Cubism in America

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Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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As a style, Cubism constitutes the single most important revolution in the history of art since the second and third decades of the 15th century and the beginnings of the Renaissance.

A number of circumstances augured in favor of the emergence of Cubism and, with it, the break with the tradition of depicting a convincing illusion of real space within the picture frame. Among all of the factors, however, the most important is the art of Paul Cézanne, who struggled with one of the great challenges intrinsic to art: how to represent a three dimensional world on a two dimensional surface while sacrificing neither solidity nor flatness.

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso took up this challenge in a joined and sustained effort which began in 1907. Their development of what came to be called Cubism—by a hostile critic who took the word from a skeptical Matisse—can, in very reduced outline, be summarized as follows:

1908-09: A Cézannesque period, in which both artists produced strongly geometric landscapes.

1910-12: the Analytic phase, in which both sought to present reality in a manner unique to painting. They presented various views of an object which would ordinarily be seen in sequence—its front, side, and back—simultaneously.

1912-14: Synthetic cubism, so named by Juan Gris, in which both artists exploited the resources of their recent invention, the collage.
Cubism

Synthetic Cubism not only synthesized "real" materials with painted/constructed reality, but also synthesized earlier discoveries, permitting objects to seem tangible while forms and surfaces were shuffled in space as thin as gossamer. World War I ended the joint investigations of Picasso and Braque and dispersed the international community of artists who had gathered in Paris. Excepting Juan Gris and Fernand Léger, all of these artists, including the American artists, were on-lookers. Few grasped all of the issues and formal ideas with which Braque and Picasso experimented. Most seized upon an aspect of the style and wedded it to theories of their own, sometimes political, sometimes purely aesthetic.

Those theories produced Futurism in Italy, Vorticism in Britain, Constructivism and Suprematism in the Soviet Union, De Stijl in Holland. Orphism and Purism were generated by French painters while two Americans in Paris, Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright developed their concept of Synchromism. The work of some of these moved toward pure abstraction, the work of others returned to a more traditional, often figurative art.

Fundamental to nearly all, however, was the use of the facets of Analytic Cubism. Fractured planes served to generate complex, geometric images which frequently were held to be a metaphor for the mechanized and shattered quality of modern industrialized experience. To many parts of this complicated avant-garde profusion of styles the American artist could and did respond. Generally, however, progressive American painters did not, collectively, generate a national style as can be discovered in Russia or Holland. Rather, Cubism in America tends to reflect the diversity of styles produced internationally.

In Joseph Stella's Cubist paintings of Manhattan, Coney Island, and the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, the small planes of shimmering color and the use of line celebrate mechanized and electrified New York in a manner that clearly reflects the artist's response to the Futurists, who also arranged the fractured planes of Cubism to produce dynamic images of speeding machinery and the rise of modern cities. Max Weber's Cubism also reflects the influence of Futurism in his concentration on the skyscrapers and hurry of New York, but his work is often monochromatic and the space virtually flat, in close accord with Picasso's Analytic Cubist canvases of c. 1911. Marsden Hartley, profoundly influenced by Weber, also produced works of analytic cubism, but in his work forms are stable and solidly realized in the manner of Cézanne's still lifes of c. 1890-1900. Many Americans, in addition to Russell and MacDonald-Wright, fused Neo-Impressionist color with Cubist geometry. Among them are such otherwise dissimilar artists as Morton Schamberg and Thomas Hart Benton. John Marin zigzagged his often delicate watercolors with "force lines" taken from Futurism, giving his closely observed street scenes and landscapes a compressed, geometric structure.

The post-war development of Cubism in America does not follow a single course either. A number of the early modernists, working in a conservative artistic milieu and finding little support for an art perceived as European, responded to the general isolationist spirit with increasingly conservative imagery. Thomas Hart Benton's rather abrupt dismissal of modernism for scenes of Americana is perhaps only the most famous reversal. Several artists, most notably Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth—and Georgia O'Keeffe in a number of paintings of Lake George barns and New York skyscrapers—produced a uniquely American style which came to be called Precisionism.

In these paintings, the inherent geometry of colonial architecture or railyards and factories, or steamships and locomotives, were pared of detail and awarded a shimmering kind of clarity in sunlight often given the geometric character of Cubist planes.

Finally, there are a small number of American painters who produced cubist works which are to be found nowhere else. In the work of Ralston Crawford, a scene from a New Orleans dockside (for instance) is handled in a manner not found in Futurism or Precisionism: the shapes of freight containers and equipment are transformed into a static arrangement of geometric shapes which hover, like elements of a Braque collage, in an airless, compressed space. Stuart Davis seized frequently upon billboards and commercial packaging to create images in which sometimes overlapping, sometimes discontinuous planes of color and letter shapes pulse across the surface of the canvas in rhythms which suggest the syncopation of American jazz. In space which was also airless and flattened to ambiguous but narrow confines, Patrick Henry Bruce presented arrangements of inherently geometric objects given three-dimensional solidity. As with Davis and Crawford, Bruce began with perceived reality, but did not fracture it into juxtaposed facets rendered as geometric planes. He, like the other two, preserved a fundamental aspect of the real things before him—their actual shape—while he also transformed those things into an abstracted image that could only exist in the space of the painted surface.

It is this creation of an actuality that can only exist in a work of art that is the center of the Cubist revolution. Cubism in America, although originally the source of bafflement and the target of derision, proved strong enough to endure and to provide the foundation for a continuing tradition of abstract art.

Donald Bartlett Doe
Patrick Henry Bruce

Much about the life of Patrick Henry Bruce remains unknown. Family records show that the great-great-great-grandson of Patrick Henry was born on March 21, 1881, but the artist's birth certificate bears the date of March 25. Bruce, as a man, proved aloof and increasingly reclusive as he aged. He communicated nothing about his own art and actually destroyed a major part of his own work.

What is known, however, suggests an extraordinary if unhappy life. He was born into an aristocratic Virginia family. Of their vast holdings—the family had once owned an estate of 5,000 acres—little remained but patrician attitudes. In spite of financial urgency, Bruce evinced no desire to enter business but very considerable interest in art. By 1902, following several years of classes at the Richmond Art Club, he was in New York, studying under the charismatic teachers Robert Henri and William Merritt Chase. Two years later, Bruce was in Paris. Except for a brief return in the summer of 1905, to settle his father's estate and marry another Henri student, Helen Francis Kibbery, Bruce was to spend nearly all of the rest of his life in France.

He became a Francophile, refusing to leave during the war years, living at the very center of the Parisian avant-garde, becoming a highly respected connoisseur and a dealer in antiques. Until the depths of the Depression, he kept a servant, dressed in hand-tailored elegance, and kept company with the rich and fashionable of Parisian society.

It was the Depression which proved disastrous. The market for antiques vanished. Poverty forced him from Versailles to his sister's home in New York. For this artist of refined taste but few expectations, life must have offered little. On November 12, 1936, a few months after arriving in the United States, he committed suicide.

In Paris, however, he had known everyone. By 1906, he and his wife were close to the Steins; Gertrude, Sara, and Leo. (His letters to them often began intimately with Dear Girls or Dear Family.) By 1908, he was in close contact with his teacher, Henri Matisse, taking an apartment above the Matisse school of art and residence at 33 Boulevard des Invalides. For an extended period, Bruce and his wife lived entwined lives with Sonia and Robert Delaunay. He came to know Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Katherine Dreier bought several of his Orphist paintings, which are today among the major examples of American abstraction in the collection of the Société Anonyme at Yale. In 1925, at the "L'Art d'Aujourd'hui" exhibition, his work was viewed as Surreal, perhaps because of his association with the Surrealists, especially the poet, Tristan Tzara.

Undoubtedly urbane, notably intelligent, he still managed to alienate others. An especially abrupt letter reversed Guillaume Apollinaire's favorable critical attitude toward his work. In his last years, he seems to have seen hardly anyone. Twice annually, long and awkward visits by Henri Roché were an exception. Roché championed his work and to him Bruce gave all 21 of his surviving geometric still lifes in 1933. It is one of those that is now in the Sheldon's collection.

Bruce's development as an artist, which culminated in these highly original works, spanned a decade and a half. At first, his work reflected the continuing influence of his American teachers and of James McNeill Whistler. By the Salon d'Automme of 1907, however, his work was beginning to reveal the influence of contemporary art. Meeting Matisse in 1908 completed the transformation of his art. The French master held that Cezanne was "the father of us all," and Bruce responded to this view with a long series of Cézannoussque still lifes.

Although his commitment to the still life would be renewed, upon meeting the Delaunay's in 1912 this chapter in his career came to a close. Like many others, Bruce found in their art a liberation from natural color. Their Orphist works, which fused flat, planar forms of Cubism with Fauve color, soon displaced the influence of Matisse.

At the Salon des Independants of 1913, he showed with Delaunay and Francis Picabia, receiving good reviews from Guillaume Apollinaire and the critic and poet, André Salmon. By 1916, his Orphist abstractions had taken on a new geometric stability. In these works, it appears that the influence of Picabia and perhaps Duchamp is at work. So too may be the work of British Vorticosists, whose version of Cubism was reproduced in the magazine, Blast, which cir—
works which began c. 1917 and did not end by c. 1918-19. Between what they believe to be the first and the second, however, there is hardly any clear relationship. In Forms, there are far fewer elements and they are arranged on one, not two table tops or surfaces. Structure of the still life. These qualities dominated during this period, and there was an innate aesthetic sensitivity, which provided $300.00 each year for study and offered the attention of a trustee, at the Cleveland School of Art. At the end of his first semester, a Cleveland school trustee, Anne Walworth, offered the young artist a five-year stipend which provided $300.00 each year for study in New York and half that amount for summer expenses. In the fall of 1899, his father's predictions that he would be an utter failure, Hartley left Cleveland to enroll in William Merritt Chase's New York Art School. After a single year, disappointed in Chase's singular emphasis on technique with the brush, he became a student at the National Academy of Design, remaining there until the Walpolt stipend expired in 1904.

Barbara Haskell, who has written the retrospective exhibition catalogue essay which most thoroughly explores the vast amount of material on Hartley's life, notes that none of his teachers could contain the intense impressionism on the artist. During these years, however, his art did change gradually from an academic realism to an American mode of Impressionism. By 1900, his work most closely resembled the muted impressionism of John T. French and, although less mystical in character, George Inness. Perhaps the clearest influence in this period, is that of an Italian impressionist painter, Giovanni Segantini. His work Harlley found reproduced in an issue of The Studio. The Italian's "brushy" work was especially suited to the difficulty of replicating the visual texture of the forested Maine hillsides and mountains, scenes to which Hartley turned every summer.

By the autumn of 1909, Hartley's growth as a painter was being recognized. A Boston collector purchased a work for $400.00, providing enough money for the artist to move to Stoneham Valley. There, he produced what he called his first master works. In spite of no direct contact with French art, Hartley began to execute thoroughly Post-Impressionist landscapes in which masses of heavily painted foliage exist on a continuous plane with the textured paint of the sky. The brilliant color often approaches the intensity of the Fauves.

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The quality of these works transformed the course of Hartley's career. In March, 1909, he took these landscapes to Boston, showing them to Maurice and Charles Pren- dergast. Impressed, Maurice secured for them members of The Eight, William Glackens and Robert Henri. Glackens, in turn, provided his studio for an exhibition of the paintings, that impressed images of Maine. Shortly after the exhibition introduction to Alfred Stieglitz. He also responded to the committed intensity of the painter and his art, and offered Hartley an exhibition at his 291 Gallery. His first true solo exhibition opened on April 22, 1910.

The Stieglitz exhibition brought Hartley into sustained contact with the most advanced art circle in America and with American artists, only recently back from Paris where he had been a student of Henri. There he encountered there struck Hartley immediately, on a postcard to Stieglitz, he wrote, I felt quite a different living itself of mystical excitation.

By the spring of 1912, Hartley left for the Near East, working solely from reproductions and ideas which had yet to take him to the Havemeyer collection, Hartley had already worked at Cezanne's still lifes. Only months later, by the end of the summer, he had moved away from Matisse and toward Picasso, adopting the sharp angular planes at St. Jugulian. The art from this period in Hartley's complex career, the Sheldon Still Life With Fan is perhaps the most notable.

A year earlier, working solely from reproductions, the following winter, 1912, Hartley had already worked at Cezanne's still lifes. Only months later, by the end of the summer, he had moved away from Matisse and toward Picasso, adopting the sharp angular planes at St. Jugulian. The art from this period in Hartley's complex career, the Sheldon Still Life With Fan is perhaps the most notable.
by the inherent geometry of the partially un­
folded fan.

Very soon, Hartley would find greater con­
geniality in the group of German artists in
Paris and would be drawn toward the Blue Rider artists and Kandinsky's ideas as ex­
pressed in his On the Spiritual in Art. Briefly, however, Hartley was concerned with the
intellectual study of forms in compressed Cubist space. Still Life With Fan thus marks
one of the moments when this American modernist came closest to the spirit of French Cubism.

Henry Fitch Taylor

Henry Fitch Taylor was born on September 15, 1853 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Six years
older than Childe Hassam, the same age as John Twachtman, and only a year older than
J. Alden Weir and Theodore Robinson, he belonged to the generation which produced
nearly all of the major American Impres­
sionists. Yet Taylor, himself an Impressionist throughout his early career, was to become
the oldest among the American artists who
responded to and explored Cubism. Even
the statesmen of American modernism,
Alfred Stieglitz and Arthur B. Davies, were
his junior by eleven and nine years, re­
spectively.

Unlike Stieglitz and Davies, however, Tay­
lor is little known. Early interest in theater
found him an established member of Jo­
seph Jefferson's popular performing troupe.
Jefferson, who was himself a painter, en­
couraged Taylor to go to Paris. There, Taylor
enrolled in the Académie Julian and then,
in 1885, went to Barbizon to paint.

He returned to the United States three
years later an accomplished painter in the
Impressionist manner. He showed success­
fully in several juried shows, but then aban­
donned the established New York art world.
Between 1898 and 1908, he resided in Cos Cob, Connecticut, painting little and showing
never. Cos Cob was something of a col­
ony for artists; among the frequent visitors
were Twachtman, Hassam and Willa Cather.
Less often, Davies, George Luks and Walt
Kuhn were there. These acquaintances were
to have a decisive role in Taylor's life as an
artist.

William Agee, who is responsible for vir­
tually all we know of Taylor, reports that with
Clara Potter Davidge (whom he was later to
marry), the artist took up the direction of the
Madison Gallery in New York in 1908. Soon
the gallery was showing progressive art.
Kuhn and others from Cos Cob joined Taylor
in conversations which led to the formation
of the Association of American Painters and
Sculptors. Taylor was its first president. A
retiring personality, he perhaps gratefully
surrendered that post to Davies in 1912, but
continued to serve as trustee and secretary.
Little more than a year later, the Association
was responsible for mounting the most im­
portant single event in the history of 20th
century American art: The Armory Show.

Nearly sixty, Taylor almost at once began
working again. At first producing Cezann­
esque still lifes, he painted his way rapidly
"through" Cubism, producing canvases
which explored both the analytic and syn­
thetic phases of the style.

By 1914, he was represented by the
Montross Gallery, which also showed the
work of the Frenchman, Albert Gleizes.
Gleizes was a member of a small group of
French Cubists (Duchamp was another) who
were influenced by the philosophical ideas
of Henri Bergson. As Agee points out, Berg­
sion saw change as the fundamental con­
dition of life, with each new development
emerging out of and being shaped by the
preceding one.

Almost immediately, Taylor responded to
the work of Gleizes, producing abstract ar­
nangements of circular, rotating forms. In
1915 as well, Taylor painted From Genera­
tion Unto Generation, a metaphorical image
in which a pale and anonymous, yet rather
traditionally rendered figure faces another
executed in cubistic planes of a machine­
like character seated in compressed cubist
space. The transformation of style clearly
symbolizes the transformation of the char­
acter of modern life.

The Sheldon's Cubist Still Life clearly pre­
dates this final stage in the evolution of Tay­
lor's own art, but it is a confident example
of his exploration of Synthetic Cubism.
In a manner which specifically suggests Picasso’s use of wall paper in his papier collé of 1912-13, Bottle and Glass on Table, Taylor employs a tile pattern which serves simultaneously as a ground and as an implied wall in the space in which the still life rests. The tile pattern, reaching from the top to the bottom of the picture on the right side, seems a paper-thin plane which compresses the pictorial space. At the left, however, the same green tonality is not marked by pattern. A horizontal line, from the central composition to the framing left edge, seems to mark a shift from a horizontal plane to a vertical one, suggesting floor and wall, with the red rectilinear shape taking on the identity of a rug or shadow.

In the central composition, the still life itself, there are a host of ambiguities. Planes of color tip backward and fold forward in space. At the rear, a purple shape seems a geometric bottle; in the foremost part of the still life, a wine glass seems to rest on its side. Taylor uses color here in two ways, as local color to describe a shape and, on the rectilinear mass over-lapping the “tiled” zone, to create shadow and hence a sense of volume.

All of these characteristics, combined with a relatively wide range of color, suggest clearly that Taylor’s mastery of Synthetic Cubism was well established.

This, in turn, suggests that the painting must date from the fall of 1913, at the earliest, to mid-1914, at the latest. In all, as an example of Cubism as practiced by an American artist past his sixtieth year, this work exemplifies a mastery hardly less adventurous in its transformation of the subject from visual to painted reality than that being produced in the same years by Picasso and Braque.

Max Weber referred to many of his works as “form in the crystal,” hoping to avoid being linked with European art. Whatever label he might have chosen, however, it is clear that in the years 1913-15 Weber produced some of the most fully resolved Cubist paintings to come from an American hand.

Weber came to the United States as a child of ten in 1891. Raised in Brooklyn, he attended Pratt Institute, studying under the remarkable teacher Arthur Wesley Dow (also an early inspiration for Georgia O’Keeffe), and graduated in 1900.

Weber taught on American campuses for several years before sailing for France in September of 1905. Like so many Americans before him, he enrolled at the Académie Julian and studied life drawing, then moved on to open academies where an artist could study without supervision by an instructor. In 1906, ’07 and ’08, his work was included in major exhibitions (each year, for instance, in the Salon d’Automne). In 1908, with Patrick Henry Bruce and Sarah Stein, he helped organize the classes held by Henri Matisse. Through Matisse, he came to know the Steins and a number of the artists, critics and poets who were a part of that remarkable circle of the avant-garde.

By the end of 1908, however, his funds had run out. Henri Rousseau hosted his bon voyage party and he returned to his adopted native city of New York.

Very quickly, he became a member of the Stieglitz circle. An egoistic man, Weber’s relationship with Stieglitz (who was equally egocentric) was not to last long. While it flourished, however, the owner of “The Little Galleries” at 291 Fifth Avenue offered impoverished Weber a tiny room in which to live, included the artist in his landmark exhibition, “Younger American Painters,” which introduced American modernism to New York, and offered Weber a solo exhibition in February of 1911.

During this period, Weber served as something of a mentor for Stieglitz, providing insight and information regarding the new developments in art which were gaining notoriety in Europe. For Stieglitz’s periodical, Camera Work, Weber wrote an article titled “The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point of Night, 1915, oil on canvas
of View," offering a theoretical basis for Cubism. Analytic Cubism would not be held for an American influence into the flow of avant-garde art. Stieglitz's exhibition of Picasso's work in 1913 gave impetus and early shape during his European stay, was to a substantial extent an American influence into the flow of avant-garde art. Weber's ideas, while of course...