



Berlin Chair

Gerrit Rietveld

Not on display**Title/Description:** Berlin Chair**Artist/Maker:** Gerrit Rietveld (Maker)**Born:** 1968 c.**Object Type:** Chair, Furniture**Materials:** Paint, Wood**Measurements:** h. 1065 x w. 730 x d. 545 mm**Accession Number:** 31221**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** De Bilt, Europe, The Netherlands**School/Style:** De Stijl, Modernism

Berlin Chair was designed by the Dutch furniture designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) in 1923 for an interior at the 'Juryfrei Kuntschau', Jury-Free Art Exhibition, in Berlin. [1] Rietveld was one of the main exponents of the Dutch *De Stijl* movement that he joined in 1919. The *De Stijl* movement, founded in Holland in 1917, included architects, designers and artists and was associated with the magazine of the same name that was published 1917-1928 and edited by the artist Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931).

The Berlin Chair is built from eight separate planks in solid oak that in turn were painted separately in white, black, and grey, which were the 'neutral' colours or tones emblematic of *De Stijl*. The movement also incorporated 'pigment primary' colours - yellow, red and blue - in their scheme, as one can see in the contrasting colour scheme of Rietveld's *Red-Blue Chair* (31220). The application of the colours to the separate parts accentuate that the Berlin Chair is composed of separate planes that created a unity and a play of between horizontal and vertical lines, both of which were defining for the *De Stijl* movement.

The backplane painted in black continues under the seat and has a double function as the third leg of the chair. The chair came in two versions, a left- or right-hand model with a broad armrest placed accordingly which accentuates the asymmetrical composition of the elements. The asymmetry of the Berlin Chair can also be said to represent another of the stylistic characteristics of *De Stijl* for which asymmetry featured as an important stylistic ideology from the beginning. [2]

Van Doesburg had already in 1919 described Rietveld's furniture in the magazine *De Stijl* as providing 'a new answer to the question of what place sculpture will have in the new interior' and even Rietveld himself wrote of his furniture as if it were sculpture. [3] The Berlin chair has a strong

sculptural quality and was often presented in the interior as a solitaire. However, it also embodies symbolic functions with the broad armrest that could be used as a table for a book or a glass.

The chair was produced in Rietveld's workshop by his assistant Gerard van de Groenekan, whom Rietveld had handed over the furniture-making workshop to in 1924 to be able to concentrate on architectural and interior design.

Therese Wiles, April 2022

[1] This only seems to have been realized as a maquette as Paul Overy points out in "Carpentering the Classic: A Very Peculiar Practice. The Furniture of Gerrit Rietveld" in *Journal of Design History*, 1991, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1991), p. 146.

[2] Ibid p. 145.

[3] Paul Overy. *De Stijl* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 73.

Further Reading

Colquhoun, Alan. "The Avant-gardes in Holland and Russia" in Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 109-136.

Curtis, William J.R. "Cubism, De Stijl and New Conceptions of Space" in William J.R. Curtis *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 149-159.

Frampton, Kenneth. "De Stijl: the evolution and dissolution of Neo-Plasticism" in Kenneth Frampton *Modern Architecture - A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 142-148.

Overy, Paul. *De Stijl* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

Overy, Paul. "Carpentering the Classic: A Very Peculiar Practice. The Furniture of Gerrit Rietveld" in *Journal of Design History*, 1991, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1991), pp. 135-166
