LOT 18
PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE EUROPEAN COLLECTION
FERNAND LÉGER
1881 - 1955
PAYSAGE
Titled, signed and dated Paysage FLEGER 14 on the reverse
Oil on canvas
28 1/2 by 39 1/2 in.
ESTIMATE 3,500,000-4,500,000 USD

PROVENANCE
Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, Paris (acquired from the artist)
Sale: Kahnweiler Collection (sold by the order of the French government), Hôtel Drouot, Paris, November 17-18, 1921, lot 156)
Mayor Gallery, London
Galerie de l’Effort Moderne (Léonce Rosenberg), Paris (archive no. 1090)
André Lefèvre, Paris (acquired from the above and sold: Palais Galliéra, Paris, November 25, 1965, lot 52)
Sybil Kummer (sold: Sotheby's, New York May 18, 1983, lot 56)
Acquavella Galleries, New York (acquired at the above sale)
Acquired from the above

EXHIBITED
Paris, Musée national d’Art moderne, Collection André Lefèvre, 1964, no. 152
New York, Acquavella Galleries, XIX & XX Century Master Paintings, 1984, no. 6

LITERATURE
Georges Bauquier, Fernand Léger, Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint, 1903-1919, Paris, 1990, no. 74, illustrated p. 139

CATALOGUE NOTE
The subject of the landscape was rarely approached by the Cubists, but in this composition Léger transforms this view of the French countryside into a spectacle of remarkable depth and formal complexity. The picture dates from 1914, when France was on the verge of war, and it would be one of the last canvases that Léger would complete before being conscripted later that year. The subject of the French landscape, therefore, had a special significance in that it was a reminder of what would soon become a battleground. What Léger is depicting here, and in at least four other landscapes that he completed during this time (see fig. 1), is the very thing that the nation was defending. The result is a work of extraordinary freshness and power that captures the dynamism and essential beauty inherent in geometric form. Paysage, executed at the height of the artist's career as a Cubist, is a testament to his skill in these areas.

Léger's interest in landscape had a pronounced connection to the work of Cézanne. The elder artist had been one of the most successful of his time at manipulating the spatial dynamics of form, and it is from Cézanne's compositions of L'Estaque and Aix-en-Provence (see fig. 2) that Léger draws his inspiration for the present work. Like his contemporaries Picasso and Braque, Léger acknowledged the profound influence of Cézanne on his own work, and credited the elder artist with teaching him to appreciate the multi-dimensional quality of the objects that he painted: "Cézanne! He has been the master of all modern painters...What would modern painting be today without him, I wonder? I worked under his influence for a long time...Cézanne taught me the love of form and volume. He made me
appreciate drawing and I felt that his drawing had to be exact not sentimental....” (Fernand Léger, “Fernand Léger retrouve la France,” Art de France, Paris, November 1946, translated from the French).

We can see the influence of Cézanne in Léger’s earlier landscapes, including Paysage, 1912-13 (see fig. 3), in which he treats the subject with an angularity that is reminiscent of the works of the Post-Impressionist painter. Christopher Green has written, "The key to his attitude to Cézanne is found in the 1914 lecture. Here Léger remarks that, although Cézanne seems to have sensed ‘plastic contrasts,’ the fact that he lived in a less dynamic and dissonant period prevented him from understanding it, and in particular prevented him from understanding the collision he sensed between houses and trees in the countryside. Léger was himself, he believed, capable of showing just how such a theme - houses and trees - could be transformed by the ‘multiple concept' which had fragmented his experience of reality" (Christopher Green, Léger and the Avant-Garde, New Haven and London, 1976, p. 95).

Throughout the 1910s, Léger advanced his understanding of multi-dimensional representation and developed a new way of manipulating form through the use of contrasting colors and negative and positive space. His palette became more conservative; his colors, like those in the present work, were often limited to red, blue, green, yellow, black and white. Among the most innovative aspects of his style was his ability to create complex compositions from a limited range of forms, an accomplishment that was completely new to the realm of Modern painting. Although considered a Cubist by association, Léger’s work paid homage to the age of the machine, much in the manner of his Futurist contemporaries Umberto Boccioni and Gino Severini, and he incorporated this mechanized aesthetic into his painting. By the early 1910s, the artist had become fascinated with abstraction and the contrasts of color and shape in his compositions, executing a series of highly geometric works called Constraste de formes (see fig. 4). He described this new development in his painting at a lecture at Marie Wassilief’s Académie in May 1913. “The realistic value of a work of art is completely independent of any imitative character," he explained. "This truth should be accepted as dogma and made axiomatic in the general understanding of painting [...] Pictorial realism is the simultaneous ordering of three great plastic components: Lines, Forms and Colours [...] the modern concept is not a reaction against the impressionists' idea but is, on the contrary, a further development and expansion of their aims through the use of methods they neglected [...] Present-day life, more fragmented and faster moving than life in previous eras, has had to accept as its means of expression an art of dynamic divisionism; and the sentimental side, the expression of the subject (in the sense of popular expression), has reached a critical moment.[...] The modern conception is not simply a passing abstraction, valid only for a few initiates; it is the total expression of a new generation whose needs it shares and whose aspirations it answers" (quoted in Dorothy Kosinski, ed., Fernand Léger, 1911-1924, The Rhythm of Modern Life, Munich and New York, 1994, pp. 66-67).

Fig. 1, Fernand Léger, Les maisons dans les arbres, Paysage No. 3, 1914, oil on canvas, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum, Basel
Fig. 2, Paul Cézanne, La montagne Saint-Victoire, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
Fig. 3, Fernand Léger, Paysage, 1912-13, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
Fig. 4, Fernand Léger, Contraste de formes, 1914, oil on canvas, Beyeler Collection