

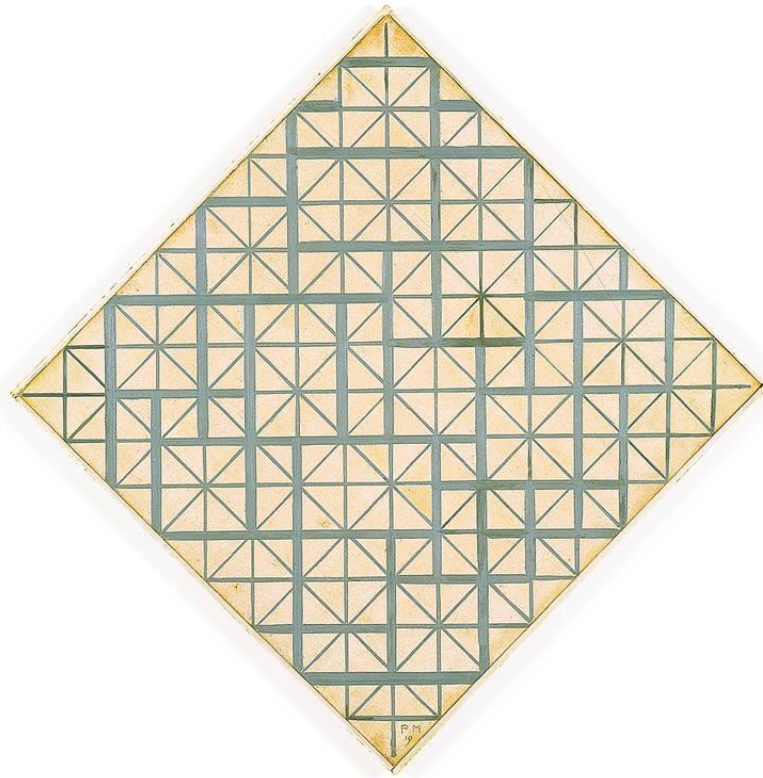
The Wall Street Journal
December 24-25, 2016

Masterpiece

Composition in Black and Gray: Composition With Grid 4 (Lozenge),
1919, by Piet Mondrian

A Starry Christmas

Piet Mondrian's 'Composition in Black and Gray' finds the spiritual in the abstract.



It presaged many of the artist's future works.

Photo: The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

by E.A. Carmean

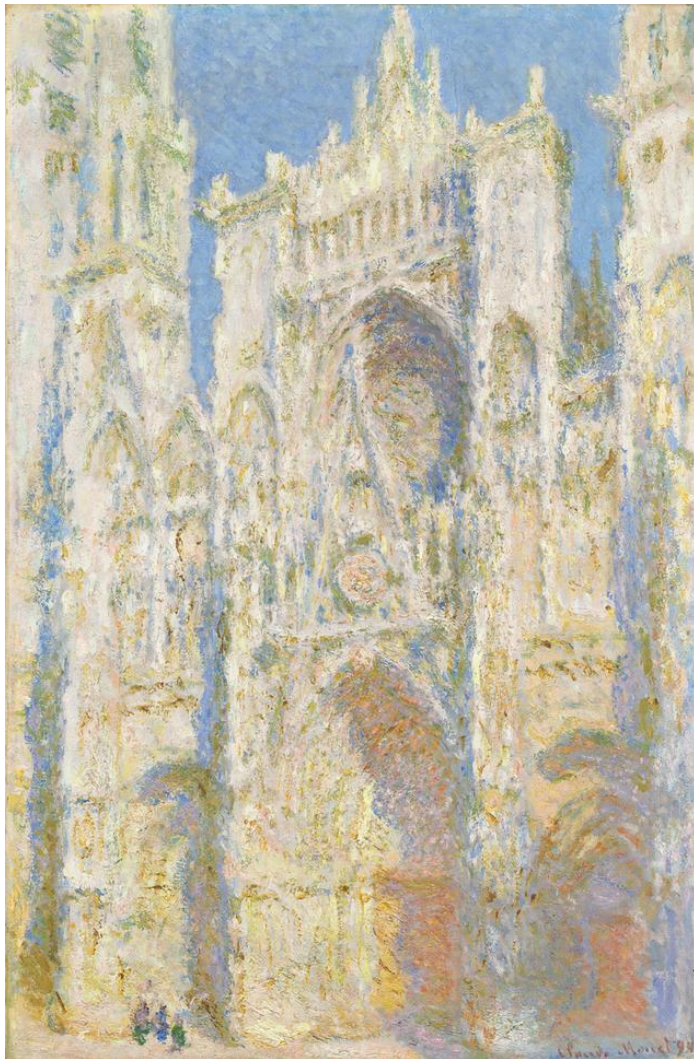
Piet Mondrian's "Composition in Black and Gray: Composition With Grid 4 (Lozenge)" (1919) is one of the Dutch modern master's most intriguing works. This diamond-shaped painting—a square turned 45 degrees to hang on one corner—is rather modest in size, stretching 33 1/2 inches across from point to point.

The diamond or lozenge format had been conventionally decorative. It became Mondrian's serious touchstone; "Composition in Black and Gray" is the second of his 16 *losangique* paintings, spread out over the artist's last 25 years. It is now in the Arensberg Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The composition is deceptively simple. Eight rows of eight squares form a grid aligned with the diagonal edges of the canvas. In turn, these individual squares are diagonally quartered, for a total of 256 right isosceles triangles.

There are counter-features. Mondrian broadened some horizontal and vertical lines to make squares, double-squares and rectangles on the grid. Within this axial structure, the cross-crossing diagonal lines produce an “optical flutter.” The consummate assurance of “Composition in Black and Gray” is remarkable, realizing at once an aesthetic that would inform the rest of Mondrian’s career. Here we see the planes-and-lines structure of the artist’s pictures from the 1930s and the visual “pop” of color bands and blocks in his last works. And—skipping a generation—this painting’s forthright grid and bold physical shape set the precedent for the Minimalism of the 1960s.

Still, an exclusively formal reading of “Composition in Black and Gray” misses its intended identity. The painting is the masterpiece of the pictures from 1915-1919 one can gather under the term “starry sky.” Further, in 1915 when a critic described one of these works having a “Christmas mood,” Mondrian agreed “if one understands the Christmas idea in a really abstract way...the predominance of the spiritual.”



Claude Monet 'Rouen Cathedral, West Façade, Sunlight' (1894) Photo: National Gallery of Art

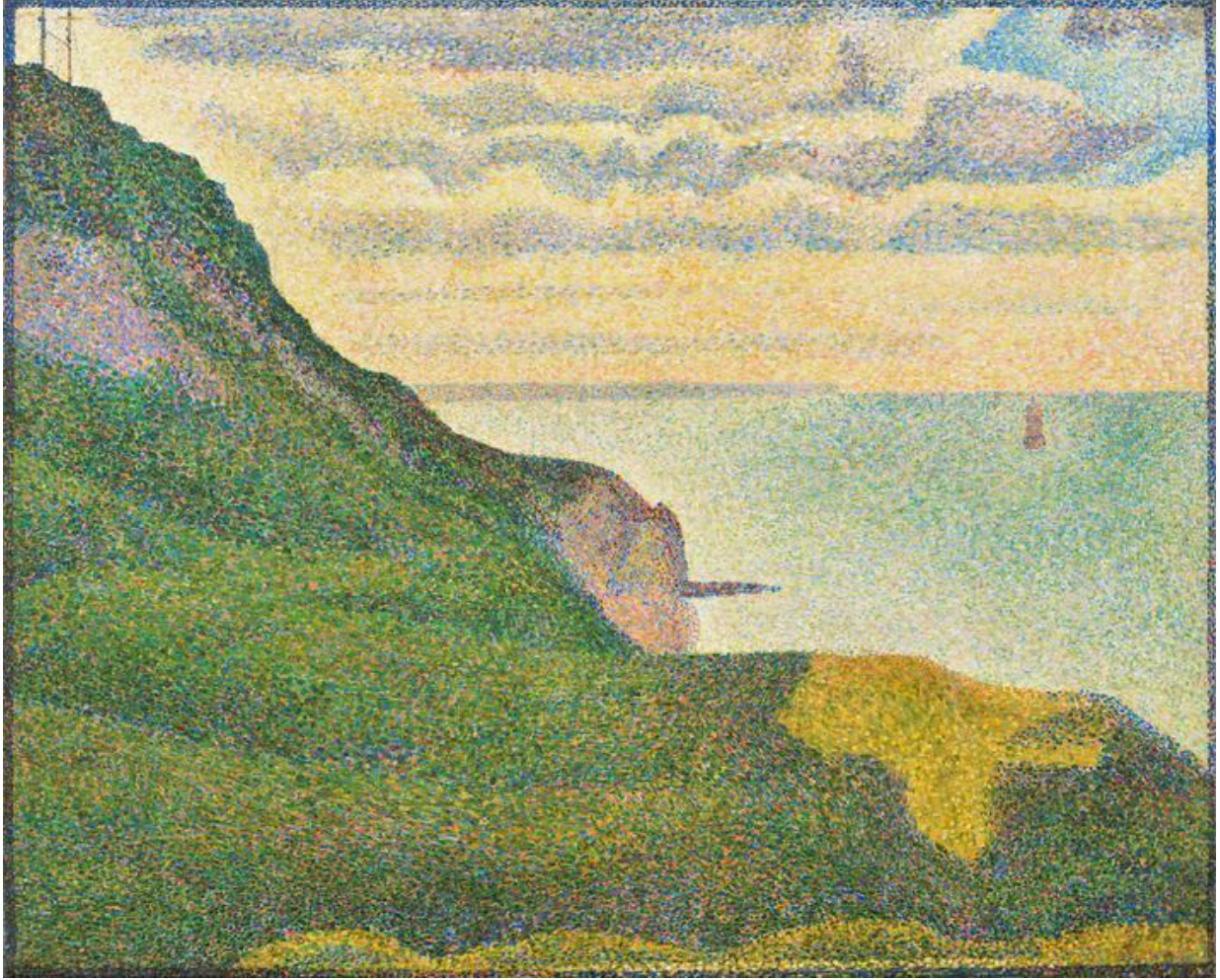
Piet Mondrian Jr. (1872-1944) was the son of a Dutch Reformed Church educator who was also an artist. The father's works included lithographic scenes of the Nativity and of the Three Magi.

The younger Mondrian was influenced by the Post-Impressionist works of Georges Seurat and of fellow-countryman Vincent van Gogh, the latter receiving a posthumous exhibition in Amsterdam in 1905. Mondrian's subjects include landscape trees, as well as ocean dunes painted at Domburg on the North Dutch coast.

Mondrian's second wave of modernism came when living in Paris between 1912 and 1914. His "tree" paintings adopted the linear scaffolding of Picasso's Cubist pictures; Mondrian's new "building facade" compositions are indebted to the glimmering sunlit surfaces rendered in Claude Monet's Rouen Cathedral series.

World War I confined Mondrian to Holland, and he returned to the Domburg shoreline. There, taking a cue from the Pointillist color "dots" of Seurat's own coastal pictures, Mondrian used short horizontal, vertical and crossing bars to create seascapes of a pier and the ocean, and soon, a starry sky above.

The artist's initial scenes came from his seaside night-sky sketches; one colleague described these drawings as moving "away from reality [toward] the spiritual evocation of it." By 1919 and "Composition in Black and Gray," a more abstract starry sky represented his theological beliefs.



Georges Seurat's 'Seascape at Port-en-Bessin, Normandy' (1888) Photo: National Gallery of Art

Mondrian was attracted to both Catholic mysticism and Theosophical religious ideas around 1908. Theosophy—founded on the beliefs of Helena Blavatsky—stressed that a divine structure was hidden beneath everyday appearances. In 1915, the artist was briefly drawn to Christosophy—a merging of Theosophy with Christian theology created by a former Catholic priest. Mondrian had begun his diamond paintings before he broke away from Christosophy four years later.

“Composition in Black and Gray” joins these theological beliefs with the formal structures of Mondrian’s art to create an abstracted starry sky—a view of a continuous heavenly field cropped by the picture’s diagonal edges. Its “optical flutter” accords with the sparkling night sky Mondrian sketched four years earlier.

We approach the “Christmas mood” tangentially. Christian tradition includes both Matthew’s Gospel story of the single star leading the Magi to Bethlehem and legends about a sky of Nativity stars. Star references range from Christmas carols personifying the heavens—“The stars in the sky looked down where he lay” in “Away in a Manger”—to the popular representation of the stars in the Nativity sky, first by multiple candles and then by strings of electric lights on the traditional Christmas tree.



Vincent van Gogh's 'Starry Night' (1889) Photo: Museum of Modern Art, NY

The closest modern art precedent for Mondrian’s holy sky is Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” (1889), a painting Mondrian surely saw in the 1905 Amsterdam exhibition. Art history links Van Gogh’s distinct 11 stars with the Bible’s Genesis episode of Jacob’s dream that “eleven stars were bowing down to me” and, by extension, considers Van Gogh’s scene as a Christmas sky with 11 stars forming a typological forecast of the loyal disciples of Christ’s Passion.

Scholars also connect Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” with another “starry night” found in Victor Hugo’s “Les Misérables.” This text passage also reads like a description of Mondrian’s celestial structure in “Composition in Black and Gray”:

“He was there...moved in the darkness by the visible splendors of the constellations and the invisible splendor of God...lighted like a lamp in the center of a starry night...in the midst of the universal radiance of creation.”

—Mr. Carmean is an art historian and a canon in the Episcopal Church. He lives in Washington.

@2016 The Wall Street Journal