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Soldiers Playing Cards

Fernand Léger was a French multi-representational artist of the turn of the twentieth century. He exhibited a diverse portfolio of modern art in the form of paintings, sculptures and later film. The development of his work reflects his experiences in a highly volatile world because of extreme technological advances and politics leading to and following World War I. His involvement and first hand experience in this war dramatically impacted his perspective on modernity in relation to human civilization. *La Partie de Cartes, (Soldiers Playing Cards, 1917)*, exemplifies Léger's artistic perspective on Modernity in the context of World War I. This piece was painted during the war while Léger was on a recuperative hiatus after he spent two years on the front of Argonne.¹ His service for the French military began in August 1914 at the start of the war. This unintended participation in the war interrupted his art practice, however this interruption became rather a source of inspiration rather than a digression from the focus of his work. World War I applied this advancement of technology with a macro scale mobilization of men and machines. This experience could be considered to have acted as a catalyst for his artistic expression in terms of the aesthetic, subject matter, and ideology.

The multifaceted artwork of Léger, is matched by it's multitude of ideological themes. Many of these concepts concern the time and setting in the context of war and new movements such as The Futurists, a revolutionary perspective on embracing modernity and the future rather than looking backward in the past. These themes include contrast, dynamism, modernity, machinery, humanity, and simultaneity. These can be understood through Léger's unique aesthetic and subject matter. As Buck aptly describes, "Léger depicted carefully juxtaposed concatenations of cylindrical and cubic volumes, using primary colors and restricted vocabulary of curved and straight lines."² Leger defines this aesthetic: "The pictorial realism is the

¹ Néret, Gilles, and Susan D. Resnick. *F. Léger*. New York, NY: BDD Illustrated, 1993. Print.

²Buck, Robert T., Edward F. Fry, and Charlotta Kotik. *Fernand Leger*. Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1982. Print.18.

simultaneous prescription of the three great plastic qualities: Lines, Shapes and Colors.”³ These are the components to consider in light of above mentioned themes.

Léger creates form through black line typically outline. The line forms geometric shapes that appear three-dimensional by warping the shapes in regards to size and angle either foreshortening or stretching the basic shape. The geometric shapes combine to form vague humanoid figures. The compartmentalization of the figures creates abstraction within the context of other shapes that do not represent figures but ground and background. This creates tension between subject, foreground, and background. The straight lines and geometric shape solicit connotations of machines. “Léger's celebration of the mechanical object, consistent with his prewar conceptual realism and aesthetic of plastic contrasts, is inscribed between the extremes of the non-objective and the real.”⁴ This tension between the “non-objective and the real” are exhibited between the expression of man and machine in one image. The sharp jagged edges, characteristic of cubism, do not exist in natural biological beings only mechanized beings. This in the context of modernity and war raises comparison between man and machine. This comparison leads to social questions about how man interacts with machines and, even more poignant, how man acts as a machine.

Léger skillfully uses color to distinguish different imagery for the sake of contrast. He deals almost exclusively with the primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. This emphasis of primary colors, a technique used by his preceding and contemporary artists such as Matisse, exhibits high contrast functioning to make a bold impression on the viewer from the first glance. He also plays with the shading and blending of color with black and white which establishes a tension within the painting between high and low contrast. Morisset recognizes this contrast motif: “The paintings done in 1912 and 1913 are composed according to the principle of maximum opposition of pictorial elements, values, lines and colors, a process that continues,”⁵ I would argue, into *La Partie de Cartes*. The color contrast also acts as a code for the different image

³ Léger, Fernand. *Functions of Painting*. Trans. Edward F. Fry. New York: Viking, 1973. Print.

⁴Kosinski, Dorothy M., comp. Fernand Léger, 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life. Munich: Prestel, 1994. Print.121.

⁵Morisset, Vanessa. "FERNAND LÉGER." *FERNAND LÉGER*. Ed. Marie-Jose Rodriguez. Centre Pompidou, Apr. 2008. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

figures. The foreground floor is yellow, humanoid parts are generally blue, other objects are generally red. However he also breaks his own color code by exceptionally using a different color to represent the same figure. In some places he even uses green a non primary color. On the macro level this work itself is a defiance from traditional artwork, and on the micro level it embodies this idea of contrast. Thematically he sets a pattern or trend within the piece and then intentionally breaks from his own pattern.

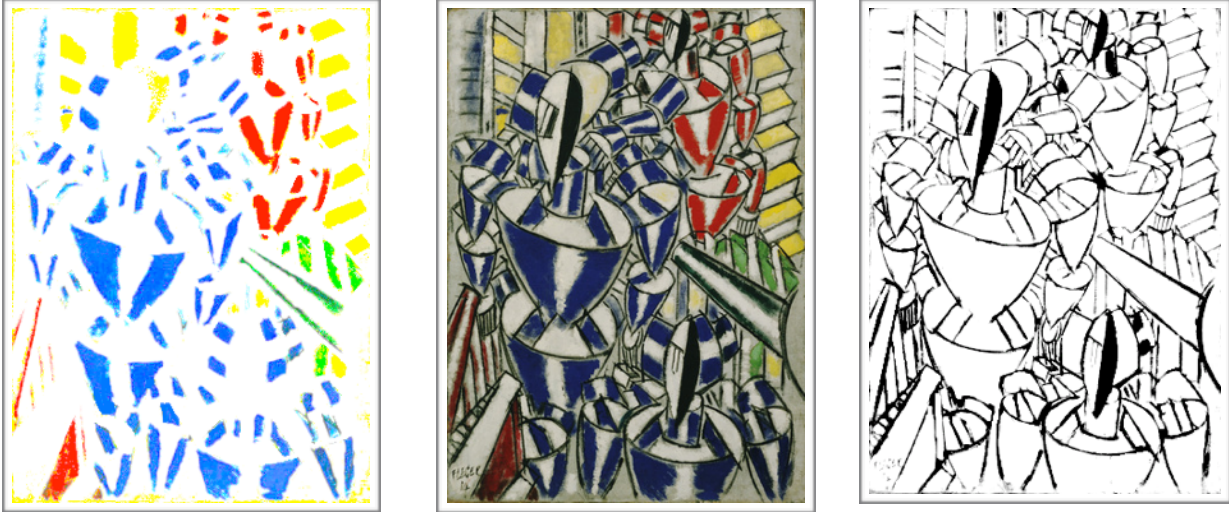
Léger's use of light dramatizes and compliments the line and color. The light source is not specifically defined within the painting, adding to the intentionally non-realistic representation of imagery. However the direction in which light effects each component shape is clear and direct. Each shape appears to have direct light on it reflecting the light back at the viewer as if the material of the shape is a metallic substance. The use of “white creates the impression of light reflecting off a shiny surfaces, animating the composition and adding to a sense of three dimensional modeling.”⁶ Moreover the light serves to portray depth and dimension to the aesthetic of basic geometric shapes that “are nonrepresentational yet spatially illusionistic.”⁷ The appearance of depth is also created by the central vacancy in terms of subject matter. The figures appear to form a perimeter around the center focus opening up a space for the viewer, possibly as if the viewer participates in the card game. Furthermore this blending from black to blue to white matches the way one would perceive a curved metallic substance. Kosinski connects this to the motif of dynamism saying, “the slashes of white highlights also create a sense of rotation, evoking the grinding and churning of massive gears.”⁸ Machines are dynamic and in motion, particularly its metallic cylindrical parts, like gears or a piston. This motif can be confirmed by Léger's later works, particularly his film, *Ballet Mecanique*, a non-narrative abstract film. In the still medium of painting he expresses, to the best of ability, this mechanical motion. This motif is also arguably present in his previous works, that “iconographic themes were incipiently dynamic”⁹ as well.

⁶Kosinski, 89.

⁷ Buck, 16.

⁸Kosinski, 89.

⁹Buck, 18.



Prior to *La Partie de Cartes* this aesthetic technique can be observed in *La Sorite des Ballet Russes* (1914) where he partially colors in the shape formed by black outline. This development of aesthetic transitioned from color and line depicted independently but together allow the reader to fill in the gaps between the separation with imagination. Leger accomplishes his intended dynamic motif in a different way, here “the freely applied patches of color instill the paintings with a sense of spontaneity and dynamism.”¹⁰ Color or line can be isolated and removed independently (as demonstrated in the figures above). This concept of contrast in function between line and color has also been explored by his contemporaries Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Vassily Kandinsky. However Léger progresses this idea maintaining both features of line and color but he visibly integrates them and makes them inseparable in *La Partie de Cartes*. In addition, both line and color combine to create shape in this “immediately prewar cylindrical style [that] was applied to the iconography of the anonymous poilu”¹¹ in his mid and post war pieces. Ideologically this expresses the importance of incorporating both aspects to enhance the viewers range of sensory perception of the image.

The painting depicts a scene, as described by the title, of WWI soldiers gathered to smoke and play cards. This is an apparent shift in focal subject matter for Léger. Kosinski explains “the experiences of the soldier at the front during the great war constituted traumatic rupture that redirected the artist attention from a non objective art to expressiveness riveted to

¹⁰Kosinski, Dorothy M., comp. Fernand Léger, 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life. Munich: Prestel, 1994. Print.

¹¹ Buck, 19.

modern life.”¹² Although the imagery remains quite abstract and the people’s bodies are not clearly or realistically represented, the meaning of the image can be understood from certain details. Humanoid bodies are represented by large and small cylinders jointed together to look like arms and fingers. Léger’s use of geometry demonstrates that he “incorporated his prewar stylistic discoveries even as he updated them in the light of the intervening wartime of synthetic cubism.”¹³ Faces are comprised of multiple cylinders, spheres, and boxes. The figure to the right has no distinctive facial features, his head is only recognizable by a hemisphere shape, presumably a helmet. Other military indicators include realistic medals, and ranking badges. The playing cards are also clearly shown in the center, in the hands of the figures and on the table or floor. The realism of these details might be considered to negate the abstract aesthetic of the piece, however I would argue that it does not for two reasons. Firstly, the size and position of these details make them inconspicuous to the initial perception. Secondly, both the cards and medals are basic shapes and therefore camouflage within the other miscellaneous shapes of the abstract aesthetic. The juxtaposition of all these intentionally contrasting figures raises questions about the significance and meaning behind the subject matter.

Machines playing cards imply the merging of man and machine in the context of war. WWI facilitated the integration and interaction of powerful mechanical weapons and the powers of human soldiers. The analogous deployment of man and machine equivocated the two, thereby dehumanizing soldiers. Soldiers are used as weapons of war, essentially putting men in the role of machines. Léger reverses these roles by situating machines in the seats of men in a card game, a humanistic setting. He, himself proclaims: “Each artist possesses an offensive weapon that allows him to intimidate tradition, in search for vividness and intensity. I have made use of the machine as others used the nude body or the still life.”¹⁴ He raises concern about the relationship that humans have with machine and the more so the potential of advancement of technology for the future. This artwork remains relevant today, even further into the future with a greater technological capacity.

¹²Kosinski, 89.

¹³ Buck, 19.

¹⁴ Léger, Fernand. "The Machine Aesthetic: The Manufactured Object, The Artisan, and The Artist." *Modern Artists on Art*. Ed. Robert L. Herbert. 2nd ed. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000. 94-101. Print.

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