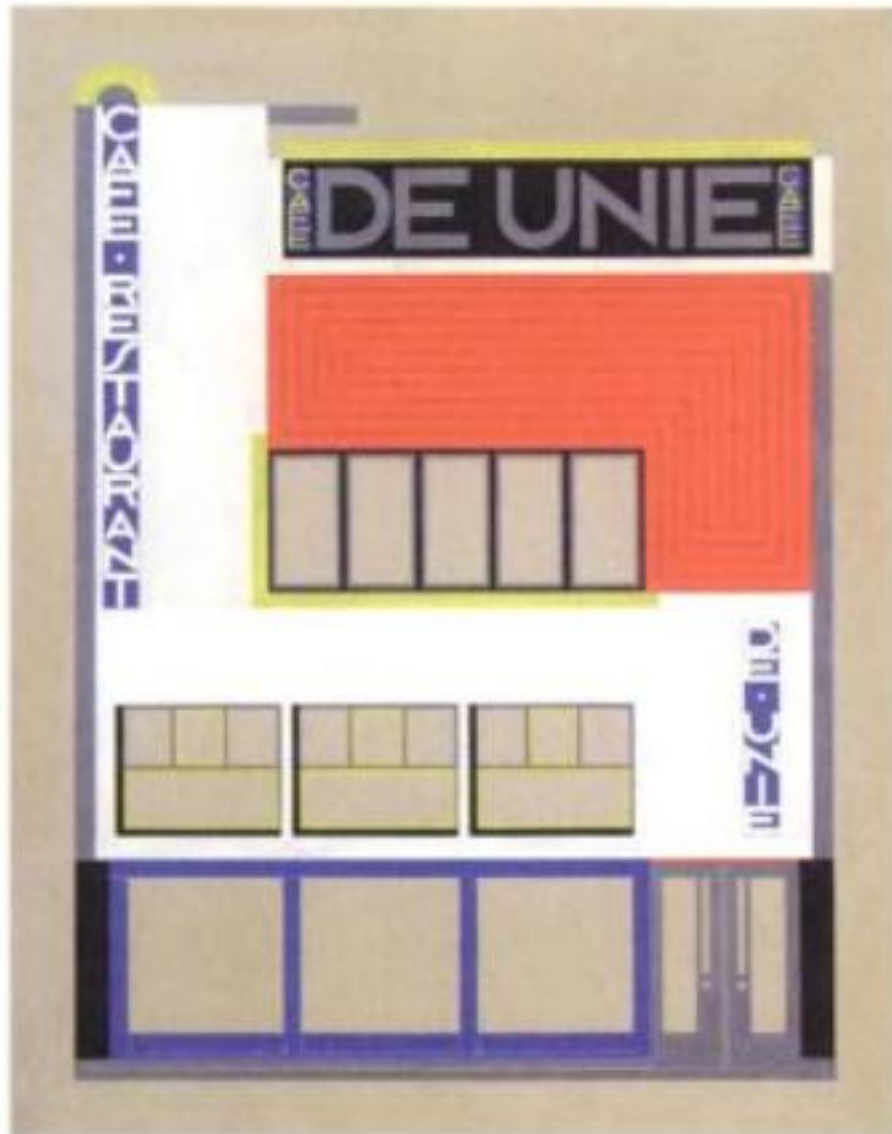


De Stijl, Constructivism and the New Typography



• Drawing of the Rotterdam Café De Unie by Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, who also designed the integrated lettering. Built in 1924–1925, the building was bombed in 1940 and reconstructed on a different location in 1985. Gouache, c. 1924. Oud Collection of the Netherlands Architecture Institute

• The first cover design of *De Stijl* magazine, used from 1917 through 1920, carried an abstract image by Vilmos Huszár. He probably designed the lettering as well.



During the war of 1914–1918, and partly as a result of it, a radical view of the arts took shape in several European countries. Although this avant-garde had many local names, mostly evoking change and simplicity, it was in essence an international movement which is now generally referred to as Modernism, or the historical avant-garde. Modernism was a drastic reaction to the devastating experience of the war and to the nineteenth-century values and attitudes of 'the old Europe' which were perceived as the war's underlying cause. In numerous manifestos and programmes the past was bid farewell and the future embraced. 'There is no longer any way out for Europe. Centralization and prosperity, spiritual and material individualism was the foundation of the old Europe. In that it has caged itself. It is falling to pieces. We observe this calmly. We would not want to help even if we could. We do not want to extend the life of this old prostitute.'¹⁷ Thus wrote Theo van Doesburg in a 1921 issue of *De Stijl* (The Style), the magazine he founded in 1917 and whose contributors included the painters Piet Mondriaan (also known as Mondrian), Vilmos Huszár and Bart van der Leek and the architects Gerrit Rietveld, Jan Wils and J.J.P. Oud. *De Stijl* magazine appeared under Van Doesburg's editorship until 1928; a final commemorative issue was put together after his death in 1931.

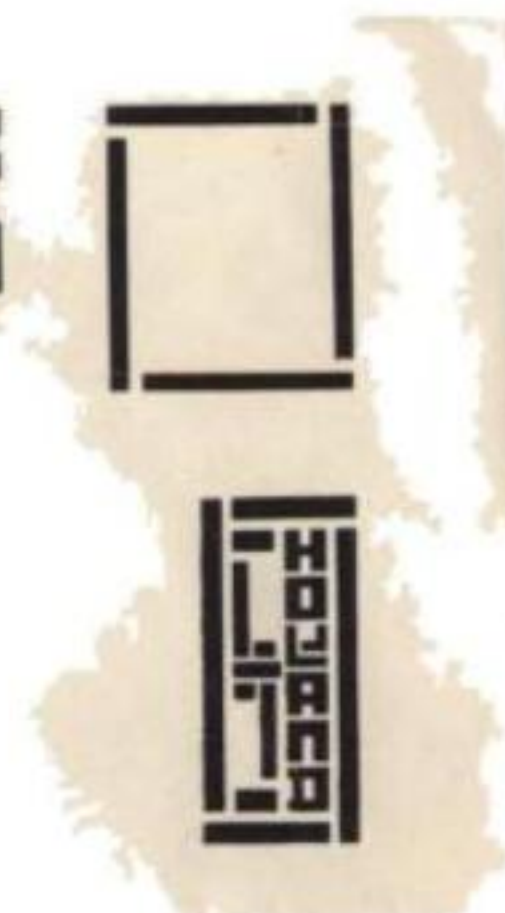
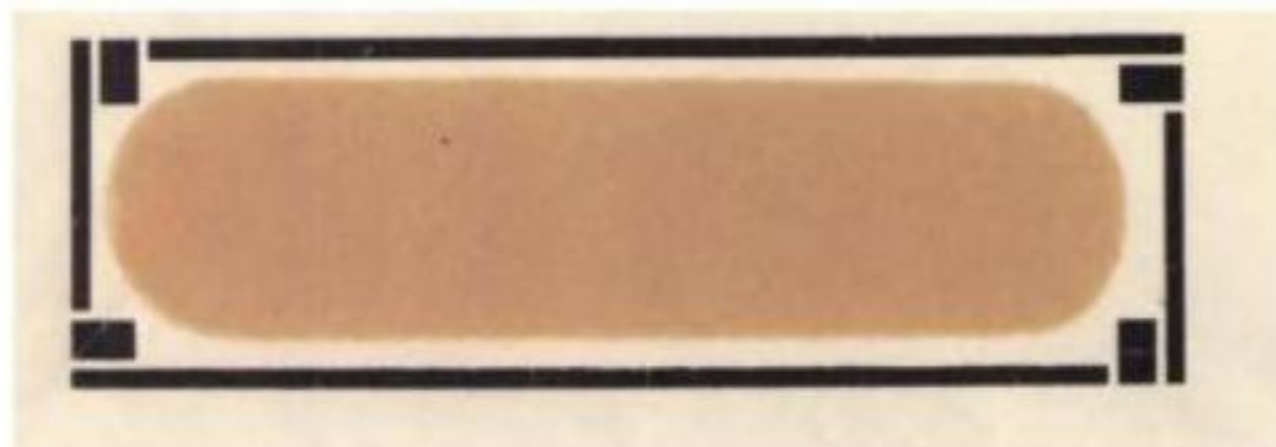
Although the magazine itself never sold more than about three hundred copies, *De Stijl* was the Netherlands' most influential contribution to the international modernist movement. Rejecting figuration and narrative, it called for simplicity and objectivity, using elements of pure form and colour 'to construct an ideal "model" for a new world through furniture, sculpture, interior design and architecture'.¹⁸ De Stijl's foundations lay in painting; Piet Mondriaan's post-1920 paintings – carefully balanced constructions of squares and rectangles in primary colours, separated by firm black lines – are among its lasting icons. Yet Mondriaan was not alone; he had arrived at his uncompromising style through a series of exercises in abstraction carried out in 1917–1919 in 'a symbiotic relationship'¹⁹ with three other painters initially associated with De Stijl – Van Doesburg, Huszár and Van der Leek. The architects and designers of De Stijl took these ideas into other realms. Gerrit Rietveld designed his famous furniture, as well as a number of houses of which the Schröder house in Utrecht (1924) stands out as one of the most innovative housing projects of its time. J.J.P. Oud and Van Doesburg, among others, also put De Stijl ideas into practice in imaginative architecture and interior design.

Some of these projects, such as the famous Café De Unie by Oud (Rotterdam, 1924, reconstructed in 1985), or shops by Rietveld, featured attractive lettering in a semi-geometric Deco style. Yet the most innovative expression of De Stijl typography is to be found in the works of those Stijl-affiliated artists who made designs for print.

Alphabets by Huszár and Van der Leek

The contribution of De Stijl to graphic design and typography has been quantitatively modest; but the radical solutions it proposed have remained relevant to date. *De Stijl*'s first remarkable piece of graphic design was the magazine's original masthead. It was an abstract woodcut composed of black rectangles, over which the words DE STIJL were drawn in fragmented square capitals. In his foreword, Van Doesburg mentioned the painter Vilmos Huszár as the designer of the vignette; it is generally assumed that Huszár also drew the lettering, which was subsequently used by Van Doesburg for the magazine's stationery.²⁰

**N.V. HOLLANDSCHE DEURENFABRIEK
C. BRUYNZEEL EN ZONEN - ZAANDAM**



**EDEN
VENA
ROOS**

* Vilmos Huszár, bookplate for
Lena de Roos, 1922.

* Vilmos Huszár, envelope for the
Bruynzeel wood factory, 1920s.

Vilmos Huszár (1884–1960), a Hungarian living in Holland, was active as a painter, interior designer, graphic designer and commercial artist. Although his contribution to the earliest editions of *De Stijl* were crucial, his relationship with the magazine was soon disrupted after heated conflicts with Van Doesburg. He had relations with the international Constructivist movement and worked with Piet Zwart; this led to an increased interest in graphic design. In his graphic work Huszár continued his exploration of rectangular, constructed letterforms but seldom, if ever, returned to the fragmented, mosaic-like forms of the *Stijl* logo. He designed an alphabet of indented square characters which he used, in various forms, throughout the 1920s: in a 1922 bookplate, in his stationery for the Bruynzeel wood factory and on his well-known cover for the 1929 Diego Riviera issue of *Wendingen*. In 1926, when commissioned to design a full-fledged advertising campaign for the cigarette brand Miss Blanche, his approach was less radical. His stylized yet seductive portrait of a female smoker (based on an existing vignette) was accompanied by hand-drawn varieties of a sanserif which owed as much to nineteenth-century grotesques as to geometry. A short article by Huszár in the magazine *i-10* (which was to some extent the successor to *De Stijl*) shows how much manual work was involved in the Miss Blanche campaign. Each billboard was designed individually, taking into account the quality of the architecture as well as other aspects of the site. 'The lamp-post in front of the building was incorporated in my composition,' wrote Huszár of one particular piece of lettering.²¹ In several posters from the late 1920s, Huszár freely combined his square alphabet with this type of more conventional sanserif lettering.

While Huszár seemingly lost interest in the logic of the *Stijl* logo, similar 'decomposed' forms were the essence of the lettering designed from 1919 onwards by Bart van der Leek (1876–1958). Van der Leek never embraced pure abstraction; one of the reasons why he broke away from *De Stijl* only a few months after its inception was his reluctance to subscribe to what he felt was a dogmatic and limiting approach.²² In Van der Leek's post-1920 paintings, figurative images are 'broken down' to form compositions of straight and diagonal lines and blocks; yet a residue of the original figure or object is always palpable. Van der Leek was convinced that painting needed to be anchored in day-to-day reality; he also wanted his art to have a place in that reality, and for several years almost entirely abandoned painting for interior and industrial design.

Unlike Huszár, Van der Leek did not adopt a different, more accessible idiom when applying his art to advertising. His famous poster for the Batavier Line (1915) used the same Egyptian-style human figures that inhabited his paintings. As soon as he had developed his fragmented forms in painting, they appeared in poster designs as well, combined with typographic constructions made along the same lines. This was an obvious choice when designing a poster for his own exhibition at an Utrecht gallery; it became problematic when in 1919 he was invited to submit a proposal to



Vilmos Huszár, campaign for
Miss Blanche cigarettes, 1926.
Each of the hand-painted
billboards was designed
individually, acknowledging
the properties of the sites
– including the lamppost in
front of the wall.

17 Purvis (cit.), p 25.

18 Paul Overy, *De Stijl*, New York 1991, p 9.

19 Ibid., p 55.

20 Els Hoek (ed.), *Theo van Doesburg*, Utrecht/Otterlo/Bussum 2000, pp 209–211.

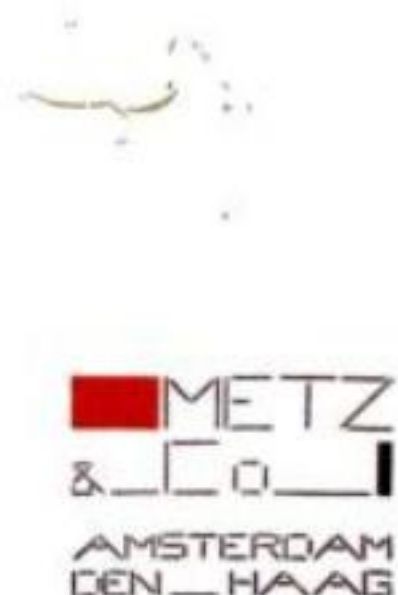
21 Republished in Arthur Lehning and Jurriaan Schrofer, *i-10, de internationale avant-garde tussen de twee wereldoorlogen*, The Hague 1963 (2nd printing 1974), pp 72–74.

22 cf. Bart van der Leek, *Lezing* (1957) in Van Kooten (ed.), *Bart van der Leek*, Otterlo 1994, pp 130–131. Van der Leek's stylistic development is discussed in the essays by Cees Hilhorst and R.W.D. Oxenaar in this book, pp 143 ff.

- Bart van der Leck's poster design for Delfia vegetable fat (1919) was rejected by the management of the Nederlandse Olie Fabriek. This gouche is said to be the last of twelve designs for the poster (Le Coultre/Purvis 2002, p 35).
Martijn F. Le Coultre Collection.
- Bart van der Leck, *Het vlas* by Hans Christian Andersen, 1941. The text was completely hand-lettered in Van der Leck's fragmented alphabet.



Bart van der Leck, packaging for Metz & Co. department store, early 1950s.



the Delft Salad Oil Factory (NOF). Van der Leck made several designs based on the same fragmented figure showing, in all probability, a moustached man holding (or selling?) a bottle of Delfia vegetable fat. The lettering follows the same logic as the image: capitals are spliced into blocks and lines along horizontals, verticals and diagonals. The board of directors was not ready for such a degree of abstraction: Van der Leck's design was rejected and the poster never printed.

In the lettering of the Delfia poster (which in fact precedes the 1920 exhibition poster), some of the characters are suggested rather than represented, which makes it difficult to read. In his later typographic work, Van der Leck solved the problem by further simplifying the letterform until he achieved an alphabet of square capitals constructed with straight and diagonal lines. He remained true to these forms for decades. In the early 1940s he was asked to illustrate a new translation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale *The flax* (*Het vlas*). He decided to design the typography as well, by meticulously hand-lettering the text. Despite the difficult circumstances of the early war years, the resulting booklet was a beautifully printed, idiosyncratic masterpiece in which the images and the text formed an inextricable unity.

Van der Leck's most important commercial client throughout the 1930s and again in the early 1950s was the Amsterdam luxury department store Metz & Co. His work for Metz first allowed him to apply his art to public spaces: the firm commissioned him to design shop interiors, colour schemes for the company's fabrics, and carpets based on his paintings. In 1952, already in his seventies, he redesigned the company's packaging. The charming grey boxes and paper bags were hand-lettered using a thin version of his alphabet.

In 1996, The Foundry in London released a digital typeface called *VanDerLeck* as part of its *Architype* series. The forms are inspired by Van der Leck's lettering, notably of *Het vlas*, but although it is a well-executed tribute, it is difficult to think of the design as Van der Leck's. The forms have been rigorously cleaned up, thereby losing the spontaneity and vulnerability of the original.

The elastic alphabet of Theo van Doesburg

Of the artists linked to *De Stijl*, it was its founder, Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931)²³, who developed the most influential and provocative view of typography.

In 1919 Van Doesburg drew an alphabet as a tool to express the typographic ideas of *De Stijl*. Although he was always extremely critical of Wijdeveld and *Wendingen*, the typeface shows some influences of Wijdeveld's brass rule style. Van Doesburg drew a modular alphabet of simplified capitals on a grid of 5 × 5 squares. It was not made for legibility: some characters, especially the K, R and X, are so unconventional that they must have been problematic (and annoying) to many readers. Van Doesburg

BOND VAN REVOLUTIONNAIR- SOCIALISTISCHE INTELLECTUELEN

allowed for slight variations of the basic forms when necessary, and often used condensed or extended versions in order to 'justify' lines that were unequal in length. It has been suggested that the varying widths were created by changing the squares of the 5×5 grid into upright or oblong rectangles.²⁴ That is not quite correct, because this would have resulted in a deformation of the stems, creating a difference in thickness of the horizontals and the verticals (as with electronic scaling).²⁵ Van Doesburg's lettering is always monoline, even where the letters are narrowed down to almost half their width. In fact, he used his alphabet in a way that was neither systematic nor aesthetic, redrawing the letters at will. This allowed him to adopt the alphabet in regular design jobs.

One such job – his largest – was an assignment from the Amsterdam trading company Hagemeyer & Co. During the second half of 1919 Van Doesburg worked almost exclusively for this firm, designing a large set of stationery, a poster which was never printed and a 'CASSA' (cash desk) sign. Some of these designs were made solely with the Van Doesburg alphabet, apparently hand-drawn; others use an existing grotesque typeface ('antieke') combined with monograms of his own design.²⁶

One of the best-known designs made with the grid alphabet is his logo for the League of Revolutionary-Socialist Intellectuals; it is a typical example of how the widths of his letters could be adapted to form a justified rectangle. The logo was used, together with a monogram, on letterheads, envelopes and a manifesto. In early 1920 Van Doesburg took part in a competition for the cover design of *Klei* (Clay), a trade magazine of brick manufacturers. Van Doesburg used a beefed-up version of his alphabet for the masthead, but although this block-like lettering was fitting to the task, the design was not selected. Van Doesburg subsequently refused to take part in an exhibition of the entries.²⁶ The Centraal Museum in Utrecht possesses another unexecuted design which is even more intriguing: a large working drawing of the words LETTERGIETERIJ AMSTERDAM (probably about 1919). As it is not very likely that the foundry commissioned a nameplate in constructivist style, this design may have been part of a campaign on Van Doesburg's behalf to introduce himself to the firm as a type designer.²⁷

In January 1921, *De Stijl* appeared in a new layout. Van Doesburg and Mondriaan had redesigned the cover, replacing Huszár's logo with a new masthead that consisted of standard sans-serif type. The words *DE STIJL* were superimposed over two large bold capitals printed in red: *NB*, i.e. *Nieuwe Beelding* ('new imaging') – Mondriaan's motto for the movement. The layout – a daring combination of symmetry and asymmetry – was highly appreciated by Tschichold, who reproduced a postcard designed in the same style in *Die Neue Typographie*, praising it as an early example of new typography: 'a pure typographic style using only type, space and colour.'²⁸

That same year Van Doesburg settled in Weimar, home of the Bauhaus. Although the school's director Walter Gropius shied away from hiring the boisterous Dutchman, Van Doesburg gave several lectures, as well as a 'Stijl course' which was attended by Bauhaus pupils and staff. His geometric approach appealed greatly to some students and young teachers, who were less taken with the romantic and esoteric approach of Bauhaus teachers like Johannes Itten. It seems very possible that Van Doesburg's presence in Weimar contributed to the radicalization and rationalization of the Bauhaus curriculum. It may have been a personal triumph for Van Doesburg that his students began designing posters using his alphabet.

In subsequent years, Van Doesburg abandoned hand-lettering for ready-made type. He wrote and designed visually challenging 'cubist poems' which were published

* The square letterforms of Van Doesburg's modular alphabet could be adapted at will to form 'justified' lines, as in the 1919 logo for the 'League of Revolutionary-Socialist Intellectuals'. Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

* Theo van Doesburg, book cover for *Klassiek, Barok, Modern*, Antwerp 1920.

* Van Doesburg's alphabet as issued by The Foundry, London (Architype Van Doesburg, 1996).



23 Van Doesburg's real name was Christian Emil Marie Küpper. He renamed himself after his stepfather Theodorus Doesburg (without 'Van'), who may also have been his biological father.

24 Kees Broos, *Mondriaan, de Stijl en de Nieuwe Typografie*, Amsterdam/The Hague 1994, p 12.

25 Donald Beekman's *FF Beekman* (1999, p 268) is a case in point: based on principles similar to Van Doesburg's, it allows for electronic scaling, deforming the verticals.

26 This example and the following: *Ouvrecatalogus Theo van Doesburg* (cit.) pp 244 – 263.

28 Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography*, transl. Ruari McLean, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1998, pp 58 – 59.



- Theo van Doesburg, proposals for the use of his alphabet on a magazine cover (1920) and in a nameplate for the Amsterdam Type Foundry (1919?).
Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

- Theo van Doesburg, stationery for Hagemeyer & Co, 1919.
Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

- Van Doesburg's alphabet for L'Aubette in Strasbourg, as digitized by The Foundry, London (Architype Aubette, 1996).



L'AUBETTE 1928 VAN DOESBURG ARP TAEUBER

LETTERGIETERY AMSTERDAM

in *De Stijl* under the pseudonym I.K. Bonset (an anagram of IK BEN SOT, 'I am crazy'). Van Doesburg's alter ego became the editor of a new magazine called *Mecano*, which published Dadaist contributions by the likes of Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia. If the 1921 cover of *De Stijl* was the prototype of modernist 'new typography', then *Mecano*, launched merely a year later, was post-modernism avant la lettre, combining an eclectic array of foundry type with found images from technical catalogues as well as original art. There was a sense of fun and anarchy about *Mecano* which was taken to new extremes in a series of wild posters and programmes for the Dada shows that Van Doesburg organized with Schwitters in early 1923.

Van Doesburg returned to his grid-based alphabet once more in 1926–1928, when working on L'Aubette in Strasbourg. L'Aubette was an eighteenth-century military building which had been converted into an enormous entertainment complex. Van Doesburg had been invited to take part in the project by Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, to whom it had originally been assigned; he soon took charge. L'Aubette was described by Van Doesburg as the long-awaited *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) of the movement: 'the first realization of a programme which we have cherished for years'.²⁹ Apart from breathtaking colour schemes for the walls, ceilings and floors of several halls, Van Doesburg designed numerous accessories, from neon lettering and signage to ashtrays and invitation cards. For these items he used a modified variant of his alphabet, allowing for a limited use of diagonals. This resulted in a more legible and 'user-friendly' lettering style. Apart from one more cover design for yet another magazine (*Art Concret*, 1930), Van Doesburg's activities as a graphic designer were over. In the last years before his early death in a Swiss sanatorium, he mainly concentrated on interior design, architecture and painting.

Van Doesburg's original alphabet and his typeface for L'Aubette have been issued in The Foundry's *Architype* series as *VanDoesburg* and *Aubette*. Both are cleaned-up yet respectful revivals; their main drawback is that they have fixed a form which, in the hands of the original designer, was made to change continually.

Zwart, Schuitema and Kiljan: towards uninteresting type

In 1928, the German typographer Jan Tschichold published *Die Neue Typographie*. In his rather schoolmasterly way Tschichold explained the motives and methods of the typographic avant-garde. As we saw earlier, he mentioned the experiments of *De Stijl* as one of the catalysts of innovation; the book even took its epitaph from Mondriaan. In turn, Dutch designers like Piet Zwart and Paul Schuitema approved of Tschichold's standpoint and embraced his notion of a 'new typography'.

The role of these designers – the torch-bearers of early Dutch Functionalism³⁰ – in the development of type design and lettering is marginal at best. However, their view of typography has had a lasting influence on twentieth-century design in the Netherlands and abroad – precisely because of the way in which they aimed to achieve 'crude legibility' with sparse means. This approach represents the antithesis of Art Deco: it aimed at radically omitting all that was aesthetic, ornamental or deliberately 'beautiful' in favour of 'pragmatic organization'.

Born in 1885, Zwart was trained as a craftsman, draughtsman and architect; his early work consisted of textile, furniture and interior designs in a style that showed affinity with the Amsterdam School. In 1918 or thereabouts, having met Vilmos Huszár and

• Piet Zwart, poster for Vicker's House, The Hague (c. 1922); the text **RUBBER VLOEREN** ('rubber floors') was drawn in fat-face letterforms invented by Zwart.
Mortijn F. Le Coultre Collection.

• A very similar alphabet was used in the lettering of a project by the H.P. Berlage studio, the First Church of Christ Scientist, The Hague 1926. To all probability, the lettering was designed by Zwart.



• After having discovered letterpress, Piet Zwart never used hand-lettering again – or if he did, the lettering was made to closely resemble ready-made type. Cover design for a series of booklets on cinema, published by W.L. & J. Brusse in Rotterdam in 1931–1933.



Jan Wils, Zwart became interested in the ideas of the avant-garde. His earliest typographic work was the stationery he designed for Wils, to whom he was an assistant for two years. From 1921 to 1927 Zwart worked for H.P. Berlage, the most influential Dutch architect of the era.

Zwart's earliest typographic experiments follow the architect's logic. His 1920 furniture designs for the Bruynzeel factory (for which Huszár supplied the colour schemes) are lettered in a square alphabet similar to the letterforms that Wijdeveld, Huszár and Van Doesburg were designing at the time. At 36, Zwart landed his first graphic design assignment – a series of advertisements and stationery for the flooring company Vicker's House. He made a hand-lettered poster, using constructed square letters combined with a sans-serif fat-face of his own making. A similar fat-face alphabet can be found in the Church of Christ Scientist (The Hague, 1926), a Berlage project for which Zwart designed the interior. By then, however, Zwart had begun using existing compositors' material in his designs for print.

In 1923, Zwart was hired by the Nederlandse Kabelfabriek (NKF) to design the cable factory's advertisements in the trade press. His very first piece was a meticulously hand-drawn composition, more or less in the Amsterdam School style. But, as Zwart told Kees Broos: 'I was still not finished with it when the magazine had already come out. So I realized that this was not a very good way to work and plunged into typography. ... I actually learned about typography from an assistant in the small printing company where the monthly magazine on electro-technology was being produced. ... I began making sketches and then during lunch hour with that young man tried to figure out how we could produce these things ... that's how it came about. I have had to learn the typographic craft from scratch like that.'²⁹

Between 1923 and 1933, Zwart made 275 NKF advertisements, acting as his own copywriter, playing with visual puns and alliterations. He began to refer to himself as a 'typotekt' (a contraction of 'typographer' and 'architect') who built pages with type, lines and photos. He embraced photography as an integrating element of the composition because of the dynamic tension between the flatness of the type and the dimensionality suggested by photography. Among his best-known works produced with this technique (for which Moholy-Nagy coined the term 'Typo-photo') are the NKF catalogues, brochures for the PTT and the covers for a series of cinema books. Zwart had precise ideas on which typefaces were best suited for photo-typography. His most extensive essay on the subject is 'van oude tot nieuwe typografie' (from old to new typography – no caps, of course), a text written for a brochure he edited and designed for the printing firm Trio.³⁰ It is a passionate plea for no-nonsense typefaces or, in Zwart's words, uninteresting type. 'we want typefaces that are more business-like; advertising demands brutal legibility. for the time being, the "grotesque" best answers this requirement although there is a senseless, unrestrained prolif-

²⁹ Quoted in Overy, *De Stijl* (cit.), p. 179.

³⁰ Dutch Constructivism – stressing the formal aspects of their 1930s work – is also a commonly used term. A notion used at the time is *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* ('zakelijk' meaning 'business-like', 'pragmatic' and 'objective').

³¹ Kees Broos, *Piet Zwart 1885–1977* (cit.), p. 38 (my translation); see also Alston W. Purvis, *Dutch Graphic Design 1918–1945* (cit.), p. 66. Zwart, of course, uses 'typography' in the strict sense of composing and printing with metal (or wood) type.

³² The brochure remained in the proof stage and was not published until 1994, when it was inserted in Kees Broos's book *Mondriaan, De Stijl en de Nieuwe Typografie*.



* Although Paul Schuitema rejected any form of 'charming' lettering in the 1930s, his early designs show some influence of fashionable Art Deco alphabets.

* Towards the end of his life, Schuitema went back to exploring letterforms in a rather playful way. His experiments resulted in this double alphabet, issued as a poster in the 1960s.



Gerard Kiljan, hand-lettered leaflet for Junker & Ruh kitchen stoves (c. 1927). In his post-war years, Kiljan returned to lettering design. The Kiljan estate contains some unpublished sketches for typefaces.



eration of the number of typefaces, due to variations on and 'improvements' of existing types, an elementarily functional, scientifically grounded letterform has not yet been made. therefore new typography is forced to make do with the simplest, least decorated, most pragmatic typefaces: a few grotesques and some old-style faces. in any case those types are to be avoided that have a self-conscious, personal, peculiaristic character; their pretentiousness is contrary to the essence of typography; *the less interesting the typeface, the more typographically usable*. a typeface is less interesting when it has fewer historic residues and is more of a product of the exact, tense spirit of the 20th century. every era has had its typical, characteristic typeface, ours still has to create its own "particular" faces. these letterforms will have to be based on physiological-optical constraints – not on individualistic considerations and predilections.'

Zwart's brothers in arms in his struggle for an objective, functional typography were Paul Schuitema and Gerard Kiljan. The three designers had independently developed similar ideas when they met in the mid-1920s. They began to operate as a kind of avant-garde design troika, signing manifestos together and participating jointly in exhibitions. In 1930 Gerard Kiljan started up a department of advertising design at the Art Academy of The Hague, and invited Paul Schuitema to become head teacher. This collaboration resulted in the first functionalist design school in the Netherlands, showing a strong affinity with the Bauhaus. Gerard Kiljan's body of work is rather limited (although it includes pioneering designs for postage stamps, a telephone and an ergonomic lemonade bottle); he saw himself first and foremost as a teacher. Schuitema, on the other hand, was one of the most influential graphic designers of the interwar period.

Trained as a painter, Schuitema soon switched to advertising – a field which he felt offered him more significant possibilities to express the spirit of the times. He made some of his most outstanding work for two related commercial clients, the P. van Berkel meat company and the (Van) Berkel scales and cutting machine factory. Yet, like Zwart, he was also active in leftist circles and made cover designs for socialist magazines. Like Zwart, Paul Schuitema developed his own variant of Constructivism, combining type – often set diagonally – and photography. It is interesting to see how this modernist work was preceded by a short phase in which Schuitema was influenced by the colourful mainstream of Art Deco design. His earliest showcards and packaging labels for Van Berkel are hand-lettered in a charming style which is a far cry from his later, more radical work but already possessed its clarity and compositional quality. Many years later, somewhere in the 1950s, Schuitema returned once more to lettering. He produced a poster showing a juxtaposition of two alphabets: a set of black 'grotesque' capitals, printed over a geometric alphabet in red.

As late as 1971, Schuitema summarized his view of type and typography in an unpublished text written on the occasion of his grandson's birth. 'To me, the letter was no more than a thing for reading that had to be used in a clear, straightforward and unadorned way. A manner of speaking without rhetorics or frills, but flexible enough in its appearance to be able ... to distinguish texts of primary importance from secondary ones.' The lively yet pragmatic typography that Schuitema envisaged required resourcefulness, scrupulousness and economic thinking, 'formulating problems as lucidly and clearly as possible at all times'.³³

Throughout the 1930s, '40s and '50s, Kiljan and Schuitema trained several generations of industrial, interior and graphic designers at the Hague Academy of Arts. Type was never a priority in the curriculum: their functionalist view of type was not very stimulating to those who had an interest in letterforms. Elsewhere at the Academy, however – in the department of Drawing and Painting – other teachers were developing contrasting views, thus laying the foundation for what would become, from 1970 onwards, the 'Hague school of letters'. That other lineage is sketched on pp 102 – 103.

³³ From the archive of Dick Maan, a former student of Schuitema.