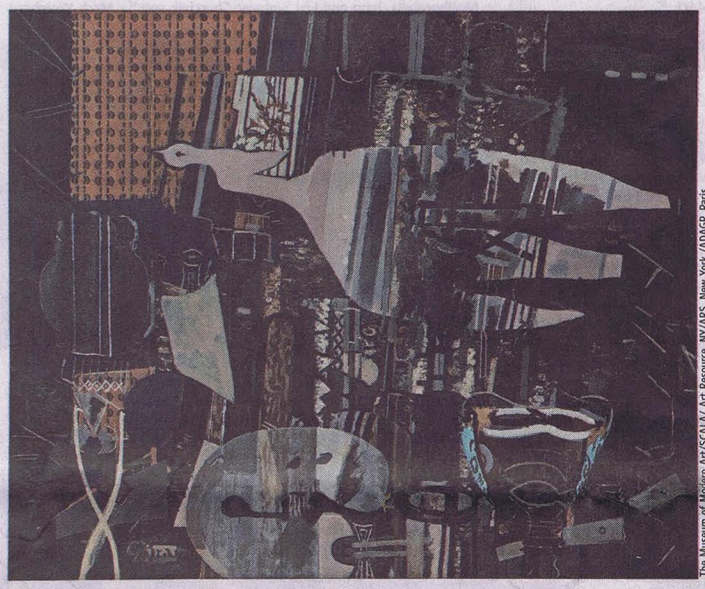
FINE ART | By Lance Esplund

A Modern Movement Unto Himself

Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism

◆ Acquavella Galleries
18 E. 79th St., (212) 734-6300
Through Nov. 30



The Museum of Modern Art/SCALA/ Art Resource, NY/ARS, New York /ADAGP, Paris

Georges Braque's 'Studio V' (1949-50) at Acquavella Galleries

Among the revelations of the Museum of Modern Art's 1989 exhibition "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" was that Georges Braque was the more courageous colorist. Braque wasn't more talented than Pablo Picasso as a painter, perhaps; but he was emotionally richer, deeper, more mysterious, daring and gallant. In the exquisite "Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism," a five-decade survey of 41 paintings and collages—all masterpieces of varying levels—Braque's virtuosity and range, his subtlety and ferociousness are accessible in full force.

In the U.S., we generally encounter Braque piecemeal, and it is exceptional to see substantial groupings of his early Fauvist or serene late paintings—as exhibitions tend to favor Braque's signature Cubist works. Spectacular shows of his late paintings traveled this country in 1982 and 1997, but no New York museums hosted them. And the last major Braque retrospective in this city was at the Guggenheim Museum in 1988. This makes Acquavella's remarkable, compact survey extremely welcome, if not long overdue.

Organized by the Austrian critic, art historian and independent curator Dieter Buchhart, Acquavella's retrospective is elegant and intimate. Installed in the gallery's French neo-classical townhouse, it fittingly presents Braque's magical ruminations as chamber works; yet it is large and vigorous enough to leave you breathless, wanting more.

Braque (1882-1963), along with Henri Matisse, was a leading Fauve—the colorful Wild Beasts. With Picasso, he co-founded Cubism, which shattered Renaissance perspective and introduced multiple viewpoints into art. Braque was the sole bridge between those two vanguard movements, which led to abstraction. He also revolutionized collage—which set into motion Dada, Pop art, assemblage and installation art. As this show demonstrates, he is a giant, a whole movement himself.

Arranged in four galleries on two floors, this survey begins in 1906 with Braque's early Fauvist landscapes and first forays into Cubism. Fauvist color is often defined as "heightened"—concerned more with expressing the artist's emotional response to the subject in front of him than with replicating its appearance. Certainly Braque turns up the heat. But his Fauvist landscapes are cool, milk-softened, crystalline. White is the ballast and skin of these temperamental pictures, in which color rises and falls, blushes and breathes. Braque's views of boats in the harbor and of houses at L'Estaque—lush, vibrant, joyous—never feel exaggerated. They suggest believable fairytale lands in which yellow skies, quite naturally, complement purple trees. Braque's free line and color, anticipating abstract painting, feel released from their descriptive functions; yet balancing these carnivalesque views (and Braque's entire oeuvre) is a weighty classicism worthy of Nicolas Poussin; a rigorous naturalism harking back to Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet.

When Braque, working from the landscape in 1908, develops a range of whites, blacks, grays, greens and browns in his Cubist paintings, he isn't limiting his palette but inventing a new language inspired equally by Parisian light, modern scientific investigation and Renaissance grisaille. Building on Paul Cézanne's late work, Braque's tessellating Cubist forms and close colors shimmer, dismantling, dissolving and reconfiguring the perceived world. The pictures are innovative, modern; yet they recall the silvery gleam of Diego Velázquez's armor, the golden-tinged, blue-gray sheen of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's fruit, the rugged, oily earth-tones of Rembrandt's shadows, and the mysteriousness of Johannes Vermeer.

Trained as both a designer and a painter, Braque was a master at *trompe l'oeil*—more adept than Picasso at creating decorative, illusionistic Cubist conundrums. Some of his forms feel carved out of wood and etched in glass; or like smoke, liquid and fog. Paintings flash among periods and styles and open like portals into other worlds, in which forms flow through one incarnation to another, moving like free association.

"Céret, Rooftops" (1911), nearly abstract, stippled with a vengeance, opens like a nest of boxes. In the collage "Bottle and Musical Instruments" (1918), a corrugated cardboard bottle twists like a female dancer and ripples like the surface of a pond. In "Gueridon" (1935), tall table legs dangle like menacing tentacles—then curtsey. In other paintings, a guitar slams into a table like an ax; leaves suggest flames and eager tongues; bananas recline as odalisques; and whole tables prance across rectangles like loaded packhorses.

In the late still lifes, figures and a miraculous series of "Studio" paintings, a number of which are on view at Acquavella, Braque generates wonderfully strange amalgamations of all genres, as fluid as memory and dream.

In these late pictures, wallpaper patterns twinkle like night skies. Billiard tables become landscapes that fold in on themselves. Musical instruments transform into birds, then seashells, Egyptian figures, fish, flowers, Greco-Roman torsos and painters' palettes. Birds, Braque's most profound and enigmatic subject (long employed in art as a symbol for the soul), fly through and explode in some of these late "Studio" paintings. Here, Braque shifts from painter to alchemist.

Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.