

Cubism(s) and Experiences of Modernity II. Telefónica Collection

In establishing and developing early Cubism, Picasso and Braque came up with solutions that emerged from a continuous, dynamic flow of work and regular and abundant exchange between the two artists. The terms “Analytical Cubism” and “Synthetic Cubism” have become widespread and are part of the vocabulary of Cubism. But they are not concepts or periods that Picasso and Braque themselves used or adopted as their own, and they do not define any specific artistic or aesthetic content. The terms “analytical” and “synthetic” are in fact part of the narratives developed by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler based on the ideas of Juan Gris, and they were not generally in use in the practice of Cubism at the time.



This notion of diversity and plurality is what motivates us to recover the “cubists’ Cubism”. Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, and the early Auguste Herbin were not received without controversy by critics and museums. But it is now possible as well as desirable to reinstate these artists with the understanding that the work they carried out between 1909 and 1915 marked the shift from the legacy of Symbolism to a new, figurative system based on the dominance of form and the dynamic assembly of planes and figures. And that they sought to express the experience of the constant flow of everyday life and the “unanimous” relationship between subject and world.

Foundational Cubism. 1907-1914

In any case, Picasso and Braque’s cubist process, in its diversity, emerged from the meeting of primitivism and Cézanne-influenced post-Fauvism. It required the study of the essential formal and structural qualities of the picture. It defined “pure” painting in analytical or hermetic Cubism. But it also immediately challenged the two-dimensional purity of the canvas, introducing graphic, text, and iconographic signs, thereby inventing a new type of “verbal-visual” art. Taking this verbal-visual art further, Picasso and Braque paved the way for the conception of collage and the notion of sculpture or even painting as “object”. From this point, Picasso and Braque developed Cubism as a “language”, and Picasso even came up with iconographic and technical inventions that Guillaume Apollinaire readily described as “surréalistes”.

According to the formalist view of Cubism, there is an apparent or supposed logic of continuity between the development of “pure” painting and the invention of collage. But from the perspective of our aesthetic sensibility today, collage appears to be a significant change in the conception of art, contrary to the meaning of painting itself. In other words, Picasso and Braque’s cubist experience also had room for diversity and antinomy.

Cubism was also able to find other ways to refract and give rise to “isms” that branched off but still preserved the enduring traces and the hallmark of Cubism. The transformations of Cubism developed by Fernand Léger and by Robert and Sonia Delaunay are widely known. Léger’s work, perhaps in line with Kahnweiler’s interests, has always been considered to fall within what is known as “essential” Cubism. The style developed by the Delaunays, on the other hand, was given its own name, Orphism, by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, based on the principle of the simultaneity of forms, colours, and sensations. But both of these developments charted a similar course between the possibilities of Cubism and the implications of “modern life”.

Meanwhile, Juan Gris was the “space” and framework that brought together these various transformations of Cubism. He was the “point of convergence”, a crucible in which the work and ideas that Picasso and Braque produced in Montmartre was mixed with what the other cubists were creating and presenting in Parisian salons and discussing in their circles. And the union of the Telefónica and the Museo Reina Sofía collections allows us to observe two key moments in the work of Gris during the foundational stage of Cubism. The first is Gris in 1913, using grid structures based on the Golden Ratio, working by building up the paintings, creating illusions of objects and textures. And the second is the Juan Gris who redefined the notion of collage by introducing iconic elements and by means of formal strategies that intensified the perception of time and space.

All these proposals shaped what we call “Foundational Cubism” or the founding moment of Cubism(s). The union of the Telefónica and the Museo Reina Sofía collections has also allowed a necessary and decisive broadening of the scope of this context that gave rise to the cubist experience, thanks to the presence of three Latin American artists who were strongly influenced by Cubism in the course of their careers. Xul Solar incorporated Cubism early on, as an initiation into modern art and as the bedrock of his artistic idiolect. Diego Rivera expanded Cubism, taking it towards heterogeneous and identity-based forms, and Emilio Pettoruti adopted Cubism as the foundation of his identity as an artist, extending the reach of the cubist legacy in Latin America.

Transitional Cubism and New Visuality. 1915-1917

Around 1913, Picasso and Braque stopped working together. In late 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, the early cubist scene fell apart. Although Picasso would lay the foundations of late Cubism in 1915, he had recently started producing neo-classical works and soon embarked on a collaboration with the Ballets Russes. Braque was seriously wounded in action during the war. Most of the artists who had been part of the cubist experience entered a transitional period. Certain cubists, like Albert Gleizes, favoured a return to the sources of Cubism or an alignment with elements of everyday life, which had been transformed. Others, particularly Juan Gris and María Blanchard, had used collage but chose to return to painting in its full sense, although incorporating the paradigm shift that collage had brought about. In 1915, Jacques Lipchitz came up with a new conception of cubist sculpture based on the prevalence of prismatic volumes and on a constructive, “architectural” compositional approach. Blanchard remained interested in the effects of dynamism, but the parallels between the ideas of Lipchitz and Gris laid the foundations for a new Cubism. The two artists described a similar cubist “method” of producing works: starting with an abstract grid, regulated according to constructive principles, they brought about the encounter with a recognisable icon or figurative form.

As all of this was taking place in Europe, in the United States Paul Strand was pushing the boundaries of the pictorialist photography practiced by the group that gathered around *Camera Work* magazines, opening up their creative premises to a new visuality. The preferred starting point for this new visuality was the study of the cubist experience, in an attempt to find a corresponding (not an equivalent) photographic practice. Years later, Argentinean photographer Horacio Coppola embarked on a similar investigation that led him to produce his famous *Homenaje a Juan Gris*.