What kind of painting is the man on the cover looking at? Have you seen a design that looks like this one before? (Perhaps in advertisements, on dishes, even in clothing designs?) The paintings created by this month's featured artist Piet Mondrian (PEA-et MONE-dee-ahn) are so unique and instantly recognizable that they have become a symbol of modern art. In fact, the cover sculpture was done a few years ago by contemporary American artist George Segal as a tribute to Mondrian.

Twentieth-century Dutch painter Piet Mondrian said that he was "born old" because he was sure he had already lived many other lives before this one. And his present identity as a painter was just one of a number of incarnations he would experience on his way to perfection. He believed that it was the function of art to project ordinary, everyday life into a dimension where time had no meaning. And it was the artist's special mission to help create this totally perfect environment.

Mondrian lived during a period when the world around him was changing rapidly. The First World War in 1914 was the earliest global conflict to use modern methods of warfare. At the same time, the scientific discoveries of people like Darwin and Freud, as well as the development of machines like automobiles, planes, and radio were changing the world. Photography — made possible by the invention of another machine, the camera, which could record every realistic detail in an instant — had taken the place of traditional representational art. At the beginning of the 20th century, artists had to find new visual forms to express a new world.

Piet Mondrian was born in 1872 into a strict Calvinist family. His father, a painter, taught at a religious school in the small Dutch town where they lived. Mondrian studied art in high school, then went to the Fine Arts Academy in Amsterdam. To earn a living, he taught and spent the rest of his time painting — realistically at first (see drawing above). In 1909 the artist had his first show. In the same year, Mondrian joined the Theosophical Society, a group whose mystical ideas (described earlier) would influence his art for the rest of his life. At the end of 1911, Mondrian moved to Paris where he saw the new geometric work of "cubists" such as Picasso. His paintings became increasingly simple and geometric. He joined a group of artists all working on the same idea — the creation of a new reality through the simplification and perfection of images. In a few
years, Mondrian had developed his own distinctive style of painting (above), and for the last 25 years of his life he used only straight lines, right angles, black, white, and three colors.

Mondrian not only painted his ideas, he lived them. Everyday things were not important to him — his art was everything. He had few possessions — not even books. He would read his mail every day then destroy it so it would not distract him. His studio was completely geometric — floor, walls, furniture. A visitor could not rearrange furniture, table settings, even an ashtray without upsetting the “balance” of the room. Everything was painted either white or the three pure colors he used in his work. Mondrian so hated the color green — it was “too close to nature” — that when he went to a restaurant, he would sit where he did not have to look at the trees outside.

During the 1930s, Mondrian’s work became well known in Europe. In 1939, when the Second World War began, Mondrian went to England, then to the United States. He spent four years in New York City where he did some of his best-known paintings. In 1944, the artist died of pneumonia.

In this issue, you’ll see how and why Mondrian developed his famous and unique style. You’ll discover the great influence his art has had on our everyday life, and the workshop at the end will give you a chance to develop an abstract style of your own.
THE REAL THING

"Art and life are the same. Abstract art is not the creation of another reality but the true vision of reality." — Mondrian

The greatest works of art look as if they've always just been there, waiting for the artist to discover them. Although the final result may look easy, the artist has always had to struggle to arrive at a statement that perfectly expressed what he or she wanted to say. Mondrian worked for over 20 years before he developed the style for which he is best known. In his early work, Mondrian was fascinated with plants — especially trees. In the mythology of nearly every culture, trees are thought of as the link between opposites — earth and sky, masculine and feminine, life and death. So in his art, Mondrian focused on trees as symbols of the natural cycle — birth, life, reproduction, death, decay, rebirth. In the nine paintings on the right, you can see how Mondrian begins with a natural object and slowly, step by step, transforms it into a completely abstract statement. The artist said, "The universe is not to be found in nature, but in the relations existing in nature."

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Now the tree has completely disappeared. The horizontal and vertical lines have become tighter and straighter, while only a few curves are left. Everything has become a bright, primary yellow.

In the next stage, all the lines have been removed, leaving rectangles of flat color. But this solution also created a feeling of depth (the big shapes seem to be floating in front of the little ones), which Mondrian didn’t want.

All curves are gone. The intersection of straight vertical and horizontal lines is the important element. But this solution did not satisfy Mondrian since the image is still not flat. The different sizes of the crosses suggest depth.

The color remains and the straight lines are back. This solution was still not quite right. The colors were not pure enough and the rectangular grid was too complicated. The painting still didn’t completely express Mondrian’s vision.

The cross shapes are explored further. The vertical lines stand for the life force, the horizontal lines for rest and death. The crossing, or union of these two forces creates tension. The colors are states of being: Blue indicates devotion and red, affection.

By 1920, Mondrian had developed his final “pure” style. The artist had realized his theory: “The essence of painting is line and color. Paintings must be as flat as the surface they are painted on. The only pure colors are those that cannot be mixed, the primaries red, blue, yellow.”
Mondrian did his two most famous paintings just at the end of his life. One is shown above and on the next two pages. The other is on the opposite page (bottom). These two paintings are a final summing up of Mondrian's unique and unmistakable style.

By 1920 Mondrian had found his method of expression, and for the next 24 years he used only straight lines meeting at right angles, and rectangles in one of three colors. He created nearly 200 paintings working within these self-imposed rules, never satisfied until each composition was perfect. A lesser artist working in this limited way might quickly have run out of ideas, but Mondrian used such variety and invention that every painting is a surprise. In each, the artist creates a carefully balanced excitement and tension.

How many variations can you find in each of the paintings shown below? In which ones does the thickness of the lines change? In what other ways do the lines change? How many colors are used in each painting? Compare them; are any two the same shade? In which paintings are the edges important? How does white space balance a line or color block? How do the intersecting lines balance other elements? Which paintings are balanced symmetrically (the same on each side)? Which asymmetrically?
"I dreamed a lovely composition last night."  *Piet Mondrian*

Mondrian didn't use mathematical or scientific formulas in his paintings. He wanted his works to be experienced, not explained. They tell no stories, contain no symbols or messages. Mondrian worked by trial and error, by 'feel' as he called it. During the last four years of his life, Mondrian lived and worked in a small studio off Broadway in New York City. The bright lights, constant noise, and busy streets of New York fascinated Mondrian. Although it seems out of character, the painter loved music and dancing, and would sometimes spend all night in jazz clubs. By day he worked constantly, trying to capture the unexpected tempos, broken rhythms, and dynamic tensions of the city.

A friend of Mondrian's describes working with him on his last painting (below), *Victory Boogie Woogie:*

My earliest recollection of the *Victory Boogie Woogie* was on a day I went to visit Mondrian and he came pattering out to greet me, waving a little piece of paper. "I dreamed a lovely composition last night," he said, thrusting the paper before my eyes. It was the beginning sketch for *Victory Boogie Woogie.*

It was on June 13, 1942, that I first saw Mondrian working on the painting. A big diamond-shaped canvas stood against the wall and he began moving tapes around on it. It was close and sticky in the studio and at first I was confused by his approach. Back and forth he trudged, laying down the colored lines and sticking little tapes at the intersections. It was subtle, the way each small dab of tape, in changing a color at the intersection, changed all the other relationships. After hours of this, I said, "Mondrian, you have 12 pictures buried under this one canvas." He replied, "It is not important to make many pictures, but that I make one picture right." Finally, he said it was complete and I made a crayon sketch of it (above).

When I next saw the picture, he had begun to break the lines into small squares of color. I was so shocked when I saw these small squares I exclaimed, "But Mondrian, it's against the theory." I remember him standing back from the painting, squinting his eyes and saying, "But it works. You must remember that the paintings come first and the theory comes from the paintings."

It was in late January 1944 that I visited Mondrian the last few times. He had a bad cold and I did not stay long. We looked at the *Victory Boogie Woogie* together. I found it very wonderful and it seemed finished. Mondrian said it was all right except for the very top.

On Wednesday I went up again, and found the doctor there and Mondrian in bed. I was asked to wait in the studio where I saw the *Victory Boogie Woogie* in its final stage. It looked as though he'd been working on it in fever and with great intensity. The effect of dynamic movement was due to the addition of colored tapes superimposed with hundreds of brightly colored little squares. Soon Mondrian was taken to the hospital. He was never to work on the *Victory* again.

Mondrian created nearly 200 paintings using only straight lines, right angles, and three colors. No two paintings are alike; each is a masterpiece.

ABOVE EXCERPT FROM A 1971 INTERVIEW WITH PAINTER CHARMIAN VON WIEGAND

VICTORY BOOGIE WOOGIE, 1943. OIL. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

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"The city is the expression of modern life; it produces abstract art. This non-figurative art will create among us a profoundly rich and human beauty."

— Piet Mondrian

BROADWAY BOOGIE WOOGIE
**MONDRIAN TODAY**

"In the future, art will become our environment. Architecture, sculpture, and painting will be united, and a new reality will be created."

—Piet Mondrian

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**THE HOUSE MONDRIAN MIGHT HAVE BUILT**

In Mondrian's pure ideal world, at some time in the future, our surroundings would become art. A painting wouldn't hang on just any wall. The wall and the painting would both be works of art, meant to be seen together. Today, we live in Mondrian's "future" world. Do you think his prediction has come true? Contemporary artists design outdoor environmental sculptures which are meant to be part of the buildings that surround them. Other artists create *painted* sculptures or shaped, *sculpted* paintings. Architects build total environments: buildings in which every element — rugs, lighting, furniture, dishes — is designed to work together as a unit. This Pennsylvania home (left), built by architect Richard Meier, has been referred to as a three-dimensional Mondrian painting. Compare it with some of the artist's paintings you've seen in this issue. The house is all white — inside and out. Every room in the building is rectangular, but each is a different size and proportion. Columns support the glass walls, allowing the eye to move in and out of the space. The severity of this geometric design is relieved by unexpected inventions — surprising corners or bright color accents — as in a Mondrian painting.
A CUBE BIGGER THAN LIFE

Why is the gigantic, bright red cube (shown above) standing on one end? Contemporary American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (ee-SA-moo na-GOO-che) likes to work with simple, abstract shapes. Many of his pieces are designed to be seen outdoors, so his sculptures have to work with their environment. Cube is set in a plaza in New York City, surrounded by tall buildings. Right behind and looming over the work is an enormous 52-story skyscraper. This building’s severe geometric bulk not only keeps the plaza below in constant shadow, it gives the area an inhuman, uninviting quality. Cube’s bright color offsets the darkness of its location. Its surprising position — balanced on one corner, as if it is about to tip over — changes the entire feeling of the space it occupies. Running through the center of the cube is a round opening lined with shiny metal that picks up and reflects any available light. In Cube, Noguchi — like Mondrian — uses simple, abstract, geometric shapes in unusual ways in order to create the very human qualities of humor and surprise.

SCULPTURAL PAINTINGS

Contemporary American artist Elizabeth Murray, like Mondrian, has developed a very personal and limited vocabulary of abstract shapes and colors. Neither artist’s work could ever be mistaken for that of anyone else. Even though she doesn’t like “neat rectangles,” Murray works as Mondrian did — by trial and error. She says, “I draw up my plans quickly, without thinking too much. When I put the shapes up on the wall, they surprise me.” The artist has moved beyond the rectangular frame, breaking her works into separate parts. After she arranges her abstract, shaped canvases on the wall, Murray paints different, brightly colored shapes on top of them. When you look at the work shown below left, try to imagine how the geometric canvases would look if they were all one flat color. Would the shapes look as if they were flying apart, or “shattering”? How do the curved, painted shapes hold the work together? How do the spaces between add tension? Look closely at this work, Painter’s Progress. Do you recognize any of the painted shapes? Can you find brushes and an artist’s palette? In works like this, Murray uses images that are not totally abstract — at least, not when you know they are there. She explains, “At first nobody saw the images. I realized that was how I felt about my life. It’s a conflict — like a painting in pieces and inside, an image that could bring it together. But only I can recognize that image.”
ARTIST OF THE MONTH

MARTIN SURAK

ABSTRACTING FROM LIFE

Why would anyone create abstract art? When you first saw the painting on the next page, would you have guessed that it was done from real life? Nineteen-year-old Martin Surak saw his mother sitting at the kitchen table, took a photo, and two months later used it as the basis of this work. But what happened while he was working on the painting? Why is his mother's face almost like a mask? Why is the grass purple and the hard, clear shapes of the kitchen all shifted and bent? In this interview you'll find out why the artist changes real life when he works, and just how he did this painting. Martin is currently a freshman at the Tyler School of Art just outside of Philadelphia. He did this Scholastic Art Award-winning painting when he was a senior at the Archbishop John Carroll High School in Radnor, Pennsylvania.

When did you become involved in art?
I was always doodling when I was a kid. Then when I was 15, a friend of mine who was a commercial artist got me interested in using colored markers. She gave me a sketchbook and I really started to enjoy drawing. Before, I used to get upset when I tried to draw. Everything I did looked horrible to me. I’d rip my drawings up — I wanted them to be perfect. But she taught me to tolerate the imperfections and try to work with them.

Why did you do this painting?
I think it was an assignment, but I asked my teacher if I could try working abstractly. The idea of using the kitchen came from a photo. I had taken a photo of my mother at the kitchen table in front of these large windows that look out on the backyard. I got a strong feeling from it — kind of calm, content, maybe a little sad. I looked at the photo for a while and discarded the idea of working from it directly. I was tired of the meticulous little drawings I had been doing all year. Here I had a chance to do something really different.

Did you draw out the shapes before you began painting?
No, I just started with the black paint, outlining each shape by line. But it was almost second nature. I sketch a lot — mostly cartoon-like, abstracted faces, very simple and flat. The figure was the hardest. I had a difficult time abstracting the foot. In the end, it doesn’t look like my mother at all, aside from the hair and sweater.

When I began doing the color, I started with the plate of food and I used realistic colors. I would choose a color that related to the color I used before. I started experimenting more when I hit the grass. At one point the grass was green, but then I decided to forget realism. I figured if I’m really going to abstract this, the thing that should be important is not what I’m representing but the painting itself. I liked the white on the right and the blue to the left, and I felt there should be purple in between. And I guess that was where I began to break free of realism — with the purple grass.

What else did you experiment with?
The texture and thickness of the
paint. When I got to the tree, I started mixing the paint directly on
the canvas. I took some white and some green, put it down where the
tree was, and mixed it right there. When it was halfway mixed, I
looked at it and I liked the thick swirls of green and white. So I left
it that way. I used the same techn-
ique in the hair. Then in the sky,
I painted in these big black globs.
I liked the idea that I could get
another color without changing the
color at all. I didn’t change the
black, but by having it in these
raised lumps, I got whitish circles
around them and reflections, too.

Sometimes instead of adding
paint to get detail, I scratched it
away. On my mother’s turtleneck,
I scratched into the paint and the
base coat came through. I also
scratched in the lines of the floor-
boards. I added the little squares
on the floor last. They have no real
basis. I just wanted a color to
break up all that brown.

When you look at the painting now, do
you get any particular feelings from it?
The feeling is more of an enjoy-
ment of shapes and colors. Maybe
with all the cool colors, it turned
out to be kind of a down feeling.
But I think the yellow counteracts
that. When I finished it though, I
was kind of confused and a little
embarrassed, because I’d never
done anything like it before.

Why do you like to work abstractly?
For me, art is human emotion.
You draw on real life, but a lot of
times it’s not perfect enough. It
doesn’t give you the feeling you
want. So it’s up to you as an artist
to change it. Abstraction for me is
a way to get perfect art — perfe-
tion that gives you an emotion.

I find so many interesting
shapes in everyday life — mail-
boxes, lamp posts, trees, faces —
that I just end up drawing them all.
Sometimes the shape is perfect —
meaning it transfers from reality
straight into a good feeling in my
brain. Sometimes a real shape
gives me an idea for a shape that is
emotional. Like a mailbox. It
might become a shape like a grave-
stone, and that’s how I draw it.

Do you plan to go on in art?
I definitely want to continue paint-
ing, as long as the urge is there.
But I think next year I want to
move into experimental film. A lot
of my drawings or paintings actu-
ally seem like scenes from films.
I’d love to be a filmmaker when I
get out of school.

Is there any advice you could offer
readers who are serious about art?
The library is probably the last
place you want to find yourself.
But get into a corner with some
books on artists that interest you.
Go to your art teacher for names of
artists — old names, new names.
Get an art history book out, and if
you see something that just flips
you out from the 20th century or
200 B.C., find out more about it.
Get as much exposure as you can.

Learn the technical stuff, but go
with your feelings as well. The
assignments your teachers give
may seem really difficult, but do
them. Complete the assignment
but add something else that makes
you feel good. Or tell your teacher
you want to integrate something
you feel like doing with an assign-
ment. The most important thing is
to keep interested, because no
one’s going to stay with something
they don’t enjoy doing.
INVENTING A VISUAL LANGUAGE

All you need to create your own abstraction is one of the ordinary kitchen tools you see below.

As you've seen in this issue, the artist Mondrian didn't start out working abstractly. He began by painting real objects and over the years developed a personal vocabulary of shapes and colors. In this way he was able to create a visual language which had special meaning for him. When doing this workshop, you'll start with an everyday object and working step by step, turn its image into your own striking and colorful abstract design.

MATERIALS
- 12" x 18" sulfite paper
- 12" x 18" tracing paper
- 12" x 18" oaktag paper
- School pencils
- Vinyl eraser
- 12" ruler
- Scissors
- Red, yellow, blue, black water felt markers
- Kitchen utensils (eggbeater, whisk, potato peeler — any utensil with interesting shapes)

STARTING OUT

1 Draw eight 3" x 3" squares (leave some space between every square). Fill each square with a drawing of a SECTION of a utensil. Use bold, simplified shapes; draw the object from many different points of view; avoid small details.
Simplify or abstract your drawings by eliminating small areas or incorporating them into larger areas. Pick your two best designs and using tracing paper, develop a repeat pattern. Repeat your design in one of the following ways:

1. Rotation
2. Mirror Image

Make changes so your four repeated units now work together as a whole (it should not look like a series of squares). Draw your final design in a 6" x 6" square and experiment with different color combinations (use tracing paper). Color final design with felt markers.

**Some Solutions**

Which is the most important element in each of these designs done by our student workshop artists—line, shape, color, or space? (Which will be the most important element in your design?) Can you tell which repetitional device was used in each design—rotation, mirror image, 1-2-2-1, or 1-1-1-1? How did each artist tie his or her design together? Did they blend shapes or lines or balance diagonals with straight or curved lines? How did each artist use color, white space, outlining? Can you tell which utensil each of the artists worked from? Do any of the abstractions give you the “feeling” of the utensil’s function—beating, stirring, squeezing, scooping, cutting? Could you take any of these designs and abstract it still further? After doing this project, why do you think artists create abstract paintings?
These three new traveling shows will give you a greater understanding of 20th-century abstract art.

THE MACHINE AGE

In this issue, you've seen the work that Mondrian and other abstract artists created to express their feelings about the technological advances of the 20th century. And if there was one object that symbolized this technology, it was the machine. A new exhibition, The Machine Age in America: 1918-1941, will show you how well-known American painters, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians, architects, and photographers (like Ralph Steiner who took the photo shown below) responded to their new machine-driven world. The show will be at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, April 4-June 28. It will then travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the High Museum in Atlanta.

MORE ELIZABETH MURRAY

On page 11 of this issue, you learned about the work of contemporary sculptural painter Elizabeth Murray. Compare the painting above, called Sentimental Education, with some of Mondrian's works in this issue. How are they similar? (Compare the colors, shapes, lines in each.) Murray's work is abstract, but it is also autobiographical. The dark, geometric forces in her life are in conflict with those that are brighter and more organic. You can see more of this artist's works (you'll be surprised at their gigantic size) in a new show, Elizabeth Murray: Paintings and Drawings, currently at the Dallas Museum of Art until April 19. It will then go to the MIT Visual Arts Center; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art; the Des Moines Art Center; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

AN ARCHITECTURAL PIONEER

Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) has been called the first modern American architect. He wanted his buildings to look like they had grown naturally, like a plant. So he broke up the geometric, machine-made shapes of his skyscrapers with areas of curved, organic decoration (below). You can see nearly 200 drawings, models, photos, reconstructions, and stained-glass windows by this important 19th-century American artist in Louis Sullivan: The Function of Ornament from March 23 through May at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City. In the fall the show will go to the Saint Louis Art Museum, ending its tour in the spring of 1988 at the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.