

ABSTRACT PAINTING

ITS ORIGIN AND MEANING

ADRIAN HEATH

1957

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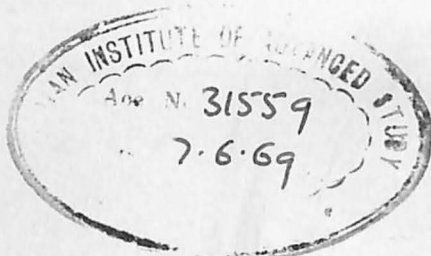
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay deals with the origins of abstract painting, with its evolution from the work and ideas of the Post Impressionist painters, and its gradual development at the hands of its most famous initiators. It is therefore purely historical in its approach, and makes no attempt to deal with various recent developments throughout the world.

Abstract painting is so closely linked with Constructivism, or abstract sculpture, that it would seem unwise to separate them, but I have done so in order to keep within the limitations of this small study. For the same reason I have not attempted to assess the possible contributions of the Dada movement. I have chosen to illustrate works by Kupka rather than Delaunay, as they are less known though equally important.

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THERE seems to be little understanding of the values of abstract painting and consequently no general appreciation of its qualities. Other aspects of modern art are invariably found more stimulating. When, therefore, the pretensions of abstract painting as an art form are seriously stressed, or when public money has been spent on its acquisition, a violent reaction is provoked. In fact, some painters, critics, and collectors—the *cognoscenti*—consider abstract art of purely personal relevance, and without any social significance. Perhaps the arguments of Worringer¹*, more recently expounded by T. E. Hulme², have contributed to this opinion. They encourage one to confuse the aims of the contemporary abstract artist with the search for absolute values by primitive man and by the highly-civilised peoples of Ancient Egypt and Byzantium. A desire to establish values independent of likeness to the subject is certainly common to all three, but it is doubtful if this desire is prompted by fear (*angst*) in the case of the modern artist.

“A feeling of separation in the face of outside Nature”—the desire to disassociate oneself from one’s environment—is attributed by Hulme to all whose work shows a tendency towards geometrical abstraction. With primitive man, the feeling of separation is prompted by his physical fear of various dangers to be encountered in a precarious existence, and by his almost physical fear of magic. In the case of the Egyptian and Byzantine civilisations, this feeling of separation arose from a distaste of material things and a pre-occupation with spiritual values.

In both cases it is the exact opposite to the happy pantheistic relationship between man and the outside world found in naturalistic art. Sir Herbert Read³, in a further summary of this theory has pointed out that the pioneers of

* These numerals refer to books listed on page 32

modern abstract art have all belonged to "the metaphysically anguished races (Russian, German, and Dutch)." One might conclude, pessimistically, that abstract art is either pure decoration, or the work of men who have chosen to retreat within themselves from the world's chaos, rather than reflect its traditional exterior.

With a closer examination of the facts one is encouraged to believe to the contrary that the pioneers of abstract art were the only artists to adapt themselves to the thought and the rapidly changing social and technical conditions of our world. It might even be suggested that the reflection of the world's exterior, and the expression of its joys and sorrows, could best be left to the film director who enjoys the most satisfactory medium for dealing with the problems of humanist art. It would certainly be difficult to deny that he enjoys the largest audience, and that the best of his work is of far greater significance than any of the recent manifestations of "social realism" in Russia, or in Nazi Germany.

If at times the analogy with the decorative ornamentation of the natives of New Guinea or the abstract symbolism of aboriginal Australians appears misleading in our present context (though no doubt relevant in connection with Joan Miró, or Matta), links with the past may be found. The

Fig. 2 17th century painting of books by an unknown artist suggests such a connection. A comparison of this painting with a

Fig. 3 work by Juan Gris, the most logical and mathematical of all the Cubists, shows their similarity of outlook. The earlier artist is bound rigidly by the laws in the manual on perspective that he has open before him, and yet the beauty of his painting is not dependent on the illusion of space, but lies in the nice definition of flat areas of light and dark, and in the play of angle and curve that he has been able to devise from the books and equipment on his study table. The objectivity of this almost *trompe l'œil* technique finds its 20th century equivalent in the free use of collage by Gris and other Cubists. With Gris the problem of space organisation in terms

of area has been tacitly admitted, though it has been complicated by the Cubist use of a multi-view point, and his own more personal use of "moving formats."

There are two main streams of abstract or non-objective art corresponding to the 19th century division of painting into classical and romantic. Classical, or geometrical abstraction, as it is frequently called, descends through the Cubists from Cézanne. The more directly expressive, or subjective style, from Gauguin, Van Gogh, and the "Fauves" These are not clear cut divisions since Fauves and Cubists alike were indebted to Cézanne.

Paul Cézanne

Paul Cézanne was among the first to express his dissatisfaction with the Impressionists' preoccupation with the appearance of nature, but nevertheless the importance of nature is inherent in his writings and in his methods of work, but it is a nature whose transitory effects could be ignored as he slowly constructed in her presence a pictorial equivalent by following his own intuitive concepts. Lines and colours were related to each other on the canvas as he became increasingly sensitive to their reciprocal action. His feeling for this relationship often led him to deviate from outward appearances as presented by the laws of linear and aerial perspective.

Fig. 1

An aspect of Cézanne's conceptual attitude towards form is to be found, though greatly simplified, in Léger's *The Scamstress* (1910) which makes an interesting comparison with *Woman with Water Pails* (1912) by Malevitch. Léger has produced a robot-like image—a woman whose structural forms, though greatly simplified, are nevertheless perfectly recognisable. The figure, heavily modelled by a consistent source of light, remains an entity seen from a single viewpoint and detached from its background.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Kasimir Malevitch

Malevitch has taken the same approach a stage further. *Fig. 5* Realising that the qualities of Léger's painting lay in the organisation of these simplified forms, rather than in their descriptive function, he has allowed himself even greater freedom. Facets and planes, still modelled in chiaroscuro, detach themselves like disintegrating armour plate and carry on a movement only remotely connected with the figures from which they originally derived. A single viewpoint, and even a logical time sequence has been abandoned.

By the following year the subject, even as a pretext for a composition, had been completely relinquished, and Malevitch became the founder of the Russian movement, known as Suprematism, which he defines as "a new realism of colour conceived as non-objective creation⁴." He continues, "by Suprematism, I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in the pictorial arts . . . the appearances of natural objects are, in themselves, meaningless; the essential thing is feeling in itself, completely independent of the context in which it has been evoked." As a challenge he exhibited his suprematist picture of that year, a black square on a white ground. "No empty square," as he assured his critics, "but the spirit of non-objectivity."

He asserted his rights to build with the new elements, renouncing all claims to the appearance of nature as the inevitable source.

Figs. 6-7 These two compositions give an idea of the progress of his work over the next two years. One cannot help speculating on its further development had not the new Soviet regime discouraged his efforts with those of other advanced artists of the period. It seems probable that he would have given up painting and joined his compatriots, Tatlin, Lissitzky, Gabo and Pevsner, the Constructivists. The forms in these

paintings seem so very positive, separate entities, against a negative white background. Space is conveyed by the basic language of Cubism. Strong blacks and reds appear to advance from the canvas to be checked occasionally by the simple expedient of an overlapping plane. The use of diagonal lines suggests a variety of directions on fixed planes, at different depths, but always parallel to the surface. A varied paint texture enhances the physical independence of the forms.

A few years after the revolution most of these artists either left Russia or turned their attention to the applied arts.

Piet Mondrian

Piet Mondrian was thirty-eight when he arrived in Paris and saw for himself the work of the early Cubist painters. "The time was around 1910, when Cubism was in its beginnings. I admired Matisse, Van Dongen, and the Fauves, but I was immediately drawn to the Cubists, especially to Picasso and Léger⁵." He goes on to say that "of all the Abstractionists, Kandinsky, and the Futurists, I felt that only the Cubists had discovered the right path"; and admits that he was greatly influenced by them for a time.

Two, from a series of four, works by Mondrian based on an apple tree are reproduced. The pure bright colours that he had used in Holland have been abandoned in favour of black and various tones of grey. The dark tracery of branches seen against a light sky has been his point of departure. The boughs flowing out from the twisted trunk with the movement of a flame remind one of the reed drawings of Van Gogh and show a love of motif not to be found in the Cubists. In successive paintings we can watch the light of the sky wage its continual struggle against the dark of the branches, simplifying, with each successive encroach-

Figs.
8-9

ment, their general rhythm until even the solid mass of the trunk has been eaten to the very core of its movement. This was the gradual process of change that admitted of no final form, but was to be the foundation for the work on "determined relationships⁵." Houses, still-lives, and church facades were to be submitted to the same process. By 1913 the image had been completely destroyed and the "allover" animation of the canvas developed. A preoccupation with the flat surface of the canvas results in the use of rectilinear areas and of the lines that form them, to the almost total exclusion of the diagonal, with its implication of a third dimension. The occasional short curved line, another heritage from Cubism, still lingers on.

Fig. 11

The outbreak of war in 1914 surprised Mondrian on a visit to his parents in Holland and he was reluctantly forced to stay there until its end. During the early years he made studies of pictures built up of plus and minus signs. These abstractions—more complicated than he had hitherto attempted—were based on the sea and the pier at Scheveningen as seen from a fourth floor window. He is no longer dependent for his initial start on the traditional solid object in space. The original lines of his pictures are no longer to be found in the dark branches of a tree against the sky, or in the lines bounding various forms set up as a still-life. It would appear that in this case he was struck by the movement of the waves, their ever changing position as they approach the shore, and the altered rhythm as they return. The fascination of the scene is one that can only be appreciated over a period of time.

Figs. 12-13

The constant change of position of these horizontal and vertical lines suggests a movement to the wandering eye. A two way movement of varying speeds is to be found in their subtly altered and syncopated progressions, analagous in terms of paint and canvas to the incessant movement of the sea. This series marks the end of Mondrian's dependence on the appearance of nature, even as a starting point.

It was during the war years that Mondrian got to know the young Dutch architects and painters whose work and ideas became known through their magazine *De Stijl*. Van Doesburg, the editor, a brilliant and versatile thinker, was their chief publicist. Architect, painter, and writer, he lectured throughout Europe.

Van de Leek, Huzzar, and Vantongerloo were the other painters of the group that preached the amalgamation of architecture, sculpture and painting in the creation of a new art—an art of environment.

“As soon as the artists in the various branches of plastic arts will have realised that they must speak a universal language, they will no longer anxiously hold on to their individuality. They will serve the general principle beyond a limited individuality. By serving this general principle they will have to produce, on their own accord, an organic style⁶.”

At the end of the war Mondrian returned to Paris. His style was then formed and he was to develop rather than to radically change it over the next twenty years. Through essays in *De Stijl* and in *Le Néo-Plasticisme* published in 1920 by Leon Rosenberg, we get a very clear idea of his intentions—“The Expressions of pure reality in terms of paint⁵.” He was convinced that the Cubists had not faced the implications of their own discoveries but had preferred to distort natural appearances for their own subjective ends, the creation of their particular and individual forms of imagery. The future for the painter lay in the acceptance of the limitations that the flat surface of the canvas imposed upon him.

“The appearance of natural form changes, but reality remains constant. To create pure reality plastically, it is necessary to reduce natural forms to the constant elements of form and natural colour to primary colour. The aim is not to create other particular forms and colours with their own limitations, but to work towards abolishing them in the interest of a larger unity⁵.”

Fig. 14 *Composition*, 1935, can be taken as a typical example of Mondrian's mature work. It is the result of the logical progression of his thought and feeling. Flat rectangles of colour that had for a time floated freely on his canvas have been abandoned as too indicative of a natural space. Black lines, clearly defining the areas and drawing them to the surface, have taken the place of the white canvas. Thus, the overlapping areas with their implication of distance and the ambiguity caused by the indecisive quality of the mediate space between them have both been rejected. To the casual observer a complete reversal has taken place. The variously coloured rectangles of 1917, positive forms against a negative white background, have given way to white areas enclosed by black lines of varying thickness. We are left with a black grid that contains an occasional section of a primary red, blue or yellow. This attempt to deny all particular form and to establish the equivalence between form and space was a novel conception; the first break with the traditional duality of form in space.

The paintings dating from 1920 should not really be called "Abstract," not in the literal sense of "to withdraw," "to take away." The Cubist destruction of a visual image by analysis and its partial re-assembly was in no way similar to the process henceforth employed by Mondrian whose works were now built up according to the laws that he had evolved. Logical and uncompromising, they necessitated the rejection not only of the illusion of space but also of colour, save for red, blue and yellow. Nature was abandoned, even as a point of departure, so also were natural colours and shapes because of the subjective qualities inherent in their associations. With this exclusion of the particular and the individual, art for many lost its charm. The image, texture, emotive colour—the illusion of the third dimension, in fact the iconography of art as well as the "handwriting" of a personality, were all discarded. To Mondrian, these subjective qualities merely tended to obscure the universal truth

that all art was the establishment of a "dynamic equilibrium." This "dynamic equilibrium" which is not to be confused with a static balance, however complex or refined, could be established by the continuous movement created in a composition by the exact determination of its space. The importance of the precise thickness of the black lines will therefore be appreciated in this context of area determination. Variety in all relationships is essential, both to avoid repetition, and to enhance what he calls the "continuous opposition of the elements in the composition⁵"; opposition that finds its clearest and most constant expression in the right angle.

It should be mentioned here that these works are not the result of mathematical calculation. "That which is regarded as a system is nothing but constant obedience to the laws of pure plastics, to necessity, which art demands from him."

It is interesting to quote the words of Vantongerloo, a fellow member of the *De Stijl* group. "To say that I wish to create a purely mathematical art is as absurd as to say that anyone creates by pure intuition. Mathematics is only the means, the instrument, used as one uses hammer and chisel to cut marble. Is it the hammer and chisel which create? No! it is brain, thought, will and ability which cause the hammer to act. I use mathematics as I use the meter, for the values I seek will be closer than if I sought them by pure guess work. If I need a meter of cloth, it is easier to measure it than to trust to my judgement. Mathematics helps us understand the relations existing between geometric forms. The new art being abstract in the positive sense of the word, is created by abstract forms and means⁷."

For twenty years Mondrian's work was to show no outward alteration in its formal structure, but during the last few years of his life it underwent several basic changes in conception and technique which were looked upon with suspicion by many of his admirers who attributed them to a general weakening of his principles. Unlike Mondrian they were not

fully aware of the essentially metamorphic character of life, of the destruction of old forms that inevitably preceded the growth of new ones. It was the pattern of the evolution of his own work. Volume had been abandoned in favour of the plane, the plane had lost its identity to become an area between lines and, in his very last paintings, the lines that had themselves become coloured were broken up by various smaller areas. This became a destruction of the illusion of volume, then of natural space, and finally, by "mutual opposition" of the lines themselves. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, and *Victory Boogie Woogie* are as dynamic as the dance from which their titles are derived. It is perhaps relevant to mention that Mondrian considered the destruction of melody in music by pure rhythm (as in *Boogie Woogie*), to be a parallel to his efforts to destroy natural form by "their mutually continuous opposition⁵."

Fig. 15 *Victory Boogie Woogie*, left unfinished at the time of his death, gives an idea of his immense and constant labour of minute adjustment. This progressive adjustment of relationships—which gave both validity and animation—would have eventually settled into the immaculate finish usually found in his completed works.

Jean Hélion

It is perhaps relevant at this point to consider the development of Jean Hélion, before returning to 1910 and the first abstractions of other older artists.

Fig. 16 *Composition orthogonale* 1932, and other works of this period clearly shows the impact of Mondrian and his ideas, but he was not to remain attached for long to the doctrine of Neo-Plasticism. The painting of this Frenchman was soon to show signs of his own personal contributions. Overlapping planes, converging diagonal lines, the introduction of curves; all tended to arouse interest in the "particular"

Fig. 17

quality of the forms themselves rather than in the relationships they created, thus rejecting the views of the *De Stijl* painters. The equilibrium of these flat shapes is derived from the laws of solid bodies in suspension, and though carefully considered in connection with the total area of the canvas, they are open to a particular, rather than a universal interpretation.

By 1939 this feeling for the particular and individual has developed until abstract shapes have been invested with a personality. *Standing figure* is an example. Forms are smoothly modelled and juxtaposed with their contrasting tonalities creating the illusion of solid objects in space.

Fig. 18

The inter-relationship of man to the machine is familiar to all students of modern painting. It has occupied at various levels and for different reasons, artists as diverse as the Futurists, Wyndham Lewis, Marchel Duchamp, Edward Burra, Chirico, and the illustrators of boys' magazines. Usually the attributes of a machine have been grafted on to man, with Hélión the process has been reversed, shapes and structures of an entirely formal character have been endowed with a significance that is largely human. The simultaneous appeal to the spectator on two such divided levels is bewildering in a surreal manner, and it is not surprising that Hélión has since returned to a representational art.

Hans Arp

There had been other manifestations of abstract art during 1909 and 1910 apart from those in Holland and Russia. In England the Vorticists had raised the question. Picabia, Delaunay and Kupka had all painted abstract pictures in Paris, whilst in Switzerland, Hans Arp had attempted to break with representational and traditional forms of art as early as 1909. At the outbreak of war he had travelled to Paris but had returned to Zurich the following year. Figure 19 dates from 1916 and bears a very marked resemblance in

Fig. 19

its arrangement of rectangles to certain works of Mondrian and Van Doesburg, but at this time Arp did not know either of the Dutchmen, and the magazine *De Stijl* had not yet been published. Later events would seem to prove that almost the only quality Arp shared in common with the De Stijlistes was a reaction from the painterly excesses of unbridled self expression then at its height. Indeed so strong was his antipathy for the personal qualities of art that he even discarded scissors as a means of cutting the paper for his collage "as too likely to betray the life of the hand⁸" and relied on the services of a paper cutting machine for impersonal exactitude; an attitude that was shared by Moholy Nagy at a later date in his constructions in various materials. Hans Arp himself fades from our scene as his most important works after his Dada period were his sculptures and reliefs.

Robert Delaunay

Before the 1914-18 war Robert Delaunay played a prominent part in linking the art of Paris and Munich. This artist, the first Frenchman to sever all connection with the visual world, was originally a Cubist with a passion for light and colour. These two elements share the responsibility for the almost total disintegration of the subject into planes of coloured light. This development was called Orphic Cubism by Apollinaire. After 1912 the forms were to become circular, which was to remain the characteristic feature of Delaunay's work throughout his life. He had been quick to see the possibilities (in the purely physical sense) of the reciprocal action of colour, which he realised could be controlled by means of simultaneous and successive contrasts until it resulted in movement. To achieve a rhythmic control of this movement was his ambition.

Frank Kupka

Frank Kupka, the other principal Orphic painter, had arrived at very similar conclusions. He was indebted to Goethe, Seurat and Chevreul for his understanding of colour. His *Disc of Newton* 1912 preceded by a few months Delaunay's work of a similar nature. Later on in the year he exhibited *Fugue in Red and Blue* and *Warm Chromatic*. These curvilinear subjects were followed in 1913 by two pictures called *Vertical Planes* which revealed an entirely different theme that had interested him for several years. The study reproduced gives an idea of the great dignity and simplicity to be found in the finished works. They had evolved from *Portrait of Madame Kupka* and *Nocturne* (1910) which were composed of little more than a series of wide strokes of paint that flowed up the canvas with a continuous but intermittent movement. By 1913 these strokes had decreased in number but become larger and more definite in shape.

Fig. 20

Jaillissement is a continuation of the more strictly "orphic" theme; where the colours affect the senses as directly as music and their circular penetration helps to control the movement.

Fig. 21

Ben Nicholson

With Ben Nicholson we come to the second generation of abstract painters. It is true that his earliest work, the *Striped Jug* goes back to 1910, and his first non-objective painting *Composition* to 1924 (the stripes in this work, straight and not curved by the form of the jug, are a legacy from the earlier painting) but it cannot be said that he made any very significant contribution to the Abstract movement until the middle thirties.

Fig. 22 *Profile—Venetian Red* is fairly typical of much of his earlier work. The cherished image, whether cup, jug, or profile, is related to the familiar table by the common bond of paint, rather than by logic, or illusion. One feels that it has been discovered there; unexpected yet inevitable. One is also very conscious of the time involved in the actual painting of the picture; of intervals of slow gestation alternating with short periods of rapid execution when even the destruction of past work proves a powerful stimulant to mystery and the excitement of discovery that Nicholson finds essential to creation.

The juxtaposition of *Profile—Venetian Red* with *Painting 1937* makes the transition appear brutally abrupt, but a wealth of significant work in various media, reliefs in wood being the most important, has intervened. One may describe Nicholson as essentially an “animator”—that is one who desires to infuse life into an object, as opposed to endowing it with the significance of illusion, or merely decorating its surface. This awareness of the essentially physical qualities of the materials used is a familiar stage in the evolution of many abstract artists. For example, a preoccupation with relief—the reality of an actual third dimension carved in a panel—is evident in his use of colour which is asked to perform a similar function, and seems to exist in layers or stratas. In this way one can deduce the existence, by logical implication, of concealed areas that play their part in creating further relationships; a harmony of implied shapes that is not at once perceived.

Paul Gauguin

Fig. 25 A Gauguin landscape of 1896 will serve to illustrate the beginning of the romantic approach to abstraction.

In this context it is of secondary importance whether his aversion to spatial illusion was prompted by a feeling for Japanese prints, cloisonné enamels, or stained glass. What is

important is his prompt rejection of the recent discoveries of Impressionism since they seemed only to lead directly towards a scientific form of optical realism.

At this period Gauguin and his followers described themselves as Symbolists. Perhaps they were not Symbolists in the usual sense of the word; their pictures were not composed from objects that stood for ideas as were those of Puvis de Chavannes, of whom he said "Puvis would give the title 'Purity' to a virgin girl with a lily⁹," but rather were their emotions to be symbolised solely by the lines and colours of their compositions. There was in fact a shift from the external aspects of the subject towards the artist's own feelings. Their landscape is no longer subjected to a continuous searching analysis in order to yield a complex pictorial structure as it was by Cézanne, but it provides the basis for transposition of the artist's emotions. Colours are strong, bright, and flat; clearly defined zones on the surface: their importance is not linked to the subject they represent, but rather to the emotional content they are able to generate.

Gauguin was constantly expressing the equivalence between painting and music. "Painting is the most beautiful of the arts. Like music, it acts on the soul through the intermediary of the senses, the harmonious tones corresponding to the harmonies of the sounds. I obtain by arrangement of lines and colours, using as a pretext some object borrowed from human life or nature, symphonies, harmonies that represent nothing absolutely real in the vulgar sense of the word; they express no idea directly, but they should make one think as music does, without the aid of ideas or images, simply by the mysterious relationships existing between our brains and such arrangements of colours and lines¹⁰."

The ideals of expressionism with its insistence on the paramount importance of colour in externalising the emotions, were to be carried on by Matisse and other Fauves of 1905. "What I seek above everything else is expression . . . I cannot distinguish between the feeling I have for life and the

artistic technique with which I translate it . . . The expression is the whole disposition of my picture. The place the volumes occupy, the space about them, the proportions, all have their part¹¹."

Wassily Kandinsky

Though these men released colour from its descriptive functions, and at times form too, it was left to the Russian Wassily Kandinsky to produce the first entirely non-objective painting.

At the age of thirty he had given up a promising career as a social scientist to study art at Munich. Kandinsky had always had a passion for colour from his earliest years, and he had given vivid descriptions of the feelings aroused in him by colour. The Rembrandts in the Hermitage, the art of Russia in the 10th-14th centuries, and its folk art, all had at various times impressed him. At an exhibition of the work of the Impressionists in Moscow he found himself drawn to a painting, *Haystacks* by Claude Monet. A picture that both troubled and captivated him but one he found himself unable to identify without the aid of a catalogue. This gave him his first doubts of the need for a subject in the work of art. Today it may seem curious to us that he should have experienced this difficulty with the work of a man whose chief concern was to capture the appearance of his subject.

Fig. 27 Kandinsky's *Bavarian Landscape with Mountains* was painted in 1908 at the end of his Fauve period. The rich and vivid colours, so strong in their contrasts of yellow and purple, are still inspired by natural effects. When compared with Gauguin's landscape of 1896 the whole painting is far less synthetic. The two-dimensional surface has not been so strictly adhered to and the forms are not so studied in their contours. Probably the most striking difference is to be found in the handling of the paint in the two pictures.

With Kandinsky one notices a great and independent feeling for rhythm in the actual brushmarks. A cluster of them, dark against light, do duty as clouds, and from these the eye is led down the steep cliff, by means of certain prominent strips of paint, through three notes of light to the cluster of brilliant colours around the factory buildings. One is conscious of these smaller broken touches detaching themselves from the main tonal divisions of the landscape and contrapuntally playing their own part; a part soon to demand complete freedom from the accidental effects of light upon the motif. By 1910 the emancipation was complete. A lyrical sketch such as *Improvisation* frequently followed an experience derived from nature but it did not employ any of the actual forms then seen. In these paintings Kandinsky has abandoned representational forms with their particular contrast and associations as detracting from one essential meaning that colour and form contain within themselves.

Fig. 28

It should here be mentioned that Kandinsky had a great distrust of scientists whom he called "Positivists," recognising only those things that can be weighed and measured. He described his disillusionment over the splitting of the atom, a fact so long considered impossible. For Kandinsky "truth was a thing of the spirit" that could not be arrived at by calculation. His essay *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*¹³ reflects a mind strongly influenced by Theosophy. The values he attributes to individual colours are essentially intuitive and subjective. The analogy of painting and music is constantly stressed. "Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibrations in the soul."

It is indeed to the enviable state of music that he thinks painting should aspire; enviable because of the directness of its appeal to the emotions without the aid of meaning. The ruling factor in all Kandinsky's judgements about his art is "inner necessity." The expression occurs again and again

in his writings and is the inevitable answer to all important questions.

“ Inner necessity originates from three elements :

“ 1. Every artist, as a creator, has something in him which demands expression (this is the element of personality).

“ 2. Every artist, as the child of his time, is impelled to express the spirit of his age (this is the element of style) dictated by the period and particular country to which the artist belongs (it is doubtful how long the latter distinction will continue).

“ 3. Every artist, as a servant of art, has to help the cause of art (this is the quintessence of art, which is constant in all ages and among all nationalities)¹³.”

However, he points out that it is impossible to reach the third element except by way of the first two. Personality and style though essential to the production of a work of art and its contemporary appreciation, will lose in the course of time some of its appeal to the third element: the objective and quintessential quality of art.

In 1914 Kandinsky went to Russia where he remained throughout the war and revolution, holding important educational and cultural posts in Moscow. When he returned to Germany in 1921 considerable differences were soon to be noted in his work. The free amorphous shapes that streamed violently through the dynamic canvases of 1911-14 had given way to tight geometric shapes such as the circle, the triangle and the rectangle. His association with Malevitch and other Russian Abstract artists is sometimes held responsible for this development. But it may well have been a growing distrust of the subjective and physical impetuosity of the handling that played such an important part in unifying his earlier works which now prompted him to choose a more cerebral manner of articulation. The geometric signs have no precise mathematical significance. They contain their own spiritual significance which could be enhanced or destroyed by

the colour from which they are formed. Kandinsky had long been aware of the impossible significance of such austere shapes. He writes that "Purely abstract forms are in the reach of few artists at present; they are too indefinite for the artist. It seems to him that to limit himself to the indefinite would be to lose possibilities, to exclude the human and therefore weaken expression. Nevertheless, there are artists who even to-day experience abstract form as something quite precise and use it to the exclusion of any other means. This seeming stripping bare becomes an inner enrichment¹³."

Shortly after his appointment to the Bauhaus at Weimar in 1922 Kandinsky published his book *Point and Line to Plane*¹⁴. Conceived and written in note form as early as 1914, this book was the result of an attempt to systematise both his theoretical ideas and his practical experience. It was a consolidation of the recent discoveries that he had made in painting and a grammar of the visual arts in their present changed form. A preoccupation with the time element in painting is implicit even in his definitions. A point is "the innermost concise form" and is described as "temporally the briefest form" while a line is "the track made by the moving point." Among the more significant results of this preoccupation with movement and time was the added function it gave to his colour. Apart from expressive harmonisation with shape it has now to articulate a series of movements in time. Mr. Hayter has drawn attention to "the similarity between audible pitch and tone, and hue and saturation of colour." The opposition of colour to distinguish approach or recession must have seemed to him similar to the change of pitch which occurs when a fast moving train whistles past the hearer.

Over the next ten years his work became increasingly calm and generally more architectural in construction. The last ten years of his life were spent in Paris. It was the period of his large paintings, "the full orchestrations, the final synthesis."

Fig. 29

Fig. 30 Figure 30, serenely calm, is more tightly organised than many of its fellows, but it shows evidence of the organic shapes that had found their way into his later works. Sometimes these shapes, reminiscent in their curves of Arp's sculpture, or of the ideographic signs used by Miró, float independently in space and at other times, increased in size, they help to weld together a series of more austere forms.

There is about Kandinsky's work an Oriental magnificence. The sumptuous colour, the intricate yet exact calligraphy, the alternation between the blurred and the precisely defined, are all characteristics of eastern art. Perhaps it is this vaguely exotic quality that can make these paintings strangely distasteful, but for those familiar with the originals, their intrinsic power and beauty will remain unquestioned.

Alberto Magnelli

Magnelli's reputation really dates from his work in collage of 1936, though there had been an abstract phase 20 years earlier. These collages, built from various scraps of domestic bric-à-brac, cardboard, wallpaper, the lids of cigar boxes, never attempt to achieve, by their juxtaposition that sense of inquietude sought for by the Surrealists. His interest lay in discovering in these "ready made" materials a purely plastic significance. It is the familiar search for an objective means of expression. A distrust of the handwriting of painting with its emphasis on the crudest manifestations of personality.

*Figs.
31-32*

This feeling for definition and clarity—the result of his recognition of literal objectivity—is carried forward into his more recent painted works. The paint is as unequivocal in its treatment as possible. Forms are frequently outlined to enhance their separate identities or to distinguish them from a similarly coloured background, and at times an ambiguity in their spatial relationship is evident. It is not the ambiguity of blurred and tasteful indecision but rather two clearly

separate readings whose constant alternation helps to prolong the life of the image.

It can be seen that Magnelli does not share with the Neo-Plastic painter an ambition to destroy particular form. He is content to free it from representational significance; to make it expressive without conscious reference to the outside world. Frequently he cultivates the illusion of tactile solidity and allows his forms to exist in an undefined space.

The least doctrinaire of painters, he has exercised a considerable influence on recent abstract art in Paris. The expressive force of Magnelli's work is combined with typically Latin sense of scale which has an immediate appeal.

* * * *

From this short study it should be apparent that the visual aspects of nature no longer provided a conscious point of departure for these painters in their mature work. This was not the eventual method of abstraction employed by them though it had been a stage through which they had passed, in many cases as early as the first decade of the century. Looking back it seems inevitable that this stage should have been but a short period of transition. They had no wish, by their abstractions to enhance the expressive appeal of a motif, or to externalise their emotional reactions to a person, place or sentiment. Such a content is not to be found in their work as they were not interested in evoking, by accidental, or calculated means, fragments from their everyday visual experience.

Constable tells us that "the sound of water escaping from mill-dams, willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts and brickworks¹⁵ . . ." made a painter of him, but it is doubtful whether the exploitation of such interesting surfaces and evocative sounds, through subconscious association, will suffice to make a contemporary non-objective artist. The structural processes of growth with their relationship to decay and disintegration may well fascinate him, though they will

have to be realised by analogous means, in terms of the medium employed.

The appearance of an actual example, no matter what the size (from the wing of a moth to a range of mountains) will always remain a particular form, however modish its aspect may become. The visual extension of our world by scientific devices may provide the bright designer with a happy hunting ground but offered no ready solution to the older generation. However, a substitute for the normal visual stimulus, that had provoked such ready and effective reactions from a Claude Monet and a Camille Pissarro, had to be found. Among the significant artists one feels the stimulus has been provided by the ideology that they had slowly evolved in the course of their work. Both logic and intuition had freely contributed to its development. A truth that was first intuitively understood would be submitted to a rationalisation of method in order that it should be consolidated and the artist enabled to progress further. He was thus to impose upon himself an individually constructed discipline which provided him with the opposition necessary to the creation of a work of art.

These principles or methods should not be confused with one of the great dangers of abstract art which lies in the employment by the artist of a system of work, the need for which he has never emotionally felt; such as a geometric scheme whose rigidity would soon lead to the most limited and arid form of academics. A more expressly English failing is to conceal the absence of a formal idea by using shapes only too redolent of their poetic derivations, beneath a patina of evocative texture. These academic and mannerist tendencies thrive equally well on the antagonism or adulation of a society when in either case its critical judgements are uninformed or disinterested.

As an unbiased approach to the actual works is virtually impossible, it would be as well, at least, not to confuse the issue with the aesthetic pronouncements and intentions of past centuries, but substitute instead the aims and aspirations of the artists concerned.

SHORT BIOGRAPHIES

Hans (Jean) Arp. 1887 -

- 1887 Born at Strasbourg, Alsace, where he attended the School of Arts and Crafts.
- 1904 He paid his first visit to Paris, where he was bewildered by the recent trends in painting.
- 1905-07 At the Weimar Academy.
Worked for a time in solitude at Weggis, endeavouring, in his search for absolute perfection, to rid his work of individuality.
- 1911 He visited Kandinsky at Munich.
- 1914 To avoid doing his military service in Germany, he went to Paris where he met Max Jacob, Picasso, Apollinaire, and Delaunay.
- 1915 Returned to Switzerland, and settled in Zurich, where he exhibited his first abstract works at the Tanner Gallery with Otto Van Rees. His work in collage, frequently in collaboration with his future wife, Sophie Taeuber, belong to this period.
- 1916 Founded the Dada movement with Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Hülsenbeck.
- 1922 Married Sophie Taeuber.
- 1925 Settled at Meudon, near Paris. Exhibited with the Surrealists.
- 1930-32 Period of torn paper collages and sculptures in the round.
- 1940 Lived in Grasse, and worked in collaboration with his wife and Magnelli.

Jean Hélion. 1904 -

- 1904 Born in Normandy.
Did not study under any artist, or at an Academy.
His early work was a figurative, showing a Fauvist influence.
- 1928 He became more detached from his subject.
- 1929 First abstract work.
- 1930 Met Van Doesburg, with whom he produced *Art Concret*.
Founded *Abstraction Création* with Arp, Delaunay, Herbin, Kupka, Vantongerloo, etc., and directed the first issue.
Dissociated from this group in 1934.
- 1932 One-man show in Paris at the Galerie Pierre.
Nine other one-man shows before the outbreak of war, mostly in the U.S.A.

- 1939 Left the U.S.A. to join the French Army.
 1940 June. Prisoner of war.
 1942 February. Escaped from Germany and reached the States in October.
 1943 His change to figuration, not a return, but a discovery, fully understood, he maintains, as a result of the early period of abstraction.
 Has had one-man shows in New York, Paris, London, Venice, Milan and Rome.
 His work is included in the principal Museums of modern art in the U.S.A.

Wassily Kandinsky. 1866 - 1944

- 1866 Born in Moscow. At the age of eighteen studied political economy, law, and statistics.
 1889 He visited Paris for the first time.
 1897 Having given up his scientific career, he became a student at Anton Azbé's school of art in Munich, where he met Jawlensky.
 1900 Admitted to the Royal Academy at Munich, where he remained for two years.
 1903 Visited Tunis and Kairouan.
 1904 Visited Holland. He exhibited for the first time at the Salon d'Automne of this year.
 1906 Lived for a year at Sèvres.
 1907 Visited Berlin and Dresden.
 1910 He made his first drawings and watercolours that were completely detached from nature, and wrote *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* ("The Art of Spiritual Harmony") which was published at the end of the following year.
 1911 The first Blue Rider Exhibition. His friends included, Macke, Paul Klee, and Franz Marc, with whom he worked on the book, *Der Blaue Reiter*.
 1914 At the outbreak of war he retired to Goldach, on Lake Constance. After spending three months there preparing the material later to appear as *Point and Line to Plane*, he returned to Russia.
 1918 Became a member of the "Arts Section of the Commissariat for Popular Culture," and taught at the Moscow Academy for Fine Arts.
 1919 He was made Director of the Museum of Pictorial Culture, and met Pevsner and Gabo.
 1920 Professor at the University of Moscow.
 1921 Founded the "Academy of the Arts and Sciences of all the Russias." Returned to Germany in December.
 1922 Elected a professor of the Bauhaus at Weimar, and moved with it to Dessau the following year.
 1926 *Point and Line to Plane* published in Dessau.

- 1931 He travelled widely in the Middle East, Italy and France, in the course of this year.
- 1933 When the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis, he moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine, outside Paris, where he remained during the war, until his death.

Frank Kupka. 1871 -

- 1871 Born at Opatowitz, Czechoslovakia.
- 1888 Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts at Prague.
- 1892 Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts at Vienna, and exhibited at the Kunstverein.
- 1895 He moved to Paris. Received his first commission as an illustrator.
- 1902 Won a Gold Medal at the World's Fair Exhibition in St. Louis, U.S.A., with *Ballad*.
- 1906 Exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. His illustrations for *Les Erinnyes* by Leconte de Lisle, and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, won him a wide reputation.
- 1910 First departure from representational work, with paintings such as *Portrait of Madame Kupka* and *Nocturne*.
- 1912 Paintings entirely abstract, *Fugue in Red and Blue* and *Warm Chromatic* exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. With Delaunay, became the founder of the movement known as "Orphism."
- 1913 *Vertical Planes* (No. 1), *Vertical Planes* (No. 2) and *Solo of Brown Line*, exhibited at the Salon des Indépendents.
- 1914-18 Joined the Czechoslovakian Resistance in France.
- 1924 Exhibited at the Galerie La Boétie, Paris.
- 1936 Exhibition of his work at the Jeu de Paume, Paris.
- 1946 Retrospective Exhibition at Prague Museum.

Alberto Magnelli. 1888 -

- 1888 Born in Florence. Studied at a private school there. Painted his first picture at the age of seventeen, and subsequently confined himself to drawing.
- 1911 He painted his second landscape which was exhibited at the Venice Biennale and sold for 1,000 lire. Encouraged, he returned to Florence, after spending a Summer in Switzerland, and began painting regularly.
- 1913 Visited Paris, where he met Chirico, Picasso, Léger, Apollinaire and Juan Gris.
- 1914 Returned to Italy.
- 1915 He painted his first series of abstract paintings.

- 1921 Advised by his doctor to take a complete mental rest, and only to work at landscapes, which he continued to paint for the next ten years. Visited Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and stayed for five months in Paris.
- 1933 Returned to Paris.
- 1936 Started his abstract collages.
- 1939-44 Stayed at Grasse with Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp, and Sonia Delaunay.

Kasimir Malevitch. 1878 - 1935

- 1878 Born at Kiev.
- 1908 Painting "Fauve" pictures in Moscow.
- 1912 Influenced by Cubism.
- 1913 Founded the Suprematist movement.
- 1919 Professor at the Moscow Academy.
- 1926 Travelled in Germany, where he met Kandinsky at the Bauhaus at Dessau.
- 1927 *Die Gegenstandlose Welt*, which was published in Moscow in 1915, is translated into German.
- 1935 Died in Leningrad.

Piet Mondrian. 1872 - 1944

- 1872 Born at Amersfoot, near Amsterdam, the son of a school-teacher.
His first lesson in painting was from his uncle, the artist Fritz Mondrian.
- 1892-95 Student at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam.
- 1895-1907 A period of naturalistic work under the general influence of the Barbizan school. Towards the end of this period the influence of his friends Jan Toorop and Jan Sluyters began to show in his work in the form of a lighter and brighter palette.
- 1910 Paid his first visit to Paris, and soon abandoned the pure colours he had been employing in Holland as "expressing too much individual emotion" and used the subdued tones employed by the Cubists.
- 1914 In July returned to Holland.
- 1917 With Van Doesburg, founded the revue *De Stijl*, and continued to contribute to it until 1925.
- 1918 Returned to Paris.
- 1920 Leon Rosenberg published *Le Néo-Plasticisme*.
- 1925 *Die Neue Gestaltung* published by the Bauhaus.
- 1939 Left for London.
- 1940 Sailed for New York, after his studio was bombed.
- 1944 Died on 1st February, of pneumonia at Murray Hill Hospital, New York.

Ben Nicholson. 1894 -

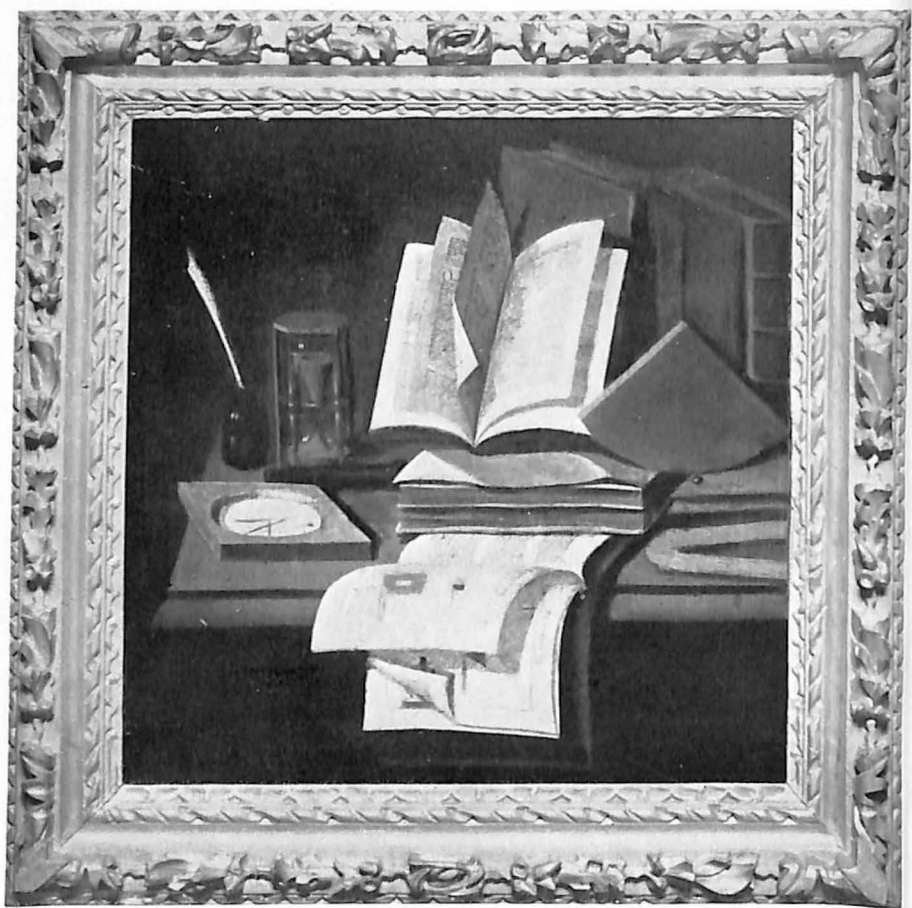
- 1894 Born in Denham, Buckinghamshire, the eldest son of Sir William Nicholson and his wife, the painter Mabel Pryde. Studied for a term at the Slade.
- 1911 Spent a year at Tours studying French.
- 1912 Studied Italian at Milan.
- 1913 Visited Madeira.
- 1917-18 Went to Pasadena, California, for his health.
- 1920-31 Married the painter Winifred Dacre. Lived and worked in Lugano, Switzerland, Cumberland and London.
- 1922 First one-man show at the Adelphi Gallery. Later shows at the Beaux Arts, Lefevre, and Tooth's, in London, and Georges Bernheim & Cie, in Paris.
- 1925-26 Member of the "7 & 5" group.
- 1932-52 Married to Barbara Hepworth.
- 1933 *Unit One*, First relief.
- 1933-35 *Abstraction Création*.
- 1937 Co-editor with J. L. Martin and Naum Gabo of *Circle*. The work of Henry Wallis, Christopher Wood, Picasso, Miró, and Mondrian, has at various times been important to him.
- 1952 Large mural for Time-Life Building, New Bond Street, London. Awarded first prize for painting at 39th International Exhibition at Carnegie Institute Pittsburgh.
- 1954 Retrospective Exhibition at Galerie Apollo, Brussels. Belgian critics award for best exhibition in Brussels for 1954. Retrospective Exhibition in British Pavilion at xxvii Venice Biennale where he was awarded the *Ulisse* acquisition prize.
- 1955 This latter exhibition was shown at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Musée d'Art Moderne Paris, Palais des Beaux Arts Brussels, Kunsthalle Zurich, and Tate Gallery London. "Governor of Tokyo" award at Third International Japan.
- 1956 *Grand Prix* award at Fourth International Lugano, International Award of the Guggenheim Foundation.

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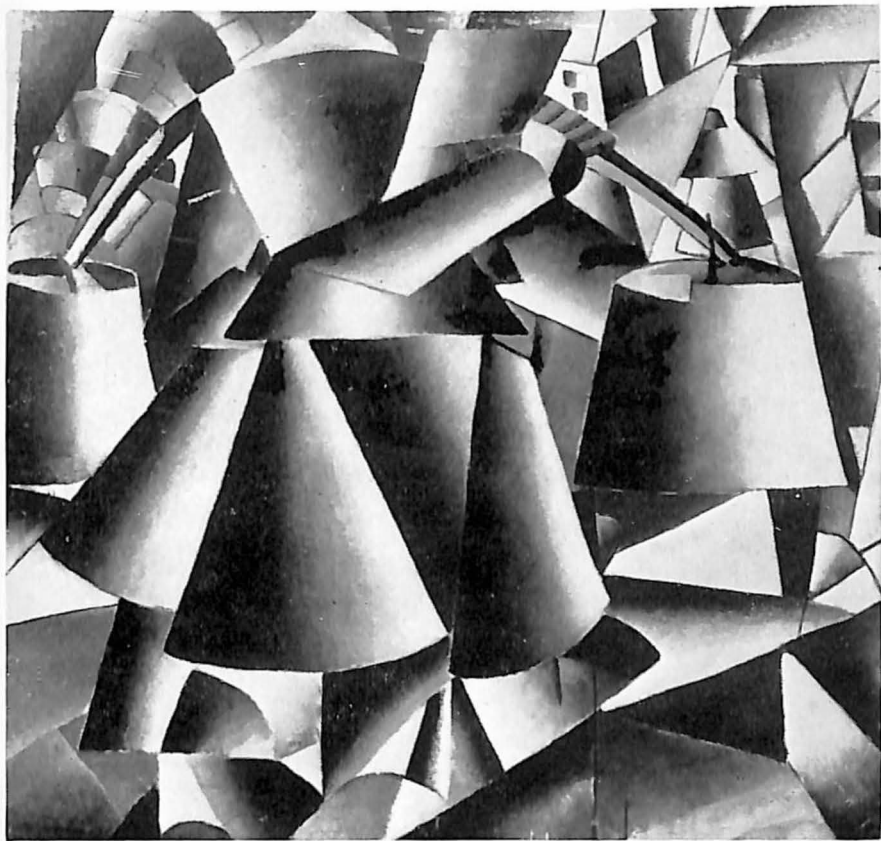
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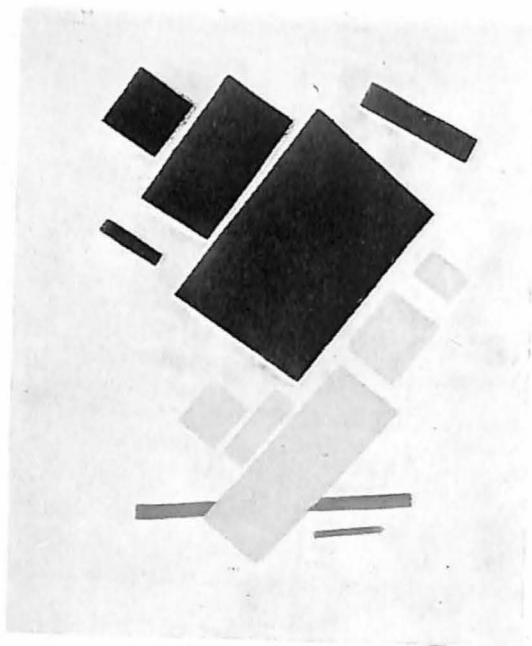


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5. KASIMIR MALEVITCH. *Woman with Water Pails*: Dynamic arrangement, 1912 (Collection Museum of Modern Art)

6. KASIMIR MALEVITCH.
Suprematist Composition, 1914
(Collection Museum of Modern
Art)

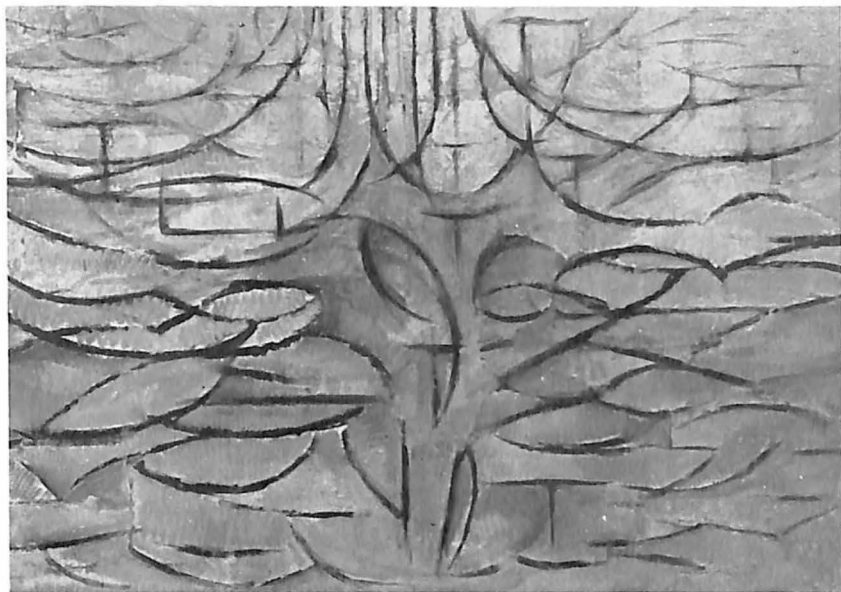


7. KASIMIR MALEVITCH.
Suprematist Composition,
c. 1915 (Collection
Museum of
Modern Art)

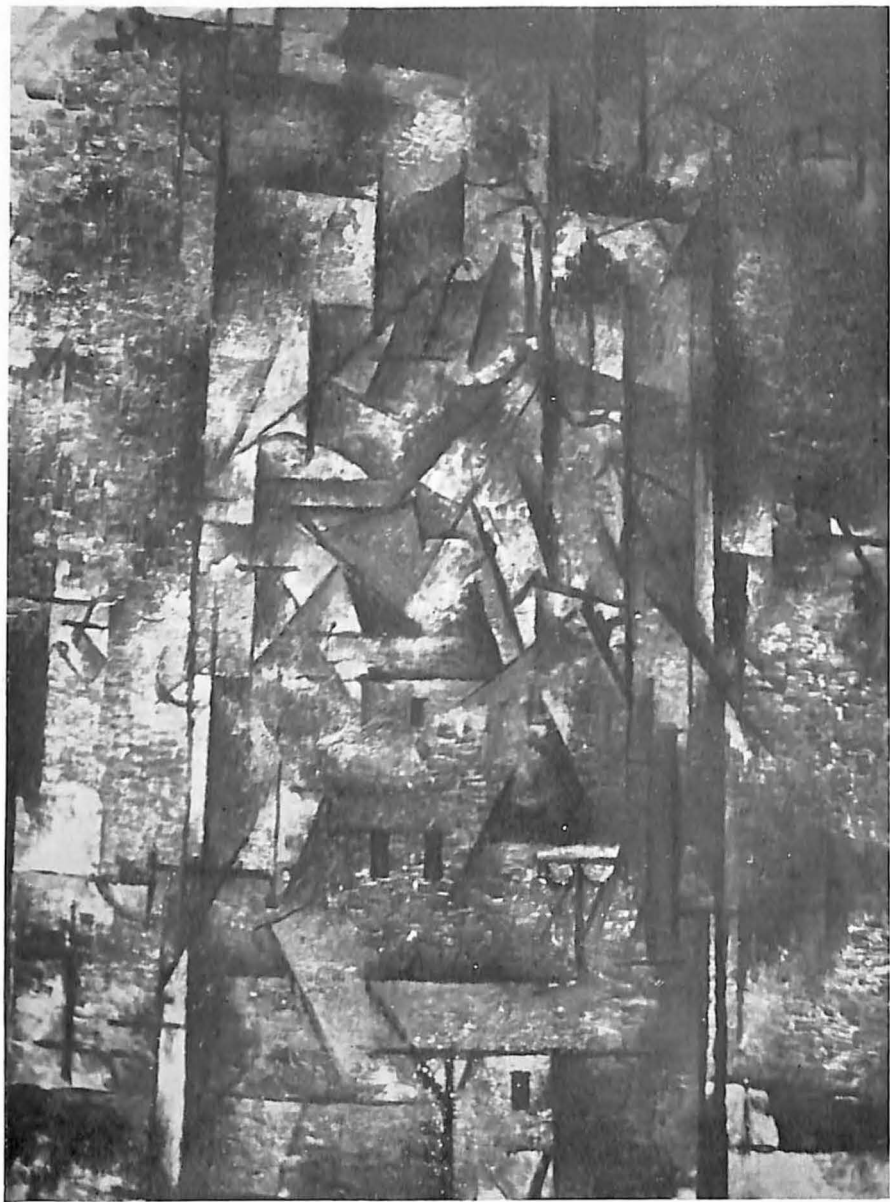




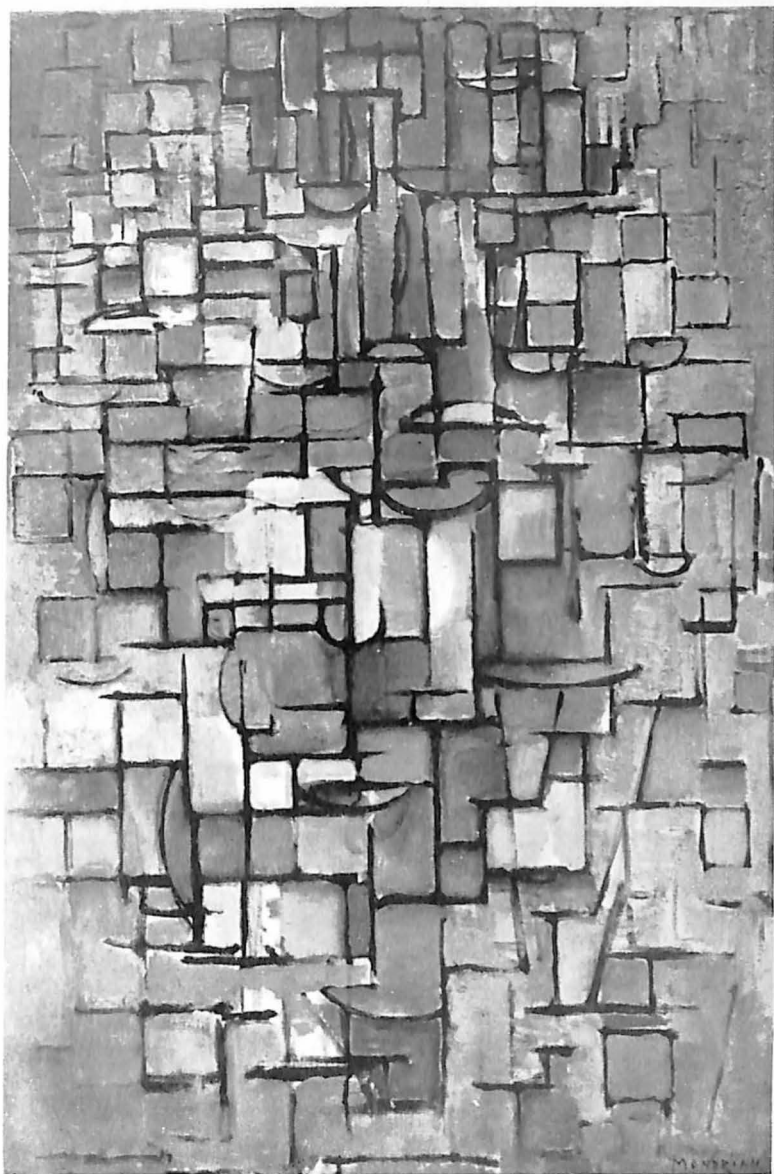
8. PIET MONDRIAN. *Apple Tree in Blossom*
(Photo: Gemeente Musea, Amsterdam)



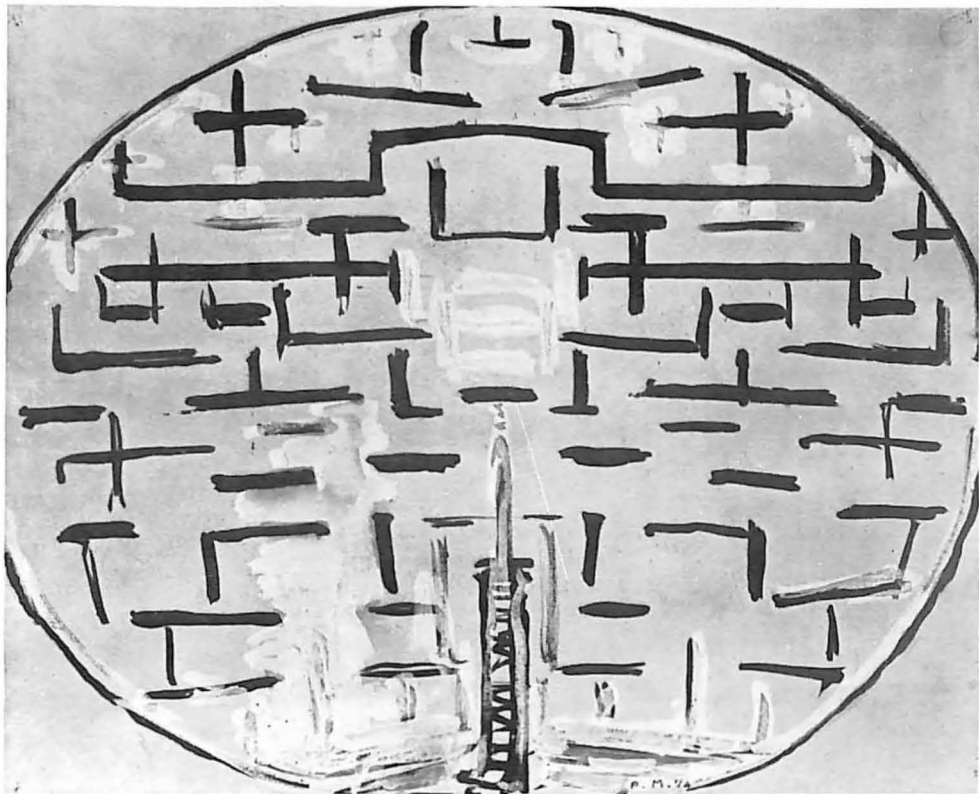
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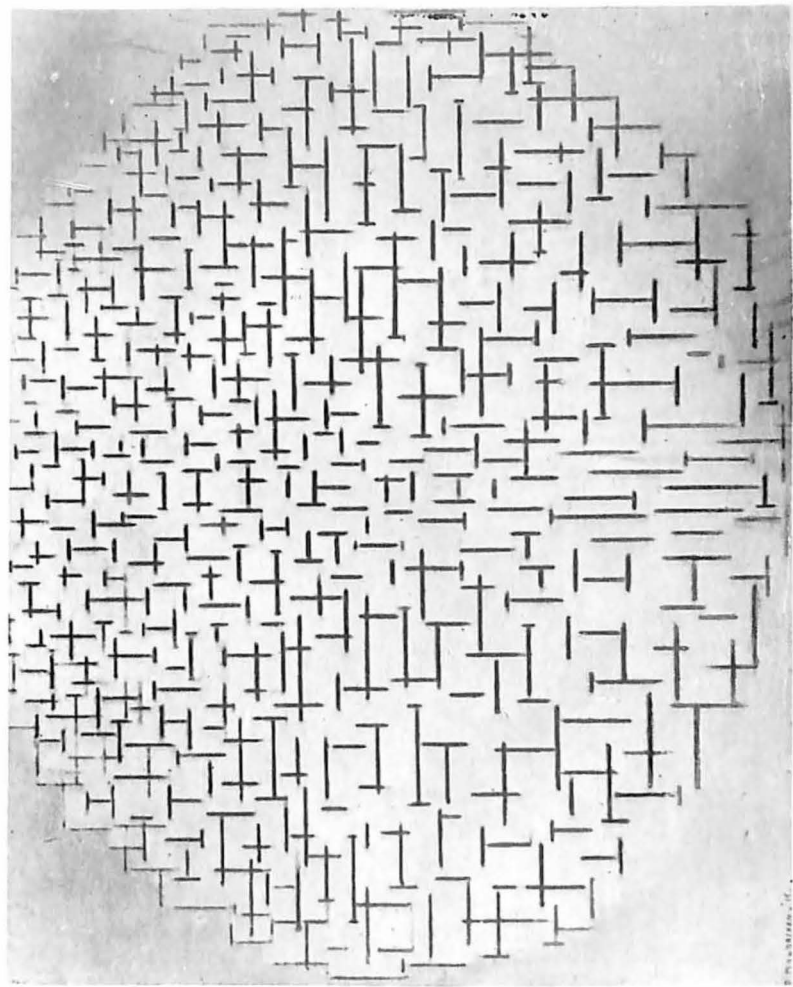
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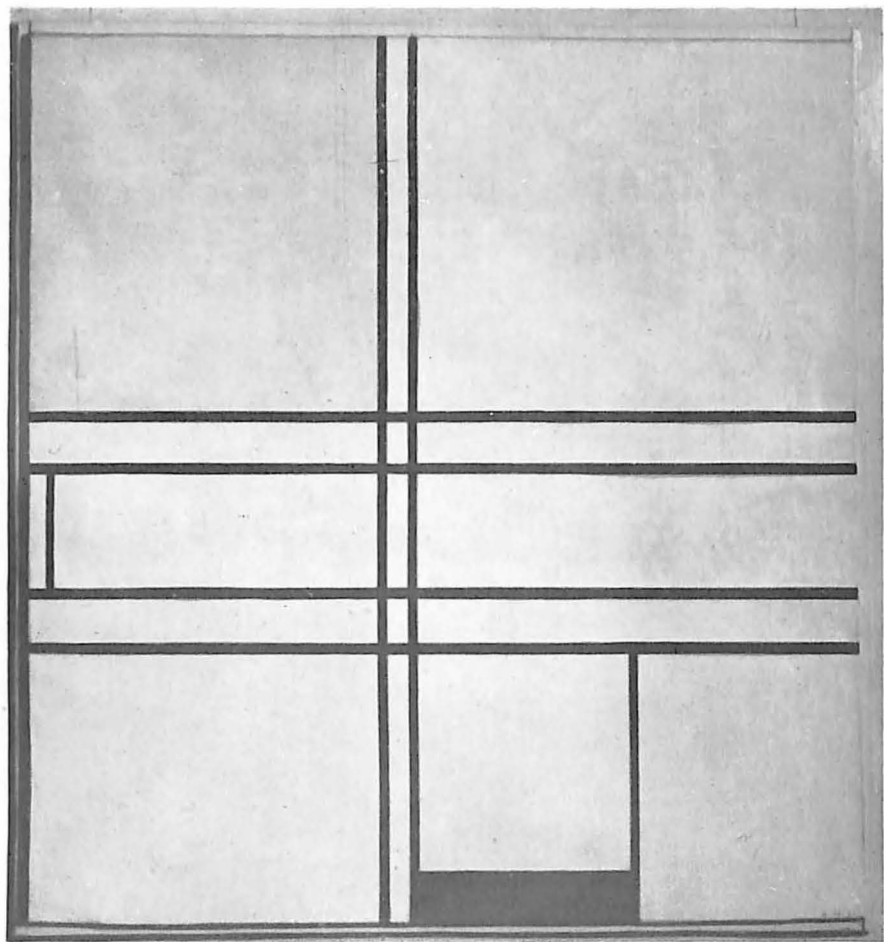
11. PIET MONDRIAN. *Composition in Line and Colour*, 1913
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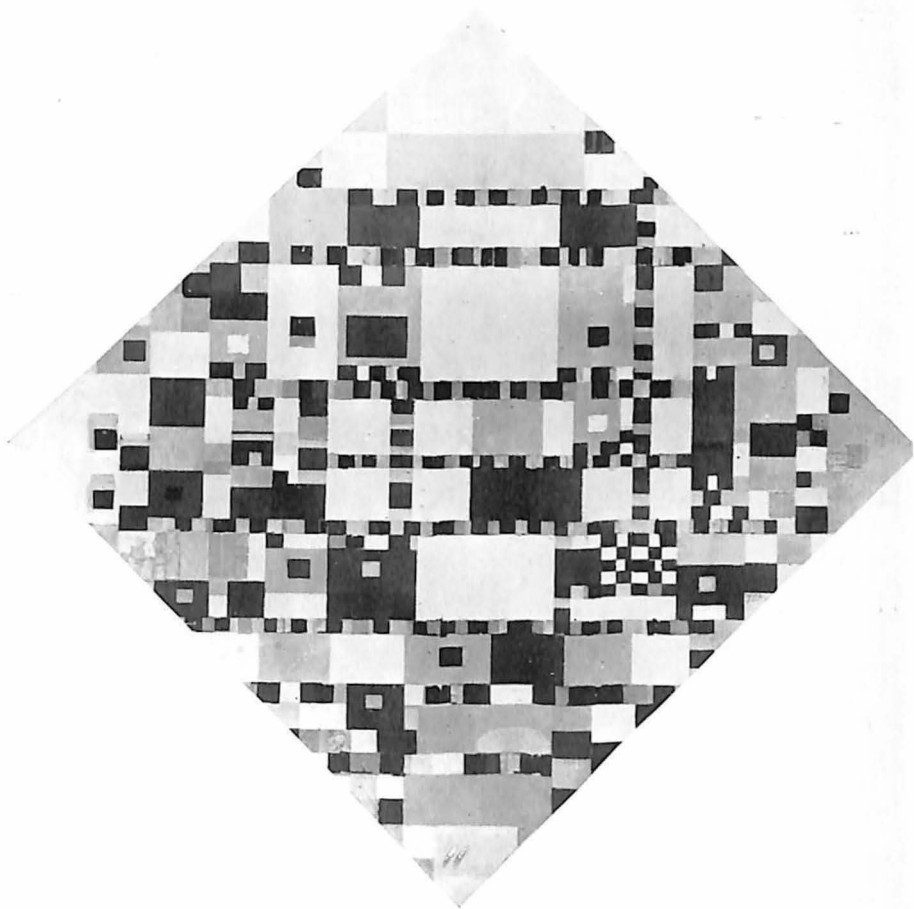
12. PIET MONDRIAN. *Pier and Ocean*, 1914 (from the Miller Company Collection, *Painting Towards Architecture Meriden*)



13. PIET MONDRIAN. *Composition*, 1917
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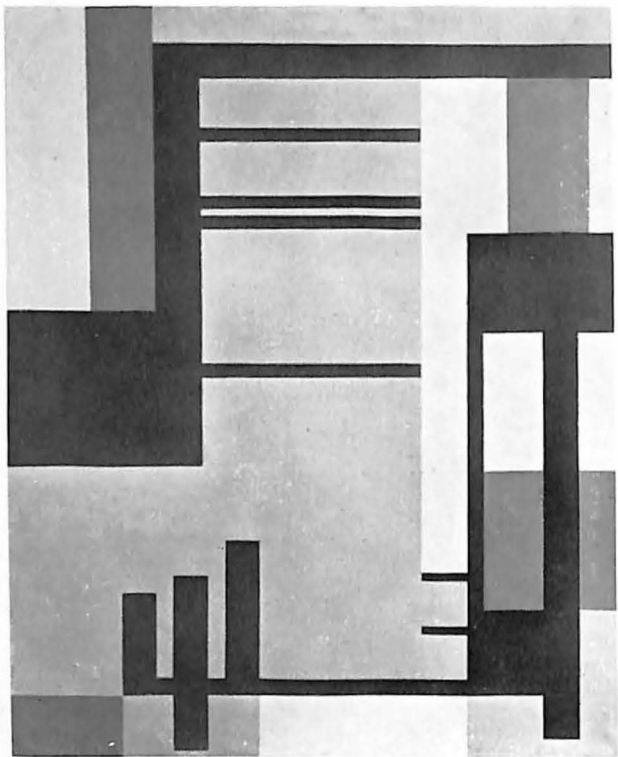


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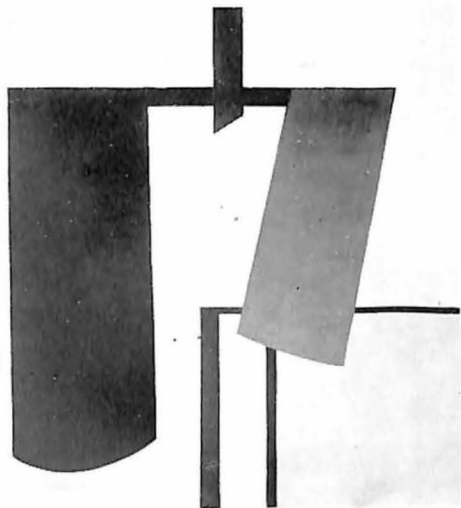


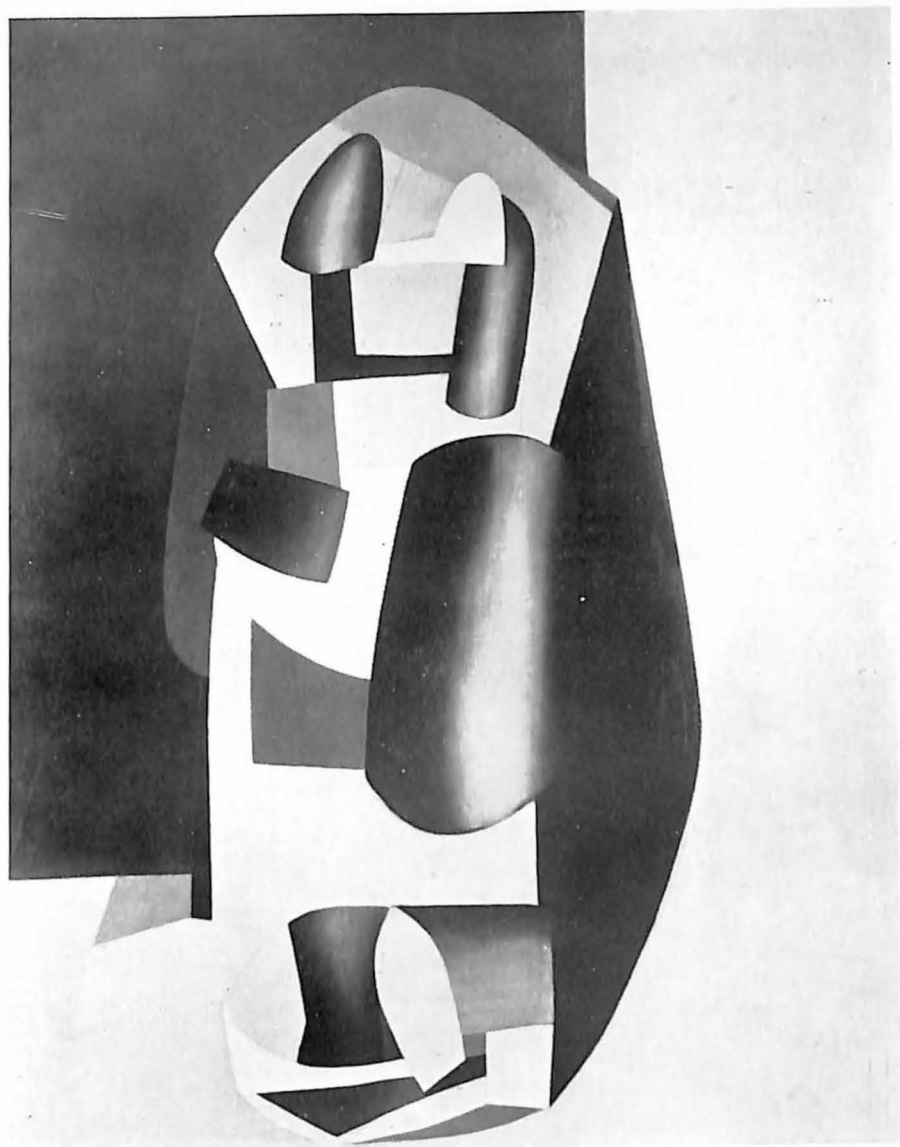
15. PIET MONDRIAN. *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1943-4 (from the Miller Company Collection *Painting Towards Architecture* Meriden)

16. JEAN HELION.
Composition Orthogonale, 1930 (Collection
of the Artist)

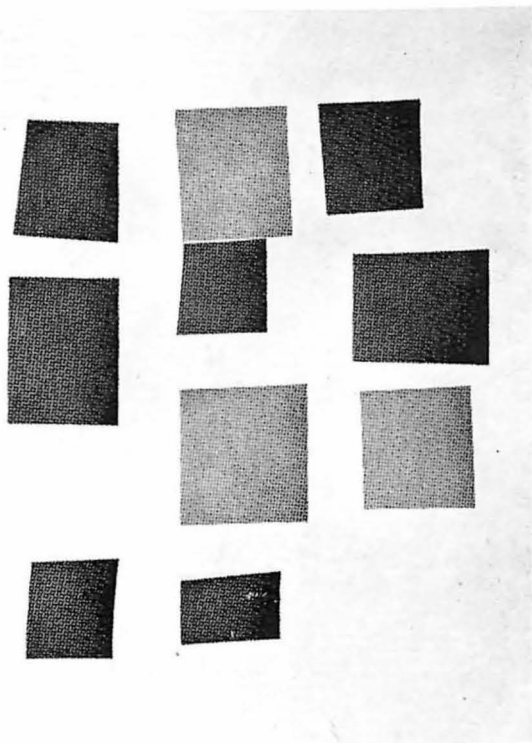


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Painting, 1933
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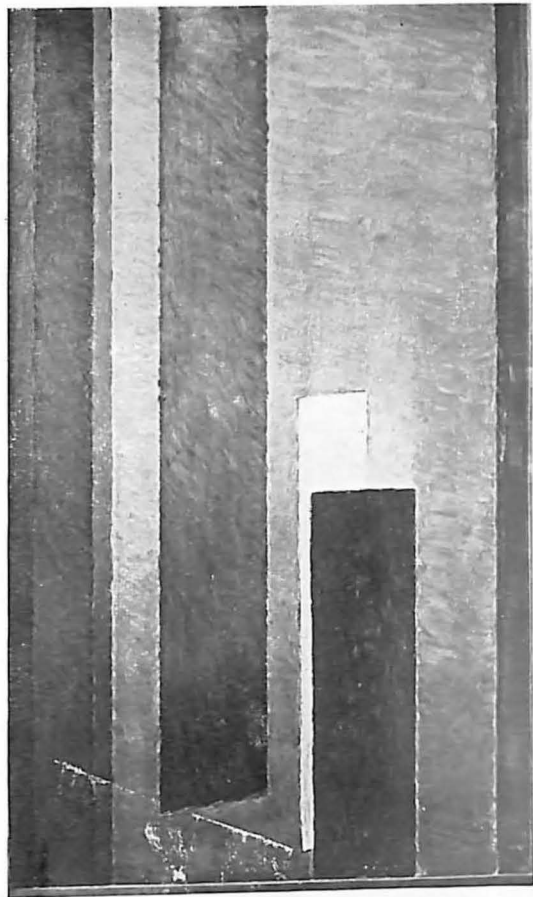


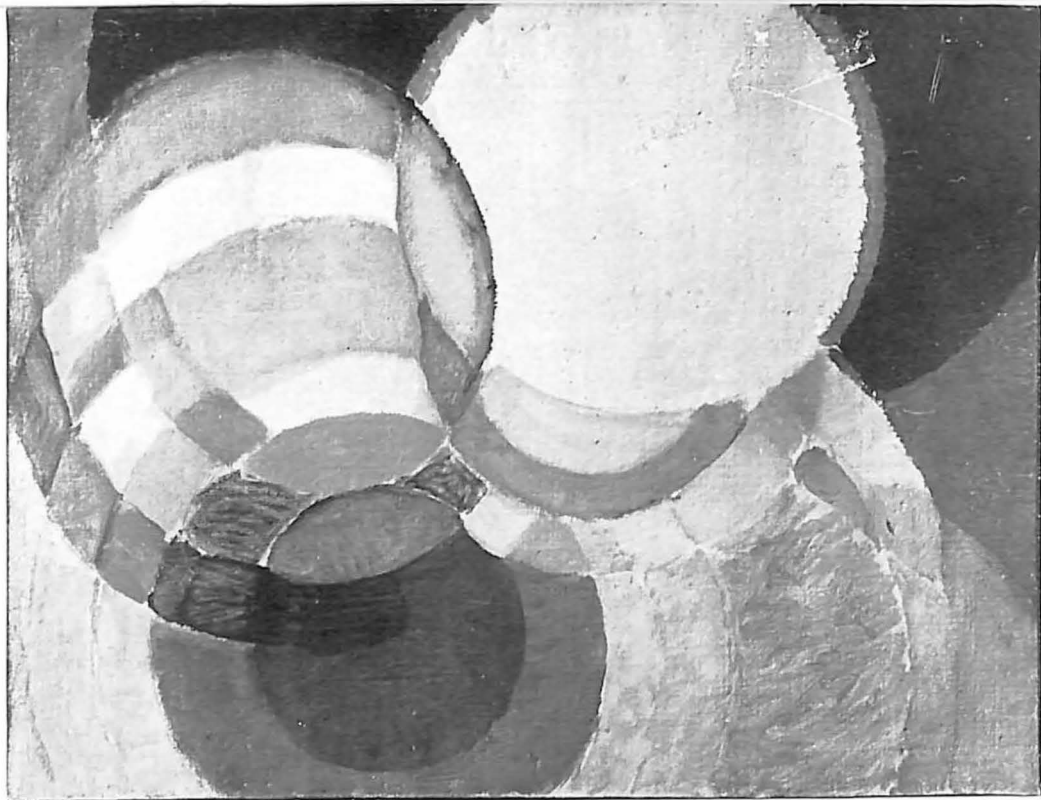
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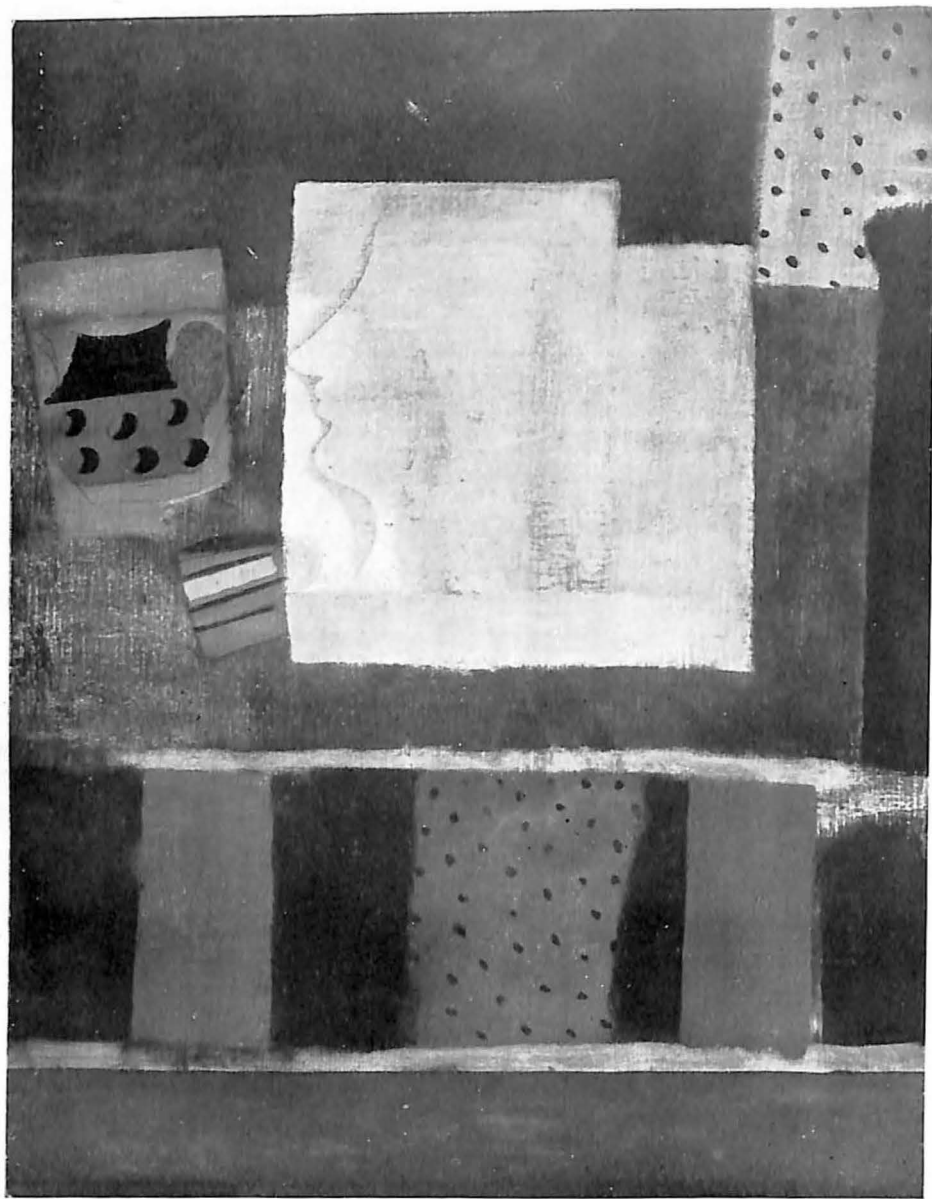
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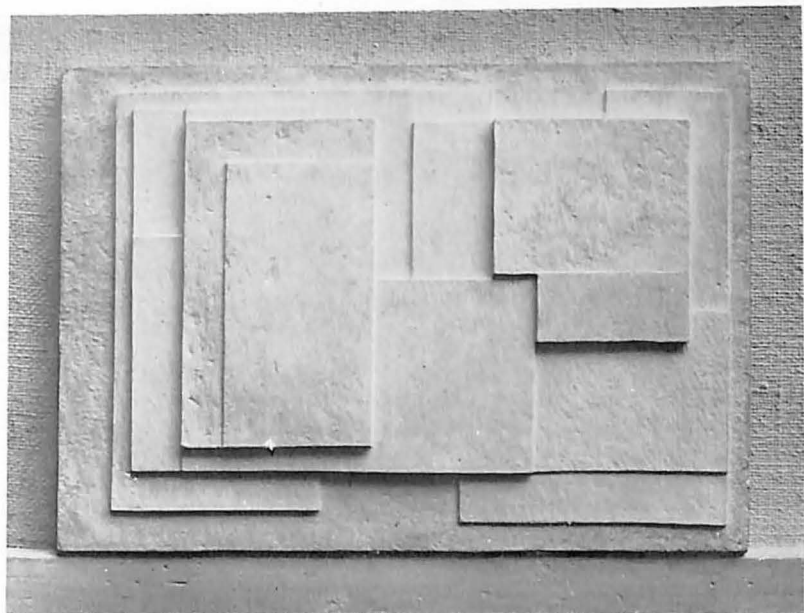




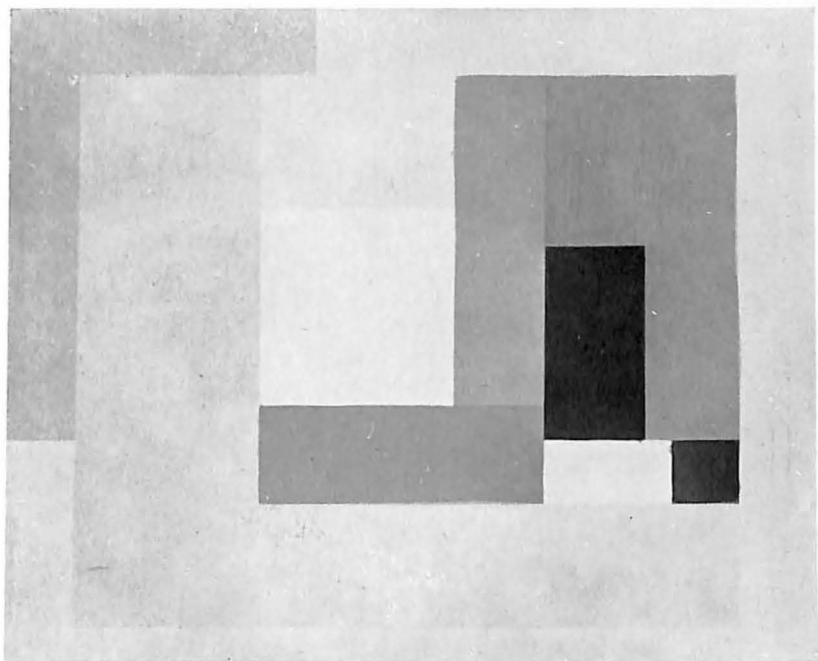
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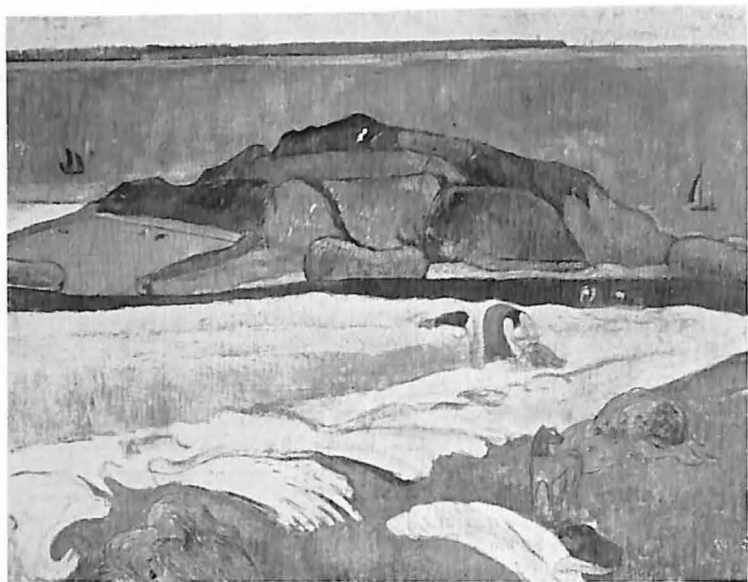
22. BEN NICHOLSON. *Profile-Venetian Red*, 1932
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23. BEN NICHOLSON. *White Relief*, 1934 (Collection Helen Sutherland)



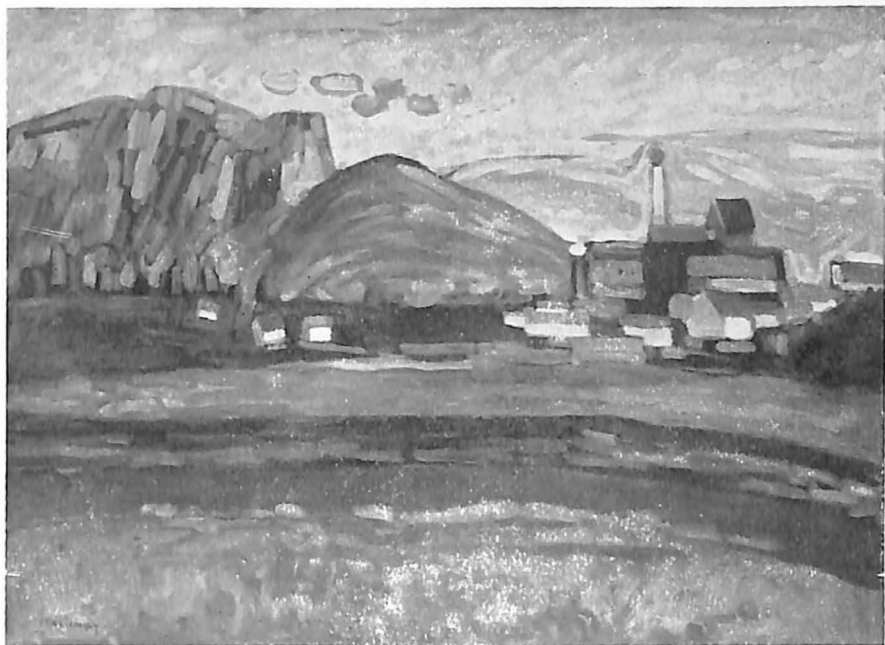
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25. PAUL GAUGUIN.
Le Poldu, 1896
(Photo: Leicester
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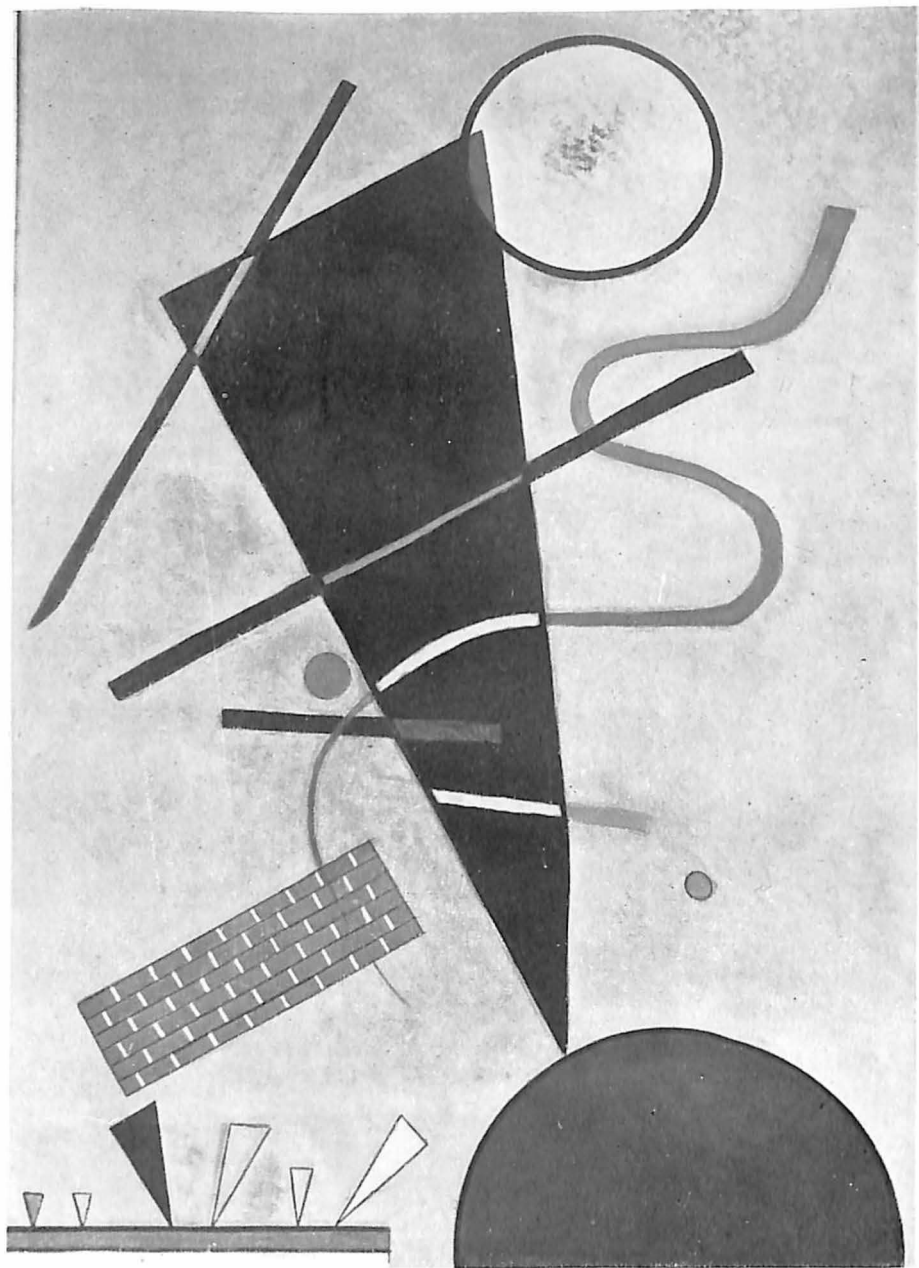
26. PAUL GAUGUIN.
The Haystacks, 1889
(Photo: Leicester
Galleries)



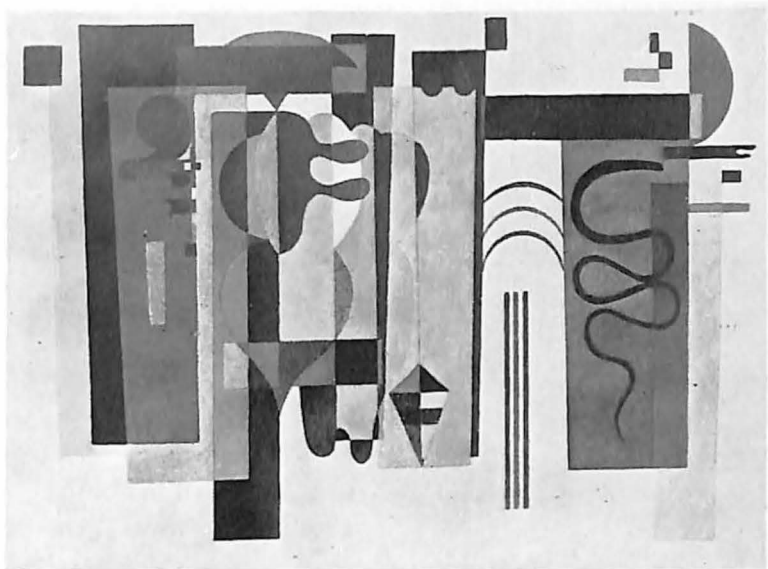
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(Photo: Galerie Maeght)



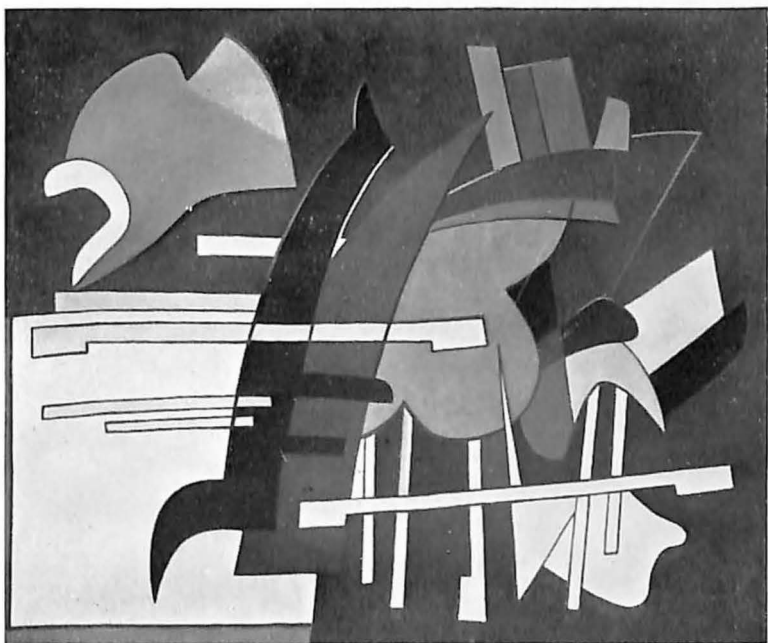
28. WASSILY KANDINSKY. *Improvisation on Acacia*, 1910
(Photo: Galerie Maeght)



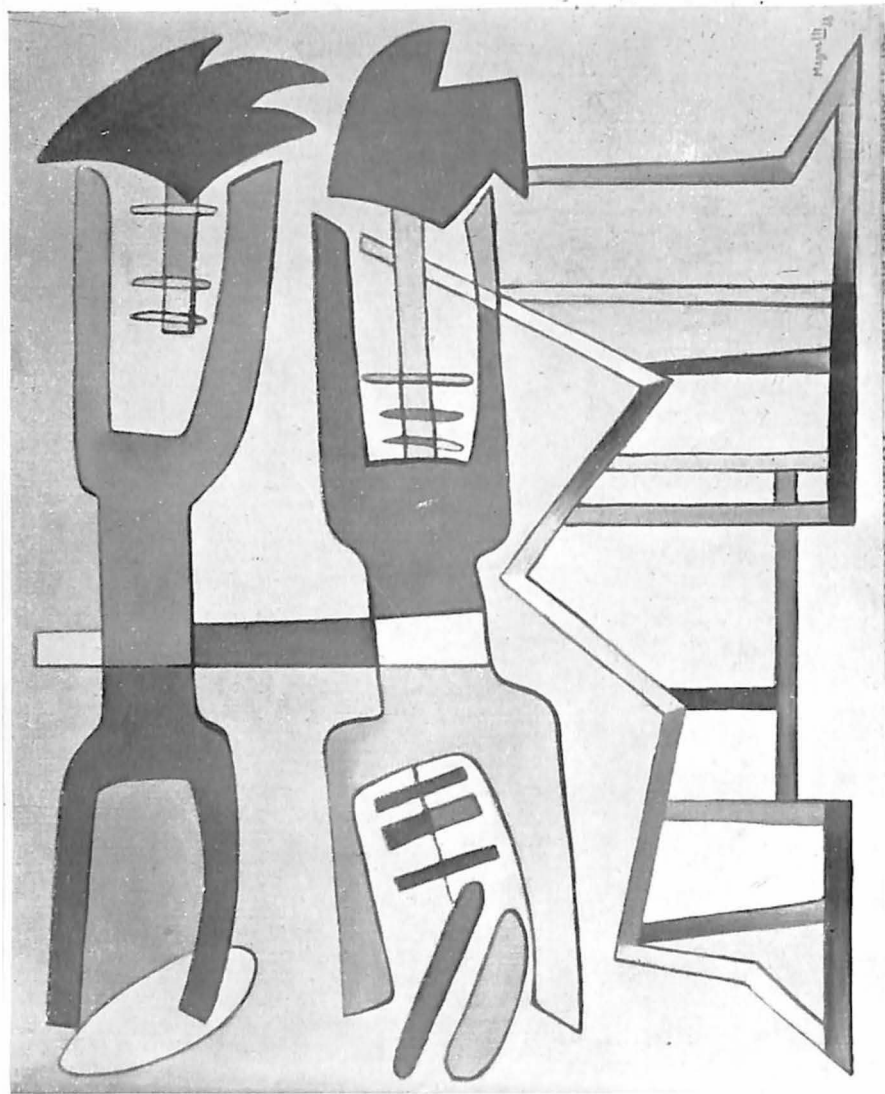
29. WASSILY KANDINSKY. *Contact*, 1924
(Photo: Galerie Maeght)



30. WASSILY KANDINSKY. *Two Green Dots*, 1935
(Photo: Galerie Maeght)



31. ALBERTO MAGNELLI. *Painting* (yellow forms on blue backgrounds)
(Photo: Galerie Denise René)



32. ALBERTO
MAGNELLI.
*Painting (red forms on
yellow backgrounds)*
(Photo: Galerie Denise
René)

