

**FERNAND LÉGER**

French, 1881–1955

*Abstraction*, 1926

Oil on canvas; 51¼ × 36½ in. (130 × 92.7 cm.)

Gift of Robert Allerton through the Friends of the Academy, 1945 (311.1)

The son of a Normandy farmer, Fernand Léger moved in 1900 to Paris, where he experimented with various painting styles. Strongly influenced by cubism, he became friends with Amédée Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, the founders of purism. The purists had great confidence in the modern machine. Léger incorporated elements from machinery such as pistons, cylinders, and cogged wheels into his compositions, often meshing them with robotlike human figures. Striving to purge his work of all but the most elemental forms, Léger created a personal idiom known for its precision, lack of sentimentality, and mastery of spatial paradox.

*Abstraction* is one of the few truly nonrepresentational paintings in Léger's oeuvre. For this painting, the artist borrowed from his own works, abstracting and enlarging part of a 1924 mural, *Élément Mécanique* (Kunsthaus, Zurich). *Élément Mécanique* in turn was an enlarge-

ment of a 1922 painting (Louis Carré Collection, Paris). Léger's murals, which are actually easel paintings, were composed with reference to architecture and, specifically, a real or imaginary white wall. The artist used flat planes to reinforce the flatness of the wall. In *Abstraction*, black, blue, gray, and orange-red rectangles overlap, seemingly retreating and advancing. This evocative sense of space, which is found in other works by Léger during this period and seems to deny their essential flatness, is accented in *Abstraction* by the white ovoid and the curved shape below. Because of the cursive lines and their shading, the viewer's eye is led around them and into the ambiguous space created by the colored rectangles and white background. The only personal touch in this meticulous composition is Léger's signature and the date placed in the lower right corner. RAD

"Abstraction," #311.1

Gift of Mr. Robert Allerton through Friends of the Academy

Oil on canvas, H. 50 1/2"; W. 36"

Fernand Leger, French

1881-1955

1926

Gallery 1

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Artist: Fernand Leger, the noted French cubist and post-cubist painter was born on Feb. 4, 1881 in Argenteuil, Normandy. He moved to Paris in 1900 and supported himself as an architect's draughtsman. Around 1903, Leger studied informally in the studios of Leon Gerome and Gabriel Ferrier. It was not until 1906, however that he transferred his interests completely to painting. He was mobilized in 1914, and served as a stretcher bearer until he was gassed and hospitalized for several months in 1917. Leger traveled extensively and lived for 6 years in the USA (1940-46). After his death in 1955 many of his major works were installed in the Musée Fernand Leger at Biot.

Subject: Depicts an arrangement of vertical and horizontal bands of varying color, which differ in length and width and are spaced around a white ovoid shape suspended from a black, vertical rectangle and a curved white shape. These curved white shapes are the only ones with any color gradation (moving from white to grey); all others are of bright solid colors. The colors create an illusory space which the viewer's eye can move through and a sense of surface movement.

Medium and Technique: Oil painting on canvas. Speed of execution marked by broken brushlines.

Style: Leger is best known for his large oil paintings, known as "murals" which utilize bright, bold color planes and little or no modeling or color gradation. His early works are firmly based in the cubist movement and make use of modern technological spaces between his color planes. His colors during this early period were of a much lower intensity - similar to those being used by other cubist painters. Later, after seeing the De Stijl exhibition of architectural projects (1923) in which each wall of 3 house models were given a

color identity of one of the three primaries or white, Leger began to use a bolder, brighter palette. The results were his large mural paintings, of which the HAA painting "Abstraction" is an example. These murals introduce Leger's final period as a painter of order. His compositions are carefully planned and manifest a strong interest in formal balance and surface tension.

#### Instructional Aids:

- Compare with Picasso's "Pipe and Glass". How is Leger's "Abstraction" a logical outcome of cubist ideals?
- Discuss space within this painting.
- Discuss color. What role does it play in relation to space, surface tension?
- Determine whether Leger was interested in formal arrangement. Compare with Delacroix's "Justice of Trajan" and Cross' "Landscape."
- What role does light play, if any?

Fernand Léger (French, 1881–1955)

*Abstraction*, 1926

Oil on canvas

Gift of Robert Allerton through Friends of the  
Academy, 1945 (311.1)

Ferdinand Léger had great confidence in modern technology, and he incorporated machinery parts and robotic human forms into complex compositions inspired by Cubism. This work, however, is one of the few truly nonrepresentational paintings in his oeuvre. In it, Léger has built up planes of color to suggest the flatness of a wall, even as he hints at a third dimension by allowing these rectangles to overlap. Space is further evoked in the white ovoid form in the center of the canvas and the curved shape below it, both of which seem to emerge from the shadows thanks to an unseen—and ambiguous—light source.

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***Abstraction*, 1926**  
Oil on canvas

Gift of Robert Allerton through the Friends  
of the Academy, 1945 (311.1)

Strongly influenced by cubism, Léger also had great confidence in the modern machine. He incorporated machinery parts such as pistons, cylinders, and cogged wheels into his compositions, often meshing them with robotlike human figures. This work, however, is one of the few truly nonrepresentational paintings in Léger's oeuvre. He developed flat planes of color to suggest the flatness of a wall, but the black, blue, gray, and orange-red rectangles overlap, seemingly retreating and advancing. He accented this evocative sense of space with the white ovoid and the curved shape below. Because of the curving lines and their shading, the viewer's eye is led around them and into the ambiguous space created by the tinted rectangles and white background. The only personal touch in this meticulous composition is Léger's signature and the date placed in the lower right corner.