

Braque

by John Olson

"What's this? What's this? What's this?" said Pablo moving from canvas to canvas. He was stunned.

"That's *Houses and Trees*," said Georges. "I did it this last summer. That's *Still Life With Mandolin*. And I call that *The Metronome*."

An orange bug crawled across a black suitcase. The room reeked of turpentine. Georges swallowed some wine and turned inward.

"I love the shape of the mandolin," he said. It is lucid and full, like an aurora harnessed to a flaming sun."

He squeezed a tube of paint. A daub of raw sienna oozed out. He gave it a quizzical glance, then daubed some cotton on the canvas he was working on, a still life of a mandolin, trumpet, concertina and sheet music.

Pablo ate a grape. A bulb of garlic rolled from the counter to the floor.

"Have you heard about the Wright brothers?" Pablo asked.

"Yes," said Georges. "I went out to the field. Their plane is beautiful. All struts and cloth. A complicated mess. Like a strange musical instrument."

Pablo formed an image of the plane in his mind. A Byzantine structure of crisscrossed wires skulked through his skull. Rumbled. Coughed. Took to the air.

The neighbor's peacock screeched.

Incident light held a bubble of Mediterranean soup then moved into the shadows of the studio. Georges went outside and stood on the balcony looking at Paris.

"Hey Pablo," he said, "come on out and look at this."

Pablo stepped out onto the balcony. They watched a blimp hover over the Eiffel Tower.

"The world is changing," said Georges.

"It is becoming tough and aggressive, like a bull," said Pablo.

"And full of invention," said Georges.

This was true. The cornflake, air-conditioning, windshield wiper, safety razor, neon light, vacuum cleaner, lie detector, helicopter, zeppelin, radio receiver, tractor, teabag, Teddy Bear and Theory of Relativity had all just entered the twentieth century.

When Pablo left, Georges went to work. A pot of azaleas flickered by one of the windows. He began to explore the alphabet of structure. Brushwork pummeled the canvas. His drawing was sharp, acute, vigorous. Powerful lines seized, hugged, and explored contour. The cylinder, the cone, the sphere. Cubes and polyhedrons.

He did not outwardly admit it right away but seeing Pablo's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* had changed nearly all of his ideas about painting. About seeing. His experimentations broadened into a complex game between words and things, illusion and reality. His efforts at distortion mirrored the elliptical syntax of Mallarmé in rudimentary, ruminative pigments and multiple points of view, a lyric reality with the elegance of bone.

He looked for correlations between signs. He added letters, stenciled and hard. He painted an aria by Johan Sebastian Bach. He introduced sand and plaster, wood shavings and metal filings. He looked at a shadow and shook his brush. He became a magician of detail. He imitated, meticulously, the grain of wood.

The painter, he thought, does not try to reconstruct an anecdote but to construct a pictorial fact.

The Big Nude was a breakthrough. Foreground and background switched places. Curved surfaces pivoted on planes that led the eyes to knobs of solidarity at the surface, a matter of hair falling a certain way, a nose, a pair of ears, a pair of eyes, legs, hands, fingers, toes were celebrated in a vibration of form.

Georges donned an African mask and said "There is only one thing in art that has value: that which one can not explain."

He got a fire going in the stove. He was talking to Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob. He liked poets.

There was a woman's bra on a bureau of drawers.

"Light does not exist for the painter," he said. "It is all about color."

"But why have you muted your colors lately?" asked Guillaume.

"They conflict with my design," Georges said.

"You can't put a muzzle on the sun," said Max.

Georges sat down on a stool, picked up a concertina, and squeezed it. It made a disconsolate wheeze.

"The vase gives form to the void and music to silence," said Georges.

He felt a trickle of sweat go down his back. It was getting hot in the room.

"We need to get out of here," said Georges.

"Where shall we go?" asked Guillaume.

"I don't have any money," said Max.

"Don't worry about," said Guillaume. "We'll share a magnum of wine."

"Let's get drunk." said Georges.

"Let's discover reality," said Max.

They found a bistro in Montmartre.

"Mystery blazes forth with the broad daylight," said Georges,

"The mysterious blends with the darkness."

He began sketching a bottle whose bouquet had turned to twigs and crinkly leaves.

"Art is inherently quixotic," said Guillaume. "Like the pattern of tread on rubber automobile tires."

"I've been thinking about taking up fencing," said Max. "Hey look, there's Pablo."

Pablo was talking to a man at the bar. It looked like an argument. The man took a swing at Pablo. But Pablo was short. The man missed.

Georges stopped sketching and went to see what the argument was about. The man that took a swing at Pablo was also a painter. He was called André Derain. He was a large man. He normally did not try to hit men smaller than him, but Pablo pissed him off. He said he was still living in the past with the Impressionists.

Georges entered the fray. He calmed André down. They were friends. Talk turned to boxing. A match was convened in the alley.

André was slightly larger than Georges but his boxing skills were outmatched. Georges won easily, connecting with every punch. The fight ended and everyone returned to the bistro.

“Did I tell you I've been growing some tomatoes?” asked Max of no one in particular.

Georges looked at Max and laughed at the innocence of his forehead. And winced. His jaw was sore from one of André's more accurate punches. He gyrated his jaw. The sensation was perfect. Acute. Distinct. The world made palpable at last.

