

# Short Notice

## R is for Red

• CEES HILHORST •

On 20 November 2012, the Rijksmuseum bought a *Composition* by Bart van der Leck through Christie's Amsterdam (fig. 1). It was the first purchase of an abstract geometric work for the relatively recent twentieth-century part of the collection. The museum paid 217,000 euros for it with support from the BankGiro Loterij and its own friends' fund. Curator Ludo van Halem devoted a short description to this purchase in *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*.<sup>1</sup> Advancing insight means that this story can now be revisited.

Bart van der Leck (1876-1958), along with Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian and others, co-founded the Dutch avant-garde magazine *De Stijl* in the autumn of 1917. Artistic and personal squabbles – mainly with Van Doesburg – caused him to dissociate from the group within a year.

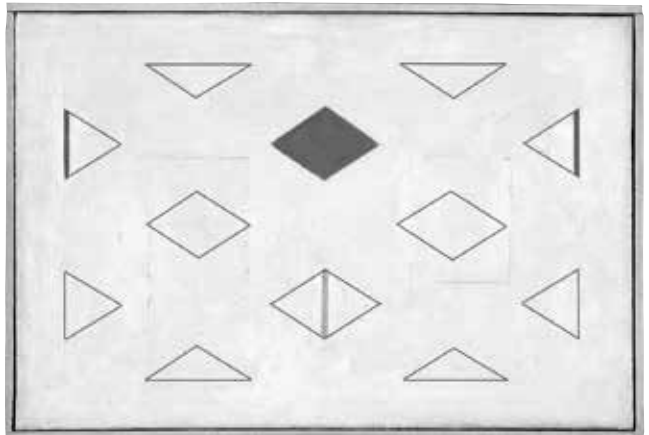
Although at first glance this painting he made in 1919 looks simple, there is a lot more going on below the surface. Inside the 'virtual passe-partout' with which he usually surrounded his compositions a vague pattern of horizontal lozenges (halved at the edges) can still be identified under the many *pentimenti* (overpaintings) (fig. 2). Just one red lozenge withstood unscathed the urge to reduce even further. It is flanked by bevelled blue bars, which on closer examination prove to be the base of

*Fig. 1*  
BART VAN DER LECK,  
*Composition R*, 1919.  
Oil on canvas,  
35 x 52.5 cm.  
Unsigned and undated.  
Photo with raking light.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
inv. no. SK-A-5018;  
purchased with  
the support of the  
BankGiro Lottery  
and the Patrons of  
the Rijksmuseum.  
© Heirs Bart van der  
Leck/Pictoright,  
Amsterdam 2017.

*Fig. 2*  
Underlying composition  
scheme (fig. 1). Recon-  
structured by the author.

equilateral triangles (halved lozenges), and floats above a yellow bar with pointed ends that proves to be the vertical axis of what was originally also a lozenge. In the white background there are vague outlines of a doorpost and a window frame.

This 'wall' corresponds almost exactly with the wall in the studio Van der Leck occupied in the summer of 1919 (fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> It was a design for a wall decoration which, oddly, he worked out in oil on canvas. Strange though this seems, it does indicate how closely free and applied painting were intertwined in Van der Leck's mind. Be this as it may, this 'design' – as far as we know – was never executed on the studio wall.





*Fig. 3*  
Interior of the original studio that Van der Leck moved into in the summer of 1919. Situation in 1976. Private collection. Photo: Ferry André de la Porte.

Between 1918 and 1920 Van der Leck's oeuvre is relatively poorly documented. This is because at that time he was unable to rely on his patron, H.P. Bremmer. On the basis of a largely self-fashioned but widely respected reputation as a connoisseur, Bremmer had created for himself a position of almost unquestioned influence in the Dutch art world as an art lecturer, critic and consultant. The 'art appreciation' courses he taught throughout the Netherlands – invariably to the privileged upper class – were fundamental to this perfectly working mechanism. He made his listeners receptive to the artists he supported financially (in exchange for their output – entirely altruistically, he insisted) and sold their work on to those who attended his courses. These operations were supported by his own magazine and contacts with various art dealers. Bremmer was the man who guided Helene Kröller-Müller in her collecting policy.

Van der Leck had been under contract to Bremmer since 1912, but at the start of January 1919 his allowance was suspended because Bremmer did not like the work that Van der Leck was making at the time – influenced, according to Bremmer, by his fellow *De Stijl* painters.<sup>3</sup> Cutting off this income stream also meant that Bremmer no longer needed to keep track of the paintings that would have been supplied in exchange.

Bremmer resumed his patronage after a year, but the work Van der Leck produced during that period of *De Stijl* influence paid the price. This is evident in the draft of an introduction to a catalogue that Bremmer wrote as late as 1954.<sup>4</sup> 'In 1917 [Van der Leck] arrived at total abstraction. He was at a point where the intellect dominated *so there is little sign of art in his work from that period.*' In the final typed version of the manuscript the last part of the sentence (my italics) was crossed out, and consequently it does not feature in the

text printed in the catalogue. This does not alter the fact that even at the end of his life Bremmer still had a low opinion of his protégé's *De Stijl* escapades.

We consequently have to rely on a handful of contemporaneous ephemera and later, often much later, catalogues and oeuvre lists to reconstruct Van der Leck's oeuvre from 1918 to 1920. Things are made even more complicated because at that time the artist was not particularly consistent in titling his works. Occasionally, when a title was needed he stuck the label 'Composition' on it, following Mondrian, but he also used 'Mathematical Image' and even 'Painting' as titles. In cases where no dimensions are given, it is generally impossible to determine which specific work it is.

This means that we cannot be certain how often the Rijksmuseum's *Composition* has been exhibited since Van der Leck created it. However, it can only have been occasionally.

Probably the first time it was shown was in his exhibition at 'Voor de Kunst' in Utrecht in the spring of 1920.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately there was no catalogue for this small exhibition, which only featured eight works from the preceding twelve months. The most we can do is roughly reconstruct the exhibition from a handful of reviews.<sup>6</sup> It seems that there were two 'types' of paintings on display: five stylized, abstracted after a scene from visible reality and three 'purely ornamental images'. To date we know of only two such non-figurative works from 1919 and just one from (early?) 1920. In other words, the chance that the *Composition* in the Rijksmuseum was one of the three 'purely ornamental' works is considerable.

The only time we can actually be sure that Van der Leck exhibited the painting during his lifetime was much later, thirty years after it was made, in 1949. It had remained in his possession for all of that time and – at least occasionally – had hung on a wall in his living room.<sup>7</sup> It may well be that during

those years his family had given it a nickname. A similar *Composition* from 1918, for example, was known in his household as the *Little Carbuncle*.<sup>8</sup> This may suggest that the final title was thought up by a family member.

In 1948, when the plans for a retrospective exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam were starting to crystallize, Van der Leck – although over seventy – was involved in it, albeit remotely from Blaricum where he was living at the time. The exhibition ultimately ran from 11 February to 14 March 1949 (extended to 4 April). Loans came from all over the Netherlands, but mainly from the collection of what was then called the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller in Otterlo. The records that the Stedelijk kept of this exhibition show that Van der Leck himself also supplied a number of works, although this is not mentioned in the catalogue.<sup>9</sup>

The 'list of works' in this catalogue does, however, refer to a previously unknown, mysterious artwork. A 'Compositie R, 1917, 36 x 53' appears as #54.

As Van der Leck was still under contract to Helene Kröller-Müller (who had temporarily taken over from Bremmer as his patron) in 1917, he had been obliged to send her all the paintings he finished in that year – four 'diptychs', eight paintings in total. No 'one-off' work dating from 1917 features in any of the Kröller-Müller collection records, let alone one with these dimensions or with the title *Composition R*.

Comparison of the dimensions of the other 'abstract', in principle 'title-less' paintings from the period concerned, reveals that it must have been the *Composition* now owned by the Rijksmuseum. But on stylistic grounds and given the link to his studio, which only became available in the summer of 1919, this final version of the *Composition* can no longer be dated to 1917, but must indisputably be dated to 1919.<sup>10</sup>

De tekst van de Catalogus. als u er ook bij!  
 ik aan het doo? -

Blancm.  
 17-1-49

Hooggeachte Heer Sandberg.

Hierbij de tekenen van de drabber-  
 Gaarne zou ik willen, dat u even nakeek welke  
 het meest lyk en op die van het schil denf, dat  
 M. meenem. -

Dan hierbij een lijst van namen die  
 van een introductie in aanmerking komen

Ten slotte een lijst van door mij reeds  
 gegeven werken. - en van werk, dat bewaard  
 wordt in het Krüller-Müller museum. van  
 de hr. G. van Deventer. -

Er is bij mijn ingediening een lijst  
 van „Compositie R.“ dat heide morgen  
 werd overgeschreeft. - dan mij rest is. Zou  
 u zoo goed willen zijn. te zeggen dat  
 daartoe gelokt wordt. - Ik denk niet,  
 dat het werk al zoo spoedig gehaald  
 zou worden. -

Het geeft u mij heel wat werk,  
 dank ik. - Ik ben u daar wel heel  
 dankbaar voor en hoop eens, dat ik  
 niet te laat bij ben.

Mit beste groet  
 hgt P. J. J. Leck

2.0.

And what about that ‘R’ in the title? The Stedelijk exhibition file provides a definite answer to this, too. On 17 January 1949 Van der Leck wrote to Willem Sandberg, the then director of the Stedelijk Museum: ‘Among my entries there is one frame of “Composition R.” that was only overpainted this morning – so it is still wet. Would you be so kind as to watch out for this. – I did not think that the work would be collected so soon’ (fig. 4). Enclosed

in this letter is a list of the works he submitted, personally written by the artist, which mentions a ‘Compositie R – olieverf’, proving that this title can definitely be attributed to Van der Leck himself. And the R in the title? The Stedelijk file also clears that mystery up. Another list (this one drawn up by the museum’s Technical Department) indicates where the works supplied by Van der Leck were temporarily stored. One of the last items on this

Fig. 4  
 Letter from  
 Bart van der Leck  
 to Willem Sandberg,  
 17 January 1949.  
 Amsterdam,  
 City Archives,  
 Stedelijk Museum  
 Archive,  
 30041/1.852.16/  
 3348-3349/  
 Folder 2 –  
 STEDI0087141428.

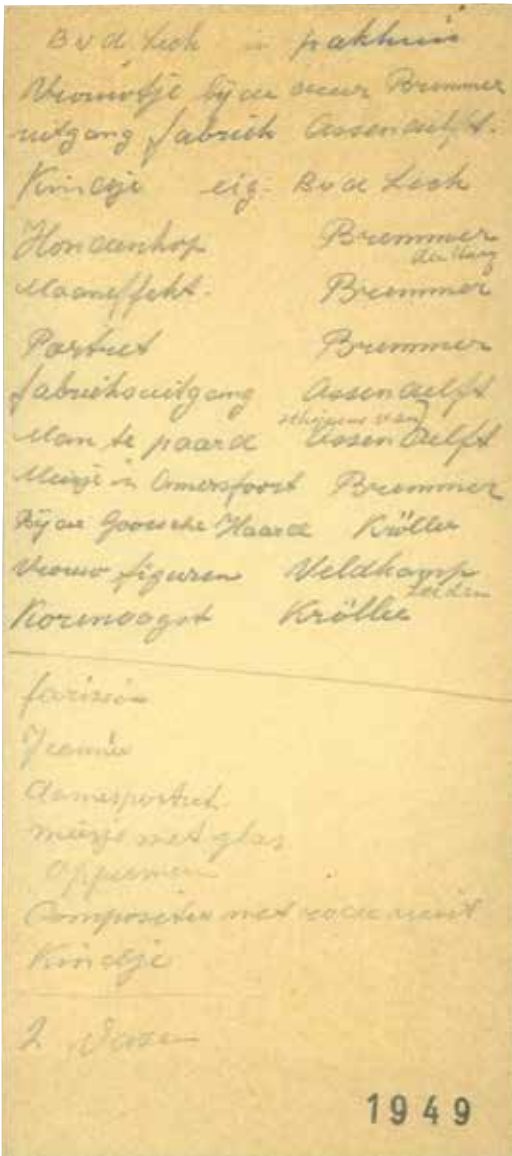


Fig. 5  
Technical  
Department  
inventory.  
Amsterdam,  
City Archives,  
Stedelijk Museum  
Archive, 3004/  
1.852.16/3348-3349/  
Folder 2 –  
STED10087141488.

list is a 'Compositie met rode ruit' (fig. 5).<sup>11</sup> This alliterative R must be the explanation for the specification in the title.

The incorrect date of the painting (1917 instead of 1919) is trickier to tackle. The most obvious assumption is that it was a typing error or misprint; the rest of the catalogue and also the various exhibition and insurance lists in the same Stedelijk file would certainly seem to support this. There

must have been considerable confusion. Although the work is not dated it nonetheless must have been obvious to Van der Leek – even after thirty years – that a dating of 1917 could not be right. But whether he ever noticed that error in the catalogue at all, and if so whether he would have had the opportunity to have such an error corrected, remains the question. The museum would not have wanted to bother him with editorial problems.

Seven years later, in the first published list of Van der Leek's works – in Feltkamp's monograph – the same 'mistake' was repeated all over again.<sup>12</sup> However, careful analysis indicates that Feltkamp leaned heavily on the slipshod 1949 Stedelijk catalogue when he compiled his oeuvre list: in a number of instances the same obvious errors occur in both publications, particularly where dates are concerned.

It is, though, impossible to deny that this predating at the very least did not do Van der Leek any harm. During the interwar years he had become the doyen of Dutch abstract geometric art in the Netherlands. With the upsurge in interest in 'De Stijl' as a 'movement' in the postwar Netherlands and in Piet Mondrian in particular, this reputation began to show increasing cracks, a phenomenon he must have found distressing in his old age. When his *Composition R* was pushed back from 1919 to 1917, he was catapulted into a pioneer's position in the 'timeline of complete abstraction in fine art', a place he was not really entitled to. To date, however, it would seem unlikely that there was any deliberate intent to mislead.

Be this as it may, it is the task of art history at the very least to keep asking awkward questions like these, even if it might not be possible to answer them straight away. It is to be hoped that growing insight will shed more light on this and give rise to an update of this Short Notice too.

## NOTES

- 1 *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 61 (2013), no. 3, pp. 314-15.
- 2 In the spring of 1919, with his brother Leendert, who was a builder, Van der Leck designed and built a simple dwelling cum studio in Blaricum. In the mid-nineteen-twenties a second studio was built on to it and the first was transformed into a living room. The white grand piano was introduced in the mid-fifties, when Van der Leck's oldest daughter and her family moved in with her parents. An attempt to have Van der Leck's cottage – which had been preserved in its original condition – declared a monument in 1984 came to nothing. It burned down in the night of 21 June 2006.
- 3 The relationship – business and personal – between the two is described in detail in Cees Hilhorst, *Vriendschap op afstand. De correspondentie tussen Bart van der Leck en H.P. Bremmer*, Bussum/The Hague (RKD-Bronnenreeks 1) 1999 (with Introduction in English, pp. 46-73).
- 4 *Bart van der Leck*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (E.J. van Wisselingh & Co) 1954. Three versions of this manuscript (two hand-written and one typed) are in the part of the Bremmer Archives held in the RKD in The Hague (arch. 0391, no. v.3.14).
- 5 *Tentoonstelling van een klein aantal nieuwe werken door: B. van der Leck*, Vereniging Voor de Kunst, Utrecht, 21 March to 11 April 1920; advertisement in *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, dated 17 March 1920.
- 6 A.M.H.[ammacher], 'Van der Leck. Voor der Kunst – Nobelstraat', *Utrechts Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, 23 and 24 March 1920; anonymous, 'Te Utrecht', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 26 March 1920; [Kasper] Niehaus, 'B. van der Leck. "Voor de Kunst"', Utrecht', *De Telegraaf*, 4 April 1920; Just Havelaar, 'B. v.d. Leck. Voor de Kunst, Utrecht', *Het Vaderland*, 8 April 1920; [Albert] Plasschaert, 'Van der Leck, te Utrecht', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, no. 2233, 10 April 1920, p. 7. Only the first three mention titles and/or descriptions of exhibited works.
- 7 Petra Timmer, 'Metz & Co', *Kunstschrift* 48 (2004), no. 4, pp. 40-45, esp. p. 45, fig. 73.
- 8 Communication from Mrs E. Schonk-van der Leck (1913-1989), eldest daughter of the painter, to the author; mid-1980s.
- 9 This part of the Stedelijk Museum's archives is in the Stadsarchief Amsterdam; archive 30041/1.852.16/3348-3349.
- 10 See note 2 and the caption to the photograph at figure 2. In the archives of the Architecture and Building Supervision Department of what was then Blaricum Local Authority is a letter dated 23 June 1919, from Leendert van der Leck, in which he requested a completion statement, since the 'gebouwde perceel ... zover is gevorderd dat het bewoonbaar is' (built property ... has advanced to the extent that it is inhabitable); Archief BEL Combinatie, Eemnes. Oddly, *Composition R* is not included in the oeuvre list in R.W.D. Oxenaar's dissertation *Bart van der Leck tot 1920. Een primitief van de nieuwe tijd*, Utrecht 1976 (diss. Utrecht University), pp. 213-21, but he does mention the canvas on p. 145 (note 483: 'Compositie "wand"') and the 'Biografische aantekeningen' refer to a 'Kleurontwerp voor een wand in het eigen atelier' (colour design for a wall in his own studio) (p. 197). It is illustrated for the first time (and in colour) in *Bart van der Leck 1876-1958*, exh. cat. Otterlo (Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller)/Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 1976, cat. no. S55 as 'Compositie 1919'.
- 11 'Composition with Red Lozenge'.
- 12 W.C. Feltkamp, *B.A. van der Leck. Leven en werken*, Leiden s.a. [1956], p. 95, no. 79; here: 'Compositie. 1917. 36 x 53 c.M. olieverf dk.'

