

De Stijl: the evolution and dissolution of Neo-Plasticism 1917-31

- 1 There is an old and a new consciousness of the age. The old one is directed towards the individual. The new one is directed towards the universal. The conflict of the individual and the universal is reflected in the World War as well as in art today.
- 2 The war is destroying the old world with all that it contains: the pre-eminence of the individual in every field.
- 3 The new art has revealed the substance of the new consciousness of the age: an equal balance between the universal and the individual.
- 4 The new consciousness is ready to be realized in everything, including the everyday things of life.
- 5 Traditions, dogmas and the pre-eminence of the individual (the natural) stand in the way of this realization.
- 6 Therefore the founders of Neo-Plasticism call on all those who believe in the reform of art and culture to destroy those things which prevent further development, just as in the new plastic art, by removing the restriction of natural forms, they have eliminated what stands in the way of the expression of pure art, the extreme consequence of every concept of art.

From the first manifesto of De Stijl, 1918

The Dutch De Stijl movement, which lasted for barely fourteen years, was centred about the work of three men: the painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and the cabinet-maker and architect Gerrit Rietveld. The other artists who constituted the original formation, in 1917, under Van Doesburg's leadership — the painters Bart van der Leek, Georges Vantongerloo, and Vilmos Huszar, the architects J.J.P. Oud,

from Gottfried Semper's critical study, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik*, of 1860.

The appearance of Mondrian's first post-Cubist compositions, consisting largely of broken horizontal and vertical lines, coincided with his return to Holland from Paris in July 1914 and with the period that he and Van der Leek spent in Laren in almost daily contact with Schoenmaekers. From Schoenmaekers came the term 'Neo-Plasticism' — from his coinage of *nieuwe beelding* — and from him too came the restriction of the palette to the primary colours of whose cosmic significance he wrote in *Het nieuwe Wereldbeeld*: 'The three principal colours are essentially yellow, blue and red. They are the only colours existing . . . yellow is the movement of the ray (vertical) . . . blue is the contrasting colour to yellow (horizontal firmament) . . . red is the mating of yellow and blue.' Elsewhere in the same text he provided a comparable justification for limiting Neo-Plastic expression to orthogonal elements: 'The two fundamental, complete contraries which shape our earth and all that is of the earth are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun, and the vertical, profoundly spatial movement of rays that originate in the centre of the sun'.

For all his formative influence Schoenmaekers played no direct role in the aesthetic evolution of De Stijl. This was left to Van der Leek and Vantongerloo, whose very independence as artists caused them to split from Van Doesburg at an early date. Yet without their contributions it is doubtful if the characteristic De Stijl aesthetic could have been formulated with such clarity in so short a time. It is obvious, for example, that Van Doesburg's famous abstraction *The Cow*, of 1916, owes much to Van der Leek, while Vantongerloo's sculpture *Interrelation of Masses*, of 1919, clearly anticipates the general massing of the Van Doesburg and Cor van Eesteren house projects of 1923. And even the aloof Mondrian, in the last number of *De Stijl* (1932) — dedicated to the memory of Van Doesburg — brought himself to acknowledge his debt to Van der Leek, for the latter's use, as early as 1917, of saturated primary colours.

The years 1914-16 had seen Mondrian in Laren, in frequent contact with Schoenmaekers. During this period he wrote his basic theoretical text, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst' ('Neo-Plasticism in Painting'), which appeared in 1917 in the first issue of *De Stijl*. The enforced seclusion and meditation of the war years brought Mondrian to a new point of departure. His work now comprised a series of compositions consisting of floating, rectangular, coloured planes. Both he and Van der Leek had now arrived at what they each considered to be a totally new and pure plastic order, with the much younger Van Doesburg closely following their lead. Yet while Mondrian remained involved in planar compositions set within the 'shallow space' of the picture plane, as represented in his *Composition with Coloured Planes on a White Ground* of 1917, Van der Leek and Van Doesburg were to arrive at a linear structuring of the picture plane itself, through the use of narrow bars of colour, etched in a white field. Van Doesburg's *The Cow* dates from this period, as does his *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* of 1918, both works being influenced by Van der Leek.

The first architectural work associated with De Stijl was created by Robert van 't Hoff, who had seen Wright's work on a visit to America before the war, and in 1916 built a remarkably convincing Wrightian villa on the outskirts of Utrecht. Aside from this pioneering reinforced-concrete house at Huis ter Heide and a number of less elegant Wrightian works by Wils, there was comparatively little architectural activity in the early phases of De Stijl. Oud, who became City Architect to Rotterdam in 1918, at the age of twenty-eight, was never wholeheartedly affiliated with the movement. After abstaining from the 1918 manifesto he took pains to establish his artistic independence. He seems to have found in the compositions of the Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann a means for detaching himself from the more 'structural' interests of De Stijl. The single exception to this was his Purnerend factory project of 1919, wherein Neo-Plastic elements were rather diffidently applied to an otherwise bland assembly of masses. There was, in effect, very little Neo-Plastic architecture before 1920,

when it made its first appearance in the work of Rietveld. Prior to 1915 Rietveld had taken courses with the architect P.J. Klaarhamer, who, while never associated with De Stijl, was collaborating at the time with Van der Leek.

The year 1917 saw the creation of the famous Red/Blue chair designed by Rietveld. This simple piece of furniture, based on a traditional folding bed-chair, provided the first occasion for a projection of the Neo-Plastic aesthetic into three dimensions. In its form, the bars and planes of Van der Leek's compositions were now realized as articulated and displaced elements in space. Aside from its articulation, the chair was distinguished by its exclusive use of primary colours in conjunction with a black frame – a combination which, with grey and white added, was to become the standard colour scheme of the De Stijl movement. Its structure enabled Rietveld to demonstrate an open architectonic organization that was manifestly free from the influence of Wright. It still predicated a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but one that was free from the biological analogies of 19th-century synthetic Symbolism, that is to say from Art Nouveau.

Few, if any, of Rietveld's colleagues could have foreseen the full potential of the modest pieces of furniture that he went on to design between 1918 and 1920 – the buffet, baby cart and wheelbarrow which, as direct developments of the Red/Blue chair, were assembled from rectilinear wooden spars and planes, simply dowelled together. None of these pieces, however, fully anticipated the architectural environment attempted by Rietveld in his design for Dr Hartog's study, built at Maarssen in 1920. In this work each piece of furniture,

including the suspended light fitting, appeared to be 'elementarized', and the effect was to imply, like Mondrian's later paintings, an infinite series of co-ordinates in space.

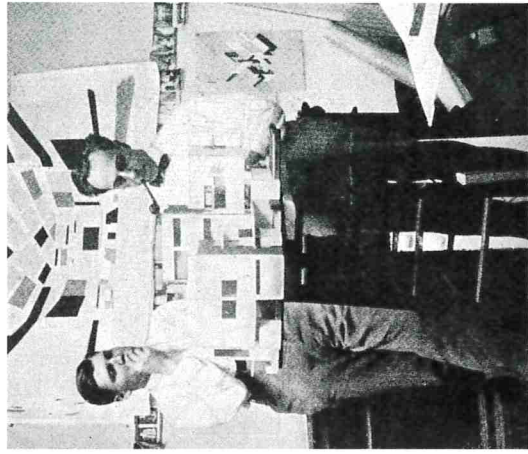
In many respects Van Doesburg embodied the movement in himself, for by 1921 the composition of the group had radically altered. Van der Leek, Vantongerloo, Van 't Hoff, Oud, Wils and Kok had all by then disassociated themselves from De Stijl, while Mondrian had re-established himself as an independent artist in Paris. This Dutch defection convinced Van Doesburg that it was necessary to proselytize for De Stijl abroad. The fresh blood brought into the movement in 1922 reflected his international orientation. Of the new members of that year only one was Dutch, the architect Van Eesteren; the others were Russian and German – the architect, painter and graphic designer El Lissitzky and the film-maker Hans Richter. It was at Richter's invitation that Van Doesburg first visited Germany in 1920, and from this visit followed an invitation from Gropius to come to the Bauhaus in the following year. Van Doesburg's brief stay in Weimar in 1921 engendered a crisis within the Bauhaus, the repercussions of which have since become legendary, for the impact of his ideas on the students and faculty was both immediate and marked. Even Gropius who, under the circumstances, had reason to be apprehensive, designed in 1923 a suspended light for his own study which displayed an undeniable affinity to the Rietveld fitting designed for Hartog.

Of greater importance for the second phase of the De Stijl movement, lasting until 1925, was Van Doesburg's meeting with Lissitzky. Just two years before this meeting Lissitzky

had developed his own form of Elementarist expression, evolved in collaboration with Kasimir Malevich at the Suprematist school in Vitebsk. Although Russian and Dutch Elementarism had quite independent origins – the one Suprematist, the other Neo-Plastic – Van Doesburg's work was transformed. After 1921, under the impact of Lissitzky's Proun compositions, both he and Van Eesteren began to project, as axonometric drawings, a series of hypothetical architectural constructs, each comprising an asymmetrical cluster of articulated planar elements suspended in space about a volumetric centre. Van Doesburg invited Lissitzky to become a member of De Stijl and in 1922 Lissitzky's abstract-typographic children's fable of 1920, 'The Story of Two Squares', appeared in the pages of the magazine. It is significant that the magazine itself changed its format at this juncture, Van Doesburg replacing the frontal composition and woodcut logotype designed by Huszar with an asymmetrical, Elementarist layout and a 'Constructivist' logo.

In 1923 Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren managed to crystallize the architectural style of Neo-Plasticism in an exhibition of their work, at Léonce Rosenberg's Paris gallery, 'L'Effort moderne'. This show was an immediate success and in consequence was restaged elsewhere in Paris and later in Nancy. Apart from the axonometric studies previously mentioned it included their project for a house for Rosenberg and two other seminal works, their study for the interior of a university hall and their project for an artist's house.

Meanwhile in Holland Huszar and Rietveld collaborated on the design for a small room to be built as part of the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung of 1923. Huszar designing the environment and Rietveld the furniture, including the important Berlin chair. Simultaneously, Rietveld began to work on the design and detailing of the Schröder-Schröder House in Utrecht. This house, built at the end of a late 19th-century terrace, was in many respects a realization of Van Doesburg's *Naar een beelddende architectuur* ('16 points of a Plastic Architecture'), published at the time of its completion. It fulfilled his prescription, being *elementary, economic and functional; un-*

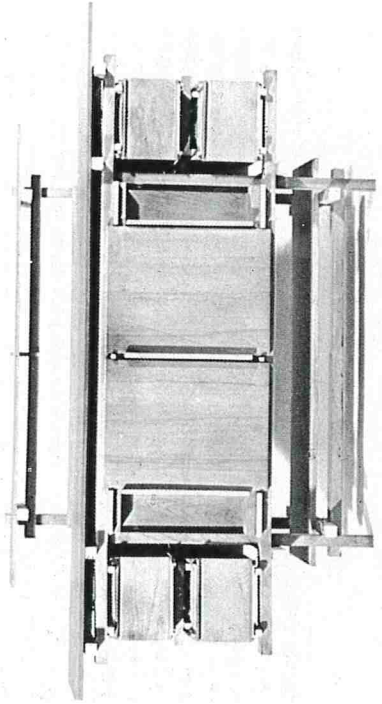


128 Van Eesteren (left) and Van Doesburg, preparing for the Rosenberg exhibition in Paris, 1923, with a model of their 'artist's house'.

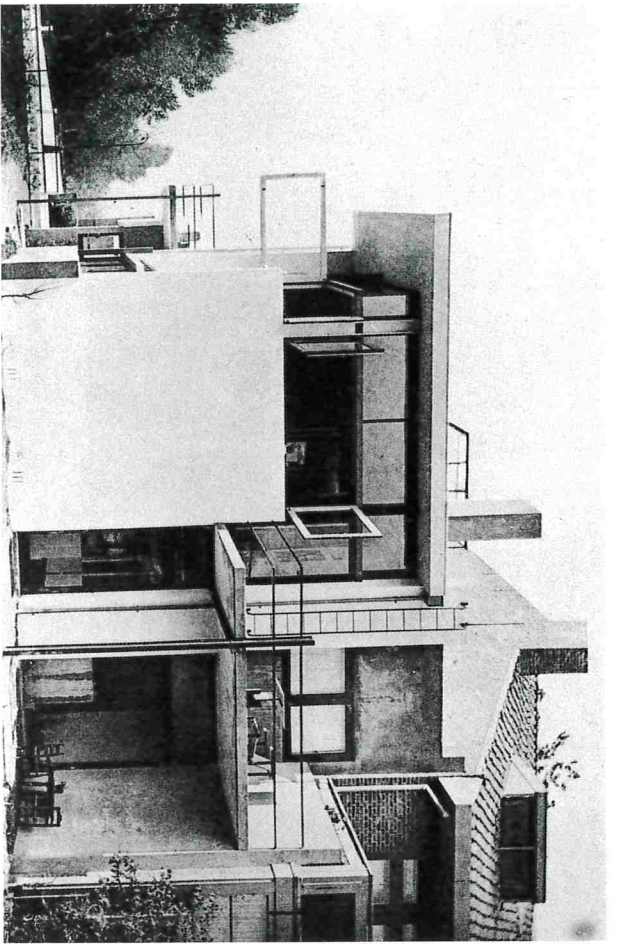
monumental and dynamic; anti-cubic in its form and anti-decorative in its colour. Its main living level on the top floor, with its open 'transformable plan', exemplified, despite its traditional brick and timber construction, his postulation of a dynamic architecture liberated from the encumbrance of load-bearing walls and the restrictions imposed by pierced openings. Van Doesburg's eleventh point reads like an idealized description of the house:

The new architecture is *anti-cubic*, that is to say, it does not try to freeze the different functional space cells in one closed cube. Rather, it throws the functional space cells (as well as the overhanging planes, balcony volumes, etc.) centrifugally from the core of the cube. And through this means, *height, width, depth, and time* (i.e. an imaginary four-dimensional entity) approaches a totally new plastic expression in open spaces. In this way architecture acquires a more or less floating aspect that, so to speak, works against the gravitational forces of nature.

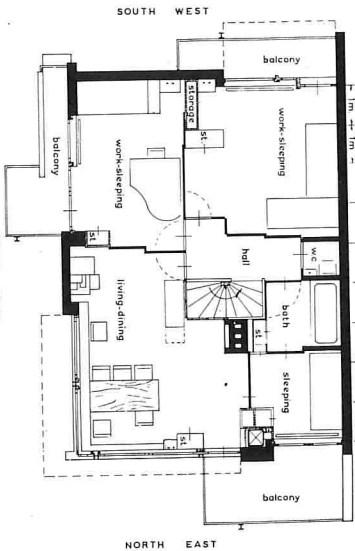
The third and last phase of De Stijl activity, lasting from 1925 to 1931, was announced by



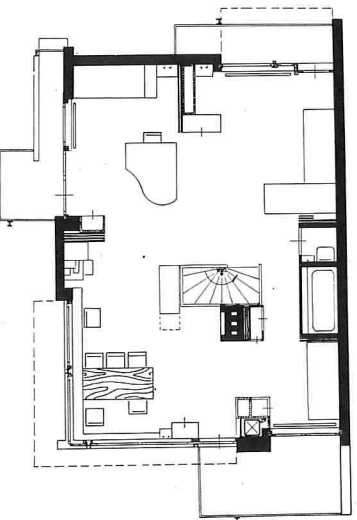
127 Rietveld, buffet, 1919.



129, 130 Rietveld, Schröder-Schröder House, Utrecht, 1924. Right, plans of the upper floor, 'closed' (above) and 'open'.



52. Schröder House, plan, upper floor, 'closed'



53. Schröder House, plan, upper floor, 'open'

a dramatic rift between Mondrian and Van Doesburg over the latter's introduction of the diagonal into his paintings, in a series of 'counter-compositions' that he had completed in 1924. By now the initial unity had been lost, as much by Van Doesburg's incessant polemical activity as by his arbitrary modification of the Neo-Plastic canon. From his association

with Lissitzky he had come to regard social structure and technology as among the prime determinants of form, irrespective of any concerns he might still entertain for the De Stijl ideal of universal harmony. By the mid-1920s he realized that universality could, by itself, only produce an artificially delimited culture, which by virtue of its antipathy to everyday objects could only be against the initial De Stijl concern – subscribed to even by Mondrian – for the unification of art and life. Van Doesburg seems to have opted for a Lissitzkian solution to this dilemma, whereby both the environmental scale and status of the object should determine the degree to which it may be manipulated in accordance with an abstract conception. Thus, while furniture and equipment as produced by the society at large ought to be accepted as the ready-made objects of the culture, the built environment itself could and indeed should still be made to conform to a higher order.

Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren gave an idealized version of this position in their essay *Vers une construction collective* ('Towards a Collective Construction'), published in 1924, in which they tended towards a more objective and technical solution to the problem of architectural synthesis:

We must realize that life and art are no longer separate domains. That is why the 'idea of art' as an illusion separate from real life must disappear. The word 'Art' no longer means anything to us. In its place we demand the construction of our environment in accordance with creative laws based upon a fixed principle. These laws, following those of economics, mathematics, technique, sanitation, etc., are leading to a new plastic unity.

Later one reads, under the seventh point of the manifesto, the essence of the spirit that was to

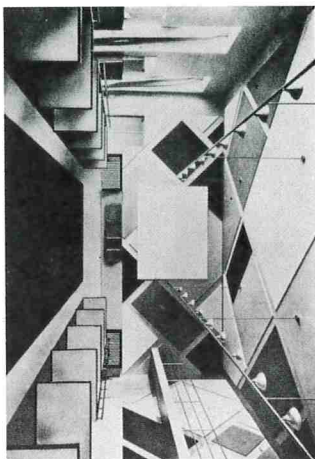
inform Van Doesburg's last major work, the Café L'Aubette of 1928:

We have established the true place of colour in architecture and we declare that painting, without architectural construction (that is, easel painting), has no further reason for existence.

Rietveld had little association with Van Doesburg after 1925. Nonetheless, his work developed in a similar direction, away from the Elementarism of the Schröder House and his early orthogonal furniture, towards more 'objective' solutions arising out of the application of technique. Rietveld started in this direction by redesigning the seats and backs of his chairs as curved planes, not only because such shapes were more comfortable, but also because they possessed greater structural strength. This led naturally to the technique of wood lamination and from there it was but a step, once the inhibiting Neo-Plastic aesthetic had been relinquished, to moulding a chair out of a single sheet of plywood. Rietveld's two-story chauffeur's house, built in Utrecht in 1927, was largely the product of a similar approach, where despite – or rather because of – its use of advanced technique, little of the original De Stijl aesthetic was left. Instead of primary colours, the exposed steel frame and concrete panels were painted black, and the surface of the panels themselves overpainted with a grid of white squares. Removed from Van Doesburg's conception of anti-cubic space as set out in his '16 Points of a Plastic Architecture', it was more determined by technique than by any drive towards universal form.

The Café L'Aubette in Strasbourg, designed in 1928, comprised a sequence of two large public rooms and ancillary spaces set within an 18th-century shell. These rooms were designed and realized by Van Doesburg in association with Hans Arp and Sophie Täuber Arp. While Van Doesburg controlled the general theme each artist was free to design his own room. With the single exception of Arp's mural, all the rooms were modulated by shallow abstract wall reliefs, colour, lighting and equipment being integrated into each composition. Van Doesburg's own scheme was, in effect, a

Le Corbusier and the Esprit Nouveau 1907-31



131 Van Doesburg, Café L'Aubette, Strasbourg, 1928-29.

reworking of his 1923 project for a university hall, in which a diagonal Elementarist composition had been deliberately imposed on all the surfaces of a partially orthogonal space. Van Doesburg's interior in L'Aubette was similarly dominated and distorted by the lines of a huge diagonal relief or counter-composition, passing obliquely over all the internal surfaces. This fragmentation through relief — an extension of Lisitzky's Pronoun room approach of 1923 — was complemented by the fact that the furnishing was free of any Elementarist pieces. In their place Van Doesburg designed 'standard' bentwood chairs and elsewhere employed extremely objective detailing. The tubular railing throughout was simply welded, while the main lighting consisted of bare light bulbs bracketed off two metal tubes suspended from the ceiling. Of this design he wrote:

The track of man in space (from left to right, from front to back, from above to below) has become of fundamental importance for painting in architecture. . . . In this painting the idea is not to lead man along a painted surface of a wall, in order to let him observe the pictorial development of the space from one wall to the other: the problem is to evoke the simultaneous effect of painting and architecture.

L'Aubette, finished in 1929, is the last Neo-Plastic architectural work of any significance.

Thereafter those artists who were still affiliated with De Stijl, including Van Doesburg and Rietveld, came increasingly under the influence of the Neue Sachlichkeit and thereby subject to the cultural values of international socialism. Van Doesburg's own house, built in Meudon around 1929, barely fulfils any of the sixteen points of his 1924 manifesto. It is simply a utilitarian studio, of rendered reinforced-concrete frame and block construction, superficially resembling the type of artisan dwelling that had already been projected by Le Corbusier in the early 1920s. For fenestration Van Doesburg chose to use the standard French industrial sash, and for furniture he designed his own version of a *sacchlich* chair in tubular steel. By 1930 the Neo-Plastic ideal of uniting the arts and transcending the division of art and life had been relinquished and returned to its origins in abstract painting, to the *art concret* of Van Doesburg's counter-compositions hung on the walls of his studio in Meudon. Yet Van Doesburg's conscious concern for a universal order remained alive, for in his last polemic, *Manifeste sur l'art concret* (1930), he wrote: 'If the means of expression are liberated from all particularity, they are in harmony with the ultimate end of art, which is to realize a universal language.' How these means were to become liberated in the case of applied art, such as furniture and equipment, was not made clear. A year later, at the age of forty-eight, Van Doesburg died in a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland, and with him died the moving force of Neo-Plasticism. Of the original De Stijl artists only Mondrian seems to have remained committed to the strict principles of the movement, to the orthogonal and the primary colours which were the constituent elements of his mature work. With these he continued to represent the harmony of an unrealizable utopia. As he wrote in his *Plastic and Pure Plastic Art* (1937): 'Art is only a substitute while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion, as life gains in equilibrium.'

You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces: that is construction. Ingenuity is at work. But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: 'This is beautiful.' That is Architecture. Art enters in. My house is practical, I thank you, as I might thank railway engineers or the telephone service. You have not touched my heart. But suppose that walls rise towards heaven in such a way that I am moved. I perceive your intentions. Your mood has been gentle, brutal, charming or noble. The stones you have erected tell me so. You fix me to the place and my eyes regard it. They behold something which expresses a thought. A thought which reveals itself without word or sound, but solely by means of shapes which stand in a certain relationship to one another. These shapes are such that they are clearly revealed in light. The relationships between them have not necessarily any reference to what is practical or descriptive. They are a mathematical creation of your mind. They are the language of Architecture. By the use of inert materials and starting from conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions. This is Architecture.

Le Corbusier
Vers une architecture, 1923

The absolutely central and seminal role played by Le Corbusier in the development of 20th-century architecture is sufficient cause for us to examine his early development in detail; and the fundamental significance of his achievement only becomes apparent when it is seen against the extremely varied and intense in-

fluences to which he was subject in the decade between his first house, built in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1905, when he was eighteen, and his last works realized there in 1916, one year before moving to Paris. Above all it seems necessary to remark on the distant Albigensian background of his otherwise Calvinist family, on that half forgotten but latent Manichean view of the world which may well have been the origin of his 'dialectical' habit of mind. I am referring to that ever-present play with opposites — with the contrast between solid and void, between light and dark, between Apollo and Medusa — that permeates his architecture and is evident as a habit of mind in most of his theoretical texts.

Le Corbusier was born in 1887 in the Swiss watch-making town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, which is situated in the Jura, close to the French frontier. One of the prime images of his adolescence must have been this highly rational gridded industrial town that had been rebuilt after its destruction by fire some twenty years before his birth. During his training as a designer-engraver at the local school of arts and crafts, Charles Edouard Jeanneret (as he then was) became involved in his late teens in the last phases of the Arts and Crafts movement. The Jugendstil manner of his first house, the Villa Faller of 1905, was a crystallization of all that he had been taught by his master, Charles L'Éplattenier, director of the *cours supérieur* at the applied art school in La Chaux-de-Fonds. L'Éplattenier's own point of departure had been Owen Jones, whose book *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) was a definitive compendium of decorative art. L'Éplattenier aimed to create a native school of applied art and building for the Jura region and, after Jones, he taught his