

Artistic Landscape

ART REVIEW

Everything you know about Cubism is wrong — maybe



JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Juan Gris' "Fruit Dish on a Striped Tablecloth," (1914), on loan from the Frelinghuysen Morris House & Studio in Lenox, is displayed with Luis Egidio Melendez de Ribera's "Still Life with Box of Jelly, Bread, Salver with Glass and Cooler" (1770) as part of "Cubism and the Trompe l'Oeil Tradition" at The Met.

At The Met, 'Cubism and the Trompe l'Oeil Tradition' recasts Cubism as being more than an anti-establishment movement

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NEW YORK, N.Y. — Cubism is — we have been told — an artistic movement that strives to break down the falsehoods of art.

Rather than emulate and create the illusion of reality, cubism did the opposite by presenting multiple perspectives simultaneously, using monochromatic color palettes and flattened picture planes, breaking objects down into geometric shapes and reassembling them in abstract yet recognizable ways.

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, in 1910, turned the modern art world on its head with their flat, fractured paintings filled with geometric shapes. And they did it again, in 1912, when Cubist Juan Gris exhibited for the first time, at the Salon des Independants in Paris. It was not only his debut, but the debut of a new art form, collage or papier collé (pasted paper), a new medium first used by Picasso. Fine art had not seen bits of paper, labels, music sheets, the detritus of everyday life pasted on and used as part of an artists work.

Cubism was radical because it refused to hold a mirror up to the world and reflect back a carbon copy. Cubism was radical because it evolved quickly, refused to stay on the canvas. Cubism wasn't just painted or pasted on. It was sculpted. It was design. It was architecture. It was a concept. It was a refusal to accept the illusion.

At least, that's the story. But, what if everything we had been told, had learned about Cubism is wrong? Or, at least, partially wrong?

What if Picasso, Braque and Gris were so radical, they weren't simply satisfied with deconstructing illusion, with teaching the art world to see reality in a new, abstract way? What if they embraced the illusion in its most highly realistic form — trompe l'oeil (paintings that create the optical illusion of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface)? And with their parodies of the most famous trompe l'oeil paintings were actually creating a discourse about truth and falsehood?

That's the radically new view of Cubism presented by co-curators Emily Braun, curator of The Leonard A. Lauder Cubist Collection at The Met, and Elizabeth Cowling, University of Edinburgh professor emerita, in "Cubism and the Trompe l'Oeil Tradition" at The Metropolitan Museum of

Art through Jan. 22. In this exhibition, long delayed by COVID, Braun and Cowling propose that Cubists, particularly Picasso, Braque and Gris, from 1909 to 1915, were not just parodying the trompe l'oeil European and American artists from the 17th through 19th centuries (wealthy Gilded Age Americans had brought the paintings back into vogue) in their paintings and collages, but were also paying homage to them, by embracing the trompe l'oeil devices that quite literally helped those artists "deceive the eye."

But the exhibition does not stop there, it pushes further, past the artistic devices of deception, the so-called tricks-of-the-trade of illusion, to a conversation that Braun and Cowling argue has been there from the beginning — a discourse shared by both trompe l'oeil artists and Cubists alike.

In pairing, for the first time ever, the works of Picasso, Braque and Gris with those trompe l'oeil works they parodied — works by Samuel van Hoogstraten, Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, Louis Leopold Boilly, William Harnett and more — Cowling says the viewer can see that this is not just a show about "affinities and things that look alike, but how objects and tropes are used over time" and how both groups of artists were after the same goal: questioning the nature of representation and misrepresentation, of truth and falsehoods.

A show seven years in the making, it is ambitious in every sense, bringing together hundreds of works from across the globe — including Picasso's "Still Life with Chair Caning," (the first Cubist collage) on display in the U.S. for the first time in 30 years, and Gris' "Comptoir Sur Une Nappe a Rayures (Fruit dish on a striped tablecloth)" on loan from the Berkshires' very own Frelinghuysen Morris House & Studio.

Ambitious in size and material, its also ambitious in expectation. Not only does it ask you to forget what you know (or don't know) about Cubism, but it also asks you to forget about trompe l'oeil, an art form that's name literally, in English, literally trans-

lates to "deceives the eye."

Forget, they say, that trompe l'oeil is the supreme form of illusion. Forget that trompe l'oeil was thought to be, while a favorite of many, nothing more than an unelevated art form — a mere copy of what existed in reality. Forget that trompe l'oeil artists tried to achieve an exact replica of that what they saw, Braun and Cowling say. Instead, they ask you to think of the trompe l'oeil artist as rejecting the status quo and being the first to challenge the limits of the plane of the painting — a threshold these artists regularly crossed with techniques that thrust objects into an illusionary space between the viewer and the canvas.

Forget, they say, what you know then about Cubism's rejection of the illusion and deception. Forget how Cubism rejects the singular point of view, in favor of many. Forget about deconstruction, about muted palettes and geometric shapes.

Instead, Braun and Cowling urge the viewer to see past those tenants of Cubism — the rigid pillars that scholars and critics have come to hold as truth — and see the similarities of the two forms. See how the Cubists, in paint and collage, create tables with drawers that jut out beyond the canvas, how they create piles of pipes, utensils, playing cards, bowls of fruit and musical instruments cross illusionary thresholds. See how the Cubists use paint, collage papers, fabric, wallpaper, charcoal and graphite to create the illusion of grainy surfaces, of items hanging on walls and casting shadows.

And they are not wrong. There, hanging side by side, the evidence is there. But is it enough? Is it enough to change the thoughts and discourse, scholarly conversations and critics minds?

Some will argue that this conversation is only a small part of the much larger discourse of the Cubist movement, a movement that came in waves and evolutions, that has to be cut into phases — analytic and synthetic and then into time periods — to be discussed comprehensively. There are many already saying, this exhibit is not enough to change how the art world

views these movements together or separate. At most, some have argued, this show shines light on Braque and Gris, given them their due, but has done little more than that.

But I ask, does it matter? Does it matter if there's enough evidence to change opinion? Does it matter if art critics and scholars disagree?

Or is it enough that Braun and Cowling have proposed a radical idea, one that deconstructs the status quo and reconstructs the narrative of who the Cubists were and what they were doing? Only time will tell. Either way, the exhibition is one the Cubists, in theory, would enjoy.

And, if you forget about what you know, what you

don't know and what people think you should know, "Cubism and the Trompe l'Oeil Tradition," at surface value, is a visual smorgasbord of delectable treats that shouldn't be missed.

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