

Atelier Nelly and Theo van Doesburg

Exhibition 1-5-2020 – 2-5-2021

A new look at the work of Nelly and Theo van Doesburg is possible thanks to the restoration of their architecture archive. The exhibition recognises Nelly as a key figure in the consolidation of the reputation of Van Doesburg and De Stijl. The magnificent focus of the exhibition will be on the couple's most striking joint project: their studio-house in the Parisian suburb of Meudon. Sketches, drawing and scale models rarely (if ever) exhibited before reveal the house's rich history.

Theo van Doesburg is well-known as a leading light of De Stijl and the Dutch avant-garde. His multi-faceted practice cannot be pinned down to one profession: he was active as a poet, novelist, typographer, photographer, interior designer and architect, but he is known above all as a painter. The aura of his artistry is reflected in his architectural work, and his sketches and drawings, now part of the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning, are recognised as unique artefacts. Het Nieuwe Instituut often receives loan requests for them for international exhibitions. This makes heavy demands on the material, most of which is in such poor condition that it cannot be lent or shown any more without restoration.

This situation is about to change. Thanks to a one-off financial injection by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the works are being restored in the context of the Disclosing Architecture programme.

The start of the restoration is also the start of a mystery. The preliminary research on the architecture archive of Van Doesburg is first and foremost formal in character. How did he handle material and colour? Are the colours of the works in the collection original, or have they been unconsciously adapted to the image of De Stijl over the years, for example by over-restoration? It has become clear to what extent the copy was a sort of semi-product for Van Doesburg that can be modified again and again. The preliminary research has therefore become a reflection on the media he used.

Nelly's role is also gradually coming into focus. Discussion of the archive is shifting more towards such themes as identity and authenticity, for instance the question of her voice within the artistic union. After Theo's death Nelly abandoned her own role as an artist, while using her influential network, including such figures as Peggy Guggenheim, to ensure that his name was firmly anchored in the history of art. Attention is being paid to their studio-house in Meudon, where she lived for decades following Theo's death. The house played an important role as a meeting place for such guests as the sculptor and painter Hans Arp, the sculptor Alexander Calder, the jazz musician Thelonius Monk, and the future president of Benin, Sourou Apithy, who organised the anti-colonial movement in France from this address.

The research has also uncovered the existence of variant signatures, which makes it likely that Nelly signed work that is attributed to Theo. This is a subject for further research –is it forgery, a gesture of authentication or appropriation, or a sign of shared authorship?

Atelier Nelly and Theo van Doesburg focuses on these and other questions, which help to demonstrate the importance of this restoration and which can in fact only be raised thanks to the restoration.