Habitus in Habitat I
Emotion and Motion
The history of modern art in the twentieth century has given a privileged place to abstraction as the most radically innovative direction in the second decade of that century. Mondrian, Kupka, Delaunay, and Kandinsky—all of different nationalities—have been hailed as those breakthrough radical experimenters who painted the first non-representational paintings in the west at virtually the same moment, around 1912. Even today their canonization as initiators of abstraction positions them as so innovative in their outlook that their colorful works—tending towards the primaries—are primarily discussed against a backdrop of treatises in optical theory—or occult interests popular around 1900, especially theosophy. Without denying those interpretive strategies, this essay positions these artists within a social and cultural milieu in which a number of their earliest abstractions had deep historical resonance, both for themselves and their viewers—namely churches and cathedrals, with their luminous, brightly colored stained glass windows. It offers suggestions regarding the relevance of familiar ritual spaces in terms of memory and community at a time when the church—Catholic and otherwise—was under increased pressure from growing secularity, and it connects early abstraction to the emerging field of sociology and to the recent field of the cognitive science of religion.

In Paris in 1912, where Delaunay, Mondrian, and Kupka were each in early but crucial transitional stages of their careers, Emile Durkheim published his central text *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. At that time, he had been chair of education at the Sorbonne for ten years, a position which was now renamed chair of education and society. This early French sociologist had made religion a central concern of his scholarship in explicating a theory addressing a general breakdown of the western social fabric in the face of capitalism. According to Durkheim, social groups uphold unity through powerful shared emotions in group rituals and ceremonies. This occurs within a sacred sphere—utterly separate from profane space and makes use of sacred representations or objects, which express collective realities. And all religions, including Christianity, derive from the same basic mental functions and needs. Even time and space are in essence social and, therefore, at base religious. Time is based in the rhythms of society deriving from rites, festivals and so on, and spatial orientation and cate-
categories such as the weighted meaning of east or west are communally recognized as part of social organization. However, modern society in its recent secular phase—increasingly distanced from traditional rituals and symbols—was losing its social memory. Durkheim's work is foundational to the cognitive science of religion, secularization theory, and the sociology of religion.¹

In the same year in Germany, where Kandinsky was living, Ferdinand Tönnies, Germany's first sociologist, reissued his well known *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft,* first published in 1887. Like Durkheim, he was concerned with societal breakdown in the face of the industrial present and the changing shape of time for those severed from *Gemeinschaft* or community. Community in Tönnies' terms was an organic, natural coming together of individuals who gained emotional sustenance from a communal sense of place, reverence for tradition, shared religious beliefs, and common rituals, with the individual being subordinate to the collective. The importance of communal sacred space to the integrity of human life was topical in these years.

In Paris in 1912, a number of canvases of Gothic cathedrals were exhibited by the most groundbreaking of modern artists, including Gleizes and Pierre Dumont. Gleizes's *Chartres Cathedral* (Sprengel Museum, Hanover) made the rose window a prominent feature, though it exhibits the neutral palette of Picasso or Braque. Both Gleizes and Dumont upheld the Gothic cathedral as a communally valid and even crucial subject. Robert Delaunay, an enthusiast of Gothic cathedrals and stained glass, painted Laon Cathedral in the same year. This was the first time he used colorful semi-transparent color patches throughout a painting, an approach he continued to explore in the window paintings and cosmic abstract works that quickly followed.² Though these planes still describe architecture, the idea for the bright, non-naturalistic colors may have come from the interior contrasts of stained glass. Indeed, Delaunay painted one of Laon's circular stained glass panels with its contrasting red and blue tones (Kunstmuseum, Berne). One year later in 1913, he painted a completely abstract disc of similar colors on the verso of this painting, part of his circular forms series. Delaunay's first true series paintings—from 1909 to 1910—were of the interior of St.-Séverin in Paris. Here, he explored how refractions from stained glass distorted the columns of the ambulatory, in a way that implicates the relationship of the body itself with this sacred space as one visually traverses the narrow corridor. As pillars narrow one can imagine the solemn passage of one body after another. According to Sonia Delaunay, the two often visited together the cathedral St.-Germain l'Auxerrois at this time, which would remain a favorite haunt for both of them.³ Though Chevreul is often cited as Delaunay's principal point of departure in his abstract

¹ On secularization theory and the period under consideration see McLeod: *Secularization in Western Europe.*
² On the dating of *The Towers of Laon* (Musée national d'Art Moderne, Paris) as immediately preceding the window series and abstractions, see Spate: *Ophism,* p. 182.
³ Buckberough: *Sonia Delaunay: A Retrospective,* p. 23.
paintings of color contrasts, Delaunay had worked out a spiritual explanation for his interest in light and color, and believed that the soul’s harmony corresponded to complementary color fields within light. In an old-fashioned biblical sense, light brought meaning out of chaos. “Our eyes”, he wrote, “are the essential intermediary between nature and our soul.” According to Delaunay, the soul exists in a state of harmony, and harmony is engendered through the simultaneity with which the measure and proportion of light enters the soul via the eye. He would also agree with Kandinsky that color itself should provoke a vibration in the soul of the viewer.

The Czech artist Kupka also took on the conflation of architecture and colored light in the Gothic cathedral, and had been a long-time enthusiast of stained glass. In 1906, he installed a stained glass window in the corner of his studio, where it remained until his death. Kupka’s preoccupation with light reflection and refraction in stained glass was paramount throughout his transitional period into abstraction. He claimed this source, along with music and general cosmological and biological forces, to be crucial for his explorations. As early as 1910, he began to create colored abstractions based on his experience with luminosity inside churches and cathedrals. Kupka scholar Margit Rowell attributes his abstract vertical paintings like *Arrangement of Verticals in Yellow* of 1910–11 (Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris) to the massing of columns in a church interior and flickering stained glass – the dominant impression being an all-over pattern. A Czech critic, upon interviewing Kupka at this time, came away with the summary statement that stained glass cathedral windows had inspired

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4 On the soul and light in Delaunay, the most helpful references can be found in Apollinaire’s notes from interviews with Delaunay. See Marchi: “Pure Painting in Berlin”, pp. 157–58.
5 Quoted in Spate: *Orphism*, p. 189.
6 Ibid. Delaunay’s interest in Viollet-le-Duc warrants investigation in this context. Viollet had written an important and influential treatise on stained glass, “Vitrail” (an entry in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du Xle au XVIe siècle*, volume 9) in 1868, in which he discussed color contrasts. Delaunay’s early window series (1912) with its color contrasts and visible medieval tower may be a kind of homage to the architect, whose writings on stained glass were considered authoritative in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Johnson, “The Stained Glass Theories of Viollet-le-Duc,” pp. 121–34). Delaunay’s first “Gothic” painting (1908) was of Viollet’s iron spire on Notre Dame in Paris. Delaunay drew the ribbed vaulting of the interior of St.-Séverin repeatedly in advance of his paintings of the church interior. Viollet’s interest in Gothic architectural principles included its potential for new urban social structures to create “an authentic style of our own times.” For example, in his *Entretiens sur l’architecture* (1863–72), he proposed an enormous public hall for 3,000 people, with a skeletal iron structure, making use of the vaulting principles of Gothic cathedrals. The Eiffel Tower (a favorite subject of Delaunay’s), though it post-dates Viollet-le-Duc’s death by a decade, was often discussed during the period of its construction in light of Gothic towers with renewed interest in Viollet-le-Duc’s vision of the modern. The Eiffel Tower appears in one of the 1912 *fenêtre* paintings, beside the luminous medieval tower.
7 Kupka / Mládek / Rowell: *František Kupka*, p. 158.
Kupka’s earliest abstractions. The importance of embodied vision and reduction to linear effects is discussed in Kupka’s *Creation and the Plastic Arts*, in which he wrote: “The different body positions; the voluntary or automatic movements that we make in the course of our life, are so many ways of situating ourselves in space. In an upright position, we place ourselves from top to bottom. In walking, we feel the height of the body following the balance of the limbs... The upright body is a vertical in relationship to the ground. The plastic arts are admirable in the way they offer a confirmation of these great lines of orientation, which followed point by point, can initiate us to the reality of space. To seize and to hold invisible lines, the artist must look for and find means of materializing abstraction.”

In the years before the war, Kupka took his students to Chartres Cathedral, where they studied the effects of light on the body through the mainly red and blue stained glass. One result of these trips is *The Cathedral* of 1912–13 (figure 1, 3). Of such works Kupka suggested that what he was seeking might be better found by painting directly onto glass, something that Kandinsky did. The unification of columns and colors of certain Kupka paintings, like the St.-Séverin series by Delaunay, underscores the importance of the sacred architectural site and embodied vision to these artists.

Mondrian found himself in Paris during this period as well. A Protestant, and like Kupka a non-national, political meanings of the Gothic in France would have had little relevance for him. Just before leaving Paris for his native Holland at the outbreak of the war, he did studies based on the cathedral Notre Dame des Champs, followed in the Netherlands by his concentration on the façade of a church in Domburg. This would be his last recognizable series, along with studies of the ocean, before the abstractions that preoccupied him for the rest of his life.

The political vicissitudes of Holland had been such that many protestant churches originated as Catholic structures, the case with the fourteenth-century church in Domburg, which retained its Gothic windows. In Mondrian’s highly abstracted drawings of the church done during the war years, Gothic arches are still visible among the scaffolding (figure 2). However, in a major oil painting based on the façade series, with its vertical and horizontal lines and yellow, blue, and pink patches, they have been removed (*Composition 1916*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York). Of one of the drawings in the façade series, Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg in October of 1915: “As you [have seen], it is a composition of vertical and horizontal lines which in an abstract way is meant to express the idea of rising, of greatness. The same idea which was behind the building of cathedrals. I refrained from giving it a title. An abstract human mind will receive the intended impression.” In that year, Van Doesburg wrote the poem “Cathedral I” in response to Mondrian’s work.

8 Ibid., p. 32.
9 Quoted in Andel / Kosinski: *Painting the Universe*, p. 68.
10 Kupka / Máňa / Rowell: *František Kupka*, p. 32.
Fig. 1: František Kupka, *The Cathedral*, 1912–13.
Fig. 3: Interior Chartres Cathedral.
The church in Domburg had appealed to Mondrian earlier, and he had first painted it in 1909 when his work was more representational. Even at this early date, he associated churches with primary colors and painted the Domburg church in pink and blue patches. In Domburg, he communed with the Roman Catholic artist Toorop. Both artists were interested in the Gothic tower of nearby Westkapelle, a remnant of a cathedral, as a subject. For Mondrian, the near phallic depictions of the lone tower of 1909, also rendered in primaries, were part of his developing ideas of vertical elements referencing masculine principles—the complement being the horizontal as a feminine, balancing principle. Mondrian apparently agreed with the basic tenets of Catholicism, writing to a friend, “Toorop sees the Catholic faith as it was in its primeval period. I remain broadly in agreement with Toorop, and I could tell that he goes to the depths, and that he is searching for the spiritual.”

During the early twentieth century in Holland, mystic Christianity was a popular trend: Mondrian was also close to the Catholic

12 Quoted in Blotkamp (ed.): De Stijl: The Formative Years, p. 8.
Schoenmackers, a self-described “christographer”, who combined religious references with mathematical principles and a preference for primary colors which he read symbolically.¹³

Along with the tower, churches and trees were also part of Mondrian’s world of the masculine principle. His paintings of trees around 1912 were often likened to leaded stained glass by critics. Churches in combination with trees had featured in some of his earliest works, such as the Dutch reformed church, originally the fifteenth century Catholic St. James the Major, in Village Church of 1898 (Private collection, Amsterdam). The multiple peaks formed by the branches in this painting suggest popularized romantic ideas that Gothic structures were inspired by earlier believers worshipping in forests.

The fact that the Domburg Church was Mondrian’s final meditation on an identified vertical motif finds important continuities in Mondrian’s earliest abstractions. Composition in Line, of 1916, consisting of black verticals and horizontals on a white background was one of the first oils without a subject. It was exhibited in 1917 purposefully in between his first two paintings making use of floating rectangular color planes of red, yellow, and blue. Of this triptych grouping Mondrian wrote: “This work shows the religious so well...and placing the three next to one another is quite expressive.”¹⁴ Robert Welsh has connected the two color works to oil studies of Notre Dame des Champs.¹⁵ Of the vertical and horizontal lines he continued to pursue, Mondrian invoked the biblical tale of Genesis in his later “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art” of 1936 in his discussion of Male (vertical) and Female (horizontal) principals. He wrote: “Adam in the Paradise story live[d] in perfect equilibrium”, but since this state was seen to be unearned by God, Eve was created for “opposition”.¹⁶

While Mondrian entered an experimental abstract period for a short time before adopting a linear scaffolding and a saturated primary palette around 1920, the mature formula may well reference both church architecture and stained glass. The inspiration also has a more immediate and modern point of inspiration. During this period, Mondrian was close to Bart van der Leck, along with Toorop part of Catholic revivalism in early twentieth-century Netherlands, and Theo van Doesburg. Both van der Leck and van Doesburg, along with Vilmos Huszar, all three of whom were associated with the emerging de Stijl movement, were working with stained glass and primary colors by 1916. Van der Leck had trained in stained glass ateliers in the 1890s and also painted on glass, writing a 23-page essay on the subject in 1905. During the war, when stained glass was expensive he created many painted glass pieces. Van der Leck, who used principally red, yellow, and blue, promoted these colors to Mondrian as those that embodied light

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¹³ On Catholic mysticism in Holland during this period, see Blotkamp: “Annunciation of the New Mysticism”, pp. 89–112.
¹⁴ Joosten: Piet Mondrian, p. 256.
¹⁶ Quoted in Marc Cheetham: The Rhetoric of Purity, p. 42.
and also reduced his forms to verticals and horizontals. Just in advance of his considerable exploration of stained glass, Van Doesburg wrote in 1916: “In the medieval museum and at the St. Bavo church I found my task – a crystal atmosphere. I have a positive plan for creation and what I shall create now will top everything.”17 His stained glass Composition IV of 1917 (Stedelijk Museum, Leiden) is a triptych – a traditional Christian format – and makes use of primaries in the outside panels. This is not to say that the planar abstractions of this period are based on specific examples in cathedrals or spiritual iconographical signs, but they are his first contributions to Neo-Plasticism.

When the Russian artist Kandinsky organized the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in 1911, he invited Delaunay to show a couple of his St.-Sévérin paintings. Kandinsky himself exhibited three glass paintings with religious imagery based on a folk technique he had learned in southern Germany, where he was living. At this time, he was working on the first issue of the Blaue Reiter almanac in which he had intended to publish “some reports on the Russian religious movement in which all classes participate” by Sergei Bulgakov, whom he called “...one of the greatest experts on religious life.”18 In paintings of this period, Kandinsky incorporated religious imagery including deluges, horsemen of the apocalypse, and saints, many of whom were based on Russian orthodox icons (figure 4). Increasingly, during the second decade of the century, many of these paintings would hide or veil imagery as Rose-Carol Washton Long has discussed, though the content was nevertheless implied.19

Despite the modernism and abstraction of these works, even some of the most avant-garde critics questioned the deeply conservative religious references that repeatedly suggested the Last Judgment. Kandinsky’s messianic approach to the spiritual was encouraged by his exposure to Russian mystics such as philosopher Vladimir Soloviev or Russian writer Merezhkovsky, who opposed the materialism of the present and believed that the current moment signaled the third and final revelation, the revelation of the spirit. Even in later years, when Kandinsky’s work had entered a geometric phase, he claimed that the Holy Spirit was at work in these forms.20 Christian theosophist Rudolf Steiner, an influence on both Kandinsky and Mondrian, believed that the Revelation of St. John held the key to understanding the universe.

In her book The Gothic Visionary Perspective, Barbara Nolan addressed the later medieval visionary arts, focusing on narrative scenes of the apocalypse, emphasizing the journey of the pilgrim to “the new Jerusalem” and cathedral

17 Quoted in Blotkamp (ed.): De Stijl: The Formative Years, p. 11.
18 Quoted in Kandinsky and Marc (eds.): The Blaue Reiter Almanac, p. 17.
20 Sixten Ringbom discusses the history of Kandinsky’s interest in apocalyptic imagery in The Sounding Cosmos, vol. 38, no. 7. See especially chapter five, “Apocalypticism and the Third Revelation”.
programs that indicated a final age preceding the last judgment. She argues that medieval vision was reorganized beginning in the twelfth century to emphasize revelation and the human nature of Christ. Throughout Western Europe thereafter, these themes were found in stained glass and sculptural programs in cathedrals. In France, Emile Male, popularizer of the history of medieval cathedrals in the early twentieth century and chair of art history at the Sorbonne in 1912, published L'Art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France in 1898 and L'Art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France. Etude sur l'iconographie du moyen âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration in 1908, examples of well-known discussions on the medieval cathedral with its colorful stained glass as the symbolic heavenly Jerusalem in the modern period. However, medieval revivalism in general at the turn of the century had made cathedral programs and craft topical.

Spectacular programs of stained glass throughout medieval cathedrals from the twelfth century onward were to suggest the bejeweled heavenly Jerusalem and the divine nature of light, bringing a foretaste of heaven to earth. Stained glass raised congregations from the material to the immaterial realm. For Abbot Suger of St. Denis, who wrote a widely influential treatise on stained glass, once lux or natural, physical light, entered the cathedral through stained glass it became lux nova, symbolic, spiritual light; the stained glass was a sacred threshold, on one side was profane light, but on the other it was holy. For Suger, this sacred light was an important source of faith and divine inspiration, an agency of grace that fed the soul. When this light passed into the eye of the beholder it became illumination and elevated vision. Suger had initiated a program of color in stained glass that would be followed at Chartres and many other cathedrals, including Laon: the use of red referencing jasper and blue symbolizing sapphires. Allegories of color shifted in the medieval ages, and the abstract artists under discussion similarly had varying ideas about the meaning of the primaries, but red often referred to earthly passion – the body, while blue often referenced eternity and the heavenly realm, and gold frequently symbolized God, truth, or the sun. The idea of light through stained glass touching the soul was popularized again by the turn of the twentieth century and is found, for example, in the writings of Huysmans, such as in his novel La cathédrale of 1898.

Though unlike Delaunay, Mondrian, or Kupka, Kandinsky does not seem at first to allude to Christian ritual spaces, he wrote that he wanted the experience of his paintings to be as if one could enter the space and walk within them. On the similarity of entering cathedrals and being surrounded with the spectacle of brilliant color, he said of an early experience:

21 Nolan: The Gothic Visionary Perspective.
22 In Germany before the Great War, this vision affected avant-garde architecture, including that of Peter Scheerbart and Bruno Taut. Here the "crystal", ultimately deriving from St. John’s description of the new Jerusalem as "clear as glass" and the river of life "as bright as a crystal", was a point of reference. See Whyte: "The Expressionist Sublime", pp. 118–37.
"Colorful houses of the Vologda taught me to move in the picture, to live in the picture. I still remember how I entered a room [in the Vologda] for the first time and stopped short on the threshold before the unexpected sight. The table, the benches, the oven...and every object were painted with bright-colored, large-figured decorations. The beautiful corner thickly and completely covered with painted and printed pictures of saints...I felt myself surrounded on all sides by painting, into which I had thus penetrated. The same feeling slumbered within me, unconsciously up to that moment, when I was in churches in Moscow and especially in the great cathedral of the Kremlin. On my next visit to this church after my return from the trip, this feeling revived in me perfectly clearly. Later I often had the same experience in Bavarian and Tyrolean chapels. The impression was differently colored each time, being formed by different constituents. Church! Russian Church! Chapel! Catholic Chapel!"

The type of memory Kandinsky is describing is episodic memory. In this case, a powerful memory, often laid down because of its attachment to a strong emotion or impression, is jarred because of a stimulus that has certain similar components (pictures of saints, brilliant colors, a total environment in the case of Kandinsky). Episodic memory is one of the principal avenues of investigation in the recent field of the cognitive science of religion. The original memory is not a snapshot in the brain, but is formed by a network of neurons connecting at nodes that come from different centers of the brain – areas that are responsible for visual, spatial or auditory experiences, for example. The neurons in question were not originally connected, but became that way because of experiences and impressions that took place. Thus, the specific neurons that fired together during the original experience (childhood days in a cathedral) become sensitized to one another and tend to fire together again – repeated exposure to the same stimulus strengthens the connections. At a later time, an experience with similar components will spark those memories, making us think we have retrieved a “snapshot.” Describing this type of memory in relationship to Kandinsky’s developing ideas is relevant not only where his painting is concerned in regard to all its spiritual complexity and Russian orthodox history, but because Kandinsky’s generation – the generation of artists under discussion – grew up during a tumultuous time for the church that would bring memory and spiritual meaning to center stage. Their parents’ generation was more generally steeped in traditional patterns and habits of belief, affecting childhood experiences of the sacred sphere. Together these generations witnessed the breakdown of a deeply rooted social

23 Kandinsky: “Reminiscences”. In a 1918 Russian publication of “Reminiscences”, Kandinsky added “...especially the Cathedral of the Assumption and the Church of St. Basil the Blessed.”

24 Harvey Whitehouse has connected “imagistic” religion with episodic memory and doctrinal religion with semantic memory. Of the “two modes of religion” see his Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity and Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission. For more nuanced responses and a further discussion of episodic memory and religion where one does not necessarily replace the other, see Whitehouse / McCauley (eds.): Mind and Religion. For more on the formation of neuronal connections in childhood see Damasio: Descartes’ Error, pp. 108–13.
institution—that also experienced a certain though by no means complete resurgence. For example, when Delaunay was seventeen, he witnessed the moment when all religious communities were expelled from a traditionally Catholic France, much the case of Germany. In France, this was followed by the trauma of separation of church and state when Delaunay was twenty, with an immediate neo-Catholic backlash, circumscribed but prominent, at the time he painted his St.-Sévérin series. Additional government repression was then taking place, including state ownership of churches. For his part, Kupka had originally chosen to study with late Nazarene artists, including the religious painter František Sequens. Kandinsky always held onto his Russian orthodox faith. In the Netherlands, Mondrian grew up in a religious Calvinist family. But in the late nineteenth century there was also a strong Catholic revival there and much cathedral building. Mondrian himself, when young, joined a branch of the Dutch reformed church that believed the world was soon drawing to a close.

Embodied and situated cognition theory is useful in examining the “religious” nature of early abstraction. It posits a joint environmentally, historically, and culturally related relationship with an organic basis between artist and viewer. Memories of a sacred sphere and communal emotions raised in a multisensory environment were powerful and threatened among western Europeans as these artists matured. In the second decade of the twentieth century, abstractions that drew upon visual components of those familiar sites—in particular the brilliant color of luminous stained glass—provided a compelling direction for artists searching for meaningful and crucial content. This was also a time when artists were interested in the relationship between the senses, exemplified by synaesthesia. The cathedral with its music, light, and hushed interior was a spectacular chamber of sensory stimulation that tapped into the emotions and developing neurological webs. Delaunay, Kupka, and Kandinsky all connected cathedrals with musical memories.

The spiritual component of early abstraction is difficult if not impossible to experience today, because circumstances and memories have changed. By way of example, I am going to briefly discuss how a well-known neurologist, Semir Zeki, and an art historian, Yves-Alain Bois, discount the spiritual message which Mondrian repeatedly claimed was behind his style. Zeki has used brain imaging techniques to demonstrate that a contemporary viewer of a Mondrian shows activation in the early visual cortices—mainly areas VI and V4, where cells register color and linear orientation. In this mechanistic model, no area of the brain is activated that has to do with deep memory or recognizable imagery (for our purposes cathedrals, stained glass, communal ritual spaces, or even Mondrian’s constant references to resonant universal principles). Zeki celebrates this about Mondrian—he is likened to a neurologist who seeks essentials. Bois is similarly
formalist in orientation. In *Painting as Model*, in developing the ideas of Hubert Damisch, Bois claims for the viewer that "the eye is ceaselessly lead back to the painting's constituent elements, line, color, design." He quotes Damisch: "One cannot give way to reverie in front of a Mondrian painting, nor even to pure contemplation....Each time perception thinks it can go beyond what is given to see toward what it would constitute as meaning, it is immediately led back to the first experience...." Neurologist and art historian are not necessarily incorrect in their claims, but they are accurate only insofar as they address today's viewer.

If barren to viewers today of the spiritual content Mondrian meant to include, then the abstract modernist project as it existed in the second decade of the twentieth century is not the one we see and experience today. Something of the possibility of what the historical Mondrian could still mean in the middle of the twentieth century can be found at the chapel at Ronchamp by the aging architect Le Corbusier, friend and admirer of Mondrian (figure 5). There the south wall is pierced by rectangular apertures of stained glass panels, further divided into rectangles of red, yellow, and blue along with the occasional green, set off against clear glass. Though only "Mondrians" by association, they are nevertheless unlikely to have been realized without his example. Clearly le Corbusier still understood the spiritual potential of a Mondrian. At Ronchamp, contemplation and reverie are invited.

Behind those optical treatises of Chevreul, Helmholtz, Wilhelm Ostwald, and others that these artists read, was a deeper history of exposure to "pure" color with emotional and social connections. I would argue that the modernist painters' interest in optical theory was *shaped* by early exposure to a colorful, luminous sacred environment, and that mystical *lux nova* is a central component of their vision. Mondrian, Kupka, Delaunay, and Kandinsky did not move exclusively into radical progressive territory in lockstep with new scientific information, or bohemian religious ideas with little real relevance for society at large, as the narrative of modernism is often told, but in fact in seeking profound meaning were engaged in the most resonant, deeply historical, and communally revered spaces in the west – underscoring just how crucial the embodied eye is in artistic practice.

I would like to thank Mary Shepard, Elizabeth Emerye, and Laura Morowitz for their helpful comments on this essay.

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28 Ibid.
Bibliography


List of figures

Fig. 1 František Kupka, *The Cathedral*, 1912–13, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. Signed I. I.: Kupka. From the Collection of the Museum Kampa. The Jan and Meda Mladek Foundation, Prague, Czech Republic.


Fig. 3 Interior Chartres Cathedral.

Fig. 4 Wassily Kandinsky, *All Saints I*, 1911, glass painting, 34.5 x 40.5. Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus, Munich.