Piet Mondrian
Working With Abstraction
Creatin

"Abstract art is not the creation of another reality but the true vision of reality.

—Piet Mondrian"

When Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (Peet MON-dee-ahn) was in his 20s, he painted the work below. Twenty years later, using the same design elements, his creations looked like the abstract work on the right. Why did Mondrian's imagery change so radically, what was he trying to express, and why are his paintings considered to be so important today?

At the beginning of the 20th century, artists like Mondrian were searching for new visual forms to express the changing world around them. Technology, industry, and science were advancing at a rapid pace. Electricity, the telephone, automobiles, movies, skyscrapers, airplanes, photography—all invented around the turn of the century—were just a few of the forces transforming modern life. Traditional representational art was no longer adequate to express the challenges and anxieties produced by this new era.

Pieter Cornelis Mondrian was born in 1872 in the Netherlands in a small town near Amsterdam. His father was headmaster of an elementary school, an uncle, a successful painter. Mondrian showed artistic talent, but his
father insisted that his son earn a teaching certificate. Mondrian did become an art teacher, but he also wanted to be a painter. In 1892, his uncle helped him finance his studies at the National Academy of Art in Amsterdam.

After completing his studies, Mondrian had a moderately successful career as an art teacher and artist. His paintings consisted mostly of representational landscapes, tranquil watercolors in muted pastels and earth tones. These images, such as the work on the left, had a hazy, soft-edged quality. Mondrian received portrait commissions, gave art lessons, and even won a few prizes for his paintings.

Then, in 1911, the artist saw an exhibit that deeply affected him. It was a group of paintings by Pablo Picasso and other Cubists. These artists had found new ways of depicting three-dimensional forms on a flat surface by breaking them into angular shapes or "cubes."

Mondrian moved to Paris, where most of the Cubists lived and worked, and where his own art would soon undergo a radical transformation.

Believing that true reality was hidden by the natural world, Mondrian sought to eliminate the "world of nature and man" from his paintings. In an attempt to simplify and perfect his images, he banished curved lines and organic shapes from his work, using only straight lines and geometric shapes. He also abandoned shading and used only black, white, gray, and the three primary colors—bright red, blue, and yellow.

Eventually, Mondrian's paintings would look like Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray (above). This work contains many of the same elements as the landscape. But the lines, shapes, and colors have been reduced to pure geometric forms. The sharp angles of the roof are reflected in the non-representational painting's diamond shape. The yellow field behind the house, the blue door, and reddish bushes in the realistic work have become red, blue, and yellow triangles in the abstraction.
Driven to Abstraction

“True artists are inspired more by the beauty of lines and color and the relationships between them than by the concrete subject of the picture.”
—Piet Mondrian

While living in Paris, Mondrian grew dissatisfied with portraying the world realistically. A friend recalled that during a nighttime walk, they noticed how the moonlight distorted the landscape—what seemed “real” was not how things actually looked. “Nature is a wretched affair,” said Mondrian. “I can hardly stand it.”

In his search for artistic truth, Mondrian would eventually purge all realistic depictions of nature from his art. His images became more and more abstract—reduced to their most basic elements or “essence.” But this metamorphosis didn’t happen overnight. Mondrian developed his abstract style over several years of experimentation.

Even before Mondrian saw the Cubist exhibit, his images were becoming more simplified and stylized. The watercolor Chrysanthemum (bottom left) is a very realistic and highly detailed depiction of a flower. The organic shapes of each petal are shaded and modeled, making the subject appear three-dimensional. But, even in this work you can see some qualities that characterize the artist’s later style—the focus on a single object and the limited color scheme. Compare this work to another flower painting, Gladioli (bottom center), painted a little later. The vase of flowers is still realistic, but Mondrian has flattened the red shapes and cropped in on the subject so that it fills the whole composition. In this work, the artist uses another of the three colors that would become so important in his later work.

Now, fast forward to 1916—when Mondrian painted Composition (bottom right). Does anything about this painting remind you of the two earlier ones? All three paintings have a vertical, rectangular format; all three use values (lightness or darkness) based on various primary colors. But the resemblance ends there. Composition is com-
This style made Mondrian one of the most important abstract painters of the 20th century. Completely abstract. It contains no recognizable images. All curves have been eliminated. Short, intersecting black lines divide the canvas into geometric square and rectangular areas. Some of these areas have been filled with tints (white has been added to the color) of the three primaries. By 1920, the colors and shapes in Mondrian's paintings were bolder and brighter. Unbroken horizontal and vertical lines divide Composition A (near left) into smaller rectangles. The repeating shapes form a rhythmic pattern within the asymmetrical composition. But the colors were not pure enough for Mondrian, and the grid was too complex. Composition with red, blue, yellow (top), painted in 1930, sums up Mondrian's final pure style and is a perfect example of his theory: 'The essence of painting is line and color. Paintings must be as flat as the surface they are painted on. The only pure colors are those that cannot be mixed—red, blue, yellow.'
“There is an absolute harmony of straight lines and pure colors underlying the visible world.”

—Piet Mondrian

Even away from his art, Mondrian insisted on perfection and order—he became upset if a piece of silverware was out of place in a table setting. His workspace was as spare as his compositions. Bright-colored panels hung on white walls; furniture followed geometric lines. It has been said that entering Mondrian's studio was like being inside one of his paintings. *Composition No. 12 with Blue* (above) shows Mondrian's style at its most severe. This work, begun in 1936 and finished in the U.S. in 1942, is a black-and-white grid accentuated by one blue square.

In the 1930s, political tensions were once again dividing the countries of Europe. When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Mondrian—along with many other nontraditional artists—was placed on a cultural blacklist. When World War II (1939-1945) began, Mondrian left Europe for New York City. He moved into an apartment on Manhattan's East Side and set about re-creating his Paris studio, complete with white walls and colored panels.

Mondrian was inspired by the city's soaring skyscrapers, bright neon signs, and jazz clubs. He even began to work with new materials, gluing down colored paper strips in pieces like *New York City* (bottom right). The energetic grid patterns in his new works recall images associated with urban American life: city streets; subway lines; tall buildings; brightly lit windows in a night skyline.

*Broadway Boogie Woogie* (top right), done during 1942-43, was the last work Mondrian completed before his death in 1944. Its title was inspired by a popular jazz-piano style. In this work, the artist abandoned severe black lines, replacing them with squares and rectangles of various sizes and colors. Their rhythmic patterns suggest the flashing lights of Times Square billboards and Broadway theater marquees.
Mondrian worked on "Victory Boogie Woogie" (pages 8-9) during the last year of his life, constantly revising it. Standing the work's simple square shape on its end adds to the excitement of its composition. While laboring on "Victory," the artist caught a cold that developed into pneumonia. He died in a New York hospital at age 71, leaving the work unfinished.

Mondrian's style, as seen in paintings such as these, made him one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Not only did his work inspire other abstract painters, but it also influenced architecture, interior design, fashion, and the graphic arts. Mondrian's spare compositions—with their clean, straight lines and primary colors—seem as fresh and innovative today as they must have when the artist first created them.
Victory Boogie Woogie
by Piet Mondrian

“The city expresses modern life; it produces abstract art. And this kind of art will create among us a profoundly rich and human beauty.”

—Piet Mondrian
Mondrian’s Legacy

Three modern abstractionists whose work was influenced by that of Piet Mondrian

"THE LIGHT GLITTERING THROUGH A TREE NEAR THE BAY WINDOW OF MY HOME ATTRACTION MY FANCY, AND I WANTED TO CAPTURE THIS MAGIC." — ALMA THOMAS

NATURAL PATTERNS

Like Mondrian, 20th-century African-American painter Alma Thomas painted realistically for many years. Both artists taught art to high school students while continuing to create art part-time. Both came late to abstraction. While Mondrian was driven to abstract his images to uncover the reality he felt was hidden by the natural world, Thomas found her inspiration in nature. Works such as Light Blue Nursery (left) were painted from the upstairs window of her home in Washington, D.C. From this high point of view, Thomas has abstracted the flower rows in her garden, creating patterns of thick and thin horizontal bands. The dense rows of brushstrokes that make up “Alma’s stripes” as she called them, capture the shimmering qualities of natural light and shadow.

"I THINK OF EACH PAINTING IN THE OCEAN PARK SERIES AS A TRANSCRIPTION OF THA PARTICULAR DAY."
— RICHARD DIEBENKORN

ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES

California artist Richard Diebenkorn (DEE ben korn) spent his entire career moving between a realistic style of painting and an abstract one. Fascinated by landscape, the artist created a number of paintings inspired by the light, colors, and rhythms of the places where he lived. Ocean Park No. 10 (right) is one of a series of 140 paintings Diebenkorn created based on the beachside community of Ocean Park in Venice, California. Diebenkorn worked with geometric shapes but unlike Mondrian, he did not plan his compositions, choosing to “discover” his images through “trial and error.” Made up of vertical shapes and acute angles, Diebenkorn’s abstract blocks of primary colors and textures resemble glimpses of sunlight, sand, and sky seen between buildings and reflected in plate-glass windows. The bright-red triangular focal point at the bottom of this work suggests brightly colored architecture or a sail as seen from the shore.
“MY EYES REFLECT SURFACE AND PATTERN BUT DO NOT SEE. I HAVE BECOME A POINT OF VIEW WITHOUT A PERSON BEHIND IT.” —SARAH MORRIS

URBAN MAZES

The abstract patterns in Alma Thomas’s paintings are predominantly horizontal, while those in Richard Diebenkorn’s are vertical. But the patterns in contemporary American artist Sarah Morris’s paintings, such as Pools—Carillon [Miami] (above), are not only horizontal and vertical, but are filled with every kind of criss-crossing diagonal. The hard-edged lines and shapes are flat, but the many intersecting diagonals in the picture suggest great depths as seen from multiple points-of-view—above, below, eye-level, even from mid-air. The overlapping grid patterns and contrasting color pairs (blue/orange; yellow/purple) suggest the sensations of speed, confusion, and fragmentation felt by a traveler moving through a large, modern city.
Emily Olsen considers herself an observer of ordinary objects. If she walks by a desk, she doesn’t just glance at the wood or the drawers. She carefully studies it for details she can use in her artwork. “I’m constantly looking at the world around me—for textures, shapes, and patterns,” says the 19-year-old. Emily enjoys incorporating what she sees in her work, typically a mix of abstract and realistic art.

As a senior at Wauwatosa East High School in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, Emily’s keen eye and strong sense of design helped her create the award-winning abstraction on the opposite page. Now a freshman at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Emily hopes to pursue a career in graphic design. “I love being the person in charge of the visual aspect of a project,” Emily explains.

**How did you first get involved in art?**
I’ve been creating art as long as I can remember. I spent hours at my little table, drawing and painting.

**How did you come to do this award-winning piece?**
I was asked to create a postage stamp as part of an advertising and design class during my senior year. The assignment was very open-ended. We had to use Photoshop to design anything we wanted onto a 5x7-inch rectangular space. The only requirement was to incorporate “37 cents” into our design.

**How did you get your idea?**
Earlier in the year, my art teacher had asked me to create 50 paintings in a weekend. She wanted me to force me to work from pure observation, and not think too hard about the composition of a piece. I painted 50 images on 3x3-inch squares. The more I worked, the freer my images got. I liked some of the squares so much I decided to use my favorites for the postage stamp.

**What did you think about as you designed your stamp?**
I thought primarily about the small space I was working with. For a stamp-sized piece to work, I knew my design couldn’t be too busy. Each square had to be distinctive, yet the shapes had to be simplified so they wouldn’t compete with each other.

**Did anything else influence you as you worked?**
Yes, the computer forced me to focus purely on design, not paint textures. My paintings have a 3-D quality because I layer paint and use lots of scratches and texture. Color and design was all I had to work with on the one-dimensional surface generated by the computer.

**How did you go about creating your stamp?**
Using the computer, I began by turning my favorite paintings into 2-inch squares. I designed the green one with the circles first. To get a playful feel, I made the black circles different sizes and locations inside the white circles. The irregular shapes reminded me of those plastic “googly” eyes you can paste on funny faces. Next, I designed the red square, basing it on one of my paintings. For the yellow square, I created long white strips with raggedy edges. I needed a fourth square shape to tie the others into a unit. So I designed

“People buy and use stamps every day. I wanted the viewer to be drawn to the energy created by this stamp’s color and abstract, almost child-like design. But I didn’t want it to look so out there it couldn’t be appreciated and embraced in the professional world.”
a dark blue shape that looks like it's almost pointing to the other shapes. When I put the four together, I loved their look. I made sure there wasn't too much white space between the four squares, then I added a beige strip on the bottom and placed the "37 cents" on it.

**What caused you to choose the colors that you did?**
I wanted colors that would look bright and appealing on a stamp. I also wanted contrast and balance. I added a duller red-orange tone to the bright-red square so it wouldn't overpower the green one next to it. The same goes for the blue square. I wanted to offset the more royal-blue with a lighter shade, so it would complement the yellow square next to it.

**What kind of stamp is this supposed to be?**
Playful, yet practical. People buy and use stamps every day. I wanted the viewer to be drawn to the energy created by this stamp's color and its abstract, almost childlike design. But I didn't want it to look so out there that it couldn't be appreciated and embraced in the professional world.

**What advice do you have for other aspiring artists like yourself?**
Don't be afraid to work from what you know you are drawn to. In my case, it's textures and patterns. Trust your instincts, and your passion. Don't work on a piece just to please others. Rather, strive to create a piece that is an honest representation of your thoughts and ideas. Honest work provides the most satisfaction as an artist.
SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

Creating an Abstract Design

Learn how to create a work of art by limiting your options.

MATERIALS
- 18 x 24 in. 80 lb. Sulfite paper
- 18 x 24 in. Vellum or tracing paper
- Ebony pencil
- Scissors
- School pencil or # 3 pencil
- 18 in. Ruler
- Vinyl eraser
- Drawing board
- Assortment of plastic flowers
- 80 lb. construction paper
  (red, blue, yellow, and black)
- Masking tape
- Elmer's Glue-All

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., Art Instructor, Morrison Junior High School, Morrison, IL. Assisted by Matthew L. Stoecker and Josh Gunderlock, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL. Photos by Larry Gregory and Wayne Duerksen, Northern Illinois University.

Eearly in his career, Piet Mondrian based his paintings on specific natural objects such as a flower, a tree, a building. For Mondrian, abstraction was a long gradual search for the "true reality" he felt lay beneath the natural world. It took the artist 20 years to reduce his subject matter to a very few elements—straight black lines, flat solid rectangles, and three primary colors on a white background.

In this workshop, you'll create a nonrepresentational composition using the same visual restrictions that Mondrian set up for himself.

STEP 1 Collect and bring in different kinds of plastic or artificial flowers. Choose a single flower with stem, leaves, and blossom. Practice a few blind contour drawings, then do two 25-minute monumental contour drawings of one flower. To monumentalize your subject, make it large. Fill the entire paper; you can even crop the flower so it goes off the paper. Then choose the composition that you feel can most successfully be abstracted.

STEP 2 With a ruler, divide the 18x24-inch tracing paper into a 3-inch grid. Cut red, blue, and yellow construc-
**The focal point** of Michael's abstraction is located in the colorful group of squares on the right side of his composition. The cluster of red and yellow rectangles of various sizes sets up a visual rhythm that leads the eye through this focal point. Four blue shapes surround and complement the red and yellow ones.

**In John's design,** color areas at the edges bring the viewer's eye around the outside of the work. Most of the color is located at the bottom, top, or sides. Red, blue, and yellow rectangles balance white rectangles of similar sizes and proportions.

**Juliana's intricate composition** is divided in half by a thick black vertical line. Many squares in the work have been subdivided, adding to the complexity of the design. The predominantly blue strip on the right is visually balanced by the predominantly white strip on the left.

**SOME HELPFUL HINTS**

**REMEMBER:** Your contour drawing of the plastic flower will be used as the basis of your abstract composition.

**KEEP IN MIND:** Setting up a grid makes it easier to abstract flower shapes. Refer to drawing underneath when abstracting.

**FINALLY:** Keep composition simple by limiting number of colors and strips. There should be a focal point.

**STEP 3** Tape tracing paper over the flower drawing. Use horizontal and vertical shapes in the flower to create horizontals and verticals in your abstract composition.

Use a ruler to break up space into rectangles of varying sizes, lengths, and widths. You may cut units in halves or quarters. Use shapes and colors to keep your eye moving around the composition. Remember, the narrow black strips will eventually be part of the composition.

**STEP 4** Begin arranging red, yellow, and blue shapes and black strips. Your shapes may be cut smaller or they may be joined together to make larger shapes. Remember that white space and black strips are part of the composition. Positive shapes and negative space must be visually balanced. When your composition is finalized, divide the 18x24-inch piece of sulfate paper into a 3-inch grid. Using tiny drops of glue, glue down colored strips first. Black strips are glued down last. At this stage of the project, craftsmanship, neatness, and accuracy are extremely important.
Abstract Patterns

How many of these abstract images can you identify?

Mondrian and other nonrepresentational artists sought to express themselves by abandoning pictorial imagery. Instead, they emphasized the elements and principles of design in their works.

Below are details of paintings that appear in this issue, as well as a list of elements and principles of design associated with their creation. Next to each phrase, write the letter of the image (or images) that is most appropriate.

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