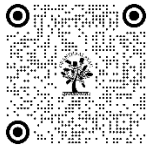


THE RED-BLUE CHAIR (1918-1923) BY GERRIT RIETVELD: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF DE STIJL PRINCIPLES AND POST-WAR MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

The Red-Blue Chair (1918-1923), designed by Gerrit Rietveld, is a seminal artifact of the De Stijl movement, embodying principles of geometric abstraction, minimalism, and functionalism. This study employs historical analysis and empirical examination to analyze the chair's design, socio-political context, and influence on post-war Modernism, emphasizing its role in redefining furniture as a spiritual and artistic medium. Drawing on De Stijl ideologies, the chair's orthogonal forms, primary colours, and mass-production potential reflect a response to World War I's devastation, aiming to rebuild Europe through unified aesthetics. The analysis highlights Rietveld's craftsmanship, colour application, and integration with architectural spaces such as the Schroder House. This study underscores the chair's lasting impact on modern design, merging art, architecture, and societal ideals.

Keywords: Red-Blue Chair, Gerrit Rietveld, De Stijl, Modernism, World War I, Minimalism

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Art and Design, the Red-Blue Chair (1918-1923) designed by Dutch architect and designer Gerrit Thomas Rietveld has been contemplated as one of the prominent artifacts of early-twentieth-century Modern art. Describing its design aspects, the American critic Martin Filler writes, "This remarkable design can rightly be called the central artifact of De Stijl, and one would be hard pressed to cite a comparable example in the whole history of design of theory induced by a 'minor art'" (Overly, 1991, p. 140).

De Stijl (literally, "the style"), the art movement founded by the painter and architect Theo van Doesburg in Leiden in 1917, encompassed a new type of style in modern art and architecture. Founder members of the group included the painter Piet Mondrian, the sculptor Vantongerloo, the architect J.J.P. Oud, and the designer and architect Rietveld. They were eager to develop a new aesthetic consciousness and an objective art based on clear principles. Their work and

research extended to the fine arts, city and town planning, the applied arts, and philosophy. This essay proposes an analytical study of the Red-Blue Chair, elucidating its various characteristics that paved the way for post-war Modernism.

2. HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Rietveld began laying out the design of the chair in 1917–1918, but it was painted as “Red-Blue” in 1923, when the chair gained impetus as a De Stijl artifact. The chair is now displayed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Rietveld was skilled in making furniture using both hand and machine methods, having worked at his father’s workshop at an early age. He started designing furniture at a time when portable and hand electric woodworking machinery was being introduced. British art historian Paul Overy describes Rietveld’s craftsmanship as his designed furniture depicts elements derived from hand production with those appropriate to machine cutting and assembly in quantity. It is this which gives it its characteristic qualities (Overy, 1991, p. 136).

To understand the thematic contexts of the chair, we need a clear idea of the socio-political environment at the time of its making and the way artists responded to the contemporaneous approach of art-making. Modernism in the West in the twentieth century was an era of celebration, rationalism, and ideas of progress. However, the devastation of World War I reduced these ideas, as it was a great shock for the people. It triggered absolute trauma and pain, as they had witnessed massive violence for the first time. The war was the reason for emerging nationalism and the rise of bourgeois ideals in European societies. Before the war, art movements were mostly concerned with rationality. However, this approach to image-making and the attitude of artists changed in the post-war scenario. Abstract artists were in disillusionment due to the war’s effects, and as a result, the notion of rationality was replaced by spirituality. They looked to the philosophy and spiritualism of the Eastern world to create pure art forms.

3. DESIGN AND DE STIJL PRINCIPLES

The rational design of the chair also brought the designer’s establishment of his confrontation and intrinsic connection to the war. Rietveld and fellow artists of the De Stijl movement intended to create a unique visual treatment or artistic style that they believed could revive Europe after the devastating turmoil of World War I. They regarded these new forms as significant to this rebuilding milieu. Based on its functionality, this chair is not designed for ease of comfort, as is evident, but it proved Rietveld’s ideas of deconstructionism and unity. Author Theodore M. Brown describes, “This simple geometric mechanism is almost as direct and primitive as the use of parts of the human anatomy, such as hands and feet, to establish spatial relations” (Brown, 1958, p. 20). The chair, with its hard seats and backs, is a new and designated way for people to sit and focus on their senses and spirits.

The Red-Blue Chair is entirely made of wood, and the construction requires a number of wooden sticks placed perpendicular to each other to form a spatial structure. It was initially painted black and grey, though Rietveld later replaced these with pure bright colors to strengthen the visual composition of the chair without ornamentation or modifications. The chair was designed with production processes in mind, enabling furniture to be made in quantity or mass-produced, as opposed to handcrafted (Overy, 1991, p. 136).

Architectural critic Banham suggests that Rietveld’s furniture was closely concerned with a deconstructivist exercise that would precede the development of new types for multiple production rather than being an “impasse” (Banham, 1960, pp. 198–199). Analyzing the Red-Blue Chair from its semiotic aspects, one can distinctly recognize the designer’s emphasis on a minimalistic approach in terms of its design. The chair, with its orthogonal lines and almost flat volumes, aimed to evoke minimalist prospects. The basic geometric approach in making is evident, with a special focus on vertical and horizontal forms.

4. COLOUR AND COMPOSITION

Rietveld, being an active member of the De Stijl movement, would have been influenced by its ideologies to paint the chair with pure primary hues and black, which created a strong visual impact on the viewer’s mind. The chair is composed of straight timber boards and battens; the seat is painted blue, and the backrest red. The battens are painted black, with the cut surfaces of the framed battens being yellow. This illustrates the designer’s proficiency in the application of colours in the composition; he incorporates both warm and cool colors, with black as a neutral hue. However, viewers, from a certain distance (especially from the front view), can perceive only the red and yellow because

of their intensity and high value (see Figure 2). As the red backrest board is larger in design compared to other parts of the chair, it directly captures the viewer's gaze. The seat, painted blue, which recedes and is tilted to the other end, does not catch one's eyes at first glance. The entire design is carefully crafted, as the structure creates a spatial interplay between vertical and horizontal planes.



Figure 1 Gerrit Rietveld, Red-Blue Chair, 1918–1923, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 2 The Red-Blue Chair, Front View

The Red-Blue Chair demonstrates a visual representation similar to a few of Piet Mondrian's paintings, a contemporary of Rietveld and a pioneer artist of De Stijl and Neo-Plasticism. Paul Overy writes, "Gerrit Rietveld's Red-Blue Chair is the most compact visual statement of the principles of De Stijl" (Overy, 1991, p. 7). Characteristics such as simplicity and geometricity in design, the combination of vertical and horizontal forms, and the use of bold, flat colors—particularly primary hues—accentuate intensity and pure abstraction within the compositions. In this way, the furniture shares the same visual translation and balance of color patterns as Mondrian's painting (see Figure 3).

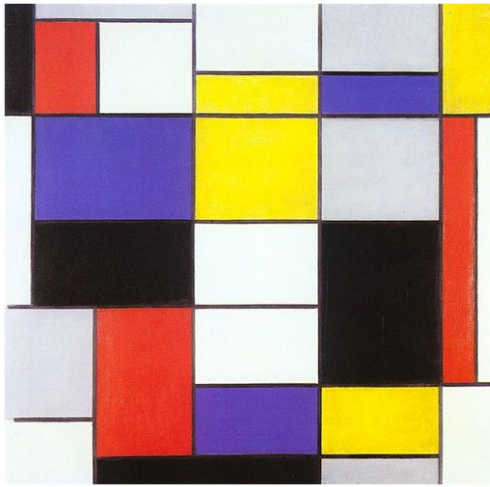


Figure 3 Piet Mondrian, Composition A, 1923.

5. INTEGRATION WITH ARCHITECTURE

In Gerrit Rietveld's own opinion on the design of the Red-Blue Chair, he states: "The construction is attuned to the parts to ensure that no part dominates or is subordinate to the others. In this way, the whole stands freely and clearly in space, and the form stands out from the materials" (Overy, 1991, p. 7). As a result, the spatial structure of this chair became momentous to later artists, motivating them to create new furniture or other designs that are compact and comprehensive as a whole, rather than being individual or separated parts.

The Red-Blue Chair was displayed and stored in the Schroder House, a distinguished architecture designed by Rietveld in 1924 that incorporates the design principles of De Stijl. The building is a Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) structure. Scholars Marijke Kuper and Ida van Zijl explain how Rietveld's work was "definitely made in Holland" given "the regulations with which every architect has to deal" and "the technical limitations and the materials available," yet Rietveld moved away from the architectural conventions of Dutch houses (Kuper & van Zijl, 1992, p. 16). While designing, Rietveld's primary intention was to create space. Unlike most architects, he was more concerned with the interior design of houses than with the exterior.

To add refinement to its interior, Rietveld's Red-Blue Chair was placed inside the Schroder House. The color scheme of the chair made it appear almost to disappear against the black walls and floor where it was displayed. The colored battens seemed to drift, giving it the appearance of a transparent structure (see Figure 4). This shows the proximity between the furniture and Modern architecture, as the furniture becomes an integral part of the structure.



Figure 4 Inside the Schroder House.

6. SIGNIFICANCE AND LEGACY

The Red-Blue Chair depicts the conventions of furniture-making by showing what they are not. Though the chair is made of timber “in the standard lumber sizes readily available at the time,” Rietveld deviated from furniture traditions by making chairs that were “simpler and sparser than the conventional furniture of the era, often making minimal use of materials” (MoMA, n.d.). Furthermore, Rietveld strayed from the conventional notion of what a chair is for: sitting. He regarded that “there was a greater goal for the furniture designer... the well-being and comfort of the spirit” (Kuper & van Zijl, 1992, p. 23). He believed that people should not sit as the body desires but as spiritual requirements dictate. Thus, the Red-Blue Chair gains the status of metaphysical disposition over its functionality. This elevates its meaning to an artwork (sculpture) rather than just a piece of wooden furniture.

7. CONCLUSION

The Red-Blue Chair becomes the material representation of the ideals of the De Stijl movement and creates the initial impetus for Rietveld to design the radical Schroder House. At the same time, the furniture describes the characteristics of architecture. This collaboration of furniture with architectural space manifests a higher value of integrated design characteristics in the Schroder House, i.e., the spatial distribution, use of colour schemes, and design concepts. The design was holistic and simplified to aim for the larger context of mass production, not limited to an individual handcrafted product. This signifies the accessibility of the chair; everyone can afford it. In this way, the accessibility and functionalism of the Red-Blue Chair revealed the fundamental value and central objective of twentieth-century modern furniture design.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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