How many sales to private clients did it take in the fall and winter of 1965-66 to transform a few simple-looking couture creations by Yves Saint Laurent into an international fashion sensation? The answer, it turns out, is not very many, because the relevant sales were not those made to individual customers, even to such world-famous celebrities as Princess Grace of Monaco and the English ballet star, Dame Margot Fonteyn. Although their purchases conferred the cachet of an international social elite on the dresses that paintings by Piet Mondrian had inspired Saint Laurent to design, the number of women willing and able to spend their time and money on acquiring fabulously expensive clothes from a Parisian couture house was modest at best. And despite the enormous prices charged for individually fitted couture clothes, the profits that the couture house earned from those sales were far less than the sums that accrued from the commercial reproduction of the same designs — the most successful ones, at least. These were sold or licensed according to a variety of arrangements to authorized distributors, department store boutiques or specialty shops; more problematically for the original creators, they might be adapted by clothing manufacturers in whose hands they were likely to become increasingly loosely related design knockoffs, mass produced for sale at ever decreasing prices. The process, as reported by the Miami Herald on October 31, 1965 (Figure 1), is compressed into a series of four images that descend diagonally across the front page of the women’s section, showing how a Mondrian dress originally for sale at $1,020 was quickly offered at lower and lower prices, ultimately ending up a few months after its introduction at a mere $3.99.

As they proliferated throughout the distribution system, the most popular couture designs — for example this model as well as other Mondrian dresses — might be counterfeited in an effort to pass unauthorized copies off as dresses made by Saint Laurent, but more often they inspired cheap, rapidly produced versions that gestured in the direction of Mondrian’s abstract idiom but whose materiality and craftsmanship were easily distinguished from Saint Laurent’s couture prototypes. Even so, what guaranteed the commercial success of a

1 “In September 1965, there were a mere 3,000 couture clients — a tremendous decline from the estimated 12,000 in 1962.” Colleen Hill, Paris Refashioned 1957-1968 (New York, 2017), 85. Writing about the American clientele for Paris couture during the decades following World War II, Melissa Leventon observes, “A couture patron required money, leisure, a social life that provided opportunities for couture to be worn and appreciated, and the desire to be in the forefront of fashion. Extended trips to Europe, particularly during the summer, have been regular features of the year for many couture patrons, and a woman who met these requirements might travel to Paris once or twice a year to view the collections, spending several weeks there having her choices fitted. Once a couture house had a client’s measurements, a mannequin could be built to replicate her figure, a tremendous time-saver.” Melissa Leventon, “Shopping for Style: Couture in America,” in New Look to Now: French Haute Couture 1947-1987. Stephen de Pietri and Melissa Leventon (New York, 1989), 23-27. Not only was Parisian ready-to-wear becoming more acceptable and encroaching ever more on the domain of couture during this period, but most successful couture houses were themselves marketing their own related but less expensive designer ready-to-wear lines.
high-end couture design was arguably the knockoff rather than the one-off; anyone who purchased a couture creation was in fact acquiring a multiple, a copy, rather than a singular original.

The tensions between originality and reproduction, the limited edition and mass production, elite patronage and popular appeal, hugely expensive models and cheap — or at least progressively cheaper — alternatives have been significant factors in the history of haute couture ever since it emerged in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. Beginning around 1858, when dressmaker Charles Frederick Worth created a design prototype that would be adapted to the requirements of numerous individual clients, the possibility of multiple and eventually mass production had always been a feature of haute couture. Indeed, Worth himself sold models destined for copying by American department stores. And while he and other couturiers always struggled mightily to maintain strict control over the proliferation of copies, including those emanating from their own workrooms, labels were sewn into Worth garments in order to lay claim to the authenticity of the designs, and thereby to distinguish an actual Worth gown from an unauthorized copy.

Pirating was not, of course, deterred by such a simple device; even before the First World War when the younger French couturier Paul Poiret visited the United States in 1913, he quickly learned that it was not just possible but easy to purchase counterfeit versions of his house label by the hundreds at minimal cost. “If our customers want the French-labeled goods,” an American label manufacturer declared at the time, “we supply ‘em. That’s what we’re in business for, to give ‘em what they want... Any woman knows that she can’t get a new Paris hat for twenty dollars. If she doesn’t she’s a fool, and she deserves to get swindled.”

After the First World War, Madeleine Vionnet continued to grapple with the enduring challenge to the authenticity of her mark, even devising couture labels that reproduced not only her signature but also an imprint of her finger. By thus...

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suggesting that the label had become an actual indexical mark of authenticity, Vionnet indicated the lengths to which designers would go in trying to protect the originality of their made-to-order clothes, which is to say, clothes that were actually adapted for multiple clients from a unique prototype that was not for sale.

If the copy has always been integral to the structure and the culture of couture, this is so not only because the garments actually in circulation were based on a design prototype, or because pirated copies might be readily available, especially in the American market, it is also because there was no effective way to prevent the circulation of counterfeit copies. Even in France, where fashion designs have enjoyed extensive and longstanding intellectual property rights, protection was always difficult to enforce in a commercially effective manner, given the brevity of a fashion cycle tied to seasonal change. The situation is even more challenging in the United States, where the law has never provided copyright protection for the design of a dress, no matter how innovative its form or ingenious its construction. A dress, in the eyes of American law, shields the wearer; it is primarily functional rather than artistic in nature, unlike a decorative object or work of applied art, and it therefore fails to qualify for protection as intellectual property, even under the rubric of the design patent. “The design patent statutes,” Rocky Schmidt explains, “grant protection to ‘a new, original and ornamental design for an article of manufacture.’... In order to be eligible for design patent protection, however, the design of an article of manufacture must be novel, non-obvious, original, ornamental, and meet the test of invention. Courts have consistently held that garment designs do not meet these requirements.” And even if they were to do so, the thorough search of existing designs, necessary in order to demonstrate that a candidate for design patent is indeed innovative, is far too lengthy to be practicable, since it generally exceeds what is called the “style life” of the garment, that brief period during which a new style retains its marketability as fashion. With no effective way to protect a novel design under the law, it is no surprise that repetition plays a predominant role, especially in the American fashion system.

As much as couturiers tried to circumvent the unauthorized appropriation of their designs, the business model of haute couture was reliant not so much on the prevention of copying as on a rather unwieldy and difficult-to-regulate system that produced copies at varying levels of fidelity to the prototype and destined for a highly

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differentiated market operating at multiple price points. As costume curator and scholar Alexandra Palmer has explained of couture in the post–World War II era, the prototype is “the garment produced as a template for production of the particular design... Thus, an haute couture model, or more technically, a Couture-Création model, was not a one-of-a-kind design. It was part of a line that was then repeated and sold, and had complex rules governing sales to private clients, department stores, and commercial buyers.”4 It is thus fair to say that there were no couture originals on the market. To the contrary, originals — prototypes — were made not to be sold but rather to be shown, publicized and copied in a variety of commercial settings.

Given the immense scale of the fashion industry and the great variety of consumers to which any particular design might be adapted, the distinctions between different degrees of authenticity could be surprisingly nuanced. Although the relevant terminology was not strictly policed, Palmer identifies the categories: “In a high-priced copy...the design, fabrics, and trims were exactly the same as the original model and were obtained through the référence [an inventory of materials and their sources, provided by the couture house]. The product was considered identical to a model ordered from the Paris workroom, complete with three fittings, but the price could be up to 70 percent lower. This could be advertised as an ‘exact copy.’ A ‘line-for-line copy,’ or ‘reproduction,’ implied a close copy of the style, though the fabric could differ. It was based on the couture original but ‘changes are made: details and workmanship are eliminated. Machine work is substituted for handwork. The result is called a line-for-line copy, though in many cases it should be called an adaptation.’”5

Prices obviously varied considerably as manufacturers made alterations that simplified the basic design template, allowing for cheaper fabrics, less expensive accessories, faster production and, ultimately, the possibility of reaching a much broader clientele. In fact, the typical American fashion client welcomed such changes, which adapted French clothes to American circumstances, including more versatile, often synthetic fabrics capable of adapting to different climates; less complex construction that made the garment easier to put on and actually wear in real-life situations, incorporating the practicality of, for example, zippers rather than a multitude of buttons or snaps.

As the process of close copying morphed into one of adaptive change and the distance mounted between the expensive couture creation and cheap, mass marketed dresses, the design prototype became ever

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4 Alexandra Palmer, Couture & Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s (Vancouver, 2001), 16.

more remote from what qualified as a knockoff, since the latter shared the general design features of the model but was made without any pretensions to being mistaken for it. Yet we should by no means assume that copies at any price point were necessarily undesirable. Certainly at the upper end of the market, Bernard Roshco reported in 1963, they might be just as coveted as the Paris product. “The line-for-line copies have been worn by women who are as well known for being well dressed as Mrs. John F. Kennedy, Mrs. Henry Fonda, Merle Oberon, and other ladies of sartorial distinction. The wife of the French ambassador to the United Nations was once reported to have delayed her departure from New York long enough to see the line-for-line copies before going home to Paris.”

Thus American manufacturers could compete successfully for the attention of clients who were thought to be buying their clothes from elite couture houses in France. From this Roshco concluded that the old order was dying out: “Nowadays the most creative and original couturiers derive a substantial part of their income from the models sold for copying in the United States. The trend of the times has made them designers for the wholesale trade as well as dressmakers for the luxury trade. When the collections are shown, buyers for Macy’s and Ohrbach’s now get the front-row seats once reserved for nobility.” Even wealthy women were happy to supplement their inordinately expensive Paris clothes with more reasonably priced purchases made closer to home, in New York.

Not only were wealthy clients pleased to have access to copies, but, Palmer points out, citing an article in Newsweek, Paris couture houses were also correspondingly pleased to participate in the copy economy. The houses typically doubled the profit they could make from the sale of a given model to a private client if that same item were purchased for copying by an authorized manufacturer: “The manufacturer then reproduced the garment just as designed, without fittings or styling alterations, lowering the cost and raising the profit margin. In [1957], a $400 couture dress ordered by a private client could thus have realized a profit of about $30 for the couture house but a much higher profit if ordered by a manufacturer. Paradoxically, the same North American mass-manufacturing system that supported the couture industry also left couturiers struggling to maintain their exclusive tradition and wondering how they could tap into some of the profit that so many others were making on their designs.”

The response to this conundrum, as far as Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé were concerned, was the creation in September 1966 of Saint

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6 Roshco, The Rag Race, 154-5.
7 Roshco, The Rag Race, 156-7.
8 Palmer, Couture & Commerce, 169.
Laurent Rive Gauche, a ready-to-wear line designed by Saint Laurent and sold in an independent shop on the Rue de Tournon at the edge of the student quarter on the Left Bank of the Seine and, significantly, on the other side of town from the haute couture premises, which were located in an affluent neighborhood on the Right Bank.

According to fashion historian Jéromine Savignon, Saint Laurent Rive Gauche amounted to an “ideological revolution of ready-to-wear that was radically independent from the closed circle of couture and that had its own global creative identity and prices that were deliberately accessible.”

But Savignon’s account tends to obfuscate the circumstances in which Rive Gauche was conceived and what accounted for its tremendous success. First of all, the clothes on offer were not necessarily unrelated to Saint Laurent’s couture line, as the designer himself acknowledged when he made a point of demonstrating for the press the close visual relationship between his ready-to-wear and couture fashions (see Figure 2). In fact, Colleen Hill has argued, “Beyond the obvious cachet of Saint Laurent as its designer, the popularity of Rive Gauche can be attributed to the fact that many of its offerings closely resembled those from his couture house.”

Furthermore, Hill points out, Saint Laurent’s prices were not as accessible as one might expect from the rhetoric that has infused the story of Rive Gauche, including what the designer himself had to say about his desire to reach a wide range of consumers, “from 15 to ... still young at heart.” Notwithstanding Saint Laurent’s youth-oriented, democratizing intentions, Rive Gauche prices, according to Hill, “were in fact better suited to wealthier, and probably older, women.”

Even the turn to ready-to-wear was not exactly new or revolutionary, since Dior as well as other couture houses had been selling lower priced ready-to-wear in their own boutiques for years. André Courrèges provides an excellent counter-example to Saint Laurent, since his orientation toward a younger, more audacious client mix arguably preceded Saint Laurent’s, becoming readily evident with
the introduction in 1964 of his so-called space-age collection, a futuristic, minimalist look characterized by short skirts and slim trousers in white or bright colors, often worn with flat-heeled, white ankle boots and a hat shaped like a helmet. Unlike Saint Laurent, however, Courrèges at the time lacked the financing required to build a significant ready-to-wear edifice on the promise of his early couture success. Forward-looking design without the means for wide diffusion was not a winning formula.12

What did set Rive Gauche apart from Courrèges and other ready-to-wear operations was its access to financing, due to the 1965 purchase by cosmetics and perfume firm Lanvin-Charles of the Ritz, of 80 percent of the Saint Laurent House. This infusion of cash made it possible for Rive Gauche to pursue rapid, seemingly unlimited expansion and as a result, create a readily recognizable brand identity. The kind of hip, youth-inspired clothing sold in the Rive Gauche boutiques could be found elsewhere in Paris, not only in ready-to-wear designed by Courrèges, but also outside the couture orbit by such stylistes as Emmanuelle Khanh, Christiane Bailly and Michèle Rosier. But the backing of Lanvin-Charles of the Ritz by President and CEO Richard Salomon gave Bergé and Saint Laurent the means to repeat the marketing formula defined by the original Paris shop, opening recognizably related, trendy looking outlets in carefully selected neighborhoods of other French, European and American cities, and eventually around the world. All the shop fronts presented similarly sleek glass and metal treatments, using identical lettering and the same brightly colored pink and orange Rive Gauche logo (Figure 3). The interiors were also designed according to a common color scheme, with bold juxtapositions whose effect Emma McClendon has described as “equal parts eccentric bohemian and 1960s modern.”13

Linking store openings to the appearance of glamorous models and actresses engendered a series of public relations spectacles that

Figure 3. Yves Saint Laurent with Betty Catroux and Loulou de la Falaise at the opening of a Saint Laurent Rive Gauche boutique in London, September 10, 1969. Photograph by Beverley Goodway, Mirrorpix/Getty Images.

attracted mobs of consumers eager to purchase Saint Laurent clothes who did not care that their manufacture had been contracted to an outside company, C. Mendès, which also produced the ready-to-wear lines of rival couturiers, including Patou, Grès and Chanel.

It was no secret that mass manufacture, whether through licensing or, eventually, through the development of designer ready-to-wear, was needed to sustain the life of even the most successful couture houses, including Dior, where Saint Laurent had been trained, and the house he subsequently founded together with Pierre Bergé. As design critic and Saint Laurent biographer Alice Rawsthorn has observed, “Pierre swiftly realized that although an impressive client-list was important for the company’s cachet, its future lay with the commercial buyers who placed larger orders and with licensing deals along the lines of those that [business manager] Jacques Rouët had negotiated for Christian Dior.”14 Like Dior, Pierre Cardin, and several other French couturiers, Saint Laurent and Bergé aggressively developed their ready-to-wear business after they opened the first Rive Gauche storefront in 1966, and the two also continued to expand the number of their licensing arrangements, of which, according to fashion journalist Alicia Drake, there were no fewer than 180 in 1980.15 And yet, unlike Cardin, for example, who reveled in his status as what one biographer has called “the man who became a label,”16 Bergé claimed to be conservative with respect to licensing: “A name is like a cigarette; the more you puff on it, the less you’ve got left,” Bergé likes to say when the question of franchising and merchandising comes up,” Axel Madsen observed in 1979. “You’ve got to know how to say no. There will be no YSL automotive tires, although we’ve had a request from America. In couture, we’re first. In ready-to-wear, we’re first, and in franchising, we’re in the lead, with Dior and Cardin.”17

Thus even as he bragged about how extensively he exploited the name, Bergé well understood that the power of the brand and its licenses had to be guarded from overexposure if their economic value were to be sustained over the long term.

As Bergé guided the Saint Laurent brand with supreme self-assurance through the complex and contradictory landscape of originality and reproduction at the heart of the couture industry, he also honed the practice of cloaking the brand in the rhetoric of art. Indeed, both Bergé and Saint Laurent laid claim to the art quotient of haute couture as a practice, which they actively, and strategically, reinforced on many levels. The fact that during the course of a 40-year career

as the central figure of his *maison de couture*
Saint Laurent frequently infused his fashion creations with fine art is a matter of record, if only because his stylistic borrowings from such canonical artists as Van Gogh, Braque, Matisse, Picasso and, of course, Mondrian, were always strikingly obvious. Indeed, that was precisely the point. And yet, his first foray into this arena was not launched as the public relations juggernaut it soon became. Which is to say that Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses did not receive their moniker from the designer or the couture house. At least, they were not identified by Mondrian’s name in the printed program of the fashion shows in which they were initially presented. Instead, the association was made by others: the commercial buyers and the journalists who immediately recognized the source and repeatedly reinforced it in the numerous press accounts that followed the inaugural presentation of the collection in early August 1965. Soon thereafter, Saint Laurent told what became an oft-repeated story of how his mother had given him a book about Mondrian in which he discovered the artist’s work through reproductions of his paintings. He was quite obviously not shy about acknowledging his debt to Mondrian, although he never sought copyright permission for his appropriation of the style or of the name that quickly became inextricably attached to his dresses.

The Saint Laurent dress designs associated with Mondrian are distinguished in most instances by basic geometric grids of black or dark lines and off-white rectangular planes, sometimes accompanied by vivid primary colors (Figure 4). Although some of the relevant dresses appeared in succession to one another as the collection was initially presented, not all were grouped together, and it was consequently not obvious how many there actually were, or, indeed, what design features a Mondrian dress should exhibit. Given these uncertainties, it is still not clear which dresses ought to qualify for the Mondrian designation. When a number of them were shown hanging in a row of short sleeveless shifts in the 1983 Saint Laurent retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the display included one example from the collection of the Met’s Costume Institute that is marked by

a large, uninterrupted panel of shocking pink (second from the right in Figure 5). The accompanying label identified it as a “MONDRIAN DRESS” — despite the fact that it bears no resemblance whatsoever to any painting by Mondrian.18 Conversely, another example in the collection of the Costume Institute at the Met is distinguished by an asymmetrical and multi-colored formal arrangement, arguably presenting a highly convincing evocation of Mondrian’s signature compositional style (see Figure 4). Not only was this the first Mondrian dress to appear on the cover of a fashion magazine but it was also shown there in full color and rendered even more vivid by the incipient movement of the model, who was captured on one foot as she appears to lean diagonally across the white ground of the cover’s printed page (Figure 6). Of all the dresses in the group, this is the one that has


18 Laurence Neveu of the Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris has shared information about private-client purchases of Mondrian dresses drawn from the only surviving sales book from the Fall-Winter 1965-66 season in the museum archive, in an email message dated November 2, 2015. Her tally counted 11 Mondrian dresses, including 2 floor-length gowns and 9 cocktail dresses, including the one discussed here, with bright pink panels bordered by black on front and back. The Oeuvre intégral, published with the blessing of Pierre Bergé by Editions de la Martinière in 2010, documents every couture collection in the house’s 40-year history; in an editorial supplement, it identifies a total of only 6 Mondrian dresses from the Fall-Winter 1965-66 collection. Meanwhile, Saint Laurent biographer Laurence Benaim describes the Mondrian line this way: “Ten straight dresses traversed by black lines, rectangles and squares in primary colors, yellow, red, blue.” Yves Saint Laurent (Paris, 1993), 140. Not only do the numbers fail to correspond, but the assumption that all of the dresses associated with Mondrian shared the painter’s characteristic formal vocabulary is also faulty. Accounting for these inconsistencies requiring more detailed analysis than is possible here, would likely reveal the role played by the press in complicating the identity of the Mondrian dresses and, at the same time, show how the couture house seems to have privileged the homogeneity of the Mondrian line over the years, presumably in order to consolidate its iconic brand identity.
been most closely associated with Saint Laurent on one hand and with Mondrian on the other. Yet its initial and enduring popularity was due not to the design’s appeal to the relatively few private clients who purchased a made-to-order couture copy (other designs in the Mondrian series were more sought-after than this one) but instead to the publicity accorded the dress by trade journals, fashion magazines and mass circulation publications.19

As important as press coverage was to the successful launch of any couture collection, allowing press access to the presentation of designs was seen by virtually all couturiers as certain to encourage copying of the designs for the purpose of unauthorized reproduction. Bergé in particular was known and controversial in the mid-1960s for trying to prevent copying by blocking or at least delaying press access to showings of Saint Laurent’s collections. And yet, copying was in a sense the essence of the Mondrian line. It emerges as a distinguishing feature not simply because the prototypes created by Saint Laurent were reproduced for his individual clients, nor even because those same prototypes were reproduced on a massive scale in the process of their commercial manufacture, whether authorized or not. Both of these are circumstances common to the circulation of all couture fashions. Instead, copying was central to the very conception of the Mondrian dresses in the first place because in them Saint Laurent revealed an unmistakable visual debt to the compositional features of Mondrian’s abstract paintings.20 Through his appropriation of Mondrian’s instantly recognizable style, including straight black lines in horizontal and vertical relationships that divide a near-white

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19  Although it provides only partial evidence of private-client purchases, the surviving sales book (see n. 18, above) indicates that model no. 81 (Figure 4) sold only three times, while no. 77, the version purchased by Margot Fonteyn and Princess Grace, sold eleven copies. In accounting for this discrepancy, one might imagine that the relative simplicity of the latter design (with a far simpler grid and only a single patch of color at the left shoulder) could have seemed much more wearable to a mature client; on the other hand, the composition of no. 81 is especially close to Mondrian’s paintings but could perhaps appear awkward or unflattering when the wearer would be seated, or assume a posture other than standing straight.

ground and thereby generate flat, rectangular planes, some of which are filled with primary colors, Saint Laurent ran headlong into Mondrian’s authorial status as the originator of that style, the figure with whom it was always identified, the locus of the copyright — even if that was never enforced by Mondrian’s heir, Harry Holtzman, who noted seven years after the fact, “Yves St. Laurent used the name of Mondrian extensively in Paris and in N.Y., and elsewhere, apropos his fashion exploitation of Mondrian’s paintings, … without consent.”

Of course, in hewing closely to the features of Mondrian’s classic paintings, Saint Laurent necessarily departed from them in order to adapt the style to the physical realities of the female body. For that very reason, in a Mondrian dress created by Saint Laurent, the style necessarily became his own, yet, as his dresses were in turn copied ad infinitum, the style began to function as something like a brand icon invested with authorial associations but otherwise circulating as if unmoored, without a persuasive link to the distinguishing material features of either Mondrian’s or Saint Laurent’s work. To put this another way, if a couture model of a Mondrian dress presents its authorship as split between the claims of the painter and the dress designer, the relative stability of this situation was threatened when the two terms — Saint Laurent and Mondrian — were drained of meaning by the proliferation of knockoffs ever more remote from the prototypes. In this way, Mondrian’s style, his authorship, his paintings became inextricably intertwined — some might say confused — with what rapidly emerged as the ubiquity of not only Saint Laurent’s fashionable creations but also, and arguably more significantly, the knockoffs they engendered. Thus the unique and authentic character of Mondrian’s individual paintings entered into a new kind of dialogue not just with couture dresses but with the full range of knockoffs as well. Saint Laurent drew Mondrian into the world of haute couture, and also, inevitably, into the world of mass-production and commodity culture in which couture has long been embedded.

Together with Bergé, Saint Laurent was operating across the spectrum from elite to popular culture, building a ready-to-wear business alongside their continuing commitment to haute couture, while at the same time assembling an outstanding art collection with the newfound wealth they accrued through merchandising arrangements and licensing deals that Bergé began to negotiate during the 1960s.

21 Harry Holtzman, Letter to Mr. Eberle, a representative of the international copyright agency Cosmopress (Geneva), July 10, 1972. Harry Holtzman Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. This correspondence is discussed in my book, The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian (Chicago, 2013), 172. My thanks to historian and art historian Vanessa Schwartz for pointing out that as adaptations of Mondrian’s style in a different medium — and not reproductions of particular works — the dresses would likely not have been subject to copyright provisions.
Becoming millionaires many times over, they eventually owned five works by Mondrian that were displayed in their private apartments. One of them (see Figure 7) eventually accrued additional value precisely because it was owned by Saint Laurent and closely identified with his Mondrian dresses. As Mondrian’s formal language circulated with increasing frequency beyond the confines of the traditional art world populated by museums, dealers, auction houses and private collectors, intensive merchandising of his style made the iconic forms of his pictures ever more visible and commodified in contexts outside both the fine arts and fashion.

Benno Temple, Director of the Haags Gemeentemuseum, has described Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dress as “the mother of all Mondrian merchandise,” but the elite fashion designer was certainly not alone in popularizing the Dutch artist’s work some twenty years after his death. In fact, Mondrian’s paintings were also being (re)discovered, represented and appropriated during the 1960s by American Pop artists including Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann who, like Saint Laurent, appreciated the iconic features of Mondrian’s abstract work that they experienced especially in reproductions. We owe this remarkable conjunction of Mondrian, couture culture and pop art to the visual rhetoric of reproduction in which Mondrian’s style had already for several decades been immersed to the point where it arguably became familiar outside the art world not so much as original paintings but as widespread graphic design adaptations and their application to all sorts of banal domestic objects. Here the style was distilled into flat arrangements of straight lines and rectangular forms that relinquished their connection to the material specificity of Mondrian’s paintings as this imagery circulated through the world of commodity culture.


22 I present this argument in greater detail in The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian, postscript; see esp. p. 231.


24 See Margit Weinberg-Staber, Mondrian auf der Tube: Popularisierung und Trivialisierung der Ideale (Zurich, 1990), and Troy, The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian.
Mondrian’s paintings also gestured to the world of the commodity when they were appropriated by a small number of pop artists newly prominent in the 1960s. For example, George Segal’s 1967 sculptural portrait of Sidney Janis (Figure 8) shows the subject admiring an original painting by Mondrian, a favorite from Janis’ own collection, displayed as if for sale on the art dealer’s presentation easel. Not only had Janis been largely responsible for establishing a vibrant market for Mondrian’s paintings in America during the 1950s, but he was also a prominent promoter of pop art, having in 1962 organized an early group exhibition devoted to what was then called The New Realism, in which Segal as well as Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann were represented.

Both Lichtenstein and Wesselmann were admirers of Mondrian’s paintings as images whose powerful graphic impact came across in reproductions and adaptations in books and especially in the mass media publications through which Mondrian’s work reached a broad and popular audience. As Lichtenstein told John Coplans in a 1970 interview, all of his sources were gathered in the same way: “The comics, and paintings of Picasso, Mondrian, Monet, and WPA murals, as well as the most modern heads and designed objects, are all available to me as reproductions.”25 That reproductions of Mondrian’s work also entered the elite world of Saint Laurent’s couture house arguably speaks to the alignment of his dresses not so much with the fine art of Mondrian — obvious likeness notwithstanding — as with the relatively unrefined Pop art of Lichtenstein and Wesselmann.

We can easily recognize an homage to Mondrian in particular works by these artists, but visual likeness — no matter how immediate — is not the only feature that insures the relevance or commonality of their work in this context. Indeed, even as we acknowledge a claim to likeness, or the copy, there is more to what pop art and the Mondrian dress together can tell us about the overlapping and mutually reinforcing narratives of art and fashion in the mid-1960s.

Instantly recognizable for its relationship to Mondrian, in the mixed media context of Wesselmann’s Still Life #20 (Figure 9) the
reproduction of Mondrian’s *Tableau I* (1921) joins a variety of other ordinary household elements: part of a kitchen sink with its attached faucet, a tubular light fixture and a cabinet door that opens onto shelves displaying a jumble of commonly available cleaning and personal hygiene products. At lower right, appearing to rest on a painted blue table is a collage that brings together printed images of food items in the remaining two colors of Mondrian’s typical palette, including a loaf of Diet Lite bread, two bottles of Ballentyne Ale and a glass of Coca-Cola — all products of familiar brands represented by prominent logos. The composition and coloring of the whole assemblage, like the equally familiar Mondrian image it includes in the form of a reproduction displayed above the table, recapitulate the features of Mondrian’s art while displacing them to the overlapping realms of middle-class domesticity, commercial advertising, and consumer culture — from the banality of which Mondrian’s work is normally thought to be located at a distant remove.

Similar to Wesselmann, Lichtenstein also presented an instantly recognizable image of Mondrian’s work in each of two oil paintings, *Non-Objective I* (Figure 10) and *Non-Objective II*, both dating from 1964. As much as these works immediately conjure Mondrian’s signature style, they do so through the screen of Lichtenstein’s own flatly painted and graphically simplified style, including the signature Ben-Day dots that — no matter how carefully Lichtenstein worked to spread them evenly across several planes of his paintings — intentionally signal banality and repetition as opposed to the refinement and subtlety that characterize the delicately brushed surfaces of Mondrian’s mature paintings. As in the Mondrian dresses, Lichtenstein’s display of likeness is unmistakable, although he too stopped short of referencing any particular works by the Dutch artist. Nevertheless, his paintings draw as much on the aesthetics of mass-circulation advertising and the comic strip as they do on Mondrian’s classic modernist style, which is their ostensible subject.

Where do Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses fit into this picture of pop art’s take on the art of Piet Mondrian? Like his contemporaries, Saint
Laurent appreciated the graphic power and simplicity of Mondrian’s spare compositions which, as previously mentioned, he too encountered in the reproductions of a book, most likely the 1957 French language edition of Michel Seuphor’s *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*, a source originally published in English in the United States the year before, which was probably mined by the American artists as well.26 Notwithstanding — or, indeed, perhaps because of — the last minute timing of his decision to appropriate Mondrian’s compositional and coloristic principles, supposedly just two weeks before the showings began in early August 1965, likeness between the paintings and the dresses is unmistakable. That from the beginning the commentary surrounding Saint Laurent’s dresses always invoked the paintings, often conveying the notion that their resemblance was close enough to collapse any distinctions between the two, was something of a mixed blessing insofar as it almost inevitably suggested that Saint Laurent had merely copied rather than invented these designs. Anxious to counter this notion, those who have written about Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses generally point out that even if the garments are remarkably faithful to the paintings and indeed they became famous as the designs that initiated the couturier’s oft-cited romance with fine art (his homages to works by well known modern artists), “Saint Laurent wasn’t copying.” According to Bernard Blistène, curator and since 2013 director of the Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, “[Saint Laurent] didn’t put a painting on a dress. He explored variations based on Mondrian. ... His dresses always remained dresses, they never became paintings or pastiches of painting.”27 Yet, in their undisguised appropriation of Mondrian’s most obvious stylistic features, these dresses share the unabashed likeness that we find in the works by pop artists, while the garments’ reiteration in untold numbers of knockoffs confirms their undeniable popular appeal. Individually and as a group, they instantiate or embody the passage of Mondrian

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26 Whether Saint Laurent’s mother had offered the book as a Christmas gift or for his birthday (accounts differ on this point), it was in any case not until her son was well into designing the Fall-Winter couture collection that he paid attention to the reproductions, as he himself recounted: “It wasn’t until I had opened a Mondrian book my mother had given me for Christmas that I hit upon the key idea.” Yves Saint Laurent, quoted in Madsen, *Living for Design*, 117.


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from elite art to pop culture. Just as pop art, in its appropriation of Mondrian’s imagery, renegotiated the distinction between original and reproduction, high and low, so Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses further muddied the distinction between the elite couture creation and the multiple knockoffs it inspired. In effect, Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses might best be understood as a form of pop art in their own right.

That the Mondrian dresses would eventually be singled out and lauded as Saint Laurent’s first foray into the identification between fashion and art only complicates these issues by suggesting that the fashionable dress could be rescued from the banality of its widespread reproduction through its identification with the uniqueness and individual creativity ascribed to fine art. Just as Mondrian was being appropriated by pop culture and circulated through its economy of reproduction, Saint Laurent was appealing to the domain of art, where the discursive currency was measured in terms of originality and uniqueness. Artists like Lichtenstein and Wesselmann traded on this very duality, making works of art that called into question the distinction between original and copy, which was, of course, a core gesture of haute couture as well.

Although Bergé disposed of the couple’s five works by Mondrian along with the rest of their extraordinary art collection the year after Saint Laurent’s death in 2008, he used part of the auction proceeds to assure the preservation of hundreds of couture prototypes in a museum that is officially recognized by the French State. Among the objects in the Musée Yves Saint Laurent is the most famous of the Mondrian dresses (see Figure 4), which has entered the collection in two versions: the prototype and a couture reproduction — the two giving silent testimony to haute couture as both original and copy sharing a design that belongs to Mondrian and Saint Laurent at one and the same time.

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