

Fernand Léger and the Creation of *La Création du Monde*:  
*Le Nègre*, Mechanical Abstraction, and the Spectacle

by

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Thesis directed by Professor Albert Alhadeff

In 1923, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris saw the debut of a ballet production unlike anything it had ever seen. The production of *La Création du Monde* was the result of a collaborative process, which pulled from every artistic corner of Paris. Beginning with Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, the group of creators expanded to include Darius Milhaud, Jean Börlin, and Rolf de Maré. Each man's contribution to the creation and design of *La Création du Monde* was paramount, as were the cultural influences weaving through each contribution. While this paper does touch on all of the collaborators and their unique artistic métier as it manifests in the production, the focus is Fernand Léger and his contribution to the production of *La Création du Monde*. In order to truly understand Léger's designs for the set and costumes, a ground work must first be laid in which his work leading up to 1923 is explored, revealing theories and practices that consistently run through his artistic production from the first decade of the twentieth century to his collaborative work on *La Création du Monde*. Moreover, this paper discusses concurrent popular trends in Paris, which play a crucial role in the conception, design, and production of all aspects of *La Création du Monde*.

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*This thesis is dedicated to my parents.*

## CONTENTS

## Chapter

INTRODUCTION .....	1
1: FERNAND LÉGER AND <i>LE RAPPEL À L'ORDRE</i> .....	13
2: THE CREATORS AND <i>LA VOGUE NÈGRE</i> .....	36
3: FERNAND LÉGER AND THE CREATION OF <i>LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> .....	60
CONCLUSION: .....	84
FIGURES:.....	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	130

## FIGURES

## Figure

1. <i>LE BALCON</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1914.....	88
2. FERNAND LÉGER AND UNKNOWN SOLDIER AT THE FRONT .....	88
3. <i>LA VILLE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1919 .....	89
4. <i>NUS DANS LA FORÊT</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1919.....	89
5. <i>PORTRAIT OF DANIEL-HENRY KAHNWEILER</i> , PABLO PICASSO, 1910 .....	90
6. <i>LE PORTUGAIS (THE EMIGRANT)</i> , GEORGES BRAQUE, 1911-12.....	90
7. <i>CONTRAST OF FORMS</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1913.....	91
8. <i>CONTRAST OF FORMS</i> , DETAIL OF FIGURE 7 .....	91
9. <i>STUDY FOR CONTRAST OF FORMS</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1913.....	92
10. <i>LE PARTIE DE CARTES</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1917.....	92
11. <i>LE MÉCANICIEN</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1920.....	93
12. <i>FEMME ET ENFANT AU BORD DE LA MER</i> , PABLO PICASSO, 1921 .....	93
13. <i>NATURE MORTE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1924.....	94
14. <i>STILL LIFE</i> , CHARLES-ÉDOUARD JEANNERET, 1920.....	94
15. <i>STILL LIFE WITH GLASS OF RED WINE</i> , AMEDÉE OZENFANT, 1921 .....	95
16. <i>STILL LIFE WITH A BEER MUG</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1921-22.....	95
17. <i>THE CREATORS</i> , c. 1923.....	96
18. AFRICAN SCULPTURES AND MASKS IN THE STUDIO OF ANDRÉ DERAÏN, c. 1912-13 .....	96
19. FIRST EDITION COVER OF <i>NEGERPLASTIK</i> , 1915.....	97
20. <i>SOLDIERS FROM THE 369TH</i> , 1919.....	97

21. JEAN BORLIN IN THE COSTUME FOR <i>SCULPTURE NÈGRE</i> , 1920 .....	98
22. ROLF DE MARÉ AND JEAN BORLIN ON THE ROOF OF THE THEATRE DE CHAMPS-ÉLYSEES, 1924.....	98
23. THE DANCERS OF THE BALLET SUÉDOIS, 1923 .....	99
24. DARIUS MILHAUD, C. 1923 .....	99
25. LES SIX, 1920 .....	100
26. BLAISE CENDRARS, C. 1914 .....	100
27. COVER OF <i>L'ANTHOLOGIE NÈGRE</i> , 1921 .....	101
28. FERNAND LÉGER (CENTER LEFT) WITH ROLF DE MARÉ AND JEAN BÖRLIN (BEHIND LÉGER) AT A BAL-MUSETTE, C. 1921 .....	101
29. JOSEPHINE BAKER AND JOE ALAN, <i>DANSE SAUVAGE</i> , 1925 .....	102
30. <i>STUDY OF BAMBARA ANTELOPE HEADDRESS FOR LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, C. 1922 .....	103
31. CHI WARÀ FIGURE, BAMANA PEOPLES, MALI, 19TH- EARLY 20TH CENTURY .....	103
32. <i>THE DISCS</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1918.....	104
33. <i>COSTUME STUDY FOR LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	105
34. <i>STANDING FIGURE</i> , MAMBILA PEOPLE, CAMEROON, 19TH- EARLY 20TH CENTURY .....	105
35. <i>STANDING FIGURE WITH HELMET-SHAPED HEAD</i> , DOGON PEOPLE, MALI, LATE 19TH- EARLY 20TH CENTURY .....	106
36. <i>SEATED COUPLE</i> , DOGON PEOPLE, MALI, C. EARLY 20TH CENTURY .....	106
37. <i>COSTUME STUDY FOR LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	107
38. <i>STILL LIFE WITH MECHANICAL ELEMENTS</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1918 .....	107
39. <i>UNKNOWN FIGURE FROM NEGERPLASTIK</i> .....	108

40. <i>COSTUME STUDY FOR BIRD</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, c. 1923 .....	108
41. <i>STUDY FOR DEITIES</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1922 .....	109
42. <i>STUDY FOR DEITIES</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, 1922 .....	109
43. <i>STUDY FOR A DEITY WITH FOUR FACES</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1922 .....	110
44. <i>DEITY TWO</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1922 .....	110
45. <i>STUDY FOR DEITIES</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	111
46. <i>STUDY FOR DEITIES AND BACKDROP</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	111
47. <i>DESIGN FOR DEITIES AND BACKDROP FOR</i> LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	112
48. <i>COSTUME DESIGNS FOR</i> LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	112
49. <i>LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , c. 1923 .....	113
50. <i>MAQUETTE FOR</i> LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, c. 1923 .....	113
51. FULL STAGE MAQUETTE OF <i>LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , 1923 .....	114
52. <i>CREATION DEITIES</i> .....	114
52. <i>CREATION DEITIES</i> .....	115
53. <i>MESSENGERS OF THE GODS</i> .....	116
54. <i>HUMANOID FIGURES</i> .....	117
55. <i>BIRDS</i> .....	118
56. <i>BEETLES</i> .....	118
57. <i>MONKEYS</i> .....	119
58. <i>FIRST MAN AND FIRST WOMAN</i> .....	120
59. SKETCH FOR COSTUME DESIGN FOR <i>LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER,	

c. 1923.....	120
60. <i>TOTEMIC (ARCHAIC) FIGURE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	121
61. <i>TOTEMIC FIGURE STUDY FOR LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	121
62. <i>COSTUME DESIGNS FOR MONKEYS</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1923 .....	122
63. (A AND B) <i>DESIGNS FOR BIRD</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1923.....	123
64. <i>WOMAN AND MAN COSTUME DESIGN</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1923 .....	124
65. <i>LUNES EN PAPIER, PG 21</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1921 .....	124
66. <i>THREE DEITIES</i> , LA CRÉATION DU MONDE, FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1923 .....	125
67. <i>DIE HELMET MASKM BAULE PEOPLE</i> , CÔTE D'IVOIRE.....	125
68. <i>SALMSON 2 A2 TWO SEAT RECONNAISSANCE BIPLANE</i> .....	126
69. <i>MAQUETTE OF LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, c. 1923 .....	127
70. <i>BACKDROP FOR LA CRÉATION DU MONDE</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	127
71. <i>THE LARGE TUGBOAT</i> , FERNAND LÉGER, 1923 .....	128
72. <i>CHOREOGRAPHY NOTATIONS FOR SKATING RINK</i> , JEAN BÖRLIN, c. 1921 .....	129

### Introduction:

A hush falls over the audience as the music begins. The curtain rises to reveal a darkened stage. There are only vague outlines visible: the set in the background and a mass of bodies in the center of the stage. It is weirdly shaped, and pulsates ethereally. As the stage lights come up, three monumental figures dislodge from the background and begin to move around the stage. *La Création du Monde* has begun.<sup>1</sup>

The production of *La Création du Monde* was the result of the collaborative effort between five individuals, each contributing in their own way to the formulation and construction of the ballet production.<sup>2</sup> The founder of the Ballet Suédois, Rolf de Maré along with his lead dancer and choreographer Jean Börlin worked in conjunction with poet Blaise Cendrars who wrote the scenario for the *La Création du Monde*, which is an amalgamation of Fang creation myths<sup>3</sup> published shortly before the production in 1921 in Cendrars's book titled *L'Anthologie Nègre*,<sup>4</sup> Darius Milhaud who wrote the score and compiled the ensemble for the performances, and artist Fernand Léger, who designed both the set and the costumes for the extensive list of

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<sup>1</sup> Full scenario reproduced on pages 55-56, and discussed further in chapter two. Published in French in Fernand Leger, *Leger och Norden* (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> There have been several recreations of *La Création du Monde*, most notably and recently in 2012 by the Ballet de Lorraine with Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, in conjunction with Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson (known for recreating lost or forgotten ballet productions from the 1900s), performed at the KSV Festival in Brussels. Hilary Koob-Sassen, "La Création Du Monde – A Post-War Cubist Collage Returns to the Stage," *DanceTabs*, May 16, 2012, <http://dancetabs.com/2012/05/la-creation-du-monde-a-post-war-cubist-collage-returns-to-the-stage/>.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Melissa Mcquillin, Monique Chefdor, and Sandra Yang have cited several Fang creation stories from *L'Anthologie Nègre* as being the source material for the scenario of *La Création du Monde*. For further discussion see chapter two.

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Cendrars' *L'Anthologie Nègre*, published in 1921, was a compilation of stories, myths, and legends from Africa that had been gathered and recorded by explorers and missionaries during expeditions throughout the African continent in the later part of the nineteenth century. Monique Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*, Twayne's World Authors Series, TWAS 571 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).



characters in *La Création du Monde*. Though there is very little definitive information on how all of these men came to know each other, what is clear is their collaboration on the Ballet Suédois's production of *La Création du Monde* resulted in something unique for the stage.<sup>5</sup>

The primary focus of this thesis is the role Fernand Léger played in the inception and realization of the collaborative project of *La Création du Monde*. The examination of his contribution- specifically his set and costume designs, as well as how his theories about the theater, modern life, machines and contrasting elements influenced those designs- is not as simple as solely focusing on the multitude of preliminary design drawings that lead up to the opening performance in 1923. In order to understand Léger's aesthetic decisions for the costumes and set for *La Création du Monde*, it is crucial to establish Léger's artistic influences as they develop in the decade leading up to his involvement with the Ballet Suédois.

Typically, his set and costume designs are discussed in a compartmentalized way, claiming that Léger's designs are a representation of one area of his artistic oeuvre, or influenced primarily by the subject matter of *La Création du Monde*. Some scholars, such as Lauren Rosenstock, emphasize Léger's interest and utilization of the modern machine. In Rosenstock's essay from the controversial 1984 Museum of Modern Art "*Primitivism*" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* catalogue, she claims that Léger's "simplified type of primitivism" was nothing more than a platform for his exploration of modern, mechanical life.<sup>6</sup> She goes on to state that Léger's "primitivism" was more "accessible and acceptable as a

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<sup>5</sup> The little information there is about how the five creators met is discussed briefly in chapters one and two.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Rosenstock, "Léger and the Creation of the World," in "*Primitivism*" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin et al. (New York: Boston: Museum of Modern Art; Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1984), 474–84.

decorative idiom” because of its simplified and modernized aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> Maureen Shanahan attempts to link Léger’s set and costume designs to his time at the front in World War I, claiming his designs represent dismembered bodies after a battle “rehabilitated by ideas of sacrifice and productive labor” demonstrated in the modern factory.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars such as Judi Freeman, Melissa Mcquillin, and Louis Sacks have focused on the overall production of *La Création du Monde*, discussing Léger’s designs in a more general way, focusing on the basic visual information in conjunction with the historical facts about *La Création du Monde* and the Ballet Suédois.<sup>9</sup> Richard Brender’s article “Reinventing African Art in their own Image: The Ballet Suédois’s ‘*Ballet Nègre*’, ‘*La Création du Monde*’,”<sup>10</sup> concentrates on the appropriation of African elements for the scenario, music, and designs for the ballet. Though he touches on Léger’s influences, his primary argument rests on the African elements, claiming that the Ballet Suédois’s production of *La Création du Monde* was in direct opposition to the “predominate colonial stereotypes” in France in the 1920s, making it a more authentic representation of Africa.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This essay aligns with the overall controversy of the 1984 MoMA exhibition in that it places non-western art and culture, in this case African, in a subordinate position to western art and artists. By utilizing this hierarchical dichotomy, non-western art loses its cultural context. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen G. Shanahan, “Creating the New Man: War Trauma and Regeneration in Fernand Léger’s Designs for *La Création Du Monde* (1923),” *Journal of Art History* 76, no. 4 (2007): 207–23.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Sacks, “Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois,” *Apollo* 91, no. 100 (1970): 463; Judi Freeman, “Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois: The Convergence of Avant-Garde Ambitions and Collaborative Ideals,” in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: [Seattle]: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1995), 86–107; Melissa Mcquillin, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926: An Aspect of the Relationship Between Art and Theatre” (New York University, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Brender, “Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballet Suédois’s ‘*Ballet Nègre*’, ‘*La Création Du Monde*’,” *Dance Chronicle* 9, no. 1 (1986): 119–47.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

I posit that Fernand Léger's designs for the set and costumes for Ballet Suédois's production of *La Création du Monde* are a mélange of Léger's artistic influences and experiences. I argue that Léger's longstanding creative convictions (the law of contrasts, mechanical abstraction, modern man) directly engage with the popular trends in Paris in the 1920s surrounding Africa, and are present within his designs for the set and the costumes for *La Création du Monde*, and not limited to one primary influence such as the modern machine, the war, or the African subject matter as has been argued previously.

\*

In 1920, art critic Maurice Raynal wrote in an essay titled *Fernand Léger: Vingt tableaux*:

The frenetic hours of war through which Léger lived, and the love of life they evoked in him, confirmed his old predisposition to enjoy only the dynamic aspect of nature's pageants, or that of the works of men.<sup>12</sup>

This eloquently defines some of the most important elements in Fernand Léger's artistic process: the modern spectacle,<sup>13</sup> man-made machines, and the contrast between the two. In the 1920s Léger, living and creating in the "cosmopolitan witches brew,"<sup>14</sup> was surrounded by a rapidly evolving art scene, one that was responding to the war as well as embracing the new popular trends that swept Paris.

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<sup>12</sup> Essay reprinted in Anna Vallye et al., eds., *Léger: Modern Art and the Metropolis* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Léger links the modern spectacle to what he calls the object-spectacle. The object-spectacle, in short, is the modern spectacle compressed, exaggerated, and represented in the visual arts. This is discussed further in the rest of the paper.

<sup>14</sup> Thora Dardel, wife of Nils Dardel and lifetime friend and supporter of Léger, said of Paris in the 1920's "Paris became a cosmopolitan witches brew in which the stimulus consisted of sexual emancipation, cocaine, hashish, and spirits." Erik Näslund, *Rolf de Maré: Art Collector, Ballet Director, Museum Creator* (Alton: Dance books, 2009).

Influenced by movements such as Orphism, Impressionism, and Cubism, his pre-World War I works demonstrated interests and theories that were prominent among the avant-garde in Paris, but also farther abroad. For instance, Léger demonstrated an interest in similar modern phenomena as the Italian Futurists, specifically movement, speed, precision, and mechanization—though he adamantly denied being a Futurist (Fig 1).<sup>15</sup> In *Le Balcon* from 1914, Léger's exploration of movement and mechanization are apparent. Several humanoid figures constructed out of metallic cylinders, screws and tubes advance toward the viewer on a narrow balcony. It was during this time Léger developed his law of contrasts, which he defines as “an external...method of creating an equivalence to life...”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more succinctly, Léger states that the law of contrasts is the complete “orchestration and order” of “volumes, lines, and colors.”<sup>17</sup> His pre-war influences and personal artistic discoveries (law of contrasts, the spectacle of modern life, and the machine) carried him through the war, becoming more refined while he was serving in the trenches.

In 1914 the war disrupted everything. Speaking about the war Léger said “Nobody saw the war- hidden, disguised, creeping on all fours, earth-colored- the useless eye saw nothing. Everyone ‘heard’ the war. It was a vast symphony that no musician or composer has yet equaled: ‘Four Years Without Color.’”<sup>18</sup> The experiences he had during his enlistment drove him further

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<sup>15</sup> In a letter written in 1922, Léger states “I consider that a machine gun or the breech of a .75 is more worth painting than four apples on a table or a Saint Cloud landscape, and I’m not a Futurist either.” Quoted in De Francia. Peter De Francia, *Fernand Léger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Fernand Léger, “Notes on Contemporary Plastic Life- 1923,” in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 25.

<sup>17</sup> According to Léger, volumes, lines and colors are the basic elements for creating a visual work. Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> In the previous paragraph, Léger describes the war as being grey and camouflaged; there was no color, because it made you a target. Fernand Léger, “Color in the World- 1938,” in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 70–73.

in the development of the law of contrasts and the incorporation of metallic mechanical components into his paintings.

After the war, Léger's work began to express his understanding and perception of what it meant to live in modernity. He strove to create images that spoke to the French people as a whole, inclusive paintings that would reflect- and be enjoyed by- the factory workers, the mechanics, the laborers. These were the men he served with, whom he spent months upon months with stuck in the trenches at the war front (Fig 2).

I came out of a milieu of intellectuals made up of Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and other friends and found myself with peasants, laborers, miners, bargemen. But I was built as they were, and as strong. I wanted my work as a painter and the imagery which would emerge from that work to be as tough as their slang, to have the same direct precision, to be as healthy...I felt the body of metal in my hands, and allowed my eye to stroll in and around the geometry of its sections.<sup>19</sup>

Léger's understanding of life had evolved to encompass much more than before the war. The increasing ubiquity of machines, factories, technology, and the influx of people, both French natives and foreigners, to Paris created a city that vibrated with activity. In an essay published in 1924, Léger explains, "the rhythm is so dynamic that a 'slice of life' seen from a café terrace is a spectacle. The most diverse elements collide and jostle one another there. The interplay of contrasts is so violent that there is always exaggeration in the effect that you glimpse."<sup>20</sup>

This is the basic element upon which Léger's theories of the object-spectacle are constructed. As we will see, Léger's object-spectacle plays a major role in his artistic production

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<sup>19</sup> The metal to which Léger is referring is the weaponry he encountered in the First World War. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> He goes on to say, "On the boulevards two men are carrying some immense gilded letters in a handcart; the effect is so unexpected that everyone stops and looks. This is the origin of the modern spectacle." Fernand Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924," in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 35.

after the war, and has a tangible impact on his collaboration in 1923 with the Ballet Suédois on *La Création du Monde*. The object-spectacle as Léger conceived it is the ultimate representation of modern life; it is the seamless integration of man with the technological advances around him, an illustration of the dynamic, jostling, often violent and conflicting visual experience of living in the city.<sup>21</sup> The spectacle is “all embracing, drawing upon a heightened perception and response to everyday life.”<sup>22</sup> Color, movement, sound, and activity in surprising and unexpected combinations were the trifecta that defined the modern metropolis, and Léger sought to harness them in order to create an object-spectacle that radiated the same energy found on the city streets, which is manifested in his 1919 painting, *La Ville* (Fig 3).<sup>23</sup> *La Ville* is a dizzying composition with a strong vertical emphasis, perpetuated by the stairs, streets, typography, and scaffolding. The array of colors, zigzagging and diagonal lines, and circular shapes are indeed a static translation of what a brief walk down a city street is like.

Chapter one introduces Fernand Léger, explaining his influences, friends, and artistic developments in Paris before the outbreak of the war, an important step to establish and understand his motivation and theories regarding artistic process before his time at the front. Subsequently, a discussion about the role war played in Léger’s life, as well as the artistic climate in Paris during and after World War I ended is necessary to further substantiate the significant events and elements that influenced Léger’s career. The establishment of his artistic

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<sup>21</sup> For a more in depth discussion about the spectacle, see Léger’s essay “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle” in *Functions of Painting*.

<sup>22</sup> Melissa Mcquillin, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926: An Aspect of the Relationship Between Art and Theatre” (New York University, 1979), 32.

<sup>23</sup> These principles associated with the modern metropolis and the object-spectacle, also extended into his paintings, such as *La Ville* (Fig 3), *The Transmission of Energy* (1937), and *Man in the City* (1954).

influences is crucial to understanding his aesthetic decisions in the development of the Ballet Suédois's production *La Création du Monde*.

Additional to the impact the Great War had on Fernand Léger and his fellow collaborators on the creation of the *Création du Monde*, it is equally important to look at some of the broader external factors that began to influence Paris as the 1920s approached. Chapter two takes time to delineate the cultural climate in Paris, specifically *negrophilia*- or the sudden Parisian obsession with Africa, jazz, and “primitive” art, as well as a brief discussion regarding the evolving demographics of Paris after 1918. The art historical usage of terms such as “primitive”, “tribal”, and the like perpetuate the historical precedence perpetrated by colonial powers, such as France, that non-western cultures from Africa, Oceania, the Americas, and more were the antithesis of western cultures. More specifically, the non-western, non-white peoples were un-evolved both mentally and technologically, and were therefore unequal to white Europeans. This carried over into cultural expressions such as art, music, and dance implying that art from non-western cultures is ‘less-than’ art created by western artists. Critical analysis regarding the usage of discriminatory terms such as “primitive” have been published in numerous essays and publications, bringing to light the still existing binary of “superior western and inferior non-western art.”<sup>24</sup> Patricia Leighton and Mark Antliff's article titled “Primitivism” in *Critical Terms for Art History* discusses the multivalent oppression that ideas and theories of

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<sup>24</sup> Just a few of the numerous publications addressing these issues are Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Archer Straw, *Negrophilia*; Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Edward Said *Orientalism* (1978), Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “European Primitives,” in *Cubism and Culture*, World of Art (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 24–63; Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (Hoboken : Taylor and Francis, 2012), and Simon Gunn's *History and Cultural Theory* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006).

the “primitive” and “primitivism” permeated beyond the west/non-west binary, including gender and temporality.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the term *negrophilia*, the Parisian infatuation with all things *noir* can also be referred to as *le virus noir*, as well as terms that encompass more specific infatuations with music and art associated with Africa such as *le hot jazz* and *l’art nègre*. These terms are heavily loaded with a long history of social and political prejudice and exploitation signifying the invented superiority of the white Euro-Christian in relation to the Other- the Other being defined as everything that is not white Euro-Christian.<sup>26</sup> The “primitive” Other was categorized as existing outside of western evolution; residing in a kind of temporal stasis, unable to evolve past their primal existence, ruled by emotion and inextricably linked to their environment. Terms such as those mentioned above, as well as “noble savage,” and *la race noir* were used to confine and define indigenous cultures in opposition to the western rational ‘I’.<sup>27</sup> It is out of the popular trend of *negrophilia* that *La Création du Monde* was born, and chapter two discusses the five main collaborators, Darius Milhaud, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Börlin, Rolf de Maré, and Fernand Léger, and their engagement with all things *noir*, but more specifically how that artistic engagement directly influenced their individual contributions to the ballet.

To utilize terms such as “primitive,” *la race noir*, *l’art nègre*, and *le hot jazz* is to perpetuate the binary imposed by white Europeans on to non-white non-Europeans. That being

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<sup>25</sup> Temporal primitivism refers to the assumption that “primitive” cultures exist in pre-historical times, denying the coevalness of the cultures labeled as “primitive,” removing them from time and effectively collapsing individuals and multiple generations into a single representative figure. Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “Primitivism,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> This process of ‘othering’, or defining oneself in relation to that which is not, is a “symbolic gesture of expulsion,” through which ideas such as ‘primitive’, ‘noble savage’, ‘*la race nègre*’, and the like were created. Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Archer Straw, *Negrophilia*.



said, I have chosen to employ these terms within the context of this paper because of the historical binary. It is important to remember that 1920s Parisian knowledge and associations were still strongly rooted in the west/non-west duality, and all of its racialized perception. I feel that to utilize these terms as a result of their historical implications they accurately convey the racialism that was present in Paris in the 1920s. Moreover, I feel these words precisely express a level of cultural ignorance the French had about the peoples and cultures of Africa, African-Americans, as well as adoption of “romantic racism”<sup>28</sup> that permeated France during this era.

When Jean Börlin’s solo performances opened in Paris on March 24, 1920, he set the stage and pace for the Ballet Suédois. More adventurous and experimental than Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe,<sup>29</sup> the Ballet Suédois quickly began to tap the avant-garde artists working in Paris to be their designers and composers, making their productions visually stunning. According to Linn Garafola, the emphasis on the visuality of the production is what made it modern: “a ballet was modern if it looked modern, regardless of the subject, music, or choreography.”<sup>30</sup> Because of the experimental nature of the company, the Ballet Suédois was

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<sup>28</sup> The term “romantic racism” a derivative of American historian George Fredrickson’s “romantic racialism”, and describes a form of racism in which the white European believes there is a difference between them and the black African/African-American that was somehow innate and therefore permanent. White Europeans and Americans who believed in this “romantic racism” projected an idea onto the African/African-American that was more “idealized,” focusing more on the “uneducated noble savage” than the “barbarous heathen”. Dienne Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe: Racial Patterns of Paternalism and Exclusion* (Transaction Publishers, 2014), op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> By the time the Ballet Suédois opened in Paris, the avant-garde Ballet Russe had been a well-established ballet company since 1909. However, in 1920, the success of Ballet Russe began to decline following several unsuccessful tours and the departure of his lead dancer and choreographer Léonide Messine. Messine was not the first lead dancer/choreographer to leave the Ballet Russe, and certainly was not the last. Michel Fokine’s departure from the company resulted in the discovery and introduction of Jean Börlin to Rolf de Maré. Sally Banes, “An Introduction to the Ballet Suédois,” *Ballet Review* 7, no. 2 (1978): op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Garafola discusses the importance of the visual element for a ballet production, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, equating to its modern appeal. Additionally, Garafola states

poised to perform *La Création du Monde*, a production that explored both the contemporary Parisian interest in *l'art nègre*, as well as a to produce a truly modern object-spectacle.

Chapter three focuses on Léger's costumes and set designs for the *La Création du Monde*. Looking first at his initial design sketches to postulate a time line for his development process, I hope to demonstrate through an analysis of the preliminary studies and the evolution of the sketches to the finalized designs, that Léger's initial intent was to create costumes and a set that not only responded to the *negrophilia* trend, but also stayed faithful to the scenario as it was written by Blaise Cendrars. Through further exploration of the sketches, I hope to illustrate the shift in the designs to create an object-spectacle, as well as an emphasis on the contrasting elements as they relate to Léger's law of contrasts used to create the vast cast of characters required for the production of *La Création du Monde*.

Through my research for this paper, it became apparent that in the variety of essays written about the Ballet Suédois's *La Création du Monde*, the same series of images are cited and addressed. Additionally, in publications that discuss the Ballet Suédois as a cultural entity also engage in the same series of images that have been published time and again. During my initial research in the Rolf de Maré Archives in the Dansmusset in Stockholm, I was amazed at the amount of visual information that was available in relation to Fernand Léger's designs for *La Création du Monde*, and it is as of yet unclear why such a larger portion of this information has not been published. In chapter three I include several images that are not among the usual repertoire of images typical for essays discussing *La Création du Monde*, in order to further

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that the "new ballet" was a full citizen of the artistic polity," in that the incorporation of so many artistic elements into a production, the avant-garde ballet companies were initiated into the avant-garde community. Linn Garafola et al., *Painters In The Theater Of The European Avant-Garde* (Madrid: Actar/Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and Aldeasa, 2001), 37.

demonstrate that Léger's aesthetic decisions for the set and costume designs are a direct result of his numerous creative convictions.

Fernand Léger's designs for the Ballet Suédois's production *La Création du Monde* have been referred to as "mechanocubist", "primitive", and "cubist".<sup>31</sup> Through this paper I hope to establish that his designs expressed more than one artistic influence, and are in fact an amalgamation of Léger's continuing interest in the law of contrast, the influences his experiences at the war front had on his artistic production and subject matter, the spectacle, the impact of the cultural climate in post-World War I Paris- specifically *negrophilia*- as well as an engagement with *l'art nègre*. These factors, though somewhat disparate, connect in a riot of colors and shapes in the final designs for the Ballet Suédois' *La Création du Monde* to create an object-spectacle, which responded to modernity as Léger experienced it living in the early part of the twentieth century in Paris.

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<sup>31</sup> Though these are just a few terms used by scholars such as Judi Freeman and Sally Banes when discussing the costume and set designs for *La Création du Monde*.

## Chapter 1: Fernand Léger and *le rappel à l'ordre*

Between 1919 and 1925, the European avant-garde experienced a crisis triggered by the events of the First World War. This six year period has been designated *le rappel à l'ordre*,<sup>32</sup> and consisted of a return to more traditional approaches to art-making by the avant-garde, and a rejection of the extreme tendencies avant-garde art<sup>33</sup> exhibited in the years leading up to the end of the war.<sup>34</sup> Though not a stylistic movement, *le rappel à l'ordre* was a collective mindset that permeated the avant-garde, but also was to dominate the socio-political sphere of Paris. There was an urge among artists to return to more traditional artistic techniques such as linear perspective and mimetic representation. A reemergence of figural compositions, strong references to classical antiquity, as well as an emphasis on fertility and motherhood, all created in a more representational manner began to emerge from even the most experimental avant-garde artists.<sup>35</sup> For example: Gino Severini, a former Futurist working in Paris, turned to themes of motherhood and fertility, Georges Braque broke away from Picasso and began to incorporate classical reclining nudes, and André Derain returned to more traditional still lifes. Parisian art critic Louis Vauxcelles observed a common thread of related virtues that connected works of this

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<sup>32</sup> This duration of time is also referred to as *retourne à l'ordre*, call to order, and return to order. It is possible that this name came from the book of essays Jean Cocteau wrote between 1918 and 1926 when it was published. Jean Cocteau and Rollo H. Myers, *A Call to Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1926).

<sup>33</sup> The extreme tendencies in art being the adamant, consistent and sometimes violent opposition the avant-garde artists had for the French Academy, and artistic tradition in general. This opposition included, for example, the exaltation of modern life (in the case of the Futurists), the dismantling and reassembling of the subject (Cubism), and the complete disregard for local color, in favor of color as a means of expression (Fauvism).

<sup>34</sup> Ruhrberg goes on to say that the *le rappel à l'ordre* was a psychological reaction experienced by the avant-garde, causing them to seek more established practices. Karl Ruhrberg et al., *Art of the 20th Century* (Taschen, 2000), 45.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Silver has written several articles and a book about *le rappel à l'ordre*, discussing its affect on the avant-garde artists across Europe. For more information see Kenneth E. 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).

period; they demonstrated “a love of and respect for nature, and an intuitive and sensuous approach based on feeling, honesty, directness and innocence.”<sup>36</sup> For Fernand Léger’s designs for the Ballet Suedois’s production of *La Création du Monde* in 1923, in the heart of *le rappel à l’ordre*, the common virtues of directness and honesty are visible in the utilization of the law of contrasts- simplified patterns within the costumes, such as wavy lines, circles, triangles, and distinct blocks of pure color placed next to, or in opposition to each other creating strong contrasts between sections of color such as white and black, or opposing shapes such as circle and rectangle.(Fig 53A).<sup>37</sup>

Along side painters such as Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Gino Severini, and Jean Metzinger, Fernand Léger’s artistic practices during this time indeed saw a move to more classical traditions. Nonetheless, not all artists working within the framework of *le rappel à l’ordre* and its classical sentiments interpreted them in the same way, but the general sentiment of the period remained the same. Jean Cocteau states, “...[an artist’s] art should resemble something. It should resemble the original movements which urge him to develop them thematically.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, a work of art should utilize the traditions and techniques of the past to develop and create something entirely new. Additionally, Cocteau discusses being a poet during the *rappel à l’ordre*: “A poet, in order to save his poem, re-invents all the old familiar

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<sup>36</sup> Many of the avant-garde artists returned to themes of nature and nurture after the war, drawing on subject matter that reflected a more stable time in history. Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>37</sup> The costumes and set designs will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

<sup>38</sup> He is speaking here specifically about musicians and composers; however, the sentiment was prevalent throughout all the arts. Cocteau and Myers, *A Call to Order*, 132.

devices. He remembers how to work them, and begins again.”<sup>39</sup> This time period was not as straightforward as its definition suggests, however.

The definition of the “past” was in flux during *le rappel à l’ordre*. Though there was a very strong French nationalistic current (an emphasis on French Masters such as Ingres, Poussin, and Degas) that pervaded the French artistic and socio-political climates, ideas of the “artistic past” also included Greek and Roman antiquity, as well as (and more importantly in the context of *La Création du Monde*) non-western cultures such as Africa. Artists saw the art from Africa exhibiting sculptural elements that were more pure than those of European sculpture.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, these “primitive” sculptures provided a new artistic idiom with which the avant-garde artists could appropriate to further their own creative explorations. The ideas the Parisian avant-garde associated with Africa in regard to “past artistic axioms” however, did not exist in the temporal past the way Greek art did, but rather in a permanent cultural stasis. In other words, the African art that was becoming more and more available in Paris was created by cultures that were still living in the same state of development they had been for centuries, and were in fact unable to evolve beyond their current mental capacity, as western Europeans had.

Léger never fully engaged in classicizing elements as Picasso and Severini did. Instead, he chose to assess and assimilate aspects of artistic tradition that fit within his creative vision, leading to stylistic developments which included the isolated investigating African artistic sources for *La Création du Monde*.

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<sup>39</sup> In other words, as it applies to painting, a painter should utilize the traditional techniques he has learned through his life, but not as an end. He should use them as raw material, which can be reworked and used to create something entirely new. *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>40</sup> The “aesthetic worth” of African art was delineated by Carl Einstein in *Negerplastik* in 1915. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

In 1900 at the age of nineteen, Fernand Léger moved from his hometown of Argentan, Orne to Paris to be an artist. The first several years were lean ones for Léger, as was so for most of the avant-garde artists setting up shop in Paris. Indeed, artists who have gone down in history as crucial players in the development of Modern art were at that point unknown, poor, and looking for their place in the artistic milieu. Léger did “hack-work”<sup>41</sup> during these years, working for various architects as a part-time draughtsman, and in a photography studio as a photograph retoucher just to pay the bills.<sup>42</sup> Rejected from the École des Beaux-Arts, and declining admittance to École des Arts Décoratifs, Léger opted to become a “free-student,” learning to paint in the studios of Gérôme and Gabriel Ferrier.<sup>43</sup>

Renting a studio in la Ruche in Montparnasse,<sup>44</sup> Léger unknowingly positioned himself in one of the two avant-garde meccas in Paris, with Montmartre being the other. In these two locations, artists quickly formed friendships and connections, allies and enemies. Taking their cues from the rebellious Impressionists, the new generation of artists developed a cacophony of styles and theories upon which a multitude of “isms” were created. Unlike many of his

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<sup>41</sup> There is an extensive amount of research pertaining to Léger and his life and artistic practices, I have included here just a few. For more information, as well as more in depth discussions on specific periods in Léger’s career see Carolyn Lanchner and Fernand Léger, *Fernand Leger* (New York: London: Museum of Modern Art; Thames & Hudson [distributor], 2010). Matthew Affron et. al, *Fernand Léger: Contrasts of Form*, 2007. Yve-Alain Bois et. al *Fernand Léger: Paris-New York*, 2008. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, The Documents of 20th-Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1973), xxxi–xxxii.

<sup>43</sup> De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> The fortuitous renting of a studio in La Ruche, a building designed by Gustave Eiffel, proved to be crucial for Léger’s introduction to the avant-garde world. Here, he made friends with artists and writers such as Blaise Cendrars, Chagall, Soutine, Delaunay, Laurens, Lipchitz, Reverdy, Apollinaire, Maurice Raynal, Archipenko, and Max Jacob. La Ruche, which translates to ‘the beehive,’ was called this because of its distinct circular shape, causing it to resemble a beehive. Léger, *Functions of Painting*, xxxi.

compatriots, Léger never renounced his debt to Impressionism. In his 1913 essay, “The Origins of Painting” Léger said:

The Impressionists were the first to reject the *absolute value of the subject and to consider its value to be merely relative*. That is the tie that links and explains the entire modern evolution. The Impressionists are the great originators of the present movement; they are its primitives in the sense that, wishing to free themselves from imitative aspects, they considered painting for its color only, neglecting all form and all line almost entirely.<sup>45</sup>

Things happened rapidly during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, with artists moving expeditiously through their artistic explorations of the world. Henri Matisse, arguably one of the founders of Modern art, was a Neo-Impressionist, then a Fauvist, and then a Neo-Classicist. André Derain was also a Fauvist, moving into Divisionism, and then into Neo-Classicism.<sup>46</sup> Fernand Léger was also caught up in these artistic metamorphoses, though he never fully committed to a single movement, a trend that would continue throughout his career. He did, however, experiment and appropriate from the rapidly changing *mise-en-scène* around him, pulling from movements such as Impressionism, Orphism, Cubism, Neo-Classicism, and Social Realism.<sup>47</sup> Commenting on the artistic trends of this era, Léger states “contemporary

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<sup>45</sup> It is in this essay that Léger’s law of contrasts begins to develop, he states, “Pictorial contrasts used in their purest sense (complementary colors, lines, and forms) are henceforth the structural basis of modern pictures.” Emphasis Léger’s. Fernand Léger, “The Origins of Painting and Its Representational Value-1913,” in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Two helpful survey books discussing this time period, and the artists as they move between movements are Briony Fer et al. *Realism, Rationalism and Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, 1993, and Karl Ruhrberg et al. *Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> The chapter titled “The Formative Years,” gives an excellent overview of Léger’s artistic development. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, op. cit.



achievements in painting are the result of the modern mentality and are closely bound up with the visual aspects of external things that are creative and necessary for the painter.”<sup>48</sup>

It is important to remember during this era that among the avant-garde artists, everyone knew or had a connection to everyone else, which perpetuated the migration of developments between Montmartre and Montparnasse, led to collaborations such as *La Création du Monde*, but also brought about rivalries and competitions. Léger had many friends in these circles, and benefited from the developments that came out of the competitive relationships of artists around him. For instance, it is no secret that Picasso and Braque played off each other’s developments for years leading up to the birth of Cubism, and indeed pushing and goading each other to develop Cubism farther, and though Léger was never directly involved with either of these two painters, the developments that evolved out of their competitive relationship gave Léger a new artistic idiom with which to experiment. Picasso also had a strong competitive relationship with Matisse, the two visiting each other’s studios and exchanging paintings while at the same time trying to out-do one another with their works.<sup>49</sup>

These friendships and connections were not limited to artists working with traditional plastic mediums,<sup>50</sup> however, and many of the companionships included writers, collectors, dealers, musicians, dancers, and many others.<sup>51</sup> The pace at which things progressed for the

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<sup>48</sup> Though written before the war, Léger’s interest in the role modern life will play in the artistic milieu of Paris is already apparent. Fernand Léger, “Contemporary Achievements in Painting-1914,” in *Functions of Painting*, The Documents of 20th-Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 12–19.

<sup>49</sup> John Richardson’s books are excellent sources for the exploration of the social and romantic entanglements surrounding Picasso. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Cubist Rebel, 1907-1916*, Reprint edition (New York: Knopf, 2007), 43.

<sup>50</sup> Traditionally, the plastic arts refer to those taught within the French Academy, specifically painting, sculpture, and architecture.

<sup>51</sup> Among the individuals living and working in Paris that were included with in the avant-garde circles were Fernand Léger’s co-creators of the Ballet Suédois’s production of *La Création du Monde*.

avant-garde in Paris, in conjunction with the budding friendships and associations, resulted in a free flow of ideas with avant-garde artists feeding off each other's stylistic developments and subject matter, one bleeding into the next. The Cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, a friend and neighbor of Léger, once said of this period in Paris "...everyone was borrowing from everyone else. We all saw one another's works and the results were some kind of collective art... We were all working so intimately together that we could not help taking motifs from one another."<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, Blaise Cendrars, Léger's life-long friend and collaborator on *La Création du Monde*, spoke of the connection between painters and writers during this time: "At that time, in 1911, painters and writers were undifferentiated. We all lived together. We all had the same preoccupations. One can say that each writer was bound to his own painter. I had Delaunay and Léger. Picasso had Jacob, Braque Reverdy. And Apollinaire had the lot."<sup>53</sup>

Through Jean Metzinger's connections with Picasso and Braque, the Cubist experimentation came to Montparnasse. The developments of Braque and Picasso were subsequently appropriated and grounded in theory by the artists working in Montparnasse, resulting in an extremely rigid Cubist idiom. Léger, along with Metzinger, Gleize, Le Fauconnier, Picabia, the Delaunays, and others exhibited their interpretation of Cubism at the Salon des Indépendants in 1911, the first foray of Cubism into the limelight, an event that has

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<sup>52</sup> Lipchitz was a member of the avant-garde circles in both Montparnasse and Montmartre. Jacques Lipchitz, *My Life in Sculpture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), 11.

<sup>53</sup> This quote exemplifies the friendships and connections developing in Paris among the avant-garde during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Monique Chefdor also discusses this relationship in her book about Cendrars, *Blaise Cendrars* 1980. Quoted in De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 19.

since labeled them as the ‘Salon Cubists.’<sup>54</sup> Picasso and Braque condemned them, believing they had warped Cubism with theory.<sup>55</sup>

*Nus dans la forêt* (Fig 4) was the first Cubist work Léger exhibited,<sup>56</sup> which was at the infamous Salon des Indépendants in 1911 during the public accession of Cubism.<sup>57</sup> The image demonstrates the beginning of Léger’s personal adaptation of Cubism to express his own artistic sensibilities, as well as the beginnings of his exploration of contrasting elements and dynamic compositions.<sup>58</sup> His subject matter expanded significantly from the restrictive canon of Cubism, as did his stylistic interpretation of the movement. *Nus dans la forêt* still possesses the restrictive color palette, complementing those of Picasso and Braque during the high Analytic Cubist period (Fig 5 and Fig 6), which consisted of muted earth tones and little else.

Typical of Analytic Cubism, *Nus dans la forêt* is very hard to read. However, Léger’s canvas is completely filled, unlike Picasso and Braque’s images in which the subject is relatively confined to the center of the canvas, giving the viewer a definitive place to focus their attention. It seems that *horror vacui* may have played a role in Léger’s artistic production, as *Nus dans la forêt* and many other works in his oeuvre completely fill the canvas.<sup>59</sup> However, this particular painting is difficult to read in completely different ways. The monochromatic color palette, also a

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<sup>54</sup> Léger was most likely exposed to Cubism at Kahnweiler’s gallery in 1910, when he was included in an exhibition with Braque. Ibid., 11.

<sup>55</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 102–103.

<sup>56</sup> Initially exhibited at Kahnweiler’s gallery in 1910. Christopher Green, *Leger and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> According to Green, this exhibition was also Léger’s public début. Ibid., 6.

<sup>58</sup> Green, *Leger and the Avant-Garde*. op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> *Horror vacui* is defined by Merriam-Webster as the fear of empty space; specific to visual art it results in works that completely fill the canvas with design elements of subject matter creating a clustered and chaotic composition. Many of Léger’s works discussed in this paper exhibit *horror vacui* including the set and costume designs for *La Création du Monde*. “Definition of HORROR VACUI,” accessed April 8, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/horror+vacui>.

hallmark of Analytic Cubism, makes it challenging to separate the subject from the surroundings. This is exacerbated by the pandemonium of the scene as a whole; it is crowded, complicated, and seemingly unorganized- a vast difference between paintings by Picasso and Braque of 1910 and 1911.

The painting is of three nudes chopping down trees in the forest, however it could just as feasibly be three figures working in a factory pushing, wrenching, and tightening the pipes, tubes, and gears in the mechanical jungle. Two figures in the foreground raise axes above their heads, while the third crouches between them, his back to the viewer. The space and subjects are fragmented; with every element melting and emerging from the elements around it. However, Léger utilized this technique differently than the fractured space typical of Cubism, and does so for a different reason. In Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (fig 5), and Braque's *Le Portugais* (Fig 6) the space and objects have been shattered as a method of dissection. This allowed for the artists to explore a subject from multiple viewpoints at the same time, reconstructing their images to render a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional plane while still conveying its three-dimensionality. Léger adapted this technique to express volumes. Rather than deconstructing the subject, he reduced it to simple geometric forms, creating rounded and angular components shaded and highlighted to create a scene focused on the dimensionality. He said of this picture, "I spent two years grappling with the volumes of *Nus dans la forêt*...I wanted to stress the volumes to their maximum degree."<sup>60</sup> "I had been overcome by an obsession, I wanted to dislocate those bodies."<sup>61</sup> The geometric makeup of *Nus dans la forêt* emerges throughout Léger's career, including *La Création du Monde*. Though his

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<sup>60</sup> De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Eric Michaud, "Art, War, Competition: The Three Battles of Fernand Léger," in *Fernand Léger 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life*, ed. Fernand Leger, Christoph Asendorf, and Dorothy M. Kosinski (Munich: Prestel, 1994), 54.

designs for the 1923 Ballet Suédois production are not sculptural in the same way the figures in *Nus* are, and the three-dimensionality and spatial depth of the *La Création du Monde* designs are present primarily because they have been removed from a two-dimensional surface and brought onto a three-dimensional stage, rather than Léger's pictorial illusion of depth in *Nus*. There are still elements that *Nus dans la forêt* and *La Création du Monde* share: the distinctive tubular fingers, the contrast between dark and light, and a strong vertical emphasis.

Léger became increasingly more interested in dynamism, formulating what he called the “law of contrasts.” In 1923, Léger discusses painting as being fundamentally about the organization of line, color and form, and the “law of contrasts” is the organization of the “opposition of contrasting values, lines and curves... I oppose curves to straight lines, flat surfaces to molded forms, pure local colors to nuances of grey.”<sup>62</sup> The law of contrasts was an important framework for Léger that continued to influence his work for the rest of his career, evolving it as he did his work. The initial exploration and experimentation of the “law of contrasts” culminated in a series of studies and paintings titled *Contrastes de Formes* done between 1913 and 1914 (Fig 7 and Fig 9).

This series of paintings and studies border on pure abstraction, and are as close as Léger would get to that in his lifetime. In his essay “Contemporary Achievements in Painting” written in 1913, Léger states: “From the day the impressionists liberated painting, the modern picture set out at once to structure itself on contrasts; instead of submitting to a subject, the painter makes an insertion and uses a subject in the service of purely plastic means.”<sup>63</sup> These paintings encouraged Léger's exploration of combining the use of representation and abstraction within a single frame, without attempting to fuse the two. The result is incredibly turbulent. The compositions are often

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<sup>62</sup> Léger, “Notes on Contemporary Plastic Life- 1923,” 25.

<sup>63</sup> Léger, “Contemporary Achievements in Painting- 1914,” 14.

painted on unprimed canvas or burlap, on top of which quick black lines are hastily drawn delineating simple geometric forms. Strong red, yellow and blue paint is scrubbed into the shapes, never filling the shapes in a solid or even coat leaving sections of exposed burlap (Fig 8). Léger juxtaposes the vibrant primary colors with pure white paint, creating forceful contrasts as the white strikes the black lines and segregates the vibrant primary colors. The result is a violently undulating mechano-morphic mass with no specific focal point, causing the viewer's eyes scramble for a recognizable feature to cling to before the viewer is engulfed. For Léger, these images spoke directly to the state of man living in the modern world: "When one crosses a landscape by automobile or express train, it becomes fragmented; it loses in descriptive value but it gains in synthetic value."<sup>64</sup> In other words, for Léger, a landscape that has been fractured by the sheer speed of a vehicle traveling past it turns into an element created by speed, becoming raw material from which a painter can pull.<sup>65</sup> Though Léger's foray into almost pure abstraction was short lived, he did continue to utilize the *Contrastes de Formes* style through his time in the war, his studies and subsequent paintings becoming somewhat more representational. The discoveries and the refinement that resulted from his "law of contrasts" during this period endured in his art through his career, and indeed had an impact on his contribution to the Ballet Suédois. Léger's designs for *La Création du Monde* possess the same juxtaposition of pure colors, allowing Léger to create the greatest sense of contrast in his designs while staying within the limited color palette of red, ochre, black, white and gray. Moreover, the colors are confined to hard edged shapes, with no blending or bleeding into one another, an aesthetic Léger used in

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<sup>64</sup> For Léger, the speed afforded to man by the invention of the automobile or the train were emblems of modern life. Ibid., 11.

<sup>65</sup> For a more in depth exploration of *Contrastes de Formes* see Matthew Affron, Fernand Léger, and Maria Gough, *Fernand Léger: Contrasts of Forms* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Art Museum, 2007).

his *Contrastes de Formes*, though the shapes in his designs for *La Création du Monde* emphasize their flatness, rather than expressing depth and volume in the *Contrastes de Formes*.

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In 1914, France entered into the fray of the First World War, an event that effectively halted the momentum of the avant-garde. Many people, both inside the art world and without, felt that Paris (and the world in general) had been on a moral backslide since before the turn of the twentieth century, effectively landing them in a state of moral decay a sign of which was cultural decadence and depravity. Analytic Cubism, with its deconstructive nature and fractured aesthetic, was seen as “old fashioned” and rooted in the pre-war moral disintegration.<sup>66</sup> As a result of this predilection, the war was seen by many as a way to cleanse the world, and return it to a more morally upright and sound state. Many of the Parisian avant-garde felt that they, as artists, would have an influential hand in the reconstruction and reordering of the new post-war world. Because of this sentiment, many vanguard artists enlisted, hopeful that the outcome of the war would be the purification of a society they saw as having lost its way. Fernand Léger was one such artist, heeding his nation’s call to serve, enlisting immediately after war was declared.<sup>67</sup> As the war wore on, the avant-garde’s idealization of the conflict was destroyed by the reality of the first modern war.<sup>68</sup> It had a profound affect on Europe as a whole, France as a country, and

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<sup>66</sup> Post-war Synthetic Cubism, however, was the antithesis of Analytic Cubism. Instead of breaking the subject down, Synthetic Cubism was rooted in construction, building or rebuilding the subject into a complete composition. Silver states, “Synthetic Cubism had been a conscious choice of direction, not a developmental ‘stage,’” meaning that the Synthetic Cubist works demonstrated the constructive spirit of post-war France. Silver, *Esprit de Corps*, 348.

<sup>67</sup> Conversely, there were many artists, such as School of Paris members Picasso, Gris and Modigliani, who did not enlist but chose to stay out of the trenches and continue to create. Furthermore, there were those who were deemed unfit to enlist, or fled the war altogether, retreating to neutral territory.

<sup>68</sup> Considered the first modern war, World War I was the inauguration of new weaponry, aviation, and trench warfare which produced new, horrific injuries including burns from Mustard Gas, head injuries from mortar and shrapnel, and the loss of all manner of body parts. The war

more specifically the mental and physical landscape of Montmartre and Montparnasse. Jean Cocteau, who helped run an ambulance during the war, spoke of the changing physical and mental landscape in France, stating “everyone was lamenting over the cathedral [Rheims], while thousands of soldiers, dying of wounds, tetanus, gangrene, and starvation, were being left at the Hospice, without any measures being taken for their evacuation, without treatment, and without food.”<sup>69</sup>

Among the dead and injured were avant-garde members such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, Georges Braque, André Salmon, and Fernand Léger.<sup>70</sup> When the survivors finally returned home, the physical and mental damage they endured during the conflict changed them; Picasso said of his close friends Georges Braque and André Derain, after he put them on the train to join the war “they never came back from it.”<sup>71</sup> Léger has been considered by scholars an anomaly among the returning soldier-artists, primarily because of the lack of any apparent mental trauma, and the seemingly positive result the war had on his art. Christopher Green reexamines this assumption, and succinctly states “the war did not disturb his fundamental idea

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affected everyone, and it is considered one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, with roughly twenty million military and civilian casualties by its close. Michael Cox and Ellis John, *The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (London: Aurum, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> Cocteau and Myers, *A Call to Order*, 89.

<sup>70</sup> Apollinaire suffered a serious head wound, and died of Spanish flu; Cendrars fought in many difficult battles, but ultimately had to have his arm amputated after the Battle of Champagne in 1915; Braque also suffered a severe head injury and took two years to heal; André Salmon suffered a mental breakdown and was deemed unfit to serve. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> There are several quotes that are said to be original, which alter the translation slightly. Kenneth Silver quotes in his *Esprit de Corps* “*Nous ne nous sommes jamais revue*” (we never saw each other again) pg. 3. In an article in the New York Times, William Rubin quotes it as “*Ils n'en sont jamais revenus*” (they never came back from it). “FRENCH ART; Challenging a Thesis,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2000, sec. Arts, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/20/arts/1-french-art-challenging-a-thesis-869813.html>.



of the modern world...What it did was finally convince him that he should openly declare [it] in his painting...”<sup>72</sup>

Léger witnessed similar horrors as his avant-garde compatriots- especially since he was stationed in the trenches- and was gassed in 1917 at the battle in Aisne, and subsequently discharged from duty shortly after.<sup>73</sup> This however, did not result in the same mental trauma so many others felt. Speaking of his time in the war, Léger said:

It was those four years which threw me suddenly into a blinding reality that was entirely new to me. Paris was in a period of pictorial liberation and I was up to my ears in abstraction when I left. Suddenly I found myself in equal footing with the whole French people. Posted to the sappers, my new comrades were miners, laborers, artisans who worked in wood or metal. I discovered the people of France. It came as a total revelation to me as a man and as a painter. Around me were men of such humor, such richness. Varied types of men who were exemplary in everyway that it gave them the exact sense of the meaning of practical reality, of its timely use in the midst of drama, this life and death struggle into which we were plunged. More than that: they were poets, inventors of everyday poetic imagery- I am speaking of the mobile and colored language of slang. Once I'd been bitten into that reality the essence and meaning of objects never left me.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 119. In her article “Creating the New Man: War Trauma and Regeneration in Fernand Léger’s Designs for *La Création du Monde*,” Maureen G. Shanahan posits that Léger was not as unharmed as Green assumes. Instead, she argues that Léger suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which continued to affect his life and influence his art well into the 1920s. For Shanahan’s argument see her article, “Creating the New Man: War Trauma and Regeneration in Fernand Léger’s Designs for *La Création Du Monde* (1923).”

<sup>73</sup> When Léger enlisted in 1914, he was thirty-three years old. He was initially assigned to 5<sup>th</sup> Army Corps as a sapper (a soldier that performs a wide variety of tasks such as bridge-building, general construction and field defenses, demolition, and minefield clearing) and later volunteered as a stretcher-bearer. According to de Francia, as a stretcher-bearer, Léger would follow “the first wave of assault troops in infantry attacks, picking up the wounded as they fell.” De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 31.

Léger continued to paint and draw during his deployment, and it was the men he served with, the surrounding mechanical marvels, and the relationship between man and machine that brought him out of the abstraction of *Contrastes de Formes*. “And at the same time I was suddenly stunned by the sight of the open breech of a .75 cannon in full sunlight, confronted by the play of light on white metal. It needed nothing more than this for me to forget the abstract art of 1912-13.”<sup>75</sup> His experiences at the front resulted in a drive to represent modern life as it was, in a way that was accessible to all- dynamic, chaotic, jarring, colorful, and violent.

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After Fernand Léger was gassed at the battle of Aisne and discharged from the war in 1917, his work underwent a transformation, one that was largely based on technique as he began to return to an artistic process that was in line with *le rappel à l'ordre* and its emphasis on traditional techniques, though his personal foray into the classicizing trends did not begin until 1920. During his convalescence, his artistic process became more controlled, with the reappearance of the subject, though still exploring the dynamic abstract elements of his pre-war *Contraste de Formes*.<sup>76</sup>

*Le partie de cartes* is a rare autobiographical image for Léger, done from a sketch created at a military hospital where he spent time recovering from his war injury in 1917 (Fig 10). It depicts a group of his fellow injured soldiers playing cards in the hospital, a familiar sight in such a setting. The jarring color palette from the *Contrastes de Formes* has carried over into this image, though the application of the colors is smoother and more refined due in part to the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> At this juncture, Léger’s subjects were still abstracted. Visually they were still tied to the *Contrastes de Formes* with similar shapes and color palette. Additionally, even though the subjects are identifiable as human, they are not mimetic, as they are constructed out of mechanical elements, which appear metallic. Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 197.

primed canvas. The faceless soldiers are constructed out of cylinders, tubes, gears, and other machine and metallic parts, with a background of hard angles and squares, similar to those Léger utilized in his pre-war abstractions. The image overall demonstrates his renewed and heightened interest in the mechanical as a means of reconstructing post-war France, as well as man's relation to the machine and its ability to create in the modern world.<sup>77</sup> "I had learnt everything, understood everything, it was there that I found the true nature of what my painting was to be."<sup>78</sup> Léger's return to a more meticulous application of color allowed him to create the illusion of metallic surfaces, increasing the overall mechanical impression. The seamless marriage of man and metal as a subject, demonstrated by the rendering of the soldiers in *le partie de cartes*, is the hallmark of Léger's *rappel à l'ordre* as well as his artistic oeuvre beginning before the First World War with paintings such as *Nus dans la forêt*. He continues to explore and develop the metal-man during the 1920s, impacting his designs for *La Création du Monde* in his construction of the set and each character, as well as the choice of design elements within each costume.<sup>79</sup>

His interest in the spectacle of the modern world, as well as his commitment to creating art that was accessible to, and spoke of the working class Parisians resulted in a different interpretation of the overarching trend of artists returning to more traditional means of artistic creation. Léger shied away from the overtly classical iconography and stylistic choices of some

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<sup>77</sup> Though Léger witnessed the incredible destructive power of the modern machine during the war, his overall focus was the use of them as a constructive tool, a means of creation. This is in opposition to the stance artists such as Dadaists Picabia and Duchamp, who "treated the machine as the agent of destructive violence, and insisted that rationality was inherently oppressive." Robert L. Herbert, "The Arrival of the Machine: Modernist Art in Europe, 1910-25," *Social Research* 64, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 1293. For more information on the machine aesthetic, see Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *Le partie de cartes* is another example of *horror vacui* in Léger's oeuvre. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 39.

<sup>79</sup> Léger's work would continue to showcase human figures constructed out of machine parts, as is seen with *le partie de cartes*. For several years, these machine-men are featureless, which changes in 1920. Other examples of the machine-man subject are *The City* from 1919, *Acrobats at the Circus* from 1918, and *The Red Disk* from 1919.

of his avant-garde compatriots, choosing instead to ground his works strongly in contemporary life. When a work such as Léger's *le Mécanicien*, (Fig 11) from 1920, which is considered a major work in Léger's oeuvre and a turning point in his stylistic development,<sup>80</sup> is compared with a work which engages with the classicizing elements of *le rappel à l'ordre* more directly, such as Picasso's *Femme et enfant au bord de la mer* from 1921 (Fig 12), the different approaches within this framework are evident.

Picasso's image is picturesque and serene, with a young woman in classical Greco-Roman dress sitting on the beach with her naked infant. The tender interaction between the two is reminiscent of the Virgin and Child, thus emphasizing the elements of traditional iconographical reference as well as notions of fertility and motherhood. Composed of soft blues and greys, subtle whites and earth tones Picasso's figures take up almost the entire canvas, seemingly overlaid on top of the modeled but featureless bands of sky, sea, and sand. Both figures are naturalistic; however they are also equally misproportioned, retaining a sense of his concurrent Cubist activities. Both have thick arms ending in abnormally large hands; their foreheads seem much too shallow, while their noses much too large. *Femme et enfant au bord de la mer*, with its traditional subject matter of maternity, the seaside location, and the woman's classical attire ground this image firmly within the classicizing framework of *le rappel à l'ordre*. Léger's *le Mécanicien*, however, can be seen as a modern interpretation of the traditional figural composition, anchoring it in modern life, rather than antiquity as with Picasso's *Femme et enfant au bord de la mer*.

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<sup>80</sup> *Le Mécanicien* demonstrates Léger's move toward a more mimetic rendering of the subject, as opposed to the mechanical metallic figures such as those in *le partie de cartes*. For more information on *le Mécanicien*, see Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Fernand Léger: Paris-New York* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008); De Francia, *Fernand Léger*; Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*; Fernand Léger, Dorothy M. Kosinski, and Christoph Asendorf, eds., *Fernand Léger 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life* (Munich: Prestel, 1994).

*Le Mécanicien* is a single figural composition, and almost the antithesis of *Femme et enfant au bord de la mer*. Léger's figure is in profile, with his body facing the viewer. The man is strong, his muscular shoulders and forearms well defined through precise chiaroscuro, though strangely tubular in shape. Incidentally, the chiaroscuro technique also gives him the appearance of being metallic. This is furthered by his pipe-like fingers holding a cigarette, the middle finger bent in a way that mimics the joint in a series of pipes. His hair looks like corrugated metal; while his forehead and cheek seem to be constructed out of sheet metal, bent to conform to the desired shapes. Like Picasso's figures, the mechanic seems to be a separate modeled element laid on top of a flat background. Contrarily, the surrounding scene in *le Mécanicien* is a riot of bold colors, contrasting tones, and an assemblage of shapes. In other words, kaleidoscopic. The colliding lines and shapes are punctuated with dashes, segments, and hollow circles- conjuring images of a factory floor filled with noise and chaos, though underneath the outward appearance of disarray is coordinated mechanical movements. The mechanic seems unfazed as he holds his cigarette, which puffs curious bubble shaped smoke. The flatness of the background as well as its well defined shapes of pure color organized in such a way to create the most contrast appear again just three years later, in Léger's costume designs for *La Création du Monde*.

Léger's commitment to modernity and the new and evolving relationship between man and machinery led him to Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, the founders of Purism. Like Cocteau and the general currents of *le rappel à l'ordre*, the Purists strove to reaffirm an artistic connection with classical traditions. They, however, did not make this connection through the use of linear perspective and classical figural compositions. The Purists (founded in 1918) wrote their manifesto, *Après le Cubisme*, and published it in their magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau* to coincide with the first exhibition of their work, which took place that same

year.<sup>81</sup> Using Cubism as a point of departure, and indeed characterized by scholars as a more rigid version of Cubism, Purism focused on the mathematical and geometric foundations in art as a means to create works that are universally beautiful, a strong Kantian sentiment. It is the utilization of mathematical foundations such as the Golden Section that allow works of art to transcend their epoch, enduring the test of time. In fact, the same mathematical foundations used in antiquity to construct classical temples such as the Acropolis are the same ones modern man used to create mechanical marvels such as the steam engine.<sup>82</sup>

The Purists saw a universally recognizable beauty in the simplicity of the machine, though this was not necessarily apparent in their art. The link between their works and the machine was more tangential than actual, as they did not actually attempt a mimetic representation of the machine. Rather, the connection relied on the fact that the utilitarian objects they included in their still lifes followed the “laws of economy” and “were analogous to the products of engineers.”<sup>83</sup>

The color palette of their works was strictly regimented; with colors divided into scales and always subordinate to form. The only truly acceptable scale to work with was the Major Scale,<sup>84</sup> as all of the colors worked in harmony with each other, none overpowering the rest. Differing from the pre-war monochromatic Cubism of Picasso and Braque, Ozenfant and Jeanneret believed that “painting cannot be made without color,”<sup>85</sup> citing artists such as

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<sup>81</sup> Christopher Green, “Léger and L’Esprit Nouveau,” in *Léger and Purist Paris*, ed. John Golding and Christopher Green (London: Tate Gallery, 1970), op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> To read the Purist manifesto in its entirety, see Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, “Purism,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: And Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood, 2nd Edition (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 61.

<sup>83</sup> Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 208.

<sup>84</sup> The Major Scale was considered by the Purists to be the most stable of the scales, as well as the strongest. It was comprised of ochre, yellows, reds, earth tones, white, black, ultramarine blue, as well as some of the derivatives of these colors.

<sup>85</sup> Ozenfant and Jeanneret, “Art in Theory 1900 - 2000,” 63.

Michelangelo, El Greco, Raphael and others as examples of great artists from the past that utilized color effectively in their works.

All of the afore-mentioned factors were taken into account by the Purists when creating a work of art, and their doctrine controlled in the strictest sense everything from proportions of the canvas, to optimal subject matter. It is through the above-mentioned connections- classical mathematical and geometric precision and precise use of color- as well as the emphasis on construction demonstrated in the simple geometric forms (analogous with Synthetic Cubism) that Purism aligned itself with *le rappel à l'ordre*. They felt that the “most essential modern experience was one of precision and order,”<sup>86</sup> bringing the classical use of accuracy and mathematics into the modern painting.

Léger shared with the Purists a high esteem for all things mechanical, as well as objects created through mass production. For the Purists mundane everyday, generally utilitarian items such as glasses, jars, vases and the like were the perfect example of their “law of economy,” and represented the ultimate version of those objects.<sup>87</sup> Still lifes, subsequently, became the ideal motif- the “creative mimicry of mass production.”<sup>88</sup> Léger’s *le rappel à l'ordre* was comparably rooted strongly in geometry. Like Ozenfant and Jeanneret Léger did not see the “geometric

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<sup>86</sup> Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 209.

<sup>87</sup> The utilitarian objects filled an essential function for man- acting almost as an extension of the human body. Objects such as containers for food and water were created by prehistoric cultures to aid in survival and were improved upon throughout the ages by way of the “laws of economy,” meaning the objects evolved into the most efficient forms, utilizing the least amount of material. According to the Purist founders, all of these objects followed a similar evolutionary process as natural selection, and all possess similar “mathematical curves.” Additionally, the move from hand crafted to machine crafted resulted in the ultimate observation of the “laws of economy,” and it is through the “phenomenon of mechanical selection that leads us to satisfactions of a mathematical order.” In other words, it is the production of these utilitarian objects by mechanical means that has allowed them to reach their perfect Platonic form; they can no longer be improved upon. Ozenfant and Jeanneret, “Art in Theory 1900 - 2000,” 53.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Green, “Léger and L’Esprit Nouveau,” 60.

order” as being radically new, merely more intense and omnipresent in the modern epoch than in any previous.<sup>89</sup>

In Léger’s *Nature Morte* (Fig 13), his association with Purism is visually apparent. Comparing this work to a still life by Ozenfant and one by Jeanneret (Fig 14 and Fig 15), Léger’s still life appears to adhere to several of the Purist requirements. Léger’s painting contains a bottle and a jar, both very schematized in a similar way to Ozenfant’s objects. Léger’s objects sit on a table, made apparent by the two legs protruding from the bottom edge of the metallic grey surface; on the table he has included a small portion of a book, its bowed pages extending out from behind the blue jar. The arched pages of Léger’s book echo the fully visible book in Jeanneret’s still life, its curvilinear pages exaggerated by the use of shading. Additionally, Léger’s piece loosely follows the color palette of the Major Scale, utilizing similar ochre, red and ultramarine.

Léger was never an “orthodox Purist.”<sup>90</sup> Ozenfant and Jeanneret formulated and regulated Purism down to the smallest details, rooting them in theories and numerical mysticisms culminating in works that were mundane and predictable. For Léger, Purism had too many restrictions and rules; furthermore he believed Purism to be far too elitist. After spending time in the trenches with working class men, Léger strove to create works that spoke directly to the contemporary workingman. In point of fact, when speaking of his pre-war abstractions, he was dissatisfied with them after he was discharged, due to their lack of accessibility to members of the working class.<sup>91</sup> Coincidentally, it was man and contemporary life that diversified Léger’s

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<sup>89</sup> Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Nina Rosenblatt, “Empathy and Anaesthesia: On the Origins of a French Machine Aesthetic,” *Grey Room*, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 93.

<sup>91</sup> John Golding, “Léger and the Heroism of Modern Life,” in *Léger and Purist Paris*, ed. Christopher Green and John Golding (London: Tate Gallery, 1970), 10.



subject matter, including modern creations extending far beyond the utilitarian subjects of Ozenfant and Jeanneret. However, it was the use of geometry as the basis for a modern visual idiom, and the geometricizing of the world that connected Léger with Purism.<sup>92</sup>

Looking at the same still lives from Ozenfant, Jeanneret, compared to an additional still life from Léger the viewer is confronted with an electrifying difference between the Purist founders and Léger (Fig 13, 14 and 15). Jeanneret's *Still Life* and Ozenfant's *Still Life with Glass of Red Wine* follow the Purist pictorial dictates, utilizing mundane utilitarian objects, the same horizontal format, with similar compositional structure. Both focus on the essential shapes of the objects, and, as discussed previously, both works implement the Major Scale. Typical of the Purist still lives, the cluster of objects is organized within a nondescript space with no contextual information; though Jeanneret does provide a doorway on the left hand edge of the frame, its inclusion reveals nothing.

Contrarily, another of Léger's still lives (Fig 16) is turbulent, effervescent, and kaleidoscopic: a painted snapshot of modern life that was anything but "still". The clash of patterns causes this work to vibrate. It is a kitchen, with a black and white checkerboard floor, a window looking out over a passing red train, and is flanked on the right by a carefully shaded blue curtain. The left side of the canvas is filled with circles, squares, rectangles, and wavy lines all intersecting and alternating in a dynamic tapestry. The table rising dramatically from beyond the bottom edge of the canvas holds a bright red beer mug, with colors and patterns that mimic those of the surrounding space. On the table are a plate of strange metallic fruit, metallic eggs, and a strip of bacon. In addition to these are a small book, three ramequins, and what appears to be a corkscrew, but strongly resembles a tiny propeller- a motif that appears several times in

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<sup>92</sup> Herbert, "The Arrival of the Machine: Modernist Art in Europe, 1910-25," 1289.

Léger's works, including one character design in *La Création du Monde*.<sup>93</sup> It is as if we have discovered the debris of a rushed lunch break, and the resident of the space has absconded without clearing the table. In this still life, we can also see the evolution of Léger's law of contrasts: black against white, circles within squares, straight lines that end abruptly where they meet a wavy line, or a pattern though all rendered with extreme precision, like a machine.

The combination of abstraction and representation, and the continued development of the law of contrasts demonstrated in *Still life with a Beer Mug* becomes a hallmark of Léger's style. He utilizes the "violence of stylistic conflict"<sup>94</sup> inherent in combining abstraction and representation to convey the dissonance and disarray of modernity. The conflict Léger creates within his paintings during *le rappel à l'ordre*, the combination of representation and geometric abstraction, the use of bright and contrasting colors, and the emphasis on the machine play an important role in his creation of the set and characters for *La Création du Monde*.

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<sup>93</sup> *Les Hélices*, 2<sup>e</sup> état, 1918; *Le Moteur*, 1918; *L'Aviateur*, 1920. According to Christoph Asendorf, Léger viewed the propeller as a representation of modern technology, movement, as well as the power of flight. Christoph Asendorf, "The Propeller and the Avant-Garde: Léger, Duchamp, Brancusi," in *Fernand Léger 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life*, ed. Christoph Asendorf and Dorothy M. Kosinski (München: Prestel, 1994), 207.

<sup>94</sup> Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 222.

## Chapter 2: The Creators and *la vogue nègre*

The five creators of the Ballet Suédois's *La Création du Monde* were all thriving members of the Paris avant-garde community after the war. As mentioned in chapter one, the avant-garde circles of Montmartre and Montparnasse were intricately connected through friendships, acquaintances, galleries, dealers, rivalries, and reputations. It was through this labyrinthine web that Fernand Léger, Blaise Cendrars, Darius Milhaud, Rolf de Maré, and Jean Börlin connected to produce *La Création du Monde* (Fig 17).

The inception of *La Création du Monde* came at an a propos time in the grand scheme of popular culture in Paris. In the 1920s, Paris experienced an influx of immigrants, specifically African-American immigrants, settling in Paris. The evolving demographics, as well as the increasing popularity of African and African-American cultural elements and artistic idioms gave rise to *negrophilia*, and *la vogue nègre*.<sup>95</sup> The Ballet Suédois's production of *La Création du Monde* was born from these trends. It was the product of the collaboration of the five great avant-garde figures listed above, each bringing his unique experiences, perspective and contribution to the ballet. "In many ways, the map of Africa was like a Rorschach test spread before the avant-garde possessed with a fierce longing to overhaul French society,"<sup>96</sup> and the creators found inspiration in that inkblot map. Jean Börlin pulled his inspiration from the *tam-*

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<sup>95</sup> Scholars such as Petrine Archer-Straw, Jody Blake, and Sieglinde Lemke discuss terms such as *le virus noir*, *l'épidémie*, *la rage* and *la vogue nègre* being used in the 1920s to express the speed and breadth at which "black" culture swept Paris. Archer-Straw explains that some of these phrases were applied to the rise in popularity of jazz music specifically, however, I believe these terms can also be used to demonstrate the more encompassing rise of African and African-American cultural elements that quickly became popular culture and a signifier of modernity in France in the late 1910s and into the 1930s. Archer Straw, *Negrophilia*, 113; Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*, 60.

<sup>96</sup> Brender, "Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballet Suédois's 'Ballet Nègre,' 'La Création Du Monde,'" 141.

*tam* and *bamboula*,<sup>97</sup> while Blaise Cendrars and Darius Milhaud looked to *la vogue nègre*, *le hot jazz*, and popular *race noir* literature. Fernand Léger began his costume designs for *La Création du Monde* with studies of African sculpture, however, they quickly moved away from an exclusively “primitive” idiom to one that incorporated the “law of contrasts,” and the modern spectacle, which spoke to him of contemporary life in Paris, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

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In 1906, members of the Parisian avant-garde in Montmartre and Montparnasse rediscovered African *l’art nègre*, which they also called “primitive” art,<sup>98</sup> appreciating it for its formal qualities and unusual sculptural language (Fig 18).<sup>99</sup> I use the term rediscovered here because *l’art nègre* had been in Paris since the beginning of colonization of both Africa and Oceania.<sup>100</sup> However, it was when avant-garde artists began to encounter these pieces outside of ethnographic museums that they began to see *l’art nègre* as more than just fetish items in a dusty museum, but rather for its formal qualities, aesthetic value, and a means of socio-political critique.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> See footnote 117.

<sup>98</sup> “Primitive” here is applied more broadly, encompassing Africa and Oceania as they were generally conflated in ethnographic museums at this time.

<sup>99</sup> 1906 seems to be the official date agreed upon, however when looking at interviews and letters from artists such as Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso it could also be 1905. Additionally, the artist in Paris who was the “first to discover” African art is contestable as Derain, de Vlaminck, and Matisse all claim that position. It is, however, generally agreed upon that Picasso was the first to effectively appropriate African forms into his works. Jack D. Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>100</sup> For further discussion about French colonial expansion see Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason*., Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>101</sup> Patricia Leighton and Mark Antliff have written several articles discussing the avant-garde appropriation of African artistic idioms as a form of social critique. See Antliff and Leighton, “European Primitives”; Antliff and Leighton, “Primitivism.” For a discussion specific to Picasso, see Leighton, “The White Peril and L’Art Nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism,” *The Art Bulletin* 72, no. 4 (December 1, 1990): op.cit. For more information about the beginning

Slowly, the collection and incorporation of “primitive” works began to permeate the avant-garde, and gradually came to represent revitalization in their works, and the spirit of rebellion and subversion against the European traditions they sought to break from. In no uncertain terms, the members of the Parisian avant-garde adamantly hailed “primitive” *l’art nègre* as embodying qualities such as essential beauty, vitality, balance, spontaneity, and the conveyance of raw human emotion. Additionally, the “primitive” sculptures they encountered in curio shops, cafés, ethnographic museums, and each other’s studios provided the inspiration the artists needed to push their art farther away from the traditions of the French Academy, and ultimately discover true abstract forms.<sup>102</sup> Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* of 1907 is considered the starting point of the appropriation of “primitive” artistic language into works by the European avant-garde.

Additionally, however, as Patricia Leighton and Mark Antliff have argued, the utilization of *l’art nègre* formal elements, motifs, and aesthetics also held a strong political connotation for some members of the Parisian avant-garde, specifically those with an anarchist or socialist political view. According to Leighton, Picasso, Derain, de Vlaminck, Apollinaire, and Cendrars utilized “primitivism” in their art as a way to declare their anti-colonial stance, or protest the French colonial atrocities that had recently come to light.<sup>103</sup> The appropriation of the “primitive” idioms to “undermine French tradition” and French socio-political critique did not, however, attempt to correct the reductive, prejudiced, and stereotypical representations of Africans that

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of the avant-garde aesthetic encounters with *l’art nègre* see *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*.

<sup>102</sup> Lauren Rosenstock, “Léger and the Creation of the World,” in “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin et al. (New York : Boston: Museum of Modern Art ; Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1984).

<sup>103</sup> Leighton is specifically referring to the French and Belgian Congo colonial administrators and the crimes of torture, murder, rape, kidnapping, and many others they perpetrated under the name of colonial power. For more information about these events as they pertain to the avant-garde in Paris, see Leighton, “The White Peril and L’Art Nègre”; Antliff and Leighton, “European Primitives.”

were still prevalent in France. The artists who aligned with, or were a part of, the anarchist and socialist groups that protested the colonial atrocities mentioned above were politically left-wing, as was Léger.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Léger associated with many of the afore-mentioned artists, and had close relationships with several of them. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Léger aligned with the anarchists or socialists, or that his eventual experimentation with African artistic idioms reflected any sort of political statement or protest about the French and Belgian colonial atrocities in the Congo in the early part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that because of Léger's leftist political stance, and his championing of the average working class Frenchman, he most likely did share the same anti-colonial sentiments exhibited by the more radical leftists, though he did not express them in his artistic practices.

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In 1915, Carl Einstein, a German writer, art historian and critic working in Paris and traveling within the avant-garde circles in Montmartre and Montparnasse, compiled the first comprehensive catalogue of non-Western art.<sup>105</sup> *Negerplastik* included one hundred and eight high quality images, and a treatise on the artistic components and aesthetic value found in the sculptures and masks created by “primitive” artists. None of the images were labeled with any identifying information (Fig 19). Einstein declared western artistic sculptures had lost their way, becoming more and more focused on the experience of the viewer. “Primitive” sculptures and masks, however, do not suffer from this loss of direction because they are strictly religious icons. In other words, the “primitive” *l'art nègre* is not created to please an audience, but to please a deity and therefore operates in isolation from the viewer's experience. This, Einstein concludes,

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<sup>104</sup> Herbert, “The Arrival of the Machine: Modernist Art in Europe, 1910-25,” 1288.

<sup>105</sup> Archer-Straw claims that Einstein collaborated with Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, one of the most prominent modern art dealers in Paris before the war, to create *Negerplastik*, however, I have found no other information that validates this claim. It does, however, raise interesting questions about the level of accessibility of this publication to the avant-garde artists represented or exhibited in Kahnweiler's gallery in Paris. Archer Straw, *Negrophilia*, 60.

has allowed *l'art nègre* artists to create a sculptural language that is more pure than the idioms used by European artists. It is important to note that the text completely ignored any contextual information about the works, including such things as the culture that created them or the original function of the pieces within their respective cultures.<sup>106</sup> Einstein's *Negerplastik* functioned solely as a way to demonstrate the artistic worth of the non-Western "primitive" works within the Western aesthetic value system. Furthermore, Einstein utilized this publication to compare the virtues of *l'art nègre* to European artistic traditions, illustrating examples of where "primitive" sculptures were more aesthetically and technically successful than western works in their cubic qualities.<sup>107</sup> This publication was extremely important in the developing stages for Léger's costume and set designs for *La Création du Monde*. As I shall demonstrate in chapter three, several of Léger's initial sketches for the ballet came directly from images found in Einstein's *Negerplastik*.

On another level, the appropriation of a "primitive" artistic language allowed the avant-garde to distance itself ideologically from French bourgeois society, whom it regarded as tainted and corrupt.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, by associating with *l'art nègre* both through appropriating and collecting, the Parisian avant-garde believed they were also appropriating aspects of the "primitive" cultures such as sensuality, spontaneity, vitality, and savagery into their lives and their works. "In this way, African figures became the totem of the avant-garde, that tiny tribe unified by its shared opposition to the rest of European society."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> At the beginning of the text Einstein does discuss the lack of information collected about the works included in *Negerplastik*, and that it would be better to exclude any partial information entirely, as not to label inaccurately. Einstein, *Negerplastik*,

<sup>107</sup> For more information on Carl Einstein's aesthetic and formal comparison and analysis see Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (München: K. Wolff, 1920) and Sebastian Zeidler, "Totality against a Subject: Carl Einstein's 'Negerplastik,'" *October* 107 (2004): 15–46..

<sup>108</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 9, 19.

<sup>109</sup> North quoted in Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*, 12.

During World War I, when Fernand Léger, Blaise Cendrars and many other avant-garde artists were at the front,<sup>110</sup> approximately 260,000 African-American men were sent to France to serve in the military making their journey to France the “largest transatlantic movement of black men since the days of the Middle Passage.”<sup>111</sup> (Fig 20) The climate the soldiers encountered was completely different from the one they left in the United States; it was one of positive acceptance by the Parisian people. As a result, many African-Americans returned as expatriates to make France their home in large part because of the experiences and reputation Paris had acquired as being far more accepting of ethnic diversity than the United States.<sup>112</sup> In addition to soldiers, African-American artists, writers, entertainers, and intellectuals also traded the oppressive United States for the more accepting city of Paris. Intellectuals such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois praised France for being the only “true democracy” and a “brilliant opportunity”<sup>113</sup> for African-Americans to be recognized as active players in modern society.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Milhaud was rejected from service on medical grounds. Though still wishing to help with the war effort, he joined the Foyer Franco-Belge, a private relief company, where he assisted war refugees by helping them find work, and providing money in the interim. Dimitri D. Lazo, “Review of Kuhlman, Erika A., *Petticoats and White Feathers: Gender Conformity, Race, the Progressive Peace Movement, and the Debate Over War, 1895-1919* and Price, Alan, *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*” (H-SHGAPE, H-Review, June 1998), <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2119>.

<sup>111</sup> Mark Whalan, “‘The Only Real White Democracy’ and the Language of Liberation: The Great War, France, and African American Culture in the 1920s,” in *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora*, ed. Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, A Modern Fiction Studies Book (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 53.

<sup>112</sup> It is important to note that though Paris provided a home with fewer racial restrictions and a chance for economic and social advancement within the less prejudiced society, which could provide an opportunity to improved their status, they were still subordinate to the white Frenchman, creating a glass ceiling that few were able to break through. Archer Straw, *Negrophilia*, 16.

<sup>113</sup> The trope of France as a place of tolerance, acceptance, and opportunity was perpetuated by a version of Paris experienced by the African-American troops that served in France during the war. This trope, however, ignored the actualities of France’s history with Africa and the islands in Oceania, and its current colonial policies. France was still actively exploiting both environmental and human resources in their colonies, and had even conscripted 620,000 soldiers from these colonies to fight for France in World War I. This reality was strategically ignored by African-American leaders in an effort to fight racial injustice at home. By turning a blind eye to



Unfortunately, over the decades Parisians conflated ‘black’ and Africa into one stereotype, with ‘black’ signifying, in broad terms, everything that was not white. Because of their skin color, African-Americans were also homogenized into *la race noire*, which allowed the French to hold onto “essentialist notions of the ‘black race’.”<sup>115</sup> Additionally, by merging ‘black’ Africa with ‘black’ Americans, the French were also diminishing the art of multiple disparate cultures to fit into the myths and stereotypes of *la race noire*. In one fell swoop, the French erased a wide geographical and temporal distance between multiple generations of Africans and African-Americans, fundamentally reducing them to the same core stereotype. By standardizing so many different aspects into a singular *la race noire*, Parisians were also perpetuating the west/non-west dichotomy established during initial encounters with unknown indigenous cultures and subsequent colonization. Consequently, even though the situation of African-American expatriates was better in Paris than in the United States, they were still the ‘Other’, and therefore ‘less-than’ the European enlightened ‘I’.<sup>116</sup> The effects this had on music and dance idioms such as jazz and the Charleston were similar to the essentialization of Africa and America. For instance, the *tam-tams* witnessed by colonial Europeans on their expeditions into Africa were conflated with the *bamboulas*, witnessed by Southern slave owners.<sup>117</sup> Both, of

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the exploitation of France’s colonial subjects, figures such as Du Bois and Locke were able to use France’s reputation of acceptance as an example in order to put pressure on the American government to adopt a similar stance of racial tolerance. Mark Whalan, “‘The Only Real White Democracy’ and the Language of Liberation: The Great War, France, and African American Culture in the 1920s,” in *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora*, ed. Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, *A Modern Fiction Studies Book* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 52–77.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 54–55.

<sup>115</sup> Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State Univ Pr, 1999)., 19.

<sup>116</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 11.

<sup>117</sup> The *tam-tam* is a group dance performed during ceremonies and rituals, and accompanied by goblet shaped drums, also called a *tam-tam*. The *bamboula* is the slave iteration of the *tam-tam*, essentialized by American slave owners and conflated with the *tam-tam*. According to scholar Simon Gikandi, the *bamboula* was a survival tactic, one that could not be defined or claimed by

course, were highly sensationalized to appeal to the general populations curiosity and essentialized knowledge of the “primitive” black race.

With the influx of African-American émigrés came a change in the entertainment scene in Paris. What was termed *le virus noir* began to take hold of Parisians leading up to the 1920s and lasting well into the 1930s.<sup>118</sup> After the Great War opportunities to experience *la race noir* diversified through the rise in popularity of jazz, and the increase in gallery exhibitions featuring *l'art nègre*, which became available for public consumption beginning in 1918 and increased in regularity as *negrophilia* spread through Paris. A year later, in 1919, the first major exhibition of this kind was organized and hosted by art dealer and collector Paul Guillaume at Galerie Devambez.<sup>119</sup> Largely an exhibition of his own collection of pieces from Africa and Oceania, he organized a *fête nègre* in conjunction with the exhibition, which was held at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées where attendees were entertained by songs and dances based on legends and tales from Africa.<sup>120</sup> It is highly probably that influential members of the avant-garde attended both the exhibition and the *fête nègre*, if we take previous soirees held by Paul Guillaume as an example. One soiree held in 1918 was commemorated in a poem by Dadaist Tristan Tzara, which happens to lists several of the guests including George Auric, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Blaise Cendrars who just a few years later published an anthology of African folktales, which

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the American slave owners. Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 23; Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>118</sup> The use of the term *le virus noir* to describe this popular trend in Parisian art and entertainment speaks directly to the stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes the French still held for Africans and African-Americans. Perhaps even eluding to the influx of ‘blacks’ to Paris after the war as being a kind of epidemic.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 57. For further discussion on Paul Guillaume and his appreciation of African and Oceanic art see Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*; Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State Univ Pr, 1999), 28.

<sup>120</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 111–112.

subsequently became the basis for the scenario for *La Création du Monde*, as we shall see.<sup>121</sup>

This event, according to music historian Bernard Gendron, catapulted *l'art nègre* “from cult to fashion object.”<sup>122</sup>

Words such as “savage,” “primal,” “animalistic,” and “spontaneous,” among others, were utilized to describe both *la race noire* and *l'art nègre*. In the 1920s, with an increasing desire among the general Parisian public to shed their bourgeois skin, Parisians began to embrace and seek out the “uncivilized” black émigrés performing in jazz-clubs, giving rise to *le hot jazz*. Though the image of *la race noire* seemed to improve among the Parisians, the long-standing stereotypes held on, shifting to fit the new obsession with jazz. Vitality, spontaneity, and potency were now associated with the syncopated beats and improvisation of the jazz bands, as well as the strong association with the “savage” African jungle, “primal” fetish sculptures, and frenzied “animalistic” tribal dancing. Jazz, and African-American performers, were suddenly in vogue, associated with modernity, and jazz was the theme music.

Additionally, the rise of a new obsession with the “urban jungles” of the United States, coupled with the “mechanical beasts” of the modern metropolis created a new version of primitivism that African-Americans and jazz were connected to.<sup>123</sup> Dance lessons, published sheet music and manuals detailing the dance steps helped to spread *le virus noir* to the Parisians, who then began to frequent both the well-established dance halls, and the brand new jazz clubs.<sup>124</sup> European composers also began to incorporate jazz elements into their own compositions, allowing the exposure to jazz to spread even wider, reaching the upper classes that did not attend popular dance halls. Furthermore, the incorporation of jazz by composers served to

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<sup>121</sup> Poem reproduced in Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 58.

<sup>122</sup> In other words, *l'art nègre* moved from being appreciated aesthetically by a limited audience to being appropriated into popular culture. Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 111.

<sup>123</sup> Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 1999, 38.

<sup>124</sup> Blake adds that the dance manuals were published by the top dance teachers, and included step-by-step diagrams of the moves, as well as photographs of celebrities dancing. *Ibid.*, 44.

bolster the idea that African artistic idioms could be appropriated into western art to regenerate and revitalize it;<sup>125</sup> according to Paul Guillaume, western art had “exhausted its energies, and was dying of a slow anaemia.”<sup>126</sup>

The appropriation of African sculptural language, the adoption and dissemination of African-American musical idioms, and the conflation of multiple cultures spanning two continents and several hundred years into a singular racial group classified and stereotyped as *la race noir* had an impact on the interpretation and reception of the various artistic elements coming into Paris from Africa and the United States. *L’art nègre*, like *la race noir*, became the umbrella term under which all forms of artistic expression were classified. Subsequently, critics, musicologists, and *l’art nègre* collectors discussed the importance of studying one element to understand the other. For instance, in 1929 collector Dr. Stephen Chauvet published *Musique Nègre*, an early study on ‘black’ music:

In order to be able to appreciate negro music, it is necessary to bring to mind the great religious, social, individual factors that played a role, more or less important, in the genesis of these musical airs. One could even say that a knowledge of the other negro arts, sculpture among others, is indispensable for appreciating negro music, because all the arts are related and explain one another reciprocally (besides, the same factors influenced their genesis) and exteriorize and objectify the same aspirations, conscious or unconscious, of the negro soul.<sup>127</sup>

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At the end of 1921, when the Ballet Suédois was still going full steam ahead,<sup>128</sup> Fernand Léger and Blaise Cendrars approached Rolf de Maré, and by extension Jean Börlin, about

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<sup>125</sup> Claude Debussy *Gollywog Ragtime* (1908), Erik Satie *Parade* (1917), etc.

<sup>126</sup> From Paul Guillaume’s essay “The Triumph of Negro Art,” originally published in the May 1926 edition of *Opportunity*, quoted in Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 1999, 7–8.

<sup>128</sup> Only a year into the establishment of the Ballet Suédois, all members of the company (the dancers, Jean Börlin, and Rolf de Maré) were still full of ideas, enthusiastic, and positive. As the years progressed, dissention and dissatisfaction grew among the dancers, causing several of the lead female dancers to leave. This ultimately led to Rolf de Maré’s decision to dissolve the

producing a “*ballet nègre*.” Both de Maré and Börlin were enthusiastic about the potential of a “*ballet nègre*.” For de Maré, the subject matter was concurrent with popular trends in Parisian society, specifically *le virus noir*, and the creative drive for the Ballet Suédois was to produce productions that were cutting edge. For Börlin, one of the ballets at his début performance was *Sculpture Nègre*, in which he performed in the guise of a wooden African sculpture<sup>129</sup> - a performance he wanted to expand upon (Fig 21).

Rolf de Maré,<sup>130</sup> founder and impresario, was the life-blood of the Ballet Suédois, literally footing the bill with his family fortune for all of the productions, including expenses associated with taking the company on tour, salaries for all of the dancers, paying artists and composers for their commissions, and securing a lease for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées for seven years. Though not directly involved in the formulation of *La Création du Monde*, he did have an impact on its production, not the least of which was agreeing to fund the endeavor (Fig 22). A series of lovers in the early part of his life led de Maré into the avant-garde circles in Paris, with one lover (Jean Börlin) being the inspiration for creating the Ballet Suédois. It was de Maré’s relationship with Swedish painter Nils Dardel<sup>131</sup> that introduced him to the world of the Parisian avant-garde artists. Dardel had been living in Paris for two years when de Maré met him, and was a part of the avant-garde circles in both Montmartre and Montparnasse. It was through Dardel that de Maré first met Fernand Léger, as the two were good friends and remained so for many years, as did de Maré and Léger. During the war, de Maré collected several pieces of Léger’s with Dardel and Madam Léger serving as intermediaries. These few purchases helped

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company. For more information see Banes, “An Introduction to the Ballet Suédois”; Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*.

<sup>129</sup> The costume for this performance consisted of a skin-tight bodysuit painted to look like wood, a “primitive” mask, larger padded gloves that also looked like wood, and long strands of straw and grasses to make a skirt and necklace. Banes, “An Introduction to the Ballet Suédois.”

<sup>130</sup> Born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1888. Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> De Maré met Nils Dardel in 1912, when they were both in their early 20s. Their relationship lasted until 1918.

sustain the Léger's through the war.<sup>132</sup> Dardel's friendships and connections with people such as Léger, as well as Dardel's personal artistic taste, guided de Maré towards a great appreciation for modern art, of which he became a great collector. His ability to purchase works began in 1912 when he started to receive dividends from his family's fortune.<sup>133</sup> His collection, which included works by Seurat, Bonnard and Monet, as well as Picasso, Braque and Léger, also served to increase his wealth as the artists he collected grew in notoriety.<sup>134</sup>

His wealth also afforded him the opportunity to travel extensively around Europe, the United States, as well as all over Asia and Northern Africa. On many of his trips he would bring his current lover along, allowing the trip to serve as a sort of educational experience for them.<sup>135</sup> Along the way, de Maré collected a wide variety of art from the places he visited, resulting in a collection that "was so remarkable, so idiosyncratic."<sup>136</sup> Of his collection, de Maré said:

[O]ne does have a chance to penetrate that particular field in greater depth than others do. Instead of owning just a few scattered fragments of the history of painting, perhaps one can be involved in living and creating an epoch. One can experience this if only collecting young, living art that has yet to become art history. One gets to know both the painters and their works from the inside.<sup>137</sup>

In 1918, de Maré met a young Swedish dancer who had left the Royal Swedish Ballet to train with the Russian dancer and choreographer, Michel Fokine. Jean Börlin became the inspiration for the creation of the Ballet Suédois, and de Maré's lover.<sup>138</sup> (Fig 23) It was through their

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<sup>132</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 92.

<sup>133</sup> Rolf de Maré's extensive family fortune allowed him to purchase art from all over the world, travel extensively, and be the monetary support for the Ballet Suédois. Ibid., 99.

<sup>134</sup> Works in De Maré's collection included Picasso's *Tête de Femme* (1910), Braque's *Le Comptoir* (1908), and Léger's *l'Escalier* (1914).

<sup>135</sup> Between 1910 and 1920 de Maré visited India, Scania (Sweden), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Siam (Thailand), Indonesia, China, Japan, the United States, North Africa, and Spain, stopping in several of these countries more than once during this time span. Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 604.

<sup>136</sup> Karl Asplund quoted in Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 312.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>138</sup> George Dorris, "Jean Borlin, A Reevaluation," *Dance Chronicles* 22, no. 2 (1999): 167.

relationship that Börlin was introduced to the avant-garde of Paris, including Léger, Cendrars, Jean Cocteau and many more. Though the love affair between Börlin and de Maré only lasted until 1924, during their time together they created and fueled the avant-garde ballet company.<sup>139</sup> Under the tutelage of Fokine, Börlin developed into a dynamic dancer.<sup>140</sup>

Börlin's début in France occurred in early 1920 at the future home of the Ballet Suédois, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The solo performance consisted of seven individual ballet numbers, with a diverse range of subject matter, music and dancing styles.<sup>141</sup> Having studied with Fokine, Börlin's choreography and performance styles aligned with the doctrines of the ballet master. For Fokine, ballets need "not to form combinations of ready-made and established dance-steps, but to create in each case a new form corresponding to the subject, the most expressive possible."<sup>142</sup> He followed this principle throughout his career. Jean Börlin was a powerhouse of an individual; within the Ballet Suédois, he was the lead dancer, ballet Master, choreographer, and a major driving force in the creative direction for the ballet company, a responsibility he shared with de Maré.<sup>143</sup> Over the five year life span of the Ballet Suédois, Jean Börlin danced in nineteen of the twenty-three ballets performed by the company; given the rigorous performance schedule including several tours, dance historian George Dorris estimates Börlin danced in just shy of nine hundred performances.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 604.

<sup>140</sup> According to Dorris, Börlin was not built the way a ballet dancer normally is. He was "clearly stocky. There is muscular development in his chest, and the torso is surprisingly straight from armpits to hips- which are not notably slim. The legs are shapely enough, but sturdy and full in the thigh." Dorris, "Jean Borlin, A Reevaluation," 181.

<sup>141</sup> *Danse céleste, Sculpture Nègre, Danse Suédoise, Danse tzigane Devant la mort, and Derviche* were the seven individual ballets performed during his solo début March 25-29, 1920. George Dorris, "The Choreography of Jean Borlin, a Checklist with the Tours and Personnel of Les Ballet Suédois," *Dance Chronicles* 22, no. 2 (1999): 203–204.

<sup>142</sup> Dorris, "Jean Borlin, A Reevaluation," 169.

<sup>143</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 313.

<sup>144</sup> Dorris, "Jean Borlin, A Reevaluation," 185.

Jazz music quickly became synonymous with both modern, fast-paced urban life and a level of rebellion against proper French society. Interestingly, this was not the first time the Parisian public had been introduced to jazz. During the 1900 Exposition Universelle, John Philip Sousa introduced ragtime to Paris, with performances at the Exposition including Tin Pan Alley<sup>145</sup> compositions.<sup>146</sup> Shortly after this introduction, some of the most popular Parisian dance halls began to capitalize on the new music that was quickly becoming a fad. Places such as the Moulin Rouge, Ambassadors, the Foliés-Bergère, and the Eldorado featured African-American ('black') performers such as Mattie Phillips, who historically have been overshadowed by the white French stars.<sup>147</sup>

Darius Milhaud,<sup>148</sup> composer of the score for *La Création du Monde*, shared several friends with Léger and Cendrars, including Jean Cocteau, Jean Börlin and Rolf de Maré,<sup>149</sup> and it is through these connections that Léger and Cendrars knew of Milhaud, and offered him the opportunity to write the score for *La Création du Monde*. (Fig 24 and 25) Towards the end of

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<sup>145</sup> Tin Pan Alley was a grouping of music business based in Manhattan, comprised of music publishers that "commissioned, bought, plugged, and distributed songs as quickly as the public demanded them." It existed from 1855 to roughly the 1950s with the rise of rock-n-roll, publishing and promoting songs such as "Come Josephine My Flying Machine" (1910), "Give My Regards to Broadway" (1904), and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911). Thomas S. Hischak, "Tin Pan Alley," *Grove Music Online*, n.d.

<sup>146</sup> Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 15.

<sup>147</sup> Though the African-American performers were promoted, it was to a much lesser extent than the European stars. Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 15.

<sup>148</sup> Milhaud's early musical education included various instruments, and developed into composing after he arrived at the Conservatoire in Paris in 1909. It is quite possible, though I have found no evidence to confirm, that Darius Milhaud would have been to the major exhibitions for avant-garde artists such as the public début of Fernand Léger with the Salon Cubists at the Salon des Indépendants 1911, and the Salon d'Automne in 1912. Darius Milhaud, *Notes without Music: An Autobiography* (London: D. Dobson, 1952), op. cit.

<sup>149</sup> Milhaud was also part of *Les Six*, six modernist composers working in and around the Ballet Suédois between 1917 and the late 1920s. Among the members of *Les Six* are Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, and Darius Milhaud. All were good friends with Jean Cocteau, who was a great supporter of all six composers. (Fig 25) Additionally, Milhaud worked with de Maré and Börlin on a previous production, *L'Homme et son désir* in 1921.



1922, as *La Création du Monde* began to take form, Léger and Cendrars agreed that Milhaud was the “the only Frenchman that could achieve” the ideal score for a ballet of such importance.<sup>150</sup> Although he was brought on well into the project and after Léger and Cendrars had begun to generate designs and a script, Milhaud completed the score over the course of just a few weeks.<sup>151</sup> For Milhaud, the opportunity to be a part of Cendrars *ballet nègre* aligned almost perfectly with his desire to create a *jazz ballet*.<sup>152</sup> Like his co-creators Jean Börlin, Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, Milhaud pulled heavily from external sources he felt exemplified the “primitive.” For Milhaud, the source material was jazz.

In 1922, Milhaud went to New York City where he encountered African-American jazz bands for the first time. Though he had experienced jazz during a 1920 diplomatic trip to London with Paul Claudel, the majority of what he heard was “white jazz,” which he later came to classify as “sophisticated,” while “black jazz” was “primitive.”<sup>153</sup> The 1922 New York City trip, which happened at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, allowed him to experience jazz at its core, as Yvonne George<sup>154</sup> took Milhaud to the as yet “undiscovered” jazz clubs in Harlem,<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *Finalement nous pensons que Milhaud est le seul des Français actuels à pouvoir réaliser cela.* Leger, *Leger och Norden*, 32.

<sup>151</sup> Notes on the score indicate it was written between May and June 1923. Sandra Sedman Yang, “The Composer and Dance Collaboration in the Twentieth Century: Darius Milhaud’s Ballets, 1918-1958” (University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), 153.

<sup>152</sup> For Cendrars, to create a *ballet nègre* meant to create an African ballet, and for Milhaud a *jazz ballet* held similar connotations, due in part to the conflation of African people, art, and culture with African-American people, art, and culture. *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>153</sup> Milhaud’s first encounter with jazz was a performance by Billy Arnold’s American Novelty Jazz Band. Additionally, however, Milhaud reconnected with a friend from the Conservatoire, Jean Wéiner who was playing jazz piano with Vance Lowery on saxophone and banjo, giving him a taste of what “black jazz” was, though on a very small scale. Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 101. Robert Ward Miller, “Darius Milhaud’s *La Création Du Monde*: The Conductor’s Guide to Performance” (Dissertation, University of Iowa, 2011), 18, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2746>.

<sup>154</sup> Yvonne George was a Belgian actress and singer who was friends with Cocteau and worked with several members of *Les Six* during her career including Erik Satie (*Je Te Veux*, 1925) and George Auric (*Chanson de marin*, 1926). William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (University of California Press, 2001), 2.

where he was able to hear “real” New Orleans jazz.<sup>156</sup> While he remained in New York, he spent every night in Harlem, hoping to “find out as much as I could about negro music.”<sup>157</sup> For Milhaud, the jazz he heard in Harlem was directly linked to Africa through the unusual rhythms and powerful voices:

Against the beat of the drums the melodic lines crisscrossed in a breathless pattern of broken and twisted rhythms. A negress whose voice seemed to come from the depths of the centuries... This authentic music had its roots in the darkest corners of the negro soul, the vestigial traces of Africa.<sup>158</sup>

Milhaud’s time in Harlem was critical to the composition of the score for *La Création du Monde*. Jazz supplied the perfect level of exoticism associated with *le hot jazz* for the scenario created by Cendrars, as well as reinforcing the link the ballet’s subject had to Africa by exploiting the association in Parisian minds between the African-Americans performers and Africa.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, Milhaud modeled the ensemble after the large jazz bands he had seen in Harlem.<sup>160</sup> Instead of composing music to follow the action on the stage, Milhaud composed a

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<sup>155</sup> Milhaud discusses the jazz clubs in Harlem as being undiscovered by the white trendsetters in New York at the time of his visit in 1922. In reality, however, by 1920 Harlem’s place as the unofficial capital of African-American sociopolitical and artistic cultures had solidified, and the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak. During this time, African-Americans moved to Harlem from all over the United States, but especially the South, as part of the Great Migration. For more information about the Harlem Renaissance see Mary Schmidt Campbell’s introduction in Alan Scuba et al., eds., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem: Harry N. Abrams, 1987).

<sup>156</sup> Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 117.

<sup>157</sup> According to his autobiography, *Notes without Music*, Milhaud spent quite a bit of time trying to understand the syncopated rhythms he had heard in the Harlem jazz clubs. He was finally able to understand and appropriate them several months after he returned to Paris, and subsequently was enthusiastic to utilize his recent musical revelation in the score for *La Création du Monde*. Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> This quote exemplifies the ongoing conflation of African and African-American. Ibid., 117.

<sup>159</sup> Yang, “The Composer and Dance Collaboration in the Twentieth Century,” 113.

<sup>160</sup> The composition was created for a large orchestra, roughly seventeen people including two flutes, an oboe, two B-flat clarinets, a bassoon, a horn in F, two trumpets, a trombone, a piano,

score that served to construct an atmosphere expressive of Cendrars' scenario.<sup>161</sup> Though he was not the first composer to attempt to utilize jazz idioms in his pieces,<sup>162</sup> he was conscious of the uniqueness of jazz, and commented that "oppressed races alone could create" rhythms such as those found in jazz.<sup>163</sup> Scholars such as Richard Brender have praised Milhaud's score for the treatment of "primitive" pieces, namely not tainting them with connotations of sin and evil. Brender goes on to say that Milhaud's score "credited African society with a highly developed, humane, and respectful civilization."<sup>164</sup> While this may be true, the score also pandered to the surging *negrophilia* in Paris. As was discussed above, jazz and the African-Americans involved in jazz performances, be they musicians, dancers, or singers, were associated with two conflicting stereotypes: on one hand the associations with the jungles of Africa, with wild *tam-tam* dances, and unrestrained physical expression held strong. On the other, they were associated with the modern urban jungle, with its cacophony of sound echoing off the mountainous skyscrapers, and the indulgences of drinking and dancing in the jazz clubs in Harlem. The "barbarism" of the United States and the "savagery" of Africa were the pillars upon which France's "civilized" people sought their entertainment.

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two violins, a cello, a double bass, and 15 percussion instruments played by a single musician. Ibid., 161.

<sup>161</sup> Brender, "Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballet Suédois's 'Ballet Nègre,' 'La Création Du Monde,'" 28.

<sup>162</sup> Milhaud followed the lead of composers such as Stravinsky (*Ragtime*, 1918), Debussy (*Gollywogs Cakewalk*, 1906-8). Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir*, 1999, 2.

<sup>163</sup> Rosenstock, "Léger and the Creation of the World," 480. This article was included in the 1984 Museum of Modern Art catalogue for "'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." The exhibition, curated by William Rubin, was lambasted for its blatant hierarchical placement of "high" European modern art with unlabeled "low" non-western art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, which were completely stripped of any cultural context and significance, effectively "using third world art and artists as footnotes to Western art history without recognizing the primacy of these formal cultures." Jerry Saltz in "Critiques of MoMA's 1984 Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," *Fireplace Chats*, July 31, 2015, <https://fireplacechats.wordpress.com/2015/07/31/critiques-of-momas-1984-primitivism-in-20th-century-art-affinity-of-the-tribal-and-the-modern/>.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Yang, "The Composer and Dance Collaboration in the Twentieth Century," 158.

Milhaud's score for *La Création du Monde*, though classified as symphonic jazz, held onto elements he deemed important within the jazz idiom: syncopated beats, improvisation, and "the spontaneous outpouring of emotion."<sup>165</sup> Though the music for *La Création du Monde* starts out slowly, with soft melodies played by the wind instruments, the score quickly picks up the pace with lively beats and the clear sounds of the brass horns. The pattern continues this way throughout the compositions, moving from slow, soft wind and string sections to a faster pace set by the percussion, and matched by the brass horns.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, for Milhaud, it satiated his curiosity and infatuation with jazz. After this production, Milhaud never returned to jazz.<sup>167</sup>

*La Création du Monde*, arguably, began with Blaise Cendrars and his scenario, upon which the entire production was created (Fig 26). In 1921, Cendrars published *L'Anthologie Nègre*, a compilation of African oral traditions that had been compiled by a variety of people on various missionary and exploratory expeditions across the African continent, including Reverend P. H. Trilles, a missionary who spent time with the Fang culture in Gabon (Fig 27).<sup>168</sup> Cendrars compiled one hundred and seven of the oral traditions that had been recorded by scholars and missionaries such as Trilles, and published them in his anthology.<sup>169</sup> Though publications such as this were not new to Paris, because of Cendrars' unique position within society, *L'Anthologie Nègre* was seen by a much larger percentage of people, no doubt including Fernand Léger and

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<sup>165</sup> Miller, "Darius Milhaud's *La Création Du Monde*: The Conductor's Guide to Performance," 28.

<sup>166</sup> Though this was written before George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), the two compositions share similar structures.

<sup>167</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 330.

<sup>168</sup> Henri-Louis-Marie-Paul Trilles (1866-1949) was a French missionary who spent many years with the Fang peoples of Gabon in the early 1900s. Though I was unable to locate the exact source text for Cendrars' *L'Anthologie Nègre*, there are several publications the Fang creations stories that served as the basis for the scenario for *La Création du Monde* could have derived from: *Tales and Legends of the Fang of Gabon* (1905), *Proverbs, Legends, and Stories of the Fang* (n.d.), *Among the Fang, or Fifteen Years Spent in the French Congo* (1912).

<sup>169</sup> *L'Anthologie nègre* was originally slated to be a three-volume set, though only the first in the series was completed and published. Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*.

the other creators of *La Création du Monde*. Subsequently, Parisian society's exposure to and understanding of *la race noire* was significantly broadened by the introduction of the oral traditions, as prior to 1921 African culture was understood only through masks, dances, music, and anthropological texts.<sup>170</sup> *L'Anthologie Nègre* elevated the African oral tradition to the realm of European literature.<sup>171</sup> It is important to remember, however, that the oral traditions included in the multitude of literature from exploratory and missionary expeditions, which were then transcribed by Cendrars into his *L'Anthologie Nègre* were significantly removed from their original versions. The initial oral tale told by a Fang elder to a Christian missionary or European explorer almost certainly went through a series of alterations in order to portray the Fang culture in a specific light, feeding into stereotypes of heathens and savages, perpetuating a binary- in this case the superior European Christian to the inferior heathen Fang (Other). Moreover, the oral tales went through another series of alterations when Cendrars reinterpreted them into his anthology, and then again when he compiled the tales for the scenario of *La Création du Monde*. In truth, the introduction of oral traditions collected in the heart of Africa and elevated to the realm of literature by Europeans were not in actuality the oral traditions of the various cultures who told them: they were the distorted, sensationalized versions written for European audiences.

The scenario for *La Création du Monde* based on Fang creation stories, a score rooted in New Orleans Jazz heard in Harlem, and initial costume and set designs pulling directly from *l'art nègre* sources caused Léger to write in a letter to Rolf de Maré on September 12, 1922, "It will

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<sup>170</sup> Kai Mikkonen, *Narrative Paths: African Travel in Modern Fiction and Nonfiction*, Theory and Interpretation of Narrative (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015).

<sup>171</sup> Interestingly, Cendrars only went to Africa once in his life, which happened after the completion of *La Création du Monde* on January 26, 1924. En route to Brazil, the ship made a stop in Dakar, where Cendrars was allowed to disembark and explore. *Ibid.*, 43.

be the only negro ballet, the only negro ballet possible in the entire world, one that will remain the example of the genre.”<sup>172</sup>

Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger insisted on an eighteen-month preparation time before opening night, and they worked together tirelessly to build the ballet from the ground up.<sup>173</sup> Cendrars envisioned a poem without words when his scenario was translated to the stage, as well as creating a work “of great scope and profundity,” that was “very modern and contemporary.”<sup>174</sup>

The scenario for *La Création du Monde*:

Curtain rises very slowly revealing a dark, unlit scene. One sees in the middle of the stage a confused heap of mangled bodies: hubbub before the creation. Three giant negro deities revolve slowly around the mass. They are Nzame, Medere, N’Kwa, the masters of creation. They hold counsel, walking around the unformed mass on the ground, and speaking magic incantations. Suddenly: something stirs. A small tree grows little by little, grows and grows more, it stands, and when one of its seeds falls to the ground, a new tree is born (the tree dance of pygmy forest tribes). When one of the leaves of the tree hits the ground, it grows, and swells, and starts to walk, it is an animal- an elephant, a turtle, a crab, a monkey (totemic dance of the Mpongwe).

The scene is illuminated little by little during the creation.

Each tree or animal is a male or female dancer flowing from the center, which evolve individually, then gently enter into a circle, which gradually begins to circle around the three deities from the beginning. The circle opens, the three deities speak new incantations. A slow hiss. The spotlight floods and we see the shapeless mass stir. A monstrous leg appears, backs quiver, a shaggy head appears, arms stretch, two busts rise at once, they stick out, they swell: it is the man and the woman, suddenly standing: they recognize each other. They stand one opposite the other. And while they perform the dance of desire and coupling according to Komo custom, what remained on the ground of shapeless beings

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<sup>172</sup> *Il devra être le seul ballet nègre, le seul ballet nègre possible dans le monde entier et être celui qui restera comme type du genre.* Leger, *Leger och Norden*, 32.

<sup>173</sup> Judi Freeman, “Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois: The Convergence of Avant-Garde Ambitions and Collaborative Ideals,” in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco : [Seattle]: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco ; Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1995), 96.

<sup>174</sup> Because of Ballet Suédois reputation of being experimental, Cendrars’s use of these terms may have been a strategic move in order to pique de Maré’s interest. Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 325.

begin to turn: they are the N'guils, the Sorcerers, Fetishes, Initiators, Cultists, Chiefs, and Cursors male and female.

\*The couple hugged, animal screams echo in the room. The couple spin in a frenzy, they fall, great drumming final frenzy. Everything revolves around the couple. Sorcerers, Fetishes, Initiators slaughter the three creator gods. Flames rise. And the ballet ends with a frantic dance around a huge fire with the dancers projecting silhouettes on the front of the stage, and large shadows on the back. Curtain.

\*This is the original ending to the Fang tale, but an alternative ending was preferred for the ballet production: The circle breaks and slows, and lives and dies in a very quiet environment. The couple is isolated in a kiss that carries them like a wave. It is spring.<sup>175</sup>

The two men divided up the scenario into twelve sections, made numerous notes and suggestions for the stagehands, and choreographic arrangements that would make sense with the

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<sup>175</sup> *Durant l'ouverture musicale la salle est noire. Lever du Rideau très lent sur la scène noire. On aperçoit au milieu de la scène un tas confus de corps entremêlés, tohu-bohu avant la création. Trois déités nègres gigantesque évoluent lentement autour: ce sont Nzame, Medere, N'Kwa, les maîtres de la création. Ils tiennent conseil, évoluent autour de la masse informe, font des incantations magiques. Tout à coup: quelque chose remue. Un arbre pousse petit-à-petit, grandit, grandit encore, se dresse, et quand une de ses grains tombe par un terre, un nouvel arbre naît (danse de l'arbre des tribus forestières pygmées). Quand une des feuilles de l'arbre touche le sol, elle grandit, se gonfle, commence à marcher, c'est un animal- un éléphant, une tortue, un crabe, un singe, (danse totémique des Mpongwés). La scène s'est éclairée petit à petit pendant la création. Chaque arbre ou animal est un danseur ou une danseuse jaillissant du centre, qui évolue individuellement, puis entre doucement sans une ronde qui peu à peu se met en branle autour des trois déités du début. La ronde s'ouvre, les trois déités font de nouvelles incantations. Un sifflement retentit. Les projecteurs jaillissent et on voit la masse informe s'agiter. Une jambe monstrueuse apparaît de dos tressaillent, une tête hirsute apparaît, des bras se tendent, deux bustes se dressent tout-à-coup, se collent, se gonflent: c'est l'homme, c'est la femme soudainement debout: Ils se reconnaissent. Ils se dressent l'un en face l'autre. Et pendant qu'ils exécutent la danse du désir et de l'accouplement selon la coutume Komo, ce qui restait par terre d'être informes apparaît surnoisement à son tour: se sot des N'guils, des Sorciers, des Féticheurs, des Initiateurs, des Adorateurs, des Chefs, des Imprécateurs males et femelles. Le couple s'est étreint, les cris d'animaux retentissent dans la salle. Le couple est pris d'un vertige frénétique, s'abat grand tam-tam vertige final. Tout tourne autour du couple. Sorciers, Féticheurs, Imprécateurs, abattent les trois dieux créateurs. Des flammes jaillissent. Et le ballet s'achève sur une ronde échevelée autour d'un feu gigantesque avec les danseurs qui se projettent en silhouettes par devant et de grande sombres portées. Rideau. (La ronde se calme, freine et ralentit et vient mourir très calme alentour. La ronde se disperse par petits groups. Le couple s'isole dans un baiser qui le porte comme une onde. C'est le printemps. Leger, Leger och Norden, 34.*

scene. They specified lighting colors and suggested musical types for each segment, as this all began before Darius Milhaud was brought on board as the composer.<sup>176</sup>

Once Milhaud was brought in, he immediately began to work closely with Cendrars and Léger. He would later comment on the collaboration saying “on this occasion I remained more closely in contact with my collaborators than for any other of my works.”<sup>177</sup> The three worked tirelessly, visiting popular dance halls for both a change of scene and inspiration. Léger once wrote, “The lower-class environment, with its aspects of crudeness and harshness, of tragedy and comedy, always hyperactive, is the environment recommended for us.”<sup>178</sup> Cendrars and Léger introduced Milhaud to the lower class side of Paris. “They were great frequenters of the bal-musette, and often took me with them, thus revealing to me a side of Parisian life with which I had not previously been familiar.”<sup>179</sup> (Fig 28) These outings, however, were still filled with discussions in order to work out the details of *La Création du Monde*.<sup>180</sup>

For the majority of the design and organization of the ballet, Börlin was on tour, and therefore absent from crucial meetings with Cendrars, Milhaud and Léger. For Léger, this was extremely unfortunate, as this production was to be a close collaboration between all of the

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<sup>176</sup> Freeman, “Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois: The Convergence of Avant-Garde Ambitions and Collaborative Ideals,” 96.

<sup>177</sup> Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 126. During his previous collaborative production with the Ballet Suédois, the process was far less collaborative with the exception of Milhaud and Paul Claudel, who he co-wrote *L’Homme et son désir* in 1921 based on their experiences during the two years they spent in Brazil, Claudel as the French ambassador and Milhaud serving as his secretary. For more information about this production see Mcquillin, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926”; Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*; Milhaud, *Notes without Music*; Yang, “The Composer and Dance Collaboration in the Twentieth Century.”

<sup>178</sup> The lower-class establishments were preferable to what Léger called “soft environments,” or places frequented by the aristocracy and the bourgeois. Fernand Léger, “Notes on Contemporary Plastic Life- 1923,” in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 27.

<sup>179</sup> Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 127.

<sup>180</sup> Milhaud discusses the outings to the bal-musette being productive in the collaboration process for *La Création du Monde*. *Ibid.*, 127.



creators. In a letter to Rolf de Maré in September of 1922, Léger stressed to the impresario the importance of having Börlin at the meeting with Cendrars, Milhaud, and himself. In the letter, he discussed the importance and implications of *la Création du Monde*, namely that “many painstaking talks between Cendrars, Börlin, and myself” were required in order to produce a work of that magnitude.<sup>181</sup> Börlin’s absence was caused by the rigorous tour schedule of the Ballet Suédois, and could not be avoided due to his crucial role as lead dancer. Because of his absence, he studied documentary footage from Congolese ceremonies to formulate the choreography for the production.<sup>182</sup>

For the collaborators of *La Création du Monde*, inspiration sprung from the cultural climate of *le hot jazz*, *le virus noir*, and the *negrophilia* that took Paris by storm after the First World War. For Blaise Cendrars, it was the opportunity to transcribe an African creation story from his *L’Anthologie Nègre*. For Darius Milhaud, the opportunity was to appropriate the jazz idioms that haunted him from the jazz clubs in Harlem. Jean Börlin’s enthusiasm and commitment stemmed from his début performance in *Sculpture Nègre*. And for de Maré, impresario of the Ballet Suédois, a desire to produce pieces that spoke both to his interest in foreign cultures, and a goal to present works that were modern and new. For Fernand Léger, however, though his designs began with *l’art nègre*, they quickly evolved into a style that demonstrated a long-standing idiom of modernity. For all of these men, however, *La Création du Monde* was an “origin story”, though the origin of what was different for each. The Ballet Suédois was never abundantly profitable, and after the disaster that was *Rêlache*<sup>183</sup> in 1924, de

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<sup>181</sup> “*Cela nécessite de nombreuses entretiens très minutieux entre Cendrars, Börlin, et moi*” Leger, *Leger och Norden*, 32.

<sup>182</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to find out more information about the footage he studied. Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 331.

<sup>183</sup> The Dadaist ballet’s set and costumes by Picabia, with music by Erik Satie. Additionally, René Clair was commissioned to create a short film that would play before the ballet began and during intermissions, called *Entr’acte*.

Maré decided to disband the company and focus his energies and money elsewhere. Because he still held the lease on the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées for another several years, in 1925 Rolf de Maré turned the space into a music hall, and at the suggestion of Léger,<sup>184</sup> brought an African-American dance troop from New York to perform in a *Revue Nègre*. With the troupe was a nineteen-year-old Josephine Baker, whose performance of *Danse Sauvage* on opening night launched her into Parisian stardom (Fig 29).<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to uncover much information on Léger's suggestion and influence on de Maré in the establishment of a *Rèvue Nègre* in Paris.

<sup>185</sup> Baker danced with Joe Alex for this number, which was slightly comic, but highly erotic. Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 913.

### Chapter 3: Fernand Léger and the creation of *La Création du Monde*

As the lights dim in the auditorium, the audience quiets and the music begins softly. The curtain rises revealing a darkened stage where only the outlines are visible. The clarinets and violins play a melancholy introduction, punctuated by the brief interruption of trumpets. The violins set the pace, while the clarinet sets the mood. On the stage there is an indistinguishable lump that seems to breathe almost imperceptibly. The lights become brighter as three immense figures dislodge from the background and begin to circle around the mass on the stage. The three larger-than-life figures are the creation deities, Nzame, Medere and N’Kwa. As they move in a circle around the mass on the floor, the mass begins to stir. Trombones join the clarinets, violins, and trumpets, their distinctive slide between notes raising the octave and the mood of the music as life begins to emerge from the mass on the fully lit stage. First a tree untangles itself, growing little by little as the dancer playing the tree straightens into a fully erect stance. A leaf falls from the branch of the tree, another dancer dislodges from the pile on the stage. As the dancer stands and becomes another tree, the three deities continue to move in a slow circle around the mass. The piano, drum and cello set a new mood and more leaves fall from the trees and as they drop to the stage more dancers emerge from the pile, twisting and turning to become the animals: the elephant, the monkeys, the insects, the birds. The trumpet adds strong clear notes, and is followed by more and more of the seventeen-piece ensemble as more and more creatures emerge from the undulating form on the ground. The trumpets dominate, sounding the creation of the land and the animals. The new creations begin to circle the deities, as the clarinets reprise their beginning tune, slowing the pace and calming the mood after the initial creation.

The circle of animals parts as the clarinets and violins continue to play, and other instruments join. What remains of the mass on the ground begins to move again, a leg appears on

one side of the pile then quickly recedes. Another leg juts out of the other side of the mass, followed by an arm. A head emerges on the opposite side of the mass from the arm and leg as the music quickens. In quick, jerky movements punctuated by the music two human figures appear. The first man and the first woman emerge from the still amorphous mass on the stage. The deities recede slowly away from the couple, fading into the background as the humans begin to dance together with the clarinets once again lead the way, followed by the violins and the faintest drum taps. The man and woman dance together as the music picks up pace. The mass on the ground completely dissolves as the remaining figures take shape, revealing all manner of evil creatures: sorcerers, witches, fetishes. The music becomes frenzied as the evil creatures move around the stage, but are chased off by all of the animals, running them off the stage. The music begins to slow, as do the dancers as they once again begin to circle the center of the stage. The beginning melody resumes as the circling dancers slow to a stop. The man and woman continue to dance, embracing, and ending in a kiss.

This is my reimagining of *La Création du Monde*, a ballet performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on October 25, 1923 by the avant-garde ballet company the Ballet Suédois. The time period in which the collaboration between Fernand Léger, Blaise Cendrars, Darius Milhaud, Rolf de Maré, and Jean Börlin on *La Création du Monde* took place, as we have seen, was characterized by a shell-shocked Parisian population embracing the fast-paced, culturally diverse city Paris was quickly becoming in the 1920s. Africa, *l'art nègre*,<sup>186</sup> the influx African-American expatriates settling in Paris, jazz, and modern technology all contributed to the reconstruction of Paris in the years following the war, creating a dizzying kaleidoscope of

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<sup>186</sup> In this chapter the terms *l'art nègre*, *le virus noir* and “primitive” are used to signify the art and culture of African-Americans, and Africans as well as the interchangeability of the three terms during the 1920s. These terms are synonymous with the conflation of Africa and all of the cultures therein with African-American culture into one entity as discussed in chapter 2.

activity. For Milhaud and Cendrars, the scenario of *La Création du Monde* gave them the opportunity to try something new, to reinvent themselves under the guise of *le virus noir*.<sup>187</sup> For Börlin, the ballet was an opportunity to expand and further explore “primitive” ethnographic dance elements, which he had dabbled in during his début performance in Paris with *Sculpture Nègre* in 1920. For de Maré, the ballet was an opportunity to produce a show that mirrored popular trends in Paris, creating a truly modern production. For Léger, however, *La Création du Monde* served as a venue to create an object-spectacle that would allow him to combine his artistic theories of the law of contrasts, the modern spectacle, and his experiences at the front as well as utilizing the popular trend of *negrophilia* to create a stage production about “Africans” that could be enjoyed by the entire Parisian community.

Léger’s costume and set designs for the ballet were inspired by Cendrars’ *la race noir* scenario of assimilated Fang creation stories from *L’Anthologie Nègre*, but did not stay strictly within the *l’art nègre* idiom. Léger’s utilization of African artistic idioms in his designs also served to connect with the general Parisian public, who were infatuated with *la race noir*. However, as the process of actualizing the ballet moved forward, Léger’s designs began to respond to his longstanding interest in the spectacle, as well as his law of contrasts, which he saw as an expression of modernity, and the African artistic elements began to serve a more formal purpose in his designs, allowing Léger to further combine abstraction with representation. Every aspect of the production- costumes, set, music, and choreography- was a crucial element within

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<sup>187</sup> In his *L’Anthologie Nègre*, Cendrars transcribed several Fang creation stories. For the scenario for *La Création du Monde* he combined several of those myths. The source myths from *L’Anthologie Nègre* include *The Story of Creation*, *The Story of the Beginning of Things*, and *The Story of Separation*. Pages 15-34 in the English translation. Blaise Cendrars and Margery Williams Bianco, *The African Saga* (New York: Payson & Clarke Ltd, 1927).

the complete object-spectacle. Each element had its own innate value, though none of the components were more important than the whole.

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When ideas pertaining to the production of the ballet began to float freely between the collaborators, Léger- like Milhaud, Börlin, and Cendrars- sought formal inspiration from sources he understood to be *l'art nègre*. Cendrars and Léger were initially the driving forces behind the production, resulting in their involvement in every portion of *La Création du Monde*, and until Milhaud was brought in to compose, this included musical suggestions. Like Milhaud, however, *La Création du Monde* was the only time in Léger's career he would engage artistically with the trends surrounding *le virus noir*. Nevertheless, because of origins of the ballet's scenario, "primitive" art was where his designs began, exploring subject matter that would echo the origins of the ballet's plot. He spent time at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, looking extensively at catalogues such as Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik*, as well as studying pieces in the private collections of Paul Guillaume and other avant-garde collectors.<sup>188</sup> Sketches he completed during his studies of sculptures such as the Chi Wara headdress from Mali (Fig 30) are done in a careful, mimetic style, with the general source sculpture easily identifiable.<sup>189</sup> (Fig 31)

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<sup>188</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 330. In addition to Guillaume and Einstein, in her essay *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*, Judi Freeman discusses another potential source for Léger with in Paris being the prominent French art collector Alphonse Kann. For more information see "Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois: The Convergence of Avant-Garde Ambitions and Collaborative Ideals," ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco : [Seattle]: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco ; Distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1995), 86–107.).

<sup>189</sup> Chi Wara was a divine half-man half- roan antelope figure, who introduced agriculture to the Bamana. The carved Chi Wara headdresses, such as this one, are power objects that provide a space for Chi Wara's spirit to reside. The base of the Chi Wara carving is said to represent the aardvark, another important animal in the Bamana life, specifically because they burrow and

Fortunately many of Léger's preliminary drawings of the costume designs for *La Création du Monde* have survived the test of time; however, not all of them are as comprehensive as the Chi Wara figure. Some of them are merely quick sketches, with the minimum amount of detail and shading, just enough to preserve the idea of the figure that Léger was studying. Because these drawings were once compiled in a sketchbook of some kind,<sup>190</sup> and have now been scattered across the globe into both museums and private collections, it is difficult to ascertain Léger's exact progression. The lack of sequential information is exacerbated by the fact that many of these preliminary drawings contain, at most, Léger's initials and the year. Unfortunately, some do not even contain that. Through diligent work, however, scholars and museums have dated most of the preliminary costume studies to 1922 and 1923. As mentioned in chapter 2, Léger and Cendrars demanded eighteen months to design and create *La Création du Monde* before opening night on October 25, 1923, so it could be assumed that the most basic of the initial drawings occurred sometime at the end of 1922 to the beginning of spring 1923. With this limited information it is possible to establish a speculative time line in Léger's design process. These exploratory drawings also demonstrate Léger's early commitment to using "primitive" sculptural elements, and identify where he begins to diverge from them, moving his designs toward an artistic language that is more demonstrative of his beliefs about the spectacle of modern life. This artistic idiom is apparent in his paintings such as those being produced after

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therefore resemble the actions of a farmer planting seeds. Chi Wara figures are worn during ceremonial performance to encourage and honor the farmers for their work in the fields. The ceremony celebrates the convergence of humanity with the sun, the earth, and water. It is unlikely, however, that Léger would have known this information. For more examples of Chi Wara and a detailed description of the story, see "Headdress: Male Antelope (Chi Wara)," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, I.e. The Met Museum*, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310864>.

<sup>190</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 330.

the war, and manifests visually as prominent geometric components, such as *The Discs* from 1918 (Fig 32).<sup>191</sup>

The opportunity the collaboration on *La Création du Monde* with the Ballet Suédois provided for Léger went well beyond the role of costume and set designer. In fact, for Léger, that was just the beginning. During his previous commission with the ballet company on *Skating Rink*,<sup>192</sup> the collaborative process had left much to be desired, primarily because the Ballet Suédois was on tour during the crucial stages of development for the ballet, taking both Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin with it. Moreover, the composer, Arthur Honegger, was away in Zurich leaving Léger alone in Paris.<sup>193</sup> Fortunately, *La Création du Monde* gave Léger another opportunity to take full advantage of the collaborative process, and ultimately realize a production that actualized his theories about the object-spectacle, namely the seamless integration of all aspects of the production so that no one portion stands out among the rest.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> For Léger, the circle was a quintessential example of modernity- it represented speed, movement, and machinery. De Francia, *Fernand Léger*, 26.

<sup>192</sup> *Skating Rink* debuted January 20, 1922, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. The production allowed both Börlin and Léger to push the limits of traditional ballet almost to the edge, as the dancers were essentially mobile pieces of the scenery on roller skates. The addition of the skates allowed Börlin to propel the definition of ballet and dance into completely new territory. Banes, "An Introduction to the Ballet Suédois."

<sup>193</sup> In addition to Léger's disappointment that his co-creators of *Skating Rink* were out of Paris, Judi Freeman discusses the struggles Léger had when it came to the actual construction of the costumes for the dancers. She states, "Léger could not give a dancer a tight sleeve or high collar without knowing how that dancer's body would move; he could not decide on a flat or circular backdrop without determining how the choreography would convey the illusion of the rink or skating." Freeman, "Fernand Léger and the Ballet Suédois: The Convergence of Avant-Garde Ambitions and Collaborative Ideals," 96.

<sup>194</sup> McQuillin discusses Léger's theories about the spectacle as being a permutation of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines *Gesamtkunstwerk* as follows: "Unified work of art. Wagner's term for a dramatic work in which drama, music, poetry, song and paintings should be united into a new and complete art-form." Léger's spectacle also sought to combine all of these elements into a single work, but took this a step farther, subsuming the vitality of modern life as part of the spectacle. McQuillin, "Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926," 103.



For Léger, the object-spectacle, or “total theatrical synthesis,” in which “neither dance, nor music, nor décor are sacrificed, but remain subordinate to an ensemble...”<sup>195</sup> extended beyond the stage and the performers. Léger argued that a theater is divided into three sections: the stage- where all of the action occurs; the orchestra pit- which is the neutral space between the audience and the action on stage; and the auditorium- where the audience sits passively in the dark observing the action on the stage, with the proscenium arch functioning as the barrier between the audience and the actors. Melissa Mcquillin equates the proscenium arch to the picture plane, separating viewer and subject.<sup>196</sup> He sought to break that barrier and extend the action beyond the stage, beyond the neutral space of the orchestra pit, and into the auditorium. Léger states that the “action ought to cross the footlights to create the atmosphere, take over the theater, and conquer the audience...”<sup>197</sup> To do this, the action on the stage had to be antithetical to the auditorium. Léger felt that the auditorium meant immobility, silence, and darkness. Therefore the stage had to be movement, action, and life.<sup>198</sup>

During the initial stages in the development of *La Création du Monde*, Léger utilized every avenue he could access to study *l'art nègre*. In a letter written to Rolf de Maré on September 12, 1922, Léger inquires as to the status of the “Ballet Nègre,” and expresses the potential need for a trip to the British Museum in London to see its collection of African and

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<sup>195</sup> “*Ni danse, ni musique, ni décor ne sont sacrifiés, mas restent subordonnés à un ensemble...*” Fernand Divoire quoted in *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>196</sup> A traditional stage, such as that found in the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, is a semi-circle, the flat edge delineating the rear of the stage, and the curved edge, or the proscenium arch, facing the orchestra pit, and the audience beyond. Mcquillin states that the arch has an “affinity with pictorial illusionism,” creating an audience/performer duality, and is the barrier that contains the action to the stage. *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>197</sup> According to Léger if this can be achieved, that is when the spectacle is its most effective. Léger, “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924,” 40.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

Oceanic artifacts for further research.<sup>199</sup> This, however, was not to be, which limited his study to the resources available in Paris. Unlike the Chi Wara drawing (Fig 30), many of his initial studies are simple line drawings, quick sketches with minimal shading and detail and no identifying information about the sculpture source, almost as if Léger paused only for a brief moment to look at the sculpture for basic formal elements before moving on to the next. The lack of information makes determining the source sculpture extremely difficult, but also provides a potential clue about Léger's intentions for appropriating African art in his designs. As was discussed in the previous chapter, many of the Parisian avant-garde appropriated "primitive" artistic idioms in their works as a form of protest to French colonialism; however, there is no evidence to place Léger within this group.<sup>200</sup> Moreover, his lack of identifying information in his initial sketches, and the emphasis on the basic formal qualities imply that he was interested in African art from a completely aesthetic perspective. For instance, figure 33 could have several different sources, such as the *Standing Figure* from the Mambila people in Cameroon (Fig 34). While the shape of the head on the Mambila figure is not quite the same as the head in Léger's drawing, the two figures do share a similar body structure; with hands raised to the chest and a prominent navel and genitalia. However, the distinct domed head that is curiously flat just below the nose in Léger's sketch is more reminiscent of sculptures from the Dogon peoples in Mali (Fig 35 and 36). The Dogon sculptures share the same prominent rounded head with the flat jawline, though on the Dogon figures' the jaw falls just below the mouth rather than just below the nose

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<sup>199</sup> "Pour quand pensez-vous réaliser ce ballet? Pensez-vous qu'il faut du temps (nécessité probable de voyage à Londres British Museum pour documentation des masques). Leger, *Leger och Norden*, 32. The British Museum's Ethnographic Collection, which in the early twentieth century included art works from the continent of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, was well known across Europe. The sizable collection included the Benin Bronzes, which had been looted from the city of Benin during the British punitive expedition in 1897.

<sup>200</sup> See discussion on pages 37 and 38.

as Léger has sketched. The *Seated Couple*, having retained more detail over the century, also allows for more comparisons with the Léger sketch. Both have a prominent navel; moreover, the Dogon figures have a pronounced nose, which extends up the face to accentuate the brow line arching over simple almond-shaped eyes, features that Léger has simplified in his sketch. Though the Dogon figures do not have their hands raised to their chest, the seated posture combined with the way the legs have been carved from the wood could cause the hips to appear to bulge out from the body, translating in Léger's figure as appearing to have large, bulbous hips.<sup>201</sup> The simplicity of the sketch with only the formal elements Léger deemed important enough to include further solidify his interest in them as aesthetic, rather than as social commentary or as an "authentic" representation of the culture.

As the development of the ballet progressed, Léger's drawings become more detailed and schematic, including more information that would be needed for further expansion of the costume designs. It is apparent at this stage that he is still relying heavily on African sculpture for inspiration; however, we begin to see a more geometric emphasis, and the introduction of his law of contrasts. Figure 37 is an example of his transition from quick sketches to more detailed studies for his costume designs. The figure is constructed out of simple geometric shapes: a long straight neck, shoulders indicated by a half dome, and two perfect circles signifying breasts that straddle the centerline and which turn into cones protruding from the body in the side view. The extending arm is rectangular with a rectangular hand and triangular fingers. The torso is

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<sup>201</sup> The comparisons between Léger's initial sketches and the selected African sculptures are my own. Though I run the risk of essentializing as William Rubin did in his "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," I felt that it was important to demonstrate the level of exchangeability Parisians felt about Africa and the many cultures that reside there. In other words, in general, the French (and Europeans as a whole) did not distinguish between African cultures, nor did they differentiate between time periods, everything they knew of, assumed, or had been taught about Africa was a reductive combination of the reality.

reminiscent of his figures constructed out of cylindrical pieces, such as *Le partie de cartes* (Fig 10), with the thighs and calves following suit, a connection that becomes more apparent in the side view with the inclusion of shading. The figure appears stiff, with the body constructed out of spare parts, an aesthetic that resembles many of Léger's still lifes of mechanical elements, though much more schematized (Fig 38). The head of this female figure is the most evocative of *l'art nègre* sculpture, with its semi-circular headpiece, flat jaw line just under the mouth with a chin piece suggestive of a beard, as well as the familiar prominent nose and eyes.

As with figure 33, identifying the exact source is difficult because his studies have become more composite figures than direct sketches. The head of this figure, however, does share similar traits to an image found in Einstein's *Negerplastik* (Fig 39).<sup>202</sup> The shape of the headpiece in Léger's drawing is comparable to that found on page 42 of Einstein's book. Léger's headpiece has been simplified to an arched band that circumnavigates nearly the entire head of the figure, ending on either side of the head with a slightly protruding rectangular element. He has included an additional band that sits between the head and the headpiece broken into segments with simple lines. The figure in Einstein's study has a similarly shaped headpiece, though far less dramatic or schematized, which approximates the look of hair. It is narrower at the top of the head than on the sides, and is accented with simple lines throughout, the same design Léger has utilized on the inner arch of his figure's headpiece drawing. From the surviving studies, the preliminary drawings for the humanoid figure in the ballet as seen in figure 33 and figure 37 do not stay in the planning stages for very long as Léger begins to solidify his designs by bringing in color, as well as more intricate and detailed renditions (Fig 40).

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<sup>202</sup> The image is a single photograph with no identifying information. Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 42.

The designs for the three creation deities- Nzame, Medere, and N’Kwa- and the backdrop also seem to follow a similar pattern of development as seen with the costume studies from simple pencil sketches to more detailed watercolors, though the early studies are still extremely detailed. In the two drawings dated 1922 (Fig 41 and 42) we can see a quick transition from combining elements of his exploration of *l’art nègre* with more geometric forms, to a design that relies far more heavily on geometric elements that he has combined in such a way that gives the impression of *l’art nègre*. In figure 42, the central and right hand deities have almond-shaped eyes, a prominent nose, brow and mouth. These three features are consistent in several of Léger’s drawings, as well as common features of figure sculptures from cultures such as Dogon in Mali, Nok in Nigeria, and Fang in Gabon. Here too we can see the initial manifestation of the law of contrasts in the use of abstract geometric forms and mimetic representation within the same composition. In figure 41, the central deity is composed of simple geometric shapes such as circles, ovals and pipes, while the deity on the left contains elements that are reminiscent of African works. In other of Léger’s studies, the almond-shaped right eye and the prominent nose and brow recall those seen in the Dogon figures (Fig 35 and 36). Additionally, on the extreme right side is a Chi Wara headdress almost identical to the one discussed at the beginning of the chapter (Fig 30). The text around the outside of the drawing discusses the development of the deities, and perhaps a hint of the struggle Léger was feeling during this process: trying to stay faithful to the African subject matter, while simultaneously moving towards designs that would further the production toward an object-spectacle.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Underneath the drawing the text reads “décor formatting plans, confusion with the deities, white on white, black on black.” (*Décor formatant de confusions de plans avec les déités, blanc sur blanc, noir sur noir.*) Along the right edge, “study for a whole deity, and decorative backdrop.” (*étude pour un ensemble déité, et décor du fond.*) Along the left edge, “cylindrical

Two individual studies for the deities (Fig 43 and 44), also dated 1922, further show the geometric emphasis in the initial designs, as well as the beginnings of Léger's intentions to have the deities be active participants in the ballet rather than static pieces in the set. However, because of the inclusion of the textual notations on both drawings, and the fact that Léger has indicated figure 44 as deity number two in the sequence, it is probable that these two drawings were done after figures 41 and 42. Moreover, fact that the deity on the left in figure 42 is almost identical to the deity in figure 43, while the central deity shares some of the same features as figure 44, such as the prominent mouth, divided head with almond-eyes, and the overall compact rectangular shape could further indicate the sequence of production of these particular images. The development of the deities and the backdrop seem to develop fairly rapidly through the next renditions (Fig 45 and 46) with extremely simplified geometric forms and the addition of a color palette including ochre, black, blue, and warm grays. The result was a nearly finalized version (Fig 47) with more complex geometric elements and a color palette that has been extended to include reds and yellows.

All of the final designs for the costumes are extremely planar. In the paintings, the costumes are composed of simplified colors, shapes and lines (Fig 48). There is no shading indicating any sort of mass or sculptural quality; they are simply flat to the surface. Léger said of his ballet designs, "In ballet, I thought only in terms of the decorative, of simple surfaces covered with flat colors."<sup>204</sup> This seems to have translated into the three-dimensional costumes for the

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portion lost in two different woods and circular." (*partie cylindrique perdu en deux bois différents et circulaires.*)

<sup>204</sup> This statement was made in an essay discussing the machine aesthetic, and the importance of using modern machines as raw material, rather than an subject to paint mimetically.

Additionally, in this statement Léger is talking about both of his commissions with the Ballet Suédois, *Skating Rink* and *La Création du Monde*. Fernand Léger, "The Machine Aesthetic:

dancers, as can be seen in figure 49. Here we can see that the costumes of the two monkeys appear very flat; the faces look like cardboard cutouts, while their bodies flatten out because the designs on the legs, torso, and arms are contained to one plane, without wrapping around to accentuate the roundness of the dancer's body. The monkeys appear larger than the other figures in the photograph, with broad, flat thighs, torso and face. The exception to the planar costume designs are the costumes for the man and woman, whose bodies have been emphasized by adding padding or extra material to the costumes (Fig 64).

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For Léger, an important component of his theories of the spectacle was the complete removal of the human element. In an essay published in 1925, Léger discusses the precedent for the "human measure" which had been dominant for some time.<sup>205</sup> He states, "Until now, dancers, singers, stars of the music-halls have all sacrificed the group spectacle to their own more or less authoritative personalities."<sup>206</sup> In order to realize a total spectacle, the human measure had to be removed; he explains that the long-standing emphasis on the star performer is "what we are competing with" and in order to break away from this tradition, "we must renew the man-spectacle mechanically. We can make the materials themselves move, set them in motion."<sup>207</sup>

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Geometric Order and Truth- 1925," in *Functions of Painting*, The Documents of 20th-Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 63.

<sup>205</sup> The "human measure" is the identifiable individuals within a production, that which the audience recognizes and identifies with. Fernand Léger, "The Ballet-Spectacle, the Object-Spectacle- 1925," in *Functions of Painting*, The Documents of 20th-Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 72.

<sup>206</sup> In essence, Léger is referring here to the cult of the genius as it manifests in theater and music, where the lead dancer, the first chair violinist, or the composer, for example, are the draw for the audience. They have not, necessarily, come to see the performance for the sheer entertainment of the piece, but rather because a specific "star" is performing. Ibid., 71.

<sup>207</sup> Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924," 36.

For *La Création du Monde*, this meant making the dancers into a mechanism in the total spectacle, a cog in the wheel. This manifested in costumes that completely obscured the dancers wearing them. There was to be no lead dancer, no one who stood out among the rest. Léger furthers this line of argument by pointing out that previously in the theater “because the man in the audience and the man on the stage resemble each other,” the maximum effect of the spectacle could never be achieved.<sup>208</sup> In *La Création du Monde*, the costumes in turn functioned like masks, allowing the individual dancers to disappear into their characters. Picasso once said of “primitive” masks that they were magical, and allowed the wearer to become the entity portrayed by the mask.<sup>209</sup> For Léger, however, masks served a much less mystical purpose in relation to the spectacle. The mask’s function was the removal of the human element, which in turn, would eliminate the resemblance and recognition between audience members and the performers, resulting in “the state of astonishment.”<sup>210</sup> Léger explains that using a mask in a performance is a tradition that spans both classical theater and “primitive” cultures as a means of creating a spectacle, asserting that “they realized their weak methods, that on stage the human resemblance was a barrier to the lyrical state...”<sup>211</sup> Léger goes on to explain that masks were created “to make a break between the visual atmosphere of the room and that of the stage, to make the individual disappear in order to utilize human material to create fiction on the stage.”<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> The quote finishes with “you have an inferior state of spectacle.” Léger, “The Ballet-Spectacle, the Object-Spectacle- 1925,” 72.

<sup>209</sup> He goes on to say that masks were worn by ‘primitive’ people to help them hide and escape from spirits that were terrorizing them. Jack D. Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>210</sup> Léger, “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924.,” 38.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Here, “human material” refers to the bodies of the dancers as raw material with which the spectacle is created. He goes on to say “the human material appeared, but it had the same



According to Léger, in order to achieve maximum efficiency in the spectacle as he was trying to do with *La Création du Monde*, it was crucial to integrate the dancers with the set. The desegregation of the dancers and the set is the antithesis of the conventional organization of a stage performance. Traditionally, and even with Léger's previous collaboration with the Ballet Suédois on *Skating Rink*, the dancers and the set were two separate elements in the production. The set serves to establish a scene and may be changed in between acts or numbers to indicate a change of location or time, but the set and the dancers always remain separate elements.

According to Léger,

We ought to be able to emerge from this theatrical command and pass on to a different plane where the star is absorbed into the plastic ranks, where a mechanical choreography closely connected its own scenery and music attains a whole, planned unity...<sup>213</sup>

In order to achieve this, the dancers had to be seamlessly incorporated into the set. Léger accomplished this in two ways. The first was to have the dancers perform directly in front of the three creation deities, which were proportional in relation to the rest of the cast allowing them to appear closer to the dancers (Fig 50). More importantly, however, was the part the deities played in the performance. The three twenty-six foot tall deities were themselves free standing characters that could be moved around, and were incorporated into the action on stage.

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spectacle value as the object and the décor," making the dancers, hidden by their costumes, an component of equal importance within the spectacle. Ibid., 38.

<sup>213</sup> In this passage, Léger is discussing the longstanding tradition of organizing a production around a single individual, in this case a dancer. Just prior to the quote, he states, "A man, a woman, with or without talent, asserts himself or herself and organizes the whole spectacle in terms of its theatrical value. We have believed in that, we have submitted to it as long as spectacle has existed." Léger, "The Ballet-Spectacle, the Object-Spectacle- 1925," 71.

If I destroy the human scale, if my scenery moves around, I obtain the maximum effect, I obtain a whole on the stage that is totally different from the atmosphere of the auditorium. This axiom must prevail in making of a spectacle: *maximum interest is obtained when the theatrical creation is diametrically different from the visual aspects of the auditorium.*<sup>214</sup>

Here again, the flatness of Léger's designs are translated into the costumes for the three deities which are flat constructions with no three dimensional sculptural elements, and are maneuvered through the choreography by the dancers. In the same manner as the rest of the costume designs, the flatness of the deities is exacerbated by the blocked colors and patterns that do not wrap around the figures, but are confined to the frontal plane. The color palette enhances the component quality of the deities, emphasizing the disparate shapes Léger used to construct the beings as well as the compositional choices with regard to the placement of each color, specifically red and yellow against black and white. This is another element within Léger's law of contrasts applied within the object-spectacle.

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The cast of characters in *La Création du Monde* is comprehensive. The time and energy Fernand Léger spent conceiving and generating each character must have been equally extensive as each set of figures contains elements that echo the rest of the characters in that particular set, while largely differing from the rest of the cast. Melissa Mcquillin discusses the patterning of the costumes as such: "with in each pairing of costumes, a decorative schema adapted from the opposition of angular and curved elements serves to further distinguish [them]."<sup>215</sup>

In the final production (Fig 51), the characters include the triptych of creation deities (Fig 52), which are massive in relation to the majority of the figures on the stage. Their height serves

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<sup>214</sup> Léger goes on to say that because of the recognition an audience member has when looking at the dancer, the dancer has lost fifty percent of its surprise element. Emphasis Léger's. Ibid., 72.

<sup>215</sup> Mcquillin, "Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926," 627.

to emphasize their importance within the creation story, but also to sever the “human scale.” The three gods- Nzame, Mbere and N’Kwa- appear in Blaise Cendrars original Fang creation story transcriptions published in *L’Anthologie Nègre*, with Nzame creating the earth, sky, land, and water, while the three deities together created the animals and humankind. Unlike the rest of the characters in the ballet adaptation, the gods are not a complementary pair, but a unique trinity. The two messengers of the gods (Fig 53)<sup>216</sup> are unique to the ballet, as they do not appear in the Fang creation stories in *L’Anthologie Nègre*. Léger has visually tied this pair of characters to the deities through visual similarities, as well as their height. These two walk on stilts, raising them up above the rest of the cast, but not to the height of the gods.<sup>217</sup> The messenger on the left (Fig 53 A) shares a similar shaped head and face patterning to the deity on the right namely the triangular shaped head divided down the middle and a single eye on the left side of the face. The messenger on the right (Fig 53 B) is not as obviously related to any of the deities, however if we look at the central deity we can see a similar set of white horizontal lines as well as an overall rectangular shape to the head. The humanoid figures are somewhere in between the gods and humans (Fig 54), sharing the same color palette as the deities and the messenger figures, but are closer in height to the remainder of the characters. Additionally, the humanoid figures share a similar body structure to that of the man and woman (Fig 58) that represent the primitive couple.

In both the Fang creation stories from *L’Anthologie Nègre* and the composite scenario Cendrars wrote for the ballet, the three creation deities create several animals prior to the

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<sup>216</sup> According to Rosenstock the messenger figures were originally modeled after traditional West African stilt dancers, possibly referring to Dogon stilt dancers. The dancers wear elaborate costumes and masks, with the stilts representing the *tingetange*, or long-legged water bird such as the Yellow-billed stork or the Marabou stork, both native to Mali and surrounding areas. Rosenstock, “Léger and the Creation of the World,” 480.

<sup>217</sup> I have been unable to locate the exact height for these costumes in the production, however if we assume the maquette is at least mostly to scale, we can see the height comparisons in figure 53.

primordial couple. In the Fang tales, the creatures are the tiger, monkey, and elephant. The characters included in the scenario for *La Création du Monde* expand beyond these three to include birds (Fig 55) and insects (Fig 56), as well as monkeys (Fig 57) and an elephant (Fig 59).<sup>218</sup> The pair of monkeys is the only set out of the animals that is confined to the color palette Léger utilized for the deities, messengers, and humanoid figures. Additionally, we can see the direct mirroring of patterning within the monkey costumes, which is confirmed in the photograph of a performance or rehearsal of the production in 1923 (Fig 49). The beetles and the birds are the only character sets that bring in colors beyond the palette Léger chose for the rest of the characters, bringing in blue, green, bright yellow and purple. The birds and insects are also exclusive to the scenario of the ballet, as they do not appear in the Fang creations stories Cendrars included in his anthology.<sup>219</sup> The man and woman are the last to be created in both the Fang creation stories and the scenario for the *La Création du Monde* (Fig 58).<sup>220</sup> There are also several figures that are not present in the stage maquette, however, but do appear in the scenario, such as the elephant (Fig 59), as well as several totemic creatures that Melissa McQuillin describes as possessing “animal and mask-like features.”<sup>221</sup> (Fig 60 and 61)

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<sup>218</sup> In my research I was unable to find any reference to a tiger in the ballet scenario, nor any costume designs for a tiger. Additionally, though the elephant is referenced in the scenario, I have only found one simple line drawing of an elephant, suggesting that perhaps the elephant costume was not included in the final version of *La Création du Monde*.

<sup>219</sup> There is reference to a single bird in the Fang stories from *L'Anthologie Nègre*, Ngofio the bird of death. Cendrars and Bianco, *The African Saga*, 20-21.

<sup>220</sup> In the Fang origin stories in Cendrars's *L'Anthologie Nègre* the first man was made out of clay by the three deities, and they called him Sekume. The Nzame, Mbere, and N'Kwa then instructed Sekume to make himself a wife out of a tree, and he called her Mbonwe. The names of the primordial man and woman were not transferred to the scenario, as the names of the deities were. Moreover, in the scenario Cendrars compiled for the ballet, after the creation of humankind, there are evil creatures that emerge from the center of the stage. I have found no reference to these creatures in the Fang creations stories in Cendrars's *L'Anthologie Nègre*. Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> It is possible that figure 61 is one of the many animals that emerges from the mass on the stage, remaining unidentified because this figure was used more as a demonstration of the

In *La Création du Monde*, the different sets of characters seem to be comprised of an even number of figures, perhaps signifying a male and female version of each (the exception being the trinity of creation deities).<sup>222</sup> Additionally, within these pairings, elements such as color, patterning, and basic shapes used to construct the figures are essentially the same, but Léger chose to rearrange these components to create a new, related costume (Fig 62 and Fig 63). This is perhaps best demonstrated by the man and woman who signify the primordial couple (Fig 64). With the woman on the left and the man on the right, the shared patterns are very apparent. The shape that runs the length of the man's torso is repeated, though slightly altered, on the woman's torso between breasts and hips. Additionally, the hatch marks that appear on her lower legs are echoed on the man's inner arms. The shape of his arms, mimicking musculature, is somewhat similar to the shape of her legs, though she is much less rigid in her outline than he. Moreover, within these particular figures, we can see the remnants of Léger's initial exploration of sculpture from Africa, and how this has been incorporated into figures that expressed his concurrent artistic practices. For example, the woman's face shares the same prominent nose and brow that we have seen in previous sketches by Léger, as well as the several African sculptural examples discussed earlier (Fig 34, 35, 36). Moreover, the undulating pattern that appears on the torso of both the man and the woman is strikingly similar to the compositional element running vertically through a wood engraving Léger completed in 1921 for André Malraux's book, *Lunes*

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magnitude of the creation of life on earth. Additionally, figure 60 is sometimes labeled as an "archaic being", which perhaps could link it to the evil creatures such as the Sorcerers, Fetishes, and Initiators that emerge after the creation of the man and woman in the scenario for *La Création du Monde*. Ibid., 627.

<sup>222</sup> Richard Brender discusses novelist Paul Morand's argument that *La Création du Monde* is a "serious religious dance re-enacting a legend that has much in common with *Genesis* and Adam and Eve." Furthermore, Erik Näslund states that *La Création du Monde* was a kind of "African *Le Sacre du Printemps*," referring to Igor Stravinsky's controversial 1913 composition. Brender, "Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballet Suédois's 'Ballet Nègre,' 'La Création Du Monde,'" 133. Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 332.

*en Papier* (Fig 65). This is also true for the hatch marks that adorn both the male and female costumes.<sup>223</sup>

Of the three deities, only one has retained a strong tie to *l'art nègre*. The deity on the left of figure 66 has a head that resembles that of a bull, sharp horns on top of a rounded head which tapers to the nose; this shape finds a match in a *Dje Helmet Mask* from the Côte d'Ivoire's Baule people, an image of which was published in Einstein's *Negerplastik*. Léger's deity has the same prominent nose and almond-shaped eye found on the Baule mask, and the shape of the head over all is very similar (Fig 67). Contrastingly, the central deity contains no discernible features, and is composed of simple blocks of color. Interestingly, running down the center of what we can assume is the head, is a long rectangular piece that is segmented into three uneven sections. This element bears a strong resemblance to an airplane propeller from a World War I era plane (Fig 68), an element that was discussed in chapter one as being a reoccurring element in Léger's work during this period.<sup>224</sup> Léger's rendition is reduced to a simple rectangle, although the central and

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<sup>223</sup> *Lunes en Papier* was published in 1921 by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in a run of only 112 copies, with seven engravings by Léger. Each copy was signed by both Malraux (in black pen) and Léger (in purple pencil). The inside of the cover bears this warning: "there is nothing symbolical in this book". The three stories are absurdist in nature, with strange plot turns and metaphors, airy, sometimes humorous in tone, while still dealing with seemingly serious matters, and ending with the death of Death." The subtitle is as follows: "little book where we find the relationship of some little known struggles of men, as well as a journey among strange but familiar objects / André Malraux; the whole truth and decorated with woodcuts which are also very truthful by Fernand Léger." (*petit livre où l'on trouve la relation de quelques luttes peu connues des hommes, ainsi que celle d'un voyage parmi des objets familiers mais étranges/ André Malraux; le tout selon la vérité et orné de grav. sur bois également très véridiques par Fernand Léger.*) "Lunes En Papier by André Malraux, 1921. Illustrated by Fernand Léger. Published by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler," *Koninklijke Bibliotheek: National Library of the Netherlands*, accessed February 27, 2016, <https://www.kb.nl/en/themes/koopman-collection/lunes-en-papier>.

<sup>224</sup> According to Asendorf, "it is clear that the elongated shape of the propeller, with its elegant curvature, might well have seemed the quintessence of modern form: a design that attained an optimum in terms of function but that was also able to spark aesthetic invention through its extreme slenderness and consummate use of line." Asendorf, "Fernand Léger 1911-1924," 204.

smallest segment corresponds roughly to the nose cone.<sup>225</sup> In regard to appropriating mechanical elements such as the propeller, Léger said that a mechanical element was a “means of succeeding in conveying a feeling of strength and power,” fitting for a god of creation.<sup>226</sup>

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Returning to an image of the stage maquette (Fig 69), the influence of the law of contrasts becomes strikingly apparent. Here, we see a complete mock up of the stage setting, including the succession of decorative panels utilized to create a backdrop while also shielding the wings of the stage from the audience. The image is bewildering, the combination of abstraction and representation combined with the vivid color palette create a mystifying presentation. The outer most panel is comprised of flat geometric shapes, which are repeated in both style and color palette within the figure costumes. The middle and back panel are more representational, with the landscape rendered with hard-edged mountains that turn into rolling hills on the right side of the stage (Fig 70). The clouds up above, sitting slightly in front of the backdrop, are on a mobile panel and shaded to emphasize their amorphous shape, while also forming a visual connection to the peaks below.<sup>227</sup> The combination of the angular mountains and the ameba-like clouds is reminiscent of several of Léger’s cityscapes. For example, *The Large Tugboat* (Fig 71 and Fig 71 A) has the same contrasting forces of angularity in the buildings and the curvilinear hills as the landscape for *La Création du Monde*. As was demonstrated in the design for the deities mentioned previously, the placement of color in

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<sup>225</sup> As defined by Merriam-Webster, the nose cone is “a protective cone constituting the forward end of an aerospace vehicle.” “Definition of NOSE CONE,” accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nose+cone>.

<sup>226</sup> Léger, “The Machine Aesthetic: Geometric Order and Truth- 1925,” 62.

<sup>227</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the series of panels used for *La Création du Monde*, see Melissa Mcquillin’s chapter on the ballet. Pages 614-629 in Mcquillin, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926.”

combination with disparate shapes creates a jarring contrast within each object-spectacle component, as well as the whole.

The creation of the object-spectacle was a prominent goal for Léger for *La Création du Monde*. The eradication of the individual identities of the dancers with costumes that functioned like masks, along with the integration of the dancers and the set into one cohesive element of the production were only two of the necessary factors. The score completed by Milhaud, the choreography by Börlin, and the lighting designed by Léger and Cendrars were the other important components in the creation of the object-spectacle of *La Création du Monde*.

Once Milhaud was brought on board the production as composer, Léger remained interested in the music, trying to design the costumes and set in a way that would “counter the rhythms of the music,”<sup>228</sup> by creating contrast between the menagerie on stage and the score. The lighting scheme he and Cendrars designed added to the feeling of contrast created by the “music and the action on stage [taking] place at the same time, though not together.”<sup>229</sup> The lighting was meticulously planned to both unify and detach the elements of the object-spectacle on the stage. According to Richard Brender, “[Léger] fragments the [costumes] further through his selective lighting of it, which can make various body parts appear to be visually linked to designs on the décor, rather than attached to the otherwise dissimilarly patterned body.”<sup>230</sup> Brender goes on to say that the ballet’s choreography is the “unifying rhythm that integrates all the visual elements temporally.”<sup>231</sup> In other words, Börlin’s choreography was the string that tied the object-spectacle together. The length of one of Börlin’s choreographic pieces coincided with what

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<sup>228</sup> Yang, “The Composer and Dance Collaboration in the Twentieth Century,” 147.

<sup>229</sup> Brender, “Reinventing Africa in Their Own Image: The Ballet Suédois’s ‘Ballet Nègre,’ ‘La Création Du Monde,’” 130.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 140.



Léger thought was necessary to produce an effective object-spectacle. Börlin's ballets were generally one act lasting between ten and fifteen minutes, allowing for several ballets to be performed on a single program. Léger states "a spectacle must be fast moving for the sake of its unity. It cannot go for more than fifteen or twenty minutes."<sup>232</sup> Moreover, he states with a watch in hand, "time the length of action (the mechanics of a gesture, a spotlight, or a sound). A plastic movement that is effective for ten seconds becomes poor if it lasts for twelve."<sup>233</sup>

Unfortunately, the original choreography for *La Création du Monde* did not survive past the death of Börlin in 1930. He has been described as an insecure man, particularly when it came to his stardom within the Ballet Suédois, consequently he did not disclose any of his choreography to anyone for fear that they would somehow supersede him. Furthermore, his system of notation consisted simple line drawn figures (Fig 72) in contorted positions and were almost impossible for anyone else to decipher.<sup>234</sup> We are able deduce from the costume designs that the elements of traditional dance were limited, perhaps performed only by the dancers playing the primordial couple. The cumbersome quality of the costumes would have made traditional dance difficult, if not impossible.

The experimental nature the Ballet Suédois was known for provided an important platform for Léger to formulate an object-spectacle, one that employed the law of contrasts, the theory he had been utilizing and developing since before World War I. Additionally, the opportunity of collaboration on *La Création du Monde* allowed him to participate in, and

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<sup>232</sup> For Léger, the shortened production allowed for the exploration of new and innovative materials. Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924," 36.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>234</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 313. In the last several years, a few ballet companies (Ballet de Lorraine, for example) have reproduced *La Création du Monde*, recreating Léger's costumes and set. Because the choreography was not recorded, however, the choreographers of the reproductions have created completely new production through their personal interpretation of the original material for *La Création du Monde*.

experiment with, a popular trend that had swept Paris, *le virus noir*. Léger's appropriation of African artistic idioms within his designs allowed him to engage with the working class citizens of Paris in a way his previous works had not, namely connecting with them in the realm of their popular culture, a culture that was contrary to that of the bourgeois. His enthusiasm and high regard for the working class people of Paris, the people who frequented the bal-musette dance clubs to listen to jazz and let loose, worked as a catalyst towards his creation of a production that would attract the working class; "there has never been an epoch as frantic for spectacle as ours."<sup>235</sup> The realization of the spectacle resulted in "the most significant manifestation on stage of [the] rapidly growing cult"<sup>236</sup> of *negrophilia*. *La Création du Monde* was a truly modern spectacle; "the interplay of contrasts is so violent that there is always exaggeration in the effect you glimpse. There is origin of the modern spectacle."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> He goes on to postulate that "this frenzy, this craving for distraction at any price, must arise from a need for a reaction against the harshness and demands of modern life." Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924," 37.

<sup>236</sup> Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 324.

<sup>237</sup> Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924," 35.

### Conclusion:

When *La Création du Monde* debuted in Paris in 1923 it was a completely new experience. The collaborative project was the first to engage directly with *negrophilia*, a popular trend in Paris at the time, “primitive” art, and *le hot jazz*. It was also the first ballet production to turn the dancers completely into moving scenery, removing the individuality of each performer in favor of the whole ensemble, eliminating the connection between the audience and the dancers through recognition in order to create an object-spectacle.

The scenario Blaise Cendrars wrote through the combining of aspects from several different Fang creation stories from his *L'Anthologie Nègre* introduced a westernized version of African oral tradition into a society that was focused on the art and music of the African Other. The amalgamated Fang story of the creation of the land, animals, and humankind was comparable to the creation of the world in Christian theology, thus making it easily recognizable to the French audiences and ultimately easier for them assimilate. The fact that *La Création du Monde* was facilitated by three massive deities took the familiar creation story into the realm of the “primitive,” speaking to the Parisian fascination with *la race noire*. With the exception of Cendrars, the creators of *La Création du Monde* appropriated the artistic and cultural idioms of *la race noire* for aesthetic and formal reasons. However, because of Cendrars’ ties to the anarchist and socialist groups prominent in Paris after World War I (as was mentioned in chapter 2), it is probable that his decision to collect and publish a collection of African stories was a social critique of France’s colonial brutality. It is feasible that Cendrars’ *L'Anthologie Nègre* was an attempt to expand the French populations knowledge of the “primitive” cultures in Africa through a medium that is traditionally regarded as a symbol of superior cultures, the written word.

Darius Milhaud's score for the production also tapped into the popular infatuation among the French for *l'art nègre* by appropriating elements inherent to jazz music, specifically the New Orleans jazz he heard in Harlem. Milhaud wrote the score for a seventeen-piece ensemble similar to those he experienced in New York, and consciously used elements such as improvisation to appropriate the jazz idiom for *La Création du Monde*. While the eighteen-minute composition is very different from the traditional ballet scores, it is not a jazz composition. It has been defined as "symphonic jazz"<sup>238</sup>: measured, consistent, and repetitive. A far cry from the spontaneity of the jazz Milhaud would have experienced in Harlem. However classified Milhaud's composition was, it still fell within the parameters of the popular jazz trends in Parisian society. The impresario of the Ballet Suédois must have seen the potential for a ballet that connected so directly with the fashionable infatuation with *la race noire*, *le hot jazz*, and "primitive" art. The experimental nature of the Ballet Suédois allowed the company to take on such an unusual project, and allowed lead dancer and choreographer Jean Börlin to reengage with his début performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1920 when he danced in the guise of a *sculpture nègre*.

Fernand Léger's unusual approach to the costume and set design for *La Création du Monde* expresses a synthesis of his artistic influences and interests, theories about the theater and modern life, a desire to stay in conversation with Darius Milhaud's score and Blaise Cendrars's scenario for the ballet, as well as an aspiration to remain connected to the working class Parisians through the popular trend of *negrophilia*. *La Création du Monde* allowed him to engage in this aspect of Parisian popular culture that, given his oeuvre before and after the production, he

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<sup>238</sup> Robert Ward Miller, "Darius Milhaud's *La Création Du Monde*: The Conductor's Guide to Performance" (Dissertation, University of Iowa, 2011), 28.

would otherwise have not. Like de Maré, the opportunity to employ elements of popular culture appealed to Léger in that he wanted to create a spectacle that could be enjoyed by the working class members of society, and not just the elite. The initial sketches Léger did for his costume designs show his commitment to engaging with *l'art nègre* in an effort to create something coherent with Cendrars and Milhaud. As the design studies progress, however, Léger begins to bring in his other influences such as the law of contrasts through the juxtaposition of geometric shapes filled with strong, pure colors against opposing shapes filled with a contrasting color. The shifts in Léger's designs also demonstrate his desire to create an object-spectacle, one that affected the choreography as well as the costumes and set. Moreover, the costume and set designs allowed him to implement his theories about the object-spectacle and the theater. The object-spectacle was a direct response to what it was like to live in a modern metropolis in the early twentieth century- the jostling, jarring and often uneasy combination of disparate elements into one glance.<sup>239</sup>

Within the context of the theater, to create a completely effective object-spectacle, the “human element” had to be completely removed: Léger destroyed the human scale by creating three twenty-six foot tall deities, as well as a variety of other characters that differed in height and shape from the two human characters in the cast of *La Création du Monde*. He also believed that in order for an object-spectacle to reach its true potential, the action on stage could not resemble in any way the audience in the auditorium, which he accomplished by removing the visual similarities between the audience and the dancers by enveloping the dancers completely in their costumes.

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<sup>239</sup> Fernand Léger, “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle- 1924,” in *Functions of Painting, The Documents of 20th-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), op. cit.

Fernand Léger's set and costume designs for *La Créations du Monde* are a coalescence of the multifaceted elements that influenced his artistic process in the decade leading up to the Ballet Suédois's production. In order to fully understand the design decisions Léger made for *La Création du Monde*, his artistic influences and creative convictions must be considered and explored, as they all played a prominent role in his designs for the ballet. The law of contrasts, the object-spectacle, modern life, and the popular trend of *negrophilia* are all crucial to the development of Léger's designs, as well as his commitment to the collaboration with Blaise Cendrars, Darius Milhaud, Jean Börlin, and Rolf de Maré. These influential elements manifest in the cacophony of colors and patterns Léger uses in his designs, the achievement of the object-spectacle, and his admiration of the French working class conveyed by the inclusion of *l'art nègre* idioms that spoke to their enthusiasm for the popular trend of *negrophilia*.

Figures:



Figure 1  
*Le Balcon*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1914  
 Oil on canvas  
 130 x 97 cm  
 Kunstmuseum Winterthur



Figure 2.  
 Fernand Léger and unknown soldier at the front  
 c. 1914





Figure 3  
*La Ville*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1919  
 Oil on canvas  
 231.1 x 298.4 cm  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art



Figure 4  
*Nus dans la forêt*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1919  
 120 x 170 cm  
 Kröller-Müller Museum





Figure 5  
*Portrait of Daniel-Henry  
 Kahnweiler*  
 Pablo Picasso  
 1910  
 100.5 x 73 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Art Institute of Chicago

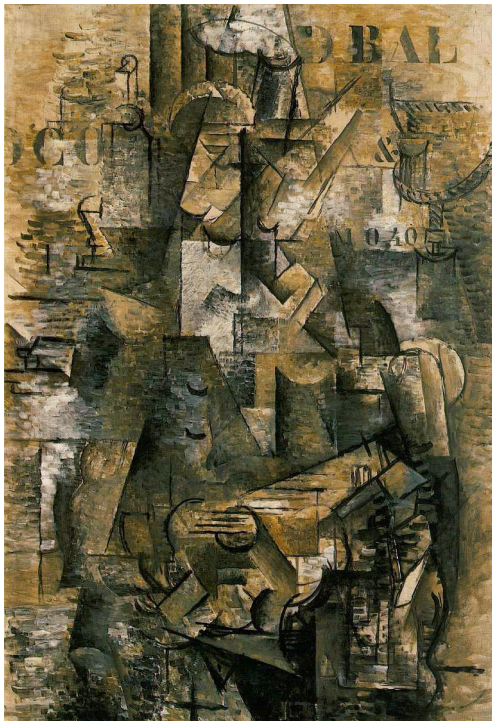


Figure 6  
*Le Portugais (The Emigrant)*  
 Georges Braque  
 1911-12  
 117 x 81 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Kunstmuseum Basel

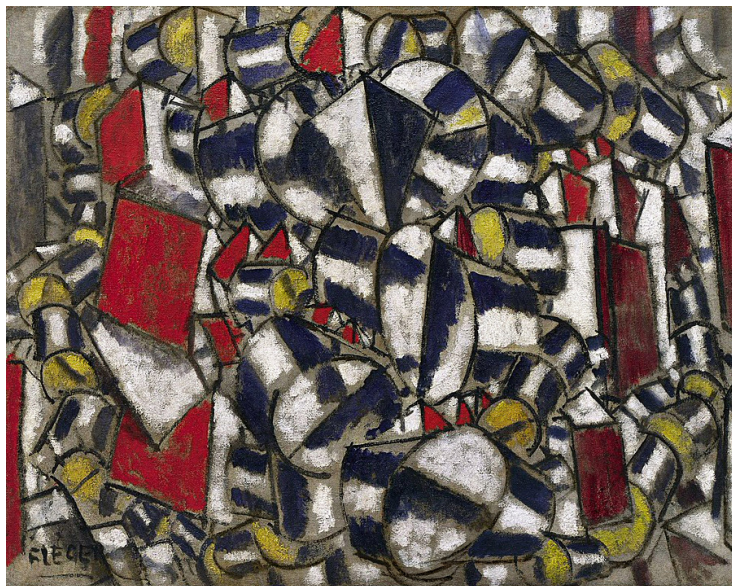


Figure 7  
*Contrast of Forms*  
Fernand Léger  
1913  
99 x 125 cm.  
Oil on burlap  
Guggenheim, New York

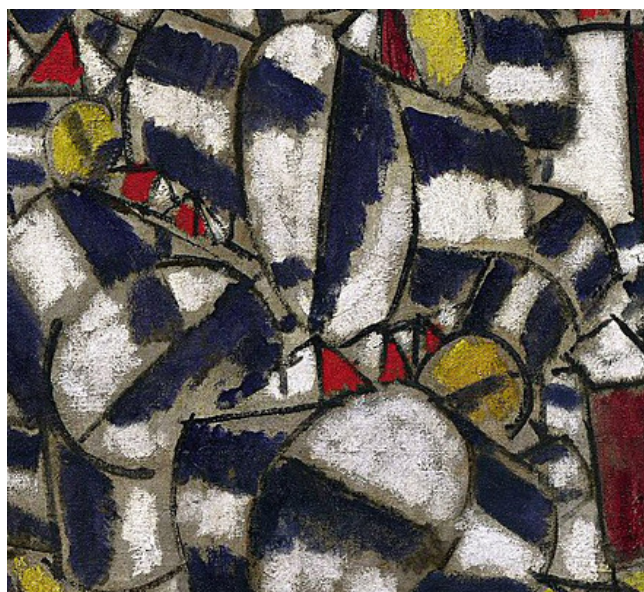


Figure 8  
*Contrast of Forms*  
detail of Figure 7





Figure 9  
*Study for Contrast of Forms*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1913  
 49.5 x 61 cm.  
 Gouache and oil on paper, mounted on board  
 Guggenheim, New York



Figure 10  
*Le partie de cartes*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1917  
 129 x 193 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Kröller-Müller Museum



Figure 11  
*Le Mécanicien*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1920  
 116 x 88.8 cm  
 Oil on Canvas  
 National Gallery of Canada



Figure 12  
*Femme et enfant au bord de la mer*  
 Pablo Picasso  
 1921  
 142.9 x 172.7 cm  
 Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 13  
*Nature Morte*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1924  
 49.5 x 64.5 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Private collection



Figure 14  
*Still Life*  
 Charles-Édouard Jeanneret  
 1920  
 80.9 x 99.7 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Museum of Modern Art





Figure 15  
*Still Life with Glass of Red Wine*  
 Amedée Ozenfant  
 1921  
 50.6 x 61.2 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Kunstmuseum Basel



Figure 16  
*Still Life with a Beer Mug*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1921-22  
 92.1 x 60 cm  
 Oil on canvas  
 Tate Modern

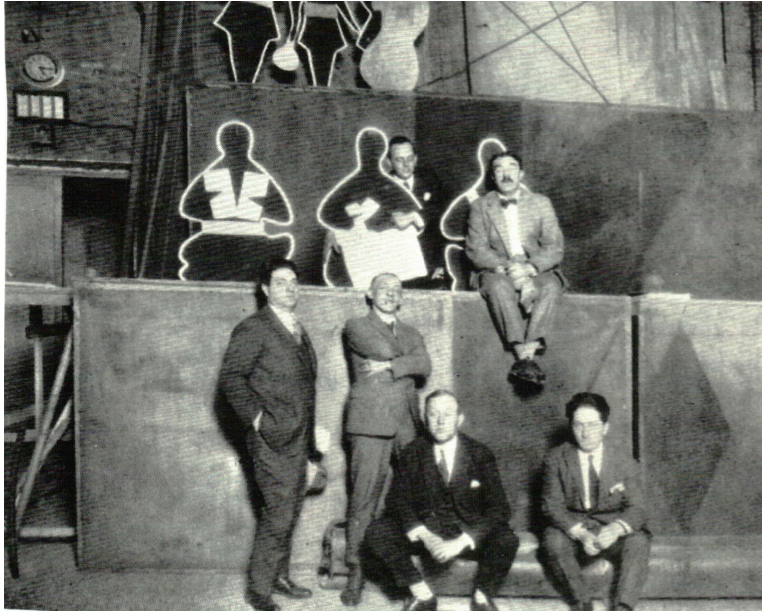


Figure 17

The Creators, c. 1923

From left to right, bottom row: Darius Milhaud, Blaise Cendrars, Rolf de Maré  
and Maurice Raynal

Top: Jean Börlin and Fernand Léger



Figure 18.

African sculptures and masks in the studio of André Derain  
c. 1912-13

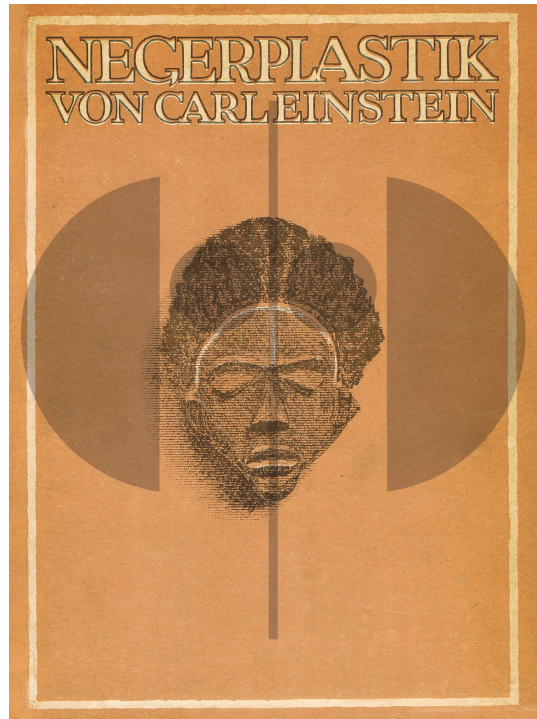


Figure 19  
First Edition cover of *Negerplastik*  
1915



Figure 20  
Soldiers from the 369<sup>th</sup>  
1919





Figure 21  
Jean Borlin in the costume for *Sculpture Nègre*  
1920  
Stockholm, Dansmuseet



Figure 22  
Rolf de Maré and Jean Borlin on the roof of the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées  
1924



Figure 23  
The Dancers of the Ballet Suédois  
1923  
Jean Börlin is in the front row, center



Figure 24  
Darius Milhaud  
c. 1923



Figure 25

Les Six

1920

(From left to right: Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, Jean Cocteau, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger.)



Figure 26

Blaise Cendrars

c. 1914



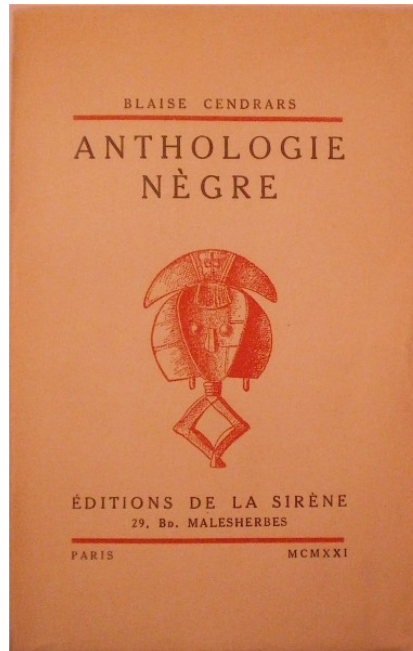


Figure 27  
Cover of *L'Anthologie Nègre*  
1921



Figure 28  
Fernand Léger (center left) with Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin (behind Léger) at a bal-musette  
c. 1921



Figure 29  
Josephine Baker and Joe Alan  
*Danse Sauvage*  
1925

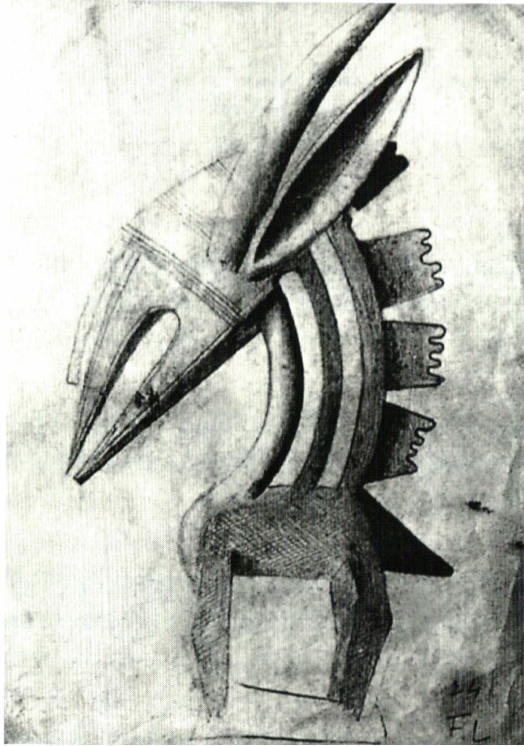


Figure 30  
*Study of Bambara antelope headdress for La  
 Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1922  
 Pencil on paper  
 28 x 22 cm  
 Estate of the Artist



Figure 31  
 Chi Wara figure  
 Bamana Peoples, Mali  
 19th- early 20th century  
 Wood, metal bands and thread  
 90.7 x 40 x 8.5 cm  
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 32  
*The Discs*  
Fernand Léger  
1918  
Oil on canvas  
94.5 x 180 cm  
Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris



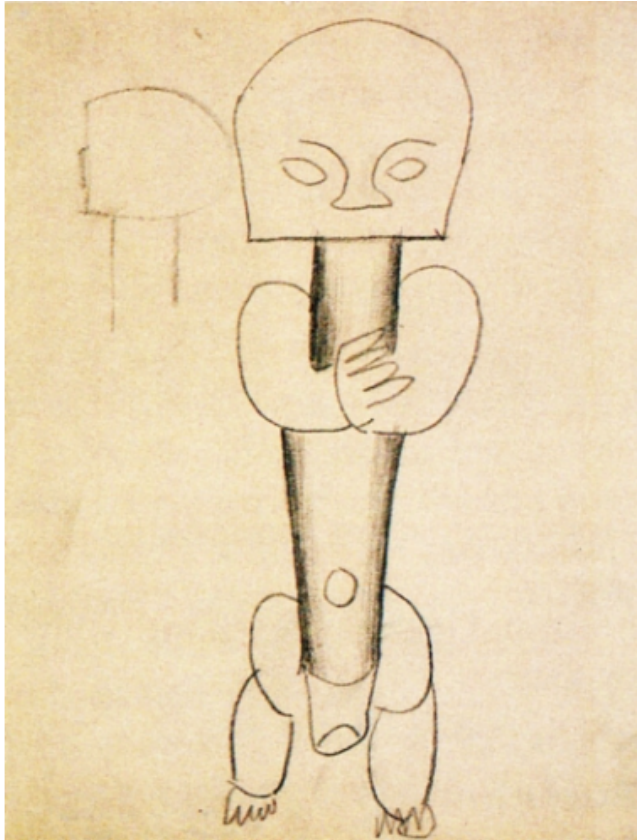


Figure 33  
*Costume Study for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Pencil on paper  
 26.7 x 21 cm  
 Private collection



Figure 34  
*Standing Figure*  
 Mambila People, Cameroon, 19th- early 20th  
 century  
 Wood and pigment  
 40.6 x 13.3  
 Metropolitan Museum of Art



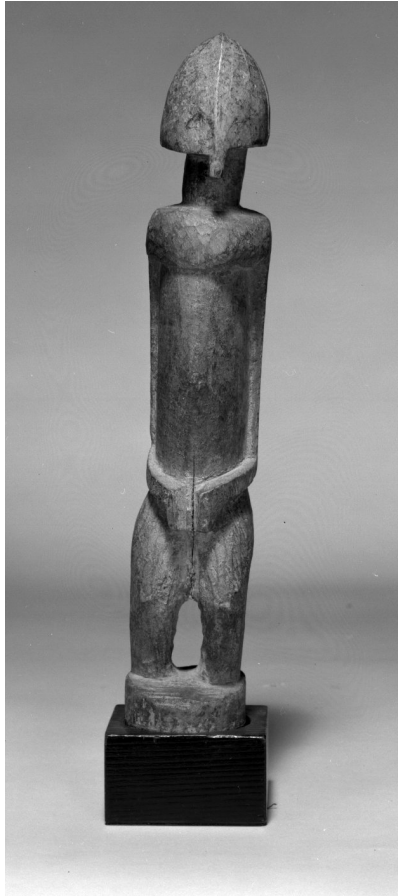


Figure 35  
*Standing Figure with Helmet-Shaped Head*  
 Dogon People, Mali  
 Late 19th- early 20th century  
 Wood  
 29.8 x 5.4 x 6  
 Brooklyn Museum



Figure 36  
*Seated Couple*  
 Dogon People, Mali  
 c. early 20th century  
 Wood  
 88.9 x 40.6 x 15.2 cm  
 Private collection

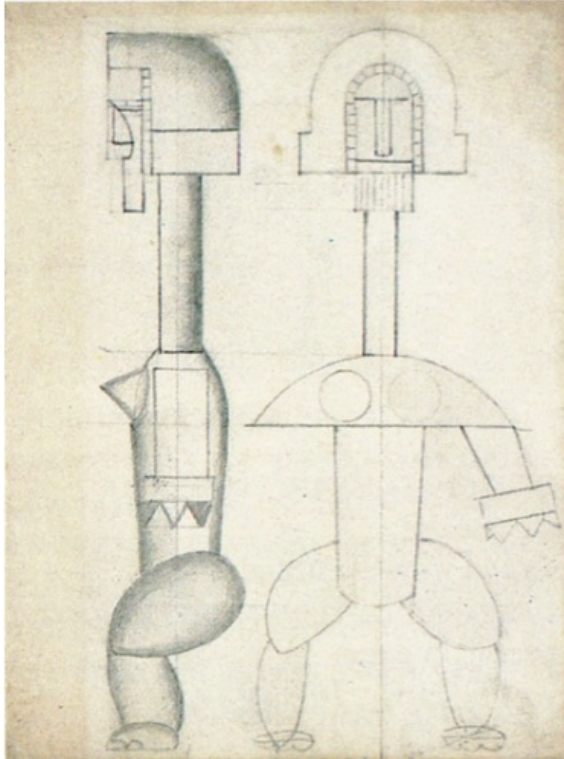


Figure 37  
*Costume Study for La Création du Monde*  
Fernand Léger  
1923  
Pencil on paper  
31 x 24 cm  
Private collection



Figure 38  
*Still Life with Mechanical Elements*  
Fernand Léger  
1918  
Oil on canvas

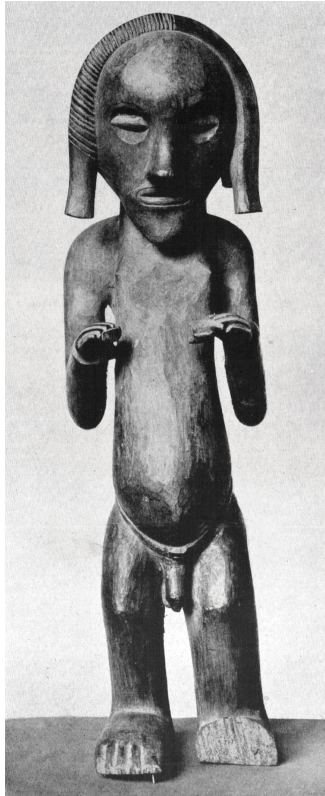


Figure 39  
*Unknown figure from Negerplastik*  
 Page number 42



Figure 40  
*Costume Study for Bird, La Création du Monde*  
 c. 1923  
 Pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper  
 22 x 15.5 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 41  
*Study for Deities*  
 La Création du Monde  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1922  
 Pencil on paper  
 21 x 27 cm  
 Private collection



Figure 42  
*Study for Deities*  
 La Création du Monde  
 Fernand Léger  
 1922  
 Pencil on paper  
 21 x 27 cm  
 Museum of Modern Art,  
 New York

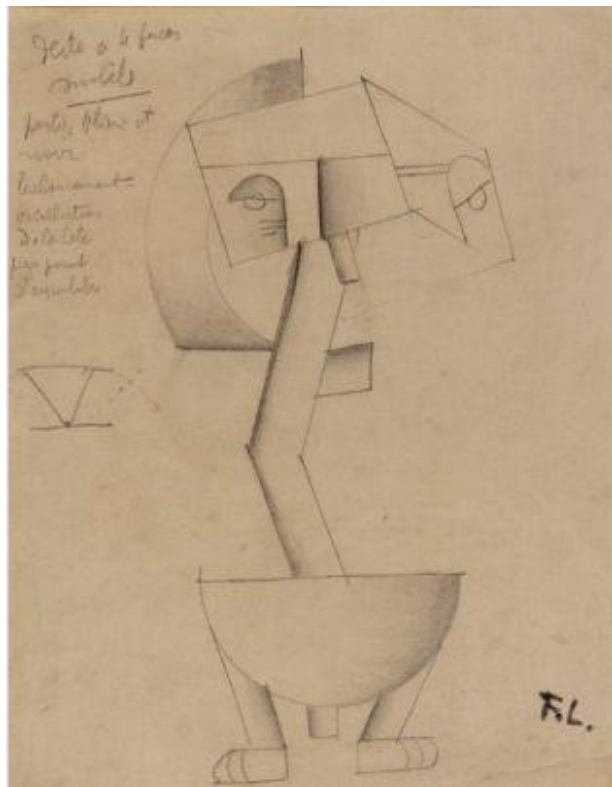


Figure 43

*Study for a deity with four faces*

Fernand Léger

1922

Pencil on paper

17 x 19.8 cm

Dansmuseet, Stockholm

"Déité a 4 faces mobile parties blanc et noir  
balancement oscillation de la tête pas point  
d'équilibre"



Figure 44

*Deity Two*

Fernand Léger

1922

27.3 x 21 cm

Museum of Modern Art

"Mobilité de la bouche et d'un oeil"



Figure 45  
*Study for Deities, La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Pencil, watercolor and Chinese ink on paper  
 23 x 28 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 46  
*Study for Deities and Backdrop, La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Private Collection





Figure 47  
*Design for Deities and Backdrop for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Gouache and watercolor on paper  
 42.7 x 57.5 cm  
 Private collection



Figure 48  
*Costume Designs for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm  
 (Details bellow)



Figure 49  
*La Création du Monde*  
 c. 1923  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 50  
*Maquette for La Création du Monde*  
 c. 1923

This image is taken from a vantage point which would have been similar to that of the audience.





Figure 51  
 Full Stage Maquette of *La Création du Monde*  
 1923  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 52  
*Creation Deities*



Fig 52 A  
*Creation Deity Costume Design for La  
 Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Leger  
 1923  
 Watercolor and Chinese ink on paper  
 37 x 19.5 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Fig 52 B  
*Creation Deity Costume Design for La  
 Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Graphite, watercolor, gouache and India ink  
 on paper  
 37 x 19.5 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 53  
*Messengers of the Gods*



Fig 53 A  
*Costume Design for Messenger, La  
Création du Monde*  
c. 1923  
Watercolor on paper  
27 x 17 cm  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Fig 53 B  
*Costume Design for Messenger,  
La Création du Monde*  
c. 1923  
Watercolor on paper  
27 x 17 cm  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 54  
*Humanoid Figures*



Fig 54 A  
*Female Humanoid Costume Design*  
*from La Création du Monde*  
Fernand Léger  
c. 1923  
Watercolor on paper  
27 x 17 cm  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Fig 54 B  
*Humanoid Costume Design for La Création*  
*du Monde*  
Fernand Léger  
c. 1923  
Graphite and watercolor on paper  
27 x 17 cm  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 55

*Birds*

Detail Image Figure 63 A and B

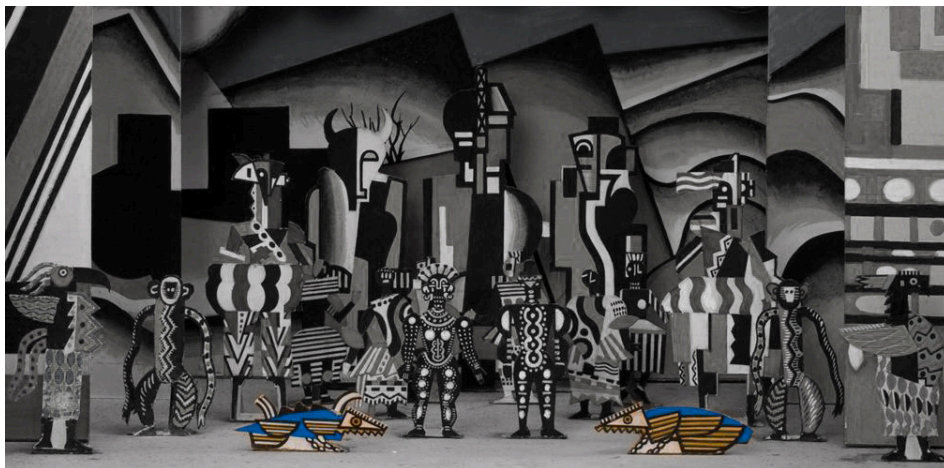


Figure 56

*Beetles*



Fig 56 A  
*Beetle Costume Design for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1923  
 Pencil, watercolor, gouache and Chinese ink on paper  
 15 x 25 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 57  
*Monkeys*



Figure 58  
*First Man and First Woman*

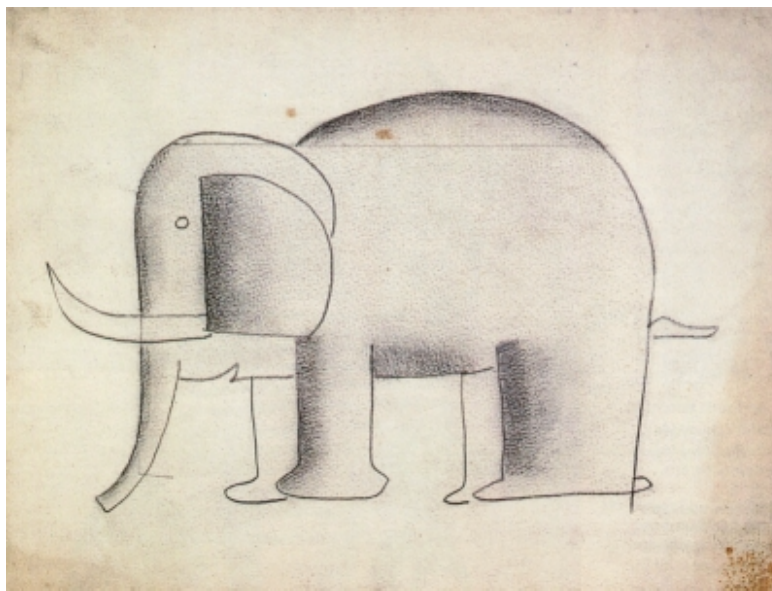


Figure 59  
Sketch for Costume Design for *La Création du Monde*  
Fernand Léger  
c. 1923  
Graphite on paper  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 60  
*Totemic (Archaic) Figure*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Graphite, watercolor and gouache on paper  
 14 x 28.5 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 61  
*Totemic Figure Study for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 62

*Costume Designs for Monkeys*

La Création du Monde

Fernand Léger

c. 1923

Graphite, watercolor, gouache and India ink on paper

34.5 x 19.5 cm

Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 63  
(A and B)

*Designs for Bird, La Création du Monde*

Fernand Leger

c. 1923

Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and India ink on paper

33 x 22 cm

Dansmuseet, Stockholm

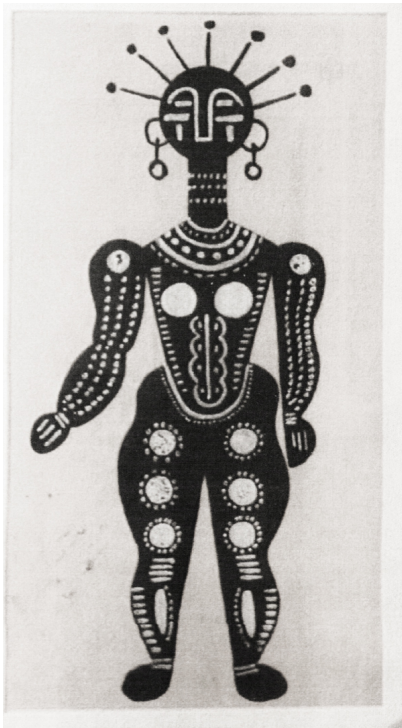


Figure 64  
*Woman and Man Costume*  
*Design*  
 La Création du Monde  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1923  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 65  
*Lunes en Papier, pg 21*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1921  
 Wood engraving on paper  
 32 cm  
 Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Netherlands





Figure 66  
*Three Deities*  
 La Création du Monde  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1923  
 Detail



Figure 67  
*Die Helmet Maskm*  
 Baule People, Côte d'Ivoire  
 Wood



Figure 68  
Salmson 2 A2 two seat reconnaissance biplane  
French Air Force  
World War I



Figure 69  
*Maquette of La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 c. 1923  
*Including side and top panels*  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm



Figure 70  
*Backdrop for La Création du Monde*  
 Fernand Léger  
 1923  
 Graphite, watercolor, gouache, and India ink on paper  
 41 x 54 cm  
 Dansmuseet, Stockholm





Figure 71  
*The Large Tugboat*,  
Fernand Léger  
1923  
Oil on canvas  
125 x 190.6 cm  
Musée National Fernand  
Léger, Biot



Fig 71 A  
Detail of *The Large Tugboat*  
Fernand Léger



Figure 72  
*Choreography notations for Skating Rink*  
Jean Börlin  
c. 1921  
Dansmuseet, Stockholm



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