

Picasso - Seminar 3

Background Notes

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WAHG

Picasso: Lecture Notes N°3

CUBISM

Cubism is a visual art style that abandoned homogeneous forms. The key concept underlying Cubism is that the essence of an object can only be captured by showing it simultaneously from multiple points of view.

In the 400 years prior to the late 19th C, space in painting was *Renaissance Space*; an illusory space using linear perspective as the tool to depict the illusion of space on a two-dimensional surface. The canvas was like a window looking out onto the real world, with parallel lines meeting at a point on the horizon line. After 1850, certain artists began to gradually see the canvas not so much as a window on the world, but as a flat support with its own limitations. They no longer wanted to depict space exclusively in terms of perspective. They also wanted to reflect flat surfaces in their paintings. Furthermore instead of smoothing over the brushstrokes in order to model three dimensions in objects, they chose to paint in separate touches, or facets of objects, not blending them together. But it was Paul Cezanne who took this new direction further by inventing a new kind of space in painting.

Cezanne constructed the objects or landscapes into a pictorial structure and leaving it exposed in the work. He combined the Renaissance notion of deep space, with the reality that the canvas is a flat surface. This combination caused his paintings to have both flatness and three-dimensional space; the forms having both volume and flatness. This combining of two types of space accounts for his distortions of objects and perspective for had he depicted the

"correct" perspective it would have destroyed the visual integrity of the flat pictorial surface/space. Furthermore this integrity was based on careful and continuous balancing of forms on the canvas. Towards the end of his life, he was at his most daring, reducing architecture and figures to geometric forms and paving the way for Cubism.

In 1907 there was a major retrospective exhibition at the *Saloon d'Automne* of Cezanne's works. A little earlier Picasso had visited the Paris *Musée de L'homme* and was fascinated by its African masks. Picasso's sudden enthusiasm for African Art and early historic European arts, especially Iberian demonstrated to him that such cultures strong expressive powers were not based on Renaissance artistic conventions.

LES DEMOISELLE D'AVIGNON.

A result was that Picasso decided to experiment and paint *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon*. It was a rejection of the naturalistic tradition of Western Art. For example the seated woman is seen simultaneously full face and from behind; the faces of the women reflect African masks or ancient Iberian art, the women are monumental, like primitive sculptures yet there is also a faceting and an emphasis on geometry that hint Picasso's Cubist future. *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon's* compressed composition, radical treatment of space and awkward not-quite-square format refer to El Greco's Apocalyptic Vision "*The Opening of the Fifth Seal*". Other aspects do not derive from this El Greco's work



Each individual figure is composed of completely diverse elements and compared to one another the figures also obey mutually contradictory aspects. There are no distinctions of light and darkness that might lend shape to the women's bodies, and together with the combination of several perspectives, this contributes to a general impression of disorientation in space. Picasso has not left an explanation as to what he was trying to achieve with his experiment which baffled many of his contemporaries. He was annoyed that certain aspects were misinterpreted for example he wrote

*“In the **Demoiselles d’Avignon** I painted a profile nose into a frontal view of a face. I had to depict it sideways so that I could give it a name, so that I could call it ‘nose’. And so they started talking about Negro art. Have you ever seen a single African sculpture -- just one -- where a face mask has a profile nose in it?”*

However its composition demonstrates the decisive change of direction in Picasso's art that was to be of such seminal importance to Cubism. Not only the proportions, but the organic integrity and continuity of the human body are denied here, so that the canvas as one critic put it "*resembles a field of broken glass.*" Most critics consider that "*the painting is more a record of work in progress, of an artist in the process of changing his mind, than a resolved composition: the forms are dislocated, inconsistent in style - in fact unfinished.*" But not all agree with this assessment for the critic Leo Steinberg argues that, far from evidence of an artist undergoing a rapid stylistic metamorphosis, the variety of styles can be read as a deliberate attempt, a careful plan, to capture the gaze of the viewer. He notes that the five women all seem eerily disconnected, indeed wholly unaware of each other. Rather, they focus solely on the viewer, their divergent styles only furthering the intensity of their glare. Whatever opinion is accepted the fact is that it is a disturbing picture – overthrowing perspective, single viewpoint, integral form, local colour, decorative colour. Yet this fact has led Art Historians to consider that it is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of this picture and the profound effect it had on art subsequently because it challenged Western expectations that paintings should represent reality.

EXPECTATIONS

Different cultures have different expectations and use of representative art. For example:

- The *Egyptians* emphasised what they *knew* rather what they *saw* thus they produced schematic representations
- The *Greeks* and *Romans* strove to produce the perfect bodily image
- *Medieval Art* used images to tell the sacred story

- *Chinese Literati Art* used images for contemplation

Neither *Medieval* nor *Chinese Literati Art* urged artists to *paint what they saw*. The idea that artists should paint what they saw started with the **Renaissance** culminating with the **Impressionists**.

To paint what you see is contradictory because we cannot **SEPARATE** what *we see* from what *we know* or *experienced*. This has been a problem of representation throughout history. It is this problem that the Cubist, amongst others acknowledged. The Cubists did NOT set out to abolish representation only to change the way that objects were presented. Their aim was no longer to copy something but to construct it *Thus they established the principle that a work of art should be autonomous and not merely imitate nature*.

CUBISM

The appellation **CUBISM** arose out of the submission by Braque of his landscape *Houses in L'Estaque* to the 1908 Salon d'Automne that led Matisse to describe the picture "*Being made up of little cubes.*" It was this comparison that prompted the critic Louis Vauxcelles to call the new art style Cubism.

The style emphasized the flat, two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, whilst rejecting the traditional techniques of perspective, foreshortening, modelling and chiaroscuro and refuting time-honoured theories of art as the imitation of nature. Cubist painters did not copy form, texture, colour and space of their subject; instead, they presented the depiction of fragmented objects, whose several facets were seen simultaneously in a *single dimension*.

Though previous art movements (*Impressionism* and *Post Impressionism*) had begun to evolve into flatter forms Picasso and Braque were more radical in their approach. Furthermore artists

working in other contemporary art movements, such as German *Expressionism* and *Fauvism* also tended towards flattened pictorial space. However a primary difference between Cubism and those movements is that Cubism is based much less on the expression of emotion than it is an intellectual experiment with structure.

All art movements reflect the contexts of their time *Cubism* was no exception Picasso and Braque were NOT the only painters who took up Cubism. Other outstanding cubist painters include Juan Gris, Fernand Leger and several others. Cubism under Picasso and Braque went through two phases roughly described as *Analytical Cubism* and *Synthetic Cubism*

ANALYTICAL CUBISM

The works up to 1912 concentrated on geometrical forms using subdued colours. Braque's and Picasso's similar compositions are broken into planes with open edges, sliding into each other while denying all depth. Colour is reduced to a grey-tan applied uniformly in small brushstrokes creating vibrations of light. Some art historians consider that the interpenetration of the forms thereby created lends these paintings a previously unknown aspect of continuity and density. Picasso constructed his images using small facets, or geometric planes, and represented objects from different viewpoints. Many critics of the period believed the artist aimed to represent reality in a new, almost scientific manner. This form of realism, which might be called conceptual, did not aim to destroy the form but rather to reinforce its pictorial autonomy. As Braque wrote in 1917

“...the aim is not the reconstitution of an anecdotal fact, but rather the constitution of a pictorial fact.”



Femme nue assise 1909-10

SYNTHETIC CUBISM

Works from 1912 used more decorative shapes, stencilling, collage, and brighter colours. Withdrawing from the abstract and hermetic character of *Analytical Cubism*, Braque and Picasso brought recognizable illusionistic features back into their paintings during their stay in Céret, from 1911 to 1913. They used letters, fragments of words, musical notes, then material elements such as sand and sawdust to create relief and cut-up newspaper pieces in their paintings. This tended to make the picture a physically object.



Fruit Dish, Bottle and Violin, 1914

A SUMMARY

Cubism created at the time and to this day a volume of critical analysis and comment that demonstrate that it was and is not always understood. Its radical approach to image making and its invention of collage and its evolution towards abstraction has attracted a mountain of verbiage upon which issues of race, colonisation, gender, pacifism and other issues have found a handy sticking place. Picasso's reaction to this can be summed up as follows:

"I have received Apollinaire's book about cubism. I am really depressed by all of this drivel."

ANALYTICAL



The Guitar Player 1910

SYNTHETIC



Comptoir avec fruits, violon et verre 1912