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Date _____

Piet Mondrian

Like so many other artists of his generation, Piet Mondrian was obsessed with making sense of an increasingly complicated, even labyrinthine, world. Born in the Netherlands in 1872, Mondrian traveled extensively as a young artist before returning to his home country before the outbreak of World War I. During the war years, he met other Dutch artists (notably Theo van Doesburg) who, like him, were appalled by the war and the mechanization of man. Together, they began reimagining art's role in the world. The resulting De Stijl (Dutch for "the style") movement was determined to create a new culture through art, one directed at the universal rather than the individual.



Mondrian's focus was singular: to free art (and, by extension, the world) from the oppression of subjectivity. In his view, art was the interplay of an artist and a subjective observer. This meant that a viewer could largely dictate what a work of art meant and what it was. And without total equality of viewers, not to mention total equality between visionary and viewer, there could be no equality in the world. Thus, Mondrian came up with a new art form: Only primary colors would be used to fill in solid geometric shapes and lines, creating a completely abstract work that could be interpreted by everyone in exactly the same way. Without depicting reality, Mondrian's art would be devoid of any personal experiences or narratives. All of us, in theory, could look at the canvas and see the shapes and colors as the artist intended. Through the simple forms, Mondrian believed he could get closer to expressing real truth through what he called the most "basic forms of beauty."

If this sounds a bit like Fascism, that's because it is. It is a Fascist ideal of art: complete uniformity and objectivity. Thus, it is hard not to feel that Mondrian missed something about art. All art is widely subjective. There is no way of knowing what personal experience, what memory, what scars a person might bring to the art gallery. For God's sake, most of us cannot look at something as ubiquitous as a cloud without disagreement. I might look and see nothing more than a collection of gases, while you might look and see your favorite childhood stuffed animal, or the faces of Mount Rushmore. A yellow square with black lines is no less open to interpretation. Yet despite my obvious reluctance to embrace Mondrian's manifesto, it is impossible not to be overwhelmed by the complex simplicity—a true oxymoron—of his remarkable work. Though I may not see what is intended in his work, I can still be moved by what I see or *think* I see.