

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Painting Modern Life



IMAGE ONE: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*. 1907. Oil on canvas, 8' x 8" (243.9 x 233.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

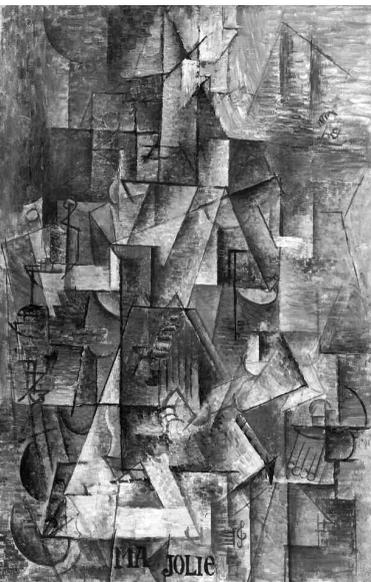


IMAGE TWO: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Ma Jolie*. 1911–12. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 25 3/4" (100 x 64.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

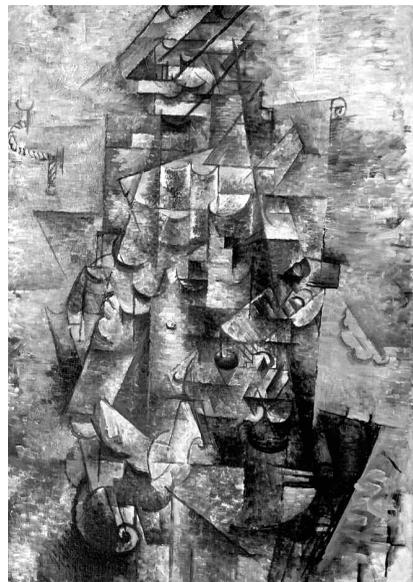


IMAGE THREE: Georges Braque. French, 1882–1963. *Man with a Guitar*. 1911–12. Oil on canvas, 45 3/4 x 31 7/8" (116.2 x 80.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

INTRODUCTION

The artists associated with Cubism were interested in creating new methods of representation. In depicting the world around them, these artists included multiple viewpoints, distorted forms, and ambiguous spatial relationships in their artworks. The traditional use of perspective, which creates a convincing three-dimensional illusion of space, was abandoned, challenging viewers to understand a subject broken down into its geometrical components and often represented from several angles at once.

All three works in this lesson depict the human figure, a classic subject for artists, and were painted by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, pioneers of Cubism. The first work students will look at, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, shocked and even repulsed the artist's contemporaries with its style and subject. The second and third works demonstrate the creative relationship that developed between Picasso and Braque as they experimented with this new style of painting, which was named after a critic's derogatory remark.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will examine the ways in which an artwork is innovative or daring for its time.
- Students will investigate how a new style was furthered by the exchange of ideas between Picasso and Braque.
- Students will compare and contrast Cubist works depicting the human figure.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Artists often inspire and influence each other. An artist who does or makes something entirely radical may have an effect on the style of other artists and create a new movement. Ask your students to remember a time when they encountered something new and radical—like a fashion trend, a new popular gadget, or new slang. Ask students to recall how the new trend spread, whether it replaced an old trend, and what their reactions were.
- The work of art we encounter in a museum (or, as a reproduction, in a book) is very often the result of revisions and modifications. Artists may work on a painting over a period of time; some create many sketches and drafts before arriving at the final work. Have your students pick a subject and make at least three or four sketches of it before completing a final work. Ask them to think about the process of creation, about how the drawing changed with each draft, and about what was left out or emphasized and why.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Give your class a few minutes to look at *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*. Ask them to describe what they see in the work. Have them observe the figures carefully, noting what each is doing and comparing them to each other. Ask your students to describe the figures' **body language**, facial expressions, and relationships to each other.
- Tell your class that Picasso based this work on his memory of the women in a brothel on Avignon Street (Carrer d'Avinyó) in Barcelona, Spain, that he had visited in his youth with his friends. The painting depicts five women, but in his many sketches and drafts, Picasso had included two male characters, a medical student and a sailor. Eventually he decided that the men were not necessary for the final work. Ask your students how they would describe the figures' relationship to the viewer and discuss how Picasso's treatment of each figure varies. Ask them how their interpretation of the work would change if there were any male figures in it.

- **Turn your students’ attention to the painting’s background and ask them if they can tell where the painting is set. Ask students how the style of representation makes the setting difficult to identify. Explain to them that Picasso fragmented and fractured the space in part by breaking the curtains in the background into splintered planes.**

Many people were outraged when this painting was first shown to the public, and the controversy sparked a number of rivalries between Picasso and his contemporaries. The artist Henri Matisse was described as “angry” about this work and others: “His immediate reaction was that the picture was an outrage, an attempt to ridicule the modern movement. He vowed he would find some means to ‘sink’ Picasso and make him sorry for his audacious hoax.”² Even his contemporary Braque disliked and was offended by *Les Demoiselles*.

Picasso, as well as many of his contemporaries, drew inspiration from non-European sources. He incorporated African masks into *Les Demoiselles* after he saw them on a visit to the Palais du Trocadéro, a Paris museum. Masks, particularly from Africa, fascinated certain avant-garde artists. The masks’ radical simplification and stylization of human features, along with the alternative they suggested to traditional Western painting practices, challenged these artists to develop new forms of representation. The two figures on the painting’s right both have masklike faces.

- **Ask your students what effect the masks create. Ask them to think of a time when they used imagery from a museum or an event from their personal lives as inspiration for an art project or writing assignment. Encourage them to think about how their work compared with the source material.**
- **Ask students to look at “*Ma Jolie*” and describe what they see. Discuss which parts of the painting are easy to identify and which are not.**
- **Now turn students’ attention to *Man with a Guitar* by Georges Braque. Have students discuss with a partner the similarities and differences between *Man with a Guitar* and “*Ma Jolie*.”**

Man with a Guitar and “*Ma Jolie*,” like *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, are representations of the human figure—a man and a woman, respectively. Both paintings were inspired by the vibrant café culture of early-twentieth-century Paris, in which artists, dancers, musicians, and celebrities would all gather in cafés to socialize, dance, debate, and exchange ideas. The expression “*ma jolie*,” which means “my pretty” in French, comes from a popular 1911 song and was Picasso’s pet name for Eva Gouel, his girlfriend at the time.

- **In both works, the artists obscure their subjects, but certain identifiable objects remain—a facial feature, the neck of the guitar, a wine glass, text, the work’s title. Ask your students how an artist other than Picasso or Braque might have depicted Parisian café culture. Ask them why these two works may be difficult for viewers to decipher. Tell them that Picasso and Braque, in creating a new style of representation, wanted their viewers to be challenged in precisely this way.**
- **Explain to students that both works were the result of an intense collaboration and friendship between Picasso and Braque as they explored their new style, developing the foundations of Cubism by exchanging ideas and artworks, often painting side by side.**
- **Ask students to think of a time when they collaborated on a project with someone. Ask them what each partner brought to the project, whether there were disagreements, and how those disagreements were resolved. Ask students what was enjoyable or challenging about the collaboration, and how their experience would compare with Picasso and Braque’s.**

2. William Rubin, Hélène Seckel, and Judith Cousins, *Studies in Modern Art 3: Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 244.

Picasso and Braque worked together so closely that many people had trouble distinguishing their work, and the artists often left the signatures off their canvases in order to encourage the confusion. Braque described their relationship as that of two mountaineers roped together.

ACTIVITIES

Have your students explore the idea of multiple perspectives by taking pictures of the same subject from many different angles. Using these pictures or parts of them, students should make a single two-dimensional collage that depicts the subject from various viewpoints.

To explore the idea of artistic collaboration in the spirit of Picasso and Braque's projects, have your students write a letter or e-mail to a partner about a new or past artwork. The letter should describe what the work looks like, what message it conveys, and what process they used in creating it. The partner then writes a letter in response and shares a work of his or her own. Proceed with a few rounds of exchange. Through these letters, students may decide to collaborate on a joint work or project.