

RHYTHM AND COLOR IN ART AS INFLUENCED BY JAZZ

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ABSTRACT

As jazz music rose to popularity in the early twentieth century, people of all backgrounds were drawn to it. Visual artists recognized the distinctive rhythms and defining colors in jazz as inherently unique, and sought to recreate them visually. Piet Mondrian's colored, pulsating blocks in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-1943) and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, created in the following year, shows that rhythm is an important element in the depiction of jazz music. In regard to color, Henri Matisse's chromatic improvisations in his famous cut-out work, *Jazz* (1947), show the importance of color to the inimitable nature of jazz music. In France, Matisse was artistically guided by the concept of jazz; but, as an artist who spent significant time in America, Mondrian was specifically inspired by the sounds of New York City. Ultimately, the new, modern city and the new modern music of jazz went hand-in-hand in their profound influence upon modern art. These artists show the inspiration that can be drawn visually from the rhythms and colors of America's music: Jazz.

World-renowned jazz musician, bandleader, and composer Wynton Marsalis is not only known for his role in the performance of jazz, but also for his historical accounts and emphasis on the education of jazz. He once stated: “Music is the art of all the invisible things that are real.” In this quote, he makes the inevitable link between music and the world of visual art. This is a field explored by both artists and musicians. Musicians strive for the visual experience a work of art gives, while visual artists work for the emotion gained through an aural performance. While history shows a host of artists influencing musicians (and vice versa), one idiom of music has substantially influenced modern artists, and that is jazz. This term encompasses a myriad of styles and genres of music. From ragtime to swing, cool to fusion, there is a style of jazz for nearly every listener. Just as jazz has matured to a universal and acknowledged music that is acceptable for musical study, modern art has also become better understood since its beginning in the early 20th century, and is now considered by most to be a legitimate form of art. By looking at the works of Piet Mondrian and Henri Matisse, it is clear that these modern artists have found inspiration in the rhythms and colors of America’s music: Jazz.

The first step in identifying the influence jazz has on art is to identify what kind of musical characteristics define jazz music. One of the most important characteristics is rhythm. Within that subject are syncopation, polyrhythm, and the triplet and “swung” eighth note. Syncopation is a series of notes presented off the beat. An example is an eighth note, immediately followed by a quarter note and another eighth note. A musical section containing polyrhythms would feature two or more independent rhythms. This could be portrayed as a soloist playing groups of three or six notes while the rest of the band plays in 4/4 time. This is a technique that harkens back to traditional African music, in which the drummers would beat incredibly complex polyrhythms. A swung eighth note is a common, albeit not mandatory, feature of jazz music. To swing an eighth note, the player elongates the first eighth note and shortens the second. Mathematically, this means the first eighth note would be the length of two notes within an eighth note triplet, while the second eighth note would be the length of the third.

The harmonic language of jazz is a significant feature. Basic jazz harmonies revolve around dominant and tonic relationships, as does Western music from the Common Practice Period (1600-1900). Jazz differs from traditional music in that there is an aspect of improvisation even within the harmonic structure. Performers are free to add additional chord members based on their experience and will. The choices performers make in this manner adds to the complexity of any given piece. These are important, though largely quantitative, definitions of jazz. It is the expressive qualities of jazz that make it not only unique, but an art work unto itself. Most jazz is defined by its improvisatory nature. According to jazz author Ted Gioia, “improvisation remains even today the most distinctive element of a jazz performance.” It is the conflict between improvisation and the confines of the familiar that relates to the listener.

The question left to the listener is whether or not these elements lead to a legitimate art form. Throughout its history, jazz has been treated as a lower form of music, usually because of its African influences. It was played in brothels, bars, and on street corners; these are hardly the places most fine art resides. Additionally, with jazz there is no finished product. There is no sheet music that accounts for exactly what the player played at any one sitting. This is because jazz is a process rather than a product. The player has the ability to look back at what has already happened and change what will happen based on that. As to its current social status, people of all races and ages participate in jazz groups. Jazz groups perform in concert halls, and there is a set jazz theory that is studied and followed. This leaves little argument that jazz is an art form. In the end, though, jazz can only be considered art if it is treated as such.

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), famous for his paintings of colorful square grids, showed the influence of jazz in his writings on art, as well as his works. An artist from the Netherlands, Mondrian's early instruction came from his father, Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan, and his uncle, Fritz Mondriaan. Mondrian moved to Paris in 1912 to further pursue his painting, and influence from Cubism is seen in his work of this time. World War I began while Mondrian visited his home in 1914, and he was not able to return to France until 1919, when the war was safely over. During this time, Mondrian focused on theosophical studies, and published his ideas in the journal called *De Stijl* ("The Style"). Mondrian wrote that painting must "set an example to the other arts for achieving a society in which art as such has no place but belongs instead to the total realization of beauty." Mondrian broke with the De Stijl group around 1925, as they began to develop a style called Elementarism, in which the diagonal line is of importance. Upon Mondrian's return to France, he focused on completely abstract art, and began making his famous grid paintings. In 1938, Mondrian felt his life and work were in danger. His work was considered *entartete kunst*, or "degenerate art," by the Nazi Regime. Mondrian moved to London, and in 1940 made the final move of his life to New York, where he received much acclaim. In 1944, Mondrian died of pneumonia. He was known as one of the "most modern" artists of his time.

Mondrian's background proves him to be a symbol of his own art movement, but it also shows an interest in jazz music from the beginning of his fame. Mondrian paid attention to the music of the time, and with the movement of American jazz bands to Europe around 1919, Mondrian found inspiration. Though he did not have much musical training, Mondrian enjoyed and appreciated the freedom of it, particularly of American jazz over European. What Mondrian later realized, was that the "suddenness and interruption" that he enjoyed of American jazz, was called "syncopation," one of the important factors of jazz music. Mondrian believed that jazz was an innately visual experience in that it featured musicians and dancers together, and so the influence of jazz found a way into his visual works.

It is Mondrian's interest in boogie woogie, as well as the stimulation of the New York City atmosphere that resulted in two of his final works: *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-1943) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-1944). The colors and rhythms of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie* were meant to depict both jazz and New York City. Mondrian was greatly influenced by the "blinking lights and neon pipelines of Times Square and Broadway, the stop and go of traffic, [and] piercing bleats of horns." Prominent graphic designer Paula Scher calls *Broadway Boogie Woogie* an "abstracted map of Manhattan." Therefore, the piece is representative of the modern city and its music (Figure 1). The colors are distinctly American, and this may resonate with the American particularly strongly, as both compositions were completed around the same time that the tide turned for Allied forces in World War II. So, although Mondrian was not American, his piece reflects the American spirit, music, and city.

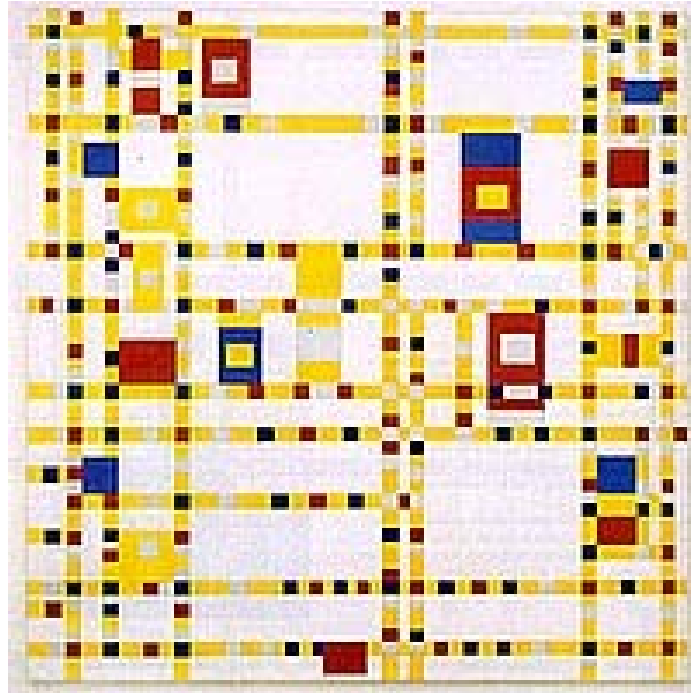


Fig. 1 *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) by Piet Mondrian. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

As aforementioned, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* was influenced strongly by the musical form boogie woogie. The musical form is known for its repetitive bass line and driving rhythms, as well as its association with dancing. This would have been a primary draw for Mondrian, who, according to accounts, “danced enthusiastically” around his studio. Mondrian’s specific inspiration came from the piano trio of Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade Lux Lewis. The three would each play at once, giving a unique and complex texture similar to that of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. As the viewer gazes at *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, the lines and blocks of colors pulsate in time. The yellow lines of color guide the eye between the larger rectangles, which are spaced in such a way as to imply syncopation. The varying short and long distances between the rectangles sound the rhythm of the piece. When Mondrian first became interested in the syncopation of jazz, he had to learn how to reflect it in his painting. In music, syncopation is an alteration of the regular, classical beat; in visual art, however, a normal grid is what grabs attention, because it breaks the general rule of perspective. Typically, lines converge as they recede, but in a grid, all lines are on the same plane, which means the lines cannot recede. Mondrian works with this in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* by placing different blocks of colors at the convergence points of the yellow lines. By covering the convergence points, Mondrian takes away the confusing recession of lines and creates syncopation in the points.

While syncopation is an important and obvious aspect of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, it is not the only representation of boogie woogie. According to James Johnson Sweeney, who was the curator for the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1936 to 1946, as well as a writer on modern art, there is a “constant repetition of the right angle theme, like a persistent bass chord sounding through a sprinkle of running arpeggios and grace notes from the treble.” In boogie woogie style, the bass line is constant and repetitive, and the harmonic structure is typical of twelve-bar blues: four measures of the tonic chord, two measures of the subdominant chord, two

measures of the tonic chord, one measure of the dominant chord, one measure of the subdominant chord, and two measures of the tonic chord. This is a standard format, and is equivalent in its reliance to Mondrian's reliable grids. The grid holds the harmonies in a familiar structure. Just as familiar to the viewer are the colors Mondrian chose to depict his abstracted view of jazz with. The colors are all primary: red, blue, yellow, and white. These colors can be related to the primary chords used in the twelve bar blues: tonic, subdominant, and dominant. The yellow is a representation of the constant bass, while the red, blue, and white depict the common chords of boogie woogie.

Mondrian used the same color composition in *Victory Boogie Woogie* (Figure 2). This was his final piece, and was left unfinished at his death. According to cultural historian Alfred Appel, *Victory Boogie Woogie* "quickens the tempo and raises the volume," as compared to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. This statement certainly is true, though the work was left incomplete at Mondrian's death. The squares of color are much more frequent, and the orderly grid present in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is barely discernable. The yellow horizontal and vertical lines are dotted with more colors, and there are even more rectangles of color. The increased complexity of this piece shows the progression of boogie woogie to be-bop, a much faster and more improvised form of jazz. In the 1940s, musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk began experimenting with advanced harmonies and fast-paced rhythms. *Victory Boogie Woogie* resonates in be-bop in the frenetic activity and complexity, but also in the nature of improvisation. Improvisation is the constant re-working of a melody. Mondrian altered his composition process with *Victory Boogie Woogie*, using colored tape to experiment with the dynamics of the piece. He moved the tape around until he was content with the effect. While this is not identical to improvisation, it shows reinvention in his work that is similar to jazz artists. Interestingly enough, Mondrian declared *Victory Boogie Woogie* to be complete twice and reworked it even after that. It seems Mondrian treated the piece as a jazz musician would: never in the same manner twice.

While Mondrian showed influences of music throughout his career, Henri Matisse only showed musical influence in his final work, entitled *Jazz*. Matisse is known as one of the first avant-garde artists in the world. Matisse was born in 1869 in Le Cateau-Cambresis, in the very northern region of France. After receiving a degree in law, Matisse became a solicitor's clerk in Paris. He began attending drawing classes because he was bored, and in 1889, he took up painting while he recovered from appendicitis. After studying under Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), an instructor of the Académie Julian who stressed imagination and feeling and allowed students to experiment with colors, Matisse was introduced to Impressionism by Australian Impressionist painter John Peter Russell (1858-1930). Color became crucial to his paintings because of the influence of Moreau and Russell. In 1905, Matisse's paintings appeared in an exhibition with other *Fauvists* ("strong colorists") at the Salon d'Automne, and Matisse became known as the leader of the Fauves. Matisse's paintings during a period in the countryside of France just after World War I were more orderly than his earlier Fauvist years. In 1929 he made a change and focused just on etchings, dry points, and lithographs. Matisse's return to painting with a new vigor a year later may have been influenced by a trip to Tahiti via New York and San Francisco. An operation for a tumor in 1941 left Matisse an invalid and unable to paint, and it is from this period that his cut-outs and drawings come. He died in 1954 of a heart attack.

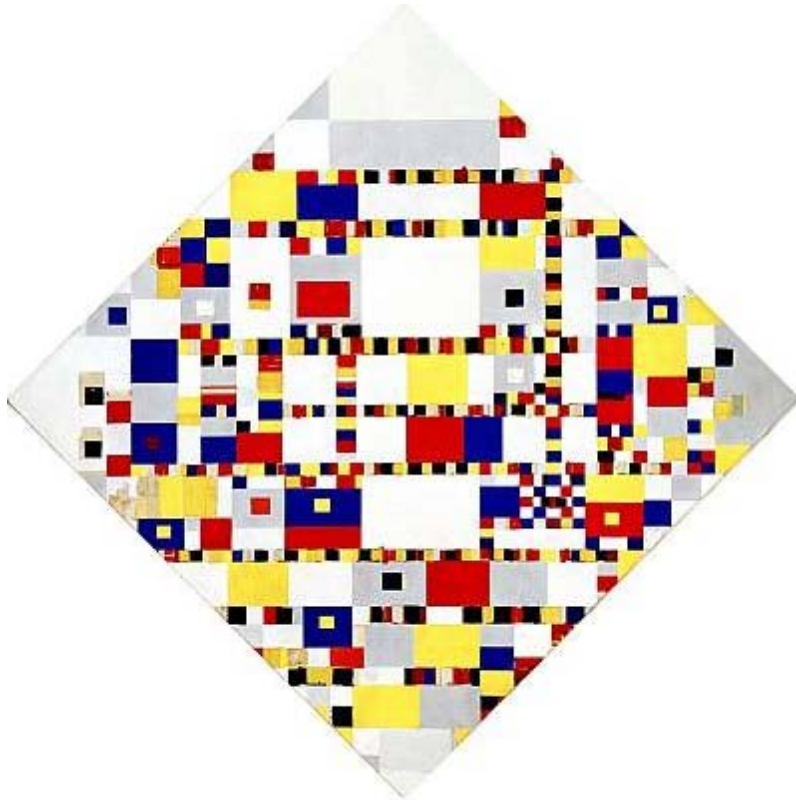


Fig. 2 *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944) by Piet Mondrian. Oil on canvas. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, the Netherlands.

It is to his cut-outs that we look for Matisse's final masterpiece: *Jazz*. Not only did the work legitimize cut paper as an artistic medium, but it symbolized Matisse's life-long search for color innovation. The subject of the work began as the circus, but Matisse realized as his pieces went on that the color chromatics he was creating related to improvisation, and so the name *Jazz* was created. Matisse's first step in the process was to paint large sheets with watercolor. The colors were so bright that "his doctor had ordered him not to enter the room without wearing dark glasses." Matisse then cut forms from the paper and arranged them in different ways until he "achieved a harmonious juxtaposition of pure colors." Matisse said of the experience: "Sometimes a difficulty arose: when I united the lines, volumes, and colors everything melted, destroying another. I had to start over again, to look to music and dance, to find equilibrium and avoid the conventional." It was up to Matisse to rework his art over and over again, much like a jazz artist would rework the same melody piece in a section of improvisation.

Matisse's balance of color and space throughout the entire work is a re-occurring example of improvisation in the composition. For instance, *Le Codomas*, named after a trapeze act, illustrates spatial improvisation (Figure 3). There are similar forms, but they are presented in different ways, which is a technique of improvisation. Spatially, the piece looks like organized cacophony: various curvilinear and rectilinear figures lay across rectangles in no particular order. But the rectangles give a semblance of some order, just as the bass and trap-set lay the groundwork for the instrumentalists improvising on top. The figures in the cut-out seem to have sprung from the viewer's own mind. In the same vein, *Le Lanceur de Couteaux*, or *The Knife-Thrower*, features two large figures improvisatory in nature on opposite sides (Figure 4). The symmetry is what gives this piece order and balance, though the figures themselves are different.

Additionally, the column on the left gives structure, but takes away from the balance, as there is no column on the other side. Leaf-like structures seem to float from the bottom in an unorganized fashion. As in *Le Codomas*, the leaf-like structures seem like motives upon which to be improvised. These motive-like structures are placed in such a way as to unite the improvisatory factors in a way that suggest meaning and purpose to even these small structures. Colors were another way in which Matisse improvised with his cut-outs. He stated: "It's not enough to place colors, however beautiful, one beside the other; colors must also react on one another. Otherwise, you have cacophony. *Jazz* is rhythm and meaning." *Le Toboggan*, or *The Toboggan*, features eleven colors that jive together harmoniously (Figure 5). At the bottom of the piece are black, yellow, dark brown, white, and peach. These colors help to make the bottom border, whereas the top border is created with black, red, white, and green. The use of different color combinations creates an interesting effect, as if the eye is blocked from movement at the top but free at the bottom. Despite the fact that the figure in the middle is portrayed in a color similar to that of the background, the figure is what stands out in the image. Matisse's careful attention to the color combinations matches those that an orchestrator would make when composing a work. For a powerful section, the brass would be paired together, but perhaps the saxophones would take over for a more mellow feeling. In other words, Matisse's colors help to focus the eye on the subject in the same way combinations of instruments focus the ear upon the melody.



Fig. 3 *Le Codomas* (1947) by Henri Matisse. Paper cutout. National Gallery, Washington D.C.



Fig. 4 *Le Lanceur de Couteau* (1947) by Henri Matisse. Paper cutouts. National Gallery, Washington D.C.

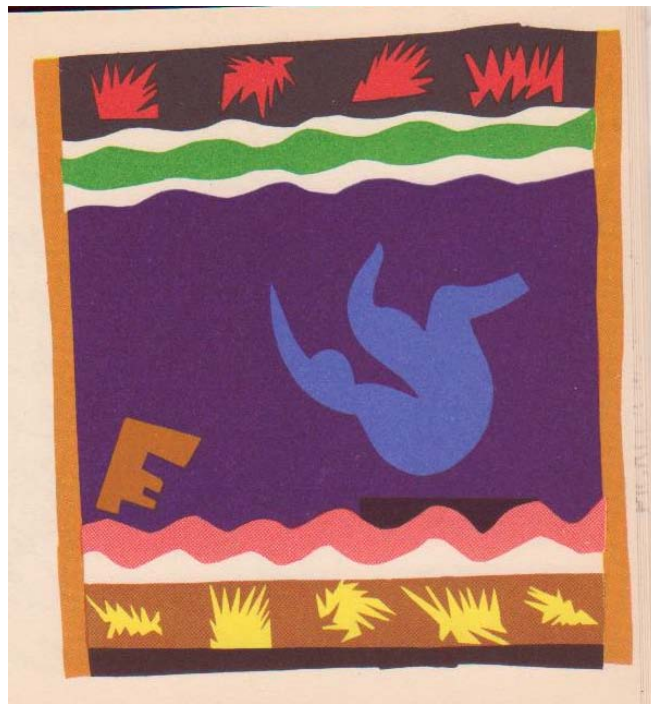


Fig. 5 *Le Tobogan* (1947) by Henri Matisse. Paper cutouts. National Gallery, Washington D.C.

Just as Mondrian's art relates specifically to boogie-woogie and be-bop, Matisse's compilation of cut-outs have a relationship with cool jazz, primarily through the leaf-like motives uniting two major themes in *Le Codomas* and *Le Lanceur de Couteaux*. In *Le Codomas*, the two themes are the black boxes and trapeze forms, with the lyrical, leaf-like motives filling in the space between. Likewise, the two forms that almost resemble abstracted figures in *Le Lanceur de Couteaux* lie on a neutral background and are surrounded by the same leaf-like motives. Simply in a visual comparison between these two works and the works of Mondrian, the viewer can see an obvious difference in the visual aggression of the works. This is created through the rhythm and color of the pieces. Mondrian's squares keep the viewer's eyes busy, and has an overall higher level of visual action between forms. Matisse's works are visually much calmer, offering the viewer more time for reflection and attention to form. Additionally, the primary, loud colors used in Mondrian's works contrast sharply with the somewhat muted colors of Matisse's works, particularly *Le Codomas*.

The powerful combination of jazz rhythm and color on art is unmistakable. Mondrian's colored, pulsating blocks indicate jazz rhythms, and Matisse's chromatic improvisations show the influence of color manipulated in a free, jazz-like fashion.

Regardless of the method, European and American painters alike found jazz to be an inspiration. Jazz infiltrated not only the art world, but all of America. As George Gershwin saw it, "Jazz is the result of energy stored up in America. It is a very energetic kind of music, noisy, boisterous and even vulgar. One thing is certain. Jazz has contributed an enduring value to American in that it has expressed ourselves." Americans embraced jazz as their own modern art because they saw it as "primitive and modern, natural and industrial." In France, Matisse was artistically guided by the concept of jazz; but, as an artist who spent significant time in America, Mondrian was specifically inspired by the sounds of New York City. Ultimately, the new, modern city and the new modern music of jazz went hand-in-hand in their profound influence upon modern art.

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