



*Blue Guitar*, 1943

Georges Braque (French, 1882-1963)

Oil on canvas | 28 3/8 x 21 in. (70.9 x 52.5 cm)

- Why do you think the artist chose these specific objects to paint?

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

Georges Braque's *Blue Guitar* from 1943 depicts a stilllife painted in late "Cubist" style—a glass jug, a multi-colored guitar, and green grapes sit haphazardly on a table in the foreground, as if collaged. The guitar

acts as the focal point of the piece, placed in the center right, the neck extends off the canvas, while solid blocks of yellow, green and blue tie together the disparate, vivid colors. Letters of text on a pink surface, and the loosely painted shadows of the objects' forms decorate the background, as well as call to mind the *found object* aesthetic of collage.

Overall the piece maintains the two-dimensional look of *Cubism* and of most Modernist works, with the perspective so flattened and foreshortened that the table seems to be pitching forward. In addition, the painting has definite texture and a surface that is almost gritty, displaying the built up paint and roughness that comes from intense working and re-working of the piece. The visible application of paint also serves to unite the physical, material objects, and the piece as a whole.

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

*Blue Guitar* is a much more traditional, pictorial painting than early Cubist paintings created by Braque. Early "Analytical Cubism" as posited by Braque and Picasso prided itself on the deliberate distortion of space and perspective, an alteration of perception, with austere and stark qualities exhibited in its paintings. Cubism was seen as an exploration of realism, and how objects inhabit space. By the 1940s, when *Blue Guitar* was painted, Cubism as a rigorous *avant-garde* movement had fallen apart, becoming more accessible. The somber palette punctuated by bright colors is evidence of that, contrasting deeply with the monochromatic, often neutral tones of early Cubism.

However, the piece still retains remnants of Cubism's climax—the text in the background is a fixture of most classic Cubist works, usually creating visual and verbal puns that often

- How did the artist's working process affect the outcome of the painting? Does this suggest anything about the artist's state of mind or outlook?

referred to inside jokes between artists, or connote hidden meaning, sometimes vulgar. As a still-life, one of the hundreds that Braque painted over his career, the work also portrays ordinary, everyday objects that make a connection to mainstream culture, especially alongside the background text.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

*Blue Guitar* was created during WWII, which influenced Braque's working process. The objects depicted are things that were most likely sitting around his Paris studio, which he was seldom able to leave during the war. This, then, affirms the fascination with the ordinary, everyday object as compelling Modernist subject matter in the face of the larger, more frightening reality of wartime.

Braque's use of Cubism was to have enormous impact on later artists and movements. The rejection of traditional pictorial means, the labeling of color as impure and distracting, the continuous flattening of the picture plane—all were absorbed by artists working in other parts of the world who saw the paintings of Braque and Picasso. Subsequently, these ideas were utilized and taken in several different directions by artists like Piet Mondrian and Marcel Duchamp, among others. Braque made it possible for later artists and collectives to solidify their own heavily

**conceptual** ideas about achieving pure abstraction.

Lastly, Braque's foremost interest lay in the picture making process itself, which in turn also became an important aspect of Cubism and later artistic movements. Braque was devoted to a slow, methodical exploration of Cubism, and is credited with a more enduring role in the development of collage. Very often, he would work on several unfinished canvases at a time.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Georges Braque remains one of the most influential and highly regarded painters to come out of Modernism. Born in Argenteuil-sur-Seine, France, in 1882, his father, who owned a painting and decorating business, moved the family to Le Havre, France, in 1890. After art school and one year in the army, Braque settled in Paris in 1902, where he began looking at art in museums, as well as the art of his contemporaries. In 1907, exposure to Picasso's works, and seeing his legendary *Les Femmes d'Alger* in person led Braque away from Fauvism (the movement begun by Henri Matisse) and toward a more subdued, structured style. Around this time, Braque began formulating his famed Cubist paintings with Picasso. Together, the two were able to collaborate, experiment, and develop the aesthetic of Analytical Cubism in the 1910s.

### VOCABULARY

**Conceptual:** Pertaining to concepts or to the forming of concepts and ideas.

**Cubism:** A style of art that stresses abstract structure at the expense of other pictorial elements especially by displaying several aspects of the same object simultaneously and by fragmenting the form of depicted objects.

**Found object:** A natural or manufactured object that is perceived as being aesthetically satisfying and exhibited as such.

**Homogenized:** To make uniform or similar, as in composition or function.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Writing Process; Writing Applications; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Earth and Space Sciences; Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

Braque is also famous for his significant experimentation and work with new media and techniques that followed—specifically, his use of collage and ‘found’ or pre-existing objects. He is also widely credited with the invention of collage technique.

In 1914, Braque was called into the army. He fought during WWI for less than a year, until he received a head wound and was temporarily blinded. Fortunately, he was able to return to

painting by late 1916. By the 1920s and 1930s, Braque had expanded his personal style, incorporating richer colors and creating work that harkened back to tradition and classical style. In 1931, he built a home and studio in Normandy, and continued to work prolifically through the war years. In 1953, he was asked to decorate a ceiling in the Louvre, quite a distinguished honor for a living artist. Braque became chronically ill during the late 1950s, and died in 1963.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** There were many intellectuals who were part of Georges Braque’s intimate circle—including Picasso, and writers like Gertrude Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Tristan Tzara. Do some short research on their biographies. Were they influential on Braque’s painting? How did the innovations created in painting by Braque and Picasso effect their writing styles? (*Middle and High School*)

**MATHEMATICS:** Cubism, contrary to its own name, is not exactly made up of hundreds of small cubes. However, it might be fun to play with this idea a little bit in terms of mathematics and geometry—how did think Braque and Picasso break down their canvases into small shapes? How many cubes would it take to fill up the spaces and what would their potential measurements have to be? What other shapes can you find within Cubist structures? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

**SCIENCE/SOCIAL STUDIES:** Braque and Picasso’s investigations into Cubism began shortly after, and were heavily influenced by, Einstein’s discovery of the theory of general relativity. Does the style of Cubism truly encompass the ideas of space and time pioneered by Einstein? Could this new painting style have been developed separately from Einstein’s work, or was the knowledge of this new math essential to Braque and Picasso’s innovations? (*High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Braque experimented with collage, and the putting together and overlapping of objects. Cut out shapes and objects—both things you can recognize and things you can’t—out of different colored and textured paper and other found objects—newspaper, magazines, books, sheet music, etc. Make many different versions of this collage. How do a few small changes in the shapes and colors change the tone of the work? (*All ages*)

Explore other Cubist artists, like Juan Gris, Fernand Leger, and Henri Le Fauconnier. What is the difference between these artists’ work, and the Cubism that Braque and Picasso exhibited? (*High School*)