On Cubism and Démoiselles d’ Avignon

First question: What is cubism and who were the cubists? Is it acceptable to call Picasso and Braque the “true” cubists and everyone else a “derivative” cubist? Is the distinction between “salon” cubism and “gallery” cubism more useful? For the French public in the early 20th century, the “salon” cubists were the real (and probably the only) cubists. Picasso and Braque did not participate in the salon system, so most people did not see their work.

Second question: If cubism changed the nature of art, what precisely was so revolutionary about it and why can’t social critics and historians agree as to what this revolutionary achievement consisted of?

There are two dominant answers to the question about what makes cubism revolutionary and they are quite different. The first, and at least until now, more widely known answer, makes the claim that cubism broke with the Renaissance approach to art, an art of vision, or an art of the camera obscura, in which the artist tries to reproduce the external appearance of objects as seen by the human eye. The cubist, in contrast, recognized that we do not perceive objects in their entirety at one glance, and that, as a result, our visual knowledge comprises a more conceptual and experiential understanding of things. For some adherents of this position, this conceptual vision can be a bridge to a higher reality, the fourth dimension, and it is also a step toward complete abstraction. Although Picasso and Braque did not go there, this theory essentially sees them as paving the way. One of the problems with it is that Picasso and Braque were not the first artists to reconceptualize the nature of seeing in art.

The second answer is based on theories which were coming into existence at the same time that Picasso and Braque were producing their cubist paintings. But they would not have been familiar with these theories because they were new theories about language and meaning (semiotics). The first insight of this theory is that signs or names of things do not have any predetermined relationship to the thing they signify. The sign has an arbitrary or conventionalized relationship to the referent (the thing it signifies). But in fact, it does not signify a specific thing; the sign signifies an idea or class of things. Hence: signifier (or sign) denotes the signified (an idea) which contains a referent (something in particular which you want to call attention to).

Example:
the word: Cat (is a sign or signifier) —> it signifies a class of four-legged animals which meow (the idea which the sign refers to) —> you think of: your particular pet which happens to be a cat (a referent and it may not be the same referent for everyone)
With respect to cubism, this theory says that as Picasso and Braque began to explore the way visual language functions as signs, they recognized the ambiguity of these signs and began to deal with them as multiple reference systems, creating tension and ambiguity between the signs and their references. This theory claims that the value of cubism lay in drawing attention to the fact that no painting is a mirror of the world, and that reality cannot be represented in a universal manner because there is no single reality to represent. Even if there a reality that everyone agreed existed, there still would be no single way to represent whatever that reality is.

But the approach taken by one of the books in the library (Art since 1900) is to start with a long-held historical belief that Picasso’s Démoiselles D’Avignon can be understood as the transition to or the beginning of cubism.¹ It proves that it can and it can’t, with the answer depending on how we ultimately define cubism. The authors begin by making note of the fact that Démoiselles is a painting which was “refused” in two ways – literally, a museum refused to accept it from a donor; less literally, people were not able to see it because the artist, we might say, refused to let them; and finally, it refuses, or more accurately, rejects the complacent relationship between viewer and painting that characterized western art. That last refusal is the key to this book’s discussion, a discussion which sees the painting as part of the modernist project of the early 20th century – a psychological, oedipal project in which the artist is essentially assaulting the tradition he (very rarely, she) comes from. And we might also want to note that by acknowledging this oedipal project, we introduce a new way of looking at the issue of autonomy. Admittedly, this brings a psychoanalytic cast to a term I’ve used to describe an aesthetic and painterly goal, but certainly it’s not difficult to see how the quest for the autonomous object of art is a direct rejection of the Renaissance tradition of art and as such, it is a rejection of the metaphorical father of the artist.

The authors of Art since 1900 then point out that the version of art history which sees Démoiselles as the beginning of cubism was largely due to an article by Alfred Barr. His article and his vision were unchallenged until the 1970s when Leo Steinberg published a radically different interpretation of the painting, one which has been responded to, amplified, and challenged, but which fundamentally altered the art historical response to role of this painting and made possible a whole new line of thought, among them, discussions of the place of love and sexuality in Picasso’s overall body of work. This is a line of thought which says that, with the exception of his analytic cubist paintings, sexuality, or the fear of sexuality, is the driving subject of all of Picasso’s art.

Although Picasso’s Démoiselles reflects a number of influences, it is now generally believed
that on some level, Picasso was responding deliberately to Matisse's painting, Joy of Life. It has also been shown that Picasso began with an allegorical subject which he eventually transformed. This transformation is one which eliminates the allegory without eliminating the meaning, and leaves an icon in its place.

The women in the painting are of interest for several reasons: first, they never engage with each other in such a way as to exclude the viewer. Their interaction is centered on the viewer. To ensure this, each woman is isolated from the others. One, for example, is in the form of a recumbent nude but appears to our eyes to be standing because of the perspective from which we see her. But in the study for the painting, everyone was standing or kneeling or sitting, and we can see that another of the awkward nudes was originally seated in an armchair. In the early studies there were two male figures; their elimination is of vital significance to the painting because they did provide some unity to the composition and they provided the narrative. Without them, this is not a scene which we observe dispassionately; it is now a scene which has no narrative unity imposed on it, which appears to lack compositional unity, and which can only make sense if the viewer recognizes his (or her) place in the scene as someone who has disrupted whatever unity might have existed before his arrival. The gazes (and masks) on the women’s faces appear to have been deliberately designed to protect themselves from the entry of the viewer.

That attempt to ward off the viewer creates a scenario of a double threat: the viewer is threatened and attacked by the women who are responding to his threat, his sudden entry into this space. No one is comfortable: neither the viewer nor the women. That acknowledgment, that the privileged role of the viewer is no longer privileged, is Picasso’s attack on the mimetic tradition of painting, his refusal of the “castration” of the artist which can only be refused if he castrates his father.

Steinberg actually has more to his interpretation. He emphasizes the fact that the whole painting is an inside painting: in an earlier painting of Two Nudes (1906), Picasso has the women confront a curtain. In this one, they have emerged on the other side of it. The message here seems to be one which says that with self-knowledge comes sexual confrontation. But whose confrontation? Picasso’s or that of the viewer? The setting is not an inviting setting, the more so at a time when sexual diseases were a major threat. But Picasso’s personal confrontation may be of greater interest if, as Steinberg describes it, it is a confrontation with existing modes of representation. In many respects, Picasso appears to be denying the painting as a representation of reality and asserting, instead, the pictoriality of the painting as an end in itself. And we should not forget that not only has he attacked the mimetic and narrative quality
of painting; he has also launched an attack on the traditional representation of space and the notion that a painting is something which hangs vertically and which we look AT, rather than looking down on it. For some viewers, more radical than the relationship of the painting to the spectator is Picasso's dismissal of Renaissance perspective in favor of a synthesis of a variety of viewpoints. The space in this painting is not yet flat, but it is no longer illusional and it is not volumetric. Also radical is his attraction to African sculpture which lay, not in its expressive qualities, but in its rational, conceptual qualities. That is, according to Picasso, African sculpture is not an art that imitates reality; it is an art of the idea of a subject. All of which is another way of making the previous point: that Picasso's interest would appear to be in the idea of the picture as an end in itself, and not as a means to another end. And all of this is another way of saying that Picasso’s painting can be seen as the beginning of cubism IF we see cubism in terms other than the traditional understanding of cubism as being about geometric forms and the stylization of volumes in space. If we understand cubism as an assault on the tradition of representation, then this painting does launch that traumatic attack. But few people have ever defined cubism that way, leading to the next question: why were critics and artists so quick to see cubism as increasing the viewer’s knowledge of the object in the painting? As most analyses point out, the “givens” that we have with cubism are these: a limited palette which is quite close to monochrome extreme flattening of pictorial space as though the volume of any object has been let out and rolled out flat on the canvas a vocabulary used to describe these paintings which focuses on the geometric qualities of the images, on the shallow space with the picture set parallel to the picture plane, and the linear, grid-like network of lines imposed over these shapes, and which has a function in some cases of clarifying the object’s forms and in other cases seems to exist merely to provide some stability to the otherwise unstable picture Daniel Kahnweiler, in The Rise of Cubism, argued 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, argues Kahnweiler, eliminates color and leaves the device of shading. As I indicated in the web site, this is a strange notion in that it seems to say that the shadow of the object has become the painting. The way in which the artist might indicate the object’s volume is now present in the painting but the object isn’t. This process of opening up the volumes without entirely eliminating the subject leads to a type of pictorial autonomy, which in this case refers
to the internal logic of the object in the painting. Kahnweiler also makes the interesting observation that the term “cubism,” used erroneously and misleading, came about because of the desire to see recognizable forms in the paintings.

By 1912, Picasso and Braque have begun to imitate textural patterns, in order to give their pictures a different element of materiality. Picasso then takes the next step by actually introducing a piece of oilcloth, one which had a chair-caning design on it, resulting in the creation of several layers of reality. The introduction of cloth serves another purpose: it implies a new status for color, which is that color exists independently of line; color is an element of its own. The rope serves as a frame but it is a frame which is actually an element of the work. the frame separates what is "real" from what is imagined, but in this case, because the frame is a collaged element, it becomes part of the world of the imaginary, and the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are confused. This is where the real break with visual representation as a strategy is made.

At this point, although we have one or two histories of cubism, the role of symbolism and the role of popular culture have been omitted. Yet both are as essential to an understanding of this movement as everything we’ve just seen and said. The interaction between symbolism and cubism in Picasso’s work will be clear when we turn to our examination of Parade.

1. The entry for 1907 focuses on the various interpretations of this painting, also making the point that Picasso worked on the painting for a long time, with sketches and studies contained in 16 notebooks. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Art Since 1900, vol. 1 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 78-84.
