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On Cubism by Maurice Tuchman, 1964

MAURICE TUCHMAN

Braque would be hard to do otherwise, since at a certain stage in their development, the work of both Picasso and Braque became virtually a joint exploration. And some of their paintings in 1910 or '11 can easily be — easily be confused one with the other. Picasso himself, a couple of decades after certain of these 1910 paintings were made, was studying a cubist painting he thought was his and then found that Braque's signature was on the back. (laughter) Well, there were two key influences upon cubism, Cézanne and primitive sculpture. And on the screen there is an African Negro sculpture at the right, a Bakota funerary fetish. And at the left is a Picasso of 1907 called *The Great Dancer*. [01:00] The Fauves, Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck had admired primitive sculpture in Paris two or three years earlier. And simultaneously, in Germany, Nolde and Kirchner and other expressionists discovered the peculiar power and energy of primitive art for themselves. Picasso probably picked up the Fauves enthusiasm for such works of art, as at the right but made use of it in a way Matisse and the others never did. The silhouette in the Picasso is very close to the African work. And in particular, we might note the similar bow-legged stance in both. And also similar is the use of a mask for a face.

Picasso's figure, like the African, is stretched flat. And he [runs?] there's the greatest distortions of anatomy. Picasso admired in primitive art [02:00] the freedom he saw to deform in order to create new shapes, and relationships, and new rhythms. But like the German expressionists, Picasso was also intrigued by the emotionality of primitive art, the compelling presence of the object, and sometimes their even terrifying power. This is important, too, in terms of Picasso's development, for no matter how abstract Picasso's art becomes, it always depends upon the character of the object, and the picture always reflects Picasso's emotional attitudes about humanity. In this way, Picasso differs from Braque, who was an imminently French artist, whose work always displayed more cerebral and intellectual qualities, and less poignancy perhaps than Picasso.

A more important influence upon [03:00] cubism than African and other primitive sculptures, however, was Cézanne. At the right is a Cézanne landscape of 1888 and a Braque of 1908. In both, there is a close-up view, which focuses on a path whose width covers most of the bottom picture edge. And the road then plunges into deep space, receding and narrowing rapidly along the rhythm of a sharp diagonal. Now, the urge to recession and depth in the Cézanne is countered, however, by an intricate network of horizontal and vertical lines, a scheme of perpendicular flat rhythms. For example, the straight rising edges of the trees at the left, which are precisely parallel to the picture edge, these verticals also align with a group of verticals at the other side of the picture, and they are repeated [04:00] in the vertical members of the viaduct scene in the background, and even in an important details, such as these trees here which span two horizontals.

Now, perpendicular to all these staccato vertical rhythms is a series of horizontal rhythms, the mountain edge at the back. The viaduct, the horizon line of the lake and the shoreline, and finally a large emphatic shadow that is thrown across the road. Again, in a detail, the arches of the viaduct here and here are straightened out by, and squared off by, the horizontal lines of the bottom of the mountain. The foliage of the trees and the shrubbery on the ground relieve any possibility of geometric stiffness, but nevertheless there is this quasi-geometric network of

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horizontals and verticals, which counters the recession into depth of the [05:00] road. The flatness of the picture surface, the flatness of the surface plane of the picture, is asserted in spite of the most direct challenge upon its flatness, which is made by the road.

Now, in the Braque, there is a similar spatial struggle between a recessive force and a configuration of flat rhythms. Not in this particular example by a perpendicular right-angle system, such as we saw in the Cézanne, but rather in the Braque by the repetition and variation of two kinds of rhythm, an arrow shape which we see down here and which is repeated many times as you go up the picture. And secondly, there is a system of rounded crowns and arcs, such as we see here most explicitly where it crosses to other arcs going in the opposite direction. This is found all over the top half of the picture. [06:00] Again, this does the same as in the Cézanne where an urge to depth is resisted by a stress upon flat rhythmic networks.

There is a major difference between Braque and Cézanne, and we can clearly see this in comparing another Braque in 1908 with the same Cézanne. Braque verges far closer to an intellectually conceived art than Cézanne, for all Cézanne's calculations and his deliberate rearrangements, one always feels in Cézanne the original presence of nature and the perceived character of a particular scene. Robert Rosenblum, in the valuable study he made of cubism, wrote that "Braque's canvas" — this holds for all of the canvases of this period — "consciously disregard the data of vision." Braque's houses, boldly defined by the most rudimentary [07:00] planes have so thoroughly lost contact with the realities of surface texture, or even with fenestration, that places, as in the background and the lower right foreground — that's here, here, and up there. In these areas, they are subtly confounded with the green areas of vegetation. And just as the description of surfaces becomes remote from reality in Braque, so too do the colors take leave of perceived nature and tend toward an ever more severe monochrome.

In the same way, the light follows the dictates of pictorial lull rather than natural lull in the Braque. Although multiple sources of light are often implied in Cézanne's work, Cézanne's painting never violates so completely the physical laws of nature. In Braque's painting, however, the houses are illuminated from contrary sources from [08:00] above, from the front, from both sides. He does this in order to define most distinctly the planes of the architecture and the landscape. And spatially too, no painting of Cézanne's is so congestedly two-dimensional. For Braque's houses, despite their ostensible bulk and the suggestions of perspective diminution as you read up the picture, Braque's houses are so tightly compressed into a shallow space that they appear to ascend the picture plane rather than recede into depth.

With paintings such as this one by Braque, that earn the name *cubism*, the art critic Louis Vauxcelles — this is the man who had given the Fauves their name a couple of years earlier — reviewed a Braque exhibition in 1908 and wrote that "Braque constructs metallic and deformed figures which have a terrible oversimplification. [09:00] He mistreats form, reduces everything, sights, figures, and houses, to geometric outlines, to cubes." The term quickly gained currency but we should realize that cubism, insofar as it is descriptive of it all, refers only to this phase of the movement and only to the paintings of Braque — that is, in a literal sense.

Before we look at some cubist works, I want to show some other Cézanne's from the point of view of what the cubists liked in him. At the left, an early painting of Cézanne, the *Portrait of*

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*Victor Chocquet*, a remarkable picture for its air of explicit construction. The top half of the figure faces us in a completely frontal position. The torso is almost stiff and rigid in its frontality. The bottom half, however, is forced into almost a profile view. [10:00] Cézanne thereby avoids foreshortening the legs in front. This would provide a sense of depth. There's a symbol in the picture of Cézanne's actual intention, and that's found in the hands with those interlocking fingers forming into flat — into a flat constructed pattern. They are like pieces of wood joined together in marquetry. And in fact, they are very much like the actual wood sections, which comprise the desk behind the figure. Again, there is this idea of fitting areas together in one flat spatial plane.

The picture also presents subtle divergences and variations on a predominantly horizontal and vertical schema. The edges of the two pictures here at the right continue into the back of the chair where the rhythm along the back of the chair first inclines to the left as it goes down, and then to the right. [11:00] This rhythm partially explains why there is a jump at the floor line from this horizontal up a few inches to the horizontal on the other side. The shift in the rhythm of this floor line counters the inclination of the chair edge. There are many of these sudden shifts and subtle alterations in this canvas. Sometimes, it is as if the viewpoint from which an object is seen suddenly changes.

In the chair, for example, the chair back is seen as if in profile. The velvet cushion on the edge is seen as from above and to the left, yet the end of that arm is seen frontally. In later works, such as *The Boy in the Red Waistcoat* at the right, Cézanne would effect still greater deformations in order to gain pictorial richness. The right arm of the boy, for example, is extraordinarily lengthened [12:00] and the left arm is distorted structurally. Cézanne, in that area, opens up the space between forearm and bicep as if the arm were connected by — or connected by a double joint of some kind rather than by an elbow.

Sometimes, Cézanne would fit human shapes into geometric forms, as in the *Bathers* with three great triangles formed by the near convergence of the trees into a crowning arc, until smaller triangles composed of figures fit into this larger triangle. Cézanne's famous phrase, written to Emile Bernard, and published in 1906, comes to mind here. "You must look in nature," Cézanne wrote, "for the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder." But not too much significance should not be given to this remark, as it often has been. Cézanne's work is not usually geometrical [13:00] and it is hardly ever as patently contrived and artificial as the *Bathers*. However, his remark did have a great currency in the Paris art world in 1906 to 1908 or '09 and this may also have affected Braque, perhaps more than Picasso.

There is little actual geometry in Cézanne's late work. A painting such as this one of 1906, the year of Cézanne's death, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, in this — in late works like these, there is a resurgence of emotion, of a rhapsodic, lyrical passion. Now, geometry as a descriptive term no better describes Cézanne here than it does mature cubist work, as we'll see, but there is a clear connection between the kind of painting we see in the detail and cubism. The little patches and areas of color at the right are not precisely rectangular or square. [14:00] They are not the creation of ruler and compass. But nevertheless, they are rather abstract shapes, shapes which have semi-geometric air about them. These translucent patches are not the result of a direct

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recoding process or perception of nature. They are shimmering patches, exquisitely sensitive and inventive, and endlessly varied. And this anticipates works we'll see by Braque and Picasso.

Before Braque absorbed Cézanne's lessons, he thoroughly indoctrinated himself in Fauvism. I just quickly wanted to show these two works, two landscapes of 1906 at the left, and 1907, which are thoroughly realized works in a manner in which he derived from Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck. Braque was in his mid-twenties at this time and [15:00] was struggling for an original manner. These works have been underrated, I think, in some — some of the Fauve Braque's, especially the later ones, such as the one at the right, stand up to the very best of, say, Derain or Vlaminck. The painting at the right is wonderfully alive, and free, and fresh. The spritely calligraphy of the foliage is equal in spontaneity and intensity to the pure, bright tones found all over the canvas, and remarkably advanced for a work of this time is the emphasis on separately felt discharges of pigment. It's as if Braque attacked the surface with short jabs and direct marks.

Braque was struggling to find himself in his mid-twenties. Picasso, who was just six months older than Braque, had commenced original work several years earlier. And [16:00] in 1906, Picasso was developing away from the style of his famous blue and rose or circus periods. At the left, a Picasso self-portrait of 1901. At the right, a self-portrait of his of 1906. The earlier conception is manifestly romantic. The artist ages his 20 years and he gives himself a flaming red ascot and a dramatic artistic manner. At the right, the conception is more cerebral or intellectual. Sweeping arcs define the collarbone, and the arms, and the jaw, and the eyebrows. The sense of volume is denied. A somber and pensive character is given to the face, and the face is stylized in a manner we will encounter again and again in Picasso, beginning shortly with the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

The sentimental nature of Picasso's early work, as we see in the *Woman Ironing* [17:00] of 1904 yields within a year or two in 1906 to more formal concerns. In the *Two Nudes*, Picasso compresses the figure so that its massive compactness becomes affecting somehow. The volume of a form becomes expressive rather than the pathos suggested by the pose of the earlier figure. And spatial problems are more important in the later work. Specifically, the tensions between the figures and the picture plane. For example, the mass of the figures occupies a narrow position in space so that when the female at the right turns her head to the back, the tension set up by her breaking out of the circumscribed space is actually gripping. Her action seems the result of intense effort and strain.

We will hold the picture at the right [18:00] and come to the crucial groundbreaking work of cubism, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907 in the Museum of Modern Art. It is often called the first cubist picture. This is an immense painting, eight feet high, created after months of development and revision in 1906 and painted in the spring of 1907. The composition of the *Demoiselles* was inspired by Cézanne's late *Bather* pictures in which figures and background effused and deep space as well as mass is denied or even eliminated.

This figure here, the female at the left in the *Demoiselles*, was painted shortly after the picture of *Two Nudes*. These figures are nevertheless very different. Picasso is no longer interested in squat forms, as at the right, or in sculpture-esque modeling [19:00] or in naturalistic curves. The

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later figure is rendered in straight lines and angular, overlapping planes. Modeling is altogether denied. The figure is flat and almost weightless. The faces in both figures are mask-like, but more so in the later work at the left. Just before I pointed to the peculiar stylization that we saw in the 1906 self-portrait of Picasso. In the two central figures, we see that Picasso's implied intention in the earlier work is here carried out. In both figures, the faces and eyes are frontal while the nose is drawn in profile. And this, of course, became a trademark, even in time a cliché of cubism.

It was an axiom of criticism that a work of art must be [20:00] stylistically unified and integrated. The *Demoiselles* nevertheless violates this tenet, for the heads of the two figures at the right, which were probably painted last, are completely unrelated in style to the other heads. Both the right-hand heads are not flat, but are vigorously foreshortened, distorted, and dislocated. All this under the influence of certain African Negro masks, which Picasso was attracted to at some time in the course of painting the *Demoiselles*. The body of the lower figure offers more violent distortions. This is completely dismembered, a splayed out figure rearranged into a new order. In this squatting figure at the lower right, the canons of conditional linear perspective which have held in Western art for 500 years or so [21:00] have all been violated. Picasso dismisses a system of perspective, which had conditioned Western painting since the Renaissance. And this figure announces a new era in art history. The picture may be called the first cubist picture for its breakup of all natural forms, especially a figure such as that one, breaking up all natural forms into an arrangement of tilting, shifting planes which are compressed into a shallow space.

The style of paintings by Picasso and Braque between 1909 and 1911 is called analytical cubism. In 1912, a transition took place and the style that then evolved and lasted to about 1924 is called synthetic cubism. Alfred Barr defined analytical as describing [22:00] in a general way the cubist process of taking apart or breaking down the forms of nature. "Analytical," wrote Barr, "also conveys something of the spirit of investigation and dissection of form carried on by Picasso and Braque, almost as if their studios were laboratories." The Picasso head at the left is of early 1909. The famous *Girl with the Mandolin* was painted in 1910. The earlier work, the [gouache?], is sculptural in effect, with broad planes seemingly carved out and modeled in light and dark. But within a year, Picasso had far extended his formal investigation and made a more painterly image. This can be seen clearly with one detail. The nose, here, is transformed in that picture into a three-dimensional form. [23:00]

The same treatment is given in the later work, but there we see that the nose shape, which is similar, is completely flattened out, and in other areas too. Sculptural roundness is reduced. Natural forms are transformed into semi-geometrical shapes. The *Girl with a Mandolin* is a transitional work with many vestiges of modeling still apparent. Most obviously, we see the rounded arms and the sense of structure to the violin, and there are even cast shadows, as in the shadow here underneath the girl's hand. This retention of the physical reality of the model will never entirely vanish from Picasso's cubism. And in this picture, it helps to explain the air of quiet melancholy of the picture. Nevertheless, the *Girl with a Mandolin* introduces mature cubist style, a style which evokes, as one [24:00] critic put it, "A strangely elusive and fluctuating world." In the cubist world, the fixed and the absolute are replaced by the indeterminate and the relative.

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This is Picasso's *Accordionist* of 1911. Perhaps I should say a word here about the subject matter of the cubists, for as much as cubism became concerned with purely formal values, it never became an abstract art and never gave up the subject. Picasso and Braque always painted familiar household and studio objects, and also objects encountered in the course of an ordinary day. As we have pipes and wine glasses, bottles, playing cards, and dice, and musical instruments too, guitars and violins, especially, and sometimes accordions. Common to all of these objects is their [25:00] reflection of the artistic or Bohemian life. And [Maya Shapiro?] once called these objects "private instruments of idle sensation."

Well, Braque had introduced musical iconography into cubist painting and he painted the violin so frequently that (inaudible) once called the violin Braque's Madonna. Many interpretations have been given to the constant use of musical instruments in cubism. And these have usually been conjectural, have interpreted the artist's depiction of musical instruments as analogous to the cubist musical that is abstract approach. It has also been suggested more concretely, I think, that the instruments themselves, as visual things and real objects, lend themselves in a unique way to cubist approach. Violins and guitars, and similar stringed instruments, are first of all objects which [26:00] combine strings with wood, elegant curves with straight lines, even an open space, the sound hole, with flat planes. And when used, these instruments quiver and vibrate. They have a subtle kind of shimmer which is like the overall shifts and shufflings of spatial layers on a cubist canvas.

The same holds for the accordion in the picture on the screen. We can see the fingers here tapping on the buttons, and nearby the parallel alignment of the bellows of the accordion, which move as the instrument is played, of course. And in a way, the rest of the canvas here seems to present variations on the realistic patterns of hand and bellows. Picasso creates a vast structure of overlapping planes with complicated light and shadow relationships.

At [27:00] this stage of cubism, in 1910 the pictures become most complex, with endless small configurations of shapes. Yet at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, the picture also becomes simpler and more clear because a greater unity relates the forms together. These are two of the most celebrated cubist Braque's, the *Violin and Palette* at the left, and the *Piano and [Luth?]* of the right, both of 1910. In both pictures, solid forms are decomposed into buoyant twinkling facets, yet the reference to the perceived object is still maintained. The violin, for example, in the picture at the left has not only a clearly discernable violin shape, but also a brown tone. In that [28:00] picture at the left, Braque introduced a brilliant device, which would lead soon to the discovery of collage, a new art form of the twentieth century.

At the top of this still life, Braque painted a realistic nail that projects obliquely through the hole of the artist's palette. The nail is painted realistically and it casts here a realistic shadow. This is an astonishing thing to do in a canvas in which all perceived forms are deliberately subjected to breakup and fragmentation. The realistic quality of the nail and the cast shadow accentuates the artificiality of the illusion on the rest of the canvas. Yet as we see the nail is as real as the ostensibly unreal cubist's still life (inaudible). [29:00] Thus a work of art presents both an external reality but indicates that the means of recording this reality are not absolute but relative. If you see the nail as external reality, it is just as false as any of the less illusionistic passages in

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the canvas. But conversely, as Rosenblum pointed out, when the nail is seen as art, it is just as true as the other passages. So a work of art is presented as a complex interchange between artifice and reality.

And reality, as we ordinarily understand the word, was made still more ambiguous by a major innovation next by Picasso in the painting *Ma Jolie*. At the bottom of this cubist treatment of a woman with a guitar, [30:00] Picasso painted the two words “*ma jolie*,” which refer to the artist’s affectionate name for his girlfriend, and also to a popular song of the time. Now, a word is usually considered as identical with the thing it represents. But in the context of the cubist world, a fragmentation, it takes on different significance. The two words appear on different levels. The words are subject to the same shifting in space as are the other forms. By stressing in this way that the words are forms, one realizes that the other pictorial elements, the arcs and the plains and so on, these are also forms or shapes which are not to be considered counterparts of the visually perceived world. The implication is that a painting has a life of its own, a life which tensely [31:00] fluctuates between illusion and symbol.

The conventional idea of a painting as being an interpretation of visual reality is destroyed by such an innovation. More radical revolutions in picture making were soon to follow. Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1912 inaugurates the collage and dispenses with the basic convention of Western painting that art has to be made with paint or pencil. For here, Picasso has pasted upon a painted still life a strip of oilcloth, which imitates chair caning. First, we saw as cubism developed, the device of the *trompe l’oeil* nail, and then the printed symbols. And finally, in line with [32:00] cubism’s probing commentary on the relationship between art and life, now we have a more complex device. The chair caning seems more real than the other painted objects, yet it is as false as they are because it poses as chair caning but it’s really oilcloth. This ironical transmutation is enriched by certain of the cubistically painted objects, which in contrast to the flatness of the oilcloth appear three-dimensional.

For example, here the paint stem sticking through the letters J-O-U from “journal,” the paint — the pipe stem, rather, seems rounded and recedes in depth. And the entire oval canvas is bound by a rope. This real object, nevertheless, suggests a carved wooden frame. [33:00] And I might note here that the oval-shaped canvas was often used by Braque and Picasso at this time in order to promote a surface of equal stresses and intensities throughout. The oval shape contradicts the sense of gravity implied by square or rectangular canvases.

In 1912, Braque made these collages, the *Fruit Dish* at the left, and the *Violin and Pipe* at the right. The *Fruit Dish* is the first picture in which paper fragments are pasted onto canvas. Here again, fact and illusion are juggled. The strips of paper we see at the left are wallpaper, but wallpaper, which simulates the grain of oak. And at the bottom, Braque [34:00] draws a circle and some vertical lines on that strip of wallpaper and thereby makes it suggest the drawer of a table. Now, two similar paper strips are placed above, but these suggest because of their conjunction with the words “bar” and “ale,” a wall of a café. Rosenblum cleverly suggests another ambiguity and confounding of identities in this picture, “Is the illusory café wall which is created by the pasted wallpaper supposed to represent real or artificial wood paneling?”

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Well, these are the last pictures we'll see today. Picasso's *Female Nude* of 1910 and Braque's *Young Girl* also of 1910. Braque and [35:00] Picasso, as we've seen, had developed very closely in the previous few years, and they would continue to. An innovation of the one, such as printing or collage, would be picked up and developed by the other. During this time, Picasso and Braque often lived and worked near each other in Paris and in certain southern French village towns. At a certain point, at Braque's suggestion, they even stopped signing their canvases in order to stress the anonymity of the cubist method. And as we noted at the beginning, certain pictures look very much alike. Nevertheless, Braque and Picasso, the Frenchman and the Spaniard, were dissimilar temperaments and their paintings constantly reveal this. It is significant that Braque rarely made portraits while Picasso was continually drawn to them. Braque preferred the more impersonal still life or landscape.

[36:00] Picasso, in still life and landscape, as well as the portrait, was attracted to the individuality and the physicalness of objects and granted to the object a greater concreteness, energy, and flavor than Braque. Thus, in the portraits on the screen, the Picasso figure has a genuine presence, a mood, and character, whereas the Braque is psychologically pallid by comparison. On the other hand, Braque was more consistently pictorial than Picasso, more cerebral, more aware of the demands of the physical surface of the canvas, and the necessity to treat that surface uniformly.

Well, the invention of collage helped bring this phase of analytical cubism to a close. And in 1912, synthetic cubism commences. The change is from an analytical process of creation to one of construction. [37:00] I'll discuss this and then synthetic works of Braque and Picasso, and also the original contribution to cubism by Juan Gris, in two weeks' time. Thank you very much. (applause)

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