Public access description
The Zig-Zag chair was designed in 1934 by the architect and furniture designer Gerrit Rietveld. Its deceptively simple Z-form arose from his desire to create a chair from a single piece of material. When this proved impossible in various materials, he resorted to the unorthodox method of bolting together planks of hardwood to give the impression of a continuous form. This was far from traditional furniture construction.

The chair is made from four planks of wood, mitred at the joins (except where the seat meets the back) and then bolted together through holes drilled into the planks. Reinforcing blocks were placed at each end of the diagonal plank that rises from the base to support the seat. The seat was dovetailed and glued to the back. The drill-holes and grain of the wood provide the only decoration to this chair, whose silhouette typified the uncompromising nature of Modernist furniture of the inter-War period.

This version of the chair was made in 1970 by Gerard A. van der Groenekan, who had worked as Rietveld's workshop assistant for many years, and after Rietveld's death continued making Rietveld designs.

Descriptive line
Chair, beechwood, designed by Gerrit Rietveld, made by G. van der Groenekan in 1970 to original designs.

Physical description
Chair made in four pieces of solid beech in a natural wood finish. The Z form has no legs, and stands on the plane of the lower part of the Z. The joints are at the front and back of the seat and foot. They are strengthened with eight bolts along the front of the seat and the back of the foot. The acute single joints are made by bevelling the edges of the wood so that the surfaces meet in a line. A block of wood, triangular in cross section, is glued into the angle and the bolts pass through diagonally. The back rest of the chair is attached to the seat by a dovetail joint, reinforced by two bolts running through both seat and back. There is a narrow rectangular cutout in the middle top of the back for lifting. (The back rest has two small circular holes cut out at bottom left and right and the bolt passes down through the thickness of the wood.) Originally Rietveld intended the chair to be made from one piece of material, but was unable to execute it. It was then designed to be built in two ways, in soft wood, using the method described above, and in hard wood using a conventional dovetail, with glued joints, without bolts in the seat and back. See Theodore M. Brown, The Work of Gerrit Rietveld, Architect Utrecht 1958.

Dimensions
Height: 74 cm, Width: 37.5 cm, Depth: 45 cm

Museum number
CIRC.368-1970

Object history note
Purchased new by the Museum in 1970 for 115 francs

Object sampling carried out by Jo Darrah, V&A Science; drawer/slide reference 6/56.


Description of V&A object from Hollis, R. 1970. Modern Chairs:1918-1970. The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London: ‘When the chair is made of hardwood a conventional dovetail, glued joint is used successfully; when the wood is soft, a dovetail joint is aided by four bolts running in both the back and the seat. Conceived originally as being made from one piece of material, Rietveld was unable to execute it thus. Psychologically the chair is a strange form. It appears to be uncomfortable and, worse, in imminent danger of collapsing. It does not collapse however, and is reasonably comfortable. One of its major physical advantages is the fact that there are no legs to obstruct the sitter’s feet; children find the chairs to be wonderful toys; by tipping them over they are able to enclose a variety of spaces. He designed the zig-zag so that it would remove a minimum of space from a volume of the room. In a chair supported by conventional legs, the legs define
a rectangular volume which is psychologically removed from that of the room. In the zig-zag chair, however, this is not true. Thus the chair does not impose itself upon the volume of its surroundings; rather it modestly blends into its background.' Theodore M. Brown in The Work of G. Rietveld Architect, Utrecht, 1958

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O142934/zig-zag-chair-rietveld-gerrit-thomas/