Space Invader. Georges Braque's radical vision finally finds perspective

By Richard Lacayo

IN THE SPRING OF 1907, GEORGES BRAQUE and Pablo Picasso, both about 25, met for the first time, in one of art history's most momentous encounters. Over the next year, they clicked, then exploded. Working on separate canvases but always in close collaboration—"two mountain climbers roped together," as Braque famously put it—they carried out the revolution that was Cubism, sweeping away the system of single-point perspective that had ruled Western art since the late 15th century. Braque is always described as the more reserved and laconic of the pair, the Gary Cooper of modern art, but he was never shy in summing up what they did—or, let's say, undid. "The whole Renaissance tradition is repugnant to me," he said. "The hard and fast rules of perspective which it succeeded in imposing on art were a ghastly mistake, which it has taken four centuries to redress." *To be redressed by us* is what he meant.

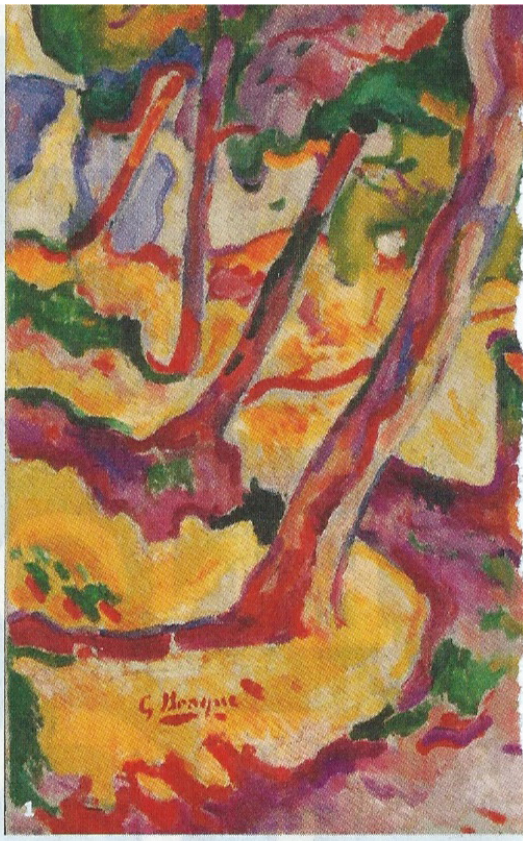
While Braque's position in art history is high and secure—when he died in 1963, France accorded him a state funeral—he's too often treated as Cubism's second banana, less daring and inventive than Picasso. This is one good reason for "Georges Braque: A Retrospective," a very fine new show that originated at the Grand Palais in Paris and is now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, curated by the Houston museum's director Gary Tinterow and curator Alison de Lima Greene, as well as Brigitte Léal of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It puts Braque on more equal footing, which turns out to be just the right posture for him.

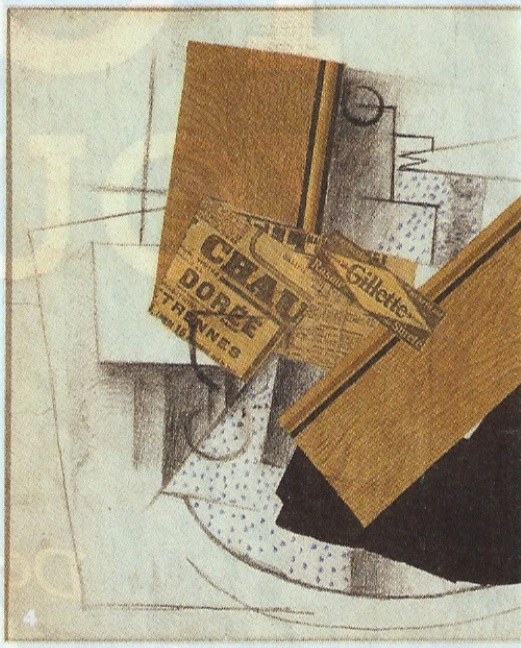
Braque's position in art history is high and secure, but he's too often treated as Cubism's second banana

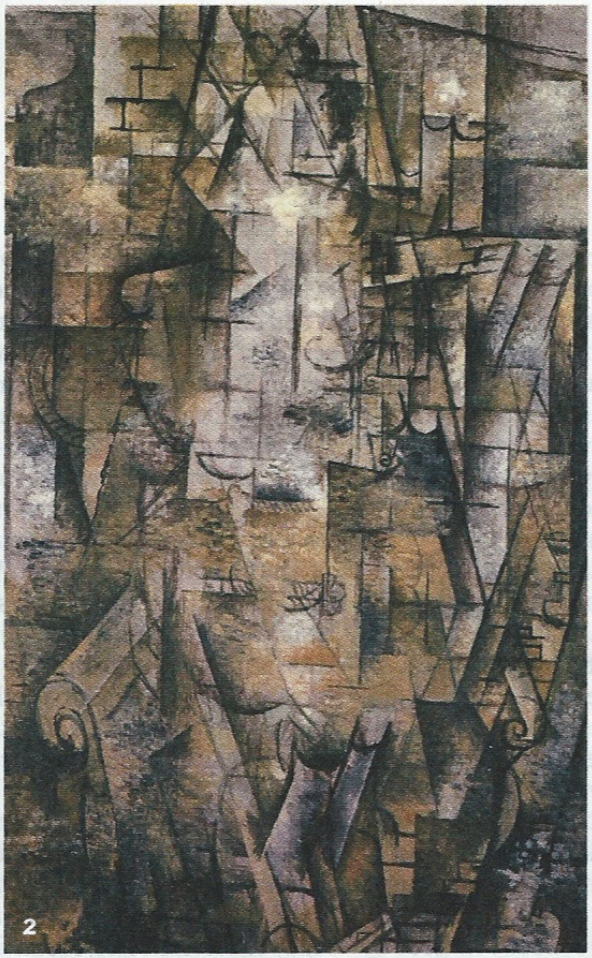
He was born on May 13, 1882, in the Paris suburb of Argenteuil. The son and grandson of housepainters who were also amateur easel painters, Braque had sporadic art-school training and also spent time learning false wood graining, marbling and stencil lettering, decorator skills that he later made the stuff of high art. In 1905 he had a life-changing moment at the Salon d'Automne, a major annual Paris exhibition, when he saw the retina-searing canvases that got Henri Matisse and André Derain labeled *les fauves*—the wild beasts. Thrilled, he adopted their shock-corridor palette, first in Antwerp, of all places, where he managed to make Belgium look as sizzling as St.-Tropez. Later, to be closer to where Matisse and Derain had painted, he moved on to L'Estaque, a village in the south of France. In canvases like *L'Estaque Landscape,* the violets and scorched yellows are set free, in proper Fauvist style, from the burdens of mere description.

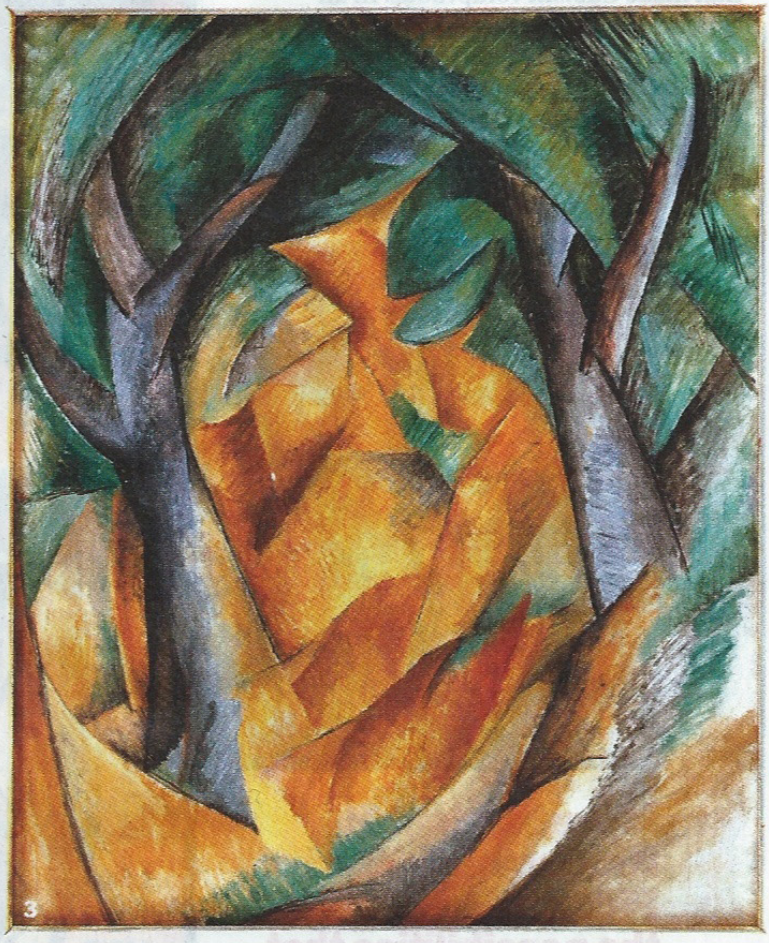
But by the following summer, Braque's first excitement over Fauvism was waning. Heating up his palette didn't do much to help him probe the interlock of form and space that increasingly obsessed him. For that he turned to Paul Cézanne, who had died in 1906, leaving behind a body of flinty pictures in which volumes and surrounding space all but conjoin in a broken surface of shingle-style brushstrokes.

When Braque and Picasso met soon after, Picasso was embroiled in producing *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* a painting that turned its back on Western art conventions more brutally than anything yet attempted by Braque. When he went to see the finished picture at Picasso's studio in the fall, Braque was suitably stunned by its saw-toothed power. But it also accorded with lessons he was already drawing from Cézanne. Even before seeing it, Braque had returned to the south with new eyes to produce the first transitional Cubist landscapes. In a painting like *Trees at L'Estaque,* he abstracted Cézanne's









1. *L'Estaque Landscape*, Autumn 1906
A pulsating Fauvist scene in which colors are freed from the chore of mere accuracy

2. *Woman Reading*, 1911
Not so much a picture of a woman as an emblem for the experience of her figure in space

3. *Trees at L'Estaque*, 1908
Instead of receding, as they would in conventional perspective, the hills and trees crowd forward

4. *Still Life on Table*, 1914
Braque brings the world directly into a work on paper by pasting scraps of real newspaper onto the surface

faceted forms into more solid volumes and tectonic plates, intersecting planes that represent hillsides and woodlands without exactly depicting them. The painting was no longer a view, a report on the appearance of a scene from a fixed position, but a conceptual work—a postcard from the mind's eye, which had traversed the motif, then digested and reassembled what it had seen.

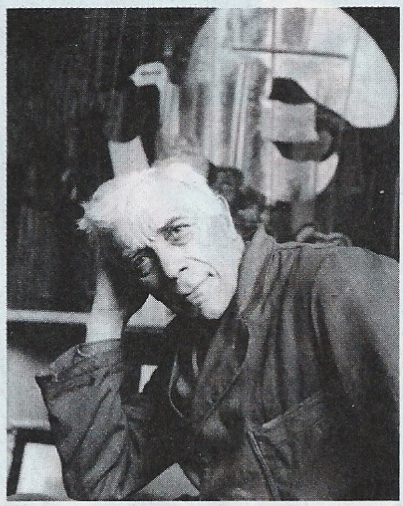
Braque submitted six or seven pictures like those to the judges choosing the Salon d'Automne of 1908. Matisse was one of them. Unhappy that his former disciple had drifted into the orbit of his rising young competitor Picasso, he complained that Braque had reduced everything to "little cubes." The canvases were rejected. Sensing an opportunity, the forward-looking young art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler gave the little-known Braque a one-man show. After the conservative critic Louis Vauxcelles echoed Matisse's quip about "cubes," journalists everywhere gleefully adopted the term Cubism, and not as a compliment.

Unabashed, Braque and Picasso forged ahead. Picasso, seven months older, was the dervish, possessed of a mad virtuosity and a willingness to go out on a limb, preferably with a saw. Braque brought a greater sense of measure, form and order and a workman's feel for craftsmanship and fine materials. He was one of the last modern painters to grind his own pigments. (In the search for more-tactile surfaces, he was also one of the first to adulterate them with sand, ash and even tobacco.) And more than once, Braque was ahead of Picasso in grasping the possibilities that Cubism offered.

Uncharted territory beckoned; they jumped right in. Braque's magnificent *Woman Reading,* from 1911, is like a cliff cut with treacherous handholds—very few of them helping you grasp that a seated woman is in there somewhere. Color was banished, a distraction from the hard questions at hand. As Cubism veered close to pure abstraction, a place neither man wanted to go, Braque began introducing stenciled words as a lifeline to the real world. So in *Guitar,* from 1912, you find the musical term *ETUDE* simply floating across the visual field. It would take us a century and Google Glass to catch up.

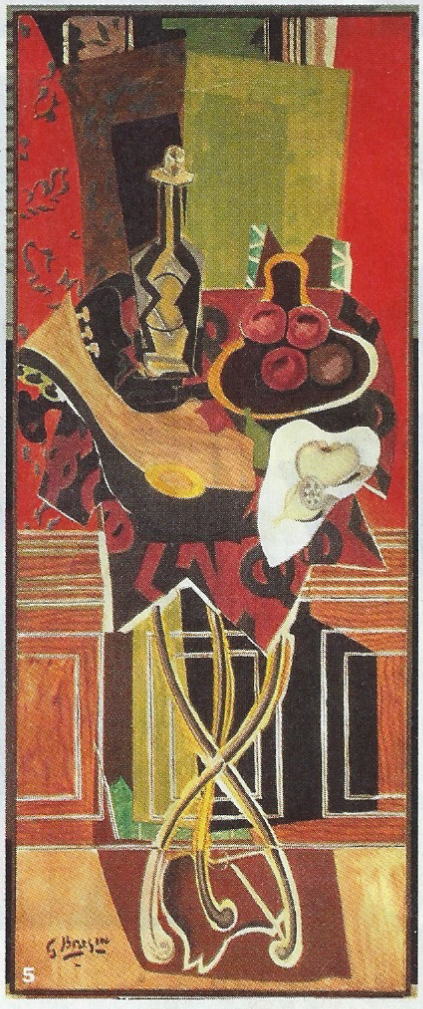
And Braque kicked off Cubism's final evolution in 1912, when he shot the real world directly into the picture by pasting scraps of newspaper onto his works on paper. In *Still Life on Table,* he complicated the game further by also adding strips of imitation wood-grain wallpaper—"real" fragments of a commercial illusion.

Then, suddenly, Georges and Pablo's excellent adventure came to an end. With the outbreak of World War I, Braque was mobilized, then suffered a near-fatal battlefield head injury. By the time he returned to painting in late 1916, Picasso was no longer his collaborator. He was too busy furthering the pinwheeling project of being Picasso. Braque went on to devote himself to a still complex but more legible Cubism, in which objects could be more easily identified. In paintings like *Still Life With Fruit Dish* and *The Red Pedestal Table,* he also felt ready to restore color, broad fields of it that made Cubism voluptuous. In all this, Braque remained art's inspired workman. His last painting, *The Cultivator,* is telling. It's a plow. What better farewell from a man who broke so much new ground? ■



More than once, Braque was ahead of Picasso in grasping the possibilities that Cubism offered

5. *The Red Pedestal Table,* 1939–52
In his work after World War I, Braque adopted a more legible Cubism, with objects more easily identified



PORTRAIT: ART RESOURCE; LE GUERIDON ROUGE (THE RED PEDESTAL TABLE), 1939–52: © GEORGES BRAQUE—COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON. ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY AND ADAGP