

Analysis

Perspective

Synthesis

Picasso

Cézanne Braque

"All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree"

Einstein

Cubism

Cubism

From the Museum

Pablo Picasso:
Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.), 1911;

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Paul Cézanne:
Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine, 1887;

Courtauld Institute of Art, London

Georges Braque:
Atelier VIII, 1911;

Colección Masaveu, Oviedo, Spain

Les Femmes d'Alger was an explosion of intuitive creativity that took a quantum leap forward in reshaping our perspective of art and the modern world. Picasso's *Femmes* proclaimed the future as they echoed the monumental nudes and mythical forms of the past. It was a painting that was "destroyed" before it was "created"; analysed as deconstruction before synthesised into something completely new (rivaling the Renaissance in its novel approach to perspective); and as individual and precocious in its execution as multi-dimensional in the forces that shaped it. Five heroic, sharply stylised nudes whose planar shapes exude the primitive dissonant power of forms are crowned by magnetic heads that stare straight at us through angular eyes and medusa-like faces. Their bodies dramatically confront us even though they are rigidly suspended in their surroundings – a fused hardness that contrasts with the transitoriness of impressionism. There is no stillness: no fixed focal point or single source of light; and no floor, horizon or uniform sense of depth. The integrity of mass as distinct from space has now been fragmented as dissected anatomies give us multiple perspectives simultaneously. Muted colour further emphasises form whilst use of the full colour spectrum (pink hued contours of the nudes set off by icy blue panes) allows for an alternative interpretation of depth perspective. Negative space is now positively painted freeing up the exploration of mass and void, line and plane, colour and value.

Picasso's *Femmes* was initially a Barcelona brothel scene that began as an allegory of vice (sailor-client seated amid fruit and women) and virtue (medical student entering on the left with a skull). But Picasso's large canvas yearned for a grander, timeless statement, and he had the genius, drive and confidence to experiment, rework and shape his painting towards the "discovery" that it became. In several master strokes of intuitive analysis and synthesis, the novel geometries of Picasso's *Femmes* have combined the primitivism of African tribal art with western archaic sculptural forms and the newest ideas in science and mathematics of space, time and dimension (Poincaré, Einstein). The multi-faceted nature of Cubist art shattered the autonomy of the individual object but in so doing enabled objects to both integrate with and transcend their environment. Cubism highlighted metamorphosis and change rather than permanence and made instability, indeterminacy and multiple points of view staples of modern art. The quantum world has now been embraced and Picasso is true to his pronouncement that "*Je est un autre*".

In reimagining three-dimensional pictorial space on a two-dimensional surface, Picasso had been shown the way by Cézanne and spurred on by Braque. Cézanne's series of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* nature paintings exemplify his patient exploration of the relativity of seeing as he *moved around* both object and visual space and painted with "*both eyes*". However the ambiguity that came with Cézanne's optics being "*not in the eye but in the brain*" was initially seen as impotence. Later generations saw this very same duality as greatness and intellectualised it. Braque in particular freed himself from all illusionistic perspective (*unnecessary distance between object and viewer*) and "*painted space*" that could be more "*fully experienced*". Whereas Picasso hungered for new beginnings and so constant and abrupt change was inevitable (mistresses and art styles), Braque's quest was for ultimate resolution leading to an oeuvre that evolved gradually. Initially, Picasso and Braque were kindred spirits as they created a new cubist vocabulary, but it is the *Atelier* series of Braque that carried this experiment towards its natural conclusion. *Atelier VIII* is a complex summation of everything Braque had learned about art during his long life (incorporating both "analytical" and "synthetic" stages of cubism). For Braque, harmony is attained when "*objects do not exist except in so far as a rapport exists between them, and between them and the viewer*". Above the lived-in microcosm of the painter's studio in *Atelier VIII* flies a huge white bird, the embodiment of the creative force. All of a sudden, space-time has collapsed into a dimension of art where the solitary experimentalist (Cézanne), the exuberant genius (Picasso) and the methodical intellectual (Braque) are all juxtaposed, somewhat separated from everything that has gone before but intimately connected to all that will follow.

Tom Kotsimbos

Dept of Medicine, Central Clinical School, Monash University; Dept of Allergy, Immunology and Respiratory Medicine, Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, 3004, Australia. E-mail: tom.kotsimbos@monash.edu