Cézanne

A LIFE

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2012 by
Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 165 3
eISBN 978 1 84765 344 4

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Prologue: The Right Eyes

The most consequential exhibition of modern times opened in Paris on 1 October 1907: "Exposition rétrospective d'œuvres de Cézanne," the first posthumous retrospective, a year after his death. It was part of the Salon d'automne. Two rooms of the Grand Palais on the Champs-Élysées were given over to fifty-six Cézannes—more Cézannes than anyone had ever seen.

Everyone went. They went to see and be seen, to marvel, to mock, to argue, to pore over the paintwork, to make up their minds about what they had heard, to investigate what he had been doing, to try to understand how he did it, and perhaps to make use of it if they could. The exhibition ran for three weeks. Some went every day.

In 1907 the Salon d'automne was still short on tradition. Founded in 1903, its primary purpose was to show new work by living artists—in a word, modern art. Its very creation was a calculated act of protest, or insolence, cocking a snook at the existing salon: the Salon national des artistes français, the reactionary institution Cézanne called the Salon de Bouguereau, after the leader of the time-serving Société des artistes français, William Bouguereau. Bouguereau did voluptuary by numbers. He painted ample buttocks on angelic maidens in allegorical poses at astronomical prices. This line had given him everything a man could desire. For a long time he was the last word in the fashionable classical, the epitome of the academy, the embodiment of artistic prowess and social success, and he knew it. In keeping with his station, Bouguereau was a figure of monumental self-importance. Rumor had it that it cost him five francs, by his own reckoning, whenever he stopped painting to relieve himself.

By the turn of the century his authority had been comprehensively undermined, but no one told Bouguereau. Among painters, he and his manner were quietly mocked. Degas and his friends had a word for the chocolate-box effect of any piece of work that looked too slick or too fancy: it was "bouguereaued."

When the Douanier Rousseau was found gazing at a Bouguereau in the Musée du Luxembourg, the old painter was ragged mercilessly by the young Fernand Léger and his avant-garde comrades-in-arms. But the Douanier was not as naïve as his painting. "Look at the highlights on the fingernails," he told them. The fingernails had been bouguereaued. Many an artist appropriated those effects. Meanwhile the power of official patronage remained deeply entrenched. The Salon de Bouguereau never stooped to admit Paul Cézanne.

For living artists, the opportunity to exhibit within the stately portals of the Grand Palais was a welcome change of scene, whatever they might think of the potboilers of salon painting. For the hoi polloi, on the other hand, "new work" meant nothing more than newfangled, and "living artist" was a contradiction in terms. Modern art was not what they were accustomed to seeing, shamelessly displayed in public places. No living artist could enter the Louvre. Museums were for the dead, by definition. The art they contained was meant to conform to certain standards. The technique should be competent, the people recognizable, the plot legible, the skies blue and the trees green. Contemplation of the work should be pleasurable or profitable, or both. By these standards, modern art was an uncouth riddle. The conclusion was clear. If it had to be made, modern art was a matter for consenting adults meeting in private. Even the most consenting found it hard to understand, and on occasion hard to stomach. When André Derain saw the work that became *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in Picasso's studio, that same year, he observed mordantly that "painting of this sort was an impasse at the end of which lay only suicide; one fine day we would find Picasso hanging behind his big canvas."

Coming to terms with Cézanne was not easy. The work itself gave ample grounds for offense. On first acquaintance, it ranged from the inexplicable to the intolerable. What is more, it was unfinished, and apparently unfinishable. Cézanne skirted the bounds of the traditional proprieties. He was in many ways a profoundly civilized creature, but he found the forms and trappings of civilization irksome. The feeling was returned in kind. All his days he was characterized as a kind of barbarian. He lived on the margins, beyond the pale. When the writer Jules Renard went to the 1904 Salon d'automne, he discovered works by Carrière, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Renoir. "Carrière, good, but a little too tricksy. Lautrec, vice couched in majesty. Cézanne, barbarian. One would have to like a lot of rubbish to like this carpenter of color. Renoir, perhaps the strongest, and excellent!"[1]

Barbarian painting exhibited every kind of imperfection and distortion. Supporters and detractors alike agreed on a single proposition: Cézanne was

strange. He seemed not to see as others saw, but slant. "Painter by inclination," he said of himself: a Delphic remark, characteristically difficult to interpret. In his pictures, the perpendicular is scorned. Joachim Gasquet's wife told how her husband had often observed Cézanne out painting with his easel at a slope. Does this help to account for the inclination in his work? "It makes no odds," Cézanne would say.[2] The angle of the easel was a matter of indifference to him.

The errors were easy to spot; the effects were difficult to fathom. The story was told of a client who stood amazed before a Cézanne landscape amid the marble and onyx of the Galerie Paul Rosenberg. He had never seen anything like it. Paul Rosenberg put him right. "No, Monsieur," he interposed grandly, "it is not a landscape, it is a cathedral."[3] Stories of this sort were common currency. Apollinaire published a satire on the theme, featuring the president of the Salon d'automne, Frantz Jourdain, selecting works for the retrospective. In this instructive flight of fancy, Jourdain sallies forth from the Grand Palais to the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune to view some Cézannes. He is attended by members of the selection committee, one of whom carries his box of sweets, another his spittoon, a third his handkerchief.

> Upon arriving at Bernheim's, he charged at an admirable painting by Cézanne, a red painting, needless to say: the portrait of Mme. Cézanne. . . . [He] then turned on a landscape. He charged, running like a madman, but that painting of Cézanne's was not a canvas, it *was* a landscape. Frantz Jourdain dived into it and disappeared on the horizon, because of the fact that the earth is round. A young employee of Bernheim's who is a sports enthusiast exclaimed: "He's going to go around the world!"
>
> Luckily that did not happen. Those assembled saw Frantz Jourdain emerge, all red and out of breath. At first, he looked very small against the landscape, but he grew bigger as he approached.
>
> He arrived, a bit embarrassed, and wiped his brow. "What a devil, that Cézanne!" he murmured. "What a devil!"
>
> He stopped before two paintings, one of which was a still life with apples and the other a portrait of an old man.
>
> "Gentlemen," he said, "I defy anyone to say that this is not admirable."
>
> "I will say it, Monsieur," replied Rouault. "That hand is a stump."
>
> And Frantz Jourdain had to remain silent, for there in fact is the chink in his armor. For him, painting is reduced to this question: is a hand a stump or is it not? Whatever he may say or do, he cannot avoid that

> stump. But when a man has spent twenty years proclaiming his admiration for Cézanne, he cannot be expected to admit that he does not know why he admires him.[4]

Apollinaire had hit a nerve. Admirers of Cézanne's art have always been extravagant in their admiration, but they have always had difficulty explaining themselves. The painter-theorist Maurice Denis remarked on this phenomenon in an influential appraisal of the artist published just as the retrospective was due to open. "I have never heard an admirer of Cézanne give me a clear and precise reason for his admiration," he began; "and this is true even among those artists who feel most directly the appeal of Cézanne's art. I have heard the words—quality, flavor, importance, interest, classicism, beauty, style . . . Now for Delacroix or Monet, for example, one could put forward a reasoned opinion, briefly stated, easily intelligible. But how difficult it is to be precise on the subject of Cézanne!"[5] As if to prove the point, Roger Fry, who translated and disseminated that article in the august pages of *The Burlington Magazine,* for the edification of the English, concluded his own pioneering study of Cézanne a generation later with a sigh of resignation: "In the last resort we cannot in the least explain why the smallest product of his hand arouses the impression of being a revelation of the highest importance, or what exactly it is that gives it its grave authority."[6]

Back to work, as Cézanne might have said. Frantz Jourdain is continuing his inspection:

> Among the dozen Cézannes at Bernheim's, there was a fruit bowl, all lopsided, twisted, and askew. M. Frantz Jourdain had some reservations. Fruit bowls generally look better than that, they stand more upright. M. Bernheim took the trouble to defend the poor fruit bowl, mustering all the graciousness of a man who frequents the most noble salons of the Empire:
>
> "Cézanne was probably standing to the left of the fruit bowl. He was seeing it at an angle. Move a little to the left of the painting, M. Frantz Jourdain. . . . Like this. . . . Now close one eye. Is it not true that in this way the painting makes sense? . . . So you see, there was no error on Cézanne's part."
>
> On the way back to the basement of the Grand Palais, M. Frantz Jourdain was deep in thought; his wrinkled brows attested to the serious-

> ness of his preoccupation. Finally, having thought over the battles he had fought, he pronounced the following words with a sincerity that brought tears to the eyes of every member of the jury:
>
> "The dozen Cézannes at Bernheim's are extremely dangerous!" He thought a bit more, then added:
>
> "As for me, I stop at Vuillard."[7]

In the event, the works in the retrospective came not from Bernheim-Jeune but chiefly from two considerable private collectors, Maurice Gangnat and Auguste Pellerin, or straight from Cézanne's son. Making all due allowance for the fantastical, Apollinaire's account was a plausible fiction. Whether or not it had any foundation in fact, he made a point of returning to the fray while the salon was still in progress: "There is no need for us to speak about the art of Cézanne. Let it be known, however, that M. Frantz Jourdain, under the pretext of not wishing to tarnish the glory of that great man and of not displeasing the clientele of his backer, Jansen, deliberately under-represented him at the Salon d'automne."[8]

The members of the Société du salon d'automne were undeniably bold. Even so they had their limits. Article 21 of their statutes decreed that political or religious discussions were strictly forbidden. Their most significant innovation lay in the mounting of regular retrospectives, often of artists still warm. These retrospectives were relatively small-scale—one or two rooms—but they had a huge impact. In 1905, for example, besides the notorious Fauves, or Wild Beasts, with their orgy of raw color, there were retrospectives of Ingres (1780–1867), Manet (1832–83), and Seurat (1859–91), each of them electrifying. In 1906 it was Gauguin (1848–1903). In 1907 came Cézanne (1839–1906) and Berthe Morisot (1841–95). Interestingly enough, it was Morisot who had the bigger build-up and the bigger exhibition. Her work was light and airy; it was well executed; it had a certain delicacy, perhaps even a finesse. There were those who found it preferable. Camille Mauclair, for one, "could not imagine a more striking contrast with the awkward, the effortful Cézanne, where the subtle nuances are constantly betrayed. It's the difference between a laborer and a princess."[9]

Gratifyingly for M. Frantz Jourdain, the salon was packed. The spectators were various. Some came as if on safari, to gawp at the exotic plumage and take potshots at the easy targets. Others came to preen and confirm their prejudices. Apollinaire knew their game only too well.

Wear your best skirt, pretty one,
And put your bonnet on!
We're off to have a lark
With contemporary art
At the Autumn Salon.[10]

Cézanne had been shown at the Salon d'automne before, as Jules Renard had witnessed. In 1904 he was given an individual room, the Salle Cézanne. Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), and Redon and Renoir (both still living) were similarly honored. This was a modest retrospective of thirty-three paintings, for the most part selected by his dealer, Ambroise Vollard, whose animal cunning and astute hoarding were crucial to Cézanne's rise to world power status. The Salle Cézanne was a luxuriant affair, complete with potted palm, stove, oriental carpet, and velvet sofa. The paintings were spaciously hung. Unusually, they were topped with several panels of photographs of other works by Cézanne, not in the exhibition: a typical piece of showmanship by the artful Vollard—a trick repeated in the 1907 retrospective, where photographs by Druet showed the artist's youthful rendering of *The Four Seasons* on the walls of the Cézanne family home in Aix-en-Provence. The photographs contributed to the sense of commemoration. They were much remarked, as was the artist's sportive signature, "Ingres."[11]

The Salle Cézanne confirmed his somewhat paradoxical position. He was at once unknown and famous, as one commentator had observed. Among painters, he was an object of fascination. His peers were his earliest collectors. Monet owned fourteen Cézannes. Three of them hung in his bedroom. Pis-

sarro owned twenty-one. Gauguin used to take one of his favorite Cézannes to a nearby restaurant and hold forth on its amazing qualities. They all tried to penetrate his secrets. "How does he do it?" asked Renoir. "He has only to put two strokes of color on the canvas and it's already something."

The path he trod to painting was a tortuous one. As a professional artist, he was remarkably unsuccessful. He did not even qualify to take the examinations for the École des beaux-arts. The "Bozards" joined the Salon de Bouguereau in his periodic raillery against the establishment. "Institutions, pensions and honors are made only for cretins, humbugs and rascals." His first sojourn in Paris in 1861 made him miserable. He was thirty-five before he sold a single painting to anyone other than friends and supporters. He was continually at war with an indifferent world and a domineering father who declared him, aged forty-seven, *sans profession.*

Late in life, after his first one-man show, in 1895, at the age of fifty-six, things began to change. Awestruck young artists would make their way to Aix, as if on a pilgrimage, to seek him out and hear him speak—and if they were very lucky, see him paint. As accounts of these meetings began to leak out, so the word spread. The sayings of Cézanne circulated like the fragments of Heraclitus. In 1904 Émile Bernard published a laudatory article on him in the journal *L'Occident,* complete with a collection of "Cézanne's Opinions," apparently straight from the source. They were avidly consumed. Matisse asked his friend Marquet to buy and send him a copy: "In this issue there is Cézanne's doctrine by Bernard, who often reports Cézanne's own words. . . . It's very interesting."[12] Cézanne had decided opinions. "To paint from nature is not to copy an object; it is to represent its sensations." "Within the painter, there are two things: the eye and the mind; they must serve each other. The artist must work at developing them mutually: the eye for the vision of nature and the mind for the logic of organized sensations, which provide the means of expression." The following year, Charles Camoin published a further selection, taken from his own correspondence with the master.[13] Not to be outdone, Bernard's celebrated "Memories of Paul Cézanne" appeared in two parts in the *Mercure de France* in 1907.[14] Cleverly timed to coincide exactly with the retrospective at the Salon d'automne, these articles were immediately ransacked for their testimony from beyond the grave. There was more to come. Émile Zola's correspondence began to appear that same year. The "letters of his youth" included no fewer than nineteen to his best friend, Paul Cézanne.[15]

Interest in these morsels reflected a certain willful elusiveness on the part of the living, breathing "*primitif du plein air,*" as Camoin called him. In the

art world, and the social world, he remained an outsider, a phantasm. Much speculation and little information gave him a kind of fictional quality. To this unstable mix he added ingredients of his own. He had a temperament, as he often said, or rather a *temmpérammennte* (rolled around the tongue, in his broad Provençal accent).[16] For Cézanne, temperament was a test of character and moral worth, or moral fiber. According to this conception, temperament governed human potential—more exactly, human-being potential. In art, as in life, temperament was the fundamental requirement. "Only original capacity, that is, temperament can carry someone to the objective he should attain," he instructed Camoin.[17] Cézanne thought of himself as seeing nature through a painter's temperament. "With only a little temperament," he told Bernard, "one can be a lot of painter."[18]

At the Salon d'automne, the struggle continued. The novice Maurice Sterne had wandered in the Salle Cézanne in search of enlightenment, without success. In 1905 he returned to the fray. Repeated visits to a group of Cézannes left him baffled as ever. Late one afternoon came a breakthrough by example. "I found two elderly men intently studying the paintings. One, who looked like an ascetic Burmese monk with thick spectacles, was pointing out passages to his companion, murmuring '*magnifique, excellent.*' His eyes seemed very poor, and he was very close to the paintings. I wondered who he could be—probably some poor painter, to judge from his rather shabby old cape."[19] The poor painter was Degas.

Cézanne's death was announced midway through the 1906 salon. Black crêpe was attached to his name in the exhibition room, where ten paintings kept a silent vigil. More than one visitor never forgot the black crêpe.[20] This was the year that the American artist Max Weber had his epiphany. Long afterwards he remembered his first sight of the ten Cézannes, and how he returned again and again to gaze at them. "I said to myself, 'This is the way to paint. This is art *and* nature, reconstructed' . . . I came away bewildered. I even changed the use of my brushes. A certain thoughtful hesitance came into my work, and I constantly looked back upon the creative tenacity, this sculpturesque touch of pigment by this great man in finding form, and how he built up his color to construct the form. . . . When you see a Cézanne, it's like seeing the moon—there's only one moon, there's only one Cézanne."[21]

The following year Weber was back for the retrospective. He went with his friend the Douanier Rousseau. "We came there and found the galleries packed. . . . It was a great event. . . . Rousseau and I walked round, we looked,

and he became quite absorbed, picture after picture. Then he turned to me and he said, '*Oui, Weber, un grand maître,* this is a great artist, *mais, vous savez, je ne vois pas tout ce violet dans la nature,* I don't see so much violet in nature.' Then he looked up at a picture of bathers, probably the largest canvas that Cézanne painted. And, of course, much of the barren paper is visible. . . . So Rousseau found it, of course, an unfinished picture. So he looked up, and he said, 'Ah, Weber, if I had this picture at home—*chez moi*—I could finish it.' "[22]

The Douanier was not the only one to harbor reservations. The American critic James G. Huneker wrote to a friend: "The Autumn Salon must have blistered your eyeballs. Nevertheless Cézanne is a great painter—purely as a painter, one who seizes and expresses *actuality.* This same actuality is always terrifyingly ugly (imagine waking up at night and discovering one of his females on the pillow next to you!). There is the ugly in life as well as the pretty, my dear boy, and for artistic purposes it is often more significant and characteristic. But—ugly is Cézanne. He could paint bad breath."[23] Walter Sickert also recognized a great artist, but came to think he was incomplete and overrated. As two men went by in the Salon d'automne, he was tickled to catch some drollery about overexposure: "They will succeed in killing Cézanne," said one to the other, as if surfeited.[24]

Rilke may have eavesdropped on the same conversation. The ardent young poet experienced something close to a religious conversion. "I'm still going to the Cézanne room," he wrote to his wife on the tenth day. "I again spent two hours in front of particular pictures today; I sense this is somehow useful for me. . . . But it takes a long, long time. When I remember the puzzlement and insecurity of one's first confrontation with his work, along with his name, which was just as new. And then for a long time nothing, and suddenly one has the right eyes . . . ."[25]

The next morning he went with the painter Mathilde Vollmoeller. As usual, "Cézanne prevented us from getting to anything else. I notice more and more what an event this is." They settled down with the paintings. After a while, Rilke was startled by his companion's observation: "He sat there in front of it like a dog, just looking, without any nervousness, without any ulterior motive." Vollmoeller was a penetrating student of Cézanne's way of working. " 'Here,' she said, pointing to one spot, 'this he knew, and now he's saying it' (a part of an apple); 'just next to it there's an empty space, because that was something he didn't know yet. He only made what he knew, nothing else.' "[26] He used to say that he wanted to astonish Paris with an apple: another saying

full of meaning.[27] In Cézanne, the empty space is as astonishing as the apple. This was a new concept of painting—not the thing, but the effect it produces, as Mallarmé had it.

Rubbing shoulders with Rilke was the next generation: Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Derain, Dufy, Gris, Léger, Vlaminck, Modigliani, Duchamp—they were all there. Léger fastened on "a canvas representing two working class chaps playing cards": one of the famous *Card Players*. "It cries out with truth and completeness." For Léger, he was the Cézanne-Christ, who had eventually to be denied. His struggle to escape Cézanne's clutches became one of Léger's best stories. It was an epic battle. "Then, one fine day, I said, 'Zut!' " He was free, or so he thought.[28] For Braque, prolonged immersion in Cézanne was a revelation of affinity and a process of anamnesis, a memory of what he did not know he knew. He set about a systematic investigation of Cézanne and the secret something he sensed in the painting. But it was not only the work that seized him; it was the life. "Cézanne! He swept away the idea of mastery in painting. He was not a rebel, Cézanne, but one of the greatest revolutionaries; this will never be sufficiently emphasized. He gave us a taste for risk. His personality is always in play, with his weaknesses and his strengths. With him, we're poles apart from decorum. He melds his life in his work, the work in his life."[29]

Others engaged in front of the works themselves. Conversations could be heard among artists, writers, dealers, collectors, museum directors, critics, and philosophers, in Dutch, English, French, German, Russian, Japanese. Two influential voices from Japan were already there, as an advance guard: Arishima Ikuma, who published a long essay on Cézanne as early as 1910, and Yasui Sotaro, who was said to paint "in the Cézanne style."[30] Gertrude Stein sailed in, escorted by Alice B. Toklas, and found what she was looking for. "And then slowly through all this and looking at many pictures I came to Cézanne and there you were, at least there I was, not all at once but as soon as I got used to it. The landscape looked like a landscape that is to say what is yellow in the landscape looked yellow in the oil painting, and what was blue in the landscape looked blue in the oil painting and if it did not there was still the oil painting, the oil painting by Cézanne."[31]

Insular Englishmen came and went. Philip Wilson Steer, a founder member of the New English Art Club, admired *The Black Clock,* "an early work of exquisite color and no oddity of form," but little else. That painting reappeared some years later in an exhibition at Burlington House, "over against some ridiculously malformed apples, proclaimed by the mystagogues to