

LESSON FOUR: Ideal Objects

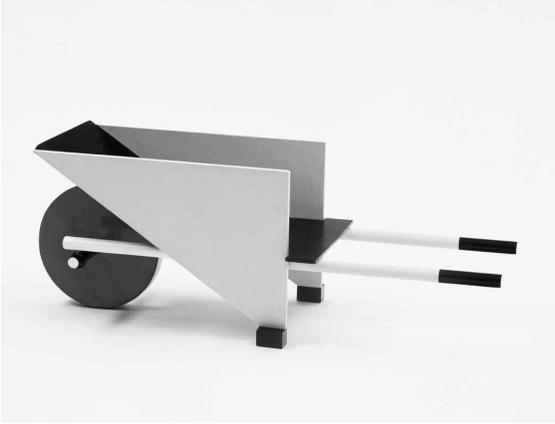


IMAGE NINE: Gerrit Rietveld. Dutch, 1888–1964. Child's Wheelbarrow. 1923. Painted wood, 12 ½ x 11 ¾ x 33 ½" (31.8 x 28.9 x 85.1 cm). Manufacturer: Gerard van de Groenekan. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Beeldrecht, Amsterdam



IMAGE TEN: Gustav Klucis. Latvian, 1895–1944. Maquette for *Radio-Announcer*. 1922. Construction of painted cardboard, paper, wood, thread, and metal brads, 45 ¾ x 14 ½ x 14 ½" (106.1 x 36.8 x 36.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund

INTRODUCTION

To make a comparison between a child's wheelbarrow and a propagandistic Soviet loud-speaker may at first seem incongruous. However, upon close inspection there are interesting connections to be drawn between the bold, simple shapes and colors employed by Gustav Klucis and Gerrit Rietveld, artists who were interested in applying modernist ideas and principles to everyday design.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will make connections between two design objects intended for different purposes.
- Students will be introduced to the ways in which artists can affect social and political behavior through design.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to define the word “propaganda” (they may refer to a dictionary and/or draw on prior knowledge for the definition). Divide your class up into small groups. Ask each group to come up with a set of criteria for successful propaganda.
- In-class writing exercise: Ask your students (with partners or on their own) to choose an object from the classroom that has been designed and manufactured. Examples could range from a paper clip to a slide projector. Ask your class to respond to the following questions: What is the purpose of this object? Does the design successfully address the function of this object? Why or why not? Did the designer(s) take into account how the object looks? Is it an appealing design? How does the design of this object affect behavior (such as when, how, and why it is used)?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Begin by looking at Gerrit Rietveld’s *Child’s Wheelbarrow* (Image Nine). Refrain from telling your students the title right away.

- Ask your students to look closely at the object. What basic shapes and forms can they identify in the work? What types of colors do they see? What do they think the object was designed for and why? Tell them that the object is a child’s wheelbarrow. Ask them to explain whether or not they think the wheelbarrow is an example of good design.

Rietveld was a member of *de Stijl* (“the style”), a Dutch group of artists that published a fine arts magazine between 1917 and 1932 devoted to art and architecture. Mondrian (discussed in Lesson One), a well-known member of the group, helped to develop a major principle of *de Stijl*: the perpendicular relationship between vertical and horizontal lines. This compositional concept comes to life in many of Rietveld’s designs for furniture and architecture. In fact, Rietveld’s trademark use of crossing, perpendicular joints became known as the “Rietveld joint.” The Rietveld joint produces designs that, rather than being dovetailed and seamless, reveal their straight-edged, architectural shapes.

- Looking at the image of *Child’s Wheelbarrow* again, ask your class to identify examples of Rietveld’s joint.
- Draw and Describe exercise: Ask your students to work with partners. Direct one member of each pair to be the “drawer.” Direct the other member of each pair to be the “describer.” Ask the drawers to turn their backs on the projected image so that they can no longer see it. Each drawer should have a piece of paper and a pencil. Direct the describers to face the wall. Project Klucis’s *Maquette for Radio-Announcer* (Image Ten) onto the wall. Ask the describers to look at the image. Ask them to describe to the drawers the lines and shapes that they see in this object as clearly as possible, so that their partners can attempt to draw the object. After five minutes or so, ask the students to finish up. Ask them to describe their experience.
- Inform your students of the title and date of Klucis’s work. A “maquette” is a model. Ask them how they think this title might reveal the purpose of the object.

Klucis designed this model of a “radio-announcer” for the transmission of Lenin’s public speech marking the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917. The bright red letters read “LENIN,” which are superimposed by smaller black letters reading “RECH,” which means “speech.” The smaller black writing along the top reads “Radio Announcer.” In Klucis’s preparatory drawings for the maquette, the outside of the loudspeakers reads “revolution megaphone,” creating further emphasis on the object’s propagandistic purpose.

Klucis designed Maquette for *Radio-Announcer* as part of a series of portable collapsible kiosks and stands to be placed in the streets of Moscow. Some of these stands and kiosks performed multiple tasks simultaneously.

The Maquette for *Radio-Announcer* embodies the simplicity of **Constructivist** objects (such as the works discussed in Lesson Two) in the reciprocal tension of its cables, bold colors, and text. Klucis fully embraced the notion that the significance of art depended on its application to everyday purposes. Klucis and other Russian Constructivists would soon discover that the most effective application of their art would not be in architecture, textiles, or furniture so much as in Soviet propaganda.

- **Ask your students to compare the shapes and colors of Maquette for *Radio-Announcer* with Rietveld’s *Child’s Wheelbarrow*.**
- **Ask your students whether or not they think Maquette for *Radio-Announcer* is a successful design. More specifically, do they think it achieves its propagandistic purpose? Why or why not?**

ACTIVITIES

1. School Propaganda

Ask your students to imagine that they have been commissioned to work on a propaganda campaign for their school. The purpose of the campaign could be general publicity or, more specifically, to promote school cleanliness and order, classroom etiquette, or participation in student government or in extracurricular activities.

Using text and artistic techniques such as collage or **photomontage**, your students (individually or in groups) should design a poster for their cause. The posters can be displayed in relevant parts of the school and judged (by students and/or administration) on their effectiveness.

2. Research Propaganda

Credited with being one of the first artists to experiment with photomontage, Klucis produced a remarkable number of propagandistic posters and books distinguished by their striking design and characteristic red, black, and white colors. Some of his most notable designs promoted Stalin’s Five Year Plan.

Ask your students to research and report on Stalin’s Five Year Plan (information can be found on Red Studio, MoMA’s teen Web site: <http://redstudio.moma.org>).

Ask your students to identify the main forms of propaganda in use today. Ask them to come up with an example. Is the propaganda effective? Why or why not?

3. Children's Furniture Design

Ask your students to design a prototype for a piece of furniture intended for a five- to seven-year-old child. The elements of the design must come from basic shapes: circles, semicircles, squares, rectangles, and triangles. Students can interpret the dimensions of the shapes as they see fit (for example, rectangles may be elongated, triangles made narrow or wide, et cetera). Students should begin by drawing a sketch for their design accompanied by a written paragraph explaining its function.

Students should then create a maquette for their design, using glue, tape, scissors, construction paper, and poster board and/or cardboard.