



Art History

Introduction to Cubism

Name:

Section:

Score: ____/5

Directions: Read the following article about Cubism and answer the questions on the back of the page.

Cubism

Cubism was one of the most influential visual art styles of the early twentieth century. It was created by Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973) and Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963) in Paris between 1907 and 1914. The French art critic Louis Vauxcelles coined the term Cubism after seeing the landscapes Braque had painted in 1908 at L'Estaque in emulation of Cézanne. Vauxcelles called the geometric forms in the highly abstracted works "cubes." Other influences on early Cubism have been linked to Primitivism and non-Western sources. The stylization and distortion of Picasso's ground-breaking *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), painted in 1907, came from African art. Picasso had first seen African art when, in May or June 1907, he visited the ethnographic museum in the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris.

The Cubist painters rejected the inherited concept that art should copy nature, or that they should adopt the traditional techniques of perspective, modeling, and foreshortening. They wanted instead to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the canvas. So they reduced and fractured objects into geometric forms, and then realigned these within a shallow, relieflike space. They also used multiple or contrasting vantage points.

In Cubist work up to 1910, the subject of a picture was usually discernible. Although figures and objects were dissected or "analyzed" into a multitude of small facets, these were then reassembled, after a fashion, to evoke those same figures or objects. During "high" Analytic Cubism (1910–12), also called "hermetic," Picasso and Braque so abstracted their works that they were reduced to just a series of overlapping planes and facets mostly in near-monochromatic browns, grays, or blacks. In their work from this period, Picasso and Braque frequently combined representational motifs with letters. Their favorite motifs were still lifes with musical instruments, bottles, pitchers, glasses, newspapers, playing cards, and the human face and figure. Landscapes were rare.

During the winter of 1912–13, Picasso executed a great number of *papiers collés*. With this new technique of pasting colored or printed pieces of paper in their compositions, Picasso and Braque swept away the last vestiges of three-dimensional space (illusionism) that still remained in their "high" Analytic work. Whereas, in Analytic Cubism, the small facets of a dissected or "analyzed" object are reassembled to evoke that same object, in the shallow space of Synthetic Cubism—initiated by the *papiers collés*—large pieces of neutral or colored paper themselves allude to a particular object, either because they are often cut out in the desired shape or else sometimes bear a graphic element that clarifies the association.

While Picasso and Braque are credited with creating this new visual language, it was adopted and further developed by many painters, including Fernand Léger, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Juan Gris, Roger de la Fresnaye, Marcel Duchamp, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, and even Diego Rivera. Though primarily associated with painting, Cubism also exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century sculpture and architecture. The major Cubist sculptors were Alexander Archipenko, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and Jacques Lipchitz.

The liberating formal concepts initiated by Cubism also had far-reaching consequences for Dada and Surrealism, as well as for all artists pursuing abstraction in Germany, Holland, Italy, England, America, and Russia.

Rewald, Sabine. "Cubism". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm (October 2004)

Thought Questions:

1. How did cubism get its name and what was it inspired by?
2. What aspects of art did Cubism artists reject? What did they try to emphasize in their paintings?
3. What were the favorite subjects of Cubism painters?
4. What impact did Picasso and Barque have on the artistic community?