

“Married Life,” by Roger de la Fresnaye, 1912, #52.1 – G367



Questions:

1. What's going on here? Does this look like a relaxed Sunday afternoon at your house? If not, what's different?
2. How would you describe the relationship between the two figures? What are they doing? What signs do you see that this is a pleasant domestic scene? What indicates it might be fractured?
3. Does this scene seem realistic? Imaginary? A fantasy?
4. How does de La Fresnaye use geometric shapes, lines and broken spaces? What is the impact of his interrupting outlines – in the side table and the figures' arms - and carrying them into surrounding areas? What is the impact of the perilously tilting table and the overlapping planes?
5. If this were a true portrait of married life, would it appeal to you? How does this scene make you feel? What is it about the painting that makes you feel that way?

Art Historical Background:

Cubism originated in Paris between 1906 and 1908 as the creation of the young Picasso and Braque. Within four years, their pioneering methods and technical innovations were being employed by artists in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Russia, America and England, who used Cubism as their starting point for new types of artistic expression. Cubism played a role in the technical experiments and stylistic adventures of virtually all the *avant-garde* developments in western art between 1909 and 1914. Although its influence diminished after 1925, Cubism continued to affect the pictorial methods of most major artists until around 1940. It has been called "possibly the most potent generative force in 20th century art."

Cubist experiments were built on the work of Gustave Courbet (considered the father of the new painters), Cezanne and African sculptural influences. Starting in the mid-19th century, Courbet concentrated on solid, tangible realistic forms. But his rational aesthetic disappeared with him. Cezanne's last paintings and his watercolors lead the way to Cubism. Although Impressionists kept alive the spirit of naturalism, they were so fascinated by the sparkling tonal nuances of nature and light, they lost sight of the solid aspects of reality. The link between **Realism** and **Cubism** was a chain of evolution that led directly from Courbet to Cezanne and on to Cubism.

Cubists sought a new language of expression. Its first phase, called the "**analytic**" stage, it adopted Cezanne's dictum: "You must see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone." Analytic Cubists broke natural forms into their geometric components, into facets - like a cut diamond.

The second, "**synthetic**" phase was one of reassembling, in which the now-simplified geometric forms lost all resemblance to objects. La Fresnaye's piece straddles these two styles. His subjects are recognizable. But the details have been changed into a "counterpoint" pattern of straight lines and contours.

No sooner had the Cubist movement begun to gather momentum that it started to disintegrate because of internal personality conflicts and differing goals. The "late" phase of Cubism began in 1912 when Picasso and Braque invented **collage** techniques, using pasted papers. "Synthetic" Cubism developed out of this.

The **Futurist** movement, which in 1911-12 drew on Cubist invention, burst out of Milan and spread its influence widely through Europe. The **Munich New Artist's Association** (Neue Kunstler-vereinigung) formed around Wassily Kandinsky and prefigure the **Blue Rider Group** (Blaue Reiter), which included Cubist paintings in their exhibitions. These modernist secessionists were regarded as forerunner to

Modern art in 20th c. Germany. The **Section d'Or** was organized as a comprehensive Cubist manifestation in Paris, where **Orphism** was also launched.

Then in August, 1914, war broke out and most French artists were mobilized. Some left France. Other groups broke away, each pursuing different courses and eventually fading out. Leger, for example, began to pursue an independent line of development. Delaunay, Mondrian, Kupka and Malevitch passed beyond Cubism into various forms of **abstract art**. The Futurist movement became more concerned with politics than art and gradually petered out. Duchamp abandoned Cubism, producing the first Dada works. The Cubist movement gained no new adherents apart from sculptors such as Lipchitz and Laurens.

1914 to 1921 marks the Aftermath of Cubism. During the war, Picasso and Gris – who as Spaniards were not drafted – continued working without interruption. In their hands the language of 'true' Cubism was enriched, becoming simpler, more personal and occasionally monumental. When Braque was demobilized in 1917-18, he returned to the Cubism, developing a freer, more poetic language.

By war's end, the **Purists, Dadists** and **Surrealists** proclaimed a reaction against the discipline and fragmentation of Cubism, even though they had used its inventiveness to propel their own art. By 1919, Picasso was exploring a more naturalistic idiom. By the end of 1920, Braque and Gris were developing 'classicizing' tendencies within the strictures of Cubism.

Roger de la Fresnaye

Roger de la Fresnaye [La fre-**ney**] was a French painter who synthesized lyrical color with the geometric simplifications of Cubism. His importance lies in the lyrical quality and orderliness of his cubist works. He was a master composer of pictures rather than an analytical pioneer in search of new methods, as were Picasso and Braque. Like those two, La Fresnaye's starting point was Cezanne, who said, "You must see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone." La Fresnaye's forms are simplified by use of rectangles, circles, arcs and straight lines. Yet, the figures remain easily identifiable.

La Fresnaye was born July, 1885, in Le Mans, France, to a French aristocratic family. His education was classical. Like aristocrats Delacroix and Degas, he set very high standards for himself. He wanted to produce art that was valid, not merely fashionable. He studied at the Academie Julian in Paris and from 1904 to 1908 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

He had the money to travel and to study, seeking out various artistic schools and putting their styles of painting into his works. His work shows one facet of Cubism

and an inspiration for later abstract art. His prismatic colors reflect the influence of Robert Delaunay. He was a member of the **Puteaux Group – an orphist** offshoot of Cubism led by Jacques Villon. From 1913 to the outbreak of World War I, La Fresnaye sought to create a monumental colored Cubism, including his most famous work, "The Conquest of the Air," 1913, depicting a scene of himself with his brother outdoors with an air balloon. This was a huge work, painted the year after the MIA's painting. During this time, La Fresnaye had many discussions with his brother, who was an engineer in the Nieuport aircraft firm. They shared an interest in the larger impact of science. La Fresnaye also traveled to Italy and Germany in those years.

In 1909 he went to Munich, where he was influenced by **German Expressionism**. He later studied under Maurice Denis and Paul Serusier, whose influence was seen in his dreamlike symbolist ambience and stylistic character of work by the **Les Nabis** [nah bee]. This group of Post-Impressionist avant-garde artists and friends included Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard. They started as a rebellious group of young student artists at the Academie Julian who sought to revitalize painting as "prophets of modern art." Nabi is Hebrew for "prophet." The nickname arose because most of them wore beards. Some were Jewish. All were desperately earnest. They even invented their own private vocabulary, signing their letters with the initials E.T.P.M.V. et M.P., meaning "In the palm of your hand, my word and my thoughts." They paved the way for the early 20th c. development of abstract and non-representational art. Their goal of integrating art and daily life was a goal they had in common with most progressive artists of the time.

La Fresnaye was never in the truest sense a Cubist painter. Until the end of 1910, he painted in a flat, somewhat stylized way influenced primarily by Gauguin and Serusier. By the end of 1910, he met Raymond Duchamp-Villon and was drawn into the Puteaux group. During 1911, he changed his style under the influence of Cezanne. His volumes of figures became more clearly defined and bodies were treated sculpturally and faceted, as in works by Picasso of 1907-08. La Fresnaye extracted from a natural scene incomplete geometric descriptions, which enabled him to give it an orderly, formal structure.

Unlike the true Cubists, La Fresnaye remained faithful to the French tradition of painting, trying to give it a new look by the use of up-to-date methods of handling form and color. It did not take him long to discover the difficulty of trying to marry the two. He used the geometric simplification and balanced composition of Cubism. But his subjects were consistently recognizable.

In 1911, La Fresnaye was associated with the Puteaux group (aka the Section d'Or), whose artists argued that the real goal of Cubism was abstraction, not realism. They met in the studio of Jacques Villon, which led later that year to the

establishment of the Section d'Or, in whose exhibitions he took part. His work demonstrated an individual response to Cubism. He was influenced by George Braque and Pablo Picasso. But his work has a more decorative than structural feel. He was considered a "moderate" cubist and, although he was an exceptionally talented painter, he was underrated as an artist. While others created Cubism, he helped to perfect it. His work reflects a strong personality and an original approach.

Cubist scholar Douglas Cooper, author of "The Cubist Epoch," described La Fresnaye as one of the "most considerable artists" of this group. But criticizes his genre scenes from 1911 to 1913, which include our "Married Life," as "lacking pictorial reality" and as "disconcertingly angular because he lacked conviction in his handling of cubist methods." Cooper also said that La Fresnaye's cubistic paintings "have a brittle, disjointed quality which belies his aspiration to represent the solid earthy aspects of reality."

By 1913, he turned away from Cubism proper and was heavily influenced by Delaunay's Orphism, which simplified the structure of compositions by focusing on large, flat planes of color (ala Fauvism).

He enlisted in the French army in 1914 when WWI broke out, in spite of having been discharged from military service in 1905 because of pleurisy. He was sent home in 1918 with tuberculosis, having twice spat blood. His poor health prevented him from painting again until 1920.

Nevertheless, he continued to draw and paint in watercolor. He still employed Cubist techniques, but he increasingly emphasized color and emotion. Although his paintings did much to popularize Cubism and to broaden its influence just before World War I, he later abandoned *avant-garde* art and became one of France's most influential advocates of traditional realism – complete with sensual reclining nudes in classical Italianate settings. During the last years of his life, he began to paint realistic works. His many self-portraits give us a picture of profound humanity amidst the ravages of diseases.

He died in Grasse in 1925 at the age of 40.

About the Work:

La Fresnaye was 29 when he painted "Married Life" in 1912, the year after he became associated with Cubism and joined the Section d'Or group, in the middle of his short career.

In this work, La Fresnaye imagines himself as a bachelor, surrounded by the amenities of an intellectual life. As he relaxes, he dreams about the bliss of married

life. A beautiful woman sits at his side, her hand intertwined with his arm. Although he used the bold language of Picasso to develop a very personal and romantic theme, La Fresnaye was both more lyrical and less radical than Picasso. We can easily recognize and relate to the human figures without straining. La Fresnaye has painted a scene of his ideal domestic surroundings.

He has surrounded his fictive couple with simple domestic objects in geometric shapes, much like those that Picasso and Braque included in their pioneer cubist still lifes: tumblers, plates, fruit, books, ash trays and tables. La Fresnaye instills all these, as well as the two figures, with a plastic quality. He has pictured all the elements of a happy home life. The man and the woman are defined with geometric shapes, especially in the female figure on the right.

He does use *passage* – a device of early Cubism – interrupting outlines so that the painting of the inner parts is carried into surrounding areas. This can be seen in the right arms of both male and female figures. He also simplifies by overlapping planes, as in the face of the male figure and the steeply sloping tabletop.

This piece demonstrates the artist's increasing emphasis on the solid geometry that underlies all forms in nature. Forms are reduced to their utmost simplicity and geometric core, in muted earthen colors – gray, beige, mustard, with vivid slashes of red and green.

Although this piece was painted just three years after Picasso and Braque reached the climax of their intense studies that led to the founding of cubism, La Fresnaye was probably most influenced by Post-Impressionists, especially Cezanne. In *L'Artillerie*, 1911, La Fresnaye was already radically simplifying.



"Artillery," 1911.
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.

Most famous work:



"The Conquest of the Air,"
1913. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Resources:

Roger de La Fresnaye: "Artillery" (1991.397) | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"The Cubist Epoch," Douglas Cooper, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Phaidon Press , 1971.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1991.397>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_de_La_Fresnaye

- **Kay Miller, May OOM**