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When high meets low: the decorative means of Cubism

Claire Le Thomas, independent scholar

When discussing **innovation** in avant-garde art movements, **art historians** often **focus** on influences from “fine art” and **neglect** other sources of inspiration. Until recently, **the historiography of Cubism hasn’t really take into consideration the contribution of popular culture or applied art (slide 2)** to the formal or technical solutions elaborated by Braque and Picasso during their collaboration. This paper aims to **reevaluate the role of two decorative sources:**

- First, **Braque’s training as a housepainter or painter-decorator**, a well-known but scarcely studied influence
- Second, **ordinary decorative practices** using paper and glue to make decorative and useful objects, a recent field of historical research full of potential for art history.

Through this paper, I would thus like to **question the traditional distinction between high and low art** and the manner in which **art historians usually analyse the interaction** between them. To understand this interaction, we must **adopt an anthropological approach**: it is not merely a question of **technical borrowings, influence** from the decorative arts often **has a deep-rooted source**, as a **way of thinking and using skills, techniques and materials**.

A case study: Braque’s tricks of the trade

“The **tradesman’s and housepainter’s skills** should, for the artist, be **the most vigorous material expression of painting¹(slide 3)**. This 1913 quotation from Guillaume Apollinaire demonstrates that **from the start**, **George Braque’s artisanal origins were a well-known source for Cubism**: his **grandfather** was a **house painter** in Argenteuil; his **father** founded a **house painting and decorating business** in Le Havre and Braque **was expected to take over the business²**. Hence, he was **apprenticed**, first with his **father** and **then**, with some of his **father’s former associates, Rupalay and Rosney** in Le Havre, and **Laberthe** in Paris. **Contemporary chroniclers and art historians³ underlined the tricks of the trade** that Braque **borrowed** from his **formative training** in decorative painting. **3 techniques are usually given as examples**: stencilled letters, painting that incorporates sand, and fake wood and fake marble – **processes (slide 4)** he **taught Picasso** and that **other Cubists**, like Gris and Laurens, **imitated**.

Stencilling letters (slide 5) was a **basic skill** for decorative painters. Indeed, a large part of the **trade consisted in painting storefront and commercial signs** on which names, goods, opening hour, menus... appear. The letters could be **stencilled**, but were **usually painted by hand**. **Forming letters in different styles (slide 6)** was then a **common**

¹ Apollinaire, *Les Peintres cubistes*, p. 83.

² Brassai, *The Artists of My Life*, p. 19.

³ Apollinaire, Salmon, Rubin, Gopnik and Varnedoe, Leal, Daix...

requirement for house painters: they **knew different alphabets** (roman, italian, gothic, egyptian, antique...) and different **ways of ornamenting letters** (slide 7) with shadows, perspective, colours... They were also **able to modify the size and shape of letters** in order to make them fit the sign. This kind of technical **skill** is clearly **noticeable in** some of Braque's and Picasso's **paintings**: in Picasso's *Souvenir du Havre* (slide 8), we can **recognize the roman capital letter** and in *Le violon (Mozart kubelick)* (slide 9), Braque pointedly **left the chalk line** (cordeau or parallel guidelines) used for the letters **KUBELICK visible**.

The **second technique** usually associated with Braque's decorative training is **paint that incorporates sand** (slide 10). In his interview with Dora Vallier, **Braque directly attributed** his **practice of adding sand** to his paint to **create a granular, stonelike surface** to his apprenticeship with **Laberthe**. Indeed, **learning to fabricate the paints** and colors was the **cornerstone** of the **trade**. House-painters **did not use ready-mixed industrial paints**, such as Ripolin. Each **paint was made in a camion** (slide 11) (a fireproof pail with a handle), following a precise **recipe for the required tint**. Thus, they **mixed pre-ground pigments**, sold as powder, flakes, and sticks, or in barrels, **with a liquid** (water, glue, turpentine, oil, or varnish) **to fabricate the desired shade and texture**.

Imitating **wood and marble** (slide 12) is the **third decorative technique** Braque learned during his apprenticeship. Fake wood and fake marble were decorative painters' **masterpieces**: they **showed the painter's ability to imitate** nature and to **deceive the eye**. Many **specialised tools and brushes** (slide 13) were developed for this work: the **veinette** or **spalter** (brushes made for graining and striations), the **badger brush** to soften the overall effect... Among the tools were **steel or leather combs** (slide 14) which **the painter ran through the fresh paint** to mimic the straight or undulating lines of wood grain – a technique often seen in Cubism and sometimes voluntarily misappropriated as in Picasso's *Poet*, where a decorator's comb is used for the hair and moustache.

This is the **first**, and most familiar, **interpretation**: Cubism **appropriated the house painter's tricks of the trade**. Decorative painters' **means** were "a benefit derived from the **beauties of the artisan's work**"⁴ to quote André Salmon. But this analysis was **not really developed**: Braque's apprenticeship and technical training have never been described in detail to support this interpretation and therefore, another **material** connected to the house painting trade has **received less consideration**: **wallpaper** (slide 15). During the second half of the 19th century the use of wallpaper **spread in society** and **decorative painters** were involved in the business of **hanging it**.

From tricks to breakthrough: technique as thinking and visual scheme

Nevertheless, a **second level of interpretation** offers a more fertile understanding of these decorative borrowings (slide 16): as **Clement Greenberg** demonstrated, stencilled letters, painting with sand, fake wood and wallpaper were **essential breakthroughs** in the history of the **Cubist movement**. They enabled Braque and Picasso to **move beyond the hermetic phase** of Analytic Cubism in 1911–12. **Emphasising the flatness of the painting substrate**, they initiated a **new kind of three-dimensional representation** where the **depicted object projects toward the viewer** without any **trace of volume**: the successive **flat planes** arranged **one above the other** indicate each **depicted object's**

⁴ André Salmon. *La jeune sculpture française*, p.13-14. More recently, William Rubin wrote, "many of Braque's innovations in Cubist practice—such as using stencilled letters, charging pigment with sand, and simulating wood and marble—had genuinely artisanal origins"; William Rubin. *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*, p. 19.

position within the painting. **I would go further** than Greenberg: I would argue that this radically new **method of representing space derived directly from Braque's formative training** as a painter-decorator.

Decorative painters **hardly ever made use of Albertian** perspective: they **didn't treat the wall as an open window** onto a **space behind (slide 17)**. Instead of seeking to **break through the flat surface**, their trompe l'oeil effects **created an impression of projecting relief**: depicted objects seemed to stand **in front of the depicted background**, like a bas-relief. Filage for example consisted in making strips to mimic wood or stone boards and moulding. This was precisely the **path** taken by **Braque** around **1908** while studying **Cezanne's** works: **objects** seemed to project in front of the picture plane rather than recede behind it. Therefore, the so-called **flatness** of Cubism and its **inverted perspective** (projection toward the picture plane, rather than recession from it) **transposed to easel painting ways of representing reality** that were **common in decorative painting**. Likewise, the **fusion of figure and ground** achieved by Braque during the Cézannian and Analytic phases of Cubism **corresponded to decorative painters' approach to representation**, which involved **superimposing and blending layers** on the painted surface **to the point where distinctions** between them **disappear**. Using highly diluted paint, glazes, and badger brushes, they strove to **erase the transitions between the successive layers**. In Braque's hands, **the Cubist system of faceting** succeeded in **unifying the different planes** in the painting in a rather similar manner. Finally, **Synthetic Cubism's representation of space** as an overlay of flat planes **matched decorative painters' ways of thinking about their work (slide 18)**. Imitating **wood or marble** meant **mastering the layering of transparent glazes** to re-create the complex tonal and textural effects of wood and marble. **Beginning with a ground glaze** in the **colour** of the type of wood or marble they wanted to imitate, **they next painted successive glazes** to create wood or marble patterns: the **network of the grain and the marble's rippling veins**. Each of these **glazes** had to be **as thin as possible**, and the **more layers there were, the more convincing the imitation would be** because the pattern of the wood or marble would seem to have greater depth. Hence, decorative painters **conceived and perceived their work in terms of flat layers**, just as happens in Synthetic Cubism. Arguably, the **housepainter's very mode of thinking influenced the Cubists' invention and treatment of space from 1908 to 1912**. Consequently, it may **not be a coincidence that Cubism's prevailing colours** - brown, grey, green... - are **similar to those used for striping and for faking wood and faking marble**.

This first case study shows that, during creation, **boundaries between categories blur**; **every creative practice can help achieve the artist's goals**. Braque **took advantage of his formative training** to find solutions to Cubism's problems. **Cubism is full of decorative tricks of the trade** but this influence **occurred in a deep-rooted way**. **Technical borrowings** from the decorative painter's trade were possible because **techniques are "materialized thoughts"** as anthropologist **Pierre Lemonier** said⁵. They **bring into play not only tools and gestures** but also **representations, unconscious schemes** that **print their mark on technical behaviours**, and it is **precisely these conceptual schemes, the subconscious structure beneath techniques, that Braque imported to Cubism**.

⁵ LEMONNIER Pierre, « Technique », in BONTE Pierre, IZARD Michel (dirs.) : *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie*, Paris, Presses Universitaire de France, 1991, p.697-698

Everyday life experience in art, Cubism's debt to ordinary decorative practice

Understanding the interaction between high and low therefore means **investigating the artist's technical or visual expertise** in order to **apprehend fully** how **techniques and the way of thinking they involve may be transferred from artistic category to another**. The **second example (slide 19)** I would like to analyse **draws the same conclusion** but from a **more unconventional research field** for art historians: that of **amateur decorative practices**. These **leisure activities**, which happened **inside the home**, consisted in **making useful or decorative objects** such as **(slide 20)**

- **A cardboard flower pot holder or lampshade** ornamented with drawings or glued-on pictures
- **Weaving an umbrella stand**
- **Turning a half barrel** into a **flower pot**
- **Decorating jewel or candy boxes** with silk, embossed or gold paper...

These **DIY and creative hobbies**, to use **present-day expressions**, proliferated during the end of the 19th century and would have been immediately familiar to Braque and Picasso. **Living in Montmartre**, a very specific neighbourhood of Paris, both poor and rural, they knew **this alternative creative culture intimately**. It was a **shared culture of making (slide 21)**: Braque, Picasso, and their friends at that time, occasionally **created everyday objects with recycled material**. Picasso crafted some of his notebooks and a doll for Van Dongen's daughter; Gris made his own slippers by cutting up old shoes. Thus, the **practices** of self-creating decorative objects **they were surrounded by found their way into Cubism, resurfacing** through the three-level reading I have previously elaborated.

First, ordinary decorative practices were a **technical repertory** for Cubism as they **encompassed all Cubist processes**:

- **Stencilling letters (slide 22)** recalls **drizzling paint** onto an item to get a negative silhouette.
- **Adding sand to paint (slide 23)** can be compared to **covering objects**, like frames, **with sand**, which might then be painted, to **get a united surface** and hide the recycled materials.
- **Ripolin** is employed **to coat** craft creations because it is cheap, robust and ready-made (there is no need to prepare the paint)
- And above all, they **used found objects (slide 24)**. Indeed, **domestic crafters** were **masters of collage or assemblage processes**: they **used** pine cones, shells or seeds **to decorate frames**; they **made pictures out of stamps or cut images** from newspapers or engravings; they **decorated** lampshades by sticking on fabrics and plants.

At a deeper level, ordinary crafts appear to have **played a key role in Cubism's evolution**. As with Braque's decorative training, **they provided solutions** to Cubist problems, offering, for instance, **stylistic and artistic effects that contributed to the new representation of space** and **allowed** Braque and Picasso **to experiment with stylistic diversity**. Indeed, some popular amateur techniques, consisted in **creating images entirely with layers of paper (slide 25)**. The **image** is obtained **through the superposition of papers** or fabrics; the design is the **result of the cutting and changes of colour** and texture... creating an **inverted perspective** just like in **Analytic Cubism**. The different **layers give the image volume**; the **depicted figure projects toward the viewer**. The ribbon is behind the hand, the glued plant comes out of the frame, akin to the violin in Braque's painting. Pasted material can also **have a textural or coloristic function (slide 26)**: the **visual effect of the work** is created by the **association of different pieces of fabric**

or paper, by slight differences in surface and tint. Furthermore, ordinary crafts drew Braque's and Picasso's attention to the potential of heterogeneity. Thanks to their varied materials and techniques, these domestic craft objects have no stylistic unity (slide 27), just as happens in synthetic cubism where the same work may combine passages of cubist fragmentation (objects, the figure) with illusionistic signs (like guitar strings, rope, stencilled letters). This stylistic heterogeneity is matched by that of materials (slide 28), with the mixture of chromos, lace and ribbons or newspapers, musical scores and wallpaper...

At the deepest level, by employing these techniques Braque and Picasso imported the conceptual thinking that lies behind the practices of ordinary crafters into the realm of high art. Braque and Picasso not only found in domestic craft an inspiring example of what can be done with non-artistic means but their concept of creation was affected by this material and technical culture. Indeed, they transposed the enforced freedom from rules of ordinary crafters, transforming it into an avant-garde method: the ability to make art with anything and in any way. Ordinary decorative practice thus provided moral support for the invention of collage and assemblage.

To conclude, Cubist's example of reusing house painters' skills and domestic crafting techniques demonstrates that high and low interactions are multi-layered (slide 29). They involve not only technical borrowing but also conceptual thinking, materialized thoughts one can apprehend best with an anthropological approach: first not to miss meanings that lie behind technical acts; second to take into consideration the impact of everyday life on creation, the ways common experiences find their way into art. Artists don't find inspiration exclusively in high art and its practice, they draw answers from the common creative culture they are embedded in. Just as Michael Baxandall⁶ or David Banash⁷ revealed, visual and technical abilities move from one human field of action to another. Therefore, when studying creative processes, one must keep in mind that are no valid distinctions between commonplace craft practices and the practice of professionally trained artists. Invented categories, such as high and low art, can blind the art historian by creating an artificial division between areas of creativity.

⁶ Michael Baxandall, *L'œil du Quattrocento, L'usage de la peinture dans l'Italie de la Renaissance*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, 254p. [1^{ère} ed. : *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford, Oxford university Press, 1972; trad. : DELSAUT Yvette].

⁷ David Banash, *Collage culture. Readymades, Meaning, the Age of Consumption*, Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi 2013

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