“Le joli est l’ennemi du beau,” the pretty is the enemy of the beautiful—this credo of Fernand Léger’s reflects an attitude to art that has also shaped our own museum’s collection. Léger himself plays an important role here, the collection containing twelve of his works, a number surpassed only by our holdings of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee. Not surprisingly, the first Légers entered the Galerie Beyeler as early as the mid 1950s, and subsequently a series of comprehensive one-man shows were devoted to him there, in 1964, 1969, 1981, and 1994–1995.

Léger was one of the fathers of modern art, his cool yet optimistic and poetic style unfolding from the beginning with great originality. The fabulous, boldly colored Cubist paintings of the pre-1914 years attested to his independence even from Picasso. Also of great force and originality was the innovative vision of the modern city that emerged in his work after 1918. Subsequently, Léger remained a formally rigorous constructor of compositions, whether in the still lifes or the figure subjects on which he began increasingly to concentrate in the early 1920s. The latter reflected a concern with the human condition that went back to his experiences in the trenches during World War I. A crucial period in Léger’s figure painting came in the period from 1940 to 1945, when from the difficult conditions of exile he wrested the life-confirming motif of the Plongeurs, or Divers. Great concentration of form and palette characterized the late work that emerged after his return to France: the compelling Constructeurs and the typical compositions of the final years, with their daring separation of figure drawing from brilliant areas of color.

We at the Fondation Beyeler are proud to be able to devote a large exhibition to Léger, focusing on his painting oeuvre. After the comprehensive 1994 show at the Kunstmuseum Basel, which concentrated on the early phase to 1924, the present exhibition, for the first time in many years, enables a review of Léger’s output from 1912 to 1954. Comprising about eighty paintings, the show is the most comprehensive to be devoted to his work in this medium since the great 1997–1998 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. At the same time, it has a quite unprecedented focus—on Léger’s relationship to America. He was profoundly influenced by this country, which he visited several times, and he created major works there, many of which are included in the exhibition. In addition, key works by American artists who were inspired by Léger have been integrated into the presentation. The emphasis lies on the Pop Art generation, especially on works by Roy Lichtenstein and Ellsworth Kelly, which are directly confronted with Léger’s in the exhibition spaces. This gives rise to dialogues of the kind previously tested in the Fondation Beyeler’s exhibitions Cézanne and Modernism in 1999, and Francis Bacon and the Tradition of Art in 2004.

We wish to thank all of those who have contributed to the exhibition’s success. First and foremost the lenders, who include many private collectors. Our special thanks go to the artists involved, especially Ellsworth Kelly and his studio,
headed by Jack Shear. Kelly, a great admirer of Léger's art, was enthusiastic about our project from the start and com-
mitted himself to it in many ways. James Rosenquist and Kenneth Noland also helped make the exhibition a reality and provided their personal support. Also of great significance for the project were the relatives of artists, above all Dorothy Lichtenstein. Together with Jack Cowart and the team of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation in New York, she furthered the exhibition in an extraordinarily generous way with loans and important suggestions and pointers. Mara Held of the Al Held Foundation likewise gave her crucial support to the project. The same holds for Alexander S.C. Rower and Joan Punyet Miró, grandchildren of Alexander Calder and Joan Miró—two of Léger's artist friends—whose kind support for the project is greatly appreciated.

Our gratitude is due to everyone who helped us with diverse information and suggestions, without which the project could not have been brought to fruition in this form. To mention only a few of the many by name: Gottfried Boehm, Michael A. Findlay, Daniel Malingue, Marzina Marzetti, Tobias Mueller, Claudia Neugebauer, Helena Newman, Jamileh Weber, and Oliver Wick.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the contributors to the catalogue, Yve-Alain Bois, Christian Derouet, Brigitte Hedel-Samson, Nelly Maillard, Katherine Jánszky Michaelsen, Raphaël Bouvier, and Daniel Kramer. The publication of the catalogue, prepared with great commitment by our own Delia Ciuha with the assistance of Raphaël Bouvier, lay in the competent hands of Annette Kulenkampff of Hatje Cantz Publishers. Our cordial thanks to her, as well as to Jürgen Geiger and Christopher John Murray. Our gratitude goes to Heinz Hiltbrunner for the attractive appearance of the cata-
logue. Finally let us express our appreciation to the many staff members of the Fondation and Galerie Beyeler who were involved in the project and whose enthusiasm helped make it a reality.

Last but not least, we would like to thank the Hansjoerg Wyss Foundation for the crucial support they provide for our exhibition activities.
Revealing Effects—Fernand Léger and American Art

Philippe Büttner

Even as far back as the caves of Lascaux it was surely so: art affects art. Influences, effects, inspirations spread from one maker of art to the next, from one work to another. Art generates art. True, no work of art can be reduced solely to the influences that helped to shape it. Yet existing art continually affects emerging art and helps it to develop—while itself being transformed, and occasionally overcome, in the process.

The Fondation Beyeler has made an exploration of this both straightforward and complex phenomenon one of the leitmotifs of its exhibitions. In 1999, Cézanne and Modernism illustrated the extent to which great modern artists were influenced by the Master of Aix. In 2004, in Francis Bacon and the Tradition of Art, the thrust was reversed, to show the way in which artists from Titian to Alberto Giacometti helped to shape Bacon’s art. And now the series continues with an exhibition that raises the issue of Fernand Léger’s impact on American art.

A promising theme, seeing that Léger’s life and art were connected in a special way with the United States. He spent several periods of time there, the last from 1940 to 1945 as an émigré in New York. Léger was deeply impressed by the vast country, its architecture, dynamism and modernity, and executed significant works there that reflected this feeling. At the same time, the works of Léger, like those of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, made a strong impression on American art. This “American connection” is well known, as is shown by Carolyn Lanchner’s seminal essay on Léger’s relation to the United States, published in the catalogue of the 1998 New York retrospective. Beginning with his arrival in America and the reception of his art from 1930 onwards, Lanchner describes the artist’s various journeys and his meetings with artists such as Gerald Murphy and patrons such as Nelson A. Rockefeller and Wallace K. Harrison, and goes on to discuss aspects of Léger’s subsequent influence on American art.1 Also noteworthy are the statements of various American artists concerning the meaning of Léger’s oeuvre for their own work, notably those by Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, and James Rosenquist, all of which appear in this volume for the first time, by Al Held, and those made by Roy Lichtenstein in an interview he gave shortly before his death,2 which is also published here.

Never before, however, has the subject of “Léger and the United States” been made the focus of a comprehensive exhibition or publication, which is sufficient reason for the Fondation Beyeler to close this gap. The aim of the project, originally suggested by Ulf Küster, is to present the major themes and phases of Léger’s oeuvre in view of its American connections. The present publication contains essays by Christian Derouet, Brigitte Hedel-Samson and Daniel Kramer on the implications of his encounter with America for Léger himself. Yve-Alain Bois and Raphaël Bouvier, by contrast, discuss Léger’s significance for American artists. In the exhibition proper, the theme is addressed directly, through the inclusion of American works. These, when confronted with works by Léger, shed new light on the more or less direct way in which
his influence manifested itself in American art. This particular accent of the exhibition is also reflected in the present publication.

The focus of the Fondation Beyeler on this theme has to do with the unique profile and strengths of the Beyeler Collection as well, which contains major works both by Léger and by outstanding American artists who have an affinity with his art. This enabled us early on, in the project’s planning stages, to explore the interrelationship between examples of the two groups of works in our own exhibition spaces. These comparisons had a seminal effect on the conception and character of the entire enterprise. A key experiment in this regard was the hanging, in 2005, of Léger’s Composition I (Décoration pour une salle à manger) of 1930 (cat. 57, pp. 76–77) close to Roy Lichtenstein’s Peace Through Chemistry of 1970 (cat. 117, p. 172). On the one hand, in view of Léger’s painting, Lichtenstein’s appeared in a new light. On the other, the effect was surprisingly reversed—a perception of the Lichtenstein prompted a rediscovery of the Léger, as if seen through American eyes. It was an exciting juxtaposition. And it led us to the realization that the planned exhibition should not only inquire into Léger’s influence on the later Americans but also explore the potentials of a visual dialogue between the specific works in the exhibition rooms. A dialogue of this kind, rather than remaining limited to the diachronic axis of a possible historic influence of one work on another, would take place in the visual synchronism of the exhibition space itself. There, to put it simply, a Robert Rauschenberg would have a chance to influence a Léger, and the Rauschenberg, equally, suggest ways of seeing that would immediately affect our perception of the adjacent Léger. In other words, the perception of Rauschenberg would influence the perception of Léger, engendering—that is to say—an altered effect. In the exhibition space, an influence in both directions, a reciprocal effect, could indeed be seen at work.

In exploring this process of action and reaction we have restricted ourselves, as far as the modern American works are concerned, to the period after World War II, particularly after 1955. Although Léger’s influence naturally began to take effect before the war—recall Stuart Davis and Léger’s painter-friend and supporter Gerald Murphy—his oeuvre proved truly influential only for the generation born after 1920, who, if they passed through Abstract Expressionism at all, did so only in an initial phase. This generation included both objective artists working in a Pop style, such as Roy Lichtenstein, and abstractionists, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Al Held. An interest in Léger, in other words, did not necessarily depend on any allegiance to the objective or the non-objective camp. This is remarkable, though perhaps less surprising when we consider that Léger himself (like Paul Klee and Joan Miró, among others) employed both modernist idioms, objective and abstract, in the context of his specific approach. More significant, it seems, was the attitude of the artists concerned to the presence of visible brushwork. In view of Léger’s cool, sober style, it tended not to be the major representatives of American gestural abstraction who found inspiration in the Frenchman’s art. But what did those artists who admired Léger find in him—and only in him?

We explore this question by means of various juxtapositions of Léger works with those of a specific selection of American artists of the Pop generation: Al Held, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol. Placed alongside Léger’s, selected works by these artists provide visual evidence of the way in which the aesthetic issues of European modernism addressed by Léger were readdressed in American art.


3 The seemingly absurd and yet intriguing notion of someone who lived earlier being influenced by someone who lived later has been explored by the English author David Lodge. In his 1975 novel Changing Places, Lodge tells of a linguist who argues that T. S. Eliot influenced Shakespeare, in the sense that an involvement with Eliot’s modern texts has led to altered readings and perceptions of earlier texts.


5 One interesting exception of a gestural artist with an affinity to Léger is Willem de Kooning, who, as an assistant of Léger’s on an ultimately abandoned mural project for the pier of the French Line shipping company, met him in 1936. See Bill Berkson, “As Ever: De Kooning,” Art in America LXXXV, 2 (February 1997), p. 68. Some of de Kooning’s late works bear a certain relation to a 1935–1936 Léger design for this mural: see Lanchner (as note 1), p. 46, and ills. p. 47; also, more generally, Berkson, ibid.

6 Further artists who can be associated with Léger are discussed by Lanchner (as note 1). These include Willem de Kooning, Tom Wesselmann, Robert Colescott, Richard Stankiewicz, Richard Lindner, Louise Bourgeois, Arshile Gorky, and Philip Guston (pp. 46, 58–60); and, by reference to Brooks Adams (“Un Léger pour les années 80,” Art Press 127 [July/August 1988], pp. 4–5 and passim), others such as Brice Marden, Leon Golub, David Salle, and Jeff Koons (pp. 60–61).