

Exploring the concept of cubism art essay



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Cubism was one of the most influential art movements of the 20th century. It took place between 1907 and about 1914. The innovators of the Cubist movement were Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 1973) and Georges Braque (French, 1882 1963). Cubism was one of the most significant changes in ideas in the history of art. It allowed for the development of many of the abstract modern art movements in areas such as Futurism and Constructivism.

One of the main characteristics of Cubism would be the presenting of a three dimensional object as an abstract form on a two dimensional surface. In order to achieve this, objects are defragmented, analysed, and reconstructed in an abstract form. The shapes are flattened onto the two dimensional surface of the canvas so that different angles of the object can be seen at the same time. Another distinct feature of Cubist paintings would be the breaking up and interlocking of background and object in geometric arrangement, creating a shallow sense of space.

Both Picasso and Braque, who were living in Paris at the time, began the Cubist movement. They met in late 1907 and began developing the idea of Cubism in their works by using complex patterns of defragmented objects, continuous outlines, and a monochromatic colour scheme.

The term Cubism can be sourced back to a conversation between French art critic Louis Vauxcelles and Henri Matisse in 1908. Matisse described Braque's paintings, which he had submitted to the Salon d'Automne, to have little cubes. However, it was Vauxcelles who coined the term Cubism in a review about the Salon des Independants just a few months later.

Cubism can be divided into two phases: Analytical Cubism and Synthetical Cubism. In the early phase, starting in 1907, objects were broken up, analysed, and put back together in an abstracted form. The use of the technique of representing various sides of an object at one time defined the work as Analytical Cubism. In 1912, the second phase came about, when Picasso and Braque began creating *papiers collés*. The technique involved pasting various types of paper in their work, which characterised Synthetic Cubism.

The prominent influences on the development of Cubism were Cezanne's later work and African sculptures. In Cezanne's later work, Picasso and Braque admired his concept of simplifying objects by seeing them as basic shapes such as cylinders, spheres, and cones. By exploring these concepts further, representing objects various viewpoints at the same time, they revolutionised how objects could be visualised in art.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Europe was discovering art from exotic continents such as Africa and Asia. Artists, such as Picasso, were inspired by the primitive and simplistic styles of the foreign cultures. Picasso had first seen African art when he visited the ethnographic museum in Paris in 1907. We can see its influence clearly in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1907), the precursor to Cubism. In his painting, he deconstructed and rearranged the faces of two of women in his painting to appear like African masks. In doing this he created a direct link between the movement and its inspiration.

The Cubist artists developed on the ideas of fauvism, the art movement that had gone before it. The Fauvists wanted to simplify art by going back to

basics. They did this by using distorted images, bright sections of colour and flat patterns. Their name Les Fauves means wild beasts in French, referring to their violent approach to their compositions. Cubists took this idea a step further by using straight lines and geometric patterns.

Analytical Cubism is one of the two main parts of Cubism. It was developed between 1908 and 1912 by Picasso and Braque. During this time they studied natural forms and deconstructed the forms into basic geometric parts on the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. Their only use of colour was a monochromatic scheme of greys and ochre. Many of their compositions by neutral colours that had no relations to the colour of the object they were depicting. Instead of focusing of colour, they concentrated on representing the natural world with shapes such as cylinders, spheres and cones. They used varying shades to create light and dark sections of their works to give their works a three dimensional quality. Examples of the early analytic phase would be Braque's Houses at L'Estaque (1908) and Picasso's Girl with a Mandolin.

Synthetic Cubism was the second part of Cubism. It was developed by Picasso, Braque, and other cubist artists between 1912 and 1919. There was a noticeable change in the works of the Cubist artists in the second phase of the movement. Synthetic cubism is characterised by the introduction of collage and papier coll , which allowed them to explore the new effects of depth. The technique of pasting coloured or printed paper fragments, usually newspaper clippings or sheet music, in the paintings of the Cubists marked the first use of collage in fine art, and the basis for all subsequent collage techniques in the years that followed. The use of collage refined the idea of

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using found objects, objects artists came across by chance, and making them part of their compositions. The idea behind it was that art could be found in the chaos of everyday modern life. Examples of the synthetic phase would be Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), and his piece entitled *Pipe, Glass, Bottle of Vieux Marc* (1914).

However, it is important to note that dividing of the Cubist movement into analytic and synthetic phases were not used by the artists at the time. The terms were coined by critics of the period. By categorising the Cubist works, it imposes rigid distinctions in the method of the Cubists. However, their techniques used in each phase can be seen throughout Cubist art.

Braque was initially involved in the Fauvist art movement, but he moved away from this style in 1908 when he rediscovered Paul Cezanne and met Picasso. Braque responded to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* by painting his *Grand Nude* in the cubist style of geometrisation of form and new spatial relationships. In 1909 Braque and Picasso started working together, using their various influences to develop a whole new way of depicting form and space. Although Braque started out painting landscapes with Picasso, they soon found the advantages of painting still-lives instead, such as them being able to see multiple views of an object as opposed to a landscape. They became close friends and worked closely together up until the First World War in 1914. The outbreak of war broke up their artistic collaboration as Braque was enlisted in the French Army and had to leave Paris. In the period between World War I and World War II, Braque adapted a more relaxed and open approach to Cubism. He was bolder in his use of colour and was less calculating in his depiction of objects. However, he was

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still powerfully dedicated to using the cubist techniques of fragmentation and simultaneous perspective.

Before beginning the Cubist period of his art, Picasso became interested in African art, which was currently being brought into Paris museums due to the expanding of the French empire. These exotic artefacts inspired his work during his African-influenced period (1908-1909) and into his Analytic Cubism (1909-1912). During this time, Picasso was also inspired by the works of Cezanne.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Cezanne developed the idea of painting a painting for what it was a two dimensional flat surface. From the Renaissance up until this point, artists had been trying to create the illusion of three dimensions within a painting, as if it were a window. Another technique of his, that greatly inspired Picasso, was to present multiple angles of an object all at once in a painting. His idea behind it was that the eye viewing the object does not stay fixed on one angle of the object, but instead moves around and receives various perspectives.

When Picasso and Braque were introduced in late 1907, they formed a close bond due to their shared interests in Cezanne and the Cubist techniques Picasso was experimenting with in his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*. In the painting, Picasso depicted the faces of the five women to resemble Iberian masks. The bodies of the women are angular and not in proportion. The changing perspectives, unnatural proportions and flat, mask-like faces in the painting shocked and confused its viewers at first. However, these motifs were explored and developed by Picasso and Braque throughout the

Cubist movement and a new style was born. At times during this period, the work of Picasso and Braque was so similar that they themselves could not tell them apart.

Picasso, in his examination of primitive sculpture and masks, arrived at the conclusion that the faces consisted of a quantity of clear shapes placed side by side. He figured that the features of the face that divide up the face should be seen as distinct sections. As Picasso progressed through the Cubism movement, he began to paint just one object at a time, painting it from several different perspectives at the same time. Picasso was successful in keeping a balance between naturalism and abstraction in his work. Before his cubist phase, he painted predominantly natural compositions, but as he explored his Cubist ideas, his work became more abstract. The objects he depicted during the period were of distorted proportions and broken into fragments, but because he used simple objects, they were generally recognisable.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was a gallery owner and art critic during the Cubist movement and was largely responsible for the broadcasting of Cubism as a style of art. When Picasso and Braque were producing their Cubist works in Paris, there were but a few opportunities for their works to be shown, usually the spring and autumn salon exhibitions. However, in 1910, Kahnweiler who was also an art dealer sent works by Picasso and Braque to avant-garde exhibitions outside of France. This began a growing acceptance for Cubist art around Europe at the time.

To conclude, the main features of the Cubist art movement are displaying objects from multiple viewpoints at the same time and intersecting the surfaces to create a shallow space. The Cubist art movement revolutionised how space and form could be visualised in art. The movement, created by Picasso and Braque, paved the way for future art movements to be abstract and began the re-examination of how space and form interact that changed the course of Western art.