

"GEORGES BRAQUE: THE FORGOTTEN GENIUS"

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Abstract

One can only recall the name of other contemporaries such as Picasso and Matisse while speaking of Braque, but in fact, Georges Braque is one of the key painters in the framework of the modern art. Despite the fact that he is often referred to as the third man along with Picasso and Matisse, which is not completely true, Braque is the author who made deep and significant innovations in the sphere of Cubism. As with those works starting with his synthetically populated landscapes at L'Estaque, he sought to alter forms and views, overthrowing the customary means of making art. The role and innovations of Braque, in particular, were well worthy of such efforts, as he pursued an essentially contemplative approach and was not immediately outgoing as were the others. Despite the failed marriage and some cases of misinterpretation of their works, he was closely working, with Picasso, that, indeed, defined the new art space. During Braque's lifetime, he was greatly unnoticed yet his final artworks not only in the 'Studios' series with their enigmatic feel, but others as well are as impeccable as the works of other legendary artists such as Bach, Rembrandt, or Rilke. Thus, according to Paul Valéry, Braque leaves a great heritage of a committed artist who wasn't only enriching art with his canvases but signifying its further evolution in practice and in spirit. With a moral and metaphysical substrate his work suggests a new readjustment of evaluation, attributing to him not a mere role of a co-author but that of an independent maestro.

Keywords: Georges Braque, Cubism, Picasso, Modern Art, L'Estaque Landscapes, Analytical Cubism, The Black Fish, Paper Collage, Fauvism, War and Art

Introduction

The role of Georges Braque in the setting of the modern art epoch is somewhat of a marginal figure, insofar with regard as such titans of the epoch as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Nonetheless, essential to comprehend the history of the twentieth-century art, the specific input of Braque, especially his experience as one of the co-originators of Cubism, has to be mentioned; born in Argenteuil, France in 1882, the young artist started with Fauvism and then evolved into the art movement that changed the world, with the help of his friend Picasso. His first works in particular and the L'Estaque landscapes in particular also introduced a new movement. These landscapes were not mere representations of nature but analyses of form and space than could not be viewed from a distinct plane.

Some of his L'Estaque pieces were taken to the Salon d'Automne in 1908, to be disowned. That defeat, however, was a precursor to his work with Picasso. They came up with the cubism, a style that depicted objects as geometrical shapes, a style that was aimed at confusing the audience's perception about reality. Known to have been as close to a marriage, this partnership was one characterized by respect together with a great amount of cross-pollination. There can be therefore little doubt that Picasso owed much to Braque in the elaboration of some of his formulas of expression, such as papier collé.

All the same, it has invariably been Picasso's dependent on whom critics and art lovers have viewed Braque alongside. However, the approach that was adopted by Braque to art was very much dissimilar. He was slow, contemplative and did not yield to the trends of turning art into commerce. His maturity is seen in later works especially in the 'Studios' series where one gets to see the pro-founding as well as emotion. The works of art he

himself enjoyed were considered mysterious and to a certain degree searched for philosophical meanings.

Braque's ideas about art were always based on a deep knowledge of existence. He was quite convinced of the fact that painting is more than an art; it is living. His professionalism was impeccable and his hatred for talent as he would term it was an affirmation to the fact that he believed in hard work. Rather, the legacy of Braque is far more subtle, yet lived and potent. It is our duty to pass his ideas, concepts, and vision with the art audience which asks them to consider the world around them through the prism of thoughtful artistry.

The Missed Masterpiece: Australia's Lost Opportunity with Georges Braque's *Nu debout (Grand Nu)*

1977 was a crucial year in Australia's art collecting, a year that would have greatly strengthened the country's art legacy. That was what was to be the grand finale at the National Gallery of Australia before the latter obtained such a prize possession, Georges Braque's *Nu debout (Grand Nu)*, a piece painted in 1908. Selling at \$1 for a value pack, 5 million with an export permit in our hands, the business was as good as done. However, the choice of the Fraser government to dispel this acquisition would later be perceived as the enormous blunder.

The government's hesitance was based on the political furore that occurred after the then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's decision to buy Canberra painting, *Blue Poles* by Jackson Pollock for \$1.3 million. *Paih* had been described as pure flamboyance and concerned by the critics as the epitome of the so-called Whitlam government's profligacy. Elected to prevent such a scandal, the Fraser government consciously tried to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy by refusing to acquire Braque's *Nu debout*. This decision, however, had a rather significant magnitude of an outcome that extended beyond the typical political settings.

In retrospect, failure to make a forward purchase to own *Nu debout* has been said to be one of the biggest things lost ever. The painting, an important part of a critical stage in Braque's and modern art's progression, would, at the time, have been the single most valuable international artwork in any publicly accessible Australian museum. The \$1. Indeed, \$5 million asking price, which now seem ludicrously low, is a mere shadow of what this establishment was to pay for a so-called above average Cézanne only months later in 2008—\$16 million. 2 million.

This episode is really a great example of a relationship between art, politics, and identity of a nation. Not only did the Fraser government make a grave error of allowing Australia to lose a piece of art history; more importantly it lost an opportunity to further establish Australia's seriousness in the international art market. The fact that *Nu debout* is, as yet, missing from Australian public collections is a sad testimony to how political considerations can sometimes prevent cultural benefits from being introduced. The painting that could have been Australia's treasure is now a lost symbol – a lost call to move Australian arts to the next level.



Georges Braque, Grand Nu, 1908 Georges Braque, The Round Table, 1929

Reflecting on Georges Braque's *Grand Nu*: A Masterpiece Revisited

Staring this painting at the Braque's exhibition in the Grand Palais in Paris I could not help but wonder about the meaning of this work, which stands in the central position at the exhibition. Paris hasn't looked at Maestro Braque acquisitively for four whole decades – one of the great painters of the twentieth century who lived such an unflashy life as Picasso and the sensual Matisse.

Contemporaries of Braque and critics tend to refer to how he has something of a disembodied and Olympian air, a quality that has elicited much speculation. His friend and the poet Francis Ponge once said about Braque's workshop, that it resembled a garage where the artist acted like a car mechanic who did not care much about gestures and in timidations of grandeur and aimed at getting each of his pieces 'running again.' Raw and unpretentious, this best describes Braque's approach to work and, most likely, to artistry as well, in general.

This commitment to the practice, not to glory, is perhaps why Braque is praised as the epitome of the 'artist's artist' of the twentieth century. Unlike most of the artists of his generation, Braque never embraced abstraction or symbolism. He found his inspiration in the physical reality of the world while, at the same time, engaging into a thorough process of translating the observed reality into a real and a radical. His famous saying "We must choose; a thing cannot be real and realistic at the same time" is symbolic of his bent towards such form of art.

This is more than just an important piece in the evolution of Braque's work, herein we have the artist's direct answer to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* de 1907. While the Picasso's picture is credited as one of the most progressive pictures painted in the twentieth century the *Grand Nu* may be considered as the equally profound response of the Braque. It is a very realistic work, but one can recognise Braque's somewhat surrealist style.

Faithfully, Braque had once said that he first met Picasso in front of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the former seems to have visited the studio of the latter accompanied by the poet Apollinaire. While Picasso's friends were shocked and dismayed by the audacity of the painting, Braque saw something different: More than this, Rubens also saw in her an "unwavering determination, an extraordinary yearning for freedom." This brief meeting was the starting point of a spirited conversation where two great artists would have a fateful impact on the creation of the destiny of modern art.

Thus, Grand Nu is closely linked with ideas of Braque's artistic career: with the evident Marxist commitment to his practice's purity and with the refusal of the artist towards the commercial demands of the art world. When we think about this work, we can see how vast an impact Braque has had on the development of modern art, and how little people seem to know about it.

The Genesis of Cubism: Georges Braque and Picasso's Revolutionary Partnership

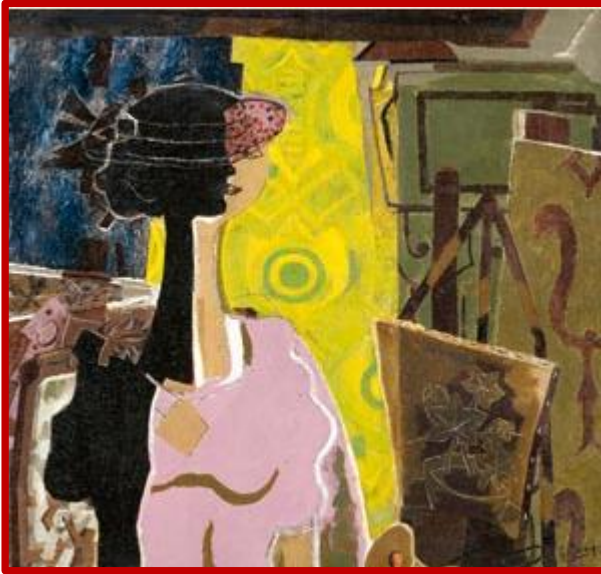
Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso have started one of the most famous duets in the art of the twentieth century. As Braque himself said, they worked like two climbers roped together and as such, they jointly created Cubism – a revolution that changed the course of art. Although the principal spokesman for this movement is often considered to be the prim-and-proper Picasso, a man who painted more than Braque and who contributed as much as anyone to depopulating the entire range of modern art, Braque was the true founder of Cubism. According to his biographer Alex Danchev, all the necessary quotation marks for the invention of an ism lie with one man and that man is Braque, 'If an ism can be said to be invented by a person, then Cubism was invented by Georges Braque'.

He stepped into a new major phase of his works in November 1908 with a solo exhibition in the gallery of Kahnweiler that continued to a series of landscapes from the L'Estaque town of southern France. Braque, who did not need to learn from Cézanne the lessons about space and form which were comprehensively encoded in his language, was capable of absorbing them more intensely than any other artist of his generation. Whereas Cézanne had transgressively overturned the pictorial space, Braque goes even further in this revelation and moves nature to its geometric letters. Such a shift in style was quite provocative to most artists and critics, most notably, Louis Vauxcelles, who saw Braque's work and came up with the term 'Cubism'. This idea was first used by Vauxcelles at the first Salon d'Automne in 1905, where, offended by the behaviour of the Fauves, they became known as 'Wild beasts', all huddled around a small statue.

Despite having briefly moved away from impressionism by momentarily dabbling in to Fauvism which included the use of bright colours and breaking away from attempts at realism, He quickly learnt that his temper was better aligned to a strict, redemptive kind of painting. At first regarded as just an imitator of the Fauves, by his Cubist paintings the audience could see an artist of an extraordinary talent. This triggered a rethink by critics and fellow practitioners on his remarkable capacity to break down scenarios to geometrical shapes and lines.

Though both men are poles apart when it comes to temperament – the unflappable Frenchman Braque, the high-strung Spaniard Picasso – the two knew that they were soulmates. The vagabond and formalistic nature of their personality make them contrasting in nature and this is depicted by German critic Wilhelm Uhde. By the time Pont and Villar made their peak of analytical cubism, their work became so fused that it is sometimes challenging to distinguish the former's work from the latter's. It may be noted that they borrowed and exchanged ideas, motifs and also styles and recipres, to such extent that one begins to wonder whether they were not creating distinctly different types of art. Both artists would later confess to finding it hard in the subsequent years to differentiate between their work and that of the other.

It was in this triangular relationship that Cubism was born and from which the art world, at large, was prepared for a revolutionary upheaval that broke with representation by extending the invitation to innumerable modern movements that succeeded it. It may therefore be understood that, while Braque was slow and systematic, Picasso was always full of zeal and that is exactly why the duo worked hand in glove probably better than any other partnership that has ever been witnessed in the world of art.



Georges Braque, 'Femme à la palette', 1936

The Diverging Paths of Braque and Picasso: War, Innovation, and Rivalry

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso's artistic collaboration was major and immensely important for the development of the Cubism: nevertheless, the two men were rather dissimilar in their character, in their motives and decisions, and in their vision of life. Though the painting by Picasso known as *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. No. 115) often is credited with catalyzing this process, taking as it did motifs from African masks exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme, it was Braque who gives every indication he proactively embraced this artistic proposition with works, for instance, such as the *Grand Nu* and another large figure piece whose fate has yet to be documented. As we shall see, the impression that Picasso constantly innovated at a fast pace while Braque remained loyal to Cubism, is misleading, it was usual that Braque introduced new ideas to them during their mutual work.

Still, Braque's slow and steady work schedule did not coincide with Picasso's maniacal pace. For example, in 1911, Braque made the first paper constructions and in 1912 he showed the spectrum of the world completing the first collages. Their personal lives mirrored these contrasts: whereas Picasso was serially involved in love affairs, Braque was faithfully married to Marcelle from 1912 till he died.

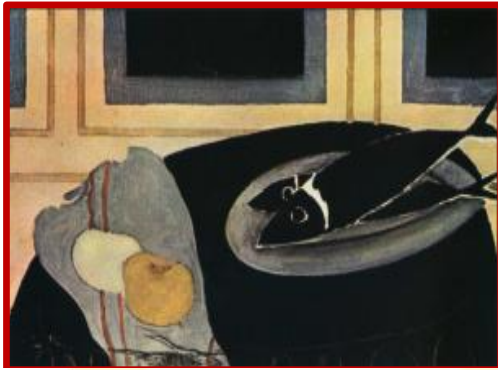
Their relationship got a major blow due to the start of the First World War. Braque fought in the First World War as an officer, being a French man, while Picasso, being a Spanish citizen was exempted from the war. The personal cost to Braque's service was heavy; on 23 May 1915 he received a serious head wound from an exploding shell and, following an operation performed under local anaesthetic for the evacuation of a blood clot from behind the left eye, was subjected to cranial trepanation in order to relieve the pressure on the brain. However, no sooner had he physically been able to resume his activities; he took up painting again after several months of recuperation.

The war sowed sharp divisions among the artists. Those who had served, like Braque, became bitter towards those who had no part in the war. The worst contempt was reserved for artists that took sponsored trips to Germany such as André Derain and who were thus labeled collaborators. While Picasso never directly worked with the Germans: the influences and revelations of the Ballets Russes situation of him to a new strata of society, far from the Bohemian ideals that were dear to the first Cubist period of his work.

Post war relations between Braque and Picasso as friends and competitors were not the same as before. Though Still in Touch, the Friendship that had characterized his earlier partnership with Herronn had died. It is rather marked by the biting comment of Braque,

who said, 'Well, Picasso had been a wonderful painter; now he is just a clever fellow.' Braque in this comment and particularly in the very confrontation with Picasso was asserting not only a personal break but also and most importantly, a philosophical difference in the way they viewed arts and life.

In the years after the war, Braque remained just as meticulous about his work while Picasso's group of friends and acquaintances rose to a different level of prominence. Once again, two individuals who had been close friends and even lovers had drifted apart and were now each following his own career, carrying with him the experience and the wounds of their past.



Georges Braque, Atelier V111 Georges Braque, The Black Fish, 1942

Braque's Enduring Vision: A Lifelong Commitment to Cubism

Whereas Picasso was indulging in a stylistic pluralism in the twenties and thirties, Georges Braque continued on the path of developing the Cubism discoveries. From this period one can mention large still lifes that are the masterpieces of the artist, which show a deep search of color, texture and form: *Guitar and Fruit Bowl* (1919) and *Table Round* (1929). These works, bleak and elegant, are juxtaposed against the more scholarly discourses of Cubism produced by Albert Gleizes and André Lhote, whose work influenced Australian artists in a similar way but whose work was not as rich, and who did not possess the volume of invention of Braque.

It is noteworthy that, although in his later years Braque was rather far from Cubism, he did not deny its tenets. Instead, he developed them, simplifying for himself even some of the rigorous elements of the style, the elements that could hinder the vision he had in mind. This is apparent in his series of small naturalistic pictures toward the end of his life; the spirit of Cubism is still operative. The Cubist ideal continues to be apparent, although in Braque's *Atelier* paintings of the 40s and 50s they are made even more elaborate, and are probably among the best works in any show of his art. This talk begins to see the candidate remain true to Cubism, not simply as an interest or just for a number of years but as a lifetime.

Perhaps, one should note that in both his art life and his private life, Braque was very orderly. He went for painting with another regimentation and measure as he did for his grooming. A combined athlete of some repute, Braque was a boxer, a cyclist, a musician, and a philosopher who saw fit to produce a pamphlet with some of his sayings before his death. Through his thinking in terms of philosophy, he brought virtually a philosophical outlook to his work, which was quite different from that of other artists of his time.

From an ethical point of view, he was a man of principles, but he was not a militant or an activist, or a propaganda artist. While Picasso, who had become party member of CP in 1944, Braque always kept aloof from the political parties; he got his inspiration from Zen Buddhism and Tao Te Ching rather than from Catholic Church. This is seen in what he produces, which is uniquely otherworldly, exhaustive of any literal or easily defined social roles or interpretative frames.

All the same, the book presents Braque as a painter of modest intervention but of great impact. Others may have been more showy or involved in politics, but Braque's steady devotion to painting and his negation of the trivial in art makes him one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century. The work of Braque, influenced by the Cubism but moving beyond it, is still fascinating to observe, and gives the viewer a look into the mind of a man who was as serious as he was talented.



Georges Braque, Blackbird and White Bird, 1960

When it comes to symbolism, Braque, at any rate, never put too much effort into it; still, he was able to distil great thoughts and feelings with the help of the powerful signs of his pictures. When France was occupied by Nazis, Braque painted skulls, but the works like *Black Fish*, painted in 1942, expressed the spirit of the time most vividly. For instance, the painting depicted here – a still life of two dead fish on the plate – is a visual allegory with a highly critical message about the state of the occupied nation – its poverty, stagnation. What is arresting is that in the case of this image, Braque's compositional mastery manages to be so engrossing that spectators get entrapped in the midst of despair. The impact of these works was enormous; when these exhibited in Britain, there followed an 'epidemic' of fish paintings – a true testimony to how Braque was able to elicit an array of human emotions with the help of ordinary objects.

As Braque's career progressed, his work began to feature a recurring motif: a mole in action, or a bird in flight. This symbol of liberty at last to the fullest extent imaginable was a complete opposite to the earlier images of captivity and rot. This bird motif emerged as a leitmotif in his subsequent oeuvre: floating over his studio pictures; and still standing for certain kind of emancipation. Of this motif there is possibly no finer example than in *Black Bird and White Bird* (1960), the painting reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. This work of art—and this slogan—are black and white bird stencils against two large semicircles of pink and yellow. The painting has no 'story' or 'message' as such but it serves as a physical manifestation of the 'constructed reality' of Braque and his desire to make art that is dictated by its own parameters rather than by symbolism.

Black Bird and White Bird exemplifies Braque's philosophy of art: the work should be autonomous, restricted only by the rules that are set by the artist themselves. It was this approach that enabled Braque to construct art that was fully individual and at the same time all-embracing and for this reason – a singular phenomenon in the world of modern art. While the late works of Braque, characterised by neat lines and precise angles continue to delight and amaze, the cohesiveness of the works also points to an artist who, despite the rigorous methodology, was ready for more and the infinite number of ways

Conclusion

Georges Braque may have been in the periphery of the history of modern art but he was one of the most resilient artists of his time and was able in compromising the worth of his work. Though not as loud and boisterous as his contemporary Picasso, Braque is instrumental in the maturing of the Cubism movement and the modern art. The systematic way that the Icelandic artist systematised his art while at the same time avoiding a sort of introspective melancholy makes him popular for a segment of art lovers who avoid the frivolities associated with fame and success. The exhibited paintings by Braque starting from early Cubist works, through the more elaborate still lives and landscapes depict an artist that was overly preoccupied by the possibilities of form, colour and composition. For his whole life, Braque continued developing the ideas of Cubism, never rejecting this technique but simplifying it to the maximum. In his later paintings, especially those containing the image of a bird in-flight, he provided a notion of liberation that is so different to anything seen in the war pictures many of which appeared desolate in nature. This duality in Braque's art is not an isolated phenomenon but corresponds to a more general philosophical stance, one which could be inferred from his war experience, his ethics, his readings of Zen Buddhism and the Tao te Ching. There is no semi-erotic affair or clear allegory in Braque's works; what it is about is living and expressing thought and feeling through carefully constructed picture space. His impact to the modern art world despite of the minimal instances that credited him, is historic and eternal. The legacy of Braque is still significant and the artists' vision has not lost its significance creative and social value – the paintings can be a possibility to look at the world and experience it. Being intelligent, self-absorbed, and professional, Georges Braque did not change until he died: he remained true to himself and his art.

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