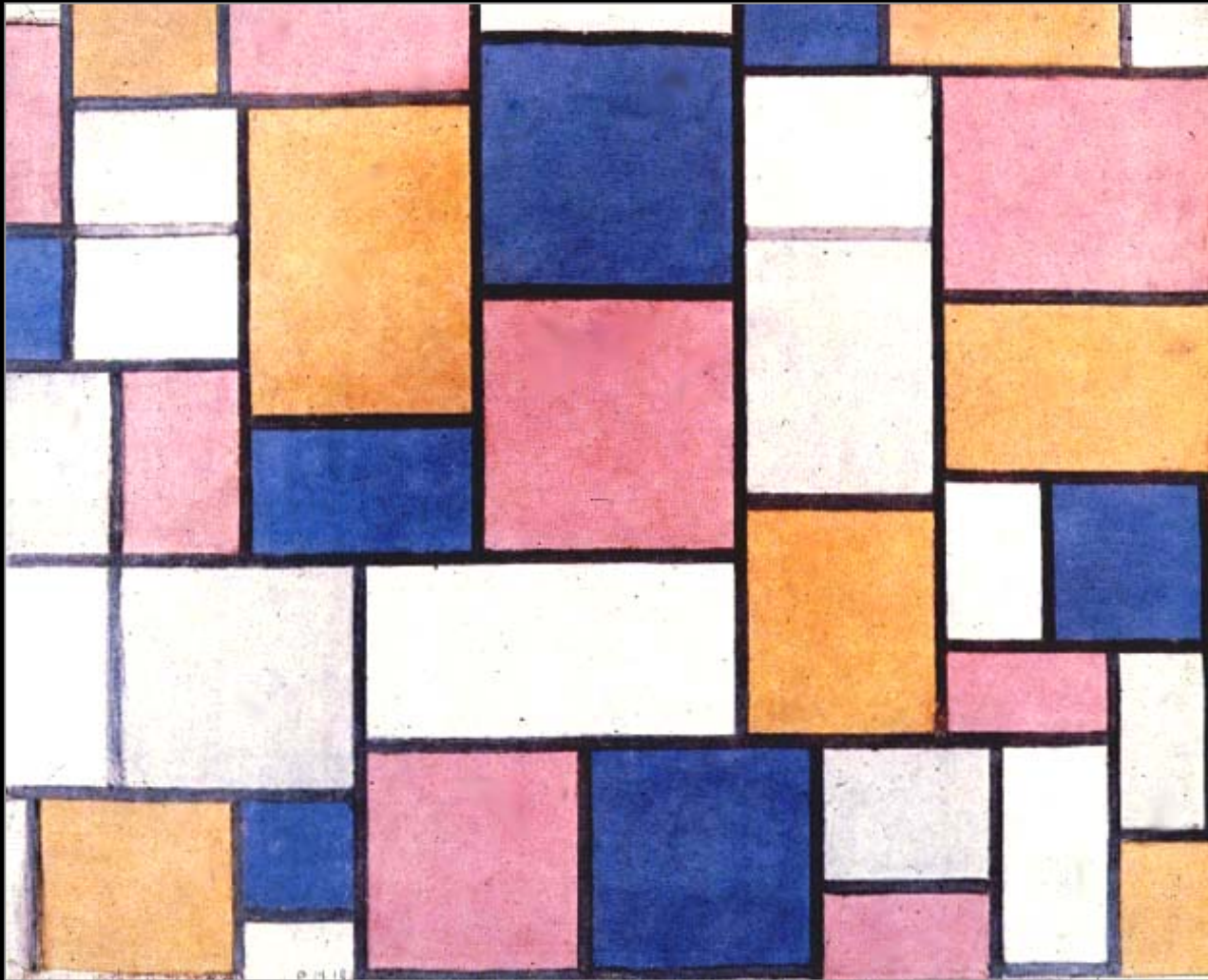
Composition III with Color Planes, 1917.

“...became rectangles. They still appeared as detached forms against a background;
the color was still impure.”



Composition: Color Planes with Gray Contours, 1918.

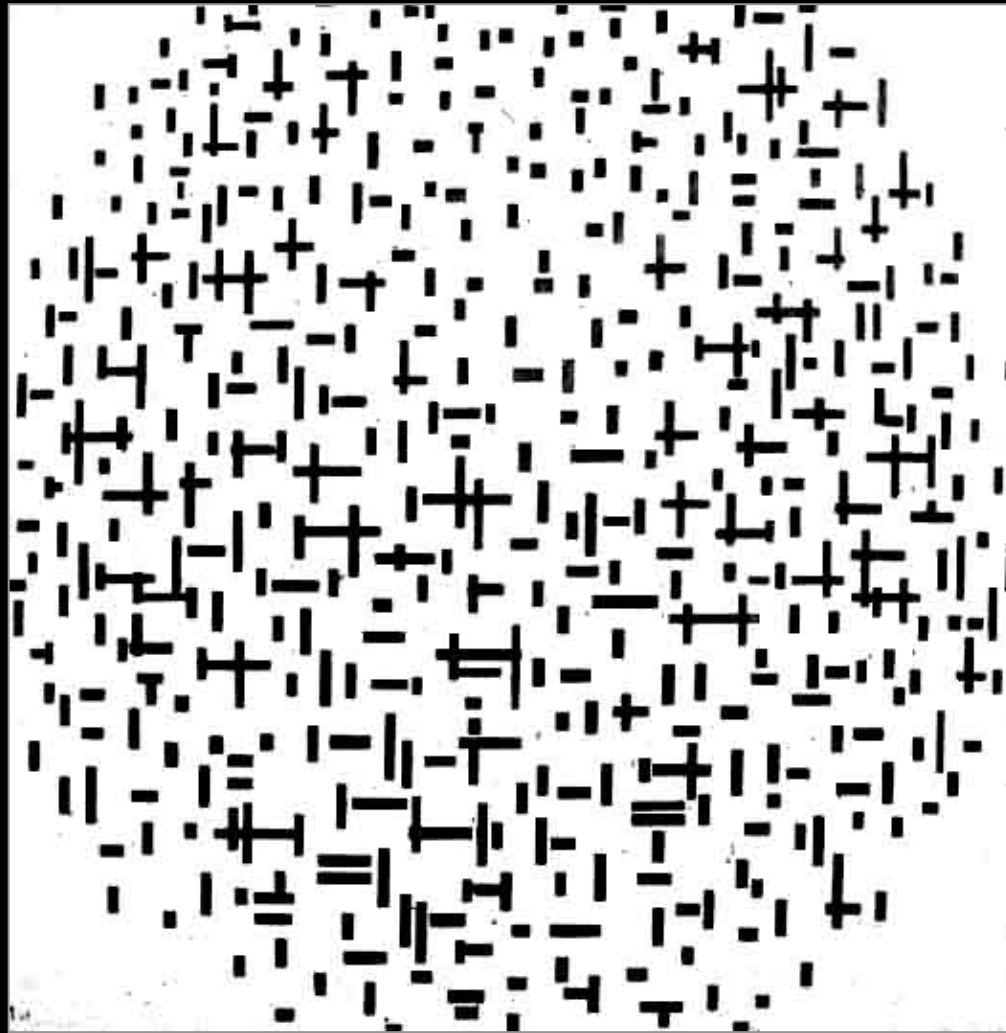
“Feeling the lack of unity, I brought the rectangles together. Space became white, black or gray: form became red, blue or yellow. Uniting the rectangles was equivalent to continuing the verticals and horizontals of the forms over the entire composition.”



Composition: Color Planes with Gray Contours, 1918.

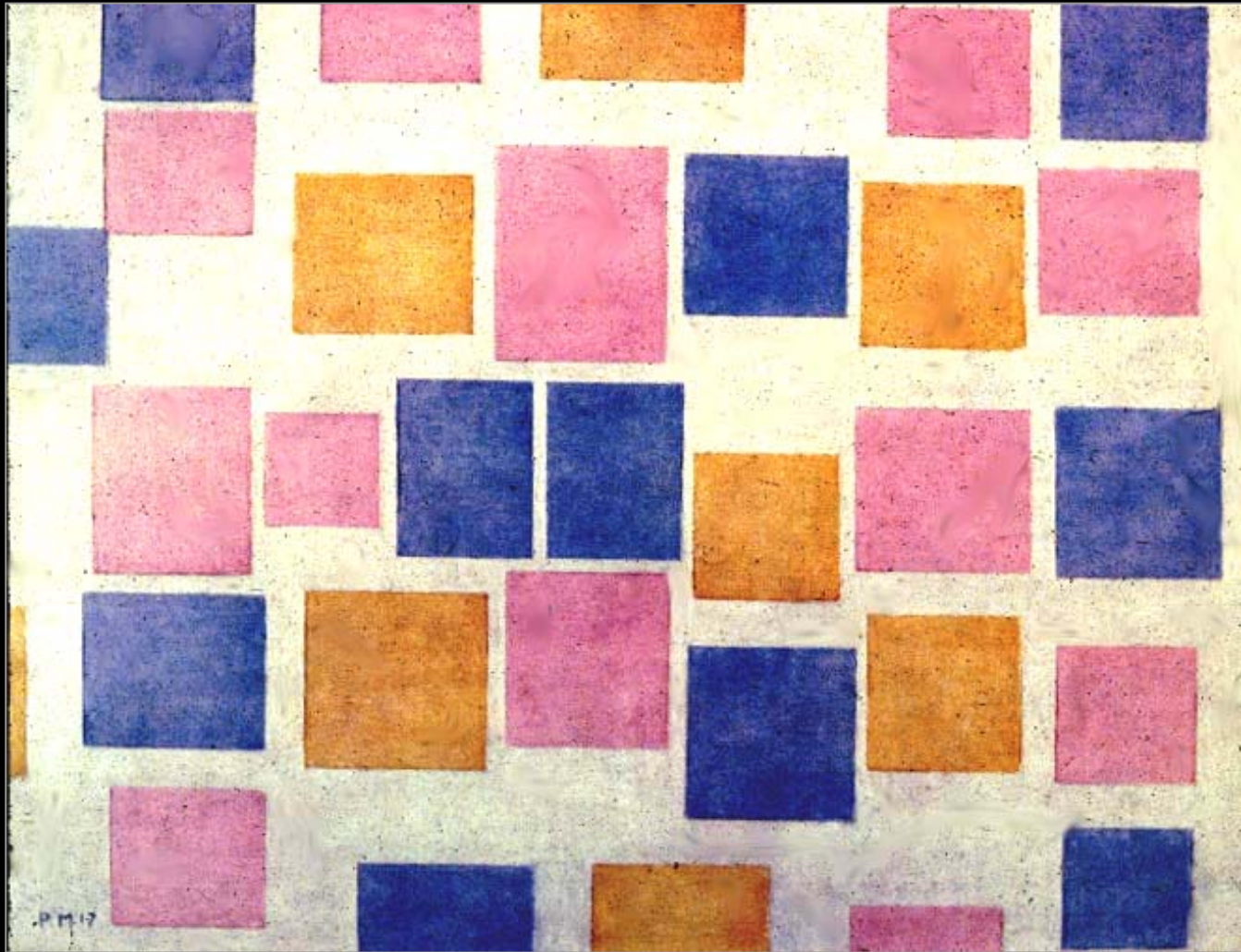
““It was evident that rectangles, like all particular forms, obtrude themselves and must be neutralized through the composition. In fact, rectangles are never an aim in themselves, but a logical consequence of their determining lines, which are continuous in space; they appear spontaneously through the crossing of horizontal and vertical lines. Moreover, when rectangles are used alone without any other forms, they never appear as particular forms, because it is contrast with other forms that occasions particular distinction ...”

[from “Towards a New Vision of Reality,” 1942].

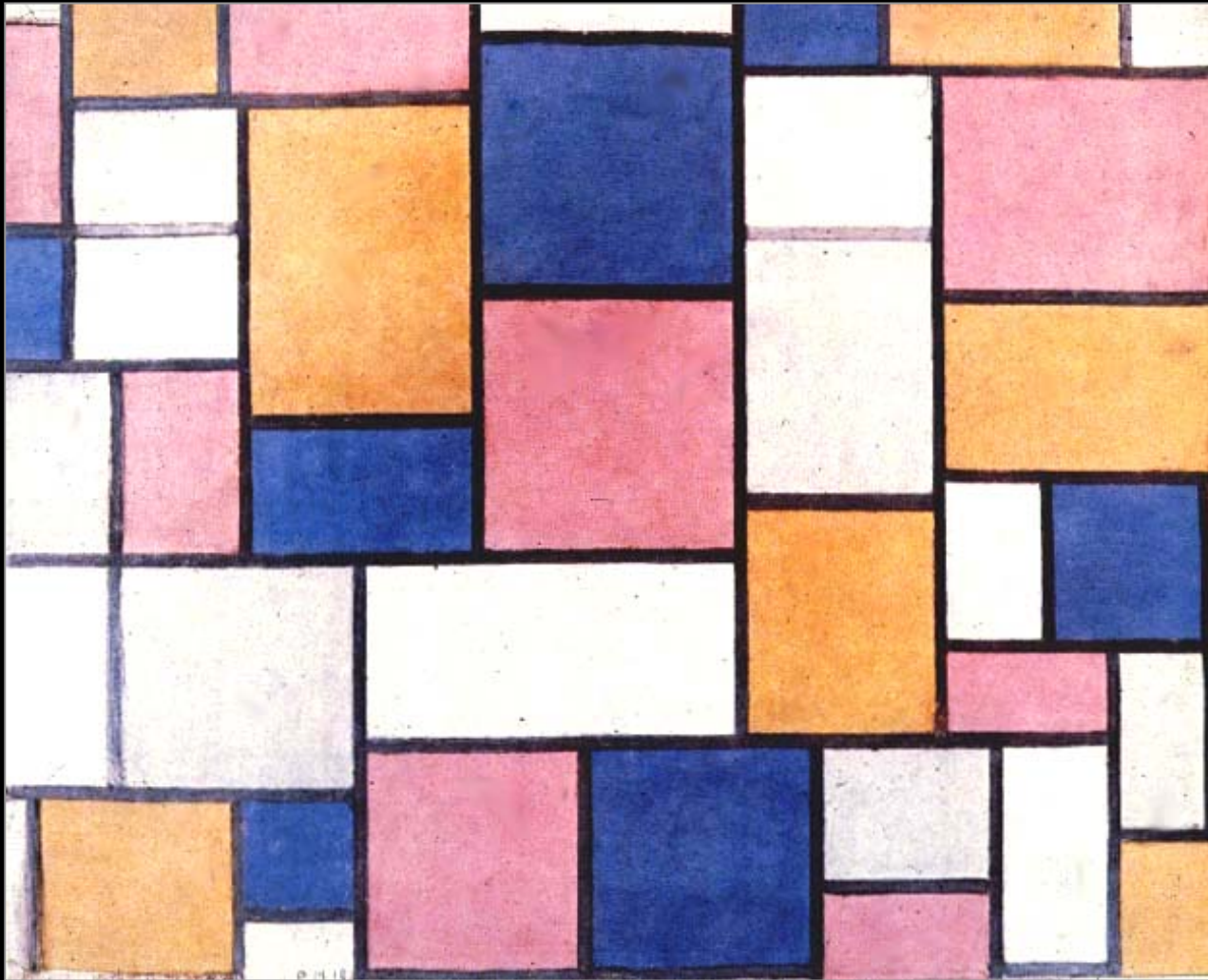


Composition with Lines, 1917.

By extending the vertical/horizontal line fragments of 1917,

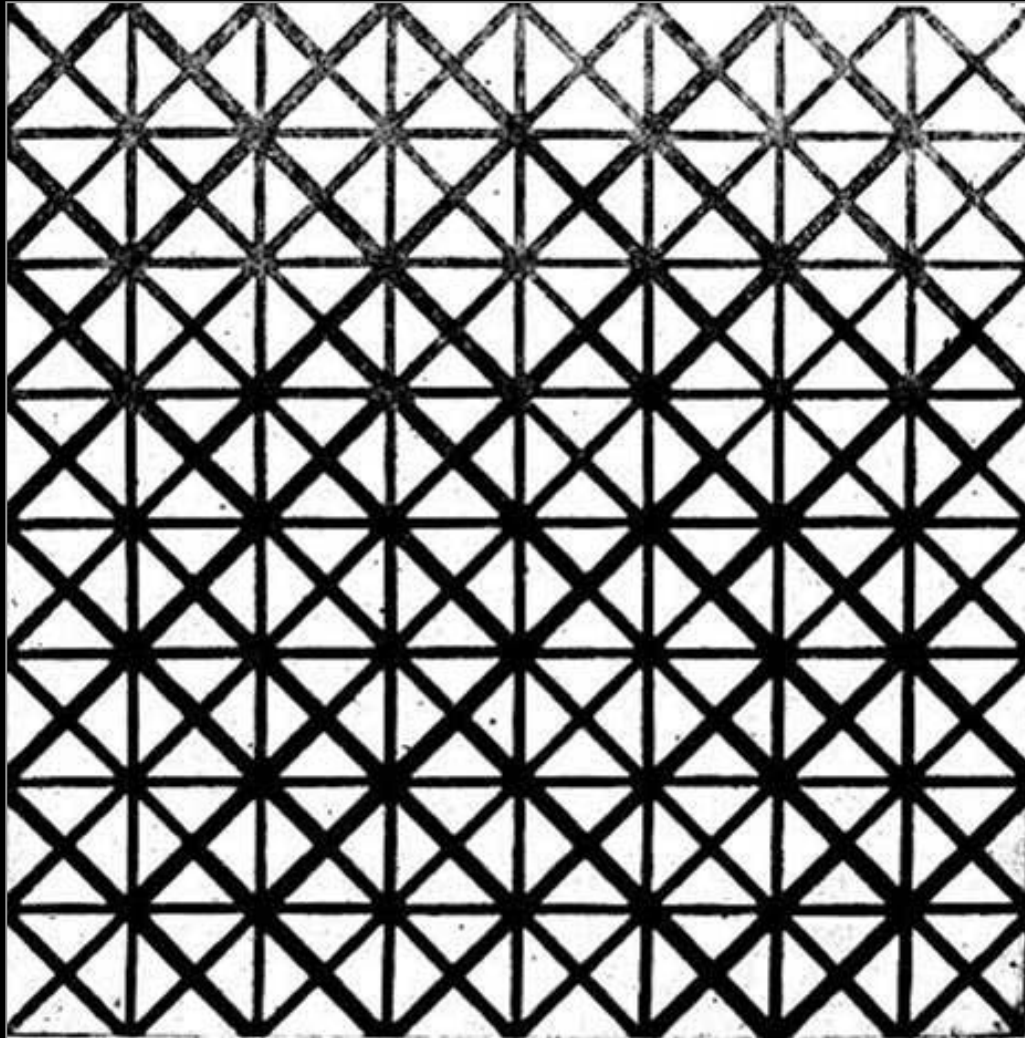


Composition III with Color Planes, 1917.
and expanding the color planes of 1917,.



Composition: Color Planes with Gray Contours, 1918.

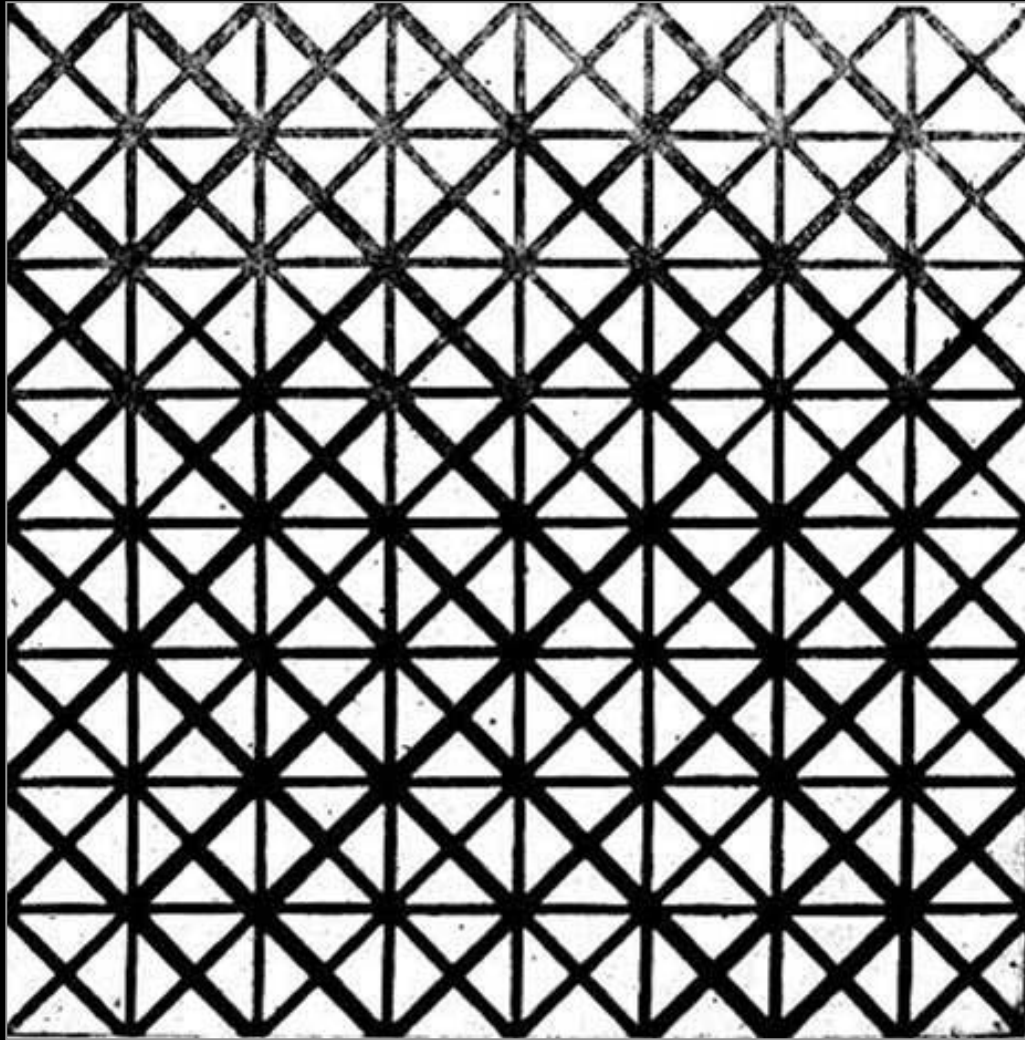
he has achieved a fabric of space that is fully unified, including the transformation of all space into positive. It is true that there are still figure/ground relationships, but now, all figure might become ground, all ground might become figure; and the painting has achieved that totality of oneness, the "Thusness" of "Being", of which Theosophy, following its eastern mentors, speaks



Lozenge with Gray Lines [before 'lozengeing,'] 1918.

Among the last works painted in the Netherlands, shortly before returning to Paris to live until the outbreak of World War II, the unity of space is handled by dividing it up into squares, with verticals, horizontals and then diagonals; and, where these lines come together, there are star-forms, points.

He had written of the sky that, "It is a vast, flat space..."



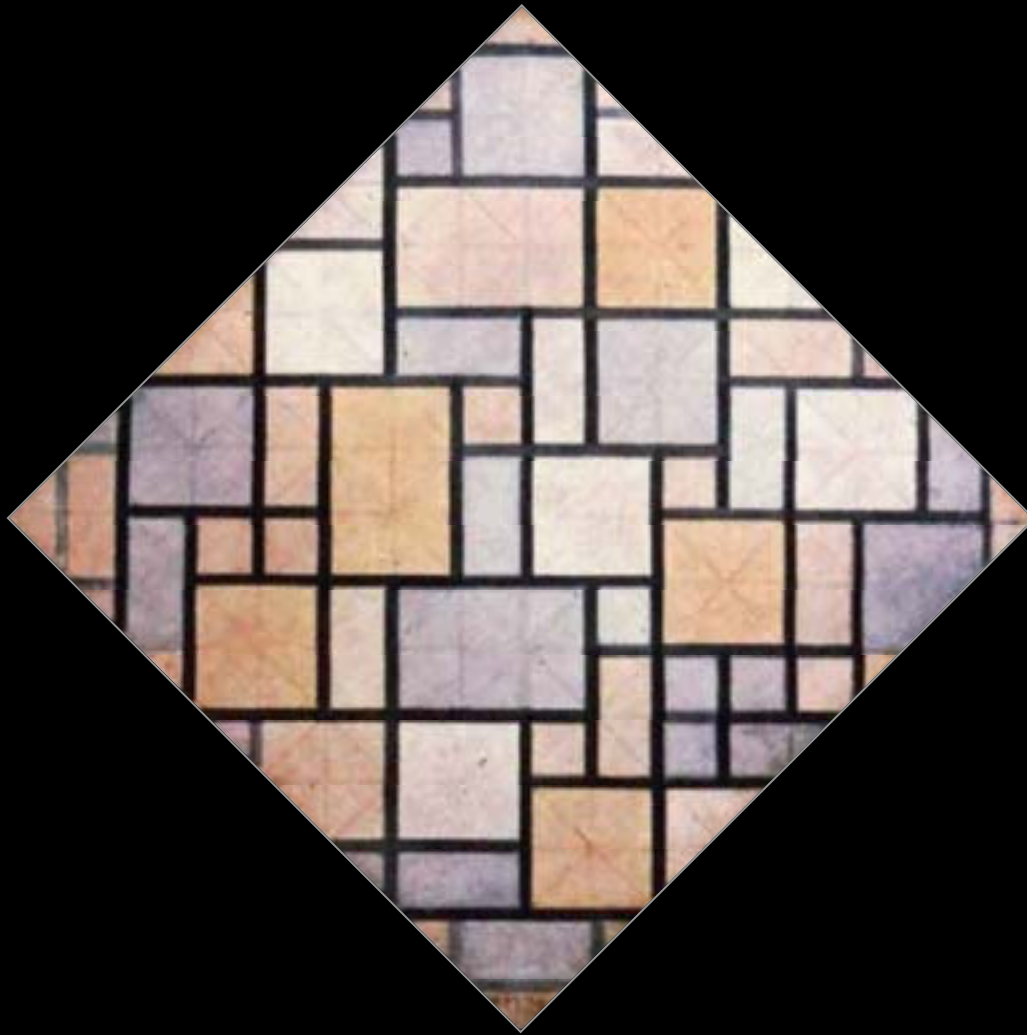
Lozenge with Gray Lines [before 'lozengeing,'] 1918.

...and he had written of points that "... we never see a point, but points. And these points create forms. The line appears plastically between two points. Between several points, between several lines. And the starry sky we look up at is showing us innumerable points. All are not equally accented; one star shines more brightly than another. And these uneven light values produce forms in their turn. Think of the constellations. They too are forms... and when we see the starry sky we are not bound to any form, and we could easily turn to the spontaneous creation of forms. "



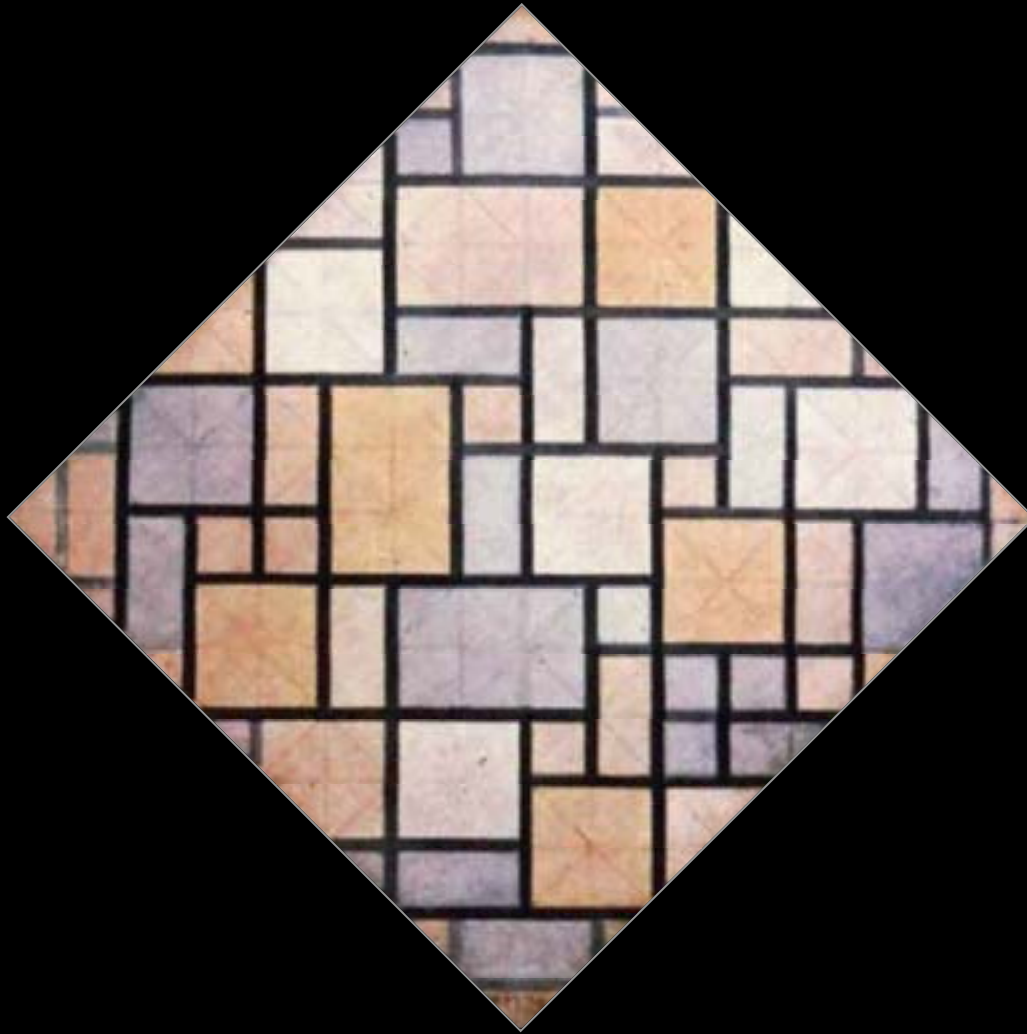
Lozenge: color planes with gray lines [before “lozengeing”], 1919.

And then the individuality of space is handled by accenting some of these diagonals, and within those accents, varying the color. But, then, the stability for which he seeks is achieved by making all those diagonals...



Lozenge: color planes with gray lines, 1919.

...become verticals/horizontals, and, with the space of the painting itself now stable, the painting itself becomes an emblem of dynamism ... a special object in a special, dynamic relationship to all of the objects around it ... to be hung, he said, "So that the bottom corner is at eye level," thus lifting the consciousness of the viewer...

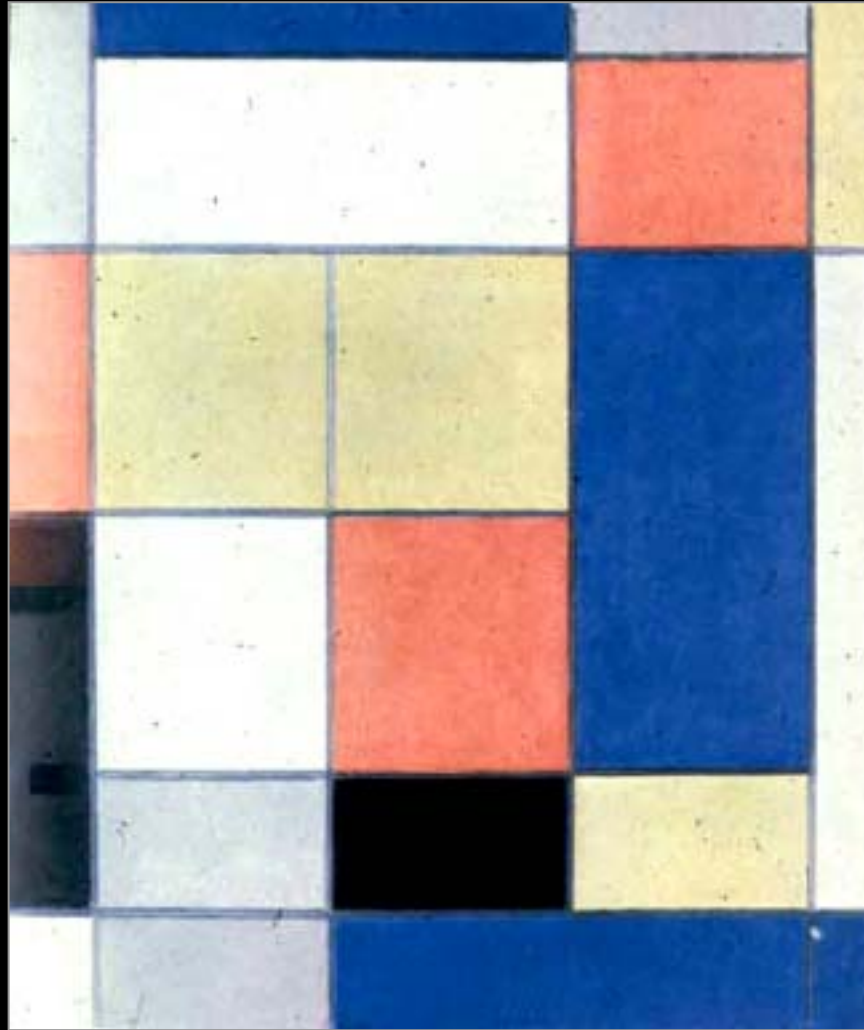


Lozenge: color planes with gray lines, 1919.

The space of the painting extends beyond the painting; the space of the painting reflects the stability of universal space—Being—extending through all things. But, that space is in dynamic relationship to our ordinary world, and is exalted above it.

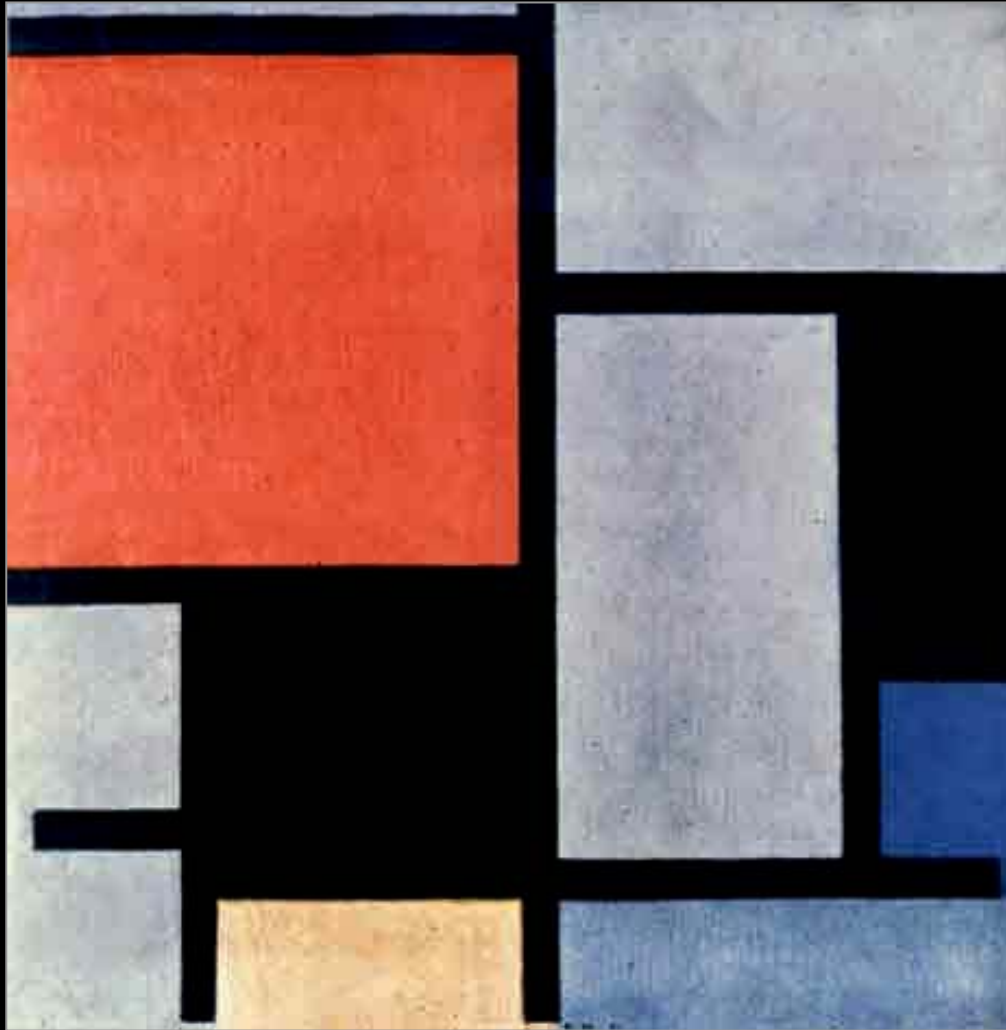


...like those emblems that hung in the churches of Holland, and which may have suggested the diamond format and special hanging to him.



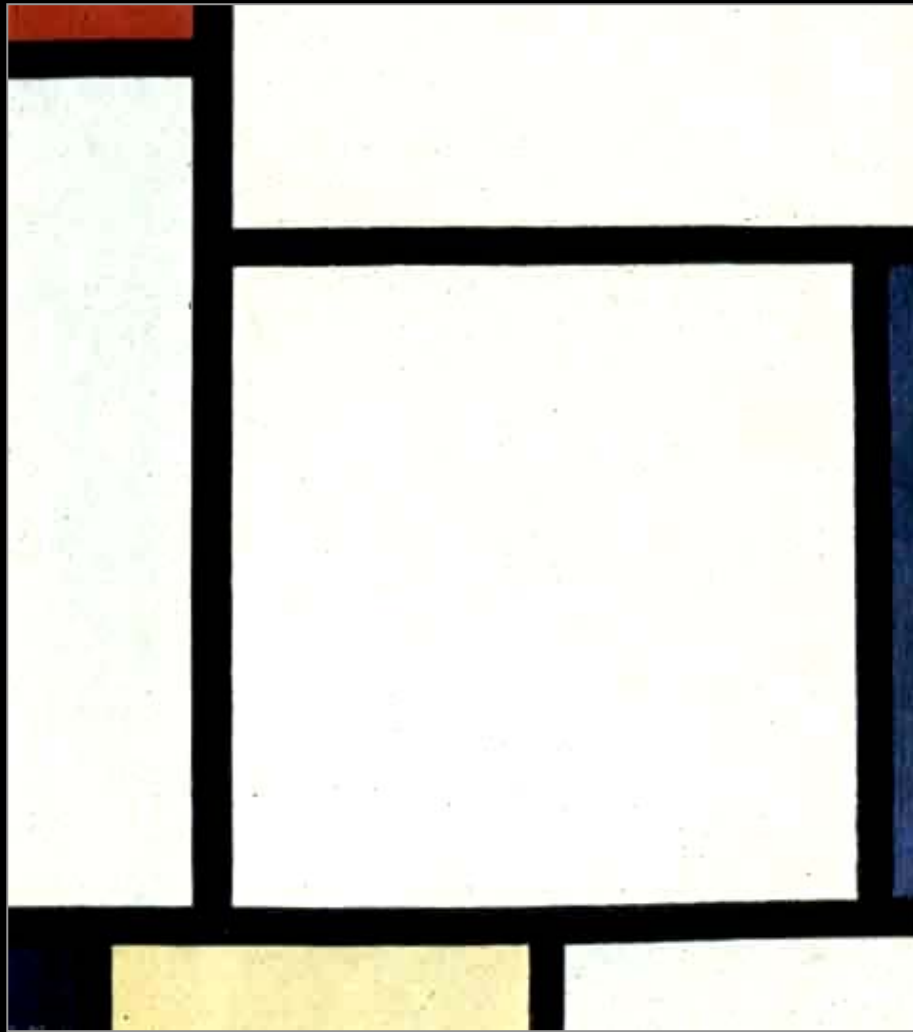
Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow Green, 1920.

On the return to Paris, the previous work continued. We don't need I think so much comment and explanation now. There was only to remember, "I brought the rectangles together; space became black, white or gray; form became red, blue or yellow"—and the total unification of the field is achieved.

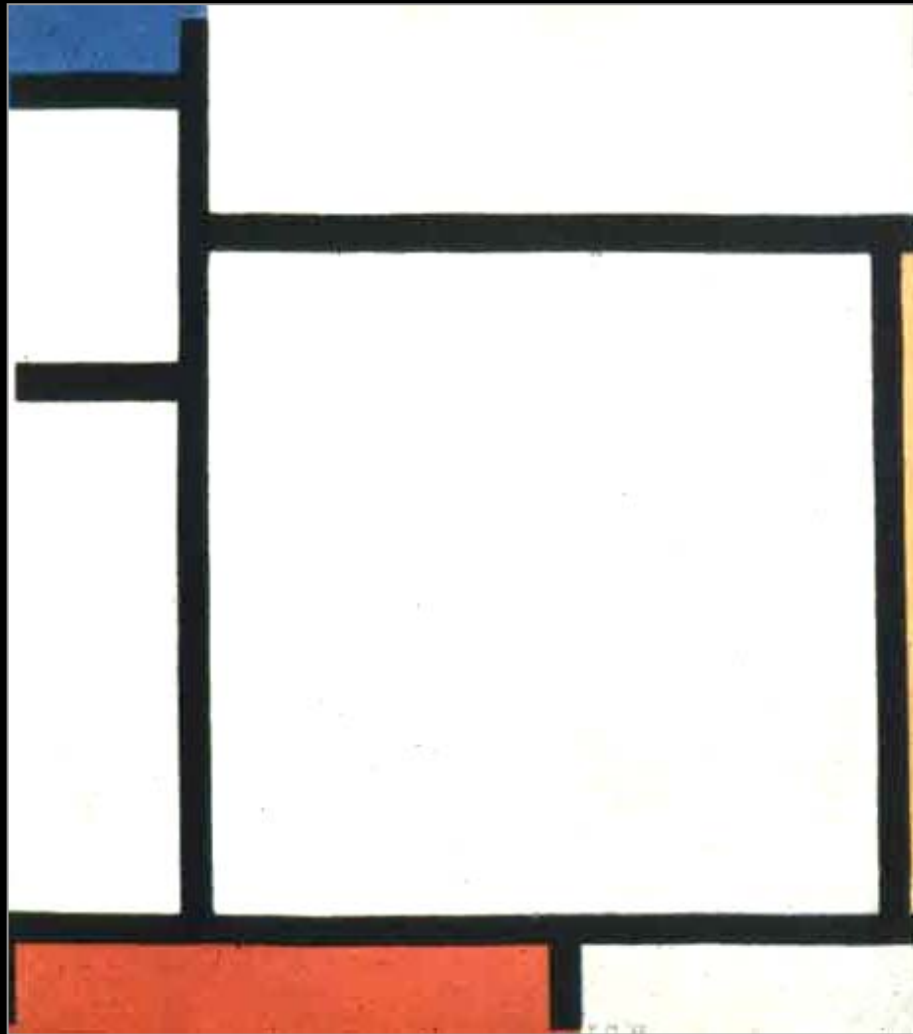


Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue, 1920.

A field which extends boundlessly (that's why the lines on the bottom do not extend, the work moves upward, opening upward. Notice, there is a red square...

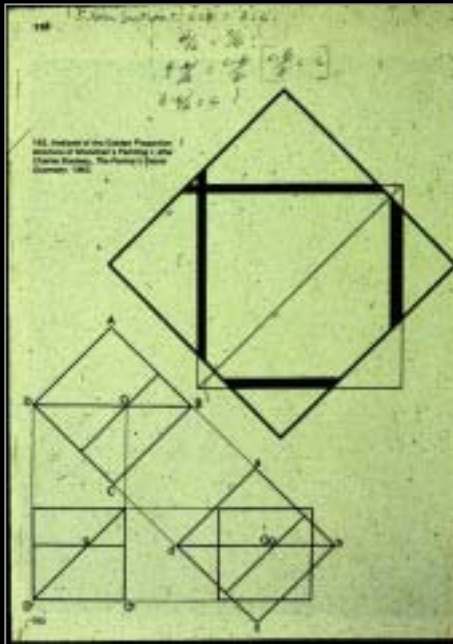
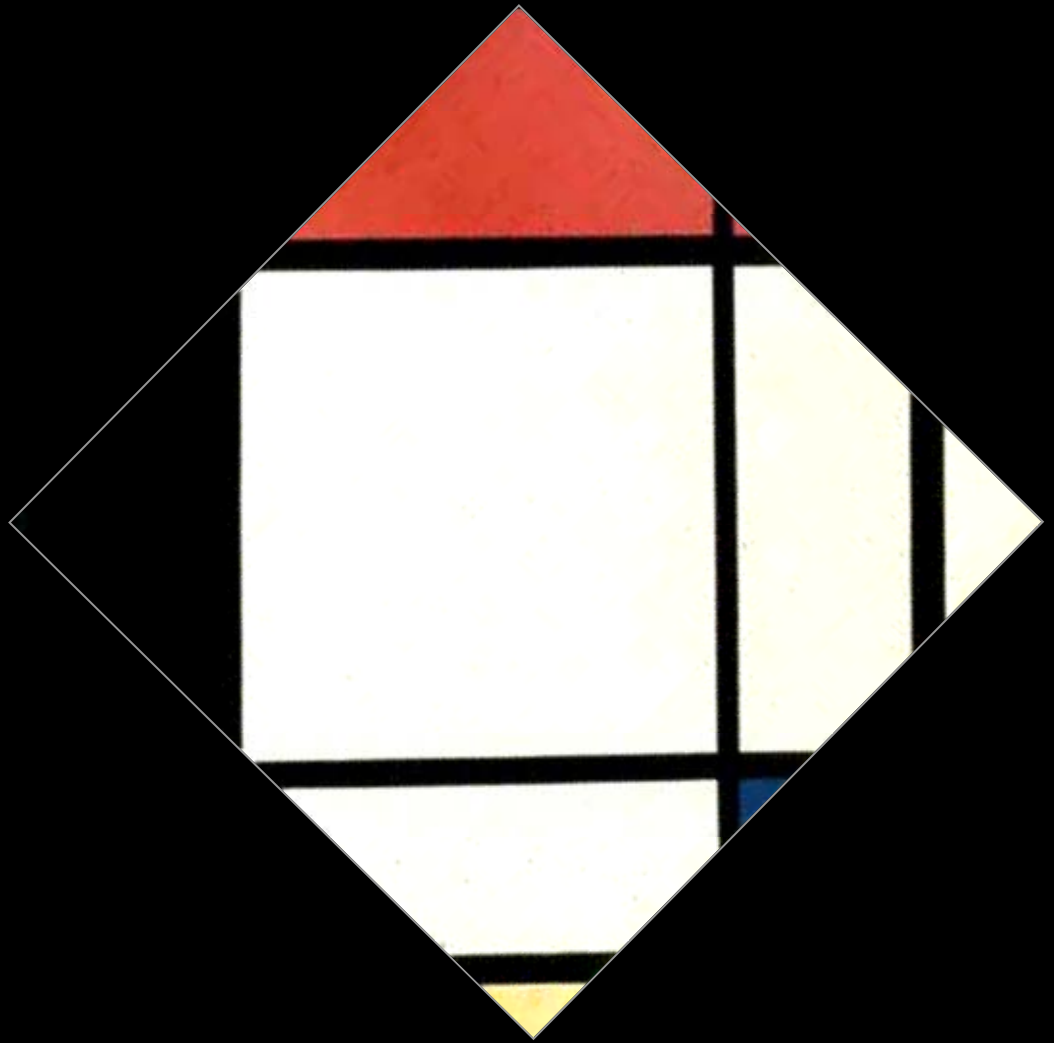


Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue, 1921
And notice, there is a white square. .

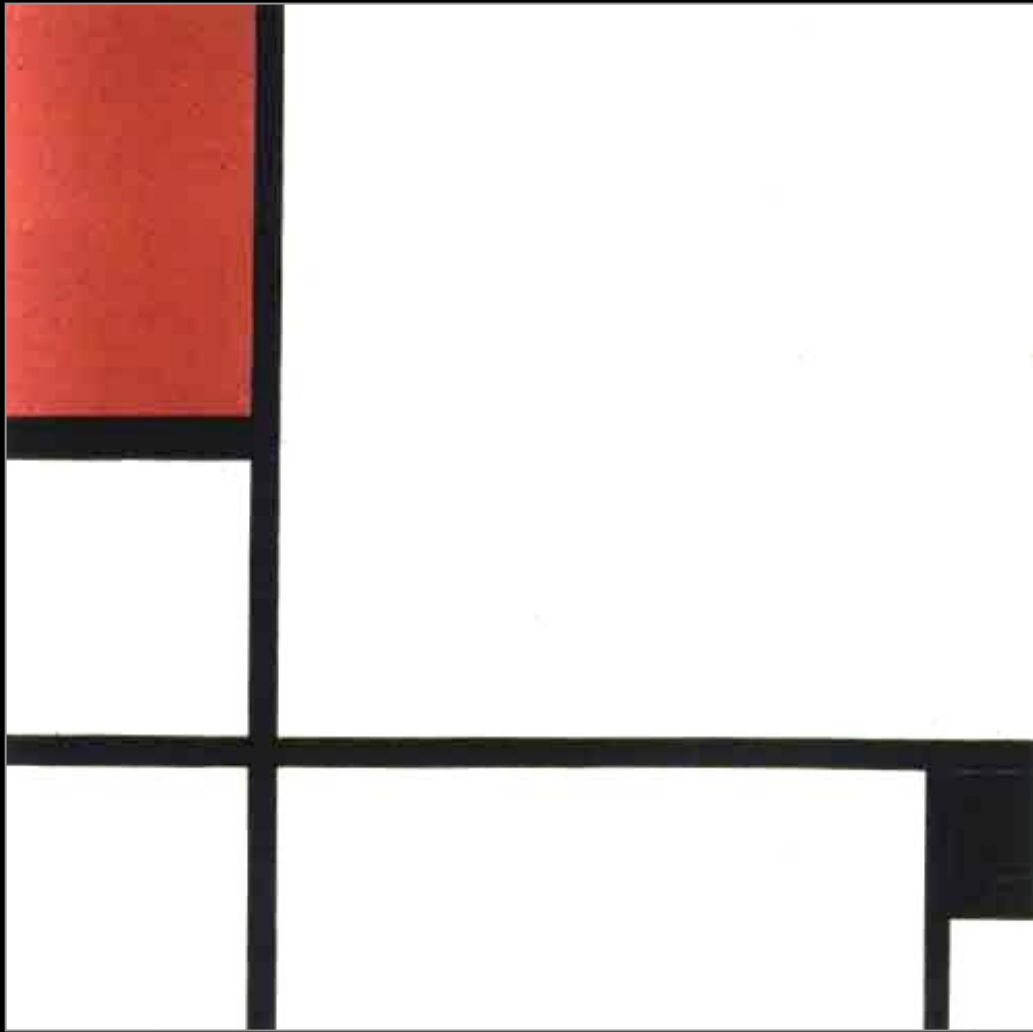


Composition, 1922.

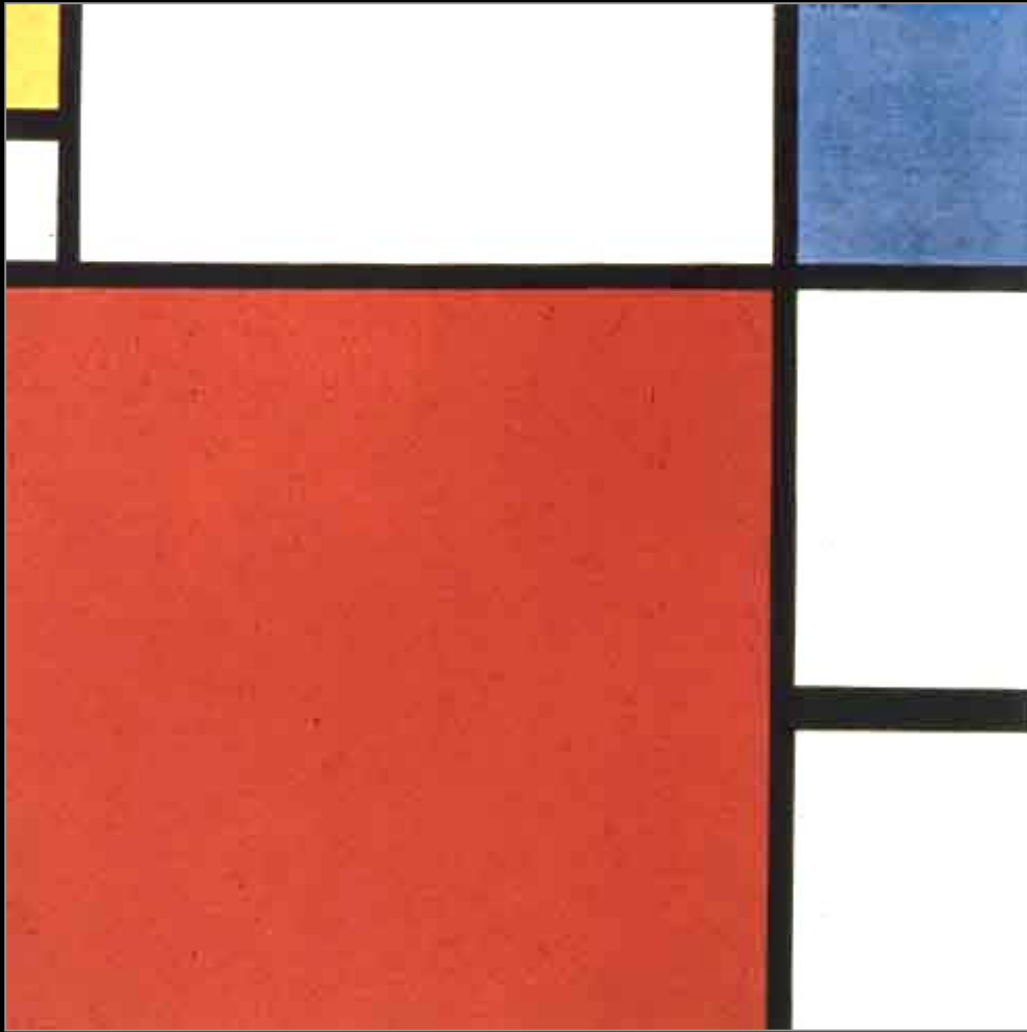
And notice, this is again a white square. And, those same divisions... and, where did those divisions come from? I don't know, but in...



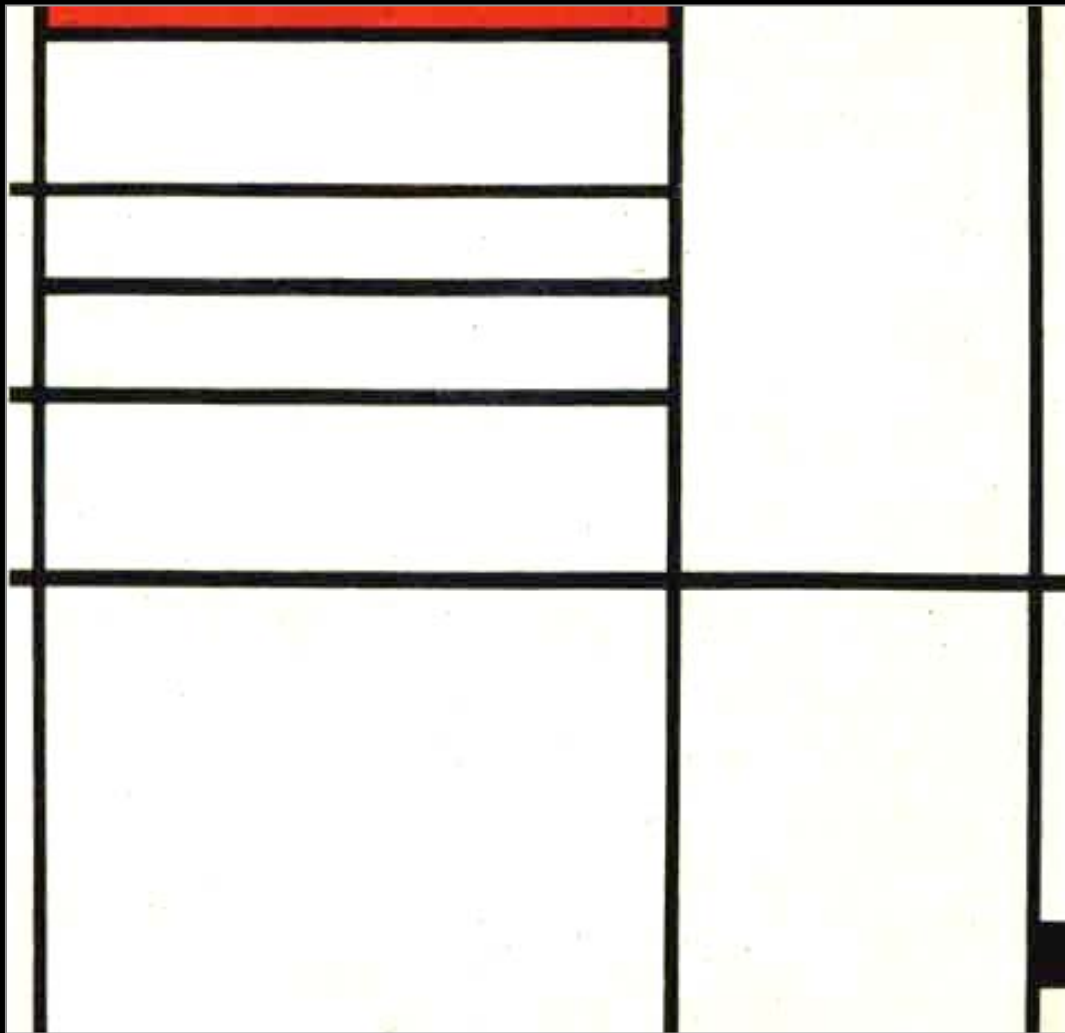
Composition in a Lozenge, 1925
a 1925 composition, they came like this...



Composition, 1929.



Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow, 1930.

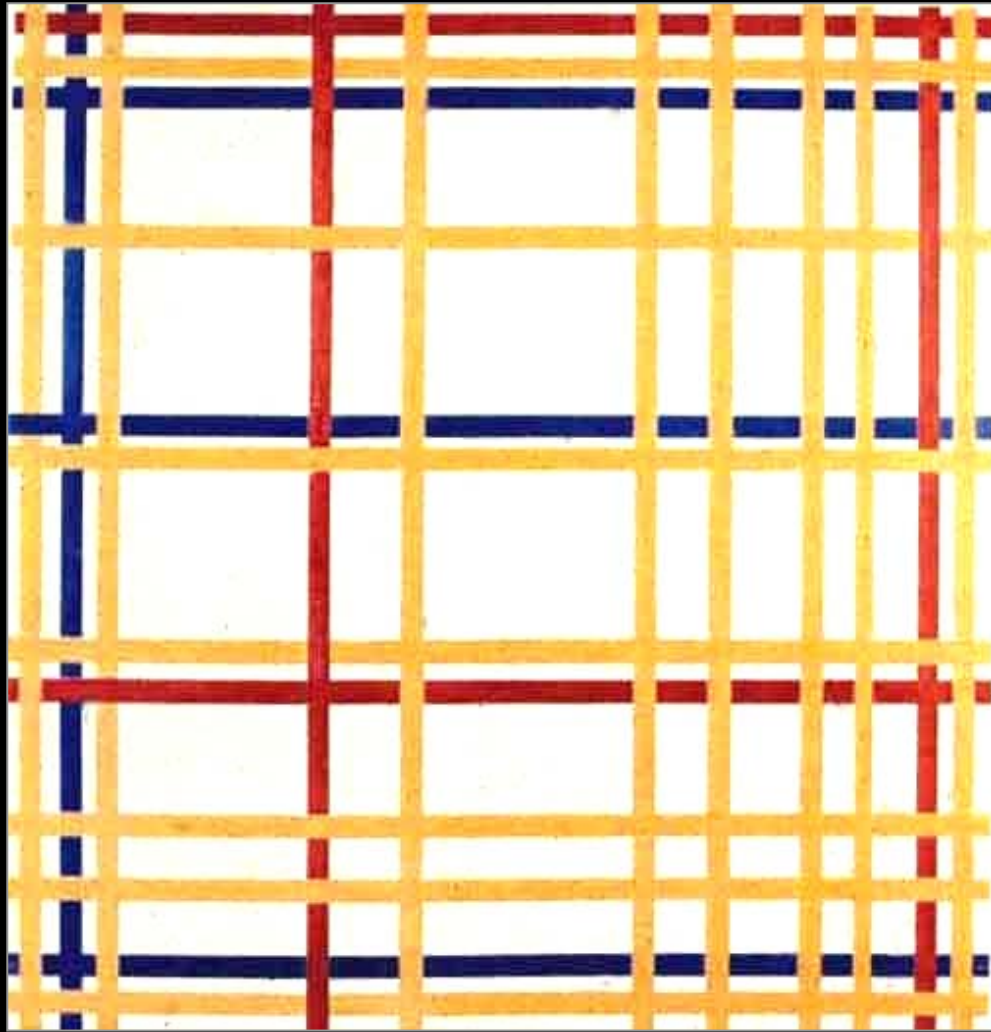


Composition with Red and Black, 1936.



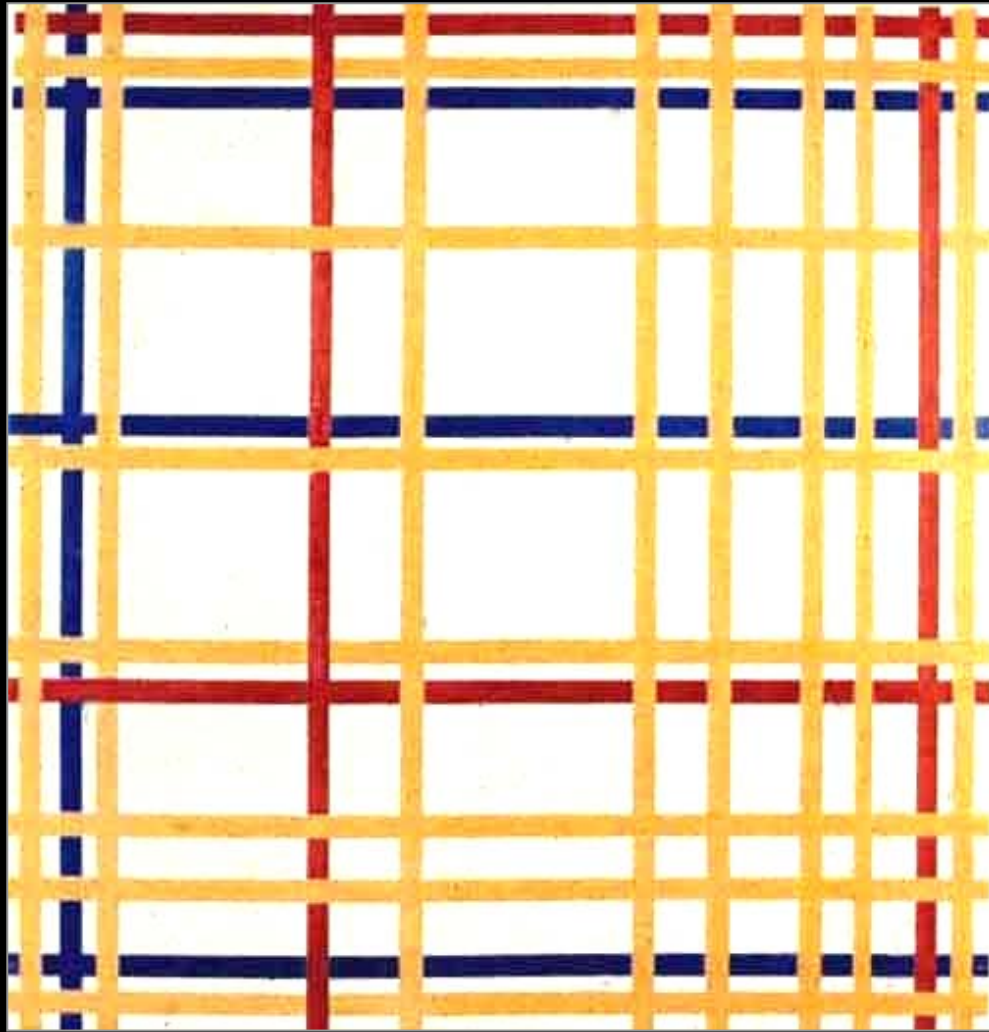
Vertical Composition with Blue and White, 1936.

Mondrian wrote in a sketchbook his concept of the tragic as “Suffering because of the dominance of one over the other”... the verticality of the unbalanced masculine over the horizontal feminine and ... and the blue, which for the Theosophists signified religious and/or divine. (Red was representative for the sensual, yellow for the intellectual and "Pure reason directed toward spiritual ends." War was coming, certainly a tragic overwhelming by the masculine, and not religious/divine, either. And, after a short time in London, Mondrian arrived in New York. .



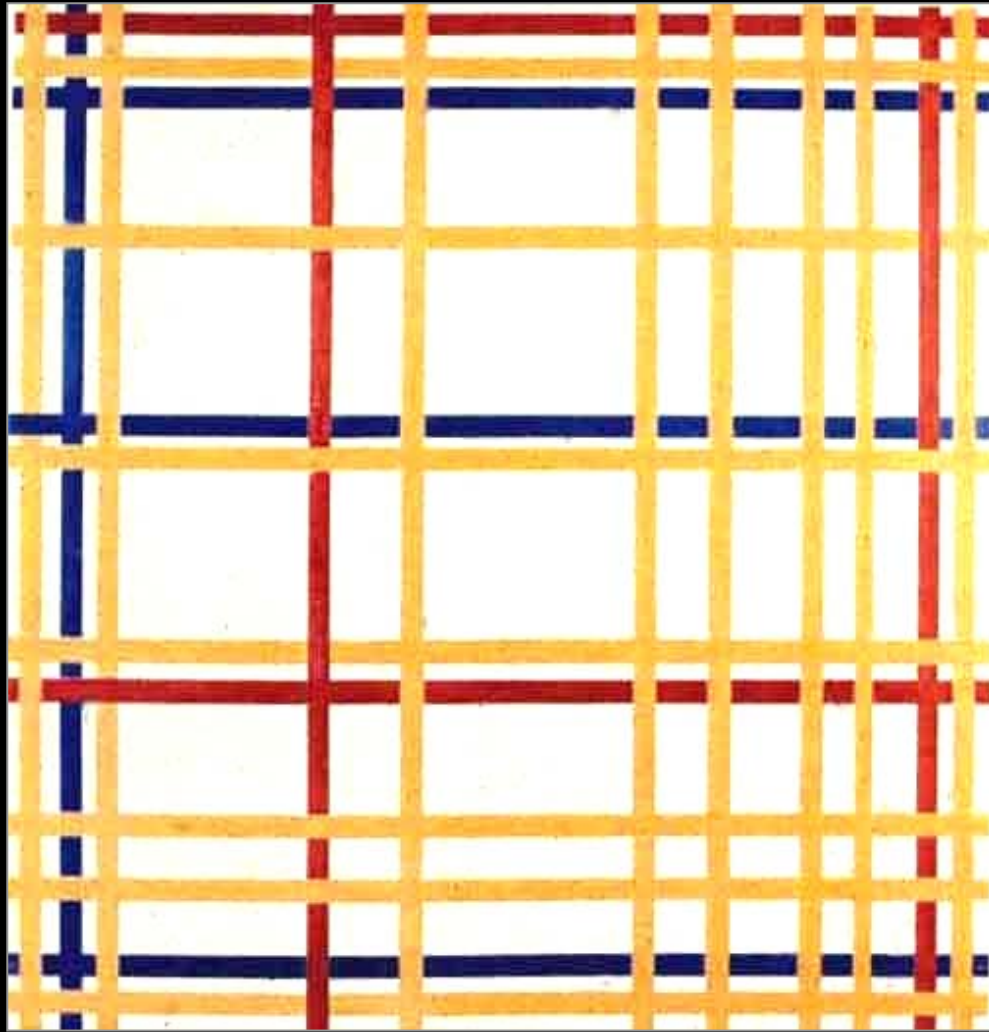
New York City I, 1942.

Mondrian had written an essay for a catalog of his work for a Paris gallery in the early 1920's. It was the credo of his style, and it was dedicated to "the people of the future." He said that "Art is ahead of life: that which we are able to detect in present life is but the prelude of the New Life."



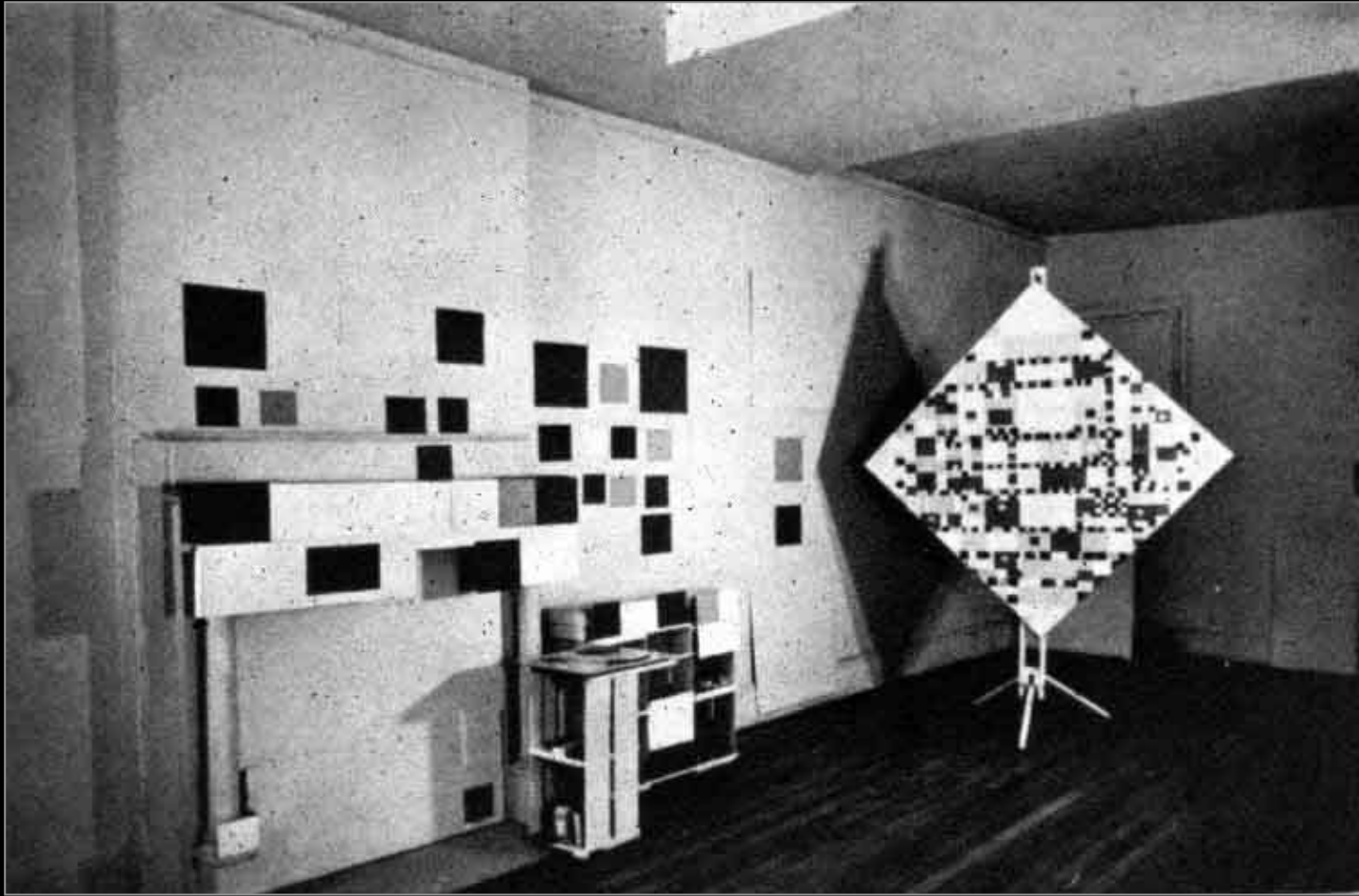
New York City I, 1942.

This New Life was to be achieved by, and was to be the expression of, equilibrium... and for him, the modern city, with its vertical and horizontal, and its exclusion of the chaos of nature, and its lights shining like stars ... in the buildings, like the very stars of his vertical/horizontal/diagonal grids ... and the escape from Europe and the dark advancing of the war, to America and New York...



New York City I, 1942.

This New Life was to be achieved by, and was to be the expression of, equilibrium... “not filled at all times with a feeling of menace and dread, but with a solid confidence and final victory over the tyranny that it driven him from Paris.” The black lines left his work—and he covered them over in many of the paintings he brought with him. And, the lines began to be interlaced, to cross over one another, and a new space to appear. Space opened up.



View of New York Studio with Victory Boogie-Boogie, 1943-44.

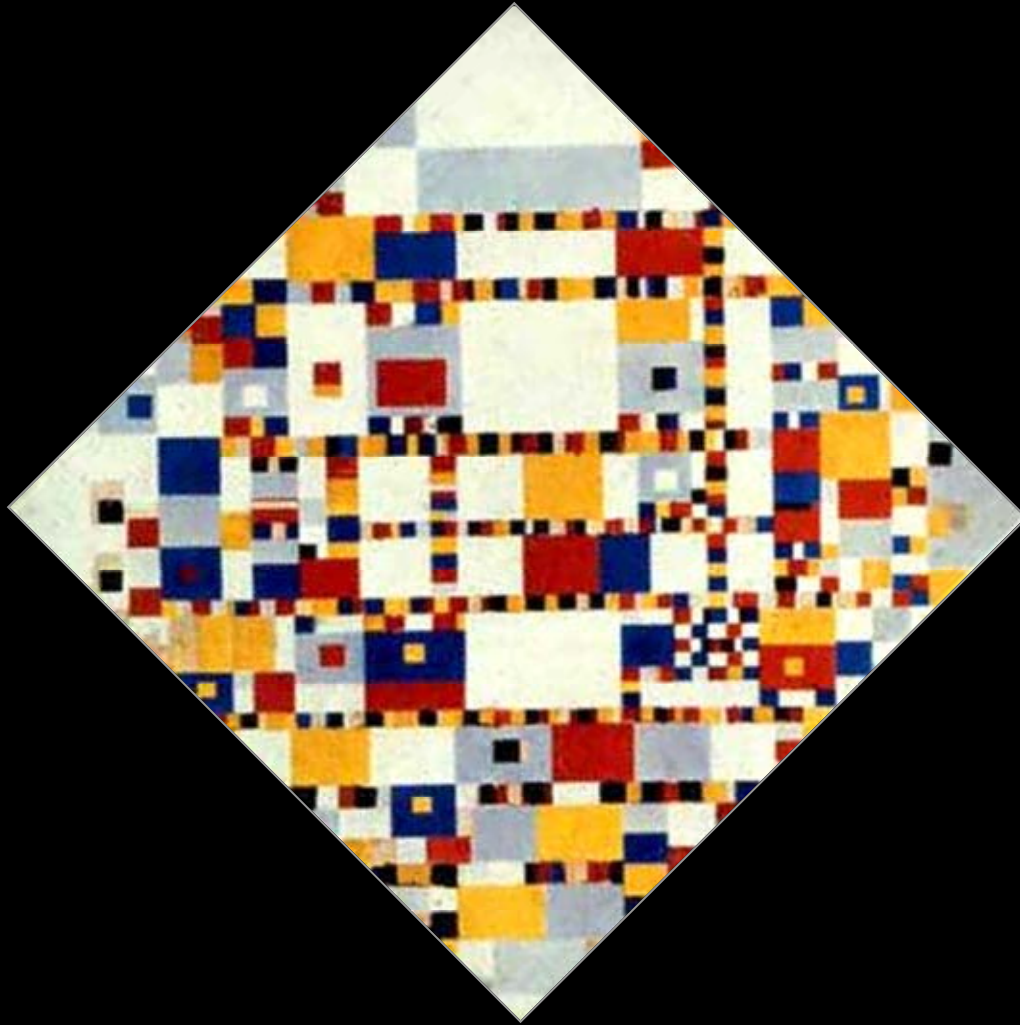
Until, in his final painting, unfinished at his death, the lines had become no longer mere direction or division, but energy in themselves. .



Dusk, 1890.

Piet Mondrian had written in a magazine in 1931,
“What a beautiful task lies in prospect before art: to prepare the future.”

One may see an artist’s life as a poetic metaphor, and some artists’ lives may sum into a symbol. Mondrian is one. And the metaphor is the journey, as it was for Van Gogh. But Mondrian’s journey was toward the light, toward the equilibrium of all things in the light, in the one, in the energy of the origin.



Victory Boogie-Woogie, 1943-4

And the symbol of his life, that for which his life was the symbol
was the light—a Victory Boogie-Woogie in 1943-4

And what his art was for, was to prepare the way and lead us into its experience, to raise our awareness
to make us into the people of the future, the people who live in light.