

Léger, Fernand

By [Annette Becker](#)

Léger, *Fernand*

French painter

Born 04 February 1881 in Argentan, France

Died 17 August 1955 in Gif-sur-Yvette, France

Summary

Léger was fascinated by the front, but barely ever depicted what he saw in his work. His correspondence, however, offers a remarkable descent into the abyss of the war.

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War and Art

The French painter, Fernand Léger (1881-1955) explored the depths of war, death and avant-garde creation. He often said how greatly his personal experience with industrial modernity as a sapper, then as a stretcher-bearer at the front influenced his [art](#): “the breach of a 75 millimetre in the sunlight taught me more than all the museums in the world.”¹

Cubism

He defended cubism – and was among its most radical experimenters – with macabre irony:

To all the blockheads wondering whether I am or will still be a cubist when I return, you can tell them more than ever. There is nothing more cubist than a war like this one, which can more or less cleanly section a man into several pieces and blast him to the four cardinal corners.²

After being poisoned by [gas](#) at [Verdun](#), he attempted to hole up behind the lines as a *camoufleur*, but despite his efforts he was still drawn to the [hospital](#). He never depicted in his

artwork the torn apart bodies that struck him so strongly; he recounted the strange horror – between impossible, “[camouflaged](#)” visions and omnipresent sounds:

The war was grey and camouflaged. All light, colour and even tone were banned on pain of death. A blind existence in which anything the eye could register and perceive had to hide or disappear. Nobody saw the war hidden, concealed, crouched on all fours, earth coloured; the useless eye could not see anything. Everyone ‘heard’ the war. It was an enormous symphony that no musician or composer has yet been able to equal: Four years without colour.³

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Notes

1. Fernand Léger à Louis Poughon, Une correspondance de guerre, Les cahiers du musée national d’art moderne, 1990. ↑
2. Ibid. ↑
3. Fernand Léger cited in: Léger, Fernand: Rétrospective, Saint-Paul-de-Vence 1988. ↑

Selected Bibliography

- [Becker, Annette: **Arts**, in: Winter, Jay \(ed.\): The Cambridge history of the First World War. Civil society, vol. 3, New York 2014 Cambridge University Press.](#)
- [Becker, Annette: **Voir la Grande Guerre. Un autre récit, 1914-2014**, Paris, 2014: Armand Colin.](#)
- [Fleckner, Uwe: **Der Kubismus an der Front. Militärische und künstlerische De\(konstrunktion\) im Werk Fernand Légers**, in: Schneede, Uwe M. / Bundeskunsthalle Bonn \(eds.\): 1914. Die Avantgarden im Kampf, Cologne 2013 Snoeck, pp. 236-245.](#)

Citation

Annette Becker: Léger, Fernand, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-08-21. DOI:

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External Links

- [Fernand Leger et al.: Ballet Mcanique, Andre Charlot musical score, 1924 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Fernand Léger \(The Museum of Modern Art\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Messer, Thomas M.: Fernand Léger: five themes and variations \(exhibition '62/2, February 28-April 29, 1962\), Solomon Guggenheim Museum New York, 1962 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)

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