

# A New Language of Form

## 15

During the postwar years, when Kauffer and Cassandre were applying synthetic cubism's planes to the poster in England and France, a formal typographic approach to graphic design emerged in Holland and Russia, where artists saw clearly the implications of cubism. Visual art could move beyond the threshold of pictorial imagery into the invention of pure form. Ideas about form and composing space from the new painting and sculpture were quickly applied to problems of design. It would be a mistake, however, to say that modern design is a stepchild of the fine arts. As discussed in chapter 12, Frank Lloyd Wright (Fig. 15-1), the Glasgow group, the Vienna Secession, Adolf Loos, and Peter Behrens were all moving a heartbeat ahead of modern painting in their consciousness of plastic volume and geometric form at the turn of the century. A spirit of innovation was present in art and design, and new ideas were in abundance. By the end of World War I, graphic designers, architects, and product designers were energetically challenging prevailing notions about form and function.

### Russian suprematism and constructivism

Russia was torn by the turbulence of World War I and then the Russian Revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century. Czar Nicholas II (1868–1918) was overthrown and executed together with his family. Russia was ravaged by civil war, and the Red Army of the Bolsheviks emerged victorious by 1920. During this period of political trauma, a brief flowering of creative art in Russia had an international influence on twentieth-century graphic design. Beginning with Marinetti's Russian lectures, the decade saw Russian artists absorb cubism and futurism with amazing speed and then move on to new innovations. The Russian avant-garde saw common traits in cubism and futurism and coined the term *cubo-futurism*. Experimentation in typography and design characterized their futurist publications, which presented work by the visual and literary art communities. Symbolically, the Russian futurist books were a reaction against the values of czarist Russia. The use of coarse paper, handicraft production methods, and handmade additions expressed the poverty of peasant society as well as the meager resources of the artists and writers. The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's autobiographical play was printed in a dissonant futurist style

designed by David and Vladimir Burliuk (Fig. 15–2), becoming a model for works by others, including Ilya Zdanevich (Figs. 15–3 and 15–4).

Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) founded a painting style of basic forms and pure color that he called *suprematism*. After working in the manner of futurism and cubism, Malevich created an elemental geometric abstraction that was new and totally nonobjective. He rejected both utilitarian function and pictorial representation, instead seeking the supreme “expression of feeling, seeking no practical values, no ideas, no promised land.” Malevich believed the essence of the art experience was the perceptual effect of color and form. To demonstrate this, perhaps as early as 1913 he made a composition with a black square on a white background (Fig. 15–5), asserting that the feeling this contrast evoked was the essence of art. In works such as the 1915 *Suprematist Composition* (Fig. 15–6) and the cover of *Pervyi tsikl lektzii (First Circle of Lectures)* (Fig. 15–7), Malevich created a construction of concrete elements of color and shape. The visual form became the content, and expressive qualities developed from the intuitive organization of the forms and colors.

The Russian movement was actually accelerated by the revolution, for art was given a social role rarely assigned to it. Leftist artists had been opposed to the old order and its conservative visual art. In 1917 they turned their energies to a massive propaganda effort in support of the revolutionaries, but by 1920 a deep ideological split developed concerning the role of the artist in the new communist state. Some artists, including Malevich and Kandinsky, argued that art must remain an essentially spiritual activity apart from the utilitarian needs of society. They rejected a social or political role, believing the sole aim of art to be realizing perceptions of the world by inventing forms in space and time. Led by Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) and Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), twenty-five artists advanced the opposing viewpoint in 1921, when they renounced “art for art’s sake” to devote themselves to industrial design, visual communications, and applied arts serving the new communist society. These constructivists called on the artist to stop producing useless things such as paintings and turn to the poster, for “such work now belongs to the duty of the artist as a citizen of the community who is clearing the field of the old rubbish in preparation for the new life.” Tatlin turned from sculpture to the design of a stove that would give maximum heat from minimum fuel; Rodchenko forsook painting for graphic design and photojournalism.

15–1. Frank Lloyd Wright, stained-glass window for the Coonley House, 1912. Space is organized as geometric planes; squares of red, orange, and blue create a vibrant counterpoint to white panes separated by dark strips of lead.

15–2. David and Vladimir Burliuk, pages from Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy, 1914. In an effort to relate visual form to meaning, Russian futurist graphic design mixed type weights, sizes, and styles.

15–3. Ilya Zdanevich, insert cover of *Milliork*, by Aleksei Kruchenykh, 1919.

15–4. Ilya Zdanevich, pages from *Le-Dantyu as a Beacon*, 1923. The Burliuk brothers and the Dadaists inspired Zdanevich’s playscript design, the lively movements of which are created by mixing type sizes and styles, and building letters with letterpress ornaments.

15–5. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, c. 1913. A new vision for visual art is as far removed as possible from the world of natural forms and appearances.

15–6. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915. A symphonic arrangement of elemental shapes of luminous color on a white field becomes an expression of pure feeling.

15–7. Kasimir Malevich, cover of *Pervyi tsikl lektzii (First Circle of Lectures)*, by Nikolai Punin. A suprematist composition is combined with typography, 1920.

An early attempt to formulate constructivist ideology was the 1922 brochure *Konstruktivizm* by Aleksei Gan (1893–1942). He criticized abstract painters for their inability to break the umbilical cord connecting them to traditional art and boasted that constructivism had moved from laboratory work to practical application. Gan wrote that tectonics, texture, and construction were the three principles of constructivism. *Tectonics* represented the unification of communist ideology with visual form; *texture* meant the nature of materials and how they are used in industrial production; and *construction* symbolized the creative process and the search for laws of visual organization.

The constructivist ideal was best realized by the painter, architect, graphic designer, and photographer El (Lazar Markovich) Lissitzky. This indefatigable visionary profoundly influenced the course of graphic design. At age nineteen, after being turned down by the Petrograd Academy of Arts because of ethnic prejudice against Jews, Lissitzky studied architecture at the Darmstadt, Germany, school of engineering and architecture. The mathematical and structural properties of architecture formed the basis for his art.

15–8. El Lissitzky, PROUN 23, no. 6, 1919. Lissitzky developed visual ideals about balance, space, and form in his paintings, which became the basis for his graphic design and architecture.

15–9. El Lissitzky, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1919. The Bolshevik army emblem, a red wedge, slashes diagonally into a white sphere signifying A. F. Kerensky's "white" forces. The slogan's four words are placed to reinforce the dynamic movement.

15–10. El Lissitzky, cover art for Veshch, 1921–22. Mechanical drawing instruments were used to construct geometric letterforms in a different style for each title; small typeset type was pasted in for plating.

15–11. El Lissitzky, title page for Veshch, 1922. Lissitzky searched for a geometric organizational system relating type, geometric elements, and photographs as elements in a whole. These goals were achieved by 1924.

15–12. El Lissitzky, layout for a Broom cover, vol. 5, no. 3, 1922. Isometric perspective letterforms are upside down and backward in the second title presentation, achieving a subtle vitality in a rigorously symmetrical design.

In 1919 Marc Chagall, principal of the art school in Vitebsk, located about 250 miles east of Moscow, asked Lissitzky to join the faculty. Malevich was teaching there and became a major influence on Lissitzky, who developed a painting style that he called *PROUN*S (an acronym for "projects for the establishment [affirmation] of a new art"). In contrast to the absolute flatness of Malevich's picture plane, *PROUN*S (Fig. 15–8) introduced three-dimensional illusions that both receded (negative depth) behind the picture plane (naught depth) and projected forward (positive depth) from the picture plane. Lissitzky called *PROUN*S "an interchange station between painting and architecture." This indicates his synthesis of architectural concepts with painting; it also describes how *PROUN*S pointed the way to the application of modern painting concepts of form and space to applied design. This is seen in his 1919 poster "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" (Fig. 15–9). The space is dynamically divided into white and black areas. Suprematist design elements are transformed into political symbolism that even a semiliterate peasant can supposedly understand: Support for the "red" Bolshevik against the "white" forces of Kerenski is symbolized by a red wedge slashing into a white circle.

Lissitzky saw the October 1917 Russian Revolution as a new beginning for mankind. Communism and social engineering would create a new order, technology would provide for society's needs, and the artist/designer (he called himself a constructor) would forge a unity between art and technology by constructing a new world of objects to provide mankind with a richer society and environment. This

idealism led him to put increasing emphasis on graphic design, as he moved from private aesthetic experience into the mainstream of communal life.

In 1921 Lissitzky traveled to Berlin and the Netherlands, where he made contact with De Stijl, the Bauhaus, Dadaists, and other constructivists. In addition, he met the architect Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld (1885–1987) and designed a cover for the magazine *Wendingen* in 1922 (see Fig. 15–60). Postwar Germany had become a meeting ground for eastern and western advanced ideas in the early 1920s. Access to excellent German printing facilities enabled Lissitzky’s typographic ideas to develop rapidly. His tremendous energy and range of experimentation with photomontage, printmaking, graphic design, and painting enabled him to become the main conduit through which suprematist and constructivist ideas flowed into Western Europe. Editorial and design assignments for several publications were important vehicles by which his ideas influenced a wider audience.

During the early 1920s the Soviet government offered official encouragement to the new Russian art and even sought to publicize it through an international journal (Figs. 15–10 and 15–11). Editor Ilya Ehrenburg was joined by Lissitzky in creating the trilingual journal *Veshch* (Russian)/*Gegenstand* (German)/*Objet* (French). The title (meaning “object”) was chosen because the editors believed that art meant the creation of new objects, a process for building a new collective international approach led by young European and Russian artists and designers. The first cover (Fig. 15–10) shows how Lissitzky constructed his designs on a dynamic diagonal axis with asymmetrical balancing of elements, the weight placed high on the page. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg realized that parallel yet isolated art and design movements had evolved during the seven-year period of separation when Europe and Russia were bled by revolution and war; they saw *Veshch* as a meeting point for new works from different nations.

Lissitzky’s Berlin period enabled him to spread the constructivist message through frequent Bauhaus visits, important articles, and lectures. Major collaborations included the joint design and editing of a special double issue of *Merz* with Schwitters in 1924. The editors of *Broom*, a radical American magazine covering advanced literature and art, commissioned title pages and other graphics from Lissitzky. A *Broom* cover layout (Fig. 15–12) shows Lissitzky’s practice of making layouts on graph paper, which imposed the modular structure and mathematical order of a grid upon his designs. Advertisements and displays were commissioned by the Pelikan Ink Company (Figs. 15–13 and 15–14). Rebelling against the constraints of metal typesetting, Lissitzky often used drafting-instrument construction and paste-up to achieve his designs. In 1925 he predicted that Gutenberg’s system of printing would become a thing of the past and that photomechanical processes would replace metal type and open new horizons for design as surely as radio had replaced the telegraph.

As a designer, Lissitzky did not decorate the book—he constructed it by visually programming the total object. In a 1923 book of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poems, *For the Voice*, also translated as *For Reading Out Loud* (Figs. 15–15, 15–16, and 15–17), Lissitzky designed exclusively with elements from the metal typecase, set by a German compositor who knew no Russian. He said his intent was to interpret the poems as “a violin accompanies a piano.” A die-cut tab index along the right margin helped the reader find a poem. Each poem’s title spread is illustrated with abstract elements signifying its content. Spatial composition, contrast between elements, the relationship of forms to the negative space of the page, and an understanding of such printing possibilities as overlapping color were important in this work.

One of the most influential book designs of the 1920s was *The Isms of Art 1914–1924* (Fig. 15–18), which Lissitzky edited with the Dadaist Hans Arp. Lissitzky’s format for this book was an important step toward the creation of a visual program for

15–13. El Lissitzky, advertisement for Pelikan carbon paper, 1924. Typewriter type, the manufacturer's signature, and stamped letters express the product's use. Overlapping planes convey the sandwiching of material to make carbon copies.

15–14. El Lissitzky, poster for Pelikan ink, 1924. This photogram was produced in the darkroom by placing objects directly on the photographic paper, then making the exposure by flashing a light held to the left.

15–15. El Lissitzky, cover of *For the Voice*, by Mayakovsky, 1923. In contrast to the *Veshch* cover, constructed on a diagonal axis, here a rigid right angle is animated by the counterbalance of the M and circles.

15–16. El Lissitzky, pages from *For the Voice*, by Mayakovsky, 1923. The poem "Our March" begins, "Beat your drums on the squares of the riots, turned red with the blood of revolution." The title type has staccato cadences of a drumbeat; the red square signifies the blood-stained town squares.

15–17. El Lissitzky, pages from *For the Voice*, by Mayakovsky, 1923. The poem title "Order for the Army of the Arts" appears on the right page opposite a dynamic constructivist design.

15–18. El Lissitzky, book cover for *The Isms of Art*, 1924. Complex typographic information is organized into a cohesive whole by the construction of structural relationships.

15–19. El Lissitzky, title page for *The Isms of Art*, 1924. The graphic spirit achieved by medium-weight sans-serif type, mathematical division of the space, white areas, and bold rules established a typographic standard for the modern movement.

15–20. El Lissitzky, text format for *The Isms of Art*, 1924. Rigorous verticals separate German, French, and English texts, and horizontal bars emphasize an important introductory quotation.

15–21. El Lissitzky, pictorial spread from *The Isms of Art*, 1924. The grid systems of the preceding typographic pages are echoed in the placement of the images, which are one, two, and three columns wide.

organizing information. The three-column horizontal grid structure used for the title page (Fig. 15–19), the three-column vertical grid structure used for the text (Fig. 15–20), and the two-column structure of the contents page became an architectural framework for organizing the forty-eight-page pictorially illustrated portfolio (Fig. 15–21). Asymmetrical balance, silhouette halftones, and a skillful use of white space are other important design considerations. By using large, bold sans-serif numbers to link the pictures to captions listed earlier, Lissitzky allows these numbers to become compositional elements. This treatment of sans-serif typography and bold rules is an early expression of the modernist aesthetic.

Lissitzky utilized montage and photomontage for complex communications messages (Fig. 15–22). On a poster for a Russian exhibition in Switzerland, the image (Fig. 15–23) gives equal position to the female and the male, a significant symbolic communication in a traditionally male-dominated society.

After returning to Russia in 1925, Lissitzky spent increasing amounts of time with large exhibition projects for the Soviet government (Fig. 15–24) in addition to publications, art direction, and some architectural design projects. His eighteen-year battle with tuberculosis had begun two years before. In December 1941, six months after Germany invaded Russia, Lissitzky died. Through his social responsibility and commitment to his people, his mastery of technology to serve his goals, and his creative vision, El Lissitzky set a standard of excellence for the designer. Later, typographer Jan Tschichold wrote, "Lissitzky was one of the great pioneers. . . . His indirect influence was widespread and enduring. . . . A generation that has never heard of him . . . stands upon his shoulders."

Alexander Rodchenko was an ardent communist who brought an inventive spirit and willingness to experiment to typography, montage, and photography. His early interest in descriptive geometry lent an analytical precision and definition of form to his paintings. In 1921 Rodchenko abandoned painting and turned to visual communication because his social views called for a sense of responsibility to society instead of to personal expression. Collaborating closely with the writer Mayakovsky, Rodchenko produced

page designs with strong geometric construction, large areas of pure color, and concise, legible lettering. His heavy sans-serif hand-lettering engendered the bold sans-serif types that were widely used in the Soviet Union.

In 1923 Rodchenko began to design a magazine for all fields of the creative arts, entitled *Lef* (Figs. 15–25, 15–26, and 15–27). A design style based on strong, static horizontal and vertical forms placed in machine-rhythm relationships emerged. Overprinting, precise registration, and photomontage were regularly employed in *Novyi lef*. Rodchenko delighted in contrasting bold, blocky type and hard-edged shapes against the softer forms and edges of photomontages. His interest in photomontage (Figs. 15–25 through 15–29) was a conscious effort to innovate an illustration technique appropriate to the twentieth century. The beginning of Russian photomontage coincided with the development of montage in film—a new conceptual approach to assembling cinematic information—and shared some of its vocabulary. Common techniques included showing simultaneous action; superimposing images; using extreme close-ups and perspective images, often together; and rhythmically repeating an image.

The concept of serial painting—a series or sequence of independent works unified by common elements or an underlying structure—was applied to graphic design by Rodchenko. In 1924 his series of ten covers for the Jim Dollar (pseudonym for the well-known Soviet author Marietta Shaginian) “Miss Mend” books (Fig. 15–29) used a standard geometric format printed in black and a second color. The title, number, second color, and photomontage change with each edition, conveying the uniqueness of each book. The standardized elements bring consistency and economy to the whole series. As seen in the work of Salomon Telingater (1903–69), a dash of Dadaist vitality was often mixed into constructivist designs (Fig. 15–30). A witty originality informed Telingater’s use of typography and montage elements.

Georgii (1900–33) and Vladimir Augustovich (1899–1982) Stenberg were talented brothers who collaborated on theatrical designs and film posters (Figs. 15–31, 15–32, and 15–33). Mindful of the reproduction difficulties with photographs at the time, they made meticulously realistic drawings for their posters by enlarging film-frame images via projection and grid methods. These three-dimensional illusions were contrasted with flat forms of bright color in dynamic, well-designed posters conveying strong, direct messages.

15–22. El Lissitzky, cover of *Zapisky poeta* (Notes of a Poet), by Ilia Selvinskii, 1928.

15–23. El Lissitzky, exhibition poster, 1929. In this stark, powerful image, the youth of a collective society are cloned into an anonymous double-portrait above the exhibition structure designed by Lissitzky.

15–24. El Lissitzky, exhibition design for *Pressa*, 1928. Light, sound, and motion become design elements. Belts symbolic of web printing are in continuous movement in this publishing-industry design.

15–25. Alexander Rodchenko, cover for *Lef*, no. 1, 1923. The logo is printed in tight registration, with the top half of the letterforms red and the bottom half black.

15–26. Alexander Rodchenko, cover for *Lef*, no. 2, 1923. In this early photomontage, a crossout overprinting the montage negates the old order; young children symbolize the new society.

15–27. Alexander Rodchenko, cover for *Lef*, no. 3, 1923. A biplane bearing the magazine logo drops a fountain-pen bomb at a gorilla representing the traditional arts of the czarist regime.

15–28. Alexander Rodchenko, poster, 1937. Lenin looms above, larger than life, yet his hand makes symbolic contact with the masses. The “podium” is a *Rabochii* newspaper proclaiming “Peace! Bread! Land!”

The master of propaganda photomontage was Gustav Klutssis (1895–1944), who referred to the medium as “the art construction for socialism.” Employing monumental and heroic images, Klutssis used the poster as a means for extolling Soviet accomplishments. His work has often been compared to John Heartfield’s powerful political statements. It is highly likely that Klutssis was familiar with Heartfield’s work, which was exhibited in Russia during the 1930s. Klutssis was convinced that photomontage was the medium of the future and that it had rendered all other forms of artistic realism obsolete. Although most of his posters celebrated the achievements of Stalin, Klutssis’s uncompromising avant-garde approach eventually caused him to be arrested in 1938 during the Stalinist purges. He perished in the labor camps in 1944 (Figs. 15–34, 15–35, 15–36, and 15–37).

Another Soviet artist associated with Tatlin and the constructivists who profoundly influenced Russian modernism was Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev (1891–1967). He embraced Bolshevism and designed bold, flat, neoprimitivist agitational propaganda posters for ROSTA, the Soviet telegraph agency. This work proved to be excellent preparation for designing picture books for boys and girls. Lebedev learned to simplify, to reduce forms to their basic geometric shapes and use only brilliant primary colors, and to tell a story visually and in sequence. “In the twenties,” he explained, “we fought for mastery and purity of art; we wanted fine art to be descriptive, not illustrative. Cubism gave us discipline of thought, without which there is neither mastery nor purity of professional language.” With the growth of the Soviet children’s book industry under Lenin’s New Economic Policy of the 1920s, Lebedev became the father of the twentieth-century Russian picture book. In such graphic masterpieces as *Prikliucheniya chuch-lo* (The Adventures of the Scarecrow, 1922) (Figs. 15–38 and 15–39), *Azbuka* (Alphabet Book, 1925), *Morozhenoe* (Ice Cream, 1925), *Okhota* (The Hunt, 1925), *Tsirk* (Circus, 1925) (Figs. 15–40 and 15–41),

15–29. Alexander Rodchenko, paperback book covers, 1924. Consistency is achieved through standardized format; montages illustrate each story.

15–30. Salomon Telingater, covers for *Slovo predstavliaetsia Kirsanovu* (The Word Belongs to Kirsanov), by K. Kirsanov, 1930. The author’s whimsy is reflected in Telingater’s rollicking typography, which changes tune, tempo, and key as it flows down the page.

15–31. Georgy and Vladimir Augustovich Stenberg, film poster, undated. Spatial dislocation is achieved by extreme perspective, circular type, and the fragmented figure.

15–32. Georgy and Vladimir Augustovich Stenberg “The Eleventh Year of the Revolution,” poster, 1928

15–33. Georgy and Vladimir Augustovich Stenberg, “The General,” poster, 1929.

15–34. Gustav Klutssis, Spartakiada postcard, 1928

15–35. Gustav Klutssis, “We Will Repay the Coal Debt to the Country,” poster, 1930

15–36. Gustav Klutssis, “Everyone Must Vote in the Election of Soviets” series, poster, 1930

15–37. Gustav Klutssis, “Building Socialism under the Banner of Lenin,” poster, 1931

15–38. Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev, book spread, *Prikliucheniya chuch-lo* (The Adventures of the Scarecrow), 1922.

15–39. Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev, book spread, *Prikliucheniya chuch-lo* (The Adventures of the Scarecrow), 1922.

15–40. Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev, book spread, Tsirk (Circus), 1928.

15–41. Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev, book spread, Tsirk (Circus), 1928.

*Vchera i segodnya* (Yesterday and Today, 1925), and *Bagazh* (Baggage, 1926), often in collaboration with the poet Samuil Marshak, Lebedev devised a flexible, modernist shorthand for figures that he reduced to their simplest shapes against a vast white background and relieved only by bright, flat harmonious color and some contrasting texture. Like his French contemporaries, Lebedev cultivated “infantilism” in his work by borrowing the fresh, spontaneous, naïve techniques of children’s art. “When I make drawings for children,” he explained, “I try to recall my own consciousness as a child.” He was also extraordinarily inventive with various typefaces. Lebedev, more than anyone else, brought the picture book up to date.

Freeing his designs of any gratuitous detail, Lebedev illustrated little Marxist parables on the superiority of the Soviet system to capitalism. Lebedev was always an agitational propagandist at heart. But a good communist, he insisted, “doesn’t deny the necessity of an individual approach to illustrations. And the more the artist shows his personality in his work, the more effective will his art be, the deeper it will influence the reader, the closer it will bring him to art.” The Communist Party thought otherwise. During the Great Purges of the 1930s, *Pravda* denounced Lebedev’s picture books for their “formalism”; and he was forced to capitulate to the dictates of the state-supported style, socialist realism, by replacing his hard-edged designs with lush, benign fluff. He always regretted the compromise.

During the years immediately following the 1917 revolution, the Soviet government tolerated advanced art while more urgent problems commanded its attention, but by 1922, having turned hostile, it accused experimental artists of “capitalist cosmopolitanism” and advocated social-realist painting. Although constructivism lingered as an influence in Soviet graphic and industrial design, painters like Malevich who did not leave the country drifted into poverty and obscurity. Like Klutskis, many artists vanished into the gulag. However, this artistic movement underwent further development in the West, and innovative graphic design in the constructivist tradition continued through the 1920s and beyond.

## De Stijl

The De Stijl movement was launched in the Netherlands in the late summer of 1917. Its founder and guiding spirit, Théo van Doesburg, was joined by painters Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Bart Anthony van der Leek (1876–1958), and Vilmos Huszár (1884–1960), the architect Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud (1890–1963), and others. Working in an abstract geometric style, De Stijl sought universal laws of equilibrium and harmony for art, which could then be a prototype for a new social order.

Mondrian’s paintings are the wellspring from which De Stijl’s philosophy and visual forms developed. By 1911 Mondrian had evolved from traditional landscape painting to a symbolic style influenced by Van Gogh and expressing the forces of nature. It was then that he first saw cubist paintings. In early 1912 he relocated in Paris and began to introduce the vocabulary of cubism into his work. Over the next few years, Mondrian purged his art of all representative elements and moved cubism toward a pure, geometric abstraction. When war broke out in 1914, Mondrian was in Holland, and he remained there during the war.

The philosopher M. H. J. Schoenmakers decisively influenced Mondrian’s thinking. Schoenmakers defined the horizontal and the vertical as the two fundamental opposites shaping our world, and called red, yellow, and blue the three principal colors. Mondrian began to paint purely abstract paintings composed of horizontal and vertical lines. He believed the cubists had not accepted the logical consequences of their discoveries; this was the evolution of abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality. Mondrian believed true reality in visual art “is attained through dynamic movement in equilibrium . . .



established through the balance of unequal but equivalent oppositions. The clarification of equilibrium through plastic art is of great importance for humanity. . . . It is the task of art to express a clear vision of reality.”

For a time in the late 1910s, paintings and designs by Mondrian, Van der Leek, and Van Doesburg were quite similar (see Figs. 15–42, 15–43, and 15–44). They reduced their visual vocabulary to the use of primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) with neutrals (black, gray, and white), straight horizontal and vertical lines, and flat planes limited to rectangles and squares.

With their prescribed visual vocabulary, De Stijl artists sought an expression of the mathematical structure of the universe and the universal harmony of nature. They were deeply concerned with the spiritual and intellectual climate of their time and wished to express the “general consciousness of their age.” They believed the war was expunging an obsolete age, and science, technology, and political developments would usher in a new era of objectivity and collectivism. This attitude was widespread during World War I, for many European philosophers, scientists, and artists believed prewar values had lost their relevance. De Stijl sought the universal laws that govern visible reality but are hidden by the outward appearance of things. Scientific theory, mechanical production, and the rhythms of the modern city formed from these universal laws.

In the Dutch language, *schoon* means both “pure” and “beautiful.” De Stijl adherents believed beauty arose from the absolute purity of the work. They sought to purify art by banning naturalistic representation, external values, and subjective expression. The content of their work was to be universal harmony, the order that pervades the universe. Mondrian produced a body of paintings of incomparable spiritual and formal quality. His compositions of asymmetrical balance, with tension between elements, achieved absolute harmony (Fig. 15–42). The implications for modern design proved to be immense.

15–42. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1922. The search for universal harmony becomes the subject, and the concrete presence of painted form on canvas becomes the vehicle for expressing a new visual reality.

15–43. Theo van Doesburg and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, book cover, 1925. The essence of De Stijl is conveyed.

15–44. Bart van der Leek, layout for a Batavier Line poster, 1915–16. In a series of preliminary layouts, Van der Leek struggled to bring order to the design by dividing the space into rectangles.

15–45. Bart van der Leek, Batavier Line poster, 1916. Flat pure color and bold horizontal and vertical spatial divisions build the design.

15–46. Vilmos Huszár, cover design for *De Stijl*, 1917. Huszár combined his composition with type and Van Doesburg’s logo to create a concise rectangle in the center of the page.

15–47. Vilmos Huszár, title pages for *De Stijl*, 1918. Huszár presented a positive/negative figure/ground study in spatial relationships. Restrained typography marked Apollinaire’s death.

A 1925 cover (Fig. 15–43) by Van Doesburg in collaboration with Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) for the former’s book *Grundbegriffe der neuen gestaltenden* (Basic Concepts of Form-making) shows the direct application of the De Stijl vocabulary to graphic design. Even before the movement formed, Van der Leek used flat, geometric shapes of pure color and created graphic designs with flat color images and simple black bars organizing the space (Figs. 15–44 and 15–45).

Van Doesburg applied De Stijl principles to architecture, sculpture, and typography. He edited and published the journal *De Stijl* from 1917 until his death in 1931. Primarily funded with his own limited

resources, this publication spread the movement's theory and philosophy to a larger audience. *De Stijl* advocated the absorption of pure art by applied art. The spirit of art could then permeate society through architectural, product, and graphic design. Under this system, art would not be subjugated to the level of the everyday object; the everyday object (and, through it, everyday life) would be elevated to the level of art. *De Stijl* became a natural vehicle for expressing the movement's principles in graphic design. Huszár designed a logo with letters constructed from an open grid of squares and rectangles (Fig. 15–46) and also designed some of the early title pages (Fig. 15–47). In 1921 Van Doesburg developed a new horizontal format (Figs. 15–48 and 15–49) that was used until the last issue, published in 1932. (Mondrian stopped contributing articles to the journal in 1924, after Van Doesburg developed his theory of elementarism, which declared the diagonal to be a more dynamic compositional principle than horizontal and vertical construction.)

In designs of alphabets and posters, Van Doesburg applied horizontal and vertical structure to letterforms and the overall layout (Fig. 15–50). Curved lines were eliminated and sans-serif typefaces were favored. Type was often composed in tight rectangular blocks. The square was used as a rigorous module for letterform design. A harmony of form was achieved, but banishing curved and diagonal lines diminished character uniqueness and legibility. Asymmetrically balanced layouts were composed on an open implied grid. Color was used not as an afterthought or decoration but as an important structural element. Red was favored as a second color in printing because, in addition to its graphic power to compete with black, it signified revolution.

15–48. Théo van Doesburg, cover for *De Stijl*, 1922. Type is asymmetrically balanced in the four corners of an implied rectangle. *De Stijl* is combined with the letters N and B, which indicated *Nieuwe Beelden* (New Images).

15–49. Théo van Doesburg, advertisements and announcements from *De Stijl*, 1921. Five messages are unified by a system of open bars and sans-serifs typography.

15–50. Théo van Doesburg, exhibition poster, 1920. Original lettering was executed in ink in a poster for The Golden Section: International Exhibition of Cubists and Neo-Cubists.

15–51. Théo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, "Kleine Dada Soirée," poster, 1922.

15–52. Théo van Doesburg, Dadaist poetry from *De Stijl*, 1921. Type size, weight, and style can be interpreted vocally when reading the poem aloud.

15–53. El Lissitzky, cover and page from *De Stijl*, 1922. Van Doesburg invited Lissitzky to design and edit a double issue of *De Stijl* that reprinted "A Tale of Two Squares" in Dutch.

15–54. Gerrit Rietveld, the Schroeder House, Utrecht, 1924. A new architecture is composed of planes in a square.

Van Doesburg comprehended the liberating potential of Dada and invited Kurt Schwitters to Holland to campaign for it. They collaborated on typographic design projects (see Fig. 15–51), and Van Doesburg explored Dada typography and poetry, which he published in *De Stijl* under the pseudonym I. K. Bonset (Fig. 15–52). He saw Dada and *De Stijl* as opposite but complementary movements: Dada could destroy the old order, then *De Stijl* could build a new order on the razed site of prewar culture. In 1922 he convened an International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in Weimar. One of the constructivists attending was El Lissitzky, who designed an issue of *De Stijl* (Fig. 15–53).

In architectural experiments, Van Doesburg constructed planes in space with dynamic asymmetrical relationships. *De Stijl* architectural theory was realized in 1924 when Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964) designed the celebrated Schroeder House in Utrecht (Fig. 15–54). This house was so radical that neighbors

threw rocks, and the Schroeder children were taunted by their classmates at school. The following year, Oud designed the Café de Unie (Fig. 15–55) with an asymmetrical facade, projecting De Stijl’s vision of order on an environmental scale.

Because Van Doesburg, with his phenomenal energy and wide-ranging creativity, *was* De Stijl, it is understandable that De Stijl as an organized movement did not survive his death in 1931 at age forty-seven. However, others continued to use its visual vocabulary for many years; for example, Bart van der Leck’s open compositions of forms constructed of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines and shapes separated by spatial intervals are found in works ranging from early posters (Figs. 15–56 and 15–57) to book designs and illustrations of the 1940s.

In 1918, the Dutch architect Wijdeveld initiated the magazine *Wendingen*. It started as a monthly publication devoted to architecture, construction, and ornamentation, but during its thirteen years of existence it represented all sectors of the visual arts. Wijdeveld constructed his letters from existing typographic material and used the same technique in his *Wendingen* covers, stationery designs, and posters. In the design of the *Wendingen* pages, Wijdeveld used solid and heavy borders constructed from right angles, typographic counterparts to the brick architecture of the Amsterdam School. This is amply evident in the design of his covers for the Frank Lloyd Wright issues of *Wendingen* (Fig. 15–58) and his 1929 poster announcing an International Exhibition on Economics at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Fig. 15–59). Wijdeveld contributed only four *Wendingen* covers, and the others were designed by various architects, sculptors, painters, and designers. The 1922 cover by El Lissitzky (Fig. 15–60) and the 1929 cover by Huszár (Fig. 15–61) are striking examples.

#### The spread of constructivism

During World War I, Russian suprematism and the Dutch De Stijl movements were apparently completely isolated from one another, yet both groups pushed cubism to a pure geometric art. After the war their ideas were adopted by artists in other countries, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The Polish designer Henryk Berlewi (1894–1967) was decisively influenced by Lissitzky’s 1920 Warsaw lectures. In 1922 and 1923, Berlewi worked in Germany and began to evolve his *Mechano-faktura* theory. Believing that modern art was filled with illusionistic pitfalls, he mechanized painting and graphic design (Fig. 15–62) into a constructed abstraction that abolished any illusion of three dimensions. This was accomplished by mathematical placement of simple geometric forms on a ground. The mechanization of art was seen as an expression of industrial society.

15–55. J. J. P. Oud, Facade of the Café de Unie, Rotterdam, 1925. Oud successfully resolved problems of structure, signage, and identification. Architectural and graphic forms of contrasting color and scale are ordered into a harmonious balance.

15–56. Bart Anthony van der Leck, exhibition poster, 1919. Moored in pictorial art, Van der Leck diverted De Stijl’s vocabulary toward elemental images.

15–57. Bart Anthony van der Leck, “Het vlas” (The Flax), 1941.

15–58. H. T. Wijdeveld, title page for *Wendingen*, no. 7-3, “The Lifework of Frank Lloyd Wright, part IV,” after a design by Frank Lloyd Wright.

15–59. H. T. Wijdeveld, Internationale Economisch-Historische Tentoonstelling (International Economic Historical Exhibition), poster, 1929.

15–60. El Lissitzky, cover for *Wendingen*, no. 4-1, 1921. Lithograph after a drawing

by El Lissitzky. El Lissitzky came to Germany from Russia at the end of 1921, and there is no indication that he came to the Netherlands before the end of 1922. It is possible that Dr. Adolph Behne, a close friend of El Lissitzky living in Berlin, asked Wijdeveld to give El Lissitzky this commission due to his dire straits at that time.

15–61. Vilmos Huszár, “The Paintings of Diego (de la) Rivera,” cover for *Wendingen*, no. 10-3, 1929. The forms on this cover are inspired by Aztec architecture, and the colors are those of the Mexican national flag.

15–62. Henryk Berlewi, exhibition poster, 1925. This early application of Mechano-faktura principles to graphic design is for an exhibition held in a Warsaw automobile showroom.

15–63. Henryk Berlewi, *Putos Chocolates* brochure, page 6, 1925. Copywriter Aleksander Wat closely collaborated with Berlewi to integrate text and form.

15–64. Ladislav Sutnar, cover design for *Getting Married*, 1929. The triangle creates a strong focal point, unifies the silhouette figures, and becomes the main structural element in a delicately balanced composition.

15–65. Ladislav Sutnar, cover design for *Samuel hleďaã* (*Samuel the Seeker*), 1931.

15–66. Ladislav Sutnar, cover of *Nejmensi dum* (*Minimum Housing*), 1931.

In 1924 Berlewi joined the futurist poets Aleksander Wat and Stanley Brucz in opening a Warsaw advertising firm called *Roklama Mechano*. They introduced modern art forms to Polish society in industrial and commercial advertisements. Their brochure stated that advertising design and costs should be governed by the same principles that govern modern industry and the laws of economy. Advertising copy was reorganized for conciseness and impact, and visual layout was adapted to this text (Fig. 15–63). Berlewi hoped that commercial advertising could become a vehicle for abolishing the division between the artist and society.

In Czechoslovakia, Ladislav Sutnar (1897–1976) became the leading supporter and practitioner of functional design. He advocated the constructivist ideal and the application of design principles to every aspect of contemporary life. In addition to graphics, this prolific Prague designer created toys, furniture, silverware, dishes, and fabrics. The publishing house *Druzstevni Prace* retained Sutnar as design director. His book jackets and editorial designs evinced an organizational simplicity and typographic clarity, giving graphic impact to the communication (Figs. 15–64, 15–65, and 15–66).

Karel Teige (1900–51), also from Prague, was initially trained as a painter but early in his career began working in typography and photomontage as an enthusiastic advocate of international modernism. He was an active participant in *Devûtsil* (Nine Forces), a group of avant-garde poets, designers, architects, performance artists, and musicians, and designed many of their publications using what was available in the letterpress printer’s type case. Founded in 1920, *Devûtsil* would eventually have as many as eighty members. Teige believed that the untrained practitioner could contribute a fresh and innovative approach to design, and from 1922 until 1938 he designed over one hundred books and periodicals. His constructivist approach involved an expressive use of type, montage, collage, and borrowed clips from silent films. He was the editor of several avant-garde magazines, including *Disk* (Fig. 15–67), *Zeme sovetu*, *Stavba*, and *ReD*. A social idealist, he believed that good design could help resolve the differences between capitalist America and the communist Soviet Union. After his own country fell to communism in 1948, the new authorities considered him to be too egalitarian and cosmopolitan. For this reason he was banned from working as a writer and designer, and he died three years later (Fig. 15–68).

In 1919, after completing law studies in Budapest, Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy turned to nonrepresentational painting influenced by Malevich. In 1921 he moved to Berlin, where Lissitzky, Schwitters, and Van Doesburg were frequent visitors to his studio. His design for Arthur Müller Lehning's Amsterdam-based avant-garde publication *i10*—one of the purest examples of De Stijl principles applied to typography—demonstrates the collaboration of constructivism, De Stijl, and Merz. De Stijl member César Domela (b. 1900) assisted Moholy-Nagy in the cover design (Fig. 15–69). The printer was initially disturbed by the complete disregard for the rules of typography, as shown in the opening page of the premiere issue (Fig. 15–70), but eventually he came to understand and appreciate the design. (In 1980, *i10* publisher/editor Lehning told Philip B. Meggs that, although the *i10* cover is often attributed to Domela, Lehning's recent retrieval of Moholy-Nagy's cover layouts indicates major responsibility should be credited to him.)

15–67. Karel Teige, cover for *Disk*, no. 1, 1923.

15–68. Karel Teige, cover for *Moderni architektura v Československu*, 1930.

15–69. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, cover design for *i10*, 1927. The designer saw type as form and texture to be composed with a rectangle, lines, and spatial intervals to achieve dynamic equilibrium. Clarity of communication and harmony of form are achieved.

15–70. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, title page spread for *i10*, 1927. The printer was deeply disturbed by this design, with its words running vertically, bold sans-serif type placed into serif text for emphasis, bullets separating paragraphs, and bold bars by page numbers.

The quest for a pure art of visual relationships that began in the Netherlands and Russia remained a major influence for the visual disciplines throughout the twentieth century. One of the dominant directions in graphic design has been the use of geometric construction in organizing the printed page. Malevich and Mondrian used pure line, shape, and color to create a universe of harmoniously ordered, pure relationships. This was seen as a visionary prototype for a new world order. The unification of social and human values, technology, and visual form became a goal for those who strove for a new architecture and graphic design.