

LESSON TWO: Rise of the Modern World



IMAGE FOUR: Robert Delaunay. French, 1885–1941. *The Tower*. 1911 (inscribed 1910). Ink and pencil on paper, 21¼ x 19¼" (53.9 x 48.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund



IMAGE FIVE: Roger de La Fresnaye. French, 1885–1925. *The Conquest of the Air*. 1913. Oil on canvas, 7' 8⅞" x 6' 5" (235.9 x 195.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund

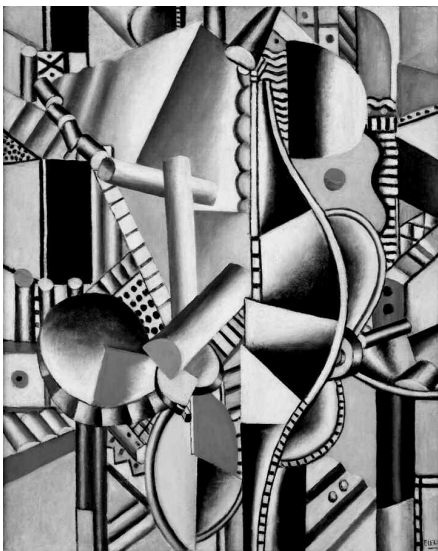


IMAGE SIX: Fernand Léger. French, 1881–1955. *Propellers*. 1918. Oil on canvas, 31⅞ x 25¼" (80.9 x 65.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

INTRODUCTION

The early-twentieth century was marked by great changes in history and technology. Artists were deeply affected by the many innovations around them and made these innovations the subjects of many of their artworks; many artists continued to explore Cubism and other new forms of representation.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider the ways in which the contemporary world and events affect artists, and how artists respond to and record these effects.
- Students will investigate how artists use symbols to convey meaning.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Discuss the idea of technological innovation with your students. Have them compile a list of all the technological innovations used today, including cell phones, digital clocks, calculators, MP3 players, and video games. Ask them what the technological predecessors of these innovations were and what they think will come next. Engage students in a discussion of how their lives are different because of these innovations.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Have your students look at *The Tower*, a drawing by Robert Delaunay that depicts the Eiffel Tower.

The Eiffel Tower was designed for the 1889 World's Fair in Paris by French engineer Gustave Eiffel. At the time it was built, the tower was the tallest structure in the world and gave Parisians a view of their city they had never seen before.

- Ask your students to imagine surveying the city from the top of the brand-new Eiffel Tower. Ask them to consider how that experience might affect the way Parisians in the late-nineteenth century felt about their city and about the tower itself.
- Ask your students to look carefully at Delaunay's drawing. Discuss the lines and shapes they see, and have them compare the buildings on the edges of the drawing to the Eiffel Tower in the center. Ask students how they would describe Delaunay's treatment of space. Ask them if they find anything surprising in the way he has represented the buildings.
- Give students time to look at *The Conquest of the Air*, but do not give them any information about the work. Divide them into small groups or partners and have them develop a narrative based on what they see the painting. Ask them to create their own titles for the work, and have them share their ideas with the class.
- Tell your students the painting's title and discuss what it could mean. Ask them what they see in the painting that supports the title.

The work's title refers to the era's advances in aviation. La Fresnaye was a French artist who took great pride in France's contribution to aviation history, including the 1783 invention of the hot-air balloon by the brothers Joseph Michel Montgolfier and Jacques Étienne Montgolfier. In 1908 American aviator Wilbur Wright broke records for distance, duration, and altitude with a fifty-six mile flight from Le Mans, France, where La Fresnaye was born, to Paris. A year later, French aviator Louis Blériot made the first complete flight across the English Channel.

- **Ask your students how La Fresnaye glorifies French aviation in his painting. Discuss how the artist arranges the picture and uses symbols to tell the story of French aviation history.**

The two men in the painting are most likely the artist and his brother Henri, who was the director of an important aircraft-manufacturing plant. The French flag and balloon highlight French aviation accomplishments, and the sailboat could indicate human mastery over wind and air.

- **Turn your students' attention to *Propellers*, and ask them what they think is going on in the painting.**

Fernand Léger was another artist who was fascinated with modern life, especially with the mechanical world and particularly with the propellers that were the inspiration for and title of this work. He was greatly influenced by his experiences as a soldier during World War I (1914–18), of which he wrote, “I discovered the meaning of machines through artillery and through the engines of war. The breech-block of a 75mm cannon lying out in the sun did more for my development as a painter than have all the museums in the world. There I was really able to grasp the object.”³

To Léger and other artists, the propeller, an attractive object that embodied movement, was the perfect symbol of the modern mechanical world. The propeller facilitated combat in World War I and reflected the early-twentieth-century obsession with the development of rapid land, sea, and air transportation.

- **Léger wrote, “Aeroplane propellers . . . strike everyone as being objects of beauty, and they are very close to certain modern sculptures.”⁴ Ask your students if they think mechanical objects can be beautiful. Extend the debate to such items as a clock mechanism, a bridge, and a can opener.**
- **Have your students compare *Propellers* with *The Conquest of the Air*. Encourage them to think about how each artist glorifies his subject.**

ACTIVITIES

Have your students return to the list of technological innovations they assembled earlier and consider the different attributes of each. For each innovation, have them design a symbol that captures its unique and powerful qualities.

Have students interview an older friend or family member about innovations that had an impact on their lives, and then compare their responses with your own experiences. As a class, create a list of technological advances in order of importance, debating when necessary.

3. Christoph Asendorf, “The Propeller and the Avant-Garde: Léger, Duchamp, Brancusi,” in *Fernand Léger, 1911–1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life*, ed. Dorothy Kosinski, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1994), 206.

4. Carolyn Lanchner et al., *Fernand Léger*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 176.