

Piet Mondrian

From a Tree towards Abstraction



Fig. 1 Piet Mondrian,
The Red Tree, 1909-1910. Oil on canvas, 70x99 cm.
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum.



Fig. 2 Piet Mondrian,
The Grey Tree, 1911-1912. Oil on canvas, 78,5x107,5 cm.
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum.

Fig. 3 Piet Mondrian,
Apple Tree in Blossom, 1912. Oil on canvas, 78x106 cm.
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum.



The numerous landscapes by Mondrian housed at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague document his progress from an early phase of Nordic landscape painting to his participation in the *fauve* style, which can be seen in the brilliant colours used to depict coastal views. He favoured views of vertical elements, depicted in a completely recognisable way, set against the landscape's horizontal planes.

By following the development of his painting we obtain a progressive and logical overview of the almost necessary stages in his **evolution towards abstraction**. An exemplary case is found in his **treatment of the subject of trees**. His first works are naturalistic and soon lead to a progressive synthesis characterised by a draining of colour and a simplification of form. These steps take him in the direction of a radical – first cubist and then abstract – deconstruction in which the tree's shape is lost.

In his *Red Tree* (1909-1910) Mondrian paints arching boughs that seem to scrape at the air like claws. Below small flame-like brush strokes spring up from the ground and reverberate against the trunk and among the branches. Used in repetition, colours and curved lines become decorative elements reiterated across the surface of the canvas.

In *Grey Tree* (1911-1912) we see a further development towards simplification. The artist has annulled colour and has stretched the arching boughs until they become axes extending into every part of the composition. Here the passage from nature to geometry is clear: the branches are geometric grid lines that draw well-defined planes.

In *Apple Tree in Blossom* (1912) the naturalism is announced verbally in the title but is visually contradicted by the difficulty of identifying the tree's flowering in the central area of the canvas. *Apple Tree in Blossom* presents the substance of a tree in extreme synthesis, an intersection of verticals and horizontals. The few curved lines that are found here will be eliminated in Mondrian's later works.

Composition in Line (1917) pushes the artist's conceptual and painterly evolution even further. Here the subject has definitively disappeared leaving only lines, a teeming sign system (a "plus"/"minus" experimentation with addition and subtraction) to occupy the surface, almost like the moving parts of matter blasted from a single form.

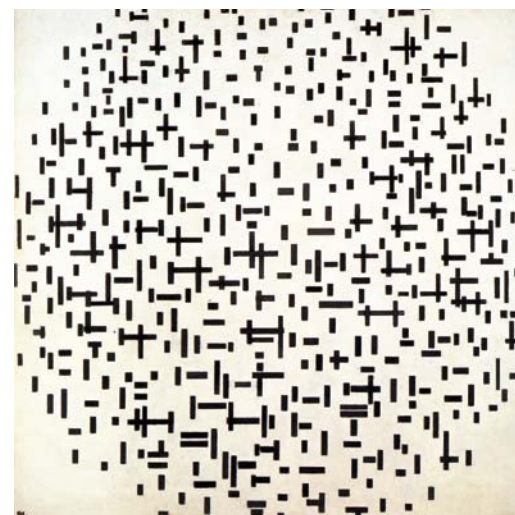


Fig. 4
Piet Mondrian,
Composition in Line, Second State, 1917.
Oil on canvas, 108x108 cm.
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.