Cubism and Futurism

CUBISM:
key artists: Picasso and Braque, although it would be useful to indicate that other artists are involved in what is called “salon cubism”
key artworks: should be dated ca 1912-13, best to include an example of analytic cubism and one example of synthetic or collage cubism

FOCUS OF MOVEMENT:
possible answers from most comprehensive to least:
1) Cubism focuses on the flat, 2-dimensional surface of the picture plane, challenging the traditional techniques of perspective, foreshortening, modeling. In so doing, it makes the viewer aware of these techniques as an artistic language. It also rejected the idea that art should copy nature in the belief that artistic illusionism is necessarily imperfect.

2) Kahnweiler argues that the cubist painting is striving to achieve a new type of unity: the unity between the volume of the presumably real object which has been depicted in the painting and the lack of volume which is characteristic of the flat canvas. The artist, says Kahnweiler, eliminates color and leaves the device of shading.

3) emphasis on a perceptual response to the act of representation, making a decided challenge to the Renaissance understanding of the painting as a window onto the world

TECHNIQUE: you actually need to identify which form or artist you’re discussing; even Picasso and Braque’s techniques differ, and in Picasso alone, we see a change in technique from 1911-1913. Certainly you should mention that analytic or phase 1 cubism is characterized by the use of an architectonic scaffolding, the use of numbers or letters to emphasize flatness, the elimination of a single source of light and therefore the elimination of shading and chiaroscuro.

A more sophisticated response:
technique is extremely radical, not because it breaks down an object and presents it from all angles (it doesn’t) but because it isolates the traditional techniques used for rendering depth and shading and uses them in contexts where they do not do that, because it tries to resolve the discrepancy between 3-dimensionality and 2-dimensionality by not showing depth on the canvas, even as the artist continues to represent real objects – in Picasso’s case this leads to an emphasis on the painting as a “table” because if we look down on something, we don’t see depth; in Braque’s case, it leads to a type of transparency in how the object is rendered

SUBJECT MATTER:
First of all, you need to realize that the visible content of the painting may not be the subject. What you see is not always what the painting is about. There are no cubist paintings of the landscape. Likewise, there are no cubist paintings of the human figure although there are proto-cubist paintings of the human figure. That, in fact, is another reason for excluding Demoiselles D’Avignon from the category of cubism. All the paintings of 1911-13 were café
scenes and some have described them as visual diaries. The visible content does change when the artists move into the next phase of cubism, although in both phases, the content is united by its “ordinary-ness” and that fact should tell us that the real subject is probably not simply what we see. Some critics believe that the real subject is the act of painting or making art; others believe that the real subject is the challenge to the separation of art and life.

**Anomalies:** that it was so easy to imitate and become a style or “look”

**FUTURISM**
The real challenge with futurism has less to do with understanding the paintings but more to do with recognizing that a manifesto is about ideology and not directly about the art. To a large degree, futurism is as much a social movement as it is an artistic movement. Although it might seem easier than cubism, it’s difficult to separate the ideology and the art.

**Key artists:** Boccioni, Balla, Carra, Sant’Elia, Severini; key artworks: I would have chosen something by Boccioni (a painting, not the sculpture) and something by Balla, since between them, they capture the range of subject matter. Carra’s *Free Words* does seem iconic of the movement’s goals but they actually make very few collages so it’s rather unusual in that respect.

**Focus:**
the overall goals of the movement are a challenge to cubism AND to Renaissance perspective at the same time; a clear break with the past (tradition) in terms of subject matter and technique, and an attempt to make modern life (not in terms of its visual characteristics but in terms of its moods and actions) the subject and technique of art

**Technique:**
although each artist is different, there are some points on which they all agree: challenge boundaries between the object and the environment, either through abstraction or through the use of new materials create conditions in which the viewer is pulled into the art work lines of force which animate and agitate paintings

**Subject:**
war on the past, war on immobility and conservatism speed, light, modern life, movement in the act of moving (the “plastic leap”) elimination of boundaries between art and life, with the expectation that art can be a force for change

**Anomalies:**
depicting movement in a static medium the language of war and the challenges to the institutions of art and society all seem contradictory to the idea of an artistic movement and may have made them susceptible to political manipulation