**Léger, Fernand (1881-1955)**

Fernand Léger incorporated the imagery of contemporary everyday life into an extensive *oeuvre,* creating a modernist celebration of work and leisure in an accessible, easily recognisable style. Active for half a century, he is known primarily for his paintings, but was also a sculptor, wrote on a wide range of artistic subjects and collaborated on a number of important projects with composers, filmmakers, and other artists. Although Léger remained true to his roots in the French countryside, he embraced the evolving urban world of industry, transportation and advertising, painting in solid, dramatic colours and mimicking the streamlined appearance of mass-produced objects. Léger worked for what he believed to be the interests of working men and women in both art and politics, although his depictions of human figures are strikingly impersonal. His vision of a world untroubled by doubt and turmoil is appealing, but it has struck some as simplistic. Thanks to Léger’s straightforward style and seemingly banal subject matter, his works are seen as important forerunners of pop art.

Born the son of a cattle merchant in Argentan, Normandy, in 1881, Léger was apprenticed to an architect in 1897 and began work in Paris as an architectural draughtsman in 1900. He entered the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs in 1903 and within a few years had become active in avant-garde circles. Although his earliest paintings reflect impressionist and fauvist influences, a memorial exhibition of the works of Paul Cézanne at the 1907 Salon d’Automne in Paris proved decisive in awakening his interest in the two-dimensional depiction of volume and space. By 1909, Léger had begun painting in his own version of cubism; one of his paintings was shown at the 1911 Salon d’Automne and the famous 1913 Armory Show in New York City. However, his experiences as a recruit on the Western Front during World War I, which awakened a fascination with machinery and a sense of identification with ordinary people, resulted in a change of course. He began painting simpler compositions in bolder colours, and over the next few years produced some of his most important works.

Léger’s newly-forged style is on full display in the large, semi-abstract painting *La ville (The City)* of 1919, in which aspects of bustling urban life - scaffolding, billboards, traffic signals, telephone poles, and so on - are thrown together in a kaleidoscopic collage now regarded as an icon of moderism. Abstraction remained attractive to Léger throughout his life, as did architecture. Coupled with his friendship with French artist and architect Le Corbusier, these concerns led to a series of works in the 1920s and early 1930s in the more ordered style of purism.

Extending his range beyond painting, Léger designed African-inspired sets and costumes for the 1923 ballet *La création du monde* by French composer Darius Milhaud. Shortly afterward, the works of American actor and director Charles “Charlie” Chaplin inspired him to make *Ballet mécanique.* This revolutionary short film, first shown in 1924, was created with the help of two more Americans: director Dudley Murphy and artist and photographer Man Ray. The film featured a rapidly changing sequence of still and moving images of human body parts, machinery and abstract designs. (A musical work with the same title by American composer George Antheil is essentially an independent work.) That same year Léger, with like-minded French artist Amédée Ozenfant, established the Académie de l’Art Moderne.

Hoping to make his art accessible to ordinary viewers, Léger adopted a more realistic style in the 1930s, concentrating on human figures. With the approach of German troops to Paris in 1940, he and his family relocated to the United States, where the optimism of the country’s people and the dynamism of its landscape and architecture inspired some of his most carefree works. After his return to France in 1946, Léger experimented with a variety of media, including mosaics and stained glass windows. Produced in the early 1950s, during the last few years of his life, his vigorous paintings of *constructeurs* (builders) constitute what is probably his most famous series.

References and further reading:

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Image suggestions:

Fernand Léger, *La ville,* 1919. Oil on canvas, 231.1 x 298.4 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Fernand Léger, *Nu sur fond rouge,* 1927. Oil on canvas, 130.1 x 81.4 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Fernand Léger, *Composition aux trois figures,* 1932. Oil on canvas, 182 x 230 cm. Musée National d’Art Moderne–Centre de Creation Industrielle, Centre George Pompidou, Paris.

Fernand Léger, *Les constructeurs, etat definitif*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 300 x 288 cm. Musée National Fernand Léger, Biot.