

# ANIMAL ABSTRACTION: FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, DE STIJL, AND GEOMETRY

**GRADE:** 6-8

**TIME:** Four 50-minute sessions

In this lesson, students will learn about abstraction by exploring the work of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright and his international contemporaries, specifically artists and designers of the early twentieth-century Dutch avant-garde art movement known as De Stijl. Dutch for “the style,” De Stijl’s characteristic pure colors, geometric forms, and abstract simplicity heralded a new international style after the chaos of World War I. While Frank Lloyd Wright’s designs also featured bold, geometric forms, Wright’s work contrasted from De Stijl works due to its emphasis on natural materials. After learning how abstraction can be expressed differently by artists and designers, students will create a sequence of progressive drawings that highlight the process of abstraction. Students will then turn their final simplified sketch into an abstract paper collage.

**INTEGRATED SUBJECTS:** Visual Arts, Social Studies

## OBJECTIVES

### MATERIALS | RESOURCES

Examples of DeStijl art and architecture  
(included below)

Examples of Frank Lloyd Wright’s designs,  
including window designs (included  
below)

Drawing paper

Pencils

Colored pencils

Fadeless paper (primary colors, black,  
white, and gray)

Scissors

Glue sticks

Internet access for independent student  
research

1. Explore the history of abstraction in art and design.
2. Learn about the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright on De Stijl artists and designers.
3. Analyze how abstraction is expressed in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and in the work of De Stijl artists and designers.
4. Create a series of drawings that demonstrate the process of abstraction.
5. Create an original work of abstract art inspired by an animal.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How do historical events shape art and design?
2. What is style and how is style related to innovation?
3. How can abstract geometric shapes represent a realistic object?

# LESSON PROCEDURE

## EXPLORE

### Session One

- **Without providing the title of the work or additional context, display Theo van Doesburg's *The Cow* (1918). Have students consider:** What am I looking at? Is it supposed to represent something? If so, what? **Encourage students to write down their ideas before sharing aloud. Challenge students to focus on design elements such as line, color, shape, and form when sharing their hypotheses.**
- **Introduce the concept of abstraction and display Theo van Doesburg's studies for *The Cow* to illustrate the process of abstraction.** (More information can be found at: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=208>)
- **Challenge students to compare and contrast the finished painting with the earlier sketches. Have students consider:** How might the finished painting depict a cow?  
Optional Extension: For an additional example, explore Piet Mondrian's painting of trees. (More information can be found at <https://medium.com/signifier/piet-mondrians-tree-paintings-cef4ccac881>). Note how as the years progress, Mondrian's depictions become increasingly abstract and simple.
- **Introduce Theo van Doesburg's work as part of a larger art movement called De Stijl.** (Tip: More information can be found in the appendix below.) **Provide examples of art, furniture, and architecture from the De Stijl movement. Challenge students to identify similarities across the examples and describe key characteristics of the movement's style.** (Tip: Key characteristics of the movement include use of primary colors, asymmetry, and geometric forms.) **Share how De Stijl emerged as a means to innovatively rebuild and unite society after the chaos of World War I. Have students consider:** How might these works be innovative for their time period?

## EXPLORE

### Session Two

- **Review the De Stijl movement and the concept of abstraction.**
- **Introduce the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, focusing on Wright's use of geometry. Challenge students to describe the works that they see and identify any similarities they see that unite the work. Have students consider:** How might Wright's buildings and furniture designs be innovative for their time? Are they still innovative today? If so, how?
- **Share that Wright's work inspired early architecture designs of the De Stijl movement. Challenge students to use what they know about Wright and De Stijl to specifically analyze how Wright may have inspired De Stijl designers.** (Tip: It may be helpful to display Wright's work alongside De Stijl designs! Images can be found in the appendix below.)
- **Introduce Wright's window designs (included below) and note how Wright, like De Stijl designers, often used abstraction in his work. Challenge students to identify what each design may have represented.**
- **Challenge students to compare and contrast the style of Frank Lloyd Wright and the style of the De Stijl movement.**

## EXPLORE

### Session Three

- **Review Frank Lloyd Wright and the De Stijl movement. Revisit Theo van Doesburg's *The Cow* and its corresponding studies.**

# LESSON PROCEDURE (continued)

## ENGAGE

Session Three

- Challenge students to find a photo of an animal from a magazine, book or the internet. Encourage students to find animals with interesting shapes such as giraffes, rhinoceroses, or elephants.
- Demonstrate how to simplify the image of an animal by emphasizing the large shapes. Instruct students to simplify these shapes into geometric forms and then break the forms apart and reassemble for a new abstract image. This process may require four or more drawings, with each drawing increasing in simplicity.

## DESIGN

Session Three

- Students can do small sketches, called thumbnails, of the progressive steps to abstract their animal. Students should aim for at least four drawings. (Tip: Students may want to fold a 12" x 18" piece of drawing paper into four sections and use each box for one drawing. Display the Theo Van Doesburg drawings of *The Cow* so that students can reference an example!) The students' last drawing should be composed entirely of geometric shapes.
- Have students experiment with adding color to their sketches. Have students consider: How might color be abstracted or simplified?

## DESIGN

Session Four

- Have students make final revisions to their sequence of drawings.
- Use the fadeless paper to cut out the shapes created in the final drawing. Tracing paper can be used as a pattern. Students should use all primary colors (red, yellow, and blue). Allow time for students to arrange the shapes. Encourage students to experiment with several arrangements and to ask their peers for feedback.
- When each student is satisfied with a final arrangement, instruct them to attach the shapes to white, black, or gray background paper using a glue stick.

## CRITIQUE & INTERPRET

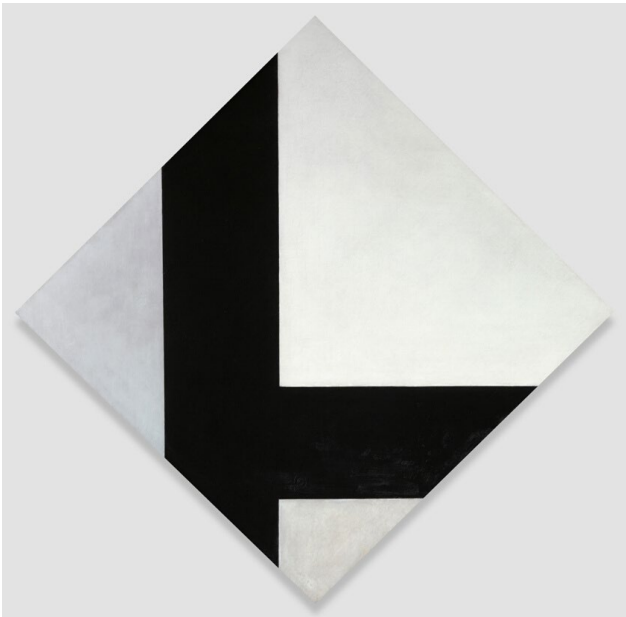
Session Four

- Discuss the finished projects. Ask students if the shapes suggest the original image. Ask students: Is it necessary for the new image to be recognized as an animal? Why or why not? Compare and contrast these images with the works of the De Stijl artists and/or Frank Lloyd Wright.
- Display the final projects alongside students' preliminary sketches.

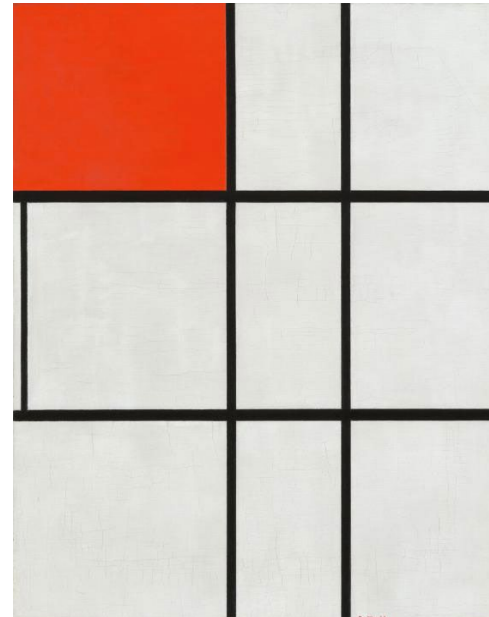
# WHAT IS DE STIJL?

Founded in 1917 with the founding of the *De Stijl* journal by **Theo van Doesburg**, De Stijl—Dutch for “the style”—consisted of an intellectual circle of Dutch artists, architects, and designers committed to the development of a universal visual language after the chaos of World War I. The resulting language was a radical abstraction of form and color, in which the natural world was depicted with primary colors, rectilinear forms, and simple geometries. Prominent members of the De Stijl art movement included **Piet Mondrian**, **Gerrit Rietveld**, **Robert van 't Hoff**, **Vilmos Huszár**, **Bart van der Leck**, **Georges Vantongerloo**, and **J. J. P. Oud**. Theo van Doesburg continued publishing the *De Stijl* periodical until 1931.

De Stijl had a profound impact on the history of modern art and architecture, inspiring designers of the Bauhaus as well as the International Style in architecture. Early De Stijl architectural works were heavily influenced by the geometric forms of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work was introduced to Europe in 1911 via the *Wasmuth Portfolio*. Frank Lloyd Wright's Frederick C. Robie House is considered to be a cornerstone of modern architecture.



**Theo van Doesburg**  
*Counter-Composition*  
VIII, 1924



**Piet Mondrian**,  
*Composition B*  
(No. III) with Red,  
1935



TEACHING  
BY DESIGN

FRANK  
LLOYD  
WRIGHT  
TRUST

# WRIGHT & DE STIJL



**Frank Lloyd Wright**, *James Kibben Ingalls House*,  
River Forest, Illinois, USA, 1909



**Robert van 't Hoff**, *Villa Henny*,  
Huis ter Heide, Utrecht, The Netherlands, 1915

TEACHING  
BY DESIGN

FRANK  
LLOYD  
WRIGHT  
TRUST

# WRIGHT & DE STIJL



**Frank Lloyd Wright,**  
*Slant-back Chair,*  
1904



**Frank Lloyd Wright,**  
*Side Chair,*  
1908



**Gerrit Rietveld,**  
*Red Blue Chair,*  
1918-1923



**Gerrit Rietveld,**  
*Zig Zag Chair,*  
1937-1940



TEACHING  
BY DESIGN

FRANK  
LLOYD  
WRIGHT  
TRUST

# WRIGHT & DE STIJL



**Frank Lloyd Wright,**  
*Emil Bach House,*  
Chicago, Illinois,  
USA,  
1915

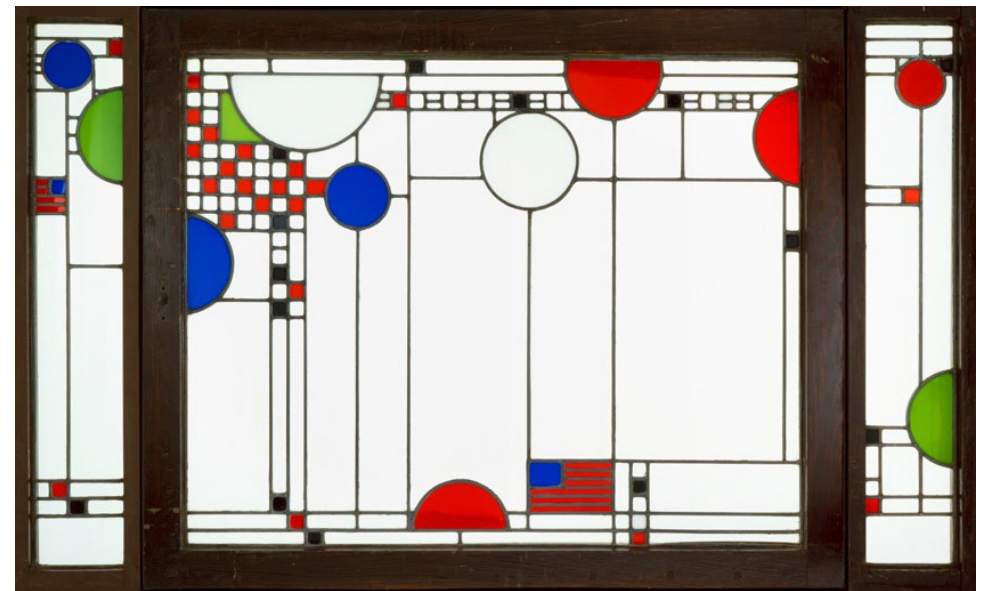


**Gerrit Rietveld,**  
*Rietveld Schröder  
House,*  
Utrecht,  
The Netherlands,  
1924

TEACHING  
BY DESIGN

FRANK  
LLOYD  
WRIGHT  
TRUST

# WRIGHT WINDOW DESIGNS



**Frank Lloyd Wright**, *Window from the Coonley Playhouse*,  
Riverside, Illinois, USA, 1912

**Frank Lloyd Wright**, *"Tree of Life" Window from the  
Darwin D. Martin House*, Buffalo, New York, USA, 1904

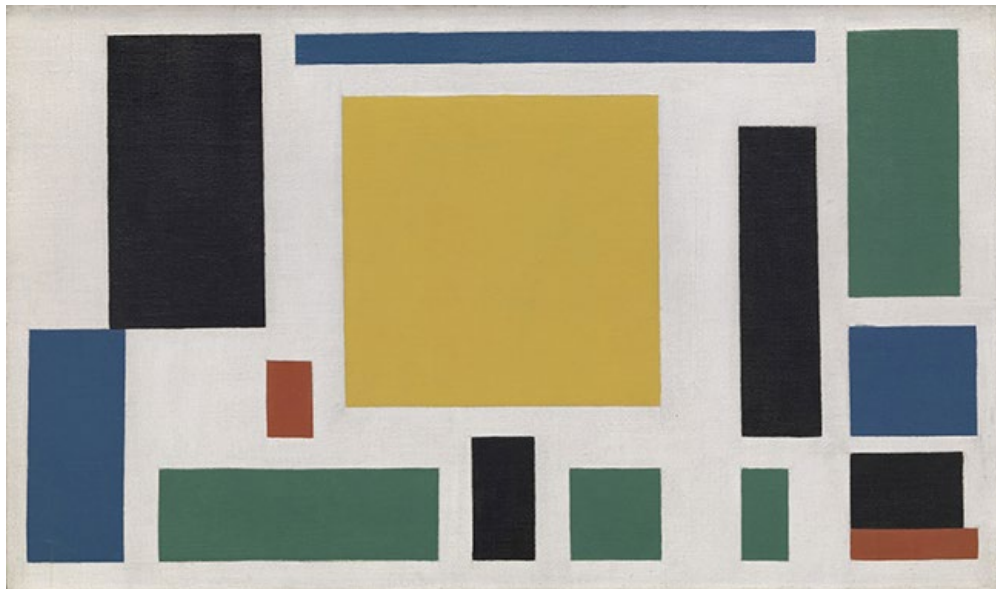
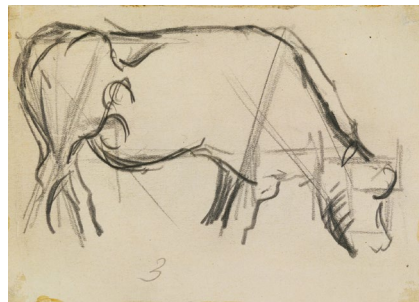


TEACHING  
BY DESIGN

FRANK  
LLOYD  
WRIGHT  
TRUST

# DE STIJL ABSTRACTION

**Theo van Doesburg,**  
*Studies for Composition (The Cow), 1917*



**Theo van Doesburg,**  
*Composition VIII (The Cow), 1918*