

Classic Cézanne: Art Gallery of NSW, 28 November 1998 to 28 February 1999

"One must see nature as no-one has seen it before"

Adrian Falk
20 January 1999

Anyone visiting Sydney before February 28 should take advantage of this unequalled opportunity to see 82 works by one of the very greatest artists. The exhibition is the product of eight years' planning, with pictures loaned from many public and private collections. It is intelligently curated and beautifully presented. To describe it as a "once in a lifetime" experience would not be an overstatement.

As an artist Paul Cézanne had the extreme and unusual good fortune of independent means, in the form of an allowance from his wealthy father, which enabled him to devote his entire life to single-minded, painstaking and constant work before the easel.

"The Village of Gardannes", painted in 1885-86, is catalog No. 29 in the exhibition. Let us try to say a few words about it.

The picture is incomplete: the top right corner, most of the lower right, and some of the center, are untouched with pigment, yet even so they do not detract from the composition, but rather allow us a glimpse of the artist at work, as we imagine what might have gone into these spaces. Depth (that is, distance) is transformed by Cézanne's technique into height, the vertical. The eye flies across the trees and roofs to the focus, the tall church building at the rear, which itself dwarfs the structures still further behind. The foliage in the foreground is rendered in curling brush strokes which imitate the movement of leaves. The scene is alive with this movement, and the atmosphere which it creates. The colours (greens, yellows and ochres) collide and interpenetrate, conditioning each other in a complex harmony. The roofs on the left form a semi-abstract composition in themselves. We are faced with the complex dynamics of human habitation in its natural frame, rendered by a hand and an eye which have mastered all aspects of this challenge.

Cézanne flourished from around 1870 until his death in 1906; that is, from the time of the Paris Commune until the year after the first Russian Revolution. These were tumultuous times socially and politically: the development of capitalism into its imperialist stage and the emergence of the modern working class posed before mankind very definite problems which today remain unresolved.

But these tremendous historical events appear, at first glance, to have passed Cézanne by. You will look in vain in his pictures for images of overt class struggle, industrial expansion. Instead, he painted landscapes without human figures, in a protean and timeless fashion. He made still lifes which challenge those of the old Dutch masters in the dynamic movement of the painterly viewpoint. He did portraits, museum sketches, scenes of nude bathers, and created an entirely new genre known as the *sous-bois*, that is, forest or undergrowth scenes, of extraordinary evocation.

Great historical movements, and the human experiences which reflect

and inform them, find expression in countless kinds of ways. It is the task of scientific aesthetics to uncover those elements of objective truth which the artists' images contain. And the demand that artworks must limit themselves to the express depiction of factory conditions, or barricades, or that they ought to revolve about the axis of any ideological tendency, is completely foreign to such a method. To constrain the conception of realism within any socio-historic analysis is to lose sight of the noble human response to social life, and to evade the living education of our sensibilities, which the great realists have given us. Consider Aeschylus, Cervantes, Shakespeare; Phidias, Michelangelo, Rodin; Beethoven, Bartok, Gershwin; Raphael, Cézanne, Kandinsky. These are provocatively chosen names which span the sweep of artistic realism, in order to argue that this is not a "school", but is rather the central axis in the relation of art to social life.

The great American art historian Meyer Schapiro concluded his survey of Cézanne's work with the following words: "Cézanne's accomplishment has a unique importance for our thinking about art. His work is a living proof that a painter can achieve a profound expression by giving form to his perceptions of the world around him without recourse to a guiding religion or myth, or any explicit social aims. If there is any ideology in his work, it is hidden within unconscious attitudes and is never directly asserted... In Cézanne's painting, the purely human and personal... are a sufficient matter for the noblest qualities of art. We see through his work that the secular culture of the 19th century, without cathedrals and without the grace of the old anonymous craftsmanship, was no less capable of providing a ground for great art than the authoritative cultures of the past. And this was possible, in spite of the artist's solitude, because the conception of a personal art rested upon a more general ideal of individual liberty in the social body and drew from the latter its ultimate confidence that an art of personal expression has a universal sense." [1]

Cézanne worked with the Impressionists in the Ile de France in the early 1870s, but moved to Provence in 1874, to escape from their influence and forge a new method of painting founded on a new sense of integrity in the face of nature. The curatorial notes which accompany the exhibition discuss Cézanne's resolution "to discipline and organise his brushstrokes" in place of the Impressionists' "diffuse swarms", to modify the Impressionists' obsession with light in favour of his "more dynamic relationship of colours" and his "carefully developed structure". So far did he succeed in this, that he could say in 1904 that "light does not exist for the painter". This striking sentence expresses his lifelong preoccupation with composition, with the syntax of colour, and with the panorama as a "god-given" entity existing independently of human sensation, but demanding a constructive visual response.

If, after absorbing these pictures of Cézanne's, one returns to the Impressionists, one realises that for them light is actually an obstacle to vision in the way in which Cézanne came to understand it. The Impressionists tried to render, not the object but the medium through which it reaches us, and in this way removed the object itself behind a veil of light. Cézanne's preoccupation was not with a shimmering surface, but with the deep structure of the spectacle. This he showed forth with a clear-eyed, transparent and truthful effort.

Like his contemporary artists Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), Cézanne was a great realist. Let us confront his paintings with some of his own words. In a conversation with his friend Emile Bernard he said, "One must make an optic, one must see nature as no one has seen it before you... I consider (art) as a personal apperception. I situate this apperception in sensation, and I ask that the intelligence organise it into a work".[2]

To Joachin Gasquet, the author of an early major study of his work, he said--and this describes his pictures in a way which no critic will ever be able to--"Here is my motif. (He put his hands together, drew them apart, the ten fingers open; very slowly brought them together again, clasped them, squeezed them tighter and tighter, as though meshing them into one.) That's what you have to try to do. If one is higher or lower than the other, all goes to pieces. Everything has so to mesh with everything else that there is no way for the feeling, for the light, for the truth to escape... Everything we see falls apart, vanishes, doesn't it? Nature is always the same, but nothing in her, nothing that appears to us, lasts. Our art must render the thrill of nature's permanence along with her elements, the appearance of all her changes... So I bring together her wandering hands".[3]

Catalog No. 14, "Still Life with Basket" (1888-90) is in the second room of the exhibition. The scene is composed in a foreshortened perspective. The entire room is depicted. In the background are a chair in the corner, a dresser on the left, with what must be some paintings leaning against the wall behind. In the foreground is a table with a cloth, pears, jugs, a large basket of fruit, and an exquisite blue and pink vase. The dresser is splayed to the left, as are the paintings against the wall. On the right the leg of a chair intrudes, splayed to the right. So the subject, the still life on the table, is cradled between these angled elements. It is obvious that if the intruding chair leg were to be removed, the entire scene would collapse. Not just the sensuous, virtually tangible fruits, nor just the atmosphere of the room taken as a whole, form the subject of this painting. It is the coherence of the visual field, its inherent logic, and one is tempted to say the existential standpoint of the viewer, which underlie the experience of absorbing this remarkable picture.

We find the artist grappling with sight, with vision, as one of the primary forms in which nature is given to us. The task is not to copy or mirror this given, but creatively to bring the seen spectacle into a fertile collision with the artist's fund of memory, imagination and technique. It is to discard the everyday, the inessential and the superfluous, and to show an inner harmony and structure of the scene, of which the only human element is frequently simply the viewer alone.

Cézanne once said that he aimed at painting "Poussin from nature". Gombrich explains this as follows: "the old classical masters such as Poussin had achieved a wonderful balance and perfection in their work... We feel that everything is in its place, and nothing is casual or vague... Cézanne aimed at an art which had something of this grandeur and serenity. But he did not think that it could be achieved any longer by the methods of Poussin. The old masters, after all, had accomplished that balance and solidity at a price. They did not feel bound to respect nature as they saw it. Their pictures are rather arrangements of forms they had learned from the study of classical antiquity. Even the impression of space and solidity they achieved through the application of firm traditional rules rather than through looking at each object anew. Cézanne agreed with his

friends among the Impressionists that these methods of academic art were contrary to nature. He admired the new discoveries in the field of colour and modelling. He, too, wanted to surrender to his impressions, to paint the forms and colours he saw, not those he knew about or had learned about. But he felt uneasy about the direction painting had taken. The Impressionists were true masters in painting 'nature'. But was that really enough? Where was that striving for a harmonious design, the achievement of solid simplicity and perfect balance which had marked the greatest paintings of the past? The task was to paint 'from nature', to make use of the discoveries of the Impressionist masters, and yet to recapture the sense of order and necessity that distinguished the art of Poussin." [4]

Although he was inspired by, and learned from, the old masters in the Louvre and the Impressionists, Cézanne set himself the original task of finding a new pictorial method adequate to a new way--such as no one had done before--of responding to nature. The integrity with which he pursued this task shines out from his canvases. For him painting was a kind of research. The unfinished parts of many pictures speak in their own way of Cézanne's task, which was not just to finish some finite number of paintings, but rather to re-discover how to paint, how to organise and render the image in accordance with his determination to clarify the objective.

In the sixth and last room we come upon the *sous-bois*. Catalog No. 73, titled simply "Sous-bois" (1893-94) is a tangle of trunks and branches. The brushstrokes vary from the straight and parallel through the dabbled, to those allowed to run and melt. The colour volumes are outlined in darker, more distinct strokes, which are then further outlined and modelled in expanding volumes. The curatorial notes observe that his *sous-bois* are Cézanne's "most original contribution to landscape painting (anticipating) the revolutionary developments of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Mondrian and Pollock". One could expand on this at some length; suffice it to make the observation that Jackson Pollock's "Blue Poles" is patently an evolved product of this genre.

Nature, as Cézanne shows us how to see it, is full of life and joy. It has an organic harmony of structure which he shows us how to find within itself, rather than to impose upon it out of the narrowly conditioned and partial properties of our individual sensations. In this way his pictures achieve a universal validity and are among the finest conquests of social man.

[1] Schapiro, M., *Paul Cézanne*, page 30

[2] Quoted in Chipp, H., *Theories of Modern Art*, page 12

[3] Quoted in Raphael, M., *The Demands of Art*, page 1

[4] Gombrich, E., *The Story of Art*, page 408



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact