Educator’s Guide

Georges Braque and the Cubist Still Life, 1928–1945
January 25–April 21, 2013

ABOUT THIS GUIDE
This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for K-12 educators bringing their students to view Georges Braque and the Cubist Still Life, 1928–1945, on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from January 25 through April 21, 2013. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussions, and postvisit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and help make meaning of the art presented. Teachers at all grade levels should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Vocabulary words that appear in bold are defined at the end of the guide.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Georges Braque and the Cubist Still Life, 1928–1945 offers the first detailed examination of Braque's experiments with still lifes and interiors during the years leading up to and through World War II, an overlooked and transitional period in the career of this leading founder of Cubism. Braque employed the genre of the still life to conduct a lifelong investigation into the nature of perception through the tactile and transitory world of everyday objects. The exhibition examines the transformations in Braque’s creative process as he moved from painting small, intimate interiors in the late 1920s, to depicting bold, large-scale, tactile spaces in the 1930s, to creating personal renderings of daily life in the 1940s. The exhibition also considers his work in relation to contemporary aesthetic debates about the politically engaged culture of war-torn France and occupied Paris.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS
Art, Art History, Film Studies, French, History, Literature, Political Science, Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• All grade levels: Students will examine how everyday objects function in their own lives and as subjects for art.
• All grade levels: Students will consider Braque's creative process, which included his close exploration of a single motif through a series of varied perspectives, reworking a single canvas, and sometimes revising works over many years.
• High school Level: Students will explore Cubist techniques, such as overlapping planes and the separation of color from contour line, and how Cubists were reacting to the way paintings had been made since the Renaissance and were seeking to develop a new way of painting that did not try to mask the flat surface of a canvas through illusionism.
• High school Level: Students will discuss whether or not they think World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris had an impact on Braque's work and within this context, the idea of political commitment and the role of moral duty in art.

This guide was prepared by Allison Taylor, manager of education programs, and Allison Fricke, assistant educator. Contact Allison Fricke at allison.fricke@wustl.edu or 314.935.5624 to schedule a visit to the Museum.
BEFORE YOU VISIT
Suggested topics to explore, research, and discuss before visiting the exhibition.

Cubism
Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso pioneered the Cubist movement in the early 20th century. Have students research this movement and the artists associated with it. What was the conception and origin of Cubism? What are the main principles of this movement? How can these principles be seen in the exhibition artworks?

Face and Figure in European Art, 1928–1945
In conjunction with the Museum's exhibition of still lifes by Georges Braque, this special exhibition of paintings, sculptures, and works on paper from the Museum's permanent collection offers a corollary probing of the meaning of the human face and figure by artists from France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe who were working in the same period. Visit this exhibition before or after your visit to Georges Braque and the Cubist Still Life, 1928 – 1945. Both Max Beckmann's Artists with Vegetable and Braque's Still Life with Glass depict everyday objects. Compare the objects depicted in each. How are they alike or different? Is one painting more personal than the other? In what way?

Nazi Occupation of Paris
During World War II, Paris was under Nazi occupation. There were many artists living in Paris during this time, including Georges Braque, who continued to create artworks. Have students research this historical period and its implications for Parisians during this time. In what ways would your life, or your art, be different if your hometown were invaded and occupied by another country? What, if any, obligation do artists have to make a political statement with their art?

Still Lifes and the Meaning of Objects
This exercise is intended to be done before and/or after visiting the exhibition. Have students bring in an object that has significant personal meaning to them. Place all the objects on a table in the middle of the room. Ask each student to choose an object other than the one they brought in. Then direct students to find the person who selected from the table the object they brought in. Divide students in pairs or small groups and have them discuss the function and meaning of the objects they selected. Have them think of different uses for these objects. Finally, ask students to rearrange all the objects on the table in a way that makes sense to them without speaking. Discuss assemblage and arrangement of still lifes. Discuss how the meaning of an object changes when placed in a new context. Do this same exercise after your visit to the exhibition. Have students' perspectives on objects changed? In what ways? What are the similarities and differences between the students' objects and the objects in Braque's still lifes?

IN THE GALLERY
Ideas to consider when viewing the exhibition.

Art Interaction: Still Life with Glass, 1930
Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso are credited with inventing Cubism. These two artists rejected conventional illusionistic painting practices—such as the use of linear perspective championed in the Renaissance, or the landscape compositional elements of foreground, middle ground, and background—in favor of a new artistic vocabulary that explores the challenges of depicting three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional format. For example, Cubist objects often look flat like cut-out pieces of paper floating and overlapping in space, offering multiple views of the same object. The resulting appearance, or aesthetic, of a Cubist painting depends on a variety of Cubist techniques, many of which are present in Braque's Still Life with Glass pictured on page one. Here Braque's palette is neutral, consisting of blacks, greys, creamy off-whites, and rich earth colors. He layered the flat objects and fragments of objects so that some are immediately recognizable, like the glass and pipe, while others are not as easy

to comprehend visually, like the fruit bowl filled with angular-shaped grapes depicted in a multi-viewpoint perspective. Look at the compositional elements: objects on the table, wavy-patterned tablecloth, drawer pull, geometric table legs, and wall skirting. How does Braque depict texture and depth? Are the spatial planes defined or ambiguous? What are the benefits and limitations of the Cubist approach versus traditional illusionism in the depiction of three-dimensionality?

**Art Interaction: Still Life with Oysters, 1937**

Early examples of still lifes can be found on the walls of burial chambers in ancient Egypt, where artists painted plentiful meals. They believed this was necessary to ensure that the deceased would have enough to eat in the afterlife. Throughout history, the objects artists choose to depict carry meaning, telling the viewer different kinds of information depending on the context of the artwork and the cultural significance of the object. For instance, a white lily in Western art historical tradition symbolizes purity and is associated with the Virgin Mary; similarly, in Buddhist art a white lotus flower signifies purity and is associated with the bodhisattva Tara. This kind of one-to-one symbolism wasn't as important to artists in the 20th century, and Braque in particular stated, years after completing these paintings, that the objects he chose to depict contained no symbolic meaning but were merely devices to help him explore tactile qualities and compositional elements.

What objects in *Still Life with Oysters* can you identify? Why would Braque choose to paint oysters, bread, and a carafe of wine? Look at the elements, the walls and the table that are visible in this painting: what kind of interior space is this? Braque had a home in Varengeville, a village on the Normandy coast where oysters are found. Is there anything about the way this painting is made that suggests that the food and objects on the table or the interior decoration relate to aspects of his personal history? Or is the painting purely an investigation of shapes? Is an artist’s history always represented in their work? Braque was interested in finding new ways to see and dissect everyday objects. He stated: “It is very important for an artist to combat routine.” The history of the still life is the history of depicting the materiality of objects. Do the oysters appear real to you? What about the other objects in this painting? Braque struggled throughout his career with the question of how to depict the tactile quality of objects and what he described as the space between humans and the objects that make up everyday life. How is this statement illustrated in *Still Life with Oysters*?

**Art Interaction: Baluster and Skull, 1938**

Georges Braque served in World War I and lived in Nazi-occupied Paris during World War II. Braque claimed that his art was not political and, more generally, that politics had no place in art, saying that “an artist is someone who is separate from the material and political worlds,” and that “artists should not be expected to pass judgment on the future of civilization.” Do you agree with him? Do artists have a responsibility to take a political stand in their art?

In *Baluster and Skull*, Braque has positioned several objects including a skull and a baluster (an upright support usually used in a balustrade or staircase) on a table. In the background one can see a brightly colored wall sharply defined behind the wood grain of the flattened table. Images of skulls first appear in Braque’s work in 1938, just before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Although war had not yet been officially declared between France and Germany, the French were certainly aware of the potential for war and of other atrocities being committed elsewhere in Europe,

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3 Ibid., 9.
such as in the Spanish Civil War that had begun in 1936. The skull has long been associated with the tradition of vanitas paintings, where it is a symbol of mortality. However, Braque maintained that these skulls were not symbols of death or references to the current state of the world but were merely devices he used for working out problems of mass and composition. Nonetheless, Braque’s wartime still lifes may provide some insight into his reaction to the war. Certain contemporary viewers, particularly poet friends, saw in Braque’s decidedly isolated artistic practice of working for days at a time in his Parisian studio as a political statement. Braque stated that “the strategy of still life was the strategy of [self-]preservation.” How do you interpret this statement? The exhibition is arranged chronologically, allowing us to see the progression of Braque’s work from 1928 to 1945. Consider the paintings in regard to size, palette, and subject matter. Does Braque’s work change as World War II progresses?


Art Interaction: *The Washstand*, 1944

*The Washstand* depicts personal objects (hairbrush, sponge, and mirror) set on a table in Braque’s studio. How do these objects compare with objects in other paintings in terms of use and meaning? All of the artworks in this exhibition are still lifes. Why would an artist choose to paint primarily one type of subject matter throughout his career? Braque was drawn to still lifes, particularly to the physical closeness to the object and the proximity of feel and texture. Braque actually began his career as a house painter, hired to paint interior walls to look like wood panels, marble, or wallpaper. Texture, illusion, and spatial concerns continued to motivate his practice throughout his artistic career. Continually challenged by the relationship between three dimensions and two, Braque would return again and again to the same subject, working in a series and often reworking the same painting multiple times. Consider the exhibition as a whole. What are some similarities you see among all of these paintings? Generally Braque’s titles are little more than a list of the objects depicted. Do the titles give you any insight into how Braque felt about objects? These still lifes are all set indoors, specifically in the artist’s studio. The artist’s studio is an enduring theme in Western art, and Braque would often isolate himself in his studio, particularly during the Nazi occupation. What clues, if any, are there in *The Washstand* about Braque’s private life?


Beginning in 1968, a tide of leftist opposition flooded Paris with political rhetoric and social upheaval. *Rue du Temple—manuscrite* from 1968 features a section of politically charged advertisements and posters that had been pasted on walls throughout Paris, then ripped and torn by anonymous passersby. Like Le Villeglé, Braque also lived at an intensely tumultuous and political era in Paris. Compare the ways these two artists reflect and interpret the political turmoil of the day.

Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *Brocart de Venise (Venetian Brocade)*, c. 1904–05

*Brocart de Venise* seems to present the rarified interior realm of upper-class women but the image depicted is actually set in the artist’s studio. There is a similar sense of intimate interior space in still lifes of Georges Braque, particularly in his painting *The Washstand*. Both artists have included everyday objects set in the interior spaces of their studios. How are the objects in each work alike or different? How does the presence of people, such as the two women in *Brocart de Venise* affect the atmosphere of a painting? How do both artists explore the use of space and objects?

Joan Miró, *Peinture (Painting)*, 1933

Georges Braque and Joan Miró both examined shape and form and explored similar questions relating to the tension between illusion and the flatness of the canvas, although Miró worked in a much more abstract fashion. In *Peinture*, Miró is exploring objects found in advertisements, among them a wheelbarrow and perfume bottle. Can you identify these abstracted objects in the painting? Both artists were also concerned with space and spatial relationships among objects. How is Miró’s *Peinture* like one of Braque’s still lifes? How is it different? How are the objects each artist used alike and different?
IN THE CLASSROOM OR AT HOME
Follow your visit to the Museum with one or more of these suggested activities.

- Look at contemporary artists who are using art to make political commentary such as Ai Weiwei, Jonathan Horowitz, and Shepard Fairey. What kind of art do they make? What does it look like? What is their motivation? How are these artists and their art similar to Georges Braque’s? How are they different?

- Explore the history of the still life from ancient tomb paintings to contemporary works. What makes this genre appealing to artists of the 21st century? How have the objects depicted in still lifes changed over the centuries? Do the objects function differently in 21st-century still lifes than in ancient ones?

VOCA n u l A R Y

1. Abstract – In visual art, refers to work such as a painting or sculpture that doesn’t depict things found in the natural world in a realistic fashion.
3. Assemblage – An artistic technique involving the combination of found objects or images in a two- or three-dimensional format.
4. Cubism – An avant-garde art style created by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in Paris between 1907 and 1914 in which different views of single objects are brought together on the picture surface in reduced, fragmented, and geometric ways.
5. Genre – A category or type of composition such as, in painting, still life, portrait, or landscape.
6. Illusionism – Artistic representations that resemble real objects in three-dimensional space.
7. Motif – A symbol, design, or object that reappears in a work of art, or in a body of artworks.
8. Nazi – The German fascist (Nationalsozialist) party that controlled Germany from 1933 to 1945 under Adolf Hitler.
9. Renaissance – A revival of art and literature in Europe during the 14th–16th centuries.
10. Still life – A depiction of inanimate objects, either natural or man-made, for the sake of their qualities of form, meaning, composition, texture, or color.
11. Symbolism – The practice of using symbols invested with a meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible representations.
12. Vanitas – A kind of still-life painting associated with funerary art, often including skulls, rotten fruit, and bubbles to represent the fragility of life.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

Film

Online
- Occupation of Paris
  There are many short video clips on You Tube showing the occupation of Paris: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXOeAlZq5tc
- Cubism
  For a general introduction to Cubism: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm
  http://artyfactory.com/art_appreciation/art_movements/cubism.htm
- Still Life
  Fun online still-life activity: http://www.nga.gov/kids/zone/stilllife.htm
- Braque

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