

THE PATRON AND THE 'HOUSE PAINTER'

Helene Kröller-Müller & Bart van der Leck

Exhibition texts

From 14 October 2017 to 4 April 2018 in the Kröller-Müller Museum

INTRODUCTION

From 1914 to 1916, Bart van der Leck works almost nonstop for art collector Helene Kröller-Müller or her advisor H.P. Bremmer. She gives him a number of design commissions for interiors or advertising purposes, but also acquires a great amount of 'free' work. From the beginning, Helene has complete confidence in his artistry, going so far in her 1925 *Considerations* to describe him as an 'even more versatile, more powerful artist than Mondriaan', even though she was struggling with the extreme degree of abstraction in his work in 1916.

In that year, Van der Leck meets Piet Mondriaan and Theo van Doesburg. Mondriaan and Van der Leck are each on the cusp of a breakthrough in their artistic development. For some time they retreat to their studios, in the same neighbourhood in Laren, to each devote themselves to their revolutionary innovations. Van der Leck simplifies form in his paintings and reduces the colour in his work dramatically, to the primary colours alone. It is in this period that the artists launch the magazine *De Stijl*, a forum for new concepts in art and architecture, and about the field of art in general.



Many of these concepts and innovations also play a role in Bart van der Leck's period of working 'on retainer' for Helene Kröller-Müller. *The patron and the 'house painter'* reveals Van der Leck's tempestuous development over the period of a few short years, under the influence of the sometimes strained but exciting relationship with patron and eyewitness Helene Kröller-Müller and the artistic interaction and discussion with his colleagues in the De Stijl movement.



Looking at prints, 1915

BREMMER INTRODUCES HELENE KRÖLLER- MÜLLER TO VAN DER LECK



H.P. Bremmer, 1903

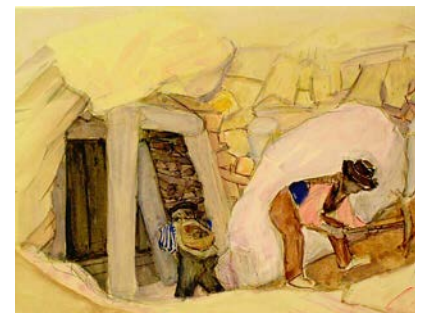
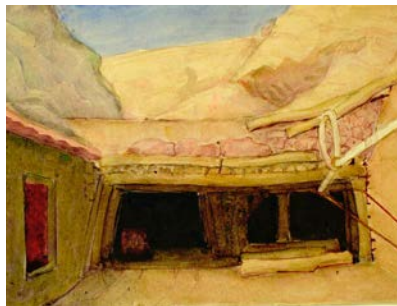
In 1905, Helene Kröller-Müller starts studying under H.P. Bremmer, who gives courses on art history and art appreciation to small groups of well-to-do ladies all over the Netherlands. She initially joins a Bremmer group in The Hague, but it is not long before she invites him to teach privately in her home, and by 1907 she has hired him to work for her one day a week on 'assisting in the formation of an art collection.' Bremmer frequently refers to Bart van der Leck in his art lessons. He has made an arrangement with the artist under which he pays Van der Leck an annual stipend, in return for which he becomes owner of all the work that the painter produces. Bremmer calls Van der Leck 'the greatest of the great' of his era, and is convinced that in Van der Leck he has discovered the Van Gogh of the 20th century. Helene shares his enthusiasm almost immediately, and purchases her first Van der Leck in 1911: *Hussars*.



Hussars, 1911

FOUR MONTHS IN SPAIN AND ALGERIA

Helene Kröller-Müller and Bart van der Leck first meet on 22 February 1914. She invites him to discuss a possible commission: creating a stained-glass window for her family's business, Wm H. Müller & Co on Lange Voorhout, a stylish high street in The Hague. To give the artist inspiration, Helene sends Van der Leck to Spain and Algeria for four months, at Müller & Co's expense, to see the company's mines first-hand. During the journey he produces many drawings and sketches of subjects that, in later years, will figure prominently in his work. From the start, Helene Kröller-Müller plans to give Van der Leck the freedom and financial security to develop as an artist, and she convinces Anton to hire him. From a financial perspective Bremmer 'trades' Van der Leck to Helene. This is a good deal for Bremmer, as the outbreak of the First World War has brought significant financial instability.



Studies 'Mines at Zaccar, North Africa', 1914

BART VAN DER LECK to
HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER
28 May 1914

'The trip so far has been superb ____ Most nights, I've been on the bridge until the wee hours with the captain and the helmsman. Just looking out into the night. So beautiful, the dark nights ____ The Moorish landscape is unforgettable.'

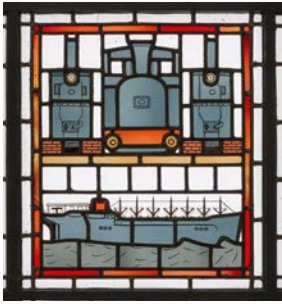
BART VAN DER LECK to
H.P. BREMMER
10 May 1914

'Last week, Mr Kröller was here. It was a lovely day. The mine is interesting, a fine subject to work on ____ The Arab people are beautiful and alien ____ I've never seen so much colour in a landscape as there is here, sometimes it goes to the head.'

BART VAN DER LECK to
HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER
late June 1914

'Madam, one last letter before the end of the journey ____ In the mine there is a tremendous power, it dominates; there is something inescapable about it, a cast-iron reality without a trace of romanticism! For the romantics, an interior like this is to die for, and gives rise to the most romantic fantasies. But I do believe ____ that the more you look at the reality with ordinary eyes, the deeper you ____ can plumb the depths of existence.'

THE LARGE STAINED-GLASS WINDOW



Mining industry (detail), 1914-1915

Soon after Bart van der Leck's return from Spain and Algeria, Helene Kröller-Müller visits him in his studio. She is somewhat surprised by its simple, modern setup. 'Standing between the patchwork of white walls, here an odd picture pinned up with a thumb-tack, there a few bold-coloured curtains ... was the short, stocky and smiling Van der Leck, still browned from the southern sun,' she wrote on 12 July 1914 to her confidant Sam van Deventer.

They examine the sketches that Van der Leck made in Spain and Algeria with great interest. He has even already made some designs for the sections of the stained-glass windows for Müller & Co. Helene is extremely impressed, and decides to add the designs and sketches to her collection.



HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
12 July 1914

'Van der Leck ____ it is modern, even removed entirely from all tradition, so modern, I never seen its like in simplicity ____ it is a true reflection of mining, this and nothing else ____ this tiny design is a work of art, and shall be retained.'

EMPLOYED BY THE KRÖLLERS

From June 1914 to February 1916, Bart van der Leck works in the *Afdeeling Gebouwen* (Buildings Department) at Müller & Co in the Hague. Another notable employee of this department is the architect H.P. Berlage. One of Van der Leck's first assignments is to design colour schemes for the Holland House, the branch of the firm in London, which Berlage is currently working on. He is also given the assignment to produce an advertising poster for the Batavier-line, the company's parcel post and passenger service, which sails from Rotterdam to London. Alongside the work for the company, the Kröllers also give Van der Leck private commissions. The Kröllers (first Helene, and then husband Anton and others) ask him for colour schemes for their homes, and have him produce decorative tiling and advertising material for their farm De Schipborg in the northern province of Drenthe. For inspiration, Van der Leck spends a few weeks at De Harskamp, the family's estate in Otterlo. Van der Leck also designs the typography for the folders for Helene Kröller-Müller's art reproductions.



Poster 'Batavier-line', 1916

BART VAN DER LECK to
PIET KLAARHAMER
10 December 1914

'Isn't it strange that I'm making a poster for the Batavier-line? The kind of work that I've wanted for myself so often? And now I'm being commissioned to make it!'

BART VAN DER LECK to
PIET KLAARHAMER
10 December 1915

'The commissions remain a joy. I've just finished a tile tableau of horses, cows, and pigs for the Schipborg in Zuid Laren, for which I spent three or four days at the Harskamp farm to study their own livestock ____ It's actually a good professional environment, one that suits me very well.'

ACQUISITIONS FOR THE COLLECTION



The cat, 1914

After being introduced to Bart van der Leck's work in 1911, Helene Kröller-Müller purchases his work regularly in the following years, often through Bremmer's mediation or from Bremmer himself. At the end of 1915, she owns eighteen paintings by the then still fairly unknown artist. She usually hangs her acquisitions as soon as she acquires them, either in one of the Kröller-Müller homes or in the Müller & Co offices in The Hague.

In her letters, she shows her appreciation for the paintings: 'The two musicians, especially, I find wonderful. They have a suppleness not seen in your previous work. Such beauty and fragility.'

In 1916, the Kröller-Müllers move from Huize Ten Vijver in The Hague to Groot Haesebroek in Wassenaar. For the move, the villa is comprehensively renovated by 'house architect' H.P. Berlage. Helene is closely involved in the entire process and discusses the colours for the interior with Van der Leck. For the art room, he creates a design with white walls, black panelling, and a frieze with a blue edging and red facets. Ultimately, both Helene and Berlage consider the design too modern, and it is never executed.

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
undated

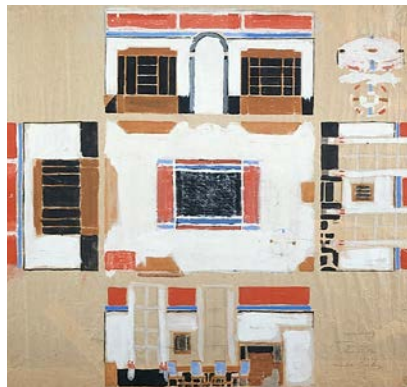
'The cat fascinated us perhaps more than the rest! I always call her "the conscience", because she follows you everywhere with her penetrating eyes, and sometimes we have to put her away to get a brief respite from her unrelenting company.'

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
21 August 1916

'These days the cat is hanging on a white wall in my bathroom, opposite the singers above the bath. They both do so well in the small, enclosed space and I enjoy them every day.'

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

During their first meetings, Helene Kröller-Müller and Bart van der Leck often discuss the relationship between art and architecture. Van der Leck expresses his desire to finally, as he puts it, be able to create a 'modern environment', with 'open colours', as he calls the primary colours, where 'harmony reigns'. Van der Leck looks beyond the limits of painting as an art and of the traditional role of the artist. With this perspective, he is the forerunner of the De Stijl movement. For Helene, this initially makes him the ideal counterpart for the old master Berlage, who in her eyes is too traditional and too often gravitates towards 'dark and heavy'. However, the partnership between Van der Leck the artist and Berlage the architect is anything but smooth. Berlage does not give Van der Leck the freedom to put his total philosophy of colour and space into practice. His role remains limited to giving occasional colour recommendations for elements developed by Berlage. In early February 1916, he informs Helene Kröller-Müller that he has decided to leave this position.



Colour design for the art room of Villa Groot Haesebroek, 1916-1917
Art room of villa Groot Haesebroek, c. 1920

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
1 December 1914

'Van der Leck is a person I will always support, as long as I can, because I expect great things from him ____ he questioned everything that they call atmospheric ____ it's exactly the thing that I myself had wanted for so long: open colours as a symbol of the truth, away with atmosphere, she's a lie, air and light and no more dark corners ____ I was so happy to finally see hope for the future in Van der Leck.'

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
31 December 1915

'I'm still thinking a lot about Van der Leck's problem ____ A room is just not a painting ____ He can apply red at the window, make the woodwork red, but he doesn't have the power to decide where the door is, or how much woodwork there is.'

BART VAN DER LECK to
HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER
early February 1916

'Tuesday I prepared all the colours for the house ____ in enamel paint ____ because I wanted to first give you the chance to consider whether you can permit me to no longer do this kind of work, that is, painting old houses. If there is some monumental contemporary subject, or a room that needs to be something special, then yes please, but I have no interest at all in going on being some kind of house painter.'

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
1 June 1915

' ____ that my little chair receives me so gently, like it wanted to help you, comfort you. Yesterday Van der Leck explained to me his aversion to curved lines, but I must say, my body is not square, and who says that every curved line is in itself a sin?'

WORK AT THE DOCKS AND THE TEMPEST



The tempest, 1916

In February 1916, Bremmer drafts a contract for Helene Kröller-Müller and Bart van der Leck, for a one-year commitment with an option for extension. Under the contract, Van der Leck will be paid a fixed salary, and Helene will own all the work that Bart produces as an artist during the contract period. The closing months of 1915 and the early part of 1916 bring a dramatic change in Van der Leck's approach. He decides to use only the primary colours red, yellow and blue along with black and white in his works. He applies the paint to the canvas without mixing, and composes his compositions from larger colour fields that, taken together, depict his subjects in a highly stylized fashion. The backgrounds he leaves white and empty, making the total impression more two-dimensional, yet more monumental.

During this period of Van der Leck's development, he produces two major paintings: *Work at the docks* and *The tempest*. The Kröllers immediately put both of them on display with the collection in their offices. The works become a sensation. Visitors have never seen such a high level of abstraction.



Study '*Work at the docks*', before 1916



Work at the docks, 1916

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
21 August 1916

' ___ the red horse in particular, people just don't understand.
Well, that will get better with time; that's what it's all about, after all.'

VAN DER LECK MEETS MONDRIAN

In April 1916, Bart van der Leck and his family move from 'pricey The Hague to Het Gooi, where it is so much cheaper.' There they live in a detached home, De Boschhoek, on Torenlaan in the town Laren. It is the same town where Piet Mondriaan has his studio at that time. Mondriaan's real home is in Paris, but while visiting the Netherlands in July 1914, the outbreak of the First World War prevents him from returning to France.

Van der Leck's studio is not far from Mondriaan's. They see each other regularly, play billiards, and talk about art. Mondriaan is fascinated by what he calls Van der Leck's 'exact technique', by which he refers to the use of



Piet Mondriaan, *Composition 10 in black and white*, 1915

only primary colours alongside black and white, and reliance on colour fields of regular and consistent size and shape. He realizes that 'equalising fields in the image' is a radically different approach to his own style, derived from the cubism that he encountered in Paris. Like Mondriaan, Van der Leck also retreats to his studio for some time. He begins a series of four compositions that seem to be pursuing an artistic dialogue with Mondriaan. In the same period, Theo van Doesburg invites both artists to join him in a new venture: the magazine *De Stijl*.



Composition 1916 no. 1, 1916 and two studies

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
18 October 1916

' ___ it seems to me you are presently in an intermediate phase.'

HAAGSCHE VOLKSUNIVERSITEIT

In 1916, Helene Kröller-Müller is asked to sit on the board of a soon to be established university, the Haagsche Volksuniversiteit. She asks Bart van der Leck to design an advertising poster for the university.

Helene is very pleased with the result. She has the design framed immediately and hangs it in the corridor at Müller & Co. But she does not present it to the rest of the board of the University, the members of which she finds too conservative, suspecting that the gentlemen on the board will not be receptive to this level of abstraction. 'Future generations will appreciate it more, I should hope, and learn to value it as a phase in your development,' she writes to Van der Leck on 21 August 1916.



HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
21 August 1916

' ___ the poster for the Volksuniversiteit ___ gives me the sense that the work of others may have brought you to some new insight ___ a work of less inspired, and more industrial art by Ms Berlage will oust yours ___ nonetheless, I am ___ happy that you made it. Future generations will appreciate it more, I should hope ___ '

LINE ART

His meetings with Piet Mondriaan inspire Bart van der Leck to experiment further and to push abstraction to greater extremes. He works on multiple subjects simultaneously, and creates large studies. He is on a feverish quest to find the right degree of simplification, the right colour, the right proportion and composition. Van der Leck achieves abstraction by leaving more and more out, a process he refers to as 'destruction'. For the painting *Work at the docks*, he describes this further as 'No illusion, no mood, no fascination, but a monumental clarity is what I see in my mind; no quantity, but extreme restraint in figuration.' In the compositions he creates in 1916, he goes one step further, 'destroying' more and more of the visible subject, both in composition and in colour, until only lines remain.



Three studies 'Composition 1916 no. 4', 1916

Helene Kröller-Müller finds it difficult to appreciate this 'line art', as she calls it. She asks Van der Leck to send her his studies for a number of works, including *Composition 1916, no. 4* (also known as *Mine triptych*), so that she can follow his process. For *Mine triptych*, Van der Leck returns to the studies he made in Algeria for inspiration. The central image is based on the entrance to a mine shaft, with the two side panels depicting the mine workers, albeit in extremely abstract form.



Three studies 'Composition 1916 no. 4', 1916

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
11 December 1916

'I hope you will excuse me for saying that for the time being, I cannot look at them. Perhaps that will change with time ___ Perhaps it shall become clear, what your intention was, if I should have the chance to obtain your studies as well.'

BART VAN DER LECK to
HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER
18 December 1916

'I have had so much difficulty with the recent work, which ___ abandons so much of what connects to the old world, that no one, least of all you, would blame me, I trust, for reserving judgment. But I hope you will eventually see that the beauty has, with barely any movement at all ___ reached pure proportions.'

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
BART VAN DER LECK
4 February 1917

'I still maintain that your abstraction is of only the object itself, and it expresses no mood ___ The completely abstracted object no longer excites, because the imagination has nothing to hold on to. I get the feeling that in your present environment you are thinking too much and, in the process, killing your initial emotion ___ Although I will be the first to acknowledge that I may be wrong, which is why we should leave it to posterity to decide ___ '

MUSEUM KRÖLLER

In early 1924, Helene prepares a presentation for the exhibition at Lange Voorhout. It is an exhibition in which Van der Leck's work occupies an important place: after the 'pointillism room', the cubists, the impressionists, the realists, and the Fantin-Latour room, a room upstairs is devoted to her Van der Lecks and Mondriaans. At that point she has over forty Van der Lecks and nine Mondriaans. She calls this room 'the surprise': it is the moment in the exhibition at which the visitor steps out of the past into a new age. To underscore this, she clads the walls in canvas, seemingly an allusion to the white background of the works.



HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
24 February 1924

'It's the surprise! When you walk into the room from the Fantin room, you feel the transition ___ the leap from the old age into the new.'

The magazine *De Stijl* is not to be found in her library, and Helene Kröller-Müller never once mentions the movement in her letters. But she nonetheless plays a part in this turning point in the development of modern art. Despite her doubts, she continues to support Van der Leck for years, and is open to innovations that many others find much too radical.

In her 1925 book *Considerations on problems in the development of modern painting* and, much later, in the first catalogue of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller

in 1938, she makes no secret of who her favourite has always been: 'An even more versatile, more powerful artist than Mondriaan, working in this zeitgeist of subjectivism, is Van der Leck.'

THE TEMPEST

The tempest is a high point in Bart van der Leck's oeuvre. The painting straddles the boundary between figurative and abstract. Perhaps it is *The tempest* that prompts Helene to implore Bart to not pursue further abstraction or, in her words, not follow the path of 'that other man, Piet Mondriaan', in setting aside reality entirely. At various times thereafter, Van der Leck writes that he always starts with 'reality' as a basis or keeps it 'close to mind'.



The tempest, 1916

COMPOSITION 1916 NO. 4

Composition 1916 no. 4, or *Mine triptych*, is displayed in the Kröller Museum in 1916, despite Helene's misgivings. Van der Leck's friends Theo van Doesburg and Vilmos Huszár are among the first to view it. They are immediately taken by it, and see in Van der Leck a great innovator.



Composition 1916 no. 4, 1916

THEO VAN DOESBURG to
BART VAN DER LECK
31 December 1916

' ___ last Friday, I went with Huszar to The Hague to see your latest work in the H. Kröller collection ___ and all in all, I can say that I have never had the opportunity to admire an oeuvre of such depth. I have never encountered an artist ___ with an artistic principle so pure and mature ___ I was particularly struck by the triptych (mining labour), how in it, its universal observations of life dissolve in relation to the pure medium of the painter's art.'

MONDRIAAN TRIPTYCH

For a long time after the meeting with Bart van der Leck, Piet Mondriaan makes only sketches. He produces little, because he is also forced to take various other jobs to make ends meet. In May 1917, he presents three paintings to the artists' group *Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring* in Amsterdam. He hangs them as a triptych, the two works at either side slightly lower than the canvas in the centre. Mondriaan has produced a new composition of horizontal and vertical lines thicker and smoother than those of *Composition 10 in black and white*. Here he has even added blocks of colour to the two outer canvasses.



Mondriaan's 'triptych', with *Composition in line, second state*, 1916-1917 in the middle



HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
23 March 1914

'A completely modern man, a thinker, with a quality of magnificence:
he creates.'

HELENE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER to
SAM VAN DEVENTER
21 August 1914

' ___ I firmly believe in his art. He is so fantastically grounded, so rooted
in a reality.'

BART VAN DER LECK to
H.P. BREMMER
4 February 1919

'This makes me think of the deconstruction period of recent years, which,
despite all, have been just as important to me as the times of the best
composed works.'

COLOPHON



DESIGN

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TRANSLATION

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The patron and the 'house painter' has been organized as part of the Mondriaan to Dutch Design theme year and is composed of works from the Kröller-Müller Museum collection.

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