

# All about Cézanne—A Brief Introduction on Cézanne’s Painting Style and Representative Works

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## Abstract

This article will lead us to appreciate Cézanne’s representative works and study deeper in this impressionist master of his painting style. In the field of modern art, almost every school that came into being after Cézanne is influenced by him. This is not only because he brought an end to classical art, which lasted for hundreds of years, but more importantly, he put forward a solution to the problem of how to process shaping. Undeniably, his art is a result of the development of European art traditions, but his achievements and influence have gone beyond regions and nationalities, society and art, and even time and space, becoming an indispensable part of human civilization. He is a pioneer of modern art and a discoverer of the new world for the art of painting.

## Keywords

Cézanne, Still Life, Observe Nature, Modern Art

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## 1. Introduction

According to Cézanne, art is “theory that is developed and applied due to integration with nature. Artists should process images of the nature using cylinder, sphere, and cone. Each object should be put into the correct perspective, so each side of the object faces a center directly” (Zeng, 1981). His predecessors often relied on strict traditional rules for the successful presentation of solid space and objects, rather than repeated observation of each object. Cézanne is different, he buried himself in experiments, used color to shape solid objects, and eventually realized the eternity of nature. His still lifes are of succinct and unique color. His painting style is strong and powerful. Although his still lifes look clumsy and

slightly heavy, resembling knock-together of pigments, they display solidity.

### **A Brief Introduction to Paul Cézanne**

Paul Cézanne, 1839-1906, is a famous painter of the France and “the father of new art”. As a pioneer of modern art, he is also addressed “the father of modern art” or “the father of modern painting” by modern painters of the west. “Cubist” artists are enlightened by Cézanne (because he pursued and expressed the volume of objects), and launched new ideas of creation. Cézanne attached importance to the genuineness of color and vision and observed unique colors of the nature objectively. This makes him greatly different from previous painters, who observed the colors of the nature “rationally or subjectively”.

Cézanne’s favorite theme is all sorts of still life. His still lifes are often expressed by “cylindrical, spherical or pointed columnar” shapes. He also painted figures, but the figures in his works are regarded as still lifes. The body features of figures are often transformed into general, mechanical, monumental images—images with geometrical concepts (Wu & Wang, 1997).

## **2. An Analysis of Typical Examples of Cezanne’s Still Lifes**

### **2.1. Still Life with Onions and Bottle 1895-1900**

In the beginning, Cézanne’s paintings were regarded as “graffiti” by French journalists. This style is derived from the fact that Cézanne never abided by any traditional painting methods. He started from graffiti, as if he had never painted before. The traditional rules, like scenography, were beyond Cézanne’s attention.

**Figure 1** *Still Life with Onions and Bottle* is one of Cézanne’s masterpieces. In it, a pile of stuff seems to be piled together by him with great interest and haste. One side of it is dotted with onion leaves; the other side is occupied by a knife and bottle. He slightly deformed the two sides of the bottle. The dish at the corner of the desk looks askew. The foot of the wine glass is not presented. This still life is of Cézanne’s mature painting features, showing a feeling of tranquility and perfect balance. There is no melody or no sharp contrast. The colors are harmonious in a reserved and subtle manner. In a word, it is of the impeccable language of art. The different parts of the painting are rearranged and complementary to each other, creating a concise and rigorous structure with clear logic and inner vitality.

### **2.2. Still Life with Basket of Apples 1895-1900**

All Cézanne’s works show solid geometrical features and ignore the texture of objects and the accuracy of shaping. They’re manifestations of his artistic ideas. He emphasized heavy and stable feeling of volume as well as the overall relationship between different objects.

Sometimes Cézanne will give up something to seek harmony among different relations: Take **Figure 2** *Still Life with Basket of Apples* for example. In this still lifes, there’s a sharp contrast between the white tablecloth and the bright-colored



**Figure 1.** Still life with onions and bottle.



**Figure 2.** Still life with basket of apples.

fruits. This is the contrast between cool colors and warm colors. Moreover, the circle, semicircle, square and the prism correspond to each other; the arc lines, vertical lines and oblique lines intersect, forming a harmonious layout and giving people a feeling of completeness. According to Cézanne, The drapes on the white tablecloth and the fluctuations of the brown tablecloth make the desk different from ordinary home supplies, and hide the square shape of the desk. The desk is neither complete nor reasonable, and the right and left side are not at the same horizontal level.

### **2.3. Still Life with Apples and Oranges 1895-1900**

This work has great visual impacts and obvious artistic effects. The color of the still lifes is pure but full of vitality, obviously different from works of previous painters, who focused on texture of objects. The size of the painting is 93 cm × 72 cm, which means that Cézanne had begun to create large size works and been increasingly skillful.

As a matter of fact, Cézanne did not observe objects from a fixed perspective, but combined the features of the objects observed from different perspectives and produced an “un-perspective” and “un-rigorous” shape that was full of Cézanne features. When they are painted, they glow with unique vital forces. Via this new way of combination, Cézanne’s still lifes are given a new environment.

That is to say, the painter changed the appearance of the still lifes via painting. This method is frequently adopted by Cézanne. In **Figure 3** *Still Life with Apples and Oranges*, Cézanne discarded the traditional method of painting—use light and shade to shape. He only shaped via the transition of cool and warm colors. There's no light and shadow variation, which was frequently used in traditional painting, and there has been a lack of spacial perspective. The color is singular and the texture of the objects is not attached importance to. Instead, the painter intentionally painted the structure of each still life, so the fruits have a firm, persistent and stable personality.

#### 2.4. Still Life with Flower Holder 1905

**Figure 4** this painting was created by Cézanne in his old life. In terms of composition, a diagonal line is used to divide the painting. At the upper part, there are a piece of patterned cloth and a pitcher; at the lower part, there is a piece of falling tablecloth; over the table, there are peaches and apples. In comparison with Cézanne's previous works, this still life is of a dim totality. In particular, two corners of the old desk is revealed the right half is completely revealed. This is a manifestation of his old life: lonely, capricious, and continuing his dream of painting.



**Figure 3.** Still life with apples and oranges.



**Figure 4.** Still life with flower holder.

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Cézanne frequently adopted the method to create a new environment and cause environment transfer. Anyone who is willing to observe will appreciate the life-containing touching point or unprecedented creativity in Cézanne's still life.

## 2.5. Conclusion

In the creations of Cézanne, calmness, harmony, balance and the special feeling for shape and color are always present. And his study of light and shade, volume, hierarchy, space and painting itself enabled him to build an artistic world that is different from the objective life, that is different from others' world of art. He had made great contributions to the art world with his color shaping, artistic transformation, and method of geometrical composition. He presented brand new artistic concepts and realms to painters and critics. And he is undoubtedly the "father of modern painting".

Throughout his life, Cézanne created over 250 oil paintings. And from his works, we see the significant changes a painter underwent during his growth. We also can infer that Cézanne, as a painter, had been sticking to his artistic pursuits. A painter like Cézanne, whose works cover a wide range of topics, show a wide variety of style, and demonstrate such great strength and unity, is rare. His artistic ideas and experience can be regarded as a textbook of artistic creation. It tells us how to master and apply form, color and skills, how to discover and create beautiful things, how we should stick to the path of our choice, and how to realize our ambition. A careful read of Cézanne is beneficial to us in the solution of the issues of art: the basic, the creation, and the recognition of modern art. Therefore, it is my opinion that an understanding and study of Cézanne' personality, ideas and achievements constitutes the compulsory course for the study of modern art (He, 1998).

Cézanne does not advocate the imitation and representation of nature. So here comes the question: what is the artistic form that he is after? "To process nature with cylinder, sphere and cone" This is the widely accepted artistic point of view of Cézanne. But as a matter of fact, Cézanne's ultimate goal is not the geometrical shapes that are so singular, but the expressionistic property and a presentation of natural order. He said: "up till now, I assume that color is a great and essential thing, is the incarnation of opinions, and is the nature of rationality." We know that Cézanne advocates the processing of natural, objective objects with generalization of shape, and the presentation of the nature, eternity and genuineness with color. Therefore, the following ideas are generated: "there's no need for us to recreate the nature, we should represent nature, via the 'equivalence' of shape and color."

## 3. Paul Cézanne's Important Position in Art History

### 3.1. Launched the History of Modern Art

In the process of artistic exploration, Cézanne gradually discarded the traditional scenography. Instead, he obtained a special spacial effect via the superimposition

of shapes and the juxtaposition of colors (warm and cool). This is the most important difference between modern art and traditional art. One of Cézanne's representatives is *The Card Player* series. In this series, Cézanne had been constantly simplifying the content of image and created five oil paintings on the theme of card players. One of them has five people in it; one of them has four people in it; three of them have two people in them. In addition, he created some oil paintings, watercolors, sketches, etc. Of them, the smallest one, also the best one, with two players, is completed during 1890-1902.

In one of *The Card Player* series with the simplest composition, two players are seated upright. The shape of different supporting objects—the desk, the chair, the bottle and the wall—is strictly parallel to the picture. The whole composition leads to the following conclusion: the strength of color not only will not hinder the formation of an integrated unity, but also can produce the effect of emphasis. If coherent contour lines are applied, the result of isolation of figures may be caused. In this painting, Cézanne refused to use such contour lines. The figures in the painting are composed of patches of color, just like the desk and background of the painting, so they are integrated.

There is a shiny area over the wine bottle located at the center of the desk. It is the center of the painting. The figures around the center are almost symmetrical, and present an arc shape, making the scene rigorously structured. In addition, the variation of tonality gives a strong three-dimensional effect; the images are depicted with great strength; the figures' personality is vividly demonstrated; the figures' movements and action are accurately presented; and the method of patched coloring is adopted, therefore, this version of **Figure 5** *The Card Players* is one of Cézanne's most outstanding works. In other versions of *The Card Players*, he also used this method to gradually minimize shapes to imply the depth of field and perspective.

When Cézanne became a senior citizen, he not only became proficient in oil painting, but also achieved greatly in watercolor. When he painted an oil painting, he was lengthy in thinking and meticulous in drawing, but when he was painting watercolors, he was rapid and direct. Lionello Venturi once remarked that Cézanne's watercolors have two tendencies: the first is that he uses the skills of oil painting, so his watercolours are as lively as the sketches; the second is that he renders a dreamlike effect by taking advantage of the continuity of objects. This is particularly true in the watercolor **Figure 6** *Bathing Women*. This work gives people such a feeling: the torrents, mixed with a dreamlike and lifelike atmosphere, rage forward. The images are as smooth as music, but at the same time, they have the solemnity of architecture due to the stable triangular composition.

### **3.2. Cézanne's Artistic Charm Lies in the Transformation of Functions and Objectives**

Cézanne's noteworthy conduct, independent character, obstinate behavior and



**Figure 5.** The card players.



**Figure 6.** Bathing women.

unruly style make him different from other painters. For his outstanding achievements, he is addressed the “father of modern art”. He does not approve of any traditional methods, which is fully embodied by his still lifes. For Cézanne, the charm of still lifes lies in the fact that the theme can be depicted and mastered, just like other predecessors and younger generation artists. According to him, “painting means more than replicating the reality, it seeks the harmony of different relations.”

Herbert Read described Cézanne’s art earnestly in his work *A Concise History of Modern Painting*: undoubtedly, modern art movements started from the strong determination of a French painter, which is to observe the world objectively. The following words are not mysterious: what Cézanne wanted to see is the world, or a part of the world, which was observed by him patiently as an object; such observation is not disturbed by any clear soul or confusing affections. Cézanne’s predecessors, the impressionistic painters, used to observe the world subjectively, that is, the truth derived from the observation of the world, conducted under varying lights or from different perspectives. Each moment, a completely different, clear impression is formed, requiring painters to depict them with independent works of art. But Cézanne disapproved of these shaking and blurry appearances, but chose to observe the eternal truth, which hides behind the bright and confusing images generated by feelings (Kong, 2007).

### 3.3. Conclusion

The colors of impressionistic painting and the attitudes of impressionistic painters are a significant transformation in the history of painting. Nevertheless, Cézanne's transformation is even more significant. He eliminated objective factors like history, plots, etc., focused on the artist's subjective insights, attached importance to the composition of image, and held the opinion that painting is "to compose for the sake of compose". Therefore, he developed his artistic personality, which eventually made him a great landscape painter, still life painter, and portrait painter. Just like his painting theory describes, he is a painter who paints his ideas.

Throughout his life, Cézanne kept these elements in his works: harmony, calmness, balance and special feelings for shape and color. He believes that a painter should pursue "the authenticity of art", rather than recreation of nature. The painter should rearrange the nature, and create the second world in his or her painting according to his or her intuitive feelings. Only when a painter embodies his subjective values, can he create "soul-touching works". These artistic ideas of Cézanne shattered the foundation of previous aesthetic values.

### 3.4. My Experience and Reflection on Oil Paintings

When I appreciated Cézanne's works for the first time, I thought that his works lacked the charm of sensitivity. But when I appreciate his works again, I find them simple, fresh and full of strength. The process of painting still lifes repeatedly is undoubtedly boring. But it contributes to the formation of his artistic ideas. The simple wooden desk is covered by a piece of tablecloth. Several apples, wine bottles, and a basket are placed on it. The basket is full of apples, so is the plate. He painted the structure, blocks and surfaces meticulously, using rigorously selected colors. His brushwork is heavy and strong. A large proportion of his work is white and black colored, plus colors like red, yellow, and blue. He pursues a strong three-dimensional feeling. And when he was demonstrating the block surface relationships, he became full of passion. His works are based on the thickness of solid objects and the depth of three-dimensional objects. Cézanne attached too much importance to volume and some images became distorted. Undoubtedly, this is caused by his inner spirit and temperament. He was so enthusiastic that, in his eyes, some silent objects became boundless structures. Cézanne once mentioned: "a painting firstly, should express color. History, psychology, etc are hidden in it, because painters are also very clever." From his words we know why Cézanne is called "the father of modern painting". When showing the relationship between different colors, he often says: "I only want to express perspectivity with color. And I think the most important thing in a painting is the proper treatment of distance." Therefore, we can infer that Cézanne is a painter of exceptional talent.

How to observe the objective world, how to remain true to oneself, and how to create works with unique vitality these are questions confronted by every artist.

While analyzing Cézanne's still lifes and other representative works, I also begin to handle the problems I am confronted with in oil painting creation. We often observe things with tinted spectacles. But this method deceived us and stopped us from perceiving the true message from nature. Man must interpret nature, use their inner eyes to observe it, and find their own way of expressing it.

In modern and contemporary art, almost every school that came into being after Cézanne is influenced by him. This is not only because he casted an end to the classical art which lasted for hundreds of years, but more importantly, he put forward a solution to the problem of how to process shaping. Undeniably, his art is a result of the development of European art traditions, but his achievements and influence have gone beyond regions and nationalities, society and art, and even time and space, becoming an indispensable part of human civilization. He is a pioneer of modern art and a discoverer of the new world for the art of painting.

When I study Cézanne's work series, I also discovered that his life is a source of inspiration. Cézanne devoted his entire life to art. His relentless struggle and exploration are inspiring to us all. Therefore, I composed a thesis on him, wishing that we could settle our minds and analyze the problems present in our creation process, because only by identifying the knot of the matter can we change the present situation of a declining painting industry.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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