

TEACHERS PACK

# MONDRIAN

AND HIS STUDIOS

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# INTRODUCTION

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*Mondrian and his Studios: Abstraction into the World* explores one of the most important contributors to the development of abstract art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Investigating Piet Mondrian's (1872–1944) significance in the field of abstraction and the complex relationship between his artworks and the space around them, the exhibition commemorates the seventieth anniversary of the artist's death.

With a focus on the connection between painting and architecture after Mondrian's move to Paris in 1911, a reconstruction of his studio at 26 Rue du Départ, Paris is a major highlight of the display. Mondrian's studios in Amsterdam, Paris and New York all represented an ideal viewing space, described by the art historian Yve-Alain Bois as 'an experimental expansion of the work and the condition for its accomplishment'. Each studio reflected different stages of the painter's way of thinking and of his intentions: the studios themselves forming a distinct strand of his work, alongside his painting and writing.

The exhibition investigates Mondrian's broader relationship with architecture and urbanism, particularly through a comparison of his earlier Parisian works and those made in the frenetic modern cityscape of New York. Many of Mondrian's best-known neo-plastic works

will be exhibited: his own abstract painting style comprising straight lines and clearly defined primary colours, embraced by the Dutch avant-garde movement De Stijl of which Mondrian was a founder.

*Mondrian and his Studios* will be exhibited alongside *Nasreen Mohamedi*. The two complementing exhibitions will share Tate Liverpool's fourth-floor special exhibition galleries. Nasreen Mohamedi, much like her Dutch counterpart, moved away from a figurative style and developed her own unique approach to abstraction. Despite comparisons drawn with American artists such as Agnes Martin and Carl Andre, or with the utopian abstraction of Kazimir Malevich and Paul Klee whom she greatly admired, Mohamedi's work defies categorisation. The result of a disciplined and continuous effort to craft a singular vocabulary, Mohamedi's work remains without parallel and is the product of her distinctive personality, process and aesthetic values.

## PIET MONDRIAN *THE TREE* A C.1913

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Piet Mondrian *The Tree A* c.1913, Tate Photo © Tate Photography 2014  
© 2014 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HRC International USA

'I want to come as close as possible to the truth, and abstract everything from that until I reach the foundation of things.'

– Piet Mondrian

## PIET MONDRIAN *THE TREE* A.C.1913

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Mondrian moved to Paris in 1911 to find out more about cubism, having discovered works by Picasso and Braque in an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. During his early career, the Dutch artist created many landscapes, working directly from nature and this is one of his last paintings of trees, based on detailed studies and sketches made in the Netherlands.

Influenced by cubism, Mondrian began to rework his subject almost to abstraction. The motif of the tree is broken up and dispersed across the surface of the canvas as a lattice of lines and planes. The trunk and branches are condensed to a network of verticals and horizontals, and patches of blue-grey and ochre suggest the interaction between the tree and the space it occupies.

Mondrian did not consider himself a cubist and though he was conscious of 'the spirit of the time' his art took a different direction to his contemporaries. In a review of the 1913 *Salon des Independents*, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote:

'Although Mondrian takes his inspiration from Cubism, he does not imitate the Cubists. It seems to me that he is influenced by Picasso and yet his personality remains entirely his own.'

Picasso and Braque's investigations into form and space focused on still life and portraiture whereas Mondrian preferred nature as his starting point. Mondrian restricted his palette to subdued tones during this period but he avoided the muddy browns and greys of analytical cubism. By mixing grey and white with his colours, he obtained pastel shades which endow his images with a sense of calmness, purity and spirituality.

For Mondrian, the development towards abstraction was primarily spiritual. Writing for the magazine *De Stijl* in 1917, he stated:

'The cultivated man of today is gradually turning away from natural things, and his life is becoming more and more abstract. Natural (external) things become more and more automatic, and we observe that our vital attention fastens more and more on internal things.'

During this period, he became interested in the ideas of the esoteric, religious philosophy known as theosophy. Under its influence, he attempted to convey 'the dynamic equilibrium of the universe' with a balance of opposite elements in his paintings, such as vertical and horizontal brushstrokes, matter and space, earthly and spiritual, masculine and feminine. He believed that art should unite these opposites, asserting that 'the balance between the two means

happiness'. The resulting work is a product of the artist's mind and an inner response rather than his visual perception of nature.

# PIET MONDRIAN *THE TREE* A.C.1913

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## ACTIVITIES

Trace Mondrian's development towards abstraction in his tree paintings. Can you identify three stages he has gone through to make them more abstract? Look at *Blue Tree*, 1908: [www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1160](http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1160) and *Gray Tree* 1911: [www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1039](http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1039) as well as the painting reproduced here from 1913.

Make your own drawings, paintings and photographs of natural objects and develop them into an abstract design perhaps following the stages identified above.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Bridget Riley, *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, Tate Publishing, 1997

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSCmWnIoRpl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSCmWnIoRpl)

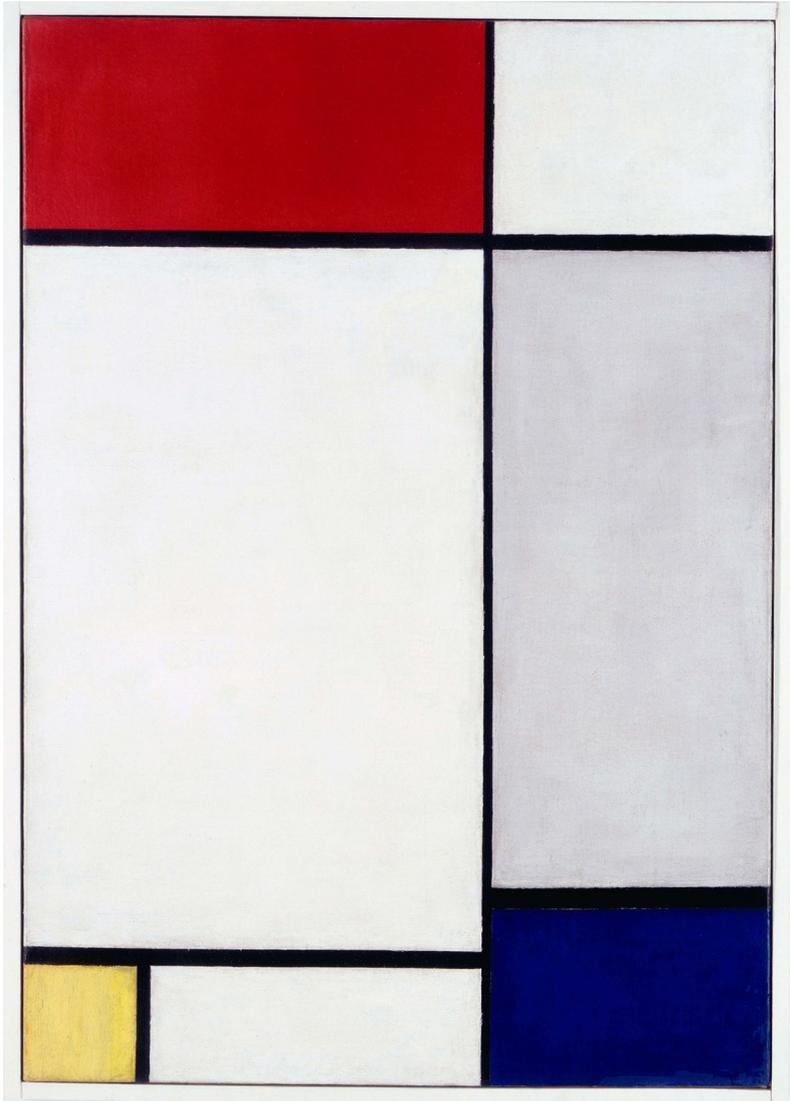
[www.whitworthstudiothinking.wordpress.com/](http://www.whitworthstudiothinking.wordpress.com/)

[www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-piet-mondrians-the-tree-a-r1140519](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-piet-mondrians-the-tree-a-r1140519)

[www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1160](http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/collection/item/1160)

## PIET MONDRIAN *COMPOSITION WITH RED, YELLOW AND BLUE* 1927

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Piet Mondrian *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* 1927  
Museum Folkwang, Essen © 2014 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HRC International USA

‘Every true artist has been inspired more by the beauty of lines and colour and the relationships between them than by the concrete subject of the picture.’

– Piet Mondrian

## PIET MONDRIAN *COMPOSITION WITH RED, YELLOW AND BLUE* 1927

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By 1916, Mondrian had eliminated any suggestion of subject in his paintings. The form of art which he referred to as neo-plasticism was limited to straight horizontal and vertical lines in black, arranged asymmetrically on a white field with blocks of primary colours. These paintings are sometimes described as 'geometric' or 'hard-edged' abstraction due to the appearance of seemingly flat, regular shapes and the grid-like lines in their compositions. However, close inspection reveals the surface is far from flat and is a painterly object, hand-crafted and bearing the marks of its creator, including his alterations and areas which he decided to eliminate or to repaint. The grids are not mathematically controlled, but intuitively composed by the artist.

In *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* 1927, the line running across the top edge of the area of blue does not intersect with the black line above the adjacent yellow and white. This gives the impression that the blue area is not static, but shifting upwards. The non-uniformity of the line widths also contributes to this sense of mobility. The colours are not bound by lines at the edges of the canvas and this suggests that rather than being complete shapes, they are parts of larger forms which continue outside the picture space. The canvas is set into a frame created by Mondrian, which projects forward into the viewer's space, revealing rather than hiding edges.

Mondrian believed the classic, purist abstract style of this art reflected a greater, universal truth which lies beyond everyday appearance.

# PIET MONDRIAN *COMPOSITION WITH RED, YELLOW AND BLUE* 1927

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## ACTIVITIES

Make your own Mondrian-style composition using lines and primary colours. Try arranging coloured squares and rectangles on a black background or arranging black lines on a coloured background. How are your compositions similar and different to the painting reproduced above?

Discuss Mondrian's form of abstraction compared to other artists' work eg. Kandinsky, Malevich, Pollock, Rothko, Nicholson, etc.

Explore Mondrian's later works. How did he develop this form of abstraction further? Did he introduce different colours, shapes, or adopt new techniques to create his works?

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: the Art of Destruction*, Reaktion Books, 2001

Herbert Henkels, *Mondrian from Figuration to Abstraction*, Thames and Hudson, 1988

Theo Maedendorp, *Complete Mondrian*, Lund Humphries, 2001

Bridget Riley, *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, Tate Publishing, 1997

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSCmWnloRpl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSCmWnloRpl)

## RECONSTRUCTION OF 26 RUE DU DÉPART, PARIS BASED ON 1926 PHOTO BY PAUL DELBO

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Reconstruction of 26 Rue du Départ, Paris based on 1926 Photo by Paul Delbo  
© 2014 STAM, Research and Production: Frans Postma Delft-NL. Photo: Fas Keuzenkamp  
© Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HRC International USA

'A room should not be an empty space, limited by six empty planes which are merely opposite each other.'

– Piet Mondrian

## RECONSTRUCTION OF 26 RUE DU DÉPART, PARIS BASED ON 1926 PHOTO BY PAUL DELBO

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The ramshackle building at 26 rue du Départ, Montparnasse, was occupied by many artists in the early twentieth century. Mondrian rented rooms here during his first period in Paris and following the First World War on his return from the Netherlands. He occupied this studio in October 1921 until 1936 and the building itself was demolished shortly after. With the aid of photographs taken by Paul Delbo in 1926, Frans Postma created his publication *26, Rue du Départ*, 1995, shown at the Pompidou Centre, 2011. A life-sized reconstruction of the studio has been created at Tate Liverpool for the 2014 exhibition, *Mondrian and his Studios*.

It was in this studio that Mondrian began to explore relationships between abstract art and three-dimensional space. He maintained the same attention to the proportions of interior design and in achieving a harmonious relationship between objects, architecture, colour and space:

‘It is as difficult to paint a room as to make a painting. It is not enough to set a red, a blue, a yellow, a gray, etc., next to each other. That would be mere decoration... It is all in the how: how the elements are placed, how the dimensions are worked out, how the colours of the various elements are interrelated...’

Mondrian conceived his atelier as a space for exhibiting and promoting his work and a room for making art. In many ways it was a conscious extension of his artistic creativity. He believed there should be no distinction between art, architecture and design and they should combine to create a whole. His studio became a stage which he furnished with movable panels, furniture and objects painted in the primary colours of his neo-plasticism. Although Mondrian worked on tables and the floor to create his paintings, they stand on easels in Paul Delbo’s photographs. The precision and attention to detail indicates the artist’s awareness that the environment itself is on display and Mondrian was also always well-presented in these images in a pinstriped suit and sharp shoes.

The studio was also a place for entertaining friends and he enjoyed playing jazz music for his guests on a red portable gramophone player. Mondrian was passionate about jazz and he enjoyed dancing in Parisian nightclubs. The relationships between colours, line and rhythm in his art has often been compared to music. In the studio, form and space is choreographed as Mondrian dissolved conventional boundaries between living and working areas and allowed the two to flow together. The concept of adaptable space in architecture was in-keeping with contemporary architectural ideas. Modernist

architect Le Corbusier famously described the modern house as ‘a machine for living’.

Though none of Mondrian’s architectural projects were ever realised, designs and models survive for a theatre and library in Ida Bienert, Plauen. The Schröder House in Utrecht, by Gerrit Rietveld was the only building created entirely to De Stijl principles, with open-plan living spaces and areas designated by colour. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 2000, the house resembles a Mondrian painting in three dimensions and demonstrates the artist’s ideas for interior design.

Mondrian’s studio had a great impact on modernists who were attracted there in the 1930s, including Alexander Calder who acknowledged that ‘one visit gave me a shock that started things’, as he consequently abandoned figurative art in favour of abstract mobile forms. Ben Nicholson experienced ‘an astonishing feeling of quiet and repose’ and writer Michel Seuphor recalled stepping into another world ‘of beauty, of peace, of quiet and harmony’. Another friend of Mondrian’s, Maude van Loon, describes the studio: ‘The front door was nothing special; just a wooden door. Then you went through his door and suddenly there was a marvelous white studio with a colour plane here and there. It was like stepping into paradise...’

# RECONSTRUCTION OF 26 RUE DU DÉPART, PARIS BASED ON 1926 PHOTO BY PAUL DELBO

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## ACTIVITIES

Explore images of other artists' studios e.g. Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, etc. Compare Pablo Picasso, *The Studio* 1955 or Gustave Courbet *The Artist's Studio, a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life*, c.1854–55 with Mondrian's atelier – what is different? What do the artists' environments tell you about their approach to art and the way they lived?

Research De Stijl architecture and design: *The Schröder House*, Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair* 1917, Theo van Doesburg's *Cinébal* at the Aubette in Strasbourg etc. Design your own room in the style of Mondrian/De Stijl and create a model using cardboard and coloured paper. Alternatively, design a room in the style of another artist.

Find examples of modern design influenced by Mondrian's art (e.g. fashion, advertising, commercial art, interior design, etc).

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Francesco Manacorda and Michael White, *Mondrian and his Studios: Colour in Space*, Tate Publishing, 2014

Frans Postma, *26 Rue de Départ: Mondrian's Studio in Paris, 1921–36*, Ernst and Sohn, 1995

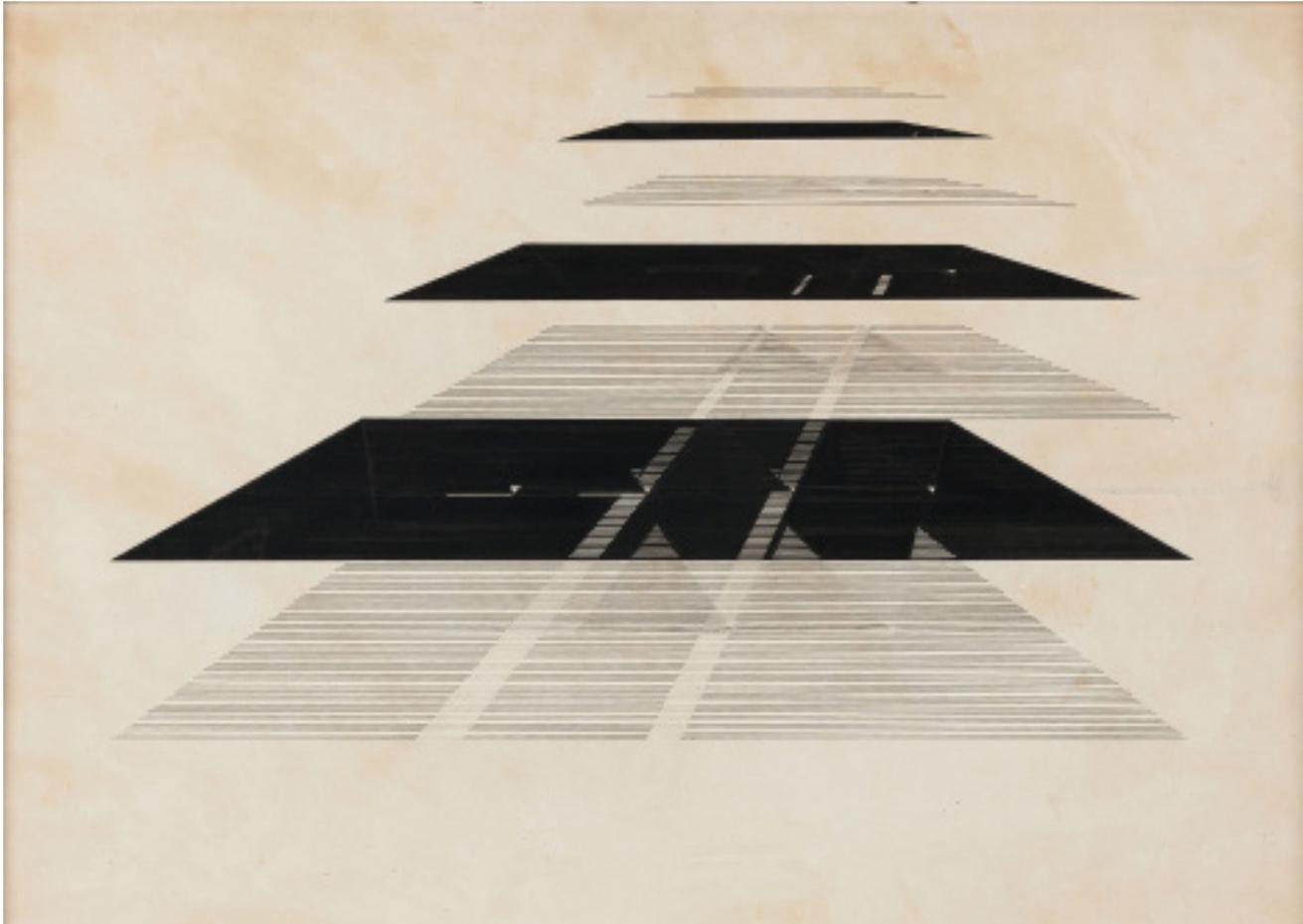
Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment*, MIT Press, 1983

Nancy J. Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian*, University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2014

[www.hoart.cam.ac.uk/undergraduates/curriculum/part1/paper2makingofart/thetropeofthestudio](http://www.hoart.cam.ac.uk/undergraduates/curriculum/part1/paper2makingofart/thetropeofthestudio)

## NASREEN MOHAMEDI *UNTITLED*

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Nasreen Mohamedi *Untitled* © Courtesy Chatterjee & Lal

1968

'Triangles in space

Long squares

Without depths

Reaching out into  
perspectives

A line cutting

Steel edged sharpness

All this running into a  
turmoil of human  
destinies

To arrive at nothingness.'

– Diary extract, Nasreen Mohamedi

A pioneer of Indian Modernism in the twentieth century, Nasreen Mohamedi has increasingly come to prominence in recent years, with her work receiving great critical acclaim internationally. Presenting more than 60 works, *Nasreen Mohamedi* is the largest solo exhibition of the artist's work in the UK to date and charts her practice as she moved from figurative work toward abstraction.

Born in Karachi in 1937 as it entered the last decade of British colonial rule (later becoming the capital of independent Pakistan) and raised in Mumbai, Mohamedi studied art at Central Saint Martin's in London (1954–57) and in Paris (1961–63). On her return to India in the early 1970s, Mohamedi moved to Baroda where she became a teacher in the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, working alongside notable artists of the time, such as KG Subramanyan, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh.

While the university prided itself on a figurative painting style drawing largely on local influences, it was here, virtually alone among her peers in India, that Mohamedi became increasingly committed to abstraction, producing small-scale, painstakingly composed geometric drawings. This has come to be seen by many as the classic period in her career, a career which can broadly be understood by significant phases in her

development. These phases, which encompass her semi-abstract lyrical paintings of the 1960s, and drawings of suspended diagonal lines, triangles and spheres from the 1980s, are highlighted by the exhibition:

- Lyrical Abstraction
- Grid
- Perspective and Diagonals
- Floating Forms
- Elliptical and late

There are also examples of her photographic practice: Mohamedi produced photographs as a visual record of her experiences, capturing images of desert landscapes and seascapes, modern architectural buildings and the historical Islamic architecture of Fatehpur Sikri.

Using the phases as a framework to understand her developing practice, the exhibition includes archival material, drawing, photography and painting, to reflect how Mohamedi gradually departed from references in the external world to re-vision three dimensional space through complex line interactions. The work encourages a reconsideration of the meaning of abstraction, where the departure from a figurative style, runs in parallel with a journey away from physical objects and into the realm of ideas.

## NASREEN MOHAMEDI – WORK IN FOCUS

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1 FEB 1974

‘THE MAXIMUM OUT OF  
THE MINIMUM. THINK.’

4 JULY 1967

‘Where do I stand in  
relation to space and  
thought

The layers in Indian  
sculpture, in Arabic  
calligraphy

In waves – in connection  
with my work.’

– Diary extract, Nasreen Mohamedi

It is difficult to chart Mohamedi’s artistic development chronologically as the artist rarely dated (or titled) works. Anecdotal evidence in the form of remembrances by friends and colleagues have enabled a rough sketch of phases, grouping works together as ‘early 1960s’ or ‘late 1980s’. While early works reveal the natural world as a dominant inspiration, her work became increasingly abstract, as she stripped back detail from her drawing, representing nature simply through one single line designating the horizon, and a number of verticals representing trees.

In 1970 Mohamedi moved from Mumbai to Delhi, a move which seems to coincide with her completely abandoning naturalistic forms in favour of working within the geometric rigidity of a modernist grid-like structure, but her work continued to progress further still. In the later 1970s Mohamedi began working in a rectangular format, telling her friends that she was proud to have broken free of the grid. Here, while continuing to work with the inked line using the same artistic process, her work creates three-dimensions within the paper, constructing almost architectural forms that seemingly recede into infinity.

While perspectively accurate, the spaces created by Mohamedi’s lines are not restricted by physical laws and allow planes and structures to float above one another, hinting at a world of

utopian design. This also relates to Mohamedi’s enthusiasm for Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, who were both members of the Bauhaus, a 1920s institution which aimed to combine art and design in the belief that harmonious forms could create a better world through architecture, furniture design and textiles, as well as art. She was fanatical about design herself, believing unity and function to be co-dependent. In some works, as with this one, the triangular form also returns, possibly signifying a connection to natural surroundings despite the stark abstraction of the drawings.

### ACTIVITIES

Make a sketch or take a photograph of your school grounds or the view from your classroom window. Make a series of drawings based on your image using only straight lines and gradually reduce the number of lines used. What are the fewest number of lines you can get to for people to still recognise what the image is?

Collectively design your own utopian, ideal landscape using collage or montage to create your own buildings, environments and even cities. These could be 2D or printed/stuck onto boxes or packaging to generate a 3D version.

Look at various architectural styles and movements online or in books and design a piece of furniture that embraces that style. You could look at the work of twentieth-century Western architects such as Gaudi, Le Corbusier, Gehry or architecture from historical periods, other cultures that you may also be studying.