

# Cézanne

## The man who changed the landscape of art

By Paul Trachtma  
Smithsonian Magazine |  
January 2006

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/cezanne-107584544/?all>

In the fall of 1894, the American painter Mary Cassatt attended a dinner in the countryside outside Paris with a group of artists, among them the notoriously bohemian Paul Cézanne. “His manners at first startled me,” she wrote to a friend. “He scrapes his soup plate, then lifts it and pours the remaining drops in the spoon; he even takes his chop in his fingers and pulls the meat from the bone. . . . Yet in spite of the total disregard of the dictionary of manners, he shows a politeness towards us which no other man here would have shown.”

As Cassatt observed, there was something surprising, even contradictory, about Cézanne. He spouted profanities yet could recite long passages of Virgil and Ovid in Latin. He scorned priests but went faithfully to Mass. He hated the official Paris Salon but kept submitting his work to its judges. He haunted the Louvre, copying sculptures and paintings into his sketchbooks, yet critics said he couldn’t draw. He was obsessed with tradition and obsessed with overturning it. He felt himself a failure . . . and the best painter of his time.

In this centennial year—Cézanne died October 23, 1906, at age 67—two shows focus on different aspects of the career of the gutsy iconoclast who has been called the father of modern art. “Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne & Pissarro 1865-1885,” an exhibition organized by New York City’s Museum of Modern Art, is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until January 16. The show, which goes on to the Musée D’Orsay in Paris (February 28 to May 28), highlights the period of Cézanne’s immersion in Impressionism, when he often painted side by side with artist Camille Pissarro. An exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., “Cézanne in Provence” (January 29 through May 7), features more than 100 paintings the artist executed in and around his hometown of Aix-en-Provence in southern France. The exhibition will move to the newly renovated Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence (June 9 through September 17) as a highlight of a national celebration in France officially marking 2006 as the Year of Cézanne. “It was by painting his own particular, familiar landscape,” says the National Gallery’s Philip Conisbee (co-curator of the exhibition with Musée Granet director Denis Coutagne), “that Cézanne changed the way later generations would see the world.”

Paul Cézanne wanted to make paint bleed. The old masters, he told the poet Joachim Gasquet, painted warmblooded flesh and made sap run in their trees, and he would too. He wanted to capture “the green odor” of his Provence fields and “the

perfume of marble from Saint-Victoire,” the mountain that was the subject of so many of his paintings. He was bold, scraping and slapping paint onto his still lifes with a palette knife. “I will astonish Paris with an apple,” he boasted.

In the years when his friends Manet, Monet, Pissarro and Renoir were finally gaining acceptance, Cézanne worked furiously and mostly in isolation, ridiculed by critics and mocked by the public, sometimes ripping up his own canvases. He wanted more than the quick impressions of the Impressionists (nature, he wrote to a fellow artist, “is more depth than surface”) and devoted himself to studying the natural world. “It’s awful for me;” he told a young friend, “my eyes stay riveted to the tree trunk, to the clod of earth. It’s painful for me to tear them away. . . . And my eyes, you know, my wife tells me that they jump out of my head.” He could often be found, said one contemporary, “on the outskirts of Paris wandering about the hillsides in jackboots. As no one took the least interest in his pictures, he left them in the fields.”

Yet by the end of his life, Cézanne had been recognized, at least by some critics, as a true revolutionary who overturned the rules of painting and upended conventional theories of color. And his paintings were clearly an inspiration to artists who followed, including Matisse, Picasso and Alberto Giacometti.

He was a rebel from the start. Among his earliest paintings—finished when he was 23—are four huge wall panels of young women representing the four seasons. He painted them in the elegant, academic style of Ingres, so pleasing to bourgeoisie taste. They decorated the salon of the family estate in Aix. The panels were parodies—he even signed one “Ingres”—showing off his skill while disguising his mockery. In the center of the same wall, Cézanne hung a portrait he painted of his father, a hatmaker turned banker. The painting was done with a palette knife—its thick, crude slabs of paint suggesting the handiwork of a mason or plasterer. The technique had been used by Cézanne’s hero Gustave Courbet, a radical painter of the previous generation, but Cézanne wielded the knife more aggressively, with quick, almost violent strokes. Referring to a portrait that Cézanne made of his sister Marie (modeled on portraits by the Spanish artist El Greco that Cézanne was copying at the time), the American artist James McNeill Whistler would later say, “If a 10 year old child had drawn that on his slate, his mother, if she was a good mother, would have whipped him.”

Cézanne’s technique, a style he called *couillarde*, or ballsy, suited his early subjects—murders, rapes and orgies among them. “The young Cézanne wanted to make people scream,” says French art historian Jean-Claude Lebensztejn. “He attacked on all fronts, drawing, color, technique, proportion, subjects . . . he savagely demolished everything one loves.” To accomplish this, says Lebensztejn, Cézanne drew on tradition, adapting themes from the erotic art of Titian and the disasters of Goya.

Cézanne’s father, Louis-Auguste, tried to set the young man straight. Remember, he said, we die with genius, but we eat with money. The two were frequently at odds. Cézanne briefly studied law, as a step to joining his father’s bank, but it didn’t take. His boyhood friend and Aix schoolmate Émile Zola—Cézanne was once beaten up by school bullies for befriending him—was living in Paris and urged Cézanne to join

him there. Cézanne's father finally agreed, and sent him off with an allowance to study art. The artist would resent this patronage all his life, even though he depended on it. His mother, Elizabeth, supported his desire to be an artist and tried to keep peace in the family by mediating between father and son.

In Paris, Cézanne, then in his early 20s, applied to the École des Beaux Arts, training ground of Salon painters, but he was rejected. "Unfortunately, he paints with excess," noted a former student of Ingres. Cézanne was soon installed in the Atelier Suisse, a studio long favored by upstarts, including Courbet. Even here, Cézanne stood out. Pissarro, who was intrigued by this "peculiar Provençal" and went to see him at the Atelier Suisse in 1861, recalled later that Cézanne's life studies "provoked roars of laughter from all the impotents of the school."

His friend Zola was one of the few to champion him. Zola had not forgotten the incident that had sealed their friendship; the day after Cézanne had been attacked for defending him, Zola had brought Cézanne a basket of apples. Late in life, Cézanne tied this incident to his still lifes, telling his friend Gasquet, "Ah, Cézanne's apples, they go far back." Now Zola, who moonlighted as an art critic, defended Cézanne's paintings—even if he didn't always understand them. (Zola and Cézanne would, in fact, become estranged in their later years after Zola published a novel that many felt portrayed Cézanne as a failed genius.)

Year after year Cézanne presented his work to the official Salon, "carrying his canvases," one critic noted, "on his back like Jesus his cross." And year after year he was rejected. In 1865 he and Pissarro, nine years his elder, began to paint together out-of-doors in villages outside Paris. The collaboration made both men more daring. From Pissarro, Cézanne picked up a sense of discipline and a habit of unremitting daily practice that would mark the rest of his life. He also began incorporating brighter colors and explored new ways of applying paint, using both brushes and palette knives. One day, a villager who watched the two artists reported: "Monsieur Pissarro, when he painted, dabbed, and Monsieur Cézanne smeared."

But in other ways the two men were similar. "They both shared in common their humongous needs, their egos," says the Museum of Modern Art's Joachim Pissarro, the painter's great-grandson and curator of the "Cézanne & Pissarro" exhibition. "They needed to be fed, like monsters, these bulks of tradition that they gulped down and re-digested in their own ways."

In March 1865, Cézanne wrote a note to Pissarro about the work he and another young painter were submitting to the Salon: "On Saturday we are going to the barrack of the Champs-Elysees to bring our canvases, which will make the Institute blush with rage and despair." But it was Édouard Manet who made the crowds blush that year. Salon officials accepted his painting of a naked courtesan, *Olympia*, an adaptation of a Titian Venus but painted without the conventional refinement. (Nearly a decade later, in 1874, Cézanne, who was tired of hearing Manet's canvas praised, would paint a retort to Manet he titled *A Modern Olympia*. He wanted, wrote Cézanne biographer John Rewald, "to create an Olympia more female, more attractive and more desirable than the proud courtesan of Manet." But when Cézanne's version was displayed in Paris, critics had a field day. Cézanne, wrote one, "can only be a bit

of a madman, afflicted while painting with delirium tremens.” Even Pissarro referred to it as “a five-footed sheep.”)

Though Cézanne continued to paint with Pissarro, it was Manet he considered the leading modern painter—and the man to beat. One evening in the early 1870s, according to Claude Monet, Cézanne made the rounds at the Café Goerbois in Paris shaking everyone’s hand. But when he came to Manet he tipped his hat and said, “I won’t offer you my hand, Monsieur Manet. I haven’t washed in eight days.” It was a gesture both of respect and insolence, says Jean-Claude Lebensztejn: “Manet haunted Cézanne.”

Cézanne was nothing if not a loner. Friends, admirers, other artists were suspect: “They want to get their hooks into me,” he complained. “The meanness of people is such,” he wrote in one of his last letters to his son, “that I should never be able to get away from it—it is theft, complacency, infatuation, violation, the seizing of your work.” He worried that other artists would steal his secrets—especially his ideas about color—and was convinced that Paul Gauguin had done just that. He disliked being touched (even his son would ask permission before taking his arm), and he was fearful of women. “Women models frighten me,” he once said, “you’ve got to be on the defensive all the time.” On a rare occasion when he hired one, he panicked when she began to undress and pushed her, half naked, out the door of his Paris studio. When, around 1869, he met and fell in love with Hortense Fiquet, a 19-year-old model 11 years his junior, he took great pains to hide her from his father (who still held the purse strings). They lived apart as much as together during their 37-year relationship, even after their son, Paul Jr., was born in 1872. And though Fiquet, a tall and handsome brunette whom he finally married in 1886 (a few months before his father died), apparently had no interest in his paintings, she put up with his quirks, didn’t interfere with his work and posed for him for hours on end. She stares out from the many portraits he made of her looking bored or pained. “Be an apple!” Cézanne would tell his sitters. Her patience helped make him a master of the modern portrait.

When the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who said that Cézanne’s paintings were one of the principal influences on his poetry, saw the portrait of Fiquet known as *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair*, painted circa 1877, when Cézanne was about 38, he wrote: “It is the first and ultimate red armchair ever painted. . . . The interior of the picture vibrates, rises, falls back into itself, and does not have a single unmoving part.”

Cézanne was constantly seeking new ways of handling form and perspective. And in many of his canvases he succeeded in creating a new sense of space. Standing in front of *Landscape, Auvers-sur-Oise* (1874) at the Museum of Modern Art show, Joachim Pissarro said: “In this landscape, try to figure out where you are sitting. Are you sitting on the edge of the wall? Are you falling off the side of the path? It’s not so dramatic that it gives you a sense of vertigo, but still, it’s completely incomprehensible, it’s a sense of being above the void! This is where Cézanne is totally a key to Modernism.”

Cézanne's growing mastery did not ease his brooding sense of failure. On his first trip to Paris, in 1861, he had ripped up an unfinished portrait of Émile Zola. Two decades later, it was Madame Zola's turn. As she posed for him in her garden, Cézanne suddenly poked holes in the canvas, broke his brushes and stalked off. Renoir recalled once retrieving a scrap of paper outside Cézanne's studio in Aix—"a most exquisite watercolor [he] had discarded after spending twenty sessions on it."

"My hair is longer than my talent," Cézanne complained in his 20s. At 50, he wrote that "the many studies to which I have dedicated myself have given me only negative results." And in 1905, a year before he died, he lamented, "My age and my health will never allow me to realize the artistic dream I have pursued throughout my entire life."

Cézanne's Impressionist friends took a different view. "How does he do it?" Renoir marveled. "He can't put two touches of paint on a canvas without success." On another occasion Renoir declared, "I don't think you can find any artist who compares with Cézanne in the whole history of painting." Pissarro said, "If you want to learn to paint, look at Cézanne." But Cézanne, it seems, couldn't take a compliment. Monet wrote about an incident at a dinner with a group of artists at his home in Giverny. When Monet started to tell Cézanne of his friends' love and admiration, Cézanne interrupted. "You, too, are making fun of me!" he protested, grabbing his coat and rushing out the door.

It was the impossibility of the task Cézanne had set for himself that accounted for his sense of failure. He called himself "a slave to nature," but he knew that he could never completely capture the natural landscape on canvas. "Art is harmony parallel to nature," he once said.

As he moved beyond Impressionism, Cézanne began investigating new ways to stimulate the eye, painting with touches and patches of color in carefully calculated juxtaposition to one another. He was looking for a new visual logic, as if to say that art lies, as he put it, "in what our eyes think." (Kathryn Tuma, assistant professor of modern art at Johns Hopkins University, says that looking at *The Red Rock*, a c. 1895 Cézanne landscape, in natural light at the Orangerie in Paris several years ago, she saw "dynamic, flickering vibrations of color appear as if floating in front of the surface of the work"—an effect she likens to Rilke's description of seeing vibrations in *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair*.)

Cézanne, according to one account, "would sit motionless in the landscape, like a lizard in the sun, patiently waiting and watching the shifting scene for the appearance of what he wanted to catch in paint." Indeed, he once told a friend: "I would rather smash my canvas than invent or imagine a detail. I want to know."

Painting as a search for knowledge is something that would engage many artists of the next generation—and Cézanne's art may be easier to grasp in retrospect, through their eyes. Mondrian, who couldn't stop reworking his later canvases, explained, "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out." And Picasso remarked, "One doesn't make a painting, one makes studies, one never ends getting

near.” James Lord, the biographer of Alberto Giacometti, says the artist often called his sculptures failures. “But that was only because he wanted to do the impossible,” Lord notes. “He wanted to make the impossible possible, and nobody can do that.” The same was true of Cézanne.

During the last decade or so of his life, Cézanne lived mainly in his hometown of Aix. There he painted his monumental bathers, his astonishing apples, his moving portraits, his Provençal scenes and, above all, his beloved mountain. “See this Sainte-Victoire,” he told a friend, “what lift, what imperious thirst for the sun, and what melancholy in the evening when all her weight falls back. . . . Her bluish shadows are part of the air’s ambient breathing.”

In his black frock coat, he looked like a banker as he painted. He was so reclusive that some in the art world thought he had died. For a time, his work could be found only in the shop of an eccentric Paris art dealer, Père Tanguy, who had traded Cézanne art supplies for paintings. When Tanguy died, however, a more ambitious dealer, Ambroise Vollard, took possession of the paintings and tracked down the artist in Aix. He proposed a show, and in 1895 Cézanne, then 56, at last astonished Paris with his first one-man show, an exhibition of some 150 paintings, including a number of his still lifes of apples. The artist, wrote one critic, is “destined for the Louvre.” But Cézanne stayed away, leaving the business end of dealing with Vollard to his 23-year-old son, who had remained in Paris.

After Cézanne’s mother died, in 1897, the artist and his two sisters sold the family estate, and he moved to an apartment on the street where his father’s bank had been. Vollard was selling his work, even raising the prices, and in 1899 he came to Aix and bought everything in the artist’s studio.

In 1901, Cézanne oversaw the construction of Les Lauves, a studio on a hill overlooking the town, close to his favorite view of Sainte-Victoire. By then, his fame had spread and young artists, including Emile Bernard, came to learn from him. But his time was running out. “Someone else will accomplish what I have not been able to do,” he said. “I am probably only the primitive of a new art.”

Cézanne once spoke of what he called Titian, Rubens and Rembrandt’s “sublime compromise”—the painters’ ability to express profound emotion in a very personal way yet with a realism faithful to nature. In the end, Cézanne too achieved this compromise, but in a radically new fashion. “In the late portraits of Cézanne’s gardener Vallier,” says Philip Conisbee, “the encrusted surface of the old man, his gnarled hands, the ravaged face with its shadowed eyes, recall the late portraits of Rembrandt. A comparable feeling of tragedy, of impending death, is powerfully present. At the same time, the views he painted from the terrace of Les Lauves are radiant. In *The Garden of Les Lauves*, Cézanne’s deep feeling for nature is translated into a series of color patches so abstract that, in hindsight, they seem to anticipate the abstract art of a far later era.”

On October 15, 1906, Cézanne climbed the winding road that led from his studio to his favorite lookout to paint his mountain, as he’d done a hundred times before. But

while he worked, he was caught in a sudden thunderstorm and collapsed. A passerby found him and carried him, half conscious, back into town on a laundry cart. "I want to die painting," he had told a friend. His last letter was to a dealer who supplied his paints. "It is now eight days since I asked you to send me ten burnt lakes no. 7 and I have had no reply," he wrote. "Whatever is the matter? An answer and quick, please." He died of pneumonia six days after writing the letter.

A year later, a major exhibition of Cézanne's works opened at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. Picasso, Braque and Matisse were among those crowding into the show—and stealing his secrets. But they would never steal his grandeur. Rilke, too, was there. "Not since Moses," he wrote to his wife, "has anyone seen a mountain so greatly."

Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/cezanne-107584544/#ItIzK9BmaMXclOsu.99>

Follow us: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter