

National Gallery of Art

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MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE TRACES EVOLUTION OF ART BY MONDRIAN

LEADING PIONEER OF ABSTRACTION

AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, JUNE 11 - SEPTEMBER 4, 1995

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- As the twentieth century comes to a close, Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944 will provide the unprecedented opportunity to assess the entire span of the artist's career and his powerful influence on modern art. This major retrospective opened last December in the Haags Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, fifty years after the artist's death. The show of 171 works will be presented in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, June 11 through September 4, 1995, and then at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 1, 1995, through January 23, 1996. Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944 is the first comprehensive exhibition of the artist's work in twenty years.

The exhibition is made possible by generous support from Heineken USA Incorporated and Shell Oil Company Foundation. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. It is jointly organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

"The exhibition traces the major steps in Mondrian's

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evolution, from his beginnings as a Dutch landscape painter through his mastery of the neo-plastic style and his dazzling New York paintings," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This landmark undertaking was made possible by scholars, lenders, and corporate sponsors from throughout the world."

Born in 1872 in Amersfoort, Holland, Mondrian began studying to be a drawing teacher in 1886. In 1892 he moved to Amsterdam and entered the Rijksacademie, which he attended full-time for two years, while painting the landscapes of his environs. The exhibition begins with Mondrian's Dutch landscapes, such as Geinrust Farm in the Mist (c. 1906-1907) and MOLEN (Mill); Mill in Sunlight (1908), when his realist methods began to reveal his rapid absorption of various modernist styles, including the fauvism of Henri Matisse and the neo-impressionism of Georges Seurat.

The crystalline surfaces of works painted by Mondrian during his stay in Paris from 1912 to 1914, such as Composition Trees II (c. 1912-1913) and Composition No. VI; Blue Facade (1914), reveal Mondrian's path toward cubism, which involved a progressive abstraction of natural and then architectural motifs.

In Holland during World War I, Mondrian painted his first total abstraction, Composition in Line (1917). The rapid pace of Mondrian's evolution from this point is demonstrated by his series of paintings consisting of floating color planes, such as Composition with Color Planes 5 (1917), followed by works based on a regular grid -- a series which includes Composition with

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Grid; Checkerboard with Light Colors (1919) as well as Mondrian's first four diamond-shaped paintings. His pioneering development of regular grid paintings in 1918-1919 developed from his intense involvement with a new group and magazine called "De Stijl" (Style).

COMPOSITION A; Composition with Black, Red, Gray, Yellow, and Blue (1920) and other paintings reveal the gradual process by which Mondrian abandoned both the regular, or modular, grid, and earlier color gradations and worked his way toward "neo-plasticism," the name he gave to his classical style and his theory of art associated with it. Its precepts were that art was to be entirely abstract, that only right angles in the horizontal and vertical positions were to be used, and that the colors were to be simple primaries, separated from one another by black lines and areas of white, black, and gray. The exhibition includes the first of these neo-plastic works, Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray, painted in late 1920.

Mondrian elaborated on his neo-plastic style throughout the 1920s, culminating in a series of eight austerely balanced works of 1929-1932, all based on a central cross. For the first time ever, six paintings from this series will be brought together (including the first, Composition No. II (1930)), allowing exhibition visitors to understand the subtle adjustments and variations of color and line at the basis of Mondrian's aesthetic.

In 1932, Mondrian terminated this series by splitting the horizontal arm of its cross in two, in Composition B. This led

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to the further multiplication of lines and opening-up of forms, evident in Composition Gray-Red (1935). Eventually the doubling of lines merged to form optically dazzling grids, as in Composition of Lines and Color, III (1937).

In 1937, Mondrian was included in the Nazis' Degenerate Art exhibition. He fled Holland for England in 1938, and arrived in America in 1940, where he settled in New York and accepted an invitation to join the American Abstract Artists. Stimulated by the exciting urban environment of Manhattan, Mondrian's art blossomed in new ways. He socialized with older emigrés and younger American followers, often going out to dance and hear "boogie-woogie" piano music. He revised many of his earlier paintings by adding small blocks and bars of color to give them more rhythm. NEW YORK CITY; New York City I (1941) and New York City III (unfinished) (1941-1942) are among Mondrian's great, last paintings in which he reintroduced color through line, began to "weave" his lines over and under each other, and ultimately achieved a liberation of color and rhythm. He died of pneumonia in 1944. The curatorial organization of the exhibition has been carried out by a team of scholars led by Angelica Zander Rudenstine, guest curator for the National Gallery of Art. The other members of the group are Yve-Alain Bois, Joseph Pulitzer Jr. Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University and a leading Mondrian scholar; Joop Joosten, author of the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of Mondrian's cubist and neo-plastic works; Hans Janssen, curator of the modern collection, the Haags Gemeentemuseum; and John Elderfield, chief curator at large, The

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Museum of Modern Art, New York. They are assisted by Harry Cooper at the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 400-page, richly illustrated catalogue published by Leonardo Arte. It has an extensive chronology of Mondrian's life and individual entries containing extracts from previously unpublished correspondence between Mondrian and his contemporaries, a complete reinterpretation of the artist's development by Yve-Alain Bois, and an essay on a crucial turning point in the artist's work by Hans Janssen. In addition, the volume includes a complete list of exhibitions and a bibliography. There are 160 full-color illustrations and 75 black-and-white illustrations. The catalogue can be obtained through the National Gallery of Art Shops at \$75 for the hardback or \$29.95 for the softback. To order, call (301) 322-5900.

The National Gallery of Art, located at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For general information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), weekdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at (202) 842-6176. For information on visitor services, call (202) 842-6690, weekdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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