Wearing Mondrian
Yves Saint Laurent's Translation from High Art to Haute Couture*

• FREDERIQUE VAN REIJ •

Six dresses stole the show when the young French fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent (1936-2008) showed his autumn/winter collection to a select group of friends and regular clients on 2 August 1965. The sleeveless cream shifts with black lines and panels of colour were inspired by the abstract geometric paintings of the celebrated Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). In the days following the show the newspapers were full of rave reviews, and within weeks mass manufacturers in Europe and the United States started producing cheap copies. Fifty years later, the Mondrian dresses are iconic and can be found in museums all over the world, the Rijksmuseum among them (fig. 1). The Mondrian dress has become a household word, although Saint Laurent himself never called it that.

The six Mondrian dresses are all the same model: a sleeveless, knee-length shift dress with a round neck, falling straight from the bust so that it conceals the curves of the female body (fig. 2).[1] The dresses were made of wool jersey with a silk lining, apart from one made of silk crêpe. Each type has a number derived from the collection book containing the design sketches (fig. 3).[2]

Five of the six were designed as an 'ensemble' with a jacket; the sixth is a 'robe simple', just the dress. The panels on the dresses are separated by black lines, and vary in size and colour. No. 103, one of which is in the LACMA in Los Angeles, has panels in two shades of grey and cream. No. 77 (Costume Institute, Kyoto) has four panels in cream and red. No. 78 (not, as far as is known, in any museum collection) is black and cream. No. 81 (Metropolitan Museum, New York) has panels of blue, yellow, red and cream. No. 80 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London) is made of silk in red, yellow and cream. No. 102, lastly (Museum of Costume, Bath), given to the museum by the English ballerina Dame Margot Fonteyn and specially made to measure for her, has cream panels. The sketch for this dress differs from the photograph, because the design was altered when the dress was made.

Fig. 1
YVES SAINT LAURENT,
Mondrian Dress, 1965.
Wool and silk,
l. 80 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-2011-58;
purchased with
the support of
the BankGiro Loterij.

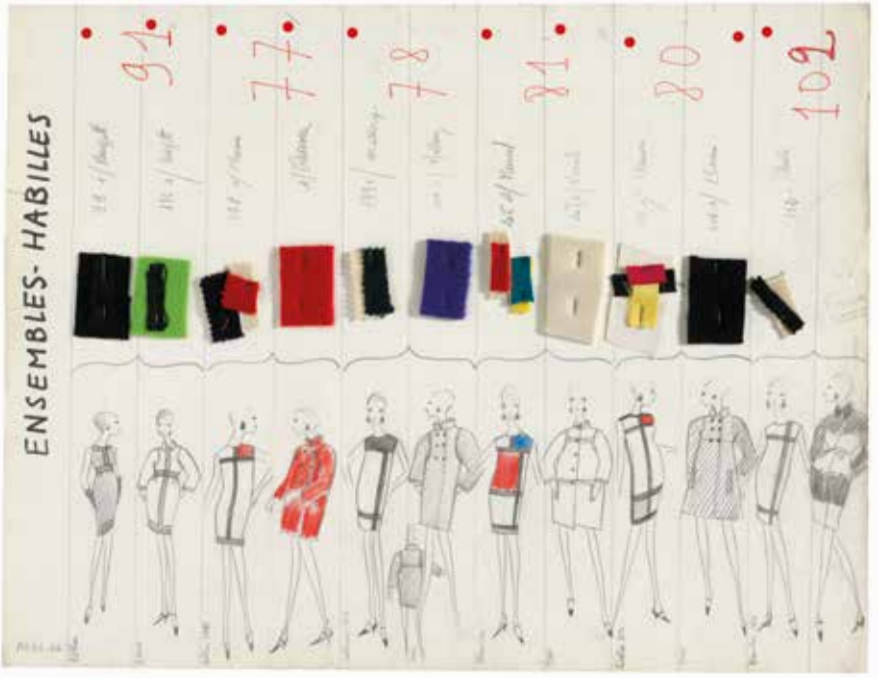
The Gemeentemuseum in The Hague has an extensive collection of twentieth-century fashion and an important collection of Mondrian's paintings, but they did not acquire a Mondrian dress. Nonetheless they were able to stage an event in 1966, where staff wore original Mondrian dresses, made by Saint Laurent, and posed for photographers in front of a Mondrian painting. The pictures appeared in Dutch newspapers the next day.

Fashion historians are divided in their opinions as to how many designs

Fig. 1
YVES SAINT LAURENT,
Mondrian Dress, 1965.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 2
a] Model no. 103.
Los Angeles, LACMA,
inv. no. M66.2;
gift of I. Magnin & Co.
Photo: © 2012 Digital
Image Museum
Associates/LACMA/
Art Resource NY/
Scala, Florence.

b] Model no. 77.
Kyoto, The Kyoto
Costume Institute,
inv. no. AC5626 87-18-1;
gift of Yves Saint
Laurent.
Photo: Taishi
Hirokawa.



c] Model no. 81.
New York, Costume Institute Metropolitan Museum, inv. no. c.169.23; gift of Mrs William Rand.
Photo: © 2012 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource/ Scala, Florence.

d] Model no. 80.
London, Victoria & Albert Museum, inv. no. T.369-1974; gift of Yves Saint Laurent.
Photo: © Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent, Paris/ Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

e] Model no. 102.
Bath & North East Somerset Council, Fashion Museum, inv. no. BATMC I.09.903; gift of Dame Margot Fonteyn.

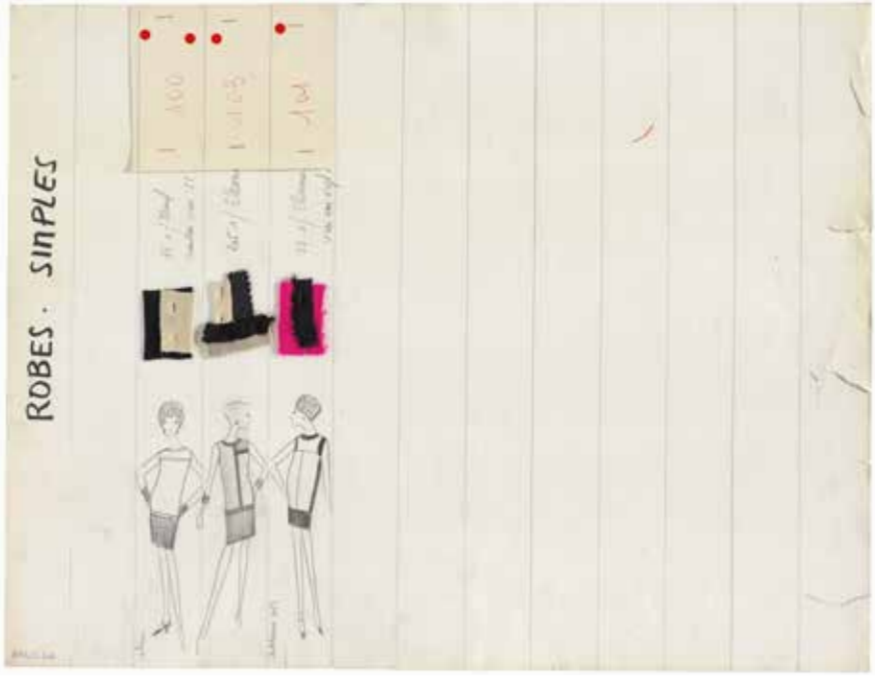


Fig. 3
Pages from the collection book with sketches by Yves Saint Laurent. With thanks to Fondation Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent.

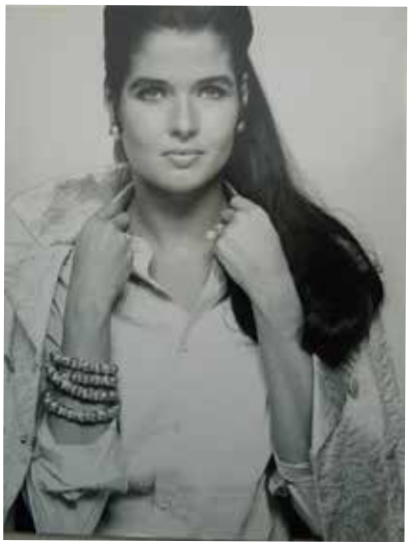


Fig. 4
Baroness Gabrielle van Zuylen van Nijevelt, with thanks to Stichting Kasteel de Haar and the Van Zuylen van Nijevelt van de Haar family.

in the 1965 autumn/winter collection can be called Mondrian dresses. At the very last moment Saint Laurent added a large number of designs, including the six types described above.[3] In his biography of Saint Laurent, Axel Madsen refers to twenty-five Mondrian dresses.[4] I suspect that he is including all the added designs that had some sort of geometric motif, most of which had no direct link to Mondrian's paintings (for instance fig. 3, model no. 91). Enquiries at the Fondation Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent in Paris (which I shall refer to hereafter as the Fondation Bergé)

Fig. 5
Yves Saint-Laurent with Baroness Gabrielle van Zuylen van Nijevelt, with thanks to Stichting Kasteel de Haar and the Van Zuylen van Nijevelt van de Haar family.

elicited the information that the curator, Laurence Neveu, considers there to be eight types: the six already mentioned and two longer dresses.[5] These are made from a different fabric and have a strip of fur over the shoulder. I have not taken them into account in my research because they differ too markedly from the dress in the Rijksmuseum. In the 2009 documentary *L'Amour Fou*, Saint Laurent's partner, Pierre Bergé, refers to six Mondrian dresses. Since he was one of Saint Laurent's intimates at the time and because the drawings in the collection book support this number, I have taken it as my starting point.

The Mondrian dresses in the collections referred to above are not the only ones in museums, and there are others in private collections, too. The Fondation Bergé in Paris, which is responsible for Saint Laurent's artistic legacy – including an archive of collection books – also has a number of dresses. It is hard to establish how many dresses altogether were made for private clients as the sales records are incomplete.[6] In 2011 the Rijksmuseum was able to acquire one of the few dresses ever to have come on to the market.[7] The model is divided into four panels, three cream, separated by black lines. The panel on the left shoulder is yellow. Baroness Gabrielle van Zuylen van Nijevelt (1933-2010) bought the dress from Saint Laurent in 1965 (figs. 4 and 5). She was the wife of Baron Thierry van Zuylen van Nijevelt (1932-2011), a member of the family that had De Haar Castle in Utrecht restored and rebuilt by the renowned Dutch architect Pierre Cuypers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The couple led fashionable lives and regularly used De Haar for glamorous parties with guests from the international jet set –people like Maria Callas, Roger Moore and Brigitte Bardot.[8] What makes the dress special is that, as far as we know, it is the only one with a yellow panel on the

Fig. 6
Cover of D. Vreeland and Y. Saint Laurent, *Yves Saint Laurent*, exh. cat. New York (Metropolitan Museum) 1983. Yves Saint Laurent poses with one of his creations based on the work of Picasso.

left shoulder. The order for the dress is recorded in the Yves Saint Laurent archives, with the request to make the square yellow. It can consequently be regarded as a variation on type no. 77. The dress was shortened when the Baroness went to the couturier's for a second visit.[9] The observant will notice that the dress looks slightly crooked on the dummy. In couture a garment is made by hand and cut to fit the body of the wearer, whose legs, like most people's, were probably not exactly the same length.

I am seeking in this article to answer three questions about the Mondrian dress: what made Saint Laurent decide to use Mondrian's work and how visible was this work in France in the 1960s? Comparing Saint Laurent's design with those of two other dress designers, Stella Brownie and Anne Klein, who had previously taken their inspiration from Mondrian, how did their approach differ from Saint Laurent's?

A great deal has been published about Yves Saint Laurent and his work – biographies, exhibition catalogues and coffee table books. Three authors have written about his life: Axel Madsen in 1979, Laurence Benaïm in 1993 and, most recently, Alice Rawthorne in 1996.[10] No new biography has appeared since Saint Laurent's death in 2008.

Saint Laurent was the first fashion designer to be honoured with a retrospective in a museum during his lifetime. Diana Vreeland, former editor of American *Vogue* and consultant to the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute, staged this exhibition in the Met in 1983. A catalogue written by Vreeland and Saint Laurent himself (fig. 6) was published to accompany the show.[11] The Fondation Bergé was involved in an exhibition in the Petit Palais in Paris in 2010 (second venue Denver Art Museum, 2012).[12]

Not much has been published about the Mondrian dress and what has been is usually only as an example in the broader context of the relation between fashion and art. In the book *Fashion and Art*, Mondrian expert Nancy Troy used Mondrian's work to demonstrate that the relation between fashion and art is less superficial than has hitherto been assumed.[13] Where Troy concentrates more on the reception of the artist's work in the United States, however, I shall focus on its reception in France in the 1960s.

Yves Saint Laurent

Yves Saint Laurent (fig. 7) was seventeen when he left Algeria, where he was born, and went to Paris to study at the École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture.[14] In Paris he met Michel de Brunhoff, the editor of French *Vogue*. Brunhoff introduced Saint Laurent to Christian Dior, one of the leading couturiers of his time. Dior was so impressed by Saint Laurent that he offered him a job as his assistant on the spot.[15] Dior died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage in 1957 and Saint Laurent was appointed as his successor. Saint Laurent's position at Dior came to an end in 1960, when he was called up to serve in the Algerian army. The hardships

Fig. 7
YVES SAINT LAURENT, 1964. Photo: Maurice Hogenboom (from F. Müller, *Yves Saint Laurent*, exh. cat. Paris (Petit Palais) 2010, p. 55).

he had to endure as a soldier were so far removed from his life as a fashion designer that he suffered a mental breakdown. In consequence he was replaced as chief designer for Dior, his position not helped by the fact that his latest – progressive – collection was not what the fashion house wanted. When he got out of the army in 1962, Saint Laurent opened a fashion house under his own name.[16]

Just three years and six collections later, Saint Laurent made the breakthrough on to the international fashion circuit with his Mondrian dresses. This was not to be the last time that he designed collections inspired by works of art. In 1966 he showed a range of dresses inspired by Andy Warhol's Pop Art, one of which made it on to the cover of *Life Magazine* (fig. 8).[17] In the 1980s he also created dresses based on paintings by Pablo Picasso.[18] In 2002 Saint Laurent announced his retirement as a fashion designer, but the Yves Saint Laurent fashion house continues.[19] He died in 2008 at the age of seventy-one. After Saint Laurent's death, his partner Pierre Bergé set up a foundation to look after the clothes and the archives. The foundation is housed in Saint Laurent's old studio in Paris's Rue Marceau.[20]

Fig. 8
Cover of *Life Magazine* 61 (1966), no. 10, featuring a dress from Yves Saint Laurent's 1966 pop art collection. Photo: Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag.

The Swinging Sixties

The sixties saw a major change in fashion. Whereas it had always been mature women who set the fashion trends, suddenly the up-and-coming youth culture took the lead.[21] Young people rebelled against their parents and identified with pop stars like Elvis and the Beatles and Hollywood heartthrobs like James Dean.[22] This generation of baby boomers, born just after the Second World War, had grown up in relative prosperity. For the first time in decades young people had money to spend and were looking for an identity that went with their new lifestyle.[23] This new attitude was expressed among other things in the miniskirt, and the shift or sack dress.[24] The rejuvenation was marked by the rise of skinny top models like Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton, whose waiflike looks made them ideal to show the new fashions in photo spreads in magazines and on the catwalk (fig. 9).

Fig. 9
Twiggy, July 1967.
Photo: Ronald Traeger.

London was the epicentre of this new mood.[25] It was here that the Swinging Sixties started and flourished. It was also where a group of fashion designers – among them Mary Quant, the inventor of the miniskirt – met the rising generation's fashion aspirations.[26] Young people could not afford to buy haute couture; the costly and time-consuming handwork involved in its creation made it much too expensive. The younger generation shopped in boutiques like Bazaar and Biba, which sprang up like mushrooms and offered affordable clothes to a younger customer (fig. 10).[27]

Against this background, couturiers could not ignore the trends in youth culture. The mini had been taken up in France, too, and the designer André Courrèges associated youth culture with an imagined vision of the future.

Fig. 10
Biba, Kensington Church Street, c. 1966.
Photo: Philip Townsend.

Fig. 11
The Space-Age Look by André Courrèges, 1964.
Photo: John French / Victoria and Albert Museum.

Fig. 12
Cover of French *Vogue*, September 1965. Photo: Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag.

Fig. 13
British *Vogue*, September 1965, with the model Verushka.
Photo: Irving Penn.

He introduced a line called the Space Age look: short white dresses with boxy little jackets and accents in metallic silver (fig. 11).[28] During his years at Dior, Saint Laurent had already realized that, as he wrote, 'social structures were breaking up. The street had a new pride, its own chic, and I found the street inspiring as I would often again.'[29] As he was designing the 1965 autumn/winter collection, he had the feeling that 'nothing was modern … except an evening gown which I had embroi-

dered with paillettes like a Poliakoff painting'.[30] And so he decided, a few weeks before the show, to add some more designs to the collection, among them the Mondrian dresses. He got the idea from a book on Piet Mondrian that his mother had given him for Christmas 1964.[31] 'I suddenly realized,' he wrote, 'that dresses should no longer be composed of lines, but of colours. I realized that we had to stop conceiving of a garment as sculpture and that, on the contrary, we had to view it as mobile. I realized that fashion had been rigid up till then, and that we now have to make it move…'[32]

After the show on 2 August 1965 the press lauded the collection as the new trend. The day after the show *The New York Times* wrote that the autumn/winter collection 'was his best. The collection was so young … that many models skipped out in pigtails or pony tails. His most switched-on dresses were in jersey with geometric designs. Some buyers compared them to mosaics, others to paintings by Mondrian.'[33] In the September editions of the fashion magazines, traditionally the most important and biggest of the year, models were pictured in Mondrian dresses. Dress no. 81 adorned the cover of French *Vogue* (fig. 12). The superstar model Verushka posed in dress no. 77 for British *Vogue* (fig. 13). *Harper's Bazaar* featured the same dress in its October issue, this time worn by Jean Shrimpton, calling the design 'the dress of tomorrow'.[34]

Design

Yves Saint Laurent was not the first fashion designer to draw inspiration from the primary colours and black lines in Piet Mondrian's paintings. Years before, in 1945, the American designer Stella Brownie of the house of Foxbrownie (established in 1937)[35] designed a collection based on Mondrian's work (fig. 14).[36] In the same period – a year after Piet Mondrian's death – the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged a retrospective of his work.[37] The magazine *Art News* devoted an article to the growing popularity of Mondrian's work in America, citing as an example Brownie's designs, which the author believed could hold their own with a real work of art: '[Mondrian's] basic underlying theories were explored. A squared silhouette, juxtaposition of strong unmodulated colour patches against black or white, exactness of proportion emphasized by asymmetrical elements were found to be as striking on a dress as on canvas.'[38]

Brownie's designs captured the mood of the 1940s: bodices fastening high to the neck with long skirts and blazers, accessorized with hats, gloves – often lace – and a handbag. One of the ensembles was a dark-coloured bodice, ornamented with lighter lines and coloured panels in 'cubistic red' and 'plastic grey' along with 'braque brown' and 'palette green'.[39] These last inclusions are interesting because the

Fig. 14
Art News 44 (1945), no. 10, p. 22, with a photograph of a design by Stella Brownie.

use of mixed colours is diametrically opposed to the strict principles that Mondrian applied to his paintings. He developed a 'neo-plasticist' system of rules in which only the primary colours red, blue and yellow were used with white, black and shades of grey. The areas of colour in his paintings were separated by black lines. The placement of the colours was also governed by rules, so that two colour planes could never appear directly beside one another; they either had to border on a colourless area or extend beyond the edge of the canvas.[40] The colour planes were always placed asymmetrically, because Mondrian did not want a traditional structure in composition. What, in fact, he wanted was to transcend reality, express a 'Nieuwe Beelding' or 'new imagery' – which came to be known as Neo-Plasticism – a pure, self-contained visual language. He found it in geometric abstraction, which 'gives a purer image of reality'.[41]

Although, like Mondrian, Brownie used vertical and horizontal lines and patches of colour in geometric shapes, the result is actually a far cry from Mondrian's paintings. In the first place, she exercised her artistic freedom to use mixed colours, a principle entirely at odds with Mondrian's ideas. She also interpreted Mondrian's abstraction more as a pattern, in the same way as an artist might design textiles. Rather than making the overall concept behind Mondrian's art part of her own designs, Brownie simply took the idea of straight lines and areas of colour and applied it in her designs.[42] This is very different from the way Saint Laurent integrated Mondrian's work in constructing his Mondrian dresses.

Some one- and two-piece dresses by another American designer, Anne Klein (1923-1974), were likewise inspired by Mondrian's paintings (fig. 15).[43] Klein had built up a solid reputation in America with designs for a younger clientele under the Junior Sophisticates label, which she founded with her husband, Ben Klein, in the 1940s.[44] She designed ready-to-wear fashion, machine-made and affordable. In 1961 Klein's designs included a top, based on Mondrian, in which panels of colour are separated by narrow black stripes.[45] Although in terms of design she came closer to Mondrian's original pictorial idiom than Foxbrownie, structurally her work has little to do with it. In this model, she opted to make a separate top and skirt, thus breaking the unity of the design. The colour panels and black grid were woven as a whole, not made of individual pieces of fabric sewn together as in Saint Laurent's design, so the colours and black lines appear to flow into one another. Klein, like Brownie, used geometric abstraction

Fig. 15
Advertisement for Junior Sophisticates in American *Vogue*, April 1961, p. 35. Photo: © 2012 Anne Klein, The Jones Group Inc.

as decoration, rather than integrating Mondrian's concept in the garment.

Where Brownie and Klein saw Mondrian's paintings essentially as a motif that could be used on fabrics, Saint Laurent tried to translate the flatness of the canvas surface and the layers of paint on it, the colours, into a wearable garment. Moving away from the more general notion that art can also serve as ornamentation, he as it were transformed the painting from a flat, two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional object. By adhering to the strict principles that Mondrian had imposed, Saint Laurent remained very close to the original and reinforced the illusion of a 'wearable painting'. This is emphasized by his choice of a heavier fabric (a wool jersey) that is less affected by movement than a lighter or thinner material.[46] The texture of the jersey, whose weave becomes more apparent the closer you get to it, looks like a painted canvas, strengthening the illusion of a painting still more.

To maintain the two-dimensionality of the painting in the dress, it is put together in a seemingly simple but actually highly complex manner. The colours are not printed on the material; they are pieces of fabric joined together by hand with countless tiny stitches.[47] The black bands that separate the coloured panels were joined to them in the same way. The colours were placed in such a way as to conceal rather than follow the lines of the body. The dress is a solid entity so that the illusion of a wearable painting is maintained.

Mondrian in the Sixties

In 1960s France, Mondrian's work was not nearly as familiar to the general public as it was to become in the following decades, which makes Saint Laurent's decision to take Mondrian as his inspiration all the more remarkable.[48]

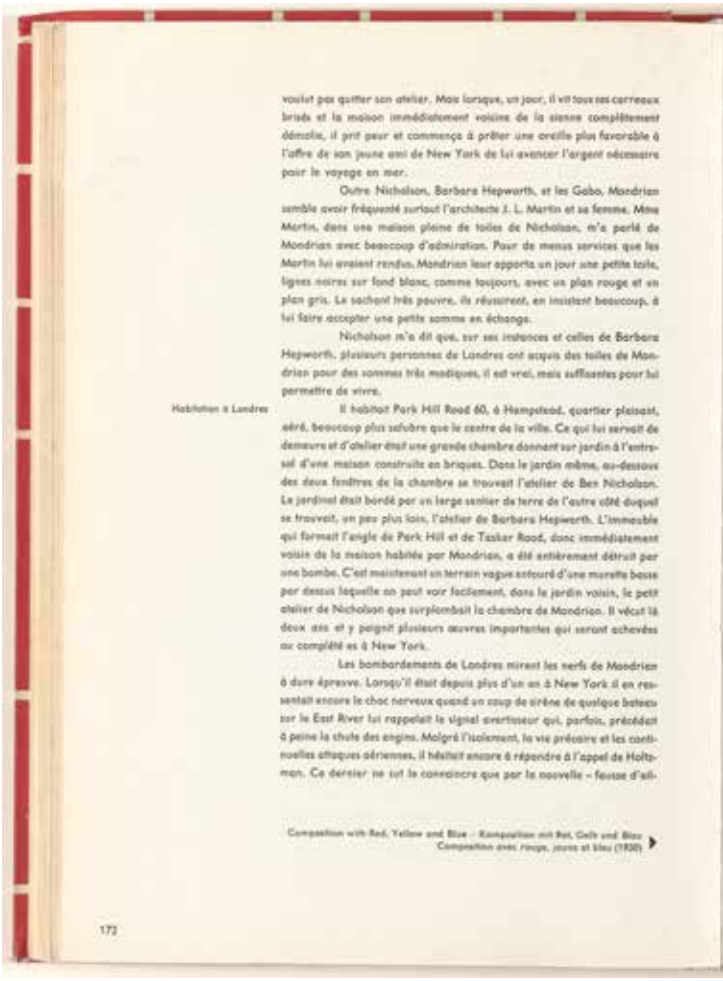
The reception of Mondrian's work in France was very different from that in the United States, particularly in New York. Nancy Troy maintains that Mondrian's work was widely known in America after his death in 1944.[49] The artist had lived in New York for the last four years of his life and had brought all his work with him from Europe. A good friend, Harry Holtzman, helped him financially with the crossing and continued to support Mondrian once he reached New York.[50] Soon after the artist's death, the New York public had the opportunity to see many of his works in a retrospective in the Museum of Modern Art in 1945. Mondrian's work was consequently very visible in the States at that time and his presence was made permanent when the major museums purchased his paintings. Between 1936 and 1950 the Museum of Modern Art alone bought seven abstracts (*Composition in White, Black, and Red*, 1936; *Composition No. II, with Red and Blue*, 1941; *Pier and Ocean 5*, 1942; *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1943; *Composition C*, 1948; *Composition in Brown and Gray*, 1950; *Composition in Oval with Colour Planes 1*, 1950).

In France, on the other hand, Mondrian's work was much less familiar to the general public – in part, at least, because he was not yet represented in public collections.[51] This seems odd, given that Mondrian lived and worked in Paris from 1919 to 1938. In this period, however, he did not show any of his work in France, exhibiting instead in the Netherlands and England. If people in Paris wanted to see his work, they had to go to his studio.[52] The sole exception was a display of five works in a selling exhibition at Galerie l'Effort Moderne, run by Léonce Rosenberg,with whom Mondrian was on good terms.[53] However, the customers for Mondrian's work came from the Netherlands, not Paris – buyers like the artist and art educationalist H.P. Bremmer who bought works with and for the collector Hélène Kröller-Müller for her collection of modern art (now the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo).[54]

The general public in France did not really take much notice of Mondrian's art until the major retrospective of his work in the Orangerie in Paris in 1969, four years after Saint Laurent's autumn/winter collection.

After Mondrian's death, art lovers with an interest in modern art were able to see his work in various places in Paris between 1945 and 1965. *Art Concret*, the first exhibition of abstract art after the Second World War, was mounted in René Drouin's gallery in 1945. It was organized by Nelly van Doesburg, the widow of the artist Theo van Doesburg, who had founded the group known as *De Stijl* with Mondrian.[55] In 1957 Mondrian's first retrospective, entitled *L'Organisation de l'Espace*, was staged in Denise René's gallery in Paris.[56] It included the abstract geometric works of the period from 1911 to 1942.[57] A small catalogue to this exhibition was published, with a foreword by Willem Sandberg, then director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.[58] Mondrian's work also appeared in other shows, including one at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1958. This was an exhibition of works by early twentieth-century artists under the title *L'Art hollandais depuis Van Gogh*, and in 1960 there was an exhibition of European art from the 1884-1914 period. There were paintings by Mondrian in both shows,[59] but it is not clear whether there were abstract works among them.

It is impossible to say with certainty that Saint Laurent actually went to see any of these exhibitions. At the time of *Art Concret* he was only nine years old and living in Algeria, so it seems unlikely. The exhibition at Denise René's was on when Saint Laurent was eighteen, the year he succeeded Dior as chief designer. Even if there is a possibility that he saw these shows, the immediate inspiration for the Mondrian dresses did not come from visiting exhibitions, it came, as we have seen, from a book his mother gave him



voulut pas quitter son atelier. Mais lorsque, un jour, il vit tous ses carreaux brisés et la maison immédiatement voisine de la sienne complètement démolie, il prit peur et commença à prêter une oreille plus favorable à l'offre de son jeune ami de New York de lui avancer l'argent nécessaire pour le voyage en mer.

Outre Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, et les Gabo, Mondrian semble avoir fréquenté surtout l'architecte J. L. Martin et sa femme. Mme Martin, dans une maison pleine de toiles de Nicholson, m'a parlé de Mondrian avec beaucoup d'admiration. Pour de menus services que les Martin lui avaient rendus, Mondrian leur apporta un jour une petite toile, lignes noires sur fond blanc, comme toujours, avec un plan rouge et un plan gris. Le sachant très pauvre, ils réussirent, en insistant beaucoup, à lui faire accepter une petite somme en échange.

Nicholson m'a dit que, sur ses instances et celles de Barbara Hepworth, plusieurs personnes de Londres ont acquis des toiles de Mondrian pour des sommes très modiques, il est vrai, mais suffisantes pour lui permettre de vivre.

Habitation à Londres

Il habitait Park Hill Road 60, à Hampstead, quartier plaisant, aéré, beaucoup plus salubre que le centre de la ville. Ce qui lui servait de demeure et d'atelier était une grande chambre donnant sur jardin à l'entresol d'une maison construite en briques. Dans le jardin même, au-dessous des deux fenêtres de la chambre se trouvait l'atelier de Ben Nicholson. Le jardinet était bordé par un large sentier de terre de l'autre côté duquel se trouvait, un peu plus loin, l'atelier de Barbara Hepworth. L'immeuble qui formait l'angle de Park Hill et de Tasker Road, donc immédiatement voisin de la maison habitée par Mondrian, a été entièrement détruit par une bombe. C'est maintenant un terrain vague entouré d'une muraille basse par dessus laquelle on peut voir facilement, dans le jardin voisin, le petit atelier de Nicholson que surplombait la chambre de Mondrian. Il vécut là deux ans et y peignit plusieurs œuvres importantes qui seront achevées ou complétées à New York.

Les bombardements de Londres mirent les nerfs de Mondrian à dure épreuve. Lorsqu'il était depuis plus d'un an à New York il en ressentait encore le choc nerveux quand un coup de sirène de quelque bateau sur le East River lui rappelait le signal avertisseur qui, parfois, précédait à peine la chute des engins. Malgré l'isolement, la vie précaire et les continuelles attaques aériennes, il hésitait encore à répondre à l'appel de Holtzman. Ce dernier ne sut le convaincre que par la nouvelle – fausse d'ail-

Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue – Komposition mit Rot, Gelb und Blau
Composition avec rouge, jaune et bleu (1930)

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for Christmas in 1964.[60] This was probably *Piet Mondrian. Sa vie, son oeuvre* (1957), the only monograph on Mondrian that had then been published in France. The author, Michel Seuphor (the pseudonym of Ferdinand Louis Beuckelaers, 1901-1999) was a Belgian artist, poet and writer. He had met Mondrian on a visit to Paris, when he interviewed him and some other artists for an article he was writing, and they soon became good friends, particularly when Seuphor moved to Paris in 1925.[61] He owned a number of Mondrians, including the 1929 abstract *Composition No. III, with Red, Blue, Yellow and Black*.[62] Seuphor wrote a

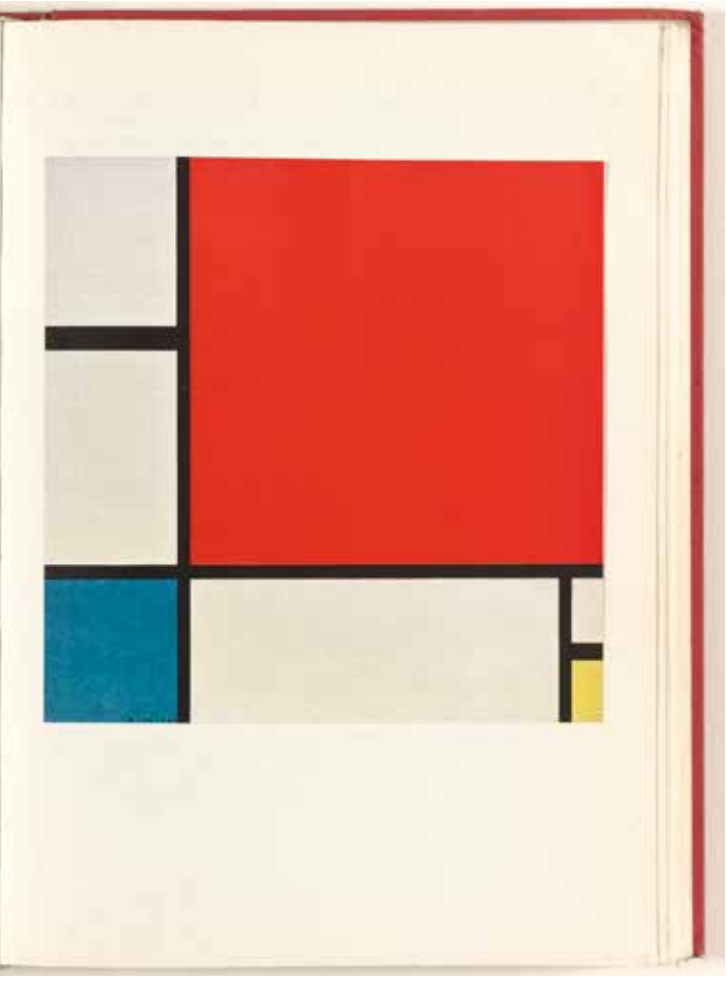

Fig. 16
M. Seuphor,
Piet Mondrian.
Sa vie, son œuvre,
Paris 1957, pp. 172-73.

number of works on abstract art and worked on Mondrian's first major retrospective in the Orangerie in 1969.

Seuphor's monograph, an initial attempt at an oeuvre catalogue, was published simultaneously in French, Italian, English and German.[63] Seuphor discussed 593 works (including works on paper), 441 of which were reproduced, thirty-five in colour. Seuphor's study was based on information from private individuals, museums and art dealers, existing catalogues and, of course, on his personal knowledge of the artist.[64] It contains an extensive biography of Mondrian and a chronological arrangement of his oeuvre, with notes in the margin referring not only to footnotes and illustrations, but also to important names and events, so that the reader can easily look up a particular moment in Mondrian's life and work. Each colour illustration occupies the whole of a right-hand page, with text on the facing page (fig. 16).

The chronological structure of the book clearly shows the various stages in the development of Mondrian's work. However, there is no direct connection between a specific painting and a dress, Saint Laurent never spoke about a particular painting that he took as his inspiration for a specific design.

Fig. 17
Yves Saint Laurent's apartment in Rue de Babylone in Paris. Photo: Ivan Terestchenko, Paris.

In a more general sense, though, it is possible to link Mondrian's abstract paintings to the Mondrian dresses. The 'colourless' dresses, for instance – model nos. 102 and 78 – are reminiscent of the lozenge paintings with just a few black lines, such as *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines* of 1931 (now in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam), which was illustrated in the book. In the 1930s Mondrian painted a number of canvases with several black lines and a red area just showing at the edge of the grid, in the same way as model no. 77 has a single red panel on the shoulder. What is also interesting is that, in retrospect, a connection can be made between the Mondrian dresses and the paintings in the art collection Saint Laurent and Bergé built up in the 1970s.

Three Mondrians

It is clear that Saint Laurent had an affinity with art – he used works of art as inspirations for his designs on a number of occasions. But his love of art went deeper, witness the huge art collection that he and his partner Pierre Bergé started to amass in the 1970s. It was museum quality, collected with an interest that encompassed every century, every artistic discipline and every part of the world. When Saint Laurent died in 2008, Bergé decided to sell the whole collection at a spectacular two-day auction organized by Christie's in the Grand Palais in Paris.[65] The apartment Saint Laurent and Bergé shared in Rue de Babylone in Paris was crammed with centuries-old sculptures, antique furniture and a significant collection of modern art that included works by Matisse, Picasso and Léger (fig. 17). They also owned five Mondrians: two early figurative works and three Neo-Plasticist paintings.

In 1965, the year of the Mondrian dresses, Saint Laurent and Bergé had not yet embarked on acquiring their art collection. They wanted to build up a

Fig. 18
PIET MONDRIAN, *Composition with Grid 2*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 97.4 x 62.5 cm. Whereabouts unknown. Photo: © Christie's Images/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Fig. 19
PIET MONDRIAN,
Composition I, 1920.
Oil on canvas,
75.2 x 65 cm.
Whereabouts
unknown.
Photo: Giraudon/
The Bridgeman
Art Library.

large amount of capital first so that they would be in a position to buy major works.[66] The couple bought their first abstract work by Mondrian in 1978: the 1922 *Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black*. This was followed in 1980 by *Composition with Grid 2* of 1918, and in 1987 by the 1920 *Composition 1*. They purchased the three paintings from the Alain Tarica gallery in Paris.[67]

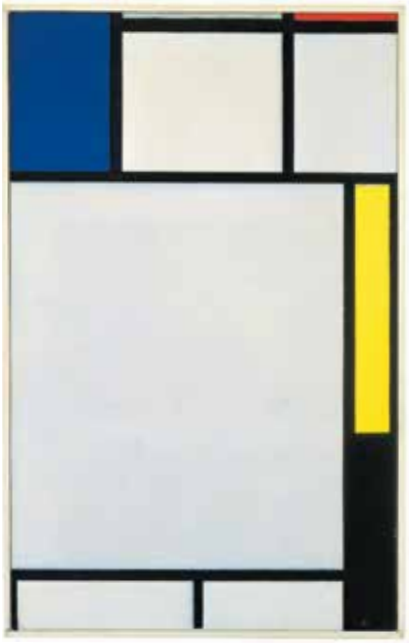

Fig. 20
PIET MONDRIAN,
Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black, 1922.
Oil on canvas,
79.6 x 49.8 cm.
Abu Dhabi,
Louvre Abu Dhabi.
Photo: © Christie's
Images/The
Bridgeman Art
Library.

The paintings represent different stages in the development of Mondrian's painting. The earliest work, *Composition with Grid 2* (fig. 18), is one of the first in a series of nine modular grid paintings from the period 1918-20, in which Mondrian constructed each painting with a pre-determined number of rectangles and squares. The 1922 painting, *Composition 1* (fig. 19), was one of the last of the series that followed the grid paintings. Here Mondrian abandoned the idea of a basic grid and started to emphasize colour. *Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black* (fig. 20) of 1922 is one of a small group of works in which Mondrian reduced his Neo-Plasticism to a radical system of rules, and used only primary colours and black lines.[68]

As well as coming from successive stages in the development of Mondrian's painting, the three paintings can also be linked to the designs of the Mondrian dresses, although Saint Laurent never said whether his designs were based on specific Mondrians. For model no. 81 Saint Laurent chose a fabric in shades of blue, yellow and red that are very close to the colours in *Composition with Blue, Red, Yellow and Black*. The same is true of model no. 77, in which the various shades of grey that were used resemble those in *Composition with Grid 2*. The division of the space corresponds, too: the breakdown into vertical 'modules', with two verticals placed above a square or rectangular module, is seen in the painting and in model no. 77. This leaves *Composition 1*, which has no direct connection with a Mondrian dress because the painting is very different in colour and design.

Not Just a Dress

Although Saint Laurent conceived of his Mondrian dresses as 'wearable paintings', he very definitely saw

himself as a couturier, not an artist. True, he regarded fashion as one of the arts, 'maybe not so minor after all, but … not fine art. I cannot pretend to do sculpture and make a woman the ridiculous pedestal of my pretensions'.[69] Saint Laurent was inspired above all by the world around him and produced clothes for the modern woman who felt self-confident in his designs.[70] One consequence of this attitude was the departure from one of Mondrian's strict rules: asymmetry. Most of the dresses have a black line precisely in the middle, so that the panels are distributed symmetrically – something that Mondrian would never have done in his work. Saint Laurent's clothes were designed to flatter the female body, and although the dresses deny its curves, the black lines are nevertheless placed so that they mark feminine contours: a horizontal stripe just above the bust, or a horizontal stripe on the hip line, where a hand can casually rest. It is a concession to fashion that Mondrian would have been unlikely to approve, but to the couturier Saint Laurent it was an essential element of his fashion concept.

The success of the Mondrian dress was evident in the many copies that were made almost immediately by dress manufacturers all over the world. They prove how Saint Laurent was able to respond to the changing times, when young people were calling the tune. Some of these copies were very close indeed to Saint Laurent's designs, but others entirely abandoned Mondrian's purity of style. In late 1965 the Mondrian Look was the trendiest thing to wear, regardless of whether the dress was a Saint Laurent design or a cheap copy. In the end, the idea of translating Mondrian into textiles went a good deal further; there were even Mondrian bras and panties. The term Mondrian dress has infiltrated everyday life and Mondrian mania has crossed over into designs for glasses, bags, shoes, pens, books, shorts and more. Mondrian has almost become a brand name, transformed into a world in which primary colours and black lines can be used on any product, any material. Mondrian is omnipresent.

NOTES

* I am particularly indebted to Bianca du Mortier, Madelief Hohé, Laurence Neveu, Katrien Timmers and Ludo van Halem for their advice.

1 V. Cumming et al., *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, London 2010, pp. 178, 184.
2 These collection books are held in the archives of the Fondation Pierre Bergé et Yves Saint Laurent in Paris.
3 A. Rawsthorn, *Yves Saint Laurent. A Biography*, New York 1996, p. 77.
4 A. Madsen, *Living for Design. The Yves Saint Laurent Story*, New York 1979, p. 117.
5 With thanks to Laurence Neveu, curator at the Fondation Pierre Bergé et Yves Saint Laurent.
6 Ibid.
7 Sale London (Christie's), 1 December 2011, lot 45. The dress was purchased with the support of the BankGiro Loterij.
8 See the Kasteel de Haar website: http://www.kasteeldehaar.nl/English-summary/castle-park/living-in-luxury/ (consulted 28 June 2012). With thanks to Katrien Timmers, curator at Kasteel de Haar, for the additional information and photographs.
9 With thanks to Laurence Neveu, curator at the Fondation Yves Saint Laurent et Pierre Bergé.
10 L. Benaïm, *Yves Saint Laurent*, Paris 1993; Madsen, op. cit. (note 4); Rawsthorn, op. cit. (note 3).
11 D. Vreeland and Y. Saint Laurent, *Yves Saint Laurent*, New York 1983.
12 F. Müller, *Yves Saint Laurent*, Paris 2010.
13 N. Troy, 'Art', in A. Geczsy and V. Karaminas (eds.), *Fashion and Art*, London 2012, pp. 29-41.
14 Rawsthorn, op. cit (note 3), p. 13.
15 Ibid., p. 10.
16 Ibid., p. 47.

17 *Life Magazine* 61 (1966), no. 10. One of the dresses was featured on the cover, while an inside double-page spread was devoted to photographs of the collection.
18 Vreeland and Saint Laurent, op. cit. (note 11).
19 The Yves Saint Laurent fashion house had already been taken over by Sanofi in 1993 and by Gucci in 1999. The new creative director and chief designer Hedi Slimane recently announced that the house was changing its name to Saint Laurent Paris. See http://www.fashionologie.com/Yves-Saint-Laurent-Name-Change-23659674 (consulted 1 September 2012).
20 Fondation Pierre Bergé et Yves Saint Laurent, Rue Marceau 5, Paris.
21 C. Breward (ed.), *Swinging Sixties*, London 2006, p. 20.
22 Ibid.
23 L. Dyer (ed.), *Vintage Fashion. Collecting and Wearing Designer Classics*, London 2006, p. 113; V. Mendes, *Fashion Since 1900*, London 2010, p. 158.
24 Dyer, op. cit. (note 23), p. 184.
25 Breward, op. cit. (note 21), p. 104.
26 B. English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the Twentieth Century: From the Catwalk to the Sidewalk*, New York 2007, p. 81.
27 Ibid.; Breward, op. cit. (note 25), pp. 26-29.
28 Mendes, op. cit. (note 23), p. 166.
29 Vreeland and Saint Laurent, op. cit. (note 11), p. 21.
30 Madsen, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 114-19.
31 Ibid., p. 117: 'It wasn't until I opened a Mondrian book my mother had given me for Christmas that I hit on the key idea.'
32 Müller, op. cit. (note 12), p. 66.
33 'Saint Laurent and Givenchy', *The New York Times*, 3 August 1965, p. 27.
34 *Vogue*, September 1965 (French edition); *Vogue*, September 1965 (British edition); *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1965 (American edition).
35 See http://vintagefashionguild.org/label-resource/foxbrownie (consulted 25 July 2012), with thanks to Judith van Amelsvoort.
36 Troy, op. cit. (note 13), p. 33
37 J. Joosten and R. Welsh, *Piet Mondrian Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, Blaricum 1998, p. 183.
38 'Mondrian Makes the Mode', *Art News* 44 (1945), no. 10, p. 22.
39 Ibid.
40 Y. Bois, 'Composition avec bleu, rouge, jaune et noir. Composition avec grille et Composition 1', in *Collection Yves Saint Laurent et Pierre Bergé*, sale cat. Paris (Christie's) 2009, pp. 152-59. See pp. 246-50 for the English translation.
41 C. Blotkamp, *Mondriaan, destructie als kunst*, Zwolle 1994, p. 13. '… een zuiverder beeld van de werkelijkheid geeft.'
42 Brownie's designs were particularly striking at the time because they heralded a new period when geometric shapes appeared as decorative elements on clothes. Prior to this flowers and animals were the main inspirations.
43 'Mondrian's art used in fashion', *The New York Times*, 14 August 1965.
44 See http://vintagefashionguild.org/label-resource/klein-anne/ (consulted 25 July 2012), with thanks to Judith van Amelsvoort.
45 It is not clear whether Anne Klein, like Stella Brownie, also used colours other than the primary ones.
46 With the exception of no. 80, which is made of a different fabric. This model is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
47 Rawsthorn, op. cit. (note 3), p. 77.
48 Müller, op. cit. (note 12), p. 308.
49 Troy, op. cit. (note 13), pp. 29-41.
50 H. Cooper and R. Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*, Harvard 2001, pp. 14-15.
51 Müller, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 308-10. For Mondriaan's oeuvre see Joosten and Welsh, op. cit (note 37).
52 Blotkamp, op. cit. (note 41), p. 178.
53 Joosten and Welsh, op. cit. (note 37), p. 120.
54 Blotkamp, op. cit. (note 41), p. 183.
55 Müller, op. cit. (note 12), p. 310; B. Leal et al., *Mondrian*, Paris 2010, p. 328.
56 Ibid.
57 In 1957 there was also an exhibition in Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris, but only figurative works by Mondrian were shown.
58 W. Sandberg and D. René, *Mondrian*, Paris 1957.
59 Leal et al., op. cit. (note 55), p. 336.
60 Rawsthorn, op. cit (note 3), p. 77.
61 See http://www.kubisme.info/kb176.html (consulted 26 July 2012).
62 Joosten and Welsh, op. cit. (note 37), p. 347. The painting was a gift from Mondrian; it is now in a private collection.
63 L. Bekkers, 'Berckelaers/Seuphor, denker en doener', *Ons Erfdeel* 45 (2002), no. 1, p. 35.
64 Joosten and Welsh, op. cit. (note 37), p. 5.
65 Bois, op. cit. (note 40).
66 P. Bergé, *Collection Yves Saint Laurent et Pierre Bergé. Art Impressionniste et Moderne*, sale cat. Paris (Christie's) 2009, p. 9.
67 Ibid., pp. 160-64, lot no. 42-44.
68 Bois, op. cit. (note 40).
69 Vreeland and Saint Laurent, op. cit. (note 11), p. 21.
70 Müller, op. cit. (note 12), p. 24.