

Abstract Formalism

With Piet Mondrian

Abstract Formalism

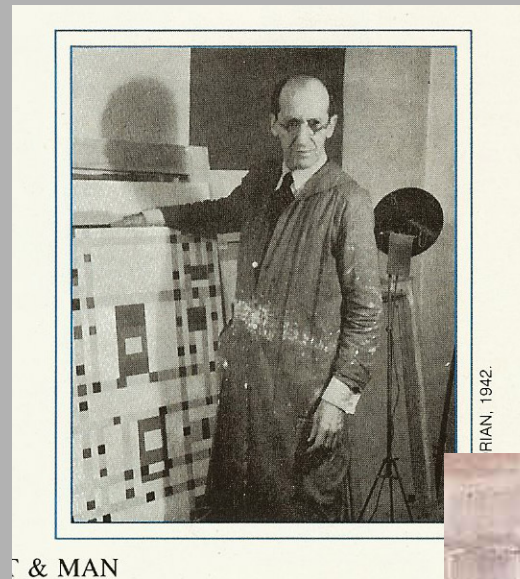
- In art theory, **formalism** is the concept that a work's artistic value is entirely determined by its form--the way it is made, its purely visual aspects, and its medium. Formalism emphasizes compositional elements such as color, line, shape and texture rather than realism, context, and content. In visual art, formalism is the concept that everything necessary in a work of art is contained within it. The context for the work, including the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist, is considered to be of secondary importance. Formalism dominated modern art from the late 1800s through the 1960s.

The “essence” of abstract art.

- Images in abstract art are generally reduced to their “essence” or most basic elements.
- Many abstract artists try to achieve spontaneity in their work by using free-flowing organic or curving shapes and a wide range of colors.
- Mondrian’s mature works were driven by a rigid set of rules that he formulated. He wanted to reduce a painting to the most fundamental elements.

Piet Mondrian

- “The essence of painting is line and color. Paintings must be as flat as the surface they are painted on. The only pure colors are those that cannot be mixed – red, blue, yellow.”

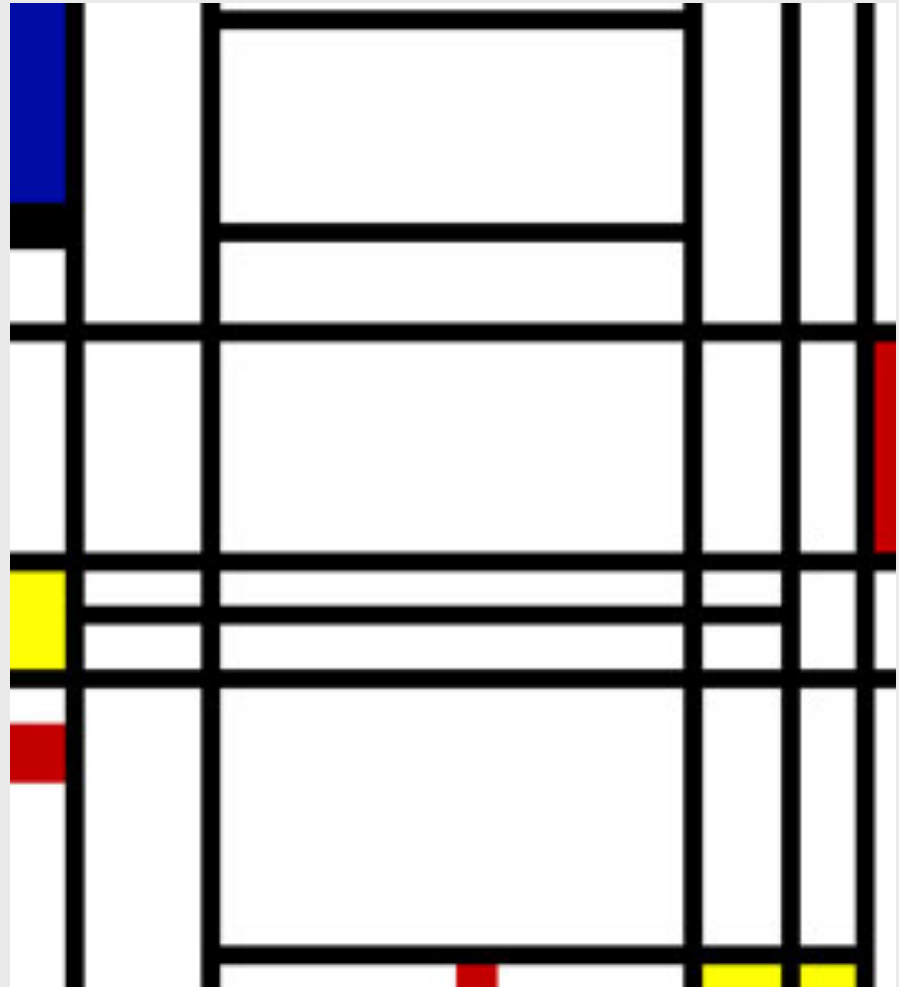




Piet Mondrian 1872- 1944
Filename: *Landscape with Ditch.*

**Piet Mondrian began as an
artist by painting realistic
landscapes.**

- Mondrian's evolved to his famous style



Composition No. 10, 1939-42, oil on canvas, 80 x 73 cm, private collection.

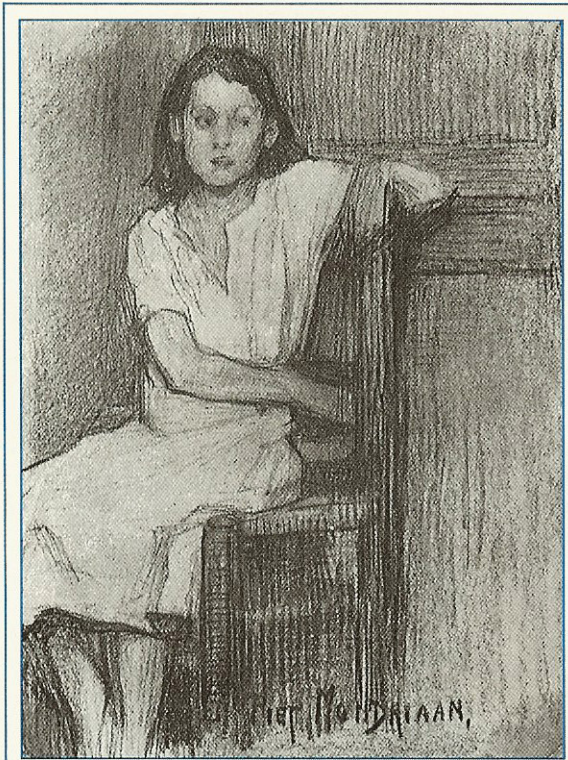
Piet Mondrian

(PEA-et MON-dree-ahn)

- Dutch Painter
- Started out as an art teacher
- Born 1872
- Lived during WWI – because of global conflict moved to New York City in 1939 when WWII began.
- Influenced by Cubism
- Lived the life and style that he painted. He reduced his possessions to the bare essentials and painted his office like his paintings.

He was an important contributor to the De Stijl or Neo-Plasticism.

- He was an important contributor to the De Stijl art movement and group - also termed as Neo-Plasticism. This consisted of a grid of vertical and horizontal black lines and the use of the three primary colours.
- Proponents of De Stijl sought to express a new utopian ideal of spiritual harmony and order. They advocated pure abstraction and universality by a reduction to the essentials of form and color; they simplified visual compositions to the vertical and horizontal directions, and used only primary colors along with black and white.



PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944), SEATED GIRL, 1904. CHARCOAL, 6 7/8 X 4 1/2". PRIVATE COLLECTION.

Can you see his geometric style start to emerge?

- He was later influenced by the Cubist movement. Like this one by Pablo Picasso



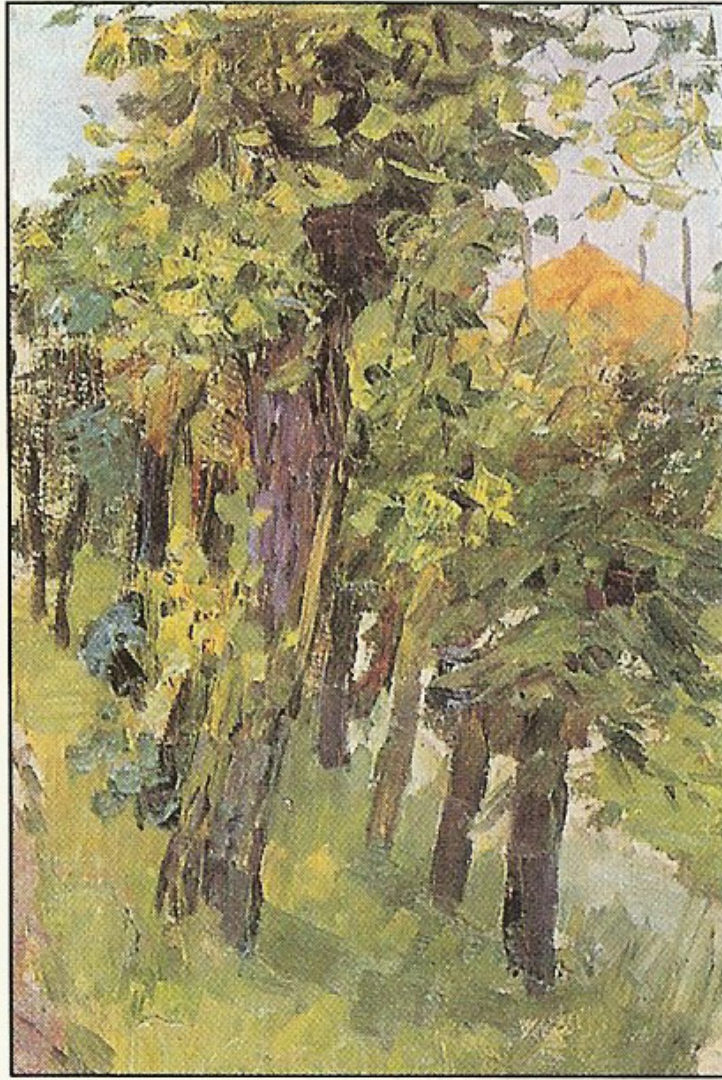
His Metamorphous

- Mondrian worked for over 20 years before he developed the style for which he is best known. In his early work, Mondrian was fascinated with plants – especially trees.
- In the mythology of nearly every culture, trees are thought of as the link between opposites – earth and sky, masculine and feminine, life and death. So in his art, Mondrian focused on trees as symbols of the natural cycle – birth, life, reproduction, death, decay, rebirth.



- In the following nine paintings you can see how Mondrian begins with a natural object and slowly, step by step, transforms it into a completely abstract statement.
- “The universe is not to be found in nature but in the relations existing in nature.”

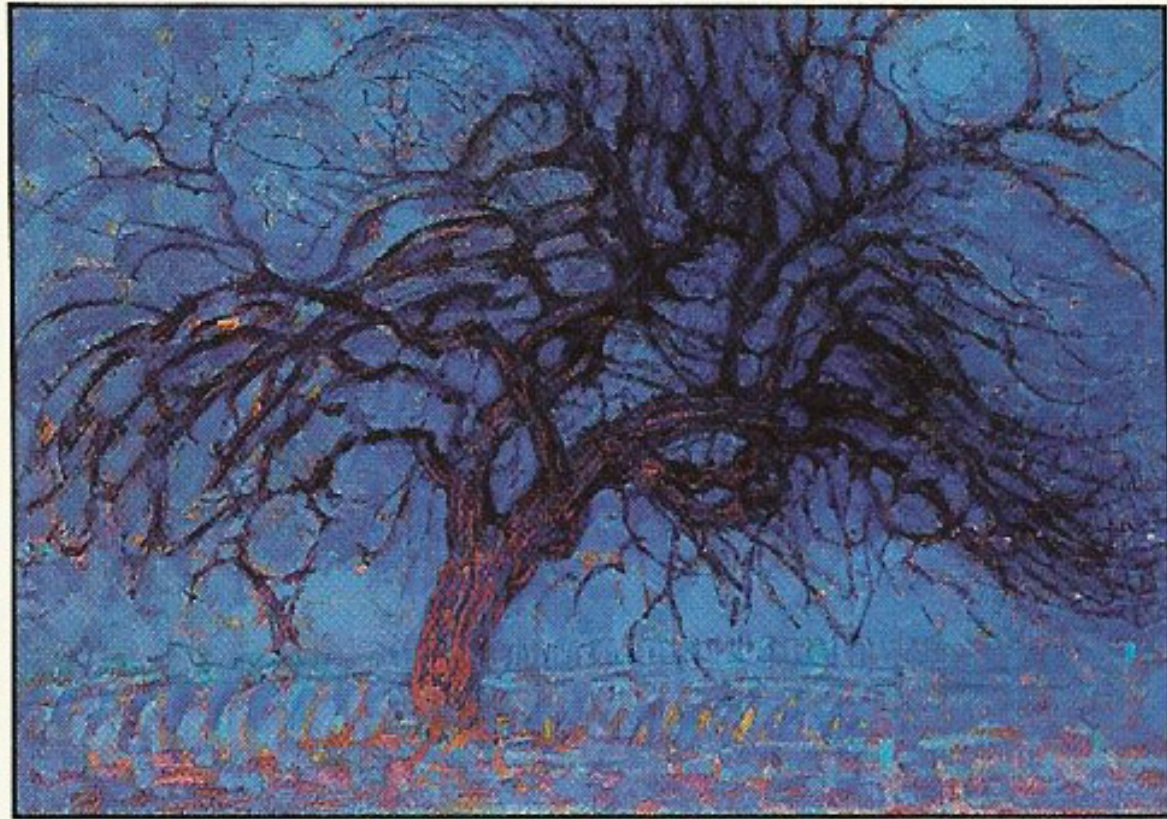
309



TREES ALONG THE GEIN, 1903. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

In this realistic painting of trees, you can already see the beginnings of Mondrian's later style — the *vertical linear* tree trunks, the *flat frontal view*, and the *closely cropped picture space*.

80



RED TREE. 1908. GEMEENTEMUSEUM, THE HAGUE.

In this work, Mondrian *fills the frame* with a single object. The black lines of the tree begin to divide the canvas into *patterns*. He also uses two of the *primary colors* that were to be so important in his later work — blue and red.

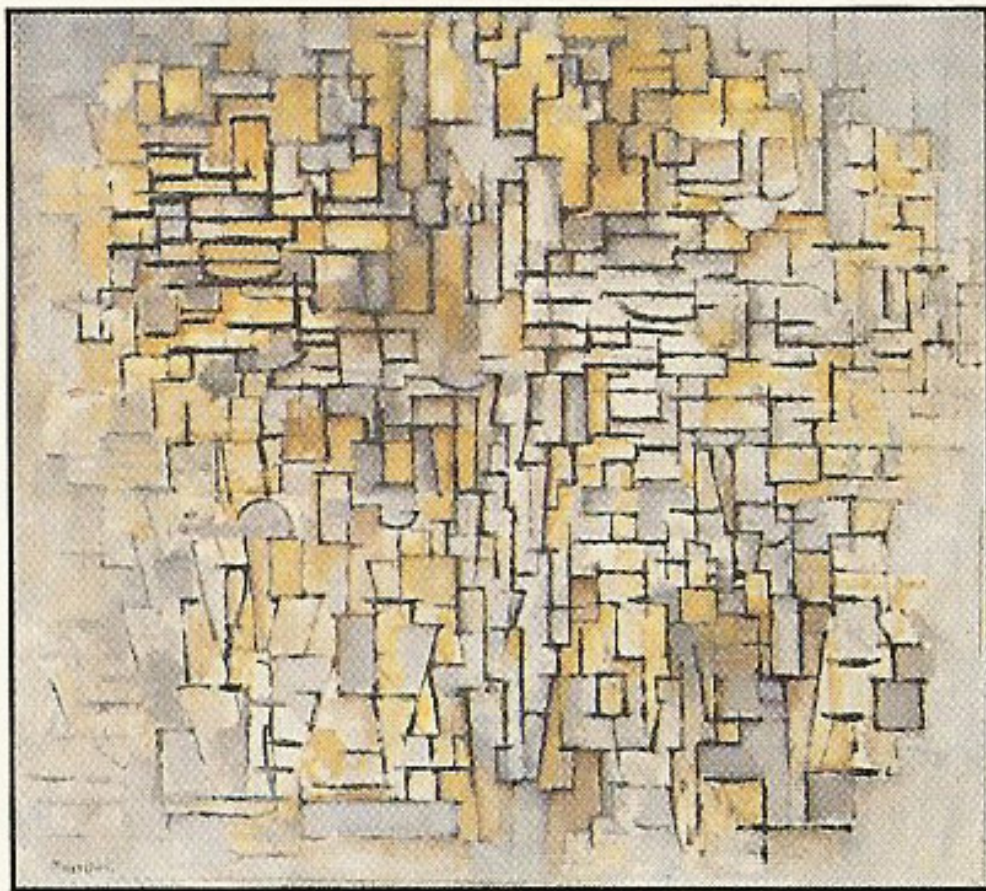
2-9-1



TREES IN BLOOM, 1912. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

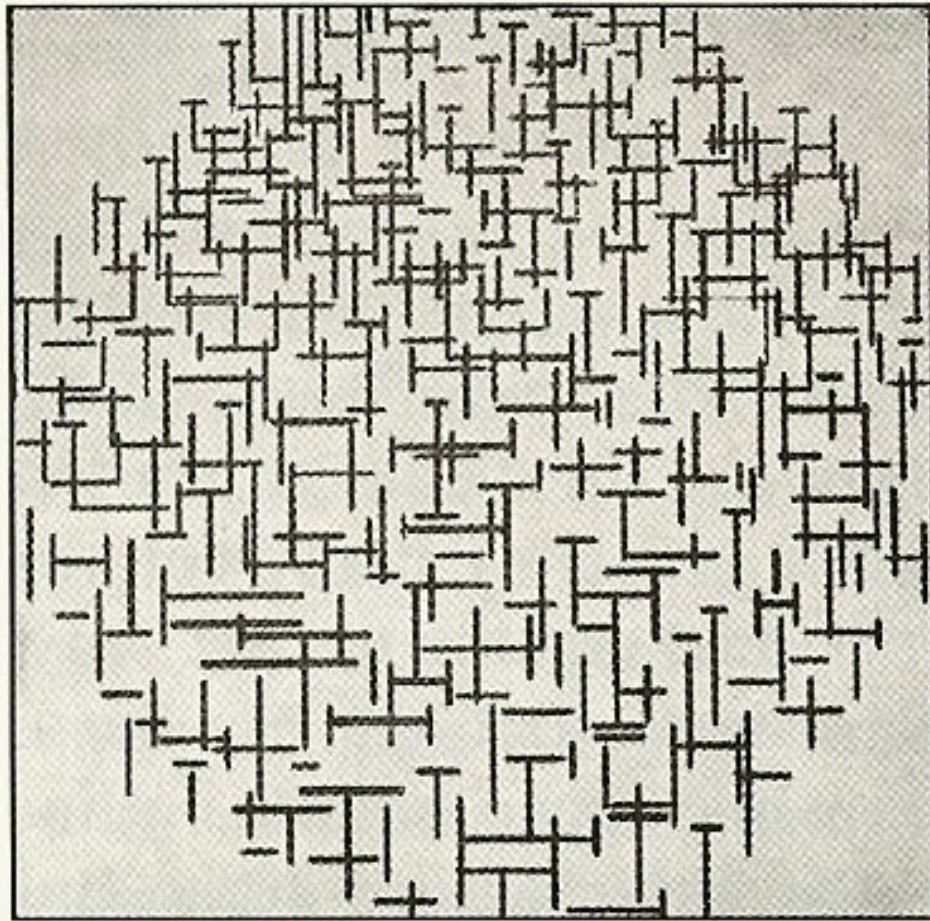
Here, the tree image has almost disappeared. A network of *horizontal and vertical lines* breaks up the flat surface into small *units*. However the background is still atmospheric, made up of pinkish and bluish grays.

1
2
3

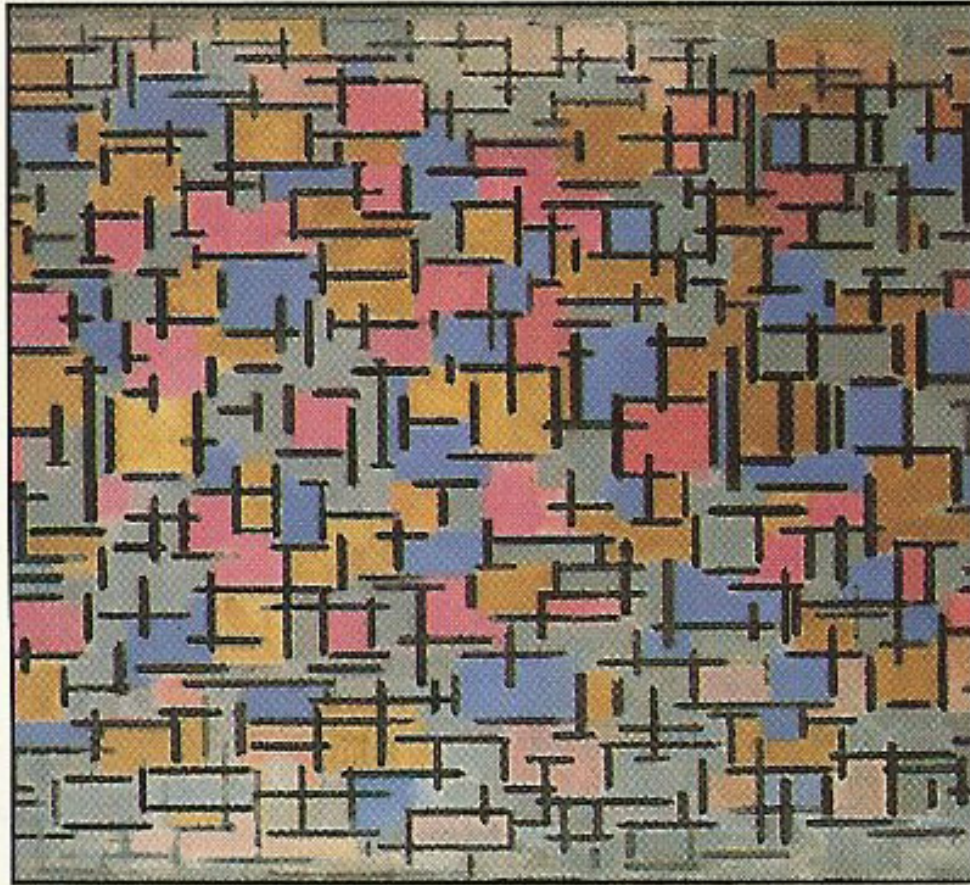


COMPOSITION VII, 1913. GUGGENHEIM, N.Y.

Now the tree has completely disappeared. The *horizontal and vertical lines* have become tighter and straighter, while only a few curves are left. Everything has become a *bright, primary yellow*.



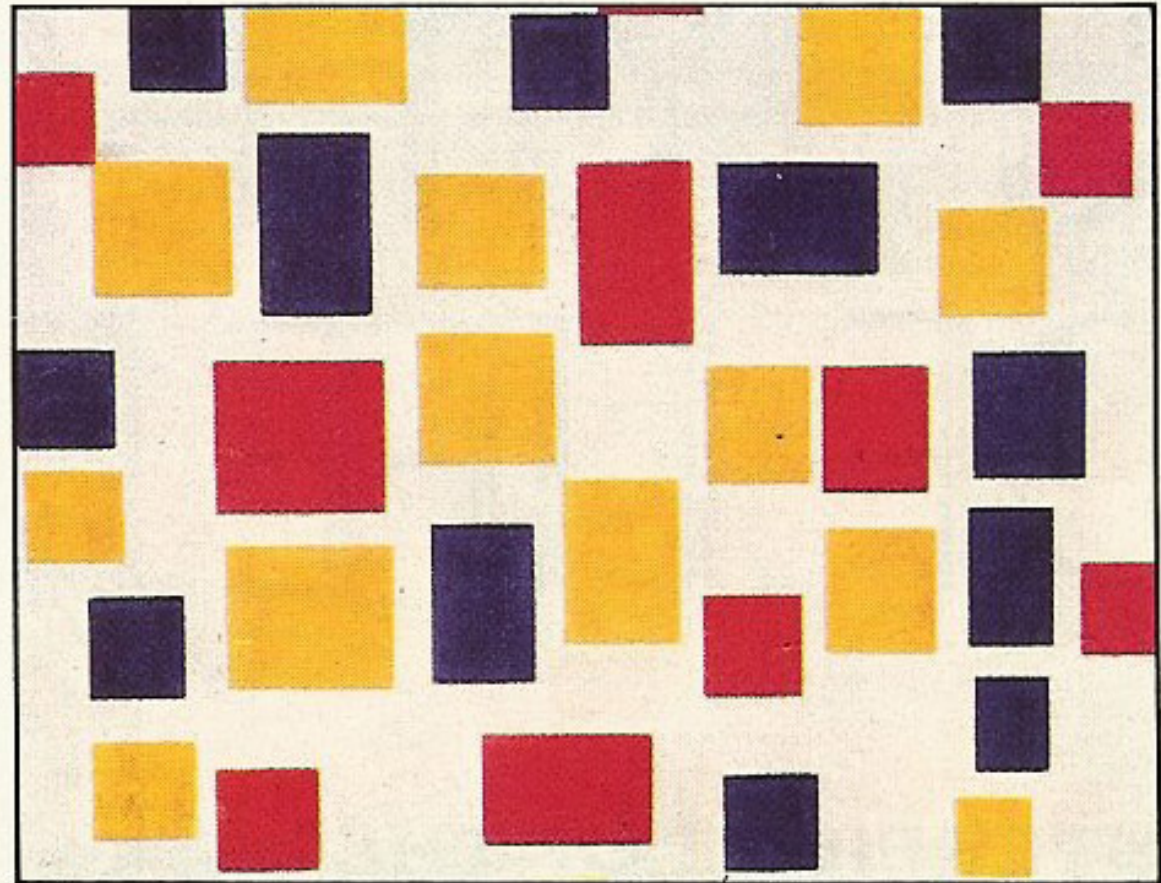
All curves are gone. The *intersection of straight vertical and horizontal lines* is the important element. But this solution did not satisfy Mondrian since the image is still not flat. The different sizes of the crosses suggest depth.



COMPOSITION (DETAIL), 1916. GUGGENHEIM, N.Y.

The cross shapes are explored further. The *vertical* lines stand for the life force, the *horizontal* lines for rest and death. The *crossing*, or union of these two forces creates tension. The colors are states of being: Blue indicates devotion and red, affection.

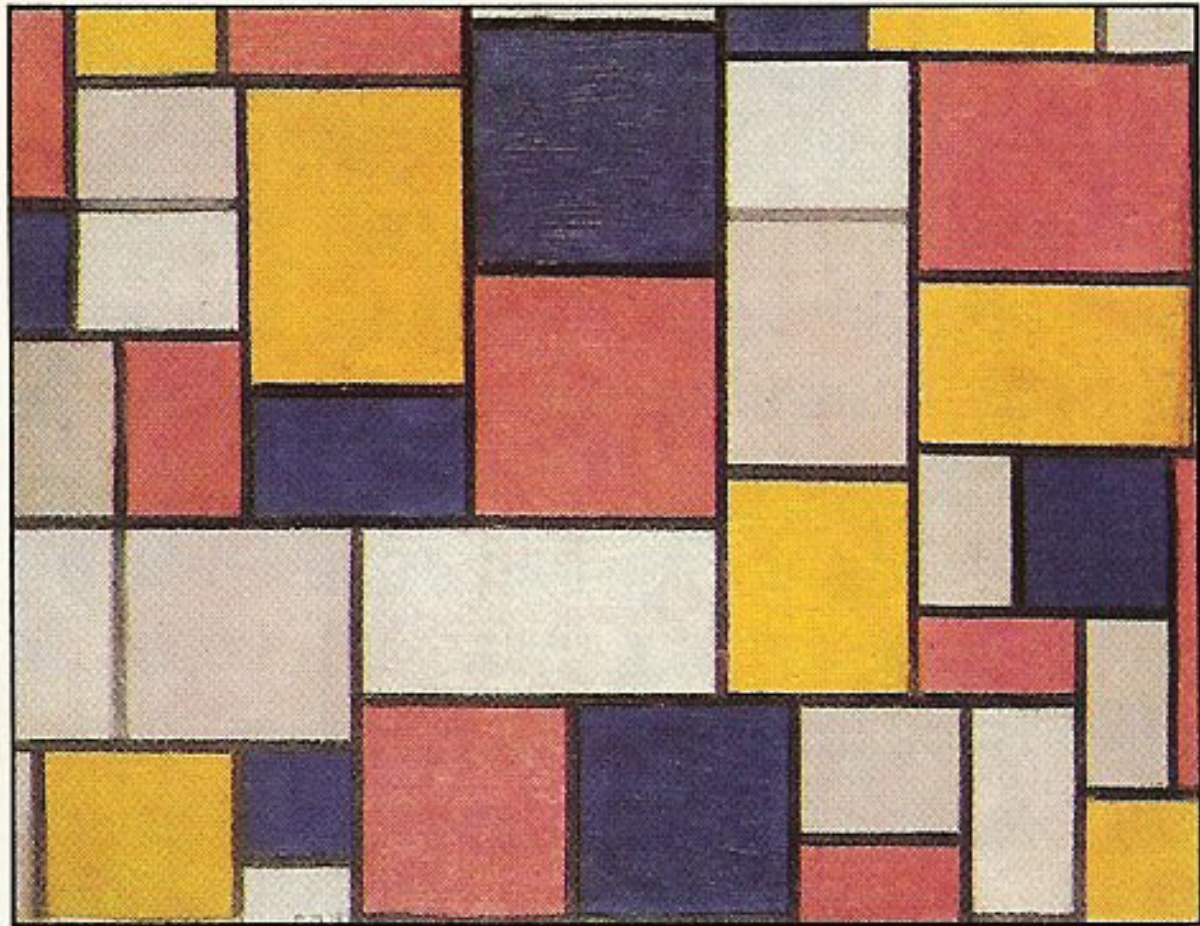
1917



COMPOSITION WITH COLOR PLANES, 1917.

In the next stage, all the lines have been removed, leaving *rectangles* of flat color. But this solution also created a feeling of depth (the big shapes seem to be floating in front of the little ones), which Mondrian didn't want.

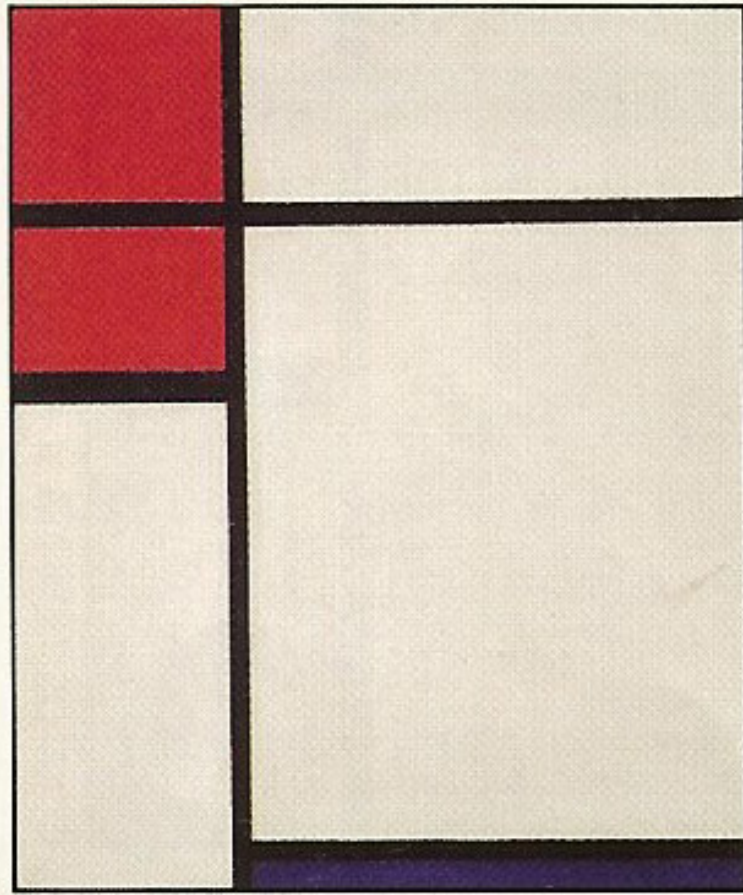
8



COMPOSITION: COLOR PLANES WITH GRAY, 1918.

The color remains and the straight lines are back. This solution was still not quite right. The colors were not pure enough and the *rectangular grid* was too complicated. The painting still didn't completely express Mondrian's vision.

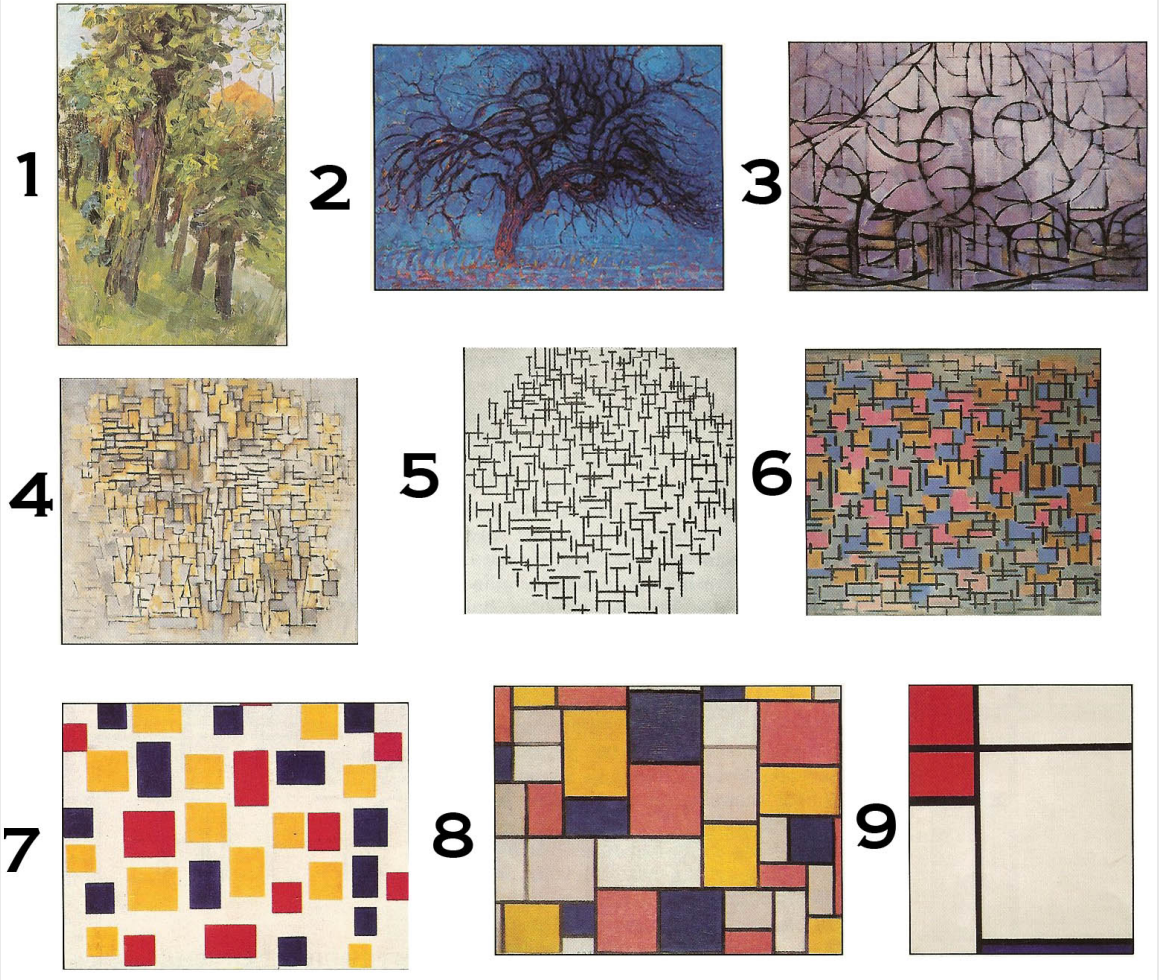
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COMPOSITION. 1933. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

By 1920, Mondrian had developed his final “pure” style. The artist had realized his theory: “The essence of painting is *line* and *color*. Paintings must be as *flat* as the surface they are painted on. The only pure colors are those that cannot be mixed, the *primaries* red, blue, yellow.”

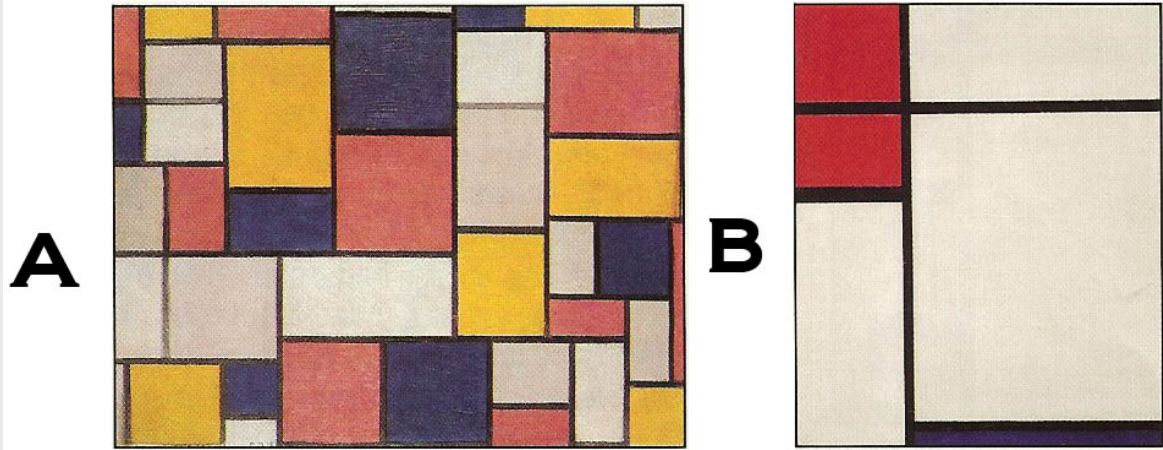
1. **What did trees symbolize for Mondrian?**
2. **In which one does the tree first disappear?**
3. **In which ones are lines emphasized?**
4. **In which one do shapes predominate?**
5. **In which ones do shape, line, and color work together in an “abstract” way?**



The natural cycle of birth, life, reproduction, death, decay, and rebirth.

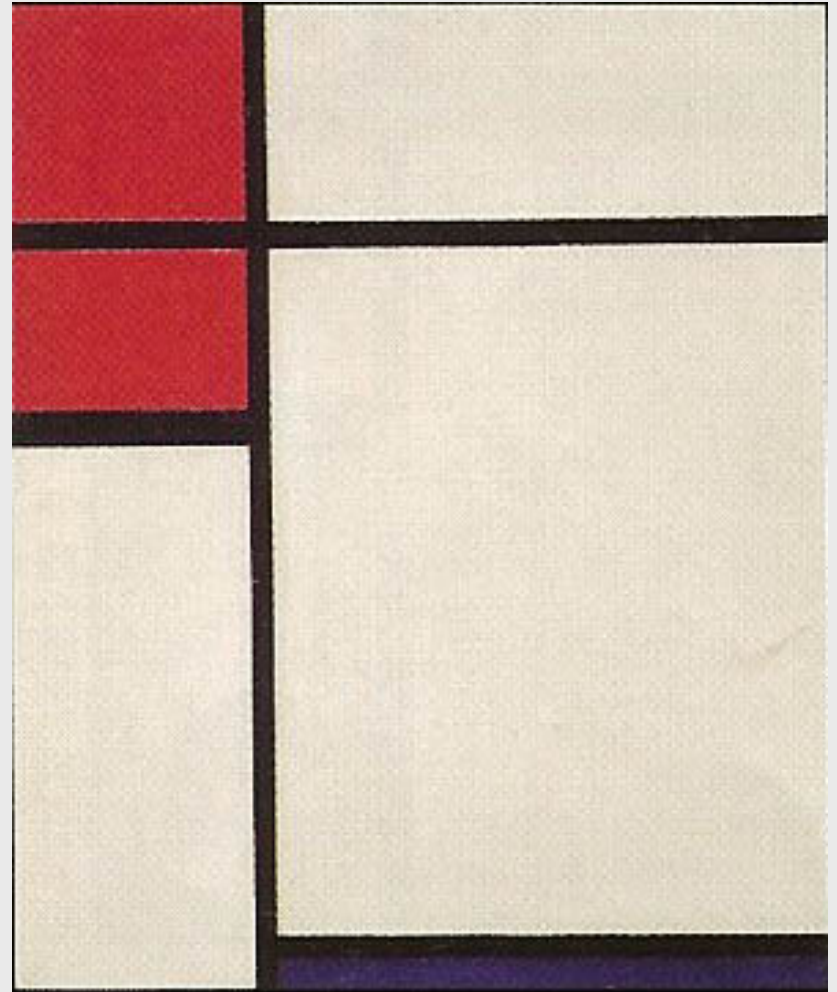
4 3,4,5,6 7 8 and 9

1. What makes the last one (B) stronger than the second to the last one (A)?



- The “pure” colors in the last one are brighter, clearer, more direct;
- the composition is simpler and more dynamic;
- there is tension between big and small, white and black, areas of color and areas without color.

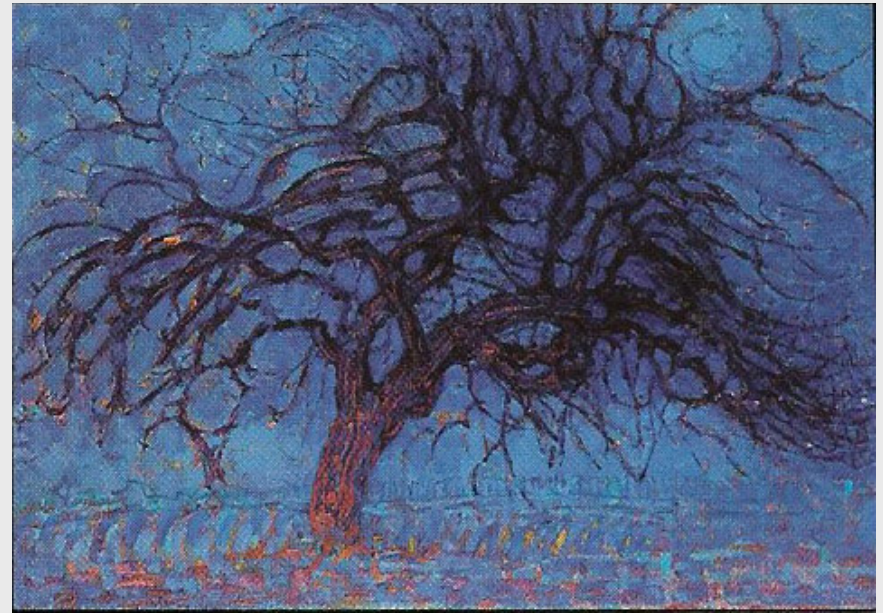
3. Does this painting make you
2. What adjectives or
think of any qualities or
phrases would you
relationships in the real
use to describe this
world?
last one?



Maybe.....

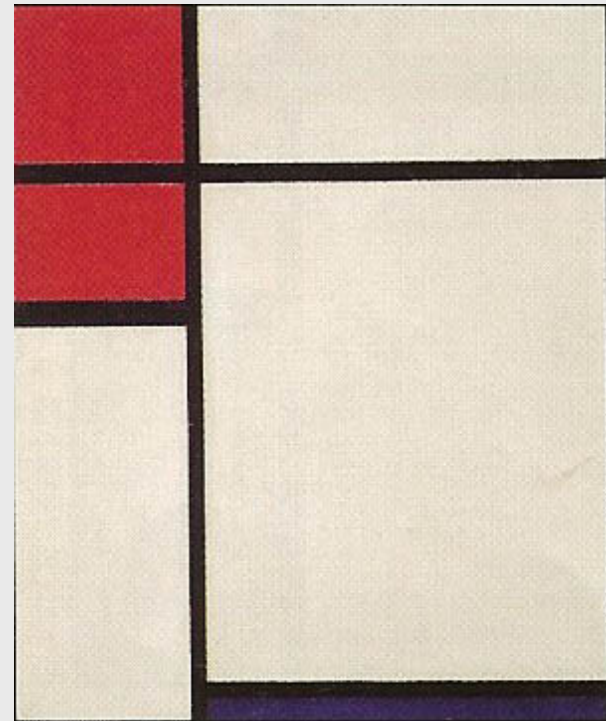
- **Harmony**
- **Direct**
- **Tension and opposition**
- **Delicate balance of life and death**
- **The feeling of a whole**
- **Perfect**
- **The simplicity at the basis of life.....**

4. What gives this tree such a strong feeling?



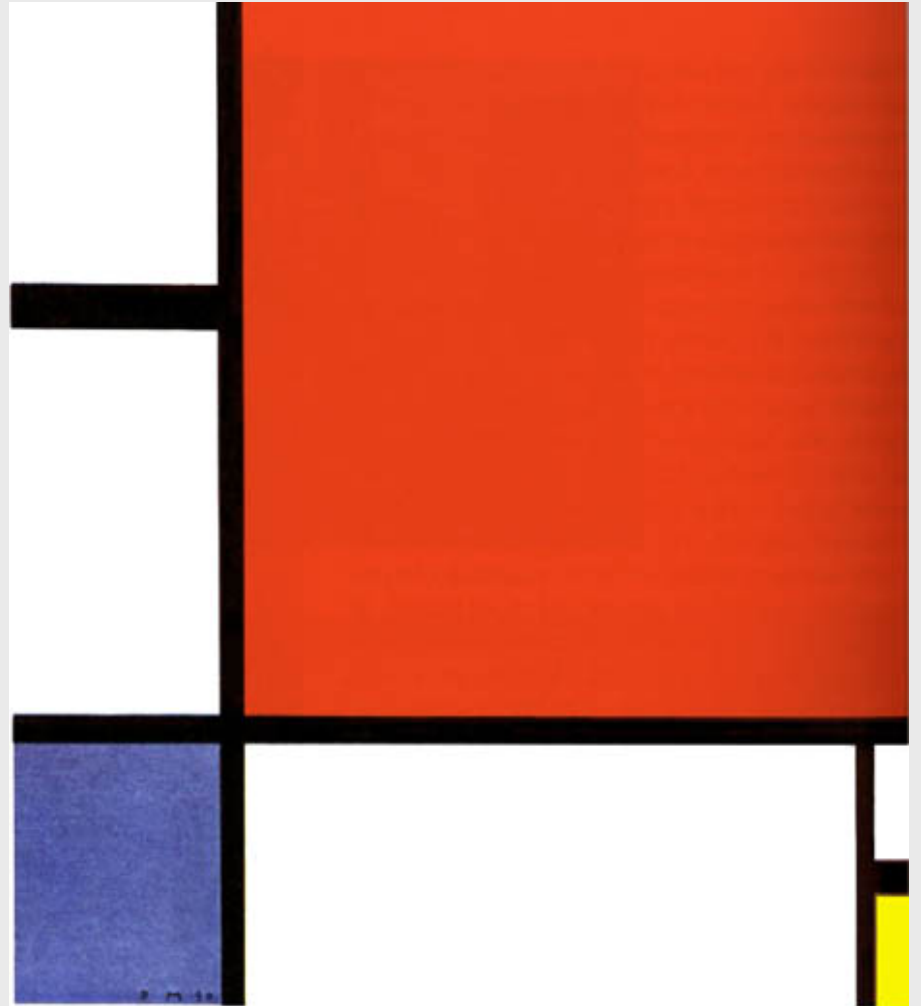
5. Does it have symbolic of vitality
anything in common

- **The dynamic network of branches that seem to reach out into every corner of the painting**
- **The colors red and blue**
- **The suggestion of opposites of life and death, earth and sky**



What rules did he set up?

- Straight lines
- Varied thickness of lines
- Right angles
- Primary colors



Besides using just the primary colors, Piet liked to use:

horizontal

&

vertical

lines in his art.

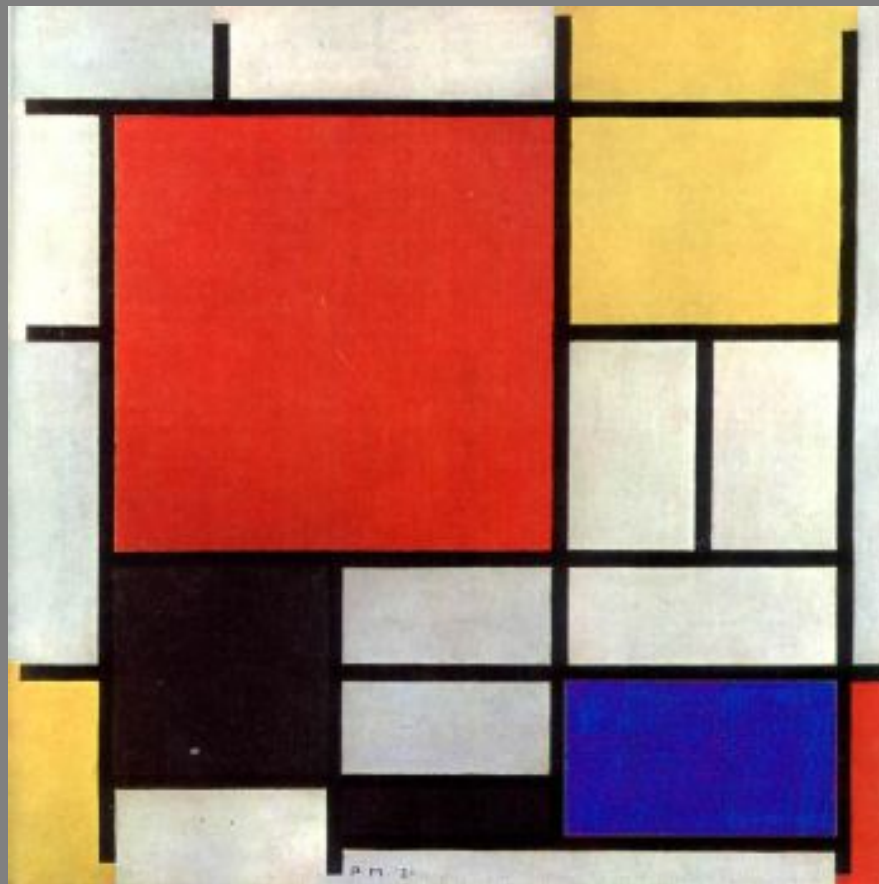
Primary colors!

▪ **Red**

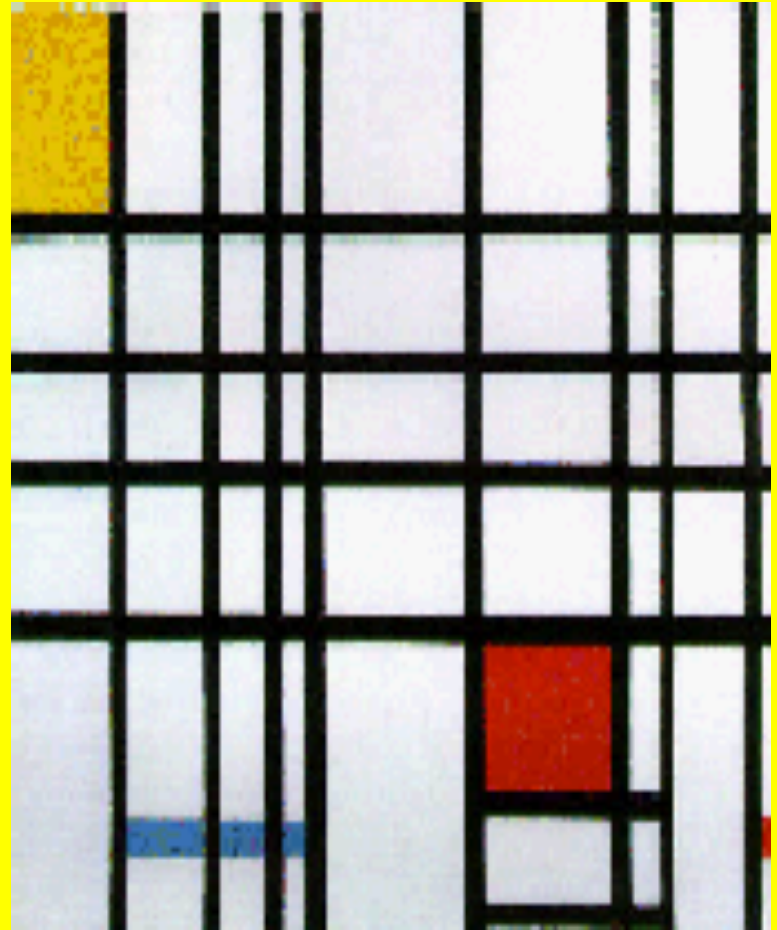
▪ **Yellow**

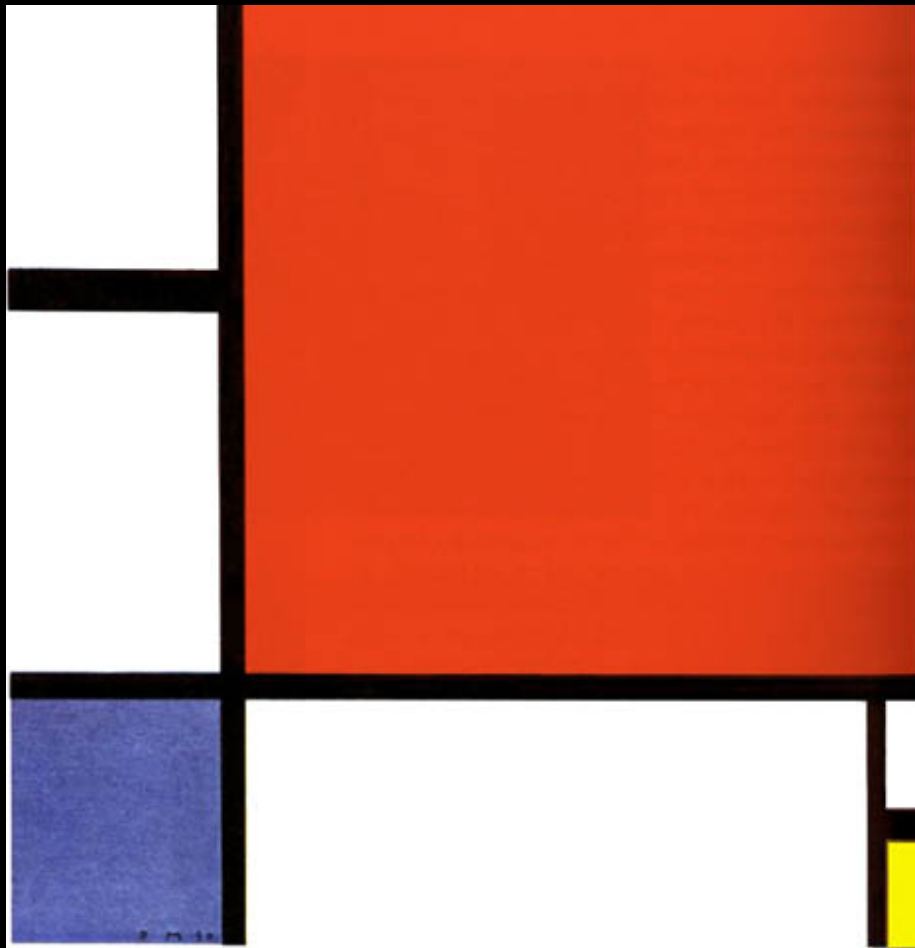
▪ **Blue**

For 20 years Piet used only black, white, gray and the 3 primary colors.

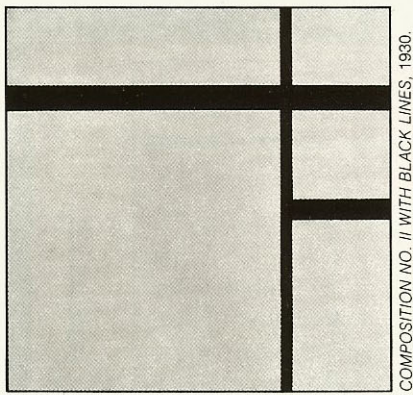


**Sometimes he
would change
the thickness
of the lines.
Other times he
would place the
lines close
together or far
apart.**

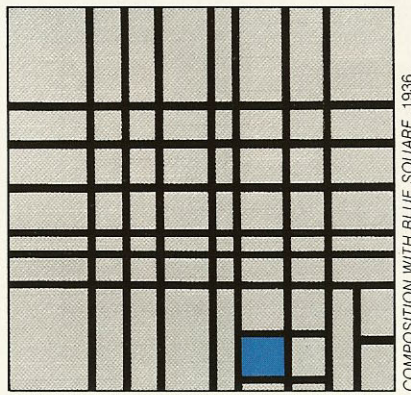




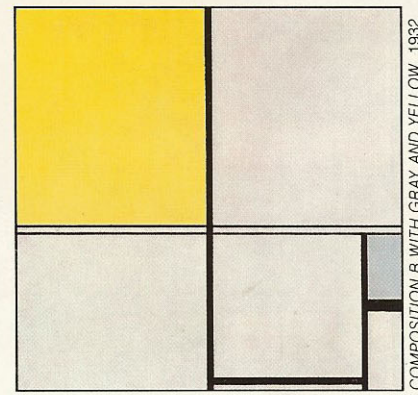
He was always trying to find a perfect balance in his art.



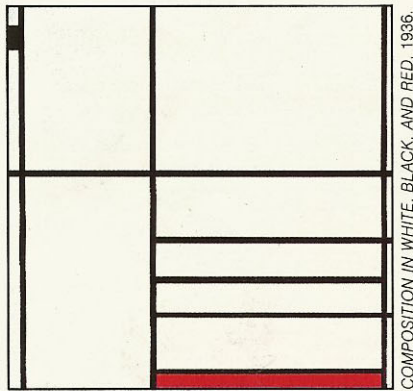
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



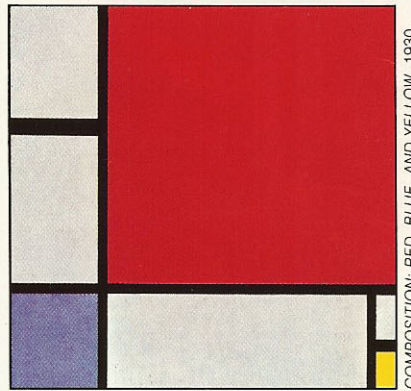
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.

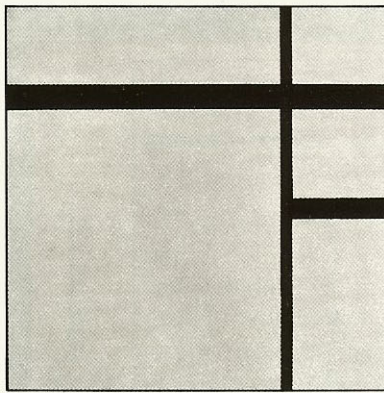


COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.

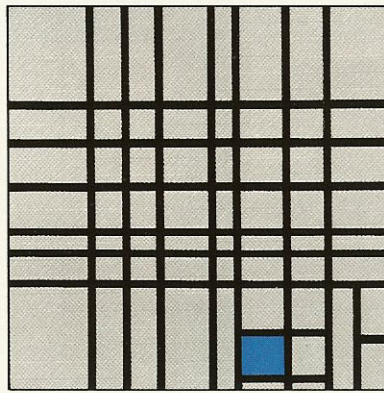


NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

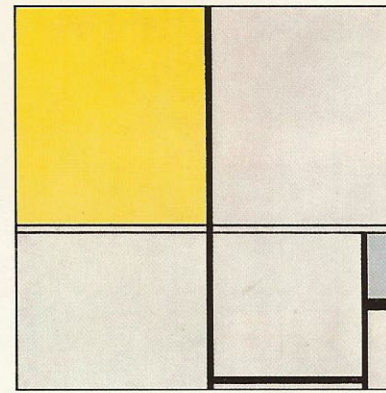
- Study the first one in the series of six. How has Mondrian given this simple composition of lines kind of excitement?
- By carefully varying the thickness of the lines, and balancing small shapes against big ones.



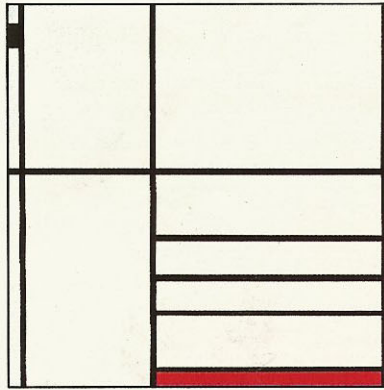
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



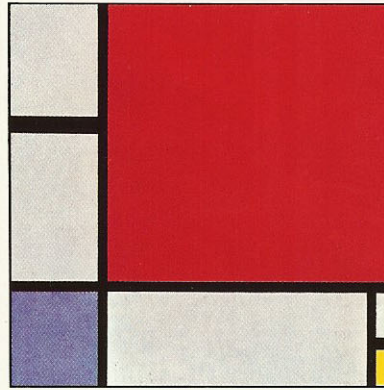
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



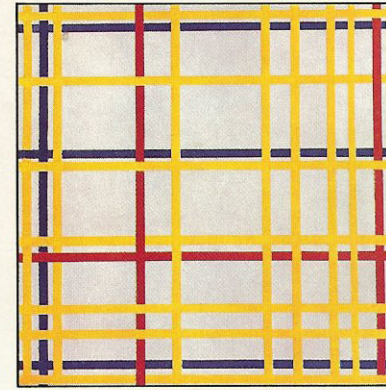
COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.



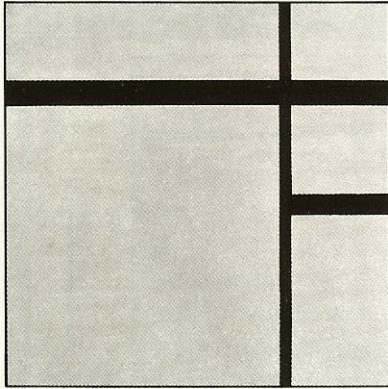
COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.



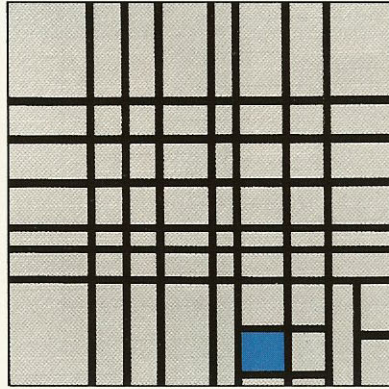
NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

Do any of these paintings have a strong optical effect?

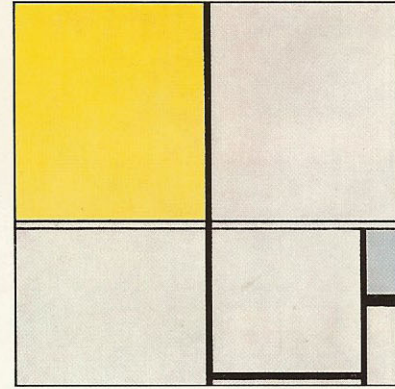
The second and sixth ones especially; lighter squares seem to appear at the intersections of the lines



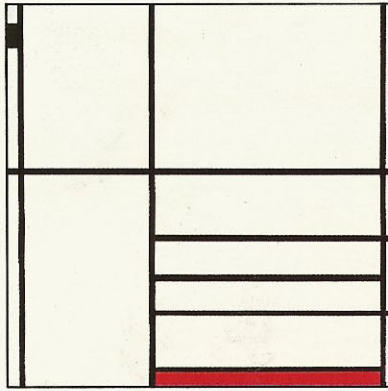
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



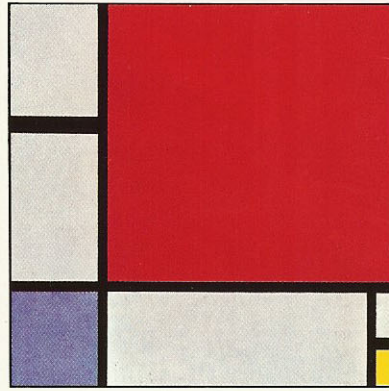
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



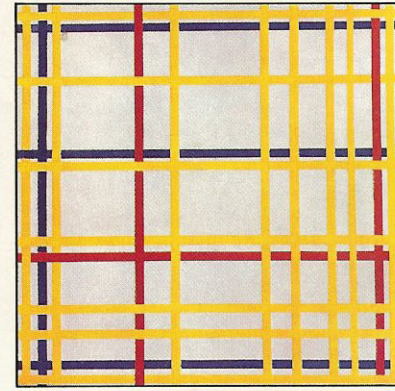
COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.



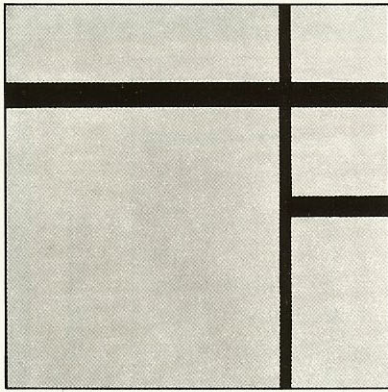
COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.



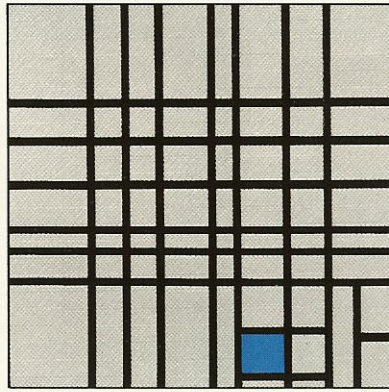
NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

In which ones does the thickness of the lines change

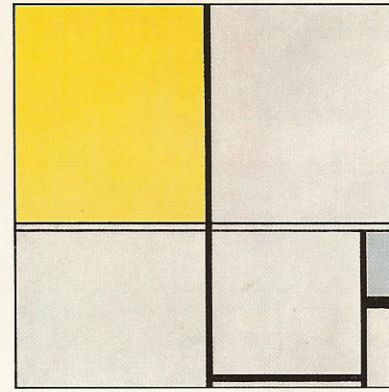
First, third, and fifth



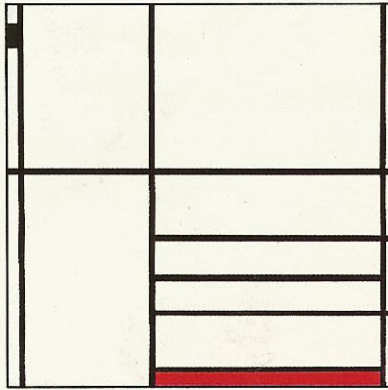
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



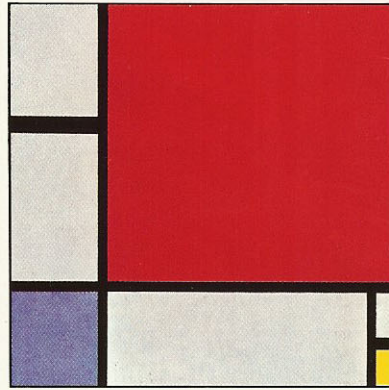
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



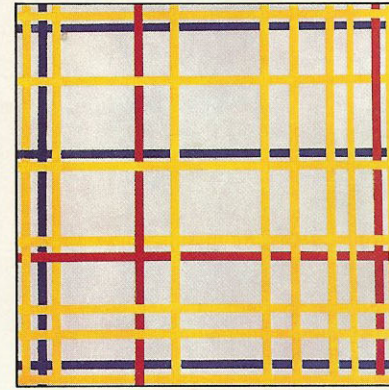
COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.



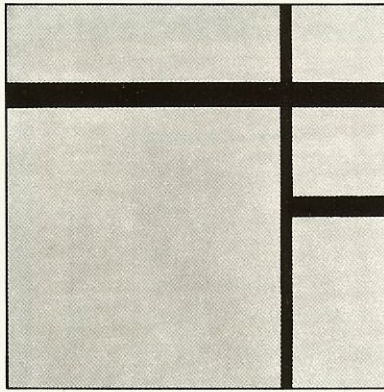
COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.



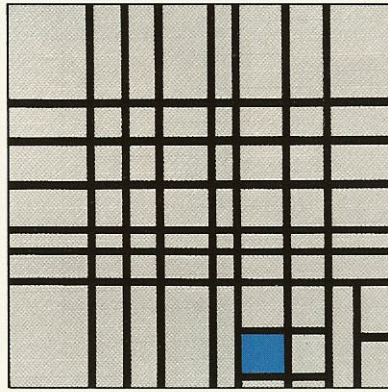
NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

In which ones is there a powerful network of intersecting lines?

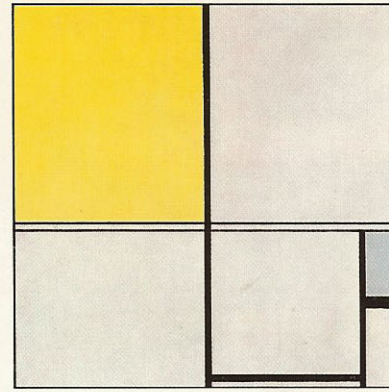
Second and sixth



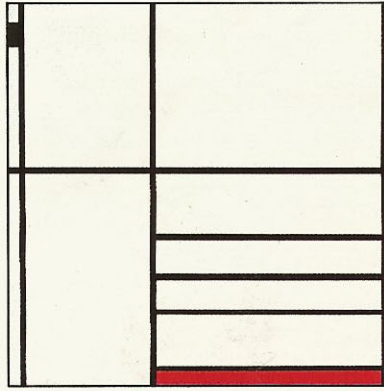
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



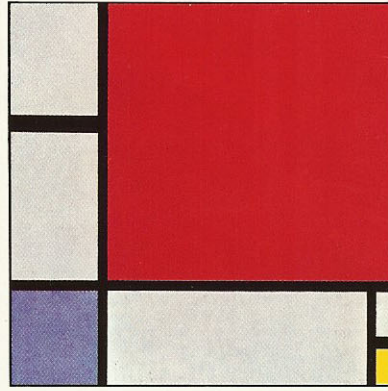
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



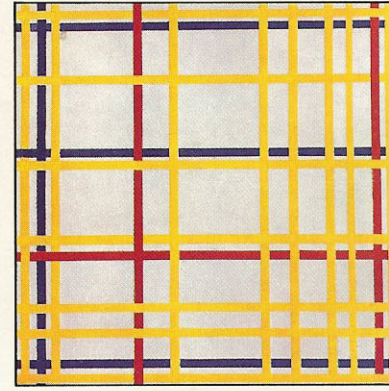
COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.

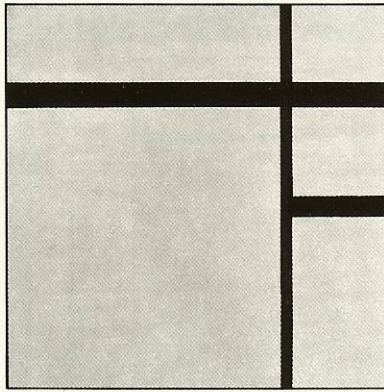


COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.

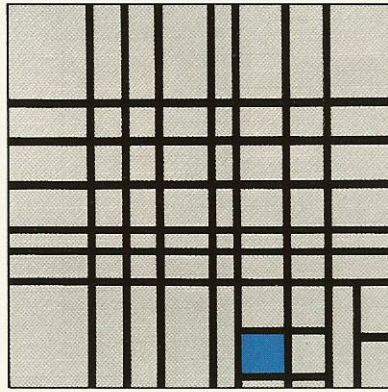


NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

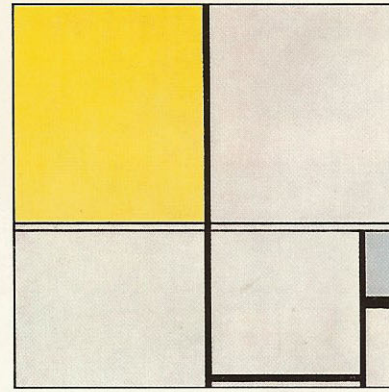
In which ones are the edges important?
Fourth and sixth especially.



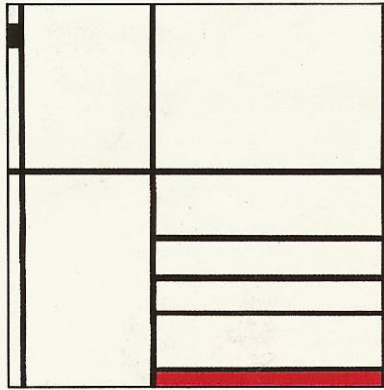
COMPOSITION NO. II WITH BLACK LINES, 1930.



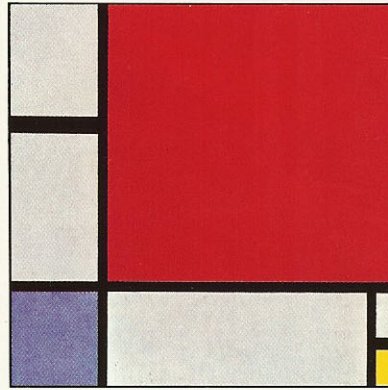
COMPOSITION WITH BLUE SQUARE, 1936.



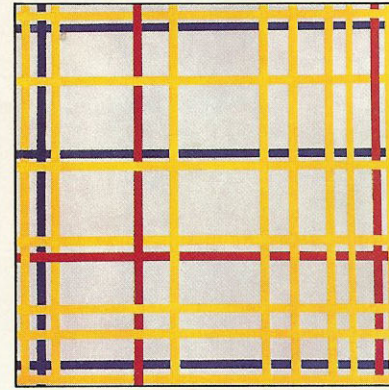
COMPOSITION B WITH GRAY AND YELLOW, 1932.



COMPOSITION IN WHITE, BLACK, AND RED, 1936.



COMPOSITION: RED, BLUE, AND YELLOW, 1930.

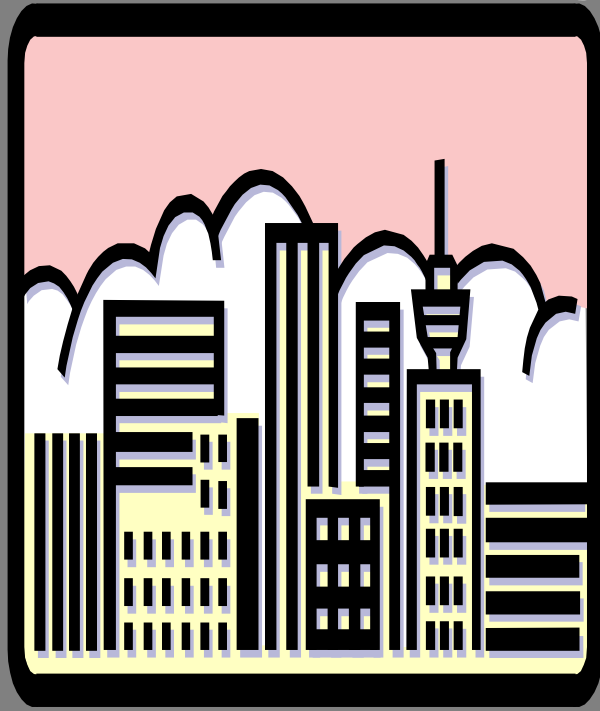


NEW YORK CITY, 1941-42.

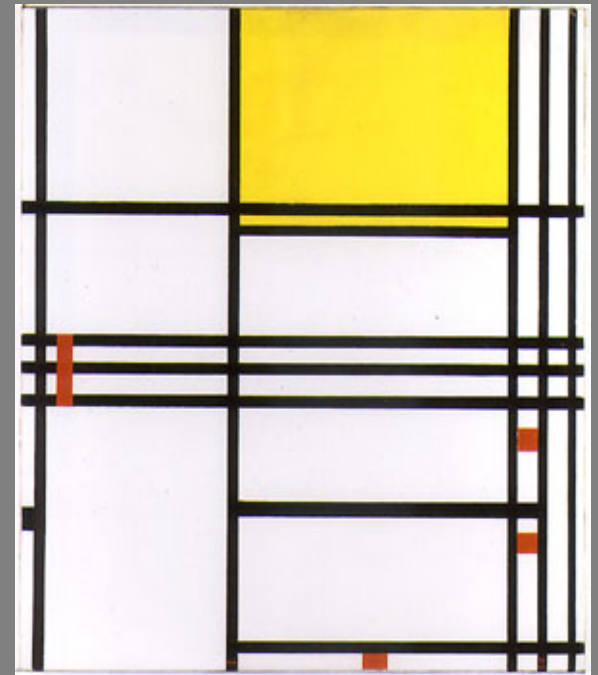
Which paintings are balanced more asymmetrically?

All but the last one

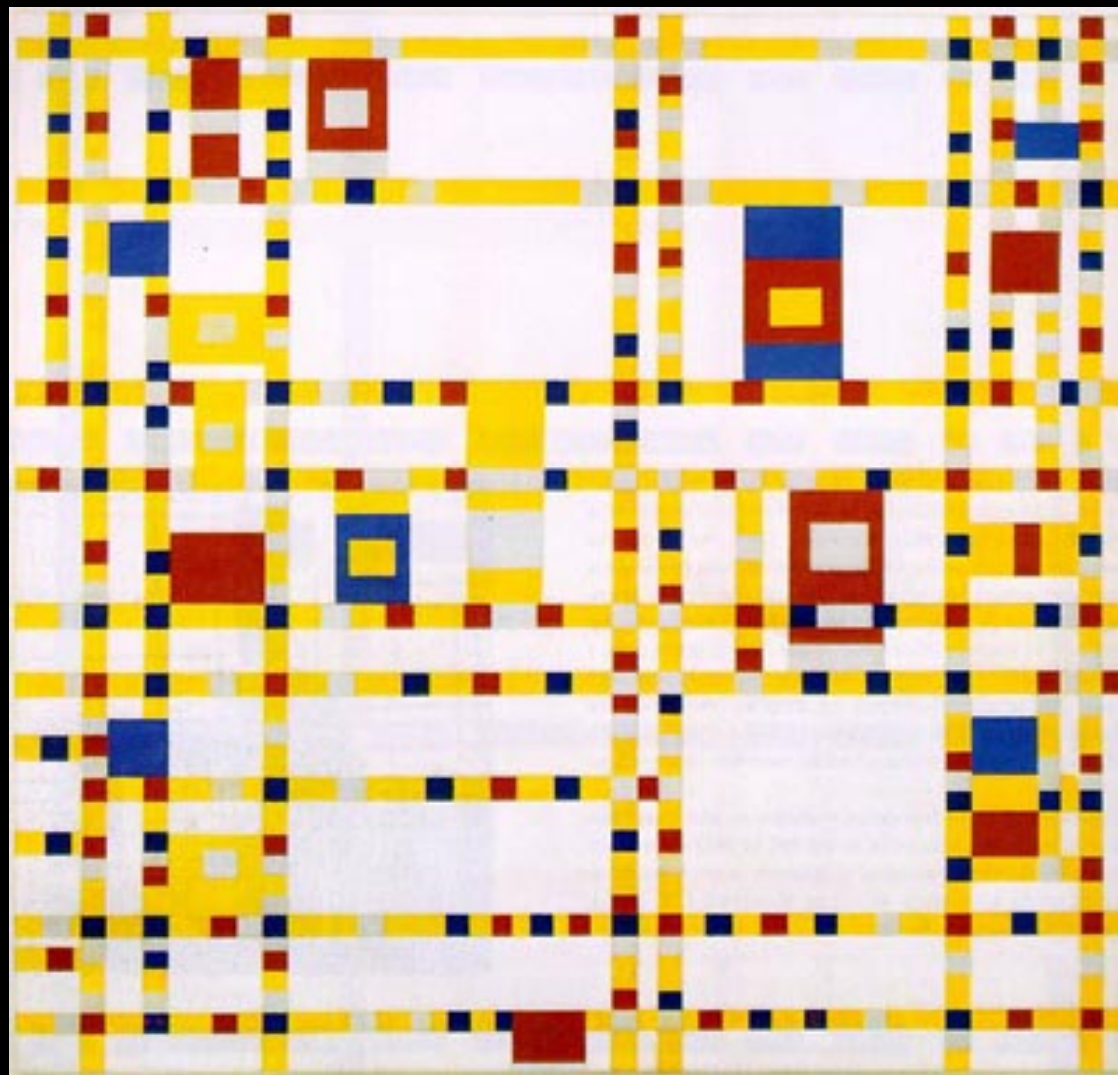
When Piet was 68 years old, he moved to New York City. The skyscrapers and the



straight lines of the streets must have reminded him of his paintings!

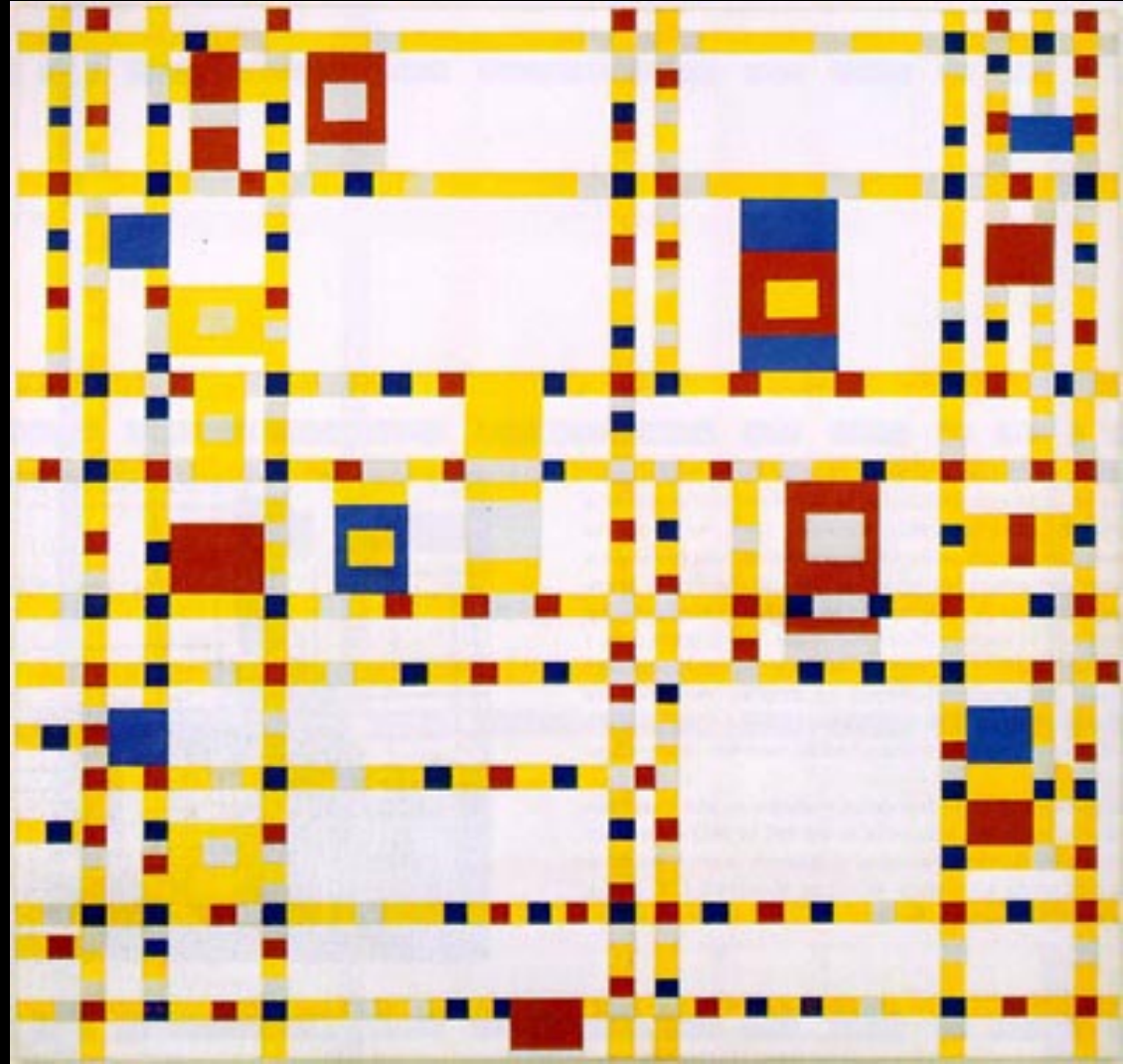


Broadway Boogie Woogie



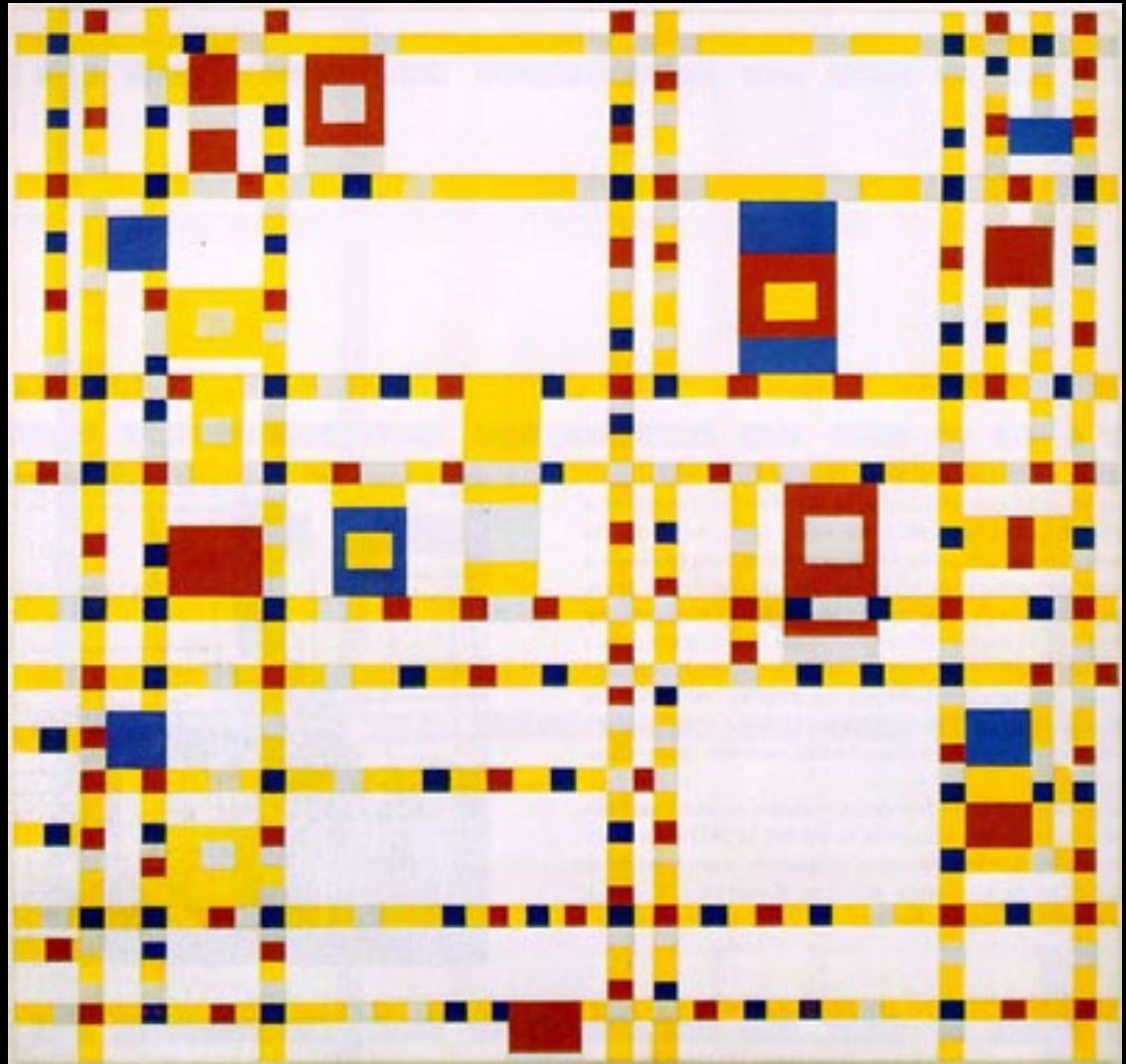
Spend a couple of minutes looking at Broadway Boogie Woogie. Take note of the optical effect of this painting. What do all the small, repeated squares and rectangles of color seem to be doing?

Vibrating, flashing or even moving



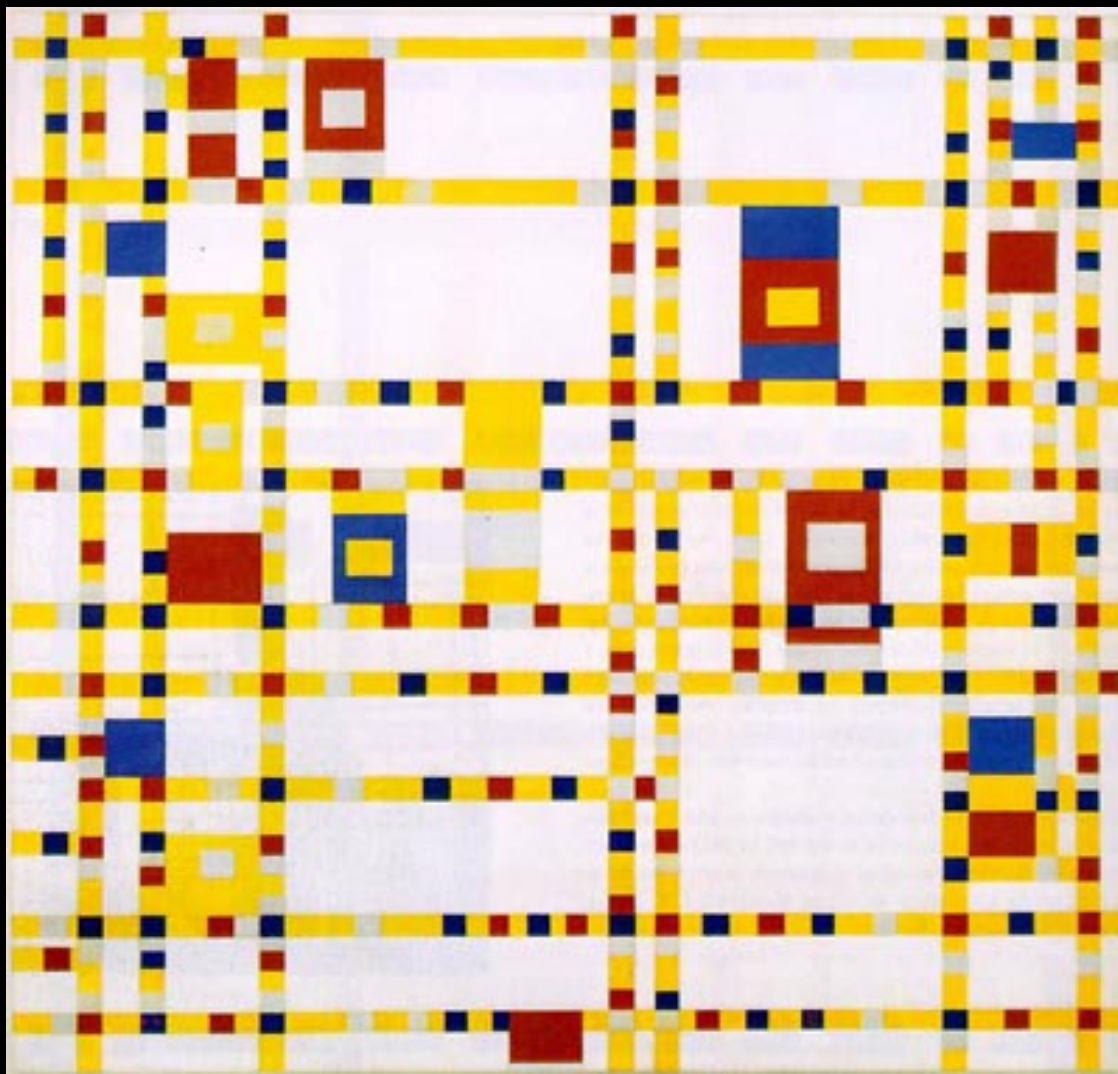
What effect do all the little light blue-gray squares have?

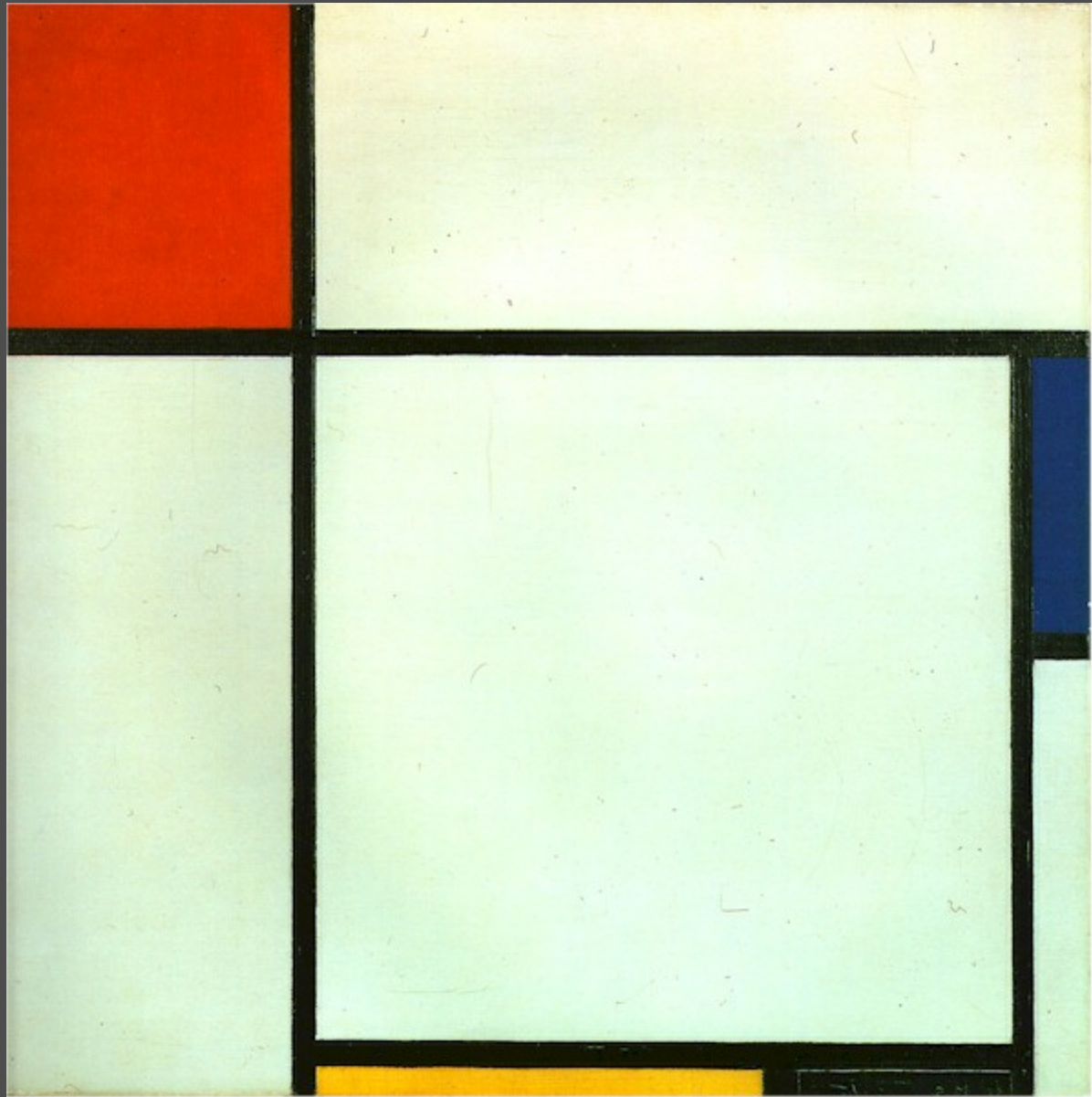
- Being neutral, they are particularly affected by the colors that are adjacent.
- This shifting effect – they seem to get lighter and darker – is almost electric.



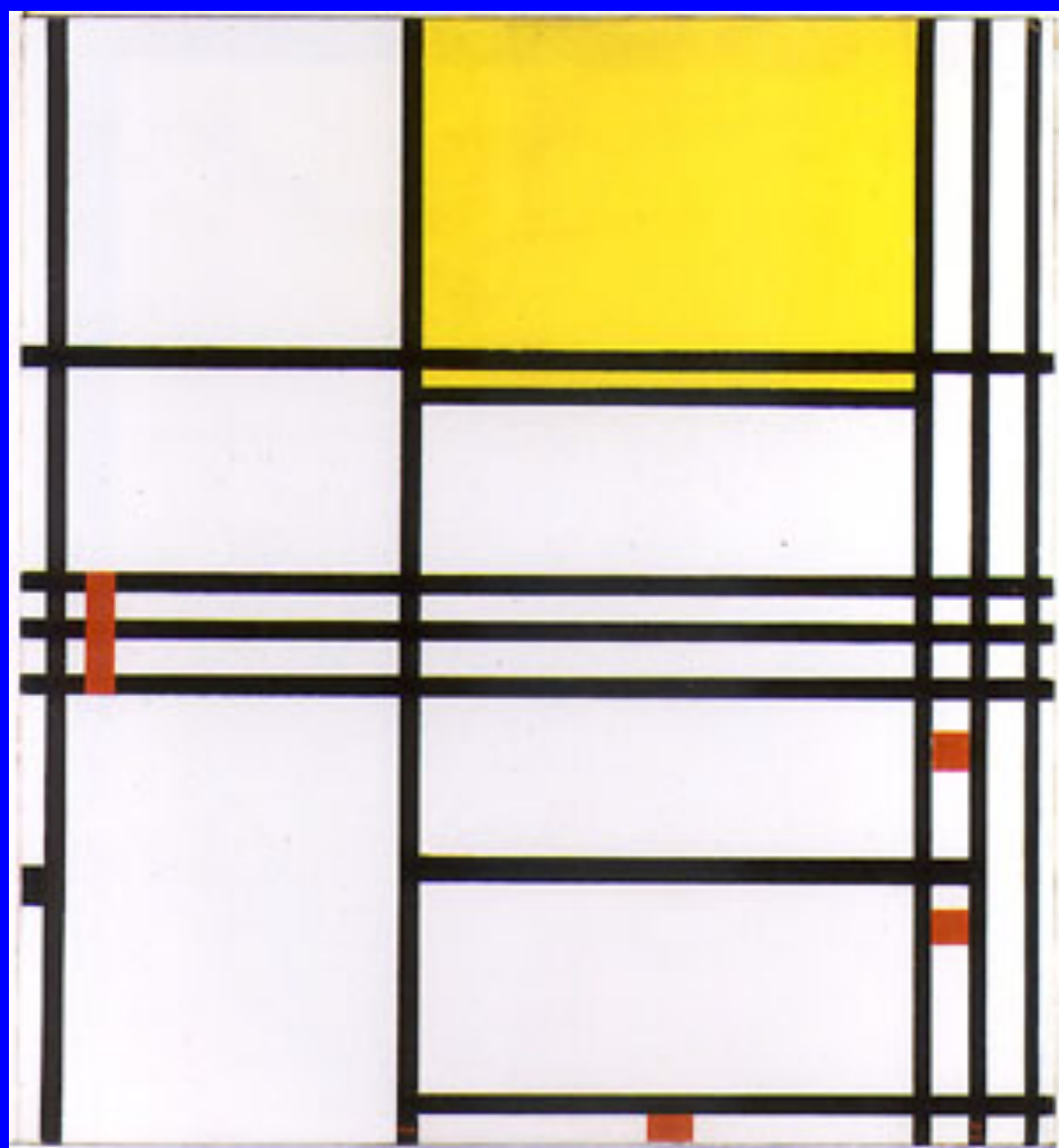
Does this painting remind you of anything in real life?

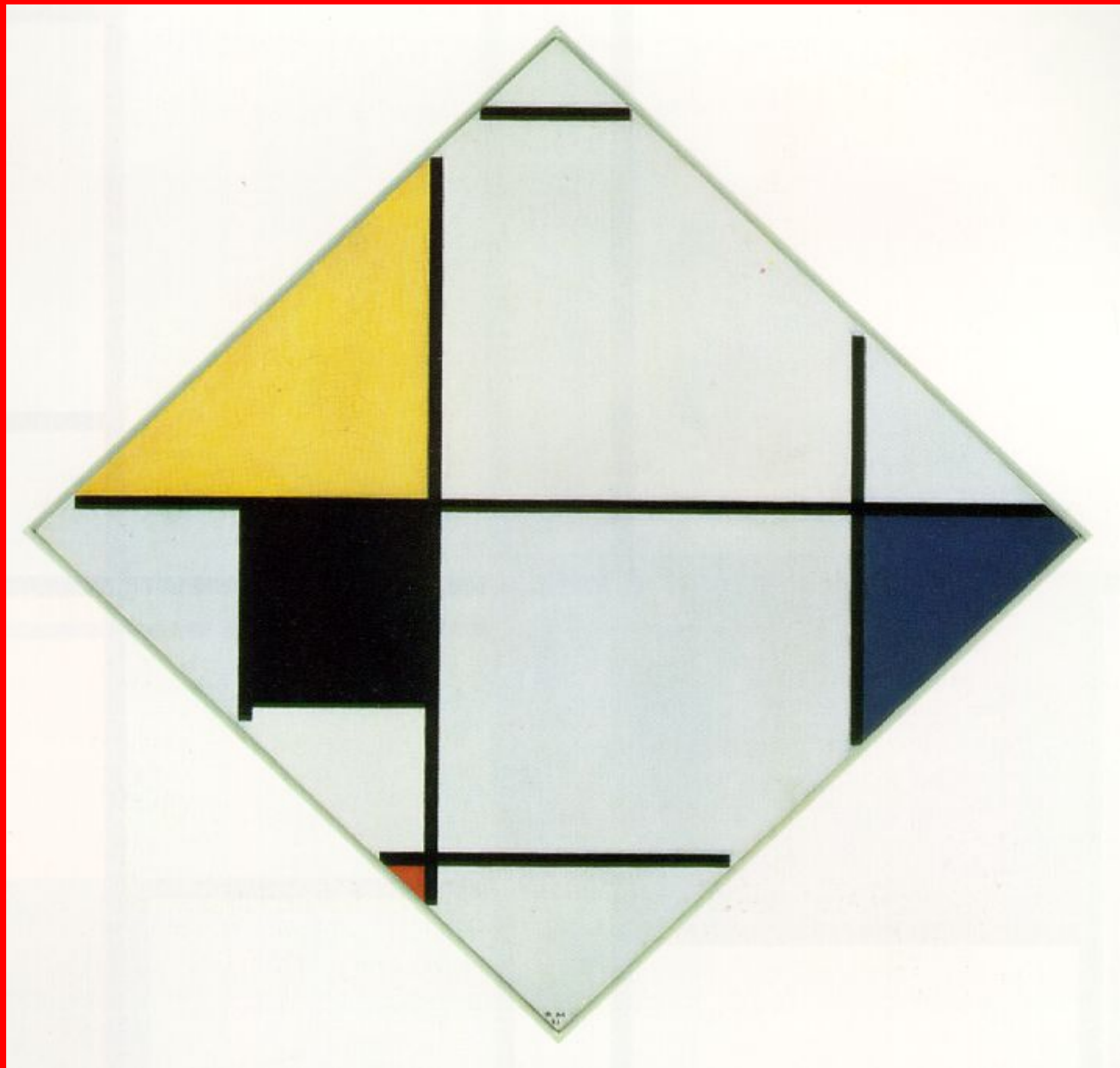
Possibly neon signs, city streets seen from above, a mazelike video game, electrical circuits, transistors, computers....





- How do you think a painting like this was done?
- Was it planned out first?
- What process might Mondrian have used to find just the right combination of colors and shapes?
- More Mondrian's paintings.....



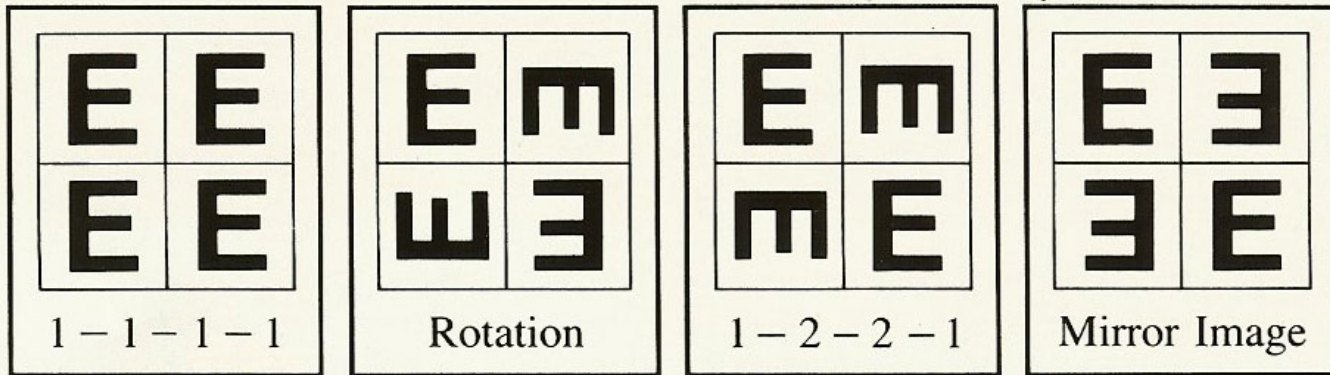


Abstract Formalism

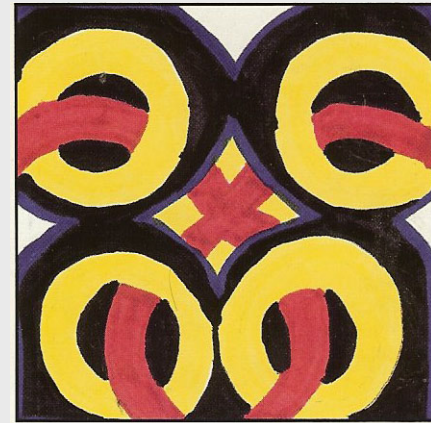
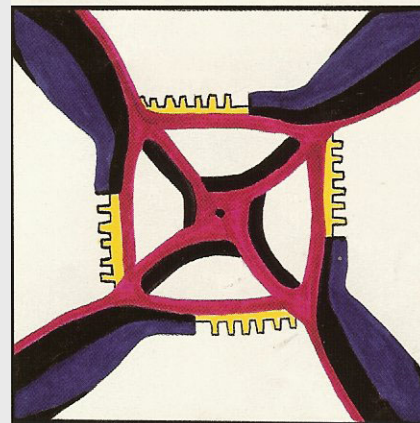
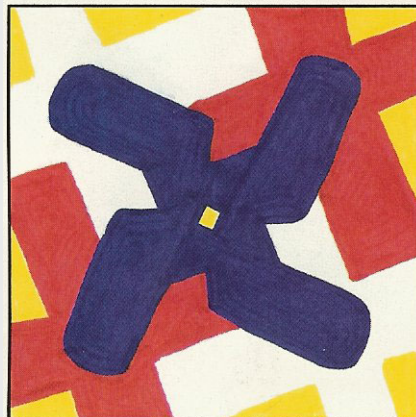
- Emphasis is on the exaggerate elements and principles of design

Assignment

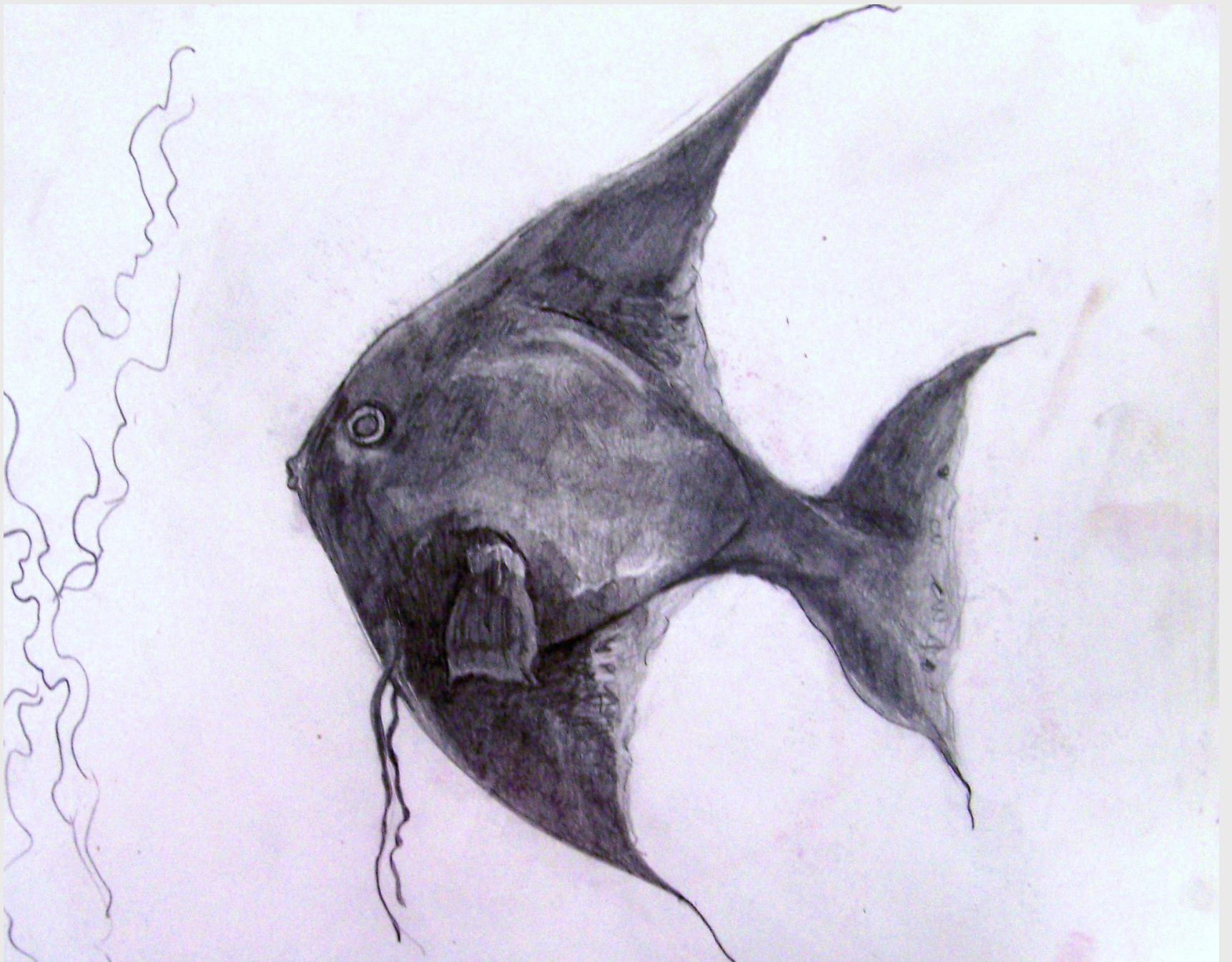
- Create 12 thumbnail abstract sketches for a painting project.
- Start with motivation – magazine photo, an object, from nature... and sketch rendering your subject to it's bare essentials.
- Use a view finder to find the most interesting design that reveals little to nothing about the subject.



- Using your selected abstract design, repeat it 3 more times in one of the above arrangement for a single composition.
- Paint with tempera paint



Design Metamorphous













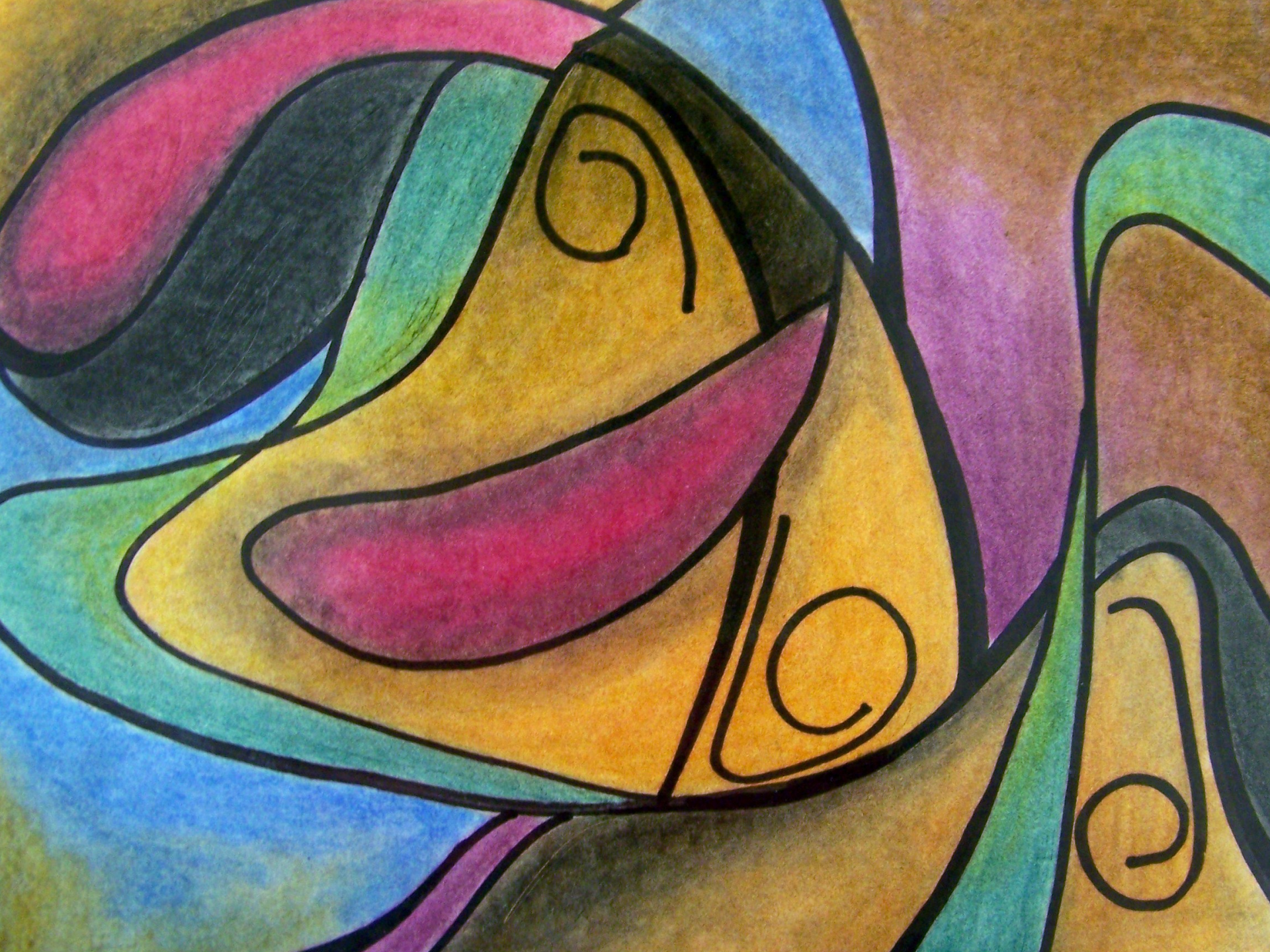
Magazine



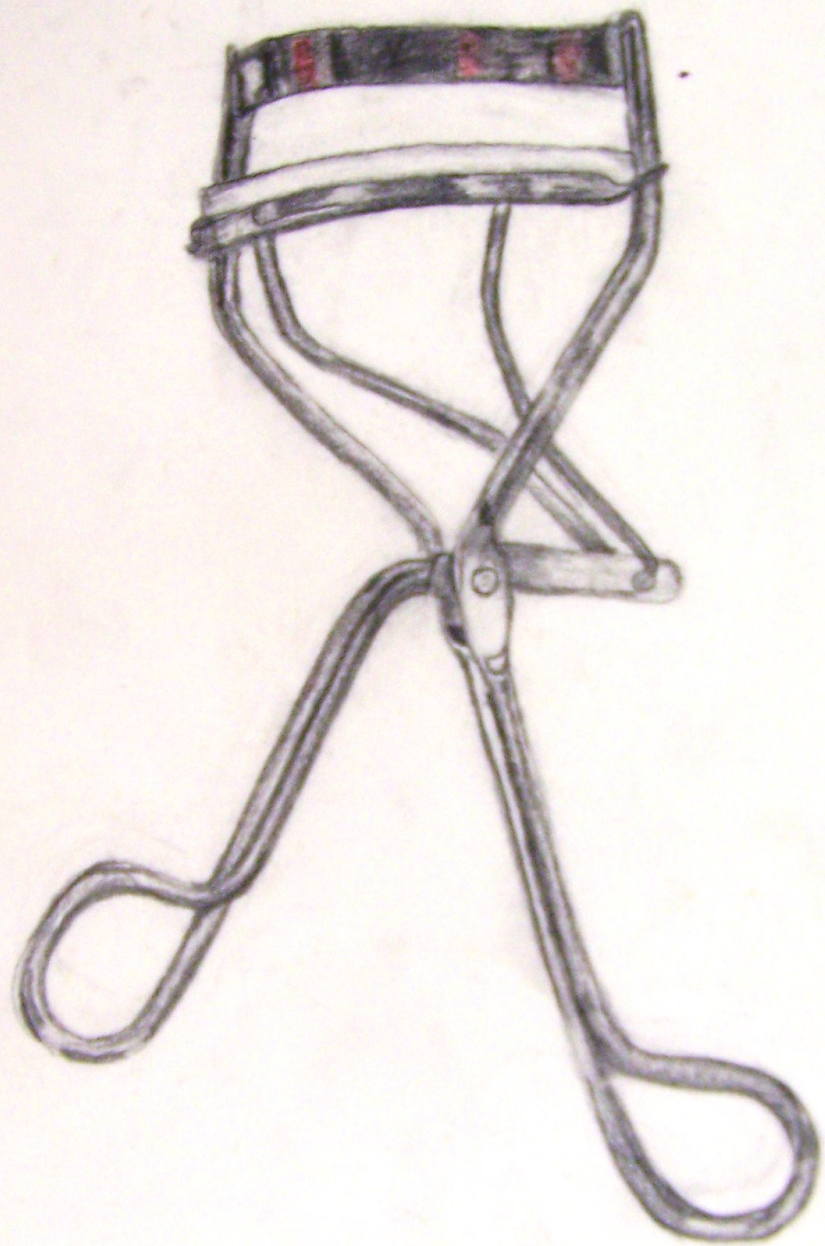


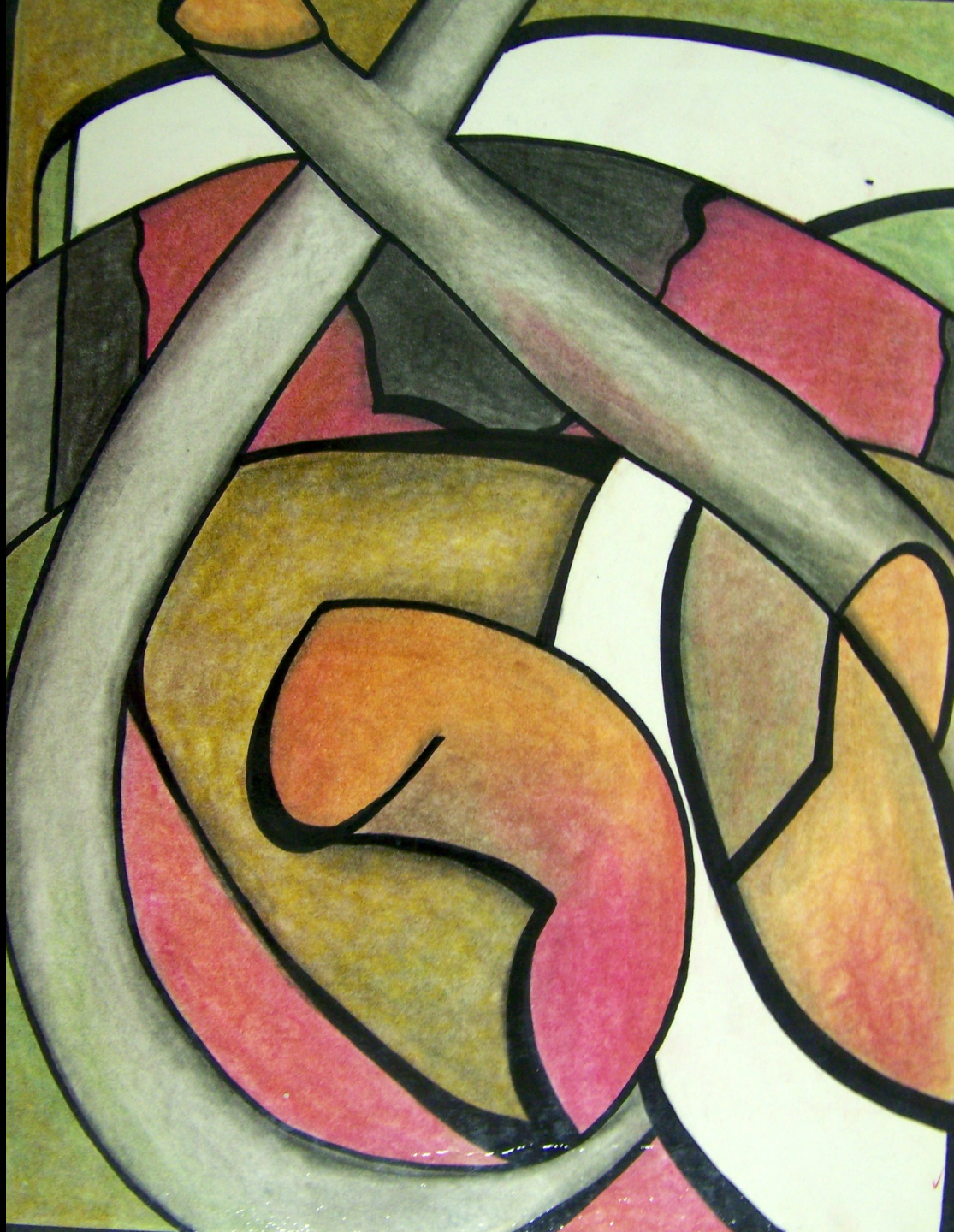


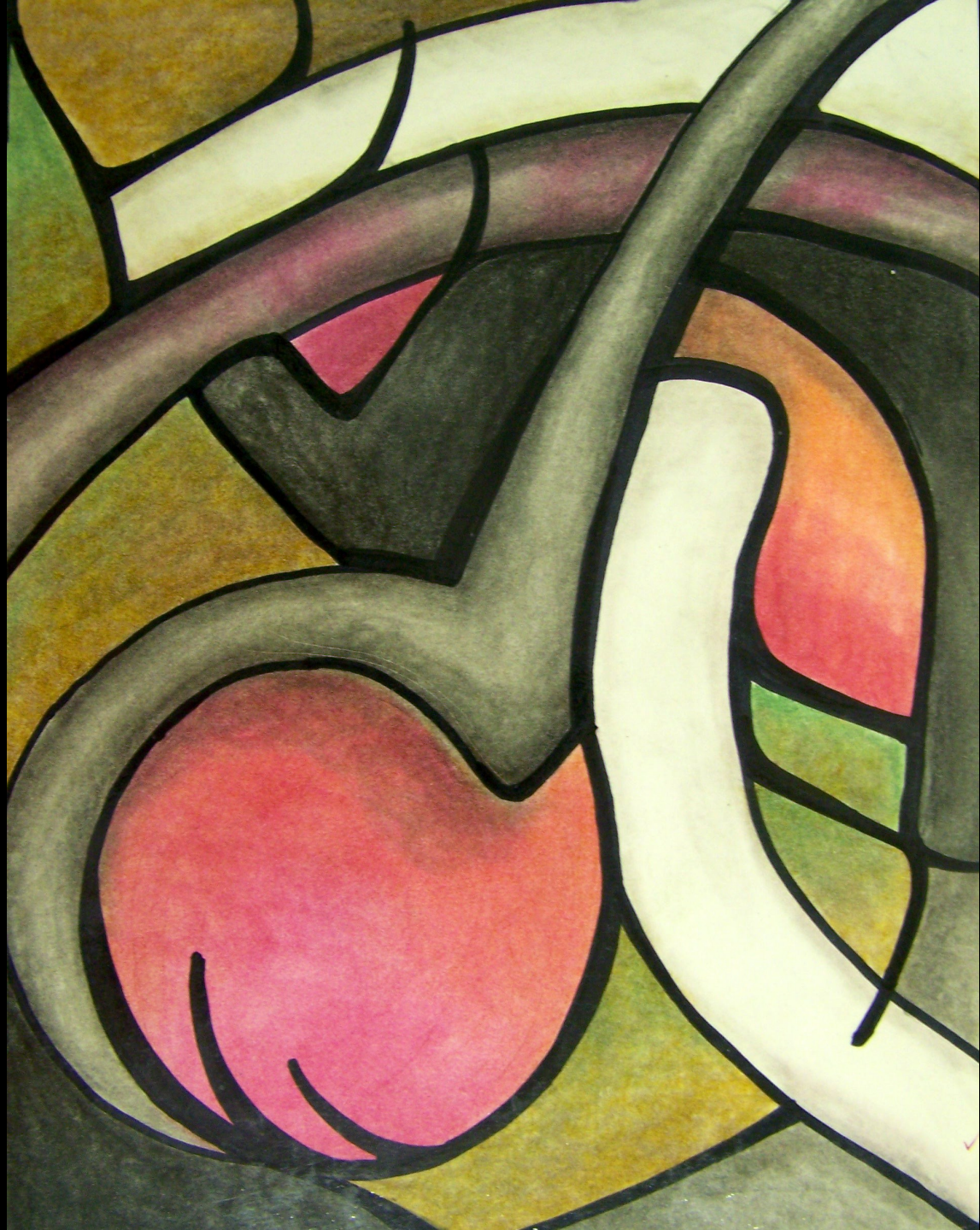


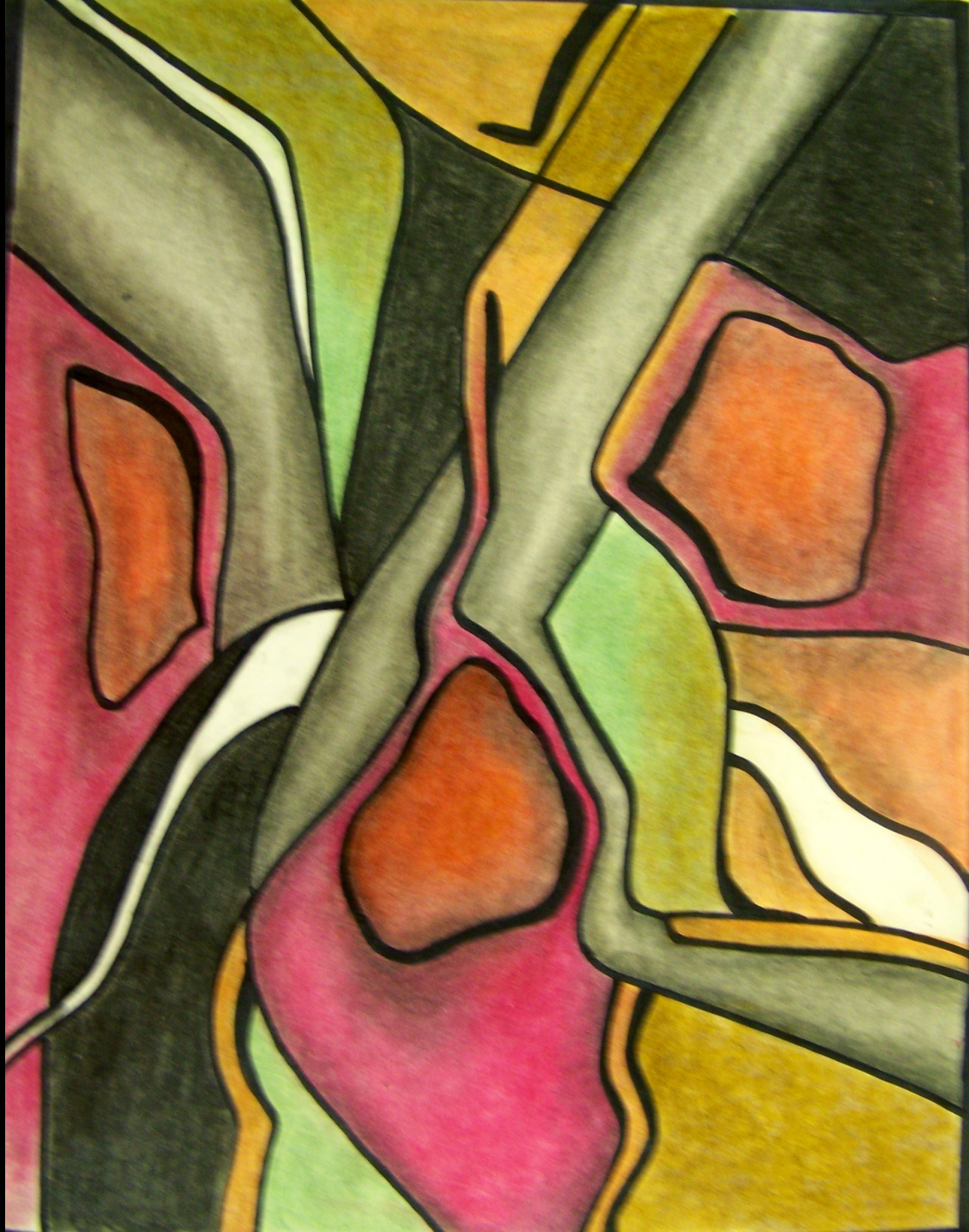


Man Made













Nature





