Composition in Gray

In Theo van Doesburg's painting *Composition in Gray*, sometimes called *Rag-time*, there are no figures, no story, no colors, just tones of gray and an arrangement of shapes. Yet this image catches our attention, making us think and reflect.

Artist	Theo van Doesburg
Nationality	Dutch
Painted	1919

What's the story?

Theo van Doesburg joined a group of young Dutch artists to produce a journal in 1917 called *De Stijl* (meaning "the style"). In this journal they set out their ideas on art and De Stijl also became the name of their art movement, although it is also known as Neo-Plasticism. De Stijl paintings featured horizontal and vertical lines and used black, white, and primary colors. De Stijl artists thought that art should be represented in as exact a way as math. De Stijl ideas also applied to architecture, furniture, and decorative objects like plates and fabrics.

For van Doesburg the De Stijl movement was also about changing the role of the artist in society and he thought that architecture should play an important part in achieving this. You only have to look at *Composition in Gray* to see the link van Doesburg made between art and architecture because the picture appears to be constructed of building blocks. The way van Doesburg shaded the painting in tones of gray created drama in the picture. Every time I look at this painting it suggests different things to me: the stones of an ancient culture, doorways opening onto unknown paths, and, in the sections of circles and ovals, a piece of the Milky Way.

The painting's alternative title, *Rag-time*, suggests a further link between Neo-Plasticism and math. Music, like math, follows a strict beat and pattern. Whistler (page 98) also saw a link between art and music and van Doesburg's work is almost the next step in Whistler's theories on art.

Think about ...

Why did van Doesburg choose not to use any color in his painting?
Van Doesburg felt that using color would detract from the beauty of the shapes. He used tones of gray to bring out the form of the shapes and to give them a structural, three-dimensional quality.

Why did van Doesburg give the painting the alternative title of *Rag-time*?
Music, like math, has a regular time and beat so van Doesburg was stressing the ordered nature of his painting by naming it after a type of jazz music.
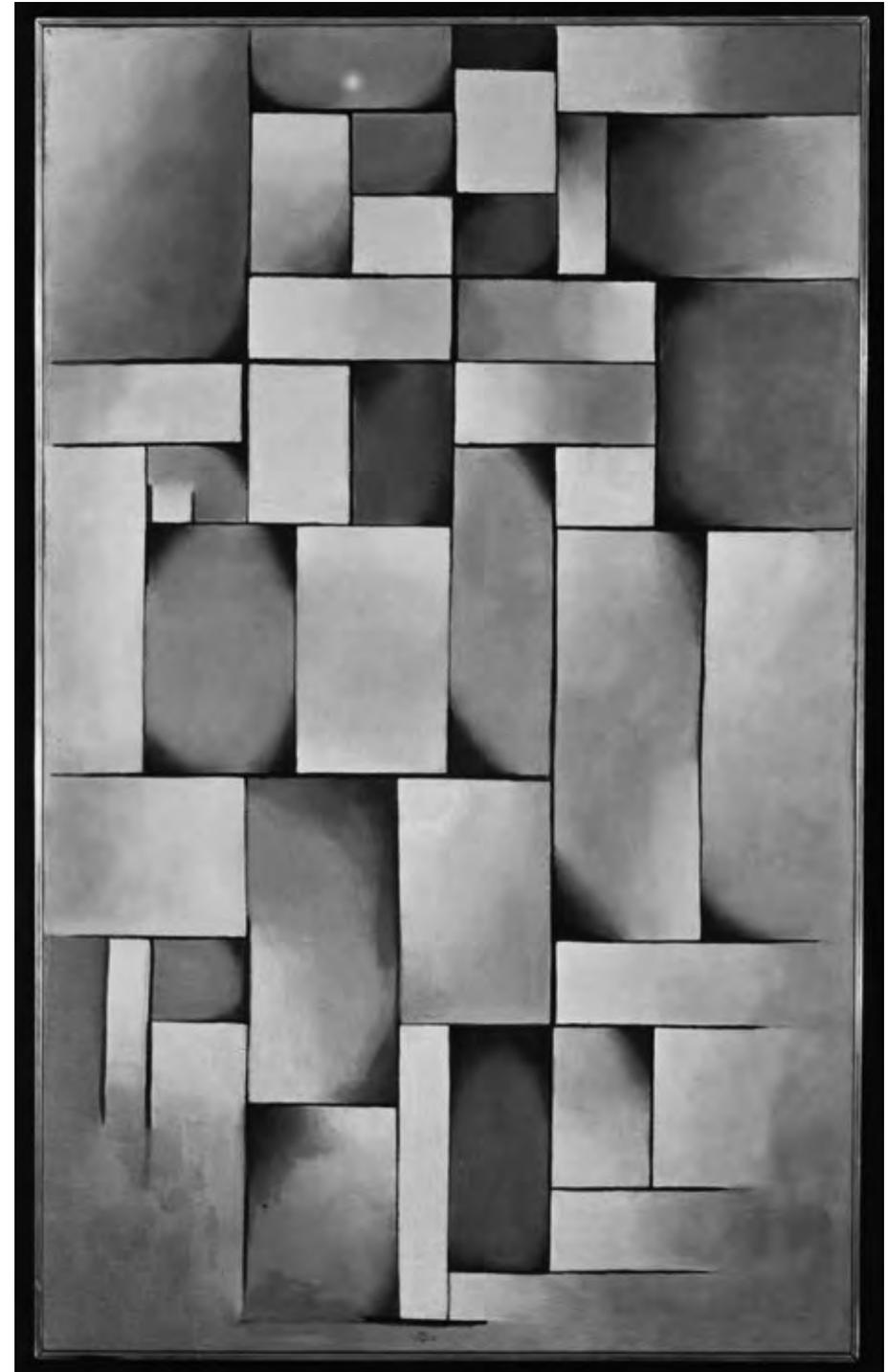
Project: Dramatic sculpture

This project turns van Doesburg's *Composition in Gray* into a three-dimensional sculpture and uses a desk lamp to add dramatic light and shadow effects.

1 Start by arranging and assembling your containers into a shape. When you are happy with your arrangement, glue together the pieces. Allow the glue to dry and set—this can take several hours.

2 Paint your sculpture all over in white acrylic paint. You might need to do more than one coat; the main thing to do is to cover up any signs of the packaging beneath.

3 After the white paint has dried, take the desk lamp and shine it onto your sculpture. If you are using a flashlight it might be a good idea to rest it on some books. The shadows should be very clear. Find the darkest shadow and try to match its color by mixing up your paint to that shade. Apply the paint to those areas. Now find the next lightest tone, mixing your paint to match the tone and adding it to the sculpture. Keep repeating this step until all the tones of the shadows have been painted in. Now display your sculpture.

Top tips

• Be inventive with the way you arrange your containers. Don't just line them up, face-on, but put them at odd angles or cut up the tubes and place them sideways so that you can see the circles they make.
• You may want to use more than one light to create more dramatic light effects.
• Take time to mix up the correct color shades—it really helps to create the final effect.