Piet Mondrian's *Trafalgar Square*

Piet Mondrian's painting *Trafalgar Square* is dated 1939-43. Normally, an extended date on artwork indicates a continuous period of production until the work is completed. However, this is not the case with this painting or sixteen others, collectively known as the *transatlantic paintings*.¹

Essentially these are the works Mondrian began in Paris and London. Some that he considered complete in the years 1935-40 were later finished or reworked in New York City after his October 1940 emigration to the United States.² So what viewers can see in *Trafalgar Square* in the bottom right corner, noted on the black grid line, are the numbers 39 and 43 (not visible in reproduction). The year 1939 is the first date that Mondrian records because at this time he felt it was finished. Later in New York City, he made revisions and adjustments that were completed in 1943, the second number he inscribed.

*Trafalgar Square* is an oil on canvas that measures 145.2 by 120 cm and today is housed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It is interesting to discover that Mondrian planned out his compositions with colored tape before he applied any paint.³ Some tape actually still remains on his *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-44), which is an unfinished work he was involved in at the time of his death. But what is even more interesting is that although Mondrian preplanned the compositions, we know from x-rays that he reworked the paint on his canvases over and over again.⁴ So as methodical and mathematical as we may think Mondrian was, he still felt constant inspiration and
intuitive urges to make changes along the way. It is interesting, too, to note that he
worked on a flat, horizontal table rather than at an easel.® Maybe it was for practical or
comfort reasons that he did this, but it also can be seen as a break from the conventional
way artists created their works just as their subject matter broke from tradition. I think of
how an artist like Jackson Pollock takes this even further by laying his canvas on the
floor and walking on and around it, dropping and splattering the paint.

In *Trafalgar Square*, as with all of his work after 1917, Mondrian created a
completely nonobjective image. There is no reference to natural forms or representational
subject matter. The viewer is presented with just the two-dimensional space of the picture
plane, and the forms are arranged on its flat surface. There is no illusion of depth, and the
artist has rejected the convention that paintings are often windows to or mirrors of reality.
And even though the title refers to a specific place, the painting is not meant to represent
Trafalgar Square, but instead it reflects a more general interest Mondrian had in the
culture of the metropolis.°

Mondrian focuses on pure, simple forms and the balance of the vertical and
horizontal. He achieves simplicity by using only the three primary colors, red, blue, and
yellow, along with black and white and by using basic rectangular shapes to create a grid
layout. There are equal numbers of long vertical and horizontal black bands balancing the
composition, which, along with the distribution on blocks of yellow, give the painting
solidity and logic. The large red rectangle balanced by the two smaller ones is one
element that charges the painting with energy. Otherwise it would seem static since the
five large white rectangular areas account for more than half of the canvas space. All of
these elements were central to Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism theory. He was intent on
"plastic expression?" [which] meant simply the 'action of forms and colors?' and a 'new reality?' or reality without the illusion or imitation of nature.\(^7\)

This painting is visually engaging because the lines and scattered blocks of color keep one's eye moving around the composition. However, one can follow the elements in an orderly way; it is not at all chaotic. I can see Mondrian's interest in his urban surroundings in this grid work. Personally, I can interpret this composition in two ways. I see it as a type of map view seen from above the street blocks and buildings. But I can also visualize it as the side of a city skyscraper with its façade of rectangular windows and steel beams. So it is both horizontally and vertically balanced even in its interpretation, and offers a pleasing and satisfying image.
Notes


2. Ibid., 24-25.


4. Cooper and Spronk, 237.

5. Arnason and Prather, 383.

6. Cooper and Spronk, 34.