

Cézanne in Provence



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON | JANUARY 29 - MAY 7, 2006

*This exhibition is made possible by a generous grant
from the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund.*

I was born here; I will die here.

CÉZANNE, AS RECORDED BY JULES BORÉLY, 1902

PROVENCE NURTURED the life and art of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) like no other place. In the distinctive countryside around his native Aix-en-Provence he found the motifs, rich in natural beauty but also in emotive associations, that have since become synonymous with his art. Cézanne created some of his most compelling images in the solitude of Provence. They include not only landscapes painted outdoors, *sur le motif* (before the motif), but also portraits, still lifes, and imaginary scenes of bathers that he executed in the studios he occupied in and around Aix.

The Master of Aix, as Cézanne came to be known during his lifetime, drew on his birthplace for the inspiration that set him on his path as an artist. Indeed, Provence was at the center of an emotionally charged body of art influenced not only by romanticism and realism, but also by the enduring legacy of the classical past. By the time of his death in 1906, Cézanne was widely regarded as a pivotal figure in the development of modern art, having paved the way for the crucial shift in artistic vision that began in the late nineteenth century and culminated in the breakthroughs of artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso in the twentieth. Along the way he participated in the impressionist movement, yet he never entirely aligned his own pictorial concerns with its optical aesthetic. Instead, he developed a more rigorous, structured

composition and more intense, saturated color, which were to influence succeeding generations of painters. Throughout the sometimes arduous progression of Cézanne's career, Provence—more specifically the countryside around his birthplace—remained a constant inspiration in his struggle to master the means of his artistic expression. Other artists had come to paint the Provençal landscape before him, but Cézanne made this corner of Provence uniquely his own, adopting motifs and views that convey a powerful sense of place.

EARLY YEARS IN AIX AND PARIS

Cézanne was born and raised in Aix, a sleepy provincial town that once had been the capital of Provence and whose history dated back to Roman times. He was the eldest of three children of Elisabeth Aubert, a doting mother, and Louis-Auguste Cézanne, an authoritarian father with whom he had a turbulent relationship. Cézanne studied at the local Collège Bourbon, where he distinguished himself in many areas, especially the classics. There he struck up a decades-long friendship with fellow student and future novelist Émile Zola. The two, along with a third companion, Baptistin Baille, regularly explored the nearby countryside, swimming in rivers, clambering along rocky canyons, and resting under the shade of tall pines. This youthful experience forged

an affective bond with the Provençal landscape that resonated in Cézanne's work throughout his career.

Upon the completion of his schooling, Cézanne entered law school at the behest of his father, a businessman-turned-banker who had amassed enough of a fortune to bring the family into the world of genteel living and who desired that his son choose a respectable profession. But Cézanne soon abandoned his law studies to devote himself to art. He went to Paris in 1861 to meet up with Zola, who had urged him to trade the stifling atmosphere of Aix for the museums, art academies, and companionship of progressive artists of the capital. Cézanne learned how to paint in Paris; however, he never adopted the city as his own. From the beginning he returned repeatedly to Provence, finding solace and inspiration in its familiar countryside. Eventually, in the 1880s, he resettled there for good, making only short trips outside the region until his death in 1906.

JAS DE BOUFFAN

One of the most significant Provençal sites for Cézanne from the earliest days of his career was the Jas de Bouffan, the family estate located on the outskirts of Aix. Louis-Auguste had acquired it in 1859, but the family used it mostly as a summer residence until moving in permanently in 1870. The grounds featured a small artificial pond with fountains of lions and a dolphin; a garden, conservatory, and farm with vineyards and orchards; and a chestnut-tree-lined avenue that led to the eighteenth-century manor house. Although Louis-Auguste remained, at best, ambivalent about his son's artistic aspirations, he nevertheless allowed the

twenty-one-year old to cover the high walls of the grand salon with murals that were among his first forays in painting, and to use the space as an occasional studio. Cézanne's energetic early style, seen in the portraits of family members and friends he painted at the Jas, including *The Artist's Father, Reading "L'Événement,"* 1866 (FIG. 1), featured a dark palette of heavily impastoed paint applied roughly with a palette knife. This rugged manner reflected Cézanne's initial debt to Gustave Courbet, whose work he encountered in Paris, as well as a typically Provençal appreciation for vigorous paint handling.

Cézanne frequently painted on the estate grounds. The manor itself was the subject of numerous works, including *The House of the Jas de Bouffan*, c. 1874 (FIG. 2), where the ocher-colored, three-



FIG. 1



FIG. 2

storied structure is seen behind a lush framework of trees. By this date, the artist had moved away from his early technique and toward more modulated brushwork that examined the relationship between color and light. The sunlit scene of *The House of the Jas de Bouffan* reveals the extent to which he absorbed the lessons of impressionism, especially those of Camille Pissarro, who had introduced him to the importance of painting *en plein air* (out-of-doors) for capturing the visual sensations of nature.

Cézanne painted there intermittently over the course of four decades, moving beyond the manor and its garden to find views at the outer edges of the estate. Even after he abandoned the Jas de Bouffan as a motif in the late 1880s, he continued to work at the house, painting some of his most celebrated still lifes as well as the renowned series of card players that took as its models laborers at the estate, including *Cardplayers*, 1890–1899 (FIG. 3). He was deeply upset when the family sold the property in 1899.

L'ESTAQUE

Located on the Mediterranean sea about twenty miles from Aix, the small fish-



FIG. 3

ing village of L'Estaque remained largely untouched by industrialization and tourism until the arrival of the railroad in the mid-nineteenth century. Because of its picturesque location and ideal climate, it soon became a popular seaside resort, even though factories were beginning to encroach upon its charm. Cézanne went there in 1870 after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, together with his companion Hortense Fiquet, whom he had met in Paris the year before. Hoping to avoid conscription, he remained sequestered in the town until the conflict ended in early 1871, returning afterward on a number of occasions.

L'Estaque played a decisive role in the development of Cézanne's artistic vision, for it was there, far removed from the dominant artistic currents in Paris, that his style began to mature into a truly personal vision. Having arrived after spending time in the colder, grayer north, the artist responded strongly to the brilliant light and vivid color of the Mediterranean coast, writing to Pissarro in 1876: "The sun here is so terrific that objects appear silhouetted not only in white or black, but in blue, red, brown, violet. I may be wrong, but it seems to me to be the

opposite of modeling.” Unlike the impressionists, however, who favored ephemeral atmospheric effects, Cézanne was beginning to analyze the way sensations of color and light defined form in the mind’s eye, and to explore the translation of that sensory perception onto the canvas. Beginning around 1880, he had moved beyond the flickering brushwork characteristic of impressionism to his more mature style, which is notable for its structured application of paint in the form of dense, parallel brushstrokes. The patches of color rendered in this way unite his compositions through an overall surface pattern, a tapestrylike effect readily seen in works such as *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L’Estaque*, c. 1885 (FIG. 4).

As always in Cézanne’s landscapes, the absence of figures in *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L’Estaque* takes the

scene out of the specificity of the present and places it into a more timeless realm: here he looks across the blue expanse of the bay from above the busy fishing village, with no suggestion of its daily activity; only the smokestack of a tile factory denotes the modern world. In other works, such as *L’Estaque: Pines, Rocks, and Sea*, 1883–1885 (COVER), Cézanne shifted the view away entirely from the town to the scenic topography of the surrounding hills, hiding factory chimneys behind a wall of tall pine trees.

GARDANNE AND BELLEVUE

In the decade after his final, 1885 sojourn in L’Estaque, Cézanne continued depicting the Provençal landscape in several locations outside of Aix. The decade was a turbulent one personally for Cézanne: his father died, his mother’s health began

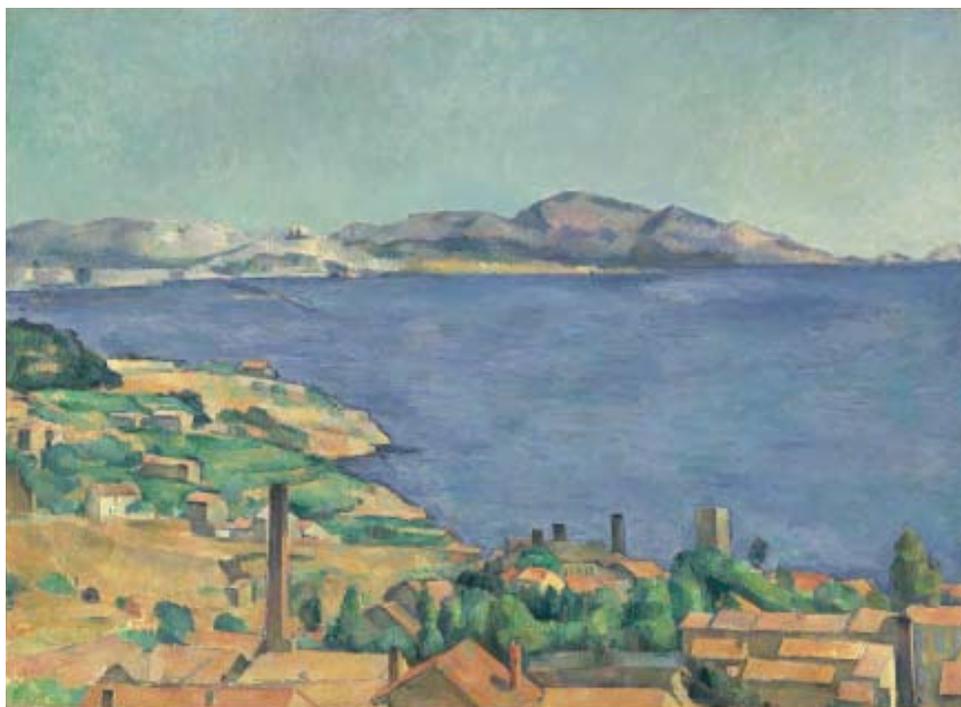


FIG. 4



FIG. 5

to fail, and he broke off relations with his oldest friend, Zola. Despite the emotional upheaval, the paintings from this period are suggestive of the artist's continuing aspiration, in his own words, "to make of impressionism something solid and enduring, like the art in museums."

Near his sister Rose Conil's home, to the south of Aix, he was attracted to the estate and pigeon house of Bellevue and the views around the River Arc valley toward the Montagne Sainte-Victoire (see FIG. 8). Farther to the east lies Gardanne, a small village situated on a high hill, where Cézanne lived for a short time with Hortense (whom he finally married in 1886) and their young son Paul.

The town's cascade of cubic houses lent itself well to Cézanne's preoccupation with architectonic forms, which had first emerged in the paintings of L'Estaque. The composition of *Gardanne*, c. 1886 (FIG. 5), stresses the geometric rhythm of homes staggered along the hill, their angular structures integrated into the soft organic forms of the landscape. The fluidly painted composition is unfinished, yet the passages of bare canvas contribute to the overall sense of light that emanates from it. As he did in the views of L'Estaque, Cézanne ignored the industrial presence of Gardanne—in this case factories and coal pits that dotted the surrounding landscape—creating instead a timeless image of a picturesque Provençal town dominated by its bell tower.

BIBÉMUS AND THE CHÂTEAU NOIR

Along the roads traveling east out of Aix lies a landscape that the artist knew intimately. As a youth, he had headed out in this direction with Zola and Baille to explore the countryside's myriad delights, which included a Roman aqueduct, a dam built by Zola's father, and Bibémus, a quarry that had been mined since Roman times for its rich supply of red sandstone. Because of these memories of childhood, the area had special resonance for Cézanne.

After his first one-man show in Paris in 1895, Cézanne began to face increased, unwanted attention from critics and the

There are treasures to be taken away from this country, which has not yet found an interpreter worthy of the riches it offers.

MAY 11, 1886

But you know all pictures painted inside, in the studio, will never be as good as those done outside.... I see superb things, and I must resolve to paint only outdoors.

OCTOBER 1866

public. Complaining about those who would get their “hooks” into him, he withdrew to the solitude of sites such as Bibémus, which had been abandoned by the time he sought it out. For several years he rented a nearby cabin so that he could work daily in the depths of its quiet, empty caverns, creating powerful images such as *Bibémus Quarry*, c. 1895 (FIG. 6). Here the wall of geometrically cut rock rises up high, nearly blocking out the sky entirely. Pushed close to the picture plane,

it creates a claustrophobic and oppressive space that contrasts strikingly with the open views of works such as *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L’Estaque* (see FIG. 4).

Near the quarry on a hillside was an old country house known as the Château Noir (whose name—the “black manor”—may relate to a previous exterior color), where Cézanne rented a room to keep his materials. In its decrepit isolation, the house inspired some of the artist’s most foreboding images. The eerie structure seen



FIG. 6

in *Château Noir*, 1900–1904 (FIG. 7), seemingly in ruins, is half-hidden behind pines that, like the rocks of Bibémus, ominously obstruct the sky. Cézanne's intense palette—dark greens, blues, and ochers—makes the scene all the more mysterious. The somber, enclosed spaces of the Bibémus and the Château Noir paintings, which count among his most emotionally intense pictures, are indicative of a decided melancholy that pervades the artist's work in his last decade, when, suffering from diabetes, he began to face the reality of his own mortality.

MONTAGNE SAINTE-VICTOIRE

Dominating the countryside surrounding Aix, the Montagne Sainte-Victoire loomed large in the identity of the area. Locals venerated it for its legendary ties to antiquity—its very name had come to be associated with a celebrated victory by the ancient Romans against invading Teutonic armies—while the paleontological excavations on its slopes by Cézanne's friend

Antoine-Fortuné Marion, who discovered evidence of its earliest inhabitants, evoked prehistoric times. Artists had long taken note of Sainte-Victoire's distinctive silhouette, but none had approached it with the single-mindedness of Cézanne. He conducted a long, intense engagement with the mountain, visible from virtually every location he painted in the Aixois countryside, that resulted in at least twenty-five oils and watercolors, starting from the 1880s until his death.

In the *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, c. 1887 (FIG. 8), an arch of tree branches in the foreground frames a panoramic view that unfolds across a wide valley. At the foot of the mountain, a modern railway viaduct reads like a Roman aqueduct, suggesting the classical landscapes of seventeenth-century painters such as Nicolas Poussin, whom Cézanne greatly admired. With its harmonious palette of greens and blues and an all-encompassing vista, the painting captures the tranquil beauty of Cézanne's corner of Provence in



FIG. 7



FIG. 8



FIG. 9

a manner reminiscent of the paintings of the bay of L'Estaque executed two years earlier. It was his personal, living Arcadia.

It is in his late, extraordinary paintings of Sainte-Victoire that Cézanne's obsession with the mountain reached its culmination. Between 1902 and 1906, he painted nine major oils and numerous watercolors from virtually the same spot, a hillside above his studio at Les Lauves

outside of Aix. Quite distinct from the earlier classical views of Sainte-Victoire, these intense images draw their power from animated brushwork and vivid coloring, often with passages left unpainted. In *Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves*, 1902–1904 (FIG. 9), motifs such as the mountain, trees, and houses are constructed out of patches of color that create a faceted pattern on the verge



FIG. 10

of dissolving into pure abstraction. The patches make the canvas seem alive with movement and lay bare the painstaking process by which Cézanne translated his sensory experience of nature—its color, light, and spatial dimensions—onto the two-dimensional picture plane. As he noted late in life, “To read nature is to see it...by means of color patches, following upon each other according to a law of harmony....To paint is to record the sensations of color.”

ATELIER DES LAUVES

After his family sold the Jas de Bouffan in 1899, Cézanne moved back into the city. However, the studio in his apartment could not accommodate the most ambitious project of his final years: three monumental scenes of bathers in a landscape. He acquired a plot of land north of

the city on a hillside known as Les Lauves, within walking distance of his apartment. There he set about building a more serviceable space. The Atelier des Lauves, a two-story structure that still exists, gave Cézanne the privacy he craved while placing him closer to favorite motifs such as the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Cézanne often painted directly in the open air (FIG. 10). He even worked on his *Large Bathers* outside: he had a special doorway built for the oversize canvases, more than six feet wide, so that they could be moved in and out of the garden. He had treated the theme of bathers for many years, not only in oil paintings but also in many watercolor studies. The subject had personal associations for Cézanne, for it conjured up his idyllic youth spent swimming in the River Arc with Zola, Baille, and others.

The theme of nude figures in a landscape enjoyed a long tradition in the history of European painting. Its arcadian imagery can be traced back to ancient literature, especially the writings of Virgil, which Cézanne knew well from his school days. By addressing the subject in monumental paintings, Cézanne staked his claim as a successor to the old masters. At the same time, all three versions of the *Large Bathers* are radically modern paintings. As evidenced by the *Large Bathers* from London, 1894–1905 (FIG. 11), Cézanne daringly dispensed with conventional ideas of draftsmanship and perspec-

Were it not that I am deeply in love with the landscape of my country, I should not be here.

APRIL 30, 1896



FIG. 11

tive, leaving passages that are seemingly unresolved despite the thick layering of paint. The *Large Bathers* is a shocking picture, not least because of the artist's willful disregard for human anatomy and classical notions of beauty. The rawness of its aesthetic alarmed many contemporary viewers. Yet it is also a supremely serene image, constructed with lushly applied, radiant colors and filled with light. As

a group, the three *Large Bathers* act as Cézanne's last great artistic testament.

In 1906, writing to his son, Cézanne declared, "I have sworn to myself to die painting." Within a month, he fell sick after being caught in the rain for several hours while painting outdoors. He died in Aix a few days later at the age of sixty-seven, on the eve of a revolution in art that his work had firmly set in motion.

FIG. 1. *The Artist's Father, Reading "L'Événement,"* 1866, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

FIG. 2. *The House of the Jas de Bouffan,* c. 1874, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Courtesy of Wildenstein & Co., New York

FIG. 3. *Cardplayers,* 1890–1899, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Bequest of the Comte Isaac de Camondo, 1911

FIG. 4. *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L'Estaque,* c. 1885, Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.67)

FIG. 5. *Gardanne,* c. 1886, oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum, Ella C. Woodward Memorial Fund and the Alfred T. White Memorial Fund 23.105

FIG. 6. *Bibémus Quarry,* c. 1895, oil on canvas, Museum Folkwang, Essen

FIG. 7. *Château Noir,* 1900–1904, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer

FIG. 8. *Montagne Sainte-Victoire,* c. 1887, oil on canvas, The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

FIG. 9. *Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves,* 1902–1904, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art; The George W. Elkins Collection

FIG. 10. *Cézanne painting at Les Lauves,* January 1906, photograph by Ker-Xavier Rousset, National Gallery of Art, Gallery Archives, Rewald Papers

FIG. 11. *Large Bathers,* 1894–1905, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London

COVER: *L'Estaque: Rocks, Pines, and Sea,* 1883–1885, oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe

Programs

FILM PROGRAMS

A film series, opening on February 4, 2006, includes a variety of works and themes relating to Provence from the early decades of the twentieth century through the present. La Cinémathèque de Marseille, La Cinémathèque de Toulouse, and La Cinémathèque française have loaned works from their respective collections, including films by directors Jean Epstein, Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, Marcel Pagnol, and René Allio. Short, early twentieth-century documentary views of the port city of Marseille and other locations are part of the program. See the Calendar of Events and winter Film Calendar for further details, or go to www.nga.gov.

CONCERT

West Building,
West Garden Court
Sunday, April 9, 2006

A concert presented in honor of *Cézanne in Provence* begins at 6:30 p.m. The Eusia String Quartet and pianist James Dick will perform a string quartet by Claude Debussy and a piano quintet by Gabriel Fauré. Concerts at the National Gallery are open to the public, free of charge. First-come, first-seated admission begins at 6:00 p.m.

INTRODUCTORY SLIDE OVERVIEWS

West Building Lecture Hall

A thirty-minute slide orientation will be offered on a regular basis. Please consult the Calendar of Events for schedules and call 202.842.6247 if additional information is needed.

LECTURES

East Building Auditorium

February 5, 2:00 p.m.

*Cézanne: Between Capital
and Provence*

Nina Kallmyer, professor of art
history, University of Delaware

February 12, 2:00 p.m.

The Lizard in the Landscape

John Elderfield, Marie-Josée
and Henry Kravis Chief Curator
of Painting and Sculpture,
The Museum of Modern Art

March 26, 2:00 p.m.

Cézanne: Impressionist?

John House, Walter H.
Annenberg Professor,
Courtauld Institute of Art

May 6, 11:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.

Cézanne's Provence

Illustrated lectures by noted
scholars address Cézanne's
Provence

AUDIO GUIDE

An audio tour is available at the entrance to the exhibition for \$5. Narrated by National Gallery director Earl A. Powell III, this tour includes commentary by curator Philip Conisbee, senior curator of European paintings, National Gallery of Art, and Cézanne scholars Mary Tompkins Lewis, visiting associate professor of fine arts at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, and Joseph J. Rishel, curator of European painting before 1900, Philadelphia Museum of Art. To reserve audio tours for groups, call 202.842.6592.

ON THE WEB

The Gallery's Web site features selected highlights from the exhibition and links to exhibition-related activities at www.nga.gov/exhibitions/cezanneinfo.htm

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 312-page catalogue, *Cézanne in Provence*, by exhibition curators Philip Conisbee and Denis Coutagne, with essays by Bruno Ely, Benedict Leca, Véronique Serrano, and Paul Smith. Produced by the National Gallery of Art and published in association with Yale University Press. Softcover \$45; hardcover \$60.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday–Saturday,
10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.,
Sunday 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.
Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov
For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the art information desk, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Musée Granet and the Communauté du Pays d'Aix, Aix-en-Provence, and the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris.

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