

# SKARSTEDT

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*Fernand Léger: The Mechanical Paintings, 1918–1923*

5 November – 20 December 2025



Skarstedt is pleased to present *Fernand Léger: The Mechanical Paintings, 1918–1923*, an exhibition devoted to the artist's so-called “mechanical period.” While Léger had important phases prior to the war, such as his *Contrastes des forms*, as well as his monumental mural work later in his career, the “mechanical period” is often described as his breakthrough and most iconic contribution to twentieth century art. It crystallized a visual language that influenced not just painting, but also design, architecture, and cinema, setting the foundation for his later explorations of the human figure and the longstanding sense of both fascination and unease with machines that would continue throughout his career. Over a century after their creation, these works resonate with striking urgency: Léger's fascination with the accelerated pace of technological development mirrors our own present moment, when questions of automation, artificial intelligence, and the role of the human within systems of progress dominate cultural debate. Just as he grappled with the promises and perils of the machine age, we too navigate the allure and anxiety of rapid change.

The experience of war was decisive for Léger. Having served at the front and been hospitalized after a gas attack in 1917, he emerged from World War I with a sharpened awareness of machinery's power. Dazzled by the gleam of a gun's breech in sunlight, he abandoned Cubism's dissolution of form for the solidity of cylinders, discs, and cogs. In turn, he sought not only new pictorial solutions but also a way to contribute to Europe's collective reconstruction through an art aligned with modern industry. His “mechanical paintings” are marked by bold geometry, volumetric clarity, and radiant color, living in the liminal space between abstraction and figuration and capturing the exhilaration of modern life and its undercurrents of impersonality and fragmentation.

The works gathered here reflect the full range of Léger's explorations between 1918 and 1923. Commemorative canvases such as *L'Armistice* and *Le 14 juillet 1918 à Vernon* (both 1918) address the memory of conflict and the fragile hope of peace, incorporating uniforms and flags as symbols of resilience and revolution. His visions of the city, including *Les disques dans la ville* (1918–19), *Le pont du bateau* (1919), and *Eléments mécaniques* (1922), translate the rhythms of Paris and its industrial infrastructure into dynamic visual systems, where tugboats, propellers, and signage pulse with mechanical energy. These pieces of abstracted machinery find the sublime in the anonymity of modern life, even acknowledging the natural landscape as part of the greater modern machine.

Equally transformative are his still lifes, where bottles, pipes, and tools are stripped of hierarchy and rendered as mechanized components. In *Le déjeuner* (1921) and *Les trois femmes et la nature morte* (1921), the everyday merges with the human figure, suggesting continuity between animate and inanimate forms. That continuity finds further expression in Léger's treatment of the body itself. These modular beings are depersonalized, highlighting the repetition latent within the quotidian, much like the repeated workings of a machine. In paintings like *Femme au miroir* (1920), domestic rituals are reframed by geometric construction, while *Les trois personnages dans le jardin* (1922) crystallizes Léger's new conception of the figure: massive, frontal, and lacking in hierarchy with their surroundings, fusing the clarity and weight of the Old Masters with the impersonal logic of the mechanical period.

Léger likewise explored this visual language through depictions of entertainment. *Le Cirque Médrano (Esquisse)* (1918) uses the circus and its lone acrobat to emphasize rhythm, repetition, and mass spectacle over singular identity. The circus becomes, in his hands, a metaphor for the de-individualized yet shared experiences of modern life.

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Also on view will be *Ballet mécanique* (1924)—the only film Léger ever produced—a landmark of early avant-garde cinema co-directed with Dudley Murphy. Rejecting narrative, the film orchestrates a rapid montage of everyday objects, mechanical parts, and fragmented human forms edited into rhythmic repetitions that mimic the logic of the machine. At once playful and disorienting, *Ballet mécanique* reveals Léger's willingness to embrace new technology, even as his paintings registered its depersonalizing effects. The film complements the paintings on view by extending their vocabulary of cylinders, discs, and stylized bodies into moving images, offering a cinematic counterpart to the fractured, rhythmic order he developed on canvas. The film's inclusion in the exhibition makes clear that for Léger, the themes of reconstruction and mechanized rhythm were not confined to canvas but part of a larger, unified vision that he sought to render across the full spectrum of modern media.

Taken together, these works chart the emergence of a new pictorial order in the wake of unprecedented social and technological upheaval. Léger's "mechanical period" captures the exhilaration and disorientation of the early twentieth century—a moment that, in its rush towards mechanization, speaks uncannily to our own.

## About Fernand Léger

Fernand Léger was born in Argentan, France in 1881. He initially trained as an architect before moving to Paris in 1900. Although he was rejected by the École des Beaux-Arts, he studied painting independently under Jean-Léon Gérôme, a prominent academic artist, until 1904. Early in his career, Léger was influenced by Impressionism and the work of Paul Cézanne, but by the 1910s, he had developed a unique style rooted in Cubism. His work from this period featured bold colors, simplified forms, and mechanical imagery, reflecting the rising influence of industry and technology in modern life.

By the 1920s, Léger had become one of the leading figures in modern art, known for his striking paintings, murals, and films that emphasized rhythm, movement, and a machine-like aesthetic. He also explored a wide range of media—including ceramics, glass, print and book arts, and large-scale murals—bringing his modernist vision into both fine and applied arts. His signature style grew out of Cubism and featured robot-like figures with tubular forms, symbolizing the blending of humans and machines in the modern world. Throughout his life, Léger remained committed to making art accessible to everyone, not just the elite.

Léger's work has been widely exhibited in major institutions across Europe and the United States. Important solo exhibitions have been held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Tate Gallery in London. His legacy is also preserved at the Musée National Fernand Léger in Biot, France, which opened in 1960. Léger's impact on modern art extended into architecture, design, and cinema, and he remains one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. He died in 1955 in Gif-sur-Yvette, France.

## About Skarstedt

Skarstedt was founded in 1992 by Per Skarstedt to present a program of museum-level exhibitions by contemporary European and American artists. Recognized for its critically acclaimed historical exhibitions, Skarstedt works closely with artists and estates to re-unite seminal bodies of work and offer focused surveys of pivotal moments in the history of twentieth-century art. Representing some of the most celebrated artists of their generations, Skarstedt also mounts ground-breaking exhibitions of new work, which continue to challenge the boundaries of contemporary identity.

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Skarstedt is committed to supporting and advancing the legacy of leading international artists by showcasing their work across its gallery spaces in New York (Upper East Side & Chelsea), London, and Paris. The gallery works with the following artists and artists' estates: Francis Bacon, Cristina BanBan, Georg Baselitz, Jean-Michel Basquiat, George Condo, Willem de Kooning, Nicolas de Staël, Yuan Fang, Eric Fischl, Günther Förg, Alberto Giacometti, Keith Haring, Secundino Hernández, Jenny Holzer, Chantal Joffe, Hans Josephsohn, KAWS, Mike Kelley, Yves Klein, Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Joan Miró, Juan Muñoz, Albert Oehlen, Marco Pariani, Steven Parrino, Pablo Picasso, Richard Prince, David Salle, Jana Schröder, Thomas Schütte, Cindy Sherman, Rosemarie Trockel, Andy Warhol, Rebecca Warren, Sue Williams, Christopher Wool, and The Estate Martin Kippenberger in collaboration with Galerie Gisela Capitan Cologne.

**Image Details:** Fernand Léger, *L'Armistice*, 1918, oil on canvas, 21 ¾ x 15 1/8 inches (55.2 x 38.4 cm). © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.