

Benno Wissing and the Modernization of de Stijl

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The 20th century was a time of destruction, innovation, and enormous cultural and social change. Two World Wars had swept across Europe, and revelations in social thought were rising in the wake of the destruction. Many of these revelations and social changes were in direct response to the wars. Numerous 20th century artists saw their ideologies crumble and transform before their eyes. Artistic movements, such as Fauvism, Cubism, and other popular late 19th and early 20th century styles soon lay tattered at the feet of a war-torn Europe. Other movements, however, withstood the test of time. Instead of abandoning their practices and ideas in favor of newer, more modern notions, artists who subscribed to the tenets of these more fortunate movements found ways to transform and modernize both themselves and their

ideas; in doing so, they were able to keep their art relevant in the ever-changing tides of the 20th century.

One of these movements was de Stijl, a Dutch movement placing emphasis on abstraction, universality, and simplicity, and one such artist was the Dutch graphic designer, Benno Wissing. Through his work as a graphic designer, Wissing was able to alter de Stijl ideas in ways that would come to make de Stijl relevant even in today's society. Wissing accomplished this modernization by transforming de Stijl ideas of simplicity, altering ideas of universality of shapes as a means for world-wide understanding of art, into an idea of universality of shapes that would be used as a means of information dissemination. The changes Wissing made, many of them in response to, or prompted by World War II, were a fundamental step in the evolution of de Stijl, and it is unlikely that many of the changes in ideology Wissing propagated would have come about if the destruction and inevitable reconstruction of World War II had not come to pass.

Benno Wissing, whose art is relatively unknown in America, played a large role in the development of graphic design in the Netherlands. His 1967 designs for Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, and his ideas concerning simplicity and directness can still be seen, mimicked in the modern work of graphic designers primarily in the Netherlands, but world-wide, as well. Wissing's life was not always centered around graphic design; he also experimented with

painting, lithography, and sculpture. Graphic design, however, would prove to be the most fulfilling means of artistic expression for Wissing, who even went as far as to state, "I prefer dealing with nondescript industry than with art..."¹ It is important to examine who Wissing was, and study his experiences as a young artist during World War II, in order to understand fully why he felt that design was the most fulfilling instrument to express his abilities.

Wissing was born in Rankum, Netherlands in 1923. He attended secondary school in Rotterdam from 1936-41 at the Erasmiaans Gymnasium, but did not complete his education there. Wissing himself states, "[my love for classical learning] was largely used up."² Upon ending his education at the Gymnasium, Wissing entered the Rotterdam Art Institute, where he dabbled in several artistic media, but was eventually asked not to return in 1943 after he was discovered teaching fellow pupils himself.³ Throughout 1941-1943, the German *Luftwaffe* were pummeling the city of Rotterdam, determined to break down the city's defenses. The Germans would eventually succeed and begin their occupation of the Netherlands.⁴ As the war years rolled on, Wissing would eventually flee to France with his good friend, Jan Begeer. While in Paris, the pair was approached with an opportunity to help guide American pilots through the Pyrenees to Spain. Wissing and Begeer accepted, but were eventually shot and wounded by German police in Paris. The two artists were detained only shortly, and let go after questioning. The pair spent the next few months recuperating in a "Mai-

son de Convalescents" in France.⁵ It is easy to see how this particular World War II experience directly affected Wissing, so much so, in fact, that many of his designs for Dutch apothecaries were based upon his experiences at the convalescent hospital.⁶

Upon his return to Rotterdam during Christmas 1944, Wissing regained contact with many former artist friends. Together, Wissing and this group of fellow Dutch artists discussed, according to author Paul Hefting, "involving artists in the life of the community, thus contributing to the reconstruction effort."

⁷ It is now that Wissing began changing his artistic and personal ideologies in response to the events of World War II. Instead of abiding by the mantra, "art for art's sake," Wissing was using art for the purpose of helping the community. In 1949, Wissing began his career as a full-fledged designer, working on catalogues, brochures, museum exhibitions, and posters. He continued working on various design projects until, in 1963, Wissing, along with fellow designers Friso Kramer, Wim Crouwel, and Paul and Dick Schwarz, established the design firm known as "Total Design."⁸ It was here at Total Design where Wissing designed and completed some of his most well-known and influential work, including the Schiphol Airport signage and fleet-marking for PAM, a Dutch gas and oil company.⁹ Wissing would eventually leave Total Design, fearing the firm was becoming too rigid in their structure, and instead, traveled briefly before moving to Rhode Island in 1980. Here, he completed numerous commissions, and briefly instructed students at the Rhode Island School of

Design.¹⁰ During his time in Rhode Island, Wissing was most notably involved with the 1982 redesigning of the signage at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation bus terminal at Kennedy Plaza in Providence.¹¹ Wissing's simple, informative designs were as well received here as those which he created in the late sixties, affirming the relevance of his innovations and ideas in the post modern age.

Long before Wissing had lifted his first pencil, de Stijl ideas had already been making their way across Europe. The de Stijl movement began with the Dutchman, Theo van Doesburg, who is described by the art historian, Paul Overy, as a "painter, designer, writer, and propagandist."¹² Though he was indeed the driving force behind the movement, Van Doesburg was among a core group of artists, architects, and designers, which included Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leek, and Gerrit Rietveld. According to the author Stephen Eskilson, this group of artists and architects felt that many of the troubles leading to World War I involved "nationalist egotism."¹³ Eskilson argues that the founders of de Stijl wanted their work to inspire a new, universal language of art, one that focused on geometric abstraction, an abstraction that could not be "identified with any one country or individual."¹⁴ The destruction caused by World War I was a driving force for artists to strive for a style of art that would transcend nationalistic disputes, one that would be meaningful for people of all nationalities.

This, of course, raises the question of "how?" How did this group of artists and architects plan to

find this new universal language of art? They began by breaking down even the most complex figures and ideas into geometric shapes. This geometric reductionism is widely considered to be the first hallmark of the de Stijl movement. Paul Overy explains that other major characteristics include "...an exclusive use of 'orthagonals' (horizontal and vertical lines or 'elements.') and the [use of] 'pigment primary' colors ('pure' red, yellow, and blue), plus the 'neutral' colors or tones (white, grey, and black)."¹⁵ De Stijl, however, was not just a movement of artistic techniques, but, as Overy explains, it was also a movement of "theoretical positions and beliefs."¹⁶ He lists these beliefs, the most important being "an insistence on the social role of art, design, and architecture," and "a belief in a balance between the universal and collective, and the specific and individual."¹⁷ This can be defined as a means for artists to connect their own individual preferences and styles with a larger community by means of an artistic language that could be understood by the populous. If examined, Mondrian's 1942 painting, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* encapsulates the very ideas of de Stijl on canvas. Using the primary colors and linear forms, Mondrian is able to communicate the feelings of excitement and electricity that are present in the New York blocks surrounding Broadway. The larger rectangular areas made up of negative space create the illusion of city blocks, while the linear areas masquerade as streets, the small blocks of interchanging colors representing an electric hum of activity.¹⁸ Even a novice onlooker could recognize Mondrian's geometric patterns as the grid of a large city, which is exactly what Mondri-

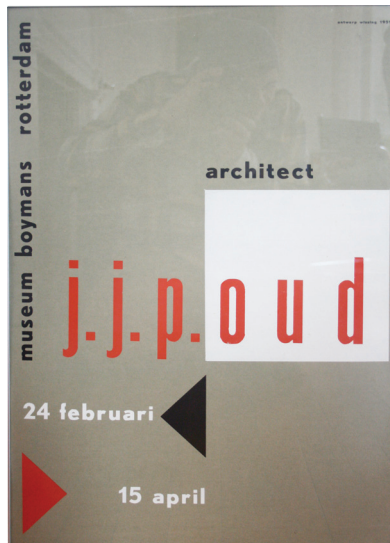


Fig. 1 Benno Wissing, *Poster for J.J.P. Oud Exhibition*, 1951.
Wissing House, Bristol Rhode Island.
Photo Courtesy of Jannie Wissing.



Fig. 3 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).



Fig. 2 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).



Fig. 4 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).

an, Van Doesburg, and other de Stijl artists wanted.

De Stijl was unlike many other art movements throughout history in the fact that its members never met to discuss ideas. In fact, the majority of information dissemination came through the journal that Van Doesburg began publishing in 1917.¹⁹ Also called *De Stijl*, the journal made it possible for the various artists involved with de Stijl to share and promote their art with each other. It also allowed the members of the movement to familiarize themselves with de Stijl concepts of typography and graphic design.²⁰ In addition to the artwork and designs showcased in the journal, it also served as the source of de Stijl philosophy. It is through this journal that de Stijl ideas began to spread throughout the Netherlands, and eventually Europe.²¹ In issues of *De Stijl* and other widely shared writings, Van Doesburg writes about the aforementioned de Stijl principles. H.L.C. Jaffé, one of the original de Stijl biographers, cites a Van Doesburg article that states "...art has to express its aesthetical content by its proper, pure means of color and form."²² The popularity of *De Stijl* steadily increased throughout Europe, and Eskilson explains that in 1921, Van Doesburg and Mondrian "completely redesigned the journal in an attempt to appeal to a broader European audience." Eskilson continues to explain that the journal would now also be published in Paris and Rome, and be printed in several other languages besides Dutch.²³

The fact that those artists who subscribed to Van Doesburg's ideas took their information pri-

marily from writings provided them with the opportunity for individual interpretation. With Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and other de Stijl artists now voicing their ideas and opinions in the form of a widely published journal, de Stijl artists could easily and readily make small changes to the philosophy of de Stijl in their own art, while still keeping their art in accord with the main foci of the de Stijl movement. One artist could read something of Van Doesburg's one way, while another could take different meaning from it. This led to highly varied de Stijl artwork, and more importantly, gave artists like Benno Wissing the ability to create their art as they saw fit, keeping in mind de Stijl ideology.

Paul Hefting explains that Wissing, unlike Mondrian and Van Doesburg, was extremely hesitant to "write down general ideas on design," for he feared that he would "categorize 'an activity, a progression if you will which more than any other, can also make use of its interdisciplinary role in society.'" ²⁴ Since Wissing's writings concerning his own artistic beliefs are hard to come by, Wissing's commitment to de Stijl must be argued for. Hefting mentions how closely the work carried out by Wissing and Total Design echoes de Stijl.²⁵ For example, covers for *De Stijl* designed by Piet Mondrian and Van Doesburg and posters designed by Benno Wissing contain striking similarities. Both designs use a limited color palette: orange and black in the case of Van Doesburg, and red, black, and white in the case of Wissing. Large text draws the viewer in, and the smaller text conveys the important information. Also, there is a free use of

vertical text in both designs. The poster designed by Wissing was made for a 1951 exhibition of the de Stijl architect, J. J. P. Oud (fig. 1). In a publication by the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, for which Wissing completed an enormous number of projects, it is explained that Wissing borrowed many techniques from de Stijl in the production of the posters made for Oud's exhibit. These include the use of triangles to capture the viewer's attention and direct the viewer to the dates of the exhibition. Also, when designing postcards for the event, Wissing chose to invoke an "oblong shape," uncommon for him, but probably done "[on the] basis of the de Stijl movement."²⁶ In these posters, and many more produced by Wissing, he uses only a few colors, and in the case of the Oud posters, only one color, the primary red. Though Wissing was not yet born during de Stijl's heyday, it is very hard to deny that he was not, at the very least, influenced by de Stijl ideology. It is through Wissing's work and the reiteration of this ideology that Wissing modernized these ideas, making them relevant even today.

Wissing's most famous and influential work, and the project that would encapsulate all of his transformative ideas, are his designs for the Schiphol airport (fig. 2). The KLM airport at Schiphol had been badly damaged during the bombings of World War II. The historian Gerald Newton explains that "many of its buildings were destroyed, and the runway [was] left a mass of craters."²⁷ The need for the airport to be rebuilt was great, and work began quickly. The Architect Kho Liang was asked to de-

sign the buildings, while Wissing was approached about designing the signage. During his research for the new signage, Wissing traveled to many European airports and found their approaches to signage problematic. At Orly Airport in Paris, he found that "the already nervous passengers" were confused by complicated signs and poor choices in building materials.²⁸ He also found that the materials and "icons" employed by Orly's designers were all different, and that legibility was poor. Wissing wanted the opposite for Schiphol. He wanted passengers to be able to find their way through the enormous space easily. Wissing made clarity his highest priority.²⁹ With the innovation of the jumbo jet, airports became exponentially larger, making it even more difficult to guide passengers easily and efficiently to their gates.³⁰ Wissing achieved these goals for simplicity by, as Hefting explains, "[paying] special attention to readability, [using] the most efficient medium for conveying the information (the ceiling), limiting the project to two colors, [and] avoiding frequently confusing pictograms (except the arrow)".³¹ Schiphol would subsequently become the basis for many modern airport designs and signage, an achievement for which Wissing receives little or no credit today.³²

Upon examining Schiphol, we can see the exact ways Wissing modernized the ideas of de Stijl, having done so in response to changes in society induced by World War II. Firstly, the de Stijl insistence on the breaking down of complex forms into simple ones has been translated into a clarified system of pictograms and the sparing use of words (fig. 3). It

is here that Wissing was able to alter the de Stijl desire for a universally understandable language of art, and transform this idea into a desire for a universally understandable way to communicate important information, as a way to direct people of all ethnicities, regardless of their spoken language. In a post-World-War-II world, new information, increased advertising, and the advent of the jumbo jet made the amount of information to which people were subjected in airports nearly unbearable. Wissing found a way to use de Stijl ideas to put travelers and the general public at ease by ensuring that they always knew where they were going, directing them using simple color coding and a variety of only a few shapes to the one out of a hundred gates they needed. Wissing also kept clarity in mind when deciding what typeface to use for the signage. As he had done in previous projects, Wissing chose “Akzidenz Grotesk,” a typeface designed by Berthold in 1896, over the similar Helvetica, a font still widely used today.³³ Wissing’s font selection contributed not only to clarity, but also played a role in keeping travelers calm and directed. None of the letters or numbers come together to form sharp points, and the negative space inside the letters, the inner part of a “C” or the two ovals within the “B,” are rather large and exude a calming lightness. Wissing also ensured that the font could be read from a distance: the letter spacing and contained negative space were likely factors in his decision, as the font can clearly be read from great distances.

Secondly, Wissing maintains de Stijl tradition by using only two colors in his Schiphol designs (fig.

4). In a shift from de Stijl, however, he does not care whether or not green is a primary color, only that using as little color variation as possible provides greater simplicity, readability, and directness. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Wissing took the de Stijl idea of a connection between art and the community, the social aspect of art, to new levels. As previously stated, in the wake of World War II, Wissing wanted to use design to help rebuild the Netherlands. He felt that he could do more for society as a designer than a traditional artist.³⁴ Gust Romjin, an artist involved with the design group ‘r,’ Wissing’s first design firm, stated, “Rotterdam lay in ruins. On a monumental level there was certainly something for artists to do.”³⁵ Wissing, like the artists of de Stijl, wanted his work to have social ties. For Van Doesburg and Mondrian, social ties meant that all of society could be brought together through a collectively understood piece of art. Wissing, however, specifically wanted his art to have social ties that would help and benefit the community, to help reconstruct a war-torn Netherlands. No matter if it was at Schiphol or designs for J.J.P. Oud, Wissing wanted his designs to facilitate society at large, whether it be navigating one’s way through an enormous airport, or understanding where and when an event would take place. His ideas of simplicity, clarity, directness and readability tied into this desire to benefit society at large.

Perhaps the best way to extrapolate Wissing’s guiding principles is found in an informational bulletin called *Syllabus Schilderskring*, which was published by ‘r.’ It stated, “The artist must have

something to say which everyone understands; no confusion, no making things difficult.”³⁶ This quote appropriately ties to the mindset of the de Stijl founders and the ideas by which Wissing produced his designs. In a post-World-War-I world, Mondrian and Van Doesburg sought to use simplicity and abstraction to communicate universal ideas without language or cultural barriers. Wissing, in a post-World-War-II world, sought to use simplicity and directness again to communicate universal ideas without confusion. In this post-modern world, however, Wissing would use these ideas of simplicity and directness to again help members of society digest the increased amount of advertising and information with which we are faced. He did so by making all of his posters, designs, and signage exceptionally readable and clear. Unlike the de Stijl artists, Wissing was relatively disinterested in drawing society into a communal appreciation of his art. Instead, he connected his art to society for the purposes of rebuilding and facilitating society as a whole.

Wissing modernized the ideas of de Stijl through his design work, making concepts of simplicity and universality relevant in a post-World-War-II world. Without his experiences during the War, or the destruction of Rotterdam and the Netherlands, Wissing may not have had the desire or opportunity to use his art in this way. Changes in society induced by World War II such as globalism, the advent of mass media dissemination, increased advertising, and new technologies, coupled with Wissing's own experiences and knowledge of de Stijl, spurred him to

modernize the movement. In the modern era, where attention spans are ever-shrinking and advertising is ever-growing, Benno Wissing's ideas about simplicity, clarity, and directness, are perhaps more relevant now than ever before.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Paul Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing* (Rotterdam: The Netherlands Foundation, 1996), 21.
- 2 Ibid., 15.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Gerald Newton, *The Netherlands: A Historical and Cultural Survey 1795-1977* (London: Ernest Benn, 1978), 134-135.
- 5 Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing*, 17.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 17-27.
- 9 Ben Bos, *Total Design and Its Pioneering Role in Graphic Design* (London: Unit Editions, 2011), 22-23.
- 10 Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing*, 27-41.
- 11 Ibid., 39.
- 12 Paul Overy, *De Stijl* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 7.
- 13 Stephen Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History* (New Haven, CT: Yale United Press, 2007), 187.
- 14 Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History*, 187.
- 15 Overy, *De Stijl*, 11.
- 16 Ibid., 12.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bridget Riley, "Mondrian: The 'Universal' and the 'Particular'," *The Burlington Magazine* 1124 (1996): 751-753.
- 19 Overy, *De Stijl*, 7.
- 20 Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History*, 188.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 H.L.C Jaffé, *De Stijl: 1917-1931* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1986), 99.
- 23 Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History*, 189.
- 24 Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing*, 31.
- 25 Ibid., 29.
- 26 Museum Boijmans Van Beuingen, *Benno Wissing: Graphic and Spatial Design* (Rotterdam: NAI, 1999), 14-15.
- 27 Newton, *The Netherlands: A Historical and Cultural Survey 1795-1977*, 148.
- 28 Museum Boijmans Van Beuingen, *Benno Wissing: Graphic and Spatial Design*, 14-15.
- 29 Ibid., 64-66.
- 30 Ben Bos and Elly Bos, *AGI: Graphic Design Since 1950* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 166.
- 31 Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing*, 33.
- 32 Bos and Elly Bos, *AGI: Graphic Design Since 1950*, 166.
- 33 Museum Boijmans Van Beuingen, *Benno Wissing: Graphic and Spatial Design*, 66.
- 34 Hefting, *1996 Lifetime Achievement Fund Foundation for Visual Arts Design and Architecture: Benno Wissing*, 21.
- 35 Ibid., 21.
- 36 Ibid., 17.