

Short Notice

A Painting in 3 Dim*

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In 2014 Theo van Doesburg's *Colour Composition in an Interior*, c. 1920-29, was transferred to the Rijksmuseum from the collection of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands.¹ This design in colour for a room in the house of Bart de Ligt in Katwijk, an important work by Van Doesburg, was added to the Print Room. The gouache-collage demonstrates the ideal that he had in mind in designs in colour for the interior.

From 1918 onwards Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) was involved in projects with various architects. He designed colour schemes for the interior and the furniture for Jan Wils's *Café-restaurant De Dubbele Sleutel* in Woerden, and he made colour designs for the exteriors of J.J.P. Oud's municipal apartment blocks in Rotterdam.² These were undertakings that pursued the ideal of *De Stijl*: to give as pure as possible form to the modern living and working environment. An important precondition was the close collaboration between architect and artist, each from their own discipline. The 'truly modern' environment they designed together had to encourage its occupants to contribute to a better society as a new person.

In the autumn of 1918 Van Doesburg was asked to collaborate on the alter-

ation of a country house in Lage Vuursche by Robert van 't Hoff.³ The client was Bart de Ligt (1883-1938), who around October 1918 renewed his acquaintance with Van Doesburg and wanted colour schemes designed by him executed in his country house.⁴ De Ligt, until 1915 a practising clergyman, had become an anarchist and freethinker. An idealist like Van Doesburg, he arranged his life so he could devote himself to building a better society.⁵ For a long time De Ligt had been convinced that a well thought-out, colourful working environment could help in this. In his vicarage in Nuenen – which he occupied from 1909 to 1915 – his friends remarked on the 'austere lines and sober colours of the study'.⁶ Now that the country house in Lage Vuursche had to be decorated and furnished for him and his wife Ina, whom he married in December of that year, he commissioned Van Doesburg to design colour schemes for seven of its rooms.⁷

The work was finished in the spring of 1919. Henri Wiessing, editor of *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*, saw the result at the end of May and was so enthusiastic that he advised a business friend of his to think about giving Van Doesburg similar commissions.⁸ No documents or photographs of this work in Lage Vuursche have survived

because in the summer of 1919 De Ligt and his family suddenly moved to the coast for his stepdaughter's health; the only design that survived was the study for the conservatory (fig. 1).⁹

Van Doesburg was again asked to design the colours of the interior for the house De Ligt and his family moved into in September 1919 – at 27 Duinoord (now 125 Zeeweg) in Katwijk.¹⁰ This time the commission was limited to one room.¹¹ Van Doesburg started on it in December 1919 and on 23 December enthusiastically informed Oud: 'I'm at De Ligt's, working on something magnificent. A painting in 3 Dim:

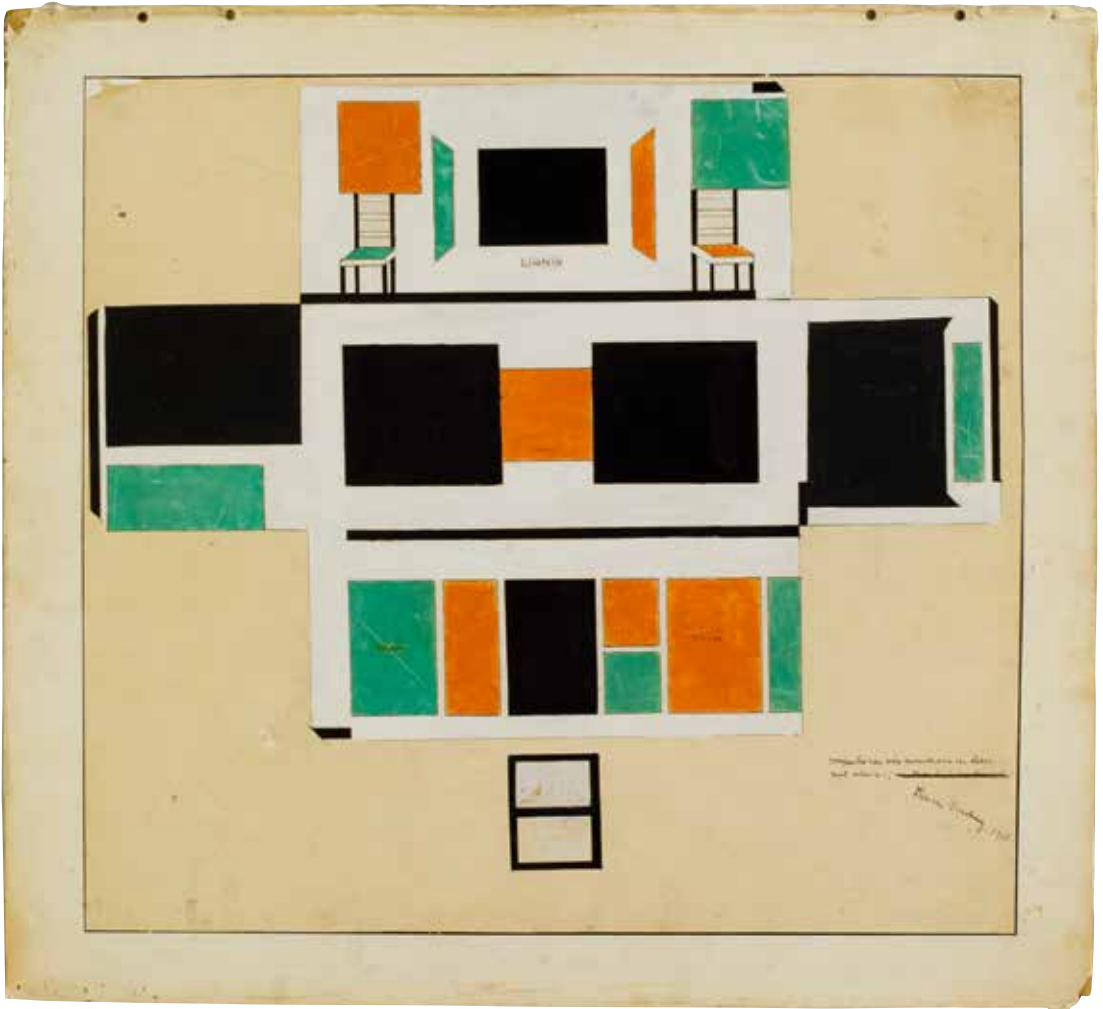
Rietveld will then make furniture for this interior.'¹²

It is his remark that he was working on a three-dimensional painting that is particularly interesting. It meant that viewers had to step into the room as a spatial image to be inspired by the dynamism produced by the colour design. This proved easier to achieve on paper than in the room itself. In early January 1920 he wrote to Oud that he could not manage it, perhaps because he was overworked.¹³

However it later emerged that the room was preying on his mind.¹⁴ The room was an awkward five-sided shape caused by a cut-off corner and there

Fig. 1

THEO VAN DOESBURG, *Colour Design for the Conservatory at Bart de Ligt's House in Lage Vuursche, 1918*. Indian ink and gouache on transparent paper, 520 x 570 mm. Rotterdam, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Does Archive, inv. no. AB5095; gift Van Moorsel.



was a shallow niche in it. Adding to the difficulty were the many doors and cupboard doors in the room, which had all had mouldings added to them. Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964), a furniture designer and maker who had recently become allied with *De Stijl* and had also been involved in this project by De Ligt (undoubtedly through Van Doesburg's mediation), also saw this problem immediately. He did not conceal his view that it was 'a shabby hole' and had little confidence that a three-dimensional painting could be achieved there. But in February 1920, when he and his wife had seen the painted room once, he felt compelled to write to Van Doesburg that he had succeeded magnificently in his design.

- Mrs de L. showed my wife and me the room
- Actually I thought it was a shabby hole and those little doors are particularly bad. It's not a bad size, though, and you have succeeded perfectly in showing it in one fell swoop (through the colour). This is extremely important to me, above everything else, and although I cannot comprehend everything in detail – seeing the room all at once remains clear in my mind and pleases me.¹⁵

This tells us that Van Doesburg's colour design had been executed by the end of February 1920. Rietveld's furniture – a table and two chairs – arrived later, in March 1920.

The room was photographed after Rietveld's furniture had been installed. This must have been around April or May 1920, possibly a little later, and was done with great care. The room was photographed from a diagonal view-point as an open, dynamic space. Van Doesburg printed the photograph in black and white, slightly retouched, in the November issue of *De Stijl* (fig. 2).¹⁶ In his accompanying commentary he again emphasized the ideal of collab-



oration between architect and artist, but also observed that the requirement of a 'balanced arrangement' of the space had not been fulfilled. The picture therefore provided no more than an impression of what was possible. He tried to overcome the lack of colours in it by describing them as contrasts: 'blue and green, red and black, and white'.¹⁷

These colours are found in the gouache of the design, although the blue is actually a very midnight blue and the red more of a rather pale (faded?) orange (fig. 3).¹⁸ Judging by Rietveld's praise, the room must actually have been painted in more convincing colour contrasts. The rather unfortunate spatial rendering

Fig. 2
APPENDIX XIV,
De Stijl 3 (November 1920), no. 12.
With the inscription:
'Theo van Doesburg,
Proeve van
Kleurencompositie
in intérieur (1919).
Meubelen van
G. Rietveld'.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum
Research Library.

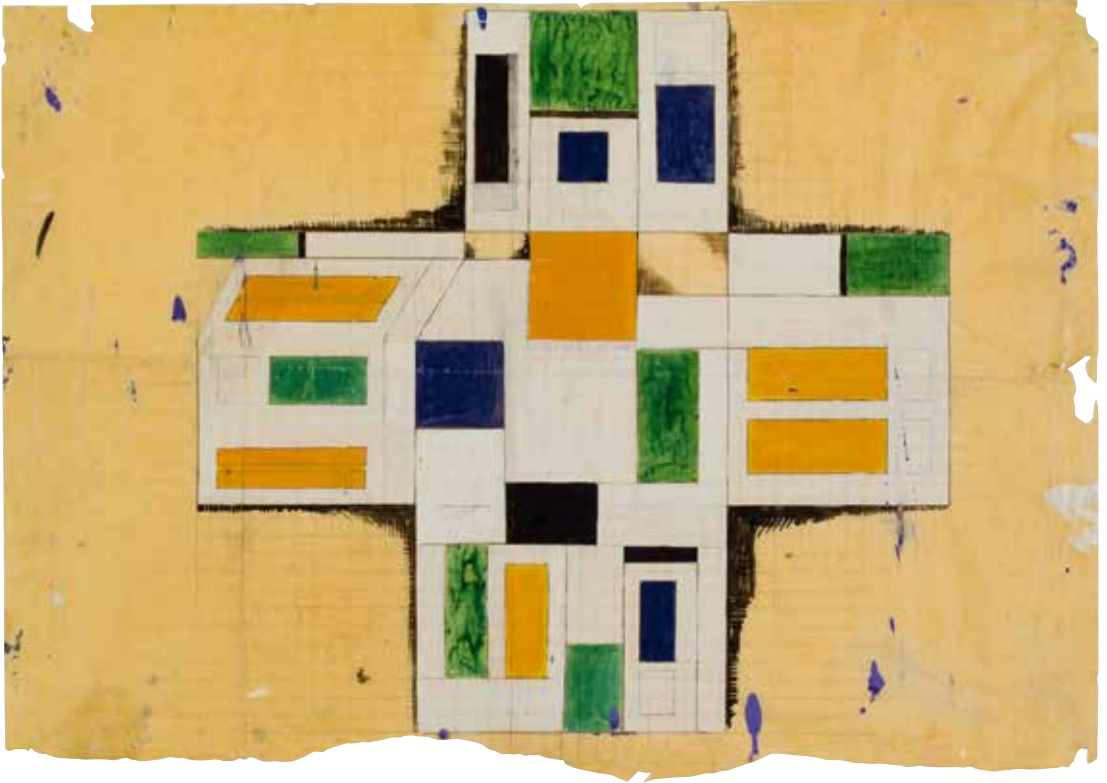


Fig. 3

THEO VAN DOESBURG, *Colour Design*, December 1919-February 1920. Pencil, gouache and Indian ink on transparent paper, 610 x 430 mm. Rotterdam, Het Nieuwe Instituut, DOES Archive, inv. no. AB5093; gift Van Moorsel.

of the room is more noticeable in the gouache. Around the ceiling 'hung' four walls to which the cut-off corner did not fit well – either to the ceiling or the wall. The two side walls were also reversed in the gouache. Unlike before, in Katwijk Van Doesburg lacked not only an architect to create or recreate the space but a specialist who could have helped him with the architectural drawing of the design.

The black-and-white picture of the room occupied Van Doesburg more than the design. It intrigued him so much that at some point he cut the reproduction out of *De Stijl*. This little snapshot of the photographed room gave a better image of his ideal colour design in an interior, particularly if colours from his meanwhile adapted palette could be added. And they could. The floor was coloured in in black, the white and red parts were painted with body colour and shapes were cut from

blue and yellow paper (instead of green) and stuck on (fig. 4). The cutting and sticking, in particular, were done with a precision we would not expect of Van Doesburg. Might someone else, perhaps one of his talented De Stijl students in Weimar, have done it under his supervision? This is not completely inconceivable. Another question that presents itself concerns the date. When was this gouache-collage actually made? It could quite possibly have been in the early 1920s, when he needed demonstration models for his lectures and for his De Stijl course, but it could equally well have happened later.¹⁹

In any case it is abundantly clear that Van Doesburg wanted to show the room as convincingly as possible, as a three-dimensional space painted in bright primary colours and black and white – and in the form of a flat picture, the best safeguard for showing this key work and for its preservation.

Fig. 4
THEO VAN
DOESBURG, *Colour
Composition in an
Interior*, c. 1920-29.
Gouache and paper
on printing on card,
265 x 210 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2013-55;
transferred from the
Cultural Heritage
Agency of the
Netherlands.

There is another, later print of the photograph of the room, which was probably made around 1951 under the auspices of Nelly van Doesburg (fig. 5).²⁰ The wider view is interesting. Instead of the frame that Van Doesburg carefully defined for the print in *De Stijl* in 1920, in this print the edges of the original photograph were followed. We can now see a cupboard with a curtain on the left, a lamp above it and a rafter. This means that the room had an outside wall with a sloping roof. Once seen, part of the rafter can be identified in the gouache-collage. What could have been the function of this little garret? In a family house with two young children, a study

for De Ligt would not appear to be an extravagance. This garret could well have been used as such. He cannot have used it for very long, however, as after something over eighteen months, on 31 May 1921, De Ligt and his family moved away from Katwijk. There is no record anywhere of what happened to the room afterwards. As far as Van Doesburg was concerned, this was perhaps not such a great disaster. The interior was to survive and be remembered in his ideal, improved versions, as shown in the gouache-collage.



Fig. 5
Late print of original
photograph by THEO
VAN DOESBURG,
*Colour Composition
in an Interior*, c. 1951
[1920].
Photograph on card,
490 x 375 mm.
Rotterdam, Het
Nieuwe Instituut,
DOES Archive,
inv. no. AB5098;
gift Van Moorsel.

Recorded as:
Theo van Doesburg,
Kleurontwerp
voor kamer in huis
van Bart de Ligt te
Katwijk aan Zee, 1918.

NOTES

- * 'n Schilderij in 3 Dim': observation by Van Doesburg about the design for his *Colour Composition in an Interior* in a letter to J.J.P. Oud, 23 December 1919, vDA inv. no. 149, The Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), The Hague.
- 1 This work is included in the Rijksmuseum's collection registry with adjusted title and date as Theo van Doesburg, *Colour Composition in an Interior*, c. 1920-29, gouache and paper on printed matter on cardboard, 265 x 210 mm, inv. no. RP-T-2013-55. The title was adapted from earlier descriptions, cf. for example note 16 and for the date the continuation of the text. See further Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg, schilder en architect*, The Hague 1988, pp. 64-68 and Els Hoek (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg Oeuvre Catalogus*, Bussum 2000, cat. no. 642b, with the title *Collage*, and dated c. 1925.
 - 2 For the collaboration with Wils for Café-Restaurant De Dubbele Sleutel see Van Straaten 1988 (note 1), pp. 56-59 and Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 610, and for the collaboration with Oud on apartment blocks I and V in Spangen in Rotterdam, Van Straaten 1988 (note 1), pp. 60-63 and Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 612.
 - 3 Commissioned by De Ligt, for whom Van 't Hoff converted a small country house in the Lage Vuursche, Van Doesburg provided colour for the entire house, see Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 611, and Van Straaten 1988 (note 1), pp. 64-65.
 - 4 Van Doesburg made it seem as if he had met De Ligt in the autumn of 1918, during the run-up to this commission, see his letter to J.J.P. Oud, 22 October 1918, Van Doesburg Archives (vDA), inv. no. 146, RKD, The Hague. However De Ligt maintained that he had met Van Doesburg earlier than that at the course he gave that year in Leiden about the development of religious life as reflected in the Bible. At the time Van Doesburg came across to him as a strikingly critical listener, see Bart de Ligt, *Kerk, Cultuur en Samenleving. Tien jaren strijd*, Arnhem 1925, Introduction, p. XLVIII.
 - 5 For the life and work of De Ligt see for example Arthur Muller Lehning, *Bart de Ligt, 1883-1938*, Arnhem 1939; Herman Noordegraaf, *Niet met de wapenen der barbaren. Het christen-socialisme van Bart de Ligt*, Baarn 1994 (dissertation UL) and the online special issue of *De Drijehornickels* 24 (2015), no. 3, which is dedicated to the 'Vredesactivist Bart de Ligt. 100 jaar Nuenen uit. 1915-2015'.
 - 6 See Jeanette van den Bergh van Eysinga-Elias, 'Nuenen – het gedicht van mijn leven', *De Drijehornickels* 24 (2015), no. 3, pp. 16-22, esp. p. 18. Her text was previously published in Muller Lehning 1939 (note 5), pp. 143-54.
 - 7 From Van Doesburg's letter of 8 December 1918 to his friend Antony Kok it emerges that he was already working on the execution of the colour designs for six rooms and a corridor, see Antony Kok Archives in the vDA, inv. no. 2203, RKD, The Hague and for a transcript: Alied Ottevanger, 'De Stijl overal absolute leiding.' *De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en Antony Kok*, Bussum 2008, letter 087.
 - 8 See the letter from Henri Wiessing to Van Doesburg of 27 May 1919, vDA, inv. no. 219, RKD, The Hague. Anton Hagemeyer, 'a great shipper in the East Indies', was looking for an artist to design new, striking printed matter for his firm and possibly also to design the layout of his office. He followed up Wiessing's suggestion and commissioned Van Doesburg to design a variety of printed matter for his business Hagemeyer & Co. Exporteurs, see Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 630.
 - 9 Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 611 (AB5095).
 - 10 I would like to thank a number of informants for discovering this address: Herman Noordegraaf, Willem de Boer, Piet Vellekoop, Bart de Ligt's grandchildren, Frans Postma and Willem Stuiver. The house was demolished some years ago.
 - 11 The design for this commission has survived, see Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 642a: *Colour Design*, December 1919-February 1920, pencil, gouache and Indian ink on transparent paper, 605 x 430 mm, now in Het Nieuwe Instituut Collection (HNI), Rotterdam. There is also a photograph of the result. The photograph of the result (which was used by Van Doesburg for *De Stijl*, see note 16) may be the small photo with the old inventory number AB9456, see also vDA inv. no. 1272, RKD, The Hague. Although Hoek 2000 (note 1) includes the gouache-collage *Colour Composition in an Interior*, (under the title *Collage*, cf. note 1) in the same cat. no. as 642b, strictly speaking this work was not part of the commission.
 - 12 'Ik ben bij de Ligt [aan] iets prachtigs bezig. 'n Schilderij in 3 Dim: Rietveld zal voor dit interieur dan meubels maken.' See Van

- Doesburg's letter to Oud of 23 December 1919, VDA, inv. no. 149, RKD, The Hague.
- 13 See Van Doesburg's letter to Oud of 7 January 1920, VDA, inv. no. 150, RKD, The Hague.
- 14 This can be inferred from a letter Rietveld wrote to Van Doesburg, see his letter of 28 February 1920, VDA, inv. no. 169, RKD, The Hague.
- 15 - Mevrouw de L. heeft m'n vrouw en mij het kamertje laten zien
 - Eigenlijk vond ik het een prutserig hol en vooral die deurtjes slecht. de maat beviel me wel en het is je volkomen gelukt het in ééns (door de kleur) te laten zien. Dit is vòòr alle al het andere bereikte, voor mij heel belangrijk en al kan ik mij niet in alles in bijzonderheden indenken – dat in ééns zien der ruimte blijft me helder bij en doet me aangenaam aan. Ibid.
- 16 See *De Stijl* 3 (1920), no. 12, Appendix XIV, with the postscript: 'Theo van Doesburg, Proeve van Kleurencompositie in intérieur (1919). Meubelen van G. Rietveld'. Van Doesburg also wrote a commentary: 'Aanteekening bij de bijlage', *ibid.*, p. 103.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 See Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 642a: *Kleurontwerp*, December 1919-February 1920, pencil, gouache and Indian ink on transparent paper, 605 x 430 mm, HNI Collection, Rotterdam.
- 19 In Hoek 2000 (note 1) the gouache-collage is dated to around 1925. The suggestion this gives rise to, that there was a direct connection with the colour illustration in *L'Architecture vivante* published in the autumn of 1925, needs some qualification, however. The collage was not used for a photographic image for the offset plate for this French magazine. The original black-and-white photograph must have been used for it, which was cropped more tightly here. And although the gouache-collage may have served as a guide for the three colour registers of this print, there is no proof of this. The work could also have been made later, after the plate in *L'Architecture vivante* – in the second half of the 1920s – and the inscription on the back of the gouache-collage: 'XXIX', may be an indication of this.
- 20 This strikingly large photograph, measuring 591 x 376 mm, is not included in Hoek 2000 (note 1) nor in the inventory of the VDA, RKD, The Hague (although there are two new prints of this retake with white borders, see VDA 1272.) In the HNI, Rotterdam, the current whereabouts, the photograph is listed with the old inv. no. DOES AB 5098. A new shot of the old, original photograph

was used for this large print. The print was made from the glass negative of this retake. Drawing-pin holes in the corners and labels on the back are evidence that this large print was mounted on cardboard at exhibitions; the first time for the *De Stijl* retrospective in 1951.