

At the center of the painting are three nude women with circular faces staring back passively at the viewer. Their faces are perfect circles, their limbs simplified to dislocated geometric forms: cylinders and spheres. Their skin looks polished, made of synthetic leather. Their curviness is highlighted with the use of shadow: the further away from the center, the limbs become darker. This progressive chiaroscuro imbues a sense of depth to the extremities of bodies. The same method is also used for their long, silky black (*noir corbeau*) hair. The three figures are engaged in a leisurely activity – reading and drinking tea or coffee – while seated on a big divan that extends beyond the right side of the painting. The two (pearl) white women are leaning on yellow cushions, which are alternatively plain or striped.

Many elements of Léger's cubism are present in the painting. Along with the use of hues for volume, strong "brut" colors are turned into localized patterns: lines of dark green diamond shaped in the lower right section, and parallel oblique blue bands in the lower right section. Behind the divan is a grid: black straight lines forming geometric rectangles of varying sizes. The painting as a whole lacks cohesion: objects have no shadow, there is no indication of a light source. Since there are no suggestions of superposition, one could view *Three Women* simply as figures on a grid.

However, one component is undeniably three-dimensional: the crimson red table-basse that covers a part of the divan. On it are disposed uni-dimensional objects: a colorless bowl of fruit, and three empty recipients (green or blue vases, and a grey mug). Yet the table itself does have depth. Léger uses two-point perspective – the table's feet are aligned so that two vanishing points can be traced. This creates a sense of depth in the painting, but as soon as this logic is adopted everything behind the table - the divan and the two women sitting on it - is flattened on the wall. Only remains the woman in beige, who still is three-dimensional, but the book on her thigh

suggests she is seated on the divan, which itself must be flat for the table to be three-dimensional. This contradiction makes the perception of space fall apart in the painting – to the point where *Three Women* can be coherent only if the whole painting is flat.

In the upper section of the artwork, a shape is reiterated twice. The left component of the shape is quadrant and the right component is a bent line that changes curvature. The shape to the left is orange, and the shape to the right is blue. The shapes have depth (again with the use of color hues for volume), and could be interpreted as curtains. Consequently the white squares in which said shape is contained become windows. In her essay *Grids*, Kraus finds the root of the grid in the nineteenth century. If the modernist use of the grid has its origins in “a trauma that must be repressed – a symbolist window parading in the guise of the treatise on optics”, then including the window itself in a grid is a way to validate the grid as an independent technology. The grid is now liberated of even its origin, it is detached from its root and all the spiritual implications the window brings.

In parallel, it can be argued that the inclusion of references to pre-naturalism painting is a way to set the grid as the dominant force in the painting. First and foremost, the return of figuration in Léger’s cubist painting: while the painter’s previous artworks only contained purely cubist elements in the *Contrast of Forms* series (1913), or at best humanoid forms in *The Staircase* (1914), *Three Women* undeniably depicts humans. Furthermore, a direct quote to an older painting can be identified in the painting: the panther at the right of the painting is reference to the black cat in Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). Finally, he uses perspectival techniques developed in the Renaissance for the red table. Kraus explains that the grid is a “visual structure that explicitly rejects a narrative or sequential reading of any kind”. Since *Three Women* is inconsistent when viewed as a painting

that possesses depth, the only way to view it is to accept its flatness. The grid is therefore stronger than the classic techniques of painting.

The grid symbolizes modernity, in that it simultaneously situates modern art as its independent realm (spatial dimension), and marks it as exclusive to the twentieth century (temporal dimension). Modernism, on the other hand, is defined as the aesthetic response to the condition of modernity. It then entails that using the grid is the tool of choice for modernism. However, in *Three Women*, the grid is no longer presented in a vacuum: it is used in conjunction with other means of painting. Indeed, the painting has to be regarded as post-cubist: Léger brings back figuration in his art, along with the various techniques that have governed painting as a discipline until his own era of cubism – of breaking free with the grid. This return must not be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the classic with the modernist. Instead, it can be seen as a challenge for modernism, a reality check.

The artist makes the two worlds collide: the narrative element entailed by figuration against the antihistorical, antidevelopmental status granted by the grid. As the visual analysis shows, *Three Women* is only coherent when viewed as flat, so when the position of the grid is adopted. Léger has attained the antinarrative whilst doing figuration. This painting is a way to show that modernism – and with it modernity – is no longer a phenomenon that can be contemplated in a vacuum or in a few works of art: it is a necessary viewpoint that allows us to understand the world. Modernity and industrialization are now irreversible and impossible to ignore: the non-modern is unable to keep up in the face of industrialization in the same way that the grid has made figuration obsolete in *Three Women*.