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The Museum of Modern Art

MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF FERNAND LÉGER OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN FEBRUARY

First Retrospective of Léger's Work to Be Shown in New York in More Than 40 Years

Exhibition Reveals the Richness and Diversity of Léger's Achievement and His Unique Contribution to the Art of this Century

Fernand Léger

February 15-May 12, 1998

The first major retrospective of the work of French master Fernand Léger (1881-1955) to be shown in New York in more than four decades opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 15, 1998. Comprising over 60 paintings and some 20 related drawings spanning the artist's entire career, this exhibition challenges stereotypical notions of Léger as a painter of circumscribed technique and reveals the true richness and diversity of his achievement as one of the century's greatest artists. Beginning with his first mature work of 1911 to his last paintings of construction workers done in the years just before his death, Léger confronted the burning aesthetic issues of his time with a unique directness and consistency, through a range of subjects from the industrial to the bucolic. The only major modern artist to choose modernity itself as his subject, Léger's unique ability to capture the epic quality of everyday experience has earned him recognition as the painter of the "heroism of modern life."

Organized for The Museum of Modern Art by Carolyn Lanchner, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, *Fernand Léger* is a collaboration between MoMA and the Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. The exhibition opened in Paris and traveled to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, before coming to The Museum of Modern Art, its final venue. MoMA's showing differs from those of the other two venues in its greater selectivity.

The series *Contrastes de formes* (Contrasts of forms) of 1913-14 exemplifies Léger's pictorial strategies and demonstrates his vigor in addressing a central issue of modernism: the debate between abstraction and figuration. The earliest, executed in 1913, are secured in history as the first wholly abstract paintings to emerge from Cubism; although devoid of recognizable imagery, these paintings have the curious effect of soliciting the viewer to find representational readings. Paradoxically, the paintings of the following year devoted to the traditional genres of still life, landscape, and the human form appear nearly abstract. This shifting relationship between realism and abstraction is largely generated by the artist's finesse in accommodating volumetric forms to a flattened surface. Although his methods were to change, the play between figuration and nonfiguration, planarity and depth announced in these paintings remained at the heart of his

constructive tactics during his entire career.

In addition to defining Léger's concerns with illusionism and abstraction most explicitly, the canvases of the *Contrastes de formes* with their rough grounds and passages of painterly bravura most obviously illustrate a romance with paint that never lost its zest. Contrary to critical and popular opinion which has seen the post-1914 Léger as a painter of hard, precisely drawn contours and of smooth slick surfaces that conceal the trace of the brush, the canvases themselves belie this impression. "Léger was a painter in love with paint and almost every canvas exhibits his enjoyment of it," writes Ms. Lanchner in the catalogue accompanying the MoMA retrospective.

For example, in one of Léger's masterpieces, *La Ville (The city)*, 1919, which incorporates billboards, bright colors, simple signs and geometric human forms, instances of deliberate pentimenti (pictorial elements visible beneath the artist's overpainting) are multiple -- perhaps most immediately observable in the over-painting surrounding what seems to be a fragment of scaffolding in the upper right. In a smaller painting from the same year *L'Homme à la roue (Man with wheel)*, scintillating color punctuated by small areas of shadowed hues is found with a thickly charged, roughly brushed yellow plane at the right. Léger had a sensualist's love of the world, of its tactility, light, and color; his pictures, as he never tired of saying, do not copy visible things, but exist as their physical equivalents in paint.

Léger's lifelong subject was the pulse and dynamism of contemporary life. "He believed that most people were caught in outworn prejudices that blinded them to the glories of the modern spectacle, and that his role was to enlist the power of art to reveal the beauty of the mechanized environment," writes Ms. Lanchner. As he increasingly felt the need for an art that would address the general public, he extended the formal language of modernism to such subjects as construction workers and popular recreation. The artist's last great masterpiece, *La Grande Parade, état définitif (The great parade, final state)*, 1954, shows circus performers moving in and out of free-floating arcs of green, red, and blue--derived from a theory of color inspired by the flashing lights of Broadway.

For Léger painting was open-ended, its competence as an expressive means without limits. More than any of his peers, he welcomed elements into his work from a wide range of the century's artistic movements from Fauvism to Social Realism, yet his work remained independent, indelibly his own. In 1954, at the end of his life, Léger declared, "My era was one of great contrasts, and I am the one who made the most of it. I am the witness of my time."

On view through May 12, 1998, this exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from an anonymous donor. Additional support is provided by the Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Inc., and the Estate of Mr. and Mrs. Edmund J. Kahn. An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Publication

Fernand Léger, edited by Carolyn Lanchner, with essays by Ms. Lanchner, Jodi Hauptman, and Matthew Affron and contributions by Beth Handler and Kristen Erickson. This publication is made possible by a generous grant from the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund. 304 pages, 67 full color, 150 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Clothbound \$60, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N.

Abrams, Inc., New York, and paperbound, \$29.95; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

Acoustiguide

Angelica Huston is the featured narrator on the 45-minute audiotour of the exhibition. She is accompanied by Glenn D. Lowry, Director, The Museum of Modern Art, and Carolyn Lanchner, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. Audiotours are \$4, members \$3.50.

Public Programs

The Museum presents two lectures in conjunction with the exhibition:

Tuesday, March 24, 1998, 6:30 p.m.

Léger, The Machine Aesthetic and "Primitivism" will be presented by Robert Herbert, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities, Emeritus, Mount Holyoke College.

Tuesday, April 14, 1998, 6:30 p.m.

Léger's Originality will be presented by John Golding, distinguished painter and eminent art historian.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets: \$8, members \$7, students and seniors \$5; available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, the public may call the Department of Education at 212/708-9781.

No. 2

[press office](#)

[menu](#)

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