

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Fernand Léger's long career spanned over fifty years. Though he built his reputation on being a Cubist, his styles varied considerably decade to decade, ranging from figuration to complete abstraction. Léger worked in a wide range of mediums including paint, ceramic, large-scale murals, film, theater and dance sets, glass, print, and in book arts. While his styles varied, overall, he was consistently graphic, favoring primary colors, depicting humans or abstract shapes in action to convey the movement of daily life.

Key Ideas

- Léger understood the Cubist notion of freeing the painter from a responsibility to realism, yet he was more interested in materialism than other Cubists, such as Braque and Picasso.
- As a Cubist, Léger was concerned with replacing his subject matter with colors and shapes rather than converging or diverging planes and forms. His paintings were closer to pure abstraction than many of his Cubist contemporaries.
- Léger sought to express the noise, dynamism and speed of new technology and machinery, working through several themes, or cycles, of imagery depicting humans in motion.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Fernand Léger was born in rural France and raised by his family to take up a valuable trade, like his father who was a cattle dealer. While Léger was not encouraged to become an artist, when he showed talent for drawing, he was encouraged. Léger was sent to architecture school and later to the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs, Academie Julian and the

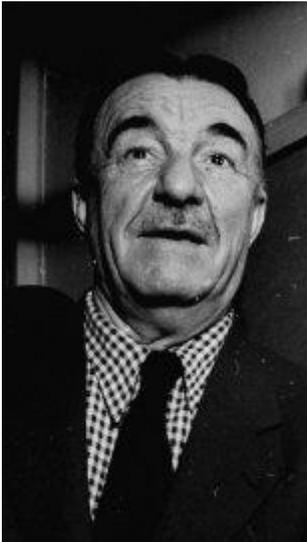
Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He studied a variety of trades within the arts, working for architects and as a photograph re-toucher. His paintings from 1905 until 1907 were impressionistic until he discovered Cézanne. At that point, he moved into an artist colony and devoted himself to the art practice that became known as **Cubism**.

Early Training

By 1909, Léger had painted early Cubist works such as *Le Comptoir sur la Table*. Though he had casually met Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Douanier Rousseau, his closest friends were the writers Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars. At the 1911 *Salon des Independents*, Léger exhibited paintings that led to his recognition as one of the major Cubist painters. His works differed from the works of others in that he employed primary colors rather than monochrome palettes. His geometric systems seemed to form patterns and his shapes floated in space rather than converging or dissipating as in paintings by other Cubists. His artistic career was altered drastically when he was recruited to the army in 1914, returning with a head injury after being gassed at Verdun in 1916. This experience fueled Léger's interest in social issues and justice, and his Cubist paintings began to deal with more socially conscious subject matter.

Mature Period

Léger continued to exhibit paintings on canvas after he returned from war, but he branched out into other methods of creative expression. He illustrated books, made sets and costumes for ballet and theater performances and even made the film, *Ballet Mechanique*, in 1924. It was also this year that he founded a school for modern art. Léger studied form broken down into geometric parts at this time. He founded what is now called Tubism, in which human body parts and architectural elements are rendered with three-dimensional shading to look like voluminous tubes and cylinders.



Léger aligned himself closely with Le Corbusier and other Modernists who were interested in machinery and depicting speed and motion. These personal alliances led to his joining the Communist Party. His subject matter during the 1920s and 1930s reflected an interest in social equality. During this period, Léger began several series of paintings that have been called "cycles," which show different groups of people in action. These

cycles are known as the *Country Outings*, *Constructors*, *Cyclists*, and *Divers*. While the artist was focused on depicting technology and machinery, more important were the characters populating his paintings.

Late Years and Death

The degrees of recognizable figuration in Léger's artwork varied greatly. Some paintings, like those in series', portrayed people working, exercising, or interacting as communities. These paintings, like *The Constructors*, look borderline cartoonish. This was because Léger was preoccupied with comparing humans to machines and he shaded human forms as if they were metallic. In many of Léger's paintings, humans appear robotic, making possible statements about his Communist ideals rather than on form. Some paintings allowed abstract shapes to interact as characters in themselves. In all, his works formally played with line and color, and in later paintings the two become increasingly distinct, separate and overlapping to create patterns resulting in an animated effect.

Léger had visited America in several times before relocating to New York to escape World War II. Between 1940-45 Léger influenced many New York School painters. He administered a lecture series at Yale called, "Color in Architecture," which many artists attended. Léger became increasingly interested in large-scale public art, but was not able to realize this interest until the 1950s. He had success creating mosaics, stained glass windows, and murals around Europe that were formal triumphs rather than expressions of psychological portent. Fernand Léger died at his home in Gif-sur-Yvette, France in 1955.

Legacy

Léger's Tubist style was influential on many abstract painters and sculptors, like Henry Moore. His legacy may lie more in his attempt to make art that "everyone can understand," one of the artist's favorite expressions. His bold use of color in combination with the idea of art for the masses inspired many Pop artists. His belief that art unifies people may have influenced community-based art as activism movements, such as Fluxus. Léger's work is timeless as it captures the essence of modern life, and yet he also used painting as an analytical means of slowing down a fast-paced society, which is still a preoccupation amongst many artists today.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Fernand Léger's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Henri Matisse</p>	 <p>Piet Mondrian</p>	 <p>Impressionism</p>
 <p>Wassily</p>	 <p>Le Corbusier</p>	

<p>Kandinsky</p>  <p>Marc Chagall</p>  <p>Chaim Soutine</p>	 <p>Guillaume Apollinaire</p>  <p>Robert Delaunay</p>	 <p>Post-Impressionism</p>  <p>Futurism</p>  <p>Fauvism</p>
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INFLUENCES ON ARTIST



Fernand Léger
 Years Worked: 1905 – 1955

INFLUENCED BY ARTIST

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Hans Arp</p>  <p>Roy Lichtenstein</p>	 <p>Alvar Aalto</p>  <p>Paul Eluard</p>	 <p>Mexican Muralists</p>  <p>Social Realism</p>

 <p>James Rosenquist</p>	 <p>Paul Rosenberg</p>	 <p>Neo-Plasticism</p>
 <p>Ellsworth Kelly</p>	 <p>Hans Richter</p>	 <p>Constructivism</p>
 <p>Frank Stella</p>		 <p>Pop Art</p>

Quotes

"Nationalism in art is superficial. You have to take the beautiful where you find it, without worrying about the signature."

Major Works:



Title: *Contrast of Forms*

Description: *Contrast of Forms* is an early Cubist work, in which Léger began to shade his geometric forms for three-dimensional effect. While Picasso and Braque were fixated on monochrome palettes, Léger employed red and blue, using white to mark the spaces between colors, giving his paintings extra volume. This painting exemplifies Léger's uniquely Cubist style, which expresses movement and activity.

Year: 1913

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: MOMA, New York



Title: *The Card Players*

Description: In *The Card Players*, Léger began rendering forms distinctively highlighted to depict shadow. Although this painting is Cubist, expressing multiple views from one angle, it is clearly moving in a new direction. Léger was above all interested in "mechanical architecture," and attempting to apply it to the human form. He was highly skilled at showing movement and achieves this within *The Card Players* as it almost appears as a film sequence.

Year: 1917

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection:



Title: *The City*

Description: *The City* demonstrates Léger's shift away from figuration in favor of employing abstract shapes to symbolize an urban landscape. Many colors collide as volumes and flat shapes both recede and move forward in space, overlapping into a collage that seeks to make the city beautiful. Léger believed that any subject matter that rendered action could suit his formal purposes. Léger always created dynamic canvases as he moved back and forth between depicting human figures and technological scenes.

Year: 1919

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Philadelphia Museum of Art



Title: *La Joconde aux Cles (Mona Lisa with Keys)*

Description: Léger made sixty paintings studying keys and eyes in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Keys, while metal and mechanical, open opportunities just as looking into one's eyes can. This painting functions as a collage, although all the elements are painted in a flat manner. *Mona Lisa with Keys*, riffing on Duchamp's treatment of Da Vinci's Renaissance portrait, *LHOOQ*, was inspired by a *Mona Lisa* postcard and Léger's questions about what imagery can be paired with a key ring pictorially, to create juxtaposing shapes.

Year: 1930

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Musee National Fernand Léger - Biot, France



Title: *Les Grand Plongeurs Noirs (The Big Black Divers)*

Description: *Les Grand Plongeurs Noirs (The Big Black Divers)*, one of his many paintings about divers, exemplifies Léger's increasingly patterned compositions in the tradition of Matisse. The bodies are woven together like textile, symbolizing a social network. Also, this painting includes outlines separate from color and blocks of color that are not outlined - a technique that marks Léger's later works.

Year: 1944

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Centre Georges Pompidou



Title: *The Constructors (Builders with Rope)*

Description: *The Constructors (Builders with Rope)* was made in homage to Jacques Louis-David and to the French working class. As a Communist, Léger was a great fan of architecture built by the people for the people. In this piece, rebars are painted in primary reds and yellows cut across a blue composition, while the figures that inhabit the painting are almost secondary. The figuration becomes a formal technique as much as line and color, while the humanist undertone of the subject matter is nearly eradicated by the stark formalism of bright color and line.

Year: 1950

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Collection Evelyn Sharp, New York