

Cubism: Requiescat in Pace

JEAN CHARLOT

FASHIONS as they recede in time pass through many qualifying trials before they settle into the perpetually pink light of the dear old past. The most trying moment comes when they are far enough from us to be out of style yet close enough to lack mystery, for we still remember that mother dressed so and that we ourselves used to be thus dolled up as babies. If art were wholly fashion, cubism would therefore be at its lowest ebb now, with cubist pictures piled into ash cans along with the hats of 1915. The impressionist picture is altogether a museum piece, but so are the bustles and "sivez-moi, monsieur" of its generation. Surrealism is so up-to-date as to be the guiding spirit behind shop-window displays. Cubism, hemmed in between them and stripped of all glamor, will indeed need undying qualities, the peer of those of the great schools of art, if at this stage it is to pass through the narrow door of the museum, where neither fashion nor history can vouch for it.

Cubism is still alive, still worshipped, but rather doting. The new-fangled approach to art, irrational, emotional, has permeated the classical structure. Cubism still struts along with the younger fashions, claims surrealist tendencies, but those are rather the worm in the fruit than the feather on the cap. To treat of cubism at its noblest we should limit ourselves to its brown period—1910-1920—when it genuinely pioneered, was serious, constrained even, had no time or taste for the fantastic. Cubism as a discipline of reason is the movement at its most genuine—an impersonal homogeneous art that could have reigned over a unified world with the autocracy of a Le Brun or a David. Cubism has at least succeeded in achieving a dictatorship in the realm of the applied arts. We live in a world streamlined as the cubist helped to create it. Duly grateful for

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its achievements we should inter cubism in History with loving care. This article is intended as its respectful eulogy.

A painting is of course a flat rectangular plane if we describe it as a physical object. But since line and color create illusive space it is nearer to optical truth, even if a departure from factual truth, to compare a painting with a box, lying on its side, its opening coincident with the picture proper. This box is also a minute stage which up to the time of the impressionists had been filled with an assortment of stage-flats whose carefully receding planes helped to carry the eye to a backdrop. The impressionists' dubious novelty radically changed this notion of a limited space trimmed into the layout of a stage. They knocked out the back of the box, and thus exposed whatever natural disorder—trees, skies, haystacks—happened to be behind it. But by making space limitless the impressionist at the same time weakened its esthetic value. The somewhat quaint arrangements of the past had brought recessions from flat to flat into mathematical relationship, had played upon spatial intervals as one plays upon musical intervals. But this could happen only when all the distances involved were measurable and comparable with each other. The infinite space of the impressionist became a joker in the game, for you cannot behold, divide or compare the infinite. Intended as an improvement on the finite, it greatly impaired instead the whole structure of art. Cubism's most important step was to nail back into place the discarded back of the box. That Cubism filled the box with solids in a somewhat over-zealous way until it looked like a packed croquet-box does not alter the great achievement. Sobered by the impressionist binge into space the cubist dropped horizons to play with blocks; but blocks are measurable, comparable, and as such are fit units for creating exact beauty.

Impressionism, proud of its knowledge that painting's reason for being lies in the mental image it creates, is somewhat unkind to the painting as an object. It forces the spectator away from the painting, blurs his vision at close range until by stepping backwards to focus properly his more than arm-length

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range hinders him from finding a tactile correlation to what his eye sees. The impressionist wants his painting to become a mirage, a protoplasmic entity that the frame limits only uncertainly. The cubist, opposed to his father's ways, gathers unto himself the physical picture—the tight drum made of canvas stretched on a wooden scaffolding; rather despising optical values he insists on tactile values—not illusive ones either but good sandpaper or corrugated board pasted on the picture. The fluffy contours that dissolve into air give place to honest lines stiffened after the ways of ruler and compass. Cubism, utterly weary of color, that treacherous element which makes a Monet out of a picture when you don't watch, safely limits itself to a tobacco-juice brown, snatched while still fresh from the palette of the academic painter. The four edges of the canvas, disdained by the impressionist, become dictatorial under the new order; the web of lines they imprison derives from them proportion, direction, the angularity of the inner design. In the same way the optical box or stage forces all the solids within its walls to ape its architecture: it becomes the paragon of all the cubes to be found in cubism.

There is a great nobility in this hunger for chains. This acknowledgment of limits is not only heroic but classic. And this discipline has received a fitting reward: the nut-brown aura which haloes the cubist picture turns it into a museum-piece before its time; to this day leaves the benighted amateur highly respectful if slightly bored. It is also appropriate to this classic vein that personality was taboo in those early days and that Braque and Picasso did not blush if they misnamed each other's pictures. Because the painting was considered mainly as an object the painter became a kind of tradesman rather than a superman. Each cult must have its idols, and the impressionist had enshrined Turner. It is characteristic of the cubist that he should enthrone the house painter rather than any one master. This workman could lay a tone flat, freed from the tremolo of Monet. He was a sound technician and used two thin coats of pigment rather than one fat one bound to crack.

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His subdued palette was careful of the retina. When he traced straight lines he used a ruler; when he traced fancy lines he pushed the paint through a stencil. Confiding in mechanical means, he escaped the narcissist attitude of the impressionist whose own wrist and eye were his gods. The cubist also hailed the sign painter as great, for among the infinite combination of lines that we may use, letters are the most spiritual, their mental content having drained them forever of any sensual connotation. Each letter is a masterpiece of design, better attained by mathematical computation with compass and ruler than by improvisation. Letters were so suitable to the cubist ideal that the painter spattered A's, O's and E's over his picture with a zest similar to that of a Monet juggling with sunbeams. The master cubist, distrusting his hand (which verily was not as well trained as that of the sign painter), preferred scissors and paste-pot to the brush. Fragments of newspapers embellish his picture, for what freehand version could match the beautiful impersonality of the printer's product. In this same vein of common sense Fernand Leger exalted the show windows of haberdashers and hatters as masterpieces of composition—not the expensive shops which employ artists and extraneous material to round up the effect but those in which the small shop-keeper presents ties, hats and shirts in rigid ranks of solids spaced with care.

But though the painter, dropping beret and beard and endorsing overalls, prided himself on being a working man, though he built his picture with as much physical soundness as if it were a chair or a table, the picture refused to play this soothing game—to become, as the painter wished it to become, a common-sense object. In fact the cubist picture became a slightly more puzzling object than the impressionist one. The latter had educated people to a kind of vision which had become second nature. The eye and the brain had become exquisitely disconnected. One dared not swear to the roundness of a tree trunk, the cubicalness of a house, but things rippled amorphously into nothing, the world at large was camouflaged

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under the sheen of a Harlequin's coat of blue shadows and yellow lights. The cubist's job was to switch on the current again between brain and eye, between what one saw and what one knew; to bring mental help to the eye which had grown hypertrophied, had run amok as if possessing an animal life of its own.

We learn from the writings of Raphael that he painted not so much from the model as from a vision or pattern which existed in his mind only, and that this vision was of a circular kind. And the more beautiful the madonnas he created the more are they unlike the women we elbow. The bulk of their features and of their hair weakens, flattens itself onto the larger volume of the skull, until the head perceptibly glorifies itself into a sphere. In Ingres, who drank deep of Raphael, we have rubber-like arms, necks and joints in which the bones soften to give way to cylindrical beauty. The shoulder and bosom lines lose their substance to become the trails to each arcs of circles whose movement would not be responsive to each ripple of fabric or muscle. In Seurat we have archaic bodies which swell or narrow equally round, irrelevant of how nature may wish it. They are related to the Nuremberg toys of turned wood, to the legs of chairs and to Ionic columns rather than to the science of the anatomist or to the optical blandness of the photographer. Those masters could conceive such sights only when the connection between eyes and brain had been so clarified and strengthened that the brain could give orders to nature—which the eye, a kibitzer, beholds overgrown with parasitic débris.

The cubist came back to the classical approach, the intellectual vision articulate as a well-balanced phrase, in contrast to the impressionist's vision which is more in the nature of an exclamation or an intaking of breath. When at the click of his eyelid Monet's wrist started to work, his brush did little but record what was before his eye. Lured by the accidental he could not elevate his art to the generic. Intellectual vision treats of genus and type, lowers itself to individual examples with

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effort. How often, in portraits of men painted by the classic Renoir, we feel by tearing off the trick moustaches and beards, prying open the collars, we shall uncover his rotund feminine paragon, the Gabrielle who was not his cook at all, whatever history tells us, but rather a type whose origin existed in this artist's own mind—a type which his earthly models reflected more or less but all imperfectly. As with Raphael or Renoir, Picasso's vision tends to general concepts. The square bottle which he paints is more than a particular bottle, for by whirling around its axis it establishes a void into which all bottles—of whatever profile, lip or belly—may be fitted.

Cubism by putting brainwork back into vision infuriated people—and who knows if it was a blessing to tear them away from their sunsets and their rainbows of lyrical moods. After all we know that houses are cubes and that skulls are egg-shaped; and as an escape from facts what is more tempting than to stand on our heads and look at scrambled reflections in the water and make believe that this omelette is a dream-world.

The eye, Monet's god, became with the cubists an invalid that had to be handled firmly if gently. Making their own Félibien's saying (1670) that the eye is easily deceived, they brought aids to the eye to correct its mirage. Something is hazy and shimmers in the sun. Come, pass your fingers over its surface, feel its hardness, its smoothness or roughness, such qualities as remain true even in darkness. You see a table with its sides running back to a horizon line, its farther side smaller than its frontal. Stop looking, correct this mistake by measuring each side and see that they are all equal; use a square and understand that all angles meet at 90 degrees even though your eye fancies them acute or obtuse. Italian perspective and its bastard son, the academic style, had immobilized the spectator into a single point of view, had even bade him close an eye so as not to be disturbed by twin images. Cubism took the spectator out of his cramped position at this peep-hole, recognized the fact that man has two eyes. Many of those idiosyncracies at which

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Cézanne's critics scoff—tables that disappear behind a bottle to reappear at a different level or at cocky angles, cubic bodies that show their thickness on too many sides—are a simple acknowledgment of our binocular vision. The cubist, however, liberates and instructs the spectator further. He bids him shuffle his feet too, walk around the object and gather a variety of data to be memorized and superimposed in a composite glyph which stands for the object. The cubist makes the heads that we see full front unhinge themselves at the nose to exhibit their profile. Not only does the spectator walk; he flies to observe the lips of the bottle as a full circle, he burrows and the bottom of the glass becomes a circle too. The power to free man from the straightjacket and the eye-blinkers of the academic vision, to transform the single point of view into the multiple one of an up-to-date movie camera, will excuse whatever coarseness may have marred the means.

The impressionist dabbled in astrology. The fragile dialogues between object and shadow which he loved to paint were at the mercy of celestial influences; his haystacks were the fingers of an ever-changing dial. Monet revolved, a minute planet himself, around his model, followed by his daughter pushing a wheelbarrow piled with canvases, one for each mood and fancy of his master, the sun. One is reminded of the apologue of the realist painter who, tackling a still life, achieved perfect duplicates of the marble chimney, the vases on both sides of the clock and the bronze statuette on top of it but was defeated throughout a lifetime by the dial whose hands he could not match.

The cubist broke this enslavement. He was forced to utilize light since it is the only means a painter has to reveal volume, but his light was not that of the sun. A diffused emanation, obedient to form, it bathed the object in inverse ratio to its distance from the picture plane. No fancy beam played on his stage; shadows were as absent from his peculiar climate as they are in things seen in dream. The effect produced was akin to that obtained by chemical photography or infra-red

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rays in the dark. Though the impressionist was naive in his sun-worship, his open window will forever afford the layman good air. The cubist picture lives in a limbo where the seasons of the year, the time of day are forgotten.

The cubist's itch to put his hand on the object, to pat its angles and test out its texture with his cheek, brought the model under the painter's very nose or even nearer. Picasso, asked how he proceeded to paint fish, answered "I eat it first." The veil of atmosphere, whose mystery had intoxicated the nature-lover of yore, was rent. The painter had become anatomist, dissecting guitar and bottle—the wood or glass here, the profile there, the elevation, the plan, the slice. Space had been the impressionists' subject matter. It had reduced the bones of trees and mountains to a jelly, had digested solids into a fog, had ebbed in and out of the picture like a breath. The cubist came to shun space and lavished his care on volume. His was a world of solids unwilling to make place for skies and clouds. The breath of life, the throbbing which keeps impressionist painting alive, was unwelcome in the cubist limbo. Natural shapes were solidified into crystal forms—or rather, shunning the sheen of crystal, into those wooden models of cubes, cones and cylinders over which the musty aroma of the classroom shelf still hovers.

The cubist concept of the world was so close to that of the sculptor that he borrowed some of the sculptor's means. A painter's space is the emptiness which gathers around a volume from the outside. A sculptor's sense of space is no more than a gauging of the volume, similar to the innate awareness each of us has of his own body, traveling within the spaces of the skull, determining the capacity of the chest by the volume of air inhaled. This voyaging through matter is obligatory with the sculptor who cannot create more distance than lies between one corner of his marble block and the other. Though the painter can include the world, up to the horizon, in his canvas, the cubist limits himself consciously to problems similar to those of the sculptor. But this concentration upon inner cub-

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ing, when applied to others than ourselves, comes close to the instinct of a ripper: it was not long till the cubist dismembered his models, exhibited piecemeal the fragments that constitute the whole, found the inventory of a body more exciting than its integrity.

The abandonment of visual means, however, had one superb advantage—that the artist got rid of the presence of the model. The sunlight and air which the man who painted landscapes inescapably absorbed were no doubt beneficial to his health but they had little connection with the painting trade. Whatever attention the painter gave his model was subtracted from the making of his picture. Painting as manual labor is a precise activity not unlike that of a druggist weighing and mixing the components of a prescription and as such requires concentration and quiet. I doubt that even a watchmaker could put together a watch in the open with the sun playing rainbows on his metals or with cows mooing and flies buzzing. No wonder the impressionist had to replace painting, as tradition had known it, by a kind of shorthand, a hit-or-miss lack of technique that was the only possible approach under such improper conditions. At last, with the advent of cubism, the painter, accepting the making of a painting as his job, became the stay-at-home an artisan should be. He put his knapsack and folding seat to rest and pottered in the workshop. This was no innovation but a return to normal. Cennino relates that when the Giottesque wanted to paint a mountain he brought a stone to his studio and copied it at the desired scale. The cubist, a man of less faith, doubting that the mountain would come to him, compromised with common sense and chose to paint indoor objects—the pipe, the bottle, Cézanne's fruits and table. His was, of course, a partisan choice: such objects better served his contention that nature is made of cubes, cones and cylinders than would have, let us say, a swan or a rose.

This modesty of subject-matter was also a judicious choice, for the cubist, who planned to hack his subject to pieces, preferred to pick on something small that had no comeback, just

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as a boy intent on fun would rather pluck the wings off a fly than tackle a bull-dog. Thus both impressionists and cubists, in agreement for once, left alone those noble subjects, historical and dramatic, in which classic painters delighted. Yet their subjects, casual as they are, differ in more than the outdoor and indoor label. The impressionist tackles a tree at the moment when the sun glorifies it into a crystal chandelier. Water, to interest him, must teem with more reflections than there are bacteria in its physical make-up. The impressionist covers nature with gauze and glitter, haloes her with trick lighting before kneeling at her feet—and, like the man who drowns his food in ketchup, leaves us in doubt as to its real worth.

The cubist takes his nature straight. Even if he rips her as a child a doll he does it with the child's serious and realistic intent. Ignoring the enchantments of light and distance the cubist can hold a pipe, a bottle, in his hand and truly delight in their shape and texture. Because he is the first man of our modern world to recognize function as beauty, the pictures painted in the teens of this century are prophetic of the world to be. His approach has become that of our architects and engineers. We live in a world streamlined by the influence of those very men of 1910 whose work we now pretend is obsolete.

The cubists choice of subject matter is also more humanistic than that of a Monet. Monet's eye, for physical rather than for philosophic reasons, had sided with the Chinese. His mountains, streams, trees, even if they do not mirror, as the oriental landscape does, a precise articulation of the metaphysical, bespeak the abandonment of man as the center of the world. The aerial bulk which is the unspoken subject of all impressionist pictures reminds one of the wheel of Lao-Tseu which revolves around a hub of nothingness. The cubist hammered a self-centered axle into this hub: his very choice of objects was strictly limited to those in human use. Smoking, drinking, playing music were the gentle activities with which his pictures dealt. When he packed all objects tightly inside the precise limits of the canvas, as a kernel within its shell, an order born of man

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reigned anew. The world became cozy again, so full of solids that no inkling of the surrounding icy spaces remained. The comeback to the mummy-brown sauce was not merely a technical quirk. It is significant that the painter cornered by a too-luxurious creation had taken refuge in Caravaggio's cave where the retina of his sun-bathed eye could again expand to normal size. The return to the studio brought the painter back also to the friendly nakedness of four walls, a floor and a ceiling. There was utter affinity between man and his surroundings. The cubist lived and labored inside a cube.

In its early days cubism lived in the same state of mental intoxication that the early Renaissance had known. It was actuated by no scruples about musing up the actual plane of a picture, no Byzantine taboo that would make the painting flat as a carpet. We sense rather the excitement of digging back of the picture with diagonal lines moving swift and straight and interweaving like arrows in the thick of a battle. The high mental climate of the period, suggested by the monotony of the color, was repeated in the labyrinth of planes, of solids that crystallized only to vanish into other solids, exhausting all alleys of investigation. A head, a hand was hammered triumphantly into those solids of 64 facets which Uccello delighted to draw. His laws of perspective and Francesca's treatises on geometry are marked by the same cold fever that seized the pioneer cubists, intent on translating passion into terms of ruler and compass.

At that early stage a great future was predicted for cubism. Its quasi-scientific and factual content, especially its connection with the mathematics of architecture, made it an ideal mural vehicle. Its objectivity in handling pigment could have opened the door to the use of a group of apprentices covering a wall under the supervision of a master, as had been customary in centuries past. Its textural qualities—imitation of wood and marble, use of printed letters—had already linked it with mural painting of the sturdier sort. It should have produced a school of men who, scorning personal squabble, would have

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renewed the monumental arts in Gothic fashion. In a way it failed. Yet we must remember that critics had also scored impressionism for its lack of heroic achievements. They had called its landscapes and still-lives mere sketches, trial balloons for the art-to-come that would use the impressionist technique as a tool for the expression of noble anecdotes. Some painters—like Albert Besnard and Henri Martin—who believed in critics followed this recipe for true greatness, but their names are already forgotten. One is reminded of the score of small men of the 16th century who, adding the color of Titian to the drawing of Michelangelo, succeeded only in making themselves ridiculous.

Cubism may have failed the letter of the prophecies made at its cradle but these prophecies were fulfilled in spirit. Instead of the murals predicted for churches and palaces, cubist posters perform in subways, streets and magazines. The printing press, which has multiplied the work of the cubist, has been more impersonal, more obedient to the spirit of the master-artist than any group of helpers could be. But cubism has also bred a group of mural painters, those Mexicans whose influence in turn is slowly modifying the place accorded art in the Americas, is changing it from a ladies' club topic into a potent social weapon. Cubism is linked so organically with mural painting that, though Rivera and Orozco occupy the same position with relation to cubism that Besnard and Martin had had to impressionism, the Mexican muralists will no doubt escape a similar fate.

The later phase of cubism has been so at variance with its early stages that the movement seems like the serpent that swallows itself. But like the serpent, notwithstanding its suicidal intent, it is nevertheless nourished by its own substance. Picasso's Greek period, for example, is nearer his brown one than appearances would suggest. The same unnatural light, subservient to volume, that characterized the still-lives of his early painting days makes his human mannikins bulge. Their plaster-cast look, which made people nickname this his Canova

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period, obeys the same restraint which in his still-lives drained the color from the fruit and now refuses to rouge the lips of his human creations. The impassive features bespeak impersonal aims; the hugeness of limbs, the heaviness of fabrics teased by no wind, relates these bodies more closely to the cones and cylinders of his early pictures than to flesh. The "Greek" subject matter is chosen with the slightly too-obvious classic intent at which his brown patina of yore had aimed. He is still eagerly courting the museum.

Cubism was perhaps greatest when it was groping, trying its best, hoping. Arrived at the top it sits on its conquest, relaxes and is inclined to levity. Those formalized lines of its early stages that nestled amorously close to ruler and compass have given way to a kind of free-hand scribble; its limited palette has been succeeded by an orgy of Matisse-pinks and coal-tar dyes. The scribble is an activity natural on a scale where wrist and fingers perform it. When imitated on the gigantic scale of Picasso's latest work the movements of wrist and fingers enlarged to such inhuman size suppose as the doodler not a man but rather an air-inflated giant, *à la* Giulio Romano, come to life. The novel addition of color weakens instead of strengthens the linear skeleton still very much in evidence, brings unwanted dramatic effects which neutralize the sober core. Cubism thereby turns against itself, commits hara-kiri in front of those dark romantic gods who hate its classical hide. The stage is set for surrealism.

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Vol. 8

Winter • 1938-1939

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Published Quarterly for General Circulation by

P H I • B E T A • K A P P A

\$2.00 a year

50 cents a copy