

Paul Cézanne, *Self-Portrait*, 1878–80. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Paul Cézanne is recognized as one of the great innovators of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, and his work has influenced countless modern artists. With an introverted temperament and generally anti-establishment stance, Cézanne forged a new approach to painting that sought not only to reflect nature but also to express his own response to it. Although during his formative years he exhibited with the Impressionists, ultimately he felt at odds with their emphasis on fleeting experience, seeking greater solidity through painterly form and structure.

He was born in the southern French town of Aix-en-Provence, the oldest child and only son of Louis-Auguste Cézanne, a banker, and his wife, Anne. He was a serious student and excelled at math as well as classical languages and poetry. When he was thirteen, he befriended fellow student Émile Zola, who would become one of the most celebrated writers of his generation. The boys would go on outings together into the countryside around Aix, instilling in Cézanne a lifelong love of his native land.

In his youth, Cézanne studied art under Joseph Gibert, curator at the nearby Musée Granet and a painter of landscapes. Cézanne's father, who supported him financially, did not approve of a career in the arts, and in 1859, the same year Zola left for Paris, Cézanne enrolled at the University of Aix to study law. Cézanne wrote to Zola that he dreamed of going to Paris to become an artist, which he did in 1861. He was initially unhappy in Paris, however, and returned to Aix later that year, enrolling in the local

drawing school. Cézanne returned to Paris in the fall of 1862; he would follow this pattern of splitting his time between the greater Paris region and Provence for much of his career.

While in Paris, Cézanne continued his studies at the independent Académie Suisse and copied Romantic and Baroque art at the Louvre. Failing to gain entrance to the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts)—and repeatedly rejected by the official state-sponsored art exhibition, known as the Salon—Cézanne rebelliously painted in an intense, even violent, manner, with thickly encrusted paint. Finding a mentor in the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, in the 1870s Cézanne lightened his palette and started working directly from the landscape. He was influenced by the solidity of Pissarro's brushwork and compositional structure, yet he sought to express his own personal perceptions and sensations through his views of nature.

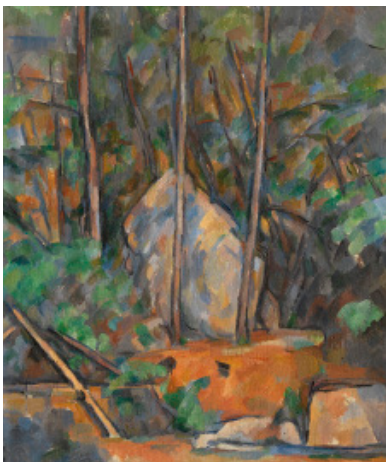
1

*The Louvre is a good book to consult but it must be only an intermediary. The real and immense study to be undertaken is the manifold picture of nature.*

— Paul Cézanne

## What is Post-Impressionism?

In 1910, the art critic Roger Fry coined the term “Post-Impressionism” as the title for an exhibition he organized in London, bringing together works by artists who came after the Impressionists, including Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin. Although these three painters’ oeuvres differ greatly in terms of subject matter and technique, the artists shared an interest in the symbolic and emotional content of art and in the use of color to create form.



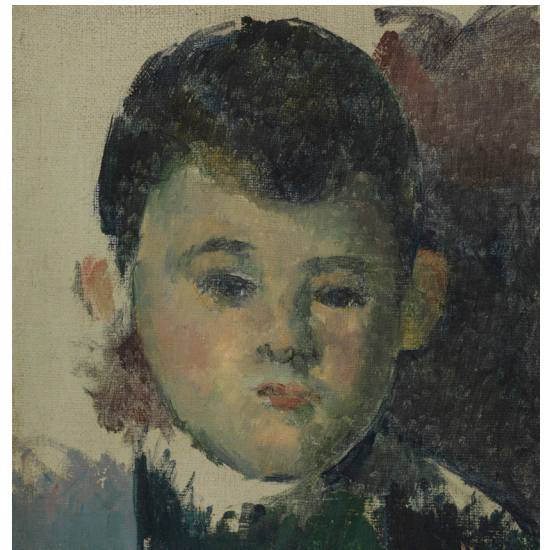
Cézanne was friends with many of the Impressionist painters, and he even participated in the first Impressionist exhibition (1874); however, he rejected their naturalistic approach to depicting light and color. Unlike Claude Monet, who applied his paint in dabs or dashes, Cézanne painted discrete planes in contrasting colors. For example, in *Cistern in the Park of Chateau Noir* he contrasted the rust and gray of the boulder with the surrounding green foliage. Small rectangles of color, set at an angle, are juxtaposed with strong vertical and diagonal lines, which give a sense of movement and depth to the picture plane.

2

Paul Cézanne, *Cistern in the Park of Chateau Noir*, ca. 1900. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

Between 1899 and 1902, Cézanne worked at the Chateau Noir estate outside Aix-en-Provence. The neo-Gothic buildings of this peculiar country manor were unfinished, giving it the appearance of a ruin. The modern stone cistern at Chateau Noir, seen at the left of this painting, contrasts with the ancient boulder at the center; the rock’s distinctive shape suggests the flint artifacts unearthed in the region. According to local mythology, the surrounding archaeological attractions and strange geological formations housed magical forces.

In 1869, Cézanne met a model named Marie-Hortense Fiquet, who became his mistress and with whom he had a son, Paul, in 1872. Fearing that his father would no longer support him financially, Cézanne kept the affair a secret. (His father finally discovered the situation in 1878 and did reduce his allowance as a result.) Cézanne and Hortense married in 1886, although by then they were leading separate lives. Even so, Cézanne continued to paint portraits of Hortense until the late 1890s.



Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Paul, the Artist's Son*, ca. 1880. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

Cézanne rapidly executed several portraits of his son at about two years old. Although the young boy may have been too lively to sit still long enough for a formal portrait, his father attempted to capture his appearance and personality at an age of increasing independence.

By the late 1870s, Cézanne's paintings showed increasing emphasis on mass and structure, and he developed a system of parallel brushstrokes, known as his "constructive stroke," that conveyed the volume of both form and space. With mind and eye working in concert, Cézanne built up his pictures slowly and deliberately, often while directly confronting his motif, whether a landscape, still-life, or portrait. His painstaking, analytical approach was particularly suited to still-lives and landscapes, which could withstand the hours of intense scrutiny Cézanne required. It is said that Cézanne preferred fruit to flowers for his still-lives because flowers would wither and die before he completed the painting.



Paul Cézanne, *Three Pears*, ca. 1888–90. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

This vibrant still-life was included in Cézanne's first solo exhibition. The artist's use of bold outlines for the fruit emphasizes their physicality.



Cézanne increasingly turned to the medium of watercolor to record sensations directly from nature and to experiment with form and structure. The quick drying time of watercolors (especially compared to oil paint) encouraged a more spontaneous approach, and their exceptional luminosity and transparency allowed him to play with light as a constructive element. Cézanne built up harmonies of color and used the blank areas of white paper to unify his compositions and heighten their sense of space. He would eventually produce almost 650 watercolors.

Paul Cézanne, *Route to Le Tholonet*, 1900–1904. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

Cézanne's watercolors had a great influence on his oil paintings. This influence is seen particularly in his use of exposed areas of blank canvas, as here (in the unfinished section at the bottom and throughout the composition), and in passages that reveal open compositional structures, such as the diamond-shaped form that is just sketched in this painting of the road that linked Aix with the village of Le Tholonet.

Most of Cézanne's mature works are rooted in the landscape of his native Provence. One of the motifs to which he returned again and again was Mont Sainte-Victoire, which dominates the countryside near Aix and which he could see from his studio. Mont Sainte-Victoire, the only such rocky protrusion in the region, is a prominent landmark from many vantage points. Cézanne and his childhood friends, including Émile Zola, developed an intimate relationship with this landscape, which they explored in their youth. At the same time, they were aware of the Provençal revival, a movement that celebrated





the region's native language, arts, and cultural traditions. Mont Sainte-Victoire had a symbolic role in that narrative: it was the site of the Roman defeat of an invading Teutonic army—an event that became the stuff of legend as well as the source of the mountain's name ("Mountain of Holy Victory"). Attracted to its enduring geometric form and the changing views offered by different light and angles, Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire more than sixty times.

Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, ca. 1904–6. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

Nearly all of Cézanne's views of Mont Sainte-Victoire are horizontal. Here, the vertical canvas accommodates a deep landscape portrayed in superimposed bands, and the sky above the mountain is reduced, creating a solidity and stability that suggest this as one of the last views in the series, created when Cézanne had fully mastered the motif.

4

Cézanne struggled to find commercial and critical success throughout his life, even as his friends, including Émile Zola, began to prosper. The artist's relationship with Zola came to an end in 1886, when the latter, who had always been intensely critical of his childhood friend, published *L'Oeuvre*, a novel about a failed artist who commits suicide. Cézanne must have seen the character as a thinly veiled version of himself, and no correspondence exists between the two men after a letter Cézanne wrote to Zola, thanking him for sending a copy of the book.

It was not until toward the end of Cézanne's life that artists and critics began to recognize his talent. Henri Matisse and other Fauvist artists noted Cézanne's use of the palette knife and his vigorous application of paint in thick marks. His approach to the geometry of nature, and the breaking down of volume into planes through color, was particularly inspirational to Pablo Picasso, who later called Cézanne his "one and only master."

*Cézanne is one of the greatest of those who changed the course of art history. From him we have learned that to alter the coloring of an object is to alter its structure. His work proves without doubt that painting is not—or not any longer—the art of imitating an object by lines and colors, but of giving plastic [solid] form to our nature.*

— Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in *Du Cubisme* (1912)

Paul Cézanne

**Mont Sainte-Victoire**, ca. 1904–6

The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum.

## Before your visit

Compare an image of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* with Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* and *Japanese Bridge* of 1899 (on view in the galleries of nineteenth-century European art).

You can download a high-res image of the Cézanne painting from the Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation's website at [http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-5\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-5_0.jpg)

You can download a high-res image of the Monet painting from the Art Museum's website at <http://artimage.princeton.edu/files/>



- *What are the subjects of these two paintings?*
- *Which characteristics of the environment did each artist communicate? Think of season, time of day, weather.*
- *Which elements of painting (e.g., color, line, shape, texture, light and dark, perspective) did each artist use to communicate the subject of his painting?*
- *Where do you think you (the viewer) are in relation to the subject of each painting?*
- *What differences and similarities do you notice between these two paintings?*
- *Which elements of painting do you think Cézanne learned from Impressionism, and which elements of Impressionism did he reject? Look at his use of color and shapes, as well as the types of brushstrokes he used.*

5

## During your visit

- *What shapes, lines, and colors do you see in the painting?*
- *Which areas of the landscape seem closest to you? Farthest away? Why?*
- *Which areas have the most detail? Which areas did Cézanne leave unfinished?*
- *Imagine you are in Aix. What sounds can you hear? What can you smell, touch, or even taste?*
- *Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire more than sixty times. Why might an artist paint the same motif again and again?*

**Compare the oil painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire with a watercolor painting of the same motif, ca. 1900–1906** ([http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-44\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-44_0.jpg)).

- *What are some of the similarities and differences between the two paintings and the choices that Cézanne made regarding shapes, colors, and composition?*
- *What are some of the differences in terms of media? How does the oil paint look compared to the watercolor?*
- *Cézanne often left some of the canvas or paper exposed. How does the use of blank canvas or paper effect how you respond to the work?*

## After your visit

Select a still-life by Cézanne and compare it to a landscape. You might choose two watercolors, like *Still Life with Carafe, Bottle, and Fruit*, 1906, ([http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-47\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-47_0.jpg)) and *Forest Path*, about 1904–6 (<http://www.pearlmancollection.org/artwork/forest-path>)

- *What are some of the similarities and differences between the two works you have chosen?*
- *In what ways did Cézanne structure a still-life like a landscape, and vice versa?*

Pablo Picasso said that Cézanne was “my one and only master . . . Cézanne was like the father of us all.” Select a painting from Picasso’s Analytic Cubist period, when he experimented with breaking forms down into faceted planes, and compare it with *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. Some examples include *Still Life with a Bottle of Rum* from 1911, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1999.363.63>), and *Ma Jolie* of 1911–12, in the Museum of Modern Art ([http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=79051](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79051))

- *Which elements of Cézanne’s approach to painting did Picasso adopt? Look closely at his use of shape and line.*
- *Which elements are different? Compare the use of color and the sense of depth of the picture plane.*

## ***Vocabulaire en français*** (French vocabulary words)

*aquarelle* (f.): watercolor painting

*atelier* (m.): workshop or studio

*cadre* (m.): frame

*dessin* (m.): drawing

*en plein air*: outdoors

*exposition* (f.): exhibition

*géométrie* (f.): geometry

*huile* (f.): oil (painting)

*montagne* (f.): mountain

*nature morte* (f.): still-life

*oeuvre* (m.): work

*paysage* (m.): landscape

*peintre* (m.): painter

*peindre*: to paint

*pinceau* (m.): paintbrush

*plan* (m.): plane

*portrait* (m.): portrait

*tableau* (m.): a painting

*tache* (f.): mark or smudge

*toile* (f.): canvas

## ***les mots-clés de l'analyse picturale*** (keywords for formal analysis)

*complémentaire*: complementary

*contrastée par*: contrasted by

*couleur* (m.): color

*équilibre* (m.): balance

*espace* (m.): space

*fond* (m.): background

*forme* (f.): shape

*ligne* (f.): line

*lumière* (f.): light

*masse* (f.): mass

*motif* (m.): pattern

*noir* (m.): dark (n.); to describe a color as dark:  
*foncé*, e.g. *vert foncé*

*ombre* (f.): shadow

*perspective* (f.): perspective

*premier plan* (m.): foreground



## Émile Zola, *The Masterpiece*

Émile Zola's *The Masterpiece* seems to have been the catalyst for the end of the writer's relationship with childhood friend Paul Cézanne. The novel's protagonist, Claude Lantier, is described as a revolutionary painter, whose work is misunderstood by a conservative public that prefers traditional subjects and techniques. Set in Paris in the 1850s and '60s, the book accurately captures the bohemian lifestyle of progressive artists in the city at that time. While Cézanne may have assumed that Zola based Lantier on him, the character appears to be a composite of several painters whom Zola knew, including Claude Monet, Édouard Manet, and Cézanne. Regardless, the novel provides an unflattering portrait of a painter who strives, yet fails, to realize his masterpiece. Lantier's artistic aims were clearly inspired by the goals of the Realist and Impressionist painters whose project Zola knew well from his friends in the group and his years writing reviews of their work. *The Masterpiece* suggests that their movement never realized its potential or perhaps never found a genius up to the task. In the final chapter, faced with his inability to live up to his promise, Lantier hangs himself in despair. The book closes with two of the painter's friends, Bongrand and the novelist Sandoz (who is based on Zola), attending Lantier's internment and reflecting on his tragic end. They place some of the blame on the unstable and unhealthy times in which they live and the misguided faith that people—and painters—have placed in science and progress:

9

Sandoz and Bongrand had looked at the scene without saying a word. Then, having passed the fire, the former resumed:

"No, [Lantier] did not prove to be the man of the formula he laid down. I mean that his genius was not clear enough to enable him to set that formula erect and impose it upon the world by a definite masterpiece. And now see how other fellows scatter their efforts around him, after him! They go no farther than roughing off, they give us mere hasty impressions, and not one of them seems to have strength enough to become the master who is awaited. Isn't it irritating, this new notion of light, this passion for truth carried as far as scientific analysis, this evolution begun with so much originality, and now loitering on the way, as it were, falling into the hands of tricksters, and never coming to a head, simply because the necessary man isn't born? But pooh! the man will be born; nothing is ever lost, light must be."

"Who knows? not always," said Bongrand. "Life miscarries, like everything else. I listen to you, you know, but I'm a despairer. I am dying of sadness, and I feel that everything else is dying. Ah! yes, there is something unhealthy in the atmosphere of the times—this end of a century is all demolition, a litter of broken monuments, and soil that has been turned over and over a hundred times, the whole exhaling a stench of death! Can anybody remain in good health amid all that? One's nerves become unhinged, the great neurosis is there, art grows unsettled, there is general bustling, perfect anarchy, all the madness of self-love at bay. Never have people quarrelled more and seen less clearly than since it is pretended that one knows everything."

Sandoz, who had grown pale, watched the large ruddy coils of smoke rolling in the wind.

"It was fated," he mused in an undertone. "Our excessive activity and pride of knowledge were bound to cast us back into doubt. This century, which has already thrown so much light over the world, was bound to finish amid the threat of a fresh flow of darkness—yes, our discomfort comes from that! Too much has been promised, too much has been hoped for; people have looked forward to the conquest and explanation of everything, and now they growl impatiently. What! don't things go quicker than that? What! hasn't science managed to bring us absolute certainty, perfect happiness, in a hundred years? Then what is the use of going on, since one will never know everything, and one's bread will always be as bitter? It is as if the century had become bankrupt, as if it had failed; pessimism twists people's bowels, mysticism fogs their brains; for we have vainly swept phantoms away with the light of analysis, the supernatural has resumed hostilities, the spirit of the legends rebels and wants to conquer us, while we are halting with fatigue and anguish. Ah! I certainly don't affirm anything; I myself am tortured. Only it seems to me that this last convulsion of the old religious terrors was to be foreseen. We are not the end, we are but a transition, a beginning of something else. It calms me and does me good to believe that we are marching towards reason, and the substantiality of science."

...

Then Sandoz, making up his mind to leave the grave, which was now half filled, resumed:

"We alone shall have known him. There is nothing left of him, not even a name!"

The complete French text of Zola's *L'Oeuvre* and Ernest Alfred Vizetelly's complete English translation, *The Masterpiece*, can be found at Project Gutenberg:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17517>

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15900>

**The following works were consulted in the preparation of this guide:**

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