CUBISM, RABBIT HOLES, AND BILLY CRYSTAL

*You Look Mauvelous!* Actor, Billy Crystal, coined this popular phrase on an old Saturday Night Live sketch, *Ferdinando’s Hideaway.* Crystal played a frivolous talk show host obsessed with appearances. He flattered his guests with superficial praises about their hair, their clothes, and their bodies. This was especially funny when his guests were people of intellectual substance who didn’t subscribe to his Hollywood world view.

In my first year as an art teacher, I sometimes treated the art I was teaching in this same way. I looked at the surface of the art, did a quick sprint down memory lane from my college art history class, and wrote a lesson on what the art looked like, rather than what the art meant. Basically I followed Billy Crystal’s mantra, *It is better to look good than to feel good.* I thought more about what the art my students made was going to look like and less about what my students were discovering. If my students made art that looked like a cubist painting, then I thought that they learned about Cubism.

I was uncomfortable with this kind of approach, but it took me another year to figure out what was amiss. I began to shift my lessons to be more about my students internal learning and less about making my students make something that I thought *looked mauvelous*.

This is what I figured out. If I wanted my students to learn about Cubism, I had to research Cubism again, even though I thought I had a pretty good understanding of it. I couldn’t rely on my hazy memories of Tuesday afternoons in the art history lecture hall with Professor Walford with his pointed goatee and his British accent lecturing about Braque and Picasso. This produced vague ideas in my mind of geometric shapes, shattered objects, pieces of newsprint collaged onto paintings, etc. Those were lovely memories, but not enough to equip me to teach about it.

So, like Alice, I fell down the Wonderland of research. At first, I thought I was researching Cubism to spruce up my 3 day lesson. However, I ended up with way more content than I could possibly teach in my allotted 3 sessions. Here’s what I found out about Cubism.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Let’s see there the thing about multiple perspectives. The cubists wanted to show how we really see things through time and movement. You can walk around a still life and see the back of the vase as well as the front of the base. When you or your friend walk as you have a conversation, you see their face in profile and in ¾ view and straight on as well. We crunch all those moments of time into one moment of time in our real lives. Our brain processes it into one thing. Uh oh. That leads to more content. My research was leading me down another rabbit trail….

ONE POINT PERSPECTIVE

In order to understand multiple perspectives, I should teach my students what the cubists were fighting against. That was the still, unmoving perspective of one person’s eye gazing across a scene. I can teach that without the ruler and the vanishing point. We can all just look through a view finder and hold perfectly still. We can take a photograph while standing still and then take a photograph while moving. Why is one clear and one fuzzy? We notice that a clear, one-point- perspective image requires stillness and a singular, unmoving viewpoint. Unlike this calm and reasonable viewpoint, the cubists wanted to depict the fuzziness of reality. They depicted the dynamic results of moving while capturing a scene. Uh oh. That leads to more research.

MOMENTS OF TIME DEPICTED IN ART

The cubists weren’t the only artists who tried to depict more than one time in one picture. People did this in other time periods, as well, and for other reasons. What about those Chinese Blue Willow plates that tell the entire, complicated story of the two lovers who turn into birds? What about those Renaissance paintings that show the same saint in one picture doing 3 miracles in 3 different scenes? What about Edward Muybridge and his cinematic photos? What about comic strips? Why did these artists have the need to crunch many moments of time into one image? Did they, in their own way, think it was a more real depiction of reality? The cubists certainly thought so.

ABSTRACTION

Which makes me then think about how earnestly Picasso and Braque wanted to depict the *real.* *We’ll have none of this artificial, stuffy history painting,* they thought. They wanted to make a truly contemporary picture of reality. They wanted to depict truth as they experienced it. What is truth? Well, for Picasso and Braque and many European artists at this time, the cubists thought that one aspect of truth hid behind the visual world. Deep down, an object had a true self revealed in a simple, geometric ideal shape. Good ol’ spheres, cubes, and cylinders were something solid that you could rely on. *If it was good enough for the ancient Greeks, it’s good enough for us*. So they did a most satisfying thing. They reduced real objects down to their basic geometric shapes. That’s abstraction 101. An apple becomes a sphere. They just wanted to cut to the chase and get real. Which reminds me of another tangent…

COLLAGE

What could be more real than, um, a real thing? *Let’s not paint a newspaper anymore,* they thought. *Let’s just rip out a page of a newspaper and paste it on the canvas.* Picasso and Braque weren’t doing this because they were interested in texture or because they were “doing” a collage. They did it because they were interested in interrupting the illusionistic picture plane with a dose of reality. It was a result of their deep desire to make pictures as true and real as they possibly could. They wanted their paintings to not just show truth, but to be truth. Wouldn’t you have loved to have been be a fly on the wall in their studios, privy to the conversations they had? Who thought of these ideas first? How did their ideas build on one another?

COLLABORATION

Wait a minute. That opens up another can of worms. Who was responsible for Cubism? Braque or Picasso? Why does Picasso get more credit? What ever happened to Braque? Is there such a thing as the *individual genius* or is *genius* a collaborative effort? What else did Picasso steal? Is stealing a form of creativity? How are art movements like collaborations? What collaborative artists work today, intentionally deconstructing the concept of the *individual genius?.*

Yikes. My 3 day window to teach Cubism has been blown to bits.

Here is what I found out after my first year of teaching. There is no 3 day window to teach Cubism. What I’ve got here is a whole unit. I found a heck of a lot of content in those wonderland rabbit holes I just went down in the name of Cubism. I can offer this content to my students. It just will take more than 3 days. That’s what you call a unit.

FUZZY PICTURES

Observe through viewfinders and take clear photographs and fuzzy photographs to find out about one point perspective

A ROOM WITH MANY VIEWS

Draw multiple sides to one object, person, scene by moving your position every minute.

PEOPLE WITH MANY VIEWS

Interview your classmates on one topic and build an artwork representing the multiple opinions.

COLLAPSING VIEWS

Hybridize two viewpoints into one artwork

COLLAPSING TIME RESEARCH

Research how different artists from different time periods collapse time into one artwork.

COLLAPSING TIME MAKING

Make an artwork collapsing two or more moments in time.

ABSTRACTION RESEARCH

Research how different artists reduce the real world down to geometric shapes.

REDUCTION EXERCISE

Reduce something complex down to geometric shapes.

REDUCTION EXERCISE ON STEROIDS

Look at the Color Field Painters and the Minimalist Sculptors from the 1960’s. Reduce those geometric shapes you made last time down to even more essential forms.

INTERUPT AN ILLUSION

Take an illusion from real life and interrupt it with something from real life, to make it more real. (maybe interrupt a toy catalogue or fashion magazine with reality)

SELF PORTRAIT WITH REAL STUFF

Empty out the bottom of your backpack, locker, pockets, pencil case. Use those objects to create a portrait of yourself.

POEM WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Take your last 10 texts or tweets. Create a poem out of them. Illustrate it.

BECOME A COLLABORATIVE

Research art collaboratives and read some 20th century art manifestos. Then, in a group of 2-4, create a collaborative and write a manifesto with 10 shared beliefs on life and art.

MAKE COLLABORATIVE WORK

Based on your 10 shared beliefs, make an artwork together, reflecting those.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Create a whole class installation connecting all the collaborative artworks from the day before.

CUBISM

Introduce Picasso and Braque’s invention of Cubism. Ask your students to make connections between Cubism and the students’ own work from the previous lessons.

P.S. (E and P Alert!)

What about the Elements and Principles of Design? That’s the easy part. You can layer these on, when appropriate, lesson by lesson. You are looking at color field painters; there’s your opportunity to learn about color. You are helping students arrange found objects into a portrait collage; there’s your opportunity to learn about unity and variety. You are making clear and fuzzy photographs? There’s your opportunity to learn about line. It is impossible to teach about visual art without referencing how artists use the elements and principles. The elements and principles are infused into it all, but they aren’t the content. They are the tools we use when we make art. As a teacher, we point them out constantly.

P.S.S. (FAVORITE RESOURCES)

I came across two wonderful picture books this semester that address the multiple perspective aspect of Cubism. They All Saw A Cat by Brendan Wenzel and Elephant in the Dark by Mina Javaherbin.