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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

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.

Table of Contents

[1 War and Art](#)

[2 Cubism](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

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.](#)

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