

24 CUBISM

THE LANGUAGE OF MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

Cubism was a movement that emerged in Paris around 1907 and profoundly altered the way artists thought about the nature of painting and its ability to represent the world. Inspired in part by the paintings of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), whose work incorporated shifting points of view, the Cubists constructed images that combined multiple viewpoints in a shallow picture space. By abandoning traditional perspectival space and continuous description of form, they asserted a new autonomy for painting, freeing it from the task of conventional representation. In sculpture, the recombination of fractured forms introduced similar possibilities in three dimensions.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) is generally credited with the first Cubist painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. 1907). Other prominent Cubists include Georges Braques (1882–1963), Juan Gris (1887–1927), and Albert Gleizes (1881–1953).

COMPONENTS

- **Simplification**
Subjects are generally reduced to simpler versions built from straight lines, cubes, circles, or cones.
- **Fracturing**
Simplified outlines of the subject are broken up so that only partial views of each element are visible.
- **Shallow planes**
Elements formed of fractured outlines of the subject are presented as the edges of planes. These are rendered simply using a tonal shift across them. The effect is to suggest a shallow space both in front of and behind the picture plane.
- **Recombination**
Elements are recombined so that multiple viewpoints are melded together to form a single image in which the viewer can move smoothly from one outline to the next. Cubist painters tried a number of different approaches to this, including the suggestion of translucency of the elements.
- **Composition and design**
The foregoing processes still left the Cubists with traditional challenges in terms of composition and design. It might be argued that the aesthetic attraction of painters, such as Picasso, Braque, and Gris, was their innate taste and almost classical sense of interval and proportion.
- **Color restriction**
Early Cubist painting tended to use restricted palettes to create a more unified surface. Later on, some of the Cubist painters, particularly Robert Delauney (1885–1941), experimented with richer color.
- **Time**
The ability to show multiple viewpoints also allowed for viewpoints from different times. The time-lapse photography of Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) had already inspired a number of painters, and Cubism now provided a way to deploy its discoveries. Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* (see page 119) is a prime example. The Italian Futurists, much influenced by Cubism, made broad use of this approach.
- **Surface**
The relative flatness of Cubist painting allowed for the inclusion of collaged elements and textured paint surfaces.

- 1 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)
Les Femmes d'Alger, 1907.
Oil on canvas, 96 × 92 in
(243.9 × 233.7cm)
- 2 Diego Rivera (1886–1957)
Still Life, 1915. Oil on canvas,
31¼ × 25½ in (79.4 × 64.1 cm)
- 3 Juan Gris (1887–1927)
Portrait of Pablo Picasso, 1912.
Oil on canvas, 36¾ × 29¼
(93.3 × 74.4 cm)



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