

# *The Creation of the World*

A tapestry by Fernand Léger at the  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



Mikel Bilbao Salsidua

**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

This text is published under an international Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs Creative Commons licence (BY-NC-ND), version 4.0. It may therefore be circulated, copied and reproduced (with no alteration to the contents), but for educational and research purposes only and always citing its author and provenance. It may not be used commercially. View the terms and conditions of this licence at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncnd/4.0/legalcode>



Using and copying images are prohibited unless expressly authorised by the owners of the photographs and/or copyright of the works.

© of the texts: Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

© Paul Colin, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2014

© Fernand Léger, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2014

#### **Photography credits**

© Archives Blaise Cendrars: fig. 3

© Archives Charmet / The Bridgeman Art Library: figs. 2 and 8

© Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao: figs. 1, 9 and 13

© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Fernand Léger) / Gérard Blot: figs. 5 and 7

© The Museum of Modern Art, New York: fig. 11

Text published in:

*Buletina = Boletín = Bulletin.* Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Eder Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao = Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, no. 8, 2014, pp. 185-217.

Sponsor



**metro bilbao**

What is the artist to do, crushed by the grandiose *mise-en-scène* of life, to attract his public? There is only one option open to him: to raise himself to the level of beauty by considering everything around him as raw material, to choose in the whirlwind that swirls before his eyes the available plastic and pictorial values, interpret them spectacularly, achieve unity and dominate at all costs. If he doesn't learn enough, if he doesn't achieve the upper level, he immediately finds himself trapped by life, which cuts him down to standard size and leaves him behind. To invent, that is the goal, no matter what the cost<sup>1</sup>.

**B**ased on a sketch Fernand Léger produced for the stage set of the ballet *La Création du monde* [fig. 1] this tapestry essentially features three great deities in a setting where geometric forms merge with natural elements. One of the innovations the Ballets Suédois presented at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in the 1923 season, the ballet is a palpable demonstration of the impact the avant-garde had on dance<sup>2</sup>. Outstanding dancers and choreographers such as Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), Michel Fokine (1880-1942) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950) made major contributions to the rise, renewal and popularity of this form of artistic expression in the first third or so of the 20th century. Fokine and Nijinsky were active members of the Ballets Russes founded by Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) in 1909, which revolutionized the Paris scene with shows that combined the talents of avant-garde musicians, choreographers and visual artists in a bid to make every single creation a “total work of art”. Although this wasn't in itself a novelty (Richard

---

1 Fernand Léger. “The show: light, colour, moving image, object theatre” in *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne*, Paris, 1925. From Léger 1990, p. 100.

2 On this point, see Rovereto 2005.



1. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*The Creation of the World*, c. 1923  
(manufactured in 1963)  
Wool, 283 x 388 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/2353

Wagner had already set himself the same aesthetic task for his operas in the mid-19th century), trying to make ballets total works of art did much to change a romantic world of tutus into a field ripe for experiment.

Swedish philanthropist and art collector Rolf de Maré (1888-1964) founded the Ballets Suédois in 1920. Despite the Nordic name and dancers, the company worked in Paris. Between 1920 and 1925, the Ballets Suédois, led by choreographer and dancer Jean Börlin (1893-1930) staged upwards of twenty productions enhanced by artists such as Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, Pierre Bonnard, Nils Dardel, Giorgio de Chirico, Francis Picabia and Fernand Léger, and musician of the stature of Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Cole Porter, Alfredo Casella, Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud. This remarkable roster of talents came up with some highly innovative, cutting-edge ideas in choreography, music and artistic settings. In all, the company gave 2,758 performances<sup>3</sup> at its official home, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, and at venues on their European and US tours<sup>4</sup>. In the first three years, company productions included *Iberia* (1920), a very Spanish affair with music by Isaac Albéniz, *El Greco* (1920), based on the aesthetic imagery of painter Doménikos Theotokópoulos, and ballets inspired by Swedish dances and popular melodies like *Nuit de Saint-Jean* (1920) and *Dansgille* (1921). Some productions were markedly exotic, for instance *Derviches* (1920), *Jeux* (1920) and *La Boîte à Joujoux* (1921), both with music by Claude Debussy, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1920), with a score by Maurice Ravel, *Les Vierges Folles* (1920), based on the parable of the ten virgins from the Gospel of St. Matthew, and the rather unsettling *Maison de fous* (1920). Even more experimental were *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), *L'Homme et son désir* (1921) and *Skating Rink* (1922), the latter work marking artist Fernand Léger's debut collaboration with Rolf de Maré's Ballets Suédois.

## A "black ballet" at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées

Premiered on 25 October 1923, *The Creation of the World* [fig. 2] was the result of collaboration between four artists [fig. 3]. Poet Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) provided the storyline, composer Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) came up with a jazz-tinged score, Fernand Léger produced the stage designs and wardrobe, and Jean Börlin created the choreography. When the production was in the planning stage, the craze for African art was at its height in Paris; indeed, the works of artists like Vlaminck, Matisse, Derain, Braque and Picasso had been feeding off this passion since the early years of the 20th century<sup>5</sup>. Events like the colonial exhibitions held in Paris (1907) and Marseilles (1906 and 1922) also helped to fan interest in the cultural idiosyncrasies of the African continent. In the art world, this interest led to shows such as the *Première exposition d'art nègre et d'art océanien* organized by Paul Guillaume in 1919<sup>6</sup>, and to essays like Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (1915) or the less consistent *African negro art; its influence on modern art* (1916) by Marius de Zayas. Einstein's erudite essay in fact proved crucial, being decisive in changing the status of African art. It was also seen as a defence of avant-garde movements like Cubism<sup>7</sup>. So it was hardly surprising that Fernand Léger should base some of his sketches for *The Creation of the World* on photographs illustrating *Negerplastik* [figs. 4-7].

---

3 Sources differ on the actual number. Fokine... [et al.] 1931 suggests 2,766, while Häger 1989 gives 2,758.

4 In 1921 the company toured Spain, performing in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Valladolid, Bilbao, Santander, Corunna, Ferrol, Orense, Vigo, Pontevedra and Santiago de Compostela. For the Spanish tour, see Baliñas 2006 and Bilbao 2013.

5 Some group exhibitions, including one staged in painter Émile Lejeune's studio in 1916 with the title *Lyre et Palette*, bear witness to this inspirational bond. At the show, thirty-five works by Kisling, Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso and Ortiz de Zárate were displayed alongside twenty-five African sculptures.

6 Ginebra 2000, pp. 36-53.

7 See Liliane Meffre's introductory essay in Einstein 2002, pp. 11-25.



2. Hand programme designed by Fernand Léger for the premiere of *The Creation of the World* ballet, by the Ballets Suédois, 1923  
Private collection, Archives Charmet



3. Max Erlanger de Rosen (?-1961)  
*The Creation of the World* team, c. 1924  
Left to right: Blaise Cendrars, Rolf de Maré,  
Darius Milhaud, Fernand Léger and Jean Börlin  
Archives Blaise Cendrars  
Inv. no. A.I.D. 3494, 366

Rolf de Maré asked Blaise Cendrars to provide the plot for a ballet inspired by a traditional African legend. Maré's choice of poet was not random, as Cendrars's output was closely linked to the theme, as is clear from the publication in 1916 of *Les Grands Fétiches* and *Continent Noir*, and the *Antologie Nègre* from 1921. In 1919, Jean Cocteau had said of Cendrars that he was the finest representative of the new exoticism then in vogue, "a mixture of engines and black fetishes"<sup>8</sup>. The storyline of *The Creation of the World* merged in five scenes the *Fang* legends of creation and the origins, retold in *Antologie Nègre*<sup>9</sup>. Content and format conditioned the structure of Darius Milhaud's music score and the designs Léger produced for the stage settings and wardrobe.

As the text by Cendrars specifies<sup>10</sup>, the first scene begins with the set in darkness and lots of interwoven bodies on stage, symbolizing the chaos before the creation. Meanwhile, the three giant deities shown in the tapestry, the lords of creation Nazme, Medere and N'kva, dance around them and cast magic spells. In the second scene the central mass moves, trees begin to grow, from whose seeds sprout other trees, and animals are born<sup>11</sup>, while the stage is gradually lit during the creation. In the third scene the three deities are surrounded by the creatures that have slowly formed a circle around them. The circle opens and the

8 In Cocteau 1920, a compilation of articles Cocteau wrote for the *Paris-Midi* newspaper between March and August 1919.

9 Cendrars 2010, pp. 23-31.

10 The plot was outlined in the hand programme for the premiere and in other subsequent sources. In this case I refer to the text given in Fokine... [et al.] 1931, pp. 65-66.

11 Dansmuseet – Musée Rolf de Maré, Stockholm, inv. no. 266, 264 and 250.



4. *Tshokwe* figurine, Angola  
Wood  
Published in Carl Einstein. *Negerplastik*, 1915, no. 57  
Pushkin State Museum of the Fine Arts, Moscow  
Inv. no. II 2nd – 232



5. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*The Creation of the World. Sketch for a costume*, 1923  
Gouache and pencil on paper, 31.5 x 24 cm  
Musée national Fernand Léger, Biot, France  
Inv. no. MNFL95002



6. Female *Baga* figurine, Guinea  
Wood  
Published in Carl Einstein. *Negerplastik*,  
1915, no. 44



7. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
Sketch of a mask for *The Creation of the World*, 1922-1923  
Pencil on paper, 27 x 21 cm  
Musée national Fernand Léger, Biot, France  
Inv. no. MNFL98025

deities cast new spells that make the shapeless mass move. The man Sekoume and the woman Mbongwe<sup>12</sup> are born, they discover and recognise themselves and stand opposite each other. In the fourth scene the couple perform the dance of desire and the N'guils, sorcerers and sorceresses, appear to curse the group. In the final scene, the circle calms down, its members move more slowly and splinter into smaller groups. The couple isolate themselves in a kiss as spring emerges around them.

Darius Milhaud, a member of Les Six<sup>13</sup>, was entrusted with setting the programme proposed by Blaise Cendrars to music. This was not the first time the composer had worked with the Ballets Suédois; two years previously the company had premiered *L'Homme et son désir*, a work based on a Paul Claudel poem that Milhaud had scored in 1918<sup>14</sup>. For *The Creation of the World* he produced a score lasting a little over 15 minutes, divided into five sections (Prélude, Fugue, Romanza, Scherzo and Finale), designed to embody Cendrars's plot in sound. As Milhaud notes in his memoirs, the work gave him the chance to use elements borrowed from jazz, which he had explored intensively. His orchestration was designed for seventeen solo instruments, just like a Harlem jazz band<sup>15</sup>. Attentive listening and a close look at the score reveal some interesting features. The composer's intention to give the music a programmatic touch is clear, with the chaos prior to the creation, the birth of plant and animal life, and the creation of man and woman seeming to be evoked respectively in fugue, romanza and scherzo. The parallels between some passages of the romanza and a melody from Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, composed a year later, are also quite striking<sup>16</sup>. However, despite the innovative side to Milhaud's scores, critics felt his work was not serious, being more suited to "dance halls and restaurants than theatres". Paradoxically, as Milhaud says, a decade later those same critics, in articles on the philosophy of jazz, described *The Creation of the World* as his finest piece<sup>17</sup>.

Dancer Jean Börlin [fig. 8] was responsible for the choreography. Trained at the Stockholm Opera ballet school, which he entered in 1902, Börlin, despite his classical training, was clearly more interested in experimentation, which was at the heart of all the projects he worked on while leading the Ballets Suédois. His urge to innovate was probably awakened and consolidated by a number of things, including seeing Isadora Duncan dance in Stockholm in 1906, and meeting pedagogue Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, inventor of an innovative method for experiencing music through movement<sup>18</sup>. But one of the main stimuli was almost certainly Michel Fokine, who led the Ballet of the Royal Opera of Stockholm after working with Diaghilev from 1909 to 1912. Jean Börlin was in fact a member of the company when the Russian-born choreographer arrived in Stockholm. Börlin certainly impressed his maestro, as is clear from some of his comments:

My earliest memories of Jean Börlin are from 1911. I began to stage ballets with the troupe at the Royal Opera of Stockholm. Although small, the company was packed with great dancers [...] it was a real discovery for me and, of them all, Jean Börlin was artistic delight personified. He was still only a boy and had yet to make a name for himself. I remember seeing him in the role of a young faun, in a revival of *Cleopatra*. He crossed the stage with

---

12 Dansmuseet – Musée Rolf de Maré, Stockholm, inv. no. 246 and 247. Note the similarities between this sketch and illustration 59 in Einstein 2002.

13 Les Six was a group of French musicians who were at their most active in the 1920s. Despite the name, there were in fact seven musicians, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Erik Satie, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, Darius Milhaud and Louis Durey. All of them except Satie and Durey worked with the Ballets Suédois in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921). In 1924 Satie wrote the music for *Relâche*, an innovative production with storyline and stage designs by Francis Picabia, a film interlude by René Clair and choreography by Jean Börlin.

14 Darius Milhaud has an interesting repertoire of music for ballet. Besides *The Creation of the World*, particularly interesting are two ballets with storylines by Jean Cocteau, *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (1920) and *Le Train bleu*, premiered by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1924. For the latter Coco Chanel designed the wardrobe and Pablo Picasso the curtain.

15 Milhaud 1974, p. 125.

16 On the music for *The Creation of the World*, see the exhaustive analysis in Mawer 1997, pp. 145-176.

17 Milhaud 1974, p. 128.

18 Häger 1989, p. 10.



8. Paul Colin (1892-1985)  
*Jean Börlin*, 1925  
 Colour lithograph on paper, 123 x 82 cm  
 Print. H. Chachoin, Paris  
 Private collection, Archives Charmet

giant leaps, fell with all his weight and slid across the floor between the groups of revellers. Such character! Such ecstasy! The single-minded sacrifice of a bruised body for the sake of maximum expression in the dance. He was an absolute revelation to me<sup>19</sup>.

Börlin was promoted to second dancer of the Ballet of the Royal Opera of Stockholm in 1913, and in 1915 created works such as *Faun* and *Bacchanal*, in which the imprint of Fokine's teachings are evident<sup>20</sup>. In 1918 he was put forward for lead dancer, but he soon left the company to found the Ballets Suédois with Rolf de Maré. Fokine was not alone in recognising Börlin's talent as a choreographer and dancer; other enthusiasts included composer and music critic Alexis Roland Manuel, Francis Picabia, Jean Cocteau, filmmaker René Clair<sup>21</sup> and Pierre Tugal, co-founder with Rolf de Maré of the Archives Internationales de la Danse in Paris in 1931.

*The Creation of the World* was not Börlin's first excursion into African-tinged dance. In Paris on 25 March 1920, he offered a solo show at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. On the programme were *Devant la mort*,

19 Fokine... [et al.] 1931, pp. 148-149.

20 Ibid, p. 156.

21 Jean Börlin worked on two occasions with film director René Clair. He took part in the 22-minute short film *Entr'acte*, part of the Ballets Suédois piece *Relâche* (1924), and also worked on *Le voyage imaginaire* (1926). The choreographer's relations with avant-garde film were clear from his participation in *L'inhumaine* (1924), a highly experimental film directed by Marcel L'Herbier. Fernand Léger, Darius Milhaud and the Ballets Suédois were also involved in the project.

*Danse céleste* and *Sculpture nègre*. Francis Poulenc scored the music for the third piece, while Paul Colin, a prolific draughtsman and author of the popular poster for Josephine Baker's *Revue Nègre* (1925) and an album of lithographs published in 1927 entitled *Tumulte noir*<sup>22</sup>, was responsible for the costumes. Reviews in *Le Figaro* and *Le Menestrel* praised the dancer's originality, exoticism and his particularly well-received "poses of idols". *Sculpture nègre* should therefore be seen as a precedent for the choreographer's work three years later. For *The Creation of the World*, Börlin and De Maré, who apparently also owned a collection of African sculptures, made a close study of a number of dances from the Congo and viewed documentaries loaned by several film companies<sup>23</sup>. Although the choreography would certainly have made an impact on its own, the effect it had was heightened further when Fernand Léger dehumanized the dancers and transformed them into genuine geometric forms in movement.

## Fernand Léger and The Creation of the World

"It will be the only black ballet. The only possible black ballet in the world, and will in itself provide a model for the genre"<sup>24</sup>, declared an enthusiastic Fernand Léger in a letter to Rolf de Maré in September 1922. This might induce us to think the artist was also in the grip of the fever African art had infected some of his contemporaries with. However, a quick glance at the works he produced in the decade after 1910 and in the 1920s would soon lay the idea to rest, as the most frequent themes in his output from this period were the machine age, the city, the human figure and the world of objects<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, it is particularly significant that in the same year this ballet was premiered he published "L'Ésthetique de la Machine" in the German journal *Der Querschnitt*. This is why *The Creation of the World* shouldn't be seen as Léger's incursion into an area that particularly attracted him; he was in fact moved to do so by his close friendship with Blaise Cendrars<sup>26</sup>. Léger's recruitment was a further instance of the liberty Rolf de Maré granted his writers and composers and a recognition of the possibilities a production of this kind held for his creative powers.

Léger's contacts with the performing arts were relatively intense between the 1920s and the 1950s. He worked on ballet, film, theatre and opera with other avant-garde artists, and this cooperation brought out an interesting side of his artistic output<sup>27</sup>. He was responsible for the laboratory sets in Marcel L'Herbier's 1924 film *L'Inhumaine*, which also featured the Ballets Suédois. With Dudley Murphy, he co-directed the radically experimental film *Le Ballet mécanique*, also from 1924, with music scored by George Antheil, and produced the posters for *La Roue* (1923), directed by Abel Gance, with music by Arthur Honegger and Blaise Cendrars as assistant. He also worked on *Dreams money can buy* (1944-1946), directed by Hans Richter and produced by Kenneth Macpherson and Peggy Guggenheim, which Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Darius Milhaud, Man Ray and Victor Vicas were also involved in, as were John Cage and Edgar Varèse, who took charge of the music. His theatre work included contributions to the puppet show *Match de boxe* (1934), directed by Jacques Chesnais, and to the "total performance" *Naissance d'une cité* (1937), for which he

22 Despite these performances lacking stage designs, if press reviews of the time are anything to go by, Paul Colin produced at least one sketch, reproduced as a photo engraving in Fokine... [et al.] 1931.

23 Näslund 2009, p. 332.

24 Fragment from a letter Fernand Léger wrote to Rolf de Maré in 1922, in the Fernand Léger archive. Quoted by Judi Freeman in Norman Baer 1995, p. 106.

25 Despite Léger's interest in primitive art not being particularly appreciable in his own painting, we need to remember that the tapestry entitled *Le masque nègre* was woven between 1930 and 1936 (Musée national Fernand Léger, Biot, France). The work was based on a design Léger made for *The Creation of the World* and may be seen as a forerunner of this tapestry.

26 On the relations and cooperation between Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, see Biot/Niza/Vallauris 2009, pp. 15-33.

27 Cf. the 1995 exhibition at the Musée national Fernand Léger entitled *Fernand Léger et l'spectacle*. See Biot 1995.

produced the stage designs and costumes. Also involved in this production were Darius Milhaud and Arthur Honegger, who contributed several songs. Milhaud's 1950 opera *Bolivar* was another interesting project and was one of Léger's rare ventures in the genre.

Ballet also gave Léger the chance to give his creative urges free rein, as is clear from the settings and the costumes he made for works like *David Triomphant* (1936), with music by Vittorio Rieti and choreography by Serge Lifar, *Le pas d'acier* (1948), scored by Sergei Prokofiev and with choreography by Serge Lifar, and *L'Homme qui voulait voler* (1952), with music by Maurice Jarre and choreography by Janine Charrat. But his links to the world of the dance were forged in the 1920s with the production by Rolf de Maré's Ballets Suédois of *Skating Rink* (1922). Arthur Honegger provided the music for the work, which was based on a poem by Ricciotto Canudo, essayist and critic close to the Futurists, published in *Le Mercure de France* two years before. As the title suggests, Canudo provides a constant flow of images set in a skating rink. A man, a woman, a madman, workers and seamstresses and others are all caricatured in a gallery of characters providing a symbolic representation of man. Léger produced stage design and costumes, and as he himself said, in this staging he wanted "to obtain the greatest intensity on stage solely through the application of pure colours on flat surfaces"<sup>28</sup>. The Cubist idiom, the sparing, simple use of colour, combined with the synthetic, innovative nature of the work as a whole, divided public and critics alike. However, *Skating Rink* was programmed in all subsequent seasons after its premiere and eventually reached the healthy figure of fifty performances.

*The Creation of the World* was Léger's second collaboration with the Ballets Suédois. He had already worked with the poet Blaise Cendrars, author of the storyline, as an illustrator for *J'ai tué* (1918) and the anti-war novel *La fin du monde, filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame* (1919), considered a landmark in the history of graphic design in the 20th century. *The Creation of the World* was also the first time he had worked with Darius Milhaud, with whom he later coincided on several of the projects mentioned above. In his memoirs, the composer regales his readers with some revealing stories about how *The Creation of the World* came together and about Léger's own ideas:

Léger wanted to interpret primitive black art and painted African divinities on the curtain and the set to express power and darkness. He never found his work sufficiently frightening. He gave me a sketch of the curtain, black on dark brown, because he thought it was too luminous and nice. A charming euphemism! He wanted to use gas-filled balloons to represent flowers, trees, all kinds of animals, which were supposed to fly up at the moment of the creation. But this was impossible, as it needed a complex installation with reserves of gas at each corner of the stage and the noise of the balloons being inflated would have drowned out the music. Léger had to make do with looking for inspiration in the animal costumes of the sort worn by African dancers in their religious ceremonies<sup>29</sup>.

Several interesting ideas may be gleaned from this passage. For one thing, it stresses the dark, terrifying effect Léger wanted for the production. The artist's taste for experimenting on stage and with technique is clear in the projected use of moving inflatable objects, an idea he could not take further and was obliged to reformulate. But above all, what prevails is the image of an artist constantly inventing or on the lookout for new formulas, until he finally lights upon the one he finds most convincing. This surely explain the dozens of sketches (now scattered in different collections) he produced for the stage design and costumes for the production<sup>30</sup>.

---

28 Fokine... [et al.] 1931, p. 180.

29 Milhaud 1974, p. 125.

30 Although the most important of these collections is in the Dansmuseet in Stockholm, some sketches are to be found in museums like the Musée national Fernand Léger at Biot, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra in Paris, and in private collections in France, Italy and the Unites States.



9. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*The Creation of the World*, c. 1923  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail

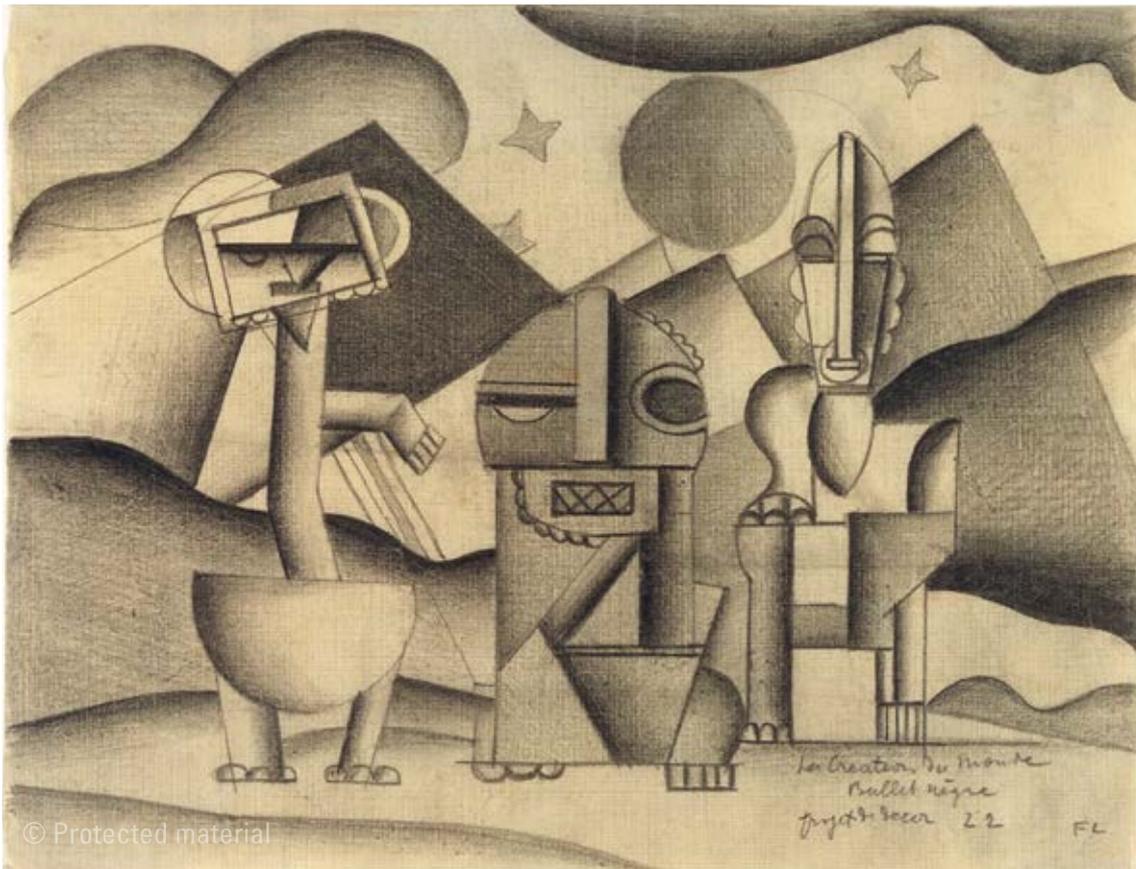


10. *Baulé* Mask, Ivory Coast  
 Wood, 70 x 28 x 27 cm  
 Published in Carl Einstein. *Negerplastik*, 1915, no. 89  
 University of Pennsylvania, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology  
 Inv. no. AF 5117

One of the gouaches Léger produced for the stage design of *The Creation of the World* was used as a reference for the tapestry in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. In it are portrayed the three divinities of creation, Nazme, Medere and N'kva, and behind them are clouds, mountains, the moon and the stars. The three deities were conceived as mobile figures between five and six metres high that supposedly were to be moved by several dancers. This factor explains why Léger made specific sketches of them<sup>31</sup>, as, despite their almost sculptural conception, they are not actually part of the scenery but are rather characters that move and play an essential role in the proceedings. That Léger took several African sculptures as models for his characters is clear from the similarities between the bull's head of one of the deities and a number of masks produced by the Baulé ethnic group [figs. 9 and 10]. Although Léger eventually opted for the image shown in the tapestry, several drawings and gouaches survive to illustrate how the artist worked and how his ideas gradually changed. While Cendrars's storyline establishes three deities, it gives no clue about what they looked like, giving Léger complete freedom of choice when it came to portraying them. A drawing dated 1922 in the MOMA collection [fig. 11] has the same theme: three deities against a background of mountains, clouds, moon and stars, but the gods look completely different<sup>32</sup>. Closer to Léger's eventual solution is a watercolour in the collection of the Dansmuseet in Stockholm (inv. no. 241), in which the divinity with the head of an ox is perfectly defined and the other two are beginning to take on their final forms and curves.

31 Dansmuseet – Musée Rolf de Maré, Stockholm, inv. no. 244 and 245. The MOMA in New York also has a pencil drawing of a deity (inv. no. 314.1980).

32 The same is true of another preliminary drawing from 1923 and a sketch for the curtain (inv. no. 239b) in the Dansmuseet collection, Stockholm.



11. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*The Creation of the World. Sketch for the stage setting, 1922*  
 Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 cm  
 Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 Donated by John Pratt  
 Inv. no. 342.1949

Apart from touches of blue and white, the stage design is predominantly ochre and black, in contrast to the colourful costumes of some animals and the birds. Many of the figurines Léger drew for this production have survived<sup>33</sup>, providing further proof of the painstaking seriousness with which he approached his creative task. The dancers led by Jean Börlin, backed by stage designs and costumes<sup>34</sup> in a Cubist idiom, played monkeys, tropical birds, beetles, archaic beings, witch doctors, gods, men and women. Léger and Cendrars also drew up notes on the *mise-en-scène* specifying that solemnity and ceremoniousness should prevail, that mobile scenery and characters should be constantly on the move on stage, and that the lighting should vary and favour chiaroscuro effects, with total lighting to be avoided at all times<sup>35</sup>. All of it was designed to add greater power to the effect Léger was looking for: the immobility, darkness and silence of the theatre was to contrast sharply with the light, the movement and the sheer vivacity of what was happening on stage. Léger's sketches also became very popular, some of them being reproduced in newspapers like *L'Œuvre*, which described the work as a "Cubist ballet", and in the November and December 1924 numbers of the *La*

33 Some mentioned and shown previously (figs. 8-12).

34 The sets were painted by Marcel Guérin and the costumes made by Marie Muelle, who had previously worked on a number of Ballets Russes productions. See Häger 1989, p. 189.

35 "Notes sur la réglementation de la mise en scène" in Fokine... [et al.] 1931, p. 66. Ginebra 2000, p. 94, also reproduces some very precise notes on lighting for the production, taken from a manuscript by Blaise Cendrars.

*Danse* journal, in which several designs were accompanied by a photograph of the two artists and a fragment of Milhaud's score. The German journal *Der Querschnitt* used the designs of one of the birds and the woman on its January and July 1928 front covers.

*The Creation of the World* gave Léger the opportunity to experiment with new ways of conceiving a performance from the viewpoint of a stage designer. Indeed, his work was displayed at Friedrich Kiesler's 1924 *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* in Vienna<sup>36</sup>. This ballet was also a perfect example of the kind of short, fast show Léger argued for shortly afterwards in a note written in 1925 entitled *The Show: light, colour, mobile image, object theatre*. In it he mentions his satisfaction with the work while also praising Rolf de Maré's audacity in promoting innovative ideas:

In accepting the ballet "Creation of the World" (black ballet) he dared to impose a truly modern set on the public for the very first time, certainly as far as technical resources were concerned. Success has rewarded his efforts, the public followed him frankly, directly, while most official critics became embroiled in pointless squabbles<sup>37</sup>.

Léger's quite beautiful designs largely stripped the dancers of their individual identity and even their essential humanity. The dancers were transformed into mere shapes moving around the stage. This was of course deliberate, as is clear from his writings, where he declared that he wanted to "make the individual as human material disappear. To create a stage set of pure invention. The human material appears, but with the same performance-value as the object or the scenery"<sup>38</sup>. What he was proposing was, therefore, a major change with respect to the roles in the dance established up to that point, where the usual preponderance of the great stars should be replaced by the dancer as choreographer, who becomes part of the performance by accepting the role of mobile prop or scenery. The nature of this particular production allowed him to put his ideas into practice; they were for the most part graphically embodied in designs like the gouache that provided the basis for this tapestry [fig. 12].

## From sketch for the stage to tapestry

Making this large tapestry involved interweaving by hand the warp, which is a series of lengthwise yarns of non-dyed wool rigidly tensed, and the weft, which comprises widthways coloured threads that cover and bury the threads of the warp from sight. The varying combinations of the dyed woollen threads are used to create the motif or motifs that will appear in the finished work. Tapestries can be made in a number of ways, perhaps the most usual being work done on a *haute-lisse* or high-warp loom, where the frame is laid perpendicularly, and the *basse-lisse* or low-warp loom, where the frame distributes the warp horizontally, enabling the weaver to sit while at the loom, move the warps with pedals and thus hand-weave. This is the technique traditionally used in Aubusson and was in fact used to make this tapestry<sup>39</sup>. Using a cartoon produced by the artist as a reference, the weaver selects, combines and then weaves the threads to recreate the motifs the artist has drawn.

In the 20th century, the art of tapestry making was affected by some major changes championed by people like Antoine Marius Martin (1869-1955), director of the Aubusson L'École nationale d'Art décoratif from 1917

---

<sup>36</sup> Apart from in the catalogue (Vienna 1924), the impact of Léger's ideas was noted in articles like the one published in *Der Sturm* in July 1925. See Dolbin 1925.

<sup>37</sup> Léger 1990, p. 104. Published in *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne*, Paris, 1925.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>39</sup> The most habitual materials used in this kind of work are cotton, wool or linen for the warp, and dyed wool and silk for the weft. For the techniques of Aubusson tapestries, see Fadat 1992, pp. 64-74.



12. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*Sketch for The Creation of the World, 1922*  
 Gouache on paper, 43 x 58.7 cm  
 Private collection

to 1930. Some of his more important contributions included limitations in the use of colour, the use of thicker threads, and fine-tuning a system of cartoons by numbers where each colour had its own code<sup>40</sup>. Marie Cuttoli (1879-1973) also did some important work in this field, persuading major artists like Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Miró, Le Corbusier and Léger himself to transfer works to tapestries, thereby giving the tapestry a very useful link with contemporary art<sup>41</sup>. But one of the main figures behind the renewal in tapestry making in the mid-20th century was undoubtedly Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), who settled in Aubusson in 1937, where he met master weaver François Tabard. With Tabard, Lurçat put some of his ideas into practice, such as using thicker threads for weft and warp, using bright, vivid colours and numbered cartoons. He also founded the Association des Peintres Cartonniers de Tapisserie in 1947 with gallery owner Denise Majorel, whose Paris gallery La Demeure provided a showcase for new creations then emerging from Aubusson<sup>42</sup>.

Throughout his long career, Fernand Léger maintained close links with the decorative arts<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, in notes and essays he argued in favour of cooperation between architects and visual artists who, in stained glass windows, mosaics, frescos and tapestries, could help “to destroy the gloomy sobriety of certain buildings”<sup>44</sup>.

40 Ibid, p. 45.

41 It is worth noting the impact of events like the *Exhibition of the Decorative Arts* in Paris in 1925, in which Léger was involved, and the important contributions associated with avant-garde movements like De Stijl and schools like the Bauhaus, where the textile workshop, led by Gunta Stölzl, produced some innovative and suggestive ideas.

42 See “Les années Lurçat et de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale” in Guinot 2009, pp. 87-96.

43 Cf. *F. Léger et les arts décoratifs*, organised by the Musée national Fernand Léger in 2002. See Biot 2003.

44 Léger 1990, p. 86. This comes from a lecture Léger gave in 1952 in La Maison de la Pensée française entitled “La peinture moderne devant le monde actuel”. In the lecture he also said that “tapestry has really taken off in recent times, which proves the path is going to open wide”; the statement underscores the position now enjoyed by tapestry as a means of expression bound up with contemporary creativity.

These ideas were set down in all sorts of projects, with designs for stained-glass windows eventually installed at the Sacré Cœur church in Audincourt, Courfaivre church in Switzerland and the university campus Central Library in Caracas. In the 1940s and 50s he also produced mosaics for the façade of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce church in Assy, the crypt for the Mémorial du Mardasson in Bastogne (Belgium), the Gaz de France plant at Alfortville, and the university campus at Caracas, for which he designed an impressive three-dimensional mural, and the Hospital of Saint-Lô.

No less important was the list of Léger's designs transferred to tapestries, although many of them were actually produced after the artist's death with the consent of his widow Nadia Léger (1904-1983). Almost all of these were made at factories in Aubusson and Felletin, both places with a long tradition in textiles<sup>45</sup>. Among the tapestries produced by the Pinton Frères factory at Aubusson-Felletin were *Les Constructeurs à l'aloès* (1951), *Les Constructeurs sur fond bleu* (c. 1954), *Formes sur fond gris* (c. 1957), *Peinture murale ou Composition murale* (1957), *Formes sur fond blanc* (c. 1960), *Peinture Murale* (c. 1960), *Formes sur fond gris* (c. 1960), *Sao Paulo*, *La Danse* (c. 1960), *Oiseaux Blancs sur fond bleu* (1962), *Ciel de France* (1962) and *Les Baigneuses* (1970). The Tabard Frères et Soeurs workshop at Aubusson also made a large number of tapestries based on Léger's designs, including *Nature morte à l'étoile polychrome* (1951), *Composition à la figure* (c. 1954), *Les Femmes au perroquet* (1961), *La Grande Parade* (1961-1962), *Composition murale* (1962), *Nature morte aux pommes* (1962), *Liberté, j'écris ton nom* (1963), based on a poem by Paul Éluard (1895-1952), *Composition au médaillon* (1965) and *Plante noire* (1962-1970)<sup>46</sup>. The workshop was also entrusted with transferring to tapestry one of the stage design sketches Léger made for *The Creation of the World*.

Denise Majorel, a prominent promoter of Aubusson tapestries from her La Demeure gallery in Paris and a key figure in the revival of the tapestry as a support and medium for contemporary art<sup>47</sup>, ordered a tapestry bearing the motif of the gouache Léger made in the 1920s for the stage design of *The Creation of the World*. Between 1962 and 1971<sup>48</sup> six were woven. The first, whose present whereabouts are unknown, was made in 1962. The second, made in 1963, was donated by Nadia Léger and Georges Bauquier to the Musée national Fernand Léger in 1969<sup>49</sup>. The third, woven the same year, is in the collection of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum<sup>50</sup> and the fourth, from 1970, is owned by Moscow's Pushkin State Museum of the Fine Arts. Numbers five and six were made in 1971, the former being auctioned in New York in 2001 and the latter in Paris in 2005. The six tapestries were made at Tabard Frères et Soeurs in Aubusson, a family business dating back to the 17th century<sup>51</sup>; the firm's workshop logo formed by the letters "T A" can be seen in the lower left corner of the Bilbao tapestry [fig. 13]. Apart from the Léger tapestries, from the 1950s to the 70s Tabard Frères et Soeurs created others based on designs by a number of major artists, including Joseph Albers, Sonia Delaunay, Le Corbusier, Jean Arp, Jean Cocteau, Wassily Kandinsky, Jean Lurçat and Victor Vasarely.

The main sketch for the stage design for *The Creation of the World* is now part of the collection at the Stockholm Dansmuseet (inv. no. 240). However, it wasn't actually used as a reference when the tapestries were being made. Léger, as noted above, produced a considerable number of drawings which, besides illustrating the way he worked, bear witness to the existence of some very similar sketches and figurines. A gouache

---

45 For their story, see, among others, Tapisserie... 1983, Fadat 1992 and Guinot 2009.

46 Dates given are for various tapestries located. However, in view of the fact that more than one tapestry was woven of several designs at different times, the dates may vary.

47 On Denise Majorel, see Denizeau 2008.

48 Biot 2003, p. 50.

49 Ibid, p. 70.

50 On the back of the tapestry, the series number 3/6 appears in the bottom left hand corner.

51 Guinot 2009, p. 120.



13. Fernand Léger (1881-1955)  
*The Creation of the World*, c. 1923  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail showing the monogram of the  
Tabard workshop in Aubusson, France

auctioned in New York in 2002 [fig. 12] was in fact used in the making of this and the other tapestries in the series. While the two sketches are essentially very alike, a brief analysis reveals significant differences that found their way into the tapestry. The most obvious is the absence of the two vertical strips decorated with geometric motifs included in the Dansmuseet gouache, together with some slight modifications in the colouring and forms of the three deities and the clouds. The tapestries also have a thin black band that frames the scene, and the artist's signature, "F. LEGER", in the lower left corner, details absent from both sketches.

Nadia Léger, the artist's widow, sold *The Creation of the World* tapestry to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1970. The work was included in the inaugural exhibition of the Museum's modern art section, an event that, as reported by the press at the time, took place during the 4th Meeting of Spanish Provincial Council Institutions of Culture held in Bilbao in September 1970. Since then, the tapestry has been part of the Museum collection and is usually displayed in the section dedicated to contemporary art. But beyond the work's intrinsic interest for the spectator, whether it be the modernity of the idiom used, the artist, the colouring or the technique employed, we need to remember that there is a lot more to it than that.

For Léger's tapestry transports us back to the Paris of the 1920s, a place where creativity was on the boil and to which visionaries like Rolf de Maré flocked, making it possible for some highly experimental theatre events to see the light of day. The talents of Jean Börlin, Blaise Cendrars, Fernand Léger and Darius Milhaud came together in a work considered a landmark in the history of dance. To a certain extent, the Ballets Suédois were conscious of the role they were playing, and dubbed themselves as "the only ones who dare ... the only representatives of contemporary life ... the only ones who are really against academic propriety ... the ones who are going to spread a revolution, in which convention will be destroyed to be replaced

by invention”<sup>52</sup>. This ideological programme found expression in more than twenty productions in the five years the company lasted. The company’s work has in fact proved to be so original that in recent decades its productions are being researched and explored by dance historians, musicologists and art historians alike<sup>53</sup>. From the 1990s, some of the company’s productions, including *The Creation of the World*, have been reconstructed and staged anew<sup>54</sup>. All of which goes to demonstrate the continued interest in the work of the Ballets Suédois, which, as Fernand Léger put it, “proved that a daring performance far removed from classical convention is possible and accepted by the public. It was just a question of taking the risk”<sup>55</sup>.

---

52 La Danse 1924.

53 In 1964, a year after this tapestry was woven, a retrospective was held at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris called *Les Ballets Suédois 1920-1925*. Since then many other exhibitions have reviewed totally or partially the dance company’s record.

54 Since the 1990s, Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer have reconstructed several shows choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, George Balanchine and Jean Börlin. Of the latter’s work, they have recovered the ballets *Derviches*, *Skating Rink*, *Within the Quota* and *La Création du monde*, re-premiered by the Ballet du Grand Theatre of Geneva in the year 2000. In 2012 the Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula and the Centre chorégraphique national-Ballet de Lorraine staged *La Création du monde 1923-2012*.

55 Fokine... [et al.] 1931, p. 179.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### **Baliñas 2006**

Maruxa Baliñas. "Los ballets suecos : el más hermoso espectáculo y el de una mejor conseguida pureza artística", *Cairón : Revista de Ciencias de la Danza*, Madrid, no. 10, 2006, pp. 5-52.

### **Bilbao 2013**

Mikel Bilbao Salsidua. "Los Ballets Suecos de Rolf de Maré y su gira española de 1921", *Musicología global, musicología local*. Madrid : Sociedad Española de Musicología, 2013, pp. 1443-1462.

### **Biot 1995**

*Fernand Léger et le spectacle*. [Exhib. Cat., Biot, Musée National Fernand Léger]. Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995.

### **Biot 2003**

*F. Léger et les arts décoratifs*. [Exhib. Cat.]. Biot : Musée National Fernand Léger, 2003.

### **Biot/Niza/Vallauris 2009**

*Dis-moi, Blaise... Léger, Chagall, Picasso et Cendrars*. [Exhib. Cat., Biot, Musée National Fernand Léger; Niza, Musée National Marc Chagall; Vallauris, Musée National Pablo Picasso]. Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009.

### **Cendrars 2010**

Blaise Cendrars. *Antología negra*. Madrid : Ediciones Ardora, 2010.

### **Cocteau 1920**

Jean Cocteau. *Carte blanche*. Paris : Éditions de La Sirène, 1920.

### **La Danse 1924**

"Número consacré aux Ballets Suédois de Rolf de Maré", *La Danse*, Paris, noviembre-diciembre, 1924.

### **Denizeau 2008**

Gérard Denizeau. *Denise Majorel : une vie pour la tapisserie*. Aubusson : Musée départementale de la Tapisserie, 2008.

### **Dolbin 1925**

B. F. Dolbin. "Die internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik in Wien", *Der Sturm*, Berlín, July 1925, pp. 97-100.

### **Einstein 2002**

Carl Einstein. *La escultura negra y otros escritos*. Barcelona : Gustavo Gili, 2002.

### **Fadat 1992**

Jacques Fadat. *La tapisserie d'Aubusson : son histoire, sa technique*. Aubusson : J. Fadat, 1992.

### **Fokine... [et al.] 1931**

Michel Fokine... [et al.]. *Les ballets suédois dans l'art contemporain*. Paris : Editions du Trianon, 1931.

### **Ginebra 2000**

"*La Création du monde*" : *Fernand Léger et l'art africain dans les collections Barbier- Mueller*. [Erak. Cat., Ginebra, Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève]. Paris : Adam Biro, 2000.

### **Guinot 2009**

Robert Guinot. *La tapisserie d'Aubusson et de Felletin*. Saint-Paul : Lucien Souny, 2009.

### **Häger 1989**

Bengt Häger. *Ballets suédois*. Paris : Jacques Damase : Denoël, 1989.

### **Léger 1990**

Fernand Léger. *Funciones de la pintura*. Barcelona : Paidós, 1990.

### **Mawer 1997**

Deborah Mawer. *Darius Milhaud : modality & structure in music of the 1920s*. Aldershot : Scolar Press, 1997.

### **Milhaud 1974**

Darius Milhaud. *Ma vie heureuse*. Paris : Belfond, 1974.

**Näslund 2009**

Erik Näslund. *Rolf de Maré : art collector, ballet director, museum creator*. Binsted, Hampshire : Dance Books, 2009.

**Norman Baer 1995**

Nancy van Norman Baer (ed.). *Paris modern : the Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*. San Francisco : Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995.

**Rovereto 2005**

*La danza delle avanguardie : dipinti, scene e costumi, da Degas a Picasso, da Matisse a Keith Haring*. [Exhib. Cat., Rovereto, Museo di Arte Moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto]. Milano : Skira, 2005.

**Viena 1924**

*Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik*. [Exhib. Cat., Viena, Musik- und Theaterfest der Stadt Wien]. Wien : Würthle, 1924.