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History of Art and Design II GE2014 J

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Formal Analysis Essay

My Formal Analysis Essay is on *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* (1911) by Pablo Picasso, 24 1/8 x 19 7/8 in. (61.3 50.5 cm), Oil on Canvas. This painting is part of the permanent collection at Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas and was included in the summer exhibition “Picasso and Braque: The Cubist Experiment, 1910 - 1912”. As the museum flyer states, the exhibition focused on a few paintings and etchings “executed by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso during one of the most fecund and intensely experimental exchanges in the history of Western art.”¹ It was my pleasure to have had the opportunity to sit, study and sketch in front of Picasso’s *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* and Braque’s *Still Life With a Pair of Bandarillas*, to me the obvious highlights of the exhibit. My natural tendency was to compare the artist’s styles, innovations, techniques and their contributions to each other’s work, which I did, but then focused on Picasso’s painting.

The two brilliant works were done while the artists were living in the town of Céret, Southern France in 1911 during a crucial time in the early development of Analytical Cubism. Picasso and Braque saw each other every day to compare notes, see each other’s work and share ideas; they worked quickly to produce as much as possible because of their collective and personal passion and drive to create new art. This was a very prolific period and their exchange of ideas led to new discoveries, techniques, and visions to create what is now called Cubism. This was a period in Western culture when science had a new impact on man’s vision of reality and philosophy had an impact on man’s instincts and desires, which led artists to change the habit of how people ‘see’. The primary aim of early Cubism was to produce a conceptual image of an object, as opposed to a perceptual one, leading to what the artists wanted on the surface of the art. It further determined that the subject is not the important idea, but to create form “in abstraction” and reintroduce reality. Design on a two-dimensional surface as art was a major leap, literally right off the canvas, introducing other dimensions to human perception and a new view of his universe.

The French writer and theorist Guillaume Apollinaire summarized well the central concepts of Cubism in 1913:

Authentic cubism [is] the art of depicting new wholes with formal elements borrowed not from the reality of vision, but from that of conception. This tendency leads to a poetic kind of painting which stands outside the world of observation; for, even in a simple cubism, the geometrical surfaces of an object must be opened out in order to give a complete representation of it. . . . Everyone must agree that a chair, from whichever side it is viewed, never ceases to have four legs, a seat and back, and that if it is robbed of one of these elements, it is robbed of an important part.²

I chose this painting because of its stunning brilliance, richness, and depth, like finely crafted gold jewelry. The more I gazed, the more intense its allure became as an immersive experience in the multiple layers of paint, planes, intersecting lines and dimension. I seemed to be allowed to take possession and to be part of the work and help create it, and once inside [the painting], the breathtaking discoveries gave me a sense of well-being. The intensity of construction and treatment of formal elements – beyond the initial visual impact and emotional response – was an unusual and memorable experience. Additionally, the thrill to study the seemingly unconnected symbols and signs laced throughout the framework helped in my analysis and understanding. I have included a page from my sketches along with an image of the painting as part of my research.

At first, the eye is drawn to the upper center of *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* where there appears to be a form in the loosely defined shape of a bottle, but one needs to be patient and ‘see’ beyond merely looking. The fragmented image seems to be recognizable, in one’s imagination, from many points of view and is at first arresting because the mind wants to connect the lines to make recognizable shapes, but at the same time is intriguing because we want to ‘see’ more. Curiosity takes control somewhat like walking toward the horizon and wanting to discover something new and to be enlightened by nature. This is something the painter Picasso does well: allows the viewer to “take possession” of the painting, “connect the dots” and be an integral part of the creation for a moment.

There are identifiable geometric shapes, letter forms, and a stylized grid structure to help orient oneself, but there is imagined shape where planes intersect and create implied line. The painting is a complex layering of visual interpretations of intended form and meaning, or projected understanding of the artist’s grasp of his subject matter and how he wants to translate it. The artist lived what he wants to project as meaning, and has developed a kind of “diary” of the story behind the meaning, so in developing the interpretation of his diary he has to create layers of messages to make a unified whole.

Important practices in the process of making art on the flat canvas surface include some, but not all, of the following techniques specific to the Cubist paintings of Picasso in 1911: fluid brushwork, wet-in-wet, wet-over-dry, colors mixed on the brush, blended colors, dry brush, palette knife, pulled paint, *scraffito*, or scoring with the back of the brush, scraped-back paint, the use of filbert round and flat brushes, stippling, *passage*, or the running of one form into another, charcoal under-drawing, varnished and unvarnished areas, impastoed bricks, *faux bois*, or false wood, stenciled letters, and *Ripolin*. The use of *Ripolin* household enamel paint was one of Picasso’s more successful technical innovations as a glossy, quick drying, contrasting medium, a kind of precursor to acrylic paint. Picasso could work

layer upon layer of paint in a short amount of time, as opposed to waiting for oil paint to dry, thus allowing him to produce many works quickly.

Picasso moved away from the direction of Impressionism, playing down color and “sensation” in order to reorganize his composition on a more architectural basis. Some Impressionist brushwork was incorporated into surface texture, but overall he used a subdued monochromatic palette to avoid emotional overtones. Much of Picasso’s palette was derived from the African sculpture he owned, and he used this pure color without the traditional glaze which would darken and alter the pigment. The final dazzling effect of color and light was from his surface textures, creating an illusion of depth and recession. The use of uncovered, primed, fine-weave canvas functions to produce volume-creating highlights; his signature warm palette; diluent used freely to thin paint to allow the luminous white canvas priming to show through—Picasso’s light came from within the canvas. I want to emphasize the impasto, brick-like strokes that help frame the work but also affect how light is directed with ease and eye flow to clarify the defined imagery, and also to modify the surface near the edge of the painting so we don’t have to consider the formal physical boundaries of the picture plane. These strokes are made with a flat brush, and Picasso referred to them as “Signac-style”, a reference to the technique of the painter Paul Signac.¹

Passage, the running of one form into another which was adopted from the painting techniques of Paul Cézanne, (as well as the use of uncovered, primed, fine-weave canvas to produce volume-creating highlights), is adequately and convincingly used to construct *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum*. I mentioned the imagined shape where planes intersect and create implied line earlier, and here is part of the genius of how the painter knew when to stop painting: to realize an eternal depth of perception and innumerable possibilities of interpretation. Once the eye makes a fairly comfortable aesthetic connection, the eye moves off that focus and the entire image is fragmented again, often from a different view point, angle, or even temperament because the emotions are stirred. Picasso makes his grid in charcoal on the primed canvas to form a scaffolding under the composition and then goes to work on sketching the still life structure again and again, pushing and pulling line from different perspectives allowing the ‘right’ lines to remain, and then shape is born.

Before he began painting *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* Picasso gathered necessary elements needed to complete his narrative so the story in the painting would have continuity. For instance, starting with the title of the piece, we have in our mind’s eye something that resembles more of a photographic image to help us use our imagination. Moving forward, we create a story behind the

snapshot projected as something we can be familiar with and make sense of, otherwise why bother? There are shards and pieces of an allegory to include such as a human element which I detect as a hand in the center of the painting near the base of the perceived bottle of rum, and maybe an eye and nose. Letter forms of differing opacities support the creation of visual depth and aid us to look 'into' the image and around the side and back of the image for a better definition; the letter forms are recognizable and comforting too. The inclusion of type adds a new level of reality and helps anchor the painting so one's mind has time to process that particular moment when viewing. There are implied geometric forms creating shapes such as a possible cigarette, a couple of glasses, table top, a hanging light fixture, labels, bits of paper, a shirt collar or jacket definition, architectural embellishments, a book and so on. I imagine a person and table weighted with the experience of a hard day's work and an evening of drinking, conversation and thinking, dreaming and planning—of life in the process...natural, real and tangible. The interplay of textures, light and color bring the viewer to the two-dimensional surface of the canvas and to the realization that what we're doing is seeing our reflection in the painting, that it's not a three-dimensional fantasy world and we suddenly sense our relationship to our surroundings.

My assessment is that *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* is astonishingly magical in its creation and a treasure for which to be grateful. The brilliance of its conception and the bold genius required to control a creation like this is to me the ultimate thrill of being an artist and shaman; to go to the edge of the abyss of creativity and return intact, willing to share knowledge gained from the experience. The humor and daring needed to imagine a twisted new way to define age-old universal elements and principles is part of Picasso's greatness. After viewing this painting I feel the artist has taught me to 'see' his Analytical Cubist work, which is amazing because I've been 'looking' at it for about half a century! Now, when viewing this type of painting, it tells a story, encourages creativity, and sends a clear message to live for the moment. When sensing the snapshots of moments that make up the narrative of this particular painting it speaks of life and the realization of the experience of living, reminding me of how memories are unique to humans as a species. All of the experiences of living may not be joyful but there are moments that need to be saved in our unique way for others to see—just as the cave paintings from 30,000 years ago were recorded for the future. The preservation of time captured in *Still Life With a Bottle of Rum* is an excellent example of an important role of the artist: to show how life was and that it mattered. This story was recorded for others by Picasso while he was inventing and utilizing a new language that has altered our understanding of his story.

Works Cited

1 <https://www.kimbellart.org/Exhibitions/Exhibition-Details.aspx?eid=73>

Picasso and Braque: The Cubist Experiment, 1910–1912, unites select paintings and nearly all of the prints created by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque during these two exhilarating years of their artistic dialogue, goes on view at the Kimbell Art Museum May 29.

“This small-scale exhibition examines a brief moment with huge implications for the history of art,” commented Eric M. Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum. “This show is the first to focus exclusively on this landmark period of intense productivity and adventure for Picasso and Braque.” The exhibit copy became the skeleton inside my outline. I thought the preciseness of text and educational values were fine and beneficial.

2 Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through The Ages: A Concise Global History*, Second Edition. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.

Gardner's Art Through The Ages: A Concise Global History is a comprehensive, beautifully illustrated tour of the world's great artistic traditions. The book is well designed and clear in its descriptions with opportunity to follow suggested paths for further development. The section on Primitivism and Cubism, including Analytic Cubism on pages 390 and 391 were especially useful for this assignment.

