

Development Issues: Georges Braque at Acquavella Galleries / artcritical

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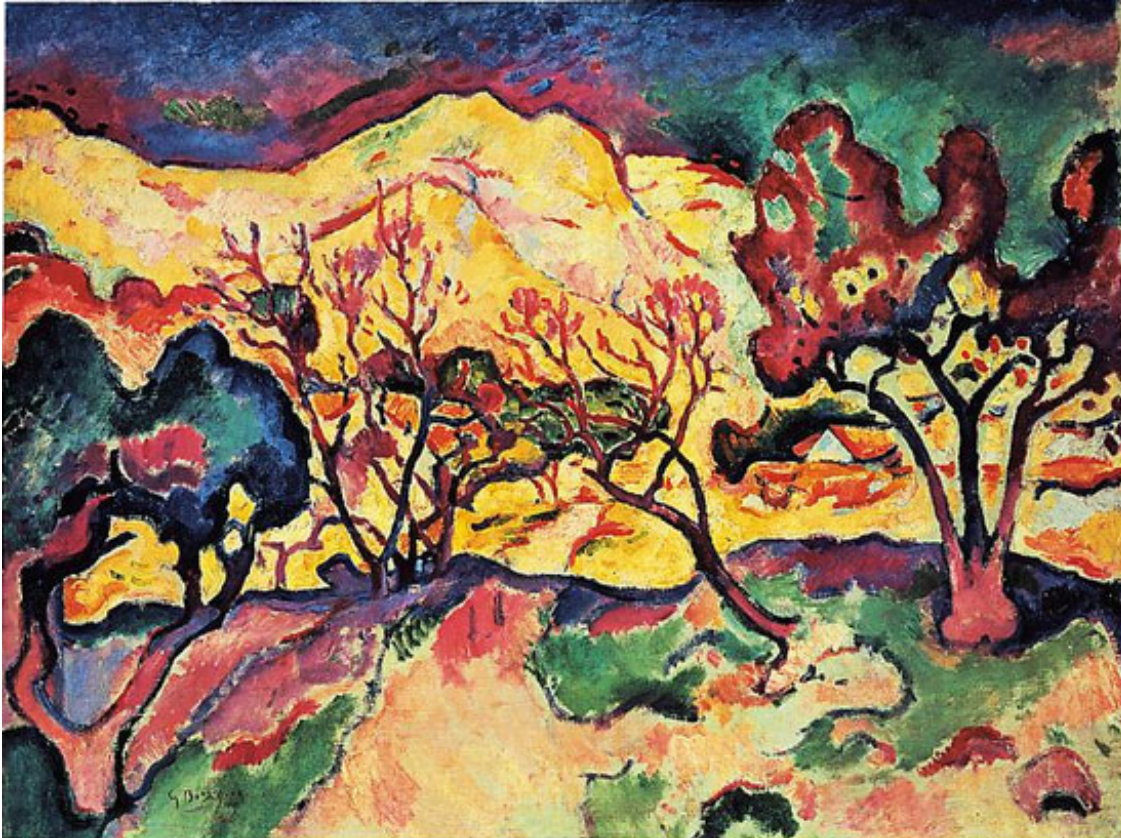
November 10, 2011

Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism at Acquavella Galleries

October 12 to November 30, 2011

18 East 79th Street (between Madison and Fifth avenues)

New York City, (212) 734-6300



Georges Braque, Landscape at L'Estaque, 1906. Oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 31 1/8 inches. Merzbacher Kunststiftung © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Every visitor to the great display of Willem de Kooning at MoMA is aware of the extreme difficulty of understanding his

development. Acquavella's magnificent show of Georges Braque, presented on two floors of a grand Upper East Side townhouse, poses the same question about an earlier modernist. How and why, one wants to know, does an artist who develops one style very successfully suddenly abandon it and move on? There are three Braques in this exhibition: the early fauve master (1906-1907); the cubist who was Pablo Picasso's collaborator (1907- 1914); and the senior figure who, after that relationship was dissolved by the Great War, developed a highly distinctive late style (1917-1956), which openly borrows from but looks surprisingly different from classical cubism.

Change is difficult, as every psychoanalyst will tell you, because most neurotics cling to miserably dysfunctional lives. How much more difficult, then, to understand how Braque, who at each stage of his artistic career was marvelously triumphant, twice abandoned his style to move on. The intense colors of *L'Estaque* (1906) are given up in *Harbor* (1909), which reconstructs a beach scene in monochromatic brown and gray planes. (*Houses at L'Estaque* (1907) shows that transition in progress.) The austere Analytic Cubist *The Mantlepiece* (1912) is very unlike *The Pantry* (1920), in which Braque opens up his picture space. In the later art we remain indoors, he never returns to the landscape; a distinctive dark palette, not however restricted to blacks, grays and whites emerges. And in *The Billiard Table* (1944-52) cubist denial of perspective and a post-cubist palette present a distinctive new motif.

Georges Braque, Harbor, 1909. Oil on canvas, 16 x



19 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Usually Braque is taken to be a lesser artist than Picasso. Once their collaboration dissolved, while the Spaniard moved rapidly through Neo-classicism, Surrealism and highly personal erotic images, before finding his late style, often based upon appropriations from the old masters, the Frenchman's career was more modest. If no John Richardson has been inspired to tell Braque's story that perhaps is because there is less to tell. The 'flesh-colored' cock forming part of the woman's body in *Woman with a Mandolin* (1937) is as

visually daring as Picasso's erotic inventions, but how different is the studio setting, whose colors might come from early Vuillard. Mostly, however, Braque avoids Picasso's explicitly autobiographical concerns

This exemplary show, which retells an important part of the now historically distant era of French modernism, speaks eloquently to the present. Not, I hasten to add, with reference to the pictorial concerns of cubism itself: That visual culture is now distant. But what remains of living interest is Braque's ability to radically develop, in ways that do not simply cancel and preserve his prior manner. When Frank Stella works in series, he works through all of the variations on a motif, which he then abandons. Robert Mangold, by contrast, develops his motifs in a more intuitive way. And after the early Abstract Expressionist abstractions, Richard Diebenkorn turned to figurative painting before embarking on the Ocean Parks. Braque's very different, arguably more radical development is even harder to rationally reconstruct. In the 1980s, some most distinguished scholars proposed to eliminate 'style' from our vocabulary. This exhibition shows that you cannot understand Braque without stylistic analysis. Since Stella's, Mangold's, and Diebenkorn's magnificent ways of developing now reveal their period style, maybe some daring young artist will find her inspiration in this exhibition.



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