Cubism and Abstraction

Cubism, the most radical of early twentieth-century art movements, abandoned the Western tradition of spatial illusionism (painting as a window onto nature) conceived during the Renaissance. Developed in Paris by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who relied heavily on the innovations of Paul Cézanne, Cubism reconsidered how three-dimensional objects could be depicted on a two-dimensional canvas. Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907 (Museum of Modern Art, New York), commonly considered the first Cubist painting, broke with traditional notions of perspective.

The first phase of Cubist painting, known as Analytical Cubism, was fully realized between 1909 and 1912. It was characterized by forms faceted into component planes, the resultant multiple viewpoints of a single object, shallow space, and the use of Cézanne's *passage*, the pictorial running together of spatially disjunctive areas. The year 1912 witnessed the rise of Synthetic Cubism, in which the fragmented forms created in Analytical Cubism were synthesized into large, flat, colorful, often patterned shapes providing a visual reference to the objects depicted.

Artists in Paris, especially Fernand Léger and Juan Gris, were affected by the new Cubist conceptions as early as 1910; they were soon joined by colleagues from Europe, Russia, and America. The innovations of Cubism have continued to reverberate throughout twentieth-century art. Even artists connected with the Dada movement, whose antiart aesthetic differed radically from the Cubist sensibility, adopted its formal vocabulary.

Though abstracted, Cubist painting and sculpture always retained references to the real world. During the same period a number of painters working independently in different countries created nonobjective art. Such artists as Wassily Kandinsky, Arthur Dove, František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian — all interested in systems of mystical and occult beliefs — considered pure abstraction a new means to explicate the essence of man's spirit and the cosmos.

Suggested Reading

Alfred H. Barr.  
*Cubism and Abstract Art.*  

Douglas Cooper.  
*The Cubist Epoch.*  

Robert Rosenblum.  
*Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art.* Rev. ed.  

*The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985.*  
Henri Matisse (France, 1869–1954)
Heads of Jeannette, 1910–13

In the five Heads of Jeannette Henri Matisse focused on the evolution from figurative to abstracted or stylized art, an important and highly charged notion during the years in which these heads were created. Although he remained an artist whose work always referred to objects in the real world, as seen in the museum’s 1919 masterpiece Tea (located on this level), Matisse clearly considered and fully digested the concept of total abstraction. Seriality is also an important aspect of Matisse’s work (particularly in sculpture), as seen in these heads as well as in Picasso’s 1909 Head of a Woman (1909–1931, casts at UCLA).

In making the heads, Matisse was inspired by Picasso’s 1909 Head of a Woman and his Cubist sculpture. In doing so, Matisse created the idealized form of Jeanette II, but it was a distortion that was both realistic and idealistic in the tradition of Picasso’s earlier works.

The works of art discussed in this guide can be found on the third level of the Robert O. Anderson Building. Not all works mentioned may be on view at all times.

Text prepared by the Education Department and the Department of Twentieth Century Art of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Design by Jeffrey Mueller.
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In making the heads, Matisse was aware of Pablo Picasso’s 1909 *Head of a Woman*, often considered the first Cubist sculpture, *Jeannette i*, sculpted from life, and *Jeannette ii*, based on a plaster cast of the earlier state, are in the tradition of Rodin’s heavily worked surfaces. In *Jeannette iii* and *Jeannette iv* the artist emphasized purity of form over physical likeness. *Jeannette v*, the most highly abstracted, was based on a cast of the third version. In this simplification to the basic components of human form and in this radically condensed description of the head from multiple viewpoints over a period of time, Matisse showed himself a master of Cubism and of sculpture.
For František Kupka, one of the first painters to create totally nonobjective images, art was the means to express the spiritual and the cosmic. Along with Mondrian and Kandinsky, he was a theosophist, believing that Buddhist and mystical concepts explained supernatural forces. He felt that everything, including thought, was made of matter and theoretically could be made visible, allowing him to turn to the inner spirit rather than to the outer world as subject for his paintings. Kupka, who was born in Czechoslovakia and worked in Paris, was also strongly influenced by late nineteenth-century color theory, in particular by the law of simultaneous contrast, which described the effects of one color upon its neighbors.

*Irregular Forms: Creation* is one of a series of paintings known as the Organic Cycle, whose imaginary motifs Kupka described as “chaotic forms circulating like clouds in spaces of a kind never seen before, bizarre and sometimes monstrous worlds, created from scratch by the painter’s poetic imagination.” Kupka here communicates the essence of order being formed out of chaos, a primordial world shaped with enormous effort out of extravagant and powerful forces. The tangible quality of the forms depicted contrasts with the painting’s otherworldly subject matter.
Georges Braque, one of the inventors of Cubism, painted *Still Life with Violin* in 1914. It is a transitional work between Analytical and Synthetic Cubism. The canvas incorporates the hallmarks of Analytical Cubism in its use of fragmented and shifting planes to define form, its limited range of colors, and its reference to *papier collé* (glued paper) in the painted depiction of wood grain. Braque was the first to use the papier collé technique; in 1912 he combined rectangles of wallpaper printed with oak grain and charcoal drawing in one work. The reference to papier collé also heralds the rise of Synthetic Cubism, in which fragmented planes were synthesized into patterned and colored forms that act as a “visual shorthand” for the objects depicted. The wood-grained rectangle here conjures up an image of the violin’s gleaming wood surface; designer *S-*scrolls suggest the sound holes; the horizontal bars, a purely abstract pattern, in this context clearly refer to sheet music. The inclusion of typography — *DUO pour* (duet for) — is typical of Cubism, as is the oval format, which Braque pioneered in 1909.
Alexander Archipenko

*Woman with Hat*, 1916

Wood, metal, papier-mâché, gauze, and paint
17 ¾ x 14 ¾ in. (44.8 x 36 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by the Loula D. Lasker Estate and Merle Oberon
M.86.130.

Alexander Archipenko was one of the first sculptors to realize that the future of the medium lay not in traditional conventions but in the more daring innovations of the Cubist painters. He moved to Paris in 1908 and in 1910 began exhibiting with the Cubists and other avant-garde groups. Although his work remained figurative, it embraced the radical formal possibilities presented by Cubism. In 1921 Archipenko left Paris for Berlin; two years later he settled permanently in New York.

During the years 1916–20 Archipenko made about thirty-five painted reliefs, considered his masterpieces; only a few are in American collections. The moral and aesthetic inspiration provided by the Parisian avant-garde allowed Archipenko to subject conventional monolithic sculpture to radical spatial and chromatic transformations. He also broke with tradition in his use of a wide variety of materials, including gauze and papier-mâché. In *Woman with Hat* two-dimensional Cubist painting literally comes off the wall into the third dimension. The various points of view suggest Archipenko’s interest in the existence of real objects in real space, while the broad planes of color and pattern simultaneously suggest his interest in surface.
Fernand Léger (France, 1881–1955)

The Disks, 1918–19

Oil on canvas
51 ¼ x 38 ¼ in. (129.9 x 97.2 cm)
Bequest of David E. Bright
M.67.25.2

The Disks reflects Fernand Léger’s enthusiasm for the activity and rhythms of urban life in the modern age of technology and the machine. Related to his large canvas entitled The City (Philadelphia Museum of Art), The Disks is further abstracted and more highly energized.

Léger began his career as an architectural draftsman and in his paintings might have been expected to have made literal renderings of the cogs and wheels of engines and the facades of buildings. Instead he moved beyond the rational and superficial to consider machinery’s effect on the human psyche. Léger’s fragmenting of structure and his reliance on the notion of simultaneous vision in The Disks reflect his debt to Analytical Cubism; his use of color demonstrates his knowledge of the science of color theory. He combined flat, abstracted patterns with modeled three-dimensional forms, and juxtaposed bold colors and areas of unmodulated black or white. His contemporaries, notably Robert Delaunay, also explored concepts of color in complex and glowing paintings of disks. Unlike Delaunay, however, Léger never turned to pure abstraction. Though somewhat disguised, human forms are visible in The Disks: two workers in the left foreground and another pair on the right side.
Cardboard, wood, metal, and paint
40 1/2 x 33 in. (102.9 x 83.8 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Norton Simon, the Junior Arts Council, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weisman, Mr. and Mrs. Taft Schreiber, Mr. Hans de Schulthess, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Janss, and Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips
M.62.22

Construction for Noble Ladies is one of Kurt Schwitters's large "Merz paintings." He coined this term to reflect his use in a collage of a shred of an advertisement for the Kommerz- und Privatbank (Commercial and Private Bank). This invention of terms was typical of the movement known as Dada (itself an invented name), which developed in Zurich, Hannover, and New York during World War I in reaction to the apparent irrationality of the war.

Though organized according to a Cubist grid composition and colored with the limited Analytical Cubist palette, Construction for Noble Ladies is revolutionary in its use of the debris of daily life — a funnel, broken wheels, a flattened metal toy train, and a ticket for shipping a bicycle by train — as well as pieces of wood and other materials. The use of ordinary materials in new contexts is key to Schwitters's work in general and inspired such later twentieth-century assemblage artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Edward Kienholz. Schwitters has also included here a traditional portrait of a "noble lady" in profile, now turned on its side and facing upward.

Despite his use of detritus, this is an elegant work of art.
El Lissitzky (Russia, 1890–1941)

Proun 3A, c. 1920

Oil on canvas
28 x 23 in. (71.1 x 58.4 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. David E. Bright and the bequest of David E. Bright
86.3

This painting is one of El Lissitzky's series of Proun pictures made between 1919 and the mid-1920s. A Russian acronym for Project for the Affirmation of the New, Proun referred to the artist's desire to fuse art and life, a process that would occur in a new utopian society. Such goals sprang from the idealistic fervor spawned by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Proun pictures were avant-garde not only in their complete abstraction but in that Lissitzky considered them to be "stations" between painting and architecture rather than traditional easel paintings. He hoped to inspire architects and urban planners with his utopian ideas, turning to architecture himself in 1923 with his first Proun Room.

Proun 3A denies all reference to perspectival tradition; the various geometric elements seem to hover in an otherwise empty space and lack any sense of scale. The absence of a horizon line suggests that the space of Proun 3A continues infinitely. The right-angled elements, particularly the white square near the center of the canvas, reflect Lissitzky's debt to his mentor Malevich, one of the earliest creators of purely abstract art.
Paul Klee (Switzerland, 1879–1940)

*Untitled, 1929*

Oil and India ink on panel
17 3/4 x 15 in. (44.9 x 38.1 cm)
Gift of the Robert Gore Rifkind Collection and purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection
78.11

*Untitled* is one among a series of works dating from 1929 that Paul Klee called the Atmospheric Group. In these he explored organic shapes, cloud-like configurations, and the process by which amorphous forms emerge in the universe. This group, completed within a few weeks, was created after a trip Klee made to Egypt in 1928–29, during his years at the Bauhaus, the German art school that sought to integrate art, architecture, and design.

In *Untitled* the artist endowed clouds, amoebic forms, and water with the magic and poetry that typify his art. Rather than depicting a scene, Klee’s microcosm serves as a metaphor for larger life forces; the composition is an imaginary abstraction generated by invisible natural energies. These energies are communicated not only by form but by Klee’s rich palette. The deep black ground conveys a profound depth, murky yet resonant, within which the airy calligraphic images hover. The texture of the wood surface adds further richness and tonality; the bare foreground, against which the organic forms are silhouetted, contributes to the starkness and modern quality of the painting. Klee’s association with Kandinsky at the Bauhaus greatly influenced his interest in mystical and spiritual philosophies, reflected here in the floating orb or concentric circle motif.
Composition in White, Red, and Yellow epitomizes Piet Mondrian’s lifelong attempt to express the pure and idealized inner reality of the cosmos. He pared his palette and vocabulary of form down to the primary colors plus black and white structured within a strict rectilinear framework. This rigorous asceticism, associated with the Dutch De Stijl (the Style) group and established by 1917, was Mondrian’s reaction to the horrors of World War 1.

Having learned from Cézanne and Cubism that overlapping planes suggest depth, Mondrian, an early proponent of pure abstraction, eliminated them entirely. Composition in White, Red, and Yellow thus resolutely avoids any reference to three-dimensional space. The sense of a syncopated rhythm suggested by the unevenly spaced black lines hints at Mondrian’s love for music, particularly for jazz. The artist designed the frame for Composition in White, Red, and Yellow to bring the picture forward “to a more real existence,” in his own words, reinforcing the notion of the painting as an object in its own right.