In 1914, while taking a driving lesson Salomon Bernard Slijper, the 30-year-old son of a diamond dealer, ended up in the village of Laren, some 30 kilometers from Amsterdam. He liked the atmosphere in the village so much that he spent several weeks there in the summer of 1915. He stayed at a large country house known as De Linden, which Katinka Hannaart ran as a guest house [fig. 1]. The singer and actress had moved in artistic circles in Amsterdam, where she had met Piet Mondrian and other artists. She liked to share her large home in Laren with friends and in the summer months she took in paying guests. Mondrian had moved to Paris in 1912 and returned to the Netherlands for a short visit in July 1914. The outbreak of war made it impossible for him to return to France, however, and Hannaart offered him a room. In exchange for her hospitality Mondrian gave her several paintings to add to the few works by him she already possessed. At least one of them was hanging in the dining room of her guesthouse when Slijper arrived in summer 1915. He not only discovered the work of Piet Mondrian there (Composition No. IV, p. 137), this was in fact the first time he had ever encountered an abstract painting.

Many years later he looked back on this moment that would be a crucial turning point in his life. “I had a little difficulty getting used to the first painting by Mondrian that I saw . . . for it was the first abstract painting I had ever seen . . . or had ever even heard of. After six weeks I noticed that the painting had had an effect on me, for I looked with less and less pleasure at ‘ordinary’ paintings, which I had enjoyed up to that point. It took years for me to realize what it was that attracted me. It must have been Mondrian’s unyielding effort to fathom the very depths of existence.”

From the 1950s onwards, when Slijper was better known as an important Mondrian collector, he would repeat this and other anecdotes about Mondrian in numerous interviews. He liked to paint a picture of a close, warm friendship. Mandy Prins was the first author to describe the relationship in detail in 2008, in a thorough account of the facts presented mainly from Slijper’s perspective. We will re-examine the myth created by Slijper in this essay, to give Mondrian’s perspective its due. We will show that though the image presented by Slijper may have been a well-intended tribute to his friend, it was based on an idealization. Mondrian acknowledged the many things Slijper had done for him. As he worked indefatigably on an exhibition of Mondrian’s work in honor of his 50th birthday, Mondrian wrote to his friend and patron, “You are on the way to earning that Slijper memorial you once spoke of.” But the reality was more complex, and the story needs to be nuanced.
LAREN 1915: THE START OF A LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP

BACKGROUND
Salomon Bernard Slijper’s childhood home was an elegant house beside the river Amstel in Amsterdam. He was born into a family of Amsterdam diamond merchants on January 20, 1884. His grandfather, father, and uncle all worked in the diamond industry. Amsterdam was the global center of the industry, employing thousands of people at that time. The family lived according to Jewish laws and were active members of the Jewish community. Sal was four when his mother died; he himself said he inherited his interest in art from her. Several months later his father married Mathilda Cohen, who had joined the household as a servant during his first wife’s illness. She came from northern Germany, and Sal had a good relationship with her.

At an early age Slijper’s teachers described him as a dreamer who had difficulty focusing on his schoolwork. Nevertheless, after completing elementary school he enrolled at the Openbare Handelsschool (Public Trade School) on Keizersgracht, where he trained as a merchant in the broadest sense of the word. He was not therefore destined to follow his father and grandfather into the diamond trade, undoubtedly because the Amsterdam diamond industry had been experiencing difficult times since 1890. After graduating with a diploma in 1900 Slijper went to work for the Amsterdamsche Handelsbank (Amsterdam Merchant Bank), merchant bank, the most important financial backer of Amsterdam’s diamond merchants. When his father died in 1903 Slijper received a not inconsiderable inheritance which enabled him to stop working at the bank temporarily in order to go travelling. He returned to Handelsbank after a time, but then left for good in 1906. That same year he moved in with his stepmother, who had returned to her birthplace of Neustadtgödens. What Slijper did between leaving Amsterdamsche Handelsbank in 1906 and meeting Mondrian in 1915 is not clear. Was his inheritance enough to live on? Did he train as an estate agent, a profession he later took up? Or did he perhaps work for his cousin Lehman Slijper, who was a stockbroker? It seems he did all kinds of things, as and when it suited him. The fact that he spent the summer of 1915 in Laren makes it clear that his occupation did not at any rate tie him to Amsterdam at that point. He was free, as he himself said, do what “was agreeable” to him.

MONDRIAN IN LAREN
Piet Mondrian arrived in the Netherlands from Paris on Saturday July 25, 1914. He was just in time to see the exhibition of his most recent paintings at W. Walrecht’s gallery in The Hague. When, three days later, the first skirmishes took place that would become World War I, he was forced to set up camp in the Netherlands for an indefinite period of time. Initially, he spent time as planned with family in Arnhem and Amsterdam. A few weeks later, however, with no prospect of a quick end to the war, Mondrian went in search of a semi-permanent place to live and work. The room Katinka Hannaart offered him must have been most welcome, as he wished to keep on his studio in Paris in order to return there immediately after the war. Mondrian spent September at De Linden. From October to January
1915 he worked in Domburg, on the coast, after which he returned to De Linden. In the summer he was forced to look for alternative accommodation in Laren when Hannaart opened her home to paying guests for a few weeks as usual. He did, however, continue to eat at Hannaart’s for as long as possible. It was at her dining table that summer that he met Amsterdam estate agent Sal Slijper [fig. 2].

At the point where Mondrian found himself stranded in the Netherlands, his work was in a transitional phase. He had trained as a painter at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam from 1892 to 1897, having previously obtained a qualification as an elementary and secondary art teacher. In those early years he mainly painted cityscapes, landscapes, and still lifes [p. 100-101]. To make ends meet, he also made commissioned copies and portraits, and sold paintings of flowers door to door. From around 1900 his work began to grow still and serene. He was averse to depicting any action, and preferred to paint in “gray, dark weather or in very strong sunlight, when the density of atmosphere obscures the details and accentuates the large outlines of objects.”

The depiction of “mood” was entirely consistent with the ideals of the Hague School, familiar to Mondrian since childhood. He found subjects for his work mainly on the periphery of the city, along the river Gein, for example. There, he painted several series featuring groups of trees, windmills, farmhouses, pollard willows, and river views [p. 87].

Around 1907 a change occurred in Mondrian’s work. His use of color intensified and he adopted a more modern approach to his subject. The painted image—often in strongly contrasting colors—became flatter. He would later state that he “had come to feel that the colors of nature cannot be reproduced on canvas.” His use of bright, unmixed colors continued in 1908–1911. During this period Mondrian evolved into one of the leading innovators in Dutch painting, working with a divisionist technique whereby the paint was applied in short, parallel strokes. One example of this is *Mill in Sunlight* of 1908 (A654), which eventually became part of Sal Slijper’s collection [p. 115].

In May 1911 Mondrian visited Paris, keen to discover the most recent developments in art. He was impressed by the Cubists’ completely new approach to reality and saw the controversial paintings of Henri Le Fauconnier, Fernand Léger, Jean Metzinger, Robert Delaunay, and others at the Salon des Indépendants. He probably also visited the galleries of several well-known art dealers and collectors, including Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Wilhelm Uhde, and he also visited some artists’ studios. The works he exhibited...
FRIENDSHIP IN PROXIMITY (1915–1919)

DOUBLE WORK AND NO WORK

Slijper returned to Amsterdam at the end of summer 1915. Shortly before, Mondrian had found accommodation elsewhere in Laren, though he still ate regularly at De Linden or another “open table” nearby where artists, writers, and philosophers would meet. The rural Gooi region was a popular destination among artists, free-thinkers and businessmen, with its unspoiled natural surroundings, typical Dutch rural motifs, favorable location close to Amsterdam, and its relatively low house prices. Laren and Blaricum, at walking distance from each other, and nearby Bussum, formed a lively center of culture, despite their village atmosphere.

Mondrian made new friends, and he also ran into a number of old acquaintances in Laren, fellow students from the academy 20 years ago who had continued working in the nineteenth-century Dutch landscape tradition (which sold well in America), and some friends who had been there when he got to know the Parisian avant-garde in 1911–12. Some of them had even shared a studio with him. Lodewijk Schelfhout, for example, had moved to the Gooi region from Paris in 1913, and Peter Alma settled in Laren in 1914 with his Norwegian wife, painter Edle Saxlund. Slijper introduced Mondrian to some wealthy merchants from his Amsterdam circle, including diamond merchant Abraham Herzberg, director of De Bijenkorf department store Aron Arthur Isaac, and director of the Metz & Co. department store Joseph de Leeuw.

Mondrian did not lack social contacts, but his work was not really selling well. Although it was admired by several fellow artists, they did not have the financial resources to buy it. And his abstract work was well beyond the tastes of the Amsterdam businessmen in Laren, who would have been able to afford it. He was forced to take commissions—often for copies of
paintings in the Rijksmuseum—and he began to make new versions of his earlier naturalistic work (pp. 84–85 and 142–143). This meant he was only able to develop his non-commissioned work in the little time that remained. He generally used evenings to write “his book,” a theoretical treatise setting out the principles of his art. He also enjoyed dancing and playing billiards at the local Hotel Hamdorff which, according to Mondrian, was like “a little Paris” [fig. 3].

He frequently met up with Slijper during visits to Amsterdam. Although they had not known each other for long, they had developed a good rapport. It is difficult to say how this can best be described, not least because only one side of their correspondence has survived. The entire range of sources (letters, interviews, the recollections of others) presents a picture of fairly contradictory characters: Slijper jovial and open, active in many ways, a bon vivant, worldly; Mondrian, despite his need for social contact, somewhat more reticent towards others, finding it difficult to give himself or to form attachments, living an austere existence, dedicated to a single purpose in life. It seems that one of the key principles of Mondrian’s theory of the New Plastic also applied in real life: the “equilibrated relationship” of two opposites. Nevertheless, their shared passion for fine clothes, good food, attractive women, music, and dancing was undoubtedly an important element in their friendship. They could often be found in each other’s company at Hamdorff’s or, after Slijper moved to Laren in October 1917, at his home, a farmhouse on Burgemeester Heerschopweg, where he hosted a Sunday afternoon salon. The letters also show that Slijper tried more than once to introduce Mondrian to one of his acquaintances. Mondrian who, as he himself put it, was “cursed with aristocratic leanings,” was able to benefit to some extent from Slijper’s comfortable circumstances, not only because his friend bought his work, but also because he occasionally lent him a nice jacket or even a tuxedo, in which Mondrian made a good impression at the Tweede Algemeen Kunstcongres (“Second General Art Conference”) in December 1915.

The friendship cannot therefore be seen in isolation from Slijper’s role as patron. Shortly after they met he began buying Mondrian’s work and put him in contact with potential buyers in his own circle, and was therefore an important business contact for him. Mondrian had some reservations about Slijper, however, particularly in the early days of their friendship, mainly because he could afford such luxuries apparently with little effort. Mondrian wrote that this was the cause of some apparent distance between them: “The only difficulty between us is a practical one: you do not need to work, and I need to work twice as hard. That is why we must maintain a certain distance—you will understand this—you are certainly smart enough.” By citing the financial disparity as the “only difficulty” Mondrian—deliberately or otherwise—was concealing another complication that appears to have stood in the way of true friendship at the time.

Anti-Semitism

The relationship between Piet Mondrian and Sal Slijper moved between two extremes: their mutual empathy and their financial or business transactions—in other words, between friendship and patronage. These two things were not separate. On the contrary: most aspects of their relationship lay somewhere between these two extremes, and included elements of both. Mondrian benefited from Slijper’s financial generosity but he also had a sincere affection for him. Slijper was always proud of the friendship, but was also aware of the steadily growing value of his collection. Sal tried to draw attention to Piet’s work; Piet gave Sal tips about work for sale by other collectors. They went out dancing, and talked about women.

As friends, there were of course similarities in the two men’s characters and interests, though there were
inevitably differences, too. Mondrian wrote about this to Slijper in April 1916: “Dear Sal, now you write saying you are so melancholy, I have to write to you again—I have no outward wit, but, as you will have noticed, I do have an inward wit, which you sense when we are in company—more than when I write. But perhaps you will receive something of it. As you are aware, I of all people have known much misery—or no, you do not know much of that—but I have always got by with inner humor. The greatest misery has never made me truly unhappy. But it is true—I am half Jewish. I believe, by the way, that you are also only half. You may regard that as a compliment. I find part of a Jew especially sympathetic—that part I have, naturally—as do you—but there is also a part of a Jew I find wretched, and you have only a little of that. That is why we get along so well.”

This passage is both illuminating and lamentable. During the early years of their friendship Sal Slijper suffered from depression, or nervous exhaustion, for which he was treated at Berkenoord sanatorium in Nijmegen. Mondrian wanted to show that he could relate to Slijper’s situation by saying that he too had “known much misery.” It is not entirely clear what he was referring to, but it could well be that was thinking of his “flight” from Amsterdam to the village of Uden in Brabant in 1904. It is said that Mondrian was “off balance” in 1903, and experiencing a personal crisis, but this has never been explained. Life in Brabant among ordinary people seemed to restore the balance. Whatever the case, citing shared experiences and recognition was Mondrian’s way of showing support, a friendly gesture. By adding that at times of psychological tension he used humor as a counterbalance, he was in fact advising Slijper to do the same: to put things into perspective and not take them too seriously.

Mondrian then includes a self-characterization that seems to refer to something Slijper must have said in an earlier letter: “But it is true—I am half Jewish.” If we understand him correctly, he seems to be saying here that humor is one of several traits he has in common with “the” Jews (“Jewish humor,” in other words). Such generalizations about Jews make us uncomfortable these days and a close reading of this passage and what follows only makes things worse. Sal Slijper had grown up in a Jewish family that was active in Amsterdam’s Jewish community and lived according to traditional Jewish rules. Until he moved to Blaricum in 1917 he was a member of the Dutch-Israelite synagogue in Amsterdam, but there is no reason to believe that Slijper was ever a strict practitioner of the faith.

We do not know what details of Slijper’s background Mondrian was aware of, but the quote suggests he was fully aware of his friend’s Jewish origins. Nevertheless, he regarded his as “half” Jewish because Sal—fortunately—did not have the bad qualities Mondrian attributed to Jews in general, the “wretched” part. Or worse, in fact, Sal had “only little of that.” Despite the fact that Mondrian may have intended this to be ironic, it does not sound very kind, and furthermore it is anti-Semitic. We cannot say how Sal interpreted
Fig. 4. Piet Mondrian, Portrait of Louis van Zwanenbergh, 1904, print on paper (postcard), 13 × 8 cm, private collection

these words. He probably faced anti-Semitic prejudices on a regular basis, but that is not to say it was any less painful for all that. Would Mondrian’s occasional use of a Yiddish (or apparently Yiddish) word in his letters actually have helped matters?39

Mondrian’s correspondence contains other anti-Semitic statements. They are sometimes fairly half-hearted, such as “I also mistrusted Apollinaire—a Polish Jew.”40 This feels unpleasant, even though he does not literally say that he mistrusted the French poet and critic because he was Jewish (and/or because of his Polish origins). On the other hand, there are also flagrant examples of anti-Semitism. Mondrian wrote to Theo van Doesburg, for instance: “I heard lately from someone who is friendly with the management of the Bijenkorf [department store] that you are to exhibit there: are they mistaken? For that person said I believe Van Doesburg is to exhibit there. Perhaps you are not aware, but I would advise against it: I know the management, good people but ‘Jewish,’ who exploit the genuine only to advertise themselves. If you are serious and this was not a mistake—which is what I assume—then I can write saying more. I believe you should not exhibit there.”41 It is not impossible that Slijper was the one who told Mondrian of the rumor about Van Doesburg’s possible exhibition. The director whom Mondrian said he knew was Arthur Isaac, mentioned above, one of the Amsterdam art lovers (and potential buyers) to whom Slijper introduced Mondrian.42 Another example can be found in a letter to his lifelong friend Albert van den Briel in 1925: “Slijper may be a Jew but he is not the common type; he has a good eye, but it is of course speculation to a large extent. He used to buy a lot of work from me, for low prices admittedly, but that was fine at the time; no one else was buying at all. So I make no accusations on that score, for he had little money. Now he has even less I believe, otherwise he would still be buying. Sometimes he purchases something being sold on by someone else, but at a low price.”43

Mondrian was therefore not only cursed with “aristocratic leanings” but also with at least some of the stereotypical prejudices of the time, which held that Jews did not have good taste and were concerned always with financial gain. How Mondrian acquired such ideas is not known. There is no evidence that Mondrian had any unpleasant personal experiences with Jews. He wrote a decidedly positive account of a visit to the Herzbergs, a Jewish family, to whom Slijper had also introduced him.44 Albert van den Briel, who often discussed personal matters with Mondrian between 1900 and 1910, and would always continue to correspond with him, wrote: “It always surprised me that M. did not like Jews (Slijper included), even
Zw[anenberg, in Uden], who was always very kind to him as a neighbor and landlord. Zw. probably thought (as did I) that M. had Jewish origins (perhaps very long ago? Portuguese-Jewish). Could it be that a Jew (by origin) married into the M. family?” [fig. 4]. As far as we know the answer to this last question is no. What we do know, however, is that Mondrian’s father was an ardent follower of Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch reformed pastor and politician who published some very anti-Semitic writings. One publication by Kuyper (originally a series of newspaper articles) of 1878 was entitled Liberalists and Jews. It is certainly possible that Mondrian’s father subscribed to his idol’s notions and that his son was raised in that spirit, whether he was aware of it or not.

Mondrian’s upbringing need not have been the only source of such ideas. Anti-Semitism was a widespread phenomenon in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century, though it was not as rabid, or indeed as violent, as it was in some other European countries. It took different forms—some of them overlapping—related to fears based on religious, social/economic or political grounds. What is striking is that the stereotypes of Jews and Jewish behavior were highly contradictory: they were said to be clever and rich, yet also poor schlemiels, they were allegedly both capitalists and bolsheviks, powerful and parasites, superior and inferior.

Mondrian’s explicit anti-Semitism—whether intended ironically or not—is an uncomfortable undertone in the story of his friendship with Sal Slijper. At the same time, would he have made such statements if he could have guessed what horrific excesses anti-Semitism would soon lead to in Europe? Some evidence can be found in the series of essays he wrote from 1940 onward, in which he unequivocally condemned national socialism and other repressive regimes; freedom of the individual, irrespective of preference or background, was an absolute necessity for a healthy society, according to Mondrian.

**THE FIRST TRANSACTIONS**

Slijper said it took some persuading before he was allowed to buy his first painting from Mondrian. The artist was not looking for “charity” and he wanted to be sure that Slijper actually cared about the work itself. The first piece he bought was a naturalistic work depicting a windmill or a farmhouse—this is not clear—and he seems to have liked it, as he soon bought more. Slijper was later accused of acquiring work by Mondrian for very little money. He dismissed this as a lack of commercial spirit on the part of the artist: “He was no merchant, he always asked much too little. I acquired that first painting for a trifle.” At any rate, the many works he sold to Slijper did Mondrian a great service at a time when he barely earned enough to keep his head above water.

The first major transaction, in spring 1916, involved five of the works Mondrian had left with his friend Anna Bruin in The Hague for safekeeping. Slijper paid 500 guilders for them. This income released Mondrian...
from the obligation to take on copying jobs for a while, and he was able to continue developing his artistic work. The letters show how Mondrian coordinated the transfer from Bruin in The Hague to Slijper, which eventually resulted in the paintings being transported from The Hague to Amsterdam by barge, covered by nothing more than a few blankets. The largest painting in Mondrian’s oeuvre, the *Evolution* triptych, experienced the same fate [fig. 5]. Mondrian had entrusted the three man-sized panels, to a friend in Haarlem. Slijper made partial payment for the huge painting by giving Mondrian a black jacket, for which he deducted 50 guilders from the price. To Mondrian’s delight, Slijper was pleased with these first purchases: “I was very happy to learn that you think the pieces fine, for I still love them very much and still think them very good, despite my changed opinions. Opinions are however an outward thing that grow with a person, are they not, and which are influenced by time, yet the inward aspect of it always remains the same.”

It was a relief to Mondrian to have found a buyer for large numbers of works from an earlier phase of his artistic development. For although the older works were “inwardly the same,” Mondrian valued his recent work more highly, in which he felt the “outward” and “inward” were in better balance. He hoped to interest renowned collectors—which at this point certainly did not include Slijper—in his new work.

When, in April 1916, he was approached by one such prominent collector, he immediately informed Slijper: “The critic Bremmer seems to have seen my piece in A’dam, and now I have received a letter from him. He writes: ‘Your quest and accomplishments are to my liking and I appreciate and admire your work. The nature of your work suggests to me that you will have difficulties with the material side of life and if this is the case I should like to make a proposal to assist you somewhat in this matter.’” Bremmer’s proposal consisted of an allowance of 600 guilders a year in exchange for four recent paintings of medium size. This suddenly assured Mondrian of a basic income, equal to some €5,000 today, a hitherto unknown luxury for the artist. For Slijper, however, this was a complicating factor in the development of his collection: “Although he was not obliged to do so, Mondrian felt he should also offer all the other work he made to Bremmer first.” This only partially explains, however, why the Slijper collection did not include any abstract work from 1916–1918. This is much more a reflection of the personal preferences of the collector, which tended toward the traditional. He therefore preferred to buy early work rather than the recent abstract compositions that he later maintained he liked so much.

**1917–1919: PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY**

During the first two years of their friendship Slijper still lived in Amsterdam, where Mondrian visited him regularly. By the end of 1916, at any rate, Slijper possessed ten works by Mondrian: the farmhouse or windmill that he bought first, the five works he acquired through Anna Bruin, the *Evolution* triptych from Haarlem, and three “studies” which Slijper bought from Mondrian’s friend Simon Maris, an artist and dealer. At that point his collection also included work by other artists, as evidenced by a letter from Mondrian concerning the transaction with Bruin in January 1916: “If you should have the opportunity, having sold other work or come into an inheritance, to make an offer for the pieces, I will instruct her to inform the gentleman who had an idea of buying them but from whom I have not heard since.”

The “other work” in Slijper’s collection was by artists like Co Breman, Ferdinand Hart Nibbrig, Wiliam Degouve de Nuncques, Sal Meijer and Piet van Wijngaerdt. Many of the artists whose work Slijper collected lived in the Gooi region, suggesting that Slijper began collecting their work, too, after his first visit to Laren. Other than this, little is known about his collection of paintings. A report of an interview he gave at home in 1969...
suggests that he owned a considerable quantity of work, however. “Mondrian’s old friend received me in a small hallway full of paintings leaning against the wall, their fronts turned away. No Mondrians: they are almost all at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, on loan.” Mondrian dismissed his friend’s purchases as speculation, but this does not do justice to his intentions. For instance, he never sold on any of the Mondrians in his collection while the artist was alive, though he had several opportunities to do so. He himself said that, during a period when his finances were tight, he would rather sell his house than accept a bid of 5,000 guilders for the Evolution triptych from collector Helene Kröller-Müller. However, we must bear in mind that this last anecdote may have been a matter of “image-building.” It could be that Slijper wished to underline the fact that his love of Mondrian’s work was greater than his own material desires. And he will have been aware that the collection as a whole would have been less interesting without the important triptych.

By 1917 the friendship and the patronage had evolved to such an extent that Mondrian regularly borrowed money from Slijper or asked for an advance on work he was to sell to him. When, in April 1917, he found himself short of funds, he borrowed 20 guilders from Slijper; he borrowed another 20 that September. This gives an idea of Mondrian’s tight finances and also suggests that Slijper had ready access to cash.
sporadically and on October 1, 1918 Mondrian wrote to Wentholt: “One Sunday I ate at Slijper’s, but I shall not go every week anymore, even if he insisted.” Did this drifting apart have anything to do with the growing closeness between Mondrian and Wentholt? Or did the approaching end of the war and Mondrian’s impending departure for France have something to do with it? It did not at any rate stand in the way of Slijper’s generosity or his faith in the artist, for it was thanks to him that Mondrian was able to leave for Paris in June 1919 with a full wallet. He had bought Mondrian’s two most recent, quite extraordinary paintings: Composition with grid 8: Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colors (B102; p. 151) and Composition with grid 9: Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors (B103), so his collection now included some abstract geometric work. Furthermore, Slijper also bought all the work Mondrian had left behind in his Paris studio, even though he had not seen it, and for a price to be determined later. He made an immediate down payment of 500 guilders.

BACK IN PARIS

The Paris Transaction

Mondrian returned to his Paris studio on Sunday June 22, 1919, after an absence of almost five years. Slijper had accompanied him to the train in the Netherlands, and was one of the first to receive word from Paris: “How different the air is in Paris. I am glad I left. . . . I found your paintings unscathed: there are more things than I thought.” Having tidied up and cleaned his studio, on July 21 he made an inventory of the work he had rediscovered there. There were 30 drawings, 15 oil studies from Zeeland, a few of which were “more sophisticated . . . (at any rate in the divisional way with painted squares),” and also some pieces he had started, as well as several earlier naturalistic works. “Now I thought perhaps you might like to buy the
spirit” that afflicted his friend is seen here again. By adding “Just think about it,” he left it to Slijper to make another (i.e.: higher) offer, or to decide not to buy certain works or groups of works. This sleight of hand placed his friend in a moral dilemma to which Slijper succumbed, though we can only guess at the price he eventually paid. When Mondrian received money sent to him by his friend Willy Wentholt in September, he said she need not worry that he was going without. “I think you think I might not have much money. That may be so, but I have enough. I even have 1,000 francs in a savings account here!! That is because I had a lot of old work here and sold it to Slijper, in Holland as you know, and got money for it while still in Holland. Now the exchange rate for the franc is so good and he has already sent me the money even though the things are still here.”

Transporting “the things” turned out to be quite a challenge, and Mondrian went all over Paris to find out how to send them. Eventually, they were dispatched at the end of October and reached the Netherlands in mid or late November. After receiving them, Slijper immediately wrote a letter saying what he thought of them.

They were apparently not all to his taste. He did not, for example, like *Mill*. Mondrian concurred. “It is I believe only good in very very strong light.”

Mondrian had the tendency to find his “latest work always the best” and, given the strong development his work had undergone over the course of some ten years, such works lay far behind him by now. On the other hand, he wrote, “I never shed a thing before I believe it is right.” Mondrian had the tendency to find his “latest work always the best” and, given the strong development his work had undergone over the course of some ten years, such works lay far behind him by now. On the other hand, he wrote, “I never shed a thing before I believe it is right.”

He then mentioned the titles or subjects of 15 paintings. Altogether, there were no fewer than 60 items, which Slijper acquired in a single transaction, firmly establishing his status as the most important collector of Mondrian’s work—as time would tell. This acquisition also hugely expanded the scope of his collection. The 60 works included some of the most important pieces from Mondrian’s luminist period (1908–1910), the subsequent transitional phase of decorative Cubism (1910–1911) and the Cubism of his first period in Paris (1912–1914). Furthermore, Slijper considerably extended his holdings of early naturalistic work, giving him a representative overview of Mondrian’s work up to 1914.

Mondrian totaled up the sums to be paid in the letter on the “Paris transaction.” He was asking 700 guilders for the 15 paintings listed, twice 150 guilders for the fifteen drawings and fifteen studies, making a total of 1,000 guilders (now approximately €6,000). He knew he was not asking too much: “I have priced some of the paintings much too low but I think it is better to have something new rather than perhaps more later. Just think about it.” The calculation makes it clear that Slijper paid the absurdly low average price of slightly over 16.50 guilders for each work (now approximately €100). That would have been a bargain price for the sketches, let alone for a painting like *Mill* of 1911 (A692) [p. 127] or *Portrait of a Lady* of 1912 (B5) [p. 129]. Slijper’s remark about the “lack of commercial spirit” that afflicted his friend is seen here again. By adding “Just think about it,” he left it to Slijper to make another (i.e.: higher) offer, or to decide not to buy certain works or groups of works. This sleight of hand placed his friend in a moral dilemma to which Slijper succumbed, though we can only guess at the price he eventually paid. When Mondrian received money sent to him by his friend Willy Wentholt in September, he said she need not worry that he was going without. “I think you think I might not have much money. That may be so, but I have enough. I even have 1,000 francs in a savings account here!! That is because I had a lot of old work here and sold it to Slijper, in Holland as you know, and got money for it while still in Holland. Now the exchange rate for the franc is so good and he has already sent me the money even though the things are still here.”

Transporting “the things” turned out to be quite a challenge, and Mondrian went all over Paris to find out how to send them. Eventually, they were dispatched at the end of October and reached the Netherlands in mid or late November. After receiving them, Slijper immediately wrote a letter saying what he thought of them. They were apparently not all to his taste. He did not, for example, like *Mill*. Mondrian concurred. “It is I believe only good in very very strong light.” Mondrian had the tendency to find his “latest work always the best” and, given the strong development his work had undergone over the course of some ten years, such works lay far behind him by now. On the other hand, he wrote, “I never shed a thing before I believe it is right.”

Without any further ado he therefore wrote telling Slijper which works he liked best: “I think the smallest of the two oval abstracts is particularly good: it exudes such pleasure in life. I also think the black portrait of a lady (Cubist) good of its type [p. 129]. Better than the nude with one eye, though that is also good . . . . It is gratifying that you have those things from Maris too, and that the large one will
return to classic French ideals of beauty. Many foreign artists had succumbed to this, too. Mondrian wrote to a friend in the Netherlands about the transformation that Diego Rivera had undergone, for example. The Mexican artist also lived in the studio complex at Rue du Départ, and before Mondrian’s departure from Paris he had been using a Cubist formal language in his art: “Rivera himself is more of a disappointment than I thought: I knew that he was simply going along with it, rather than being a true Cubist. Now he has abandoned Cubism completely and makes things you could hang in the Louvre. Very accomplished, but not contemporary. He said himself that the war had brought back much that was not abstract. This was not to my liking.”

Even the “extraordinarily brilliant” Picasso came in for criticism: “I also saw that Picasso exhibition. Old and also new work, not so very much changed but I found his latest work less serious, less confident. I hear he is also producing other work, not to earn money but because he wants to be versatile! This is true: so his work cannot be convincing, can it?”

At the point when Mondrian had left the city in mid-1914 abstract art was very much in the ascendancy. Cut off from the latest news from Paris, Mondrian had developed his own unique, abstract visual idiom in the Netherlands. He had dubbed it the “New Plastic,” and he believed it to be the logical consequence of the principles of Cubism. Mondrian had taken the innovation that Picasso et al. had initiated to its ultimate consequence: complete abstraction, consisting of black horizontal and vertical lines, combined with rectangles in white, gray, black, and primary colors. The “retour à l’ordre” that he found when he returned to Paris was, to his way of thinking, a step backwards compared with the abstract art being produced before the war. It pushed Mondrian into further isolation, from which he would emerge only a few years later, when his work gained the appreciation in other countries that he had sought in vain in France.
RETRORSPETIVE IN AMSTERDAM

In the meantime, Slijper was steadily building his Mondrian collection. He was mainly buying work at auction or from Mondrian’s acquaintances. If Mondrian told him about an old acquaintance or collector who had bought work from him in the past, Slijper would often try to buy it from them. He visited an old friend of Mondrian’s, coffee merchant Cornelis Bergman, for example, who owned at least ten works by Mondrian. No work changed hands, however. He had more success with three drawings (one of them double-sided) and an oil study owned by collector J.F.S. Esser. When they were auctioned in autumn 1919, Slijper managed to acquire three of the four works by Mondrian that were being offered. The artist had already referred him to his friend Simon Maris in 1915, and he and Slijper remained in contact for many years. Maris alerted him to any Mondrians that were up for sale. And so Slijper managed to expand his network of friends, acquaintances and Mondrian collectors.

In early 1920 Mondrian experienced a major setback when collector H.P. Bremmer decided quite suddenly to phase out the financial support he was giving him. To fill the gap in his finances, he attempted to come to a new arrangement with Slijper, who had indicated that he wished to add a recent work to his collection. That work would be Tableau I (B128), which Mondrian completed in 1921 [fig. 16]. Mondrian asked the same price he had received from Bremmer (200 guilders, now approximately €1,250) and proposed that Slijper pay the sum in monthly instalments of 50 guilders. He also offered him a work that due to the war had only recently returned from an exhibition in Switzerland in 1914. And also a “painted self-portrait” that warrants individual attention.

Slijper had already given Mondrian the idea of painting a self-portrait in 1916. When Bremmer showed an interest in his work in spring of that year, Mondrian wrote to his friend: “Now that people are promoting me so, I too am starting to feel that a portrait should be produced!!” That year he drew a self-portrait for Slijper, which he gave to him in exchange for a suit. Thus far it has been assumed that Slijper also commissioned the painted self-portrait that was completed in 1918 [p. 153]. This appears not to have been the case, however, given that Mondrian took the painting to Paris, and did not sell it to Slijper—and even then reluctantly—until August 1920. This hybrid work may be painted in a naturalistic style, but in the background it includes a reference to Mondrian’s abstract work of the time. It was painted in a small hut in the countryside between Laren and Blaricum that Mondrian used as a studio at the time. Wooden paneling up to shoulder height can be discerned in the background. Above that cardboard rectangles appear to have been mounted on the wall using drawing pins. Mondrian did the same thing years later in New York in order to explore new compositional possibilities, as can be seen in photographs from the time [fig. 8]. This way of working was also entirely in line with Mondrian’s style in 1917, when he was painting rectangles in primary colors on a white background without “fixing” them with black lines. The self-portrait must have been a welcome acquisition for Slijper, as it meant he now had a prestigious painted self-portrait of the most important artist in his collection.

From 1920 onwards, Slijper supported Mondrian not only as his patron, but also by loaning his work and by organizing exhibitions. His efforts resulted, in 1922, in the Retrospective Exhibition of Works by Piet Mondrian in Honour of his Fiftieth Birthday, part of the annual Hollandsche Kunstenakring exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Slijper opened up his records and drew on his by now extensive network of owners of work by Mondrian. Although Mondrian was unable to come to the Netherlands, he tried to exercise a certain influence on what would be displayed...
through his correspondence. This was after all the first time since 1909 that a retrospective of his work had been organized. With 57 works on display, 36 of them from Slijper’s collection, the exhibition was not only a tribute to Mondrian, it was also the first large-scale presentation of the Slijper collection. Slijper surprised Mondrian by purchasing a 1914 work from him together with a number of friends in order to donate it to a Dutch museum: “I was also pleased about the purchase by the friends of the oval canvas. Now I shall be able to manage for another year.” The sale of that one painting will have been nothing more than a morale boost for Mondrian. Generally speaking he was still regarded in the Netherlands as “the maker of those kitchen-tile ‘tableaux’ and ‘compositions’ . . . Art that intrigues us, we called these products of an artist’s brain which appeared more contrived than inspired, and more domestically than artistically painted. This type of work has not yet enjoyed success in a worldly sense. One generally understands nothing of it. Which makes the tenacity with which this painter continues to produce his bloc-tableaux all the more curious.”

**FAME AND ESTRANGEMENT**

**AN UNEXPECTED FOOTHOLD**

The retrospective exhibition had enabled Mondrian to sell several more paintings. Helene Kröller-Müller was interested in a 1922 painting. Railway official, modernist poet and member of De Stijl Anthony Kok actually bought two recent paintings. Despite these incidental sales, the prospects were not good, however, given the absence of structural support. Mondrian had been able to depend on Slijper in the Netherlands, and on his contract with Bremmer, but back in Paris he had only himself to rely on. He had made a hopeful start, making contact with gallery owner Léonce Rosenberg, whose younger brother Paul became famous as the representative of Picasso (from 1918) and Braque (from 1922), among others. Léonce Rosenberg published Mondrian’s pamphlet *Le Néo-Plasticisme* in 1920, an abridged version of the artistic program he had published in *De Stijl* in 1917–1918. In 1921 Rosenberg included five recent paintings by Mondrian in the exhibition *Les Maîtres de Cubisme*, at his Galerie l’Effort Moderne [fig. 9]. The French dealer also sent three paintings to be auctioned in the Netherlands, one of which Bremmer bought for Helene Kröller-Müller. To Mondrian’s satisfaction, Rosenberg himself bought “various things” from him for 2,500 francs. However, he held most of the works in consignment, and did not in fact sell a single one in France. The association therefore turned out disappointingly for Mondrian.

Slijper also stopped buying work directly from Mondrian after 1922. He did, however, continue to buy...
mainly older work at auction and from private collectors. After 1922 his support for Mondrian consisted largely of selling “flowers.” To make a living, Mondrian made at least some 120 pen, ink, and charcoal drawings of flowers, some of them colored with watercolor or gouache. A number of friends helped him to sell these pieces. As thanks for his efforts, in July 1923 he gave Slijper “a little flower”: “I have so much to do, otherwise I would have given you something more important—in fact as you know I have been away from my own work for so long, but Neo-Plasticism is now established so it is not such a problem any more, only I do not enjoy that other work!” [p. 149 left].

In 1923 Mondrian’s situation slowly began to improve thanks to interest from an unexpected quarter. Until then, he had focused mainly on the Netherlands and France, but from May to September 1923 he exhibited three paintings in Germany, at the Grosse Berliner Kunstaustellung, probably thanks to the efforts of Léonce Rosenberg. Somewhat to his surprise, all three were sold, which signified a breakthrough for him in the German market. This success was followed in February 1924 by a request from László Moholy-Nagy, artist and editor of the Bauhausbücher series, to publish a number of articles in the series. When in summer 1924 El Lissitzky and his girlfriend Sophie Küppers contacted Mondrian, there was again potential for a sale. Lissitzky worked for the publication Die Kunstismen, in which he wished to include work by Mondrian, and Küppers turned out to be quite a successful agent for Mondrian in Germany. In autumn Mondrian sent her four paintings, three of which were sold very quickly: “You will certainly have . . . heard of my sale in Germany, an earlier painting for 700 and a later one for 900 fr. Now I have received word that one of the most recent ones has been bought by the Provinciamuseum in Hannover for 250 Marks. Marvelous, is it not?” This was the first time that a museum had bought work by Mondrian. Encouraged by this success, in 1925 Küppers organized an exhibition featuring at least 13 paintings by Mondrian at Kühl & Kühn art dealers in Dresden. This led to more sales and even to a commission for an interior design for collector Ida Bienert. After Dresden the exhibition moved on to Munich [fig. 10].

At the same time, in modernism’s “inner circle” it became known that Mondrian had decorated and painted his studio at Rue de Départ entirely in accordance with the principles of Neo-Plasticism, in which art and architecture would ideally merge, literally giving form to the modern age. In summer 1925 he completely repainted the studio with the help of a friend, Belgian artist Georges Vantongerloo. Mondrian told Slijper—not long after he had visited him in Paris, in fact—that it had been a “huge job,” not least because of the high walls, which meant they had had to use a ladder. More importantly, Mondrian wrote to his friend, architect J.J.P. Oud, that
His success in Germany renewed Mondrian’s confidence. When J.J.P. Oud proposed organizing an exhibition of his work in Rotterdam in March 1925, Mondrian wrote to Slijper: “I too do not see the point of that exhibition. I think it very kind of Oud to take the trouble and appreciate the fact that he is so interested in the work, but I am afraid few people will take to it. Nothing will be sold and certainly not for such prices as I can now command in Germany. And they will not at any rate take the abstract work at the museum in Rotterdam, I think.”

Slijper was also attempting to loan parts of his collection long-term, or even to sell it to a Dutch museum. This might have been connected with a near-catastrophe that occurred in October 1924 when, according to a local paper, “a candle that stood on the mantelpiece fell [over] . . . without immediately attracting notice.” A large work by Mondrian sustained heavy damage, though the others remained intact because the smoldering fire was discovered in

“so many interested people are coming, particularly from abroad.” Artists, architects, and collectors from the Netherlands, Germany, France, Switzerland, the United States, and elsewhere regularly arrived at his door wishing to see his studio, which had gained a certain renown. Parisian photographer Paul Delbo even took a series of photographs of it, at Mondrian’s request, in spring 1926. These pictures later became very famous. The Slijper archive includes an original print from this series [fig. 11]. Mondrian’s American visitors included collector Katherine Dreier, who would later own three works by Mondrian, and art historian Alfred H. Barr, who shortly afterwards became director of the Museum of Modern Art. The rapidly growing interest from the United States would have major implications for Mondrian’s career a decade later.

A HOME FOR THE SLIJPER COLLECTION

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Fig. 11. Paul Delbo, Piet Mondrian’s studio, 26 rue du Départ, Paris, 1926, RKD – Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis

Fig. 12. Henri van de Velde, Portrait of S. B. Slijper, 1930, oil on wood, 35.5 × 27.2 cm, Museum Arnhem
Mondrian was aware of the importance of the collection, as evidenced—in addition to the passages Mondrian himself underlined (rendered here in italics)—by the fact that he kept a “Slijper album” in which he stuck reproductions of the works so that he could show it as a kind of portfolio to any interested parties. However, they were unable to prevent some of Van de Velde’s work, and his important library, from being lost in the fire.

Slijper’s chances of placing his Mondrian collection in the hands of a museum turned out to be fairly slim. In 1922 it took considerable effort on the part of Slijper and two of his friends to have Tableau III (1914, B49), which they had purchased on behalf of a group of Mondrian admirers, placed in a museum. The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam turned down the offer. The Stedelijk Museum did however take the work on loan.

It was not until 1928 that Slijper’s plans were raised again: “As far as your idea is concerned, yes, it would be good to sell directly to a museum, but that is not the habit of museums! The other idea, to sell privately as cheaply as possible on condition that they remain together, and later go to a museum, would be feasible, it seems to me. You would need a trusted person, like Bremmer for example. He once wanted to buy some of them, but the price was too high.”

Mondrian was concerned about another risk associated with the non-professional storage of his work at Slijper’s home: “But what about writing to Bremmer about it; you know him, don’t you? You could explain the matter to him and say—as is indeed the case—that there is a chance of mold etc. at your place, in the farm-house. Well, think about it, I am at any rate afraid that they might be damaged by the damp at your place. But I greatly appreciate the fact that you have kept them together. So, my good fellow, now you know how I feel about it. It’s up to you: they are your property; you gave me what you could afford for them at the time and, though it was not much, no one else did so at that time.”

It seems Sal Slijper was not doing too badly in commercial terms at this time. He regularly travelled to Berlin on business, to the disappointment of Mondrian, who hoped that his work would also bring him to Paris. Slijper was sworn in as an estate agent in Blaricum in 1927, and newspaper reports suggest that he did a lot of real estate business, which must have brought in a fair amount of revenue. His purchase of two works by Mondrian at an auction in Amsterdam in 1929 also

Fig. 13. Farm near Duivendrecht in the Evening, c. 1916, oil on canvas, 85 × 100 cm, Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum
suggests he had considerable financial resources. He paid 1,350 guilders (approximately €10,400 today) for the painting *Farm near Duivendrecht in the Evening* (C4) (fig. 13) of 1916, much more than the 1,000 guilders Mondrian had asked ten years before, when Slijper bought the 60 works he had left in his Paris studio. In 1926 he placed an advertisement in a national newspaper seeking to purchase work by Mondrian, Jan Sluijters, and Leo Gestel. Although these artists had now taken different paths, between 1907 and 1910 they had put Dutch luminism “on the map” and thus boosted the popularity of Dutch painting.

Slijper had by now become a well-known local figure in Blaricum. In 1923 he became treasurer of the local political party Blaricums Belang (Blaricum’s Interest). In this capacity, he campaigned for the preservation of the Blaricum windmill, which Mondrian had painted in 1916–17, and supported the construction of modern villa’s in the style of architect Gerrit Rietveld. That same year he hosted the legendary Dada tour of the Netherlands, a series of performances by Dadaist artists Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Vilmos Huszár, and others. The performances left many members of the audience disoriented—something Slijper would have enjoyed. He also still liked to mix with artists from the Gooi region, was portrayed several times by a local caricaturist, for example, and spoke at the funerals of artists and dignitaries (fig. 14).

His patronage of Mondrian finally came to an end in 1930, however. Until then he had sold some “little flowers” by his friend, but when he asked Mondrian to produce another work in the old style, the artist replied, on October 13: “I received an invitation to send 2 canvases to an exhibition in New York and fortunately managed to get that done. I sold a painting in Zürich, and am now working on something for Cologne. You will see that I really have no time to make work in the spirit you suggest, for which I apologize. That work too would take a great deal of time, and I do not have it.”

Although his work was not yet selling in large quantities, Mondrian was apparently in a position to devote himself entirely to his autonomous work, no longer having to comply with the wishes of others, even those of his good friend and most important patron. This loosening of business ties also had an impact on their personal relationship. When, later in October, Slijper visited Paris, Mondrian standoffishly wrote to say that he had an opening in his diary for his one-time friend on Saturday between 3pm and 5pm or between 7pm and 9pm. Despite this less than welcoming attitude, Slijper did visit Mondrian, and again in 1934 and on subsequent visits.
THE DECLINE OF THE FRIENDSHIP 1938–1944, LONDON AND NEW YORK

In the early years of their friendship Slijper and Mondrian had lived in close proximity and kept in close contact, both in person and by mail, so it was natural for his patron to become a friend. Mondrian’s return to Paris in 1919 forced them to cast their friendship in a new form. Mondrian never returned to his homeland again, not even for his father’s funeral in 1921. Slijper travelled to Paris several times, or called there on his way to other destinations, including trips to and from his holiday home in Royat. In late summer 1925 Mondrian wrote in a friendly tone after a visit from Slijper: “Old friendship never tarnishes, eh?” But living at such a distance inevitably meant they had less personal contact than before, and as the years went by their correspondence also steadily grew less frequent. By way of illustration: during the first half of Mondrian’s time in Paris, up to early 1929, he sent an average of 0.68 letters a month to Slijper; in the second half it was only 0.33; in other words, approximately eight letters a year and later only four—just half as many.

Mondrian’s move to London in September 1938 brought the contact between the two friends to an end. The Nazis’ threats of war had forced Mondrian to flee to London, and this meant they could no longer meet up in person. The figures tell the story: only two letters from Mondrian to Slijper are known of from the period he spent in London, and they were the last. A month after he arrived there the avant-gardist—aged 66 by now—briefly wrote saying he had arrived safely and giving his first impressions, and almost a year later he sent a letter of fewer than 250 words thanking Slijper for his birthday wishes—which he had received no less than six months before. Clearly, from Mondrian’s point of view, the friendship—and certainly his desire for contact—had been extinguished. Slijper is said to have described Mondrian in an interview as a “friend for life,” and it could well be that the collector and patron always felt this to be the case, but one has to wonder whether the same applied to Mondrian in his later years.

He had landed in another world, and above all in a different artistic world, quite apart from all the other differences between the two metropolises. This was the result of a process that had begun a few years before: the growing international appreciation of his art and his ideas on the New Plastic, or Neo-Plasticism. The form by which he gave expression to those ideas in his paintings had by now evolved into a largely white picture plane with a grid of rhythmically positioned thin black horizontal and vertical lines. Only a few of the rectangles created by the lines were filled...
with primary colors, sometimes only one small rectangle, as in *Composition de lignes et couleur: III* of 1937 (B277) [fig. 15].128 While the early Neo-Plastic works, up to 1922, had been more densely painted in various colors, making them appear fairly “heavy,” in Paris they became more open, and around the time that Mondrian left for London they even gave the impression of being virtually weightless.

Mondrian’s fame grew in the 1930s, and in Paris he met British artists Ben and Winifred Nicholson, who would provide his springboard to London. There, they introduced him to other progressive artists, who welcomed him with open arms. Sijlaer, on the other hand, was a collector in a cultural climate in the Netherlands that was not very receptive to the ultra-modern. And although in later interviews he said that after meeting Mondrian in 1915 he quickly came to appreciate his abstract work, after some initial slight hesitation, his collection as a whole suggests that the modern was not really his taste. Judging by the surviving letters, he would buy a new work by Mondrian on several occasions, though he acquired only one piece from his “classic” Neo-Plastic period (after 1919): *Tableau I* of 1921 (B128) [fig. 16]. He did buy two Neo-Plastic works later, however, from their mutual friend Jo Steijling.129 One reason why Slijper bought so few of these works directly from Mondrian lay in the fact that his rate of production was fairly slow, and that more and more collectors were demanding his work, so much of what he had on his easel, or elsewhere in his studio awaiting further work, was already destined for a particular buyer before it was finished. While Slijper had had little competition in the early years, the reverse was now the case.

Another factor was that Mondrian had found a new benefactor. His completely unique, distinctive work had convinced artists working in an abstract manner and progressive critics, collectors, and even museum directors in both Europe and America of the power and importance of his paintings. Harry Holtzman, an aspiring American artist, saw some Mondrians in 1933 in New York and immediately decided to visit the master in Paris. “When I saw the two paintings [in A.E. Gallatin’s Museum of Living Art] I immediately felt that Mondrian had probably already been where I was going. . . . I determined to go to Paris to meet Mondrian,” he wrote after they first made contact, which turned out to be the start of a friendship that would last until Mondrian’s death.130 During that period Holtzman helped his friend in many ways, both practical and financial.131 He encouraged Mondrian to go to the United States in 1938, but the artist was initially unwilling to leave Paris. When things eventually became unbearable there, he opted for London. Despite a warm reception there, he did not have much to live on, so Holtzman proposed that he lend him money which he could repay in time with paintings.132 Holtzman was also immediately willing to write...
a letter of invitation which Mondrian would need for the authorities if he were to go to the United States. This he finally did in September 1940.

By 1938 Slijper had not given Mondrian any direct financial support for some time. With the friendship waning, he was unable to see the further development his work had undergone in London and New York until after Mondrian’s death. In London, apart from the sparse color planes framed by black lines, it also began to feature small separate color planes; several small rectangles—in primary colors, of course—that were subtly positioned in the composition, giving them a certain dynamism and playfulness. In New York, those separate colored planes would evolve into colored lines, and increase in number, as the black lines eventually disappeared. This was a radical step in Mondrian’s idiom. Though well into his sixties by now, he was still driven by a desire for innovation and progress. And even this was not his endpoint: in the final two years of his life he went one step further. The lines were broken into a succession of small colored squares, in the absolute tour de force of “dynamic balance in equilibrium” that we know as Broadway Boogie-Woogie and Victory Boogie-Woogie. These paintings, the latter never completed, were soon recognized as the high points of his oeuvre. Slijper first saw these works in 1946, at the Piet Mondrian Memorial Exhibition, which he had helped organize. He must have been amazed when he first caught sight of the final paintings by his now deceased friend (fig. 17). The exhibition catalogue irrefutably demonstrates the importance, but also the unbalanced character, of Slijper’s collection. Of the 125 works on display, 45 came from his collection, equivalent to 36%. Of the 51 works in the “1914–1944 Neo-Plastic period” category, however, only five belonged to Slijper: fewer than 10%.

Piet Mondrian died at the Murray Hill Hospital in New York on February 1, 1944, in the presence of American friends and acquaintances who were fully aware of his great importance as an artist. His memorial service at the Universal Chapel two days later was attended by some 200 artists, writers, art experts, and collectors. The Dutch Consul General Tom Elink Schuurman and the director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, gave the eulogies. At the moment when Mondrian was laid to rest in a very simple grave at Cypress Hill Ceremony in Brooklyn, Slijper was in hiding in his home at Dorpsstraat in Blaricum. His “live-in housekeeper” (who had been with him since 1917) and later wife, Johanna Hamdorff, concealed him from the occupying German forces in the attic. Despite the physical distance of thousands of kilometers and the even greater difference in their present circumstances—Mondrian as a celebrated representative of European culture in America, a free country, and Slijper a hunted Jew in an occupied European country—the collector would say in an interview 25 years later that, “I watched him dying for a whole week, in a bright blue light. I didn’t know if it was me or him dying there.”