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THEOSOPHY

**IN THE WORK OF
WASSILY KANDINSKY
AND
PIET MONDRIAN**

**SUBMITTED BY
SARAH O'DOHERTY**

**IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE IN FINE ART PRINT**

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Introduction

The influence of the spiritual and interest in the hidden side of things have been found in a number of major modern art movements. Many artists were not satisfied with attempting to represent the ordinary world, and so they began to look towards a higher world and what was contained within for inspiration. These spiritual urges led many artists to abstraction as they had great difficulty attempting to represent the spiritual by using elements contained in the real world. Abstraction, therefore, ultimately became the instrument that allowed the spiritual to advance over the material.

After initial research on Abstraction in general, I decided to concentrate on two particular artists that were of great interest to me, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. These two artists appear to be quite different in the way they execute their work and one would imagine that their interests would also differ enormously. However, it seems that both of these artists had a major common interest in the occult and, in particular, theosophy.

As an art student, studying art history, I found that information on the subject of theosophy was not readily available to me. Had I been studying philosophy and had known the basics, my task would have certainly been less difficult. Researching this subject through biographical literature on the artists themselves was initially disappointing as I found that the interest in the occult was somewhat

dismissed by many art historians. Theosophy was referred to, but not discussed at length. I became intrigued by this lack of acknowledgment of what seemed to me to be a major interest, and so I set about trying to find information on theosophy, through writing to the Theosophical Society in England (unfortunately with no success as they did not reply), acquiring literature from the Theosophical University Press and Theosophical Publishing House and also gathering information posted on the internet from either students studying Theosophy or members of the Theosophical Society itself.

'The Secret Doctrine' by Madam Blavatsky, 'An Introduction to the Super Sensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man' by Rudolf Steiner, and 'Thought-Forms' by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, were among the first books I obtained. Madam Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner had been briefly mentioned in literature regarding the work of both Kandinsky and Mondrian. I was optimistic about finding interesting information in this literature I had acquired, that would tie in with these artists work. As it happened, I struggled through these theosophical writings trying desperately to extract sections that made sense to me. Fortunately, I had an open invitation to call on a friend studying Philosophy. Through talking to Lance Grundy, Brighton University, England, who is familiar with what theosophy is trying to communicate, I began to see the

theosophical content within Kandinsky's and Mondrian's paintings and writings quite clearly. As I continued to read more literature on theosophy and on the artists themselves, I became convinced that theosophy was an important interest that needed to be recognised - I could see how very important theosophy and the spiritual really was for these artists.

In order to understand the intense interest that Mondrian and Kandinsky had in the spiritual, I needed to familiarise myself with the general goings on, in and around the year 1875, when the Theosophical Society was found. I was eager to find out how powerful these theosophical ideas actually were.

The book 'Thought-Forms' certainly shed light on Kandinsky's inspiration and also at a later stage Mondrian's. After reading this book, which was refreshingly easy to understand, I could examine many of Kandinsky's paintings and find areas of colour that were related to particular thought forms. In embarking on this discussion about Kandinsky and theosophy I hope to prove that theosophy ultimately gave Kandinsky endless reasons for executing his masterpieces.

Piet Mondrian declared his love for theosophy by joining two separate Theosophical Society lodges. He was influenced by the writings of Steiner, Besant and Leadbeater, and also Madam Blavatsky. The artist went from executing theosophically representational pieces, to concentrating on

geometrical compositions based on theosophical ideas. In my opinion theosophy was of major importance to Mondrian and must be addressed in any discussion of his work. I hope to conclude in my chapter on Mondrian, that theosophy dramatically influenced his work until the day he died.

I found myself exploring endless amounts of literature in the search to prove that theosophy did exist within Kandinsky's and Mondrian's work. As a result I discovered rewarding information contained in the writings by art historians, Robert P. Welsh, Rose-Carol Washton Long and Kathleen J. Regier, as they confirmed what I suspected and hoped to be true, that both Mondrian and Kandinsky were executing works of art based on their theosophical beliefs.

Chapter one : Theosophy

There were other artists as well as Mondrian and Kandinsky concerned with this ancient phenomena known as magic, some of which included Malevich from Russia and Kupka from Czechoslovakia, Picasso was also known to play with Tarot cards and smoke Opium. These artists essentially became some of the first abstract painters. Through their interest in the spiritual they saw themselves as visionaries claiming to have insights into the world of the intangible which normal individuals did not have. By using colour and texture in a particularly intense manner they wished to communicate their understanding of the universe.

The environment that surrounded these artists would have encouraged them to favour the spiritual. At the dawning of the twentieth century people in general were turning away from the church and becoming more interested in inventions of science - Astrology etc. This led to a spiritualist craze. Many people held seances and played with Ouija boards as a form of entertainment. It was amidst this interest in hocus pocus that theosophy was born in 1875 in the United States of America, spread through a movement founded by a Russian aristocrat by the name of Helena Petrova Blavatsky. Madam Blavatsky, as she was known, has a curious history. She is said to have worked as a performer in a circus and was apparently a medium and also a concert pianist. She worked as an apprentice with a group of Egyptian mystics called The Brotherhood of Luxor and travelled widely before settling in

New York as a metaphysician and occultist. Blavatsky, therefore, had a mixed bag of philosophical experiences from throughout the world, some of which included "Pharonic Wisdom Texts, Sanskrit Poetry, and Renaissance Neoplatonist Tracts ". (Goldstein, 1998, p. 1)

Lilian Storey, once general secretary for the Theosophical Society in England, describes Madam Blavatsky's physical appearance and makes particular reference to Blavatsky's eyes. They are described as being sharp and piercing when she looked at you and she was thought to be attempting to look into your soul . Madam Blavatsky was known to attract the attention of anyone she wished whether the individual was willing or otherwise. This suggests that she may have used hypnotism in order to do so. Colonel Henry Alcott is said to have succumb to her hypnotic powers. Blavatsky and Alcott teamed up and with the support of other associates, they formed a group. When the question arose as to what name would be best suited to their group, they looked to a dictionary and discovered the word "Theosophy", which was described as being the love of the divine or of divine wisdom (In Greek, "theos" meaning God, "sophia" meaning Wisdom) (Dictionary reference) They decided it appropriate to call themselves the Theosophical Society. Theosophy is defined as being "any of various ancient and modern systems of philosophy teaching the attainment of fundamental truth by direct contact with God through inspiration or intuition,

religious ecstasy, direct revelation...." (Dictionary reference: Dodge Lewis, year unknown, approx. 1960, p. 103) And so the Theosophical Society was founded in New York on September 18th 1875. The core of the beliefs within the society came from Blavatsky herself. She believed that there is a main truth within all religions and in studying the various major religions, one would find they are all saying more or less the same thing and pointing in the same direction. Blavatsky's beliefs and her particular way of preaching about the spiritual was received openly in the United States and also at a later stage in England.

Blavatsky decided to write about this new spiritual science she and Alcott had found. However, she claimed that she did not write much of the work herself, but that most of it was executed by spirits. She talked of spiritual forces that transcribed many pages for her and that when she did write, she was under the influence of a particular spirit, dictating to her. Her 1877 written discussion, on occult knowledge, ' Isis Unveiled' was incredibly popular and sold approximately three thousand copies in the year it was published, and almost half a million copies to date. In this book Blavatsky discusses what Matthew Mulligan Goldstein describes as : "belief in the persistence after death of individual human souls with discernible personalities, the conviction that spirits are caught up in a progressive cycle of development, and the idea that spiritualism is a higher more rigorous route to knowledge".

(Goldstein, 1998, p.1) Blavatsky's writing taught that God is mighty, absolute and unknowable and is the source of both spirit and matter. The spirit descends into matter and matter ascends into spirit by a cyclical action. She writes about souls, and that all souls are essentially alike in essence, although they may differ in degrees of development. According to Blavatsky every individual has a higher and lower nature within. The higher nature is comprised of mind, soul and spirit and has been somewhat polluted by the lower nature which is the physical. The higher nature must be purified before it can return to the divine. This purification process takes place through a series of incarnations.

Those who read Blavatsky's work were enthusiastic about her ideas and the notion of embracing the irrational in order to acquire a deeper level of understanding. Even though Blavatsky's teachings were intensely popular, many questioned her sincerity. Paul Gillingwater, from Oxford University Libraries, comments on the speculation that surrounded her work: "a lot of folks consider her to have been a charlatan who made it all up, others have found great value in her writings". (Gillingwater, 1998, p. 2)

Madam Blavatsky died in 1891 and the interest in her and theosophy continued to grow. At the turn of the century anybody who was in any way artistically inclined knew of or was involved in theosophy. As a result of this great interest

the Theosophical Society opened up lodges throughout Europe and had many followers. Today there are active Theosophical Society lodges in approximately 45 countries world-wide. The three objects of the Society are as follows:

" 1. To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.

3. To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man". (Oxford University, 1998, p. 1)

Chapter two :

Wassily Kandinsky

Blavatsky's Theosophical Society was founded only nine years after Wassily Kandinsky was brought into the world. We can therefore immediately relate to the environment in which Kandinsky grew up and the interests and influences that surrounded him.

Known as one of the most original and influential artists of the twentieth century, many regard Kandinsky as the so called father of abstract expressionism. Kandinsky's move towards abstraction took place between 1909 and 1911. This radical transformation changed the very concept of art itself.

Kandinsky's move towards abstraction was not a sudden occurrence. The artist's work changed gradually and slowly as he explored various new directions and interests through writing, painting, theatre and music. It does not appear to be common knowledge, however, that Kandinsky spent many of the early years of his life immersed in occultist ideas. "The Spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement, forwards and upwards". (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982, p. 131)

It cannot be denied that theosophy was of great importance and interest to Kandinsky : more specifically, the artist discusses Madam Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society in his book 'Concerning the Spiritual In Art' referring to

theosophy as, "One of the most important spiritual movements". (Bolt, 1980, p. 45)

In 1904 Kandinsky and his female partner at the time, Gabriella Munter, travelled to Tunisia. Here they saw what were called Whirling Dervishes, mystics that danced and prayed. Through these unusual rituals these mystics claimed to reach a higher state of consciousness and remain in a trance, having done so. This enabled them to insert potentially harmful instruments into their bodies without experiencing any pain. Kandinsky was intrigued by this concept and became excited at the thought of the viewer of his work being able to reach this higher state through struggling to understand it. He wrote that : "Every artist who buries himself in the inner treasures of his art, is a man to be envied, a co-worker upon the spiritual pyramid that will one day reach to heaven". (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982, p 155)

In 1911, Kandinsky and his long time friend Franz Marc, who was also a painter, formed 'Der Blaue Reiter' or The Blue Rider group. Kandinsky and Marc exhibited and corresponded with other artists under this name. Many of these artists were interested in theosophy and hocus pocus in general. The artists, including Munter, with whom Kandinsky interacted at this time, explored the contents of occult books and concepts. This environment which surrounded Kandinsky

would ultimately have great influence on him and therefore on his work.

'Der Blaue Reiter' , named after a canvas that Kandinsky executed in 1903, requested from its members that they express what was within themselves rather than veering towards a particular style. Essentially, this body of artists were searching for a spiritual reality in art. The painters, musicians, dramatists and poets of this group were working towards the same end - expressing the soul within humanity and nature or, as Kandinsky put it, the "Innerer klang".

The association was embarking on something new and interesting which proved to be very popular. 'Der Blaue Reiter Almanac' was published in 1912. At the same time the almanac was being put together, Kandinsky revealed his own personal body of written work, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' which was published in late 1911.

'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' was an important piece of work which influenced and opened the minds of many. Kandinsky's book declared a goal which he would achieve through painting over the following four years: to move away from material existence and discover the new, based on the artist's "inner need". It contributed to a considerable number of experiments with abstraction before World War 1. The idea of painting in an abstract style was not newly discovered

and after Kandinsky's book was circulated, artists such as Mondrian exhibited works which contained very few imagistic references. A direct connection between two artists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian cannot always be seen. However, by the year 1912 Kandinsky's paintings and essays were looked upon, (as one German critic pronounced) as being "representative of a new idealism". (Washton-Long, 1980, p.43)

Kandinsky's work was ahead of its time, but the time was right. Artists began to eliminate objects and were looking upon art as a spiritual activity. But what encouraged Kandinsky to develop this new and very particular way of working? In order to understand why, we must take into account the artist's philosophical beliefs as well as his aesthetic beliefs.

The symbolist movement which was dominant through most of Europe before the First World War was interested in creating a new aesthetic which suggested the portrayal of realities that were higher than the ordinary physical world. Many of the artists who were interested in and who practised symbolism, were involved in occultism and theosophy. Theosophical ideas in many ways supported symbolist ideas. Both suggested that the higher world could not be understood easily and that it may be more easily communicated through indirect means.

Kandinsky believed that a new golden epoch would come about sometime in the future. This allowed him to remain committed to an abstract style. He was optimistic that the work he executed, based on this style, would fit in with this new age. But for the moment he looked upon himself as an individual responsible for showing spiritual ideas to the layman. He appeared to be concerned about the state of the world and expressed this in an article which appeared in a Russian periodical : "Our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit and of the downfall of the purely material world view, for many people it is a time of terrible inescapable vacuum, a time of enormous questions, but for a few people, it is a time of presentiment or of precognition of the path to truth". (Washton-Long, 1980, p.6)

Kandinsky is suggesting that the age in which he lived was overcome by a struggle between evil, which he saw as being the materialistic elements, and good, which he saw as being the spiritual elements. For the artist, abstraction was not connected in any way with the material. He pursued abstraction in order to help awaken individuals to the forces of good, the spiritual. He believed that the world was moving forward and upward towards this utopian age and that his work, if it were successful, if this abstract language he was trying to create actually worked, it would help to bring about this utopia. He saw the purpose of his work as being there to

"serve the development and refinement of the human soul".
(John E. Bolt, 1980, p.45)

The hope that Kandinsky held for the coming of a new age may have been influenced by theosophical ideas. He wrote of theosophy in 'Concerning the Spiritual In Art' and suggested that it was a great force in the "spiritual climate, striking, even in this form, a note of salvation that reaches the desperate hearts of many who are enveloped in darkness and night - a hand that points the way offers help". (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982, p.145)

There is no evidence to suggest that Kandinsky was an initiated theosophist himself. However, it is reasonably evident that he followed the search, as the theosophist did, for hidden truths. Kandinsky knew in detail, the work of Blavatsky and in his own 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' quoted directly from her book 'The Key to Theosophy' : "The earth will be a heaven in the twenty-first century in comparison with what it is at present". (John E. Bolt, 1980, p. 45)

Kandinsky also referred to Rudolf Steiner, the head of the German Theosophical Society, in his book. Steiner was based in Munich at the same time Kandinsky lived and worked there. In 1922 the first English edition of Steiner's 'Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible

Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man', was published. Kandinsky attended Steiner's lectures and took notes that apparently still survive. Kandinsky and his circle were enthusiastic about Steiner's ideas. Steiner was a teacher, come guru, who emphasised the Christian heritage above the eastern religions. Steiner lectured that Christianity contained the wisdom within previous religions and cults and was therefore an incredibly beneficial source in the process of advancing the destiny of man. While Blavatsky pushed towards the importance of Buddhism and Hinduism, - Steiner used Christianity to express his belief that the world would experience a great catastrophe before this golden age emerged. Steiner's physical presence in Munich, accompanied by the fact that he believed art and art practices were important in order to develop an understanding of the spiritual, encouraged Kandinsky to become more interested in theosophy. In 1910 Kandinsky wrote to Franz Marc insisting that the 'Blue Rider Almanac' must comment on theosophy: "Theosophy must be mentioned briefly and powerfully". (Washton-Long, 1980, p. 39)

The subject of theosophy was not included in the publication of the almanac and reasons for this are unknown. It may be that the lack of inclusion of theosophy from the almanac and its elimination from Kandinsky's 1914 edition of 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' would have made these publications more acceptable.

Kandinsky, believing that his work could be of great importance in the creation of this coming utopia, felt that he needed to incorporate hidden images in his paintings in order to communicate his visions of this new golden age.

Kandinsky discusses in 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' his idea that colour, form and object each have their own spiritual possibilities. He suggests that if objects are used in a particular way in the work, they could produce desired effects. Kandinsky changed the physical appearance of the objects which he contained within his work through a process he called "Veiling and Stripping". The artist would blur the outline of the object and place it somewhere unrelated, while also using colours that were unrelated to the object. This was the veiling process. The stripping process was a reduction of the object to a simple outline. The combination of these two processes produced what Kandinsky called "The Hidden Construction". Through the artist's use of the "Hidden Construction" he avoided materialism, but allowed the viewer to see familiar motifs. If we look at the painting

Improvisation 30 (fig A) we initially see a mass of colour and various forms. When looked at closely, we see two cannons represented on the right hand side of the work. This captures the viewer's attention as it is something vaguely recognisable. Kandinsky wanted these hidden images to draw the spectator in, literally attracting the viewer into taking part in the understanding of the piece. By doing so, the viewer would



Figure A: **Kandinsky**
Improvisation 30 (1913)

almost become, in a meditative trance in the struggle to decipher the confusion within Kandinsky's work. Kandinsky advised artists openly in his writing to encourage and strengthen their spirits through "Exercises". Here, he may be encouraging the use of meditation and other spiritual practices.

Kandinsky is known to have researched occultist ideas and also mediumistic photography. He is suspected to have made his own occultist photographs, however, this matter appears to be a constant subject of debate and criticism among many art historians as there is no evidence of these photographs in existence. Kandinsky's extensive library was found to be full of occult journals and books, some of which were on mediumistic photography. This kind of photography was based on the idea that each person had an invisible light which surrounded the body. This light could be made visible under certain conditions. A photographic plate was believed to show this light. This photography was important because it represented a way of capturing the invisible. If we look at a particular painting by Kandinsky *Painting with White Form* (fig. B) we see shapes that may have related to these sorts of photographs. In this painting we see a ghost like figure positioned on the left hand side. This figure resembles what is pictured in some mediumistic photographs (fig. O - P)

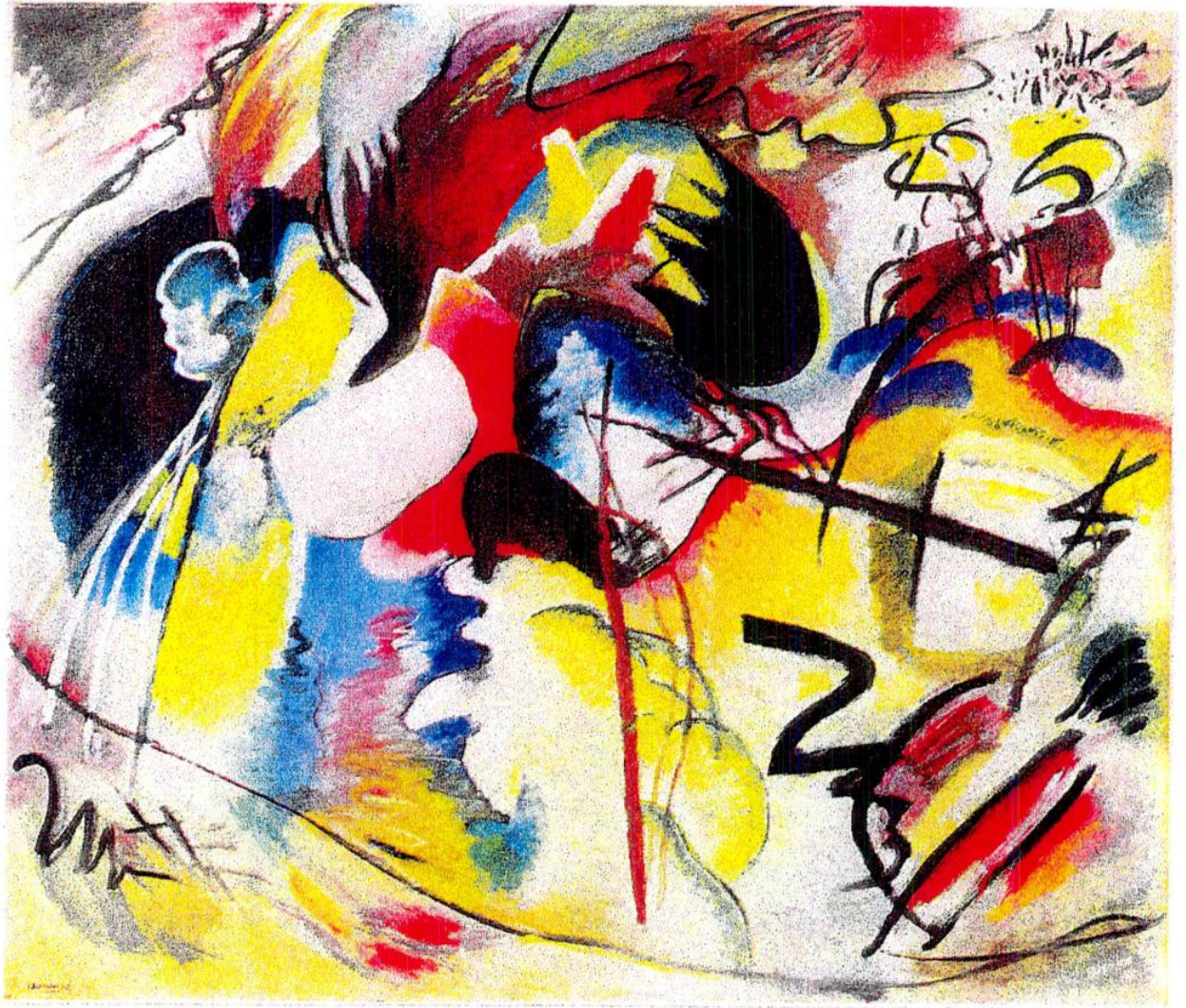


Figure B: Kandinsky
Painting with White Form(1913)

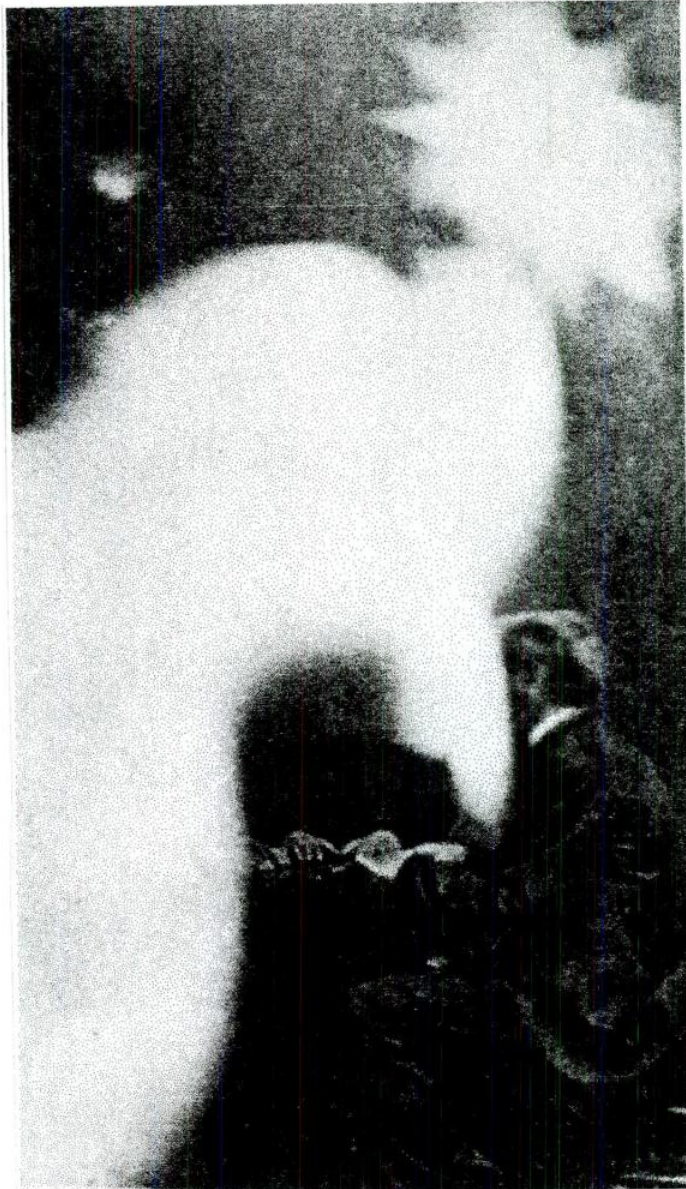


Figure O: Mediumistic photograph



Figure P: Mediumistic photograph

Occult photographs were also of interest to Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, two leading English Theosophists, who took over from Madam Blavatsky. Evidence of this interest is contained in the introduction to their book 'Thought-Forms'. "Clairvoyants were occasionally justified by the appearance on sensitive photographic plates of figures. . ." (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 2) Besant and Leadbeater claimed to have clairvoyant abilities and were committed to exploring man's powers and the existence of man's invisible nature. In 1901 they produced a series of books based on their experiments. In doing so, they came across, quite without realising, some of the very first modern images. They believed that they could illustrate emotions, in colour. In their book 'Thought-Forms' they discussed their observations on the power of thought and the forms it creates. They wrote many books dealing with the hidden side, although 'Thought-Forms' in particular was poured over by artists across Europe. It appeared in German translation in 1908 and Kandinsky and his friends whipped it up. There were many illustrations in this book executed by individuals under the guidance of Besant and Leadbeater. When we examine these illustrations we realise that they are essentially vague blobs of colour. Besant comments on these illustrations: "to paint in earth's dull colours the forms clothed in the living light of other worlds is a hard and thankless task". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, foreword.) Besant wrote that : "it is our earnest hope that this book will serve as a striking moral

lesson to every reader, making him realise the nature and power of his thoughts". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, foreword.)

If we look at the paintings Kandinsky produced particularly those before the First World War, we see very similar coloured areas within his work. Examples of this are shown in *Painting with Black Arch*, (1912) (fig C) and *Small Pleasures*, (1913) (fig D). It seems that there is little doubt as to where these coloured areas in Kandinsky's work originated from. The artist was, after all, trying to invent an abstract language which did not contain references to the real world.

Kandinsky was also suspected to have been influenced by Rudolf Steiner's colour theories. Steiner lectured that specific colours could indeed convey specific feelings. These influences, coupled with Kandinsky's acceptance of the concept of synaesthesia, which is defined in the dictionary as, "an unusual type of perception, in which sensations aroused by the stimulation of one sense organ are accompanied by sensations usually particular to another, when tones or flavours suggest colours" (Dictionary reference), led to Kandinsky making his own observations and proposals regarding the psychology of colour. The artist believed that his paintings could stimulate various reactions in the spectator. His belief that form, colour, lines and images each

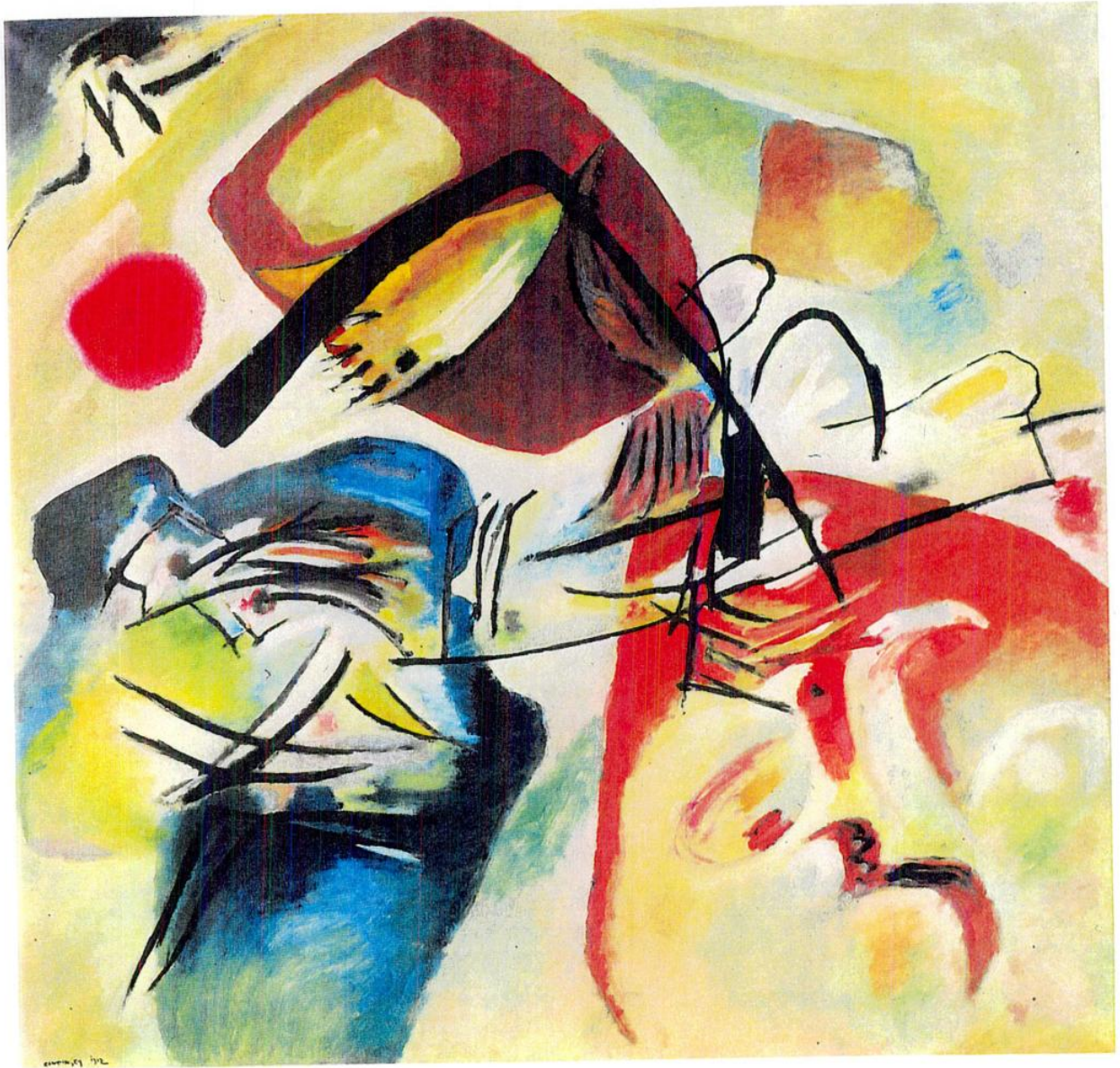


Figure C: **Kandinsky**
Painting with a Black Arch(1912)



Figure D: **Kandinsky**
Small Pleasures (1913)

contained stimuli, convinced him that his work could potentially communicate the spiritual.

By 1912 Kandinsky claimed that he had moved beyond what he called his "melodic" way of painting, and had moved towards a "symphonic" way of working. Interestingly, the artist refers to his work in musical terms. In 'Thought-Forms' we encounter a chapter based solely on 'Forms Built by Music'. The essence of this discussion is based on the idea that sound can produce form as well as colour: "every piece of music leaves behind it an impression which persists for some considerable time and is clearly visible and intelligible to those who have eyes to see. Some such forms are very striking and impressive and naturally, their variety is infinite". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 67)

Kandinsky's use of the power of colour in his paintings was of great importance. This use of colour as well as dematerialised forms and space, moved him towards creating his masterpieces of 1913 to 1914. It is interesting to know, however, that the artist still executed representational pieces even though he could communicate what was important to him, in non objective work. One particular representational oil painting is called *The lady in Moscow* (1912) (fig. E).

The literature that I have explored shows that Kandinsky had attended lectures by Steiner, had read the works of Blavatsky



Figure E: **Kandinsky**
Lady in Moscow (1912)

and Besant and may have even practised meditation. Keeping all of this in mind, we can examine the painting *The Lady in Moscow*, for what it genuinely seems to be. Fred Gettings sums up his interpretation of this painting which he has extensively researched and examined. For him, this piece is : "a philosophical reflection on the relationship which humanity holds to the visible and invisible worlds; it is a sermon on the occult nature of man". (Regier, 1987, p. 187)

When looking at this painting and the geometrical aspects are brought to our attention, we immediately notice that the canvas itself is a perfect square shape. Kathleen J Regier suggests that the structure of this piece may relate to Blavatsky's book 'Isis Unveiled'. This book puts forward the idea that the square, according to theosophical beliefs symbolises : "divine equity geometrically expressed. All the powers and great symphonies of physical and spiritual nature lie inscribed within the perfect square". (Regier, 1987, p. 188)

The lady in the painting is loosely framed within a triangle. Regier suggests that this triangular shape may have originated from ideas discussed in another of Blavatsky's books, 'The Secret Doctrine' : "A triangle represents the symbol of the septenary man". (Regier, 1987, p. 188). According to Regier, Blavatsky emphasises the belief that man is made up of seven

natures, three being spiritual natures and the other four being material natures.

We notice that to the lower left of the woman who is positioned in the centre, there is a blue coloured spire. Having explored Besant and Leadbeaters book 'Thought -Forms' we recognise this blue spire as a thought-form symbolising devotion, more specifically, an 'Upward Rush of Devotion' (fig F) : "The man who feels such devotion as this is one who knows in whom he has believed, the man who makes such a thought form as this is one who has taught himself how to think". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 36) Kandinsky is clearly showing his devotion towards this woman and what she represents as he places this spire shape thought-form close to her in the piece.

There is also a swirl of the colour red positioned on the right hand side of the woman. This is the thought-form relating to 'Radiating Affection' (fig G). Which is described as being : "intentionally generated since its author is making the effort to pour himself forth in love to all beings". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 33) . This form intends on suggesting an atmosphere of great love and affection.

Considering the amount of theosophical content within this piece, we can reasonably suggest that the lady surrounded by these thought-forms may be a representation of Madam

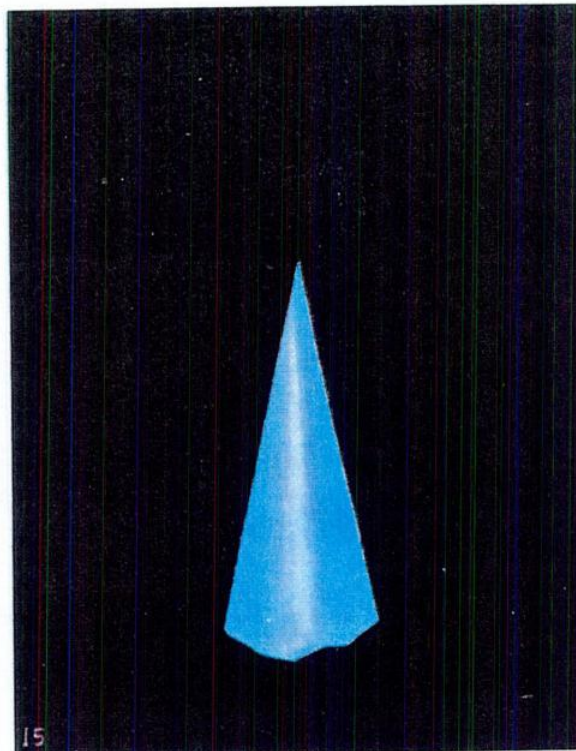


Figure F: *Upward Rush of Devotion*

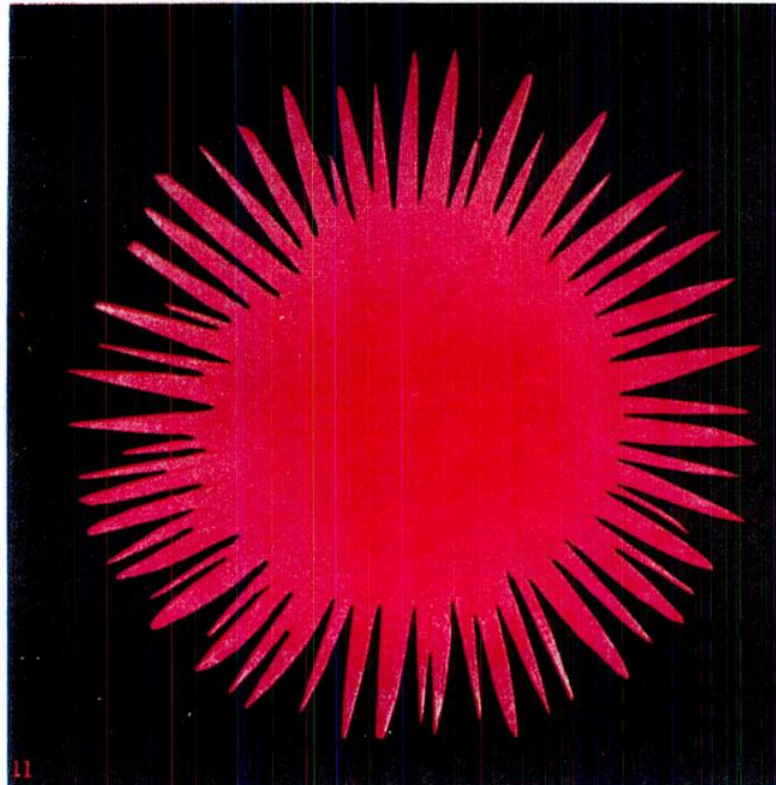


Figure G: *Radiating Affection*

Blavatsky herself, Kandinsky proclaiming his affection and devotion towards her.

In the artist's 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' he discusses the age in which he lives containing much conflict. He compares this atmosphere of fear and insecurity to that of a person at sea on a stormy night where, "black clouds gather over the sea the dry land is hidden in mist and the bleak wind heaps up the water into black mountains". (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982, p. 140) In the painting *The Lady in Moscow* we see that the artist is portraying, in the background, a city that is going through mystical changes. The sky is dark, the sun is covered over by a large black form. This background composition may be influenced by Rudolf Steiner's belief that the world must go through calamity before experiencing paradise. Kandinsky expresses his views in writing : " Our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit and of the downfall of the purely material world-view. " (Washton-Long, 1980, p. 6). More specifically in chapter 3 of 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' Kandinsky describes in detail what we see before us in *Lady in Moscow* . He talks of a "spiritual city" experiencing "sudden disturbances". He goes on to say that "the sun framed so artistically shows spots and darkens and what can replace it in the fight against darkness?" (Lindsay and Vergo, 1982, p. 142) Kandinsky also discusses the forces that threaten the spiritual. He describes them as combining to resemble a "great dead black expanse". (Lindsay and Vergo,

1982, p. 134), not unlike the black shape that we see covering the sun in *Lady in Moscow* . In the same year the artist painted this piece, Kandinsky illustrated this dark force in a piece simply entitled *Black Spot*.

After exploring this piece *Lady in Moscow* we can accept Fred Gettings opinion that it is overall, a unique piece of work representing Kandinsky's occultist beliefs.

The philosophical explorations that Kandinsky pursued in his paintings and in his written work, allow him a secure place as an important founder of modern art. In his desire to communicate his concepts to the spectator it is understandable that his work was as a result of the many sources and influences Kandinsky accumulated throughout his endeavours.

Chapter : Three

Piet Mondrian

Piet Mondrian follows the same path as Kandinsky as far as his interest in theosophy and the occult is concerned.

However, it can never be said that the work of Kandinsky and the work of Mondrian is alike.

The work of Piet Mondrian has had a great influence on art in general and, particularly, the art of today. His work does not only continue to influence painting, but also architecture, designer clothing, packaging for various products, fashion accessory design and television advertising. Mondrian has so far achieved what he intended to accomplish; his paintings and writings were meant to influence the design of the world and portray something optimistic for the future. In a way, he wanted to change the viewer of his work into a different kind of person.

Many art historians who have specifically researched the work and interests of Mondrian, have brushed over the subject of theosophy. This gives the impression that Mondrian's interest in theosophy does not merit notability. However, through my research I have come to realise that it is important to keep in mind, however much theosophy may be rejected, or indeed even ignored, it cannot be disregarded.

Mondrian was a member of two Theosophical Society lodges - one in Amsterdam which he joined in 1909, another in Paris

which he joined as late as 1938 (fig N). This, surely, is evidence enough to suggest that many of his works may have been executed based on his interest in theosophy. In his early work the artist teased out theosophical ideas relating to geometry, colour and balance. He ultimately became so passionate about his findings that he envisaged a style of his own which he called 'Neo-Plasticism'. The theory articulated in Mondrian's writing formed the basis of a geometric style that we recognise to be Mondrian today, whereas, it is difficult to connect the artist to his very theosophically representational pieces.

We see published evidence of Mondrian's early interest and involvement with theosophy in a letter addressed to the Amsterdam writer and critic Israel Querido. This letter was written by Mondrian in the summer of 1909, shortly after his initiation to the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam. Mondrian was commenting on Querido's article in the magazine 'De Controleur'. In this article Querido reviewed an exhibition of the paintings of Spoor, Mondrian and Sluyters. He was enthusiastic about Mondrian's work and commented on the painting *Devotion* (1908) (fig H). Querido described the painting as representing a girl in the act of prayer. Mondrian was dissatisfied with the critic's interpretation and although he wanted his paintings to go beyond the physical world, he remained concerned about how spectators viewed his work. As a result, Mondrian wrote a



Figure N: Mondrian Meditating

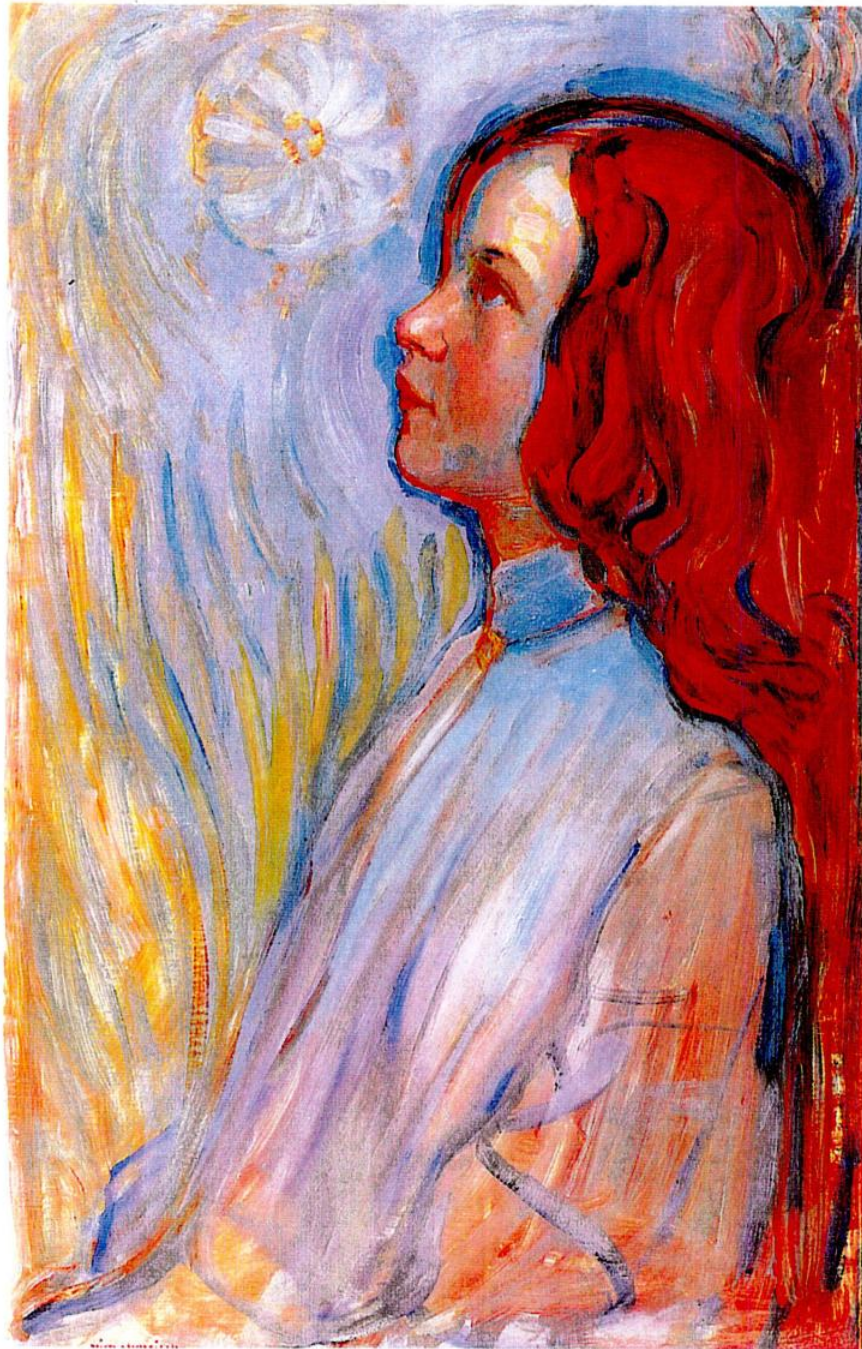


Figure H: **Mondrian**
Devotion (1908)

letter in order to correct this misunderstanding: "I seem to have expressed to you incorrectly, if I made you believe that I wanted the girl to express a prayerful act. With that work I only envisaged a girl conceived devotedly". (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 35). For Mondrian this painting was meant to portray an emotional feeling of devotion.

I will examine this piece and keep the influence of the spiritual in mind, hoping to reveal the true artist's interpretation. We are presented with the profile of a young girl placed within a space which we cannot determine. The girl appears to be in a somewhat meditative state, concentrating on an ethereal flower that is floating in front of her eyes. The way in which the brush strokes are executed allows for a lot of movement within the piece. The artist's use of colour is also very vivid. Initially, we might say that this painting does not contain elements that point towards a specific interest in theosophy. Therefore, we can accept and understand the reasoning behind Querido's interpretation of this piece *Devotion*. More importantly, however, we must take on board and investigate the meaning given, and originally intended, by Mondrian. On receiving Mondrian's letter, Querido acknowledged the importance of its content and decided to publish it, in its entirety, as opposed to justifiably commenting on it himself. Consequently this letter became the first piece of writing by Mondrian, to be published. He wrote, "...I try to attain occult knowledge for

myself in order better to understand the nature of things". (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 36) It is clear from Mondrian's writing that he intends to pursue his interest in the hidden side of things in order to heighten his understanding of the world.

The use of colour in the painting *Devotion* is of great importance and Mondrian explains why: "By giving the hair that sort of red, to tone down the material side of things, to suppress any thoughts about 'hair', 'costume' etc. and to stress the spiritual". (Blotkamp, 1994, p.35) The colour red itself, is not necessarily a spiritual colour. However, Mondrian's use of an unnatural reddish tone, is given a spiritual role in this painting. The artist intends this colour to exist within the work to distract the viewer, moving the attention away from the girl's material existence. This use of colour and also the use of symbolism in this piece may have resulted because of two particular theosophical influences.

One influence is the writings of Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater. Their book 'Thought-Forms', which we discussed previously in relation to Kandinsky, explores and discusses the meaning of colours. It contains colour charts that refer specific colours to specific feelings or states of spirituality. Thought-forms themselves are coloured accordingly. A particularly bright yellow hue may suggest 'high intellect' (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p.1) and the colour blue in varying degrees of brightness suggests

'Devotion To A Noble Ideal,' 'High Spirituality' or 'Pure Religious Feeling' (fig I). We can suspect that this book may have influenced the content Mondrian decided on in his painting *Devotion*. Therefore we can speculate that the most appropriate thought form appears to be figure 17, 'The Response To Devotion' (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 36.) (fig J). This thought-form is pictured as a blue spire placed in front of a background containing a lot of energy. It is described by Besant as suggesting : "A very great strengthening and uplifting...the spreading all about him of a most powerful and beneficent influence". (Besant and Leadbeater, 1925, p. 38) On the left side of the painting *Devotion* we see a mass of energy created by the way in which the brush strokes are executed. Coloured blue, this energy moves above and around the young girl. If we observe carefully the boundaries of this textured blue area we may realise that it is vaguely, the shape of a downward pointing spire.

Another influence on the content of this painting may be found in the work of the leader of the German Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner. As it happens, Mondrian had little time for or interest in books and possessed only a few which he kept until his death. Among these were some of Steiner's lecture notes with particular passages underlined. Steiner discusses how, "Impulses...time and time again must work themselves into

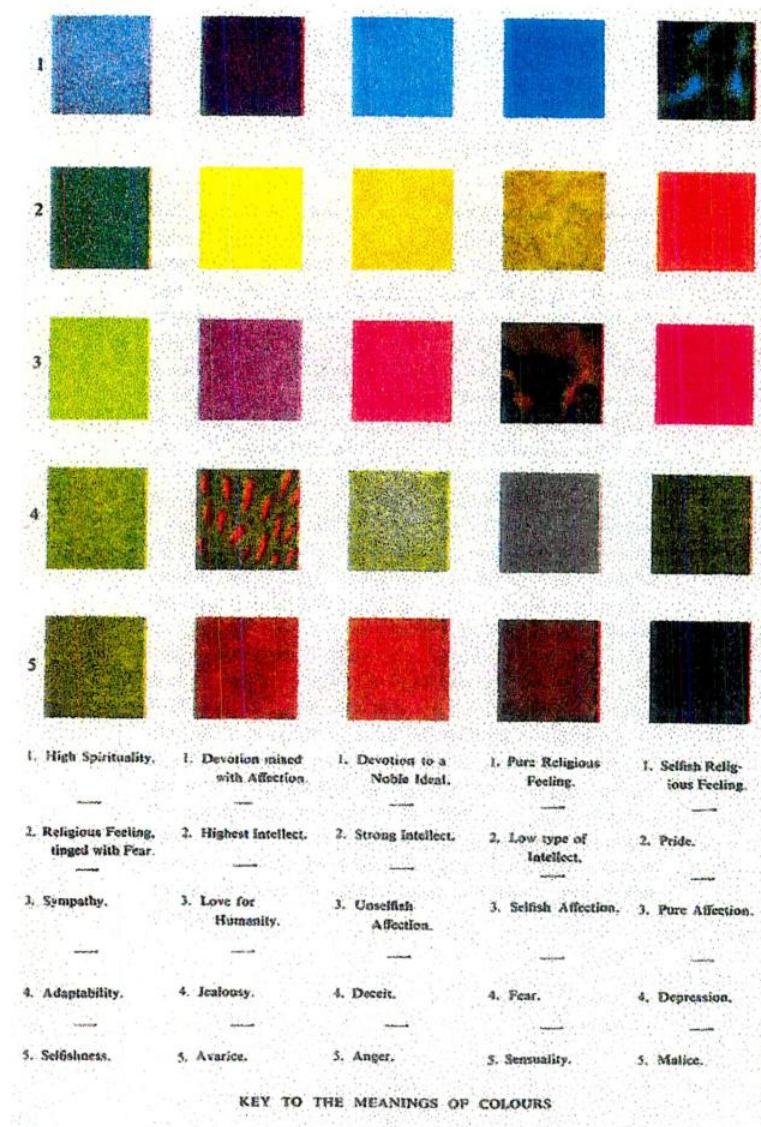


Figure I: Key to the Meanings of Colours

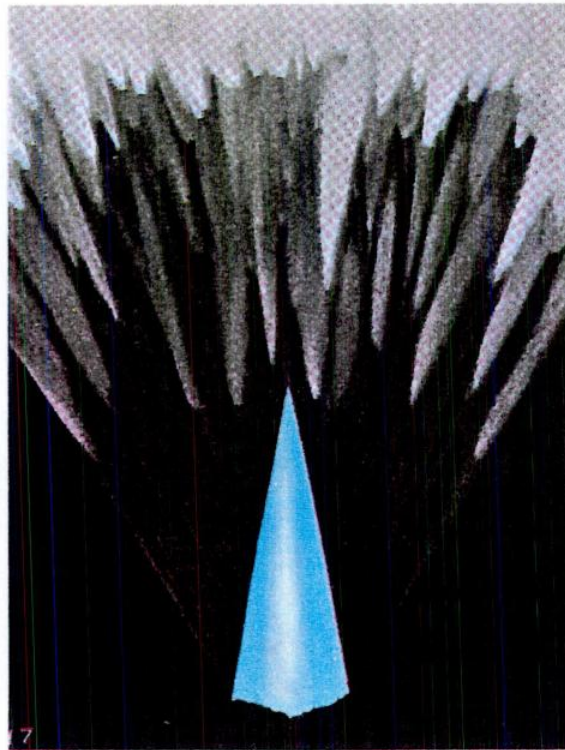


Figure J: *The Response to Devotion*

the etheric body, can be awakened by devotional religious feelings, true art, music". (Regier, 1987, p. 168)

Robert P. Welsh in his essay 'Mondrian and Theosophy', discusses Steiner and tells of Steiners belief in true devotion. Welsh explains that Steiner believed true devotion could be acquired through meditation. Steiner states that, in order to find the path leading to devotion, one must examine and carefully observe the mystical forms within plant life in particular. This may explain the use of the mystical flower within Mondrian's painting.

Welsh goes on to suggest that Mondrian's representation of a young girl in *Devotion* may also be related to Steiner's belief that young girls are sometimes gifted with feelings of devotion. There is a particular way in which this feeling may be experienced: through mental attention and visual concentration. As the viewer, we notice the young girl's face in the painting is alert and her eyes are wide open. We can feel the intensity in her stare.

Steiner has also lectured on the significance of colour in art. Like Bessant and Leadbeater, he associates blue with devotion and red with affection. Mondrian continues, in his letter to Querido, to say : "I believe that a painter's conscious spiritual knowledge will have a much greater influence on his art". (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 36)

Welsh suggests that in executing this painting, Mondrian may have been intentionally attempting to replicate an image from a dream or a vision. In doing so Mondrian is showing the viewer of the work, and also his peers that he is familiar with meditation and reaching a higher state of consciousness.

In another of Mondrian's paintings *Evolution* (1911) (fig. K) we can see almost immediately the conscious decision by the artist to execute a piece incorporating ideas derived from theosophy. This painting, along with *Devotion* and some other exclusively theosophical works, do not fit in with Mondrian's later work which allow him to be referred to as the ultimate clean cut modernist.

In Mondrian's triptych *Evolution* , it seems that he is attempting to make a statement about life. Traditionally, this would have been done through the use of biblical subjects and mythology. However, the content of this painting is coming directly from Mondrian's commitment to the beliefs and doctrines associated with theosophy. The artist's imagery is referring to Madame Blavatsky's interpretation of evolution which according to Welsh, is not completely unlike Darwin's theory of evolution. Blavatsky's evolution is said to resemble that of Hinduism. It emphasises the spiritual travelling through a cosmic cycle of birth, death and rebirth. According to Blavatsky's theory, the only mistake that Darwin made was

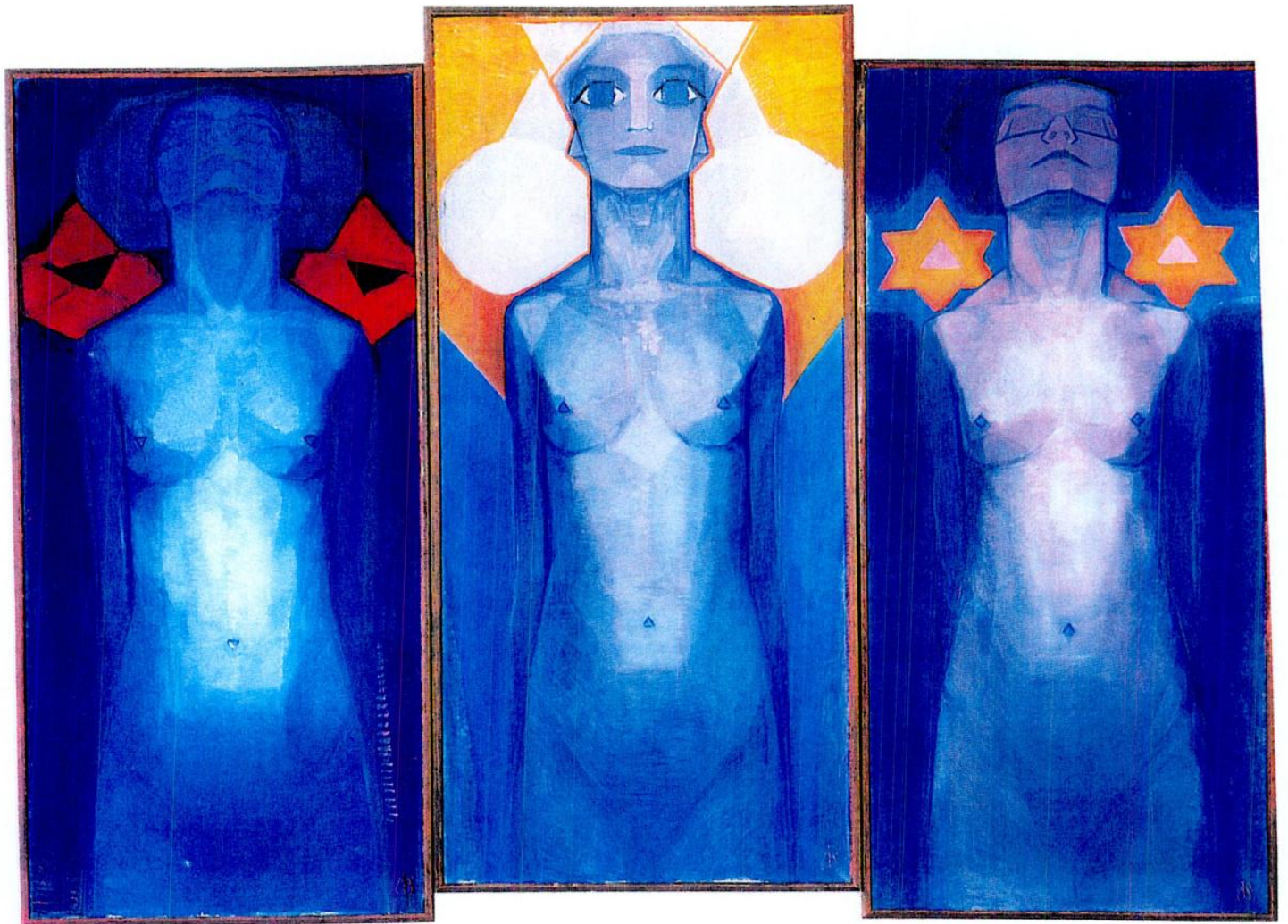


Figure K: *Mondrian*
Evolution (1911)

positioning matter, as opposed to the spiritual, as the principal force in the universe. Robert P. Welsh has examined Mondrian's early theosophical pieces in great detail, *Evolution* being one of them and comments on why the artist may have been moved to execute the mystical *Evolution* triptych : "In his sketch books of circa 1912 - 1914 . . . he specifically alludes to the theosophic doctrine of evolution as a determining factor in the history of art". (Regier, 1987, p.174).

When we examine this painting we may notice that Mondrian portrays images of the naked body for the first time. It is thought that his Calvinist background would have prevented him from doing so earlier. The three female figures stand very upright, their shoulders pushed backwards. The figure on the left hand side of the piece, stands with her eyes closed and head tilted upwards, as if she is in the middle of meditation. We see a similar pose in an earlier painting by Mondrian called *Passion Flower* (1901) (fig L). The central figure contained in the largest piece of the triptych, has her eyes wide open suggesting that she has reached a higher spiritual state. Furthermore, if we look at the way in which her eyes are constructed, we realise that they have been somewhat geometricised. The background too consists of geometrically painted circles and stars. Mondrian, in fact, geometricised all the elements in this piece. What would ordinarily be round in shape, like the pupils of the eyes, is made up of several

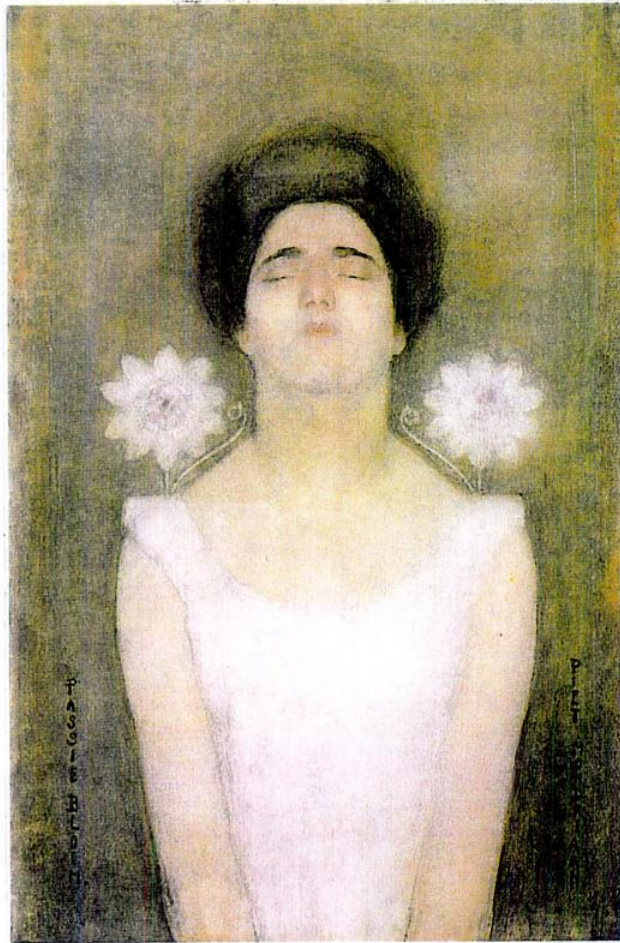


Figure L: **Mondrian**
Passion Flower (1901)

straight lines. By doing this Mondrian is trying to give a highly spiritual atmosphere to this painting. He is directly relating to Blavatsky's belief that God geometricises. For Blavatsky, geometry was, essentially, the structural sign of God's hand. She states that : "The philosophical cross, the two lines running in opposite directions, the horizontal and the perpendicular, the height and the breadth, which the geometricising deity divides at the intersecting point...is the basis of the occultist". (Regier, 1987, p.179).

When the *Evolution* triptych (1911) and another painting *Dune Landscape* (1911) (fig M) were exhibited together in 1911 the public reaction was far from positive. Mondrian was severely criticised and his works were described as "Empty". He was called "A True Brother" (Deicher, 1995, p.24) which suggests that critics were not impressed by his subject matter deriving from the theosophical. Because *Evolution* is probably the most exclusively theosophical piece of Mondrian's, it is quite often seen as vulgar to the critical modern eye. However it is viewed, it must be acknowledged as a piece that proved to be very important as far as Mondrian's later work is concerned. In *Evolution* Mondrian explored the theosophical view of evolution itself, which led him to geometry, and this he used exclusively in his later work.



Figure M: **Mondrian**
Dune Landscape (1911)

Mondrian stated "My idea of evolution in art is entirely consistent with theosophical writing". (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 77) Theosophical doctrines point towards the importance of "The Four Points Of The Cross", which "Represent in succession earth, life, death and immortality". (Regier, 1987, p. 180). Coupled with the influence of Cubism, which Mondrian discovered in Paris, we can see how, for example, the painting *Composition With Blue Grey and Pink* (1913), could be viewed as one of Mondrian's first tributes to geometric form and composition, which point straight to Blavatsky's philosophical interpretation of the cross.

Mondrian left Holland destined for Paris, when he had completed *Evolution*. As he began to take on elements of the Cubist style, it became evident that the artist's interpretation of Cubism was very much his own. He began to break down his imagery allowing it to become more fragmented and, as a result, more difficult to interpret. He did not follow the Cubist rules when it came to volume and so his paintings were flat in appearance. What the artist was doing at this time was using superficial elements from the Cubist language combined with his theosophical beliefs to create his own particular style. In studying theosophy Mondrian had learned that the real world was covered in a veil of appearance and he wanted his paintings to allow the spectator a glimpse of the world underneath this veil - the real world. The adaption of Cubism gave Mondrian the means to express this belief.

By 1913, Mondrian's work was made up of almost pure line, horizontals and verticals intersecting each other. He was using what theosophy viewed as essentially the basic universal forms. In the eyes of the theosophist, geometry was seen as that which distinguished the ordinary world from the higher world. Welsh points out interesting similarities between the ideas and work of Mondrian and writings of Madame Blavatsky : "Considering the importance of simple two dimensional geometric forms to theosophical teaching, it is not surprising that shortly after completing the *Evolution* triptych, Mondrian introduced and increasingly emphasised a free play of often crossing vertical and horizontal lines, as the basis of his evolving compositional experiments". (Washton-Long, 1980, p. 147)

Mondrian found the urban architecture of Paris inspiring. He made drawings of planes of interior walls, exposed as a result of the demolition of the exterior. These walls bore remnants of wallpaper and paint, allowing for patches of colour on flat surfaces. As subject matter, this was exciting for Mondrian because the flat surface of the building wall could be unified with the flat surface of the canvas. Mondrian looked at these patches of colour closely; they provided him with a loose grid within which he could articulate plains of colour. This subject matter was in keeping with theosophist principals, the process of examining the elements that lie behind the veil of

appearances. In 1914 Mondrian wrote to the editor and critic H.P. Bremmer about his work : "I construct complexes of lines and colours on flat planes so as to plastically express universal beauty . . . with the use of horizontal and vertical lines constructed consciously but without calculation, under the guidance of higher intuition". (James, 1986, p. 14) It is evident in the work Mondrian produced, between 1912 - 1913 that theosophy had been absorbed and the artist's work was almost completely different.

In 1913 the Dutch journal 'Theosophia' asked Mondrian to write an essay discussing theosophy and art. Mondrian placed a lot of importance on this responsibility and put a lot of effort and time into his essay. Unfortunately, the essay was rejected and it appears that Mondrian may not have been entirely surprised by this reaction. Evidence of this is contained in a letter he wrote to H P Bremmer: "It will appear at the end of the month if they do not find it too anarchistic". (James, 1986, p. 15)

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 caught Mondrian by surprise; he was in Holland at the time visiting his family. The war prevented him from returning to Paris. Fortunately enough the interest in Mondrian's work in his native country was increasing. This enforced break allowed the artist to look back on the many changes and phases that had occurred regarding his work. As a result of this, he slowly became

more certain about himself and in what direction his work was going. Mondrian always had a great interest and love for the sea, and began to re-examine it as a theme for his work. He executed a series of paintings based on the motif of the pier and ocean. These particular paintings are recognised today as an important turning point for Mondrian and the world of painting. This new style was abstract without being purely decorative and was full of content without being illustrative.

During these years in Amsterdam, Mondrian became a close friend of the painter and critic Theo Van Doesburg. Together they decided to form a group which they called 'De Stijl' - The Style. They also published a magazine in which they aired their views. This magazine allowed Mondrian to accompany his work with personal written discussions regarding his ideas and beliefs. The artist saw these writings as providing the key to his paintings. He openly wanted his paintings and writings to be recognised collectively as a suggestion of something optimistic and exciting for the future. Many of the painters and designers that were part of the 'De Stijl' group shared the same interest. Essentially, they wanted to redesign the world.

When Mondrian returned to Paris after the War he concentrated a lot of effort into designing and redesigning his studio, putting the order and harmony he had experimented with in his paintings to practical use. By the end of 1920

Mondrian arrived at what he called 'Neo-Plasticism'. This theory is articulated in Mondrian's essay 'Neo-Plasticism : The General Principal of Plastic Equivalence'. When put to use, this theory formed the basis of the artist's own personal style. Theosophical ideas, coupled with experimentation, ultimately pushed Mondrian to create Neo-Plasticism. Mondrian's theory found a perfect balance between line and colour, allowing for a unique harmony. This parallels Blavatsky's way of thinking which suggests that one arrives at the ultimate state of spiritual grace and harmony through a process of evolution by a progressive reconciliation of opposites. Blavatsky's vision of a future perfect world is also interesting in relation to the fact that Mondrian's plastic works were clearly not meant for the present but for the future. In Blavatsky's book 'Key to Theosophy' she says, : "The twenty-first-century would be heaven by comparison to what...is now". (Regier, 1987, p. 191). If, according to theosophy, the future is meant to be a utopia, then Mondrian's work was executed intentionally to aid the bringing about of this utopian society.

We can, in many ways, regard 'Neo-Plasticism' as the new force for Mondrian's spiritual ideas ; however, it did not replace theosophy. He joined the French Lodge of the Society late in his life and ideas that Mondrian acquired from theosophy influenced his work continually. Mondrian's essay 'Home - Street - City' of 1926 is accompanied by sketches that

the artist executed of layouts for rooms. One room in particular was planned and improved many times over. These drawings are very interesting and were installed at the Pace Gallery, New York, in 1970. Mondrian named this room 'Salon de Madame B'. in obvious homage to Madame Blavatsky(fig.Q). In his essay accompanying these sketches, he states : "The creation of a sort of Eden is not impossible if there is the will. To be sure this cannot be done in a day, but by giving all our effort we can not only achieve it in time but can start to enjoy its benefits even tomorrow". Mondrian continues, "...and man?...he will be happy in the Eden he will have created". (Holtzman, 1970, p. 14)

The main characteristic of Mondrian's work in his last period is the way in which he balanced the complex structure of his compositions. The dynamic vitality of these works reached levels of great intensity. Mondrian insisted at this time in keeping his studio and surroundings as controlled as his paintings. The artist believed that his work of the 'twenties and 'thirties were his attempt to pare down forms and colours contained in the world so that they would be universal shapes. He felt that through studying theosophy he had actually found what he thought to be the basic structural principals of the universe. Significantly, among the few things Mondrian possessed was a portrait of Madame Blavatsky which he cherished, and which remained in his studio until his death in 1944.

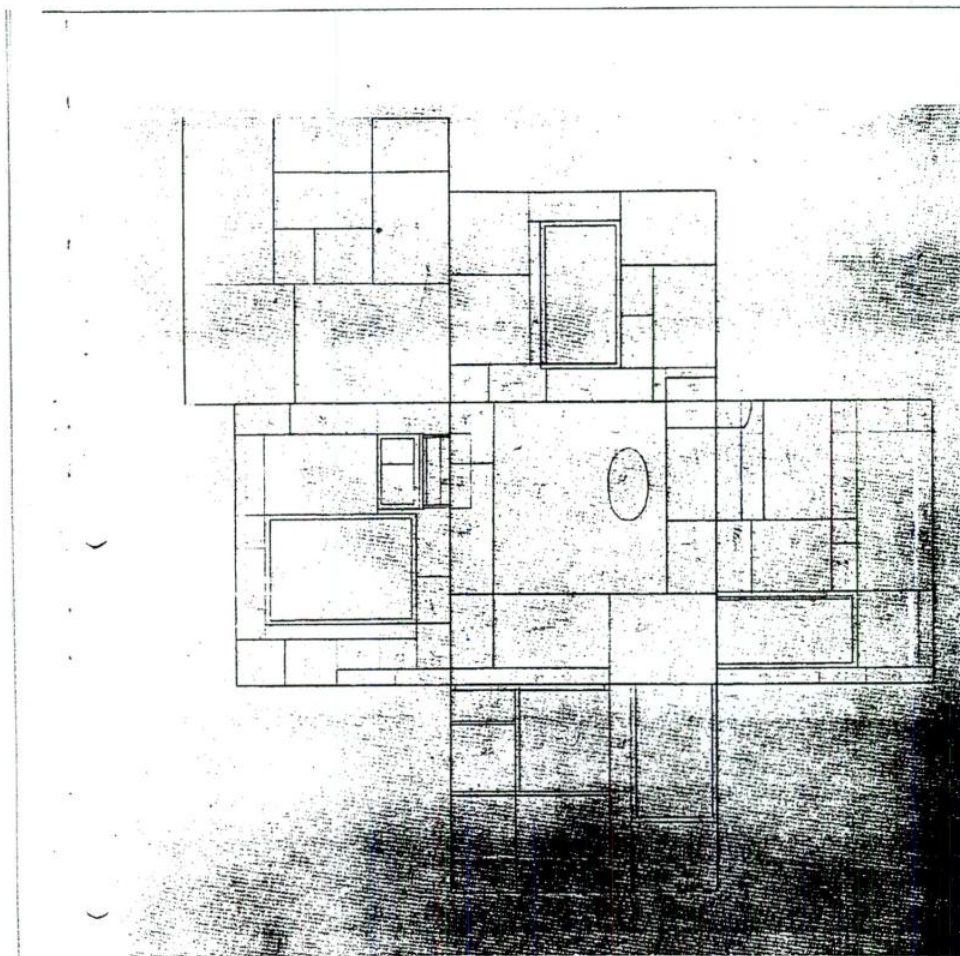


Figure Q: Mondrian
Drawing for Salon de Madame B..

Conclusion

Having previously studied Abstraction on a broad and general scale my interest in the work of these two particular artists Kandinsky and Mondrian became apparant to me. I explored each of their backgrounds and interests in the hope of finding the main influences that guided them through their careers. I was surprised to discover similarities between these two artists. Similarities that seemed quite bizarre at first - spiritualism; the hidden side; theosophy and meditation. After much exploration these similarities seemed to be so powerful that I was convinced they needed to be addressed. However, in order to discuss these interests, I had to understand theosophical beliefs and what was contained within the spiritual. I found myself reading literature that dealt with meditation, exploring the power of the mind, and the power of the use of colour. . etc and also desperately searching for proof that this interest in theosophy actually existed, as such a great deal of speculation seemed to surrounded it.

I acquired theosophical literature and biographical literature on each artist and was amazed at what I discovered. Ultimately, theosophy appeared to be the very inspiration behind Kandinsky and Mondrian's work. I came to the conclusion that, theosophy in itself needed to be addressed in a manner that was comprehensive and easily comprehensible.

The element of theosophy in the work of Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky is not at all evident to the unassuming viewer pondering over either *Evolution (1911)* - Mondrian, or *Lady in Moscow (1912)* -Kandinsky. However we must accept that this work does contain theosophical references.

The lack of attention given to the spiritual element within abstract art may be due to the fact that the coming of the First World War brought more serious realities to mind and as a result the existence of, and interest in, magic was forced underground. Both Mondrian and Kandinsky continued to be devoted to theosophy and the spiritual although they may not have made this publicly known.

Today I, personally, see the work of both these artists in a very different light and have become tremendously curious about the subject of theosophy. I feel that even though both artists openly expressed their interests in the form of written essays contained in various publications, they, more importantly executed their work as a means of portraying what they held as true and close to them.

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