

Piet Mondrian.
Red Amaryllis with Blue Background. 1907.



Great artists constantly astonish us and the best art is always pushing at the boundaries of the unexpected. Piet Mondrian has been called “one of the supreme artists of the twentieth century” and so it is fitting that his *Red Amaryllis with Blue Background* should be a work of endless surprises and questions.

What first strikes us is the sheer vibrancy of the painting. If we need waking up, a hit of colour on a dark December day, this will do it. There are, essentially, only two colours, the fiery red of the flowers and the deepest, brightest blue of the background. But it is the background in name only. The blue and the red each fight for our attention so that it becomes hard to know where Mondrian intends us to focus.

For many, seeing this painting for the first time, perhaps the biggest surprise is the discovery that it is by Piet Mondrian. We tend to think of Mondrian as the painter of abstract grids with black lines and blocks of primary colours and white. He is not, generally, associated with flower painting. However, for about ten years from 1906, Mondrian made an extensive series of drawings, pastels and paintings (in both oil and watercolour) of flowers. This is, without doubt, his most striking and forceful floral painting but the subject matter is not that unusual.

Surprising too, is the structure of the image. Piet Mondrian was, of course, Dutch and so could draw on the vast tradition of Netherlandish flower painting, a tradition that stretched from the sixteenth century to Van Gogh (who influenced Mondrian enormously) at the end of the nineteenth. But, unlike his predecessors, Mondrian paints, not a vase overflowing with flowers but a single stem, just the one simple flower. It is a strange and radical image. Faced

with these surprises and eccentricities, how do we explain and make sense of this extraordinary painting?

Lying behind Mondrian's paintings of flowers (there are over one hundred of them) is a deep interest in nature; the cycle of birth, growth and death common to all living things. Connected with this love for the natural world was Mondrian's study of theosophy, a branch of spiritual thought that stresses the existence of a universal harmony beneath the visible world. All nature is, in the end, connected.

Many of the leading artists of the early twentieth century were influenced by a profound spiritualism and sought to give artistic expression to this idea of a fundamental unity within nature. This was achieved by creating simple, abstract images showing the essential elements of line, shape and colour from which the world is constructed. This is art in search, not of the real, but the Ideal.

While Mondrian's *Amaryllis* is clearly a painting of a flower, it is moving in the direction of the minimalist abstraction for which he is more famous. This explains why he painted the lone flower: "I enjoyed painting flowers", Mondrian wrote, "not bouquets, but a single flower at a time, in order that I might better express its structure". So, Mondrian is aiming not just at the likeness of a particular flower but the essence, the form and colour that lie behind it: the straight line of the stem and the vivid colour of the petals. The simplicity of this image suggests almost an abstract flower: this painting therefore shows us the beginnings of Mondrian's move from reality to the abstract.

And if we see *Amaryllis* as an early abstract painting, we can make better sense of the brilliant violence of the colour. The red and the blue are so strong and demand our attention to such an extent that they almost float free of the image itself, so that if we look at the painting for long enough, we start to wonder exactly what the subject matter might be. Is the flower or is it the colour? Or perhaps it is both and Mondrian, with his genius, is giving us a study in nature and abstraction.