

Brief Overview of Early 20th Century Modernism

1) True or Instinctive Cubism: generally defined as the work of Picasso and Braque from about 1911-1913 but some writers include Gris, and Léger. Typically, most people now divide this into two groups: the first or “analytic” period and the second or “synthetic” period, and they place Gris and Léger in the second period. Defining this style has always been a challenge: is it a record or analysis of the perceptual experience of an object over time? Or is it not about changing visual experiences but rather about the fundamental question of how does one represent a three-dimensional object in 2-dimensional space, without using perspective? This is the period of cubism with the most relevance to photography in the early 20th century. Paintings by Picasso and Braque from this 2-year period are the best examples.

2) Synthetic cubism, like analytic cubism, is not widely used anymore; most people prefer to speak of the second phase of cubism. If the first phase involved the elimination of color, the emphasis on an architectonic grid, and the seeming dissection of the object, the second phase seems to reverse the process. Returning the use of color, these paintings appear to record the materialization of an object as it emerges from planes and shapes. The collages are also more likely to be synthetic than analytic. Because this phase is dominated by color and collage, it would appear to be less relevant to the goals of modern photography. [examples: Juan Gris, *Smoker*, 1913; Ferdinand Leger, *Stairway*, 1913; Picasso, *Harlequin*, 1915.]

3) Kinetic cubism: used some of the vocabulary of cubism but more concerned with the expression of movement (Duchamp, Villon, Joseph Stella). The term is unusual and most writers are likely to call work in this style cubo-futurism.

4) American cubism, or precisionism: In stylistic terms, this relates more to a 1920s movement called purism. It involves a machine-age or industrial age view of the landscape, with an emphasis on clean or precise edges in the rendering of forms (Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, and a few others are good examples). The objects themselves are rarely treated cubistically although the entire composition seems to be. The interest in the lines of the machine influence Sheeler’s work in photography; in some cases, the distinctions between his photographs and paintings are quite subtle.

There are other forms of cubism but for the most part, they do not have much bearing on the modernist directions in photography.

A number of 20th century movements would have been impossible without the precedent of cubism. Some of these ultimately show no relationship at all to cubism, but on some level, all of the following owe at least part of their stylistic evolution to cubism:

Futurism: This is an Italian movement which rejects traditional political and cultural values; it insists on experiencing the present in terms of speed, movement, dynamism; modern life should be the subject. Instead of the cubist fragmentation of an object, the focus in futurism is on “force lines” and the vibrations of movement. Whereas in cubism, daily life often becomes

the subject matter, in futurism the subject is war, riots, athletes, the diffusion of electric light. In sculpture and in painting, a sense of the object unfolding in space and in time is a goal; the viewer should be thrust into the center of the painting. If cubism is an intellectual and conceptual response to reality, then futurism is an emotional and dynamic response. Futurist paintings and sculpture are more expressive of movement than cubism, and the style is often overlaid with a more agitated, dynamic field of force lines. Some of the futurists are Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Boccioni, Balla, Severini, and Sant-Eliás.

Russian Suprematism: developed by Malevich in the period leading up to WW I and the 1917 Russian Revolution, this movement asserts the "supremacy" of the plane (rectangle or square) of color. The black square is the first suprematist painting, and Malevich refers to it as the "zero" of form, from which all creation will then emerge. The goal of this movement is transcendence of the logical world, to reach the fourth dimension. Although other movements at the time share this interest in the 4th dimension, it is difficult to see any relationship between suprematism and photography.

Constructivism:

- 1) an interest in the use of real materials united with an approach to design which lets the material determine the final form of the work (*faktura*)
- 2) an interest in the production of work, in the process of making it, of bringing together raw materials in order to create something real which exists on its own terms (rather than as a representation of some reality which exists outside of the art work). This interest in process is generally more important than the end product (*konstruktsiia*)
- 3) a new understanding of the role of the spectator of the art work as someone who engages with it mentally, physically, and ideologically; because this "spectator" is a proletarian communist, the work must also engage the life style of the proletariat (*tektonika*)

Dada was a reaction against the autonomy of art, claiming that art and life are the same. It has been called anti-art because of its rejection of traditional attitudes and techniques; yet it was also pro-art in the sense of finding art in everything. This type of obvious contradiction in terms is itself a characteristic of dada which declared itself to be against everything and for everything. For some of the dadaists this primary contradiction leads to the belief that art is inherent in nature; for the American dadaists, it leads more naturally to the belief that art is inherent in the machine. In either case, there is a tendency to negate the controlling role of the artist—the role of chance in the creation of the work of art becomes an important strategy and will remain one throughout much of the 20th century.

Surrealism

André Breton, one of the founders of surrealism, issued his first manifesto in 1924, calling for the use of automatism and dreams in order to express the functioning of the real and inner mind. The more biomorphic and poetic surrealism of artists like Miro and Masson emerged initially within a cubist infrastructure which eventually disappears, leaving only a shallow cubist space. Ernst remains a major surrealist figure throughout his career, and is most characteristic, perhaps, in his continual search for new techniques which bring new imagery and unexpected juxtapositions, levels of meaning, to his work. Dalí's illusionistic surrealistic

idiom becomes characteristic of the movement in the 1930s. Also in the 30s surrealistic objects begin to appear, objects which are banal but juxtaposed with unusual materials or in unusual combinations. Surrealism, along with dada, does have a discernible and identifiable influence on photography in the 1920s and 30s.