



Twentieth Century Design Icons  
no. 1

## "The Red Chair"

by  
Gerrit Rietveld  
(1888-1964)

GERRIT RIETVELD was born on 24 June 1888, in Utrecht (the Netherlands), and lived there most of his life. He was trained as a cabinetmaker and as a jewelry designer before studying and working with the architect P. J. Klaarhamer. Rietveld's career as an independent architect began in 1919.

A commission to copy furniture designed by Frank Lloyd Wright brought Rietveld into contact with *de Stijl* (the Style), founded in 1917, which advocated a "pure" artistic expression based upon the interrelationship in space of rectangles of primary colors. Rietveld became a member of this group in 1919, but already in 1917-1918 had designed the so-called "Red (or Red-Blue) chair". Composed of a modular grid of square or rectangular sticks painted black and with a sustaining seat and back of red and blue rectangular plywood planes, this design enabled each element to maintain its own absolute identity because of the color scheme and the joinery. It was the first executed object to exhibit the artistic principles of *de Stijl*, and became the movement's most recognised icon.



Rietveld applied the same interplay of rectangles to an architectural design in his remodeling of the ground floor shop front of the G. & Z. C. Jewelry Store, Amsterdam (1920). In collaboration with the designer Truus Schröder-Schröder, he designed the apotheosis of *de Stijl* architecture, the Schröder House, Utrecht (1924). The exterior was a *de Stijl* composition of particolored, stuccoed brick planes and painted steel stanchions suggesting an inner volume dynamically defined by discrete lines and planes, but not actually enclosed. It set the standard for the progressive architecture of the 1920s in Europe.

*De Stijl* principles also informed a series of designs for shop fronts (1924-1929) which, with large-scale housing projects, comprised the bulk of Rietveld's work of the late 1920s. Rietveld broke with the *de Stijl* movement in 1928 and switched to the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid*. The same year he was one of the co-founders of the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* or International Congress of Modern Architecture).

By the 1930s Rietveld's time seemed to have passed. Commissions became fewer, although he continued to design furniture (Zig-Zag chair, 1934) and buildings, including the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Most of the latter were country houses displaying the canonical white stucco cubes, large areas of glass, and flexible, open planning of the mature International Style in Europe (Hillebrandt House, The Hague, 1935). With renewed interest in *de Stijl* following World War II, Rietveld continued to design private houses (Stoop House, Velp, 1951) and again received important commissions, including the Hoograven Housing complex, Utrecht (1954-1957), the Jaarbeurs, Utrecht (1956), and the De Ploeg textile factory, Bergeyk (1956). He died in Utrecht on June 25, 1964.