



PERSPICACIOUS:
PUTTING ART IN PERSPECTIVE

Welcome to Perspicacious: Putting Art in Perspective, an EPMA periodical created to enlighten and encourage conversations about art. There are many paths to understanding artworks; out of which there is always room for debate and discussion. The articles presented in this periodical are not meant to be better than or describe the art on view in the museum, but rather it is to put the art in an historical or social context enhancing the perspective of the viewer. As such, these essays pay careful attention to and analysis of primary sources, alongside archival research in order to provide a more in-depth discourse. Look for Perspicacious in conjunction with major exhibitions and installations.



Since our closure due to Covid-19, the El Paso Museum of Art is pivoting to explore new methods of reaching out to our members and patrons. These changes have afforded us the ability to expand our programming virtually as well as in the old-fashioned sense of a journalistic article. It is through this outreach that we hope to come together over shared opportunities to read, learn, and view. Join us in our first installment of Perspicacious as we explore the history behind the art in our current exhibition *Cercle et Carré and the International Spirit of Abstract Art*.

Rue la Boétie is a short crowded street in Paris, France. It fits snugly between the famed avenue des Champs-Élysées and the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, and is only a few blocks from the Grand Palais and the Seine River. Rue la Boétie was once the grounds for the Royal Nursery, providing the residences with trees, bushes, and flowers. It is on this street in 1930 that

something else was budding and being nurtured. At *Galerie 23*, a group of abstract artists presented their self-titled *Cercle et Carré* exhibition and journal. The exhibition consisted of 130 works by forty-six various artists, who represented different mediums and styles, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Le Corbusier.



Michel Seuphor. Photo of the participating artists in the group exhibition *Cercle et Carré*, from left to right: Franciska Clausen, Florence Henri, Manolita Piña de Torres-García, Joaquin Torres-García, Piet Mondriaan, Hans Arp, Pierre Daura, Marcelle Cahn, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Michel Seuphor, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Vera Idelson, Luigi Russolo, Nina Kandinsky, Georges Vantongerloo, Jean Gorin. 1930. Black and White Photograph. 180 x 238. Archive of Michel Seuphor. Collection City of Antwerp, Letterenhuis. tg: lhph: 47458.

Beyond Paris and Rue la Boétie, Europe started feeling the consequences of economic depression and the rise of Totalitarianism in Russia, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Concurrently, United States Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg, and France's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aristide Briand also sensed the mounting political tensions that come with economic hardship. In an attempt to prevent another World War, both men introduced an international agreement in 1929. In the agreement, commonly known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, signers resolved not to use war as a method for solving conflicts. However, there were no provisions in the treaty designed to enforce it or punish those who did not follow the agreement. In 1933, Germans elected Adolf Hitler as Chancellor and by 1939 Europe and the rest of the World were engrossed in the struggles of a Second World War. Consequently, modernist art was an unexpected casualty of WWII.

In the 1920s and 30s the German political party,

the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or NSDAP), commonly known as the Nazi Party, began to use the term Entartete Kunst or Degenerate Art, a derogatory name in which to describe Modern Art. Their distaste for modernist art was linked to their animosity of the Weimar Republics' administration, for whom they blamed Germany's economic and political hardships. The Nazi party argued that the Weimar government's support of Avant-Garde, Expressionism, and Abstract Art degraded society and mocked Christianity. As the NSDAP rose to power under the Third Reich, all artwork in Europe came under their scrutiny.

In the midst of all this, Cercle et Carré originated in 1929 as an artist association founded by Michel Seuphor and Joaquin Torres Garcia, with the goals of connecting Abstract artists and promoting new techniques and styles. Two prominent artists, Fernand Léger and Willi Baumeister, were both part of the *Cercle et Carré* artist association and exhibition

on Rue La Boétie. Léger and Baumeister became friends through their shared interests; each was influential in their own right.

Fernand Léger, born in Argentan, Normandy, France in 1881 worked as an architectural draftsman until he began to seriously study painting at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs and the Académie Julian. After years of study and experimentation, Léger emerged as one of the foremost

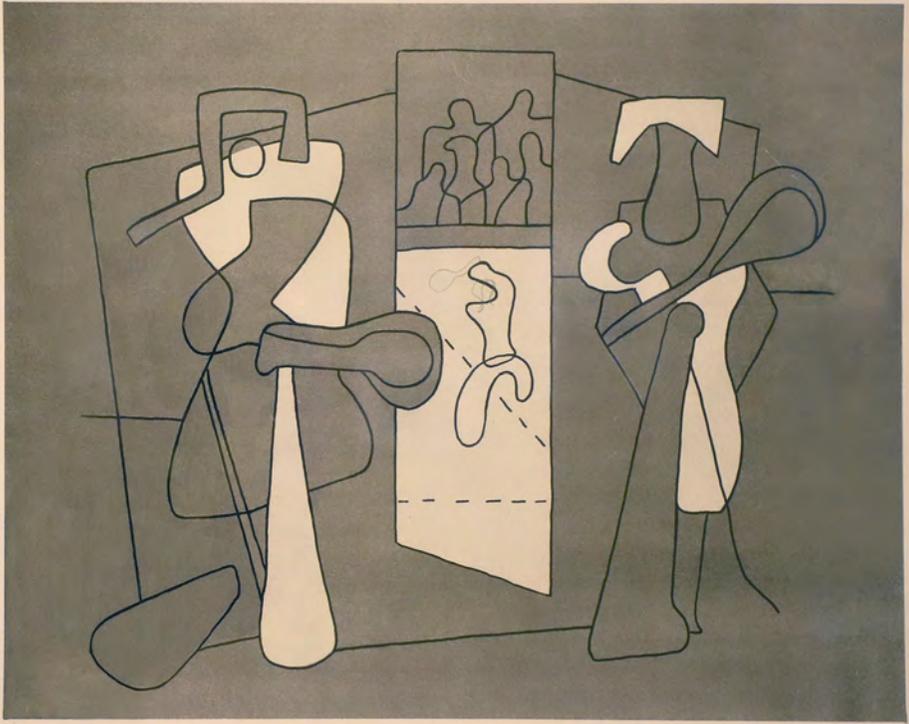
Cubist artists.

Known for his personal style of Cubism, called Tubism, he focused on cylindrical and conical shapes using primary colors along with green, black, and white. While many of his paintings seem to be absent of subjects, others often appeared to depict robot-like characters.

Baumeister, born in Stuttgart, Germany in 1889, trained as a decorative painter



Fernand Léger (French, 1881–1955) *Abstract*, 1937. Watercolor and gouache on paper 10 3/4 x 14 5/16 inches, 24 x 30 inches (frame). Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia; The Eva Underhill Holbrook Memorial Collection of American Art, Gift of Alfred H. Holbrook. GMOA 1945.60

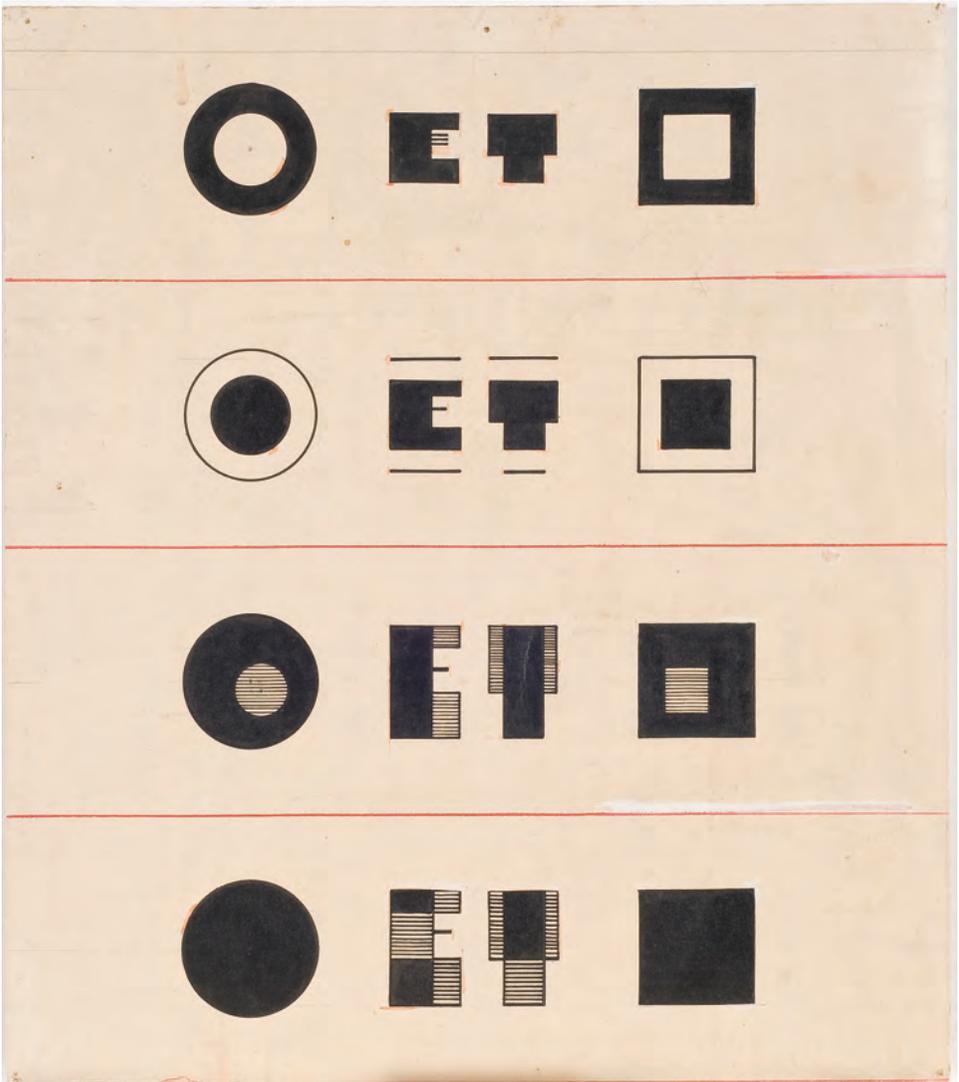


Willi Baumeister (German, 1890–1966) *Tennisspieler II*, 1935. Lithograph on paper. Edition of 50. 12 ¼ x 15 ¾ inches (image), 17 x 23 x 1 ¼ inches (frame). Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Pierre Daura Center Fund. GMOA 2013.97. Photo courtesy of EPMA

and attended the Royal Württemberg Academy of the Fine Arts. He served in World War I while still taking part in art exhibitions. Through his work in typography and commercial design, he gained an appointment as a professor of typography, commercial graphics, and fabric printing at the Municipal Applied Arts School in Frankfurt. In 1927 he presented his first solo exhibition in Paris.

During these years, he developed an interest in prehistoric and archaic art which inspired artwork based on organic forms and symbols, an ideogram of sorts. This style can be seen in his “Tennisspieler II”, 1935.

Although not everyone appreciated or understood Baumeister and Léger’s work. Under the Third Reich, they were seen as targets and their art was designated as



Pierre Daura (American, b. Spain, 1896–1976). *Designs for Cercle et Carré logo*, 1929
Pen and ink on paper, 9 11/16 x 6 inches (image), 23 x 17 inches (frame). Georgia
Museum of Art, University of Georgia; Gift of Martha Randolph Daura. GMOA
2011.125

Entartete Kunst, or Degenerate Art. Many pieces of modernist art from museums, galleries, and even personal collections, some created by well-known artists such as Picasso, Chagall, Klee,

Klimt, and Modigliani, were deemed degenerate or subversive and confiscated or seized by the German government. Some of these works were displayed as part of an exhibition also called

Entartete Kunst. The exhibition presented the art as propaganda in order to demonstrate how modernist art degraded German culture. Other works were sold, traded, or stolen by Nazi Party officials or collaborators for their own art collections. However, other artworks suffered a worse fate. These works were destroyed, lost to history and subsequently to the World. Even the gallery space on Rue la Boétie felt the grasp of the Third Reich. During the occupation of France, the building was requisitioned as a sub-office to the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, and the artworks stored there were confiscated

After *Cercle et Carré*, Léger traveled to the United States, where he was able to escape the upheaval of German-occupied France. Once in the United States, the newly opened Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City exhibited a collection of Léger's works. Léger won respect and rose in popularity with the upper echelons of society, even to be commissioned to decorate

Nelson Rockefeller's lavish New York apartment. He settled into a professorship at Yale University, where he continued to explore and expand his style. He focused on figures and objects juxtaposed with freely arranged bands of color, all of which were outlined in black. Léger once commented that he was inspired by the neon lights of New York City.

Baumeister, a German citizen, struggled more than Léger. He was dismissed from his professorship and several of his paintings were shown in the National Socialist exhibition, *Entartete Kunst*. Recorded in the inventory of confiscated art, a group of 7 paintings by Baumeister, including one called "Tennisspieler", sold for just \$45.00; other works were destroyed or lost. Baumeister eventually left Germany for Switzerland where he was able to safely practice his art. After WWII he continued working toward uniting international modern artists through the development of publications, artist associations, and exhibitions.

Fernand Léger and Willi Baumeister's impact on international art is demonstrated through their talent, perseverance, and devotion to create art despite facing the most hostile of circumstances. An incarnation of the original *Cercle et Carré* exhibition is now on view at the El Paso Museum of Art which exemplifies

the international significance of abstract art and can be viewed via YouTube: <https://youtu.be/YTOqkJkib2M>. Rue la Boétie also remains as a nursery of creativity as it currently houses several art galleries and a concert hall.



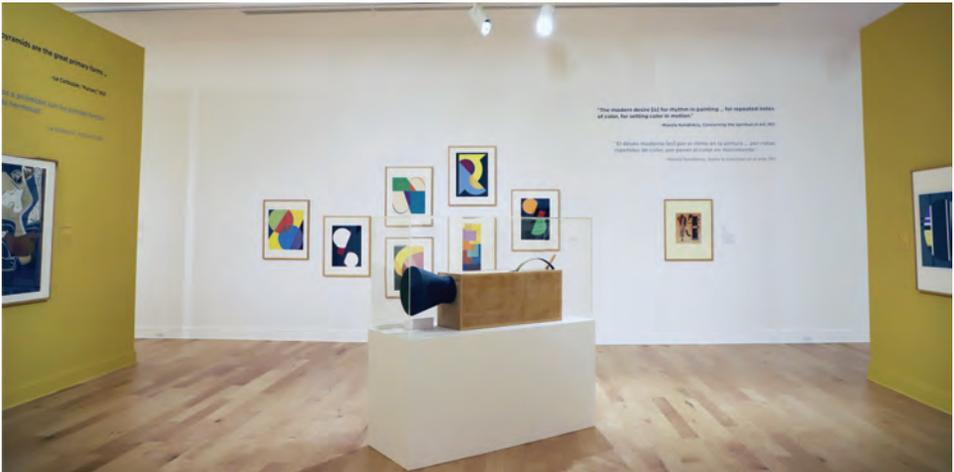
"Here, at 21 rue La Boetie, Paul Rosenberg set up his art gallery between 1910 and 1940. He exhibited the greatest modern painters there, including his friends Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Léger. The building was requisitioned by the Gestapo to install the Institute of Jewish Questions (IEQJ) in 1941."

Erwmat(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plaque_Paul_Rosenberg_au_21_rue_La_Boétie_à_Paris.JPG#metadata), "Plaque Paul Rosenberg au 21 rue La Boétie à Paris", <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>



Alexandra Exter (Russian, 1882–1949) *Costume design for Aelita*, 1924. Pencil, collage and gouache on paper, 17 1/2 x 27 9/16 inches, 23 x 17 inches (frame) Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Collectors of the Georgia Museum of Art and Board of Advisors members Robert E. Burton, Randolph W. Camp, Marion E. Jarrell, David W. Matheny, Marilyn D. McNeely, Carl W. Mullis III, Deborah L. O’Kain, and Sarah P. Sams GMOA 2011.36

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Installation view, *Cercle et Carré and the International Spirit of Abstract Art*, El Paso Museum of Art, April 8–August 15, 2021. Exhibition courtesy of the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia.