

The Dutch Stijl Group

by

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Dutch painting has the same fate as Dutch literature in foreign countries. The foreign countries do not know either of them and misjudge both. Louis Couperus, Albert Verwey, Frederic van Eeden, these three personalities are best known beyond the Dutch border and are put besides the most celebrated European writers, but they do not exercise in their homeland an intellectual activity which would justify their fame. That in Holland a certain group celebrates them as literary exponents, does not change the fact that their work is a mere passing expression and does not partake in the creative life of the country. The works, which in painting correspond to their literary creations of a well-meaning bourgeois, undemoniacal, self-satisfied, naturalistic character are those paintings of the ocean, windmills and seamen in the manner of the Barbizon school: Mesdag, ^{the} Brothers Maris, Bosboom, Breitner, J. Israel; they achieve at the art market, domestic and foreign, high prices but they do not represent the real now of Dutch artistic achievement and do not mean to the young generation an example, law or ideal. In every field, the young Dutch art broke with the tradition of 1900. That this change has not been noticed by everyone, is mainly due to the lack of an alert art-criticism in Holland. With the exception of a few among whom the Van Gogh scholar H.P. Bremmer is outstanding, the art connoisseurs and art judges could not free themselves from the conventional concepts of beauty so entrenched in Holland. The important daily newspapers and art magazines ~~a~~ still cling to the realistic representation of nature as the decisive value measurement. Not even the exceptional Berlage gained a satisfactory following

which would have furthered his theoretical investigation concerning the architectural ideal and thus would have gained supremacy for Berlage's method of construction; the organic development from the space-cell versus all archeological and baroque art.

If the new Dutch art did not become more popular at home and abroad, it is not due to a lack of their own self-confidence. It is indeed remarkable to watch how around 1900 the veneration of nature has been transformed into the interest into the inner world, and how this tendency has striven for more sincerity and greater adequateness of artistic means year after year. Would it not be for the parallel tendencies in other European countries, the Dutch activities would find an echo through their exceptional clear and forceful development. There are two equally strong and new tendencies, although stemming from different spheres, which unite in the Dutch artistic world just as in the other European countries, in order to overthrow the burden of the past. In 1880^{0?} the "return to nature" slogan of the naturalism of the artists was meant to be applied to the individual life as well as the general condition of human society. This revolution, however, remained a rebellion confined to the studios and the cafés. The demands of this other revolution were different, away from nature. This revolution wanted also to be applied to art as well as general public life. And it had not only the aesthetic program but also the moral strength. The aesthetic and the moral revolution were entirely intermingled as the manifestos, interpretation and even the rejections demonstrate. The slogan "away from nature" was interpreted in painting in the following way: out nature was not more to be the supreme judge of composition but the painted canvass had to develop its own imagination on the foundations of its own intellectual language of forms. In ther words, the artistic creation had to live entirely

independent as an organism of its own. Just as in art "away from nature" had its own social credo: to free man, as a social and spiritual phenomenon, from the traditional perspectivism and to place him on the foundation of his invisible Ego of his eternal humanity. The accentuation of the intellectual in art finds its parallel in the seriousness with which the new generation leads its battle against practical reality, against this type of reality which succeeded to humiliate man to its mere appendix. The revolution finds its resources as well in the aesthetic as in the moral sphere. Their tendencies cross each other and purify each other. Formal expressionism is imbued by metaphysical beauty. The new art of language is filled with political-humanitarian amelioration tendencies. Freedom and purification from the chains of materialism becomes the content of art and the aim of individual life. Style and humanity shall be built on the destruction and the rejuvenation of a new cultural will.

This is the center around which all artistic work of the new Dutch artists revolve. In other countries there are some who incline more to an ethical, others more to an aesthetic expressionism and in other countries we find cases of one-sided artificiality and frustration. There are always ^{imitators} apers and fellow-travellers of those who vacillate between futurism, cubism, pure expressionism, as if they were only different styles like luminism, divisionism and cubism, etc. and other forms of impressionism.

This tremendous turn of things is consciously most clearly experienced by the so-called Stijl group which forms the extreme left and is the only movement in Holland which has its own magazine. It has among its ranks personalities who know how to write and who have international relations to similar groups in Rome, Berlin and Paris; this group is the most representative. Its spiritual and actual leader is

Theo van Doesburg; associated with him are the painters Piet Mondriaan, B. van der Leek, P. Alma, Cries Beekmann, Vilmos Huszar (Hungary), van Tongerloo (Belgium) and the architects J.J.P.Oud, Rob. van't Hoff, Huib. Hoste, A. Kock. The monthly *De Stijl*, edited by van Doesburg, is now in its third year. The reason that it had not been published previously are merely financial ones. The aims for which they are most sincerely fighting, have been formulated over a dozen years ago by Van Doesburg and his associates. They have given lectures, written articles, and organized exhibitions all over Holland. Each of them started in the usual academic way and gained in the academic realm recognition and esteem. The well-know favorite objection that abstract painting is merely the impotence in front of reality is disproved by the pre-expressionist achievements of these Dutch artists.

The obvious development can be best characterized by a consideration of van Doesburg's own evolution. Among many reasons this is possible because we have the most penetrating literary comments by the leader of the Dutch *Stijl* movement. Passionate and with the mastery of the pen, equal to the French and Russian art critics, Van Doesburg has not only predicted the great spiritual revolution but has battled for its necessity, logic and expansion. In Holland the stupidity of some of his contemporaries mocked at him, called him a misled outsider and went through all stages, from the stage of criticism and the vulgar to the ridiculous. Not the least significant about van Doesburg is the importance he has for the European revolution of ideas, and that he was a kind of martyr for the new ways of life.

Van Doesburg's reason to oppose the optic naivety of naturalistic craftsmen and of the idolatry of *l'art pour l'art*, have a serious foundation. His revolutionary demands find expressions even in little comments and all through the years his demands have never weakened.

The decisive awakening has taken place in both directions, at the same time it has overthrown the fundamentals of the painter and of man. Already one of his earliest literary works, a dialogue, called significantly "Insurrection" brings the idea of revolution to life and art at the same time. The representative of impressionism in this dialogue is satisfied with what he sees: "I am only responsible to my eyes, the face is the mediator between my deepest being, my soul and the world" - against this attitude the representative of the intellectual art claims the entire anti-aesthetic power of conscience as a touchstone: "The soul is the mediator between God and man. The responsibility to your soul is infinitely deeper, its appeal is to your conscience. If you are tying yourself to your art, you are limiting your being and you will never be able to recreate limit-transcending art. Art must satisfy man's deepest longing, must give him confidence in life and death, not confidence in the temporal life and the changing forms of existence, but in the life of eternity. The work of art must be a guide to his own soul and to his deepest feelings. If these feelings are asleep the word of art shall awake them. If the artist wants to talk of the eternal he has to create out of a feeling of eternity. Therefore he must conquer the position of Christ, therefore he must be a human being."

This briefly characterized attitude is in obvious contrast to its predecessors, who made it possible for the artist as well as the art-appreciator in the enjoyment of the work of art to be morally untouched. The new group is filled with deep religious interests, which are expressed in their preference for the motif of the crucifixion, especially with the expressionistic painters. But the religious meaning has been no more alive nor clearer nor more powerful than in van Doesburg. Out of the religious background of his character comes the serious new of van Doesburg's will for style. Everything in him tends towards the final,

the absolute. Not only does he destroy the means of style of previous painting as unessential but also he abolished the accidental, visually conceived visions of reality. Art starts in his works whenever nature transcends in sur-nature, into concept and spirit. He makes the moral demand to stop conventional anthropomorphisation of the earthly surroundings and beyond this he asks from the human being abstraction and freeing from all inessential motifs and feelings, the demand to transcend into this sphere of silence, which stands above the joy of creation. "My final joy is that I have grown through art, beyond art and that I, from now on, have to consider art as an inadequate handmaid for the spirit." (1920)

Searching for the absolute, van Doesburg has to get rid of the whole sum of historical convention of the artists; because these have become a mere schimera of formerly true representation of reality. The mathematical foundations emerge as the only ones which are trustworthy and they form the basis for a new development of style. They will be the only means through which the emancipation of the painters work from nature, the continued transmission of the individual feeling for life into the rhythm of the idea will become possible. "The question which impressionism put, was as follows: can the form of nature disappear from the canvass without the fact that this lack will hurt the paintings? Can the content of a painting be only carried by the creative form - the forms of purest consistency are the mathematical ones, they speak for themselves because they have a content per se. This content is space and because every kind of art is primarily concerned with space, mathematical forms are most near to them. Other primary forms do not exist, neither Greek sculpture, nor Roman architecture, nor the art of India did know others and if artists did not put life and spirit into these forms the reason was that mankind needed a naturalistic repre-

sentation of the universe. This concept of form has brought about the decay in painting and architecture. If we get rid of all practical, naturalistic, perspective, anatomic parts of a historical works of art, the purely constructive elements remain. These elements form the rule of construction, this rule is pure harmony, not bound to time, it is the expression of the inner beauty of the object."(1917)

Van Doesburg's attempts for expression have nothing to do with what is usually understood as expressionism. "The commonly valid theory of the expressionistic school (Kandinsky) that a painting is able to reproduce , through colours and line stimuli the immediate reality of our feelings, I reject, as a slogan of the day."(1919). In another respect the Stijl group does not belong to those abstract artists who in the manner of Paul Klee or the post-futuristic Italian metaphysicists still do accept traces of figure and objects in their paintings. Van Doesburg, in opposition to the physical expressionists, demands purification and simplification of feelings, and stabilisation and in opposition to the chaotic model of feelings he demands a monumental order of harmony. Versus those abstract artists who are still having illusions about nature, van Doesburg insists on the complete renunciation of man's inherent desire to mythologize existence. All expressions of individual observation, should dissolve in general aesthetic value formulae. "The spiritual, the entire abstract, is the real human while the mere sphere of feelings does not border to the heights of the spirits and therefore has to be considered as belonging to an inferior state of culture. Every emotion, indifferent, if belonging to pleasure or sorrow-feelings, means an interference in the harmony and the equilibrium between subject (man) and object (universe). The Work of art shall put the observer into the equilibrium between itself and the universe, emotional actions achieve only the contrary. They are the consequences of disharmonious confused

concepts of life which are founded in the predominance of individualism and of slavery to nature. All emotions have to be reduced to pure space-relations." (1919)

If the Stijl group is opposed to every individual emotional reproduction of reality, that does not mean the relationship between the experience of reality and art is given us and that the problem of form is reduced to a mere play of ornaments. Easily to be applied to decorative purposes, window painting, floor designs, etc. However, the line and column composition of Stijl artists are not accidental whims but results of a development which has its foundation in philosophical pre-supposition. The Stijl-manifesto of November 1918 puts it in these pointed words:

"There is an old and new conscience of time. The old one is directed towards the individual. The new one is directed towards the universal. The ~~xxx~~ fight of the individual versus the universal is shown in the world war as well as in contemporary art. The war destroyed the old world with its content: the individual predominance in all spheres. The new art has brought to life the content of the new conscience of time: equal relationships between the universal and the individual."

The method of reality-destruction and reconstruction of the mathematical style of van Doesburg and his group is based on certain rules. This method leads to an abolishment of all realistic accidentals and to the construction of one motif and the establishment of its essentials of space, plain and relationships. These essentials, with the help of an intuitive appreciation of beauty form the synthesis which is free from sentiments and objects. Nobody knows better than van Doesburg that this method can peter out into mere mathematical exercises. He writes: "those who do not know how to use the classic, mathematical means of art or who indulge in mere forms of relationships, are going to decay into meaningless formalism. Here lies the great danger

of the new style. Without inner experience of the motif the result will be meaningless and instead of the essence of beauty only relationship of measures and numbers will appear." (1919).

The universal importance which the Stijl group is stressing becomes clear from the just published Second Stijl manifesto, in which the same de-individualization and mathematical absolutizing of the art of language is demanded. The beginning of the manifesto is as follows: "The structure of contemporary word art is still living on the sweet sentimentalism of a past, effeminate generation. The word is dead. The exercises of aping nature and the glitter of dramatic expression with which the bookmakers are presenting us by miles and pounds, do not contain anything of the new development in the art of our life. The word is powerless. The shortbreathed and sentimental poetry of the I and the You which is used everywhere, and especially so in Holland, under the influence of an individualism, afraid of spaces, fills us with disgust."

This manifesto appeals to all those in the world who attempt a spiritual rejuvenation of the world from its roots. It does not make any difference between the national civilizations or between music or architecture or a race, more gifted with the logic of the word or the sensual colour. This international mode of thinking which considers at least Europe as a de facto moral unity, expresses a stronger sense for strategy and form than the German expressionists do. Also in itself, as a thinking unit, the Stijl group shows more unity and sturdiness. They are more able to change the form concept of Europe than many other central European groups who are also striving for a new freedom. In the power and determination of their principles, the Stijl group allies the European concepts of beauty for revolutionizing, ^{and} the firmness and pride of Dutch intellectualism is expressed which has always been

ahead of the German and is able to influence and to fire on the latter's spiritual life. Furthermore, it should be noticed that the fact that almost all participants of the Stijl-movement and all other radical artist in Holland are natives of small city or peasant communities and residing even today in the provinces. This contradicts the theory that the development towards abstractionism is a consequence of big city life. The Dutch radicalism of style sprung from purely spiritual needs and therefore is convincing proof of the historical determinism and the timeless unity of todays art revolution.