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Pablo Picasso, Cubism—A Revolution of Spatial Presentation in Artistic Expression (with parallels in cartography), *CSISS Classics*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3wt7p9m2>

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Publication Date

2002



Pablo Picasso: Cubism—A Revolution of Spatial Presentation in Artistic Expression (with parallels in cartography)

By Scott Crosier

Background

"My mother said to me, 'If you become a soldier you'll be a general; if you become a monk you'll end up as the pope.' Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso." *Pablo Picasso*

Cubism, the artistic expression that forefathered all abstract art, was simply a method of portraying multiple dimensions onto a two dimensional canvas. This is not unlike the task of the map maker in representing the earth in two dimensions.



Many people, when considering what makes "a good painting," consider the ability of a painting to depict an actual or realistic image of the person, object or location that the artist is presenting. We often think of the "realist" artists, who, through their skills in shading, color use, perspective, and understanding, were (and are) able to draw or paint a nearly picture perfect depiction of the subject. We idealize the artist, with his or her paints and palette, working at an easel, studying the landscape or their subject. The artist produces a painting depicting that object from their one point of reference.

However, as we interact with something, we rarely interact using only one perspective. For example, as we appreciate nature, we walk around. We might see a tree off in the distance, and as we approach it, our perspective of the tree changes. We might even walk past the tree, and look back on it from a completely different view or see an areal view of the location and appreciate it from a different perspective. How, then, can an artist depict this changing interaction with the subject, while working on a flat piece of canvas? This question is what spurred several artistic innovators to the pioneer form of all

abstract art called Cubism.

Innovation

Although inspired by the later work of Cezanne, the era of Cubism (1907–1920s) was first begun by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. The major benchmark of this work was in Picasso's painting "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O), 1911" (Mus. of Modern Art, New York City). In seeing this painting, many might ask among other things, "What was Picasso trying to do?"

The Cubists (including Picasso, Braque, Jean Metzinger, Gris, Duchamp, and Léger) were attempting to depict their subject matter not as the eye, but as the mind saw the subject. For example, the woman in the lower right corner of the painting has her back towards the artist. However, we know, and it is depicted in the painting, that she has a face. Also, as the veil or curtain drapes around the bodies, we see a boundary between the women and the drape, while in other places (the leg of the woman to the left) the boundary is not so clear, suggesting the flow of the veil in and around the bodies. The two women in the middle of the painting also have the profile of their noses painted on what appears to be the front of their face. This too, depicts Picasso's attempt to portray the front and the side of the face in the same image.

This style was in revolt to the traditional artistic expressions. These traditions followed many rules or elements that artists were strictly tied to. This included the use of paint to accurately depict texture and color, play of light on a form and shape, atmosphere, and the illusions derived by following the rigid, scientific laws of perspective. To break away from these traditions, the cubists fragmented the subject (usually into planes) and reconstructed it into an interlocking pattern. This is evident and perhaps most popular in many of Picasso's portrait paintings in which the front of the face and the profile of the face are interlocked, usually along the ridge of the nose. The cubist revolution in visual artistic expression spurred much controversy and an alternative way of thought throughout all artistic expression, including poetry, dance, theater, and sculpture.

Many perhaps jest at how the presentation of the subject matter is so distorted by Picasso and his comrades, however, if we consider the methods attempted for centuries by cartographers, of distorting the spatial properties of the earth in fitting a sphere (the globe) to a 2-dimensional representation (a map), then these ideas are perhaps not so extreme or difficult to accept. Work is also being done to allow a user to "navigate" a subject by "moving" in, out, and around in a "virtual reality" to better understand the subject. Is this much different than what the Cubists did? They too attempted to help the viewer better understand by presenting many perspectives of the subject, rather than presenting one singular perspective.

[The Early Cubists included [Picasso](#), [Braque](#), [Jean Metzinger](#), [Gris](#), [Duchamp](#), & [Léger](#)]



Related Works

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Links [Pablo Picasso: Le site officiel \(English translation available\)](#)

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