

Press kit: Mondrian. Evolution

Mondrian. Evolution

October 29, 2022 – February 12, 2023

K20

Press conference and preview

Thursday, October 27, 2022, 11 am, K20

Speakers

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen
- Beate Gerlings, Embassy Counsellor of Culture and Communication, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- Kathrin Beßen / Susanne Meyer-Büser, Curators, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

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#K20Mondrian

#PietMondrian

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#DerBeatVonPiet

In Celebration of the 150th Birthday of Piet Mondrian – The Evolution of Abstraction in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

2022 marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Piet Mondrian. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is taking this as an opportunity to honor him and his art in the comprehensive exhibition “Mondrian. Evolution.” Many are familiar with Piet Mondrian (1872– 1944) as a painter of rigid geometric compositions with black-and-white lines and fields of pure color in red, blue, or yellow. However, the fact that the Dutchman initially chose landscapes and other representational motifs during the first decades of his career and often staged these with surprising colorfulness is hardly known. On the basis of ninety works, the exhibition, which opens to the public on October 29, sheds light on Mondrian’s remarkable path from the early naturalistic paintings to the late abstract works and traces the formal connections that exist between the paintings spanning five decades.

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In this process, the concept of “evolution” plays a key role. For Mondrian, evolution meant conducting experiments in an effort to reach a new artistic level. In order to illustrate this systematic progression in Mondrian’s work, visual axes are formed in the chronologically hung exhibition, which allows works from different phases to be juxtaposed with one another. For example, the Impressionist painting “Lighthouse in Westkapelle” (1910) hangs next to the Neoplastic work “Composition in Blue and White” (1936), thus visualizing the artist’s amazingly stringent development. The juxtaposition reveals that, already at a young age, Mondrian was a painter with a distant vision.

Mondrian’s artistic roots lie in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of his career, he worked in the style of the Hague School of Painting, which was influenced by Realism and Impressionism. He thus painted primarily Dutch motifs, interiors, and landscapes under gray, rain-filled clouds. A break with academic painting took place around 1908, initiated by several factors: on the one hand, by the influence of the works of Vincent van Gogh and the Symbolism of Jan Toorop; on the other hand, by mystical-religious approaches of Theosophy that increasingly preoccupied Mondrian in his thinking. From the beginning of his career, the artist searched for a pictorial language that would express the universal, the deepest essence of all that exists. For him, the visualization of this spiritual dimension in painting arose through the perfect balance of all pictorial elements. Mondrian took the decisive step in this direction through his friendship with the women painter Jacoba van Heemskerck and her partner Marie Tak van Poortvliet, who boldly experimented with the intrinsic value of color. As a result, Mondrian’s palette also brightened, and his style became increasingly expressive, free, and sketchy.

A short time later, in Paris in 1911, Mondrian encountered the Cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. These revolutionary paintings made an immense impression on the almost forty-year-old Dutchman. As a result, he radically reduced his color palette. Predominantly gray and ochre tones now determined the overall impression of his paintings, and the line became increasingly important. Subsequently, in a process that can be described as organic abstraction, the famous series of trees was created. By the beginning of the First World War, Mondrian was creating large-scale abstract compositions that only hinted at the original motifs.

When he was prevented from traveling to Paris during the war, he experimented with landscape motifs, again creating paintings of farms and windmills. This retreat into figuration is less a return to naturalism than a reexamination of organic abstraction on the basis of representational motifs.

Within the context of the De Stijl group and parallel with his return to Paris, he developed radical abstract paintings at the age of almost fifty, calling the style of this new abstraction “Neoplasticism” (New Design). The first theoretical substantiation of his abstract art was published in the magazine *De Stijl* in 1920. These Neoplastic paintings—consisting in principle of the infinite possibilities of combining white and black lines meeting at right angles, and the primary colors red, yellow, and blue—formed the foundation of Mondrian’s fame, which continues unabated to this day. His studio at 26 rue du Départ, which he occupied from 1920 to 1936, became a legendary, frequently photographed location. He furnished it according to the principles of Neoplasticism, so that it appeared to visitors like an accessible work of modern art. Mondrian’s lifestyle, his enthusiasm for jazz, and his unconventional, open mind made him one of the most important protagonists of the Parisian avant-garde.

With Neoplasticism, Mondrian’s development seemed to have reached a temporary end point. However, when Mondrian emigrated to New York City in September 1940, his style changed once again. Under the impression of the pulsating metropolis, the artist was convinced that his works needed more “boogie-woogie.” Mondrian not only condensed the surface and rhythm of already finished Neoplastic works, he also discovered montage tape as a modern working material for himself. In place of the black line frameworks and the surfaces of white and primary colors, more lively, freer compositions comprised of adhesive strips in red, yellow, and blue appeared.

Following Mondrian’s remarkable development as one strolls through the exhibition, it becomes clear that there are various recurring constants in his work: first of all, from the very beginning, an obvious interest in experimenting with the structures and rhythms of individual motifs and lines. Secondly, Mondrian must have held the view early on that pictures can evoke in viewers the idea of a spiritual dimension that is actually invisible. And finally, Mondrian’s work was presumably influenced in a fundamental way by the idea of concentrating more and more on the essentials of the picture itself, starting from the model of nature, continuing through progressive abstraction, and leading up to the abstract pictures of his later years.

The exhibition *Mondrian. Evolution* is a joint project of the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen near Basel and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and was created in close cooperation with the Kunstmuseum Den Haag. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen boasts four Neoplastic works by Mondrian that Werner Schmalenbach acquired through the mediation of Ernst Beyeler: “Composition with Yellow” (1930), “Composition with Blue and White” (1936), “Rhythm of Straight Lines” (1937–1942), purchased in the early 1960s, and the famous “New York City I” (1941) with a time lag in 1980.

UPSIDE DOWN?

The story of the making of *New York City 1* holds a number of further riddles for posterity, and the question still remains as to whether the picture was correctly registered by the executor of Mondrian’s estate. During his lifetime, the artist had already assigned the rights to his works to Harry Holtzman, who allowed a photographer to take pictures in the studio only a few days after Mondrian’s death. In June 1944 the photographs were published as part of a fashion feature in the magazine “Town and Country” ¹*New York City 1* is seen at an angle, perched on an easel and standing, astonishingly, on its head. Mondrian had been working in his studio, possibly even on this very picture, only a few days before his death. Could it be, then, that the photograph shows the correct orientation as Mondrian had intended? Did the inversion occur by chance, or through a mistake, of the kind that can easily happen when works of art are being crated up or unpacked? It may no longer be possible to determine whether the orientation previously considered correct is in fact valid, but the question invites closer attention.

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Surprisingly, if we go along with the experiment and rotate *New York City 1* by 180 degrees, we find that the picture still “works.” In fact, it functions extremely well: the composition gains in intensity and plasticity. The density of the strips along the top edge lends the work a resemblance to its close relative *New York City*, in which the zone of greatest density is also located at the top edge. The blue strips along the left, top, and lower edges are now positioned in exactly the same places.

A detailed conservator’s examination of the direction of the strips in *New York City 1* has yet to be carried out, but an initial visual inspection confirmed the suspicion that by turning the canvas upside down, the adhesive strips on the upper edge are aligned with the edge of the picture, whereas those at the lower edge peter out, with pieces missing here and there. Assuming that Mondrian began by attaching the strips at the top, and, following the principle of gravity, unrolled them downward to attach them at the bottom of the canvas, then the painting has indeed been hanging upside down ever since it was first exhibited in 1945.

It is possible that Mondrian repeatedly turned the picture around while he was working on it, in which case there would be no right or wrong orientation. This may be the truly revolutionary feature of *New York City 1*: the fact that it can be read in any direction, like the street map of a big city, in an attitude of open-mindedness, moving every way at once, like couples dancing the boogie-woogie.

¹ The photograph from the fashion shoot was rediscovered by the Italian artist Francesco Visalli, who has engaged intensively with Mondrian in his own works and hit upon the photograph while conducting research that has yielded excellent results. When Visalli communicated his findings to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in the autumn of 2021, their significance was not immediately appreciated, but we have now been able to take account of it in our own work. The author would like expressly to thank the artist for supplying this highly valuable information.

With the kind support of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Curators: Kathrin Beßen, Susanne Meyer-Büser

Architecture

The exhibition architecture in the Klee Hall of K20 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was designed by the architectural team please don't touch, Dortmund.

Mondrian and His Fascination with Jazz Music

Painting, music, and rhythm form a close bond in Mondrian's work. The artist was an avid fan of jazz who drew inspiration for his painting from music and its rhythms, especially in his abstract works. The first Neoplastic works, created in Paris in the early 1920s, were inspired by ragtime, a precursor of jazz. Mondrian also enjoyed attending concerts and dances and cutting a fine figure on the dance floor. In New York, he even took professional dance lessons before venturing onto the dance floor with boogie-woogie steps. In his writings, Mondrian repeatedly used the term "rhythm," using it equally to describe phenomena from the realms of music, dance, and the visual arts. In doing so, he emphasized the fact that, for him, music and visual art are not only comparable but forward-looking forms of expression. In 1927, he wrote in the journal "Internationale revue i10" about the affinity in spirit between the two disciplines: "Strangers amid the melody and form that surround us, jazz and neoplasticism appear as expressions of a new life."¹

Interpreters include Duke Ellington, Paul Whiteman, Mae West, and Louis Armstrong.

¹ Piet Mondrian, "De Jazz en de Neo-plastiek," in: *Internationale revue i10*, vol. 1, no. 12, December 1927, pp. 421–427, here p. 421; reprinted in: Piet Mondrian, *The Complete Writings. Essays and Notes in Original Versions*, compiled and edited by Louis Veen (Leiden 2017), pp. 285–290, here p. 285.

Action Space “Piet’s Beat”

An extensive educational program accompanying the exhibition contextualizes and updates Piet Mondrian and his artistic work. The action space “Piet’s Beat” sets the tone. In the midst of the exhibition, curious visitors can use the action space set up for them in a variety of ways to actively enter into contact with the surrounding exhibits through various senses. In addition to the individual exchange with other visitors about what they have seen, they can also listen to music to which Mondrian himself danced. For guided tours (in German, English, French, and simple language) and workshops dedicated to Mondrian’s fascination with rhythm as a connecting element between music and visual art, the action space offers the possibility of interaction in a protected atmosphere. By means of adhesive tape, visitors are invited to creatively embellish the walls and floor and thus create an accessible, collective work.

The educational program was developed by Julia Latzel and Sarah Schmeller.

Publication

Mondrian. Evolution

Edited by Susanne Gaensheimer, Kathrin Beßen, and Susanne Meyer-Büser, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, together with Sam Keller and Ulf Küster, Fondation Beyeler

With essays by Kathrin Beßen, Ulf Küster, Susanne Meyer-Büser, Charlotte Sarrazin, Bridget Riley, Benno Temple, and Caro Verbeek

German and English edition

Hatje Cantz Verlag

264 pages

44 euros

Digital Accompanying Booklet K+

The exhibition is accompanied by a digital booklet that provides multimedia insights into the individual creative phases of the artist as well as background information on the work and life of Piet Mondrian. Through QR codes at various stations within the exhibition space, K+ can be accessed via smartphone or tablet while visiting the exhibition.

Exhibition Diary for Children

The exhibition diary for children from the age of six guides them through the exhibition with exciting search games and artistic-creative tasks. In this way, young visitors can playfully discover the work of the artist Piet Mondrian for themselves. The exhibition diary is available free of charge at the ticket desk.

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With the kind support of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Media Partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the
State of North Rhine-Westphalia

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Supporting Program

Opening of the exhibition

October, 28, 2022, 7 pm

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Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

Ina Brandes, Minister of Culture and Science of the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Beate Gerlings, Embassy Counsellor of Culture and Communication, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Kathrin Beßen / Susanne Meyer-Büser, Curators, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

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Exhibition Preview**Etel Adnan
April 1 — July 16, 2023****Press Conference: Thursday, March 30, 2023, 11 am at K20**

The Lenbachhaus in Munich and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf are jointly organizing the first comprehensive monographic exhibition of the work of Etel Adnan in Germany. Born in Beirut, Etel Adnan (1925–2021) is an important representative of modernism. Her artistic and literary work is characterized by a great and lived exchange between the Arab and Western worlds.

The work of the poet, journalist, painter, and philosopher, who spent her life between Lebanon, France, and California, combines very different art forms, media, languages, and cultures. After the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), Adnan refused to continue working in French and showed solidarity with Algeria: “I didn’t need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.” Her political clarity, as well as the close connection between writing and painting, became an essential feature of her oeuvre.

An exhibition of the Lenbachhaus Munich, and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, curated by Sébastien Delot, Direktor LaM, Lille métropole musée d’art moderne d’art contemporain et d’art brut.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Rudolf August Oetker Foundation.

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Jenny Holzer
March, 11 — August 6, 2023

Press Conference: Thursday, March 9, 2023, 11 am at K21

Starting March 11, 2023, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen will present a sweeping exhibition of the internationally celebrated American artist Jenny Holzer (b. 1950). Since the 1970s, Holzer has been renowned for her thought-provoking use of text in various media and her pioneering adaptation of new technologies. Holzer's Düsseldorf exhibition, spanning K21's Beltage and temporary exhibition galleries, will range from posters to paintings and stoneworks, touching on subjects such as war, absurdity, and populism. In keeping with Holzer's deeply democratic approach and artistic practice, her works challenge viewers to grapple with conflicting perspectives and find their own empathic, open-minded positions in complex debates. This makes the exhibition a public forum for discussions of current global challenges.

Jenny Holzer has presented her astringent ideas, arguments, and sorrows in public places and international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale, the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Bilbao, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Her medium, whether a T-shirt, plaque, or LED sign, is writing, and the public dimension is integral to the work. Starting with her New York City street posters and continuing through her light projections on landscape and architecture, her practice has rivaled ignorance and violence with humor and kindness.

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Ströer ist Partner of the exhibition of Jenny Holzer.

The exhibitions in the Bel Étage of K21 are supported by the Stiftung Kunst, Kultur und Soziales der Sparda Bank West.