

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) Figure Composition

Born in **Malaga**, southern **Spain**, Picasso is often mistakenly thought to be French. This is due to his adopting France, and in particular, Paris as his home from a very early age. He showed incredible ability when still very young, and was encouraged by his art-teacher father to pursue studies in fine art. Picasso studied first in Barcelona, moving quickly to **Paris**, the accepted centre of all things artistic. Far from rich, Picasso lived in the artists' quarter of **Montmartre**, in the city's poorer eastern district. Here he mixed with circus performers, music hall divas and other artists.

1902 - 04

From 1900 Picasso struggled and sold little. His paintings were of his fellow downtrodden, forgotten émigré Parisians. The **colours** were dull and muted, often cold and bleak looking. This body of work is commonly known as Picasso's '**Blue Period**', with all of the **depressed** emotion the name suggests, (e.g. **Old Man with Guitar, 1903**)

1904 - 06

Famously fond of the opposite sex, Picasso has been linked with a string of women, (See section on **Picasso's Women**). Marrying and becoming a father for the first time lifted the painter out of this down period, giving his images a more cheerful and **optimistic** quality.

His figures actually look happier, healthier; with more animation about them, (e.g. **Acrobat & Young Harlequin, 1905**). This more positive attitude was to be more important, pivotal in fact, than Picasso could ever have imagined. The character of this work lends it the title '**Rose Period**', (or 'Pink Period').

In 1906, the art dealer **Ambrose Vollard** bought all of Picasso's paintings from this 'Rose Period'. He paid handsomely for the works and this turn around in the young Picasso's fortunes had massive implications. The **security** this provided allowed Picasso to relax and **experiment** with his talents, painting for his own exploration, rather than with a view to what he could sell. A move **towards abstraction** was the result.

Picasso plundered the wealth of international influence that Paris' status as Europe's centre afforded it. In the **African and Oceanographic Museum** he was drawn to the **figure carvings and masks of African ceremonial rituals**. Harsh angles and symbolic representations of figures, inspired by these images began appearing in his sketches. The influence can clearly be seen in:

Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O), 1911-12. Figure Composition

A hugely important painting, this grouping of nude female figures is credited with being the image that signals the opening of 'Modern Art'. Picasso takes a triangular composition, (familiar to us from an earlier **Cezanne** image), and drastically **reduces his representation of realism**. The strong outlines of his Blue and Rose period figures remain, but the shapes become far more **angular**. **Colour** and **Form** are used minimally, with the paint being applied in **flat surfaces**, roundness barely attempted. **Cezanne's** simplification to **geometric shapes** is advanced to the point where whole sections of each female figure seem difficult to understand. Their twisted poses, brutally sharp limbs and features challenge the viewer as much as their nudity.

It is almost unnecessary to note that this painting caused an immense scandal upon its unveiling. Indeed, we are still quite shocked by it even today.

1906 – 1914 Analytical Cubism

Picasso **collaborated** during this period with his friend and fellow painter, **Georges Braque**. Picasso is commonly held as the father of **Cubism**, and Braque's contribution is somewhat forgotten by popular versions of history. In truth, Picasso's character as expert self-promoter is the thing that ensured his place in history. As we will see, **many others across Europe** were arriving at similar conclusions to Picasso around this period.

Analytical refers to the pairs' **reduction of the curves and forms** of recognizable items.- e.g. the human figure or still life objects – to **flat, angular, directional 'planes'**. These were investigated using a **limited range of colours and tones**. Mainly dull, muted palettes.

Picasso described Cubism as trying to capture several views of the same thing simultaneously. This is perhaps the simplest way in which we can approach cubist images and try, as we naturally always do, to make sense of them.

Portrait of Henry Kahnweiler, 1911 by Picasso

Violin and Palette, 1910 by Braque

Next came the experimentation with sections of the actual objects themselves being employed in the artworks. Built up **almost collage** like, paintings began to contain sections of **actual newspaper, string and wood veneer**. These were also often built-up like a relief sculpture, rising out of the canvas. This use of non-traditional painting materials gave this technique the name **Synthetic** Cubism.

e.g. **Still Life with Newspaper, 1912** , by Georges Braque.

The **bravery** of dealers like Ambrose Vollard in supporting such experimentation plays a very important part in the evolution of 20th century art. The money they provided allowed artists like Picasso and Braque to widen the horizons, experimenting with more and more daring ideas.

Throughout his life, Picasso began and ended relationships with a string of women. These relationships are well documented in his portraits. See for example:

Portrait of Dora Maar, 1937

Picasso's hatred of Fascism was well known and amply illustrated in his anti-war statement of 1937. He made a very blatant and controversial condemnation of the massacre at Guernica, a small Spanish town near his birthplace that was mercilessly bombed in a bid to warn off growing revolutionary forces.

Guernica, 1937

Yet, he was one of the few artists who **did not flee Paris** during the Nazi occupation during WWII. Despite the Fascist forces' noted mistrust of anything out of the ordinary, it is reported that they were intimidated by his reputation and fierce character.

Pablo Picasso is the most famous of all **early abstract artists**, but he was by no means a lone voice. All across Europe – in **Britain, Germany, Italy and even further east in Russia** – artists were expanding their experiments towards semi-abstractness, simplification and emphasizing the geometric. Look at some of these for comparison. See if you can find examples that you interest / excite you as much , or more than the better known Picasso or Braque examples:

Britain	Vorticism	Percy Wyndham Lewis , (England) Paul Nash , (England)–WWI Official War Artist Stanley Cursiter , (Scotland)
France	Orphism \ Simultanism	Robert Delaunay Sonia (Terk) Delaunay
Italy	Futurism	Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Giacomo Balla Gino Severini Umberto Boccioni
Germany	Der Blau Riter	Auguste Macke Franz Marc Wassily Kandinsky
Russia	Avant-Garde	Kasemir Malevich Steponova
U.S.A.	Synchromism	Harold De Muth Charles Sheeler

1900 – 1914 was a period of European history that witnessed much change. Art is always a social history document and we see these changes reflecting in the images of the day. Not just things like the birth of the motor car, electric light, photography, but also the rise of fascism, revolution and prevailing wish for social change. Much of this was halted by WWI in 1914. The war had a huge impact on those discussed above, especially the Italian Futurists.