

Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged

ARTISTS IN WORLD WAR I

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Revolution's task: de-reification, destruction of the object in order that humankind may be saved.

— Carl Einstein¹

Our young recruits have a real tenderness for [the 75-millimeter field gun]. Upon encountering the batteries along the roadside, they run their fingers over the grey tubes of each unit, just as cavaliers once touched the necks of their horses.

— Louis Baudry de Saunier²

IN A LETTER TO HIS ART DEALER, LÉONCE ROSENBERG, written in the early 1920s, Fernand Léger (1881–1955) cast a retrospective glance over the previous decade of his career, noting that he “had been extreme two times, in 1914 (forms and contrasts) and in 1918, Disks. Cities.”³ Until the publication in 1990 of a volume of fifty letters sent from Léger to his childhood friend Louis Poughon between

1914 and 1917, it was difficult to thread the gap between these two “extremes,” other than to say that the experience of war radically recast the painter’s approach to cubism.⁴ Although he was conscripted into the *génie*, or engi-

Fernand Léger

Objects, Abstraction, and the Aesthetics of Mud

DANIEL MARCUS

neering corps, during the national mobilization on 1 August 1914, Léger apparently did not cut the figure of a born sapper; as of that October, his commanding major, who had taken a liking to the artist, reassigned him to serve as a stretcher-bearer in the same company—less arduous, although by no means safer, work. Nonetheless, over the course of the next three years, Léger would try every way he could think of to be removed from the front, enlisting Poughon, who had been appointed prefectural adviser in Deux-Sèvres, to help him secure transfer to the camouflage unit, and, when that effort failed, to a rearward medical unit—an equally futile gambit.⁵

As for the artist’s activities and whereabouts: Léger’s company was stationed at various sites in the Argonne forest from 12 August 1914 until at least August 1916. In the summer of 1915, he received his first permitted leave and returned to Paris for six days, where he was able to reestablish ties with the avant-garde and acquire art supplies. Upon his return to the Argonne, he made drawings in pencil and ink, watercolors, and paintings on panel, some of which were commissioned work for his fellow soldiers and commanding officers. As of January 1917, his company had moved to Champagne, where Léger found himself in “a ridiculously calm sector,” as he put it in a letter to Poughon.⁶ While on leave in Paris during late July, he took ill with rheumatism and spent the better part of a year in and out of military hospitals. In the summer of 1918, he continued his convalescence at a rented house in the town of Vernon. It was during this period of medical leave that Léger resumed painting and secured a contract with Rosenberg.

How, then, did Léger's experience of World War I alter the stakes of his art? In an often-cited 1949 interview, Léger suggested that the social and environmental conditions of combat steered him away from the formalist concerns of the prewar years:

The super-poetic atmosphere of the front excited me to the core. God! What faces! And cadavers, mud, cannons. I never made any drawings of cannons, I had them in my eyes. It was in the war that I put my feet into the dirt. I left Paris during a period of full-blown abstraction, era of pictorial liberation. Without transition, I found myself among the people of France; sent to the *génie*, my new mates were miners, pavers, woodworkers, metalworkers. . . . At the same time, I was astounded by the open breech of a 75 [millimeter cannon] in full sunlight, magic of light on white metal. It didn't take much more for me to forget the abstract art of 1912–1913. The roughness, the variety, the humor, the perfection of certain types of men around me, their exact sense of useful reality [*le réel utile*] and its right application in the midst of this drama—life and death—in which we were mixed up; more than that, [they were] poets, inventors of everyday poetic images; I have in mind their slang, so fast-paced, so colorful. Once I had a taste of that reality, the object never again left me [*l'objet ne m'a plus quitté*].⁷

What sorts of objects did Léger have in mind, and what did it mean to rediscover them in the midst of battle, under conditions that had left the physical object-world pulverized? How should we interpret the initiatory role played by the famed 75-millimeter field gun, or 75—a machine that had been in circulation since the late nineteenth century and that served as the mainstay of France's artillery sector during World War I?⁸ Art historians have tended to answer these questions by gesturing to the implicit resonance of cubist methods with the physical destruction and fragmentation of the landscape.⁹ Likewise, Léger's totemic vision of the 75 might seem to conform to a similar logic: the painter discovered a species of object suited to the planar faceting of cubist still life. He had merely to depict what he saw, or near enough to it.

Ultimately, I will offer quite a different interpretation of Léger's "return to objects" during and after the war. As a preliminary, however, I must touch briefly on his work made prior to 1914, in particular the series *Contrasts of Forms*, for it was in the prewar period that Léger first began to interrogate the dyad of abstraction and objecthood. Although he veered sharply from the depiction of discrete, identifiable objects in this body of work, Léger nonetheless retained many of the definitive signifiers of thingness. Far from jettisoning volumetric modeling or spatial recession, Léger deployed these conventions to excess, launching cubism in the direction of abstraction, yet doing so, paradoxically, by means of objects.

For example, in the largest work of the series, the *Contrast of Forms* held in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (fig. 1), one can readily identify all the raw materials of a still life, or even a figure painting. Two sequences—we could call them *chains*—of cylinders wend along the sides of the canvas, each receding from center to periphery in a trail of blue and yellow. Interspersed within and superimposed

over this circuitry of cylinders are rectilinear planes of red, orange, green, and mauve. In this work, "contrast" is a matter of color, but also, more importantly, of the conflict between surface and depth. Taken on their own, the cylinders could conceivably depict a riot of drums or swarming bees, and they almost conjure the figure of a hooded serpent. Ultimately, however, these proto-objects fail to yield any particular subject or content. Even when tangible subject matter reemerged in Léger's work of the following year, as in *Still Life: Alarm Clock* (1914), objects were merely a pretense,



FIGURE 1. FERNAND LÉGER (FRENCH, 1881–1955). *Contrast of Forms*, 1913–14, oil on burlap, 130.2 x 97.6 cm (51¼ x 38½ in.). Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

not ends in themselves. Summoning a glut of contours and volumes, he used them not as the constituent parts of a totality but rather as host bodies for colors applied in thin, dry blotches.

The *Contrasts of Forms* was a crux for Léger; it would not be simple to walk back from the high-water mark set in 1913. During the war, however, Léger emerged as a critic of his own attitude toward objects, as well as a skeptic of abstraction—a shift he framed in terms of class. Thrown into a company of peasants, laborers, and artisans, Léger was acutely aware of his displacement as a cultivated city dweller among the salt of the earth. Expressing fascination more than resentment, Léger's letters to Poughon brim with mentions of his countrymen's preternatural sense of an object's "value," a term that implied something more than mere monetary value. For Léger, the sudden absence of a market economy on the front had the effect of intensifying the fetish character of everyday commodities (which did not cease to be commodities); objects became newly visible, and therefore valuable, precisely because no amount of money could buy them. Writing from the Argonne about life in the trenches, he observed, "Money no longer exists, every raw material becomes of enormous value. There's bread, meat, potatoes and wine. I know what it is to choose potatoes. I've learned not to waste bread. A pants button costs an arm and a leg, and socks would be beyond price if prices existed."¹⁰ In another letter to Poughon, Léger harangued his friend for not having undergone the transformative privation of life in the trenches, avowing that, were it possible to take a leave in Paris, "I'm sure that I wouldn't waste a single minute there—I used to waste entire months—because I would see things in their 'value,' their true, absolute value, by God! I know the value of each object, understand, Louis, my friend? I know what bread is, and wood, and socks, etc. Do *you* know that? No, you can't know because you've not been to war."¹¹

Although we might expect that Léger would have responded to his newfound sympathy for objects by returning to the still-life format, these precious wares appear to have loomed so large—and so valuable—as to fall beyond depiction. In any event, no drawings of bread, socks, buttons, and the like survive among his drawings from the front. Having acquired drawing supplies during a leave from combat in September 1915, Léger began to make studies of the surrounding landscape, at least when it was safe to do so, and of his fellow soldiers hunkered in the trenches.¹² Art historian Kenneth Silver has described these drawings as "genre scenes": unassuming sketches, they depict the common soldier, or *poilu*, at rest, smoking a pipe, playing cards, or gathering around a horse-drawn mess carriage. Silver suggests that Léger "found cubism appropriate for life in the trenches (trench warfare itself being an essentially new form of battle);" yet it was less the novelty of this mode of shelter that the drawings index than its inescapable poverty. From Verdun, Léger wrote Poughon: "We're stuck in the ground, we're absorbed by it, we press ourselves close to the earth to evade the death that is everywhere."¹³ Months earlier, he had marveled at the way his fellow *poilus* managed to live, work, and sleep "knee-deep in water and [still] make little paper boats" to amuse themselves.¹⁴ In his drawings from the front—such as *The Drillers*, a study of two men laboring underground (dated winter 1916, near Verdun) (fig. 2)—Léger bent the cubism of his *Contrasts of Forms* into a kind of pictorial materialism, a figure of the *poilu's* phenomenology; it is not just the body but also the



FIGURE 2. FERNAND LÉGER (FRENCH, 1881–1955). *The Drillers*, 1916, possibly pencil and gouache on paper, 28 x 19.5 cm (11½ x 7¾ in.). Location unknown.

soldier's ego, his face and voice, that bleeds into the muddy surround, into fragmentary objects. Man becomes not machine but mineral, barely distinguishable from the chalky faceting of the background plane. Léger never joined the camouflage unit, but he saw a parallel between the *poilu's* ability to disappear—to *be* the mud—and his own brand of object-oriented abstraction.

...

The ethics of cubism were obviously on Léger's mind during his years on the front: on the one hand, he saw that the same operations that had generated abstract paintings prior to the war could be mobilized to celebrate the *poilu's* resiliency and instinctive self-preservation (and even self-abnegation); yet on the other hand, he recognized an unsettling kinship between his own artistic powers and the mechanical forces responsible for "the death that is everywhere." Cubism could champion the underdog, but it could also dominate space with the same totalizing efficacy as the *canon de 75*;

both possibilities remained open to Léger during the war. The shattered, cratered landscapes of Verdun obsessed Léger, and he wrote Poughon enthusiastically in November 1916:

I love Verdun. Maybe I already told you so. This old city all in ruins with its powerful calm. I love to spend afternoons here. . . . Here at Verdun there are completely unheard-of subjects, a delight to my cubist soul. For example, you'll see a tree with a chair perched on top of it. So-called sensible people will treat you like a madman if you present them with a painting composed that way. Here, however, one has only to copy it. Verdun authorizes every kind of pictorial fantasy.¹⁵

Léger was aware of the logic underlying this pattern of juxtapositions: the truth of the war was "as linear and dry as a geometry problem. So many shells in so much time over such a surface, so many men by meter per hour fixed in order. Everything unfolds mechanically. It's pure abstraction, purer even than Cubist Painting 'himself.'"¹⁶ In his own renderings of the landscape, however, no such order offers itself to the eye; far from conjugating pictorial geometry with the mathematics of killing, Léger's drawings take stock of the damage *after* the violence has passed — and, perhaps, as a means of warding against its return.

In another body of work, however, Léger began to address this "geometry problem" head-on. A trio of drawings, all made near Verdun in 1916, focus closely on what is almost certainly the aiming mechanism of a *canon de 75* (figs. 3, 4); they represent the artist's only foray into still life during the war and are also his sole exploration of an explicitly mechanical object from close-up.¹⁷ One of these studies is titled *Mechanical Elements*; the others occupy the recto and verso of a single sheet of paper (now held at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg) inscribed "Souvenir de guerre." Strikingly inventive, these drawings foreshadow the radically attenuated surface-level compositions that would come to occupy Léger in the war's aftermath, such as *The Disks* (1918) and *The City* (1919). With the drawing titled *Mechanical Elements*, for example, the artist constructed a shallow facade of vertical columns and intersecting lines studded with pseudo-mechanical forms — including crank handles, various valves, and contours — that suggest the smooth precision of machine-tooled fabrication. Yet the drawing stops short of depicting any recognizable mechanism; various elements of the aiming mechanism are identifiable, but the picture picks and chooses according to its own logic, de-objectifying what was otherwise the summa of military engineering and a totem of national pride.

By the time he painted *The Motor* (1918), enlarging and refining the pictorial grammar first sketched in *Mechanical Elements*, it seems Léger had shed his former resistance to abstraction, instead positioning himself as a celebrant of machines and mechanized landscapes. Despite this shift in attitude, however, Léger continued to mishandle his array of source objects, from coal-powered tugboats to Taylorized factories, refusing to depict the commodity-form as such. As with his drawings of artillery, there was nothing mechanical — no coherent arrangement of functional parts, nothing that could be designated "object" with any certainty — to be discovered

1 Carl Einstein, "The Revolution Smashes through History and Tradition," trans. Charles Haxthausen, *October* 107 (2004): 140.

2 Louis Baudry de Saunier, *Le canon de 75* (Paris: Flammarion, 1922), 7. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3 Fernand Léger to Léonce Rosenberg, undated letter. Reprinted in *Fernand Léger: Une correspondance d'affaires* (Paris: Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, 1996), 114.

4 I am by no means the first scholar to make use of this collection of letters. For example, the chronology written for the Museum of Modern Art's most recent Léger monograph closely follows the Poughon correspondence; see Carolyn Lanchner, ed., *Fernand Léger* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998). My essay offers only a relatively brief summary of the artist's wartime itinerary; readers are referred to the correspondence for further details. See Fernand Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre à Louis Poughon* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990).

5 For a more detailed account of Léger's efforts to be transferred away from the front (a practice known in French as *embusquage*), see Charles Ridet, *Les embusqués* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), esp. chap. 6.

6 Léger to Louis Poughon, 9 January 1917. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 75.

7 "Que signifie: Être témoin de son temps?," *Arts*, Paris, no. 205 (11 March 1949), 1.

8 The *canon de 75* was an object of national veneration in France during the First World War, its diminutive stature casting it as David to the German Goliath. To raise funds for the war effort through the sale of commemorative medals, a *journée du 75* was held on 4 February 1915.

9 For a representative sample of this argument, see the following passage from Kenneth Silver's landmark study of French modernism during and after World War I:

[Cubism's] dissonant, visually explosive style was an especially appropriate language in which to describe the destructive powers of modern warfare. Cubism offered both a system for the breaking down of forms and a method for organizing pictorial decomposition. For a war that—with its trench fighting, new incendiary devices, modern artillery, and poison gas—was unprecedented in almost every way, Cubism's lack of association with the past was the analogue of the *poilu's* general sense of dissociation. As a new visual language with a radically altered perspective, Cubism was an excellent means for portraying a war that broke all the rules of traditional combat. For those who had actually been in the trenches, the image of a wounded cuirassier could not possibly translate or epitomize lived experience: Cubism, on the other hand, for rendering one's comrades whether at leisure or in the midst of battle, seemed to have a ring of truth.

Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 84–85.

10 Léger to Louis Poughon, 5 October 1914. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 12.

11 Léger to Louis Poughon, 12 April 1915. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 35 (emphasis Léger).

12 At Léger's suggestion, Douglas Cooper published a selection of forty-four of these wartime drawings and gouaches; see Cooper, *Fernand Léger: Dessins de guerre, 1915–16* (Paris: Beggren, 1956).

13 Léger to Louis Poughon, 7 November 1916. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 70.

14 Léger to Louis Poughon, 17 December 1914. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 26.

15 Léger to Louis Poughon, 23 November 1916. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 72.

It is noteworthy that in the drawing *Dans Verdun*, annotated by Cooper in *Fernand Léger: Dessins de guerre* with the recto caption "autre dessin (crayon) avec chaises et arbres," the chairs are depicted on the ground, not in the trees.

16 Léger to Louis Poughon, 30 May 1915. Léger, *Une correspondance de guerre*, 36.

17 Other drawings show various pieces of war material in landscape format. See, for example, *La cuisine roulante* (1915), *Hissage de forme mobile* (1916), and *L'avion brisé* (1916).