ARTS

lectors were soon drawn in, supported by enthusiastic institutional involvement, from Holger Cahill's American Folk Art: The art of the common man at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 to the Whitney Museum's The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1876 in 1974. American enthusiasts have put British neglect down to class consciousness and a snobbish lack of sympathy for everyday creativity.

But folk art is always validated for a reason, as the historic folk museums of Central Europe - Budapest, Zagreb, Belgrade - make plain. In North America, folk art was mobilized in the service of nationhood. Early American art was seen as being made by pioneers, coming out of what Holger Cahill called "the fertile plain of everyday competence in craft". Less attractively, the first collectors privileged white Anglo-Saxon Protestant material culture – as, of course, did the entire Rockefeller Colonial Williamsburg project. But folk art, on the whole, stood for a democracy of aspiration. There was much well-intentioned enthusiasm. As the fabulously rich Mrs Havemeyer Webb expressed it: "Since the word 'folk' in America means all of us, folk art is that self expression which has welled up from the hearts and minds of the people".

It is not surprising, therefore, that folklore and folk art studies are embedded in American universities while regional folk craft production still flourishes in areas like southern New Jersey's coastal and riverine communities. In Britain, by contrast, anthropology emerged as the supreme ethnographic discipline from the late nineteenth century onwards. Its focus was on societies within the British Empire and its findings had obvious practical applications. Rulers need to understand their subjects. Indigenous British folklore and folk art and craft were left to amateur enthusiasts.

But perhaps this lack of academic traction has allowed folk art to occupy a more creative, playful role in British culture. One only has to think of Barbara Jones's exhibition Black Eyes and Lemonade (recalled in the TLS, August 16, 2013), staged at the Whitechapel Art Gallery during the Festival of Britain in 1951. This was folk art brought up to date, incorporating DIY a tiled fireplace in the shape of an Airedale dog - and vulgar commerce - a talking lemon that extolled the delights of Idris lemonade and a handful of Bassett's Liquorice Allsorts isolated under a spotlight. That British Pop art was soon to develop Jones's aesthetic comes as no surprise.

Just now we appear to be in a fresh phase of creative engagement with non-academic art. Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's ongoing Folk Archive was initially put together in reaction to the Millennium Dome's ersatz representation of Britain. It offers an idiosyncratic mix of prostitutes' phone cards, personalized crash helmets, images of crop circles, trades union banners, Stop the War posters, and folk performance from well-dressing to tar barrel rolling. Folk Archive's sprawling contemporaneity and inclusiveness make Tate Britain's British Folk Art appear a relatively cautious if finely presented contribution to creativity outside the mainstream. In any case, "folk" has already crept in the back door of Tate Britain, not least in the form of the shamanistic activities of Marcus Coates, seen at Tate Britain's show Altermodern (2009), and at Spartacus Chetwynd (aka Marvin Gaye Chetwynd)'s carnivalesque 2012 Turner Prize performance. The folk may yet be heard.

Genius among the beasts

eorges Braque once said of Picasso, the rartist in collaboration with whom he changed the course of twentiethcentury art, that "he used to be a great painter. Now he is merely a genius". The accusation is that his co-protagonist in the invention of Cubism shied away from the graft that consolidates a breakthrough to pursue the popular glory of fresh conquests. Picasso might have been tempted to retort, had he walked through this stately survey of his friend and rival's career at the Guggenheim Bilbao, by reversing the formulation.

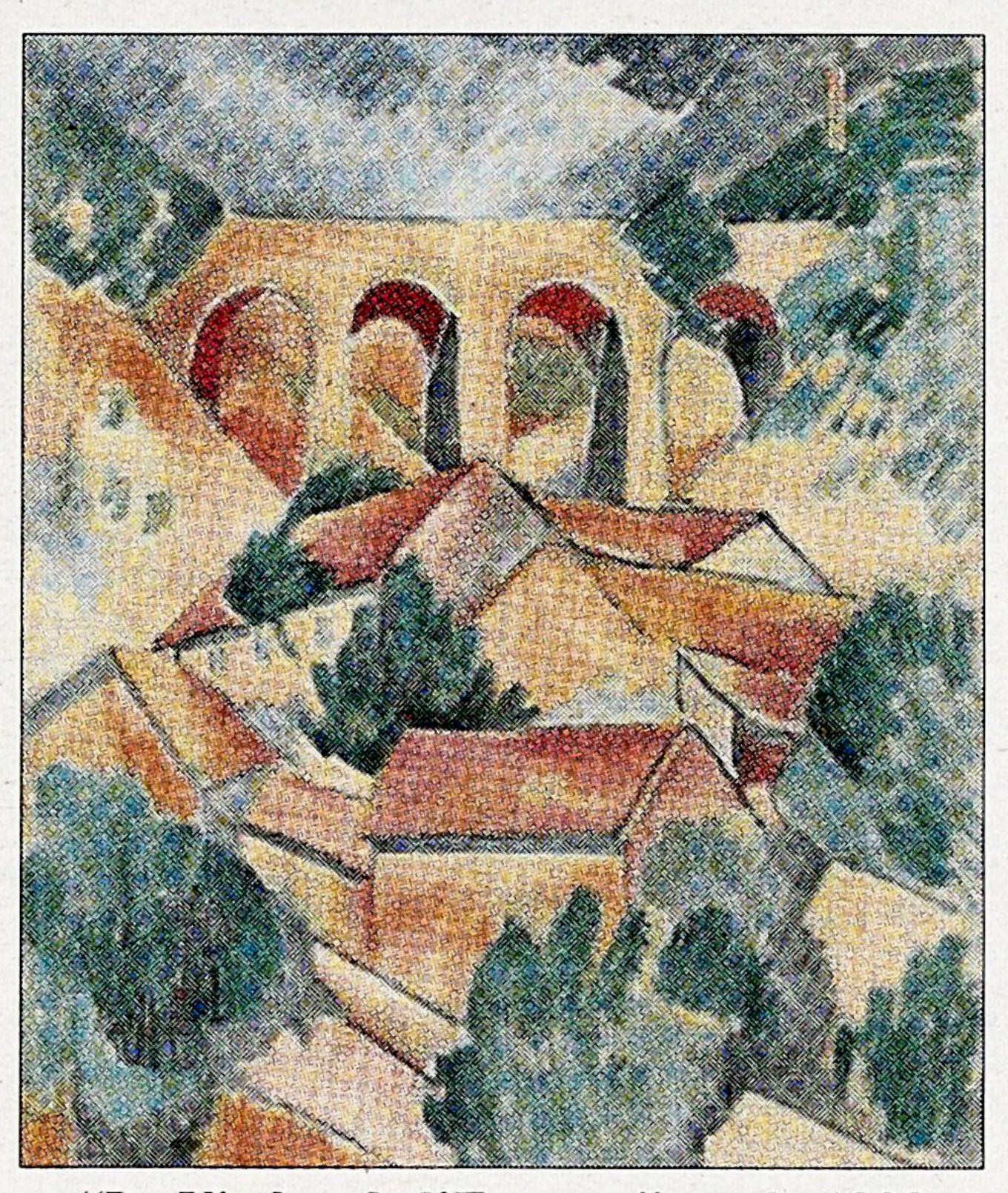
Braque began, even before he became a genius, among the beasts. The early Fauvist works that open this straightforwardly chronological retrospective are, in their carnival jostling of purples, oranges and reds, at first difficult to reconcile with the austere, dun tones and precisely reconstructed planes that we instinctively associate with Braque. Tame in comparison to the fantastic distortions of Derain or the ecstatic colours of Matisse, these paintings nonetheless suggest a relish for the properties of paint and colour to which Braque would much later return. The gleaming landscape of "La Petite Baie de la Ciotat" (1907) delights in the myriad ways that a low sun catches on the sky and sea. The dappled surface of the water is captured in single stubs of pure colour, applied with a pressure that deposits the paint in an uneven sweep, like a wave rising from the canvas.

The transformative influence of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907), which Braque first encountered in Picasso's studio, is apparent in the first masterpieces of the show: the majestic 'Grand Nu" (1907/8) and "Tête de Femme" (1909). The latter's mineral colours and sharp, BEN EASTHAM

GEORGES BRAQUE Guggenheim Bilbao, until September 21

hatched, Euclidean shapes herald the beginning of Cubism's high period, an era during which Picasso and Braque were, in the latter's celebrated phrase, "roped together like two mountaineers". Their partnership was terminated by the outbreak of a war from which Braque returned, like his friend Apollinaire, trepanned.

This exhibition makes the case that Braque's work of the 1920s deserves to be more thoroughly appreciated, but it is not one that I find



"Le Viaduc de l'Estaque", early 1908

"Touth is wasted on the young": Wildean in essence if not also in provenance, this aphorism is adopted as the raison d'être of Lucy Bailey's new production of The Importance of Being Earnest, which boasts a cast with an average age of nearly seventy. In a youth-obsessed culture, age and experience are a refreshing basis for re-examining a classic. It is regrettable, then, that Simon Brett has devised a reductive high-concept framework Cuthbert, who have performed the play over many summer seasons and grown old in their parts. The setting, designed in lovingly rich detail by William Dudley, is the beautiful Arts and Crafts home of one of the Players.

Bailey and Dudley cite the influence of Tom Stoppard's Arcadia in which "there are two distinct worlds in the one unchanging house, separated by a gap of nearly 200 years. one generation would appear just as the other left the stage." But there is none of that Stoppardian fluidity and brilliance in this self-conscious conceit. The opening gags about missing props, miscued sound effects, unfinished costumes and unhealed love affairs are like interpolations from an inferior Noises Off,

Oscar Wilde

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Harold Pinter Theatre, until September 20

mere trifles beside Wilde's sublime triviality.

One might have expected more comic collision and meaningful dialogue between the "backstage" scramblings of the Bunbury to rehouse this most perfect comedy and pro- Players and the rarefied, simmering restraint claim the novelty of maturity. The premiss is of Wilde's mise-en-scène. As it is, the dress that we are watching a dress rehearsal of Ear-rehearsal is not enough of a playful or purposenest by the Bunbury Company of Players, an ful device to justify styling itself a "reimaginamateur dramatic group based in Morton St ing". And Earnest, which as a theatrical species is remarkably self-contained, is not a work that lends itself readily to reimagining. As William Archer noted of the original production in 1895, it "raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions". It is not a play of ideas, nor does it offer especially keen insights into the human condition. What it does is exalt the comedy of pure fun to the realms of high art, Both occupy the stage, unaware of each investing it with an exquisite craftsmanship other's presence. We remember it being done and a singular imagination. Max Beerbohm so fluidly and brilliantly – the way in which described the play as a "dazzling prism", and when we are permitted to lose ourselves in its unadulterated pleasures, Wilde's beautiful nonsense sparkles as though new-minted, transcending the quaint modern accretions. It needs no layer of reality other than its own.

It would have been better for the real-life veteran actors to have played their parts

convincing. His most notable contributions to the "return to order" of a traumatized generation are two life-size portraits of women bearing baskets, classical figures reimagined in the wake of Primitivism. But these "Canéphores" (1922) bear little trace of life, weighed down by their allegorical associations and buried beneath murky, muddy browns and greens (that Braque is generally at his best when avoiding symbols is confirmed by the work he made during the Second World War, which is blighted by skulls). Two still lifes - "Guitare et verre" (1921) and "Guitare et bouteille de marc sur une table" (1930) – demonstrate that he was still capable of greatness, but these are flashes of brilliance in a mid-career that deepens rather than extends his chosen mode, and it is here that the exhibition flags.

A late, great series of paintings that take the artist's studio as their subject seem to provide a fitting culmination to Braque's career. The shimmering light that skips across "Atelier VIII" (1954) invests the still life with a feeling of unreality and enchantment, an atypical levity that finds figurative expression in the bird (a recurrent motif) that glides above the assembled objects. This is a triumphant expression of Braque's lifelong investigation into the possibilities of a single style.

Yet this exhibition has a grand coda. Its final section, hidden away across a flying gangway above the Guggenheim's grand atrium, presents a series of revelatory late landscapes. Appearing at first as abstract striations of pure colour, closer inspection reveals that it is a horizon that cuts the picture plane in two, cleaving sky from land, one field of colour from another. Applied with a knife, swathes of impasto colour scatter light away from the surface of the picture at angles other than the perpendicular, like a sparkling, unsettled sea.

"purely" and unapologetically, trusting in the play's perennial youth, and with all the passion and innocence that comes with age. Audiences, after all, long to suspend their disbelief, provided that an essential truthfulness is preserved. Of the "juveniles", Nigel Havers as Algernon, still lithe and boyish, is credible, while Martin Jarvis as Jack/Ernest is a likeable if less obvious foil than he was in 1982 when the pair played the same roles for Peter Hall at the National Theatre. Gwendolen and Cecily, as played by Cherie Lunghi and Christine Kavanagh, have about them a touch of the Ugly Sisters in their wielding of the pantomimic broad brush. Their brazen sexuality and the ferocious duel fought with teacups and cake show the spillage of teeming emotion with none of the requisite comic veneer of social constraint. Siân Phillips's Lady Bracknell, although less Gorgonesque than her daughter Gwendolen, hits her mark more accurately and ripens in the second half. All the cast are, forgivably, too practised, too imbued with the lessons of seasoned professionals, to pass muster as Home Counties hams, but there is a certain satisfaction in the expert timing and good diction of senior actors.

This production marks the 160th anniversary of Wilde's birth and when the "dazzling prism" emerges intact from its lacklustre new framework, we are reminded of what Wilde said in "The Decay of Lying", that "it is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned".

KATHLEEN RILEY