

Topic Page: [Cubism](#)

Definition: **cubism** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 (*often capital*) a French school of painting, collage, relief, and sculpture initiated in 1907 by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, which amalgamated viewpoints of natural forms into a multifaceted surface of geometrical planes

> 'cubist *adj, n*

> cu'bistic *adj*

> cu'bistically *adv*

Summary Article: **cubism**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Revolutionary style of painting created by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in Paris between 1907 and 1914. It was the most radical of the developments that revolutionized art in the years of unprecedented experimentation leading up to World War I, and it changed the course of painting by introducing a new way of seeing and depicting the world. To the cubists, a painting was first and foremost a flat object that existed in its own right, rather than a kind of window through which a representation of the world is seen. Cubism also had a marked, though less fundamental, effect on sculpture, and even influenced architecture and the decorative arts.

Cubism was a complex, gradually evolving phenomenon, but in essence it involved abandoning the single fixed viewpoint that had been the norm in European painting since the Renaissance and instead depicting several different aspects of an object simultaneously. Objects were therefore shown as they are known to be, rather than as they happen to look at a particular moment. In the early days of cubism, this way of representation involved fragmenting objects into facets. Only a handful of Braque's and Picasso's paintings actually use cubelike forms, so cubism is not really an appropriate name. However, the name stuck after being coined facetiously by the critic Louis Vauxcelles in 1908, and it was accepted by the two inventors of the style and their followers.

Braque and Picasso met in 1907 and worked in very close harmony at times over the next few years: Braque said that they were 'like mountaineers roped together'. The influences that helped them forge their new style included the work of Paul Cézanne, whose subtle depiction of form came close to dispensing with traditional perspective, and African sculpture, the expressive distortion of which encouraged them to cast aside inhibitions.

Their work in the period 1907–14 is generally divided into two main phases: analytical cubism (lasting to about 1911) and synthetic cubism. In the first phase they analysed objects into the elements that made them up and rearranged these shapes on the canvas. In the second phase, they more or less reversed this procedure and built up ('synthesized') the picture from pre-existing shapes. Analytical cubism was so concerned with pictorial structure that the two artists deliberately downplayed colour; many of their paintings of this phase are made up almost entirely of muted browns or greys. In synthetic cubism colour was reintroduced and Braque and Picasso also started to incorporate collage elements in their

pictures. Their favourite subject was still life, as this allowed them the greatest freedom to study and rearrange form. However, they also painted landscapes and portraits.

By 1911 several other artists in Paris had taken up cubism. The most important were Juan Gris and Fernand Léger; the lesser figures included Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Roger de La Fresnaye, Jean Metzinger, and Francis Picabia. Two of these, Gleizes and Metzinger, wrote the first book on cubism, published in 1912. By the time that World War I broke up the collaboration of Braque and Picasso in 1914 (Braque enlisted in the French army), cubism had already made a powerful impact outside France, influencing Futurism in Italy and Vorticism in England. After the war its innovations quickly became part of the general vocabulary of avant-garde art. Artists now felt that they could rearrange reality in whatever way they wanted, and, building on the cubist use of collage, they felt free to make art out of diverse materials rather than just paint and canvas. Cubism also influenced sculptors, notably Alexander Archipenko and Ossip Zadkine, who opened up the forms of their figures, contrasting solids with voids. In Czechoslovakia cubism also made a brief but distinctive impact on architecture; just before World War I there was a flourishing group of cubist painters in Prague, and several buildings there feature prismatic decorative shapes that recall the forms of analytical cubist paintings.

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