

Institution: University of York
Unit of Assessment: 34, Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
Title of case study: De Stijl and the Netherlands' Cultural Canon
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>In 2007, the Dutch Ministry of Education introduced the <i>Cultural Canon of the Netherlands</i>: 50 events, artefacts and people that every citizen should know, including the Dutch modernist movement, De Stijl. The canon was designed to guide school curricula and to create a sense of shared Dutch heritage and responsibility. In response, in 2011 the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag opened a 750m sq De Stijl display, promoted as the permanent Dutch 'home' for De Stijl and definitive port of call for scholars and the public. The display's characterisation of De Stijl was heavily indebted to Michael White's <i>De Stijl and Dutch Modernism</i> (2003).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Michael White (appointed 1999, promoted to Senior Lecturer 2007 and Reader 2011), carried out the research for his monograph, <i>De Stijl and Dutch Modernism</i> (#3.1), during the academic years 1999/2000 and 2000/2001. The research was supported by a period of two terms' leave funded by the University of York in the spring and summer of 2001.</p> <p>In the monograph, White set out to examine the connections between artists associated with the De Stijl group and modernising projects more generally in the Netherlands in the early twentieth century, particularly in fields such as social housing, urban planning, commercial display, exhibition culture and graphic design. Much of the research was carried out using archival and library resources in the Netherlands in order to provide a better understanding of the local reform discourses that brought about the group's formation and intersected with its development.</p> <p>Where the history of De Stijl previously emphasised its position in a succession of modernist movements centred on locations of international cultural activity, such as Paris, White's study demonstrated that the group was better understood from the opposite end of the telescope, so to speak, from the housing estates of Rotterdam. White's principal argument was that De Stijl should not be understood in the manner in which avant-gardism has traditionally been presented, as the failed, utopian attempt to utilise aesthetic principles developed in isolation to effect social change. Rather, White contended, De Stijl needed to be understood as both a product of social processes and as a catalyst for their transformation. In particular, White paid great attention to the way in which De Stijl reformulated the discourse of <i>gemeenschapskunst</i> (community art), an idea that had been current in the Netherlands since the late nineteenth century and that had been deployed by advocates of an authentic modern art for a mass audience, a key aspect of which was the integration of the arts.</p> <p>White has continued to research in this field. The integration of art, architecture and design promoted by De Stijl was presented at the exhibition 'Theo van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde' at the Stedelijk de Lakenhal, Leiden and Tate Modern in 2009-10, of which he was consultant curator (#3.2) and he has written further on this topic for catalogues of recent De Stijl exhibitions which have taken place in France (#3.3), Germany (#3.4) and Italy (#3.5).</p> <p>The attention White paid to the interaction of local and international currents of cultural production, to the relationships between esoteric, avant-garde artistic activity and the everyday, and to the world of commerce as well as fine art, made his research particularly influential at a moment when the Dutch Government sought to emphasise the relevance of cultural knowledge to the wider population through the introduction of the Cultural Canon.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>3.1 M. White, <i>De Stijl and Dutch Modernism</i> (Manchester University Press, 2003; reprinted 2009). This book was part of the Department's RAE 2008 submission, in which 95% of the returned work was assessed as 2* and above. The book received the following reviews: Thomas Muirhead, 'The Mod Squad', <i>Building Design</i> (26 September, 2003); Carel Blotkamp, 'Reviewing De Stijl', <i>Art History</i> 27.3 (2004), 470-474; Paul Overy, 'Revising De Stijl', <i>Oxford Art Journal</i> 28.3 (2005), 491-495; and Flora Samuel, 'De Stijl and Dutch Modernism', <i>Journal of Design History</i> 18.2 (2005), 224-225.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

- 3.2 G. Fabre, D. Wintgens Hötte, eds, & M. White, consultant ed., *Theo van Doesburg and the International Avant-Garde* (Tate, 2009). (Submitted to REF2)
- 3.3 M. White, 'Cities of Style' in Frédéric Migayrou ed., *De Stijl* (Centre Pompidou, 2010), 77-84.
- 3.4 M. White, 'De Stijl: Eine Kunst fürs Volk? / De Stijl: An Art for the People?' in H. Friedel & M. Mühling, eds, *Mondrian De Stijl* (Lenbachhaus, 2011), 46-59.
- 3.5 'De Stijl: un'arte per il popolo?' in Benno Tempel, ed., *Mondrian: L'armonia perfetta* (Skira, 2011), 60-67.

The Department can supply copies of these outputs upon request.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Gemeentemuseum Den Haag is one of the most important museums in the Netherlands and one of the best known museums of modern art in the world. Its reputation rests primarily on its collection of early twentieth-century art and it has, since the 1950s, been the home of the largest single collection of works by the painter and De Stijl contributor, Piet Mondrian, which now number over 300 objects.

The reputation of the De Stijl collection at the museum has gone through significant turmoil in recent years. In 1998, a national scandal was caused following the Dutch government's purchase of Mondrian's unfinished canvas *Victory Boogie Woogie* for \$40 million from a private American collector. The deal for the picture was struck in private and subsequently required the finance minister to seek a retrospective royal decree, a procedure attracting a storm of criticism that challenged the integrity of the government. The work itself, part painted, part covered in bits of coloured tape, was subject to pillory in the national press, and, when finally installed in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, was placed behind a protective screen and subject to round-the-clock security for fears that it might be damaged by outraged citizens. In response to the accompanying media tirade, art historians and museum professionals began to speak of the work's canonical value. However, at that time, it was solely to position it as an exalted masterpiece.

Following the institution of the Cultural Canon in 2007, the curator responsible for the Mondrian collection at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Hans Janssen, contacted White to discuss the possible re-presentation of Mondrian and De Stijl in the museum with the express aim of employing aspects of White's 2003 book in the new display (#5.1). Alongside painting and sculpture, the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag has very extensive design and textile collections, some of which relate directly to De Stijl. However, they had never been shown alongside one another, but kept in separate departments. With these various contexts in mind, Janssen's idea was to follow the tendency of White's monograph, and even to sharpen it where possible, by bringing together items that were formerly consigned to different areas of the museum, and also to include long loans from specialist institutions, such as the Netherlands Architecture Institute (#5.1).

As the concept for the display developed, Janssen consulted White regularly, and the final display includes several sections which focus on the explicit elements of his research, for example the patronage of De Stijl by industrialists, such as Cornelis Bruijnzeel, a wood manufacturer whose company still exists in the Netherlands and is one of the largest suppliers of fitted kitchens; and the presentation of Mondrian's studio, formerly considered an exceptional project of almost mystical significance, here contextualised in relation to a number of contemporary Dutch contexts. In addition, the exhibition opens with a section dedicated to the concept of *gemeenschapskunst*, the central exhibit of which is a model of H.P. Berlage's Amsterdam Stock Exchange building, a project which brought together architecture, sculpture, stained glass, wall painting and poetry in one ensemble in a great public building. White had used this example in the introduction to his book to analyse the idea of community and how it was analogised in aesthetic terms. Drawing significantly on White's research, then, the exhibition sought to reorient the presentation of De Stijl's canonical character from being about the refinement of an abstract vocabulary of pure colour and form to an engagement with public art practices and mass culture; an agenda tying closely with the Dutch government's desire to capitalise on, and create a public audience for, as well as a sense of shared ownership and responsibility towards, De Stijl (#5.1).

Impact case study (REF3b)

The display, which is intended to remain in place for an initial period of five years, opened on 24 September 2011, and, since then, has provided the first port of call for members of the public, schools and community groups who wish to find out more about what is now nationally recognised as the most important artistic contribution to the cultural life of the Netherlands of the twentieth century, as well as Dutch contribution to European modernism. As a permanent display, there are no separate ticket sales from which to record attendance. However, the museum estimates that around 250k people visited the display between its opening and May 2013 (#5.2), which is half of all visitors to the museum during this time, a very large number for a permanent installation in competition with the museum's rolling programme of high profile temporary exhibitions. This should be seen in the context of an overall Dutch population of 16m and a museum in a city of 500k inhabitants. Each school day, the display is visited by around 7 educational groups, and the museum has devised educational programmes at primary and secondary levels in direct connection to it (#5.2-3). The display is also linked to many of the museum's other educational tours and workshops which cater for around 15k school children and 10k adults annually (#5.2-3).

Media interest has been exceptionally high for a permanent installation. On opening, the display attracted commentary from all the major Dutch newspapers, as might a temporary exhibition (#5.4). Interestingly, the display has continued to be discussed in the press, on the radio and on television after that point. It has featured on review programmes ('Kunststof TV', Nederland 2, December 27 2011; 'Kunstuur', Nederland 2, March 30 2013) as well as children's television ('Het Klokhuis', Nederland 3, November 17 2011), thereby reaching an extremely diverse range of audiences across the entire country.

To accompany the display, the museum commissioned a book in Dutch and English editions, *Het verhaal van De Stijl / The Story of De Stijl* (#5.5), inviting White to co-author it with the curator. To ensure the impact of the exhibition, the book relates closely to the design of the show; one of its structuring devices is the identification of chapters under headings of 'Home', 'Street' and 'City', bringing to the fore the links between De Stijl and modern transformations in those areas. The book is the only general text on De Stijl recommended by the official Canon of the Netherlands website, among a range of other specialist books, and White is the only non-Dutch author listed on it in the De Stijl-related literature (#5.6). The decision to publish in two languages indicates that the results of White's original research are being disseminated not just to an Anglophone academic audience, but to a Dutch generalist audience, and to the very many English-speaking international visitors the museum receives every year.

In 2010 and 2011, just prior to the opening of the display in The Hague, De Stijl exhibitions were held at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Lenbachhaus, Munich; and the Complesso del Vittoriano in Rome, all of which benefitted from collaboration with the Gemeentemuseum and in which the approach to the subject the Gemeentemuseum had taken was clearly present. The catalogues of the exhibitions contained essays by White (#3.3-5), the only author to contribute to all three of them, examining the engagement of De Stijl with public art practices, demonstrating that, while this topic has obvious significance for a Dutch audience, its reach and significance go far beyond the Netherlands and relate to the manner in which its culture is perceived abroad.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Corroborating statement from Hans Janssen, curator at large, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.
- 5.2 Statistics on visitor numbers, educational visits and media coverage compiled by Samantha Hoekema, research assistant, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, May 2013.
- 5.3 Copies of educational brochures from the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.
- 5.4 Portfolio of museum press releases, social media activity and 36 press mentions from the time of the exhibition's opening to the end of 2012.
- 5.5 H. Janssen and M. White, *Het verhaal van De Stijl / The Story of De Stijl* (Ludion and Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, 2011).
- 5.6 Copy of the relevant page of the website of the Canon van Nederland:
<http://entoen.nu/stijl/verwijzingen/boeken-en-films>.