

Short Notice

Rhythmic Movement in Flat Space*

• ALIED OTTEVANGER •

In 1955 the Print Room bought a letter and a drawing by the founder and key figure of *De Stijl* magazine (1917-31), Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931).¹ The letter is dated 10 November 1917. The separate drawing, done in 1916, was originally enclosed with it (fig. 1). The surprising and early acquisition took place after the *De Stijl* retrospective in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1951, which helped launch a reassessment of this art movement. Even so, this was probably not the real reason why the director Jon van Regteren Altena and the curator Karel Boon, both from the Rijksprentenkabinet – now called the Print Room – decided to buy it. They actually persisted with this acquisition undaunted by Rijksprentenkabinet policy. Since it was established at the end of the nineteenth century, its curators had always purchased contemporary prints and drawings, although restrictions had been put in place around the Second World War. Nevertheless, the acquisition of these items in 1955 is remarkable because at that time there was actually no budget to buy letters or artists' manuscripts. The letter was probably bought despite this because, in conjunction with the drawing and the sketches in the letter, it was a unique example of a written and drawn explanation of the meaning of the artist's work by the artist himself.

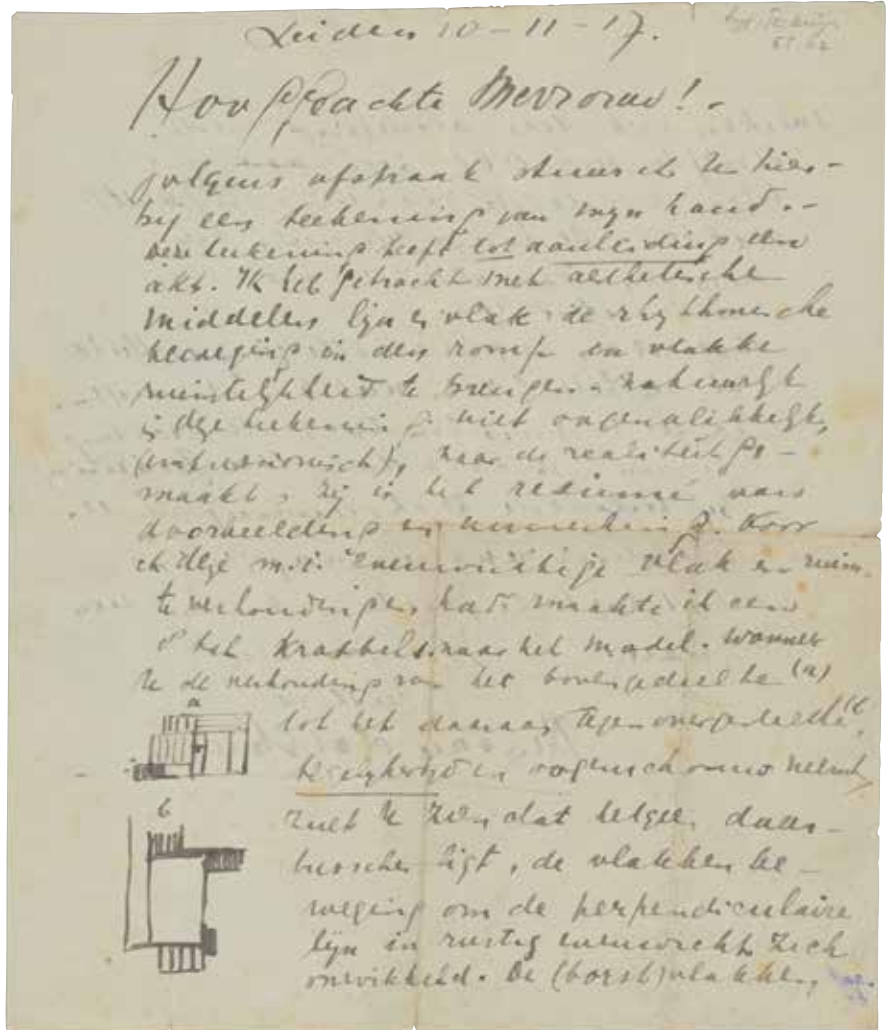
Fig. 1

THEO VAN
DOESBURG,
Seated Nude,
1916-17.
Ink on paper,
230 x 160 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1955-62.

Purchase

The letter and drawing, along with a watercolour by Floris Arntzenius, were bought for 150 guilders.² The letter was priced at fifty guilders.³ Both works were offered by one A. Alexander, a company name that was a front for Alexander Samter, who at that time briefly dealt in art from his address at 335 Hoofdweg in Amsterdam.⁴ Given that he was selling to the Stedelijk Museum as well as the Rijksprentenkabinet in 1954 and 1955, he might have been expected to offer Van Doesburg's letter to the Stedelijk first – however, this proves not to have been the case.⁵ He took it straight to the Rijksprentenkabinet.

For almost sixty years the letter and the enclosed drawing were the only works by Theo van Doesburg in the Rijksmuseum.⁶ They must have been shown in the museum at some point in the twentieth century, but unfortunately there is no record of this. The same applies to external exhibitions. This relatively invisible existence came to an end with the inclusion of the drawing and the letter in the Theo van Doesburg oeuvre catalogue published in 2000.⁷ Afterwards the drawing was seen at *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde*, an exhibition staged by De Lakenhal in Leiden and Tate Modern in London in 2009-10. Before that, in 2001, the



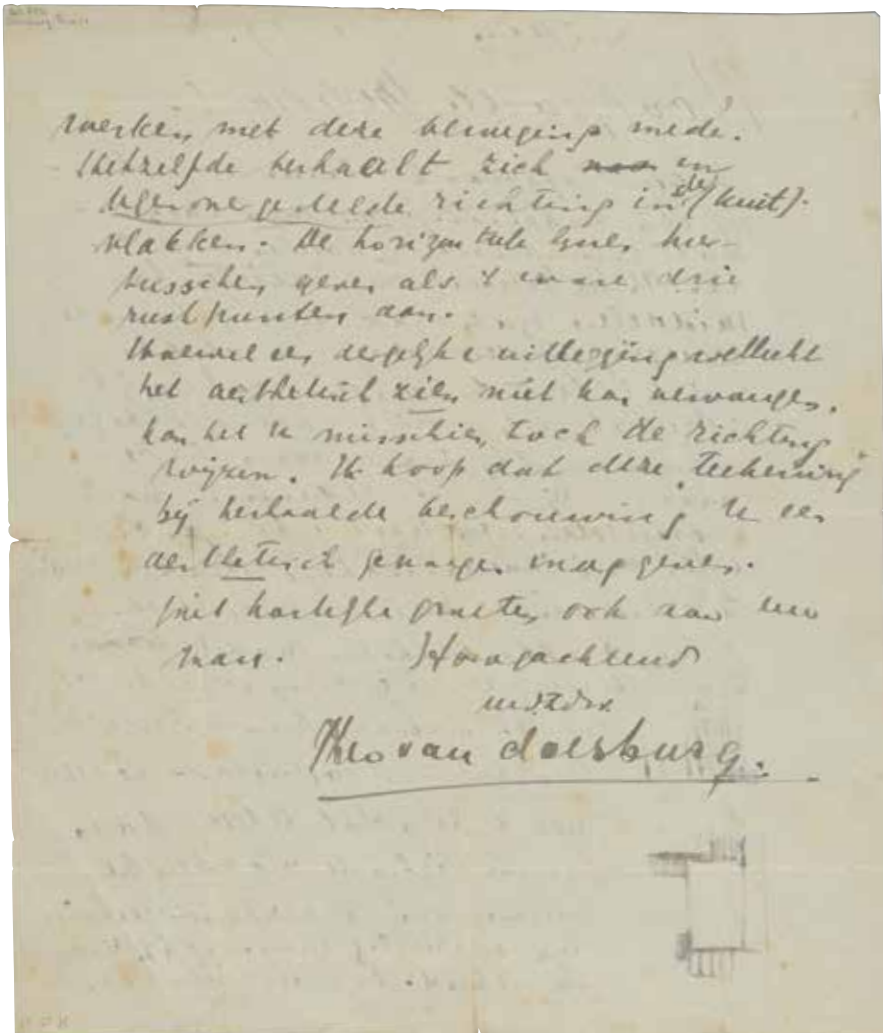
drawing and letter were cited as examples of the rare purchases made in and shortly after the Second World War.⁸ It was only under the directorship of Jan Wolter Niemeyer (director of the Rijksprentenkabinet from 1974 to 1990) that separate letters and ensembles were acquired regularly, chiefly through the great dedication of Freek Heijbroek (curator 1980-2014).

A Nude

As there was no envelope we regrettably do not know who Van Doesburg wrote the letter to (fig. 2), nor does he mention a name in the

salutation. The tenor of the letter would suggest that the recipient did not belong to his intimate circle of friends, although Van Doesburg also knew the lady's husband, to whom he asked to be remembered at the end of the letter. It can be inferred from the letter that she had asked why Van Doesburg used abstract shapes, a question he was delighted to answer.⁹ He did this on the basis of a drawn example: an ink drawing he had made almost a year earlier, which he enclosed with the letter. As Van Doesburg states in the letter, he had seven or eight drawings like this,

Figs. 2a-b
THEO VAN
DOESBURG,
Letter to anonymous,
10 November 1917.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-D-DOESBURG.TH.V.-1.



all studies of the same nude model, or as he described it, 'an action'.

The subject of the drawing can be described rather more precisely as a female nude sitting on a chair or stool (not depicted), holding her bent left arm upwards with her hand resting on her head. The figure is shown from her right side. Van Doesburg had made several studies of this motif between the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, in a sketchbook and on separate sheets (fig. 3). The Rijksprentenkabinet drawing is among those on a separate sheet and is one of the two smallest in this group.¹⁰ These sketches and studies

were probably made in the first studio that Van Doesburg occupied in Leiden at 9 Maria Gondastraat (now Da Costastraat) in early December 1916. He lived and worked at that address until mid-April 1917. It may have been Lena Milius, his sweetheart whom he married on 30 May 1917, who modelled for him.

On the basis of this drawing Van Doesburg explained what he wanted to express with his art: not the reproduction of a recognisable motif, but the experience of balanced movements created in the subject by opposing forces. To identify this he began by researching the motif. He analysed it

and interpreted the forces in aesthetic image elements to express the movements that created them as purely as possible in planes and lines. In the letter he explained his approach and vision.

Leiden 10.11.1917

Dear Madam!

As agreed I am sending you a drawing by my hand. This drawing was prompted by an action. I have tried with the aesthetic means of line and plane to bring rhythmic movement into the core in flat space. Naturally this drawing was not made instantaneously (impressionistically) from reality; it is the résumé of further abstraction and processing. Before I got what I

believe are the balanced proportions of this plane and space I made 8 scribbles of the model. If you examine the relationship of the top part (a) to what is opposite to it (b) simultaneously, you will see that what lies between them brings the flat movement around the perpendicular line into quiet equilibrium. The (breast) planes work with this movement. The same thing repeats itself towards in the opposite direction in the (calf) planes. The horizontal lines between them as it were provide three pauses.

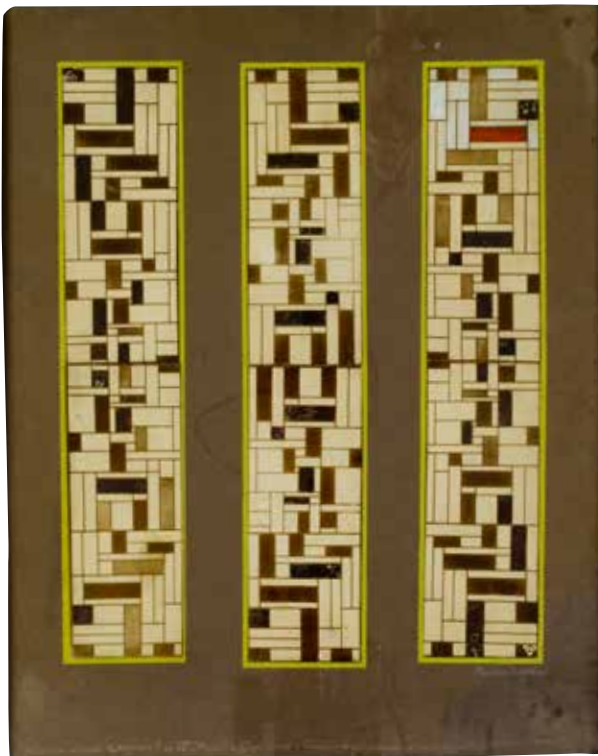
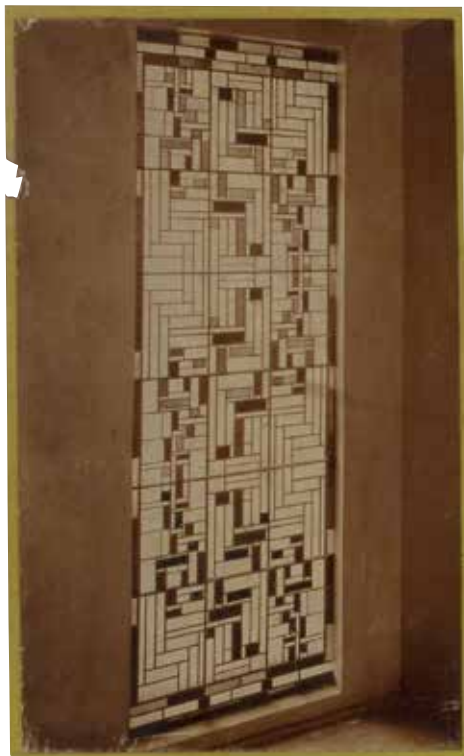
Although an explanation like this probably cannot replace aesthetically seeing, it may perhaps show you the direction. I hope that on repeated examination this 'drawing' may give you aesthetic satisfaction. My best regards to your husband.
Your servant [illegible] Theo van doesburg"

The nude subject, as we see, is only the starting point. Van Doesburg wanted to express the rhythmic movement he recognized in the nude with the aesthetic resources of line and plane. He saw this in the core and tried to reproduce it in flat space. On the basis of detail 'a' (head and arm) and detail 'b' (hand at seat height), which he also drew in the letter, he indicated how these two parts – which are determined by opposing forces – should be looked at simultaneously. Then a movement becomes perceptible in the area between them. The planes and lines move in right angles in that middle part, 'around the perpendicular line', in a definite rhythm. An identical movement takes place in the leg with the black calf, but in an opposite direction. He was very explicit about the horizontal lines in this part (the thighs, say): they are pauses. By depicting the seated nude in this way he could make it an abstract motif that expressed rhythmic movement. As such Van Doesburg could use it in his art.

Fig. 3

THEO VAN
DOESBURG,
*Female Nude with
Her Hand on
Her Head*, 1916-17.
Indian ink on
transparent paper,
320 x 150 mm.
Utrecht, Centraal
Museum, inv. no.
AB4715; loan of the
Cultural Heritage
Agency of the
Netherlands (Gift
Van Moorsel) 1999.





Abstract Motif

When Van Doesburg described his way of looking and representing in November 1917 he had already incorporated the seated nude as an abstract motif in his art. In the spring of 1917 he had used it for two almost completely abstract compositions in stained glass.¹² In the design of the large *Stained Glass Composition II*, which had been placed in Villa Allegonda in Katwijk in May 1917, he had used the motif in mirror image and turned over (fig. 4). This window had already been removed and disappeared before the Second World War, but according to a description dating from around 1927 it had been executed in red, yellow, blue and clear glass.¹³ It was one of Van Doesburg's first works in primary colours. The other work in which this motif was the starting point is his *Stained Glass Composition IV* which consists of three

tall, narrow windows placed side by side in Huis De Lange in Alkmaar (fig. 5). This glass triptych was delivered in September 1917. According to a note on the photograph of this window – now replaced by a copy – the two 'side panels' were executed in 'red-blue-yellow-white-black' and the middle window in 'purple.green.orange.white.black'.¹⁴

In both stained glass compositions the seated nude has been used to express movement in the way explained in the letter. The movement can be perceived here, too, by fixing the gaze on the top and bottom parts at the same time. Repetition and variation of planes and the constant perpendicular changes express a rhythm of their own in space. The sunlight shining through it must have added an extra dimension of movement.

Fig. 4

Photograph of Villa Allegonda, with Theo van Doesburg, *Stained Glass Composition II*, 1917. Rotterdam, Het Nieuwe Instituut, DOES Archive, inv.no. AB5055; gift Van Moorsel.

Fig. 5

THEO VAN DOESBURG, *Stained Glass Composition IV*, 1917. A triptych *in situ* in Huis De Lange in Alkmaar. Rotterdam, Het Nieuwe Instituut, DOES Archive, inv. no. AB5053; gift Van Moorsel.

NOTES

- * Paraphrased statement by Theo van Doesburg in the letter in question, see text and note 1.
- 1 The letter is filed with the same object number as the drawing. See also Els Hoek (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg Oeuvre Catalogus*, Bussum 2000, esp. p. 186, cat. no. 528d, as *Vrouwelijk naakt met hand op het hoofd*.
 - 2 Floris Arntzenius (1864-1925), *Street View in The Hague*, 1874, watercolour, chalk, 270 x 209 mm, inv. no. RP-T-1955-63.
 - 3 See the account sent to the Rijksmuseum by A. Alexander, Hoofdweg 335, Amsterdam, with the note that it was paid on 22 April 1955, Noord-Hollands Archives, Haarlem, stored in the Rijksmuseum Archives 1945-95, inv. no. 2690. With thanks to Dick van der Fluit.
 - 4 In the Amsterdam Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths, Alexander Samter (Berlin 1897-Amsterdam 1983) is registered as a dealer in women's wear, fashion designer and auctioneer ('koopman dames-conf., modeontwerper en veilinghouder'); with thanks to Ludger Smit and colleagues at Amsterdam City Archives.
 - 5 See the Archives of the Stedelijk Museum in the Amsterdam City Archives (accession number 30041), inv. nos. 2036 (1954) and 2037 (1955). With thanks to Ellen Grabowsky of the ACA and Margreeth Soeting of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
 - 6 In 2014 another work on paper by Van Doesburg was transferred to the guardianship of the Rijksprentenkabinet from the collection of the Cultural Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) in Amersfoort: Theo van Doesburg, *Colour Composition in an Interior*, c. 1920-30, which is dealt with elsewhere in this issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. It came from the estate of Theo van Doesburg, which was gifted to the Dutch State by Nelly van Doesburg's heir, Dr Wies van Moorsel.
 - 7 See Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. nos. 528d and 528d-1.
 - 8 See Freek Heijbroek, 'Kunst per brief: een overzicht van de collectie kunstenaarsauto-grafen in het Rijksprentenkabinet', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 49 (2001), nos. 2-3, pp. 230-45, esp. pp. 236-37 and figs. 4a-b.
 - 9 Van Doesburg actually did this quite often, see for example his response to a letter sent in by the artist Edith Pijper included in full in *De Stijl*, to which Van Doesburg wrote a detailed answer, see *De Stijl* 1 (1918), no. 6. A later indication is the letter from A.J. Lakke replying to Van Doesburg; see Van Doesburg Archives, inv. no. 104, Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), The Hague. It is not out of the question that Van Doesburg was replying in this letter to a question from the wife of the notary De Lange, who had stained glass windows in which this motif was used installed in their house Huis de Lange in Alkmaar, see notes 12 and 14. With thanks to Jenny Reynaerts for her suggestion.
 - 10 See Hoek 2000 (note 1), and cat. nos. 524d, 524t, which refer to drawings in a sketchbook and see for the series on separate sheets cat. nos. 528a-d. The drawing in question is part of this group. Cf. also 528d, a work that likewise seems to be dated to 1916-17.
 - 11 Hooggeachte mevrouw!
Volgens afspraak stuur ik U hierbij een teekening van mijn hand.- Deze teekening heeft tot aanleiding een akt. Ik heb getracht met aesthetische middelen lijn en vlak de rhythmische beweging in den romp in vlakke ruimtelijkheid te brengen. Natuurlijk is deeze teekening niet oogeblikkelijk (impressionisch), naar de realiteit gemaakt, zij is het resumé van doorbeelding en verwerking. Voor ik deze m.i. evenwichtige vlak en ruimte verhoudingen had, maakte ik een 8 tal krabbels naar het model. Wanneer U de verhouding van het bovengedeelte (a) tot het daaraan tegenovergestelde (b), tegelijkertijd in oogenschouw neemt, zult U zien dat hetgeen daartusschen ligt, de vlakke beweging om de perpendiculaire lijn in rustig evenwicht zich ontwikkelde. De (borst) vlakken werken met deze beweging mede. Hetzelfde herhaalt zich naar in tegenovergestelde richting in de (kuit)vlakken. De horizontale lijnen hiertusschen geven als 't ware drie rustpunten aan.
Hoewel een dergelijke uitlegging wellicht het aesthetisch zien niet kan vervangen, kan het U misschien toch de richting wijzen. Ik hoop dat deeze 'teekening' bij herhaalde beschouwing U een aesthetisch genoegen mag geven. Met hartelijke groeten ook aan uw man.
Hoogachtend Ued.Knecht [?onleesbaar]
Theo van doesburg.
This transcript, which reproduces the letter as written, with spelling and grammar mistakes, differs in a number of details from the letter text in the oeuvre catalogue, cf. Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 528d-1. This is important here because in the second sentence: '... bring rhythmic movement into the core

in flat space ...' the conjunction 'and' is replaced with 'into' (cf. for example further on in the manuscript: 'examine'), which alters the tenor of the sentence.

- 12 See for *Stained Glass Composition II*, 1917, Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 530 in Villa Allegonda in Katwijk and *Stained Glass Composition IV*, 1917, a triptych for Huis De Lange in Alkmaar, cat. no. 554.
- 13 The Swiss architect Alfred Roth visited Villa Allegonda in 1928 and described the window in his book *Begegnung mit Pionieren. Le Corbusier, Piet Mondrian, Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann, Auguste Perret, Henry van de Velde*, Basel/Stuttgart 1973, see p. 128.
- 14 'rood-blauw-geel-wit-zwart'; 'paars.groen.oranje.wit.zwart'. This original stained glass window was removed in 1980 and transferred to the RCE, Amersfoort. The window is now in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. In 1984 a copy was installed in Huis de Lange, see Hoek 2000 (note 1), cat. no. 554.