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*Organizers of Life. De Stijl, the Polish Avant-garde, and Design* is the last in a series of exhibitions organised by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in the year 2017 as a part of the celebrations marking the one hundredth anniversary of the Polish Avant-garde, aiming to show its oeuvre in a new light. The scope of the exhibition—presenting the contacts and links between the Dutch De Stijl and the Polish avant-garde groups and artists—is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it touches upon a heretofore-neglected aspect, overshadowed by a viewpoint prevailing in major studies of the history of the Polish Avant-garde, which accentuate the crucial influence of Soviet Constructivism. Secondly, it relates to important issues presented in the projects of avant-garde artists, seeking to create an entirely new plastic culture and to transform and improve the surrounding world through architectural, interior, and furniture design, among others.

As an artistic group, De Stijl worked closely together between the years 1917 and 1920. During that time, their principal theoretic works were conceived, laying the foundations for the movement and its oeuvre. The De Stijl circle produced its most important works in the 1920s. The group also published a journal under the same title but shut down in 1932, a year after its principal contributor's—Theo van Doesburg's—death. The group consisted of Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, Bart van der Leek, Vilmos Huszár, Gerrit Rietveld, Cornelis van Eesteren, Willem van Leusden, Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, Robert van 't Hoff, and Jan Wils, among others. In 1924, as a result of a conflict with Theo van Doesburg over the principles of Neo-Plasticism, Piet Mondrian distanced himself from the movement. In the last years of the movement's existence, it managed to attract several artists of the younger generation, such as Frederick Kiesler, Jean Gorin, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, and César Domela Nieuwenhuis.

The idea of Neo-Plasticism, elaborated by Piet Mondrian, served as the point of departure for De Stijl's concept of art. Initially related to painting, it was later translated, largely by Theo van Doesburg, into the third and fourth dimension. It was not meant as a simple idea for industrial design, but as a comprehensive model for the shaping of plastic form, manifesting itself on many different levels and through interaction among various artistic fields: painting, sculpture, and architecture (and even music and literature), together forming a total *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The figure of Dr. Mathieu H. J. Schoenmaekers, whose works *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld* (The new world view) and *Beginnelen der Beeldende Wiskunde* (The principles of visual mathematics) were supposed to lay the groundwork for the theory of Neo-Plasticism and even became an inspiration for the group's name, often recurs in studies of De Stijl. The group's theosophic foundations came forth in Piet Mondrian's radical concept of Neo-Plasticism, while exerting influence

on other forms of De Stijl's artistic output. The deeply philosophical background—which bestowed absolute meaning upon geometrical abstraction, making it an equivalent, or the very essence of the shape of the world and its pertinent interdependencies, studied both by physical sciences, and the new, syncretic, spiritual tendencies—gained a rational basis, derived from mathematical principles. Being the basis of the functioning of the environment, and in consequence the basis of new art, according to Schoenmaekers's theory, mathematics was “the queen of all sciences.” Based upon mathematical principles and elementary geometrical forms, art proclaimed the restitution of the primordial order (the organic whole), and in this particular concept became an epitome of modernity, of the “new order.” Art seemed to be a perfect organiser of the modern world, an organiser of life in accordance with eternal fundamentals. As Theo van Doesburg argued in the third De Stijl manifesto, published in 1921, in the eighth issue of the group's journal: “Europe is lost. Concentration and property, spiritual and material individualism were the basis of old Europe. ... A new Europe has already begun to grow within us. ... It does not exist in words, but in visual deeds and inner strength. Mental strength. With that the new scheme is being formed.” Written just a couple of years after the catastrophe of World War I, Van Doesburg's words position De Stijl among art groups seeking to rebuild the destroyed world, and create a civilisation able to bear the weight of responsibility for the future of the world. De Stijl's artistic objectives, according to which art was understood as a tool of progress, linked the group to Constructivism in their fight for artistic activism and international cooperation in that matter, materialised in the idea of the Congress of International Progressive Artists (held in Düsseldorf in May 1922) and the Congress of the Constructivists and Dadaists (held in Weimar in September 1922).

Władysław Strzemiński similarly perceived the role of art, writing:

“tensions must be opposed by an ideal of purposefulness, balance, organisation and construction, founding art upon objective, verifiable, and universal elements. These intersubjective elements, expressed in measures and numbers, constitute social bonds. Art should arise from intellectual and rationalizing impulses.” [“Aspekty rzeczywistości” (Aspects of reality), *Forma*, no. 5, 1936]

In the beginning of the 1920s, when Polish artists had already settled into the new geopolitical situation that had brought Poland its independence, an organised stance and endeavour suddenly became possible to put ideas into action that previously could only be presented in the form of artistic manifestos. With the establishing of the Blok group, and the publishing of the first issue of the group's journal, closer relations between the Polish and Dutch Avant-gardes developed—an exchange of letters along with reprints of articles and photographs of completed projects. The artists associated in the two groups shared a common goal: to organise modern life through art.

At the same time, such founders and promoters of Neo-Plasticism as Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and Vilmos Huszár had already successfully tried to put theory into practice in the fields of architecture, design, and typography. In Poland, new architecture was then only just in the making, searching for a middle way between the national “country-mansion style” and Western egalitarian ideas, aiming to provide all with a fair standard of living. Functionalism, which prevailed in architecture, furniture design, and interior colour schemes, was supposed to be the hallmark of modernity. The use of colour, addressed, among others, by Szymon Syrkus, was considered a very serious issue: “Instead of white tiles, colourful, modern compositions and colour combinations à la Mondrian or van Doesburg are becoming more and more popular.” [“Preliminarz architektury” (Architectural estimates), *Praesens*, no. 1, 1926].

In addition, the artists debated the problem of colour, tackling



it in a more theoretical manner than the architects. As Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński wrote in their book *Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm* (Łódź, 1931): “Colour, coming in contact with space, emanates the force of its energy into it. The influence of colour in space could be said to stretch all the way to infinity. Colour subdues space and radiates into it. The greater the tension of colour, the greater the force of its influence on space—space succumbs to the energy of colour that emanates out from the sculpture, opening up the scope of the sculpture’s effect into space ...” [English translation reprinted from: *October*, no. 156, Spring 2016, p. 34].

Andrzej Pronaszko spelled out the theory of colour in interiors in a manner more easily understandable to the average citizen (see pp. 111–116 in this volume). In October 1929, when Pronaszko published his article, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, members of the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM, International Congress of Modern Architecture), participated in the second meeting of the organisation, then entering its second year of existence, in Frankfurt am Main. The conference of architects was accompanied by an exhibition called *The Minimum Dwelling*, where plans of often already completed flats in housing complexes across Europe were presented. The conference was devoted to the problem of living space, lighting, and ventilation standards, elaborated for the newly-built flats. The application of structural steel in architecture, combined with autoclaved aerated concrete and glazing, allowed houses to be designed in compliance with the new directives. The Warsaw Housing Cooperative housing complex in the Rakowiec district in Warsaw, designed by Helena and Szymon Syrkus between 1934 and 1938, was one the first of this kind in Poland. The complex implemented a vision of architecture where the functional usage of the limited living space is maximised thanks to transforming furniture that could be folded up or out, changing the function of the space

according to the inhabitant’s needs.

Starting from the principles concerning the structure of painting and sculpture, Kobro and Strzemiński proposed a theory of modern architecture that could form a harmonious whole with its environment: “Architecture does not just consist of designing comfortably functional apartments. ... Architecture creates a complete union between the arrangement of utilitarian things, inventive construction, and the colour qualities and orientation of forms which themselves uphold and direct the rhythm of human life within architecture.” [*Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm*, Łódź, 1931; *October*, no. 156, Spring 2016, p. 53].

Many of Strzemiński’s pre-war architectural designs implementing the above-mentioned directives remain unknown, but there are records of them existing. Those that remained untouched by World War II are presented on exhibition: the villa for Julian Przyboś, designed by Strzemiński, and a model for a *Functional Nursery School*, which is an example of Katarzyna Kobro’s translation of sculpture into architecture. A late, but fully realised vision of translation of Neo-Plastic principles into architectural composition can be seen in the Neoplastic Room, designed by Strzemiński for the Muzeum Sztuki in 1947.

The influence of De Stijl’s output on European design, especially the Polish Avant-garde and Polish avant-garde designs, is discussed in three extensive essays opening this publication, written by Prof. Marek Wieczorek, Dr. Michał Wenderski, and Dr. Szymon Piotr Kubiak. While Prof. Wieczorek focuses on the international perspective, discussing the details and the essence of De Stijl designs, Dr. Wenderski reconstructs the history of contacts between the Polish and Dutch Avant-gardes, and Dr. Kubiak examines specific examples of Polish, especially architectural, interpretations of the De Stijl circle’s designs.

Since this catalogue is the first to present so extensively the connections between Polish avant-garde design and De Stijl’s output, it is supplemented with reprints of selected primary sources. Starting from Szymon Syrkus’s short text, originally published in the journal *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie*, where the role and meaning of Neo-Plasticism in the oeuvre of the two avant-garde groups Praesens and “a.r.” and in modern architecture is clearly outlined, through one of Theo van Doesburg’s most important texts on architecture, and fragments of Szymon Syrkus’s article on a similar topic, and ending with Andrzej Pronaszko’s unconventional article, written in the form of a dialogue between an “advocate” and an “opponent” of the new style. All this is complemented by hitherto unpublished reproductions of selected letters exchanged between Theo van Doesburg and members of the Blok and Praesens groups concerning plans for an exhibition and lectures about the Dutch group to be organised in 1920s Poland.

The catalogue part of the publication mirrors the structure of the exhibition, showcasing its most important themes—starting with examples of Theo van Doesburg’s and Gerrit Rietveld’s works and ending with designs by such Polish artists as Szymon Syrkus, Bohdan Lachert, and Władysław Strzemiński. This part is supplemented with archival materials not exhibited or exhibited in the form of prints and slides. It concludes with an alphabetical index of all works shown on exhibition, arranged by their creators’ last name.

Surely, the publication and exhibition do not exhaust the subject of the role of Neo-Plasticism and the De Stijl group in the formation of the Polish Avant-garde. Nevertheless, we would like to express the hope that they contribute to the on-going debate on the concept of art that resulted from these inspirations. Today, in common knowledge, De Stijl has been wrongly narrowed down to the idea of using primary colours together with black, grey, and white, along with

elementary geometrical shapes, whereas it was a total, utopian proposition for an improved organisation of the world—a world both rational and balanced.

In 2017 the centenary of the founding of the Dutch avant-garde movement De Stijl (1917–1932) was celebrated across the Netherlands with numerous exhibitions, publications, and manifestations.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *Organizers of Life. De Stijl, the Polish Avant-garde, and Design* at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź now offers an important occasion at the end of the centennial year to assess significant aspects of the internationalization and dissemination of the movement’s principles, which were among its founding goals. This essay examines specific qualities of De Stijl’s impact on the European Avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s.

The discourse of De Stijl’s influence surrounding the many recent manifestations has generally been rather vague and shunned a definition of the movement’s principles, noting mainly the obvious formal similarities involving straight lines, right angles, and primary colours, as had been common practice all along in books and articles on De Stijl. In order to understand De Stijl’s impact, that is, its dissemination and appropriation, we need to go back to a more precise and narrow definition, one based on conceptual foundations. The central goal of the movement involved the creation of a new kind of space, which its members described as a new type of “plasticity” or Neo-Plasticism (*Nieuwe beelding*), not based on form or mass, but on dynamic relationships, on a relational play between rectangular *planes* in expansive equilibrium to the point that the separate art forms merge with each other into a balanced whole. A more focused understanding of De Stijl allows us to discover what is truly paradigmatic of the movement and how other artists creatively engaged with that paradigm.

# Definition

The first sustained definition of De Stijl also just had an anniversary: last year marked sixty years since the first monograph on the movement was published by Dutch scholar Hans Jaffé. With *De Stijl, 1917–1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, Jaffé in 1956 presented De Stijl as “one of the longest lived and most influential of modern art movements.” The subtitle of his book provocatively confirms the then emerging international acclaim for a movement, but also indicates the author’s attention to national identity, and Jaffé was indeed the first to look in greater depth into the philosophical roots of De Stijl. He mentioned its Hegelian heritage, yet also the influence of Mathieu Schoenmaekers, a Dutch Catholic

<sup>1</sup> The 2017 centenary celebrations were presented under the umbrella “Mondrian to Dutch Design,” and showcased exhibitions and manifestations in the major cities, including the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, where a Dutch design week was held, as well as Leiden, Amersfoort, Drachten, and Leeuwarden (Friesland), Otterloo, Winterswijk, Harderwijk, and Arnhem (Gelderland). The centenary was preceded by what was likely the first international symposium on De Stijl, held in April 2016 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and organized by this author and Christa Maria Lerm-Hays. Representatives of the Netherlands Institute for Conservation, Art and Science presented examples of new research efforts in the Netherlands that focus on scientific and technical questions, of material characterization, colour analysis, deterioration, and conservation in innovative empirical attempts at reconstructing the creative process. One of the intended goals of the symposium was to take stock of the state of research, revisit important questions about differences between art/historical and material/technical questions, and examine in what ways dialogue across disciplines can be productive and offer new roads into the ongoing rewriting of De Stijl.



priest turned syncretic nature philosopher, who coined the term *Nieuwe beelding* and influenced the terminology in the magazine *De Stijl*, especially the writings of painters Piet Mondrian and Bart van der Leck.

In *De Stijl: The Formative Years* of 1984 (Dutch original 1982), Carel Blotkamp and his students at the University of Utrecht, on the basis of letters and new archival material, shifted the focus more on individual artists, so much so that they established the now common notion that De Stijl was only a group in name. The movement was held together by Theo van Doesburg, the indefatigable promoter and editor of *De Stijl* (1917–1931), who held up a façade of unity and replenished the ranks as founding members already began to defect during the first few years. The sequel, *De Vervolgjaren van De Stijl: 1922–1932* [literally The continuing years of De Stijl: 1922–1932] from 1996, also edited by Carel Blotkamp, shows even more dispersal and discord through individualism, although here, too, De Stijl remains a frame of reference in name, even as we get a more diffuse sense of what it may have been.

If the individual agendas and formal idioms distort or even belie the claims of universalism and collaboration, so the often-implied logic goes, how can we come to a definition of De Stijl or take seriously the movement’s utopian aspirations, let alone the idea that simple forms and pure colours could affect profound social change and a new organization of life? We are accordingly left with an ever more complex picture of distinctive personalities and artistic approaches that increasingly thwart any characterization of what is paradigmatic about De Stijl and its unique contribution to the history of art. And yet, a definition is worth risking, especially on the conceptual level, because this can show both what is singular to De Stijl and what the movement inspires. The works of Mondrian and of the furniture designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld are conceptually closest and exemplary of De Stijl (see pp. 183–194), even though the two never met. Theo van Doesburg often embraced new directions, only to reject these as outdated within a year or two, although the case of his adoption of the diagonal forms an exception that led to innovations that are still not recognized as part of the De Stijl paradigm. Only by examining that paradigm closely will we be able to see what constitutes genuine influence, and what is merely appropriation.

One rare earlier attempt at definition that does not reduce the movement to a collection of individuals and recognizes instead the conceptual implications of the formal arrangements typical of the best of De Stijl is a 1984 encyclopaedia entry titled “The De Stijl Idea,” by Yve-Alain Bois. Bois’s definition provocatively excludes much of what we normally associate with the movement, including most architectural projects. He also acutely intuits that the “specificity of De Stijl lies ... in the idea that a *single generative principle* might apply to all the arts.” Bois understands that “De Stijl’s environmental utopia, however naïve it may seem to us today, was no mere ideological dream, but a corollary of the movement’s general principle,” which involves the profound effects of framing, among other ideas.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Bois tries to define the general principle as predicated on the autonomy and integrity of each art form, involving a process of “elementarization” or reduction of each medium to its materials and codes, and the “integration” of these irreducible elements into a “syntactically indivisible, nonhierarchical whole,” which in painting means striving for flatness. The Greenbergian terminology of autonomy, medium-specificity, and flatness is common among commentators, from Kermit Champa, who was Greenberg’s student, to Dutch scholars

2

Yve-Alain Bois, “The De Stijl Idea,” reprinted in his *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 102–3.

22

ii. 1, 2

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ii. 3

3

Yve-Alain Bois, “The Iconoclast,” in *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944*, eds. Y.-A. Bois et al., exhib. cat., Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1994), n. 12, p. 364.

Life in Plane Terms:

De Stijl’s Impact on the European Avant-garde

Organizers of Life.

De Stijl, the Polish Avant-garde, and Design

such as Louis Wijzenbeek, Blotkamp, and Evert van Straaten. However, Bois goes further, asserting elsewhere that Mondrian eventually embraced “the absurd notion of the possibility of a ‘flat’ architecture.”<sup>3</sup> Mondrian never made a statement of that kind. Rather, he wrote that painting, architecture, and all objects in the interior (what we now call design) should be defined in planar terms in such a way that “the plane” becomes a generative principle ensuring their integration or merger into a complete, coloured Neo-Plastic space. Each planar element (or art object) is no longer autonomous, no longer a “thing in itself,” and its rhythmically dynamic, non-repetitive and non-hierarchical placement within the whole creates a play of expansive relationships. Expansive equilibrium is the key marker of the best works of De Stijl, with each element taking on an inward-outward framing function in relation to the others.<sup>4</sup>

Mondrian and fellow De Stijl founder Bart van der Leck derived their ideas on “the plane” from reading, and meeting with, Schoenmaekers. They introduced Schoenmaekers to Van Doesburg, who encouraged Belgian De Stijl sculptor Georges Vantongerloo to read Schoenmaekers in turn. Although Schoenmaekers’s significance is now all but discounted, his terminology, and more importantly, his conceptual framework, became the cornerstone of key texts found in *De Stijl* during its early years and beyond. Especially important were the notions of a vital force of “expansion” in planar form and “*Nieuwe beelding*,” the neologism that became synonymous with De Stijl and was first translated by Mondrian in 1920 as “Neo-Plasticism.” Van der Leck in 1918 wrote that the planar surface of painting “transmits spatial continuity. ... Painting today is architectural because in itself and by its own means it serves the same concept as architecture—space and the plane.”<sup>5</sup> Mondrian wrote that “Neo-Plasticism expresses the essence of space through the relationship of one colour plane to another.”

Once we recognize that the artists themselves sought to dissolve the individual arts into a new shared form of plasticity or space, we can no longer affirm the Greenbergian construct of the autonomy of each art form or flatness, derived from a misreading of De Stijl’s goals. The flexible upstairs space that Rietveld designed with Truus Schröder for her house is truly outstanding as an integrated, balanced whole, achieved through dynamically expansive, intersecting planes (see pp. 190–193). In De Stijl each art form does not make a claim to the specificity of its medium. Rather, painting and sculpture, combined with architecture, chairs, tables, and cabinetry all but dissolve medium-specificity. In the Schröder House, painting and sculpture have disappeared into an expansive, planar whole, where nothing is separate, and everything relational.<sup>6</sup>

De Stijl was founded by a small group of painters who sought to explore the expansive dimension of the colour plane (painting) in opposition to the limiting effect of the enclosing walls of architecture. They were the instigators of the expansive thrust, always from the interior outward. They resisted Van Doesburg’s enlisting of architects, whom Mondrian called “valets of the public.” He emphasized that

5

Bart van der Leck, “Over schilderen en bouwen,” *De Stijl*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1918), p. 37.

6

The premise of expansive equilibrium is a continual pointing in outward direction, away from the defining marker, and thus toward nothing *per se*. The idea may explain Mondrian’s enigmatic statement that “the content [of Neo-Plasticism] is, practically speaking, nothing,” uttered to the baffled architect J. J. P. Oud. Unpublished letter from Mondrian to Oud, Fondation Custodia, Institut Néerlandais, Paris, 1972 A 403 (2)/403 A, dated on the envelope: “13–VII–1922”.

4

For an analysis of the origins of the notion of “the plane” in De Stijl, see my “Mondrian’s First Diamond Composition: Spatial Totality and the Plane of the Starry Sky,” in *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, Paul Crowther & Isabel Wünsche, eds. (London: Routledge, 2012), and “Piet Mondrian’s Studio Utopia, 26, rue du Départ,” in *Mondrian and His Studios: Colour in Space*, exhib. cat. Tate Liverpool, eds. Francesco Mancorda and Michael White (London: Tate Publishing, 2014).





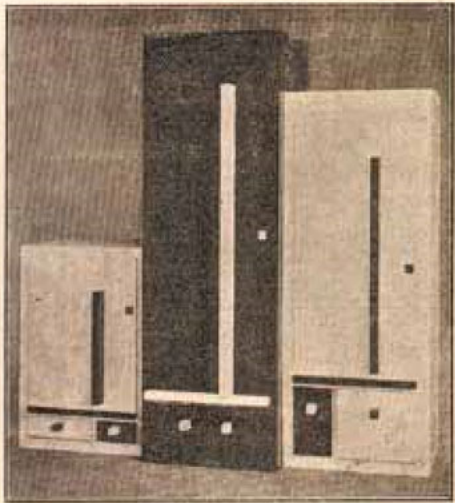
J. J. P. OUD      Domy robotnicze w Rotterdamie



J.J.P. OUD      „Matrenesse” pod Rotterdamem



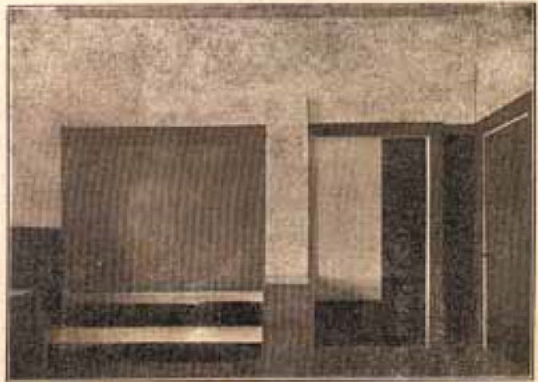
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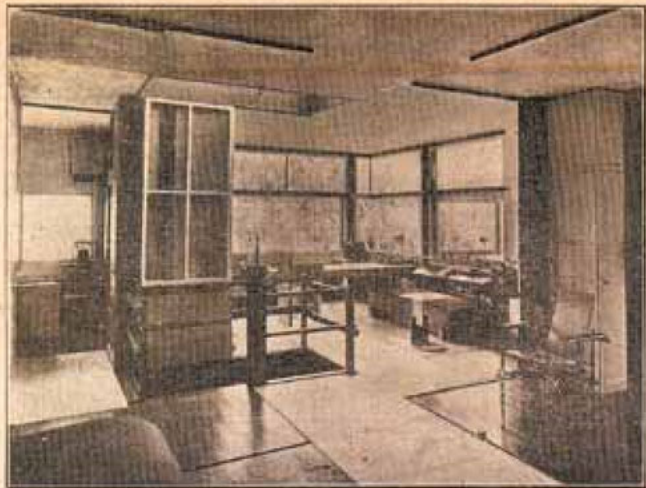
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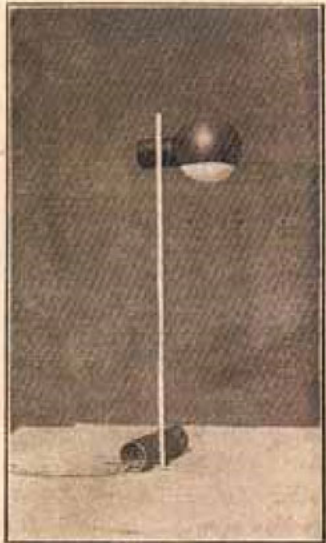
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(biały i niebieski)



S. VAN RAVESTEYN      Fragment gabinetu domu w Utrechcie  
(czarny – szary – biały)



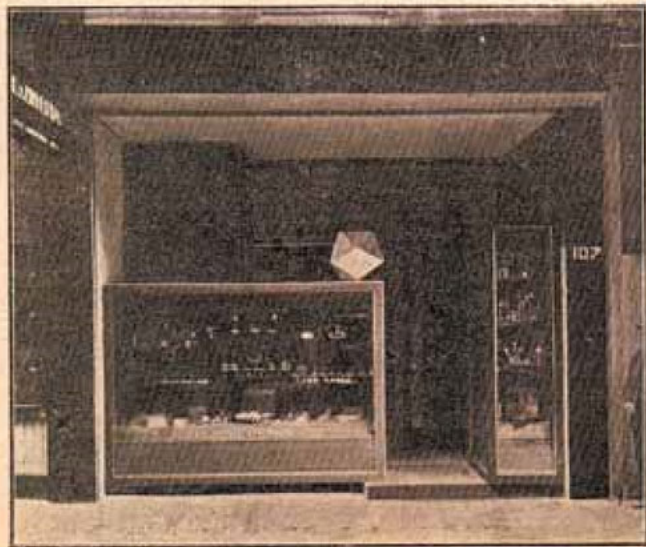
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Wnętrze domu T. Schrödera



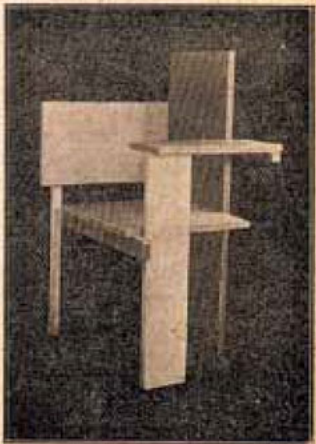
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Dom Schrödera      Utrecht



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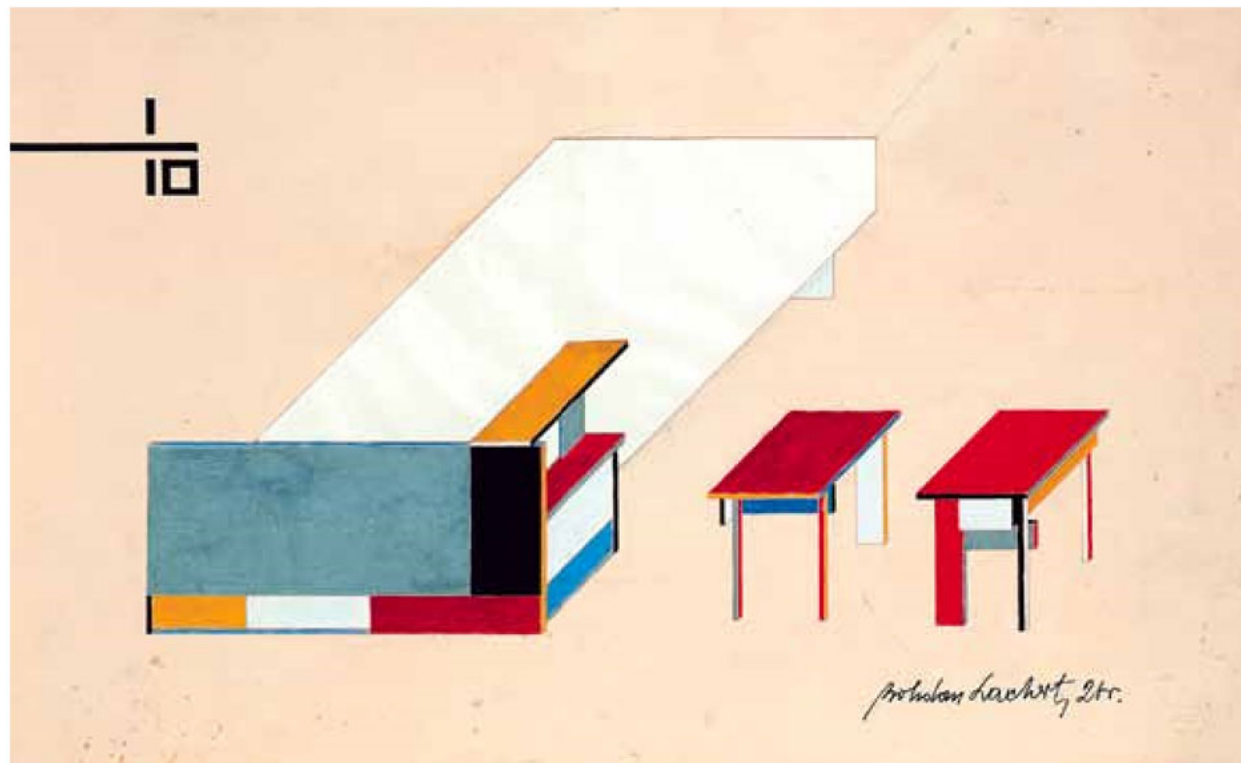




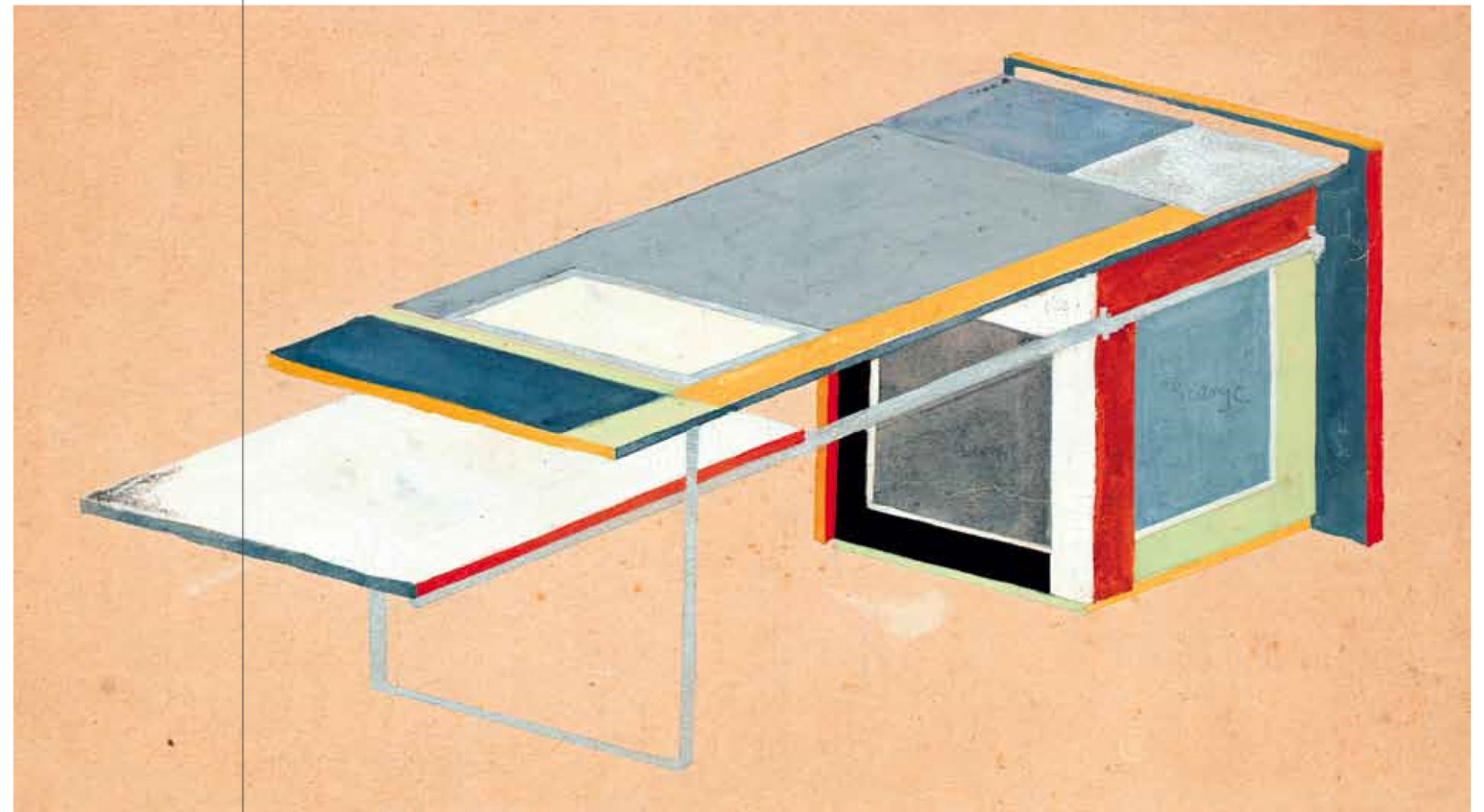
il. 5  
Gerrit Thomas Rietveld

Red-Blue Chair, 1918  
paint, wood, 88 x 60 x 66 cm  
Centraal Museum, Utrecht  
© Centraal Museum, Utrecht,  
The Netherlands / Ernst Moritz / c/o Pictoright  
Amsterdam 2017





Bohdan Lachert  
Office furniture. A couch and a small table (axonometric views), 1926  
gouache, ink, paper, 26.6 × 42.9 cm  
Museum of Architecture in Wrocław



Bohdan Lachert  
Office furniture. A desk, 1926  
distemper, pencil, paper, 20.3 × 36.2 cm  
Museum of Architecture in Wrocław

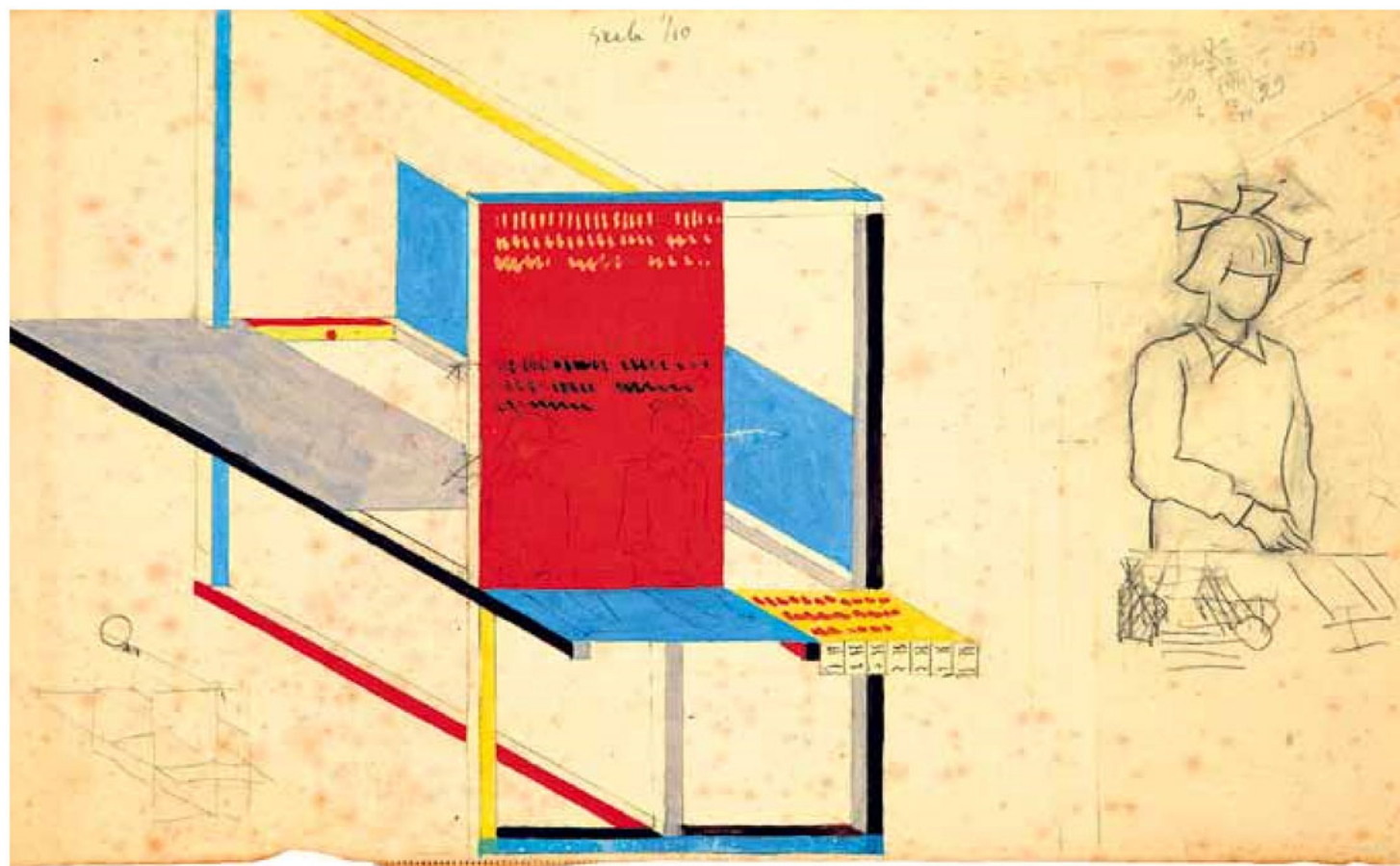
The home office furniture set (including a desk, a lounge chair, a stool, and a divan with shelf) by Bohdan Lachert with colour decoration by Aleksander Rafalowski, was part of the furnishings of the architect's own villa, located at no. 9 Katowicka Street in the Saska Kępa district. The set is made of wood, metal, and glass. The asymmetrical, functional pieces of furniture were inspired by Gerrit Rietveld's Berlin Chair, a photograph of which was displayed at the 1926 International Exhibition of Modern Architecture at Warsaw's Zachęta National Gallery of Art. The pioneering versatility of the set reflected in smaller scale the aesthetics of the multifunctional residential modernist interiors. The Neo-Plastic colour schemes, completed in collaboration with painter Aleksander Rafalowski—who, like Lachert, belonged to the modernist *Praesens* group—stem from the designers' fascination with Piet Mondrian's and Theo van Doesburg's doctrines. Details of the colour decoration were noted down by Irena Lachert, the architect's wife, in a journal article entitled "Modern Furniture": "The painting procedure was as follows—after filling, the wood was thrice painted with oil paint, and after each painting polished with sandpaper and pumice. When dry, it was

coated with one layer of a special carriage lacquer. ... The colour scheme is a combination of white, black, grey, yellow, red, and blue. The pieces were designed for a residential lounge, where each one had its own designated place." [Irena Lachertowa, "Meble nowoczesne." *Organizacja Gospodarstwa Domowego. Organ Sekcji Gospodarstwa Domowego przy Instytucie Naukowej Organizacji* no. 4 (1928) pp. 63–64.] The use of lacquer was an isolated experiment at the time, as lacquered furniture was still considered a novelty around the year 1930. The designs of the now non-existent set consist of several colour studies of individual pieces, detached from the context of the interior or even the ground. The studies can also be viewed as abstract spatial forms modelled on Katarzyna Kobro's compositions—a point proven by her very own *Abstract sculpture (1)* being incorporated into a sketch depicting the whole set.

Katarzyna Uchowicz

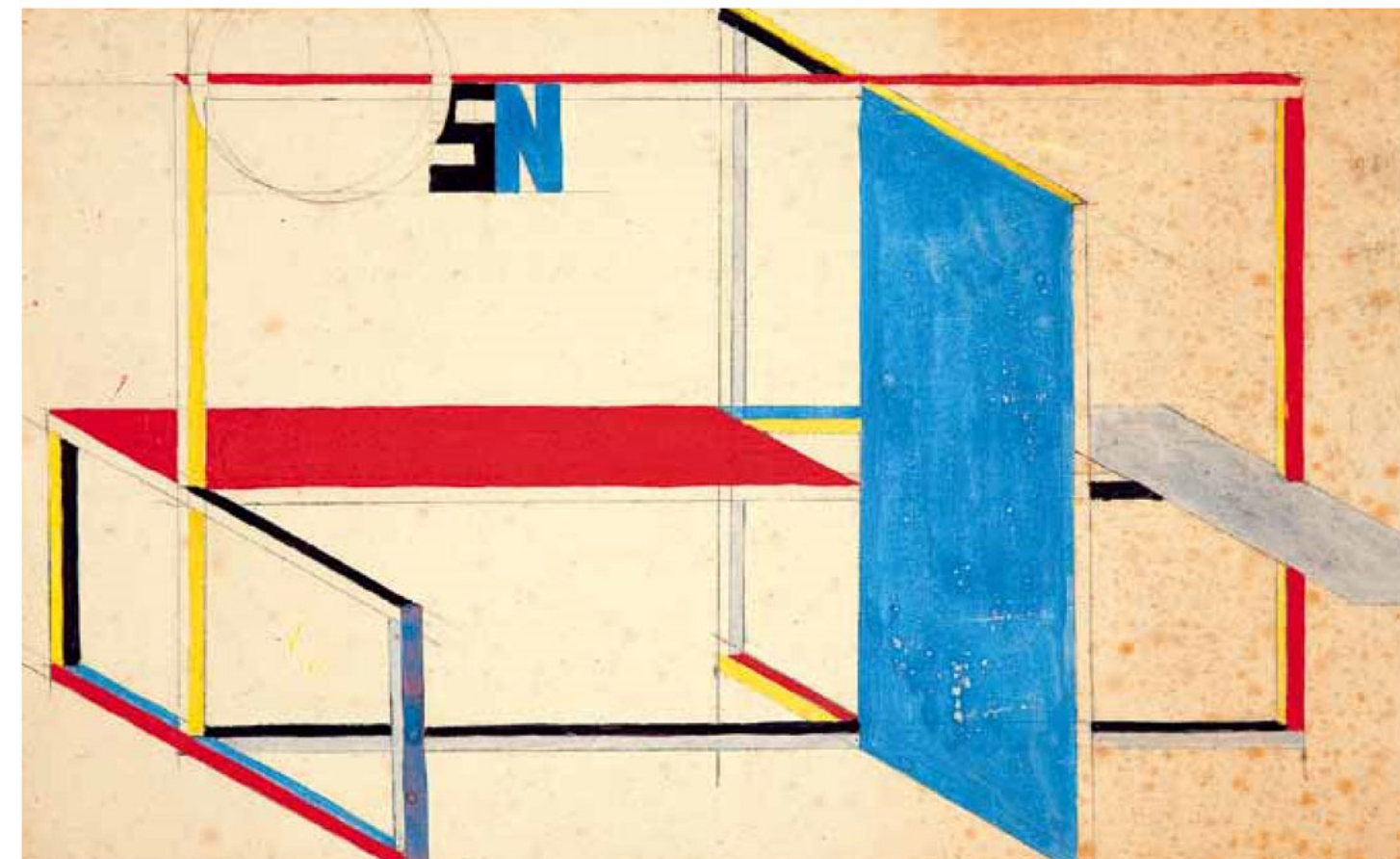
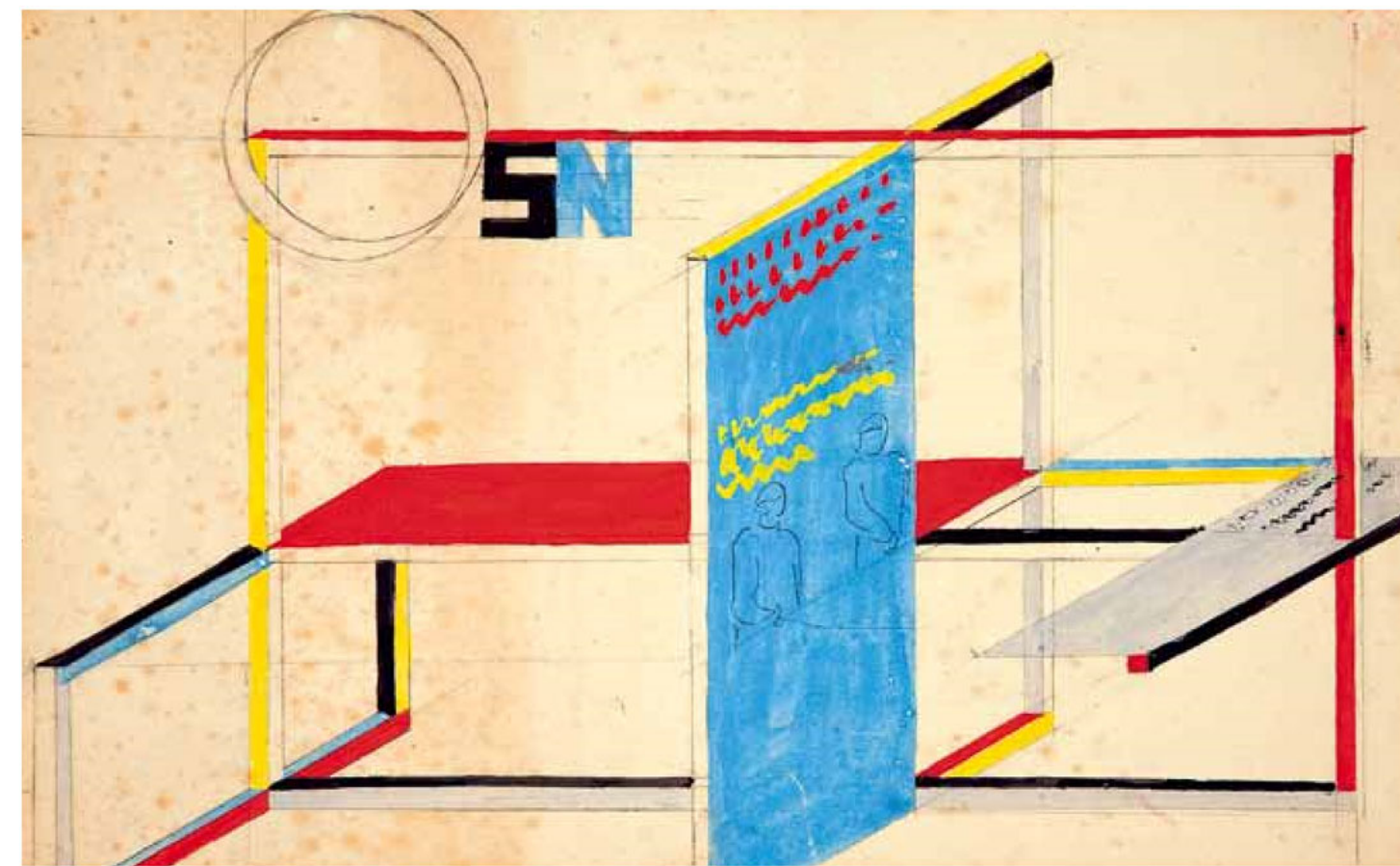
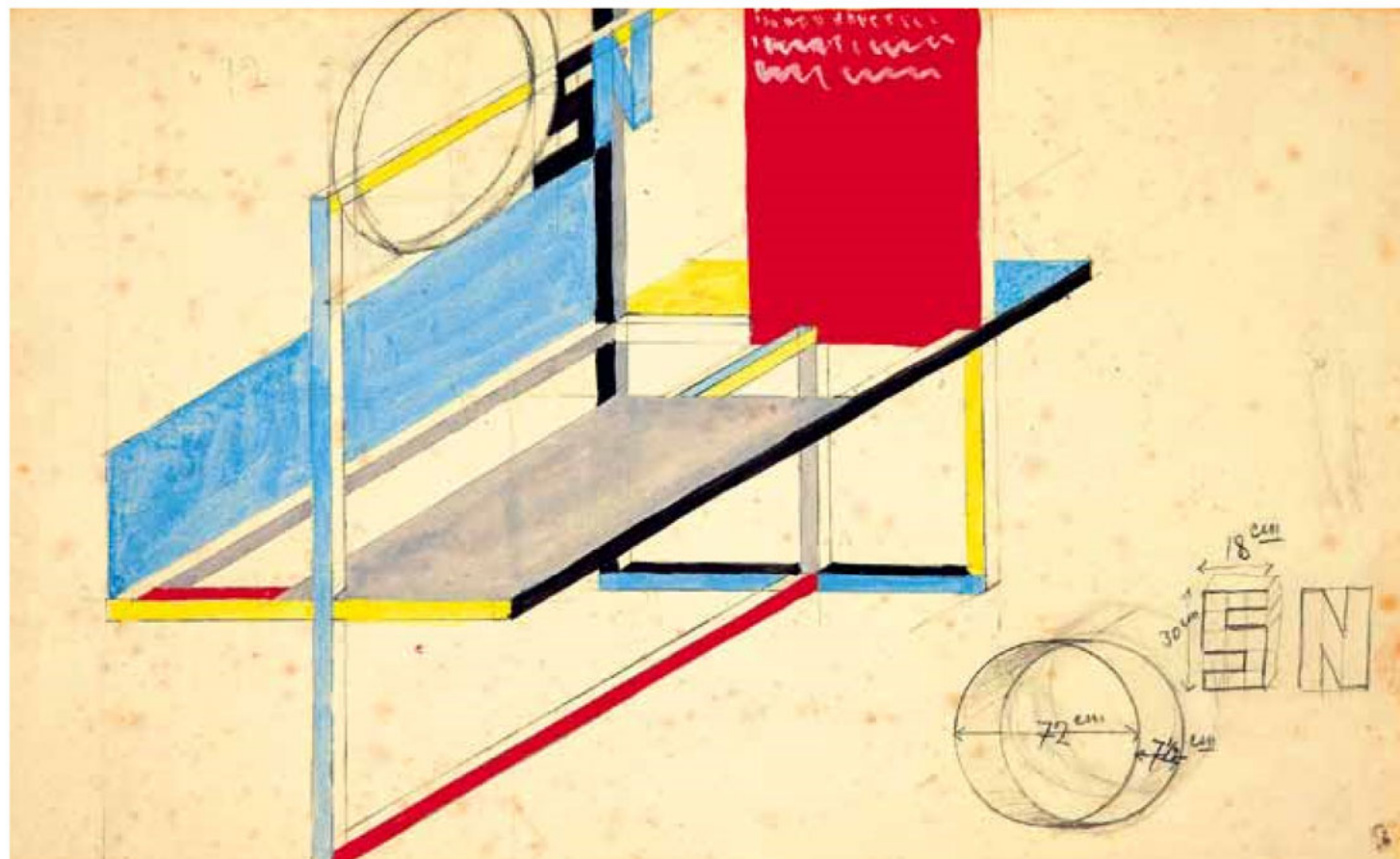
trans. Ada Łobożewicz





Władysław Strzemiński

*Design for an Exhibition Stall*, from the Series:  
*Design for Exhibition Arrangements*, ca. 1946–1948  
 pencil, distemper, cardboard, 26.2 × 41.7 cm (each one)  
 Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź  
 © Muzeum Sztuki & Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak







Henryk Stażewski

Sketches of paintings and furniture  
(page from a *Sketchbook*), 1924–1926  
watercolour, pencil, paper, 23.2 × 24.3 cm  
two-sided drawing  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

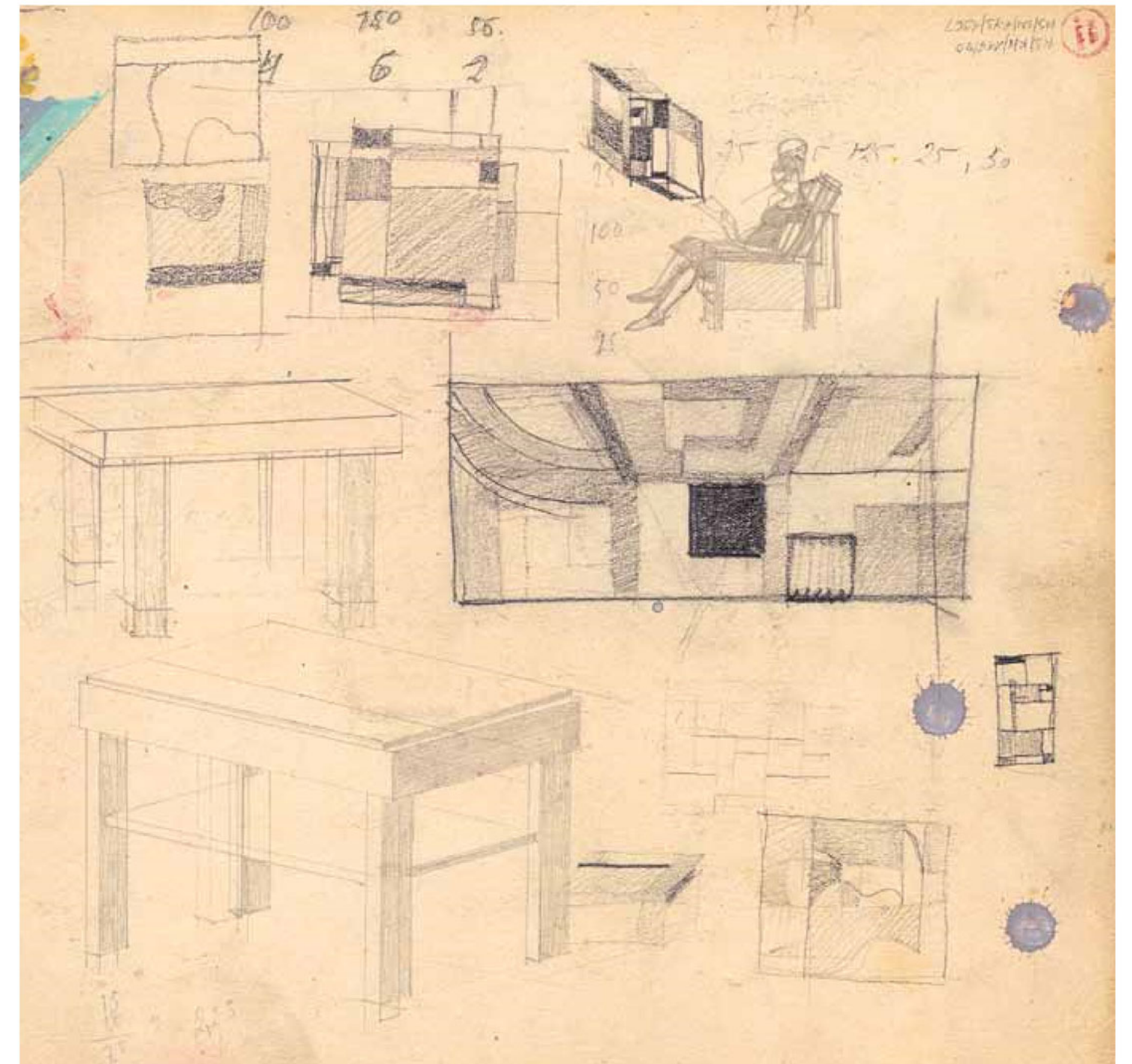


Henryk Stażewski

Design of an Exhibition Pavilion, 1931  
source: Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro,  
*Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time  
Rhythm*, biblioteka „a.r.”, vol. 2,  
Łódź 1931, il. 45  
Department of Scientific Documentation,  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź  
© Muzeum Sztuki & Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak

Henryk Stażewski

Sketches of paintings and furniture  
(page from a *Sketchbook*), 1924–1926  
watercolour, pencil, paper, 23.1 × 24.3 cm  
two-sided drawing  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź





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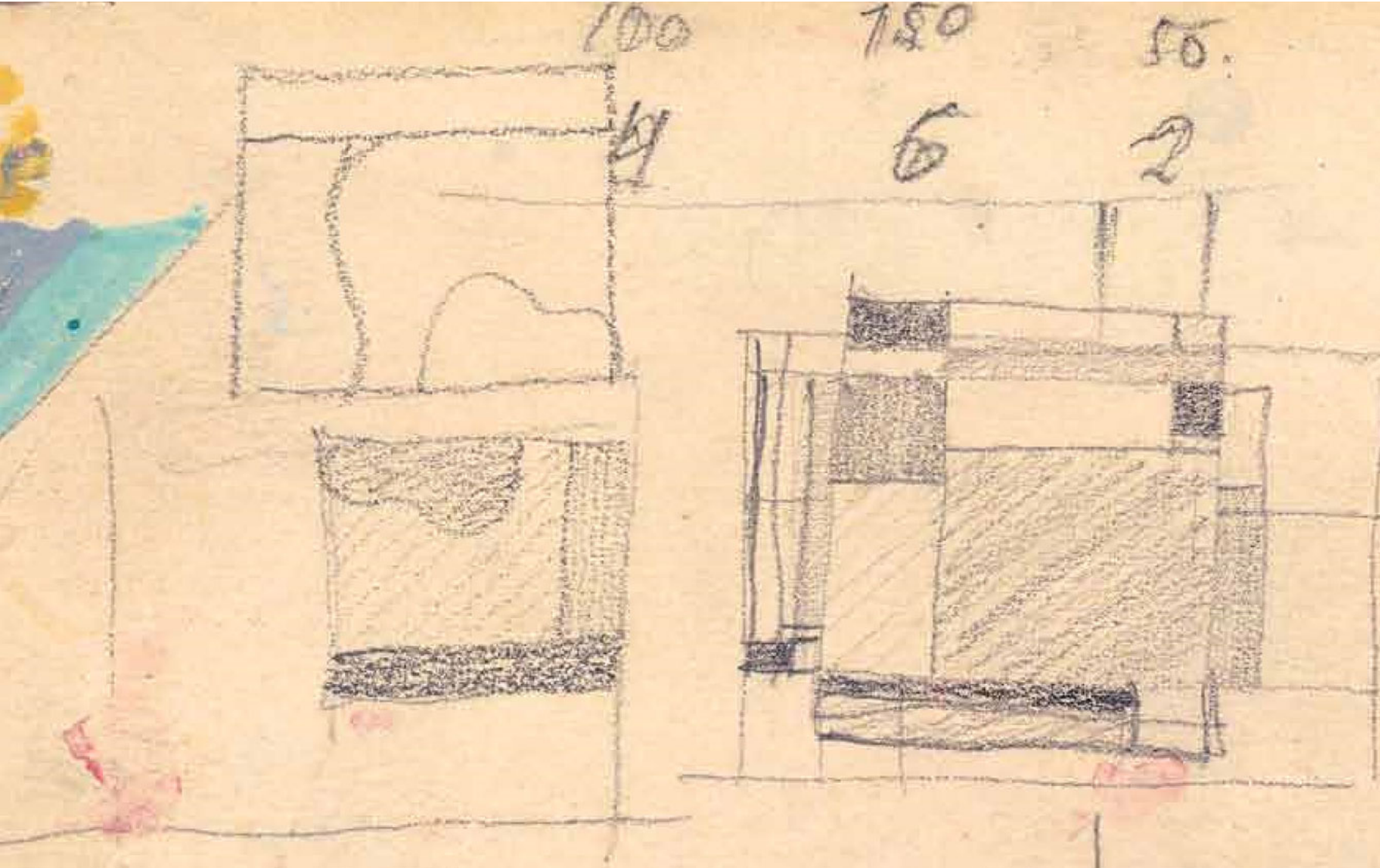


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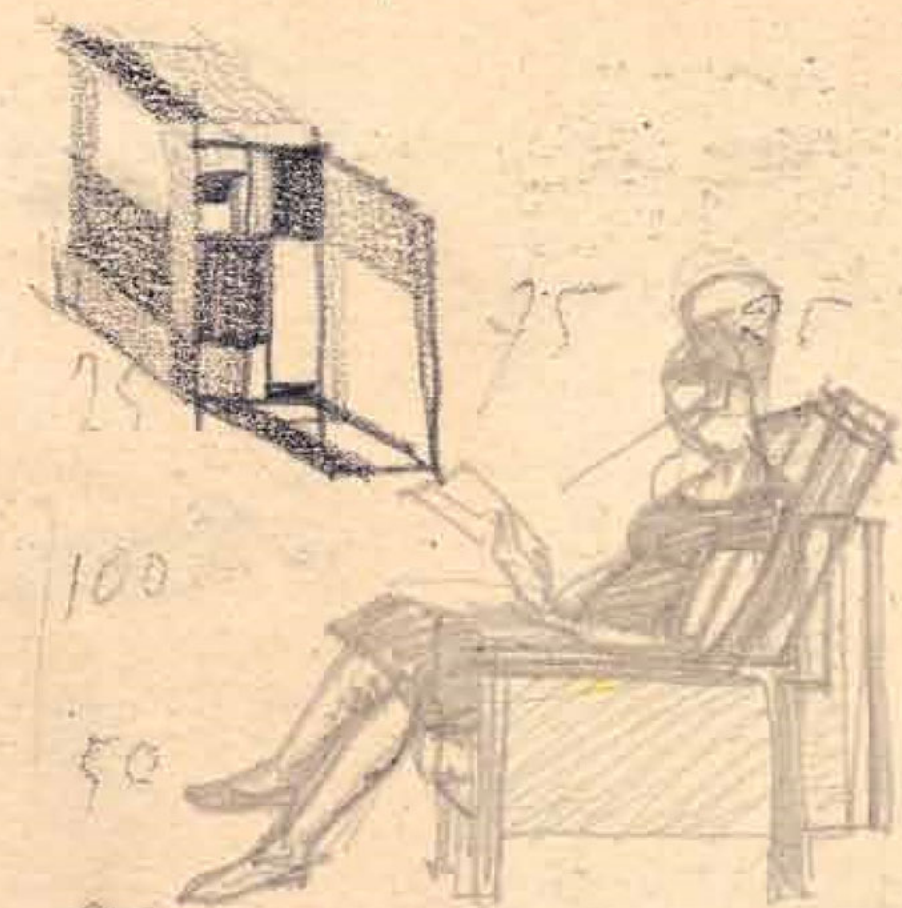


15

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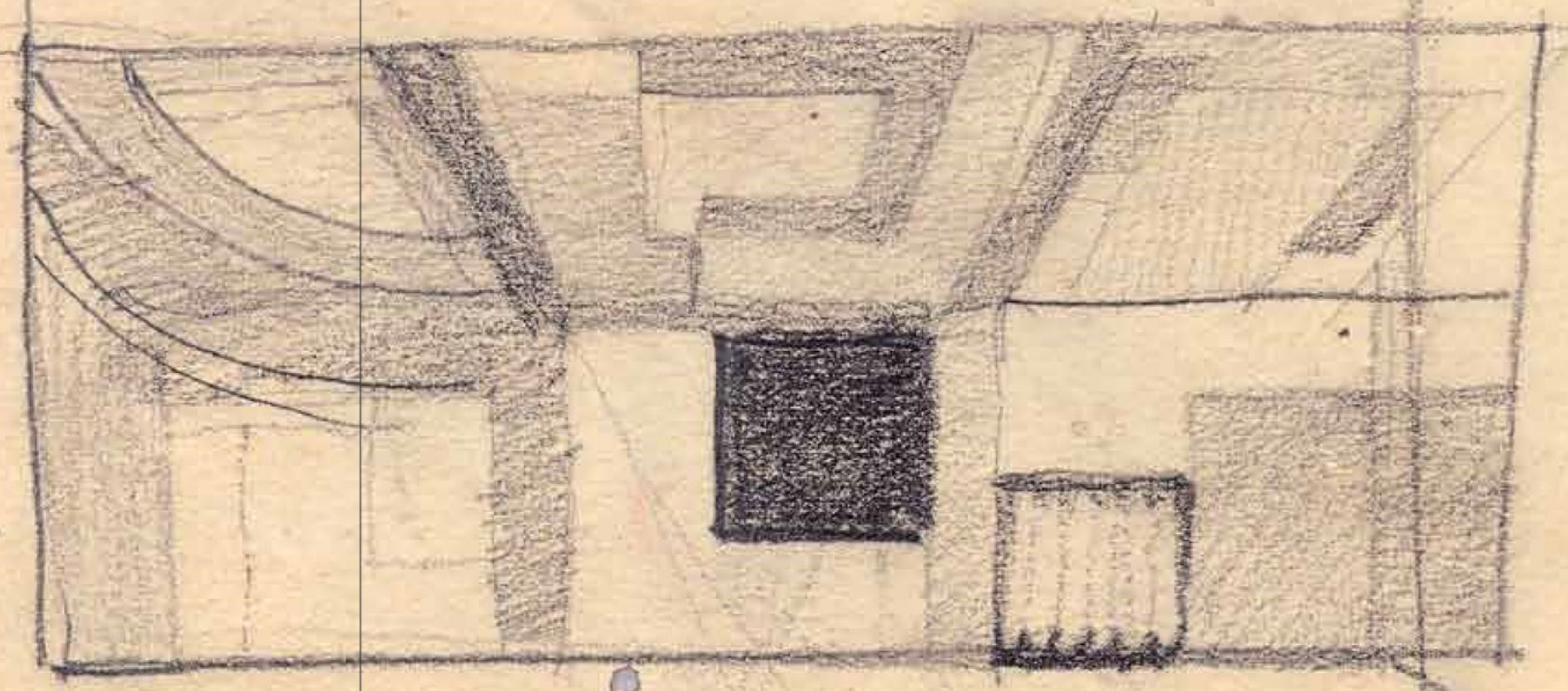


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*The Neoplastic Room,*  
designed by Władysław Strzemiński in 1947  
at the request of Marian Minich, the director  
of the Muzeum Sztuki, realized in 1948  
archival photography, 1948  
Department of Scientific Documentation,  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

In 1947, Marian Minich, the Director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź at the time, invited Władysław Strzemiński to design an exhibition space for the International Modern Art Collection of the “a.r.” group. The extent of Minich’s contribution to the conception of the space is not entirely clear, as he might have had specific demands about its arrangement. As Marian Minich’s daughter recalls, before the war Strzemiński had designed the living room in the Minich family’s private apartment, and the room was arranged according to Neo-Plastic principles. All its design and furniture was painted in primary colours complemented with white, grey, and black. The same colour scheme was applied in the exhibition space. After the Second World War, the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź moved to a new building—the former palace of the Poznański family. The space that Strzemiński was commissioned to design was located on the second floor, at the end of a suite of rooms, where the front building and the annex meet. The room is shaped pentagonally, and arranged as a rectangle with one cut corner. Its walls and ceiling are divided into coloured rectangles and squares, with a carpet running through the middle of the floor. In her text devoted to the Neoplastic Room, Janina Ładnowska mentions a brown linoleum patterned with “faux, rhythmical weave of coir matting,” which was replaced by a black textile carpet runner in the years afterward. A window placed in the diagonal wall is divided into sixteen rectangles—four horizontal and four vertical. The metal casting with separate panes together with the segmentation resemble a typical industrial window in Łódź. Despite the lack of confirmation in documents, because of its incongruence with the architecture of the palace and the fact that it is the only such window in the building, it is assumed that the window was deliberately replaced by Strzemiński. Interestingly, the window matches the one in Piet Mondrian’s New York studio. It is almost implausible that Strzemiński could have seen photographs of Mondrian’s final studio, to which the artist moved just months before his death on February 1, 1944. At the time, the Second World War was still on in Poland, and the liberation of Łódź was not to happen until January 1945.

Strzemiński was evicted from his pre-war apartment, while Mondrian, fleeing the Nazis, left the continent. After the war, Strzemiński, whose philosophy of painting was based on entirely different principles than Mondrian’s, acknowledged Neo-Plasticism as an influential idea in architecture as well as in social and individual life during his lectures at the State Higher School of Visual Arts: “Neo-Plasticism ... offers a solution to the problem of organic incorporation of separate fragments of a painting into one whole ...” “The neoplastic framework is being transformed into a framework of movement of function in space. Henceforth emerges an architectural scheme” (Kazimierz Kędzia’s notes held at the Department of Scientific Documentation). Despite the Neo-Plastic Room being entirely different from the Abstract Cabinet, designed in 1927 by El Lissitzky for the Sprengel Museum Hannover, the two ventures share a mutual interest in movement. As Lissitzky wrote: “Space should be so organised, that it compels the viewer to stroll.” While in the case of the Abstract Cabinet the notion of dynamics is expressed by vertical black and white stripes, subdividing the grey plane of the wall, in the Neo-Plastic Room it takes on a form of colour planes, serving as a background for the paintings presented there. It may have been Strzemiński’s and Mondrian’s shared belief in the utopia of art capable of transforming the society that provided the impulse to create the Neo-Plastic Room, but it may as well have been the loss of faith and the desire to create an epitaph for an idea shattered during the Second World War. In 1948 the Room was opened to the public as an exhibition space for some of the most important works from the International Modern Art Collection of the “a.r.” group, including paintings by such artists as Theo van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, Henryk Stażewski, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Georges Vantongerloo, accompanied by Katarzyna Kobro’s sculptures.





Władysław Strzemiński

Furniture from a set for the *Neoplastic Room*  
at the Muzeum Sztuki, 1947–1948  
paint, wood, plywood, fabric, chair: 56 × 55 × 55 cm,  
small table: 80 × 60 × 45 cm, armchair: 82 × 59 × 43 cm  
photo from the exhibition *Atlas of Modernity*,  
Muzeum Sztuki, 2014  
Department of Scientific Documentation,  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Władysław Strzemiński

Desk, 1947–1948  
paint, wood, 69 x 127 x 77 cm  
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

