



## Piet Mondrian

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**Published:** 14th January 2022

Lieke Wijnia. 2022. "Piet Mondrian." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 14 January 2022. <https://www.cdamm.org/articles/piet-mondrian>

### Introduction

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Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was a key modern artist in the first half of the twentieth century. This period is characterized by a plethora of artistic movements, each proclaiming radically new art for a new world. Such visions contained key features associated with [apocalyptic discourse](#). Rather than religious concerns with an afterlife or heaven, this discourse conveyed an urgency for a renewed version of the earthly world. In this new world, spirituality was prominent and directly addressed through art—which, in turn, was built upon reasoning about destruction. Manifestoes outlined the aims and rules of the new movements. In 1912, Franz Marc (1880–1916) famously introduced the movement known as *Der Blaue Reiter* as a sign of turbulent times: 'Today art is moving in a direction of which our fathers would never even have dreamed. We stand before the new pictures as in a dream, and we hear the apocalyptic horsemen in the air. There is an artistic tension all over Europe' (quoted in Lankheit 1974, 252).

Other prominent movements operating from such a premise were Futurism (Italy, 1909), Dadaism (Switzerland, 1916), *De Stijl* (Netherlands, 1917), and Bauhaus (Germany, 1919). All envisioned holistic approaches to art, which would diminish boundaries between disciplines. Architecture, painting, sculpture, design, fashion: all would become elements in an integrated whole. Despite such a common goal, the routes towards it were conceived differently. Bauhaus aimed to reach this goal through educating students at an academy. Futurists called for the destruction of archives, libraries, and museums in order to make way for the future. And *De Stijl* sought solutions on a project-by-project basis. Mondrian employed the notion of destruction in his search for a spiritually elevated art. This entry builds on the observations that modernist visions of a new world coming can be valuably understood through the lens of [apocalypticism](#) and that the study of modern art can inform that of apocalypticism, and vice versa.

### Biography

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Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan was born on 7 March 1872 into a Calvinist family in Amersfoort, in the Netherlands, then a city of some thirteen thousand inhabitants of various religious affiliations. At one month old, Mondrian was baptized in St Joris Church. When he was aged eight, the family moved to the village of Winterswijk, in the east of the Netherlands. In 1892 Mondrian obtained two art teaching degrees, after which he applied and was admitted to the Amsterdam Art Academy. Once there, he registered with

the Reformed Church, seemingly a formality that provided him with connections and commissions. Mondrian also became interested in esotericism and in May 1909 registered as a member of the Theosophical Society, in which he remained for the rest of his life.

Over the years, Mondrian established a reputation as landscape painter and was involved in modern art initiatives. His artistic aspirations led him, by then nearly forty years old, to Paris in early 1912. He omitted one 'a' from his last name, making it more accessible for international clientele, but also marking a departure from the umbrella of his father and uncle, who no longer artistically supported him. Spending World War I in the neutral territory of the Netherlands, Mondrian reached the fully abstract style that he continued to work on back in Paris from 1919 onward. In 1938, he fled Paris due to the emerging threat of war. After spending two years in London, he fled to New York in the autumn of 1940. On 1 February 1944, he passed away, leaving his final, unfinished painting, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, behind in his studio. Mondrian was buried at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn.

## Sociopolitical Context

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During Mondrian's lifetime, major social and political transformations took place. In his years in the Netherlands, Dutch society showed the first signs of 'pillarization'. Social structures would become organized by religious affiliation or worldview. Protestants, Catholics, labourers: each pillar eventually had its own schools, sports and culture associations, newspapers, and so on. Mondrian escaped from such emerging societal structures, a move also demonstrated by his radical departure from the neoclassical style taught at the academy. During World War I, he mostly spent his time in Domburg and Laren, towns home to communities of the artistic and free-spirited. Mondrian was seen as one of them. Even though he began his career as a landscape painter, after his move to Paris he fully embraced urban life. Paris was the centre of the art world, where many international artists lived. To Mondrian, this was where truly modern life was lived. He was greatly interested in the 'new': the Charleston, jazz music, cinema. Such interest in the new was thoroughly manifested in his conception of abstract art and in his worldview at large. Like jazz music, in his conception abstract art blew open and unravelled existing structures and built something new upon its very foundations.

In his view, Mondrian was working towards a wholly new art. His utopian view was of a world constituted of ultimate harmony and balance, but in a radically different way from the world that he lived in. This resulted in frequent misunderstanding and debate. Mondrian very directly experienced such misunderstanding as a threat, when several paintings were included in the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich. In this exhibition, the Nazis displayed modern art to be ridiculed as infantile and mentally disturbed (notions also attributed to Mondrian's art during his late Amsterdam years). He felt increasingly unsafe living in Paris and, with the help of artist friends Winifred (1893-1981) and Ben Nicholson (1894-1982), he moved to London in 1938. Here he lived in Hampstead, also home to other exiled artists. London impressed Mondrian. For instance, he needed to get used to the steep Underground escalators, which were of different scales to those of the Paris Metro. Two years later, war arrived in London. In his Hampstead home, Mondrian was witness to the Blitz bombings and was able to, just in time, escape on the SS *Samaria*, which departed from Liverpool to the United States. After a two-week journey, he arrived in New York on 3 October 1940. By then sixty-eight years old, Mondrian generally suffered from ill health, but this did not prevent him from enjoying his new life. He experienced a sense of freedom no longer present

in Europe. He discovered boogie-woogie music, in which the notion of destruction plays an important role. He paralleled this with his approach to abstract art. Being part of, again, an international artistic community, Mondrian's art was revived one last time.

## Beliefs

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While not constructed within a fully-fledged theological system or distinct religious movement, the [apocalyptic](#) is explicitly encountered in Mondrian's work in the artistic quest for truth and the urge to unveil. This, to him, resulted in representations of a new ordering of reality that were destructive of the current values of his time. Mondrian's beliefs are to be understood through a combination of his art, theoretical texts, and personal letters, in which he frequently used the notion of *geestelijk* (in English translated as 'spiritual', in German as *geistlich*). It became his ultimate aim to address, or even manifest, the spiritual through his art. Once he attained an abstract style, he titled it Nieuwe Beelding, which he translated to English as Neo-Plasticism. The term did not previously exist in the Dutch language, which underlines the novel character Mondrian attributed to his artistic project. In his paintings, he reduced the visual style to its very core: the primary colours, and horizontal and vertical lines. By reaching this core, he could not get further away from traditional art, which he considered either a form of representation (*afbeelding*) or imagination (*verbeelding*). Hence, even in the linguistic translation of his artistic approach, Mondrian retained the core: *beelding*.

Mondrian found in Cubism the stylistic tools to work towards a pure form of abstraction. By not directly referencing visible features of the outside world, Mondrian's art was to embody the relationships of which that world essentially consisted. In a letter of 1914, he wrote:

*I want to come to the truth as close as possible and therefore abstract everything until I arrive at the fundament (the fundament of the appearance!) of things. For me it is a truth that the intention of saying nothing in particular, actually says the most particular, the truth (which is greatly encompassing) (Janssen 2014, 50-51).*

Mondrian was convinced that leaving behind visible particularities would lead him to a universally true representation of reality.

In addition to using Cubist stylistic tools, he found the philosophical and theological foundations of his work elsewhere. Mondrian maintained a strictly dualistic worldview in which he regarded binaries such as material-immaterial, earthly-spiritual, and female-male as reflective of the fundamental relationships underlying the visible world—which he in turn captured with his fundamental painterly tools of line and colour. He found important intellectual sources in the work of the Neo-Hegelian philosopher Gerard Bolland (1854–1922), the theologian and philosopher Mathieu Schoenmaekers (1875–1944), founder of the Theosophical movement Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), and founder of Anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). They had an impact on the discourse in which Mondrian discussed his art. Although he referred to Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* as the foundation of all his activities (Blotkamp 1994, 13), a booklet with published lectures Steiner had given in the Netherlands in 1908 was a treasured lifelong possession. Such texts opened his mind to what he called occult, ancient knowledge.

Here, another crucial binary can be unearthed: old-new. Although Mondrian's pictorial language was radically new, that which he conveyed through this language he regarded as intrinsic and unchanging truths. As he described in 1909:

*I find the work of the great masters of the past very beautiful and very grand, but you will agree with me that everything done in our own time must be expressed very differently. ... There are great intrinsic values or truths which remain the same throughout the ages, but form and expression are changing. (Welsh 1998, 129)*

When Mondrian wrote this, he painted in colourful Luminist style. Ten years later, he reached radical abstraction. In his conception of both form and expression, the destructive was pivotal. It was his mission, by means of pictorial instruments, to unveil foundations, in order to work towards new constellations.

## Understanding of Prophecy

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For Mondrian, abstraction unveiled invisible, essential, and universal opposing structures of which the visible world consists. In order to get there, existing artistic traditions had to be undone, reduced to the use of primary colours, horizontal and vertical lines, and non-colours such as black, white, and grey. To him, these were the most fundamental pictorial instruments, which allowed him to convey a fundamental truth. Mixed colours or the diagonal, for instance, were already variations on these fundamentals, and therefore out of the question. He saw a direct relationship between his paintings and the world. This abstraction process was not a formula he applied to the visible world. Rather, the notion of destruction played an important role (Blotkamp 1994). In 1937, he stated:

*The important task of all art, then, is to destroy the static equilibrium by establishing a dynamic one. Non-figurative art demands an attempt of what is a consequence of this task, the destruction of particular form and the construction of a rhythm of mutual relations, of mutual forms of free lines. (Veen 2017, 395)*

Through the destruction of the status quo, fundamental relationships would emerge—the relationship he conveyed in his art.

Mondrian positioned himself as a visionary, a seer. Although he was horrified by spiritualist seers and practices like seances, in his writings he characterized himself as an artistic [prophet](#). In a 1914 sketchbook he noted:

*The artist intuitively sees in a more spiritual manner than the everyday human: this is why he sees reality more beautiful, which is why art is beneficial for the everyday human. However, the artisthuman [sic] requires an artist that sees more beautiful than himself, and this human requires abstract art. (Veen 2017, 69)*

Mondrian characterized himself in a special position, as the artist who could provide abstract visions to both artists and non-artists. In addition to the importance of his pictorial tools, which he grouped under the term *beelding*, Mondrian also coined a term to reinforce the importance of vision and the visionary. This term, *ziening* (perhaps best translated with the obscure term 'visioning'), can be seen as the binary partner of *beelding*. Combined, these terms convey the heart of Mondrian's artistic project. It was his conviction that his paintings unveiled a visionary understanding of the world that, were it not for his paintings, would have remained hidden.

This was simultaneously a position that helped him to cope with the frequent misunderstandings to which his paintings were subjected. Despite his affinity with Theosophy, his attempts in 1913–14 to get an essay published in the journal of the Dutch association failed. His essay on art and Theosophy was rejected for being 'too revolutionary' (Welsh 1998, 104). In 1921, Mondrian wrote a letter to Steiner, who never responded at all. While Steiner's ideas inspired Mondrian and provided him with a discourse to help him formulate his own thoughts, they endorsed two completely different art forms. When Mondrian was confronted with Steiner's artistic expressions in 1922, he was 'utterly disconcerted' (Paaschen 2017, 101). Although such rejection disappointed him, it also confirmed his convictions of being a visionary, of being ahead of his time, and thus encouraged him to make art for a future people who would understand.

Mondrian's sense of the future was rooted in a strong belief in evolution. In a 1914 sketchbook, he paralleled visual art to religion in how these are both 'instrument[s] that evolve mankind' (Veen 2017, 68). His abstraction offered the culmination of artistic evolution, which in turn would offer a template for a culturally and spiritually evolved society. In 1919 he wrote: 'the pure *Beeldend zien* has to build a new society, like in the arts it has built a new plastic—a society of equal dualities between the material and the spiritual, a society of balanced relationships' (Veen 2017, 154). He had already expressed his spiritual affinity with evolution in a Symbolist painting titled *Evolution* in 1911.

In the 1942 essay *Towards the True Vision of Reality*, Mondrian brought together all of his visionary convictions regarding the spiritual potential of his abstraction:

*Neo-plasticism should not be considered a personal conception. It is the logical development of all art, ancient and modern. ... It is my conviction that humanity ... can accelerate its progress through the acquisition of a truer vision of reality. Plastic art discloses what science has discovered: that time and subjective vision veil the true reality. (Veen 2017, 493, emphasis in the original)*

Writing in New York, he was surrounded by other exiled artists—a sign of restricted artistic freedoms. His writing became increasingly political, positioning his art as breaking free from oppression:

*At the moment, there is no need for art to create a reality of imagination based on appearances, events, or traditions. Art should not follow the intuitions relating to our life in time, but only those intuitions relating to true reality. ... If we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision. (Veen 2017, 494)*

While the world had faced dramatic transformations in the course of the first half of the twentieth century,

Mondrian's visionary ideas consistently remained focused on the necessity of destruction in his artistic search for universal truth.

## Source Material and Critical Debates

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The most important primary source material is Mondrian's art. Scattered across modern art museums and private collections around the world, the largest collection of the work is housed at Kunstmuseum Den Haag, where over three hundred of his paintings and drawings are located. In the study of Mondrian's art through the lens of [apocalypticism](#), his texts play a crucial role. The writings emerged in strong symbiosis with his paintings, as Mondrian told his friend and student Charmion von Wiegand (1896–1983) in the 1940s: 'the paintings come first and the theory comes from the paintings' (Rowell 1971, 82).

His first published text was in the form of a letter he wrote in response to a review by Israel Querido in 1909 (Veen 2017, 66–69). With the painter's permission, Querido published this response in the magazine *De Controleur*. During the period of World War I that Mondrian spent in the Netherlands, he recorded his thoughts in several sketchbooks. More frequent publications of his writings began in 1917, with the establishment of the art magazine *De Stijl*. Founder Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) encouraged all participating artists in the art movement to also write about their artistic convictions. Mondrian published several extensive essays, such as *De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst (Neo-Plasticism in Painting, 1917–18)*, *Dialogo over de Nieuwe Beelding (Dialogue about Neo-Plasticism, 1919)*, and *Natuurlijke en Abstracte Realiteit (Natural and Abstract Reality, 1919–20)*. In 1920, the French translation of *Neo-Plasticism in Painting* was published. In 1926, both the Dutch *Neo-Plasticisme: De Woning—De Straat—De Stad* and its French translation (*Le Home—La Rue—La Cité*) were published, in which Mondrian developed an artistic vision for the creation of homes, streets, and cities in their totality.

Initially Mondrian wrote in Dutch, followed by French, and after moving to London and later New York he also wrote in English. His first English text, dated 1938, was titled *A New Religion?* and seems to be an unfinished draft. It deals with the repressive character of institutionalized religions and, in Mondrian's view, the new political ideological religions of Nazism and Soviet communism. In New York, Mondrian predominantly reflected on his career and combined such reflections with views on the future. He received editorial assistance from Von Wiegand.

Over the course of his life, he wrote over a hundred essays, in addition to numerous letters. Mondrian frequently corresponded with family, fellow artists, and (potential) collectors and benefactors. He regarded such correspondence as strictly personal, even when the letters concerned art or other professional matters. More than once he instructed the receivers of his letters to destroy them after reading. Although Mondrian discarded the letters he received, those at the receiving end hardly ever complied. Mondrian's letters are currently being compiled and digitized in the project *The Mondrian Papers* (RKD and Huygens KNAW 2015-).

In addition to the primary sources, Mondrian may very well qualify as one of the most-written-about artists in the world. There is an abundance of art historical studies and exhibition catalogues to be found. Over recent years, there has been remarkable biographical interest in Mondrian (Hanssen 2015; Janssen 2016; Fox Weber 2018). However, the place of religion and spirituality in the understanding of the artist and his

work continues to be a contested topic (Wijnia 2018, 55–59). This discussion emerged in 1963 with an article by Martin James (1963–64), who argued for the importance of Symbolist notions in Mondrian's route to abstraction. The occult played an important role in Symbolism, which was further explored in the context of the emergence of abstraction by Sixten Ringbom in 1966. In the catalogue to the 1971–72 centennial exhibition, Robert Welsh argued that Theosophy had strongly affected Mondrian's intellectual and artistic development (Welsh 1971). This approach was significantly expanded by Marty Bax in her 2006 PhD dissertation, which discussed the widespread influence of Theosophy on Dutch culture. Bax established direct connections between Mondrian's vocabulary and Theosophical models of enquiry. In the current state of Mondrian scholarship, Mondrian's Theosophical affinity remains a topic of much debate.

Other forms of spiritual impact have been explored as well. Rosalind Krauss (1979) analysed the use of the grid from a psychoanalytical perspective, leading her to observe: 'I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that behind every twentieth-century grid there lies—like a trauma that must be repressed—a symbolist window parading in the guise of a treatise on optics' (59). Rather than taking a psychoanalytical approach himself, Michael White (2006, 100) looked at Mondrian's work in the context of psychoanalysis's rise and popularization in the Netherlands. He traced a link between the unconscious and abstraction, which Mondrian described as 'inner vision', a term influenced by psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, Mondrian's Calvinist upbringing remains a source of academic interest. Susanne Deicher (1995) argued for the persistence of two notions from his Protestant upbringing throughout Mondrian's career. The first is the presence of an embodiment of truth amid a world of chaos. In Protestantism this is the church, whereas for Mondrian this embodiment became his art. Second, the notions of suffering and martyrdom shaped how Mondrian saw his own position as a misunderstood artist who continued to create art for a greater good. In a 2017 lecture series, Joseph Masheck (2018) analysed the classic abstract paintings from the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Mondrian's critical reception from a Neo-Calvinist perspective.

As I argue elsewhere, Mondrian's varied spiritual affinities can never be understood in solitude. These need to be combined with his other interests in the new, whether jazz music, the cinema, or advanced infrastructure. While many scholars claim the primacy of the impact of one religious or spiritual tradition on Mondrian's route to abstraction, an 'integrated approach to the spiritual embedding of his artistic interests, inspirations, and intentions' (Wijnia 2018, 59; see also Wijnia 2020) is much more beneficial.

The lens of [apocalypticism](#) offers a route into such an integrated approach. It allows for a link between visions of an artistic alternative world and the experienced necessity for a sense of destruction as a prerequisite to establish this alternative world. For Mondrian, painting disclosed a transcendent reality and can be seen as a revelatory result of spiritual, artistic, and intellectual engagement. His approach to art was driven by a firm belief in evolution, in which his own visionary abstraction functioned as the culmination. In the evolution towards his abstraction, previous artistic achievements were to be left behind. Mondrian's abstraction arose out of destruction. Expanding upon the case of Mondrian, this lens offers a broadened approach to locating and studying religious features in modern art beyond the not always clearly defined notion of 'the spiritual'. It also contributes an artistic body of knowledge to the understanding of apocalypticism as a wider cultural phenomenon and its original meaning of 'unveiling'.

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Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Catalogue Raisonné of the work of 1911-1914, II*. Blaricum, Paris: V + K Publishing / Inmerc, Editions Cercle d'Art.

The second anthology can be found online:

Geerts, Ton, ed. 2018. *Piet Mondrian: Catalogue Raisonné*. RKD Monographs. Retrieved from <http://pietmondrian.rkdmonogra...>

All theoretical texts, published and unpublished, are compiled in:

Veen, Louis. 2017. *Piet Mondrian: The Complete Writings; Essays and Notes in Original Versions*. Leiden: Primavera Press.

A majority of Mondrian's letters are in the collection of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History). The RKD and the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands are working on the digitization of Mondrian's theoretical texts and letters in a project expected to be finished in 2027:

Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) and Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands (Huygens KNAW). 2015-. *The Mondrian Papers*. Retrieved from <https://mondrianpapers.org>.

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## Article information

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Lieke Wijnia. 2022. "Piet Mondrian." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 14 January 2022. <https://www.cdamm.org/articles/piet-mondrian>

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