

Henry van de Velde's Theoretical Thought as a Driving Force and Its Manifestation in His Design Practice

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Abstract: Henry van de Velde, a pivotal figure bridging Art Nouveau and Modernism, demonstrated a dynamic, dialectical relationship between his theoretical thought and design practice. This paper analyzes how his evolving ideas both drove and were verified in his work across three periods. His early career, championing "line is force," featured abstracted natural forms in works like the Bloemenwerf villa. Later, his shift towards functionalism, emphasizing rationality and art-technology integration, led to simplified forms evident in the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. In his final years, he masterfully balanced standardization with artistry, epitomized by the Ghent University Book Tower. Van de Velde's theory was not merely a precursor but was continuously tested and refined through his practice. His career thus fully encapsulates design's transition from craft decoration to industrial rationality, remaining highly relevant today.

Keywords: Henry van de Velde; Theoretical Thought; Design Practice; Art Nouveau; Modernist Design

1. Introduction

Henry van de Velde (1863-1957) was a preeminent architect, designer, and educator from the late 19th to the early 20th century, and a pivotal figure in the Belgian Art Nouveau movement. Operating at the confluence of Art Nouveau and Modernism, his design philosophy uniquely combined an abstract interpretation of natural forms with a forward-looking embrace of industrial potential. Consequently, Van de Velde is widely recognized as a critical bridge between these two major movements—a visionary who sought innovation and provided a crucial link in the evolution of design history.

Van de Velde's career spanned these two formative periods, resulting in a significant evolution in his design ideology and practice. He was a rare pioneer who not only established a

robust theoretical framework but also consistently implemented it through his work. This paper examines the dynamic interplay between his evolving theories and his practical output across his early, middle, and late periods. By tracing this development, we can gain a deeper understanding of Van de Velde's unique position in design history and the enduring relevance of his work for contemporary design practice.

2. Early Ideology and Practice (1888-1900): An Explorer of Art Nouveau

During his early career, Van de Velde championed the use of abstracted lines derived from natural forms. Deeply influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement, his design practice focused primarily on furniture and interior design. His works from this period are characterized by an extensive use of fluid, dynamic, and abstract curves, embodying the essence of Art Nouveau.

2.1 Transition from Painting to Design

Van de Velde's artistic career began as a painter. In his youth, he received traditional painting training in Antwerp, Belgium, and Paris, France. Influenced by Realist painter Jean-François Millet, his early works—primarily landscapes and portraits—displayed a Neo-Impressionist style. In the 1880s, upon returning to Belgium, his exceptional artistic talent propelled him to leadership within the avant-garde group "Les Vingt" (The Twenty). Witnessing the profound impact of the Industrial Revolution, Van de Velde recognized the significant implications of industrial mass production for the arts. Consequently, he guided Les Vingt in a pivotal shift from pure fine arts towards the applied arts of design. This group subsequently evolved into a pivotal organization championing the Belgian Art Nouveau movement [1].

During this period, Van de Velde began formulating his early design philosophy. In contrast to the French Art Nouveau's emphasis

on pure decoration, his approach, while also extensively employing curves and natural motifs like flora and tendrils, was not mere imitation. Instead, he sought inspiration from nature to develop a more abstract and rational language of line, infusing his designs with emotional force [2,3]. His proclamation that "line is a force," attributing unique aesthetic power to the line, signaled his growing focus on the fundamental principles of design. This early philosophical shift marked the initial transition in his work from Art Nouveau sensibility towards Modernist design thinking [2].

2.2 Early Theoretical Propositions and Their Embodiment in Design

Unlike many of his contemporaries in the Art Nouveau movement who were skeptical of industrial production, Van de Velde did not oppose mechanical mass production. He insisted that designed products should balance rationality and function with appropriate decoration and aesthetic refinement, ensuring they were both useful and beautiful [4]. He championed the "unity of art and technology" as a core tenet of his philosophy. He believed art should not be divorced from everyday life, arguing that designers must master both aesthetic sensibility and technical craftsmanship to merge artisanal skill with industrial production, thereby creating works that were both artistic and functional. Furthermore, Van de Velde advocated that "form must follow function," articulating a view similar to Louis Sullivan's slightly earlier, emphasizing that functional requirements are the starting point of design and opposing superfluous ornamentation. He contended that a "beautiful product" is inherently one that is "functionally sound," and that decoration must serve function, not merely be applied arbitrarily. A pivotal turning point in his career came in 1889 after visiting the Paris World's Fair, where he was profoundly inspired by the Art Nouveau principles manifested in Victor Horta's Tassel House. This experience catalyzed his gradual shift from painting to the fields of architecture and design.

In the realm of architecture, Van de Velde completed his first architectural project in 1895: his own residence in Brussels, the "Villa Bloemenwerf" (As shown in Figure 1). The design incorporated the curvilinear lines characteristic of natural forms and the Art Nouveau style. While the flowing, undulating

lines suggest natural themes, they already demonstrate Van de Velde's move towards abstraction and simplification. This early practice embodies his belief that decoration must be novel and must rationally respect the properties of the materials used. The Villa Bloemenwerf stands as a seminal work that marked his official transition into the profession of architecture [5].



Figure 1. Villa Bloemenwerf

In the domain of furniture design, a rosewood cabinet (As shown in Figure 2) designed by Van de Velde in 1897 exemplifies his evolving style. Characterized by its clean, streamlined form, the cabinet is divided into three sections, each featuring a stylized bud motif abstracted into four succinct curves at its base. This design demonstrates his move beyond literal mimicry of nature toward a refined abstraction of line and an exploration of Modernist principles [2]. Similarly, an oak desk (As shown in Figure 3) designed between 1897 and 1899 draws inspiration from pea pods, with its legs abstracted into curved, pod-like forms. The desktop is inlaid with brass strips, further illustrating his design philosophy: deriving inspiration from nature while infusing it with personal emotion, rational thought, and a consistent focus on functionality.



Figure 2. Rosewood Cabinet



Figure 3. Oak Desk

In the field of graphic design, Van de Velde's 1898 poster for Tropon Food Company's concentrated seasoning (As shown in Figure 4) is a quintessential exemplar of his early work. The design employs an intricate pattern of interlacing curves, embodying the distinctive style of Art Nouveau. The fluid lines and organic forms visually communicate the product's essence (derived from egg white or protein nutrients), while the densely packed linear pattern emphatically reinforces the strength of the company name. This poster directly materializes Van de Velde's doctrine that "line is a force," demonstrating his pioneering exploration into the expressive potential of abstract lines.

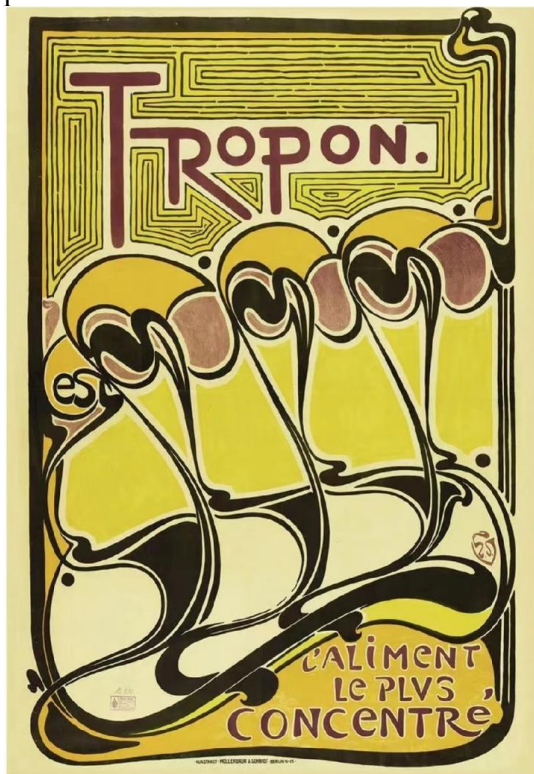


Figure 4. Tropon Brand Poster

2.3 The Inherent Tension in Early Thought

Although Van de Velde's early design practice

was distinctly aligned with the Art Nouveau style, his theoretical framework already revealed signs of transcending it. A central tension existed between his appreciation for the vitality of nature, from which he freely drew inspiration, and his simultaneous emphasis on rationality and function, where decoration was expected to serve a purpose. This inherent duality was manifest across his work in architecture and furniture design.

Crucially, the seeds of his later functionalism were already germinating in this early period. In his 1894 essay "Déblaiement d'art" ("Clearing the Way for Art"), he asserted: "A design, perfectly practical and created according to rational principles of construction, can alone fulfill the primary condition of beauty and attain its very essence" [6]. This perspective significantly diverged from the preoccupation with superficial forms common among many of his Art Nouveau contemporaries and laid the groundwork for the functionalist thinking that would characterize his middle period. It was precisely this forward-looking element within his early ideology that enabled his swift transition towards a more modern design direction as the influence of Art Nouveau waned.

3. Mid-Career Ideology and Practice (1900-1914): The Functionalist Turn and the Exploration of Design Education

During his middle period, Van de Velde's work was centered in Germany. He dedicated himself to design education by founding the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts, the institutional predecessor of the Bauhaus. He explicitly advocated the principle of "function first" and the union of art and technology, thereby establishing a crucial paradigm for modern design education.

3.1 Theoretical Breakthrough in the German Period

In 1899, Van de Velde accepted an invitation from Grand Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Saxe-Weimar to participate in the reform of art education in Germany, gradually shifting his professional base from Belgium. This geographical relocation marked a pivotal intellectual and ideological transition in his career.

In 1906, Van de Velde founded a design-oriented school in Weimar, Germany—the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. For its

curriculum, he articulated three core pedagogical principles: first, the design must be structurally sound; second, materials must be used appropriately; and third, the working procedure must be clear and methodical [7,8]. He elaborated that a product's structure must align with its functional requirements, emphasizing internal logic and rationality. Furthermore, the inherent characteristics of materials should be fully utilized, highlighting their natural textures. The design process itself required a clear workflow, advocating for a systematic methodology from conception to execution. These principles embodied his theoretical stance that design must be grounded in rationality, striving for the unity of form and function while carefully considering the properties of materials and techniques.

Compared to his early ideology, the most significant evolution in Van de Velde's mid-career theory was his positive affirmation of technology and machinery. This shift enabled him to transcend the Arts and Crafts movement's rejection of mechanization, thereby laying crucial groundwork for Modernist design thought. Another vital aspect of his mid-career thinking was his heightened emphasis on design education. Van de Velde believed that only through systematic pedagogy could a new type of designer—one proficient in both art and technology—be cultivated, ultimately achieving a genuine synthesis of art and technique [9].

3.2 The Practice of Functionalist Principles in Design

Van de Velde's mid-career design practice demonstrates a distinct transition from the curvilinear style of Art Nouveau towards Rationalism. The period from 1900 to 1914 was one of intense creative activity for him, during which his design philosophy matured and gained significant influence. His work spanned architecture, interior design, furniture, everyday objects, and design education. A clear functionalist shift is evident in his designs from this time. Although he continued to employ curvilinear elements, they were subjected to a more streamlined and disciplined treatment, reflecting his emphasis on "rationality" and the "primacy of function," all while maintaining his commitment to the unity of art and technology.

In the field of interior design, his work on the Folkwang Museum in Hagen (now the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum) from 1900 to 1901

exemplifies this principle. Here, his "rationality" was manifested in the spatial layout, ensuring a logical visitor flow and clear functional zoning for a comfortable exhibition experience. He rigorously implemented his "function-first" doctrine, where any decorative element was integrally tied to the structure or functional needs of the space, never applied as mere superfluous ornamentation.

In the realm of architecture, Van de Velde founded the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts (As shown in Figure 5), which embodied his aspiration to cultivate a new generation of designers through systematic education, thereby achieving the integration of art and technology to influence society. Furthermore, his design for the Osthaus House in Hagen in 1906 exemplifies his evolving style. The residence's exterior is characterized by a simple and dignified form, reflecting his increased focus on functionality. In terms of ornamentation, the once-fluid, nature-derived lines were now balanced by more geometric, rational straight lines and simplified shapes. This transformation not only signifies the evolution of his personal style but also epitomizes the broader shift in European design from Art Nouveau to Modernism.



Figure 5. Weimar School of Arts and Crafts

3.3 The Cologne Debate: The Standardization Controversy

In 1914, a significant ideological rift emerged within the Deutsche Werkstatt, culminating in the Cologne Debate. The two central figures in this debate were Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde. Muthesius represented the industrial faction advocating for standardization and mass production, while Van de Velde staunchly defended the creative individuality of the artist. The Cologne Debate was far from a mere academic dispute; it was a watershed

moment in modern design history. This debate clearly delineated the core tension in the development of modern design and ultimately helped establish the Modernist direction centered on rationality, standardization, and mass production [5]. It signified a pivotal shift in design ideology from the 19th-century "Arts and Crafts" emphasis on artist-craftsmen to the 20th-century "Modernist" ethos serving an industrialized society.

This debate also revealed an inherent contradiction in Van de Velde's thinking. On one hand, he did not entirely oppose industrialization, as evidenced by his mid-career design practice which clearly acknowledged the value of machinery. On the other hand, he feared that excessive standardization would stifle designer creativity and individual expression. This tension reflected a common dilemma among many designers transitioning from the craft era to the industrial age and is characteristic of Van de Velde's role as a pivotal figure bridging Art Nouveau and Modernism. His stance demonstrated an attempt to embrace industrial civilization while preserving artistic freedom, an endeavor that profoundly influenced his later thinking.

4. Late-Career Thought and Practice (1914-1957): Balancing Individuality and Standardization

In his later years, Van de Velde's design philosophy matured and deepened. He continued to emphasize rationality and modernity while seeking a subtle equilibrium between craftsmanship and industrial production. During this period, he actively disseminated his design philosophy through personal retrospective exhibitions and the publication of his autobiography, thereby ensuring his ideas would continue to indirectly influence future generations.

4.1 The Culmination of His Late-Career Thought

Van de Velde's late-period philosophy can be viewed as a synthesis and transcendence of his early Romanticism and mid-career Functionalism. Having engaged in the standardization debate, he developed a more profound understanding of the inherent conflict between industrialization and individual expression, and he sought to resolve this contradiction on a higher, more integrated level

[10]. His design thinking during this phase demonstrates a stronger dialectical quality, one that steadfastly adhered to fundamental functionalist principles while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of artistic expression.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 was a pivotal event. As a Belgian national, Van de Velde was declared an "enemy alien" by German authorities and was forced to resign from his post as director of the Weimar Art School and leave Germany. His educational reforms in Weimar, however, laid the essential groundwork for the establishment of the Bauhaus in 1919. Following the war, Van de Velde's design ideology matured further, continuing to advocate for rationality and modernity. In his final years, he taught at institutions such as Ghent University, ensuring that his refined design philosophy were disseminated to influence future generations indirectly through his students and academic work.

4.2 Late Design Practice: The Integration of Rationality and Individuality

Van de Velde's design practice and philosophy after 1914 reflect the profound reflections and adaptations of a design pioneer navigating epochal changes. His late work clearly embodies the matured perspectives of this period: while he continued to champion rationality and functionalism, he demonstrated a new flexibility in its application.

From 1921 to 1923, Van de Velde designed the "De Zonnebloem" (The Sunflower) residence in Wassenaar, Netherlands. This house featured a clear and rational layout, prioritized practicality, and strictly adhered to the inherent properties of its construction materials, aligning perfectly with his principle of "rationality." The ornamentation and form of the villa were more restrained, with lines becoming more regulated and geometric, marking his further transition from Art Nouveau towards a Modernist idiom.

Van de Velde's design of the Ghent University Library in 1939 (As shown in Figure 6) stands as a pivotal work of his late career. Known as the "Book Tower," it is a significant landmark of modernist architecture in Belgium, fully embodying the maturity of his late-period thinking. The core of the Book Tower's design lies in its rationalism and functional supremacy—principles that Van de Velde consistently applied to his architectural practice.

By this stage, he had developed a more dialectical perspective on technology and machinery, placing greater emphasis on human-centered application.



Figure 6. Ghent University Library

4.3 Van de Velde's Historical Position and Influence

Van de Velde's design output did not diminish with age; he remained actively engaged in practice, education, and writing throughout his later years. Returning to Belgium in 1947, he continued to contribute through design consultancy, mentoring younger designers and disseminating his ideas. In 1951, he published his autobiography, *Geschichte meines Lebens* (History of My Life), providing a systematic retrospective of his career and the evolution of his design philosophy, which has since become an essential document for studying Art Nouveau and the history of modern design. In 1955, a major retrospective exhibition in Brussels comprehensively showcased his transdisciplinary work—from painting and architecture to furniture and graphic design—reigniting professional recognition of his identity as a "universal designer." Henry van de Velde passed away in Zurich, Switzerland, on October 25, 1957, at the age of 94.

Van de Velde's impact on subsequent generations has been profound. He was not only an exceptional designer but also a theorist, educator, and a foundational figure of the modern design movement. His influence transcends his own era and continues to resonate across the fields of design, architecture, and education. It is particularly noteworthy that his ideas retain significant relevance today. His persistent effort to find a balance between standardization and individual creativity remains a valuable reference for contemporary designers.

5. Conclusion

Through a systematic analysis of Henry van de

Velde's theoretical ideas and design practice across his early, middle, and late periods, we trace the trajectory of a pioneering designer's evolution: from his initial embrace of Art Nouveau naturalism, through his mid-career shift toward functionalism, to his later pursuit of a balance between rationality and individuality. This evolutionary process reflects not only the personal development of Van de Velde's thinking but also the broader shifts in European design discourse from the late 19th to the mid-20th century.

Van de Velde's influence is multifaceted and profound. He not only demonstrated how to create modern objects through rational methods but also, through his personal practice and intellectual debates, showed us how to embrace progress while preserving humanistic concern and respect for creative individuality. Today, as we grapple with issues such as globalization and localization, artificial intelligence and human creativity, or mass production and personalized customization, Van de Velde's ideas continue to offer valuable insights. He belongs not only to the history of design but also to its present and future.

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