

A Closer Look

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means. There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might be:

How does this painting break with tradition? In what ways is it like a “realistic” still-life? In what ways is it different?

Why might Picasso have wanted to break with tradition? How might the increasing use of photography have affected him and other painters of his time?

Picasso changed the evolution of Western art forever with works like this. How does this painting set the stage for other works of modern and contemporary art?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art. Critical assessment can also change over time.

Overall, do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you?

Does this image represent issues that are still relevant today? Why or why not?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

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Pablo Picasso
Spanish, active in France, 1881–1973

Guitar on a Table

1912

Oil, sand, and charcoal on canvas
Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930;
P.975.79.

Guitar on a Table is an excellent example of the innovations of cubism, a revolutionary artistic movement developed between 1908 and 1914 by Pablo Picasso and fellow artist Georges Braque. Before cubism, most artists aspired to the Renaissance ideal that painting should represent an illusionistic image of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. Confronted with early-twentieth-century advances in science and technology that fundamentally shifted our understanding of vision and perception, the artists of Picasso's generation sought new approaches to painting that could make sense of the modern world. The cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque challenged older notions about the nature of vision by asserting the flatness of the picture plane and the materiality of paint, and by presenting subjects from different perspectives and planes at the same time. Most importantly, cubism cleared a new path for painting in an age when audiences believed that photography could more faithfully represent “reality” than paint on canvas.

In *Guitar on a Table*, Picasso worked within the format of a traditional still-life painting. The still-life arrangement—an assortment of everyday items placed on a table—was a common subject for artists for centuries. For the cubists, the tabletop still life allowed for extended observation of the same subject, and they often portrayed the same arrangement from various angles and perspectives within the same painting. Here, Picasso dissects his subject into its elemental textures, colors, volumes, and geometric planes. Familiar pieces of the guitar—its hourglass

contours, sound hole, strings, fret-board, bridge, even the wood grain of the interior—are seen only in fragmented glimpses, as though the instrument has been cut apart and reassembled.

In 1912, both Picasso and Braque were experimenting with a method of art making called *papier collé*, or collage. In these works, the artists often combined charcoal or pencil drawing with collaged elements, such as newspaper, or patterned and textured paper. Although this painting may have predated Picasso's first true *papier collé* by a few months, several earlier paintings incorporated collaged elements, such as segments of sheet music and printed wallpaper. *Guitar on a Table* is entirely painted, but Picasso imitated in paint the effect of industrially produced paper with a faux-wood grain pattern, a material that would frequently appear in Braque's and his own *papier collés* of this period. *Papier collé* allowed for the artist to think through the implications of flattening the volumes of a three-dimensional object—in this case, the guitar—into a single plane, one that is at times indistinguishable from the surface of the tabletop supporting it.

The tabletop and guitar, emblematic motifs of cubism, were often employed by Picasso, Braque, and their followers to reference the sights and sounds of a café, an important venue of avant-garde artistic exchange. Picasso himself did not play an instrument and was not interested in most forms of classical music. He did, however, have a fondness for guitars, which were popular, non-classical instruments closely associated in his time with café life and flamenco music and connected specifically with his own Spanish culture. While the form and structure of a guitar, with its combination of curved and straight lines, volumes, and textures, was a perfect subject for cubist painting, it also likely held personal meaning for Picasso, referring to his own identity as an expatriate Spaniard living in Paris.



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The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?



What do you notice about the shapes?

How are they arranged on the canvas?

Are they concentrated in one area or spread evenly throughout the canvas?



Which shapes are geometric?
Which seem more organic?

Do the shapes appear flat or three-dimensional?

Which are colored? Which are not?



What do you notice about the colors?

The way in which the colors are applied?

What do you notice about the texture of the painting?
Is it smooth like a mirror?
Rough? Is the paint thick or thin?

Do other sorts of materials appear to have been used in this work of art?



What do you notice about the lines in this painting?

Are they straight? Curved?
Heavy? Thin?

How do they move your eye around the painting?

Overall, how would you describe the look of this painting? Fractured? Cohesive? Beautiful? Gritty? Hard? Soft?

Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

Do the colors or shapes in this painting remind you of anything?
Recognizable objects? A particular place?

Is this painting still or do you get a sense of movement?

What ideas do you think this artist might be trying to communicate with this style of painting?

What did the artist choose NOT to do in this work?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides background information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the text mention anything you did not see or think about previously?
If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you had read the background information first?