Broadway's Last Curtain?

Thomas M. Disch, the *Nation*'s theater critic, writes an obituary for Broadway in the *Atlantic* (Mar. 1991).

In the '90s . . . the Great White Way [is destined] to become a graveyard for great white elephants, as, one by one, the 36 theaters left in the Broadway area find themselves unable to attract either shows or audiences.

Those who feel a professional obligation to contradict the handwriting on the wall—theater owners, producers, and press agents—can cite cheery statistics. The League of American Theatres and Producers announced [in June 1990] that for the third year in a row Broadway set box-office records, with $283 million in ticket sales. However, this record reflects not dramatically increased attendance but only higher ticket prices—as high as $55 or $60 for musicals . . . . In the 1967–1968 season 58 shows opened on Broadway: 44 nonmusical plays . . . and 14 musicals. The 1989–1990 season yielded 35 shows [including] 21 nonmusical plays (six of them revivals) and 12 musicals (four of them revivals) . . . . Musicals seem to be holding their own, but clearly 'legit' drama . . . is an endangered species . . . .

Now, except among the rich, a night on the town has become a once-a-year extravagance, a fact reflected in the strength of Broadway musicals relative to plays . . . . After all, people can see actors on TV any night of the week; they can read a good story. When they go to the theater, they want a lavish production, visible millions, their money's worth . . . . Broadway has become a tourist attraction, New York City's dilapidated and inadequate response to Disney World. Most native New Yorkers have come to regard it as . . . a place one goes to, if at all, only with out-of-town visitors . . . .

Let us suppose that legitimate theater is a lost cause on Broadway, except for a few ever-more-retro revivals each season. Doesn't that still leave the musical as a living art form? I think not, and for parallel reasons—the dwindling supply of talent and the disparity between what producers can offer and what consumers want . . . . If Broadway's musical menu is beginning to be almost as antiquarian as the Metropolitan Opera's, the reasons are no further away than your radio and your cable-TV screen. Broadway style . . . no longer represents the consensus preference in matters of song and dance.

tions in recent decades have made the real Mozart more visible. Indeed, the specialists' efforts, Hayes writes, have produced "a 'new' Mozart: a sophisticated social observer whose operas are charged with political overtones, a mercurial personality whose tangled finances and behavior are just now becoming better understood, and an almost inconceivably gifted musician whose inspirations and compositional procedures are no less astonishing" when seen in an accurate light.

Forbidden Garden

"Mondrian's Secret Garden" by Robert Kenner, in *Art & Antiques* (Mar. 1991), Art & Antiques Associates, 89 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003.

Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's abstract arrangements of right angles and primary colors can be seen on everything from bedsheets to bathroom tiles. But Mondrian (1872–1944) himself remains a somewhat mysterious figure. Art historians have portrayed him as having made an orderly artistic progression from landscape painter to grid maker, but to tidily portray him thus, says Kenner, a senior editor at *Art & Antiques*, they have had to ignore an important part of his work—his flowers.

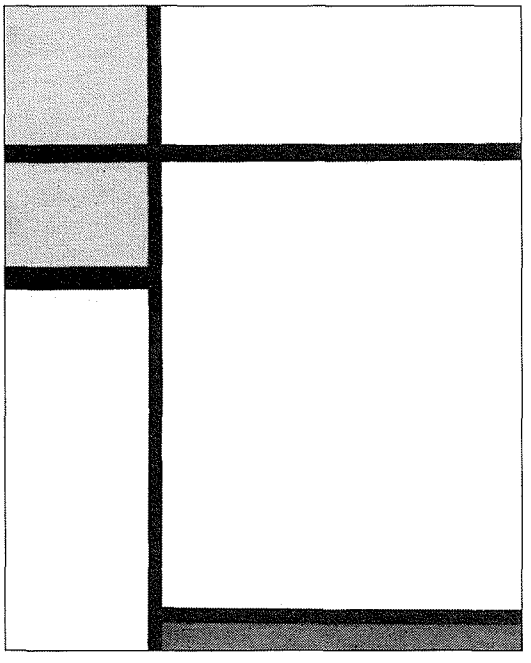
"Between 1900 and 1925, Mondrian the dogmatic abstractionist sketched or painted as many as 100 realistic studies of solitary flowers," Kenner notes. "These obsessively rendered blooms—crisp snowy blue chrysanthemums, languorously wilting sunflowers, vibrant red amaryllises, [a] penciled lily . . . fresh and frank as any nude—include some of the artist's boldest, most expressive work, but

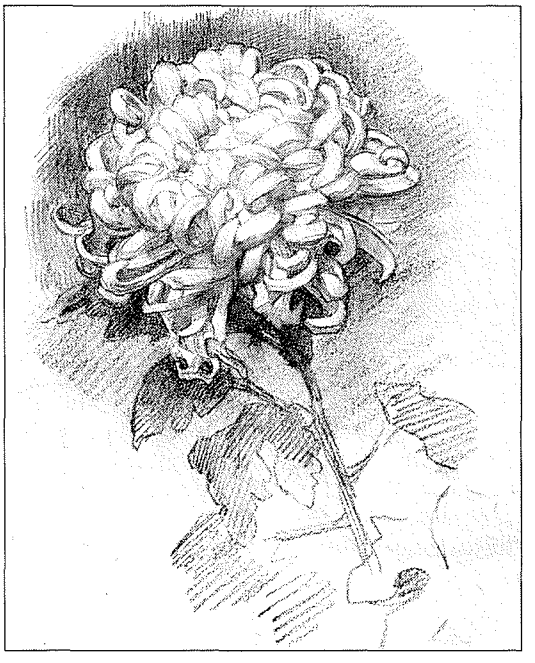
he rarely exhibited them and wouldn't discuss them except to say they 'weren't any good' and had 'no permanent value.'"

Mondrian's realistic flowers ran counter to his own artistic doctrine of "neoplasticism," which he once defined as "the absolute devaluation of tradition . . . the exposure of the whole swindle of lyricism and sentiment . . . the need for abstraction and simplification." The artist, he often said, had to turn away from the delights of the natural world.

In his life, as in his art, Mondrian, a lifelong bachelor from a strict Calvinist family, was continually stripping away the extraneous. He appeared to be the most devout of abstractionists. Yet among the few things he kept always with him was a group of his flower pictures. "This fact alone speaks louder than all his own renunciations of his secret garden," Kenner says.

Mondrian believed that art could be a means to achieving "paradise on earth." His delicate flowers, Kenner writes, "form a sort of spiritual autobiography, a record of [his] oblations to the new art and the new life he believed it would usher in. If he recognized the integrity and power of these works, he suppressed them out of a fierce dedication to the ideals of 'neoplasticism.'"





Abstractionist Piet Mondrian, famous for such works as the 1933 Composition *(left), kept* Chrysanthemum *(right) and his other realistic studies of flowers hidden from public view.*

Literary Financiers

"The Literary Financier" by Harold James, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1991), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

The financier was one of the large figures of the 19th-century novel. In his savage satire, *The Way We Live Now* (1874–75), for example, Anthony Trollope tells of the sudden rise of financial speculator Augustus Melmotte, a "hollow vulgar fraud" whom a corrupt society chooses to venerate, and of his fall after being unmasked at the height of his success. Today, observes Princeton historian James, a modern Trol-