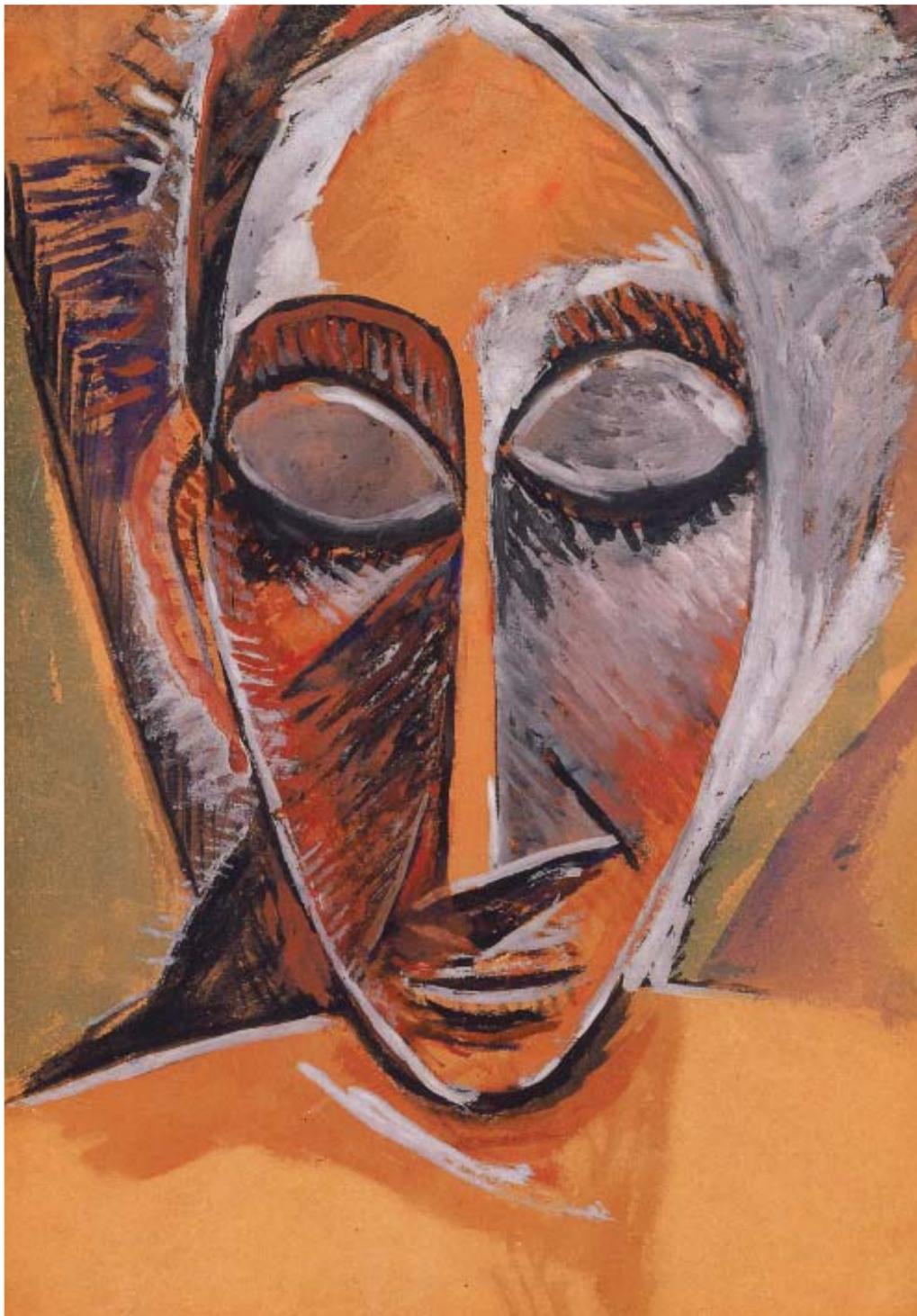


NEVERMIND EUCLID, HERE'S THE CUBISTS



HEAD OF A WOMAN (1907) | PABLO PICASSO

LIKE MANY modern movements in the arts, cubism was first met with ridicule. The lines were skewed, the dimensions off, the effect boxy—or, as the insult ran, “cubist.” In the intervening near-century viewers have radically re-adjusted their gazes. What was once an outrage to the artistic establishment has become a proud part of it. Cubist works by Picasso, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Henri Laurens, Jacques Lipchitz, and Juan Gris—vigorously denounced upon their presentation to the public—are now to be found in the most prestigious collections of modern art in the world.

The Museum of Fine Arts’ “Facets of Cubism” exhibit, which opened on Dec. 7 and runs through April 16, returns us to the origins of cubism, to the strangeness of cubism, and to the strangeness of the origins of cubism. Featuring a remarkable number of rarely to be seen works from private collections, it is by no means a parade of Greatest Hits. Picasso’s “Demoiselles d’Avignon” is not on display, for example, nor are similarly iconic works such as his “Bust of a Woman” or “Violin and Grapes.”

That is all to the good. Not because those works are not masterpieces, but because their greatness has led to their being shown and seen so often—in exhibitions, on postcards, calendars, coffee mugs, and more—that we are no longer accustomed to see the bold change they represented. The bright lights of iconic fame and institutional celebration make it easy to forget why cubist works once seemed so shocking and strange. The coming together of such divergent things as African art and speculative geometry in the minds and hands of the cubists helped them break apart the traditional space of trompe l’oeil representation stretching from Golden Age Greece to the present—and to break through to a new dimension in painting. In short, it is easy to forget that cubism was born of the most unlikely of bedfellows: Euclid and a Guinean sculptor.

One day in 1902 the young French artist Maurice de Vlaminck was seated

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on the Ile de la Grenouillère painting a bridge. The scene was peaceful but his depiction was not. Impatient with the classically inspired and institutionally celebrated trompe l’oeil style, and inspired by the wild imaginings of Van Gogh and Gauguin, Vlaminck was experimenting with the ferocious colors that would soon earn him and his friends the insult “les fauves” (the wild ones) and thereby give a name to the rising fauvist movement.

Vlaminck heard a cough behind him. He turned to find André Derain, a singularly well-connected young painter, who was intrigued by what he saw; the two became fast friends. Vlaminck passed along to Derain his hobby and passion: collecting masks, sculptures, and other objects d’art from the steady flow of adventurers, explorers, sailors, speculators, and colonizers then returning from French West Africa. Derain saw in the vital and vibrant forms of these African arts just what he, along with many artists of the day, was looking for: the promise of something truly new.

Cubism is nature flattened to unexpected depths. It leaves it to the viewer to put the pieces of thought and feeling back together.

A year later Derain passed his newfound passion for the primitive along to Matisse—the French painter who, though not a cubist, was to give the movement its name—and a year after that to Picasso, who was to give the movement its masterpieces. (Matisse did briefly experiment in a cubist vein—attested to in the lithograph “Large Nude” from 1906-07 included in the MFA show.) It was this African influence that led Picasso to paint masks over the shocked faces of his demoiselles d’Avignon in 1907, and to divorce his subsequent explorations ever more from the space of traditional representation. Primitive art, as it came to be called, offered not just what the European artists saw as a magical and mythical

dynamism, but also a way of representing natural forms that was expressive without being realistic.

But primitivism was only one element in the cubist equation. The other was geometry. In 1904, Paul Cézanne, the French painter who Picasso would come to call “the father of us all,” said that artists should treat nature “in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone.” This was an extraordinary thing to say. It seems that what he was envisioning was depth and the best way to render the solidity of the material world. Still more extraordinary than Cézanne’s cryptic prescription, however, was that gifted young artists began to follow it.

In the case of Picasso, Cézanne’s geometrical initiative found an unlikely lobbyist in Maurice Princet, insurance actuary by day and amateur mathematician by night, who was a regular visitor to Picasso’s studio. One day he brought with him a curious idea. According to Princet, art needed to appropriate the untapped riches of geometry—just as Cézanne had wished—but not just any geometry. During these years of artistic and other upheaval, all manner of persons, places, and things were being overturned. Princet added an unexpected name to the list: Art needed to overthrow Euclid.

The Greek mathematician had laid down the geometrical rules for the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, and much of the rest of the three-dimensional world in the third century BC. Those rules remained largely in effect. Why should they be overturned? Princet’s answer was simple: to go beyond the traditional space of Euclidian geometry and enter at last the “fourth dimension.”

The cubist work of art was to enter this elusive dimension. The question remained how. Picasso and his cubist collaborator Georges Braque looked for the fourth dimension in a surprisingly simple place: the second one. The two artists worked so closely together during these years that it is said they themselves had trouble telling their work apart; Braque was later to say, “We were like two mountain climbers roped together.”

Paintings had always been two-dimensional. The cubists found that Western art had treated its two-dimensionality, however, like an embarrassing secret—striving to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. The Golden



STILL-LIFE (1913) | FERNAND LÉGER



FRUIT DISH AND GLASS (1912) | GEORGES BRAQUE

The curious tale of how Picasso and others combined African art and speculative geometry—and broke through to a new dimension in painting

BY LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE



MAN WITH GUITAR (1913) | PABLO PICASSO



Euclid



Pablo Picasso



Paul Cézanne

Age Greek painter Zeuxis is rumored to have held such a fine and faithful mirror up to nature that he could fool it. The grapes he painted on an Athenian wall were said to seem so real, so round, reflecting, and three dimensional that birds came and pecked at them, only to knock their surprised beaks against a flat wall.

Picasso and Braque valued technical mastery of this sort, but sought different criteria for artistic success and turned away from what they saw as the coy successes of linear perspective. They called for the end of trompe l’oeil artifice, the end of fooling birds. The goal was no longer to mimic the third dimension, but the fourth.

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When we look at a painting like Picasso’s “Standing Figure” (1908), featured in the MFA show, it indeed seems to treat the human figure in terms of the cylinders, spheres, and cones Cézanne called for. But that is not all it does. Its geometrical abstractions extend in another direction. The natural forms Cézanne spoke of were three-dimensional forms requiring the techniques of perspective to render them on a two-dimensional canvas. Picasso and Braque sought something else: to bring out the disguised geometry of painting’s process. They wanted to be frank about the artifices of art.

This is where the two strains that gave rise to cubism—passionate primitivism and analytical geometry—came together. African art seemed to the early cubists immediate, intuitive, magical, and mystical. Geometrical speculation

and the sharp lines of its rationality seemed to offer them a blueprint for the implementation of such intuitive intensity. But in addition to breaking with the technical conventions of painting, Picasso and Braque also wanted to break with its thematic conventions: the idea that art had to be about something grand, whether Christ on the cross, or Napoleon at Jena, or the rape of the Sabine women. No history or narrative was required. A simple house, a violin, a bottle, or a chair richly sufficed for the complex task of depicting how thought shaped feeling and feeling shaped thought. Cubism was to deconstruct a deep world on a flat surface; it was to stretch and strain, strip and stipple it.

Cubism is nature flattened to unexpected depths. It involves a very special conceptual operation. The canvas often shows an object reduced to its refracted elements and leaves it to the viewer to put the pieces of thought and feeling back together. In so doing it tries to see through the cracks of a two-dimensional surface representing three-dimensional objects a different (a fourth?) dimension of sense and sensibility.

What were the cubists looking for in the fourth dimension? They couldn’t say. The fourth dimension, if it exists, can only be a private, personal dimension that the artist employs every and any means to express. In 1910 the poet Apollinaire, the critical midwife of the movement—he’s depicted in a cubist portrait by Louis Marcoussis in the MFA show—declared that cubism was, at last, “pure painting.”