



## Biography

### Georges Braque: A Life

Alex Danchev

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## GEORGES BRAQUE

A Life

ALEX DANCHEV

This read is a romp. Around its central character eddies the world of Bohemian Paris before the Great War, between the wars and during the German Occupation. As the artist grows older, we follow him to Varengeville, there to paint the *Studio* series, his *Billiard Tables* and the *Birds* – works that, from a close perusal of the artists' collaborative years, would appear to have been executed in opposition to Picasso, and instead in accordance with the vision of Cézanne, who remained Braque's single greatest influence throughout his career.

Danchev initially introduces us to the youthful Braque, influenced and comfortably supported by his father, who worked as a painter and decorator in Le Havre. During his stay in Paris, Braque sought an introduction to Picasso who invited the newcomer to his studio. Thereafter the two became close friends, combatants and collaborators. Much of the biography correctly searches out the detail of that relationship. Employing snippets of contemporary gossip, in extensive and well-researched quotes from period commentators, the story brings Braque to life on the page, as it does Picasso and, indeed, Paris itself - with its social *mêlée* of artists, poets and philosophers.

Illuminating anecdotes concern the relationship of the Parisian set to *l'art nègre*. It was Picasso's complaint that Braque saw only formal possibilities in the pieces, whereas he felt the power of the works and their immanence: Picasso, the expressionist; Braque the formalist.

Interestingly, Danchev challenges the received view that Cubism was inaugurated by *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). Predating Braque's first brush with that painting is a series of pictures he started in L'Estaque during October 1907, which 'broke the mould'. It is with this series of paintings that Danchev identifies the initiation of Cubism and the inevitability of Braque and Picasso's collaboration.

In Cubism the two great artists were searching for a pictorial architecture within which their motifs could structure a new kind of space. Recognizing the elements of still life, the viewer is drawn into the picture by feeling his or her way around the structure that is imposed upon the surface of the canvas. Consistent with this quest is Braque's later insistence that, 'Objects don't exist for me except in so far as a harmonious *rapprochement* exists between them, and also between them and me.'

This book is a pleasure to read: persuasive, rewarding, controversial and, above all, witty. In it, Braque emerges as an important painter but, more importantly, as a decent man, when seen against the political upheaval, the personal injury and the hardship endured, to persist in the making of poetical works.

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