

CARL EINSTEIN

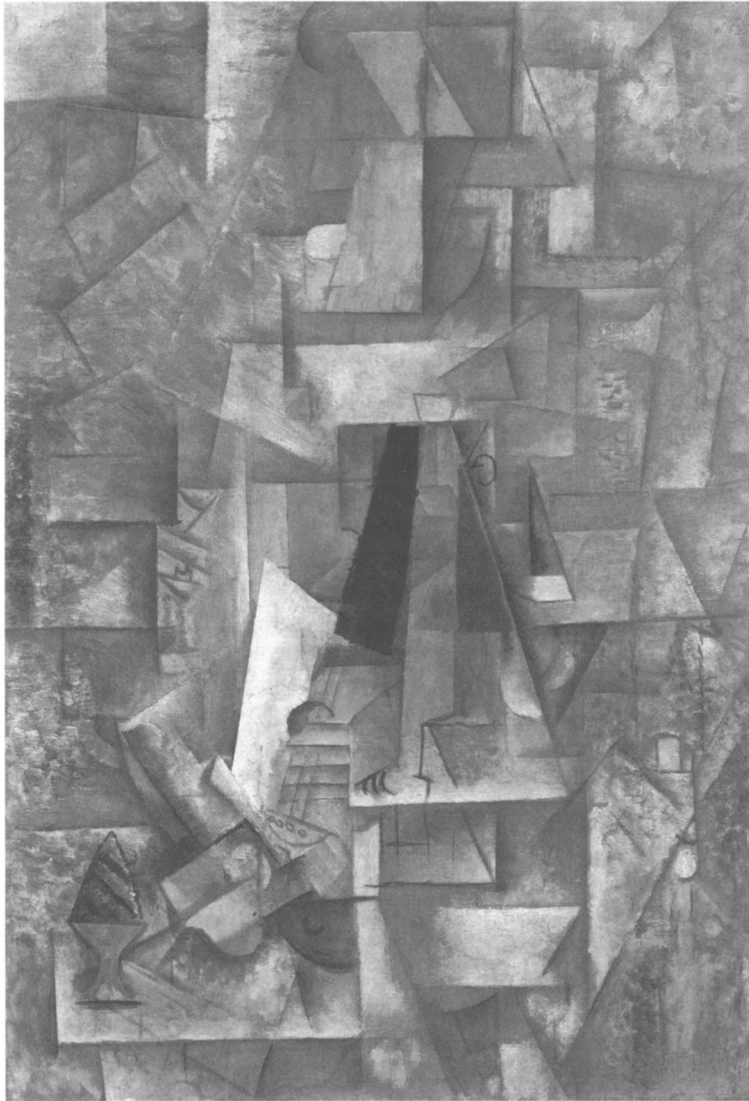
Translated and introduced by Charles W. Haxthausen

Carl Einstein's writing on modern art is to a large extent defined by his encounter with Cubism. Although not mentioned by name, Cubism informed his early theoretical essay "Totality" (a draft of the first section of the text was originally titled "Picasso"), and his *Negro Sculpture* (1915). Yet not until 1926 did he publish a fully developed account of Cubist painting, in the first edition of his *Art of the Twentieth Century*.¹ "Notes on Cubism" (1929), written for *Documents*, offers a condensed version of that interpretation, now embedded within the broader approach to the changing functions of images that characterized "Methodological Aphorisms" (1929).

Among early interpretations of Cubism, only Einstein's, from his initial essays of 1912 to his *Georges Braque* of 1934, can be justly compared with Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's *The Rise of Cubism* (1920) in its probing, nuanced analysis and intellectual substance. Yet the two Germans offer essentially antithetical interpretations of this art. For Kahnweiler the fundamental problem facing Cubist painting was a strictly aesthetic one that had emerged with Impressionism: the conflict between illusionistic representation and an increasingly autonomous pictorial structure. In the first phase of Cubist painting, Braque and Picasso attempted to reconcile this conflict by adapting objects to the painting surface through extreme distortions of form. Yet this discrepancy between the beholder's memory images and the distorted objects he encountered in the pictorial representation was deeply disturbing. In 1910, writes Kahnweiler, Braque and Picasso found a solution to this conflict; they eliminated perplexing deformations of the motif by adopting a nonillusionistic schematic rendering of the object's position in space, supplemented by the inclusion of "real details" (lettering, clay pipes, etc.), integrated into the structural whole. These details, augmented by the painting's title, were "a stimulus

* "Notes sur le cubisme," *Documents* 1, no. 3 (1929), pp. 146–55.

1. Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1926), pp. 56–86.



*Pablo Picasso. Man with a Guitar. 1912–13. © 2004 Estate of Pablo Picasso/
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which carries with it memory images. Combining the 'real' stimulus and the scheme of forms, these images construct the finished object in the mind." In the end, Kahnweiler relates the process to the Kantian synthesis described in the first *Critique*, in which differing representations in the mind are reconciled in their diversity in a single act of cognition.² And, ultimately, the painting is reconciled with the known, familiar world as given.

Einstein, by contrast, locates the origins of the Cubist project not merely within a problematic of painting but within a larger epistemological crisis: "a skepticism concerning the identity of objects." For him there is no conflict between representation and structure, for the Cubist's brief is not the representation of objects, but a pictorial figuration of visual (and mental) process. Moreover, for Einstein the conflict between memory images and Cubist form, so troubling to Kahnweiler, marks a salutary historic break with the past. In asserting that the Cubists "undermined memory, in which ideas [*notions*] are reconciled with one another," he seems to be pointedly contradicting Kahnweiler's interpretation. And for good measure he declares, "Their greatest achievement is their destruction of mnemonic images." Purged of memory images, the viewer now experiences the object not as something that exists apart, but as a function of his own vision, his own cognitive processes. The painting is an autonomous totality, unverifiable vis-à-vis reality. It becomes "the distinguishing sign of the visually active human being, constructing his own universe and refusing to be the slave of given forms."

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It is clear that there exists an abyss between art history and the scientific study of art, and that both disciplines have become altogether dubious. When art history wishes to be more than a calendar, it quite naively borrows ill-founded judgments and ideas. Within these ideas the individual works melt into generalities without contours, and the concrete deed dissolves into a sort of vague aestheticism; on the other hand, a thousand anecdotes and dates of art history do not touch at all upon technical questions of the work of art or on the forms themselves. Ultimately one ends up with an anecdotal psychology that transforms the history of art into a novel. As for that pedantic method that consists of pictorial description, we wish to point out that the structure of language is such that it breaks up the synchronic power of the picture and that the heterogeneity of words destroys the overall impression.

A psychological method presents other difficulties. In the first place we know of none that is without problems, none that succeeds in defining its object. Psychoanalysis itself has never pretended to constitute the totality of a method, and psychologists who have previously attempted to create a psychology have

2. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1949), pp. 1, 9–12.

constructed their object in such a way that what was properly psychological was dissipated. In any case, psychology remains incapable of mastering something as complex as the work of art, conditioned as it is by a psychological polarity—on the one hand the genesis of the work, on the other the beholder—considering that the psychological, in contrast to quantitative physics, allows for entirely contradictory effects.

There remains a no less formidable phenomenon: the act of judgment and its terminology. Ideas change as rapidly as fleas change humans. In the first place one would have to write the history of aesthetic judgments to bring some order into this museum of arbitrary terminologies, and begin to discern the foundations of these ideas and these judgments, in order ultimately to determine whether a hierarchy of such values exists at all. In general we believe that a painting, which is a concrete realization, disappears in the act of criticism because it serves as a mere pretext for generalized formulas whenever someone wishes to endow a risky opinion with a universal value by the trick of generalization. The result is nothing more than a witty paraphrase, thanks to which the work of art is neatly inserted into its cultural context, where it disappears as a mere symptom, losing its technical specificity. And then there is the lyrical paraphrase, that revenge of failed poets—let us call them errand boys of poetry.

The main problem remains the difference between these two categories, that of the picture and that of language.

To unhinge the world of objects is to call into question the guarantees of our existence. The naive person believes that the appearance of the human figure is the most trustworthy experience that a human being can have of himself; he dares not doubt this certainty, although he suspects the presence of inner experiences. He imagines that in contrast to this abyss of inner experience the immediate experience of his own body constitutes the most reliable biological unit. His body, the instrument of all spatial experience, seems to him such an infallible machine that he uses it to represent what is most durable and vital: his gods and his dead.

In the past, it was the custom to worship images, images that were the doubles of gods and the deceased, and in this way one strengthened one's belief in a world that seemed all the more certain for being so little subject to proof. The mortal human body became the sign for the immortals. From a eugenic standpoint these idealized archetypes broke all the records, and the optimism of the breeders was glorified from the Parthenon to the postcard. Someday someone should point out the banality, eroticism, and optimism that underlie the academic aesthetic. . . . Everything problematic was countered with an as yet uncorrupted entity, the human figure. What servile optimism and what solace for the ugly and the losers who were thus able to identify with a gigolo who pulls a thorn out of a god's foot, or with a fat dryad!

The possibility of duplicating things calmed those who feared death. The world of pictorial doubles fulfilled a longing for eternity. Weakened aesthetically in order to reinforce the stability of reality, images proved more secure and

durable than human beings. Tautology was insurance against death, and the certainty of things was confirmed by images. One practiced an ancestor cult with objects; still lifes—symbols for the joys of ownership—immortalized dead turkeys, grapes, and asparagus. . . . Eternity, what a fraud!

One put one's trust in conventional objects, those comfortable signals, familiar in their effects. Pictorial positivism, biological indolence. Reality was hypertrophied; one grafted onto it the gonads of evolution, jammed it with an optimistic teleology that was nothing more than an ersatz metaphysics.

Around 1908 a new sentiment began to gather strength: the indifference of pictorial technicians vis-à-vis the motif evolved into a skepticism concerning the identity of objects.

Sentimental people could easily suspect a pessimism at work here. . . . Reality began a death struggle, and at the same time there was an interest in archaic, mythic, and tectonic epochs. A long-prepared dualism between form and object now became manifest: the real was rejected as a criterion for the image; this was the end of that optimistic unity of reality and image. The image was no longer an allegory, no longer a fiction of another reality. The rights of reality were therefore drastically curtailed, and in this sense one can speak of the *lethal power* of the work of art. A tangled reality disintegrates when confronted with unmediated facts; one could speak of an asceticism analogous to that of the mystics, of a retreat into the regions of autonomous vision.

History is not unitary: different generations create different value systems that are rooted in their respective presents. One can discern a shift of axis in the course of history. The models that up until now were considered classical (Polykleitos or Myron, for example) today look like the virtuosos of a degenerate classicism and the end of a grand tradition, just as Socrates no longer looks like the initiator of philosophy but rather like the culmination of the great age of mythic antiquity. Characteristic of mythic epochs is the sense for grand construction and tectonic forms, a hierarchy of forms that later disappeared with the use of tactile details and pictorial equivalents. Frontality and surfaces dominate. In these periods important sculptural motifs were invented: the columnar male figure, for example, the sun menhir, or the crouching Egyptian figure whose head is a sphere resting on the cube of the body. Parallelism and the repetition of forms are used in relief. It is always the archaic epochs in which we see this practice. The paintings of the Paleolithic era, for example, display a richer repertory of forms than those of the Neolithic period. Yet we are struck by a powerful dictatorship over objects; the architectural sense is dominant, as if one wanted to defend oneself against irrational forces and avoid the cruel hold of objects.

We do not wish to conceal that there is a negative side to the taste for the primitives. Sometimes, out of fatigue, one looks for quick and easy solutions and wants to simplify the historical heritage. One produces generalized forms into which the spectator automatically projects the details. We are familiar with these so-called visual revolts that operate with second-rate means and we are not

ignoring the misunderstandings provoked by false contemporaneity. Is there anyone who does not claim to be an heir of Paul Cézanne or Georges Seurat? But often one emphasizes only the technical nuances, instead of recognizing that these painters mark the advent of grand decorative composition. Too frequently a new synthesis has been proclaimed when it was solely a matter of decorative arrangement.

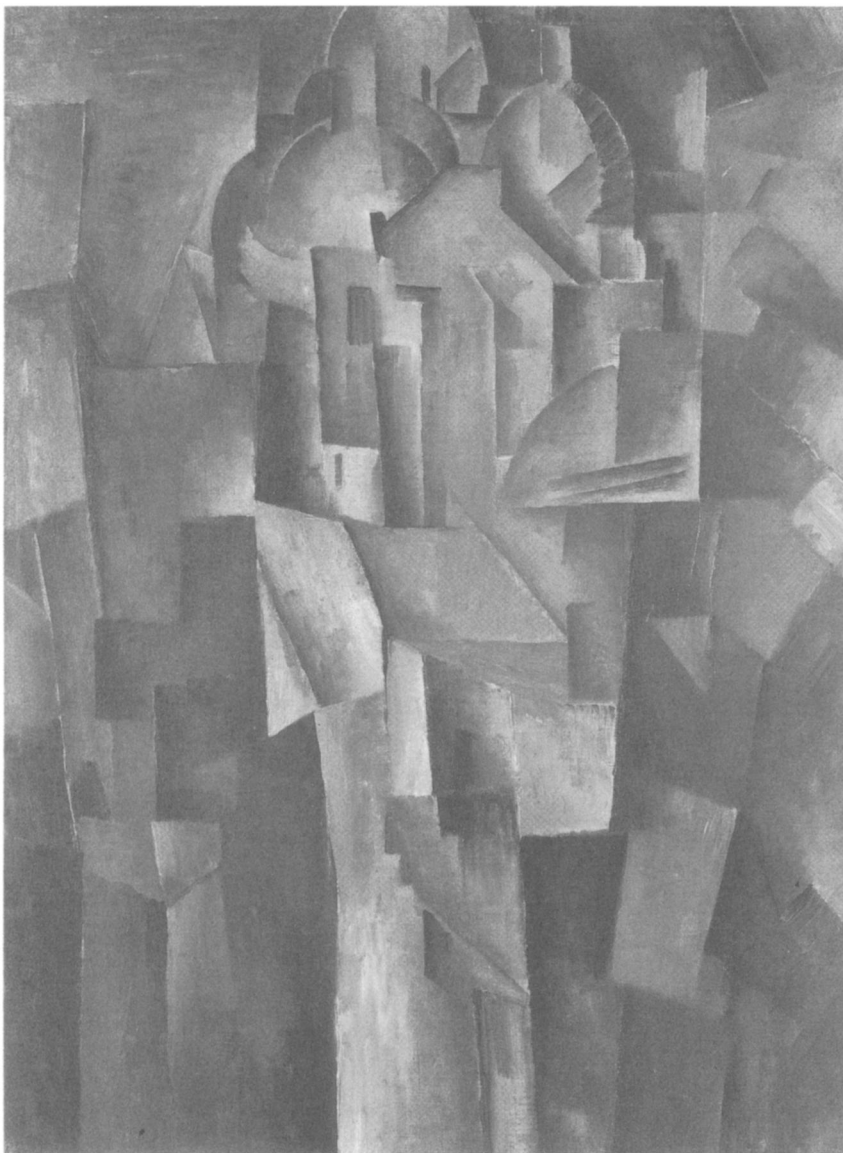
It is necessary to distinguish clearly between *autonomous vision* and *deformation*. As an example of deformation we cite the metaphorical variations in which two different representations become conflated. When a naturalistic representation is schematized to the point that the model assumes the role of commentary on the stylization, it is rather a matter of an abbreviation with the goal of idealizing the model by means of a *facile schema*. In caricature and the grotesque, stylization operates in a fashion hostile to the object; two different modes of being are conjoined here. In caricature, it is judgment that is predominant. In any case, deformation presupposes a naturalistic orientation and is generally a compensation for a pedantic puritanism that adores wax figures.

Here we have reproduced some examples of Cubism from its first period, which is called *Analytical Cubism*. Instead of presenting the result of an observation, the painter presents the result of a visual process that is not interrupted by objects. He is not content with an abbreviated rendering that would eliminate the refracted parts.

The motif is a function of human vision; it is subordinated to the conditions of the painting. The decisive factor is volume, which is not identical to mass, because volume is a totalization of discontinuous optical movements. Thus the conventional continuum of the body is ruptured. . . . For far too long volume has been confused with mass, and this has led to tactile interpretations in painting. An antipictorial experience was transposed onto a planar surface, and tactility was suggested by the modeling of light and shadow. There is, however, another manner of representing volume: the planar and simultaneous figuration of optical movements.

It is characteristic of Cubism that it should have passed through different stages of formation: first the simple deformation, then the analysis and destruction of the motif, and finally the realization of diverse syntheses. This indicates the depth of the problem that it posed, one of such magnitude that for a given painter any one of these moments could seem to constitute the whole of the problem. Here we are dealing with only a part of the road traveled, Analytical Cubism, the period in which we see less the analysis of the exterior motif than the dissociation of pictorial ideas. The principal challenge was to represent volume as a planar phenomenon even as one showed the plastic movements in all their richness.

From a biological standpoint volume and depth constitute the strongest, the most elemental sensation. It is in space that we project our action and our energy; without it, the existence of objects seems impossible. The task lies in condensing these spatial experiences in such a way that they are repeatable and are concentrated in a planar unity less complex than that of our body.



*Georges Braque. Le Sacré Cœur. 1909–10.
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Around 1908 painters began to be dissatisfied with purely pictorial solutions. A crisis of color erupted. This is, as in the time of Giotto, the dawn of a new attempt at the conquest of space and the expansion of visual consciousness.

The artists of the Renaissance had discovered what they called *nature*, and individualization of the motif was the essence of their art. That is why, in the late baroque, one moved toward ever greater tactile illusion until a purist like Domenichino separated painting from this misalliance with sculpture.

The Cubists first eliminated the conventional motif, which is situated at the periphery of visual processes. Now the motif is no longer an objective thing separate from the spectator; rather, the thing seen participates in his activity as he configures it according to the sequence of his subjective optical perceptions.

As stable signs of our actions, objects are precious. We treasure resemblance as a guarantee of life. The world as tautology. One duplicates creation, which is regarded as perfect. The astonishment wrought by miracles, the sensation of gaps, the multisensory experience of objects—all this disappears for the sake of a reassuring repetition. A bit of positive theology is eternalized by reproduction, and the need for identity is satisfied because everywhere one finds the identity that one sought within oneself. Yet we pay for this tendency toward reproduction by diminishing creation.

It was the Cubists who undermined the object forever identical with itself; in other words they undermined memory, in which ideas are reconciled with one another. Their greatest achievement is their destruction of mnemonic images. Tautology conveys the illusion of the immortality of things, and it is by means of descriptive images that one has sought to avoid the annihilation of the world through forgetting.

The Cubist painters separated the image from the object, eliminated memory and turned the motif into a simultaneous and planar figuration of representations of volume.

The sensations of a table as such cannot be rendered, but only our own sensations, and a table represented in a picture makes sense only if the sum of a complex of tangled sensations called *table* is subordinated to the technical demands of the picture. The mnemonic legacy of objects had to be destroyed, forgotten; thus the image became not the fiction of another reality but a reality with its own conditions.

Here we do not wish to interpret the work of the great Impressionists, whose efforts are assessed by critics in excessively naturalistic terms, while in truth it was the Impressionists who revealed the primacy of the planar surface and rendered objects as symptoms of a subordinate phenomenon: light. At another time we will show that it is important to separate these masters from the literature of naturalism with its limited contemporary relevance.

In this sketch we can give only an outline of the situation in 1908. At some other time we will describe the agony of space and the different phases of its renewal. Suffice it to mention that Cézanne was the first to show the predominance

of volume over color, he who told Joachim Gasquet: “Only the volumes are important!”

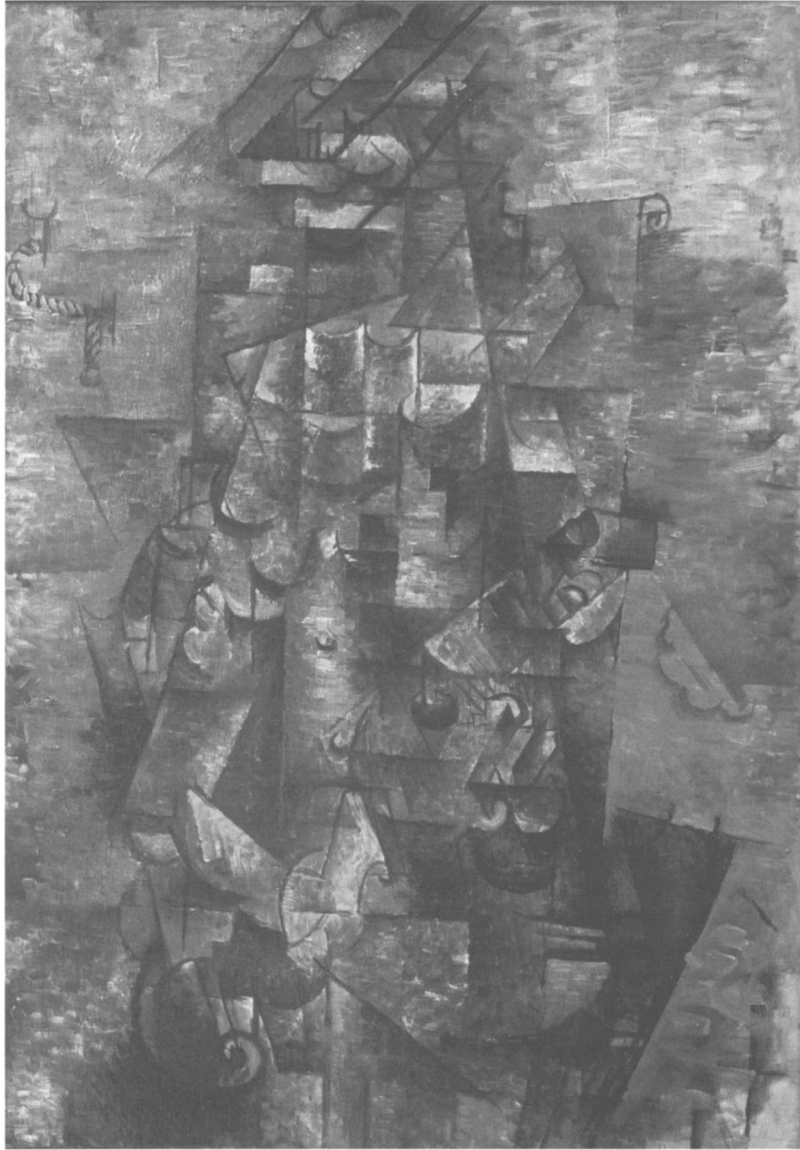
A great visual discontent became apparent around 1908. Fixed objects had already been fragmented by the chromatic analysis of the Impressionists. Now one went further, and realized that the defined object is the result of a complex tangle of experiences and is, ultimately, a myth; in other words, one could open up objects as one opens a box, and break them down in order to select those elements that are important for the painting. Similarly, in a novel or a play, time is cut up arbitrarily, and this category of literary time has nothing to do with actual time; take, for example, the dramatic catastrophes where qualitative and contrasting temporalities cross like the contrasting forms of a painting. One could almost call the drama the annihilation of real time.

The first condition of Cubist painting is the surface. One no longer works between two imaginary layers that traverse the canvas. Now the totalization of the picture is achieved by its unverifiability, by the fact that the beholder does not leave the reality of the painting and that the artist’s vision is not interrupted by comparative observation. The viewer isolates himself and forgets. This is a fatal process, and it is the observer who is in charge, not the motif. This process could be called ascetic. The painter selects the decisive moments of an experience that occurs in two dimensions—he eliminates the tactile elements and creates an independent form that is separate from other phenomena. He renders a pictorial construction whose parts balance each other out without recourse to object associations.

Temporal notions of movement are transformed into a static simultaneity in which the primordial elements of contrasting movements are condensed. These movements are divided into different *formal fields* in which the figure is dissociated and broken up. Instead of presenting, as one did previously, a group of different objective movements, one creates a group of subjective optical movements. Light and color are employed in a tectonic sense, to support the construction.

Volume is expressed by the simultaneous contrast of differently situated parts, or rather by rendering certain parts as situated on several axes simultaneously. The painter deploys planes that intersect, what we call *transparency of planes*. The figure is broken up. Partial motifs are shattered or repeated, depending on their importance for the composition. It was not the cube that was important; one chose simple constructive elements that made possible a unitary sequence of forms and contained the principal directions.

The method we are describing here is that of Analytical Cubism ca. 1911. While the Impressionist dissociated forms by means of color, the Cubist does so tectonically. The notion of space was enriched, even as one used simple elements that allowed for variations and clear contrasts. We see here on the one hand a complication of space and on the other a simplification of means. The mnemonic dimension (i.e., that which is conceived only over time) is integrated by means of dynamic presentations, thanks to the planar dissociation, and by showing the



*Braque. Man with a Guitar. 1911–12.
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multiplicity of the axes of the figures. The Cubist does not imitate volume, but instead renders its autonomous equivalent; and the totality seems to us still stronger, due to what has been said of the separated parts. This simultaneity has allowed the incorporation of optical acts into the work that had remained unconscious until now. One chooses views along several axes, and it is thus that the tension between movements and formal fields is reinforced. The condition of such simultaneity is a quickness immeasurable in time that resembles the rapid, synthetic force of dreams. Such quickness is possible only because one is not distracted by the motif, and because the objective tendency dwells at the periphery, yet does remain present, for the pictorial forms are directed toward the subjugation of nature.

One final, important point: these imaginative paintings present a completely invented structure. Because of a certain geometric quality of the figurative elements, this painting has been considered rationalistic, but this reproach can be easily repudiated, for it is precisely in mythic periods that we almost always find a tectonic art, and the tectonic has never been a means of mimetic representation. It would be more accurate to say that since 1908 the figure has become functional and has been humanized. We observe a sort of animism of form, except that now the vitalizing forces no longer come from spirits but from human beings themselves. Artists no longer work from an image of the gods but from their own conceptions. Consequently we regard tectonic forms, precisely because they are not measurable, to be the most human, for they are the distinguishing sign of the visually active human being, constructing his own universe and refusing to be the slave of given forms.