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Summary of the Provenance Dossier

The City of Krefeld owns four paintings by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944): *Tableau No. VII*, *Tableau No. X*, *Tableau No. XI* (all 1925), and *Composition IV* (1926). They belong to the collection of the Kunstmuseen Krefeld. Descendants of the Mondrian heir Harry Holtzman have demanded the return of the artworks.

In order to clarify whether this claim is legally justified, the City of Krefeld commissioned the two provenance researchers Dr. Katja Terlau and Dr. Vanessa-Maria Voigt to examine the provenance of the paintings. Between June 2018 and May 2019, the researchers traced the history of the paintings since the 1920s, evaluated archive material, and spoke with experts both in Germany and abroad. In the process, they did not come across any indications that the works could be unlawfully in the possession of the City of Krefeld.

The findings of the researchers—whose dossier has ninety-one pages plus appendices—can be summarized as follows:

The Path of the Paintings from Their Creation to the Late 1920s

The four paintings were executed in the mid-1920s. At that time, the German art historian and collector Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (1891–1978) was Mondrian's art dealer in Germany. She sold his works "on consignment." In 1925, Lissitzky-Küppers was involved in the preparation of the exhibition *Piet Mondrian, Man Ray*,

and Kurt Schwitters at the gallery Kunstaussstellung Kühl & Kühn in Dresden.

Three of the four paintings in question were included in this exhibition and offered for sale there. As a result of the exhibition in this prestigious gallery, Mondrian's art became known and recognized in Germany. In 1926, through the mediation of Lissitzky-Küppers, the exhibition was therefore also presented in Galerie Goltz in Munich, presumably with an identical list of works.

One year later, all four paintings in question were displayed together with nine others in a comprehensive exhibition at the Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim: *Wege und Richtungen der abstrakten Malerei in Europa* (Paths and Directions of Abstract Painting in Europe). The lenders were again Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and the Dresden-based art dealer Heinrich Kühl. All paintings were available for sale and were listed at net prices of 300–400 marks. However, none of the paintings were sold in Mannheim either—although Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers had urgently pushed for this in a letter: “It is very important to me to sell something, especially by Mondrian, because the artist has no opportunity in Paris to earn anything and is almost completely dependent on what we can achieve for him in Germany.” After repeated written requests by Heinrich Kühl, all paintings were sent back to Dresden in late April 1927.

Three months earlier, in January 1927, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers had emigrated to Moscow and transferred representation for Mondrian's works to Kühl. According to the customs of the German art trade at the time, an authorized dealer had a right of disposal over the works entrusted to him or her and could

decide independently on sales. Everything therefore speaks for the fact that the art dealer Kühl henceforth also offered the paintings of Piet Mondrian for sale throughout Germany and freely disposed of the works on consignment to him. Piet Mondrian never objected to this form of representation of his interests and never demanded that his works be returned to him.

In the spring of 1929, the Museum of Decorative Arts in Frankfurt am Main organized the exhibition *Der Stuhl* (The Chair), in which modern design chairs were juxtaposed with paintings by Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, and other artists. Photos of the exhibition prove that at least three of the four paintings were shown there. On March 14, 1929, Mondrian himself informed his friend Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud that all of his works that were located in Germany at the time would be included in the exhibition. Therefore, the thirteen works from the Mannheim exhibition were also shown in Frankfurt and were also offered for sale there.

The Paintings' Connections to the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum and the City of Krefeld

In the 1920s, Krefeld was a prosperous city with close ties to the artistic avant-garde. The city's velvet and silk manufacturers attracted numerous designers and architects to the Lower Rhine region. They put their creativity at the service of the textile industry, which was searching for innovative ideas in the face of increasing competitive pressure. It was during these years that the now world-famous villas Haus Lange and Haus Esters designed by the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were built.

Many prominent representatives of the velvet and silk industry, including Hermann Lange (1874–1942) and Erich Raemisch (1896–1958), also had a strong private interest in modern art and were well networked in the corresponding circles. There were close connections to the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum and its then director Max Creutz (1876–1932), who featured contemporary artists and designers in numerous exhibitions. By purchasing Expressionist paintings and sculptures, Creutz succeeded in linking the Krefeld collection more closely to modern art. He was supported in his efforts by influential private collectors, as well as by artists such as Heinrich Campendonk (1889–1957).

It was during this time—namely beginning in mid-1929—that an exhibition project revolving around international abstract art was being planned. It was to be a traveling exhibition, which Max Creutz wished to organize in cooperation with the collector Katherine Dreier (1877–1952). The concept for the exhibition was developed in May 1929, but further planning progressed slowly. From Krefeld’s side, in addition to Creutz, Campendonk and the silk manufacturer Hermann Lange were also closely involved in the preliminary discussions. On a list of thirty-nine artists proposed for the exhibition, the name Piet Mondrian is also mentioned.

In December 1929, in a letter to Katherine Dreier, Max Creutz unambiguously rejected the exhibition project: “In Germany, people now want to see more German and popular art.” The question as to whether Mondrian’s works from the Frankfurt exhibition had already been sent to Krefeld at this time cannot be answered on the basis of the available sources. What is certain is that the

planned exhibition in Krefeld was cancelled at a very early stage and that, eighteen months later, in the summer of 1931, Mondrian stated himself that he no longer had any works that he could make available for exhibitions in Germany. This is an indication that the works, which had been available for many years, had already been sold at that time. They were not needed as loans in Krefeld at that time.

A letter dated September 13, 1929 may provide decisive information about the route by which the four paintings reached Krefeld. Written by Ernst Kállai, Editor-in-Chief of the *Bauhaus* magazine in Dessau, this letter was addressed to Erich Raemisch (1896–1958), at the time Managing Director of the Association of German Silk Weavers. Privately, he was actively engaged in the Society for Young Art in the Rhineland, the Managing Director of which he had been since 1929, and, as a member of the board of the Krefeld Museum Society, he maintained close contacts with the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. Later, he was also, together with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Vice Chairman of the Deutscher Werkbund.

In this letter, Kállai reports the following incident: “having just returned from vacation, i find eight paintings by piet mondrian in my editorial office. at first, i could not understand why and from where these pictures ended up in my office. Finally, I found out from our janitor that these pictures were in the crate that also contained pictures by young bauhaus painters and that they were part of the shipment from krefeld. [...] i hasten to inform you about this and kindly ask you to make arrangements for the pictures. should they be sent to the address of your art

association?" According to this, there is much to suggest that eight paintings by Mondrian were sent to Dessau by mistake, together with works from the touring exhibition *Young Bauhaus Painters*, which was shown in Krefeld in July 1929.

It is no longer possible today to determine precisely which paintings were involved, but the four works now in the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum were presumably among them. It also stands to reason that Ernst Kállai, who left the editorial office in October 1929, sent the Mondrian pictures back to Erich Raemisch. The paintings in question were thus in Krefeld both in the summer of 1929 and after their presumed return by Ernst Kállai.

At that time, the official address of both the Association of German Silk Weavers and the Society for Young Art in the Rhineland was that of Erich Raemisch. The latter was an association of art experts, most of whom were collectors themselves and who, since 1924, had been acquiring a large number of works of art, also on behalf of the Society for Young Art. Privately, Erich Raemisch verifiably owned works by artists such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and Fernand Léger. It is not known whether works by Mondrian were also among them.

The museum's director Max Creutz also had a private art collection. He maintained close friendships with many artists, including Campendonk, Johan Thorn Prikker, Helmuth Macke, and Heinrich Nauen. Paul Wember (1913–1987), who later became director of the museum, also reported in 1973 on a "friendly contact" that Max Creutz had maintained with Piet Mondrian over many years. After Creutz's

sudden death in March 1932, his widow Käthe Schütze-Creutz attended to his private art collection.

With the death of Creutz, a period of instability began in the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. From 1932 to 1946, five different directors were listed—in some cases, the museum was completely closed. During the so-called “Degenerate Art” campaign in 1937, the National Socialists confiscated a total of ninety-five works from the Krefeld collection. None of Mondrian’s works were among them.

Finding the Paintings and Exhibitions After the Second World War

After the war, Krefeld, like many German cities, improvised: From 1945 onwards, the building of the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum housed the municipal cash office, the library, the press office, and the tax collector’s office, among others. It was not until the mid-1960s that this external occupancy was abandoned. It is not certain when exactly, in the midst of this confusing situation, the paintings by Piet Mondrian were found in the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. According to the information in the museum, it was 1950—this coincides with the information provided by former staff members.

The director of the museum at the time, Paul Wember, later noted that the painting had been found “under curious circumstances.” There are different versions of this story: The site of their discovery is noted as, among others, the paper cellar and a pedestal on the former staircase. To explain the provenance, Wember stated that Creutz presumably “paid for the pictures personally”: They were “not expensive at the time” and “Creutz was not without means.” But these are assumptions, which Wember also

identifies as such. As early as 1953, Wember presented the four paintings (together with stained-glass windows by Johan Thorn Prikker) for the first time in Krefeld in the exhibition *Das neue Bauen in Holland*. In a document preserved in the municipal archives, it states: “In the early 1920s, our museum already acquired several of Mondrian’s ‘curious’ paintings, and a kindred spirit has always been felt in Krefeld between Mondrian and the late windows by Thorn Prikker.”

The paintings were not inventoried until 1954, and whether this delay is due to the difficult new start after 1945 can no longer be determined today. It is certain, however, that “finding” works of art in museum inventories after the chaos of war was not uncommon, as is the case with the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum.

After Piet Mondrian’s paintings were first shown in Krefeld in 1953, numerous loans to other museums followed. *Tableau No. VII*, for example, was exhibited at the Kunsthalle Kiel in 1959, *Composition IV* in Berlin and Stuttgart in 1955, in Recklinghausen in 1956 and 1958, and at the world-renowned *documenta* in Kassel in 1959. It was thus widely known since the 1950s that the paintings were part of the Krefeld collection. This can also be seen in Michel Seuphor’s early catalog raisonné, which, in 1957, already contains the following entry: “After completion of the catalog raisonné, the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, points to the fact that four paintings by Mondrian are in its possession, which are not yet included in the present oeuvre catalog.” Immediately below this is a list of the four works in question. The works also appear in the catalog of the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum’s holdings published in 1963, *Malerei in unserem Jahrhundert* (Painting in Our

Century), together with the note: “acquired before 1932. Hidden and lost. Found again.” In later years, both Paul Wember and his successor Gerhard Storck worked closely with Joop Joosten for his catalog raisonné.

After the premature end of the exhibition project in 1929, neither Piet Mondrian himself nor his art dealer Heinrich Kühn demanded the paintings back. As late as 1938, Kühn returned to Mondrian an unsold painting by the artist that had been taken on commission. After Mondrian’s death in 1944 and the end of the Second World War, his heir Harry Holtzman did not formulate a claim for restitution. The existence and location of the paintings in Krefeld had been generally known since the 1950s and was recorded in the relevant directories and catalogs. ◀