

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

March 2026

HOW TO PAINT WATER (PART 2)



Monet, London Waterloo

Part 1 of **How to Paint Water** ended with a glance at Seurat's *Bridge at Courbois* and the elegant intrusion of a distant smokestack casting its dotted reflection into the middle ground of the composition. We had already considered Monet's fascination with richly coloured poisonous air. In *Coal Barges* (1888) Van Gogh takes similar subject matter to the toxic extreme, suffusing the entire image with bilious yellows, greens and oranges emanating from the chimneys of the distant coke factory. The unnatural green reflections suggest a body of water that is not just still but dead; a vision of hell.



Van Gogh, Coal Barges

By way of complete contrast, Van Gogh offers *Blue Beach*, a meticulous study of the sea on a windy sunny day. Every detail bespeaks a close observation of the scene; the waves rising and breaking, the previous onslaught sliding under the incoming water, the sand and the shingle as it sinks into the wet sand, the high-water mark further up the beach, the sea unexpectedly but correctly darkening towards the horizon, the shifting colours and the striking glare of the sun and its reflection.

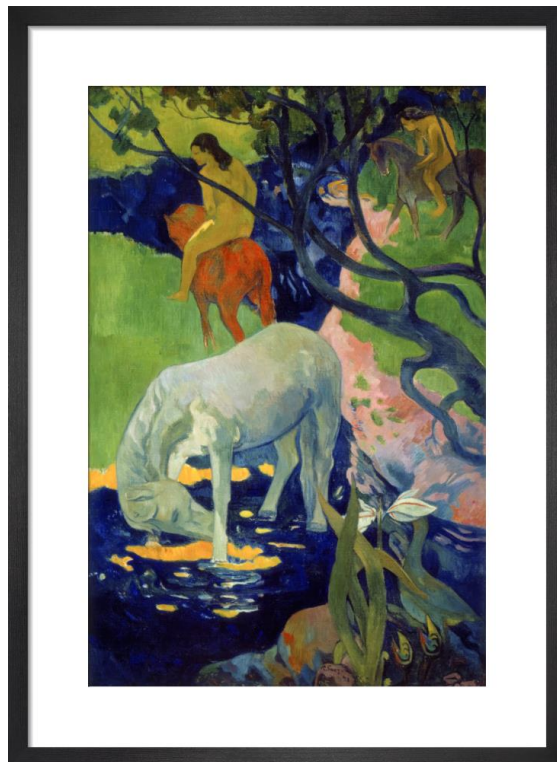


Van Gogh, Blue Beach

Gauguin takes the depiction of shifting colours to an extreme in the foreground of *Day of the God* (1894). The water reflects its surroundings in shapes that suggest the pieces of a puzzle but which represent depth and movement, perhaps initiated by the feet of the central figure. The shapes and their variations work their way up through the composition to the clouds. In *Cheval Blanc* Gauguin uses a deep blue/black for the water, which appears as flattened shapes in a composition of compressed space and repeated curves. He sets the blue against its complementary orange and the red against its complementary green. The space is also tipped forward so that the upper area of water seems to defy gravity.



Gauguin, Day of the God, 1894



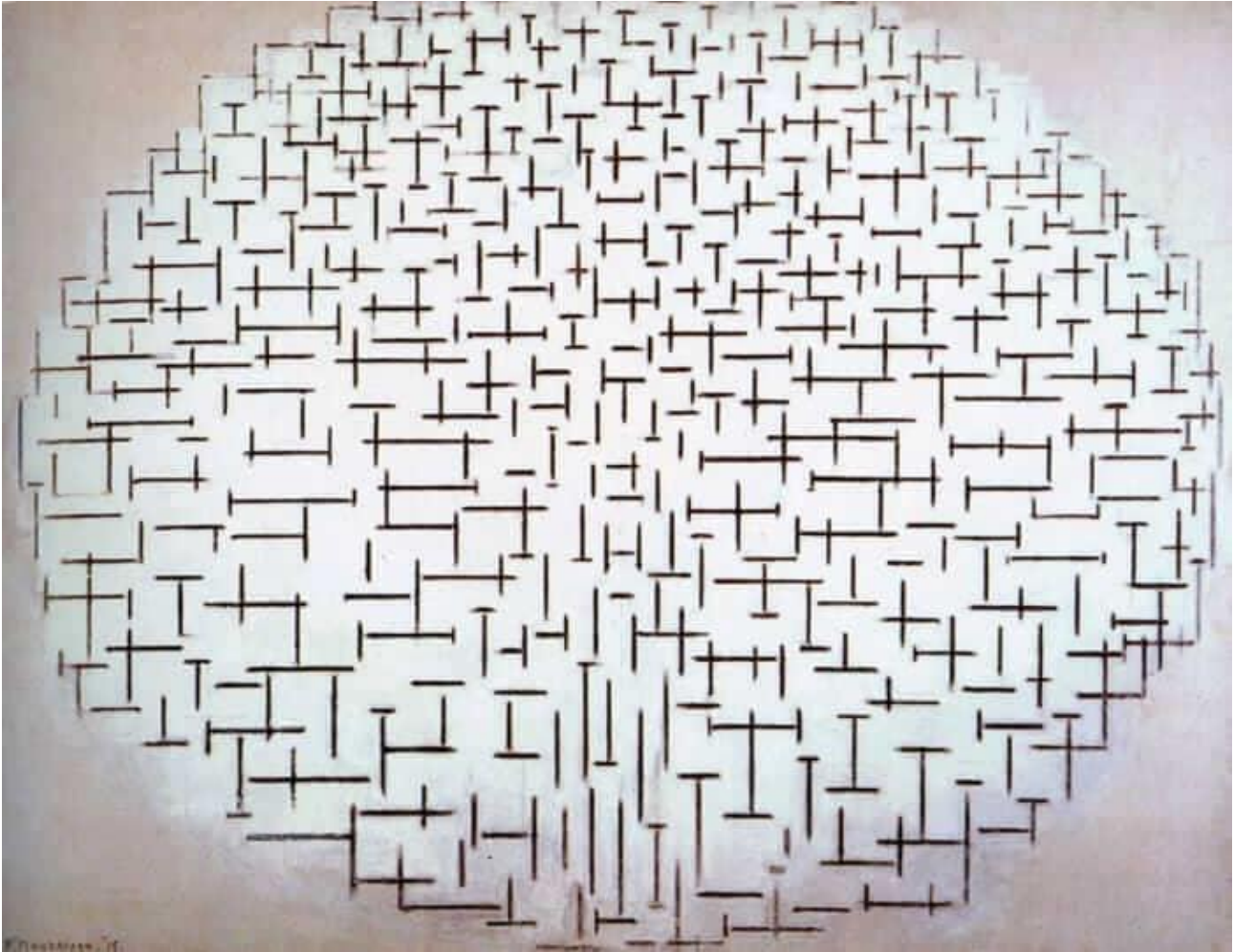
Gauguin, Le Cheval Blanc

In Mondrian's *View from the Dunes* the artist appears to come very close to abstraction, using stripes applied with a palette knife and an ambiguous treatment of space. A second glance reveals a rather more conventional seascape. Tiny figures at the bottom provide a sense of scale. We can discern the sun breaking through the bands of cloud and catching the tops of the waves. We can find a boat and even a couple of seagulls. The wedge of breaking waves provides a strong sense of depth in a composition which can also be seen as flat shapes rendered in impasto.



Mondrian, *View from the Dunes*, 1909

If Mondrian flirts with abstraction with his birds's eye view of the sea, he leaves no room for doubt in his drawing *Pier and Ocean* (1915). We are left with a suggestion of movement, a flicker of light and a hint of vastness. Despite its marginal connection to the real world it is a compellingly self-contained image.



Mondrian, Pier and Ocean

In contrast to Mondrian's cerebral mapping we can look at August Strindberg's *The Mirage* (1903). Here the sea is in turmoil, reflecting similar torment in the mind of the painter. The sky, the rocks and the water are in a state of violent uproar. Waves crash into rocks and a torrent races across the open water. On the far shore an illuminated city seems to offer a sense of hope - or is it about to be devastated by a giant wave? The sea, rocks and sky have been handled in a very physical, not to say passionate way, evoking the storm's powerful menace.



Strindberg, *The Mirage*, 1903

In Eileen Agar's *Kynance Cove* the artist treats the depiction of water in a simple and elegant manner. At the bottom left the incoming sea emerges from a few smeared brushstrokes. A cursory blue-green reflection anchors a rock formation firmly in the sea, while a thin blue leads to the distant horizon. White paper fills the composition with light and air.



Agar, Kynance Cove



Grant, Bathing

Duncan Grant's *Bathing* looks like a collage of wallpaper or upholstery, both of which he designed for the Omega Workshop. The image is more about the experience of struggling in rough water than it is a depiction of the sea. It is also more about abstraction and pattern making than about waves and currents. It is about rhythm, the rhythm of the heaving swell and the rhythm of swimming. Ultimately, of course, Grant's real interest reveals itself repeatedly.