



Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, *La fin du monde, filmée par l'ange N-D*, Paris: Éditions de la Sirène, 1919. Rare Books Collection, RARESF 702.81 C3324F

Blaise Cendrars and Fernand Léger, *La fin du monde*

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Acquired 2014

The 20th century, particularly in France, saw a dramatic rise in the production of deluxe illustrated books drawing on the skills of a new generation of artists. These *livres d'artistes* (artists' books) highlighted original work by modern artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse, often paired with texts by contemporary writers. These artists no longer saw their illustrative role as subservient to the text; they were engaging with words at the point of design, integrating text and image in new and innovative ways.

Given State Library Victoria's collecting emphasis on art and art history, it is surprising that virtually none of these illustrated works entered the collection, aside from Pablo Picasso's *Carmen sur le texte de Prosper Mérimée* (1949), featuring 38 engravings by the artist. In recent years, the Library has endeavoured to rectify this collecting oversight, acquiring through purchase and gift a number of works, including Surrealist artist Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté* (1934) and *La nourriture du bourreau* (1983), a collaborative book featuring the work of French poet André Frénaud and Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies. Such works, which are integral to the development of the modern artists' book, support the Library's strong collection of contemporary Australian artists' books.

Many of these works command prices well beyond the Library's acquisition budget. It was decided, therefore, to use the 2014 State Library Foundation Appeal to acquire a significant work in the field: *La fin du monde*, a collaborative book made in 1919 by French artist Fernand Léger, an early exponent of Cubism, and Swiss-born modernist poet Blaise Cendrars. Both were wounded fighting in the Great War, and their book, produced the year following the war's end, features an apocalyptic end-of-the-world scenario, arguably a veiled response to their own experiences.

The book is justly famous for Léger's dramatic illustrations – 22 *pochoir* (a stencil-based technique) designs – that reflect the fractured rhythms of a new mechanised century. In particular, the work was pioneering in its marriage of image and typography, anticipating developments in typographical layout and book design that we take for granted today. It has been described, in *Artists' Books in the Modern Era 1870–2000* (2002)¹, as '...the most beautiful and accessible French artists' book of its era ... A message of modernity is evident on every page of this bibliographic masterpiece.'