PORTRAIT OF ACHILLE EMPERAIRE, 1869-70 His first masterpiece, in which a stunted fellow painter is viewed as a parody king

# Modernism's Patriarch

**By Robert Hughes, *Time*, June 6, 1996**

## The Cezanne exhibition in Philadelphia is an epic, humbling event, fully worthy of its great subject

The greater the artist, the greater the doubt; perfect confidence is granted to the less talented as a consolation prize. "As a painter, I become more lucid in front of Nature," Paul Cezanne wrote to his son in 1906, the last year of his life. "But that realization of my sensations is always very painful. I cannot attain the intensity which unfolds to my senses. I don't have that magnificent richness of coloration which animates nature."

As Picasso famously said, it's Cezanne's anxiety that is so interesting. But not only the anxiety. There are anxious mediocrities too. It's the achievement that counts. If Cezanne was not a heroic painter, the word means nothing.
This was evident to some of his friends and contemporaries, such as Emile Zola. They saw, as later generations have seen, that his painting was also a moral struggle, in which the search for identity fused with the desire to make the strongest possible images of the Other—Nature—under the continuous inspiration and admonishment of an art tradition that he revered. He compared himself, not quite jokingly, to Moses: "I work doggedly, I glimpse the Promised Land. Will I be like the great Hebrew leader, or will I be able to enter it?"

He was indeed the Moses of late 19th century art, the conflicted, inspired, sometimes enraged patriarch who led painting toward Modernism—a deceptive Canaan sometimes, not always flowing with milk and honey, but radically new territory all the same. The essential point, however, is that just as Moses died before reaching Canaan, so Cezanne never lived to see Modernism take hold—and he might not have liked what he saw, had he lived. It used to be one of the standard tropes of art history that Cezanne "begat" Cubism, and it is a fact that no serious painter since 1890 has been able to work without reckoning with Cezanne. But the idea that Cubism completed what Cezanne began is an illusion. It may be that Cezanne was reaching for a kind of expression in painting that did not exist in his time and still does not in ours.

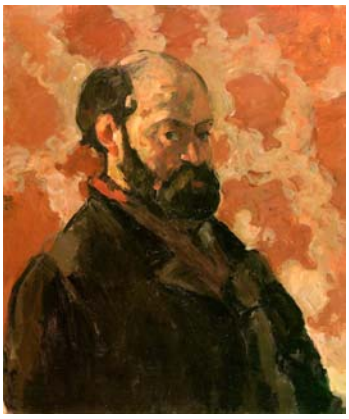
Instead of theory, he had "sensation," the experience of being up against the world—fugitive and yet painfully solid, imperious in its thereness and constantly, unrelentingly new. There was painting before Cezanne and painting after him, and they were not the same. But Cezanne's own painting matters more than its consequences. Inevitably, this deep innovator claimed he invented nothing. "In my opinion one doesn't replace the past, one adds a new link to it." Yes and no.

The Cezanne retrospective that opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art last week is beyond question one of the greatest shows that has ever been held in America, or anywhere else. Eight years in preparation, it contains 112 oils and 75 drawings and watercolors. The last Cezanne retrospective was held 60 years ago in Paris. In size, in scholarship, in the magnitude of its subject's achievement, this new one is a truly epic event. God help any fool who is not humbled by it.

In the first and most obvious place, the show is a mighty narrative of development. There was no art in Cezanne's background in Aix-en-Provence, where he was born in 1839. His father was a laborer who became a hatter and, eventually, a banker, thus securing his son from money worries. From 1852 to 1858 young Cezanne studied humanities at the College Bourbon in Aix, where he met the future writer who was to be his lifetime friend, Zola. Then he studied law for a while, but under Zola's constant prodding he turned to painting. By 1861 both young men were in Paris.

Cezanne was fascinated by Gericault, Daumier, Delacroix and the revolutionary Realism of both Courbet and Manet. But he had no facility at all; the impression given off by his early *style couillarde*—his "ballsy style," as he called it—is of a thwarted, tumultuous, half-articulate imagination bashing against the limits of its own abilities. He produced dark, macabre paintings of murders and orgies whose motivation; despite the guignol of their subject matter, remains as mysterious as their muddy paint and overladen black tonalities.

Nevertheless, he painted his first masterpiece in 1869-70, a portrait of his fellow painter from Aix, Achille Emperaire (above), with his dwarf's body and weak mantis limbs, enthroned—there is no other word for its weirdly authoritarian effect—in a high-backed chair upholstered in floral chintz. Painted darkly in homage to Manet and preceded by some of the most beautiful head studies in Cezanne's early work, it depicts the stunted Emperaire as a parody king, an "emperor," but with compassion; no mere caricatural impulse could account for the averted gaze and the great, sad, liquid eyes.



Cezanne was, from that point on, a great portraitist, one of the best the world has seen, especially of himself. His self-portraits invite comparison with those of Rembrandt, and the best of them justify it. He begins, in his own images, as a wild man, a solitary, an uncouth glaring peasant with greasy hair, massed on either side of the pale dome of a bald head; he ends, in his last years; as a kind of sage. Between the extremes is a painting like the *Self-Portrait (Portrait of the Artist with a Rose Background*) (left), with its powerfully modeled head, "formed," as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote after he saw it at the 1907 Paris Salon, "as though by hammering from within." The figure gazes at you with that uniquely Cezannian conjuncture of wariness and authority, every molecule of its flesh and bone asserting its pictorial structure against the dissolution suggested by the lavish wet brushstrokes that represent the wallpaper pattern behind it.

Cezanne admired the Impressionists, especially Pissarro and Renoir, and derived inspiration from them; it is hardly possible to imagine his landscapes of the 1870s without their quantum of Impressionist freshness. But the whole thrust of his work is about something other than the delight in the fleeting moment, the "effect" of light, color and atmosphere, to which Impressionism was dedicated. Underneath the delectable surface was structure, like reefs and rocks beneath a smiling sea, and that was what Cezanne sought and obsessively analyzed—the bones and masses of the world. His famous remark about seeking in nature "the cylinder, the sphere, the cone" need not be taken literally—he was never a geometric painter, still less an abstract one, though later abstractionists would build on his work. And yet his greatest paintings bear abstract constructions of tremendous amplitude and sureness.

One example among many is *Woman with a Coffeepot*, circa 1895. One would need to go back 400 years, to Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, to find a painted human figure of such monumental gravity. All is volume, all is power, not only the large masses—the head that seems hewn from some skin-colored rock, the torso and the flaring blue pyramid of the skirt, the cylindrical coffeepot and the cup with the spoon set vertically in it—but also the microforms, such as the knot tying the woman's apron at her waist, which has the finality of a turned lock. The poetry of this image isn't in expression—it is almost ineloquent—but in space, form and immense deliberation.

Early Cezanne the stumblebum turned into one of the finest manipulators of paint who has ever lived. Perhaps manipulator is the wrong word—it suggests trickery, whereas in Cezanne the relation between the paint surface and the imagined surface of the object (a rock, the side of a house, an apple) is astonishingly direct and candid. This doesn't come across in reproduction. It rises from the paint itself, that discreet paste in which every trace left by the brush seems to help create the impression of solidity, so that you feel you could pick the apple—which is both a rosy sphere of light and a ball as heavy as plutonium—off the table. And yet the surface is never closed, never overdetermined; that is part of the magic.

*WOMAN WITH A COFFEEPOT*, ca 1895. Underneath the delectable surface is monumental structure, like reefs and rocks beneath a smiling sea

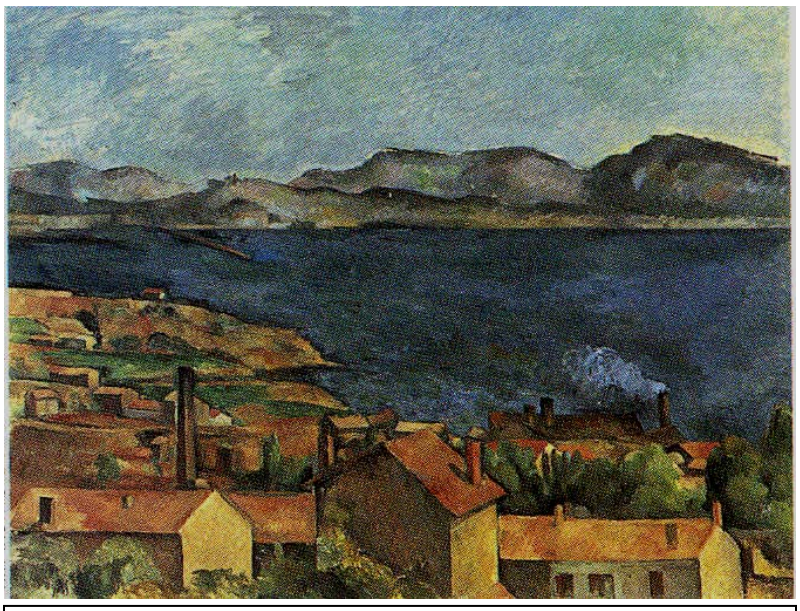
STILL LIFE WITH CURTAIN AND FLOWERED PITCHER, CA. 1899. "These glasses, these plates ...talk among themselves," the painter wrote to a friend.

In the magisterial *Still Life with Curtain and Flowered Pitcher*, circa 1899, the heavy leaf-pattern curtain on the left and the folds of white cloth below it have the same sculptural density as the fruit and the jug, with its exquisitely suggested peony design. But there, on the right, Cezanne has another white cloth, its folds sharper and more geometrical, its surface unfinished, so that you see glimpses of table through it—and the balance is suddenly perfect, despite but actually because of this shift of gear. Then there is the play between mass and instability—how the fruit in the dishes is so grandly solid, while the plates themselves tilt just enough to convey an underlying peril. The relationships in a still-life were as infinite to Cezanne as those in a landscape: "These glasses, these plates, they talk among themselves," he wrote to his friend Joachim Gasquet, "Interminable disclosures."

Cezanne has often been called a universal artist, but you cannot grasp his work unless you realize that he was a deeply local one as well. He was not just French but southern Mediterranean French, a Provencal; and the obsessive, enduring, reinforcing sense of the particular landscape of his cultural memory is wound into his work so far as to completely remove it from the domain of pure, unsymbolic form. In a sense it is part of the great movement away from the national toward the local that characterized so much of European, including French, culture in the latter half of the 19th century.

You feel it particularly in Cezanne's series of landscapes of his "sacred mountain," Mont Sainte-Victoire. Now it is a mere shimmer of profile in a watercolor, whose blank paper becomes the white light of the Midi, burning through the pale flecks of color. Elsewhere, in the late oils, it achieves a tremendous faceted density, that crouched lion of rock. In between there are lyrical tributes to it, as in *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Bellevue*, 1882-85, where it appears almost shyly on the left of a tender, early springtime landscape, all new green, traversed by an aqueduct (sign of the ancient Roman roots of Provence) and crossed by a pale road whose kinks are tied to the branch forms of the pine that rises in the foreground to bisect the canvas.

MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE SEEN FROM BELLEVUE, 1882-85. Cezanne's "sacred mountain," at times a mere shimmer, at others a crouched lion



THE GULF OF MARSEILLE SEEN FROM L 'ESTAQUE, CA. 1886. Radiating an easeful sense of being united with a landscape of ancestral memory

These apart, perhaps the most beautiful evocation of Provence in Cezanne's work is a seascape, *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L'Estaque*, circa 1886. A blue bay, with blue hills on the horizon and a pale, scrubbed blue sky; a pier running into the blueness on the upper left, reaching (it seems) toward a white scarf of smoke coming from a chimney in the right foreground and binding the whole space between; below, the faceted blocks of houses and the lovely

staccato rhythm of chimneys. It radiates peace and balance and, above all, easefulness—the sense of being united with a landscape of ancestral memory.

But anxiety is never far away; it breaks through time and again. It is the Thanatos to the Eros of Cezanne's Provencalism. The summation of both—along with his deep relation to his own pictorial gods, such as Poussin—is in the paintings of bathers that Cezanne worked on in the last decade of his life.

In the last of them, his unfinished the *Large Bathers*, 1906, one sees the characteristics that have always rendered these peculiar arcadian scenes difficult to love even as they compel admiration and even a certain awe. This group of 14 stock nudes gathered around what must have been a picnic basket is as absolutely antisensuous as an assembly of naked women could possibly be. Some of them look like seals stranded on rocks. Others are lumpish giantesses. None were painted from actual models because, as his friend the painter Emile Bernard recalled, "he was the slave of an extreme sense of decorum, and…this slavery had two causes: the one, that he didn't trust himself with women; the other, that he had religious scruples and a genuine feeling that such things could not be done in a small provincial town without provoking scandal." Instead, he recycled his old art-school drawings, a process which must have contributed to the strangely abstract look of the figures.

*THE LARGE BATHERS*, 1906. Equilibrium achieved at the end of a conflicted, inspired, anxious and always heroic career

Cezanne's sublimation produces not flesh but a kind of architecture. Yet this architecture is incontrovertible. Its scale as increased by the overarching trees, which supply a Gothic vault, and by the high, cloud-laden sky. And the final effect is one of exhilaration at the sight of the old man in his last year of life winning from his turmoil an equilibrium that was truly classical, and yet hiding so little of the inner compulsions that drove its making. .