

Critical Analysis

How important is historical context when reading an object? For the furniture of Gerrit Rietveld and more specifically the Hoge Stoel (1919) the context and the design are inextricably linked. The chair exists at once a part of the traditional furniture canon – in which Rietveld had trained – and at the same time as an example of line and colour in its most basic form.

The work sits in an interesting time in Rietveld's career, it dates from after the initial design of the classic Red-Blue Chair (1918), of which Rietveld is most closely associated, yet it predates its final realization in full colour in 1923. Whilst not his most famous design its use of line and the first introduction of colour, the Hoge Stoel acted as a stepping stone for Rietveld to bring the 3rd dimension to Neoplasticism. Whilst initially I wished to discuss the chair in regards to its shape and form I found its strong connection to a certain time and ideology always got in the way, making me wonder what value historical context has when reading an object?

Stylistically, the chair embodies a certain tension. If we associate the chair with De Stijl, which Rietveld joined in the same year he designed this (1919), it doesn't quite fit into their own ideology as it is not truly a reduction to its most essential form. Take for instance the side panels below the arm rests. These planes are detached from any function, they offer just a minimal form of ornamentation. If you were to take this to the extreme, even the arm rests aren't essential. Yet with these contradictions the chair is still undeniably a part of the De Stijl timeline.

Let's discuss the chair exclusively in regards to its form and colour. The form of this chair is undeniably affected by Rietveld's decision to use these standardized sizings of the time; already this reading is being clouded by history. The design consisting of only vertical and horizontal members - with the exception of the slightly angled backrest. These members create bold lines through space affording the chair a certain graphic quality in keeping with his new-found De Stijl colleagues. There is an air of architecture to the piece, a physical exploration of the space using, in essence "sticks and planes". Theo Van Doesburg remarked that "Rietveld's furniture formed a separate category between furniture and architecture". The chair is without doubt large; it doesn't shy away from the space it's in, rather it dominates it. This isn't to undermine the importance of the negative space within the design. The base of the chair with its cross beams and Rietveld joints - a name that would later become commonly used to refer to the specific type of joint used in this design in which the members meet then continue past one another – act as a sort of cage for the negative space beneath, claiming this space as equally a part of the chair as the sticks and planes.

All objects are a reflective of the historical context they were designed within. The context and the form are inextricably linked.



In the case of Rietveld he, like many of his contemporaries was looking towards the future. Rietveld was a man who was embracing the issues of his time.

A post-model T designer offering a solution for mass produced furniture in a pre-Ikea world. Yet how would this chair look if it was designed now? I mention this, to raise the conflict that exists between craft practices of the time and Rietveld's aim for simplicity. If this chair was designed today would it be a totally different object, perhaps made of plastic or metal, materials which were not in common use in manufactured furniture at the time but are the norm now? Perhaps it would resemble the 21400mm Chair by Nendo, another object rooted in a reading based on line and abstraction.

Whilst the decision to pick this design was not based on my own grand views on design as stated in the personal statement written previously it does touch on my interest in dutch design and my shifting views surrounding industry and systems. Whilst Rietveld designed this chair from his own small studio and not a large organization, he had the foresight to design for systems that were in place and use these systems to affect a change he wanted to see.

I would align my own critical position most with Arnheim's. Whilst Arnheim argues that we should view the work based on the shape and form in order to read the true intention of the artist rather than grounding the reading in history and symbolism, I feel when reading the original object historical context will creep in, and that this actually allows better analysis of its overall form and colours.

I took an approach very much in keeping with that of Arnheim's when replicating this chair without even realizing. Even the initial decision for the object was not placed within a reading of great social issues or history but rather a chance encounter at a museum. I had never seen the chair before but was instantly drawn to its shape, the fact that there was no prior knowledge of the object intrigued me more so than designs I was already aware of. In my initial stages I actually tried to not cloud my mind with the history of De Stijl, The Netherlands or that of Rietveld himself. This afforded me an ability to question the object in its most abstract; Why a line here? Why a fleck of colour there?

Yet the history associated with this object slowly crept in. At this stage I became more interested in the history and context which I now believe is integral to the object as a whole. In fact it answers the questions I had previously wondered. If we take Arnheim's view of a reading based on artistic process alone, are we really understanding all the elements of an object? perhaps if we allow ourselves to understand its context we can in turn understand the work in regards to form and colour better.

Critical Analysis