

Habiba Salem

1003241119

FAH347 | Essay

## Fernand Leger

This essay will analyze Fernand Leger's artworks and determine whether they are part of the Cubism movement. The essay will also explain Leger's style, transformation, and the influences that shaped him as an artist.

Leger's artworks share similar cubist elements such as pictorial innovations, flat colour planes, single-point observation, and "a priority of conception over perception."<sup>1</sup> Unlike Braque and Picasso, he focused on visual dynamics, in which he tried to form realities rather than fragmented realities.<sup>2</sup> He had always been interested in intense colours, precise proportions, and visual effects of the machine age and was less interested in his artworks' psychological effects.<sup>3</sup> Leger used volumes and intense, dynamic colours, whereas cubists achieved composition by assembling surfaces.<sup>4</sup> Elements such as motion, dynamism, and mechanization in some of his artworks subtly link to the attitudes of Italian Futurism.<sup>5</sup> However, Leger had no interest in claiming or belonging to any movement as those elements existed in his artworks before

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<sup>1</sup> Fernand Leger, *Functions of Painting* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), Intro—xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Leger, *Functions of Painting*, Intro—xxii.

<sup>3</sup> "Fernand Leger," *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1953): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4112593>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "Fernand Leger," *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 564 (1950): 64, [www.jstor.org/stable/870352](https://www.jstor.org/stable/870352).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1971), 96.

discovering Cubism and Futurism. Analyzing the artist's artworks, Leger combined both cubist and futurist elements, developing his own movement/style.

Looking at Leger's earlier artworks, he started with cube-like shapes like Braque and Picasso. However, his interest in volume and forms and using smoke<sup>6</sup> as a motif perhaps motivated the emergence of his tubist style that would later dominate the form of artworks' subjects. Tubism is a term given to define Leger's style as he was obsessed with illustrating tubes and cylindrical forms.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the use of smoke in his early artworks possibly derived from conversations with the writer Jules Romain at a cafe in Montparnasse about the poet's imagery of smoke in the city.<sup>8</sup> Romain thought of smoke as an element linking city dwellers with their environment.<sup>9</sup>

In a letter to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Leger explained his influences on his artworks.<sup>10</sup> Such influences included Cezanne, Louis David, and Henri Rousseau. Cezanne and Impressionism enabled Leger and his friend Robert Delaunay to free colours and geometric forms and explore art.<sup>11</sup> He admired Rousseau for his static works and for freeing him from traditions<sup>12</sup>, and David for his large artworks in which Leger had liked to express himself immensely like him.<sup>13</sup> Although he was interested in Impressionism, he reacted against it for its

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Braun and Rebecca Rabinow, *Cubism: Leonard A. Lauder Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 164.

<sup>7</sup> Neil Cox, *Cubism*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Carolyn Lanchner, *Fernand Leger* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 153, [www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/200](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/200).

<sup>10</sup> Kahnweiler, "Fernand Leger," 64

<sup>11</sup> Leger, *Functions of Painting*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1953), 21, [https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2833](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2833).

<sup>13</sup> Kahnweiler, "Fernand Leger," 69.

lack of constructive forms by exacerbating volumes and forms, something Braque and Picasso purposely avoided in their work.<sup>14</sup> This reaction differentiates him from other cubists.

In 1913, Leger experimented intensely with colours, abstraction, and representation in his *Contrast of Forms*, in which he explored forms or tubist forms. This artwork consists of bright, bold, and smooth black outlines with primary colours of yellow, blue, and red with the addition of green, orange, and white. The line combines all of the colours for three-dimensionality while contrasting them simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> In *Functions of Painting*, Leger emphasized the importance of Lines, Forms, and Colours in painting for visual dynamics.<sup>16</sup> His artworks seem consistent with the idea of contrasting forms, colours, and lines.<sup>17</sup> The artist had always been interested in colour's ability to create an illusion of forms while moving within the canvas by relating one colour area to another, continually varying intensity and size.<sup>18</sup>

*Nudes in the Forest* presents a tubist style. Cezanne possibly inspired this artwork through his feeling for defining forms and a sense of volume in space<sup>19</sup>, which Leger recalled, "Cezanne taught me to love forms and volumes, he made me concentrate on drawing. And Then I realized that drawing had to be rigid and in no way sentimental."<sup>20</sup> The artwork, reduced to primary geometric forms<sup>21</sup>, consists of three geometric-shaped nudes wielding axes in a mechanized landscape that are difficult to depict because of its muted colour palette and the

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<sup>14</sup> Kahnweiler, "Fernand Leger," 64, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Leger, *Functions of Painting*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 86.

closed spaces between the figures and their surroundings.<sup>22</sup> The colour palette can mistake the viewer into thinking that Braque and Picasso influenced this artwork. However, Leger was introduced to the early cubist artworks after he finished his painting in 1910, which did not affect how he approached his work later.<sup>23</sup> Leger explained that as much as he was interested in adding colours<sup>24</sup>, he expressed, “The painting for me consisted of a battle between volumes. I felt that I could not cope with colours. Volume alone sufficed.”<sup>25</sup> Leger’s subject matter also helps differentiate his artworks from cubists who use occasional portraits, landscapes, and still life. The reduced forms in this artwork reminisce Cezanne but also suggest modern machinery’s shapes.<sup>26</sup>

Leger took part during the First World War, changing his painting approach. Before the war, life was grey, and colours were limited. However, an explosion of colours flooded where they had become a vital need in life, dominating the walls and used in advertising.<sup>27</sup> He had mentioned that, along with Robert Delaunay, he “managed to liberate colours” by using the most violent colours he had ever used during the war. It was essential to him to do so because of the lack of colours at that time.<sup>28</sup>

Leger was not interested in portraying machines but was fascinated with mechanizing elements in life, while others were portraying or fragmenting bodies, still life, and landscape.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cox, *Cubism*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 88

<sup>25</sup> Cox, *Cubism*, 156.

<sup>26</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Leger, *Functions of Painting*, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Leger, *Functions of Painting*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 33.

While recovering in the hospital in 1917 from gas poisoning, he painted *Soldiers Playing Cards*, depicting his friends playing cards during their free time at war.<sup>30</sup> The figures are dressed in armour to reflect his war state and fascination with machines. Card games were one of the few games available to use as a temporary means of distraction from the misery of the war.<sup>31</sup> Cezanne's *The Card Players* could have inspired this artwork, which Leger had transformed into his own figures and representation.<sup>32</sup> The work consists of cubist elements, such as newspaper fragments, figures drawn in profile, and different viewpoints.<sup>33</sup> Although the figures are void of organic flesh and emotions, some elements help individualize each figure, such as the medals, hats, and cigars.<sup>34</sup> Unlike his prewar works, such as *The Staircase*, the figures are metallic and drawn in such precision.

In 1919, Leger produced a series of artworks focusing on cityscapes and architecture. A work titled *Disks in the City* appears to merge all of Leger's influences. It consists of great geometric design, prominent colours, and the city drawn from different viewpoints in a synthetic cubist style. The city is composed of bold colours, advertisements and billboards to represent the mechanization and urbanity of the new modern life after the war.<sup>35</sup> Although his artworks' subjects had changed, Leger kept his principle of form, colour, and lines, which provided a structural framework.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Fernand Leger," 23.

<sup>31</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 179.

<sup>32</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 175.

<sup>34</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 177.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, 88.

In 1920, Leger started integrating human flesh without abandoning mechanical elements and tubist forms into an artwork titled *The Mechanic*, which consists of a tubular-shaped figure smoking a cigarette in front of an intricate and geometric city. The figure perhaps portrays the image of the new worker after the war in France, where the figure is well-groomed and individualized with a moustache, tattoos, and rings.<sup>37</sup> The influence of Rousseau is present in the figure's stability against the background, depicting a man within a machine economy.<sup>38</sup> Leger's postwar paintings could represent his vision towards a modern development of an organized life full of colours and away from the chaos presented during the war.

During the postwar period, Leger got to know Amedee Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, who influenced him to produce architectonic, mechanical, pure, and pristine artworks.<sup>39</sup> Leger also started to depart from Cubism towards Purism as he shifted his focus to architecture. Purism is a movement by Ozenfant and Le Corbusier based on a revaluation of Cubism and a recall of the order.<sup>40</sup> They believed Purism was a "more rational and universally valid form of expression"<sup>41</sup> than Cubism. Ozenfant had also described, "a painting is an association of purified, related and architected elements, a painting should not be a fragment, a painting is a whole... Space is needed for architectural composition; space means three dimensions. Therefore we think of the painting not as a surface, but as a space."<sup>42</sup> The artist's background and interest in architecture

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<sup>37</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 189.

<sup>39</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Lanchner, *Fernand Leger*, 188.

<sup>41</sup> Cox, *Cubism*, 377.

<sup>42</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 221.

helped him form an understanding between architecture and painting.<sup>43</sup> Thus, building his work successfully during the period after 1919.

Purist elements are evident in *Three Women*, made in 1920, which consists of three nudes in a modern apartment having a drink together, representing the new lifestyle after the war. Their body structure is simple, massive, and tubular-shaped with machine-like forms and expressionless features, perhaps to show the simplicity and emotionless lifestyle post-war. The features were perhaps intentional to shift the focus onto the decorative background, which had been the most crucial part of his artworks of this period, as he had started to explore architecture again. Leger explained, “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.”<sup>44</sup> As recalled, Leger was fascinated by machines, which could explain the women’s expressions that perhaps are supposed to convey the unemotional machines and the feelings of the people after the world war. The artwork is also a visual depiction of a Greek mythology tale titled “The Three Graces,” about three daughters of God Zeus, symbolizing beauty, charm, and joy.<sup>45</sup> The background and objects surrounding them are in natural and realistic form with a diverse colour palette, linking to Purism, which calls for balance, simplicity, basic colours, and decorative elements in paintings. Unlike most cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque, this artwork is perfectly organized and pristine, with the position of the subjects being geometric. The work also presents elements of Cubism, such as flat colours, geometry, and the tubular-shaped forms of the figures.

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<sup>43</sup> Braun and Rabinow, *Cubism*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, 3rd. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 195.

Upon examining Leger's artworks, although his approach had developed tremendously over the years, the form of his subjects remained unchanged as it only became more refined and straightforward. His fascination with machines and colours had also remained unchanged. A focus on lines, forms, and colours stayed consistent throughout his artworks. Leger experimented with various elements from different movements that asserted his style. For example, *Three Women* and *Disks in the City* combine his ideas of contrasts, Cubism, Purism, and colours. Other artworks, such as *The Mechanic*, integrate all these approaches by adding an organic figure with mechanical elements.

Lastly, *Nudes in the Forest* perhaps can be closely linked to Cubism for its monochromatic tones, forms, and the confusion it plays. Leger was developing his artworks at the same time as Braque and Picasso. Therefore, the resemblance was only coincidental.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of what movement he belonged to, his main drive was Cezanne, whose work helped form the elements immediate to each movement.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, *Nudes in the Forest* and *Contrast of Forms* perhaps were the beginning of Leger's intensive exploration of colours and forms and the integration of architecture that helped him define his style and painting.

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<sup>46</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Art Institute of Chicago, *Leger*, 13.



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