

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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local general

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FIRST COMPREHENSIVE LEGER SHOW AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first comprehensive showing in America of work by the great French artist and designer Fernand Léger (born 1881), will be on view in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from October 21 through January 3.

The exhibition traces the development of Léger, "the folk artist of our scientific and mechanistic age," from his first paintings in 1905 to his most recent major canvas in 1950. Twelve major easel paintings of heroic size, 3 abstract mural compositions and a stained glass window dominate the exhibition which contains over 90 works including watercolors, drawings, a tapestry and a recent ceramic sculpture. The exhibition was organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in collaboration with the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition catalog was written by Katherine Kuh, Curator of Modern Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago who also selected the exhibition.

In her introduction, Mrs. Kuh says:

No artist has ever grown out of his times more completely than Fernand Léger. He is unquestionably one of the great protagonists of twentieth century life, a man so steeped in the world around him that his art cannot be separated from contemporary vision. In a sense he is the folk artist of our scientific and mechanistic age but he does far more than report and reflect; he makes painting an integral part of the life it comes from. Though he is indebted, as are all artists, to the past, his true source of material is drawn from his immediate surroundings. ...he is more than influenced by the machine age; he is immersed in it. Motion pictures, mass production, modern gadgets, stream-lined engines, stainless steel, jazz music, burlesque shows and hand painted neckties - these he understands and incorporates into his work.

Léger, writer, lecturer and art teacher, has frequently commented on his own art and Mrs. Kuh's catalog contains many illuminating quotations, including one of his most famous remarks, "I have used the machine as others have used the nude or still life." He has also explained the familiar robot-like depersonalized figures which appear in so many of his pictures. "For me," Léger has said, "the human figure, the human body has no more importance than keys or bicycles.... These are for me objects of plastic value to be used as I wish.... One may consider the human figure not for its sentimental value but only for its plastic value. That is why in the evolution of my work since 1905 until now the human figure has remained purposely inexpressive."

In bold colors and geometrical forms Léger has painted the everyday objects of our time, always following his dictum that "a painter should not try to reproduce a beautiful thing, but should make the painting itself a beautiful thing."

Among the outstanding paintings in the exhibition, Women in Blue (1912), lent to the exhibition from Switzerland, and considered by Léger as one of his greatest canvases, marks his first attempt "to liberate pure color in space," a problem to which he has applied himself intermitently ever since.

The famous Card Players of 1917, lent to the exhibition from Holland, was finished by Léger while recovering from having been gassed during World War I. This painting exemplifies his first interest in the machine, a fascination which he says probably resulted from his daily contact with machines during his war service and which he has continued throughout his career.

After the war he returned to his experiments in color. Later discussing this he recalls, "At that time (1918) we younger men were in violent reaction from Impressionism. And a return to local color, broader areas of unbroken color and larger forms was the character this revolt took in my paintings." Of one of the major pictures of this period in the exhibition he says, "In 1919, in The City, pure color incorporated into a geometric design was realized to the maximum; it could have been static or dynamic -- the important thing was to have isolated color which had a plastic activity of its own, without being bound to an object." In this painting, Mrs. Kuh notes in her catalog, by means of fragmented objects associated with a metropolis, Léger depicts the brilliance, the excitement and the unbounded vitality of a brightly lighted city. Instead of breaking up color prismatically like the Impressionists he breaks up visual continuity, again relying on a kaleidoscopic process.

Léger's pictures of the early 20s show a new concern with static composition, and are classic in their complex organization. The Mechanic, Three Women, Woman with Book and The Readers, in the exhibition, reflect his attitude toward the human figure as subject matter and machine pictures from this period such as Mechanical Elements and The Great Tug, his preoccupation with everyday objects of our time.

In 1924 Léger made his first film, Ballet Mécanique, the first abstract film to use regular cinema techniques. The influence of the film closeup and montage techniques can be seen in such paintings as The Siphon, a closeup of ordinary objects, and in The Compote and The Mirror.

The three murals in the exhibition were done in 1924, 1936 and 1941. Léger, trained as an architect, has always been interested in this form of painting. His first mural painting was executed for Le Corbusier's pavillion at the Arts Décoratifs Exhibition in Paris in 1925. The three examples in the exhibition are pure abstractions. Léger has explained this by saying: "For myself I cannot see nowadays any justification for murals setting forth the major religious, military or

social issue; these can be so adequately dealt with by books, the cinema and radio."

The exhibition includes many of the paintings Léger made in the United States where he lived for six years during the last war, and where he had visited several times during the 30s. In America Léger felt "confronted with a power in movement, with force in reserve without end. An unbelievable vitality -- a perpetual movement." During his first two years here much of his time was devoted to the Divers series, inspired by the beaches of Marseilles. Many of these paintings, such as Divers on Yellow Background, are large and characterized by strong color and the interweaving of heavy bodies moving in space without any contact with the ground.

Léger spent his summers at Rousses Point, in New York, and in New Hampshire, where he used an abandoned farm as the basis for such paintings in the exhibition as The Yellow Root. "I painted a group of American landscapes being inspired by the contrast presented by an abandoned machine -- become old scrap iron -- and the vegetation which devours it," he said.

In Woman with Butterflies, also painted during his American visit, Léger's experiments with color, started in The Woman in Blue (1912) and continued in The City (1919) are carried further. Now color determines the composition and flashes over boundary lines. Patches of kinetic color set up an active counterpoint between the central human figure and the circulating butterflies and birds.

If his landscapes have a new dramatic intensity, his figure paintings of this American period, such as The Three Musicians and The Great Julie, both in the exhibition, are warmer and less depersonalized than before. Summing up his American work at the end of his stay, Léger said, "...I do feel I have worked with greater intensity and achieved more expression than in my previous work."

Leisure, lent to the exhibition from Paris, although started in America was finished in 1949, three years after Léger had returned to France. The people, bicycles, birds and flowers seem on first view closely related to paintings done in the United States, but the picture's classicism and restraint is typical of the artist's work prior to his American period.

Léger's most recent paintings grow out of European reconstruction after the war. Exhilarated by the hammering, welding and riveting which surrounded him, he responded with a group of drawings, water colors and paintings which he called The Builders. The largest and the definitive painting of the group, finished in 1950, has been lent by the artist to the exhibition.

Since the war Léger has had several commissions which have extended the range of his art beyond painting: in 1949 a mosaic facade for the church at Assy, and in 1951 stained glass windows for the Church of the Sacred Heart at Audincourt. A rep-

lica of one of these windows, which in itself measures six by nine feet, is installed in the last gallery of the exhibition. In the handblown glass, over an inch thick, Léger's color takes on a new dimension. A recent tapestry and a ceramic sculpture of 1951, derived from a mural panel of 1941, represent his current interest in the collaboration of the three major art forms -- architecture, painting and sculpture.

The exhibition in New York was installed by Margaret Miller, Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.

Two publications accompany this exhibition:

Léger, by Katherine Kuh. 90pp. 57 bl. & wh. plates, 2 color plates.
Biblio. Catalog. paper. \$1.50

Léger, by Katherine Kuh. 122 pp 71 bl. & wh. plates, 4 color plates.
University of Illinois Press. \$5.75

The first full-length book in English on Léger.

An illustrated lecture on Léger will be given at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on Wednesday, November 18 at 8:30 p.m. by James Johnson Sweeney, Director of the Guggenheim Museum. The lecture is under the sponsorship of the Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Admission \$1.00 and \$1.25 to members and non-members respectively.

NOTE: Photographs of the exhibition available on request from the Publicity Dept., Museum of Modern Art.