

July 2011 Spotlight
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum
by Meredith Malone, associate curator



Fernand Léger (French, 1881-1955)
***Les Belles cyclistes*, 1944**

[Fernand Léger's *Les Belles*](#)

[*cyclistes* \(1944\)](#) depicts a group of four physically powerful women dressed in shorts and t-shirts at rest during a bicycle outing. The women stand together with their arms on each other's shoulders, their highly stylized and disjointed

bodies intertwined with their bicycles. Rendered using only thickly drawn outlines and selective modeling, these stout, frontal figures appear emotionless, staring blankly out at the viewer as if posing for a picture. But this is not to say that Léger's composition is devoid of emotion or feeling. The artist's considered use of vibrant contrasts of bold line, simplified form, and abstract planes of pure color (red, blue, yellow, and green) infuses the composition with a joyous visual dynamism and energy. Unlike Léger's other versions of the theme of the cyclists from this period, in which he clearly anchored his bicycle party in a rural setting through the inclusion of elements such as a rustic fence, trees, rocks, flowers, and clouds, the figures in *Les Belles cyclistes* are not situated in any recognizable location. Existing in neither city nor country, these robust women and their vehicles are depicted in an abstract colored space.

Painted at the height of World War II, while the artist was in exile in the United States during the German occupation of France, this modest easel painting offers a compelling view into Léger's struggle to advance his longstanding sociopolitical ambition to put modern art at the

service of the common man through an exploration of the psychological effects of light and color.¹ *Les Belles cyclistes* represents a confluence of ideas first formulated in France and influenced by Léger's involvement with the cultural debates of France's short-lived leftist Popular Front government in the mid-1930s—namely, a turn to popular subjects with the goal of establishing a new optimistic civic art with the human body as its object—but notably conditioned by the outbreak of war and the artist's exile in America.²

Ideologically, Léger was always more concerned with the France he had left in 1940 than with America's distanced position from the struggle against Fascism in Europe. The artist was never interested in assimilating; rather, as his friend and architectural critic Sigfried Giedion explained, Léger recreated “a kind of Parisian atmosphere” around his studio near Fifth Avenue in New York, “expounding plans and commenting upon the American scene” with friends such as Alexander Calder and José Luis Sert.³ What most intrigued Léger about the US were the country's abundant contrasts, between its vast natural resources and immense mechanical forces, its great vitality and its excessive waste.⁴ “Nowhere else have I found such an energetic and dynamic atmosphere,” he stated. “The French public will be amazed when it compares my

¹ Léger would not become an official member of the Communist Party until the end of his stay in New York in 1945, but his leftist political leanings were evident since the 1910s, dating back to his time as a soldier during World War I. Léger often referenced his experience during the war, in which he lived alongside workers, laborers, and miners, as a foundational moment that allowed him “to discover the People and to change completely.” See Léger, “Art and the People” (1946), in his *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 143. For more on Léger's political beliefs during this period, see Sarah Wilson, “Fernand Léger: Art and Politics, 1935–1955,” in *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Whitechapel, 1987), 55–75.

² Léger arrived in New York on November 12, 1940, and stayed until December 1945. For overviews of Léger's life, work, and reputation in America, see Carolyn Lanchner, “Fernand Léger: American Connections,” in *Fernand Léger* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 15–70; and Simon Willmoth, “Léger and America,” in *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, 43–54

³ Sigfried Giedion, “Some Words on Fernand Léger” (1955), in his *Architecture, You and Me: the Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 53–54. Léger always maintained a strong predilection for his native culture and language; though living in the US for many years, he never learned English.

⁴ See Léger's interview with James Johnson Sweeney, “Eleven Europeans in America,” in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 13, nos. 4 / 5 (1946): 13–14.

American painting with my pre-American output. America has added color to my palette.”⁵

What the artist was referring to is the bright color overlays that appear in his paintings in the early 1940s, layers of free-floating color planes that appear to arbitrarily interpenetrate the strong black outlines of his simplified figures and objects. While the separation between color and drawing was a fundamental Cubist device, one that had been of paramount importance for Léger since the 1910s, it became markedly more acute in his paintings of the 1940s. In *Les Belles cyclistes*, Léger juxtaposes color and representational form in a way that maintains both elements as distinct from each other. The geometric bands both highlight and fragment the human figure, confusing the spatial relationships between these bodies while also complicating any clear division between background and foreground. The seemingly random swaths of primary and secondary color introduce into the composition a complex sense of space and movement despite the static nature of Léger’s drawing style.

The artist attributed much of the increased chromatic vitality in his American work to the garish fashions and the modern advertising techniques he experienced in New York and other American cities.⁶ He noted in particular the impact of the colorful fashions of young American women he encountered: “Girls in sweaters with brilliant colored skin; girls in shorts dressed more like acrobats in a circus than one would ever come across on a Paris street. If I had only seen girls dressed in ‘good taste’ here I would never have painted my *Cyclist* series....”⁷ Léger’s discourse on color theory was often organized around descriptions of popular clothing styles,

⁵ Léger, as quoted in “Art: Machine Age, Paris Style,” *Time*, March 18, 1946.

⁶ Léger spent much time in New York City during his period of exile, but he also made trips to the American Midwest, and Southwest, and to California.

⁷ Léger, as quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, “Eleven Europeans in America,” 15.

accessories, and even women's make-up.⁸ Modern art, in Léger's view, needed to share the creative impulse, adaptability, and relentless urge to modernize that characterizes fashion design.

The appearance of geometric, flat color planes of blue, red, yellow, and green moving in and out, as well as across, the group of figures in *Les Belles cyclistes* was also inspired by the flashing lights of Broadway. Speaking to Dora Vallier in 1952, Léger explained:

In 1942, when I was in New York I was struck by the advertising projectors on Broadway which played upon the street....You're talking to someone and all of a sudden he becomes blue. As soon as that color passes another comes and he becomes red or yellow. That kind of color, the color of the projector, is free; free in space. I would like to have the same thing in my canvases. It is very important for mural painting because that has no scale, but I have also used them in my easel paintings.⁹

In *Les Belles cyclistes*, Léger created with paint a new visual equivalent to the ambient effects of the electronic lights of Broadway, letting color act as an abstract agent that both enlivens and fragments his stylized bodies. It is important to note that while Léger recognized the innovations and pervasiveness of advertising—in his writings he often marveled at its ability to take possession of the roads and transform the landscape—he was never interested in merely illustrating or reproducing the chaos of publicity posters and the colored spectacle littering the urban metropolis. Rather, his aesthetic approach, based on the translation and precise orchestration of the visual world of the modern city, was very much driven by a progressive social imperative formulated in France and underscored by a belief in the mental and physical effects of color in everyday life.

Beyond a mere decorative supplement or ornament, Léger valued color as a necessary life force. In a 1938 essay titled "Color in the World," he wrote, "Color is a vital necessity. It is a raw

⁸ For more on Léger's color theory and its relationship to both the economy of fashion and the modernist white wall, see Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 262.

⁹ Léger, as quoted in Dora Vallier, "La Vie fait l'oeuvre de Fernand Léger," *Cahiers d'Art 2* (1954): 156.

material indispensable to life, like water and fire. Man's existence is inconceivable without an ambience of color."¹⁰ He went on to discuss the colors of the countryside in the years proceeding World War I, the colorlessness of the war years, and the confused cacophony of color produced by modern advertising. It was up to the painter to "organize this whole riot of colors."¹¹ Convinced that modern space must be colored space, he strove to extend his painterly practice beyond the individual-oriented and commodified easel painting to that of the communal wall, creating environments for the common man through a new orientation in mural painting. Despite the cataclysmic world picture of the 1940s, and the drastically different environment politically and materially in the US, Léger's positivist theory of color did not appear to waver. If anything, his desire to invest modern art and architecture with new means of collective expression was given renewed urgency during the war.¹² Though the poor man "cannot find a space of liberation through the help of a masterpiece upon his wall," he could, Léger reasoned in his 1943 essay "On Monumentality and Color," be stimulated by the realization of a colored space that responds to humanity's vital need for light and color.¹³

While easel painting dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Léger strongly believed that a renaissance of mural arts was on the horizon and regarded collaboration with modern architects as the most promising avenue for shaping the emotional life of the masses.¹⁴

¹⁰ Léger, "Color in the World" (1938), in *Functions of Painting*, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹² Léger gave many lectures while living in the US on color in modern painting and in architecture, and co-authored the 1943 position paper titled "Nine Points on Monumentality" with architectural critic and historian Sigfried Giedion and architect Jose Luis Sért. In this paper, plans for postwar rehabilitation were laid out with special emphasis on the crucial relationship between aesthetics and civic representation in postwar society. In point nine, Léger reiterated his belief in the social and psychological benefits of color and light in the urban environment.

¹³ Léger, "On Monumentality and Color" (1943), reprinted in Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me*, 43.

¹⁴ Since the 1920s, Léger was a tireless proponent of the synthesis of the major arts (art, architecture, and sculpture) and was a longtime friend and associate of French architect Le Corbusier. For more on the mutually influential relationship between these two men, see Joan Ockman, "A Plastic Epic: The Synthesis of the Arts Discourse in France in the Mid-Twentieth Century," in *Architecture + Art: New Visions, New Strategies*, ed. Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Esa Laaksonen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2007), 30–61.

As a genre subordinate to architecture, he believed that mural painting functioned to enhance spatial awareness through color contrast, and it remained for Léger the ideal terrain for nonobjective formulations. The easel painting, on the other hand, he felt stood alone, unable to completely surrender the possibility of thematic associations.¹⁵ *Les Belles cyclistes* displays an adroit unification of the type of nonobjective compositional strategies the artist was concurrently exploring in his mural paintings—such as the now destroyed Consolidated Edison mural commissioned for the “City of Light” building at the New York World’s Fair of 1939—with an equally strong figurative component that reflects Léger’s growing ambition since the 1930s to develop legible iconography that would appeal to the masses.¹⁶ His focus on popular leisure activities and the ennobled working class has its roots in nineteenth-century French figure painting. However, Léger reinvented the tradition without anecdote or allusion to topography, using the popular motif of cycling (an activity of necessity during the war due to gas shortages) as means of involving the public in a concerted exploration of pictorial form. By placing emphasis on painting first, rather than on narrative or descriptive sentimentality, Léger aimed to set a new course for advanced, politically conscious, artistic practice distinct from that of the didactic pictorial language of Social Realism or the broadly popular representations increasingly available through movies, photography, and advertising. The artist optimistically intended that his modernist paintings would provide the common man (read the workers of France) a sort of

¹⁵ In his 1950 essay “Mural Painting and Easel Painting,” Léger wrote: “I believe and I maintain that abstract art is in trouble when it tries to do easel painting. But for the mural the possibilities are unlimited. In the coming years we will find ourselves in the presence of its achievements” (*Functions of Painting*, 162).

¹⁶ The social role of mural painting was also very current in 1930s America as the WPA offered new opportunities for enacting public art. Léger understood the context of New Deal America as an opportunity for securing his own commissions for murals. Before his exile during WWII, he visited the United States on three occasions, in 1931, 1935, and 1938. See Willmoth, 44.

aesthetic relief, helping them to fully grasp “the joys and satisfactions which the modern art work can give.”¹⁷

While *Les Belles cyclistes* exemplifies Léger’s ongoing aesthetic experimentation with hybrid relationships between abstraction and figuration, between line and color, it could also be understood as a prototype, presenting in small-scale his grand vision to expand his aesthetic practice beyond the canvas and flood the urban space using dynamic light spectacles with new chromatic emotion. The liberation of pure color in the environment, no longer bound to any object or surface, was for Léger a crucial step in the psychological advancement of the working masses.¹⁸ The idea of a multicolored city had come to him while on leave during World War I, a dynamic vision of urban life given expression in his early canvas *The City* (1919). He discussed the idea with Leon Trotsky in Paris, who was enthusiastic and urged Léger to realize his idea in Moscow, but the project was never achieved.¹⁹ Léger revived the notion after his first visit to New York City in 1931, and proposed an expanded version for the Paris International Exhibition in 1937, which would have involved engaging 300,000 unemployed French laborers to sandblast the facades of Paris so that powerful projectors installed in the Eiffel Tower could bathe the city in colored light. The municipal authorities rejected this spectacular proposal.

Wartime New York, with its dynamic commercial, architectural, and technological infrastructure, offered renewed possibilities for the realization of Léger’s projected chromatic vision. In 1942, for example, Léger was invited by architect Paul Nelson to speak to a committee of the US Housing Authority in Washington, DC, which was charged with providing housing for war workers, about his ideas for using color in town planning. Léger outlined a theory that involved combining colors to produce different effects in various areas of the town: in the center,

¹⁷ Léger, “The New Realism Goes On” (1937), in *Functions of Painting*, 118.

¹⁸ See Léger, “Modern Architecture and Color” (1946), in *Functions of Painting*, 152.

¹⁹ See Léger, “A New Space in Architecture” (1949), in *Functions of Painting*, 158.

brilliant colors would be combined in a “cocktail” in order to reflect the excitement and variation of its activity. Outside the city center, color was to become less intoxicating, with one strong color balancing more neutral tones in residential areas to produce a more intimate atmosphere that would have a positive emotional effect on the inhabitants.²⁰ While Léger met with sympathetic supporters in the US, including Nelson, his leftist political views and modernist aesthetic was never to garner backing from officials in wartime America. When read against the backdrop of World War II, Léger’s idealist belief in human emancipation through the careful organization of color and light appears as a gesture of hope for the future, for a radical rebuilding and restructuring of Europe (and France specifically) based on collective ideals, and for overcoming the chasm opened up between rationalist thought and feeling.

Despite Léger’s monumental public aspirations, commissions for large-scale mural paintings, other than temporary manifestations, did not occur in any great number until the last decade of his life, and his projects for spectacular colored environments never materialized beyond his elaborate proposals. Easel painting always remained for him of primary importance for both aesthetic experimentation and economic stability. *Les Belles cyclistes* stands as a formidable statement of Léger’s aesthetic response to his life as an émigré in wartime America, as well as his ongoing efforts to advance ideals of activist social improvement through avant-garde aesthetic practice.

²⁰ Simon Willmoth describes Léger’s 1942 proposal in his essay “Léger and America,” in *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, 47. See also Ruth Ann Krueger Meyer, “Fernand Léger’s Mural Paintings 1922–55,” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1980), 253.