

# DE STIJL



MAANDBLAD VOOR DE MO-  
DERNE BEELDENE VAKKEN  
REDACTIE THEO VAN DOES-  
BURG MET MEDEWERKING  
VAN VOORNAME BINNEN- EN  
BUITENLANDSCHE KUNSTE-  
NAARS. UITGAVE X. HARMS  
TIEPEN TE DELFT IN 1917.

# Editorial

## Nota Bene: De Stijl

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first issue of *De Stijl* in the Netherlands. It was a small artists' magazine subtitled *Maandblad voor de moderne beeldende vakken* (Monthly magazine for the modern visual arts). The editor of the magazine was Theo van Doesburg, the pseudonym of Utrecht-born Christian Emil Marie Küpper (1883-1931) who was an artist, art critic, writer and architect. On the cover it stated that he had been assured of the cooperation of distinguished artists from at home and abroad (fig. 1).

These associates were a motley crew who did indeed work in the visual arts and beyond. Including various disciplines in the magazine would make it clear 'that in principle they are equal to one another, that they have a common language to speak', wrote Van Doesburg in the introductory editorial. He was assisted in founding the magazine by his close friend, the poet Anthony Kok, the painter Piet Mondrian, the architect J.J.P. Oud and the Hungarian émigré painter and designer Vilmos Huszár. The artist Bart van der Leck also contributed to the first issues of *De Stijl*, while in the course of the first year of publication the architects Jan Wils and Robert van 't Hoff, the Belgian sculptor Georges Vantongerloo and the Italian painter and critic Gino Severini also became involved. The furniture maker (and later architect) Gerrit Rietveld joined in in 1919.

In all respects it was an unassuming magazine that fell through subscribers' letter boxes in the autumn of 1917. There were no more than twelve pages of text in a single wide column, in a cover of green paper with such a high wood content that it discoloured extremely quickly. Along with the editorial by Van Doesburg and the articles by Mondrian, Van der Leck, Kok and Oud there were two separate supplements with an illustration on art paper. The limited size meant that readers' patience had to be called on in two articles. Kok's piece was concluded in a subsequent issue, whereas Mondrian began an argument that was to carry on through all twelve issues of the first volume (and a supplement in the second).

But the outward unpretentiousness was a sham, because *De Stijl* was a magazine with a mission. It was exclusively devoted to 'the revelation of abstract art', the new non-figurative art that had appeared everywhere in Europe since 1913. *De Stijl* represented a specific direction that Mondrian had called the 'Nieuwe Beelding' (new plastic or neo-plasticism): an art form in which line and surface were reduced to their geometrical essence and colours only appeared in their pure form. Purifying visual media in this way made it possible to give expression to 'universal beauty', as Mondrian forcefully wrote. That the all-embracing legitimacy of the geometric art *De Stijl* propagated was even part of a wider social development was emphasized in the second year of publication. This opened at the end of 1918 with the *Manifesto I of "The Style"* which stated that the

Fig. 1  
*De Stijl, Maandblad  
voor de beeldende  
vakken* 1 (1917), no. 1.  
Vignette: Vilmos  
Huszár.  
Photo:  
[www.iaddb.org](http://www.iaddb.org).

devastating First World War that had just come to an end was a sign that the norms and forms of the old world had been swept away. The ‘individual’ character of the old world was now giving way to the ‘universal’ of the new epoch.

Changing the subtitle to *Internationaal maandblad voor nieuwe kunst, wetenschap en kultuur* (International monthly magazine for new art, science and culture) in 1921 sent a signal that the magazine no longer wanted to confine itself to the visual arts but was trying to occupy a wider social position. The reference on the cover to Leiden, Antwerp, Paris and Rome, and later even to Warsaw, Hanover, Brno and Vienna, was designed to add gravitas. The abstract geometric vignette to a design by Huszár was replaced by the bold red letters ‘NB’ that Van Doesburg and Mondrian had thought up. The ‘Nieuwe Beelding’, after all, was not just a style but the only conceivable style for the new age that was dawning. These red letters stated loudly and clearly that *De Stijl* was the mouthpiece of the Nieuwe Beelding; the fact that the title could also be read as *Nota Bene De Stijl* was, of course, an added bonus (fig. 2).



Fig. 2  
*De Stijl*, Internationaal maandblad voor nieuwe kunst, wetenschap en kultuur 4 (1921), no. 1. Typography: Theo van Doesburg assisted by Piet Mondrian. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Research Library, no. 1918/0185c.

### The Rijksmuseum and De Stijl

The Rijksmuseum was one of the first subscribers to that new ‘little magazine’ of an ‘intimate nature’, as Van Doesburg was still modestly calling it in 1917. In 1918 it was registered in the inventory of the library and every issue of *De Stijl* is present, except for the *dermier numéro* of 1932 which was published in Van Doesburg’s honour after his death. At the time it was not surprising that there was considerable interest in the Rijksmuseum in the very latest trends in art. As an art critic Willem Steenhoff, deputy director of the Rijksmuseum voor Schilderijen, kept a close eye on new developments, and with director Jonkheer Barthold van Riemsdijk had made it his business to acquire a number of significant loans and gifts of paintings dating from after 1880. As well as Dutch artists from the Hague and Amsterdam Schools, a foreigner like Paul Cézanne, and Vincent van Gogh were represented beyond expectation. In 1917, when two recent landscapes of Mallorca by Leo Gestel and a Cubist painting by Piet Mondrian were given on loan (fig. 3), Van Riemsdijk wrote proudly and happily in the annual report that the ‘cultural and historical overview that the entire collection in the Rijks Museum presents from the fifteenth century onwards has now been extended to the most recent times’. The director of the Print Room, Jonkheer Hendrik Teding van Berkhout, who was also responsible for the library, also



Fig. 3  
PIET MONDRIAN,  
*Tableau no. 3:  
Composition  
in Oval, 1913.*  
Oil on canvas,  
94 x 78 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Stedelijk Museum,  
inv. no. A6043.



Fig. 4  
PIET MONDRIAN,  
*Tableau III:  
Composition in  
Oval, 1914.*  
Oil on canvas,  
140.5 x 100 cm  
Amsterdam,  
Stedelijk Museum,  
inv. no. A24589.

followed international developments in modern art and in 1922, for example, purchased the by now extremely rare portfolios *Neue Europaeische Graphik* by the Bauhaus.

The Rijksmuseum followed close on De Stijl's heels, not just as a magazine but as a movement. In his capacity as art critic, in 1916 Steenhoff wrote critically and expectantly about a new painting by Mondrian, stylistically on the threshold of neo-plasticism, that he saw in an exhibition by the *Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring* in the Stedelijk Museum: 'This work of art is not powerful in creative spirit, nor broadly profound, but it is nonetheless of very exceptional value – a decadent, perhaps, but nevertheless certainly an extremely important modern phenomenon. ... In its restrictedness (temporary, we hope) this work is of complete purity and, once understood, can be enjoyed undisturbed like none of the other moderns.' It would seem to be only a question of a few years before neo-plasticism would be added to the Rijksmuseum collection.

It was evidently possible to take an important step in this direction in 1922. To mark Mondrian's fiftieth birthday, a group of his 'admirers' – Peter Alma, Sal Slijper, Jo Steijling and Willem Steenhoff – offered the Rijksmuseum a large painting dating from 1914, a work which, compared with the Cubist composition of 1913, signified a substantial step in the direction of neo-plasticism (fig. 4). But it was not to be. The new director Frederik

Schmidt Degener, who had succeeded Van Riemsdijk in 1921, turned down the gift without consulting Steenhoff because he believed that the Rijksmuseum should be devoted exclusively to the 'art of the past'. Five years after Van Riemsdijk's proud words Schmidt Degener drew a firm line through the policy of also allowing the 'most recent time' to be represented in the Rijksmuseum's 'cultural and historical overview'. Mondrian's painting was subsequently lent to the Stedelijk Museum, which in 1950 was also the recipient of the Cubist composition of 1913. Steenhoff's dismissal in 1924 – occasioned by cost-cutting measures – meant a bitter end to his career and to his dream of achieving a 'Rijksmuseum for Modern Art'.

For decades the Rijksmuseum showed no further interest in De Stijl. Not a single work by Van Doesburg, Mondrian, Van der Leek, Huszár or any other artist connected with De Stijl was added to the collection. Van Doesburg may not have been disappointed, given that he detested anything with a Rembrandtesque feel – and the Rijksmuseum, after all, was the temple where Rembrandt was worshipped. But it did annoy Mondrian, as he had been a serious student of the Dutch painting tradition of which the Rijksmuseum had so much to offer and had even worked there as a copyist. Works by fellow painters in the Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring exhibition in 1916, such as Gerrit van Blaaderen and Ferdinand Hart Nibbrig, were, though, accepted as gifts. The Print Room's purchase of a letter with an abstract drawing of a seated nude by Theo van Doesburg in 1955, discussed by Alied Ottevanger in this issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, is a remarkable exception to this policy.

Even Hans Jaffé's groundbreaking doctoral thesis *De Stijl 1917-1931* failed to kindle a spark in the Rijksmuseum when it was published in 1956. In it he linked the movement with the Dutch aesthetic and ethical tradition and made a direct link between the geometric abstraction of neo-plasticism and the 'mathematical' elements in the work of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter Saenredam. From the nineteen-fifties onwards De Stijl was only collected locally in the Netherlands, not nationally, even though Jaffé had described the movement in emphatic italics as *the Dutch contribution to modern art* as a subtitle to this thesis.

This is why the most notable Dutch De Stijl collections are to be found in a number of municipal museums such as the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, and in some specialist institutions like the Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague and the State Archive for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning in Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. A few smaller local museums like the Museum Drachten in Friesland, the Mondriaanhuis in Amersfoort and Villa Mondriaan in Winterswijk also concentrate on the history of De Stijl and the people linked to it.

The spark did not catch in the Rijksmuseum until ninety years after the birth of De Stijl. In 2007 Christie's in Amsterdam auctioned a white slatted armchair by Gerrit Rietveld that had been owned by the author Til Brugman, who at one time had lived in The Hague. In 1923 her home was briefly the centre of the international avant-garde in which De Stijl was by then making a typically characteristic Dutch voice heard as a magazine, as a movement and as 'style'. The unusual and surprising version of Rietveld's most famous furniture design and the evocative context of this specific example aroused interest, and three years later the chair was purchased from the art dealer Leigh Keno, who had bought it at the sale. It was seen as the ideal object that could throw open the 'window' – as it was called in the historical Canon of the Netherlands, widely discussed at that time – to De Stijl in the Rijksmuseum. The significant context of 'Til's chair', as Til Brugman's friend Hannah Höch called it in 1926, as if it was a throne, is the main subject of this bulletin. Two Short Notices are devoted to acquisitions that followed on from it and address the area that was so typical of the inter-disciplinary character of De Stijl – the relationship between painting and interior design.

The purchase of the Rietveld chair was a prelude to the 2013 reopening of the Rijksmuseum, which for the first time was to have a department devoted to the twentieth century. It was obvious that De Stijl would have a place in it. It is, after all, hard to overestimate De Stijl's significance in the art and history of that period – not only had Jaffé been proved right when he contended that De Stijl was the Dutch contribution to the canon of modern art, it had also left its mark on the development of the art and architecture of the entire twentieth century as Van Doesburg experts Evert van Straaten and Anton Anthonissen demonstrated convincingly in their recently published study *De Stijl 100 jaar inspiratie. De Nieuwe Beelding en de internationale kunst 1917-2017*. The myriad examples they give include the iconic Mondrian dresses designed by the couturier Yves Saint Laurent in 1965, a very special version of which was acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 2011 (fig. 5). It was looked down on for a long time because De Stijl itself was so purist. But the reverberations caused by the movement made an extraordinary contribution to the cultural history of the twentieth century and it deserves a place of honour in the Rijksmuseum, the national stage of the Netherlands. *Nota bene* De Stijl.

Ludo van Halem



*Fig. 5*  
YVES SAINT  
LAURENT, *Mondrian*  
*Dress*, 1965.  
Wool, silk, l. 80 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
inv. no. BK-2011-58;  
purchased with  
the support of the  
BankGiro Lottery.