

Cubism's Break with Space

While on the one hand cubism looked to the past for models that were untainted by western culture, it also became, on the other, an artistic movement that broke with the pictorial tradition inherited from the Renaissance. The materialisation of its commitment to the new spirit of modernity was the way it was attracted by the image in movement, best expressed in silent film.



Cubism challenged the fundamentals of Western representation which, since the Renaissance, was thought of as a window through which to have access to the visible world from a singular point of view. The Cubist rupture put an end to the traditional conception of painting as a reflection of a fixed and inherent form of understanding reality. In this sense, the Cubist artists drew on sources distant from Western parameters, such as African sculpture, knowledge of which (a vestige of colonial occupation) begins to be of interest in the Europe of the turn of the century. This art, which was called *primitive* or *art nègre* for its artistic stylization and simplification, served to catalyze the rejection of the dominant pictorial conventions.

The simultaneity and multiplicity of Cubist painting connects with the new mobile and dynamic experience of modernity. This dynamism links Cubism with the cinema, which in those years seemed to embody the spirit of the new century and was offered as a metaphor for modernity in its totality. The philosopher Henri Bergson, in his work *Sur l'évolution créatrice*, published in 1907 (of unquestionable importance for Cubism), highlights its capacity of construction of an absolute and continuous totality from static fragments. Meetings before the cinematographer formed part of the customs of the Parisian bohemian set, which frequently attended projections in *cafés* and *boulevards*. Those artists, who had renounced an academic and bourgeois art, embraced popular forms as a stimulus to subvert the conventions of the elevated academic art, and at the time cinema was, above all, a popular entertainment similar to the circus, magic shows, or cabaret. It is not the issue of a visual similarity which linked Cubism with the cinema, but rather a structural link fundamentally carried out by two factors: a dialogue between reality and unreality; and the fragmentation of the body and of space through the distortion of the shot.

The relationship between Cubism and cinema is that which is established with a new way of seeing; one and the other re-conceptualized the Western visual arts, inventing a new aesthetic relationship with the world. Both Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) as well as Georges Braque (1882–1963) used the cinema as a catalyst to demolish conventions of representation and later to reconstruct them. Fernand Léger (1881–1955) took on cinema as a new artistic language to experiment with his fascination with the machine and dynamism. *Ballet mécanique*, 1924, considered the only strictly-Cubist film, takes the fragmentation of the every-day object, to which it gives a very precise movement and rhythm, to the extreme in order to present it as the protagonist actor, in whom the true beauty of modern life will reside.

Nonetheless, the borrowing was not one-way, for even though the artists knew the silent screen, as Léger's subtle homage to Charlot in this film (the cinema furthest from the Parisian artistic Bohemian set) demonstrates, neither can it be unders-

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tood without the experience of the Cubist fragmentation, as Buster Keaton (1895–1966) shows when he dismantles that portable bungalow in *One Week*, 1920, an example which shows a knowledge of Cubism on the part of the cineaste.

Analysis and the Machine

Cubism represents the end of the nineteenth century with regards to visual arts, inaugurating new ways of seeing and new painterly conceptions. But it also introduced new relationships between the artist, society and the market. In a short amount of time, Cubism would turn into the first avant-garde movement whose experimentation made room for different artistic positions and tendencies, whether actively pursued or produced in reaction to it, in the first avant-garde movements from Abstractionism to Constructivism.



Given the movement's centrality, interpretations of Cubism have focused on different tendencies in twentieth-century art history through sociology, semiotics, visual culture and, above all, its formalist features. Traditionally privileged by museums, the study of forms understands Cubism as a sequence of three styles or phases in brief time periods until it acquired a kind of representation derived from specific painterly qualities.

The first phase, called Analytical Cubism, would destroy the traditional notion of perspective and the painting as a window into another space, to the extent that it threw the mimetic function of images into crisis. Demonstrated in the painting by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) painting *Le compotier* (Fruit in a Vase), 1910, and his bust titled *Tête de femme* (Fernande) (Head of a Woman, Fernande), 1910, cubist decomposition consists of an intellectual process that geometrically schematizes and recombines multiple planes configuring the internal and external structure of things. But it also applies the same approach to the observer's potentially different points of view. Time is introduced into the canvas, as is Cubism's critique of sight as a flawed, incomplete manner of perceiving the world. In general, Analytical Cubism has been interpreted as a joint response of Picasso and Georges Braque (1882-1963) to the painting of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). Yet, as the film by Louis Lumière (1864-1948) *Partie d'écarté* (The Card Game), 1896, illustrates, there existed iconographic circumstances that demonstrated interrelations produced among film, new material culture and popular culture in the nineteenth century and the development of Cubism and its precedents.

Analytical Cubism is developed with such complexity that by 1911, geometric structure itself, thought of as a tool to elucidate other relationships between the world and subject, ends up dispensing with figurative representation. Hermetic Cubism, this new

period is called, is the closest step to abstraction. The object's multiplicity gives way to a closed representation that proves difficult to interpret, close to Mallarmé's thesis, since it presents the aesthetic field as a stage for reinventing one reality from another. This is how Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) understood it at Gallery 291 in New York, as did the other members of *Camera Work* magazine who compared it in their publication to the space of symbols akin to Gordon Craig's stage designs.

Cubism's pioneers Picasso and Braque abandon this direction in an intense *tour de force*, returning to representation by way of constructing assemblages that represent Synthetic Cubism. Its main features bring together uniform colors and two-dimensional planes within the space of painting, but also within the material world. Synthetic Cubism incorporates everyday elements into the painting, such as letters or numbers cut out of posters or newspapers from the artist's surroundings, using them as pictorial elements that reconnect with the modern world. The invention of collage in Synthetic Cubism understands artistic space as a playful space for reconfiguring and resignifying the everyday and the painting at the same time.

The origins of Cubism are often attributed to a conversation between Picasso and Braque, but this assertion ignores other voices. One of them being Juan Gris (1887-1927), who would develop unparalleled features in Synthetic Cubism through his use of color and composition. Opposite Juan Gris' personal cubist approach to still life paintings, French artist Fernand Léger (1881-1955) repre-

sented a kind of tubular Cubism related to the industrial machine. Together with Picasso, Braque and Gris, there were other painters considered cubists, whose work would be exhibited in public salons, like those by Albert Gleizes (1881–1953) and Jean Metzinger (1883–1956). Three-dimensional space, a fundamental aspect of cubist analysis, was also developed in sculptures like those by Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973). His contact with Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) introduced him to Cubism to later reclaim a kind of figurative representation close to the work of Henri Laurens (1885–1954).

Cubism's most important exhibition was *Section d'Or* at the Galerie de la Boétie in 1912. That same year Apollinaire wrote a series of articles on Cubism compiled in *Les peintres cubistes*, published in 1913. In Spain, Cubism was shown for the first time in 1912 thanks to the *Exposició d'art cubista*, which Josep Dalmau organized in his gallery. The exhibition included works by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968),

Gleizes, Metzinger, Léger and Juan Gris and had a great influence on Spanish artists. On an international level, Mexican artist Marius de Zayas (1880–1961) played a fundamental role in introducing Cubism and the avant-garde movements to New York. As Stieglitz's advisor, de Zayas convinced him to print works by artists he had discovered in his trips to Paris—such as Picasso, Braque and Francis Picabia (1879–1953)—in *Camera Work* magazine and exhibit them in Gallery 291. Moreover, his work as a caricature artist evolved significantly after coming into contact with the Parisian avant-garde, combining mechanical elements with cubist principles.

Braque ended his relationship with Picasso in 1914 after being called to serve in World War I. From this moment, Picasso endowed his work with a greater poetic intensity, working within Cubism but with total freedom. The early death of Juan Gris in 1927 and the return to order after the Great War marked an end to one of the most productive periods and artistic languages in twentieth-century art. Similarly to scientific research by Albert Einstein and Max Planck, or to philosophical re-

flections by Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl, Cubism demonstrated conclusively that the experience of modernity was bound to a dynamic and subjective reality, irreconcilable with the preeminence of a visual order invented in the Renaissance.

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Poetry, Sight and Dance

Cubism became a wide-ranging movement, in which interest in scientific advances mixed with the importance of its relationship with poetry, dance, music and theatre in the development of the language of the avant-garde. Various branches grew out from it, including "Orphism", characterised by chromatic juxtaposition and contrast.



At the same time that Cubism was achieving widespread recognition, some painters began to break away from this avant-garde movement. The term "Orphism" was created by Apollinaire to refer to the art of Robert Delaunay (1885–1941), exhibited in Section d'Or in 1912. At first, only Delaunay and Francis Picabia (1879–1953) accepted the term, which had also been imposed upon Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Frantisek Kupka (1871–1957). Delaunay would later reject the label, considering it a maneuver to present all avant-garde art as belonging to the same front. Apollinaire thought of Orphism as a developed branch of Cubism, even though it would not be long before he recognized distinguishing characteristics in its simultaneity and colorful contrasts. Simultaneity did not imply an attempt at describing different objects and points of view on canvas, but a desire to represent forms without resorting to procedures that divide or fragment the object, known to Cubism and Impressionism.

On this last point, color and light achieved a fundamental importance. Interested in Michel Eugène Chevreul's theory of color, husband and wife Robert and Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979) designated colorful contrasts as the foundation of their pictorial experience. In this manner, chromatic surfaces interacting among each other created forms to construct a painterly space. They crafted their compositions from simultaneous contrasts in which the painting's rhythm is measured by the retina's play among bright tones; exemplified in Sonia Delaunay's *Dubonnet* (1914), colorful surfaces juxtapose each other, constituting different chromatic structures. These paintings came close to abstraction through an intense process of experimentation with forms.

With close ties to both the world of poetry in their relationship with Blaise Cendrars (1887–1961) and modern physics in its conception of primary colors, the Delaunays

intended to forge a link between all of the arts, as Apollinaire had done with poetry. Orphism had a very close connection to literature, since the Delaunays' paintings inspired Apollinaire to write poetry. Moreover, Cendrars published a book on the parameters of simultaneity, titled *La prose du transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Transsiberian and of little Jehanne de France), 1913, printed on a colored background designed by Sonia Delaunay, a copy of which is exhibited in this room.

The connection between the arts also came to fruition in work developed by American dancer Loïe Fuller (1862–1928). Her innovative stage sets combined the freedom of bodily movement, emphasized by costumes with large quantities of material, with colorful lighting that optimized techniques in chemistry and electricity. Choreography by Loïe Fuller, such as *Danse Serpentine II* (The Serpentine Dance II), 1897, was highly imitated at the time, fascinating many artists and writers, among them Stéphane Mallarmé, who found her to be an expression of his ideals for creating a new poetry. For the symbolist poet, dance was capable of representing abstraction as immaterial poetry, and it did so through rhythm and its decomposition of movement. In this sense, Loïe Fuller's experimentation can be linked to symbolism, similarly to Futurism or Cubism, exemplifying the importance that dance, music and theatre had in developing the avant-garde's artistic language.

In Spain the painter María Blanchard (1881-1932) shared an interest in this movement's use of light and color during crucial years in her artistic production. Her paintings approach volumetric analysis of Cubism's own space through faceted, colorful planes and figurative decomposition.

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