

Introducing Modern Western Art : Movements and Artists
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Lecture - 16
Abstract Painting (Picasso, Paul Klee, Mondrian)

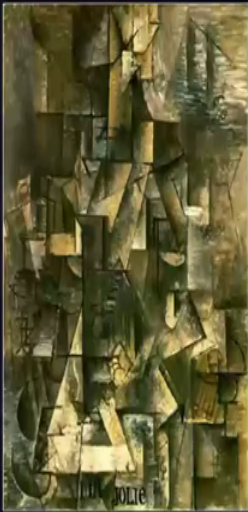
Welcome viewers to MOOCs online course on Introduction to Modern Western Art Movements and Artists. This is the fourth week and the first lecture is dedicated to the understanding of abstract painting. And in this lecture beside discussing briefly the concept and nature of abstract painting, we will be also looking at a few specific examples of abstract paintings by a selected number of very famous painters like Picasso, Paul Klee and Mondrian.

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Along with Cubism a new norm of picture making came into being; picture without or very less suggestion of any figurative or representational hint.

Gradual disappearance of any clue to identify any object or figure within a painting compelled the viewers to consider the possibilities of 'Abstract art'.

For example, this painting called *Ma Jolie* painted by Pablo Picasso in 1911 is a clear indication of this hitherto unknown tendency. Forms tend to lose their figurative identity and become independent entity.



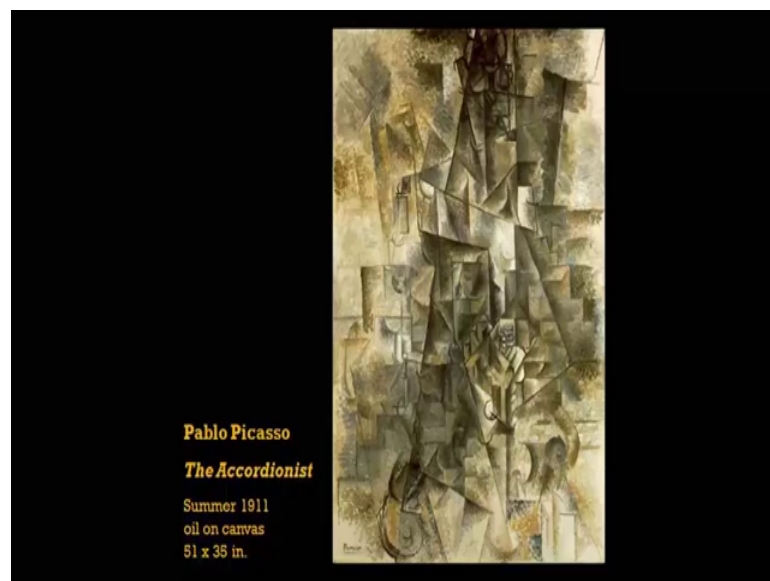
Now, as being a seeing that along with cubism a new form of picture making came into being in very early part of the 20th century. And we have seen that in those paintings they carried very less suggestions or no suggestion at all of any figurative or representational hint. It is in this sense that in these kinds of paintings we fail to identify any particular object or figure within the painting and as such these paintings are generally speaking known as non representational paintings which is another name for abstract paintings.

So, what we witness here is a gradual disappearance of any clue to identify any object or

figure within a painting and that compelled the viewers to consider the possibilities of abstract art that is it is now possible as it has been understood from the early part of the 20th century. It is now possible to have a work of art to do a work of art to encounter a work of art whether in painting or sculpture which may not have any recognizable trait or clue at all. And that work of art will mainly consist of very fundamental basic visual elements like line colour form shape composition that is in case of painting. And in case of sculpture we will be encountering shapes, rhythms, geometry, mass, volume, etcetera.

So, when you look at one very early example of abstract painting which was a result of cubism for example, this painting called *Ma Jolie* painted by Pablo Picasso in 1911. This painting is a clear indication of this hitherto unknown tendency though in this painting you may still feel tempted to identify certain portions maybe of a few objects, but by and large as you keep looking at the painting or any painting of this kind made by Picasso or Brock in the wake of cubism you will see that how the forms gradually tend to lose their figurative identity and become independent entity.

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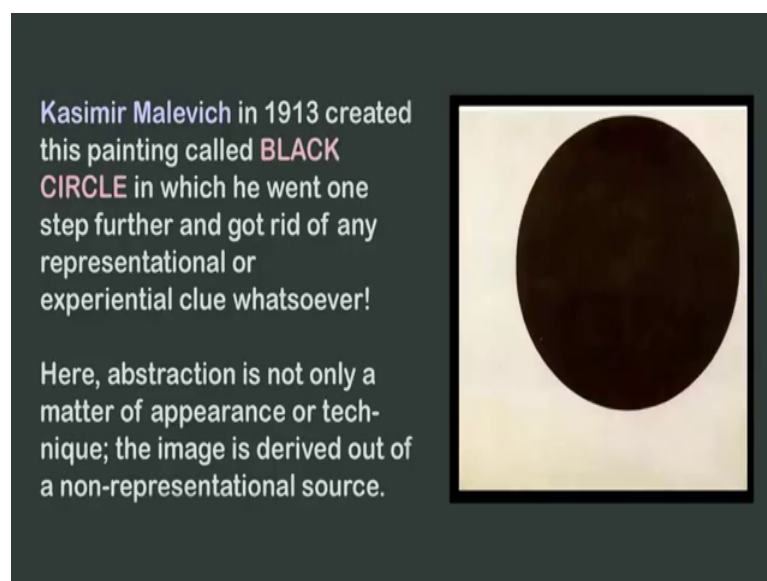


So, that is the crux of the issue that abstract painting eventually gives rise to independent entity or forms independent of any recognition independent of any identity independent of any objective reference to the factual world.

Look at these painting called the accordionist once again by Picasso painted in 1911, again though the title suggests the real life subject matter the painting is not so real, I

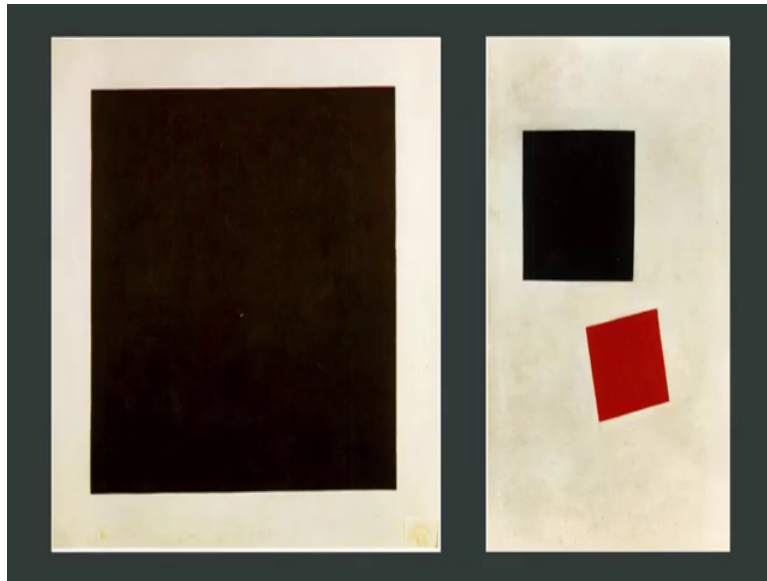
mean the forms do not lend themselves to an easy recognition or identification of the figure or the object or anything that is related to the subject matter what we see here as we have observed before is a conglomeration a strange combination of various lines shapes angles and triangles intersecting each others at various points. And thereby forming a strange visual composition and same happens with another painting painted in 1911 again called the Portuguese and this time it is by Georges Braque and the fellow Tubist of Picasso and he in the wake of cubism was also following the same path a kind of gradual progression towards abstraction.

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And though abstraction itself is not their goal, but Tubists gradually happened to be and happened to have emerged as the first group of painters to have strongly not only conceptualized, but also executed abstract paintings and almost at the same time, Kasimir Malevich in 1913 created this painting called the black circle in which he went one step further and got rid of any faintest hint of the objective world. This is again I would say a very hardcore abstract painting at least in case of the paintings done by Picasso or Brock though very remote very faint yet one could sense a shadow presence of some objective world.

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But in case of a painting like this called the black circle by Malevich painted at the same time in 1913; there is absolutely no reference to the objective experiential world the entire painting, it based on a certain understanding of shapes composition. In this case, the very placement of the black circle shifted slightly towards upper right within the white square is the subject is the theme of the painting if I am allowed to say. So, one more painting by Malevich, here again what you see is simply the relationship between geometric shapes without having any reference to the experiential real or human world raw art around the same time as the part of the movement.

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And he later also joins the surrealist movement was also coming up with the strange compositions where once again you do not see anything that is a part of your known world or experiential world, it is all about shapes and moreover in case of. It was also not a very predetermined arrangement of shapes, but he was also giving chance a role to play in determining the composition an element of accident an element of unpredictable movements.

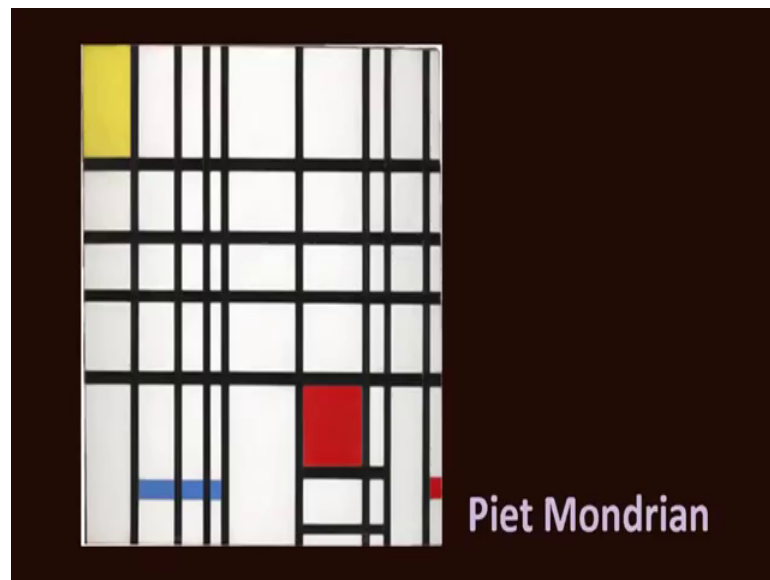
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So, this is possible with abstract art.

Now, you also have Liubov Popova another Russian artist who worked simultaneously at the same time with Malevich and he was also a part of the constructivist movement, he was also coming up with paintings which straight away dealt with geometric entities and shapes and forms there is nothing human or objective or representational about them.

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And slowly these painters were paving the path for a long kind of movement or an engagement with abstract art or abstraction for the artists to follow for example, the very famous the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian.

Now, when you look at a painting by Mondrian one of his very famous well known paintings like this; what to say is again a great kind of composition which almost reminds you of a modern house or building or window frames having a few square neatly coloured with one solid pigment rest is all about verticals and horizontals.

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Your Piet Mondrian and then you have somebody like Paul Klee, who was deeply lyrical in his approach to the world that he was painting, but many of his painting did not have any real life clue like this one what you see is a composition of small little colour tiles or cubes.

But whereas, a constructivist painting like the one that we have seen by Malevich was straightaway derived from the idea of geometry and calculation Paul Klee's paintings although the paintings might get appearance are very abstract that is completely detached from the real world Paul Klee's source of his paintings are not so abstract that is why I say it, right, at the outside that Paul Klee had a lyrical engagement which the surrounding with nature with what he observed and then he transformed his experiences into a visual pattern which happen to be abstract.

And then of course, you have several others whom we have already mentioned like Malevich and Popova.

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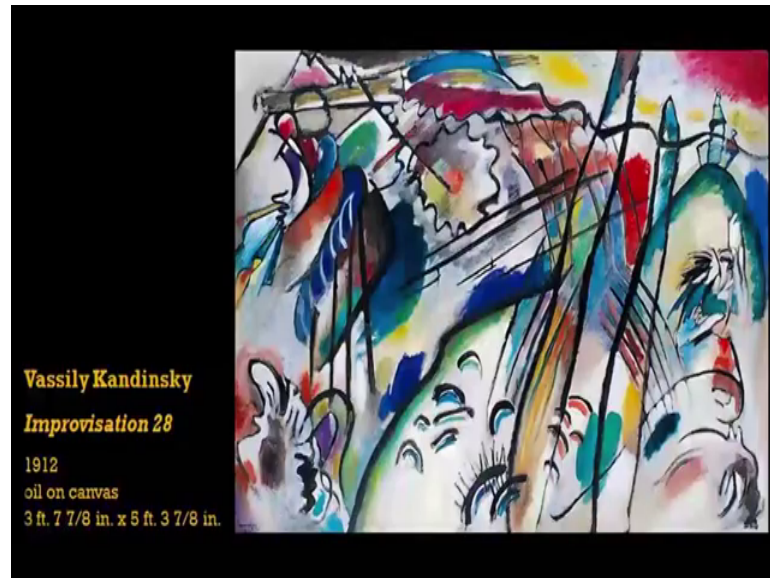


But then when you look at their timeline you will see that almost all of them were born more or less very close to each other which implies that the lift and work at the same time which further implies that abstraction was quite and in theme during the time when these artists and many others whom we are not mentioning right now we are working.

So, basically it was a early 20 century during which abstraction abstract art and not just

abstract painting both abstract painting and sculpture the whole idea of making an abstract art without any reference to the real world caught the imagination of a number of artists and then even within the context of an entirely different movement.

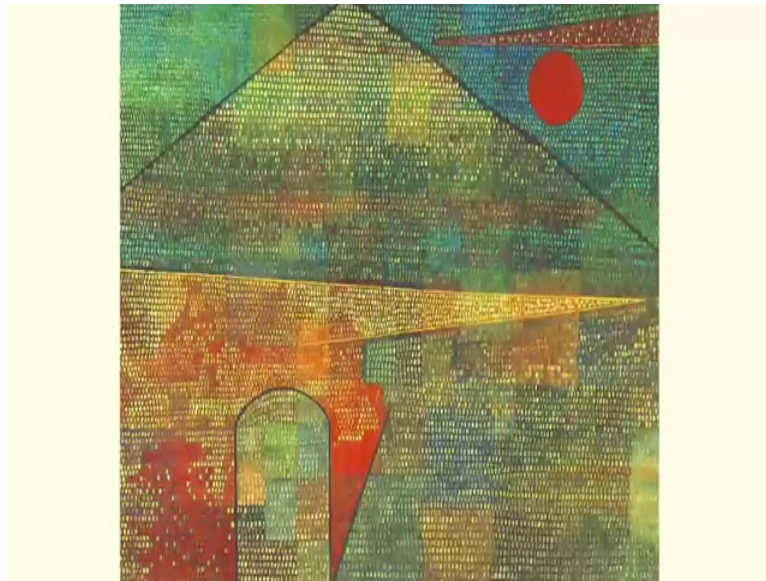
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Which we have already discussed in one of our previous lectures that is German expressionism; we have seen the work by Vassily Kandinsky who despite his deep association with German expressionist movement which was more of a kind of a social movement a movement and art movement that was deeply consent with the immediate social and political reality.

But Kandinsky was doing paintings not this one, but many of his paintings are pretty abstract in nature without having any direct political or social reference and once again he was doing this particular painting also in 1912.

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Now, let us look at a few paintings by Paul Klee where you will get to see a strong presence of the possibility of abstract medium with of course, how would you say presence, but not very strong presence obvious, but muted and subdued presence of a real life for example, a few lines suggesting the roof of house and maybe a shape that is suggesting a doorway into the house or a small little fear perhaps signifying the sun.

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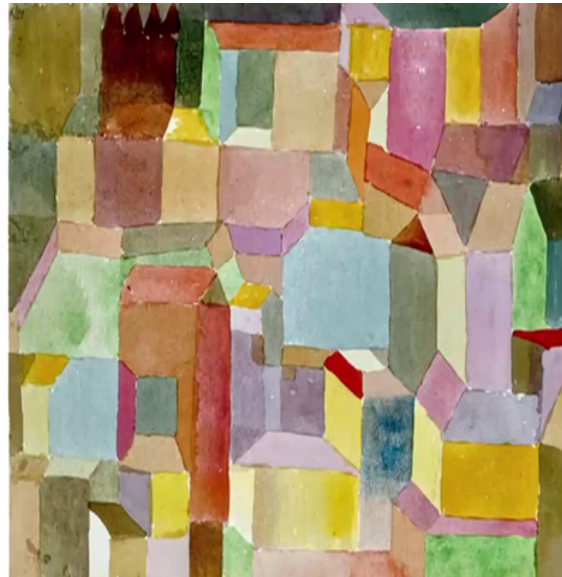


Now, when you look at this kinds of paintings by Paul Klee you may ask that why do we call them abstract paintings, because many of these paintings do not have though slightly

oblique, but they do have a reference they do have some kind of recognizable feature in their paintings in their works of art in their forms in their shapes.

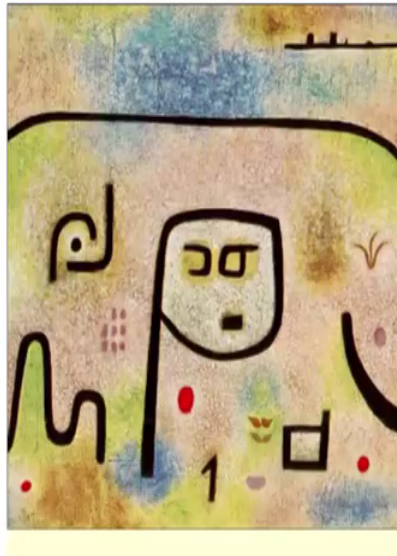
So, how do you and why do you call them abstract well we call them abstract.

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Because particularly Paul Klee's paintings in spite of his off and on reference and again the references to the real world at least in his paintings are not very very strong. They are obvious, but they are subdued. Now in spite of those references his paintings look very abstract and they are abstract because of an overwhelming presence of the idea that forms colours shapes lines can also exist independently. So, on the one hand there is a reference a connect between his forms and the world out there.

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On the other hand even if you like to be you can always try to forget the references and focus mainly on the forms and you are free to enjoy them.

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For example in a painting like this by Paul Klee you see that of course, there are some graphic marks which resemble plants flowers and grass, but at the same time; there are long strips of horizontal bands of colours which do not directly represent anything.

I mean; so, as I was telling you it is not an ambiguity that he was trying to create he was rather trying to keep both simultaneously But at the end of the day whether you look at a

drawing like this or the earlier paintings.

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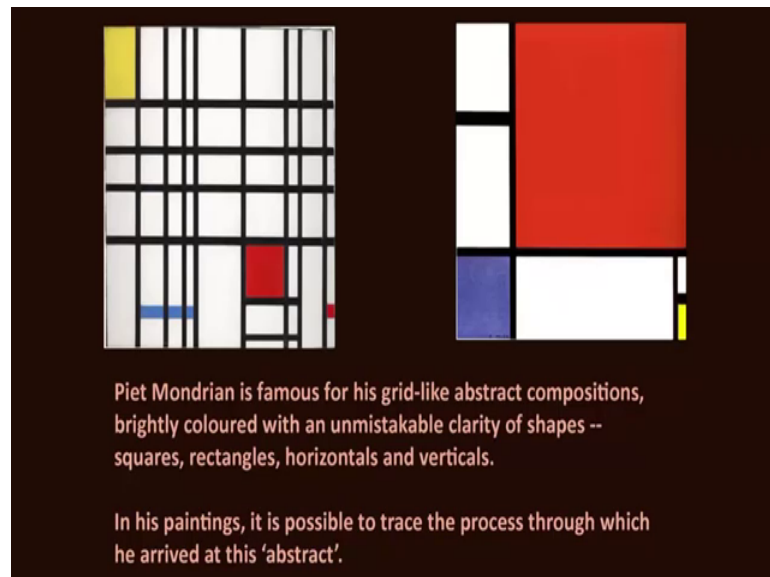


Paul Klee
Fire in the Evening
1929

What you see is an overwhelming presence of the abstract quality in this painting in this painting though the name is the caption the title of the painting is quite poetic because it is called fire in the evening, but what you see in this painting is neither fire nor evening, but what you feel in this painting is both. So, it is more than a visual reality that is trying to explore in these paintings what Paul Klee is trying to explore in this kind of paintings is a sensor reality beyond the immediate visual reality.

That is by in his paintings the titles are extremely important, because when you follow the title, you may not find the references in the painting as it is suggested by the title, but if you are looking at the painting with a sensitive eye you will bound to feel what the title is suggesting like this one.

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And we have the next brilliant abstract painter called Piet Mondrian who is famous for a grid like abstract compositions brightly coloured with an unmistakable clarity of shapes squares rectangles horizontals and verticals.

In his paintings, it is possible to trace the process through which he arrived at this abstract his one exceptional painted. In fact, Piet Mondrian who in several of his paintings has actually left behind the tragic tree the path that he travelled in order to arrive at a pure abstract painting.

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For example he begins with a painting like this which is not at all abstract because this particular painting has a very clear representation of an immediately recognizable form like a tree which is not really the idea for tree; it is the tree itself that has been represented in his painting.

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Let us look; at the following painting by him where he breaks down the form of a tree into several parts and fragments and they gives to reduce the recognisability bit by bit.

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In the third painting in the same series the recognisability is almost gone; I mean if you have not seen the tree before nobody would be able to imagine that this one has been derived or had come out of the original form of a tree it is absolutely difficult. Now that we have seen the first one it is possible for us to see and follow the developments.

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In fact, when you look at a painting like this again unless we have seen unless you are aware of this process it is difficult to find the tree though for somebody like Mondrian, it was very important to travel from the known to the unknown from the recognition to the

non recognition from representational to abstract.

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And finally, here at that a painting like this where there is no trace of tree no trace of any natural association between the artist and the object this is absolutely an abstract painting composed of independent abstract elements like lines mainly and shapes and a few curves and space the most ambiguiest entity in any painting for example, this one again. So, this is one brilliant example and we are fortunate enough that Mondrian has left this example for us to know how at least how he this may be not be a path to be followed by all the painters, but at least Mondrian followed this path and created his kind of abstract paintings that is from the known to the unknown from the real to the a abstract.

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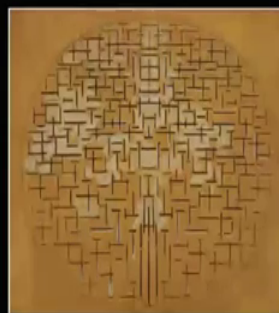


But not everybody would do that there are lot of abstract painters in the modern art somebody like for example, Malevich who squares and circles kind of painting. So, straight away derived from squares and circles he did not have to start from the form of a real tree.

But in case of Mondrian the path was different now this is a good example, because to lastly let us look at this particular painting by Mondrian called sea and starry sky painted in 1915.

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Mondrian's title for this drawing, 'Sea and Starry Sky', implies a landscape. It is not hard to imagine how the flat landscape of his native Holland, where sea, sky, and land meet so seamlessly, might have inspired him. But he would soon abandon the use of such descriptive titles, choosing instead (as Malevich did) to use the term "composition."



'Sea and Starry Sky' features the artist's early experimentation with vertical and horizontal intersections. He saw this perpendicular relationship of the Cartesian x- and y-axes as being essential to nature, as revealed in the intersection of trees and land.

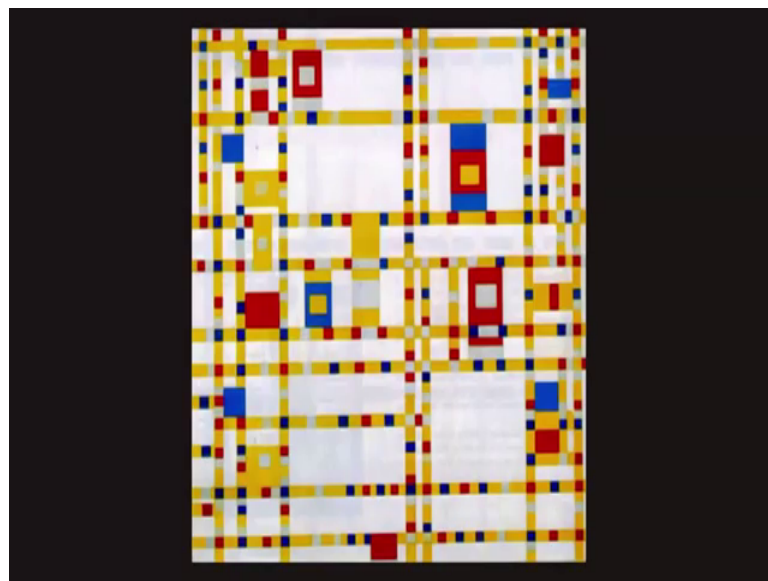
This element of Mondrian's work is quite distinct from Malevich's tilted view of the world.

But like Malevich, Mondrian had begun to abandon the subject in favor of what he called "pure", "true" forms.

Let us go into the details of the painting now Mondrian's title for the train drawing called sea and starry sky it implies a landscape as I was telling you the title may imply something, but what we see and feel in the painting that experience could be different. So, it is not hard to imagine how the flat landscapes of his native Holland where the sea sky and the land meets. So, seamlessly might have inspired him, but he would soon abundant the use of such descriptive titles choosing instead as Malevich did to use the term composition. So, that was also one position that many abstract painters have taken that to get rid of any descriptive title and use titles we are equally abstract.

So, sea and starry sky features the artist early experimentation with vertical and horizontal intersections he saw this perpendicular relationship of the Cartesian x and y axis as being essential to nature as rebuilt in the intersection of trees and land the element of Mondrian world is quite distinct from Malevich's tilted view of the world, but like Malevich Mondrian had begun to abandon the subject in favour of what he called pure true forms and this brings us to a very very fundamental understanding about abstract art.

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As it has been understood by quite a few painters like Mondrian that abstract art is quote unquote pure art quote unquote true art. So, associating purity truthfulness to abstract painting gave this form a tremendous justification. And a foundation in the modern art because any kind of referentiality to the world outside with any painting meant at least implied to some of them then that particular work of art would not be understood as pure

as an abstract painting.

So, conceptually and philosophically this is a very interesting position that abstract painting claimed to be the purest and the most truthful form of painting.

Thank you.