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## The Other Father of Cubism

By ROBERTA SMITH

The Acquavella Galleries' splendid Georges Braque exhibition is a 42-gun salute to this pioneering French Modernist. The first large Braque survey to be staged in New York in more than 20 years, it musters a vigorous if compressed account of more than five decades of art making, with 42 paintings and collages, almost all top-notch. More than half have been borrowed from American and European museums; the rest come from private collections and in several cases have not been on public display in quite some time.

This show means to establish Braque's importance in a town where Picasso, his flamboyant partner in the development of Cubism, which set so much of 20th-century art in motion, looms very large. How large? The Museum of Modern Art's Web site places the number of works by Braque in its collection at 31. The number by Picasso (sitting down?) is 1,211. Picasso was inordinately talented and important, but 40 times more so than Braque?

Organized by Dieter Buchhart, an Austrian critic, art historian and independent curator, the Acquavella show rarely lets down its guard. In nearly every effort Braque is at his most elaborate and ambitious, from his slightly over-heated Fauvist efforts of 1906-7 to his opulent still lifes of the 1930s and '40s and his crowded and shadowy studio interiors of the 1950s. In the show's middle portion, of course, we see Braque the Cubist.

His collaboration with Picasso began in earnest after he first saw the groundbreaking "Demoiselles d'Avignon" in Picasso's studio in late 1907. But by then Braque was already alert to the implications of Cézanne's angled brush strokes and multiple perspectives and the tantalizing way they destabilized painting's traditional unities of form and space, and therefore time.

Braque would later say that he and Picasso were roped together like mountaineers in their invention of Cubism. Picasso saw things a bit differently, referring to Braque as "ma femme," or "my wife." Either way, their intensely close collaboration lasted until the fall of 1914, when Braque enlisted in the French Army early in World War I. They went their separate ways and, like many divorced couples, rarely spoke of each other.

They could not have been more different. Braque's father was a house painter and decorator who made sure that his son learned the artisanal skills of his trade; Picasso's was an academic painter who gave him drawing lessons.

Braque was tall, reticent, methodical and quintessentially French, with all that that implies in terms of reason and balance. He dressed in a neat, discreetly dandyish way, was intensely private, remained married to the same woman all his life and worked in the same studio from 1926 until his death in 1963, at 81.

Picasso was short, volatile, charismatic and innately messy and bohemian, as well as Spanish. He changed houses, companions and painting styles at regular, closely watched intervals and did more than his share to establish the persona of the modern artist as celebrity, complete with entourage.

This show confirms that Braque may have separated from Picasso, but he never really divorced Cubism, which he developed, as he later said, "above all to put painting within the reach of my own gifts." These gifts did not include, for example, Picasso's genius for drawing or for psychological expression conveyed by continually metamorphosing faces and figures.

Braque was never much for figures; his abiding, even monogamous, interest lay in the complex act of perceiving and painting accumulations of objects, in his studio. Cubism gave him a system, a way of dissecting, enhancing and complicating reality that he cultivated for the rest of his life.

The show gives a wonderful account of Braque's contribution to Cubism and of the way that his early training in his father's trade — which included sign painting and the painting of imitation wood and marble — figured increasingly in this project, and throughout his career. It was clearly the basis for his interest in what he called the “tactile” or “manual” space of a painting.

In this spirit, his innovations included the contradictory practices of painting flatness-inducing letters and words, and depth-creating trompe l'oeil nails and other details (with shadows) that so confound Cubist space. Both float among the tensile scaffoldings and eddies of brush strokes in “The Mantelpiece,” a shimmering, mostly white and gray Analytic Cubist painting from 1911 that is also strewn with fragmented scrolls that evoke violins and architectural molding.

It was also Braque who began to emphasize physical surface by adding sand, sawdust and metal shavings to his paint and gluing pieces of wallpaper and newsprint to his drawings, inventing the refined form of collage known as papier collé (glued paper). The papiers collés here include the delicate “Glass, Bottle and Newspaper,” of 1912, and the wonderfully blunt “Bottle and Musical Instruments,” with its corrugated-cardboard decanter, from 1918. Wood-grain wallpapers would inspire him to resuscitate his wood-grain-painting skills, another habit that you can follow through the later pieces.

It is actually the less familiar, later work in this show's second half that is most gripping, as Braque continues on alone with Cubism, expanding and filling it out, making its intersecting forms and transparencies and free-range details more legible and consequently more engaging and seductive.

In the 1935 still life “The Guéridon,” with its eponymous three-legged, oval-topped table stacked with fruit, glass vessels and a hint of a newspaper, we get lost in the carefully built composition; the overlapping, papier-collé-like rectangles of color; the contrast between outlines and full-bodied forms; and the odd decorative details, like the zigzags accompanied by trios of dots that wander across the wall, but also float in front of it, pulled forward by an unexpected rectangle of rather real light.

From the next year, the tilted still life of “The Mauve Tablecloth” is accompanied by a golden ghost chair and disrupted by another unquiet background, this one of deliberately awkward marbled panels.

These are mysteriously beautiful, oddly ego-free works. John Russell, writing in *The New York Times*, aptly described Braque as “an unemphatic genius.” In his still lifes and also his studio interiors, his elaborate physical processes and layers of pattern and shadow slow down time, but so does the way he disappears into the work, which is personal without being burdened by personality. Nothing gets in our way as we wander through these elaborate compositions, warming to the quiet intelligence and patient craft with which they were made, and slipping into their deep, meditative strangeness.

In the catalog's essays, written by the art historians Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Richard Shiff, as well as Mr. Buchhart, several things illuminate these works: Braque's use of the word “hallucination” and his interest in Zen, and above all his stated preference, as quoted by Mr. Shiff, for “the lyricism that derives wholly from the means.” Braque was no Picasso, but his art after Picasso, while mysterious, should be less of a mystery to us. This show, with its succinct presentation of high points, erodes that obscurity.