

GEORGES BRAQUE. DANCE OF SHAPES
10 OCTOBER 2020 TO 24 JANUARY 2021

The Bucerius Kunst Forum is devoting a retrospective to Georges Braque starting in autumn 2020, the first comprehensive survey of his paintings in Germany in over thirty years. Braque is regarded as the initiator of Cubism and one of the premier artists of the twentieth century. Presenting 80 works, the chronologically arranged exhibition traces his astonishing creative diversity: from his early Fauvist works, through the development of Cubism, to his last, almost abstract series in the post-war period. The exhibition is a collaborative project with the Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, whose collection will be the source of the majority of the works on loan.

"Monsieur Braque is a very young and brave man. [...] [He] reduces everything - landscapes, figures, houses - to geometric patterns, to cubes," remarked art critic Louis Vauxcelles upon viewing Braque's first solo exhibition in 1908, which is considered to be the public debut of Cubism. From 10 October 2020 to 24 January 2021, the Bucerius Kunst Forum will host a large-scale retrospective devoted to Georges Braque (1882-1963), the pioneer of Cubism. His work was exhibited extensively in Germany particularly in the 1930s to 1960s, with the last big show taking place in 1988. However, while the Grand Palais in Paris (2013) and the Guggenheim Bilbao (2014) recently honoured Braque with major exhibitions, not much has been seen on the German exhibition circuit by this important French painter since the late 1980s. Now, after a hiatus of over 30 years, a comprehensive selection of his paintings will finally be on view again in Germany in an exhibition featuring 80 important works on loan, most of them from the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition *Georges Braque. Dance of Shapes* was conceived by Brigitte Leal, an expert on Cubism and deputy director of the Centre Pompidou. Chronologically arranged in seven chapters, the show demonstrates how Braque, for all his diversity, and despite stylistic changes and formal shifts, always remained true to his signature line - quite unlike his fellow-artist Pablo Picasso, for example.

The first chapter of the exhibition looks at the artist's early work in the years 1906/07. The few known paintings from this period attest to his enthusiasm for Fauvism and close relations with its protagonists, chief among them Henri Matisse, André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck. Braque would later comment that it was the physical aspect of Fauvism that most appealed to him at the time. Bright tones, expressive brushwork and forms created by pure colours dominate his works from these years.

In the second chapter of the show, the progress of Cubism is traced from 1908 and 1914. "Treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the

cone," wrote Paul Cézanne as early as 1904. In the landscapes, still lifes and nudes Braque painted starting in 1908, he adopted Cézanne's geometric approach to form as well as his restriction to shades of ochre. Braque and Picasso then began to collaborate closely in 1909, forming a Cubist "team" that would last until war broke out in 1914. In the works the two produced between 1909 and 1912, they break down their motifs into schematic forms and then place various views of the depicted object frontally side by side. Characteristic of this analytical Cubism are a reduced grey-brown palette and the breaking open of closed forms. This first Cubist mode was followed by synthetic Cubism from 1912 to 1914. In contrast to the almost abstract-looking works of the previous phase, the forms in these new paintings were more legible, the colours more vibrant, and the approach almost playful, challenging the precepts of traditional painting.

The First World War then brought about an abrupt break in the development of Cubism. Many modern artists seemed to renounce avant-garde approaches and turned instead to cultivating a neoclassical style. Braque played a key role in this trend, as the third chapter of the exhibition shows. At the Paris Salon d'Automne in 1922, an entire exhibition gallery was dedicated to his work. Many art critics surmised upon viewing the paintings on display, which reflected the legacy of Camille Corot and the Renaissance sculptor Jean Goujon, that Braque had turned his back once and for all on Cubism. The German art historian Carl Einstein was one of the few who interpreted Braque's pseudo-classicism instead as a continuation and further step in his Cubist trajectory. In contrast to the Cubism of his previous phase, however, Braque's still lifes from the early 1920s appear softer and more organic.

A further chapter of the show offers a glimpse of Braque's costume and stage designs from the mid-1920s. On display as prime examples are his works for Léonide Massine's and Darius Milhaud's *Ballet Salade*, which the company *Les Soirées de Paris* performed in Paris in 1924 at charity events it organised. Braque's stage settings and costumes have a plain, low-key look, displaying the same grey and brown tones as many of his paintings.

Between 1931 and 1942, Braque created a series of still lifes that hark back to the legacy of synthetic Cubism. These are the focus of the fifth chapter of the exhibition. The still lifes from this period have a planar, ornamental design. Braque treats the inanimate objects in his compositions like living beings, lending them decorative round and curvilinear forms. This biomorphism can be compared to contemporary still lifes by Picasso, but Braque also brings in Surrealist elements. He explores here the fusion of object and body and their infinite transformations - the curved silhouette of a guitar, for example, echoes the human figure: "a glass ends up as a mandolin, a guitar completes a bottle" (Carl Einstein).

When the Second World War broke out, Braque initially stayed in his house and studio in Normandy, and then returned to Paris with his family in 1940. He spent the occupation years living and working under precarious conditions, retreating into a kind of "active passivity". The pared-down, dark compositions of this period are presented in the sixth chapter of the exhibition. Braque once noted that the recurring motifs of the skull, rosary and crucifix were only a pretext for formal research and not intended to

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evoke the war-time travails. And yet the gloomy atmosphere of war and occupation nevertheless seems to pervade Braque's paintings.

The post-war period brought Braque widespread recognition. In 1946 he was awarded the order of merit of the Légion d'honneur in France and in 1948 the Grand Prize for Painting at the Venice Biennale. A number of exhibitions of his work were held, especially in Germany, where his art had once been stamped as degenerate during the Nazi era. In 1961, the Louvre in Paris mounted a major Braque retrospective - the first exhibition the museum had ever dedicated to a living artist. In the early 1950s, the Louvre had already commissioned him to do a ceiling painting. The image shows black bird silhouettes floating on a blue background and was the starting point for a series of works with bird motifs, which can be seen in the last chapter of the exhibition. In these works, the birds are represented pictographically and the conception of space is new for Braque. Since his Cubist phase, he had painted almost only interiors. But now the bird motif stimulated him to open his works up to the outdoors: the sky became visible again. Braque thus devoted himself in the final years of his life to a series of landscapes, adopting a horizontal format that is rare in his oeuvre, and applying paint in impasto layers. The twilight landscape of *The Weeding Machine* - often compared to Vincent van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Ravens* - is considered to be the last painting Braque did before his death on 31 August 1963. It also forms the conclusion of the exhibition at the Bucerius Kunst Forum.

The show features a total of 52 paintings, 27 drawings and a book of etchings on Hesiod's *Theogony*. Most of the works on loan come from the Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, which has the largest Braque collection in the world, for the most part directly from the artist's estate. Other works in the show were lent by the Hamburger Kunsthalle, the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, the Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris, and two private collections.

An exhibition catalogue with essays by Uwe Fleckner, Christopher Green,, Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt, Brigitte Leal, Maximilien Theinhardt and Pierre Wat is being published by Hirmer Verlag, Munich (approx. 218 pages with colour illustrations of the exhibited works, 29,90 EUR at the exhibition).

The exhibition was organised in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.

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