



1919

Oil on canvas

91 x 117 ½ inches (231.1 x 298.4 cm)

FERNAND LÉGER

French, 1881–1955

LET'S LOOK

Describe the shapes, patterns, and colors you see in this painting. What do they remind you of?

What letters can you find?
Why might they be here?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Look at the title of the painting. How does it relate to what you see?

What do you think the artist is saying about the experience of being in a city?

THE CITY

The French artist Fernand Léger (fair-NAHND LE-zhey) was inspired by the modern city and celebrated its vitality in his art. In *The City*, he filled the painting with geometric shapes and patterns that remind us of lights, shopwindows, signs, buildings, and other objects. Unlike a traditional **landscape** in which space **recedes** into the **background**, many shapes and colors push toward the **foreground**.

Léger described modern urban life as “more fragmented and faster moving than life in previous eras.” He captured this exciting, fast-paced movement with striking colors, eye-catching patterns, and overlapping shapes that crowd together and compete for our attention. Our eyes jump from one place to the next, creating a sensation similar to what it feels like to move through busy city streets. With so many interesting things to see, we seem to only catch glimpses of each.

Living in the vibrant city of Paris, Léger admired the bold text and graphics on billboards and posters, and was fascinated by the power of train engines and airplane propellers. He also enjoyed movies, a relatively new form of popular entertainment in the early twentieth century, and appreciated the way scenes quickly moved from one to the next. All of these sources of inspiration are reflected in *The City*, such as in the white letters (including Léger’s initials), flat colors, mechanical people, and its **collage**-like quality. The painting’s size—over seven feet tall and almost ten feet wide—is also similar to a billboard or movie screen, encouraging viewers to feel as though they can easily enter this lively and colorful city.

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