

Introduction

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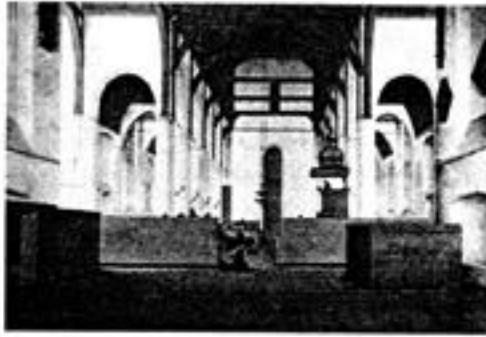
What was De Stijl, and why has this loosely organized, mercurial group had a sustained influence on the visual arts—not only painting, but architecture, typography and furniture design—throughout this century? Never a cohesive movement, in the beginning it included three painters, two architects, a sculptor and a poet, who came together to exchange ideas in a public forum. The vehicle for this exchange was a monthly magazine, *De Stijl*. Founded in mid-1917 in Leiden, Holland, it ceased publication in 1931 after the death of its founder, Theo van Doesburg, who was publisher and editor of the magazine and the movement's primary spokesman. Without van Doesburg, De Stijl as a movement fell apart.

In visual terms, the group had a shared point of departure: the principle of absolute abstraction—that is to say, the complete elimination of any reference to objects in nature. Its means of visual expression were limited to the straight line and the right angle, to the horizontal and the vertical, to the three primary colors—red, yellow and blue—with the addition of black, white and gray. But this initial description reveals only the method of De Stijl, not its scope or its philosophical outlook.

In order to discover what these artists wished to render with their new, revolutionary language, a series of facts about De Stijl's genesis and history must be reviewed. In rejecting perceptible subject matter, the artists of this movement did not abandon content or meaning in their work. The essential content of De Stijl works is harmony, a harmony that for these artists could only be rendered by abstract means, through compositions unhampered by associations with objects in the external world. This search for harmony was the springboard and constant goal of De Stijl. Yet De Stijl artists were not solely concerned with aesthetics. The movement was an effort to renew the links between life and art. In creating a new visual style it attempted to create a new style for living.

This unity between art and life was stressed even in De Stijl's first manifesto in 1918:

4. Vilmos Huszar
Figure Composition for a Mechanical Theater,
circa 1923
gouache on paper mounted on cardboard
48 x 31
121.9 x 78.7
Collection Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Cornell University
Gift of Sylvia Pizitz



S. P.J. Saenredam
Interior of the Church of St. Odulphus,
Assendelft, 1649
 wood panel
 17 x 30
 48.5 x 76.2
 Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
 (not in exhibition)

There is an old and a new consciousness of time.
 The old is connected with the individual.
 The new is connected with the universal.
 The struggle of the individual against the universal is revealing
 itself in the World War as well as in the art of the present day.
 The War is destroying the old world with its contents:
 individual domination in every state.
 The new art has brought forward what the new
 consciousness of time contains:
 a balance between the universal and the individual.
 The new consciousness is prepared to realize the internal life as
 well as the external life.¹

De Stijl was founded during World War I. Though its origins were in a then neutral country, it came out of a period of utter chaos, when harmony and balance were longed for by the majority of Europeans. But it was clear that future harmony implied changes in the traditional ways of life. De Stijl artists discovered these changes everywhere in contemporary life: in industrial production, in the organization of politics and trade unions, in the growth of large cities. In all of these domains, a general plan, a conception was established to replace individual, often arbitrary decisions. A blueprint, a formula, stood at the base of all modern, progressive creation. The blueprint, therefore, became the model for artistic creation as well. Just as a building is complete in its ground plan and elevations, before a single wall is constructed, or a symphony exists in its score, before a note is played, the conception of a visual work of art gains priority over its execution. And in the execution of their conceptions, the De Stijl group was striving for a precision such as that found in the products of the machine. They determined that precision and exactitude can only be realized with strictly determined geometrical elements, which do not include the arbitrary forms of perceived objects. Abstraction requires precision and precision is—as in music—the only way to render harmony. For the De Stijl artists, harmony did not only mean a restful, reassuring balance: harmony for them was the law of the entire universe. This law and the rules derived from it were only veiled and obscured by the arbitrary forms of objects. Nature presented only variations of this law, and what the artists had to seek and reveal was the theme behind these variations.

De Stijl was founded in a country with a tradition that corresponded with the movement's central aspiration: the domination of nature by human thought and inventiveness. It seems absurd to think that the Dutch landscape with its rectangular fields and straight roads and canals should have been the hidden subject matter in De Stijl paintings; but one can establish a common goal in De Stijl work and in the will of the Dutch people to control nature. The Dutch landscape is, in fact, man-made,

1. Redactie, "Inleiding Bij De Tweeden Jaargang," *De Stijl*, II, 1 (Nov. 1918), p. 2. From the facsimile reprint, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Athenaeum and Polak & van Gennep; The Hague: Bert Bakker, 1968), I, p. 236.

using the means of geometry and precision. This precision has been highly valued in The Netherlands, and the De Stijl group made use of it in order to show, in a visual language, the triumph of the human spirit over the capriciousness of nature. When van Doesburg wrote, "Gradually the old dream of primitive man becomes reality: to be the master of his surroundings," he formulated a centuries-old Dutch aspiration. It may, therefore, not be a mere accident that De Stijl was founded in The Netherlands: its scope and characteristic features coincide with what historian Johan Huizinga called ". . . the hallmark of Dutch spirit."

De Stijl is closely linked with The Netherlands in another way as well—in its history. The artistic purism of De Stijl is synonymous with the tradition of Dutch puritanism. A peculiarity of the Dutch language throws some light on this relationship. In Dutch, the word "schoon" means "clean, pure" as well as "beautiful." This double meaning appears again in the works of De Stijl. Their beauty consists in their purity, in their utter sobriety. In their structure, parallels can be found with works of such masters of the 17th century as Saenredam (fig. 5), de Hooch and Vermeer. But the most significant parallel in the 17th century, and in Dutch tradition, seems to be with philosophy, in the great work of Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica, Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*. Spinoza chose the geometrical method of presentation in order to free his arguments from arbitrary or casual interpretation—so did the De Stijl group. They strove for precision, for the unchangeable elements of the visual language. Their preference for abstraction also can be placed within Dutch tradition. The Dutch national character owes a great deal to the influence of 16th-century Calvinism. As a matter of fact, almost the first act of the early Calvinists was the destruction of the images of worship in their churches. They felt that any representation of a religious image was a detraction from the absolute sanctity of God. The De Stijl artists, who can be regarded as descendants of these earlier iconoclasts, had similar reasons for their banishment of every representation of nature: any representation of a natural object was, for them, a distortion of the divine purity of the laws of creation. Abstraction was the only way to maintain their faith in universal values.

Universal values, the absolute harmony, were the goals of De Stijl's work. To this end an absolute purification of the vocabulary and grammar of the arts seemed necessary. Abstraction and strict limitations on the elements of visual language were the consequences. Purification of the arts meant, in the first instance, the autonomy of the various arts, their independence from each other and their obedience to their particular laws. Independence had a double meaning: on one side it meant liberation from the arbitrary subjective temperament of the artist and the

Doesburg succeeded in allowing reality to dominate the dream, the spirit of architecture to prevail upon that of painting. And van Doesburg, the gifted painter, turned toward architecture after 1923. He had brought a number of architects into the collaborative work of De Stijl. First, J.J.P. Oud, who had, in 1918, given three-dimensional form to the principles of De Stijl, and very soon after, Gerrit Rietveld and Cornelis van Eesteren. As a team, van Doesburg and van Eesteren studied the new possibilities of architecture on the occasion, in 1923, of a commission to design an artist's house and a private residence for an exhibition in Paris. In the same year, Rietveld designed a house in collaboration with Mrs. Truus Schröder-Schräder in Utrecht, which has become the most significant monument of this phase of De Stijl architecture. And van Doesburg continued to work in this vein. The internal reconstruction of L'Aubette, a Strasbourg café—alas destroyed not long after its completion—was one of his major works, completed in 1928. This building, and his 1929 house in Meudon, were landmarks of a new spirit in the old city. And the city assumed a new harmonious shape with the planning of van Eesteren who succeeded, in his master plan for the enlargement of Amsterdam, in applying the principles of De Stijl to urbanism, to the organization of a large city, realizing them in daily life and on a large social scale.

The artists and architects of De Stijl not only redefined the vocabulary and the grammar of the visual arts, they assigned a new task to painting, architecture and the other arts: to serve as a guide for humanity to prepare it for the harmony and balance of a "new life;" to serve mankind by enlightening it.



beholder, on the other, it involved the dissolution of every link with the perception of objects in nature. Abstraction granted freedom from external reality; the limitation of the means of expression excluded, by its elementary character, individualistic tendencies. It was a vital step towards "... a true vision of reality." This step was deemed necessary and logical to the history of art which was leading gradually from the representation of things to a rendering of the essential laws of creation. The arts ceased to be the handmaiden of any other field of creative activity and became—like science, philosophy and religion—another way to approach universal truth in strict objectivity. Only an "art of pure relationships" could fulfill this demand, could render a visual image of the laws of harmony, which dominate the entire creation and are related to every single appearance in reality as the theme in music is related to the variations based upon it. This conception of reality, parallel to ancient philosophical views of the world, brought with it far reaching implications.

The art of De Stijl starts from and aims at conceptions that are not only artistic, but that pertain to the formation of a new style of life. De Stijl's paintings and buildings do not want only to purify the work of art, but the "gates of perception," the spirit of the beholder, as well. De Stijl's art aspires to be a "model" for future life. Mondrian's dedication of his pamphlet "Le neo-plasticisme," of 1920, "to future man," is one of the proofs of this fact. In De Stijl's outlook on contemporary life, the arts—and first of all painting—were able to free themselves from the oppression of everyday irrelevancies, which prevented man from pursuing his true purpose: to seek truth and to find harmony. Where daily life was still working in the dark, the arts had already seen the light. Art is therefore ahead of life, and hence its task is to show life the way towards the realization of that harmony. Art could be capable of guiding mankind toward a brighter future, a new and revolutionary utopia.

Mondrian felt at home in this future world, but he realized that if this concept were carried to its ultimate conclusion, the visual arts would be doomed to disappear. He did not worry about this fate. As long as universal harmony was not a reality in daily life, painting would offer a temporary substitute. And once harmony had found its way into every domain of life, painting—as a guide toward harmony—would have played out its part. It would no longer be needed. The art of De Stijl cannot be looked at adequately without considering this utopian vision, this newly created task for the visual arts, which exceeds the boundaries of aesthetics and sets itself moral and ethical aims.

It was primarily Mondrian who prophesied this great utopian dream. But a different personality was needed to make the dream a reality. Theo van