**Pure Abstraction**

Shapes and colors have always had their own emotional force: the designs on ancient bowls, textiles, and furnishings are abstract, as are whole pages of medieval manuscripts. But never before in Western painting had this delight in shape as such, in color made independent of nature, been taken seriously as a fit subject for the painter. Abstraction became the perfect vehicle for artists to explore and unversalize ideas and sensations.

Several artists claimed to be the first to paint an abstract picture, rather as early photographers had wrangled over who had invented the camera. For abstract art, the distinction is most often given to Wassily Kandinsky, but certainly another Russian artist, Kasimir Malevich, was also among the first.

Kandinsky's late style had a geometrical tendency and Suprematist abstraction revolved largely around the square, but the real artist of geometry was the Dutchman Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). He seems to be the absolute abstract artist, yet his early landscapes and still lifes were relatively realist.

The Grey Tree (1912; 79 x 108 cm (31 x 42 1/2 in)) adumbrates the abstractions that were a half-way house to his geometrical work, yet it also has a foothold in the real world of life and death. The Grey Tree is realist art on the point of taking off into abstraction: take away the title and we have an abstraction; add the title and we have a grey tree. He claimed to have painted these pictures from the need to make a living, yet they have a fragile delicacy that is precious and rare. Mondrian sought an art of the utmost probity: his greatest desire was to attain personal purity, to disregard all that pleases the narrow self and enter into divine simplicities. That may sound dull, but he composed with a lyrical sureness of balance that makes his art as pure and purifying as he hoped.

Mondrian imposed rigorous constraints on himself, using only primary colors, black and white, and straight-sided forms. His theories and his art are a triumphant vindication of austerity. Diamond Painting in Red, Yellow, and Blue (c. 1921-25; 143 x 142 cm (56 1/4 x 56 in)) appears to be devoid of three-dimensional space, but it is in fact an immensely dynamic picture. The great shapes are dense with their chromatic tension. The varying thicknesses of the black borders contain them in perfect balance. They integrate themselves continually as we watch, keeping us constantly interested. We sense that this is a vision of the way things are intended to be, but never are.