



EPMA

Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso: Birth of Cubism

Modern Masters Series: Highlights from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

What is Cubism?

These two paintings in the museum's Peter and Margaret de Wetter Gallery focus on the development of Cubism. Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso played important roles in this development. Cézanne challenged traditional ideas about space and perspective. This set the stage for the artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque to create artworks that broke objects into multiple perspectives and planes, while retaining a sense of mass. Cubism is a style of art that is abstracted. In art the term "abstract" refers to an image or object that has been reduced to its basic elements of color and shape. In Cubism, the subjects are abstracted, but can still be identified with careful and close study.

In one of his Calvin and Hobbes comic strips author/artist Bill Watterson created an amusing but helpful exploration of Cubism.



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Paul Cézanne

Paul Cézanne was born in 1839 in Aix-en-Provence, France, into a prosperous banking family. He became a good friend of the writer Émile Zola, whom he met when both were teenagers. Cézanne began drawing lessons in 1857, although at the insistence of his father he also studied law. To his father's disappointment, he moved to Paris in 1861 to pursue a career in art. Ultimately the elder Cézanne gave in and agreed to support him in his chosen profession. The income he received from his father allowed Cézanne to be independent of the need to sell his work and thus freed him to work as he wished without being concerned with popular taste.

Cézanne was strongly influenced by the Impressionist Camille Pissarro, and exhibited at the 1863 Salon des Refusés along with other artists who were rejected by the established Paris Salon. He exhibited in the first Impresioist show in 1874, and again in 1877. Cézanne's first solo exhibition took place in Paris in 1895, and indicated his increaing popularity. Beginning in the 1880s, however, the artist spent the majority of his time in Provence rather than Paris, and many of his paintings are of subjects from that region. Cézanne died of pneumonia on October 22, 1906 after being caught in a storm while he was painting.

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Cézanne and Painting Technique

The goal for some artists is to paint so smoothly that the hand of the painter is invisible, but Cézanne never tried to hide his paint strokes. In his early painting career he developed a style using thick, deliberate strokes. He also liked to use a lot of paint on his canvas. Sometimes he would even use a palette knife instead of a brush in order to apply as much paint as possible.



Example of paint applied with a palette knife



Pear, Kathryn Trotter (American, 1976)
2009
Oil on canvas
10 x 10 inches



Example of paint applied with a brush



Look carefully at this detail in Cézanne's *Still Life: Plate of Peaches*. Do you think it was painted with a brush or a palette knife? What do you see in the painting that makes you come to your conclusion?

You Be the Expert

The way Cézanne used his brush changed over the course of his career. His paintings from the 1880s show a strong, overlapping, basically straight stroke, with no gaps in the paint. By the early 1900s, his stroke had become more fluid, with a lighter paint application. According to art historian Dr. Richard Shiff, portions of *Still Life: Plate of Peaches* were probably painted at different times in Cézanne's career. Play art detective and study the brushwork on the left and right-hand sections of the painting. What do you think?

Cézanne's Space

Cézanne's very deliberate use of paint contributed to his ability both to create depth and to emphasize the form and color of individual objects. Describing Cézanne's unique perspective on space is a challenge. Modern artist Henri Matisse put it this way, "One must have a feeling for the surface (of a painting) and know how to respect it. Look at Cézanne. . . . Everything has to be brought to the same plane in the mind of the painter."

The modern concept of deconstructed food can help clarify what Matisse meant. Deconstructed dishes are meals in which ingredients are cooked and/or assembled separately. The photograph below shows an example of deconstructed lemon meringue pie. All the ingredients are there but they are presented so that each shines on its own.



(iStockphoto Ltd)

For Cézanne, giving each object its own space within the picture was more important than maintaining a proper perspective point. As a result his still life paintings often look as though he painted the images from differing viewpoints, standing for a while, and then sitting, or changing sides.

How many different viewpoints can you find in *Still Life: Plate of Peaches*?

Try It Yourself

- Using the pencils and paper provided, sketch something in the gallery from different perspectives.
- How does it change the way you see the object(s)?
- How does it affect your drawing?

Cézanne's Legacy

Cézanne's style was very influential in the work of artists who came after him. Pablo Picasso called Cézanne "the father of us all." The list of artists who were influenced by Cézanne is very long and includes Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Ellsworth Kelly. These artists' styles are each very different from one another and illustrate the extent to which Cézanne's innovations could be used in varying ways. Perhaps his greatest contribution was to the development of the Cubist style. When he began to look at space differently, Cézanne opened the door for Cubist pioneers, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, to go even further in their ideas about and use of space, perspective, and fragmentation.

Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain in 1881. His father was both an artist and professor, and Picasso studied under him before attending art schools in Madrid (1897) and Barcelona (1899). He divided his time between France and Spain for a few years, but eventually moved into the “artists’ quarter” in Paris. There he became part of the intellectual circle that met in the home of the siblings Gertrude and Leo Stein.

Picasso was drawn to the unconventional and experimented with new approaches and techniques. His artistic interests ranged widely from painting, to set design, to play-writing, although it is in painting and print-making that his fame rests. His artistic style also ranged widely over the years, beginning with variations on styles familiar to European art history. In 1906 he broke sharply from traditional naturalistic treatments of the human figure. Using the simplified forms and geometrical angles that characterized much of African art as his inspiration, he began moving toward what became the Cubist style.

Picasso and fellow artist Georges Braque independently began to create pictures in which the forms were given the appearance of mass by the use of color and shading, similar to the approach used by Cézanne, but were also broken into geometric angles. Picasso’s early Cubist works, including *Carafe, Jug and Fruit Bowl*, were characterized by heavily fragmented yet recognizable objects or people, and painted in muted colors.

Picasso pursued this style through the outbreak of World War I in 1914. After the war, he largely abandoned formal Cubism, but the principle of fragmenting figures continued to play a role in his art. This is evident in his masterpiece *Guernica*, painted in response to the bombing of that city during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso’s fame increased following World War II, and he continued to develop new styles. He worked with great energy, producing a great number of works before his death in France at the age of 91.

Cubism: Things to Think About

Try to imagine how your best friend might look if she or he were made out of cubes or other geometric shapes. Why do you think Picasso wanted to try painting people in this way?

Look at the example of African carvings below. How might they have inspired Picasso to take a geometric approach to figures?



Antique African Mask,
Ndebele tribe Bulawayo,
Zimbabwe (iStockphoto
Ltd)



Carved Wooden Grave
Markers
Arfaide, Ethiopia
(iStockphoto Ltd)

In some of Picasso's later Cubist works it can be difficult to identify the original figure. One way to try to reveal it can be by tracing some of the primary lines and angles. The image to the right is the first stage of a "tactile diagram" of his painting *Ma Jolie*. In creating a tactile diagram, which is a textured surface that makes art accessible to the low-sighted and blind, the basic lines are marked out. In the case of a Cubist painting, this allows us to identify the base shape within the fragmentation.

Tactile Diagram of *Ma Jolie* by Pablo Picasso, Paula L. Gerson, PhD.,
Art History Through Touch and Sound: European Modernism:
1900-1940.



Try It Yourself

- When you get home, try studying the *Three Musicians* by Picasso and making your own tactile diagram. You could work on it with friends or family members.

- Sketch a version of *Carafe, Jug, and Fruit Bowl* with smooth lines instead of cubes. What impact does this change have on the image?

Looking Like Cézanne

In an article written in 1980, British art critic Christopher Andreae argued that *Carafe, Jug, and Fruit Bowl* "shows one painter deliberately trying to see through the eyes of another." That other painter was Cézanne, whose practice of looking thoroughly and thoughtfully at objects Picasso much admired. If this is the case, *Carafe, Jug, and Fruit Bowl* essentially lets us see Picasso trying out Cézanne's way of looking and moving toward something new.

Can you see results of Picasso's use of Cézanne's deliberate looking technique in this painting?

Compare *Still Life: Plate of Peaches* with *Carafe, Jug, and Fruit Bowl*. What similarities do you see?

In what parts of Picasso's painting can we see geometric shapes? How does this compare with Cézanne's use of shapes?

Looking on Your Own

This series of paintings is your opportunity to explore works by two very significant artists. You can share your thoughts with others, or write them down. Look closely at both works and use the following questions to help guide your thinking:

- Which of the two paintings is more appealing to you? Why?
- What impact does Picasso's use of color have on how you view his painting?
- What impact does Cézanne's use of color have?
- How do Picasso's brush strokes compare with Cézanne's?

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About the El Paso Museum of Art

Opened in 1960, the El Paso Museum of Art (EPMA) is a major cultural and educational resource for West Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico. The Museum houses a permanent collection of over 6,500 works of art. In addition to displaying works from its holdings, the Museum offers a diverse schedule of temporary exhibitions, films, lectures, concerts, and other educational programs to the general public. EPMA has a steady record of accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums. The Museum was first accredited in 1972, re-accredited in 1985 and most recently in 2001. Since the new downtown building opened in 1998, the Museum serves approximately 70,000 visitors per year.

Museum Hours

Tuesday-Saturday: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Thursday: 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Sunday: 12:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.

Administration Office Hours

Monday-Friday
8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Address and Phone Number

One Arts Festival Plaza
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References:

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/school-educator-programs/teacher-resources/arts-curriculum-online?view=item&catid=740&id=64>
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