

Red / Blue Chair

The “3D Mondrian”

The painter Piet Mondrian thought of rectangles as merely the byproducts of lines crossing at right angles. For many years, Mondrian belonged to a group of artists based in the Netherlands and known as De Stijl (Style). Another member was Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964). And Rietveld's Red/Blue Chair has often been thought of as the 3D equivalent of a Mondrian painting.

Ironically, Mondrian himself left De Stijl in protest in 1926, in a dispute over the introduction of oblique lines or diagonals. He did not like them, although eventually he may have reconciled himself to them. The Red/Blue Chair features two spectacular obliques: the seat and the back. It was perhaps the modern world's first “abstract” chair. And it presented the principles of the De Stijl movement in three dimensions. Rietveld also designed the only surviving house constructed according to De Stijl principles: the 1924 Schröder house in Utrecht.

What did De Stijl hope to accomplish? Nothing less than the liberation of post-World-War-I society. De Stijl artists and designers did not always agree, but in general they favored simplicity and abstraction. The idea was to free design from both nature and decoration, creating a new, universal “language.” They thus favored right angles, other basic geometric shapes, primary or neutral colors, and simple machining of parts. Future furniture and houses would rely more on machines to make construction easier, and to create simple frameworks and spaces. Art and life would be one.

Rietveld's father was a cabinet maker; Gerrit himself was apprenticed at his father's shop from the age of 11. He was influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement. He set up his own cabinetry shop in Utrecht in 1911; and while he certainly understood design theory, he remained practically oriented. Between 1917 and 1931 he designed some 75 pieces of furniture.

The Red/Blue Chair is made of about a dozen struts: small sections which touch but do not intersect. Within this framework are set two oblique planks: the seat and back, which do not touch each other at all. So the lines and planes seem to continue into space. The chair is thus dematerialized. Is it emerging out of empty space? Such feelings are reinforced by the famous color