# "Cubism" at the Met: Modern Art That Looks Tragically Antique

Ben Davis, Thursday, November 6, 2014

SHARE





Georges Braque, *The Castle of La Roche-Guyon* (1909).
Photo: © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

First thing's first: The Metropolitan Museum's current "Cubism" show is very good. If you are an art lover, go see it.

Now that this is out of the way, we can move on and ask if there is actually anything left to say about Cubism.

The show, sweeping through six packed, mausoleal galleries, presents some of the best examples of Cubist art that money can buy—and I mean that phrase very literally, since it is in essence a curated inventory of cosmetics mogul Leonard A. Lauder's obsessive Cubist collection, a trove he pledged to the Met last year as a promised gift. (As the heir of Estée Lauder, Leonard is, incidentally, a perfect



Latest Headlines


Singapore Gallery Opens Southeast Asian Group Show in Cuba


Makeshift Chinatown Button Shop Gallery Still Exists


Top Collector Aby Rosen Talks Wining and Dining with...


These Turn-of-the-Century Selfies Are Fantastic


Ina Ginsburg, Arts Patron and Warhol Chum, Dies at...

representative of Thomas Piketty's theory that we are returning to “patrimonial capitalism.")

In the show's catalogue, Jack Flam reminds us that the term “cubism" actually came into currency in 1910 to describe a group that specifically did not include the movement's pioneers, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. It was used then to refer to artists like Jean Metzinger and Henri Le Falconnier, as well as Marcel Duchamp and his brother, the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, the so-called “Salon Cubists." This context goes missing from the Met's “Cubism" blockbuster. Instead, Lauder's collection focuses on the biggest names, the “Four Horsemen" of the Cubist apocalypse.

Pablo Picasso, *The Oil Mill* (1909).
Photo: © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Thus, in the opening galleries, you have a cascade of classic early-period Cubism by Picasso and Braque. In smallish landscapes like Picasso's *The Oil Mill* (1909) and Braque's *The Castle of La Roche-Guyon* (1909), they come across very much as what they were, lusty young art nerds competing to out-Cézanne one another. Ultimately, they out-Cézanned Cézanne, carrying the Post-Impressionist master's laborious analysis of form to the point where form broke apart all-together. This discovery inspired an exchange of exploded still-lifes, the kind of intimate yet adventurous paintings that we think of as quintessentially Cubist. Often, these center on references to table games, like dice or chess, as well as musical instruments, suggesting both the hothouse art studio atmosphere that was the context of their work, and what the two painters were doing: playing around, jamming together.

Juan Gris, *Houses in Paris, Place Ravignan* (1911).
Photo: Promised Gift from the Leonard A. Lauder Cubist Collection.

Next comes Juan Gris, Picasso's fellow Spanish expat and a former political cartoonist, who gets his own gallery at the Met. In works like *Houses in Paris, Place Ravignon* (1911)—displayed both as a study and as the final version to show how meticulous the placement of the fragmented forms is—Gris's melodious spin on Picasso/Braque's wild style looks terrific, though it does not dispel his reputation as *Friends* to their *Seinfeld*, the better-looking rip-off, but missing some of the spiky, subversive edge.

The show concludes with a too-abbreviated presentation of the other big name, Fernand Léger, whose signature move was to transform everyone and everything he saw into robot-like cylindrical parts. His 1913 *Drawing for "The Staircase"* and *Still Life*, from the same year, look startlingly similar. Both are on tan paper, both a collection of shimmery cylinders standing in for typical artistic subject matter. He should really be called a “tubist" instead of a “cubist."

Fernand Léger, *Drawing for "The Staircase"* (1913).
Photo: © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

“I consider the modern school of painting to be the most daring thing that has ever existed," the poet-critic Guillaume Apollinaire, who had introduced Braque to Picasso in 1907, wrote with characteristic poet-critic hyperbole in *The Cubist Painters*. “It has raised the question of beauty itself." To anyone who's taken Modern Art 101, the Met's “Cubism" show will certainly elicit a shiver of pleasurable recognition. But it takes real effort—and is maybe even impossible now—to see the work as Apollinaire did.

How do we see it? For one thing, when we look at it, we see a billion dollars. That is the amount that the Lauder collection is valued at, the hook for headline-writers everywhere touting his donation. Of course, the great Cubist paintings were always destined for the halls of the well-to-do—Picasso, Braque, Gris, and finally Léger were all snapped up into exclusive contracts with dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. But by now, more than a century on, this art is so synonymous with money that it looks not like thrilling innovation but like a safe investment; instead of raising “the question of beauty itself," these paintings appear as icons of good taste.

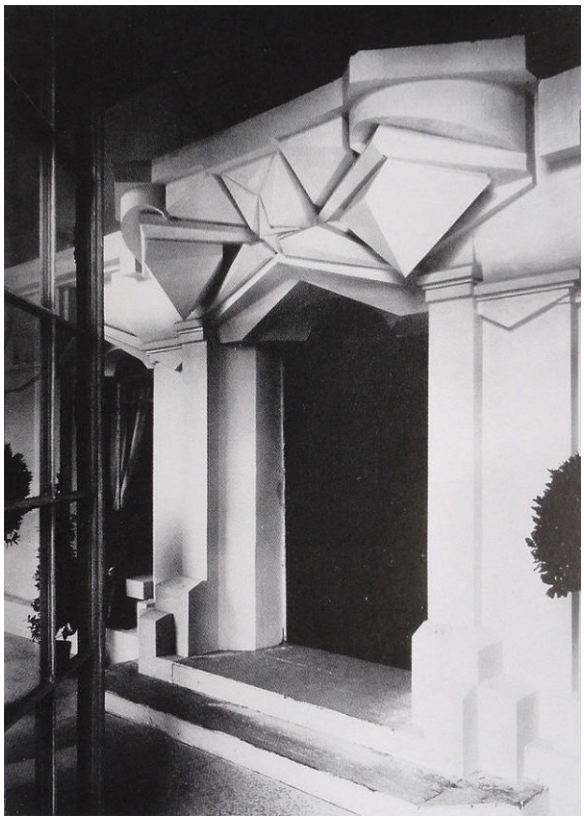
Incidentally, the curation here does nothing to cut against this impression by introducing the show with an antechamber featuring photographic wallpaper showing the paintings as they are hung in Lauder's mansions. What purpose this device serves besides flattering an ego and giving the show a certain *MTV Cribs* accent, I don't know.

Photographic wallpaper depicting Leonard Lauder's collection in situ, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Cubism" exhibition

In fact, however, I'd argue that the weight of money is the smaller of the burdens borne by this art. The even greater challenge to seeing Cubism today is something else: its vast *popular* success.

Cubism gets credit for opening the way to abstract art. But its influence on fine art is really the least of it. Just four years after Henri Matisse was turning his nose up at Braque's "little cubes," the second generation Cubists were showing off a "Cubist House" (by Duchamp-Villon) in the autumn salon of 1912. That is, the movement's style was almost immediately perceived as not just relevant to fine art objects, but as presenting a new, modern way of approaching form, and consequently as being possibly transformative to architecture and design. Cubism's influence was felt in the streamlined, mechanomorphic whimsies of Art Deco, and a conventionalized version of Cubist thinking thereby became part of the foundation of modern graphic and industrial design.

In some very real sense, we live in a Cubist world now. But one consequence of this insight is that you must admit that it is difficult today to truly appreciate this art's original brilliance, much as the first electric lights must have been dazzling in a way that we, in our light polluted contemporary cities, cannot really appreciate.



Raymond Duchamp-Villon, 1912, *La Maison Cubiste* (Cubist House) at the Salon d'Automne, 1912, detail of the entrance

The period charted by the Met's "Cubism" show ends, as so many things did, with the First World War. Yet one of my favorite anecdotes about Cubism dates from wartime Paris, from Picasso's longtime patroness, Gertrude Stein. "I very well remember at the beginning of the war being with Picasso on the boulevard Raspail when the first camouflaged truck passed," she remembered. "It was at night, we had heard of camouflage but we had not yet seen it and Picasso amazed looked at it and then cried out, yes it is we who made it, that is cubism."

Picasso's intuition was literally correct, as camouflage was the creation of a section of French painters employed by the military, applying modern art to the practical problem of confounding the Germans ("In order to deform totally the aspect of the object, I had to employ the means that cubists use to represent it," said project leader Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scévola). I always think of Picasso's reaction as one of the more haunting anecdotes in the history of modern art, with its overtones of child-like artistic innocence cut by disoriented awe, the slow-maturing realization that modern art was a kind of invasive species released into the visual landscape, and that its implications were multiplying and as yet unknown.

We can't quite share this innocence today, or at least we can mainly appreciate it as history; hushed over-reverence for these paintings is, to some extent, the negation of what such a style meant. Because in its day it was not just a manner of generating trophies or pleasing composition, but a fearsome, unkempt, experimental, and fervently new way of appreciating the world. We are now at once too far and too close to the spirit of Cubism to appreciate it easily. It is, as it were, camouflaged from us, and we can approach it only as we approach the objects behind all those little cubes, indirectly, piecing it back together from the splinters and clues left for us.

*"Cubism: The Leonard A. Lauder Collection" is on view at the*

*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through February 16, 2015.*

SHARE

## Related Articles

**NEXT ART WORLD ARTICLE**

Artist Censored After Artwork With Daughter Branded As Paedophilia