

Dynamics of Harmony: A Comparison of Principles between Ikebana and Mondrian's Neoplasticism

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Abstract. The paper Ikebana and Mondrian's Neoplasticism explores the meaning and form of harmony. By integrating the principles of traditional Japanese floral arrangement, Ikebana with the principles of neoplasticism harmony evolves, not as a static state but that of push and pull drawn on the thinking of Piet Mondrian. The discussion sprung from a deeply personal search for harmony through two seemingly contradictory schools of thought and cultures: Japanese flower arrangement and the abstract art of Piet Mondrian. By bending branches and shaping lines, the nature of harmony takes a visceral form. Initially, they appear similar, not in expression but in their absolute stillness. The East seeks harmony through accord, the West through the reconciliation of discord. Yet beneath the surface, Ikebana and Mondrian grapple with a push and pull, searching for concord amidst tensions. I argue that harmony is a dynamic, fluctuating state that is deceptively perceived as a state of stillness.

Keywords: Mondrian; neoplasticism; Ikebana; harmony; dynamic state; accord; discord.

1. Introduction

Ikebana and Mondrian may appear to have nothing in common. Yet, Ikebana as Mondrian seeks to express the universal in nature, which is fundamentally harmony but not always by balance, or equilibrium. Neoplasticism mirrors the idea that harmony is never static. In every neoplastic composition, it shows the connection between the changes in life and how necessary it is for human to find a way to stabilize it with longer duration and greater constancy [1]. What is unforeseen in life constantly stimulates us and opens up opportunities of innovation.

Ikebana is an art central to Japanese life and culture, a union of nature and humanity where cut flowers are given a new meaning seeking forms that are harmonious but not symmetrical. In the three lines that construct an Ikebana flower arrangement, the third line represents fulfillment while one holds harmony and the other is symbolic of our chaotic existence. Life, people, and nature, according to Ikebana, must co-exist harmoniously. In this sense, there is a tension in the still life presented, a dynamic balancing of an equilibrium between what is curved, straight, dead, and then made alive. Similarly, Piet Mondrian searched in his work for a space based on a relationship between opposing entities, while evoking unity. Mondrian's worked with mainly primary colours in square and rectangular shapes, focusing on its relations applying these elements for universal harmony. Mondrian's principles of Neoplasticism sought to give form to a visible simplicity and a tangible balance to achieve an enhanced moral and physical well-being in human beings. Existing research focuses either solely on Mondrain or ikebana, but the two have not been explored together searching for an understanding of harmony in idea and form.

Mondrian presents boundless space with ever changing horizontals and verticals in abstraction, where ovals becomes squares, and undulating lines straight. This multiplicity leads to a dynamic unity. My text reflects on how to give harmony form through as flower arrangement – Ikebana – as a structure in space. I draw on Mondrian's art as a 'unifying consciousness of dealing with the boundless and multifarious space of the world' and Ikebana's underlying Buddhist principles of existential. These two seemingly opposite creative expressions both seek harmony, appear to be static but I argue, that they embody the dynamic equilibrium necessary for harmony governed by

natural laws- that of balancing opposites. Ikebana may be a way to meditate and express the search for peace, harmony does not come naturally- it is a push and pull.

2. Mondrian and Neoplasticism

Mondrian's paintings negate a modern reality scarred by world wars. Neo-plasticism, developed by Mondrian used the canvas as a method to represent modern reality. His paintings express the ideal of universal harmony in his work through, -plasticism, a form of plastic art where forms are stripped to geometrical lines, planes and colors. Mondrian and the artists of De Stijl argued for a new visual language from a dying past of realistic, narrative images. Pure abstraction attempted to express universal harmony by an utopian ideal. Mondrian sought an expression of harmony after WWII – to re-introduce visually order and balance to the world.

In his painting, Mondrian's 'elements of art' are line, shape and form, space, colour, texture, and composition. To him, the rectangular plain is universal; for everyone, and at all times. Rectangular planes in Neoplastic composition are filled with a primary colour (red, yellow, blue) or with a non-color (black, white, grey). He considered the interplay of opposites in the world to explain the constant interaction and movement towards balance and harmony. The 'doctrine of opposite' can be seen in Mondrian's painting – Neoplastic compositions, such as colour vs non-colour, horizontal vs vertical, small vs large, and matt vs glossy. The term 'the relationship of position' refers to lines in perpendicular position to each other, uncanilly mirroring the principles of Ikebana, ideas undeknownst to Mondrian. Utilizing the negative space, is an important component in achieving harmony and balance in Ikebana. Similarly, Mondrian's work with geometric shapes and primary colors produces a sense of harmony and balance with the negatice space between lines, they are important in its overall composition. Various schools of Ikebana follow the principles of silence in natural forms, minimalism from Buddhist precepts, graceful lines, found forms, reflection of feelings, Japanese aesthetics, and order or structure of heaven, earth, and humanity.

Mondrian furthered his abstraction from nature to lines arranged in a dispersed manner portraying the rhythmic movement of waves with dominating vertical lines showing jetty projecting in the sea. Balancing colour and line harmony could be achieved even through discord between the elements.

In 1921, his new style of abstract art was successfully developed with black lines and primary colors – red, yellow, and blue. Mondrian expanded or loosen his grids. These expanded spaces or enlarged zones appeared to look like they have their own powers and as if the colours has internal power [2]. Eventually, when blocks of squares and rectangles became meaningless to Mondrian, they were identified simply as structures in space.

Eventually, Mondrian reduced the world to large areas of colors defined by straight lines reflecting his radical simplification of what he viewed as the essence of energy and dynamic forces that governed nature and the universe mirrored in pure planes of colors creating harmony to balance such forces [3].

In both the Japanese Ikebana flower arrangement and Mondrian's structuring composition in space, the basic vertical-horizontal and color elements represent the balance of essential opposing forces, be they yin and yang, dynamic and static, or positive and negative. Even the stillness is deceptive, a quietude only achieved by opposing forces. Harmony becomes a tensioned balance signified by a deceptive quietude.

3. Ikebana

In Ikebana, a composition begins with giving lines, heights and planes philosophical and human meanings. True Ikebana is part of our life, not constrained by time or style of living.

It is a traditional Japanese art in arranging flowers that captures the beauty of nature and displaying poised as a sparse living sculpture. As early as 1400 CE, Ikebana reflects the Japanese

native spiritual belief of animism, Shinto, that all is alive from river, stone to flower. Under the basic rules of Ikebana, the three branches were expressed by “heaven”, “man”, and “earth”. The Principle of Three represents the wholeness in flower arrangement where man (“so”) stands in the middle position between heaven (“shin”) and earth (“gyo”) [4].

3.1 Ikenobo

The Basic Shoka style starts by focusing on a bundle of stems from the container. With the lines showing the three branches of the Subject, Secondary, and Object, it is essential to note that the elements usually appear in odd numbers. The container symbolises earth where plants sprung up from. Shoka is usually in an upright form, where most plants grow naturally. However plants may slant towards the sun, arrangements starting from earth to heaven This is metaphysical expressing life span of living things from earth to spirit [5].

3.2 Ohara

Unishin Ohara was a sculptor of vases before he started another separate school of Ikebana. The traditional style seemed too rigid to him, and he began his creations with Western flowers and low containers called suiban. Unishin created a new arrangement trend representing a realistic form of flower arrangement that looks like flowers on hills with grass. This modern Moribana's Basic Shakei technique led to a revolution in the Japanese history of Ikebana. After Unishin's passing in 1916, his son Koun formalized the newly founded Ikebana style in a new descriptive teaching method with the terms “subject line”, “object line”, and “subsidiary lines” [6].

3.3 Sogetsu

Sofu Teshigahara , founder of Sogetsu School, Tokyo, combined traditional theories of Ikebana with his revolutionary ideas of arranging flowers out of feelings of the moment and derived the free forms of Ikebana. Sogetsu incorporates elements of the former two styles, such as the main lines include the Subject line, or *shin* (representing heaven); the Secondary line, or *soe* (representing earth); and the Object line, or *hikae* (representing man). Similarly ,Mondrian defined the lines in his work as female and male representing vertical and horizontal, dynamic and static. His compositions portrayed balancing of these universal and elemental forces [7].

3.4 Mondrian, Ikebana and harmony

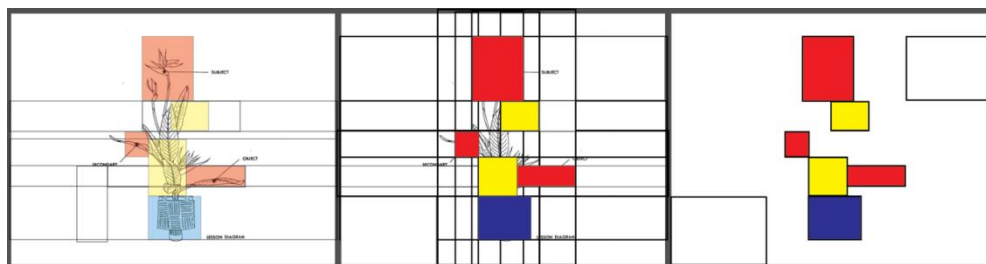


Fig. 1 Experimental Composition of Basic Shoka Style with Structure in Space (Author’s work)

Mondrian was deeply concerned with injustice and inequality in humanity. Ikebana too seeks a balance between heaven, earth, and man. The search for harmony is a balancing act central to human, art, and nature. The space around Mondrian's colour block , and the flowers of Ikebana is activated quietly, existing in dialogue between. object and emptiness. To provide a balance of space, white blocks are carefully included in the experiment to achieve balance and harmony, akin to the “unseen” in Ikebana, which is not empty space but rather a sustained spiritual fullness [8]. Mondrian’s paintings, could, as the Ikebana, operate as a meditation and a longing and an expression for harmony.

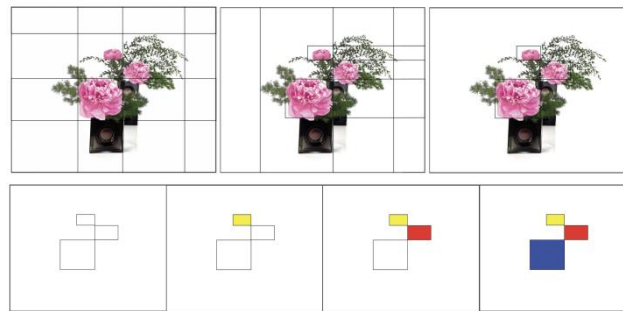


Fig. 2 Experimental Composition of the Sogetsu Freestyle with Structure in Space (Author's work)

4. Summary: Constructing Harmony

Modern life is chaotic and increasingly out of balance. To force it into order is futile. Instead, I find solace in realizing that harmony is a dynamic process, an equilibrium of wavering forces. I feel that the tensions can be peaceful, but deceptively still as an Ikebana arrangement. At first glance, Mondrian's paintings appear to represent a Confucian ideal of harmony- a clean and methodical order. Yet, in nature, harmony superimposed by control is an impossibility. Nature rots, and comes alive again, just as an Ikebana arrangement is made from dead flowers made alive. That perfect order, a static snippet of nature is instead a dynamic equilibrium and in the process of change. Mondrian's colour blocks move together and apart, pulling in tension to create order. A Western approach suggests that harmony forms by opposites, by tension and conflict. Asians, formed by the Confucius concept of harmony, expect it to be orderly, by quietly accommodating diversity. Tak -lap Yeung argues that harmony exists both in diversity and conciliation and where both can represent something beautiful [9].

When juxtaposing abstract Mondrian-style blocks against an arrangement, Ikebana's fundamental theme of the harmonious union between nature and humanity becomes clear. The arranger's personality – and a sense of order – remain within the confines of Ikebana, the use of primary colours, and the arrangement of the different blocks, which correspond to the overall floral arrangement, alignment of the stems and leaves, and vessel.

Both Mondrian and Ikebana arrive at a dynamic balance from different ways- Mondrian reaches the form through his individual character, a man formed by a Christian belief system and a War, where harmony, or peace is reached by a reconciliation of discord, and in Ikebana based on Shintoism, and Buddhism, where harmony is reached by transformation and never by opposition but more like an embrace, an inclusion of the combined with the practitioners process.

By probing Ikebana through the principles of Mondrian's creativity I shifted from believing that 'harmony' must be still, incorporating symmetry, balance, and unity. Harmony emerges when there is a need to balance and to embrace disunity. The final outcome brought to life new compositions that brings about harmony in abstract art with floating, coloured structures in space and the fundamental structure in Ikebana. Harmony can be given a form with the similar values that underpin Ikebana and Mondrian's processes: an asymmetrical composition, inspired by nature, and common interest in humanity. Ultimately, harmony arises by a reconciliation between opposing and conflicting parts, through a push and pull of change, fast or seemingly still homeostasis.

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