

## 9.2 Analysis of a masterpiece: visual bricolage in cubist painting

### Objective

This exercise suggests a creative approach based on the remix strategy and the ideas that started the Cubist artistic revolution to reimagine and reflect on a space that you are familiar with (e.g. a room in your home, your office, a hotel room).

### Background

Various artists throughout history have experimented with the method of fragmenting objects and recombining their parts in novel ways. One way to look at these experiments is to see it as an attempt to dissect our experience of reality before it gets boxed into taken-for-granted forms. This ability is particularly significant in times of social change. The forms through which we put order in the world are questioned and prove to be inadequate to explain the new reality.

The two decades between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were one of those times: many disruptive technological changes were introduced by the Second Industrial revolution. In the 25 years between 1889 Paris World's Fair, with the Eiffel Tower soaring in the Paris skyline, and the beginning of the Great War in 1914, the world had experienced a frantic acceleration thanks to many revolutionary inventions such as the automobile, the cinematographer and the gramophone, the Wright brothers' first flight (1903), telephone and electricity. Not to mention the deep philosophical and existential crisis that followed Einstein's formulation of the theory of relativity (1905).

How did artists react to these changes? Certainly, the idyllic country landscapes of the nineteenth-century painters were now light years away from this new sensibility. Even the Impressionists' choice to indulge in the flow of sensations and the joyful dance of light and emotion had run aground.

Picasso, Braque, Gris and Delaunay provided a new and convincing answer in visual arts to this dilemma. Between 1907 and 1914, these artists started the Cubist revolution. To understand the importance of this artistic movement, it is necessary to refer to two figurative canons that had never been questioned before: the representation of the three-dimensional space through the rule of perspective and the portrayal of the human body according to a proportionality criterion that dates back to the classical art of ancient Greece (remember the Vitruvian man by Leonardo da Vinci).

Questioning these paradigms was a very bold move. The discovery of perspective by the artists-scientists of the Italian Renaissance was based on a mathematical method that kept into account objective and unquestioned knowledge such as the laws of optics and the functioning of human vision. Similarly, the harmony of the human body, located at the top of creation, had never been called into question. Centuries of measurement, theories and representation had defined the proportions of beauty based on such canons.

In the blink of an eye, cubist painters got rid of these centuries-old conventions. In our daily experience, our eye, head and bodies move continuously. What we see it is a mental

construction, in which sensations from the experience and the preconceptions from memory interact and are stabilized by existing mental models. Based on this observation, Cubists claimed that perspective was just another form of abstraction, one assuming a still eye and a world made of static and stable shapes and colors. An even more obvious abstraction is the canonical image of the human body. The ideal proportions are, in fact, an idealization based on conventions that have limited correspondence to individual bodies.

Where to start to identify the shape the new world was taking? Once again artists started from fragmenting existing forms and ideas. Observe the painting 'Candlestick and Playing Cards on a Table', made by Georges Braque in 1910 (fig. 9.2a).



Fig. 9.2.a - Candlestick and Playing Cards on a Table, Georges Braque (1910).

The objects in this cubist still life are broken into fragments, like tiles in a wooden puzzle. However, the nature of cubist painting is mostly analytical and destructive. Artists do not have the presumption to offer us a way to assemble these units into something whole and bigger: instead they leave on us the burden of connecting these parts. This is not an easy task, though: fragments don't easily connect with each other, they resist yielding their identity to the formation of a larger unity that incorporates and nullifies them. This is why, when observing a cubist painting, our eyes get lost in the details jumping from one fragment to another. We are able to discern and recognize here the profile of a table, there the seed of a playing card, or circular profile of a glass or bottle, but we have a hard time seeing the

table, the card, or the bottle as a whole. Observing a cubist picture is about surrendering ourselves to the chaos of experience. These are the fragments that Ovid in the *Metamorphosis* imagines floating on the sea of chaos at the origin of the world. On the surface, in the painting there are only the discordant seeds of things (in Latin: *non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum*). However, if we insist and refrain from the temptation of imposing what we know on what we see, the same fragments can also become the seeds of many possible new shapes.

### Instructions

The compositional idea of Cubists is even more evident in Juan Gris's 1915 painting 'Still Life with Checked Tablecloth' (Fig. 9.2b), where the fragments are much more recognizable.

Observe the painting through the following checklist:

1. Recognize the objects in the painting.
2. Identify from which point of view the object is seen (from above, on the side, etc.).
3. Notice which objects are reproduced several times.
4. Observe how colour defines shapes.



Fig. 9.2b - Still Life with Checked Tablecloth, Juan Gris (1915).

Now that you have trained your eyes to read a cubist painting, try the following experiment:

1. Take a picture of a space you use or live in, such as a your office desk, your kitchen pantry or a whole room using a traditional perspective (e.g., a room seen from its entrance or a desk seen from the top).

2. Identify some objects or parts of them using as a criterion the point of view with which the object is normally seen, touched, or used. For instance, a keyboard is typically seen from above.
3. Take some more pictures of these same objects but from different angles and perspectives, e.g., take a picture of your keyboard while it is standing vertically, orthogonal to the desk.
4. Create a final collage by replacing some of the objects in the initial picture with pictures of the same objects taken from other perspectives that are not consistent with the expected angles in the first picture.

Congratulations! You have just created a cubist image.

As a final step for this exercise, analyze your cubist still life and reflect on whether the remixing you have just performed gives you any insight or new awareness of the space you have portrayed. Now that some objects have been deliberately made inconsistent with your pre-existing mental image of the space, here are some questions you may want to explore:

1. How would you consider reorganizing this space now that you have seen it with new eyes?
2. Is it easier for you to find things in the new picture compared to the first one?
3. Is the relationship between the objects more or less clear in the new representation?