

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: New Visions of the World

Comparison I

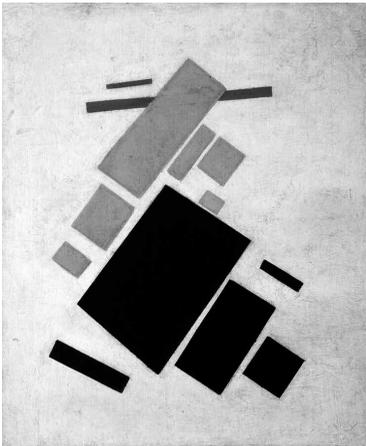


IMAGE TWO: Kazimir Malevich. Russian, born Ukraine. 1878–1935. *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*. 1915 (dated on reverse 1914). Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 19" (58.1 x 48.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1935 acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange)

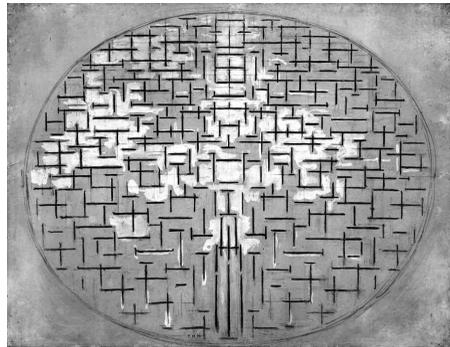


IMAGE THREE: Piet Mondrian. Dutch, 1872–1944. *Pier and Ocean (Sea and Starry Sky)*. 1915 (inscribed 1914). Charcoal and gouache on paper, 34 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 44" (87.9 x 111.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. © 2006 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust, c/o hcr@hcrinternational.com

Comparison II

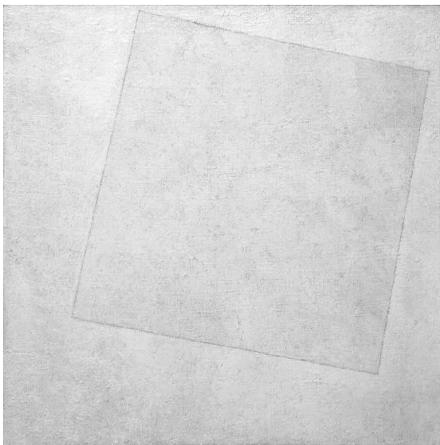


IMAGE FOUR: Kazimir Malevich. Russian, born Ukraine. 1878–1935. *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. 1918. Oil on canvas, 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (79.4 x 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1935 acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange)

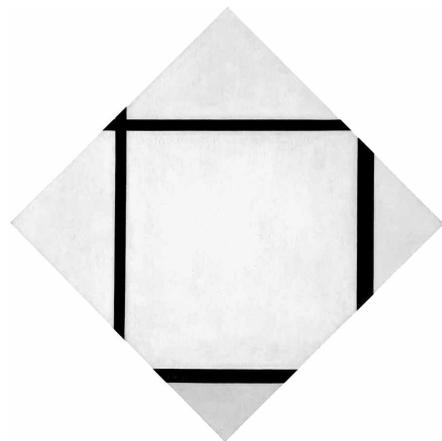


IMAGE FIVE: Piet Mondrian. Dutch, 1872–1944. *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray*. 1926. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 44" (113.7 x 111.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. © 2006 Mondrian Holtzman Trust, c/o hcr@hcrinternational.co

INTRODUCTION

During an exceptionally charged moment in European history, two artists, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, began exploring an entirely new form of painting. In 1914, World War I broke out in Europe, followed, in 1917, by the overthrow of Russia's Romanov dynasty and the October Revolution. A curtain of war was drawn across Europe. Paris, which had been the epicenter of avant-garde art, was suddenly inaccessible to many artists. Independently of one another, Malevich and Mondrian had already begun to feel that **Cubism** and **Futurism**, the leading artistic movements of the time, were too confining, given what the artists wished to communicate. Living in Russia and Holland, respectively, they developed two distinct methods of nonfigurative painting. They were pioneers venturing into unknown territory; in fact, painting the unknown was in some respects very much what they were after.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to two artists, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, who pioneered different systems of abstract painting.
- By comparing Malevich and Mondrian, students will consider how the two artists' use of shape, line, composition, and color reflect both similarities and differences in their artistic ideologies.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your class to come up with definitions of the word "modern." Ask them to consider what it might mean to be a "modern" artist.
- Invite your students to reflect on the kinds of choices (such as color, line, composition, subject matter, and scale) that an artist might make when creating a painting.
- Ask your students what makes two lines perpendicular. Ask them what makes two lines parallel. Have them define "quadrilateral," "rectangle," and "square."

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Begin by looking at Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (Image Two). Refrain from telling your students the title right away.

- Have your students consider the kinds of artistic choices Malevich made. Ask them to describe the various shapes in the painting.
- Ask your students to consider how the shapes relate to one another in the composition: Are they perpendicular, diagonal, layered, or separated? How much space exists between the shapes? Do the shapes seem to be pulling together or pushing apart?
- Invite your students to describe the colors Malevich used in the painting.

Introduce the title of the painting to your students.

- Ask your students to describe what it feels like to fly in an airplane. Ask them how they might connect an airplane in flight with what is represented in the painting.
- Ask your students to describe what it is like to look out of an airplane window, based on their experience of flying or seeing aerial photographs or film.

Are there any other ways in which the painting reminds your students of flying in an airplane? Some students may feel that the painting is reminiscent of a landscape seen from above. Others may see elements of a propeller plane in the composition.

- Ask your students to summarize the artistic choices Malevich made in *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*.

When Malevich painted *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, he was familiar with the leading artistic movements of the time. He had most recently been involved with Russian Futurism, a movement fascinated by the dynamism of trains, planes, automobiles, moving pictures, electricity, and other accomplishments of the machine age. The Futurists captured the speed and dynamism of modern life through fragmented forms and stippled brushwork.

Malevich refers to Futurist impulses in the second part of the painting's title, "Airplane Flying," but his choice of color and composition and his lack of a recognizable subject mark a significant break with past styles. Malevich reduced his palette to primary colors alongside black and white. He developed a sense of movement not through brushstrokes but through the tension created by the proximity and irregularity of his flat shapes, placed on a diagonal axis rather than along a vertical or horizontal one. Malevich called his new language of painting "Suprematism."

Malevich presented *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* in his 1915 exhibition *The Last Futurist Exhibition*, in St. Petersburg. He published a pamphlet to accompany the exhibition, a practice that would become critical for Malevich, as his radical painting style inspired confusion and sometimes even outrage. Malevich wrote, "Color and texture in painting are ends in themselves. They are the essence of painting, but this essence has always been destroyed by the subject[. . .] Painters should abandon subject and objects if they wish to be pure painters. . . ." Malevich also commented on realism, writing that "The new realism in [Suprematist] painting is very much realism in painting, for it contains no realism of mountains, sky, water. . . ." He closed with a dramatic call to arms: "We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry!—For tomorrow you will not recognize us."²

- Ask your students to summarize some of the central points Malevich made in the above statement. What did the artist think painting had to abandon in order for it to be truly modern? How did he want to change painting?
- Ask your students to reflect on the word "realism." In his statement, Malevich referred to traditional artistic tools of illusion (such as the use of perspective and naturalistic colors, and the shading and modeling of forms), which create recognizable images of landscapes, people, and objects. Ask your students to consider why Malevich thought that flat, geometric forms were more "real" than traditional realism.

2. Kazimir Malevich, in "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting" (1916), *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 173–83.

- Now ask your students to look closely at Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean (Sea and Starry Sky)* (Image Three). Refrain from telling them the title right away. What kinds of artistic choices did Mondrian make? What types of lines and shapes can be seen, and what colors? Ask your students to compare Mondrian's choices with Malevich's. Ask what similarities and differences they see in the composition and use of line. Introduce the title of the painting to your students. Ask them how the title might relate to their observations.

Mondrian's title for this drawing, *Pier and Ocean (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." In 1914 Mondrian returned to Holland from Paris, where he had been living, in order to care for his sick father. While in Paris, Mondrian had befriended such artists as Diego Rivera and Fernand Léger, who shared a common interest in new forms of art, including Cubism. Unable to return to Paris because of the start of World War I, Mondrian stayed in Holland and continued to explore a new way of drawing and painting.

Pier and Ocean (Sea and Starry Sky), a work in what is referred to as the "Plus and Minus" series, features the artist's early experimentation with vertical and horizontal intersections. Mondrian thought of lines drawn on a vertical axis as "male," and horizontal lines as "female." 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. These similarities and differences between the two artists are explored further in the next pairing, Comparison II.

- Ask your students to look at Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (Image Four). Refrain from telling them the title of the work. Your students may feel challenged by this painting and ask questions such as "Is this art?" or "How much does this cost?" Let them know that these sorts of questions reflect the radical nature of the painting. What other kinds of questions does the painting inspire? What questions does *White on White* raise about Malevich? What questions does the painting pose about the role of the viewer? Ask your students what they see in the painting that inspires these kinds of questions.
- Ask your students to clearly describe the painting's shapes and composition. If the inner quadrilateral were placed in the very center of the painting, would it change the way that they see the work? What colors did Malevich use in the painting?
- Introduce the title to your students. Ask them to recall some of the principles about Suprematism they discovered when looking at Malevich's earlier work, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*. What similarities and differences do they see between the two works?

With *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, painted three years after *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, Malevich relinquished concrete titles in favour of abstract ones. The diagonal orientation of the form remained, but the primary colors and the black disappeared. Instead, Malevich began to look at white as the ultimate color (white light embodies the full color spectrum). The work's accompanying explanation elevated painting to an astrophysical level:

I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of colour. I have come out into the white. Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss. I have set up the semaphores of Suprematism.³

Malevich was deeply interested in space-time physics and the notion of the fourth dimension, ideas that had been introduced in the 1880s. With *White on White*, Malevich was not only trying to record the disorienting modern experience, he seemed to be reaching for the stars as well. As fellow Russian artist El Lissitzky noted, “We have made the canvas rotate. And as we rotated it, we saw that we were putting ourselves in space.”⁴

- **For the following exercise, your students will need a piece of paper and a pencil or pen. Ask your students to look at Mondrian’s *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray* (Image Five). Ask them to draw a square (preferably using a straight edge) in the middle of their piece of blank paper. Ask them to rotate the paper so that the square is oriented in the same diamond shape as Mondrian’s canvas. Ask them to duplicate the lines that they see in *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray* on their own “canvas.” Ask them to imagine that the lines extend beyond the canvas. It is now their turn to make artistic choices. Based on what they see, ask them to extend the lines to fill the entire piece of paper.**
- **Ask your students to reflect on the exercise. What kinds of choices did they make when extending the lines, and why?**
- **Ask your students to compare *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray* with Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. Ask them what similarities and differences they see.**

Painted more than twelve years after *Pier and Ocean (Sea and Starry Sky)*, *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray* is a rigorous exploration of the relationship between perpendicular lines. During the years between these two works, Mondrian became associated with a Dutch group known as *de Stijl* (“the style”). Both Mondrian and the group’s founder, Theo van Doesburg, believed that by using primary colors, rectangular shapes, and asymmetrical lines, their compositions could be understood by anyone, regardless of nationality or education. The artists associated with *de Stijl* were idealists and hoped to create a universally relevant art. But a major point of departure between Mondrian and Doesburg occurred in the 1920s, when the latter moved away from employing the perpendicular axis in art and design in favor of a diagonal axis. It is no accident, therefore, that Mondrian turned the canvas of *Lozenge with Four Lines and Gray* on an angle. This very minimal, monochromatic work (much of Mondrian’s work is famous for its bright primary colors) emphasizes the dominance and central role of the horizontal and vertical lines over diagonal ones.

Mondrian continued to exhaust the compositional possibilities of perpendicular lines and primary colors for another twenty years. By 1917, he had already set his future course:

For the present at least I shall restrict my work to the ordinary world of the senses, since that is the one in which we still live. Still, art can already provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm, perhaps erroneously; for I have read whatever has form is not yet spiritual. It is nonetheless the path of ascension: away from the material.⁵

3. Malevich, in “Non-Objective Art and Suprematism” (1919), *Art in Theory*, 293.

4. Varnedoe, *A Fine Disregard*, 267.

5. Harry Holtzman and James Martin, eds. and trans. *The New Art, the New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1986), 14.

ACTIVITIES

1. Composing Compositions

Mondrian used masking tape to create the straight-edged lines of his paintings. He also used the walls of his house and studio as experimental spaces where he could compose shapes and lines in preparation for his paintings.

Using the walls (and floors, if you wish) of your school hallway or classroom, assign your students the task of creating compositions using colored (or black) masking tape and colored construction paper. Your students should work in small groups or with partners. You may want to divide the class up into “color composition” and “line composition” teams, so that half of the students are responsible for the line composition and the other half coordinate the color composition.

2. Envisioning Space

Malevich was influenced by the writings of Charles Howard Hinton, who popularized his ideas about the fourth dimension in a series of essays at the turn of the twentieth century. Edwin A. Abbott, a contemporary of Hinton, was also interested in the notion of an unseen fourth dimension, and in 1884 he published a popular tale called *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. The story describes a square (a “Flatlander”) living in a two-dimensional world, unable to comprehend the notion of a third dimension. Abbott used the following example to illustrate our own limitations in envisioning space of a higher dimension:

Does this [notion of a fourth dimension] still seem strange to you? Then put yourself in a similar position. Suppose a person of the Fourth Dimension, condescending to visit you, were to say, “Whenever you open your eyes, you see a Plane (which is of Two Dimensions) and you infer a Solid (which is of Three); but in reality you also see (though you do not recognize) a Fourth Dimension, which is not color nor brightness nor anything of the kind, but a true Dimension, although I cannot point out to you its direction, nor can you possibly measure it.” What would you say to such a visitor? Would not you have him locked up?⁶

- **Assign your students to read and report on the central ideas of *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.**
- **Ask your students to write about what they imagine life would be like in two dimensions. What would the world look like?**

6. Edwin A. Abbott. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 2–3.