

Cubism and Related Styles

In 1970, Douglas Cooper published an important book on cubism called *The Cubist Epoch*. Although some of his ideas have been challenged more recently, he provides a good place to start.¹

Apollinaire, one of the writers on cubism in the early 1900s, tried to establish a connection between cubism and the realism of Courbet. Courbet's innovation was the refusal of abstract ideals of beauty in favor of a more sordid realism. The impressionists, although their art is rooted in the real world, were not concerned with this sordid reality since their focus was light and color. The neo- and other post-impressionists did not completely abandon reality but their interest was the idea, a transcendence of reality to reach a deeper plane. Cézanne, to a degree, bridges these directions. He wanted to represent permanence and transience, volume and flatness, the effects of light and structure. It is in this respect, of seeking both sides of the dualities raised by realism and the impressionist response, that Picasso related to Cézanne. We see these dichotomies most clearly in the pre-cubist painting of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a painting which is not flat but does not create the true illusion of depth, a painting which uses the female nude (an eternal icon of beauty) to communicate the antithesis of beauty.

As both Picasso and Braque begin to move toward a more geometric, angled and seemingly multifaceted rendering of the figure, the primitivizing influence does not immediately leave their work although it is relocated in the hatchmarks and in a tendency to make the figures look as though they have been carved of wood. [See: Picasso, *Woman in Yellow*, 1907.] By 1911, this effect has been eclipsed by the artists' interest in opening up forms and planes and in uniting the figure and ground through the planar structure of space [see: Picasso, *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, 1910]. This is the point at which their work becomes hermetic, or difficult to decipher, as the artists appear to be more concerned with the structure of lines and planes than they are with the "objective" content of the picture. This does create a conflict since the artists never give up that content, even as their paintings become more abstract, but eventually they resolve it in the direction of reality, in large part by inserting elements from reality into the art work. These "alien" materials do two things for the paintings: they reinforce the flatness of the surface, and in many cases, they offer ironic commentaries on the real world. Actually, they do a third thing as well: they emphasize the fact that a work of art is constructed out of materials. [See: Braque, *Still Life with Glass, Dice and Playing Card*, 1913, and Picasso, *Guitar (El Diluvio)*, 1913.]

For Douglas Cooper, this development leads to the end of what he calls "high" cubism, as the artists begin to imitate textural patterns, to introduce materials which have their materiality, and essentially create works of art which contain different levels of reality. For other writers, while not specifically calling this the end, it is the moment when Picasso, at least, recognizes that painting is an "impoverished" activity because it will always be removed from the world. But if this is the case, then the artist must find some way to put even greater distance between the art work and the world.² We might then note that around 1912, Picasso began to make three-dimensional constructions. [Picasso, *Still Life*, 1914.] We might also note that he never

gives up painting but his paintings do not continue to look like analytic cubist paintings after around 1913. After 1914, Picasso begins to return naturalistic techniques to his paintings without abandoning cubist techniques [Picasso, *The Card Player*, 1913-14].

In Cooper's discussion, the followers of Picasso and Braque did not really understand cubism and used it in a decorative manner, compressing space so as to bring more of the object into the picture. Not everyone agrees with this interpretation although just about everyone does agree that the cubism of artists like Gleizes and Metzinger does not have the radical or innovative qualities that Picasso and Braque brought to their work. [For example, see Metzinger, *Fruit and Jug on a Table*, 1916]

By 1914, cubism had changed so substantially that most writers invented a new word for it. By the 1920s, not even the cubists themselves talk about cubism and even they might be accused of using it as one of many styles.

Cooper identifies four categories of cubism (#1, 3, 4, and 5 below) but other writers use different categories. The descriptions below should give you a good idea of the standard approaches to the discussion of cubism and its "offspring":

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?

2) Synthetic cubism is not a widely used term 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. [Juan Gris, *Smoker*, 1913; Ferdinand Leger, *Stairway*, 1913; Picasso, *Harlequin*, 1915.]

3) Systematic Cubism: artists who flirted with the ideas of cubism or used it as a stylistic formula: Gleizes, Metzinger, and Le Fauconnier are examples. Most writers now refer to these artists as the "salon" cubists because they primarily showed their work in the salons and were therefore seen by a larger public – Picasso and Braque did not.

4) Orphic cubism: a cubism which is more interested in color than in form (Delaunay, Morgan Russell, Stanton MacDonald-Wright). This definition hasn't changed but recent writing on Delaunay offers some arguments that his interest in color is an interest in the process of seeing.

5) Kinetic cubism: used some of the vocabulary of cubism but concerned with the expression of movement (Duchamp, Villon, Joseph Stella). The term is unusual and Cooper may be the only one who uses it; other writers are more likely to speak of cubo-futurism.

6) Purism: centralizes rationality and order and universality in the depiction of forms; a rejection of earlier cubism for being too personal and too decorative (Ozenfant and Jeanneret, or Le Corbusier). There are very few examples of work by these artists (Le Corbusier was an architect more than a painter) but overall, the 1920s sees a return to “order” even in the work of artists like Picasso and the Italian Futurists.

7) American cubism, or precisionism: In stylistic terms, this relates more to purism than to true cubism; 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). The objects themselves are rarely treated cubistically although the entire composition seems to be.

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. Stylistically, evolves from divisionism (pointillism) and cubism; but this will be overlaid with a more agitated, dynamic field of movement or force lines. Since expressionism also evolved from neo-impressionism, the reason why some of the early expressionist work looks like some of the early futurist work can be traced to the style influences on these artists. Some of the futurists are Boccioni, Carra, Balla, Severini, and Sant-Elias.

Russian neo-primitivism: Russian artists deliberately turn to native Russian sources--peasant art, the lubok (graphics: a combination of text and illustration, first made by hand-printed methods, later by mass-produced printing), other Eastern arts, Russian icon painting. There are some parallels to the styles of Cezanne and Gauguin, and there may be some direct influence of these artists on the Russians. Cubism is not likely to be an influence until around 1913, futurism around the same time; but these influences are not reflected in the neo-primitivist artworks. Larionov and Goncharova and Malevich, as well, all painted in a neo-primitivist style until around 1912. Characteristics: coarse outlining, flatness or untrue perspective, figures that often do not appear planted on the ground plane, bold colors, use of size to indicate distance and to indicate relationships of important/lesser important figures;

when the icon is the influence, there may be isocephaly of figures (i.e., all the figures are at the same height--we see this in some of Goncharova's paintings). It has recently been suggested that the influence for Larionov is the art of children, although not everyone agrees with this hypothesis.

Rayonism: although there are Russian artists who call themselves futurists, rayonism looks more like Italian futurism than other Russian art forms. Its central interest is in the rays of color/light emitted by objects; these rays of color are the means for how we perceive an object in rayonism. Larionov speaks of collisions of color and light, creating drama in the painting. Ultimately, through the life of the rays of color, the viewer will attain a glimpse of the fourth dimension. Larionov and Goncharova are rayonists after about 1912. There are paintings by these artists that look more like a reflection of cubist/futurist ideas; they generally precede the development of rayonism.

Suprematism: developed by Malevich, 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.

Notes

1. Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch* (London: Phaidon, 1970).
2. This theme of cubism as an attempt to rid the painting of illusion (hence, dis-illusionment) is developed by T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).