

George Braque (1882 – 1963)  
Viaduct at L'Estaque, 1907  
82.22 (no image), G371



Between 1906 and 1910, Georges Braque made several trips to the south of France and the port at L'Estaque, just west of Marseilles. There, he found the new landscapes to paint using the nonnaturalistic colors of the Fauves. During his 1907 stay, Braque also became influenced by the art of Paul Cézanne, who had painted there earlier. Like Cézanne, Braque reduced the site to simple geometric forms. Moving beyond Cézanne's solid masses, however, Braque made the tilting planes obey his own--rather than nature's--laws. Two years after finishing this picture, Braque abandoned Fauvism for Cubism.

Props – photo of Braque and wife  
Cezanne – painting of same place

### **INTRODUCTION**

From 1908, when it became part of a private collection and disappeared from view, until 1977 when it reappeared, *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* was known to the world only through a poor black and white photograph. A key painting in Georges Braque's oeuvre, its reappearance has stimulated scholars to reassess that artist's role in the formative years of one of the most influential artistic movements of the 20th century. Braque took a decisive

step toward Cubism in this canvas, combining Cézannesque geometrically defined shapes and multiple angles of perspective with vestiges of his earlier, decorative Fauve style. *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* clarifies the chronology of Braque's independent artistic development prior to his meeting and joining forces with Picasso, demonstrating his crucial role in the birth of Cubism.

### **THE TURN OF THE CENTURY**

At the turn of the century, developments were taking place in science, technology, philosophy, and the arts, which made it evident that the notion of "reality" was infinitely complex. Like scientists, modern artists were experimenting and investigating the possibilities of their media, searching for better means of expressing their changing world.

### **CUBISM**

Cubism, one of the first new art movements in the 20th century, developed mainly through the collaboration of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. It presented a revolutionary way of representing the subject of a painting, breaking a 500-year old tradition that can be traced to the Renaissance. Cubism may be understood not so much as a new concept as it was a return to the conceptual principles of the Medieval world, a time when artists often depicted what they knew as opposed to what they saw.

**Multiple Viewpoints** From the Renaissance through the latter part of the 19th century, artists attempted to create the illusion of three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface through atmospheric and linear perspective. They achieved this illusion, based on a single point perspective, by relying on the fact that objects appear smaller in the distance. However, the Cubists theorized that vision is not a static experience, because when we view an object, our memory fills in other details. Our visual experience of an object is rather, the sum of several different glimpses of that object. To convey that idea, Cubists presented an object from multiple viewpoints simultaneously.

**Rejection of Illusionism** Both Picasso and Braque rejected three-dimensional illusionism when they began to stress the two-dimensional plane of the picture surface. In their paintings of 1908, they began to compress objects into an extremely shallow space and often treated them as flat, geometric shapes. In some of Braque's paintings of this year, one form was allowed to fuse with an adjacent form through open contours. This technique was derived from Cézanne and is called *passage*.

### **ANALYTIC CUBISM**

By 1909, these tendencies led to the formation of the style known as Analytic Cubism. This style lasted until about 1912. The term "analytic" refers to the method of breaking down objects into basic components and reassembling them within a shifting perspective so that objects are seen from multiple viewpoints simultaneously. The use of *passage* further dissolved forms into the surrounding space so that distinctions between solid and void became ambiguous (as seen in Léger's *Table and Fruit*, for example). The reduction of color to a nearly monochromatic palette of browns and grays forced viewers to focus on the new treatment of form.

### **SYNTHETIC CUBISM**

In 1912, Picasso and Braque began experimenting with the technique of collage, a method which involves pasting shapes of cut-out paper and cloth directly onto the canvas. This led to a simplification of their earlier compositions and signaled the second phase of

Cubism, known as Synthetic Cubism. Synthetic Cubism is characterized by flat, usually geometric forms that are sometimes combined with collage elements or painted surfaces resembling collage (Gris' *Still Life*, for example). The major difference between the two forms of Cubism is that Analytic Cubist works began with the visual analysis and observation of the objects, while Synthetic Cubist works began with shapes and materials, which then might suggest to the artist the resemblance of certain objects. Thus, the term "synthetic" refers to a process of building up a composition through the arrangement of freely invented forms; whereas, "analytic" refers to the breaking down of forms into their component parts.

### **INFLUENCE OF CUBISM**

The revolutionary development of Cubism by Braque and Picasso influenced nearly every important European modernist movement before World War I. Even more influential than their stylistic innovation was the underlying attitude that Cubist paintings exemplified. This attitude, which had been "in the air" since the 19th century but was now stated in a more dramatic way, rejected the notion that art must imitate nature, and asserted that art had expressive properties of its own. In other words, a painting was not a mirror of visual reality, but a palpable object in its own right.

### **BRAQUE'S DEVELOPMENT**

Georges Braque received his first critical acclaim when he made his debut at the Salon des Indépendants in 1906 as the youngest member of the Fauves. The public was shocked by the artists' explosive use of color. A critic referred to Braque and his fellow artists as *les fauves*, meaning the "wild beasts." A short-lived movement with Matisse as the unofficial leader, Fauvism was characterized by intense, brilliant, non-descriptive color, which attempted to express the inner qualities of a subject, rather than to describe the way it appeared in nature. The Fauves continued to paint the natural world in recognizable forms, always emphasizing the expressive possibilities of color.

### **INTRODUCTION TO CÉZANNE**

During the Fauvist phase of Braque's career, he was closely associated with André Derain. In the autumn of 1906, at Derain's suggestion, Braque visited L'Estaque, a village situated west of Marseilles. It was here that Cézanne, whom Braque called the "father of us all," had painted in the 1880s. The impact of Cézanne was further felt by Braque in 1907 in seeing two exhibitions of Cézanne's work: 75 of his watercolors in June and a major retrospective at the Salon d'Automne in October.

### **CÉZANNE'S CONTRIBUTION**

The problem with which Cézanne had struggled was how to establish volume and solidity in a painting without denying the actual two-dimensionality of the picture plane by resorting to traditional means of illusionism. Cézanne's solution is evident in *The Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan*. The rejection of linear and aerial perspective and the use of overlapping planes of modulated color to achieve depth are characteristic of his mature style, as is the use of linear contours to define objects. Although Braque's *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* shows the influence of Fauvism in its color, the composition clearly reveals the influence of Cézanne. (This is described fully in the discussion of the painting which follows.)

### **MEETING PICASSO**

During this early phase in the development of Cubism, Braque and Picasso had not met. *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* reveals that Braque, working independently, had already made

a decisive step toward the development of Cubism. Picasso had likewise staged a revolution in painting in 1907 with *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*. One artist who saw this work and understood it was Braque. More importantly, the two artists, in meeting and comparing work, recognized their affinity. In the following years, Braque and Picasso joined forces and became "like two mountaineers roped together." The term "Cubism," which was coined from the comment of art critic Louis Vauxcelles, was never used by Braque or Picasso to describe their work or their goals in inventing a new style of painting.

### ***THE VIADUCT AT L'ESTAQUE***

*The Viaduct at L'Estaque* dates from Braque's second visit to L'Estaque in the autumn of 1907. This painting and several subsequent works from this crucial period show the rapid development of Braque's style toward Cubism. (For a full discussion of this development, see Alvin Martin's article in the *MIA Bulletin*, LXV.)

### **THE INFLUENCES**

It is apparent in this painting that Braque combined aspects of Fauvist style with the newer influences of Cézanne. For example, the painting is rendered in Fauve color (although it is more subdued than is usual) and curving lines (another trait of Fauvism) shape the contours of the rolling hills of the foreground and the branches of the trees. The houses, however, are simplified into geometric shapes (similar to Cézanne's buildings). Similarly, in some areas, the contours of the buildings are left open so that one form merges into the adjacent one, as Cézanne's forms do. Additionally, depth is achieved by a layering of forms (buildings, trees, hills, and viaduct) that are rendered by planes of color. Objects appear simultaneously as flat two-dimensional shapes and as forms having volume and solidity, because they are modulated with color. The influence of Cézanne is also apparent in the high horizon line, the framing device of the trees which form an arch over the center of the composition, and in the open, featureless foreground.

### **PERSPECTIVE**

The composition of *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* shows that Braque was taking some liberties with perspective, again demonstrating Braque's debt to Cézanne's landscapes of the 1880s. The road at the right does not recede into space but seems to fold up and come forward. A dual perspective system allows one to look down upon the rooftops in the foreground and over the viaduct to the factory and, yet, just beyond the houses, one can see up and through the arches of the viaduct as if viewing it from below. Moreover, the buildings behind the viaduct do not recede into the distance. Instead, because of the high horizon line, we tend to view the picture from top to bottom. The foreground and background are unified by the smokestack in the distance which rises up to touch the trees of the foreground. Color further unites the two, because yellow areas of equal intensity fill the sky and the open area of the foreground. The oblique planes of architectural forms in the center of the composition foretell the direction in which Braque's style was to move in his subsequent canvases.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF CUBIST STYLE**

During the months following the painting of *The Viaduct at L'Estaque*, Braque's work showed the continued evolution of his style toward Cubism. In the winter and spring of 1908, he further developed the tendency towards geometry and abstraction begun in the Minneapolis picture, liberating himself even more from a dependence upon nature. By the time of the Salon des Indépendants in the spring of 1908, his new style was well

established.

*The Viaduct at L'Estaque* clearly illustrates the moment in Braque's career when he turned from his Fauve style and initiated the revolutionary changes that would evolve into the Cubist style. More significantly, it demonstrates Braque's independent development prior to meeting Picasso, identifying him as a co-creator, if not a forerunner, in the invention of Cubism.

## THE ARTIST

Born in Argenteuil, Georges Braque was encouraged to paint by both his father and grandfather who were house painters by trade as well as amateur artists. After becoming an apprentice house painter in 1899, Braque went to Paris where he continued his apprenticeship and briefly studied art. In 1904, he set up his own studio. After his second exhibition in the Salon des Indépendants in 1907, he was acknowledged as a member of the avant-garde. It was at this point in his career that he met Pablo Picasso. In sharp contrast to the volatile and bohemian Picasso, Braque was a calm, confident, reflective, and disciplined artist. However, seldom in the history of art has there been a closer collaboration between two artists as that of Picasso and Braque from about 1907 to 1914.

Braque was severely wounded in the war, and when he resumed his artistic career in 1917 he moved away from the harsher abstraction of cubism. Working alone, he developed a more personal style, characterized by brilliant color and textured surfaces and—following his move to the Normandy seacoast—the reappearance of the human figure. He painted many [still life](#) subjects during this time, maintaining his emphasis on structure. During his recovery he became a close friend of the cubist artist [Juan Gris](#).

He continued to work throughout the remainder of his life, producing a considerable number of distinguished paintings, graphics, and sculptures, all imbued with a pervasive contemplative quality. Braque, along with Matisse, is credited for introducing Pablo Picasso to [Fernand Mourlot](#), and most of the [lithographs](#) and book illustrations he himself created in the 1940s and '50s were produced at the [Mourlot Studios](#). He died on 31 August 1963, in Paris. He is buried in the church cemetery in Saint-Marguerite-sur-Mer, Normandy, France. Braque's work is in most major museums throughout the world.

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### **TOUR TIPS**

Use on the following tours:

- Highlights of the Museum's Collection
- Visual Elements
- 20th-Century Art
- French Art

Compare *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* to Cézanne's *Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan*, emphasizing Cézanne's extremely important influence on Braque.

Compare the vestiges of Fauvism in *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* with Vlaminck's *Blue House* or André Derain's *St. Paul's from the Thames*, Fauvist paintings made at the height of the movement.

Contrast the treatment of space and the means of achieving depth in a Dutch 17th-century landscape (or other traditional landscape painting) with that of this proto-Cubist work.

After considering the developments in Braque's painting, look at a late 20th-century painting (Stella, for example) to see how far modern artists have taken these ideas. (For example, the idea that a painting is an object in its own right, not an imitation of nature.)

Use this painting as an introduction to Cubism and then proceed to Léger's *Table and Fruit* (as an example of Analytic Cubism) and Gris' *Still Life* (as an example of Synthetic Cubism) to demonstrate its development. The following exercise is a helpful way to illustrate the Cubist technique.

### **EXPLANATION OF CUBISM**

For this exercise, you will need three milk cartons:

- Carton #1 is left whole.
- Carton #2 is cut and flattened.
- Carton #3 is cut into basic geometric shapes.

**STEP 1:** *Recognition of a Three-Dimensional Object*

(SET MILK CARTON #1 ON THE GALLERY FLOOR.)

"In order to see an object from all sides, one must take the time to look at it from multiple viewpoints. If a group of people is looking at the same object, each person is seeing the object from a different point of view. In order to see multiple viewpoints, a person would

have to take the time to move around the object."

(HAVE CHILDREN WALK AROUND THE MILK CARTON ON THE FLOOR. LOOK AT ALL SIDES AND TOP, AND IMAGINE THE BOTTOM.)

**STEP 2:** *Translating Three-Dimensions (3-D) to Two-Dimensions (2-D)*

(SET A MILK CARTON THAT HAS BEEN CUT APART AND FLATTENED ON THE FLOOR WITH THE LABEL SIDE SHOWING. CARTON #2, SIDE A.)

"An artist working with a 2-D surface or plane like a canvas must flatten the object to show the multiple views."

**STEP 3:** Reduce the Object to Its Basic Geometric Shapes

(TURN THE CARDBOARD OVER SO YOU DON'T SEE THE LABELS AND OUTLINE THE BASIC GEOMETRIC SHAPES ON THE BACK OF THE MILK CARTON. YOU WILL SEE RECTANGLES, SQUARES, AND TRIANGLES. CARTON #2, SIDE B.)

"The artist simplifies the object to its basic geometric shapes."

**STEP 4:** The Artist Fragments the Object

(SCATTER THE CUT GEOMETRIC SHAPES OF A MILK CARTON ON THE FLOOR. CARTON #3.)

"The artist fragments the basic geometric shapes."

**STEP 5:** *The Artist Condenses and Rearranges the Geometric Shapes*

(PUSH THE SHAPES TOGETHER INTO A NEW DESIGN WITH SHAPES OVERLAPPING ONE ANOTHER. CARTON #3.)

"The artist condenses and arranges the basic geometric shapes."

**STEP 6:** Look at elements of Cubism applied to a figure in Modigliani's *Head of a Woman*. This can be approached in the following manner:

- Ask the members of your group to become Analytical Cubists and analyze all the geometric shapes one can find in the head of a person. Look carefully at a person's head and face for geometric shapes:
- Look at the head from the side to see the nose is a triangle.
- Turn your head down to see that the top of the head is an oval.
- Look at the face from the front. What shape is the head? Square, oval, or round? Look at the eye. Is the iris round?

Have one child come forward and analyze the parts of the head in the sculpture or painting.