



38 Fernand Léger

1881 – 1955 French

Peinture imaginaire

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1939 – 1952 and on verso signed, dated, inscribed *Paysage Imaginaire* on the canvas and on a label and stamped indistinctly 23 ½ x 36 ¼ in, 59.7 x 92.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie Louis Carré, Paris
 Svensk-Franska Konstgalleriet, Stockholm
 Mr. & Mrs. Soderlund, Geneva and Stockholm
 Sold sale of Sotheby's London, July 1, 1980, lot 77
 Sold sale of *Impressionist and Modern Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture, Part 1*, Sotheby's London, December 1, 1992, lot 38a
 Private Collection
 A Prominent European Private Collection

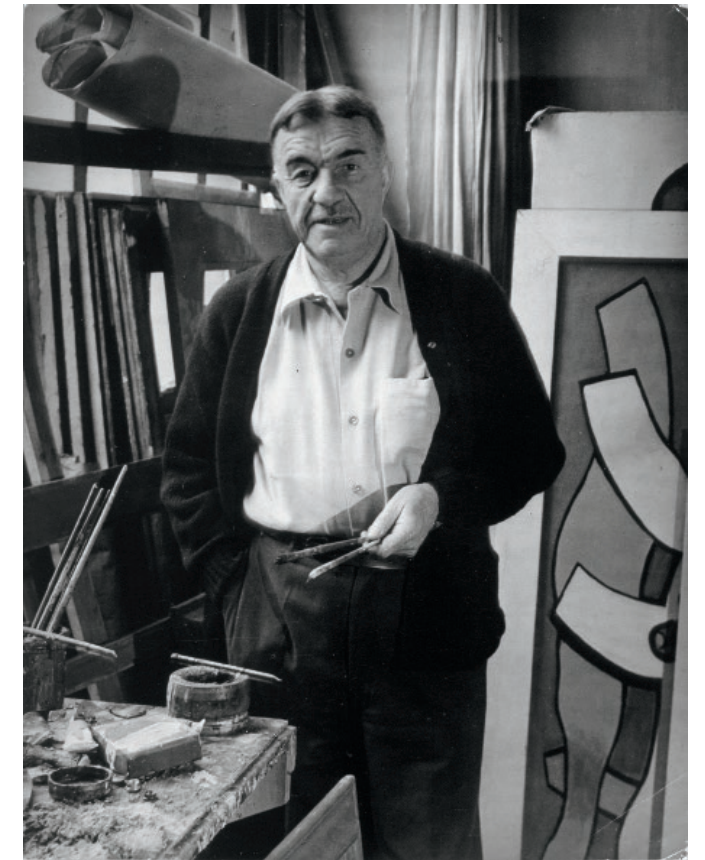
LITERATURE

Georges Bauquier, *Fernand Léger, Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint, Volume 6, 1938 – 1943, 1998*, reproduced page 134, catalogue #1062

JOSEPH FERNAND HENRI LÉGER was a French painter and designer, who settled in Paris in 1900. After training as an architectural draughtsman and for a period as a photographic retoucher, he worked in an Impressionist mode. However, he soon came under the spell of the Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne, whose paintings were shown at the *Salon d'Automne* in 1907. Léger was also influenced by Fauvism and Cubism, and he was one of the first artists to respond to the austere Cubist colour schemes, with *Woman Sewing* (1909 – 1910, collection of Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris). As he recounted: "If Apollinaire and Max Jacob had not come to see us, we would never have known what was going on in Montmartre. They told us to go to Kahnweiler's, and there sat fat Robert Delaunay and I saw what the Cubists were doing. Well, Delaunay, surprised to see the grey canvases, cried, 'But they paint with cobwebs, these guys!'"¹

In *The Cubist Painters* (1913), poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire recognized Léger "as one of the most gifted artists of his generation."² Because of his use of bold tubular shapes and his rough-hewn style, early paintings such as *Nudes in a Forest* (1909 – 1911, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo) were jokingly referred to as "Tubism." According to the Cubist's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Picasso told me, 'You see, this boy must have something new, since they don't even give him the same name as to us.'"³

In 1909, Léger was developing his Cubist cylindrical language among a coterie of avant-garde artists, including Alexander Archipenko, Robert Delaunay, Sonia Delaunay (née Terk) and Jacques Lipchitz, and the poets Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, who, in turn, acquainted Léger with the *Salon* Cubist painters Henri Le Fauconnier and Jean Metzinger. In November 1911, the satirical magazine *Fantasio*, spurred on by the scandal and bawdy mockery of Room 8 at the October *Salon d'Automne*, published

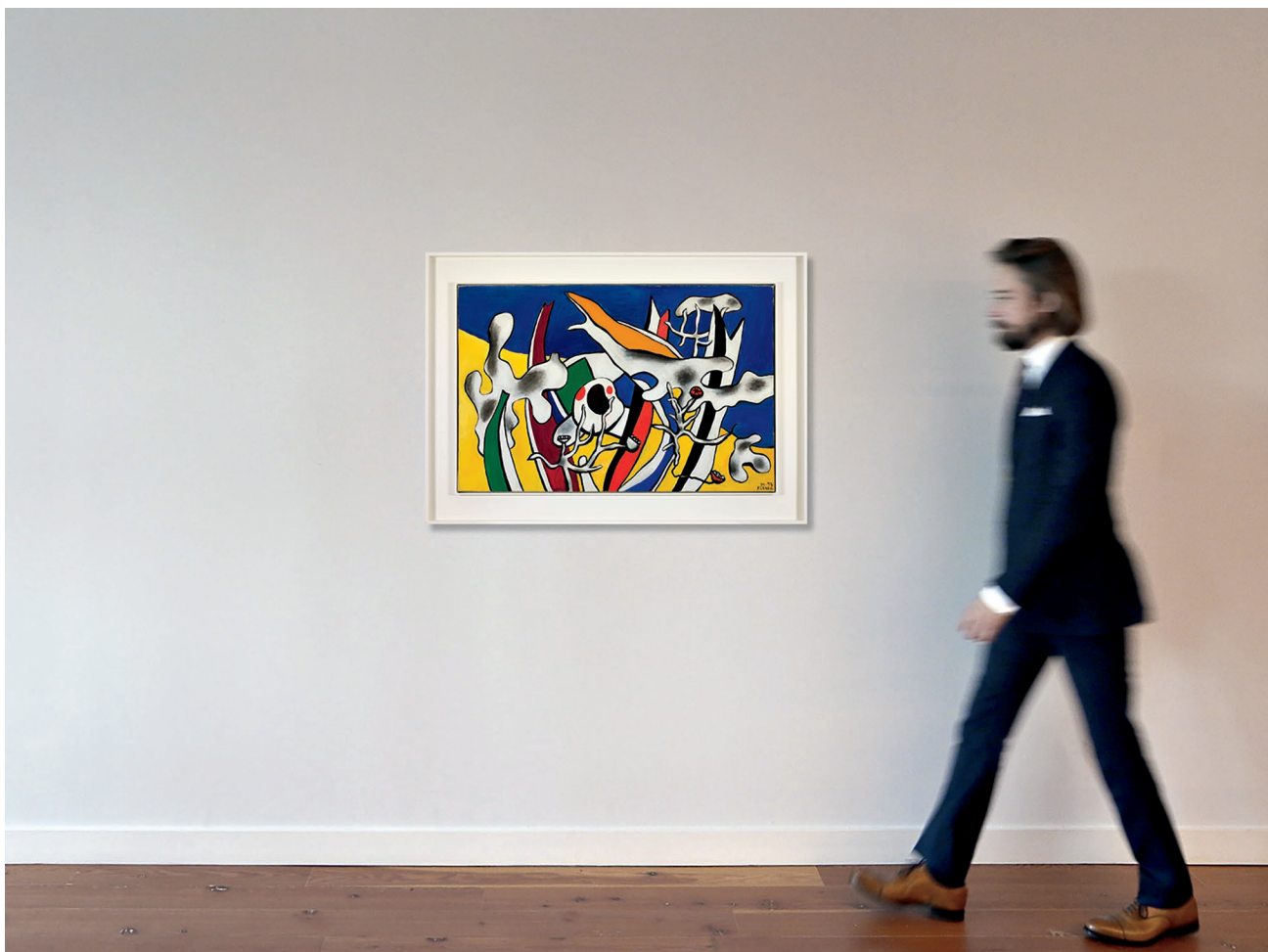


Fernand Léger in his studio, rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Paris, 1937
 Photo: © Estate Brassai-RMN (Gyula Halasz, 1899 – 1984), Michele Bellot
 Courtesy of RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY Image Reference: ART193812

three Cubist portraits by Léger, Albert Gleizes and Metzinger, accompanied by a heavily sarcastic headline, "What the Cubes Mean."⁴

The following year, Léger's *Woman in Blue* (1912, Kunstmuseum Basel) was illustrated in two mass-readership newspapers, *Le Matin* and *L'Éclair*—its prismatic colour display causing a furor at the *Salon d'Automne*. The response to *Woman in Blue* indicates that Léger was regarded as one of the major figures of Cubism, but in style his art always stood apart from its central direction. In this painting and the correspondingly colourful *The Wedding* (Musée national d'art moderne, Paris), dynamic angular planes show an awareness of Italian Futurism, while the painting's prismatic "illegibility" sits alongside the "Orphic" Cubism of Delaunay and Francis Picabia.⁵

Moreover, as Apollinaire described Léger's cityscapes, "all the colours seethe and bubble together...the infinitely gentle raspberry-coloured roofs...the pleasing plumes of smoke are the sign of civilisation."⁶ In 1914, as with his *La fumée* (Smoke) (1912, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY), Léger would elucidate: "I take the visual effects of smoke rising round and curling



between the houses. In this you have the best possible example in your search for multiple effects of intensity.⁷⁷ Léger preferred disjointed forms, tubular shapes and bright colours; his Cubism had come near to abstraction, but he did not fragment things in the manner of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (compare with Picasso's contemporary *Ma Jolie*, 1911–1912, MOMA, New York). Unsurprisingly, “What is a Cubist?” inquired the tabloid *Petit Parisien* in 1911. “Is it a painter from the Picasso-Braque school?”⁷⁸

In 1912, Léger had his solo show at Kahnweiler's gallery. Subsequently, in 1913, he would join Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris to become the fourth member of Kahnweiler's Cubists. Léger's series *Contrast of Forms* (1913, Galerie Rosengart, Lucerne), in which he reiterates Apollinaire's idea of “pure painting,” appears closer in aesthetic to the Cubism from which it sprang, particularly the effort to be rid of perspective and traditional representation. In this and similar works, including *The Staircase* (1914, Moderna Museet, Stockholm), Léger's painting has a *material* reality, where his rapid, rugged painterly technique functions to avow the quantifiable flatness of the picture whilst simultaneously presenting solid forms via a simple, easily interpreted set of signs—the trust in both “pure painting” and representational things common to countless modernists.

Similarly, in *Peinture imaginaire* (1939–1952), Léger juxtaposes bright primary colours, white highlights and volume-giving contours in black to express his own theory of painting. He stated, “Pictorial contrasts used in their purest sense of colours and line, are from now on the armature of modern painting.”⁷⁹ Of the modernist school, Christopher Green observed, “The picture-object was always a ‘picture’ as well as an object.”⁸⁰ In this way, Léger's Cubist painting style is not dissimilar to the “Synthetic” collage Cubism and construction by Picasso, or the “sculpture-objects” by Archipenko and Henri Laurens, created between 1912 and 1918. (See *Fruit Dish with Grapes*, 1918, Laurens Collection.)

Léger was beginning to flourish when, as for many artists in France, World War I stalled his career. In a volatile political climate, clamouring for “civilizing, Latin values,” modernism, and Cubism in particular, was seen as little better than a foreign enemy and hostile to French culture.⁸¹ As a sapper (a soldier who digs trenches) and stretcher-bearer on the Aisne front and at Verdun, Léger sat in the heat of battle near the forest of Argonne, where 26,000 French troops were killed in four months of bombing. In his correspondence, Léger attempts to portray the danger of his situation: “Alongside that, winter weather, two days in blood and mud, two of the hardest days I've ever known, so you need to have your head screwed on if you don't want to lose it.”⁸²

Regardless, in 1919, Léger published a text celebrating the beauty of the war machine: “I was dazzled by the breach of a 74-millimetre gun which was standing uncovered in the sunshine: the magic of light on white metal. Once I got my teeth into that sort of reality, I never let go of objects again.”⁸³ In *The Card Game* (1917, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), Léger's lauding of mechanized power is unambiguous; these are not just man-machines, they are correspondingly men-as-guns. The 1914 to 1918 war demonstrated, as no war had previously, the destructive power of modernization. Hence, Léger regarded his painting as “the first picture in which I deliberately took my subject from our own epoch.”⁸⁴

His inherent fascination with modern apparatuses and technologies, his so-called mechanical period, expressed urban modernism with its motorized forms, clean lines and metallic surfaces in *The Propellers* (1918), *The City* (1919), *The Mechanic* (1920) and the film *Ballet mécanique* (1924). *Ballet mécanique* was a study in moving mechanical configurations, full of pumping pistons and gleaming machines. Predictably, the type of work admired by the Purist movement included Léger's cityscapes, which resembled the factory chimneys, ocean liners, modern cars and other mechanistic devices illustrated in the pages of their tract *L'Esprit nouveau* (1920). His work likewise reflects the post-war “neo-classical” principles that Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (better known as Le Corbusier) championed as the following step “after Cubism.”

In his film *Ballet mécanique*, Léger even foresaw 1960s Pop Art strategies by displaying specific aspects of modern culture. Léger's attraction to window displays, advertising, transport systems, industrial and geometrical objects, and the everyday world, his desire to segregate objects or parts of things (as in his drawing *Pair of Pants* from circa 1931) and his much repeated dictum, “For me the human figure is no more important than keys or bicycles,” are very much Pop sentiments. In truth, however, Léger elevated mechanical objects on a par with the figure rather than rejecting humanity, so we should not misconstrue his famous saying.⁸⁵

Léger founded his own school with Ozenfant as the Académie de l'Art Moderne in 1924, which continued until 1939. In the late 1930s, he traveled widely, making three trips to America. Likely, *Peinture imaginaire* was executed between two visits in 1938, to decorate Nelson Rockefeller Jr.'s New York apartment, and a visit in 1940, when he went to teach at Yale University and Mills College, California.⁸⁶ *Peinture imaginaire* is filled with disquieting plant formations, spiky corals, “surreal” tumescent forms, and stylized clouds that match bleached bones. This wilderness above all has a strangeness and unfamiliarity, which is akin to hallucination. In his wartime paintings, the machine aesthetic is substituted with images of acrobats, cyclists and musicians. In *Adam and Eve* (1934, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf), conversely, the biblical pair become proletariat young workers, Léger's modernism “plainly compatible with the values of socialist realism.”⁸⁷

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, Léger produced ceramic sculptures and large-scale decorative commissions in mosaic, stained glass and tapestry. In 1970, John Golding and Christopher Green organized *Léger and Purist Paris* at the Tate Gallery. As Golding noted of Léger's career: “No other major twentieth-century artist was to react to, and reflect, such a wide

range of artistic currents and movements. Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Purism, Neo-Plasticism, Surrealism, Neo-Classicism, Social Realism, his art experienced them all.”⁸⁸

We thank John Finlay, a historian of French history specializing in twentieth-century modern art, for contributing the above essay.

1. Quoted in Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 129.
2. Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, trans. Peter Read (1913; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 64.
3. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler with Francis Crémieux, *Mes galeries et mes peintures* (1961), 73–74, translated as *My Galleries and Painters* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 46.
4. Roland Dorgelès, “Ce que disent les cubes,” *Fantasio* (Paris), November 1, 1911.
5. Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-figurative Painting in Paris, 1910–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
6. Apollinaire, *Cubist Painters*, 67.
7. Quoted in Peter de Francia, *Fernand Léger* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 15.
8. *Petit Parisien* (Paris), April 23, 1911, cited in Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900–1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 22.
9. Fernand Léger, “Les origines de la peinture et sa valeur représentative,” *Montjoie!* (Paris), May 29 and June 14–29, 1913, translated by A. Anderson in Edward Fry, ed., *Fernand Léger: Functions of Painting* (New York: Viking, 1973), cited in Cox, *Cubism*, 224.
10. Green, *Art in France*, 102.
11. See Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).
12. Quoted in Cox, *Cubism*, 363.
13. Fernand Léger, “Pensées,” *Valori Plastici* (Rome), February–March 1919, 3, cited in Ian Chivers, *A Dictionary of 20th-century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 342.
14. Ibid.
15. Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 20.
16. Jean Cassou and Jean Leymarie, *Fernand Léger: dessins et gouaches* (Paris, 1972).
17. Green, *Art in France*, 182. Léger joined the French communist party soon after his return to France in 1945, but had been sympathetic to its cause long before this date.
18. John Golding and Christopher Green, *Léger and Purist Paris* (London: Tate Gallery, 1970), exhibition catalogue, cited in Chivers, *Dictionary*, 343.

ESTIMATE: \$1,500,000 – 2,000,000