

Piet MONDRIAN (Amersfoort 1872 - New York 1944)

Three Flower Blossoms, One a Chrysanthemum
Charcoal on white paper.

Signed with the artist's monogram PM in charcoal at the lower right.

413 x 311 mm. (16 1/4 x 12 1/4 in.)

Piet Mondrian lived in Amsterdam between 1892 and the early months of 1912. During this period he also made numerous studies - in charcoal, watercolour and oil - of various types of flowers, including amaryllis, lilies, rhododendrons, roses, sunflowers and, in particular, chrysanthemums. Some of these works, probably including the present sheet, were exhibited at the Vereeniging Sint Lucas, the artist's society in Amsterdam, where they were often bought by private collectors.

Mondrian's interest in flowers had been established as early as the late 1890s in Amsterdam. As one scholar has written, 'On his walks along Verwerspad, Mondrian would sometimes end up at the Vis family's market garden, whose greenhouses were home to an exotic world of flowers. The family grew magnificent chrysanthemums and cyclamens, the former of which particularly fascinated Mondrian. In the harsh, hot light of the greenhouses, the flowers had an unbridled radiance, which the artist felt he had to try and capture. He took a few flowers home with him that served as models for a number of drawings and a small painting, Two Chrysanthemum Blossoms (c.1899-1900). The painting had a spiritual quality, precisely as Mondrian had intended, creating an image that was literally radiant.' Within a few years of the start of the new century, Mondrian had begun depicting species of flowers other than the chrysanthemums which had occupied him almost exclusively up to that point, and he continued to produce superb drawings of flowers until the outbreak of the First World War.

Mondrian's sensitivity to the natural world is perhaps most readily evident in his drawings of flowers, often on a large scale, which have always been admired and sought after by collectors. Beyond their beauty as images, however, these singular works are also now recognized as an important step in the artist's journey towards abstraction. As Mondrian recalled, in an autobiographical essay written in later years, 'From an early date, I enjoyed painting flowers, not bouquets, but a single flower at a time, in order that I might better express its plastic structure.' The complex structure of the chrysanthemum, with its many petals, fascinated the artist, and he produced more drawings of chrysanthemums than any other flower. As Robert Welsh, author of the catalogue raisonné of the artist's drawings, points out, 'The number of chrysanthemum representations among Mondrian's known surviving flower pieces overpowers those of other species.'

As the artist wrote in c.1912, 'I too find flowers beautiful in their exterior beauty, yet there is hidden within a deeper beauty.' Mondrian's many exquisite studies of flowers were, for the most part, drawn in watercolour, although he also worked in charcoal, gouache, graphite and oil. While most of these works can be dated to the period between 1906 and 1914, the artist also produced several flower drawings in the 1920s, when he was having financial difficulties and turned to making elaborate flower studies for sale or on commission, as a source of much-needed income. In total, some 150 flower drawings by Mondrian are known.

The present sheet has been dated to c.1908-1909. As Robert Welsh has noted of the artist's drawings of this period, 'The intensity with which by 1908 Mondrian returned to depictions of flowers in indicated by their number, their often relatively large size and their frequent public exhibition…One possibility for explaining this renewed interest in flower depictions is Mondrian's membership in the Theosophical Society, the importance of flower symbolism within which is well known.' And, as a modern scholar has remarked, 'Plant forms, especially flower blossoms, like human and animal bodies, may be said to recapitulate in microcosm the eternal circle of birth, reproduction, decay, material death, and regeneration that Theosophy sees as the ruling principle of the universe.'

This large drawing depicts a chrysanthemum together with two other blossoms that are difficult to securely identify, but may be poppies or sunflower crowns. Mondrian produced a number of charcoal drawings of chrysanthemums, since the use of the medium allowed the artist to combine the precision needed to depict the blossom with shading to achieve a sense of painterly depth and texture. Among stylistically comparable charcoal drawings by Mondrian are two large studies of chrysanthemums in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. Other charcoal drawings of the same flower by the artist are in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, MA, and elsewhere.

The first owner of the present sheet was the Dutch banker Marius Johannes Heybroek (b.1882), who is thought to have acquired the drawing from Mondrian in 1911. The drawing later passed to his son, the artist, sculptor and designer Folke Marius Heybroek (1913-1983), who spent most of his professional career in Sweden. Sold by him at auction in the 1960s, the drawing was last on the art market in New York in 1969. It then remained in the same private collection for nearly fifty years.

Exhibitions

Possibly Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, Vereeniging Sint Lucas: Negentiende jaarlijksche

tentoonstelling van kunstwerken van leden der vereeniging, 1909, no.387 ('Zonnepit. (Teekening), Dfl. 75.-'); New York, Galleria Odyssia, Drawings and Watercolors, Summer 1969, unnumbered; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Legion of Honor, Judging by Appearance: Master Drawings from the Collection of Joseph and Deborah Goldyne, 2006, no.53.

Literature:

Robert P. Welsh, Piet Mondrian Catalogue Raisonné, Vol.I: Catalogue Raisonné of the Naturalistic Works (until early 1911), New York, 1998, p.403, no.A608, where dated c.1909 (as whereabouts unknown); Robert Flynn Johnson and Joseph R. Goldyne, Judging by Appearance: Master Drawings from the Collection of Joseph and Deborah Goldyne, exhibition catalogue, San Francisco, 2006, pp.122-123, p.230, no.53.