twenty-two paintings, drawings, gouaches and watercolors by Fernand Léger (1881-1955) will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art from November 16 through January 2 in the first of a series of shows drawn entirely from the Museum's own holdings. This ground floor exhibition was installed by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of Collections.

The purpose of the new series is to display the riches of the Museum Collection either in one man shows of work by important artists or in selections of paintings by groups or movements. Usually, due to limited gallery space, only a sampling of works by one artist or of one movement can be shown. Other exhibitions of this kind to follow include "Latin American Masters," "Derain, Dufy, van Dongen," "Pioneers of Geometrical Abstraction," "The American Scene Between the Wars," "Dada" and "Surrealism."

The Léger collection has been formed over the past 25 years by purchase, gift and exchange. Because of the extremely high market in recent years, the Museum's last two important Légers, Exit the Ballets Russes and the Umbrella and Bowler could be acquired only by the sale of three less important works by the same master.

The collection includes two capital works of unique importance, The Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner) of 1921 and the Three Musicians of 1944, which is not only one of Léger's masterpieces, but marks the beginning of the more realistic figure style which characterizes the work of his last years. Like the Three Musicians, The Divers II of 1941-42, the Red Decoration and Blue Decoration of 1941 and the Big Julie of 1945 were all done in New York during the war.

"The Museum's Léger collection is strong in most periods of the artists' work although not in paintings of the 1930s and the last ten years of his life in Paris. With the exception of the Léger Museum recently established at Blot in the South of France, the Museum's collection of Léger paintings is the most important in any public collection," according to Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Other painters especially well represented in the Museum of Modern Art include Matisse, to whom an entire gallery is temporarily devoted, Cézanne, Picasso, Klee, Miró, Orozco, Hopper, Levine, Shahn, Pollock and Mondrian, samplings of whose works are usually to be seen in the second floor galleries where a selection from the collections is always on view. The current crowded installation is called "A Bid for Space", and is presented as a demonstration during the 30th Anniversary Fund Drive.

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Exhibition: November 16 – December 16, 1961

CUBIST LIST

with notes by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Oil Paintings

Contrast of Forms. 1913. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 32". Philip L. Goodwin Collection.

The Ballets Russes. 1914. Oil on canvas, 53 3/4 x 39 1/2". Gift of Mrs. and Mr. Peter A. Rubel.

According to Leonid Massine, the previous owner of this picture, Léger himself gave it its title. Massine joined Diaghilev's troupe in 1913 and made his debut as a young dancer in Paris early in 1914.


There are several canvases and a number of watercolors painted by Léger as studies for the very large mural painting, The City 1919, now in the Philadelphia Museum.

Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner). 1921. Oil on canvas, 72 1/8 x 99". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

This painting is the greatest of a series of figure compositions painted partly as a reaction against the previous period of comparative abstraction represented by the propellers and the study for The City in the Museum Collection.

"I have thought in terms of monumental figures after The City and in reaction against the last painting. All my life I have been in conflict between the mural idea and the easel painting idea. After I painted The City I felt the urgent need to do an easel painting—the Three Women as a contrary force--; so, more or less unconsciously, after using elements taken out of modern life, I felt the need to try to work with subjects or objects which have been treated by painters of other times. I felt the tradition of classicism dominating my work...It is the classical line in my opinion to put the subject or the object inside, behind the picture expression. The romantic is just the contrary, the subject or object is first. I have lived in this uneasy conflict all my life and the Three Women is a composition in which the classical won." (Letter, somewhat edited, from the artist to A. H. Barr, Jr., November 20, 1943)

Still Life. 1924. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 23 5/8". Hillman Periodicals Fund.

This and the two larger still lifes, The Baluster of 1925 and the Umbrella and Bouler, 1926, represent a continuation in the mid-twenties of the classic spirit to be found in the Three Women of 1921. In 1921, Léger had visited Italy where he was much impressed by Roman and Byzantine mosaics.

The Baluster. 1925. Oil on canvas, 51 x 38 1/4". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

Umbrella and Bouler. 1926. Oil on canvas, 50 1/4 x 38 3/4". A. Conger Goodyear Fund.

Red Decoration. 1941. Oil on canvas, 70 x 48". Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Murphy.

This and the Blue Decoration of the same size and year were commissioned by Gerald Murphy for his New York apartment not long after Léger arrived in New York as a refugee.

Blue Decoration. 1941. Oil on canvas, 70 x 48". Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Murphy.

The Divers, II. 1941-42. Oil on canvas, 90 x 68". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

Léger painted several large compositions of divers in New York between 1941 and 1943. This is one of the two most important. Léger referred to this series in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney: "what has come out most notably, however, in the work I have done in America is in my opinion a new energy -- an increased movement within the composition -- in paintings where
the modelling was emphasized such as the Plongeurs series, as well as in the
flatter organizations such as the 1912 Divers, Acrobat and Dancers."
("Eleven Europeans in America", The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, 1946,
Vol. XIII, Nos. 4-5.)

Mechanical Fragment, 1913-14. Oil on canvas board, 24 x 19 7/8". Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Donald H. Peters.

Three Musicians. 1914. Oil on canvas, 68 1/2 x 57 1/4". Mrs. Simon Guggenheim
Fund.

"The Three Musicians is perhaps something apart. It was based on a drawing
of 1925 which I had always hoped to expand into an oil, but only found the
opportunity after my arrival here. But even in this canvas, for all its
static character, there is strength which is new. It would have been less
tense and colder had it been done in France. And as a matter of fact I cannot
imagine that my series of 1912 of moving figures would ever have been possible
there." (Interview with James Johnson Sweeney in "Eleven Europeans in America",

La Grande Julie. 1945. Oil on canvas, 44 x 50 1/8". Acquired through the Lillie P.
Miss Bequest.

"For me," Léger once said "the contrast in the United States between the
mechanical and the natural is one of great anti-melodic intensity. But bad
taste is also one of the valuable raw materials for the country. Bad taste,
strong colors -- it is all here for the painter to organize and get the full
use of its power. Girls in sweaters with brilliant colored skin; girls in
shorts dressed more like acrobats in a circus than one would ever come across on
a Paris street. If I had only seen girls dressed in 'good taste' here I
would never have painted my Cyclist series, of which La Grande Julie in the
Museum was the culmination.

"I always hate to see 'good taste' come to the people. For painters like me
who are robust it is very dangerous to frequent the beau monde, ballets and
the like. French 'taste' is a pitfall for the creative artist...In Paris the
'Bassin de Paris' represents 'taste': the same sort of taste has taken the
vitality out of the musical shows in New York. Even burlesque shows are in­
fected by 'good taste'. Still there is no need yet to worry. One only has
to study the hand-painted ties on Broadway -- a locomotive and four pigeons
on a violet and black ground, or a buxom nude on a saffron ground -- to realize
there is still a vigorous survival." ("Eleven Europeans in America", The

Landscape with Yellow Hat. 1952. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 28 7/8". Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. David M. Sollinger.

Drawings and Works in Watercolor and Gouache

Sleeping Nude, c. 1907-08. Pen and Ink on grey paper, 12 1/4 x 9 3/16". Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Victor Thaw.

Verdun: The Trench Diggers. 1916. Watercolor, 14 1/8 x 10 3/8". Frank Crownin­
shold Fund.

Léger served three years in the French Artillery in various positions both
behind the front and in the trenches.

Skating Rink: design for costume. 1921. Watercolor, 13 3/8 x 9 1/2". W. Alton
Jones Foundation Fund.

Between 1921 and 1923 Léger designed the settings and costumes for two pro­
ductions for the Ballets Suédois, produced in Paris by Rolf de Maré under the
general direction of the Swedish dancer, Jean Borlin. Léger himself wrote:
"The Ballets Suédois show that an audacious spectacle beyond classic convention
could be accepted by the public. It had to be risked. Rolf de Maré understood
this and went the farthest in the adventure. He always accepted the newest
projects without even trying to restrain them...(In Skating Rink) I attempted
to obtain the greatest scenic intensity only by using pure tones applied
flatly."

The first of these was Skating Rink, first performed in Paris January 20, 1922.

(More)

The Creation of the world: Design for Setting. 1922. Pencil, 8 x 10 3/8". Gift of John Pratt.


Compass and Paint Tubes. 1926. Gouache, 10 1/2 x 14 1/4". Gift of Edward M. M. Warburg.

On view in the exhibition, 100 Modern Drawings: A Selection from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art.

Foot and Hands (left) Composition (right). 1933. Pen and ink, each 12 3/4 x 9 3/4". Purchase.