

Cubism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Iberian sculpture and primitive African masks were just two influences on Cubism. Interestingly, this artistic movement began to break traditions in European art. This lesson covers:

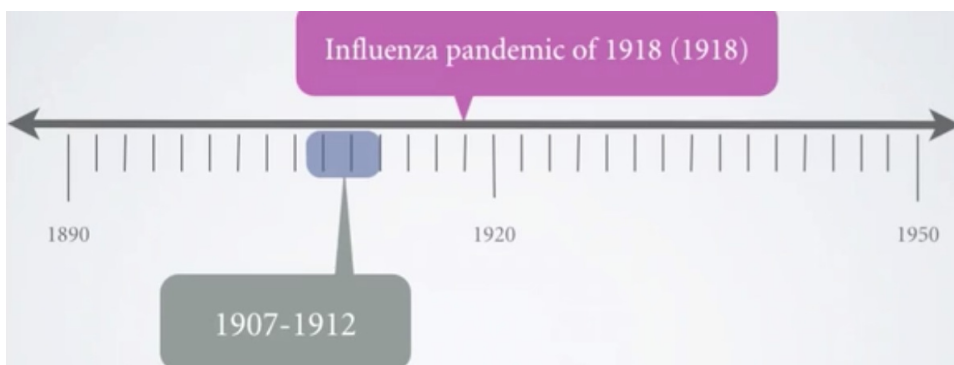


BIG IDEA

Cubism extended the formal innovations of Cezanne and made a break with the illusionistic depiction of space in the European tradition that preceded it.

1. Period and Location: Cubism

This lesson covers artwork from the years of 1907 to 1912 in Paris, France, as shown in the timeline below. Paris is important to Cubism, as it was here that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque worked independently and together in the early part of the 20th century.



2. Cubism

The Cubist movement encompasses a style of art and philosophy regarding how art portrays subject matter, specifically in how perspective is used. Georges Braque is noted for commenting on what he saw as the confinement of traditional art instruction, and thought of Cubism as a way of breaking free from that confinement.

As a style, **Cubism** includes:

- Multiple views/multiple perspectives within the same composition
- Reduction of 3D space to flatten

- Two-dimensional planes
- Geometric construction
- Influence from the superficial expressive qualities of primitive forms of art
 - Examples: mask art of Africa, Tahiti, and the Marquesas Islands



TERM TO KNOW

Cubism

A 20th-century art movement characterized by qualities of abstracted figures and forms, overlapping planes and facets, and colors that are often muted browns or monochromatic tones

2a. “Les Demoiselles d'Avignon”

Below is Picasso’s painting “Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.” It is considered to be the painting that launched the Cubist movement. Notice how it is definitely a different take on the more traditional female nude paintings from times past.



Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O) by Pablo Picasso

1907

Oil on canvas



DID YOU KNOW

Picasso intended the painting to be shocking. He wanted to challenge the work of Matisse, his friend and

rival, who was more popular at the time. Mission accomplished! This painting was extremely controversial. For example, the name was in reference to Avignon, the temporary 14th-century home of the Papal court. However, Avignon is also the name of a red-light district in Barcelona, Spain, which is probably what this painting is referring to.

Picasso completely throws aside traditional depictions of perspective in the above piece. He reduces the entire image to the very immediate two-dimensional picture plane in the foreground. The figures, as well as the surrounding space, are broken up into shards of geometric forms. The space in which the women exist seems as tangible as the women themselves.



THINK ABOUT IT

Try thinking about Cubist art from the perspective of looking at a broken mirror or a stained glass window. The nature of stained glass places everything in the immediate foreground, as seen above. Just like a broken mirror, Picasso's image is broken into shards. Each seems to show a slightly different perspective, some more noticeably than others.

The figure on the far left was supposedly originally a man, possibly a medical student. Picasso reworked the figure of the man to move the viewer into the role of the customer. It's no longer the gentleman entering on the left, now a woman. It's us. We are the customer.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The women stare directly at the viewer, creating a similar disinterested interaction that recalls Manet's "Olympia," shown below.



Olympia by Édouard Manet

1863

Oil on canvas

Notice the angular depictions of these women in Picasso's image; they appear dangerous. Picasso's posturing of the two central figures was considered to be particularly divisive. Matisse felt that Picasso was mocking modern art, such as Matisse's work, which almost broke apart their friendship.

It is important to note several influences on Cubism:

- Influence of Iberian sculpture
 - Almond-shaped eye
- Influence of African masks
 - Primitive details
- Two figures on the far right

In fact, many artists of this time showed interest in primitive art of other cultures, such as those of Africa or the South Pacific Islands colonized by the French, like Tahiti.

3. Analytic and Synthetic Cubism

Picasso was interested in the superficial qualities of simplification and abstraction, which worked well in this new design aesthetic. While some of his techniques caused tension between Picasso and the art community, not everyone was appalled. The French artist Georges Braque saw great potential in Picasso's vision, and the two began a joint endeavor and friendship to create a new form of art. This art form was built upon the formal innovations of artists such as Cezanne, who sought to reduce elements of a composition to their basic geometric forms and broke with the traditional illusionistic depiction of 3D space.

Braque and Picasso developed two forms of Cubism, analytic and synthetic. One of the best ways to understand these two forms is to compare and contrast them.

3a. "Violin and Candlestick"

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this first image, called "Violin and Candlestick," by Georges Braque from 1910.



Violin and Candlestick by Georges Braque

Analytic Cubism

1910

Oil on canvas

This oil on canvas is an example of **Analytic Cubism**, which follows suit with the painting that inspired it, “Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.).” This makes sense given that Analytic Cubism occurred slightly earlier than Synthetic Cubism. Similar to a broken mirror, the analytic composition is broken up into geometric shards, giving us multiple perspectives simultaneously. This hadn’t really been done before, at least not so overtly.

The subject matter is somewhat discernible. For instance, if you look closely at the image above, you might see the images of the violin and the candlestick. Although this painting is not completely abstract, you can see that art is starting to head in that direction.



TERM TO KNOW

Analytic Cubism

A technique of inventing shapes and characteristics that would symbolize an object or person.

3b. “Still Life with Chair Caning”

➔ **EXAMPLE** This second example is called “Still Life with Chair Caning” by Pablo Picasso from 1912:



Still Life with Chair Caning by Pablo Picasso

Synthetic Cubism

1912

Collage

The above **collage** is an example of **Synthetic Cubism**, which is a synthesis of different types of media.



DID YOU KNOW

The easiest way to tell the two styles apart is by the type of media used. Analytic Cubism generally used just one medium, while synthetic Cubism is a synthesis of multiple types of media, such as paper and oil painting.

This piece by Picasso may be the first example of collage in high art. Picasso has taken the idea of using overlapping geometric forms but has used scraps of real materials, such as paper, rather than painted forms. It is hard to discern what it represents for certain. It seems to be more abstract than the example of “Violin and Candlestick,” but it is not completely abstract.



DID YOU KNOW

While artists such as Wassily Kandinsky eventually made the leap into complete abstraction, this is something that Braque and Picasso never moved into.



TERMS TO KNOW

Collage

A French word meaning “a pasting,” it is artwork created by using the technique of layering unrelated scraps or fragments into a composition.

Synthetic Cubism

A technique that incorporates the methods of “analytic Cubism” but uses collage and actual overlapped materials to represent a metaphor for life and art.



SUMMARY

Cubism, an influential artistic movement, broke traditions in European art. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Cubism**.

In doing so, you explored **Cubism**, which is characterized by qualities of abstracted figures and forms, overlapping planes and facets, and colors that are often muted browns or monochromatic tones. An important piece of art from this time is “**Les Demoiselles d'Avignon**.” Remember, this piece of artwork is considered the painting that started the Cubist movement.

Finally, you compared and contrasted **Analytic and Synthetic Cubism** by looking at “**Violin and Candlestick**” and “**Still Life with Chair Caning**”. While synthetic cubism incorporates the methods of analytic cubism, it uses collage and actual overlapped materials to represent a metaphor for life and art. In contrast, analytic cubism is a technique of inventing shapes and characteristics that symbolize an object or person.

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



TERMS TO KNOW

Analytic Cubism

A technique of inventing shapes and characteristics that would symbolize an object or person.

Collage

A French word meaning “a pasting,” it is artwork created by using the technique of layering unrelated scraps or fragments into a composition.

Cubism

A 20th century art movement characterized by qualities of abstracted figures and forms, overlapping planes and facets, and colors that are often muted browns or monochromatic tones.

Synthetic Cubism

A technique that incorporates the methods of ‘analytic cubism’ but uses collage and actual overlapped materials to represent a metaphor for life and art.