

## CEZANNE'S ENDLESS QUEST TO PARALLEL NATURE'S HARMONY

Helen Dudar, *Smithsonian*, April, 1996

**After all the analysis of his apples, his bathers, that mountain, his paintings still electrify in a show coming to Philadelphia**

Surely nothing tells us more about Paul Cezanne's unsinkable faith in his own genius and his obsessive drive to justify it than the fact that he painted for years with little formal recognition. A bruised veteran of a few group shows, Cezanne had to wait until 1895 for a full-scale one-man exhibition in Paris. By then, he was 56 years old and had been so long absent from the mainstream art scene that some of the regulars thought he was dead.

The impact of that event was immediate and lasting. Other artists looked at the work—at the way he used color without line to suggest form, at the still lifes that transformed complicated arrangements into holy objects—and those with francs to spare succumbed to the lust to have one, to pierce the mysteries of his vision. The critics rarely stopped sneering, but Monet, Renoir and Degas bought paintings, and a few years after the show, a young, impecunious Henry Matisse was making payments on a small, treasured *Three Bathers*, a work that would transform his imagery and technique.

If the 1895 exhibition lit a few fires, the great homage of 1907, a year after Cezanne died, was close to an explosion. At least one art historian believes that Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso saw it together, taking in the skewed perspectives in the late portraits and the naked bathers that looked like invented figures; he is persuaded that, as those young men moved, stunned and shaken, past fertile offerings of Cezanne's late artistry, the former turned to the latter and said something like, "Pablo, we've been doing it all wrong."

In no time at all, correctives were in place. Picasso went back to his atelier to work on a painting of large angular women imagined as stylized objects; with *Les Femmes d'Alger* the focus and direction of modern art was transformed. So was the language. Only a year later, Matisse, making his way through a joint Braque-Picasso gallery show, could not resist a cheerfully acid comment. "Oh, See the little cubes," he said. Cubism had arrived, and a platoon of artists from Klee to Kandinsky would go to school with Cezanne.

To Picasso, Cezanne would forever reign as "my one and only master!" For a time, in his youth, he packed a gun, waving it half-seriously at anyone who annoyed him, particularly anyone insulting the memory of Cezanne. "One more word," he would say, "and I fire."

Now to be sure, late-Cezanne landscapes do suggest arrangements of cubes, and Cezanne's big, nude, featureless bathers verge on abstractions. All of this is demonstrated in the sprawling, demanding exhibition of his art that reaches Philadelphia next month. But as you work your way past some 100 oil paintings and 70 works on paper, you may find that seeking clues to Cezanne's impact on later artists can be a blight as well as a blessing. It is a little like trying to parse sentences in Henry James' gloriously complex late novels.



Cezanne worked out formal problems in the Bathers series. This one, *The Three Bathers*, was painted in 1875 and purchased by Matisse twenty years later.

Certainly there have been other major Cezanne shows in years past, but Joseph Rishel, one of the principal organizers of the current one, believes this is the first exhibit in six decades to offer a full survey of the artist's life's work. A figure of florid charm, Rishel is Philadelphia's senior curator of European painting before 1900; leading a group of art writers through the Grand Palais last September, he swiftly confessed to being "hopelessly biased" on Cezanne—"arguably the greatest painter to come out of the 19th century."



The exhibition's first shock is some of the early paintings; while fascinating and revealing, they hardly hint at greatness to come. The works from Cezanne's 20s are dark, angry and often violent images of male cruelty to women, bearing such titles as *The Abduction* (above left, from 1867) and *The Murder* (above right, from 1870). Those early pieces surely reflect the tormented young man who studiously dressed like a beggar, who was full of rage and haunted by depression, who could not bear to be touched, who suffered agonizing shyness around women and who felt out of place almost everywhere. "Life is fearful," he would say, or, "The sky of the future is overcast."

His 30th birthday had come and gone when two events brightened the heavens, not to mention his canvases. Cezanne met and began to live with a young woman named Hortense Fiquet, who bore his only child, Paul, and stolidly sat for dozens of portraits that scarcely suggest affection. In time, she seems to have become more of a convenience than a companion.

Soon after Hortense gave birth to their son, Cezanne had the luck to fall under the spell of Camille Pissarro. Ten years his senior, Pissarro was kind, gentle, gifted, a source of fatherly friendship and direction. For several years, they painted together in the countryside north of Paris, and Pissarro's influence briefly transformed Cezanne into an Impressionist. He would eventually move beyond that style, but he began to realize what could be accomplished with brilliant blues and greens, and to respond to the demands of his craft. "It was only when I kept company with Pissarro, who painted non-stop," he once said, "that I learned discipline."

Cezanne never did learn to control his anger. When his eye failed him or when his work was interrupted, he could explode in fury: brushes would be broken, a half-finished canvas slashed or simply discarded in the brush by some country road. Vollard once visited Cezanne in Aix-en-Provence; the first object he noticed upon stepping into the studio was a huge picture "pierced full of holes with a palette knife."

Aix was the sleepy medieval town where Cezanne was born in 1839 and to which he always returned from painting expeditions around the country. Presumably, his spike temperament grew out of the hard circumstances of his youth. His father, Louis-Auguste, was an

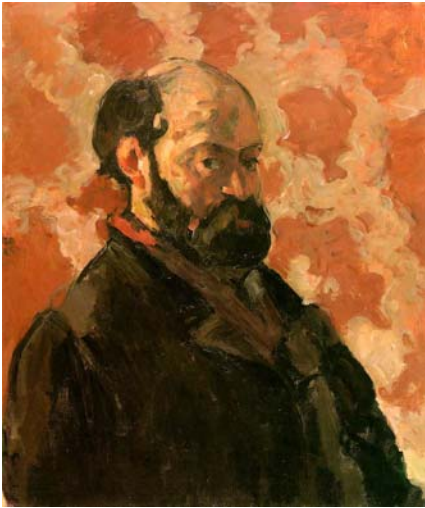


*Madame Cézanne in Blue*, 1885-1887. With her center part and steady gaze, Cezanne's wife, Hortense, is an island of calm amid complexity.



authoritarian, miserly man who began as a laborer but ultimately achieved wealth and then power, first as a prosperous dealer in hats, later as the owner of the only bank in town. He did not marry the mother of his children until Paul was 5.

A steady flow of profits allowed the elder Cezanne to acquire and renovate the Jas de Bouffan, a handsome 18th-century manor on 37 acres. In that old town, riches did not guarantee social respect. According to John Rewald, Cezanne's biographer, the Cezannes were pretty much ostracized as *parvenus* [people with "new money"], looked down upon by people with "old money"], and the son forever found it difficult to make friends.



In his 1875 self-portrait, Cezanne portrayed himself as an unruly cross between bourgeois and peasant.

But in adolescence, he cemented one friendship that would sustain him for decades. Together with a third schoolmate, Cezanne and Emile Zola became "the inseparables." They roamed the radiant countryside and bathed in the Arc River; they read Victor Hugo and memorized Baudelaire. And almost anywhere they went, Mont Sainte-Victoire loomed on the horizon, a huge, brooding, gray-rock pyramid that would become an obsessive subject for Cezanne in the years ahead. Even after Zola moved on to Paris they maintained a close friendship and an intimate correspondence. The budding young writer would provide hospitality, encouragement, even spare cash when the elder Cezanne's stingy doles failed to cover his son's needs. Actually, years passed before Cezanne acknowledged to his father that his expenses included a mistress and a son.

At his father's insistence, young Paul had unhappily begun law school in Aix. But his spare hours were spent copying works at the town's little museum. Eventually, in 1861, the elder Cezanne agreed to allow his 22-year-old son to study art in Paris. He stayed for five difficult months. "The least obstacle reduced him to despair," an exasperated Zola wrote to a friend.

Cezanne went home and put in time at the family bank where, legend has it, the ledgers were his sketch pads. By late 1862, he was ready to try Paris again. As he had earlier, he became a student at the Atelier Suisse, and this time he made important friends: Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley, Degas. They were seminal connections—

a new generation groping toward a style that would be called "Impressionism," applying techniques that the traditionalists among the students regarded with scorn and contempt. A man with Cezanne's unease could feel comfortable among those outsiders.

In the great city, Cezanne began what would be an unchanging habit during his Paris stays: some part of the afternoon he spent in the Louvre, filling sketchbooks with drawings of sculptures and paintings by the masters. As he once wrote, "The Louvre is the book from which we learn to read."

Certainly those early imagined scenes of erotic violence were the work of an imperfect "reader," betraying a lack of control and an absence of models. On the other hand, the earliest portraits—the brooding image of Uncle Dominique as a monk (right)—impaled on canvas in thick slabs of a palette knife are transfiguring. "Painting like a bricklayer," Joseph Rishel calls it, as a way of praise. And the first few times Cezanne set down an arrangement of kitchen items—*Bread and Eggs*, for example—the results promised a remarkable body of vibrant works created out of everyday objects.

Public approval was absent. Cezanne's work had been included in an 1863 outsider exhibition, but in 1867, when two entries were refused for an establishment show, a critic for *Le Figaro* went to the trouble of ridiculing "M. Sesame" and his rejected paintings. Seven years later, three Cezannes could be seen in what was the first Impressionist exhibition, and a journalist denounced their creator as "a sort of idiot who paints in the throes of delirium tremens."



By the early 1870s, Cezanne had settled into the rich, verdant countryside around the towns of Pontoise and Auvers-sur-Oise, not many miles north of Paris, and was laboring steadily alongside Pissarro. Years later, critics would accuse the

two of copying each other during that period. Pissarro's calm response was that surely they influenced each other, and just as surely each artist responded to a landscape in his own way.



*Gardanne* (c. 1885): the paintings of the town are from different viewpoints, as if Cézanne rotated it in his head.

Actually, Cézanne would soon part from the Impressionist way of looking and would leave it far behind. A farmer who watched the two men at work once noted that Pissarro was "stabbing the canvas" while Cézanne "slapped" the paint on. An Impressionist "stabbing" a canvas was interested in idyllic natural scenes awash in light and color. Cézanne's short, parallel, often slanted strokes created a lively texture on the surface of the canvas but, more importantly, introduced a mathematical rigor and precision into his pictures.

Cézanne's landscapes shimmer with color—and without obeisance to the sun's light—and sometimes appear to stretch for miles toward the horizon. There was another crucial difference in much of his work: an absence of signs of human existence. As a rule, in a Cézanne countryside view, not a child is to be seen on a road or a cow in a field; there is no narrative in his landscapes. And among the elements that spoke to the next generation of artists were the square and triangles so artfully set down on the surfaces of his later works. The images in *The Gulf of Marseille seen from L'Estaque*, for example, might be the walls and rooflines of a cluster of houses or an arrangement of cubes and cones.

Still, for every dozen experts who rank Cézanne as the great god of modernism, we are confronted with at least one authority proposing that we rethink the idea of his modernism. For example, Françoise Cachin, director of the Musée de France and one of the three organizers of the exhibition, bluntly sees that role as "overplayed," and the work "too often observed from a modern point of view." Cézanne clearly influenced 20th-century art, she

has said, but "he also embodied his own era.... Cézanne was not an abstract artist."

It is striking that while we have a generous body of biographical material on Cézanne and a wealth of letters to family and friends, Joseph Rishel, among others, insists that we know little about him "in terms of daily factual mundane detail. Whole years of his life go past and we might have a street address, we might not."

Rishel is certain of one thing: that for all of Cézanne's self-doubts, the sneers of critics, the rejections of the art establishment, his faith in his gift was strong. "He knew he was different. He somehow always knew he was out there." Or, as Cézanne late in life told a young artist, "I have perhaps come too early. I was the painter of your generation more than my own."

Except for fellow painters who set up their easels alongside him, the only witnesses to Cézanne at work were those who posed for portraits, and the only sitter who has left a substantial account of the process was Ambroise Vollard. In his little 1914 book, *Paul Cézanne*, Vollard reported that the portrait (right) required an astonishing 115 sittings.

Some experts have questioned the count, believing that Vollard tended either to embellish reality or to ignore it. (Vollard's book never mentions, for example, that his 1895 show was organized at the urging of Pissarro, Monet and Renoir, who understood Cézanne's importance.) In any event, at the rate of 115 sittings for one portrait, it is hard to imagine a lifetime labor that could produce more than 950 oils and close to 650 watercolors.





While at work, Cezanne required absolute silence; according to his dealer, the sound of a barking dog could destroy his concentration. He also wanted absolute immobility from his subjects. Once, when a numbed Vollard dozed off and tumbled from his perch, an exasperated Cezanne scolded him: "Do I have to tell you again you must sit like an apple?"

Apples were ideal subjects; they did no fidget. Their obedience may help to explain how a relatively minor genre—the still life—became, in his hands, a body of major work. A variety of objects may be seen in those arrangements, including oranges and onions and tableware; but apples, voluptuously round and rosy, hint at what might have been accomplished had Cezanne been able to deal with his discomfort with live naked women.

Hortense, who apparently had no trouble sitting like an apple, was his most frequent female subject. While many of his portraits of men are intense and penetrating, including at least 30 self-portraits, images of Hortense often suggest Cezanne's still lifes. His references to her in his letters are certainly polite and even affectionate, but in private he called her "La boule," a label suggesting an object without noticeable intelligence, say, a round wooden missile for a game.



*Still Life with Onions*, 1895: the onions lend a rustic touch to this study of transparent and opaque materials.

She and Cezanne were not married until 1886. Only a year earlier, he had been involved in an intense affair about which nothing is known except that mail from his lover was sent to the residence of Zola, who forwarded it to a safe address. The Cezanne marriage commanded the attendance and presumably the approval of the elder Cezanne. If nothing else, the ceremony legitimized Cezanne's treasured 14-year-old son. Cezanne's father died soon after, and the artist was at last free of financial worries.



In the early 1890s, Cezanne painted five major versions and numerous sketches for his *Cardplayers* series; this oil was done after the larger one at the Barnes Foundation. Workers at the Jas de Bouffan, where he had lived since he was 20, served as his models.

The year of Cezanne's marriage was also the year when Zola dealt their friendship a fatal blow. He published *L'Oeuvre* (*The Masterpiece*), a novel about a subject on which he considered himself to be expert. Its dominant figure, Claude Lantier, is a failed painter who can neither abandon nor complete a major work, and in despair finally hangs himself.

Claude Lantier was supposed to have been a composite of several contemporary artists, but Cezanne saw a close resemblance to himself and took the story personally. The fiery young journalist who had once defended a maligned avant-garde was now a popular novelist rather out of sympathy with the new art. As he always did, Zola had taken care to see that Cezanne received a copy of the novel. Cezanne acknowledged it in a curt note. They never again exchanged a word. But Cezanne apparently never abandoned memories of their intimacy. When in 1902 the news came that Zola had died, he locked himself in his studio and wept all day.

That episode was a rare instance of Cezanne giving way to tears. As age overtook him, the townspeople saw only a frail, unsociable old man who went into the countryside on clement mornings and came back to lunch at the Deux Garçons Cafe,

where meals are still served today. After World War I, Roger Fry, the Bloomsbury painter and critic for whom Cezanne was a lifelong obsession, toured Provence in search of material for a book and found that the shopkeepers of Aix had little to contribute. All they recalled was "an old man who was rather cracked." Indeed, when Fry was a student in Paris in the 1890s, he would later remember with amazement, not once did he hear "the name of the recluse of Aix."

"Recluse" is poetic license. After the 1895 exhibition, young admirers hunted Cezanne down and were politely welcomed. But his last years were not easy. He developed diabetes with its attendant afflictions. When his aged mother died, the family homestead was sold so that her estate might be divided among a son and two daughters, and he had to find new living quarters.

Eventually, Cezanne settled into an apartment in the center of town with a housekeeper. In time, he built a small two-story studio outside the city, with commanding views of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Repeatedly, he set down images of that great rock, massive, menacing, mysterious; there are 75 views of Mont Sainte-Victoire on canvas and paper. For the young artists of the early 20th century, the sight of some of those late landscapes flowing from the mountain must have been dizzying: depending on where you stood, the houses and trees were houses and trees or simply abstract forms.

In the last month of his life, Cezanne, exhausted by a recent heat wave, wrote to his son, "With my nerves so weakened, only oil painting keeps me alive." Then, one day in mid-October 1906, as he worked near his studio, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. Passers-by found him collapsed and drenched and wheeled him back to town in a laundry cart. In little more than a week, Cezanne was gone.

Nine decades later, he is not merely an Aixois cultural icon but a major industry. The city fathers have lately paid the lavish sum of 25 million francs for the Jas de Bouffan and what remains of its reduced acreage; it will not become a public place until the current owner, whose grandmother bought it from the Cezannes, has died. Les Lauves, the once-isolated hillside studio, was rescued from demolition by devout Cezannistes some years ago and is now a shrine, filled with artifacts and shadowed by huge apartment dwellings. And scattered about town are a Cezanne retirement home, a Cezanne school, a Cezanne garage and a Cezanne hotel.

The tourist bureau has produced a slick brochure in three languages entitled "Circuit Cezanne" for worshipers who want to follow the artist's walks from 23 Rue Boulegon into the hills. And to make certain that visitors will feel secure tracking the great man, Aix has provided an inspired piece of kitsch: large brass studs emblazoned with a "C"—marking "the footsteps of Cezanne"—are now embedded in the old stones of this old place. Surely, an artist who wanted desperately to be taken seriously could not have imagined a more tastelessly devout tribute.

On the other hand, the more rewarding sight for an explorer might be found outside town near the Chateau Noir, a large crumbling house that Paul Cezanne painted many times and where he sometimes stored his art gear. Alongside the chateau is a path marked *Prive*. If you ignore the sign and slip a few feet beyond it, you are suddenly confronted by the sight of Mont Sainte-Victoire standing guard over a stretch of land carpeted in a dozen different shades of green. It's not a living Cezanne, but it surely and touchingly bears silent witness to the artist's inspiration.

*By Helen Dudar, of New York City, who last wrote about Johannes Vermeer (November 1995) and the film Jefferson in Paris (March 1995).*



From a nearby knoll, Cezanne painted his last, most-heroic Mont Sainte-Victoire series; here, an oil (c. 1902). "The structure is more and more implied, and less and less apparent," wrote scholar Lionello Venturi.

**Note: Your reading assignment also includes ["Modernism's Patriarch," Robert Hughes, Time, 6/10/96.](#)**