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LEGER DE MAIN

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THE image here is a condensed, stylised ikon. But it is very much a "look" of today: the neat hair, the moustache, the tattoo, the sleeveless vest, the cigarette as token of "time off."

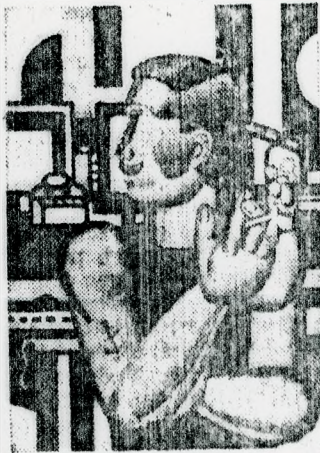
He could be posing against the background of the Beaubourg museum in Paris, with those flat graphic areas and tubes carrying materials and communication. But the painting is "The Mechanic" of 1920, by Fernand Léger (1881-1955), now in Canada's national gallery in Ottawa (which has just itself celebrated its centenary without permanent premises—no wonder they have just lost another despairing director). To my mind, it best sums up a young, concentrated, and honourable career. A centenary exhibition at Riverside Studios of 69 works by Léger confirms that a full retrospective of this most serious artist, born in the same year as Picasso, would be well worth while.

As the Riverside show reveals by glimpses, the more you see of Léger's work, the more you respect his aims and integrity. A single image of his, seen briefly, may seem naive, simplistic or ineffectual—a bit like the Tin Man in the "Wizard of Oz"; or some, like a Matisse drawing gone over with a fibre-tip pen. But the moral substance of Léger builds up and lingers. Picasso may have presented the century most strikingly, but he did not say all there was to be said. To speak of "the dignity of honest labour" is to risk calling down vituperation from both ends of the political spectrum; equally perhaps "the harmony of man and machine." But that is the moral and ideal world which Léger looked to, expressed in very Gallic imagery, perhaps, but not less relevant to, say, travelling to work in a crowded London tube train at rush hour in summer: (Léger's brand of Cubism was labelled at one period, "Tubism.")

Léger was born of Normandy peasant stock, and if he maintained an emotional attachment to the urbanised peasant, or rather, mechanised peasant, it

was one buttressed by experience and not sentiment. For instance, he noted that peasants appreciated bright posters in their fields as much as they appreciated machinery to ease their back-breaking toil. The harmony of man and machine was one of his devoted themes. That is why his mechanic is portrayed centre stage, but against a background of abstract shapes as perfectly interlocking as a key turning a well-oiled multi-lever lock.

Later in life, after a period in New York from 1940 to 1945,



Léger's "The Mechanic," now in Canada.

Léger simplified his work still further. He believed that contemporary art should take on the poster in being simple, strong and attractive.

The Riverside show has borrowed 41 works from the recent show of Léger's work from 1928-1934 at the Beaubourg—a period when he returned to a close study of objects in themselves. These intense works represent however only one important aspect of his work, and the view of Léger is filled out with 27 loans from British collections. Make sure you don't miss "The Red Fruit Dish" of 1925, for it reveals the depth of Léger's simple but deeply-contemplated, balanced and dignified contribution to our times.

Spare a glance too for the works of the restaurant fover at Riverside by Nemesio Antunez, born in Chile in 1918, and director on and off of Chile's national museums from 1961 to 1973. He, like Léger, has moved through many of the realities of life and art in our century; he now lives in London, and from the glimpses here, a larger exhibition of his work would be very welcome. In fact a non-political South American art survey in London would seem very timely—particularly with such a distinguished artist as Matta, also now resident here, to guide the selection.