Giving Life to Matter[[1]](#footnote-0) as a Principle of Beauty

In their constant concern with the past and in the unreal domain wherein they sought artistic beauty, artists lost any knowledge of the beauty of the materials they employed in their works. This ignorance peaked in the so-called “academic” period, which reached its high point in the middle of the nineteenth century. The academies and the jumble of things they taught strangled any remnant of the divine naiveté with which the early painters, sculptors, poets, and musicians employed their primitive techniques and imagined their subjects. These academies destroyed any remnant of the passion and sensuality with which, at the time of the Renaissance, architecture, painting, and sculpture handled the materials from which they formed their works.

Academicians destroyed the pagan idea of art that the Renaissance had created and the sensual pleasure it took in art.

Thereafter, artists needed an infinite amount of time to acquaint themselves with the natures and virtues of their means of expression, and to strip away the fog-gray figments and theories that had obscured these and minimized their importance. From this length of time one can estimate the quantity of ballast artists had to cast out so as to rise to the concept of a beauty that exists through technique, form, style.

Artists cleared away that which had been inserted between themselves and their techniques when they established the principle of *l’art pour l’art,* in other words, “art need only be concerned with art.” Thus they freed themselves from distressing doubts as to whether the subject they had captured in the realms of mythology or history was tragic enough, serious enough, comic enough, or tender enough to arouse pity, fear, laughter, or weeping. They spared themselves the endless search for appropriate gestures, postures, facial expressions, words, or costumes, for which the artist could draw upon as little documentation or observation as he could for the corresponding landscapes or interiors.

According to an old habit, we seek an artwork’s essential beauty in its subject and believe the means that fall under the rubrics “invention” and “composition” are more important than those that are associated with “technique” and “form.” But invention, composition, gestures, facial expression, and postures, these are merely things that can please each beholder differently. And precisely because they may and must please each beholder differently, there have been disputes in aesthetics since the dawn of time. Assassination or murder, tender or passionate love, exuberant joy or a furtive smile, loud or quiet happiness, rigid terror or a mere averted gaze, all extraordinary or natural emotions that provide the subject for most artworks—who is able to represent all these in such a manner that every beholder feels the same emotion before the work, precisely the same terror, pity, or happiness? Any such artistic subject depends on the differences in emotion that reside in human nature and that increase in cases of strongly opposed characters or races. In America a murder is judged differently than it is in Turkey, and the fear of death is not everywhere the same. Thus, for death to make an equally strong impression in Europe and Japan, entirely different compositions and gestures are required. Now, love is understood even more differently than death. And where we perceive pity or pain, the Indian or African will not feel the slightest sensation.[[2]](#footnote-1) What makes us laugh makes another temperament weep. And so everything we feel can also be perceived in precisely the opposite way, even by people who stand on the same cultural plane as we do and ought to enjoy the same artworks. I mean to say that if the beauty of an artwork were truly grounded in its subject, then this beauty would run the greatest risk of being not valued nor even acknowledged.

If it can still happen today that Böcklin’s fairy tales make no impression outside Germany, that Watts’s philosophical compositions find no admirers outside England, that Puvis de Chavannes’s austere and yet serene murals are really only enjoyed in France, then the reason for this resides in the different characters and attitudes of these races.[[3]](#footnote-2)

All these works are indeed truly beautiful; but the fact that their beauty depends on the mental proclivities of a race, a nation, already contains an inherent argument against the possibility that this beauty could be modern beauty.

It can no longer suit us to proceed with beauty as with truth, of which we lightly say, “one man’s truth is another man’s heresy.”

This lenient definition of truth is useful to us and may well put our conscience to rest; but beauty is less elastic, I think, less “beyond good and evil.”[[4]](#footnote-3) She wants to remain whole and inviolable, despite the aestheticians who have never wholly recognized her. They reached out their hands to her and only grasped what they could touch with their fingers and hold under a magnifying glass. One of them singled out content or subject matter and declared that beauty could only exist in the subject. Another, who had more of a flair for the abstract, spied a symbol behind the content and declared that there must be a symbol behind the content in every case. A third went so far as to recognize the composition and its components—the staging, gestures, postures, facial expressions—and declared that beauty would be inconceivable without these. Yet another, finally, who was even more gifted, advanced to the style and instructed that only the style of the work achieves beauty. But each of them took from beauty only what he himself could experience. Thereupon he built his theories, which were tightly sealed, infallible, and sterile.

These theories are impasses. Now, it is indeed imaginable that beauty does not want to be at an impasse. She is there exposed to various dangers at the hands of the learned. And she yearns for fresh air, for open space and freedom. She wants to go her own way, as nymphs hasten from flower to flower to pluck and braid them into their hair. She wants to be free, to bathe and mirror her body in every pool. She wants to sound her love aloud over mountain and valley, as birds call at their pleasure.

Lately, however, perceptions have arisen that are beginning to curtail the dominance of this belief that an artwork’s most essential beauty resides in its subject and that which serves to render the subject clearly and effectively.

Naturalism passionately renounced the advantages that idealizing, heart-stirring, or also merely agreeable subjects had secured for previous works. It preached the first principled uprising against tendencies that had exhausted artists by asking of them nothing but fancy, and that valued and praised them only for the interest or sympathy they were able to arouse. For in order to achieve those effects that had led, in all fields of art, to works such as *Endlich allein* [Alone at last] or *Die Lebensmüden* [The life-weary]*,* it was no longer necessary to understand the techniques of painting, sculpture, poetry, or composition.

Today it is clear that the Naturalist revolution was directed as much against this wretched state of technique as against the dominance of a subject that laid claim to the participation of a broad public and turned away from the wholesome pleasure found in execution, technique, material.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Naturalism is still so familiar to us that I need not remind you of its history and the storms it unleashed. I only must emphatically point out that it was so quickly and universally victorious because it restored technique to honor in painting, sculpture, literature, and music. Naturalism burst open the impasse. In France, it was the painters Courbet, Millet, Manet; the writers Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant; the sculptors Carpeaux and Rodin; in Germany, somewhat later, the painters Liebermann and Leibl and the dramatist Hauptmann; in Belgium, the writer Camille Lemonnier and the sculptor Constantin Meunier, who, in their first acts of demolition, put their hands to the task and cleared the horizon once more, which the learned edifices, the demanding and difficult aesthetics had long concealed from us. Suddenly a perspective was opened on fields, on life, on moving, pulsing reality. The beauty that we can see again in the works of this Naturalist period is a beauty only proper to art that issues from the material it employs. What the subject’s disinterest and ultimate stupidity had put to sleep—the life that slumbers in any matter, be it color, stone or metal, word or sound—readied itself to wake. Is this waking conscious? No more conscious than any other waking. And yet we often content ourselves with an understanding of what has occurred that is less clear than the one we will very soon possess.

Already with Naturalism we are approaching an understanding of art and beauty that does more justice to the material. Ultimately, this understanding achieved its fullest potency with Impressionism.

What is called Impressionism is rather indefinite and yet from the outset it meant something clear and distinct. It advanced the painter’s right to capture on his canvas the impression[[6]](#footnote-5) that a landscape or an event provoked in him, instead of reproducing with pedantic exactitude all the details of which the landscape or event was composed. The painter grandly aspired to make the soul’s instantaneous movement eternal, and to make it live with the strength of the first moment. Impressionism knew this would only be possible by omitting the details that draw the painter’s attention and analytic eye away from the rhythm of lines and colors, their properties, interactions, and proportions, whose contrasts and complements demanded more diligence than the details that necessarily slow the artist’s work and cool his emotion. For indeed, it is all that is fleeting and momentary— all that is trembling and pulsing, suggesting life— that must be captured and preserved.

The perception is now de-throned that the beauty an artwork pursues depends mostly on its subject; soon we will only deem a work beautiful according to more stringent, new conditions.

Soon, it will please us to find a work beautiful only if we discover in it something highly specific, namely, *life.* Not the kind of life with regard to which we like to say a picture or bust is a perfect likeness [*sprechend ähnlich*], or that a character in a novel or play has been taken from real life. This kind of life can indeed occasion us to reflect on the marvelous artistry that has been employed to achieve such a result; this kind of life can make us proud that man has thus stolen the secret of creation from the gods. But the means that engender this kind of life stand apart from real artistic beauty, apart from the beauty that issues from the essential organs of an artwork, that endows it with the gleam and splendor of its own life. Such means draw life from the soul and mind of the living being that the painter, sculptor, or writer wants to make come alive again in our presence. But this achievement cannot be recognized as a revelation of pure and true beauty. It is certainly an achievement. And this achievement in itself is also valuable and wonderful. But the beauty of an artwork consists in a life and soul that are its own, not in the lives and souls of its models.

Colors and lines derive their life from their mutual interaction; stones and metal from the possibilities they present to create and hold light and shadows; words and sounds from their capacity to join in harmonies and merge with the fertile moods of rhythm.[[7]](#footnote-6)

I expressly declare that it is far from my intention to deny beauty to the idea, the melody, or the subject in drama, sculpture, and opera. But I maintain that this beauty is of a different kind than true artistic beauty. The beauty of content is by nature intellectual. And this is sufficient for its greatness but limits its effectiveness, while organic beauty is by nature material. And this is also sufficient for its greatness and in addition ensures its general validity.

Everything indicates that our era is adopting this concept of beauty. Our time has infused art with its incandescent love of life and wants to find in art the pulse of life that never so strongly as today has animated the image of the city in which we work.[[8]](#footnote-7) Never have the lights been so bright; never have such showers of sparks cascaded from over the casements; never in such number, never so infinitely, have they hung in glistening garlands, which the pavement reflects after rain, as if the streets could really become streams and rivers. Across the squares, through the alleys, never have so many brightly colored cars, sundry uniforms, and flamboyant costumes hastened past each other. Never have the harbors sent skyward so many smokestacks and jarring cries of work. Never have their waters rolled so many flashing jewels. And also the railway stations, on fog-drenched winter nights, have staged fantastic dramas, which transported us into the depths of enormous aquariums, where snorting behemoths charge in and rattle the earth and shake the many small suns and moons whence these once undreamed-of, fabled worlds receive their light. Our parks have become greener and our flowerbeds more variegated.[[9]](#footnote-8) The gravel on our paths is yellower; and we have discovered that shadows are purple. And when ennui lays its leaden hand on our soul, we go to places where glasses and silver laugh on white linens; where a bright, gay little soul showers from each object whose sunny nearness and life frees our soul from ponderous weight. The restaurants are hospitals, and the waiters good, wise nurses for our ennui.

From the life of the materials that surround us, we literally draw the needed strength to combat threatening moods of indolence. In their life we have discovered beauty; in their beauty, life.

From every artwork we will suck life as bees suck honey from blossoms in order to feed us.

When one has such a definite standard of admiration and judgment, then one is consistent and looks as happily into the past as into the future. What we cherish in a Renoir or Degas, namely, the wonderful life of the material, we cherish just as much in a van Goyen, a van der Meer von Delft, a Rembrandt, or a Rubens. What delights us in a Rodin, namely, the pulsing life of the stone or bronze, delights us in Rude, Goujon, the bronzes of the Renaissance, the *Naumburger Stifterfiguren*, and the divine sculpture of Greece.[[10]](#footnote-9)

We follow the traces of life backwards with all the more certainty, since this life—namely, this life of the material—is eternal. The marble that Phidias made vibrate 2000 years ago continues to vibrate. The canvas on which Velazquez or Goya placed lively spots of color side by side continues to move.

Through all art history, we can follow how each material put to use by art develops step by step toward life. And this stepwise ascendance to life can be seen so often that we are truly justified to rewrite all art history and rebuild it again on this basic fact.[[11]](#footnote-10)

This would give the discipline such unity and such firm foundations as no historian yet has recognized. The book seems already written, so evident is this basic principle. It will ascend to the sources other scholars have discovered and will gladly acknowledge their worth.

But the historian will now follow this development with other eyes. He has glimpsed in every material a seed, which circumstances will develop quickly or slowly into life according to their favor or disfavor.

The essential point here is that the first trace of beauty coincides with the first trace of life in the material.

Thought has never fructified the material in which it embodies itself as an image, statue, or poem. Thought only engenders thought. It is a world in itself, in which just as marvelous events take place as in the world of matter.

But materials obtain life from the fructifiers that are appointed to them by nature.

Metal and stone live when the play of light and shadow undulates across their surfaces and brings about the miracle that light appears to stream out from the material and shadow to penetrate deep within it.

Linen lives when the play of perforated and closed areas, or of different densities of weave, prevails over the hard, stiff surface, which in itself is as barren as an endless moor.

Glass lives when it laughs in sun and light, by means of sunbeams and the light it steals from the sun.

Wood lives when the tool ruts the material just as the plow wakes the sleeping earth.

Words live when they touch one another so that vowels flare like sparks, and consonants—gray, lifeless, consonants— become animate, living nuances, like water across which a sunbeam glides.

Presently I will say what gives life to color, when I speak at greater length about this material.

But first, it should be noted that this life inherent in matter conveys all matter to ever more insubstantial, immaterial[[12]](#footnote-11) forms of manifestation. And thus have we can affirm the following two principles, which are as follows:

1. All matter develops step by step toward life.
2. All matter develops step by step toward its most immaterial form of manifestation.[[13]](#footnote-12)

From coarse and seemingly barren linen gradually emerges lace. The iron bridges and towers of the present look less substantial than the grates of Baroque and Rococo castles. Now, with respect to our relationship to color, our surroundings seem a severe, gray *basso* that surely and tenaciously infiltrates us. The nearly eternal gray of our homeland sings to us “in a sorrowful mood”[[14]](#footnote-13) and burdens our soul. And therefore, beams of light, trills and arpeggios of enveloping, bright harmonies are what our soul seeks, in order to overwhelm the painful sensations that are forced upon us.

Color has developed symphonically since the Middle Ages, which is the Western world’s primitive era. Everything before it is night to us, as the time before the first pharaohs is to the Orient.

The color sequences of the early Flemish, Dutch, Germans, and Italians were still simple. Each color sought only to live on its own, with the help of the sole means available to it as a single color: the radiance, power, and depth that are necessary to withstand the counter-effect of other colors, which otherwise will too quickly extinguish and destroy it. Colors had not yet advanced beyond the role of mere illuminations; they were still broad, uniform tones inside contours, which, in their way, said the same thing as a picture book. They did not aspire to life with any haste; the most impatient of them hastened upward into stained glass. In comparison to stained glass, panel paintings seem like sedate Sisters whom fate has appointed to the cloister rather than to love. But the sun and light imbued stained glass with the highest intensity of life—a life that changed, like the sun and light, from hour to hour.[[15]](#footnote-14)

In stained glass, the colored pigments did not have time to degenerate—so suddenly and quickly did they achieve the pinnacle of life. They remained pure, that is, they remained prismatic, and were spared the ruptures and mixtures that later in painting led colors toward gray and black.

In the stained-glass window, color has been utterly brought to life before our eyes. I mean the individual life of each single particle of matter and the individual life of the whole as such; thus each particle contributes its own life to the birth of something new without being extinguished in it.

All the stages in the development of painting aspire to this final goal.

Gothic paintings were works of a true love for the subject they represented; yet the pious artist of the Middle Ages did not dare rouse matter to life; this would have struck him as dangerous and blasphemous; rather like alchemy and sorcery.

Renaissance artists were less afraid of such catastrophes. Pagan reason once again penetrated their souls. The sense for life again sent fire through their veins; and lashed by it, colors—the materials of which pictures are composed—began to vibrate. Temperamental differences consigned to artists such as Titian, Rembrandt, and Rubens quite different means for achieving the same goal, namely, life; but, on this first attempt, they obtained the highest degree of life that was achieved at this time. And then a decline occurred. Life disappeared again from all materials. After the boldness, the passion of Rubens, who forcefully outlines the Christ Child’s hand in green on the Madonna’s red cloak, in Antwerp in the triptych of the *Descent from the Cross*;[[16]](#footnote-15)after the possibly more attentive observation of the wonderful, dimly animated life in chiaroscuro, out of which the Dutch master makes the faces and hands of his figures shine; after the warm, golden dusting of light in Titian’s pictures, which seems to undulate like a field of ripe grain, came the murky flaccidity of dead surfaces, on which stale characters and uninteresting events are onerously painted. The pigments, which a short time before seemed close to solving the mystery that would have roused them to life, become muddied again. A miserably long time then passed before a new resurrection could be celebrated, before the arrival of a new spring of the pagan soul, whose winter freeze is easily prolonged. Sun-King*,* Rococo, Fêtes-Galantes, precious magic words! Watteau and Fragonard are imminent, and matter shall quicken once more. They are the precursors of the one who recognized painting’s deadliest enemy. Eugène Delacroix named it explicitly when he said, “The enemy of all painting is gray.”[[17]](#footnote-16)

With a little more acuity, Delacroix could have expressed what we are saying today, that all matter aspires step by step to life. Does he not say quite rightly that a painting whose colors do not vibrate must appear dirty, barren, and lifeless? “Dust you are,” he says, “and to dust you will return,” according to the Catholic saying that reminds us of our inevitable end on All Soul’s Day.

The fact that Delacroix did not arrive at a clear understanding of the truth that we have understood is the tragedy of his life. And this tragedy would last beyond his life and infiltrate that of his successors. Life and the struggle for a result that their artist’s conscience demanded of them—this tragedy also claimed the lives of Manet and Vincent van Gogh.

This is the moment in art history when painters are about to give up the chemical mixture of substances in favor of optical mixture. In his admirable book, the American physicist Rood elucidates scientific color theory through a persuasive attempt to explain the difference between the mixture of different-colored masses of light and the mixture of different-colored pigments. He proves through experimentation, thus irrefutably, that every mixture on the palette brings a color closer to black.

What science lately demonstrates, painters have always suspected. And if the science of Bezold, Brücke, Young, Chevreul, Helmholz, Maxwell, if the reliable and comprehensive work of Rood had not come to their aid, then the drama would continue today of artists who set out to capture light blindly walking the road at night because they mixed colors on the palette. Now they recognize the ancient curse that long has burdened artists who aspired to a certain goal—namely, radiance and light—with means that necessarily destroyed this goal from the outset. Having recognized this, is it too much to speak of “drama” and “tragedy”?

Now, optical mixture and chemical mixture are two altogether different procedures. Both create artworks that serve a similar purpose. But in reality, these works are made from two utterly different materials.

Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist pictures, which are painted according to the procedure of optical mixture, use colored masses of light; other pictures use colored pigments.

These painters of the first technique mix the colors they use in the same way as different kinds of light combine, specifically, in sets of rays in which each ray preserves its distinct nature: although it oscillates together with the others when it meets or touches them, it reappears in a perfectly pure state when it is viewed beyond this point of interaction. The other painters since ancient times have mixed pigments chemically, pigments that combine and merge into one another, losing their distinct nature in this mixture and irrevocably sacrificing to it not only their nature and their purity, but also their life.

Thus becomes apparent the different nature of the materials employed by the painters of the old school and those of the new. Those of the old school use materials that they do not succeed in seeing as anything other than what they are in the narrowest sense—namely, pigments that are killed in every act of mixing with each other, and to which only the genius of a few masters has given a type of life. The new school works with the same materials after having divested them of their materiality by conceiving them as sources of light. They protect them from any mixture and have won the marvelous ability to allow light to shine, whereas other painters lay down a coating of pigments. Thus they give life to the surfaces they cover by means of noble substances.[[18]](#footnote-17)

The Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists require that the materials they bring to the canvas work and be active. Other painters expect no more work or activity from their materials. Their work is completed; chemical mixture on the palette has killed them by consigning them to black. From this fundamental difference in procedure follow all the others. The Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists use only the colors of the sun’s spectrum, which alone can become sources of light; they leave to the other painters all shadow colors, all ochers, all grounds.

The course of the development of music, poetry, and architecture is similar to that of color. Perhaps the materials used by those arts did not arrive at life through such a powerful crisis as what in painting preceded the renunciation of chemical mixing. But if I could elaborate the course of development of each of these arts, it would be recognized that the development of rhythmic sensation led certain materials and certain forces just as powerfully toward life.

Perhaps I have said enough herewith to justify the idea that all art history ought to be rebuilt on those fundamental truths according to which all matter develops toward life. The surest sign of the beauty of a work consists in whether the materials from which it is produced *live.*

1. Van de Velde’s conception of matter can be understood in relation to that of Schopenhauer, who identifies matter as that which connects the Idea (as defined by Plato) and its particular manifestation in objects. See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 1: 238. Van de Velde will discuss Schopenhauer’s philosophy in his later essay “Rational Beauty” (1910), included in this volume. In van de Velde’s essays, his German translators used the words *Materie* and *Stoff,* along with *Material,*to denote physical matter or artistic material. The German terms can be interchangeable. In our translation we use “matter” or “substance” when van de Velde refers to the natural and physical worlds, and “material” when he refers to artmaking. In English as well as German the lexical separation between these senses is relatively recent. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This remark, made casually, reflects racialist views of artistic expression, according to which humankind can be divided into indelible and unequally endowed biological groupings. Such ideas were widespread in nineteenth-century architectural writings on style, in which architectural theorists ascribed the crudest sensibilities to the “primitive” races of Africa and Oceania, with the most developed sensibilities being attributed to Europeans. See Irene Cheng, “Structural Racialism in Modern Architectural Theory.” Here, van de Velde uncritically perpetuates racialist views, even as in his writings on ornament, such as “Remarks on a Synthesis of the Arts,” in this volume, he questions the hierarchical assumptions on which they are based. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Van de Velde invokes the reception of Symbolist painters Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) in Germany, George Fredric Watts (1817–1904) in England, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98) in France, whose work depicted mythological and classical subjects replete with mystery and innuendo. Each of these painters was hailed as a national hero in his home country but found little acclaim beyond national borders. By contrast, the reception of the Naturalist and Neo-Impressionist painters van de Velde discusses later in the essay was truly international in scope. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. In referencing Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)*,* van de Velde distances himself from the philosopher’s complete rejection of moral standards. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Van de Velde continues a line of interpretation of Naturalism that he initiates in his essay, “Adrien-Joseph Heymans: A Study” (1889), in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. In the original text, both the French and German terms are given: “die Impression, den Eindruck.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Van de Velde summarizes, in condensed and poetic language, Schopenhauer’s various observations on how light enlivens stone architecture and how rhythm imbues words with imaginative life. See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 1: 239–240, 269–70; 2: 441–45. Van de Velde then adds more recent ideas from modern painting pertaining to line and color and their aesthetic effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. This highly visual and evocative account of modern city life anticipates arguments and language that August Endell will employ some five years later in his *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt* (Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder, 1908), in which Endell characterizes the modern city as a source of life, joy, force, and beauty. Endell sided with van de Velde in the Werkbund debate of 1914; van de Velde reciprocated by recommending Endell, along with Hermann Obrist and Walter Gropius, as his potential successors in Weimar in 1914. This overlap in their theoretical writings indicates that the basis for their allegiance in 1914 was laid years before. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Van de Velde will make a similar observation in “Rational Beauty” (1910), included in this volume. His age witnessed a color revolution due to the manufacture of new synthetic commercial dyes that allowed for a broader range and intensity of color in every area of life and art, including intensely colored chemical glazes employed in the new ceramics, brightly colored tube paints employed by the Impressionists, and brighter and broader arrays of colored garden flowers. In this case as in others, advances in industry stimulated artists’ imaginations. On the art and science of color around 1900, see Laura Ann Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Technology, Commerce, and Art* (College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Van de Velde’s ahistorical view of art, according to which art from all times and places shares a common life impulse, informed his work on the Folkwang Museum in Hagen, which opened in 1902 at the same time that he wrote this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Van de Velde’s re-envisioning of art history based in a study of form and materials, not society and history, relates to the work of his supporter, art critic Meier-Graefe, who in 1904 published a comprehensive account of art based in a close, formal reading of materials and composition. See Meier-Graefe, *Entwickelungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst,* 3 vols (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1904). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. This idea of matter aspiring to its least material form of manifestation relates to Schopenhauer’s account of the aesthetic effects of architecture in *The World as Will and Representation*, whereby the interplay of opposing forces latent in matter expresses the Platonic Idea underlying all particular phenomena. Van de Velde can be understood to harness Schopenhauer’s concepts of “immateriality” and “dematerialization” to the articulation of an abstract, non-objective vocabulary in the visual arts. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. This second principle concords with the following Schopenhauerian assertion by Gottfried Semper: “The destruction of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous human creation.” See Semper, *Style*,439n85. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. “In a sorrowful mood” [Traurige Weise] is placed in quotation marks, presumably as a reference to a note designating emotional quality at the beginning of a musical score. This same musical direction can be found in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde,* at the beginning of Act III, where it sets the tone of the shepherd’s melancholic piping. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Van de Velde’s observations on stained glass and its superiority to oil painting align with passages in physicist Ogden Rood’s study, *Modern Chromatics,* which van de Velde cites below. Rood’s research on colored light as superior in luminosity to colored pigment informed the divisionist methods of Neo-Impressionist painters. See Rood, *Students’ Text-Book of Colour; Or, Modern Chromatics, with Applications to Art and Industry* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1879), 16, 72–73*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. The specific painting passage van de Velde discusses is not present in Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross,* his triptych located in the Antwerp Cathedral. Van de Velde may be conflating visual memories of two different paintings here. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Van de Velde’s recognition of Delacroix’s importance for the development of prismatic color in painting is indebted to Paul Signac, “D’Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme,” which was originally published in *La Revue blanche* 16 (1898) and re-published in German in *Pan* in July 1898 before appearing one year later as a pamphlet, *D’Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue blanche, 1899). In this text, Signac lists van de Velde among the group of Neo-Impressionists. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Van de Velde uses the term “noble substances” [Edelstoffe]. A “noble gas” is a gas that does not form bonds with other elements, and a “noble metal” is one that does not corrode. This resistance to change is analogous to the behavior of colors mixed optically according to van de Velde’s account of modern painting. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)