

The Art of Cubism and its Role

Introduction

In this research paper, I have explained the art of cubism and its role. I have chosen the cubist painting "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)" painted by Pablo Picasso. He was the famous cubist painter. Picasso and Braque were the innovators of the cubist painting. In this research paper, I have tried to explain the formal characteristics like color, theme and texture that were used in the painting Les Femmes d'Alger. The paper also includes political and social factors related to the painting. In this paper I have also mentioned the interpretation of the art historians related to the painting.

About Cubism

Cubism can be defined as an advanced art movement that modernized European painting and sculpture in the early 20th century. The core essence of cubism is that instead of viewing subjects from a single, fixed angle, the sculptor breaks them up into a multiplicity of aspect, so that several aspects or features of the subject can be seen simultaneously. It is a wonderful way to express the complexity and depth of world in a simplified manner (Cubism, 2001).

Cubism is a unique format where square shapes are formed together. In cubism, the square shapes are also often softened with curves. In the artworks of a cubist, objects are broken up, analyzed, and re-assembled in an abstracted form. The artist depicts the subject of his painting from a massive number of viewpoints to represent the subject in a greater context instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint (Curtis, 1999).

One of distinct characteristics of Cubism is that the background and object planes interpenetrate with one another to create the shallow ambiguous space. The Cubist style emphasizes on the flat and two-dimensional surface of the picture plane. It rejects the traditional techniques of perspective, foreshortening and disproving the time-honored theories of art as the replication of nature. A cubist painter presents a new reality in paintings that depicts radically fragmented objects, whose several sides can be seen simultaneously. They do not copy the form, texture, and color (Cubism, 2001).

The chief creators or innovators of Cubism were Picasso and Georges Braque. In the year 1908, the term cubism was first used by the French art reviewer Louis Vauxcelles. After some years, the term was in wide use but the two creators of cubism avoid using it for a long time (Cubism, 2001). Cubism seems to be uniquely adjusted to the busy dynamic of contemporary life. Cubism consists of both theoretical and practical forms; practical form being more dominant (Curtis, 1999).

Formal characteristics of the work

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Picasso was a painter as well as a sculptor. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* was the most significant work of Picasso in the development of Cubism. Picasso uses angular definitive lines and a great concept of light and shadow (Picasso, 1996). With his artwork, Picasso was also a free thinker. He had a unique style and due to this unique style, he became the first artist to have fame during his lifetime. Picasso was a great innovative artist who used to search new ways to express space and forms in painting. There are different shades used by Picasso that describe the still life composition of women (Cubism, 2001).

The painting is designed with tempera paint using a flat style and a neutral palette. In this painting of Picasso, collage papers are created by mixing colors and creating texture by using sponges. After the shapes are attached in place, oil pastels are used to create patterns and enhance the overall design. Picasso is used to apply different themes, styles and moods to design the painting (Picasso, 1996). All his paintings are different to each other. He tries to use very dark colors and textures, which make his painting unique and different. In the early modern art, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* was widely held as an influential and decisive work (Picasso, 1996).

The painting is more a record of an artist in the process of changing his mind than a resolved composition. The forms are dislocated and inconsistent in style. In fact, they seem to be unfinished. It is a painting with overthrowing perspective, single viewpoint, local and decorative color and integral form (*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, 2008).

Picasso uses darker colors on the left side of the painting and warmer colors on the right side of the painting. The painting is slightly buff as compared to the paintings of Cezanne. The strong, harsh and different coloring has given the painting a different look in the cubist era (Picasso, 1996). The structure indicates the use of sharp white or black curves and outlines and cinnamon tone of the background at the left (*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, 2008). A harsh blue, as if a sudden glimpse of sky, surrounds the figure at the upper right. The middle figures' warmly indeterminate body of Picasso's painting. Contrasts of color and texture are reduced to a minimum, so as not to compete with the design.

Larger social/political context

The painting "*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*" was painted during the summer of 1907 by Picasso. According to Picasso, the cubism has come in a time period when the world was experiencing modernization in technology and medicine; and the societies were rapidly growing and developing as well (Picasso, 1996). The meaning of the painting in English was the Young Ladies of Avignon; it depicted five prostitutes in a brothel. It is one of the most important paintings in the genesis of modern art. There is a strong similarity in the dramatic clashing of light and dark tones and the overhead light source (Meighan, 2008).

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The work of Picasso in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* truly introduced cubism as art of movement. His painting has been noted as the twentieth century's most significant painting. His work depicted a crude version of prostitutes through a deformed style never seen before. The painting was an anti-idealist representation of un-ideal subject matter (Meighan, 2008).

Depictions of prostitutes and the theme of sexuality had been the subject of paintings in the past, but *Les Femmes d'Alger* left an impact because of Picasso. He had portrayed the prostitutes in erotic poses with their arms recognizable positioned above their heads in order to show off their feminine, but offensively distorted female framework (Meighan, 2008). Picasso's choice to use five figures in his work was to multiply the penetration of the bitter gaze created. The harsh life style gives sad expressions on the faces of the prostitutes, which in fact, lack any kind of emotion (Picasso, 1996).

To conceal their identity, the two women painted on the right are shown wearing African inspired masks. Through the representation of these prostitutes, Picasso conveyed a message of filth disease in the cubist style. He has deliberately changed the prostitute as a way to express the rising cultural awareness and effects of venereal disease, which had become a violent threat to these women's lives (Meighan, 2008). According to Picasso, cubism is directly related to modernism. Picasso has his own perception to explain cubism. According to him, cubism is an expression of the mind's relationship with the external world (Picasso, 1996).

He is of the opinion that it is a direct analysis of the awareness, the process of vision and the relationship of one's unconscious that is based on one's personal experiences. Cubism represents the process, which the mind undergoes in order to create a classical art from the past. Picasso's Cubist art is the first aesthetic representation, which accurately conveys the process of reflexivity of the human mind. Picasso was a productive and creative artist. He has made near about 12,500 paintings, 2,500 original prints, 1,000 different ceramics, and 700 sculptures.

His works are often categorized in periods and each period is different in style and themes than the other. Picasso's paintings are like pages from his diary (Picasso, 1996). He believed that painting is another way of keeping a diary. Picasso says that painting brings him a great pleasure and release. For him, painting is an extremely hard work.

He tells us that when he works on a painting, there is a feeling that he is climbing a mountain with a heavy load on his back, without even knowing when he will lose his balance (Picasso, 1996). Once the picture is completed, he feels exhausted and tired but at the same movement he enjoys a lot. He has created the pictures based on his own experiences. Picasso's work is approved by all the cubist painters like Filla, Braque, Feininger, Dellunay, etc. He is used to paint on the real aspect of the life. He believes that painting

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should be such a medium that describes the things on its own (Picasso, 1996).

In the year 2007, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was described as the most influential work of art of the last 100 years. Picasso had the ability to interpret the most complex images in his own language (Picasso, 1996). There were many painters who could transform the sun into a yellow spot, but Picasso was the one, who with his art and intelligence could transform a yellow spot into the sun. The movement also inspired about the modern architecture, sculptures, clothes, and even literature (Art of Picasso, 2008).

Interpretation by two art historians

The painting seems to be a form that goes in all pursuits of spatial depth and maintains a relationship to the pictorial surface. Picasso restructured the painting into harsh and angular planes, which destroyed the spatial depth and ideal form of female nude. The painting is not flat, but it is shaded in a way that gives it different dimensions. The painting includes the concave or convex style and looks like a portion of solidified space (Art of Picasso, 2008).

The cubist painting constitutes a unique kind of matter, which imposes a new kind of integrity and continuity on the entire canvas. Each individual figure is united by a general geometrical principle, which overlays its own laws on to the natural proportions and merges almost completely with the background (*Les Femmes d'Alger*, 2008). There are no differences of light and darkness that might lend shape to the women's bodies and with the combination of several perspectives; this contributes to a general impression of perplexity in space. To reach the internal structures of objects and to establish that a picture is not a window on the world, Picasso simplifies the painting. The flat space in the painting is created by the definite solid outlining, tonal contrast and by both thick and heavy curves (*Les Femmes d'Alger*, 2008).

Picasso was not interested in describing tone, depth or form of some of his painting. He expressed his indignation by making the use of imagination like the bull, the dying horse, a fallen warrior, a mother and dead child, a woman trapped in a burning building and a figure leaning from a window and holding out a lamp. The painting represented a revolutionary breakthrough in the history of modern art (Art of Picasso, 2008). The nudes that frame the composition already demonstrate the decisive change of direction in Picasso's art. In terms of Cubism, this painting is of a seminal importance.

His revolt against the myth of feminine beauty is relatively insignificant when compared with his other rebellion. With this picture, Picasso wants to destroy the whole of Western art; not only the proportions, but the organic integrity and continuity of the human body also (Choi, 2004). It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of this picture and the profound effect it has on art.

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There has been a critical debate over the years on the Picasso painting that attempts to account for multiplicity of styles used within the work. The famous art historian Leo Steinberg in his landmark states that Picasso used different explanation for the wide range of stylistic attributes. Another art historian Rubin states that some of the figure's faces symbolize the disfigurements of syphilis (Choi, 2004).

The painting of Picasso is created by following a series of brothel. Rubin interprets that the painting expresses the artist's skepticism, his willingness to risk anarchy for freedom, his fear of disease and illness and most forcefully his deep-seated fear and disliking of the female body. The painting is sharp and pointed and has the influence of ancient Iberian sculpture. The faces have a compelling force that obliges to African sculpture. Picasso has sometime used Negro sculpture. Picasso has used the different objects, analyzed them and re-assembled in an abstracted form (Choi, 2004).

Conclusion

Cubist painting is an art form created through a modernized approach to expression of the mind's interpretation of the natural world. Cubist art is a form based on art. Cubism is a unique format where square shapes are formed together. The artist depicts the subject of his painting from a massive number of viewpoints to represent the subject in a greater context instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint (Meighan, 2008). Picasso was a very good painter and sculptor. He painting had the meaning and was different to others. He used to paint his own experiences and believed the painting should have some meaning. He used to create paintings with connection to reality.

Word Count: 2188