From Pollock drips to perfect white in Jan Schoonhoven’s Zero reliefs

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, painted reliefs from all periods by the Dutch Zero artist Jan J. Schoonhoven (1914–1994) have been treated, and their materials and construction techniques investigated and compared. From 1960 onwards, Schoonhoven, a renowned member of the Dutch Nul Group (1960–65), together with Henk Peeters (1925–2013), Armando (b. 1929), and Jan Henderikse (b. 1937), produced countless white reliefs, now spread throughout art museums and private collections around the world (Wesseling 1990, Melissen 2015). In 1960, he abandoned color for the sole use of white paint on his serial reliefs. For Schoonhoven, white stood for the absence of color, rather than a color: his formal reliefs with repetitive squares and rectangles have “no meaning other than that they represent what they are, and they are what you see.” Up until 1960, Schoonhoven made constructions with tubes and irregular, polygonal shapes out of cardboard by smashing and reworking them into abstract reliefs. He then covered them in an “action painting” manner with paint in various colors. Between 1957 and 1990, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam purchased 18 reliefs, representing Schoonhoven’s entire artistic oeuvre. A condition survey of these reliefs, carried out at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, along with several conservation treatments and interviews with his former colleagues, made it possible to make an inventory of the uniformities and changes that occur throughout his production. The recent centennial birthday publications and exhibitions in 2016 highlighted once more his artistic life alongside his full-time employment at the Dutch postal service (PTT), and the inspiration he found in the streets of his native city, Delft.

FROM INFORMAL TO ZERO

From 1955 onwards, Schoonhoven constructed his reliefs first with cardboard and the slow-drying papier-mâché, but soon started covering his constructions completely with glued-on pieces of newspaper. He built labyrinthine structures, smashed them with his shoe or a brick, repaired them with glue and newspaper, and then smashed them again until he was satisfied with the final shape. Coincidence in the creative process for these constructions-détruites represents the main “informal” aspect. This notion is essential to these early reliefs (Wesseling 1990, 27). Inspired
by international artistic movements, such as American abstract painting and Jackson Pollock’s action painting, he randomly applied colors in wide brushstrokes, and drips and splashes. Other reliefs he painted in monochrome black, grey, or cream white (Wesseling 1990, 30).

The radical shift in 1960 to the white serial reliefs marked the start of the Zero period and the Dutch Nul Group (Wesseling 1990, 34–51; Melissen 2015, 45–101). The same materials were now used to form repetitive rows of squares and rectangles in horizontal or vertical orientation, systematically planned beforehand. Schoonhoven applied white house paint, in Dutch known as *latexverf* or *Acryllatex*, for its matte appearance, and it is known that he preferred to use paint of a good quality. In several statements, Schoonhoven declares himself to be a sculptor rather than a painter. His reliefs were designed to catch the light and cast shadows, the light defining the appearance of the reliefs depending on the variations in (day)light and position of the viewer.

Photographs and film fragments show Schoonhoven with a knife, ruler, scissors, paper tape, cardboard, and glue at hand working on a relief laid flat on the small kitchen table where he produced all his reliefs in the 1960s. In these films, Schoonhoven comments that this work entails handicraft; that the small irregularities in the corners and the subtle layering of torn patches of newspaper are the artist’s “handwriting” visible on the white surface, and represent a specific quality on the otherwise anonymous surface (Wesseling 1990, 68).

From the condition survey carried out at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, information about his materials and the different steps in the production process was gathered:

- Corrugated cardboard is used as a backboard; later Masonite, particle board or plywood are used.
- His reliefs are built from cardboard strips (vertical, horizontal, diagonal, slated planes, etc.).
- Paper tape is used to fix the cardboard structures onto the backboard.
- Patches of newspaper are used to cover the complete structure with wallpaper paste (printed newspaper is used at first, and later unprinted newspaper).
- The relief is mounted on a wooden framework with nails on the front.
- The nails are hidden with commercial stucco (filler).
- The relief is completely painted with commercial white house paint, in several layers, to cover the newsprint; the early reliefs are painted with enamel paint (referred to as “lacquer”) and in muted colors.
- His signature along with the number of the relief is added on the back of the work in paint, felt-tip pen, and/or pencil.

Tables 1–4 provide an inventory of 18 reliefs from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; each table refers to a different style/working period in Schoonhoven’s oeuvre.
His production methods remained the same over the decades except for a few changes (Wesseling 1990, 69, figs. 56 and 57). Some of Schoonhoven’s informal and early Nul reliefs have a backboard made of cardboard covered by patches of paper (Table 1; Figures 1 and 2). Later, more rigid backboards dominated and apart from the occasional use of Masonite, particle board and plywood become the standard. Backboards were ordered to size from the local carpenter. Wooden frameworks were mounted with nails onto the back of the reliefs. The backboards of larger reliefs are comprised of several plates.

Schoonhoven varied and experimented with shapes, making large rounded-off squares or circular reliefs called “Dish” reliefs. More complex forms were introduced later in the 1960s in the “Quadraten” reliefs, which use diagonals, inclined planes, or surfaces slanting toward the midline of a square (Table 2). The Sao Paulo Biennale Awards in 1967 and 1969 resulted in a sudden high demand for his artworks, forcing Schoonhoven to employ assistants to help produce the reliefs. One of his assistants, Aad in ‘t Veld, became Schoonhoven’s life-long assistant and, in fact, went on to produce almost all the reliefs from the 1970s onwards following the detailed instruction drawings provided by Schoonhoven, which indicated the number of horizontal and vertical squares or rectangles, their width and depth, and the relief’s size (Schoemaker and van Leeuwen 2015, 67–70). The Stedelijk Museum has five reliefs from this transitional period that involved the use of assistants (Tables 2 and 3, no. 6–11).

### Table 1. Early works from the Dutch Nul Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<th>Image</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Signature/backside</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 1   | ‘Timor’ (1958)  
R 58-2  
83 × 115.5 × 22 cm  
Signature (front): JJS 58 in white  
Signature (back): in black paint | ![Image](image1.jpg)  
Informal relief  
construction-détruite, ‘action paint’ | Cardboard, covered with paper, wood, back covered with paper  
Paint: Red, green, black | ![Signature](signature1.jpg) |
| 2   | R 60-2 (1960)  
48 × 32 × 10.5 cm  
Signature (back): in white paint on grey paint | ![Image](image2.jpg)  
Informal relief  
construction-détruite | Cardboard, paper, particle board, wood, back covered with paper  
Paint: matt and glossy black | ![Signature](signature2.jpg) |
| 3   | R 61-3 (1961)  
114 × 70 cm  
Signature (back): in black paint | ![Image](image3.jpg)  
Serial relief  
(558 squares) | White paint, paper, cardboard, wood | ![Signature](signature3.jpg) |
| 4   | R 62-16 (1962)  
81.5 × 61.5 × 6 cm  
Signature (back): in black paint | ![Image](image4.jpg)  
Serial relief  
(48 rectangles) | White paint, paper, cardboard, wood | ![Signature](signature4.jpg) |
In an interview, Aad in ’t Veld explained the changes in the working methods he introduced to work more efficiently in order to meet the high demand for the reliefs. He replaced the printed newspaper for unprinted newspaper of a heavier quality, enabling him to work with long strips, thus moving away from the subtle surface structure of torn pieces of paper. The structures also became more linear and straight, and had fewer “handicraft” details. Schoonhoven oversaw and agreed with these developments, commenting thus: “Yes, this is another way of doing it” (Table 3, no. 12 and 13).

The manner of signing the works, and the signature itself, show a parallel development. Starting with the initials JJS 58 applied with paint and a brush in a corner (Post-Office relief), he then started signing his work with his full name, J.J. Schoonhoven, in paint and with a brush on the back of the cardboard, or Jan J. Schoonhoven in felt-tip pen and/or pencil (Tables 1–4). The informal reliefs have biblical or other meaningful names; however, from the Nul period onwards, this is replaced by a numeric system: “R” refers to Relief and “T” to Drawing (Tekening in Dutch). The first number indicates the year (69) and the second number indicates the number of the

### Table 2. Serial reliefs from the 1960s and transitional period where Schoonhoven’s assistants produced the works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Recthoekige schuine vlakken (1966)</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Serial relief (108 rectangles) Slated planes, alternating</td>
<td>White paint, paper, cardboard, hardboard (Masonite), wood</td>
<td>Signature (back): in purple paint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Quadratenrelief (1967)</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Serial relief (100 squares) Slated planes toward the midlines, alternating</td>
<td>White paint, paper strips, cardboard, hardboard (Masonite), wood</td>
<td>Signature (back): in black felt-tip pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Quadratenrelief (1968)</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Serial relief (100 squares) Diagonal slated planes</td>
<td>White paint, paper, cardboard, hardboard (Masonite), wood</td>
<td>Paint: ‘Latexverf’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>R 69-19 (1969)</td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Serial relief (25 squares/50 diagonals)</td>
<td>White paint, newspaper strips, cardboard, paint, plywood, wood</td>
<td>[No signature on the back]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>R 69-34 (1969)</td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Serial relief (400 squares)</td>
<td>White paint, cardboard, newspaper, plywood, wood</td>
<td>Signature (back): in felt-tip pen</td>
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artwork from that year (R69-55). The reliefs produced by In ‘t Veld would receive a preliminary signature in pencil as a first approval and later a similar final one in black felt-tip pen. This would take place in the gallery or before an exhibition, as a solemn event (Wesseling 1990, 95, fig. 74).

Schoonhoven temporarily returned to making reliefs himself by hand in around 1980: the so-called “Roof” reliefs resemble the informal style prior to 1960 (Table 4, no. 14 and 15). Made out of corrugated cardboard, he constructed irregularly positioned rectangular shapes that were only partially painted white. The “Roof” reliefs made by In ‘t Veld are clearly different, being straighter and more regular in their shape and build-up. A final series of reliefs produced in the 1990s were made quite differently. Here, vertical rows of triangles are comprised of solid pieces of cardboard; these are massive reliefs and exceptionally heavy in weight. The rhythm of the zigzag shapes combined with the uneven surface structure from the stacked pieces of board are again typical of Jan Schoonhoven, as is his signing of them after In ‘t veld had made them (Schoemaker and van Leeuwen 2015, 69) (Table 4, no. 17 and 18).

**PAST CONSERVATION APPROACHES**

The matte-white-painted paper reliefs have always been vulnerable to damage, dirt, and staining. The treatment approach in the past has not always been straightforward. Schoonhoven repeatedly advised repainting

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>R69-55 (1969) 104 × 104 × 5 cm Signature (back): in felt-tip pen</td>
<td>Serial relief (60 vertical triangular ridges)</td>
<td>White paint, cardboard, newspaper, plywood, wood</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>R70-59 (1970) 122 × 84 × 4.5 cm Signature (back): in felt-tip pen</td>
<td>Serial relief (120 longitudinal ridges)</td>
<td>White paint, paper (straight strips), cardboard, plywood, wood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>R72-24 (1972) 165.5 × 165.5 × 7.5 cm Signature (back): in felt-tip pen and pencil</td>
<td>Serial relief (1600 squares)</td>
<td>White paint, newspaper, cardboard, 4 chipboard plates, wood, backside covered with wallpaper</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>R75-6 (1975) 250 × 250 cm 244 × 244 × 7.2 cm Signature (back): in felt-tip pen</td>
<td>Largest serial relief (64 squares, each with double slope sides, alternating horizontally and vertically)</td>
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dirty reliefs with commercial white house paint. This accords with his idea that the reliefs should have no color but should be white. This is at odds with the commercial art market, which traditionally tends to value the so-called “patina.” Schoonhoven is known to have encouraged owners to have their reliefs restored by his assistant Aad in ’t Veld, who indeed repainted various examples.10 Also Schoonhoven’s close friend and fellow Nul artist, Henk Peeters, repaired damage to Schoonhoven’s works with commercial stucco on a regular basis and is known to have repainted reliefs with diluted house paint just before an exhibition in order

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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>R.81-11 (1981)</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘Roof-tile’ stile relief (10 rows) experimental irregular shape, handmade by Schoonhoven</td>
<td>White paint (thin) corrugated cardboard, wood</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>R.81-12 (1981)</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘Roof-tile’ stile relief (8 rows) irregular shape, ‘double ridge’ on the sharp edge of the ‘roof-tile’</td>
<td>White paint, corrugated cardboard, wood</td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>R.83-2 (1983)</td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘Roof-tile’ stile relief</td>
<td>Two vertical sections each with 8 regular triangular shapes (roof tile) Thinly covered with paint (white)</td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>R.90-3 (1990)</td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Vertical stacked triangles of carton paperboard</td>
<td>Stacked, cut paperboard on plywood back board, white paint: Acryllatex</td>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>R.90-5 (1990)</td>
<td><img src="image9.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Vertical stacked triangles of carton paperboard</td>
<td>Paperboard triangles, three full and two half rows: Stacked, cut paperboard on plywood back board, white paint: Acryllatex</td>
<td><img src="image10.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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to enhance them (Figure 3). In an interview with Henk Peeters during the conservation of two white reliefs by the author, Peeters tempered the statements made by Schoonhoven in the past, explaining that in the end Schoonhoven did not bother too much (Figure 4).

As a result, Schoonhoven’s reliefs today vary in appearance due to grime, repairs, and varying degrees of retouching and repainting. The practice of repainting the works tends to cover up the fine lines from the torn pieces of newspaper on the surface and has led to loss of this delicate detailing. Repainting is clearly not an option as a conservation treatment. The cleaning of matte-white-painted surfaces is a delicate operation; however, due to the good quality of the house paint Schoonhoven used, it is not impossible. But it does require careful consideration of the overall final appearance, before and during treatment. At the same time the conservator – ethically constrained by what is and what is not possible – may be inclined towards a more pragmatic approach, with more limited results.

**CONSERVATION OF DISH RELIEF (1963)**

In 1963, Schoonhoven made one of his so-called Dish reliefs (Figures 1 and 2). In a rectangle with rounded corners he positioned some 200 overlapping pieces of cardboard that descend radially towards the center. The artwork is randomly covered with torn pieces of newspaper, including the reverse, and is painted white on both sides. Purchased by the Dutch State in 1964, it has hung for years in the Dutch Embassy in Bonn, Germany, where heavy dust accumulation and stains from water drops on the lower half have heavily damaged the artwork. At the time, it was deemed too tricky to treat the matte-white surface. Awaiting a new approach to restore the artwork, it stayed in storage for many years, too dirty to be exhibited. A first surface cleaning was performed with good results. However, the removal of the dark surface dirt revealed an unevenly distributed yellowish layer and stains caused by water drops. A second surface cleaning with a soft sponge and a warm solution of tri-methyl cellulose followed by immediate drying with warm air to avoid new tidelines brought back a rather beautiful, white-painted surface with subtle brushstrokes over the fine lines of the underlying torn newspaper. Today, Dish relief (1963) is seen as a good example of Schoonhoven’s early original handmade technique.

**CONSERVATION OF THE POST-OFFICE RELIEF (1958)**

The permanent loan in 2015 of the large Post-Office relief (1958) from the KPN Art collection to the Rijksmuseum included a detailed condition
assessing, conservation treatment, and research into the relief’s history (Figure 5). Although relatively unknown, much new information on this relief was gathered from three sources: the extensive explanatory letter by Schoonhoven from November 1958, which includes sketches and drawings of the working method; an interview with Jan Henderikse in front of the relief about its making; and an interview with Schoonhoven’s assistant, Aad in ‘t Veld, who restored the work in 1994 (Schoemaker and van Leeuwen 2015, 37) (Figure 6).

The relief was commissioned in 1958 for the new post-office at the Hippolytusbuurt in Delft. Schoonhoven ordered a large particle board, 115 cm high by 265 cm wide, and built box-like shapes from plain and corrugated cardboard somewhat lower around the edges and higher in the center to form a curved shape to optically “counter” the weight of the ceiling – as Schoonhoven explained in his letter of November 1958. He had the young Jan Henderikse cover all the shapes with pieces of newspaper, today still visible on the edges of the forms and on the reverse. A white ground layer was then applied, followed by bright colors in “lacquer paint”: a combination of red with drips and splashes in black, grey, red ochre, white, and light violet. Brushstrokes, poured paint, and wet-on-wet dripping layers of thick paint are visible (Figure 7). The cardboard used for the relief was packing material from a local audio store, and the commercial house paint was purchased from a nearby paint company, where occasionally leftovers were available.

Henderikse emphasized that in order to avoid any specific painterly effect, the work was produced in a flat horizontal position, as can be seen from the direction of the paint drips, which run into the deeper parts and holes. Later installed high on the wall close to the ceiling for 23 years, it was taken down during the redecoration of the post office in 1981. When it was reinstalled, it was hung on a different wall and much lower, where, according to Aad in ‘t Veld, it was within reach of the employees and the public and “used” to stack stamp booklets and as a pin-board for notes. Sometime after 1990, when it was finally removed from the post office, In ‘t Veld managed to save it from destruction and restored the heavily damaged artwork, repairing some 184 areas. The recent surface cleaning revealed the colorful action painting technique that Schoonhoven used (Figure 8). The relief is now on permanent display as part of the Rijksmuseum’s 20th-century collection.
CONCLUSION

The positive results of the conservation treatments on Schoonhoven’s large colored 1958 Post-Office relief and the white Dish relief from 1963 help clarify how the original artworks must have looked. Their appearance is also in keeping with the outcome of the survey of Schoonhoven’s reliefs in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Both the treatment and the survey provide further insight into Schoonhoven’s artistic development when making the “Informal” colorful artworks and the famous white Nul reliefs.

The interviews with Henk Peeters, Jan Henderikse, and Aad in ‘t Veld have been crucial in clarifying Schoonhoven’s step-by-step decisions while making the reliefs, thus providing indispensable information for their conservation. The personal stories of their lifelong relationships with Schoonhoven testify to what was said, when it was said, and what was really meant, and reveal how certain statements can be interpreted, providing both valuable insight into the art scene during the Dutch Nul Group period and on how the Zero movement manifested itself.

Schoonhoven’s frequently quoted comments “to just overpaint” the reliefs are placed in their original context and provide a better understanding of Schoonhoven’s artistic preference for a bright white surface where light can freely play with the visual experience of a relief unhindered by the effects of yellowing, dirt, or “patina.” The confirmation that both Schoonhoven and also In ‘t Veld always used good-quality house paint, for the enamel (lacquer) on the early informal reliefs, and later well-bound synthetic house paint of an “outdoor” quality allows for surface cleaning treatments. This makes it possible for conservators to clean/treat the artworks, rather than to literally follow Schoonhoven’s advice to overpaint them, or, at the other extreme, to do nothing. The artist’s intention that the reliefs are to be experienced as monochrome, white, and sculptural volumes rather than as painterly surfaces encourages the conservator to take the extra step: to treat them rather than take a non-interventionist minimalistic approach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1 Conservation treatments were performed by Lydia Beerkens.
2 In Wesseling (1989, 7, 36 and 53).
3 According to his assistant Aad in ‘t Veld, “The white paint is latex. Always the same vinyl latex or acrylic latex, mostly vinyl, Super Flexa – which is manufactured by AKZO Coatings Holland” (Scheidemann 199, 242–6).
4 Interview with Schoonhoven by Diana Stijger(Tegenbosch 1989, 267–75).
5 Film documentary: Jan Schoonhoven, beambte 18977, by Sherman de Jesus, Memphis Film, 2005 (53 minutes).
MODERN MATERIALS AND CONTEMPORARY ART
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7 Famous photograph from the early 1970s showing 14 new reliefs in the studio of In ’t Veld (Wesseling 1990, 71, fig. 59; Melissen 2015, 122).
8 Filmed interview: Lydia Beerkens with In ’t Veld, Delft, October 17, 2015; camera: Yannic Heesakkers.
9 Statements by the assistant In ’t Veld in a film documentary: Jan Schoonhoven, beambte 18977, by Sherman de Jesus, 2005.
10 Idem, see note 8.
12 Jan Schoonhoven, Dish relief (1963), 113 × 85 × 14 cm, Rijksmuseum collection, Amsterdam, former collection of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE).
13 The treatment was performed for the RCE in 2009 by Lydia Beerkens.
14 The colored Post-Office relief (1958) (115 × 265 × c. 20 cm); Jan J. Schoonhoven, paint on paper, cardboard, particle wood, wooden framework on reverse.
16 See note 15, statement by Henderikse.
17 Idem, statement by Henderikse.
18 Interview with In ’t Veld, see note 8.

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WESSELING, J. 1989. Alles was mooi, een geschiedenis van de Nul-Beweging. Amsterdam: Nieuw Vennep.