Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963)

*Nature morte et verre (Still Life with Glass)*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 20 3/16 x 25 5/8”
University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946

*Still Life with Oysters*, 1937
Oil on canvas, 21 1/8 x 36 3/4”
Gift of Mrs. Richard K. Weil, 1960

If scholarship is any indication, the 1930s are Georges Braque’s lost years. For his Fauve and Analytical Cubist work, Braque’s position as a leader of the avant-garde is unassailable. For the years between World War I and the twenties, we have the scholarship of Kenneth Silver and Christopher Green, who discuss his place in the *retour à l’ordre*, a general rejection of the innovation and progress of the prewar years and a return to *la grande tradition*, an art of neoclassicism and thematic wholeness.¹ And Braque’s late work, created between 1940 and the artist’s death in 1963, was recently featured in an international exhibition focusing on his grand cycles of paintings, the *Billiard Tables*, the *Studios*, and the *Birds*, which continue the artist’s lifelong investigation of the complexities of spatial representation.² But there is little scholarship on the years between 1928 and 1940—an interim period of experimentation that does not allow for easy categorization.

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² See John Golding, Sophie Bowness, and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, *Braque: The Late Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). The exhibition was organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts, London.
Braque’s *Still Life with Glass* (1930) and his *Still Life with Oysters* (1937) were both made during this period of transition. They mark the work of a mature and relatively reclusive artist who is negotiating his place in the changing field of artistic practice. *Still Life with Glass* was made in the years immediately preceding Braque’s canonization as one of the great masters of the School of Paris (his first important retrospective was held in Basel in 1933), but it also followed the neoclassicism of the mid-1920s. In it, he returns to a method of representation that he knows well—his Cubist practices of the teens, as demonstrated by the overlapping planes, the separation of volume from contour, and the play with texture. The second picture, *Still Life with Oysters*, made seven years later, demonstrates a different approach to form, one that appears more naturalistic, but is no less experimental in its subtle investigation of spatial reality.

In much art historical scholarship, Pablo Picasso, Braque’s colleague and cofounder of Cubism, is celebrated for his recognition that all representation is by nature semiotic, while Braque is sometimes passed over—as if a willing partner in Picasso’s investigations, but one who might not have fully understood the complexity of the game. Christine Poggi, however, has successfully shown that these are not the correct terms in which to frame the study of Braque’s early work. “Braque’s goal,” she writes, “seems to have been to discover a means of representation that would avoid the deformations of perspectival illusion, while conveying a strong sense of the material presence of objects.”³ Both artists rejected illusionism but for different reasons. For Picasso, the depiction of volume and depth was inconceivable in a system of two-dimensional representation that relied on combinations of pictorial signifiers with no substantive relationship to an object in the real world. Braque too rejected an idealized association of representation to reality. While he recognized that illusionism was simply a method for imitating volume and depth, however, he never relinquished an interest in individual sensation and perception. He still sought out methods of painting that would materialize space and the physicality of objects themselves.

During the early Cubist years, Braque had turned his attention more and more to still lifes, associating the genre with the depiction of objects that were within reach of the hand. In an interview toward the end of his life, he explained that the tendency of still lifes to evoke the material quality of an object “corresponded to the desire that I have always had to touch the thing, not just see it.” For Braque, the question of how to depict the tactile quality of an object and what he described as “the space between things” was one that compelled him all of his life. The 1930s were years in which these questions came to the fore in particularly provocative ways, as, after the return-to-order of the late teens and twenties, he began to reengage with the problem of three-dimensional representation on a two-dimensional canvas.

It may be that in searching for a way out of the neoclassicism and the more conventional illusionism of some of his works of the 1920s, such as the *Canephora* series, Braque returned to a moment of progressive creativity. Thus *Still Life with Glass* is governed by a tension between flatness and a materialized experience of space that is characteristic of the works of the teens (such as *Table with a Pipe*, 1912). On a square wooden table covered with a patterned tablecloth, Braque has arranged a group of objects: a pipe, a glass, a fruitbowl with a bunch of grapes, a brown gourd-shaped object, and the letters “J O R.” Here, a number of different spatial perspectives are at work, creating a conflict between the illusion of physical presence and the flatness of the canvas itself.

This tension is most manifest in the breakdown of the perspectival system. Numerous areas of the picture are governed by fragmented systems of perspective: the legs of the table, the drawer at the front that is slightly ajar, the left side of the canvas where the table extends out and back at a broken angle, and the objects on the table, such as the round pipe and the glass that is rendered volumetrically but from two different perspectives (as if seen both from above and frontally). Other objects are resolutely flat and seem to work against the illusion of three-dimensionality. The gourd- or hat-shaped

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object on the left side of the table is a flat ochre field defined only by the limits of contour line and an unidentifiable black shape that appears to fold over it (though in fact there is no suggestion of depth to indicate a fold, just overlapping shapes). The fruit bowl and the bunch of grapes inside are also flat; this is primarily because the different passages of color that make up the two objects are essentially independent of form. The separation between fragmented illusionism and flatness is most evident in the application of language to the canvas. The letters “J O [U] R” evoke the French word *journal*, suggesting the presence of a newspaper on the table, yet there is no form or even the outline of a form that could be a newspaper. The viewer must conceptually “see” this newspaper by imagining a paper folded in such a way that the “u” in the middle of the word is hidden. For Braque, the letters of a word inserted onto the pictorial field heightened the difference between flatness and illusionism: “They were forms that could not be deformed because, being flat, the letters were outside of space and their presence in the painting, by contrast, permitted one to distinguish the objects that were situated in space from those that were outside of space.”

The tension between flatness and illusionism defies perceptual certainty, but also invites sensory investigation. The viewer is given enough clues to read the objects as three-dimensional, but not enough to place them in the real world beyond the frame of the canvas. The objects on the table tilt towards the viewer, as if they were to slip into the viewer’s space, and some, such as the pipe and the gourd-like object, even appear to reside above it or precariously balance on the edge. There is an unexpected combination of thick, volumetric space and an adamant sense of flatness in the area around the table. On the right, Braque has emphasized the shadow at the edge of the table with thick, black strokes that transition from dark to light. Contrary to this suggestion of depth and presence on the sides of the table, the tabletop is pushed flatly up against the vertical plane of the wall, as if there was no space behind it at all. The tabletop itself consists of a series of overlapping planes that create an almost accordion-like pleating of space.

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5 Braque, ibid., 16: “C’était des formes où il n’y avait rien à déformer parce que, étant des aplats, les lettres étaient hors l’espace et leur présence dans le tableau, par contraste, permettait de distinguer les objets qui se situaient dans l’espace de ceux qui étaient hors l’espace.”
similar to the folding indicated by the letters “J O R.” This continual telescoping between depth and flatness creates a space that challenges the viewer’s perceptual navigation.

*Still Life with Oysters* displays the same desire to represent real objects within a physical space but none of the complex folding and materializing of space that require the viewer to imaginatively negotiate it. Interior space is fairly straightforwardly and naturalistically depicted, while the objects and surfaces take on tactile presence. The similarities of composition in both paintings highlight these differences. Although in *Still Life with Oysters* the objects on the table have changed—a plate of oysters, half of a lemon, a napkin in a napkin ring, a glass bottle, and a loaf of bread—the arrangement is essentially the same; the objects are placed on a table in an interior. The picture equivocates between naturalism, which is conveyed by the thick, smooth black shadows of the objects on the table, giving them body and weight, and the schematic abstraction of the forms themselves, such as the bottle and napkin, which consist of only a few suggestive contour lines and thin washes of paint on mostly bare canvas. In general perspective is not problematized here as it is in *Still Life with Glass*: the objects on the table are stationary—they rest on one plane, the tabletop—and are seen straight on, rather than from multiple perspectives. This painting demonstrates the finesse with which Braque, the son of a *peintre-décorateur*, or house painter, who was trained in the production of illusionistic decorative techniques, renders interior detail. The wood grain on the wainscoting bears the traces of the delicate marks of a housepainter’s comb, and the faux marble wallpaper is likewise rendered in realistic detail. The table itself consists of a thin wash of green oil that holds the traces of the brush, giving the table the texture of varnished wood. Instead of building up space and objects through complex spatial aggregation, which foregrounds the rupture of perspectival illusionism in the picture from 1930, the objects take on physical and tactile qualities. Set in the bourgeois interior rich with luxurious (if fake) materials, the objects are simple, yet refined; pushed forward in

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6 *Still Life with Oysters* is one of a group of three paintings of the same subject probably painted in a short space of time given their small size, lack of reworking, and close similarities (the objects on the table are all the same); *Still Life with Oysters*, 1937 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg) and a picture titled *Oysters, Lemon and Serviette*, 1937 (location unknown).
the picture plane, they seem to render the space of the painting and its objects more immediate.

Braque’s continual investigation of the hermetic world of the still life has tended to invite interpretation of a singular kind: most critics of his work of the thirties resort to purely formalist descriptions of the pictures and do not contextualize the artist’s work. While this essay is only a beginning, it seems time to overturn the neglect of, if not outright prohibition on, this period. Let us instead open up the question of the thirties and investigate the embodied, sensory work of this artist who “painted without seeing,” as Braque’s colleague and friend, the French writer Jean Paulhan, described him. Much remains to be done to understand this incredibly productive, transitional time in the career of one of the century’s leading avant-garde artists.

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8 In 1972, the well-known Cubist scholar Douglas Cooper officially condemned Braque’s work from the first half of the early thirties: “the paintings Braque produced between 1930 and 1936 are among the least alive, the least interesting and the least substantial of his entire œuvre” (Douglas Cooper, Braque: The Great Years [Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1972], 68). Cooper’s statement was made in the context of an exhibition that investigated works from the later years—1918 and on—and was (somewhat ironically) intended to redress what Cooper saw as the problem of preference for Braque’s early years.